

# Dying on the Stage in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*: Perspectives from the Sanskrit Theatre Tradition

*Bruce M. Sullivan*

*The Sanskrit theatre tradition of India has often been regarded as avoiding, even prohibiting, depiction of death on the stage. This article argues that death was both threatened and enacted on the stage, and has always been integral to the Sanskrit theatre tradition, as seen to the present day in Kerala's kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition. The apparent conflict between "rules" from the Nāṭyaśāstra, the normative text for theatre, and actual dramas is examined, and the surprisingly large number of references in the Nāṭyaśāstra to dramatic uses of death are discussed. For the audience member, seeing depictions of or threats of deaths on the stage can be a significant component of the Indic theatrical experience.*

*Bruce M. Sullivan (PhD, University of Chicago), professor of religious studies at Northern Arizona University, is a specialist in Hinduism, Indian drama, and Sanskrit literature. He has published four books, including two on kūṭiyāṭṭam with N. P. Unni: The Sun God's Daughter and King Saṃvaraṇa (1995), and The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadrā (2001). Support for this research was provided by the Fulbright Association and Northern Arizona University. Thanks are due the participants at the International Seminar on Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Asian Theatre Traditions, held in January 2006 in Trivandrum, Kerala, and sponsored by UNESCO and the government of India.*

When I went to Kerala in 1992 to see *kūṭiyāṭṭam* dramas, my first experience of them was on television. The national television network Doordarshan showed a performance by Ammannur Mādhava Cākyār of the act "Bāli Vadham" (The Killing of Bāli) from *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*, in which there is an extended enactment of Bāli's death scene. Later that year when I actually met the great performer himself, I asked him

about enacting that scene in particular, and depicting death on the stage in general. He told me that this is one of the most demanding and challenging scenes, and a true measure of an actor's ability, because the representation of dying on the stage is difficult. He had to master breathing techniques "to make the death-throes realistic" and said that of all the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* dramas the death of Bāli "has the greatest popularity" (personal communication, July 1992; see also Venu 1989: iv–v). Issues surrounding the popularity and methods of depicting death on the stage are central to this article.

Yet there is a widespread idea that depicting death on the stage is prohibited in the Sanskrit theatre tradition. In a number of Sanskrit dramas, however, characters die on the stage. The questions of why a playwright would compose a drama in which a character's death is seen on the stage, why an audience would want to see that, and why an actor would want to perform that are all important questions to ask and to try to answer. Vital too are the issues of how and why scholars of Sanskrit drama assert that depicting death on the stage is taboo when dramas feature characters dying on the stage. This article demonstrates that, far from being prohibited, the enactment of death is integral to the production of aesthetic experiences for the audience, and that death is not only alluded to but also overtly displayed.

### **Scholarly Perspectives, Ancient and Modern**

Modern authorities on the Sanskrit theater tradition have often called attention to what they regard as an absolute prohibition on depicting death on stage, a prohibition for which they frequently cite no specific source. For example, H. H. Wilson (1835: xxvi–xxvii) observed that depiction of a character dying on the stage "is prohibited by a positive rule, and the death of either the hero or the heroine is never to be announced." Indeed, "death must invariably be inflicted out of the view of the spectators." Arthur A. Macdonell (1900: 294) stated that "death is never allowed to be represented on the stage." A. B. Keith (1924: 354) was of the opinion that not depicting death on the stage was a "rule." Keith also observed (1924: 110), however, that the great early playwright Bhāsa allowed death to be depicted on the stage: "Daśaratha's death he admits; the bodies of Cāṇūra, Muṣṭika, and Kaṇsa lie on the stage, and Vālin perishes there as well as Duryodhana, but all these are evildoers, and their death evokes no sorrow." He seems to imply that this transgression of the "rules" was moderated by the identities of the deceased as "evildoers," though this idea is his own and not found within the tradition of Sanskrit drama he purports to describe.<sup>1</sup> Woolner and Sarup, who translated all the plays attributed to Bhāsa, commented that death on the stage "is against the

canons of orthodox Sanskrit dramaturgy” (1930, vol. 2: 43). Herman Tieken (1997: 27) states that depiction of a death on stage “would violate the rules of dramaturgy,” while Edwin Gerow (1985a: 406) states, “Death . . . is *never* to be represented on the stage.” These scholars of Indic theatre do not cite specific sources for the “rules” or “canons” concerning dying on the stage. Yet many of these same authorities note in their works that Sanskrit dramas do represent death on the stage, especially in the *kūṭiyāttam* dramas sometimes attributed to Bhāsa. Clearly, scholars of drama have had problems with the issue of the representation of death on the stage, as they compare actual dramas with what they regard as the “rules” of India’s theatre tradition.

One scholar does cite the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (the earliest normative text on Indic theatrical performance) as the source of what is said to be a traditional ban on depicting death on the stage, but does so erroneously: Tarla Mehta (1995: 96) refers to certain incidents as “forbidden by the tradition for portrayal” because they are without *rasa*, and in a footnote lists eighteen such “actions forbidden on the stage,” one of which is death.<sup>2</sup> Although she cites Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* XX, 20.22 (by which she seems to mean chapter 20, verses 20 through 22), she should also include verse 19 in the citation as it lists some of the material she mentions. Moreover, she has badly misinterpreted the meaning of verse 22. Her vague reference to “tradition” seems to reflect the text of Dhanamjaya’s tenth-century *Daśarūpa* or *Daśarūpaka* (The Ten Forms of Drama; see Haas 1912), for there chapter 3, verses 39–40 better correspond than the *Nāṭyaśāstra* passage, though Mehta does not cite it. Neither the *Nāṭyaśāstra* nor the *Daśarūpa*, however, states that death or other such acts are not to be represented because they lack *rasa*.

Given the importance of the ancient authoritative text the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, to both the theatre tradition and this article, some comments on the text are necessary. Clearly the text as we have it is the work of multiple authors, a compilation, or as Graham Ley (2000: 194) termed it, “a compendium” for which “its date is open to debate.” As he rightly observed, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is insistent upon its own status as the definitive and authoritative treatise on theatre, comparable to other *śāstra* literature. “The creation of a *śāstra*, not the creation of drama, is the continuing subject of the *Natyasastra*, and that creation offers both a context and status to a theatre practice, which is all the more likely to wish to conform to its precepts for just those reasons” (Ley 2000: 194–95).

The text, however, has not been well preserved by the Indian tradition, and manuscript evidence is consequently not as abundant as we would like. As Ludo Rocher (1981: 126) observed, “The text of the

NŚ needs to be critically edited. None of the existing publications meets the criteria of a scientific critical edition.” While the dating of an Indian text is usually problematic because of being a compilation repeatedly reworked, the text probably existed in the form we now know by the fifth century CE. It is striking, however, that so few manuscripts of this text have been found, and that as a consequence this text has been edited and translated on the basis of a very weak manuscript tradition. With this cautionary note sounded concerning the text, let us examine its contents.

Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (20.19–22, i.e., chapter 20, verses 19 to 22) specifies that a drama’s hero is not to be killed on the stage in a drama of the *nāṭaka* or *prakaraṇa* types. (While both these types of drama have multiple acts and multiple characters, the *nāṭaka* is based on a well-known story and the *prakaraṇa* on a story created by the playwright.) In this passage, Bharata goes on to say that instead of a hero of such a drama dying, he could flee or be captured or enter into a treaty with the enemy, and that these outcomes could be indicated through dialogue between secondary characters in an introductory scene (*praveśaka*). This, then, is the passage that most modern authorities seem to have in mind (if not cited directly) as prohibiting the depiction of death on stage. It is vital to notice, however, that the “prohibition” is limited by Bharata: only the hero of a *nāṭaka* or *prakaraṇa* cannot be shown dead on the stage. It would seem then that Bharata envisioned secondary characters dying on the stage, or even a hero in dramas of types other than *nāṭaka* or *prakaraṇa*. Given the classic enumeration of ten types of drama (found in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, chapter 20 and throughout the *Daśarūpa*), plus a variable set of minor forms beyond those, ample scope is afforded the dramatist who might wish to compose something other than a *nāṭaka* or *prakaraṇa*.

But Bharata has much more to say about characters dying on the stage, and the uses of death in dramas. In his discussion of the eight *rasa* states of aesthetic enjoyment an audience member can experience, Bharata notes that the pathetic (*karuṇa*) *rasa* relates to despair which can be caused by losses, including death, while love in separation can be represented on the stage by a variety of reactions (*anubhāva*), one of which is death (6.45). Similarly, sorrow (*śoka*) is to be represented on the stage by an array of *anubhāva*, including tears and falling on the ground, but also insanity and death (7.10). Bharata names thirty-three transitory states (*vyabhicārī-bhāva*) used in acting, of which death is the thirty-first.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 7 presents each one, including how it is to be depicted on the stage. For example, anxiety is to be represented by deep breathing, sighing, agony, brooding, pondering with downcast face, thinness of the body, and so on. In a detailed discussion of the

state of death (7.85–90), Bharata observes that death by disease or poison should be represented differently than death by injury, because the gradual onset of the effects of disease or poison allow for stages of decline; eight stages of the effects of poison are listed, ending in death. By contrast, death from wounds or injuries should be represented by no further movements of the body.

Bharata goes on to discuss the application of the transitory states (*vyabhicāri-bhāva*) in relation to the various *rasa* experiences. He notes that one of the states employed in evocation of the pathetic (*karuṇa*) *rasa* is death, along with anxiety, depression, and so on (7.111 and 6.61). In the terrible (*bhayānaka*) *rasa* depiction of death is used, along with fear, trembling, and so on (7.115 and 6.68). One of the states employed in the disgusting (*bībhatsa*) *rasa* is death, along with despair, insanity, and so on (7.116). The furious (*raudra*) *rasa* is to be represented on the stage by striking another character, and by “special acts” such as cutting off the head and limbs (6.64–66), acts that (though the text does not specify this outcome) would typically result in death. And in the erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) *rasa*, only three of the thirty-three transitory states are excluded as having no role (indolence, cruelty, and disgust). Noteworthy is the fact that death is not excluded, meaning that even in a drama emphasizing the erotic, death may figure as a transitory state.<sup>4</sup> We see this, for example, in Bharata’s discussion of the manifestations of love in female characters (24.190–191), with death being the final stage in separation from the beloved. Death can be represented, then, either as an *anubhāva* or *vyabhicāri-bhāva*. In Bharata’s view, the representation of death on the stage was clearly important in evoking *rasa* experiences for the audience.

We find another passage in Bharata’s work that addresses the issue of representation of death on the stage, in chapter 26 under the title *Citrābhīnaya* (Varied Representation) (26.101–115). Bharata specifies how one should speak while dying on the stage, with a faltering voice or repeating oneself. Again he lists the eight stages of death by poison, and comments that death from different causes would have different appearances, sometimes represented by paralysis, sometimes by thrashing about (26.103). He seems also to suggest that the actors should learn from and accommodate to local traditions concerning the representation of death (26.115). Obviously we are forced to conclude that the representation of death on stage is part of the theatre tradition Bharata is describing, and that representing death from various causes was part of the actor’s set of skills.

Moreover, in addition to its occasional representation on the stage, we can add that death (*mṛtyu*) was ever present at the theatre building itself as one of two door-guardians at the threshold, along

with fate (*niyati*), according to Bharata (1.87–88). He also places the staff of Yama, ruler of the underworld, on the threshold and the pike of Śiva above the door. These symbolic representations of death and the afterlife, to be confronted as one enters the theatre, suggest a passage from this life to a new, transcendent state in which theatrical presentations occur and are apprehended in one's experience—indeed, that the portal to the world of theatre is the radical transformation of oneself.

We find a similar pattern in the discussion of theatrical practices in Dhanamjaya's *Daśarūpa* (Haas 1912), a text that perhaps five centuries after the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata reached its final fifth-century form, presents a scholarly treatise on the performance of dramas. Dhanamjaya focuses his discussion on the *nāṭaka* as the most important type of drama, and insists that such heroic plays not present the killing of a character on the stage (3.39). In the next verse he specifies that the death of a principal character (a hero or heroine) should not be represented anywhere in the *nāṭaka*. Later in the chapter he discusses other types of drama, ending with the *ihāmṛga* (Pursuing the Gazelle), about which he says that even if the source legend includes the killing of the great person in the story, this must not occur in the drama (3.64). However, he also notes the use of death as a transitory state in evoking various *rasa*-s, including the pathetic (4.87) and even the erotic (4.57–60 and 4.74), its application being especially relevant in the aspect of love in separation (*ayoga*). Dhanamjaya discusses death on the stage less than Bharata, and he seems more intent on excluding the sight of a dead or dying character, but even Dhanamjaya does not prohibit death entirely.

### The *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* Performance Tradition

Sanskrit dramas that are performed in the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition include several in which characters die on the stage. I will discuss first the well-known set of thirteen plays published in Trivandrum that are sometimes attributed to Bhāsa, all of which have been performed as *kūṭiyāṭṭam* dramas (see Sullivan and Unni 1996). *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka* (The Consecration) begins with a benedictory verse recited by the *sūtra-dhāra* (troupe leader) that is very militant: it praises the extermination of demonic opposition by Rāma, the royal incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. Act 1 ends with Bālī (also known as Vālin) the usurping monkey dying on the stage from Rāma's arrow. He blesses his brother and rival Sugrīva, and advises Sugrīva to live according to *dharma* and not grieve for him. He asks that the women not be allowed to see him dying, and eventually dies on the stage with great dignity. At the end of *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*, by contrast, Rāvaṇa's death is reported in an intro-

ductory scene rather than enacted before the audience. This is an interesting choice by the playwright, and we must ask whether the reason for the two different modes of presentation of the deaths of Rāma's enemies is that Bālī is not as important a figure, nor as much a principal character, as is Rāvaṇa. Even more important might be that the death of Bālī allows for reconciliation between him and his brother Sugrīva, and an expression of sorrow at his death; reconciliation with the demon king Rāvaṇa was out of the question.

*Pratimā* (The Statue), another *nāṭaka*, also includes a death on the stage early in the drama. In act 2, King Daśaratha, the father of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, lamenting the absence of Rāma, his wife Sitā, and Lakṣmaṇa due to their exile, is grief-stricken. When a chariot arrives at the palace, he exclaims that if Rāma is not riding in it, then it must be the god of death Yama's chariot coming to bear him to the afterlife. He sees his deceased ancestors, and swoons, dying or already dead as his courtiers rush to his side. Rāma is clearly the hero in this drama, and Daśaratha is only a secondary character. But the death of Daśaratha is an important element in the drama's overall effect because of its impact on the hero (Rāma laments the death of his father), and therefore on the audience as they witness Daśaratha dying on the stage.

*Bāla-carita* (The Youth's Exploits) is another *nāṭaka* attributed to Bhāsa, and it tells the story of the boyhood of Kṛṣṇa (an incarnation of Viṣṇu), here called Damodara. In act 5 we have the climax of the drama in the form of a fight scene. Two wrestlers, Cāṇūra and Muṣṭika, are sent by Kaṁsa the ruling usurper against the heroes, Damodara and his brother Saṁkarṣaṇa (Balarāma). The wrestlers are killed by the heroes, then Damodara turns on Kaṁsa and kills him as well. The three lifeless bodies lie on the stage for some time. Again, we have a drama in which secondary characters die on the stage.

*Ūrubhaṅga* (Broken Thighs) is the most interesting of the Trivandrum plays for several reasons. It has a remarkably long introductory scene (*viṣkambhaka*), fully as long as the single act play it introduces. Curiously, the drama is named not after its hero Duryodhana but after an event described but not enacted in the long introductory scene—the breaking of the warrior's thighs—an event that, unlike the norm in titles (and as I will argue), does not constitute the hero's attainment! In addition to the odd title, learned authorities have not agreed on how to interpret the drama, nor even how to classify it in one of the ten dramatic genres (*daśa-rūpaka*). Is it an example of *utsrṣṭikāṅka* or *vyāyoga* (pathetic or heroic)? Winternitz, Pusalker, Tarleker, and Mehta all refer to it as *utsrṣṭikāṅka*.<sup>5</sup> Gerow (1985a) provides the most detailed analysis of the drama, and insists that it is a *vyāyoga*.

K. P. A. Menon chooses not to choose, saying that Bhāsa “never tried to be true to a type” and that *Ūrubhaṅga* does not fit “under any of the defined categories” of the ten *rūpaka-s*.<sup>6</sup> Correct identification of the drama’s genre or type is important because it directly relates to the dominant *rasa-s* of the play (different types have different dominant *rasa*), and therefore to how we interpret the drama as well.

I begin interpretation with the point that for a character to be understood as a drama’s hero that character must indeed attain his goal. In attaining his goal the hero produces the “happy ending” we associate with Sanskrit dramas. What then was Duryodhana’s goal? Or to put it another way, what is the dramatic goal for *Ūrubhaṅga*, and in what way is it achieved? Obviously it was not the more typical goal of the *nāṭaka* and its hero, namely, to attain worldly success, especially in terms of *kāma* (love) and *artha* (profit). Instead, Duryodhana overcomes his anger, counsels his family members to forgive his enemies the Pāṇḍavas (his cousins whom he has opposed in the great war of the *Mahābhārata* epic), and transcends the limited ambitions of his former self as his death nears. In this regard, Duryodhana’s death in *Ūrubhaṅga* is strikingly similar to Bāli’s death scene in *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*. The key point is that the Indic tradition of literary and aesthetic criticism accepts more than one type of hero: Duryodhana is transformed in the course of the drama from a hero in war (*yuddha-vīra*, or *raṇa-vīra*) to a hero in compassion (*dayā-vīra*), a heroic figure who has attained his goal of transcendence. He has made his peace with his former enemies within the family, and become truly worthy of the afterlife in the heroes’ heaven that the end of the play envisions for him. I believe therefore that *Ūrubhaṅga* best conforms to the definition of the *vyāyoga* type of drama with heroism as its dominant *rasa* rather than the *utsṛṣṭikāṅka*, which must be dominated by the pathetic.<sup>7</sup> *Daśarūpa* 3.60 defines the *vyāyoga* as excluding the comic and erotic *rasa*, and featuring many well-known male characters engaged in action in a single day, represented in one act. The drama being considered meets all these criteria. The *utsṛṣṭikāṅka* is defined (3.63) as dominated by the pathetic *karuṇa rasa*, with heroes who are ordinary men (*prākṛtā narāḥ*)—a description at which I suspect the noble and haughty Duryodhana would take umbrage. In my view, scholars have been overly keen to emphasize the other features of the definition: that such a drama would contain lamentations of women and a description of a battle. In my view, then, Duryodhana is a hero, and not a pathetic figure, because he triumphantly attains his goal of heaven and peace within the family, even if through his own defeat and death. I propose that the goal attained by this drama and its hero Duryodhana is reintegration and wholeness—precisely the goal of all classical Sanskrit dramas.



The idea that there are various types of hero is not unique to this drama, and not even to the theatre tradition as a whole. Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (6.79) lists three kinds of *vīra*: heroes in generosity, religion, and war (*dāna*, *dharmā*, *yuddha*). The literary criticism tradition makes use of a similar three-fold categorization of types of heroes, as we see in *Daśarūpa* 4.79, but in this text the terms are heroes of compassion, war, and generosity (*dayā*, *raṇa*, *dāna*).<sup>8</sup> That there is a hero of compassion is also accepted and discussed by the great literary critics Ānandavardhana (ninth century) and Abhinavagupta (tenth century) in their analyses of theatre.<sup>9</sup> In the present day, the renowned Kerala playwright and director Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (1990: 198) has written that he interprets the epic warrior Karṇa as a hero of generosity (*dāna*) as well as war (*yuddha*) for his combination of magnanimous nobility, even to the point of sacrificing his own life, and exceptional fighting ability. The epic source of many of these dramas and their heroes, the *Mahābhārata*, seems to elaborate even further on the theme of a multiplicity of heroic ideals in Bhīṣma's oration to Yudhiṣṭhira, where twenty-one types of hero (*śūra*) are listed.<sup>10</sup> The multiplicity of heroic ideals is relevant also in interpreting the drama *Nāgānanda* (Joy of the Serpents), to which we turn now.

Harṣa's play *Nāgānanda* is another drama that has been performed in the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* style. It presents the highly unusual feature of the hero Jimūtavāhana dying on the stage in the final act, only to be revived by divine intervention. He is identified as a bodhisattva, a practitioner of the Buddhist path of perfection who has so much compassion that he is willing to offer his own life to save that of another. In this drama, Jimūtavāhana offers himself as a substitute for a Nāga (Serpent) who is to be the eagle Garuḍa's daily meal.<sup>11</sup> Our hero is partly consumed and dies, but the distressed Garuḍa, who has learned, too late, the identity of his meal, prays in desperation to Śiva. The great god sends his wife, the goddess Gaurī, to restore the deceased bodhisattva-hero and remove everyone's grief. Thus we have both the death of the drama's hero being depicted before the audience and divine intervention restoring the hero to life.

*Nāgānanda* has been the subject of considerable debate among ancient literary critics, some of whom see it as an example—perhaps the only example—of a drama in which the dominant *rasa* is *śānta* (peace). The literary critics Ānandavardhana (3.26 and 3.43) and Abhinavagupta cite the *Nāgānanda* as one in which *śānta* is a very important *rasa*, perhaps even the dominant one (see Ingalls 1990: 518–526 and 663–666). Dhanamjaya in the *Daśarūpa* (4.44 and 53) disagrees, and notes that some authorities use the category *śānta rasa*,

but “there is no development of it in the drama,” that is, no examples of *śānta rasa* exist in actual dramas. Dhanika in his *Avaloka* (4.45), a tenth-century commentary on *Daśarūpa*, insists that *śānta rasa* cannot be enacted: “Although *śāntarasa* is not brought into plays because it cannot be acted out, there is nothing to prevent its occurrence in poems, since all things, including those that are subtle or in the past, can be presented through their ability to be described in words” (as quoted by Tubb 1985: 145).

An audience member could experience *śānta rasa* only if the stable emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) of tranquility (*śama*) could be enacted, and Dhananjaya and Dhanika questioned whether any gestures or actions could effectively depict the liberated state (*mokṣa*), or whether anyone in the audience who had not experienced *mokṣa* could appreciate such a depiction.<sup>12</sup>

My approach to interpreting this drama, however, is to focus on the way it ends: the hero is crowned *cakravartin* (a Buddhist ideal king), emperor of the Vidyādhara realm, and will rule a long time in the company of his beloved wife. This is not the sort of outcome one would expect of a drama dominated and harmonized by *śānta rasa*! Marriage and ruling a kingdom are delightful, no doubt, but those worldly endeavors are activities conducive to experiencing the erotic and heroic *rasa*-s, and are profoundly different from *śānta rasa*'s transformative peace of religious experience. The most cogent interpretation is that we have here another instance of a hero of compassion and a drama dominated by love and heroism. In other words, this drama is not so very different from the usual themes of other dramas of the *nāṭaka* type.

Finally I want to draw attention to one more feature of *kūṭiyāṭṭam* dramas regarding the role of death on stage, namely, the frequent occurrence of threats of suicide. Particularly in dramas about love, we see suicide being threatened, and sometimes preparations for suicide are made on the stage before the eyes of the audience. Moreover, these threats are made by characters of all types, including the hero and heroine—indeed, perhaps most often by them. Needless to say, were the hero or heroine actually to commit suicide in a drama, this deed would raise the question whether this drama had achieved success, or at least in what way such a death could be construed as a success. I will cite examples of suicide being threatened in Sanskrit dramas of the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition.

*Subhadrā-Dhanañjaya* by Kulaśekhara Varman (translated as *The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadrā* by Unni and Sullivan 2001) includes a scene in which Subhadrā, the sister of Kṛṣṇa who marries the Pāṇḍava

hero Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*, threatened to commit suicide by hanging herself over the mistaken notion that she was in love with three different men (act 3). She was ashamed because to be in love with more than one man meant that she was immoral. She says, “Fortunately this place is secluded. I shall not vacillate any more in the vortex of love pangs and in the state of a harlot. So I shall make use of this jasmine creeper hanging down from this young mango tree” (Unni and Sullivan 2001: 170). As it happens, while she thought that she had met three men, all were Arjuna in various guises, and clarification of the misunderstanding dissuaded her from performing the deed. Later in this drama, Arjuna fainted when Subhadrā was abducted by a demon, and he threatened to commit suicide over his failure to save her and to regain the throne; his Brahmin companion proclaimed his intention to join Arjuna in self-inflicted death (Unni and Sullivan 2001: act 5). First, though, the Brahmin tried to bring the prince back to his senses by reminding him of his family, but this only provided Arjuna the opportunity to highlight the link between world-weariness and suicide: “Friend! For me who has left worldly pleasure, what regard would there be for kin?” (Unni and Sullivan 2001: 192) Finally, by appealing to Arjuna’s heroic nature, his Brahmin friend roused Arjuna to action, and again the matter is resolved without anyone fulfilling their threat.

*Tapatī-Saṃvarāṇa* (translated as *The Sun God’s Daughter and King Saṃvarāṇa* by Unni and Sullivan 1995; see also Sullivan and Unni 1996) is another drama attributed to Kulaśekhara Varman in which major characters threaten suicide. In act 3, the comic companion to the king, the *vidūṣaka*, mistakes the king’s lovelorn condition as fatal and vows to join his friend in death by committing suicide, but is dissuaded. In act 4, the heroine Tapatī overhears a threat by the demoness Mohinikā to kill the king and threatens to commit suicide in despair, but the king reassures her. In act 6, in a veritable frenzy of misinformation and mistaken identities, the king, Tapatī, and her female companions all threaten suicide until the confusion is dispelled and the hero attains his goal: the marriage of the hero and heroine, blessed by her father the Sun God, produces an auspicious conclusion.

*Nāgānanda* provides similar instances of the prominence of suicide as a plot device. The drama’s hero Jīmūtavāhana was the cause of “joy for the *Nāga-s*” by offering himself as a substitute for the serpent who was the bird Garuḍa’s daily meal (Bak Kun Bae 1992: act four). As his “gift of the body” became known by the heroine, she threatened to commit suicide by fire, as did his father and mother. Even Garuḍa contemplated suicide as he realized that he had killed and partially eaten

a saintly bodhisattva (Bak Kun Bae 1992: act 5). As already noted, the hero and all the *Nāga* snakes were revived, so that the hero attains his goal and the drama has a happy ending after all. It is worth also noticing, however, that early in this drama, the heroine is in love with Jimūtavāhana but despairs that he loves another, so her response to this frustration is to threaten suicide, going so far as to put a noose around her neck for that purpose (act 2, prose after verse 10). He intervenes heroically to save her. This drama is an especially compelling example for this article because it includes a threat of suicide by the heroine and a suicidal vow by the hero being not only pronounced but enacted, so that there is a dead body lying on the stage, which then results in a wave of threats of suicide by other characters.

In *Ūrubhaṅga*, as Duryodhana lies dying on the battlefield with his legs broken, his wife Pauravī announces her intention to follow him into death, killing herself by throwing herself on his funeral pyre as a *satī*.<sup>13</sup> Since he soon dies in the drama, we are left to presume that perhaps she did indeed follow through on her stated intention, though we do not see her fulfill her suicidal vow in the drama. In the one-act play *Karṇabhāra* (Karṇa's Burden), Karṇa offers the disguised Indra his life ("Then I'll give you my head!"—prose after verse 20). The drama and the epic *Mahābhārata* on which it is based reflect the same suicidal generosity on the part of Karṇa: he surrenders his invulnerability to maintain his vow of generosity, having promised to yield anything requested during his daily worship of Sūrya and not renegeing even if it means his life. We do not see him threaten suicide as such, but we see him give away his armor and earrings that had made him invulnerable; he knowingly shortened his life by giving away his armor.

Finally, I would like to refer to the case of the heroine of the *Rāmāyana*, the kidnapped Sītā. The final act of *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* (The Wondrous Crest-Jewel) by Śaktibhadra includes the meeting of Rāma and Sītā after her captivity. Both of them are depicted wondering what the people will say (Jones 1984: 86–87; act 7, prose after verse 13 through prose after verse 15). When Rāma refers to her as an "unchaste woman" and accuses her of infidelity (verse 17), her smile prompts Sugrīva, Lakṣmaṇa, and Hanumān to advocate that she be punished. Sītā's response to the situation is to request permission to enter the fire (prose after verse 18). She performs an act of truth and steps into the fire, an action that has all the indications of her ending her life.<sup>14</sup> In *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance, much of the work of presenting Sītā's actions is actually done by Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma's brother, in a "flashback" (*nirvaḥaṇam*) in which he enacts Sītā through the conventional gesture of tucking part of his costume into his waistband as a

signal that he is enacting her. As with *Nāgānanda*, however, divine intervention saves her—or perhaps her own divinity saves her.

### Conclusions

In this essay I have given an overview of how the tradition of Sanskrit theatre, especially *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, makes use of the depiction of death on the stage. Obviously it is a much more complicated situation than has been indicated by many modern scholars who assert that the tradition simply prohibits any such enactment of a character dying on stage. But as is now evident, it is not the case that the Sanskrit theatre tradition prohibits all depiction of death, either in normative texts (such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or works by later literary critics) or in the dramas themselves. How then is the enactment of death used in Sanskrit theatre?

Allusions to death, in the form of threats of suicide, are effective in conveying to the audience the depth of a character's feelings. In the case of love apparently frustrated or the grief of losing a loved one, the threat of suicide indicates the extent to which a character feels love for another person and feels that life cannot be sustained without that other person. Other allusions to death set a mood, for example, the description of the battlefield in the introductory scene in *Ūrubhaṅga* helps to establish the context for Duryodhana's heroic transformation.

The killing of a secondary character on the stage is a feature of a number of dramas. Keith (1924: 110) badly misinterpreted *Pratimā* and *Abhiṣeka nāṭaka-s* in saying that all who died were enemies of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma and their deaths cause "no sorrow." One can only marvel at Keith's comment—he may never have seen these dramas performed, but his statement calls in question whether he had closely read either of these two plays. Obviously the death of Daśaratha, the hero's father, is enacted in part to emphasize the love Daśaratha felt for his son, and the son Rāma's sorrow at the loss of his father. The death of the rebellious monkey Bālī is also a sorrowful situation, as the drama clearly shows: his brother the rightful King Sugrīva and the dying monkey's son, Aṅgada, are overcome with sorrow and lament his death. And the audience is to relish the depiction of this sorrow, of course: the pathetic (*karuṇa*) *rasa* is dominant in these scenes.

We also have two instances of the hero dying on the stage, and in both cases we can best understand him as a "hero of compassion." The hero's death is integral to the drama's plot, indeed, it is indicative of his very nature: Jīmūtavāhana gives up his life to save another's, and for his selfless act he is restored to life, he attains sovereignty and so he becomes a *cakravartin*. In *Nāgānanda*, Jīmūtavāhana through sacri-

ficing his life demonstrates that he has perfected the virtues of selflessness and compassion for others, qualities that he will need as a ruler. And I would argue that the hero's death is the point of *Ūrubhaṅga*<sup>15</sup>: Duryodhana nobly teaches forgiveness and reconciliation to his family and friends to his last breath. For his heroic compassion he attains heaven. In both dramas, the hero demonstrates that he has transcended worldly ambitions by giving up his own life to attain a more important goal.

Why then have so many scholars thought that the depiction of death was prohibited on the stage? I have cited works by Wilson, Macdonell, and Keith—British scholars who wrote during Britain's colonial enterprise in India. Wilson left the Calcutta Mint's post of assay specialist to become the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, and Macdonell succeeded him at Oxford, while Keith was Regius Professor of Sanskrit and comparative philology at Edinburgh University in the early twentieth century. In describing them in this way, I do not attribute to them Orientalist or colonialist attitudes: these academic appointments do not constitute indictments against them for facilitating Britain's colonial dominance over India. Instead, I credit them with the sort of "honorable errors" that advance our study of Indian theatre by being "seeds for progress in the quintessential activity of correction" (Gould 1996: 17). Their statements compelled me to examine the data again, to reassess the works of modern scholars and ancient literary critics as well as the dramas themselves.

Furthermore, Wilson and Macdonell wrote on limited textual material before the discovery by Western scholars of the Trivandrum plays sometimes attributed to Bhāsa, and still enacted in the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition. These dramas, with multiple instances of characters dying on the stage, make more evident the need to reassess assertions that such an enactment was prohibited. Keith and later authors, writing after these dramas were known and making explicit reference to them, were in a better position to make that reassessment, but, perhaps because they were scholars of literature rather than performance, did not do so. Wilson's book on what he called "Hindu theatre" and Macdonell's short, twenty-page chapter on drama, however, share with Keith's book on Indian theatre one feature that is highly problematic: these works do not utilize the extensive Indian commentary tradition. Keith (1924: 106), for example, does not hesitate to pronounce Duryodhana "the chief subject but not the hero" of the drama *Ūrubhaṅga*, though he grudgingly (and perhaps confusedly) admits that Duryodhana "remains heroic in his death." Such comments reflect Keith's personal evaluation but not the "theory and practice" of the Sanskrit theatre tradition that he is purporting to describe in his

book. Particularly striking is Keith's observation (1924: 278) that "it is a mere reading of modern sentiment into ancient literature to treat Duryodhana in the *Ūrubhaṅga* as the hero of the drama." Yet Duryodhana is recognized as that drama's hero by the Indian commentary tradition. Greater familiarity with the works of authoritative Indian commentators (Dhanamjaya, Ānandavardhana, Abhinavagupta, etc.) would have enabled Keith to describe the Sanskrit theatre tradition more effectively.

Wilson, Macdonell, Keith, and other scholars after them have overstated the extent to which representing death on stage is restricted. They have tended to regard the theatre tradition as unanimous on this point and to privilege normative texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* over the texts of the dramas themselves as constituents of the tradition. They also neglected the limitation Bharata placed on dying on the stage, a "prohibition" only for heroes in *nāṭaka* and *prakaraṇa* dramas, a limited subset of theatrical genres. I want to suggest that what seems to be a conflict between the "rules" and the dramas is, in fact, not a conflict. The hero dies in only one *nāṭaka* (*Nāgānanda*), and then only temporarily. Secondary characters die, but Bharata includes numerous indications that death is, at times, to be enacted on the stage and has a role to play in evoking the *rasa* experience for the audience. I conclude that for the audience member, seeing depictions of or allusions to death on the stage can be a significant component of the experience of many different *rasa*, which is, after all, one major purpose of the enactment of the dramas.

## NOTES

1. Furthermore, Keith says, in Bhāsa's dramas there is a "disregard of the rule which objects to death on the stage" (p. 354). Somewhat similar comments can be found on pp. 38 and 292.

2. Mehta's note 29 (p. 107) suggests that there are still others by ending the list with "etc." Among the "forbidden" depictions listed are "a death" and "the killings of a hero" (*sic*). Additional passages from Bharata worth noting are chapter 24, verses 239–241 and 291–295. *Rasa* is a state of aesthetic enjoyment that an audience member can experience; originally eight were enumerated, and later a ninth (*śānta*, peace) was added by some commentators.

3. Or complementary states that move in relation to the *rasa* states.

4. Tieken (2000: 123) notes that, for Bharata, the erotic includes all thirty-three states except these three, but inexplicably in the next sentence he writes: "The inclusion of disgust (*jugupsā*) among the symptoms of the erotic *rasa* is curious."

5. Winternitz as quoted in Pusalker (1940: 203), Tarlekar (1975: 39), and Mehta (1995: 116–128).

6. See the end of his introduction to the three volume text and translation of Bhāsa's plays (1995, vol. 1: lxxxviii–lxxxix).

7. As argued by Gerow 1985a. Certainly Gerow 1985b is the best translation of this drama.

8. Tieken (2000: 117, 127) is thus entirely wrong in his assertion that the term *dayāvīra* is “Gerow’s own invention”—see, for example, the clear citations in Gerow’s work (1985a) to the *Daśarūpa*, as in footnote 22 (p. 409). Tieken (1997: 30, 48) is also off the mark in stating that Gerow is endorsing *karuṇa rasa* as the dominant *rasa* of *Ūrubhaṅga*.

9. See Ānandavardhana’s *vṛtti* on *Dhvanyāloka* 3.26 and 3.43 (Ingalls 1990: 524, 663–664) and Abhinavagupta’s commentary on these (Ingalls 1990: 524–525, 665). These discussions relate to the drama *Nāgānanda* and will be noted in relation to that text which has the hero sacrifice himself to resolve the animosity between the divine eagle and the snakes (*nāga*) of the title.

10. *MBh* 13.74.23–27, where twenty-one types of hero are listed (the term here is *śūra* rather than *vīra*), and while *dayā* (compassion) is not one of the types, *satya* (truthfulness and goodness) and *kṣamā* (patience and tolerance) cover some of the same field of virtue.

11. Venu (1989: 12–13) presents an interesting account of the technical requirements for depiction of Garuḍa the divine eagle flying down to the stage by having an actor manipulated by sixty-four strings held by another performer. A famous pair of eighteenth-century performers is credited with this enactment.

12. See Tubb 1985: 145–148 for a more extensive discussion of this debate than can be accommodated here.

13. See prose after verse 52 in Menon (1996, vol. 1: 405).

14. An act of truth (*satya-kriyā*) is a ritualized statement similar to a vow, but the speaker cites past actions done well, and the speaker’s truthfulness in describing them, to compel a desired outcome to transpire. See Jones (1984) for a translation of the production manual for this drama; pp. 150–151 for this particular scene. See my essay “Character and Identity in the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* Drama Tradition” (Unni and Sullivan 2001: 58–74) for a fuller discussion of this aspect of one character enacting the role of another in performance. A similar scene is also found in the last act of *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*, though it is no longer performed by contemporary *kūṭiyāṭṭam* actors.

15. Tieken (1997: 27–30; 2000: 127–128) may be correct that the drama was performed on the occasion of a funeral, in the hope that the deceased would transcend anger and hatred in the afterlife and be a benevolent ancestor. One might envision a similar purpose for “Bāli Vadham” (The Killing of Bāli) since the same themes occur. It is important to note, however, that performers of the *kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition today (Margi Madhu, Usha Nangiar, C. K. Jayanti, and Arya Madhavan) as well as scholars in Kerala (N. P. Unni, K. G. Paulose, G. Venu, and Rama Iyer) state that actors have not been



asked to perform these dramas in association with funeral ceremonies, and that their performance manuals make no reference to such occasions of performance either (personal communications, January 2006).

#### REFERENCES

- Ānandavardhana. 1940.  
*Dhvanyāloka*, with the *Locana* of Abhinavagupta, ed. and trans. Pat-  
 tābhirāma Sāstrī. Kashi Sanskrit Series 135. Varanasi: Chowkhamba  
 Sanskrit Series Office.
- Bak Kun Bae, trans. 1992.  
*Nāgānanda of Harṣa: The Sanskrit Text with Annotated English Transla-  
 tion*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Bharata. 1926–1964.  
*Nāṭyaśāstra*, 4 vols. Ed. M. Rāmakrishna Kavi et al., with commentary  
 by Abhinavagupta (*Abhinavabhāratī*). Gaekwad Oriental Series 36, 68,  
 124, and 145. Baroda: Oriental Institute.
- Gerow, Edwin. 1985a.  
 “Bhāsa’s *Ūrubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics,” *Journal of the American Ori-  
 ental Society* 105, 3: 405–412.
- , trans. 1985b.  
 “*Ūrubhaṅga*: The Breaking of the Thighs.” *Journal of South Asian Liter-  
 ature* 20: 57–70. [Reprinted in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*. Ed. Arvind  
 Sharma. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991: 68–83.]
- Gould, Stephen Jay. 1996.  
 “Up Against a Wall.” *Natural History* 105, 7: 16–23.
- Haas, George C. O., trans. 1912.  
*The Daśarūpa, a Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy, by Dhanamjaya*. Sanskrit  
 Text and English Translation. New York: Columbia University Press.  
 [Reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962.]
- Ingalls, Daniel H. H., ed. 1990.  
*The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*.  
 Trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Pat-  
 wardhan. Harvard Oriental Series, 49. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Uni-  
 versity Press.
- Jones, Clifford Reis, ed. 1984.  
*The Wondrous Crest-Jewel in Performance*. Delhi: Oxford University  
 Press.
- Keith, A. Berriedale. 1924.  
*The Sanskrit Drama in Its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice*. Lon-  
 don: Oxford University Press.
- Ley, Graham. 2000.  
 “Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Bharatamuni’s *Natyasastra*, and Zeami’s Treatises:  
 Theory as Discourse.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 17, 2: 191–214.
- Macdonell, Arthur A. 1900.  
*A History of Sanskrit Literature*. London: W. Heinemann.

- Menon, K. P. A., trans. 1996.  
*Complete Plays of Bhāsa*, 3 vols. Delhi: Nag Publishers.
- Mehta, Tarla. 1995.  
*Sanskrit Play Production in Ancient India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Panikkar, K. N. 1990.  
 “Mahābhārata Reflected in Performance.” In *The Mahābhārata Revisited*, ed. R. N. Dandekar. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi; 193–200.
- Pusalkar, A. D. 1940.  
*Bhasa: A Study*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Rocher, Ludo. 1981.  
 “The Textual Tradition of the *Bhāratīyanātyaśāstra*: A Philological Assessment.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 25: 107–130.
- Sullivan, Bruce M., and N. P. Unni. 1996.  
 “*Tapati-Saṃvaraṇam*, a *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* Drama by Kulaśekhara Varman. Introduced by Bruce M. Sullivan. Translated, with notes, by Bruce M. Sullivan and N. P. Unni.” *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, 1: 26–53.
- Tarlekar, G. H. 1975 [1991].  
*Studies in the Natya shastra with Special Reference to the Sanskrit Drama in Performance*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (2nd edition revised, 1991).
- Tieken, Herman. 1993.  
 “The So-Called Trivandrum Plays Attributed to Bhāsa.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 37: 5–44.
- . 1997.  
 “Three Men in a Row (Studies in the Trivandrum Plays II),” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 41: 17–52.
- . 2000.  
 “On the Use of *Rasa* in Studies of Sanskrit Drama.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 43: 115–38.
- Tubb, Gary A. 1985.  
 “*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*.” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20: 141–68. [Reprinted in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*. Ed. Arvind Sharma. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991: 171–203.]
- Unni, N. P., and Bruce M. Sullivan, trans. 2001.  
*The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadrā: The Kūṭiyāṭṭam Drama “Subhadrā-Dhanañjaya*.” Delhi: Nag Publishers.
- . 1995.  
*The Sun God’s Daughter and King Saṃvaraṇa: Tapati-Saṃvaraṇa and the Kūṭiyāṭṭam Drama Tradition*. Delhi: Nag Publishers.
- Venu, G. 1989.  
*Production of a Play in Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Irinjalakuda: Natanakairali.
- Wilson, H. H. 1835.  
*Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus: Translated from the Original Sanskrit*. Second edition, 2 vols. London: Parbury, Allen. [First edition, Calcutta: V. Holcroft, 1826–1827].
- Woolner, A. C., and Lakshman Sarup, trans. 1985.  
*Thirteen Plays of Bhāsa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. [First edition, Lahore: Motilal Banarsidass, 1930, 2 vols.].