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Śûdraka's *Little Clay Cart*: What India can teach us about New Comedy

Of all surviving Sanskrit dramas, Śûdraka's *Little Clay Cart* seems the most familiar to students of New Comedy. There is a central marriage plot between two lovers of unequal status, as well as several intertwined subplots, including a romance between a maid and a thief who happens to be a Brahman, the transformation of a gambler into a Buddhist monk, and the story of Aryaka, the cowherd's son who overthrows the corrupt king of Ujjain, ushering in a new society based on virtue. Although the play is clearly infused with Indian cultural and spiritual traditions, scholars have argued that it is also influenced by Greek New Comedy. The assumption is that local Indian audiences would have been exposed to New Comedy during Alexander's the Great's campaigns in India because he was accompanied by troupes of actors (Richmond 1990, Varadpande 1981). Nevertheless, as Richmond emphasizes, the case for direct Greek influence on *The Little Clay Cart* is tenuous at best. The date of the play is unknown, with estimates ranging from the 2nd century BC to the 7th century AD. Rather than looking for signs of influence, in this paper I suggest that the *Little Clay Cart* can be read as being in conversation with New Comedy, irrespective of whether Śûdraka actually encountered New Comedy, since in Śûdraka's play we find seemingly familiar character types, devices, and plot patterns employed in unfamiliar ways. Examining these differences allows us to view New Comedy in a new light and at the same time, to consider Śûdraka's use of a seemingly familiar poetic repertoire to culturally distinct ends. In so doing, I hope to make the case that *The Little Clay Cart* has much to offer students of New Comedy.