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Worlds of Desire:
Gender and Sexuality in Classical Tamil Poetry

By

Elizabeth Rani Segran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

South and Southeast Asian Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor George Hart, Chair
Professor Paola Bacchetta
Professor Penelope Edwards

Fall 2011

Abstract

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University of California, Berkeley

Professor George Hart, Chair

This dissertation contributes to the nascent study of the Tamil *Caṅkam* corpus, a collection of poetic anthologies produced in the first three centuries CE. The *Caṅkam* poems are constructed around the two complementary themes of the “inner world” relating to emotions, romance and family life, and the “outer world” relating to kingship, warfare and public life. This dissertation argues that the thematic division within the corpus is gendered, as the “inner world” is associated with the feminine while the “outer world” is associated with the masculine. Each chapter explores the way that the poets establish the boundaries of femininity and masculinity through both the form and content of their verses. This dissertation focuses closely on the moments of rupture in the poets’ system of gender construction, for these moments suggest that the poets acknowledged that gender is more fluid and complex than it initially appears. To better understand the workings of gender and sexuality in these poems, this study juxtaposes recent theoretical frameworks with these poems from the distant past. Methodologically, this dissertation collapses traditional historical time, bringing the ancient *Caṅkam* anthologies into conversation with ideas that are circulating now. In doing so, it seeks to elucidate both the poems and the theory, while also opening up new questions in both fields.

Dedication

For my father.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to my three advisors, who have offered their insight and guidance through the writing of this dissertation. George Hart has been the kindest and most loyal advisor any student could ask for. He has encouraged me to pursue the ideas that have interested me, even when they seemed unconventional. He has always approached my work with enthusiasm and generosity. More than this, I have valued his friendship and his advice as I have navigated through the thorny patches of the doctoral program.

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Through this chapter of my life, I have relied on the love of my parents and fiancé, who have always believed in me and have supported me through the most difficult moments. It is their kindness that keeps me afloat.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Task of Measuring Silences

I

In this dissertation, I examine the way that gender and sexuality is constructed in anthologies of classical Tamil verse written in the first three centuries CE. These poems are collectively described as *Caṅkam* literature, named for the academies (*caṅkams*) of poets who composed the poems. The corpus is the oldest extant literature written in Tamil and occupies a canonical position in the cultural history of the Tamil people. The *Caṅkam* poets engage with many themes relating to life in the ancient Tamil country, including kingship, warfare and family life. Within the love genre, they present intricate descriptions of desire and sexual intimacy. Although the poems are highly stylized and abide by rigid poetic conventions, they display remarkable creativity and expressivity, as is evident in the following verse:

There was no one there,
only that man
who is like a thief.
If he lies, what can I do?
With little green legs like millet stalks,
a heron searched for eels in the running water
when he took me.¹

This intimate articulation of a woman's emotional state is typical of the love genre of classical Tamil poetry. Our speaker expresses ambivalence towards her lover. As she recalls their lovemaking, she is nostalgic about the closeness they shared but she is also resentful that he now denies his love for her. This man has betrayed her and she feels helpless to change his behavior. She compares him to a thief, for he has stolen both her heart and her innocence. With brevity, the speaker communicates her unfulfilled desire, her frustration and her sense of loss. Poems such as this present the seductive possibility that we may gain insight into the perspectives of premodern Tamil women. They appear to offer glimpses into the sexual cultures and complex emotional landscapes of early female figures. Yet, we cannot escape the fact that it is a male poet, Kapilar, channeling the female voice in this poem. Reading this verse two millennia on, can we construe the theft evoked here to take place at the level of poetic production? Has a woman's voice been usurped to achieve poetic or political ends? Is it anachronistic to read a sense of loss into this corpus, not unlike our speaker's loss over the intimacy that was so brusquely stolen from her?

While I ponder and address questions such as these in my dissertation, I acknowledge from the outset that many questions we bring to the *Caṅkam* corpus are met with silence. What little knowledge we have about the world in which the poems were written comes from the poetic archive alone. There is scant archeological or epigraphical evidence from this historical moment, so we have limited extratextual understanding about the social, cultural and material milieux of the *Caṅkam* age. We know nothing about the poets' positionalities nor do we know

¹ *Kuruntokai* 25, ascribed by Kapilar, translated by George Hart.

about the audiences for whom they were written. As no other textual evidence from this period has survived, we do not know what else may have been written or why this text in particular was preserved.

In the collective enterprise of producing and transmitting these poems over twenty centuries, much has been erased. Many voices involved in the writing and preserving of the corpus have been lost. What does a literary scholar do with a text surrounded at every point by erasures and ellipses? This kind of study requires being attuned to what the text does not say, or perhaps what it cannot say. To use the words of Gayatri Spivak, by way of Pierre Macherey, we are faced with the task of “measuring silences, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged.”² An awareness of silence enables us to consider the process by which some knowledge was selected for inclusion in the archive, while other knowledge was deliberately or unintentionally lost. Tracing the journey of silence also incites us not to fill in the gaps or speak on behalf of the text. Ventriloquism perpetuates the epistemic violence we are seeking to identify in the history of the *Caṅkam* corpus.

In this dissertation, I will think through the moments of silence to which I allude here. Let me begin by delineating the most recent chapter in the history of the *Caṅkam* corpus. The *Caṅkam* corpus had fallen into oblivion from the medieval period on because the religious institutions at the helm of literary scholarship considered the erotic descriptions in the poems frivolous.³ The *Caṅkam* anthologies fell out of mainstream circulation until 1883 when an Indian scholar named U. Ve. Cāminātaiyar discovered palm leaf copies of the poems in a corner of a monastery in Tiruvāvaṭuṭurai.⁴ His breakthrough started him on a quest to locate, publish and annotate the *Caṅkam* manuscripts. Cāminātaiyar’s labors laid the foundation for the corpus to be studied in the modern academy. His project has since been taken up by a range of scholars in India and around the world. Among them are George Hart, Martha Selby and A.K. Ramanujan in America, Takahashi Takanobu in Japan and Kamil Zvelebil and Herman Tieken in Europe. These scholars have begun the work of translating the poems to make them available to new generations of readers.

The poems of ancient Tamil offer scholars the opportunity to examine the formal and thematic elements of these pre-modern texts. The poems also open up the enticing, if tenuous, possibility of reconstructing the world of ancient South India. In this dissertation, I am interested in what these poems can tell us about the sexuality at work in the collective imaginations of the early Tamil people. Literature is a representational modality: it does not reflect historical reality. The themes and images in the *Caṅkam* poems are mediated by the highly stylized nature of Tamil literary conventions, the political economy structuring literary production and the ongoing process of redaction. These issues obfuscate our understanding of early Tamil culture, however, as I will show in what follows, reconstructing gender and sexuality during this period is not a hopeless endeavor. These poems document the fantasies and imaginings of these ancient people.

² Spivak (1994).

³ In the 18th century, the scholar Nakkiranar attempted to fit the sexual relationships in the poems into a Saiva devotional framework, but his efforts were largely unsuccessful.

⁴ Swaminathaiyer (1980), 259.

There are ways of teasing out valuable insights from the text, while remaining historically responsible. I will describe my methods in greater detail later in this introduction.

Indian and Western scholars have engaged with many issues surrounding the text, including the thorny questions of the poems' dating, authorship and readership as well as the influence of orality on their production. In this dissertation, I propose to examine the *Caṅkam* poems from a perspective that has been largely unexplored. Using frameworks derived from the feminist and post-structuralist movements, I delineate and analyze representations of gender and sexuality in the poems. Several scholars have performed cursory studies of women in the corpus. Nainar Subrahmanian (1966) and Devapoopathy Nadarajah (1969) have traced the presence of women in the *Caṅkam* anthologies without providing much critical analysis into the representational nature of poetic descriptions.⁵ George Hart (1975) and Martha Selby (2000) have shed light on the female subject and female sexuality in the poems, however their insights were primarily designed to open the discussion of gender in *Caṅkam* literature rather than to offer the definitive word on the subject.⁶ My project differs considerably from these other studies in scope and methodology.

II

The *Caṅkam* Corpus

Through this dissertation, I hope to be in conversation with scholars of gender and sexuality working on other cultures and historical periods. To make this study more accessible to those working outside of the field of Tamil studies, let me pause to provide a survey of the literature with which I will be dealing.

The corpus of classical Tamil poetry consists of eight poetic anthologies and ten long songs.⁷ I have included a detailed list of these compendiums in an appendix. All poetry within this tradition is divided into two genres: poetry of the interior (or *akam*) and its opposite, poetry of the exterior (*puṛam*). As evoked by their names, *akam* poems relate to the private world of love and domesticity while *puṛam* poems relate to the outer, public world of kingship and warfare.

Poetic Structure

The *Caṅkam* anthologies of poetry are accompanied by a work on grammar, poetic technique and linguistics called the *Tolkāppiyam*.⁸ There has been a great deal of debate about

⁵ Nadarajah (1969), Subrahmanian (1966).

⁶ Hart (1975), Selby (2000).

⁷ The Tamil name for the hyper-compilation of eight poetic anthologies is *Eṭṭuttōkai* and ten songs are called the *Pattuppattu*.

⁸ The format of the *Tolkāppiyam* consists of a series of brief sayings. It is divided into three sections: sounds, words and meaning. These correspond to our current linguistic fields of phonology, morphology and semantics.

whether this text was written before or after the anthologies.⁹ The current consensus is that the *Tolkāppiyam* was not written all at once but is a compilation of writings from many periods, parts of which were written before, during and after the time of the anthologies.¹⁰ Whether or not the *Tolkāppiyam* informed the *Caṅkam* poets, it has certainly affected how the poems have been read. The *Tolkāppiyam* also lays the foundation for the other major commentaries on the *Caṅkam* corpus, which contributed to the interpretative frameworks that readers have inherited. The most notable of these commentaries are the *Iraiyānār Akapporul* (circa 6th C CE) and Nakkirar's commentary (circa 8th C CE). The *Akapporul Vilakkam* (circa 14th C CE) is significant erudite work that replicates the conventions of the *Tolkāppiyam* by presenting verses followed by a commentary on how to write *akam* poems.¹¹ Taken together, this literary tradition provides vital insight into how readers have been conditioned to respond to the text. The *Tolkāppiyam*, in particular, allows us to glimpse how the earliest Tamil readership dealt with the intellectual and aesthetic processes involved in the act of reading.

Since this dissertation deals primarily with love themes in the *Caṅkam* corpus, I will focus on conventions associated with *akam* poems. The *akam* chapter of the *Tolkāppiyam* presents seven stages of love, of which only the middle five are deemed appropriate subjects of poetry: unrequited love, love in union, patient waiting, unfaithfulness, separation, love in hardship and mismatched love. The *Tolkāppiyam* establishes a symbology that connects each phase of love to specific natural imagery. According to this system, each type of love exists in a particular landscape (called a *tiṇai*), complete with specific flora and fauna, seasons and even times of day. The name of a flower is used to represent each phase of love as well as the nexus of emotions and natural images connected to it.¹² For instance, the wasteland (called *pālai*), with its connotations of barrenness and desolation, serves as the context for poems about abandonment. Martha Selby posits that each landscape has its own psychology that connects the physical surroundings with the emotional traits of characters. She imagines that, “the whole land itself is involved in romance and sex, and is allowed to emote.”¹³

⁹ George Hart (1975) refers to the epigraphical work of Iravatham Mahadevan (1971) to determine that the writing system in the *Tolkāppiyam* was not in use until several centuries after the anthologies were written. Therefore, he asserts that some parts of the *Tolkāppiyam* were written rather late. Kamil Zvelebil (1973) argues that the first two sections of the *Tolkāppiyam* were written around the second century B.C.E, while the *Porulatikaram* was written seven centuries later. K. Paramasivan (1980) argues on linguistic and stylistic grounds that the *Tolkāppiyam* was written by a single author before the period of the *Caṅkam* anthologies. He therefore dates the entire text to the second century B.C.E. Takahashi Takanobu (1995) provides a much more complex answer to the question. He divides the *Porulatikaram* into four chronological layers, with the earliest dating from the first through the third centuries C.E. Later sections that reveal greater Sanskrit influence he dates to the fourth through six centuries C.E.

¹⁰ Takanobu (1995), 16.

¹¹ Takanobu (1995), 15-35. Zvelebil (1973), 131-155, 247-263.

¹² Specifically, the lovers' union is associated with the kurinci flower found in the mountains; separation is associated with the *palai* flower found in the desert, patient waiting is associated with the mullai flower found in the forests, anxious waiting is associated with the neytal flower found on the seashore and the lover's infidelity is associated with the *marutam* flower associated with the countryside.

¹³ Selby (2000), 102.

<i>Tiṇai</i>	Geography	Romantic Situation
Kuṛiñci	Mountains	The lovers' first meeting and their subsequent clandestine trysts. The gossip that surrounds the new couple and the heroine's parents watching in anticipation.
Neytal	Seashore	Anxiety in love and lamenting the lover's absence.
Pālai	Wasteland	Mothers grieving their daughter's elopement. The heroine's grieving over her separation from the hero, who has left because of war or the pursuit of wealth.
Mullai	Forest pasture	The beginning of the rainy season, which signals the husband's eminent return. The wife's patient waiting.
Marutam	Cultivated fields	The husband's leaving of his wife to pursue courtesans. The wife's unhappiness about this philandering. The husband's desire for reconciliation with his wife.

These five *tiṇais* may be further divided into two categories: *kaḷavu*, secret love affairs before marriage and *karpu*, love that can be openly displayed after marriage. *Kuṛiñci* and *neytal* represent love before marriage, while *mullai* and *marutam* depict love after marriage. *Pālai* is an ambiguous space, in which the character's marital status is unclear. This division is elaborated in Iṛaiyaṅār's *Akapporuḷ* a treatise on the *akam* genre written between the 5th and 8th centuries. If we string the five phases together, they would appear to trace a narrative that takes the lovers through their love story into domestic family life. The 13th century grammar written by Nārkaṅkavirāca-nampi, the *Akapporuḷ vilakkam*, arranges the *tiṇais* in this sequence, which allows later theoreticians to adopt this narrative-based analysis to the poems. Alternatively, it is also possible to conceive of the landscapes reflecting specific behaviors of the tribal people that inhabited each of these geographical regions in the ancient Tamil country.¹⁴ In this framework, the various *tiṇais* would contain heroes and heroines with fundamentally different behaviors and traits.

The *akam* genre involves a speaker describing personal experiences with one of the five phases of love. These speakers are drawn from a small number of fixed characters comprising the hero, his friend, the heroine, her friends, her foster-mother, the 'other woman' and the occasional bystander. The speakers do not address readers directly; instead, readers simply observe what is taking place in the poetic microcosm.¹⁵ According to poetic convention, the speaker is located in the landscape that corresponds to that particular variety of love. In the

¹⁴ See Sivathamby, K. "Early South Indian Society and Economy: The *Tiṇai* Concept." *Social Scientist*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Dec., 1974): pg. 20-37.

¹⁵ The *Tolkāppiyam* contains rigid specifications about the situations that may be discussed, when the speaker is allowed to speak and to whom. While the *Canṅkam* poems may be enjoyed on their own terms, those familiar with conventions laid out in the *Tolkāppiyam* have access to the layers of implied meaning that the poets incorporate into the poems.

following poem, for instance, the speaker is a woman located in countryside, known as the *marutam* landscape:

Listen:
That woman you've taken is gullible.

They say that she's proud
of her own great beauty
which rivals mine,
but I cannot rival her.

Many have dulled her hair
and her bright forehead,
more than there are bees
sucking honey from budding flowers.¹⁶

In this poem, the landscape is associated with the phase of love in which a man is unfaithful to his wife. Here, the wife describes the other woman, presumably a prostitute, whom her husband has been visiting. Speakers in the poems typically describe aspects of their immediate surroundings. This situates the speaker within the natural world, but it also allows them to speak figuratively, as the external world reflects and symbolizes the internal world of emotions and thoughts. In this poem, the wife describes the bees sucking on honey from a flower nearby, but this image also metaphorically stands for the many men who have tasted of the prostitute's sexuality. Readers familiar with Tamil literary traditions share a poetic language with the poets. The poets have the power to evoke emotions and ideas in their readers merely by alluding to images in the natural world.

The rules governing speakers in *puram* poems differ significantly from these. Unlike the *akam* poems that present us with a poetic microcosm abstracted from historical time and place, the *puram* verses are grounded in the material reality of the ancient Tamil country. The poems explicitly mention the names of kings, poets and cities. They recount real events, including wars, festivals and deaths. As such, the atmosphere of the *puram* anthologies differs significantly from the *akam* ones. Although the *Tolkāppiyam* applies the *tinai* system to both genres of poetry, the *puram* poems do not deploy the extensive symbology used in the *akam* verses. *Akam* and *puram* are opposites in many ways, however, Martha Selby suggests that we think of the two genres as complementary systems that occasionally share a common vocabulary.¹⁷ The meaning in each genre depends on the existence of the other. I will elaborate on the conventions of the *puram* poems and their connection with the *akam* poems in the chapter on masculinity.

Historical Problematics

There has been considerable discussion about when the poems were composed. I work on the assumption held by many scholars that the poems were produced in the first three centuries CE. Kamil Zvelebil, provides extensive arguments for these dates in *The Smile of Murugan*

¹⁶ Selby (2000), 205.

¹⁷ Selby (2000), 47.

(1973), building on the work of earlier historians such as Nilakanta Sastri and Vaiyapuri Pillai.¹⁸ In his book he provides comprehensive evidence drawn from linguistic, epigraphic, archeological, numismatic and historical data, both internal and external to the text, to conclude that the earliest segments of the *Caṅkam* corpus are dated between 100 BCE and 250 CE.¹⁹ He further specifies that the *Pattuppāṭṭu*, the *Paripāṭal* and the *Kalittokai* were composed slightly later than the others based on epigraphical, stylistic and linguistic indications in the poems.²⁰

In his controversial book, *Kavya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry* (2001), Herman Tieken dates the *Caṅkam* corpus much later, to the ninth or tenth centuries CE. His theory is that the poems were written by Pāṇṭiyaṅ court poets who were attempting to retroactively produce a classical Tamil literature to rival that of Sanskrit. To do this, the poets would have had to study and reproduce names, literary styles and history from Tamil culture centuries before.²¹ His argument has been largely rejected by the Tamil scholarly community.²² Scholars have questioned his philology, his rejection of the epigraphical evidence and his inability to provide the Pāṇṭiyaṅ poets with a motivation “to portray a pure Tamil society”.²³

When considering debates about poems’ dating, it is also worth thinking about the process of anthologization and redaction that resulted in our current version of the corpus. According to Tieken’s theory, the *Caṅkam* anthologies would have been written as unified works. It is unlikely that this was the case. It is more plausible that there were many phases of transmission involved in the preservation of the *Caṅkam* corpus, each influencing the product that exists today. Between the 8th and the 14th centuries, there was a glut of commentarial activity surrounding the corpus. During this period, the poems were anthologized, redacted and codified then submitted to extensive comments, annotations and interpretations. It is possible that

¹⁸ Zvelebil (1973), Zvelebil (1992).

¹⁹ Zvelebil (1973), 41.

²⁰ Zvelebil (1973), 119.

Many Tamil scholars also cite the work of the epigrapher Iravatham Mahadevan, who asserts that an inscription in Pukalūr dated to about 200 CE refers to Chera chieftains mentioned in several *Caṅkam* anthologies, most notably the *Patirruppattu*. (Mahadevan (1971), 94.)

For instance, Hart believes that the other six anthologies were all written in the first three centuries CE because, “...the language is too consistent and does not contain forms and words that Mahadevan has shown occur in the earliest inscriptions of the second and first centuries B.C., or that occur later in such literature as the *Cilappaiṅkāram*. The people mentioned in these anthologies, moreover, seem all to have lived within about ten generations. It is almost certain, then, that the six earliest Tamil anthologies were written in the first, second, and third centuries A.D., after the use of the old Brāhmī script, which was probably first adapted for Tamil during the reign of Aśoka (272-232 B.C.), had become standardized and after literacy in it had spread widely.” (Hart (1975), 8-9.)

²¹ Tieken argues that the style of the *Caṅkam* corpus is akin to Prākṛit, particularly the *Sattasaī*, in the way that the poems reflect how sophisticated urban classes imagined the awkward, impoverished lives of villagers. He thus implies that the *Caṅkam* poems are derivative of northern traditions, in direct contradiction of Hart’s conclusions that ancient Tamil poetry is generally free of North Indian influence.

²² See Cox (2002), Monius (2002) and Hart (2004).

²³ Tieken (2000), 140.

hundreds of poems were taken out of the final anthologies because they did not conform to the poetic frameworks articulated by the commentarial community.²⁴ As such, we cannot take the corpus to be a depiction of the ideologies and imaginings of the original poets. It is a heavily collaborative work that reflects the values and taxonomic impulses of generations of redactors.

The Problem of Poetic Production

In attempting to historicize the poems, another complicating factor is the poems' authorship. Our knowledge of the Tamil poets is limited to a few sparse details that we can infer from the poems themselves. Our efforts to discover the poem's historical context seem to be frustrated at every turn. We are not the first scholars interested in the poets of the Tamil anthologies. The identities of the *Caṅkam* poets have been a source of fascination for centuries. A curious legend about the production of the *Caṅkam* corpus gained currency in the 7th century. Nakkīrar's commentary, the *Iraiyāṇār Akapporuḷ*, tells the story of the three great academies, or *Caṅkams*, that produced the anthologies. The first was located at the southern tip of Maturai, which was submerged by the sea after the great deluge. It consisted of 4449 poets, among whom were gods and sages, including Śiva, Muruka, Kubera and Agastya. The second *Caṅkam* was situated in Kapātapuram, also submerged now. It lasted 3700 years and contained 3700 poets. During this *Caṅkam*, the *Tolkāppiyam* was written and became the normative grammar. Finally, the third *Caṅkam* is situated in upper Maturai. It lasted for 1850 years, under 49 kings. It included 449 poets which was presided by Nakkīrar.²⁵

There is little within this mythology that offers useful information about the *Caṅkam* poets. However, the story does reveal there that has been a demand for a narrative about the poem's origins for centuries. Knowledge about the historical poets of the Tamil anthologies was so obscure by the 7th century that this legend was able to circulate widely. The legend of the *Caṅkams* is so deeply connected to the poems that it has given the corpus its name. *Caṅkam* poetry and the *Caṅkam* age both carry traces of this myth in their nomenclature. Nakkīrar's deliberate articulation and circulation of the legend also indicates that factions in Tamil society were invested in reifying the corpus to ensure that it established a place in the collective memory. In other words, the poems have been a contested site in the making of Tamil cultural history for over a millennium.

Modern scholars, skeptical of the legend, have attempted to discover information about the poem's origins and the poet's identities using philological data. Four hundred and seventy-three poets are identified in the epigraphs, but many others are anonymous.²⁶ 154 of the poets have feminine names. If these names refer to actual female poets, it would seem that women were actively involved in the process of literary production during this time. However, it is difficult to distinguish male-authored poems from female-authored ones because all the poems in the corpus conform to the rigid poetic conventions I have described. The poems cannot reveal an

²⁴ Zvelebil (1973), 26.

²⁵ Zvelebil (1973), 47.

²⁶ For instance, the name Orerulavanar means "The Poet of The Single Plow".

authentic female perspective because the poems were not expressions of personal emotion or individual experience. Moreover, it would be problematic to conflate the poet with the speaker. The poets chose from a list of conventionalized speakers and often wrote in both male and female voices. In this dissertation, as I make sense of gender construction in this poetry, this sparse knowledge of the poems' authorship opens up a range of questions. How much control did women have over literary representations of the feminine in the corpus? What do we make of the male poets' use of the female voice?

By all accounts, the poetic academy was male-dominant. From the poets' names, some scholars posit that they were also upper caste, with about a tenth being Brahmin, but many other castes were represented among the group.²⁷ Despite the diversity within this community of writers, the poems are stylistically homogeneous. This indicates that the poets were not writing as individuals, but as a collective. The poets appear to have been in dialogue with one another, if not orally, then by responding to each other's work. They were constantly adding new dimensions to a shared imaginative space.

The tradition does everything possible to depersonalize the poetry. All parties implicated in the writing process are anonymous: the subject, the audience, even the location. Unlike the *puram* verses, *akam* characters are never given names. Moreover, these stock characters can only express themselves in closely delineated contexts that are described in the *Tolkāppiyam*. For example, friends of the heroine may speak only when the heroine is abandoned by her lover, when she helps the couple elope, when she comforts the grieving mother, etc. The rigid structure of the poems mean that they are never truly spontaneous expressions of emotion.

As we attempt to draw out historical details from the poems, it is important to remember that we have no access to an original version of the poems and we know little about the process of anthologization. Let me describe in more detail the method by which the poems were classified and codified. This process happened in stages, over centuries, to arrive in its current form. Many poems produced during the *Caṅkam* age are likely to have been removed from the corpus. The coherence in the corpus, both in style and content, may be the result of centuries of editors who judiciously withdrew poems that did not conform to their standards.

Takanobu Takahashi argues that the anthologization of the poems took place over the course of half a millennia, between 50 CE and 550 CE, as the ancient Tamil dynasties of the Cēras, Cōlas and Pāṇṭiyas began to decline. In their place, the northern Pallava kingdom came to prominence. Many cultural changes took place with this transition, including the introduction of the Aryan languages of Sanskrit, Prakrit and Pali into the Tamil country. Under Pallavan patronage, the several major religions - Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism - began to grow in influence, affecting the literary landscape. During this period, *Caṅkam* themes of love and war began to be reworked into religious frameworks, giving rise to a new wave of devotional poetry reminiscent of *Caṅkam* verse. The anthologization process was therefore a reaction to this change: it was an attempt to preserve the original *Caṅkam* corpus and canonize it as the literature of the Tamil golden age. It was also during this period that the legend of the *Caṅkams* began to circulate. This history of the text makes clear that factions within the Tamil country were deeply

²⁷ Hart (1975), 149. Hart uses evidence drawn from K.K. Pillay, "Aryan Influences in Tamilaham during the Sangam Epoch," *Tamil Culture* 12, nos. 2 and 3 (1966): 159-170.

defining the Tamil tradition as separate and distinct from its northern counterparts. The *Caṅkam* corpus came to symbolize a moment when Tamil culture was still pure and unadulterated. The text became a site of political and cultural struggle, a cornerstone in the formulation of a Tamil history and identity.

Takahashi posits that it took about fifty years to anthologize the oldest texts, the *Kuṟuntokai*, the *Narṟinai* and the *Akanānūru*.²⁸ The *Aiṅkuṟunūru* and *Kalittokai* were probably anthologized soon after they were composed: many of the poems in these two appear to be deliberately written in cycles or series that match the internal structures of the earlier anthologies. The other anthologies that we consider part of the *Caṅkam* corpus, the *Paripāṭal* and the *Kalittokai* and the *Patirruppattu*, were probably written and anthologized much later. This compilation process resulted in a standardized style and formalized terminology.

The practice of anthologization was deeply related to interpretation. As poems were selected for inclusion into an anthology, it became the norm to include a colophon with the poem which gave the reader a particular exegesis of the poem's content. These colophons, called *turaiś*, present specific information about each poem, such as the situation, the theme, the speaker and the author. Using philological analysis, Takahashi posits that the earliest colophons were produced in the fourth century CE, by anthologizers who attached them to the poems as a kind of brief memo. The majority of the colophons were produced later, between the fifth and seventh centuries. By the eighth century, commentators were relying heavily on the colophons to understand the poems. These colophons have been connected to the poems almost from the moment of their production and continue to be printed with modern editions of the *Caṅkam* texts. They have significantly affected the way that these poems have been read.

Commentators and grammarians have also had a crucial role to play in the production of meaning in the *Caṅkam* corpus. As previously mentioned, *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest extant Tamil grammar, presents extensive analysis on the meaning in the *Caṅkam* poems in its third volume, the *Poruḷatikāram*.²⁹ A number of commentaries were later written to explain the more ambiguous aspects of the *Tolkāppiyam* and build on it.³⁰ One of the most influential commentaries produced on the *akam* poems is Nakkīrar's work. Kamil Zvelebil fixes the date of this commentary to the 8th century CE. In this text, Nakkīrar presents a commentary on the *Irāiyanār Akapporuḷ* (circa 5th century CE), the treatise on the *akam* poems, ascribed to the god Śiva, in which the legend of the three *Caṅkams* is first articulated. In this lucid text, Nakkīrar lays out the five stages of love as a serial love narrative which was an instrumental intervention. Nakkīrar also refers to the opinions of another school of scholars, indicating that he was writing in the midst of lively literary debate. Nakkīrar's text was regularly cited in medieval commentaries. Another important erudite work on the *akam* poems is the grammar written by Nārkavirāca-nampi entitled the *Akapporuḷ Viḷakkam*. Written between the 13th and 14th centuries,

²⁸ See Takahashi (1995), 231-232.

²⁹ Scholars believe that this text was produced between the third and sixth centuries, after the earliest *Caṅkam* poems were written and during the production of the later *Caṅkam* verses. See Takahashi (1995), 16.

³⁰ These other works, such as the 12th century commentary by Ilampuranar, the 13th century commentary by Peraciriyar and the 14th century commentary by Naccinarkkiniyar elucidate the *Tolkāppiyam*, but also build on it.

this text presents a taxonomy of *akam* themes into 32 subcategories and nearly 500 mini-themes. With this system, the *Akapporuḷ Viḷakkam* transitions from an analysis based on the speaker of the poem, to an analysis based on themes. This theme-based analysis was adopted by all theoreticians after Nakkīrar. It is important to note that these commentaries also relied heavily on the colophons. Thus, their analysis was fundamentally derivative.

Within the field of Tamil studies, scholars have not adequately problematized the relationship between the poems and their historical context. This brief history of the anthologization and commentarial tradition highlights the difficulty, indeed impossibility, of definitively locating the origins of the *Caṅkam* corpus. The text itself and the meaning projected onto it has been in an ongoing state of flux. Rather than imagining that the corpus was produced in a single historical moment by a group of poets, it is perhaps more productive to think of it as an evolving document that took on new dimensions over time. The corpus itself was never a fixed, integrated entity, and even as it changed, the meaning attached to it was highly unstable. The text was deployed by different groups to achieve different ends at different points in history. We cannot assume that our received knowledge about poetic production and authorship is historically accurate. No productive methodology has yet been developed for historicizing the corpus. Here, I do not attempt to solve the range of historical problematics specific to early Tamil literature. However, I suggest new avenues through some of these impasses by considering literary and historical approaches drawn from other literary traditions. In the next section, I examine a range of methodologies that I believe will be constructive in my analysis of the *Caṅkam* corpus.

III

Methods

Poststructuralism

My work, in contrast to what has come before, takes into account insights regarding the construction of meaning in texts and in society developed over the last forty years. This dissertation is an experiment in thinking through premodern literature with postmodern frameworks. The study of the *Caṅkam* corpus in the modern academic context developed in the late sixties and early seventies, at the same time as the poststructuralist movement was taking shape. However, there has not been any significant interaction between scholars in these two spheres. While Tamil scholars approached the text from historical and philological perspectives, few considered how the poststructuralist intervention could present new interpretative frameworks for the poems. Daniel Boyarin (1995) and David Halperin (1991) have pioneered this kind of scholarship in their analyses of sexuality in Talmudic culture and classical antiquity respectively.³¹ Their work provides a very useful model for my own, particularly as I consider the many potential pitfalls that this kind of methodology entails, not least the problem of falling into anachronisms.

³¹ Boyarin (1995), Halperin (1991).

Before I describe how poststructuralist theory affects my own work, let me briefly describe what I mean by the term. I define poststructuralism as the rejection of the notion that meaning comes from some sort of deep structure or binary system. I take difference and otherness to be constructed meanings rather than objective truths. What connects poststructuralists, despite their diverse disciplinary backgrounds and their varied responses to structuralism, is the drive to question ideas that appear to be stable, natural and known. The poststructural mode of analysis, known as deconstruction, can be applied to many belief systems and ideologies. Indeed, some would argue that all beliefs need to be deconstructed as bearers of some residual metaphysics.

While Jacques Derrida, the pioneer of the poststructuralist method, focused primarily on language and signification, Michel Foucault turned his attention to the institutions and disciplines that control the circulation of knowledge in society.³² Although Foucault also sought to displace the subject from a transcendent center, thereby rendering the subject incoherent and fragmented, he wanted to move beyond language to a broader system of language and practices, which he described as discourse. With this intervention, Foucault was able to broaden the scope of the discussion opened by the poststructuralists to consider the relationship between power and knowledge.

In this dissertation, my approach to meaning within the text will be mediated by these poststructuralist and Foucauldian notions. My presupposition is that signification in text is essentially unstable and does not emanate from a privileged center. Poststructuralist practice demands textual vigilance to the fluid, ongoing process by which meaning is produced. As I deal with the issues of gender, sexuality and history, my goal is to go beyond observable phenomena in text to consider how these meanings may be constructed. As such, I ask whose beliefs are being articulated in the poems? In what sociocultural context? What is at stake in the pursuit of such beliefs and under what circumstances should they be attacked?

Poststructuralism undergirds the two other theoretical frameworks that feature prominently in my dissertation: feminist theory and new historicism. In the following sections, I describe the feminist and new historicist influences on my work in the theoretical frameworks that I deploy and the critical practices that I adopt.

Gender and Sexuality

A great deal of feminist criticism may be described as poststructuralist because it is invested in deconstructing presuppositions, particularly about gender.³³ In this dissertation, my starting position is that gender is not biologically determined but is culturally constructed. This idea is famously articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) when she claims

³² Michel Foucault explicitly distanced himself from both the structuralist and poststructuralist movements, although his methods and theories aligned with those of many poststructuralist thinkers.

³³ Although feminists have occasionally had a vexed relationship with the poststructuralist movement, claiming that it is ideologically rooted in patriarchy and masculinism. See Miller, Nancy K, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader," in Teresa de Laurentis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). pp 102-120 and Schor, Naomi, "Dreaming Dissymmetry: Barthes, Foucault, and Social Difference," in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 109.

that, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”³⁴ Beauvoir’s formulation implies that there is a distinction between sex and gender. She posits that one becomes a woman not by having a female-sexed biological body, but through a process of initiation into a culturally constituted identity. Her construction of gender enabled her to make the argument that a woman’s biology has no bearing on her social destiny.

However, Beauvoir’s separation of gender and physiology appears to make the sexed body irrelevant to the individual’s gendered cultural identity. Foucault offers a way through this impasse by suggesting that the body is a principal target of power in society. With this conceptual move, Foucault provides a way to think about the body without reducing its materiality to a fixed biological essence.³⁵ Foucault insists that the corporeal reality of the body is directly molded by social and historical forces.

Judith Butler builds on Beauvoir’s and Foucault’s formulations of the body with her theory of gender performativity, which incorporates personal agency into the gendering of the body. Butler asserts that the body is rather more protean than the sex/gender distinction suggests.³⁶ She argues that both sex and gender are constituted simultaneously through choice and acculturation. According to her theory, gender is not a stable identity, but rather an identity tenuously constituted over time through a stylized repetition of bodily acts. Gender is instituted through the body by, “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”³⁷ She offers an empowering understanding of gender, because she asserts that gender can be transformed through breaking or deliberately subverting stylistic repetitions. Nonetheless, Butler acknowledges that there are powerful, entrenched social forces that dictate how the body should be cultivated. Specifically, Butler highlights the system of compulsory heterosexuality, documented by anthropologists across diverse cultures, as a means of conditioning the body to abide by specific appearances, desires and sexual dispositions. Here, she agrees with Michel Foucault, who also argues that sex, gender and heterosexuality have become inextricably connected in society and reified as natural.

My chosen formulation of gender is important because it has a bearing on how I interpret representations of gender in the Old Tamil poems. We have very little access to knowledge about premodern Tamil culture apart from what we can gather from *Caṅkam* texts themselves. The brief glimpses we do catch, however, indicate that gendered meanings and practices were constituted very differently from our own. It is therefore vital that we avoid exporting modern

³⁴ Beauvoir (1989), 267: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization that produces this creature...In so far as he exists in and for himself, the child would hardly be able to think of himself as sexually differentiated.”

³⁵ Foucault (1978), 151-152: “...deployments of power are directly connected to the body - to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations and pleasures...I do not envisage a “history of mentalities” that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a “history of bodies” and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested.”

³⁶ Butler (1986), 38: : “The body is not a static phenomenon, but a mode of intentionality, a directional force and a mode of desire. As a condition of access to the world, the body is being comported beyond itself, sustaining a necessary reference to the world, and, thus, never a self-identical natural entity.”

³⁷ Butler (1988), 519.

constructions of gender into the ancient world. The theories of gender that I have delineated, when deployed with care, avoid simple generalizations or easy essentialisms about gender identity. Indeed, in poststructuralist critiques of essentialism, the presupposition is that subjects are inherently unstable. As such, it is questionable whether fixed gendered identities can be categorically applied to women and men. When we consider masculine or feminine figures in literature produced in a time and place so radically different from our own, we need to be even more vigilant about not foisting our modern frameworks onto the text.

According to Beauvoir, Foucault and Butler, gender identity is in an ongoing process of cultural constitution. Bodies are also in a perpetual state of transition, as they are disciplined by social forces (according to Foucault) as well as by personal decisions to adhere to social scripts (according to Butler). If we deploy these ideas in the practice of literary analysis, we may consider how representations of gender, bodies and sexuality are shaped by discourse. From a feminist perspective, I examine the literary images of women. I also think through how women are related to literary representation as producers and consumers of *Caṅkam* texts. With a marked dearth of extra-textual sources, this kind of social analysis relies on a degree of speculation. Still, it is possible to arrive at some educated hypotheses about women's involvement in textual production based on the limited knowledge we have.

These literary practices can also be used to examine the issue of sexuality. In this dissertation, I treat sexuality not as a natural fact, but as the cultural interpretations of the human body's erogenous zones and sexual capacities. This particular understanding of sexuality is derived from Michel Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), in which he distinguishes sex from sexuality. Sex, according to Foucault, can be understood as the body's genital functions and capacities for arousal - in other words, aspects of human experience which are effectively outside of history and culture. On the other hand, sexuality makes room for the possibility that the norms and practices of sexual activity vary from culture to culture. The concept of sexuality enables me to approach the *Caṅkam* poems with an awareness that the most basic aspects of life, including sexual contact, may have been understood differently. It also allows me to recognize that the meaning of sex in the poems is only intelligible in the context of other themes interwoven in the fabric of the text. As such, it needs to be studied alongside gender relations, politics, labor and wealth, to name but a few areas of relevant literary discourse.

From the outset, it is obvious that the world represented in early Tamil verse is dramatically different from ours.³⁸ When we turn our attention to the *Caṅkam* poems, we cannot assume that the plethora of ideas and behaviors related to love, desire, marriage, adultery and reproduction were necessarily organized under the rubric of sexuality. Nor would they have been produced by poets whose sense of self was determined by their sexuality. Therefore, while this theorization of sexuality is productive in the study of ancient literature, it must be deployed with the understanding that it is itself a modern construct - one that may not exist in the poems or in the culture in which the poems were written. At this juncture, it is necessary to move beyond the space of the poem into the world of the poets and their original audience. As I explore gender and sexuality in these poetic works of the imagination, it becomes inevitable to consider the relation of the literary text to the rest of culture.

History

The notion that we have no unmediated access to reality was a central one during the poststructuralist movement. To borrow from Stephen Heath, reality is a matter of representation.³⁹ This has been particularly apparent to me throughout my reading of the *Caṅkam* corpus. All that we know about the world of ancient Tamil country, we know through poetic representations. Yet there is no simple way to make sense of the relationship between literary representation and historical reality. It is obvious that the poetic portrayals in the corpus are not simple reflections of reality, but neither are they completely abstracted from the real world. Poets integrate their experiences of life into the images and themes of their poetry.

To complicate matters, reality itself is constituted through representations. Representations have a way of entering our collective social understandings; they serve to constitute our sense of selves and the positions we take up in the world. We can assume that the Tamil poems had a kind of dialogic relationship with the society in which they circulated. They

³⁸ To better understand how sexuality is constituted in the text, it is productive to consider the lenses through which we perceive sexuality in our own moment. Although it would be impossible to condense the wide variety of individual sexual experiences in modernity, it is still helpful to describe with broad strokes the tendencies in current sexualities to situate our ourselves in relation to the text. In the introduction to *Before Sexuality* (1990), a volume of essays on sexuality in classical antiquity, the editors perform this very exercise by listing qualities evident in the modern, Western, middle-class experience of sexuality. They argue that in individualistic and industrialized societies, our model of personality is largely centered on sex:

“Sexuality represents the most intimate feature of an individual, that dimension of the personality which it takes longest to fathom and which, when finally known, reveals the truth about much of the rest...sexuality is thought to provide a key to unlocking the mysteries of the self, even for my self: that is, I can explore and discover what my sexuality is... It has become a new category - central and centralized; universally organized as a tool for understanding, place and controlling individuals; ramified into many branches so that everyone sits somewhere on the schematic tree.”

This particular version of sexuality has a history. It evolved from the Enlightenment notion of the private life and was reinforced by the Christian confessional. It then solidified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the *scientia sexualis*, a field of study which reified sexuality endowing it with discursive power. This brief genealogy suggests that modern, Western sexuality is a unified set of concepts and practices that center on the self.

³⁹ Heath, Stephen. “Narrative Space,” *Screen* 17, no 3 (Autumn 1976): 73.

were based, in part, on the material realities of early Tamil society, and they also shaped the way that people imagined their own lives. The problem with this source material is that we are separated from it by a vast gulf of time, making it impossible for us to determine exactly how it reflected or influenced the culture in which it was produced.

Poststructuralist thought affects the way that I approach history in this dissertation. Within a poststructuralist perspective, historical narratives are always called into question, even in texts that purport to be written in a historical genre. Problems with the construction of historical meaning are compounded when the text is of a fictional nature, which is the case with the *Caṅkam* poems. The question of historicity in the *Caṅkam* corpus is notoriously tricky. In the *akam* genre, characters are so abstracted from reality that they are not even given proper names. In the *puram* genre, while poets use the names of people and events, the poems adhere to such rigid poetic conventions that they deliberately draw attention to their own artificiality. These problems are compounded by the dearth of extra-textual knowledge about the period in which the poems were written. As such, it is very difficult to corroborate any hypotheses we may have about the cultural and historical realities about the *Caṅkam* age. Given these serious complications, how do we go about historicizing our readings of the poems? Before I present my own method, let me briefly examine how other *Caṅkam* scholars have approached the question of history.

Since the early twentieth century, scholars have attempted to use the *Caṅkam* corpus as a historical document. Among the more recent of these, Nainar Subrahmanian and Devapoopathy Nadarajah produced extensive histories of the *Caṅkam* age in *Sāṅgam Polity* (1966) and *Women in Tamil Society - The Classical Period* (1969) respectively. Both treat the poems as uncomplicated statements of historical fact.⁴⁰ These scholars fleetingly acknowledge the pitfalls of positivistic historiography, however, they do not believe that these problems will undermine their project nor do they suggest strategies to mitigate them.

V. T. Manickam, in his book on the *marutam* poems, explicitly articulates his belief that,

“Literature is at bottom an expression of life. It reflects the customs and civilization of the age. The *Caṅkam* poets, who very well knew what literature is, have described without

⁴⁰ Subramanian (1966), vii: “The purpose of this work is to give an exhaustive and authentic account of the governmental and social polity of the Tamils of the Sangam age. For this purpose the main source of information, namely, the ‘Sangam literature’ has been utilised *in extenso*. This source material has been most considerable and useful; but has not been so fully utilised at any time before for the reason that most of the scholars who did pioneering work in this field of historical research had little direct means of access to the source.”

Subrahmanian (1966), 14: “The Tamil Sangam literature like any other is capable of exaggerating; but still it contains a large fund of correctly recorded material of considerable assistance to a historian...Legends, of course, are not scientifically useful. But when they corroborate evidence adduced by other sources or suggest useful hypotheses, they must be treated as tolerable evidence.”

Nadarajah (1969), 4: “Though literature is not a mirror of society, it is certainly an ‘imitation’ of ‘life’. It imitates chiefly the social life of the people besides throwing occasional light on the political life.”

In her introduction, she quotes from Rene Wellek and Austin Warren’s article on the Theory of Literature (1949) in which they observe, “Used as a social document, literature can be made to yield the outlines of social history.”

hiding the fact in their poems the existence of this system (prostitution) in ancient Tamil society, where a strict standard of morality was observed.”⁴¹

Manickam treats the text as a transparent record of life in the ancient world. He states, without providing any evidence, that ancient Tamil society was governed by rigid codes of morality. He takes the references to prostitution in the poems to indicate their historical accuracy because, according to his logic, a moral society would not document immoral social practices unless they were attempting to paint an authentic picture of their society. His fundamental assumption that the *Caṅkam* poems are somehow reflective of real life needs to be thoroughly deconstructed. Artifice is an inherent in poetic production. Moreover, it is necessary to ask whose perspective these poems would be portraying, if they indeed were representative of a worldview. Given the complex social structures and heterogeneity at work in the process of poetic production, whose reality would these poems be reflecting? That of the wealthy classes, or that of the common folk? That of women, or that of men?

Kartigesu Sivathamby applies a more sophisticated, Marxist historiographical approach to the *Caṅkam* poems.⁴² According to his analysis, the various *tiṇai* landscapes in the poems corresponded to prehistoric Tamil geographical realities, which by extension, produced various modes of production and social systems. The five stages of love in the poems were a product of the economic organization of each region. Sivathamby’s argument that the *Caṅkam* poems mirror life in ancient Tamil country is convincing at times. He asserts that the *tiṇai* system, unique to Tamil poetry, reflects the geographical diversity in the pre-historic period and the resultant social structures. Still, he ignores the literary basis of this landscape categorization. The entire commentarial tradition from the *Tolkāppiyam* onward makes no reference to the geographical or social aspects of *tiṇai*. The system is conceived in purely poetic terms, as a means of structuring the content of the verses. Sivathamby’s speculations about the material realities that may have inspired the *tiṇai* concept are interesting, but ultimately, it is impossible to make definitive claims about the early Tamil social structures based on a system of poetic conventions.

George Hart provides a nuanced historical analysis of the *Caṅkam* poems. In *The Poems of Ancient Tamil* (1975), Hart does not explicitly problematize literary representation and historicity but refrains from drawing vast conclusions about the ancient Tamil life. Instead, he identifies themes and phenomena that occur in the verses, using them as evidence that these ideas circulated in the culture. For instance, he observes that women in the poems are often tabooed after giving birth and concludes that women were considered to be bearers of sacred power in ancient Tamil culture. He corroborates his hypotheses with structuralist anthropological studies of so-called ‘archaic peoples’, such as Ernest Crawley’s *The Mystic Rose* (1927). While this kind of formalist anthropology has now fallen out of favor, Hart’s approach to history in literature was significantly more progressive, interdisciplinary and complex than those that came before him.

Some *Caṅkam* scholars have steered away from the question of history altogether. Martha Selby, for instance, is significantly more influenced by poststructuralist critical practice than any of the other scholars I have highlighted. Her acknowledgment that the act of reading destabilizes

⁴¹ Manickam (1982), 84.

⁴² Sivathamby (1974).

meaning leads her to largely avoid addressing the poems' historicity. In her brief discussion of the *Caṅkam* poems in *Grow Long Blessed Night* (2000), Selby concedes that, "Though aestheticized, the poems represent aspects of romantic and sexual culture, and I assert that we can read them as indices of specific cultural attitudes towards the erotic."⁴³ Yet, even as she acknowledges that the poems are not "ahistorical floating manuscripts", she refrains from drawing any conclusions about social practice in ancient India.

It seems to me that there must be a middle ground between treating the *Caṅkam* texts as simple reflections of historical reality and eschewing historicity altogether. Only one scholar has attempted to approach the poems as if they were works of the imagination. Herman Tieken goes against the grain by arguing that the characters in the poems do not describe real people but are caricatures of poor and foolish villagers. He attempts to demonstrate that the *Caṅkam* poets were imagining peasant communities living in the distant past, rather than depicting the world around them. In his view, the poems are meant to be humorous, throwing into relief "the differences in intellect and circumstances between the people portrayed, on the one hand, and the poets and the audience, on the other".⁴⁴ Tieken's argument is controversial, primarily because he rejects the traditional dating of the *Caṅkam* corpus and attempts to prove that the poems were written in the eighth- and ninth-century Pāṇṭiyan courts. His evidence for these dates are unconvincing, causing many scholars to dismiss his work entirely.

However, it is worth revisiting his endeavor to reframe the poems as fictionalized accounts of people in another place and another time. His major contribution to the discourse is to insist that neither the *akam* and *puram* poems can be read as historical documentation of life in early Tamil society. Instead, they must be treated as literary creations of the imagination. This is an important intervention that has not been adequately addressed in Tamil studies. In this dissertation, I consider what it means for these poems to be representational, rather than reflective in nature and how this affects our scholarship. How do we read gender and sexuality in a poetic work of the imagination, given that gender and sexuality relate, at least in part, to social practice and historical reality?

One possible answer is to treat literature as a form of discourse, taking Michel Foucault's use of the term. A Foucauldian understanding of literature allows us to treat the text not simply as a product, but as a process that is connected to other social institutions which control the flow of knowledge and power in the community.⁴⁵ This approach to literature also characterizes the literary movement known as new historicism. The principle behind the new historicist method is the rejection of the idea that literature is an entity that transcends time and place; rather, literature

⁴³ Selby (2000), 101.

⁴⁴ Tieken (2001), 51.

⁴⁵ Hodge (1990), viii.

is considered one practice among others by which a culture organizes the production of meaning.⁴⁶

In many ways, the new historicists reflect a classically post-structuralist approach to literature and history. Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, scholars who pioneered this particular critical practice, strongly resist the systematization of new historicism. They argue that it is unproductive to formulate an abstract, unified system of ideas that can be applied to literary works.⁴⁷ Instead, they hold general principles which inform their reading. They believe that art and history are mutually embedded. As such, literature and poetry offer insight into particular historically embedded social and psychological formations. This notion leaves open the seductive possibility that all the written and visual traces of a particular culture may be a mutually intelligible network of signs. The question, throughout all of this, is how to execute the principles of new historicism in the critical practice of reading, especially considering the peculiar range of historical complications in the *Cañkam* corpus?

Several literary scholars have managed to make convincing historical claims without any references to extra-textual material. Erich Auerbach, whom Stephen Greenblatt considers to be a predecessor of the new historicists, uses textual analysis alone to draw conclusions about the culture in which the text originated. While Auerbach never describes his approach explicitly in his book, *Mimesis* (1953), Greenblatt manages to distill his method in the following terms, asserting that his strategy involved,

...the isolation of a resonant textual fragment that is revealed, under the pressure of analysis, to represent the world from which it is drawn and the particular culture in which that work was produced and consumed. That culture in turn renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterized by a particular set of circumstances, structures and assumptions and as something that conveys the life-world of that moment.⁴⁸

Auerbach's strategy is to identify a textual fragment and consider its particular representational power. He is interested in the historically specific process of representation visible in the chosen fragment. By carefully studying, "modulations in the level of style, resonances of diction, nuances of tone, rhetorical strategies, latent philosophical and sociological assumptions", Auerbach offers his reader insight into the culture and conditions that enabled such a work to be produced.⁴⁹ Through philological study, Auerbach revealed how fragments represent the texts from which they are drawn. Taking his analysis further, he delineates how the fragments also

⁴⁶ Daniel Boyarin, who deploys this critical strategy extensively in his study of Talmudic culture describes it as, "a practice that respects the literariness of literary texts (that is, as texts that are marked by rhetorical complexity and for which that surface formal feature is significant for their interpretation), while attempting at the same time to understand how they function within a larger socio-cultural system of practices." Boyarin (1995), 14.

⁴⁷ Gallagher and Greenblatt (2001), 6: "The task of understanding then depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

represent the “historically determined and determining methods by which the world is apprehended, imitated and reproduced”.⁵⁰

Auerbach’s methods are not faultless. His fundamental assumption - that an anecdote can be made to reveal the whole system - has drawn critics from many quarters. To some, this strategy feels too much like conjuring up the ‘spirit of representation’ from a few lines of text.⁵¹ Taking these considerations into account, I still believe it is possible to extricate techniques from Auerbach’s methodology that are productive in the study of the *Caṅkam* poems. Auerbach’s real genius is in making small but significant observations about ideological processes at work in literary cultures. He is able to point to junctures in text that signal the conditions of the world in which the work was originally created, worlds that may have been lost and that may no longer fully intelligible modern readers. He then dwells on these rich moments of representation, offering his readers insights into how these other worlds are fundamentally different from our own. In some ways, Auerbach’s approach accords with Foucault’s attempts to denaturalize ideas from the past and to create awareness about our own limited grids of intelligibility.⁵²

I find the principles of new historicism to be the most reasonable and potentially constructive in my study of the ancient Tamil verses. Several other scholars writing South Asian historiography have arrived at conclusions similar, although they do not align themselves with the new historicists. In *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (2003), Narayana Rao, David Schulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam argue for an analogous method for approaching history in literature. They propose that it is possible to distinguish fact from fiction in a text if we are attentive to the literary details that contribute to its “texture”:

This means that in any such genre we are likely to find both history and non-history - to be distinguished by such textural considerations as markers, shifters, syntax, lexical choices, evidentials, density and intensity of expression, structured gaps and silences, metrical devices, various phono-aesthetic indicators and finely calibrated suggestions of the domain of a statement’s intended application and potential meaning.⁵³

These kinds of generic distinctions would have been obvious to the original recipients of the text, however, to the modern reader, it is necessary to be attuned to textual markers. The authors’ impulse is reminiscent of Auerbach’s, as is their belief that literature embeds and encodes historical realities.

I am still agnostic about historical methods and theories. The scholars I have referenced deploy their methods in texts that are far more recent than the *Caṅkam* corpus. They do not have to confront the particular constellation of problems evident in classical Tamil literature. While I have not yet found a historical approach that is completely germane to my source materials, the methodologies I describe provide helpful new avenues through the old impasses. As I make

⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

⁵² Foucault (1978), 93.

⁵³ Rao et al (2003), 4.

references to the culture in which the poems were produced, I will borrow from new historicist frameworks.

IV

The Plan of Study

Each chapter in this dissertation is organized around one significant character in the *Caṅkam* anthologies: the heroine, the hero, the other woman and the child. The focus of each chapter allows me to consider how the poetry addresses issues of gender and sexuality. My strategy will be to juxtapose the poems with recent theoretical discourses, bringing them into conversation with one another, with the intention of engaging with both the poetry and the theory in productive new ways.

My first chapter focuses on the character of the heroine, or as she is known in Tamil, the *talaivi*. As a central character in the *akam* genre, I am interested in how the poems portray the *talaivi*'s "inner world". Using the modern formulation of subjectivity, I consider how poets construct feminine subjectivity by representing the *talaivi*'s emotion, desire and thought. I argue that the *talaivi*'s subjectivity hinges on her desire and more specifically, her frustrated desire. It is a portrayal of subjectivity that corresponds neatly to Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject. However, unlike the Lacanian model of subjectivity, I will demonstrate that the Tamil concept of *akam* is not inherently sexist. Indeed, while *akam* is associated with the feminine, it can be experienced and adopted by both male and female characters. As such, the Tamil poems reflect a sophisticated separation between sex and gender.

In the second chapter, I shift my focus to the figure of the hero or the *talaivan*. In doing so, I move from the feminized inner world of love and domesticity into the masculinized outer world of warfare and kingship. Within the *puram* poems, men are regularly described in the language of hegemonic masculinity, but I will show that there are also many descriptions of men in postures of subservience, weakness and effeminacy. I demonstrate how the *Caṅkam* poets construct a binary gender system, but also how they make sense of the liminal spaces of gender, in which gender is shown to be fluid. I am particularly attuned to male characters that wrestle with their identities as they move between masculine and feminine spaces.

In the third chapter, I examine the *talaivi*'s rival, known as the *parattai*, with whom the *talaivan* has an extramarital affair. I argue that the *parattai* represents an alternative model of female sexuality. While the *talaivi*'s sexuality cannot be separated from marriage and motherhood, the *parattai*'s sexuality thrives outside of marriage. Poems about the *parattai* are related to the theme of the *talaivan*'s infidelity. These poems describe the unhappiness experienced by both the *parattai* and the *talaivi* when confronted by the *talaivan*'s philandering and promiscuous behavior. Yet, although women are largely powerless to change the *talaivan*'s ways, I argue that these women are portrayed as active agents, asserting their right to be happy. In this chapter, I will examine the various strategies through which the *talaivi* and the *parattai* assume control: by claiming to be desiring subjects, by working collectively as communities of women, and by the *talaivi*'s performance of jealousy to manipulate the *talaivan*'s into changing his ways. While none of these attempts are shown to be successful, what interests me is how the

poets use the *talaivi*'s and the *parattai*'s displays of agency to deepen their representation of women's subjectivity.

In the fourth chapter, I examine the mother-child relationship in the poems. The *talaivi* and *talaivan* are often portrayed as adults, but in poems involving the mother and the foster-mother (or *cevoli*), we get insight into the childhoods of these character. The mother figure is the only female character who manages to move between *akam* and *puram* poems. My argument is that she queers the boundaries between genres. The mother queers other distinctions as well, by undermining the separation between maternal desire and romantic desire; between the maternal body and the eroticized female body. Within queer studies, queerness is shown to be often connected to loss. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the mother figure, who is the most liminal character in this poetry, is consistently connected to loss. The theme of the mourning mother exists in both genres: in the *akam* poems, the mother mourns the loss of her daughter when she leaves to get married, and in the *puram* poems, she mourns the death of her son on the battlefield.

Over the course of these chapters, I traverse the *akam* and *puram* genres and delve into the four central characters within the poetry. My consistent focus on the workings of gender and sexuality brings the various strands of this dissertation together. With the help of modern theoretical frameworks, I seek to uncover the strategies by which the *Caṅkam* poets represent the inner world of human desire and its inevitable frustrations. In the end, it becomes clear that the Tamil poets had a striking insight into the mechanisms of masculinity and femininity, as well as the fluid and overlapping nature of these categories.

Appendix 1: Detailed List of Works in *Caṅkam* Corpus

The Eight Anthologies (*Eṭṭuttōkai*)

Akam Anthologies

- *Aiṅkurunūru*, or ‘five hundred short poems’ of verses between three and five lines in length, by five poets, each of whom treats a different *akam* theme.
- *Kuruntokai*, or ‘short anthology’ of 401 poems from six to eight lines by 205 poets.
- *Narriṇai*, or ‘four hundred poems’ from nine to twelve lines by 192 poets.
- *Akanāṇūru*, or ‘four hundred on *akam*’ containing poems from thirteen to thirty-one lines, by 142 poets.
- *Kalittokai*, or ‘poems in the *kali* meter’ containing 150 poems of twelve to eighty lines, by five poets, each of whom treats a different *akam* theme.

Puṛam Anthologies

- *Puṛunāṇūru*, or ‘four hundred on *puṛam*’ of four to forty lines by 156 poets.
- *Patirrupattu*, or ‘one hundred songs’. Two sets of ten poems have been lost. As such there now remains eighty poems of five to fifty-seven lines, ten by each poet on one *Chera* king.

Mixed Anthology

- *Paripāṭal*, containing verses of thirty-one to one hundred and forty lines that do not fit neatly into the *akam* and *puṛam* binary. Only 22 of the original 70 poems are extant.

Linguistic analyses of the poems suggest that the *Kuruntokai* and *Puṛunāṇūru* are the earliest compositions, while the *Kalittokai* and the *Paripāṭal* are the latest. (George Hart (1975), 8. A.K. Ramanujan (1967), 100.)

The Ten Songs (*Pattuppattu*)

These are much longer poems of 103-782 lines by ten different poets set to specific musical meters. These poems describe and praise the gods. They do not conform to the *akam* and *puṛam* rubric either.

CHAPTER TWO

The *Talaivi*: Subjectivity and Desire

...Heart, so trustful
of his sweet and empty speeches,
what will happen to you
now?

Akanānūru 348⁵⁴

I

In my introduction, I emphasized the primacy of the *akam/puram* division within the Tamil corpus and described how it structures the form and subject matter of the poetry. In this chapter, I would like to show that the meanings of *akam* and *puram* go far deeper than the simple generic distinction between love and war poems. The Tamil Lexicon offers a constellation of meanings for the words.⁵⁵ *Akam* refers to the interior, the heart and mind, the self, kinship ties and the home. Conversely, *puram* is associated with the exterior, the surface of the body and its extremities, other people, those who are not kin and to spaces outside the home. A.K. Ramanujan, who wrote extensively about the significance of *akam* and *puram*, believed that there is logic to the multiplicity of connotations surrounding the words. He argued that, “It is characteristic of this poetry and its poetics that the meanings seem to expand and contract in concentric circles, with the concrete physical particular in the center, getting more and more inclusive and abstract as we move outward.”⁵⁶

Over the course of this dissertation, I will periodically return the poetic implications of the *akam/puram* division. At present, though, I would like to take up Ramanujan’s suggestion that *akam* and *puram* are more than poetic classifications, but represent a particular understanding of the human experience. According to the Tamil Lexicon, the term *akam* or “inner” evokes the world within a person, the depth of emotions, thoughts and desires contained inside. *Puram* poems provide a counterpoint by reflecting an “outer” world of external, observable realities. The *akam/puram* distinction offers an existential framework of sorts, positing that some experiences are situated within the body and are inaccessible to other people unless they are articulated through language.

Akam poems focus on interior spaces, both figurative and literal. They relate to the world within the body, but also to inner spaces of society, that is to say, the home. In some ways, the entire *akam* genre is the realm of the feminine. Women are at the heart of these poems. The poems describe romantic relationships and family life, in which women are central figures. While men speak in the *akam* anthologies, they appear infrequently and their tone is similar to that of their female counterparts. They are portrayed in feminized terms that are vastly different

⁵⁴ *Akanānūru* 348, ascribed to Maturai ḷampālācīriyaṅ Cēntaṅ Kūttāṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

⁵⁵ Tamil Lexicon (1936)

⁵⁶ Ramanujan (1985), 236.

from their masculinized portrayal in the *puram* genre. In many poems, men are seen transition from the masculine *puram* environments to the feminine *akam* spaces. This is particularly noticeable in the *mullai* landscape when the *talaivan* is described returning home from battle on his chariot.

In this chapter, I will argue that the *akam* poems present us with a premodern representation of subjectivity, and very frequently, feminine subjectivity. This poetry accords female characters with profound inner selves that encompass complex emotions and desires. I am interested in thinking through the poems as a site for the staging of feminine subjectivity, particularly in the figure of the *talaivi*, the female lover. I will analyze the representational strategies the poets use to give the reader access into the inner world of the *talaivi*'s desires and thoughts. My close readings of the poems reveal that the poets were attentive to the processes by which the *talaivi* engages with her sexuality and contends with her unfulfilled desire.

Subjectivity is not an idea that originates within the *Caṅkam* anthologies. The term, as I am using it, refers to an eminently Western construction that grew out of the philosophical discourses of the European Enlightenment. I am not suggesting that the Tamil poets were deliberately producing a theory of subject formation in their work. Their investment in developing the inner world in the poems appears to have emerged from their desire to work within the *akam/puram* rubric, rather than from a philosophical interest in what it means to be a subject. Nonetheless, I believe that juxtaposing these ancient Tamil poems with Western theories of self will elucidate the processes by which the poets construct the inner world of human experience in their verses.

For several centuries, the theoretical discourse of the Western academy has recursively focused on subjectivity.⁵⁷ In this chapter, I concentrate on one juncture in this history of ideas: the theories of Jacques Lacan, which posit that subjectivity emerges from frustrated desire, and subsequent response of Luce Irigaray. I highlight this particular discourse of subjectivity because it closely mirrors the portrayal of the female subject in the *akam* poems. The internal drama of the *talaivi* centers on her desire for intimacy with the *talaivan*. Yet her desires are never fulfilled. In Lacan's theory of the subject, he proposes that a similar dynamic lies at the heart of human subjectivity. According to his theory, we are all propelled by unfulfilled desire. In the first part of this chapter, I will read the *akam* poems alongside Lacan's formulation of subjectivity, bringing them in conversation with one another, in order to better understand how the "inner world" constructed in the *akam* poems.

⁵⁷ In fields ranging from philosophy to sociology to politics, Western thought has orbited around the question of what it means to be a self. One version of this intellectual trajectory would take us from Descartes' radical assertion, *Cogito ergo sum*, ('I think therefore I am') and Kant's vision of the conscious self; to Freud's and Lacan's notions of the fractured subject; to Nietzsche's and Foucault's beliefs that the subject is merely a construct that emerges from an interplay between power and language. Of course, many other thinkers have disrupted and intervened in this discourse, taking it in new directions. Feminist scholars, such as Irigaray, Butler, Kristeva and Haraway, questioned the presuppositions about gender and sexuality that undergirded each phase of the conversation. Postcolonial scholars (Fanon, Spivak and the Subaltern Collective) and sociologists (notably, Bourdieu) challenged the reductive and essentializing nature of the discourse. The wave of postmodern scholars, including Jameson and Lyotard, rejected the possibility of arriving at a unified theory of the subject altogether, arguing that ultimate answers and final solutions are endlessly destructive. This expansive genealogy of ideas makes it clear that the definition of subjectivity is not homogenous nor obvious.

In the second part of the chapter, I think through the question of gender in the portrayal of “inner world”. To do this, I consider Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of Lacan’s work. Irigaray asserted that Lacan’s theory was sexist because it presupposed that women were incapable of possessing subjectivity. Using Irigaray’s insights a point of departure for my own, I consider the intersection of gender and subjectivity in the *akam* poems. My argument is that subjectivity is associated with femininity within this poetry, but that it does not belong exclusively to women. In other words, male and female characters both have the capacity to experience an inner world, even though *akam* is marked as feminine. Here we begin to see a separation between gender and sex, a pattern that occurs repeatedly in the *Caṅkam* poems and which I will take up throughout this dissertation.

II

The Desiring Subject

Let me start with an *akam* poem that depicts feminine sexual desire. In the following poem, the *talaivi* speaks about the *talaivan*. The poem is set in the *kuṛiñci* landscape, situated in the mountains, away from the town and the *talaivi*’s family. *Kuṛiñci* poems describe the first meeting of the lovers and their secret trysts.

“But look
 look at him out there
 standing like a sentinel
 who keeps a rain-tank from flooding.
 rain-wet bright sword
 hung at his side,
 war anklet
 twined with moss,
 his striped waist-cloth
 tight,
 and wet with dew.”⁵⁸

The *talaivan* in this poem is oblivious that he is the object of the *talaivi*’s gaze. Yet, from her voyeuristic perspective, the *talaivi* takes him in, relishing his body. Indeed, she urges the reader to join her in taking pleasure in this man, calling us to “look, look”. She draws particular attention to his erogenous zones, his torso and lower body. The peripheral descriptions of the damp weather and his military accessories suggest her yearning.

In poems such as this one, a particular construction of female sexuality is produced. The *talaivi*’s desire is stimulated by the mere sight of the *talaivan*; her desire exists apart from his desire for her. To a degree, she experiences pleasure simply by her visual consumption of him. The *talaivi* takes on the role of the subject; she is the one who looks, the one who sexually objectifies the *talaivan*. This portrayal of subjectivity functions on multiple levels. The woman is a subject in a grammatical sense as she is the initiating principle of the sentence. On another level, the poem portrays female subjectivity in the sense of an interior world of mental and

⁵⁸ *Aiṅkuruṇūru* 206, ascribed to Kapilar, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

emotional existence. Within the *akam* corpus, female sexuality originates within the mind and the emotions, rather than within the mutual contact of bodies.

The *kuṛiñci* poems offer a representation of feminine desire. They describe the pleasure that the *talaivi* experiences in and through her body. The *kuṛiñci* and *neytal* poems, in particular, portray the *talaivi* as free to move throughout the landscape and to act on her desire. These two landscapes are set in the premarital phase of the relationship between the *talaivi* and the *talaivan*. The *talaivi* takes more pleasure in her sexuality before she marries the *talaivan*. After marriage, the *talaivi*'s desire is often thwarted by the burdens of childbearing and the possibility of her husband's adultery. The Tamil poets do not portray feminine sexuality as purely utilitarian. Feminine sexuality thrives apart from the patriarchal need to produce an heir.

Marriage is a turning point in the *talaivi*'s life. Early on, commentators recognized the significance of marriage in the construction of landscape imagery, thematic focus and character development within the poems.⁵⁹ The commentarial interest in marriage is understandable given that marriage has profound implications on the lives of the characters, particularly the *talaivi*. Even before she settles into her role as wife and mother, the institution of marriage influences the *talaivi*'s sexuality. If the *talaivi* acts on her desire, it may harm her future prospects. Moreover, the characters in the *talaivi*'s entourage disapprove of her premarital trysts with the *talaivan*, primarily because it puts the *talaivi*'s social status at stake if he does not eventually marry her. The *talaivi*'s friends and family are profoundly invested in her marriage to the *talaivan*. In one poem, the *talaivi* describes her mother's constant surveillance of her behavior, which prevents her from easily meeting with her lover: "And what with an unfair Mother too / keeping strict watch over us / will our love perish here / in fallow patches...?"⁶⁰ Marriage thwarts the *talaivi*'s sexuality. It forces her to move beyond her own private world of desire, to the external realities of her life. The *talaivi* recognizes that acting on her passion will lead to gossip and scandal so she must negotiate between her sexual desire and her desire to maintain her good reputation within her community.

The *talaivi* is pulled in different directions by these two desires. Often she chooses to indulge in her sexual desire even if it risks diminishing her marriage prospects. The *talaivi* is willing to risk the displeasure of her parents and possibility of her reputation being besmirched by gossiping neighbors. The following poem, in which the *talaivi* confides in her friend, captures her struggle:

Tell me, Friend,
is it right
or isn't it?

⁵⁹ Around the fifth century, the Tamil commentary entitled the *Iṛaiyaṅār Akapporuḷ* suggested a new way of organizing the poems, by distinguishing the phase of premarital love (*kaḷavu*) from married love (*karpu*). This new taxonomy had a profound impact on the interpretation of the poems and spurred later commentators to think of the poems as a narrative that follows the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* through from their first encounter to their married life. The fifteenth century commentator, Nārkavirāca-nampī, built on the earlier commentaries by suggesting that we divide the *akam* poems into three groups, adding the wedding (*varaivu*) to the traditional two-fold division of premarital love (*kaḷavu*) and married love (*karpu*).

⁶⁰ *Narriṅai* 63, ascribed to Ulōccaṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

I can't bear the pain
of this hard sorrow,
and besides,
I fear the big change
called death.
Even more than that,
I wonder if that man
from the good mountain land
is afraid of the gossip
that says we're inseparable lovers.

Even at midnight
when the town huddles close and sleeps,
save for into my heart,
he doesn't even know what coming is.⁶¹

The *talaivan* has stopped coming to meet her at night, causing her to stay awake worrying while the rest of the town sleeps. As she considers the reasons that her lover is no longer coming, she wonders whether he has been frightened by the gossip that is ruining their reputations. She has no explanation for his absence, so her speculation reveals more about her own anxieties than it does about the *talaivan*'s motivations. Yet, while she is profoundly aware of the damaging rumors that are circulating, the loss of her lover feels worse to her than death. Ultimately, she feels that her love affair with the *talaivan* has been worth the sacrifice.

The *akam* anthologies are full of poems that recount the *talaivi*'s dilemma. Sometimes, they present the *talaivi* willing to reject social norms to pursue her own desires and pleasures. In many other poems, however, the *talaivi* acknowledges the consequences of her choices. In this poem, for instance, the *talaivi* expresses regret about her decisions:

As for me,
I am here.

My virtue lies
with boundless grief
in a salt marsh.

He is in his town
and our secret
has become gossip
in common places.⁶²

The *talaivi* has destroyed her stature by choosing to meet with her lover in secret. If the *talaivan* does not return to her, then she has lost everything: her lover, her reputation, perhaps even the possibility of a stable future.

Marriage appears to be the only solution to the *talaivi*'s predicament. If the *talaivan* returns to marry the *talaivi*, her virtue will be redeemed. In one poem, set on the *talaivi*'s

⁶¹ *Kuruntokai* 302, ascribed to Mānkuṭikilār, translated by Martha Selby.

⁶² *Kuruntokai* 97, ascribed to Veṅpūti, translated by Martha Selby.

wedding day, the *talaivi*'s friend describes the *talaivi*'s torturous period of waiting for the *talaivan* to return to marry her. The *talaivi* had grown pale with the worry that he would never come back. She says that, "Our man of the seashore / ...has cleared once for all / the pallor of our lovesick girl."⁶³ While these poems can be read as a reflection of the *talaivi*'s emotional attachment to her lover, they also reveal her desire to escape her tenuous social position by entering into marriage. Take the following poem, for instance. Here, the *talaivi* articulates the instability of her situation, wishing that her lover would understand the troubles she must face because of her love for him:

If only someone
would go to him
and tell him,

‘If Mother should ever hear the scandal about us,
it would be hard
for me to live here,’

maybe he'll take me then.⁶⁴

It is obvious that the *talaivi* is dependent on the *talaivan* to vindicate her. She cannot control his behavior and must wait for him to act.

Throughout the *akam* poems, we see the *talaivi* vacillating between her sexual desire for the *talaivan* and the desire for a socially sanctioned marriage. The unfolding of these two competing desires are at the core of the *talaivi*'s internal drama. Yet the *talaivi*'s desires are forever frustrated. The *talaivi* cannot indulge her physical desire for the *talaivan* without incurring social disapproval and losing the possibility of achieving a good marriage. However, if the *talaivan* does come back to marry the *talaivi*, she is no longer able to enjoy him sexually as she did before they were married. When we move from the phase of premarital love (*kaḷavu*) to married love (*karpu*), the *talaivan* ceases to reciprocate the *talaivi*'s sexual desire. Poems set in *marutam* and *mullai* landscapes describe the domestic life shared by the *talaivi* and the *talaivan*. The *marutam* poems focus on the *talaivan*'s unfaithfulness to his wife, while the *mullai* poems involve the wife waiting for the hero to return from his travels, since as a married man, he must go off to seek his fortune in war or trade. A few *mullai* poems do portray the *talaivi* and the *talaivan* as a happy couple, but none describe the sexual life of the couple after marriage. The *talaivi* continues to express sexual desire for her husband after marriage, but this desire is doomed to remain unfulfilled. The *talaivi* is originally lured by the promise that marriage would bring her closer to the *talaivan*, only to discover that marriage drives them apart. Marriage is like a specter lingering throughout the *akam* poems, even when it is not explicitly mentioned. It plunges the *talaivi* into an unpredictable situation, in which her sexual fulfillment is threatened by her husband's choices.

⁶³ *Aiṅkurunūru* 145, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

⁶⁴ *Narriṇai* 4, ascribed to Ammūvanār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

The *marutam* poems center on the *talaivan*'s infidelity. The *talaivi* expresses a range of reactions to this behavior. She vacillates between rage over his betrayal and pain because she desires a man who no longer desires her. In the next section of this chapter, I will fully explore the dynamics of infidelity at work in the *marutam* poems. The *marutam* genre depicts how the prospect of intimacy between the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* is undermined by the *talaivan*'s philandering and the *talaivi*'s responsibilities as a mother.

Within the *mullai* poems, the *talaivi* is depicted in a passive state, perpetually waiting for the *talaivan* to return to her. Kamil Zvelebil points out that the *talaivi*'s wait is the most recurring idea in the corpus,

“...it is interesting, that out of the five major themes, actually four deal in this or that form with waiting: the two *tinai*s appropriate for waiting *par excellence* are *mullai* - patient waiting - and *neytal* - long and anxious waiting for the hero to return. But *pālai*, wasteland, also deals with waiting and separation (apart from elopement); and so does *marutam*: here the wife is waiting till the debauchee returns from the harlot.”⁶⁵

The anthologies are full of poems recounting the *talaivi*'s unhappiness because of her separation from her husband. In the following poem, the *talaivi* tells her mother of her disappointed hopes.

That man from the place
where a speckled crab scabbling in the mud
burrows under a root
of a thorn bush -
he spoke sweet words, married me;
said he'd never leave.

What has happened now, Mother?⁶⁶

Marriage has clearly failed the *talaivi*. She hoped that marriage would lead to greater intimacy and stability in her relationship with the *talaivan*. Now, she finds herself alone. Her husband is constantly moving, the same way that the crab scabbles from one place to another in the sand. In desperation, the *talaivi* seeks answers from her mother, who was the one who suggested the possibility that marriage would be a happy outcome.

In another poem, the *talaivi* describes how profoundly lonely she has found herself in marriage.

Even if my chastity is dead,
my beauty blighted
and my sweet life ebbs away,

don't tell him, Friend.

He's like Mother and Father to us now,
isn't he?

Why sulk

⁶⁵ Zvelebil (1973), 103.

⁶⁶ *Aiṅkurunūru* 22, translated by Martha Selby.

when there is no love?⁶⁷

This poem encapsulates the changes in her relationship with the *talaivan* after their marriage. The *talaivi* is not considered physically attractive any more. She is no longer valued for her chastity. Her beauty has been worn away by the rigors of motherhood and childbearing. She feels as if her very life is ebbing away from her. Her passionate, erotic relationship with the *talaivan* has been transformed into a relationship of dependence: he is now like a parent to her. In this poem the *talaivi* expresses resignation towards her unsatisfactory life, giving up the hope of happiness.

The *talaivi*'s inner experience revolves around frustrated desire. Herman Tieken offers this analysis of the *akam* poems:

Akam poetry... specialized in portraying the dark side of life. The poetry is mainly about lovers frustrated in their attempts to meet, about husband and wife separated because of work or unfaithfulness, about parents who fail to protect their daughters. Union, when depicted, which is only rarely, is always tainted, either by unfaithfulness or the threat of the husband's departure, or else it is of a type which the parents had always dreaded but could not prevent.⁶⁸

Tieken's broader argument is that the *akam* poems were written as a mockery of the poor village classes. He asserts that poems about the *talaivi*'s misery were designed to provide wealthy city dwellers with humorous accounts of simpletons in rural parts. His theory has been widely dismissed by Tamil scholars. While I join these other scholars in disagreeing with Tieken's largely unsubstantiated theory that the *akam* poems are sardonic, I believe Tieken accurately observes the profound frustration and misery that penetrates the lives of the all the characters, but most obviously, the *talaivi*.

This representation of the *talaivi*'s inner world dramatizes the model of subjectivity that Jacques Lacan proposed in his later lectures. Lacan suggested that human subjectivity springs from desire that is, by definition, always frustrated. According to him, we are seeking self-completion and are motivated to compensate for the sense of lack that permeates our existence. Lacan theorized that this pursuit of satisfaction begins in our early stages of development, when we momentarily experience completion. He speculated that this moment takes place when we locate ourselves in a mirror for the first time and take in an image of our whole self. Until this point, we only saw fragments of our bodies. During this "mirror stage", Lacan argued that we begin to desire wholeness and completion:

...the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation, and for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to...its totality...⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Kuruntokai* 93, ascribed to Aḷḷūr Naṅmullai, translated by Martha Selby.

⁶⁸ Tieken (2001): 35.

⁶⁹ Lacan (2004), 6.

The “mirror stage” results in a phase of development he describes as the “imaginary”, when we seem unified with the world around us. In this moment, we enjoy a brief instant of satisfaction. This feeling is quickly lost when we enter the phase he describes as the “symbolic”, the realm of language which forces us to recognize the existence of others and our separateness from the world around us. As human beings, we are condemned to move towards an object that we believe may complete us and which, in fact, will never enable us to recover our sense of ultimate fulfillment. It is this frustrated desire that lies at the center of our subjectivity. Indeed, we are subjects because we perpetually desire, but never possess, the object.

This is a model of subjectivity that neatly corresponds to the inner world in the *akam* poems. The drama that unfolds within the *talaivi* hinges on her desire and then on her pain when this desire is inevitably frustrated. The Tamil poets stage a model of feminine subjectivity that centers on the *talaivi*'s desire for union with the *talaivan* - a desire that remains forever inaccessible to her. It is this desire that constitutes her identity within the poems. The pathos we see in the *talaivi* echoes the intense pathos of the human condition as Lacan defined it. The following poem encapsulates this dynamic. In it, the *talaivi* speaks to herself - to her own heart - and asks,

...Heart, so trustful
of his sweet and empty speeches,
what will happen to you
now?⁷⁰

This poem presupposes that the *talaivi* experiences a private world of thought, emotion and desire. Yet, in almost every instance that we gain insight into the *talaivi*'s inner self, we see her heartbrokenness. The *talaivi* blames her heart for her troubles. It is her heart that has made her so gullible, causing her to fall in love with the *talaivan*. Now, it is her heart that enables her to feel pain. In the *akam* poems, the heart serves as a synecdoche for the whole interior world contained inside the subject. The *talaivi* despises her subjectivity, for it only produces pain and frustration. The pessimism we see in the *akam* poems aligns with Lacan's essentially pessimistic formulation of subjectivity. The world constructed in the poems is populated with characters who are perpetually unfulfilled. It is this unhappiness that draws the reader into the characters lives.

III

Subjectivity and Gender

Lacan's theory of subject formation was an intervention in the fields of psychoanalysis, linguistics and philosophy. However, his work was also the target of intense scrutiny and criticism by feminist thinkers who attacked him for being sexist. Luce Irigaray, his erstwhile student, was his most famous critic. Irigaray absorbed many of Lacan's major insights into her own philosophy. For instance, she accepted his linguistic turn, acknowledging the importance of language in structuring how cultures understand and define themselves. Irigaray also agreed that

⁷⁰ *Akanānūru* 348, ascribed to Maturai ḷampālācīriyaṅ Cēntaṅ Kūttāṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

people must enter the symbolic realm of language to have a coherent social identity.⁷¹ However, she asserted that Lacan's explanation for subjectivity presupposed a gender hierarchy in which the feminine is always subordinate to the masculine.⁷² She argued that Lacan's formulation of gender was derived from earlier theories of subjectivity which were unanimously sexist. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray famously maintained that, "We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'. When (a woman) submits to such a theory... (she is) subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse - by being 'female'."⁷³ Irigaray undermined Lacan's assertion that the symbolic realm of language is an ahistorical system that predates culture, arguing instead that language is malleable and determined by power relations that are in flux. Put in another way, Irigaray argued that our understanding of male and female does not emerge from biology, but rather, from the way that we shape culture through language

The exchange between Lacan and Irigaray provides a useful framework for our analysis of the poems, because it allows us to think about how subjectivity in the poems is gendered. Irigaray attacked Lacan for attributing subjectivity exclusively to the masculine. In the *Caṅkam* poems, we see the opposite dynamic at work. The model of subjectivity I have analyzed in this chapter is epitomized by the *talaivi* who is the focal figure in *akam* poems. Indeed, the entire *akam* realm, which offers a vision of the inner world, is presented as the realm of the feminine and serves as a counterpoint to the masculinized poetry of the *puram* genre. Interiority and subjectivity are central to the *akam* genre, while conversely, physicality and embodiment are central to *puram* genre. Tamil poetics reverses the axis upon which the Lacanian model of gender turns. Moreover, the poems do not essentialize gender, but distinguish between gender and sex. Tamil poetics allow for male speakers to adopt the feminized subjectivity of the *akam* poems, while also allowing for female speakers to occasionally speak within the embodied, masculine world of the *puram* poems.

Irigaray attacked Lacan for feeding into the ideology that connected men to transcendence, while connecting women to the body. She was building on the work of earlier feminists, starting with Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that Western culture attributes intellect and inner depth to men, while defining women entirely by their reproductive capacity. Many feminists took up Beauvoir's cause by attempting to uncover the ways that various structures of society reduced women to their role as mother. Irigaray was among them. In her work, she sought to disrupt the Western philosophical discourse on subjectivity that insisted that women could not be real subjects. Her strategy was to subvert the structures of language that produce our understanding of woman. For instance, she undermined common metaphors and turns of speech that consistently diminish women: "Dispersing, piercing those metaphors - particularly the photological ones - which have constituted truth by the premises of Western philosophy: virgin,

⁷¹ In other words, she accepted his tripartite classification of orders into the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.

⁷² Lacan's work builds on Freud's, which assumed that women were not distinct from men, but rather defective variations of men.

⁷³ Irigaray (1985a): 133

dumb, and veiled in her nakedness, her vision still naively ‘natural,’ her viewpoint still resolutely blind and unsuspecting of what may lie beneath the blindness.”⁷⁴

Irigaray’s critique of Western cultural symbols and metaphors cannot be easily transposed onto the *Caṅkam* poems. The construction of woman as virginal, natural and devoid of inner depth is not evident in the Tamil verses. Indeed, the *akam* poems contradict this construction of woman. The *talaivi*’s identity is not determined by her roles as wife and mother. As I have shown, the *talaivi* has ambivalent feelings towards marriage. While she desires the stability and intimacy that come with marriage, she is willing to threaten her marriage prospects by indulging her sexual desires out of wedlock. After marriage, the *talaivi* is fully aware that establishing a household comes with responsibilities that would diminish her intimacy with her husband. The *talaivi*’s complex relationship with the institution of marriage makes it impossible to reduce her to a sexual and maternal role. Irigaray criticized Western culture for treating woman as, “nothing but the receptacle that passively receives (man’s) *product*, even if sometimes, by the display of her passively aimed instincts, she has pleaded, facilitated, even demanded that it be placed within her.”⁷⁵ In the *akam* poems, the *talaivi* is not essentialized in this way. She is not passive at all but, on the contrary, profoundly self-aware.

The poems present a complex relationship between the body and the inner world of subjectivity. While the *talaivi* is not reduced to a body, the poems depict her experiencing pleasure through her body. Earlier, I described the *talaivi* taking pleasure in looking at the *talaivan*, but many poems also recount the way that she acts on her desire. As a subject, the *talaivi* is constituted through her expressions of desire, but also through her bodily practices. In the following poem, for instance, the poet focuses on the *talaivi*’s embodied experience as she meets with the *talaivan* in secret. The previous poem recounted the *talaivi*’s personal enjoyment taking on the role of subject gazing at the *talaivan*. Here, she experiences pleasure through touch and bodily contact.

What She Said

Like moss on water
in the town’s water tank:
 the body’s pallor
 clears
 as my lover touches
 and touches
 and spreads again
 as he lets go,
 as he lets go.⁷⁶

The *talaivi* describes the motions of lovemaking: the holding and the releasing of bodies. She likens her body, with color diffusing across her skin, to water with moss spreading on its surface. The *talaivi*’s skin is the membrane between the world within and the world beyond. It draws attention to the way that the *talaivi*’s subjectivity is contained in a body.

⁷⁴ Irigaray (1985a): 136.

⁷⁵ Irigaray (1985a), 18.

⁷⁶ *Kuruntokai* 399, attributed to Paraṇar, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

The *akam* poems traverse the boundaries of sexual desire, taking us into the *talaivi*'s thoughts and emotions, and into her outer, bodily interactions with the *talaivan*.

Is it truth this time, Friend?
If it is, bless you.

Just as a money of the slopes,
face black as kohl,
errs in his leap
and crashes down with branches
too thin to bear his weight,

So my lover missed
the signal for our tryst
and my soft, round shoulders
have gone pale.⁷⁷

In this poem, we see the *talaivi* pursuing her desire by initiating a clandestine tryst with the *talaivan*. She has sought out her own pleasure, giving her lover a signal to meet her. It is not enough for her to desire him from afar; she seeks physical intimacy with him. When he fails to meet her, she her frustration is revealed in her body: her shoulders grow pale. Throughout the *akam* poems, we see the *talaivi*'s inner experience inscribed and expressed outwardly, in her body. Her body's appearance changes to adapt to her emotions.

Western thought has polarized subjectivity and the body from the time of the Greek philosophy.⁷⁸ Feminists scholars observe that within this structuralist rubric, men are always associated with subjectivity while women are associated with the body.⁷⁹ According to this duality, the former is always deemed more valuable than the latter; or perhaps more accurately, the former extracts value from the latter.⁸⁰ In other words, men and subjectivity assert the power over women and the body, respectively. Within the *akam* poems, we see similar binary patterns at work, but they are far more nuanced than the patterns that feminists denounced in Western culture. Within the Tamil poems, the two parts of the binary - *akam/puram*, feminine/masculine, subjectivity/body - are often shown to be overlapping and intertwined. The *talaivi* is identified by her inner world of thought and emotion, but she is also portrayed as a carnal and embodied person.

⁷⁷ *Kuruntokai* 121, ascribed to Māmalāṭaṇ, translated by Martha Selby.

⁷⁸ The Aristotlean view that women are naturally inferior to men, and thus destined to fulfill different and unequal roles, is embedded in western philosophy.

⁷⁹ See de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Also Ortner, Sherry. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2. (Autumn, 1972.): 5-31.

⁸⁰ Ofelia Schutte, in her commentary of Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, asserts that the two parts in the gender binary are not merely unequal; one part extracts its power from the other. She writes, "Every time the slash [/] representing the mark of difference occurs between masculine and feminine, we must ask ourselves the question, where does the value, in particular the excessive value, attributed to the masculine term come from? Is it the case that it attains its superiority or predominance precisely because it extracts its value from what originally belongs to the other, the residue after the mark of difference? Or, in Irigaray's words, if the (phallic) economy of discourse is one in which the subject (he) speaks and the object (she) is silent, what would happen if the other began to speak? Can we imagine her discourse?" (Schutte, 70.)

However, the representation of the embodied female subject is complicated by that fact that the *talaivi* is not associated with a particular embodied woman, but with a generic female character who serves as a stock figure or a trope. The subjectivity we see in the *akam* poems is identified with the feminine, but it also has the quality of being universal and transcendent. In other words, the *talaivi* represents a model of subjectivity that is purportedly shared by all women and, indeed, all men. Within these poems, subjectivity is associated with the domestic, feminized “inner world” but it is also accessible to all people, including men. This positions the model of subjectivity within the *Caṅkam* poems in direct contrast to what we see in Western culture.⁸¹

Unlike the *puram* poems which document the lives of real people, the *akam* poems are abstracted from reality. The *akam* landscapes and cast of characters exist outside the reader’s space or time. The poetic formulae laid out in the *Tolkāppiyam* utterly depersonalizes the poetry. For instance, Sutra 57 of the *Tolkāppiyam* specifies that, “In [the five phases of] *akam*, no names of persons should be mentioned. Particular names are appropriate only in *puram* poetry.”⁸² While the characters in the *akam* poems are portrayed as complex and multifaceted, these qualities are not embodied in actual people, but in vague, abstract figures. The *talaivi* is not so much a person as an archetype whose identity is encapsulated by her roles as lover and wife.

Take the following poem, for instance:

My lover capable of terrible lies
at night lay close to me
in a dream
that lied like truth.

I woke up, still deceived,
and caressed the bed
thinking it my lover.

It’s terrible. I grow lean
in loneliness
like a water lily
gnawed by a beetle.⁸³

The speaker is completely obscure; we have no insight into her background or identity. The only way we can identify her as the *talaivi* - the feminine lover - is because of the last stanza, where she speaks of growing thin in her anxiety. The experience of losing weight because of heartsickness is only attributed to women in Tamil literature and culture, so we understand that the speaker is not male. The focus, then, is not the *talaivi*’s character, but on the emotions that well up within her. She externalizes her emotional state: she expresses profound longing for a lover who made her promises, but has now left her to languish in loneliness. Since we know so little about the *talaivi*, these sentiments of frustration and sadness exist in an abstract state,

⁸¹ de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, 1989: xxiii: “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.”

⁸² *Tolkāppiyam* 57, translated by A.K. Ramanujan (1985).

⁸³ *Kuruntokai* 30, ascribed to Kaccipēṭṭu Nannākaīyār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

untethered by context or narrative. Put another way, these emotions do not necessarily belong exclusively to the *talaivi*, but to any person who experiences the loss of love.

While the *akam* poems are about subjective experience, there are no actual subjects behind the verses. There is no real *talaivi*: she is simply a proxy for any woman in love. A.K. Ramanujan suggests that this abstraction is central to the meaning of *akam*. He argues that, “The reason for such an absence of individuals is implicit in the word *akam*: the ‘interior’ world is archetypal, it has no history...”⁸⁴ Ramanujan’s assertion brings us back to the question of subjectivity. He contends that the model of subjectivity within the poems - the inner world - does not pertain to individuals but to a universalized construction of selfhood. The poems do not offer us an insight into a particular woman’s subjectivity, or even into feminine subjectivity, but into a broader formulation of human subjectivity. As readers, we are invited to consider whether this vision of subjectivity relates to us.

The *akam* poems are driven by affect; they produce an empathetic bond between the poem’s speaker and reader. Indeed, the fact that these characters are not tied down by particular contextual descriptions allows the reader to relate more fully to their sentiments. In this way, the *akam* anthologies correspond closely with the genre of lyric poetry in the Western tradition. *Akam* verses and lyric poems share a common focus on interiority, emotion and first-person utterance. Scholars of lyric poetry have made the case that lyric poems encourage the reader to enact the what they are reading. For instance, Helen Vendler describes the lyric poem as, “a script for performance by its reader.”⁸⁵ Gustavo Firmat asserts that when we read lyric poetry we are, “Reading for feeling, (that is), reading the feeling in the poems as well as feeling the poem in our enactment of it.”⁸⁶

Since the *Tolkāppiyam* does not lay out a theory of reader response, it is difficult to know whether the *Caṅkam* poets, like the lyric poets, intended to foster particular reactions in their readers. The authors of the early Tamil grammars and poetic commentaries were less interested in the poetry’s effect on the reader than in the process of constructing virtuosic poems within the rigid constraints of the genre. Even though the *Caṅkam* poets do not explicitly address reader response, their poems are undoubtedly affecting. The *akam* verses allow readers to experience emotions along with the speaker. We are drawn into the speaker’s inner world, infecting us and causing us to reframe the terms of our own subjectivity. We empathize with the *talaivi*, feeling her pain over the loss of her lover. In the poem we have just seen, the *talaivi*’s loneliness and frustration suddenly becomes our own. Her pain is so generalized and abstract that it allows us to conjure up our own similar experiences and emotions from the past. The *talaivi* gives voice to our own inner experiences.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the *talaivi*’s subjectivity is built around her emotions and, more specifically, her unfulfilled desire. Here, I would like to posit that the subjectivity staged in the poems is not presented as unique to the *talaivi* but rather as shared by all readers. The representation of self in these poems is collective rather than individual. As such,

⁸⁴ Ramanujan (1985): 235.

⁸⁵ Vendler (1997): xi.

⁸⁶ Firmat (2007): 39.

the reader is implicated in the *talaivi*'s yearning for more intimacy. It is assumed that we share her desire and experience similar dissatisfaction. The following poem illustrates this well:

Are there others too
with held-back tears
breaking out
from eyes streaked with red,
sick for love, lonely, confused,

who hear,

through the big rain
blown about by the wind
at midnight in the cold month

when the oxen
shake off the buzzing flies
again and again,

the poor thin chime
of clappers
in the crooked cowbells?⁸⁷

Here, we find the *talaivi* alone. Her articulation of her inner experience is not addressed to a specific listener. Yet, the poem is structured as a question that is directed outward, to 'others'. As readers who have access to her private thoughts, we are being explicitly engaged. The *talaivi* wants to know if we understand the despondency, loneliness and confusion that overwhelms her now. The *talaivi* incites us to feel for her, but also to feel our own sadness. The pathos of the poem affects us, allowing us to sympathize with her pain. We also empathize with her, because she spurs us to go through our memories to determine if we have felt what she now feels.

This poem presents a particular construction of subjectivity, one that we are asked to evaluate. The *talaivi* describes the way her feelings appear to be reflected in the world around her. The weather is cold, wet and windy; the oxen are restless, but can do nothing but shake off the flies that bother them. The pathetic sound of the broken cowbells echoes her own pitiful state. The *talaivi*'s sadness affects her perception of the landscape. There is no such thing as objective reality, for the world is simply refracted through her emotional experience. In this poem, the *talaivi* asks whether this is true for 'others', as well. As readers, who are 'others', do we also feel that that world changes according to our affective states? In some ways, the question in this poem is rhetorical. The very structure of the poetry assumes that an empathic bond exists between speaker and reader; it assumes that we have felt, and continue to feel, the same way as the *talaivi*. While this poem is particularly explicit about the relationship between speaker and reader, it points to a dynamic that is consistent throughout the *akam* anthologies. The speaker's subjectivity is so generalized that it appears to stand for a universal subjectivity, which, by extension, we share.

⁸⁷ *Kuruntokai* 86, ascribed to Venkorraṅ, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

III

Sex/Gender

While subjectivity in the *akam* poems is epitomized by the *talaivi* and associated with the feminine, domestic, “inner world” of *akam*, it is not exclusively experienced by female characters. Men also speak in the *akam* genre. The *akam* anthologies contain poems in which the *talaivan*, the male lover, speaks of his desire for the *talaivi*. In the poems written in the *talaivan*’s voice, his language is similar to the *talaivi*’s. His struggles, too, are similar: he is also saddled with unfulfilled desire, forever seeking the *talaivi*, but unable to possess her. While the subjectivity depicted in the *akam* poems is marked as feminine, both male and female characters are capable of experiencing an inner world of desire and frustration.

This is a poem written in the *talaivan*’s voice:

The marauding wolf
has gouged here and drunk
of this little stagnant water,
now mantled over
by the wild jasmine.

How I wish my girl,
my heart’s mistress, her hands all bangles,
were here with me
to share even this:
 but it would be pitiful
 if she were.⁸⁸

The language of this poem is reminiscent of the poems written in the *talaivi*’s voice. We do not know many details about the speaker besides the fact that he is male and is without his lover. The *Tolkāppiyam* provides some context for poems such as these. According to the *Tolkāppiyam*, the reason the *talaivan* is in the desert alone is because he must search for his fortune. While he desires the *talavi*, he must make enough money either by engaging in trade or by becoming a mercenary soldier in order to create a home with her. Like the *talaivi*, the *talaivan* is caught in a bind. To be close to his beloved, he would have to live in poverty, but to make money, he must leave her.

We can only make sense of the context through extra-textual materials. Looking at the poem on its own, it is very sparse. The emphasis is not on the speaker, but his absence from his beloved. The speaker externalizes his forlornness and loneliness. Like other poems we have seen, the *talaivan*’s descriptions of his surroundings reflect and refract his emotional state. Even the wolves in the desert are pathetic, looking around for the comfort of food and water, but finding nothing. The *talaivan* is conflicted: he wishes his *talaivi* were with him to share even this sad sight, but he also is glad she is not, because it would mean that she would have to struggle against the harsh elements of the desert alongside him.

⁸⁸ *Kuruntokai* 56, ascribed to Ciraikkuṭiyāntaiyār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

When the *talaivan* speaks in the *akam* poems, he is also rather obscure, serving as an archetype of a lover, rather than as a fully formed individual. Like the *talaivi*, the *talaivan* articulates his subjectivity, which is similarly defined by his desire and its insatiability. In the *akam* genre, male speakers inhabit sphere of the home and engage in the various concerns of domestic life. They speak about their desire to possess their beloved and to establish a home. Male speakers often contrast life in the desert or at war to domestic life, incorporating soft, nurturing language into their speech. Although the inner world of love and domesticity is marked as feminine, men participate and speak. This is the opposite dynamic to what feminists argue is at work in Western culture.⁸⁹

This ability for men to adopt feminine qualities such as interiority points to a distinction between gender and sex in the poems. I would like to make it clear that I do not believe that the *caṅkam* poets were primarily concerned with gender. I am not suggesting that they were engaged in a kind of proto-feminism or gender theory. They were, however, interested in formal literary conventions and poetic form. Since genre was so deeply tied to gender in this literature, the constructed nature of masculinity and femininity became a concern to them in the process of literary production. In other words, the poets' involvement with gender took place vis-à-vis their concern with genre. What is interesting about their conceptualization of gender is that it corresponds quite well to modern ideologies of gender articulated in the feminist movement, particularly in terms of the distinction between sex and gender elaborated since Simone de Beauvoir.

In *The Second Sex* (1989), Beauvoir made the groundbreaking assertion that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," suggesting that gender is not a biological imperative, but rather a gradually acquired aspect of identity.⁹⁰ Her distinction between sex and gender has been crucial in the feminist effort to undo the claim that anatomy is destiny. Judith Butler elucidates Beauvoir's formulation in the following terms: "sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspect of the female body, whereas *gender* is the cultural meaning and form that the body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation."⁹¹

Within the sphere of the *caṅkam* poems, masculine and feminine are not exactly the same as male and female. By connecting the *akam* genre to the feminine and the *puṛam* genre to the masculine, the poets of this tradition were effectively creating microcosms associated with each gender. The *akam* genre embodies a range of feminine ideas and qualities, including the notion of the inner spaces of the home and of the self. Although the *akam* poems are largely populated by female characters, there are also many male characters who act and speak in the *akam*

⁸⁹ Irigaray, for instance, believed that Western culture produced a version of subjectivity that was inherently masculine. When women are granted subjectivity within this ideological system, their identities are constructed according to masculinist logic. Irigaray, 133: "When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse - by being "female". Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself "as" a masculine subject."

⁹⁰ Beauvoir (1989): 267.

⁹¹ Butler (1986): 35.

vocabulary. Likewise, the *puram* genre represents the masculinized outer spaces of governance and warfare that are largely inhabited by men, but that also include women.

This poetic tradition imagines feminine and masculine to be the cultural dimensions of female and male. Feminine and masculine are therefore infinitely more complicated than female and male, because they are inherently unstable formations. The *akam* and *puram* spaces are never consistent; their boundaries are constantly undergoing change. This concept of gender conforms uncannily well to the notions of gender elaborated by radical feminist theorists. Judith Butler, for instance, describes gender not as an entity but as a process: “If gender is the variable cultural interpretation of sex, then it lacks the fixity and closure characteristic of simple identity. To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities. Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form.”⁹²

Judith Butler takes her theory a step further by arguing that if sex and gender are indeed radically distinct, then it should be possible for sexed bodies to take on a range of possible genders, maybe even genders that are not restricted to the usual two. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), she suggests that, “If sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex.”⁹³ The poets of the Tamil tradition do not go this far. They remain firmly bound to the heterosexual matrix: homosexual or transgendered identities are simply beyond the poets’ grid of intelligibility. In the *caṅkam* tradition, sex and gender exist in strictly binary terms. Indeed, the qualities that correspond with masculinity and femininity are developed in close conjunction with one another. Just as the *akam* and *puram* genres exist in a deeply intertextual relationship, so too are masculinity and femininity bound in a mutually oppositional relationship. Put another way, the masculine is constructed with the feminine “other” in mind, while the feminine is constructed with the masculine “other” in mind. In the following chapter, I will closely examine the construction of masculinity in the *caṅkam* anthologies.

⁹² Butler (1986), 36.

⁹³ Butler (1990), 152.

CHAPTER THREE

The *Talaiyaṅ*: Hegemonic and Subservient Masculinities

How can I place him in words?

Puranāṅṅūru 49⁹⁴

I

In my previous chapter, I argued that the *Caṅkam* literary tradition produces two poetic genres that are clearly and deliberately gendered. *Akam* and *puṛam* exist in a binary system that separates the feminine sphere of the home from the masculine sphere of all that lies beyond. In this chapter, I would like to take this analysis further by showing that the gendered worlds produced through the verses are inevitably fluid and overlapping. There are moments when the fissures and fractures in this carefully constructed system of gendering become apparent. At these junctures, the poets sometimes endeavor to make things cohere: sometimes, however, they simply acknowledge the artificiality and futility of gendered categories by allowing the inner and outer worlds to collide. I am particularly interested in delineating these moments of confusion, where men transgress into the domain of women and women stray into male territory. These moments shed a great deal of light on the process of gender construction in this literary culture.

Until now, I have largely focused on issues surrounding women and the feminine in the corpus. The majority of the surviving poems are written in the feminized *akam* genre: of the eight *caṅkam* anthologies, six are written in the *akam* genre, while only two are written in the *puṛam* genre. The volumes of *puṛam* verse are the *Puranāṅṅūru* (literally, “The Four Hundred About The Exterior”) and the *Patirruppattu*, (literally, “The One Hundred Songs”). The *Puranāṅṅūru* contains poems on many themes relating to public life, while the *Patirruppattu* poems are limited to glorifying the Cēras kings. In this chapter, I break from my emphasis on women and look more closely at the male-dominant world of the *puṛam* poems. I examine how masculinity is conceived as part of the gender system in this literature. I will base the majority of my analysis in this chapter on the thematically varied *Puranāṅṅūru* poems.

Literary Conventions of the *Puṛam* Genre

According to the literary traditions established in the *Tolkāppiyam*, *akam* and *puṛam* are designed to be complementary systems, with parallel poetic structures. As we have already seen, the *akam* poems are written in one of seven phases of love, each situated in a particular landscape, known as a *tiṅai*. The *akam tiṅais* are named for plants native to the landscape. The *Tolkāppiyam* states that there are seven corresponding *tiṅais* in the *puṛam* poems, each related to a stage of warfare. They are as follows:

⁹⁴ Translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

Tiṇai System				
Puṛam	Situation	Akam	Situation	Place
Veṭci	Prelude to war, cattle raid	Kuṛiñci	Lover's union	Mountains at night
Vañci	War preparations, beginning of invasion	Mullai	Patient waiting	Meadowlands during the rainy season
Uḷiñai	Siege	Marutam	Lover's unfaithfulness	Countryside
Tumpai	Pitched battle	Neytal	Anxiety in love, separation	Seashore
Vākai	Victory	Pālai	Elopement, hardship	Wasteland
Kāñci	Transience of the world			
Pāṭān	Praise or elegy, asking for gifts			

To illustrate the correlations between the genres, let me offer two parallel poems. The first is an *akam kuriñci* poem, set in the night, during the cold season. It portrays the union of lovers:

Where the white waters from the peak
 crash through the mountain caves,
 it flowers on the slopes;
 and there, the little hill-town chieftain
 has a younger daughter, a girl
 with great arms, and she is tender as water;

 fancy her quelling my fire!⁹⁵

The poet describes the waterfall found in the mountains where his beloved lives. The alpine terrain and the white waterfall clearly mark this poem as a *kuriñci* verse, which conjures up the image of lovers meeting in a clandestine manner. The lover's union is not described directly: their lovemaking is only suggested in the descriptions of the crashing water. The poet also uses the water to allude to the girl's character. She is described as 'tender as water', which captures her delicate and breakable quality – and perhaps also her soothing presence. Finally, the speaker uses water metaphorically to describe the girl's power to fulfill her lover's passion.

Like the *kuriñci* poems, the *veṭci* poems in the *puṛam* genre are also set in the mountains at night. However, rather than the meeting of lovers, the theme of the poems is the nocturnal cattle raid, which is the prelude to war:

Strain the toddy! Slaughter a male goat! In a pavilion
 with pale columns, roofed over with green leaves,
 spread the fresh sand everywhere that has been
 carried here by the waters! My lord is approaching now
 with a herd, but more tired than he is are the men
 who take their stand beside him behind

⁹⁵ *Kuruntokai* 95, ascribed to Kapilar, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

the cattle and they ward of the vanguard of the enemy!⁹⁶

The poet describes the slaughtering of a goat stolen from the enemy's territory. The sand described is residue from the mountain streams. It is a scene of carousal, as the men revel over the success of their invasion by eating the pillaged animals and drinking toddy wine.

The mood in this *vetci* poem has parallels in the previous *kuruñci* poem. In both, there is a sense of anticipation about the things to come – in the previous poem, the lover looks forward to the blossoming of her yet nascent love affair, while here, the soldiers are excited about the prospect of war. The hastening onset of dawn only heightens the feeling of expectation. The categories of *akam* and *puram* are oppositional in many ways, particularly because they create binary distinctions between emotional experience and civic activity; between the sphere of the home and the sphere of kingship and warfare. However, *akam* and *puram* are also interdependent and intertextual systems. Martha Selby asserts, “We cannot...treat these two systems as exclusive divisions; they are as matrices in constant poetic dialogue. Each poem has shades of the other embedded in it; not only in the shared verbatim line but in the complex emotional structures...”⁹⁷ In other words, *akam* and *puram* are spaces that are locked in a simultaneously contradictory and complementary relationship.

In many poems, the parallelism between the genres comes across clearly. However, it is important to note that the neat and rigid poetic system elaborated in the *Tolkāppiyam* does not always correspond accurately to the poems themselves. The poets and grammarians working within the *tiṇai* system were invested in maintaining the balance and symmetry between *akam* and *puram*, but the neat correlations work better in poetic theory than in practice. We actually find more *tiṇais* in the poems than the seven recorded in the *Tolkāppiyam*. Some poems are assigned certain *tiṇais* that are not described in the grammars at all and that, by extension, do not fit into the *akam/puram* matrix. These include the *tiṇais* of *nocci* and *potuviyal*, which refer to the defense of the fort and to general heroism respectively. The two other *tiṇais* are, interestingly, related to love themes: they are *kaikkiḷai* and *peruntīnai*, which deal with one-sided love and mismatched love respectively. In the *akam* anthologies, these two phases of love are never portrayed because they are considered examples of imperfect love. There is one *kaikkiḷai* poem found in a *puram* anthology but it refers specifically to love directed towards a king. According to this logic, mismatched or one-sided love is only acceptable when it occurs between a king and his consort or supplicant - relationships already defined by power imbalance. I will explore this peculiar mixing of *akam* and *puram* concepts at greater length at a later point in this chapter.

For all their similarities, the *akam* and *puram* poems read very differently. The *puram* poems refer to historical figures and places by name, something which happens less commonly in the *akam* poems. The *akam* genre masks all personal detail and individual voice by using a cast of generic speakers. The *puram* poems, by contrast, are replete with specifics that paint an intricate picture of public life in early South India. While the *puram* poems are grounded in real life, the *akam* poems present a poetic microcosm brimming with emotion, albeit removed from

⁹⁶ *Puranānūru* 262, ascribed to Maturaippēralavāyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

⁹⁷ Selby (2000), 51.

the reader's immediate reality. The majority of the speakers in the *akam* genre are women (although there are male speakers, as in the *kuriñci* poem above). Conversely, *puram* poems are dominated by male characters and are written almost entirely in the male voice. Of course there are exceptions, for mothers occasionally speak in the *puram* poems, as we will see in Chapter Five. For the most part, however, the *akam* poems appear to represent the feminine worldview, while the *puram* poems depict a masculine outlook on life. While the perspectives in the poems are idealized and generalized, they nonetheless provide insight into the ways that femininity and masculinity are conceived in this literary tradition.

Hegemonic Masculinity

With this general overview of how genre intersects with gender in this poetry, we may begin to consider the ways that the masculine is constructed in the *puram* genre of classical Tamil poetry. The *puram* poems articulate a range of masculine values and ideals that have much to do with social power and dominance. Masculine qualities are associated with men in powerful social positions, particularly kings, chieftains and warriors. We also see men in subordinate positions, such as bards and foot soldiers, who take on some qualities attributed to more powerful men, but adopt them to a weaker degree. Traits that are obviously attributed to manliness in the poems include movement and pursuit, bellicosity and warfare, and productivity and the flow of wealth.

The qualities associated with being a man in this literary context appear to conform neatly to the notions of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept that emerged across the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s. It is generally understood to be a set of practices, role expectations and identities that allow men to perpetuate their social dominance over women.⁹⁸ Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony is crucial to this formulation, because it incorporates notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups.⁹⁹ With hegemonic masculinity, we are not necessarily dealing with patterns of explicit male control or dominance, but with a variety of ideologies and practices that interpellate individuals of both genders. While hegemonic masculinity is normative in the sense that it establishes a standard of behavior, it is actually only enacted by a small number of men within the population. In Connell and Messerschmidt's comprehensive study of the concept, they conclude that, "it embodie(s) the currently most honored way of being a man, it require(s) all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate(s) the global subversion of women to men."¹⁰⁰ Weaker men may participate in what may be described as complicit or subordinate masculinity as individuals who enjoy the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of male dominance.

⁹⁸ For a comprehensive examination of the history and criticism of notion of hegemonic masculinity, see Connell, R.W. and James W. Messerschmidt (2005).

⁹⁹ The concept of hegemony is elaborated in Gramsci (1995).

¹⁰⁰ Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), 832.

The king is the cornerstone of the *puṛam* genre. George Hart describes the *Puṛanānūru* as “a treatise on kingship: what a king should be, how he should act, how he should balance his responsibilities, how he should treat his subjects, and how he should show his generosity.”¹⁰¹ In terms of our gender analysis, the figure of the king serves to establish the boundaries of masculinity within this poetic tradition. He represents masculinity *par excellence* and is the embodiment of masculine ideals. This articulation of masculinity is inextricably bound to social power. The king’s masculinity is tied to claiming and asserting control over subservient men and women as a class. As such, the king’s hegemonic masculinity constantly interacts with subservient masculinities and femininities. Over the following pages, I will examine some of the masculine qualities elaborated in the poems and consider how they produced a normative masculinity within this culture.

Both the form and the content of the *puṛam* poems are characterized by energy and motion. The verses are replete with descriptions of men’s activities, contrasting strongly with the *akam* poems that focus on a single emotion and a spare natural image. This difference between the genres is obvious from the naming of the *puṛam* and *akam* categories: as already noted, *puṛam* poems are named for events and activities, while *akam* poems are named for plants. The mobility in the *puṛam* poems takes place across both space and time. Characters in the *puṛam* poems travel back and forth across the vast expanse of the South Indian landscape. They are also described in moments of transience and evanescence: after the event is described, it is over. This is quite different from the *akam* poems, which describe individuals experiencing timeless emotions in timeless moments.

Kings are often described in postures of motion and bodily exertion. They continually move across various landscapes in their territories. In the following poem, the poet associates the king with different tracts of land:

Shall I call him a mountain king? Shall I call him a king of the plains?
Or a king of the lands by the sea, by the cool roaring ocean?
Kōtai, with his sword on high! How can I place him in words?
When men of the mountains strike their noisemakers, from nearby
then,
from the fields where bending blade of rice are swept by the wind
and from the ocean rich in waters, as one all the birds take flight!¹⁰²

This poem is notable because it covers a range of landscapes that would be distinct *tiṇais* in the *akam* genre (specifically, the *kuriñci*, *marutam* and *neytal tiṇais*). In the *akam* genre, however, only one landscape is ever described in a single poem. Here, the king traverses landscapes, moving between them in one verse. Once again, the king is surrounded by noise, color and commotion. The mountain men celebrate their king with loud instruments. Even the natural world is animated, with the wind sweeping the rice stalks and a covey of birds taking flight from the ocean’s waters. There is nothing mild about the king and his world: he appears to breathe life and energy into everything that surrounds him. In fact, the poet feels a little regretful about

¹⁰¹ Hart and Heifeiz (1999), xvii.

¹⁰² *Puṛanānūru* 49, ascribed by Poykaiyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

transmuting the king's likeness into verse, for fear that it may take away his vibrance: "How can I place him in words?". In binding the king to the static and two-dimensional space of the page, the poet robs him of his energy.

Kings are regularly portrayed as a men of remarkable physical prowess. Among the many male-oriented ventures, we see descriptions of kings on hunting expeditions, slaughtering the enemy's cattle and taking part in battle marches. For instance, in the following elegy, typically of the *puram* genre, the poet describes his patron leading his men into war:

Victorious king, you who ride a mountain
of an elephant and lead a vast army
with flags of many colors that flutter
as if they were brushing the sky clean!¹⁰³

The king is in action, riding up an elephantine mountain tirelessly and fearlessly. He also appears to bring life and energy to everything around him. His soldiers ride forward carrying multicolored pennants that blow in the wind, conjuring up images of the bustle of the battlefield.

The notion of the king as a life-giving force is a recurring one in the *puram* anthologies. In another verse, the poet explicitly articulates that the king literally keeps his people alive:

Rice is not the life of the world nor is water the life!
The king is the life of the world with its wide expanses!
And so it is incumbent upon a king who maintains an army
wielding many spears to know of himself: "I am the world's life!"¹⁰⁴

In this land in which the population is utterly dependent on the paddy harvest, rice and water are often described as the source of life. Here, the poet contradicts this common trope by asserting that the king is the true source of life to the world. While the king's sustaining and revitalizing qualities are, in part, otherworldly, the king is also directly responsible for the safety of the lands. The people depend on the king's strength to defend their lands from the enemy's attacks. As such, the king is the protector of his people's livelihoods.

The theme of warfare is an important one in the *puram* poems. The poets use combat as a platform to illustrate men's bravery. The qualities of valor, fearlessness and heroism are described here as the possessions of men: women hardly ever appear on the battlefield, nor do they generally partake in any of the activities that demonstrate courage.¹⁰⁵ The king is symbolically and physically at the helm of battle. The warriors fight in his name, bearing his banner. But in many poems, the king himself rides into battle, representing the epitome of martial bravery. The following verses portray the king's might in battle:

He himself, with his army like the ocean that encircles the earth,
wears a garland of golden tumpai blossoms and carries a shield
pierced by arrowheads that leave marks like leg rings and like tiny bowls.

¹⁰³ *Puṛaṇāṅṅuru* 38, ascribed to Āvūr Mūlaṅkiḷār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹⁰⁴ *Puṛaṇāṅṅuru* 186, ascribed to Mōcikīraṅṅār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz .

¹⁰⁵ Though there are occasional exceptions. For instance, the figure of Āti Manti's wife, name Atti, is described bravely going in search of her husband who was lost at sea in *Akananuru* 44.

How can those who draw his anger escape?¹⁰⁶

This king leads his army into battle. While he is distinguished from the rest of his soldiers by his garland, he sees combat alongside his men. His shield is punctured many times over, revealing extensive hand to hand fighting. The poet emphasizes his patron's might: he is undefeated in war. Indeed, as much as these kings show compassion and kindness to the weakest in their kingdom, they are equally merciless in war. In one poem, the poet lauds the king's ruthlessness against his enemies:

You whose powerful hand with its sliding bracelets triumphs and brandishes
An infallible sword that brings you victory, cutting your enemies down
On the field! Añci of the golden garland, rich in murderous battle!¹⁰⁷

The kings must have the strength to annihilate their enemies, because this is how they will claim land and wealth for their own kingdom. The poets describe the king's plunder not only as evidence of his strength, but also as a sign of his care for his people. With pride, the poets document their patron's capacity to claim tribute:

...Valuti, fierce in battles, with his great radiance!
When they say the cool Tamil land is ruled in common,
he will not bear it and he dissents in battle! If he wishes
tribute, kings who say "take what you want!" and give things to him
do not tremble. But to be pitied, to be pitied are those
who lose his grace!

Although the king epitomizes strength and prowess in battle, the poets use a similar vocabulary of masculinity to describe regular men who also fight bravely. Commoners are also sometimes described as physically strong and full of energy; however, they always fall slightly short in some measures of masculinity. In this verse, a farmer is portrayed as a skillful archer and fighter who is nonetheless struggling to feed himself.

Who is that man with the bow, his legs strong, his belly
elegant, his chest wide, with angry eyes, his beard
the deep shade of kucci grass, with full sideburns growing
down low from his ears, the one who is like a pebble
in the sandal of his enemies? Must we feel sorry for him?
You should consider that he rarely leaves his city. He does not
fortify the forest to defend himself. Early in the morning,
he surveys sites where the herds of cows that belong
to his enemies have gone and he points at them and he counts them
and then he attacks and seizes them with his bow. As many
as they are then, of what use are they to him, he who does not
whiten his own bowl with milk and never hears

¹⁰⁶*Puranānūru* 97, ascribed by Auvaīyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹⁰⁷ *Puranānūru* 91, ascribed to Auvaīyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

the sound of churning sticks spattering drops of milk by the light of day?¹⁰⁸

The poet describes the man's body in manly terms, drawing attention to his attractive chest and beard. The poet makes it clear that this man is skillful with his bow: he easily attacks the enemy's cows during a cattle raid. However, there are many ways in which this man fails to live up to the kingly ideal of masculinity. He does not have the capacity to devastate and annihilate his adversary. He is merely an annoyance to him - a pebble in his sandal. Indeed, he can barely protect himself from his enemy's assaults: "He does not fortify the forest to defend himself." Moreover, unlike the king, he does not travel throughout the lands. He is ensconced in his city. All of these things make the poet wonder whether we should pity this brave man who is simply overwhelmed by poverty. By the end of the poem, the poet asks whether we should sympathize with him, because for all his masculine virtues, he still has no milk to drink nor curd to eat. The verse can be interpreted to emphasize the bravery and doggedness of the common man who proves he can be a strong warrior despite his hunger. However, we can also see the pathos in this man's life, leading us perhaps to answer the poet's question with compassion and sympathy for him.

While the poems make a point of praising men who show bravery despite their poverty, hardship presents a challenge to achieving the ideals of masculinity. In this tradition, the masculine is connected to labor, productivity and the flow of wealth. Great men are lauded for their generosity, but also for their skill and power to accumulate the riches they can afford to give to others. The poets often describe the opulence of their patron's homes in reverent tones:

At the palace of the Chola king who reduced
the strength of the coastal people of the south
and drove away the swords of the Andhra people of the north, he whose
chaplet is elegantly fastened, whose powerful hand holds a straight spear,
who wears spurs to goad his swift horse and dons a handsome garland
and is rich in liquor, I was standing with the great mansion before me
like a cool pond, its upper story glowing white with its plaster so that
it resembled the new moon...¹⁰⁹

The poet emphasizes the sheer extravagance of the king's palace, with its pond, multiple levels and glimmering white plaster walls. These descriptions are interlaced with evidence of the king's might, in order to demonstrate that his wealth is well-deserved. The Cōla king amassed his riches by conquering many lands, including southern coasts and northern inland states. The poet portrays the king singlehandedly fighting these foes by sword, on horseback. Wealth is simply another example of the king's physical prowess. The poet makes reference to the king's material possessions as a measure of his competence and achievement. He suggests that he deserves his wealth, having earned it through the work of his hands.

¹⁰⁸ *Puranānūru* 257, author unknown, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹⁰⁹ *Puranānūru* 378, ascribed to Ūṅpoti Pacuṅkutaīyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

Good kings do not simply enjoy their wealth; they allow it to flow to members of his court and then outward into the kingdom. In the same poem, the poet goes on to describe the king's generosity:

...Then he poured out precious gems
 Before me, a wealth of them so that I could barely endure it, of such
 Supreme excellence, of such a number! And they were no way jewels
 Relegated for the likes of us! When they saw that, my large family,
 Burned dark under the sun, suffering, and in need, took up the ornaments
 Meant for the fingers and put them on their ears...¹¹⁰

In the context of the *puram* poems, the bards are the most obvious recipients of the king's generosity. Indeed, these poems are premised on bards asking the kings to take pity on their poverty and patronize their art. In this poem, for example, the bard makes his pathetic existence known to the king: "...my large family, burned dark under the sun, suffering and in need..." Towards the end of this excerpt, the bard explains that his family is so unused to receiving jewelry that they are confused about where each ornament should go. The king's wealth and generosity are once again tied to his life-sustaining quality. His riches are responsible for the livelihoods of many. He also serves as the prime mover within this rustic economy, causing the circulation of wealth within his kingdom.

If the king's masculinity is connected to his wealth, the poets of this tradition must repeatedly emasculate themselves in order to demonstrate their need. Many poems are heartbreaking descriptions of the poets' own suffering:

My tangled hair is soaked from sleeping
 through all the dew of the many stretches
 of night, and to relieve my poverty in some home
 of wealth where they sleep sweetly I went out beating upon
 my *kinai* drum and while the gods who consume
 their offerings of boiled rice protected me,
 I said, "May he whose heart is inclined
 toward Righteousness live many days" and he,
 hearing it, welcomed me. Because he is
 generous without end, his hand ready
 to give, he cannot be compared with others
 for whom poets have wished long life
 nor can others be compared with him.¹¹¹

This poem is written in the voice of the court drummer, who is of the lowest caste and forbidden from entering the houses of most people. He describes his own misery and precarious existence in piteous terms. The poem is full of contrasts. The drummer has spent many nights sleeping in the wet fields. When he performs for the rich, he is acutely aware that those in his audience sleep in comfort. And although he expresses thanks to the gods for their protection, he does so fully recognizing that his life hangs on a thread. After all, even the idols he worships have food to eat, while the drummer himself battles starvation. The ultimate contrast here is between the drummer

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ *Purānānūru* 377, ascribed to Ulōccaṅār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

and the king. The drummer can barely support himself, and yet the king's existence is so bountiful that he can afford to be generous to others.

There are many other poems that recount the bard's inability to look after his family. In the following two poems, two separate poets explicitly describe their domestic lives in all its unhappiness:

Now the sharpness of my mind
has gone and so has that of my wife who has been with me a long time,
and my pain is great as I sing my song for one clan after another...
I think of your noble reputation, you
for whom it seems the whole wealth of the world has been gathered together
lifting away the fierce suffering from my large family burned dark by the sun,
who have forgotten how it feels to have their hands moist with food...
And you should strip me of my ragged garment that is split
like the tongue of a serpent that has laid its eggs at its time to breed,
and you should clothe me then in a broad garment with folds like petals...¹¹²

The lice are an enemy! They're all over us...
And hunger is an enemy, a ferocious one,
pursuing me and pursuing my family,
so that we sweat and our eyes water,
our flesh wastes away from lack of food!...
We trust in your glory!¹¹³

The lives of the drummers and bards are full of perils. In the first poem, the drummer describes the terrible heat of the sun. Without homes, the drummers are at the mercy of the elements. Both the drummer and the bard choose to use the imagery of terrifying vermin of the natural world: the snake that has just laid eggs and the infestation of lice illustrate the horrors of life in the wild. The poets must contend with these forces of nature - but they appear to be fighting a losing battle. The poems portray the poignancy of being close to starvation. In the first, the drummer and his wife no longer remember what it is like to feel food in their hands. In the second, the bard describes the feeling of flesh wasting away. Both men have lost their dignity, submitting themselves entirely to goodwill of their patrons. In doing so, they abandon their autonomy and independence - qualities that define them as men. Supported by a far greater man - the king - they are made effeminate by their posture of subservience.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the king in this cultural and literary milieu. In addition to being a leader in warfare and government, he was also an important symbol of power, virility and masculinity. The figure of the king establishes the boundaries of the masculine within the *puram* genre and produces other expressions of gender, including subservient forms of masculinity and femininity. He serves as an important point of reference in the process of gender construction in the poems, allowing the poets to negotiate the tricky divide between masculine and feminine in the generic conventions of the literature. In the following section, I will more closely examine the nuances of gender construction in this ancient document.

¹¹² *Puranānūru* 393, ascribed to Nalliraiyanār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹¹³ *Puranānūru* 136, ascribed to Turaiyūr Ōṭaikilār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

II

Gender Trouble

In my comparison of the *akam* and *puram* poems earlier on in this chapter, I described the ways that the two genres share interrelated structures that shape both form and content. In a similar way, the concepts of masculinity and femininity in this poetry only acquire meaning in relation to one another, through a dialectical process. The two genres and, by extension, genders, exist in a dualistic relationship. The poets deliberately create balance and equivalence in their representations of women and men. Like the concepts of *akam* and *puram*, which literally mean inner and outer, the poets assign masculine and feminine attributes in a binary manner. They also attempt to create very clear boundaries that separate the world of the masculine from the world of the feminine: the two worlds are positioned antithetically.

As I have repeatedly described, the qualities associated with the masculine in the *puram* genre have counterparts in the *akam* genre. While the *puram* poems are replete with depictions of movement and pursuit, the *akam* poems contain images of still life and meditations on a single emotion. While the *puram* poems contain descriptions of battle and warfare, the *akam* poems describe the unchanging tranquility of rural life. While the *puram* poems also pay particular emphasis on the daily minutia of eking out a living, the *akam* poems are blissfully free of mundane, pragmatic concerns. In sum, the *puram* poems purport to describe the gritty material world, whereas the *akam* poems focus on the intensity of emotion in the intangible realm of subjectivity.

The poets make a concerted attempt to distinguish the masculine from the feminine. However, throughout the anthologies, there are instances where the poets struggle to neatly classify behaviors or qualities into these gendered categories. These moments of confusion often occur when male characters are found in the feminine spaces and when female characters show up in the masculine spaces. When this happens, the poets appear to be negotiating and re-negotiating the gendered rubric in their poem, revealing how fluid and artificial it is in the first place. In the following part of the chapter, I examine the examples of disorder that emerge in this carefully constructed system of gender.

Thus far, I have described attributes in the *puram* poems that are portrayed as unequivocally masculine: movement, work and warfare. However, there are themes in the *puram* poems that rest uneasily within the binary distinctions of outer and inner worlds, public and private life, masculine and feminine. While the conventions of Tamil poetry attempt to situate sexuality and familial responsibility in the impersonal, emotional realm of *akam* verse, the *puram* poems constantly veer into this feminized territory.

Desirable Women

In some ways, the world of warfare and kingship is incongruous with romance and erotic love. In the *puram* poems, men are described in positions of strength and courage, postures that are discordant with the vulnerability and dependence that come with being in love. As such, in

the majority of *puram* poems, men do not express longing for women. On the other hand, men appear to be judged by their capacity to ignite desire in women. The great kings in the poems are surrounded by adoring women. In one verse, the king's wife is described in these terms: "...the woman, with fine ornaments, with divine purity, on whose breasts a shining necklace lies like a waterfall descending a great mountain, your woman who desires you!"¹¹⁴ This is one of a few poems in the entire *Puranānūru* anthology in which a woman's beauty is described. Her value in the poem comes from her role as the king's consort, rather than for her inherent merit. Her impressive sexual potency, emphasized in the descriptions of her breasts, belongs exclusively to this man. In another poem, a poet describes how a courtesan becomes exhausted with arousal simply by dancing for the king, her patron: "O lord of a good land where the Kaviri spreads its water without fail even in the season of the heat when everything withers like the yoni of the dancing girl when the dance is done!"¹¹⁵ Here sexual desire is not reciprocated: men are the objects of desire rather than desiring subjects.

Once again, the king represents manhood, *par excellence*. He is considered the most sexually desirable man - the universal object of women's desire. But other men also achieve some degree of this masculine ideal by having courtesans and wives who care for them. In the following poem, a warrior is considered particularly accomplished because he has many women pining for him. Now, however, he has abandoned the life of a warrior to become an ascetic:

We have seen a warrior who made the bangles of his women loosen
with their longing for him, women lovely as dolls wearing
their tiny bracelets in the mansion as elegant as a building depicted
in a painting. Now he bathes in a waterfall on a high mountain
overgrown with bamboo and dries the curling, matted hair that falls
on his back, and the red fire, strong and raging,
fueled with wood brought in by forest elephants is what he yearns for.¹¹⁶

The poet takes pains to emphasize that the bevy of beautiful, wealthy women does not have the slightest effect on this warrior, turned ascetic. He bathes obliviously in the mountain forests, longing for a warm fire rather than a woman's touch. He is ruggedly masculine, caring little for the urbane domesticity of the feminine world. Still, these women serve to enhance his social standing. In yet another poem, a poor itinerant bard describes his wife who supports him in his work. It is important to him to describe the extent of her devotion to him, as she accompanies him through the long, perilous search for a patron: "With my wife, the dancer decked with bangles following after me...her body stooped over and taking only short steps because she has already walked too much, I have come, my king!"¹¹⁷ Even among the weakest and poorest men, women are portrayed in postures of support and admiration.

¹¹⁴ *Puranānūru* 198, ascribed to Vaṭama Vaṇṇakkaṅ Pēricāttāṅār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹¹⁵ *Puranānūru* 393, ascribed to Nalliraiyaṅār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹¹⁶ *Puranānūru* 251, ascribed to Mārippittiyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹¹⁷ *Puranānūru* 135, ascribed to Uṛaiyūr Ēṇiccēri Muṭamōciyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

However, there are other poems that contradict this portrayal of men as stoically unmoved by women. One poem describes a soldier who has fallen in love:

Noble man with the victorious spear! Wondering, you ask,
 “The young woman who wears a chaplet of mayilai flowers
 whose shoulders are as long as he flowing wing of a forest crow –
 can she be the daughter of anyone other than a warrior?”
 Her loveliness, so choice as to merit the envy of Laksmi
 is for no one but fighting men!...And should the kings begin
 a great war just because they cannot have her, her brothers
 will display their greatness...¹¹⁸

Although this poem is strongly reminiscent with the *akam* genre, aspects of the *puram* style are apparent. The soldier is described in full regalia, complete with weapons of war. The depiction of the woman is full of militaristic references. According to the poet, her great beauty indicates that she is the daughter of a warrior and, therefore, should be given in marriage to a warrior. But even though the soldier is smitten by this beautiful girl, he is also aware of the chaos and destruction that will ensue should the king decide that he desires her. If the king lays claim to her, this could result in major conflict. In the *puram* verses, women are often the cause of war.

The *Puranānūru* contains several examples of women causing strife and conflict between men. In one poem, a father vows not to give his daughter away to the king, “even though he begs for her!” As a result, the father and the king gear up to go to war, fully aware that they may die in the process:

Together with his followers ferocious as a band of tigers,
 He will not be false to his vow. He is spoiling for a fight...
 And the chieftain, while laying his hand on his weapon, has spoken
 “Either tomorrow I will marry that girl who is resplendent
 With glittering ornaments, whom no man has ever had, who is
 Yielding by nature and has the spots of puberty spreading
 Across her beautiful breasts; or else...
 I will go to the world from which no one returns!”¹¹⁹

Despite being about love, the poem is full of martial imagery. Both men are clearly skilled in battle and have warriors who would willingly fight on their behalf. And yet, all of this tumult is the product of the king’s sexual desire for this young girl. The poet makes no secret of the king’s attraction - the king is captivated by her breasts and wants to lay claim to her unblemished sexuality. As such, masculine sexuality is profoundly troubling in this literature because it has the capacity to cause war and death.

In the following more sinister verse, the poet depicts the destruction that will be wrought upon a city for the sake of a woman. This poem is assigned to the *kāñci tinai*, which describes the evanescence of life.

The spear with its heavy shaft is plunged into water and her father,
 though kings advance against him, will not yield. Since his foremost

¹¹⁸ *Puranānūru* 342, ascribed to Aricilkiḷār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹¹⁹ *Puranānūru* 341, ascribed to Paraṇar, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

warriors have gathered, he sends them on ahead so that he may bathe.
 The elegance of this city where the young girls play in the water
 of a reservoir at the entrance to all the fields of paddy and then return
 to their wealthy homes carrying scabbard fish which leaped from that water
 because of their fear of a crane catching carp - will be destroyed
 by the innocent and joyful gaze of the woman whose arms are as graceful
 as bamboo with its large joinings, whose high breasts
 rise in their beauty and are spread over now with spots of puberty?¹²⁰

The poet paints a powerful picture of the potential destruction that could take place by describing the current peace and calm in the city. Rather than depict the future bloodshed, he portrays the children playing in the water and returning to their safe and comfortable homes. This makes the future violence seem all the more terrifying. Yet, the poet makes it clear that the woman herself is not to blame for the ensuing warfare: indeed, she is “innocent”. It would therefore appear as if male sexual desire is responsible for this situation. Indeed, the spear is presented as an unmitigatedly phallic symbol. Unbridled masculine sexuality is a dangerous force.

Women, as a group, have a tenuous, threatening presence in the *puram* verses. The only exception is the figure of the mother, who repeatedly appears in the verses and is described in entirely respectful language. Mothers usually occur in the context of warfare, mourning their slain sons. They are generally described as old, decrepit women, as exemplified by the following verse:

My mother is old. Over and over she complains about how many years
 have passed and she is still alive and her life will not end. Hobbling
 with many small steps, a stick for an extra leg, her hair like
 spread string, her eyesight gone, she cannot even walk to the verandah.
 and my love wears her one meager, filthy garment and she is
 hungry and as she thinks of how things stand with her she grieves.
 Her body is faded, her breasts withered as the many children moving
 beside her squeeze them and suck at them.¹²¹

When they are portrayed, mothers are entirely desexualized. Here, the old woman’s body is devoid of any feminine beauty: her hair has lost its luster and her breasts are withered. Unlike attractive young women, mothers do not pose any threat to the patriarchal order, because they are incapable of inspiring sexual desire in men.

Indeed, in many poems, the mother figure actually reinforces the social system by articulating support for their son’s heroism in battle. There are several poems in which mothers express pride that their sons have died in combat. In the following poem, the crone’s lament is interwoven with her sense of fulfillment at having raised so valorous a son:

When she hear the many voices saying, “That aged woman with dry
 veined arms where the soft flesh hangs down, she whose belly
 is wrinkled like a lotus leaf - her son was afraid of the enemy army
 and he showed them his back and ran!” the rage overcame her and she said,
 “If he fled in the furious battle, I will cut off the breast

¹²⁰ *Puranānūru* 354, ascribed to Paraṇar, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹²¹ *Puranānūru* 159, ascribed to Peruñcittiraṇār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

at which he sucked!” and she snatched up a sword and she
 turned over every body lying there on the blood-soaked field.
 And she when she found her son who was scattered
 in pieces, she felt happier than she had been the day she bore him.¹²²

In this poem, the figure of the mother does not represent any threat to masculinity. At the start of the poem, she expresses profound anger when she is led to believe that her son has been cowardly when confronted by the enemy army. Indeed, she expresses her rage in violent, even masculine terms, promising to cut off her breast if this rumor proves to be true. The breast holds a great deal of auspicious power in this culture: the symbolic act of cutting it off is believed to unleash a great destruction.¹²³ Moreover, in doing so, she removes an important marker of her womanhood, causing her to take on a masculine quality. She even goes into the scene of battle, a place usually absent of women, to search for her son’s body. In the end, the poet juxtaposes this scene of the warrior’s death in battle with the scene of his birth: to the mother, both are equally gratifying.

The mother is the only figure who is able to move between the *akam* and *puram* spaces with ease. However, in the *puram* verses, the poets make a very concerted effort to present these women in terms that do not threaten hegemonic masculinity. They are always portrayed as sexually repulsive creatures. In the previous poem, the poet deliberately describes her “veined arms where the soft flesh hangs down” and her “belly...wrinkled like a lotus leaf”. These women have a place in the *puram* poems because they could never conceivably be the object of masculine sexual desire.

Scholars who have examined masculine sexuality in other contexts have argued that it is notoriously difficult to depict or pin down. Part of the problem is that sexuality is often gendered as feminine. Paul Smith asserts that, “sexuality has chronically been ‘feminized’, but the concern is male-centered,” meaning that while sexuality is imagined to be the purview of the feminine, it is generally directed towards the masculine.¹²⁴ Some have gone even further than this, by arguing that masculine sexuality is not merely elusive but actually impossible to represent. Martha Selby, in her analysis of Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil love poetry, suggests that male poets fail to depict masculine sexuality entirely: “Because male desire and anxiety are all mediated through an obsession with the feminine subject, the “masculine” becomes largely “unsymbolizable”.”¹²⁵

There is no doubt that sexuality is feminized in the *caṅkam* corpus. This is clear from the outset, as love and desire are the primary concerns of the *akam* genre. In this literary tradition, sexuality is sequestered in the interior, feminine realms and largely left out of the exterior, masculine realms. Indeed, according to the poetic conventions established in the *Tolkappiyam*, love should not be a major theme in the *puram* poems. Despite these stipulations, the poets

¹²²*Purāṇāṅṁ* 278, ascribed to Kākaipāṇiṅiyār translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹²³ This motif is epitomized in the final scenes of the Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikāram*, in which the heroine cuts off her breast, thereby causing the destruction of the city of Madurai.

¹²⁴ Smith (1991), 1011.

¹²⁵ Selby (2000), 111.

constantly cross the line between *akam* and *puram*, allowing love, desire and sexuality to enter the sphere of action, work and warfare. As we have seen, the poets do not evade the issue of masculine sexuality completely, but include sporadic references to desiring men throughout the *puram* anthologies. But the poets appear to be conflicted about how masculine sexuality fits into the larger constellation of masculine traits and qualities. When male erotic desire is described in the masculine landscape of the *puram* poems, it is depicted in profoundly ambivalent terms.

On the one hand, the poets encourage the reader to empathize with men in love. They present women in enticing language so that we appreciate why warriors and kings would be so love-struck. In a poem about a king going to war to lay claim to a chieftain's daughter, the poet makes it easy to understand his yearning for her: "The king with his desire for her is in burning rage. Her father, though it is his duty, will not let her go... Her mother is evil and surely has no principles for she created this quarrel, blithely raising those young, erect breasts until they reached their present beauty. Not as yet full grown, they are as lovely as the buds of the flowering red cotton tree..."¹²⁶ On the other hand, the poets never describe masculine sexuality in unmitigatedly positive terms. References to masculine sexuality are swiftly followed by the warning that desire for women inevitably interferes with the men's work, whether it be accruing wealth or governing the country.

Desirable Men

When this masculine sexuality is directed towards a woman, it has a jarring effect that destabilizes the foundations of the masculine identity. However, there are moments in the *puram* anthologies when this male desire is turned towards another man. In these poems, the *akam* themes of passion and affection emerge in the context of a male relationships. Take the following poem, a song of praise to a chieftain:

Vaḷuti! Your beauty glows, as befits you! Your strong
arms reach to your knees and a necklace hangs down low
upon your handsome chest!...
You are, great being, like the sun that rises from the ocean,
never relenting in your burning ferocity
toward your enemies, but you are like the moon to men like me!

The poet is enamored by Vaḷuti's physical appearance. He describes in detail the form of his body, including various erogenous features – his strong arms and his handsome chest. He also uses *akam* symbolism to illustrate his admiration of this man: the chief is like the moon, shining gentle light on the poet. When directed towards a man, in this case, a king, these expressions of male sexuality do not have devastating consequences. Instead, they strengthen the social structure by reinforcing the king's power and vigor.

Throughout the poems, there are many expressions of male desire and affection directed to other men. Emotions usually expressed in heterosexual relationships come to be found in relationships between men. For instance, the bond between the patron-poet and his lord has

¹²⁶*Purānānūru* 336, ascribed to Paraṇar, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

strong similarities to the marriage relationship bond: both are sustained by love and dependence. This connection is reinforced by the fact that poets and wives are both described taking their lives when their respective patrons or husbands die. Martha Selby notes the parallels in language between *akam* poems about absent lovers and *puram* poems composed by bards lamenting the death of their patrons. This point is made explicit in the fact that the line, “Our master who supports us – where is he now, I wonder?” is repeated verbatim in *Kuruntokai* 325 and *Puranānūru* 235.¹²⁷ The poets of the *puram* anthologies bring aspects of the inner world into the outer world by including these feminized emotions of dependence, vulnerability and affection. These examples show how the two worlds overlap and interweave.

Domestic Responsibility

In the *puram* poems, the inner space of the home occasionally appears, but once again, men appear to have a vexed, uneasy relationship with it. At times, the family is described as a burden that interferes with the quests for fortune and productivity. The following poem, for instance, highlights how oppressive a family can be:

Surely as if someone were hunting you across the breadth
of a white salt-flat stretching out like a flayed skin
thrown down to dry, one could run like a deer
and flee, but life with a family binds up your feet!¹²⁸

Familial responsibilities tie men down, preventing them from pursuing aspects of life that once defined them. In this poem, the speaker wants to renounce the world and become an ascetic: he is prevented from doing so his family and domestic responsibilities. As a result, he feels restricted and unable to pursue his desires.

They must also confront the task of supporting the people who depend on them. In their pleas to local kings for employment in the court, the bards often refer to the families they must look after on their income:

Though I have to make a living for the many
young girls who wear their double braids,
whose shoulders are scored from all their carrying,
and for my dancing women too, waists as thin
as vines and their feet aching from the long climb,
I will tell you the truth and not lie to you!¹²⁹

A veritable entourage of women encircles this bard: he is surrounded by his wife, many daughters. While these women serve as status symbols and markers of success, they are also a terrible burden and their current impoverished state reflects badly on him.

¹²⁷ Selby (2000), 51.

¹²⁸ *Puranānūru* 193, ascribed to Ōrēruḷavar, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹²⁹ *Puranānūru* 139, ascribed to Marutaṅṅaṅānār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

However, poems like this are counterbalanced by other poems that tenderly uphold the joys of children. The following verse, for instance, brims with fatherly affection:

Piling up wealth and possessions, a man can feed crowds of people,
but unless he has children coming to him in the middle of his meals,
who cross the floor with their tiny steps, stretch out their small
hands for the food, setting it down then, kneading it, chewing it,
stirring it and smearing themselves all over with rice and with ghee
in a way that enraptures their father
then he will have won nothing throughout all the days of his life!¹³⁰

The fond, affectionate tone of this poem is reminiscent of the *akam* genre. In this common domestic scene, toddlers that are still unable to feed themselves create chaos at the table. The poet uses this simple illustration of family life to describe the pleasure that children bring to their fathers. Here, family life is described in unequivocally affirmative language.

But in many other cases, the *puram* poems strain to incorporate aspects of the inner world into the outer world. Sometimes, there is no easy way for the two spaces to intersect neatly. While, as a whole, the *puram* poems uphold martial values and attempt to place men firmly in the sphere of work and warfare, poems like the ones above undermine these pursuits. In order for men to partake in important masculine ventures, they cannot be tied down by the responsibilities of family life. The activities that allow a man to prove his masculinity carry great risk: engaging in warfare, searching for one's fortune, even partaking in hunting expeditions, all involve a degree of peril. Because there is no easy compromise between family life and manly pursuits, the poems appear slightly schizophrenic.

Take this poem, for instance. The poet depicts a familiar household scene, in which a father listens adoringly to his infant's incoherent utterances. In the next line, he presents the rather contrasting image of the king's military triumphs. He seems to deliberately combine the discordant imagery of domestic life with that of warfare, in order to reveal their incompatibilities:

Their tenses all wrong and no way to know their meaning,
they are no match for the music played on the *yal*, but yet
the babbled words of a son will still fill a father with love.
O Netuman Anci, you who have seized many fortresses, their walls
guarded by soldiers, just like those words
are the words that come out of my mouth, since they make you feel love!¹³¹

What is interesting is that the poet feels the need to place the spaces of the home with the spaces of kingship in a kind of contest. He makes it clear that childish babbling is "no match" for the music of the *yal* instrument played in the courts. In this poem, the inner and outer worlds are seen as conflicting spheres, not complementary ones.

Ultimately, however, the description of the fatherly affection is not an end in itself. Rather the poet uses it to reflect on his relationship with the king: he dwells on the indulgent

¹³⁰*Puranānūru* 188, ascribed to Pāṇṭiyan Arivūtai Nampi, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

¹³¹*Puranānūru* 92, ascribed to Auvaiyār, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz.

feelings of a parent towards their child in order to elucidate the similarly indulgent relationship of patron to his poet. Earlier we saw how the poet-patron relationship was likened to the marriage relationship: here, it is equated to the relationship between father and son. Once more we see that aspects of the inner world are only allowed to thrive in the *puram* poems when they channeled towards the homosocial relationships that support the kingdom. Like male sexuality, male domestic sentiment becomes benign, perhaps even productive, when directed towards other men.

III

Fractures in the System

There are clear fissures in the demarcations between the inner and outer worlds elaborated in the Tamil poetic conventions. The poets attempt to clearly distinguish between the realm of man and the realm of woman, but occasionally, the spaces overlap and blur into one another. The poets struggle to place the male instincts of sexuality and familial affection within this binary system. Often, these tendencies fit uneasily with the other masculine values of pursuit, warfare and productivity. Thus, the poems either present contradictory perspectives, or redirect feminized instincts into relationships between men.

The contradictions in the poems point to the reality that masculinity is an inherently polyvalent and nebulous concept. In the world of social practices masculinity has many facets and manifestations. In the spaces outside of the poems – in material life, relationships and culture – masculinity may have very well encompassed a range of contradictory behaviors and desires. The instinct to engage in risky behavior may represent a version of masculinity that exists in young men, while the domestic values of stability and tenderness may be compatible with a more mature masculine identity. Indeed, scholars who study masculinity in conjunction with gerontology make the case that as men age, they experience transformations in identity, self, belief and behavior. David Guttman asserts that men are less oriented towards masculine traditions in their post-productive years and are less likely to take risks. In fact, they often begin to explore feminized aspects of their identities: “Exempted now, they can reclaim some of their blunted ‘feminine’ component and experience new potentials as resources of an expanded self.”¹³²

While it is conceivable that both of these experiences and desires coexist within the scope of masculinity as it is experienced in life, what interests me is how the poets struggled rather unsuccessfully to make them cohere within the binary logic of their poetry. In their discourse on gender, the Tamil poets made deliberate attempts to reinforce the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. However, they acknowledge the fruitlessness of this endeavor, because the inner and outer worlds are, in fact, interdependent. While *akam* and *puram* are regularly held in contrast to one another, these two spheres are connected in a dialogic, complementary relationship.

¹³²Guttman and Huyck (1994), 66.

The landscapes of *akam* and *puram* correspond to one another. The masculine and feminine realms thus share a language of symbols and natural imagery. Facets of *akam* regularly appear in the *puram* genre. In unexpected places, the poet makes references to the inner spaces of the home – from depictions of a family at mealtime to eroticized descriptions of the king’s body. The worlds are indelibly and profoundly tied to one another. In spite of all efforts to dissociate the genders, on a fundamental level, masculinity encompasses feminine qualities, desires and imagery.

The converse also appears to be true: the feminine sphere of the *akam* poems is incomplete without the presence of masculinity. While the *akam* poems are both oriented towards and dominated by female characters, men also make appearances and express feelings of love, longing and sexual desire. The men in the *akam* poem adopt postures of tenderness and vulnerability that are rarely seen in the *puram* poems. In the following poem, for instance, the male speaker conveys how difficult it is for him to function because he has fallen so profoundly in love with a girl.

O did I not think of you?
and thinking of you
did I not think and think again of you?
and even as I thought of you
was I not baffled
by the world’s demands
that held me to my work?

O love, did I not think of you,
and think of you till I wished
I were here to sate my passion
till this flood of desire
that once wet the branch of the tall tree
would thin
till I can bend and scoop a drink of water
with my hands?¹³³

The speaker is so fixated on the object of his desire that he cannot pursue his work, which is an important component of his masculine identity. His love now interferes with his productivity and his quest for wealth. But in this poem, he surrenders to his desire with very little hesitation. In the second verse, the speaker uses the language of symbols to describe the overwhelming surge of his passion: it is like gushing water. Unlike the *puram* poems, there are no warnings against the dangers of such passion: it is conceived as a natural phenomenon, like the flow of a river. In the world of *akam* verse, male sexuality is allowed to flow unhindered.

In the *akam* genre, there is no doubt that male speakers are feminized. It is as if men have transgressed into a foreign world, where they can abandon the masculine activities of work, warfare and the pursuit of fame. But their entry into this inner world appears to be only temporary, for the concerns of the outer world are never far from mind. Even in their declarations of love, male speakers cannot help but refer to the themes of the *puram* poems:

¹³³ *Kuruntokai* 99, the poet is unknown, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

Her arms have the beauty
of a gently moving bamboo.
Her eyes are full of peace.
She is faraway,
her place is not easy to reach.

My heart is frantic
with haste,
 a plowman with a single plow
 on land all wet
 and ready for seed.¹³⁴

The sexual metaphor here is obvious. What is interesting is that the speaker uses the idea of physical labor to describe the act of lovemaking. He brings aspects of his worldview into this feminine space, clearly marking his sexuality as masculine. Male speakers are not completely engulfed by the feminine in these poems: they make deliberate attempts to retain aspects of their masculine identities.

Aspects of the masculine are always embedded in the feminine and vice versa: the gendered spaces overlap and interlock in complex ways. In their attempts to make sense of gender, the Tamil poets cling to discrete categories of masculine and feminine, but also deconstruct this simple binary division. In both the *akam* and *puram* poems, men stray into liminal zones, where they must negotiate their masculinity. The poets sometimes express discomfort with these transgressive moments by issuing warnings against the dangers of embracing sexuality and familial relationships. However, on the whole there is an acknowledgement that wandering into the sphere of the feminine is an inevitable, perhaps even necessary, venture for men. Indeed, the entire poetic system hinges on the intertwining and coalescing of these deeply interdependent spaces. The poets of the Tamil tradition were fascinated with the idea of gender and explored it constantly in their work. These poems reveal the meandering process through which notions of masculine and feminine were formed in this ancient culture. But, more than this, the discourse on gender elaborated in the poems serves to enrich the verse by complicating its structures and themes.

¹³⁴ *Kuruntokai* 131, ascribed to Öreruravañār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

CHAPTER FOUR

The *Parattai*: Male Infidelity and Female Agency

Go back to your whore, who is not angry with you.

When loneliness torments me
like floods spreading over the parched fields

just the sight of you is good enough for me.

Narriṇai 230¹³⁵

I

In the minds of many readers, *akam* poetry is synonymous with love poetry. On the surface, the genre appears to dwell on the desire that the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* experience for one another. Yet, as I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the poems rarely portray the pleasure of the couple coming together but focus, instead, on the anxieties and frustrations of love. Throughout the five phases of love, there are many obstacles to the couple's intimacy. After marriage, the most notable one is infidelity, or more accurately, the *talaivan*'s betrayal of the *talavi* with another woman.¹³⁶ Nearly a third of all poems set in the context of married life involve the *talaivan*'s unfaithfulness.¹³⁷ The *marutam* landscape, set in the agricultural pastureland, is specifically devoted to the theme of infidelity.

In the *marutam* poems we come across the figure of the *parattai*. Existing scholarship has commonly (and reductively) translated *parattai* as 'prostitute'. However, if we consider the breadth of *marutam* poems, the figure of the *parattai* is rather more complex than the English term suggests. A *parattai* could refer to a woman from a range of different social positions. These include: *parattais* who offer their services to many men who compensate them; more refined courtesans who limit the number of men to whom they are available; and finally, concubines, who live with one man as if they were their wives.¹³⁸ The *Caṅkam* poets use generic terms to describe all women with whom married men have affairs. *Parattai*, *enkaiyar* and

¹³⁵ *Narriṇai* 230, poem by Ālaṅkuṭi Vaṅkaṅār, translation by Elizabeth Segrant.

¹³⁶ According to Iraiyanar's *Akapporul*, an 8th century commentary on the *akam* poems, the *akam* poems may be divided into two basic groups: love before marriage (described as *kalavu*) and love in the marital context (known as *karpū*).

¹³⁷ Specifically, adultery appears in 279 of the 966 poems set in the post-marital context. Manickam (1982), 69.

¹³⁸ Takahashi (1995), 198. I am not sure if the poems portray *parattais* who act as second-wives. I address this in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

kamakkilatti are among the many terms used interchangeably.¹³⁹ Takanobu Takahashi, in his extensive analysis of the poems and the *Tolkāppiyam*, provides a convincing argument that these various terms are synonymous.¹⁴⁰ To retain the ambiguity of the Tamil concept, I will use the term *parattai* in this chapter.

The *Caṅkam* poets conceived of *parattai* as a single category, regardless of whether a woman offered her services to many men or served a single one. They juxtaposed the *parattai* against the category of the legitimate wife, the *talaivi*.¹⁴¹ The *akam* genre thus presents two distinct but intersecting models of feminine sexuality: the *talaivi*'s sexuality that is directed towards marriage and the *parattai*'s sexuality that belongs outside of marriage. In the first part of this chapter, I will consider how this bifurcated feminine sexuality is constructed in the poems. Since the *parattai*, unlike the *talaivi*, is never portrayed as a mother in these poems, I am particularly interested in how these two models of sexuality relate to motherhood.

In the entire *Caṅkam* corpus, there is not a single representation of the *talaivi* having an affair. This is particularly conspicuous because other analogous literary traditions in India occasionally depict faithless wives. For instance, the Prakrit *Sattasāī*, an anthology of love poems ascribed to Hāla in the first century CE, includes many poems about wives smuggling their lovers into their houses behind their husbands' backs.¹⁴² The silence on the subject of wifely infidelity in the Tamil anthologies is curious. It is possible that such a situation was transgressive within early Tamil culture, or alternatively, poems about unfaithful wives may have been removed from the anthologies during later periods of redaction.¹⁴³ Whatever the case, the anthologies that have survived only portray unfaithful men. The construction of infidelity in this corpus means that marriage is inherently unbalanced. The poems present a relationship in which the *talaivaṅ* is free to seek pleasure elsewhere, while the *talaivi* is bound to her home.

The *talaivi* and the *parattai* are equally unhappy that they are unable to hold the *talaivaṅ*'s attention. The *marutam* poems portray both women grieving over the loss of the *talaivaṅ* when he inevitably leaves them for the other woman. Yet, even though the poems focus on women who are frustrated at every turn, utterly incapable of controlling the *talaivaṅ*'s behavior, these women are not portrayed as passive objects to be used by the *talaivaṅ*. Instead,

¹³⁹ The word *parattai* literally means “another woman”, *enkaiyar* means “my younger sisters” and *kamakkilatti* can be taken to mean “mistress of desire”.

V.T. Manickam lists the full range of terms denoting ‘other women’ in the poems: “Parattai, Potumakal, Kanikai, Cillai, Turttai, Patiyilar, Taliyilar, Vecaiyar, Kuttaiyar, Potuvar, Taciyaṅ, Porutpentir, Putaippentir, Alavaippentir, Purappentir, Puravitimakalir, Kataikalimakalir, Kontimakalir, Vilaimakalir, Puvilaimatantaiyar, Natakamakalir.” He also points out that all ‘other women’ were categorized into two groups, namely “irparattaiyar” and “ceripparattaiyar”. The former referred to women who had long term relationships with married men, while the latter refers to women who took on many sexual partners. Manickam (1982), 152.

¹⁴⁰ Takahashi (1995), 198.

¹⁴¹ Later medieval commentators attempt to classify the *parattai* further. However, the original poets use a few terms interchangeably to refer to all the varieties of ‘other women’.

¹⁴² Khoroché and Ticken (2009), 125-130. Poems 399-422 of the *Sattasāī* are on the subject of faithless wives.

¹⁴³ Alternatively, poems about unfaithful wives may have been removed from the anthologies in later periods of redaction.

the poets give the impression that the *talaivi* and the *parattai* are active subjects, asserting their desires and their wills. In this chapter, I will examine this apparent contradiction between women's inability to change their difficult circumstances and their persistent expressions of empowerment. In particular, I will examine the expressions of female desire and control in the *marutam* poems, which allow the *talaivi* and the *parattai*, to imagine that they are controlling the unthinking *talaivan*. I consider the close-knit communities of women that support one another, both emotionally and pragmatically, to respond to the *talaivan*'s callousness. Finally, I will consider the *talaivi*'s performance of jealousy, which can be seen as a way to manipulate the *talaivan* to remember her rights within marriage. I would like to make it clear that, in this study, I am not seeking to reconstruct the social practice of adultery and prostitution in the early Tamil country. Instead, I am interested in how the theme of marital infidelity allows the poets to broaden their portrayal of women's inner worlds. The figure of the *parattai* is important as a literary construct, because she allows the poets to open up new facets of women's subjectivity.

II

Two Models of Feminine Sexuality

In Chapter Two, I performed a close study of the *talaivi* in the *akam* poems. I argued that the *talaivi*'s subjectivity hinges on her frustrated desire, a portrayal of subjectivity that neatly mirrors Lacan's theory of subject formation. The *talaivi* is shown to have two intertwined desires: a desire for sexual intimacy with the *talaivan* and a desire for marriage. While the *talaivi* is willing to jeopardize her marriage prospects to indulge her sexual desire, her ultimate goal is to achieve both: to have a sexually intimate marriage with the *talaivan*. We see this in poems like the one that follows, written in the voice of the *talaivi*'s friend:

O man of the mountain slopes
 where the jackfruit tree has fruit almost on its roots
 with the small live bamboo for its fences,
 be of good thoughts and think of marriage.
 No one knows of her state.

She's like those other trees on the slopes,
 their giant jacks hanging
 from slender boughs:
 her breath is short,
 and her great love beyond bearing.¹⁴⁴

According to the convention of the *kurinci* genre, in which this poem is written, the *talaivi* and the *talaivan* have already met in secret and made love before this moment. If the *talaivi* does not marry the *talaivan*, it will be hard for her to find another suitor. The *talaivan* has still not begun to consider marriage, while on the other hand, the *talaivi*, is sick with worry - "No one knows of her state." The speaker compares the *talaivi* to a jackfruit hanging low on the trees, waiting to be

¹⁴⁴ *Kuruntokai* 18, ascribed to Kapilar, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

plucked. The implication is that if the *talaivi* does not marry, she will waste away, like a jackfruit rotting on the branch. The *talaivi*'s desire for marriage is not merely pragmatic. The *talaivi*'s friend asserts that the *talaivi* seeks marriage because of her love for the *talaivan*. Her desire for him is so strong, it is "beyond bearing". To the *talaivi*, marriage represents greater intimacy and stability in her relationship with him.

While the *parattai* also expresses sexual desire for the *talaivan*, she never brings up the possibility of marriage. Her desire for him is confined to a brief, ephemeral sexual encounter. Take the following poem, for example. Here, the *parattai* describes the intimacy she feels during her meeting with the *talaivan*:

In the lily ponds, the plump colorful buds
are forced open by bumblebees
on his cool seashore.

I sit with him,
we are two bodies.

We lie together
we are close
as fingers around a bow.

He goes home,
I too am left
with a single body.¹⁴⁵

The *parattai* relishes the idea of merging with the *talaivan*, of becoming so close that they seem to be a single being. However, the figurative part of the poem tells a different story. It suggests that the *parattai* may not be free to give herself to the *talaivan*. The *parattai* compares herself to a lily, who is found and pried open by a bumblebee. In other words, she did not initiate this meeting with the *talaivan*, but is passively selected by him. The poem depicts several "colorful buds", which are forced open by many "bumblebees". Similarly, the *parattai* is one among a group of women who sleep with many customers.

This poem ends with the *talaivan* going home, leaving her feeling abandoned and lonely. This is a familiar trope in the *marutam* poems. The *parattai* is consistently portrayed as a woman who is heartbroken by the men who enter her life and then leave her. In one poem, a *parattai* laments that she is now old and decrepit, worn down by the many men that have used her only to desert her when she is of no longer of any use. It is unusual because although it is written in the *parattai*'s voice, it is not classified under the *marutam* genre, but rather the *neytal* genre, which ordinarily describes lovers or married couples that have been separated.

The fishing boat
has been
thrashed around
by the violent waves and
thrown against the rocks.

¹⁴⁵ *Kuruntokai* 370, ascribed to Villakaviraliṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

Old and rickety
with ragged edges,
It is tied to a tree trunk.

Fishermen find no use for it
any more.

It brings to mind
a buffalo
once strong and valuable
but old now and
unable to work.

I built a friendship with you,
which meant so much to me
but now, O Chief, it seems

it was my mistake

because those who love you
have arms, like mine,
that grow thin.¹⁴⁶

In this poem, the *parattai* compares herself to a well-used fishing boat and to an old buffalo. These two images offer a multiplicity of meanings that may be associated with the *parattai*. The boat and the buffalo are both depersonalized objects. They are owned or rented for temporary use and are associated with accruing a yield of fish or grain, respectively. They are not associated with the home, but with places of commerce or trade. The *parattai* sees herself in these two objects. She realizes that, like the boat and the buffalo, she has been discarded when she has proven no longer to be useful to the *talaivan*. Yet while she is able to acknowledge that she has been treated like an object, she refuses to relinquish her own subjectivity. In this poem, she asserts that she experiences inner turmoil because of the *talaivan*'s departure. She also takes responsibility for the heartbreak she now feels. She accepts that she should not have become attached to the *talaivan* because his leaving was inevitable. As a *parattai*, there was no possibility of a future with the *talaivan*, since she could never marry him.

In another poem, a *parattai* warns her friends not to trust in a men who lie to their lovers:

Listen, Friend, and live long:
He is an expert in lying
to the women who want him,
as their painted eyes dim
and fill with tears,
but he doesn't know a thing
about making a sworn oath real.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ *Narriṇai* 315, poem by Ammūvaṇār, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

¹⁴⁷ *Aiṅkuruṇūru* 37, anonymous, translated by Martha Selby.

In this poem, like the one above, the *parattai* experiences an emotional attachment to the *talaivan*, knowing that he will eventually return to the *talaivi* and his domestic responsibilities. Part of this attachment appears to be caused by the *talaivan* himself, who woos the *parattai*, making her feel special and loved through his sweet words. These words turn out to be lies, as the *parattai* decries in this poem. In the end, the *parattai* feels betrayed, even though she is well aware of the temporary nature of their affair.

For all his loving words and elaborate courting, the *talaivan* will always abandon the *parattai* to return to the *talaivi* and his children. Unlike the *talaivi*, who lives in a household owned and supported by the *talaivan*, the *parattai* has her own home. She is not dependent on the support of a single man, but appears to have some degree of financial and social autonomy. The poems present the *parattai* as independent and self-reliant. Nonetheless, she often experiences a profound desire for the men with whom she sleeps. She repeatedly feels heartbreak and frustration when the *talaivan* leaves.

As the mother of the *talaivan*'s children, the *talaivi* has some degree of control over the *talaivan*. It is true that the act of childbearing makes the *talaivi* less attractive to the *talaivan*, causing him to temporarily seek the pleasures of the *parattai*. However, having a child and more specifically, a son, ensures that the *talaivan* will never permanently leave her. The *talaivi*'s son is the only one capable of compelling the *talaivan* to come back from his philandering or, as we shall see in the following poem, even completely refrain from visiting the *parattai*.

Many said that those lucky people
 who get children whose appearance is without blemish,
 whom even their enemies love,
 live with fame in this world and attain the next world without sin
 and now I have seen how true that old proverb is, friend.
 Yesterday, wearing a full garland on his chest,
 he wanted to get together with a certain woman.
 Wearing newly made ornaments, he was going along this street
 the fine, well-fashioned bell ringing on his chariot.
 As he passed our gate, our son with eyes like flowers
 ran out shakily, wanting to see him.
 He looked, said, "Stop the high chariot, driver!"
 got down and at once embraced the child
 so his mouth red as coral pressed his chest.
 Then he said, "Now, fine driver, go to her house!"
 The child would not let him go but cried,
 and he entered my house looking like the god of wealth himself.
 I felt ashamed, worried he might think I had arranged it,
 and took a stick to punish the child and approached him
 saying, "This naughty boy has interfered with his father
 and ruined things for him." But he took the child to him
 and even when the sweet beat of the concert drum
 with a sounding eye rang out, he wasn't tempted.
 Making me think back with sadness on the old kindness
 he showed me that day I played *kaḷaṅku* with my friends,
 he gave up going to his woman.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *Akanānūru* 66, ascribed to Cellūr̥k Kōcikaṅ Kaṇṇaṅār, translated by George Hart.

In this poem, the *talaivi* reveals that she is fully aware of the *talaivan*'s unfaithfulness. He has not bothered hiding his behavior, but boldly bedecks himself in finery for his encounter with the *parattai*, from the "full garland on his chest" to the "well-fashioned bell ringing on his chariot". Yet, when the *talaivan* sees his son calling out from him, he cannot resist embracing him. This child, refusing to let *talaivan* go, causes him to change his mind about visiting the *parattai*. The *talaivi*'s reaction to this scene is complicated. She feels embarrassed because she does not want the *talaivan* to think that she has sent their son out to stop him from seeing the *parattai*. Indeed, she goes so far as to scold her son for interfering with his father's whoring. This seems to indicate that she condones the *talaivan*'s infidelity, even though it is devastating to her. Nonetheless, the last lines of the poem reveal how profoundly saddened she is by the *talaivan*'s unfaithfulness. The scene she has just recounted reminds her of a time before she married the *talaivan*, when the *talaivan* also refrained from seeing other women. Back then, he chose to stay with the *talaivi* out of his sheer desire for her. Now it is their son who has the power to call the *talaivan* away from the *parattai*. The *talaivi* must accept her husband's love for their son as a proxy for his love for her, although it is clearly not the same thing.

We never see the *parattai* in a maternal role, nor does she ever explicitly express a desire marriage or a family with the *talaivan*.¹⁴⁹ As we have seen, the *parattai* appears to be content with being the occasional object of the *talaivan*'s desire, even though she is saddened when he inevitably leaves her to go home. There is one poem, though, in which the *parattai* acts affectionately towards the *talaivan*'s son, suggesting perhaps, a yearning for motherhood. The *talaivi*, who witnesses the *parattai* embracing her son, recounts her reaction.

...Enchanting everyone,
he was playing alone in the street
with his toy chariot,
our son wearing gold ornaments -

When that woman of yours,
burdened with gold,
teeth sharp and lovely,
seeing your likeness in him,
thinking there was no one watching,
bent down happily
and called out to him,
"Come here, my love!"
and clasped him to her young breast
bourne down with necklaces.

Seeing her,
I couldn't move
but when she turned to me,
I held her close and I said,

"You young innocent,
Don't be shy.

¹⁴⁹ Please see Appendix 1 at the end of this chapter, in which I respond to the commentators and scholars who argue that some poems portray the *parattai* as a long-term mistress who lives in a separate home with the *talaivan*.

You too are a mother to him.”

Her face fell
as one confessing a theft;
she stood scratching the ground
with her toenails.

Looking at her state,
didn't I too love her then,
thinking

“She's like a powerful goddess in the sky,
Goddess of chaste wives,
and fit to be a mother to your son?”¹⁵⁰

The *talaivi* has ambivalent feelings towards the *parattai*. She acknowledges that the *parattai* is a rival for the *talaivan*'s affection. She refers to her as “that woman of yours”, a painful reminder that the *talaivan*'s affections and loyalties are being directed to this other woman. The *talaivi* also realizes that the *parattai* is competing for the *talaivan*'s wealth. She draws attention to the heavy gold jewelry hanging seductively on the *parattai*'s chest: “young breasts / borne down with necklaces”. This emphasis on the *parattai*'s young, perfect breasts are meant to contrast the *talaivi*'s own, which would have begun to sag from years of nursing. The necklace she describes was possibly a gift from the *talaivan* and an obvious sign that wealth is trickling away from her and her family.

Yet, her response to this woman is not anger or disgust. With apparent generosity of spirit, she calls her a “young innocent” and entreats her to play with her son as if she were also his mother. The *talaivi* forges a kind of kinship between herself and the *parattai*, on the basis that they both desire the same man. She goes so far as to spontaneously embrace the *parattai* in an overt display of affection. Her behavior is surprising to the reader as well as to the *parattai*, who is embarrassed by the *talaivi*'s touch. This poem is an unusual example of the relationship between the *talaivi* and the *parattai*. The *talaivi* transforms her rivalry with the other woman into an intimate bond mediated by the man to whom they both make love.

Poems such as the one above throws into relief that the *parattai* is never imagined as a mother. On the other hand, she is regularly portrayed as a daughter. Many poems describe the *parattai*'s relationship with her own mother. The *parattai*'s mother is ever present in the *marutam* poems, offering the *parattai* advice and tending to her appearance. The *parattai*'s mother is invested in making sure that the *parattai* is able to support herself by attracting as many clients as possible. The following poem, for instance, reveals how intimately the *parattai*'s mother is involved in her life, showing concern for her emotional welfare and her success with attracting clients.

They are laughing at your hero
and I am not sorry about it.

He came to me on his fast horse

¹⁵⁰ *Akanānūru* 16, poem by Cākalācaṅār, Translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

like the chiefs of great fortresses
 assembling before the Pāṇṭiyān kings
 saying, “Live long!”

The same kings
 whose armies destroy mighty walls.
 whose elephants shatter defenses.

He came to me,
 gave me his garlands
 and left with my heart.

How can I possibly forget him?

But, my mother stands there
 angrily holding a bamboo cane.

She has no sympathy for me.¹⁵¹

In this poem, written in the *parattai*'s voice, the *parattai* describes a kind of ritual that establishes a relationship between her and her client. The *talaivaṇ* bestows a garland on the *parattai* formalizing his claim to her. This act signals the transactional nature of their relationship. Even though giving the *parattai* the garland is not a purely romantic gesture, the *parattai* still feels touched by his apparent display of love. Indeed, she says that he “left with my heart”. Of course, the *talaivaṇ* is a customer. As to be expected, he suddenly and unceremoniously abandons the *parattai*, sending her into despair.

In this poem, the *parattai* describes her mother's involvement in the affair. Commentators suggest that this poem serves as a threat to the *talaivaṇ*, as the *parattai* warns him that her mother will avenge the hurt he has caused by attacking him with a bamboo cane. Read in another way, the mother may be scolding the *parattai* herself. She may be expressing her anger that the *parattai* has gotten so emotionally entangled in a relationship that was clearly a business transaction. She shows no sympathy for her daughter's feelings, because if she is weighed down by a single man, she is less likely to get involved with other men and thereby accrue wealth. However, these warnings from the *parattai*'s mother, typical of those throughout the *marutam* poems are generally ignored. The *parattai* cannot ultimately separate sex from desire and longing.

III

Female Desire

While male sexuality is ostensibly the subject of discourse in the *marutam* genre, men are largely absent from the poems. *Parattais* discuss male customers, but men are never portrayed actively seeking out sexual services. The *talaivi* articulates the sadness and jealousy that the *talaivaṇ* has caused, but since the *talaivaṇ* is never present to respond to these accusations, she is

¹⁵¹ *Narriṇai* 150, poem by Kaṭuvaṇ Iḷamaḷḷaṇar, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

left to confide these feelings in her friends. Curiously, what emerges from this poetry is not a depiction of male subjectivity, but rather a depiction of female desire – a desire that engenders specific forms of female community.

This is paradoxical because women in the poems do not appear to have much choice with regards to their sexuality. While men may conduct multiple sexual relationships with impunity, women's sexual behavior is circumscribed. The *talaivi* must be faithful to a single man. The *parattai*, conversely, must avoid feelings of attachment towards any sexual partner. Yet, even though women's conduct is constrained, the *marutam* poems overwhelmingly represent women as desiring subjects while men appear to be simply objects of female affection.¹⁵² This sets up a curious tension: women, who have the least choice over whom they love, display the greatest passion and desire in the poems.

This portrayal of women as active, desiring subjects and men as passive objects of desire is reinforced through poetic devices at work in the poems. As with all *Caṅkam* verse, the *marutam* poems begin with a metaphor from the natural world that parallels the romantic situation in the poem. In the majority of these metaphorical descriptions, a weak and easily manipulated animal represents the man. Take the following poem spoken by the *talaivi* after hearing that the *talaivaṅ* has been consorting with *parattais*:

In your town, a red-eyed water buffalo gets tired of being penned in mud
and at night, when everyone is asleep, breaks the rope holding him,
opens the sharp-thorned fence with his horns
and, as the fish all run from him on the water-filled field,
stirs up the vallai flowers with their lovely throats
and eats the cool lotuses while the bees buzz inside them.¹⁵³

In these lines, the *talaivi* likens the *talaivaṅ* to a helpless, trapped water buffalo. In the image she paints, the water buffalo is not intimidating but is “tired of being penned in”. In his effort to escape, he cannot help but stir up the fish and the flowers in the paddy fields, which metaphorically refer to the other women he approaches. If the *talaivi* figures in the poem at all, she is the buffalo's owner – the one who keeps him caged. Yet, the poet and the reader know that the *talaivi* is the helpless one in the relationship. At the end of the poem she indignantly declares that she no longer cares about the *talaivaṅ*'s philandering: “Go, my Lord, no one will keep you here”. Yet, we know that she has very little recourse in the face of the *talaivaṅ*'s inconsiderate and hurtful behavior towards her. In the poem, however, the power dynamics become inverted: the *talaivi* is portrayed as dominating over her vulnerable *talaivaṅ*.

This kind of metaphor is prevalent in the *marutam* poems. The following poem has the similar premise of the *talaivi* being upset with the *talaivaṅ* after his return from a visit to the *parattai*:

In your flower-filled town, a large male varal fish

¹⁵² In other *akam tināis*, such as *pālai*, we do see the *talaivaṅ* expressing desire for the *talaivi* in emotional terms. However, the *marutam* poems never portray a desiring man.

¹⁵³ *Akananūru* 46, poem by Aḷḷūr Naṅmullaiyār, forthcoming translation by George Hart.

with a gaping mouth and lines on its body takes the bait on a curved iron hook
 and jumps, tearing the soft leaves of water-lilies
 and scattering the abundant kupalai flowers opening from buds.
 He mixes up the lovely intertwined vines of vallai
 and, not coming when the fisherman pulls him in on the hook,
 stirs up the pond in the early morning, as arrogant
 as an angry ox pulled with a rope by the nose.¹⁵⁴

In this mixed metaphor, the male figure is portrayed as two distinct animals, both of which are in vulnerable positions. In the first part, he is metaphorically depicted as a helpless fish that has been pierced by the fisherman's hook; in the second, he is an angry ox being pulled by the nose. Here, the other woman is represented as the one holding the animal captive, thereby creating chaos in the surrounding waters. The animal's vigorous attempt to wrench itself away results in the "tearing of the soft leave of the water-lilies and scattering the abundant kupalai flowers".¹⁵⁵ The *talaivi*, like the flowers, is destroyed by the tumult caused by the *parattai*.

In the metaphorical descriptions throughout the *marutam* poems, the power dynamics shift, as the *talaivi* and the other woman variously appear to control the *talaivan*. The male figure, on the other hand, is consistently portrayed as a subdued and manipulated creature at the mercy of greater forces. However, this is not an uncomplicated portrayal of gender relations. In the nonfigurative parts of the poems, when the *talaivi* or other woman is expressing her feelings, women are disempowered and lacking in options. While the *talaivan* may choose to seek out adulterous relationships or return to his wife, the *talaivi* in these poems cannot do anything but react to the *talaivan*'s actions and express their grief. The poems display a tension in which women vacillate between seeming empowered and disempowered, sometimes over the course of a single verse.

Female desire is the cornerstone of the *marutam* poems. These images of men as weak, harnessed creatures perpetuate the idea that men are simply objects of desire to be passed around between women. Women demonstrate emotional complexity as they articulate a wide range of emotional responses towards men, from sexual longing to romantic attachment to jealousy. Men, on the other hand, are flat characters, devoid of willpower or emotional depth. Although the poems are premised on men's inability to be sexually satisfied by a single woman, male sexuality is referenced in strictly oblique terms. It is inferred but never portrayed.

The absence of male subjectivity in these poems stems, in part, from the fact that they are largely written in the female voice. It is worth pointing out again that women were not heavily involved with the writing of these poems. Therefore, these poems should not be taken to be an actual expression of women's angst, but rather a cultural perception of how women respond to male infidelity. The poets of the *Caṅkam* anthologies collectively imagined that women reduced unfaithful men to hollow, helpless objects. This stereotype was encoded in the poetic conventions of the *marutam* genre and transmuted into generic metaphors.

¹⁵⁴ *Akananūru* 36, poem by Maturai Nakkīrar, forthcoming translation by George Hart.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

IV

Female Community

With the absence of men in most of these poems, we are left with a largely female cast of characters. The poems offer insight into the subjectivity of individual women, but they also reveal a great deal about relationships *between* women. Female speakers in the *marutam* poems are embedded within a larger body of women connected by their experiences of male unfaithfulness. This female bonding is evident between the *talaivi* and her friends, as well as between the *parattai* and her friends. These relationships deserve particular attention because, in some ways, they come to displace heterosexual relationships as the subject of these poems.

The *marutam* poems focus on the unreliability of male affection. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the women in the poems are connected by their anxiety about men's fickleness. Within the social milieu represented in the *Caṅkam* poems, heterosexual unions do not conform to the structure of companionate marriage. Spouses do not appear to share emotional intimacy, rather, their bonds are driven by sexual attraction and by the need to produce a male heir. There is a distinction between friendship and marriage in this literary context. While heterosexual relationships fulfill sexual and economic needs, friendships between members of the same gender fulfill emotional needs.

Women in the poems are invested in caring for other women's needs, especially in the realms of marriage and sexuality. Women provide solace to friends who have been abandoned by their lovers, but they also provide tangible support by acting on behalf of their friends through establishing contact with their friend's lovers. Therefore, bonds of friendship between women are responsible for creating and sustaining heterosexual relationships. Indeed, while the *marutam* poems are purportedly about the relationship between men and women, the poems largely involve women forming bonds with other women, and occasionally men forming bonds with other men.

The poems offer insight into the inner workings of women's community. Female friendships in the poems are not formulaic. They weave through the social spectrum: the *talaivi* and the *parattai* are both portrayed in communities of supportive women. Friends also have varied responses to the issue of male infidelity: some women encourage their friends to take the *talaivan* back, while others indignantly tell their friends to hold their moral high ground. Empathy between women is so profound that they are viscerally affected by their friend's sadness. In some poems, the *talaivi*'s friend describes the *talaivi*'s experience as if it were their own, going so far as to use personal pronouns when describing the situation:

In his town
 the water lilies
 make the darkness go away
 for they are bright
 as the dawn
 the ponds

brim with carp.

Leave me to stand here alone.

Go back to your whore, who is not angry with you.

When loneliness torments me
like floods spreading over the parched fields

just the sight of you is good enough for me. ¹⁵⁶

The colophons and the commentarial material surrounding this poem identifies the speaker as the *talaivi*'s friend. Yet, the poem itself reads as if it were a dramatic insight into the *talaivi*'s own inner world. This indicates that the tradition surrounding this poetry imagined the *talaivi*'s friend to be on profoundly intimate terms with the *talaivi*. The poem recounts the complicated mixture of love and anger that consuming the *talaivi*. In the figurative part of the poem, the speaker describes water lilies that are so radiant that they appear to pierce through the darkness. The *talaivi* feels that, like these flowers, the *talaivan* also has the power to make the world brighter. However, the speaker also mentions the carp in the pond that nibble away at the lilies above. This may refer, perhaps, to the *parattais* that linger nearby, waiting to feed on the *talaivan*'s sexual desire and wealth.

The *talaivi*'s friend, speaking on the *talaivi*'s behalf, describes the loneliness that floods the *talaivi* as she faces life alone. Yet, even though she misses the *talaivan*, her anger is so profound that she does not want him to come home. She asserts that just seeing him is enough for her. It is obvious that the *talaivi*'s friend has insight into the *talaivi*'s nuanced emotional state. The poem also suggests that the friend is perhaps pursuing the *talaivi*'s interests in pragmatic ways as well, by communicating to the *talaivan* how deeply he has hurt his wife and by denying him entry into the home. By articulating the *talaivi*'s grievances on her behalf, the *talaivi*'s friend is attempting, perhaps, to pressure the *talaivan* into changing his ways.

In the *marutam* poems where women are powerless to stop men's hurtful behavior, gossip is a tool for women to assert a small degree of control. It is common trope for the *talaivi*'s friend to bitingly disparage the philandering *talaivan* within earshot of his friends. In one poem, a friend tells the story of the *talaivi*'s misfortune to the village potter, who also happens to be the town crier. Other people gather around her, including a bard who will convey her story back to the *talaivan*. The friend explicitly tells the potter to spread the word about the *talaivan*'s lascivious and untrustworthy behavior:

O wise potter,
adorned with garlands
of clustered flowers
like a blossoming mint plant.

When you announce the festival
on this street
so wide
it is like a river,

¹⁵⁶ *Narriṇai* 230, poem by Ālaṅkuṭi Vaṅkaṇār, translation by Elizabeth Segrān.

please do this as well:

Go to the city with water tanks
and the sweet rice fields
brimming with water lilies.

Go to the girls with sharp teeth and wide hips

Tell them about the troubles
the bard brought me;
that bard, who skillfully strums the strings of the yāl .

Warn them of his lying words. ¹⁵⁷

The *talaivi*'s friend asks the potter to describe the *talaivan*'s behavior when he is announcing the festival, so that it reaches a large number of people. She wants the town to know that the bard has stirred up trouble, by taking the *talaivan*'s part and lying about how loving he is. The *talaivi* is devastated that the bard's promises were untrue: the *talaivan* has proven to be unfaithful by spending time with the *parattais*, "the girls with sharp teeth and wide hips". By spreading this gossip, the friend attempts to help the *talaivi* in several ways. These slanderous statements may make their way back to the *talaivan*, shaming him into returning to her. This gossip also serves to warn the *parattais* of the *talaivan*'s deceitful tendencies so that they will stop seducing him. While the poems do not reveal whether the friend's efforts are ultimately successful in changing the *talaivi*'s fate, what comes through is her devotion to the *talaivi*'s happiness.

Subaltern studies scholars draw attention to the role of gossip as a tool of subversion. James Scott provides a concise analysis of the politics of gossip in *The Weapons of the Weak*. He asserts that gossip must function within socially sanctioned order for it to be effective: "Behind every piece of gossip... is an implicit statement of a rule or norm that has been broken. It is in fact only the violation of expected behavior that makes an even worth gossiping about."¹⁵⁸ In the *Caṅkam* anthologies, women characters attempt to establish and reinforce the value of martial fidelity by maliciously gossiping about the *talaivan*'s infidelity. The women's deployment of gossip also has the effect of bringing into relief their own powerlessness. The women in these poems protect themselves by acting collectively against male behavior. Gossip allows them to act advance the *talaivi*'s claims and interests against those of the *talaivan*. However, they must deploy gossip only because open acts of disrespect by women appear to be dangerous in this society.¹⁵⁹ In Scott's words, "the use of gossip... manifests a kind of prudence and respect, however manipulative, of its own."¹⁶⁰

The dynamics of gossip are nicely illustrated in the following verse. Here, a woman tells a group of people about how she saw the *talaivan* pursuing *parattais* in the village.

¹⁵⁷ *Narriṇai* 200, poem by Kūṭalūrp Palkaṇṇanār, translation by Elizabeth Segran.

¹⁵⁸ Scott (1985), 282.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

I went to the village dance,
hoping to catch him
with the dancing girls.

When I saw him, he was like a stranger,
wearing other women's ornaments -
earrings, garlands, little yellow bangles.

I was frightened, so I walked away
down a winding, twisty street
but there he was, rushing towards me.

He almost knocked me over.

I said,
"Is there no one to question this kind of behavior?
Will no one take you to task?"

As if he didn't know what I meant,
he said, "Your pale face is pretty."

I retorted,
"You have no shame."

But when I remember what a man he is
- a man so strong that his enemies respect him -
I think that in my smallness,
I lost sight of his greatness.¹⁶¹

Among those listening are the *talaivi* and a bard who will convey the gossip back to the *talaivan*. However, the storyteller's portrayal of the straying *talaivan* is ambivalent. Even though she attempts to rebuke the *talaivan* by asking, "Is there no one to question this kind of behavior? Will no one take you to task?" she also admits that he is a noble warrior, "a man so strong that his enemies respect him". She ends her story by acknowledging that her earlier words were hurtful and thoughtless. This storytelling is not simply an opportunity for the woman to articulate her thoughts on the *talaivi*'s relationship, it is also a strategic attempt to disseminate information. She is very specific in her attack of the *talaivan*: she chooses to circumscribe her disapproval specifically to his unfaithful behavior and not to his entire character. She cautiously ends on a repentant note, perhaps to protect herself and the *talaivi* from social censure. By remaining within the established normative framework, women's gossip succeeds in being simultaneously subversive and respectful.

In these examples, women act collectively after the *talaivan* has been unfaithful. Occasionally, we also see women gathering to prevent the *talaivan* from meeting with the *parattai*. In one poem, a woman calls upon her friends to help rein in the *talaivan*: "My friends! Let us hurry to protect our chief from her treacherous ways!"¹⁶² Women also provide their friends tangible help by directly engaging with the philandering *talaivans* on the *talaivi*'s behalf.

¹⁶¹ *Narriṇai* 50, poem by Marutampāṭiya Iḷaṅkaṭuṅkō, translation by Elizabeth Segran.

¹⁶² *Narriṇai* 170, poem by Paraṇar, translation by Elizabeth Segran.

It is a common trope within the *marutam* poems for women to speak directly to their friend's husband. While the *talaivi* occasionally confront the returning *talaivans*, sometimes, they choose to make themselves unavailable. In these cases, their friends will describe the pain the *talaivan* has caused her. In one poem, a woman denounces the *talaivan* to his face. She asserts that this man has no concept of true wealth, because even though his land is prosperous, his heart is devoid of compassion:

You are from a town

where fields are wet and plowed over
where they cut stalks and gather harvests
where baskets go out brimming with seed, culled from stems
and return heaped with fish.

You are honored by the king
and ride his swift animals.

Do not think that these things are true wealth;
they are but the fruits of your karma.

True wealth is the quality of the heart
that fears the suffering of those
who come to you for help.¹⁶³

This woman attempts to conjure some remorse in the *talaivan* by directly intervening in their relationship. This kind of intervention is common in the *marutam* poems.

There are some *marutam* poems in which we see the *parattai* interacting with their friends. The homosocial dynamics among these other women is different from those between legitimate the *talaivi* and her friends. While their conversations and interactions also focus on male infidelity, these women do not condemn men for their unfaithfulness. Indeed, the *parattai*'s livelihood depends on maintaining a social system in which men can easily have sex outside of marriage. *Parattai* and her friends are keen to stoke the rivalry with the *talaivi*, because she fares better than *talaivi* in comparisons of physical beauty and sexual prowess. The *parattai* strategically describes her desirability to the *talaivan* when the *talaivi* is present, backhandedly emphasizing the futility of controlling male sexuality. For instance, in an interesting poem the *parattai* describes a sexual encounter with her friends, fully aware that what she is saying will get back to the *talaivi*. She is deliberately invidious as she recounts the way the way that she made love to a man:

Our hero is from a town
where water lilies drift
on the lake's deep waters
shining like the sharp beaks
of the long-clawed cranes
in the rains.

One day, he took hold of my honey-scented hair
he pulled me
brusquely taking bangles off my arms.

¹⁶³ *Narriṇai* 210, poem by Miḷaikiḷān Nalvēṭṭāṇār, translation by Elizabeth Segran.

I did not show my anger on my face
but said, “I will tell your wife what you have done.”

This made him tremble
like the surface of the drum
beaten by traveling dancers
skilled at making music.

Like the mud-smearred eye
of the drum
beaten by wandering drummers
in the courts of Malayaman -
a chief so generous, he bestows chariots
on his grateful subjects;
a warrior so mighty, he drives long herds of cattle
from the countries he vanquishes with his bow.

When I think of how he trembled, I laugh to myself. ¹⁶⁴

During their lovemaking, this *parattai* causes the *talaivan* anxiety by telling him that she will expose his cheating behavior: “I will tell your wife what you have done.” She enjoys the control she has over the *talaivan*, going so far as to make him tremble, and relishes the thought that he has undergone social risk to be with her. Of course, by loudly recounting this whole story to her friends, she effectively communicates what happened to the *talaivi* anyway. The *parattai* finds satisfaction in knowing that both the *talaivan* and *talaivi* live in fear of her: the *talaivan* because he cannot resist her, and the *talaivi* because she is powerless to change the situation. *Parattai*’s friendships portrayed in the poems reinforce the status quo, presenting male infidelity as normative and inevitable. They also undermine the *talaivi*’s social position by revealing how powerless she is to prevent the *talaivan* from succumbing to the seduction of *parattais*.

Although the intimacy between women manifests itself differently in each context, we see some consistency in the fact that women – both the *talaivi* and the *parattai* – have a finely tuned sense of how they fit into each others’ erotic lives. Not only do friends describe their intimate sexual encounters, they also attempt to help each other achieve their sexual ends by manipulating men. Interactions between women in the poems create the idea that men are simply passive objects to be controlled by women or, perhaps more accurately, groups of women. It is important to remember that these women merely endeavor to be agents in their own fate: we never see them achieving their goals with the men in their lives. In other words, the discourse of female homosociality allows women to imagine that they have more social power than they do. It is through their friendships that women navigate through a heterosexual system in which they are thoroughly disempowered.

¹⁶⁴ *Narriṇai* 100, poem by Paraṇar, translation by Elizabeth Segran.

V

The Performance of Wifely Jealousy

Marutam poems written from the *talaivi*'s perspective portray the jealousy unleashed by the act of the *talaivan*'s infidelity. The poems presuppose that the *talaivi* has a right to be angry about the *talaivan*'s promiscuity and, importantly, that the *talaivan* must appease the *talaivi* for his behavior. Within the Tamil literary tradition, wives respond to their unfaithful husbands in a particular expression of emotion described as *ūṭal*. *Ūṭal* is often translated as "sulking" by *Caṅkam* scholars, however, I would suggest that it is a much more complicated dynamic than simply an expression of the *talaivi*'s jealousy and unhappiness.¹⁶⁵ In this section, I would like to argue that *ūṭal* is an elaborate performance in which both the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* are aware of the script they are meant to act out. Significantly, during the performance of *ūṭal*, the *talaivi* is afforded a rare opportunity to break out of her conventional role as a docile, submissive wife. In several poems, the *talaivi* uses the brief interlude before she is reunited with the *talaivan* to assert her right to be treated well.

The *ūṭal* dynamic is evident throughout the *marutam* poems. In the poems written in *talaivi*'s voice, we hear her registering her unhappiness by denying the *talaivan*'s entry home. Even though the *talaivan* presumably owns the house and supports the *talaivi*, she still feels entitled to prevent him from coming home to sleep:

...Last night,
you enjoyed *parattais*
as if they were fresh grass
then quickly moved
on to greener pastures.

Go ahead, Chieftain,
enjoy grazing on them.

One day, perhaps,
you will sleep in peace
in your own home,
but not today.

Today, you can leave...¹⁶⁶

The *talaivi* insults the *talaivan* both implicitly and explicitly in this poem. In the first section, she compares him to a cow, thoughtlessly consuming the *parattais* as if they were freshly mowed grass. She then turns him away, making it seem as if she were the one rejecting him, rather than the other way around. In a sarcastic tone, she gives the *talaivan* permission to continue philandering, saying, "Go ahead, Chieftain, enjoy grazing on them." In this poem, she reverses

¹⁶⁵ V. S. Manickam (1962), Subrahmanian (1966), Nadarajah (1969), V. T. Manickam (1982) all translate *ūṭal* as "sulking". It is also the word used in Sundaram's translation of the *Kural* (1990).

¹⁶⁶ *Narriṇai* 360, poem by Ōrampōkiyār, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

the dynamics of the relationship, assuming the position of control, even though she is disempowered by the *talaivan*'s behavior.

In another poem, the *talaivi* uses strong language to describe how the *talaivan*, and by extension, their marriage, has been polluted by *parattais*:

...do not come near me...
Your chest has been polluted.

Accepting your embrace
is like eating from a plate
that is dirtied and discarded.

Do not come in.

The other woman you embrace -
let her prosper...¹⁶⁷

Here again, the *talaivi*'s tone is offensive. She reduces him to an object - a dirty plate - that she has the power to discard. It is important to note that within the Indian cultural context, a dirty plate was, and continues to be, an especially foul and polluted object. She also insults the *parattai* by sarcastically asking her to prosper. Of course, she means the opposite of what she says. She is condemning the *parattai* to a miserable fate and perhaps even suggesting that she will never be able to truly prosper, because she will never have the security of marriage. Finally, like the previous poem, the *talaivi* asserts her authority to deny the *talaivan* entry into their house.

There are other poems, however, in which the *talaivi* cannot help but take the *talaivan* back, even though she would rather not do so: "Although I would rather reject your embrace,/ I cannot dwell in my resentment,/ or turn you away because of what you have done."¹⁶⁸ Even though the *talaivi* may hold on to her anger for a while, she always, eventually gives in. The *Caṅkam* poems do not reveal any recourse for the *talaivi* other than to reunite with the *talaivan*. The betrayed *talaivi* cannot do much more than manage her feelings of bitterness. In the following poem, for instance, the *talaivi* confides in her friend that she deliberately throws herself into housework to distract herself from her anger towards the *talaivan*:

Friend,
you tell me not to be angry
about the endless whoring

of my man,
from the town
where a sweet fruit
from the mango tree
loosed by the heron
as it settles on the branch

¹⁶⁷ *Narriṇai* 350, poem by Paraṇar, translated by A.V. Subramanian.

¹⁶⁸ *Narriṇai* 340, poem by Maturai Nakkīrar, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

then falls into the deep water
filled with water lilies
whose buds resemble
that same bending heron.

I will try not to be angry.

My house is overtaken by a stream of guests.

My work is like the labor
of the ancient Veḷṛ people of Kunroor
who plow the fields so unceasingly
they stop only to break roasted snails
on the backs of field tortoises...¹⁶⁹

The *talaivi* acknowledges that her husband has been regularly visiting *parattais*. Although she is fuming, she strategically attempts “not to be angry”. As she describes her household labor, she compares herself to the Veḷṛ people, who are known for their hard work. Within ancient Tamil culture, the task of serving guests was considered the highest duty. By emphasizing that she is busy serving guests, the *talaivi* is signaling that the *talaivan* is forsaking his responsibilities by seeing his *parattais*. The *talaivi* also makes the point that while the house is a symbol of her security and stability, it also produces exhausting work for her to complete. This labor is made harder by the emotional burden of unspoken wrath and sadness that she carries.

While the clearest voices in the *marutam* poems tend to come from women, there are a several poems in which the *talaivan* speaks directly about his extramarital affairs. In these poems, the *talaivan* is usually attempting to return to family life after having spent the night with the *parattai*. Upon his return, he confronts the *talaivi*'s cold demeanor. Poems written in the *talaivan*'s voice are replete with domestic imagery, portraying cooking, guests and children. They display the contrast between the exciting, urbane world of the *parattai* and the simple, rural world of home. While the *talaivan* is aware of the misery he has brought upon the *talaivi*, he appears to treat her unhappiness as a hindrance rather than a legitimate concern. In the following poem, a *talaivan* who has returned from a *parattai* enjoys having a visitor in his house, because it distracts the *talaivi* from her anger towards him:

Our good home
has calves tied
to every pillar.

My innocent *talaivi*
adorned with earrings and rings
makes her tender fingers red
from cutting banana leaves.

Her eyes redden
from the rising smoke
as she puts them in the fire.

She wipes away the sweat

¹⁶⁹ *Narriṇai* 280, poem by Paraṇar, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

from her moonlike forehead
with the edge of her sari.

I know she is angry with me,
but she stays in the kitchen.

When the guests arrive,
the redness in her eyes
goes away
and she smiles
showing her small white teeth.

How I love to see that face!¹⁷⁰

In this poem, the *talaivaṇ* carefully observes the *talaivi*'s domestic labors. He tenderly notices her fingers that are sore from chopping and her eyes that are irritated by the kitchen smoke. On the surface, the poem appears to be about the *talaivaṇ*'s affection towards his wife. He obviously takes great pleasure in her "moonlike forehead" and "small white teeth". However, the poem is set in the *marutam* landscape and the implication is that the *talaivaṇ* is confronting the *talaivi* after having been to the *parattai*. Commentators suggest that the *talaivi* is stifled because with guests around, she cannot openly express her hurt or anger at his recent indiscretions. At the end of the verse, when she smiles for the guests, the *talaivaṇ* does not take pleasure in her face for her sake, but for his own. Her smile allows him to avoid dealing with the consequences of his infidelity a while longer.

In another poem, a *talaivaṇ* returns to the *talaivi* and infant son. As he reaches the entrance to his home, he begins to feel tenderness towards the family he has recently neglected to visit the *parattai*. Here he is recounting his feeling to his friend, the bard:

We will laugh, Bard.

My child, rolls his little toy chariot down the street,
his anklet with it's wide openings
tinkling with pebbles,
his red lips smudging the sandal paste
on the my chest.

My heart brims with desire
to embrace my beloved,

the one
whose hair is fragrant and
whose perfect brow carries the beauty of the crescent moon.

But she is angry,
standing away from me
like a frightened doe,

saying,

¹⁷⁰ *Narriṇai* 120, poem by Māṅkuṭi Kīlār, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

“Who do you think you are?”¹⁷¹

Again, the *talaivan* expresses affection towards his wife and child. He takes pleasure in the physical intimacy he experiences with his son, holding him so close that his mouth smudges the sandal paste on his chest. He delights in the *talaivi*'s brow, which “carries the beauty of the crescent moon”. To the *talaivan*, his wife resembles a frightened deer - a small, helpless creatures. He imagines himself to be greater and stronger than them, as both need his protection and sustenance. However, in the end, this poem is also about the *talaivan*'s return home after seeing a *parattai*. Like the previous poem, the *talaivan* belittles the *talaivi*'s anger. Rather than acknowledging her grief, he chooses to treat this as an opportunity to have a laugh with his friend. This reaction undermines the care and tenderness that is evident throughout the verse.

There is a striking contrast between the male and female approaches to *ūṭal*. The *talaivi* expresses grief and despair, while *talaivan* treats his wife's feelings lightly. The *talaivan*'s approach is echoed throughout the commentarial and ethical literature, which imagines the anxiety and anger produced by adultery as a way for both parties to remember their love. The first work of ethics written in the Tamil language, the *Tirukkural*, comments extensively on the dynamics of *ūṭal* in its third volume, on the theme of love. The couplets in this section are spoken by male and female characters in a dramatized form reminiscent of the format of *Caṅkam* poetry. They provide some insight into how this culture imagined the appropriate gendered approaches to *ūṭal*.

The *Kural* portrays *ūṭal* as a necessary and beneficial aspect of married life. Both male and female speakers in the *Kural* describe the separation produced by *ūṭal* as a means of increasing desire before the inevitable reconciliation. Couplet 1322, spoken by a female speaker, states that, “The pinpricks of sulking do not discourage but strengthen love.”¹⁷² However, the female speaker also has a strategic sense of how much sulking is necessary to achieve her goals, as evident in couplets 1302-1304, “Love's salt is sulks - a pinch of it is welcome, too much will ruin the taste.” When the female speaker directs the couplets to her husband, she describes her desperation at his coldness in ignoring her pain: “¹³⁰³To leave a sulky woman alone is to add insult to injury. ¹³⁰⁴To ignore the resentful is to cult a fading plan at its root.”¹⁷³

While the female speaker speaks in a tone of reluctant acceptance of *ūṭal*, the male speaker appear to relish the experience. Male speakers in the *kural* imagine a wife's sullenness to be an aphrodisiac. Take couplet 1310 and couplet 1328-1330, for instance:

¹³¹⁰ Only my desire makes my heart pine
For union with the one who keeps on sulking.

¹³²⁸ When shall I know her sulks again
And the ardor which bedewed her brows?

¹³²⁹ Sulk, sulk bright jewel, and let me plead
In the endless night!

¹⁷¹ *Narriṇai* 250, poem by Maturai Ōlaikkāṭaiyattār Nalvellaiyār, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

¹⁷² Tiruvalluvar. trans. P.S. Sundaram (1990), Couplet 1322.

¹⁷³ Ibid., Couplets 1302-1304.

¹³³⁰ The body held back is love's joy,
And the joy of the joy embrace forthcoming!¹⁷⁴

We see a similar gendered dynamic in the *marutam* poems. The *talaivi* appears unmitigatedly heartbroken about their *talaivan*'s philandering ways. In contrast, the *talaivan* takes great satisfaction in his wife's jealousy, taking it to be an affirmation of her love for him. When he is refused permission to enter to his home, he does not seem to take this to be a serious threat, but condescendingly plays along with the *talaivi*, aware the two of them are acting out a script in which he will ultimately be welcomed home.

Ūṭal functions along rigid rules of conduct, in which both the *talaivi* and the *talaivan* perform culturally orchestrated roles. Given the scripted nature of *ūṭal*, it is possible to see the entire interaction as merely a simulated display of emotion. The expression of women's sullenness in these poems is not premised on spontaneous emotion, but as a means of marginally shifting the power dynamic in their favor. By performing *ūṭal*, she is partaking in a socially intelligible means of expressing her complex emotions and a strategic way of reminding their *talaivans* of his love for her. While *ūṭal* can be read as an attempt for women to achieving her goals, the performance also highlights the social inequality between the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* in the *marutam* poems. The *talaivi* is unable to proactively improve her situation: she can only react to the *talaivan*'s hurtful behavior, and even then, only according to the predetermined enactment in *ūṭal*.

The various displays of female agency I have examined in this chapter reveal that the *Caṅkam* poets were concerned with portraying nuanced gender dynamics in their verses. Although the poets were constrained by the rigid poetic formulas and conventions, they were invested in constructing complex and varied inner worlds for their characters. The *talaivi* and the *parattai*, in particular, are both shown to respond to their circumstances with in interesting ways. Although they appear to be unable to alter their fates or change the *talaivan*'s behavior, the poets describe the way that they manage their emotions and responses. In the end, we are left with a sense that the *talaivi* and the *parattai* react with purpose, rather than disempowerment, in the face of difficulty. These portrayals of women's agency deepen our insight into the subjectivity of the *talaivi* and the *parattai*, allowing us to glimpse the intricacy of their inner worlds.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., Couplets 1310, 1328-1330.

Appendix 2: A Note About The *Kamaparattai*/*Cheriparattai* Distinction

Over the centuries, commentators and grammarians have suggested that there was separate category of women who were long-term sexual partners to the *talaivan* although he is already married to the *talaivi*. They refer to these women as *kamaparattai*, with the prefix *kama* denoting love. According to tradition, these women had a much more stable relationships with men than women who were not faithful to a single man, who are often are described as *cheriparattai*, with the prefix *cheri* referring to the towns or urban spaces where they would gather.¹⁷⁵ Commentators specify that *kamaparattais* were secure enough in their relationships to point out their lover's faults and expressed sadness during periods of separation from their lovers.

I would like to argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the figure of the long-term mistress in the poems because verses ascribed to these women are identical in tone to poems spoken by the *talaivi* or by the *talaivi*'s friend. It is only in the colophon that the speaker is identified as a *parattai*. The following verse, for instance, is ascribed to the *parattai*. The commentarial material on the poem produces a rather convoluted backstory, asserting that the *parattai* is attempting to quell the anger of her lover's *talaivi* who is upset by his constant philandering behavior:

Do not be angry with him
though you are
a beautiful woman
with a good heart.

People do not call him a man,
but say he is rather like a bee
drinking honey
from flowers
that bloom in ponds
at night.¹⁷⁶

There is nothing within the verse that identifies the speaker as a woman who also has sexual relations with the man in question.

It is possible that the early commentators had greater insight into the social system in which these poems were written and were thus able to distinguish between various kinds of *parattai*. If there are signs in the text specifying that a *parattai* is being referenced, they are now unintelligible to us. However, it is also possible that the commentators and grammarians were trying to fit the poems into a rigid poetic system with a specific set of characters. While the rubric laid out in the grammars is largely coherent, it sometimes fails to correspond to the poem's content. Nonetheless, the long commentarial tradition connected to the poems is instructive to the modern reader because it indicates that there were complexities and nuances in the figure of other woman. The poems reflect a world in which there are many women, with various social identities, competing for men's attentions.

There has not been much secondary scholarship on the subject of infidelity in the *Caṅkam* corpus. V. T. Manickam wrote a book on the subject entitled *Marutam* and two other scholars have alluded to marital sexuality in their work: Nainar Subramanian in *Śaṅkam Polity* and Devapopathy Nadarajah in *Women in Tamil Society*. Subrahmanian and Nadarajah both accept the dichotomy of 'other women' elaborated by the commentaries, identifying women who were permanent mistresses, faithful to one man,

¹⁷⁵Based on the etymology of the word, scholars assume that such women were found in specific quarters of the village. References from the poems themselves support this hypothesis. Women who are free to seduce many men also tend to be described in urban settings, such as village festivals. See Nainar Subramanian (1966), 304 and Devapopathy Nadarajah (1969), 84.

¹⁷⁶ *Narriṇai* 290, poem by Maturai Marutaṅ Iṅāṅkaṅār, translated by Elizabeth Segran.

and women who were not bound to a single patron. They assert that poem's heroine would eventually become a *talaivi*, but after marriage, another woman may become her *talaivan*'s long-term partner, complete with her own household. Nadarajah imagines that the poems are describing a polygamous system of sorts. Subramanian concurs, describing these other women as "unmarried spouses".¹⁷⁷

This is a flawed comparison and an anachronistic use of the modern construction of polygamy. While there are some similarities between the polygamous framework and the situation of *talaivan* having long-term attachments to women apart from the *talaivi*, the key difference is that the *talaivan* does not marry these other women. This fact is reinforced by the poetic structure, which only allows for one *talaivi*. All other women are considered secondary to the *talaivi*; indeed, they are considered her rivals. It is also of vital importance that the *talaivi* was the only woman who is conferred with the status of motherhood in the poems. If *parattais* had children, they are never mentioned. Therefore, the poems themselves seem to create a clear distinction between the *talaivi* and the *parattai*. Subramanian and Nadarajah both argue that the poems portray a society in which it was socially acceptable and even normative for men to have multiple sexual partners after marriage. However, it is worth remembering that the entire premise of the genre is *that* mistresses are a source of grief to the *talaivi*. According to the literary tradition, the specific purpose of the *marutam* genre is to depict the situation of the *talaivi* being upset with the *talaivan* because of his unfaithfulness.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Subramanian (1966), 304 and Nadarajah (1969).

¹⁷⁸ This is specified in the *Poruḷatikāram* section of the *Tolkāppiyam*.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Daughter, The Son: The Queerness of the Mother Figure

My daughter who loves her parrot, her ball, her *kalaiṅku* beans,
who had such kindness, love, gentleness, goodness
is not like she was before - and I wish my life were over.

Akanānūru 49¹⁷⁹

I

In this dissertation, my goal has been to examine the way that gender is constructed in the classical Tamil literary tradition. In each chapter, I have analyzed one character at the heart of the poetry: the *talaivaṅ*, the *talaivi* and the *parattai*. These three figures provide the narrative structure and the emotional weight of the poems. While the *talaivaṅ* and *talaivi* are often portrayed as adults forging their own paths on the battlefield or in matters of love, they are also imagined within a broader network of family and community relationships. Men are portrayed as brave warriors, but also as sons. Women are portrayed as passionate lovers, but also as daughters. It is primarily through the figure of the mother that we gain insight into the past. The poets use the mother's voice to offer us a glimpse into the childhoods of the *talaivaṅ* and the *talaivi*.

The mother appears in both the *akam* and *puram* genres. As we compare her role in each genre, it becomes clear that the poets construct the mother-daughter relationship very differently from the mother-son relationship. In the *akam* poems, the relationship between the *talaivi* and her mother is presented as a profound emotional connection. In this chapter, I argue that the intimacy between mother and daughter is evocative of romantic intimacy. Poems about the mother's love for her daughter echo other poems within the corpus about the passion between the *talaivaṅ* and the *talaivi*. Within this tradition, maternal love lays the foundation for sexual love; it provides the daughter with a language of bodily closeness, emotional attachment and grief that she will deploy within her romantic relationship. It is within her relationship with her mother that the *talaivi* learns and cultivates a desire that is eventually fulfilled by the *talaivaṅ*.

Conversely, the mother-son relationship which is presented in the *puram* verses, describes a relationship that focuses on a bodily connection. The poets describe the mother's cultivation of the *talaivaṅ*'s body as she carries him in her womb and as she nurses him from her breast. While there is certainly an emotional attachment between mother and son, the poets emphasize the embodied nature of this bond. We can also see the mother-son relationship as part of a larger relationship between women and the state. Within this poetry, the mother considers it her responsibility to nurture her son's body, so that he can become a brave warrior who will fight for his people. In this way, the mother's bodily sacrifices for her son mirrors her son's own bodily sacrifice on the battlefield.

¹⁷⁹ *Akanānūru* 49, by Vaṅṅappurak Kantarattaṅār, translated by George Hart.

Although *akam* and *puram* present very different facets of motherly love, Tamil poetics also connect the representations of motherhood in these two genres. Classical Tamil poetry associates motherhood with loss. Both *akam* and *puram* poems present mothers grieving for their lost children. In the *akam* poems, mothers lose their daughters when they leave the home to join their lovers or their husbands. In the *puram* poems, mothers mourn the loss of their sons in the battlefield. In this poetic tradition, motherhood is indelibly associated with sadness. Mothers must live in their happy memories of the past, when their children were at home.

I argue that the figure of the mother also brings up questions of sexuality in both *akam* and *puram* genres. Within the *akam* poems, the poets use the character of the mother to consider the continuity between the intimate spaces of childhood and adulthood. They think through how sexual desire is learnt within the home, before it can be understood in the world beyond the home. In the *puram* poems, the poets explore the way that erogenous parts of women's bodies, particularly their breasts, are recontextualized within motherhood. Yet even as the poetic conventions attempt to desexualize women, traces of the mother's sexuality come through. The classical Tamil poems engage with the way that motherhood and sexuality are connected, despite all efforts to separate the two.

By portraying mothers with erotic qualities, the Tamil poets disrupt many structures within this poetic system. The mother is a thoroughly destabilizing figure, undermining the distinction between inner and outer spaces, between familial and sexual intimacies, between care and desire. To borrow from the language of queer theory, the mother is a queering figure in this poetry. She queers the boundaries of masculine and feminine space; she complicates the reader's understanding of who can desire and who can be desired. In saying this, I am deploying the term "queer" in its broadest sense, as a deconstructive practice that challenges identity categories as arbitrary, totalizing and exclusionary constructions that preclude ambiguity. My argument is that the Tamil poets use the mother figure to produce poetic ambiguity by challenging the stability of the characters in the text, particularly the identity of women who must take on the qualities of a lover and a mother at different points in their lives. The poets explore and engage with the rich ambiguity that comes when these two figures are imagined within a single body.

As modern readers, the portrayal of motherhood in this poetry forces us to confront our own anxieties about eroticism and motherhood. In a post-Freudian world, we continue to inhabit a psychoanalytic framework that structures our understanding of what constitutes healthy sexuality. Freud's theories about incest and maternal sexuality were meant to have universal implications. Classical Tamil poetry offers a radical disavowal of Freud's work, by creating spaces for the expression of maternal sexuality and a mother's desire for her daughter. As we read these poems, the poems read us in some ways, bringing to the fore our own axioms about motherhood and sexuality. In doing so, they also prompt us to rethink them.

II

Mothers, Daughters and the Cultivation of Desire

In the *akam* poems, situated within the domestic spaces of the home, the Tamil poets paint a picture of female intimacy. The *talaivi* of the poems is deeply connected to the older

women in her life. Apart from her mother, the “*cevili*” appears frequently as a significant figure in her life. The word *cevili* has been commonly translated as “foster mother” by Tamil scholars, however, the *cevili* has a complex and multifaceted role in the *talaivi*’s life that does not have a clear parallel in modern society. Devapoopathy Nadarajah and Herman Tieken speculate that this figure may be based on the historical figure of the wet nurse, although the poems never explicitly portray her in this role.¹⁸⁰ Unfortunately, we have very little insight into the role of the *cevili* within early Tamil society or whether the Tamil poets were even representing an actual relationship in their poems. As modern readers, it is perhaps more productive to consider the literary function of this character, rather than to hypothesize about what these poems reveal about social structures in the ancient Tamil country.

The corpus often use several terms for “mother” (*annai*, *tāy*, *yāy*) to refer to the *talaivi*’s biological mother and foster mother interchangeably. Redactors and grammarians, writing in the centuries after the poems were produced, attempted to clearly distinguish between these two characters. For instance, Cāminātaiyar, writing in the 1930s, uses the term *narrāy* (“good mother” or “genuine mother”) to refer specifically to the *talaivi*’s biological mother, as opposed to the *cevili*. In many poems, though, it is impossible to distinguish between these two kinds of mother. Martha Selby observes that these figures are often conflated into one, going so far as to argue that the concept of mother “is always plural; perhaps one entity expressing twin facets of the single self.”¹⁸¹

Selby does not explore the implications of this statement in her own writing. In this chapter, I would like to take up the question of what it would mean for the Tamil poets to represent the fractured nature of motherhood in their choice of language. Within the poetry, the notion of motherhood does not appear to refer to an individual, but rather to a constellation of emotional and bodily qualities that belong to a community of women. Motherhood refers to intimate behaviors between older women and children that may be construed as either caring or desiring. Motherhood also applies to the physical nurturing of children through the embodied practices of breast-feeding and embracing. I believe it is important that the poets do not apply maternal qualities to the biological mother alone because it allows them to create ambiguity around the mother figure.

The early Tamil poets appeared to be comfortable with this ambiguity, treating motherhood as a term that left open many possibilities for imagining relationships between older women and the younger people for whom they cared. Later commentators and redactors were invested in codifying the maternal role by ascribing particular behaviors to the *cevili* and others to the biological mother. Within these subsequent frameworks, it is the *cevili* rather than the biological mother who has the greatest bodily and emotional intimacy with the daughter. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know the commentators’ motivations for distinguishing these characters. Were they attempting to avoid imbuing the biological mother with too much desire? Was this part of a larger pattern of desexualizing mothers? Was it to deny the possibility of incest? As modern readers, we cannot tell. Nonetheless, the consequences of their choices are clear. Within their taxonomy, the *cevili* is the desiring mother and the one who cultivates the

¹⁸⁰ Tieken (2001), 45. Nadarajah (1994), 145.

¹⁸¹ Selby (2008), 35.

daughter's desire. Consequently, the biological mother is depicted as less erotic. As I consider the mother-daughter relationship in this chapter, I will fall back on the distinctions between the *cevili* and the mother that have been codified by the poetic tradition that accompanies the corpus. However, I would like to point to the possibility that the figure of the mother may have been more ambiguous to the Tamil poets than later readers, including ourselves, can imagine.

Within the Tamil poetics laid out in the *Tolkāppiyam*, the *cevili* has very specific functions within the *talaivi*'s romantic life. She is particularly present in situations involving the *talaivi*'s departure from her family home into a new life with her husband. The *Tolkāppiyam* also emphasizes a distinct shift from the period of pre-marital love to the period of love within marriage. Poems before marriage are set in the mountains and seashore (*kuriñci* and *neytal*), where the *talaivan* and the *talaivi* meet secretly. Poems after marriage involve the *talaivi* settled within her own home (set in the meadows, *mullai*, or in the cultivated fields, *marutam*). Between these two phases is *pālai*, the desert wasteland, where the *talaivi* has eloped with her *talaivan*. It is in the *pālai* landscape that the *cevili* plays the most important role.

The *pālai* landscape is no-man's land; it is uninhabited and desolate. The geography of the place reflects the *talaivi*'s vulnerable social position: she no longer has a proper home. The *cevili* is present in the moment of transition in the *talaivi*'s life, as she moves from the innocence of childhood into a relationship with the *talaivan*. Her presence is significant during this process because until she falls in love with the *talaivan*, the *cevili* is the most intimate figure in her life. Indeed, within this poetry, maternal love is portrayed in very similar language as romantic love. The *cevili* cultivates the *talaivi*'s need for physical and emotional connection, which she eventually fulfills in her relationship with the *talaivan*. The *talaivi*'s departure from the family home is particularly devastating to the *cevili* because it breaks the powerful mother-daughter bond that has been nurtured over the course of the *talaivi*'s childhood. According to precise rules laid out in the *Tolkāppiyam*, the *cevili* is responsible for searching for the daughter to bring news of her whereabouts back to the family home. After telling the *talaivi*'s mother the sad news, the two women then grieve together for the girl that they love.

The following poem is typical of the *pālai* genre:

My feet have stumbled;
my eyes have looked and looked
and lost their light.

There are more couples
in the world
than there are stars
in the black and widening sky.¹⁸²

This poem is written in the mode of a lament: the *cevili*'s love for the *talaivi* is evident in her despair when she is unable to find her. While the *talaivi*'s biological mother is also devastated by the loss of her daughter, it is the *cevili* who wanders through the desert to find her. As a result, the *cevili*'s longing for the girl is portrayed in more visceral terms. The ache in her body and the dullness in her eyes mirrors her despair. In the following poem, the *cevili* feels helpless to protect

¹⁸² *Kuruntokai* 44, written by Vellivītiyār translated by Martha Ann Selby.

the daughter. All she can do is hope for rain and shade so that the *talaivi* will have some respite from the desert heat.

Leaving us behind,
Our dark, simple girl crosses the desert
With that young man, his spear long and flashing.

Let cool rains fall today,
On the sands overspreading
Their narrow path through the mountains
Under the shade of trees
Impenetrable by the rays of the sun.¹⁸³

The *cevili* describes the *talaivan* with a “spear long and flashing”, a phallic image that may allude to his virility. Yet, even armed with a spear, he cannot protect the *talaivi* from the harsh elements of the desert. To the *cevili*, at least, the couple looks vulnerable and pitiful.

The *cevili* is present during this moment of transition. She observes the *talaivi*'s flight from the home and pursues her. These *pālai* poems also give us insight into the ways that the *cevili* has prepared the *talaivi* for her role as a lover. In many poems, the *cevili* describes the depths of her heart-brokenness and her sense of abandonment in language that is synonymous with lover's laments found in other parts of the corpus. In other words, the *cevili* articulates her love for the *talaivi* in terms that the *talaivi* uses to describe her own love for the *talaivan*. Take the following verse, for instance, in which the *cevili* is candid about her own grief.

How your love for your daughter stings you!

Our beloved, pretty girl
has crossed the forest
in a place that spans two countries,
saddening us,
making our empty hearts grieve to the point
that our lives are so starved that they leave us,
right along with all our lush sorrow and pain.¹⁸⁴

The *cevili* asserts that it is her love that causes her pain yet without this love, her heart and her life are empty and meaningless. The *cevili*'s expression of sadness in the poem is similar to the following poem, in which the *talaivi* describes her sadness at her lover's departure.

If I think of him,
my heart boils

and not thinking of him
is beyond my ken.

Love hurts me -
its so big that

¹⁸³ *Kuruntokai* 278, by Kayamañār, translated by Martha Ann Selby.

¹⁸⁴ *Aiñkurunūru* 313, by ? , translated by Martha Ann Selby.

it scrapes Heaven itself.

He isn't so noble,
this man I lay down with.¹⁸⁵

The *talaivi* feels abandoned by her lover. Like the *cevili* in the previous poem, she says that her love is the source of her pain. In both poems, the speakers claim responsibility for their pain, because they have let their love consume them. Yet, both speakers also ascribe blame to their loved ones, who have left them and forgotten about them.

There are many poems like the ones above that express the *cevili's* anguish. In other laments the *cevili's* primary emotion is anger at being abandoned. In the poem below, for instance, the *cevili* resentfully refuses to grieve for the *talaivi* who has forsaken her. She indignantly chooses to grieve, instead, for the *talaivi's* best friend, who is saddened by her friend's departure.

I will not grieve for that girl
who left us along with our tears
in the evenings
when a bat in its struggle to go
unfurls its wings
and soars.

But I will grieve for her friend,
her lovely eyes rimmed in black,
her heart now full of pain
without her sweet-tongued companion.¹⁸⁶

Of course, even though she frames this as a rejection of the *talaivi*, who is not worthy to be grieved, she manages to communicate how much the *talaivi* has hurt her nonetheless. The *cevili* compares the daughter's flight to the bat that "unfurls its wings and soars". With this image, she communicates that the daughter did not leave thoughtlessly, but knowingly struggles to leave her family home. This deliberate rejection further fuels the *cevili's* sense of abandonment.

The *cevili's* indignation at her daughter's departure is virtually identical to the emotions in the following poem, in which the *talaivi* tells her friend about how her lover has left her.

...
No, we will not think a thought of him,

if he thinks he's strong enough
to stay wherever he has gone,
forgetting me

who cannot bear one blink of time
without him

¹⁸⁵ *Kuruntokai* 102, by Auvaiyār, translated by Martha Ann Selby.

¹⁸⁶ *Aiñkurunūru* 378, by ? , translated by Martha Ann Selby.

who is the breath of my breath.¹⁸⁷

The *talaivi* refuses to think about her lover even while acknowledging that she is thoroughly fixated with him. She is profoundly hurt that her lover has deliberately chosen to leave and does not appear to need her, the same way that the *cevili* is upset that the daughter has left the home and appears not to need her mother any longer. In both poems, the speakers express the conflicting emotions of anger and sadness through the trope of denial. They defiantly assert that they will reject the ones who have hurt them, all the while admitting that life would be unbearable without them.

Within this tradition, motherly love lays the foundation for the romantic love in the *talaivi*'s life. The *cevili*'s love for the daughter shapes the way that the daughter imagines and speaks about her *talaivan*. The poets emphasize the continuity of intimacy from childhood into adulthood. The Tamil poets are comfortable with thinking about parental affection for their daughters in conjunction with sexuality. This challenges the modern, Western constructions of sexuality which have been mapped out by Freud and Foucault, among others. Let me briefly present a survey of the theories about incest that have dominated modern thinking to illustrate how differently motherly sexuality is represented in the Classical Tamil corpus.

Although Freud's theories of incest, laid out in *Totem and Taboo* (1946), were widely repudiated from the beginning, they have always had a strong hold on the Western imagination. His fundamental assertion is that human beings are inherently incestuous, prone to mating with blood relatives thereby producing tainted, unnatural offspring. This impulse towards incest must therefore be regulated by kinship rules. Part of Freud's genius was in connecting his theory to Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, allowing him to harness the power of narrative and storytelling to persuade his readers of the coherence of his ideas. Foucault took up the question of incest in the following decades, articulating a somewhat more nuanced and contextualized hypothesis in *The History of Sexuality* (1978). He claimed that modern conceptions of incest are influenced by two sexual systems. The first, he describes as the "deployment of alliance" and echoes Freud's theory of incest: family is defined by biological relations, sex is about procreation and incest is about offending the boundaries of kinship. Foucault suggested that there was also a newer system at work, which he describes as the "deployment of sexuality", wherein family is defined by diverse relationships and sex is constructed as either pleasure and perversion. Under this system, incest is attributed to perpetrators' pathological desire to harm victims.

The 20th century discourse about sexuality to which Freud and Foucault contributed points to a social anxiety and perhaps a morbid fascination with the question of incest. Their theories are problematic because they make claims that are universal and all-encompassing. The portrayal of mother-child relationships in classical Tamil poetry suggests that sexuality and incest may have been constructed in very different terms to those laid out by Freud and Foucault. We cannot project modern anxieties about incest onto this poetry, particularly because it is from a culture that is so spatially and temporally distant from ours. This poetic corpus presents an alternative picture of mother-child sexuality from our own. I will take up this distinction further in the next section of this chapter. For the moment, it is worth remembering that the sexual

¹⁸⁷ *Kuruntokai* 218, by Korran, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

nature of the maternal relationship with her daughter may not have been a source of anxiety for the poets.

While the poems primarily describe the motherly affection for her daughter as an emotional bond, there are moments when the poets even describe a physical bond between mother and daughter. The mother's touch described in these poems is sensuous and strongly reminiscent of the bodily intimacy between lovers. In this *pālai* poem, as a *cevili* reminisces about the *talaivi*'s childhood, her memories of their love for one another focuses primarily on physical contact.

My daughter who loves her parrot, her ball, her kaḷaṅku beans,
 who had such kindness, love, gentleness, goodness
 is not like she was before - and I wish my life were over.
 I used to embrace her gently, coming up to her slowly
 from behind and smoothing her round forehead
 as caring as a cow tied up to a tree with her bent-legged calf,
 and my daughter would hug me tightly, again and again,
 until the sweat stood out on her breasts.
 Now that is gone - what am I to do! Her fine, deserving man
 who is so strong has taken her with him into a wilderness...
 If I had known, I would have been like her shadow wherever she went
 in her father's large, guarded house brimming with stockpiled food...
 I would never have left her alone.¹⁸⁸

The *cevili*'s embrace in this poem is full of erotic undertones. The mother holds her daughter from behind, a position that is commonly used to describe sleeping lovers. This embrace begins gently and slowly, with the mother "smoothing her round forehead" but it becomes more passionate as the daughter goes on to hug her tightly and repeatedly. The contact between them is so intense that the daughter's breasts are covered in sweat by the end. In the metaphorical parts of the poem, the poet emphasizes that this affection is maternal, describing it in terms of a domesticated cow caring for her calf. However, the language of the poems is strongly reminiscent of poems about lovers' intimacy.

There is another portrayal of an erotically charged embrace between mother and daughter. This poem is classified as a *Neytal* poem, which is about the separation of lovers and the *talaivi*'s patient waiting. The *talaivi*'s friend urges the *talaivan* to hurry back to marry her. In an attempt to entice the *talaivan*, the *talaivi*'s friend describes a moment of motherly affection suffused with sensual, bodily intimacy:

...What love
 she bore me, her mother, all this while!
 When I embraced her
 I felt I was pressing her full-grown breasts too hard
 and loosened my grip by ever so little...¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ *Akanānūru* 49, by Vaṇṇappurak Kantarattaṅār, translated by George Hart.

¹⁸⁹ *Narrinai* 29, by Pūthanār, translated by A.V. Subrahmanian.

The friend chooses to describe the maternal bond to convey the intimacy the *talaivan* stands to lose if he does not marry the *talaivi*. The physical touch between mother and daughter is so redolent of the intimacy of lovers that the speaker evokes this moment to arouse the *talaivan*'s desire.

There are hardly any poems in the corpus that point to an uneasiness with imagining maternal intimacy alongside sexual intimacy. The following poem is a rare example that may point to a moment of rupture in the *talaivi*'s life, when she suddenly feels uncomfortable by the embraces of her *cevili*.

That girl has the fragrance
of *vēṅkai* and *kāntaḷ* flowers
from *Āy* with his loose bracelets
and his cloud-covered *Potiyil* hill;
and she herself is cool as a lily.
After a time,
when I embraced her, again,
she complained she was sweating.
Now I understand
her revulsion.¹⁹⁰

In this subtle poem, the poet uses the technique of suggestion rather than directly describing the situation. The *talaivi* rejects her *cevili*'s embrace, claiming to be too hot and uncomfortable for such close contact. Yet the *cevili* can tell that the *talaivi* is, in fact, "cool as a lily", and is therefore not being honest about her reason for pulling away. The *cevili* can also smell the scent of foreign flowers on the *talaivi*'s body, indicating that she has been away from her family home. This implies that the *talaivi* has been off with a lover. The most common reading of this poem is that the *talaivi* pulls away from her mother because she doesn't want her scent to reveal her secret tryst. Let me suggest another interpretation, which is that the *talaivi* is uncomfortable by her *cevili*'s touch because after having had her first sexual experiences with the *talaivan*, bodily intimacy can now be coded as sexual. The *talaivi*'s displeasure may reflect her discomfort with the juxtaposition of two kinds of touch that feel so similar and yet hold such different meanings. Such a reading would point to a rupture between maternal and sexual desire; it may be unjustifiably foisting a discomfort with incestuous desire onto the *talaivi*. Given that this anxiety does not come up frequently in the poems, if at all, it may be too Freudian an interpretation.

It is possible to construe moments of bewilderment for the daughter, when she discovers the similarities and differences between maternal touch and sexual intimacy. It is quite clear, on the other hand, that the mother is not oblivious to the changes taking place in her daughter's life. As the daughter begins to develop knowledge of the love to be found outside the home, the mother regularly speaks about the sexuality that awaits her daughter. In a few *pālai* poems, the mother imagines the physical intimacy her daughter will experience with the *talaivan*. In the this poem, for instance, a mother who is profoundly grieved that her daughter has gone into the wasteland with her lover, nonetheless hopes that the lover will take pleasure in her daughter's breasts: "She has left and become like a stranger to us and yet I pray,/ may he who is her companion, who made her go to a land/ where no one knows her, sleep on her breast,/finding joy

¹⁹⁰ *Kuruntokai* 84, by Mōcikiran, translated by Shanmugam Pillai and David Ludden.

and comfort in her extraordinary beauty”.¹⁹¹ The mother hopes that in the midst of their hardships, the lovers may experience bodily pleasure. After all, it is perhaps the only comfort to be found in the barren desert.

Several poems from the *Mullai* genre, about the domestic bliss of a newly married couple, involve the *cevili*’s documenting the intimacy of their daughter’s marriage bed. The *cevili* enters the privacy of her daughter’s home to bring news of her new life to the rest of the family. In the following two poems, drawn from a decade of poems on this subject in the *Aiṅkuruṇūru*, the *cevili* depicts the *talaivi*, her *talaivaṅ* and her child embracing in bed.

The way
they lay together

like deer, mother-doe
and fawn,

with their boy
between them, was very sweet:

neither in this world
hugged by the wide blue sea
nor in the one above

is such a thing easy to get.¹⁹²

Embracing the young mother from behind
as she hugged her little son,
the way
her husband lay:

it was like music
from the strings
of a minstrel,

a thing of quality.¹⁹³

These poems about the physical affection between husband and wife echo the language of bodily intimacy between mother and daughter that we have just seen. In the second poem, the husband embraces his wife from behind, in the same way that we saw the mother embracing her daughter from behind in the earlier *pālai* poem. The affection between mother and daughter prepares the daughter for the physical intimacy she will experience with her husband. Indeed, the intimacy of marriage appears to replace the mother-daughter intimacy the *talaivi* experienced in her childhood. Still, the mother continues to have access to this space of bodily pleasure and

¹⁹¹ *Akanānūru* 35, by Ammūvaṅ, translated by George Hart.

¹⁹² *Aiṅkuruṇūru* 401, by Pēyaṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

¹⁹³ *Aiṅkuruṇūru* 402, by Pēyaṅār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

affection as she observes her daughter's new relationship. The poets describe the mother vicariously, perhaps even voyeuristically, partaking in her daughter's intimate moments.

In both poems, we see the daughter experiencing intimacy with her husband, but also, notably, with her son. The daughter involves her son in the affection and perhaps even sexual embrace that she shares with her husband in their marriage bed. Here, we see a collapse of boundaries between maternal affection and sexual intimacy. The daughter in this poem is also a mother. As a mother, her desire for her husband is entangled with her desire for her son. In these poems, we see this drama literally played out in the bed. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, the mother figure must constantly negotiate her seemingly incompatible allegiances to her son and to her husband.

III

Mothers, Sons and the Cultivation of Bodies

I have already described the gendered nature of binary division in Classical Tamil poetics into poems of the inner world and poems of the outer world. I have argued that the *akam* genre embodies the realm of the feminine, while the *puram* genre embodies the masculine. The relationships between mothers and children follow from this system that connects genre with gender. *Akam* poems repeatedly come back to the mother-daughter relationship, while the mother-son relationship is only fully elaborated in the *puram* genre. The speakers within the *puram* genre are all men, with the notable exception of the mother. As the only female character who has a voice in the *puram* poems, the mother plays a critical role in the construction of the masculine in this tradition.

Even though there are significant differences in the way that motherhood is represented across the genres, the theme of maternal loss continues from *akam* into *puram*. Tamil poetics, elaborated in the *Tolkāppiyam*, draws a connection between the physical spaces that the mothers inhabit in the two genres. In the *akam* verses, mothers are located in the *pālai* landscape, the barren wasteland, where they search for their daughters who have eloped.¹⁹⁴ In the *puram* verses, mothers appear in the *vākai* landscape, the battlefield after a victory, which is also a wasteland of sorts. Although the poets make it clear that the Tamil army has won the fight, the *vākai* landscape is still covered with the mutilated bodies of Tamil warriors who have given up their lives for their people.

The *puram* genre centers on the world outside of the home. These poems focus on external events, rather than on the internal responses to them. As figures who move between *akam* and *puram*, mothers trouble the simple distinction between genres. They bring emotion into the philosophical realm of *puram*. They juxtapose the comforts of the home with the wasteland of the battlefield. The *vākai* landscape is one of triumph because the Tamil army has vanquished the enemy, yet the *vākai* poems count the cost of the victory by portraying the soldiers who have died to make victory possible. Mothers are portrayed on the battlefield, rejoicing over their son's death. It is a strange, unnatural image that reflects the values and ideals

¹⁹⁴ Although some *palai* poems situate the mother at home, describing how the daughter has eloped.

of a martial culture. However, the undercurrent of the poem is the mother's agony. Readers are aware of the tragedy that has taken place and inevitably read grief into these verses. Mothers come to personify the ambivalence that permeates *vāikai* poems. Mothers on the battlefield are utterly torn: their pride in their sons is inevitably mixed with their profound sadness over their loss. The following poem demonstrates the emotional ambivalence characteristic of the *vāikai* landscape:

When she learned that her son had fallen slaying an elephant,
the old woman whose hair was as white as the feathers
of a fish-eating heron felt even more joy than the time
she gave birth to him. And the tears that she shed then
were more than the drops that hang
from sturdy bamboo after they collect there in the rain.¹⁹⁵

Unlike the *akam* poems, in which the mother feels unmitigated grief over her lost daughter, the mother in the *puram* poems describe joy and happiness about the loss of her son. However, this reaction does not capture the fullness of the mother's emotional experience. The reader completes the narrative by acknowledging the pain that the mother must feel in the face of her son's death. While *akam* poems focus entirely on the inner world of emotions, the *puram* poems appear to be carrying out the state's agenda by presenting a world of public events that are more important than private grief. The individual in the *puram* poems exists beyond the world of familial relationship, but is responsible to king, the community and the state.

Motherhood, in this context, is not primarily an affective bond between mother and child; it is repeatedly described as a woman's civic responsibility. In the following poem, a mother describes the duties of the community towards her son, who is about to go to war.

It is my duty to bear him and to raise him. It is
the father's duty to make him into a noble man. It is
the duty of the blacksmith to forge and give him a spear.
It is the king's duty to show him how to behave rightly
and the duty of a young man is to fight
indomitably with his shining sword, kill elephants, and come back
home.¹⁹⁶

This poem reads as a manifesto about the individual's responsibilities towards the state. Although women are largely left out of matters of public life, this speaker claims that mothers have one important task: to bring sons into the world. Indeed, without women as child bearers, the entire mission of the state falls apart. Although the mother's tone in this poem is stoic and patriotic, the last line communicates her emotional vulnerability. She obediently sends her son out of her home, into the battlefield, yet she insists that it is his responsibility to survive the war and return to her.

We see many bittersweet *vāikai* poems. Mothers articulate a mixture of pride in their courageous sons and a fear of losing them.

¹⁹⁵ *Puranānūru* 277, by Pūnkaṇ Uttiraiyār, translated by George Hart.

¹⁹⁶ *Puranānūru* 312, by Poṇmutiyār, translated by George Hart.

You stand against the pillar
of my hut and ask:
Where is your son?

I really don't know.
This womb was once
a lair
for that tiger.

You can see him now
only on battlefields.¹⁹⁷

Like the previous poem, the speaker acknowledges that she has played an important role in the battle by producing a son who has grown up to fight. Her relationship with her son and, by extension, with the state, is a primarily a physical one. She describes herself as a mere receptacle for housing this warrior: her womb is nothing but a “lair for that tiger”. This kind of imagery gestures towards a physical connection between mothers and sons, but also to an emotional distance. The son - the tiger - simply resides in his mother’s body and appears to have an identity and an existence apart from hers. While mothers in the *akam* poems cultivate their daughter’s sexuality, the mothers in the *puram* poems cultivate the bodies of their sons. Yet, even though these *puram* poems frame motherhood in bodily terms, the reader reads maternal emotionality into the poem’s silences. While their words resound with bravery and pride, the reader understands their undertone to be saturated with the fear of loss.

Besides their wombs, the mothers of the *puram* poems describe offering their breasts to their infant sons. Breasts and breast milk have a central place within Classical Tamil literature. Mothers repeatedly refer to their breasts at the moment that they hear of their son’s death. In the following poem, a mother hears rumors that her son fled from the enemy during the battle. This causes her so much anguish that she vows to destroy her breasts if the stories are true.

When she heard the many voices saying, “That aged woman with dry veined arms where the soft flesh hangs down, she whose belly is wrinkled like a lotus leaf - her son was afraid of the enemy army and he showed them his back and ran!” then rage overcame her and she said, “If he fled in the furious battle, I will cut off the breast At which he sucked!” and she snatched up the sword and she turned over every body lying there on the blood-soaked field. And when she found her son who was scattered in pieces, she felt happier than she had been the day she bore him.¹⁹⁸

Women’s breasts, which are described in erotic terms in the *akam* poems, take on a different meaning in these *puram* verses. In poems such as the one above, breasts are connected to a woman’s anger towards her son and, also, towards herself. The *puram* corpus repeatedly assert that a woman’s contribution to the state is to produce sons who will become brave soldiers. If

¹⁹⁷ *Puranānūru* 86, by Kāvāṟpeṭṇu, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

¹⁹⁸ *Puranānūru* 312, by Kākkaipatiniyār Nacellaiyār, translated by George Hart.

their sons are cowards in battle, mothers have failed in their duty. Here, the mother vows to embody this ideology through the disfiguring her breasts. In doing so, she would be destroying the body that gave birth to this warrior and that sustained him through his infancy. It also ravages the center of her erotic power in a kind of symbolic castration. Her potential act of violence communicates her regret at having given birth to a son who was unable to protect his people. Her breasts recall the bodily connection she had with her son and her implicit, oblique responsibility for this outcome.¹⁹⁹

In a different poem, a mother finds her valiant son “hacked to pieces”, having died honorably facing the enemy. In this scenario, the mother’s breasts produce milk.

There, in the very middle
of battle-camps
that heaved like the seas...

he had fallen
in that space
between armies,
his body hacked to pieces:

when she saw him there
in all his greatness,
mother’s milk flowed again
in the withered breasts
of this mother
for the warrior son
who had no thought of retreat.²⁰⁰

The mother’s breasts, dried up with age, are renewed and flow with milk again. In this poem about death, the poet deploys the image of the breast as a sign of a life. In spite of her sadness, the mother acknowledges that her son’s death is a source of pride and happiness, because his sacrifice has brought safety, freedom and life back to his people. At this moment that her son has proven himself a worthy warrior, the mother believes that she has succeeded her duty. The milk in her breasts evokes nursing her son in his infancy, bringing a sense of completion to the cycle of motherhood.

¹⁹⁹ George Hart, among others, have connected the mother’s destruction of her breast in the *puram* poems with the *Cilappatikāram*, a Tamil epic written towards the end of the Classical period. The epic ends with the *talaivi*, Kaṇṇaki, destroying her breasts to avenge her husband, Kovalan. When Kovalan is falsely accused of stealing an anklet from the *Pāṇṭiya* courts, the King orders him to be killed without a fair trial. Kaṇṇaki goes to the court to prove that her husband’s anklet contained precious gems, not pearls, like the anklets made by the *Pāṇṭiya* jewelers. When the King and Queen realize that they murdered an innocent man, they are both die suddenly. Kaṇṇaki’s anger is still not appeased, so she tears off her left breast and flings it into the city of Madurai, which erupts into flames. There are clear parallels between these destruction of the breast the *puram* poems and the *Cilappatikāram*. In both, enraged women seek vengeance by self-mutilation. However, the context for their anger is very different. The women in the *puram* poems are mothers whose anger is directed towards their cowardly sons. Kaṇṇaki, on the other hand, seeks to avenge her husband for the miscarriage of justice caused by the King and Queen. It is therefore difficult to make a cohesive argument connecting these two examples of women destroying their breasts.

²⁰⁰ *Puranānūru* 295, by Auvaiyār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the symbolism of the breast in Classical Tamil scholarship. The majority of these discussions have used literature as an indicator of underlying ideologies within Tamil society, both within ancient times and today. George Hart's theories on the subject have been particularly influential. Hart conjectures that the references to breasts in *puram* poetry point to an ancient Tamil belief in a woman's sacred power, described as *aṇaṅku* in the anthologies. Hart draws on the structuralist anthropological research of Ernest Crawley, in *The Mystic Rose* (1929), which articulates and makes connections between the sexual ideologies of diverse "primitive" cultures. From his reading of the poems, Hart concludes that the references to women's breasts indicate that the early Tamil people possessed a worldview similar to those of other tribal communities to which Crawley refers. Specifically, he argues that the early Tamils believed that women's sexuality was a kind of sacred power that had to be controlled through "a sort of asceticism, the restraining of all impulses that were in any way immodest".²⁰¹ According to Hart, the breast was the center of a woman's power. Hart claims, "If a woman's breasts can best be described to invoke her beauty, since they are the seat of her *aṇaṅku*, they can also be used to invoke her wretchedness...The sacred power that a woman possesses can work two ways: if she is married and in an auspicious condition, it protects her husband; if she is not, it can bring destruction."²⁰²

C. S. Lakshmi offers an interpretation similar to Hart's. She asserts that the Tamil people have always believed in the mystical nature of the mother's body. These beliefs continue on into modern society. She uses anecdotal evidence from colloquial Tamil speech, in which it is common to say that, "nothing can quench like mother's milk" or to accuse a man of, "having drunk impure milk from his mother".²⁰³ To Lakshmi these expressions speak to a Tamil belief in the supernatural quality of the mother's breast and womb. She identifies the origins of these beliefs in Classical Tamil literature, interpreting the *puram* poem about motherhood to mean that, "The birth of valorous sons is decided by the quality of the womb and the quality of the milk from the breasts of a woman. Where the son is a coward or a warrior, in classical poetry, the mother has considered it her own limitation or achievement."²⁰⁴ According to Lakshmi, the mother chooses to slash her breasts because she believes that her milk caused her son to become cowardly. Conversely, the same breast milk that caused her son to grow into a brave warrior begins to flow again when he dies at the hands of the enemy.

While Hart's ideas have been influential in the field, inspiring the works of scholars such as C.S. Lakshmi and Susan Wadley, he has not been without detractors. Specifically, V.S. Rajam has argued that Hart's interpretation of the word *aṇaṅku* is inaccurate and that his analysis of the symbolism behind women's breasts is misguided. In a lengthy philological argument, she seeks to prove that *aṇaṅku* does not categorically refer to a dangerous sacred force. What is interesting about this debate is that both Hart and Rajam appear to be deeply invested in what it indicates about social life and cultural ideology in the early Tamil period. Indeed, Rajam begins her

²⁰¹ Hart (1975), 97.

²⁰² Ibid, 99.

²⁰³ Lakshmi (1990), 73.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 72.

polemic against Hart with the assertion that, “The burden of portraying an accurate picture of a society is on the interpreters of the society’s literature as much as it is on other kinds of interpreters like the anthropologists, general historians, historians of religion, and sociologists.”²⁰⁵

The framework underlying this exchange is problematic to me. As a representational modality, Classical Tamil poetry cannot serve as a simple reflection of historical realities. Moreover, Tamil poetics beginning from the *Tolkāppiyam* onward indicates that the poems were never intended to incorporate spiritual and historical knowledge. Instead, they are construed as works of aesthetic and imaginative virtuosity. My own work is not concerned with what this corpus indicates about the material realities or the ideological frameworks of the early Tamil people. Rather than asking what these poems indicate about belief systems, I am interested in how the Tamil poets deploy ideas of gender and embodiment to poetic ends. What do these images enable the poets to achieve in their work?

Taken alone, the poems themselves do not lend themselves easily to an interpretation of women’s wombs and breasts as sacred entities. Indeed, as I have shown, the discourse of motherhood in the *puṛam* verses focuses on the physical, rather than on the mystical or the spiritual. Within the extensive system of poetic conventions laid out in the *Tolkāppiyam*, the language of the poems is deeply rooted in natural imagery. Like all the poems in the corpus, the poems about maternal loss are surrounded by descriptions of the Tamil landscape. Mothers, as distinctly embodied creatures, are part of this natural world. The breast imagery in the *puṛam* poems allow readers to focus on the physical relationship between mother and son, and the mother’s cultivation of her son’s body.

They are also, inevitably, sexual. In the midst of the lengthy scholarly debate about women’s breasts, there has not been much discussion about the relationship between *akam* and *puṛam* depictions of breasts. However, if we are to make sense of the breast imagery in the *puṛam* poems, it is vital that we consider how poets represent breasts in the *akam* genre as well. The two branches of Classical Tamil literature are inextricable. Both poets and readers construe one with the other in mind. The portrayals of women’s bodies in the *akam* and *puṛam* genres are therefore mutually constitutive. The *puṛam* images of women’s breasts as a means of nurturing future soldiers must be read alongside *akam* poems in which portrayals of women’s breasts are erotically charged. Indeed, poets writing in the *akam* genre often describe the *talaivi*’s breasts as among her most sexually desirable features.

Descriptions of the *talaivi*’s breasts occur frequently in the *pālai* genre, which we have examined throughout this chapter. These poems about the couple eloping into the wilderness are sexually charged because although the desert is desolate and far away from home, it is also space where the lovers are free to consummate their relationship. In the following *pālai* poem, the *talaivan*’s friend discourages the *talaivan* from going away in search of his fortune. Instead, he encourages the *talaivan* to focus on the charming *talaivi* and perhaps consider eloping with her into the desert:

...Surely she must have already heard that,
with your thirst for wealth, you intend to go there,

²⁰⁵ Rajam (1986), 257.

and now your woman, her dark thick hair buzzing
 as bees descend and taste the flowers,
 her body lovely and dark, her ornaments carefully chosen,
 cries, and her blackened many-petaled eyes
 stream cool water wetting her young, rising breasts,
 spread with the marks of beauty and bewitching men...²⁰⁶

The poet's description of the *talaivi* is highly erotic. Her hair is so thick and fragrant that it brings to mind bees flying to pollinate the flowers. In the midst of this picture of lush fertility, he describes the *talaivi*'s tears falling upon her breasts. These "young, rising breasts" are capable of bewitching men. The *talaivan*'s friend draws attention to these other potential suitors to encourage him to make his move quickly. In another *pālai* poem, a *cevili* warns her daughter not to play in the view of the villagers, because men may find her developing breasts attractive. She says, "... Your breasts are appearing, your thornlike teeth shine,/your hair is coiled on your head and you wear a dress of cool leaves/ You must not go wandering around with your friend..."²⁰⁷ In the *akam* poems, breasts are described as an object of male desire. The foster mother in this poem recognizes her daughter's body may become a temptation to the village men.

In the *akam* genre, breasts are synonymous with beauty and eroticism. However, there are several poems in which the duties of motherhood intersect with sexuality. The poets often describe the *talaivi*'s breasts when she is carrying her young son. These poems come up exclusively in *marutam* poems, set in the agricultural tracts, which are about the *talaivan*'s adultery. In these poems, the *talaivi* uses her son as leverage to prevent her husband from betraying his family by going to see a prostitute. In the following *marutam* poem, the *talaivi* speaks to her friend about a time in the past, in which the *talaivan* was still sexually attracted to her. Now, after her body has been ruined by childbirth and nursing infants, the *talaivan* seeks out women whose bodies have retained their youth and beauty. Here, the *talaivi* directly accuses the *talaivan* of having gone off with another woman:

You were playing there yesterday
 With the woman you lust for, who wears ornaments
 and fine bright earrings. As you held on to the white raft made of sugarcane
 your face had a contented expression...
 Now you come and you bow to me and you say,
 "You are the mother of our son, you with your faultless chastity
 and the blush spreading on your lovely breasts."
 Don't mock me for my age, I am content with it.
 My youth is gone and vanished, like King Matti's town of Kaḷāar...²⁰⁸

The *talaivi* identifies the woman with whom the *talaivan* has been unfaithful as a prostitute, because of her ostentatious jewelry, her "ornaments and fine bright earrings", which are likely to have been gifts from men who sleep with her. Within the corpus, these other women are never

²⁰⁶ *Akanānūru* 161, by Maturaip Pullaṅ Kaṅṅaṅār, translated by George Hart.

²⁰⁷ *Akanānūru* 26, by Kayamaṅār, translated by George Hart.

²⁰⁸ *Akanānūru* 6, by Paraṅar, translated by George Hart.

described as having children and are therefore able to maintain their sexual potency. The *talaivan* responds to the *talaivi* by addressing her as the mother of his son. She is no longer valued for her beauty, but rather for her position as the mother of his son and for her sexual restraint. When the *talaivan* describes her “lovely breasts”, the *talaivi* construes this to be an insult and a mockery, for her breasts are no longer beautiful as they have been destroyed by the rigors of breast-feeding. Within this poetry, motherhood is an aging process, one that robs the female body of its beauty and sexual appeal.

Yet, even when the *talaivi* becomes a mother, she still yearns for sexual intimacy. Although the body damaged by motherhood is no longer deemed sexually desirable, mothers continue to have sexual desires. In the following poem, also drawn from the *marutam* genre, a *talaivi* wistfully describes to her friend the time, before she was a mother, when the *talaivan* considered her beautiful:

... Friend, there were times when at night
 he would embrace me pressing these breasts,
 their nipples as beautiful as the iron rings put on the tusks
 of elephants that break great gates...
 He used to celebrate these breasts of mine,
 but now they sag with milk for our son,
 they are soft and gentle and pale.
 I wished to embrace his chest closely,
 rich colored and fragrant with sandal powder,
 but he was afraid sweet milk might fall on him.
 When I saw his hands that used to be so eager to hold me
 suddenly hesitant, I looked my son,
 whose walk is still unsure, held by his nurse,
 and I said, “No doubt, you are worthy of your wonderful women,
 but I am fit for this prince,” and slowly
 I went to my child. He looked and said, “I love him too,”
 and he bent down and when he embraced me from behind,
 my heart grew soft and melted like rich plowed earth
 flowing in the cool drops of heavy rain
 even though I knew he was cheating me.²⁰⁹

This poem conveys the *talaivi*'s frustrated desire. She continues to long for her husband's embrace even though she knows he has betrayed her by turning to prostitutes. Before she gave birth to her son, her husband would “celebrate” her breasts with their dark, firm nipples. Now, her breasts are soft and pale. Her husband no longer takes pleasure in them. Indeed he is repulsed by breast milk. It is only when she claims her place as the mother of his child that he remembers his love for her. Even when his affection for his wife returns, he only embraces her from behind, so that he makes no contact with her heavy breasts. Still, this embrace is a sign of tenderness and bodily intimacy. Earlier in this chapter, we saw how the act of hugging a loved one is a common image within the poems, at times reflecting the motherly affection towards a daughter and at other times portraying sexual intimacy between lovers.

²⁰⁹ *Akanānūru* 26, by Pāṇṭiyaṅ Kāṅarppēreyil Tanta Ukkirapperuvalūti, translated by George Hart.

This poem above brings together the representations of women's bodies that we have seen in the *akam* and *puṛam* genres. In the *marutam* genre, which portrays life after marriage, the *talaivi* exists in both the role of lover and mother. Breasts, in the *marutam* landscape, take on multiple meanings. The eroticism of the breast collides with its function of nursing her son. Within this poetry, the two implications of the breast do not appear to be able to coexist easily. The *talaivan* no longer appears to find the *talaivi* sexually attractive when she becomes a mother. Indeed, the *marutam* poems portray the *talaivan* leaving the *talaivi* for prostitutes specifically when she is pregnant or nursing. The process of motherhood appears to desexualize the *talaivi*. Yet the sexuality of the *talaivi* is never completely divorced from the chastity of the mother. The two are always connected, since one leads to the other. The poets wrestle with this ambiguity within the *akam* poems.

Within the *puṛam* poems, the poets also appear to consciously desexualize the mother. In the *vākai* poems we have seen, the poets describe mothers as old and devoid of any beauty. In *Puṛanānūru* 312, the rumormongers in the village describes the mother of the cowardly son in these terms, "That aged woman with dry veined arms where the soft flesh hangs down, she whose belly is wrinkled like a lotus leaf. . ." ²¹⁰ The poet portrays the mother as utterly unattractive, focusing particularly on those parts of her body that were ruined by giving birth to her son, such as her belly. In *Puṛanānūru* 295, the poet describes milk flowing from the mother's "withered breasts". ²¹¹ Despite these attempts to extricate sexuality from motherhood and its synecdoche, the breast, the female body is inevitably polysemous. The lover and the mother exist in the same body.

I would like to make the case that the Tamil poet's attempts to eradicate traces of maternal sexuality from their discourse are comparable to our own. Within the modern, Western context, the juxtaposition of motherhood and sexuality has been so alarming that there is virtually no discussion about it in popular culture or analytical spheres. Academic scholarship, even within feminist studies, has largely stayed clear of maternal sexuality. Susan Weisskopf argues that the dearth of scholarship on the subject reveals a deep-seated anxiety about the possibility of an erotic mother. ²¹²

The early psychoanalytic thinkers, beginning with Freud, imagined that the mother-child relationship produced an erotic experience for the child. They theorized that the various practices of maternal care, such as nursing and soothing, stimulate the infant's body and prime it for adult sexuality. ²¹³ These views about infant sexuality were considered outrageous when they were proposed. Yet even these radical psychoanalysts could not fathom the possibility that this erotic experience could be mutual, one that the mother might find sexual as well. The lapses and ellipses within our discourse on maternal sexuality suggest our collective investment in desexualizing mothers. They also reveal the anxieties about maternal sexuality that we may bring

²¹⁰ *Puṛanānūru* 312, by Poṇmutiyār, translated by George Hart.

²¹¹ *Puṛanānūru* 295, by Auvaiyār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

²¹² Contratto (1980).

²¹³ Kastenbergh (1968).

to the classical Tamil poems. As readers, it is useful to consider the way that our cultural and ideological perspectives inflect our understanding of a text such as this one.

While we see a propensity to desexualize mothers in the *puram* poems, other parts of the Tamil corpus appear to recognize that motherhood and sexuality are unavoidably and extricably connected. In the *marutam* poems I have just examined, the poets explicitly present mothers in postures of desire. Often, these mothers decry the way their aging bodies are no longer attractive to their husbands. Yet even though they may not be desirable, they are clearly desirous. These mothers constantly express sexual longing for their husbands. Taken as a whole, the *caṅkam* corpus reflects both the anxiety surrounding erotic mothers as well as the fact that erotic mothers exist. Indeed, the portrayal of mother-daughter relationships in the *akam* verses reflects the wide array of possibilities for the expression of maternal desire.

The classical Tamil poems signal an alternative sensibility towards maternal sexuality to our own. I am not suggesting that there are no signs of discomfort with the juxtaposition of motherhood and sexuality within this corpus. My point is that the poems indicate that the Tamil poets may have construed bodily intimacy and desire according to different frameworks. It bears repeating that my investments are not historical or sociological, but literary. I am not interested in using these poetic representations to diagnose the parameters of social anxiety within early Tamil society. Rather, I am keen to consider what the character of the mother enables the poets to achieve in their poems.

IV

The Lament of the Queer Mother

The mother is a thoroughly transgressive figure within the classical Tamil poetic corpus. The poets depict her literally transgressing boundaries between genres. She moves between *akam* and *puram*, between feminine and masculine spaces, between the landscapes of love and war. The poets deploy the character of the mother to disrupt the structures and categorizations at work within Tamil poetics. Within each genre, the mother further queers boundaries. In the *akam* poems, she queers the distinction between maternal and romantic love. In the *puram* poems, she queers the distinction between the female body as an instrument of the state and the female body as a source of erotic pleasure. As a result, we are left with a sense that the female subject is thoroughly fluid and ambiguous.

In the *akam* genre, maternal and romantic relationships are juxtaposed to reveal that they are not really that different. By blurring the line between maternal desire and romantic desire, the poets create the possibility that women seek pleasure and connection in diverse relationships, not merely romantic ones. Women in this poetry develop intimate physical bonds with their daughters as well as their lovers. On the other hand, this portrayal of mothers enjoying physical intimacy with their daughters demonstrates and affirms that women take pleasure in and through their bodies. Women's bodily pleasure does not need to be tied to reproduction. It can exist in social interactions apart from marriage and child-bearing. Motherhood also takes on different meaning when mothers are allowed to enjoy their relationship with their children. The mother's role is not reduced to her care-taking and sacrifice.

The figure of the foster mother adds further complexity and ambiguity to this dynamic. By allowing multiple women to share the tasks and pleasures of motherhood, the figure of the mother becomes even more open-ended, defined neither by biological nor emotional bonds. It presents a completely different framework for imagining relationships between older and younger women. These relationships could include various degrees of sexual desire and practice that would not have been construed as deviant. Across the history of this corpus, commentators and redactors have attempted to overcome the ambiguity around mothers by clarifying the roles of the mother and *cevili*. Their reasons for doing so are unclear and inaccessible to us; we can merely speculate about their reasoning. It is possible that they were simply providing a clear taxonomy to better order the poems. Alternatively, their goals may have been ideological. Were they attempting to weaken the bond between biological mother and daughter because it came too close to incest? These are simply conjectures on my part. However, from a broader perspective, they point our difficulty as readers in attempting to make sense of poems that are, on some level, outside our grid of intelligibility.²¹⁴

The portrayals of mother-son relationships in the *puram* poems dwell on the mother's body. Unlike the *akam* poems that describe the emotional dimensions of a mother's relationship with her daughter, the *puram* poems focus on the bodily sacrifices a mother makes towards her son. While the *akam* poems depict women's desire being directed towards many objects, the *puram* poems depict women's bodies serving many purposes. The mother figure consistently complicates the representation of women in the *caṅkam* corpus. Within the harsh, masculine spaces of warfare, mothers have an important role, which is to bring strong, healthy sons into the world. The *puram* poems present women's bodies as productive entities which serve the needs of the state.

Within the *akam* poems, women's bodies are aesthetically pleasing and a source of sexual pleasure. Yet, the poets take every possible measure to desexualize mothers in the *puram* poems. They repeatedly describing women's erogenous zones - their breasts, arms and stomachs - as wrinkled and ugly. This concerted attempt to distinguish between the female body in the *akam* and *puram* contexts only emphasizes how difficult it is to separate the erotic and functional capacities of the female body. These efforts to desexualize women also suggests that the category of incest may have been salient in the construction of Tamil poetics. The *Tolkāppiyam* clearly delineates what is acceptable in the portrayals of mother-children relationships. While the mother-daughter relationship is never threatened by the fear of incest, the mother-son relationship appears to be much more closely regulated. There are no examples of mothers in close physical contact with their sons beyond infancy. The lack of physical intimacy between mothers and sons precludes the possibility of sexual practice that could produce offspring.

The *puram* poems allow us to imagine the female body fulfilling many roles. However, the mother figure also forces us to acknowledge that these roles are connected. The sexual, desiring *talaivi* in the *akam* poems eventually becomes the desexualized mother in the *puram*

²¹⁴ “The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it.” Butler (2004), 42.

poems. The different functions of women's bodies cannot be separated. We see this most clearly in the *marutam* poems in which the *talaivi* is portrayed as the mother of a young son but also, simultaneously, as a lover who is jealous of the other woman. Although the structures of Tamil poetics attempt to produce a trajectory from the sexual *talaivi* and the desexualized mother, the poets portray liminal moments between these phases, in which mothers exhibit erotic desires. The character of the mother defies simple categorizations of women's bodies.

Melancholia is central to the construction of motherhood in this poetry. The mother's queering tendencies are played out against the backdrop of her profound and irreparable loss. The mother's desire is directed towards an object who is absent. As a result, it can never be requited; it will never be mutual. Although the poems describe moments in the past when the mother experienced emotional and bodily bonding with her children, in the poem's present, the mother desires a child who is no longer there. Although her husband passionately yearned for her body, the mother is now deemed undesirable and sexually repulsive to him. Maternal desire is always, already frustrated desire.

Within the field of queer theory, scholars have regularly connected queerness to loss. Being queer often carries harsh penalties, including, at times, death. In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Heather Love argues that queer historians have been reluctant to consider the losses sustained by queers in their drive to produce a narrative of progress, particularly in the wake of the Stonewall riots of 1969 which launched the gay rights movement in America and around the world. In her work, she attempts to re-inscribe loss back into queer history. In this chapter, I have inverted the logic of Love's argument. I have examined representation of loss in Tamil poetry and gone back to consider the queerness of the figure that is repeatedly subjected to this loss: the mother. With this move, I have sought to understand how loss uncovers the queerness and the ambiguity latent in this poetry. It is this close reading of loss that opens up the possibilities of sexual desire and sexual practice that may not be obvious at first glance.

Love's work, like mine, focuses on the way that loss is not merely evident in the lives of queer people, but bears on representational practices as well. She claims that, "The history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants...Looking back at these texts and images can be painful."²¹⁵ According to Love's formulation it is not simply that queer *individuals* have suffered pain and death throughout history; *representations* of queer people have been equally subject to pain and death. The poems I have examined within this chapter are drawn from an archive that is vastly different from the one that Love examines. I readily acknowledge the dangers of reducing queerness to an identity category that can be compared across gulfs in culture and history. Still, I wonder whether it is a coincidence that the classical Tamil mother figure, who inhabits the liminal spaces between boundaries and categories, is also plagued with loss.

The character of the mother is merely a representation - a figment - produced within the framework of Tamil poetry and poetics. Yet even as an imaginary queer figure, she is deeply unsettling. She produces confusion and ambiguity throughout the corpus. The association of motherhood with loss serves to regulate the mother, diminishing her power to undermine the structures of the poetry. After all, if the object of the mother's desire is never within her grasp,

²¹⁵ Love (2007), 1.

queerness must be attributed solely to the mother and we never have the opportunity to imagine what would happen if her queer desires are reciprocated. Consequently, the mother's queering tendency is contained; it is not allowed infiltrate other characters, or indeed, the structure of the poetry itself. The presence of loss in these poem points to a proclivity, conscious or not, to regulate even those ideas that too dangerously challenge our thinking.

CHAPTER SIX

On Pleasure and Scholarship

“Against pain and loss, (my method) posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times.”

Elizabeth Freeman²¹⁶

“We need to understand and practice time as fully incorporated, as nowhere existing outside of bodies and their pleasures, as inalienable from the historical and collective body of pleasure.”

Cesare Cesarino²¹⁷

I

This dissertation serves as a corrective against the historicist approach to Classical Tamil Studies that has dominated the field since its inception. Through my work, I have sought to demonstrate that the classical Tamil corpus cannot provide unmediated access into the past. In the wake of the poststructuralist intervention in the academy, literary scholars and historians have been forced to reckon with the critique of objectivity. I have come to acknowledge that the past is, in many ways, irrecoverable. In our analysis of texts, we occasionally get fragmentary glimpses into the past, yet these insights are always, already mediated by systems of representation. While history is a necessary axis in the study of any ancient text, it must be one among many disciplinary methods.

Many of the scholars who established the modern field of Classical Tamil Studies were driven, in part, by a sense of lack. So little was known about ancient Tamil history that the rediscovery of the *Caṅkam* corpus appeared to provide a rare opportunity to access the past. Compelled by loss, the study of Classical Tamil poetry became a quest to produce a materialist account of the early Tamil period. It was a quest that largely avoided the question of pleasure. My work differs significantly from my colleague’s because I believe that pleasure is central to our understanding of classical Tamil poetry. I am invested in reclaiming the value of pleasure in our work as scholars of these ancient documents. It is not enough for us to take pleasure in our work: pleasure must be productively incorporated into our analysis and methodology.

Pleasure permeates the Classical Tamil poems. The Tamil poets devote themselves to translating the pleasures of bodily contact into language that will provide pleasure to the reader. Our pleasure as readers occurs on multiple levels. We vicariously experience the pleasures of the *talaivi* and the *talaivan*, but we also experience an aesthetic pleasure in the language itself. The classical Tamil poems are crafted with a virtuosity that draws us into the beauty of poetic landscapes and the vocabulary of symbolic natural images. This poetry produces a language between poet and reader - a bond that persists across time and space - so that modern readers can forge pleasurable relations with individuals from the distant past. As scholars of this poetry, our

²¹⁶ Freeman (2005), 57.

²¹⁷ Cesarino (2003), 202.

work should consider pleasure as means of accessing the text and the context from which it emerges.

II The Poet's Pleasure

Throughout this dissertation, I have recursively examined the *akam/puram* division, which is a cornerstone of *Caṅkam* poetry. The *Caṅkam* poets were working within rigid generic conventions which structure both the poems' form and content. In my work, I have tried to show that *akam* and *puram* provide insight into the practice of poetic production, but also represent a particular way of understanding the world. In *Poems of Love and War*, A.K. Ramanujan wrote that, "*Akam* and *puram* are ancient, complex words. To understand them is to enter Tamil poetics, and much that is crucial to Tamil culture."²¹⁸ In my work, I have taken up Ramanujan's suggestion that *akam* and *puram* reveal deep currents at work within the early Tamil imaginary. I have demonstrated that the *akam/puram* division uncovers two important aspects of the poets' thinking: their recognition of human subjectivity and their distinguishing of sex and gender.

The *Caṅkam* poets posit that there are worlds within a person as well as outside of them. *Akam* poems portray the vast interior landscapes that encompass an individual's private world of thought, emotion and desire. Conversely, the *puram* poems document the structures of public life, ranging from a king's management of the state to a soldier's experience of battle. I have argued that the *akam/puram* division is also gendered. *Akam* relates to the domestic female-dominated spaces of society, while *puram* provides a counterpoint by portraying public male-dominated spaces. As such, subjectivity is associated with the feminine while external, observable civic affairs are associated with the masculine. Significantly, the Tamil poets acknowledge a distinction between sex and gender. Men and women are present in both *akam* and *puram* poems, suggesting that human beings, regardless of their sex, can take on a combination of masculine and feminine qualities.

The *Caṅkam* poets devote themselves to constructing the complex worlds of *akam* and *puram*, each governed by their restrictive rules about symbols, characters and poetic form. It has been particularly productive to trace the moments when the poets test the boundaries of these categories to reveal that are more vague and indeterminate than they initially appear. For each poem that perfectly fulfills the conventions of the *tiṇai* landscape system, there are many others that reveal *tiṇaimayakkam*, which literally refers to the confusion or mixing of landscapes. We see similar confusion and mixing in the construction of gender through *akam* and *puram*. In Chapter Three, I focused on moments in which male characters transgress into feminine territory and confront the limits of masculinity. In Chapter Five, I considered the liminal status of the mother-figure, who can move between *akam* and *puram*, but who thrives in neither. The interstitial spaces - between landscapes, between genders, between *akam* and *puram* - are the most interesting, but also the most dangerous for the characters who dwell in them. The male and

²¹⁸ Ramanujan (1985), 235.

female characters who exist in the gaps are confronted with loss, unable to achieve the pleasure and intimacy they so desire.

III The Character's Pleasure

To an extent, this is the fate of all *Caṅkam* characters. They are driven by their desire for intimacy and pleasure, but are frustrated at every turn. These poems hinge on the anticipation of pleasurable contact with the object of desire. As readers, we are first drawn into the characters' hope of erotic fulfillment, then into their bitter disappointment. This was evident when we considered the *talaivi*'s desire for intimacy with the *talaivan* in Chapter Two. The *kuriñci* and *neytal* poems describe the lengths to which the *talaivi* seeks her own erotic pleasure. Yet, fleeting sexual pleasures gives way to a desire for marriage, which she believes will ensure a lifetime of intimacy with *talaivan*. I argue that this hope of greater closeness is a ruse, for marriage ultimately causes the *talaivan* to move further away: family life compels the *talaivan* to leave in search of wealth and if he prospers, he is tempted by the *parattai*, who also draws him away from the *talaivi*.

In the figure of the *parattai*, we find another woman driven by the prospect of pleasure. Though her relationship with the *talaivan* appear to be transactional in nature, the *parattai* resolutely holds on to her right to take pleasure in sex. However, with desire also comes heartbreak, as the *talaivan* inevitably returns to his wife and son. In Chapter Three, I juxtaposed the two models of female sexuality in the *akam* poems: the *talaivi*'s sexuality which is bound by marriage and the *parattai*'s sexuality which flourishes outside of marriage. Both women desire the *talaivan*, yet each is frustrated by the *talaivan*'s inability to reciprocate the intensity of emotion that they offer him.

The *talaivan* appears to be largely the object of desire in the *akam* verses, although he is occasionally described desiring the *talaivi*. It is in the *puram* verses that we see him thoroughly compelled by pleasure and desire. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that men in the *puram* poems desire to be like the king, who represents the masculine ideal. It is a desire that is easily confused with an erotic desire to merge with the king, reminiscent of the *talaivi*'s desire to merge with the *talaivan*. The quest for masculinity is a pleasurable endeavor, but like many desires found within the corpus, it also ends in disenchantment. Kingly masculinity is quickly shown to be out of reach to the common man, for the struggle to survive in the world is often emasculating and undignified.

Of the characters I examine, the mother is perhaps the most clearly associated with tragic disappointment. In Chapter Five, I demonstrated that her desire for closeness with her children is repeatedly subject to frustration. Both the *akam* and *puram* genres portray her loss: the daughter leaves home when she falls in love and marries, while the son leaves for war where he will likely die. I connect the mother's loss to her liminal position between the genres of *akam* and *puram*. As a figure who queers the boundaries between categories, including the distinction between sexual desire and maternal desire, the mother is never at ease but is constantly losing the object of her desire.

IV The Reader's Pleasure

The *talaivi*, the *talaivan*, the *parattai* and the mother are each driven by the pleasure of contact with the other. Yet, as the poems repeatedly show, the other exists most vibrantly in the realm of the imagination. In these poems about subjectivity, the characters desire relationships with an other that they have largely built up in their minds. The characters' relationship with their fictional other corresponds to the reader's relationship to this text. As readers, we are drawn to the text out of a similar desire for contact - across time and space - with a fictional other. While the characters in the corpus remain forever unfulfilled, the reader does not come away from the text with the same sense of longing, for we resonate with these unfulfilled characters. These characters present us with the possibility that we are not alone in our melancholy and frustration. While the characters' desire is never satisfied in the space of the text, it is in the act of reading that our desire as a reader is fulfilled.

While I cannot speak for every reader who comes to these poems, it is my suspicion that many of us are drawn to the *Caṅkam* anthologies for personal reasons.²¹⁹ With this text, readers are able to forge pleasurable connections across time. We can relate to these tender expressions of desire and affection, of frustration and heartbreak, of love and war. Affect is central to our understanding and appreciation of this poetry. Queer theorists would describe this as a "touch across time" in which individuals from the present palpably connect with those in the past.²²⁰ Among historians, this movement to conceive of history as intimate connections between bodies past and present seemed radical. However, among readers of premodern poetry, this desire to establish bonds across time is not surprising at all: it is an obvious part of the reading process. Ancient literature is exhilarating not simply because of the differences we see between past and present, but also because of the similarities. In these works from a different time and place, we find things that are relevant and useful to us.

I have taken this impulse and allowed it to be part of my scholarly practice. Collapsing conventional historical time, I have sought to bring ideas from the *Caṅkam* anthologies into conversation with ideas that are circulating now. This methodology has allowed me to respond to questions from the past with answers from the present. Of course, the opposite has also been true: I have been able to respond to desires from the present with voices from the past. I acknowledge that this is ultimately a subjective process. I have chosen to juxtapose the poems with theories of gender and sexuality that I have found to be particularly relevant and that elucidate both poetry and theory. Others will bring other sets of questions and ideas to this text. Unlike many of my predecessors, my method absorbs the poststructuralist critique of objectivity.

²¹⁹ What Carolyn Dinshaw describes as a "deep desire for history". Dinshaw (2001), 203.

²²⁰ Dinshaw (1999), (2001), Freeman (2005): Queer theorists asserted that this historical method allowed self-described queers to feel a sense of community with those who have transgressed sexual norms in the past. Scholars have since broadened the definition of "queer" to encompass broader social and political categories. In my work, I argue that this methodology can be exported from Queer Studies, allowing readers to respond to their own situation from historical documents. Carolyn Dinshaw who pioneered this method in *Getting Medieval* (1999), signals her hope that her approach will be transposed into other disciplines in her article "Got Medieval?" (2001).

It presupposes that reading, even within the context of academic scholarship, is inherently subjective.

It seems appropriate for me to end this dissertation the way I began, with a poem. It is written by Auvaiyār, a female poet who was a master of both genres and continues to be remembered as one of the greatest Tamil poets who ever lived:

Bless you, earth:

field,
forest,
valley,
or hill,

you are only
as good
as the good young men
in each place.²²¹

In this *puṛam* poem, Auvaiyār describes the varied landscapes spanning the Tamil country. These places may have been familiar to the poems' first readers. To those of us reading in different places and different times, these landscapes call to mind the *akam tiṇais*. In deploying *akam* imagery in this *puṛam* poem, Auvaiyār reminds us of the fluidity of the genres and the intertextuality of the corpus. She asserts that the land is good not merely because of its beautiful, diverse terrain, but because of the goodness of the men who inhabit it. Auvaiyār believes that the land will remain good as long as decent men continue to live in these places. Her poem speaks of the new generations of young men who will arise in the Tamil country. Here, Auvaiyār looks forward, the way we look back. Somewhere in the middle, our eyes meet.

²²¹ *Puṛanānūru* 187, ascribed to Auvaiyār, translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

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