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On Brewing Love Potions and Crafting Answers: Two Literary Techniques in an Early Modern Maṇipravāḷam Poem

ABSTRACT: This paper studies *Naiṣadha in Our Language* (*Bhāṣānaiṣadha-campu*), a 16th-century Maṇipravāḷam retelling of the Nala and Damayantī tale from Kerala. It focuses on two main aspects of this text, both illustrated by different expressive modes: one 'high,' pulling towards the polished, dense literature of the Sanskrit style, and the other 'low,' pulling towards the performative, the local, and the colloquial. The first is exemplified by reading several verses where Damayantī is struggling to formulate an answer to Nala. Here, I discuss a heightened interest in the depiction of the individual, encapsulated in his or her relationship with and separation from other individuals. The second is illustrated by long prose sections describing men on their way to the wedding. Here, I discuss several allusions to Kerala's contemporary society and literature, and the expressive possibilities of Maṇipravāḷam prose. The association with Śrīharṣa's canonical Sanskrit *Naiṣadhacaritam* serves as a roadmap to some of the intriguing literary selections of this text.

KEYWORDS: Maṇipravāḷam, Kerala, *Naiṣadhacaritam*, *Bhāṣānaiṣadhacampu*, Maḻamaṅgalakkavi

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Introduction

Some texts seem to be written for the canon; bold, innovative, alluring, and full of secrets, they provide generations of scholars with work. Śrīharṣa's 12th-century *Life of Naiṣadha* (*Naiṣadhacaritam*), one of the most beautiful and complex poems ever to be written in Sanskrit, is a fine example of such a composition. From an all-time favorite love story found in the *Mahābhārata*, Śrīharṣa turned the tale of Nala and Damayantī into a powerful meditation on the nature of human beings, on the power of language, and on love. After such a poem, however, what else is left for future poets? Does it not cast a dense shadow on all further attempts at retelling the same story? Or, perhaps, quite the opposite? Might that shadow, adopting a botanical metaphor, provide a fertile ground for new poems? While literary critics working on South Asian literature in the 19th and most of the 20th century have often adopted the first approach, more recent literary studies in this field show how rich and understudied is the eco-system of 'late' Sanskrit and 'early' vernacular[1] literature from South Asia. In this paper, not a theoretical essay but more of an exploratory case study, I investigate the relationship between a canonical Sanskrit poem and its vernacular counterpart in 16th-century Kerala. The framework that I adopt is related to the wider subject of this volume, namely the novel way in which the tale of Nala and Damayantī allows for a discussion on the nature of the individual, human communication and being a part of society.

During the 16th century, Kerala, although relatively far away from the great centers of Sanskrit scholarship, was a vibrant intellectual locale. Divided into multiple little principalities, the larger of which

[1] I use the term 'vernacular' in the sense specified by Sheldon Pollock in his work on Sanskrit and the Indian vernaculars. Pollock does not use this term as a synonym for 'modern languages' as is often the case, but does so specifically to denote local literary languages that are contrasted with a standard, cosmopolitan language. He defines vernacularisation as "the historical process of choosing to create a written language, along with its complement, a political discourse, in local languages according to models supplied by a superordinate, usually cosmopolitan, literary culture" (Pollock 2006: 23).

had their own local courts, it produced numerous texts in an array of disciplines, both in Sanskrit and various forms of the vernacular.[2] From around the 14th century onward, the most prolific style of literary composition in the vernacular was undoubtedly Maṇipravāḷam, literally 'Gem-Coral,'[3] an elevated register of the local language that, by definition, included inflected Sanskrit nouns and verbs meant to be woven together in an even, flowing manner. Various compositions in Maṇipravāḷam are still extant; the most dominant among them belong to the *campu* genre (in Sanskrit: *campū*), poems that combine verse and ornate prose. In this paper, I discuss *Naiṣadha in Our Language*[4] (*Bhāṣānaiṣadhacampu*), a Maṇipravāḷam *campu* retelling the tale of King Nala and princess Damayantī, who fell in love with each other, not by meeting personally but by hearsay. The work is ascribed to a poet known as Maḻamaṅgalakkavi, literally, 'the poet of the house of Maḻamaṅgalam.' Born to a family of Brahmins that resided near

[2] See Rich Freeman's thorough review of Kerala's literary culture, along with the various vernacular compositions it yielded (Freeman 2003: 437–500).

[3] Elsewhere, following Freeman's work, I translate the term Maṇipravāḷam as 'Rubies and Coral.' I often use that translation when writing on the *Līlātilakam*, a 14th-century text on the grammar and poetics of Maṇipravāḷam. There, the author claims that 'maṇi,' a generic term for a gem that could also signify several specific gems (pearls, rubies, etc.), should only be understood as a ruby. This is important for the author because the image of rubies and corals, two red gems that are similar in color but different in texture, point to the combination of Sanskrit and Kerala-language words in Maṇipravāḷam: although they are different, their combination should create an even and smooth composition. This comment of the author seems to address former images of Maṇipravāḷam as a combination of red and white flowers or gems. Here, I use the shorter and more neutral 'gem-coral,' suggested by Andrew Ollett in his paper "Images of Language Mixture in Early Kannada Literature" (2022).

[4] I thank Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey for suggesting 'our language' for the term *bhāṣā*. This translation works well with the fact that throughout South Asia and as far as Indonesia, this term has been in use to denote the language of the speaker, with no need to specify which language that might actually be. Different people could use this term to denote different languages, while still meaning the same thing, that this is their own language. This does not mean, of course, that within specific regions these *bhāṣā*s were monolithic.

modern Trissur in central Kerala, Maḷamaṅgalakkavi is known to have also penned a Sanskrit one-act play called the *Mahiṣamaṅgala Bhāṇa* (*Mahiṣamaṅgala* is the Sanskritized form of Maḷamaṅgalam), a work patronized by one of the kings of Kochi named Rājarāja. In both compositions, the Maṇipravāḷam *campu* and the Sanskrit play, the poet addresses his family deity, the goddess Valayādhīśvarī of the Ūrakam temple, also near Trissur (Raja 1958: 155–162). The Maḷamaṅgalam family provides a prime example of a cross-linguistic, versatile, and highly productive type of erudition. Different family members produced texts in various fields: mathematics, astronomy, grammar, ritual, and literature in both Sanskrit and the local vernacular. One member of this family, Śaṅkaran, was a well-known astrologer who composed *Steps to Arrive at the Correct Form* (*Rūpānayanapaddhati*), a grammatical text, as well as numerous commentaries on Sanskrit mathematical and astronomical texts, such as *A Synopsis of the Bhāskarīyam* (*Laghubhāskarīyam*), *The Essence of Calculus* (*Gaṇitasāra*), and *Method for Moon Calculations* (*Candragaṇitakramam*). According to the colophon of his work, Śaṅkaran was born in 1494. His son, Nārāyaṇan, composed *Discursus on Legal Expiation* (*Smārtaprāyaścittavimarśinī*), a text on ritual. Another family member, Parameśvaran, also composed a text on ritual, *Light on Ritual Impurity* (*Āśaucadīpikā*), in the year 1578. It is almost certain that it was one of these three scholars who composed the Sanskrit *bhāṇa* and the Maṇipravāḷam *campu*. If indeed both poems are his, Maḷamaṅgalakkavi could be viewed as part of a growing trend in early modern South Asia, that of literary translingualism, or the composition of literature in a language other than the author's primary language.[5]

[5] On literary translingualism in South Asia, see Deven M. Patel's chapter (Patel 2021: 71–82). Patel notes that "all of Sanskrit literature is, in some sense, translingual," since "by the turn of the first millennium CE (if not much earlier), Sanskrit was probably no one's primary spoken language, though it remained a healthy secondary language for many centuries thereafter" (*ibid*: 71). Translingualism, then, in the case of Sanskrit literati, did not mean composing literature that was not in the author's primary

Maṇipravāḷam *campu*s had been composed in Kerala roughly from the 13th or 14th century. By the 16th century, the tradition had reached a high level of maturity. This is apparent in the natural elegance that characterizes Maḻamaṅgalakkavi's work, an elegance that reveals both proficiency in Sanskrit and skill in juggling it with the local language, all in a balanced, flowing style. Yet in essence, this basic characteristic of the poem—its ability to be both local and colloquial, elitist and complex—is a distinctive feature of the entire Maṇipravāḷam *campu* from its very inception. In this paper, I explore both these frontiers, the 'high' and the 'low' in Maḻamaṅgalakkavi's Maṇipravāḷam work.

High and Low

In her forthcoming PhD dissertation, Talia Ariav (one of the contributors to this special issue) discusses the principle of variegation (*uccāvaca*), literally 'high and low.' In Ariav's formulation regarding one of the poets she studies, the 17th-century Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, this principle involves "a literary Sanskrit that encompasses, and in effect mixes together all genres and registers" (Ariav, forthcoming). Nīlakaṇṭha's work embodies this aesthetic, combining various registers and genres of Sanskrit. Note that this is not a practice meant to open up Sanskrit literature to the less competent audiences. On the contrary, as Ariav observes, "the principle of variegation actively delineates communities of readers who can enjoy both ends of the spectrum. The contrastive effect doesn't work otherwise." Likewise, it is important to note that when applying this principle to Maḻamaṅgalakkavi's *Naiṣadha in Our Language*, I do not take Sanskrit as 'high' and the local language as 'low.' As I aim to demonstrate in this essay, the reality is far more complex. This is partly because, considering the heavy loan from Sanskrit into the local language, in Maṇipravāḷam, Sanskrit and the local language are not always easy to tell apart, and because

language but rather one that was not in his primary literary language—in other words, not in Sanskrit—in addition to their Sanskrit composition.

Maṇipravāḷam authors used both languages as their own intimate building blocks. Unlike the modern tendency to view Sanskrit as a foreign, northern language that clashed with the existing Dravidian civilization, the fact is that Maṇipravāḷam poets owned Sanskrit, both as language and literature, as much as they owned their local language. Thus, their Sanskrit is not always 'high,' while their local language is not always 'low.' It is the various mixtures of the two that are sometimes 'high' and sometimes 'low.' In this sense, Maṇipravāḷam was undoubtedly an elitist project.

From the earliest extant Maṇipravāḷam *campu*s, one can sense a certain pull in two different directions, provisionally labeled the classicist and the local. On the one hand, using an image suggested by David Shulman in his work on the early-modern *prabandha*, authors compose Maṇipravāḷam texts "with whole libraries at their disposal, libraries that are massively raided and made present at almost every step" (Shulman 2019: 19). Readers, too, were familiar with the works in these 'libraries.' Maṇipravāḷam literature in Kerala was written for an audience that was not only able to read Sanskrit but was also well versed in Sanskrit literature. This is clearly evident in a text like Punam's *Rāmāyaṇa in Our Language* (*Bhāṣārāmāyāṇacampu*), where the author borrows verses from multiple Sanskrit sources and weaves them into his poem (Goren-Arzony 2019b: 91–98, Shulman 2019: 14–20), but, I suggest, it goes far beyond that. When an author like Maḷamaṅgalakkavi composes a new *Naiṣadha* in the vernacular, it becomes crucial to read it with an awareness of prior texts. This is particularly relevant to a retelling of the Sanskrit *Naiṣadha*, a text that was, as noted by Patel, "the first, and in some cases the only, *mahākāvya* translated into the early literary cultures of South Asia's regional languages" (Patel 2014: 6). Patel terms the "sets of textual and scholarly practices that grow up around a root or source text" a 'tradition' (*ibid*.: 4) and discusses the prolific 'Naiṣadha tradition' to which Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's text certainly belongs. *Naiṣadha* retellings are also part of the larger *Mahābhārata* tradition. Nell Hawley Shapiro and Sohini Pillai, the editors of a new publication on this tradition, propose to read the *Mahābhārata* as a genre of its own. They note,

> The important thing isn't whether a composition 'is' a *Mahābhārata* or calls itself one, but whether the value of interpreting that work increases as a result of putting it into conversation with other *Mahābhārata*s. We would argue that it almost always does, and often with a sense of discovery that feels like crystallization. (Hawley Shapiro and Pillai 2021: 12)

Indeed, the story of Nala and Damayantī is not only a part of the *Mahābhārata* tradition, but can also be viewed as its miniature version, its 'essence,' containing multiple recapitulated motifs from the epic's frame story. As Shulman notes,

> Both stories proceed through *svayaṃvara*—the Indian royal bride's ritual choice—to a disastrous dice-game after which the hero or heroes, bereft of wealth and status, must depart for the wilderness; in both there is a crucial period of hiding and disguise; both speak of recognition and restoration in an agonistic mode […]. (Shulman 1994: 2)

Moreover, as Shulman further claims, two of the general 'problems' that Nala's story conveys deal with the "boundaries of the self," and the "possibilities and implications of real self-knowledge" (*ibid.*: 7). As I demonstrate further on in the essay, these problems are central to Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's version.

The other direction of the 'pull' steers down, to the very ground, to the soil of Kerala if you like. A basic characteristic of multiple Maṇipravāḷam poems is that from time to time the author appears to sit back in his chair and let the center stage (of his poem, of course) be occupied by a variety of men from different communities, each exhibiting particular behaviors and often speaking in the first person in a highly colloquial form. These (mostly) comic interludes often depict Brahmins—but not only. Doctors, astrologers, sorcerers, and others are popular, too. I would like to suggest that the tension and the play between these two expressive modes have a lot to do with the way Maṇipravāḷam feels and with the pleasure it induces in the audience.

Crafting Answers

Let us begin with the first direction, with the pull up, or rather, backwards. While, as mentioned earlier, the *Naiṣadha in Our Language* is part of the larger *Mahābhārata* tradition, one poem stands out as its most dominant intertext—Śrīharṣa's 12th-century Sanskrit *Life of Naiṣadha* (*Naiṣadhacaritam*).[6] Śrīharṣa's work is one of the most complicated Sanskrit poems ever written, clearly authored by a true virtuoso, a wizard of words. Thus, retelling it in the vernacular does not seem like the most obvious choice. Yet, more or less four hundred years separate the two poems. And, as this volume illustrates, great changes were taking place in South Asia right at that time. Some of these changes had to do with literature—its authors, compositions, and audiences. For example, Śrīharṣa wrote Sanskrit for the Sanskrit cosmopolis, his poem traveling far and wide; four centuries later, Maḷamaṅgalakkavi wrote for his home audience.

But before we delve into details, a brief introduction to our protagonists. Nala and Damayantī were a king and a princess who fell madly in love without ever meeting in person. It was language that brought them together—first through the stories that reached their respective kingdoms, then through a messenger acting as an intermediary—a certain goose that was caught by Nala and became an emissary of love to save its life. The lovers' story is told in the *Mahābhārata* and then retold again and again in multiple forms and in different languages,[7] one of which is Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's Maṇipravāḷam poem.

[6] Like this poem, Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's version is divided into two parts: *pūrva* (prior) and *uttara* (latter). While the first part covers roughly the same narrative in both poems, from the beginning to the wedding, in the second, Maḷamaṅgalakkavi narrates the couple's separation and ensuing reunion following their wedding, while Śrīharṣa's version does not include this aftermath.

[7] See Wadley 2011 for a selection of such retellings. Freeman's contribution to this volume (in chapter 8) discusses the Kerala case, including Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's text.

We enter this poem at a thrilling point in time, when Damayantī is just about to dispatch the goose back to Nala, along with her answer to his message of love. But first, we shall see how this moment is depicted in Śrīharṣa's Sanskrit poem. In that version, Damayantī is presented as a competent speaker. While her unequivocal answer to the goose is that she is utterly committed to Nala and will marry no one else, the language in which she delivers this message is by no means simple or straightforward. Śrīharṣa himself uses the term *aspaṣṭam*, 'unclear' or 'incoherent,' to describe it. The goose goes so far as to call Damayantī *śleṣakavi*, 'poetess of puns.' This it says in reaction to her initial answer to Nala's message: In the final verse of this message delivered on Nala's behalf, the goose claims that were Damayantī to desire something from as far as Laṅkā, an island in the middle of the ocean, Nala would unhesitatingly fulfil her wish. In answer to this Damayantī simply says, "My heart doesn't go to Laṅkā" (*ceto na laṅkām ayate madīyaṃ*). Yet, this short sentence could also be parsed differently to mean, "My heart desires Nala" (*ceto nalaṃ kāmayate madīyaṃ*). Note that although she resorts to punning, in both readings Damayantī says one and the same thing: I want Nala, and nothing else. Reading a later section of Śrīharṣa's work, the part where Damayantī must choose one of the five lookalike Nalas, Yigal Bronner suggests that Damayantī is presented as the "reader of the text" (Bronner 2010: 87), one made to decipher the riddle in front of her eyes.

In Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's text too, Damayantī's answer is rich with meanings. Yet, his Damayantī is different. In order to see just how different, let us first consider Nala's message. He seems to be quite confident of her forthcoming answer. Note one of the final verses in this message (which, like many of the verses that I cite here, although taken from a Maṇipravāḷam poem, is composed entirely in Sanskrit):

> When two youngsters aren't yet familiar
> with each other's hearts,
> a request is improper.
> So goes the saying, and it is true.

> Yet I know your mind inside out
> because you are always there in my heart,
> regardless of what I do.
> And you hold me always in your mind, and won't let go,
> not for a moment.[8]

Nala presents the kind of all-pervasive love that assumes a complete symbiosis between the two subjects. He knows what is in Damayantī's mind because she is always in his heart. The quoted verse is reminiscent of one of Śrīharṣa's verses in which the goose describes Nala to Damayantī, as he (Nala) is looking at her painting:

> You, lady, live in his heart,
> but you're also somehow outside him,
> in fact, you're his very life's breath
> moving through nose and mouth.
> His mind, too, being utterly absorbed
> in you, never budges from that wondrous
> painting, and this, too,
> is a wonder. (3.105)[9]

In both verses, Damayantī is said to be residing in Nala's heart. In Śrīharṣa's version, she holds a simultaneous internal and external position: he looks at her picture, a simulacrum of the 'real' Damayantī living out there in Kuṇḍina, and at the same time she lives 'in his heart.' This simultaneity is compared to the fluid position of the breath, constantly moving between the nose and the mouth; an apt metaphor, since, after

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[8] *ajñāte hṛdaye mithas taruṇayor abhyarthanā nocitā satyaṃ vākyaṃ idaṃ mayā tu viditaṃ tatvena te mānasaṃ /*
yat-tvan nityam avasthitāsi hṛdaye tat-tat-vidheyāntareṣv āsaktaṃ
ca na muñcasi kṣaṇam atisnigdhena māṃ cetasā // 1.45
All translations, if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

[9] *tvaṃ hṛdgatā bhaimi bahirgatāpi prāṇāyitā nāsikayāsyagatyā /*
na citram ākrāmati tatra citram etanmano yadbhavadekavṛtti // 3.105
Translated by David Shulman in *Sensitive Reading* (2022: 24).

all, she is his 'very breath of life.' Maḻamaṅgalakkavi adopts the image but alters its element of simultaneity: in his verse, Damayantī is always in Nala's heart, and he is always in her heart, as if they had changed places.

As we shall see, Damayantī's response expresses certain doubts as to the possibility of knowing another person—or even of knowing oneself—in such a total way. At first, she does not seem to be able to find the right words to respond, her resolve being 'perforated by Love's arrows' (*citta-bhava-śara-nikara-nirdaḷita-dhṛtir*) until she becomes 'another woman' (*abhavad anyā*). Therefore, one of her friends, who is said to be "with not even the slightest bodily difference from Damayantī" (*uṭaloṭu bheda-lavam-iyalāta toḻi*) speaks up instead of her. The message the friend gives to the goose is composed in the form of a *daṇḍakam*:

> […] O you of shape so rare on this earth! Messenger of the Niṣadha king! Ocean of merit! Ornament of the bird clan! Bless you. So answers my friend: "The highest truth is this: My pain is over. Happiness has come to my heart." O Indra of the bird race! You who are most skillful in speaking cleverly, best among experts! Thanks to you, having ears now bears fruit. Since someone came here and told her about all the merits of the King of Niṣadhas, she made up her mind that he was to be hers alone. She cannot bear her sorrow. Wicked Love who knows no mercy is constantly showering her with his flower arrows. Without anyone helping her to privately inform you, King of the Niṣadhas, of her growing dependence, this lotus-faced girl, devoid of all support, is utterly desperate. She moves like a mad elephant, her mental pain increasing by the hour. Her body is now so lean. O bird! With so much mental pain, my friend can't even say what is going on in her mind. Skillful one! Please secretly convey this message, told by my friend and uttered by my own throat, to the Niṣadha king.[10]

[10] […] *pṛtthvī-talāsulabha-bhadrākṛte niṣadha-pṛtthvîndra-dūte guṇa-rāśe pattra-ratha-kula-tilaka bhadram iha tava bhavatu vakti punar iti bata sakhī me paramārttham āyat' itu paritāpam aṟṟu bata paritoṣam eti hṛdayaṃ me pataga-kula-vala-mathana-catura-tara-paṭu-vacana-sarasavara saphalayasi cĕvikaḷ mama cĕmme oro-janaṃ niṣadha-bhūpāla-vīra-guṇam oronnu vann'iha paṟaññuṃ ŏttat'iha*

Note that Damayantī's answer, quoted by her friend, is far from eloquent. It consists of three very short sentences that stand out conspicuously against the background of lengthy, complicated sentences that are so common in Maṇipravāḷam prose: "The highest truth is this" (*paramārttham āyat' itu*). "My pain is over" (*paritāpam aṟṟu*). "Happiness has come to my heart" (*paritoṣam eti hṛdayaṃ me*). Damayantī is virtually mute. The section just cited is followed by five Sanskrit verses, four of which comprise the actual message that her friend constructs for her:

> Some way or another, I'll say
> what I, a mere child, want.
> Skillfulness in sending back a message
> belongs to older women. (1.48)
>
> *Hear my words, my dear!* is somewhat immodest.
> *O King!* would sound aloof.
> *My breath of life!* is fine, but now it sounds repetitive.
> What a shame! How can I begin to answer you
> with such an agitated mind? (1.49)
>
> The wise know the hearts of faraway people
> through reasoning.
> Others, even after hearing the words of those
> who fill their thoughts, know nothing.
> You know that my heart is always bound to you.
> But even though I hear your words,
> I still don't know your mind. (1.50)

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mama niyatam ittaruṇan iti karutiy attal iyam agati sahiyāñṇuṃ ŏru neravuṃ karuṇay aṟiyāta pāpi punar alarbāṇan ampukaḷ cŏriñṇum ŏru rahasi niṣadha-nara-patiyŏṭ' iti vaḷarumŏru paravaśata paṟavatinum ŏruvan utakāñṇum mugdhāravinda-mukhi muktāvalaṃbam iti nityaṃ viṣīdati sughoraṃ matta-kari-madhura-gati citta-tuyir pĕruki muhur itra kṛśataram itu śarīraṃ madanārtti cīrttu nija-hṛdaya-sthitaṃ kimapi gadituṃ sakhī pataga nālāṃ mama vadana-gaḷitam itu sakhi paṟayumŏru vacanam atinipuṇa rahasi vada niṣadha-nara-pālaṃ.

Your love has grown, you are now insane!
I am getting myself ready to fall
into this mighty danger, too.
Shame abandoned me, absentminded,
and went elsewhere.
And I abandoned my childhood,
answering you like a woman. (1.51)[11]

These verses are about the difficulty of crafting an answer. They stand in stark contrast to Damayantī's initial answer in Śrīharṣa's Sanskrit poem, which is crafted as an eloquent, yet relatively straightforward pun (as much as a pun can be straightforward), expressing her unequivocal lack of doubt. In Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's text, on the surface, the difficulty of crafting an answer seems to be connected to being of a young age, since, as Damayantī says, "skillfulness in sending back a message belongs to older women." Yet, the difficulty has additional aspects, of which I would like to consider two. First, Damayantī is not only having a hard time finding the right words; she doubts the actual possibility of knowing the minds and hearts of other people, that is, what they think and how they feel. Note that the text abounds with cases where the verb

[11] *yathā kathāñcid vakṣyāmi*
bālāyā mama vāñchitam/
prauḍhānām eva nārīṇāṃ
*pratisandeśa-kauśalam //*1.48
vācāṃ me śṛṇu vallabheti vacane vaiyātyam āpadyate
he rājann iti ced ihāpi ca pṛthag-bhāvo mahān āpatet /
mat-prāṇā iti yuktam etad adhunā kīrokti-vat bhāsate
*kaṣṭaṃ kātara-cetanā katham aham sandeṣṭum adyārabhe //*1.49
dūrasthasya janasya vetti hṛdayaṃ yuktyā janaḥ paṇḍitaḥ
śrutvā citta-gatasya cāpi vacanaṃ jānāti naivāparaḥ /
yal-jñātaṃ bhavatā madīya-hṛdayaṃ tvayyeva saktaṃ sadā
*śrutvā cādya vaco mayā na tu punaś cittaṃ tava jñāyate //*1.50
unmāde patito bhavān upacita-premākrameṇādhunā
sannāho 'yam aho mamāpi patitum tasmin mahā-saṅkaṭe /
lajjā mām apahāya śūnya-hṛdayāṃ kutrāpi ca prasthitā
*prauḍheva pratisandiśāmi yad ahaṃ hitvā kumārī-patham //*1.51

jñā, 'to know,' accompanies various terms describing the heart and the mind: *hṛdayam*, *cittam*, *cetas*, and *citta*. Three possible scenarios of communication present themselves here. One, suggested by Nala, is that when we love someone, we know them wholeheartedly. This is exactly what Nala says: "I know your mind inside out because you are always there in my heart." The second scenario, suggested by Damayantī as she speaks about learned people, is that they "know the hearts of faraway people through reasoning." In other words, while they lack intuitive knowledge, the wise can use reasoning to understand people, even when they are far away. The third scenario is the one that Damayantī identifies herself with: those who "even after hearing the words of those who enter their hearts, know nothing." Although she has heard his words, she still does not know his thoughts (*mayā na tu punaś cittaṃ tava jñāyate*).

The three scenarios seem to reflect wider patterns in the presentation of love in early-modern India. In my MA thesis (in Hebrew, unpublished), I studied three late Sanskrit messenger poems from Kerala. I suggested that if Kālidāsa, in his *Cloud Messenger*, presents a separated lover who knows and feels exactly what his faraway beloved knows and feels, later poems gradually shift to a model of love that involves much more uncertainty, fear, insecurity, and distance. This is not to say that love in premodernity was more perfect than it came to be in the early-modern period, or even that its literary depictions throughout India show such linearity, but rather that, in the early-modern period, Sanskrit and Sanskrit-style poets became increasingly interested in presenting the inner gap that separates people, a gap manifested by our inability to actually see into someone's head (or heart), to actually understand the other and their messages to us, and therefore, to be able to respond or to truly communicate. Damayantī thus embodies a certain loneliness of the individual, separated from other individuals by walls of thoughts and feelings. In other words, her depiction entails a different subjectivity from that of Nala. A gap in communication between Nala and Damayantī is there already in the *Mahābhārata* version (Shulman 1994: 10–11). There, however, it pertains to the second part of their lives, after Nala abandons Damayantī in the forest and they find each other again through riddles.

In Maḻamaṅgalakkavi's version, this gap is there all along, right from the happy beginning. This was my first point.

Secondly, I would also like to point out how Damayantī relates to the act of composition. Bronner suggests that in the Sanskrit *Naiṣadha* Damayantī is presented as a reader; here, in the Maṇipravāḻam version, she is presented as a writer. But unlike Śrīharṣa's Damayantī, a poetess of puns, Maḻamaṅgala's Damayantī seems to be tormented by the act of composition. Right at the very beginning of her answer, when she is looking for the right words with which to answer Nala (not even to answer him, simply to choose the title by which to address him), she seems unable to make up her mind. If she simply tells him, "Listen to my words, dear" (*vācāṃ me śṛṇu vallabha*), she will risk being immodest. If she chooses something more restrained, such as "O king!" (*he rājan*!), it would be too remote. Were she to use the words Nala himself used when he addressed her, "*My breath of life*" (*prāṇā me*, verse 1.44), it would sound repetitive, and she should not plagiarize him, right? If she cannot even forge the opening words (the vocatives) for her text, how can she get on with the actual missive? In a sense, Damayantī is unable to compose the message and thus, a friend who is exactly like her, a reflection of her if you like, finally does the talking.

To conclude the first part of my paper, Maḻamaṅgalakkavi's text can be polished, thought-provoking, and complex, expressed in sophisticated Sanskrit at will. Damayantī's deliberations give voice to something discussed by other authors in this volume, a pattern we have come to see as characteristic of the early-modern period in South Asia: intensified interest in the depiction of the individual, encapsulated in his or her relation with and separation from other individuals. And yet, this text can also be down-to-earth, entertaining, and hilarious. This is the aspect I will discuss in the second section of this paper.

Brewing Love Potions

We are now shifting to a different moment in the Nala and Damayantī tale, one of the high points of the entire poem, where, during her

groom-selection ceremony, Damayantī must identify her true Nala out of the five identical Nalas, four of whom are gods in disguise. In Śrīharṣa's text, this section acts as a literary climax, where each verse can be read in at least two and sometimes up to five different ways, to describe the five different Nalas.[12] The section is considered so unique that it has even acquired a name of its own: the *pañcanālīya*, namely *Of the Five Nalas*. How can a later poet match such a mastery of words? Maḻamaṅgalakkavi doesn't even try. First, he narrates the plot in simple language:

> The four gods, Indra and the rest
> decided to test the princess's virtue.
> Plotting together, they all assumed the form of the Niṣadha king
> and took their seats. (1.102)
> Those five Nalas, all together,
> stunned the eyes of all the women around.
> It was as if Love had taken his five arrows,
> prepared, assembled, and laid them on his bow. (1.103)[13]

If you ask yourself what happens next, how Damayantī identifies the right Nala, or how the poet depicts her doing so, you will have to wait a bit, for Maḻamaṅgalakkavi decides that this is the right time to move into an altogether different subject, a description of the various people who have come to attend the wedding. As you will notice right

[12] All the verses in this section are punned. The first four include two possible meanings: one for the 'real' Nala and one for the god described. The last verse can be read in five different ways: one for the 'real' Nala and, simultaneously, one for each of the gods.

[13] *dharmādikā tadanu deva-catuṣṭayī sā*
dharmaṃ parīkṣitum atho nṛpa-nandanāyāḥ /
sammodinī niṣadha-puṅgavanoṭu sāmyaṃ
*cĕmme kalarnn' alam alam kurute sma mañcam //*1.102
anyūna-dhairya-haram ambuja-locanānām
ŏnnŏttu tatra naḻa-pañcakam ābabhāse /
arṇoja-sāyakan ĕṭuttu tŏṭuttu vayyiṭṭ-
*ŏnniccu-vĕcca śara-pañcakam ĕnnapolĕ //*1.103

away, this part feels entirely different from the Sanskrit verses we have just read. The depiction of the various guests is presented in another *daṇḍakam*:

> That's right. Had he tried to describe the entire detailed story of the various inquisitive people who had traveled from all over, dressed in the most extravagant outfits, thinking (and rightly so) that there was no other way to satisfy their curiosity than to come and see for themselves the royal wedding, attended by all those praiseworthy, eager kings—[had he tried to describe all that], even Bṛhaspati wouldn't have been able to find the right words. And what a festival it was, with people roaming here and there, carefree and happy, meeting each other and asking for the latest news. Hey, Vāsu! When did you arrive from up north? I've been dying to see you for so long! It must have been ten whole years! What a shame! Because of all these worldly troubles and pressing needs, our getting together again was so delayed. Iṭṭināˉrāyan, when he is home, will he take the trouble to look after the house? What does he know, he is heedless, with no worries at all. As for me… I worry about everything. Because that astrologer, what's his name, said that having an heir was so difficult, I got married four times. With all these wives, I have ten girls and not even a single male child. Two of the girls have come of age. They are at home. Two are almost grown. Two just got their tonsures. Yesterday I fed one for the first time. There are three more. They were born at such inauspicious times; I can't even decide on their names. Now that I think about it, did I count them all? Except for lunch during the annual ancestor memorial, there has been no sign of that Nāˉrāˉṇan. I am not a rich man and yet I still owe five thousand! *Spreading such idiocy far and wide*: Don't forget that we might get some food today. We must go and leave our loincloths to reserve seats. Hurry! We still need to take baths and come back here. *In this manner, these gods on earth rumble here and there, carrying their wet, dirty loincloths, their sandals, cane-sticks, and umbrellas, gathering for some gossip* […].[14]

[14] *mahitam iti tadānīm vidarbha-rājātmajā-pāṇi-pīḍotsavaṃ ceṇĕṟuṃ kautukaṃ kṣoṇipālāvalī-mānanīyam tuloṃ cĕnnukāṇeṇam ĕnn' ĕnnume nirṇṇayaṃ kaṇṇin' ĕnt'*

It turns out that Damayantī is not the only one who is having a hard time finding the right words to express herself. Yet, after claiming the impossibility of such a description even for someone who is as eloquent as Bṛhaspati (here termed *vākpati*, master of words), Maḷamaṅgalakkavi does just that, when, without any formal mark, one of the guests starts speaking in the first person. Maḷamaṅgalakkavi does not, however, implement an eloquent and lofty Sanskrit-style Maṇipravāḷam to describe these guests, but rather a colloquial, wild, and free-flowing Kerala-language. This seems like a meaningful statement on the power of his multifaceted idiom.

In a paper about three Nala and Damayantī retellings from Kerala, Freeman discusses this very section in Maḷamaṅgalakkavi's poem. He notes that "such settings seem deliberately and reflexively turned on the social milieu of Kerala" (Freeman 2011: 201), explaining how it is that the speaker came to be married to four Brahmin women, while his (likely) younger brother is free to roam around idly, and why having

anyathā maṟṟu sāphalyam ĕnnuṇma cinticc' uṭan vĕnmayil koppum iṭṭ' ĕṭṭudikkunn' uṭan puṣṭa-śobhaṃ sakautūhalaṃ vannukūṭunna nānā-janānām ŏro vāypulāvuṃ caritrāntaraṃ vāḻttuvān vākpatikkuṃ varā vākpaṭutvodayaṃ ĕtrayuṃ kautukaṃ cittatāriṅkal annasta-śaṅkaṃ naṭann' aṅṅum iṅṅum mudā taṅṅaḷil kaṇṭ' ŏro vārtta codikkayuṃ vāsuv ĕppŏḷ vaṭakkunnu vannū bhavan ĕtra nāḷ uṇṭu kāṇmān kŏṭikkunnu ñān pattu saṃvatsaraṃ pūrṇṇam āyī dṛḍham kaṣṭam ororŏ saṃsāram uḷkkŏṇṭ' 'sau muṭṭupāṭākakŏṇṭ' vaikīṭinen iṭṭināṟāṇan illatt' irikkunnanāḷ ŏṭṭu daṇḍiccu gehaṃ bhariccīṭumo ĕnt' aṟiññān avan cintayill' etume hanta ñāno valaññīṭinen iṅṅanĕ santatikk' ĕtrayuṃ saṅkaṭaṃ pāram ĕnn' ĕntuvān per avann akkaṇisan-girā kālame hanta ñān nālu veṭṭ' īṭinen nāliluṃ kūṭiyinn' orttukāṇuṃ vidhau pattu pĕṇṇuṅṅaḷ uṇṭ' uṇṇiy ill' ŏnnume raṇṭ' aṅṅ' akattu tiraṇṭ' irikkunnatuṃ raṇṭ' atinnāy' ŏrumpĕṭṭ' irikkunnatuṃ sāṃprataṃ raṇṭu cauḻaṃ kaḻiññiṭṭum uṇṭ' innlek kannikŏṇṭ' ŏnnin' annaṃ kŏṭutt' īṭinen pinnĕ mūnn' uṇṭu mūlaṃ mutalkāl piṟanniṭṭ' avaṟṟinnu periṭṭ' at' ill' iṅṅanĕ buddhi cĕlutteṇame pattumŏttīlayo cāttamūṭṭunnanāḷ ucca-neratt' ŏḻiññ' iṭṭināṟāṇanĕ kkāṇmatinn' ill' aho kayyil ill' etum ayyāyirattinnuporuṃ kaṭakkārar ĕnn' ittaram cāpalaṃ nīḻave tūkiyuṃ nūnam inn' ūmum uṇṭ' orttukŏḻḻaṇame koṇakaṃ kŏṇṭiṭaṃ vĕccu sūkṣiccupoykkālame cĕnn' upasthānavuṃ cĕytukŏṇṭ' iṅṅ' vanniṭṭuveṇaṃ viśeṣaṅṅaḷ oronn' uraccīṭuvān ĕnnum ity ādi ghoṣicc' umīṟan viḻuppuṃ cuvappuṃ cĕrippuṃ muḻaṃdaṇḍuṃ āchatravuṃ peṟiyŏkkĕp piṭicc' aṅṅum iṅṅuṃ naṭakkunna pṛtthvī-suraśreṇi […] (*daṇḍakam* 2)

ten daughters and no sons has been so devastating for him. All this is highly specific to Brahmin lifestyle and inheritance patterns in Kerala at the time, according to which the firstborn alone could marry within the caste and inherit his father's estate. His younger siblings were left to form romantic bonds with women of 'lower' matrilineal castes and function as their 'visiting' husbands, with no financial responsibilities, while his sisters would marry Brahmin firstborns, who could have up to four wives each. Freeman further notes the performative, 'carnivalesque' character of the text (*ibid.*: 203) and the fact that similar descriptions can be found in early Maṇipravāḷam works of the 13th and 14th centuries (*ibid.*). These earlier poems often depict such men as admirers of the courtesans who flock to their houses. In later poems, where courtesanship ceases to be a dominant literary theme, groom-selection ceremonies (*svayamvara*s) provide a good excuse for the insertion of such set pieces. One similar scene is found in Punam's *Rāmāyaṇa in Our Language*, just before Sītā's groom-selection ceremony. As I have shown elsewhere (Goren-Arzony 2019a: 317–321), similar scenes appear also in some Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage manuals. For example, in *Mantrāṅkam*, one such manual, men of different communities are described in detail as princess Vāsavadattā is walking through the streets of her city together with her maidservant.

The kind of humor that is presented by Maḷamaṅgalakkavi in this set piece is not only performative in the general sense but specifically reflects *Cākyārkkūttu*, which is one of Kerala's dramatic traditions. *Cākyārkkūttu* is a lively one-man show, based on Sanskrit verse but replete with local jokes, that is likened by Donald Davis to a 'roast' (Davis 2014: 94). Since *Cākyārkkūttu* was traditionally performed in Kerala's Brahmin temples, its audience consisted of Brahmins and their allied, temple-affiliated *ampalavāsi* communities. Many *Cākyārkkūttu* performances, as well as those of the jester (*vidūṣaka*) in the larger scale Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances,[15] are dedicated to 'roasting' the audience of

[15] Both performed by the same actors belonging to the same *Cākyār* community, but the first being a solo act and the second a part of a group performance.

Brahmins in a way that is both mocking and intimate and reflects great familiarity with their way of life. In this literary tradition, Brahmins are always hungry, greedy, absorbed in petty issues, and entangled in their multiple conjugal relationships. Thus, when our speaker loses count of his daughters, when he blames an astrologer, whose name he cannot even remember, for the decision to marry four times, and when he gripes about his relative Nārāṉan who cares only about food and then rushes himself to get a free lunch, he does so in a way that is familiar and meaningful to his readers. If part of the pleasure in reading about Nala and Damayantī in the vernacular results from the intuitive comparison we make with these characters as they appeared in Śrīharṣa's 12th-century Sanskrit poem and in other retellings, these particular sections activate a different kind of intuition, one grounded in Kerala's specific Brahmin milieu. See, for example, the description of a sorcerer (*mantravādin*) in the same *daṇḍakam* section:

> […] If you blow on them, they will fly! *Looking around, he puts some rings on his sacred thread and then goes looking for wealthy men*. When it comes to magic, you need have no doubt—who is there on earth better than me? If you're looking for a magic potion to get those pretty girls interested in you, let me tell you how: kill one crow and stuff it with areca nuts, then boil it for five days. As long as you live, not one of those sweethearts is ever going to leave you. And here is another recipe. In the whole wide world, there's no better obedience charm than the flesh of a raw green chameleon. And who on earth doesn't know that the most effective thing is a snake's tail? It's only when hardships come that this becomes visible. Bake a leech and grind it well. If you apply it to your forehead daily, all those beauties with their dark hair will be attracted to you—no doubt about it. And as for a miraculous potion to get the wife crazy about you, how many divine potions do I have for that! […][16]

[16] […] *ūtum ākil paṟannīṭum ammotira-śreṇiyĕ pūṇu nūlttannile tūkkiyuṃ kŏṇṭatuṃ nokki nokki kkanaṃ kaṇṭa mālokaroṭ' iṅṅanĕ teṇṭiyuṃ, mantravādattin' inn' ĕntupol saṃśayaṃ hanta ñān ĕnni maṟṟāru bhūmaṇḍale mallanerkaṇṇimār mānasaṃ kŏḷḷuvān nallanallauṣadhaṃ veṇṭukil cŏlluvan, kākanĕ kkŏnn' atinnuḷḷil iṭṭ' añcunāl vĕntaṭakkā kŏṭuttīṭil ājīvāntaṃ bhramicc' ĕnnume kannalnerkaṇṇimā verpĕṭā*

It seems that our author went to great lengths to choose the most gruesome ingredients for his sorcerer's potions. Doing something like this would certainly be suitable in the context of a 'roast:' both settings share the same kind of pointed humor and the same sense of intimacy mixed with a pinch of nastiness. Various authors (myself included) have noted the connection between the Cākyār community and Maṇipravāḷam literature.[17] The fact that such performative set pieces found their way into different Kerala compositions across the boundaries of genre and time supports this theory.

Yet, there must be more to this section than a comic relief or a set piece. We must also account for the decision to include it right at this very moment of the story—a moment that is not only at the peak of narrative tension but also a model of literary density. In a sense, in terms of the literary textures they weave, Maḻamaṅgalakkavi does exactly the opposite of Śrīharṣa: instead of compression he unleashes a wild disintegration, a raging plurality, like a great explosion of a dense core. This could be viewed as a parodical move, saying something of Śrīharṣa's unbelievable feat in his *pañcanālīya*. In the intertextual space where Maḻamaṅgalakkavi meets Śrīharṣa, the vernacular offers new possibilities of expression, and it does so in a way that is both surprising and unflinching.

The actual selection of the groom, totally forgotten by now, is described only after an extremely long prose piece in Sanskrit, describing Damayantī from head to toe (another favorite Kūṭiyāṭṭam set piece) and verses in which her nanny introduces the various kings who have come to ask for her hand. What happens at the end? How is Damayantī able to identify the real Nala? In this version of her tale, no linguistic

nirṇṇayaṃ, niścayicc'inni maṟṟŏnnu cŏllīṭuvān, paccayont'innakattuḷḷa māṃsattŏḷaṃ vaśyam āyiṭṭu maṟṟilla bhūmaṇḍale, sāramāy ŏnnitil cer-vāl ĕnnato pāril āre dhariccīlay ākunnatuṃ, kaṣṭam ĕnnākile dṛṣṭam ĕnnuṃ varuṃ, cuṭṭukŏṇṭ' aṭṭayĕ bhasmam ākki pparaṃ nityamāy nĕṟṟimel tŏṭṭukŏṇṭīṭukil kaṟṟavar kkuntalār uṟṟuvann ĕtrayuṃ paṟṟuṃ inṅoṭṭ'it'innilla kill'etume, saptamattĕ bhramippiccukŏṇṭītuvān ĕtrayuṇṭ'ittaraṃ nalla divyauṣadham […] *daṇḍakam* 2.

[17] See, for example, Nair 1971: 56–66; Veluthat 2013 and Goren-Arzony: 2019a.

feats take place. Rather, Damayantī finds a quick solution. When she sees the five Nalas, she immediately understands that "to amend a calamity caused by a god (just like tears of a child spanked by his mother), only bowing to a god is of help".[18] So she asks the goddess for help and gets a sign from the gods. The entire scene, from viewing the five Nalas until placing her garland on the right one, takes only five verses. This might feel somewhat anticlimactic, but it is not without reason: the climax is indeed behind us.

Conclusion

When we try to define a vernacular literature, we often search for features that distinguish it from the cosmopolitan literature. So, for example, we say that the vernacular is sweeter, more intimate, more local. Maṇipravāḷam literature teaches us that the vernacular can be all that while still incorporating many of the expressive possibilities of the cosmopolitan (Sanskrit) and that it can also change the cosmopolitan language while doing so. Maṇipravāḷam poets can simply cite or compose whole Sanskrit verses; their writing is endlessly resonant of the Sanskrit texts that they, as well as their audience, have read and memorized. At the same time, their literature can be colloquial, making use of the spoken language and thus reflecting specific aspects of the lives of their audiences. As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, a dual expressive mode, one which resonates with the concept of 'high and low,' can

[18] *devata-kṛta-virodha-śāntaye*
devatānamanam eva yujyate /
mātṛ-tāḍita-kumāra-rodanā
*mātar ehi paripāhi mām iti //*1.125

Note the aural effect of this verse, created both by the implementation of initial rhyming, here induced by the fact that the terms 'god' (*devatā*) and 'mother' (*mātṛ*/*mātar*) are repeated in the initial word of each line (this is usually considered a flaw in Sanskrit poetry but I think that the verse justifies it, because the repetition is intended) and by the usage of the *rathoddhatā* meter, resembling the energetic (*uddhata*) rumble of a war chariot (*ratha*).

be far more complex than a simple dichotomy, with Sanskrit considered high and the vernacular low. Even if tradition itself sometimes nurtures the idea of such a dichotomy, doubting the very feasibility of a register where both are closely bound together[19] in practice, nothing is less dichotomic than Maṇipravāḷam.

To return to Maḷamaṅgalakkavi, his poem embodies both loyalty to Maṇipravāḷam literature as it existed before him (in terms of form and content) and a lively conversation with voices being raised everywhere around him. This resonates with the fact that the composition of literary texts in both Sanskrit and Maṇipravāḷam in early modern Kerala was not the work of poets who were solely involved in the production of literature. As we know (but often ignore), wider networks of scholarly erudition were at play, and poets were also connected with (or were sometimes themselves scholars working on) various other disciplines such as ritual, mathematics, and grammar, disciplines that existed across linguistic borders. The more we learn about early modern Kerala and its intellectual history, the more such connections we can identify and the better we can understand local literatures such as Maṇipravāḷam.

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[19] I here refer to a section in the *Līlātilakam*, a 14th-century work on the grammar and poetics of Maṇipravāḷam, in which the following challenge is raised by an opponent: "What has this lowly, ungrammatical, and corrupt regional discourse to do with the words of mighty Sanskrit?" In Sanskrit: *atimahita-saṃskṛta-śabda-prastāve kā nāmāti nikṛṣṭāvācakāpabhraṣṭa-deśa-bhāṣā-varttā?* (*Līlātilakam*, p. 315).

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