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**Mistreated Vasanta: Comical Degradation of Ritual in  
the *Hāsyārṇavaprahasana***

SUMMARY: The *Hāsyārṇava* of Jagadīśvara (14<sup>th</sup> century CE), because of its crude and, sometimes, vulgar tones, is one of the least studied *prahasanas*. The work depicts the celebration of the Spring Festival, Vasantotsava, with particular features which have few parallels in Sanskrit literature. The sacred meaning of the festivity in itself, which showed connections with the cult of Kāma and in this way centred on the themes of birth and regeneration, is mocked through comical devices. These themes contribute to outline a frame characterized by vulgar and degraded sexual elements. Despite its farcical and grotesque atmosphere, this comical piece undoubtedly underlines deep connections existing between a ritualistic act (understood here as the undertaking of the rite in the *prahasana* itself) and performative theatre in general.

KEYWORDS: *kāvya*, *rūpaka*, *prahasana*, festival, spring.

The Vasantotsava, ‘Spring Festival’, is one of the many festivities occurring in the Indian calendar and is celebrated, together with other rituals, in the lunar month of Caitra, which corresponds to March–April, coinciding exactly with the arrival of spring. Although nowadays it is not executed in its original form in India, it occupied a considerable position during ancient and, especially, medieval times. Its prominence is highlighted in fact by the exhaustive and lengthy descriptions of

it given in Sanskrit sources,<sup>1</sup> which “are not unanimous as to precisely when in the spring season it was to be celebrated” (Anderson 1988: 65).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Anderson pointed out that

the *Vasantotsava* was not, in fact, a specific Spring Festival composed of specific ritual practices to be celebrated at a specific time but, rather, that the term *Vasantotsava* was a generic term meaning simply and literally ‘Spring Festival’. That is, the *Vasantotsava* is a term which may include a large number of festivals celebrated in spring, and it may not itself be treated as a festival separate from these other festivals. (*ibid.*: 76)<sup>3</sup>

This festivity, in which “people drink and rejoice in the company of women, throw water through syringes and coloured powder, on each other” (Raghavan 1979: 86), showed many connections to the cult of Kāma: celebrations of the God of love, according to the sources, were included in the *Vasantotsava* or sometimes even equated to it (Anderson 1988: 69). In this sense, the arrival of the good season, bringing the regeneration of the earth from the ‘deadly’ winter, shows beyond doubts close affinities and connections with sexuality, youth and procreation. Moreover, the festival was also an occasion in ancient and medieval times for staging theatrical pieces: as is known, this is corroborated by the prologues of many Sanskrit plays.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A vivid description of it can be found for example at the opening of the first act of the *Ratnāvalī* by Harṣa (I, prose before stanza 10), with the depiction of music and dances in the royal palace and the city; see Anderson 1988: 67 and Raghavan 1979: 86.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of the problematics connected to the names and the overlaps of *Vasantotsava* with other festivals is beyond the scope of the present paper; for further details see Anderson 1988, which was later reworked as the first part of her more elaborated and canonical study of the topic (Anderson 1993, especially pp. 11–29).

<sup>3</sup> See also Bakker 2014: 125, note no. 391.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance *Ratnāvalī* (*sūtradhāra*’s first prose, after I, 4): *adyāhaṃ vasantotsave sabahumānam āhūya nānādigdeśāgatena rājñah śrīharsa-devasya pādapadmopajīvinā rājasamūhenokto yathā—asmatsvaminā śrīharsa-devenāpūrvavasturacanālaṃkṛtā ratnāvalī nāma nāṭikā kṛtā | sā cāsmabhiḥ*

It is an interesting detail that in some literary works the Vasantotsava and the arrival of spring in general are used as a theatrical frame in which the dramatic action is placed. This is an evident element in the comic genre (*bhāṇa* and *prahasana*) if we consider “the relationship between satire and the Spring Festival, the possible development of satire out of farce and farce out of more ancient spring rite” (Siegel 1987: 79). It is the case, for example, of the *Ubhayābhisārikā* of Vararuci (5<sup>th</sup> century CE?; 100 BCE–200 CE according to Warder 1990: 347), a theatrical monologue in which the *viṭa*, a rogue, greets the coming of Spring and meets various fictitious characters in the course of his wanderings.

A more complex in its implications and fascinating example of the depiction and celebration of Vasantotsava, where the ritual occurrence becomes the frame for the dramatic plot, is the *Hāsyārṇavaprahasana* (“Ocean of Laughter”) of Jagadīśvara Bhaṭṭācārya (approximately 14<sup>th</sup> century CE). This work, together with the *Dhūrta-samāgama* by Jyotirīśvara (13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century CE), is traditionally defined as a “spring *prahasana*”, a vernal farce (Siegel 1987: 78). Its author, about whom, unfortunately, we do not have any kind of information, was supposedly native to Bengal, according to Ramaratnam (Ramaratnam 2014: 209). The farce, composed in two *aṅkas*, depicts in fact the celebration of the Spring Festival, but in a very peculiar and unique way.

The work opens with two *maṅgalaśloka*s which refer to the amorous games of Śiva and Pārvatī:<sup>5</sup>

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*śrotraparamparayā śrutā na tu prayogato dṛṣṭvā* |—“Today, on the occasion of the Spring Festival, respectfully addressed by all the kings who came here from regions of different directions, subjected to the lotus feet of the glorious king Harṣadeva, I was asked this way: ‘Our King, Śrīharṣadeva, has composed a *nāṭikā* entitled *Ratnāvalī*, adorned by a new plot arrangement; we have heard about it from repeated reports but have not seen it staged’”. (All translations in the present article are made by the author.)

<sup>5</sup> For the Sanskrit text of the *Hāsyārṇava* I make reference to the edition by Chaturvedī for Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan (1963). This edition

*svedasyanditasāndracandanacayaṃ dorvallibandhaśramāt  
ūrdhvaśvāsapariskhalatsmarakathaṃ sandaṣṭadantacchadam |  
śītkārāñcitalocanaṃ sapulakaṃ bhrāntabhru nṛtyatkaraṃ  
pārvatyāṃ surataṃ mude rasavatām āstāṃ mṛḍānīpateḥ || I, 1 ||*

May the love-making of Śiva and Pārvatī become the source of pleasure for the knowers of *rasa*—the dance of hands, eyebrow confused with thrill, the oblique look [accompanied by] the sound of pleasure,<sup>6</sup> the lip bitten by the teeth, the love talking tottering due to the shortness of breath and sandal flowing because of the intense sweating for the fatigue of the embrace.

The depiction of the love-making of the two deities, which can bestow birth and regeneration to the whole universe, is followed by the entrance of the *sūtradhāra*, affirming that the staging of the *prahasana* is requested by Śiva himself, who declares that “this [farce] composed by me is appropriate for the Spring time”.<sup>7</sup> The literary route shifts now from the divine *sambhogāśṛṅgāra* to the earthly world, where the effects of the union of the heavenly couple are clearly visible in the arrival of Spring:

*āsāsu prasaranti kokilakalasvānā nikuñjāntare  
guñjanto bhramarāḥ samutkamanasaś cumbanti puṣpāvalīm |  
sparśotsāritamallikāparimalaḥ śrīkhaṇḍavāyur vaha-  
ty evaṃ kaṃ na karoty ayaṃ smaraśarākrāntaṃ vasantodayaḥ || I, 7 ||*

The melodious song of cuckoos is spreading in the thicket in all directions; the buzzing bees, with eager minds, kiss the row of flowers; the Malaya breeze carries the fragrance of jasmine diffused by its touch. Whom does not this coming of Spring assail with the arrows of Kāma?

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contains numerous misprints and mistakes in the text: I have provided corrections and emendations wherever necessary.

<sup>6</sup> *Śītkāra* literally means ‘the sound *śīt*’, which can denote at the same time pleasure or pain. Taking into consideration the content of the present stanza, here the term clearly refers to the joy of amorous play.

<sup>7</sup> *Hāsyārṇava*, prose passage after I, 3: “...*surabhisamayocitenāsmad-viracitena...*”.

This classical description, typical of *kāvya* poetry, establishes a link between the arrival of spring and the amorous sentiment through the images of the awakening and active nature (cuckoos and bees) and the reference to the power of Kāma, in this way stressing such a link since the outset of the play. These two stereotypical stanzas, in which the presence of the aesthetic sentiment of love is indeed perceivable (the sexual union of the gods, the bees “with eager minds”), are in this way connected also through the employment of a clearly erotic terminology.

Furthermore, “these standard determinants of the aesthetic sentiment of love [...] build expectations which are suddenly subverted with the entrance of characters who are inappropriate to that mood” (Siegel 1987: 79); in fact, at the end of the *prastāvanā*, the king Anayasindhu (‘Ocean of Misrule’<sup>8</sup>), sovereign of a wicked kingdom, makes his entry on the stage, followed by his minister Kumativarman (‘Shelter of Evil Intellect’). The latter informs now that the celebration of the Spring Festival will be led in a brothel, the house of the old harlot Bandhurā (‘Charming’). The king, desiring to assist in the ritual and in the initiation into the erotic art (*manmathatantra*) of a young courtesan, decides to reach the place, declaring “I have gained the merit of hundred sacred places”.<sup>9</sup> Anayasindhu is welcomed with auspicious songs connected to spring (stanza I, 14) and, after a brief dialogue with the prostitute, the young lady, Mṛgāṅkalekhā (‘Moon’) enters the house; astonished by her beauty, the king sings her praises:

*sañjātenduparābhavaṃ parilasad vyālola[em; yālola]netrāñjanaṃ  
bhrāntabhrūlatam aiṇanābhitilakaṃ śrīkhaṇḍapatrālakaṃ |  
bandhūkādharasundaraṃ suramunivyāmohivākyāmṛtaṃ  
trailokyādbhutapaṅkajaṃ varatanor āsyaṃ na kasya priyam || I, 15 ||*

<sup>8</sup> In *prahasana* texts, the names of the characters always refer to moral, physical or behavioural connotations, obviously distorted by comic features; see Ramaratnam 2014: 65–66.

<sup>9</sup> *Hāsyārṇava*, prose after I, 13: “*prāptaṃ mayā tīrthaśataparyāṭanapunyaṃ*”; here the comic distortion of the sacred acceptance of *tīrtha* is very clear.

Her loveliness overthrowing the beautifully risen moon, the collyrium on her inconstant eyes shining around, her trembling brows like a creeper, the musk *tilaka*, the curl like sandal leaves, her beautiful lips like *bandhūka* flowers, her speech seducing even gods and sages, a lotus, marvel of the three worlds; to whom is not pleasing the face of this beautiful woman?

As can be conjectured, the stereotypical description of the girl's beauty denotes a comparison, or better say a combination between the woman and the spring itself: the young lady is portrayed with elements denoting desirability and sensuality exactly as the spring depicted in stanza I, 7. Moreover, the comparison is suggested also by another reason, as we will see below.

Then the teacher Viśvabhaṇḍa ('Buffoon of the Universe'), summoned to perform the ritual, comes, accompanied by his nasty pupil Kalahāṅkura ('Trouble-maker'). Seeing the old harlot Bandhurā, the boy exclaims in Sanskrit:

*stanau tuṅgau nipatitau kāmasaṃgrāmamarditau |*  
*purastād avalokyāsyā bhagaṃ śuṣkaṃ bhayād iva || I, 24 ||*

Her tits [once] lofty, fell down crushed during the battle of love-making; her cunt saw what happened up there and got dry out of fear, as it were.<sup>10</sup>

The aged prostitute is depicted in a very realistic way and Jagadīśvara does not spare even thorny details in this vivid and almost grotesque

<sup>10</sup> Viśvabhaṇḍa gives a similar account in *Hāsyārṇava* I, 27:

*prāptā prasphuṭakāśapuṣpapadavī keśais tathaiva bhruvā*  
*samyag locanapakṣmaṇā ca jarasā jīrṇā ca dantāvalī |*  
*śuṣkaṃ manmathamandiraṃ nipatitau śuṣkātiśuṣkau stanau*  
*etasyāḥ sutarāṃ tathā 'pi vacane jāgarti puṣpāyudhaḥ || I, 27 ||*

“Her eyebrows, her hair and, in the same way, the lashes attained the condition of white *kāśa* flowers. The teeth are worn out due to old age, the temple of love is dry and the shrivelled breast hang down; even in this way, Love is so evident in her voice!”.

frame; the old woman, whose body is ruined by the signs of time, represents the counterpart of young Mṛgāṅkalekhā. The reference to the “dry” genitals, apart from being vulgar and indelicate, symbolizes the fruitlessness, the inability to give birth, an impossible regeneration. On the other hand, the young courtesan, to be baptized into the erotic art and adulthood, represents the pulse of vitality and procreation. As Siegel correctly points out, “the imagery establishes her as a representative of the fecund, anxious earth in spring in contrast to the depleted earth of winter which is incapable of bestowing birth or nourishment” (Siegel 1987: 80). In this way, the descriptive polarity between Bandhurā and Mṛgāṅkalekhā can be suggested as the seasonal one between winter, the dead season, and spring, the time of regeneration and new birth.

At this point, the aged Viśvabhaṇḍa, sexually attracted to the young lady, asks his pupil, likewise in love with her, to act as a go-between and to arrange a secret meeting. The boy, desiring obviously the girl for himself, approaches Mṛgāṅkalekhā and kisses her out of the blue! The reaction of the Master is immediate:

*V.: (sakrodham) | are pāmara baṭo | matkāṅkṣitāṃ nāyikāṃ āliṅgasi cum-  
bati ca | ataḥ prāyaścittī tvam |*

*K.: ahaṃ ṇa, tumaṃ, jado sissāliṅgidāṃ ṇaiāṃ makkāṃkhidāṃ jappesi |*

*V.: yasyāṅgasya yogāt gajo hastīty ucyate tadabhidhānam aṅgam tava  
chedyaṃ bhavati, yena guruvāñchitā nāyikā sprṣṭā |*

*K.: aṅgaṇājahaṇarajjanaṇāmaheam aṅgam tuha bicchejjaṃ bhodi, jeṇa  
sissaparicum̐bidāṃ ṇaiāṃ svabāṃchidāṃ jappesi |*

*V.: adharo yasyācchādanam tasyotpātanam yuktaṃ, yena asyā adharah  
pīḍitaḥ |*

*K.: ligi pperaṇeti dhātuṇor ac-paccaeṇa jaṃ rūam sijjhaṃ bhodi tuha tassa  
uppātanam joggaṃ, jeṇa sissacum̐bidāṃ ṇaiāṃ pecchasi |*

V.: Oh, you wicked young Brahmin! You embrace and kiss the lady I long for! You will pay!

K.: Not me, but you, who are conversing with the girl desired and embraced by your student!

V.: This hand of yours, in connection with which an elephant is called *hasti*,<sup>11</sup> is to be cut off, because it touched the woman desired by the Master!

K.: Your penis, the limb called ‘pleaser of pudenda’ by women, is to be uprooted, because you speak with this girl desired by you and embraced by the student!

V.: The things whose covering is the lip, your teeth, are to be smashed, because by them her lip was bitten!

K.: The word which is obtained by affixation of a vowel to the root *lig*, your penis,<sup>12</sup> must be eradicated, because you are watching the girl kissed by the student!<sup>13</sup>

The quarrel for the possession of the lady degenerates in aggressive tones, with mutual menaces of mutilation and emasculation. These kinds of dialogues are very common in *prahasana* literature, where Master and disciple argue about futile reasons. Moreover, this is not a simple dispute between *guru* and pupil: the fight is in fact

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<sup>11</sup> Monier-Williams 2005: 1295: “having hands, the animal with a hand i.e with a trunk, an elephant”.

<sup>12</sup> *Lig* is probably a Prakrit form for Sanskrit *liṅg-*, from which *liṅgam* ‘penis’ is formed through affixation of *ac*, a grammatical term denoting all vowels. As the previous one, this is an example of *nālikā*, enigma, one of the thirteen limbs of *vīthīs* employed in *prahasana*: in the *Daśarūpaka* III, 19b, its definition runs as below: *sopahāsā nigūḍārthā nālikaiva prahelikā* || III, 19 ||—“*Nālikā* is a riddle that is humorous, with a hidden meaning”. See also Sternbach 1975: 103. I would like to thank Hermina Cielas (Jagiellonian University) for this last reference.

<sup>13</sup> Prose passage after I, 49.



projected into a divine/mythological frame; in stanza 49, Kalahānkura, resorting to Sanskrit,<sup>14</sup> affirms:

*svāditam sudaśanacchadasīdhu nāmarair vidhurabuddhibhir asyāḥ |  
yad vidhantudamukhād avaśiṣṭaḥ pīyate pramuditair hāriṇāṅkaḥ || I, 49 ||*

The liquor covering her beautiful teeth is not tasted by stupid Immortals; delighted, they drink the moon which is the leftover from Rāhu's mouth.

The gaze shifts now from the world of men to the divine one, following an inverse and comical route in contrast to the one observed at the opening of the farce, where the descriptive trajectory started from the otherworldly regions. In the same way as the demon of eclipse provoked the wrath of the gods stealing the nectar of immortality, the boy mocks and incites the fight with his old Master (Siegel 1987: 80). The equating between the naughty disciple and Rāhu is eased also by the obvious word play on *hāriṇāṅka*, 'moon', exactly as the meaning of the name *Mṛgāṅkalekhā*—as the moon was the object of Rāhu's desire, the young lady is the one of the young disciple. The quarrel is clearly another example of a harsh and distorted seasonal contest, in which youth (Kalahānkura) and old age (the wintry *Viśvabhaṇḍa*<sup>15</sup>) fight for the erotic and exclusive possession of the young courtesan/Vasanta: youth and old age are then hardly fighting for regeneration and life.

The dialectic fights, full of indecency and vulgarity, are typical of the spring festivals or regeneration rites, where the verbal license was a fundamental part of the celebration of the ritual.<sup>16</sup> The comically sacral

<sup>14</sup> In Sanskrit dramas characters speaking in a Prakrit dialect sometimes resort to Sanskrit, through the caption *samskṛtam āśritya*.

<sup>15</sup> In stanza I, 40, looking into a mirror, the Master is scared by the obvious signs of time on his face and as much surprised by his erotic desires.

<sup>16</sup> If we assume the development of farce from ancient ritual, especially the spring ones, we can think about this connection between dialectic quarrels, licentiousness and rite in a wider perspective: Attic comedy in ancient Greek, especially by Aristophanes, is a clear example of this dynamic.

meaning of the previous quarrel is justified moreover by the mockery of the ritual itself; the image of the emasculation is suggestive in fact of Vedic sorcery: as noticed also by Siegel, a similar image can be found among the *Atharvaveda*'s spells for impotence (*ibid.*: 81).<sup>17</sup>

Master and disciple start to tussle in a furious way and Bandhurā, pointing out the arrival of the night, puts an end to the fight, leaving the responsibility for resolving the matter to Madanāndhamiśra ('Blinded by Love'), who will come the next day to officiate the morning rites.

At the beginning of the second act, all the characters enter the stage, waiting for the *purohita*'s arrival. The caption *nepathye* ('behind the scenes') describes in this way his entrance into the dramatic scene:

*veśyāṅgarāgarasalo hitayajñasūtraḥ*  
*śakrāśanāśanavilohitatāranetraḥ |*  
*ābhālapūrṇatilako hṛtadharmakṛcchraḥ*  
*saṃsarpati svayam ayaṃ madanāndhamiśraḥ || II, 5 ||*

The sacred thread reddish due to the make-up of whores, the look shining and reddened for taking hashish, the *tilaka* smeared on the forehead and his penance spoiled: Madanāndhamiśra himself is creeping along.

The ascetic supervenes together with his disciple Kulāla ('Wild Cock'), celebrating the spring and, inebriated by the graces of the good weather, asking himself: "how can I spend such a spring without a harlot?".<sup>18</sup> They reach Bandhurā's brothel and, as everyone else, remain astonished in front of Mṛgāṅkalekhā's beauty; on request of the old bawd, Madanāndhamiśra is preparing himself to celebrate the sacrifice of

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See also Anderson 1993: 29–33 concerning vulgar and obscene songs during the Spring Festival.

<sup>17</sup> Siegel 1987: 81: "...your member, peg-like and in-thrusting, is to fall off, is to be impotent toward women (*Atharvaveda* 7.90.3)".

<sup>18</sup> *Hāsyārṇava*, prose after II, 6: "*kathaṃ mayā asmin madhau gaṇikāṃ vinā jīvanīyam |*".

love, *kandarpahoma*,<sup>19</sup> in his own way. Planning to enjoy the girl, the officer says to himself:

*vedī sajjaghanañ ca tatparisare kuṇḍaṃ varāṅgaṃ phalaṃ  
naivedyāya kucadvayaṃ mṛgadṛśaḥ kāmānalaḥ projjvalaḥ |  
hotāhaṃ khalu śukrahavyanivahaḥ śephaḥsruvo vartate  
nityaṃ pañcaśarādhvaram tyajati kaḥ sadyaḥ sukhaṃ yat phalam || II, 16 ||*

Her thighs are the sacrificial altar and, adjoining, her vagina is the hole for the fire; her tits the fruits for offering and the passion of this doe-eyed girl is the sacred fire. I am the officer who brings the oblation of sperm and my penis is the sacrificial spoon. Who could leave this everlasting love sacrifice whose fruit is the immediate pleasure?<sup>20</sup>

Through this vulgar distortion of sacrifice and its terminology, we assist to a connection between the ritual and the young prostitute: this ‘sacrifice of love’, the initiation into adulthood, will lead the way

<sup>19</sup> The rite is defined in this way in the prose passage after stanza II, 15; *kandarpa*, according to Monier-Williams 2005: 249, is explained as “inflamer even of a god”, namely the god Kāma. Considering anyway another meaning of the expression, the name of this ritual, through the use of *śleṣa*, assumes more defined and vulgar erotic connotations: *kandarpa* signifies in fact *membrum virile*.

<sup>20</sup> This trivial distortion of sacrifice and its ritual objects has a precedent also in *Mattavilāsaprahasana* by Mahendravarman I Pallava (6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century CE), but devoid of all this vulgarity (prose passage after stanza 9): *priye! paśya paśya! | eṣa surāpaṇo yajñavāṭavibhūtim anukaroti | atra hi dhvajastambho yūpaḥ, surā soma, śauṇḍā ṛtvijaḥ, caṣakāś camasāḥ, śūlyamāṃsaprabhṛtaya upadaṃśā havirviśeṣāḥ mattavacanāni yajūṃṣi, gītāni sāmāni, udaṅkāḥ sruvāḥ, tarṣo ’gniḥ, surāpaṇādhipatir yajamānaḥ* |—“O my love, look, look! This tavern has the grace of the sacrificial site: this banner here is the pole for the sacrifice, the liquor is the *soma*, the drunk men are the priests, the cups are the *camasas* [dishes or cups used for drinking *soma*], condiments like roast meat are the oblations, the chit-chatting of the drunks are the *Yajurveda* hymns, their chants are the *Sāmanas*, the containers are the *sruvas* [wooden spoons with two hollows to mix clarified butter], thirst is fire, the host of the tavern is the patron of the sacrifice”.

to the symbolical possibility to bestow life/regeneration, exactly as spring, whose coming is welcomed by means of religious festivals, will give a new life to the world. In my opinion, also this element can suggest the hypothetic tie between Vasanta and Mṛgāṅkalekhā, united by similar connotations in their depictions, as we have seen previously.

With the excuse of private instructions concerning the sacrifice, Madanāndhamiśra takes the lady beyond the stage and enjoys her. They return on the scene and Mṛgāṅkalekhā's body shows the signs of vigorous love making, which, according to stanza 17, possesses all the characteristics of a ritual act:

*āśleṣapīḍitakucam śramagharmitāsyam  
daṣṭādharām laliṭaśītkṛtamīlitākṣam |  
cāṭukticārulalitabhṛcalatkaṭākṣam  
veśyāratam janiśatārjitapuṇyalabhyam || II, 17 ||*

Her breast pressed by the embrace, the face suffering from the heat of fatigue, her lips are bitten and her eyes narrowed with innocent sighs; her lovely speech, charming eyebrows and tremulous glances. The love with a whore is gained by merits obtained in a hundred of existences!

Now Viśvabhaṇḍa incites the ascetic to settle the quarrel between him and his disciple; but Madanāndhamiśra finds the scariest of the solutions: the young courtesan will marry both the old ascetics, Viśvabhaṇḍa and Madanāndhamiśra exactly as Draupadī married the five Pāṇḍava brothers (stanza II, 19). The young Kalahāṅkura and Kulāla, enraged in front of the defeat, find their own solution: both of them, on their part, will marry Bandhurā, the old harlot! In the course of their dialogue, here comes their plan:<sup>21</sup>

*Ku.: baassa, pekkhassa edehiṃ guruehiṃ milidaṃ eṣā miṃkalehā edehiṃ  
jjeba pariṇedabbā, tā kadhaṃ amhehiṃ eṣā baṃdhurā ṇo pariṇiadi |*

*K.: baassa, bhaddaṃ ṇa bhaṇidaṃ, jado amhāṇaṃ bi buḍḍhiā [em; buḍbā]  
suradaṃ ṇa biṇṇādaṃ [em; bissādaṃ] | idaṃ uṇaṃ ekkam paṃ dukkhaṃ eṣā  
tihuṇamohiṇī buḍḍhehiṃ pariṇedabbā | ṇa hi mālaīmālā bāṇarahatthagadā*

<sup>21</sup> Prose after stanza II, 19.

*sohai, na hi katthuriāguṇaggāmaṃ kuggāmiṇo jāṇamti, na hi galidajobbaṇāe  
bakkhatthale mottiamālā sohai |*

*Ku.: baassa, edehiṃ jjeva buḍhvehiṃ kattidiṇaṃ jībidabbaṃ | edāṇaṃ  
loātaragamaṇe esā amhehiṃ pariṇedabbaṃ |*

Ku.: My friend! Look! These two masters have come together and this Mṛgānkalekhā will marry them; but why won't we marry Bandhurā then?!

K.: Friend, you did not speak well, because I do not know how to make love with an old woman! It is a great shame that this enchantress of the three worlds is going to be married to these two old men: indeed, a garland of *mālatī* flowers does not look good in the hands of a monkey, the villagers do not know the properties of musk and a pearl necklace does not look beautiful on the breast of an old woman!

Ku.: Friend, but for how many days will they live?! When they pass to the other world, we will marry her.

Despite their resolution, the waiting is too harsh: they decide they will possess the girl when their *gurus* will be outside for begging. This is the defeat not only of the two young boys: as noted by Siegel (Siegel 1987: 83) this is the defeat of the sons against the fathers. This is also the defeat of youth, from which, paradoxically, the sexual enjoyment and, consequently, the regeneration are precluded. Youth, instead of being involved in the ritual and vernal celebration, is comically confined in the wintry shadows, symbolized by the old harlot, who embodies the features of the dead and static season, so happy to have such young husbands.<sup>22</sup> Old age is triumphant and, following Viśvabhaṇḍa's words, mocks youth, to whom new birth has been negated, not coincidentally discrediting its sexual power:

*niṣkrāmati śiśoḥ kāyo yena randhreṇa yoṣitaḥ |  
kiṃ kariṣyati tatrāyaṃ baṭuḥ śiśnaśalākayā || II, 20 ||*

Such a female hole<sup>23</sup> through which a baby's body can pass,  
what will this boy do there with his penis like a sprig?

<sup>22</sup> In the prose passage after stanza II, 19, Madanāndhamiśra explains that Kalahānkura is a boy of only twelve years; due to his age, he is a worthy husband to Bandhurā, a harlot of more than one hundred years!

<sup>23</sup> *Randhra* (according to Monier-Williams 2005: 866) has the meaning of "cavity, hole" and is a synonymous of *kha*, which, according to the medical

Now enters the priest to celebrate the marriage and the ritual starts; but the two ascetics, requested to pay for the ceremony, do not have money and ask for an extension of four years; the officer decides then to take Mṛgānkalekhā/Vasanta hostage and to enjoy her later. Before the ending of the play, characterized by joyful and wild dances—as is usual during the Vasantotsava—the young courtesan pronounces a stanza full of desperate regret, practically her only speech in the whole *prahasana*:

*śrīgauripādapadmāc caṇamativijena jak kidam sabbaālam  
 ṇiccaṃ cittaṇa bhaktidr̥dhatalama ṇisaṃ jak kidā pupphabāṇe |  
 tasmāj jevaṃ ppaṣāo ṇihilasurakido jo guruppāṇadam̐do  
 paccāsaṇṇo vihāo visamatararujā jīṇṇabippehi dohim || II, 29 ||*

I have continuously worshipped the lotus feet of Gaurī with solitary resolution and, day and night, I have demonstrated with all my mind the strongest devotion to the God of love; from this I have received the favour of all gods, a heavy punishment for life! My marriage with the two old Brahmins is near at hand, more terrible than disease.

The image of the *purohita*, Mahānindakācārya (‘Great Prosecutor/Blamer’), dancing and taking away the poor girl is the comical deformation of the ritual officer; the woman represents the impulse to procreation and birth: the act of taking her away symbolizes the seizing of perpetual regeneration, exactly as the Vedic priest reaches the otherworldly land for an everlasting dwelling thanks to the nectar of immortality, the *soma*.<sup>24</sup>

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tradition, denotes all the apertures of the human body. In this context, the reference to the female genitals is quite obvious and underlined by the usage of the word *yoṣita* (‘of a woman, female’). The occurrence of medical vocabulary highlights also the comic nuance in the stanza.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance stanza II, 32, pronounced by Mahānindakācārya himself:

*pitṛkānanamedinyāṃ mahāśayyānuśāyibhiḥ |  
 suciraṃ sthīyatāṃ nityaṃ mahānidrāvalambibhiḥ || II, 32 ||*

May all, reaching the eternal sleep [death] or enjoying the everlasting repose in the abode of the Ancestors, live for a long time, forever.

To sum up, the *Hāsyārṇavaprahasana* depicts in vivid and peculiar tones the celebration of the Vasantotsava, which coincides in the work with the ritual initiation of a young woman into erotic life, underlining beyond any doubt the profound connection that exists between springtime and sexuality. Usually, according to the ancient texts mentioned at the beginning of the present work, the Spring Festival was one of the greatest festivals in ancient India and was characterized by public participation; in an atmosphere of social looseness, this element denoted obviously the possibility of a collective access to the ritual and its celebration permitted a symbolical regeneration, embodied by the licentious and sexual aspects themselves. In the farce, where the ritual is mocked in funny and vulgar ways, we assist exactly to the contrary: the Vasantotsava is confined to a finite and degraded place, a sleazy brothel, where the rite has a limited access, benefited only by few 'chosen ones'. The arrival of Vasanta is not collectively welcomed by hopeful joy and happiness, but by nasty attitudes and lechery of shady figures: Mṛgāṅkalekhā, who embodies all the aspects of the good season, becomes not coincidentally the object of the erotic impulses of all characters. She is enjoyed by and obliged to marry two disgusting old men and then she is taken hostage by the celebrant Brahmin, who has now the intention to take advantage of her one more time. It is not by chance that the girl pronounces only one stanza and few words in the whole *prahasana*: Mṛgāṅkalekhā/Vasanta is the silent and motionless witness of the degradation that dwells in the human world.

The ritual, the celebration of the symbolical marriage between the young prostitute and the two old Brahmins, is not complete and its execution is only apparent: its suspended character is in fact defined by the delay which the two ascetics are asking for. Vasanta is kept under custody of the priest for four years: symbolically interpreted, it may be considered as a waiting for her 'return', a new spring, whose new ritual celebration will permit the hoped regeneration of the earth. Also in this case, the young lady/Vasanta becomes an exclusive object of enjoyment, precluded to the collectivity.

As we have previously seen, the *Hāsyārṇava* opens with the heavenly love games of Pārvatī and the ityphallic Śiva, whose embrace symbolizes the new birth of the world after the deadly winter; the subsequent descriptions of the spring season, whose standard features are linked to the ones of the previous stanza, help to reflect at an earthly level this fundamental aspect of awakening and rebirth. Only apparently the reflections of the divine union are mirrored on an earthly level; perhaps, a regeneration in the distorted mundane world, in which depravation and degradation dwell, is not possible.

The joyous ending of the work, characterized by unrestrained dances of celebration, is then only ephemeral: the laughter of Jagadīśvara, in all its irreverent aspects, hides the shadow of fatalism. Desperation and the universally ancestral fear of death, sublimated by the erotic impulse, creep along the pages of the *prahasana* and the ridiculous world of men.

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