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THE POETICS OF DISTORTIVE TALK

Plot and Character in Ratnākara's "Fifty Verbal Perversions"
(*Vakroktipañcāśikā*)

What have I left to say?
Have you left? You're present to my right!
What present have you kept? please tell me. You are known as the Renouncer of
All.
You're absolutely divine girl.
I'm not the vine girl at all.
May Śiva – smiling as he is defeated by the Daughter of the Mountain –
point you to good fortune.¹

There is a couple fighting. The wife has had enough of her husband's cheating and bad habits. She resolves to leave. The husband will not let this happen. He cleverly deflects her complaints by intentionally misconstruing them, and drags her into an extended verbal contest that eventually leads to their reunion. It is quite fortunate that the two do not break up – the unity of the cosmos depends on their union, for the wife is Pārvatī, the goddess, and her husband, the god Śiva. Still, their quarrel takes on a form which is very human, domestic and, above all, poetic. Their dialogues of mutual misconstrual make up the "Fifty Verbal Perversions" (*Vakroktipañcāśikā*), a work by the ninth-century Sanskrit poet Ratnākara.

On the surface, Ratnākara's poem appears to be, and has generally been regarded as, a collection of more or less independent verses, thematically united by their praise for Śiva and Pārvatī and their use of the device of verbal distortion, but lacking any higher level structure.² No interpreter, ancient or modern, has stopped to consider the possibility that the "Fifty Verbal Perversions" contains any narrative development whatsoever, let alone a plot. Indeed, the few modern scholars who have taken notice of the poem at all, take for granted that the work is merely "an exercise in style," whose sole purpose is to exhibit the poet's skill in clever wordplay.³ However, as we will show, the work is not merely a set of similarly structured verses assembled in no particular order. It is first and foremost a story, one which explores with great subtlety the characters and the relationship of Śiva and Pārvatī. Moreover, the technique of verbal distortion which gives the poem its name is

not incidental to this exploration. The characters' use of wordplay in intentional misinterpretation of each other's words is both the primary means of characterization and the main engine driving the plot; it is anything but an end in itself.

This paper is the first literary analysis of Ratnākara's poem. Our aim is to understand what this device of intentional misconstruction is, how it functions for both Śiva and Pārvatī, and how it is used to characterize them. We also want to know what is at stake in their quarrel, how it proceeds and how it concludes; what changes take place in it, and how it leads to their union. What kind of poetry is that which is made of a dialogue of constant misrepresentation?

INTRODUCTION: DISTORTIVE TALK AND ITS HISTORY

Deliberate misreading has been recognized and defined by Sanskrit poetic theorists (*ālaṃkārikas*) as a poetic device. This device, *vakrokti* – “verbal perversion” or, more literally, “distortive-talk” – is traditionally defined as one speaker's willful misconstrual of what has been said by another.⁴ Yet beyond this basic characterization supplied by indigenous theory, a brief examination of its practice reveals additional features closely associated with the use of this device.

Possibly the earliest appearance of *vakrokti* is the benedictory verse of Viśakhadatta's play, *Mudrārākṣasa* (estimates of his date range from the fifth to the sixth centuries):⁵

Who is this fortunate one, residing on top of your head?
 Śaśikalā [moon-digit].
 What? Is that her name?
 Absolutely! How could you forget a name you know well?
 I am not questioning the moon. It is the woman I'm after!
 Fine, if the moon is not an authority, call [your female friend] Vijayā and question her!
 May the slickness of the Lord –
 anxious to hide the Divine River from the eyes of the Goddess –
 protect you!⁶

This verse plays on the common theme of Śiva's infidelity with the river Gaṅgā, who flows through his hair and thus is said to reside on his head. Pārvatī is pressing Śiva to acknowledge his affair with Gaṅgā. Yet Śiva deftly evades her insinuation: he consistently misinterprets her remarks to refer not to his beloved Gaṅgā but to the crescent-moon, also known to reside on his head.

In this verse we see certain features which will prove to be typical and indeed nearly universal in the practice of distortive talk (*vakrokti*).

First, it contains not a single instance of distortion but an extended sequence. One character's misconstrual of the other invariably provokes a response, necessarily generating a dialogue. In this sense, the device of distortive talk always constitutes a story, however brief. The term *vakrokti* typically refers not just to a single distortive reply, as the traditional definition implies, but to the entire back-and-forth exchange.

A second prevalent feature of distortive talk seen here has to do with the nature of the characters involved. Such exchanges almost always take place between bickering lovers. Moreover, very commonly, the lovers are none other than Śiva and Pārvatī. A third, nearly universal characteristic, clearly related to the divinity of the couple, is the fact that the dialogue culminates in a benediction. And, typically, the invocation comments on the distortive exchange itself.

Another instance of distortive talk (*vakrokti*) which possibly predates Ratnākara is a septet of verses ascribed uncertainly to the seventh-century poet Mayūra (the distortion in these verses relies on the extraction of unintended meanings from multivalent utterances, a technique explained below; these possible unintended meanings are in given in parentheses):⁷

O Vijayā, the Three-eyed One is so skillful [with the dice], I can't play with him,
(*In victory, the Triple-diced One is skillful . . .*)
I am skillful in victory alright, but I'm not triple-diced; there are two dice in my hand.

What do I care about the dice game anyhow? (*. . . about the Pot-bellied One?*)⁸
Well, if you don't care for Gaṇeśa, let him go.
Who takes Gaṇeśa (*Garuda [vināyaka]*) for an enemy?
The snake-folk. Don't you know?

You thief! How could anyone gamble with you, you're penniless! (*. . . You're without the Vasu gods!*)
To hell with the Vasus!⁹ Look! I have all the gods and demons at my feet.

I can't enjoy myself without (your) bringing the moon. (*. . . without the Seizer of the Moon.*)
Why are you putting me off like this? Hey Nandin, if this is what the lady wants, then summon Rāhu.

Oh no! Who can think of love when this terrifying, white-fanged Rāhu is around?
(*. . . When this necklace-snake [hārāhau] is around?*)
Well, if you don't like the necklace-snake, consider it gone.

Don't put words in my mouth! I'm not at all thinking of your ornament. (*. . . not at all aware of your lap.*)
How can you say that? You've been sitting on it for a thousand aeons! –

May the face of Pārvatī –
whose eyes are fluttering with delight at the distortive talk [*vakrokti*]
which Paśupati [Śiva, lord of animals] playfully employs as a silken leash –
protect you!¹⁰

This septet shares all the features noted in connection with the previous verse: an extended distortive dialogue, between quarreling lovers, especially Śiva and Pārvatī, culminating in a benediction which directly comments on the distortive exchange itself. It also manifests additional characteristics which are common to a great many cases of distortive talk. To begin with, they tend to occur in multi-verse blocks rather than as individual verses.¹¹ Moreover, the verses making up such blocks, are thematically linked to one another, so as to form a succession of events – in effect a miniature narrative. Thus the first three verses of the above example all deal with the dice-game of Śiva and Pārvatī, the next four concern their verbal foreplay.

Furthermore, even within these sub-units, narrative development is evident. The first set begins with Pārvatī attempting to resign from the dice-game. She again attempts to withdraw in the next verse. In verse three it appears that the tide has turned in Pārvatī's favor, since Śiva is now bankrupt, and she is complaining about the pointlessness of continuing the game. Of course, in each case her words are cleverly deflected. The fourth verse marks a transition into the erotic domain. Pārvatī requests moonlight as a necessary prerequisite for their love-making. Śiva twists her words as a demand for Rāhu, the demonic creature who swallows the sun and the moon, thereby causing eclipses. Pārvatī decries the very idea in the next verse. "Who can think of love when this terrifying, white-fanged Rāhu is around," she says, only to be misread again by Śiva as speaking of his necklace-snake. Thus provoked, she complains of his verbal distortion. "Don't put words in my mouth!" she tells him, "I'm not at all thinking of your ornament." But Śiva once again pretends to hear what was not intended, and uses her speech to make a specifically erotic reference to her sitting on his lap. The plot's culmination in a sexual union is implied by the septet's final verse, which invokes Pārvatī's face, her eyes trembling with joy at the time of love-making.

How are additional readings so easily generated out of Pārvatī's speech? In order to answer this question we need to briefly consider the vast domain of Sanskrit bitextual poetry, known as *śleṣa*, found at least as early as the onset of the sixth century. Thus, by the time of Mayūra, the putative author of the above septet, there already existed an extensive arsenal of sophisticated tools for the generation of multiple meanings from a single string of sounds. There are basically two methods for creating bitextuality. The former involves the use of multivalent lexical items. For example, in the first of the above verses, the word for eye, *akṣa*, may also signify a die. Thus the epithet "Three-eyed" could be

understood to mean “Triple-diced,” thereby implying that Śiva is cheating in using an extra die. The latter technique is based on resegmentability – the construction of a string of phonemes such that it can be differently segmented into words. A rather simple example of this occurs in the fifth verse of the above poem. Pārvatī’s words “oh no!” [*hā*] and “when Rāhu . . .” [*rāhau*], which occur consecutively in the Sanskrit, are read by Śiva as a single compound-word meaning “when the necklace-snake . . .” [*hārāhau*]. Distortive talk is almost always created by means of these two techniques of bitextuality. (Though this is not invariably so, as can be seen in the above *Mudrārākṣasa* verse in which verbal distortion is not based on bitextuality.) Yet whereas in bitextual poetry proper the speaker (be it the poet or some character) intends both possible readings, in distortive-talk poetry it is the respondent who reads a second meaning against the intention of the initial speaker.¹²

The verse from *Mudrārākṣasa* and the septet ascribed to Mayūra notwithstanding, Ratnākara’s “Fifty Verbal Perversions” (*Vakroktipañcāśikā*) is by far the most noteworthy instance of distortive talk. It is surely not a coincidence that the earliest theoretical notice of the device of *vakrokti* is found at precisely the place and time of Ratnākara’s work, namely mid-ninth century Kashmir. Rudraṭa (c. 850) is the first theorist to define and discuss *vakrokti* in his system of poetic figures.¹³ Indeed, Rudraṭa’s first example of the device is clearly an imitation of a verse from Ratnākara’s poem.¹⁴ In addition, the great Kashmiri poetic theorist Ānandavardhana, Ratnākara’s colleague at the court of king Avantivarman (r. 855–883), alludes briefly to the device of *vakrokti*.¹⁵

It seems evident, then, that *vakrokti* suddenly gained prominence through Ratnākara’s work. Indeed, it is worth entertaining the possibility that Ratnākara is not only the most celebrated *vakrokti*-poet, but also the inventor of the device. The date of both putatively earlier examples is open to question. True, it is widely accepted that the Avantivarman named as a patron in some manuscripts of Viśakhadatta’s play – whose benedictory distortive-talk verse was quoted above – is a late sixth-century king of Kanauj. Nevertheless, the fact that *vakrokti* first gains notice precisely at the court of the far more famous Avantivarman of Kashmir could indicate that he, in fact, is the patron named in the *Mudrārākṣasa*.¹⁶ And, as already noted, the ascription of the above septet to Mayūra derives only from the late anthology *Subhāṣitāvalī* (see note 7); such ascriptions are often unreliable. To summarize, while the data are inconclusive, it is at least possible that Ratnākara was the

first to compose *vakrokti* verse and also the one who gave the device its name.¹⁷

In any case, Ratnākara's "Fifty Verbal Perversions" is without doubt the most renowned and influential specimen of a nascent genre of distortive-talk poetry. In addition to occasional isolated *vakrokti* verses, and short sets of verses collected in the anthologies or quoted in works of poetic theorists, we know of three more extended distortive-talk poems composed on the model of Ratnākara's work: Śivarāma's *Lakṣmīśarasvatīsaṃvāda*, and the anonymous *Rambhāśukasamvāda* and *Girijākamalāvivāda*.¹⁸ The preeminent position of Ratnākara's poem in this genre is confirmed by the fact that it is the only such poem to have been commented upon: it is included in the short list of canonical works on which the famous poetic commentator Vallabhadeva (c. 900) chose to expound. Yet despite Ratnākara's position as the most important distortive-talk poet, his "Fifty Verbal Perversions" has been almost totally ignored by modern scholars. It is clearly his work that has to be studied first if this forgotten genre is to be recovered and understood, and it is to the "Fifty Verbal Perversions," then, that we now turn.

INTRODUCTORY VERSES (1–4): PĀRVATĪ'S ATTEMPT TO PART AND ITS
DEFLECTION BY ŚIVA

The poem begin abruptly:

As of now, you heartless man, I give up being your left half! (... *I give up the snake-filled forest!*)

Go ahead: give up the snake-filled forest, beautiful. I'm not heartless.

What forest? Don't speak like that! (*No! Are you carrying water?*)

Of course I carry water on my head.

May Śiva –

rendering the Daughter of the Snowy Mountain¹⁹ speechless by means of distortive talk (*vakrokti*) –
protect you.²⁰

Just as the poem is about to begin, Śiva is in his *ardhanārīśvara* iconic form – an androgynous body of which Pārvatī forms the left half. The very first utterance of the "Fifty Verbal Perversions" is Pārvatī's act of separation from this intimate union. In a highly dramatic moment, her anger bursts forth as she bitterly complains about his callousness. Just as in all of the examples discussed above, it is Pārvatī here who makes a complaint and initiates the dialogue. Yet in sharp contrast to the quite playful tone of the septet ascribed to Mayūra, the mood here is of intense emotional rupture. The issues at stake *there* – Pārvatī's desire to abandon the dice-game and her prolongation of their foreplay

– pale in comparison to her outright rejection here of Śiva himself. Even the *Mudrārākṣasa* verse which raises the more troublesome issue of Śiva’s infidelity amounts to little more than light-hearted banter. But here, Pārvatī is deadly serious.

Śiva’s reply to Pārvatī’s hostile declaration is not a reply at all. As we have come to expect, he deflects here assault, erasing what has been said by her, rewriting it differently, and responding to this self-composed text. The sheer audacity of Śiva’s deflection of her words into the totally irrelevant domain of the snake-filled forest finds Pārvatī entirely unprepared. When her angry protest against the twisting of her words is itself twisted she is reduced to stunned silence: her response would suggest that this is her first encounter with distortive talk.

Disregarding her husband’s verbal trickery, Pārvatī tries to justify her separation from him (2):

When I embrace you, you make me nauseous with your poison. (. . . *with your booze and plow.*)
 I drink no booze and carry no plow, Silly girl, how could I be a plowman?
 Well, you might just as well be a plowman, being so attached to your bullock!
 (*govāhane*)
 May Śiva –
 smiling as he is defeated by the Daughter of the Snowy Mountain by means of distortive talk (*vakrokti*) –
 protect you.²¹

The overt subject of Pārvatī’s complaint is the primordial poison which Śiva swallowed at the churning of the ocean in order to protect the universe. The poison, which is eternally kept in his throat, sickens her. Śiva once again parries her expression of disgust. But this time, rather than fold under his deflective tactics she attempts to fight back. While her answer is not, strictly speaking, distortive – she does not misread his words about being a plowman – it does contain a play on words. The compound *go-vāhana* could mean both the act of driving a bullock (in the case of a plowman), and the bull which serves as Śiva’s mount. In this way, Pārvatī builds on Śiva’s verbal distortion, making it into an insult. Yet her play on words is anything but playful, and she remains hostile. Śiva, in contrast, accepts her slander with a smile.

In the third verse, Pārvatī’s attack becomes more pointed:

You mean nothing to me! (*You are dear to Menā.*)
 Sure my mother-in-law likes me, Slender one.
 OK, well put; I’ll say it again: I don’t like you! (. . . *I’ll say it again: you’re covered with nameru-fruits.*)
 But I’m not covered with *nameru*, Silly girl. Look at me!
 May Śiva –
 Silencing with his distortive talk (*vakrokti*) the Daughter of the Snowy Mountain, as she smiles – protect you.²²

Rather than complain about his disturbing attributes, Pārvaṭī launches a direct assault on Śiva himself; she doesn't love him any more. Moreover, she is no longer baffled. She responds to his deflection by acknowledging his gamesmanship and, for the first time, tries to put the same message through again. Yet, in spite of the heightened intensity of her attack, this acknowledgment signals that she is more ready to enter into a dialogue with him. And, while Śiva once more silences her with his verbal distortion, the benediction finds her smiling.

The next verse shows a more pronounced shift in Pārvaṭī's attitude, and sets their quarrel on a new footing (4):

I'm fed up with our union (*peace*);²³ I won't stay in your body anymore!
 If you're not happy with peace, Sweet-buns, just say so. Shall I declare war then?
 (*Shall I declare a bird-hunt?*)
 What do I care about bird-hunting, you jerk!
 May the distortive talk of Śiva and Śivā [=Pārvaṭī], engaged in the game [*keli*] point
 you to good fortune.²⁴

In line with her previous verse-openers, Pārvaṭī begins by expressing her exasperation with Śiva and her resolve to break up with him. But when Śiva parries her by now familiar thrust, he does something different: he makes his reply into a challenge for a war of words (implying that she herself has asked for this). Pārvaṭī, for her part, rises to the challenge and begins the game at once. Her distortion of his own call to battle is in itself her opening shot. This is both Pārvaṭī's first act of willful misinterpretation and, as far as we can determine, the first ever instance of counter-distortion in the history of the genre. That is to say, in all cases we have seen so far, both in the putatively earlier *vakroktis* and in the "Fifty Verbal Perversions" itself, the misreading was always one-sided, Śiva being the sole distortionist.

This new give-and-take is underscored by the benediction. For the first (and, with one exception, the only) time, it is neither the god nor the goddess who is invoked, but rather their distortive dialogue itself. Moreover, this mutuality is reinforced by the mention of Śiva and Pārvaṭī by a single term *-śivayoh*, literally 'the two Śiva-s.' Finally, it is in the benediction of this verse alone that the exchange between the two is referred to as a "game" (*keli*).

For Śiva, this game really began in the very first verse. From the start, he has disallowed any threat of leaving or complaint on the part of Pārvaṭī. In fact, he never acknowledges a single thing she says, and responds only to the words he puts in her mouth. As all her attempts to resist his maneuvers only provide more fodder for distortion, Pārvaṭī is sucked into the game regardless of what she says. Had she wished to, she could have simply ignored him and left. Thus her very first

response “What forest? Don’t speak like that!” is itself an act of staving, albeit a grudging one. But she gradually warms to the game and now, by herself engaging in distortion, willingly enters the contest on Śiva’s terms. Śiva’s distortive talk is a trap, although at first it is not recognized as such by Pārvatī. But by her first act of counter-distortion she openly acknowledges Śiva’s snare and allows herself to be caught; from this point on, there are no more threats of departure. In this sense, the distortive duel resembles the frame story of the *Arabian Nights*. For there too, Shahryar’s immanent threat to execute Sheherazade is repeatedly postponed by her storytelling – an act of verbal entrapment. In both cases, an initially reluctant participant is lured into a seemingly temporary exchange which then extends to the point of deferring the crisis indefinitely.

PĀRVATĪ MASTERS THE GAME (VERSES 5–14)

Now that she has willingly joined the contest, Pārvatī actually begins to enjoy herself. At the end of verse five, amused by Śiva’s distortion, she laughs even as she is defeated. This continues the progression we have seen in earlier verses. Beaten at the end of verse one, she is mute and dumbfounded, while her defeat in verse three leaves her silent and smiling. Now she pursues the game with enthusiasm, frequently distorting and counter-distorting (6):

How could I not be disgusted by your half of the body, garlanded with skulls! (*How could I, uncertain of victory, not be disgusted by your half of the body*)
 Silly girl, you’ve broken the armies of the demons in battle. *You’re* uncertain of victory? (*You’re uncertain, O Jayā?*)
 Tell me, why do you all of a sudden address me as Jayā, idiot?!
 May Śaṅkara [=Śiva] – left mute by the Daughter of the Mountain with her distortive talk – purify you.²⁵

Pārvatī once again opens with a complaint about Śiva’s notorious and unattractive features, in this case, his habit of wearing a necklace of skulls. However, in counter-distorting his evasion she introduces a new grievance. Misreading him to address her by the name of her maidservant Jayā, she implies that he has taken Jayā as his lover. This plays on a very common theme in Sanskrit erotic poetry, in which men frequently reveal their infidelity by inadvertently calling their lovers by the wrong name. Here, of course, there is no genuine slip-of-the-tongue on Śiva’s part, but by reading such a slip into his words, Pārvatī cleverly hints at his real fidelity problem, most notably his affair with the river Gaṅgā. From this point on, Śiva’s promiscuity becomes at least as prominent an issue in Pārvatī’s complaints as his appearance.²⁶

Not only does Pārvatī raise a new grievance, she does so in a novel way. She has made all of her previous complaints straightforwardly, without resorting to distortion, only to be easily deflected by Śiva. Now, entering more fully into the game, she uses the distortive technique itself to transform Śiva's own innocent, indeed complimentary words into an inadvertent revelation of an imaginary offense. Most distortions we have seen so far have diverted the words of the previous speaker into the realm of the totally irrelevant: snakes, fruits and birds. But now Pārvatī employs distortive talk to turn the dialogue *toward* a relevant issue rather than away from one. One might term this use a misconstrual an 'indeflection,' as opposed to the earlier 'outdeflection,' for it both avoids the claim of the first speaker and yet allows the second to make a pertinent argument of her or his own.

Śiva too resorts to this technique of indeflection, but significantly with a very different goal in mind. In the above verse, for example, he twists her complaint about his skull-necklace into an admission of insecurity ("*I, uncertain of victory . . .*"), which he then uses as a springboard for complement ("*Silly girl, you've broken the army of the demons in battle. You're uncertain of victory?*"). This reply still effaces Pārvatī's actual grievance, but unlike his references to snakes etc., its meaning is pointed rather than pointless. Still, while she uses indeflection to put through her faultfinding agenda, he uses it to placate her by means of flattery.

This asymmetry of intent in distorting reveals a more basic asymmetry of emotional investment. From the outset, Pārvatī has had a strong critical agenda to press; it is she who finds their relationship intolerable. She is genuinely pained and distressed. Śiva, on the other hand, is quite content with things as they are. He wants only to prevent her from leaving. He is not really concerned about her anguish and is only interested in evading her criticism. He has no other agenda. Whereas Pārvatī is smoldering with resentment, Śiva remains cool and distant throughout. The difference in both strategy and emotional tone between Śiva and Pārvatī is largely gender-driven, and builds on conventional portrayals of the tensions between male and female lovers (to be discussed further below).

As Pārvatī both masters the game and presses her attack more forcefully, Śiva, without losing his cool, is briefly put on the defensive. For the first time it is he who initiates the dialogue. Moreover, he adopts an apologetic tone not seen before. In the opening line of verse seven, he points to the crescent-moon on his head as an attractive element in his appearance – an implicit counter to Pārvatī's ungracious

characterization of his looks. And in verse eight, taking notice of her irritation, he asks to be let off the hook:

Drop this anger now, my good lady; I'm at your feet (*O Vinatā*), hands cupped.²⁷
I'm *not* Vinatā! And anyway, if they've done nothing wrong, why are your hands cuffed?

Silly girl, I didn't say that (*it's stupid I said that*).

Yes, it sure was stupid of you to say it.

May the Three-eyed One – beaten by the Daughter of the Mountain with her clever speech – be favorable to us (*śivāya-astu*).²⁸

Without admitting any guilt or promising to change his ways, Śiva at least acknowledges her anger. But now it is Pārvatī who does not let his message through. This defensive tack on Śiva's part is quite rare in the poem as a whole, but occurs frequently here, precisely when the momentum is on Pārvatī's side. In fact, Śiva's verse-openers are invariably conciliatory and, with one exception, always occur just after Pārvatī has defeated him. And (with the same exception, verse 24), verses which he opens end in a defeat for him.

Although now on the defensive, Śiva remains playful. In verse ten, he twists Pārvatī's protest "I have said nothing of the sort" to mean "there is something that would do my navel good." His response – "tell me, beautiful, what would be good for your navel?" – is in effect a sexual come-on, but one which allows him to portray Pārvatī, rather than himself, as the sexually interested party.²⁹ Her smile at this sly insinuation ends the verse. Yet in the opening line of the very next verse, we find her counter-insinuating that it is really *he* who is sex-obsessed: "I know it is *you*, all hands, who always wants to hold me. Aren't I lucky?"³⁰ Whatever playfulness there is in her tone here, it is offset by the harsh note of sarcasm.

This sarcasm carries over into the following verses. For example (13):

Pretty one, you've always been my beloved idol. (. . . *my beloved, unruly cow, my bee.*)

I'm not your beloved cow, you jerk, I'm not at all unruly, and I'm certainly not a bee!

You are developing such skill (*grass-vine*) in distortive talk (*vakrokti*).

What the hell is this grass-vine?!

May the Three-eyed One – beaten in crooked speech by the goddess – destroy your enemies!³¹

Here her aggression becomes fully manifest not only in her harsh tone but even more so through her indeflection of Śiva's opening flattery into a vile insult. In response Śiva, still on the defensive, compliments her growing mastery of the distortive game, a compliment she validates precisely by deflecting it. And, in fact, Pārvatī is doing very well: Of

the ten verses beginning with verse five, she is victorious in eight. It would seem that she has the upper hand.

THE TIDE TURNS (15–27)

But now Pārvatī's fortune begins to change. While raising basically the same issues against Śiva, she is now less playful and more genuinely aggrieved by his infidelity (15):

I can't even stand to look at your head anymore, with that Gaṅgā falling on it! (. . . *which is a path for birds.*)

My head is certainly not a path for birds, Dearest.

You know what it is that I hate about your head, divine-river flowing over it!

But, Dear, there's no wine-river flowing on my head.

May the Lord's distortive-talk with the Goddess protect you.³²

Here the fidelity issue comes to the fore again, but in a more straightforward manner than typically seen before.³³ Up to this point her complaints about his unfaithfulness have almost all been of the playful variety. She has repeatedly fabricated slips-of-the-tongue, blaming Śiva for addressing her with the names of five different women (Jayā, Bhū, Uṣā, Vinatā, Sānumatī).³⁴ Yet from this point on she no longer makes him call her by the name of another woman.³⁵ However, her references to his relationship with Gaṅgā, never playful and never expressed distortively, continue. Her complaints, precisely because they are expressed without distortion, more clearly reveal her real pain.

Now the tide of battle turns against Pārvatī. Of the thirteen verses beginning with the one just translated, she loses in all but three, including her longest string of losses throughout the poem (20–26). At the same time, it is clear that she is losing her enthusiasm. We no longer find her smiling; indeed, the above mentioned smile in verse ten is her last in the poem. Moreover, Pārvatī seems far less willing to fight back. In the previous nine verses she resorted to distortion eleven times; in the next thirteen, she distorts only five times. She already seems to be tired of playing the game.

And, as she becomes weary, Pārvatī's tactics change in another important way. Significantly, *she* becomes conciliatory for the first time just when we find a marked decrease in her rate of distortions (16):

Why don't you hold your head high, since the knot of your hair is held by the crescent moon? (. . . *by the hand of Uṣā?*)

Silly girl, the knot of my hair is certainly not held by Uṣā.

You jerk, I'm talking about the moon! (. . . *I'm talking to the One who is with Umā.*)

If you left me, I wouldn't be the "One who is with Umā [=Pārvatī]," don't deny it!

May Śiva – striking down the answer of the Daughter of the Mountain – protect you.³⁶

Earlier in the poem (7), when Śiva was first put on the defensive, he tried to dilute Pārvatī's criticism of his appearance by pointing to the attractive crescent-moon on his head, only to have his self-praise deflected. Now, when Pārvatī wishes to be conciliatory she praises the very same crescent-moon, yet Śiva refuses to accept her compliment. This exactly reverses the pattern we saw in verse thirteen. There, she turned his compliment into an insult; here, he misreads her favorable gesture as yet another false accusation against him. Ironically echoing her earlier spurious accusations, Śiva puts into her mouth another baseless charge of infidelity, one which she did not really intend. And, significantly, the name that Śiva uses in this indeflection is one which she herself has already put in his mouth, in one of her manufactured slips-of-the-tongue.³⁷

In contrast to her initial conciliation, her response to his twisting of her words ("you jerk") is quite indignant. Śiva, on the other hand, is perfectly cool. The joking manner in which he refers to her possible departure in his second indeflection ("If you left me . . ."), indicates that her threat of separation – however serious it may once have been – is now almost a laughing matter. Clearly, Śiva has the upper hand now and wins almost every time. The benediction of verse twenty-three comments on the improvement in his fortune, by invoking him as Śiva "whose speech is getting progressively better" (*praguṇottarottaravacāḥ*). With the advantage on his side, Śiva seems almost to toy with her. This, again, is reflected in one of the benedictions (25), where Pārvatī is not merely described as defeated, but rather as deprived or cheated (*vañcita*).

It is at this point that the distortive-talk itself becomes an issue for Pārvatī. Immediately after the verse translated above, she complains: "Lord, intent as I am on distortion, I'm incapable of beating you with words."³⁸ A few verses later (20) she flatters Śiva for his skill in distortive-talk, further suggesting her growing insecurity. Her difficulty in keeping up with him continues to be an issue for Pārvatī (27):

Your glance shines forth with fire. (*It looks like there is a peacock in your eye.*)
 There is *no* peacock in my eye!
 You're extremely enamored of your distortive talk. (*You're enamored of your distortive talk, O you whose limit is unattainable.*)
 True, even Brahma and the others failed to reach my limit,³⁹ since my body is boundless. (*since I am the nurturer of those with no sound.*)
 Why do you nurture those who lack sound?
 May Śivā [Pārvatī] – striking down the reply of Śambhu [=Śiva] – protect you.⁴⁰

She mocks his own love of the game, a further indication of her growing irritation with it. Even though she has the last word here, winning no longer gives her any satisfaction.

PĀRVATĪ ATTEMPTS TO WITHDRAW (28–39)

While familiar themes such as Śiva's repellent appearance and his affair with Gaṅgā continue to be raised, Pārvatī's agenda is increasingly dominated by one central concern – she wants to end the game (28):

Lord of the gods, don't treat me like this! In submission to you I find my greatest pleasure! (*I get my greatest pleasure from your dew.*)
 How can you get pleasure from dew?
 Don't talk like that! Who said anything about dew? (... *about this sharp one?*)
Who is this Sharp One?
 May the Three-eyed one – speaking crookedly to the Daughter of the Mountain – produce blessings (*śivam*) for you.⁴¹

Pārvatī begins with an abject plea for relief. Moreover, in a complete reversal of her marked assertiveness in the poem's opening, she now declares herself fully submissive. Śiva, of course, is deaf to her cry. Oblivious to her suffering, he slyly turns her last remark (“Don't talk like that . . .”) into an insinuation of his own cleverness (“*Who* is this sharp one?”).

Faced with his refusal to let her out of the game, Pārvatī continues to press the issue with increasing agitation (31):

Damn it! I can't come up with an answer good enough to match your super-crooked tongue. (*I'm inferior . . .*)
 What is this inferiority complex of yours? The entire universe bows down to you!
 This, at least, is not a lie. (*This is what the Twin-gods⁴² say.*)
 Why are you bringing up the statements of the Twin-gods?
 May the Wielder of the Pināka-bow – rendering the Daughter of the Mountain speechless – steal your sins.⁴³

Śiva, while still not allowing her complaint to register, now appears to adopt a more conciliatory tone. He indeflects her claim of inadequacy, and aptly uses it as a springboard for a generous comment on her universally revered status. But when Pārvatī, somewhat sarcastically, accepts his compliment (“This, at least, is not a lie.”), Śiva immediately pulls the rug from under her; he does not let her enjoy even this brief moment of contentment. This duplicity on his part is perhaps underscored by the benediction (“May the Wielder . . . *steal* your sins”).

This is where the above comparison with the *Arabian Nights* breaks down. There, once the linguistic gambit has fulfilled its original purpose it is dropped; when Shahryar is fully won over and no longer intends to kill Sheherazade, the *Arabian Nights* comes to an end. Yet here, even when Pārvatī, caught in Śiva's verbal trap, has given up all thoughts of separation and, indeed, openly declared her submission to him, he refuses to let go. Clearly, the purpose of his distortion has changed. What began as a means of keeping Pārvatī from leaving now serves no

purpose other than his pleasure. As Pārvatī begins to suffer more and more under the pressure of his relentless distortive talk, Śiva's pleasure increases. He begins to twist her attempted insults into statements of homage to himself.⁴⁴ His enjoyment begins to seem almost sadistic.

Pārvatī's initial threat to leave Śiva is, at this point, long-forgotten, as is her earlier enthusiasm for the game. Defeated and dejected she is almost solely focused on escaping the trap's tight grip. But Śiva is in no hurry to let go and seems to enjoy every minute of it. By now, Śiva is very much in control of the game; as in the previous section, he has another long string of victories (28–33, 37, 39) and he is almost never put on the defensive.⁴⁵

There is, however, one domain in which Pārvatī enjoys increasing success. Parallel to the main action of the poem Śiva and Pārvatī are depicted as engaged in a game of dice. This subplot appears to invert the basic dynamic of poem. In verse ten she initiates the game by asking him what he would bet. Soon after (14), she declares her inability to play ("I won't play anymore with Śiva, he's too good with the dice"), in a manner strikingly similar to her later protests at the game of distortion itself.⁴⁶ Later on she actually appears to accuse him of cheating (23). From this point on, however, her fortunes rise rapidly. She teases him: "Why do you uselessly prolong the dice-game? You have no money left" (26), and again: "I've stripped you of all your stakes; I can't tell you how much I'm enjoying this game!" (29).⁴⁷ Finally, just after the verse quoted above ("Damn it! I can't come up with an answer . . ." [31]), she declares that she will beat him "in a moment" (*ūrdhvaṃ muhūrtāt*).

The dice-game is a common motif in Śiva-Pārvatī mythology, where it is often the case that Pārvatī wins.⁴⁸ We have already seen this theme dealt with in a strikingly similar manner in the septet ascribed to Mayūra.⁴⁹ There are important differences, however. In the septet, the dice-plot comprised a single block of three verses followed by a block of four foreplay-verses, with no clear transition. Here, on the other hand, the dice-narrative is carefully interwoven with the main plot in more than one way. First, as already noted, the dice-subplot mirrors yet inverts the course of the poem as a whole. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the dice-story feeds back into the main plot. All of Pārvatī's attempts to capitalize on her victories in dice by teasing, themselves run up against the wall of Śiva's relentless distortion; in verses where Pārvatī is winning at dice she always loses the verbal contest.

Significantly, as Pārvatī's distress at the verbal duel increases, the dice-plot disappears, never to be heard of again. At this point, Pārvatī is in total agony and only wants to be released. She again proclaims her inability to play (35), but Śiva does not let her off the hook. She becomes more submissive and more desperate (37):

Your exploits, so famous in the world, drive out all sorrow. (*Your famous exploits whose road is paved . . .*)

Where is this paved road?

I DON'T WANT ANY MORE OF THIS GAME! (*I don't want any more of this monastery.*)

If the house of the monks is not to your liking, then live with me in the cremation-ground. May the Three-eyed one – conquering Pārvatī with his clever speech – burn away your illusions.⁵⁰

Śiva still toys with her rather cruelly, deflecting both her flattery and her cry of despair, but his final words give at least a hint of some future relief. He seems to suggest that they can resume their former relationship, if she is willing to accept him as he is. The mention of the cremation-ground, Śiva's favorite place of residence, evokes the very same gruesome attributes that Pārvatī has been complaining of all along (skulls, snakes etc.). If Pārvatī is to reunite with Śiva, it can only be on his terms.

SURRENDER (40–50)

Pārvatī continues to look for a way out. Since both complaining and complimenting simply draw her further into his web, she tries a new tactic. She attempts to change the subject (40):

The bees are loudly buzzing on Gaṇeśa's cheek, sipping the secretions⁵¹ oozing from his forehead. (*. . . destroying the demons.*)

How could these bees be capable of destroying demons?

Who said anything about demons? (*What would the One with Forehead-secretions say?*)

If Gaṇeśa is the one to speak, ask him.

May the Lord – soundly defeating Umā with his words – ever protect your welfare.⁵²

Pārvatī actively tries to stop the quarrel by turning to an innocuous issue – the attractiveness of their elephant-headed son Gaṇeśa. She attempts to do the same thing again a few verses later, by alluding to her dance performance with her friend Vijayā (44). Śiva, of course, is unswayed by this new tactic, and easily erases her transparent attempts to wriggle out of the contest without admitting defeat.

Pārvatī falls back on her previous, conciliatory approach. Her complaints dwindle almost to nothing. In fact, there is only one unfavorable reference to his appearance – when she offers to throw away the

bloody elephant skin he uses as a cloak (43) – and one distortive fabricated accusation (47), to be discussed below. Compliments, however, are abundant (41, 42, 45, 48, 49, 50), and begin to take on a tone of veneration or even awe: “Your mind is so profound, I can’t get to the bottom of it” (42).⁵³

As is hinted at in this quote, but more directly indicated elsewhere, the ongoing game of distortion continues to be the dominant issue for Pārvaṭī. She again stresses her inability to compete with him in distortion: “I simply can’t give you a reply.” (46)⁵⁴ And later, she finds herself stumped “What part of your speech can I make into a clever reply?” (48)⁵⁵ Furthermore, she lets him know how disturbed she has become: “Your crooked speech unsettles my mind.” (45)⁵⁶

Pārvaṭī makes one last attempt to resist. She wins a rare victory in verse 46, after which Śiva briefly becomes conciliatory and she takes the offensive, both for the last time (47):

Pretty-eyes, I assure you I have no lover other than you now. (. . . *I have Menakā as a lover now.*)

You jerk, you have taken *Menakā* as a lover?!⁵⁷

In what is her final inflection in the poem, Pārvaṭī goes so far as to make Śiva admit a non-existent affair with *Menakā*, her own mother!

Still, after this last expression of hostility, she reverts to submissiveness. In the remaining verses, only Śiva plays the game of distortion; Pārvaṭī merely tries to soothe him (49):

Your glance never lacks the glow of fire. (*Your vision is far from petty, it is celebrated and beneficial to others.*)

True, Pretty-eyes, my ideas are not at all petty, they are praised and serve to benefit others.

I’m not talking about your mind. (*Umā isn’t saying “mind.”*)

You, Umā, have just said that word yourself. How can you deny it?

May the One with matted locks – overpowering the Daughter of the Mountain with his clever speech – steal your sins.⁵⁸

Śiva once again deflects Pārvaṭī’s attempted praise and, in his second deflection, presses the technique of distortion to its limit. He twists her speech into a statement which is not only unintended but also self-contradictory – in effect making her say ‘I’m not saying what I’m now saying.’ This amounts to a kind of psychological attack, questioning her very sanity.

It is at this point that Pārvaṭī finally cracks (50):

Whatever wrong I’ve done you by distortive talk, Blessed one, may it be forgiven now. (*Whatever wrong was done to you by the speech of Mars . . .*).

Why? I’m not the least bit troubled by the speech of the Offspring of the Earth [=Mars].

I said nothing about Earth's son. (. . . *about a bad son.*)
 What's all this talk about a bad son?
 Thus, having defeated Umā, may Śiva – whose hairs stand on end at her embrace
 – lead you to blessings (*śivaprāptaye*).⁵⁹

It appears that before the duel can end, Pārvatī must apologize. This despite the fact that it was Śiva who initiated the game of distortion and has been the prime distortionist all along. But even her apology – her most explicit declaration of submission – is not quite enough. It is deflected by the ultimate act of misconstruction. Recall that in the latter half of the poem, the distortive talk was the primary focus of Pārvatī's agenda. Of course, all her attempts to raise the issue were deflected, and now, reaching the very pinnacle of distortion, Śiva refuses her apology by dissolving the word *vakrokti* (distortive talk) itself; it is now taken to mean the speech (*ukti*) of the planet Mars (*vakra*). In what seems to be a symbolic gesture signaling the end of the poem, Ratnākara finally breaks apart the name of the device which gives his work both its title and its theme.

When even her abject apology fails to extricate her, Pārvatī is left with just one option. Ultimately, the only way out of the trap of verbal distortion is to remain silent. Defeated, she accepts him on his own terms, and simply embraces him. Śiva, now satisfied, is sexually aroused by her passionate embrace. The poem which began with the severing of their asexual cohabitation in a single androgynous body ends in their sexual union.

NOT AN END IN ITSELF

Why has the “Fifty Verbal Perversions” of Ratnākara received almost no attention from modern scholars? One major reason was the notion that the kind of word-play seen here and in similar poems necessarily distracts from, and indeed supplants, the proper ends of literature: psychological depth and character development. The critics' dismissal of *vakrokti*-poetry is itself an epiphenomenon of the discourse on bitextuality (*śleṣa*). The far more prevalent figure of *śleṣa*, in which the speaker or poet intentionally multiplies the meaning by means of the techniques explained above, has been seen as an illegitimate literary device, only used to parade the poet's verbal gymnastics; it can serve no other purpose than itself.⁶⁰ This attitude is based not on a close reading of bitextual poetry, but rather is an uncritical, *a priori* assumption. This animus against *śleṣa* carries over to all figures similarly based on word-play, *vakrokti* included.⁶¹

The above analysis of Ratnākara's "Fifty Verbal Perversions" should be sufficient to disprove the assumption that *vakrokti*, and bitextual poetry more generally, is necessarily inimical to the portrayal of complex characters developed within a plot. It is the modern critics, not Ratnākara, who are unable to see beyond verbal games. In this poem, the linguistic pyrotechnics are not a distraction from plot, emotion and character. Rather, they are the very means of exploring them.

We have seen several ways in which Ratnākara uses the device of distortive talk to explore the evolving relationship between his characters. First, Śiva's choice of verbal distortion as the means to avert Pārvatī's threatened departure itself epitomizes his relationship with her: he will neither let her go nor deal with what she has to say. Second, and more specifically, once the context is begun, the strategies adopted by Śiva and Pārvatī differentiate and deepen our understanding of them. Pārvatī is always trying to make a point, while Śiva's basic tactic is evasion. She distorts far less than he does, usually expressing her criticism directly. And when she does distort, she often uses *indeflection*, returning the conversation to the subjects of her critique, particularly Śiva's infidelity. Śiva *indeflects* too, but for very different ends: conciliating her through compliments, mocking her by the generation of false accusations against himself, and mischievously putting into her mouth praise of himself. These disparate approaches to the distortive exchange reveal the fundamental asymmetry between the two. Śiva's cool and his playful, almost sadistic attitude manifest his essential self-confidence. Pārvatī, on the other hand, is emotionally vulnerable. She is insecure, prone to outbursts of anger, embittered sarcasm, and desperate pleas.

Moreover, Ratnākara uses the device of distortive talk not only to depict his characters in static opposition to one another, but also to explore the development of their relationship. Faced with Śiva's distortion, Pārvatī's initial response is shock. Drawn into the game, she is at first enthusiastic, and for a brief time quite successful. But soon, frustrated by Śiva's victories, she begins to lose patience with the game. Her attempts to bail out become increasingly pathetic and culminate in her unconditional surrender. The development in Śiva's character, while subtle, is no less real. After resourcefully drawing Pārvatī into the *vakrokti*-trap, he seemingly becomes somewhat defensive as she masters the game. Yet, quickly gaining the upper hand, he becomes more playful and ironic. Now, as Pārvatī wilts, Śiva reveals a new side of himself: his refusal to let her off the hook gives his playfulness a

touch of cruelty. It is only when she completely surrenders herself to him that he finally relents.

A remarkably complex pattern of relationship between Ratnākara's characters is thus depicted and developed through their approach to, and continued use of the device of distortive talk. It is clear that the poet's employment of this device in the service of characterization is highly innovative. But does the verbal contest also teach us something new about the characters depicted through it? Does it alter what we know about husbands and wives, gods and devotees, or Śivas and Pārvatīs from other texts of Ratnākara's day?

The relationship between Ratnākara's characters is no doubt underlain by an uneven balance of power. Not only is Śiva strong enough to avert the initial crisis caused by Pārvatī's threatened departure by drawing her into a verbal contest, but it gradually becomes clear that he is also capable of holding her in his trap, against her will, for as long as he likes. In portraying such an asymmetry of power, Ratnākara builds on, yet in some ways transcends the conventional literary representations of several types of relationships. The most readily apparent of these seems to be the poetic portrayal of quarreling lovers.

The lovers' quarrel is hardly a rare theme in Sanskrit *kāvya*. In fact, a vast body of short, single-verse poems or collections thereof is dedicated to the heated exchange between an anonymous male figure (*he*) and his female partner (*she*). Typically, his infidelity is at issue, and quite often the fight takes place just after he has spent the night at the home of another woman, and is being confronted by his lover upon his return. The basic scenario of such poems is highly conventional. He falls to her feet begging forgiveness and acceptance. For a while, she seizes the opportunity to abuse him, both verbally and physically. Yet before long, he is forgiven and embraced, and the two turn to passionate love-making. As furious as the quarrel may initially appear, at least in hindsight it is always understood to have served as foreplay.

The female character (*nāyikā*) may be the simple-minded type, an easy prey to the manipulations of her male partner (*nāyaka*), or, alternatively, a sophisticated woman who cleverly exposes his dishonest conciliatory gestures. This, however, has no effect on the outcome – the invariable victory of the *nāyaka* who manages to win back his *nāyikā* without having to change his ways. Moreover, it is clear that the script of this scenario is known to the actors themselves, and indeed, it is this knowledge more than anything else which allows the *nāyaka* to keep his cool when facing the rage of his *nāyikā*. His apparent submission – placating, complimenting, falling at her feet – merely masks the

fundamental power relations of the sexes as represented in this poetic genre: the *nāyaka* is allowed to have numerous affairs with other women (this even seems to add to his sex appeal), while the *nāyikā*, protest as she may, has no option but to accept him as he is.

Ratnākara's "Fifty Verbal Perversions" begins with a situation very much like the conventional lovers' quarrel, although Pārvatī's threat of leaving Śiva (verse 1) and her statements like "You mean nothing to me" (3), set from the start a tone somewhat harsher than we would usually expect from a *nāyikā*. Still, like all *nāyakas* before him, Śiva is initially put on the defensive – he falls to Pārvatī's feet, clasps his hands in reverence and humiliates himself (8). For a moment the two seem to play their normal *nāyaka-nāyikā* parts – he is the tongue-in-cheek humble type, who does not lose his cool, while she takes the role of the aggressor who nonetheless smiles at his self-abasement and laughs at his sexual insinuations (3, 5, 10). In this context, Pārvatī's manufactured slips of the tongue, as well as genuine complaints about Śiva's infidelity (6, 7, 8, 9, 12), are perfectly appropriate to the conventional mood. A quick, happy and highly erotic resolution of the quarrel, in the light of which both her anger and his humility would appear feigned, seems imminent. This is also what distortive-talk verses such as Viśākhadatta's or the septet ascribed to Mayūra would lead us to expect.

But as the poem progresses, its plot deviates from the course of a typical lovers' quarrel. It becomes less and less playful – indeed, extremely painful for Pārvatī, who incessantly asks for it to be over – and culminates in her total submission. No *nāyikā* is ever depicted to be so grieved, embittered and humbled as Ratnākara's Pārvatī, nor is any *nāyaka* shown to be as psychologically aggressive as his Śiva.

The departure from the normal scenario may partly be rooted in the identity of the poem's lovers. Ratnākara's characters are not, after all, the anonymous 'he' and 'she' of conventional erotic poetry, but the mighty god Śiva and his devoted wife Pārvatī. The relations between god and his devotee have their own script. Often the god takes hold of the devotee against his or her will.⁶² The devotee tries to turn away from the god, but the god never lets go.⁶³ One may love or hate, praise or abuse, desire or be disgusted by the god, but in the end, one must embrace him as he is. All this seems to fit the pattern we have seen in Ratnākara's poem.

Moreover, the relationship between Śiva and Pārvatī as we know it from the *Purāṇas* and other textual sources entails specific elements which should by now seem familiar. One often finds the god and goddess to be initially in their androgynous form (*ardhanariśvara*), just as in

verse one of Ratnākara's poem. This asexual union has to be broken up for the divinities to become engendered and sexually reunite; to become creative and even procreative.⁶⁴ For this union to occur, then, an event of separation and an element of discord seem essential. And, as in the "Fifty Verbal Perversions," the split is initiated by Pārvatī, who commonly complains about Śiva's treatment of her, his dreadful attributes (skulls, snakes, etc.) and his affair with Gaṅgā.⁶⁵

Yet here too there are differences. Poetic representations of the relationship between Śiva and Pārvatī allow Pārvatī a much stronger position than what we see in the "Fifty Verbal Perversions." Thus the famous poem devoted to their love – "The Origin of a Young God" (*Kumārasambhava*) by Kālidāsa – is, as shown by Gary Tubb, really *her* story; *she* is the willful, active subject and he a rather passive object of her passions and actions.⁶⁶ Now Kālidāsa's work deals only with the events leading to the marriage of the divine couple and does not relate their post-marital bickering. Still, when such quarrels are narrated elsewhere, the balance of power is never so one-sided as it is for Ratnākara. For instance, Pārvatī is usually in a position to part with Śiva who can do little to stop her. Once separated, she often seduces him in the guise of an untouchable woman, only to confront him later with proof of his affair with that "other" woman.⁶⁷

Moreover, the balance of power in the game of dice played by Śiva and Pārvatī – which Handelman and Shulman (1997) view as essential to their myth – is starkly at odds with that of the distortive-talk contest narrated by Ratnākara. For whereas in the former it is Śiva who is trapped, stripped (often quite literally) and forced to acknowledge "her superiority, her truthfulness, and his defeat,"⁶⁸ in the latter he has her trapped, and forces *her* to acknowledge *his* superiority, *his* cleverness and *her* defeat. Indeed Śiva's distortive talk erases, and in some sense cancels, Pārvatī's claims of victory in dice. Handelman and Shulman found the dice-game to be central to the dynamics between Śiva and Pārvatī. But in Ratnākara's poem, it is a subplot which only serves to highlight a game with very different rules.

Of course, the god-devotee paradigm is itself modeled on that of male and female lovers as conventionalized in Sanskrit erotic poetry – the constant bickering of the divine couple often resembles that of a human lovers'-quarrel. Where Ratnākara's characterization of his heroes deviates from *both* patterns, it really magnifies and takes to its ultimate limit the power-dynamic which is always there, even if veiled. While women (*nāyikās*, devotees, wives of the god) seem to play an active, even leading role in their contests with men (*nāyakas*, whether

human or divine), they actually enter a game the rules of which favor the latter. Apparently, they stand on an equal footing, and initially they may score a few victories. But ultimately, the moment of their entry into this game is also their moment of defeat.

It is crucial to understand how Ratnākara focuses on language as the main arena of this battle of the sexes. Men use language of a specifically crooked (*vakra*) type as a tool of social, psychological, and erotic interplay, struggle, and uncompromising domination; women allow themselves to get trapped by the playful “silky” quality of what is, nonetheless, ultimately a noose.⁶⁹ It is probably not a coincidence that later *vakrokti*-poets used the device – fit, theoretically, for contested dialogues of any type – solely to meditate on sexual tensions of various types. Thus, in addition to the *nāyaka-nāyikā* and Śiva-Pārvatī verses found in the anthologies, poets created distortive dialogues between rival wives of the same husband (Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī in the *Lakṣmīsarasvatīsamvāda* of Śivarāma), wives of rival husbands (Pārvatī and Lakṣmī in the *Girijākamalāvivāda*), and the ascetic and the beautiful woman who wishes to seduce him (Śuka and Rambhā in the *Rambhāśukasamvāda*).⁷⁰

Ratnākara’s *vakrokti* is thus not only a highly innovative means of portraying well-known characters; it also tells us something new about them and their relationship. Pārvatī, though highly able and artful in her own right, is ultimately unable to prevail. Śiva, on the other hand, proves to be the consummate and tireless master in the use of such speech; the lord of verbal perversions. Far from a jumble of disconnected verses driven by an impulse toward verbal trickery, the *Vakroktipañcāśikā* is arguably one of the most sophisticated explorations of the psychology of a romantic relationship to be found in the history of Sanskrit literature. And what makes this exploration possible is precisely the literary device of distortive talk.⁷¹

NOTES

¹ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* of Ratnākara, 46:

śaktā vaktum ihottaram na khalu te tad dakṣiṇām āśrayeḥ
kiṃcin me vada sarvadasya bhavataḥ kā dakṣiṇā labhyate |
saṃjatā satatam tvam eva saralā nāham latā tāravī
smeraḥ śaṃbhur iti śriyaṃ diśatu vaḥ śailātmajānirjitaḥ ||

² See Bernheimer 1908: 816–817; Warder 1988: 157–158; and Ingalls 1990: 10 (“a small collection of clever verses”). Smith 1985: 294 feels that the verses “have an organic unity which entitles them to be called a single poem.” Yet his notion of the poem’s structure and progression (“the couple alternate from verse to verse in punningly outwitting each other”) is vague.

³ Dasgupta and De 1962: 382; see also p. 335, n. 1.

⁴ See for example the *Kāvyaṣaṣṭakā* of Mammata p. 491; the *Alaṃkārasarvasva* of Ruyyaka p. 200. For Rudraṭa's slightly different take see below.

⁵ See Krishnamachariar 1937: 604 for an estimate of the fifth century, and Warder 1977: 257 and Telang (in his Bombay edition of the *Mudrārākṣasa*, 1884: xix–xx) for the sixth century. For a possibly much later estimate see below.

⁶ *Mudrārākṣasa* of Viśākhadatta, 1 (ed. Kale, p. 7):

dhanyā keyaṃ sthitā te śirasi śaśikalā kiṃ nu nāmaitad asyā
nāmaivāsyās tad etad paricitam api te vismṛtaṃ kasya hetoḥ |
nārīm prcchāmi nenduṃ kathayatu vijayā na pramāṇaṃ yadīndur
devyā nihnotum icchor iti surasaritaṃ śāṭhyam avyād vibhor vaḥ ||

⁷ The septet is quoted anonymously by the twelfth-century Kashmiri theorist Ruyyaka (*Alaṃkārasarvasva*, p. 200). The much later (sixteenth century?) anthology *Subhāṣitāvali* ascribes it to Mayūra (pp. 20–21).

⁸ The Pot-bellied One is an epithet of Gaṇeśa, the son of Śiva and Pārvatī.

⁹ For *vasubhinna-*, read *vasubhir na-*. Cf. the *Alaṃkārasarvasva* of Ruyyaka, p. 201.

¹⁰ *Subhāṣitāvali* of Vallabhadeva 123–129 (alternate readings based on resegmentation are given in square brackets):

vijaye kuśalas tryakṣo na krīḍitum aham anena saha śaktā |
vijaye kuśalo 'smi na tu tryakṣo 'kṣadvayam idam pāṇau ||
kiṃ me durodareṇa prayātu yadi gaṇapatir na te 'bhimataḥ |
kaḥ pradveṣṭi vināyakam ahilokaḥ kiṃ na jānāsi ||
vasurahitena krīḍā bhavatā saha kīdrśi na jihreṣi |
kiṃ vasubhir namato 'mūn surāsūrān eva paśya puraḥ ||
candragrahaṇena vinā nāsmi rame kiṃ pravartayasy evam |
devyai yadi rucitam idam nandinn āhūyatām rāhuḥ ||
hā rāhau [hāra-ahau] nikaṣṭhe sitadamṣṭre bhayakṛti ratiḥ kasya |
yadi necchasi tat tyaktaḥ sampraty evaiṣa hārāhiḥ ||
āropayasi mudhā kiṃ nāham abhijñā tvadānkasya |
divyaṃ varṣasahsraṃ sthitvaivaṃ yuktam abhidhātum ||
itthaṃ paśupatipeśalapāśakalīlāprayuktavakrokṭeh |
harṣavaśataralatārakam ānam avyād bhavānyā vaḥ ||

¹¹ The pervasiveness of this tendency is attested to by the *Subhāṣitāvali* anthology, which contains the only collection of short distortive-talk poems (pp. 18–22). Of the thirty verses assembled there, there are only three single verse and one couplet. The rest consists of blocks of five to eight verses.

¹² For more on the history and development of bitextual poetry see Bronner 1999 and 2000.

¹³ The figure, *vakrokti*, in the specific sense of intentional verbal distortion is to be distinguished from the broader notion of the oblique quality of poetic language which goes by the same name (e.g. *Kāvyaśaṣṭakā* of Bhāmaha 2. 85–87, 93–95; *Kāvyaśaṣṭakā* of Daṇḍin 2.13, 2.360; and the *Vakroktijīvitā* of Kuntaka 1.8). All post-Rudraṭa theorists are clearly aware of these two distinctive senses of *vakrokti*.

¹⁴ *Kāvyaśaṣṭakā* of Rudraṭa 2.15. Cf. *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 13. Rudraṭa divides *vakrokti* into two types. The first, *śleṣa-vakrokti*, consists of distortive dialogue based on bitextuality, such as we have seen above. The second, *kāku-vakrokti*, is based on intonation and is something altogether different in that it does not comprise a dialogue at all. Rather, it entails a monologue in which, by means of intonation, a second, ironic meaning is hinted at. Later theorists, with the possible exception of Ānandavardhana (on whom see note 15 below), would not consider this a type of *vakrokti* at all.

Most of them do allow an intonation-based type of *vakrokti*, but *only* within the frame of a distortive dialogue (e.g. *Kāvyaṣa* of Mammaṭa pp. 491–493). What Rudraṭa calls *kāku-vakrokti* they would consider a case of subordinate suggestion (*guṇībhuta-vyaṅgya dhvani* – cf. *Kāvyaṣa*, pp. 210–211, *Kāvyaṅgīyā* of Hemacandra: 234–237).

¹⁵ *Dhvanyāloka*, pp. 239–240. In connection with his discussion of sound-based suggestion (*śabda-sakti-mūla dhvani*), Anandavardhana cites a verse which does not meet his criteria for inclusion in this category of suggestion, and which he says must be regarded as a case of “*vakrokti* or some such expressed figure” (*vakroktyaḍivācyālamkāra*). The verse appears to be a combination of Rudraṭa’s two categories (see previous note), in that on the one hand it is based on *śleṣa* yet on the other it consists not of a distortive dialogue but of a monologue which ironically hints at a second meaning. Like most distortive-talk verses including Ratnākara’s, the verse culminates in a benediction.

¹⁶ The grounds adduced for the patronage of the earlier Avantivarman are rather thin (cf. Telang, in his introduction to *Mudrārāksasa*, pp. xix–xx, Kale, in his edition, pp. xiii–xiv, and Warder 1977: 257). The Kāshmiri Avantivarman patronized many poets, while the earlier king of the same name is not known to have patronized any. The earliest known mention of the *Mudrārāksasa* is found in Kuntaka’s *Vakroktijīvita*, (c. 950) also from Kashmir, so a date of the mid-ninth century for Viśākhadatta is perfectly possible.

¹⁷ If the septet is accurately ascribed to Mayūra, however, then his would be first mention of the name known to us.

¹⁸ For the longer works see Krishnamachariar 1937: 376–377. As for short sets of *vakrokti* verses see, in addition to the *Subhāṣitavali* section already mentioned, see for example *Sūktimuktāvali* pp. 355–356. Most later *ālamkārikas* cite examples of single-verse *vakroktis*, which also appear incidentally (e.g. an inscription from Khajurāho [*Epigraphia Indica* 1, 1892, p. 140, verse 3]; cf. Desai 1987: 143).

¹⁹ That is, her father, the mountain Himālaya.

²⁰ *Vakroktiṣāṅgīkā* 1:

savyālambanam [savyālam vanam] etad adya bhavato niḥsneha muñcāmy ahaṃ
savyālam vijahīhi sundari vanaṃ niḥsnehatā nāsti me |
maivaṃ vaksyasi kiṃ vanaṃ nanu jālam mūrḍhnā mayaivohyate
vakrokyeti himādrījam avacasam kurvan haraḥ pātu vaḥ ||

²¹ *Vakroktiṣāṅgīkā* 2:

tvaṃ hālāhalabhr̥t karoṣi manaso mūr̥chāṃ mamāliṅgito
hālāṃ naiva bibharmi naiva ca hālam mugdhe katham hālikah |
satyaṃ hālikataiva te samucitā saktasya govāhane
vakrokyeti jito himādrīsutayā smero haraḥ pātu vaḥ ||

²² *Vakroktiṣāṅgīkā* 3:

tvaṃ me nābhimate [menā-abhimate] bhavāmi sutanu śvaśrvā avaśyaṃ mataḥ
sādhūktam bhavatā na me rucita [nameru-cita] ity atra bruve ‘haṃ punaḥ |
mugdhe nāsmi nameruṇā nanu citaḥ prekṣasva māṃ pātu vo
vakrokyeti haro himācalabhuvam smerānanam mukayan ||

²³ But compare Vallabhadeva, who gives an equally viable reading, breaking up the compound as *samdhya-āhitā*, “resentful of Twilight” (also reputed to be one of Śiva’s lovers, cf. O’Flaherty 1973: 226ff.) rather than *samdhya-āhitā*.

²⁴ *Vakroktiṣāṅgīkā* 4:

no samdhyāhitamatsarā tava tanau vatsyāmy ahaṃ samdhinā
na prītāsī varoru cet kathaya tat prastaumi kiṃ vigrahaṃ |
kāryaṃ tena na kiṃcid asti śatha me vīnāṃ graheṇeti vo
diśyāsuh pratibaddhakeliśivayoḥ śreyāṃsi vakroktayaḥ ||

(Reading *diśyāsuh* for *diśyād vaḥ* in the fourth line, cf. Bernheimer, p. 819.)

²⁵ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 6:

nāsūyāmy ahaṃ asthirājaya [asthirā jaya] iha tvaddehabhāge kathaṃ
mugdhe saṃyugabhagnadānavagaṇā naiva sthirā tvam jaye |
mūdheneva jayā vadeti bhavatākasmāt kiṃ āmantryate
vakroktyeti punātu vo giribhuvā mūkīkṛtaḥ śaṃkaraḥ ||

²⁶ References to Śiva's unattractive features are found in verses: 2, 5, 6, 11(?), 20, 21, 30, 33, 36, 39, 43. Complaints about his infidelity appear in 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, 18, 19, 34, 36, 38 and 47.

²⁷ Literally, clasped together to form an *añjali*, a traditional gesture of supplication or reverence.

²⁸ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 8:

kopaṃ saṃprati muñca devi vinate mayy eṣa baddho 'ñjalir
naivāhaṃ vinatā nirāgasam amuṃ badhnāsi kiṃ nu añjalim |
mugdhe noktam [mugdhe-na-uktam] idaṃ mayā sphuṭam idaṃ tvam mugdha itthaṃ
bruvan
sūkyā śailabhuvā vinirjita iti tryakṣaḥ śivāyāstu naḥ ||

²⁹ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 10:

... nābhihitavaty asmīti kiṃ bhāṣase | syāt kiṃ sundari nābhaye vada hitaṃ yat te
'sti ...

³⁰ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 11:

tvām āliṅgitaṃ adṛtaṃ bahubhujam jānāmi dhanyaṃ cirād ātmānaṃ ...

³¹ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 13:

iṣṭā gauravaśalinī tvam adhikaṃ tanvaṅgi me sarvadā
neṣṭāhaṃ śatha gauḥ kadācid avasā naivalinī ca kvacit |
vakroktau tava jṛmbhate kuśalatā syād darbhavallyātra kiṃ
devyā vo 'nrjuvākyanirjita iti tryakṣaḥ kṣiṇotu dviṣaḥ ||

³² *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 15:

no śaktāsmi patatrimārgam adhunā mūrdhānam etaṃ tava
draṣṭuṃ naiva patatrināṃ priyatame mārgo 'sti mūrdhā kvacit |
nanv etad viḡalatsurāpagam ahaṃ dveṣmi priye no surā-
nady asmin galatīti vakram uditam devyā vibhoḥ pātu vaḥ ||

³³ There is one prior verse (10) in which she directly expresses her jealousy of Gaṅgā. There, however, her tone is lighter and she responds to his outdeflection with a playful distortion of her own.

³⁴ Jayā is referred to in verse 6, Bhū and Uṣā in 7, Vinatā in 8 and Sānumatī in 12.

³⁵ There are three more instances where Pārvatī inflects to suggest Śiva's promiscuity. Two of these are generic and mention no names (19, 38). For the third (47) see below.

³⁶ *Vakroktipañcāśikā* 16:

uccaiḥ kiṃ na dadhāsy uṣākarakṛte keśagrahe tvam śiro
mugdhe nātra kṛtaḥ kacagraha uṣāhastena me kutracit |
somaṃ vacmi śaṭha tvayā virahitaḥ somo 'smi nety anyathā
mā brūhīti hatottarāṃ agabhuvam kurvan haraḥ pātu vaḥ ||

³⁷ This occurs in verse seven, precisely in deflecting Śiva's own reference to the moon.

³⁸ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 17: jetum nātha na vakratāvahitayā śakyo girā tvam mayā ...

³⁹ A reference to the story of Brahma's and Viṣṇu's inability to find the top and bottom of Śiva's infinitely long phallus.

⁴⁰ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 27:

drṣtis te śikhinā vibhāti ghaṭitā drṣtau na barhī kvacid
vakroktir bhavato nitāntadayitā ['nīta-anta dayitā] satyam mamānto gataḥ |
na brahmādibhir apy apāravapuṣaḥ kiṃ śabdaśūnyān vibho
puṣṇāsīti hattotaram vidadhatī śambhuṃ śivā pātu vaḥ ||

⁴¹ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 28:

tenaivaṃ tridaśeśa māṃ na kuruṣe vaśyā yato ['vaśyāyato] 'haṃ tava
prāpta prītim anuttamāṃ priyatame 'vaśyāyapṛītiḥ kutaḥ |
maivaṃ brūhi nigadyate 'tra na niśātoyaṃ [niśāto 'yam] niśātaḥ sa kaḥ
śaṃsan vakram iti kṣamādharaśutāṃ tryakṣaḥ śivaṃ vaḥ kriyāt ||

⁴² A pair of gods commonly known as the Aśvins.

⁴³ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 31:

hī nāham [hīnā-aham] bhavato 'tivakravacaso dātum pravīṇottaram
kā te sundari hīnatā nanu natā sarvā triloky eva te |
nāsatyoktir iyam kuto 'tra ghatate dasrābhidhānāgamo
muṣṇitād agham adrijāṃ avacasam kurvan pinākīti vaḥ ||

(Reading *-vacaso* for *-vacasā* in the first *pāda*, and *adrijāṃ* for the clearly mistaken *ādrijāṃ* in the fourth.)

⁴⁴ See 27 and 28 above, and verse 30 twice.

⁴⁵ In the latter half of the poem Śiva's openers – the only occasions where he gets defensive – diminish almost to nothing (24, 38, 47). So rare do these become that the poet uses a special marker to warn the reader that counter to expectations, Śiva is the initial speaker: All three verses begin with the same vocative epithet addressed to Pārvatī, *subhrūḥ* (you with the beautiful brows).

⁴⁶ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 14: no dīvyāmi sahāmunāham adhunā dyūte pravīṇo haraḥ ...

⁴⁷ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 26: vyartham kiṃ tanuṣe durodaram idam na svāpateyam tava ...; 29: kṛtvā tvām paṇavañcitam nahī mayā dyūtena na prīyate ...

⁴⁸ "In the texts we have examined, Śiva does not, and apparently cannot, win a game. He can, however, win a single round." (Handelman and Shulman 1997: 25)

⁴⁹ Verse 1 of the septet closely parallels the opening line of Ratnākara's verse 14; verse 3 resembles 26.

⁵⁰ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 37:

khyātam sajjagatīha [sajja-gati-īha] kiṃ nu caritam viṣvaginodīva te
sajjāsti kva gatiḥ na me 'tra rucitaḥ kaścid vihāraḥ kvacit |
neṣṭam te jinasadma ced vasa tataḥ sārḍham śmaśāne mayā
māyāṃ vo dahatād iti trinayanah sūktyā jayan pārvatīm ||

⁵¹ The rut, or ichor, which flows from the temples of male elephants in the mating season is considered a sign of beauty and virility.

⁵² *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 40:

gaṇḍe dānavanāśīno [dānava-nāśīno] gaṇapateḥ kurvanti kolāhalaṃ
rolambā danusūnūnāśānavidhau saktāḥ syur ete katham |
brūyāt kaḥ khalu dānavān gajamukhaḥ śamsaty asau prcchyatām
uktyā sādhy iti nityam astu kuśalāyomāṃ jayan vo vibhuḥ ||

⁵³ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 42: durgāhaṃ bhavato ‘vagāhyata idaṃ cetaḥ katham vā mayā

...

⁵⁴ This is a somewhat more literal rendering of the phrase translated in the prologue to this paper as “What have I left to say?” (śaktā vaktum ihottaraṃ na khalu te).

⁵⁵ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 48: ... vaktum te kuśalā kayā tava girā syāṃ ...

⁵⁶ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 45: ... uktis te viṣamā tanoti manasaḥ kṣobhaṃ ...

⁵⁷ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 47:

subhrūḥ sampratī me na kāpi[menakā-api] dayitā tvatto mamāyaṃ grahaḥ
prāptā te śāṭha menakā dayitatām ...

⁵⁸ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 49:

drṣtis te na kṛśānutāparakitā [kṛśā nutā parahitā] satyaṃ na tanvī stutā
subhrūr anyahitā ca me matir api prajñocyate no mayā [na-umayā] |
khyātvaiva tvam umātmanāsy abhīhitam kasmād apahnūyate
muṣṇitād agham adrijam abhibhavan sūktyā kapardīti vaḥ ||

⁵⁹ *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 50:

vakroktya yad asatkrto ‘si bhagavaṃs tat kṣamyatām me ‘dhunā
kasmād bhaumagirā na kheditamanā noktaḥ kuputro mayā |
syāt kiṃ sundarī kutsitena tanayenoktena jītvety umāṃ
stād vas tatparirambhasāndrapulakaḥ śambhuḥ śivaprāptaye ||

⁶⁰ See Bronner 1990: 10–20.

⁶¹ See also Smith 1985: 7–13, for the unfavorable estimate of Ratnākara’s larger poem, the *Haravijaya*.

⁶² Cf., for example, Shulman 1990: xv–xvii.

⁶³ See Handelman and Shulman 1997: 173–174.

⁶⁴ As hinted in Ratnākara’s last verse; “What’s all this talk about a bad son?” – *Vakroktipāñcāśikā* 50, see above. On the need for Śiva and Pārvatī to divide in order to unite sexually, cf. O’Flaherty 1980: 318–320.

⁶⁵ See for instance *Matsyapurāṇa* 154ff.; cf. Courtright 1985: 66–68; cf. Handelman and Shulman 1997: 156.

⁶⁶ Tubb 1984: 22ff.

⁶⁷ See for example *Skandapurāṇa* 1.1.34–35; cf. Handelman and Shulman 1997: 17–20.

⁶⁸ Handelman and Shulman 1997: 110.

⁶⁹ To paraphrase *peśalapāśaka*, from at the end of the septet ascribed to Mayūra and discussed above.

⁷⁰ See above, note 18.

⁷¹ We are grateful to Sheldon Pollock, Edith McCrea, Galila Spharim, and Catherine Rottenberg for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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