



# Kalidasa's Meghaduta

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translated from the Sanskrit  
by C. John Holcombe

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# The Cloud Messenger

The Meghaduta by Kalidasa

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by

Colin John Holcombe

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# The Cloud Messenger

The Meghaduta or Cloud Messenger is a masterpiece of Sanskrit literature, and was composed by the court poet Kalidasa some time before AD 634 in northern India. A Yaksha or nature deity begs a passing cloud to carry a message across the subcontinent to his grieving consort in the fabled city of Alakā. The first part describes the journey the cloud must make, which is north-westwards across present-day Madhya Pradesh, and then northwards into Tibet. The second part moves the story to Alakā, where the Yaksha depicts his consort's sadness, and tells the cloud what to say to her. Under this fiction, Kalidasa presents a sympathetic portrait of northern India, and weaves in the various moods of love traditional in classical Sanskrit poetry.

About its author, who wrote five or six other great works, little is known, but he may have served one of the pre-Gupta rulers of northern India at Ujjain.

The poem is written in unrhymed stanzas of four lines in the slow-moving Mandakrata measure. Many translations exist, generally in the style of their period, some being designed to help Sanskrit students understand the grammar and vocabulary of Kalidasa's elevated and harmonious language. The work here adopts the 1912 Hultsch text, and uses five-line stanzas of rhymed pentameters to render the simple magnificence of the poetry while remaining faithful to the prose sense. The few occasions where my interpretations differ from those of previous translators, or I have been unable to fully encompass the meaning in a particular stanza, are noted in the Appendix, which also contains a short treatment of metrical issues, an introduction to Sanskrit poetry, and a glossary of unfamiliar words and allusions.

It may help to know that syllables are long in Sanskrit words when the vowel is naturally long (shown with an accent), or the vowel is

followed by more than one consonant. Aspirated *dh*, *bh*, *gh*, *th* and *ph* count as single consonants, however, and *ph* and *th* are pronounced as breathy *p* and *t*, not as *f* or the *th* of ‘thin’.

## Meghaduta: Part One

A year from amorousness: it passes slowly.  
So thought a Yaksha by his master sent,  
for scanting duty, to the Rāmagiry:  
to mope in penance groves as banishment  
by rivers Sitā's bathing there made holy.

Āshādha's ending on the mountain found  
him weakened, gold ring slipping from his wrist.  
And mixed his pleasure as a cloud came down  
so playfully to hug the summit mist,  
as elephants in heat will butt the ground.

In tears withheld he took his fall from grace,  
from wealth attending on the King of Kings.  
The otherworld that brimmed in cloudy air  
was still discomfort when far longing brings  
a breath to hold him to that neck's embrace.

With now the rainy month stood close at hand,  
to fresh Kutaja blooms he adds his plea,  
and asks most courteously the cloud bring news  
of welfare to his loved-one—words that she,  
revived to hear of him, will understand.

How can a cloud so moving, mixed and got  
of water vapour, fire and wind be used  
by Yaksha appropriately as messenger?  
But he in eagerness and grief confused  
mistakes as sentient a thing that's not.

Such clouds the ending of the world presage.  
You minister to form at will. Though kin  
I plead for are by power detained, better  
to be by majesty refused than win  
an approbation of base parentage.

I ask you, shelter from the sun's fierce glare,  
as one apart, beneath Kubēra's sanctions,  
to bear this message to a loved one waiting  
in Alakā, where Shiva on those mansions  
sheds gardens' moonlight from his forehead there.

For you the women look through tangled hair  
on men-folk travelling, and take their cheer  
from unions urged on by your path of air,  
while I still distant and to blame appear  
a hapless prisoner to another's care.

A sight of her the open roads impart:  
a woman delicate, as flowers are sinking  
from want of nourishment. Your brother's wife,  
on days reflecting, of her husband thinking,  
awaits, a captive taken at the heart.

10. As wind will move you onward, ever slow,  
to greet you on the left you'll hear the cry  
of nesting chātakas, and, all around,  
conceiving female cranes will bless the eye,  
across the sky in garlands, row on row.

Thunder, and the ground is thick with white  
assurances of harvest. The wild geese wake  
and bearing lotus shoots for voyage flap  
out for Mānasa. Your company, these take  
you on to Mount Kailāsa with their flight.

Time to quit the lofty mountain station,  
where years of festivals do not efface  
the steps of Rāma, that most honoured man.  
But take your leave, as old friends do: embrace  
in tears long following on separation.

Cloud, take in the features I compile  
for you of onward journey, day by day  
more arduous and more testing: wearied,  
very wearied, on those peaks you'll stay  
and by their foaming waters rest awhile.

Among the wet Nichula, where there crop  
the wandering elephants you'll come to, shrink  
from contact with their heavy trunks but thence  
fly up, that startled Siddhas women think  
the wind has carried off the mountain top.

To ray about you in the darkening storm  
the broken bow of Indra, many-gemmed  
as serpent reared up from an anthill top,  
or, with his peacock feathers diademed,  
flares Vishnu in his dark-hued cowherd form.

Arrived where women furrow brows for men,  
and moisten eyes as of that harvest telling,  
you'll stop and bless the high ground here and thence  
from soil fresh ploughed and sweetly smelling  
a little westward float on north again.

To Āmrakūta mountain, provident  
to bear your weariness and not forget  
its forest fires you quenched with rain. The poor  
remember kindness and repay each debt:  
how more will one who is so eminent!



So on that summit, and in drifts unrolled  
of glistening hair, around so thickly pressed,  
the slopes, with fruiting mangoes, it will seem  
to heavenly couples passing earth's own breast,  
the dark surrounded by the palest gold.

And thence to groves which shelter forest wives  
to see how, waters emptied, heady pace,  
like whites on elephants when streaked with ash,  
the tumbling Revā through the rocky base  
of Vidhya Mountain, bouldery, arrives.

20. If now you take in moisture where there mate  
wild elephants and clumps of Jambū choke  
the streams, yet drink in moderation: while  
mere lightness will your worthiness revoke,  
it is the winds that onward bear your weight.

Where Nipa stamens, green and brown, detain  
the spotted deer, and rich Kandali grow  
in blazing white along the banks, the fragrant  
humours of the forest earth will show  
the hot, dry path to you for dropping rain.

In mountain after mountain, as you're faced  
with flowered Kakubha and the gladdening sight  
of peacocks screeching and their watering eyes,  
I call this favour from you: Cloud, despite  
such joyful welcomings, pass on in haste.

At your approach, the garden walls ignite  
with white Ketaka out of pointed shoots,  
the village crows thick nest in sacred trees,  
and in the woods for days, as Jambū fruits,  
the wild geese settle and forget their flight.

You'll come to Vidishā, the capital  
well known across the compass of these quarters,  
when, like a lover, at the Vetravati,  
hang on her face to have the frowning waters  
turn to murmuring, and drink your fill.

Rest on Nichais mountain. At your touch  
kadamba flowers will bristle out as hair,  
and grottos give out odours, those by which  
the venal women of the town ensnare  
the roistering youth who have no sense as such.

Refreshed, upon the forest river tiers  
of jasmine, sprinkle moisture you have gained,  
and on the female garland-makers, shading  
those who, brushing faces sweat has stained,  
have hurt the lotus blossoms in their ears.

Circuitous your path: if not received  
with tumult in the palaces of Ujjain  
by women sidelong glittering in their eyelids,  
your lightning's sweep and dazzlement has been  
by their eyes' allurements much deceived.

From undulating lines of birds above  
the extended water's loquacious girdle string,  
see the Nirvandhyā reveal her navel  
and, like a woman passed from dallying  
in gestured overtures, declare her love.

From dwindled to a single braid of hair,  
and pale with old leaves fallen on her banks,  
so will the Sindhu cast off separation  
and from her thinness correspond with thanks:  
how fortunate to pass her needful there!

30. Hear in Avanti, whose villagers are found  
with Udayana stories, that renown  
again of Ujjain, enriched by worthy  
ones whose last of merit has brought down  
a part of brilliant heaven to the ground.

In wind, which off the River Shiprā brims  
with smell of morning lotuses, is caught  
the long, sad calling of the cranes, at which  
the coaxing lovers skilfully exhort  
again their pleasure out of tired limbs.

Hang by lattice windows, large and sweet  
with incense out of women's new-washed hair,  
watch the filial peacocks dance affection,  
and in the flower-scented palace air  
see dancers moving on their red-lac feet.

If dark as Shiva's neck you thence frequent  
that master of the three world's shrine, the gaze  
of Ganas there will show respect. In groves  
an odour off the Gandhavatī strays  
with girls there laughing and the lily scent.

Cloud, when come to Mahākāla, wait  
for sun descending to have settled under  
the line of sight to Shiva's shrine. If then  
you offer moderately your solemn thunder  
praise unlimited attends your state.

Begemmed their hands, and jingling navels please,  
though wearying the chowries and the dances.  
But shoot your raindrops through the nailmarks, soothing:  
the courtesans will cast you sidelong glances,  
their rows in unison as honey bees.

After Shiva's dance, when twilight fills  
the forest long-encircled by his arms,  
then red as Japā flowers, remove his need  
for blooded ganja skin. His consort calms,  
her eyes to see you as devotion wills.

When night upon the road so thickly clings  
a needle cannot prick the darkness, draw  
a lightning flash of gold to lead the women  
out for lover's dwellings: do not pour  
down rain or thunder: they are timid things.

Among the pigeons on some rooftop stay  
the night with lightning who is half worn out  
from all her flickering, but on the morrow  
promptly leave as those who go about  
good offices for friends and won't delay.

That time returning lovers brush a tear  
from faces they've offended, leave the path  
of sunlight unattended. He who draws  
the dew drop from the lotus burns in wrath  
to find obstructions to his sunbeams here.

40. Let no barrenness of heart deny  
the ever-glancing Gambhīra her wish,  
for you are handsome on her surface. Watch  
how white-as-lotuses Shaphara fish  
beguilingly there greet you, leap and fly.

Remove the deep blue robe of water where  
her bank of abdomen slopes down to view  
a trail of canes like slender hands. You'll go  
at last from her reluctantly, for who  
will leave a mistress with her charms laid bare?

Afterwards when cooled the earth and wholly saturated with your rain, and rich with smells to please the sniffing elephants, are wild figs ripening in the wind by which to Devagiri you are carried slowly.

Arrived, you'll form a cumulous of flowers for Skanda who is resident, the god of war. All-powerful Shiva took him from the sun's fierce mouth to safeguard Indra's army. Pour down the Ganges in your heavenly showers.

With thunder, echoed in the mountains, make to dance then Skanda's peacock, corner-eyed with Shiva's crescents. Bhavānī will put a lustrous feather in her ear beside that deep blue lotus for her dear son's sake.

Left the god who in the reeds took birth, you're clear of Siddha pairs who fear the waters will harm the lutes they carry. Rantideva here made slaughter of Surabhi's daughters that now the River Chambal blesses earth.

When you there drinking at the water's hem have stolen Krishna's colouring, you stand to gods intently staring from that distance as pearls there settling in a single strand enlarged with sapphire set as central gem.

Having crossed that river, train your powers to lift in coquetry the tendrilled brows of Dasapura women making lashes unlock a beauty as wild bees unblouse a darkness in the tossing jasmine flowers.

Against the land of Brahmātavarta loom,  
above the graves of Kshatriyas slain  
in hundreds by Arjuna when on Kurus'  
field his sharpened arrows fell as rain,  
the which you'll sprinkle on each lotus bloom.

Having drunk those waters you are kin  
with Balarama, gentle one, refraining  
from war with kinsmen as from wine that shone  
in Revati's bright eyes. You, remaining  
black in colour, are now white within.

50. Thence to Jahnu's daughter, there descending  
the Himālaya, the heavenly stair  
of Sagaras, but laughing at the frown  
on Gaurī's face to tug at Shiva's hair:  
her hands as wavelets to his moon extending.

On Jumunā stretched out, the where it seems  
that instantly your flanks have dropped to drink  
like Indra's elephant of crystal white:  
at wrong-place meeting where such blendings sink  
delightfully in slowly moving streams.

Arrived, you'll rest on peaks of snow,  
until, in looks recovered, you appear  
as mud that Shiva's bull unearths, and then,  
from rocks thick-scented with the sitting deer,  
you'll fall to that same river source below.

When winds ignite Sarala pines that press  
together, matted as are wild yak's tails,  
put out the torment with a thousand drops.  
Goods for the eminent, when grief assails,  
are means to succour and allay distress.

Scatter the Sharabhas should they attempt  
on hearing thunder to attack your person:  
laugh with hailstones as they break their bodies.  
Those, who with extended self-exertion  
labour fruitlessly, deserve contempt.

Bent low as Siddhas walking round the rim  
of Shiva's footprint in an adoration,  
you'll bring your worship as the thronged ascetics  
who from this rock, and purged of sin's negation,  
believe eternally and follow him.

As breezes out of hollow bamboos come  
with pleasing music, and of conquest sing  
at famed Tripura the Kinnara women,  
completing Shiva's concert you will bring,  
from caves resounding, a muraja drum.

From snow-clad mountains northwards, drift your length  
of glistening darkness as the foot of Vishnu  
who put down Bali on the Krauncha Mountain.  
Wild birds frame the opening of that fissure,  
a tribute to Parashumāra's strength.

As joint-cracked Mount Kailāsa's guest you'll stay,  
whose top was made a mirror on behalf  
of heavenly wives by Rāvana. There note  
in peaks as white as lotuses the laugh  
of Shiva there collecting, day to day.

I see you resting as a darkened stroke  
across that mountain, just as made-up eyes  
are capped in beauty by collyrium.  
Across a fresh-cut tusk of whiteness lies  
the dark blue bulk of Balarama's cloak.

60. As Shiva gave a helping arm to greet  
her, leaving off his serpent-fashioned ring,  
So for Gaurī out of frozen water  
your help upon that pleasure hill will bring  
a wave-like stairway for her climbing feet.

Around you, watch the heavenly women sport  
as on your spray-releasing form they beat  
so playfully their bracelet's sharpened points.  
If hard to leave them in the summer heat  
then hurt their eardrums with your harsh retort.

Let at Mōnasa your winds assist  
in shaking droplet-from the wishing-trees,  
and where the mountains in the crystal lake  
reflect the golden lotuses, you'll please  
the elephant of Indra with your mist.

At Alakā the Ganges' cloth unfurls  
but slowly, as with lovers, showing there  
a lap with palaces that crowd the slopes.  
So falls in season, as your rain through air,  
the hair unloosening its strings of pearls.

## Meghaduta: Part Two

When weighed with Alakā, you look the same:  
you both have palaces that graze the sky,  
both floors of crystal, yours more water-formed.  
For dazzling women you make lightning fly;  
and for her pictures you have rainbow flame.



All times see lotuses, and women where  
the cheeks are beautiful with Lodhra dust;  
aramanth in topnot, ears acacia.

At your approach, Kadamba flowers combust  
along the path-like partings of the hair.

On crystal terraces are Yakshas found,  
their consorts beautiful: the high above  
bright stars reflect as flowers, while wishing trees  
give Ratiphala that engenders love  
as drums roll softly with your thunder sound.

Do not obstruct, but let the moon-lit air  
collect in shining water droplet strings.  
Such moonstones mitigate the arm's fatigue  
in pleasure's drowsiness that loving brings  
to women loosed at last, still lying there.

Propelled by winds across the mansion tops  
those wantoning adopt another shape.  
Afraid, lest rain should harm those painted walls,  
they change at once to smoke, and make escape  
through window lattices in tattered drops.

When Yaksha lovers would that knot untwist  
which hides their modesty, as lovers must,  
abashed, their women in that candid light,  
would throw on jewelled lamps their fists of dust,  
but fruitlessly: the hands do not desist.

70. From nighttime visiting, Mandāra curls  
of petals show the path by women taken,  
as do the rich, gold ornaments from ears.  
And left as dropped, by hurried bodies shaken,  
at dawn lie strings of bosom-scented pearls.

Respect for Shiva stops the love god use  
his bow too openly, here strung with bees.  
Not so the women who with knitted brows  
draw back the love-looks and with practised ease  
transfix successively each man they choose.

Kubera's dwelling northwards, bearing such  
a gate to notice, arched in rainbowed stone:  
so stands my house with young Mandāra tree  
my love adopts as offspring of her own,  
bent down with blossoms that a hand may touch.

To ease their journey, here an emerald flight  
of stairs leads down to golden lotuses  
with beryl stems. Lake Mānasa is near,  
but not a settled bird here notices  
as now the rainy season looms in sight.

A pleasure mountain rises, sapphire blue,  
and has about it golden plantain trees.  
You, framed at length there in your lightning strikes,  
return my loved one to such memories  
of that same mountain she was fond of too.

Here the red Ashoka waves, here twine  
the Mādhavī and aramant, a bower  
close by the Kesara. The first requires,  
like me, a lovely friend's left foot to flower,  
the last, they say, a mouth that sprinkles wine.

In the midst thereof, where gems enhance  
its crystal pedestal, a gold perch stands  
whose lustre is of young bamboo. At night,  
her bracelets tinkling as she claps her hands,  
my loved one makes the friendly peacock dance.

You'll know, with wisdom stored, O noble one,  
my house from conch and lotus painted on  
both sides of doorway and from gloom therein.  
A house that's lustreless when I am gone  
as is the lotus when deprived of sun.

Descend at once from such exalted height.  
In size a baby elephant, you'll take  
a seat upon that pleasure-mount. From here,  
like threaded fireflies, have your lightning make  
within that house a play of moderate light.

With glances timid as the startled fawn,  
with teeth fine-wrought in ripened Bimba lips,  
dark skin, deep abdomen, slim waist, perhaps  
with breasts half-burdening slow-moving hips,  
you'll find that model of pure woman born.

80. Reserved she is and hardly speaks, who will  
from day to day become more solitary.  
Oppressed by absence is my second life:  
a single chakravāka misery  
or lotus injured in the winter's chill.

From off her hand her face she hardly lifts,  
her eyes are swollen, and long sighs replace  
the colour in her lower lip. Her hair's  
unkempt, dishevelled and half hides her face  
as is the moonlight tangled in your drifts.

At duties constantly, and makes to view  
in thought my form emaciated, yet  
still asks the same of that sweet mainā bird:  
remember him, your master, little pet:  
of all his song birds he was fond of you.

Perhaps she sings there words that make my name,  
a lute upon the lap, on which there fall  
her tears, and on her clothes. She plucks, adjusts  
the strings, forgets the melody for all  
that songsmith and its singer are the same.

The months allotted from the day exiled  
from me she marks and counts by flowers set  
upon the threshold floor, imagining  
the joys of union in bodies met:  
in this way lonely women are beguiled.

With hand uncared for and with uncut nail  
she brushes hair from cheek, continually  
reminded of that rough, bare knot I tied:  
a parting's token to be loosed by me  
when sorrows and that curse no more prevail.

Engaged and busily in daylight she  
may feel at night the emptiness, and fear  
my absent company in separation.  
But you at midnight looking down may cheer  
her tossing on her couch with words from me.

The thinnest moon that hangs beneath the eastern sky  
recalls her laid out on her side, where she,  
with tears obstructed and in fitful sleep,  
can scarce recall that bliss, how instantly  
was pleasure answering to her every sigh.

Her hair, rough-washed in water, on her face  
so spread her swollen lower lip is hurt.  
She sighs when thinking of us and our sport,  
when on an instant now those nights revert  
to hot tears falling on her sleeping place.

Her eyes not wet with pleasure, yet disposed  
to let the moon in with its nectared ray  
through creviced eyelashes, she turns away  
now as the lotus on a cloudy day  
will show an aspect neither full or closed.

90. She holds at heart, my friend, such love for me  
I knew on separating how that state  
must fall from pleasure into dimming grief.  
The claims I make are not immoderate,  
as all too fully, brother, you will see.

Without her ornaments, too heavy grown,  
she lies the midway on her bed of pain:  
enfeebled, miserable, consumed by tears.  
Assuredly to view her is to drop your rain,  
an act to which the tender soul is prone.

Unkempt, without collyrium in her hair,  
no deer-like glances when a look dissembles,  
no eyebrows wanton, and the wine is stopped.  
At your approach, however, her eyelid trembles  
as fish in leaping stir a lily there.

No near-side nailmarks on her thigh today,  
no pearls at waist, but like the plantain tree  
whose shoot is moist and tender, yellow-white,  
her limbs will tremble, and remember he  
would stroke and gently knead her after play.

If she be sweetly sleeping, Cloud, then stop  
and wait the night-watch passing: quiet, no thunder.  
She feels my creepers clasp around her neck:  
from such or other bliss she may be under  
don't wake her suddenly or arms will drop.

With cool, moist wind you'll have her stirred  
as Mālatī revive when rains appear.

But mark her status and keep lightning in:  
intent, she'll watch you fill her window, hear  
the wisdom in each pondered thunder-word.

You see me as a cloud. I am a friend  
as well of your dear loved one who exhorts  
you hear his message in these pleasant sounds,  
as clouds drive hosts of travellers on with thoughts  
of hair's undoing when their journeys end.

The heart that hears will brim with eagerness.  
She'll gaze as Sītā did on Hanūman,  
and listen avidly, for women know  
that words through confidants of husbands can  
against reunion weigh scarcely less.

By words and nature, noble one, be blessed,  
and say her loved one in the Rāma hills  
in penance groves, still living, asks for news  
of one so blamelessly beset by ills:  
to have her welfare is his first request.

Excessive sorrows, and her sighs are his  
as he in waiting sighs for her. Distress  
that wastes her body wears out his. To thwart  
once lawful union with a hopelessness  
still lies that fate across their path to this.

100. The one who'd whisper there to touch your face  
with things allowed in front of female friends  
is now far out of earshot, out of sight,  
but in his fervent longing for you sends  
the words that faithfully this mouth will trace.

The peacock's hue within the ringlet's fall,  
the dark-eyed glances of the startled fawn,  
the suppleness of vines in limbs, the moon's  
full roundness in the face—your playful scorn  
in eyebrows tells me you combine them all.

With mineral dyes I've drawn you in this feint  
of anger at me when in truth the stone  
should show me at your feet, my eyes thick-filled  
with tears. How hard a fate that won't condone  
the warm reunion I long to paint.

When he who would embrace you only sees  
his virtuous at distance, and appears  
to outstretched arms an ache or emptiness,  
the woodland deities are sad: their tears  
are swollen tenderly to pearls in trees.

The winds from Himalayan snows that blast  
their way on southwards to the air have lent  
the smell of opened pine trees' oozing shoots.  
Let me hold you, worthy one, whose scent  
has come assuredly from bodies passed.

How can the night's extended watches shrink  
or all the days be cast in moderate heat?  
But in this manner, with unsteady eye,  
the sights petitioning for my defeat,  
in pain and helplessly of you I think.

I live by brooding on you. Do not feel  
excessive grief for me, my tender one.  
Unending pain and joy are no one's lot,  
but always upwards, downwards we are spun  
about the felly of life's turning wheel.

When Vishnu rises from his serpent bed  
the curse has ending, which is four months hence.  
My soul's desire, now close your eyes, and think  
how love's long parting brings its recompense  
in moonlight falling through that night instead.

Asleep, with arm on neck, in love's long draught,  
your waking caught me with a sudden cry:  
I saw you sporting there with someone else,  
you said, when urgently I pressed for why.  
Oh what a rogue you are!—and quietly laughed.

Accepting, hearing now I am in health,  
believe no scandals of me. People say  
a love unsatisfied, my dearest, dark-  
eyed one, must wither and must fall away,  
but this my ardour is my added wealth.

110. No answer, worthy one, I seek to gain  
from one who into silence has retired,  
but hope that friendship is its own acceptance.  
The eminent will do as is desired;  
to chātakas in quiet you bring the rain.

I pray, this favour granted, as you ride  
above all regions with the rain's distension,  
magnificent, a wanderer, in pity's  
kindness—improper though my intervention—  
lightning not a moment leave your side.



# Appendix

Anyone translating classical Sanskrit poetry for a contemporary audience faces three obstacles: the long and quantitative nature of the verse, the elevated diction and impersonal style, and the intermingling of Indian religion, mythology and the natural world.

## Notes on the Versification

To these must be added Kalidasa's freedom in word order. The first stanza, which I have translated as:

A year from amorousness: it passes slowly.  
So thought a Yaksha by his master sent,  
For scanting duty, to the Ramagiry:  
To mope in penance groves as banishment  
By rivers Sita's bathing there made holy.

in fact has this structure:

1. kAzcit kAntAvirahaguruNA svAdhikAra pramattaH

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

a\_certain beloved separation hard\_to\_be\_borne his\_own office negligent

2. zApenAstaMgamitamahimA varSabhogyeNa bhartuH

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

curse caused\_to\_set power a\_year to\_be\_endured master

3. yakSaz cakre janakatanayAsnAnapuNyodakeSu

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

Yaksa made janaka daughter bathing pure water

4. snigdhaAcchAyAtaruSu vasatiM rAmagiryAzrameSu

g g g g l l l l l g / g l g g l g v

pleasant tree\_affording\_shade dwelling Rama\_mountain hermitage

where l indicates a short syllable and g a long one: the v can be long or short. Each line is unrhymed, and follows the same pattern of 10 long syllables and 7 short ones, which allows a great deal to be said with unhurried beauty.

Clearly, nothing in English remotely resembles the Mandakrata metre, and the translator must either 1. give up regular forms and allow stanzas to expand to individual content, probably employing prose or free verse of some sort, 2. use stanzas of some recognized English stanza, compressing the meaning into four relatively short lines, or 3. employ a traditional English verse line in an ampler stanza form.

Most free verse today is a variously-ordered prose, which allows the prosaic surface meaning to be closely rendered, but not the aesthetic and emotive power which makes the original worth reading. True free verse may indeed be moving and beautiful, but employs an adroit phrasing intended to convey nuances of feeling in everyday speech through subtle changes in syntax and word arrangement—a phrasing that has nothing to do with traditional metre. Kalidasa did not write in the vernacular, of course, but in an elevated court language. He did not express his feelings, moreover, or strive for originality, but rendered more extensively and beautifully what was already known to his audience.

Though it is certainly possible—option two—to employ a traditional stanza form to render the Mandakrata quatrains, the loss is not simply shades of meaning, but that fusion of form and content which distinguishes poetry from versified prose. Once the door is opened to leaving out words that do not fit the stanza, there is no need to adapt and extend the power of verse to precisely express what Kalidasa is saying, and translations tend to convey western sentiments in an Indian setting.

In English there is only one line with the beauty, emotional power, flexibility and wealth of precedent to be serviceable, and that is the iambic pentameter. I have therefore—option three—developed a slow-moving iambic pentameter in stanzas of five lines, holding together a free use of tense and sometimes word order by an introduced abxba rhyme scheme.

## Introduction to Sanskrit Poetry

Kalidasa's free word order resists any unambiguous, word-for-word rendering, in prose or verse. Classical Sanskrit poetry commonly lacks relative or subordinate clauses, moreover, or even finite verbs at times, employing in their place long compounds and gerunds with the passive tense.

For poetry, that brings benefits and difficulties. The 'precise meaning'—in the way expected of European prose—is not always clear, and interpretations naturally differ. Compounds can also be involved—monstrously so in later poetry—but do produce evocative similes. One celebrated example is *vIcikSobhastanitavihagazreNikAJcIguNA*, the first line of Stanza 28, which is a compound (samasa) in two parts. The second is simple: *kAJcI-guNA*, a girdle-string. The first is an adjectival descriptive samasa in which *vihaga-zreNi*, row of birds, is qualified by *vIcikSobhastanita*, loquacious through wave agitation. The latter is itself another samasa, in which *stanita* is qualified by the compound *vIci-kSobha*, agitation of the waves. Involved, yes, but through its use Kalidasa can draw a parallel between the river and a woman making her overtures of love. Compound similes operate throughout Meghaduta, where the cloud's life-giving passage across the parched Indian landscape is an extended metaphor for the sexual congress of nature.

Sanskrit plays, and probably its poetry recitations, were formal occasions, given before the whole court. Decorum was important.

Kings are rather stereotyped, praised for their virtue, prowess on the battlefield and skill in the harem. Wives are dutiful, courtiers faithful and other women modest. It is a world of great beauty and sensitivity to nature, but the players are not characters in any Shakespearean sense, and vexing social issues do not intrude. The sentiment of kama or love which underlies these compositions is not the dangerous, fracturing passion of Greek or Jacobean drama, but something accepted, expanded in all its forms and contained by strict rules. Of the fourteen conditions of the Kamasutra, eleven appear in Meghaduta. A sympathetic and moving exposition of these conditions is what the audience looked for.

Even more unlike poetry today, Sanskrit poetry was chanted, and the poet was expected to draw on a very large number of synonyms to develop, ever more richly and evocatively, a palpable, emotion-laden atmosphere where the audience could realize again the cultural implications of their world. The Mandakranta is a long metre, slow moving and complicated, but one allowing Kalidasa to exploit the sonorous effects of Sanskrit in self-contained stanzas of great beauty. It is these aspects I have sought to render in this translation, playing the phrasing in various ways against the stanza form, and extracting what music I can from the words operating in a predominantly iambic setting.

Poets write to exploit their medium, and it is unlikely that the meaning of a particular stanza, even when loosely paraphrased, will neatly fill the space available in its English equivalent. As it happens, this translation comes very close to previous prose renderings, which are themselves radical reorderings and interpretations of the Sanskrit. The small departures from a simple prose sense are listed in the Notes below, but I illustrate here two instances where I have been unable to encompass the meaning in my chosen form. The first is Stanza 7, where the second part runs: ‘the rich Yaksha mansions in Alakā are

bathed in moonlight emanating from the head of Shiva, who dwells in an outer garden of the city'. Space considerations obliged me to choose between 'outer' and explaining where the moonbeams came from. Originally I wrote the enigmatic:

I ask you, shelter from the sweltering days,  
as one apart, beneath Kubēra's sanctions,  
to bear this message to a loved one waiting  
in Alakā, where Shiva on those mansions  
sheds moonlight from his forehead's garden blaze.

But that was too compressed, and it seemed better to leave the parallels implied: that as the earth is under the sun's fierce heat in summer, and the Yaksha is under Kubēra's wrath, so are the mansions where the Yakshas live under the blaze of moonlight from Shiva's forehead. There may be some significance in the word 'outer', but I suspect Kalidasa is again filling the Mandakrata metre with beautiful phrases. So:

I ask you, shelter from the sun's fierce glare,  
as one apart, beneath Kubēra's sanctions,  
to bear this message to a loved one waiting  
in Alakā, where Shiva on those mansions  
sheds gardens' moonlight from his forehead there.

The second is Stanza 73, where the Yaksha compares the cloud to Alakā by its palatial appearance in the sky, its watery form to gem-laid floors, its rainbows to pictures, its lightning flashes to dazzling women and its thunder to drumming music. We can deal with this list of fanciful comparisons by writing:

When weighed with Alakā, you look the same.  
You both have palaces with high sky crowned,  
both floors of crystal, yours more water-formed;

for women, lightning; drumming, thunder sound;  
and for her pictures you show rainbow flame.

But it seems better to explain the comparisons, and omit the drumming comparison, which appears too often anyway in Meghaduta:

When weighed with Alakā, you look the same.  
You both have palaces that graze the sky,  
both floors of crystal, yours more water-formed,  
for dazzling women you make lightning fly,  
and for her pictures you have rainbow flame.

The Hultsch text seems a little repetitious, but as my Sanskrit is not good enough to tell what is authentic Kalidasa from what is not, I have kept to the Hultsch version in all instances but Stanza 61, where a phrase from Kale's version has been substituted to make matters clearer.

Previous translators and commentators have of course suggested many interpretations and phrasings, helping enormously to guard my basic Sanskrit from obvious blunders. I am greatly indebted to them, but have placed just the references I found most useful in the final section.

## Notes on Individual Stanzas

Although we read Kalidasa for the beauty of his poetry, any decent translation will contain many unfamiliar words and concepts, plus references to India's customs, religion, geography and animal life that illustrate and extend the narrative. Hence these notes, where it should be remembered that Kalidasa is India's Shakespeare, with a critical literature to match. Much is disputed: authenticity of texts, interpretation of lines, even the identity of some plants, places and animals. The reader will catch hints of such controversies on Internet sites, though most are the concern of scholarly journals. More in evidence on the Internet, and well worth following up, are photographs and details of places mentioned in the text, and proper treatments of Indian customs, religion, and mythology.

### Stanza 1

Yakshas were nature deities, a class of semi-divine beings, benevolent and inoffensive generally, who attended Kubēra, the Hindu god of wealth. Why this Yaksha was banished from home and consort in Alakā, we are not told, only that he had been negligent in his duties. The Rāmagiry, or Rāma hills, were probably located in east-central India at Namtek, in present-day Maharashtra, which was a popular place of pilgrimage allowing devotees to practise penances in hermit cells, monasteries or secluded glades. Sītā, identified as the daughter of Janaka, a brave king of Mithila, is the faithful wife in the popular Ramayana story, who remains true to her husband Rāma through appalling hardships.

### Stanza 2

Āshādha is the lunar month of June-July. I have omitted emaciated from 'wrist'. The translated last line is rather condensed or unclear in the original, and I have added 'in heat' to draw out the meaning: the

elephant-shaped cloud, in seeming to butt the mountain, reminds the Yaksha of past love-making.

### Stanza 3

The general meaning is that a cloud, which brings thoughts of rain and so disquiet or happiness to the ordinary viewer, here causes the Yaksha to remember his consort who loved to cling to his neck. I have read *meghāloke* as ‘not-of-this-world-cloud’, rather than the more usual ‘cloud-seeing’, to link the cloud’s form with the insubstantial nature of memory. The King of Kings is Kubēra, the god of wealth or treasures.

### Stanza 4

The text says Nabhas, July to August, which opens the rainy season in India. The Yaksha makes an offering of Kutaja flowers (*Holarrhena antidysentrica*), which are white and appear at this time.

### Stanza 6

A little complicated. The Yaksha is flattering the cloud, comparing it to those diluvian clouds appearing at the end of the world, and acknowledging that it serves Indra, the Hindu god able to assume any form at will.

### Stanza 7

An expanded prose rendering will run something like: You, who act as shelter from the summer heat, and as one separated and suffering from Kubēra’s anger, I beg to bear a message to a loved one in Alakā, where the mansions of wealthy Yakshas are bathed in the moonlight emanating from Shiva who is resident in the city’s outer garden. Condensing, I made more explicit the comparison between the Yaksha and the earth suffering from summer heat, and omitted the ‘outer’.

### Stanza 8

Wives with husbands absent traditionally left their hair unkempt.



### Stanza 9

The brother's wife is the Yaksha's consort, the Yaksha calling the cloud brother. The Sanskrit of the last line simply says 'faithful'.

### Stanza 10

Kalidasa supposes the left side to be propitious, and continues the popular view that clouds make the cranes conceive, probably because the rainy season coincides with their gestation period.

### Stanza 11

Mānasa is the holy lake near Mount Kailāsa, to which geese make an annual migration. 'Assurances of harvest' may be white mushrooms or flowers of the plantain tree: authorities disagree, and I have opted for significance rather than the botany.

### Stanza 12

Rāma was a king of ancient India who features in the Ramayana, one of the two great Hindu epics. For his father's honour, Rāma gave up his claim to Kosala's throne for exile in the forest, and then fought Rāvana and his demonic powers to retrieve his kidnapped wife Sītā.

### Stanza 14

Siddhas are a class of semi-divine beings thought to inhabit the space between the sun and earth, and noted for extreme purity and holiness. Nichula is a type of cane growing in watery locations.

### Stanza 15

The 'serpent' is only implicit in the Sanskrit text, in the mention of ant-hill, and the popular view of rainbows as gems in the hoods of great serpents. 'Diademed' is my addition. Krishna, the dark-bodied

cowherd incarnation of Vishnu often wears a headdress of peacock feathers: the text says ‘with peacock tailfeathers flashing’.

#### Stanza 16

Māla in the Sanskrit may refer to a specific but unknown location, or, more probably, and as accepted here, simply an elevated, hilly spot.

#### Stanza 17

Āmrakūta is generally taken to be present-day Amarakantaka, the eastern part of the Vindhya mountains where the Narmadā and other rivers rise. The Vindhya is one of seven mountain ranges that separate Hindustan from the Deccan, forming the southern boundary of Madhyadesha in central India.

#### Stanza 19

Revā is another name for the Narmandā, one of the sacred rivers of India, which rises on Mount Āmrakūta in Gondvana and runs some 800 miles westwards to empty into the Gulf of Cambay.

#### Stanza 20

Jumbū is the rose apple tree, *Eugenia jambolana* or similar species. The ‘drink in moderation’ is my amplification of the text, which simply balances the need for lightness against the worthiness of carrying moisture.

#### Stanza 21

The Nipa and Kadamba (of stanza 25) may be different species of the same tree (*Stephegyne* genus), and the flowers of both are used to decorate the hair. The immature flowers of the Nipa are greenish-brown in colour, and are thought in the early monsoon period to incite feelings of love. The Kandali (*Musa superba*) bears its red flowers only after the ground has been soaked by monsoon rains.

## Stanza 22

The Kakubha is also known as the Arjuna tree (*Terminalia arjuna*) and has clusters of flowers towards the end of the hot season resembling those of the mango: they have a sweet smell.

## Stanza 23

The Ketaka (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) is a shrub with very fragrant flowers in the shape of long, pointed leaves. The crows nesting in sacred trees may be a reference to contemporary closures of Buddhist monasteries.

## Stanza 24

Vidishā was the capital of the second century BC Sunga dynasty, and of the Dashārṇa region, modern Dhasan. The city was probably Benagar, near Bhilsa in Madhya Pradesh. The River Vetravati is the modern Betwa, which flows north-eastwards from the Pāriyātra mountain to join the Yamunā above its confluence with the Ganges.

## Stanza 25

Nichais is probably the ancient name of the Udaigiri hill near Vidishā, which has caves, some with inscriptions and sculptures dating from the Gupta period.

## Stanza 27

Ujjain was the splendid capital of the Kushan empire (AD 25–320), a seat of learning and great trade centre. The city declined under the succeeding Guptas, but still draws tourists to its many temples and monuments. The text includes ‘travel northward’, which I’ve omitted for reasons of space and euphony.

## Stanza 28

The Nirvandhyā emerged from the Vindhya mountains, and is now called the Nevuz, a tributary of the Chambal between the Betwa and Kalisindh rivers.

### Stanza 29

A River Sindhu exists in Kashmir, but this Sindhu is probably an unidentified river in Malwa.

### Stanza 30

Avanti is Malwa, or western Madhya Pradesh now. Udayana was a prince of the lunar race, and his anecdotes passed into popular folklore.

### Stanza 31

The Shiprā is a tributary of the Chambal, and the river on which Ujjain stands.

### Stanza 33

Shiva is the god of three worlds, and Ganas are his attendants. Shiva's neck turned black when he drank the poison produced by the churning of the milky ocean. The Gandhavatī is a small river that formed the boundary of the temple garden at Mahākāla.

### Stanza 34

Mahākāla was an important temple at Ujjain, devoted to the worship of Shiva. The Sanskrit of my 'praise unlimited' is 'pleasant fruit in full.'

### Stanza 35

Chowries are fly-whisks, and the dancers referred to are courtesans or sacred prostitutes at Mahākāla.

### Stanza 36

Ganja is elephant, and the Japā is a plant with red flowers (*Hisbiscis rosasinensis*). Shiva wore an elephant's skin dripping with blood when he killed Gajāsura, an evil deity. Shiva's consort Pārvati is calmed by finding the red glow in the forest is not blood but only the cloud irradiated by the evening's colours.

#### Stanza 40

The Gambhīra is a tributary of the Yamunā and flows east from Gangapur through eastern Rajasthan. Shaphara is a white fish.

#### Stanza 42

Devagiri, literally Mountain of the Gods, may have been located near the Gambhīra at today's village of Devagudaria.

#### Stanza 43

Bhavānī is the ferocious aspect of the Hindu goddess Shakti or Devi, though she also shows mercy. Skanda is the god of war, son of Shiva and Gaurī.

#### Stanza 44

Peacocks are said to welcome the rainy season, becoming agitated by the sound of thunder.

#### Stanza 45

King Rantideva was enormously rich and pious, sacrificing two thousand head of cattle a day. The torrent of blood reputedly formed the River Chambal. Surabhi is the divine cow of Indra.

#### Stanza 47

Dasapura is the kingdom of Rantideva. Kalidasa is making a play on the coquettish dark eyes of women.

#### Stanza 48

Brahmātavarta is the region northwest of Hastinapura, itself the capital of the Kurus and now located some 22 miles northeast of Meerut, between the Sarasvatī and Drishadvatī rivers. Arjuna is the leader of the Pāndavas in the great epic of the Mahābhārata, and Kshatriyas are warriors, or those of the warrior class.

### Stanza 49

Balarama is the fair-skinned brother of Krishna, who commonly wore a dark cloak. Though a warrior and drunkard, he gave up wine and practised penance during the great Mahābhārata war, refusing to take sides. Balarama was immensely strong, and once diverted the Jumnā river by dragging a plough across its course, a feat by which he is identified in the Sanskrit here. The beautiful Revatī was his wife.

### Stanza 50

Jahnu's daughter is the Ganges. Gaurī represents austerity and purity, reflecting the penances she underwent to marry Shiva.

### Stanza 52

The cow is venerated as the mother of mankind, and Shiva's bull occupies a particularly honoured place.

### Stanza 53

Sarala pines (*Pinus longifolia*) exude a sweet-smelling resin, and their tall shapes form a majestic sight in the Himalayas.

### Stanza 54

The Sharabha is an extinct or mythical animal, reputed to be very strong and to pull up water from deep pits in the hot season.

### Stanza 56

Kinnaras are the professional musicians of the gods, and Tripura are three demon cities destroyed by Shiva. The muraja is a tall cylindrical drum or tambourine.

### Stanza 57

The Krauncha is the pass taken to enter Tibet from India. Now called the Nīti Pass, it was supposed to have been cut by the arrow of Parashumāra, the terrible Brahmin warrior and enemy of the

Kshatriyas. Bali was a demon slain by Vishnu, who tricked him by approaching as a dwarf and then growing to enormous size.

#### Stanza 58

Rāvana is the demon king slain by Rāma in the Ramayana story. In attempting to move the mountain, the demon loosened its joints.

#### Stanza 60

Kalidasa refers to the Ganges as a flight of steps because these traditionally allowed the sons of King Sagara to climb to heaven. Gaurī is Shiva's consort.

#### Stanza 61

I have followed most translators in preferring Kale's text for the 'bracelet's sharpened point': Hultsch's text says only 'in entrance'.

#### Stanza 62

Indra is chief of the gods, though inferior to Shiva, Vishnu and the other great beings of the Hindu pantheon.

#### Stanza 63

Though Indian women wore a net or gauze of seed pearls to keep their hair in place, the pearls referred to here are probably the scanty undergarments worn in private chambers. The Sanskrit includes 'seeing again Alakā', which I have left implied to better develop the rainy air and pearl-sewn hair comparison: the rainy season traditionally brought men home and renewed sexual relations.

#### Stanza 65

The Lodhra (*Symplocos racemosa*) is a forest tree with yellow, red or white bell-like flowers, whose pollen is used as a face powder. 'Path-like' is my addition, to make explicit what is implied in the cloud's approach.

### Stanza 66

Ratiphala is a wine-like aphrodisiac.

### Stanza 70

Mandāra (*Calatropis gigantea*) is a tree with pretty but delicate flowers, popularly supposed to blossom when a young woman says something witty in its presence.

### Stanza 75

Ashoka, a tree with blazing red flowers (*Saraca indica*), has attracted many legends. The Kesara is a fairly large tree (*Mimysops elengi*) with small, round flowers whose sweet and pungent smell lasts when the flowers are picked and dried in the sun. The Mādhavī is a creeper (*Gaertnera racemosa*), and aramanth is Kurabaka (*Barleria prionites*), which has a lip-like flower of five petals.

### Stanza 79

The fruit of the Bimba shrub (*Cephalandra indica*) is a glowing red, and often compared to red lips.

### Stanza 82

The small mainā bird is a good mimic and has a sweet voice.

### Stanza 80

Chakravākas are fat, well-shaped birds the size of water fowl, which pine for each other when separated.

### Stanza 95

Mālatī is a creeper with white flowers, either *Jasmin grandiflorum* or *Aganosma caryophyllata*.

### Stanza 97

Hanūman is the swift-as-the-wind monkey god, who located Sītā after her abduction by the demon king Rāvana.



Stanza 101

Conventional comparisons of a beautiful woman.

Stanza 104

A reference to the tall pine tree (*Pinus deodara*) in Himalayan regions: its young foliage has a fragrant smell.

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