

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

RARE BOOKS • INDIAN MINIATURES
INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

*The Heetopades Of Veeshnoo-Sarma, In a
Series Of Connected Fables, Interspersed With
Moral, Prudential And Political Maxims;
Translated From An Ancient Manuscript In
The Sanskreet Language. With Explanatory
Notes,*

By Charles Wilkins

1787

The second Sanskrit book translated directly into English, just two years after the seminal work of Wilkins in The Bhagavat Geeta.



COUNSEL IN THE COMPANY OF ANIMALS

Charles Wilkins's The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma
Bath, 1787 • First English Edition

THE CUSTODIANS



Books outlive their owners. Every collector is merely a temporary custodian in the long journey of civilisation.

The privilege of collecting is not possession, but preservation; not ownership, but stewardship. Every volume entrusted to The Eye of the Beholder carries with it the voices of those who created it, those who cherished it before us, and those who will inherit it after us.

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES

विद्या नाम नरस्य रूपमधिकं प्रच्छन्नगुप्तं धनम्। विद्या भोगकरी यशः सुखकरी विद्या गुरुणां गुरुः ॥

Knowledge is man's highest adornment, a hidden treasure that cannot be stolen. It brings honour, happiness, and is itself the teacher of teachers.

Although these celebrated lines are not taken directly from the *Hitopadeśa*, they express the spirit of the work. For almost a millennium the *Hitopadeśa* has taught that wisdom is acquired not merely through abstract philosophy but through stories—stories in which kings, ministers, ascetics, merchants, birds and beasts reveal enduring truths about power, friendship, prudence, ambition and human nature. Charles Wilkins recognised this immediately. In translating the work into English in 1787, he introduced Europe not merely to another Sanskrit text, but to one of India's greatest manuals of practical wisdom.

Why This Book Matters

Every civilisation possesses a handful of books that transcend their original purpose and become ambassadors of an entire intellectual tradition. Homer's *Iliad* introduced Europe to the heroic age of Greece. Confucius' *Analects* distilled the ethical foundations of China. Machiavelli's *Prince* shaped political discourse across Renaissance Europe. For India, among these civilisational texts stands the *Hitopadeśa*.

Yet this volume is significant for another reason altogether.

It represents one of the earliest moments at which Europe attempted to understand India not through commerce, conquest or missionary enterprise, but through literature. During the eighteenth century, as the East India Company transformed from a trading corporation into a territorial power, a small circle of remarkable scholars began asking a revolutionary question. If Britain was to govern India, should it not first attempt to understand the civilisation it had inherited?

Among the first to answer that question was Charles Wilkins.

Today Wilkins is rightly remembered as the translator of the first English *Bhagavad Gītā* (1785), a work that transformed Europe's understanding of Indian philosophy. Yet his *Hitopadeśa*, published only two years later, deserves recognition as one of the great monuments of early Indology. It revealed another dimension of Sanskrit civilisation—not metaphysics this time, but statecraft, ethics, diplomacy and practical intelligence conveyed through elegant fables whose influence stretches across Asia.

The *Hitopadeśa* belongs to a literary tradition in which animals speak with greater wisdom than kings and in which political lessons are disguised as entertaining stories. Foxes deceive lions, crows outwit serpents, turtles perish through vanity, and monkeys expose the dangers of misplaced trust. Beneath these charming narratives lies a sophisticated philosophy of governance, friendship, prudence and human conduct. The work was never intended merely for children. It educated princes.

For European readers of the late eighteenth century, this discovery was astonishing. India was no longer simply the land of exotic religions or fabulous wealth. It possessed an educational literature comparable in subtlety to Aesop, Phaedrus or La Fontaine, yet rooted in an intellectual tradition entirely its own.

This first edition therefore occupies an important position in the history of cultural exchange. It marks the transition from curiosity to scholarship; from hearsay to careful translation; from mythology about India to direct engagement with Sanskrit sources.

It is also an object of extraordinary beauty. Printed in Bath by Richard Cruttwell, the volume reflects the restrained elegance of late eighteenth-century English typography. Its generous margins, finely composed title page and balanced proportions exemplify the standards of British book production at the close of the Enlightenment. Surviving copies in contemporary bindings possess a quiet dignity that modern reproductions cannot replicate.

The copy preserved in the collection of *The Eye of the Beholder* embodies these qualities particularly well. Its handsome gilt-decorated spine, marbled boards and remarkably fresh title page illustrate why original eighteenth-century bindings possess a character that no later rebinding can entirely reproduce. Every abrasion upon the leather and every mellowing of the paper bears witness to more than two centuries of careful survival.

For collectors of Indian books, this volume stands beside Wilkins' *Bhagavad Gītā*, Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws* and Sir William Jones' *Śakuntalā* as one of the foundational monuments of early Sanskrit studies in Europe. Together they represent the beginning of a scholarly conversation between India and the West—a conversation that continues today.

Chapter I

Historical Background

India, Britain and the Discovery of Sanskrit

When the *Hitopadeśa* appeared in English in 1787, the world was changing with extraordinary speed.

Across the Atlantic, the United States had only recently secured its independence. In France, revolution was gathering momentum. The Industrial Revolution was beginning to reshape Britain. Meanwhile, on the Indian subcontinent, the East India Company had become one of the most powerful political institutions on earth.

Yet despite its expanding authority, British knowledge of India remained remarkably superficial.

Company officials could negotiate treaties, collect revenue and command armies, but few possessed more than a passing acquaintance with the languages, literature or intellectual traditions of the people they governed. Persian served as the language of administration, while Sanskrit remained largely inaccessible to Europeans. Even educated officials relied heavily upon interpreters.

This situation began to change during the administration of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal from 1773 to 1785.

Hastings believed that stable government required intellectual humility. Rather than attempting to replace India's legal and literary traditions with European models, he encouraged British officials to study indigenous learning. Sanskrit scholars were invited to collaborate with European orientalists. Manuscripts were collected, translated and printed. Courts increasingly relied upon learned pandits to interpret Hindu law.

It was within this remarkable intellectual environment that Charles Wilkins emerged.

Unlike many contemporaries who regarded Indian languages merely as administrative tools, Wilkins approached Sanskrit with genuine scholarly curiosity. Under the guidance of learned pandits in Bengal and Benares, he mastered a language that few Europeans had previously attempted to study seriously. His achievement was extraordinary. Sanskrit grammar is among the most sophisticated linguistic systems ever devised, demanding years of disciplined study even from native scholars.

Wilkins persevered.

His efforts soon produced results that transformed European scholarship. Before translating great philosophical texts, however, he immersed himself in the literature through which generations of Indian students had learned language, ethics and political wisdom. Among the most important of these educational texts was the *Hitopadeśa*.

Originally compiled around the twelfth century and traditionally attributed to Nārāyaṇa Paṇḍita, the work drew extensively upon the much older *Pañcatantra*, itself one of the most influential books ever written. Over centuries these collections of animal fables travelled across Persia, Arabia, the Islamic world and medieval Europe, where they inspired countless adaptations. Yet remarkably, Europe still lacked a direct translation from the Sanskrit original.

Wilkins resolved to change that.

His translation therefore represented far more than literary curiosity. It was an attempt to return to the authentic source of a tradition whose descendants had already shaped world literature.

The publication of the *Hitopadeśa* also demonstrated another remarkable achievement. By the late 1780s, Wilkins had already become one of the pioneers of Indian typography. His work in designing Bengali and later Sanskrit types made it possible for complex Indic scripts to be printed with unprecedented accuracy. Although this English edition does not showcase those types directly, it belongs intellectually to the same programme: making India's literary heritage accessible through the technology of print.

The importance of this cannot be overstated.

Until the eighteenth century, Sanskrit learning existed primarily within a manuscript culture. Palm-leaf and paper manuscripts, copied painstakingly by hand, preserved texts across centuries but inevitably limited their circulation. Printing altered that equation permanently. Scholars separated by continents could now study the same works, compare translations and establish a common body of knowledge.

The *Hitopadeśa* entered this new world at precisely the right moment.

Within a generation, European universities would begin teaching Sanskrit. Comparative linguistics would emerge as a scientific discipline. The Indo-European language family would be recognised. German philosophers, British administrators and French orientlists would increasingly look to Sanskrit literature as one of humanity's great intellectual traditions.

This modest octavo volume belongs to the opening chapter of that remarkable story.

Chapter II

Charles Wilkins

CHARLES WILKINS AT A GLANCE

1749 — Born at Frome, Somerset

1770 — Arrived in India in the service of the East India Company

1785 — Published the first English translation of the Bhagavad Gītā

1787 — Published The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma

1808 — Published A Grammar of the Sanskrita Language

Later served as Librarian of the East India Company; Fellow of the Royal Society

1836 — Died in London



Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), pioneering Sanskritist, translator and typographer.

Scholar, Printer and the Making of a Sanskrit Classic

Among the remarkable figures who laid the foundations of European Indology, few combined technical brilliance, linguistic genius and scholarly humility to the extent that Charles Wilkins (1749–1836) did. If Sir William Jones became the great public intellectual of Oriental scholarship, Wilkins was its master craftsman—the quiet scholar whose painstaking labour made much of that scholarship possible.

His name today is inseparable from the first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (1785), yet that achievement should not obscure the extraordinary breadth of his contributions. He was at once a linguist, typographer, engraver, translator, printer, Orientalist, administrator and bibliophile. Without his work, the first generation of British Sanskrit scholarship would have developed far more slowly.

The *Hitopadeśa* occupies a special place within that remarkable career. It demonstrates Wilkins not only as a translator of profound philosophical texts but also as an interpreter of India's educational and literary traditions.

From Somerset to Bengal

Charles Wilkins was born in 1749 at Frome, Somerset. Unlike many of his contemporaries who entered the East India Company's service through aristocratic patronage, Wilkins came from relatively modest circumstances. His early education gave little indication that he would one day become Europe's foremost Sanskrit scholar.

Like many ambitious young Englishmen of his generation, he sought opportunity in India. In 1770, at the age of twenty-one, he entered the service of the East India Company as a Writer—a junior administrative appointment that combined commercial responsibilities with governmental duties.

Few could have predicted the path his career would take.

Most Company officials devoted themselves to commerce or administration. Wilkins became fascinated by language.

Living in Bengal required proficiency in Persian and Bengali, and Wilkins mastered both with unusual speed. His aptitude soon attracted attention, not least from Warren Hastings, who recognised in the young civil servant an uncommon intellectual curiosity.

That encouragement changed the course of Wilkins' life.

The Encounter with Sanskrit

Learning Sanskrit in eighteenth-century India was no simple undertaking.

Unlike Persian, which many educated administrators already knew, Sanskrit remained largely confined to traditional centres of Hindu learning. Access to qualified teachers depended upon personal relationships and mutual trust. European students were exceedingly rare.

Wilkins approached the language with patience rather than arrogance.

He studied under learned pandits, accepting the traditional methods of instruction rather than attempting to impose European pedagogical assumptions. Progress was slow. Sanskrit grammar is extraordinarily systematic but correspondingly demanding. Every noun changes according to case and number; every verb follows intricate patterns of conjugation; compounds may extend for entire lines.

Yet Wilkins persevered.

His notebooks reveal not merely linguistic competence but genuine admiration for the precision of the language. Long before Franz Bopp or Max Müller, Wilkins recognised that Sanskrit represented one of the world's great intellectual achievements.

This humility distinguished him from many later Orientalists. He did not approach Sanskrit as an exotic curiosity but as the vehicle of a sophisticated civilisation.

The Printer Who Changed Indian Publishing

Perhaps Wilkins' greatest contribution lay not in translation but in typography.

Printing European alphabets was already a mature craft by the eighteenth century. Printing Indian scripts presented an entirely different challenge.

Bengali and Sanskrit required hundreds of individual characters, conjunct consonants and ligatures. No satisfactory metal type existed.

Wilkins therefore undertook the astonishing task of designing one himself.

Working with local craftsmen, he engraved punches, cast type and experimented with layouts that would faithfully reproduce Indic scripts while remaining practical for commercial printing. The process demanded artistic skill, mechanical precision and a profound understanding of the language itself.

These efforts culminated in the first successful Bengali types and later in Sanskrit typography of remarkable elegance.

Their importance cannot be overstated.

Every printed Sanskrit book produced during the early decades of British Oriental scholarship owed something to Wilkins' pioneering work. His typography made possible not only translations but also the publication of original Sanskrit texts for scholars across Europe.

Modern readers often celebrate translators while overlooking printers. Yet without printers there can be no transmission of knowledge.

Wilkins excelled at both.

Warren Hastings and the Orientalist Vision

No account of Wilkins can ignore Warren Hastings.

The Governor-General recognised that governing India required more than military power. It demanded an understanding of Indian institutions, laws and intellectual traditions.

Hastings therefore encouraged the study of Sanskrit and Persian, supported translations and fostered collaboration between European scholars and Indian pandits.

Wilkins became one of the principal beneficiaries of this enlightened patronage.

Hastings personally supported several of his projects, including the publication of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Indeed, Hastings' famous preface to that translation remains one of the most remarkable statements of intellectual respect ever written by a British colonial administrator. He predicted that Britain's political power in India might one day disappear, but the philosophical achievements of India would endure.

History has vindicated that observation.

The empire vanished.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* remained.

The same intellectual spirit also informed Wilkins' translation of the *Hitopadeśa*. Although less overtly philosophical than the *Gītā*, the work revealed another aspect of Indian civilisation: its concern with ethical conduct, diplomacy and practical wisdom.

A Translator of Exceptional Restraint

One quality distinguishes Wilkins from many eighteenth-century translators.

He resisted the temptation to improve his originals.

European translators of the period frequently paraphrased, embellished or moralised foreign texts in order to suit contemporary tastes. Wilkins generally preferred fidelity.

His English possesses the dignified cadence characteristic of late eighteenth-century prose. It is elegant without becoming florid, literal without becoming unreadable. Where Indian concepts lacked obvious English equivalents, he explained rather than simplified.

This scholarly restraint explains why his translations remain historically valuable today.

Later translators, benefiting from advances in philology, have naturally corrected occasional errors. Yet Wilkins' work retains an honesty and seriousness that continue to command respect.

He translated because he wished readers to encounter India—not an English imitation of India.

Beyond the *Bhagavad Gītā*

Public memory has understandably centred upon Wilkins' *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Yet that success sometimes overshadows the remarkable diversity of his scholarship.

Among his principal works are:

- *A Grammar of the Sanskrit Language* (1808), the first substantial Sanskrit grammar written in English.
- *The Heetopades* (1787), introducing one of India's great collections of political and moral fables.
- Extensive work on Bengali typography.
- Important translations of inscriptions and historical documents.
- Contributions to the early cataloguing of Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in Britain.

Taken together, these works reveal a coherent intellectual programme.

Wilkins was not collecting curiosities.

He was building the foundations upon which future generations could study India directly through its own literature.

London and the East India Company Library

After returning to England, Wilkins continued his scholarly career with undiminished energy.

He became Librarian of the East India Company, overseeing one of Europe's most important collections of Oriental manuscripts. The appointment suited him perfectly. Surrounded by Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic texts, he continued researching, cataloguing and publishing until advanced age.

His influence extended well beyond his own writings.

Younger Orientalists increasingly relied upon his advice. His linguistic expertise informed the work of scholars throughout Britain and continental Europe. When Sanskrit studies blossomed during the nineteenth century, they did so upon foundations that Wilkins had helped construct decades earlier.

Recognition and Legacy

Recognition came gradually but deservedly.

Wilkins became a Fellow of the Royal Society, one of Britain's highest scholarly honours. Oxford awarded him an honorary Doctor of Civil Law, acknowledging contributions that extended far beyond the ordinary achievements of civil servants.

He died in 1836 at the age of eighty-seven.

By then, Sanskrit had entered European universities. Comparative linguistics had begun transforming historical scholarship. German philosophers, French Orientalists and British administrators alike recognised India's literary heritage as one of humanity's greatest intellectual traditions.

Charles Wilkins did not accomplish this transformation alone.

But few individuals contributed more.

His genius lay not in dramatic discoveries but in disciplined craftsmanship. He mastered difficult languages, designed new typefaces, collaborated respectfully with Indian scholars, translated faithfully and published beautifully.

The *Hitopadeśa* stands as one monument among many to that extraordinary career.

For collectors today, a first edition of Wilkins' *Heetopades* represents more than an early translation. It is a tangible reminder of the moment when Europe first began to approach Sanskrit literature with genuine scholarly seriousness. Every surviving copy carries within it the quiet legacy of a man who believed that understanding another civilisation begins by reading its own books.

Chapter III

The Literary World of the *Hitopadeśa*

The Book That Taught Princes to Rule

Few books have travelled farther, influenced more cultures, or lived more lives than the *Hitopadeśa*.

Although modest in size and deceptively simple in style, it belongs to one of humanity's oldest and most successful literary traditions. Its stories have crossed mountains, deserts and oceans. They have been translated into dozens of languages, retold in countless forms, and absorbed into cultures whose readers often had no idea that their favourite fables originated in India.

When Charles Wilkins published *The Hectopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma* in 1787, he was not merely translating a Sanskrit book. He was restoring Europe to one of the original sources of a literary tradition that had already travelled around the world.

What Is the *Hitopadeśa*?

The Sanskrit title *Hitopadeśa* is usually translated as "Beneficial Instruction," "Wholesome Advice," or "Profitable Counsel." The word is composed of two Sanskrit elements:

- *Hita* — welfare, benefit, that which is advantageous.
- *Upadeśa* — instruction, teaching, advice.

The title therefore expresses the book's purpose with remarkable clarity. It is not entertainment for its own sake. Every story exists to teach.

Unlike philosophical treatises, which explain ideas through abstract reasoning, the *Hitopadeśa* teaches through narrative. A foolish monkey illustrates the dangers of impulsiveness. A crafty jackal demonstrates political manipulation. Faithful friends overcome seemingly impossible odds through cooperation and intelligence. Every tale concludes with a moral principle that extends far beyond the immediate story.

Its intended audience was not children.

It was princes.

Vishnu Sharma—or Narayana?

Wilkins followed a long-standing tradition in attributing the work to Vishnu Sharma (Viṣṇuśarman), whose name appears prominently on his title page as "Veeshnoo-Sarma."

Modern scholarship, however, paints a more nuanced picture.

The original *Pañcatantra*, from which many of these stories ultimately derive, was traditionally attributed to Viṣṇuśarman, a legendary Brahmin scholar said to have educated three ignorant princes through animal fables.

The *Hitopadeśa*, by contrast, is generally believed to have been compiled several centuries later, probably between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, by **Nārāyaṇa Paṇḍita**, who drew extensively upon the *Pañcatantra* while rearranging, revising and expanding its material.

This distinction matters historically, but not aesthetically.

The genius of the *Hitopadeśa* lies less in originality than in refinement. Nārāyaṇa did not merely copy older stories. He reorganised them into a more coherent educational programme and enriched them with quotations drawn from classical Sanskrit poetry, ethical literature and political philosophy.

The result became one of India's most widely studied educational texts.

Education Before Textbooks

Modern education relies heavily upon textbooks organised by subject.

Pre-modern India followed a different model.

Knowledge was transmitted through memorable stories, poetry and aphorisms designed for oral recitation. Students learned grammar through verse, philosophy through dialogue and ethics through narrative.

The *Hitopadeśa* belonged squarely within this tradition.

Its stories were intended to be read aloud, discussed with teachers and memorised by students. Each tale contains numerous embedded Sanskrit verses summarising the lesson to be learned. These verses were easily committed to memory and could later be recalled whenever similar situations arose in life.

In this respect, the *Hitopadeśa* resembles neither a novel nor a children's book.

It is closer to a handbook of applied wisdom.

Its subject is not morality in the abstract but decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

How should rulers select trustworthy advisers?

When is reconciliation preferable to war?

How does one recognise deception?

What qualities distinguish genuine friendship from convenient alliance?

These questions remain remarkably modern.

The Four Books

THE ARCHITECTURE OF COUNSEL

- I. Mitralābha — The Gaining of Friends
- II. Suhṛdbheda — The Loss of Friends
- III. Vighraha — War and Conflict
- IV. Sandhi — Peace and Reconciliation

Unlike the older Pañcatantra, which consists of five books, the Hitopadeśa is usually divided into four principal sections:

I. Mitralābha — The Gaining of Friends

The opening section explores one of civilisation's oldest political truths: power depends upon trustworthy relationships.

Animals of different species form unlikely alliances, demonstrating that cooperation often proves stronger than physical strength. Intelligence, loyalty and mutual confidence emerge as the true foundations of success.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the work begins here.

No prince governs alone.

II. Suhṛdbheda — The Loss of Friends

Having shown how friendships are formed, the text next examines how they are destroyed.

Here appear some of the most memorable villains in Sanskrit literature—scheming jackals, manipulative courtiers and malicious advisers whose whispered insinuations gradually poison trust between allies.

Few political observations are more timeless.

Empires rarely collapse solely through external attack.

More often they disintegrate from internal suspicion.

III. Vighraha — War and Conflict

The third section addresses diplomacy, conflict and the management of power.

The stories acknowledge that conflict cannot always be avoided. Yet they repeatedly emphasise prudence over aggression, calculation over impulse and intelligence over brute force.

Military victory begins long before armies meet.

It begins with judgment.

IV. Sandhi — Peace and Reconciliation

The concluding section balances the preceding discussion of conflict by examining negotiation, compromise and restored harmony.

Peace is not portrayed as weakness.

Rather, it is presented as one of the highest expressions of political wisdom.

The sequence is carefully designed.

Friendship.

Conflict.

War.

Peace.

Together they constitute a complete education in governance.

Animals as Political Philosophers

One reason for the extraordinary success of the *Hitopadeśa* lies in its use of animals.

Human beings often resist direct criticism.

A king may resent being told that he behaves foolishly.

He will readily laugh at a foolish monkey.

Through animals, the author creates a safe distance between reader and lesson. Pride gives way to reflection.

A lion becomes the archetype of royal authority.

The jackal embodies cunning opportunism.

The crow symbolises intelligence.

The turtle represents caution.

The monkey illustrates impulsiveness.

These symbolic roles transcend culture.

Readers in India, Persia, Arabia or Europe instinctively understand them.

This universality explains why the stories travelled so successfully across linguistic and religious boundaries.

A Book That Conquered the World

The influence of the Hitopadeśa cannot be understood without recognising its relationship to the broader Pāṇcatantra tradition.

Beginning in late antiquity, Indian collections of animal fables travelled westward through Persia. During the sixth century they were translated into Middle Persian under the Sasanian king Khosrow I. Although that version has disappeared, it became the source for one of the most influential books of the medieval Islamic world.

In the eighth century, the Persian scholar Ibn al-Muqaffa⁵ translated the stories into Arabic under the title **Kalīla wa Dimna**.

From Arabic they spread with astonishing speed.

Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, Spanish, Latin, Italian, French, German, English.

Generations of European readers encountered these stories without ever realising that they had originated in Sanskrit centuries earlier.

Thus, when Wilkins published the *Heetopades* in 1787, Europe experienced something rather unusual.

It was discovering the source after already knowing many of the descendants.

Why the Stories Never Grow Old

Literary fashions change.

Political systems collapse.

Empires disappear.

The *Hitopadesā* endures.

Its survival owes little to nostalgia.

Rather, it reflects a profound understanding of permanent features of human behaviour.

Envy, Loyalty, Fear, Greed, Ambition, Friendship, Deception.

These forces operate in royal courts, corporate boardrooms, universities and families with equal persistence.

The settings change. Human nature does not.

This explains why the stories continue to resonate more than eight hundred years after their compilation. They describe not merely ancient India but humanity itself.

Wilkins' Choice

One may reasonably ask why Wilkins chose this work so soon after the monumental achievement of translating the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The answer reveals much about his intellectual vision.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* introduced Europe to Indian metaphysics.

The *Hitopadesā* introduced Europe to Indian practical wisdom.

Together they shattered the simplistic stereotype of India as a civilisation concerned only with mystical speculation.

Here was a literature deeply engaged with politics, diplomacy, psychology and education.

The two books complemented one another perfectly.

One explored the inner life.

The other explored the conduct of life.

For eighteenth-century readers, this combination was transformative.

India emerged not as an exotic curiosity but as a civilisation whose literature addressed the same enduring questions that occupied Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Machiavelli.

That recognition marked one of the great intellectual turning points of the Enlightenment.

Chapter IV

Anatomy of the First Edition

The Physical Book as Historical Evidence

The true collector does not merely read a rare book.

He studies it.

Its paper, typography, binding, sewing structure, ownership inscriptions, printer's ornaments and even its imperfections form part of the historical document. A first edition is not simply a text; it is an artefact that embodies the technology, craftsmanship and intellectual culture of the age that produced it.

Charles Wilkins' *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma* is an exemplary illustration of this principle. Every physical feature of the volume reflects the standards of English printing during the final decades of the eighteenth century, a period often regarded as one of the great ages of fine book production.

The collector who understands these details begins to appreciate the book not only as literature but also as an object of material culture.

A Bibliographical Description

Full Title

The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma, in a Series of Connected Fables, Interspersed with Moral, Prudential, and Political Maxims. Translated from an Ancient Manuscript in the Sanskrit Language.

The title itself deserves attention.

Unlike modern titles, eighteenth-century title pages often functioned as miniature advertisements, informing prospective purchasers precisely what they were buying. Every phrase serves a purpose.

"Series of Connected Fables."

"Moral, Prudential, and Political Maxims."

"Translated from an Ancient Manuscript."

"Sanskrit Language."

For a British reader in 1787, these words conveyed novelty, authenticity and scholarly authority.

Publication

Bath

Printed by

R. Cruttwell

1787

Sold in London by

C. Nourse

and

J. Marshall

Bath was by then one of Britain's most fashionable intellectual centres. Its printers had developed a reputation for elegant typography and careful production. Richard Cruttwell belonged among the better provincial printers of his generation, producing books that frequently rivalled those issued in London.

This explains the remarkable balance and clarity evident throughout the volume.

Format

The book was issued in **octavo (8vo)**.

To modern readers this may seem a trivial bibliographical detail.

It is not.

An octavo is produced by folding a printed sheet three times, creating eight leaves (sixteen pages).

Octavo volumes occupied a particularly attractive middle ground.

Large folios projected grandeur.

Small duodecimos emphasised portability.

Octavos combined elegance with practicality.

They were books intended to be read repeatedly.

The *Heetopades* therefore appeared in precisely the format one would expect for a work intended to educate cultivated readers.

Typography

One of the first impressions created by this volume is the serenity of its typography.

The title page demonstrates the restrained confidence of late Georgian printing.

Different type sizes establish hierarchy without unnecessary ornament.

Capital letters provide emphasis while generous spacing prevents visual congestion.

The result is remarkably modern.

Unlike many eighteenth-century books overloaded with decorative flourishes, Wilkins' *Heetopades* relies upon proportion rather than embellishment.

This restraint reflects Enlightenment ideals.

Knowledge should persuade through clarity.

Not extravagance.

Paper

The paper used in quality English books of the eighteenth century differs fundamentally from most modern paper.

It was manufactured primarily from linen and cotton rags rather than wood pulp.

Consequently it possesses several remarkable characteristics.

It ages slowly.

It resists brittleness.

Its surface retains a softness that modern machine-made paper rarely achieves.

More importantly for collectors, rag paper often survives centuries with astonishing freshness when properly stored.

Examining the title page of the present copy, one immediately notices this quality.

The paper remains creamy rather than brown.

Its texture retains vitality.

Foxing is minimal.

The margins remain generous.

Such preservation greatly enhances both scholarly and aesthetic value.

Printing

Each page of this book was printed on a hand-operated press.

Every sheet required individual inking.

Every impression depended upon the skill of the pressman.

Minor variations inevitably occurred.

Occasional irregularities in ink density remind us that this was not industrial production but craftsmanship.

Each copy therefore possesses subtle individuality.

Modern offset printing produces near-perfect uniformity.

Hand press printing produces character.

Collectors often find themselves unconsciously drawn to these slight variations because they reveal the human hand behind the printed page.

The Binding



The present copy: marbled boards with calf spine and corners.

Perhaps the most immediately attractive feature of the present copy is its binding.

Although careful examination in hand would naturally permit more precise conclusions, the photographs suggest an early period binding incorporating beautifully marbled paper-covered boards with a richly gilt-decorated calf spine.

The spine deserves particular admiration.

Its compartments remain clearly defined.

The gilt tooling retains much of its original brilliance.

The leather has mellowed into the warm brown tones so prized by collectors.

Unlike heavily restored examples, this copy presents with honesty.

It bears its age gracefully.

There is no attempt to disguise two centuries of careful use.

Instead, the binding has acquired precisely that quiet dignity which distinguishes genuinely old books from artificially antiqued modern reproductions.

Marbled Boards

The marbled paper covering the boards deserves separate mention.

Book marbling developed into a sophisticated decorative art during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

No two sheets are identical.

Floating pigments upon a prepared liquid surface created patterns that were then transferred directly onto paper.

Consequently every marbled binding becomes unique.

The present copy displays an attractive traditional pattern whose colours continue to harmonise beautifully with the mellow calf spine.

Such details contribute significantly to the visual pleasure of collecting eighteenth-century books.

The Spine



Detail of the gilt-decorated spine, lettered "The Heetopades — Wilkins" and dated 1787.

Collectors frequently describe the spine as the "face" of a rare book.

After all, it is the portion most often seen upon the shelf.

The spine of the present volume possesses several particularly desirable qualities.

Its proportions remain elegant.

The gilt decoration is neither excessive nor sparse.

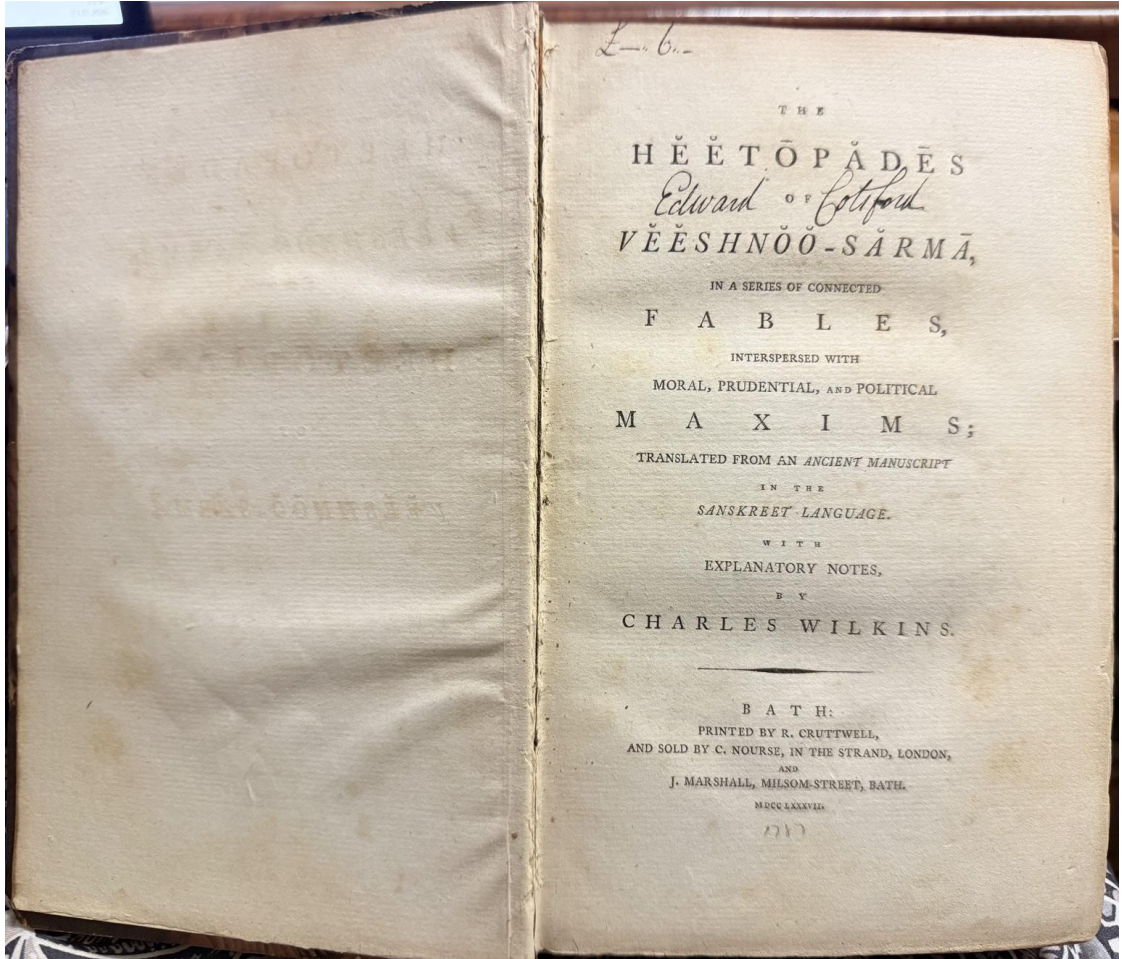
The title remains legible.

The raised bands continue to define the structure clearly.

Together these elements create precisely the appearance one hopes to encounter in an eighteenth-century English binding.

It is a book that announces quiet refinement rather than ostentatious luxury.

The Title Page



Title page of the present copy, with an early ownership inscription.

Every great antiquarian book deserves to be judged first by its title page.

It is here that printer, author and reader first meet.

The title page of the *Heetopades* achieves a remarkable balance between information and elegance.

The varying sizes of type naturally guide the eye downward.

The emphasis falls first upon the title.

Then upon the attribution.

Then upon Wilkins' role as translator.

Finally upon publication.

Nothing appears accidental.

Everything serves visual harmony.

The present copy possesses another feature of considerable interest.

Near the upper portion of the page appears an early ownership inscription.

Although only partially legible from the available photographs, the signature appears to record an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century owner, possibly "Edward..." followed by a surname.

Such inscriptions frequently become valuable historical evidence.

They allow collectors to reconstruct the journeys individual books have made across generations.

Further research may yet identify this owner.

Margins

Collectors often speak of "large-paper" copies or "wide margins."

Because margins represent survival.

Books were frequently trimmed during rebinding.

Each trimming removes part of the original sheet forever.

Generous margins therefore indicate restraint.

The binder respected the printed page.

The present copy appears to retain comfortably proportioned margins throughout, contributing to its handsome appearance.

Collation

Although complete collation requires examination leaf by leaf, the standard first edition consists of the expected preliminary leaves followed by the translated text arranged according to eighteenth-century printing conventions.

Before any major acquisition, experienced collectors verify:

- completeness
- signatures
- pagination
- cancels
- inserted leaves
- repairs
- supplied pages

The importance of careful collation cannot be overstated.

Many apparently attractive copies conceal missing leaves.

Conversely, some imperfect copies preserve unique provenance or exceptional bindings that compensate for minor defects.

Every copy possesses its own personality.

The Book as an Object

One of the great pleasures of antiquarian books lies in their physical presence.

Modern books communicate information.

Eighteenth-century books communicate civilisation.

Their proportions are calmer.

Their materials are warmer.

Their typography breathes.

Holding Wilkins' *Heetopades* one becomes aware of the remarkable continuity of intellectual history.

This very volume could have stood upon the library shelves of Company officials in Calcutta, Oriental scholars in Oxford, or gentlemen collectors in Bath.

It may have travelled aboard East Indiamen crossing the Cape of Good Hope.

It may have passed through Victorian libraries before finding its way into the present collection.

Books possess biographies no less fascinating than those of their authors.

Assessment of the Present Copy

THE PRESENT COPY

Attractive early binding with marbled boards

Richly gilt calf spine with strong shelf presence

Fresh title page and pleasing rag paper

Early ownership inscription

Honest signs of age, without the appearance of excessive restoration

Based upon the photographs provided, the copy preserved in The Eye of the Beholder may be described as an attractive collector's example.

Its principal strengths include:

- A handsome early period binding with marbled boards.
- An exceptionally attractive gilt-decorated calf spine.
- A clean and well-preserved title page.
- Good quality rag paper showing pleasing freshness.
- An early ownership inscription that adds historical interest.
- Honest signs of age without evidence of excessive restoration.
- Strong shelf presence and considerable aesthetic appeal.

Overall, the volume presents exactly the qualities sought by collectors of eighteenth-century Oriental literature: authenticity, elegance and integrity.

Its appeal lies not in perfection but in preservation. It remains unmistakably a book that has lived for nearly two and a half centuries while retaining the grace, balance and craftsmanship of the Georgian age.

Chapter V

Reading the *Hitopadeśa*

A Mirror of Human Nature

"Stories are the shortest road to wisdom."

The enduring greatness of the *Hitopadeśa* lies not merely in its antiquity, nor even in its elegance of language. Its genius resides in something far rarer. It understands people.

Civilisations rise and fall. Kingdoms disappear. Religions expand and contract. Political systems replace one another. Yet the fundamental impulses that govern human behaviour remain astonishingly constant. Ambition, jealousy, loyalty, greed, gratitude, fear and friendship are as recognisable today as they were eight centuries ago. The *Hitopadeśa* is, above all else, a study of these permanent features of human nature.

For this reason, it has often been described as a "mirror for princes." That description is only partly correct. It is equally a mirror for ministers, merchants, scholars, judges, diplomats—and indeed anyone entrusted with making decisions in an uncertain world.

Unlike the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which asks how one ought to act in accordance with Dharma, the *Hitopadeśa* asks a different question:

How does one act wisely among imperfect human beings?

That distinction explains why the two books complement rather than compete with one another. One addresses the moral life; the other addresses the practical life.

Wisdom Hidden Inside Stories

One of the first things that strikes a modern reader is the extraordinary economy with which the *Hitopadeśa* teaches.

There are no long philosophical arguments.

No elaborate theories.

No systematic treatises.

Instead, there are stories.

A crow discovers a clever way to defeat a snake that has repeatedly devoured its young.

A lion is persuaded to distrust his most faithful companion by the whispered intrigues of jealous courtiers.

A monkey loses everything because he cannot restrain his tongue.

A foolish turtle dies because he speaks when silence would have saved him.

The stories are entertaining.

That is precisely why they work.

Modern psychology has repeatedly demonstrated that narratives are remembered far more effectively than abstract principles. Long before cognitive science discovered this, Indian educators had already mastered it.

The lesson enters the mind almost unnoticed.

By the time the reader reaches the concluding maxim, the moral has already become emotionally convincing.

The Politics of Friendship

The opening book, *Mitralābha* ("The Gaining of Friends"), may appear surprisingly political.

Friendship here is not merely sentimental affection.

It is social capital.

The text repeatedly teaches that wisdom consists in recognising dependable allies before adversity arrives.

This reflects an important principle of classical Indian political thought.

Power is rarely exercised alone.

Every king depends upon ministers.

Every merchant depends upon partners.

Every scholar depends upon teachers.

Every traveller depends upon companions.

Isolation is weakness.

One particularly beautiful aspect of the *Hitopadeśa* is that genuine friendship repeatedly transcends differences of status.

Animals of different species cooperate.

The weak overcome the strong through intelligence.

Mutual trust proves stronger than brute force.

These stories retain remarkable relevance today.

Successful institutions, businesses and governments continue to depend far more upon trusted relationships than upon formal hierarchies.

The Psychology of Deception

If friendship occupies the first book, deception dominates the second.

Here the *Hitopadeśa* displays psychological insight of astonishing sophistication.

Rarely does evil appear dramatically.

Instead, destruction begins quietly.

A rumour.

A suspicion.

A misunderstood remark.

An adviser who appears loyal while pursuing private ambitions.

The gradual erosion of trust.

The lion and the bull, one of the most celebrated narratives inherited from the *Pañcatantra* tradition, illustrates this perfectly. Two powerful allies are manipulated into mutual suspicion by a cunning intermediary whose true objective is personal advancement.

The story has been retold for nearly fifteen hundred years because its central insight remains painfully familiar.

Relationships are seldom destroyed by open enemies.

They are more often destroyed by those who profit from division.

Readers who have spent time in politics, diplomacy or corporate leadership frequently discover that the *Hitopadeśa* understands organisational behaviour with remarkable precision.

Its observations require little updating.

Only the costumes have changed.

Intelligence Versus Strength

One recurring theme deserves particular attention.

Again and again, intelligence triumphs over physical force.

Small birds defeat larger predators.

Weak animals escape powerful enemies.

Careful planning overcomes superior numbers.

This reflects a broader characteristic of Indian political literature.

The greatest victories belong not to the strongest warrior but to the wisest strategist.

Readers accustomed to heroic epics may initially find this emphasis surprising.

The *Mahābhārata* celebrates martial courage.

The *Hitopadeśa* celebrates intellectual agility.

Victory belongs to the one who thinks.

The Discipline of Speech

Among the book's most consistent themes is the ethical use of language.

Words possess consequences.

A careless sentence may destroy friendships.

A truthful sentence may preserve kingdoms.

Silence itself becomes a form of wisdom.

Several stories illustrate how impulsive speech produces irreversible disaster.

The lesson remains timeless.

Modern societies communicate with unprecedented speed.

Yet the moral challenge has not changed.

The inability to govern one's speech continues to ruin reputations, careers and relationships.

The *Hitopadeśa* repeatedly reminds its readers that wisdom begins not with eloquence but with restraint.

Wilkins as Translator

Reading Wilkins today offers an opportunity to appreciate eighteenth-century scholarship at its finest.

He does not attempt to modernise the stories.

Nor does he burden them with unnecessary commentary.

Instead, he allows the Sanskrit narrative to unfold in dignified English prose.

His style inevitably reflects his own age.

Certain turns of phrase appear characteristically Georgian.

The rhythm is measured.

The vocabulary occasionally formal.

Yet beneath this eighteenth-century surface one senses Wilkins' profound respect for the original.

He trusted his readers.

He assumed they possessed patience, curiosity and intelligence.

Such confidence is refreshing.

Modern translations sometimes simplify excessively.

Wilkins preferred fidelity.

The Sanskrit Behind the English

One should remember that every page of Wilkins' translation rests upon a remarkable linguistic achievement.

Sanskrit presents difficulties unlike those encountered in most European languages.

Its compounds may combine numerous ideas into a single grammatical unit.

Its philosophical vocabulary often possesses no exact English equivalent.

Its poetry depends heavily upon sound, metre and layered meaning.

Wilkins therefore faced continual choices.

Should he translate literally?

Should he preserve elegance?

Should he explain?

Should he paraphrase?

No translator solves these questions perfectly.

What distinguishes Wilkins is his evident desire to preserve the intellectual character of the original even when complete literalness proved impossible.

For the late eighteenth century, this represented scholarship of an exceptionally high order.

A Book About Prudence

Perhaps the central virtue celebrated throughout the *Hitopadeśa* is prudence.

Modern readers sometimes misunderstand prudence as timidity.

The Sanskrit tradition means something quite different.

Prudence is disciplined judgment.

It is the ability to recognise consequences before acting.

It is neither cowardice nor hesitation.

Rather, it is intelligent foresight.

Kings who ignore prudent counsel lose kingdoms.

Merchants who neglect prudent calculation lose fortunes.

Individuals who ignore prudent friendships lose happiness.

The book therefore educates its readers not merely to distinguish right from wrong, but to distinguish wisdom from folly.

That distinction may be even more difficult.

Why It Still Matters

One measure of a classic is whether it continues to illuminate the present.

By that standard, the *Hitopadeśa* remains astonishingly alive.

Its lessons speak naturally to diplomats negotiating international agreements.

To corporate leaders managing complex organisations.

To judges weighing conflicting evidence.

To teachers guiding young students.

To parents raising children.

To collectors deciding whom they can trust.

Indeed, many of its stories feel uncannily contemporary.

One occasionally forgets that they were composed centuries before the Norman Conquest of England.

That is the mark of genuine literature.

It escapes chronology.

The Book as a Conversation Across Civilisations

When Wilkins published the Heetopades in 1787, European readers encountered something more significant than a new translation.

They encountered another civilisation thinking aloud.

The stories did not ask Europe to imitate India.

Nor did they present India as an exotic curiosity.

Instead, they invited comparison.

Readers recognised familiar virtues expressed through unfamiliar imagery.

They discovered that political wisdom was not the monopoly of Greece or Rome.

India possessed its own tradition of reflective statecraft, no less subtle and no less humane.

That realisation quietly altered European intellectual history.

It encouraged scholars to read Sanskrit literature not as anthropological evidence but as literature in the fullest sense of the word.

The *Hitopadeśa* thus became more than a collection of fables.

It became one of the books through which India entered the Republic of Letters.

A Passage Worth Remembering

Among the many memorable teachings of the *Hitopadeśa*, one sentiment captures its enduring philosophy:

"Wisdom is not measured by strength, wealth or rank, but by the ability to discern what ought to be done before events compel action."

Whether expressed in exactly these words or through one of its many narratives, this principle lies at the heart of the work. The *Hitopadeśa* teaches that foresight is the highest form of intelligence, and that the wisest person is often the one who appears least powerful.

It is perhaps for this reason that the book has never ceased to find new readers. Every generation believes its challenges to be unprecedented. The *Hitopadeśa* gently reminds us that human nature changes far less than we imagine.

Chapter VI

The Reception of the *Heetopades*

How a Sanskrit Classic Entered the European Republic of Letters

No book truly begins its life when it leaves the printing press.

Its real history starts when readers encounter it.

Some books disappear almost immediately into obscurity. Others provoke controversy before fading from memory. A very small number quietly reshape intellectual history, not through dramatic public acclaim but by influencing generations of scholars who build upon them.

Charles Wilkins' *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma* belongs firmly to this third category.

It was never intended to become a bestseller. Nor was it written for casual readers seeking entertainment. Its audience consisted of scholars, administrators, clergymen, linguists and educated readers curious about the civilisation that Britain had only recently begun to govern.

Within those circles, however, the book exercised an influence far greater than its modest size might suggest.

Europe Discovers Sanskrit Literature

By the late eighteenth century, Europe had become fascinated by the intellectual traditions of Asia.

The Enlightenment had encouraged scholars to compare religions, legal systems, languages and philosophies across cultures. Classical Greece and Rome no longer represented the only models worthy of study. Increasingly, educated Europeans began to suspect that India possessed literary and philosophical traditions of comparable antiquity and sophistication.

Yet suspicion required evidence.

Wilkins supplied that evidence.

His translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in 1785 had demonstrated that Sanskrit philosophy could stand beside Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics.

The *Heetopades* revealed something equally important.

India also possessed a refined tradition of secular literature.

These were not obscure ritual texts understood only by priests. They were works read in schools, memorised by students and used to educate future administrators and rulers.

European readers suddenly recognised a civilisation whose educational ideals were at once unfamiliar and deeply recognisable.

The Asiatic Society and the Birth of Indology

The publication of the *Heetopades* coincided with one of the most important developments in the history of Oriental scholarship.

In 1784, Sir William Jones founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta.

Its ambitions were extraordinary.

Rather than collecting curiosities from the East, the Society sought to study Asia with the same seriousness that European scholars devoted to Greece and Rome.

Its members translated inscriptions.

Collected manuscripts.

Published grammars.

Investigated astronomy.

Studied botany.

Recorded history.

Compared languages.

Examined legal traditions.

Within this remarkable intellectual community, Wilkins occupied a central position.

The *Heetopades* emerged not as an isolated achievement but as part of a broader scholarly movement that permanently altered Europe's understanding of India.

For the first time, Sanskrit texts became primary historical sources rather than exotic rumours.

Sir William Jones' Admiration

Although Jones is remembered today chiefly for recognising the relationship between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, he was also among the earliest admirers of Wilkins' scholarship.

The two men complemented one another.

Jones possessed extraordinary literary elegance and public influence.

Wilkins possessed unmatched technical mastery of Sanskrit and typography.

Each respected the other's strengths.

Their combined efforts transformed Oriental studies.

Where Wilkins translated, Jones interpreted.

Where Wilkins printed, Jones inspired.

The publication of works such as the *Heetopades* gave substance to Jones' broader argument that Indian civilisation deserved to be studied with the same seriousness as classical antiquity.

The German Romantics

Perhaps nowhere did Wilkins' work bear greater long-term fruit than in Germany.

During the early nineteenth century, German scholars developed an intense fascination with Sanskrit.

August Wilhelm Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel, Franz Bopp and later Max Müller regarded India not merely as an object of colonial curiosity but as one of the great sources of Indo-European civilisation.

Although they would eventually produce more philologically precise editions and translations, these scholars built upon foundations laid by Wilkins and Jones.

The earliest translations demonstrated that Sanskrit literature was worthy of sustained scholarly attention.

Without that initial demonstration, later advances might have been delayed by decades.

Comparative Literature Begins

One of the unexpected consequences of Wilkins' translation was the emergence of comparative literary studies.

European scholars had long recognised similarities among various collections of animal fables.

Aesop.

Phaedrus.

La Fontaine.

Medieval beast literature.

Arabic *Kalīla wa Dimna*.

Persian adaptations.

The publication of the *Heetopades* allowed these traditions to be compared directly with one of their Sanskrit ancestors.

Questions previously impossible to answer suddenly became accessible.

How had these stories travelled?

Which versions were oldest?

What changed as they crossed linguistic and religious boundaries?

How did moral lessons evolve?

These investigations contributed to the birth of comparative folklore, comparative literature and historical philology.

A seemingly modest collection of animal stories thus helped establish entirely new academic disciplines.

The View from India

The reception of Wilkins' translation within India was naturally more complex.

Traditional Sanskrit scholars had no need for an English translation.

They continued reading the original.

Yet educated Indians increasingly recognised the significance of Wilkins' work.

It demonstrated that Sanskrit literature had begun attracting serious attention beyond the subcontinent.

During the nineteenth century, as Indian intellectuals engaged more actively with European scholarship, works such as the *Heetopades* acquired additional importance.

They represented early attempts—however imperfect—to present Indian civilisation respectfully to the wider world.

This does not mean that later scholars accepted every aspect of Orientalist interpretation.

Far from it.

Modern scholarship has rightly criticised certain colonial assumptions embedded within early European studies.

Nevertheless, Wilkins himself has generally escaped the harsher judgments reserved for some later Orientalists.

His scholarship displays an intellectual humility that continues to command respect.

Later Translations

As Sanskrit studies matured, new translations inevitably appeared.

Each reflected the scholarly standards of its own age.

Victorian translators emphasised literal accuracy.

Twentieth-century translators often prioritised readability.

Contemporary scholars benefit from improved manuscript evidence and more sophisticated philological methods.

Yet Wilkins' work has never become merely obsolete.

Rather, it occupies the same position as William Tyndale's English Bible or George Chapman's Homer.

Later scholarship may improve technical accuracy.

The pioneering translation retains historical importance because it changed intellectual history.

Collectors value first editions not because they represent the final word, but because they represent the first great step.

A Collector's Perspective

From the perspective of the modern collector, reception history matters for a practical reason.

It explains rarity.

Books that profoundly influence scholarship tend to be read intensively.

Libraries preserve them.

Private owners treasure them.

Many copies disappear through constant use.

Others suffer rebinding, trimming or repair.

Consequently, genuinely attractive first editions become increasingly difficult to locate.

This is precisely the case with the *Heetopades*.

Institutional copies survive in important libraries, including the British Library, Oxford, Cambridge and several major American collections.

Fine copies in original or early bindings, however, appear only occasionally on the market.

Collectors therefore compete not merely for ownership of a text but for possession of one of the earliest surviving witnesses to Europe's encounter with Sanskrit literature.

Wilkins Through Modern Eyes

Modern Indology has naturally advanced far beyond the scholarship available in 1787.

Critical editions now compare numerous manuscripts.

Historical linguistics has refined textual dating.

Philologists have clarified relationships between the *Pañcatantra* and the *Hitopadeśa*.

Questions that Wilkins could scarcely have imagined are now discussed routinely.

Yet remarkably, his reputation has remained secure.

Why?

Because genuine scholarship is measured not solely by conclusions but by method.

Wilkins approached Sanskrit with respect.

He collaborated with Indian scholars.

He acknowledged difficulties.

He avoided extravagant speculation.

He translated with intellectual honesty.

These qualities rarely become outdated.

The Enduring Legacy

Nearly two and a half centuries after its publication, *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma* continues to occupy a distinctive position within the history of Oriental scholarship.

It is simultaneously:

- one of the earliest English translations of a major Sanskrit literary classic;
- one of the foundational publications of British Indology;
- an important milestone in comparative literature;
- a landmark in the history of translation;
- and a beautiful example of late eighteenth-century English printing.

Few books satisfy all these criteria simultaneously.

Its influence has been quiet rather than spectacular.

Yet quiet influence often proves the most enduring.

Every modern scholar of Sanskrit literature stands, however indirectly, upon the work of pioneers such as Charles Wilkins. Every collector who opens this volume participates in a conversation that began in Bengal during the 1780s and continues across universities, libraries and private collections throughout the world.

The *Heetopades* has therefore achieved something remarkable.

It no longer belongs exclusively to India.

Nor exclusively to Britain.

It belongs to the shared intellectual heritage of humanity—a book that crossed cultures not by abandoning its identity, but by remaining profoundly itself.

Chapter VII

Collecting Wilkins' *Heetopades*

Why This First Edition Belongs in Every Great Collection of Indian Books

"Some books are merely old. Others are milestones. The wise collector learns the difference."

Every field of collecting eventually develops what collectors affectionately call its "cornerstone books."

In English literature, they are the Shakespeare Folios.

In science, Newton's *Principia* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

In Americana, Audubon's *Birds of America*.

In voyages, Cook's journals.

These are not merely famous books. They are books that define an entire collecting field.

Indian antiquarian books possess their own canon.

Although opinions naturally differ regarding the precise order, very few experienced collectors would dispute that Charles Wilkins' *Heetopades* belongs among the earliest and most historically significant printed monuments of British Indology.

Indeed, if one were asked to assemble a library illustrating the birth of European scholarship on India, Wilkins' *Heetopades* would almost certainly stand beside Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776), Wilkins' own *Bhagavad Gītā* (1785), Jones' *Śakuntalā* (1789/1792), and the early volumes of *Asiatick Researches*.

These are not simply books.

They are the founding documents of a discipline.

Why Collectors Prize It

WHY IT MATTERS TO COLLECTORS

A genuine first edition of 1787

One of the earliest English translations made directly from Sanskrit

A foundational work in the history of British Indology

A milestone in comparative literature and the transmission of Indian fable

Scarce in an attractive early binding

At first glance, the *Heetopades* appears surprisingly modest.

It lacks coloured plates.

It contains no spectacular maps.

It is not a lavish folio intended to impress visitors.

Its attraction is intellectual rather than decorative.

That very quality explains its enduring desirability.

Experienced collectors eventually discover that the greatest books are rarely those with the most elaborate bindings or the largest illustrations. They are the books that changed the way the world thought.

The *Heetopades* satisfies several of the most important criteria by which serious antiquarian books are judged.

First, it is a true **first edition**.

Not merely an early printing.

Not a revised edition.

The genuine first appearance of Wilkins' translation.

Second, it represents the work of one of the founders of European Sanskrit scholarship.

Charles Wilkins occupies a position analogous to William Jones in linguistics or William Carey in Bengali printing. Books associated with such pioneering figures almost always retain long-term historical importance.

Third, the book marks an intellectual "first"—one of the earliest occasions on which Indian secular literature became directly accessible to English readers through translation from the Sanskrit rather than through Persian intermediaries.

Collectors rightly value beginnings.

Scarcity

One of the most common misconceptions among new collectors is that age alone determines rarity.

It does not.

Many sixteenth-century books survive in hundreds of copies.

Some twentieth-century books survive in only dozens.

Scarcity depends upon survival.

The *Heetopades* was never printed in large numbers.

Its readership was specialised.

Most copies entered institutional or scholarly libraries, where they were used repeatedly rather than displayed as luxury possessions.

Others travelled extensively between Britain and India.

Many were rebound during the nineteenth century.

Some disappeared through fire, humidity, insects or neglect.

The consequence is that genuinely attractive first editions are encountered far less frequently than many collectors expect.

They are certainly obtainable.

But they are not common.

The appearance of a clean, complete copy in an appealing early binding is an event that attracts immediate attention from knowledgeable dealers.

Condition Matters

As with every important antiquarian book, condition exerts a profound influence upon value.

Collectors of early Oriental books generally seek:

- complete text;
- crisp paper;

- generous margins;
- attractive early or contemporary binding;
- minimal restoration;
- sound joints and hinges;
- absence of major staining or damp damage;
- and, ideally, some evidence of early ownership.

The present copy satisfies many of these criteria.

The binding possesses considerable visual appeal.

The marbled boards remain harmonious.

The gilt spine retains impressive definition.

The title page presents beautifully.

The paper has aged gracefully.

Equally important, the book retains what collectors often describe as **integrity**.

It does not appear over-restored.

Modern restoration can sometimes improve appearance while diminishing historical authenticity.

Collectors generally prefer an honest eighteenth-century survivor to a heavily rebuilt specimen.

The present volume possesses precisely that quiet authenticity.

Provenance

One of the pleasures of antiquarian books is that they often carry traces of previous owners.

Bookplates.

Signatures.

Library stamps.

Marginal notes.

Presentation inscriptions.

Each transforms an anonymous object into an individual historical witness.

Your copy appears to preserve an early ownership inscription on the title page.

At present, the name remains only partially legible from the available photographs, but further examination under magnification or ultraviolet light may reveal the owner's identity.

Should that individual prove historically significant, the provenance could materially enhance the book's scholarly interest and potentially its market value.

Even if the owner remains unidentified, the inscription reminds us that this volume has lived an active intellectual life for nearly two hundred and forty years.

Market Performance

Unlike spectacular colour-plate books, the Heetopades does not appear at auction every season.

Its market is comparatively discreet.

Many copies pass directly through specialist antiquarian booksellers rather than public auctions.

This is typical of scholarly books with an established collector base.

When copies do appear, pricing depends heavily upon three factors:

Condition

Fine copies command a substantial premium.

Binding

Contemporary or attractive early bindings are significantly preferred over later library rebinding.

Provenance

Copies associated with notable owners or collections may achieve exceptional prices.

In recent years, the market for foundational Indian books has strengthened steadily. As collectors increasingly recognise the historical importance of early Indology, demand has expanded beyond traditional bibliophiles to include museums, academic institutions, family offices, and collectors building focused libraries on South Asia.

Unlike many categories of collectibles that are driven by fashion, the appeal of Wilkins' *Heetopades* rests on enduring scholarly significance. Markets fluctuate, but cultural milestones tend to retain their importance across generations.

The Place of the *Heetopades* Within the Indian Canon

A FOUNDATIONAL SHELF OF EARLY INDOLOGY

Halhed — *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776)

Wilkins — *Bhagvat-Geeta* (1785)

Wilkins — *Heetopades* (1787)

Asiatick Researches (from 1788)

Jones — *Śakuntalā* (1789/1792)

One of the most interesting questions facing collectors is not whether a book is rare, but how important it is.

After studying the history of Indian printing for many years, I have become convinced that a relatively small group of books forms the intellectual backbone of any serious collection devoted to India.

Among them are:

- Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776), which introduced Hindu jurisprudence to the English-speaking world.
- Charles Wilkins' *Bhagvat-Geeta* (1785), the first English translation of one of India's greatest philosophical texts.
- Charles Wilkins' *Heetopades* (1787), which revealed the richness of India's tradition of ethical and political literature.
- Sir William Jones' *Śakuntalā* (1789/1792), which transformed European perceptions of Sanskrit poetry and inspired Goethe.
- The early volumes of *Asiatick Researches* (from 1788), laying the foundations of scientific Indology.

These works belong together.

Each opened a different window onto Indian civilisation.

Together they revealed India as a civilisation of philosophy, law, literature, science and statecraft.

To own one is to possess an important historical artefact.

To own all of them is to possess the documentary record of Europe's first sustained engagement with India's classical intellectual traditions.

The Collector's Experience

There is another reason why books such as the *Heetopades* remain so desirable.

They reward repeated acquaintance.

A fine atlas may astonish on first viewing.

A beautifully illustrated natural history book may delight with its images.

The *Heetopades* offers a different pleasure.

Each return to its pages reveals another observation about leadership, character or human behaviour. The stories mature with the reader. What appears to be a simple fable at twenty may read like subtle political philosophy at fifty.

This is one of the hallmarks of a truly great book: it grows as its reader grows.

Collectors often speak of living with their books rather than merely owning them. Few books invite that lifelong companionship more naturally than the *Hitopadeśa*.

The Present Copy

*The copy preserved in the collection of **The Eye of the Beholder** deserves special comment.*

It is not merely desirable because it is a first edition. It possesses the qualities that distinguish a collector's copy from a reading copy.

The elegant period binding, the handsome gilt spine, the well-preserved title page, the attractive marbled boards and the overall freshness of the volume combine to create a copy that is aesthetically satisfying as well as historically significant.

Equally important, it has clearly escaped the fate that befell many eighteenth-century books. It has not been aggressively trimmed, harshly cleaned or excessively restored. It wears its age with dignity.

Books, like people, acquire character over time. This volume bears the quiet confidence of nearly two and a half centuries of survival.

For a collector seeking to assemble a library of the foundational books of India, it would represent not merely an acquisition but an anchor—a volume around which an entire collection might be organised.

Concluding Reflections

Charles Wilkins could scarcely have imagined the long afterlife of the modest octavo he published in Bath in 1787.

His purpose was scholarly rather than commercial. He wished to introduce European readers to one of India's great educational classics with fidelity and respect. In doing so, he accomplished something larger than he could have foreseen.

He helped inaugurate a conversation between civilisations.

The *Heetopades* reminds us that wisdom has never belonged to a single culture. It travelled from Sanskrit manuscripts copied by generations of Indian scribes to an English printing press in Georgian Bath; from there into the libraries of scholars, the shelves of collectors, and the intellectual history of the modern world.

Today, nearly two and a half centuries later, this first edition continues to speak with remarkable clarity. It speaks not only of Indian statecraft and moral philosophy, but of the values that underpin all great collecting: curiosity, stewardship, scholarship and the belief that books are among humanity's most enduring cultural achievements.

To preserve such a volume is not merely to own an old book. It is to become, for a time, one of its custodians.

Epilogue: A Note for the Reader

The finest antiquarian books are those that continue to ask questions long after they have been read. Wilkins' *Heetopades* asks a simple but profound one: *What does it mean to govern oneself wisely in the company of others?*

That question confronted the princes of medieval India. It confronted the administrators of the East India Company. It confronts us still.

Perhaps that is why this elegant little octavo has never truly grown old.