

Appendix III: Sources for the Play

Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta: Mahābhārata: Book 1: chs 62–69

The bard Vaiśampāyana tells this story to the monarch Janamejaya, descendant of Bharata, at the Great Sacrifice that the monarch was performing.

Duṣyanta,* out on a great hunt, arrived at Kaṇva's Hermitage, deep in the forests by the river Mālinī, to pay his respects to the revered sage. There he met Śakuntalā who was alone, her father having gone out of the hermitage to gather fruit. She offered the King due hospitality and in response to his questions about herself, told him the story of her birth as she had heard it from her 'father's own lips'. The Apsarā Menakā, had abandoned her as soon as she was born and some birds (*śakunta*) taking pity on the new-born babe had protected and fed it, until Kaṇva found the child and brought it up as his own daughter.

The King enamoured of Śakuntalā's uncommon beauty and grace, wanted to marry her according to the Gāndharva mode of marriage—a recognized form of marriage based on love and mutual agreement. Śakuntalā demurred, asking him to wait for her father's return, 'When my father returns, O King, he will himself give me to you.' But the infatuated Duṣyanta wanted to marry her instantly and began persuading her that according to the Law, she had complete right over herself and did not need parental permission to dispose of herself. Śakuntalā replied that if it was not against the Law, she would become his wife on one condition, that the son born to her would be the heir-apparent and succeed him as King. The King agreed and took her as his wife, and then left for his capital promising to send for her with the proper retinue accompanied by a detachment of his army. Kaṇva on his return to the Hermitage soon after was pleased, and

* Same as Duḥśanta. Duṣyanta is the form used in the Mahābhārata.

felicitated Śakuntalā on her excellent choice of a husband. But Duṣyanta, apprehensive about how the sage Kaṇva would react to this union contracted during his brief absence from the Hermitage did not send for her.

A son was born, blazing like fire; years went by until Kaṇva noticing the extraordinary strength and energy that the boy displayed, advised Śakuntalā that it was time to take him to his father and get him consecrated as the heir-apparent, and sent her with her son in the company of some hermits to the capital. Śakuntalā arriving at Duṣyanta's palace had herself announced, and having duly honoured him, presented her son to him. 'Here, O King, is the son, resembling a god, born of your strength; now accept him and carry out the promise you made.'

Duṣyanta, although he remembered his promise and every detail of their meeting and marriage, pretended to remember nothing and in the cruellest and most insulting words asked her to take her boy and get out.

Śakuntalā, shattered by Duṣyanta's treatment of her, stood dumb-founded, but being a girl of great spirit and courage decided to fight for her son's rights. Even though she could have destroyed him by the power of her penance, she remained calm and explained the Law to him and laid out what his duties and obligations were under the Law to her and his son. Seeing that all her arguments were of no avail, she flung these last words at him, that she would not have anything to do with a man like him, but that in the end her son would be sovereign, and prepared to leave. At that point, an aerial voice spoke testifying to the truth of Śakuntalā's words and demanded that the King keep his promise to her. The nobles, ministers and priests at the Court heard the aerial voice and accepted its testimony. Relieved, Duṣyanta welcomed her with costly gifts and received her and his son with honour, making Śakuntalā Queen and consecrating the boy as heir-apparent.

The story ends with Duṣyanta explaining to Śakuntalā as to why he had acted as he did. The marriage having been a secret one, unwitnessed, his ministers and people would have doubted the legality of the marriage and the legitimacy of the prince. 'I forgive you all the unpleasant words you spoke to me, my beloved, because I love you,' he says welcoming her and accepting his son as the heir.