Shakuntala

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KALIDASA KALIDASA

Little is known about Kalidasa, who is widely considered to be the greatest poet and dramatist who wrote in the Classical Sanskrit language (the language of religion and high culture in ancient and medieval India). It's possible that he wrote under the patronage of the Gupta dynasty, which ruled most of the Indian subcontinent during his lifetime. He was probably a member of the brahmin (priestly) class, and the benedictions in the prologues of his plays suggest that he was a particular devotee of the gods Shiva and his consort Kali ("Kalidasa" means "servant of Kali"). *The Recognition of Shakuntala* is considered to be his masterpiece and it is widely translated, but he also wrote two other plays, *Malavika and Agnimitra* and *Urvasi Won by Valor*, as well as epic poems and other poetry. Kalidasa's writings draw heavily from ancient Hindu texts, including the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—two vast Sanskrit epics filled with mythology and Hindu teachings.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story of *Shakuntala* originates in the *Mahabharata*, a large collection of legendary, philosophical, and religious material that dates at least as early as 400 B.C.E. Shakuntala's son, Sarvadamana—later called Bharata—is a legendary emperor in the work, and one of the official names of modern India, Bharata, may derive from his story. The *Mahabharata* attained its final textual form and became pervasive in Indian culture around the time that Kalidasa lived, in the 4th century C.E. The Gupta period, dating from approximately the mid-3rd to the mid-5th century, is sometimes known as the Golden Age because of the tremendous cultural flowering across the Indian subcontinent during these centuries, with *Shakuntala* being a prominent literary example.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The story of *Shakuntala* is a dramatic expansion of an episode in the first book in the massive Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*. Because Kalidasa is considered to occupy an equivalent position in classical Indian drama as Shakespeare occupies in English literature, such plays as *As You Like It*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also provide interesting comparisons to *Shakuntala*'s themes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Recognition of Shakuntala*
- **When Written:** 4th-5th century
- **Where Written:** Northern India
- **Literary Period:** Classical Indian
- **Genre:** Play
- **Setting:** The Himalayan foothills
- **Climax:** Shakuntala and King Dusyanta recognize one another in Act VII
- **Antagonist:** Durvasas's curse
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Faust and Shakuntala. The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was so taken with *Shakuntala*, newly introduced in Europe in the 1700s, that he adapted its Prologue when writing his own play, *Faust*.

Language mix. In the play, Kalidasa actually employs a mixture of languages—Classical Sanskrit and Prakrit, a related but relatively unsystematic collection of popular dialects. Sanskrit is primarily spoken by the educated, upper-class male characters in the play; Prakrit is spoken by female characters and lower-class male characters.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dusyanta, a king in northern India, is racing along in his chariot, preparing to shoot a **deer**. Suddenly, a forest-dwelling ascetic warns him not to shoot, since the deer belongs to the nearby hermitage of Kanva, a great sage. The ascetic invites King Dusyanta to visit the hermitage, which is under his royal protection. He explains that Kanva isn't home, but the sage's daughter, Shakuntala, is receiving guests.

When the King enters the hermitage, he notices Shakuntala and her two friends, Anasuya and Priyamvada, watering the sacred **trees**. He hides in the shadows to observe them, instantly drawn to Shakuntala's beauty. When Dusyanta reveals his presence, a flustered Shakuntala is immediately attracted to him, too. Though Shakuntala is modest and shy, the King questions Shakuntala's friends about her and offers her his signet ring.

Before the King has to concoct a reason to linger near the hermitage, he's asked to protect the ascetics from evil spirits in Kanva's absence. He quickly dispels the demons, then overhears Shakuntala, who's desperately lovesick, confiding her feelings for him to her friends. When Shakuntala recites a love poem she's composed for him, he emerges from hiding and

openly declares his love for her. Their mutual declarations effectively constitute a secret marriage. Before long, Shakuntala is pregnant.

After Dusyanta is forced to return to his capital, Shakuntala is so distracted that she unintentionally offends Durvasas, a short-tempered sage, when he visits the hermitage. Durvasas puts a curse on her that will cause Dusyanta to forget Shakuntala, but when Priyamvada intercedes, he grants that the sight of a memento—the signet ring—will lift the curse. After Kanva returns, he celebrates Shakuntala's good fortune and sends her to join her husband, escorted by seers.

In the capital, when Dusyanta receives word that a party from Kanva's hermitage is on its way, he is surprised and uneasy. To Shakuntala's grief, the baffled and defensive King denies having any connection with her. When she tries to show him the signet ring as a reminder, she discovers it's missing from her finger. Dusyanta relents and agrees to house Shakuntala until she gives birth, but before he can do so, Shakuntala is spirited away to the celestial realm by nymphs.

A poor fisherman discovers the King's signet ring in the belly of a fish and is threatened with execution, but he is let go with a reward after the King, seeing the ring and remembering everything, corroborates his story. Soon thereafter, Sanumati, a nymph and friend of Shakuntala's mother, spies at the palace to find out why the spring festival has been canceled. She learns that the King, overwhelmed by depression and remorse over Shakuntala, has forbidden the celebration. Dusyanta continues to obsess over the situation until Matali, the god Indra's charioteer, appears at the palace and takes him away on an urgent mission to fight demons.

Six years pass. King Dusyanta has successfully vanquished the demons and been duly honored by Indra. When Matali and the King tour the earth in a flying chariot, they descend to visit Marica's hermitage, a celestial realm of the demigods. Here the King is astonished to meet a little boy who greatly resembles him. When he picks up the boy's protective amulet—able to be touched only by the boy and his parents—he confirms that the boy, Sarvadamana, is indeed his child, the prophesied world ruler. Then Shakuntala enters, and, though it takes her a moment to recognize the King, they are soon tearfully reunited. The three of them talk with Marica the sage, and he explains Durvasas's curse, telling the couple not to blame themselves or one another. Marica confirms Sarvadamana's destiny and blesses the family, sending them home to live in Dusyanta's court.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shakuntala – Shakuntala is the heroine of the play. A beautiful young woman, she is the daughter of a royal sage and the nymph Menaka, and the foster daughter of Kanva. She lives as an ascetic in Kanva's hermitage, where she tends the sacred **trees** and loves them like sisters. When King Dusyanta visits the hermitage, she is instantly attracted to him and vice versa. However, she is shy and modestly conceals her feelings in his presence. When Dusyanta is to leave, she becomes gravely ill with longing. Her friends Anasuya and Priyamvada hatch a plan to convey Shakuntala's feelings to Dusyanta, but he overhears a love poem she's written, and they're quickly married by common consent. She soon becomes pregnant with Dusyanta's son, Sarvadamana. After Dusyanta returns to the capital, Shakuntala is distracted and accidentally incurs the curse of Durvasas, ensuring that when she joins Dusyanta in the capital, he fails to recognize her or to remember their marriage. Though she boldly defends herself against the King's denial, it's to no avail, and Shakuntala begs the earth to swallow her whole. Then she's spirited away by nymphs to the celestial realm, Marica's hermitage, where she gives birth and raises her son. When Dusyanta discovers her there six years later, she doesn't recognize him at first, but they're quickly reconciled and return to his capital together, along with their son.

King Dusyanta – King Dusyanta, a member of the Puru lineage, reigns in northern India, with his capital at Hastinapura. He is the hero of the play. He is attentive to his royal duties, especially those of caring for the oppressed and protecting religious practitioners. At the beginning of the play, he visits Kanva's hermitage and immediately falls in love with Shakuntala. When he learns that their feelings are mutual, he quickly marries her in secret. After his business at the hermitage is concluded, however, he must return to the capital, and Durvasas's curse ensures that he forgets Shakuntala and the fact that they are married. Accordingly, when Shakuntala travels to the capital to join him, he rejects her, but he is uneasy about their encounter. After he sees the signet ring he'd given Shakuntala, breaking the curse, he is overwhelmed by remorse. A demon-fighting assignment from Indra's charioteer, Matali, recalls him to his duties. When, six years later, he is rewarded with a visit to Marica's celestial hermitage, he discovers his son, Sarvadamana, and is reconciled with Shakuntala.

Sarvadamana – Sarvadamana is King Dusyanta's and Shakuntala's son. He is destined to become a world emperor, a fate prophesied by Vaikhanasa at the beginning of the play. He doesn't appear in the play until the final act, when Dusyanta visits Marica's celestial realm (where Sarvadamana was born and raised) and discovers that the willful, spoiled little boy is his son. Sarvadamana then goes to Dusyanta's capital with his reunited parents. In later life he will be called Bharata, "Sustainer."

Kanva – Kanva is a great ascetic sage, head of the hermitage that's the setting of the play's first few acts, and Shakuntala's beloved foster father. At the beginning of the play, he is absent from his hermitage because he's trying to appease the gods on

Shakuntala's behalf. When he returns, he's pleased to learn of his daughter's good marriage and sends her to join King Dusyanta, accompanied by an escort of ascetics and seers.

Durvasas – Durvasas is a hot-tempered sage who visits the hermitage, then places a curse on Shakuntala and King Dusyanta because Shakuntala, distracted by her new husband's absence and her pregnancy, fails to welcome him with appropriate formality. Durvasas's curse causes Dusyanta to forget Shakuntala and the fact that they're married, with the exception that if the King sees a memento, such as his signet ring, the curse will be lifted.

Marica – Marica is the father of the god Indra and a divine sage, the head of the celestial hermitage to which Shakuntala was spirited away by nymphs and has since lived with her son, Sarvadamana. At the end of the play, he explains Durvasas's curse to Shakuntala and King Dusyanta, blesses their family, and sends them to live together in the King's court.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Matali – Matali is the god Indra's charioteer. He rouses King Dusyanta from depression by pretending to threaten Vidusaka's life, then summons the King on an urgent demon-fighting mission.

Anasuya – Anasuya is a friend of Shakuntala and Priyamvada and a fellow ascetic at Kanva's hermitage. She is a faithful companion, protective of Shakuntala, and encourages her romance and marriage to King Dusyanta.

Priyamvada – Priyamvada is a friend of Shakuntala and Anasuya and a fellow ascetic at Kanva's hermitage. She is a faithful companion, protective of Shakuntala, and encourages her romance and marriage to King Dusyanta.

Vidusaka – Vidusaka is King Dusyanta's close companion, a good-humored, overweight brahmin. His humorous remarks provide comic relief throughout the play. Matali pretends to threaten his life in order to rouse the King out of his depression.

Vaikhanasa – Vaikhanasa is an ascetic who lives in Kanva's forest hermitage. At the beginning of the play, he stops King Dusyanta from killing a hermitage **deer** and then invites him to visit the hermitage. He also pronounces a prophetic blessing about the King's future son, Sarvadamana.

Sanumati – Sanumati, a nymph, is a friend of Shakuntala's mother, Menaka. She spies on King Dusyanta's court, but she doesn't directly intervene in events, knowing that Menaka is working to bring about the King's reunion with Shakuntala.

Menaka – Menaka is a nymph and is Shakuntala's mother. She conceived Shakuntala when she was sent to test the self-restraint of a royal sage, who proved unable to resist her beauty.

Karabhaka – Karabhaka is a royal messenger whom the queen sends to King Dusyanta from the capital.

Gautami – Gautami is the senior female ascetic at Kanva's hermitage and accompanies Shakuntala to the capital.

Sarngarava – One of the ascetics at Kanva's hermitage, who accompanies Shakuntala to the capital.

Caturika – Caturika is a maidservant in King Dusyanta's court.

Lady Hamsapadika – Lady Hamsapadika is one of King Dusyanta's consorts in the capital city. She sings a song that fills him with melancholy desire, although he can't remember Shakuntala at the time.

Fisherman – The poor fisherman discovers Shakuntala's lost ring in the belly of a fish, then gets arrested on suspicion of having stolen the ring from King Dusyanta. His story is quickly corroborated by the King, and he's let go with an ample reward.

Actor-Manager – The actor-manager introduces the play in the Prologue, inviting the actress to sing a mood-setting song about summer romance.

Actress – In the Prologue, at the invitation of the actor-manager, the actress sings a song about summer romance to set the mood for the audience.

Chamberlain – The chamberlain serves at King Dusyanta's court. From his observations, Sanumati learns about what's happened between the King and Shakuntala.

Doorkeeper – The doorkeeper is a female attendant at King Dusyanta's court.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE NATURAL WORLD, THE BODY, AND SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

The Recognition of Shakuntala, the greatest work by classical Indian playwright Kalidasa and perhaps the most renowned Sanskrit play, is a very lush work. The setting is marked by the beauties of the forested Himalayan foothills, where the young hermitage-dwelling girl, Shakuntala, falls in love with King Dusyanta. As the action develops—Shakuntala and the King falling in love, being separated by a curse, and ultimately reuniting, after years of grief-filled waiting, in a celestial hermitage—the play develops a connection between the external appearances and deeper inner truths: first, the natural world reflects the interior state of the main characters, and then similarly, the bodies of these characters manifest the condition of their hearts. As the play

goes on, this connection continues, but becomes less straightforward: youthful physical beauty gives way to a more subdued spiritual vibrancy by the final act. Through this progression, Kalidasa argues that the highest manifestation of beauty is actually that which has been developed through suffering, because it reveals a deeper spiritual refinement.

The natural world of the play reflects human romantic desire, especially in Shakuntala's case, because her years of devotion to the hermitage **trees** have created such a strong bond between her and the natural world. This bond establishes a basic correspondence in the play between the natural world and human emotional/spiritual states. Shakuntala's beloved jasmine tree, Light of the Forest, whom she says she would only forget to water "when I forget myself," is a symbol of her own impending union with King Dusyanta. In a suggestive passage hinting that she herself is ripe for romance, Shakuntala dreamily remarks, "[T]he union of this tree and this jasmine has taken place at the most wonderful time—the jasmine is a young plant, covered in fresh blossoms, the mango has soft buds, and is ready for enjoyment…"

When Shakuntala confides in her friend Priyamvada about her love for King Dusyanta, Priyamvada affirms that Shakuntala's attraction to a king is only natural: "My dear, how lucky, then, that your desire's at one with nature. Where should a great river wend, if not to the sea? What plant's lush enough for the jasmine to entwine, if not the mango?"

After marrying King Dusyanta in secret, when Shakuntala departs from the forest to join her husband in the capital, the trees themselves bless her: "It was a tree itself spun this moon-white cloth, / And a tree that oozed lac to redden her feet, / And gods of the trees that conjured these jewels, / Hands sprouting from branches like fresh green shoots." A voice in the forest air even speaks a blessing for Shakuntala's auspicious journey into married life.

Shakuntala is so closely associated with the natural habitat of her youth that her desires are expressed in terms of the beauty and fecundity of the forest. But in the play this association between inner human feelings and outer realities isn't entirely unique to her. Emotional states like love and grief manifest in the characters' bodies as well. As the play goes on, their physical states reflect their feelings just as the natural world reflects Shakuntala's. For instance, in the world of the play, lovesickness isn't a metaphor, but a real physical malady that reveals the state of characters' hearts. In Act III, when Dusyanta is in doubt about Shakuntala's love for him, her physical state makes it plain: "Now, is it the heat, or is it the heart […]? / Her breasts are smeared with lotus balm, / Her fiber bracelet slips her wrist, / Her body's wracked—and lovely still, / The summer sears her—but so does love, / And love with greater skill." In other words, her pining for Dusyanta manifests in symptoms even more blatant than those of heatstroke.

The king also suffers in harmony with his beloved: "My golden bracelet […] / […] shuttles up and down my arm, made slim / By love's cruel wastage of my bow-scarred limbs." In other words, the bodies of both characters are fundamentally connected to and affected by their inner emotional conditions. While their physical lovesickness doesn't obscure their natural attractiveness, it demands healing that can only be achieved through marital union.

Similarly, late in the play, the physical suffering caused by lovesickness is echoed by that caused by remorse and grief. Here, however, physical decline—though it doesn't look as vibrant as youthful longing and lovesickness do—reveals a more refined spiritual beauty than even early romance could create. In Act VI, after the curse has been broken and the king has remembered Shakuntala, he dresses as a penitent and appears "wasted with remorse." His chamberlain observes: "Instead of jewels, / [Dusyanta] wears a single band / Above his left-hand wrist; his lips are cracked / By sighs; brooding all night has drained his eyes / Of lustre; yet, just as grinding reveals / A gem, his austerity lays bare / An inner brilliance and an ideal form." Like when he was newly in love, Dusyanta is thin, sleepless, and faded, but now his condition "lays bare" the spiritual solidity beneath.

Shakuntala, too, is withered by six years of sadness from the effects of the curse: "Her robes are dusky, drab, / Her hair a single braid, / Her cheeks drawn in by penance." Yet when they meet, Dusyanta instantly recognizes her, as he failed to do when she appeared in her maiden brightness in the capital. The implication is that her beauty doesn't shine forth *in spite of* her physical decline, but rather that her decline makes her underlying beauty all the more compelling.

The play's treatment of beauty makes even more sense when considered in relation to the play's religious context—in the culturally Hindu world of the play, signs of physical renunciation are understood to reflect detachment from the world, and thus greater closeness with the world of the gods. Shakuntala's and Dusyanta's progression over the course of the play—from youthful ardor reflected in the natural world, through suffering and separation, to mature union—could be thought of as a version of this detachment, but a form of it that's attainable to those who don't spend their entire lives practicing spiritual austerities—which, of course, includes most of the play's likely audience.

DUTY VS. LOVE

Throughout *Shakuntala*, duty and love are closely intertwined. This connection is in keeping with the importance of *dharma* (duty) in Hindu practice at the time. *Dharma*, along with *artha* (material success) and *kama* (desire), was understood to be one of the primary goals of human existence, while the ultimate goal of that existence was to attain *moksha*, or liberation from worldly existence. In the

play, there is particular tension between *dharma* and *kama*. The structure of the play—from opposition between duty and love during Shakuntala's courtship, to failed efforts to harmonize them in the middle of the play, to reconciliation between them in the final act—suggests that reconciling the competing goals of human existence is a lifelong journey, but that when that struggle is faithfully undertaken, it eventually proceeds toward spiritual liberation.

Early in the play, love and duty are seen as being at odds with each other, and duty is even used as an excuse to pursue love. For example, when Dusyanta first sees Shakuntala, the king sees something incongruous about Shakuntala's devotion to religious duty. To him, Shakuntala's desirable physical beauty seems wasted in her life of ascetic striving. Meanwhile, Shakuntala's first experience of passion seems to her to be incompatible with her lifelong religious piety. As soon as Dusyanta reveals himself in the ascetic grove, Shakuntala thinks, "But how can it have happened that, simply at the sight of this man, I am shaken with a passion so at odds with the religious life?"

Rather transparently, Dusyanta then uses his sacred royal duties (kings were to defend the oppressed, with special care for safeguarding the rites of religious practitioners) as a cover for romantic desire. He tells Shakuntala and her friends, "I have been appointed [...] as Minister for Religious Welfare. And in that capacity I've come to this sacred forest to ensure your rituals are not obstructed in any way." Dusyanta, here, is not actually connecting duty and love. Rather, he is using duty as a lie to pursue love. At this point, as described in the stage direction, Shakuntala "displays all the embarrassment of erotic attraction." She apparently sees through Dusyanta's ruse, and at any rate, she's aware that her own religious devotion is more likely to be obstructed, not helped, by her attraction to this man!

Before leaving the grove, Dusyanta reflects to himself, "Suddenly, the city doesn't seem so attractive [...] The truth is, I can't get Shakuntala out of my head." Dusyanta's responsibilities in the capital city no longer appeal to him, going against the grain of the erotic desire he now feels. Duty and desire, seemingly, don't go together.

In the middle acts of the play, there's a struggle to harmonize love and duty. In Act II, Dusyanta is asked to protect the ashram for a few nights in the sage Kanva's absence. But no sooner has he agreed to this than a messenger arrives with a competing obligation, a request from his mother to participate in a ritual fast in the capital. "I have to weigh my duty to the ascetics against the request of a revered parent—and neither can be ignored." He finally decides in favor of staying close to Shakuntala in the ashram, though he knows duty will eventually tear him away.

In Act III, Priyamvada somewhat coyly brings love and duty together by casting Shakuntala's lovesickness in terms of the king's duty: "They say it is the king's duty to relieve the pain of those who live in his realm [...] So, if you would save [Shakuntala's] life, you must take her under your protection." Dusyanta acts on this advice to contract a secret marriage with Shakuntala, trying to hastily circumvent any conflicts between his royal duties and his bride's religious ones.

In Act IV, Anasuya worries that once the King returns to his capital, "who can say whether he'll remember what's happened in the forest?" While Anasuya means that Dusyanta's passion might fade under the pressures of royal duty, the audience knows that Dusyanta will literally forget Shakuntala because of a curse. But even this literal forgetting can be seen, by extension, to symbolize the subordination of desire to duty. In fact, when Shakuntala journeys to reunite with Dusyanta in the capital, the busy king is pointedly described as "the guardian of the sacred and social orders;" in this realm, he proves unable to recognize her or desire's claim on him.

In Act VI, he hears about the death of a childless merchant and is overcome with grief about his own (so he thinks) childlessness. Since he has no children, his own ancestors must be wondering, "Who will feed us in the afterlife / As he does now, if there is no heir?" In this context, having sons isn't just a sign of earthly prosperity, but a guarantee that one's forebears will continue to be honored in perpetuity. Put another way, in the creation of children, love and duty are intertwined. Thus Dusyanta's lack of a child is a great shame for him, an indication of his failure in both duty *and* love.

In the play's final act, love and duty finally achieve harmony. Indra's charioteer interrupts Dusyanta's grief with a summons to fulfill his kingly duty of demon-fighting, and Dusyanta is later rewarded for his work with a tour of the heavens in a winged chariot. They descend to the mountain of the demigods, where the sage Marica leads a life of asceticism. Here, Dusyanta discovers his son, Sarvadamana, which leads to his and Shakuntala's recognition of one another. The three are finally united as a family unit, and their son, the fruit of their passion, is prophesied to become a world ruler—thus, the three of them together constitute the fulfillment of duty as well as of love, and all in a place oriented toward spiritual liberation. Harmony between duty and love is finally being achieved.

As Dusyanta prepares to return to his capital—the worldly realm of duty—with his wife and son, Marica blesses them: "And so let time and seasons pass / In mutual service, / A benefit to both our realms." No longer is there tension between love and duty; they've been integrated, such that Dusyanta can fulfill his duties as husband, king, and religious devotee without a sense of strain or disharmony.

PROPHECIES AND CURSES

Throughout *Shakuntala*, supernatural beings like gods and nymphs, powerful utterances like sages'

prophecies and curses, and even bodily omens experienced by the main characters are ever-present. In fact, none of the main events would take place if it weren't for such supernatural interventions into human events. Such interventions appear to work outside the limits of human plans and intentions, suggesting that, in the play, they're meant to signal to audiences the inscrutability—and inevitability— of divine plans.

Prophecy frames the entire play—specifically, the prophecy that Dusyanta will father a world emperor. When Dusyanta refrains from shooting the **deer** belonging to the hermitage, one of the forest-dwelling ascetics voices the prophetic wish, "Great Lord of the Lunar Dynasty, / May you have a son / With all your virtues, / Destined to rule the world." Dusyanta merely thanks the brahmin at the time, not thinking much about it.

At the end of the play, however, when Dusyanta sees the little boy, Sarvadamana, playing with a lion cub in Marica's realm, he notices the marks of a world ruler on the boy's body. When his paternity of the child is established, the brahmin's prediction at the very beginning of the play is likewise confirmed. Therefore, the play's entire sequence of events—from Dusyanta's detour into the hermitage, to his marriage to Shakuntala, to Shakuntala's removal to the celestial realm—is shown to have been directed toward a specific, higher purpose—namely, the future emperor's birth and celestial upbringing.

In a similar way, the central drama of the play is driven by a curse that estranges the heroic couple, but ultimately can't prevent their spiritually powerful reunion. The reason Shakuntala and the King initially meet is because her father, the sage Kanva, who would normally have met the King, is not at home, because he has gone on a pilgrimage "to appease the gods on her behalf, and avert her hostile fate." Though this fate is not named, it's presumably the curse that will soon be pronounced against Shakuntala by Durvasas. When Shakuntala, distracted after Dusyanta has returned to the business of the capital, accidentally slights the short-tempered sage, he utters: "That man whose brilliance / Robs your thought of everything, including me, / A great ascetic fired by penance— / That man, though prompted, / Shall not remember you at all, / Like a drunken sot, who cannot recall / What he said in his cups the night before." If Shakuntala hadn't been distracted by lovesickness and accidentally offended the sage, this curse wouldn't have been spoken. Yet if her father hadn't had some premonition of the curse and gone on pilgrimage to avert it, she wouldn't have been home alone to meet and fall in love with Dusyanta in the first place. When the curse goes into effect, it results in the couple's agonizing yet spiritually fruitful separation—and ultimately leads to their more triumphant reunion in the celestial realm. Like the prophecy of their son's birth, the curse reverberates across time, seemingly out of proportion to the event that prompted it. These seemingly unavoidable sequences of events suggest that supernatural pronouncements like curses don't operate according to human intention and can lead to greater consequences (even good ones) than anyone foresees.

Audiences watching *Shakuntala* would likely have been familiar with the cultural meanings behind prophecies, curses, and many other supernatural signs, like evil omens, that occur in the play. But even without that familiarity, the complexity of these recurring, overlapping signs in the play shows that there are mysterious powers at work, which bring about events much bigger than the mundane circumstances in which they first appear.

CONCEALMENT AND SEPARATION

In *Shakuntala*, there is a multi-layered exploration of concealment and revelation, which occurs most clearly in the complete hiddenness of Shakuntala and Dusyanta from one another during their six-year separation brought about by a curse. The lesser concealments in the story, such as hidden emotions, the ring swallowed by the fish, and people's grief-altered appearances, mirror the central one: the secret of the couple's marriage giving way, at last, to public acknowledgement of their union and royal reign. Through this complex interplay, Kalidasa suggests that the truth will always come to light, no matter what hardships (even supernatural obstacles) seem to obscure the truth along the way.

The couple's initial courtship is marked by the interplay of clarity and concealment. For example, the King's identity is concealed at first. Dusyanta hands over his insignia and bow to his driver before entering the hermitage so that he'll appear modest and humble while there, thus concealing his royal identity. Then, as soon as the king enters the hermitage grounds, he sees Shakuntala and her friends at a distance and waits in the shadow of the trees to admire them. The king thus shields his identity both symbolically and physically at the outset of the play.

The feelings of the two eventual lovers are also hidden from one another at first. Despite flirting during their initial meeting, both Dusyanta and Shakuntala languish with symptoms of lovesickness, each unsure of the other's true feelings. Later, after hearing Shakuntala reading a love poem she's composed for him, the eavesdropping King abruptly reveals himself, confessing his own love. These teasing concealments and subsequent revelations set the tone for the weightier concealments to come.

Shakuntala's and Dusyanta's marriage is initially secret as well. The two are secretly married according to a *gandharva* marriage, which is effectively a declaration of love that is not solemnized by formal vows. Though genuine according to traditional law, their marriage itself therefore has a hidden character, which leads to the ambiguity of the middle part of the play, when they are separated for a time by Dusyanta's

royal duties.

In Act V, when Shakuntala arrives in the capital following a separation much grieved on her side, the king, thanks to a previous curse, has no memory of her or their marriage. Furthermore, the signet ring he'd given her as a keepsake marking their union slipped from Shakuntala's finger and vanished when she was bathing in the Ganges. When she arrives in the capital, Shakuntala expects that her secret marriage will be publicly acknowledged. However, its reality is now concealed even from one of its parties (Dusyanta), resulting in an even greater estrangement—Shakuntala is spirited to a celestial realm by nymphs and hidden there for the next six years.

After Shakuntala leaves the earthly realm, the separation of the two lovers is so complete that they have to remember each other only through mere symbols. In Act VI, a fisherman finds Shakuntala's lost ring concealed in the belly of a fish. When the King sees the ring, "he [becomes] really agitated for a while. Just as though he'd remembered someone out of the blue—someone he really cared for, perhaps." He is so distraught when he remembers the truth about his marriage—and realizes he'd unknowingly rejected his own wife—that he cancels the spring festival, "mortified by regret." The ring, which was intended to seal their promises to one another and confirm their reunion, instead only accentuates their separation.

Dusyanta assumes that the separation will be permanent. When he's at the height of his lovesickness, Dusyanta looks at a portrait of Shakuntala he painted himself. "I rejected my love when she stood before me, / Yet now I'm obsessed by her painted image: / I crossed the stream of living water / To drink from a mirage." In other words, Dusyanta failed to recognize reality, so he becomes fixated on the illusory likeness in the absence of the real thing.

When the lovers are finally reunited, their familiar appearances are obscured by years of grief and distance. After six years—during which time Shakuntala has lived with her son in the demigod Marica's celestial hermitage, and Dusyanta has been dutifully fighting demons—the two are so much changed that they don't recognize each other easily. Shakuntala is especially startled by her husband's changed appearance, prompting the king to say, "My dear, that cruelty I practiced on you has come full circle, since now it is I who need to be recognized by you." Shakuntala, too, looks different from her youthful appearance—the six years' separation have inscribed themselves on her body and dress: "Her robes are dusky, drab, / Her hair a single braid, / Her cheeks drawn in by penance— / She's been so pure and constant / In that vow of separation / I so callously began."

But seeing Shakuntala this way prompts the recognition that Dusyanta failed to achieve when his bride stood before him earlier: "For in looking on your pale / Unpainted lips, I have at last / Recalled your face." Furthermore, the secret marriage of the two is now publicly confirmed in the person of their son, the future emperor, and by Marica's charge to them to rule on earth.

The trajectory of Kalidasa's play—from a playful courtship in the obscurity of the hermitage forest, to a divinely prophesied marriage that ultimately rules over the whole realm—suggests that the play is about more than just one couple's complicated romance. Rather than simply being complicated, the play suggests that this romance has a place in the cosmic order of things and thus can't be permanently thwarted by human or supernatural opposition, no matter how it may have been hidden at various points.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEES

In *Shakuntala*, **bees** primarily symbolize erotic attraction, particularly the fleeting, teasing touch of flirtation. In the Prologue, for instance, the actress sings an erotic song in which blossoms are "gently brushed by black woodland bees." In Act 1, when Shakuntala is attacked by a bee in the sacred grove, King Dusyanta envies the "honey-maker" because it brushes her eyelids, murmurs in her ear, and "[wins] her, / While I am stalled." After he and Shakuntala come together, he likens himself to a bee, who "[kisses] the bud of your unbruised lip / And [floods] my thirsting mouth with nectar." At the midpoint of the play, however, the symbol changes somewhat, when the cursed King compares himself to "a bee mithering at dawn" because he doesn't recognize Shakuntala and can't decide whether to draw close to her or flee. Dusyanta also includes a likeness of a bee in his portrait of Shakuntala and pretends to shoo it away, recalling the significance of the bee attack in his initial attraction to her and suggesting that perhaps bees might signify the confusion of passion as well as its pleasure.

DEER

In the early part of the play, **deer** symbolize innocence, especially Shakuntala's sheltered innocence, while the pursuit of deer symbolizes the King's romantic appetites (and the taming of those appetites). The play opens with King Dusyanta recklessly chasing a deer, until an ascetic warns him not to shoot the animal because it belongs to the hermitage, where it's lovingly tended and protected. Here the deer symbolizes Shakuntala, who's been tenderly raised within the bounds of the hermitage and isn't to be aggressively pursued. When, after abandoning the hunt, the

King meets and falls in love with Shakuntala, he asks if she will "live forever among these hinds, / Doe-eyed among her beloved does," suggesting that he wants her to give up her virginal (doe-like) innocence and give herself to him. But the next day, lovesick, the King has completely lost his appetite for the hunt, content that "deer chew the cud in crowded shadows" instead of being the object of pursuit. There is only a single "deer" who interests him now, and he must respect her purity and wait for her to act.

TREES

Throughout the play, **trees** often symbolize fertility and beauty. Because Shakuntala has spent her life lovingly tending the hermitage trees, she thinks of them like "sisters," and their allure is often associated with her own. A certain favorite jasmine vine, entwined with a neighboring mango, catches her attention in Act 1, as she says: "The union of this tree and this jasmine has taken place at the most wonderful time—the jasmine is a young plant, covered in fresh blossoms, the mango has soft buds, and is ready for enjoyment…" Though Shakuntala hasn't met the King yet, her personification of the two trees signals her openness to romance and marriage, giving hope to the spying Dusyanta. In Act 4, when Shakuntala departs from the hermitage, the gods of the trees offer her garments and jewels and utter a blessing, not only confirming Shakuntala's sisterly bond with them, but symbolizing a fruitful marriage in the future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Shakuntala* published in 2008.

Act 1 Quotes

VAIKHANASA. King, this is a hermitage deer. You should not—you must not kill it!

Indeed, indeed, no missile should be shot,
Scorching, like a flame through velvet petals,
This young fawn's tender head.
Alas, what is the filigree life
In this poor animal's frame,
Beside the adamantine rain
Of bowshot?

Related Characters: Vaikhanasa (speaker), King Dusyanta

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the play, King Dusyanta is on a deer-hunt, which takes him to the borders of an ascetic hermitage. Just as he's preparing to shoot the deer he's been pursuing, Vaikhanasa, one of the forest-dwelling ascetics, rushes to intercede, warning Dusyanta that the deer belongs to the hermitage property, where it dwells in peace and is lovingly tended by the ascetics. While such animals had a protected status, King Dusyanta also has a special mandate as a protector—it's his duty to ensure that religious institutions, like this hermitage and its inhabitants, are free from the harassment of demons or any earthly intrusions. Vaikhanasa's warning recalls Dusyanta to a duty greater than his own pleasure in the hunt. Even though he enters the hermitage in peace a short time later, his sudden arrival also foreshadows the impending disruption of the sheltered forest life Shakuntala has always known—like the deer, she's never had to worry about anything beyond the borders of the hermitage. This moment sets up the deep connection between Shakuntala and the natural world that persists throughout the play.

ANASUYA. Dear Shakuntala, here's that jasmine you call Light of the Forest. She's chosen the fragrant mango as her bridegroom. You've forgotten her.

SHAKUNTALA. Only when I forget myself. [*Approaches the jasmine and gazes at it*] The union of this tree and this jasmine has taken place at the most wonderful time—the jasmine is a young plant, covered in fresh blossoms, the mango has soft buds, and is ready for enjoyment…

Related Characters: Shakuntala, Anasuya (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up in the forest hermitage, Shakuntala has a close bond with the trees she tends. She's even named the jasmine, and she feels a deeply personal association with it ("only when I forget myself"). She hasn't yet met King

Dusyanta (though, unbeknownst to her, he's concealed in the shadows, watching this whole scene), but she obviously has marriage on her mind. Her description of the two intertwined trees, fresh and ripe for union, has strongly erotic overtones that neither the audience watching the play, nor the watching King, would have missed. The King is undoubtedly encouraged by Shakuntala's mood, as well as by the fact that the jasmine—which Shakuntala associates with herself—has "chosen" her bridegroom, a marriage arrangement that was permitted to princesses at the time. He's soon to confirm the truth that Shakuntala is indeed of royal blood (thus eligible for marriage to a king), although her ascetic garments and habits conceal this reality for now.

KING. […] Because I'm so eager to hear about the lives of the virtuous, there *is* another question I should like to ask.

PRIYAMVADA. Don't hesitate, my lord—there are no bars to what you may ask an ascetic.

KING. Then tell me this about your friend:

How long will she keep her love-starved hermit vows—
Till she changes them for the marriage kind?
Or will she live forever among these hinds,
Doe-eyed among her beloved does?

Related Characters: Priyamvada, King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After King Dusyanta emerges from hiding in the shadows, he quickly begins gathering information about the beautiful Shakuntala by coyly questioning her friends. He claims curiosity about the ways of ascetics, and Priyamvada, an eager matchmaker, plays along. He asks if Shakuntala will give up the ascetic life for marriage anytime soon, or if she'll stay sheltered among the innocent animals she loves so much. Shakuntala hears the entire exchange and at least pretends to be offended by it, briefly trying to withdraw from the scene until King Dusyanta offers her his signet ring, revealing his identity in the process. Shakuntala has already admitted to herself that she's inclined toward romance and that she even felt an instantaneous passion for Dusyanta, so there's every hint that Dusyanta's flirtation will prevail and that this match will be successful. This discussion of the importance of vows, however, makes it clear that a sustainable passionate union will need to be reconciled somehow with the idea of personal duty and responsibility. The difficulty of reconciling these two values will form a key aspect of the play's conflict going forward.

SHAKUNTALA. Anasuya! I've spiked my foot on a blade of grass . . . And now my blouse is snagged on a branch. Wait while I free myself!

[*Using this pretense to remain gazing at the king,* SHAKUNTALA *finally leaves with her friends*]

KING. Suddenly, the city doesn't seem so attractive. I'll link up with my followers and camp just outside this sacred grove. The truth is, I can't get Shakuntala out of my head.

My body forges on, my restless mind streams back—
A silken banner borne against the wind.

Related Characters: King Dusyanta, Shakuntala (speaker), Anasuya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When it's reported that an elephant has gotten loose in the hermitage grove, the King and the girls scatter, but first, Shakuntala makes a pretense of hurting herself and snagging her clothing in order to savor a last glimpse of Dusyanta. After she finally leaves, Dusyanta's reflections reinforce the fact that he's in love. The city—the place where a king properly belongs, fulfilling his fundamental duties as a ruler—has lost its appeal for him; instead, he lingers as well, setting up camp on the borders of Shakuntala's home. Both he and Shakuntala are in a strained intermediate position, desiring one thing to the point of distraction and illness, while simultaneously being forced to carry out ordinary duties. The rest of the play will be a striving to integrate love and duty for both of them—as Dusyanta poetically puts it here, a disharmony between the body and the resisting mind.

Act 2 Quotes

BOTH SEERS. The inhabitants of the ashram have learnt that Your Honor is here, and they have a request to make of you.

KING. Their wish is my command.

BOTH SEERS. They say that, owing to the absence of the great and revered sage Kanva, evil spirits are disrupting their rituals, and so they ask that you should come with your driver and protect the ashram for the next few nights.

KING. It's an honor to be asked.

VIDUSAKA [*aside*]. This couldn't be better if you'd planned it yourself.

[...]

BOTH SEERS [*with delight*].

And so you are at one with your ancestors:
For all the descendants of Puru are initiates
In that great sacrifice which protects
The afflicted and alleviates
Their pain.

Related Characters: Vidusaka, King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala, Kanva

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

King Dusyanta, helplessly distracted by his longing for Shakuntala, is trying to invent some pretext for staying longer at the ashram. In impeccable timing, seers from the hermitage request that he fulfill his kingly duty of protecting them from evil spirits in the absence of their sage, Kanva. Dusyanta's companion, a self-indulgent brahmin named Vidusaka who serves as comic relief throughout the play, observes the irony. At the same time, this moment is in keeping with the way that supernatural occurrences and coincidences advance the action of the play and often override the intentions of the human characters. The seers know nothing of this, though, happily praising Dusyanta's faithfulness to the example set by his ancestors in the Puru dynasty—he helps the afflicted and is quick to relieve his subjects' pain where he can. Their words aren't mere flattery, however; Dusyanta lives up to this reputation throughout the play, and his faithfulness to duty actually helps to bring him and Shakuntala together at the end of the play, when a triumphant campaign of demon-fighting wins him a visit to the celestial hermitage where Shakuntala is living.

Act 3 Quotes

KING. Shakuntala seems to be very ill. [*Pondering*] Now, is it the heat, or is it the heart, as it is with me? [*Gazing with longing*] But there's really no question:

Her breasts are smeared with lotus balm,
Her fibre bracelet slips her wrist,
Her body's racked—and lovely still,
The summer sears her—but so does love,
And love with greater skill.

Related Characters: King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After being invited to stay at the ashram, King Dusyanta quickly vanquishes the evil spirits that had been disturbing the ascetics. He no longer has a reason to stay there and is tormented by his feelings—not yet clearly requited—for Shakuntala. As he did earlier in the play, he peeks through some branches to observe her beauty and sees that his beloved has fallen ill; Shakuntala's friends fan her with lotus leaves, as she's apparently suffering from heatstroke. But lovesickness was understood to be a physical malady as well as an emotional one, so Shakuntala's condition really *could* be "the heart," not "the heat." When Dusyanta observes Shakuntala's emaciated body, he concludes that she must be suffering from lovesickness, the same as himself—but that doesn't answer the question of whether he is the object of her pining. This passage, erotic in tone, is an example of the notable bodily manifestations of the condition of the soul that are found throughout the play. That the King again observes Shakuntala while hiding emphasizes the theme of concealment and highlights how hard it is, at this early phase, for the main characters to perceive the truth of their situation.

SHAKUNTALA.
I cannot say I know your mind,
But day and night the god of love
Injects that pain through all my limbs,
Which you prepared—ah sweet unkind—
I cannot say I know your mind.

KING [*revealing himself suddenly*].

Slender lady, you should know
That same love which tortures you
Consumes me quite—
The sun, that merely dulls the lotus' glow,
Engulfs the moon in azure light.

Related Characters: Shakuntala, King Dusyanta (speaker), Anasuya, Priyamvada

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

When Shakuntala admits her feelings for Dusyanta to her friends, they plot to convey her love to the King in some subtle way. Priyamvada suggests that she etch a love poem into a lotus leaf. Shakuntala does, then reads the result aloud to her friends. The poem essentially sums up Dusyanta's own dilemma—he's overcome with painful longing, but he doesn't know what his beloved thinks. Thus Shakuntala's poem answers both their questions at once, as Dusyanta, no longer able to contain himself, withdraws from hiding to assure Shakuntala that he shares the same feelings. Because the couple isn't married in a formal ceremony, this exchange of mutual sentiments amounts to an exchange of marriage vows. But the problem of not "knowing [one's] mind" persists in the play—the couple is about to face a series of estrangements that occur through a number of mechanisms: geographic distance, the effects of Durvasas's curse, and Shakuntala's later removal to the celestial realm. Throughout each of these separations, one or both of them suffers for lack of understanding the other's feelings or motivations, though the reasons for that lack vary.

KING. Timid fawn—don't worry about your elders! The father of your family knows the law, and he shall find no fault in what you've done. Besides:

You wouldn't be the first royal sage's daughter
To take a prince for love—
And receive her father's blessings later.

SHAKUNTALA. Let me go now. I need to ask my friends' advice.

KING. Yes. I shall release you—

SHAKUNTALA. When?

KING. When?

When, like a bee, I kiss the bud of your unbruised lip
And flood my thirsting mouth with nectar.

[With these words, he tries to raise her face. SHAKUNTALA evades him with a dance]

OFF-STAGE VOICE. Red goose, take leave of your gander. Night is falling!

Related Characters: Gautami, Shakuntala, King Dusyanta (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

After King Dusyanta and Shakuntala admit their feelings for one another, Shakuntala's friends withdraw, leaving the pair alone. Shakuntala, modest and unaccustomed to being alone with a lover, keeps trying to leave, but the King tries to calm her, assuring her that their marriage—effected through their mutual declarations of love—is acceptable according to traditional law. Though it was irregular, a woman of royal lineage, like Shakuntala, was allowed to consent to marriage with a prince and even to sleep with him before seeking her father's approval. In essence, the King is claiming it's possible at this point for Shakuntala to fulfill the twin drives of duty and passion, but her skepticism foreshadows how difficult it will be to bring these opposing forces together as the play goes on.

There is still a heavily flirtatious tone to their interactions, as Dusyanta playfully detains Shakuntala (with a reference to bees, a romantic symbol in the play) and Shakuntala darts away from him. As here, dance was another element of classical Indian drama that conveyed a great deal to audiences without using words. But Shakuntala really does leave when she hears an off-stage voice, presumably addressing actual hermitage animals but conveying a double

meaning to the audience; again, Shakuntala is equated with the natural world, and the behavior of animals (first the doe, and then the goose) sheds light on her emotional experience. The line "Night is falling!" also hints at the dark period of separation that's soon to come for the two of them.

Act 4 Quotes

OFF-STAGE VOICE. So, you slight a guest, do you?

That man whose brilliance
Robs your thought of everything, including me,
A great ascetic fired by penance—
That man, though prompted,
Shall not remember you at all,
Like a drunken sot, who cannot recall
What he said in his cups the night before.

PRIYAMVADA. Ah! What a disaster! Absent-minded Shakuntala has offended someone she should have welcomed. [*Looking ahead*] And not just anyone—it's the great sage Durvasas—short-tempered's not the word! Now he's cursed her, spun on his heel, and shot off like a flaming arrow!

Related Characters: Priyamvada, Durvasas (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After their marriage, King Dusyanta must soon leave Shakuntala and return to his duties in the capital. Shakuntala is left grieving and distracted in the hermitage, and she's also pregnant with their son by this time. When a well-known ascetic, Durvasas, arrives for a visit, Shakuntala fails to welcome him properly. Given her usual delight in her work around the hermitage, her failure in this basic duty shows just how unsettled she is. However, her absent-mindedness has even graver consequences than expected. While hospitality was an important duty for any Hindu, it was Shakuntala's special responsibility in her father's absence, and in this case, the prickly sage Durvasas takes major offense at being slighted, immediately pronouncing a curse on Dusyanta, the source of Shakuntala's distraction. The curse is particularly crude, implicitly reducing the couple's love to a drunken encounter. Shakuntala doesn't hear the curse, however, and is ignorant of its consequences—which will turn out to be far-reaching.

SHAKUNTALA [*aside*]. Anasuya, mark that! How the wild goose honks in anguish because her mate is hidden by lotus leaves . . . But my suffering is worse.

[ANASUYA] Don't say that, my dear!

Though the night seems everlasting
Without her mate,
Hope lifts her—time burns,
And she'll endure the weight
Of separation.

Related Characters: Anasuya, Shakuntala (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Kanva returns to the hermitage, he happily approves of Shakuntala's marriage and prepares to send her to her new home in the capital with due honor. She bids an emotional farewell to her foster father, friends, and fellow ascetics. Before she leaves, she's characteristically attentive to the welfare of her beloved hermitage animals, noticing a goose who's disturbed by its mate's apparent disappearance. The scene is also another example in the play of a correspondence between the natural world and human emotions. Shakuntala gloomily observes that her own sadness without Dusyanta is worse than the goose's fleeting sadness—unaware that, when she reaches the capital and is rejected by Dusyanta, she'll face a far more grievous separation. Anasuya's reply, besides assuring her friend, also hints to the audience that Shakuntala's separation will have a hopeful resolution as well; as endless and irreparable as her separation from Dusyanta will seem, it's ultimately no worse than a temporary concealment behind lotus leaves.

Act 5 Quotes

VOICE [*singing in the air*].

Have you forgotten—forgotten so soon,
How you settled on the mango bloom,
Turning nectar to honey with kisses?
Have you really forgotten what bliss is?
To change it so quickly
For the wan and sickly
Night-flowering lotus?

[...]

KING [*to himself*]. Why should this song fill me with desire, when I'm not even separated from someone I love? But perhaps

It's what survives of love from other lives,
Trapped in certain forms and sounds,
And then released by song,
That keys my mood
From happiness to longing.

[*He remains in some bewilderment*]

Related Characters: King Dusyanta, Lady Hamsapadika (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

One day after King Dusyanta has returned to the capital, he hears one of his consorts singing this song. The song basically asks how Dusyanta can have so quickly forgotten the bliss he enjoyed with Shakuntala, now exchanging it for the less passionate affections of his wives in the capital. At least, that's what the audience is meant to recognize; Dusyanta himself is baffled by his emotional reaction to the words. He doesn't believe he's separated from someone he loves, so he figures the reaction comes from embedded memories of loves in past lives. This quote prepares the audience for the confrontation to come, when Shakuntala arrives in the capital and Dusyanta doesn't remember her whatsoever. Interestingly, too, it separates emotion from cognitive memory somewhat—even though Dusyanta has no conscious recollection of his wife, the emotions she evokes are still deeply present and active.

KING [*staring at Shakuntala; to himself*].

They offer me this flawless girl...
Could I have married her? I no longer know.
Like a bee mithering at dawn
Round a jasmine soaked in dew,
I can neither approach her, nor go.

[*He remains thinking*]

Doorkeeper [*to herself*]. Ah, duty always comes first for my lord. Who else would hesitate, faced with such a free and beautiful offer?

SARNGARAVA. So, king, why do you remain silent?

KING. Ascetics, however hard I try, I don't remember marrying this lady. So how can I accept her when she's obviously pregnant, and I have no reason to believe it's anything to do with me?

Related Characters: Sarngarava , Doorkeeper, King Dusyanta (speaker), Durvasas, Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Shakuntala's entourage arrives in the capital, and Dusyanta is told that she is his wife. His memory obscured by Durvasas's curse, the King is perplexed. While he is unable to recognize Shakuntala herself, he is open to the possibility that he might have forgotten, and his will darts back and forth like a hesitating bee. The doorkeeper assumes that duty silences the King; otherwise, who could say no to the offer of love? But Dusyanta is torn between attraction and bewilderment, finally concluding that he can't accept an unknown woman who will presumably claim his paternity for her child. This tension-filled scene is a cruel anticlimax to Shakuntala's hopes, as she'd journeyed to her husband's palace in hopes that their secret marriage would finally be publicly recognized. Instead, even her husband is unable to recognize the truth. Notably, however, it's not wrongdoing on the part of either lover that causes this painful separation; rather, they're simply at the mercy of the supernatural forces that have shaped their story so far, most notably Durvasas's curse.

SHAKUNTALA [*aside*]. What's the use in reminding him, when passion can change so monstrously? But I owe it to myself to clear my name. [*Aloud*] Dear husband—[*she breaks off in the middle*]—no, my right to address you in that way has been cast into doubt. Puru King, then . . . It becomes you very well to disown a naive and innocent girl with meagre words, after you used them so richly to deceive me in the hermitage.

KING [*covering his ears*]. Enough of this wickedness!

What are you doing?
Like a torrent in spate,
Dissolving its banks,
Undercutting great trees,
You pollute yourself and your family's name
In your vile attempt to shame
And drag me down.

SHAKUNTALA. Very well! If you really think you're in danger of taking another man's wife, let me show you something that will refresh your memory.

KING. An excellent idea.

SHAKUNTALA [*feeling her ring-finger*]. No! It can't be! The ring has gone from my finger!

Related Characters: Shakuntala, King Dusyanta (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

When Shakuntala—who's unaware of the sage's curse— is humiliated by the King's rejection, she assumes that his feelings toward her have changed and that he's wantonly seduced her. In this quote, she speaks up in her own defense. Shakuntala's self-defense is striking, because up to this point in the play, she's actually spoken relatively little—during her courtship with the King, her feelings were conveyed more through gesture (or reflections in the natural world around her) than through words, and her character has always seemed fairly modest and restrained. Now, however, she not only addresses the King directly, she utters quite serious accusations that could bring great shame on him. Her words have their intended effect, as Dusyanta is distraught and defensive in response to her "torrent." Shakuntala's displaying of the King's signet-ring is meant to be the climax of this scene, so its disappearance is an effective dramatic moment, undercutting audience expectations and adding another layer to the plot.

Act 6 Quotes

CHAMBERLAIN [*observing the* KING]. Whatever the conditions, exceptional beauty always entrances us. Even though wasted with remorse, the king looks wonderful.

Instead of jewels, he wears a single band
Above his left-hand wrist; his lips are cracked
By sighs; brooding all night has drained his eyes
Of lustre; yet, just as grinding reveals
A gem, his austerity lays bare
An inner brilliance and an ideal form.

SAMUMATI [*aside, staring at the* KING]. I can see why Shakuntala goes on pining for him, even though he rejected and humiliated her.

KING [*pacing about slowly, deep in thought*].

Useless heart—buried in sleep
When my doe-eyed girl
Tried to wake it.
Now it beats in pain
To each pang of remorse,
And shall never sleep again.

Related Characters: King Dusyanta, Sanumati, Chamberlain (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Dusyanta has seen his signet ring, recovered from the belly of a fish, and remembered his marriage to Shakuntala. He's immediately plunged into a deep depression, rivaling his lovesick phase earlier in the play. In fact, the King's current condition parallels his youthful heartache, but it's far more extreme—he now dresses as a penitent, devoid of jewels, and his appearance is wasted by tears and sleeplessness. Yet, those who see him—here, both his royal chamberlain and the spying nymph, Sanumati—consider him beautiful. Their judgments point to a thematic shift in the play; while beauty was associated with youthful passion early in the play, it's now associated more with "inner brilliance," which only comes to the surface through the "grinding" effect of suffering. Both Dusyanta and Shakuntala are wasted and aged by such pain, but it's actually drawing them closer to one another, even though they don't know it now. When Dusyanta eventually makes his way to the celestial hermitage where Shakuntala

lives, it's no mere signet ring, but rather his enhanced spiritual purity that opens his eyes to recognize her. Rather than concealing his emotions in any way, the King expresses them openly here, and the play suggests that this true expression is part of what leads to his eventual reunion with Shakuntala.

KING [*sighing*].

I rejected my love when she stood before me,
Yet now I'm obsessed by her painted image:
I crossed the stream of living water
To drink from a mirage.

VIDUSAKA [*aside*]. It's too late for the river now, but there's no dispelling the mirage.

Related Characters: Vidusaka, King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

King Dusyanta has been working on a portrait of Shakuntala, and in this scene, he stares obsessively at the painting, seemingly unable either to draw comfort from the image or turn aside from it. This quote plays with the theme of concealment and estrangement that comes up so frequently throughout the story. Because Shakuntala is believed to be lost forever, the King seeks consolation in her memory and likeness, yet that very likeness only reminds him of the bitter truth that he rejected her when she was actually present, driving her away for good. As Dusyanta continues to talk with Vidusaka about the painting, he tries to drive away a bee that he's painted in the picture, seeming not to understand that the insect—and the woman—aren't real. If the King's words are taken at face value, then it seems that his remorse has truly driven him to the edge of madness by this time.

KING.

I planted the seed of myself,
Then, without lawful reason,
Abandoned my fruitful wife,
Blighting that golden season.

SANUMATI [*aside*]. Yet your line will not be broken.

CATURIKA. [*whispering to the* DOORKEEPER]. This story about the merchant has only compounded His Majesty's suffering. Go and fetch noble Madhavya from the Palace of Clouds to console him.

DOORKEEPER. A good idea! [*Exits*]

KING. Dusyanta's ancestors are unsettled and ask:

'Who will feed us in the afterlife
As he does now, if there is no heir?'
And thus distressed, they drink the offering
Mixed with tears. [*He faints*]

CATURIKA [*looking at him in consternation*]. You'll be all right, my lord!

Related Characters: Doorkeeper, Caturika, Sanumati, King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As the King wrestles with his grief, he struggles to attend to his ordinary royal business. One day, he has to attend to an urgent matter concerning the inheritance of a childless merchant who's just died at sea. This case only seems to compound the depressed King's despair, reminding him that as things stand, he'll be just like his dead subject—he won't have any children to carry on his lineage. Yet this isn't just a question of pride or politics; in the world of the play, failure to produce children was seen as a fundamental neglect of one's spiritual duty as well, since one's ancestors depended on the offerings brought by their living descendants. If Dusyanta's rejection of Shakuntala isn't distressing enough, it also represents a missed opportunity—"blighting that golden season"—to carry on the family line (ensuring that he, too, would be remembered in perpetuity). However, Sanumati's aside, unheard by the King, gives this sad scene an inkling of hope and foreshadows the later revelation that the King will fulfill this duty, after all—and he'll do so through pursuing his passionate love for Shakuntala.

KING. Indra honors me, indeed. But why this rough treatment of Madhavya?

MATALI. Quite simple. I saw you were depressed for one reason or another, and sought to rouse you by making you angry.

Stir the embers and the fire leaps up,
Threaten the snake and its hood expands—
Everything in nature, if provoked, responds.

KING [*aside to the* VIDUSAKA]. Friend, I cannot ignore the Lord of Heaven's command. Inform Minister Pisuna what's happened, and tell him this from me:

Concentrate your mind on protecting the realm:
My bow and I have godly business to perform.

Related Characters: Matali, King Dusyanta (speaker), Shakuntala, Vidusaka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after Dusyanta's dismal episodes with the painting and the sorrowful story of the dead sailor, his close friend, the hapless Vidusaka, is dragged onto the roof of the palace by an invisible spirit. Immediately jumping into action, Dusyanta prepares to shoot the attacker, but then Matali, the god Indra's charioteer, suddenly materializes. Matali explains that he was simply trying to snap Dusyanta out of his depressive stupor, since "nature, if provoked, responds." The ruse works—Dusyanta not only acts like his old self in saving his friend, but responds to Matali's summons to fight some demons who are threatening the realm. Dusyanta's announcement that he and his bow "have godly business to perform" thus recalls the active, duty-driven King of the play's earlier acts. This turning point will eventually lead Dusyanta out of self-pity and back to Shakuntala, showing how duty can actually lead toward love rather than just distracting from it.

Act 7 Quotes

MATALI [*looking at the king*]. Your Majesty could sit at the foot of this ashoka tree, while I find the right moment to announce your arrival to Indra's father.

KING. Whatever you advise. [*He sits.*]

MATALI. I shall go now. [*He exits.*]

KING [*sensing an omen*].

My desire is hopeless, yet this vein
Throbs in my arm—
Once abandoned, fortune
Is incessant pain.

OFF-STAGE VOICE. Don't act so rashly! How he reverts to his nature!

KING [*listening*]. This is no place for uncontrolled behavior. Who can they be reprimanding? [*Looking in the direction of the voice, surprised*] Ah! And what kind of child is this, guarded by two female ascetics, and so much stronger than his years? [...] Why am I drawn to this child, as though to my own son?

Related Characters: King Dusyanta, Matali (speaker), Sarvadamana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

After King Dusyanta vanquishes the demons threatening the realm, he's rewarded with a journey through the heavens, culminating in a visit to the celestial hermitage of Marica, a realm of demigods—where supernatural forces will again shape the protagonists' fates. It turns out that this is where Shakuntala has been living all along, under the care of her nymph relatives, but the King doesn't know this yet. While he waits for an audience with the sage, he feels an omen for the second time in the story. While the first omen, upon entering Kanva's hermitage, presaged his meeting with Shakuntala, this omen foretells his meeting with his son. Dusyanta initially writes it off as an echo of the older omen, but then he sees the strong, willful little boy playing with his ascetic minders. He feels an instant connection with the child, which soon leads to the discovery that Sarvadamana is, in fact, his son, the prophesied future emperor. The appearance of Sarvadamana reconciles the tension between duty and love that's prevailed for much of the story—the King's little boy is the embodiment of both earthly duty *and* desire.

KING [*seeing Shakuntala*]. Ah, it *is* the lady Shakuntala!

Her robes are dusky, drab,
Her hair a single braid,
Her cheeks drawn in by penance—
She's been so pure and constant
In that vow of separation
I so callously began.

SHAKUNTALA [*seeing the KING pale from suffering*]. He doesn't look like my husband. Who is this who dares to pollute my son with his touch, in spite of the amulet?

BOY [*running to his mother*]. Mamma, this stranger is calling me his son!

KING. My dear, that cruelty I practiced on you has come full circle, since now it is I who need to be recognized by you.

Related Characters: Sarvadamana, Shakuntala, King Dusyanta (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

This quote includes the climax of the play—King Dusyanta's recognition of Shakuntala, at long last. Yet the awaited reunion looks much different than either of them, or the audience, might have guessed. In contrast to the youthful beauty who captivated the King in the play's opening act, Shakuntala is now as plain as can be. And the King is far from the vitality-filled hunter who sped onto the scene six years earlier—in fact, Shakuntala questions his identity as first. The King tenderly points out the irony: he failed to recognize his bride in her prime, and he now deserves her own hesitation. But even though the two lovers are dramatically changed in their outward appearances, their deeper spiritual maturity is unmistakable. Their common suffering ultimately helps them recognize one another, having produced an enduring beauty in both of them. There is no longer any need for concealment, whether produced by a flirtation or a curse—and they'll never be separated again.

MARICA. When Menaka came to Aditi, transporting her daughter from the nymphs' ford in such obvious distress, I saw, in meditation, that you had rejected your forest wife because of a curse, spoken by Durvasas. I saw too that the curse would lift when you caught sight of this ring.

KING [*sighing with relief*]. So—I am not to blame.

SHAKUNTALA [*to herself*]. It's good to know my husband didn't reject me for no reason at all. And yet I don't remember being cursed. Or perhaps it fell unnoticed through the emptiness of separation that engulfed me then. My friends did urge me to show the ring to my husband.

MARICA. Daughter, now you know the truth. Feel no resentment towards your lord:

When his memory was cursed,
Your husband was cruel to you,
But that darkness has lifted
And your power's renewed;
The mirror was tarnished,
The image obscure,
But with polishing
It all becomes clear.

Related Characters: Shakuntala, King Dusyanta, Marica (speaker), Durvasas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, at the conclusion of the play, the reunited family sits before the celestial sage, Marica, who ties up the loose ends in their respective experiences (and also sums up the action for the audience one final time). Namely, he explains the curse that obscured Shakuntala's identity from Dusyanta; both Dusyanta and Shakuntala had been oblivious to it the whole time. This revelation frees them both from guilt and resentment—though it's worth noting that Shakuntala has, by all appearances, already forgiven her husband. This celestial summit thus brings the entire play to a peaceful resolution, as the family is soon dismissed back to the earthly realm, where they'll fulfill their duties in the capital as a King's family should—while also enjoying their love for each other. Marica's verses capture the play's theme of concealment well: the darkness of the curse has been lifted, and Shakuntala and the King can finally dwell together in clarity, with nothing obscured.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The play opens with a benediction, seeking the Lord Shiva's protection of all those present. The benediction calls upon the eight physical embodiments of Shiva, including water, fire, earth, and breath.

Plays at this time were preceded by various rituals, of which this blessing would have been the last. Because benedictions could only be pronounced by brahmins (priests, who made up the highest Hindu social caste), the play's manager, if he was a brahmin, might have performed this role.

The actor-manager and an actress discuss the play about to be performed, a new romance by Kalidasa. The manager asks the actress to sing a song about summer to set the mood for the audience. The actress sings a romantic song about a mimosa blossom brushed by **bees**. The manager says approvingly that the song carried him away, "Just as the headlong rush of a spotted deer / Carries this king, Dusyanta, into our play."

The exchange between the manager and actress serves as an introduction to the play for the audience. The actress's song sets a romantic tone for the play, sweeping the audience into a state of rapture, as was the goal of a classical Indian playwright. The manager segues smoothly into the action of the play's opening act.

ACT 1

King Dusyanta, holding a bow and arrow and being driven in a chariot, enters the scene, in pursuit of a **deer**. The chariot picks up speed, and the king prepares to shoot, when suddenly an offstage voice warns him that the deer belongs to the hermitage and mustn't be killed. Vaikhanasa, a forest-dwelling ascetic, reminds the king that his job is to defend the oppressed, not to harm them. The king duly reins in the chariot and drops his weapon.

The play opens with exciting action, as the King is on the hunt. But on the cusp of triumph, his pursuit is cut short by the ascetic's warning. One of the traditional duties of kings was to be a guardian of religious practitioners, and Dusyanta is a faithful king. This scene sets the stage for the significance of asceticism and duty in the play.

Vaikhanasa, in response to the King's merciful action, pronounces a prophetic wish: "May you have a son / With all your virtues, / Destined to rule the world." He urges the King to receive the hospitality of the nearby hermitage, which belongs to the great sage Kanva. The visit will make the King realize "how far your own bow-scarified arm / Reaches to give protection."

The ascetic Vaikhanasa speaks a prophecy, which is even more momentous than the King realizes at the time; his son will be a key to the resolution of the story. Receiving the hospitality of a hermitage would be a special blessing both for the King and for the ascetics who benefit from his special protection.

Vaikhanasa then explains that Kanva himself is not at home, because he has gone to appease the gods on behalf of his daughter, Shakuntala, who's been left behind to receive guests.

The ascetic doesn't elaborate on Kanva's errand, though it will later emerge that he's foreseen a curse befalling his daughter. Ironically, if he hadn't been absent when Dusyanta arrived, then the curse would likely have been averted in the first place—but so would the play's entire romance.

As they drive toward the hermitage, King Dusyanta comments to his driver that it's obvious they're near the holy groves—the deer stroll unafraid, the **trees** are well tended, and the smoke of sacrificial *ghee* (clarified butter used in rituals) drifts by. When the chariot stops, the King removes his insignia and bow in order to look "modest and humble" before going in. As he enters the grounds, a vein throbs in his arm—an omen "presaging some woman's charm."

The hermitage is a place of harmony, which is reflected in its peaceful natural environment. In a minor act of concealment—which will become a common thread in the story—the King hides his royal identity. Given the ascetic environment, he's surprised to receive an omen that foretells romantic attraction.

Right away, the King sees some hermitage girls going to the sacred grove to water the **trees**. He hides himself in the shadows to observe the "charming sight." It's Shakuntala, with her two friends, Anasuya and Priyamvada. Shakuntala chats with her friends as they work, remarking that she loves these trees "like sisters."

The King hides himself so that he can watch the beautiful girls without being seen. He observes Shakuntala, the sage Kanva's daughter, for the first time. Shakuntala loves the hermitage trees, and her beauty is often associated with the trees throughout the play.

Dusyanta is surprised to see Kanva's beautiful daughter doing menial tasks. He watches her more intently. As Shakuntala loosens her chafing bark garment, the King remarks to himself that "this slight child beggars her beggar's clothes / all rags are gowns on girls who burn this bright."

The King thinks the beautiful Shakuntala looks out of place doing manual labor. She wears traditional ascetic clothing made from tree bark (which again emphasizes her connection to the natural world), but even thus modestly dressed, there are strong erotic overtones to his observation of her.

As Shakuntala waters a mango **tree**, Priyamvada remarks that "with you next to it, that tree looks as though it's been married to a beautiful, sinuous vine." At a distance, the King agrees, observing how "youth pushes up through all her limbs."

Shakuntala, with her slight, youthful figure, is associated with the beauty of trees again. The King continues to take in the appealing sight from his hidden spot, setting up the concealment that will continue to define their relationship in various ways throughout the play.

Shakuntala then approaches the jasmine **tree** she has named Light of the Forest. Gazing at it, she tells the other girls, "the union of this tree and this jasmine has taken place at the most wonderful time—the jasmine is a young plant, covered in fresh blossoms, the mango has soft buds, and is ready for enjoyment…"

Shakuntala's remarks about the two trees, with their strongly erotic overtones, anticipate her own union with Dusyanta and again show how, in the world of the play, human emotion is often reflected in the natural world.

Priyamvada comments playfully that Shakuntala is thinking along these lines because she, too, wants a suitable husband. The King thinks that if only Shakuntala were the daughter of a brahmin and a woman of another class, then *he* could hope to marry her. Meanwhile, Shakuntala is frightened by a **bee** that's been disturbed by her watering. Dusyanta envies the bee's closeness to Shakuntala.

If Shakuntala were the daughter of two brahmins, then she would only be permitted to marry another brahmin. It later emerges that the King needn't have worried, since Shakuntala's real father was a member of the princely class, making her eligible to marry him. In any case, the King is so taken with Shakuntala that he's already thinking in terms of marriage, even though it's not clear how such an attraction can coexist with his royal duties.

Shakuntala's friends say that she should call on King Dusyanta for help, since he's the protector of ascetic groves. The King hesitates a moment, then reveals his presence, stepping out of the shadows. The girls are surprised and agitated. Dusyanta asks Shakuntala how her religious practice is going. Shakuntala is speechless.

The girls joke about summoning Dusyanta, and his unexpected appearance among them is startling, although they don't immediately recognize him as the King. The King immediately focuses on Shakuntala, and his inquiry about her practice makes a somewhat awkward introduction.

Shakuntala wonders how it's happened that "simply at the sight of this man, I am shaken with a passion so at odds with the religious life?" They all wonder who the mysterious man is, and Anasuya questions him. Dusyanta claims that he's a newly appointed "Minister for Religious Welfare" who's come to make sure the ascetics' rituals aren't being disrupted. Listening in silence, Shakuntala "displays all the embarrassment of erotic attraction."

Shakuntala is attracted to Dusyanta as instantly as he was drawn to her, and she's startled by the strength of her feelings—something she's not used to, after a lifetime of religious asceticism. This moment makes it clear that, like Dusyanta, Shakuntala will have to confront conflicts between her sense of duty and her newfound feelings of love. Dusyanta's claim about being a "Minister" isn't completely off base, since such duties were within a king's purview, but it's clearly an invention, and Shakuntala sees through it. The stage direction—about her "embarrassment"—is in keeping with the conventions of classical Indian plays, in which feelings like attraction were conveyed more through gesture and expression than through speech.

Dusyanta asks how it's possible that the chaste sage Kanva has a daughter. Anasuya explains that Kanva is Shakuntala's foster father. She's the biological daughter of a royal sage and a nymph, Menaka, who was sent to test the sage's self-restraint. The King is heartened to learn that he and Shakuntala are actually of the same class.

Dusyanta feels encouraged to learn that Shakuntala is actually a member of the royal class, which removes the primary barrier to their marrying. Dusyanta's questioning makes it fairly transparent that he's interested in Shakuntala. Shakuntala's connection with the nymphs will also be significant in later Acts.

Dusyanta is "eager to hear about the lives of the virtuous" and asks how long Shakuntala "will [...] keep her love-starved hermit vows / Till she changes them for the marriage kind?" Shakuntala, appearing angry, tries to leave, but her friends urge her not to neglect hospitality to her distinguished guest.

The flirtation implied in Dusyanta's questioning is obvious to Shakuntala, and she appears to try to evade it, but her friends appeal to the sacred duties of hospitality—Shakuntala's particular responsibility in Kanva's absence—to keep her there. Here, love and duty intersect, though Shakuntala is still clearly troubled by the seeming conflict between them.

The King observes that Shakuntala is exhausted from watering and offers her his signet ring as a way of discharging her debt of hospitality. When the girls see the King's inscription on the seal, they're shocked. Priyamvada says that Shakuntala has been released by the King and had better go; Shakuntala thinks, "If I have the strength." Watching her, the King wonders if he dares hope that she returns his feelings, given Shakuntala's shyness and evasive gaze.

The King finally reveals his identity, and Shakuntala is shaken, weakened by her desire for Dusyanta. Her shy demeanor hints that she's simply modest, but the King can't know for sure if she returns his feelings; again, concealment colors every phase of their relationship. The gift of the King's ring will be significant later in the story.

Just then an offstage voice warns that King Dusyanta's chariots have endangered the sacred grove, scattering the deer and sending an elephant on a rampage. As they part ways, Shakuntala lingers on the pretense of a snagged blouse, watching Dusyanta. The King thinks, "Suddenly, the city doesn't seem so attractive [...] The truth is, I can't get Shakuntala out of my head."

Dusyanta's hunting party abruptly breaks up their meeting, but Shakuntala doesn't want to leave the King. Though the King's primary duty is in his capital city, he's now feeling torn by his attraction to this hermitage girl. The chaos in the forest, in contrast to the earlier tranquility, echoes this sense of disruption and conflict between duty and love.

ACT 2

Vidusaka, the King's overweight companion, complains about what a pain it is traveling with Dusyanta on his hunting trips—and now the King was awake all night meditating on Shakuntala. As the King enters, he's still wondering if he dares hope that Shakuntala is attracted to him, or if he's misread her modest signs. When Vidusaka complains that he's been crippled by the hunt, the King remarks that thinking of Shakuntala is enough to make even *him* sick of the chase.

Vidusaka, the King's brahmin friend and a figure of comic relief in the play, reveals that the King continues to obsess over his newfound love. He only has Shakuntala's physical signs to go on and longs to know her feelings for sure, but again, confusion and hidden feelings cloud what would otherwise be a happy union. Even his favorite pursuits aren't appealing to him anymore, which foreshadows how his love for Shakuntala will come to interfere with his official duties as the play goes on.

When the King's general comes seeking orders, the King tells him that his enthusiasm for the hunt has dampened, and the general is to make sure his party doesn't disturb the ascetics' grove in any way. Then Dusyanta turns to Vidusaka for advice. He describes Shakuntala and their interactions the day before, Vidusaka teasing him that he's "turned the penance-grove into a pleasure-garden." Dusyanta says that he'll need a new excuse in order to visit the ashram again today.

The King's whole object has changed since the day before; he only cares about his proximity to Shakuntala, and resolving the question of whether his feelings are requited. Interestingly, this fixation on Shakuntala actually makes him complete his duties more thoroughly in this instance; does a better job protecting the ascetics' grove because of his love for her.

Just then, two seers are ushered in with a message from Kanva. They explain that in Kanva's absence, evil spirits are disrupting the ascetics' rituals, so Dusyanta has been asked to stay and protect the ashram for a few nights. Dusyanta eagerly agrees.

Just when the King needs it most, the perfect opening is made, giving him good reason to linger at the ashram. Since the sage isn't there, it falls within the King's duties to defend against evil spirits. This occasion brings another form of pretense into the story; the King will stay at the ashram, but he won't reveal his real reason for being excited to do so.

Karabhaka, the royal messenger, then comes in with another message. He explains that the King has been requested by his mother, the queen, to attend the upcoming ritual fast to safeguard his succession. The King wonders how "to weigh [his] duty to the ascetics against the request of a revered parent." Finally he dispatches Vidusaka to take the King's place in the ritual. Before he leaves, however, Dusyanta, fearing Vidusaka will gossip, pretends that his feelings for Shakuntala aren't serious.

Though the King must weigh his duty to the ascetics against his duty to his mother, in a larger sense he's also weighing kingly duty against desire, since nearness to Shakuntala is the bigger motivation for his lingering at the ashram.

ACT 3

An assistant of Kanva says that King Dusyanta is so powerful, he had only to enter the ashram in order to quell the disruptive demons. He then speaks to Priyamvada, offstage, who reports that Shakuntala has been stricken with heatstroke. The King, meanwhile, is depressed that there's no longer anything keeping him at the ashram. He decides that gazing on Shakuntala is the only thing that will revive him. Indeed, when he peers through some branches and sees her resting on a rock, his "eyes are in paradise."

The King quickly achieves his goal of defeating the evil spirits who threatened the ashram—to his regret. But the sight of Shakuntala alone—once again from a concealed position—relieves his depression. It's also notable that Shakuntala's strong emotions manifest in a bodily form; she may not yet express her love openly, but her symptoms of heatstroke are nonetheless a visible symbol of them.

Priyamvada and Anasuya are fanning Shakuntala with a lotus leaf, but she hardly seems to be aware of it. Noting how ill she looks, Dusyanta wonders, "Now, is it the heat, or is it the heart, as it is with me?" The girls question Shakuntala about the source of her illness, since it appears she's "feeling exactly what women in love are said to feel." The King, full of doubt, anxiously waits for her response. Shakuntala says that from the moment she saw Dusyanta, she's been filled with longing for him, so her friends must help her. The King rejoices.

Lovesickness is understood literally, not metaphorically; Shakuntala's unsatisfied longing for Dusyanta causes her physical suffering, in keeping with the theme of inner states being manifested in the external world. Hearing Shakuntala's admission finally relieves the King's own doubt and depression about his beloved's feelings.

Shakuntala's friends ponder how best to help her. Priyamvada says it's obvious that the King shares her feelings, because "he's as thin as she is from lack of sleep." They decide that Shakuntala must write a love poem, which Priyamvada will slip to the King among some flowers. Shakuntala composes a little song, etching it into a lotus leaf with her nails. As she recites her poem aloud, the King suddenly reveals himself in their presence.

Shakuntala's friends come up with a plan that will allow her to speak her feelings to the King, albeit in an indirect, modest way. This turns out to be unnecessary, however; as soon as Shakuntala reveals her feelings explicitly, the King also reveals himself openly. The drama of this moment underscores the play's central tension between concealment and open expression of emotion.

As Dusyanta sits next to the embarrassed Shakuntala, Priyamvada says that since it's the King's duty to relieve the pain of his subjects, he must take the suffering Shakuntala under his protection. Soon the friends leave on the pretense of helping a wandering **deer**. Shakuntala weakly tries to summon them back and then to leave herself, but the King soothes her. He reminds her that Kanva "knows the law, and he shall find no fault in what you've done." She wouldn't be the first royal daughter to accept a prince and receive her father's blessings after the fact.

Priyamvada rather coyly casts Shakuntala's lovesickness in terms of Dusyanta's duty to care for his suffering subjects. Now that Shakuntala and the King have declared their love for one another, they can consider themselves married—according to the gandharva *form of marriage, which could be legally contracted in secret between members of the princely class, even without a formal ceremony. This secret marriage is another form of concealment in the story, and it's also an early example of how it might be possible to serve the goals of both love and duty at the same time.*

When Gautami, the senior female ascetic, comes in search of Shakuntala, Shakuntala sorrowfully takes leave of Dusyanta. Dusyanta grieves their separation, regretting not having kissed her. Then the King himself is summoned away to dispel demons who are disrupting the evening rites.

The married couple's nighttime separation foreshadows the much longer separation to come. Once more, the two are separated by the conflict between their love and the summons to their respective duties.

ACT 4

Anasuya and Priyamvada enter, talking about how well Shakuntala's secret marriage is working out. But Anasuya worries what will happen now that the King's business at the ashram has concluded: "Who can say whether he'll remember what's happened in the forest?"

Shakuntala's and Dusyanta's marriage is going well, but the King has been called back to his duties in the capital. Though Anasuya speaks metaphorically of the distractions of the city, her remark also foreshadows the literal forgetting to come.

They hear a visitor announcing himself. It's Durvasas, a short-tempered sage. They hear him pronouncing a curse: "That man, though prompted, / Shall not remember you at all, / Like a drunken sot, who cannot recall / What he said in his cups the night before." The girls realize that Shakuntala has, disastrously, failed to welcome Durvasas with the formality he expects. Priyamvada rushes to placate him, and Durvasas concedes that "the sight of a memento can lift the curse." The girls relax, recalling the ring Dusyanta has given Shakuntala.

Shakuntala grieves her separation from Dusyanta to the point that she neglects her duties at the ashram. Because hospitality is a sacred duty, failing to welcome an important guest would be considered a significant fault. However, the cranky Durvasas has an extreme reaction—placing a curse on Dusyanta, that he won't remember Shakuntala when he sees her again. Remembering the signet ring Dusyanta gave her, the girls assume all will be well, but as the play goes on to reveal, such curses can have consequences that range far beyond the simple human circumstances in which they originated.

Shakuntala is full of grief in Dusyanta's absence. Anasuya frets about the King's failure to even send a letter, worrying that he's faithless after all, or has been affected by Durvasas's curse. She also fears how Kanva will react now that Shakuntala is carrying Dusyanta's child.

Separation from the King causes all sorts of worries, especially now that Shakuntala is pregnant with his child. Even for such a happy couple, the threats of supernatural intervention and human secrecy are ever-present.

Suddenly Priyamvada appears, delighted—they are to celebrate Shakuntala's departure as a bride. It turns out that Kanva, while making a sacrifice, heard a voice chanting the news: "For the world's welfare your daughter / Bears the lustrous seed of King Dusyanta." Kanva is happily sending her to her husband with an escort of seers.

The girls' concerns about Kanva's reaction to Shakuntala's marriage and pregnancy were unfounded, it turns out. Kanva is happy to learn that his foster daughter carries a royal child, and he's ready to reunite husband and wife with due honor. At this point, it seems that duty and love will become one for Shakuntala, though it will actually turn out to be some time before they are fully united.

Priyamvada, Anasuya, and the other hermit women shower Shakuntala with blessings. They also adorn her with ornaments which the forest **trees** have miraculously provided: "It was a tree itself spun this moon-white cloth / […] And gods of the trees that conjured these jewels, / Hands sprouting from branches like fresh green shoots." Priyamvada takes this as a sign of the royal fortune awaiting Shakuntala.

The women celebrate Shakuntala's marriage and her impending departure to join her royal household. The trees, so lovingly tended by Shakuntala, fashion miraculous adornments for her to wear—the natural world once again reflects the emotional state of human beings, and the blessings of the trees are another form of the supernatural forces common throughout the play.

The **trees** of the forest bless Shakuntala, and she and Kanva share an emotional farewell. As Shakuntala bids goodbye to her favorite tree, the Light of the Forest, Kanva comments that Shakuntala has attracted the very husband he would've wanted for her: "And now the jasmine and the mango / Have entwined, I have no worries left." She tearfully says goodbye to Priyamvada and Anasuya, and they remind her to show Dusyanta the ring he gave her, in case he's slow to recognize her.

Shakuntala bids goodbye to the pair of trees she'd compared to a married couple in Act I; she and Dusyanta appear here to be the personification of the trees' "romance." Everything appears to be going auspiciously as Shakuntala leaves her native hermitage for her new life in the capital. But her friends remind her of the signet ring, foreshadowing the ongoing effects of Durvasas's curse.

ACT 5

In the capital, the King overhears a song that fills him with desire: "Have you forgotten—forgotten so soon, / How you settled on the mango bloom?" He wonders why the song arouses such passion in him: "I'm not even separated from someone I love."

The romantic song, which again connects human emotion with the natural world, obviously calls to mind Dusyanta's recent marriage to Shakuntala. The audience is thus prepared for what's coming when Shakuntala arrives—the curse is fully in effect.

Then a chamberlain walks in, reluctant to disturb the King. However, "a king can't put off his duty." He reports that a group of forest ascetics have appeared with a message from Kanva, and that there are women among them, too. Dusyanta is surprised and wonders what business Kanva's messengers have; their approach "fills [him] with unease."

The entourage from Kanva's hermitage interrupts the King in the midst of his royal business, suggesting an uneasy middle ground between love and duty. Dusyanta clearly doesn't know what's coming, but he has a premonition that it won't be good.

As her party approaches the King, Shakuntala's right eyelid trembles—an evil omen. The King, seeing Shakuntala at a distance, wonders, "Who is she, this veiled creature […] Enough. One shouldn't stare at another man's wife." Arriving, the ascetics salute Dusyanta, and they formally greet each other.

Shakuntala's bodily omen as she enters the city recalls the omen Dusyanta experienced when he approached the hermitage, but in this case, it's a warning. Dusyanta ironically refrains from looking at his own wife. Shakuntala is hidden beneath her veil, but removing the veil won't reveal the truth to the cursed King; here as throughout the play, concealment and separation are layered and complex.

One of Kanva's messengers informs the King that Kanva isn't displeased with Shakuntala's secret marriage, since the two are so well matched in honor and virtue. Now that Shakuntala carries his child, he must receive her, and they'll "perform [their] duties together as a couple should." Baffled, Dusyanta asks, "What is being proposed? […] You're saying this lady is already married to me?"

Shakuntala's arrival should be a triumphant homecoming and reunion—duty and love finding their fulfillment as the two establish a household together—but instead, as the curse does its worst, their meeting is a disorienting nightmare for them both. As physical distance disappears, their separation from one another becomes all the greater.

One of the ascetics lifts the despondent Shakuntala's veil so that Dusyanta will know her, but he continues to regard her in silence, finally admitting that he has no memory of their marriage and can't accept a pregnant lady with whom he has no known connection. Shakuntala tries to clear her name and convince him, accusing him of having deceived her. Then, when she tries to show him the signet ring he'd given her, she discovers, to her shock, that the ring is missing from her finger.

Shakuntala, who doesn't know about Durvasas's curse, is heartbroken, and her grief turns to anger as Dusyanta denies any connection with her. Then she discovers, in the most dramatic moment of the play so far, that her ring, the object that would override the curse, has gone missing. At this point, the couple's efforts to unite love and duty seem to have been completed thwarted by powers outside their control.

The more Shakuntala tries to spark Dusyanta's memory, the more he accuses her of using "honeyed words" to deceive him: "Females of every kind / Have natural cunning to perform these tricks." Shakuntala is angry, telling him that he sees "everything through the distorted lens of [his] own heart." She reproaches herself for having entrusted herself to a man "with honey in his mouth but poison in his heart."

Dusyanta's accusation that Shakuntala is deceptive doesn't show him in the best light, but Shakuntala stands up for herself, telling the King that his attitude towards her speaks volumes about what's hidden in his heart. She assumes she's been deceived as to his character, but the audience knows that it's not actually Dusyanta who has done the deceiving; rather, it's the hidden curse that interferes.

The ascetics prepare to go, telling Dusyanta it's up to him to take or leave Shakuntala, since "a husband's power is absolute." They call Shakuntala presumptuous, saying that if she's what Dusyanta claims, then she can't stay in Kanva's house. If her actions have been faultless, on the other hand, then she can bear the shame of his rejection.

Shakuntala is in a completely vulnerable, helpless situation, since as a woman, she doesn't have much recourse. She's abandoned both by her beloved and by her father's household, the curse having a devastating ripple effect even though Shakuntala herself has done nothing wrong—and in fact, neither has the King.

Dusyanta consults with a court priest, wondering if it's worse to "[collude] in the ruin of my faithful spouse / Or [risk] the defilement / Of another man's wife?" Given the predictions about Dusyanta's future son—that he'll bear the bodily signs of a world emperor—the priest encourages the king to house Shakuntala until she gives birth, and then they can see the truth for themselves. Before Dusyanta can follow this advice, Shakuntala prays that the earth will swallow her up. Moments later, the court priest tells Dusyanta that the weeping girl has suddenly disappeared: "Close to the nymph's shrine, a curtain of light / Shaped like a woman, whisked her away." The king is still bewildered: "My heart's so full of anguish / I almost think it may be true. / Have I betrayed her?"

The king, his conscience uneasy about the whole situation, asks a priest how he should respond and decides to show a degree of mercy to Shakuntala—but first she's whisked beyond the human realm altogether. Even though Dusyanta can't remember his bride, sympathy and shame seem to be at work deep down, suggesting that failing to join duty and love has painful consequences. Here, as before, the lovers' relationship is defined by supernatural forces that go well beyond human intention. That is, Shakuntala may have wished to vanish, but the nymphs take her request much more literally than she likely intended.

ACT 6

Two policemen enter, leading a fisherman. He's been accused of stealing a ring with the King's name engraved on it. The fisherman, frightened, insists that he discovered the ring in the belly of a fish he was cutting up. One of the policemen taunts the fisherman that he'll soon be executed, but soon the chief of police returns from the palace with news that the fisherman's story has been corroborated. The fisherman is also to be given a sum of money equal to the ring's value. The chief adds that when Dusyanta saw the ring, he became "really agitated," as though remembering someone important to him.

The playwright doesn't show Dusyanta's moment of revelation, choosing to relay it through this exchange between a lower-class fisherman and the police; again, emotion is hidden beneath layers of concealment, this time in the form of Dusyanta's separation from the audience. Nonetheless, he news of Dusyanta's agitation is enough to signal to the audience that, as Durvasas promised, the curse has been broken, and he has remembered Shakuntala.

A nymph, Sanumati, enters. She's a friend of Menaka, Shakuntala's mother, and has promised to help Shakuntala. She wonders why the palace isn't being prepared for the spring festival and decides to spy on some gardeners in order to find out.

Major dramatic details continue to be relayed through intermediary figures, in this case a spying nymph, who visits the palace and notices that all isn't as it should be.

The two young female gardeners, newcomers to the palace, are happily enjoying the scent of mango blossoms, when a chamberlain comes in and angrily scolds them for celebrating the spring festival in any manner. At the girls' questioning, the chamberlain explains that the festival has been cancelled due to "the scandal of Shakuntala." It turns out that when he saw the ring, Dusyanta remembered that he really did marry Shakuntala and "rejected her out of sheer delusion. And ever since, he has been mortified by regret" and depressed.

Sanumati learns of the King's catastrophe, which is so far only apparent because of the uncharacteristic stifling of celebration. That is, the extent of the King's depression is conveyed by the solemnity of the palace, particularly the lack of enjoyment of beautiful trees (which characterized earlier acts), rather than through direct expression.

The King enters, dressed as a penitent, and the chamberlain observes that the king still looks wonderful even though "wasted with remorse:" "His austerity lays bare / An inner brilliance and an ideal form." The king paces, speaking of his heart's remorse. Sanumati, invisibly watching, notes that Shakuntala feels the same grief. Vidusaka, looking on, calls the king's illness "Shakuntala fever."

The King's austerity isn't outwardly beautiful, but it conveys a spiritual "brilliance," implying that even if his external attractiveness has faded, the King's repentance and grief have refined his spiritual beauty.

The King sends word that, after a sleepless night, he's not fit to sit in judgment over any civil cases today. Vidusaka encourages him to take a rest in the garden, where his "mind and . . . soul are fresh impaled" at the sight of the mango **tree**. He sits in the jasmine bower, where the vines remind him of Shakuntala. Sanumati hides behind the vines, watching.

In contrast to the joyful romance of the hermitage forest, the palace garden is a place of emotional anguish and loneliness. Again, the natural world reflects the emotional states of the main characters, this time by reflecting the King's devastation. Since the nymph Sanumati is already invisible, it's unclear why she needs to make a special effort to hide; it may be the playwright's attempt to underscore the theme of concealment.

Vidusaka tries to cheer the King, arguing that if indeed Shakuntala was carried away by nymphs, then surely Menaka will take pity on her daughter and reunite the lovers before long. He also suggests that the recovery of Shakuntala's ring, lost when she was worshipping at Indra's ford in the Ganges, is "itself proof that coincidence fashions what has to be." The king just faults both the ring and himself.

Vidusaka points out that Shakuntala's connection with the nymphs might work to their advantage, and that even so-called coincidences indicate hidden forces at work. His words here highlight the importance of supernatural influence on human life and demonstrate how divine plans can even be a comfort to mortals. However, the King refuses to be consoled.

Then a maidservant, Caturika, enters, carrying a portrait of Shakuntala painted by the King. As Dusyanta resumes work on the painting, he laments that he rejected the living woman and must now obsess over her mere image: "I crossed the stream of living water / To drink from a mirage." He notices a **bee** in the painting and warns it not to harm his beloved. When Vidusaka tells him it's only a bee in a picture, Dusyanta responds, "What picture?"

The portrait seems to both comfort and torment the King, reminding him of his beloved while making their separation all the more painfully apparent. The bee recalls Dusyanta's first meeting with Shakuntala. His depression is such that it's hard to tell if he's joking or deluded when he asks, "What picture?"

A little later, a doorkeeper enters with documents from a complex civil case demanding the king's attention. A great merchant has been lost at sea, and because he was childless, his wealth goes to the King. Dusyanta reflects, "How terrible to be childless!" The wealth of Dusyanta's own family will undergo a similar fate when he's gone, because he abandoned his "fruitful wife" for no good reason. He wonders who will feed his ancestors in the afterlife. Sanumati wishes to console the king, but remembers that Indra's queen plans to "maneuver matters" such that husband and wife will soon reunite; she must wait until the time is right.

Childlessness was a failure to fulfill one's duty to one's ancestors, since one couldn't guarantee offspring to continue paying homage to their forebears in future generations. Thus it's a source of deep grief to the King. But Sanumati's comments assure the audience that everything is going to be put right; indeed, the audience already knows that Dusyanta isn't childless after all, so perhaps he'll be able to fulfill the duty that he currently feels he's shirking.

Just then, offstage, Vidusaka yells for help in a strangled voice. The doorkeeper runs in, explaining that an invisible spirit has seized Vidusaka and dragged him onto the palace roof. Dusyanta rushes to his aid, but can't see his friend. Just as he's about to shoot an arrow anyway, Indra's charioteer, Matali, materializes. Matali explains that there's a near-invincible brood of demons that Dusyanta must face. He threatened Vidusaka to try to rouse Dusyanta from his depression by making him angry. Dusyanta agrees to mount Indra's chariot and fulfill his duty of protecting the realm.

As in Act II, Dusyanta is unexpectedly called upon to render his services as a guardian against evil spirits. And, like the last time, this assignment will ultimately lead the King back to Shakuntala, by means of a path he couldn't have contrived himself. It seems that, in the world of the play, supernatural intervention is necessary for the human characters to successfully join their opposing drives toward duty and passion.

ACT 7

Six years have passed. Dusyanta has successfully destroyed the demons. He and Matali are returning to earth in the chariot. The king's mind, body, and soul are calm, and he admires the beauty of the earth below. They see the Golden Peak, "the mountain of the demigods, where asceticism ends in perfect success." The king wishes to descend to honor its sage, Marica, Indra's father.

In stark contrast to his devastated appearance in the previous act, the victorious Dusyanta here is in a state of perfect harmony, reflecting the benefits, both to society and to oneself, of faithfully fulfilling one's duty. In contrast to the reckless chariot ride to an earthly hermitage that opened the play, Dusyanta now rides peacefully to a celestial hermitage.

They enter Marica's tranquil hermitage. While Dusyanta waits for an audience with Marica, he senses another omen, a throbbing vein in his arm. He wonders at this, since his desire is "hopeless," then concludes that "once abandoned, fortune / Is incessant pain." Then he's distracted by the arrival of a little boy (who later turns out to be Sarvadamana), playing with a lion cub and accompanied by two female ascetics.

Like his arrival at the earthly hermitage, Dusyanta's arrival here is heralded by a bodily omen, but this time he dismisses it, assuming it's a relic of abandoned hopes. But then he catches sight of three people—only this time, it's not Shakuntala with two ascetics, but her son with two ascetics. The omen of the throbbing vein turns out to be genuine, even though Dusyanta doesn't believe it at first.

The King marvels at a strong sense of connection to the willful, spoiled child. He notices that the boy "bears the marks of a world ruler," such as delicately webbed palms. He approaches to greet the boy. One of the ascetics remarks, "I'm astonished that you and the boy are so alike!" She explains that Sarvadamana belongs to the Puru lineage, and though a child of the royal line would normally have grown up in a castle, his mother was allowed to give birth to him here because she's the daughter of a nymph.

Bodily markings indicate Sarvadamana's fulfillment of prophecy, as does his domineering personality. The King learns that the boy belongs to his own dynasty; the clues are falling rapidly into place as the truth of the play's over-arching divine scheme comes to light.

The King heartens at this news, and is further excited when the ascetic happens to mention that the boy's mother's name is Shakuntala. When the boy drops his protective amulet, Dusyanta picks it up. The ascetics are shocked, because the amulet cannot be picked up by anyone except for the boy's parents and the boy himself. The king at last realizes that he has "his heart's desire."

None of the evidence the King hears convinces him beyond the shadow of a doubt until he picks up the amulet unharmed, confirming that the boy is his son and that Shakuntala is near. Whereas the King despaired in the last act that he would never fulfill his duty of having children, it becomes clear here that he has done so—and that, perhaps even more importantly, he has done so in a way that joins perfectly with his "heart's desire."

Shakuntala enters. The King recognizes her at once: "Her robes are dusky, drab, / Her hair a single braid, / Her cheeks drawn in by penance-- / She's been so pure and constant / In that vow of separation / I so callously began."

This time, the King has no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing his wife—even though her dress indicates austere asceticism, and her single braid is a sign of separation from her husband. Her spiritual purity shines through her drab appearance, providing another example of the way in which duty (in this case, the duties of asceticism) can actually help love on its way.

Shakuntala doesn't think that the pale King resembles her husband. Dusyanta says, "My dear, that cruelty I practiced on you has come full circle, since now it is I who need to be recognized by you." Shakuntala realizes that her "bitter fate has turned compassionate."

In an ironic and fitting turn, Shakuntala doesn't recognize the King instantly, but she quickly recognizes that her fate has been reversed.

As Shakuntala breaks down in tears, Dusyanta tells his wife that "In looking on your pale / Unpainted lips, I have at last / Recalled your face." He offers back the signet ring—"let the vine take this flower back as a sign of her reunion with spring"—but Shakuntala, no longer trusting it, tells him to wear it instead.

Though Shakuntala's external beauty has faded, her spiritual beauty is all Dusyanta needs to confirm her identity. Shakuntala no longer wants to wear the symbol of their youthful love—besides seeming untrustworthy, it also seems not to fit the maturity of their marriage.

The family of three goes together to see Marica. Marica and his wife, Aditi, the parents of Indra, greet and bless Dusyanta and Shakuntala: "Fortune unites faith, wealth, and order: / Shakuntala the pure, her noble son, the king." When the King tells the sage the story of his rejection and then recognition of Shakuntala, Marica tells the King not to blame himself, and tells Shakuntala not to resent him—it was all because of Durvasas's curse.

The royal couple is blessed by a divine couple. Marica explains everything that's come between the King and Shakuntala, ensuring that there's no lingering doubt or resentment. It seems that the curse, though previously so devastating for them both, has ultimately brought them together stronger and more purified, despite the ill intent that originally lay behind it.

Marica confirms that their son, Sarvadamana, will be a universal emperor who will later be called Bharata, "Sustainer." One of Marica's pupils is sent to tell Kanva the happy news of the broken curse and the reunited family. Now, Marica says, Dusyanta must return to his capital with his wife and boy. He blesses them, particularly wishing that Dusyanta and the god Indra will mutually benefit one another's realms. The King closes the play with a prayer for freedom from rebirth and death forever.

At last, duty and love—seemingly at odds at the beginning of the play and frequently in conflict throughout—are fully reconciled as the reunited couple go to fulfill their royal duties with the blessing of the gods.

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