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Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa seriously

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創価大学
国際仏教学高等研究所
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平成25年度
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Annual Report
of
The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology
at Soka University

for the Academic Year 2013

Volume XVII

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Taking the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Seriously

Jonathan A. SILK

“The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*,” Étienne Lamotte tells us, “is perhaps the crowning jewel of the Buddhist literature of the Great Vehicle.”¹ And indeed, among modern scholars (perhaps more so than among contemporary Asian Buddhists), there are many who are willing to agree, to rank the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as among the most sublime expressions of Mahāyāna thought. Without necessarily disagreeing with this valuation, one might yet ask—what does it mean? Whose judgement is being reflected in this appraisal? Upon what bases is this assessment being made? By what standards is the scripture being evaluated? For if it is more than empty rhetoric, a requirement for any such value judgement to be meaningful is a clear statement of its parameters. If we want, this is to say, to understand the place of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in Buddhist literature, we must seek out the whys and wherefores behind such claims.²

Any effort to appreciate or evaluate judgements about a scripture’s status must begin with the contexts within which such judgements might be offered. From this starting point, the importance (which is to say primarily, the influence) and popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* at least in China and Japan can be relatively easily demonstrated. Or at least this is possible if the measure of this importance and popularity is, for instance, the number of commentaries written on the text, the frequency of its citation—and particularly in the Chinese case, this includes citations in genres of literature not necessarily Buddhist—or the inspiration the text provided for artists.³ Since among East Asian lands it is in China that the sūtra found the most eager reception, a detailed examination of the Chinese case is called for. But while we should not necessarily generalize in this regard, the evaluations we find scholars and enthusiasts offering about the sūtra do not, as a rule, limit themselves geographically, or even chronologically: they are often presented (albeit tacitly) as abstractly and ahistorically factual. However, so long as we accept the basic axiom that nothing is important, influential or popular in the abstract, but only to some person or group(s) of persons at some place and time, it is

¹ Lamotte 1976: V.

² The present paper has a long history. Earlier versions were presented and circulated among a few friends and colleagues also under the title “Why Has the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Been So Popular?” I am grateful for the suggestions I have have received, some of which I try to respond to at the end of this paper. I have not made a special effort to update the paper’s references in recent years, however, so I may well have overlooked some relevant contributions.

³ Much of this has been studied, the commentaries by the prolific scholar of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Ōshika Jisshu (1982) and others, the artistic works by many art historians, and so on. For quotations see the convenient accounting in Watanabe 1940: 134–136n3. For the wider cultural context one accessible starting point is Demiéville 1962.

simply not meaningful to speak of decontextualized prominence. Therefore, given the aforementioned decision to pivot the following discussion around China, in order to locate this exploration more broadly it makes sense to first briefly ask what one can say of the importance of the text elsewhere, outside of East Asia.⁴

It is possible to dispense with the case of Tibet rather quickly. It is a reasonable generalization to say that no sūtra has been particularly important for most Tibetan Buddhists, including scholars, whose interests rarely go beyond the secondary quotation of scriptural passages quoted in Indian śāstras or anthologies.⁵ This, interestingly, is true despite the common idea that the two bases of an argument are *āgama*, scriptural authority, and *yukti*, reasoning. Of this pair, *āgama* is usually given only passing mention by most authors, Indian as well as Tibetan. In sum, one would be hard put to argue for the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s direct importance in Tibet.⁶

As for India itself, the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is not unlike that of another sūtra also highly influential in East Asia, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* or Lotus Sūtra. As I have shown,⁷ that scripture, while known to Indian authors, has left precious few direct traces in Indian texts. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, like the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, is quoted by a small number of authors, Śāntideva and Kamalaśīla and one or two others,⁸ and is quoted or referred to a few times here and there in works which, although they no longer exist in Sanskrit, are also certainly Indian. But there are not many such citations. The relative paucity of quotations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in Indian works contrasts sharply with the rate at which a number of other sūtra texts are cited in Indian treatises, texts such as the *Adhyāśayasamcodana*, the *Tathāgataguhyaka*, the *Samādhirāja*, and the *Śālistamba*, not to mention the larger *Prajñāpāramitā*. It also bears mention that there is no known Indian commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, although compared to the total number of such scriptures, there are very few Indian commentaries, extant or lost, on any Mahāyāna sūtras at all, a circumstance which requires its own investigation. Given the relative (in)frequency with which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is cited in Indian literature, we are compelled to conclude that it was not a very important or popular text in India either, at least among those who composed Buddhist philosophical literature.⁹ However, as I will

⁴ Even though present-day thoroughly non-Mahāyānist Burma and Sri Lanka were once home to Mahāyāna followers, and Mahāyāna texts circulated there, for our present purposes we need not consider the theoretically possible one-time influence of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in these regions. It is the limitations of my own knowledge which prevent me from offering any consideration of regions such as Vietnam, Mongolia or Korea. To judge by Maggi 2007 the text, while known in Khotan, was perhaps not terribly influential.

⁵ For a start on studying this issue with regard to Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo*, see Langelaar 2011. In the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, when Tsong kha pa quotes the text (twice) in his *Lam rim chen mo*, he does so on the basis of Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama*. Some scriptures did naturally attract attention from broad audiences in Tibet, such as the *Aparimitāyurjñāna*, which I discuss in a forthcoming study. I am of course also aware that some writers in Tibetan have taken up the study of sūtras, even composing lengthy commentaries on the entire Kanjur (see for instance Pad dkar bzang po 2006), but these few cases are tiny islands in the vast sea of Tibetan Buddhist literature.

⁶ Its impact on Tibetan Madhyamaka thought might hypothetically be located through the influence of Candrakīrti, but at least in his *Prasannapadā* he nevertheless quotes the sūtra only once, while in the *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* he cites it not at all.

⁷ Silk 2001.

⁸ I have, however, some doubt about Soeda 1978. For the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, see Mochizuki 1962, and note 2, above.

⁹ We might also note that, to judge by its content, we would be hard pressed to argue that the

suggest below, there is another manner in which it indeed does seem to have exerted considerable influence, namely in inspiring the composition of other sūtras. Given this, our evidence suggests that much of the historical popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was primarily limited to East Asia, that is to say, to China and to the lands under its cultural influence.¹⁰

It is these just stated limits to the historical popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* that lead me to cast the central question here as one concerning, in the first place, the popularity of the sūtra in China. However, I am not a Sinologist, and I am not able properly to explore the literary, social, political or doctrinal environment into which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was introduced in fourth century China, although it may well be there that crucial keys to the scripture's popularity are found. This notwithstanding, the questions I would like to explore most centrally are not those regarding the specifically historical Chinese reception of the text, in its literary, social, political or doctrinal environment. Rather, I would like to pursue several questions which touch on the overall structure of the sūtra, on aspects of its composition that are, for the most part, independent of the language in which it is transmitted and the specific environment within which it was read and studied. If, and if so how, these factors may have influenced the reception of the text in various different cultural milieux must remain, again, questions for another day.¹¹

Fortunately for my lack of competence in Sinology, the question of the popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in early China has already been taken up by experts. One of the best of these, Erik Zürcher, addressed the question as follows in his landmark study *The Buddhist Conquest of China*:¹²

The popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* ... among the fourth century Chinese intelligentsia is easily explainable. In the first place this sūtra is a kind of dramatized exposition of the doctrine. The different dialogues between various groups of personages ... ably strung together in a *Rahmenerzählung* with an ever-changing scenery, have been used to treat a great variety of doctrinal subjects. We find long passages about the wonderful power of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva, about the superiority of the Mahāyāna over the Small Vehicle, about the transcendent nature of the Buddha-body, about the concept of non-duality,

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa's popularity lay elsewhere, as may well have been the case with texts such as the aforementioned *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* or the *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, texts which left even fewer traces in Indian philosophical literature than did the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—in the case of the *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, none at all—but which, in contrast to it, do contain ideas which may conceivably have won them another kind of (“popular”) following, although if this hypothetical scenario be true, it nevertheless remains to be demonstrated. Influences in subtler domains of intertextuality are possible, but a much greater familiarity with the breadth of Indian Mahāyāna sūtra literature than I possess would be required even to begin any informed discussion of this topic.

¹⁰ The modern popularity of the sūtra, which has been translated now many times in both Asian and European languages, may have different causes, but this aspect of the text's popularity should be dealt with separately.

¹¹ I am, at the same time, both aware of and in strong agreement with the suggestion of Kontler 1988: 330, who wrote: “ne serait-il pas possible d'affirmer que, si le mode de narration et son développement dramatique déterminent l'exposition et la mise en oeuvre de cette doctrine, ils déterminent aussi, dans une certaine mesure, la doctrine elle-même.” So also Hamlin 1988: 89, “For this text more than for most, the success of a doctrinal argument is hinged on the success of a poetics, and vice versa.”

¹² Zürcher 1959: 131-132; I have adjusted the Chinese romanization to the pinyin system.

etc. On the other hand, all these subjects are treated as variations and illustrations of the one basic theme of the whole sūtra: the loving and saving power of the Bodhisattva who, like Vimalakīrti himself, voluntarily undergoes the “disease of existence” for the sake of all beings. Hence this scripture may be regarded ... as a real compendium of Mahāyāna doctrine. This explains why it remained one of the most venerated and influential works of the Buddhist canon in the Far East, and, at the same time, why it never became the favorite scripture of any particular school in later Chinese Buddhism, as happened to other Mahāyāna sūtras with more specific doctrine centered around one basic theme, such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha* and the treatises of the *Sanlun* school.

In the second place, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* possesses some special features which must have been very attractive to the cultured Chinese public in medieval times. The dialogue ... is handled here with extraordinary skill. By the arrangement of themes in ascending order of emphasis, both the narrative as a whole and the individual sections of dialogue have a certain dramatic tension which is sadly lacking in practically all other Buddhist canonical works. To the fourth century Chinese intelligentsia this must not only have appealed because of its literary qualities as such; to them the whole situation described in the main part of the sūtra—the conversation between Vimalakīrti and his guests—must have been strangely reminiscent of their own rhetorical meetings devoted to the discussion of more or less philosophical themes. Vimalakīrti, the famous householder (or, in Chinese, *jūshì* 居士, “retired scholar”!) of Vaiśālī, rich, honored and well-versed in debate, resembled their own ideal of the eloquent *qīngtán* [清談] adept; his “skill in expedient means” applied to save all creatures in accordance with their special nature and needs closely agreed with the “responding” activity of the *xuánxué* [玄學] Sage; Vimalakīrti’s famous moment of silence as the most adequate expression of the Absolute came near to the *xuánxué* concept of the ineffability of Truth and the ideal of “silent understanding”; the frequent and able use of the paradox and of short enigmatic statements corresponded with similar practices in *qīngtán*.

For all these reasons the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* soon became one of the most influential scriptures in gentry Buddhism.

There is very little here with which one might disagree, but two main points may be somewhat further explored. First, Zürcher talks of the sūtra as “a kind of dramatized exposition of the doctrine.” Second, he alludes to its popularity among the gentry, the non-monastic elite of southern China, the scholars belonging to the class of those who had, although educated and qualified for government service, lost their expected opportunities for such service and indeed their very sense of their place in the world thanks to the chaos into which their society had been cast by the fall of the Han and the division of China into Northern and Southern realms. For it was among these thinkers, and among their monastic partners in intellectual conversation, that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* first gained a constituency in China. Thus, although this certainly oversimplifies Zürcher’s careful formulation, we may not unfairly reduce to two fundamental factors the apparent causes of the popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in early China. First is its dramatic exposition, second its appeal to lay followers,¹³ particularly in the way that the figure of Vimalakīrti himself is taken as a possible model for those who remain outside the monastic world to nevertheless understand and

¹³ Kontler 1988: 335 goes so far as to warn us to “n’oublions pas que l’auteur du *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* s’adresse à de larges assemblées laïques,” without however providing evidence for this assertion.

legitimate their claims to spiritual attainments equal, if not superior, to those of monks.

To take up first the former of these two points, that concerning the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s dramatic exposition,¹⁴ Zürcher speaks of “both the narrative as a whole and the individual sections of dialogue hav[ing] a certain dramatic tension which is sadly lacking in practically all other Buddhist canonical works.” Just what in the drama of this scripture might have proven itself so attractive? A related question concerns the presence or absence of similarly dramatic sections of dialogue in other scriptures. Since we do find similar episodes elsewhere, one basic question to ask is: why the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, rather than something else? I would like to propose that—as Zürcher himself indirectly suggests—the key lies not in the individual elements or units of the scripture but in the overall way these are put together: the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as a whole, unlike most other Buddhist sūtras, has what I believe can be identified as something close to a classical Aristotelian ‘plot.’¹⁵

A task not yet even begun by Buddhist scholars is that of attempting to forge a poetics of Buddhist sūtra literature. All literatures have their own features, their own characteristics. Some of these may be universal, or if not universal, at least applicable across the boundaries of traditions. Poetry, for instance, in many cases (though certainly not all), has features which transcend the language in which it is written, such that Sanskrit poetry can be recognized and analyzed and studied with some of the same sorts of tools that one brings to bear on the study of Kālidāsa or Pindar, of the Irish poet Yeats, or the Japanese Fujiwara no Teika. It is true that there is some Indian Buddhist literature which can be approached even with the now ‘old-fashioned’ tools of Western textual criticism, materials such as the *jātaka-avadāna* tale literature in particular. This is a literature of ‘story’ in the most basic and perhaps most universal sense. By the same token, however, as we know from our reading of the *Jātakas*, many of them are hardly particularly Buddhist at all.¹⁶ It is rather the most particularly Buddhist forms of literature which present the most problems. For most Buddhist sūtras cannot be approached with these same critical tools, since whatever they are doing and however they are doing it, it does not involve the types of structures familiar to Western literary traditions.¹⁷ In the *Jātaka* literature there are characters who encounter some problem and

^{14.} By referring here to Zürcher, I do not mean to suggest that he is the only scholar to have offered such an approach to the text. See merely as examples also Demiéville 1962, Hamlin 1988 and Kontler 1988 (the latter two independently and simultaneously offering similar creative and provocative readings of the sūtra). This may be an apposite spot to express my appreciation to and for my old friend Ed Hamlin, with whom I began graduate school together in 1983. He was by far the better student, and his choice to follow another path, while probably best for him, has been a loss for the field. His paper on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* remains one of the best appreciations of it as literature.

Much later, another fellow student was Alan Cole. While there is a very great deal indeed with which I cannot agree in his 2005 *Text As Father*, the fact remains that Cole here insists on taking Mahāyāna sūtras seriously as rhetoric, a stance with which I am in full agreement.

^{15.} I do not think I am by any means the first to suggest this, though I have not noticed the theme elsewhere developed as I do.

^{16.} It is well known that many of the Jātaka tales, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha as bodhisattva, are ‘Buddhist’ only in the final framing identifications of characters from the story with (narratively speaking) present-day figures, the Buddha and those in his circle. Otherwise most are simply examples of the rich trope of stories for which India is so famous, many of which were borrowed later by Aesop, La Fontaine and others.

^{17.} I restrict this consideration to Mahāyāna sūtra literature here, but it might apply equally to Āgama/

the problem is resolved in one way or another. Nothing like this happens in most sūtra literature, because nothing much *happens* as such. It is certainly true that modern writing—novels or poetry for instance—sometimes also veers rather radically away from the structures plotted and analyzed and understood by conventional literary criticism. There is modern literature which tells no apparent story, which does not have the classical “quest” pattern consisting of a situation, a challenge, and the challenge overcome, the pattern mapped by Vladimir Propp and his successors. Some critics have worked to develop tools for understanding this type of literature too, and it may be in such theoretical approaches that we will find the hints and the tools we will need to begin to build a poetics of Indian Buddhist sūtra literature. However, no matter how helpful they might somehow be, we do not need to employ such tools in order to understand the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—or at least, there are ways in which we may approach and appreciate this text which do not require us to make use of such tools.

What is the relation between the structure of a text, the way it is put together, and its meaning or its message? How is a text built such that it communicates? There are many aspects to such a question, including what the characters in a text do, who they are and how we learn about them, where the text is set, what its world includes, and how time works in the text—is the story a straightforward chronological progression, or are there flashbacks, and so on. In the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* I would like to address a more basic, or at least a more limited, question: how does the text develop? And I asserted above that the old conventional tools of Aristotelian poetics may suffice to address this question because, unlike the case in almost all other Buddhist sūtras, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* something *does* happen, and the narrative *does* develop; it involves a story, or more technically speaking, it actually involves a plot. The distinction is, in one sense, that between a mere chronological sequence—first this happened, then that—and a logical sequence—this happened, therefore that happened. As the novelist and critic E. M. Forster famously wrote, “The king died, and then the queen died” is a story; “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. Most Buddhist sūtras do not even have a story, much less a plot. Whatever they contain, there is no “this happened, then that” because nothing happens as such. What this signifies about our ability to analyze and understand Buddhist sūtra literature as literature is a topic well worth careful consideration.¹⁸ For the moment, however, I rest content to argue that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* not only has a story, it also has a plot.¹⁹

Zürcher and others have told us that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was known and appreciated for its language, its dialogic style, its philosophical content, and for the way

Nikāya sūtra literature.

^{18.} Here some of what Hamlin 1988: 117 says about the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* can potentially be generalized, namely that “to grasp its philosophical orientation correctly it is essential to give due weight to the narrative and aesthetic structures which underpin it.” At least it should remain an open question whether this is true for other texts, rather than, as is almost universally the case, ignoring such factors in favor of a sort of philosophical or doctrinal strip mining which pays no attention to the scenery or broader environment.

^{19.} As Michael Radich suggests to me (personal communication), having a plot as such is not enough; it has to be a good, and a fresh plot. I am not as sure that I agree with other of his suggestions, such as that the work must be of elegant craftsmanship, for instance. That is indeed amply on display in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, but quite noticeably lacking in, for instance, Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*.

all of this is fit together. I would emphasize that the way things are put together is the crucial element here. The wonderfully wry and striking style of many of the episodes, such as that of the Goddess and Śāriputra in chapter six and the beauty of the Chinese language of Kumārajīva's translation may be important contributions to the overall success of the scripture,²⁰ but the key lies in the totality, rather than in any particular content. I believe this in part because some of those same contents, or variants on those same contents, some of the most impressive episodes of the text, are found elsewhere as well.

The literary critic Jonathan Culler has reminded us that “The analysis of plot structure ought to be a study of the structuring process by which plots take shape, and ... one of the best ways of discovering what norms are at work [is] to alter the text and consider how its effect is changed.”²¹ In other words, Culler suggests that one technique for understanding how a plot develops is to change part of it, and see what happens then—a kind of scientific experiment in which one understands the parts and the whole by making changes to the parts, one by one, altering the variables, as it were. In the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, we do not have to imagine changes to the text in order to explore how its meaning or its impact might be affected, since ready-made examples exist for us already.

Two of the most dramatic and striking episodes in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the third chapter's series of interviews with the various auditors and bodhisattvas, leading up to the dialogue with Mañjuśrī which culminates in Vimalakīrti's famous “thundering silence,” and the sixth chapter's seriocomic episode of Śāriputra's interview with the Goddess, culminating in a dramatic and unexpected sex-exchange for the hapless disciple and transcendent Goddess, provide excellent material for our experiment.²² The wonderful rhetorical power and beauty of these episodes is beyond doubt, as is the contribution they make to the appeal of the text. Thus, we might expect that even on their own, apart from the context of the sūtra, they would be able to convey some of that power. In order to investigate this issue, let us think for a moment about the relation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to other texts.

The genre of ‘sūtra’ in Buddhist literature is defined emically by certain characteristics, by stock opening and closing, for example. But sharing certain formal structural features is not the only way in which sūtras are connected one with another. The suttas of the Pāli canon, collected in the Nikāyas, share large numbers of formulaic passages or stock formulae, a fact recognized, for example, both by traditional scribes and by the editors and translators of the editions of the Pali Text Society who regularly abbreviate such stock expressions (for instance with the term *peyālam*, often itself reduced to simply *pe*). But it is not only the suttas of the Nikāya (and corresponding Sanskrit Āgama) literature which abound in stock expressions and formulaic passages;

²⁰ Demiéville 1962: 179 writes: “Through its contents as well as its form, there is hardly any foreign text, before modern times, which so touched Chinese sensibilities,” and a few pages later (p. 186) he opines of Kumārajīva's translation that it “is one of the most brilliant of the whole Chinese Canon; its high literary quality had a great deal to do with the lasting acclimatisation of the sūtra in China.”

²¹ Culler 1975: 223.

²² I use the term ‘seriocomic’ with hesitation: I am far from convinced that what strikes us as amusing was meant—most especially in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—primarily comedically. See below for my remarks on Williams 1990.

Mahāyāna sūtra literature shares this characteristic. Modern scholarship has, however, yet to come to terms with the vastness of Mahāyāna sūtra literature, and consequently it seems that scholars have sometimes failed to appreciate the extent to which formulaic expressions and shared pericopes are found in Mahāyāna sūtra literature, or what this commonality may indicate.

One way in which shared or common passages may be understood is to assume that one version is a borrowing from another. If two texts share a passage, and we know which text is earlier, the problem would seem to have been solved. Things are not nearly this simple, however. Even assuming that it is possible to determine that passages are ‘similar’—and often even when two passages are not literally identical there can be little argument²³—still two other obvious explanations exist: interpolation, or mutually shared origin.

In his masterly translation and study of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Lamotte has devoted one section of his introduction to its sources. He has been able to identify a large number of stock phrases, formulae, epithets, and other such material which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* shares with other Buddhist literature. He seeks to locate, moreover, the “sources” of these phrases, formulae and the like, while acknowledging that “as the same formula or stock phrase appears in many texts, it is practically impossible to know from which of these the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* borrowed them.” He goes on to suggest that “Experienced in the reading of Sūtras, the author of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may well have taken them from his memory, without referring, even mentally, to any particular text.” Nevertheless, Lamotte seems to believe it possible to identify scriptural sources for certain stock phrases, formulae, images and motifs.²⁴ (Parenthetically we may observe that it is remarkable in this respect that Lamotte appears to have overlooked what seems to be a chief source [albeit perhaps indirectly] for the very characterization of Vimalakīrti himself, the layman Citra, an issue discussed below in Appendix I.²⁵)

In his analysis, Lamotte divides his survey into the following groups of sources: (1) “Canonical sūtras of the Tripiṭaka,” by which he seems to mean the Nikāyas in Pāli, including the Khuddaka (he refers twice to the *Dhammapada*).²⁶ (2) “Vinaya,” again only in Pāli. (3) “Paracanonical sūtras,” defined as follows: “This is a question of the Sayings of the Buddha (*vacana*) not mentioned in the Nikāyas-Āgamas and which the Small Vehicle does not generally recognize as being authoritative.”²⁷ This group includes

²³ This of course side-steps the fundamental methodological problem that we lack any rigorous tools for determining ‘similarity.’ There seems to be no escape from the ad hoc. See Silk 2002 for a consideration of a conceptually related problem.

²⁴ Lamotte is not, of course, the only scholar to indulge in the search for ‘sources.’ Edward Conze (1948), for example, in his edition of the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*, printed next to the text of the *Hṛdaya* the identification of passages from the “larger Prajñāpāramitā sūtras” which he considered to be the “sources” for the *Hṛdaya*’s text. Kotatsu Fujita (1980) sought to establish a “close relationship” between the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha* and the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* on the basis of a borrower-borrowed model. More recently, Pāsādika 2010: 95-96 discusses a sentence from the *Ekottarikāgama* which he treats as a “probable source for a passage in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*,” though in my opinion this too is likely to be yet another example of shared materials.

²⁵ Other possible models proposed include Dharmodgata and Ugra, according to Taki 2007: 186n5.

²⁶ All of Lamotte’s references are to the Pāli Nikāyas, none to the Āgama in Chinese or in Sanskrit fragments.

²⁷ Lamotte 1976: LXXXIII.

among others the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa*. (4) ‘Mahāyānasūtra.’ The following discussion will focus on this last category, but my remarks should perhaps apply *mutatis mutandis* to Lamotte’s analyses of the first three groups of texts as well.

Lamotte prefaces his discussion of the Mahāyāna sūtras with a warning of his own: “The question of the relationship of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to other Mahāyāna sūtras is particularly delicate because the uncertainties of relative chronology do not enable us to decide which is the borrower and which the borrowed. The present summary is of only provisional value.”²⁸ The implication here is that it should be possible, with more information on the chronology of the texts, to ascertain the directionality of borrowing; that borrowing occurred is assumed. Note also that Lamotte seems to assume that there is no question but that materials which are found in both the Nikāya corpus and in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* have the former as the source and the latter as the borrower. It is not possible to investigate here the details of the parallels Lamotte alleges between passages in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and those in the Pāli texts, but it should be mentioned that some of the ‘parallels’ are not at all obvious, at least to me. The question of ‘sources’ is again a complex one, especially given the likely fact that whatever the corpus of Āgama literature with which the compilers of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were familiar,²⁹ it was in Sanskrit or perhaps a form of Middle Indic, but that Middle Indic was certainly not Pāli. The degree of correlation between the Pāli canon now available and any Sanskrit ‘canons’ which may have existed is beyond determination at this time. I introduce these details to underline the point that even such an ‘obvious’ assertion as that a passage in a Nikāya sutta served as the source for a passage in a Mahāyāna sūtra encounters tremendous, even insurmountable, difficulties.³⁰

In the context of Mahāyāna literature, Lamotte suggests that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* refers to two sūtras in the Mahāratnakūṭa collection, the *Tathāgataguhyaka* and the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha*.³¹ For the first, which he claims is referred to twice, he resorts to a comment in a Chinese commentary to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the *Zhu Weimojiejing* 注維摩詰經 by Seng Zhao 僧肇, which has Kumārajīva identify the ‘secrets’ of all bodhisattvas and buddhas with the aforementioned text, a connection which of course in no way suggests any historical relationship.³² The second suggestion, that of a

²⁸. Lamotte 1976: LXXXIV.

²⁹. If we follow Fussman 2009: 646, three separate stylistic “hands” are responsible for the sūtra as we have it. He wrote: “on peut donc reconnaître au moins trois «mains» dans ce texte dont l’unité foncière ne fait cependant pas de doute: c’est une texte très savamment composé, pas un texte fait de bric et de broc. Ces trois «mains» supposent une élaboration assez longue, peut-être trois générations, et laissent supposer l’existence d’une première version vers 100 de n.è. au plus tard.”

³⁰. That is, the assumption that Āgama materials are best seen as ‘sources’ for Mahāyāna sūtras seems to me to be in need of reevaluation in the very broadest context of the overall principles of the composition of Buddhist scriptures, a topic I will address in the near future.

³¹. Lamotte 1976: LXXXV.

³². Regarding the sentence in §IV.1, Lamotte 1976: 114n3 writes: “Kumārajīva translates: ‘There are no secrets of the Buddha which he does not penetrate,’ and he explains (T. 1775 [XXXVIII] 371a7): ‘According to the Mi chi ching, this concerns the body, speech and mind [of the Buddhas].’” The Chinese reads: 諸佛祕藏無不得入 什曰: 如密迹經說身口意是也. Here of course the first expression is the lemma from the sūtra, found now in Sanskrit as *sarvabodhisattvasarvabuddhaguhyasthāneṣu supraṇiṣṭaḥ*. For Kumārajīva to identify this expression in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* with one in the *Tathāgataguhyaka* is not to make any historical claim, pace Lamotte, being rather what we would consider a synchronic exegesis. However, Lamotte (and see 168n36) goes on to suggest that a reference in §VI.13 “settles the question,”

connection with the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha*, stands on even less firm ground. Lamotte can claim no more than that “It is probably under the inspiration of this text that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (XI.3-7) gives so much importance to the buddha Akṣobhya and to his universe Abhirati where it places Vimalakīrti before his manifestation in Sahāloka.”³³ This relies on the incorrect assumption that a given text has some kind of exclusivity over a given buddha or buddha field.³⁴ Before turning to consider several other texts in the Mahāratnakūṭa collection, I would mention briefly the other texts which, Lamotte suggests, served as sources for the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

Several texts from the Mahāsaṃnipāta collection are alleged to be connected with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, “without it being possible to decide which is the borrower and which the borrowed.”³⁵ The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* does not seem to be connected in any substantial way to the texts in this collection, although the character of Vimalakīrti appears. The supposition of connection seems to be based on a tacit assumption that the character of Vimalakīrti is always and necessarily connected with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in such a way that if Vimalakīrti appears some (direct) connection with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is indubitable. Perhaps needless to say, such an assumption remains to be proved. Suggesting a further connection between the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the *Ratnakūṭapari-varta*’s first chapter, Māra-jihmīkaraṇa, since this contains a story about Māra’s daughters, Lamotte is more cautious, saying only “There are close analogies between the conversion of the Apsaras related by the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (III.62-67) and the story of the defeat of Māra which appears [in the *Ratnakūṭapari-varta*].”³⁶

Some texts Lamotte refers to might with justice be said to be more certainly connected with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: the *Mahāvaiṣṭyāyāmūrdharāja* and the

since indeed (and in the Sanskrit as well) it refers to a *tathāgataguhyam nāma dharmamukhapraveśa*. The *Tathāgataguhyaka* was translated into Chinese by the end of the third century, but whether it even existed in anything like the form we now have it in the period in which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was being composed remains an open question, as is the issue of whether *tathāgataguhyam nāma dharmamukhapraveśa* need refer to a specifically identifiable and delineable scripture text (much less precisely the text now known by the slightly different title *Tathāgataguhyaka*), or whether it rather might refer to a more amorphous articulation of teaching.

³³ Lamotte 1976: 64.

³⁴ A point argued for instance by Schopen 1977.

³⁵ Lamotte 1976: LXXXVI-LXXXVII.

³⁶ A final claim is perhaps the most tenuous of all. “Vimalakīrti advises the daughters of Māra to study a *dharmamukha* entitled *Akṣayapradīpa* ... but I have not been able to identify it.” (Lamotte 1976: LXXXVI) The claim that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (§III.66; Lamotte 1976: 105n134) “here ... is referring to a text (*chos kyi sgo* in Tib.; *fa-mên* in the Chinese versions) entitled *Akṣayapradīpa*” seems unsupported. A *dharmamukha* (the Sanskrit term confirmed by the manuscript) certainly need not even be a text. Hubert Durt (*Hōbōgirin*, IV: 363b, s.v. Chōmyōtō), to whom Lamotte refers in his note, goes even farther than his teacher Lamotte: “It seems that this famous allegory was borrowed from a ‘Rubric of the Law,’ *hōmon* 法門, sk. *dharmaparyāya*, which may have existed as an independent Mahāyāna text.” (Note that the use of the term *dharmaparyāya* here is incorrect.) The text in fact seems to say more or less precisely what the *akṣayapradīpam nāma dharmamukham* is, since in answer to its own question *tat punaḥ katamat*, ‘What then is it?’ it offers the example (*tadyathā*) of a single lamp which lights a hundred thousand other lamps yet is itself not thereby diminished, comparable to single bodhisattva who causes many hundred of thousands of beings to set out for awakening, without his own mindfulness [*cittasmṛti*] being diminished; the more he teaches others all virtuous qualities, the more his own grow as well. ‘This is that [aforementioned] *akṣayapradīpam nāma dharmamukham*,’ *idaṃ tad akṣayapradīpam nāma dharmamukham*. See also Yasui 1970: 279-282, who refers to *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* IX.54 for the imagery of the inextinguishable lamp, pointing out that Sthiramati’s commentary refers to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* for this passage (Derge Tanjur 4034, *sems tsam*, *mi*, 132b5-7, quoting §III.66).

Candrottārādārikā. The first presents the character of the son of Vimalakīrti, the second his daughter. It seems reasonable to think that the authors of these sūtras were aware of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, even inspired by it.³⁷ But not every scholar agrees with this view. Izumi Hōkei 泉芳璟 writes of the *Candrottārādārikā*: “One can see at a glance that this text is related to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Its subject matter is the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, and the names of the Arhats Śāriputra and Kāśyapa, and bodhisattvas like Mañjuśrī and so on appear. However, this sūtra’s Vimalakīrti is an ordinary fellow, and not at all the Vimalakīrti who has performed the silence of the non-dual dharma door. ... Perhaps the author of this text was unaware of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. If he knew it, we would not expect such a portrayal of Vimalakīrti. No, probably the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* itself took many materials from this text.”³⁸ I do not find Izumi’s assertion altogether convincing; I read him to suggest that the noble Vimalakīrti could not have been humbled in a later text having been once raised proud in an earlier one, but I am not precisely sure why this should be so. Perhaps a more careful and comprehensive study of the *Candrottārādārikā* will help to clarify the relationship between the two texts.

We are not now, however, concerned with the details of Lamotte’s investigations (although in most cases I believe models of common origins for shared materials are better able to account for commonalities than are models of direct or indirect borrowing).³⁹ In other words, I am here less concerned with what sort of model best explains the origins of the similarities between parts of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and other sūtras than in a different question: given several scriptures—all, traditionally, seen equally by Buddhists as the preachings of the Buddha, and therefore of presumably equivalent authority—why should one presentation, one framing of a certain content, gain popular acclaim, while other framings of similar content have been virtually ignored? To phrase this another way: if we can locate similar contents in two different Buddhist texts, modern scholars may well argue that, historically speaking, one of the two borrowed from the other, and thus the content of one sūtra is primary, while that of the other is secondary. Such considerations (misguided as they may be, in my opinion), while of great interest to modern scholars and historians, are presumably of no interest whatsoever to traditional Buddhist believers, for whom all scriptures—or at least all scriptures not judged to be heretical forgeries—are, all other things being equal, equally the word of the Buddha.⁴⁰

³⁷ For example, Paul 1985: 191: “The Candrottārā may be viewed as a sequel to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.” Little work has been done on the *Mahāvaiṣṭhāpūyāmūrdharāja*, but Wada Tetsujō 和田徹城 comments (Ono 1932-1935: 6.376.b) that parts of the text are reminiscent of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

³⁸ In his brief article in Ono 1932-1935: 2.27c.

³⁹ The same applies to the scriptures discussed by Taki 2007. The similarities he detects seem to me to point in the direction of the shared world within which Mahāyāna sūtras were composed, rather than being evidence for discrete mutual influences. The promiscuous use of *kankei* (関係, ‘relation’) conceals more than it reveals.

⁴⁰ An exception might be as they are hierarchically ranked as in a *panjiao* 判教 or *siddhānta* (*grub mtha*) system, something irrelevant here. It is also true, as Vincent Tournier points out to me, that a number of texts—the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama* is a good example, its very title including the self-reference *sūtrendrarāja*, ‘king of scriptures’—engage in a vigorous sort of self-promotion, which seems to convey an implicit claim to superiority over other scriptures. The term *sūtrarāja* has a parallel in *tantrarāja*, as in the title *Hevajratantrarāja*, *Sarvabuddhasamayogatantrarāja*, etc. At the same time, the term alluded to by Tournier, *sūtrendrarāja*, appears in Pāli as *suttantarāja* in the commentary to the *Mahāpadānasutta* (Stede 1931: 480.15-17) as follows: *tepiṭake buddhavacane aññaṃ suttaṃ chabbīsati bhāṇavārasataparimāṇaṃ nāma*

Without going into excessive detail, it is nevertheless possible to point to just a few passages in a few sūtras which present striking parallels to the iconic episodes of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* mentioned above. Through quotation of these passages it is possible to demonstrate that even some of the most dramatic passages in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may be found elsewhere, sometimes in very nearly the same words.

The first such text is the above-mentioned *Candrottārādārikā-vyākaraṇa*.⁴¹ Here the girl Candrottārā, Vimalakīrti's daughter, engages in dialogues with various bodhisattvas. For the present purposes, reference to a couple of short, but striking, parallels may suffice.

I)⁴²

<i>Candrottārādārikā-vyākaraṇa</i>	<i>Vimalakīrtinirdeśa</i>
Then the Crown Prince Mañjuśrī spoke as follows to the girl Candrottārā: “Girl, from where did you die that you came here, and where will you go having died here?”	[Śāriputra] said: “Dying from here, Goddess, where will you be reborn?”
The girl said: “Mañjuśrī, what do you think: this image ⁴³ of the Tathāgata seated on a lotus in my right hand—from where did it die to appear here, and having died here where will it be reborn?”	[The Goddess] said: “Precisely where an illusory creation of the Tathāgata will be reborn, there I will be reborn.”
Mañjuśrī said: “Girl, this is an illusory creation, and illusory creations neither die nor are they born.”	[Śāriputra] said: “Illusory creations of the Tathāgata neither die nor are they reborn.”
The girl said: “Mañjuśrī, I too have such an illusory intrinsic nature; I do not perceive all things as dying or being born.”	[The Goddess] said: “Just so, all things neither die nor are they reborn.”

n’atthi. suttantarājā nāma ayaṃ suttanto veditaḥ, “There is, in the preaching of the Buddha collected in the Tipiṭaka, no other sutta that has as many as 2600 sections of recitation [2600 x 250 silokas]. [Thus] this sutta is to be known as the King of Suttas.” This topic deserves careful study.

⁴¹ This sūtra was studied in comparison with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in 1970 by Ōshika Jisshu. Note that all of the parallels from the *Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā*, *Sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā*, and *Aśokadatta-vyākaraṇa* discussed here were noticed already long ago in the articles in Ono 1932-1935: 8.254.b-c, 5.88d, and 10.395b, respectively.

⁴² For the passages cited here, see Appendix II, below. My translations are intentionally overly literal, in order to bring out something of the verbal parallelism. I am aware, for instance, that “from where did you die,” idiomatic in Sanskrit, is not any form of English.

⁴³ Lit. body, *sku*, but Chinese *xíngxiàng* 形像.

II)

<i>Candrottarādārikā-vyākaraṇa</i>	<i>Vimalakīrtinirdeśa</i>
Then the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī spoke to the girl Candrottarā as follows: “Girl, how long will it be until you attain Unexcelled Perfect Awakening?”	[Śāriputra] said: “Goddess, how long will it be until you attain Awakening?”
The girl said: “It will be as long as it is until the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī passes beyond the Pṛthagjanabhūmi, and passes beyond even the Buddhabhūmi.” ⁴⁴	[The Goddess] said: “When the elder [Śāriputra] becomes endowed with the characteristics of an ordinary man (<i>pṛthagjana</i>), then I shall attain Awakening.”

There are a number of other exchanges between Candrottarā and different auditors (śrāvakas) which, more or less closely, provide parallels between the two texts, as well as resemblances in other spots and in other ways. And while a detailed consideration of the *Candrottarādārikā-vyākaraṇa* belongs elsewhere, one thing is worth emphasizing: this is, at least in so far as any conventional means of judging such things would allow us to say, almost entirely an obscure text.⁴⁵

The kinds of profound exchanges in which not only auditors but even great bodhisattvas are shown to have a limited understanding, pericopes which characterize the third chapter of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, may be paralleled elsewhere too. Several interesting examples are found in sūtras collected in the Mahāratnakūṭa collection, namely the *Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā*, *Sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā* and *Aśokadatta-vyākaraṇa*, and in a different fashion in the *Gaṅgottara-paripṛcchā*.⁴⁶ Among these, the *Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā* presents us with a striking parallel to this series of interviews. In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* auditor after auditor and then bodhisattva after bodhisattva demure when requested to go to Vimalakīrti to inquire after his health, and each recounts an incident in which he was taken to task for failing to fully understand the philosophical underpinnings of his own characteristic attainment. In the *Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā* the first seven interviews are presented with nearly the same auditors in the same order—the young girl Vimaladattā of course plays Vimalakīrti’s role. And while the specific issues raised with each interview are different between the texts, the tone is the same, with the disciples of limited understanding reduced to stunned silence. Vimaladattā then confronts a series of bodhisattvas, beginning with Mañjuśrī, with the same results. Following this

⁴⁴ Chn: omits “passes beyond even the Buddhabhūmi.” The reference here is to complexities of path theory, the details of which are not germane to the present discussion.

⁴⁵ This despite its alleged connection, centuries after its translation, to the Japanese *Taketori Monogatari* 竹取物語, for instance.

⁴⁶ For some idea of these sūtras see the translations in Chang 1983: 73-99, 256-261, and 115-133, respectively. The *Gaṅgottara-paripṛcchā* is translated in the same volume on pp. 37-40, but see now Silk Forthcoming. While there is room for improvement in the renderings in Chang 1983, they do provide a general picture of the texts. It is curious that so many of the texts which bear similarity to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* are to be found among the forty-nine sūtras of the Mahāratnakūṭa collection. I have no hypothesis to explain this, although one should certainly not rule out a possible connection between Bodhiruci’s compilation of the collection, completed in 713, and the reign of the Empress Wu Zetian which, however, ended in 705.

she asks a series of questions of the Buddha, after which she is challenged by Mahāmaudgalyāyana who accuses her of, apparently, the impossibility of offering a teaching of the Dharma in the form of a woman, at which point she transforms her gender.

Further on in the *Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā*, we find once again a remarkable parallel to one of the most memorable passages in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*:

III)

Then the Venerable Mahāmaudgalyāyana spoke to the bodhisattva Vimaladattā as follows: “Gentle sir [!], when it has been such a long time that you practiced to awaken to Unexcelled Perfect Awakening, why did you then not transform your female state?”

The bodhisattva Vimaladattā said: “The Elder Mahāmaudgalyāyana is spoken of as supreme among those possessing magical powers. Why do you, Reverend, not transform out of your male body?”

And the Elder Mahāmaudgalyāyana was reduced to silence.

There are similar dramatic parallels in the *Sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā*, with the protagonist Sumati challenged first by Mahāmaudgalyāyana and then by Mañjuśrī. She and Mañjuśrī engage in a dialogue on the nature of the *dharmadhātu* and so forth, at the conclusion of which he asks her why she does not change her body. She replies by attacking the notion of sexual characteristics, but changes her body anyway.

The *Aśokadatta-vyākaraṇa* presents yet additional instances of parallelism. The girl Aśokadattā interviews five auditors, the list of which closely parallels the list of those Vimalakīrti confronts in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Being challenged by Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti and Rāhula, Aśokadattā bests them in short order and then preaches Mahāyāna doctrine to each of them. Later Śāriputra challenges her by asking the Buddha if she is not able to change her female body into that of a male. The Buddha replies by asking whether Śāriputra sees a woman. The female body, he teaches, is due to the power of the bodhisattva’s vow, and it is assumed in order to save beings. Other texts which should also be included in any larger discussion of this theme are the above-mentioned *Gaṅgotarapariṇchā* and the *Strīvivartavyākaraṇa*.⁴⁷

In various texts the same episodes occur and recur: interviews with various auditors and confrontations which lead a female protagonist to change her sexual attributes, attributes which are, from a higher point of view, as unreal as all reality. These are remarkable episodes, in their own ways as dramatic and memorable as any scenes in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. And yet, these texts were always, as far as we know, both in South and East Asia, virtually unknown, while the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has been famous since the early days of Buddhism in China, as it continues to be today. In this light, what Ōshika Jisshu, for instance, did not do with this material in his paper in which he detailed parallels between the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the *Candrottāradārikā* is at least as interesting as what he did do. Neither he nor (as far as I know) anyone else asked what seems to me to be one of the most interesting questions: why is the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

⁴⁷. For the latter, see for the time being Ogawa 2001 and Gianotti 1999, 2001, 2012: 111-121 (I thank the author for sending me copies of these papers).

famous and the *Candrottārādarikā* not? In order to approach this question, we must overcome our modern viewpoint that sees some sūtras written after others, with one borrowing from another and honor going to the innovator, replacing it instead with the awareness that for traditional audiences, all sūtras are theoretically expected to be equally records of the preaching of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Therefore, when we notice content in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the *Candrottārādarikā*, for example, which is identical, or nearly so, we are entitled to ask why one presentation of this content was highly regarded by traditional audiences while another remained obscure. For such audiences, the reason cannot have been an awareness that one of the two was derivative, if both are equally records of the Buddha's words. If there is a difference in the attention paid to one scripture over another, we must look elsewhere than in the 'history' (or 'pre-history') of the two texts for the reasons for this disparity. It is in an attempt to address precisely this question that I revert to the observation offered above, in which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was characterized in terms such as 'dramatic.' Is this adjective just used loosely, or can we see something more here?

A classical Aristotelian approach to dramatic plot demands that a plot be a whole action, that it have a beginning, a middle and an end, that the parts follow naturally and causally upon one another, and that the whole constitute a unity.⁴⁸ The classical plot is a series of conflicts, with an interplay of forces leading to a climax and *dénouement*.

The basic elements of the "conflict" plot may be sketched as follows:⁴⁹

- (1) An Exposition, the establishment of a situation for the conflict.
- (2) An Initiating Action, the event bringing opposing forces into conflict.
- (3) The Rising Action, the events which advance the conflict to the crucial point, or crisis.
- (4) The Falling Action, in which the victorious forces establish their supremacy. And
- (5) The Dénouement or Conclusion, in which the conflict begun in the Initiating Action is resolved.

On the scale of the whole text, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is constituted by two, or at least two, major story lines—it is best not to use the term plot just yet. The first contains the frame of the text. At the beginning the Buddha resides in Vaiśālī, in the Āmrapālī grove, preaches a teaching on the purification of the Buddha-field, and beings are awakened.⁵⁰ The Buddha then does not re-enter the narrative until the last chapters (chapter 10). In Holman's view, a frame story need not become a plot or part of a plot. He offers as examples the frame of Boccaccio's *Decameron* which is not a plot, and of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which has a narrative, but still no true plot.⁵¹ The suggestion that philosophical concepts may constitute plot is rejected: "The raw material of plots are conflicts and actions, not concepts and philosophical statements."⁵² In this light, this frame story in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in itself cannot be said to constitute any sort of plot.

^{48.} Holman 1974: 623.

^{49.} Holman 1974: 624f.

^{50.} As Whitehead 1976: 71n23 points out, Chapter one serves as an introduction, and in his translation Xuanzang even names it so, *xùpǐn* 序品.

^{51.} Holman 1974: 624.

^{52.} Holman 1974: 624.

If the exterior of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has no plot, what then of Vimalakīrti's own story within? Let us consider the following correspondences between the outline of Vimalakīrti's story and the “conflict” plot model:⁵³

- (1) Exposition = Chpt. 2, wherein Vimalakīrti manifests himself as ill.
- (2) Initiating Action = Chpt. 3, wherein the auditors and bodhisattvas decline to visit the sick Vimalakīrti.
- (3) Rising Action. Chpts. 4 through 8 constitute a series of crises, especially in the episodes of the lion thrones, the Goddess's interview with Śāriputra, the statements of 32 bodhisattvas on emptiness with the climax in Vimalakīrti's silence, and the divine nectar brought from the Sarvagandhasugandha world.
- (4) Falling Action. By this point the thread of narrative, the conflict, is lost. However, Vimalakīrti's supremacy, his status as virtually a buddha in his own right, is established. The ostensible conflict has somehow evaporated, and there is no “conclusion” as such.⁵⁴

If this suggestion has any merit, one of the contributing reasons—although surely not the only reason—for the success of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may be its conformity to the well-established patterns of the plotted story, a series of episodes which develop a theme and introduce tension and anxiety in an audience, which wonders what will happen next.

To suggest that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* owes some of its popularity to its “plot” is not to suggest, however, that all other Buddhist literature necessarily lacks plot. Obviously, the life story of the Buddha, as indeed most narrative literature of the *jātaka-avadāna* variety, is plotted in a rather conventional way. Moreover, there are other sūtra texts which contain within them, or are framed by, plots in, again, a rather classical sense—one might think of the *Guan Wuliangshou jing* and parts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā*, for instance, in this respect.⁵⁵

One problem with this suggestion of the centrality of this type of plot in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, of course, or rather limitations upon it, is that if we wish to apply it to more than the case of the history of a sūtra in China, where much is known of the social context of textual transmission, we will have to attempt to determine who was in that intended audience of the sūtra, a task which for ancient India remains almost an impossibility.⁵⁶ In addition, it will be necessary to investigate in much more detail how the sūtra was made use of by those who created other scriptures in its wake. This challenge must form one basis for further research.

⁵³ From a different point of view Hamlin 1988 has also discussed the plot development of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in a most interesting way. Cp. Whitehead 1976: 71-78.

⁵⁴ As Whitehead 1976: 71 observed, “the final two chapters of the sutra function as brief epilogues to the text. ... Both epilogues [in chapters 13 and 14] also repeat the concluding formula that appears first at the end of chapter twelve.” This formulation is based of course on the Chinese translations, which divide the text into fourteen rather than twelve chapters. See Lamotte 1976: XCVIII-C on the different ways of dividing the text.

⁵⁵ For the former see Silk 1997, for the latter for instance Changtzu 2012, with a good bibliography. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* presents another case that might be considered in this context.

⁵⁶ However, I do believe that it is possible—for example, in the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—to argue that both the authors and their audience were monastics, given what we (think we) know of the breadth of awareness of scholasticism among the non-ordained. This, however, all requires an enormous amount of speculation to attain even the little coherence it has, and can thus hardly be termed knowledge.

Although the treatment of the dramatic elements and character in and of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* can in no way be considered complete, with this superficial hypothesis we may turn to the second of Zürcher's main suggestions regarding the reasons for the favor in which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was held in early China, namely that from the earliest period Vimalakīrti was taken as a model by those engaged in 'Pure Conversation' (*qīngtán* 清談) and the so-called Neo-Daoist 'Dark Learning' (*xuánxué* 玄學) movement. Vimalakīrti is a layman, and yet as such he demonstrates a level of awakening and Buddhist awareness which equals, if it does not indeed exceed, that of even the most wise of the bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī. More than a lay bodhisattva even, Vimalakīrti is a lay buddha. It is this Vimalakīrti, in (as tradition dating from the Tang has it) his ten-foot square hut, his *fāngzhàng* 方丈, who was taken as a model for Chinese non-monastic gentry Buddhists, particularly in Southern China, in the period between the fall of the Han and the reunification of China under the Sui. More than one interpreter would agree with the characterization that Vimalakīrti's reinterpretation (§III.39-40) of renunciation as something that can take place through making the aspiration to unexcelled perfect awakening "is consistent with the larger theme of the lay Buddhist as capable of full enlightenment."⁵⁷ Yet, I want to ask what may seem a bizarre question: Is Vimalakīrti really a layman?⁵⁸

On the one hand, the answer is obvious. The text has two monks refer to him as an *upāsaka* (§III.36), a Buddhist lay follower, and although it immediately follows this with Upāli's "correction," the correction itself only reinforces Vimalakīrti's status as an *upāsaka*. Upāli declares that Vimalakīrti should not be thought of as a householder, *gṛhastha*, because his eloquence and wisdom are equalled by no one except the Buddha. The point here is obviously that he is no *ordinary* householder, that to label him is to let language dictate reality. And this is made absolutely clear by the terms used for Vimalakīrti elsewhere. Without objection the sūtra has Vimalakīrti repeatedly hailed by monks (§§III.40, 43, 54 etc.), and even by a voice from the sky (§III.46), as a "householder," *gṛhapati*, so the text clearly has no objection to viewing him as a non-monk. (He is also referred to more than once as *satpuruṣa*, another term applied generally to lay followers.) So certainly Vimalakīrti is a householder, a layman. And it is this fact that has led many to see the sūtra as offering a redefinition of the renunciant state, one in which renunciation is an internal rather than an external matter.⁵⁹ But I would like to suggest that to stop here with this simple reading is to very seriously underestimate the authors of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Any reading of this profound and wonderful text tells the reader—indeed, yells at him—that its authors mean more than they seem to say on the surface. Their message is, however, in one paradoxical respect, crystal clear: words cannot convey the full scope and depth of the profound Dharma. The famous "thundering silence" of Vimalakīrti himself, the expression of his refusal to characterize the Absolute with words, is proof of this. The duality with which, and

⁵⁷. Whitehead 1978: 10.

⁵⁸. The importance of his status for some modern readers is clear. For Burton Watson, who translated the sūtra from Chinese, and who perhaps not coincidentally has worked extensively for the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese lay Buddhist group, Vimalakīrti "epitomizes the ideal lay believer" (Watson 1997: 1).

⁵⁹. This is both a modern and a pre-modern reading; see among many studies the ample discussions in Whitehead 1976: 288-302; 1978.

through which, we see the world, a duality imposed by language, is a false imposition onto the true nature of non-dual reality.

There are many who have clearly recognized the fact that although Vimalakīrti may be a layman, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is not advocating a “lay Buddhism” in the sense of a Buddhism which dismisses, denigrates or in any way challenges the primary importance of the monastic state.⁶⁰ As Richard Mather says of the traditional Chinese reception of the text:⁶¹

Obviously no statement in the sutra, however radical, was ever seriously felt to pose a threat to the institution of monasticism. The homeless bodhisattva and the householder-bodhisattva simply followed equal but separate vocations, and common sense dictated that no religion can long survive without a core of specialized professionals keeping the tradition alive and large number of devoted laymen supporting them.

Modern scholars have also often seen things in similar ways, although they have not always stated their ideas as clearly as we might have wished. Ōshika Jisshu, for instance, wrote the following:⁶²

The popular understanding of the main point of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as an embrace of lay Buddhism (*zaïke bukkyō*) is off the mark. That is, the liberation spoken of in the subtitle of the scripture [namely, *acintyavimokṣa*]⁶³ is the liberation of beings from discriminatory view which entangles them in discriminating what is not to be discriminated, namely renunciant and lay, and so on. In order to liberate beings from the discrimination of human thinking to which they are attached, one must rely on a realm separate from the human realm, the inconceivable cut off from human thinking. This is why Vimalakīrti is not simply a layman from Vaiśālī, but a bodhisattva come from the Abhirati world of Akṣobhya. And this is why heavenly women suddenly appear in Vimalakīrti’s empty chamber.

Richard Mather in the conclusion of his above-cited essay wrote as follows:⁶⁴

Although its disparagement of the śrāvakas and exaltation of the layman Vimalakīrti might lead us to expect in the sūtra seeds of anticlericalism and secularization, both the intention and actual influence of the sūtra were, on the contrary, strongly supportive of the Saṅgha. The bodhisattva ideal which it championed so eloquently could be followed by householder or monk, each in his own way, without any necessity of opposing one another.

For Mather, then, Vimalakīrti is a layman, but the text is not an attack on the monastic institution. Others have been less willing to accept Vimalakīrti as a simple lay follower.

^{60.} It would appear, however, that Nakamura 1962: 3 did hold precisely this opinion. Earlier in a typologically similar reading, Hashimoto 1956: 189 viewed the text’s discussions of gender differences as a bold and direct criticism of the distinction between monks and nuns.

^{61.} Mather 1968: 69-70. On this see also Whitehead 1976: 406. Mather’s final clause is, of course, quite problematic historically speaking: Judaism has managed to survive rather a long time while entirely free of “a core of specialized professionals keeping the tradition alive.”

^{62.} Ōshika 1974: 186n5.

^{63.} On the variations of the subtitle of this text, see Lamotte 1976: liv-lv—JAS.

^{64.} Mather 1968: 73.

The Western Buddhist who styles himself Sangharakshita, for instance, wrote that Vimalakīrti is not a layman—he “appeared to be a layman, but that was only his skillful means. In reality he was an advanced Bodhisattva.”⁶⁵

Now, on one level we must of course agree with these scholars, and firmly reject the sūtra in its original intent as in any way anti-clerical or as representing an attack on the value of monasticism. But I believe we can go much farther than this. Most would agree that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is above all concerned with the resolution of dichotomies through the realization of their ultimate falsity in the light of emptiness. And although it is not directly reflected in any of the sūtra’s alternate titles,⁶⁶ it is clear that the doctrine of non-duality, *advaya*, is central to the text, being not only the subject of its eighth chapter but, according to my understanding, underlying the entire philosophical viewpoint of the sūtra as a whole.

Still, let us focus on one particular point. Ōshika and Sangharakshita believe, as have many before them, that although the sūtra clearly calls him a *gṛhapati* Vimalakīrti cannot be a real layman. Indeed, in a series of remarkable examples at the beginning of the second chapter the text tells us that while he seems to be, from his outward behavior, a layman, his inner understanding is that of a buddha, or so close to that of a buddha that there is hardly any difference. But here is where I think these scholars, from whose works we can learn so much, flinch. They decline, as I see it, to take the text and its authors completely seriously. But if we read the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as something like a Madhyamaka text—and there are many good reasons for doing so—we should be prepared to be startled, even shocked, our expectation of linear logic rudely overturned. After all, texts tamer than the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* warn us in so many words of the fear induced by hearing the teachings of *śūnyatā*. So, what happens if we take the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* completely seriously? What if we trust its authors to say what they mean?

Vimalakīrti, these authors tell us, is a layman. And yet, this lay follower is wiser than Mañjuśrī, the virtual embodiment of the bodhisattva’s wisdom and insight. Is this really possible? How, within the universe of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist thought—and rhetoric—could such a portrayal conceivably make sense? I believe it *is* possible and it *is* conceivable—but only in a very special way, namely, in the same way that it is possible for me to be me and you to be you, at the same time that both of us really, ultimately, truly have no self, that all phenomena are empty of persistent personal identity. Vimalakīrti is both a layman and wiser than the wise in the same way that both *anātman*, ‘non-self,’ is true and discrete personal identity is true. We each of us have some personal identity, and yet the true nature of the world is that nothing has intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*. This is a paradox, the mystery of the truth of emptiness. Yet it is only because emptiness prevails, as Nāgārjuna reminds us in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, that everything exists. It is only the empty, non-static nature of reality which permits dynamic existence. This is the

⁶⁵ Sangharakshita 1995: 57. There is no need to enter here into the (pseudo) question why a layman cannot be an advanced bodhisattva. Fussman 2009: 648, however, seems to take a similar stance, when he refers to §III.36, translating freely “ne croyez pas que ce soit un gṛhapati. Pourquoi? Il n’y a personne qui puisse mettre son éloquence en défaut, ni moine ni bodhisattva, excepté le/un *tathāgata*: telle est la lumière qu’apporte sa sapience,” to which Fussman comments: “En d’autres termes, Vimalakīrti est un *tathāgata*.”

⁶⁶ See Lamotte 1976: liv-lx, and in the sūtra §XII.23.

highest truth. Vimalakīrti is, then, a layman wiser than a monk, wiser even than Mañjuśrī,⁶⁷ in the same fashion that, as the text narrates, he is a married celibate with children and a harem, in the same manner that he is surrounded by a retinue yet alone in isolation, in the same manner that Śāriputra's body could become that of the Goddess and vice versa.⁶⁸

The narrative, dramatic and rhetorical force of casting the character of Vimalakīrti as a layman comes precisely from the apparently contradictory nature of this casting. Vimalakīrti is an effective spokesman for the principle of non-duality precisely because he himself *embodies* the idea of the paradoxical reality of impossibility. And this contradiction between seemingly incompatible states reveals a higher truth, just as does any other truth of conventional reality, such as that there are two realms, one of existence or *saṃsāra*, another of non-existence or *nirvāṇa*. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (as the Madhyamaka thought which so closely tracks its teachings)⁶⁹ makes clear that to really understand the true nature of reality we must transcend such seemingly ordinary dichotomous truths, seeing through the apparent impossibility to the profoundly non-dual, the only true reality, the 'really real.' And it is precisely the apparent paradox, the naive assumption of incommensurability, that holds the key to unlocking the standpoint of the authors of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

No one disputes that there is some lay Buddhism in some Mahāyāna sūtra literature. But ironically, if I am right in detecting in the casting of Vimalakīrti as a layman wiser

^{67.} Mañjuśrī is of course generally perceived to be not exactly a monk (although in some texts he is a buddha who taught Śākyamuni!), but as far as I know, neither he is characterized as a layman with any of the terms such as *upāsaka* which are applied to Vimalakīrti. His most usual epithet is *kumārabhūta*, something like 'heir apparent'. For some his preeminence as the epitome of wisdom though not a monk may call into question some assumptions about the lay-monastic dichotomy, but in fact this very complex character has not yet been investigated sufficiently. Note, for instance, that according to Hirakawa 1970, 1995, at least for the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras *kumārabhūta* is used to refer to individuals in both lay and monastic states, and a number of other texts also portray Mañjuśrī in a fashion that strongly suggests he is indeed seen as a monk.

^{68.} As far as I know, potentially very interesting questions have not been asked about the doctrinal background of this episode of gender transformation and Śāriputra's depicted response. As shown by Bapat 1957 (and Sakuma 1991), change of gender is related in some cases to karma. Bapat cites examples of men becoming women due to transgressions, including the incident cited in the *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* (Wogihara 1936: 394.9-11, ad *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* IV.55ab, Pradhan 1975: 232.7-8), in which as a direct result (*drṣṭadharmaphala*) of the expression of criticism of the monastic community that "you are all women (*stṛīyo yūyam*)," a monk immediately became physically female (*tasya drṣṭa eva dharme puruṣavyañjanam antarhitam stṛīvyañjanam ca prādurbhūtam*). If this background were to be relevant here (cf. Sakuma 1991: 631 who refers to this episode in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), it is possible that Śāriputra is not responding to the goddess's 'playfulness' (I doubt this reading in any event) but to the implication that he is karmically deficient and that his gender is subject to demotion (for female is in Buddhist contexts universally inferior to male) due to his own failings. In this light one should remember, as I noted above, that the most probable intended audience of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was one of monks, who would have received such teachings from their own standpoint, steeped, as it were, in daily awareness of Vinaya regulations and rules of proper behavior.

^{69.} By using this expression I do not at all mean to reject the suggestion of Fussman 2009: 643 that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* "dans bien des cas ... semble illustrer ou résumer Nāgārjuna," to which Fussman adds, without further investigating the issue, "Mais la majeure partie des savants préfère considérer que c'est l'inverse: Nāgārjuna développe les thèses du [*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*]." In large part any discussion of influences such as this must rest on the dating of Nāgārjuna and of the sūtras in question. For the moment it remains unclear just when the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was composed; all we can say for certain is that it was available, in substantially the form we have it in various recensions, to Zhi Qian in the early third century. For Fussman's view see above note 29.

than monks and bodhisattvas a dramatic embodiment of the teaching of paradoxical non-duality, then we are forced to conclude that not only did the authors of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* not intend to advocate a lay Buddhism, on the contrary, they wrote in a context—which is to say, they belonged to a community—in which such an interpretation of the capacities of a lay person was quite literally unthinkable (*acintya*). In other words, if this hypothesis is sustainable, we are led to conclude that the original audience of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, just as its authors, would have imagined a lay person wiser than the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī to be *as impossible* as a man and a woman spontaneously changing bodies, *as impossible* as 32,000 lion thrones being placed in a small room without shrinking the thrones or enlarging the room, and so on—namely, an absolute impossibility, something which simply *does not* happen in their world, and *cannot* happen, because it does not make sense, because it defies the “laws of nature.” This reading has the merit of placing the characterization of the protagonist Vimalakīrti on the same logical and rhetorical level as the remainder of the carefully crafted sūtra; it takes seriously the intentions of the text’s authors to convey their message in a sophisticated and multivalent fashion, and thereby demands of readers a corresponding appreciation of the rhetorical, narrative and dramatic sophistication of those authors active on every layer of their composition.

If this hypothesis is agreeably received, then whatever the value and legitimacy of the reading given to Vimalakīrti’s status as a role model for lay Buddhists in East Asia, such an understanding cannot but be seen as having been in complete and utter contradiction to the assumptions and expectations of the Indian authors of the text. Certainly we can understand the reasons which may have led the fourth and fifth century Chinese gentry advocates of “Pure Conversation” and Neo-Daoism to read the scripture as depicting Vimalakīrti as indeed a layman.⁷⁰ But the case remains that, if this hypothesis is upheld, as powerful and inspirational as their understanding was, it directly contradicted the intended spirit of the Indian scripture upon which it was based.

I hasten to insist that I do not intend to challenge the legitimacy of this Chinese reading. This is not a case comparable to naively missing the sarcasm of an intended remark or taking seriously what is meant as a joke, but rather one of being simply unable to appreciate a context so foreign to one’s own.⁷¹ Given their completely different environment, the Chinese were incapable of interpreting the sūtra in the fashion I suggest was intended by its authors.⁷² All innovation, and all evolution, in its turn, must by necessity involve a departure from the original upon which it is based. The incredibly powerful Mahāyāna visions of non-monastic Buddhism, so important in early Buddhist China and in Japan from medieval times, may owe some of their inspiration, according

^{70.} It is important to pay careful attention to the point stressed to me by Michael Radich (personal communication), namely that at least in earlier times in China, ordination was not well established, nor were large and visible monastic institutions. Thus the sharp contrast between lay and monastic that we assume to have existed in India would not have been a factor in the China of Zhi Qian. The possible reevaluation this insight calls for should be addressed by sinologists.

^{71.} I am not unaware that we modern interpreters are likewise probably guilty of such a myopia rather frequently.

^{72.} It is a conceptually related question, yet to be researched, how the Chinese received and understood other culturally embedded agendas in Indian Buddhist texts. What could they have made, for example, of the frequent harping on the status of brahmins, a class totally inexistent in China?

to this suggestion, to misunderstandings of Indian ideas. This, however, is not a cause for alarm. If anything, it is a reason for rejoicing in the discovery of an example of vital and creative religious imagination at work. I am most emphatically not arguing that the Chinese did not understand the sūtra. Rather, I would first acknowledge the problematization of the notion of one correct understanding (also in “the” Indian context), and second, and more interestingly, on the basis of this preliminary problematization, I would argue that a certain Indian understanding inherent, I believe, in the text in its Indian context(s) was not visible to Chinese readers because their own circumstances differed so considerably from those of the text’s Indian authors. There is no question here of correctness but of an extension of the natural and inevitable process of any reader appropriating something foreign in a new context.

This hypothesis could, of course, be wrong, and there are other possible explanations. Jay G. Williams, for example, sought to explain what he found “implausible” in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as humor.⁷³ Sketching the character of Vimalakīrti himself, and the antithetical nature of his outward appearance, he goes on: “What is even more unexpected—even implausible—is that none of the great *bhikṣus* or bodhisattvas so lauded in chapters one and two holds a spiritual candle to our lay hero.”⁷⁴ He likewise finds the refusals of the disciples and bodhisattvas to visit Vimalakīrti laugh-provoking: “the notion that the great Śāriputra would hesitate to call upon a mere layman is preposterous, by definition. ... Such protestations are ludicrous enough, coming as they do from the holiest of the holy arhats....” The conclusion seems clear to Williams: “If the comic incongruity of a layman lecturing to one of the great bodhisattvas does not draw a smile, certainly what he teaches ought to produce, at the very least, a smile.”⁷⁵ The spiritual intent of the scripture is not in question, but the resolution, Williams believes, is that it is intended to be humorous:⁷⁶

The ultimate intent of the sutra is surely serious, of that there can be little doubt, but that seriousness is cloaked in a garment of laughter, as a divine comedy. ... The philosophy of the sutra is one of complete paradox. ... old distinctions between good and evil, secular and sacred, samsāra and nirvana, enlightenment and ignorance are exploded. Because this is so, it is no longer possible legitimately to tell stories in which monks are better than laymen or the sacred is better than the secular. Vimalakīrti is himself the message, for in him all distinctions are overcome. ... What prevents the sutra from becoming a counsel of despair is that ever-present comic sense of incongruity.

It is true that it is very difficult to detect humor in other cultural contexts, and likewise to say with assurance what is not intended to be funny. Still, while not denying that there may be (intentional) humor in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, I find this overall reading of the text unlikely and, to a great extent, pointless. For what is gained by the authors of the text if they resolve its tensions through laughter? How could this promote any possible

⁷³ This point was already made by Mather 1968: 62, who speaks of “Śāriputra, whose pedestrian remarks are the target of many a good-natured jibe and create frequent situations of humor throughout the sutra, a fact which undoubtedly enhanced its charms in the eyes of the Chinese.”

⁷⁴ Williams 1990: 91.

⁷⁵ Williams 1990: 92.

⁷⁶ Williams 1990: 94.

agenda, save perhaps that of garnering attention for the text as an entertainment? Once that attention has been captured, however, one would certainly expect the authors to have done something additional with it. That they did not, as far as we can tell, argues against this reading. In other words, Williams's reading seems to me to be both intellectually and rhetorically impoverished. It sees the text as little more than a satire. I cannot prove that this is wrong, but I find it a profoundly unsatisfying and flat approach to a text that is anything but flat and uninteresting.

Another possibility, as some colleagues have suggested, is that the sūtra was indeed written to promote lay Buddhism. This would not necessarily require it to have been written by a lay author, something I consider to be a near impossibility; the text demonstrates through and through, as do most Mahāyāna sūtras, a comprehensive familiarity with Buddhist scholasticism. Everything we (think we) know about Indian Buddhism suggests that lay people did not have access to such knowledge. Of course, once again, this may be wrong. Maybe the text was written by a lay person to promote lay Buddhism. Or maybe it was written by a monk to promote lay Buddhism and demote the special status of the monk. But then, why? Such possibilities seem to me, when all is said and done, at the very least uninspiring. Moreover, they are not coherent, in that they demand a strict divide between the inner logic of the text itself and its message. For so much about the text—from its occasional skilled verses (e.g. §I.3) to its crafty playing with Sanskrit grammar⁷⁷—bespeaks a thoughtful authorship, an authorship more than capable of irony, sarcasm and literary panache. In fact, it is not too much to claim a sort of literary mastery for the text's authors. I am convinced, therefore, that the text was composed by monks intent on a profound message, a message they presented with utmost subtlety and flair, one in which the very casting of the main character is meant to undermine naive and unquestioned assumptions about the very nature of reality and liberation, and one in which paradox and the confusion of expectations work together simultaneously through many levels.

This said, it would be too simple to assume that the intentions of the authors have been exhausted by this approach to their work. What, we should wonder, was the purpose of the text's scornful rejection, as I read it, of mere inner transformation as a substitute for outer conformity? For if the text is telling us not to take *Vimalakīrti* at face value, it is also telling us not to believe in the sanctity of a man with a harem who proclaims his chastity. To understand this, I believe that we must read the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in the context of other Mahāyāna scriptures, such as the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, *Rāṣṭrapāla-paripṛcchā*, *Ratnarāśi* and others, tracts which work so hard at stressing the centrality of orthopraxy within a Mahāyāna ideological frame. Like so many other earlier Mahāyāna sūtras, when examined closely the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* too comes to look more and more like an extremely conservative, even reactionary, work. If my placement of the sūtra in this respect is correct, it comes out of a world in which the layman was so far removed from the monk that a suggestion of his spiritual superiority is on a par with the suggestion of the spiritual superiority of a woman, namely, unthinkable and absurd. That the likelihood of this reading has not suggested itself to modern audiences is likely due to the ways in which we moderns have (re)constructed Mahāyāna Buddhist ideology,

⁷⁷. As pointed out by Fussman 2009: 647.

especially under the strong influence of Japanese sectarianism. It goes without saying, however, that as historians or as literary critics, we have a duty to try to understand how a work was intended, and to appreciate its potential rhetorical power within that intentional universe.

That the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* owes some of its popularity, both classical and modern, to its presentation of the awakened Vimalakīrti as a paradoxically embodied layman seems to me obvious. Would not it be most delicious if we could conclude that this very reading, as potent and creative as it is, is, in fact, from a historical point of view, on a number of levels a mis-reading, yet another irony to add to the myriad already woven into the fabric of the scripture itself?

Appendix I: A Source for The Character of Vimalakīrti?

The Saṃyutta-Nikāya of the Pāli canon contains a section of ten suttas titled Citta-samyutta,⁷⁸ these being discourses involving the layman Citta, Sanskrit Citra, Chinese Zhīduōlō 質多羅. This layman Citta is named by the Buddha the chief of those lay disciples who preach the Teaching.⁷⁹ In the *Ekottārikāgama* he is rather termed the first among the wise,⁸⁰ and in the *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論, a commentary on the *Ekottārikāgama*, the first among householders.⁸¹ The name Citra is confirmed in a Sanskrit fragment to which corresponds Chinese Zhīdīlì 質帝隸居士,⁸² and in a sūtra of the Saṃyuktāgama preserved partially in Sanskrit, in which we find *c(i)trhr̥patyaḥ* corresponding to 衆多長者婦女, and hence understood by the editors of the fragment to represent *Citra-gr̥hapati-patyah*.⁸³ This appears to be the only instance of the transcription Zhòngduō 衆多. The name Citra gr̥hapati also appears in Sanskrit a number of times in the Paṇḍulohitakavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya.⁸⁴

The portrayal of the householder Citta is remarkable.⁸⁵ In the first of the Saṃyutta-Nikāya suttas he educates a group of monks on the correct understanding of ‘fetter,’ *saññojana*; in the end the monks praise him saying “your eye of wisdom ranges over the profound word of the Buddha.”⁸⁶ In the second sutta, Citta asks a respected elder (*āyasmā theera*) for clarification regarding what the Buddha meant when he spoke about *dhātunānatta*, diversity of elements. “Being so addressed, the reverend elder was silent.”⁸⁷ This is repeated thrice. Finally, the most junior monk, Isidatta is able to answer the question. In the next sutta, the same response of silence is offered when Citta asks about questions such as whether the world is eternal or not, whether life and body (*jīva* and *sarīra*) are the same or different, and so on. (The Chinese says that the monks were silent and did not answer; asked thus three times, they again three times were silent).⁸⁸ In

^{78.} Feer 1894: IV.VII (41).

^{79.} In the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*, Morris 1885: i.26,5 (I.xiv.6): *etad aggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvakanāṃ upāsakānaṃ paṭhamāṃ saraṇāṃ gacchantānaṃ ... dhammakathikānaṃ yad idaṃ citto gahapati macchikasaṇḍiko*.

^{80.} T. 125 [6.1] (II) 559c10: 第一智慧, 質多長者是。

^{81.} T. 1507 (XXV) 42c17-20: 出家第一. Here he is referred to as Zhīduō 質多, perhaps suggestive of a Middle Indic form of the name, akin to Pāli Citta rather than Sanskrit Citra, but also possibly an example of the common phenomenon of truncation of a final syllable in Chinese transcriptions.

^{82.} Lévi 1932: 8, line 9 of the transcribed manuscript, *citrasya gr̥hapa///*, Chinese T. 1425 (XXII) 425c23.

^{83.} T. 99 [1215] (II) 331b13, Sanskrit in Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 137, 1140 v5, with note 29, and see Enomoto 1994: 45.

^{84.} See the index in Yamagiwa 2001. Here it is rendered in Tibetan by *khyim bdag nag pa*, a curious translation. The connection is clear however in the *Karmaśataka* (Derge 340, *mdo sde a* 18b1), where the Buddha speaks of the past life of an individual known as *nag pa glang chen gnas* (15b7; Feer 1901: 436ff. gives for this Citranāgadeśa) who in his past life is called *khyim bdag nag pa*; this individual is named after the Citra which is the 12th (or 14th) lunar mansion, under which he was born.

^{85.} The only discussion I know of the connection with Vimalakīrti is that of Watanabe 1940, but Nakamura Hajime 中村元 (1962: 2-3) has also mentioned the same point. Despite the title of Alsdorf 1957, it does not deal with questions of relevance here.

^{86.} Feer 1894: 283,18-19: *te gambhīre buddhavacane paññācakkhu kamati*.

^{87.} Feer 1894: 284,15: *evaṃ vutta āyasmā theera tuṇhi ahoṣi*; T. 99 [569] [II] 150c20-21: 時諸上座默然而住。

^{88.} T. 99 [570] (II) 151a14-15: 時諸上座默然不答。如是三問, 亦三默然。

the fifth sutta Citta is made to give an elaborate exegesis on a riddle verse, at the conclusion of which the monk Kāmabhū praises him as he is praised in the first sutta, namely as one whose eye of wisdom ranges over the profound word of the Buddha.⁸⁹ The seventh sutta also sees Citta offering an elaborate preaching to a monk, this centered on liberation of mind (*cetovimutti*), after which Citta is praised in the same terms as before. In the eighth sutta, Citta encounters the Jaina Nigaṇṭha Nātaputa, and demonstrates his cutting intellect, angering the Jaina, whom he tricks. In the ninth, Citta proclaims the superiority of the Buddhist path over that of the Jainas, and avows his own attainments, saying that if he were to die before the Buddha it would not be at all strange were the Buddha to predict of him that: “there is no fetter by which the householder Citta is connected which would draw him again to this world.”⁹⁰ In other words, the Buddha would predict him, he says, as a non-returner. The tenth sutta is notable for its setting, portraying as it does Citta as ill on his death-bed.⁹¹ After rejecting the idea that he should aspire to the state of universal emperorship, as advised by the deities of the grove, Citta exhorts them to abandon all impermanent goals, aiming rather toward informed faith (*aveccapāsāda*) in the three jewels. Having offered these words, Citta dies.

Another passage of great interest occurs in the Pāli Vinaya,⁹² narrating the encounter between the householder Citta and the monk Sudhamma. Citta frequently invited monks for meals, always asking the venerable Sudhamma for his consent. Once, however, encountering Sāriputta, Mahāmoggallāna, Mahākaccana, Mahākoṭṭhita, Mahākappina, Mahācunda, Anuruddha, Revata, Upāli, Ānanda and Rāhula, he invited them without first having asked Sudhamma. Later, when he did ask, Sudhamma refused his permission repeatedly. In the end, Sudhamma also arrived at the appointed meal, but then complained of the absence of sesame cakes. Citta tells Sudhamma an odd little tale that the commentary interprets to mean that Sudhamma’s request is befitting neither to a monk nor to a layman.⁹³ The monk is offended, and accuses Citta of reviling him, which Citta denies, suggesting that Sudhamma consult the Buddha. This duly takes place, and the Buddha backs Citta, ordering (through formal monastic procedure) that Sudhamma go and apologize to Citta. This story is repeated in somewhat simplified terms (but elaborated in other directions as well) in the commentary to the *Dhammapada* V.14.⁹⁴ In this version, when Citta comes to visit the Buddha a rain of celestial flowers falls from the sky. The wealth of Citta, and that bestowed upon him by adoring admirers, are also strongly stressed.

Although with materials now at hand we cannot prove any direct connection, it is not at all difficult to imagine that this portrayal of Citta inspired the author of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to create the character Vimalakīrti, a wealthy layman whose wisdom nevertheless surpassed that of monks, even great ones, and who took the opportunity of his illness to preach the true meaning of the doctrine of momentariness and impermanence.

⁸⁹. The same in Chinese, T. 99 [566] (II) 149c2-3: 汝得善利, 於此甚深佛法, 賢聖慧眼得入。

⁹⁰. Feer 1894: 301,21-23: *natthi taṃ saññojanam yena saññojanena saṃyutto citto gahapati puna imam lokam āgaccheyya*; cp. T. 99 [573] (II) 152b11-14.

⁹¹. Feer 1894: 302,20-21: *tena kho pana samayena citto gahapati ābādhiko hoti dukkhito bālhaḡilāno*.

⁹². Cullavagga I.18; Oldenber 1880: ii.15-18.

⁹³. Horner 1952: 24n3.

⁹⁴. See Burlingame 1921: II. 144-149.

Appendix II: Sources Texts

I)

Candrottārādārikā-vyākaraṇa: Derge Kanjur 191, *mdo sde*, tsa 236a6-b2:

de nas 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pas bu mo zla mchog la 'di skad ces smras so || bu mo khyod gang nas shi 'phos te 'dir 'ongs | 'di nas shi 'phos nas ni gang du 'gro bar 'gyur |

bu mo smras pa | 'jam dpal 'di ji snyam du dgongs | gang bdag gi sug pa g.yas pa na de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku pad ma la bzhugs pa 'di gang nas shi 'phos te 'dir byon la | 'di nas shi 'phos nas ni gang du skye bar 'gyur snyam |

'jam dpal gyis smras pa | bu mo 'di ni sprul pa ste sprul pa la ni 'chi 'pho yang med la ske ba yang med do ||

bu mo smras pa | 'jam dpal bdag gis kyang de bzhin du sprul pa'i rang bzhin gyi chos thams cad la gang 'chi 'pho ba'am skye ba de ma mthong lags so ||

T. 480 (XIV) 620b1-8 (*juan xia*) 佛說月上女經

爾時，童子文殊師利告月上女作如是言：汝於往昔從何捨身，而來生此。當捨此身復生何處。

其女答言：文殊師利，於意云何。我今所執如來形像坐蓮華者，從何捨身而來生此。今捨此身當生何處。

文殊師利復言月上：此是化耳。夫言化者，無處捨身，後亦無生。

其女報言：如是，如是。文殊師利，一切諸法本體是化。我於彼法不見捨時，不見生時。

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: VI.16:

āha: itas tvan devate cyutā kutropapatsyase |

āha: yatraiva tathāgatanirmīta upapatsyate, tatraivāham upapatsyate |

āha: tathāgatanirmītasya na cyutir nopapattiḥ |

āha: evam eva sarvadharmāṇāṃ na cyutir nopapattiḥ |

T. 475 (XIV) 548c9-12 維摩詰所說經：

舍利弗問天：汝於此沒當生何所。

天曰：佛化所生，吾如彼生。

曰：佛化所生，非沒生也。

天曰：衆生猶然，無沒生也。

Compare *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: XI.2:

athāyusmāñ śāriputro vimalakīrtim licchavim etad avocat: kutas tvaṃ kulaputra cyutvehopannaḥ |

vimalakīrtir āha: yaḥ sthavireṇa dharmāḥ sāksātkṛtaḥ, kaccit tasya dharmasya cyutir upapattir vā |

āha: na tasya dharmasya kācic cyutir upapattir vā |

āha: evam acyutikānām anupattikānām bhadantaśāriputra sarvadharmāṇāṃ kutas tavaivaṃ bhavati — kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopanna iti | yaṃ bhadantaśāriputra nirmītāṃ striyaṃ puruṣaṃ vā pṛccheḥ — kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopanna iti , sa kiṃ vyākuryāt |

āha: na kulaputra nirmītasya cyutir nopapattiḥ, sa kiṃ vyākariṣyati |

āha: nanu bhadantaśāriputra nirmītasvabhāvāḥ sarvadharmāḥ tathāgatena nirdiṣṭāḥ |

āha: evam etat kulaputra |

āha: nirmītasvabhāveṣu bhadantaśāriputra sarvadharmeṣu — kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopanna iti | cyutir iti bhadantaśāriputra abhisamśkāraḥ śāṇapadam etat | upapattir ity abhisamśkāraprabandha eṣaḥ | tatra bodhisatvaḥ cyavate, na kuśalamūlābhisamśkāraṃ kṣapayati | upapadyate ca, na cākuśalaṃ prabadhnāti |

The Venerable Śāriputra spoke to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti as follows: “Where did you die that you were reborn here?”

Vimalakīrti said: “Is there any death or rebirth of a phenomenon realized by the Elder?”

[Śāriputra] said: “There is no death or rebirth of that phenomenon.”

[Vimalakīrti] said: “It being the case, Reverend Śāriputra, that all phenomena are free of death and rebirth, why does it occur to you [to ask]: ‘Where did you die that you were reborn here?’? If, Reverend Śāriputra, an illusorily created woman or man were asked ‘Where did you die that you were reborn here?’ what should he reply?”

[Śāriputra] said: “Gentle Sir, an illusory creation has no death or rebirth; what will he answer?”

[Vimalakīrti] said: “Has not the Tathāgata taught, Reverend Śāriputra, that all phenomena have the intrinsic nature of an illusory creation?”

[Śāriputra] said: “Just so, Gentle Sir.”

[Vimalakīrti] said: “It being the case, Reverend Śāriputra, that all phenomena have the intrinsic nature of an illusory creation, [when you ask me] ‘Where did you die that you were reborn here?’ this [word] ‘death’ has as its characteristic mark the cessation of activity; this [word] ‘rebirth’ [indicates] continuity of activity. When a bodhisattva dies, the activity of his roots of good does not cease, and when he is reborn, his unwholesome [karmic seeds] do not continue.”

II)

Candrottarādārikā-vyākaraṇa: Derge Kanjur 191, *mdo sde, tsa* 236a7-b1:

de nas byang chub sems dpa' byams pas bu mo zla mchog la 'di skad ces smras so || bu mo khyod yun ji srid cig gis bla la med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub mngon par rdzogs par 'tshang rgya bar 'gyur |

bu mo smras pa | yun ji srid cig gis byang chub sems dpa' byams pa so so'i skyes bo'i sa las 'da' bar 'gyur zhing sangs rgyas kyi sa las kyang 'da' bar 'gyur ba de srid kyis lags so ||

T. 480 (XIV) 620c15-17 (*juan xia*)

爾時，彌勒菩薩告彼女言：汝於何時當得成就阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。

其女答言：亦如彌勒菩薩何時得超凡夫行地。

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: VI.16:

āha: kiyaścireṇa punar devate bodhim abhisambhotsyase |

āha: yadā sthaviṛaḥ pṛthagjanadharmmasamanvāgato bhaviṣyati, tadāhaṁ bodhim abhisambhotsye |

T. 475 (XIV) 548c12-15:

舍利弗問天：汝久如當得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。

天曰：如舍利弗還爲凡夫，我乃當成阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。

III)

Vimaladatta-paripṛcchā: Peking Kanjur 760 (33), *dkon brtsegs, zi* 273a3-6:

de nas tshe dang ldan pa mo'u dgal gyi bu chen pos | byang chub sems dpa' dri ma med kyis byin pa la 'di skad ces smras so || rigs kyi bu khyod de ltar yun ring du bla na med pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub kyi phyir spyod spyod na | ci'i phyir khyod kyis de'i tshe | bud med kyi dngos po ma bsgyur |

byang chub sems dpa' dri ma med pas byin pas smras pa | gnas brtan mo'u dgal gyi bu chen po ni rdzu 'phrul dang ldan pa rnam kyi mchog tu bstan pa yin || btsun pa khyod ci'i phyir skyes pa'i lus las ma sgyur |

gnas brtan mo'u dgal gyi bu chen po cang mi smra bar gyur to ||

T. 310 (33) XI) 563c2-9 無垢施菩薩應辯會：

爾時，大德目連謂無垢施菩薩言：善男子，汝已久發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。何以不轉女人身也。

無垢施菩薩答目連言：世尊記大德於神足人中最為第一。何為不轉男子身也。

大德目連即便默然。

無垢施菩薩謂大德目連言：亦不以女身得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。亦不以男身得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。所以者何。菩提無生，是以不可得。

See also T. 339 (XII) 106b10-16; T. 338 (XII) 96c22-28.

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