

Domesticating Sanskrit Drama: H. H. Wilson's *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* (1826–1827)

Lynn Zastoupil¹

Abstract

This essay seeks to recover the historical significance of H. H. Wilson's Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus. It reviews Wilson's participation in the English amateur theatre in Calcutta and his directorial contribution to the first proscenium-style Bengali theatre, a personal involvement that challenges the notion of the Select Specimens as a purely academic work. The heart of the essay examines two overlapping sets of European intellectual influences on Wilson: British literary antiquarianism and German Romantic nationalism. The first can be traced in the countless notes to the Select Specimens exploring Sanskrit drama as a repository of manners, sentiments and expressions. The latter is evident in the explicit references to national character and culture, as well as in the implicit valuation of Sanskrit drama as a treasury of the nation. Wilson's exposure to the works and ideas of key British antiquarians and German Romantics (particularly A. W. Schlegel) is explored in detail. These intellectual influences suggest possibilities for further investigation into Wilson's place in the history of the modern Bengali theatre. They also shed fresh light on Wilson's defense of British support for Sanskrit (and Arabic) studies against critics such as James Mill and T. B. Macaulay. The essay concludes with a brief look at how contemporary Scottish cultural nationalists – also interested in literary antiquarianism and influenced by German Romantics – recognized in the Select Specimens the work of a kindred spirit.

¹ It has been my pleasure to know Gita Dharampal-Frick for nearly twenty-five years. Her fascinating study of early modern German cultural encounters with South Asia first brought her to my attention, and since then we have had welcome opportunities to engage each other on research matters of mutual interest. Indeed, I consider myself fortunate to have shared the stage with Gita at academic conferences in my country and at the seminar table with her students in Heidelberg, as well as for other opportunities for scholarly exchange. In appreciation of Gita's collegiality and contributions to our shared field of study, I offer this essay on the flow and counterflow of ideas between Britain, Germany, and South Asia.

Introduction

H. H. Wilson's three-volume *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* (Calcutta, 1826–1827)² has attracted scant attention. Initially Indologists recognized its foundational importance for the study of Indian literature, with French and German translations and multiple English editions adding to its stature (Weber 1876: 224; Konow 1920: 1; Solomon 2004: 113–114). But since the early twentieth century it has been largely relegated to the status of obligatory reference for scholars examining various features of drama in the subcontinent (Gray 1912: 59–60; Charpentier 1923: 586; Dasgupta 1935: 114–115; Goodwin 1988: 131; Walker 2004: 1). The few who have given Wilson's volumes more than perfunctory mention have criticized its inattention to staging matters and omission of non-Sanskrit drama (Solomon 2004: 114) or its neglect of the Indian commentary tradition (Sullivan 2007: 435). A supposedly Orientalist view of Sanskrit theatre as “exotic, changeless, and timeless” is another charge (Solomon 2004: 114). As for Wilson's aims in producing the volumes, little has been suggested beyond noting a desire to champion Sanskrit drama as great literature (Solomon 2004: 114) or repeating his twice-stated ambition “to secure to the Hindu theatre, a place in English literature”³ (Raghavan 1993: 9–10).

Wilson also crops up briefly in the history of Bengali theatre. Wilson himself noted in 1835 that the manuscripts he used for the first edition of his translations formed the basis of a Sanskrit edition of the dramas prepared by Jayagopala Tarkalankara of Calcutta Sanskrit College and published by the Bengal government's General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI) (Wilson 1835, I: vii–viii). In 1831 or 1832 Wilson also produced and directed a version of *Uttara Rama Cheritra* – his English translation of Bhavabhuti's *Uttaramacharitam* – that was performed alongside scenes from *Julius Caesar* at the first Bengali proscenium-style theatre. That theatre – Prasanna Kumar Tagore's Hindu Theatre – lasted but a year, but it gets credit as “[t]he first genuine Bengali theatre” (Guha-Thakurta 1930: 46) or “the first Bengali private theatre” (Trivedi 2005: 14). As enthusiasm for the western-style theatre grew, the plays produced were initially mostly English ones (Shakespeare being ever popular), but these were replaced in the 1850s by vernacular translations or adaptations of Shakespeare and of San-

² The title pages of the three volumes list the date of publication as 1827. Each of the dramas translated, however, is given with its own full-title page and pagination (because apparently intended for publication separately), and these individual title pages are dated either 1826 or 1827. The introductory essay and appendix also have separate pagination. Citations from this edition will give volume number, title of item, and page numbers.

³ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface,” pp. x–xi; Wilson 1835, I, p. vii.

sanskrit dramas, and eventually original vernacular dramas. Among the Sanskrit dramas chosen for vernacular translation/adaptation were at least three that Wilson had included in his *Select Specimens* (Guha-Thakurta 1930: 49–87; Chatterjee 2007: 69–75, 88–92; Trivedi 2005: 15–17).⁴ Bengali versions of Sanskrit dramas that Wilson had mentioned, but not translated, were also published in 1828 and 1840 (Dasgupta 1935: 114–115).

Poonam Trivedi has noted that “the study and performance of Shakespeare in India coincided with the revival of Sanskrit drama” (Trivedi 2005: 33). A closer look at Wilson’s theatrical activities and scholarship helps with understanding this phenomenon. It also uncovers intellectual influences ignored in the scholarly literature on Wilson. These influences situate the *Select Specimens* in the cultural currents of contemporary Europe and cast new light on the ambition to find a place in English literature for Sanskrit drama. Those currents, in turn, may not be irrelevant to the history of modern Indian theatre.

Wilson, Stage and Page

The theatre was not only an academic subject for Wilson. Since the fourteenth century, plays have been performed in England by youth at colleges, schools and the Inns of Court (Warton 1774–1781, II: 374, 377–406). Wilson was exposed to this tradition. He began his education at London’s Soho Academy – known for the Shakespeare performances staged by its pupils – and it seems Wilson’s enthusiasm for the theatre began there (Courtright 2004–2012; Devereux 1998: 15–16). He then trained in medicine and went out to Bengal as a surgeon in the East India Company’s service. After arriving in Calcutta in 1809, he became active in the local British theatre scene. In 1813 he helped found the Chouringhee Theatre – the managers described Wilson as its “parent” – and was important to its early success.⁵ He also appeared on stage and was noted for his portrayal of elderly men (Devereux 1998: 36). Wilson also acted the part of a bohemian member of the theatre scene, scandalizing some by living in a

⁴ Kalidasa’s *Vikramorvasiyam*, Bhavabhuvī’s *Malatimadhava* and Harsa’s *Ratnavali* were Sanskrit dramas that Wilson had translated into English before they appeared on stage in Bengali.

⁵ A printed copy of the “Rules and Regulations of the Chouringhee Dramatic Society,” dated 30 June 1814, has Wilson first on the list of trustees: British Library, Asian, Pacific and Africa Collections, Mss Eur E301/1, ff. 9–16. A letter from J. Young and other managers of the Chouringhee Theatre, dated 16 October 1815, notes with regret that Wilson had given up his stage management duties, but holds out hope that he would still help with the general management and perform on stage. The managers call Wilson the parent of their theatre and stress his importance to its success: British Library, Asian, Pacific and Africa Collections, Mss Eur E301/1, ff. 23–24.

“state of notorious concubinage” with a married actress which resulted in two children and nearly cost him the Boden chair of Sanskrit in 1833. One critic decried Wilson as the “chief ornament and supporter of the Calcutta Theatre,” a cultural scene supposedly immoral beyond anything imaginable in Britain (Devereux 1998: 37, 52). In 1829 Wilson married in Calcutta Frances Siddons – granddaughter of Sarah Siddons, the famous actress from the Kemble acting family – whose father was in the Bengal civil service (Courtright 2004–2012).

The Chowringhee Theatre figures prominently in the history of the modern Bengali theatre. British theatres were an important part of the Calcutta cultural world from the 1750s onwards, bringing English-language dramas, British theatre professionals, and European theatrical traditions to the emerging capital of British India. English plays performed in private residences and proscenium-style theatres became popular, with increasing numbers of professional actors and actresses from London joining the local amateur performers. The Chowringhee Theatre was at the center of this for nearly two decades, producing mostly productions of Shakespeare and drawing frequently on the talents of noted figures of the London stage (Guha-Thakurta 1930: 40–43; Trivedi 2005: 13–14; Chatterjee 2007: 17–24; Majumdar 2005: 260–263). It also attracted the interest and capital of Bengalis, most notably Dwarkanath Tagore who rescued the theatre from financial ruin in 1835 by purchasing it. Fire destroyed the Chowringhee in 1839, but its star actress founded a new theatre, the Sans Souci, to replace it (Kling 1976: 160; Chatterjee 2007: 24–25).

All this argues for reading the *Select Specimens* as more than an academic work. It is unlikely that the man who stage managed both English and Sanskrit (in translation) dramas in Calcutta would have “completely ignored practical staging matters” (Solomon 2004: 114) in volumes produced while he was still close to that city’s theatre scene. Indeed, Wilson is quite attentive to staging matters in the *Select Specimens*. Sanskrit theatre prohibited both sleeping and dying on stage, he claimed (incorrectly regarding the latter [Sullivan 2007: 423, 435–436]).⁶ He addressed the length and settings of productions, staging/set design, costumes, props and the like.⁷ He opened his volumes with dramaturgical observations regarding the arrangement, aims, plot devices, character depiction, dramatis personae, etc. of Sanskrit theatre.⁸ And his translations of individual dramas are laced with notes addressing stage directions, plot develop-

⁶ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “On the Dramatic System of the Hindus,” p. 12; III, “Appendix,” p. 45.

⁷ For but a few examples from the first volume see: Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface,” p. vii, “On the Dramatic System of the Hindus,” pp. 13, 27, 74–75; and *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 18, 42, 44–45, 119.

⁸ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “On the Dramatic System of the Hindus,” pp. 23–44.

ment issues, character stratagems or depictions, music, and related matters.⁹ Even metatheatrical elements were explained, such as company members speaking directly to the audience as introducers or interpreters.¹⁰ The experienced eye of someone involved in theatre production is apparent.

British Antiquarianism and the *Select Specimens*

Scholarly interests were at work too. Wilson's volumes are replete with references to the theatre, dramatic works and playwrights of Europe from classical Greece to the contemporary era. This comparative perspective extended to dramaturgical issues as well as to production matters such as frequency, length and social settings of performances, stage design, special effects, and actors' entrances and exits.¹¹ Wilson owned copies of George Steevens' *Twenty of the Plays of Shakespeare* (1766), Francis Douce's *Illustrations of Shakspeare* (1807) and Thomas Warton's monumental *History of English Poetry* (1774–1781) (Anonymous [1861]: 19, 64, 76). The first was a pioneering effort to republish the quarto editions from Shakespeare's day by the man who later co-edited critical editions of the Bard's works (Walsh 2012: 31–34). The last two works offered historical observations on venues, sets, casting, costumes, props and other production matters of the sort that pepper Wilson's volumes (Warton 1774–1781, II: 366–406; Douce 1807, II: 315–330). The scholar and the amateur actor-director obviously found common ground in the comparative history of dramatic production.

There is, however, a deeper significance to this engagement with drama-related scholarship in Britain. The *Select Specimens* reveals a manifest debt to a British antiquarian mindset that viewed literature as the repository of important historical, cultural, and linguistic material. This outlook would in turn feed into a Romantic perspective that linked literature and national character. As we shall see, Wilson imbibed this perspective from German sources and employed it to defend Sanskrit literature from British critics. This combination of antiquarian research and Romantic insight is also central to understanding his desire to secure a place in English literature for his subject.

John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* was an antiquarian work on Wilson's bookshelves (Anonymous [1861]: 8). Originally published in 1777

⁹ For examples from each volume see: Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 15, 44–45, 52, 203–204; II, *Vikrama and Urvashi*, pp. 34–35, 63–64, 71, 104–105; and III, *Mudrá Rákshasa*, pp. 2, 155–156.

¹⁰ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “On the Dramatic System of the Hindus,” pp. 27–28.

¹¹ For some examples, see: Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface,” pp. vi–viii, “On the Dramatic System of the Hindus,” pp. 9–13, 23–24, 32, 74, *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 29, 44–45; II, *Malati and Madhava*, pp. 14, 60, 63–64, 101; and III, *Mudrá Rákshasa*, pp. 46–47, 156.

as a revised edition of an earlier work by Henry Bourne, Brand's work popularized the study of what a later generation would call folklore. Brand continued collecting new materials for a planned expansion of his book and these would be used by Henry Ellis to produce an influential posthumous edition in 1813. The 1810 edition that Wilson owned was a posthumous reprint of the 1777 edition. In his work Brand demonstrated how deeply old customs, manners, ceremonies and superstitions permeated English life, using a vast array of written sources, including literary works, to uncover the richness and longevity of popular culture. One of his notable contributions was illuminating "the debts of poets, dramatists, and prose-writers to the bubbling springs of popular tradition" (Dorson 1968: 13–25; Boyer 1997: 56). Shakespeare, for instance, drew upon folkish beliefs about the witching hour, animal cries as bad omens, and haunted houses or walking spirits (Brand 1810: 74, 101, 119). Wilson's familiarity with Brand's approach is evident in the *Select Specimens* where he offers up similar examples of popular superstitions given voice in Sanskrit drama.¹²

Warton's *History of English Poetry* was also important here. René Wellek credits Warton with establishing in Britain "the whole conception and possibility of literary history." In the execution, however, Warton fell short. His work was less a narrative history than a bibliography and an anthology with notes, often antiquarian in its approach. To Warton, poems were historical documents illuminating the social life of past times, "pictures of ancient manners" basically "painted from the life." This documentary function was the main entertainment value of old poetry. Hence, analysis often gave way in Warton's *History* to a descriptive use of literature to illustrate "manners and customs, modes of life, and favourite amusements" (Wellek 1941: 174–176, 196–201).

What Wellek criticized as a shortcoming attracted Wilson. The *Select Specimens* is awash with notes in the spirit of the *History of English Poetry*. Where Warton noticed legendary tales preserved in poetic verse or song (Warton 1774–1781, I: 13–19; II: 175), Wilson found legends from the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the Puranas and other sources preserved and embellished in numerous works of Sanskrit drama.¹³ If Warton thought Chaucer's tale of the squire a historical source regarding the education and acquirements of young gentlemen, found a Henry Bradshaw poem interesting for its account of an Anglo-Saxon royal feast, or pointed out the presence of Wycliffe's doctrines in

¹² For examples see: Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, p. 93; II, *Malati and Madhava*, pp. 10, 123, and *Uttara Rama Cheritra*, p. 50; III, *Retnavali*, p. 15.

¹³ Wilson 1826–1827, III, "Appendix," pp. 1–107. The appendix is devoted to brief accounts of various Sanskrit dramas not included for translation; Wilson begins many of these accounts with a reference to the legend upon which these plays are based.

Piers Plowman and like-named poems (Warton 1774–1781, I: 306–307, 448; II: 181–188), Wilson noted that *Uttara Ram Cheritra* offered “curious pictures of the beau ideal of heroic bearing, and of the duties of a Warrior and a Prince” while *Malati and Madhava* depicted features of pre-Islamic society such as the public roles of women of status, Buddhist ascetics with access to the great and employed as science teachers, the linga worship of Shaivites, and the presence of yogis.¹⁴ Wilson and Warton were also akin in claiming that drama preserved bits of its own history, the latter arguing that *Hamlet* evidenced the tradition of school plays performed in Latin (Warton 1774–1781, II: 387–388) and Wilson noting that *Vikrama and Urvasi* gave proof of Indian playwrights anterior to Kalidasa.¹⁵ Additional parallels in the two men’s works can easily be found. Suffice it to say, the antiquarian tendencies lamented by Wellek clearly animated Wilson, who patiently detailed all manner of pre-modern customs, habits, and rituals – such as gambling games, the tricks of thieves, home interiors, fire rituals, and the horse sacrifice – on display in Sanskrit drama.¹⁶

This conception of literature owed something as well to Douce, whose *Illustrations of Shakspeare, and of Ancient Manners* was also in Wilson’s library. As the subtitle indicates, these volumes reinforced the dominant tendency of Warton’s work. A prominent antiquary and collector, Douce also published *The dance of death* (1833), supplied other scholars with materials or collaborated on their projects, and bequeathed to the Bodleian a massive personal library and antiquarian collection. Douce was animated by an “illustrative imperative” to exhibit popular “manners, customs and beliefs” over the ages (Hurst 2004–2012). This imperative likely explains why he produced the first type facsimile edition of Shakespeare’s plays in 1807 (Walsh 2012: 38). Douce’s collections, collegiality – he loaned Brand many rare works – and diverse interests located him at the center of the intellectual trend that was transforming literary antiquarianism into folkloristics (Dorson 1968: 22–23, 57–61, 109).

Douce also followed Brand and Warton in explicating obscure phrases, idiomatic expressions, and forgotten words. Brand offered etymologies, original usages or alternative meanings for such words and phrases as “witches,” “carlings,” “second sight,” and “deuce take you” (Brand 1810: 317, 325–326, 382, 387–388). The 1813 posthumous edition of *Popular Antiquities* was especially rich in this area, mining seventeenth-century dramas for colloquialisms of the

¹⁴ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Uttara Rama Cheritra*, p. 113; *Malati and Madhava*, p. iii.

¹⁵ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Vikrama and Urvasi*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 52–54, 69, 92, 125; II, *Uttara Rama Cheritra*, p. 39.

day (Dorson 1968: 23).¹⁷ Warton's *History* took note of similar matters. Anglo-Saxon alliteration and idioms long persevered in English verse. The medieval meaning of "magister" has overlap with the words mystery and mastery. A 1547 poem was "a repertory of proverbs" (Warton 1774–1781, I: 314; III: xxxvii, 91–92). For his part, Douce sought to clear up obscurities in the Bard's plays. "Scrape-trenchering," "day-woman," "Winchester goose," and other expressions were illuminated using philological, literary and cultural analysis and evidence (Douce 1807, I: 17–18, 215–216; II: 64). He also weighed in on scholarly debates regarding the origins, import or contemporary usage of words and phrases in Shakespeare, such as "man in the moon," "henchman," and "wassel" (Douce 1807, I: 15–17, 188–189; II: 206–216). Allusions to old proverbs, customs or popular superstitions preserved in mysterious words or phrases – such as "Some men must love my lady, and some Joan," or "This is that very Mab/That plats the manes of horses in the night" – also attracted Douce's antiquarian attention (Douce 1807, I: 225; II: 180–182).

Mysterious phrases, dim allusions, forgotten references – these too brought out the glossarist in Wilson who, of course, wrote for an audience ignorant of most things Indian. A line about "a monkey tied as fast as a thief" alludes to using those creatures as scape goats in Indian stables, and the phrase "*Indra* carried forth" to some now forgotten ritual observance for the god.¹⁸ Longing for a woman with tresses of "[t]he Jasmine's golden hue" is very strange, given the modern Indian prejudice against all but black hair.¹⁹ A description of a family preserves the various ways Brahmans were then distinguished, such as taking precedence at festivals, maintaining the five fires, drinking soma juice and being learned in the Vedas.²⁰ "Smells their heads" is "a mode of expressing intense affection – parental yearning – still common in India."²¹ The belief that delight stimulates body hair to elevate explains a simile using the Kadamba flower, while describing someone as "White with protecting flour" adverts to the practice of applying white mustard powder to the heads of newborns to ward off evil.²² "Lucky knot" comes from the custom, still practiced, of tying a knot every year in the string binding a person's nativity scroll.²³ The puns in one particular exchange of dialogue are too obscure to recover, but why a con-

¹⁷ Dorson gives a striking example from a Thomas Heywood play listing the multiple ways the English of his day described a drunkard.

¹⁸ Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 93, 181.

¹⁹ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Vikrama and Urvashi*, pp. 79–80.

²⁰ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Malati and Madhava*, pp. 6–8.

²¹ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Malati and Madhava*, p. 43.

²² Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Malati and Madhava*, pp. 84–85, 123.

²³ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Uttara Rama Cheritra*, p. 50.

juror calls out “Reverence to *Indra* who lends our art his name” is easily explained by parsing the word for conjuror into its parts (“*Indra*” and “net”).²⁴

Wilson’s work can thus be read as a contribution to literary antiquarianism. It also illustrates how this intellectual tradition could evolve into cultural nationalism. Brand, Warton and Douce were implicitly interested in English national manners, beliefs and localisms. And Warton’s project was clearly driven by the idea that English poetry had a distinct history and course of development. This may very well have inspired Wilson’s claim that Sanskrit drama demonstrated “original design and national developement [sic].”²⁵ But Wilson went beyond the hints of cultural nationalism found in his eighteenth-century British sources and did so in ways that connect him to German Romanticism.

German Romanticism and the *Select Specimens*

The *Select Specimens* refers directly to the relationship between literature and the nation. In the works he translated, Wilson noted, “[t]he manners and feelings of the people are delineated living and breathing before us.”²⁶ Hindu myths, legends and epics – particularly the “national mythology” found in the *Ramayana* – were the wellspring of this drama.²⁷ The plays illustrated Indian political mores, historical events, domestic culture, religious rituals and popular beliefs.²⁸ In them, “national manners,” “the national creed,” “national peculiarities,” and the “national character” were on display.²⁹ Sanskrit drama, Wilson seemed to be saying, was a great repository of national culture.

These comments indicate a frame of reference different from that of Wilson’s British sources. The 1777/1810 editions of Brand preserved and expanded upon Henry Bourne’s earlier work, which was predicated by the conviction that English popular culture was full of heathen superstitions – perpetuated by, or originating with, the Roman church – and thus was of little value to modern, Protestant Britain (Bauman & Briggs 2003: 80–85). Brand shared the sentiment, though he recognized that “useful knowledge” could be gained from studying

²⁴ Wilson 1826–1827, III, *Retnavali*, pp. 14, 62.

²⁵ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface”, p. iv.

²⁶ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface”, p. ii. This is true of every nation’s drama, Wilson noted.

²⁷ Wilson 1826–1827, II, *Uttara Rama Cheritra*, p. 112. Wilson’s volumes are replete with references to the myths, legends and epic literature that dramatists drew upon. For but a few examples, see: II, *Vikrama and Urvasi*, pp. 3, 9–11; and III, “Appendix,” pp. 63, 80, 86, 93.

²⁸ For some examples of his many notes on these aspects of Sanskrit drama, see: Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, pp. 11, 92, 125; II, *Vikrama and Urvasi*, p. 25; III, *Mudrā Rākshasa*, pp. 1–13; and “Appendix,” pp. 48–49, 75–79.

²⁹ Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, p. 7; II, *Vikrama and Urvasi*, p. 104; and *Malati and Madhava*, pp. 131, 133. Substituting “Hindu” for “national,” as he was wont to do, Wilson made a similar point elsewhere: III, *Mudrā Rākshasa*, p. 2.

popular culture, and wisdom extracted from “the follies and superstitions of our forefathers” (Brand 1810: vi; Bauman & Briggs 2003: 85–89). This more generous spirit led to occasional suggestions of enduring national culture and traditions, as in the custom of April Fools’ Day (Brand 1810: 398–402). But the general story line from Bourne remained intact, with its negative sense of pagan traditions and vulgar superstitions held over from barbarous times due to the early church’s accommodations. Such a master narrative is at odds with a view of literature as a national treasury. Wilson’s debt to Brand was clearly limited.

Douce and Warton are also unreliable sources for the origins of Wilson’s nationalist musings. *Illustrations of Shakspeare* suggests a close connection between Shakespeare and popular culture, and it implicitly presents the Bard’s works as a depository of the sort that Wilson found in Sanskrit drama. The stress, however, is on explicating the obscure. Warton was interested in the rise and development of a literature distinctively English. This led to commentary that can be read as nationalist in nature, as in references to “our poetry” and “our writers” (Warton 1774–1781, III: 494). But Warton’s narrative prioritizes the rise of refined literature and polished language at the expense of the rude and vulgar. Hence Anglo-Saxon poetry is largely ignored, early English language and culture denigrated, and Latin, French and Italian influences praised for their civilizing influences (Warton 1774–1781, I: 2, 457; II: 122–123; III: 70, 487). As with Bourne/Brand, the narrative is of overcoming the primitive, with major progress coming through foreign influences. By preserving “antient manners,” old literature could only provide antiquarian entertainment (Warton 1774–1781, II: 264). A modern literature, however, bore the universal marks of refinement.

Seeing Sanskrit drama as a national literary treasure places Wilson in a different intellectual tradition. Many German thinkers such as J. G. Herder and the early Romantics believed that literary heritages were vital to national cultures. Friedrich Schlegel gave clear expression to this perspective in his 1812 lectures on ancient and modern poetry. Nothing is as necessary to a nation’s future development and, indeed, its entire intellectual existence

“as the possession of a plentiful store of those national recollections and associations, which are lost in a great measure during the dark ages of infant society, but which it forms the great object of the poetical art to perpetuate and adorn. Such national recollections [are] the noblest inheritance which a people can possess” (Schlegel 1818, I: 15; Eichner 1970: 117–119).

It is not clear that Wilson was familiar with these lectures (although, as we shall see, they had a major impact on Scottish cultural nationalists with an interest in the *Select Specimens*). But Wilson did own a copy of Herder’s *Ideen*

zur *Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Anonymous [1861]: 41). There he would have found a similar sensibility extolling ancient sagas as national literary treasures (Herder 1791: 29–30). Wilson’s main access to German cultural nationalism, however, came through the work of August Wilhelm Schlegel.

The elder Schlegel came to British attention through Germaine de Staël-Holstein, whose *De l’Allemagne* had first appeared in two 1813 London editions, the original French and an English translation titled *Germany*. The volumes were a “bestseller” in the winter of 1813–14” and Madame de Staël became “the hit of the social season” in London circles (Sauer 1981: 58–60). *Germany* owes something to A. W. Schlegel, who was at Madame de Staël’s side while she composed parts of it. Schlegel was tutor to her children and her intellectual companion for many years. He also gave influential lectures on drama in Vienna that his patroness had arranged. The lectures and *Germany* share a concern for the linguistic and literary features of cultural nationalism (Paulin 2016: 337–340). Both also opposed aping of foreign literature and culture, with Madame de Staël citing Schlegel on the point (Staël Holstein 1813, I: 91–95; II: 385–386; Schlegel 1815, II: 356–357). A debt to Schlegel and other Germans is also evident in her views on language, folksongs and national character; on discovering the spirit of a nation through its language; and on national differences in literary tastes (Staël Holstein 1813, I: 89, 123, 257, 280–281; II: 366–367; III: 411).

Germany also introduced British audiences to Schlegel. In it Madame de Staël praised him as a translator, literary critic, and opponent of Napoleon, and gave a brief introduction to his Vienna lectures on drama. She also talked up the lectures in salon circles during her winter in London (Staël Holstein 1813, I: 286, 373; II: 366, 370–386; Sauer 1981: 60). All this led to an 1815 English translation of the drama lectures that catapulted Schlegel to literary fame in Britain. During the ensuing fifteen years Schlegel’s lectures were read by “[j]ust about everybody who was anybody in British literary circles” (Sauer 1981: 112). As James Mackintosh wrote Schlegel in 1821, “I know no book so generally read and followed or opposed as your lectures on Dramatic Poetry. You are become our National Critic” (Körner 1929: 70; Sauer 1981: 112).

Schlegel not only took Britain by storm, he also reached audiences in British India. The *Select Specimens* makes clear that Wilson had read Schlegel’s lectures and was aware of the German’s celebrity back home. This is evident in his appeal to Schlegel’s authority on reading Sanskrit drama in the right spirit. *The Mrichchakati*, Wilson noted in 1826, should not be judged wanting by contemporary theatrical conventions or dismissed for contravening “our social institutions.” Instead, “[w]e must judge the composition after the rules laid down by *Schlegel*, and identify ourselves, as much as possible, with the people

and the time to which it belongs.”³⁰ Wilson was undoubtedly referring here to the opening pages of Schlegel’s first lecture on drama, where the Romantic critic stated that no one “can be a true critic or connoisseur who does not possess a universality of mind, who does not possess the flexibility, which, throwing aside all personal predilections and blind habits, enables him to transport himself into the peculiarities of other ages and nations, to feel them as it were from their proper central point” (Schlegel 1815, I: 3).

The influence of Herder is clear in the reference to finding this central point. In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* Herder had famously written that “[e]ach nation has its center of happiness in itself, like every sphere its center of gravity!” (Herder 2002: 297).³¹ Schlegel’s lecture also reveals a more general debt to the idea of *Einfühlung* as popularized by Herder. In his early years Schlegel had been deeply influenced by Herder’s work, including the latter’s historical method with its stress on *Einfühlung*. One must appreciate different historical periods and civilizations on their own terms, rather than judge them by supposed universal norms. Individual artists in turn were products of their time and culture and should be evaluated accordingly (Zehnder 1930: 65–78, 100–101, 186; Schmidt 1917: 35, 42–43). An author, Herder wrote, “stands in his own century like a tree in the earth in which he is rooted, out of which he draws sap, with which he dresses the limbs of his emergence” (Zammito 2009: 72). Responding to the *Sakuntala* craze set off by William Jones’ translation, Herder hence urged that “[i]m Indischen, nicht Europäischen Geist muß man also auch die Sakontala lesen” (Herder 1886: 577). Schlegel knew Herder’s *Sakuntala* essay very well (Schmidt 1917: 43), and he echoed its sentiments in an essay on Dante where he insisted that one must imagine oneself in the Italian’s time and place – become a Guelph or Ghibelline – to grasp *The Divine Comedy* (Zehnder 1930: 72).

Wilson thus situated himself squarely in the German hermeneutical tradition with his plea to read *The Mrichchakati* in the spirit of the people and times for whom it was intended. Schlegel’s influence on Wilson continued – despite critical scholarly differences – as the Romantic reinvented himself in the 1820s as an Indologist and engaged Wilson on matters relating to Sanskrit studies.³² In an 1822 review of Wilson’s Sanskrit dictionary, for instance, Schlegel posited

³⁰ Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, p. 203.

³¹ This allusion to a distinctive idea buried deep in one of Herder’s works was typical of Schlegel (Schmidt 1917, p. 39).

³² Their at times bitterly contentious intellectual relationship is beyond the scope of this essay. Good glimpses of it can be found in the voluminous notes to Rocher & Rocher 2013 and in Rocher & Rocher 2012, pp. 187–189. For Schlegel’s turn to Indology see Herling 2006, pp. 157–201, and Paulin 2016, pp. 478–519.

that Sanskrit was once a living *Volkssprache* (Schlegel 1822: 331).³³ Wilson endorsed the idea in the *Select Specimens*, but doubted that it ever was spoken across all of India, adding that it had ceased to be a living language at some point, kept in use by elites only. Thus vernacular dramas, now lost, were likely more numerous and popular, and therefore “more strictly speaking national.” The sanctity of performances and the Sanskrit language, along with popular stories, helped Sanskrit plays maintain an appeal. But this only made them akin to the “Latin plays of *Ariosto*, or the scholastic exhibitions of Westminster,” where scholarship was a “sorry substitute for universal, instantaneous, and irrepressible delight.” Still, the Sanskrit theatre was self-generated, not derivative, and “strongly evidence[d] both original design and national development [sic].” Schlegel was right, Wilson added, to suggest that it should be categorized as Romantic rather than as classical. This was an autonomous development, however, because Sanskrit drama was already in decline when modern European theatre emerged.³⁴

Wilson’s Cultural Nationalism

Wilson’s deepest debt to Schlegel is manifest in his repeated references – already noted – to Sanskrit drama as a repository of national mythology, creeds, manners and character. Schlegel’s lectures on drama, as Roger Paulin notes, were infused with a cosmopolitan spirit of cultural nationalism. The type of drama Schlegel celebrated was rooted in the spirit of a people, reflected the national character, and helped build the nation. This was true of Greek and Spanish drama and especially Shakespeare’s history plays, which “supplied the English with their national epic.” It might too be true of his homeland, if only a German historical drama would be fashioned (Paulin 2016: 302–314, 339). The theatre, Schlegel lectured, is “where the whole of the social cultivation and art of a nation, the fruits of centuries of continued exertions, may be represented in a few hours” (Schlegel 1815, I: 37). Powerful drama results when artists draw their language from life around them, as with the “great poet” Shakespeare, whose characters speak almost “in the tone of their actual life” (Schlegel 1815, II: 146–148, 159). Bad art results from aping foreign manners and culture. The “wretched imitations” of French theatre in early eighteenth-century Germany proved this. Great drama was in the offing, however, if German dramatists would look to medieval German history for inspiration. “What a field for a poet

³³ Wilson owned a presentation copy of the bound volume in which the review was republished in 1823 (Anonymous [1861], p. 56).

³⁴ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface,” pp. iv–viii. For Schlegel’s view of Romantic literature and of *Sakuntala* as akin to modern Romantic drama, see Schlegel 1815, I, pp. 8, 25.

who, like Shakspeare, could discern the poetical side of the great events of the world!" (Schlegel 1815, II: 356–357, 388–390).

This sensibility – sans the express interest in (re)building a national theatre – is evident in the *Select Specimens*. But if Schlegel's concern with creating a national theatre was absent from Wilson's published translations, it may help explain the latter's participation in the fledgling modern Bengali theatre, which, as noted, began with translations of Sanskrit drama. If so, Wilson was not alone in imbibing Schlegel's message about a national theatre. Translators, critics and dramatists in France, Spain and Eastern Europe were led by the lectures on drama to a newfound interest in Shakespeare and nationalist themes in theatre. Among those so inspired was Alexander Pushkin (Paulin 2016: 425–430; Körner, 1929: 69–74; Clayton 2003: 33–35). Along with his theatrical activity, Wilson's *Select Specimens* ought at least to be considered in the context of the literary nationalism that Schlegel's Vienna lectures helped unleash across Europe.

So too should be Wilson's insistent plea for preserving Sanskrit studies during the EIC's education debates. His work on the *Select Specimens* coincided with a long stint on the GCPI. Wilson was a key member of that committee from its establishment in 1823 until his retirement to England in 1833. He also was instrumental in the founding of Calcutta Sanskrit College in 1824 and crafted its early curriculum. In his educational work Wilson promoted the policy of engraftment, whereby European knowledge and the English language would be slowly added to the traditional curricula at madrasas and Sanskrit colleges. One important reason for this approach was recognition of the fact that Indian educated elites were strongly attached to traditional learning and thus would not take to European subjects until an interest in these had been cultivated (Zastoupil & Moir 1999: 17–21; Dodson 2011: 73–76).

Twice Wilson came to the defense of engraftment when the policy was challenged by liberal reformers. Each time he went beyond common arguments for engraftment by endorsing a version of Romantic cultural nationalism. The first instance was in 1824 after James Mill and the London authorities lambasted the engraftment policy for promoting the study of useless subjects, some of which were "worse than a waste of time ... either to teach or to learn." This included poetry, which Mill thought inappropriate for college education. Such a program was based on undue attention to local prejudices when the focus should be on teaching useful subjects (Zastoupil & Moir 1999: 21–22, 115–117). Wilson and the education committee responded with a defense of Indian science and literature and an appeal to Indian sentiments. Anyone knowledgeable about Indian public opinion is aware of the "very slight estimation" in which all

Indians regard European literature and science. Pandits and maulawis in particular are “not disposed to regard the literature and science of the West as worth the labour of attainment.” The “actual state of public feeling” hence necessitated upholding Indian languages and literature, including the poetry that James Mill found objectionable. The GCPI defended the study of this subject in language drawn from the vocabulary of Romantic cultural nationalism. “[A]s the source of national imagery, the expression of national feeling, and the depository of the most approved phraseology and style, the poetical writings of Hindus and Mohammadans” are legitimate subjects of study at colleges established for them (Zastoupil & Moir 1999: 22–23, 118–123).

The strong resemblance between these sentiments and ones that Wilson soon published in his *Select Specimens* is alone reason to think that the last passage was his doing. Conclusive evidence came a decade later when he again defended engraftment, this time from the onslaught of T. B. Macaulay and other Anglicists. These reformers introduced a new educational policy in Bengal stressing the study of English and the promotion of Western knowledge at the expense of traditional Sanskrit and Arabic studies. Their antipathy to Sanskrit was openly expressed. Wilson, who had retired from India in 1833 to take up the Boden chair of Sanskrit at Oxford, led the counteroffensive in Britain. He collaborated with Indian allies regarding strategies of resistance and challenged the new policy in an 1835 letter to the editor of the *Asiatic Journal*. Among those taken by the 1835 letter was John Stuart Mill, who sought, unsuccessfully, to undo the Anglicist reforms from his position in the London offices of the East India Company. Wilson’s arguments in that 1835 letter included ones that the GCPI had employed against James Mill in 1824, as well as fresh ones addressing changing circumstances and new criticisms of engraftment (Zastoupil & Moir 1999: 26–49). Among the familiar arguments was a more strident appeal to cultural nationalism. Wilson went beyond merely defending the importance of Sanskrit and Arabic poetry as repositories of national sentiments and imagery to positing their essentiality for forging a modern national literature. This project could not be realized using an imported foreign language. It needed Indians drawing on “forms of speech which they already understand and use” to dress modern ideas in familiar garb. This could be accomplished only by those versed in the classical languages of Sanskrit and Arabic. Sanskrit and Arabic philology were thus “indispensable,” not only for acquiring those languages, but “for the perfection of the current forms of speech and the formation of a national literature.” Although the Anglicists believed they could annihilate Indian literature, “[sweep] away all sources of pride and pleasure” among Indians in their own intellectual efforts, and render “a whole people

dependent upon a remote and unknown country for all their ideas and for the very words in which to clothe them,” this was simply not possible.

“[W]e shall never wean [Indians], nor need it be attempted, from the congenial imagery and sentiments of their poetry – from the intelligible and amusing inventions of their dramatists and tale-writers – from the, to them, important facts of their history, and the interesting and not uninteresting legends of their tradition.”

The plan to import “English literature along with English cottons” and bring it into universal use in Bengal was “chimerical and ridiculous. If the people are to have a literature, it must be their own. The stuff may be in a great degree European, but it must be freely interwoven with homespun materials, and the fashion must be Asiatic” (Zastoupil & Moir 1999: 219–221).

If Indians are to have a modern literature, it must be fashioned in good part from their own heritage. Might this sentiment explain Wilson producing and directing his English translation of Bhavabhuti’s *Uttararamacharitam* for Prasanna Kumar Tagore’s Hindu Theatre? Whether the Bengali theatre that developed from Tagore’s initial effort owed anything to Wilson’s engagement with German Romantic nationalism is beyond the bounds of this essay. Instead, let me close with a brief look at how Scottish cultural nationalists were drawn to Wilson’s *Select Specimens* and what this suggests about its larger import.

In the early nineteenth century, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* became associated with a Romantic perspective akin to that of Wilson’s. In its pages, writers familiar with German thought – and in some cases inspired by Madame de Staël – helped in their own way transform literary antiquarianism into Romantic cultural nationalism. Friedrich Schlegel’s lectures on ancient and modern literature were particularly important to contributors celebrating the preservation and promotion of Scottish national character in and through literature (Duncan 2007: 46–50, 57–62). John Lockhart translated Schlegel’s lectures and drew from them conclusions that H. H. Wilson’s defense of engraftment would later echo: literature should have reference to religion as well as to national history and character; literature is the great “conservator” of national associations and, since “every nation has its own mental character and constitution propagated from generation to generation, no traditions or poetry can be so congenial” to a people as their own; and a “great national character” can only be maintained by a literature that keeps alive the “characteristic spirit” of ancestors and rivets the impressions peculiar to the nation ([Lockhart] 1818: 500).³⁵ John Wilson claimed that same year that “[e]very people has ... its own individual character” and that this character is revealed in their literature

³⁵ For Lockhart’s authorship, see Strout 1954, p. 37.

which presents “the picture of their minds.” Sanskrit drama was a good example. *Sakuntala*, he noted in 1820, “makes us feel in the heart of ancient India” ([Wilson] 1818: 797; [Wilson] 1820: 418).³⁶ In an 1833–1834 two-part review of the *Select Specimens*, John Wilson went one step further, citing *Sakuntala* as evidence that “the Hindus had a National Drama.” He also lavished praise on H. H. Wilson’s volumes for “unfold[ing] before us the whole of the finest part of a national literature, and thereby illustrat[ing] a highly interesting national character.” In addition, John Wilson called for a reprint edition because copies of the Calcutta work were hard to find in Britain ([Wilson] 1833: 716).³⁷ As it turns out, a second edition did appear in London two years later.

The existence of that 1835 edition is revealing. Essays, reviews and commentaries on drama were common enough in *Blackwood’s* during this period, and Wilson did cite the magazine in the *Select Specimens* on a staging issue.³⁸ Familiarity with *Blackwood’s* could explain why his 1835 defense of engraftment used the same argument about the congeniality of a national poetic heritage that Lockhart had used in 1818. If a regular reader, H. H. Wilson might then have seen in John Wilson’s review the possibility of using a London edition of the *Select Specimens* to bolster the engraftment policy against its critics. After all, Scottish intellectuals championing the vital connection between literary heritage and national character were praising Wilson for illuminating this fact as regards India. At the very least John Wilson’s review suggests a domestication of Sanskrit drama. H. H. Wilson had brought home to British audiences long attuned to literary antiquarianism, and newly captivated by German Romanticism, the notion that Sanskrit drama was a repository of Indian national character and a crucial part of Indian national literature. These currents in British literary criticism are the neglected context for Wilson’s desire “to secure to the Hindu theatre, a place in English literature.”³⁹

³⁶ For John Wilson’s authorship of these, see Roberts 2013, pp. 257–258.

³⁷ For John Wilson’s authorship of these, see Roberts 2013, pp. 260–263.

³⁸ Wilson 1826–1827, I, *The Mrichchakati*, p. 42.

³⁹ Wilson 1826–1827, I, “Preface,” pp. x–xi.

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