THE THREE KALIDĀSAS

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This is the celebrated stanza of Rājaśekhara quoted in Jalhana’s Sūkti-Muktāvāli, among other places, which refers to Kalidasa:

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\begin{align*}
\text{ekō'pi jīyate hanta kālidāso na kena cit} & \\
\text{ṣyāgāre lalitogāre kālidāsa-trayī kim u} & \quad 4.60
\end{align*}
\]

We may give the drift of this stanza as follows: “Even one Kalidasa, alas, none may hope to excel in the treatment of love—much less three Kalidāsas!”

There are several implications in a statement like this which we may be clear about, before we proceed:

1. There were three poets of the name of Kalidasa.
2. They all lived before Rājaśekhara, i.e., 900 A.D.
3. They were all equally famous; and
4. Famous for the treatment of love in particular.

Now there have been many poets of the name of Kalidasa, but whether of these at least three lived before Rājaśekhara is doubtful. But there is nothing impossible in such an assumption. There might have been and we might have lost traces of them. Or on the authority of Rājaśekhara it might be possible to place three of the available Kalidasas earlier than A.D. 900. But all attempts to identify the three Kalidasas generally ignore this most important implication of the stanza, that they were all equally famous for the treatment of love. Though unfortunately there is no dearth of amorous poems of questionable taste attributed to Kalidasa, we must not forget that Rājaśekhara’s taste is of a fairly high order, though it may not be quite infallible. To obviate this difficulty, some divide the available works of Kalidasa into three groups—into plays, mahākāvya and khaṇḍakāvyas—and attribute one group to each of the three Kalidasas. This division no doubt satisfies all conditions including the one about the treatment of love—because two of these groups deal exclusively with love and the mahākāvya group partly does so. But it assumes that there were no other works of Kalidasa, leaving out of account works like the Kunteśvara-Dautya, for example, from the argument, of whose nature we of course know next to nothing. But worst of all, such a division is vitiated by a fundamental defect—a false assumption that a poet cannot be a dramatist also. It is much more reasonable a priori to argue about

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1 Ed. Embar Krishnamacharya, GOS. LXXXII. Baroda, 1938.
individual works like the Mālavikāgnimitra or the Rtusamhāra as works of another Kalidasa, as some actually have done.

But before trying to identify these three Kalidasas it is worth while examining whether Rājaśekhara himself affords any more evidence. Of the 37 stanzas about individual poets attributed to Rājaśekhara in the Sūkti-Muktāvali there is only one stanza—this one—which refers to Kalidasa, though he has three or four about Bāna and two about Bhāravi and Māgha. These probably were his favourite poets—especially Bāna. However, in a stanza about Kumāradāsa (4.76) there is accidentally a reference to a ‘Raghuvamśa’, and in a stanza about Vijayānkā (4.93) another to the Vādarbhī style of a Kalidasa—though Rājaśekhara does not disclose which of the three Kalidasas unless we assume that all the three love poets wrote also in the sam Vādarbhī style. Thus there is no further evidence about the three Kalidasas in the quoted stanzas about individual poets. A similar conclusion follows from an examination of Rājaśekhara’s other works. Except for this stanza there is no mention anywhere of the three Kalidasas in his available works.

Moreover we are beset with another misgiving. As a rule Rājaśekhara has at least one stanza about every poet he mentions, and he has always something to say about the nature or theme of his or her work, including some evaluation of it, and quite often even the name of the most celebrated work of the author. But in the present case he must be understood to have departed from this rule. He has only one stanza about three Kalidasas in which he mentions nothing more than this, that they were all love poets. This all too brief reference can hardly be termed praise, and it is intended to be shared by three of the greatest Sanskrit poets and dramatists, as it appears! This is indeed very strange. Moreover it is most unlikely that, if Rājaśekhara had written more stanzas about ‘Kalidasa,’ Jalhana would have omitted to include them in his anthology. The fate of all the three Kalidasas therefore is sealed at one stroke by faint praise. But this is hardly probable. Except for this stanza there seems to be no reference anywhere, either in Rājaśekhara’s work or in the works of any other author to three Kalidasas of equal celebrity. In fact we might not have known of their existence, otherwise than through this stanza.

It is most probable therefore that Rājaśekhara never meant to speak of three Kalidasas at all. If he did so, probably the fact would have been betrayed elsewhere in his work. Even if his taste is questioned and it is assumed that he is putting poets of unequal merit together, there still seems no other evidence in favour of it. It seems to know

1 jānakāharaṇaṁ kartum rāghuvamśe sthitē sati |
   kaviḥ humāradāsaḥ ca rāvaṇas ca yadi kṣamaḥ ||
2 sarasvatīśa karnāti vijayānka jayatyasau |
   yā vidarbhaṅgirāṁ vāsaḥ kālidāsaḍanantaram ||
no more about it than we do. We are therefore reduced to the necessity of asking ourselves whether his stanza is capable of a different interpretation and whether all our difficulties may not be due to a misunderstanding of its significance.

I suggest therefore a plausible solution. I understand the crucial word *trayī* not merely in the sense of ‘triad’ but also in its other sense of ‘the Triad’, i.e., ‘the three Vedas’. The stanza would then constitute an example of what is called an ‘apparent contradiction’, a *virodhaḥbhāsa*. Such play on words and figures of sense and sound even in these stanzas about poets are quite common. The Kalidasa-*trayī* would then refer to the works of the *only* Kalidasa. I find justification for this interpretation, which resolves the riddle in my opinion, in two factors. One is the preference of the word *trayī* to the word *trayaṁ* which would equally well have served the purpose without loss of metre—why, would have added some nasal assonance—if Rājaśekhara intended really to refer to three Kalidasas; whereas the word *trayī* would only apparently do so, while adding to the beauty of the stanza and including a subtle evaluation as we shall see. The other factor is the use of the word *udgāra* in the compound *lalitodgāre* rhyming happily with *śrīgāre*. This word is not very common in use. The word is formed according to Pāṇini (*unmyorgrah | 3.3.29*) by adding the *kṛt* affix *ghan* to the root *gr*: The Kāśikā on this says: *gr: śabde, gr: nigarane, dvayor api graham| Anc this fact is borne out by usage also. In addition to its meanings like ‘disgorging’, ‘throwing out’, etc., it can also mean ‘a roar’ or ‘repeating’, ‘narration (*kathana*)’ or ‘citing repeatedly’. In conjunction with the word *trayī* this *lalitodgāra* might therefore suggest a contrast to Vedic ‘repetition’ or ‘recitation’ which is not generally found associated with what is *lalita*—the charming and the romantic. The word *lalita* might refer both to the theme as well as to the treatment of the theme. The stanza would then mean something like this. As the apparent contradiction in *trayī* is untranslatable, I use the word ‘triad’ in both the senses of ‘three’ and ‘Veda’:

Even one Kalidasa, alas, none may excel in the sweet chants of love—much less ‘the Kalidasa-Triad’!

By such an interpretation of Rājaśekhara’s stanza, I suggest he may be said to have implied many things of value in Kalidasa’s art.

Kalidasa is predominantly a poet of love. *Śrīgāra* is the theme of nearly all his work. In the *Rtusamhāra* we see him viewing Nature in all her changing beauty and glory, through the eyes of happy lovers. Everything animate or inanimate, in man or Nature is described by the poet to his anonymous beloved, as coloured by their mutual passion. The *Meghadūta*, on the other hand, almost personifies the unhappy state of love in separation. Freed from all earthly stain *vipralambha*
is almost rarefied and idealised in this lyric poem. All the three plays are romantic comedies of love. The Mālavikāgnimitra deals with the story of a Prince who, for the first time, though a little late in life, is really in love—and then with a disguised princess. His passion though strong is curbed by his regard to his queens and restrained by a desire for reciprocation of love on the part of his beloved. The Vikramottor vasiya pictures the yearning of a mortal prince for the love of an immortal nymph, whose yearning is not less. In this play the very limits of human passion are reached. The Śākuntala deals with the most impassioned love between man and woman chastened by suffering and transmuted, by passing through a baptism of fire, into an almost divine state. In the Kumārasambhava we actually find in allegoric form Kalidasa’s philosophy of love as exemplified in the lives of the ideal couple, Śiva and Pārvati, the parents of the universe.¹ The Raghuvaṁśa alone forms an exception to this general rule. Even here Kalidasa’s favourite theme appears in the tragic love story of Induma and Aja. We thus see that Kalidasa’s theme is predominantly Śṛṅgāra. His work is the Bible of Lovers—the Śṛṅgāra-Veda.

There are also suggestions in the use of the expression lalitotgāre—of Kalidasa’s love for music, the dance and song. Kalidasa’s work is ‘Veda’ and more; unlike the Veda which is only holy, this is holy and beautiful.

It is even possible that Rājaśekhara intended by the word trayī also to suggest some three works of Kalidasa—possibly the three plays, or the three types of kavya, all of which have love as their theme. Mention of great works of poets is almost the rule in his other stanzas, as we have seen. But such problems as these will be solved probably by the discovery of the source-book of these stanzas.

If my interpretation is accepted, then all our doubts and difficulties in connection with this stanza will disappear. The bogey of the three Kalidasas will be laid for ever. The stanza will then constitute a magnificent tribute to the greatest merit of this world poet and dramatist in handling the theme of love, by raising his work to the status of a Bible of Love. ‘And, alas, none may excel him in this!’

¹ See M. Hiriyanna, Popular Essays in Indian Philosophy, pp. 37-42.