

Thieves in the Storehouse of Sarasvatī: Metaliterary Aspects of the *Caurapañcāśikā*

Andrew Ollett

The *Caurapañcāśikā* is a short Sanskrit poem about remembered love. It can, however, be read as a poem about poetry: its ascription to the poet Bilhaṇa, the stories about its composition, and the choice of metaphors in the text invite us to think of the beloved as an embodiment of literature (*kāvya*), and the poet’s constant return to her in memory as a model of the kind of relationship that participants in a literary culture (*sahṛdayas*, *rasikas*) have to literature. The main implications of this reading are the attribution to literature of the qualities of the beloved—and *vice versa*—and the characterization of literature as an inalienable possession in the “storehouse of Sarasvatī in the heart,” which memory keeps safe from the dangers of political life to which it is constantly exposed.

The *Caurapañcāśikā* (“The Thief’s Fifty”) is a collection of fifty Sanskrit verses in the *vasantatilaka* meter, each of which begins with the words *adyāpi* “even now,” in which the anonymous speaker remembers his beloved—identified only as a princess—and the moments they shared. Or rather, the *Caurapañcāśikā* is several such collections that have circulated in different areas of India under somewhat different titles, ascribed to different authors, and containing a different selection of verses.¹

The variation is not great enough for us to speak of a *genre* of “thief” poetry, but great enough to make us wonder whether we’re actually dealing with text-tokens of the same-type, or stated differently, whether the texts we have actually descend from a single *Urtext*. Miller (1971: 6) summarized the textual situation clearly: the available texts fall into two recensions, Northern and Western-Southern, and these recensions only have *five* verses in common. The verses are also quite heterogenous even within these recensions, differing in tone, effect, and execution.

From this critical perspective, it makes no sense to speak of an “author” of the *Caurapañcāśikā*, because there simply isn’t a text to be the author of. It may be possible to isolate the five shared verses as the “original” text (Tadpatrikar 1927–1928), but such a text, if it ever even existed (it certainly never circulated on its own), would not solve the question of authorship. It would only further problematize it, by refocusing the question from actually-existing texts onto hypothetical texts, and by giving 5% of the “thief” verses a different kind of “author” than the other 95%. These “authors” are historical hypostases of a textual theory: their author-function is *text-critical*.² They are quite different from the “authors” to whom the *Caurapañcāśikā* is actually attributed in

1 I will refer to the text as the *Caurapañcāśikā*, one of its more common titles. The Kashmiri version of the text edited by Solf (1886) is titled *Caurīsuratapañcāśikā*. I am grateful for the perceptive comments of an anonymous reviewer for ALT.

2 See Foucault’s classic article (1977) for the idea of an “author-function” as one solution to the critical problems that authorship poses.

manuscripts, who bear the names Caura/Cora, Sundara, and most commonly of all, Bilhaṇa. They have a more *ascriptional* author-function.

One of these characters, Bilhaṇa, is often identified with the great Kashmiri poet of the later 11th century, who produced his *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* at the court of the Cālukya king Vikramāditya VI.³ Bilhaṇa takes on yet another author-function as a historical individual who can serve to anchor the *Caurapañcāsikā* in a specific historical moment. The ascription to Bilhaṇa also invites us to see it as one of *his* works, with definite and significant intertextual connections to Bilhaṇa's other works. The historical accuracy of this ascription is doubtful, to say the least— Bhoja and Abhinavagupta both quote some of the “Thief's” verses about a century before Bilhaṇa. As Bronner (2010b: 476–481) has shown, Bilhaṇa quickly became a celebrity of Indian literary culture, and ascriptions tended to “stick” to him. In this essay I am more interested in the work that these ascriptions do than their accuracy or their motivation, but my argument accords with Bronner's suggestion that it was Bilhaṇa's distinctive “voice,” and particularly the way that he gave voice to the contradictions of political poetry, that accounts for his active “posthumous” career.

Many manuscripts contain, in addition to the *Caurapañcāsikā* or included within it, a story about how the text came to be composed: the text is thus embedded within a larger text in which the author is a character. One such “introduction” (*pūrvapīṭhikā*), which is typical of the Western-Southern recension, is related by Solf (1886: xiii–xiv) as follows:⁴

There was a city called Lakṣmīmandira in the Pañcāla country, and there ruled a king named Madanābhirāma. He had a wife named Mandāramālā and a daughter named Yāminīpūrṇatilakā. The king sought a teacher for his daughter, and decided upon Bilhaṇa, the best poet and scholar of his age. But the king did not want the beautiful girl and the handsome teacher to fall in love. His minister knew that Bilhaṇa had vowed never to look upon anyone with leprosy, and the girl had vowed never to look upon a blind person, so he convinced Bilhaṇa that Yāminīpūrṇatilakā was leprous, and he convinced her that he was blind, and thus required them to conduct their lessons across a screen. This went on until one night, when the moon was full, the girl heard Bilhaṇa singing a verse about the full moon and correctly inferred that he wasn't actually blind. She looked beyond the screen at him, he looked back, and she fell into his arms. When word got back to the king, he ordered Bilhaṇa killed. In the face of death, Bilhaṇa recalled his moments with his beloved in the form of the *Caurapañcāsikā*. When he heard these verses, the king was moved to pardon Bilhaṇa and gave his daughter to him in marriage.

Another “introduction,” characteristic of the Northern recension (appendix 1 in Tadpatrikar 1966), is roughly similar. Here the king is called Vīrasimha, of Anahilapattana in Gujarat, and the girl is called Śāśikalā. The veil does not serve as a device here; Śāśikalā simply falls in love with Bilhaṇa as he is teaching her erotology (*kāmasāstra*). The king banishes Bilhaṇa, but when the latter continues to send love-poems through messengers, the king recalls him and arranges to have him impaled. Bilhaṇa recites the poem as he is led to the stake, where the introduction concludes, without saying whether the poet was killed.

3 On Bilhaṇa and his *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, see Bronner (2010b), Cox (2010), and McCrea (2010).

4 Solf's summary, which I merely translate here, is based on the edition of Ariel (1848). It corresponds to Appendix 2 in Tadpatrikar (1966).

Such stories provide an interpretive frame. They tell us what the significance of the *Caurapañcāśikā* is in the context of a particular moment in the life of a particular individual: what the verses *mean* is, through the person of the author, intrinsically related to the circumstances in which they were *composed*. The interpretive frame that these stories provide, in other words, is that of biographical criticism. Modern scholarship has never taken these stories very seriously. They are melodramatic, they incorporate motifs that are common in the story literature of South Asia (such as the would-be lovers separated by a screen), and the only points on which they all agree are precisely those provided by the *Caurapañcāśikā* itself, namely, the poet's illicit love-affair with a princess. Where scholarship seeks the facts of authorship, these stories give us fantasies of authorship.

But these fantasies, too, are part of the text. They arise, first of all, out of the lyrical and personal tone of the verses, the anonymity of the speaker, and the scattered hints that his beloved is a princess. They also arise within the tradition of reading and writing Sanskrit poetry that the *Caurapañcāśikā* belongs to. We might think of these stories not as *ex post facto* mythifications of the text's authorship, but as possible answers to questions posed by the text itself and by *kāvya* more generally. Among these questions are those that I will focus on in this essay: What is *kāvya* really about? What value does it have as a cultural practice or form of life? How can we think about and represent this value? Where does it exist and for whom does it exist? The *Caurapañcāśikā* poses these questions not directly, and not insistently, but through a layer of *metaliterary* significance superadded to the primary meanings of the poem. This layer is admittedly thin and uneven; the erotic meanings of the verses always predominate, and many verses lack a metaliterary significance altogether. The stories that are attached to the *Caurapañcāśikā* could nevertheless be seen as a dramatization of the text's metaliterary dimension, in which one of *kāvya*'s most renowned authors is cast in the lead role.

Here I will sketch out what this metaliterary dimension is and how it operates throughout the *Caurapañcāśikā*. I will refer to the texts of both the “Northern” and “Western-Southern” recensions (Miller 1971), and also the Kashmiri text (Solf 1886). In doing so, it may seem as though I am sidestepping the crucial issues of the *Caurapañcāśikā*'s textual history. My intervention, however, is primarily interpretive rather than text-critical: I am offering a way of reading the text which, I will argue, was not entirely unknown to the various people—authors, editors, redactors, scribes, commentators—who gave shape to the text as we have it today. My reading, in fact, might seem obvious to sensitive readers of Sanskrit poetry. It nevertheless seems worthwhile to point out, in one of *kāvya*'s more popular poems, an additional level of meaning that speaks to the meaning of *kāvya* itself. It may be that metaliterary reflection is more prominent within some versions of the text than others, and I will argue that the reading of one recension sometimes makes better sense against this background of meaning than others, but I doubt that it can be elevated to a general text-critical principle.

Only one of the eight commentaries on the *Caurapañcāśikā* listed in the *New Catalogus Catalogorum* (Kunjunni Raja 1973) is available to me: that of Gaṇapati in the edition of Bohlen (1833), the only commentary published as of yet. Gaṇapati sometimes corroborates the interpretation I offer here, but obviously I will resist more general conclusions about the meanings that the *Caurapañcāśikā* had to its premodern readers—a question that has curiously been a low priority for modern scholarship on the text and deserves much further consideration.

I will begin with the first two verses of the *Caurapañcāśikā* that I encountered: those at the beginning of the Kashmiri text edited by Solf (1886). Solf thought these verses were authentic.

Miller disregarded them, perhaps for formal reasons (they are not in the *vasantatilaka* meter and do not contain the phrase *adyāpi*), or perhaps because the first was transmitted outside of the *Caurapañcāsikā* in anthologies. She considered the Kashmiri text in which they are found to be a secondary blend of the two main recensions.⁵

*sarvasvaṃ gr̥havarti kuntalapatir gr̥hṇātu tan me punar
bhāṇḍāgāram akhaṇḍam eva hr̥daye jāgarti sārāsvatam |
re kṣudrās tyajata pramodam acirād eṣyanti manmandiram
helāndolitakarṇatālakaraṭiskandhādhirūḍhāḥ śriyaḥ || (K1)*

The King of Kuntala can take everything I own, but
the storehouse of Sarasvatī in my heart remains undiminished.
Quit laughing, you small-timers. Soon, Fortune will pay me a visit
on the back of an elephant playfully flapping its ears.

*ayi kim anīsaṃ rājadvāre samuddhurakaṃdhare
kuvalayadalasnigdhe muḡdhe vimuñcati locane |
amararamaṇililāvalgadvilocanavāgurā-
viṣayapatito na vyāvṛttiṃ kariṣyati bilhaṇaḥ || (K2)*

Why, girl, do you keep lifting up your neck
and casting your eyes, glossy as lotus-petals, on the king's door?
After falling into the snare of your eyes,
darting with the grace of celestial beauties,
Bilhaṇa is not going to turn away.

Both verses refer to the frame-story of the poem: the poet faces punishment from the king, while his beloved waits anxiously outside the court. What is striking about these verses is not just that the poet becomes a character in his own poem—almost all lyric poetry does precisely this—but that the poet-as-character enters with an explicitly programmatic message. The poet lets us know here that he is in fact talking about poetry.

This message is clearest in K1. What the poet contrasts with mobile property—things that can physically be taken away—is not memory *per se*, but literary memory in particular. What remains un plundered is the “storehouse of Sarasvatī,” goddess of language, learning, and literature. This phrase has a number of implications. It suggests, first of all, that the poet's memories of his beloved are intrinsically linked to his poem of remembrance, that the “storehouse of Sarasvatī” contains the poet's memories in the form of the *Caurapañcāsikā*. More generally, and in a sense more relevant to the meaning of the verse as a whole, the “storehouse of Sarasvatī” is a person's internal and inalienable cache of knowledge; it provides poets and other men of learning with stability and protection against the vicissitudes of life and especially of the royal courts to which many of them were attached. Whether or not Bilhaṇa wrote this verse, his own biography offers

5 The first verse was anthologized in Śrīdharadāsa's *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* (verse 2150 in the edition of Banerji 1965); see also Bronner 2010b: p. 480 and n. 69. I refer to the verses as follows: N = Northern Recension, WS = Western-Southern Recension, AV = Additional Verses (all from Miller 1971); K = Kashmiri text (from Solf 1886). Gaṇ = Gaṇapati's text (from Bohlen 1833), which is Type 1B of N in Miller's classification. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

an excellent example of the uncertainty and itinerancy that courtly poets had to live with: he travelled from his home in Kashmir in search of further learning and then in search of a patron, stopping in Mathurā, Kānyakubja, Prayāga, Kāśī, Ḍāhala, Dhārā, and Somanātha before becoming Head Scholar (*vidyāpati*) at the court of the “King of Kuntala,” the Cālukya king Vikramāditya VI, in Kalyāṇi.⁶ The first half of K1 contrasts exteriority and interiority, the political and the literary, from the position of a court poet who lives between them. The second half is a response to those who think that the poet is ruined because of the political trouble he’s exposed himself to—having an affair with the king’s daughter, as the case may be. Poets are never ruined because what makes them poets, the “storehouse of Sarasvatī,” can never be destroyed. The poet in fact promises to transform Sarasvatī into Śrī, the goddess of wealth, fame, and fortune—shuttling once again between interiority and exteriority. It may not be a coincidence that Śrī is represented on top of an elephant, for the historical Bilhaṇa claimed to have received an elephant from Vikramāditya VI upon being made Head Scholar.⁷

In K2, the poet ostensibly assures his beloved that he will not forsake her. At the same time, it takes up the theme of literature at the royal court that was introduced in the preceding verse. Through his beloved, the poet addresses Sarasvatī, or literature personified: her head is constantly craned toward the court, since she depends on the patronage of kings, but regardless of what happens there, Bilhaṇa promises never to abandon her pursuit.

These verses put the text into another interpretive frame beyond that of biography. They invite us to read the *Caurapañcāsikā* as a reflection upon literature (*kāvya*), to identify the nameless beloved with literature itself, and to see in the dramatic situation—merely hinted at in the text itself, but well-known to all of its readers—the drama of a literary life. The keystone of this interpretation is the equation of the beloved and literature, which the two introductory verses prepare the reader for, and the unfolding of its programmatic significance. K1 emphasizes that it is poetry about the beloved, rather than the beloved herself, of which the poet can never be deprived; K2, with its bivalent apostrophe, begins to construct the beloved as beautiful, graceful, and captivating, all qualities which will apply equally to the beloved and to poetry throughout the text.

The equation appears again, quite explicitly, in the verse with which the text begins in the Northern and Western-Southern recensions:⁸

*adyāpi tāṃ kanakacampakadāmagaurīm
phullāravindavadanām navaromarājīm |
suptotthitām madanavihvalasālasāṅgīm
vidyām pramādagalitām iva cintayāmi || (N1, WS1, K3)*

6 Bilhaṇa relates these travels in the 18th book of his *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* (Bühler 1875). Kuntala is the ancient name for the region of northern Karnataka, where Kalyāṇi was located. See the aforementioned articles in note 3 on Bilhaṇa’s ambivalent relationship to the political.

7 *nīlacchatronmadagajaghaṭāpātram uttrastalocāc
cālukyendrād alabhata yo ’tra vidyāpatitvam |
asminn āsīt tadanu nibiḍāsleṣahevākalilā-*

velladbāhukvaṇitacalayā santatam rājalakṣmīḥ || (Vikramāṅkadevacarita 18.101).

See also *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 8.936 (Stein 1988 [1892]), which says that Bilhaṇa left Kashmir and, “as he rode on elephants through the forests of Karnataka, his lofty parasol was seen ahead of the king’s” (*prasarpataḥ karaṭibhiḥ karṇāṭakātāntare | rājño ’gre dadṛṣe tuṅgam yasyaivātapavāraṇam ||*).

8 Reading *sālāsa* in *pāda* c (with *Gaṇ*) for Miller’s (and K3’s) *lālāsa* (she notes no variants here).

Even now I am thinking about her,
brightened by garlands of golden *campaka* flowers,
her lotus-face in bloom, with a line of soft hair,
rising from sleep, her body languorous and exhausted from lovemaking,
like learning that slips away because of negligence.

Here, the beloved (*tām*) is the object of comparison (*upameya* in the terms of Sanskrit poetics) and learning (*vidyām*) is the standard of comparison (*upamāna*). Such comparisons always hinge on the presence, explicit or implicit, of common qualities (*sādharāṇa-dharmas*): in this case, both learning and the beloved have somehow been lost, although the point of the verse—and of the text as a whole—is that what has been lost can be recovered through an act of poetic imagination. This is the first comparison the reader encounters, and that alone would give it a special significance in the interpretation of the whole text. There is, however, a certain infelicity in the comparison. How can learning be present in absence in the same way as the beloved is here? The corresponding *pāda* of the Kashmiri text reads *madvallabhām samadahaṃsagatiṃ smarāmi* (K3), “I remember my beloved, impassioned, who walks like a goose.” In this text, the crucial comparison is delayed to the next verse, the first three *pādas* of which are not found anywhere else:

*adyāpi tām suratalabdhyasaḥpatākām
lambālakām virahapāṇḍuragaṇḍabhittim |
suptām vilolanayanām kṣaṇadrṣṭanaṣṭām
vidyām pramādagalitām iva saṃsmarāmi ||* (K4)

Even now I remember her
after raising the victory-banner of lovemaking,
her hair hanging over her face,
her cheeks pale at the thought of separation,
her eyes rolling as sleep closes in,
seen in one moment and gone the next,
like learning that slips away because of negligence.

This verse, even more than the preceding one, sets up the themes that characterize the *Caurapañcāśikā* throughout. It is a recollection, in a moment of separation (*vipralambha*), of a moment of union (*saṃbhoga*): the moment right after lovemaking and at the threshold of sleep, and even then the threat of separation (*viraha*) casts its pale shadow. The comparison reflects this mutual involution of union and separation. The image of the beloved herself flickers in the poet’s memory (*kṣaṇadrṣṭanaṣṭām*), like her rolling eyes as she drifts in and out of sleep. Knowledge, if neglected, has the same kind of flickering, shadowy existence. To be stable and secure in the “storehouse of Sarasvatī,” it needs to be the object of exactly the same care that the poet directs toward his beloved: it needs to be constantly remembered (*saṃsmarāmi*), thought over (*cintayāmi*), and never forgotten (*na hi vismarāmi*).

The awkwardness of the comparison in N1 and WS1 drove Miller to translate it as “magic I lost somehow in recklessness,” which closes off this level of metaliterary significance. Gaṇapati glosses *vidyā* as the goddess of language (*vāgdevatā*). He mentions another interpretation according to which *vidyā* is a woman’s name. Gaṇapati thinks that this is ridiculous, since ex-girlfriends (*jyeṣṭhastri*) have no place in love poetry. The suggestion, however, supplies evidence for conflation

between (the goddess of) learning and the beloved, or at least *some* beloved. A very similar conflation occurs in the stories that circulate in Bengali manuscripts of the text, according to which the king's daughter and the poet's beloved is actually named Vidyā (Solf 1886: xii).

A similar comparison occurs a few verses later in the Western-Southern recension:

*adyāpi tāṃ kuṭilakomalakālakesīm
unnidratāmarasapattraviśālanetrām |
prottuṅgapīvarakāṭhorapayodharāḍhyāṃ
dhyāyāmi cetasi yathaiva gurūpadeśam || (WS7)*

Even now I concentrate my mind on her,
her hair curly, soft, and black,
her eyes long like the unfolded petals of a day-lotus,
her breasts high, round, and firm,
just like on the teaching of my *guru*.

The content of the *guru*'s teaching is not stated here. The ambiguity allows this verse to be read against the background of spiritual instruction, which is perhaps the most obvious meaning of *gurūpadeśam*. The final word is unexpected and demonstrates the scope for humor in this collection. But it also allows the verse to be read as an elaboration on the parallel between romantic love and the pursuit of literature and its associated forms of knowledge. For “instruction” (*upadeśa*) in *both* senses is precisely what Bilhaṇa provides to Yāminīpūrṇatilakā (or Śāśikalā or Vidyā) in the stories that circulated with the text.

I offer one other example of these parallel meanings before discussing the implications of their parallelism. The final verse in many manuscripts implicitly compares the poet to Śiva, Viṣṇu (in his incarnation as the tortoise), and the ocean:

*adyāpi nojjhati haraḥ kila kālakūṭaṃ
kūrmo bibharti dharaṇīm khalu pṛṣṭhabhāge |
ambhonidhir vahati duḥsahavāḍavāgnim
aṅgīkṛtaṃ sukṛtinaḥ paripālayanti || (N50, K56)*

Even now, they say, Hara hasn't spit out the *kālakūṭa* poison,
the tortoise still bears the earth on his back,
the ocean still carries the insufferable *vāḍava* fire:
those who do good works
keep the promises they've made.

In itself, this verse straightforwardly commends keeping one's promises, and indeed it appears in some manuscripts of Bhartṛhari's *Nīśāta* (Kosambi 1948: 81), a collection of such ethical verses. Its meaning changes when it is contextualized, or recontextualized, in the *Caurapañcāśikā*. The subject is here the poet, and somewhat ironically, his “good works” are his illicit affairs with the king's daughter. Solf (1886: xxi) spells out the immediate implications of “keeping one's promises” in this context: the lover remains true, even to death, and will not forsake his beloved. This sentiment forms a ring with K2, where Bilhaṇa promises not to turn away (*na vyāvṛtīm*

kariṣyati). But the verse links back to K2 in another respect: the poet cannot turn away from poetry, because poetry is actually a part of him; it is not just something he agrees to (the conventional meaning of *aṅgīkṛta*) but something that has been made part of him (the literal meaning of *aṅgīkṛta*). The ethical examples apply equally to the poet *qua* lover and to the poet *qua* poet, and what stands on the other side of the king’s door—love in the one case, and literature in the other—is figured as abiding as long as the earth, or the *vāḍava* fire, in the storehouse of the poet’s memory.

Now we can turn to some of the implications of understanding the *Cauratapañcāsikā* in this way, as a love-poem that is also about poetry itself. The first and most significant implication is that each of the two terms in this equation colour the other: the beloved takes on the qualities of literature, and literature is in turn imagined through the image of the beloved. Several verses, for example, represent the beloved with a *vīṇā* (AV10) or speaking like a *vīṇā* (AV14). The *vīṇā* can easily represent Sarasvatī, who plays it, and the whole complex of cultural aptitudes that Sarasvatī herself stands for. Women are standardly imagined to have these aptitudes in *kāvya*, but rather than speaking against the metaliterary reading, this shows how pervasive it is. Indeed there is a metaliterary resonance in many of the conventional descriptions of the beloved: so many of these qualities, such as grace (*līlā*), softness (*sukumāratā*), and sweetness (*mādhurya*) belong to the normative vocabulary of literature and literary theory.⁹ There are clearly systematic sympathetic resonances between the literary and metaliterary domains of application of these words. One of the principal preoccupations of the *Caurapañcāsikā*, to take one example, are the adornments (*alaṃkāras*) of the beloved: garlands of flowers, kohl on her eyes, vermilion on her lips and feet and hands, the fragrant pastes and oils on her skin, strings of pearls, bangles, anklets. These “adornments” provided Sanskrit poetics with one of its governing metaphors: figures of sound and sense were “adornments” (*alaṃkāras*) upon the body that is the text (*kāvya-śarīra*).

I find this metaliterary resonance to be strongest in passages where the poet remembers his beloved’s voice. In such passages, the adjectives applied to her voice can also apply to *kāvya* in general, or to this *kāvya*, the *Caurapañcāsikā*, in particular. Some examples include K24 (cp. also WS24), where the words (*vākyāni*) of the beloved “come out beautifully, since they spill out over the surface of her red lips” (*bimboṣṭhapṛṣṭhaparikīrṇasuniḥsṛtāni*), they are “sweet as a drink of nectar” (*pīyūṣapānamadhurāni*), and they “glimmer in [the poet’s] mind” (*cetasi visphuranti*)—exactly as the words of a poem should. N21 might seem to speak against this interpretation, because it presents the beloved’s speech as slurred and inarticulate:

adyāpi cātuśatadurlalitocitārthaṃ
tasyāḥ smarāmi surataklamavihvalāyāḥ |
avyaktanisvanitakātarakathyamāna-
saṃkīrṇavarṇaruciraṃ vacanaṃ priyāyāḥ || (N21, Gaṇ24)

Even now I remember my beloved’s voice,
completely exhausted after making love:
hundreds of whisperings
gave her meanings a naughty shade,
and I was charmed by the way the sounds came out
indistinctly, murmuringly, quietly.

9 Ingalls (1962) is the seminal study of this important domain of the Sanskrit poetic vocabulary.

Yet this verse, too, encodes some of the key features of the best *kāvya*. The first *pāda* alludes to the subtle transformation of meaning: the “standard meanings” (*ucitārtha-*) are “made naughty” (*durlalita*) by the erotic context.¹⁰ The third *pāda* even contains a term of poetic art: the sounds (*varṇas*) of the beloved’s speech are, literally, “not manifest” (*avyakta*). In Sanskrit poetics, the verb *vyañj-* refers to the “manifestation” (*vyakti, vyañjanā*) of various elements of a literary work, an idea that was highly controversial and highly influential in Sanskrit poetics. In this verse, the beloved’s speech is like a poem: its more interesting and significant meanings are not on the surface, but need to be elicited by sensitive readers (or lovers).¹¹

In K36 as well, the pointed use of a key term in Sanskrit poetics adds a metaliterary significance to the erotic scene:

*adyāpi me varatanor madhurāṇi tasyā
yāny arthavanti na ca yāni nirarthakāni |
nidrānimīlitaḍṛśo madamantharāyās
tāny akṣarāṇi hṛdaye kimapi dhvananti || (K36)*

Even now the sweet sounds of my beloved—
both meaningful and meaningless—
as the wine slowed her down
and sleep started to close her eyes
echo faintly in my heart.

The “faint echoes” of sounds, fading in and out of meaningfulness, can be compared with the “resonance” (*dhvani*) of poetic language which gives it, so to speak, higher frequencies of meaning. Ānandavardhana had elevated *dhvani* to a unifying concept of poetic language in the 9th c. Abhinavagupta evidently knew of this verse about a century before the historical Bilhaṇa, since he quotes part of it in his commentary to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Abhinavabhāratī* (Kulkarni and Nandi 2001: 223). Abhinavagupta’s quotation of this verse is important not just because he estimates it so highly (it is one of the “reflections of the full moon passing over the ocean of the hearts of sensitive readers”) but because it occurs in a discussion of the self-referentiality of literature. This verse is one of several that thematize the effects that literature itself is supposed to produce. With reference to this verse, however, Abhinavagupta’s focus is not on the “resonance” of a suggested meaning but on the explicit mention of the affective states (*anubhāvas*)—intoxication (*madāgama*) and drowsiness (*nidrā*)—that contribute to the aesthetic experience.

The use of the language of poetics and literary criticism does not necessarily signal metaliterary meanings, since much of this language is richly polysemic to begin with. The language of *rasa* is a case in point: *rasa* is a key term in Sanskrit poetry, with meanings that range from the concrete (“liquid,” “semen”) to the abstract and conceptual (“emotion,” “feeling,” “love”). On the latter range, these meanings overlap with the technical terminology developed in Sanskrit poetics, where (to simplify the theory quite a bit) *rasa* is a particular emotional state that

10 In this respect my translation differs from Miller’s (“a hundred flatteries spoiling the sense of her words”).

11 A similar layer of metaliterary significance is to be found in the allegorical verses ascribed to Bilhaṇa in Śārngadhara’s *Paddhati*, where Bronner (2010b: 478) suggests that the sounds of the animals (*garjitam, ārava, dhvani*) refer to poetry.

has been brought on by a complex of aesthetic factors (*vibhāvas* and *anubhāvas*). One of these *rasas* is *śṛṅgāra*, “the erotic,” which predominates in the kind of poetry that the *Caurapañcāśikā* exemplifies. *Śṛṅgāra* and *rasa* are indeed mentioned in the text, and even though they are usually used without a hint of their technical connotations, the words connect the poet’s memory, and thus the text, to a realm of aesthetic evaluation and appreciation. In N22, the poet compares his beloved to “a royal goose in the lotus-pond of *śṛṅgāra*” (*śṛṅgāravārihahakānanarājahaṃsīm*); similar phrases occur in other verses.¹² In AV13, the poet says that her lip is “full of a *rasa* which is hard to find anywhere in the three worlds” (*lokatraye ’pi duravāparasābhipūrṇam*). N24 is different because it draws more directly upon the technical senses of *śṛṅgāra-rasa*:

adyāpi tāṃ kṣititale varakāminīnāṃ
 sarvāṅgasundaratayā prathamāikarekhām |
 śṛṅgāranāṭakarāsottamaratnapātrīm
 kāntāṃ smarāmi kusumāyudhabāṇakhinnām || (N24)

Even now I remember my beloved,
 the standard measure for all beautiful women on earth
 because of her total-body beauty,
 the lead part in the play of *śṛṅgāra*,
 the best of all *rasas*,
 a jewelled goblet for the supreme flavor
 of the play that is love,
 stuck with the arrows of the god of love.

The third *pāda* involves a series of potential double-meanings without yielding completely distinct senses, and probably represents an attempt at “condensed expression” (*samāsokti*).¹³ *Śṛṅgāra* is widely considered to be the “best of the *rasas*” (*rasottama*). But just as *rasa* can refer to a liquid, as well as an aesthetic-emotional state such as *śṛṅgāra*, the word *pātra* can mean both a “container” for a liquid and a “part” in a play. The poet thus evokes the armature of Sanskrit poetics in figuring his beloved as an embodiment of *śṛṅgāra-rasa*. If this verse does not apply equally to literature itself, it at least turns on a set of literary values that the poet expects his readers to share and appreciate.

Works on poetics are not the only intertexts for the imagination of the beloved. One of the reasons, perhaps, that the *Caurapañcāśikā* has been so popular is that it locates itself so decisively within the imaginary of *kāvya*, in accordance with its time-honored conventions and using the standard vocabulary of erotic poetry: the beloved is imagined almost entirely intertextually, making her both instantly recognizable to sensitive readers and, according to my reading, an icon of *kāvya* itself. I do not simply mean that there are parallels in the tradition for many of the phrases, images, and figures deployed in the *Caurapañcāśikā*, which are indeed countless.¹⁴ I mean

12 N22 is almost identical to K44 (which reads *śṛṅgāravārikamalākararājahaṃsīm*).

13 I owe the identification of the *alamkāra*, as well as part of the translation, to a reviewer for *ALT*. I have translated it twice to bring out the separate resonances; Miller translated both senses at once (“the perfect cup for tasting nectar in the play of passion”).

14 For example, the idea of the “play of love” in N24, discussed above, has an early parallel in verse 344 of Hāla’s *Sattasāi* (Weber 1881), where a lovers’ embrace is compared to “the first act in the play of lovemaking” (*raiṇāḍāapuvvaraṃgassa*).

that some verses seem to actually be *about* these figural and imaginative conventions. One example is WS42, where the poet cycles through the conventional standards of comparison and denies their application to his beloved: the girl’s walk is judged superior to that of a goose, her braid to a peacock’s tailfeathers, her eyes to those of a *cakora* bird, and her voice to that of a cuckoo. This is itself a conventional strategy of praise, but a second-order strategy that places figures in relation to other figures.¹⁵

The second major implication of this reading relates to the ontology, so to speak, of literature: where, when, and for whom it exists. As the introductory verse tells us, literature does not primarily exist in books, but in the subject’s heart, in the “storehouse of Sarasvatī.” It is accessed through a purely internal movement: the acts of recollecting, remembering, considering that structure each individual verse of the *Caurapañcāśikā*. These are the practices by which “the text becomes truly incorporated into a person” (Malamoud 1996: 256). What the poet has internalized exists in him and “goes along the road with him” (*pathi mayā saha gacchatīva*, WS2); it has a mobility that is especially important in the transregional space of Sanskrit literary culture. Note, incidentally, that “the road” (*panth-* in WS2 and WS48) is the standard image in Sanskrit poetics for style (where it is more commonly called *mārga-*), and was used in this sense by Bilhaṇa himself.¹⁶ Literature is actualized in the moments of creative remembrance that the *Caurapañcāśikā* dramatizes. We can even think of the *Caurapañcāśikā* as constituted by these moments of remembrance: every “I remember” (*saṁsmarāmi*) and “I can’t forget” (*na hi vismarāmi*) is spoken by generations of readers, and generations to come, in reference to the text.

This reading draws literature into the space of memory. The Sanskrit word *smara*, as is well known, means both “memory” and “love,” and the *Caurapañcāśikā* is the quintessential Sanskrit text of remembered love.¹⁷ Here I will only elaborate on what this polysemy might mean on a metaliterary level. Memory is the condition of union-in-absence, of *sambhoga* in *vipralambha*; it is also what allows the text to be recited and reinscribed at enormous distances and across enormous lengths of time.¹⁸ Memory operates on traces of past experience, on the body as well as in the mind: its icon in the *Caurapañcāśikā* is the *nakṣapada*, the nail-mark that is one of the physical traces of lovemaking. N35 offers a picture of the transformation of experience into memory:

*adyāpi tāṃ nakṣapadaṃ stanamaṇḍale yad
dattaṃ mayāsyamadhupānavimohitena |
udbhinnaromapulakair bahubhiḥ samantāḥ
jāgarti rakṣati vilokayati smarāmi || (N35)*

Even now I remember her
bristling all over with excitement,
cherishing, guarding, looking over
the nail-mark that I put on her breast

15 The idea of second-order figuration derives from Bronner (2010a: 196ff.). Another example is N38, where the poet doubts, in succession, whether his beloved is Pārvatī, an apsaras, Lakṣmī, or “fashioned by the creator himself, to delude the world, or perhaps because he wanted to see the perfect girl.”

16 At the end of his play *Karṇasundarī* (*granthakartuḥ praśastiḥ* v. 2 in Durgāprasāda and Parab 1932), Bilhaṇa writes that he was “always on the path of Kālidāsa’s speech” (*sadyo yaḥ pathi kālidāsavacasām śrībilhaṇaḥ*).

17 See Malamoud (1996) on the semantics of *smara*. The use of the noun *smara* itself in the text is judicious: it mostly occurs in the phrase *smara-jvala*, “lovesickness.”

18 Miller (1984: 39), in her discussion of Kālidāsa’s “aesthetic of memory,” discusses the relation of *sambhoga* and *vipralambha* and cites N22.

when I was drunk on the liquor of her lips.

Note how, in the last *pāda*, the verbs of the subordinate clause run on into the verb of the main clause, linking the past to the poem's present, and an act of memory-making to an act of memory-retrieval. Recall also that the same verb *jāgarti* was used in K1 of the “storehouse of Sarasvatī.” If the *Caurapañcāsikā* is about literature, one of its primary concerns is the close relationship between literature and memory: literature's existence within the unassailable safety of memory, its mobility and time-traveling capabilities, the traces that it leaves, the kind of subjectivity that forms around it, and the communities that it engenders. If we connect these features to the historical realities of courtly culture, we can easily see literature as a source of stability in an unstable world. And perhaps we can read verses such as N23 and K38—put in the mouth of a poet, like all of these verses—as a valorization of literature:

adyāpi tāṃ praṇayinīm mṛgaśāvākākṣīm
pīyūṣapūrṇakucakumbhayugaṃ vahantīm |
paśyāmy ahaṃ yadi punar divasāvasāne
svargāpavarganararājasukhaṃ tyajāmi || (N23)

Even now,
if at the end of the day I see her
gazing at me with her doe-like eyes
and her breasts like two pots full of nectar,
I'd give up heaven, liberation, and the pleasures kings enjoy.

adyāpi tāṃ yadi punaḥ kamalāyatākṣīm
paśyāmi pīvarapayodharabhārakhinnām |
trailokyarājyaṃ iva tatkṣaṇam āptam anyad
ātmānam indrasadasi sthitavat smarāmi || (K38)

Even now, if I can see her again—
her long lotus-like eyes, the heavy burden of her ample breasts—
I would think that I was sitting in Indra's place,
having obtained in that very moment
rulership over the three worlds.

These are not simply verses of renunciation of the form “I would give up *x* to see her again.” In placing the beloved alongside the highest political and spiritual goals—heaven (*svarga*), liberation (*apavarga*), royal pleasures (*nararājasukha*), and total sovereignty (*trailokyarājya*)—they make a programmatic statement about the value of the literary life *vis-à-vis* the political life and the spiritual life. Literature discloses in a moment a world of memory and imagination where the reader can in fact see himself as Indra, or indeed as anything else. These verses depend on the sense of memory that Abhinavagupta found in the famous verse at the beginning of the fifth act of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*: according to Miller (1984: 40), this kind of memory “is not discursive recollection of past events, but rather an intuitive insight into the past that transcends personal experience, into the imaginative universe that beauty evokes.”¹⁹ These verses disavow the external

19 See the *Abhinavabhāratī*, pp. 273–274 in the edition of Krishnamoorthy (1992). The verse (p. 60 in Pischel 1922) is:

kingdom for the internal kingdom. In the interpretive context of the collection as a whole, we know that the internal kingdom of literature is not entirely independent of the external kingdom of power—both the historical Bilhaṇa and the imagined Bilhaṇa of the *Caurapañcāsikā* were salaried employees of a king—but we are also given to understand that the internal kingdom is a source of meaning unto itself.

Finally, although the opposition between internal and external aligns quite well with the *Caurapañcāsikā*'s thematic contrasts—between the security of memory and the insecurity of the body, between private love and public shame—it would be a mistake to see memory as completely internalized in this poem. These verses are meant to be read and recited. The poet's memory is both private and public—according to the stories that frame it, it is the irruption of private love into the publicity of the royal court that provides the poem's occasion, and the poet in fact recites it publicly on the way to his own execution. In one version of this story, the king is moved to pardon the poet after hearing the poem. The poem thus thematizes the communicative power of literature. On the reading that I am proposing here, it also thematizes the cultural practices on which this communicative power depends: the beloved stands in for literature, and the poet's memory of her stands in for the collective memory of a literary culture. If literature is an inalienable possession, it is something that people can nevertheless possess *in common*; it forms the basis of a literary public. The ability of readers to put themselves into the subject-position of the poem, to say “I remember” (*saṃsmarāmi*) and “I can't forget” (*na hi vismarāmi*), is what allows the text to be continually reconstituted over time and space.

The metaliterary resonances that I have tried to elicit here are, I repeat, unsurprising and perhaps unremarkable given that a certain degree of autotelicity and self-referentiality are built into *kāvya* at all levels: Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka defined *kāvya* as “the subordination of words and their meanings to the aesthetic process.”²⁰ The *Caurapañcāsikā* provides a relatively clear example of how these metaliterary resonances are deployed through the basic equation of the beloved with *kāvya* itself. I use the word “resonances” because that is what they are: not a coherent system of meanings that sublates the literal meanings of the poetry, but a sprinkling of subtle invitations to think beyond these literal meanings. To slightly stretch one of the standard analytics of Sanskrit poetics, the *Caurapañcāsikā* is characterized by a secondary signification in which the primary signification remains in full force (*ajahallakṣaṇā*); its vivid sensuality cannot be neutralized by a metaliterary reading. These resonances, however, partly explain the tendency among premodern readers to see the *Caurapañcāsikā* as a poem about poetry, at least in the minimal sense of ascribing it to an already-famous poet and interpreting it by recourse to the poet's biography (even if this biography is completely fictional). The biographical interpretation sets up a parallelism between two author-functions by locating them in the same person: the author as the one who speaks, the mere subject of the poem's verbs, and the author as a courtly poet and literary-cultural celebrity. Closely aligned with these two functions are two parallel meanings, one focused on love and the other on literature, which overlap with and codetermine each other.

ramyāni vikṣya madhurāṃś ca niśamya śabdān paryutsuko bhavati yat sukhito 'pi jantuḥ | taccetasā smarati nūnam abodhapūrvaṃ bhāvasthirāṇi jananāntarasauḥṛdāni || “A man sees beautiful things, hears sweet words, and is happy—but disquieted. He must unconsciously recall, deep within his being, the intimacies of prior existences.”

20 Pollock (2010: 163): *dvayor* (sc. *śabdārthayor*) *guṇatve vyāpārāprādhānye kāvyagīr bhavet*.

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