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Shakuntala

Kalidasa · *c. 4th–5th century AD; English 1912 · Arthur W. Ryder, 1912*

King Dushyanta, hunting, comes to a forest hermitage and meets Shakuntala, the sage Kanva's foster-child. They marry by consent, and he leaves a ring as his pledge. A slighted sage curses her so that the king will forget her until he sees the ring. The ring is lost; she is rejected at court. When the ring is found, memory returns, and in the last act he finds her again with their son.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What remains of a marriage when the husband no longer knows his wife, and what can restore recognition?

"My words must be fulfilled. But the curse shall be lifted when her lover sees a gem which he has given her for a token."

Durvasas, reported by Anusuya · Act IV

The play binds a true marriage to a visible token. Under the curse, and without the ring, the king will not receive Shakuntala at court. The ring is found, memory and grief return, and the last act completes a recognition that Act V could not. It is a Hindu drama of pledge and return, not a church allegory.

KEY CHARACTERS

Shakuntala
Foster-child of Kanva; wife of Dushyanta; mother of All-tamer. The play is named for her recognition.

King Dushyanta
Her husband, who forgets her under a curse and knows her again when the ring is restored.

Kanva
The sage who has raised her in the hermitage and later sends her to the court.

Durvasas
The irascible sage whose curse makes the king forget her until he sees the ring.

Priyamvada and Anusuya
Her friends, who hear the curse and try to help her.

All-tamer (Bharata)
Their son, found with his mother in the last act.

THE TOKEN

> *"My words must be fulfilled. But the curse shall be lifted when her lover sees a gem which he has given her for a token."*
>
> **Durvasas, reported by Anusuya** · Act IV

> *"You cannot mean that this young woman is my wife."*
>
> **King Dushyanta** · Act V

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The hunt

PROLOGUE AND ACT I

After a benediction and a prologue, the king pursues a deer into Kanva's hermitage and meets Shakuntala.

- The stage-director asks for a song, and the play of the ring is named.
- The king is checked from killing a deer in a holy place.
- He sees Shakuntala and her friends in the hermitage.

> *"Until the wise are satisfied, I cannot feel that skill is shown; The best-trained mind requires support, And does not trust itself alone."*
>
> **The stage-director** · Prologue

02 Love and the pledge

ACTS II–III

The king stays near the hermitage. He and Shakuntala come to love one another, marry by mutual consent, and he gives her a ring before he returns to the city.

- The clown Madhavya is with the king in the forest.
- They marry in the gandharva form, by mutual consent.
- The king leaves a ring engraved with his name and goes back to the court.

03 The curse

ACT IV

Lost in thought of her husband, Shakuntala fails to greet the sage Durvasas. He curses her so that the king will forget her until he sees the token he gave.

- Durvasas is slighted and speaks a curse.
- The curse will be lifted when the king sees the gem he gave her.
- Shakuntala, now with child, is sent to the court.

> *"My words must be fulfilled. But the curse shall be lifted when her lover sees a gem which he has given her for a token."*
>
> **Durvasas, reported by Anusuya** · Act IV

04 The rejection

ACT V

At court the king does not know her. The ring is gone. She is rejected in public, and is borne away.

- Kanva's message presents her as the king's wife, with child.
- The king will not receive her: "You cannot mean that this young woman is my wife."
- The ring is lost; she is rejected and taken from the court.

> *"You cannot mean that this young woman is my wife."*
>
> **King Dushyanta** · Act V

05 The ring found

ACT VI

A fisherman is found with the royal ring. Memory returns to the king, and his grief is sharp.

- The ring is recovered from a fisherman.
- The curse is lifted when the king sees the token.
- He remembers Shakuntala and is wretched.

06 Recognition

ACT VII

The king is carried to a heavenly hermitage and finds Shakuntala again, with their son All-tamer, who will be Bharata.

- A heavenly journey follows the king's grief.
- He finds Shakuntala and the boy called All-tamer.
- The family is recognized at last.

> *"With a hermit-wife I had no part, All memories evade me; And yet my sad and stricken heart Would more than half persuade me."*
>
> **King Dushyanta** · Act V, close

A pledged marriage | The lost ring | Forgetfulness | Public shame | Recognition

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted English is Arthur W. Ryder, 1912, the play only, extracted from Gutenberg #16659.
2. The curse and the lost ring work together; neither alone explains the rejection at court.
3. Ryder's name for the child is All-tamer (Bharata).
4. The last act is a recognition, not a mere undoing of Act V; the boy is part of what is restored.
5. The play is a Hindu classic. Do not recast it as a church allegory.

Quotations are verbatim from the Arthur W. Ryder, 1912, Arthur W. Ryder, 1912; Project Gutenberg #16659, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/shakuntala/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.