

Of Bees, Dragonflies and Drones

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In Old Tamil love poetry nature plays an important role: plant life and animal behaviour are used to describe the emotional reactions of the lovers. Such descriptions are a standard feature of this poetic tradition, for which Ramanujan has coined the phrase “interior landscape”. They are leading in the attempt to determine the situations in the love lives of the villagers portrayed in the poems. It is clear that the descriptions were based on careful observations of nature. This means that when in our analysis of a poem we end up, for instance, with behaviour uncharacteristic of the animal in question, we should reconsider our analysis. Unfortunately, however, it has proved not to be as simple as that. Many translators of Old Tamil poetry rely on the commentaries, medieval ones, and if not available, on modern ones written by the text editors, and the authors of these commentaries were (or are) far removed from the world in which the earlier poets lived and worked. In analyzing the poems, the commentators compared them with the dicta of the traditional grammatical and poetical traditions. The latter, poetical, tradition does classify plants and animals according to season and milieu, but does not deal with the lives of individual plants (from blossoming to defoliating) or how animals interact (fighting, mating). It is precisely for this that plants and animals are used as images in the poems.

Another source of information about nature available to the commentators might have been the other poems. However, in the absence of indexes, the corpus forms an unwieldy mass. More than once the commentators have therefore missed the point. The unreliability of the commentaries on Old Tamil poetry is well known, or should be known. Nevertheless, many a translator sails blindly on them, while they do have the tools to check. But then, with a few exceptions, most of them (or should I say, most of us?) are armchair scholars for whom excursions into nature are chores. However, as soon as he could read our eldest son Christiaan devoured books on animals and plants, and during dinner liked to teach us the differences between such creatures as crocodiles and alligators. One of his books came in handy when years later I read a translation of a Tamil poem in which a dragonfly was laying its eggs in a lotus. The word translated as dragonfly was the common Tamil word for bee, *tumpi*. So I asked myself why the translator (Martha Selby) choose to translate it as dragonfly. I found the answer in Christiaan’s books: a bee does not lay its eggs in a lotus, nor does the dragonfly, who instead lays its eggs in the water (see picture below). However, for Selby this was as close as she could get to the lotus in the poem.

I have discussed Selby’s translation of the poem in question, *Aiṅkurunūru* 20, in a review article on her translation of all 500 poems from that collection already about ten years ago (Tieken 2012). I will briefly discuss it here again, to turn after that to a more recent translation by Thomas Lehmann (2020). Lehmann’s translation is annotated, in that he quotes relevant parts of a medieval commentary, which was apparently also consulted by Selby. Selby’s and Lehmann’s translations thus stand in a *paramparā*, the authority of which has evidently made them impervious to inroads from biology, in the process failing to do justice to the poets.

Aiṅkurunūru 20 reads:

*nāru cil kāla vañciṛai tumpi
nūrritaḷt tāmaraip pūcciṇai cīkkuṅ
kāmpu kaṇṭaṇṇa tūmpuṭai vēḷattut
tuṛai naṇiy ūraṇaiy uḷḷiy eṇ*

iraiy ēr el vaḷai nekiḷpu ḍtūmmē,

for which Selby offers the following translation:

Thinking of that man
from the place near the riverbank
where tubular reeds as hollow as bamboo
rip out eggs laid in a hundred-petaled lotus
by a tiny-legged dragonfly with iridescent wings,
the beautiful, gleaming bangles
slip from my wrists.

As said, dragonfly translates *tumpi*, “bee”, and bees do not lay eggs on lotuses, they lay their eggs in a honeycomb (see picture below). The solution to Selby’s translation problem lies in the analysis of the grammatical construction. She links *tumpi*, “bee”, in the passage *nūrrital̄t tāmaraip pūcciṇai cīkku(m)*, directly to *ciṇai*, “embryo or foetus of animals, pregnancy”, which foetus is placed in the flower (*pū(c)*) of the hundred-petaled (*nūrrital̄(t)*) lotus (*tāmarai(p)*). However, the bee is actually the subject of the participle *cikku(m)*, “brushing against, grazing” (not “ripping out”) which beside *kāmpu kaṇṭanna tūmpuṭai vēḷattu(t)* tags another descriptive passage to the *tuṛai*, or “bathing ghat” (in paraphrase):

The man from the village with the bathing ghat with reeds as hollow as bamboo,
where bees brush against the swollen pistil of the hundred-petaled lotus flower.

In the poem, a woman complains about her lover (the bee), who is unwilling to leave his pregnant wife (the lotus), or the mother of his future son, to visit her.

The participle *cīkkum* is also found in *Aiṅkuṛunūru* 19, where it is used in a practically similar meaning. The first part of this poem reads:

*ekkar māattup putuppūm peruñciṇai
puṇarntōr meymmaṇaṅ kamaḷun taṇpoḷil
vēḷa venpū vēḷḷulai cīkkum
ūraṅ,*

which Selby translates as follows:

That man is from the place
where white reed flowers in cool groves
tear at [*cīkkum*] the pale threads
of the mango tree growing in a dune

For reasons I am unable to follow, in this translation the words and phrases of the original Tamil text have been jumbled. Literally, the text reads (in paraphrase):

The white plumes (*vēḷḷulai*) of the white flowers of the reed (*vēḷa venpū*), (like fans) blow away (*cīkkum*) from the grove (*taṇpoḷil*) the scent of the love-making of the lovers who had met (*puṇarntōr*) under the wide branches of the mango tree (*māattu ... peruñciṇai*).

It should be noted that that the word for “love-making” (*maṇam*) also means “smell, fragrance”.

Aiṅkurunūru 20 is dealt with almost a decade later by Lehmann in an article on a anonymous commentary on this compilation (Lehmann 2020: 242-44). His translation does not materially differ from Selby’s:

Thinking about the man from the place near the ghat
with the reed, tubular in form as if one looks at bamboo,
which rubs away [*cīkkum*] the egg
of the bee with six small legs and beautiful wings,
in the lotus flower with hundred petals,

The translation is therefore as wrong as Selby’s. However, because Lehmann quotes from the commentary investigated by him, we now know his and Selby’s source of inspiration. The commentary explains:

*tāmaraiṭ pūvakat tuḷatākiya tumpic ciṇaiyai vēlam cīkkum enṛatu taṇmāṭṭu
empuṭalvaṇ uraitalaiyum vilakkuvārākiya potumakaḷiraiyuṭaiyāṇ enṛu,*

Saying, that “the reed rubs away the egg of the bee that is in the lotus flower” means that “He (the *talaivaṇ*) [the husband of the woman speaking, HT] is one who has prostitutes, who are the ones who prevent my (the *talaivi*’s) [the *talaivaṇ*’s wife, HT] son staying with him” (translation Lehmann).

“That is to say,” Lehmann continues, “that in the same way that the reed destroys the egg which the bee has planted into the lotus flower, the prostitutes too destroy the opportunity for the *talaivaṇ* to be with his son and also with the *talaivi* [his wife, HT]. In this way the prostitutes destroy the love which the *talaivi* has planted into the heart of the *talaivaṇ*.”

The commentator also mentions a variant reading *cēkkum* for *cīkkum*:

*ciṇaiccēkkum enṛu pāṭam ḍtuvār tumpicciṇai varunta vēlam taṅkum enṛu
poruḷuraippa,*

Those who recite give the variant *ciṇai cēkkum* and explain the meaning as “the reed stays so that the egg of the bee suffers” (translation Lehmann).

Lehmann adds a comment of his own: “The commentator shows that a simple lexical variant of an adjectival participle changes considerably the meaning of the sentence: “The act of rubbing away (= destroying) the egg of a bee” is not identical with “the state of being there so that the egg of the bee suffers.”

What I had not gathered from the translations themselves is that the bee stands for the queen bee here. It is indeed the queen bee which lays the eggs in the honey comb. Drones, the male bees, die – they literally explode – in the act of impregnating her. However, in Tamil poetry the bee invariably stands for the man, in particular the unfaithful lover, who, like the bee, hops from one woman to the next. Thus, Lehmann does not only ignore natural life but also the literary conventions of the poetic tradition. His translation is found in an edited volume of contributions on the Tamil commentatorial tradition. In his article he presents excerpts from an anonymous, presumably old, commentary on the *Aiṅkurunūru* collection, *Aiṅkurunūru* 20, because the commentator draws attention to a variant reading. In his conclusions (pp. 248-49) he merely provides a list of the topics and peculiarities addressed in

this commentary, typically, however, without a word of caution against using it. The above discussion shows that the commentary – and this commentary is not the only one – is prepared to accept anything and to go to any length to make sense of it, in this case concocting a story of a battle of custody.

References

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Honey comb with larvae in various stages of development



Dragonfly laying eggs in the water

