

Danielle Feller
danielle.feller@unil.ch
(University of Lausanne, Switzerland)

Food and Love in Sanskrit Poetry: On the Margin of Desires

SUMMARY: In Western representations, food and sex are frequently connected and compared in an erotic context. A survey of Sanskrit poetry shows that it was not so in the context of ancient India, despite the *kāmaśāstras*' dictates. Parts of women's bodies are occasionally likened to certain items of food (mostly fruit and nectar), and can sometimes be drunk, but are rarely said to be eatable. Lovers who are madly in love or suffer from the pangs of separation lose their appetite, and in consequence become thin. In contexts of love-in-union, wine, but not food, is frequently consumed and appreciated for its aphrodisiac qualities. Except in some cases when the pairs of lovers are animals, or at least animal-like, descriptions of food consumption do not lead to the erotic flavour (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*), but rather lead to the comic (*hāsyā*), sometimes disgusting flavour (*bībhatsa-rasa*). Food descriptions were probably considered improper for poetry, because food had too many unerotic associations, being a favourite topic of Sanskrit ritual, legal and medical treatises.¹

KEYWORDS: Sanskrit poetry, sexuality, food, wine, comparisons between body and food, stages of unrequited love, *rasa*, *kāmaśāstras*

¹ Earlier versions of this study were presented in 2015 in Bangkok, and in 2016 in Cracow. On both occasions, my presentation greatly benefitted from all the positive input and very helpful advice I received from the attending scholars. I also wish to express my deepest gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, for their precious remarks and corrections. All the remaining mistakes are of course my own. And, last but certainly not least, my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Lidia Sudyka for accepting to publish my paper in the *Cracow Indological Studies*.

Introduction: theoretical premises

This study proposes to examine the relationship between food and love in Sanskrit poetry. Both the topics of nourishment and sexuality in ancient India have separately received a great deal of attention.² The aim of the present paper is to study them in combination, and, more precisely, in the corpus of texts which belong to *kāvya* literature.³ I do not intend here to discuss specifically aphrodisiacs, namely preparations of food and drink which are meant to increase the sexual appetite, and whose preparation and application—which by the way can hardly be termed erotic—usually form a chapter of the *kāmaśāstras* (see for example *Kāmasūtra* chapter 7, *Anaṅgaraṅga* chapter 6). Rather, the idea for this paper started from the following theoretical premise: eating and sexuality are in many ways comparable and compared. For all animals, including humans, both are basic physiological needs. Of course, satisfying one’s hunger and thirst is more urgently vital than satisfying one’s sex-drive, and it is more common to die of hunger and thirst than of lack of sex.⁴ However, in the long run, if both desires are not satisfied, either the individual in isolation or the species at large become extinct. Furthermore, both drives share a certain number of common points: both activities are indulged in following a certain rhythm; sensuality plays

² For the topic of food, see Prakash 1961; Zimmermann 1987; Olivelle 1995 and 2002. More recently, a collection of articles was dedicated to this topic, see Pieruccini and Rossi 2016. For the topic of *kāmaśāstras*, see (apart from the various editions and translations of the texts) especially Ali 2011. As far as I could ascertain, the only paper that addresses both topics in combination is Goldman 2001.

³ This study does not aim to be exhaustive, and the texts have not been selected according to very strict criteria. I have tried to peruse to the best of my abilities the corpus of Indian classical Sanskrit literature, especially the texts that deal with *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, or the flavour of love. But it is extremely likely that some relevant passages may have escaped my notice. Alternatively, certain texts may not be mentioned at all because they do not contain anything of interest to the present topic.

⁴ Not quite so, however, according to the Indian erotic conventions, as we shall see below.

a role in both; once these needs are satisfied, one feels a certain satiety, which shows that regulating mechanisms intervene both at a visceral and mental level (Pasini 1994: 53–54); from a medical point of view, food and sex consumption, both in excess and in insufficiency, can become pathological, and necessitate medical treatment. Furthermore, both food-intake and sexuality are subject to a great number of taboos, regulations and restrictions in all societies and religions. As the psychologist Willy Pasini, in his 1994 monograph entitled *Nourriture et amour. Deux passions dévorantes. (Food and Love. Two Devouring Passions)*, states: “The social history of sexuality and nourishment reflects a constant and parallel oscillation between freedom and repression and between impulse and control” (Pasini 1994: 9). Greek Dionysian Bacchanals and Roman orgies (in)famously involved excessive eating and drinking, as well as unbridled sex. In the Catholic Church, on the contrary, lust (*luxuria*) and gluttony (*gula*) hold pride of place among the seven deadly sins,⁵ and the Fathers of the Church considered that gluttony opened the gate to lust (Pasini 1994: 38). This thought also finds expression in ancient Indian texts, though without any moral judgement. The connection between eating appropriate food and sexual potency was well recognized by Āyurvedic texts. Thus chapter 1.27 of the *Caraka-saṃhitā* (2nd c. CE) contains long disquisitions on the various properties attributed to different types of food. Some of the recurring and highly desirable characteristics of food are of being *vṛṣala* (increasing sexual vigour) and *śukrala* (producing semen). But the idea that lust is increased by rich food found favour not only in medical and scientific milieus, but in popular beliefs as well. Thus, Bhartṛhari’s *Śṛṅgāraśataka* 65 (4th c. CE) hyperbolically illustrates that good food increases sexual appetites, which even lack of proper food cannot entirely subdue:

⁵ In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, we meet several noted gourmands and libertines both in Purgatory and in Hell.

*viśvāmitraparāśaraprabhṛtayo vātāmbuparñāśanās
te 'pi strīmukhapañkajaṃ sulalitaṃ dṛṣṭvaiva moham gatāḥ /
śālyannaṃ saghṛtaṃ payodadhiyutaṃ bhuñjanti ye mānavās
teṣāṃ indriyanigraho yadi bhaved vindhyas taret sāgaram //
Śṛṅgārasataka 65 //*

Even (sages like) Viśvāmitra, Parāśara and others, whose food consists of air, water and leaves, become infatuated at the lovely sight of a woman's face-lotus. If men who eat rice and wheat together with milk, ghee and curds can keep absolute control over their senses, the Vindhya mountain range might as well cross the ocean!

From this perspective, we understand why Indian sages and Christian anchorites alike kept their food-intake to the minimum—because this was understood in both traditions as a way of simultaneously bridling their sexual appetites.

In Western erotic and sensual imagination, eating and sex are often associated, and appear together in novels,⁶ paintings,⁷ and, in modern times, films.⁸ Gallant rendezvous are often preceded by candle-lit

⁶ A paradigmatic example of love turning cannibalistic is P. Süskind's *Das Parfum*. Zurich: Diogenes, 1985, whose hero is the inventor of the most exquisite perfume in the world. The intoxicating fragrance excites such lust in those who smell it that he ends up devoured by a mob.

⁷ This theme is nicely illustrated by well-known French paintings such as E. Manet's "Déjeuner sur l'herbe" (1862–1863), which depicts two fully-dressed men enjoying a picnic on the grass in the company of naked women, the remains of their meal lying scattered around them. The women, like the food, seem offered for consumption. Also P. A. Renoir's "Déjeuner des canotiers" (1882), which shows a group of young men and women flirting, drinking, eating, and generally merry-making on a terrace, around tables laden with food and wine. The luncheon here is clearly a preliminary to other carnal delights.

⁸ Though not up-to-date, Pasini (Pasini 1994: 305–306) provides a list of films illustrating the topic. We can also cite two recent Indian films: "Jodhaa Akbar" (directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) in which the Rajput princess Jodhaa, who married the Moghul emperor Akbar, wins her husband's love by preparing for him a delicious (vegetarian) menu (see Ciolfi 2016: 296–298). Also, "The Lunch-box", (directed by Ritesh Batra, 2013) in which a man falls in love with a completely

dinners in fashionable restaurants, or by romantic picnics out in the green. In such cases, the shared meal becomes a quasi-erotic preliminary for the love-act. Certain items of food are perceived as erotic, due to their shape and colour, and naturally enter into the composition of aphrodisiac recipes. The connection between sexuality and gastronomy is evidenced in the titles of French cook-books, such as (among many others): *Le corps à corps culinaire*⁹ or *La cuisine de l'amour*.¹⁰ History has documented a number of well-known erotic recipes used by famous personages to kindle the flames of desire, and it is said that some aphrodisiac meals were accessories in the conception and birth of historical figures (see Pasini 1994: 55). One could even speak of an erotico-culinary mythology. In speech too, the close connection between food and sex is emphasized in certain expressions. There is a French saying: "L'amour passe par l'estomac", which has an English equivalent: "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach". Metaphors like "cherry-lips" or "honey-moon" liken the taste of love to the sweetness of cherries or honey. More vulgarly, slang expressions such as "to beat her cakes" and "to play hide the salami" mean "to have sex". In French, "passer à la casserole" means to be enjoyed sexually. In American slang, young girls are called "cookies", while in England an attractive woman can be called a "crumpet" (Pasini 1995: 32). You can declare to someone you fancy very much: "I want to eat you up!" In German, this sounds rather more ravenous: "Ich hab' dich zum Fressen gern!" If on the contrary you don't like someone, you can say that you "can't stomach him/her". In other languages one will of course find different idiomatic expressions that mean the same thing. Clearly, to some extent, love verges on cannibalism.¹¹ Such being the situation in the West, we shall now investigate Sanskrit

unknown woman merely by tasting her food: she had prepared it with special care to win back her husband's love, but it was delivered to him due to a *dabbawala*'s mistake.

⁹ N. Châtelet. Paris: Le Seuil, 1977.

¹⁰ A. Roustan. Paris: Albin Michel, 1986.

¹¹ If we consider the myth of the Greek god Dionysus, we see that this god, famous for his wine-drinking, his sexual orgies and his cannibalistic tendencies, is himself also cut to pieces and boiled in a cauldron. See Graves 1960: 103.

literature and try to determine whether the same close interconnection between food and love can also be found here. Our investigation will be conducted along the following two main axes:

- We shall examine if there are Sanskrit expressions that compare the body, or parts of the body, to food-items.
- We shall determine if, in the works of Sanskrit literature, eating together, or feeding each other in the case of a couple of lovers are common manifestations of love, or lead up to love-making, or form a part of the love-play as such.

Positive evidence 1) Comparisons between parts of the body and items of food or drink

We find in Sanskrit a certain number of expressions, often set metaphors or poetic conventions (*kavi-samayās*), in which parts of the body are likened to something edible, with the possible implication that the body of the lover is so appetizing that you want to eat or drink it. Thus, the English expression “cherry lips” finds a close equivalent in the Sanskrit “*bimba* lips”. We shall presently examine this type of expressions as they appear in Sanskrit literature. At this point, we can make the following three preliminary observations:

Such expressions are not as common in Sanskrit poetry as one might expect, even though Sanskrit has a verbal root, BHUJ-, which means both “to eat” and to “enjoy sexually”.¹² Even *Kāmasūtra* 2.5, which concerns biting (the sexual practice which certainly comes closest to eating) is short and terse, and remains rather on a theoretical level. It is mainly concerned with enumerating the shapes of the bites and the places where one may apply such bites, and does not once make

¹² Kuntī, thinking that her sons are bringing back food, when in reality they want to show her Draupadī, uses this verbal root by in *Mahābhārata* 1.182.2 when she exclaims: “*bhūṅkteti sametya sarve*” (“Enjoy, having all come together!”) Due to this, the Pāṇḍavas are obliged to marry Draupadī conjointly.

explicit comparisons between biting and eating, nor between the body and edibles. The same applies to Kokkoka's *Ratirahasya*, chapter 9, which deals with biting even more summarily.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these comparisons between bodily parts and food/drinks exclusively concern the bodies of women. I have not come across a single instance in which this applies to male bodies. Ancient Sanskrit poetry was of course mostly—if not entirely—composed by men and aimed at a male public, which probably explains this fact. From the vantage-point of a male heterosexual poet, only the female body is considered as appetizing. Even in passages like Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*, song 10, where a group of heavenly nymphs assemble to seduce Arjuna, who is performing a severe penance, and instead collectively fall in love with him due to his beauty, Arjuna's body is not described in realistic detail, even though the situation itself would seem to vouchsafe it—a group of nymphs lusting after a man, who is moreover quasi object-like in his unconscious state, plunged as he is in deep meditation. On the contrary, the poet characterizes Arjuna's body by means of lofty comparisons: he looks like the Veda in his calm and majesty (10.10), like the moon in his splendour (10.11), like fire due to his matted reddish hair (10.12), like a mountain in his steadfastness (10.14). Far from being an object that can be grasped and consumed, his body, as shown by these comparisons pertaining to the religious and supra-human realm, is transposed to a vastly superior plane, far out of even the *apsarases*' reach.

While such metaphors are frequently vulgar in Western languages (cf. the examples given above), in Sanskrit poetry, on the contrary, they often tend towards the sublime and even other-worldly, as we shall see below.

The standard and most common expression comparing a part of the body and fruit is of course that between the lips and ripe, red *bimba* fruits. The *bimba* fruit is a type of small red gourd, probably *Momordica monadelphica* Roxb., though its exact identity is controversial (see image 1). One could multiply the examples, for the *bimba*-like lip is a standard element in literary portraits of beautiful ladies, but a few will suffice here. In Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* 2.22 (5th c. CE),

the *yakṣa* describes as follows his beloved and sorely missed wife, explaining to the cloud-messenger how he will recognize this paragon of beauty when he reaches Alakā:

*tanvī śyāmā śikharidaśanā pakvabimbādharoṣṭhī
madhye kṣāmā cakitahariṇīprekṣaṇā nimnanābhiḥ /
śroṇībhārād alasagamanā stokanamrā stanābhyām
yā tatra syād yuvatiṣaye sṛṣṭhir ādyeva dhātuḥ // Meghadūta 2.22 //*

The lady who will be found there, slender-framed, dark, with pointed teeth and her lower lip resembling a ripe *bimba* fruit, thin in the middle (waist), possessed of eyes like those of a frightened doe, having a deep navel, of a gait slow on account of the weight of her hips, slightly stooping on account of her breasts, and the first creation, as it were, of the Creator in the department of woman-kind. (Transl. Kale 1969, modified)

This verse contains nearly all the standard elements of description for a beautiful woman: thin, with a dark complexion,¹³ sharp teeth, a *bimba*-like lower lip, thin waist and deep navel, large hips and breasts, walking slowly and somewhat stooped on account of these—indeed this verse could be called the *yuvatiṣaye sṛṣṭhir ādyeva kaveḥ*, “the first creation, as it were, of the Poet in the department of woman-kind”. But as we see, only one part of her body is compared to something which is—at least in theory—eatable, namely her lower lip, which is likened to a ripe *bimba* fruit: *pakvabimbādharoṣṭhī*. Jayadeva in his *Gītagovinda* (12th c. CE), uses the *bimba* lips twice in the same song (3.7.13–14). Kṛṣṇa, who is looking in vain for Rādhā and suffering because he misses her, describes how the memory of various parts

¹³ In my translation of *śyāmā* (lit. dark), I differ from Kale who translates this term as “youthful”. Here Kale follows Mallinātha’s commentary, who glosses *śyāmā* as *yuvatīḥ* (young), quoting the *Utpalamālā* (a dictionary compiled by Utpala). Undoubtedly, Kālidāsa meant dark and not young. Indeed, the latter goes without saying. Esthetic standards obviously changed over time. A dark complexion was considered beautiful in Kālidāsa’s time (5th c. CE) but no longer so in Mallinātha’s (14th c. CE).

of Rādhā's perfect body are torturing him to death. This verse is full of double-entendre or *śleṣa*, which the polysemy of Sanskrit allows: thus, *rāgavān*, applied to the *bimba*-like lower lip, means both “red” and “passionate”:

*bhrūcāpe nihitaḥ kaṭākṣaviśikho nirmātu marmavyathāṃ
śyāmātmā kuṭīlaḥ karotu kabarībhāro 'pi mārodyamam /
mohaṃ tāvad ayaṃ ca tanvi tanutāṃ bimbādharo rāgavān
sadvṛttastanamaṇḍalas tava kathaṃ prānair mama kṛḍati // Gītagovinda
3.7.13 //*

Glancing arrows your brows' bow conceals
May cause pain in my soft mortal core.
Your heavy crooked braid, whose essence (soul) is black
May even lift up death.
Your luscious red (or passionate) *bimba* lips, frail Rādhā,
May spread strange delirium.
But how do breasts in perfect circles (or: well-behaved) play havoc
with my life? (Transl. Stoler Miller, modified)

This verse draws a portrait of Rādhā, and we understand from it that she has perfectly round breasts; very long black hair; red lips; beautiful arched eye-brows, which are compared to a bow whose arrows are the side-long glances she shoots to equally deadly effect.

The following verse from the *Ṛtusamhāra*¹⁴ does not describe an individual, but a type of heroine, namely, the despairing traveller's wife at the onset of the rainy season.¹⁵ It contains a charming vegetal metaphor, in which the lips of the wives, sprinkled by the tears flowing

¹⁴ The “Circle of the Seasons” was probably composed between 100 and 500 CE, by a poet whose name has not come down to us. As Lienhard (Lienhard 1984: 108) remarks: “Critics indirectly confirm that Kālidāsa can hardly be the author, as excerpts from this short poem are never quoted by them.”

¹⁵ The travellers' wives are especially anxious when the rains arrive, because their husbands should have returned from their journeys at the beginning of this season, which makes the paths unpassable. This is a topos of Sanskrit poetry. See Feller 1995: 164.

from their eyes, are likened at the same time to new sprouts and to *bimba* fruits—both being of course red:

vilocanendīvaravāribindubhiḥ
nīśiktabimbādharacārupallavāḥ /
nirastamālyābharaṇānulepanāḥ
sthitā nirāśāḥ pramadāḥ pravāsinām // R̥tusaṃhāra 2.12 //

With the charming sprouts of their *bimba*-like lower lips sprinkled by the drops of water (flowing) from their waterlily-eyes, having discarded their make-up, ornaments and garlands, the wives of the travellers stand hopeless.

Static (*sthitāḥ*), as opposed to their wandering husbands (*pravāsinām*), the wives are reduced to a plant-like state, sprinkled by their own tears instead of the rain. They derive their colours and beauty from the vegetal world, which is indeed strikingly luxuriant in the monsoon and allows them to retain their red lips, even though they have discarded their artificial ornaments as a sign of sorrow. Again, as in *Meghadūta* 2.22, the *bimba* is introduced as an object of comparison (*upamāna*) for the lip due to its red colour and shape, and not due to its edible quality. Since the *bimba* belongs to the same genus as the bitter gourd (*Momordica charantia* L. or *karela*), it is not ruled out that it may have a bitter taste. Though valued in culinary preparations, the bitter taste may not exactly be what one looks for in love, which favours the sweetness of honey or nectar. In any case, in both instances, the ones who might have enjoyed biting into these fruits (the *yakṣa* and the travellers) are away from home.

On occasion, even animal females, by transfer, are said to have a *bimba*-red mouth. For instance, the goose in Pūrṇasarasvatī's *Haṃsa-saṃdeśa* (14–15th c. CE). The *haṃsa* (or bar-headed goose, *Anser indicus*) has an orange beak, which justifies the simile. The following verse is addressed to the gander:

kaccid bhrātāḥ kathaya kuśalair āgamas tvam dharitrīm
dhanyā kaccij jayati varaṭā dharmadārāḥ priyā te /

*dūraṃ yāte tvayi sumadhuraṃ yā tṛṣārttāpi vaktre
bimbātāmre bisakisalayaṃ bibhrati joṣamās te // Hamsasamdeśa 1.4 //*

Tell me brother, did you land on earth well?
Your goose, your lawful wife, is delighted.
Though she was suffering from thirst [/desire] while you were away,
She still holds the sweet lotus-shoot silently
In her coppery-red *bimba* mouth.¹⁶ (Transl. Szczepanik, modified)

Occasionally, the lips may be compared to other fruits. In a reverse comparison, the black plum or jambolan (*jambū-phala*)¹⁷ is compared to the lips of a beautiful woman in Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśīya* 4.13 (see image 2). The love-crazed Purūravas, who is looking for his beloved Urvaśī who has vanished in the wilderness, interrogates animals and inanimate objects as to her whereabouts.¹⁸ One of them is the female cuckoo, who pays no attention to him. Purūravas then exclaims:

*mahad api paraduḥkhaṃ śītaḥ samyag āhuḥ
praṇayam aḡaṇayitvā yan mamāpadgatasya /
adharam iva madāndhā pātum eṣā pravṛttā
phalam abhinavapākaṃ rājjambūdrumasya // Vikramorvaśīya 4.13 //*

Other people's sorrow doesn't hurt us.
It's true what people say.
Arrogant, self-centered, the cuckoo
doesn't even notice that I'm suffering
in love. She's absorbed in drinking the newly-ripe black plum, as if
it were (a woman's) lip. (Transl. Rao and Shulman, modified)

¹⁶ On the sustenance of (avian) messengers in *dūta-kāvya*s, see Szczepanik 2016.

¹⁷ According to Wujastyk (Wujastyk 2004), *jambū* does not denote the rose-apple tree (as it is frequently mistranslated) but the black plum tree (previously termed *Eugenia Jambolana*, now renamed *Syzygium Cumini*), which is of a dark purple color, but lighter red in its early stages of ripening. The shape of the black plum is quite similar to that of the *bimba*. I thank my anonymous reviewer for this reference.

¹⁸ For the topic of searching the wilderness for the lost beloved, see Pieruccini 2004.

Here, it is not the lower lip itself which is drunk, but only the black plum, which is likened to the lip.¹⁹ But the quality of being drinkable is thereby transferred onto the lip. Tasting and drinking are more often evoked in comparisons between parts of the body and wine, honey, nectar or ambrosia. The verbs meaning “to drink” are mostly forms of the root PĀ: *pātum*, *pibanti*, *pibati*, *nipīta*. As we see, ambrosia or nectar is drunk, not eaten. Thus, the lower lip and the mouth, or perhaps more accurately the saliva, become ambrosia/nectar (*amṛta*, *rasa*, *madhu*) or honey/nectar/wine (*madhu*), drunk by the lover while kissing his beloved.²⁰ This is seen in Bhartṛhari’s *Śṛṅgāraśataka*: “The fortunate drink the honey/wine/nectar of their wives’ lower lip”, *adharamadhu vadhūnām bhāgyavantaḥ pibanti* (*Śṛṅgāraśataka* 26d). *Śṛṅgāraśataka* 93 contains a pretty poetic fancy:

*sudhāmāyo ‘pi kṣayarogaśāntyai nāsāgramuktāphalakacchalena /
anaṅgasaṃjīvanadr̥ṣṭiśaktir mukhāmṛtaṃ te pibatīva candraḥ //
Śṛṅgāraśataka 93 //*

Even though he consists of nectar and has the power to engender passionate love (or: the power to revive the Love-God) by its (mere) sight, the moon, in the guise of a pearl at the tip of (your) nose, seems to drink the ambrosia of your mouth in order to cure himself of the waning disease (consumption).

Here the pearl (*muktāphalaka*) on a lady’s nose-ring is likened to the moon who, like a sick lover, wishes to drink the ambrosia of the lady’s mouth in order to cure himself of the *kṣayaroga* (waning disease or consumption)—a pun on the moon’s waning, which in Indian mythology

¹⁹ Usually, a fruit is eaten, not drunk, but here drinking is probably considered more delicate than eating—even for a cuckoo.

²⁰ Compare with the French poet Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Le serpent qui danse”:
*Quand l’eau de ta bouche remonte
Au bord de tes dents,
Je crois boire un vin de Bohême
Amer et vainqueur (Les fleurs du mal, 28)*

is said to be caused by a curse inflicting consumption on the poor moon.²¹ In Amaru's *Śṛṅgāraśataka* 66 (7th c. CE), a young woman tells her friend:

*ahaṃ tenāhūtā kim api kathayāmīti vijane
samīpe cāsīnā saralahṛdayatvād avahitā /
tataḥ kaṛṇopānte kim api vadatāghrāya vadanam
grhītvā dhammilam mama sakhi nipīto 'dhararasaḥ // Śṛṅgāraśataka 66 //*

“I have a word for thee,” he said and drew me to a lonely spot; and as my heart was filled with eager longing, I sat close to him and was attentive; then whispering something in my ear and smelling my mouth he caught hold of the braid of my hair and sipped the nectar from my lower lip. (66) (Transl. Devadhar 1959, modified)²²

Like the mouth and lips, the breasts too are often combined with ambrosia in metaphors and comparisons. Most frequently, they are likened to pots filled with ambrosia. In Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* 9.18.3, we find a many-levelled comparison, in which Rādhā's full breast is likened simultaneously to a *tāla-phala* (the sweet palmyra nut), to a pot, and to ambrosia, with a play on *phala* (fruit) and *vi-phala* (fruitless). The verse is difficult to translate due to the polysemy of the term *rasa*, which includes the idea of taste, juice, nectar and, without doubt, *rasa* as literary flavour. These words are spoken by Rādhā's *sakhī* (friend), who is scolding her and encouraging her to make up with Kṛṣṇa:

*tālaphalād api gurum atisarasam /
kiṃ viphalīkuruṣe kucakalaśam // Gītagovinda 9.18.3 //*

²¹ Candra, the Moon-God was married to twenty-seven sisters, the asterisms, all daughters of Dakṣa. But his favourite was Rohiṇī, and he consorted with her only. This angered the remaining twenty-six wives, who complained about it to their father. Dakṣa cursed the Moon and inflicted tuberculosis on him as a punishment (*Mahābhārata* 9.34). See Mani 1975: 172.

²² Jayadeva combines the *bimba* and the nectar in connection with the lips in *Gītagovinda* 11.21.22: *pātum icchati sudhāsambādhabimbādharām*: “He longs to drink your sweet berry lips’ nectar”. (Transl. Stoler Miller)

Your pot-like breast is heavier and more juicy/tasty/full of ambrosia/
full of *rasa* than a palmyra fruit.
Why do you make it fruitless?

The love-thief in Bilhaṇa's *Caurapañcāśikā* (11th c. CE) describes his beloved as follows:

*adyāpi tām prañayinīm mrgasāvakaḥśīm
pīyūṣapūrṇakucakumbhayugaṃ vahantīm /
paśyāmy ahaṃ yadi punar dīvasāvasāne
svargāpavarganararājasukhaṃ tyajāmi // Caurapañcāśikā 23 //*

Even now,
If I see her again at the day's close,
Adoring me with a fawn's liquid eyes
And offering her breasts' brimming pots of nectar—
I'll renounce the kingly pleasures
And even heaven and final emancipation. (Transl. Stoler Miller, modified)

In the next verse from the *Caurapañcāśikā*, the girl in her entirety (not just a part of her) becomes a vessel of ambrosia, literally, "a jewelled/choice cup of the best of juices/nectar/flavour":

*adyāpi tām kṣititale varakāminīnām
sarvāṅgasundaratayā prathamāikarekhām /
śṛṅgāranāṭakarāsottamaratnapātrīm
kāntām smarāmi kusumāyudhabāṅghinnām // Caurapañcāśikā 24 //*

Even now,
I remember her,
The first and only ideal of amorous women on earth
By the beauty of her body,
A jewelled-cup of the choicest nectar in the play of passion—
My girl, wounded by Love's flower arrows. (Transl. Stoler Miller, modified)

These comparisons with nectar and ambrosia—a divine substance usually reserved for the gods—tend towards the sublime and the other-worldly. We see from the above verses that drinking from the woman's lips or

breasts, or tasting the beloved's body, brings bliss which is superior to kingly pleasures, to divine happiness and even to liberation. The pleasures of love-making provide on this very earth a quasi-mystical rapture and delight that render heavenly pleasures entirely superfluous. Likewise, by procuration, as it were, the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, here thematized in the expression *śṛṅgāranāṭakarasottama*, which can also be translated as "the supreme *rasa* in the theatre of love", leads the *rasika*, or connoisseur of poetry, to supreme aesthetic enjoyment.

The above remarks are of course valid mainly for "high" or "romantic" poetry, which takes love seriously. It may not necessarily hold, however, for comedies or satirical works, which tend to take a more down-to-earth and even crude view of love and its various emotions. Thus, in the *Bhagavadajjukam* (7th cent. CE?), a play of the *prahasana*-type (comedy) whose author is unknown, we find the character of Śāṇḍilya. Śāṇḍilya is the perpetually hungry disciple of a yoga-master. He has become a mendicant only to get regular meals (!), which is probably saying something about his desperately famished state. Smitten by the beauty of the courtesan Vasantasena, he describes her as follows: "The sound of her song is excessively sweet, like ghee on a rice-dish", *pāase ghidaṃ pakkhitaṃ via aimahuro ko vi gīaravo* (p. 32). Here we must imagine the whole woman as a tasty rice-dish, and her melodious voice like unctuous ghee poured on top of it. Further, he says about her: "Her breasts, smeared with saffron and sandal-paste, are plump like the fruits of wine-palms", *edāṇi tālaphalapīṇāṇi kāleacandaṇāṇulittāṇi thaṇāṇi* (p. 42).²³ The fruit of the *tāla* or palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer* L.), similar to coconuts, are round and brown, with a yellowish tip, which explains the comparison with dark breasts smeared with yellow sandal-paste.

²³ Further on, Vasantasena's lover Rāmilaka says of the presumed Vasantasena's face (in reality the yoga-master who has possessed the courtesan's body and is hiding away from Rāmilaka): "For your face, only partly seen, delights like water drunk little by little in the hollow of the hand." ... *prīṇāti nāma tava vaktram asarvadṛṣṭam alpālpapītam iva pānipuṭena toyam* (28), p. 48.

They are used to make sugar and palm-wine (or toddy), which is why the tree is also called toddy-palm or wine-palm. We understand that the comparison—besides the shape and the colour—also evokes something both sweet and intoxicating (see image 3). In these expressions, we clearly see the superimposition of food and sex. Śaṅḍilya’s sexual attraction towards Vasantasenā is clothed in culinary language, and we do not know which is upmost in his mind: eating or having sex? But of course, Śaṅḍilya is a low, comical character, not the type of the romantic hero. In his case, these comparisons are acceptable, even expected, and provoke laughter, but they would be quite ruled out in the case of a noble (*udāta*) hero²⁴ (See Rajendran 2016 and Rajendran forthcoming). We may move even further down the scale of “heroes” and briefly examine the case of the anti-hero par excellence and arch-villain of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely, Rāvaṇa, the *rākṣasa*-king.²⁵ In his case, the equivalence between sex and eating is established in its crudest and most explicit form. When the monkey Hanumat explores Rāvaṇa’s palace in his search for Sītā, he visits in quick succession Rāvaṇa’s harem, which is filled with a great number of exquisite sleeping beauties (*Rāmāyaṇa* 5.7.30–59 and 5.9.26–30), and then his drinking halls, which are filled with an extraordinary amount of the most diverse and delicious food and drinks (*Rāmāyaṇa* 5.9.10–24). These two long juxtaposed descriptions already establish an equivalence between food and other carnal delights, which is then further driven home in a most unequivocal fashion when it comes to Sītā herself. When she proves unwilling to yield to his advances, Rāvaṇa gives her the following ultimatum:

dvau māsau rakṣitavyau me yo ’vadhī te mayā kṛtaḥ /
tataḥ śayanam āroha mama tvam varavarṇini //
dvābhyām ūrdhvaṃ tu māsābhyām bhartāraṃ mām anicchatīm /
mama tvām prātarāsārtham ārabhante mahānase //
Rāmāyaṇa 5.20.8–9 //

²⁴ In *Gītagovinda* 9.18.3, quoted above, the breast is also likened to a *tāla-phala*, but the verse is spoken by a friend, not directly by the would-be lover, as in the *Bhagavadajjukam*.

²⁵ Goldman 2001 brilliantly deals with this topic.

“I will honor the two-month period that I set as your deadline. But after that, my pretty, you must come to my bed. Once the two months have passed, if you still do not want me for your husband, then they will slaughter you in the kitchen for my breakfast.” (Transl. Goldman)

As we see, Rāvana is so passionately infatuated with Sītā that he will have her either way: for sex (preferably) or for food. But this, of course, can only be expressed so bluntly in the case of a cannibalistic *rākṣasa*, who, as Goldman (Goldman 2001: 109) remarks, represents the most radical “Other” in the Sanskrit Brahmanical tradition.

From the above, we can conclude that explicit comparisons between parts of the body and edibles are rare, because food and eating are generally not considered to be romantic in Sanskrit poetry. Drinking on the other hand is acceptable—we know that drinking wine (*madhu-pāna*) is even an obligatory topic for *mahākāvyas*, because wine is considered as an aphrodisiac. This explains why the poets use comparisons between mouths, lips and breasts on the one hand, and ambrosia, nectar, honey, wine, or even the milk of the palmyra palm—all drinkable substances—on the other. But comparisons with edibles are clearly undesirable in the case of poetry supposed to evoke the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*. As we have seen, lips may look like *bimba* fruit, but they are never said to taste like them.

Positive evidence 2) The Kāmasūtra

Let us now turn to the second part of our investigation, namely, determining whether Sanskrit literature uses descriptions of edibles and of couples eating together as a means to produce the erotic mood or *śṛṅgāra-rasa*. Let us first examine the “text-book” par excellence—the *Kāmasūtra* (3rd c. CE)—and see what it has to say on the subject of food, knowing that Sanskrit poets were supposed to be fully conversant with the content of *kāmaśāstras*.

In its first chapter which describes the mode of life of the man about town (*nāgaraka*),²⁶ the *Kāmasūtra* deals with the preliminaries:

²⁶ On the *nāgaraka*, see Hartmann 2017 who questions the reality of such a figure.

They have drinking parties at one another's houses. There the courtesans get the men to drink, and drink after them, wine made from honey, grapes, other fruits, or sugar, with various sorts of salt, fruit, greens, vegetables, and bitter, spicy, and sour foods. *Kāmasūtra* 1.4.22–23. (Transl. Doniger and Kakar)

After making love, this is what the text prescribes for the lovers:

When they return [from their bath], they sit down in their usual places without embarrassment, and chew some betel, and he himself rubs sandalwood paste or some other scented oil on her body. He embraces her with his left arm and, holding a cup in his hand, persuades her to drink.²⁷ Or both of them may drink some water or eat some bite-sized snacks or something else, according to their temperament and inclination: fruit juice, grilled foods, sour rice-broth, soups with small pieces of roasted meats, mangoes, dried meat, citrus fruits with sugar, according to the tastes of the region. As he tastes each one he tells her, “This one is sweet” or “delicate” or “soft”, and offers it to her. Sometimes, they sit on the rooftop porch to enjoy the moonlight, and tell stories that suit their mood. *Kāmasūtra* 2.10.6–9. (Transl. Doniger and Kakar)

These passages from the *Kāmasūtra* undoubtedly betray dietary preoccupations: the food of five different tastes is certainly meant to increase physical vigour, both before and after sex. At the same time, eating together is seen as an erotic preliminary to having sex, and also, especially afterwards, as a way of showing continued concern and care for the beloved in a romantic setting.

So far, the picture seems to bode well for our topic. Let us now turn to Sanskrit literature and see whether, in its descriptions of love-scenes, it follows the *Kāmasūtra*'s prescriptions concerning food, and uses scenes of eating and drinking as a means to produce, or at least enhance, the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*.

²⁷ Lovers sharing a cup of liquor are consistently depicted in the same attitude in Indian figurative art; for instance, in Ajanta (see image 4) and subsequently in miniature paintings (see image 5). It could be called the canonical posture for wine-drinking.

Positive evidence 3) Animals and animal-like lovers

As far as I could ascertain in the works of Sanskrit *kāvya* that I have perused for the purpose of this study, the erotic sentiment is brought about by the description of couples sharing drinks *and* food mostly in the case of *animal* couples, not humans. For instance, in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, various pairs of animals succumb to the combined power of Love, Desire, and Spring, who suddenly appear in Śiva's penance grove to help Pārvaī in her attempts to distract the great yogin from his fierce austerities:

*taṃ deśam āropitapuṣpacāpe ratidvītīye madane prapanne /
kāṣṭhāgatasneharasāmividdhaṃ dvandvāni bhāvaṃ kriyayā vivavruḥ //
madhu dvirephaḥ kusumaikapātre papau priyāṃ svām anuvartamānaḥ //
śrṅgeṇa ca sparśanimīlitākṣīm mṛgīm akaṇḍūyata kṛṣṇasāraḥ //
dadau rasāt pañkajareṇugandhi gajāya gaṇḍūśajalam kareṇuḥ /
ardhopabhuktena bisena jāyāṃ sambhāvayāmāsa rathāṅganāmā //
gītāntareṣu śramavārileśaiḥ kiñcitsamucchvāsitapatralekham /
puspāsavāghūrnitanetraśobhi priyāmukhaṃ kiṃpuruṣaś cucumba //
Kumārasambhava 3.35–38 //*

When Madana, with his flowery bow strung, reached that place in the company of Rati, the couples exhibited by their behaviour amorous feelings mixed with the emotion of love which had reached its peak. Following his beloved one, the male bee drank honey out of the same flower bowl, and the black deer scratched with his horn the female deer whose eyes were closed due to the pleasure of the touch. Out of love, the female elephant gave to the male a mouthful of water fragrant with lotus pollen; the *cakravāka* bird paid homage to his wife with a half-eaten lotus stem. In the intervals of the songs, the *kiṃpuruṣa* kissed the face of his beloved, on which the leaf drawings were slightly blurred by drops of perspiration, and which was beautiful with its eyes rolling due to the flower-wine.

As if conversant with the dictates of the *Kāmasūtra*, the couples of animals in Śiva's hermitage display their tender feelings towards their mates by sharing honey drinks, lotus stems and mouthfuls of water.

This charming and justly famous description is clearly meant to produce the *rasa* of love.²⁸ The theory of *rasa* is even thematized in verse 3.35 by means of the expression “amorous feelings mixed with the emotion of love”, *sneharasāmuviddham... bhāvam*. Kālidāsa takes up the same theme once again in his *Vikramorvaśīya* 4.23: the love-crazed Purūravas is wandering in the wilderness in search of the lost Urvaśī. He wants to ask an elephant if he has seen her, but hesitates to disturb him in his courtship, thinking:

*ayam acirod gatapallavam upanītaṃ priyakareṇuhastena /
abhilaṣatu tāvad āsavaśurabhirasaṃ sallakābhaṅgam // Vikramorvaśīya 4.23 //*

Let him eat the cut branch of the *sallakī*²⁹ with its newly-appearing shoots and its juice sweeter than nectar (or liquor), offered to him by the trunk of his dear elephant-lady.

The above verses in turn inspired the playwright Bhavabhūti. In act nine of his *Mālatīmādhava*, the hero Mādhava, whose plight is similar to Purūravas', is wandering in the forest, half-maddened by pain, looking for the lost Mālatī. Seeing a herd of elephants, he tries to ask them for news of his beloved, but, wholly intent on their love-making, they pay him no heed. Envious of the elephants' happiness, Mādhava rebukes one of them in terms and phrasings clearly inspired by Kālidāsa:

*līlotkhātamarṇālakāṇḍakavalacchedeṣu sampādītāḥ
puṣyatpuṣkaravāsītasya payaso gaṇḍūśasaṃkrāntayaḥ /
sekaḥ śīkariṇā kareṇa vihitaḥ kāmaṃ virāme punar
na snehād anarālanālanalinīpatrātapatram dhṛtam // Mālatīmādhava 9.34 //*

²⁸ On this point, see Feller (Feller 1995: 71–72): “These amorous gestures are the *anubhāvas* of the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*. [...They] increase in intimacy and intensity, but find a sudden anti-climax in verse 40, which says that Śiva, for whom all these efforts are made, remains master of himself. Thus, the *śṛṅgāra-rasa* does not reach its ultimate fulfillment, which would be Śiva falling in love with Pārvaṭī...”

²⁹ Here I wish to thank my anonymous reviewer for the following excellent suggestion: “Could it be that the juice of a *sallakī* branch (if the plant refers to *Boswellia serrata* ... which is allegedly made into frankincense) smells of some distilled alcoholic beverage (*āsava*)?” If this supposition is true, the verse would also allude to the motif of lovers sharing wine.

True that when she had tasted her fill of lotus stalks dug up in play
You offered her mouthfuls of lotus-scented water.

True that you sprayed her refreshingly with your trunk. But after this
You held over her no parasol of straight-stalked lotus leaves.³⁰

(Transl. Coulson 1981, modified)

As we see from the above verses, when animals offer each other choice morsels of food as a token of their love, this is considered as both charming and erotic. But what is allowed in the case of animals is only acceptable for humans if they are either animal-like, or living like animals in natural surroundings, as we shall presently see in two passages from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha*.

It appears that the *Mahābhārata* (3.110–113) and the *Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha* (18.257–313) offer some of the rare instances where the recommendations of the *Kāmasūtra* in matters of food are applied to human beings in a seduction or love scene. As far as the *Mahābhārata* is concerned, this is rather surprising since the Sanskrit epic does not otherwise offer much in the way of erotic descriptions. Thus, when the story of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga,³¹ or the “unicorn-sage” as he is sometimes called, crops up in the forest-book with its unexpected erotic flavour,³² it offers a rare treat for the amateur of both poetry and of the *ars amatoria*. Of course, the *Mahābhārata* does not usually count as *kāvya*, and as a whole, the epic is certainly earlier than the works of *kāvya*; but this particular passage, with its marked flavour of *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, appears to be distinctly poetic. The story is as follows: the young sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga is the son of a forest hermit and of a doe. He grows up in the forest alone with his father and lives an ascetic life.

³⁰ See also verse 9.32 for a similar image.

³¹ The story of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga also appears in a more condensed form in *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.9, and in various Buddhist sources. See Lüders’ two ground-breaking studies (Lüders 1897 and Lüders 1901) and Pinault 2015.

³² Yet perhaps not so unexpected, for after all the *śṛṅgāra-rasa* derives its name from *śṛṅga*, “the horn”. The young sage, as his story shows, has plenty of virility and fertility, since he causes the rain to fall after twelve years of drought.

The realm of King Lomapāda meanwhile suffers a terrible twelve-year drought, and there is a prediction that the rain will fall if Ṛṣyaśṛṅga can be brought to the court. Accordingly, a courtesan is sent to the forest to seduce him and bring him to the king. The young sage is completely beguiled by the girl's charming ornaments, attire, and seductive behavior, the likes of which he has never seen. She also offers him "delicious food", *bhaksān mahārḥān*, and "excellent liquors", *pānāni ... agryāni* (3.111.13–14) to seduce him.³³ Such is the young boy's innocence that he has never even seen a woman in his life, and he does not know what a woman is. He addresses her as "*bhavān*" (sir) (3.111.9), and later, when he describes her to his father, he uses the pronoun "he" throughout. In *Mahābhārata* 3.112, Ṛṣyaśṛṅga naively describes her charms in a *kāvya*-like depiction containing all the standard elements which are the essence of female beauty—but using the masculine gender, which adds piquancy to the tableau. He lists some of her ornaments and physical peculiarities by means of periphrases, since he does not know what they are: thus, the ball she is playing with is described as follows: "with his right hand he bounced a round and colorful object that looked like a fruit...", *tathā phalaṃ vṛttam atho vicitraṃ samāhanat pāṇinī dakṣiṇena* (3.112.10). Of her breasts, he says: "And below the throat he had two globes, without a hair on them, most beguiling", *dvau cāsya piṇḍāv adhareṇa kaṅṭham ajātaromau sumanoharau ca* (3.112.3). Concerning the fruit she gave him to eat, he comments: "those fruit of his, I ate them all, their taste was not like these at all..." (Transl. van Buitenen), *mayopayuktāni phalāni tāni nemāni tulyāni rasena teṣām* (3.11.14). As we see, the fruit are not the only round things that the girl has to offer, and Ṛṣyaśṛṅga is equally taken in by the ball, the fruit and the breasts,³⁴ as if

³³ In the *Rāmāyaṇa* too, the courtesans sent to seduce the boy offer him fruit, sweets and other good things to eat (1.9.19–21). Pinault (Pinault 2015: 208), who studies the Buddhist versions of the story in Tocharian manuscripts, also notes that the offering of fruit and sweets seems to be a constant trait of the legend in its various versions.

³⁴ Both her ball and her breasts are compared to something edible—respectively, fruit and food-balls (*piṇḍau*).

roundness was the epitome of womanhood. The whole scene is extremely charming and erotic, not least because it departs from the usual scenario of love between an innocent girl (*mugdā*) and a more seasoned lover; here, the girl is experienced and the boy is an absolute neophyte in the art of love. We may surmise that this is one of the reasons why the offering of food was allowed to be part of the seduction (taming?) scene, because the forest-boy (half deer-half man) is quasi fawn-like in his innocence and not part of the social grid where sharing food—that too with a prostitute—is much more complicated, as we shall see below.

Chapter 18 of Budhasvāmin's *Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha* (10th c. CE), one of the extant summaries of the (legendary?) *Bṛhatkathā*, contains one of the many side-stories found in this collection of tales, that of the merchant's son Sānudāsa. Sānudāsa sets out on a ship across the ocean in order to find riches, but is shipwrecked on the way. By chance, he is washed ashore and wakes up in an idyllic spot:

candanāgurukarpūralavaṅgalavalīvanaiḥ /
yatrākrāntāḥ saritvantaḥ śailopāntāḥ samantataḥ //
kadalīnārikerādīphalinadrumasamkaṭāḥ /
āraṇyakair aranyānyo bhajyante yatra kuñjaraiḥ //
Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha 18.257–258 //

“There were rock-pools everywhere, surrounded by sandal, aloe, camphor, clove and *lavalī* groves. The forests were thick with banana, coconut and other fruit trees, and frequented by wild elephants.” (Transl. Mallinson 2005)

In this deserted spot, Sānudāsa meets a young girl named Samudradinnā, who has been shipwrecked too, and who lives alone in a cave. As it turns out, she is a merchant's daughter from Rājagṛha, who had been promised to Sānudāsa himself in her childhood. Since they were anyway supposed to marry, the couple then get together, feeling keen attraction to each other, and spend a honey-moon of sorts on the shore of the ocean:

tatas tat tādṛśam duḥkham potabhaṅgādihetukam /
sarvam ekapade naṣṭam sādḥv apakṛtam yathā //...

*mīnakūrmakulīrādivṛṣyavāricarāmiṣaiḥ /
 nārikelādibhiś cāṅgam apuṣāvopabṛṃhibhiḥ //
 pulinaiḥ sindhurājasya muktavidrumasaṃkaṭaiḥ /
 rājahaṃsāv ivotkaṅṭhau pṛitau samacarāvahi //
 kadācit kuñjaśikharair acalānām sanirgharaiḥ /
 saphaladrumasamṇāhaiḥ kareṇukalabhāv //
 lavaṅgapūgakarpūratāmbūlādyair adurlabhaiḥ /
 nityam aṅgam anaṅgāṅgaiḥ samaskurva sacandanaiḥ //
 guhālatāgrhāvāsau vasitadrumavalkalau
 devam ātmabhavaṃ dhyāntau jātau svaḥ kāmayogināu //
 Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha 18.308–313 //*

“All the distress brought about by the shipwreck was destroyed in an instant, like a sin in a virtuous man. [...] We lived off the stimulating flesh of aquatic creatures like fish, turtles and crabs, as well as coconuts and other invigorating fruits. Like a couple of amorous swans, we joyfully roamed about the beaches, which were covered in pearls and coral. Sometimes we were like a pair of young elephants, wandering about the lush mountaintops with their waterfalls and mantles of fruit trees. Aphrodisiacs such as cloves, areca, camphor and betel were in abundance and every day we adorned our bodies with a mixture of them and sandalwood paste. Living in caves and creeper bowers, wearing bark and meditating on the self-born god, we became yogins of love.” (Transl. Mallinson 2005)

The beach is a paradise, and the two lovers return to a state of primeval innocence, roaming the wilderness like animals. Nature provides all the shelter and nourishment they need, including aphrodisiacs and stimulating, invigorating food which come in handy for a honeymoon.³⁵ Indeed, we see that the passage insists on the food which is freely available in the sea and in the forest, and on its consumption. Again, as in the above-quoted passage from the *Mahābhārata*, we see that this scene takes place in the wilderness, far from all social

³⁵ We see that nature spontaneously provides all the aphrodisiacs prescribed by the *Kāmasūtra*.

constraints, and where the shipwrecked humans return to a primitive, semi-animal state—note the comparison with swans and elephants. In such an environment, food-intake appears to be no longer taboo—at least no more so than it is in the case of loving pairs of animals.

Drinking wine: a liminal phenomenon

If sharing food is rare, drinking wine and chewing betel-nut frequently occur in connection with erotic scenes. They are typical of love-in-union. As we have seen above, the *Kāmasūtra* prescribes them as preliminaries to love-making. Both wine and betel may be considered as somewhat marginal cases for the present topic, for none of them really qualifies as food. As the subject of betel has already been extensively treated in the secondary literature, we shall not further dwell on it here, except to remark that betel was chewed and shared among lovers for its erotic and aphrodisiac virtues, and that the very assemblage of the betel-pod is redolent of erotic symbolism.³⁶ The *Kāmasūtra* recommends it as a means of flirting before and during the love-play (3.2.11–12; 5.2.21; 6.1.31; 6.2.11). Cielas (Cielas 2016: 166) remarks that “it was ... a significant component of the art of love”. As far as drinking wine is concerned, the *alaṃkāraśāstras* prescribe scenes of wine-drinking as an obligatory topic for *mahākāvyas* or court epics (see for instance Daṇḍin’s *Kāvyaḍarśa* 1.16; 7th c. CE). Depictions of lovers enjoying a drink of liquor are also among the favourite subjects of miniature paintings up to the present day (see image 6). Wine³⁷ (*madhu*, *madya*, *surā*) is mainly taken as an aphrodisiac and appreciated because it removes natural shyness and inhibition. These two qualities are emphasized in Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava* 8.79, where the newly-wed Pārvatī gets drunk on the “wine produced from the divine wishing tree”,

³⁶ For the topic of betel chewing in Indian literature and art, see Cielas 2016 and the secondary literature indicated in her article.

³⁷ We here translate these terms using “wine” as a generic term, but it is not always clear what exact type of alcoholic beverage is meant.

kalpavṛkṣamadhu, and consequently sees her shyness removed and her passion for Śiva enflamed:

*tatkṣaṇaṃ viparivartitahriyora neṣyatoḥ śayanam iddharāgayoḥ /
sā bhabhūva vaśavartinī dvayoḥ śūliṇaḥ suvadanā madanasya ca //*
Kumārasambhava 8.79 //

At once the fair-faced lady was under the power of them both—Trident-bearing Shiva and intoxication—as they each removed her shyness, inflamed her passion, and led her to the bed. (Transl. Smith)

In *Raghuvamśa* 9.36, wine is called the “friend of Love”, and is said to increase the women’s passion and love towards their husbands:³⁸

*lalitavibhramabandhavicakṣaṇaṃ
surabhigandhaparājītakesaram /
patiṣu nirviviśur madhum aṅganāḥ
smarasakhaṃ rasakhaṇḍanavarjitam //* *Raghuvamśa* 9.36 //

The women enjoyed the drink of wine, this friend of the god of Love, which heightens their skill in making graceful gestures, surpasses the *bakula*-flower by its sweet fragrance and is devoid of interruption (or denial) of love towards their husbands.

According to *Ṛtusamhāra* 5.10, wine is drunk to advantage during the winter season.³⁹ “In the [winter] nights, the women, rejoicing, drink wine—that best of intoxicants—in the company of their lovers”, *niśāsu hr̥ṣṭāḥ saha kāmibhiḥ striyaḥ pibanti madyaṃ madanīyam uttamam*. Besides making the women prone to love-making, wine, still according to the *Ṛtusamhāra*, has the additional advantage of producing a “trembling in their eyes made languid by wine”, *netreṣu lolo madirālaseṣu* (6.10) and of making their “words slightly slurred”,

³⁸ In *Raghuvamśa* 19.11–12, the dissolute king Agnivarṇa is drinking wine in the company of the women of his harem. In 19.46, a cocktail of wine and other items serves him as an aphrodisiac.

³⁹ The *Ṛtusamhāra* (5.5) also recommends betel or paan (*tāmbūla*) for the cold winter nights to enhance amorous pleasures.

*vākyāni kiṃcid madirālasāni*⁴⁰ (6.11), which are both considered to enhance the beauty of the already ravishing girls. Earlier poets use the topos of wine-drinking rather sparingly in their works. Not so Bhāravi (6th c. CE), whose *Kirātārjunīya* contains in succession all the recommended topics for a *mahākāvya*, such as the sun-set and sun-rise, pleasure-walks in gardens, the enjoyments of love, baths, drinking wine, etc. Thus canto 9 of the *Kirātārjunīya* describes the *apsarases* and the *gandharvas* making love and drinking wine together during the night preceding their (failed) attempt to disturb Arjuna's penance. Bhāravi dedicates no less than 27 verses to this topic (9.51 to 9.78). His description contains the usual themes, such as: wine removes shame, disinhibits, increases pleasure and makes the women forget their love-quarrels. Verse 9.58, which in its first part resorts to the figure of speech known as *arthāntaranyāsa* (generalization), describes how the lovers share mouthfuls of wine:

*prāpyate guṇavatāpi guṇānām vyaktam āśrayavaśena viśeṣaḥ /
tat tathā hi dayitānanadattam vyānaśe madhu rasātīśayena //
Kirātārjunīya 9.58 //*

Evidently, in conjunction with a receptacle of qualities, pre-eminent excellence is obtained even by that which (already) has qualities: thus, the wine offered by the mouth of the beloved lady was filled with superior taste.⁴¹

Similarly, Māgha (8th c. CE) dedicates the entire chapter 10 of his *Śiśupālavadhā* to wine-drinking (verses 1–32) followed by the pleasures of love. As Lienhard (Lienhard 1984: 188) remarks, Māgha “demonstrably imitated and tried to outdo [Bhāravi], both in detail

⁴⁰ In *Ṛtusamhāra* 6.12–13 we also find *madālasa*. The slackening/relaxing quality of wine is stressed.

⁴¹ *rasātīśayena*: “with superior taste” (meaning that wine drunk from the mouth of the beloved tastes better) or “with a surfeit of *rasa*”. This means that scenes depicting wine-drinking lead to *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, but when the wine is drunk straight from the beloved's mouth, there is an increase in *rasa*.

and in his whole concept.” Verse 10.9 is interesting because it contains one of the rare allusions to the practice of biting. After drinking wine, the lover wants to bite (or eat?) his sweetheart’s red lip:

*pīyavaty abhimate madhutulyasvādam oṣṭharucikaṃ vidadāṅkṣau /
labhyate sma pariraktatayātmā yāvakena vīyatāpi yuvatyāḥ //
Śīsupālavadha 10.9 //*

When the lover had drunk the liquor, he wished to bite the equally sweet and delicious lip of the young woman. Thereby the lip regained its original (colour) (for it was reddened by the bite), even though the red lac had been removed (while drinking wine).

As the following verse from the *Caurapañcāśikā* shows, wine was perhaps also used to give a sweet breath, along with camphor (*karpūra*) and betel nut (*pūga*):

*adyāpi tāṃ nidhuvane madhudigdhamugdha-
līḍhādharaṃ kṛṣatanuṃ capalāyatākṣim /
kāśmīrapaṅkamṛganābhikṛtāṅgarāgāṃ
karpūrapūgaparipūrṇamukhīm smarāmi //
Caurapañcāśikā 9 (Northern recension)*

Even now, I remember the wine-smearred lower lip she innocently licked in love, Her weak form, her wanton long eyes,
her body painted with saffron paste and musk, her mouth full
of camphor and betel nut. (Transl. B. Stoler Miller, modified)

As we see from the above quoted verses, descriptions of couples sharing wine are meant to produce the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, since drinking wine usually leads to making love; furthermore, wine heightens the women’s good looks, who seem even more charming when in their cups. Bhavabhūti (8th c. CE) makes a deliberate pastiche of this convention, and in his play, the *Mālatīmādhava*, he has *piśācīs* adorned with various parts of bodies in the guise of make-up and ornaments, drinking “marrow-wine” (*asthisnehasurā*) in a funeral ground. Thus, Bhavabhūti very daringly mixes the *śṛṅgāra-rasa* with the feeling of disgust (*bībhatsa-rasa*),

a combination which perhaps results in the *hāsya-rasa* (comic), since his hero Mādhava laughs (*vihasya*) when he witnesses the scene:

*āntraiḥ kalpitamāṅgalapratīsaraiḥ strīhastarakṭotpalā-
vyaktottamsabhṛtaḥ pinahya sahasā hr̥tṣuṇḍarīkasrajaḥ /
etāḥ śonitapaṅkakuṅkumajuṣaḥ sambhūya kāntaiḥ pibanty
asthisnehasurām kapālacāṣakaiḥ prītāḥ piśācāṅganāḥ //
Mālatīmādhāva 5.18 //*

With guts for bracelets, and elegant lotus-chains of hearts,
And women’s lac-painted hands for red waterlilies at their ears,
With thick blood for make-up, the demon women join their lovers
And drink in skull goblets the marrow wine. (Transl. Coulson 1981, modified)

In all the above instances, we see that the intake of wine is always viewed favourably, since wine furthers the designs of Love. No morally reproofing stance is ever taken. However, we must note that scenes depicting wine-drinking always seem rather unreal or, we might say, other-worldly, detached from the humdrum of every-day life. Such scenes are often evoked in connection with kings and their harem, gods and goddesses, *apsarases* and *gandharvas*, even *piśācīs*, in short, beings who are above the strict rules governing the lives of ordinary mortals.

Budhasvāmin takes quite a different stance on alcohol consumption in his *Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṅgraha*. Some of the heroes of his story occasionally drink wine, but mostly against their will. Wine is said to be morally reprehensible, and all the unpleasant side-effects of wine-drinking (including addiction) are brought to the fore. Thus in 13.6, drinking wine is described as “a great vice” (*vyasanam mahat*). Furthermore, its taste, which is usually said to be sweet—after all, wine is called *madhu*, “sweet”—is described in the following unflattering way by prince Naravāhanadatta, the main hero of the story, after he has been persuaded to taste it by one of his wives:⁴²

⁴² The sister-narrative, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, refers to the same story in 14.1.42–64. But here, no moral judgement is passed on drinking.

*āpāne madhurāsvādam anusvāde tu tiktakam /
kṣaye kaṣāyaṃ kaṭukam avacchede manāg iti //
Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha 13.9 //*

When I first drank it it tasted sweet, but then it tasted bitter and finally it was astringent. There was a slightly acidic aftertaste. (Transl. Mallinson 2005)

He then goes on to describe how his mind becomes unwell, how everything starts whirling around him, and how he is finally overcome with passion (13.11–16)—in this last point, at least, the *Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha* conforms to the traditional topos.⁴³ Similarly, the first part of the story of the merchant’s son Sānudāsa—whom we have already met before—realistically underscores the dangers of drinking alcohol. Sānudāsa is first a very virtuous and serious man, so much so that his friends despair of making him have some fun. One of his close friends, Dhruvaka, entices him to come to a party, saying:

*... mitra kriyatām tad bravīmi yat //
udyānanalinīkūle sadārāḥ suhrdas tava /
anubhūtajalakrīḍāḥ khādanti ca pibanti ca //
bhavatāpi sadāreṇa tatra gatvā mayā saha /
sāphalyaṃ kriyatām adya rūpayauvanajanmanām //
Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha 18.15–17 //*

“My friend, please do as I tell you. Your friends and their wives are at the lotus pool in the park. They have been playing around in the water and are now eating and drinking. You and your wife must accompany me there and reap right now the rewards of your good looks, youthfulness and birth!” (Transl. Mallinson 2005)

⁴³ Naravāhanadatta, however, quickly gets used to alcohol: some time later, in the course of his adventures, he pretends to be a Brahmin, and, to conform to the persona, he asks for a lunch of rice-pudding. But once this unaccustomed meal is served, he wonders how to get rid of it, thinking: “This has gone from bad to worse! I’m used to wine and meat and I’ve got rice pudding with ghee!” (*Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṃgraha* 16.70). Here we have the usual cliché of wine-drinking, meat-eating *kṣatriyas* versus vegetarian, milk-drinking Brahmins.

Not only does Sānudāsa object to drinking wine himself. What he has to say about drinking wine and eating in public in the company of his wife is also quite enlightening and clearly shows that he considers such behaviour reprehensible:

*yām yathāsukham āsīnām aśnantīm ca striyaṃ prati /
nekṣyate pratiśedhāt sā katham evaṃ viḍambyate //
goṣṭhīmaṇḍalamadhyasthā madopahatacetanā /
viṣamūrccāparīteva bhartur bhāryā viḍambanā //
atha vā gacchatu bhavān yathāsukham aham punaḥ /
na yāsyāmi na dhāsyāmi dāraiḥ saha sabhām iti //
Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha 18.27–29 //*

“It is forbidden by a wife to be seen when she is relaxing or eating⁴⁴: why should she be insulted thus? A wife who is drunk in the midst of a group of friends and appears to be overcome by intoxication is a disgrace to her husband. You go if you want, but I will not go, nor will I take my wife to the gathering.” (Transl. Mallinson 2005)

In the end, however, Sānudāsa is mollified and accepts to go to the party, but alone and without drinking. Of course, his friends trick him into tasting wine—which they pass off, by means of a whole *mise-en-scène*, as blue-lotus nectar. With lightning speed, Sānudāsa then becomes addicted to wine and falls into the clutches of a courtesan, who takes all his money before throwing him out penniless, his whole family having been reduced to dire straits and living in a slum. The social impact of wine-drinking and its powers to bring ruin and decadence on the addict are depicted with an acumen never found in romantic poetry. His friends’ description of the picnic resembles the standard description of love-scenes and drinking parties found in *kāvya*, whereas Sānudāsa’s objections—and indeed his whole subsequent piteous story—sound like the voice of sober morality. The poetic dream-world in which such behaviour is possible is here powerfully deconstructed to reveal the threadbare reality underlying it.

⁴⁴ Note the prohibition for a woman to be seen eating.

Negative evidence 1) Love-longing brings about weight-loss caused by lack of appetite—food is neither romantic nor erotic

Far from describing amorous couples engaged in feeding each other lovingly, Sanskrit poets on the contrary insist that love—especially love in its initial, passionate stages, as well as love in separation—brings about lack of appetite and weight-loss, among other even worse symptoms.⁴⁵ This is theorized in the classical list of the stages of (unrequited) love (*madanāvasthā*), found at the beginning of chapter 13 of a hand-book on love, Kokkoka’s *Ratirahasya*—or *Kokaśāstra* as it is commonly known. This list is as follows:

- 1) *nayana-prīti*: joy for the eyes
- 2) *cittāsaṅga*: affection
- 3) *saṃkalpa*: resolution
- 4) *nidrā-ccheda*: insomnia
- 5) *tanutā* (= *kārśya*): thinness**
- 6) *viṣaya-nivṛtti*: aversion from the objects (of the senses)
- 7) *trapā-nāśa*: lack of shame
- 8) *unmāda*: madness
- 9) *mūrcchā*: loss of consciousness
- 10) *mṛti*: death

We are especially interested in point 5 of the list, namely, thinness (*tanutā*) caused by loss of appetite.⁴⁶ As regards this list, it is most likely that Kokkoka drew his inspiration essentially from poetry and

⁴⁵ *Gītagovinda* 4.9 describes very effectively the mental and physical tortures undergone by Rādhā when Kṛṣṇa deserts her, and the (mostly useless) remedies used to soothe her pain.

⁴⁶ According to Pasini (Pasini 1994: 132–133), who conducted an extensive survey on the related sex and food habits of the French people, 22% of the people who were interrogated said that they lost their appetite when they fell in love. 39% of them declared that on the contrary it increased their appetite, while for the remaining 39% of them it roughly made no difference. When taking into account gender, age and the level of education, the figures show considerable fluctuation from the average.



Image 1: bimba. Photo: Flickr



Image 2: jambū-phala (black plum). Photo: JoeGoaUk Goa, Flickr



Image 3: tāla-phala (palmyra palm). Photo: Manoj K, Flickr



Image 4: detail of the story of Udāyin, vihāra n. 17, Ajanta (Maharashtra), second half of the 5th century AD. Photo: C. Pieruccini



Image 5: painting on paper,
Rajasthan 18th century (detail):
lovers enjoying a cup of liquor.
Photo: R. Conus



Image 6: painting on paper,
Rajasthan, modern: a man drinking
on a terrace in the company of his
concubines. Photo: R. Conus



Image 7: mango tree. Photo: D. Feller



Image 8: paláša flower. Photo: Dinesh Valke, Flickr

from Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which contains a very similar, though not exactly identical list.⁴⁷ Since the *Ratirahasya* was probably composed in the 12th c. CE (Lienhard 1960: 19), it is later than most of the poets we are dealing with in this study. Nevertheless, the stages of love are already apparent in their work, even if less systematized in form. These physical side-effects of unrequited love are usually taken very seriously and treated as a real sickness in works of Sanskrit poetry. Rightly so, since, according to the above list, the outcome may be death.⁴⁸ In the *Ratirahasya*, these stages of unrequited love appear in chapter 13, which deals with sex with another man's wife: they are thus especially meant for men who are in love with "forbidden" women and unable to satisfy their passion. On the other hand, the poets, perhaps following Bharata in this, displayed less gender-bias: as we shall see, both heroes and heroines suffer in equal measure from unrequited love. Thus, in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, act 3, both King Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā are similarly afflicted by pangs of love, and subsequent loss of appetite and thinness, when they first meet and are yet uncertain of the other's feelings. Śakuntalā's weight-loss is described by her friend Priyaṃvadā by means of a personification in which Śakuntalā's limbs and shadow seem endowed with a free will. Priyaṃvadā tells Śakuntalā: "Day by day you're abandoned by your limbs. Only your beautiful shadow does not leave you."

⁴⁷ Bharata's list, which lacks *tanutā*, is as follows (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 24.169–171): "First there will be Longing (*ābhilāsa*), secondly Anxiety (*cintā*), thirdly Recollection (*anusmṛti*), fourthly Enumeration of the (beloved one's) Merits (*guṇakīrtana*), fifthly Distress (*udvega*), sixthly Lamentation (*vilāpa*), seventhly Insanity (*unmāda*), eighthly Sickness (*vyādhi*), ninthly Stupor (*jaḍatā*), and tenthly Death (*maraṇa*). These are the stages of love in case of men as well as of women" (Transl. Ghosh 1967: vol. 1, pp. 465–466). These stages are then described more in detail in *Nāṭyaśāstra* 24.172–191, concluding with the observation that they should all be shown on stage except the last one (death).

⁴⁸ There are, however, exceptions to this rule: in *Kathāsaritsāgara* 10.3.153–154, the parents of a *vidyādhara* girl, who is similarly suffering from love-sickness, lose patience with her and curse her to be reborn as a *niṣāda* woman.

anudinam halu parihīyase 'ṅgaiḥ. kevalam lāvaṇyamayī chāyā tvām na muñcati (*Abhijñānaśākuntala*, act 3, before verse 8).

This new thinness, accompanied by other symptoms of love, is corroborated by King Duṣyanta who is secretly watching the girl:

*kṣāmakṣāmakapolam ānanam uraḥ kāṭhinyamuktastanam
madhyaḥ klāntataraḥ prakāavinatāv aṃsau chaviḥ paṇḍurā /
śocyā ca priyadarśanā ca madanākliṣṭeyam ālakṣyate
patrāṇām iva śoṣaṇena marutā sprṣṭā latā mādhavī // Abhijñānaśākuntala 3.8 //*

Emaciated cheeks, breasts that have lost their firmness,
Thin waist, drooping shoulders, complexion drained of colour:
Languid with love, she seems both piteous and fair—
A spring creeper visited by a breeze that withers its leaves.
(Transl. Coulson 1981)

Meanwhile, King Duṣyanta fares not better. This is how he describes himself:

*idam aśīśirair antastāpād vivarṇamaṇīkṛtaṃ
niśi niśi bhujanyastāpāṅgaprasāribhir aśrubhiḥ /
anabhilulitajyāghātānkaṃ muhur maṇibandhanāt
kanakavalayaṃ srastaṃ srastaṃ mayā pratisāryate //*
Abhijñānaśākuntala 3.11 //

Night after night, as I lie with my face on my arm,
The hot tears dull the jewels on this golden bracelet:
And again and again I push it back as it slips
Away from my wrist, not even grazing my bow scars.
(Transl. Coulson 1981)

Likewise, in his *Meghadūta* 1.2, which describes the exiled *yakṣa*'s lovelorn state, due to his long separation from his beloved wife, Kālidāsa expresses the *yakṣa*'s sadly diminished condition merely by alluding to his golden bracelets, which have slipped off his arms. As Mallinātha remarks in his commentary entitled *Samjīvanī*, “the vivifying”: “This means that he is thin due to the pain of separation”, *virahaduḥkhāt kṛṣa ity arthaḥ*.

*tasminn adrau katicid abalāvīprayuktaḥ sa kāmī
nītvā māsān kanakavalayabhraṃśariktaprakoṣṭhaḥ /
āṣāḍhasya prathamadivase megham āśliṣṭasānum
vaprakrīḍāparīṇatagajaprekṣaṇīyaṃ dadarśa // Meghadūta 1.2 //*

When he, a lover of sensual pleasures, had passed some months on the mountain, separated from his (helpless) wife, and his fore-arms bare on account of the slipping off of his golden bracelets, he beheld, on the first day of Āṣāḍha, a cloud resting on the peak of the mountain, and looking as attractive as an elephant stooping down in his butting sport against a bank. (Transl. Kale 1969)

We see how subtly and indirectly Kālidāsa alludes to the weight-loss of suffering lovers. He merely says: “his golden bracelets have slipped from his arms” or “her limbs are abandoning her”, and this suffices to conjure up the picture of the lovers wasting away under the onrush of passion. This delicacy of expression is of course the reason why Kālidāsa is praised above all other poets, and his use of *dhvani* (suggestion) is particularly remarkable in these verses.

Amaru’s *Śṛṅgāraśataka* 31 nicely illustrates the general debacle undergone by a poor lady whose beloved is leaving, and whose bracelets (indicating thinness), tears, firmness and spirit—here all personified as her dear friends—leave her at the same time. This induces her to think of death:

*prasthānaṃ valayaiḥ kṛtaṃ priyasakhair asrair ajasraṃ gataṃ
dhr̥tyā na kṣaṇam āsthitam vyavasitaṃ cittena gantaṃ puraḥ /
yātuṃ niścītacetasi priyatame sarvaiḥ samaṃ prasthitam
gantavye sati jīvita priyasuhr̥tsārthaḥ kim utsrjate // Śṛṅgāraśataka 31 //*

The bracelets have left, and after them go the tears, my sweet companions, flowing incessantly; courage no longer stays behind, and my mind has resolved to wander ahead; all these depart with my beloved who is determined on leaving. If thou must depart on a journey, dear life, do not scorn the escort of thy dear friends. (Transl. Devadhar 1959)

As we see from these examples, aversion from food and ensuing weight-loss are typical of love or romantic passion in Sanskrit poetry.

Obviously, this is especially true for unhappy lovers. But the converse does not seem to hold, for even in the case of happy couples enjoying love in union, sharing a common meal is hardly ever evoked in an erotic context.

Negative evidence 2) Food is used for the production of the comic, sometimes disgusting *rasas*

We have seen so far that, notwithstanding a few exceptions concerning animals or animal-like couples, descriptions of lovers eating together or lovingly feeding each other were by and large not used to produce the erotic mood in Sanskrit poetry. This leads us to the following question: if descriptions of food are not used to enhance the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, then what *rasa*—if any—is brought about by the description of food and its consumption?

If we examine Sanskrit plays, we see that some playwrights skillfully used excessive or obsessive gluttony in their delineation of certain characters. We can observe from the start that these characters often belong to the lower types. Thus, in Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaṣīya* (act 2, after verse 2), king Purūravas longs to meet again the lovely nymph Urvaśī, whom he has rescued from a demon in act 1. Unable to find peace, he wonders how to distract his mind from her, and the following comic dialogue ensues between him and his companion the *vidūṣaka*, who, true to the tradition of Sanskrit theatre, is a real glutton:⁴⁹

Rājan: ... atha kvedānīm ātmānaṃ vinodayeyam /

Vidūṣaka: mahānasaṃ gacchāvaḥ /

Rājan: kiṃ tatra?

*Vidūṣaka: tatra pañcavidhasya abhyavahārasya upanatasambhārasya
yojanām prekṣamānābhyām śakyam utkañthā vinodayitum /*

*Rājan (sasmitam): tatrepitasamnidhānād bhavān raṃṣyate / mayā
khalu durlabhaprārthanaḥ katham ātmā vinodayitavyaḥ /*

Vikramorvaṣīya, act 2, after verse 2.

⁴⁹ On the *vidūṣaka* and his hilarious gluttony in Kerala's *kūṭiyāṭṭam* theatre, see Rajendran 2016.

King: "Where shall I divert myself?"

Vidūṣaka: "We shall proceed to the kitchen."

King: "Why there?"

Vidūṣaka: "There the very sight of the preparation of the five kinds of dishes with all their materials put together will be sufficient to dissipate all distressing thoughts."

King (smilingly): "There you will surely find much diversion, because what you covet will be at hand. But with my heart longing for an unattainable object, how may I find diversion?" (Transl. Devadhar 1966)

Clearly, to one who is in love, food is no consolation. In fact, the state of unrequited love and the act of eating seem completely antithetical. The comic effect here is produced by the *vidūṣaka* proposing an absolutely unsuitable remedy for the disease at hand. In act 3, Kālidāsa again uses the same motif of food to produce welcome laughter after depictions evoking the mood of love-in-separation. The king is still longing for Urvaśī. He and the *vidūṣaka* are looking at the moon-rise from the crystal-pavilion. The king poetically depicts the eastern region, to which the *vidūṣaka* replies: "Ha! Ha! Yonder rises the lord of the twice-born (the moon), looking like a broken ball of sweets!", *hī, hī! bhoḥ! eṣa khaṇḍamodakasaśrīka udīto rājā dvijātīnām* (act 3, after verse 6). The moon is used in a variety of standard comparisons in Sanskrit poetry, but of course, likening it to a broken ball of sweets (*khaṇḍamodaka*) is not one of them. The comic effect produced by this un-poetic comparison is heightened by the pompous designation, on the part of the *vidūṣaka*, of the moon as "the king of the twice-born"—to which class he himself of course belongs. Here Kālidāsa uses to good effect the motif of food to produce as it were a voluntary *rasa-bhaṅga* (breakage of *rasa*) thus providing comic relief for the public, who might be starting to chafe under the drawn-out sighs and laments of the *vipralambha-śrṅgāra-rasa*.

Kālidāsa again resorts to the same device a little later in the play: Purūravas is still wondering how to find relief from his feelings and he enumerates several standard "cooling" remedies to alleviate and soothe the burning pains of unrequited love, such as the moon-rays, sandalwood paste, jewel necklaces, adding as the last: "Or secret

conversation regarding her can mitigate (the suffering)”, *rahasi laghayed ārabdhā vā tadāśrayiṇī kathā* (3.10d). To which the *vidūṣaka* obligingly replies: “Quite so! I too, when I do not get a dinner of dainty venison, but feel a desire for it, take comfort in speaking about it.” *ām! aham api yadā miṣṭahariṇīmāmsabhojanam na labhe tadā etat prārthayamānaḥ samkīrtayann āśvasimi*. Again, comparing two incomparable things such as love and food leads to laughter.

Sūdraka (4th c. CE?) in his play *Mṛcchakaṭīka* also uses very effectively the motif of eating, here especially of eating meat, to delineate the character of the villain of his play, called Saṃsthānaka. Whereas the *vidūṣaka* in the *Vikramorvaśīya* is merely comic with his gourmet fantasies of balls of sweets and dainty venison, Saṃsthānaka, on the other hand, is a veritable boor: he is ignorant, violent and cowardly, but unfortunately, he wields power because he is the king’s brother-in-law. He tries to gain the favours of the courtesan Vasantasena, who scorns him because she is in love with the noble hero Cārudatta, who comes from a good but impoverished Brahmin family. To attract Vasantasena, Saṃsthānaka delivers himself of real show-case verses such as the following:

*kiṃ yāsi dhāvasi palāyase praskhalantī
vāsu prasīda na mariṣyasi tiṣṭha tāvat /
kāmena dahyate khalu me hṛdayam tapasvi
aṅgararāśīpatitam iva māmsakhaṇḍam // Mṛcchakaṭīka 1.18 //*

Why do you go, run and scamper and stumble? Be pleased, O girl!
You won’t die. Stay awhile. Indeed, my poor heart is being burnt by
passion, like a piece of meat fallen into a heap of burning charcoal.
(Transl. Kale 1972, modified)

Remarking on his obsession for Vasantasena, Saṃsthānaka further resorts to this inappropriate comparison: “Friend, even now I remember that Vasantasena. Like the words of a wicked man, she does not leave my mind”, *bhava, adyāpi tām vasantasenām smarāmi / durjanavacanam iva hṛdayān nāpasarati*. And goes on to add in the same breath: “I have been very hungry for a long time!”, *ciram asmi bubhuṣitaḥ* (*Mṛcchakaṭīka* act 8, after verse 8). Here the connoisseur immediately

knows for a fact that Saṁsthānaka cannot really be in love with Vasantasenā, because if such were the case, according to the theatrical and literary conventions, he would not be feeling hungry, but would be wasting away, his appetite gone. Being firmly and continuously repulsed by Vasantasenā, who is impressed neither by his threats nor by his poetry, he resolves to have her killed. To this end, he bribes his servant with the promise of meat:

Saṁsthānaka: *yadīcchasi... māṁsam ca khādituṁ tathā tuṣṭim kartuṁ cuhū, cuhū, cukku, cuhū, cuhū iti* (8.22)

Viṭa: *tataḥ kim / ...*

Saṁsthānaka: *māraya vasantasenām /*

Saṁsthānaka: If you desire ... to dine upon flesh and derive satisfaction (therefrom), (munching) with the sounds *chuhoo-chuhoo, chukku, chuhoo-chuhoo*,—(8.22)

Servant: Then what? ...

Saṁsthānaka: Kill Vasantasenā! (Transl. Kale 1972)

Vasantasenā sums up nicely both Saṁsthānaka's and Cārudatta's characters when she says: "Moreover, having resorted to the mango tree, I shall not betake myself to the *palāśa* tree." *sahakārapādapam sevivā na palāśa-pādapam aṅgikariṣyāmi* (act 8, after verse 33). The noble Cārudatta is of course like the majestic mango-tree, yielding rich fruit and providing shelter and protection with its generous shade (see image 7); the ignoble and carnivorous Saṁsthānaka is like a *palāśa* (*Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub.), the very name of which signifies "carnivorous, flesh-eating".⁵⁰ The *palāśa* is a medium-sized deciduous tree, and thus cannot be relied on to provide shade. Its red flowers, though beautiful, certainly bear some resemblance to pieces of meat (see image 8). By means of these allusions to food and meat, Śūdraka not only brings into rich relief the base, unrefined and ultimately sinister character of Saṁsthānaka, but at the same time produces the comic verging on disgusting *rasas*, with his vulgar comparisons and his onomatopieis of mastication. As a contrast to Saṁsthānaka

⁵⁰ Śrīharṣa (12th c. CE) in his *Naiṣadhacarita* 1.84 similarly makes a pun on the name of the *palāśa* tree, which is supposed to eat the flesh of the emaciated (lovers) who are travelling (*sphuṭam palāśe 'dhvajuṣāṁ palāśanāt*).

in the *Mṛcchakaṭika* and to the *vidūṣaka* in the *Vikramorvaṣīya*, the noble heroes Cārudatta and Purūravas, who are both deeply in love, never once think about food. *Ils vivent d'amour et d'eau fraîche*,⁵¹ as the French saying goes. Clearly, eating and feeling hungry are the characteristics of lower characters, and lead, not to the *śṛṅgāra-rasa*, but to the *hāsyā-*, and sometimes to the *bībhatsa-rasa*.

In fact, one of the rare instances I have found in Sanskrit poetry where eating provides for a noble hero something akin to erotic pleasure is in King Harṣa's play, the *Nāgānanda* (7th c. CE). Here, the devout Buddhist Jīmūtavāhana is not eating, but being eaten alive! The divine bird Garuḍa devours Jīmūtavāhana, who dreamed of offering his life to save another's and who voluntarily climbed onto a slaughter-rock to save a *nāga* designated as Garuḍa's next victim. Impressed by his breakfast's unexpected fortitude, Garuḍa remarks:

*glānir nādhikapīyamānarudhirasyāpy asti dhairyodadher
māmsotkartanajā rujo 'pi vahataḥ prītyā prasannaṃ mukham /
gātram yan na viluptam eṣa pulakas tatra sphuṭo lakṣyate
dṛṣṭir mayy upakāriṇīva nipataty asyāpakāriṇy api // Nāgānanda 5.14 //*

There is no languor in him, the ocean of courage, though his blood is being drunk in profusely; his face beams with pleasure though he bears the pain caused by the tearing up of his flesh; the thrill of joy (horripilation) is clearly seen on the limb which is not plucked off; and his eyes fall on me as if on a benefactor though I am doing harm to him.⁵² (Transl. Toraskar and Deshpande 1953)

From the vocabulary used here, such as *prīti* (pleasure) and *pulaka* (horripilation), which are usually associated with erotic thrills, it is clear that the hero, rather perversely—or should we say mystically?—experiences something akin to masochistic ecstasy while being devoured alive. Earlier in the text, when Jīmūtavāhana sees the slaughter-rock, he already declares:

⁵¹ “They live on love and fresh water”.

⁵² This is expressed in very similar terms in the 16th tale of the *Vetāla* (= *Kathāsaritsāgara* 12.23), which also narrates the story of Jīmūtavāhana.

*na tathā sukhayati manye malayavatī malayacandanarasārdrā /
abhivāñchitārthasiddhyai vadhyaśileyaṃ yathā sprṣtā // Nāgānanda 4.23 //*

I think that even Malayavatī, cool with the juice of the sandal from the Malaya mountain, does not please me so much when embraced, as does this slaughter-slab touched by me for attaining my desired object. (Transl. Toraskar and Deshpande 1953)

As shown by the comparison with his beloved Malayavatī, Jīmūtavāhana feels erotic pleasure when he touches the stone-slab, even though he couches it in religious language: the phrase *abhivāñchitārthasiddhyai*, “for the attainment of the desired object”, straightforwardly evokes the name of the Buddha, Siddhārtha or Sarvārthasiddhi.

Concluding remarks

What can we conclude from the above observations? The first point I would like to raise concerns gender: We have seen that, as far as the analogies between parts of the body and edibles are concerned, only female bodies—never male bodies—are subjected to such comparisons, either by male characters in the plays,⁵³ or by male authors. Since Sanskrit poets were all men,⁵⁴ and most connoisseurs of Sanskrit poetry probably too, this does not come as a real surprise. Poetry was written from a heterosexual male perspective and designed to provide erotic pleasure for heterosexual men. On the other hand, when it comes to suffering from unrequited sexual longing, we see that both the heroes and the heroines of the texts fare alike:⁵⁵ the *yakṣa* and king Duṣyanta lose weight and are tormented by love, in the same way as

⁵³ On one occasion, such a comparison is made by Rādhā’s *sakhī* (*Gītagovinda* 9.18.3, quoted above). But of course, the (male) poet stands behind the female character.

⁵⁴ At least, the authors whose works have come under scrutiny in this study.

⁵⁵ And this despite the fact that Kokkoka, as we have seen, meant his stages of (unrequited) love only for men.

Śakuntalā and other unnamed women whose husbands are travelling. In suffering, at least, there is gender-equality.

The second question I would like to raise concerns a possible evolution of our topic over time. Is there a change between earlier and later authors—inasmuch as it is at all possible to establish their dates with any certainty? Here I would tentatively answer no, although the topic would probably deserve further research. We have seen that the metaphors of *bimba* lips and ambrosia mouths did not go out of fashion in the course of the centuries—if not the millennia. Of course, Budhasvāmin in his *Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha* condemns wine-drinking, which is otherwise glowingly praised as an aphrodisiac. But this is probably not due to a change of attitude over time, but rather to an entirely different approach to the topic or to a difference in the poetic genre: most poets, as we have seen, describe wine-drinking scenes in dream-like contexts involving supernatural beings, or at least courtesans, whereas Budhasvāmin takes a more realistic stance and views it from the perspective of bourgeois society and married life, in which the consumption of alcohol was probably never approved of. We have also seen that the *Mahābhārata*, in the story of R̥syaśṛṅga, describes how food is used along with other things to seduce the young ascetic. Whether this is allowed in the epic due to its different literary genre, earlier date, or due to the fact that, as I hinted above, the sage is half animal, is hard to determine with certainty. But I would feel inclined to stress the last motive, with the support of the much later passage from the *Bṛhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha*, which describes the shipwrecked couple roaming in the forest wilderness and freely partaking of the bounties of nature. Food is mentioned more freely where strict social and conventional rules do not apply.

We have by now ascertained that in Sanskrit literature, food and love are by and large considered as mutual enemies.⁵⁶ And this despite

⁵⁶ Not so, however, in Tamil Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* poetry, where the poets express their love of the Lord in frankly cannibalistic terms: they want to eat and drink the Lord, who eats and drinks them in turn. The sexual analogy is evident there.

the *Kāmasūtra*'s prescriptions, which are otherwise highly valued, cited, and followed by the poets. And despite, too, we may add here, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s analogy between the *rasa*, literally “sap, juice” or “flavour, taste” of a drama/text and the ingredients used to prepare a meal. Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* uses very clear culinary metaphors and analogies with food while describing *rasa*. As Lidova (Lidova 2013: 196) remarks: “Of the many meanings of the word *rasa*, the traditional theoretical evaluation of the theatre selected only one, **taste**. The word had grown to be used as a technical term by the time the *Nāṭyaśāstra* appeared.” Lidova quotes the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, chapter 6, after verse 31:

What is an example [one may ask]? It is said: as taste emerges from the various seasonings, herbs and other components, so does *rasa* emerge from a combination of the various *bhāvas*. As six tastes are produced with treacle and other components, seasonings and herbs, so do *sthāyibhāvas* combined with various *bhāvas* attain [the characteristics] of *rasa*.⁵⁷

Analogies with food are not only developed in the *rasa* theory, but in another literary theory, that of the *kāvya-pāka*, the “ripeness of poetry”. As Battistini (Battistini 2016: 145) remarks: “The origin

(see Woźniak in the present publication). It would of course be interesting to investigate why this extreme expression of love is accepted in Tamil poetry but not in Sanskrit poetry. In comparison, the *Gītāgovinda*, also a Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* text, is quite restrained, containing only a few standard comparisons between lips and *bimba* fruits, etc. as we have seen above.

⁵⁷ The metaphor of food is pursued at some length in the following verses too. Thus 6.32–33: “Just as a connoisseur of cooked food (*bhakta*) while eating food which has been prepared from various spices and other articles tastes it, so the learned people (*budha*) taste in their heart (*manas*) the Durable Psychological States (such as love, sorrow, etc.) when they are represented by an expression of the Psychological States with Gestures. Hence these Durable Psychological States in a drama are called Sentiments [*rasa*]”. Also 6.37: “Just as a combination of auxiliary cooked eatables (*vyañjana*) and rice imparts good taste to the food [in totality], so the Psychological States and the Sentiments cause one another to manifest themselves (*bhāvayanti*)” (Transl. Ghosh 1967).

of the idea most probably lies in an impressionistic comparison between poetry and fruit ...”. This ripeness of poetry is a quality depending on the presence or absence of certain characteristics. The final result then tastes like certain fruit (coconut, mango, grape, cucumber, etc.) depending on its sweetness or hardness (see Battistini 2016: 148–149). As we see, the analogy with food and with tasting underlies at many levels the whole aesthetic experience of enjoying poetry. The poets were obviously conversant with the *rasa* theory, for we have seen that in quite a few instances they play on the polysemy of the word *rasa* (sap-juice-taste, or literary flavour) to produce *śleṣas* (double-entendre) alluding to the theory within the poem itself. Such being the case, it is all the more surprising that actual descriptions of food do not seem to have found favour with the poets.⁵⁸

How can we explain this state of affairs? In my opinion, the reason for this aversion from food in Sanskrit poetry may be due to the fact that food, in the ancient Indian context, is far from being an “innocent” topic. Indeed, preoccupations with food are all-pervasive. As Olivelle (Olivelle 1995: 367) remarks: “The cultural landscape of India, from the earliest Vedic period to contemporary times, is littered with food”. Sacrificial, medical and legal texts had appropriated the topic of food, for different reasons. Sacrificial texts are mostly concerned with food from the point of view of the sacrificial oblations: what food (vegetal or animal) can be offered up to the gods and Manes? Medical texts of course analyze and classify food from the perspective of health.⁵⁹ Legal texts discuss food mostly from a socio-religious

⁵⁸ I had already commented on this point in my book on *The Seasons in Mahākāvya Literature*, noting that even though a poetician such as Rājaśekhara (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 18.33–34 & 69) prescribes the mention of certain types of food during certain seasons, “surprisingly, food is hardly ever mentioned in our season descriptions, maybe because it was considered to be an “unpoetic” subject” (Feller 1995: 38).

⁵⁹ Medical texts sometimes prescribe food that is prohibited by legal texts. See Olivelle 2002: 13: “Indeed, many kinds of animals that are prohibited in the legal documents are considered in the medical treatises not only as edible but also as providing health benefits”.

stand-point, and rule who can eat what, where, when, with whom and from whom. In this respect, as far as our subject of couples eating together is concerned, *Manusmṛti* 4.43a states: “He should not eat with his wife ...”, *nāśnīyād bhāryayā sārđham* ... And again in 4.219cd: “... the food ... of whores cuts him off from (all desirable) worlds”, ... *gaṇikānaṃ ca lokebhyaḥ parikṛntati* (Transl. Doniger & Smith 1991). It is clear that such dictates, if followed, would hamper the realization of romantic scenes with moon-lit suppers in the company of courtesans as described in the *Kāmasūtra*, or simply of husband and wife eating together: in India, the wife traditionally eats after her husband—and ideally, his left-overs.⁶⁰ On the other hand, feeding each other is allowed in the case of animals, who of course are not subject to the rules laid down in law-books. Undoubtedly, food was a “loaded” topic, and mentions of food would inevitably evoke legal, religious and medical concerns. This may well be the reason why the ancient Indian poets shunned the topic of food as lacking delicacy and propriety (*aucitya*), even if this is never stated in so many words. Food had too many unerotic associations which would have jarred with the smooth unfolding of the mood of love.

⁶⁰ See for instance *Mahābhārata* 3.4.7. After feeding the Brahmins, then the younger Pāṇḍavas, then Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī finally eats the remaining food (*śeṣa*).

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⁶¹ Kālidāsa's works are listed under "Kālidāsa".

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Images

Image 1: *bimba*. Photo: Flickr

Image 2: *jambū-phala* (black plum). Photo: JoeGoaUk Goa, Flickr

Image 3: *tāla-phala* (palmyra palm). Photo: Manoj K, Flickr

Image 4: detail of the story of Udāyin, *vihāra* n. 17, Ajanta (Maharashtra), second half of the 5th century AD. Photo: C. Pieruccini

Image 5: painting on paper, Rajasthan 18th century (detail): lovers enjoying a cup of liquor. Photo: R. Conus

Image 6: painting on paper, Rajasthan, modern: a man drinking on a terrace in the company of his concubines. Photo: R. Conus

Image 7: mango tree. Photo: D. Feller

Image 8: *palāśa* flower. Photo: Dinesh Valke, Flickr