Pururavus is the poet’s second study of kinghood; he differs substantially from Agnimitra. The latter is a prince, a soldier & man of the world yielding by the way to the allurements of beauty, but not preoccupied with passion; the subtitle of the piece might be, in a more innocent sense than Victor Hugo’s, “Le Roi s’amuse”. He is the mirror of a courteous & self-possessed gentleman, full of mildness & grace, princely tact, savoir-faire, indulgent kindliness, yet energetic withal & quietly resolute in his pleasure as well as in his serious affairs. “Ah, Sire” says Dharinie with sharp irony “if you only showed as much diplomatic skill & savoir-faire in the affairs of your kingdom, what a good thing it would be”. But one feels that these are precisely the gifts he would show in all his action, that the innocently unscrupulous & quite delightful tact & diplomacy with which he pursues his love-affair is but the mirror of the methods he pursued in domestic politics. We see in him the typical & ideal king of an age hedonistic, poetic, worldly but withal heroic & capable. Pururavus is made of very different material. He is a king and a hero, a man of high social & princely virtues, otherwise Kalidasa would not have taken the trouble to depict him; but these qualities are like splendid robes which his nature has put on, & which have become so natural to him that he cannot put them off if he would; they are not the naked essential man. The fundamental Pururavus is not the king and the hero but the poet & lover. The poet on a throne has been the theme of Shakespeare in his Richard II and of Renan in his Antéchrist; and from these two great studies we can realise the European view of the phenomenon. To the European mind the meeting of poet & king in one man wears always the appearance of an anomaly, a misplacement, the very qualities which have fitted him to be a poet unfit him to rule. A mastering egotism
becomes the mainspring of the poetic temperament so placed; the imagination of the man is centred in himself, and the realm & people whose destinies are in his hands, seem to him to be created only to minister to his ingenious or soaring fancies & his dramatic, epic or idealistic sense of what should be; his intellect lives in a poetic world of its own and thinks in tropes & figures instead of grappling with the concrete facts of the earth; hence he is unfitted for action and once absolute power is out of his hands, once he is no longer able to arrange men & events to his liking as if he were a dramatist manoeuvring the creatures of his brain but is called upon to measure his will & ability against others, he fails & his failure leads to tragic issues; for he persists in attempting to weave his own imaginations into life; he will not see facts; he will not recognize the inexorable logic of events. Hence, though not necessarily a coward, though often a man of real courage & even ability, he plays the part of an incompetent or a weakling or both. Moreover he tends to become a tyrant, to lose moral perspective & often all sense of proportion and sanity; for he regards himself as the centre of a great drama, and to all who will not play the part he assigns them and satisfy his emotional needs & impulses, to all who get in the way of his imaginative egotism he becomes savage & cruel; his rage when a word of his life-drama is mispronounced or a part ill-studied or a conception not complied with is a magnified reflection of the vexation felt by a dramatist at a similar contretemps in the performance of his darling piece; and unfortunately unlike the playwright he has the power to vent his indignation on the luckless offenders in a fashion only too effective. The last end of the poet-king is almost always tragic, the madhouse, the prison, suicide, exile or the dagger of the assassin. It must be admitted that this dramatic picture largely reflects the facts of history. We know some instances of poet-kings in history, Nero & Ludwig of Bavaria were extreme instances; but we have a far more interesting because typical series in the history of the British isles. The Stuarts were a race of born poets whom the irony of their fate insisted upon placing one after the other upon a throne; with the single exception of Charles II (James VI was a pedant, which
for practical purposes is as bad as a poet) they were all men of
an imaginative temper, artistic tastes & impossible ideals, and
the best of them had in a wonderful degree the poet’s faculty
of imparting this enthusiasm to others. The terrible fate which
dogged them was no mysterious doom of the Atridae, but the
natural inexorable result of the incompatibility between their
temperament & their position. Charles II was the only capable
man in his line, the only one who set before him a worldly &
unideal aim & recognising facts & using the only possible ways
& means quietly & patiently accomplished it. The first James
had some practical energy, but it was marred by the political
理想, the disregard of a wise opportunism and the tyrannical
severity towards those who thwarted him which distinguished
his whole dreamy, fascinating & utterly unpractical race. Nor
is the type wanting in Indian History. Sriharsha of Cashmere
in the pages of Kalhana affords a most typical picture of the
same unhappy temperament. It is interesting therefore to see
how Kalidasa dealt with a similar character. To our surprise
we find that the Hindu poet does not associate incompetence,
failure & tragedy with his image of the poet-king; on the con-
trary Pururavus is a Great Emperor, well-loved of his people,
an un conquered hero, the valued ally of the Gods, successful in
empire, successful in war, successful in love. Was then Kalidasa at
fault in his knowledge of the world and of human nature? Such
a solution would be inconsistent with all we know of the poet’s
genius as shown in his other work. The truth is that Kalidasa
simply gives us the other side of the shield. It is not an invariable
law of human nature that the poetic temperament should be
by its nature absolutely unfitted for practical action & regal
power. Nero & Charles I were artistic temperaments cursed with
the doom of kingship. But Alexander of Macedon & Napoleon
Buonaparte were poets on a throne, and the part they played
in history was not that of incompetents & weaklings. There are
times when Nature gifts the poetic temperament with a peculiar
grasp of the conditions of action and an irresistible tendency to
create their poems not in ink & on paper, but in living characters
& on the great canvas of the world; such men become portents
& wonders, whom posterity admires or hates but can only imperfectly understand. Like Joan of Arc or Mazzini & Garibaldi they save a dying nation, or like Napoleon & Alexander they dominate a world. They are only possible because they only get full scope in races which unite with an ardent & heroic temperament a keen susceptibility to poetry in life, idealism, & hero worship. Now the Hindus, before the fibre of their temperament had been loosened by hedonistic materialism on the one side & Buddhistic impracticability on the other, were not only the most ardent & idealistic race in the world, the most ready to put prose behind them, the most dominated by thought & imagination, but also one of the most heroic, and they still preserved much of this ancient temper in the days of Kalidasa. It was only natural therefore that the national dramatist in representing the great legendary founder of the Kurus as of the poet-emperor type, should mould him of stronger make & material & not as one of the beautiful porcelain vessels that are broken. Yet always, even when gifted with the most extraordinary practical abilities, the poetic temperament remains itself and keeps a flaw of weakness in the heart of its strength. The temperaments of Alexander & Napoleon were both marked by megalomania, gigantic imaginations, impossible ideals; though not wantonly cruel or tyrannical, they at times showed a singular insensibility to moral restraints and the demands of generous & humane feeling; especially in times of abnormal excitement or temporary indulgence of their passions, the birthmark came out and showed itself in acts of often insane tyranny. This was especially the case with Alexander; but Napoleon was not free from the same taint. Alexander, we know, strove consciously to mould his life into an Iliad; Napoleon regarded his as a Titanic epic and when facts would not fit in ideally with his conception of himself as its great protagonist, he would alter & falsify them with as little scruple as a dramatist would feel in dealing licentiously with the facts of history. All men of this type, moreover, show a strange visionary impracticability in the midst of their practical energy & success, make huge miscalculations & refuse to receive correction, insist that facts shall mould themselves according to
their own imaginations and are usually dominated by an unconquerable egoism or self-absorption which is not necessarily base or selfish; their success seems as much the result of a favouring destiny as of their own ability & when the favour is withdrawn, they collapse like a house of cards at one blow. Joan of Arc dreamed dreams & saw visions, Mazzini & Garibaldi were impracticable idealists and hated Cavour because he would not idealise along with them. The rock of St Helena, the blazing stake at Rouen, the lifelong impotent exile of Mazzini, the field of [_____]¹ & the island of Caprera, such is the latter end of these great spirits. Alexander was more fortunate, but his greatest good fortune was that he died young; his next greatest that the practical commonsense of his followers prevented him from crossing the Ganges; had Napoleon been similarly forced to recognise his limit, his end might have been as great as his beginning. Pururavus in the play is equally fortunate; we feel throughout that the power & favour of the Gods is at his back to save him from all evil fortune and the limits of a legend help him as effectually as an early death helped Alexander.

Kalidasa’s presentation of Pururavus therefore is not that of a poetic nature in a false position working out its own ruin; it is rather a study of the poetic temperament in a heroic & royal figure for no issue beyond the study itself. This is in accordance with the temper of the later poetry which, as I have said, troubles itself little with problems, issues & the rest, but is purely romantic, existing only to express disinterested delight in the beauty of human life & emotion & the life & emotion of animate & inanimate Nature.

When Pururavus first appears on the scene it is as the king and hero, the man of prompt courage and action, playing the part which he has assumed like a royal robe of purple; but it is not in the practical side of his character that Kalidasa is interested. He has to introduce it only as a background to his inner temperament, in order to save him from the appearance

¹ Blank in manuscript. Apparently Aspromonte or Mentana, sites of defeats suffered by Garibaldi, was intended. — Ed.
of frivolous weakness & unworthiness which always surrounds the dilettante in life, the epicure of his own emotions. This he does with his usual consummate art. Pururavus is introduced to us at the very beginning in a scene of extraordinary swiftness, decision & tumultuous excitement like an eagle cleaving the winds in the rushing swoop upon his prey. The remembrance of this rapid & heroic episode lingers with us & gives us a sense of concealed iron behind his most feminine moods as lover & poet. Then again at the end of the play Kalidasa skilfully strikes the same note & when we take leave of the Ilian it is again as the King & hero whose strong arm is needed by the Gods in their approaching war with the Titans. Thus finding & leaving him as the warlike prince, we always have the impression that however great the part played by his love for Urvasie in his life, it is not the whole; that we are listening only to a love episode in some high epic. This impression again is skilfully aided by brief but telling touches in each Act, such as the song of the Bards, for example, which remind us of the King of Kings, the toiling administrator & the great warrior; in not a single Act are these necessary strokes omitted & the art with which they are introduced naturally & as if without design is beyond praise. But here again Kalidasa does not depart from his artistic principle of “nothing too much, nothing too little”; the purple robes of the Emperor and the bow of the hero being needed only for the background are not allowed to intrude upon the main interest, which is Pururavus the man in his native temperament.

From the very first utterance that temperament reveals itself; the grandiose & confident announcement of his name & his communion with the Gods is characteristic of the epic megalomania; we are not deceived by his proud assumption of modesty, which he only wears as a fit outward ornament of the role he is playing on the world’s stage, part of the conventional drapery of the heroic king. “For modesty was ever valour’s crown.” Through this drapery we see the man glorying in himself as a poet might glory in some great creation & when madness has removed all conventional disguise, his temper breaks out with the most splendid frankness. We see his mind empurple with
the consciousness of his worldwide fame, “This is too much; it is not possible he should not know me”; of his marvellous birth “the grandson to the Sun & Moon”; of his matchless achievements as “the chariot-warrior, great Pururavus”; of his mighty empire, “the universal sceptre of the world and sovran footstool touched by jewelled heads of tributary monarchs”. The glory of this triple purple in which he has wrapped himself, matchless valour, matchless fame, matchless empire, dominates his imagination, and he speaks in the proud brief language of the hero but with an evident consciousness of their fine suitability to the part. We seem to see Napoleon robing himself in the dramatic splendour of his despatches and proclamations or Alexander dragging Batis at his chariot wheels in order that he may feel himself to be Achilles. Shall we accuse these men as some do of being liars, theatrical braggarts, inhuman madmen, mountebanks? Let us not so in our feeble envy spit our venom on these mighty souls to half whose heights we could never rise even if we have no opportunity given us of sinking to their depths!

And then as he rushes in pursuit of the Titan and revels in the speed of his chariot and the scenic splendour of the crumbling thunderclouds flying up like dust beneath it, all the poet in him breaks out into glories of speech. Surely no king before or after, not even Richard II, had such a royal gift of language as this grandson of the Sun & Moon. It is peculiar to him in the play. Others, especially those who habitually move near him, Manavaca, the Chamberlain, the Huntsman, the Charioteer, catch something at times of his enthusiastic poetry, but their diction is usually simple & unpretending and when it is most ambitious pale to the colour, energy & imaginativeness which floods all his utterance. For example in the scene of the vulture how he catches fire from a single trope of the Huntsman’s and his imagination continues coruscating & flashing over the jewel until it has vanished from sight. I have said that his imagination has become empurpled; but the tendency is really inborn in him; he sees, thinks & speaks in purple. Not only is his mind stored with pictures which break out in the most splendid tropes and similes, but he cannot see any natural object or feel any simplest
emotion without bathing it in the brilliant tones of his imagination & expressing it in regal poetry. He has also the poet’s close & inspired observation, the poet’s visualising power, the poet’s sensuousness & aim at the concrete. Little things that he has seen in Nature, a portion of the bank of a river collapsing into the current, the rapid brightening of a dark night by the moon, fire at night breaking its way through a volume of smoke, a lotus reddening in early sunlight, a wild swan flying through the sky with a lotus fibre in his beak, remain with his inner eye and at a touch burst out in poetry. So inveterate is this habit of seizing on every situation & emotion & turning it into a poem, that even when he affects a feeling as in his flattery of the queen, he takes fire & acts his part with a glory & fervour of speech which make the feigned emotion momentarily genuine. Thus with a mind stored & brimming with poetry, a habit of speech of royal splendour & fulness and an imagination fired & enlarged by the unequalled grandeur of his own destiny, Pururavus comes to the great event which shall be the touchstone of his nature. Such a man was alone fit to aspire to & win the incarnate Beauty of the world & of its sensuous life, the Opsara who sprang from the thigh of the Supreme. The Urvasie of the myth, as has been splendidly seen & expressed by a recent Bengali poet, is the Spirit of imaginative beauty in the Universe, the unattainable ideal for which the soul of man is eternally panting, the goddess adored of the nympholept in all lands & in all ages. There is but one who can attain her, the man whose mind has become one mass of poetry & idealism and has made life itself identical with poetry, whose glorious & starlike career has itself been a conscious epic and whose soul holds friendship & close converse with the Gods. This is Pururavus, “the noise of whom has gone far & wide”, whose mother was Ida, divine aspiration, the strange daughter of human mind (Manu) who was once male & is female, and his father Budha, Hermes of the moonlike mind, inspired & mystic wisdom, and his near ancestors therefore are the Sun & Moon. For Urvasie he leaves his human wife, earthly fame & desire, giving her only the passionless kindness which duty demands & absorbs his whole real soul in the divine. Even he,
however, does not enjoy uninterrupted the object of his desire; he transgresses with her into that fatal grove of the Virgin War-God where ethereal beauty & delight are not suffered to tread but only ascetic self-denial & keen swordlike practical will; at once she disappears from his ken. Then must his soul wander through all Nature seeking her, imagining her or hints & tokens of her in everything he meets, but never grasping unless by some good chance he accept the Jewel Union born from the crimson on the marvellous feet of Himaloy’s Child, Uma, daughter of the mountains, the Mighty Mother, She who is the Soul behind Nature. Then he is again united with her and their child is Ayus, human life & action glorified & ennobled by contact with the divine. It is therefore one of the most profound & splendid of the many profound & splendid allegories in the great repertory of Hindu myth that Kalidasa has here rendered into so sweet, natural & passionate a story of human love & desire. [The religious interpretation of the myth, which is probably older than the poetical, is slightly but not materially different.]

In one sense therefore the whole previous life of Pururavus has been a preparation for his meeting with Urvasie. He has filled earth & heaven even as he has filled his own imagination with the splendour of his life as with an epic poem, he has become indeed Pururavus, he who is noised afar; but he has never yet felt his own soul. Now he sees Urvasie and all the force of his nature pours itself into his love for her like a river which has at last found its natural sea. The rich poetry of his temperament, the sights & images with which his memory is stored, his dramatic delight in his own glory & greatness & heroism, are now diverted & poured over this final passion of his life, coruscate & light it up & reveal it as in a wonderful faeryland full of shimmering moonlight. Each thought, image, emotion of his mind as it issues forth, connects itself with his love and for a moment stands illumined in the lustre of his own speech. The same extraordinary vividness of feeling & imagination is poured over Ayus when Pururavus finds himself

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2 The square brackets are Sri Aurobindo’s. — Ed.
a father; never has the passion of paternity been expressed with such vivid concreteness or with such ardent sensuousness of feeling. Yet the conventions of life & the dramatic part in it he feels bound to sustain cling about him and hamper his complete utterance. In order therefore to give him his full opportunity, Kalidasa has separated him from Urvasie by a more romantic device than the dramatically unmanageable contrivance of the original legend, and liberated him into the infinite freedom of madness. The fourth Act therefore which seems at first sight episodical, is really of essential importance both to the conduct of the play & the full revelation of its protagonist.

Yet madness is hardly the precise word for the condition of Pururavus; he is not mad like Lear or Ophelia; it is rather a temporary exaltation than a perversion or aberration from his natural state. An extraordinarily vivid & active imagination which has always felt a poetic sense of mind & sympathy in brute life & in “inanimate” Nature leaps up under the shock of sudden & inexplicable loss & the encouragement of romantic surroundings into gigantic proportions; it is like a sudden conflagration in a forest which transfigures & magnifies every petty object it enlightens and fills the world with the rush & roar & volume of its progress. The whole essential temperament of the man comes whirling out in a gyrating pomp of tropes, fancies, conceits, quick & changing emotions; everything in existence he gifts with his own mind, speech, feelings and thus moves through the pageantry of Nature draping it in the regal mantle of his imagination until the whole world exists only to be the scene & witness of his sorrow. For splendour of mere poetry united with delicate art of restraint and management, this scene is not

3 Sri Aurobindo wrote the following passage on a separate page of the manuscript used for this essay. He did not mark its place of insertion:

That accomplished scholar & litterateur Prof Wilson in introducing the Vicramorvasieum to English readers, is at pains to inform them that in the “mad scene” of this play they must not expect the sublime madness of King Lear, but a much tamer affair conformable to the mild, domestic & featureless Hindu character & the feebler pitch of Hindu poetic genius. The good Professor might have spared himself the trouble. Beyond the fact that both Lear & Pururavus go about raving in a storm, there is no point of contact between the two dramas.
easily surpassed. We may note one of the smaller & yet essential features of its beauty, the skill with which the gradations of his excitement are indicated. When he first rushes in he is in the very height & tumult of it mistaking the cloud for a Titan who carries off his Urvasie and threatening him with a clod of earth which he imagines to be a deadly weapon. But he is not really mad; the next moment he realises his hallucination, and the reaction produces a certain calming down of the fever; yet his mind is still working tumultuously & as he ranges through the forest, every object is converted for a moment into a sign of Urvasie and the megalomaniac in him bursts out into the most splendid flights of self-magnification. But each fresh disappointment brings a reaction that sobers him just a little more; he turns from the inanimate objects of nature to the bee in the flower, then to the birds, then to the beasts; he gifts them with a voice, with articulate words, with thoughts lent out of the inexhaustible treasury of his teeming imagination. Next he appeals to the God of the mountain and fancies the Echo to be his answer. Mark that now for the first time it is a real articulate voice that he hears, though but the reflection of his own. Immediately afterwards his mind coming nearer & nearer to sanity, hits upon something very close to the truth; he realises that a divine force may have transformed her to some object of nature & at first by a natural misapprehension imagines that it must be the river which has the appearance Urvasie wore when she fled from him. Then reason as it returns tells him that if he wishes to find her, it must be nearer the place where she disappeared. As he hurries back, he appeals for the last time to an animal to speak to him, but does not lend him a voice or words; again also he sees tokens of her in flower & tree, but they are no longer hallucinations but real or at least possible tokens. He touches the Jewel Union & hears the actual voice of the sage; he is now perfectly restored to his normal state of mind & when he embraces the creeper, it is not as Urvasie but as an “imitress of my beloved”. Through the rest of the scene it is the old natural Pururavus we hear though in his most delicate flights of imagination. What a choice of a “conveyance” is that with which the scene closes & who but
Pururavus could have imagined it? I dwell on these subtle and just perceptible features of Kalidasa’s work, the art concealing art, because the appreciation of them is necessary to the full reception on our mind-canvas of Kalidasa’s art & genius and therefore to the full enjoyment of his poetry.

And while Pururavus glorifies & revels in his passion, he is also revealed by it; and not only in the strength of the poetic temperament at its strongest, its grasp of, devotion to & joy in its object, its puissant idealism & energy & the dynamic force with which for a time at least it compels fate to its will, but also in its weaknesses. I have spoken of his self-magnification & touches of megalomania. There is besides this a singular incompetence or paralysis of activity in occasional emergencies which, as I have before suggested, often overtakes the poetic temperament in action even in its most capable possessors. His helplessness when confronted by Aushinarie compares badly with the quiet self-possession & indulgent smile with which Agnimitra faces Iravatie in a much more compromising situation. Characteristic too is his conduct when the jewel is lost. We feel certain that Agnimitra when rushing out of his tent would have caught up his bow & arrows & and shot the thief on the spot; Pururavus occupies time in pouring out splendid tropes & similes over the bird & the jewel and appeals helplessly to Manavaca for advice. This is characteristic of the poetic temperament whose mind has long trained itself to throw out its imagination to meet every new object or situation and not its acting faculties; except in natures of a very firm balance the habit must lead to paralysis of the will. Such a sapping of vigour has been going on in Pururavus during the long years of absorption in his romantic passion.4 One must hope that when he stands again in the forefront of battle “Heaven’s great soldier” will have sufficient elasticity of character to recover in the shock of action what he has lost in the peace of the seraglio. Then there are certain

4 Alternative to this sentence:

This growing incompetence is the result of vigour being sapped by long indulgence in the poetical sensibilities to the comparative exclusion of the practical side of the temperament.
moral insensibilities, certain feelings which seem to have been left out in his composition. It is part of his self-assumed rôle in life to be the ideal king, the mirror of gallantry & conjugal duty, the champion of the gods & of religion. Yet it is Urvasie and not he who remembers that his “high capital awaits him long” and who shrinks from the displeasure of the people. He exhibits deference & a show of love to Aushinari because he “owes” her respect & affection, but in spite of his glowing language and fine acting we feel that he cherishes towards her none of the genuine respect & affection or of the real & indulgent kindliness Agnimitra feels for Dharinie & Iravatie. In the last Act he expresses some fear that he may lose religious calm; one feels that religious calm in Pururavus must have been something like the King’s robe in Hans Andersen’s story. But it was one of the necessary “belongings” of the great semi-divine king which Pururavus considered his “part” in life, just as impassive calm & insensibility to human misfortune & grief was one of the necessary “belongings” of the great demigod, the human Jove which Napoleon thought to be his destined rôle. If that vast, flaming and rushing mass of genius & impetuosity which we call Napoleon was incompatible with stoical calm & insensibility, so was the ardent mass of sensuousness & imagination which Kalidasa portrayed in Pururavus incompatible with the high austerity of religion. It is in the mouth of this champion of Heaven Kalidasa has placed one of the few explicit protests in Sanscrit of the ordinary sensuous man against the ascetic idealism of the old religion.

And yet I cannot think of her
Created by a withered hermit cold.
How could an aged anchoret dull & stale
With poring over Scripture & oblivious
To all this rapture of the senses build
A thing so lovely?

The minor male characters of the piece look too wan in the blaze of this great central figure to command much attention except as his adjuncts. As such the Charioteer, the Huntsman &
the Chamberlain, Latavya, appear; the former two merely cross
the stage and are only interesting for the shadow of tropical
magnificence that their master's personality has thrown over
their mode of speech.

In nothing does the delicacy & keen suavity of Kalidasa's dra-
matic genius exhibit itself with a more constant & instinctive
perfection than in his characterisation of women. He may some-
times not care to individualise his most unimportant male fig-
ures, but even the slightest of his women have some personality
of their own, something which differentiates them from others &
makes them better than mere names. Insight into feminine char-
acter is extraordinarily rare even among dramatists for whom
one might think it to be a necessary element of their art. For
the most part a poet represents with success only one or two
unusual types known to him or in sympathy with his own tem-
perament or those which are quite abnormal and therefore easily
drawn; the latter are generally bad women, the Clytaemnestras,
Vittoria Corombonas, Beatrice Joannas. The women of Vyasa
& of Sophocles have all a family resemblance; all possess a quiet
or commanding masculine strength of character which reveals
their parentage. Other poets we see succeeding in a single femi-
nine character & often repeating it but failing or not succeeding
eminently in the rest. Otherwise women in poetry are generally
painted very much from the outside. The poets who have had an
instinctive insight into women, can literally be counted on the
fingers of one hand. Shakespeare in this as in other dramatic gifts
is splendidly & unapproachably first or at least only equalled in
depth though not in range by Valmekie; Racine has the same gift
within his limits & Kalidasa without limits, though in this as in
other respects he has not Shakespeare's prodigal abundance and
puissant variety. Other names I do not remember. There are a
few poets who succeed with coarse easy types, but this is the
fruit [of] observation rather than an unfailing intuitive gift. The
Agnimitra is a drama of women; it passes within the women's
apartments and pleasure gardens of a great palace and is full of
the rustling of women's robes, the tinkling of their ornaments,
the scent of their hair, the music of their voices. In the Urvasie where he needs at least half the canvas for his hero, the scope for feminine characterisation is of necessity greatly contracted, but what is left Kalidasa has filled in with a crowd of beautiful & shining figures & exquisite faces each of which is recognizable. These are the Opsaras and Urvasie the most beautiful of them all. To understand the poetry & appeal of these nymphs of heaven, we must know something of their origin & meaning.

In the beginning of things, in the great wide spaces of Time when mankind as yet was young and the azure heavens & the interregions between the stars were full of the crowding figures of luminous Gods & gigantic Titans by the collision of whose activities the cosmos was taking form & shape, the opposing forces once made a truce and met in common action on the waves of the milky ocean. The object for which they had met could not have been fulfilled by the efforts of one side alone; good must mingle with evil, the ideal take sides with the real, the soul work in harmony with the senses, virtue & sin, heaven & earth & hell labour towards a common end before it can be accomplished; for this object was no less than to evolve all that is beautiful & sweet & incredible in life, all that makes it something more than mere existence; and in especial to realise immortality, that marvellous thought which has affected those even who disbelieve in it, with the idea of unending effort and thus lured men on from height to height, from progress to progress, until mere beast though he is in his body & his sensations, he has with the higher part of himself laid hold upon the most distant heavens. Therefore they stood by the shore of the milky Ocean and cast into it the mountain Mundara for a churning stick and wound round it Vasuqie, the Great Serpent, the snake of desire, for the rope of the churning and then they set to with a will, god & devil together, and churned the milky ocean, the ocean of spiritual existence, the ocean of imagination & aspiration, the ocean of all in man that is above the mere body and the mere life.

They churned for century after century, for millennium upon millennium and yet there was no sign of the nectar of immortality. Only the milky ocean swirled & lashed & roared, like
a thing tortured, and the snake Vasuqie in his anguish began
to faint & hang down his numberless heads hissing with pain
over the waves and from the lolling forked tongues a poison
streamed out & mingled with the anguish of the ocean so that it
became like a devastating fire. Never was poison so terrible for
it contained in itself all the long horror & agony of the ages, all
the pain of life, its tears & cruelty & despair & rage & madness,
the darkness of disbelief & the grey pain of disillusionment, all
the demoniac & brute beast that is in man, his lust & his tyranny
& his evil joy in the sufferings of his fellows. Before that poison
no creature could stand and the world began to shrivel in the
heat of it. Then the Gods fled to Shankara where he abode in
the ice and snow & the iron silence & inhuman solitudes of the
mountains where the Ganges streams through his matted locks;
for who could face the fire of that poison? who but the great
ascetic Spirit clothed in ashes who knows not desire and sorrow,
to whom terror is not terrible & grief has no sting, but who
embraces grief & madness & despair and5

And now wonderful things began to arise from the Ocean; Uc-
chaisravus arose, neighing & tossing his mighty mane, he who
can gallop over all space in one moment while hooves make
music in the empyrean; Varunie arose, Venus Anadyomene from
the waters, the daughter of Varuna, Venus Ourania, standing on
a lotus & bringing beauty, delight and harmony & all opulence
into the universe; Dhunwuntari arose, cup in hand, the physician
of the Gods, who can heal all pain & disease & sorrow, minister
to a mind diseased & pluck out from the bosom its rooted
sorrow; the jewel Kaustubha arose whose pure luminousness
fills all the world & worn on the bosom of the Saviour & helper
becomes the cynosure of the suffering & striving nations;6

There is nothing more charming, more attractive in Kalidasa
than his instinct for sweet & human beauty; everything he

5 Here there is an abrupt break in the text. — Ed.
6 Here there is another abrupt break with nothing to link this paragraph to what
follows. — Ed.
touches becomes the inhabitant of a moonlit world of romance and yet — there is the unique gift, the consummate poetry — remains perfectly natural, perfectly near to us, perfectly human. Shelley’s Witch of Atlas & Keats’ Cynthia are certainly lovely creations, but they do not live; misty, shimmering, uncertain beings seen in some half dream when the moon is full and strange indefinable figures begin to come out from the skirts of the forest, they charm our imagination but our hearts take no interest in them. They are the creations of the mystic Celtic imagination with its singular intangibility, its fascinating otherworldliness.

The Hindu has been always decried as a dreamer & mystic. There is truth in the charge but also a singular inaccuracy. The Hindu mind is in one sense the most concrete in the world; it seeks after abstractions, but is not satisfied with them so long as they remain abstractions. But to make the objects of this world concrete, to realise the things that are visited by sun & rain or are, at their most ethereal, sublimated figures of fine matter, that is comparatively easy, but the Hindu is not contented till he has seized things behind the sunlight also as concrete realities. He is passionate for the infinite, the unseen, the spiritual, but he will not rest satisfied with conceiving them, he insists on mapping the infinite, on seeing the unseen, on visualising the spiritual. The Celt throws his imagination into the infinite and is rewarded with beautiful phantoms out of which he evolves a pale, mystic and intangible poetry; the Hindu sends his heart & his intellect & eventually his whole being after his imagination and for his reward he has seen God and interpreted existence.

It is this double aspect of Hindu temperament, extreme spirituality successfully attempting to work in harmony with extreme materialism, which is the secret of our religion, our life & our literature, our civilisation. On the one side we spiritualise the material out of all but a phenomenal & illusory existence, on the other we materialise the spiritual in the most definite & realistic forms; this is the secret of the high philosophic idealism which to the less capable European mind seems so impossible an intellectual atmosphere and of the prolific idolatry which to the dogmatic & formalising Christian reason seems so gross.
In any other race-temperament this mental division would have split into two broadly disparate & opposing types whose action, reaction & attempts at compromise would have comprised the history of thought. In the myriad minded & undogmatic Hindu it worked not towards mental division but as the first discord which prepares for a consistent harmony; the best & most characteristic Hindu thought regards either tendency as essential to the perfect & subtle comprehension of existence; they are considered the positive & negative sides of one truth, & must both be grasped if we are not to rest in a half light. Hence the entire tolerance of the Hindu religion to all intellectual attitudes except sheer libertinism; hence also the marvellous perfection of graded thought-attitudes in which the Hindu mind travels between the sheer negative & the sheer positive and yet sees in them only a ladder of progressive & closely related steps rising through relative conceptions to one final & absolute knowledge.

The intellectual temperament of a people determines the main character-stamp of its poetry. There is therefore no considerable poet in Sanscrit who has not the twofold impression, (spiritual & romantic in aim, our poetry is realistic in method), who does not keep his feet on the ground even while his eyes are with the clouds. The soaring lark who loses himself in light, the ineffectual angel beating his luminous wings in the void are not denizens of the Hindu plane of temperament. Hence the expectant critic will search ancient Hindu literature in vain for the poetry of mysticism; that is only to be found in recent Bengali poetry which has felt the influence of English models. The old Sanscrit poetry was never satisfied unless it could show colour, energy & definiteness, & these are things incompatible with true mysticism. Even the Upanishads which declare the phenomenal world to be unreal, yet have a rigidly practical aim and labour in every line to make the indefinite definite & the abstract concrete. But of all our great poets Kalidasa best exemplifies this twynatured Hindu temperament under the conditions of supreme artistic beauty & harmony. Being the most variously learned of Hindu poets he draws into his net all our traditions, ideas, myths, imaginations, allegories; the grotesque
& the trivial as well as the sublime or lovely; but touching them with his magic wand teaches them to live together in the harmonising atmosphere of his poetic temperament; under his touch the grotesque becomes strange, wild & romantic; the trivial refines into a dainty & gracious slightness; the sublime yields to the law of romance, acquires a mighty grace, a strong sweetness; and what was merely lovely attains power, energy & brilliant colour. His creations in fact live in a peculiar light, which is not the light that never was on sea or land but rather our ordinary sunshine recognisable though strangely & beautifully altered. The alteration is not real; rather our vision is affected by the recognition of something concealed by the sunbeams & yet the cause of the sunbeams; but it is plain human sunlight we see always. May we not say it is that luminousness behind the veil of this sunlight which is the heaven of Hindu imagination & in all Hindu work shines through it without overpowering it? Hindu poetry is the only Paradise in which the lion can lie down with the lamb.

The personages of Kalidasa's poetry are with but few exceptions gods & demigods or skiey spirits, but while they preserve a charm of wonder, sublimity or weirdness, they are brought onto our own plane of experience, their speech and thought & passion is human. This was the reason alleged by the late Bunkim Chundra Chatterji, himself a poet and a critic of fine & strong insight, for preferring the Birth of the War God to Paradise Lost; he thought that both epics were indeed literary epics of the same type, largely-planned and sublime in subject, diction and thought, but that the Hindu poem if less grandiose in its pitch had in a high degree the humanism and sweetness of simple & usual feeling in which the Paradise Lost is more often than not deficient. But the humanism of which I speak is not the Homeric naturalism; there is little of the sublime or romantic in the essence of the Homeric gods though there is much of both in a good many of their accidents & surroundings. But Kalidasa's divine & semidivine personages lose none of their godhead by living on the plane of humanity. Perhaps the most exquisite masterpiece in this kind is the Cloud Messenger. The
actors in that beautiful love-elegy might have been chosen by Shelley himself; they are two lovers of Faeryland, a cloud, rivers, mountains, the gods & demigods of air & hill & sky; the goal of the cloud’s journey is the ethereal city of Ullaca upon the golden hill crowned by the clouds and bathed at night in the unearthly moonlight that streams from the brow of Sheva, the mystic’s God. The earth is seen mainly as a wonderful panorama by one travelling on the wings of a cloud. Here are all the materials for one of those intangible harmonies of woven & luminous mist with which Shelley allures & baffles us. The personages & scenery are those of Queen Mab, Prometheus Unbound & the Witch of Atlas. But Kalidasa’s city in the mists is no evanescent city of sunlit clouds; it is his own beautiful & luxurious Ujjayini idealised & exempted from mortal affection; like a true Hindu he insists on translating the ideal into the terms of the familiar, sensuous & earthy.

For death and birth keep not their mystic round
In Ullaca; there from the deathless trees
The blossom lapses never to the ground
But lives for ever garrulous with bees
All honey-drunk — nor yet its sweets resign.
For ever in their girdling companies. etc.⁷

And when he comes to describe the sole mourner in that town of delight eternal & passion unsated, this is how he describes her.⁸ How human, how touching, how common it all is; while we read, we feel ourselves kin to & one with a more beautiful world than our own. These creatures of fancy hardly seem to be an imaginary race but rather ourselves removed from the sordidness & the coarse pains of our world into a more gracious existence. This, I think, is the essential attraction which makes his countrymen to this day feel such a passionate delight in Kalidasa; after reading a poem of his the world and life and

⁷ The “etc.” indicates that Sri Aurobindo intended to quote more from his now-lost translation of The Cloud Messenger. — Ed.
⁸ Sri Aurobindo evidently intended to insert another passage from his translation of The Cloud Messenger here. — Ed.
our fellow creatures human, animal or inanimate have become suddenly more beautiful & dear to us than they were before; the heart flows out towards birds & beasts and the very trees seem to be drawing us towards them with their branches as if with arms; the vain cloud & the senseless mountain are no longer senseless or empty, but friendly intelligences that have a voice to our souls. Our own common thoughts, feelings & passions have also become suddenly fair to us; they have received the sanction of beauty. And then through the passion of delight & the sense of life & of love in all beautiful objects we reach to the Mighty Spirit behind them whom our soul recognizes no longer as an object of knowledge or of worship but as her lover, to whom she must fly, leaving her husband the material life & braving the jeers & reprobation of the world for His sake. Thus by a singular paradox, one of those beautiful oxymorons of which the Hindu temperament is full, we reach God through the senses, just as our ancestors did through the intellect and through the emotions; for in the Hindu mind all roads lead eventually to the Rome of its longing, the dwelling of the Most High God. One can see how powerfully Kalidasa’s poetry must have prepared the national mind for the religion of the Puranas, the worship of Kali, Our Mother & of Srikrishna, of Vrindavun, our soul’s Paramour. Here indeed lies his chief claim to rank with Valmekie & Vyasa as one of our three national poets, in that he gathered the mind-life of the nation into his poetry at a great & critical moment and helped it forward into the groove down which it must henceforth run.

This method is employed with conspicuous beauty & success in the Urvasie. The Opsaras are the most beautiful & romantic conception on the lesser plane of Hindu mythology. From the moment that they arose out of the waters of the milky Ocean robed in ethereal raiment & heavenly adornments, waking melody from a million lyres, the beauty and light of them has transformed the world. They crowd in the sunbeams, they flash & gleam over heaven in the lightnings, they make the azure beauty of the sky; they are the light of sunrise & sunset, and the haunting voices of forest & field. They dwell too in the life of
the soul; for they are the ideal pursued by the poet through his lines, by the artist shaping his soul on his canvas, by the sculptor seeking a form in his marble; for the joy of their embrace the hero flings his life into the rushing torrent of battle; the sage, musing upon God, sees the shining of their limbs & falls from his white ideal. The delight of life, the beauty of things, the attraction of sensuous beauty, this is what the mystic & romantic side of the Hindu temperament strove to express in the Opsara. The original meaning is everywhere felt as a shining background, but most in the older allegories, especially the strange and romantic legend of Pururavus as we first have it in the Brahmanas and the Vishnupurana.

But then came in the materialistic side of the Hindu mind and desired some familiar term, the earthlier the better, in which to phrase its romantic conception; this was found in — the Hetaaira. The class of Hetaireae was as recognized an element in Hindu society as in Greek, but it does not appear to have exercised quite so large an influence on social life. As in the Greek counterpart they were a specially learned and accomplished class of women, but their superiority over ladies of good families was not so pronounced; for in ancient India previous to the Mahomedan episode respectable women were not mere ignorant housewives like the Athenian ladies, they were educated though not in a formal manner; that is to say they went through no systematic training such as men had but parents were always expected to impart general culture & accomplishments to them by private tuition at home; singing, music, dancing and to some extent painting were the ordinary accomplishments, general knowledge of morality, Scripture and tradition was imperative, and sometimes the girls of highborn, wealthy or learned families received special instruction in philosophy or mathematics. Some indeed seem to have pursued a life of philosophic learning either as virgins or widows; but such instances were in preBuddhistic times very rare; the normal Hindu feeling has always been that the sphere of woman is in the home and her life incomplete unless merged in her husband’s. In any case the majority of the kulabadhus, women of respectable families, could hardly
be more than amateurs in the arts & sciences, whereas with
the Hetairae (Gunicas) such accomplishments were pursued and
mastered as a profession. Hence beside their ordinary occupa-
tion of singing & dancing in the temples & on great public
occasions such as coronations & holy days, they often com-
mmanded the irregular affections of highborn or wealthy men who
led openly a double life at home with the wife, outside with the
Hetaira. As a class, they held no mean place in society; for they
must not be confused with the strolling actor or mountebank
caste who were a proverb for their vileness of morals. Many of
them, no doubt, as will inevitably happen when the restraints of
society are not recognized, led loose, immoral & sensual lives;
in such a class Lais & Phryne must be as common as Aspasia.
Nevertheless the higher & intellectual element seems to have
prevailed; those who arrogated freedom in their sexual relations
but were not prostitutes, are admirably portrayed in Vasuntsêna
of the Toy Cart, a beautiful melodrama drawn straight from
the life; like her they often exchanged, with the consent of their
lover's family, the unveiled face of the Hetaira for the seclusion
of the wife. This class both in its higher & lower type lasted
late into the present century, but are now under the auspices of
Western civilisation almost entirely replaced by a growing class
of professional prostitutes, an inevitable consummation which
it seems hardly worth while to dub social reform & accelerate
by an active crusade.

The Opsaras then are the divine Hetairae of Paradise, beau-
tiful singers & actresses whose beauty and art relieve the arduous
& worldlong struggle of the Gods against the forces that tend
towards disruption & dissolution, of disruption represented by
the Titans who would restore matter to its original atomic condi-
tion or of dissolution by the sages & hermits who would make
phenomena dissolve prematurely into the One who is above
Phenomena. They rose from the Ocean, says Valmekie, seeking
who should choose them as brides, but neither the Gods nor the
Titans accepted them, therefore are they said to be common or
universal.
We see then the appropriateness of the Hetaira as a material form into which the vague idea of sensuous beauty in the world might run. For the charm of the Opsara even when working on the plane of the mind, is still vital & sensational; it does not belong to the more rarefied regions of the spirit. Now vital & sensational charm in seeking its fulfilment demands that the pursuit of sensuous beauty shall be its sole object, that it shall be without check as without any sideglance or afterthought; it does not seek to be immoral, but simply rejects all moral tests; it recognizes no law but the fulfilment of its own being. This is the very spirit of the Hetaira. The beauty of nakedness sculptured, painted or shaped into words, is not immoral; but the moment we apply the test of morality, it becomes clear that we must either rule it out as not belonging to the world of morality, or rule out morality itself for the moment as not belonging to the world of beauty, which is essentially a world of nakedness in the sense that dress there is an occasional ornament, not a necessary covering — not because there is any essential opposition between them but because there is no essential connection or necessary point of contact. The ideals of all the plastic & sensuous arts fall within the scope of the Opsara; she is actress, songstress, musician, painter. When they arose from the waves, neither the gods nor the demons accepted them; accepted by none, they became common to all; for neither the great active faculties of man nor the great destructive recognize sensuous delight & charm as their constant & sufficient mistress, but rather as the joy & refreshment of an hour, an accompaniment or diversion in their constant pursuit of the recognized ideal to which they are wedded. Moreover sensuous beauty has a certain attraction & splendour which seem to some minds finally & occasionally to most, fairer & brighter than that other ideal which by daily occupation with it, by permissibility & by sameness, grows stale for some, fades into homeliness & routine for others & preserves its real undying, unageing and unforsakeable freshness & delight only to the few constant & unswerving souls, who are the elect of our human evolution. In all this the idea of the Opsara coincides with the actuality of the Hetaira. In choosing the Hetaira therefore for the
Opsara’s earthly similitude, the Hindu mind showed once more that wonderful mythopoeic penetrativeness which is as unerring & admirable in its way as the Greek mythopoeic felicity & tact.

But in the Opsaras the beauty and allurements of the sensuous universe are diffused, scattered, broken up into a million facets just as they first present themselves to human observation. The Hindu imagination needed some one figure into which all this should be compressed, a figure essential & superlative, compressed & running over with beauty. This was at first sought in Tilottama, the wonderful maiden to whose loveableness every gracious thing in the world gave a portion of its own subtlest charm; but this was too much of a fancy, not sufficiently profound & searching for the Hindu mind. It attempted to find a more perfect expression of its idea & created for the purpose a characteristic & therefore favourite legend.

When Naraian, the primeval and dateless sage of old, entered upon austerities in the most secret & desolate recesses of the Snowy Mountains, Indra, prince of the air, always hostile to asceticism, always distrustful of the philosophic & contemplative spirit, was alarmed for the balance of the world and the security of his own rule. He therefore sent the Opsaras to disturb the meditations of Naraian. Then upon the desolate Himalaya Spring set the beauty of his feet; the warm south wind breathed upon those inclement heights, blossoming trees grew in the eternal snow and the voice of the cuckoo was heard upon the mountain tops. It was amidst this vernal sweetness that the Opsaras came to Naraian; they were the loveliest of all the sisterhood who came, & subtlest & most alluring of feminine arts & enchantments was the way of their wooing; but Naraian, who is Vishnu the World Saviour when he comes in the guise of the ascetic, moved neither by the passion of love nor by the passion of anger, smiled in the large & indulgent mood of his world embracing nature and opening his thigh took from it a radiant and marvellous creature of whose beauty the loveliest Opsaras seemed but pale & broken reflections. Ashamed they
veiled their faces & stole silently away from the snowy hermitage. But Naraian called this daughter of his creation Urvasie (she who lies in the thigh of the Supreme, the thigh being the seat of sensuousness) and gave her to Indra to be his most potent defence against the austerities of spiritual longing.

The legend is characteristic of the Hindu mythopoeic faculty both in its slight and unpretentious build and in the number of searching & suggestive thoughts with which it is packed. Indra is the universal cosmic energy limited in the terrestrial forces of conservation; like all active & conservative forces he distrusts the contemplative spirit of philosophy because it is disruptive and tends to cast thought & therefore life into solution towards the creation of fresh forms. Thus he is besieged by a double anxiety; on one side the spirits entrusted with the work of destruction & anarchy are ever endeavouring to seat themselves in the place of Indra, the high conserving force, on the other he dreads to be dethroned by some embodiment of the contemplative spirit, examining, analysing, synthetising new forms. His method of defence against the former is usually though by no means invariably open warfare, against the latter sensuous seduction. He tempts the mind of the philosopher to sacrifice that aloofness from ordinary sensuous life & its average delights on which his perfect effectiveness depends; or if he cannot succeed in this, to move him to an angry and abhorrent recoil from sensuousness which is equally fatal to complete philosophic efficiency. This then is the inwardness of the sending of the Opsaras by Indra. Naraian conquers the temptation, not by ignoring or repelling it, but by producing out of the sensuous in himself a lovelier sensuousness than any that can be brought to tempt him. Here is a peculiarity in the highest Indian conception of ascetism. The sage who delivers the world by his philosophy must not be a half nature; he must contain the whole world in himself. It is told that the great Shankaracharya in the midst of his triumphant religious activity had to turn aside and learn by personal experience the delights of sensuous life and the love of women, because the defect of this experience left him maimed for his philosophic
task. The philosopher must be superior to sensuousness not because he is incapable of experiencing passion & delight, but because he has fathomed their utmost depth and measured their utmost reach, and far passed the stage of soul-evolution where they can satisfy.

And yet the work of the philosophic mind incidentally serves sensuous and material life by increasing its resources and the depth of its charm. For the power of the philosophic ideals which have profoundly affected humanity is not limited to the domain of the intellect but also affects, enlarges and strengthens man's aesthetic outlook upon the world. The sensuous world becomes fuller of beauty, richer in colours, shades and suggestions, more profound and attractive with each widening of the human ideal. It is Urvasie who sprang from the thigh of the withered hermit cold and not any of those original daughters of the inconstant waves who is the loveliest and most dangerous of the Opsaras.

Such then is Urvasie, Naraian born, the brightness of sunlight & the blush of the dawn, the multitudinous laughter of the sea, the glory of the skies and the leap of the lightning, all in brief that is bright, far-off, unseizable & compellingly attractive in this world; all too that is wonderful, sweet to the taste & intoxicating in human beauty, human life, the joy of human passion & emotion: all finally that seizes, masters & carries away in art, poetry, thought & knowledge, is involved in this one name.

Of these outward brilliances Kalidasa’s conception of Urvasie is entirely void. His presentation of her is simply that of a beautiful and radiant woman deeply in love. Certainly the glories of her skiey residence, the far-off luminousness and the free breath of the winds are about her, but they are her atmosphere rather than part of herself. The essential idea of her is a natural, frank & charming womanliness; timidity, a quick temper, a harmless petulance and engaging childishness afterwards giving way to a matronly sedateness & bloom, swift, innocent & frank passion, warm affections as mother, sister & friend, speech
always straight from the heart, the precise elements in fact that give their greatest charm to ideal girlhood & womanhood are the main tones that compose her picture. There is nothing here of the stately pace & formal dignity of the goddess, no cothurnus raising her above human stature, no mask petrifying the simple & natural play of the feelings, the smile in the eyes, the ready tears, the sweetness of the mouth, the lowered lashes, the quick and easy gesture full of spontaneous charm. If this is a nymph of heaven, one thinks, then heaven must be beautifully like the earth. Her terror & collapse in the episode of her abduction & rescue, where Chitraleqha manages pretty successfully to keep up her courage as a goddess should, is certainly not Opsaralike — Chitraleqha with sisterly impatience expresses her sense of that, “Fie, sweet! thou art no Opsara” — but it is nevertheless attractively human and seizes our sympathies for her from the outset. Still more engaging is her timidity. There is also a sensitiveness in her love, a quickness to take alarm & despond which makes her very human. If this is jealousy, it is a quick & generous jealousy having nothing in it of “jealous baseness”, but rather born of a panic of timidity and an extreme diffidence & ignorance of the power of her own beauty. This detail is very carefully observed & emphasized as if Kalidasa wished to take especial pains to prevent even the most hidebound commentator from reading in her character any touch of the heavenly courte- san. The ostentatious splendours, the conscious allurements of the courtesan are not here, but rather a divine simplicity and white candour of soul. It is from an innate purity & openness that the frankness & impulsiveness of her love proceeds. Incapable of disguise, hastily open, even tremulously playful at times, she is easily dashed in her advances & quick to distrust her own merit. There are few more graceful touches in lighter love-drama than her hasty appearance, unconsciously invisible, before Pururavus, and her panic of dismay when he takes no notice of her. In the same scene, her half playful, half serious self-justification on embracing her lover and her immediate abashed silence at his retort, portray admirably the mixture of frank impulsiveness and shy timidity proper to her character. These
are the little magic half-noticeable touches of which Kalidasa's characterisation is mainly composed, the hundred significant trifles which Kalidasa's refined taste in life felt to be the essence of character in action. A shade of wilfulness, the occasional childlike petulance, the delighted abandonment of herself to her passion, which are part of her charm, proceed also from the same surface lightness & quickness of a deep & strong nature. With all this she can be very sweet and noble too, even dignified as in a few utterances of the Third Act, her reunion with Pururavus in the fourth and all through the fifth where she is wife and mother and while losing the girlishness, petulance & playfulness of the earlier scenes has greatly deepened her charm. I see nothing of the heavenly courtesan which some over-precise commentators insist on finding in her; within the four corners of the play, which is all Kalidasa allows us to consider, she is wholly delightful, innocent, even modest, at any rate not immodest. Certainly she is more frank and playful in her love than Shacountala or even Malavica could venture to be, but something must be allowed to a goddess and her demeanour is too much flavoured with timidity, her advances too easily dashed to give any disagreeable impression of forwardness. Urvasie's finest characteristic, however, is her sincerity in passion and affection. The poet has taken great pains to discharge her utterance of all appearance of splendour, ornament & superfluity; her simple, direct & earnest diction is at the opposite pole to the gorgeous imaginativeness of the Ilian. And while her manner of speech is always simple and ordinary, what she says is exactly the unstudied & obvious thing that a woman of no great parts, but natural and quick in her affections would spontaneously say under the circumstances; it is even surprisingly natural. For example when she sees Ayus fondled by Pururavus, “Who is this youth” she asks with the little inevitable undertone of half-jealousy “Himself my monarch binds his hair into a crest! Who should this be so highly favoured”; and then she notices Satyavatie & understands. But there is no poetical outburst of maternal joy & passion. “It is my Ayus! How he has grown!” That is all; & nothing could be better or truer. Yet for all the surface colourlessness there is a charm in
everything Urvasie says, the charm of absolute sincerity & direct unaffected feeling. Her passion for Pururavus is wonderfully genuine and fine from her first cry of “O Titans! You did me kindness!” to her last of “O a sword is taken Out of my heart!” Whatever the mood its speech has always a tender force and reality. Her talk with Chitraleqha and the other Opsaras from the outburst “O sisters, sisters, take me to your bosoms” to her farewell “Chitraleqha, my sister! do not forget me”, is instinct, when moved, with “a passion of sisterliness” and at other times, bright & limpid in its fair kindness & confidence. To her son she comes “with her whole rapt gaze Grown mother, the veiled bosom heaving towards him And wet with sacred milk.” & her farewell to the Hermitess sets a model for the expression of genuine & tender friendship. Urvasie is doubtless not so noble & strong a portraiture as Shacountala, but she is inferior to no heroine of Sanscrit drama in beauty & sweetness of womanly nature.

In dramatic tone and build therefore this is an admirable creation, but there is so far no hint of the worldwide divineness of Urvasie, of the goddess within the woman. In direct allegory Kalidasa was too skilful an artist to deal, but we expect the larger conception of this beautiful and significant figure to enter into or at least colour the dramatic conception of the woman; some pomp of words, some greatness of gesture, some large divinity whether of speech or look to raise her above a mere nymph, however charming, into the goddess we know. Yet in rigidly excluding the grandiose or the coloured Kalidasa has shown, I think, his usual unerring dramatic and psychological tact. Dramatically, to have made Pururavus & Urvasie equally romantic in spirit & diction, to have clothed both in the external purple of poetry, would have been to offend the eye with unrelieved gorgeousness and converted the play from an interesting & skilfully woven drama into a confused splendour of lyrical dialogue. Psychologically, the divinity and universal charm of Urvasie would have been defaced rather than brought out by investing her with grandeur of feeling or a pomp of poetic
ornament. Perfect beauty has in it a double aspect, its intrinsic self and the impression it makes on the vivid & receptive mind. In itself it is simple, unconscious & unadorned, most effective when it is most naked, ceasing to be these, it loses its perfection and a great part of its universal charm. The nude human figure in painting and sculpture, unadorned magic or strength of style & conception in poetry, clear, luminous & comprehensive thought in philosophy, these are what the pursuing human spirit feels to be ideal, highest, most worthy of itself. Drapery blurs the effulgence of the goddess, ornament distracts the spirit and disappoints it of its engrossed and undisturbed sense of possession. On the other hand the mind while most moved by what is simple and natural in its appeal, is romantic in its method of receiving the impression; becoming engrossed and steeped with the idea of it, it directs to it and surrounds it with all the fresh impressions that continually flow in on the consciousness, gathers from it colour, fire & passion, creates around it a host of splendid associations and clothes it in the pomp of its own passionate imagery. The first period of a literary race when its mind is yet virgin & has to create beauty is invariably simple and classical, the last period when its mind is saturated and full of past beauty is always romantic and aesthetic. The relations of Urvasie & Pururavus are true to this psychological principle. She herself is mere beauty and charm sufficient to itself and commanding delight and worship because she is herself, not because of any graces of expression, imagination or intellectual profundity. But the mind of Pururavus receiving her pure and perfect image steeps her in its own fire and colour, surrounding her with a halo of pomp and glory, which reveals himself while seeking to interpret her.

Minor Characters

Nothing more certainly distinguishes the dramatic artist from the poet who has trespassed into drama than the careful pain he devotes to his minor characters. To the artist nothing is small; he bestows as much of his art within the narrow limit of his small
characters as within the wide compass of his greatest. Shake-
spere lavishes life upon his minor characters, but in Shakespeare
it is the result of an abounding creative energy; he makes living
men, as God made the world, because he could not help it, be-
cause it was in his nature and must out. But Kalidasa’s dramatic
gift, always suave and keen, had not this godlike abundance; it
is therefore well to note the persistence of this feature of high art
in all his dramas. In the Urvasie the noble figure of Queen Aushi-
narie is the most striking evidence of his fine artistry, but even
slight sketches like the Opsaras are seen upon close attention to
be portrayed with a subtle & discriminating design; thought has
been bestowed on each word they speak, an observable delicacy
of various touch shows itself in each tone & gesture they employ.
A number of shining figures crowded into a corner of the canvas,
like in meaning, like in situation, like in nature, they seem to
offer the very narrowest scope for differentiation; yet every face
varies just a little from its sister, the diction of each tongue has its
revealing individuality. The timid, warmhearted Rumbha, easily
despondent, full of quick outbursts of eagerness and tenderness
is other than the stately Menaca with her royal gift of speech
and her high confidence. Sahajunya is of an intenser, more silent,
less imaginative, more practical type than either of these. It is
she who gives Pururavus the information of the road which the
ravisher has taken, and from that point onward amid all the
anxious and tender chatter of her sisters she is silent until she
has the practical fact of Pururavus’ reappearance to seize upon.
This she is again the first to descry and announce. Her utter-
ance is brief, of great point & substance. From the few words
she has uttered we unconsciously receive a deep impression of
helpfulness, earnestness and strength; we know her voice and
are ready [to] recognise it again in the Fourth Act. Her attitude
there is characteristic; since help she cannot, she will not waste
time over vain lamentation; Fate has divided the lovers, Fate will
unite them again; so with a cheerful & noble word of consolation
she turns to the immediate work in hand.

Chitraleqha, more fortunate than the other Opsaras in ob-
taining through three acts a large canvas as the favourite and
comrade of Urvasie, suffers dramatically from her good fortune, for she must necessarily appear a little indistinct so near to the superior light of her companion. Indeed dramatic necessity demands subdued tones in her portraiture lest she should deflect attention from Urvasie where it is her task to attract it to her; she must be always the cloud’s dim legion that prepares us to watch for the lightning. Richness of colour & prominence of line are therefore not permissible; yet in spite of these hampering conditions the poet has made her a sufficiently definite personality. Indeed her indulgent affection, her playful kindliness, her little outbreaks of loving impatience or sage advice,—the neglect of which she takes in excellent part,—her continual smiling surrender to Urvasie’s petulance & wilfulness and her whole half matron-like air of elder-sisterly protection, give her a very sensible charm and attractiveness; there is a true nymphlike & divine grace, tact & felicity in all that she says & does. Outside the group of Opsaras the Hermitess Satyavatie is a slighter but equally attractive figure, venerable, kind, a little impersonal owing to the self-restraint which is her vocation, but with glimpses through it of a fine motherliness and friendliness. The perpetual grace of humanness, which is so eminently Kalidasian, forming the atmosphere of all his plays, seems to deepen with a peculiar beauty around his ascetics, Kunwa, Satyavatie, the learned & unfortunate lady of the Malavica. The “little rogue of a tiring-woman” Nipounica, sly & smooth tongued, though with no real harm in her beyond a delight in her own slyness and a fine sense of exhilaration in the midst of a family row, pleasantly brings up the rear of these slighter feminine personalities. The masculine sketches are drawn in more unobtrusive outlines and, after Kalidasa’s manner, less individualized than his women. The Charioteer & the Huntsmen are indeed hardly distinct figures; they have but a few lines to utter between them and are only remarkable for the shadow of the purple which continual association with Pururavus has cast over their manner of speech. The Chamberlain again, fine as he is in his staid melancholy, his aged fidelity, his worn-out and decrepit venerableness and that continual suggestion of the sorrowfulness of grey hairs, is still
mainly the fine Kalidasiian version of a conventional dramatic figure. The one touch that gives him a personal humanity is the sad resignation of his “It is your will, Sire” when Pururavus, about to depart to asceticism in the forests, commands the investiture of his son. For it is the last & crowning misfortune that the weary old man must bear; the master over whose youth & greatness he has watched, for whose sake he serves in his old age, with the events of whose reign all the memories of his life are bound up, is about to depart and a youthful stranger will sit in his place. With that change all meaning must go out of the old man’s existence; but with a pathetic fidelity of resignation he goes out to do his master’s last bidding uttering his daily formula,—how changed in its newly acquired pathos from the old pompous formality “It is your will, Sire.” Manavaca & Ayus need a larger mention, yet they are less interesting in themselves than for their place, one in the history of Kalidasa’s artistic development, the other among the finest evidences of his delicacy in portraiture & the scrupulous economy, almost miserliness, with which he extracts its utmost artistic utility, possibility, value from each detail of his drama.

The age of childhood, its charm and sportive grace and candour, seems to have had a peculiar charm for Kalidasa’s imagination; there is an exquisite light and freshness of morning and dew about his children; an added felicity of touch, of easy and radiant truth in his dramatic presentation. Vasuluxmie in the Malavica does not even appear on the stage, yet in that urbane & gracious work there is nothing more charming than her two fateful irruptions into the action of the play. They bring up a picture of the laughing, lighthearted and innocent child, which remains with us as vividly as the most carefully-drawn character in the piece. The scene of the child playing with the lion’s cub in the Shacountala has the same inevitable charm; ninety-one poets out of a hundred would have hopelessly bungled it, but in Kalidasa’s hands it becomes so admirably lifelike and spontaneous that it seems as natural as if the child were playing with a kitten. Kalidasa’s marvellous modesty of dramatic effect and power
of reproducing ordinary hardly observable speech, gesture and action magicalising but not falsifying them saves him from that embarrassment which most poets feel in dealing dramatically with children. Even Shakespeare disappoints us. This great poet with his rich & complex mind usually finds it difficult to attune himself again to the simplicity, irresponsibility & naive charm of childhood.

Arthur, whom the Shakespeare-worshipper would have us regard as a masterpiece, is no real child; he is too voulu, too eloquent, too much dressed up for pathos and too conscious of the fine sentimental pose he strikes. Children do pose & children do sentimentalise, but they are perfectly naive and unconscious about it; they pose with sincerity, they sentimentalise with a sort of passionate simplicity, indeed an earnest businesslikeness which is so sincere that it does not even require an audience. The greatest minds have their limitations and Shakespeare's over-abounding wit shut him out from two Paradises, the mind of a child and the heart of a mother. Constance, the pathetic mother, is a fitting pendant to Arthur, the pathetic child, as insincere and falsely drawn a portraiture, as obviously dressed up for the part. Indeed throughout the meagre and mostly unsympathetic list of mothers in Shakespeare's otherwise various & splendid gallery there is not even one in whose speech there is the throbbing of a mother's heart; the sacred beauty of maternity is touched upon in a phrase or two; but from Shakespeare we expect something more, some perfect & passionate enshrining of the most engrossing & selfless of human affections. And to this there is not even an approach. In this one respect the Indian poet, perhaps from the superior depth and keenness of the domestic feelings peculiar to his nation, has outstripped his greater English compeer.

Kalidasa like Shakespeare seems to have realised the paternal instinct of tenderness far more strongly than the maternal; his works both dramatic and epic give us many powerful & emotional expressions of the love of father & child to which there are few corresponding outbursts of maternal feeling. Valmekie's Cowshalya has no parallel in Kalidasa. Yet he expresses the true
sentiment of motherhood with sweetness & truth if not with passion.

Ayus & Urvasie in this play were certainly not intended for the dramatic picture of mother & child; this mother has abandoned her child to the care of strangers; this child is new to the faces of his parents. Such a situation might easily have been made harsh and unsympathetic but for the fine dramatic tact of the poet which has purified it from everything that might repel and smoothed away all the angles of the incident. But here the circumstances excuse if not justify Urvasie. Acting under hard conditions, she has chosen the lesser of two evils; for by keeping Ayus, she would have lost both her child and Pururavus; by delivering him into wise and tender hands she has insured his welfare & for her part only anticipated the long parting which the rule of education in ancient India demanded from parents as their sacrifice to the social ideal. Knowing that the child was in good hands she solaces herself with the love of her husband, but it is not from maternal insensibility that she bears quietly the starvation of the mother within her. When he returns to her, there is a wonderful subdued intensity characteristic of her simple & fine nature in the force with which that suppressed passion awakes to life. She approaches her son, wordless, but her veiled bosom heaves towards him and is “wet with sacred milk”; in her joy over him she forgets even that impending separation from the husband to avert which she has sacrificed the embrace of his infancy. It is this circumstance, not any words, that testifies to the depth of her maternal feeling; her character forbids her to express it in splendours of poetic emotion such as well spontaneously from the heart of Pururavus. A look, a few ordinary words are all; if it were not for these & the observation of others, we should have to live with her daily before we could realise the depth of feeling behind her silence.

Ayus himself is an admirable bit of dramatic craftsmanship. There is a certain critical age when the growing boy is a child on one side of his nature and a young man on the other, and of all psychological states such periods of transitional unstable
equilibrium are the most difficult to render dramatically without making the character either a confused blur or an illjoined piece of carpenter’s work. Here Kalidasa excels. He has the ready tact of speech gradations, the power of simple & telling slightness that can alone meet the difficulty. By an unlaboured and inevitable device the necessary materials are provided. The boy comes straight from the wild green & ascetic forest into the luxurious splendours of an Oriental court and the presence of a father and mother whom he has never seen; a more trying situation could not easily be imagined; he inevitably becomes self-conscious, embarrassed, burdened with the necessity of maintaining himself against the oppressions of his surroundings. He attempts therefore to disguise his youthful nervousness behind the usual shield of an overdone & formal dignity, a half unconscious pompousness and an air of playing the man. We are even aware of a slight touch of precocity not unbecoming in one who has been put through the “complete education of a prince” by the mightiest scholar and sage of his time. Confronted with all these new faces making claims upon him to which his past consciousness is an alien, the whole adult side of his nature turns uppermost. But fortunately for our comprehension of his true state of mind, something of the green forest which is his home has come with him in the person of his fostermother, Satyavatī. With her he feels as a child may feel with his mother. When he turns to her or speaks to her, he is again and instinctively in manner, utterance and action the child who ran by her side clutching the skirts of her dress in the free woodland. He speaks like a child, thinks like a child, acts docilely at her bidding like a child. Nothing could be more finely artistic in execution or more charmingly faithful to nature in its conception.

Manavaca on the other hand is an element of weakness rather than of strength. I have already spoken of the progressive attenuation of the traditional buffoon part which keeps pace with Kalidasa’s dramatic development. Gautama in the Malavica is a complete and living personality who has much to say to the action of the plot; witty, mischievous, mendacious & irresponsible
he adds to the interest of the play even independently of this functional importance. But in the Urvasie to have made the main action of the plot turn in any way on the buffoon would have been incongruous with the high romantic beauty of the drama and therefore a serious dramatic error. The function of Manavaca is accordingly reduced to that of an interlocutor; he is there because Pururavus must have somebody to confide in & talk with, otherwise his only dramatic purpose is to give rise by his carelessness to the episode of Aushinarie’s jealousy & self-subdual. Nevertheless his presence affects the composite tone of the picture. He is other than the buffoons of the Malavica & Shacountala, far more coarse in the grain, far less talented & highspirited than Gautama, yet not a mere stupid block like [Mandhavya]. He has along with the stock characteristics of gluttony, ugliness & cowardice, an occasional coarse humour, infertile & broad, and even a real gift of commonsense and rather cynical practicality, to say nothing of that shadow of the purple flung across the speech of all those who associate habitually with Pururavus; he is at the same time low in mind, unable to understand characters higher than his own. His best virtue is perhaps his absence of all pretensions & readiness to make a gibe of himself. Such a figure necessarily tends to set off by its drab colour & squat dimensions the lyric idealism of Pururavus, the radiant charm of Urvasie & the pale loftiness of the Queen. But it is by his place in the picture and not by what he is in himself that he justifies his existence. He does not attract or interest, indeed he at times only just escapes being tiresome. At the same time he lives.

Among all these minor figures who group themselves around the two protagonists and are of purely accessory interest there is one who stands out and compels the eye both by her nobler proportions and her independent personality. Queen Aushinarie has no real claim by any essentiality in her actions to the large space she occupies in the play; her jealousy does not retard and her renunciation sanctifies rather than assists the course of Pururavus’ love for Urvasie. The whole episode in which she figures fits more loosely into the architecture of the piece than can be
exampled elsewhere in Kalidasa’s dramatic workmanship. The interest of her personality justifies the insertion of the episode rather than the episode that justifies the not inconsiderable space devoted to her. The motif of her appearance is the same conventional element of wifely rivalry, the jealousy of the rose-in-bloom against the rose-in-bud that has formed the whole groundwork of the Malavica. There the groundwork, here its interest is brief and episodical. And yet none of the more elaborated figures in the earlier play, not even Dharinie herself, is as fine and deep a conception as the wife of Pururavus. Princess of Kashie and daughter of the Ushenors, acknowledged by her rival to deserve by right of her noble majesty of fairness “the style of Goddess and of Empress,” we feel that she has a right to resent the preference to her even of an Opsara from heaven and the completeness of Pururavus’ absorption in Urvasie gives a tragic significance to her loss which is not involved in the lighter loves & jealousies of Videsha. The character is more profoundly & boldly conceived. The passion of her love strikes deeper than the mere heyday of youth and beauty and the senses in Iravatie as the noble sadness of her self-renunciation moves more powerfully than the kind & gentle wifeliness of Queen Dharinie. And in the manner of her delineation there is more incisiveness and restraint with a nobler economy of touch. The rush of her jealousy comes with less of a storm than Iravatie’s but it has a fierier & keener edge and it is felt to be the disguise of a deep and mighty love. The passion of that love leaps out in the bitter irony of her self-accusal

Not yours the guilt, my lord. I am in fault
   Who force my hated and unwelcome face
      Upon you.

and again when in the very height of her legitimate resentment she has the sure consciousness of her after-repentance.

And yet the terror
   Of the remorse I know that I shall feel
      If I spurn his kindness, frightens me.

Anger for the time sweeps her away, but we are prepared for her
repentance and sacrifice in the next act. Even in her anger she has been imperially strong & restrained and much of the poetic force of her renunciation comes from the perfect sweetness, dignity & self-control with which she acts in that scene. The emotion of self-sacrificing love breaks out only once at the half sneering reproach of the buffoon

    Dull fool!
    I with the death of my own happiness
    Would give my husband ease. From this consider
    How dearly I love him.

Putting gently but sorrowfully away from her the King’s half-sincere protestations of abiding love, she goes out of the drama, a pure, devoted & noble nature, clad in gracious white “and sylvanly adorned with flowers, her raven tresses spangled with young green Of sacred grass”; but the fragrance of her flowers of sacrifice and the mild beauty of the moonlight remain behind her. She does not reappear unless it is in the haste of Urvasie to bring her recovered child to his “elder mother”. This haste with its implied fulness of gratitude & affection is one of Kalidasa’s careful side touches telling us better than words that in spirit & letter she has fulfilled utterly the vow she made on the moonlit terrace under seal of

    The divine wife & husband, Rohinnie
    And Mrigolanchon named the spotted moon.

The deepening of moral perception, the increase in power & pathos, the greater largeness of drawing and finer emotional strength and restraint show the advance Kalidasa has made in dramatic characterisation. Grace, sweetness, truth to life and character, perfect & delicate workmanship, all that reveals the presence of the artist were his before; but the Urvasie reveals a riper & larger genius widening its scope, raising mightier vans before yet it take its last high and surpassing flight.