RECONSIDERING RĀJAŚEKHARA: PERFORMANCE AND COURTLY CONTEXT IN VIDHAŚĀLABHAṆJIKĀ

by

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss historical and contemporary approaches to the 10th century Sanskrit poet and playwright Rājaśekhara (most of which centre upon literary criticism) and propose an alternative approach to his work in which his plays might be examined in terms of their performance and courtly contexts. I then apply this analysis to his play Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā (The Hollow Statue). By analyzing the performance context focusing on the categories of body, space, and object, I argue that the text puts forward strong evidence for its own performativity, offers a diverse set of indications of how the play is to be staged, and contains a number of noteworthy and unique material characteristics. I then examine the courtly and historical context surrounding the play’s creation to offer suggestions about how its content may have been intended and received, as well as the significance of certain historical characters or events which seem to be embedded in the text. The result is that—rather than being a poorly-constructed, incomprehensible play full of inappropriate moments, depicting a Sanskrit dramatic form in decline—Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā is in fact quite a novel and complex work of Sanskrit drama that shows a conscious sensitivity to performance concerns and an acute awareness of its place in society.
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1 Introduction – Approaching Rājaśekhara and His Work

Rājaśekhara (ca. 9th–10th century CE, primarily of Kannauj) is a problematic figure in the history of Sanskrit drama. Though by all accounts well-received during his career and in anthologies compiled long after his death, his works are nonetheless widely criticized in early Western Indological scholarship, and a rather venomous body of opinions about him formed and disseminated during the foundational period of Western Indology. Curiously, these early modern critics of Rājaśekhara are quite inconsistent in their assessment of precisely what makes him a poor poet and dramatist. He is simultaneously accused of being derivative and uninteresting in his plots and characters, while also being acknowledged as often quite original in his crafting of situations. He is acclaimed as a master of language (particularly Prākrit) while also being questioned on his linguistic precision. His unconventional decisions are regarded as horrible by some, and as redeeming by others. In this period, there seems to be no broad consensus on his value to Sanskrit drama. He is, rather, taken to be a prolific, popular author who pales in comparison to the paragons of Sanskrit drama.

The problems faced by Western scholars in assessing Rājaśekhara’s plays might be a result of their approaches to his work. A focus on the literary aspects of his writings and a privileging of traditional orthodoxy have robbed much analysis from a proper consideration of the social and performance contexts surrounding the work. Combined in the early period with Orientalist and essentialist attitudes towards Sanskrit drama and its historical narrative of decline, what remains is generally derisive and often unelaborated criticism, with a few perfunctory acknowledgements of what small merits he may have possessed. In the post-colonial world, analysis of Rājaśekhara has focused more on his writing style, what his contemporaries and later commentators said about him, and the potential historicity of his
plays. However, while these kinds of analysis dismantle the more specious attacks against him and give some consideration of his wider potential merits, the approaches are still generally confined to literary characteristics and historical opinions of his work.

In this thesis I would like to accomplish several things: First, I will review the body of historical Western analysis and criticism (negative and positive) of Rājaśekhara’s plays. This will allow an understanding of the different approaches taken in looking at Rājaśekhara’s works, their evolution and scope, and the problems that may arise from them. Second, I will propose an alternative performance-centric approach that may better serve analysis of his plays and resolve or reconcile outstanding criticisms. The aim of this is to directly to fill in contexts not so easily considered by the historical approaches reviewed, though some overlap is to be expected (and in fact should serve to further assess the quality of arguments about Rājaśekhara already advanced). Third, I will apply this approach to a specific analysis of Rājaśekhara’s play Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā (The Hollow Statue), which I think exemplifies his qualities. I intend to demonstrate that by moving away from literary criticism and orthodoxy, and towards incorporating performance and courtly contexts that Rājaśekhara’s contributions to the Sanskrit drama might be recognized for their extra-textual values to the form: those of performance-sensitivity, and social/historical consciousness.

1.1 Rājaśekhara’s Life & Writings

Rājaśekhara was born in the 9th century CE to a Mahārāṣṭrian family. Though the location and details of his early career are sparse (but which he claims earned him the title Bālakavi), he came to particular prominence in Kannauj in the court of Mahendrapāla (ca. 885–910) (where he received the title Kavirāja), and continued in the court of Mahendrapāla’s son and successor Mahīpāla (ca. 912–940). At some point in his later career, he went to Tripurī, where he may have stayed until his death (Mirashi 1955, clxxv).
Rājaśekhara is purported to have written at least six works, including one courtly epic
(*Haravilāsa*) four plays (*Bālarāmāyaṇa, Bālabhārata* or *Pracaṇḍapāṇḍava, Karpūramaṇjarī,* and *(Viddhaśālabhaṭījà), and one unfinished text on rhetoric and poetics (*Kāvyamāṃsā*). All but the *Haravilāsa* survive, with *Bālabhārata* in fragmentary form. There is some disagreement as to the chronological order of the works, owing to Mirashi’s argument that Rājaśekhara stayed in Tripurī after writing *Viddhaśālabhaṭījà* (Mirashi 1934, 365); I have reproduced Mirashi’s proposed order here (Mirashi 1934, 360) though it is considered elsewhere that *Karpūramaṇjarī* is his first play, and *Bālabhārata* his last (Konow 1901, 184). Rājaśekhara is also represented in the anthologies of Śāṅgadhara (14th century CE) and Vallabhadeva (15th century CE) with 24 verses from his surviving works and 7-10 verses untraced but attributed to him (Konow 1901, 189-191).

Each of Rājaśekhara’s plays is quite distinct. The *Bālarāmāyaṇa* is a ten-act retelling of the Rāma story depicted mainly from the point of view of secondary characters, effectively casting Rāvaṇa in the role of the dramatic hero for much of the play. The *Bālabhārata* (though only two acts survive, and it may not have been finished [Warder 1988, 521]) is an attempt to dramatize the story of the *Mahābhārata,* from the winning of Draupadī by the Pāṇḍavas to the death of Duryodhana. The *Karpūramaṇjarī* is a Prākrit *saṭṭaka* and the *Viddhaśālabhaṭījà* a Sanskrit *nāṭīkā*—both genres similarly involving an invented story with a king as the hero containing much dance and song and many female characters. It has been speculated that many characters and situations in the *Viddhaśālabhaṭījà* are based upon historical figures existing in Tripurī when it was written (Mirashi 1955, lxxvii-lxxxiv; Mirashi 1975).
1.2 Historical Approaches to Rājaśekhara

The colonial period contains the first great bulk of Western scholarly analysis, editing, and translation of Rājaśekhara’s works. Konow enumerates 27 books and papers concerning Rājaśekhara published between 1827 and 1890 (this includes critical editions, essays, and general histories) (Konow 1901, 175-176). The beginning of the 20th century also sees the first two English translations of Rājaśekhara—the Karpūramaṇjarī in 1901 by Lanman and Konow, and Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā in 1906 by Louis Gray. It is clearly in this period (1890-1924) that Rājaśekhara’s reputation in Western scholarship is established, and not until the post-colonial period that these impressions begin to be significantly challenged.

V. S. Apte wrote a lengthy paper in 1886 that stands as one of the earliest widely cited (and still available) sources on the subject of Rājaśekhara, and clearly informs the subsequent and more widely published opinions of Konow and Keith. Apte’s estimation of Rājaśekhara is, unfortunately, quite blunt: “He is undoubtedly a poet of great learning and much information. But he is not a dramatist. None of his works display any artistic skill – any dramatic genius” (Apte 1886, 41-42). Apte has very little positive to say about any play except the Bālarāmāyaṇa, a condition he attributes not particularly to the playwright but rather to “the sublime and exalted nature of the subject itself” (Apte 1886, 31). The Karpūramaṇjarī is called “a worthless production,” though Apte acknowledges that it demonstrates Rājaśekhara’s mastery of Prākrit (Apte 1886, 24). The Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā is not only “quite uninteresting,” but Rājaśekhara’s decision to have the Queen unwittingly marry two females, that “he has completely marred the beauty of a nātikā” (Apte 1886, 28). Somewhat mystifyingly, among the criticisms of uninteresting characters, undramatic plots, and inappropriate content, Apte contradictorily asserts “Rājaśekhara is nothing if not original. He thought he was not bound to slavishly follow the practice of his predecessors in
the field, and has therefore invented not only ideas, but a peculiar method of arranging incidents so as to impart novelty to his works. In trying to improve upon his predecessors he has given us several ideas which are quite extravagant and affected” (Apte 1886, 30). Though the harsh criticisms resume immediately, this anomalous admission is one of the few statements that presciently echoes positive assessments of Rājaśekhara’s work some sixty or more years later.

French Indologist Sylvain Lévi writes at some length about Rājaśekhara’s work in his 1890 *Le Théâtre Indien*. As a set of case-studies of the various genres of Sanskrit drama, Lévi focuses particularly on Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā as a characteristic example of a nāṭikā (which he calls “little heroic comedy”),¹ and Karpūraṁaṅjarī as an example of saṭṭaka (a genre of Prākrit drama very similar in style to nāṭikā), providing a synopsis of both plays. In Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā, Lévi declares that all characters apart from the vidūṣaka (the jester/fool) are uninteresting: “Cārāyaṇa [the vidūṣaka] is not the glutton, greedy, boastful coward of ordinary dramas. He is a simple spirit, naïve, capable of being duped by the crudest jokes, but possessing common sense; he loves to talk in proverbs like the common people.”² Lévi continues that Rājaśekhara seems to attach far more importance to the creation of his lavish description (moonrise, sunrise, harem amusements, etc.) than he does to his characters (Levi 1890, 248). Overall, Lévi’s estimation of Rajaśekhara is quite poor: “Rājaśekhara crawls painfully in the footsteps of his predecessors and pushes their faults further.”³

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1. “petite comédie héroïque” (Levi 1890, 245).

2. “Le seul personnage intéressant est le bouffon; Cārāyaṇa n’est pas le compère glouton, goulou, poltron et vantard des drames ordinaires. c’est un esprit simple, naïf, capable d’être la dupe de farces les plus grossières, mais pourvu du gros bon sens populaire; il aime à parler par proverbes comme les gens du commun” (Levi 1890, 248).

3. “Rājaśekhara qui se traine péniblement sur les traces de ses devanciers a poussé ce défaut plus loin encore” (Levi 1890, 292-293).
Sten Konow’s 1901 essay on Rājaśekhara’s life and writings, written to accompany C. R. Lanman’s translation of *Karpūramañjarī*, generally avoids critiquing Rājaśekhara’s plot and characters. He cites Apte’s synopses and observations of content, as well as Sylvain Lévi and German Indologist Richard Pischel’s estimations of Rājaśekhara’s traits. Regarding Apte’s criticism Konow says “The poet’s works ought, as I think, to be translated and interpreted by some Western scholar before a judgement is passed upon them which the Occident may fairly accept… Native judgement sometimes goes too far in condemnation; and it often goes too far in praise” (Konow 1901, 204-205). Instead of judging value, Konow focuses his attention on the quantitative literary characteristics of Rājaśekhara: the different metres employed by him, use of proverbs, repetition, and the characteristics of his Prākrit. Regarding the characteristics of the Prākrit language used in *Karpūramañjarī*, Konow speculates that Rājaśekhara either mixed or confused the two Śaurasenī and Māhārāṣṭrī dialects within the play (Konow 1901, 202).

Louis Gray, in the introduction to his 1906 translation of *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā*, draws on the work of Apte, Konow, Lévi, and Pischel. Gray is noteworthy however for responding to some of the harsher criticism of the play (particularly Apte and Lévi), arguing that “Allowance should [be] made for the fact, not generally recognized, that a Sanskrit drama is to be compared with an opera rather than with a play, since the main stress is laid on beauty of diction and versification instead of action” (Gray 1906, 5). This statement, as with only a few that came before it, presages attempts to reconcile Rājaśekhara’s reception within his own field with the emerging body of Western negative criticism against him. Regrettably, Gray’s focus on duplicating the ornateness and beauty of Rājaśekhara’s original language comes to the great detriment of accuracy in his translation.
Moriz Winternitz, conversely to Gray, recapitulates the scholarly attitudes towards Rājaśekhara without much apology in his 1909 _Geschichte der indischen Litteratur_. He quotes Pischel that “Rājaśekhara was a master of language and his dramas are extremely important for knowledge of Sanskrit and rather of Prākrit,” but also that “as a dramatist, [his] position is not very high” (Winternitz 1963, 270). Curiously, Winternitz also claims of Rājaśekhara that “probably he lacks in taste as well as in originality,” though he does not elaborate further. Whether this is an actual disagreement with Apte as to Rājaśekhara’s characteristics, or rather an agreement with the general criticism of him being uninteresting, it is not clear. Nonetheless, Winternitz does not himself seem to contribute any new material to the critical literature on Rājaśekhara, instead reinforcing the existing attitudes of scholarship before him.

A. B. Keith’s 1924 book _The Sanskrit Drama_ is noteworthy not only because it is one of the later colonial-era general overviews of Sanskrit drama, or even because it is among the most widely read and available of such histories, but because it returns to the harshest, most dismissive criticisms of Rājaśekhara advanced from the late 19th century. It begins (rather tellingly) “Rājaçeekhara, with the usual prolixity of bad poets, is voluble on his personality” (Keith 1924, 231), and refers to Rājaśekhara’s merits as “non-existent.” Keith’s criticisms bear a striking resemblance to those made by Lévi some thirty years earlier (which were never translated into English). Evidently, he dislikes even the _Bālarāmāyaṇa_, calling its length a “horror” and the acts “tedious,” though Keith does concede some novelty in the way Rāvaṇa is portrayed (Keith 1924, 232-233). The _Bālabhārata_ is called “mercifully unfinished” (Keith 1924, 233). Keith compares the _Viddhaśālabhañjikā_ unfavourably with the _Karpūramaṇjarī_, defending only the merits of the character Cārāyaṇa who he says “has plenty of sound common sense,” and claims of its plot “the taste of giving two brides to the
king at once is deplorable” (Keith 1924, 236), which brings to question whether he himself actually read the text of the play. Both plays, however, are seen as confusing, and their heroines poor. Overall, Keith argues that Rājaśekhara is “merely concerned with exercises in style… if poetry consisted merely of harmonious sound, he must be ranked high as a poet,” and that “[He] is capable of producing elegant and attractive verses, which are largely spoiled in their context by being embedded in masses of tasteless matter” (Keith 1924, 236-237). In sum, Keith seems to believe that although nobody can rightfully dismiss Rājaśekhara’s technical excellence, they may dismiss with prejudice nearly everything else about his work.

By the end of the first quarter of the 20th century, Western scholarly opinions on Rājaśekhara are fairly concrete. He is regarded for his skill in the technical use of Sanskrit and Prākrit (notwithstanding a few criticisms of his mixing of dialects). His characters and plots are seen as derivative, dull, and sometimes vulgar. He is nowhere near the like of Kālidāsa or Bhavabhūti, though he is of academic interest due to the amount of his writing that survives and the unique traits of some of the works (such as the Karpūramañjarī being the only extant saṭṭaka, or the length of the Bālarāmāyaṇa). There is uneven consideration of whether he is original, in the sense of being wilfully unconventional. Overall, he is regarded as quite poor despite his acknowledged popularity.

The colonial-era judgements of Rājaśekhara are—with a few exceptions—impaired by their biases. An Orientalist sense pervades here in two ways: First, that there is an assumption of normativity in Sanskrit drama—being found in the orthodoxy of the śāstras and in the writings of Bhavabhūti and Kālidāsa—and that deviation from this normativity is to be disparaged. Second, (chiefly from Konow and Lanman) that there is a kind of judgement only the Occident is capable of making, for the benefit of the Occident, whereas “native” judgement is dismissible because of its own native biases (Konow 1901, 204-205). A degree
of puritanism rears its head here as well; depictions of farcical marriages involving multiple brides or secretly female grooms are decried as “deplorable” (Keith 1924, 236) and said to “completely marr” the potential beauty of the work (Apte 1886, 28). Moreover, it is ironic that much of the colonial-era Western scholarship on Rājaśekhara is rooted in criticism by Apte, himself an Indian scholar, whose opinions were even considered strong enough to warrant moderation by subsequent scholars. However, particularly with regards to notions of social appropriateness, Apte’s criticisms might be seen as reflecting his anxieties, attempting to defend classical Indian culture in a world determined increasingly by Christian morals.

Finally, there seems to be a conflict between two sets of criteria upon which scholars attempt to judge Rājaśekhara: first by the essentialist notions outlined above (standards by which he fails quite spectacularly), and second by his originality and technical skill (where he is considered quite laudable). It is clear that in this period the former standards are considered of much greater importance than the latter.

It is not until the post-colonial period that scholarly attitudes towards Rājaśekhara begin to widely soften. Beginning in the 1950s, historical contexts for Rājaśekhara’s works start to be considered in detail, some technical questions and criticisms about his use of language are resolved, and his work is analyzed with more of an eye for authorial intent and aesthetics, rather than for his adherence (or lack thereof) to tradition.

V. V. Mirashi’s study of Rājaśekhara begins before Indian independence, so it would not be fair to suggest that his ideas are eminently a product of some post-colonial sea change in scholarship surrounding Rājaśekhara. Nonetheless, it is in the 1950s that his elaboration on the potential historicity of Rājaśekhara’s Viddhaśālabhañjikā occurs. Studying the inscriptions of the Kalachuris of Tripurī, Mirashi notes that the play corroborates inscriptions of the Kalachuri King Yuvarājadeva I (ca. 915–945) and argues, owing to this and additional
similarities in the plot of the play regarding war alliances and marriage, that the hero of the
play is in fact a fictionalization of Yuvarājadeva I himself (Mirashi 1955, lxxviii-lxxx).
Mirashi continues on with several attempts to match characters and incidents mentioned in
the play with analogous local events of the time. We might proceed with some caution in
accepting these views, since they evolve quite a bit over time (Mirashi 1975), though this also
represents a willingness to revise opinions given better arguments or information. However,
the attempt to connect such a work to its historical contexts has the potential to inform a
wealth of extra-textual information that may assist in pursuing alternative approaches to the
work.

In 1982, Richard Salomon offers a resolution to several questions about the technical
correctness and categorization of the Prākrit dialects Rājaśekhara uses in the Karpūramaṇjarī
(notably by Pischel and Konow, mentioned above). He argues that the play is written in both
Māhārāṣṭrī and Śaurasenī Prākrits, and that manuscript and inscriptional evidence
corroborates the accuracy of irregular words considered ‘corrupt’ by previous scholars
(Salomon 1982, 137). He points out that Konow and Lanman “produced their edition without
ever questioning that the standard formula for the dramatic uses of Prakrits in the Sanskrit
drama—i.e. Śaurasenī for prose and Māhārāṣṭrī for verse—applied to the KM as
well” (Salomon 1982, 120). Salomon further points out that where Konow claims that he has
“in some places introduced the peculiar forms of the two dialects, even against the readings
of all manuscripts” (Konow 1901, xxi-xxii), he has in fact done it quite often (beginning with
the second word in the text) (Salomon 1982, 121), leading Salomon to admonish Konow for
never thinking to question his doctrinaire approach to editing the text. The result is that the
Konow edition, “an introductory text for generations of American Indologists… presents a
highly distorted view of the Prakrit dialects” (Salomon 1982, 120), and thus that criticism of the technical proficiency of Rājaśekhara based upon these analyses are faulty at best.

A. K. Warder’s Indian Kāvya Literature series again sees the full treatment of Rājaśekhara’s chronology of works in the format of Lévi, Winternitz, and Keith. However, with a body of modern scholarship and a less orthodox, colonial era approach than those 50 or more years before him, Warder comes to much different conclusions about Rājaśekhara’s value. Warder focuses on Rājaśekhara’s critical work Kāvyamāṇsā as an indicator of his style and personality: “Rājaśekhara’s style in the Kāvyamāṇsā suggests his characters, at least his inward character… He is eminently readable, which means he is always interesting in what he says as well as fresh and unexpected in the expression of it. He seems free to coin new words… His liveliness and wit lead us on and his frank personality produces in the reader a sense of nearness to the author as he faces his task” (Warder 1988, 415). Warder continues that Rājaśekhara’s plays evince a “character of easy reflection in their details of construction” and express a “taste for pleasure in their content,” noting that in the Bālarāmāyaṇa, “the serious and harsh aspects of the story are adjusted to his aesthetic purpose. With the universe safely in divine hands, demons need not be feared and life, even war, becomes a pleasure excursion” (Warder 1988, 416-417). In some ways, this glowing general assessment is the exact opposite of those advanced by Apte and Keith. Warder clearly sees Rājaśekhara’s unconventionality as the stylistic expression of a strong personality, concerned more with aesthetic pleasure than with orthodoxy. He notes that Rājaśekhara cleverly deploys several tropes from myth, history and śāstra to lend his work a certain credibility—for instance, that in the Bālarāmāyaṇa he “fancies that he is the same kavi as Vālmīki, Meṇṭha and Bhavabhūti… the suggestion here is that these great poets and dramatist each presented the story of Rāma in a manner appropriate for their own
time” (Warder 1988, 414). Warder, in covering Rājaśekhara’s individual works, does not directly assess or praise them in detail, but instead includes the impressions of pre-modern commentators and critics on what is most noteworthy, as well as the author’s own words in defence of his works (where those seem to be contained in the text). While it is clear that his personal impression of Rājaśekhara is favourable, Warder’s use of criticism from the literary/cultural world in which the author and works existed saves him from speculating on the context surrounding the works, and having to himself judge their quality in that context.

As for more close critical analyses, one example is Lawrence McCrea, who looks at the distinctness of Rājaśekhara’s use of perspective in the Bālarāmāyaṇa. McCrea suggests, as did Warder, that the Bālarāmāyaṇa attempts to situate itself among a canon of Rāma-stories, a kind of “literary reincarnation.” However, as far as a re-telling of the most popular myth story of the time, McCrea argues that the Bālarāmāyaṇa is “not so much a play about Rāma and Sītā as it is about those who watch them” (McCrea 2003, 2-3). His analysis attempts to look at the play in terms of an exercise in alternate presentation rather than a substantial modification of the original tale, suggesting that the use of secondary characters to tell the story of the Rāmāyaṇa allows a sort of meta-analysis of or “looking back” at the original tale and the canon of incarnations through which it was told “with a light heart and a playful eye” (McCrea 2003, 31). This analytical perspective emphasizes a much more broad-minded attempt to deconstruct Rājaśekhara’s work in terms of how it interacts with its own history and the conventions of its form, and although largely confined to the narrative space, McCrea’s discussion of perspective does have some broader dramatic implications.

The post-colonial scholarly landscape offers quite a few alternate perspectives on Rājaśekhara. These perspectives often better justify his reputation in Sanskrit drama and suggest the merits of what he may have been trying to accomplish. However, the analyses
reviewed have been confined within a few important but limiting contexts. They have dealt with historicity, assessment by contemporaries, or the mechanics and style of language and narrative. Putting aside historicity, the other facets are dominantly textual, or at least have been considered in such terms by the scholars who present them. As for historicity, its consequences have largely not been considered. Below, I will propose several more kinds of analysis that attempt to separate from the world of historical speculation and literary criticism, and which may allow for a further understanding context and content in Rājaśekhara’s works.

1.3 An Alternative Approach to Rājaśekhara

I would like to broadly propose a new approach to looking at Rājaśekhara’s plays which takes into consideration three kinds of analysis not extensively done before. I do not put forward that these ideas are entirely novel, or completely absent in historical analysis of his work; nor do I contend that each of these perspectives is necessarily more valuable than those advanced before. Rather, they are trying to represent a different origin in perspective that has yet to be fully pursued, and which may allow for additional value and sense to be made out of these works that other approaches have thus far been unable to provide. These three perspectives can be described with the terms “performance context,” “courtly context,” and “theorizing the drama.”

It is particularly easy to distance Sanskrit drama from considerations of performance. After all, the form is not only intensely concerned with language and categorized among the literary arts, but that literary focus predominates in the later period, and in the primary methods of modern Indology. However, the genesis of Sanskrit drama exists in a world filled with performance conventions: Dance and music are integral to the event; genre is conveyed not just by the narrative but largely by specific emotions which are themselves conveyed by
particular movements; the stage is ideally apportioned into the various spaces: garden, river, hermitage, forest, etc. (Raghavan 1981, 24). It seems reasonable that consideration of performance should in some way embody itself in a play’s text; just as an un-performable play should be recognizable as such, so should one written specifically with performance in mind evince some understanding of the need for presentation and staging.

This kind of action-based analysis is not without flaws: for instance, the stage direction *parikramya* (“walking around/about”) may be an active instruction, or it may simply be a conventional marker for the listener or reader that the scene is changing. However, this is not all we have to go on. Rājaśekhara’s *Bālarāmāyaṇa*, for example, presents a response from the playwright to a hypothetical person complaining of the play’s unbearable length, which Warder translates to mean that the play has been accepted by actors, but is also suitable to be read (Warder 1988, 447). If this reading is correct, then it suggests that (unless all this is an exercise in convention) Rājaśekhara has intended his play to be performable.

Once we have satisfactorily established whether a play is performable—and I will argue below that we have compelling evidence for this in the case of Rājaśekhara—the question becomes not a matter of if, but rather *how* the play was likely to have been executed. This is again no simple matter, since we have very little surviving documentation of the particulars of a staged play. However, it does not prevent us from attempting to consider what extra-textual value can be added to our understanding of the play by placing it on a hypothetical stage and envisioning it as a performed piece, rather than simply a textual narrative.

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4. “brūte yaḥ ko’pi doṣaṁ mahad iti sumātir bālarāmāyaṇe ’smin praṣṭavyo ’sau paṭīyān iha bhanitiguno vidyate vā na veti ṭ yady asti svasti tubhyāṁ bhava paṭhanarucir viddhi naḥ ṣaṭ prabandhāṁ naivaṁ ced dirgham āstāṁ nāṭavaṭuvadane jarjarā kāvyakanyā” (BR 1.12ad) (Vidyasagara 1884, 10).
Related both to performance contexts and also to historicity is the idea of the courtly context immediately surrounding the drama. Daud Ali suggests that the Nāṭyaśāstra, the principal defining text of the Sanskrit dramatic form, informs the world of the court. The basic theoretical framework of aesthetics as set out in the Nāṭyaśāstra was likely to be understood by the members of the court, forming a sort of “interpretive community” of refined spectators for drama (Ali 2004, 188-189). This suggests an audience that is, in a sense, hypersensitive to a particular set of presentational conventions, and that identifying where those aspects are likely to surface in a play (its text or performance) is key to understanding its effect. This perspective is also particularly poignant when considering plays such as the Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā, which may well have been performed in a court full of people who were mirrored by characters and circumstances onstage. In this kind of environment, the priorities of the playwright in trying to entertain, comment on, and perhaps even tease his audience would understandably be different from one simply trying to present an aesthetically-pleasing fanciful story onstage. These considerations ought to inform our judgement of things like characters and plot which, although perhaps seeming terribly droll, may in fact have been perfectly tailored for their desired audience.

Finally it may also be helpful to consider drama as a theorizable entity in its own time and place, and what this means in terms of Rājaśekhara theorizing it himself. I would like to draw a parallel to English director and playwright Peter Brook. Brook’s The Empty Space (Brook 1968) is an attempt to create an artificial and highly personal typography of drama as Brook sees it in his time and place (1960s Europe). This typography is filled with Brook’s own perspectives on good and bad theatre, his conception of personal and audience engagement, and his own paradigm of presentation. The Kāvyamāṃśasā seems to be a similar sort of work for Rājaśekhara, presenting a temperament and personal aesthetic that
echoes in Rājaśekhara’s written style. Although it has already been proposed that this manifests in a certain lightness and taste for depicting pleasure, we might also explore the implications of Rājaśekhara’s own meta-myth and theory expounded in the Kāvyamīmāṃsā. This may be perhaps the most literary-focused of my proposed perspectives, but it also has the greatest potential to see into the mind of the creator.

1.4 Viddhaśālabhañjikā

In the context of applying the above analysis to Rājaśekhara’s work in this thesis, I will focus exclusively on his play Viddhaśālabhañjikā. I have done so for a number of reasons. It is the best-known and perhaps best-received of all of Rājaśekhara’s plays, though just like all of his kāyas it is widely criticized. The text is widely available and not particularly long. The action of the play, and the way that Rājaśekhara describes it, are fertile ground for a performance-centric analysis of the text. Additionally, the specific historical circumstances and courtly context surrounding Viddhaśālabhañjikā’s creation offer several interesting avenues of exploration. Finally, after reading and analyzing the play, it is clear to me that it is not nearly as one-dimensional and poorly constructed as it is reputed to be by Western scholars, and I wish to do my part to redeem such an interesting work of art.

1.4.1 Editions and Commentary

The only substantial editorial history I am able to find for Viddhaśālabhañjikā is provided by Gray:

Four editions of the Viddhaśālabhañjikā are generally available: by Vāmanācārya in the old series of the Paṇḍit, vi. Nos. 65-72 (Benares, 1871-1872), pp. 117-124, 146-151, 173-175, 199-202, 225-228, 274-276, 299-302, giving merely a text and a chāya but no commentary; by Vidyāśāgara with the commentary of Satyavrata Sāmaśrami (Benares, 1873) and again with his own gloss (Benares, 1883); and by Arte (Poona, 1886), with the commentary of Nārāyaṇa Dīkṣita, which ends abruptly
in the middle of the Brahmanee’s speech in the praveśaka of the fourth act.
Manuscripts of the play are not infrequent, sixteen being listed by Aufrescht, together
with two commentaries by Nārāyaṇa Dīkṣita and one by Ghanaśyāma (Aufrecht, i.
573, ii. 135, iii. 121; comp. Schuyler, Bibliography of the Sanskrit Drama, s. v.
Rājaśekhara). (Gray 1906, 2-3)

Gray cites examples from the commentary of Nārāyaṇa to suggest that the text given
by Arte is unreliable, and separates from Arte’s “B” manuscript into an appendix a
significant portion of Act 4 containing no fewer than 5 verses (Gray 1906, 3, 69-71). These
verses are, however, admitted in the 1975 edition by Shukla (which also includes a complete
commentary of Nārāyaṇa) from which all my translations and analysis have come. These
verses have a significant impact on the resolution of one particular element of the plot (the
verse-poem that is uncovered act-by-act over the course of the play) and figure prominently
into Warder’s analysis (Warder 1988, 517-519) and my own in the following chapters.

1.4.2 Synopsis

A brief synopsis of Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā follows, written with assistance from R. N.
Dutta and A. K. Warder’s more detailed synopses (Dutta 1912; Warder 1988, 491-521):

Act 1’s praveśaka (prologue) begins with the entrance of the sutradhāra (director) in
the role of Haradāsa, pupil to Bhāgurayaṇa, prime-minister of king Vidyādhamalla of
Karpūravarṣa. Haradāsa explains that the neighbouring king Candravarman of Lāṭa, having
no son, has disguised his daughter as a son. Bhāgurayaṇa has discovered this through his
spies, and conspired with a mind towards politics to bring her to Karpūravarṣa to secretly see
the king. A bard announces the dawn and the king’s awakening, which Haradāsa surmises is
early due to the effectiveness of the minister’s plan, wherein through a hollow column in the
king’s bedchamber the minister can manipulate his dreams. Haradāsa then excuses himself to
visit the treasury and deliver payment to the workmen who built the chamber, as well as those who are to begin building an ornamented quadrangle.

King Vidyādharamalla enters along with his friend Cārāyaṇa (the vidūṣaka, or fool/jester) filled with anxiety and longing over the dream he had about a beautiful woman. Cārāyaṇa chides him about his easy affection for women, mentioning a certain girl called Kuvalayamālā whom the king saw bathing on the riverbank and was instantly infatuated with. The king describes how in his dream the woman gave him a necklace (which he is now wearing) but disappeared as he tried to grasp at her garments. The fool asks about the queen, and the king admits that she had angrily left him to sleep alone, jealous about his thoughts for another (presumably Kuvalayamālā). The fool implores the king to go to the queen and reconcile, which the king sees as pointless.

The two enter the royal gardens out the back door (avoiding the potential courtiers in the assembly-hall) and remark on the coming of spring and the scenery, making their way to the crystal pavilion on the pleasure mount. Along the way, the king hears a sound and—looking towards it over a wall in the garden—sees women playing, among them the girl from his dream. As they approach, the sound ceases and it is clear the girl is gone, so they continue on to the pavilion. Inside the pavilion is a painting of the king, queen, and various other courtly characters. The king notices the girl from his dream is painted here, and the fool remarks to himself that she looks like Mṛgāṅkavarman, the son of the queen’s uncle, whom the queen has been known to dress up as a girl. Another painting of the queen and her retinue includes the same girl. The fool recognizes the girl once more in the form of a statue in the pavilion, and the king places the necklace from his dream on the statue. Below the statue, the fool sees written some words, which the king recognizes as a fragment belonging to the śikhariṇī meter. As he is pondering this, the fool is frightened by a vision of the girl on the
other side of the crystal wall. The two exit the pavilion to see her, but she has fled, so they follow her footsteps towards the women’s quarters. Bards announce that it is midday, and so the king and the fool exit to the queen’s apartments to perform their midday prayers.

Act 2 begins with two maidservants meeting onstage. One of the maidservants relates that Kuvalayamālā (the girl who the king had seen bathing in the river) is the daughter of king Caṇḍamahāsena of Kuntala, who has lost his kingdom. The queen intends to arrange a marriage between her cousin Mrgāṅkavarman and Kuvalayamālā. The other explains that the queen is planning a mock marriage in order to fool Cārāyaṇa. They both exit to fulfill the queen’s arrangements. King Vidyādharamalla enters, again in a state of longing, and finds the fool in the garden. The fool is attempting to remain silent, preparing for the imminent wedding the queen has arranged for him. When the fool names his bride and her parents, the king suspects that this is a joke, but does not reveal it to the fool. A maidservant enters, finding the two men and bringing them to the bower where the wedding is to take place. The queen and her retinue enter, along with the bride, a male servant dressed as a woman. The wedding ceremony begins, but as vows are being exchanged the servant reveals himself and everyone laughs at the joke. Cārāyaṇa is furious and stomps off. The king excuses himself to go calm his friend, and the queen and her retinue exit. In the garden, the king sees the girl from his dream playing in the quadrangle ahead. As they approach she again runs off, leaving some fallen jewellery, including a leaf-earring upon which is inscribed a second quarter-verse. As they sit to ponder this, the fool is surprised to overhear a voice offstage, thinking it something inhuman, while the king thinks it must be some enamoured girl discovered by her friend. The voice is speaking to a girl called Mṛgāṅkāvalī, a name which upon hearing the king instantly remarks must be the girl he has been pursuing. The voice confirms that Mṛgāṅkāvalī is enamoured with the king, and that the speaker is acting as her messenger. The
fool maintains that the voice must be due to demons haunting the quadrangle as night falls, and so he and the king go to the queen’s apartment to perform the evening sacrifice.

Act 3 begins with two maidservants meeting onstage, apparently friends who have not seen each other in a long time. One of these maidservants, Vicakṣaṇā, is the hidden voice from the quadrangle in the previous act. She reveals to the other that she has been doing the bidding of the minister Bhāgurāyaṇa and his pupil Haradāsa. Mrgāṅkavaran is actually Mrgāṅkāvalī, who the minister is determined to marry to the king. To make the king fall in love with her, she has been made to appear to the king in his bedchamber through the hollow pillar and give him the necklace, to appear on the swing, and to paint her likeness in the paintings of the pavilion. This has had the desired effect, and she is also now enamoured with him. The other servant, Sulakṣaṇā, reveals that she has secretly been enlisted to help Cārāyaṇa play a joke on Mekhalā, the queen’s foster-sister, in revenge for the mock marriage. She climbed a bakula tree and impersonated a voice prophesying Mekhalā’s impending death, terrifying her. To avoid her fate, she was told she must find a Brahman expert in music and crawl between his legs. The queen has arranged such a ceremony this night. Both leave to fulfill their duties.

The king and fool enter, waiting by the hedge near the women’s quarters. The king is characteristically anxious about Mrgāṅkāvalī, while the fool prepares for the ceremony to save Mekhalā. When the queen and Mekhalā arrive to perform the ceremony, voices from offstage claim to be the voices of death. Cārāyaṇa dramatically exhorts them to leave, and when Mekhalā crawls between his legs he laughs and declares his revenge for the mock-wedding. The queen is incensed and leaves with Mekhalā. The king and the fool venture into the garden in the moonlight and converse. They hear voices and hide among the plantains to eavesdrop, upon which Vicakṣaṇā and Mrgāṅkāvalī enter, conversing themselves. When the
fool laughs loudly, the women go to investigate the noise, and the men re-emerge. They find a palm-leaf envelope upon which is written a third quarter-verse. The fool sees footprints leading to the jasmine grove and they follow. The king and Mṛgāṅkāvalī meet for the first time, but are abruptly interrupted by the announcement to clear the gardens for the evening. All exit to their chambers.

Act 4 begins in the morning, with the fool and his wife entering, the wife still asleep. She is nonetheless talking, revealing that the queen has heard of the king’s love for Mṛgāṅkāvalī, sister of Mṛgāṅkavarman and has encouraged him to marry her, since the astrologers say she is destined to marry an emperor. The queen, thinking that Mṛgāṅkāvalī is actually the boy Mṛgāṅkavarman, plans this to be another mock-marriage to revenge the deceit against Mekhalā previously, while actually intending to make good on her original plan to marry Mṛgāṅkavarman and Kuvalayamālā.

The fool and king meet in the garden, where the king reveals that Vicakṣaṇā came to him and described Mṛgāṅkāvalī’s state to him, and delivered the last line of the verse. Upon reciting it, he realizes that the poem is of her revealing her love for him. As they go towards the picture gallery, they are intercepted by servants who take them to the golden quadrangle for the wedding. There the wedding between Vidyādharamalla and Mṛgāṅkāvalī is performed. A portress announces the arrival of Bhāgurāyaṇa and a messenger from Candravarman, who reveal that the king has just had a son, and so declare that Mṛgāṅkāvalī was in fact his daughter all along, not his son Mṛgāṅkavarman. Everyone is shocked, particularly the queen. The fool paraphrases Manu’s dharmaśāstra, pointing out that since Kuvalayamālā was betrothed to Mṛgāṅkavarman, she now belongs to king Vidyādharamalla. Finally, a messenger enters, bringing news of the military victory of the king and his allies over all of his foes, confirming the king’s paramount sovereignty in the region.
2 Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā – Performance Context

2.1 Body & Action

I will begin analysis of Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā with an examination of the text’s stage directions for several reasons. First, certain directions in the text provide a set of initial evidence supporting the argument that the play was written to be performed. Second, they perform the role of embedding the dialogue in the physical circumstances of theatrical performance. Also, the stage directions form a “language of production” that speaks to actors and producers differently or more directly than they would to a reader. Finally, stage directions underpin the practical conventions concerning the internal definition and use of the theatrical space.

Due in large part to the characteristics of the stage action described in the text by the author, Rājaśekhara, it quickly becomes apparent that Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā fails to work as either a text to be purely read or recited. Although the playwright describes much of the scene—and indeed, even action—as part of dialogue, he does not consistently describe action either in sufficient detail or a style that conveys necessary information to the reader. Without engaging a process of interpreting these suggestive actions into embodied behaviour, the action as described remains cryptic and incomplete.

Once the performativity of the text is established, it then becomes possible to look at the stage directions in a different light. Instead of merely being a set of line-delivery notes, scenic description, and conventional use of dramatic language, the stage directions become a “language of production,” speaking to the performers and producers directly about how to execute the dialogue and activity of the play in harmony with the playwright’s instructions. This communication is definitionally inconsistent, as Rājaśekhara employs different strategies
of description throughout *Viddhaśālabhaṃjikā*, each with their own implications, but it need not be absolutely precise if it is to go through a process of translation from a text into a performance piece.

These interpretive processes exist within the realm of “practice.” Set somewhat apart from the script and the theory surrounding it, practice can be thought of as the manifestation of both through the instrument of performer/producer. Unlike text and theory, which we have in a material form to analyze, practice remains more ephemeral. The idea of a “language of production”—looking at stage direction/description and its contextual meaning—gives us a perspective from which to imagine this practice and its implications.

In this section, I will restrict my theoretical references to two texts: the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Rājaśekhara’s own *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*. This is not meant to imply that these texts are the most important or only texts on the topic, but rather to give a set of useful and relevant examples that might expose the depth of the theoretical challenge some of these directions can present.

### 2.1.1 Categorizing Stage Directions

Before discussing particular parts of the text, I will broadly attempt to categorize stage directions in *Viddhaśālabhaṃjikā*. The categories do not adhere directly to an existing theoretical framework, but rather group together stage directions based on their utility, conventionality, and how they engage the hypothetical reader, performer, or director. To this end, I have identified four categories of stage direction: Specific, Affective, Expressive, and Technical. Each of these categories fulfills a particular role in the description of action, ornamentation of delivery, or structural conventions of the dramatic style. Some of these categories are not initially helpful for gauging the performability of the text, but come to have
interesting implications in their own right once we have established performability by different means.

Throughout the text, some directions are referred to in terms of the performance or following of something spoken in dialogue (e.g. “Vidūṣaka: …let us go to the garden by the back way. [They do so.]”). These kind of “correlative” directions I have considered not to be a distinct category on the sole merit of their similar formatting, but instead as belonging to one of the previously mentioned four categories, based upon the details of the behaviour and how it is referred to.

I have tabulated the frequency of each type of stage direction as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Specific</th>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
<th>Technical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act 1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1: Tabulation of stage directions by category in Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā.

**Specific Directions**

The “specific” category of directions in Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā are, unsurprisingly, the most straightforward and the most numerous throughout the text. They describe actions in enough detail for those actions to be clearly understood by reader or performer. Though most directions of this kind are brief and simple (e.g. “he laughs”, “he looks at the ground”), they are also often employed in the text in longer form where a series of actions needs to occur.

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5. “vidūṣaka – ... pakṣadvāreṇa pramadodyānaṃ praviśya gacchāvaḥ | (iti tathā kurutāḥ)” (VSB 1.23) (Shukla 1976, 23).
(e.g. “all having approached, they bring gifts/jewels, garments, the bracelet/ribbon, etc. [these being the wedding implements]. The King puts them on with a gesture.”).  

While these directions illustrate a particular behaviour, they can additionally suggest some aesthetic, emotional, or mental states. The Vidūṣaka for example is described as “touching his sacred cord”—an action represented according to the Nāṭyaśāstra by use of the sandamṣa hand gesture (“the forefinger and the thumb of the Arāla hand crossed and the palm a little hollowed” [Ghosh 1950, 180]), and that “[two] such hands should be combined” (Ghosh 1950, 180). After doing this, he says to the King “May your dream true by the word of me, a mighty Brahman whose necklace is a cord of dry grass!” The Vidūṣaka’s action of indicating the Brahmanical cord coloured by the line that follows it connotes a certain sense of haughty confidence which neither the action nor dialogue in isolation communicates as well.

By their nature being closest to the standard concept of description in literary texts, this category does not itself provide evidence for a necessary performance dimension of the play. Certainly, if the play was performed, these would seem the most immediately comprehensible of actions. However, theory is not silent on the performance potential of specific actions. The Nāṭyaśāstra describes in detail gestures used to represent theatrically many kinds of action that are otherwise specifically described in the text.

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9. “vidūṣakaḥ – (yajñopavītaḥ prāṃṣya) śuṣkakusārajjukarkaśadārasya mahābrāhmaṇasya vacanena satyasvapnatvaṃ te bhavatu ā” (VSB 1.18) (Shukla 1976, 19).
Affective Directions

The “affective” directions provide the most compelling argument for a the existence of a necessary performance dimension of Rājaśekhara’s play. Rather than describing action in specific terms, Affective actions are described instead as gestures or performances of aesthetic, emotional, or environmental states. To determine precisely what these actions might be when embodied requires an interpretive process involving understanding of dramatic theory as well as experience with local or current convention. The theoretical approach yields many different possibilities for appropriate actions. The Nāṭyaśāstra contains no fewer than five chapters which go into detail suggesting different appropriate actions for such states, in general terms as well as specific movements of hands, body, and feet. As such, the nucleus of these actions resides idealistically in a series of specific movements of the body interpreted and executed by a trained actor. Without such a performer, the audience would need to imagine one, and interpret themselves which actions were to be performed, with what precision, and from that understand the aesthetic conveyance of the author.

The primary kind of “affective” direction describes the performance of an emotional or aesthetic state. In Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā the protagonist King Vidyādharamalla is described described variously as “acting being overcome by love,”10 “acting remembrance,”11 “gesticulating frustration/anguish,”12 and “acting torment from love and sorrow,”13 among other such actions. From all of these states, a performer equipped with theoretical knowledge

can determine what behaviour might appropriate from a fertile stock of specific actions associated with the state.

To examine one such example in more detail, we shall take the affective direction of the King “acting being overcome by love” and see what the Nāṭyaśāstra suggests in terms of its performance. Chapter 8 (“Gestures of Minor Limbs”) indicates that both parivāhita (“the head is alternately turned to the two sides” [Ghosh 1950, 151]) and nihañcita (“two shoulders raised up with the neck bent on one side” [Ghosh 1950, 151-152]) may be appropriate movements of the head to convey such an action. Additionally regarding the eyes, kāntā (“when with a feeling of love a person contracts his eyebrows and casts a sidelong look” [Ghosh 1950, 153]), snigdhā (“which is not much widened, is sweet, and in which eyeballs are still, and there are tears of joy” [Ghosh 1950, 154]), and lalitā (“which sweet, and contracted at the end [of the eye] and which is smiling and has movement of the eyebrows” [Ghosh 1950, 156]) are all potentially appropriate glances, depending on the producer and performer’s intention of conveying rasa (an aesthetic sentiment), sthāyībhāva (an emotional state which directly corresponds to a rasa), or vyābicārabhāva (a transitory emotional state). The same chapters continue on with appropriate movements of the eyeballs (vivartana – “turning sideways of the eyeball” [Ghosh 1950, 160]), eyebrows (catura – “slightly moving and extending” [Ghosh 1950, 162]), and face (prasanna – “bright” [Ghosh 1950, 167]). The eyelids, nose, cheeks, lower lips, mouth, and neck are all either give no direction for amorousness or love, or else direct the limb to be in its natural state or to simply follow the movements of proximal limbs (such as the neck movements following head movements). The next chapter, “Gestures of the Hands,” likewise indicates at least three potential gestures: catura (“the four fingers stretched and the thumb bent near the middle finger” [Ghosh 1950, 179]), niṣadha (“the left hand holding the [right] arm above the elbow
and the right hand similarly touching the left arm with a clenched fist” [Ghosh 1950, 183]), and \textit{dola} (“when the two shoulders are at ease in a \textit{Karaṇa} and the two \textit{Patāka} hands are hanging down” [Ghosh 1950, 183], where \textit{karaṇa} refers to any of four classes of hand movements [Ghosh 1950, 189-190], and \textit{patāka} refers to a particular hand gesture described as “fingers extended and close against one another, and the thumb curved” [Ghosh 1950, 171]). Finally, Chapter 10 (“Gestures of Other Limbs”) indicates that the sides may be \textit{prasārita} (“stretched” [Ghosh 1950, 192]), but that the belly, waist, thighs, and feet are not mandated a particular way.

Looking at the above examples from the \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra}, which themselves are inexhaustive, we have assembled a list of particular movements, some of which are minute and some of which are mutually exclusive to each other. Further to this list we may even include, as the \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra} periodically states, local gestural traditions and conventions. The interpretation and execution of such a set of actions to convey the text’s direction calls for an expert not only in the theoretical aspect of drama—to determine, as has been attempted above, what would be appropriate—but an expert in the practical embodiment of those disparate movements into some recognizable and communicable whole.

A second type of affective directions describe action in terms of environmental states. The text describes “acting the touch of the wind”\textsuperscript{14} and “acting the touch of moonlight on the creepers.”\textsuperscript{15} These may seem somewhat more straightforward than their emotional associates discussed previously, however they are peculiar in their own way, ornamenting scenic and environmental description with bodily gesture. As such, they call for a theoretical review. The \textit{Nāṭyaśāstra} devotes a chapter to \textit{citrābhīnaya}—the theatrical representation of a miscellany

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{“pavanaspārśamabhiniya”} (VSB 1.27) (Shukla 1976, 26).

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{“latāntare candrikāspārśamabhiniya”} (VSB 3.23) (Shukla 1976, 118).
of things, including environment, time, season, and the properties of objects. With respect to the two examples above, there is a specific suggestions of gesture for the second: “to indicate moonlight… one is to use gestures for representing touch and horripilation” (Ghosh 1950, 492). As for the “touch of the wind,” some process of interpolating from the various defined gestures, especially in the hands of a trained actor, would undoubtedly yield some appropriate result.

Although this affective category comprises the smallest number of stage directions in Viddhaśālabhañjikā, it challenges any conceptions that may exist claiming that the play was meant to be recited or read, rather than performed. After all, if performance were not the author’s intention, then why would Rājaśekhara employ a descriptive style so entangled in performance concerns when clearly others suffice to describe most circumstances throughout the same text? To a performer, the affective directions are not peculiar, only somewhat more effortful to execute, since they require a degree more dramatic expertise on the part of the theatre practitioners than specific and (in most cases) expressive directions. As such, it seems that performance is the only answer to the problem of how to successfully convey this type of stage direction.

**Expressive Directions**

The “expressive” directions are a category that largely serves to ornament the delivery of speech, both in terms of emotional expression and pacing. They are somewhat more specific than the affective directions, by virtue of this common attachment to speech, but are also largely aesthetic in language. This category also encompasses some conventional directions clarifying to whom speech is directed. Directions in this category are notable for their prevalence, and find some presentational attachment in texts like the Nātyaśāstra, but are not particularly extraordinary in their significance. Their usage by Rājaśekhara, however,
may call to mind some of his own contributions to poetic theory with regards to kāku (intonation) (see Parashar 2000, 95-100).

The majority of expressive directions come in the form of adjectives and adverbs describing speech and pacing (e.g. “having reflected,””16 “anxiously”)17 and are rarely, if ever, more than two words long. These actions often reflect emotions and aspects that are rich with theoretical expressions, though they present mostly as markers of intonation, rather than obliging the described character with a gesture.

The other variety of expressive directions are those that clarify certain conventional or practical matters of delivery. This includes directions indicating asides, replies, and the like. The chapter of the Nāṭyaśāstra discussing miscellaneous action refers to various specific gestures indicating different types of asides and concealed speaking. These venture into certain types of dramatic convention, discriminating between, for example, asides that represent a character thinking out loud, or a character speaking confidentially to another, or when one nearby character is indicated as explicitly not hearing something said to others (Ghosh 1950, 504-505).

Technical Directions

The category of “technical” directions encompasses all of the conventional and structural language of drama. They are a common, but particularly finite set of directions denoting things such as entrances, exits, voices from offstage, and the ends of act prologues. The one particularly interesting technical direction, among the most common of its type in Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā, is the conventional parikrāmya (walking around), which is generally used to indicate scenic transition onstage. Because they are so closely linked to the staging of

17. “sotkaṇṭham” (VSB 1.37, 1.38) (Shukla 1976, 37, 38).
the play, the theoretical and practical substance of these directions will be discussed in
greater detail as I move on to discussions of the stage and the use of the performance space.

2.1.2 Action and Space

It is only once we have established some likely performance dimension for the play,
and have examined in some detail how the descriptive language may be embodied that we
might be able to properly conceptualize the theatrical space. It should be apparent by now
that practically all interactions with the space and objects inside it are mediated by stage
directions, whether those that clearly describe some interaction with the space or those given
by convention.

2.2 The Theatrical Space

To the extent that I have argued that Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā requires a performance
space to be properly conceived, an examination of that space is clearly necessary. Although a
set of basic questions must be answered as to the probable size, shape, and configuration of
the theatrical space, more interesting is the question of how Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā was
intended to interface with the space in which it was performed, and what evidence can be
gathered from the text and its context. The text itself illustrates a set of locations that are
limited enough in number to exist independently on even a small stage and unified by the
liminal spaces between those locations, which serve as secondary settings for the play’s
action. However, since movement through these settings is described in terms of a
conventional dramatic vocabulary, which itself is entangled in a theoretical framework that
admits multiple interpretations, the substance and persistence of scenic location cannot be
immediately derived from the description alone. Instead, theoretical examination, the
technical language of the play, and the characters' interactions with scenes as inferred or described in the text all inform a hypothetical stage geography.

### 2.2.1 Theory and Space

Any examination of theatrical space in the Sanskrit drama inevitably involves speculation, which is not without its share of challenges. In the case of the Sanskrit drama, the first challenge is determining the reality of the playhouse. Farley Richmond approaches this issue in his article "Suggestions to Directors of Sanskrit Plays" (Richmond 1981). In addition to outlining the theoretical disagreements and uncertainties of the Nāṭyaśāstra’s description of the ideal theatrical space as well as the historical-archaeological record of performance spaces in Sanskrit drama (no ancient playhouses survive to this day), Richmond poses several questions that are critical to establishing an understanding of the basic configuration and facility of the theatre which are necessary to answer prior to examining the specifics of staging a particular text: "What was the juxtaposition of the audience and the actors? What was the size of the playing area and where were the entrances and exits? How was the playing space designed to be used?" (Richmond 1981, 76). While some of these questions have straightforward, probable answers, others are less clear. The three theatre configurations as laid out in the Nāṭyaśāstra are universally oriented in an "end stage" configuration, with the stage separate from the audience space, facing it on one side and sharing side walls with it (Bhatt 1975, XLIII, LII). The stage in the oblong (vikṛṣṭa) playhouse configuration—which the Nāṭyaśāstra describes in detail as a standard model—measures 32 hastas (approximately 48 feet) wide and deep; the backstage area (nepathya) takes up the rear half, and is divided by a wall with two doorways or arches from the forestage area (raṅgaśīrṣa and raṅgapīṭha) (Bhatt 1975, XXXVII-XLI). There is some disagreement as to the difference between raṅgaśīrṣa and raṅgapīṭha, with M. M. Ghosh and
Subba Rao contending that the terms are synonyms for the entire forestage (Ghosh 1933; Rao 1956) while D. R. Mankad and Raghavan maintain that they are separate areas (Mankad 1932; Raghavan 1933), the rear presumably reserved at least partially for musicians (at least some of whom the Nāṭyaśāstra places at the centre of the raṅgāśīrṣa between the two doors [Ghosh 1950, 288]) and the front-most for actors (Bhatt 1975, XXIX). Two side-stage areas (mattavāraṇī) eight hastas (hands) in length (approximately 12 feet) are described as either adjoining the forestage, or incorporated into the already-defined stage area (Bhatt 1975, XLII-XLIII); the purpose of these areas is not specifically explained, though they are described as each being bounded by four pillars. The entire stage surface (backstage and forestage) is raised 1½ hastas (approximately 27 inches) from the ground, with the raṅgāśīrṣa slightly higher than the other divisions. This gives the acting space in the playhouse of the Nāṭyaśāstra an area of between 60' x 24' (the full forestage including adjoining mattavāraṇī) and 24' x 12' (the front-most raṅgapīṭha only with the mattavāraṇī incorporated into this stage and excluded as non-acting space). Two smaller playhouse configurations are also described, a square (caturastra) and triangular (trayasa), with similar proportional divisions but approximately half the total space, and a uniformly-raised stage, rather than one with different levels (Bhatt 1975, LI).

Below, I have provided two figures (2.1 and 2.2) illustrating the hypothetical Sanskrit stage by the most generally-accepted dimensions described previously, in order to give a visual idea of the size and shape of the performance space.
Figure 2.1: 2D floor-plan view of the theoretical Sanskrit stage

Figure 2.2: 3D rendering of the theoretical Sanskrit stage (person to scale)
The description of the ideal theatrical space is very detailed, but also open to a number of interpretations. Since no historical Sanskrit playhouses are known in the archaeological record, it is not clear whether the ideal playhouse was ever a perfectly-realized entity, much less whether Rājaśekhara’s patrons constructed or maintained one. Nonetheless, the playhouse of the Nātyaśāstra must be considered in examining the staging of Viddhaśālabhañjikā, especially where the text can be seen to incorporate a vision of this theoretical stage (to at least the extent which it is embedded in the conventions of Sanskrit dramas in general) and is structured in such a way as to be compatible with it. It should be apparent from the figures above that the basic size and layout are not overly onerous or complicated, meaning that further-simplified or different-sized stages would not necessarily render difficult the “ideal” practice of theatre.

The performers’ movement through and interactions with the space described in the Viddhaśālabhañjikā are also mediated by theory. The text describes such action predominantly by use of a minimalistic, conventional theatrical vocabulary, which I earlier categorized as “technical” stage directions. While the meaning and usage of some of the vocabulary is clearly part of a general language of theatre—such as the directions praviśati (“he/she enters”) and niśkrāntaḥ (exit, lit. “departed”)—some of the terms used refer back to more specific or arcane theoretical topics, and may not be as naturally comprehensible. The term nepathye, for instance, indicates that the words that follow are coming from some off-stage or backstage voice (literally “in the backstage”), making direct use of the Nātyaśāstra's own term for the backstage area. The most theoretical unravelling concerns the direction parikramya (walking about) and its variations. This direction appears to originate in the Nātyaśāstra’s fourteenth chapter, which starts by describing kaksyāvibhāga (the division of the stage into “zones”) where the text says “The Zonal division is to be indicated by going
about on the stage. [When one is in a particular] Zone [of the stage, it] will change [lit. be
another] with his walking out of it” (Ghosh 1950, 238). The subsequent verses in the
Nāṭyaśāstra elaborate on this convention, explaining that this process of delineating zones on
the stage establishes for the audience the different settings (such as house, garden, etc.,
presumably in the manner that scenery changes would in the modern theatre), and also
describe several additional rules, among them: performers entering a stage are assumed to be
outside of the scene until they explicitly enter it; performers entering the stage intending to
see characters already onstage indicate so by turning to the right; leaving a “zone” should be
done by the same door from which it is entered, and if that place is re-entered later it should
be done so by the same door (by “door” it is probably meant the place within the zone that
the door has been established to be, i.e. where the parikramya movement concluded with the
performer stepping into the zone) (Ghosh 1950, 239).

The way that this conventional establishment (and disestablishment) of setting in the
theatrical space is described concedes that settings were not indicated primarily (or even
necessarily at all) by set pieces, but rather by actors. The Nāṭyaśāstra does, however, imply
that pieces of what would seem to be scenery may have been used, and offers suggestions on
how they are to be constructed. At the end of Chapter 23 (on costumes and makeup) these
objects are categorized as upakaraṇa (accessories). Mentioned explicitly are armour, shields,
banners, hills, palaces, gods, caves, horses, elephants, carts, weapons, and (presumably
severed) limbs or heads, fruits, and flowers; the Nāṭyaśāstra advises that these are to be
nāṭyadharmī (conventional), as opposed to lokadharmī (realistic). Larger objects are to be
built with a bamboo frame, covered in painted cloth or grass, while smaller objects are to be
made from bamboo, cloth, and lac (Ghosh 1950, 437-438).

18. “kakṣyāvibhāgo nirdeśyo raṅgapīṭhoparikramat \ parikrameṇa raṅgasya kakṣyā hy anyā
vidhiyate” (NŚ 14.3).
2.2.2 The Space Defined

The way the theories of conventional space, movement, and scenic accessories interact, and the degree to which each is followed, suggests a diverse set of performance scenarios. In order to determine which of these are more likely than others, and propose a geography of the stage, the specific needs and usages of the text must be examined. The entire action of Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā—with the exception of the praveśaka that prologues each act—takes place within the boundaries of the royal gardens and its adjoining courtyards and colonnades. At the edge of this boundary are two places that serve as the play’s entrances and exits: the royal palace and the women’s apartments. This trope of setting the action of the play within the garden is a common one among Sanskrit dramas and is a feature of all surviving plays in the nāṭikā genre, shared by such plays as Mālavikāgnimitra, Svapnavāsavadatta, Ratnāvalī, and Priyadarśika (Ali 2004, 230). In terms of actual places depicted in Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā, the action takes place in a relatively small number of primary locations, and a somewhat larger number of secondary liminal spaces in between them. Each act has no more than three such primary locations, limiting the number of distinct places the audience has to conceive, and similarly the number of locations onstage which may contain props or scenic accessories.

The praveśakas (prologues or connecting scenes which occur at the beginning of each act) in Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā all take exception to the otherwise consistent unity of setting within the acts themselves. Each takes place in a location that is never described, though it may sometimes be inferred. However, these locations are not a part of the continuum of setting or within boundaries of the rest of the play’s setting. In any case, even when it is possible to infer the location, that information is itself unimportant. Once the purpose of the praveśaka is fulfilled—the progress of the intrigue of the play is recapped, and potentially a
few new pieces of information that were not supplied in the previous act are now introduced—then the act in earnest begins and the scene is established as an actual place. In the case where a character in the praveśaka is also in the first scene, they literally step out of their weakly-defined space and into the bounded setting of the act (this will become clearer with the examples below). The setting at this “first scene” point may continue to be somewhat unclear for a few exchanges (until the characters onstage either say where they are, or move to an adjoining scene), but the setting is nonetheless part of the coherent set of connected spaces the characters in the act move through from that moment until the end of the act.

The first act takes place in the morning, with the plot introduced in the praveśaka by the minister Haradāsa from somewhere inside or adjoining the king’s bedchambers. This may be the same location as the first scene, but it is both unclear and unimportant, since Haradāsa is the only character in the scene, and exits at its conclusion. The act begins in earnest with the emergence of the king from his chambers in the palace to a colonnade adjoining the garden, where the fool joins him. From there, they move into the garden, where the characters pause to talk on their way to the crystal pavilion on the keli-kailāsa (play-mountain). After a long scene inside the pavilion, the king and fool head down the path towards the women’s quarters, following the sight of the girl Mṛgāṅkavalī. At the close of the act, they exit into the women’s quarters to find the queen. The first act is therefore defined by three primary spaces: the colonnade, the pavilion, and the courtyard of the women’s quarters. Secondary are the liminal spaces connecting them: the path through the garden up the keli-kailāsa and the path down towards the women’s quarters.

The second act takes place in the afternoon, with the praveśaka consisting of a conversation between two female servants. Again, the location is unmentioned. The act
commences with the exit of the servants and the entrance of the king and fool, who encounter each other in the garden and move towards a bower of kadali plants called Tuṣārapuṇḍja. The queen enters with her retinue and performs a mock-marriage on the fool, after which he angrily leaves—not exiting the stage, but moving to another location, described to be down a path in the garden—and the king shortly follows him, at which time the queen exits (and the setting she is in is not returned to). However, for a short period of time, there are two active but separate “zones” onstage. After this, the pair “walk about, acting descending steps”\(^\text{19}\) while travelling to the next location, although there is some disagreement as to which location this is. Gray describes the setting as returning back towards the women’s quarters (Gray 1906, 35n3, 38n3), while Warder suggests that the king and fool are, in fact, moving towards the golden quadrangle (suvarṇacatuṣkikā) following Mṛgāṅkavalī, where they arrive in time to find her dropped ornaments and sit (Warder 1988, 505-506). This latter opinion would make more sense, since not only does the fool suggest (and the king resist his urging) that they return to the queen’s chambers, but later in the act, the fool says after hearing strange voices “I know that here some Brahman-demons are talking in the golden quadrangle, having entered to deceive us.”\(^\text{20}\) The two then descend\(^\text{21}\) again towards the queen’s chamber, where they exit to perform the evening sacrifices. Overall, the second act then contains only two primary locations—the kadalī-bower, and the golden quadrangle—with the secondary spaces being the path joining those two places, and returning to the women’s quarters. As Warder also notes, some particular hints to the geography of the garden are provided by Rājaśekhara when he describes the king and fool as descending steps as they enter the

\[\text{19. } “(parikramya sopānāvataraṇāṃ nātayataḥ)” (VSB 2.12) (Shukla 1976, 66).\]

\[\text{20. } “ahaṃ punar jāne ’nupraviśyāsmūn chalitum \| aho iha suvarṇacatuṣkikā saṅkrāntā ko’pi brahmaraṅkasāḥ jalpanti ṭ” (VSB 2.22) (Shukla 1976, 75).\]

\[\text{21. } “(iti ubhāv avataraṇāṃ nātayataḥ)” (VSB 2.22) (Shukla 1976, 75).\]
quadrangle, and also as they leave to head towards the women’s quarters ("[Tuṣārapuṇja] is evidently on high ground in the palace gardens, the quadrangle or colonnade lower down and the Queen’s palace… at the bottom of the slope" [Warder 1988, 509]).

The third act takes place in the evening, and like the second is introduced by two maid-servants who both exit after conversing. The king and fool enter the stage, evidently near the entrance to the women’s quarters. After the queen emerges with her retinue, the fool takes his revenge on the servant that tricked him earlier and the queen exits. The fool and the king travel into the garden. There, they hear the voice of Mṛgāṅkavalī and hide among the plantains to eavesdrop on them. Mṛgāṅkavalī enters with her servant Vicakṣaṇā, and both pairs converse onstage, the women not noticing the men until the fool laughs loudly. As the women follow the noise, the king and fool emerge to find the women gone, but a palm-leaf message on the ground. They follow a series of footprints on the ground towards a creeper grove, where the two pairs meet at last. When an offstage voice announces the closing of the garden for the evening, the king and fool retire to the palace and the women to the women’s quarters. Though the act really has only three locations—the entrance to the women’s quarters, the kadali-thicket, and the creeper-grove—much of the act is scenically complicated because from the moment Mṛgāṅkavalī and Vicakṣaṇā enter, there are two groups of performers active onstage who do not directly interact until the final scene. Instead, the script relies upon the conventional zonal-division of kaksyāvibhāga to keep the characters separate as they move through the space.

The final act takes place the next day, with the praveśaka occurring in the fool’s apartment with his wife. Although the fool is in both the praveśaka and the first scene of the act, he exits and re-enters with the king. The two are waiting outside the courtyard of the women’s apartments. When they see the servants coming, they leave to go towards the picture
hall (a place not previously mentioned, though it might refer to the pavilion in the first act). The female servants enter, see the king and fool leaving, and intercept them, bringing them to the golden quadrangle. It is here the rest of the act resolves. Thus, the final act only contains two primary locations—the courtyard of the women’s apartments and the golden quadrangle—with a single secondary location of the path heading towards the picture gallery.

### 2.2.3 Unity of Space & Stage Geography

The unity of space within the play’s acts must inform how the stage is used. Though not a novel feature of *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā* in particular, there are no “scene changes” as such in the play except at the act-breaks and the end of the *praveśakas*. All action on the stage moves between one adjacent location and the next. When two active zones are defined by a character walking off (but not exiting), the play always resolves the multiple zones back into one before continuing on to another place. This might suggest that locations in the play are all entirely conventional areas defined and undefined by the actors, with no physical requirements, yet every act has one or more locations where physical objects are interacted with, seats are sat upon, and likewise.

The geography of the stage in *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā* seems, to me, fairly clear. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s ideal theatre has two exits, and the *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā* text likewise has only two places from which characters enter or exit. The spectrum of locations lies between these two places, and the text hints at which locations are near to or far from one or the other. The script makes heavy use of voices, songs, and announcements from backstage, so there must have been such a place from where sound could be clearly be heard. Since the play is a *nāṭikā* and thus “it should be based on an incident relating to music or the harem… and it contains an abundance of female characters… many dances, songs, and recitations, and love’s enjoyment are its central features” (Ghosh 1950, 365), there is clearly intended to be music
and dancing. The text describes no fewer than fifteen maidservants (Gray 1906, 8), and the wedding scene at the conclusion of the play explicitly commands it, 22 so the Nātyaśāstra’s notion of musicians occupying the raṅgasīrṣa between the two doors may be accepted as likely. This leaves the full front half (raṅgapītha) of the forestage (likely between 32 and 48 feet long, and 12 feet deep), as well as the areas in front of the left and right doors (likely to approximate 16 feet wide by 12 feet deep). While there are quite a limited number of places in each act, there are too many to each occupy a permanent place on the stage for the duration of the entire performance, and naturally scenes with more actors or action in them will have to be large enough to contain them. Therefore, each individual act must have its own set of zones within the universal bounds of the two exits. The location of such zones on the stage was probably pre-determined, insofar as there may be objects or suggestions of scenery that would need to be there at the commencement of the act. However the boundaries of those locations would need to be somewhat elastic, and in the mind of the audience it is not until the area is indicated conventionally by the actor as being established that it is really considered there. The physical trajectory of each act’s primary locations, and the establishment of the two exits as the bounds of the palace and the women’s quarters, give us frames of reference to anchor the spots onstage, and convention allows for the establishment of the secondary liminal spaces in between. Between each act, where there is very likely to be music, dancing, or an interval of some sort, whatever arrangements of objects may be made for the next act. Between this and the explicit subversion of the standard unity of space in the praveśaka, the expectations of specific settings in the previous act can be wiped clean and re-established anew.

22. “(vidūṣakeṇa saha sarvāḥ nṛtyantī gayantī ca)” (VSB 4.15) (Shukla 1976, 148); “vidūṣakaḥ – (ceṭh prāti) bhavatyo nṛtyataḥ āhamapi nṛtīśvāmi gāśyāmi ca, yato vivāhe sāmprataṃ samvṛtte ī (sarve tathā kurvanti)” (VSB 4.21) (Shukla 1976, 157).
On the following pages I have provided a series of prospective stage diagrams (figures 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6). These illustrate the various “zones” and the movements through them that occur during each act of *Viddhaśālabhañjikā*, and propose one (but by no means the only) coherent configuration of the scenes of the play. The movements are numbered sequentially, and the different arrows indicate different actors or groups of actors onstage. The solid arrow represents the King and whichever characters accompany him. The double-slashed arrow represents the Queen and her retinue. The thin arrow represents secondary characters moving independently of the King or Queen (Mekhalā, Cārāyaṇa and Vicakṣaṇā in Act 2; Vicakṣaṇā and Mṛgāṅkāvalī in Act 3; the group of maid-servants in Act 4). Finally, the double-ended arrow in the figure for Act 4 represents the various ministers and messengers who enter and exit in the final scenes.
Figure 2.3: Prospective stage diagram for Act 1.
Figure 2.4: Prospective stage diagram for Act 2.
Figure 2.5: Prospective stage diagram for Act 3.
Figure 2.6: Prospective stage diagram for Act 4.
2.3 Object

Objects in the Sanskrit drama—outside of costuming and personal properties—are almost as enigmatic as the space. The Nāṭyaśāstra devotes only a small section to upakaraṇa, the category of items encompassing all non-costume objects (weapons, mountains, furniture, flowers, etc.). Scenery is characteristically sparse; the script infers the existence of the statue in the first act and a sitting-place in the second, but no other such objects are interacted with or made use of except by the sight of the performers. It is therefore understandable that of “objects” in Viddhaśālabhañjikā, costuming and personal properties make up the largest part of the objects onstage, and are used to unique effect on at least one occasion. Additionally, a series of peculiar objects (including the aforementioned statue) are made critical use of throughout the play.

2.3.1 Costuming & Personal Properties

There are few references to costuming in the text of Viddhaśālabhañjikā, confined to one major costume-related event, and several other moments where ornaments (necklaces, bangles, earrings) are put on, taken off, or dropped. Likewise, there are only a handful of moments where personal properties are mentioned. This leaves the majority of decisions regarding the performers’ dress and accessories up to theatrical convention and the producer’s preferences. The Nāṭyaśāstra prescribes in detail how the characters should dress and make-up themselves, according to rank, gender, region of origin, race/species, and circumstance. Particular ornaments, colours of clothing, hairstyles, and masks further differentiate among the types, clearly indicating to the audience at the first sight of a performer a detailed set of information about the role that performer is playing. This according to the text, is to assist the performers: “Indicated first by their Costumes and Make-up they accomplish the representation without much effort by means of gestures and the
like” (Ghosh 1950, 410). The moments where the text chooses to deliberately impose alternative direction with regard to these parts of presentation are therefore all the more significant for their contrast to the audience’s pre-set expectations and understanding.

The most significant moment in Viddhaśālabhaṅjakā pertaining to costume is in the second act, when the queen plays a practical joke on the fool by arranging a mock marriage for him. The text states “then enters the Queen, a male servant dressed like a maiden, and her retinue according to rank.” As they start to perform the marriage ceremony, the servant “improperly” uses the masculine pronoun while reciting the wife’s vows. “She” is corrected by the fool, who is obviously the only one onstage who does not realize what is happening until the servant reveals himself, saying “not even in other lands is it heard to happen that a man marries a man or a woman marries a woman” and everyone laughs at him being fooled. For the audience—as for the characters onstage except the king and the fool—the sham of the wedding is clear from before the scene starts. Once the praveśaka explains the plot, the entire process of the mock marriage from the clearly-fictional names of the bride and her parents to “her” entrance, actions, and words leading up to the reveal are humorous precisely because for the entire time, the audience understands what is really happening. This necessitates the gender joke being evident immediately upon the character’s entrance; the only obvious way to do this given the text is visually. The alternative is that the audience is left in at least partial confusion until the reveal, rendering most of the preceding dialogue humorous only in

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23. “nānāvasthāḥ prakṛtayāḥ pūrvaneśvāsīcikāḥ | aṅgādibhirabhīvyaktimupagacchantyāyatnataḥ” (NŚ 23.4).

24. “(tataḥ praviśati devī kṛtaḥviśeṣaḥpūraḥ vibhavatasca parivāraḥ)” (VSB 2.4) (Shukla 1976, 55).

25. “cetāḥ – …na ca dvīp’āntare’pi eṣā vārtā śrāvate yat puruṣaḥ puruṣaṁ pariṇayati strī vā striyam” (VSB 2.4) (Shukla 1976, 57).
retrospect. If the “sight gag” is used, however, it maintains the theoretical notion that costume and makeup are meant to demonstrate to the audience at first sight who the performer is.

Despite the simplicity of Rājaśekhara’s description, there is no clear precedent for how to visually portray the mock bride. Gray notes in his translation that “disguises of this type are exceedingly rare on the Sanskrit stage” and while giving several possible comparisons, gives only one example from Nāgānanda, where the fool “clothes himself like a woman to escape the bees, and thus misleads the viṭa [lover], who mistakes him for his love…” (Gray 1906, 31n4). The Nāṭyaśāstra contains plenty of descriptions of how men or women dress—which could be executed by a man or woman—but does not indicate any preferred or canonical way of depicting a male character who is himself dressed as a female character, or a female character dressed as a male. Thus, the challenge to find a solution falls to the performers and producers of the play. It is not an impossible task to imagine, however, and could be compared to the device of the play-within-a-play which Rājaśekhara makes use of in his play Bālarāmāyaṇa; the secondary presentation that exists does so as an action within the primary execution of the play. In the case of a play-within-a-play, however, the nesting of very structured presentational forms may impose more rules on the action and more similarity between presentational modes than in the more simple case of a dramatic character being costumed to look like someone else. After all, the male servant (a dramatic character) is not himself being costumed for a play, as far as his context is concerned, at least not in the formal sense. Nonetheless, the audience still needs to understand what they are seeing. I would suggest that the performer is likely dressed and made-up as they would normally be expected to in order to portray their true character—in this case, a male servant—and over that, some additional costuming and ornamentation is added that suggests the disguise (a veil, female jewellery, etc). It would be helpful to the audience for these
additional accessories to follow conventional theatrical costuming of a female maiden, though the degree to which this is possible is necessarily limited by pieces that cannot be combined or overlaid with the base costume.

2.3.2 The Three Verse-Objects

Central to the plot of Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā is a kind of literary mystery laid out in pieces by the playwright. At some point in each of the first three acts, the king and the fool discover an object on which is written a quarter of a verse in the śikariṇī meter. It is not clear initially whether there is a whole verse to be found, and if so what the meaning of the whole verse is. Finally in the fourth act, as the last quarter is revealed, the reciprocation of love by Mṛgāṅkāvalī towards the king is understood, and the play can conclude (this recalls Kalidāsa’s Abhijñānashākuntalam, where all of the king’s lost memories of his love return to him when he at last sees her ring, allowing for the happy resolution of the plot).

In the first act, the king sees a statue of Mṛgāṅkāvalī in the crystal pavilion, under which is written “On which limb here does not youth make its mark?” In the second act, after following the sight of Mṛgāṅkāvalī to the golden quadrangle, the king and fool discover that she has dropped some of her ornaments on the ground, among them a leaf-necklace, upon which the fool sees inscribed “But even so, there is a quite clever maturity in this pair of eyes.” In the third act, as the king and fool emerge from their eavesdropping on Mṛgāṅkāvalī and Vicakṣaṇā in the garden, the fool sees a sealed palm-leaf letter, which reads “Since they [the pair of eyes] understand the whole blend of emotions from the one who is seen.” In the final act, however, there is no such physical object that brings the revelation. Rather, the last

27. “tathāpi prāgalbhyaṃ kimapi caturaṃ locanayuge āṃ” (VSB 2.14) (Shukla 1976, 68).
stanza is relayed to him by a messenger: “Even as [they] proclaim to the person who is seen the inner workings of the heart of the seer.”

The question here from a material point of view is: what is the purpose of using these three objects to deliver the first three quarter-verses, and why is the final verse revealed through a different means? Clearly, since the three objects (statue, earring, and leaf) are the only interactive objects in the text that are not directly given by one character to another, but rather discovered onstage, and since they are each instrumental in revealing parts of the narrative mystery, some conscious decision was made by Rājaśekhara to employ them as such. The answer, I propose, is related to the context of the verse, and the circumstances of the play to that point. As Warder points out about the whole verse:

[The verse is] completely impersonal in expression and says nothing overtly of love. The lines would convey nothing to any other person who might see them and their reference can be understood only in the actual situation of the heroine secretly revealing her feelings to the hero she loves. (Warder 1988, 518-519)

Until the third act, Mṛgāṅkavalī does not exist onstage. She is referred to, is gazed at (and gazes) from a distance, and is pursued, but the active “zones” of the stage are always focused on the king and fool, who are always at least a few steps too late to encounter her. As a result, the three objects are the only physical, onstage substance she has to both the king and the audience for most of the play. They are stand-ins for Mṛgāṅkavalī herself, existing to prove that the king is not simply imagining her. However, once the king and Mṛgāṅkavalī finally meet in Act 3, and he places his necklace upon her (recalling the moment in Act 1 where he placed the necklace on the statue of her, which itself recalls his “dream” where she placed it on him), she is now unquestionably real; there is no need anymore for simulacra or

29. “manovṛttim draṣṭuḥ prathayati ca drśyaṁ pratijanam ||” (VSB 4.12d, with previous 3 stanzas) (Shukla 1976, 140).
substitutions to convey her feelings to the king. Rājaśekhara plays with this somewhat by forcing them to quickly part company once they finally meet, preventing the final verse from being revealed directly from the mouth of Mṛgāṅkavali, though it is then done by the most personal means available—her maid Vicāśaṇā.
3 Viddhaśālabhañjikā – Courtly Context

The final aspect of Viddhaśālabhañjikā that must be examined is the courtly context surrounding the play and its performance. In order to understand who the play was meant for, and how that audience was likely to have received it, it is critical to develop some vision of the immediate world in which the author and audience existed with their own mainstream sensibilities and artistic agendas, and how they intellectually and socially interacted with the drama. Such an understanding does more than bring its own novel insights into Viddhaśālabhañjikā. It also challenges analyses of the play that rely predominantly on textual comparisons with the works of Rājaśekhara’s contemporaries (or those works of much older Sanskrit paragons like Kalidāsa) or those that rely on an insensitive application of dramatic theory. This perspective rethinks a number of historical or surface readings of the play, and reveals that elements of the drama which have been called flaws or (at best) idiosyncrasies may in fact be seen as decisions made by the author for conscious effect in performance and reception.

3.1 The Theoretical and the Real Audience

The Nāṭyaśāstra itself is concerned with the dramatic spectator. In Chapter 27 on “Success and the Drama,” the necessary qualifications, ideal qualities, and classes of spectator are discussed. Among the qualities of an ideal spectator are “good character, high birth, quiet behaviour and learning… alert, honest, unaffected by passions” as well as having an understanding of music, the constituent theoretical elements of drama (costumes, dialect, types of representation, etc.) and “various other Śāstras.” Other spectators, lacking in such sophistication, may nonetheless be suitable to appreciate sentiments befitting their natural state: “Young people are pleased to see love, the learned a reference to some [religious or philosophical] doctrine… women, children, and uncultured men are always delighted with the
Comic sentiment.” The minimum standards for an acceptable spectator, however, are not overly harsh, since “He who attains gladness on seeing a person glad, and sorrow on seeing him sorry and feels miserable on seeing him miserable is considered fit to be a spectator in a drama,” but as to the spectators’ overall quality “on such dispositions [the Success of] a drama rests” (Ghosh 1950, 519-520). Clearly, the Nāṭyaśāstra expects that for a drama to be successful, the spectators must be of a certain knowledge and refinement to understand and appreciate the drama in more than a few superficial ways.

This hypothetical ideal spectator of the drama becomes much more real when we consider that the world of the medieval Indian court was itself imbued with the aesthetic of Sanskrit dramatic theory. In his landmark 2004 book *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, Daud Ali dedicates a chapter to examining in detail how the Nāṭyaśāstra in particular informs the disposition of the court, specifically its emotional understanding and expression (Ali 2004, 183-206); it will suffice to extract only a few observations. Ali suggests that the forty-nine bhāvas (emotional states) listed in the Nāṭyaśāstra form a sort of taxonomy of emotions for the people in court (Ali 2004, 185-187). As well, he describes the Nāṭyaśāstra’s notion of the spectator (which I discussed above), and gives examples from several dramatic prologues which “address the sophistication and expertise of their courtly audiences,” remarking that “audiences are often implored by the same courtesies which formed the vehicles of mannered disposition at court” (Ali 2004, 190).

Finally, Ali puts forward that this organized structure of aesthetic emotional states and dispositions “function as a sort of ‘education of disposition’ at court” (Ali 2004, 191), and concludes that:

[The] constant thematisation of emotions in literary works and on the the stage created a sort of mannered emotionalism at court. The great concerns of the aesthetic literature—when and where particular emotions should be experienced, how they
should be indicated (physiologically, gesturally, verbally), for whom were they appropriate and with what other dispositions could they be inflected—shaped the affective habits of people at court. (Ali 2004, 192)

This association between theoretical and real aesthetic experience—and the textual communication between plays and audiences in explicitly courtly terms—suggest that the real-world members of the medieval court in many ways resembled the ideal spectators of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Accordingly, the level of sophistication with which they can be expected to receive and understand a dramatic performance would be quite high. For the audience of *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā*, this would also manifest an ability to grasp contemporary in-jokes and poetic allegories to specific knowledge embedded by the playwright which we now have only limited ability to decode ourselves. This may, for example, help us understand the title of the play, which Warder suggests is mysterious but may have been understandable in terms of courtly anecdote as well as by the oblique reference to a single part of the play’s action (see also Pollock 2001).

### 3.2 Authorial Agenda and Style

A brief consideration should be made of Rājaśekhara’s own literary agenda, perspective, and style. In his *Kāvyamāṃsa*, Rājaśekhara exhibits a diversity of concerns with respect to *kāvyā*: structure, recitation/intonation, description (different seasons, regions, and time), moral matters (plagiarism, conduct of poets and kings) (see Parashar 2000). Additionally, his fictive origin story of *kāvyā* represents an aesthetic imagining of the place of poetry in the universe. Kulkarni notes that he “emphatically declares that nothing is untrue in *kāvyā*” (Kulkarni 1993, 113). Warder says, regarding the characteristic “lightness” of Rājaśekhara that the poet “is confident that art must be an excursion for pleasure and that life should imitate this ideal,” and points out his clear “fondness for colloquial sayings” (Warder 1988, 417). All of this points towards an agenda that is not so much iconoclastic or
revolutionary as it is strongly-opinionated, keenly aware of convention, and wilfully playful. To this end, Rājaśekhara seems perhaps less concerned with conformity to tradition—although he does not disregard it—than he is to beauty and enjoyment.

3.3 The Play in Context

Having established some parameters for both the real audience and the author’s own agenda, certain aspects of Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā—particularly those parts attacked by previous scholars as theoretically improper or morally transgressive—deserve a closer examination. This will reveal that many of Rājaśekhara’s compositional choice seen to be unorthodox or subversive may, in fact, only suggest subversion and taboo while actually remaining firmly situated within the proper parameters of dramatic convention. This pre-supposes that the audience of Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā are of the requisite sophistication to see the ruse.

Lévi (and Keith, who more-or-less directly duplicates his opinion on this matter) both single out the “common sense” of Cārāyaṇa, the fool of Viddhaśālabhaṅjikā. Lévi claims (as discussed earlier) that he is not gluttonous, boastful, or cowardly, and loves proverbs. In this sense, the fool appears to represent a kind of self-insertion of Rājaśekhara, at least insofar as he is a vehicle for proverbs and merriment. This might explain why he is not always typically “foolish.” However, the degree to which Cārāyaṇa is a subversion of his conventional type is not nearly as great as Lévi claims. In direct contradiction of Lévi’s description, Cārāyaṇa at several points in the play is notably cowardly, and uses boastfulness to disguise his fear. For example: in the first act, he is frightened of the apparition of Mṛgāṅkāvalī through the wall of the crystal pavilion, and declares “(acting trembling with fear) Oh, get away, get away! Surely this is some ghost in here! So I will strike it with my staff which is bent like the curved brows
of rageful Devī! So behold my manliness!” In Act 2, he is alarmed by the voices of Vicakṣaṇā and Mrgāṅkāvalī offstage, exclaiming “(expressing surprise) Oh bind [up] my hair! I hear an inhuman sound,” and despite the king’s reassurances maintains “I know that here some Brahman-demons are talking in the golden quadrangle, having entered to deceive us.” On a broader scale, while King Vidyādharamalla’s melodrama and agitation render him the brunt of jokes and thus “foolish” for much of the play’s action, he is ultimately following a truth that is vindicated at the end; Cārāyaṇa conversely is assisting the king in pursuing what he thinks is a farce—Mrgāṅkāvalī, who he believes from first seeing on the wall of the pavilion is really Mrgāṅkavarman.

Another social issue taken up by critics (particularly Apte and Keith) is that of the supposedly transgressive marriages in the play, whether the mock-marriage between Cārāyaṇa and the male servant disguised as a woman or the resolution in the final act of the king marrying one woman but then receiving two wives. These are, again, perhaps shocking in their face-value content (at least as far as the mock-marriages are concerned), but ultimately harmless in their content. The ruse is either revealed before the ceremony is complete or the ceremony is in fact in accordance with law; Rājaśekhara, through the vehicle of the fool quotes law to the effect of explaining the legitimacy of Kuvalayamālā becoming

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30. (“...bhītyā āsphoṭam nāṭayitvā) bho apasarāpasara , bhūntaram khalu kimapy etat | tad anena parikupitadevibhrulisāhnaṅgakṣitilena dāṇḍakāṣṭhena taḍiti taḍayisyāmi | tat prekṣa me puruṣakāram |” (VSB 1.43) (Shukla 1976, 43).

31. “(camatkṛtya) bho śikhābandham me kuru | amānuśi vāṇī śṛṣṭyate |” (VSB 2.15) (Shukla 1976, 70).

32. “ahaṁ punarjāne’npraviśyāsmān chalitum | aho iha suvarṇacatuṣṭikāsāṅkāntā kopi brahmarākṣasāḥ jalpanti |” (VSB 2.22) (Shukla 1976, 75).
the king’s wife. It seems in this case that the criticism comes from either a shallow reading or a puritanical one, whereas a perspective in context would note the near-indignity, but also the satisfactory turnabout by which it does not come to pass.

The historical geography of the play also has an impact on the content and context in which it is received. Mirashi maintains that the play was written and performed in Tripurī for the king Yuvarājadeva I, though there is some desultory challenge to this perspective (Sathaye 2009). If Mirashi’s arguments are accepted (and I have not yet found any arguments forceful enough to reject them), they easily outline a *dramatis personae* filled with analogues of contemporary figures in—or at least familiar to—the courtly audience of the play. The protagonist, King Vidyādharamalla, is in all probability meant to represent Yuvarājadeva, with a number of the character’s epithets echoing the the real king’s (“Karpūravarṣa” for Vidyādharamalla and “Keyūvarṣa” for Yuvarājadeva, likewise with “Trilīṅgādhipati” and Trikaliṅgādhipati), and the fictional king is explicitly said to rule at Tripurī34 (some editions render this “Nripurī” which is either a spelling mistake or fictional name that makes no secret of its meaning) (Mirashi 1955, lxxix). Mirashi speculates about the potential historicity of Candravarman and his daughter Mṛgāṅkāvalī with little substantive result (Mirashi 1955, lxxx). However, the figure of Vīrapāla (also called Caṇḍamahāsena, father of Kuvalayamālā), the king dispossessed of his kingdom who takes refuge in Vidyādharamalla’s court—according to “indisputable inscriptional evidence”—represents the historical Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Cālukya-Bhīma II (Mirashi 1975, 70).

33. “bhāryā dāśaśca putraśca nirdhanāḥ sakalā api te ʿyaṃ te samabhigacchanti yasya te tasya taddhanam ||” (VSB 4.21ab) (Shukla 1976, 156) Gray suggests a comparison to Manu (Gray 1906, 66n2).

34. “svasti śrīmattripuryāṃ tuhinakarasutāvīcivālātaśā yevaṃ keyūravarṣaṃ vinayanataśirāḥ sarvasenādhiñāthaḥ ||” (VSB 4.21ab) (Shukla 1976, 158).
Rājaśekhara’s contemporary framing of *Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā* goes a long way to explain his general priorities and decisions in the play. Though scholars like Mirashi may complain of the playwright’s “unreliability” or that he has “unnecessarily complicated” the plot, especially with regards to the king’s marriages in the final act (Mirashi 1975, 50), what seems to be happening is really just a certain conscious, fanciful distancing of the play’s plot from reality. Clearly, this is meant as popular entertainment, suggestive of real people who are known to or who are themselves a part of the audience. This means that certain limits on representation can be expected, especially insofar as the station of the person represented. As an example Vidyādharamalla, despite his melodramatic demeanour, is never made more than a passing joke of, and even then only by the fool. Likewise, he is spoken to in anger, but only by the queen. Rājaśekhara indulges the king and court’s aspirations for glory and pride, as well as their vanity. Vidyādharamalla’s fortune comes to somewhat absurdly extreme climax at the end of the play: he receives two princesses as brides, miraculously wins all of his wars, and is crowned emperor of the entire region. All this evinces a social and political climate that would see the text as an acceptable or even desirable artistic representation of the contemporary time and place—either a fiction ornamented with realities, or a reality heavily ornamented with fictions (see also Knutson 2010).
4 Conclusions

Historical Western literary-critical approaches to Rājaśekhara and his Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā have typically not been kind. Only in recent decades have these attitudes started to change. While some of this criticism may simply come from poor readings of complicated texts, much of it suggests a set of essentialist attitudes towards Sanskrit drama which even a slightly-iconoclastic playwright such as Rājaśekhara may have been seen to flaunt. As a result, he is an easy target to accuse of exhibiting the late decline of the Sanskrit dramatic form. However, I have proposed several alternative approaches to analyzing Rājaśekhara’s works, and demonstrated at least insofar as the example of Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā that they in fact contain a great deal of content that is understandably invisible to the context provided by these historical Western literary-critical approaches.

Examining the play with an eye to its performance context, it becomes clear that the text speaks a “language of production.” This language is firmly rooted in the foundational dramatic theory of the Nāṭyaśāstra, but moreover describes action in ways that require and engage the interpretive expertise of the producers and performers; that is, it doesn’t actually make sense unless it is performed. As well, the construction of the play with respect to space (and how it uses that space in its action) illustrates remarkably practical suggestions of staging. Finally, the text’s use of physical objects, while characteristically sparse, nonetheless merges the practical side of the play with its more symbolic, aesthetic goals.

Moving on to the courtly context of the play, Viddhaśālabhaṇjikā seems to be keenly aware of the theoretical, social, and historical environment in which it exists. It relies on the sophistication of its audience to understand how certain subversive or transgressive parts of the play are, in fact, merely suggestions of subversion and, in truth, conventionally acceptable. It incorporates contemporary historical events and clearly implies that certain
characters represent certain real figures, while simultaneously ornamenting those recognizable events and personages in fictions, and maintaining a certain degree of socially-expected restraint in such depictions.

When I initially proposed my alternative approaches to Rājaśekhara, I mentioned one topic which has not yet been resolved: the idea of “theorizing the drama.” The reason is that where kāvya ends and drama begins, Rājaśekhara goes silent. Despite the fact that five of his six “great works” (as he describes them) are plays, Rājaśekhara’s theoretical concern—at least insofar as he explicitly states it—remains in the realm of kāvya and not in the realm of performance practice. This may be due to the existing body of dramatic theory; it could be said that the Nāṭyaśāstra lays out almost everything that needs be said about drama, though it is so broad that nearly anything can be made to fit within it. Perhaps more likely this is a function of the forms themselves, and Rājaśekhara’s inclinations. Defining the drama, in the sense that Rājaśekhara operates when defining kāvya, might simply be incompatible with such a multi-party, interpretive process as dramatic practice. For now, at least, the question of what implied insights into Rājaśekhara’s conception of drama can be found inside his works is I hope evident in some of the work above, while still remaining an avenue for further study.

In closing, I could not hope to accurately describe Rājaśekhara in more concise terms than these, which present what I hope reflects his recovering reputation in modern scholarship:

There is something marvellously idiosyncratic about Rājaśekhara’s mind and mode of discourse, [But] there is nothing in the least idiosyncratic about Rājaśekhara’s conception of literature. His narrative style may be his own but what he expresses is, in every particular, a theoretical presupposition of Sanskrit culture as a whole. (Pollock 2006, 204)
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