

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI  
NUOVA SERIE

# RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA  
ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI STUDI ORIENTALI

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RIVISTA  
DEGLI  
STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

VOLUME XC

FASC. 1-4

(2017)



PISA · ROMA  
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE

2018

# RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

Trimestrale

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*Print and Online official subscription rates are available at Publisher's website [www.libraweb.net](http://www.libraweb.net).*

I versamenti possono essere eseguiti sul conto corrente postale n. 171574550 o tramite carta di credito (*Visa, Eurocard, Mastercard, American Express, Carta Si*)

FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE

Pisa · Roma

Casella postale n. 1, Succursale 8, I 56123 Pisa

*Uffici di Pisa:* Via Santa Bibbiana 28, I 56127 Pisa,  
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Fabrizio Serra editore, Pisa · Roma

*Fabrizio Serra editore incorporates the Imprints Accademia editoriale, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Fabrizio Serra editore, Giardini editori e stampatori in Pisa, Gruppo editoriale internazionale and Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali.*

ISSN 0392-4866

ISSN ELETTRONICO 1724-1853

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# ON WORKING WITH AND LEARNING FROM ORNAMENTS: AN AFTERWORD

YIGAL BRONNER

Coming as an afterword to the six papers addressing “Condensed speech” (*samāsokti*), this short essay assesses their cumulative contribution to our understanding of Daṇḍin’s *Mirror of Literature* (*Kāvyaḍarśa*) and its impact. It tries to think of ornaments (*alankāra*) as primary tools with which we can understand aesthetic theory and practice in South Asia, and which we can also use for analyzing negotiations between its cosmopolitan and vernacular forms (negotiations wherein Daṇḍin’s *Mirror* played a central role).

KEYWORDS: Ornaments, Daṇḍin, *alankāra*, *samāsokti*, Sanskrit, Sinhala, Tibetan, Tamil, Ruyyaka

THE SIX essays in this issue emerged from a collaborative project centered on Daṇḍin’s *Mirror of literature* (*Kāvyaḍarśa*) and its long and largely unstudied career in different parts of Asia. By focusing on one ornament, «condensed speech» (*samāsokti*), the essays shed light on the diverse creative engagements with the *Mirror* in disparate literary cultures. Evidently, Daṇḍin’s expanded, playful, and open-ended formulation of *samāsokti* and his verses about the honeybee and the scentless bud, fruit-yielding trees, and a sweet ocean gone dry spoke with special force to poets, readers, and thinkers from Sri Lanka to Tibet, where poems inspired by his model continue to be composed. This small case study demonstrates the necessity of understanding the *Mirror*’s transmission and reception in a world where Sanskrit cosmopolitan models played a key role but where other models were often equally important (as seen most clearly in the case of Tamil), and where engagement with the *Mirror* created large textual communities, at times across languages (as in Sri Lanka). Sheldon Pollock’s seminal work on the Sanskrit cosmopolis provides a synoptic road map for this scholarly journey, and it is time we use it to study its different landscapes in detail.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding essays also prod us to reexamine the very notion of literary «ornaments» (*alankāra*), such as *samāsokti*, as part of this journey. We are accustomed to taking ornaments for granted as sidekicks to the poem’s supposed aesthetic hero. This view reflects the official stance of Ānandavardhana and his followers, although not necessarily their practice.<sup>2</sup> But the theory of suggestion (*dhvani*) was not the only one available in the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

<sup>1</sup> POLLOCK 2006; BRONNER 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For the much greater complexity Ānandavardhana displays in his scholarship and in his poetry, and on the nuanced comments of Abhinavagupta thereon, see SHULMAN 2016.

The discussion of *samāsokti* reveals an alternative model that was at least as productive as that of *dhvani*. Indeed, the texts consulted show that citizens of the literary cosmopolis were well aware of the two competing models. This awareness pertains to more than contested labels, that is, whether *dhvani* is *samāsokti* under a new name or something altogether different.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it concerns questions that are key to any poetic tradition: what literature is, how it is enjoyed, and in what way it is generated anew. For instance, is the aesthetic experience instantaneous and rapturous, as Abhinavagupta believed, or does it come about through a complex series of intellections of the sort mapped out in Ruyyaka's discussion of *samāsokti*?<sup>4</sup> The texts in Pali, Sinhala, Kannada, Tibetan, Tamil, and Sanskrit discussed in this issue all indicate a strong preference for the *alaṅkāra* model.

But what exactly does this model entail? Are the figurative elements that many in Asia have come to recognize as «ornaments» something that poetry may have, or are they what it actually is? Think, again, of Daṇḍin's first example of condensed speech:

The bee sipped honey to its fill  
from a flower in full bloom.  
Look! Now it's kissing a bud  
that is yet to develop a scent.<sup>5</sup>

Everyone agrees that whatever else this stanza does, its charm hinges on the interplay between its stated import (the honeybee and the two flowers) and its suggested one (the love triangle). In the ninth century CE, the question emerged which of the two is predominant: the suggestive import, as Ānandavardhana argued, or the suggested one, as Daṇḍin's commentator Ratnaśrījñāna retorted.<sup>6</sup> But this disagreement is rather technical and has more to do with external theoretical concerns than with the poem at hand.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, proponents of both *dhvani* and *alaṅkāra* models would probably agree that in cases such as this poem, the condensation of stated and suggested imports does not so much enhance the beauty of the verse as it forms its very essence. If we could somehow sever the bee from the lover, the result would be no poem at all.

It may be slightly more difficult to defend this argument with respect to Ānandavardhana, but as far as Daṇḍin and his followers were concerned, there was little room for speculation. In this world, ornaments are not

<sup>3</sup> For more on this contestation, see the essays by Bronner and Cox in this issue.

<sup>4</sup> See the essay by Cox in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> KĀ 2.204. For text and discussion, see the essay by Bronner in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Again, see the essays by Bronner and Cox in this issue.

<sup>7</sup> For Ānandavardhana it is key that the suggested meaning here be subordinate so that he can classify such examples as cases of subordinate suggestion (*guṇībhūtavyaṅgya*), unlike *dhvani*, where suggestion is predominant. For Ruyyaka's subtle critique of the idea of predominance, see the essay by Cox in this issue.



sideshows but «the factors that make poetry beautiful» (*kāvyaśobhākarān dharmān*, KĀ 2.1). The implications of this dictum are twofold: first, ornaments are necessary in poetry, for beautiful it must be; and second, anything that makes poetry beautiful is by definition an ornament. This is why, for Daṇḍin, the category «ornament» must remain open ended. There are endless types of beauty in literature, and innumerable factors may be responsible for its charms, many of which have yet to be realized or invented.<sup>8</sup> Thus ornamentation is necessarily varied and includes elements of different order. Moreover, human taste, both collective and individual, is built into it, and taste is also always subject to change.<sup>9</sup> An illuminating example of these implications is that even *dhvani*, Ānandavardhana's aesthetic principle meant to reign alone over all other factors, was easily incorporated as one ornament among many in the *Way of a poet-king* (*Kavirājamārga*).<sup>10</sup> After all, the proponents of *dhvani* had demonstrated its intrinsic charm, so room had to be made for it in the inherently elastic inventory of *alāṅkāras*.

The unprecedented, avowed openness of this system may give the impression that Daṇḍin forwent theory altogether in favor of an approach of «anything goes». But a careful reading of the *Mirror* reveals that it offers a nuanced but robust theory of figuration, in which the members of a small set of seminal (*bīja*) ornaments are seen as key aesthetic principles.<sup>11</sup> These define the primary ways in which the poetry Daṇḍin knew typically achieved its aesthetic effects, and as he repeatedly shows, they can interact with one another to create infinitely more such ways.<sup>12</sup> Daṇḍin's system, then, is open in more than one respect: it accepts the fact that future generations will come up with aesthetic principles currently unknown, but it also shows how existing principles can generate countless new varieties by modular combinations and constant intertextual play.

All the essays in this issue show how later readers of Daṇḍin were immensely receptive to these notions of openness. For one thing, they put Daṇḍin's *samāsokti* to uses not seen and sometimes surely unforeseen in his *Mirror*. These include praises of the Buddha and his Dharma (in Sri Lanka), descriptions of actual warfare and, possibly, work-length experiments with *samāsokti* (in Kannada), and criticism of China's Cultural Revolution (in Tibet). For another, they clearly viewed *samāsokti* as an integral part of an «*alāṅkāra* system», to use a phrase from Jennifer Clare's essay, and were always eager to indicate its productive relationship to other ornaments, often in surprising ways (as with *samāsokti*'s ties to *sūkṣma* and *bhāvika* in the

<sup>8</sup> KĀ 2.1: *te cādyāpi vikalpyante kas tān kārtsyena vakṣyati*. I intend to write more systematically on Daṇḍin's openness elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> For Daṇḍin's long exposition on regional taste, see KĀ 1.40-101. For an instance where he expresses his personal taste pace Bhāmaha, see KĀ 1.22.

<sup>10</sup> KRM 3.208. For a similar point on *hāṅgum* in the *Siyabaslakara*, see Hallisey's essay in this issue.

<sup>11</sup> KĀ 2.2.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, KĀ 2.307, 311, 360.

*Siyabaslakara*) and in endless new combinations (as in the discussion of Ruyyaka).<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Daṇḍin's demonstration of *samāsokti* as a form of «high-density» expressivity, to quote Andrew Ollett's essay, was universally taken as an invitation for further densification. Consider, in this context, the immense scope for semantic embrace (*śleṣa*) and ambiguities in the Tamil examples, where additional readings always seem to be lurking (Clare in this issue), or the endless potential for doubling in the Tibetan verses by and against the fifth Dalai Lama, where we find, for instance, what we may call a «second-order *samāsokti*»: one's rival is worthy of condensed criticism precisely because he believes himself to be a truly condensed entity (Bhum and Gyatso in this issue). Or think again of Ruyyaka's dizzying discussion of the «complex instances of doubled, trebled, and simultaneous figuration» in connection with *samāsokti* (Cox's contribution).

Then there is the density resulting from playful engagements with Daṇḍin's own playfulness. Every bee encountered is reminiscent of Daṇḍin's honeybee, which in turn evokes Kālidāsa's. Parrots, too, can be bees, as in the case of the *Sidat saṅgarā*'s poem in Hallisey's essay. And as we see in Cox's essay, even when no bees are present, *samāsokti* has a propensity for romantic triangles that may hark back to Daṇḍin's verse. Thus even the absence of bees can be said to be a loudly humming presence. It is perhaps no wonder that several Tamil sources distinguished «their» bee from other «crazed swarms of drunken bees» (Clare in this issue). The same applies, of course, to whole forests – some lush, others thorny – that grew out of Daṇḍin's two fecund, shade-giving trees, which in turn emerged from Bhāmaha's storm-stricken woodland, and so on. Moreover, just as was the case with Daṇḍin's many playful echoes, intertextuality in those texts that responded to him need not work only vertically, from the translation or adaptation back to its one source or, indeed, from the vernacular to the cosmopolitan. Multiple sources are simultaneously evoked (Bhāmaha is clearly a prominent example in the Kannada, Pali, and Sinhala materials), and we may well posit horizontal axes between Tamil and Sinhala, Kannada and Tamil, and, of course, Sinhala and Pali. It can thus be said that it is only in these later works that Daṇḍin's «condensed speech» becomes true to its name.

Indeed, a kind of a metaornamentation emerges. Ornaments are used to demonstrate not just how to make beautiful poetry but also, as Ollett notes, how «to use Daṇḍin's *Mirror*». It can be stated more broadly that ornaments become means for negotiating the aesthetic models of different literary cultures. Clearly the most remarkable example of this is found in Jennifer Clare's essay, where she shows how *samāsokti* was used in Tamil texts to embrace two dramatically different poetic traditions, that of landscapes and that of orna-

<sup>13</sup> See Hallisey's and Cox's contributions, respectively.

ments. The result is surely a unique «condensed speech». But even cases that involve less spectacular condensations offer similar lessons, as the essays in this issue indicate, each in its own way. As Hallisey puts it apropos of the Sinhala and Pali texts he discusses, it is «as if their concern is more *to learn from samāsokti* than *to learn about it*», and, as he adds, this is something we, too, can «*learn from*». Ornaments such as simile (*upamā*), embrace (*śleṣa*), distinction (*vyatireka*), and condensed speech (*samāsokti*), to mention only a few, may be the best tools with which to analyse the processes by which emerging literary cultures tried to match, incorporate, outdo, and densify, respectively, the Sanskrit cosmopolitan models. The notions of «translation» and «adaptation» pale in comparison.

One last nod is owed to the *Mirror*, the text at the center of much of this immensely rich conversation. There is something deceptively simple about Daṇḍin's verses, such as those depicting a honeybee's movement from «a flower in full bloom» to «a bud / that is yet to develop a scent» – four short lines, with the faintest hint of a pun («kissing») and a seemingly unassuming nudge to the listener to «look». But the more we look, the more we see with the help of the gazes of the many who have heeded this invitation. The bee may have been a charmer, a loser, or even a despicable paedophile; a canny or poor critic; and the very embodiment of Sanskrit literary culture, distinct from the Kannada elephant (while also reminiscent of its Prakrit ancestors). It may also have been the same bee haunting Pārvatī's thick hair, or a traveling parrot in disguise (see Cox's and Hallisey's essays, respectively). In retrospect, all of these and more are somehow packed into Daṇḍin's dense original if we only look close enough.

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COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE SERRA DANTE DALLA  
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE, PISA · ROMA.  
STAMPATO E RILEGATO NELLA  
TIPOGRAFIA DI AGNANO, AGNANO PISANO (PISA).

★

*Finito di stampare nel mese di  
Febbraio 2018*

(CZ 2 · FG 21)



★

Periodico iscritto alla Cancelleria del Tribunale di Roma  
in data 7 marzo 2006 n. 121/06  
RAFFAELE TORELLA, *Direttore responsabile*  
Periodico già registrato in data  
30 aprile 1958 n. 6299