Introduction

On Erotic Devotion

From its formative period in the seventh to ninth centuries onward, South Indian devotional poetry was permeated by erotic themes and images. In the Tamil poems of the Śaiva Nāyaṉmār and the Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs, god appears frequently as a lover, in roles inherited from the more ancient Tamil love poetry of the so-called *saṅgam* period (the first centuries A.D.). Poems of this sort are generally placed, alongside their classical *saṅgam* models, in the category of *akam*, the "inner" poetry of emotion, especially the varied emotions of love in its changing aspects. Such *akam* poems—addressed ultimately to the god, Śiva or Viṣṇu, and contextualized by a devotional framework, usually that of worship in the god's temple—are early South Indian examples of the literary linkage between mystical devotion and erotic discourse so prevalent in the world's major religions.

A historical continuum stretches from these Tamil poets of devotion all the way to Kṣetrayya and Sāraṅgapāṇi, a millenium later. The *padam* poets clearly draw on the vast cultural reserves of Tamil *bhakti*, in its institutional as well as its affective and personal forms. Their god, like that of the Tamil poet-devotees, is a deity both embodied in temple images and yet finally transcending these icons, and they sing to him with all the emotional and sensual

intensity that so clearly characterizes the inner world of medieval South Indian Hinduism.[1] And yet these Telugu devotees also present us with their own irreducible vision, or series of visions, of the divine, at play with the world, and perhaps the most conspicuous attribute of this refashioned cosmology is its powerful erotic coloring. As we seek to understand the import of the Telugu *padams* translated here, we need to ask: What is distinctive about the erotic imagination activated in these works? How do they relate to the earlier tradition of South Indian *bhakti*, with its conventional erotic components? What changes have taken place in the conceptualization of the deity, his human devotee, and the intimate relationship that binds them? Why this hypertrophy of overt eroticism, and what does it mean to love god in this way?

Let us begin with an example from Nammāḻvār, the central poet among the Tamil worshipers of Viṣṇu, who wrote in the southern Tamil area during the eighth century:

> The whole town fast asleep,
> the whole world pitch dark,
> and the seas utterly still,
> when it's one long extended night,
> if He who sleeps on the snake,
> who once devoured the earth, and kept it in his belly,
> will not come to the rescue,
> who will save my life? (5.2.1)

> Deep ocean, earth and sky
> hidden away,
> it's one long monstrous night:
> if my Kaṇṇaṉ too,
> dark as the blue lily,
> will not come,

now who will save my life,
sinner that I am?
O heart, you too are not on my side. (5.2.2)

O heart, you too are not on my side.
The long night with no end
has lengthened into an eon.
My Lord Rāma will not come,
with his protecting bow.
I do not know how it will end—
I with all my potent sins,
born as a woman. (5.2.3)

"Those born as women see much grief,
but I'll not look at it," says the Sun
and he hides himself;
our Dark Lord, with red lips and great eyes,
who once measured this earth,
he too will not come.
Who will quell the unthinkable ills
of my heart? (5.2.4)

This lovesickness stands behind me
and torments my heart.
This eon of a night
faces me and buries my sight.
My lord, the wheel forever firm in his hands,
will not come.
So who will save this long life of mine
that finds no end at all? (5.2.6)

The speaker is a young woman, obviously separated from her lover, who is identified as Kaṇṇaṉ/Kṛṣṇa, the Dark God, Rāma, and others—that is, the various forms of Viṣṇu as known to the Āḻvār devotees. The central "fact" stated in each of the verses—which are

taken from a closely knit decade on this theme and in this voice—is that the god-lover refuses to come. The woman is alone at night, in an enveloping black, rainy world; everyone else in the village, including her friends and family, has gone to sleep. She, of course, cannot sleep: her heart is tortured by longing, an unfulfilled love that can be redeemed only by the arrival of the recalcitrant lover. She seems quite certain that this will never happen. Her very life is in danger because of this painful inner state, but there is no one to help her. She blames herself, her "sins," her womanhood—and perhaps, by subtle intimation, the god-lover as well, callously sleeping on his serpent-bed (or, in the final verse of the sequence, "engaged in yoga though he seems to sleep").

All in all, it is a picture of plaintive and frustrated desire. It would be all too easy to allegorize the verses, to see here some version of a soul pining for its possessing deity, translated into the language of *akam* love poetry. Indeed, the medieval Vaiṣṇava commentators go some way in this direction, although their allegoresis is neither as mechanical nor as unimaginative as is sometimes claimed.[2] But scholars such as Friedhelm Hardy and Norman Cutler are surely right to insist on the autonomy of the poetic universe alive in the Āḻvārs' *akam* poems. To reduce this poetic autonomy to metaphysical allegory is to destroy the poems' integrity, and with it most of their suggestive power.[3] So we are left with the basic lineaments of the love situation, so delicately drawn in by the poet, and above all with its emotional reality, as the bedrock on which the poem rests. Using the language of classical Tamil poetics, which certainly helped to shape the poem, we can label the situation as proper to the *mullai* landscape of the forests, with its associated state of patient waiting for the absent lover. The god himself,

Māyoṉ, the Dark One (Kṛṣṇa), is the *mullai* deity, and the ceaseless rain is another conventional marker of this landscape.[4] As always in Tamil poetry, the external world is continuous with, and expressive of, inner experience. Thus, in verse 10:

> Even as I melt continually,
> the wide sky melts into a fine mist
> this night,
> and the world just sleeps through it
> saying not a word, not even once,
> that the Lord who paced the earth
> long ago
> will not come.

The heroine is slowly turning to water, "melting," in the language of Tamil devotion, and although there is pain in this state—the pain of unanswered longing—it is also no doubt a stage in the progressive softening (*urukutal*) of the self that Tamil *bhakti* regards as the ultimate process whereby one achieves connection with the object of one's love.

And things are yet more complex. The blackness of night seems to imitate the role of the god; like the latter, the darkness is enveloping, saturating the world. It is also, again like the deity, cruelly indifferent to the heroine's distress—another form of detachment, like the sleep that has overwhelmed the village (and the god). Internal markers of the *mullai* landscape thus resonate and alternate with one another, reinforcing its emotional essence within the speaker's consciousness. And, again, the basic experience is one of separation (Sanskrit: *viraha*), nearly always a constitutive feature of the *bhakti* relationship between god and human devotee. Other features of this relationship are also evident in the poem. For example, one immediately observes the utter asymmetry

built into the relation: the heroine, who in some sense speaks for the poet, is relatively helpless vis-à-vis her beloved. She can only wait for him and suffer the torment of his absence. He, in contrast, is free to come or not, to show compassion, if he wishes, and save her life—or let her die of love. There is no way for her to reconstitute his presence. The whole universe proclaims to her his remoteness, seemingly both physical and emotional; she is dwarfed by the inherent lack of equality between them. Interestingly, she blames her situation in part on her womanhood. Being a woman puts her precisely in this position of helpless dependence. She is not even in control of her emotional life: she accuses her heart of having turned against her ("you too are not on my side"), as if a part of herself had split away. This sense of a torn and conflicted personality is typical of the Tamil *bhakti* presentation of self. Overruling passion for the unpredictable and usually distant deity has disrupted the harmony and coherence of the devotee's inner being.

Contrast this picture—blocked desire, unending separation, a world turned dark on many levels, the helplessness of womanhood, a shattered self—with one we find in Kṣetrayya:

Woman! He's none other
than Cĕnnuḍu of Pālagiri.
Haven't you heard?
He rules the worlds.

When he wanted you, you took his gold—
but couldn't you tell him your address?
Some lover you are!
He's hooked on you.

And he rules the worlds

I found him wandering the alleyways,
    too shy to ask anyone.
I had to bring him home with me.
Would it have been such a crime
    if you or your girls
had waited for him by the door?
You really think it's enough
to get the money in your hand?
Can't you tell who's big, who's small?
    Who do you think he is?

And he rules the worlds

This handsome Cĕnnuḍu of Pālagiri,
    this Muvva Gopāla,
has fallen to your lot.
When he said he'd come tomorrow,
    couldn't you consent
    just a little?
Did you really have to say no?
What can I say about you?

And he rules the worlds

The senior courtesan or madam is chiding her younger colleague. God himself has come as a customer to this young woman, but she has treated him rather haughtily—taking his money but refusing even to give him her address. The madam finds him wandering the narrow streets of the courtesan colony, too embarrassed to ask for directions. Although his real nature and power are clear enough—as the refrain tells us (and the young courtesan), this customer rules the worlds—it is the woman who has the upper hand in this transaction, while the deity behaves as an awkward and essentially help-

less plaything in her control. He wants her, lusts for her, and yet she easily eludes him. Their relationship, such as it is, is transactional and mercenary, and the advantage wholly hers. If Nammāḻvār showed us an asymmetrical bond between the god and his lover (who speaks for the poet-devotee), here the asymmetry, still very much in evidence, is boldly reversed. Moreover, the emotional tone of the Telugu *padam* is radically different from that of the Tamil decade. The atmosphere of tormenting separation, *viraha*, has dissolved, to be replaced by a playful though still far from harmonious tone. God and woman are involved here in a kind of teasing hide-and-seek, with money as part of the stakes, and the woman is an active, independent partner to the game.

It is not always the woman's voice we hear in Kṣetrayya; on rare occasions, the male deity-lover is the speaker. But the image of the woman—the human partner to the transaction—is on the whole quite consistent. Usually, though again not always, she is a courtesan, practiced in the arts of love, which she freely describes in graphic, if formulaic, terms. She tends to be worldly, educated, articulate, perhaps a little given to sarcasm. In most *padams* she has something to complain about, usually her divine lover's new infatuation with some rival woman. So she may be angry at him—although she is also, at times, all too easily appeased, susceptible to his facile oaths of devotion. Indeed, this type of anger—a lover's pique, never entirely or irrevocably serious—is the real equivalent in these poems to the earlier ideology of *viraha*. The relationship thus retains elements of friction and tension, though they are less intense than in the Tamil *bhakti* corpus. Loving god, like loving another human being, is never a simple matter. One might even argue that the god's persistent betrayals, his constant affairs with

other women, are felt to be an integral and necessary part of the love bond (just as quarrels are seen as adding spice and verve to love in both Sanskrit erotic poetry and classical Tamil poems). Indeed, these tiffs and sulkings, so perfectly conventionalized, come close to defining the *padam* genre from the point of view of its contents, which sometimes function in a seemingly incongruous context. Thus, in a dance-drama composed during the rule of Vijayarāghava Nāyaka at Tañjāvūr and describing his marriage to a courtesan, the bride sings a *padam* immediately after the wedding ceremony, in which she naturally complains that her husband is (already?) betraying her: "You are telling lies. Why are you trying to hide the red marks *she* left on your lips?"[5]

We should also note that, despite the angry recriminations, the quarrels, and even the heroine's occasional resolve never to see her capricious lover again, many of the *padams* end in an intimation of sexual union and orgasm. A cycle is completed: initial love, sexually realized, leads to the lover's loss of interest or temporary disappearance and to his affairs with other women. But none of this prevents him from returning to make love to the speaker, however disenchanted she may be, as Kṣetrayya tells us:

I can see all the signs
of what you've been doing
till midnight,
you playboy.
Still you come rushing
through the streets,
sly as a thief,
to untie my blouse.

In general, physical union represents a potential resolution of the tensions expressed in many of the poems. In this respect, too, the *padam* contrasts strongly with the Tamil *bhakti* models.

It should now be clear why the courtesan appears as the major figure in this poetry of love. As an expressive vehicle for the manifold relations between devotee and deity, the courtesan offers rich possibilities. She is bold, unattached, free from the constraints of home and family. In some sense, she represents the possibility of choice and spontaneous affection, in opposition to the largely predetermined, and rather calculated, marital tie. She can also manipulate her customers to no small extent, as the devotee wishes and believes he can manipulate his god. But above all, the courtesan signals a particular kind of knowledge, one that achieved preeminence in the late medieval cultural order in South India. Bodily experience becomes a crucial mode of knowing, especially in this devotional context: the courtesan experiences her divine client by taking him physically into her body. Even Annamayya, who is primarily concerned not with courtesans but with a still idealized series of (nonmercenary) love situations, shows us this fascination with bodily knowledge of the god:

> Don't you know my house,
> garland in the palace of the Love God,
> where flowers cast their fragrance everywhere?
>
> Don't you know the house
> hidden by tamarind trees,
> in that narrow space marked by the two golden hills?
>
> That's where you lose your senses,
> where the Love God hunts without fear.

The woman's "house of love" (*madanagṛha*) is the true point of connection between her and the deity-lover. This notion, which is basic to the entire *padam* tradition, takes us considerably beyond the sensual and emotional openness of earlier South Indian *bhakti*. The Tamil devotee worships his deity in a sensually accessible form and through the active exploration of his emotions; he sees, hears, tastes, smells, and, perhaps above all, touches the god. But for the Telugu *padam* poets, the relation has become fully eroticized, in a manner quite devoid of any facile dualistic division between body and metaphysical or psychological substratum. Put starkly, for these devotees love of god is not *like* a sexual experience—as if eros were but a metaphor for devotion (as so many modern South Indian apologists for Kṣetrayya insist). Rather, it is erotic in its own right, and in as comprehensive and consuming a form as one encounters in any human love.

Still, this conceptualization of the relationship does have a literary history, and here we can speak of a series of transformations that take us from *saṅgam* poetry through the Āḻvārs and Nāyaṉmār to the *padam* poets. As already stated, the ancient tradition of Tamil love poetry, with its rich body of conventions, its dramatis personae, and its set themes, was absorbed into the literature of Tamil *bhakti*. In effect, *bhakti* comes to "frame" poems composed after the prototypes of *akam* love poems. The verses from Nammāḻvār cited above, in which the lovesick heroine laments the absence of her lover who is the god, are good examples of this process:

> If my Kaṇṇaṉ too,
> dark as the blue lily,
> will not come,

now who will save my life,
sinner that I am?

What might look like a simple love poem has become something else—a lyric of devotion, which uses the signs and language of *akam* poetics but which subordinates this usage to its new aim by internal reference to the divine object of worship, replete with mythic and iconic identifying traits.[6] By the time we reach the Telugu *padams*, the process has been taken a step further. The "reframed," *bhakti*-oriented love lyric has now acquired yet another frame, which reeroticizes the poem, turning it into a courtesan's love song that is, nonetheless, still impregnated with devotional elements, by virtue of the prehistory of the genre. This development, however, takes somewhat different forms with each of the major *padam* poets and thus needs to be examined more closely, in context, according to the sequence in which it evolved. Indeed, if we focus more on context than content, our perspective on these poems changes significantly. Although all of them, even those seemingly closest to out-and-out love poems, retain a metaphysical aspect, the exigencies and implications of their social and cultural milieux now come to the fore. In what follows, we briefly trace the evolution of the *padam* in context from Annamayya to Kṣetrayya.

On Contexts

Tāḷḷapāka Annamayya composed a song a day for his deity, Lord Veṅkaṭeśvara of the temple on Tirupati Hill, where the Tamil and Telugu lands meet. According to Annamayya's hagiographer—his own grandson, Tiruveṅgaḷanātha—Annamayya's son Pĕda Tiru-

malayya had these songs inscribed on copperplates together with his own compositions. Considering the total number of songs—Tiruveṅgaḷanātha speaks of some thirty-two thousand[7]—this was a very expensive enterprise indeed, which reflects the status of the poet's family as servants of this most wealthy of the South Indian temple gods. The copperplates were housed in a separate treasure room within the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple at Tirupati; inscriptions suggest that the treasure room was itself an object of worship. Annamayya's songs were probably sung by courtesans who led the processions and danced before the deity in the temple.

The copperplates divide Annamayya's songs into two categories: the metaphysical and the erotic. It is conceivable that Annamayya's career had two corresponding phases, but it is more likely that this classification resulted from a later act of ordering the corpus. In any case, the two categories are reminiscent of Nammāḻvār's poems. Indeed, Annamayya is believed to have been born under the same astrological star as Nammāḻvār and is sometimes regarded as a reincarnation of the Tamil poet. Our first concern, then, is with the manner in which Annamayya uses the language and imagery of eroticism to express his type of devotion.

The courtly tradition in both Sanskrit and Telugu subsumed sexual themes under the category of *śṛṅgārarasa*, the aesthetic experience of desire. Many long erotic poems were composed on mythological subjects, with gods as the protagonists, as well as on more secular themes, with human beings as the heroes. Still, it was considered unsuitable to depict the lovemaking of a god and a goddess, even for devotional purposes; such depictions were thought to block the highest aesthetic experience. (Hence the controversy in Sanskrit aesthetic texts over whether *bhakti* is an aesthetic experi-

ence, a *rasa,* or not.) Some even insist that such descriptions constitute a blemish because the god and the goddess are father and mother of the universe; explicit reference to their lovemaking is thus offensive.

But for Annamayya no such barriers exist. He describes how Padmāvatī, Lord Veṅkaṭeśvara's consort, sleeps after making love to her husband:

> Mother, who speaks so sweetly,
> has gone to sleep:
> she has made love to her husband
> with all her feminine skills
>
> and is now sleeping
> long into the day,
> her hair scattered on her face.[8]

Annamayya has songs describing the lovemaking of the goddess, Alamelumaṅga/Padmāvatī, in all conceivable roles and situations. Nor is Annamayya content with love between god and his consort. He goes on to describe the lovemaking of other women with Veṅkaṭeśvara, these women representing every erotic type described in the manuals of love (*kāmaśāstra*).

For Annamayya, love/devotion is an exploration of the ideal experience of the divine. Most often, he assumes the persona of the woman who is in love with the god—either the consort herself or another woman. Unlike later *padam* writers, Annamayya does not describe a courtesan/customer relationship between the devotee and the god. No money changes hands, and the woman does not manipulate the customer to get the best deal. In Annamayya it is always an ideal love relationship, which ultimately achieves harmony. God here is always male, and he is usually in control. He

has the upper hand, even when he adopts a subservient posture to please his woman. The woman might complain, get angry, and fight with him, but in the end they make love and the god wins.

When we come to Kṣetrayya, however, the situation is transformed. For one thing, Kṣetrayya composed during the period of Vijayarāghava Nāyaka (1633–1673), the Telugu king who ruled Tañjāvūr and the Kāveri delta. This period witnessed a significant shift, leading to the identification of the king with the deity.[9] Earlier, the god was treated as a king; now the king has become god. For the *bhakti* poets of Andhra, however, especially of Annamayya's period, the king was only too human, at most sharing an aspect of divinity, in the strict Brahminical *dharmaśāstra* tradition. These poets did not recognize him as their true sovereign since for them the real king was the god in the temple. But during the Nāyaka period in South India (roughly the mid-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries), the distinction between the king in his palace and the god in the temple blurs and even disappears. Kṣetrayya could thus address his songs to the king and at the same time invoke the god.

Furthermore, this was also the time when cash began to play a more powerful role in interpersonal transactions. A new elite was emerging, one composed not of landed peasants, as in Vijayanagara times, but of soldier-traders, who cut across traditional social boundaries. These people combined two qualities usually considered incompatible in the Brahminical worldview—martial valor and concern for profit, the quality of a *kṣatriya* (warrior) and the quality of a *vaiśya* (trader). Earlier, when god was king or when the king shared only an aspect of the divine, kingship was ascriptive. To be recognized as a king, one had either to be born in a particular

caste as a legitimate heir or to fabricate some such pedigree. Now, in the more fluid social universe of Nāyaka times, ascriptive qualities like birth became less important than acquired qualities like wealth. If a king is god, and if anyone who has money is a king, anyone who has money is also god. For Kṣetrayya, therefore, who sings of kings as gods, the shift to customer as god was not far-fetched. Courtesans, who earlier were associated with temples, were now linked to kings—any "king," that is, who had money. The devotional mode, however, did not change. The new god, who was not much more than a wealthy customer, was addressed as Muvva Gopāla, as Kṛṣṇa is known in the local temple.

The shift did not happen overnight. Even in Kṣetrayya we still encounter songs in which the divine aspects are more dominant than those of the human customer. But there are songs unmistakably addressed to the latter. Although the devotional meanings still linger, one sometimes suspects that they are simply part of the idiom, often not much more than a habit. The direction is clear and pronounced when we reach Sāraṅgapāṇi, where money is almost the only thing of value. Here any customer is the god, known as Veṇugopāla (again after the local name of Kṛṣṇa).

We have a slightly earlier precedent for this shift in Rudrakavi's *Janārdanāṣṭakamu*, a composition of eight stanzas that are also sung, though not to elaborate music like the *padams* (nor are they danced to). The theme of this sixteenth-century poem is familiar: the poet assumes the persona of a woman who is in love with the god Janārdana (Kṛṣṇa); she complains that her divine lover is seeing another woman. These songs are very much like Annamayya's, except for one major difference. Here the woman threatens the god, although in the end she is still taken by her cunning lover.