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**Nuns involving in the affairs of the world.**  
**The depiction of Buddhist nuns in Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava***

SUMMARY: In Bhavabhūti's play, the *Mālatīmādhava*, we find the characters of three Buddhist nuns. Though by no means negative or disreputable characters, these nuns nevertheless display a behaviour that contravenes some explicitly stated precepts of the Buddhist *dharma*, such as lying, acting as go-betweens and encouraging others to commit suicide. This paper examines in detail the nuns' behaviour, trying to assess what merely belongs to the realm of dramatic fiction, and what might correspond – at least to some extent – to reality.

KEYWORDS: Sanskrit drama, Bhavabhūti, *Mālatīmādhava*, Buddhist nuns, *Bhikṣuṇīvinaya*, offenses against the Buddhist *dharma* and *vinaya*.

This article stems from the following basic observation: mostly, Buddhist literature provides us with an ideal picture of Buddhist nuns. In the *Therīgāthās*,<sup>1</sup> the nuns present themselves as liberated from all fetters, removed from worldly life and entirely dedicated to contemplation. Furthermore, the *Bhikṣuṇīvinaya*, or rules of discipline for nuns, lists a series of very strict and elaborate rules concerning the behaviour prescribed for nuns, laying great emphasis on their chastity, modesty, obedience and humbleness. In non-Buddhist literature, on the other hand, especially in Sanskrit plays, female ascetics in general and

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<sup>1</sup> Transl. Norman 1969-1971.

Buddhist nuns in particular have a very poor reputation and exhibit a behaviour that seems quite opposed to what is expected and prescribed for them. As Jyväsjarvi (2007: 77) remarks: “These female ascetics of drama, who are typically of the unmarried variety, begin to take on increasingly disreputable characteristics and are depicted as malicious, licentious, farcical, or even dangerous.”

It has of course for some time been recognised that the every-day life of monks and nuns living in Indian monasteries did not in fact quite correspond to what the scriptures on Dharma (doctrine) and on Vinaya (discipline) would have us believe. The works of Gregory Schopen,<sup>2</sup> and Jonathan Silk,<sup>3</sup> especially, have emphasised that many of the monastics were a lot more involved with service, administration and even money-matters, than meditation and the pursuit of liberation. Nevertheless, the characters of the nuns who appear in some works of literature sometimes contravene even the most important and basic commandments of the Buddhist order, even on occasion going as far as to commit *pārājika* offenses (punished with expulsion), and generally exhibit a behaviour that could by no means have been condoned by the Buddhist monastic institutions.

Schopen (2012: 597) questions the likelihood of certain offenses against which rules are passed in disciplinary Buddhist manuals:

It could be argued that to be plausible for their intended audience the narrative accounts of the behavior of nuns presented as the justification of a rule could not be too far removed from actual observable behavior – here such accounts would have to correspond, at least broadly, to what the nuns that the compilers of the codes knew actually did. This is certainly possible. But it is equally possible that such accounts only represent what monks imagined – in every sense of the term – or feared that nuns might do: here too, however, such activities would have to be at least conceivable – for a monk to imagine or fear, for example, that a nun might go to court for the recovery of property this must at least have been legally possible in the compiler’s world.

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<sup>2</sup> Many of his papers have recently been reedited in a combined volume in Schopen 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Silk 2008.

If distinguishing between the factual and imagined is already a delicate question concerning law-books or manuals of discipline, when it comes to works of fiction, the difficulty is even compounded precisely because the characters are fictitious. This raises a further question: to what extent were the characters in Sanskrit plays supposed to be true to life? Obviously, in Sanskrit dramas, the characters are usually quite standardised and correspond to ideal types. Also, it is not unusual for such plays to stage supernatural events and characters. Yet the question of plausibility probably plays a certain role too, especially in the case of more realistic characters such as a Buddhist mendicant nun.

In this paper, I propose to concentrate on one play, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*, which is very promising as far as our subject is concerned. For here we find not just one, but three female ascetics who are quite without doubt Buddhist nuns: the venerable Kāmandakī (who speaks Sanskrit) and her two disciples Avalokitā and Buddharaṣitā (who speak Prākṛit). We will try to determine the exact function of these religious characters in the play, and evaluate whether or not their behaviour and actions correspond – to a certain degree at least – to the social reality of Bhavabhūti's time, or whether they simply reflect the then-current clichés on such personages.

Before examining these nuns' role in this play, let us first briefly discuss Bhavabhūti and his play, the *Mālatīmādhava*. From the prologue of his play, we learn that Bhavabhūti was born in a distinguished family of learned and traditional brahmins, in the country of Vidarbha (nowadays northern Maharashtra). According to Mirashi (1974: chapter 1), he was in all likelihood active as a play-wright at the court of king Yaśovarman of Kanauj between *circa* 700 and 730. This was a time when Hinduism co-existed with Buddhism and Jainism (Mirashi 1974: 25). Bhavabhūti is the author of three (known) plays. The one which concerns us here, the *Mālatīmādhava*, is a play

of the *prakaraṇa* type,<sup>4</sup> i.e., based on invented subject matter,<sup>5</sup> with love as its main sentiment or *rasa*, whose hero is an ordinary man,<sup>6</sup> and whose heroine is a young girl.<sup>7</sup> The plot of the play is complicated in its details, but rather simple in its main lay-out: the hero (Mādhava) and the heroine (Mālatī) were destined from childhood by their respective fathers to marry each other. Before the beginning of the play, Mādhava is sent by his father to the town of Padmāvātī, officially to study the *nyāya* philosophy, but really to meet Mālatī who lives there. The two young people fall in love at first sight. But then a problem arises: the king of Padmāvātī asks for Mālatī's hand on behalf of one of his courtiers, Nandana. Mālatī's father, Bhūrivasu, who is also the king's minister, is very embarrassed because he cannot straight away refuse the king's request. So he devises a plan: officially, he pretends to agree to the match between his daughter and the king's courtier. But secretly, he plots with the nun Kāmandakī to have Mālatī and Mādhava elope together: in this way his honour will be safe on both fronts. So the Buddhist nun Kāmandakī, one of the central characters of the play, with the help of her two side-kicks, the nuns Avalokitā and Buddharakṣitā, brings about Mālatī and Mādhava's secret marriage, and also – on the side – the union between Makaranda, Mādhava's childhood friend, and Madayantikā, one of Mālatī's friends. Ultimately, after

<sup>4</sup> On the *prakaraṇa*, see Mirashi (1974: 198-199).

<sup>5</sup> In reality, Bhavabhūti was no doubt inspired by a story found in Guṇāḍhya's *Bṛhatkathā*, a Prākṛit collection of stories probably composed around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., nowadays lost. It is only known through two much later Sanskrit adaptations, Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* and Kṣemendra's *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī*, both composed around the 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The story of Madirāvātī, which probably served as Bhavabhūti's source, is found in the 13<sup>th</sup> *lambaka* of the *Kathāsaritsāgara*. For a discussion of this story, see Mirashi (1974: 199-201).

<sup>6</sup> I.e., not a king, or a supernatural being. Mādhava is a brahmin.

<sup>7</sup> Or a courtesan, as in the *Mṛcchakaṭika*.



a lot of very dramatic and colourful events,<sup>8</sup> all is well that ends well, and everyone is happy including the king himself who gets reconciled to this union.

Let us now examine in some more detail the characters of the three nuns, especially that of the nun Kāmandakī, whose role is absolutely central in the play. She is the one who takes the major decisions, plans and plots, and, so to say, “holds the strings” of the actions taking place in the play. In this respect, it is not surprising that her role is played precisely by the director of the play, the “string-holding” *sūtradhāra* himself.<sup>9</sup>

In Sanskrit literature, it is sometimes difficult to determine to what exact religious obedience certain ascetic characters belong, for their description is not always precise, and the terms used to designate them can be ambiguous and apply to various sects or even religions.<sup>10</sup> The last point also applies here: in Bhavabhūti’s play, the three nuns are called *parivrājikā*, a term which is perhaps best rendered as “wandering female mendicant”. As Jyväsjärvi (2007: 82) notes: “The negative connotations of a woman who wanders around become accentuated in the term *parivrājikā*, which implies a more specifically peripatetic lifestyle.” Furthermore, Jyväsjärvi (2007: 86) notes that: “*Parivrājikā* ... seems to be a curious term in that it is used by other people and for other people – that is, for the female ascetics or nuns of other sects, never of one’s own.” Brahmanical texts, such as the *Arthaśāstra* for instance, apply it to Buddhist or Jain nuns, whereas Bud-

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<sup>8</sup> The *Mālatīmādhava* contains most of the current clichés on India. It is extraordinarily “exotic” and full of unusual events and characters. To list just the most obvious, in this play we find elephants, attacks by fierce tigers, characters swooning on all sides and repeatedly attempting suicide, forced or secret marriages, tantric magicians, *yoginīs* flying through the air, sacrifices of virgins in abandoned temples in the middle of the jungle, and even hair-raising scenes in deserted graveyards haunted by grisly demons and ghouls.

<sup>9</sup> This is revealed at the end of the prologue (*prastāvanā*).

<sup>10</sup> The characters of Sāṃkṛtyāyanī in Harṣa’s *Priyadarśikā* (cf. Doniger 2006) and of Kauśikī in Kālidāsa’s *Mālavikāgnimitra* (cf. Balogh & Somogyi 2009) are cases in point.

dhist texts apply it to female ascetics belonging to other religions. (See Jyväsjärvi 2007: 82-84). The *Mālatīmādhava*, as we shall see, does not present the three nuns in a particularly negative light, even though it designates them as *parivrājikās*. But the very use of this particular term by a brahmanical and brahmin author already seems to signify that they belong to a non-brahmanical group, even though this group remains to be determined more precisely. In this respect, the following points may be of help:

- They wear reddish robes (*rakta-paṭṭikā-nepathye*) (end of *prastāvanā*, first entrance of the characters of Avalokitā and Kāmandakī),<sup>11</sup> and torn, ragged clothes. Thus, at the beginning of Act 1, Kāmandakī is described as “your reverence who wears tattered vestments” (*cīracīvaraparicchadāṃ... bhagavatīm*).<sup>12</sup>
- they subsist only on alms, literally, on “the fall of food-balls (into their begging bowl)”. At the beginning of Act 1, Kāmandakī is described as “your reverence who lives on the dole of alms only” (*piṇḍapātamātraprāṇayātrāṃ bhagavatīm*). Also in the prelude to Act 3, Avalokitā mentions that: “It is for a long time that her reverence (Kāmandakī) has been attending upon Mālatī excepting the time for begging alms” (*ko ‘pi kālo bhagavatyāḥ piṇḍapātavelāṃ varjayitvā mālatīm anuvartamānāyāḥ*).<sup>13</sup>
- the three nuns are said to live in a monastery (*vihāra*) near the town of Padmāvātī (Act 1, after verse 15).
- the names of Kāmandakī’s two disciples have a clear Buddhist connotation: Buddharakṣitā means “protected by the Buddha” and Avalokitā, “who looks down in compassion”, is undoubtedly

<sup>11</sup> The citations and translations given here are those of Kāle (1967), whose translations are close to the original Sanskrit text.

<sup>12</sup> The terms *cīra* and *cīvara* are more or less synonymous and designate rags or torn clothes, more precisely the robes of Buddhist mendicants.

<sup>13</sup> We may note that the term *velā* is in the singular. Indeed, Buddhist mendicants were expected to go begging for alms only once a day.

an allusion to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise, save an occasional reference to *saṃsāra* (prelude to Act 1, and Act 4, verse 6), which of course is not exclusively Buddhist, and *bodhisattva* (Act 10, verse 21), nothing is ever said concerning the Buddhist doctrine or the rules governing the nuns' lives. While reading the play, it strikes us that Bhavabhūti mentions only such "visible", "exterior" details that were probably common knowledge to all and sufficed to establish the identity of his chosen characters. Certainly, he did not care to talk about Buddhist doctrinal or disciplinary matters any more than he cared to talk about other philosophies, since such topics, in his opinion, were not really suitable for plays.<sup>15</sup>

Now that we have established beyond doubt that Kāmandakī, Buddharaṣitā and Avalokitā are Buddhist nuns, let us examine their role and behaviour in the play. As we shall presently see, they are rather a far cry from what one would expect of Buddhist nuns. The following are the main points which, in my opinion, go against the rules of behaviour prescribed for nuns.

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<sup>14</sup> The name Kāmandakī, on the other hand, betrays quite a different source of inspiration: according to Mirashi (1974: 204), the name is probably an allusion to the title of a Sanskrit work on political science, the *Kāmandakīya-Nītisāra*.

<sup>15</sup> Bhavabhūti explains this in verse 7 of the prologue to the *Mālatī-mādhava*:

What avails it to speak of the study of the Vedas and the knowledge of the Upanishads, and of the Sankhya and the Yoga philosophies ? They are of no use in dramatic compositions. If one has felicity and richness of expression (command of language) and depth of meaning, then that alone serves as an index to one's scholarship and poetic excellence.

*yad vedādhyayanam tathopaniṣadām sāmkyasya yogasya ca  
jñānam tat kathanena kiṃ nahi tataḥ kaścīd guṇo nātake /  
yat prauḍhitvam udāratā ca vacasām yac cārthato gauravam  
tac ced asti tatas tad eva gamakam pāṇḍityavaidagdhyaḥ //*

*Excessive involvement in the affairs of the world.* Far from spending their time in the pursuit of monastic and religious activities, as one would expect on the part of nuns, Kāmandakī, Buddharakṣitā and Avalokitā dedicate themselves and their time exclusively to matters pertaining to the household of the king's minister, Bhūrivasu. Neither Bhūrivasu himself, who is a rich brahmin, nor the members of his household, are said to be *upāsakas*, or lay Buddhists (which would to some extent justify Kāmandakī's visits to their house). Clearly, they follow the brahmanical religious traditions: Mālatī, for instance, visits temples and performs *pūjās* there.<sup>16</sup> No doubt, Bhavabhūti himself felt the oddity of this and realised that it needed some explanation. Twice, in his play, he has characters expressing wonder about Kāmandakī's involvement in affairs of the world, whereas she has supposedly freed her mind of "worldly attachments". At the beginning of Act 1, this concern is voiced by Kāmandakī's pupil, the nun Avalokitā:

It is extremely wonderful that minister Bhūrivasu should employ in such a wearisome matter [i.e., in secretly bringing together the two lovers] your reverence who wears tattered vestments and lives on the dole of alms only. (And strangely enough) you too apply to it your soul<sup>17</sup> that has broken through the shackles of worldly life.

*āścaryam āścaryam yad idānīm cīracīvaraparicchadām piṇḍapāta-  
mātraprāṇayātrām bhagavatīm idrśa āyāse 'mātyabhūrivasur niyoja-  
yati / tatra cotkhaṇḍitasamsārāvagraha ātmā yuṣmābhir api niyujyate /*  
(prelude to Act 1).

<sup>16</sup> This, by the way, provides excellent opportunities for her to meet Mādhava secretly. In Act 1, for instance, Mādhava narrates his first meeting with Mālatī in the temple of the god of love; in Act 3, they meet at the temple of Śaṅkara.

<sup>17</sup> Although we should perhaps not make too much of this, we may note here the use of the term *ātman* (the self, the soul), which is rather incongruous in the case of a Buddhist nun who is precisely not supposed to have a soul, according to the Buddhist doctrine. Of course, the term may simply be used here in its banal sense of "self", even though this would appear more likely in the active than in the passive construction.

To this, Kāmandakī replies that she is helping the young couple due to her long-standing friendship with Bhūrivasu (Act 1, verse 9).<sup>18</sup> In Act 4, verse 6, Mādhava's friend Makaranda underlines the opposition between Kāmandakī's religious call and her involvement in mundane affairs:

O revered lady, your compassion (or affection) for these [your] children moves your heart although detached from worldly life; and hence is actively set forth your effort so opposed to the usual practices of a life of renunciation; but again, destiny also prevails.

*dayā vā sneho vā bhagavati nije 'smiñ śiśujane  
bhavatyaḥ saṃsārād viratam api cittaṃ dravayati /  
ataś ca pravrajyāsulabhasamayācāravimukhaḥ  
prasaktas te yatnaḥ prabhavati punar daivam aparam // Act 4, verse 6 //*

Here, Kāmandakī's involvement is explained by the compassion and love she feels for the young couple, who are considered as her own children (*nije 'smiñ śiśujane*). Compassion (here *dayā*) is of course a key-term of Buddhism, and thus appears as an excellent reason to invoke in order to explain Kāmandakī's behaviour. But true Buddhist compassion, obviously, should not consist in inveigling people in mundane passions, but on the contrary in making them averse to them. And excessive – downright motherly<sup>19</sup> – affection is quite unsuitable in the case of a nun who is supposed to have renounced all worldly attachment.

*Lying and dissembling.* In Act 2, Kāmandakī does not shy away from bare-faced lies (or at least deceit) when she tells Mālatī that her

<sup>18</sup> She goes on to add that she had been Bhūrivasu's co-student when she was younger. What type of studies could be common to a brahmin man and a Buddhist nun is left unexplained.

<sup>19</sup> That Kāmandakī feels for Mālatī as a mother feels for her daughter is perhaps most movingly brought to the fore in Act 10, when the nun, thinking her dear protégée forever lost, laments and reminisces about Mālatī's childhood (see Act 10, esp. verses 1, 2, 5, 6).

father has decided to give her away to the king's friend. She first pretends to shed tears of distress on Mālatī's behalf:

Lavaṅgikā (To herself)

This is but the prelude to the drama of deception.<sup>20</sup> (Aloud) Your reverence's speech is quite unusual the breath being choked (sticking) in the throat rendered dull by the heavy flow of tears being suppressed. What can be the cause of this disconsolation?

Lavaṅgikā

(*svagatam*) *prastāvanā khalv eṣā kapaṭanāṭakasya / (prakāśam)*  
*guruka-bāṣpastambhamantharitakaṇṭhapratilagnaniḥśvāsam anyādṛśam*  
*evādyā bhagavatyā vacanam / tat kim idānīm udvegakāraṇam bhaviṣyati ?*

Then Kāmandakī rather dramatically tells Mālatī that Bhūrivasu is selfishly planning to sacrifice her happiness in order to curry Nandana's favours, although she knows very well that Bhūrivasu really has no such intentions:

Kāmandakī

Wonderful! How he set this on foot without any regard to merits! Or whence can there be affection for their offspring in those whose minds are well-versed in crooked policy! This is, however, his sole object, that the monarch's companion-in-pleasures should be his friend by this gift of his daughter.

*āścaryam /*

*guṇāpekṣāśūnyam katham idam upakrāntam atha vā*  
*kuto 'patyasnehaḥ kuṭilanayaniṣṇātamanasām /*  
*idaṃ tv aidamparyam yad uta ṛṣpater narмасacivaḥ*  
*sutādānān mitraṃ bhavatu sa hi no nandana iti // Act 2, verse 7 //*

Obviously, she is doing all this for a good reason, because Mālatī needs to be kept in the dark as to what is really going on. Yet the Buddhist "noble eight-fold path", in its third point concerning "correct speech" (*samyag vāc*), prescribes that one should watch one's speech carefully

<sup>20</sup> As we see, Lavaṅgikā uses rather strong words, calling the nun's *mise en scène* a *kapaṭa-nāṭaka* (a drama of deception, or fraud, or cheating).

and especially refrain from uttering untruths or frivolous words, which are considered a sin of speech.

*Acting as go-betweens.* In this play, the nuns act as go-betweens to arrange the marriages between Mālatī and Mādhava, and Makaranda and Madayantikā. Now, acting as a go-between is the first in the list of the nineteen Saṃghātiśeṣa offenses for the nuns (and the fifth in the list for monks). It is thus a common precept for nuns and monks. The Saṃghātiśeṣa<sup>21</sup> offenses, i.e., offenses that necessitate an expiation (usually in the form of a temporary exclusion from the order), are listed immediately after the eight Pārājika offenses for nuns (punished by irrevocable expulsion from the order), and are thus rather serious offenses. The fact that acting as a go-between is the first in the list of Saṃghātiśeṣa offenses for nuns gives it a special importance and visibility, and perhaps indicates that this was indeed a relatively common misbehaviour on the part of Buddhist nuns. Here is what the Mahā-sāṃghika-Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya has to say on acting as a go between:

Thus the Blessed One taught: “If a bhikṣuṇī should serve as a go-between to bring a man and woman together, whether for marriage or for a secret meeting, (even if their meeting) is only for a short time, at that instant her Act is to be considered a Saṃghātiśeṣa offense.”<sup>22</sup>

In Bhavabhūti’s play, Kāmandakī is quite conscious that she and her friends are acting as go-betweens. Yet she seems completely unaware that such actions constitute an offense. Indeed, far from quot-

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<sup>21</sup> Sometimes the term Saṃghāvaśeṣa is also used. The meaning of the term Saṃghātiśeṣa is not entirely clear. According to Roth (1970: 103), it designates a “group (*saṃgha*) of offences which is the supplement to the first group” (i.e., the first group of Pārājika offenses). But the explanation which is usually offered in the commentaries is that Saṃghātiśeṣa means “(an offence which has) a remainder (*atiśeṣa*) in the Order” (i.e., which is expiated within the fold of the Buddhist Order, unlike a Pārājika offense which entails a complete expulsion and has therefore no remainder in the order). On this, see Hirakawa (1982: 135-136).

<sup>22</sup> Transl. Hirakawa (1982: 136-137).

ing the Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya in this respect, she refers to the *Kāmasūtra* to explain what sort of go-between she is, namely, the “go-between-taking-the-whole-responsibility-on-herself” or “fully authorised messenger” (*niṣṣṛṣṭārthadūtī*), hence the first type of go-between mentioned by Vātsyāyana.<sup>23</sup>

Kāmandakī (aside): “Maintaining an attitude of indifference well have I lightened the burden of a go-between taking-the-whole-responsibility-on-herself, with regard to Mālatī. For,

I have produced in her a dislike to another husband, and a suspicion about her father’s doing; I have pointed out to her the course to be pursued by narrating historical instances and incidentally praised the greatness of the dear boy both as regards his noble birth and personal accomplishments; now, indeed, it remains (for me) to bring about an intimate acquaintance between them.”

*Kāmandakī (apavārya): sādhu samprati mayā taṣasthayaiva mālatīm prati niṣṣṛṣṭārthadūtīkrtyasya laghūkrto bhāraḥ / tathā hi vare’nyasmin dveṣaḥ pītari vicikitsā ca janitā purāvṛttodgārair api ca kathitā kāryapadavī / stutaṃ tanmāhātmyaṃ yad abhijanato yac ca gunataḥ prasangād vatsasyety atha khalu vidheyaḥ paricayaḥ // Act 2, verse 13 //*

If we compare the way Kāmandakī goes about her business (as she describes it in the above quote) with the *Kāmasūtra*’s recommendations for go-betweens, we realise that the nun must be keeping the *Kāmasūtra* as a bed-side manual or else that she knows it by heart, because she follows its advice step-by-step and quotes from it quite literally! Here is what the *Kāmasūtra* prescribes for go-betweens (5.4.63-65).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Kāmasūtra* 5.4.46: “The fully authorised messenger understands the goal that is in the minds of both the man and the woman and then by her own intelligence undertakes to bring it about.” Transl. Doniger & Kakar 2002.

<sup>24</sup> These verses serve as a summary for the whole preceding chapter.



And there are verses about this:

A widow, a fortune-teller, a servant girl,  
 A beggar woman, and a woman artist  
 Quickly enter a woman's confidence  
 And understand the duties of a messenger.  
 She inspires hatred of the husband,  
 Describes his [the lover's] sexual charms,  
 And reveals the various enjoyments of sex,  
 That other women, too, have had.  
 And she describes the man's love for the woman,  
 And, again, his skill in love-making,  
 And tells how he is sought by great women,  
 And remains constant (Transl. Doniger & Kakar 2002).

*bhavanti cātra ślokāḥ:*  
*vidhavekṣaṇikā dāsī bhikṣukī śilpakārikā /*  
*praviśaty āśu viśvāsaṃ dutikāryaṃ ca vindati // 63 //*  
*saṃkṣepeṇa dūtikarmāny āha:*  
*vidveṣaṃ grāhayet patyau ramaṇīyāni varṇayet /*  
*citrān suratasambhogān anyāsām api darśayet // 64 //*  
*nāyakasyānurāgaṃ ca punaś ca ratikauśalam /*  
*prārthanām cādhikastrībhir avaṣṭambhaṃ ca varṇayet // 65 //*

Here we obviously have the play-wright Bhavabhūti displaying his knowledge of the *Kāmasūtra*, which was a desideratum for any respectable poet. But the fact that he keeps these words in the mouth of a nun seems singularly incongruous. Due to obvious chronological reasons, the Vinaya does not explicitly forbid the monastics to study the *Kāmasūtra*, but it is a safe bet that the study of *kāma* was probably not encouraged by the elders!

*Knowledge of sex and love-affairs.* This point in a sense continues and completes the preceding point. Considering that they are nuns, supposedly living a chaste and sexually abstinent life, Kāmandakī and her pupils seem to have a remarkable knowledge of love-affairs, love-feelings and even sensual love. This comes of course very handy for go-betweens! In order to encourage Mālatī to fall in love and elope with Mādhava (all the while pretending to disapprove of such a course of

action!), Kāmandakī tells her famous love-stories, especially stories of “star-crossed” couples who unite despite adversity, such as Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, Urvaśī and Purūravas, or Vāsavadattā and Udayana.<sup>25</sup>

Generally, their sires and Destiny have power over daughters. As to what men, adept in historic lore, say with reference to Śakuntalā, daughter of Kauśika, having loved Duṣyanta, the heavenly nymph Urvaśī having bestowed her affection on Purūravas, and Vāsavadattā espousing Udayana, although betrothed by her father to king Sañjaya – all that looks like rashness and therefore this course cannot be recommended.

*prabhavati prāyaḥ kumārīṇām janayitā daivaṃ ca / yac ca kila kauśikī śakuntalā duṣyantam apsarā urvaśī purūravaśaṃ cakama ity ākhyānavida ācakṣate vāsavadattā ca sañjayāya rājñe pitrā dattam ātmānam udayanāya prāyacchad ityādi tad api sāhasābhāsam ity anupadeṣṭavya evāyam arthaḥ / (Act 2)*

Again, such stratagems are recommended for go-betweens by the *Kāmasūtra* (5.4.14), in order to bring couples together. At times, Kāmandakī waxes quite the poet, composing verses in which she encourages Mālatī sexually:

Dear child,

This is that youth, very much beloved, whose eye for you, and for whom your eye, first conceived love ; whose heart to you, and to whom your heart, was then solely attached ; and whose body on your account, and on account of whom your body, became emaciated: give up this hesitation, O fair-faced one, towards him ; let the wishes of Kāma be fulfilled.

*Vatse*

*puraś cakṣūrāgas tadanu manaso 'nanyaparātā tanuglānir yasya tvayi samabhadra yatra ca tava / yuvā so 'yaṃ preyān iha suvadane muñca jadatām vidhātur vaidagdhyam vilasatu sakāmo 'stu madanaḥ // Act 6, verse 15 //*

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<sup>25</sup> Here again, we have the poet Bhavabhūti showing off his sound knowledge of his predecessors' works.

Or verses depicting the heroine's erotic sensations when she imagines that she is making love with Mādhava:

Verily, she is enjoying the union with her lover pictured by her mind. For –  
The tie of her lower garment is loosened; her lower lip is quivering ; her arms are drooping; she is perspiring; her eye is glossy, pleasing, a little contracted, affectionate and pretty; her limbs are motionless; her bud-like breasts are heaving continuously; the hair on her broad cheeks is standing erect; and there is stupor and consciousness.

*nīyatam anayā saṃkalpanirmitaḥ priyasamāgamo 'nubhūyate /  
tathā hy asyāḥ  
nīvībandhocchvasanam adharaspandanam dorviṣādaḥ  
svedaś cakṣur maṣṇamadhurākekarasnigdhamugdham /  
gātrastambaḥ stanamukulayor utprabandhaḥ prakampo  
gaṅḍābhoge pulakapaṭalaṃ mūrccanā cetanā ca // Act 2, verse 5 //*

Not only does it seem odd that a Buddhist nun should recite erotic poetry, moreover, the problem is also one of verisimilitude: whence would a nun get this sort of poetic and erotic knowledge ? We can safely surmise that here, as in the case of the *Kāmasūtra* citations, we really have the poet Bhavabhūti speaking through the nun and displaying his own skills for erotic poetry.

*Encouragement to suicide and contemplating suicide.* In Act 10, Kāmandakī and Mālatī's two childhood-friends, Lavaṅgikā and Madayantikā, are wandering in the forest, desperately looking for Mālatī who has been abducted by an evil *tāntrikā* named Kapālakuṇḍalā. Losing all hopes of finding her alive, Lavaṅgikā contemplates suicide. She tells Kāmandakī:

Revered lady, be gracious. I am now wearied by bearing (the burden of) my life. I will, therefore, precipitate myself from the top of this mountain and find relief thereby. Your Reverence should give me such a blessing that I shall see my beloved friend at last in my next life.

*bhagavati, prasāda / niḥsahāsmi sāmpratam jīvitodvahanena / sāham  
asmād giriśikharād ātmānam avadhutya nirvṛtā bhaviṣyāmi / tathā me  
bhagavatya āśiṣam karotu yena janmāntare 'pi tāvat priyasakhīm prekṣiṣye /*

Far from dissuading Lavaṅgikā from committing this rash deed, as one might reasonably expect, Kāmandakī on the contrary encourages her, and even declares herself ready to join her! She replies:

Oh Lavaṅgikā, Kāmandakī too will not live any longer in separation from the dear daughter. Equal is this our pang of anguish. Moreover, If owing to the diversity of actions there is no union (after death), let it not be: but the quitting of life has this fruit that all suffering is annihilated.

*nanu lavaṅgike kāmandaky api nātaḥparam vatsāvīyogena jīviṣyati /  
samaś cāyam utkaṅṭhāvega āvayoḥ / kiṃ ca:  
saṅgamaḥ karmaṇām bhedād yadi na syān na nāma saḥ /  
pāṇānām tu parityāge saṅtāpōpaśamaḥ phalam // Act 10, verse 7 //*

Now, killing a human being, or even encouraging a human being to take his/her own life, is a Pārājika offense (punished by expulsion from the order), listed as the third (out of eight) Pārājika offenses for nuns. This is what the *Mahāsāṃghika-Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya* says on the topic:

If a *bhikṣuṇī*, by her own hand, takes the life of a human being, or if she looks for the owner of a sword to do the killing, or if she makes another think of death and praise death by saying: « Shame on you! There is no hope for one who has led such a wicked life. It would be better if you were dead than alive. » If she thus praises and encourages death using such methods in order to encourage one to kill himself or think about it, and if that person kills himself for this reason and for no other (reason), that *bhikṣuṇī* commits a pārājika offense, and ought not to be allowed to live together with the others (in the Order). (Transl. Hirakawa 1982: 110)

As we see, Buddhist casuistry is quite precise in this case: it is not merely brutal, direct murder which is punishable, also but indirect, psychological attempts to make someone commit suicide (on which the above passage lays the greatest emphasis). In our case, this is seen

in Kāmandakī's words when she remarks: "The quitting of life has this fruit that all suffering is annihilated". Not only can this be construed as an encouragement for Lavaṅgikā to take her own life, but it is also deceitful and untrue according to Buddhist beliefs, according to which committing suicide would only result in another (perhaps worse) rebirth, equally filled with suffering.

Concerning suicide, Buddhist views vary quite widely according to different texts, schools and times.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, there is no absolute consensus on the topic: according to some schools, especially the Theravādins, it should be avoided at all costs, while most others accept it under certain circumstances. For instance, suicide accomplished as a self-sacrifice, especially in order to save someone else's life, receives wide support (for instance in the *Jātaka* tales).<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Buddha himself is said to have approved, even encouraged, suicide in the case of certain *arhats* who were afraid they would again lapse from their state of release.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the Buddha clearly discouraged some people from taking their own life out of despair,<sup>29</sup> and he specifically prohibited suicide by "throwing oneself off (a cliff)", since this could result in somebody else's death.<sup>30</sup> As we can see, Kāmandakī's case, who wishes to end her life – precisely by jumping off a mountain-top – due to the pangs of anguish (*utkañṭhāvega*) she feels due to her separation from Mālatī, hardly fits into a category

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<sup>26</sup> On the topic of suicide in Buddhism, see Berglie and Suneson 1986 and Delhey 2006, and the bibliographies given in these two articles.

<sup>27</sup> See Delhey (2006: 42).

<sup>28</sup> See Berglie and Suneson (1986: 31-37) and Delhey (2006: 34-41).

<sup>29</sup> See Delhey (2006: 43, 58). Also Berglie and Suneson (1986: 38). So too Mirashi (1974: 348):

<sup>30</sup> This rule is established by the Buddha in *Vinayapiṭaka* 3.82: *na attānaṃ pātetabbam*. See Delhey (2006: 30): "... there is a report of a monk who throws himself off a cliff. Another man is hit by him and dies, while the monk himself survives. On this occasion the Buddha declares that a monk is not allowed to "throw himself off". This was interpreted by some later texts as a general prohibition of suicide. See Delhey (2006: 37).

of suicide which would have met with the Buddha or the Buddhists' approval. Fortunately, the nun and her friends are saved from this unsavoury death *in extremis* by the sudden good news that Mālatī is safe.

These are, as far as I could see, the types of behaviour which are problematic for a Buddhist nun, and which are nevertheless indulged in by Kāmandakī and her disciples in Bhavabhūti's drama. Some of these, such as lying, acting as a go-between, or encouraging other people to take their life, are explicitly forbidden by the Buddhist *dharma*; others, such as reciting erotic poetry, knowing the *Kāmasūtra* by heart, or getting excessively involved in the affairs of a brahmanical household, seem merely out of line, not to say bizarre. What to make of this? One of the first ideas that comes to mind is that it is meant as deliberate slander of Buddhism and Buddhist nuns on the part of Bhavabhūti, a traditional brahmin. But it seems to me that this supposition does not hold, for two reasons: first of all, because this type of criticism of Buddhism would require, to be understood as such, that the audience of the play be familiar with the disciplinary and doctrinal rules of Buddhism, which was probably not necessarily the case. Secondly, on the whole, Kāmandakī and her two female disciples appear as positive characters in the play: they certainly work towards fulfilling the destiny of the lovers, and display constant friendly and disinterested behaviour towards them, especially Kāmandakī who feels downright motherly affection for the young people. In the world of a drama of this type, where love reigns supreme, this is of paramount importance.<sup>31</sup>

It seems to me that at times Kāmandakī's behaviour strikes us as incongruous or out of place, because her character is in reality a conglomeration of various characters, all rolled into one: she first and foremost represents the type of the *wise woman*, either a widow or

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<sup>31</sup> So too Mirashi (1974: 348): "The supposed antagonism of Bhavabhūti to Buddhism ... has no basis. Bhavabhūti has nowhere shown disrespect to Buddhism. The Buddhist old nun Kāmandakī, her disciple Avalokitā and her female friend Buddharakṣitā take an active part in bringing about the union of Mālatī and Mādhava, and of Madayantikā and Makaranda."

an ascetic, who frequently acts as the advisor to the main female character of a play. Such a personage is found for instance in Kālidāsa's play, the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, where we find the wise and learned (*paṇḍitā*), Sanskrit-speaking Kauśikī, who is introduced as a *parivrājikā*, the companion of Queen Dhāriṇī. According to Mirashi (1974: 7), Kauśikī served as the direct model for Kāmandakī. At the end of Kālidāsa's play, it turns out that Kauśikī has been an ascetic only for about a year, and that she is in fact a brahmin woman, the widow of a king's minister. This explains satisfactorily both her knowledge of literature and of the world, which are left unaccounted for in the case of Kāmandakī. Secondly, Kāmandakī also stands for the *poet*, or speaks for the poet, allowing him to display his literary knowledge and skills, especially when she composes erotic verses, or refers to other works of Sanskrit literature and drama, or when she cites the *Kāmasūtra*. Furthermore, the elderly nun acts on behalf of Mālatī's *father* in scheming and arranging everything, including the marriage, and she acts on behalf of her *mother* in the care and affection she bestows on the young girl. In this respect, it is worth noting that neither Mālatī's father, nor her mother ever appear in person on stage, they are only mentioned *in absentia*. Lastly, Kāmandakī also – perhaps less convincingly to us – stands for the rather disreputable and unsavoury character of the *nurse* or *bawd*, in the way she wakes up Mālatī's passion and encourages her sexually. This trait may have been taken over from the story found in the *Bṛhatkathā*, which, as we have noted above, probably served as the model for Bhavabhūti's play. There, the character of the heroine's nurse mediates between the hero and the heroine. This nurse no longer figures in Bhavabhūti's play, even though, curiously, Mālatī retains a devoted foster sister, Lavaṅgikā.

To conclude: the character of a nun, especially an elderly nun such as Kāmandakī, presents certain advantages for the plot of this play. A nun is, obviously, a woman, yet she can move about freely like a man, especially during her begging-rounds. She has thus access

to both the hero and the heroine.<sup>32</sup> She combines this freedom of movement with an aura of respectability, wisdom, and even saintliness (at least in Bhavabhūti's play), which allows her access to a girl of good family.<sup>33</sup> She has the reputation of being intelligent and knowledgeable (even if, in Kāmandakī's case, this knowledge concerns surprisingly mundane matters!), which explains why the heroine's father entrusts her with such a delicate task. Finally, her russet garb is easily recognisable on stage, and allows the audience to understand at once who she is.<sup>34</sup> What I am suggesting here is that Bhavabhūti may have chosen the characters of Buddhist nuns mainly for reasons having to do with dramaturgy, and that thus the behaviour of these fictional nuns does not necessarily reflect the behaviour of real Buddhist nuns in Bhavabhūti's time and society. But at the same time, we cannot rule out either that Buddhist nuns did indeed – perhaps more than occasionally – act as go-betweens<sup>35</sup> and that they had more intense and intimate contact with the lay population<sup>36</sup> than the rules of discipline would seem to warrant.

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<sup>32</sup> Obviously, in reality too, this could have been a real advantage for those Buddhist nuns who felt tempted to mediate between lovers.

<sup>33</sup> Everyone in the play shows her great respect, she is always called the “venerable” (*bhagavatī*) Kāmandakī.

<sup>34</sup> We have noted above that other female ascetics are not easily classifiable and recognisable. Buddhist nuns were probably the only group of female ascetics which had a clear organisation and structure in ancient India.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that the prohibition against acting as a go-between is the first in the list of Saṃghātiśeṣa offenses for nuns may be an indication that this was a relatively frequent misbehaviour on the part of Buddhist nuns. It is only the fifth in the list for monks, which perhaps shows that monks were less inclined to take up this task, perhaps precisely because it was less convenient for them to gain access to the women. As we have seen above, the *Kāmasūtra* only prescribes female messengers (*dūtīs*) to do the job, not males.

<sup>36</sup> In this play, however, the likelihood of this is undermined by the fact that the lay population with whom the nuns are on such intimate terms are a Brahmin family.



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