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Elisa Ganser, *Theatre and Its Other: Abhinavagupta on Dance and Dramatic Acting*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. 2021. Gonda Indological Studies 23.XII, pp. 412. ISBN9789004449817 (hardback).—Reviewed by Halina Marlewicz  (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)

The book, *Theatre and Its Other*, by Elisa Ganser is a study which can be subsumed under the heading of a well-established Italian tradition of research into the works of Kashmirian philosophers and art theoreticians of Sanskrit literary tradition. In her book Ganser discusses a fragment of *Abhinavabhāratī*, one of the works by Abhinavagupta, the 11th-century philosopher from Kashmir. The focus of Ganser's monographic study is theory, but more importantly, the performative aspects of dance and dramatic acting of medieval India.

Abhinavagupta, a follower of the Śaiva religious tradition, came from a noble family cultivating literary and theatrical traditions. A polymath, an art connoisseur and art philosopher with a deep interest in the histrionic art and aesthetics, who became most famous as the theoretician of the *pratyābhijñā* branch of Śaiva Tantra philosophy and of classical Indian theatre and literature; and the author of more than a dozen philosophical works in Sanskrit, not to mention literary ones; Abhinavagupta may be considered one of the world's subtlest philosophical minds. However, his work does not seem to be sufficiently known in the Western world.

It would be correct to say that, to some extent, Abhinavagupta's subtle and often extremely involved way of thinking, as well as his unique style, which demands from the reader a heightened attentiveness and expertise in his idiosyncratic philosophical vocabulary, makes the task of reading and translating his works challenging.¹ Yet it is also these very features combined with the originality of his seminal ideas that make Abhinavagupta our contemporary;² a thinker, whose works retain their philosophical value and continue to be read and interpreted. One can only hope that his ideas may become better known in the world beyond the Indology or Sanskrit tradition.

It therefore is fortunate that Elisa Ganser devoted her study to the analysis and interpretation of a relatively small portion of the work—written by this complex and difficult thinker—titled *Abhinavabhāratī* (ABh), a commentary to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (NS), which in turn is a comprehensive encyclopaedical work on Indian theatre, most probably composed around the 3rd to 5th century CE and attributed to the mythical author Bharata. *Abhinavabhāratī* can be translated simply as *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on Bharata's Treatise*. One can also follow the suggestion of Filip Ruciński who proposes to translate it as the *Revived Art of Bharata*,³ which rendering is not only innovative but also more evocative of the original

¹ Sheldon Pollock concludes his short introduction to Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa* thus: "In a real sense, it is far too early in the history of Abhinavagupta studies for anyone to presume to describe his theory with any precision, let alone completeness" (Pollock 2016: 193). See also Ganser 2021: 215.

² Just like Shakespeare is for the literary critic Jan Kott, in his influential study *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, cf. Kott 1991.

³ Cf. Ruciński 2021: 115 and ff. Such translation of the title of the treatise is, of course, philologically acceptable, as the Sanskrit word *abhinava*, which constitutes a part of the name of Abhinavagupta, means exactly new, young, fresh or modern. Ruciński's proposition of translating the title *Abhinavabhāratī* so that it conveys the sense of modern (to Abhinavagupta) interpretation of the respected treatise does not seem to be too far-fetched, especially since Abhinavagupta did, indeed, introduce new interpretations of Bharata's concepts, arguably the most famous is adding the ninth *rasa*, aesthetic experience, namely *śānta rasa*, a taste of inner calm, which for him was the *rasa* of all the *rasas* and the basis of all the remaining eight *rasas* enumerated by Bharata.

and individual approach of Abhinavagupta to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the work he supposedly only commented upon but as a matter of fact created a highly original interpretation of it.

The monographic study, whose textual focus is an excerpt from *Abhinavabhāratī* to *Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.261cd–269ab devoted to dance, is divided into two main parts and four chapters. This division is a bit misleading to the reader as far as the numbering of parts of the book goes. However, it becomes an opportunity, as good as any, to practice attentiveness. Therefore, the reader should pay attention to the fact that the Introduction (pp. 1–13) and Chapter 1, “Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinavabhāratī: Trends and Open Questions” (pp. 14–60) come before Part One of the book. Part One titled “Practice and Aesthetics of Indian Dance”, begins with Chapter 2 “Formalizing Dance, Codifying Performance” (pp. 63–127), to be followed by Chapter 3 “The Aesthetics of Dance” (pp. 128–212). Chapter 4, “Introduction to the Edition” (pp. 215–250), together with other sections of the book, not listed as subsequent chapters, make up Part 2 titled “Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of Abhinavabhāratī *ad* Nāṭyaśāstra 4.261cd–269ab” (pp. 215–377). The two independent non-chapter sections are titled “Analysis of ABh *ad* NŚ 4.261cd–269ab” (pp. 251–258) and “Edition and Translation of *Abhinavabhāratī ad* Nāṭyaśāstra 4.261cd–269ab” (pp. 260–377). These are followed by the Appendix: Hemaçandra’s *Kāvyānuśāsana* (pp. 379–382) where the Sanskrit text mentioned in the title is given in transcription; Bibliography (pp. 383–405) is divided into three parts where Part A provides the list of printed editions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*, Part B lists (other) Sanskrit Sources, and Part C gives Secondary Sources; and a helpful subject Index (pp. 406–413) of Sanskrit technical terms, English terminology, and the names of the authors quoted. A short Preface to the book may be found on pp. ix–xii.

My minor grievances concern the division of the book into parts and chapters (as well as subchapters, which I am not going to enumerate here in order not to complicate the matter further), which is rather perplexing and not helpful. I realized this when I tried to describe in detail the content of the book above.

From the Preface the reader gets to know that the book is “the result of a complete revision both in form and in content, of the doctoral dissertation defended in Rome in November 2010” (p. x). It is also here that the author informs us about the objective and the focal point of her book, immediately related to the question formulated in the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī*, Abhinavagupta’s commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The question is whether dance should be considered different or not different from theatre in its nature and purpose. It is around this focal point of the original Sanskrit text that the book revolves.

Introduction (pp. 1–13) offers an overview of the subject matter to be addressed in the study, establishes the field of enquiry, gives a brief account of the text with special attention to the fragment in focus, and presents the structure of the book in front of us.

Chapter 1 (pp. 14–60) provides a detailed account of the editorial history and textual reception of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī* (15–18), together with succinct but informative evaluation of the discussed editions. In the subchapter titled “The Archiving Performance: Text and Images”, we are presented with a short but most engaging narrative of how one publication of the text of *Abhinavabhāratī*, which was accompanied by reproductions of the dance bas-reliefs from the gates of the Naṭarāja temple in Chidambaram, allowed the Indian dance enthusiasts and researchers to find a direct link between the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the living traditions of dance today (Ganser 2021: 19 and ff.). By describing the far-reaching consequences of the publication of the *Abhinavabhāratī* to what became later known as “Indian classical dance(s)”, the subchapter becomes a vivid exemplification of “how to do things with words” in the very Austinian sense of the expression (Austin 1975). It was indeed this combination of words and images in the publication that had an astonishing performative effectiveness, which allowed Indian scholars and enthusiasts of reviving and reforming the art to establish not only the antiquity but the overall characteristics of Indian types of “classical” dances.

In the subsequent subchapter Ganser discussed the issue of the place of dance in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and the *Abhinavabhāratī* as a medieval document on performance. It is also here that Ganser rightly indicates the lack of studies of Abhinavagupta's aesthetics which would focus on the performative aspects of Indian theatre/dance. Ganser notices that a relative scarcity of studies which would emphasize these aspects is due to a couple of factors, among them the highly technical character of how the staging process is dealt with by the Sanskrit theoretician, the corrupt state of the text in the available editions and manuscripts, as well as the very fact that the performative techniques Abhinavagupta writes about are no longer extant due to the art being ephemeral in nature (Ganser 2021: 2).

Part 1 of the book titled "Practice and Aesthetics of Indian Dance" begins with a synopsis of the textual history of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*. It is also in this part that Ganser focuses on the structure of the fourth chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra* on dance, its reception in the twentieth century, as well as on the aesthetic of dance. Chapter 2, "Formalizing Dance, Codifying Performance" examines first a rather blurry division of dance into *nāṭya*, *nr̥tta* and *nr̥tya* as that which is to be placed "between movement and mimesis"⁴. Then comes the discussion of dance as technique (pp. 76–88), to be followed by a detailed analysis of the stylistic types of dance described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī* by ancient authors as vehement (*tāṇḍava*), and delicate (*sukumāra*, *lāsya*) (pp. 89–104), along with the question of whether the two types were unambiguously identified in the past with the gender of the performer, as they are today. It is followed by a discussion of the idea of *nr̥tta* (pp. 105–110) and that of tradition, creativity, and artistry, discussed from a Śaiva perspective (pp. 111–127). In Subchapter 3 the aesthetics of dance is discussed under the following headings: "Dance within Theatre, Dance without Theatre" (pp. 132–138); "Enacting Emotions: A *vademecum* for the Actor"

⁴ The phrase is, of course, meant to resonate with the study of Mandakranta Bose, *Movement and Mimesis: The Idea of Dance in the Sanskrit Tradition* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012).

(pp. 139–148); “Communication without Words” (pp. 148–173) with the subtopic of “Dramatic Mimesis vs Imitation”; “Dance, Beauty, and the Fabrication of Dramatic Fiction” (pp. 174–201) which Ganser divides into the problems of the “Psychagogic Power of Dance” and “Dance and Fiction”. The final subchapter here deals with the idea of *abhinaya* in dance (pp. 201–212). Chapters 2 and 3 introduce us to the question of how dance evolved in history and the aesthetics of dance, entailing a reflection on the mimetic process and the different roles of non-verbal communication media, such as dance and music, and dramatic acting, all analysed within the larger framework of Abhinavagupta’s rasa theory.

Part 2 of the book contains the critical edition and translation of the *Abhinavabhāratī ad Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.261cd–269ab. Here is the last Chapter 4 of the book, which is the result of the author’s painstaking efforts to produce the final, critical edition of the text after consulting “all the available manuscript sources, printed editions, and external testimonia” (p. 6).

The general remarks on the transmission of the *Abhinavabhāratī* (pp. 215–218) are followed by detailed information on what printed editions and manuscripts of the translated text have been used and scrutinized by the author (pp. 219–246). Then follow notes on the Sanskrit text and its translation, which are meant as clarifications of Abhinavagupta’s commentary (pp. 247–250).

Before the last part of the main body of the book, which contains the critical edition of the Sanskrit text of the *Abhinavabhāratī ad Nāṭyaśāstra* 4.261cd–269ab and its translation conveniently printed on opposite pages and furnished with copious notes, there is a very useful analysis of the general layout of the structure of the discussion (p. 251–258) on whether dance is to be considered as different or nondifferent from theatre. In this way, the reader can have an overview of the whole debate, which is often difficult to follow when we immerse ourselves in the intricacies of the discussion in the original text. The synthesis clearly presents the opponent’s view or first thesis (*pūrvapakṣa*), the positions of various adversaries, their refutations and the final presentation of the con-

clusive statements about the subject in question (*siddhānta*). Anyone who has ever read a Sanskrit philosophical text will certainly appreciate this.

The Sanskrit text has been critically edited through a complete examination of all available manuscript sources, printed editions, and external testimonia. Although “all the available manuscripts of the *Abhinavabhāratī* postdate the original work by many centuries and contain many passages that look corrupt beyond any possible reconstruction” (Ganser 2021: 215), the author managed to tentatively reconstruct the original text, by collating and comparing the manuscripts and by resorting to other available testimony.

It is indeed a difficult task to indicate all the salient features of the monograph under review. Although quite a few Indologists have translated portions of the fourth chapter of the *Abhinavabhāratī* into European languages, and there are two translations into Hindi (Ganser 2021: 8, fn. 15), it is Ganser who gives us the first complete English translation of the critically edited Sanskrit text, making it available also to academics from the field of comparative studies in aesthetics and theatre. Introduction and Part 1 of the monograph provide a complete analysis of many intricate questions related to the old debate on how dance and theatre, and in particular acting on stage, were and are related to one another. We engage in the discussion about change and novelty in the theory and practice of dance/theatre; we learn about historic evolution of different forms of dance and theory related to it; we are introduced to many new hypotheses based on the hermeneutics of the Sanskrit text and the questions its analysis and interpretation raised (e.g., starting with the issue of the transmission of the *Abhinavabhāratī* after its composition, to shifts in theorizing the aesthetics and performative practices of dance(s) through ages, and many more).

The reviewer of the book written by Ganser—who in the reviewed monograph appears to the reader as a skilled, meticulous and attentive critical editor of a Sanskrit text (even if only of a small portion of a big work); as a historian of ideas related to Indian dance well acquainted with the state of the art, as well as having a good

judgement of it; as an inquisitive academic, who proposed a series of plausible hypothesis related to the questions raised both by the text itself, as well as by its reception over the ages and in the field research—can only welcome the result of the research with appreciation. For the first time, specialists in the field receive such a complete study on Indian dance/theatre. The additional bonus is that the book is available in electronic form under Open Access initiative and can be downloaded from the publisher's website: <https://oapen.org>

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