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# BOOK REVIEWS

*Reading the Mahāvaṃsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravāda Buddhist History* by Kristin Scheible. Columbia University Press, 2016. 240pp. Hb. $60 (£49.95). ISBN-13: 9780231171380.

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Kristin Scheible's *Reading the Mahāvaṃsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravāda Buddhist History* is an insightful new work that presents an important contribution to recent scholarship on the literary functions of Buddhist texts. Scholars of Theravāda Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka clearly have the most to gain from Scheible's corrective reading of the *Mahāvaṃsa* as a text that seeks not only to establish political legitimacy for its community but to actually help produce such a community of 'good people' through its textual practices. In addition, scholars of literary texts in a variety of traditions will appreciate the strategies Scheible outlines for reading the *Mahāvaṃsa,* which are grounded in theories and methods drawn from history, literature, and religion as well as Buddhist studies.

The *Mahāvaṃsa* is one of many literary texts central to Buddhist traditions that tend to be read for their historical or doctrinal content, while their imaginative and poetic dimensions are praised yet largely ignored. Scheible argues that previous approaches to the *Mahāvaṃsa* have shifted scholarly focus from the text itself to a growing body of commentaries and interpretations that limit understanding of the text and its function for readers. By paying attention to those literary features of the *Mahāvaṃsa* most often ignored in previous scholarship, Scheible brings the complete text into view. She argues that elements such as voice, figurative language and mythology, dismissed for their irrelevance to a presumed political or historical agenda, are actually vital to a central purpose of the *Mahāvaṃsa*: the transformation of its readers into ethically engaged subjects of the religious community its narrative constitutes.

Scheible presents each of these previously neglected components of the text in detail in the five main chapters of *Reading the Mahāvaṃsa.* In chapter one she highlights the voice of the proem that operates outside the main chronicle of the narrative, instructing readers to 'listen up' in order to prepare them for the 'anxious thrill' of the text and the 'serene satisfaction' it will ultimately provide. As these readers are called to commit themselves to the experience of the text, they effectively enter the community and begin to act in ways that will develop and sustain it. As the vocative call of the proem recedes into the omniscient voice of the narrative, other literary strategies take over to keep the reader engaged in the transformative process of the text.

Keywords: *Mahāvaṃsa*, *vaṃsa*, Buddhist literary history, *samvega*, *pasāda*, metaphor, *nāga*s, religion, reading

Among such strategies are the metaphors of light, which Scheible highlights in chapter two. Following Steven Collins' work[1] on the importance of *saṃvega* or 'anxious thrill' and *pasāda* or 'serene satisfaction' in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, Scheible highlights the way metaphors of light and darkness promote such religious experiences. These include the fear and trembling inspired by the metaphoric darkness surrounding the *nāga*s that provide religious or ethical perspective and the calm, clarity and religious devotion inspired by figures of light, which Scheible likens to that associated with paying homage at a Buddhist *stūpa*. Scheible suggests that while those who ignore the poetic language of the text and focus only on its narrative chronicle may understand the transformation of ancient Laṅkā into a centre of *dhamma,* only those who pay attention to its figures of darkness and light will experience the inner transformation required to bring *dhamma* into being in themselves.

Scheible might have strengthened her analysis of *saṃvega* and *pasāda* by considering traditional Indic aesthetics, which she dismisses as anachronistic and irrelevant to her analysis. While the 'anxious thrill' of *saṃvega* and 'the serene satisfaction' of *pasāda* that she claims the *Mahāvaṃsa* cultivates may not correspond to the terms used to describe the eight or nine basic *rasa*s, as she points out, theories of *rasa* are much closer in their description of such states than anything in the Western models Scheible chooses to rely on, despite their further remove from the context of the *Mahāvaṃsa*. One might consider how the *adbhuta-rasa*, which emphasizes awe and marvel, could be extended to describe the thrill of *saṃvega* and how the peace and tranquility of *śānta-rasa* might relate to *pasāda.* While the Western theories of metaphor and simile she cites, such as those of Lakoff and Johnson,[2] are useful in articulating how the poetics of the text activates its readers, one wonders what further attention to the specificities of *rūpaka* and *upamā,* as Daṇḍin explains (in the *Kāvyādarśa*) these South Asian forms in the literary traditions that precede him, might contribute to the understanding of how metaphors and similes derived from Indic traditions work in the *Mahāvaṃsa*.

Nevertheless, poetics are only one overlooked element of the text Scheible reconsiders. In chapters three and four she turns to the prominent role played by the mythological serpent-like beings known as *nāga*s. As Scheible points out, some scholars have attributed their abundance in Buddhist texts to their effectiveness in grabbing the reader's attention. Scheible rejects this explanation, arguing that they also prompt readers to use their imagination to empathize with others who are foreign to themselves and to consider the benefits of a human life, with its capacity for living by the *dhamma. Nāga*s are not mere devices for Scheible. They have important roles in the *Mahāvaṃsa* as those who meet the Buddha and subsequently function as guardians and protectors of his relics. Scheible notes that their capacity to produce intense emotional experience in readers, from 'anxious thrill' to the

1. E.g. *Nirvāṇa and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pāli Imaginaire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 593–601.

2. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

compassion that leads to 'serene satisfaction', is essential to the ethical project of the *Mahāvaṃsa*.

Having presented the significance of these overlooked literary features to such a project, Scheible addresses the historicizing agenda more often attributed to the text in chapter five. In particular, she follows Anne Monius[3] in considering how literary works such as *vaṃsa*s may supplement our understanding of more documentary forms of history by providing insights into the ways in which such texts construct, or reconstruct, Buddhist communities. While the *Mahāvaṃsa* may not represent historical evidence for political, sectarian or nationalistic authority, Scheible concludes by suggesting that this literary version of Buddhist history may function to connect the reader to the authentic lineage of the Buddha after all. Through the ethical transformation and imaginative experience the text provokes, Scheible suggests it becomes a kind of relic, with a religious purpose for the reader, that compels scholars to read it in a new way.

3. Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.