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## The Holy Ghoul and Lalla: Bhakti and Medieval Poetics

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Bard

The Holy Ghoul and Lalla:  
Bhakti and Medieval Poetics

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies at  
Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York December 2016



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“What kind of cartography best suits the mapping of dharma and bhakti across this large terrain?”<sup>1</sup> - *Dharma, Hildebeitel*.

### Introduction: Perspective and Interpretation in Regards to *Bhakti* and Sanskrit

Within the field of western scholarship on the literature of Medieval India, *bhakti* (participation/devotion) poems, composed between the 6th and 18th centuries CE, and the biographical or hagiographical literature on the lives of the poet-saints to whom the poems are attributed, have been analyzed through distinct interpretive perspectives as the field progresses. Early 20th century western scholarship on *bhakti* such as the 1910 article by George A. Grierson in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, in which he describes a process by which ‘outsiders’ to the priestly class conceived of a monotheistic religion of adoration and passion which departed from the pantheistic<sup>2</sup> tradition of the Brahmin priests,<sup>3</sup> or famed sanskritist M. Monier-Williams (1819-1899), who compared the *bhakti* tradition to protestant reform within Christian history,<sup>4</sup> presented *bhakti* as an individual layman’s devotion practice concerned with mysticism and spiritual knowledge which broke from the priestly and Vedic traditions of the upper classes in Hindu society.

As Karen Pechilis notes in her book, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (1999), Grierson categorized *bhakti* poems as passionate and unbridled departures from the perfected standard of orthodox Sanskrit compositions (such as the Vedas and later epic poems and law codes), and as a specifically heterodox movement of religious and social reformation which broke from the strictures of the Hindu tradition.<sup>5</sup> In particular, this first wave of

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<sup>1</sup> *Dharma*, 128.

<sup>2</sup> The worship of more than one god; the belief that the universe is a manifestation of god.

<sup>3</sup> *Embodiment of Bhakti*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Embodiment of Bhakti*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Embodiment of Bhakti*, 14.

scholarship highlighted 'peripheral' *bhakti* practices as personal, emotive, and often passionate experiences of god unmediated by class or gender in comparison to the 'central' Brahmin tradition which emphasized the religious authority of elite males. While *bhakti* poets composed devotional verses which appeared to oppose central traditions, and although the subversion of gender roles and class identities became dominant themes throughout *bhakti*, there remain strong ties between *bhakti* and the Sanskrit texts which Grierson and others claimed that *bhakti* opposed. While the ties between *bhakti* and Sanskrit often took on unconventional appearances which seemed to contradict elements of the Brahmin tradition, they were formed in conversation with and not as a break from Brahmin and Sanskrit practice.

While Pechilis discusses how both Grierson and Monier-Williams relied upon Christian frameworks to establish their analysis on the *bhakti* tradition, scholars from the end of the twentieth century, such as Karine Schomer, began to move beyond the comparisons between *bhakti* and Christian history, yet maintained the orthodox-heterodox paradigm which reified Brahmin religious practices as central and *bhakti* as peripheral. Specifically, Karine Schomer continued this interpretive trend in the introduction to the 1987 book, *The Sants*, in which she argued that *bhakti* traditions replaced the spiritual leadership of the Brahmin priests who were knowledgeable about ritual and Sanskrit scriptures. Schomer goes on to say that through *bhakti*, salvation became a prerogative to which everyone could aspire and not simply a religious preoccupation for the men from the upper classes. Additionally, Schomer characterized *bhakti* as a shift in religious focus from ritual observance, the performance of prescribed duties, and ascetic withdrawal in search

for spiritual knowledge, to any practice that places devotion at the heart of religious cultivation.

While Grierson focused on the themes of what he saw as adoration<sup>6</sup> in *bhakti*, Schomer argued that *bhakti* conceived of devotion to a supreme but personal god. Where Grierson prescribed a monotheistic framework beneath his interpretation of *bhakti*, Schomer argued that *bhakti* cultivated a loving relationship between the individual and the divine without specifically mandating for a monotheistic reading of the *bhakti* tradition.<sup>7</sup> Although Schomer moved beyond the perspective that both Grierson and Monier-Williams present, that *bhakti* stands as a primary source for personalized monotheistic religious practices, she confirmed their analysis of *bhakti* as a tradition initiated by those on the 'outside' of what Grierson terms the 'orthodox' Brahmin traditions and Sanskrit texts. While Schomer recognized that there were multiple differences between specific *bhakti* groups, such as the worship of Visnu and Siva respectively, these groups did not deny the existence of other gods yet they did focus primarily on devotion to a single god. From this conceptualization of *bhakti* by scholars writing roughly 100 years apart, it becomes evident that this interpretive lens became a dominant position within the academic study of *bhakti* for quite some time. As we can see from the way *bhakti* plays out in the works of scholars like Grierson and Schomer, slight variations in their interpretations of *bhakti* practice were undercut by the same fundamental assumptions about *bhakti* and religious reform.

Contemporary scholars Wendy Doniger and Karen Pechilis have argued against this kind of interpretation perpetuated by Schomer, which presents the relationship between *bhakti* and the Sanskrit literary 'cornerstones' of the Hindu tradition as one of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sants*, 1.



rejection. While *bhakti* does rely on the use of antinomian expressions of devotion and seemingly profane devotional imagery and practices--characterized by emotive or passionate outbursts of devotion poetry which are reflected within the behavior of the saints as well-- both Doniger and Pechilis acknowledge how the formulation of *bhakti* cannot be separated from central ontologies within the Hindu Sanskrit canon. In the interpretation argued by Pechilis and Doniger, *bhakti* becomes conceptualized not simply as a rejection of Sanskritic and Brahmin ideals, even though *bhakti* does emphasize different forms of religious practice and poetics. Through the lens of these two interpretive groupings, the relationship between *bhakti* and the 'central' Brahmin tradition becomes mediated through the works of these scholars. Consequently, the first part of this project attempts to clarify the mediation of *bhakti* by relying not on the secondary source material which analyzes *bhakti*, but on the poems around which *bhakti* is built.

Throughout the course of this project, my endeavour is to lay out the complicated dialectic between the categories and judgments which articulate the sacred and profane in regards to religious practice and *dharma* as they are seen within the Sanskrit canon, and to relate those religious ideals to the formation and the ongoing composition of *bhakti* poems throughout the 1st millennium CE. Although this extensive period within Indian history presents numerous *bhakti* participants or poets, both male and female from both lower and upper classes, this project will primarily examine two female poet-saints from the beginning and end of the *bhakti* period (or swerve,<sup>8</sup> as Alf Hiltebeitel calls it). These poets, Karaikkal Ammaiyar from 6th century Tamil Nadu and Lalla from 14th century Kashmir, not only represent different regional practices of *bhakti* as they lived in different

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<sup>8</sup> *Dharma*, 126.

geographic locations, but they also exemplified key aspects in the formation of *bhakti* poetics such as the subsumption of religious and literary themes from both the Sanskrit canon as well as from regional poetics.

At the interstices of many Sanskrit texts and *bhakti*, seemingly contradictory imaginations of the sacred and the profane juxtapose and subvert the religious practices substantiated by the other. While Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas and *The Laws of Manu* emphasized the importance of the upper classes and the religious authority of men, the Sanskrit texts the *Mahabharata* and the *Kama Sutra* problematized the same topics. Although *bhakti* was initially qualified as a practice which was more freely associated with all classes and genders, perhaps because a majority of *bhakti* saints were women, these contradictions were primarily noted between comparisons of *bhakti* to *The Laws of Manu*. Interestingly, many of the contradictions positioned amongst different Sanskrit texts were ignored by the same scholars who focused so closely on the differences between *bhakti* poetics and Sanskrit literature. In order to investigate these differences, a portion of this project sets out to establish its own interpretive framework for tracing the connections and disruptions amongst Sanskrit texts and between Sanskrit and *bhakti*.

The framework which I adopt specifically for this project revolves around (1) the conceptualization of the female literary voice within *bhakti* poetics and (2) seeks to examine the literary moves employed within both *bhakti* poems and Sanskrit texts in regards to the conditions of, and qualifications for, the evaluation of *bhakti* in terms of the sacred and profane. Additionally, this project relies on elements of gender in order to trace the claims that both literatures make about the religious authority of the female voice within devotion poetics. And it relates the use of genderized voices within *bhakti* poems to

the larger literary subversion tactics present throughout the genre of *bhakti*--tracing them to similar narratives of subversion within the Sanskrit canon. Although this framework goes against the analysis of *bhakti* which both Grierson and Schomer present--the idea that *bhakti* encapsulates a radical and emotive break from tradition, it does not fully dismiss the emotive elements that Grierson and Schomer fixated on in their own work. However, this project does reposition these characteristics in relation to key narratives within Sanskrit texts.

The Sanskrit texts to which I refer in this project, the Vedas, the epic poems the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, *The Laws of Manu* and the *Kama Sutra*, can be differentiated between two Sanskrit genres, *smriti* "to remember", which refers to human knowledge that is passed down through teaching, and *shruti* "to hear", which refers to unchanging knowledge that has always existed.<sup>9</sup> While the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Laws of Manu*, and *Kama Sutra* were all composed by human authors, and are therefore considered to be representations of human understanding, the Vedas originate not from human reflection but from eternal knowledge that is beyond human thought.<sup>10</sup> Doniger writes: "*smriti* designates a traditional sacred text, in contrast with *sruti*, revelation (i.e. the Veda)."<sup>11</sup> Aside from these genre distinctions, Wendy Doniger, in her book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), discusses what little is known about the history of such texts.

A brief history of these texts reveals that the Vedas are comprised of four books: the *Rig Veda*, "*Knowledge of Verses*," which was composed between 1700-1500 BCE by nomads in the Punjab region of what is today north India and Pakistan, and the *Yajur Veda*,

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<sup>9</sup> *Sanskrit-English*, 1101.

<sup>10</sup> *The Hindus*, 218.

<sup>11</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, xviii.

“*Knowledge of Sacrifice*,” *Sama Veda*, “*Knowledge of Songs*,” and *Atharva Veda*, “*Knowledge of the Fire Priest*,” which were composed between 1200-900 BCE by the Vedic people who have many contradictory histories.<sup>12</sup> The later epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, was composed between 300 BCE-300 CE, and epic poem, the *Ramayana*, was composed between 200 BCE-200 CE. Similarly, seminal law codes such as *The Laws of Manu*, which became widely recognized between the third and fifth centuries (but was probably composed earlier around 100 CE<sup>13</sup>), and the *Kama Sutra*, composed sometime in the third century,<sup>14</sup> appeared during roughly the same period in the early centuries of the first millennium.

Although this project frequently uses words such as ‘text,’ ‘literary,’ ‘literature,’ and ‘composition,’ it is important to note that most if not all of the texts addressed throughout this project began as orally transmitted songs or verses which were preserved through recitation. In the case of Sanskrit and *bhakti*, both literatures were initially performed and recited until being written down, usually long after their initial composition. In the case of Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla, their compositions were remembered through the writing of biographical literature composed after their deaths. These biographies, while embodying the spirit of the saints’ historical influence and preserving their poems, presented the saints through the lens of the biographer’s interpretive perspective.

To this end, I discuss how the the biographies of both Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla injected or framed their religious legacies with particular narratives on traditional *dharma* themes which at times contradicted what the poets said about themselves and their

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<sup>12</sup> I will not give a full history of the origins of the Vedic people here, because their history remains decidedly complex and unresolved. See Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, chap 4, for a detailed discussion of the dominant theories on Vedic authorship.

<sup>13</sup> *The Law Code of Manu*, xvi.

<sup>14</sup> *The Kama Sutra: It Isn't All About Sex*, 18.

practice within the scope of their own poetry. This line of inquiry within my own project can be traced directly to the historian and medieval scholar Caroline Bynum, whose book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987), examines the interpretive contradictions within the religious literatures of medieval Europe; focusing in particular on women's devotion writing.

In her book, Bynum argues that in order to understand the devotion practice set out by individual female saints within the larger Christian tradition, their own writing must be the primary entrance for analysis. While the poetry of both Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla was passed down through their biographies, I turn specifically to analysis of their poems, removed from the framing that their biography offers, in order to make claims about *bhakti* as it is presented in both saints' poetry. Like Bynum, I compare my findings to the framing that their biographer's present, yet I treat these pre-modern biographers in the same way that I treat Grierson and Schomer's scholastic conceptions of *bhakti*: as secondary source material which mediates and times obscures the reading of *bhakti* poems.

In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Bynum specifically argues that the female body itself became a space in which women practiced devotion, often through ritual acts of eucharistic eating and extreme fasting. While these practices were often seen as taboo both within the church as well as within daily life, Bynum argued that the religious figures who embodied such practices did in fact maintain a dynamic theological conversation with central church ideas about the purpose of Christ's death on the cross. In this light, Bynum's discourse on the female body as a space for devotion and prayer in medieval Europe actively contradicts the degradation of the female body prevalent in much of the writing from Christian male

authors of the same period. Bynum writes, “Most of our information on late medieval women comes from male biographers and chroniclers. The problem of perspective is thus acute. Some of the stories men loved to tell about women reflected not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred.”<sup>15</sup> Although Bynum writes specifically about medieval Christianity, her insights on the female body and the feminine literary voice, as well as the interpretive issues surrounding the legacy of female authors who were primarily remembered through historical texts created by men, remains a central issue for interpreting the religious practice of the poet-saints of the *bhakti* tradition, such as Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār and Lalla. Although I assume a similar position to Bynum in the way I regard secondary writing about *bhakti*, I do not use her entire argument, which would be to further perpetuate the analytical glosses and generalizations made about *bhakti* in academic writing. Instead, I take my cue from Pechilis.

Although in her book *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, Pechilis criticizes the Christian framework which Grierson suggests, in her book later book *Interpreting Devotion* (2012), Pechilis uses Bynum’s analysis to foreground her own analytical work on Karaikkal Ammaiyar. While Pechilis suggests similarities between Bynum’s argument and her own approach to the study of *bhakti* poetry, she departs from Bynum’s conclusion regarding the christian female saint’s body as a realm of unmediated devotion. Where medieval christian saints, such as Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), maintained a sense of religious authority within themselves through rejecting traditional marriage and engaging in bodily practices such as extreme fasting, Pechilis does not go as far as to impose Bynum’s conclusion onto Karaikkal Ammaiyar. While Pechilis approves of Bynum’s interpretive move to place the

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<sup>15</sup> *Holy Feast*, 28.

writing of female religious figures at the center of any analysis on them, Pechilis does not surface with an analysis of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's physicality along the lines that Bynum suggests. For Pechilis, this becomes particularly important in establishing Karaikkal Ammaiyar's legacy as a female saint, because within the poems attributed to her she makes almost no reference to her own body or her gender. Instead, details on her life are supplied by later biographers who emphasize both her saintliness as well as her feminine attributes - even while her poems themselves mention little about them.

Like Pechilis, I justify using Bynum's discussion as a springboard within my own project because both Lalla as well as Karaikkal Ammaiyar assume positions within later religious biography that at times appear antithetical to their own poetry. By placing both Lalla's and Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry at the center of my analysis, I employ the interpretive perspective supported by both Pechilis as well as Bynum as I contradict various ideas set forth by previous scholars within the field as well as ideas set forth their pre-modern biographers. To this end, I not only trace themes found in *bhakti* to the Sanskrit texts which they were initially characterized as refusing, and I also examine the mediation of *bhakti* that occurs within *bhakti* by comparing the biographies of both Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla to their poetry.

While both Pechilis and Bynum refer to saint's biography as a genre of religious literature chronicling the lives and religious practices of saints, they do not use the word as it is often used today. Where modern biography refers to the story of an individual written by someone else, and usually holds to objective standards of historical veracity, the pre-modern biographical literature to which both Bynum and Pechilis refer includes both miraculous narratives as well as social ideals which cannot be attributed directly to Lalla or

Karaikkal Ammaiyar. For Lalla especially, who becomes memorialized through documents composed around two hundred years after her death, her legacy was maintained not from within her own tradition but through later muslim hagiography. Although the genre of hagiography specifically refers to saint's biography as a genre which idealizes and idolizes its subject, Pechilis uses only the word biography to refer to the literature on Karaikkal Ammaiyar.

Aside from this distinction between biography and hagiography, both Pechilis and Norman Cutler, who wrote about Karaikkal Ammaiyar, as well as scholars Ranjit Hoskote, Durre Ahmed and Jayalal Kaul, who wrote about Lalla, discuss not only the poetry attributed to each saint but also the way in which their religious legacies become remembered through narratives composed after their deaths. For both Lalla and Karaikkal Ammaiyar, historiography, or the analysis of the writing of historical texts, remains a central element in interpreting and accessing their poems. Without such texts, the stories about both figures as well as their compositions, would have been lost. However, the biographical narratives which preserved their legacies often reflected the interests of the biographer over those of the poet. Through biography, what is known about both Lalla and Karaikkal Ammaiyar, as well as the interpretation of their poems, become mediated through the imperative of their biographers, who contextualized their poems through specific *dharma* narratives which shadow their legacies. While these narratives supported the establishment of their positions as poet-saints, they also normalized and subsumed the radical, unconventional, and profane elements within their poems, shaping them into religious frameworks which reflected the biographer's motivations more than the poet's interests.



While devotion can generally be identified as a category of practice in many of the world's religious traditions, *bhakti* in particular emphasized both an emotional and an intellectual participation between the devotee (*bhakta*) and god. And it was primarily this intellection that the first wave scholars of *bhakti*, such as Grierson, Monier-Williams, and then later Schomer, neglected. While the Brahmin tradition of ritual and Vedic sacrifice accentuated the priest's role as a mediator between the public and god, emotive range within *bhakti* practice became conflated with personal and unmediated religious experiences and participation with the divine. In *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, Pechilis writes:

The tension in bhakti is between emotion and intellection: emotion [to] reaffirm the social context and temporal freedom, intellection to ground bhakti religious experience in a thoughtful, conscious approach. This tension was missed by orientalist scholars, who even in the earliest definitions stressed what they viewed as the uncontrolled emotion of bhakti[...] But the orientalists were mistaken in their analysis; in bhakti texts, emotion is freed from social and temporal constraints, not moral principles.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Pechilis argues that the initial scholarship on *bhakti* overlooked the thematic roots that it maintained with Vedic ethics and morals. While *bhakti* obsessed over passionate displays of religious visions and the oral recitation of devotion poems in public spaces, practices which contradicted the privacy of Brahmin ritual and the elite study of Sanskrit, Pechilis shows that this relationship was not primarily one of rejection, but was rather a form of literary reconceptualization within the compositions by *bhakti* saints. Although these reconceptualizations within *bhakti* appeared to signal a break from earlier Sanskrit tropes, many of the narratives which were central within Sanskrit texts became remodeled in *bhakti*.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 20.

While scholars like Grierson emphasized the display of personal emotions throughout *bhakti* as a genre, they overlooked how these emotional sentiments were performed for the public while Vedic ritual was performed in private. Although *bhakti* presents emotive experiences as thematic material, because these personal experiences are shared in a public space, on what grounds are they judged as personal? Along with this kind of gloss or mischaracterization about *bhakti* thematics of emotion, I view similarly generalized claims that *bhakti* transcends gender as an additional mischaracterization of *bhakti*.

Exactly because *bhakti* became a vehicle for the feminine literary voice, which was seen as a contradiction to the dominance of the male literary voice in Sanskrit texts, rather than proving that *bhakti* practice existed beyond gender identification, it is exactly because of the repeated use of feminized experiences and the feminine perspective which ties *bhakti* to gender. Accordingly, I discuss the function of the feminine literary voice within *bhakti* poetics and poet-saint biographies, tracing how this rhetoric of the feminine has been both contested and affirmed across the geography of classical Sanskrit texts. While the *Kama Sutra*, and the *Mahabharata* constructed literary scenarios in which *bhakti* transgressed the peripheries of *dharma*, modeling a framework for the later transgression of the feminine voice from traditional roles, *The Laws of Manu* upheld dominant social systems and conceptions of women's religious practice compared to Brahmin tradition and *dharma* or 'right action.' While *bhakti* was also seen as a tradition which transcended class, many of the poet-saints from the *bhakti* tradition were themselves born into the Brahmin class and continued to travel within the educated circles throughout their lives as poets. Although *bhakti* poems present divine scenarios which diverged from Sanskritic

imaginings of the sacred, the *bhakti* genre as a whole does not entirely reject its Sanskrit progenitors as they keep in constant conversation with them. This conversation takes on many forms and operates on multiple levels within both literary as well as social circles and often involves methods of subversion.

Additionally, the conversational nature of *bhakti* extends through both the oral performance setting by which these poems were publicly circulated, as well as through conversational templates within the poems themselves. While Vedic ritual and the Brahmin class conserved religious authority amongst themselves and practiced inside a closed circuit of their peers, *bhakti* initiated points of connection between the poet or the devotee and others. In this respect, Grierson and Schomer got *bhakti* right. *Bhakti* perpetuates religious practices which are opposite or inverted variations on Sanskritic narratives and Brahmin practices. Pechilis writes:

In their *bhakti* poems, the poets play with the conventions of both social behavior and poetry itself, in the interest of transforming aspects of the known world (for example, social mores and literary works) into a world that puts God at the center of existence and participation in God at the center of human life.<sup>17</sup>

### 1. Understanding the Etymology and Translation of *Bhakti* and *Dharma*

During the seventh through fourteenth centuries across India and the surrounding region of Kashmir, the *bhakti* religious practice emerged in both the behavior of *bhakti* poet-saints as well as in their compositions of religious poetry. Characterized by a central tradition of vernacular composition, *bhakti* sentiments, both behavioral and poetic, challenged central elements of Brahmin social prescriptions and also repeated existing

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<sup>17</sup> *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 23.

Sanskrit narratives regarding ethics and religion (*dharma*). While the use of emotive and theologically charged language, and the use of the feminine literary voice, remain notable themes across the *bhakti* poems of various authors, unanimous and uniform scholastic claims about the nature of *bhakti* rarely hold up to unmediated readings of specific poems or poets. Although *bhakti* was initially studied as an emotive and passionate break from central Brahmin traditions, the poems composed by the poet-saints Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla, each turn their specific use of imagery which breaks with tradition toward a devotional end which deeply maintains traditional relationships between god and the human devotee (*bhakta*). While *bhakti* often appears oppositional, the subversive narratives that it reframes from Sanskrit texts shows that it maintains a constant conversation with them and does not break from them.

The term *bhakti*, from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, is most commonly translated as devotion. However the term also conveys other meanings or devotional moods which complicate and even contradict dominant academic conceptions of *bhakti*. A.K. Ramanujan in his book, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar* (1981), a book of poetry attributed to the Vaisnava poet-saint (880-930 CE), turns to a dictionary entry adapted from Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, for an extended translation of *bhaj*:

*bhaj* to divide, distribute, allot or apportion to, share with; to grant, bestow, furnish, supply; to obtain as one's share, receive as, partake of, enjoy (also carnally), to possess, have; to turn or resort to, engage in, assume (as a form), put on (garments), experience, incur, undergo, feel, go or fall into...to feel terror...; to pursue, practise, cultivate; to declare for, to prefer, choose (e.g. as a servant); to serve, honour, revere, love, adore...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Hymns for Drowning*, 104.

Through this entry, Ramanujan traces the complicated variety of experiences which can be qualified as an expression of *bhakti*. And as the root *baj* shows, experiences related to *bhakti* are diverse and often surprisingly subversive. Ranging from declarations of love, themes of sharing or partaking, putting on or assuming, to experiences of possession and fear, *bhakti* revolves around a system of emotive yet active relationships which often appear antithetical. In each case of *bhakti*, direct engagement or intimacy with the divine remains central, even while the terms of *bhakti* engagement take on various forms. While devotion in english implies actions of service on the part of the devotee, and possession implies outside influence on the devotee, both experiences share in a sense of proximity to the divine and the idea that the *bhakta* or the poet-saint interact with the divine.

Through Monier-Williams translation, it becomes clear that *bhakti* as a classical Sanskrit term presents a wide variety of english verbs through the etymology of its root-- which Ramanujan aptly refers to as 'treacherous' because it clearly complicates the conceptualization of *bhakti* in english. In addition to these opposite sentiments embedded in *bhakti*, *bhakti* stands against the Sanskrit term, *dharma*, which can be translated as a system of organization which intersects life, religion and law. Through the classical Sanskrit texts the *Vedas* (1200/900 BCE), the epic poems the *Mahabharata* (300 BCE/300 CE), and *Ramayana* (200 BCE/200 CE), as well as seminal law codes such as *The Laws of Manu* (100 CE) and the *Kama Sutra* (300 CE), *dharma* appears within a shifting literary discussion on ethics, duty and nature related to class and everyday life. While this assortment of Sanskrit texts places different kinds of authority on *dharma*, they also include narratives which inform later *bhakti* practices.

While *bhakti* suggests devotion, the sanskrit term *dharma*, from the root *dhr*, ‘to hold’, literally means that which ‘holds’ or ‘upholds.’<sup>19</sup> *Dharma* is also linked to the word ‘foundation’ through the Vedic term, *dharman*, which shares the same etymological root.<sup>20</sup> As with *bhakti*, *dharma* implies a variety of meanings and implications which become articulated through various Sanskrit texts. In the following passage, Alf Hiltebeitel discusses the various linguistic uses of the word *dharma* and how these different linguistic uses impact its meaning and especially its translation. Hiltebeitel writes in his book aptly titled, *Dharma* (2010):

Here you will meet a linguistic feature of *dharma* that has to do with the way it is used to speak of things worth holding to in what is known as *samsara*, the “world in flux.” You might think of *samsara*’s hold, and thus *dharma*’s, too, as “the ties that bind.” This linguistic feature is that *dharma* is prominently used in compounds with other words. When it appears as the first member, it can refer to something being “virtuous,” “lawful,” “just,” or righteous,” as with *dharma-yuddha*, a “just war,” or *dharma-raja*, a “righteous king.” When it appears as the second member, it can refer to the “law” or “duty” that pertains to the person or group mentioned before it, as with *sva-dharma*, “one’s own duty,” or *vara-dharma*, “the laws of class” or “caste.”<sup>21</sup> From this passage it is clear that the translation of *dharma*, as we have seen with *bhakti*, requires a kind of etymological parsing in order to access the full implications and possibilities related to the word. Like *bhakti*, which can imply a range of different devotional moods and voices, *dharma* conveys a variety of implications related to themes of justice, righteousness and virtue. As Hiltebeitel shows, *dharma* can pertain both to society and culture as its definition of “lawful” implies, as well as to personal conscience and personal moral responsibility as “duty” implies. To this end, *dharma* can be translated as both an adjective and as a noun. It can serve as both a descriptor (*dharma-raja*

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<sup>19</sup> *Dharma*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Dharma*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Dharma*, 1.

“righteous king”) and as thing itself (*vara-dharma* “the laws of class”). Within this distinction, *dharma* assumes a similar differentiation as the two kinds of Sanskrit texts or genres *smriti* and *shruti*. While *smriti* and *shruti* specifically refer to the differences between the Vedas as ‘revelation’ and the later Sanskrit epics as traditional religious texts, *dharma* becomes categorized between natural or inherent good compared to the prescribed or human construction of good.

These linguistic difference in how the word is used point to the two contrasting understandings of *dharma*: the natural and the learned. On the one hand, *dharma* as ‘virtuous’ or ‘just’ signals an underlying or inherent good which is essential, natural and often permanent in relation to the subject. The ‘righteous-king’ or the ‘just-war’ implies fundamental characteristics about their relationships with *dharma* that are unchanging. On the other hand *dharma* as ‘law’ or ‘duty’ implies the opposite of the natural or inherent *dharma*; it instead reflects the prescribed constructs of human law and social ideals created through human understanding. This difference between nature and learned, prescribed and inherent, allows for new conceptions of religious and cultural ideals such as *bhakti*.

Although Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla depart from the Sanskritic and Brahmin conceptions of *dharma* and religion because they both travel, unmarried, with little regard for social ideals or decorum, they were still affirmed through *dharma* infused narratives which focused on the ways in which both poet-saints embodied inherent religious virtues and predispositions. Although *bhakti* was judged by its outwardly unconventional appearance, in the case of Lalla and Karaikkal Ammaiyar traditional religious relationships were explored through unconventional poetic imagery.

## 2. Bhakti and Dharma Narratives in Classical Sanskrit Literature

Wendy Doniger, in her book *The Hindus; An Alternative History*, traces both the roots of prominent *bhakti* actors such as the gods Siva and Visnu, as well as classical *dharma* principles, through the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, analyzing the rise of the worship of specific gods outside of the Vedic pantheon.<sup>22</sup> Considered as a successor to the early Vedic period in India, devotion practices to specific gods--which emerged as early as the first century BCE-- began to take hold of popular culture after what Doniger calls the "era of the two great poems."<sup>23</sup> The poems she refers to, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, present some of the earliest literary narratives for the popular worship of non Vedic gods outside of the Brahmin realm of religious practice. While these texts upheld Brahmin standards to the extent that they were composed in Sanskrit for an audience educated in Sanskrit, primarily from the upper classes, they also created literary openings through narratives which contradicted Brahmin codes of conduct and social law (*dharma*).

Doniger notes that throughout both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, repeated declarations made by individuals who worship a particular god through specific practices of devotion and participation articulate within Sanskrit literature the possibility of an alternative religious endeavour outside the priestly tradition of Vedic sacrifice and ritual. While sacrifices to the Vedic pantheon, Indra, Soma and Agni, continued to be used for legitimizing kings and priests, Visnu and Siva, who were not prominent deities within the Vedas, were legitimized themselves through repeated mentions within the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.<sup>24</sup> Instead of being denied or ignored by the epic poems, non Brahmin

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<sup>22</sup> Gods such as Indra, Agni and Soma were prominent recipients of sacrifice in Vedic worship.

<sup>23</sup> *The Hindus*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> *The Hindus*, 258.



devotion trends were both addressed and even supported within them. The *Mahabharata* not only includes a “*Hymn of the Thousand Names of Shiva*,” but gold coins from around 150 BCE depict Siva standing in front of his usual vehicle, a massive bull, and holding a trident.<sup>25</sup> Within Doniger’s discussion, this points to Siva’s growing popularity as the importance of his image becomes depicted both materialy on a coin as well as narratively in the *Mahabharata*.

In one such narrative about Siva from the *Mahabharata*, Siva is described as living peacefully with his wife Parvati in the mountains when other gods and deities appear to Siva in order to pay him homage. During their visit, neighboring King Daksha<sup>26</sup> begins to perform a Vedic horse sacrifice, which Siva’s divine guests wish to attend. Although Siva specifically gives his guests permission to attend the sacrifice, when Parvati finds out, she becomes so upset that Siva’s guests are in attendance at the sacrifice, when they claimed to be in attendance for Siva, that he changes his mind on her behalf. Siva then gathers his most faithful servants and destroys the sacrifice, which miraculously takes the form of an animal and flees to the skies. Siva then takes his bow and arrow and chases the sacrifice; frightening all the other gods and shaking the earth with his ferocity. Finally, Brahma (Daksha’s father) begs Siva to stop the chase, and promises him a share of the sacrificial offerings which Siva happily accepts.<sup>27</sup>

In this story, it is remarkable that Siva earns his portion of the sacrificial offerings through the destruction of traditional Vedic sacrifice. Although Siva was not initially a part of Vedic ritual, this narrative maps his trajectory as a focus within later Hindu traditions

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<sup>25</sup> *The Hindus*, 259.

<sup>26</sup> *The Hindus*, 260.

<sup>27</sup> *The Hindus*, 260.

such as *bhakti*. Here, Siva's initial position as an outsider to Vedic sacrifice emphasizes both his otherness, as he turns to means of disruption and destruction in order to prove his divinity among the gods of the Vedas, as well as his importance. In addition to this story (which Doniger characterizes as a mythologized narrative on actual religious trends from the period), other gods who maintained lesser roles within the Vedic pantheon such as Visnu, and later Rama and Krsna, began to attract more and more worshippers because of repeated mentions throughout the epic poems. In the case of Siva specifically, his inherent authority as a god is proved at the expense of traditional religious acts; in this case ritual sacrifice. Because Siva destroys King Daksha's horse sacrifice the other gods are forced to recognize his divinity as their ritual can only be performed at his whim. Instead of maintaining absolute divine authority, the authority of the gods portrayed throughout this narrative compete and interact on a dynamic field of shifting power. Although Siva was initially excluded from Vedic sacrifice, through the destruction of King Daksha's horse sacrifice, he overpowers the established gods and successfully asserts his own divine power.

Where Vedic sacrifice can be seen as a reciprocal worship structure in which ritual sacrifice sustains the sacred nature of the gods, who in return grant their divine favour to those who sacrifice in their name, in the story about Siva from the *Mahabharata*, divine hierarchy and the use of unusual means for proving one's religious authority are the means by which Siva confirms his status as a god. In much of the poetry of the *bhakti* saints, as well as in their behavior, a similar model of the disruption of Brahmin tradition and Vedic ritual, likewise affirms their status as saints. From this story about Siva, it becomes clear that in spite of the rejection or the disruption of traditional aspects of worship, religious

authority can actually be confirmed through narratives which appear to break from tradition. Richard Davis in his book, *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India* (2000), writes:

Relations between the high gods and humans are, likewise and even more so, asymmetrical and hierarchical, not reciprocal as in the Vedas. The proper attitude for a person to take toward Visnu or Siva is that of *bhakti*: recognition of the god's superiority, devoted attentiveness, and desire to participate in his exalted domain. The god is in no way compelled by human devotion, nor by any ritual action humans may undertake (as the Vedic exegetes claimed of sacrificial ritual), but he may freely choose to grant favor (*prasada*) or grace (*anugraha*) to those humans who have properly recognized and served him.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage from Davis' book, which looks closely at Siva worship and ritual, he explains not only the proper relationship of devotees to Siva, but also the ontological differences between Vedic sacrifice and *bhakti*. Here, Davis explains that the appropriate attitude for a *bhakta* (devotee) is not only one which recognizes the supremacy of god, be the god Siva or Visnu, but also one which desires to participate with the divine through devotion. While Vedic ritual involved reciprocal generosity between practitioner and god, *bhakti* was primarily hierarchical. What this shows, is that the *bhakta* remains in a state of longing for participation with god, while remaining thoroughly grounded in human experience. While the grounds for participation change from person to person, it is this constant reaching for god which comes to define popular religious practices outside of the Vedas.

Because of this interplay between the authority of Vedic sacrifice and the affirmation of lesser gods through repeated mentions in the epic poems, the Hindu tradition branches into different literary configurations through these texts. As Doniger puts it: "The configuration of clusters of Hinduism's defining characteristics changes through time,

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<sup>28</sup> *Worshipping Siva*, 7.

through space, and through each individual.”<sup>29</sup> She continues: “There is therefore no central something to which the peripheral people were peripheral. One person’s center is another’s periphery...The Brahmins had their center, which we will refer to as the Brahmin imaginary, but there were other centers too, alternative centers.”<sup>30</sup> If the Vedas and ritual sacrifice can be seen as one center within the religious traditions of medieval India, an alternative center can be identified in the worship of “new” deities such as Siva through *bhakti* practices.

Through Doniger’s description of the transmutation between center and periphery for different religious practices and trends, it becomes clear that while the Vedas as well as Sanskrit, were often idealized as the highest circles of worship, other practices and traditions which challenged that authority remained in conversation throughout much of Sanskrit literature. This shifting center-and-periphery format that Doniger points out between the different Hindu groups who worship different gods, and between the Brahmin class and Vedic sacrifice, can also be used to categorize the shifting attention paid to *dharma* and *bhakti* in the Sanskrit classics and the later centralization of *bhakti* around vernacular mediums. While *dharma* was a central focus amongst Brahmin priests who wished to uphold their place in society, *bhakti* after emerging from Sanskrit literature, became the focus and obsession of poet-saints who used vernacular languages. In the Sanskrit classics, *dharma* was central to order and religious authority while *bhakti* was peripherally referred to. However in *bhakti* poetics, the means and practices of devotion took center stage while *dharma* was given importance only when it related to devotion. This shifting relationship between the role of *dharma* and *bhakti*, as well as between the

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<sup>29</sup> *The Hindus*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *The Hindus*, 29.

popularity of different gods, posits a Hindu tradition which hosts an array of parallel and contradictory beliefs which may or may not be mutually exclusive.<sup>31</sup>

While the *Mahabharata* presented gods which challenged the traditions and gods of the *Vedas* and vernacular literature presented an alternative language medium for poetry on devotion, *bhakti* presented personal experiences of devotion as alternatives to particular *dharma* models. In the following passage, Dongier summarizes the narrative tone of the both *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, pointing out how they relate to *dharma*:

The *Ramayana* tells of a war against foreigners and people off another species, with clear demarcations of forces of good triumphing over evil; the *Mahabharata* is about a bitter civil war with no clear winners. The *Ramayana* doesn't usually problematize *dharma*; the *Mahabharata* does, constantly. Where the *Ramayana* is triumphalist, the *Mahabharata* is tragic. Where the *Ramayana* is affirmative, the *Mahabharata* is interrogative.<sup>32</sup>

Within the two epics, *dharma* is approached as having two different kinds of authority.

While the *Ramayana* accepts *dharma* and can clearly identify between upholding good and rejecting the profane, the *Mahabharata* does not have the same clarity when it comes to *dharma*. Doniger uses the word, interrogative, in that the *Mahabharata* lays a framework for questioning the authority of *dharma* principles. From these two epics which offered two interpretations for understanding *dharma*, what becomes clear is that a seemingly absolute system of religion, law and class is also understood to be flexible and based on the circumstances at hand .

Although themes of both *dharma* and *bhakti* are interwoven through the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, in the *Manavadharmasastra* or *Manusmrti* (*The Laws of Manu*), *dharma* is closely attended to while *bhakti* is almost completely ignored. In

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<sup>31</sup> *The Hindus*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> *The Hindus*, 301.

Doniger's translation and introduction to *The Laws of Manu* (1991), she discusses its composition as a pivotal text and as a compendium for understanding the structure of Indic society as well as Hindu family life. Composed around the beginning of the Common Era or perhaps earlier, Doniger argues, "The text is, in sum, an encompassing representation of life in the world-- how it is, and how it should be lived. It is about *dharma*, which subsumes the English concepts of 'religion', 'duty', 'law', 'right', 'justice', 'practice', and 'principle'."<sup>33</sup> For men born into the highest three social classes, the Brahmins (priests), the warriors or rulers (Kshatriyas), and the merchants (Vaishyas), *The Laws of Manu* spoke extensively on the religious authority inherent to their birth position and affirmed their role as those who were knowledgeable of Vedic sacrifice and ritual.<sup>34</sup> However, while *Manu* affirmed the position of high class men, the strict framework for social rules surrounding widows as well as the prescriptions for marriage which it laid out, presented a social hierarchy which favored the elite and made whole groups of people (including women) as well as new religious ideas (including *bhakti*) as other and therefore inherently more profane in comparison to their perfect standard.

Because *Manu* primarily attends to the sacred world of Vedic sacrifice and *dharma*, social interests such as *bhakti* and vernacular composition as well as the religious practices of women are almost completely ignored. In the following passage, Hildebeitel discusses both *Manu*, as well as the epic poems, examining each text's position to both the Vedas and to *dharma*. Hildebeitel writes:

If someone wants to get into the bones of these works, the first answer for a book on *dharma* is to keep track of the way the epics and *Manu* relate to the Veda...[A]ll three

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<sup>33</sup> *Laws of Manu*, xvii.

<sup>34</sup> *The Hindus*, 37.

depict *dharma* as allegiance to the Veda, but in markedly different ways. The *Mahabharata* identifies itself as a 'fifth Veda' and fits itself out with Vedic allusions. *Manu* lists Veda as the first and foremost of its four sources of *dharma*. And the *Ramayana* surrounds Rama with a virtually Vedic world. Also, in contrast to the very ambiguous and capacious treatments of both *dharma* and *bhakti* in the *Mahabharata*, *Manu* seems to screen out *bhakti* while putting an orthodox stamp on *dharma*; and the *Ramayana* streamlines and straightens out both *bhakti* and *dharma* around its figure of a royal perfect man living in a nearly perfect Vedic time. If *Manu* refuses to accommodate a *bhakti* swerve and the *Ramayana* seeks to disambiguate it, we have further ways to think about the politics of *bhakti* and the spiritualities it fosters in relation to *dharma*.<sup>35</sup>

As Hildebeitel dissects the complicated dialectic on *dharma* formed through the Sanskrit classics it becomes clear that the presence of *bhakti* and *dharma* within a particular text depends essentially on the motives of the work. As the *Mahabharata* attends to both *bhakti* and *dharma* while *Manu* ignores the growing alternative that *bhakti* suggests, it becomes clear that the texts are themselves arguing for or against the importance of *bhakti* in the religious world at the time of their composition.

Although *The Laws of Manu* undertook the transmission of a prescribed model for upholding a 'principled' and 'good' life according to class and life stage (*dharma*), Hildebeitel argues that its authority as a social law code is complicated by the treatment of *bhakti* in other Sanskrit classics. Likewise, Doniger argues that the different takes on *dharma* within the classics results from a basic tension in the understanding of *dharma* itself: "This comes down to the basic tension between *dharma* as descriptive (which implies that nature and society are naturally harmonious, that eating and sexuality are good) and *dharma* as prescriptive (which implies that society must fight against nature, that eating and sexuality are dangerous)."<sup>36</sup> While *The Laws of Manu* disavow *bhakti*

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<sup>35</sup> *Dharma*, 126.

<sup>36</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, lvi.

practice by ignoring it, the *Mahabharata* acknowledges *bhakti* through the specific narratives like the story about Siva and King Daksha. The story about King Daksha's horse sacrifice illustrates the *Mahabharata's* acknowledgment of *bhakti* as it demands the full attendance of the deities who visit Siva in the same way that the relationship between any *bhakta* and Siva demands full attention. In the story about King Daksha, the gods who visit Siva are not attentive guests. And this reveals that they do not desire to participate with god which both Pechilis and Davis suggest is the proper conduct for a devotee.

In the following passage taken from Patrick Olivelle's 2004 translation, *The Law Code of Manu*, the extent to which *Manu* emphasizes *dharma* as proper conduct stands in contrast to both Siva's behavior in the *Mahabharata* as well as to the behavior of Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lalla. To complicate matters even more, *Manu* presents specific devotion practices for women which completely contradict what both Lalla and Karaikkal Ammaiyar discussed in their own poems, however elements of *Manu* present in the biographical work on both saints. Olivelle writes:

Proper conduct is the highest Law, as well as what is declared in the Veda and given in traditional texts. Applying himself always to this treatise, therefore, let a twice-born man remain constantly self-possessed. When a Brahmin has fallen away from proper conduct, he does not reap the fruit of the Veda; but when he holds fast to proper conduct, tradition says, he enjoys its full reward. Seeing thus that the Law proceeds from proper conduct, the sages understood proper conduct to be the ultimate root of all ascetic toil (1.108-110).<sup>37</sup>

In this passage from *Manu*, "proper conduct" is highlighted as the highest form of *dharma* or law. Additionally, the clear contradictions between the sentiments found in this passage and the narrative about Siva from the *Mahabharata* show the different conditions that both texts present in terms of what "proper conduct" entails. For *Manu*, proper conduct is of

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<sup>37</sup> *The Law Code of Manu*, 20.



particular importance to the Brahmin class, and Vedic tradition, and it is achieved through specifically applying oneself to “this treatise.” However, even within this passage, *Manu* accepts the authority that other traditional texts have, and so it simultaneously asserts and undermines its own authority as a source for prescriptions about proper conduct.

In comparison to the proper conduct which *Manu* recommends for twice-born men (which refers to men from the Brahmin class), the recommendations that *Manu* asserts about *dharma* for women replaces the vedic rituals of consecration with marriage and home-keeping. Titled, “*Consecratory Rites for Women*,” Olivelle writes: “For females, tradition tells us, the marriage ceremony equals the rite of vedic consecration; serving the husband equals living with the teacher; and care of the house equals tending the sacred fires (2.66-67).”<sup>38</sup> While proper conduct for men involves the performance of Vedic sacrifice and tending the sacrificial fires, for women, proper conduct is service to the husband. In this regard *Manu* presents the religious practices of women as mediated by their role within the home. In one of the most infamous passages from *Manu*, this mediation of women’s religious practice becomes impossible to ignore. Olivelle writes:

Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god. For women there is no independent sacrifice, vow, or fast; a woman will be exalted in heaven by the mere fact that she has obediently served her husband (5.154-155).<sup>39</sup>

In this passage, *Manu* makes clear claims about religious practice which present proper conduct for women as extreme obedience. Even if the husband is devoid of all virtue, women’s salvation is earned through unwavering service to him. And while this perspective came to define many later analyses about *bhakti* as a break from tradition,

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<sup>38</sup> *The Law Code of Manu*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> *The Law Code of Manu*, 96.

especially in the case of female poet-saints who exemplified religious practices which differed from *Manu's* paradigm on *dharma* and proper conduct, narratives from other Sanskrit texts framed more lenient understandings of right action for women.

The following verse from the *Kamasutra*, translated by Doniger, contrasts *Manu's* strict prescriptions about right action with its own discourse on women's access to Sanskrit texts. Although Doniger, in her essay on the *Kamasutra* titled, *The "Kamasutra": It Isn't all about Sex* (2003), writes that the following passage refers specifically to whether women should have access to the *Kamasutra*, it also reveals how narratives within different Sanskrit texts approached the topic of women and proper conduct differently. Doniger writes:

Scholars say: "Since females cannot grasp texts, it is useless to teach women this text." Vatsyayana says: But women understand the practice, and the practice is based on the text. This applies beyond the specific subject of the *Kamasutra*, for throughout the world, in all subjects, there are only a few people who know the text, but the practice is within the range of everyone. And a text, however far removed, is the ultimate source of the practice (1.3.1-14).<sup>40</sup>

In this passage, Vatsyayana the author of the *Kamasutra* and the speaker within this verse argues with what "the scholars say." Vatsyayana very clearly states that while those who study the text are few, the practice is possible for everyone. Where *Manu* reserves the reading of sacred texts to primarily Brahmin priests, Vatsyayana extends an invitation to those outside of the Brahmin imaginary to cultivate the practices which are rooted in Sanskrit texts.

For those who emerged as proponents of *bhakti*, their compositions can often be seen as interrogating the divide within *dharma* between nature and nurture. Because *dharma* represents both 'the good' and 'how to be good' within life (*samsara*), an interrogative

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<sup>40</sup> *Kamasutra: It Isn't All About Sex*, 21.

conversation between the two emerges. *Love Poem: A Case of Possession*, by Nammalvar

(translated by Ramanujan) reads:

My girl, who's just learning to speak  
 says,  
     "I'm beyond all learning.  
     I'm all the learning you learn."  
     "I'm the cause of all learning,  
     I end all learning,  
     I'm the essence of all learning,"  
                                           says she.

Does my girl talk this way  
     because our lord of all learning  
     has come and taken her over?  
 How can I tell you,  
     O learned men!<sup>41</sup>

In the first stanza of the poem, Nammalvar uses the determiner 'my' to describe a girl who is supposedly "just learning to speak." While his use of the determiner 'my' could infer that the child is his daughter or a relation, it could also be seen as a figurative or metaphorical imagination of himself. Although the poem begins within this pretense, by the third line, not only is the girl speaking, but she goes on to claim that she already embodies all the learning possible to achieve in the world. In addition, she paradoxically claims that she is simultaneously beyond all learning while also being the end of all learning. What Nammalvar stresses through this paradox is a girl who seems to be the center of all knowledge even while she has had little chance to study or even communicate, as Nammalvar suggests. While the first stanza sets up the paradox at the center of the poem, the second stanza frames the poem as a conversation between the poet and the "learned men" which he addresses.

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<sup>41</sup> *Hymns*, 71.

In the second stanza, Nammalvar asks two questions. In the first he asks if the girl is able to speak in this way because the god of learning has possessed her. In the second question, Nammalvar seems to be addressing the scholars of his community as he asks how he can even begin to communicate this contradiction to them. If we are to understand the girl's "learning" as knowledge of the sacred, then the "learned men" that Nammalvar struggles to communicate with can be applied to the upper castes, probably those who studied Vedic sacrifice and Sanskrit. Although Nammalvar seems to feel as though he himself speaks a different language from the "learned men" and can't fully express himself to them, he does associate himself with the girl by referring to her as both "my girl" and by using the first person possessive pronoun to refer to "our lord of all learning."

Thus, embodied in Nammalvar's paradox of the girl is both a sense of divine nature as well as divine knowledge, one which Nammalvar suggests is mitigated by "our lord of all learning" as he wonders out loud. As Ramanujan puts it: "...god is not a hieratic second language, a Sanskrit to be learned, to be minded lest one forget its rules, paradigms, exceptions; he is one's own mother tongue. In [Nammalvar's] view, god lives inside us as a mother tongue does, and we live in god as we live in language--a language that was there before us, is all around us in the community, and will be there after us."<sup>42</sup> If we are to map this poem over the *dharma* question of descriptive or prescriptive virtue laid out by Doniger, it becomes clear that Nammalvar suggests a form of devotion which merges both a sense of the intuitive or natural sacred with sacred knowledge--through his depiction of the girl. Although she has little formal knowledge, Nammalvar suggests that "our lord of all learning" has taught her everything.

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<sup>42</sup> *Hymns*, 138.

In the framework of the *bhakti* swerve which we have seen coalesce through classical literature, Nammalvar's poems are some of the earliest devotion poems to Visnu from South India. Nammalvar's name, which literally means, "our alvar", is one of the twelve alvar poet saints who were devotees (*bhaktas*) to Visnu between the sixth and ninth century. Although Nammalvar composed some of the earliest religious poetry in Tamil he was, according to Ramanujan, born into a peasant caste.<sup>43</sup> Ramanujan writes that Nammalvar, "...composed four works, of which the 1,102 verses of *Tiruvaymoli* ("holy word of mouth" / "word of holy mouth" -- "god-spell" if you wish), are the most important. Very early, the *Tiruvaymoli* was hailed as "the ocean of Tamil Veda..."<sup>44</sup> and was applauded in a Sanskrit panegyric which was recited before the Tamil poem. While Nammalvar's *Love Poem* appears to question the absolute authority of hierarchy and knowledge, his *Tiruvaymoli* becomes directly associated with the *Vedas* and with Sanskrit.

For the Visnu devotees such as Nammalvar and the other alvars, Ramanujan argues that their poetry became characterized by *ubhayavedanta*, the two-fold philosophy which faced both ways as it reconciled both Sanskrit and Tamil as well as Veda and popular thought<sup>45</sup> Ramanujan writes, "... commentators on Tamil poems developed an enlarged alphabet and a highly Sanskritized Tamil called *manipravala*. *Manipravala* meant a stringing together of Sanskrit diamond, *mani*, and Tamil coral, *pravala*."<sup>46</sup> This metaphor which imagines a string of beads made from both Tamil corals and Sanskrit diamonds conveys an impulse within the devotion poems of the Vaisnavas (Visnu devotees) to link elements from both traditions in their work. Ramanujan goes on to describe a complicated

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<sup>43</sup> *Hymns*, xi.

<sup>44</sup> *Hymns*, xi.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

dialectic between the 'high' Sanskrit literature of (Vedas and epic poems) and the Tamil literary tradition. Because Tamil at this point already inhabited both a courtly tradition of performance and recitation as well as a 'low' folk tradition of song, dance and play, Ramanujan argues that Tamil pre-qualified itself as an alternative language for composition, one which could stand beside Sanskrit for popular religious poetics.<sup>47</sup>

Ramanujan writes:

Bhaktas prefer the active mode. Nammalvar's text is called Tiru-vay-moli, 'holy-mouth-word,' or 'divine utterance;' Manikkavacakar called his work Tiruvacakam, 'the holy utterance;' the Kanada speaking Virasaivas called their poems *vacanas* or 'sayings.' The emphasis has shifted from hearing to speaking, from watching to dancing, from a passive to an active mode; from religion and a poetry of the... few to a religion and a poetry of anyone who can speak.<sup>48</sup>

Beginning with this period in South India, the development of regional languages and *bhakti* poems appear in similar relationships across different geographic regions. As *bhakti* poetry pushes the evolution of vernacular languages to become accepted mediums for religious composition, the genre of *bhakti* itself becomes further established as a devotional practice and a literary tradition in its own right. Ramanujan continues, "In medieval India, vernaculars run true to this pattern. A language, once a mere dialect, becomes associated with courts and bards and begins to rival Sanskrit as literary medium. One of its first written compositions is a *bhakti* work--which, in turn, asserts its importance as a new medium."<sup>49</sup> In this sense, *bhakti* poems and the languages in which they are composed strengthen in tandem with each other.

Chronologically, Kannada is the next language in which *bhakti* poetry appears.

Followed by Marathi, a close cousin to Kannada, and then Gujarati in the twelfth century

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<sup>47</sup> *Hymns for the Drowning*, 128.

<sup>48</sup> *Hymns*, 135.

<sup>49</sup> *Hymns*, 129.

and Kashmiri in the fourteenth century. In each area, the turn to vernacular languages for composing religious poems fomented the establishment of a breed of saints who were outside the circles of Veda and Sanskrit. For people born in the lower class (such as Nammalvar), or for women, the gate to a religious voice as well as religious authority was opened through the use of popular languages, which then themselves became dominant modes of religious expression through the composition of the poems. For Nammalvar and the Vaisnavas, their devotion poems were composed on behalf of Visnu, however for the Nyanmars who emerged at the same time as the Vaisnavas in South India, as well as for principle women figures such as Karaikkal Ammaiyar (6th century, also of South India) and Lal Ded from Kashmir (fourteenth century), their poems were composed for Siva.

Although the devotion practices of these two sects focused on different deities, they each pursued a model of *bhakti* poetics which shared certain characteristics, such as the use of vernacular languages and triadic conversations between poet and god or poet and audience, while the other overheard.<sup>50</sup> In *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, Pechilis writes:

From a comparison of voices within bhakti, it becomes clear that active human agency is a premise of this religious perspective...The term bhakti is used specifically to describe the human response to God and never to characterize God's response to human beings. In actively encouraging participation (which is a root meaning of bhakti), the poets represent bhakti as a theology of embodiment. Their thesis is that engagement with (or participation in) God should inform all of one's activities in worldly life. The poets encourage a diversity of activities, not limiting bhakti to established modes of worship--indeed, some poets harshly criticize such modes--but, instead, making it the foundation of human life and activity in the world.<sup>51</sup>

From the previous etymological and literary archeology on *bhakti* and *dharma* and the literary relationship between the two, it becomes clear that while the Brahmin imaginary

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<sup>50</sup> *Songs of Experience*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 6.

centralized the activity of 'upholding' as the pious or devotional act, *bhakti* centralized complete devotion even at the expense of tradition. While the Brahmin ideal of 'upholding' sacred standards supported traditional models of divine hierarchy; *bhakti* presented personal models of devotion that were conveyed in public settings which consistently broke with or challenged the private nature of Sanskrit texts and Brahmin ritual traditions. The adoption of the use of vernacular languages for devotion poems challenged the perfected standard of Sanskrit, and the public or quotidian display of vernacular devotion poems as publicly performed songs opposed the privacy of the Brahmin ritual and the seclusion of the upper class. Although the active verb root *baj*, links *bhakti* with embodiment and personal or intimate experience, because of the nature of the poems' performative transmission, *bhakti* remains inherently engaged in a conversation on intimate or personal devotion narratives within the realm of the public.

### 3. *Bhakti* and Popular Language

Although texts like the *Vedas* and the epic poems the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, *The Laws of Manu* and *Kama Sutra*--had been composed in Sanskrit, *bhakti* poetry spurred the use of vernacular languages on the Hindu literary stage. During this period of increased literary diversification in India, *bhakti* emerged as both a poetic form as well as a widespread genre of devotion literature. Because Sanskrit was considered to be the perfected language of the gods and was considered the highest medium for devotional literature, devotional poetry in vernacular languages came as both a rebuttal and as an ongoing conversation with it's religious authority.



While the Vedas dealt with priestly rituals and the *Mahabharata and Ramayana* dealt with various gods, great heros, and respected storytellers, the *bhakti* literature which emerged in different vernacular languages across India dealt with the intimate expression of personal experiences with god. While Sanskrit literature was the primary source for *dharma* traditions, *bhakti* presented alternatives to both. What this posits about the Hindu tradition is a question between the sacred standard of *dharma* in relation to *bhakti* practices. If *dharma* in classical Sanskrit literature was considered the highest sacred endeavor, then *bhakti* in popular languages was asked to interject or contrast its own parameters for sacred or devotional acts. Through the medium of vernacular languages, devotees (*bhaktas*) could practice in whatever language they thought best.

Where western scholars took this decision as a sign that linked *bhakti* to the personal and the intimate, the use of vernacular languages actually fostered community and the sharing of *bhakti* ideas. While models of Vedic sacrifice and ritual as well as religious texts composed in Sanskrit as a whole were closed to the public and primarily available to the Brahmin elite and to those educated in Sanskrit as a second language,<sup>52</sup> the first language of many priests and scholars if not all were regional languages through which they communicated with their families, friends and servants. Although Sanskrit was posed as the ideal language through which to practice devotion and ritual, it was never the only language, even among priests. In his book, *The Quotidian Revolution*, Christian Lee Novetzke writes:

...[Vernacularization is almost always a display of power in some form or another. It may be the power of courtes and empires to enunciate their dictates to their subjects and rivals or it the power of religious leaders to express their texts and

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<sup>52</sup> *The Hindus*, 5.

practices to their followers and distinguish themselves from contending traditions or the power of literary elites to recondition the aesthetics of literature and power within the literary field.<sup>53</sup>

In the case of *bhakti*, the use of vernacular languages clearly distinguished it from Brahmin practice. While Brahmin practice was clearly privatized through its use of Sanskrit, *bhakti* projected what had been previously elite religious knowledge onto a public audience.

While *bhakti* poetics became known for its unusual dependence on vernacular languages, this use was not simply a break or reform as it was often viewed. Instead, the use of vernacular languages by *bhakti* poets across different geographic areas and across different centuries grounds *bhakti* in human and day to day communication. Pechilis writes:

*Bhakti* is a classical term which describes the human love for God, and not God's love for humankind[. T]hus, *bhakti* poetry, while it reaches for the divine, is thoroughly grounded in human experience. Chronologically, Kāraikkāl Ammaiār stands at the beginning of Indian traditions of female and male saints who wrote *bhakti* poetry in regional languages.<sup>54</sup>

In this passage, Pechilis notes how *bhakti* poetry reflects human experiences in moments of divine presence. Pechilis demarcates the human reach for the divine as a human endeavour grounded in human experience. For devotees who composed in local languages, their poetry took on the language of the everyday as a linguistic embodiment of community space. Because *bhakti* poetry expressed devotion sentiments in local languages, it contrasted the perfection of Sanskrit with public displays of religious practice in common and local vernaculars.

Both Lalla as well as Karaikkal Ammaiayar used vernacular languages for their poems. However, because they were both from upper classes themselves, they were probably exposed to Sanskrit. They were also both educated in Sanskrit texts because

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<sup>53</sup> *The Quotidian Revo*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 2.

many of their poems contain both references to specific narratives about Siva, and also draw from other secular and regional literary circles. While subjective sentiments about specific relationships with Siva drew their poems in the direction of the, these personal elements were not disconnected from Brahmin tradition, nor were they private.

#### 4. Tamil and The Disembodied Poetics of The Holy Ghoul

Established as a poet-saint in the twelfth century, Karaikkal Ammaiyar (sixth century) is included in the *Tirumurai* cannon, a compendium of Siva-*bhakti* compositions from the sixth through eleventh century. While the poetry attributed to Karaikkal Ammaiyar is not widely known and is seldom performed, her legacy as a saint and *bhakta* (devotee) remain very well known within the Tamil region today. Karen Pechilis in her book, *Interpreting Devotion: The poetry and legacy of a female bhakti saint of India*, writes, “Kāraikkāl Ammaiār is an important poet from classical Indian tradition. Her poetry is included in a cannon; she has been publicly recognized as a saint since the twelfth century; and she is understood today as having initiated new genres of poetic creativity.”<sup>55</sup> While Karaikkal Ammaiyar is widely recognized and affirmed as a saint, her poetry articulates devotion through non traditional images which focus intently on the body of Siva with little focus on her own experience or herself. In this way, the poetry composed by Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not directly refer to personal feelings or situations. Although her poems

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<sup>55</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 1-2.

are clearly devotional as they consistently focus on Siva, they do not regard her emotions, or even her physical body, as an author.

Although Karaikkal Ammaiyar's surviving poems are seldom performed, an abundance of biographical information about the saint is found in biographical literature composed after her death. While later biographers constructed a narrative for Karaikkal Ammaiyar which proclaimed her religious merit and authority, they also accentuated interests in *dharma* and adherence to Brahmin social standards which were absent in her poetry. Although *bhakti* was characterized as a personal and physical practice of devotion, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems reveal little about her life or her body, placing a primary focus on the body of Siva. Because Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not use her own human experiences as thematic material in her poems, her legacy as a poet-saint becomes split between the biographical literature that was written about her and the verses which she composed.

From biography, we know that Karaikkal Ammaiyar is thought to be the author of two hymns set to music, *The Sacred Decade of Verses 1 and 2 (Tiruvāḷankāttut Tiruppatikam)*, as well as two other poems, *Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder (Aruptat Tiruvantati)*, and the *Sacred Garland of Double Gems (Tiruvirattai Manimālai)*. Interestingly, only three of these four compositions are ended by the signature verse-phrase associated with Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. In this verse-phrase, Karaikkal Ammaiyar refers to herself as 'Kāraikkālpēy,' which Pechilis translates as "the ghou from the town of Kāraikkāl."<sup>56</sup> Pechilis notes that in the name, Kāraikkālpēy, the *pēy* or ghou, does not carry the same gendered specificity as with the word, *penpēy* ("female pey"), which appears in opening

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<sup>56</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 8.

stanza of the song below from Karaikkal Ammaiyar's collection, *The Sacred Decade of*

*Verses:*

1.

The female *pēy* has  
 sagging breasts and bulging veins  
 hollowed eyes and bared teeth  
 ruddy down on her sunken belly  
 long canines  
 and lanky shins on knobby ankles;  
 she lingers, howling, at the cremation ground.

Dancing here,  
 with effortless composure  
 as his matted locks radiate in all directions,  
 our father resides at Tiru Ālankātu.<sup>57</sup>

Immediately, striking differences between this poem and poem by Nammalvar are clear.

Where Nammalvar's poem includes two speakers who addressed a clear audience, this poem has no distinct speaker and refers to both Siva and the female *pey* in the third person.

In the first half of the poem, the *pey* is described as howling and bearing her teeth as she watches Śiva dance at the cremation ground. Although the first verse presents a frighteningly intimate image of a naked ghoul, Pechilis argues that it can be read as an indirect description of the poet, who identifies as a female *pēy* (*penpēy*). Although *Manu's* views about *dharma* for women and the qualifications for sainthood compared to the ghoul's attributes found in the poem initially appear incompatible, it is still the ghoul who is able to view Siva's dance. Without reference to personal merit or holiness, the ghoul is able to interact with Siva. While *Manu's* authority on *dharma* would acknowledge the superiority of a priest, Karaikkal Ammaiyar collapses such distinctions as Siva presents himself to the female ghoul in the cremation ground. Here, the poem clearly departs from

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<sup>57</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 188.

the ordered and contained religious practice which *Manu* suggests, yet Karaikkal Ammaiyar's later biography mediates and redeems some of the more profane aspects of her poems through the position she assumes within her biography.

Additionally if the description of the *penpey* is to be read as a self-description, then the image of the inarticulate ghoulish contradicts elements of the saintly poet imagined in later biography. In the poem, the ghoulish's body is described as 'hollowed,' 'bulging,' 'lanky,' and 'knobby,' words which imply organs and bones pushing or straining against skin. While this description of the physical state of the ghoulish orients the poem, Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not literally tie the description to herself, yet she alludes to it. In a physical sense, hollowed eyes result from exhaustion, lanky shins and bony ankles result from from hunger, and bulging veins result from excitement or from exertion, and it is through these descriptions of the ghoulish that her engagement with Siva is revealed.

While Karaikkal Ammaiyar the poet-saint becomes imagined in later hagiographic material as an embodiment of Laksmi,<sup>58</sup> imbued with the qualities of traditional beauty, virtue and obedience to social custom, in the poem above, her ephemeral ghoulishness dominates the imagery of the first verse as the *penpey* howls and stands naked. In contrast to the idea of the poet-saint as someone who uses the linguistic medium of words to practice devotion, within the poem, the ghoulish is shown as howling which is not speaking or communicating. Although Pechilis presents the female ghoulish as a vision or description of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the image of the howling ghoulish and the idea of the poet-saint stand in sharp juxtaposition. Because Karaikkal Ammaiyar uses composition and recitation as an

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<sup>58</sup> Laksmi is the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity. She was born from the churning of the primordial seas. Women who were declared to be embodiments of Laksmi were thought have an auspicious mark over their lives. The marriage between Laksmi and Vishnu became a paradigm for later wedding rituals ( Patricia Monaghan, *Goddesses in World Culture*, page 5-11).

element of her religious practice, self-identifying as the animalistic ghoul appears contradictory and paradoxically contrastive and within later hagiography, these elements are narrativized to include the biographers understanding or analysis of these contrasts.

Where the first stanza of the poem revolves around the physical description of the ghoul, the second stanza describes the dancing Siva. While the description of the ghoul feels strained and tense, the description of Siva's dance gives off the calm intensity of a rehearsed performance: "Dancing here,/ with effortless composure/as his matted locks radiate in all directions,/ our father resides at Tiru Ālankātu." Although the *penpey* sees Siva dancing nearby in the cremation ground, it is important to note that Siva can travel beyond the cremation ground. What this implies is that Siva has chosen to leave his usual place at Tiru Ālankātu to perform his dance for the ghoul. Because the ghoul lingers at the cremation ground, waiting for him, it becomes clear that Siva's transience, his ability to come-and-go, means they are often separated. Although it is not clear whether it is this separation and impatience which contributes to the ghoul's frenzy, it is clear that the *penpey* has a proximity to Siva which allows her to take part in his dance as his audience. Because the ghoul is completely engaged by Siva's radiance, hungry for it even, she does not need to participate directly with or interject her own performance into the dance. In this sense, the ghoul seems to be beyond verbal devotion sentiments as she is completely absorbed by the dance that Siva offers on her behalf. In this sense, while the ghoul may not be socially ordained as a figure of proper conduct deserving of religious merit, she does assume an appropriate stance for a *bhakta*. In the poem, the ghoul remains attentive, the ghoul recognizes Siva's superiority as she focuses on his dance and his dance alone, and the

ghoul also presents a legitimate desire to participate with Siva's domain as she participates in his dance through viewing.

In comparison to Nammalvar's poem on the girl who has just learned to speak but who claims to embody the totality of all learning, and who prompts Nammalvar to ask, "Does my girl talk this way/ because our lord of all learning/ has come and taken her over?," Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poem deals with a similar theme of possession through different imagery. Despite the supposed ignorance of Nammalvar's girl, Nammalvar suggests that she has been possessed by Siva and that it is this possession which allows her to discuss such paradoxes on the nature of learning. In the case of the girl, Siva's take-over causes her to go from speechless to erudite. However in the case of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's ghoulish who is taken over by Siva's dance and becomes speechless, the literary and prolific nature of the poet-saint transfigures into the wordless state of the ghoulish.

In addition to these semantic and thematic inferences about the relationship of the ghoulish to Siva, the form of the poem as a verbal event within the community, is a vital aspect in the poetics of early Tamil devotion poems such as those composed by Karaikkal Ammaiyar. Norman Cutler, in his book, *Songs of Experience, The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*, discusses the triangle of communication that forms through the recitation or composition of devotion poetry. Cutler explains that within the logistics of any verbal event, speaker, addressee, and audience form a triadic relationship within the poem or the speech act. If the poet directly addresses god in the poem, the audience overhears. If the poet addresses the audience, god overhears. If the poets address themselves, then both god and audience (as well as reader) overhear. At times, the poet speaks to an unidentified addressee and at times neither the addressee or the speaker is specified at all. Cutler writes:



Because bhakti poetry is a 'poetry of connections,' in order to fully understand its nature it is important to account for the persona and things it connects and for the contact between them. As I hope to make clear, the prevailing intent of many bhakti poems is to establish contact or 'communion' between the poet and an addressee, who in many instances is the god who inspires the poet's devotion, but who may also be an audience of devotees or potential devotees. Also, very often the subject of a bhakti poem is the poet, the god whom the poet worships (who may also be the addressee), an audience other than the god or even the very fact of contact between the poet and the god (or between the audience and the god).<sup>59</sup>

According to Cutler's model of triangular communication, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's ghoul poem, because it does not directly specify speaker or addressee, uses the least explicit model of communication as the framework for its rhetorical structure. As Cutler goes on to discuss the structure of certain poems in which neither speaker nor addressee is specified, he uses a verse from Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poem, *The Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder* as an example. While Cutler does not specifically discuss verse 1 from *The Sacred Decade of Verses* (poem above), the poem which he does attend to also uses this least explicit form of the verbal event. In the following passage, Cutler explains this model of un-specificity within the rhetorical structure of the poem. He writes:

In some poems the poet clearly identifies himself as the speaker, but he does not invoke his audience "by name." Here the poet clearly is not speaking to the deity, and we know this is so because the deity is spoken of in the third person. However, the poem does not specifically prevent audience members from viewing themselves as the addressee... There are poems that are rhetorically even less explicit than the poem cited above, and in such poems the reader is given even wider scope to infer the poem's rhetorical structure. Again, the deity usually cannot be the addressee because he is referred to in the third person. This verse by Karaikkalammaiyar illustrates the type:

Whatever penance a man performs,  
 whatever image he conjures,  
 the perfect lord  
 whose throat is blue as sapphire

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<sup>59</sup> *Songs of Experience*, 19.

takes the form of his vision  
 and all the while these dullards  
 speak the wisdom of books  
 and follow aimless paths.<sup>60</sup>

What Cutler seeks to point out through this poem and his discussion of rhetorical structure is the way in which both the speaker and addressee float above the poem, with a metaphorical birds eye view of the event and without being clearly assigned to roles within it. As Cutler points out, these ambiguities leave room for a kind of interpretative variation where the audience is asked to grapple with the undefined location of speaker and addressee. While Karraikkal Ammaiyyar seems to be admonishing the ‘dullards who wander aimlessly with their books,’ apparently criticizing a specific people or tradition with whom she disagrees, she never speaks directly to anyone and so her criticism remains completely undirected and disembodied from any particular event or moment in time. Because the poem above--as with the previous poem concerning *penpey*-- is spoken in the present tense, the deity is spoken of in third person, and neither the addressee or the speaker are specified within the poem, Cutler’s discussion of rhetorical structure frames the narrative ambiguities seen in both poems by Karaikkal Ammaiyyar in a conversational light. Even though these poems do not specify either speaker or addressee, they are nevertheless put into a motion of conversation through the connections that are made through public acts of performance and audience viewing.

To push Cutler’s model a step further, because the poem does not exist within the narrative of a conversation formed by speaker and addressee, the poem instead revolves in an a-temporal moment of speech which is not contained by the specification of the speaker or addressee within time. In this sense, the disembodied poem relates across time as it is

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<sup>60</sup> *Songs of Experience*, 27, 119.

not contained by the temporal continuity of contained conversation. For the reader and more directly audience (as many of these poems were performed as songs), this structure results in a descriptive event which avoids concrete or complete narrative evaluation. While both poems present particular images which might include snippets of narrative information about Karaikkal Ammaiyar, such as the ghoul's haggard and extreme physical state compared to Siva's calm, radiant dance, or the paradoxical social critique in the descriptions of the unintelligent men with books, neither poem asserts the 'I' of a defined speaker and therefore avoids making authorial claims outright. As Cutler points out, as the audience overhears the poet through recitation and performance, they share in the experience of the poem as they take part in it through their role in the audience. Because of the relationship which Cutler posits between devotion poetry and public performance, oral transmission, or recitation,-- when the speaker of the poem (or poet) addresses either self, public, or god-- there are always those who are in the position of 'overhearing'. In this sense, the performance of *bhakti* poems eliminate the personal even while the poets express devotion sentiments which appear wholly personal.

While *bhakti* poetics revolve around personalized experiences or visions of the divine, because these experiences (or insights) are captured in the oral and performance based medium of the poem (or song), they enter into public spaces. In this space, the distance between the audience and poet collapses, as the relationship between *bhakta* and public share a common reality through the medium of the poem.

In Nammalvar's poem, Nammalvar clearly assumes both the voice of the girl as well as his own voice within the event of the poem. Additionally, Nammalvar phrases his poem as a question that is clearly directed at the "learned men" which he names at the

conclusion of the poem. To use the language of Cutler's model, Nammalvar's poem involves two clear speakers as well as an addressee within the rhetorical structure of the conversation taking place within the poem itself. While Nammalvar takes on an additional female voice within the composition, the two poems by Karaikkal Ammaiyar do not explicitly state speaker or addressee and as such avoid assuming a specified voice. Pechilis writes:

Significantly, male *bhakti* poets adopted the female voice as an option in their devotional poetry, whereas female *bhakti* poets generally spoke in their own voice. In poetry attributed to other ancient Indian female poets, such as the poets of the Tamil Cankam ("academy") era of approximately 100 BCE-250 CE, whether the author is writing from her own gendered position or is participating in a common poetic language, or both, is left ambiguous.<sup>61</sup>

This ambiguity, which Pechilis traces through other female poets in the earlier Tamil Cankam era, remains a central literary structure within Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry as a whole. While Nammalvar adopts a feminine persona in his poems, using the female voice as a literary tool or metaphor, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's own gendered position is left open, as Pechilis suggests.

While male poets often took on or adopted a female voice in their *bhakti* poems, as Nammalvar does, Karaikkal Ammaiyar does not adopt any voice, but analogises her entire physical form with the form of the *penpey*. If the *penpey* is to be read as a representation of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's authorial voice, as Pechilis argues, how does the *penpey's* role within the poem articulate a gendered voice? While Nammalvar clearly assumes the voice of the girl, Karaikkal Ammaiyar assumes no clear voice.

In the following passage, Pechilis specifically refers to the Tamil Caṅkam academy era between 100 BCE-250 CE, in which popular poetics of the period used the

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<sup>61</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 10.

female voice to articulate 'interior' (*akam*) poetry which explored the love between a man and a woman, while the male voice typically featured in 'exterior' (*puram*) poetry most often explored themes of kingship and battle.<sup>62</sup> Pechilis writes:

[Where] poets did not appear to have to match their own gender to the gendered motifs [in their writing]; they were able to choose to represent the experience of love and the experience of war from any of the established poetic motifs...We can note here that the structure of Caṅkam poetry was influential on later Tamil *bhakti* poetry; for example, Karaikkal Ammaiyar drew on its motifs of the battleground and *pey* in her "Decades," Manikkavacakar (ninth century) used the *akam* ("interior") framework of lovers speaking to their family and friends, and Nammalvar (seventh to early eighth centuries) used the *akam* convention to represent a mother describing her daughter's lovesickness--for a Lord in this case, not a boy as in the Caṅkam poetry.<sup>63</sup>

Here, Pechilis points out that the authorial use of genderized voices within Cankam Tamil literature took on a particular significance as a stylized literary device for *bhakti* poetics. While love poems composed in the female voice in Caṅkam poetry echoed the classical *dharma* traditions for women discussed earlier, Pechilis remarks that "both genders explored themes of the bravery of fighters, praise of kings, and the glory of mothers whose sons died in battle,"<sup>64</sup> signaling an underlying fluidity in poetic voice between the gender of the author and the gender of the speaker within the composition. Additionally, Pechilis argues that threads of the poetic tropes from these secular Tamil poems of the Cankam era (as well as other literary elements from early Buddhist poems composed by female nuns, 80 BCE,<sup>65</sup> as well as later Buddhist tantra poems, 1000 CE)<sup>66</sup> were influential on the literary styles and voices which later *bhakti* poets emulated.

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<sup>62</sup> *The Hindus*, 342.

<sup>63</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> *Tantric Treasures*, 4-5.

While Cutler specifically characterizes the *bhakti* genre as a series of connections between the poet, audience, and god, Pechilis additionally characterizes early Tamil *bhakti* poetry as one which utilizes gendered voices in relation to devotion. Yet, in the poems by both Nammalvar and Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Nammalvar adopts a rhetoric of the feminine while Karaikkal Ammaiyar adopts the howling ghoul. In this way, it becomes clear that while *bhakti* transcended the dominance of the male voice in Sanskrit texts, gender remained a dynamic aspect of the structure of *bhakti*. While male *bhakti* poets could freely take on a feminine voice in their poems, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's uses of the cremation ground and the *pey* as a rendition of her experience and her own voice become mediated by her later biographers.

Although *bhakti* poetics were generalized as a personal devotion poetics concerned with embodiment, separation from and longing for the divine, as well as direct experiences of communion with God, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's compositions exist in the public realm and focus on the act of participating with Siva's dance rather than her own longing for that participation. While her poems lack personal history and the biographical entries composed after her death strongly reiterate her poetic legacy through the lens of women's *dharma*, they also formulate a saintly biography through which she is memorialized. Pechilis writes:

The Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* tradition preserves a record of several references that are understood to signify Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār; these are of interest to us as they show the interpretive trajectory of the definition of her identity, which represents her first as devotee and author, and then later as female. The first reference to her is the signature verse in her own poetry.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 12.

The signature that appears at the end of three of her four poems, “Kāraikkālpēy,” meaning ‘the ghoul from Kāraikkāl,’ uses a non-gendered declension on the word ‘ghoul.’ Because few authors use images of *pēy* in devotional poetry to Śiva, other references of *pēy* tend to be considered as referring to the same author. Additionally, the *penpēy* (‘female ghoul’) from *Decade - 1*, serves as a pseudo reference to the poet as it lacks specificity but still refers to the speaker of the poem, and if we assume the speaker to be the same person as the author, as one who is female.

Beyond the poetry tied to Kāraikkāl Ammaiār the author, Cuntarar (ninth century) in his *Tiruttontattokai* (‘Collection of the Sacred Servants’), a hymn that lists devotees to Śiva, makes reference to *pēyar*, “the one who is a *pēy*.” Although it is likely that Cuntarar references the same author as the signature verse, Kāraikkālpēy, because it is a one word description, a typical style for hymns which reference saints, it does not include biographical information such as gender, or whether the *pēyar* was also an author.<sup>68</sup> What can be gleaned from Cuntarar is that *pēyar* appears to be synonymous with devotee, as it is listed in a his hymn specifically titled ‘Collection of Sacred Servants.’

In the tenth century and the late tenth-early eleventh century, two commentaries on grammar by Naccinārkkiniyar and Ami(r)tacākarar, which discuss prosody, meter and versification, reference a “Kāraikkārpēyar” who not only appears as an author but whose verse appears as an example of a “verse of sages.”<sup>69</sup> While the author’s gender is still missing from these references both suggest that not only was the ‘ghoul from Kāraikkāl’ an author, but was one who exemplified the characteristics of a sage, a classification not far from a saint.

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<sup>68</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 12.

<sup>69</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 12.

In Nampi Āntār Nampi's *Sacred Linked Verses on the Sacred Servants (Tiruttontar Tiruvantāti*, eleventh century), a new narrative on the life Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is added to the milieu of brief notices mentioning the poet. Nampi's notice on Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār is the first to contextualize her within a narrative format and has remained a prominent story in Tamil folklore. Pechilis translates:

Thinking, "I will not tread upon my Lord's mountain," she walked on her head with her two legs high above. Umā smiled when she saw it, but the Lord whose body is coral in color called the lady "my Mother." She is the treasure of the town of Kāraikkāl, where the tree branches drip with honey.<sup>70</sup>

In this narrative, a different kind of emphasis is placed on the poet. Instead of asserting Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār as an author or describing her as a *pēy*, Nampi emphasizes the fertility and beauty of her hometown, her pilgrimage on her hands in search of Śiva, and Śiva's reception of her as his "Mother" (*ammai*). Where the single word reference, *pēyar*, begins to unfurl with 'the *pēy* from Kāraikkāl' found in the grammar commentaries, through Nampi's expanded narrative, the saint's humanity and femininity become central to her historical trajectory.

In the above passage, not only does Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār appear as a devotee who has gained Śiva's recognition, but because she is depicted as walking on her head, her devotion is suggested to be particularly distinctive and miraculous. From Nampi's narrative we also encounter the justification for the poet's saint-name. Pechilis explains:

Significantly, the verse reveals the rationale for the saint name Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār; the name can be rendered several ways in English, including 'the lady from Kāraikkāl,' 'the female saint from Kāraikkāl,' and 'the Mother from Kāraikkāl,' with 'the female saint from Kāraikkāl' capturing the most elements of this multilayered saintly personality.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 13.



Working with the biographies concerning Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Pechilis sorts through encounters with both the self proclaimed ghoul and the narrativized Mother.l. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems leave biographical holes in the life story of the poet, later biographers conversely focused on the perfection of her physical body as a central element of her religious legacy and merit as a devotee (*bhakta*). These social extremes which Karaikkal Ammaiyar inhabits in her biography as both a mother and as a ghoul,<sup>72</sup> remember Karaikkal Ammaiyar in two ways. On the one hand, Karaikkal Ammaiyar becomes imagined as physically loathsome and ephemeral, on the other, her authority remains saintly and fecundic. These two representations of Karaikkal Ammaiyar navigate or mediate her poetic voice by justifying her status as a saint with social narratives about *dharma*.

Although the ghoul-poet and the Mother-devotee seem to appear as two distinct personalities, the twelfth century hagiographer Cēkkilār weaves the two together in a full exegesis on the life of the saint. In the sixty-six verses composed by Cēkkilār, he tells the story of a beautiful woman who transforms into a *pēy* out of devotion to Siva, and then makes pilgrimage to Mount Kailāsa, Siva's dwelling place. Not only are Cekkilar's verses the most detailed narrative extolling the saint (as well as the longest), but they also explicitly cite her compositions as well as listing all the pen-names attributed to her as a poet. Although previous biographical notes on Karaikkal Ammaiyar offered little historical evidence about her life, their existence does suggest that stories about the poet were circulating in the centuries after her death.

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<sup>72</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 13-14.

Interestingly, Cēkkilār’s sixty-six verses appear not to refer to previous biographers at all. Instead, Cekkilar’s narrative on the life of Karaikkal Ammaiyar arranged themes of *dharma*, wifely duty, and devotion around a close reading of her poems themselves. While Cekkilar draws from social tradition as it is depicted in *The Laws of Manu*, weaving themes of marriage, devotion, and *dharma* into his historical reimagining of the poet, he also soddens the two depictions of Karaikkal Ammaiyar together as he positions the story of the ghoul who worships Siva at the cremation ground in relation to Punitavati the beautiful wife.

In the opening two verses of his biography, Cekkilar describes a beautiful village on the coast where a daughter is born to a wealthy merchant. The baby is named Punitavati, “the pure one,” and she soon becomes highly respected for her beauty, virtue, and devotional merit. The second verse of Cekkilar’s biography reads:

2. At Kāraikkāl, the sea is full of ships. Tanatattan, the head of the community of seafaring merchants who flourish there, secured by his practice of austerities the birth of a daughter, Punitavati [“the pure one”], who was of such great beauty that she was reputed to be an embodiment of Laksmī.<sup>73</sup>

In this description, Cekkilar gives the baby a name which reflects her inherent virtue. While remarking on her beauty and her reputation as an embodiment of Laksmi, Cēkkilār goes on to describe how both Punitavati’s beauty and merit continue to increase with everyday, foreshadowing her miraculous life to come. After describing her birth, Cekkilar almost immediately describes her eligibility for marriage. He writes:

6. Her beauty increased, full of the features that are described as desirable in traditional books; because of its magnificence, there came a time when she should

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<sup>73</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 199.

not leave the home, and traditional merchant families compatible with her own began to inquire about a marriage alliance.<sup>74</sup>

In this verse, Cekkilar makes it clear that Punitavati is well respected within her community for both her physical beauty as well for her ‘features,’ which he describes as aligning with tradition. Here, Cekkilar frames Punitavati’s merits through the lens of *dharma* and right action as the relationship which he posits about Punitavati and marriage tie her virtue to proper conduct regarding modesty and marriage. Because Cekkilar specifically points out that Punitavati she stays home and dutifully waits for a proper marriage, it is clear that his motive from the very beginning of his biography on Karaikkal Ammaiyar, is to present her actions as self conscious and dutiful (*sva-dharma*, “one’s own duty”). While Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s poems do not discuss her marriage, Cekkilar introduces the poet-saint in regards to this tradition. In verse twelve, Punitavati becomes married to a wealthy merchant.

Cekkilar goes on to describes how Punitavati not only serves her husband, dutifully preparing his meals and actively upholding her station as his wife, but how she continually meditates on Siva. In verse fourteen of the biography, Cekkilar describes both her domestic discipline as well as her growing faith:

14. There, the lady with hair like flowers settled into the caring activities of domestic life and flawlessly maintained the household with unceasing discipline and ever-increasing love for the sacred feet of the Lord who rides the great bull.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout the biography thus far, Cekkilar has portrayed Punitavati as a traditional proponent of marriage, even while her own devotional practices increase in intensity. In another example of Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s devotion to Siva, Cekkilar describes how whenever Karaikkal Ammaiyar recognized a holy servant of Siva traveling near her home,

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<sup>74</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 199.

<sup>75</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 200.

she would give them food, fine cloth, and even gems, out of love for them.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, during her daily task of hauling water for the home from the nearby stream, Punitavati would spend time alone in meditation and prayer. Where Ceikkilar emphasizes the ways in which Karaikkal Ammaiyar upholds tradition, expounding on her proper conduct as a wife as well as on her beauty, he also shows that beneath these outward shows of virtue and duty is an inner devotion to Siva. In this way, Ceikkilar justifies Karaikkal Ammaiyar's devotion practices through her conduct.

After some time in her marriage had passed, Ceikkilar describes the first of two significant events which become the catalysts through which Punitavati transforms into the ghoul from Karaikkal. In the first event, Punitavati is given two ripe mangos by her husband, who instructs her to save them for him for when he returns from work. As Punitavati goes about her day preparing his meal, a traveller comes to her home looking for food. Punitavati immediately recognizes him as a "holy servant," of Siva because he wears the sign of the cobra, one of Siva's many symbols.<sup>77</sup> Although the food which Punitavati is preparing has not finished cooking, she gives the holy servant a portion of soft rice with one of her husband's mangos.

When her husband returns, Punitavati serves him the food she prepared and then brings him the remaining mango. Her husband enjoys the mango so much that he asks for the other. As Punitavati moves into the next room as though to fetch it, she faints because she knows she has already given what was her husband's to the traveller. In that moment, Ceikkilar writes that Karaikkal Ammaiyar meditated on the feet of Siva and that Siva, seeing her distress, miraculously placed a mango in her hand. Revived by Siva's intervention on

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<sup>76</sup>*Interpreting Devotion*, 200.

<sup>77</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 201

her behalf, Punitavati gives the mango to her husband, who eats it, and exclaims that it is even better than the last. Punitavati's husband then asks how she came to possess such a rare and delicious mango, and out of her sense of honesty and duty, she tells him about the miracle. He doesn't believe her. Cekkilar writes:

29. The master of the house heard about the grace of the Lord but did not believe it. He looked directly at the she who is like the goddess who sits on the fragrant lotus and said, "Alright, if you got this by the grace of the Lord who has lustrous locks, ask him again for a sublime fruit by his grace and give it to me.

30. The wife moved to the side and prayed to the Lord who wears a cobra as ornament, "If you do not grant this by your grace now, my words will be false," and she obtained a mango by his grace. Her husband was completely astonished as she came to put it in his hand.

31. As soon as the mango touched the merchant's palm it disappeared. He was seized by fear that would not abate, and his mind became perplexed. Thinking that she was a local deity, he resolved to leave without telling anyone, for the time being he lived without much interaction with her.<sup>78</sup>

Although Punitavati strove to serve her husband faithfully, he, frightened of her devotion and the miraculous interaction with Siva which he witnessed, decides to leave her. While Punitavati's religious merit, her proximity to Siva, is revealed throughout this passage of Cekkilar's biography, her husband's ignorance is accentuated. Where Siva's direct intervention serves as a frightful reminder of Punitavati's spiritual authority over her husband, for Punitavati, the miraculous interaction with Siva regarding the mangos arises out of her prayer or devotion to him.

Because Punitavati's husband is too afraid of the divine experience which he witnessed, he soon leaves the village on one of his merchant vessels. However, because Punitavati's actions arose from her position as a *bhakta*, her merit as a dutiful wife remains intact. Because Punitavati's husband initiates their divorce, Karaikkal Ammaiyar remains

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<sup>78</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 202.

blameless even as her life becomes marked by this break from the tradition of marriage. Cekkilar goes on to note that even after her husband's departure, Punitavati continued to steadfastly and faithfully preserve her virtuous domesticity, further accentuating her blamelessness in this regard. While *bhakti* was seen by modern western scholars as a break from or a rejection of tradition, Cekkilar binds the two together in his biography.

This binding on the part of Cekkilar comes to a head when Punitavati's family goes to look for her departed husband. When they find him, they are shocked to find that he has not only married a second wife, but has a child. At this point, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's family takes her to confront him. When the husband hears that his wife and her family are on their way, he once again becomes very afraid. Cekkilar goes on to describe the reception between Karaikkal Ammaiyar, her family and her husband. He writes:

45. With his wife and toddler daughter he paid homage to the feet of his first wife, who stood like a young doe; he said, "I wish to live by your grace; because of this my very young daughter bears your name," and prostrated himself before her.

46. Seeing the husband worship her, the lady who was like vine in bloom and the relatives surrounding her stood dumbfounded; some came to their sense, felt ashamed, and demanded: "Why are you of the fragrant garland worshipping your wife?"

47. Then he responded to them: "When I realized that this lady was no longer human--that she had become a good and great goddess-- I left, and gave my infant daughter her name. I worshipped her golden feet and you must also honor her."<sup>79</sup>

In these three verses, Cekkilar describes how Punitavati's husband reacts to seeing her.

First, her husband is filled with fear at the sight of her and tries to win her favour or redeem himself by praising her in front of her family and presenting his daughter to her. Not only does he prostrate himself before her but at her family's shock, he demands that they also do the same. While Cekkilar foreshadowed Punitavati's birth with a sense of

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<sup>79</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 203.

divine purity when he compared her with Laksmi, and her husband had seen the miracle of Siva's mango in private with his wife at their home, as her husband brings her devotion and proximity to Siva into the public space through his reaction to her, her merit and virtue which had previously been confined to the home and to her role as a wife, becomes a public conversation.

In this way, Cekkilar bridges the publicity of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's legacy as a storied poet-saint with his narrative inside look at her home life. Cekkilar also goes on to say that Karaikkal Ammaiyar assumes the form of a ghoulish as a reaction to her husband's public display. While Cekkilar began his biography with a discussion of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's attractive human features in regards to both physical beauty and *dharma*, he ends his biography with Karaikkal Ammaiyar transforming into a ghoulish, receiving the transmission of her poems, and reciting them before her family and her husband. The following verses describe her transformation from a human to a ghoulish. Cekkilar writes:

49. Worshipping the feet of the highest Lord she said: " I request that you remove this sack of flesh that bears my beauty only for the sake of this man here who has spoken thus. Instead, give to me, your servant, the form of the ghoulish who venerate your sacred feet in that place."

50. At that moment by the grace of the Lord who dances in the hall she fully realized the spiritual path and obtained what she desired. She shed all of her beauty that her fleshly body possessed and became a body of bones in the form of a ghoulish that is venerated by all on heaven and earth.<sup>80</sup>

If we are going to situate Karaikkal Ammaiyar between her poems and the biographies which seek to remember her, then these two clear streams of remembrance within cultural memory both work together and also compete. While authors such as Cekkilar clearly infused Karaikkal Ammaiyar's saint biography with beauty ideals for women, exaggerating

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<sup>80</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 203.

what little emphasis was placed on gender and biographical details within her poems, they also preserved them. As we have seen from Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems, an obsession with Siva's divine body dominates the imagery within them, while the imagery in her biography is fittingly dominated by depictions of her. As literature which memorializes the saint, Cekkilar's biography effectively depicts the saint as having accepted sacred attributes which strengthen her legacy as an important religious figure. However, while Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems depict immediate experiences of divine presence, the biography filters this immediacy through the narrative that it constructs about the saint.

While Cekkilar's biography uses her poems to inform his narrative on the evolution of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's devotion, he contextualizes her devotion poems in a manner which downplays the profane images which she used in her poems. Before the scenario with the mangos, Karaikkal Ammaiyar's devotion practices were primarily depicted as inner meditations. While Cekkilar's repeated mention of her meditations and her conduct as a wife depict her devotion as inward, private and within the home, Karaikkal Ammaiyar, as the *penpey* not only experiences Siva's full form in the public realm of the cremation ground but also his dance. In Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems, her devotion is total as she uses images of Siva's entire body repeatedly, and as she imagines herself as a ghoul in relation to his radiance. Yet in her biography, the devotion imagery from her poems is simplified as it is repeatedly turned toward the home.

In his biography, Cekkilar uses patriarchal social points within his narrative to effectively domesticate Karaikkal Ammaiyar's own poetic register. Although Cekkilar describes the saint as profoundly insightful and as having attained union with Siva, he critically uses her poems within this socially confined sense of the sacred to memorialize



her 'otherness' within the bounds of socially accepted paradigms. However for Karaikkal Ammaiyar, her practice is not one of 'otherness,' and it is certainly not 'peripheral.' Rather, it is completely engaged with 'central' Brahmin practice as it subsumes the story of Siva and King Daksha into its pattern of disruption and reassertion of religious standards. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems are devotional and emotive, a large part of their emotional strength is a result of her descriptions of the cremation ground where burning corpses and naked ghouls linger for a glimpse of Siva. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems attend to minute details in Siva's appearance and glorify his every movement and action, they refer to herself not only as a ghoul but as a howling ghoul, diminutizing her own voice as a poet and *bhakta*. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar the ghoul appears antithetical to the beautiful Punitavati, as well as to Grierson and Schomer's claims about *bhakti*, if we refer back to Pechilis' claims that *bhakti* seeks to place devotion at the center of all human action, then the antinomian moves which Karaikkal Ammaiyar makes in her poems can be seen as various attempts at this centering. Karaikkal Ammaiyar writes:

When his feet stamp  
the underworld shakes;

when his locks whirl  
the heavens vibrate;

when his armbands revolve  
the cardinal directions shift;

he knows that this place  
cannot withstand his dance.<sup>81</sup>

For Karaikkal Ammaiyar, worshipping Siva and engaging in his dance at the cremation ground shifts not only the cardinal directions, but shakes the whole world. As "this place"

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<sup>81</sup> *Interpreting Devotion*, 170.

cannot withstand Siva's dance and remain in the same form, so religious practice and devotion poetics must change in light of *bhakti*.

### 5. The Siva Tradition in Kashmir: The Poetics of Lal Ded

34

Bitter can be sweet and sweet poison.

It's a question of what your tongue wants.

It's hard work to tell what it wants, but keep going:

the city you're dreaming of, it's at the end of this road.<sup>82</sup>

In this poem by Lalla, she uses food and eating to gesture toward the fallibility of human perception and in so doing she critiques the human capacity for discerning reality while offering encouragement on overcoming the difficulty of realizing "what the tongue really wants." Although Lalla's poems are generally shorter in length than either Nammalvar or Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems, they do upend conventional ideas about knowledge and religious authority. In this poem, Lalla's conversation on the nature of the senses and the relationship between personal preference, reality, and sensory deception revolves around confusion and questioning what one thinks one knows, be that knowledge of a taste or of religious practice in general.

Although the poem opens with this paradoxical dilemma that sweet can be tasted as poison, and vice versa, the speaker goes on to suggest that one's ability to perceive taste is actually a matter of personal preference or want. Immediately after asserting this causal relationship between want and experience, the poem goes on to challenge the immediacy and uncontrollability of experiencing a sweet taste, by saying that "it's hard work to tell what "the tongue wants, but keep going." While the first sentence presents a troubling sensory deception which revolves around false experiences of different tastes, and the

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<sup>82</sup> Hoskote, 36.

second sentence claims that this sense deception is in fact caused by the 'wants' of the experiencer, the third sentence encourages the addressee to continue attempting to discern "what the tongue wants," concluding with the revelation; "the city you're dreaming of, it's at the end of this road."

Here, the scenario set out in the first two lines of the poem, is in the second two lines turned on itself, collapsing the thematic tension of perceptual dis-reality through the clause, that in fact, the goal lies on *this* road. What this clause implies, is that although perception can mirror false want or self-deception and can therefore be perceptually misleading, the road to the city is this one, so in spite of fallible perception and the difficulty that discernment entails, this is the right way to go or at least the only way.

Within the body of Lalla's poetic work as a whole, her poems cycle through religious sentiments of ease and realization as well as through those of separation and confusion. At times her religious practice appears focused and precise within her poems and at times she appears wild or 'mad' with longing and desire for a sense of proximity to Siva. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar uses the realm of the cremation ground as the setting in many of her poems, a space uncontested by human existence or culture where she can experience Siva's unmediated immanence as a ghoul, Lalla uses no fixed setting within her poems but often obsesses over themes of pilgrimage and where she can 'look' for Siva. In the poem above, her constant searching for Siva is metaphorized as the sense of taste which can be misled from reality. If reality is participation with Siva or finding "the city you are dreaming of," then one possible reading for the poison which misleads her taste would be the converse experience of *bhakti* participation.

Historically, Lalla or Lal Ded, a name understood colloquially as “Grandmother Lal” and literally as “Lal the Womb,”<sup>83</sup> is thought to have lived between 1320-1373<sup>84</sup> near Srinagar in Kashmir. Born within the Brahmanical class of a Hindu-Kashmiri family and married at twelve, Lalla had abandoned her husband and her marriage by twentyfour. Although her own compositions and sayings refer very little to her married life or to her biography, popular folklore and hagiography depict her relationship with her husband’s family and mother-in-law as emotionally abusive and ostracizing. Seeking autonomy from her in-laws, Lalla chose instead to pursue Siva through a life of wandering and devotion. Instead of pursuing the wife’s *dharma* central to the hindu ontology of womanhood, Lalla used her own body as a place of ritual as she journeyed naked, alone.

During the 14th century in Kashmir, the Trika school of the Siva tradition existed alongside a growing Islamic community which culminated in Shams-ud-din Shah Mir’s rule of the Kashmiri region beginning in 1339.<sup>85</sup> Although Hindu historians during the period were diligent as they catalogued the shifting political and economic details from the region, Lalla as a noteworthy social and religious figure does not appear in any of their texts, despite her pervasive influence on the language and culture of the region.<sup>86</sup>

Instead, the first biographical references to her life are found in hagiographic Persian compendiums produced by Islamic scholars during the Shams-ud-din Dynasty between two hundred and four hundred years after her death. The earliest literary mention of Lalla is found in the *Tadhkirāt ul-rifn* (1587), a hagiography of Kashmiri saints written by Mulla Ali Raina, and she is then mentioned again in Dawud Mishkati’s *Asrār ul-Akbar* (“The

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<sup>83</sup> Hoskote, x.

<sup>84</sup> Hoskote, xvi.

<sup>85</sup> Hoskote, xxiv.

<sup>86</sup> Hoskote, pg xv.

Secrets of the Pious," 1654) 67 years later, in which the name Lalla is attributed to a woman ascetic who meets a Sultan's son in the forest and offers him a cup (which is considered to be a depiction of a Saivite initiation ceremony).<sup>87</sup> Jayalal Kaul in his book titled, *Lal Ded*, offers this passage in translation from Mishkati's *Asrar ul-Akbar*:

In the cradle of the earth, absorbed in God, was she, Lalla 'Aarifa, constantly aware of God...She was one of those who wander in the wilderness of love wailing and lamenting for the Beloved; and she was a knower of the Path of Valley of Truth (*haqq*). Shaikh Nasir-ud-Diin, a Proclaimer of Unity (*vahdat*), an expert in Gnosis, and the father of fakirs (May his secrets be sanctified), has written this in praise of her:

Passion for God set fire to all she had,  
 And from her heart rose clouds of smoke.  
 Having had a draught of "ahd-e-alast",  
 Intoxicated and drunk with joy was she.  
 One cup of this God-intoxicating drink  
 Shatters reason into bits.  
 A little drowsiness from it is headier than,  
 Intoxication from a hundred jars of wine.<sup>88</sup>

In this passage Lalla is memorialized through muslim hagiography, however strong *bhakti* elements are also acknowledged and included in this narrative about her life. Not only is Lalla described as absorbed in god, always aware of god, and as having knowledge of gnosis or of the mystery of god, but she is also described as wailing and lamenting in the 'wilderness of love.' This aspect included in her biography, where Lalla's devotion is described in terms of love and separation, is a clear theme throughout the lives of many *bhakti* poet-saints. Where Cekkilar's biography on Karaikkal Ammaiyar. adds traditional and accepted social elements to her legacy as a saint, the muslim hagiography on Lalla affirms her rejection of social code without needing to justify it. While both Mishkati as well

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<sup>87</sup> Hoskote, xvi.

<sup>88</sup> Kaul, 1-2.

as Nasir-ud-Diin use Islamic and quranic references in relation to her identity as a saint, they maintain the antinomian qualities of her religious practices as they refer to as drunk and wailing, mad with love.

While the first part of the passage is a translation of Mishkati, it goes on to quote from a poem by Nasir-ud-Diin, adding a poetic response to Lalla with Mishkati's prose remembrance of her. In this poem about Lalla, she is depicted as being utterly intoxicated by god, her reason shattered. In the same way that Karaikkal Ammaiyar was completely absorbed in Siva's dance as well as in Siva's body throughout her poems, Lalla is described by both Nasir-ud-Diin as well as Mishkati as being engaged in devotion to the point that both her heart and her worldly possessions are burned away by her practice. As with Karaikkal Ammaiyar's, whose worldly beauty, status as a wife and as a saint were simultaneously shed and confirmed through her transformation into a ghoul at Siva's intervention, Lalla's authority as a saint likewise becomes confirmed through her break with the Brahmin world.

While what little is known about Karaikkal Ammaiyar's life is heavily mediated by her biographers, Lalla's biographers more readily accept the antinomian qualities of her practice. Mishkati and Nasir-ud-Diin praise Lalla as a saint in their hagiographies, even though they themselves were not Siva devotees. Where Cekkilar subsumes Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry into a narrative which emphasizes her virtuous *dharma* and proper conduct, Mishkati and Nasir-ud-Diin recommend Lalla's "madness" as one of the reasons why they can declare that Lalla was on the true path even though she practiced a different tradition. Due to the period when she lived, a period when both Islam and Kashmiri Saivism were practiced in the same upper class circles of Kashmiri society, practitioners from both

traditions new about the practices of the other. Although the first hagiographical notices on Lalla were composed around two centuries after her death, they show that stories about Lalla were traveling through muslim groups long after she died.

From Ranjit Hoskote, author of *I Lalla, The Poems of Lal Ded* (2014), as well as Jayalal Kaul, it becomes clear that Lalla was alive during a period marked by shifting religious and political hierarchies. While Lalla's vernacular compositions in the *vākh* meter present her religious insights as a devotee to Siva, her historical legacy as a *bhakti* poet-saint and the miracles related to her life are preserved not by Hindu historians or priests from her tradition, but by Islamic religious scholars who lived after her death. Because of the overlapping between the two traditions, Lalla remains contested by particular religious groups who wish to claim her as definitively Hindu or Muslim. These distinctions are complicated by the rhetoric within her poems, which draws from both Hindu and Islamic literary aesthetics. Hoskote's text as well as Jayalal Kaul's earlier book, *Lal Ded*, attribute her use of both Hindu and Islamic imagery to the diffusion of cultural ideas that took place in the region where she lived over the course of her life. Although Lalla's adoption of muslim devotion themes could be categorized as break from Siva worship or as a sign of her conversion, she continually returns to references of Siva, subverting this borrowed imagery to her own devotional ends.

While the translations of Lalla's poems by both Kaul as well as Hoskote convey images and metaphors which appear in both Hindu and Islamic devotional poetry, both Hoskote and Kaul argue that these cross overs or interpolations, rather than being attributed to religious conversions from one tradition to another, should be considered as an effect of the cultural space or conversation between the two. This space, which involved

the many voices of a region in flux, and the space created by two religious traditions existing inside one society during Lalla's life, opened the way for later muslim literary and historical commentaries to subsume outsider religious figures from the region.

In the way that both Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Nammalvar's compositions subsumed secular Cankam imagery and tropes on the cremation ground, which they then refitted within their compositions to a devotional end, Lalla turned not to secular but to religious metaphors, turning them from one tradition to another. In the following poem by Lalla, she critiques the traditional practice of pilgrimage which is central to both the Hindu tradition as well as to Islam. She writes:

1  
 One shrine to the next, the hermit can't stop for breath.  
 Soul, get this! You should have looked in the mirror.  
 Going on pilgrimage is like falling in love  
 with greenness of faraway grass.<sup>89</sup>

In this poem, Lalla critiques the practice and tradition of pilgrimage and instead uses image of the mirror to express her focus, that devotion is embodied in the self. Instead of falling in love with far off beauty and wandering from shrine to shrine, Lalla encourages the soul to look in the mirror. In this poem, devotion is depicted as a practice similar to self reflection and not as a series of ritual pilgrimages to specific devotion locations. In the following poem, Lalla continues this critique of pilgrimage.

2  
 I burnt up the landscape with footprints, looking for Him everywhere.  
 Then it hit me, what am I thinking, He's everywhere!  
 Lalla distilled the truth from a hundred pieces of talk.  
 Now hear this people, and go mad!<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Hoskote, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Hoskote, 4.



In this poem, pilgrimage is again criticized. In the first line Lalla describes herself on pilgrimage 'looking for Him everywhere.' But in the second line she realizes that He is everywhere already, implying that He is all pervasive. In the first line, Lalla uses the word everywhere as though she is looking for something that is lost; and so everywhere becomes the a devotion place or a pilgrimage where Lalla might find Siva. Additionally, the 'everywhere' from the second line departs from the idea that He might be found at a specific place or at a specific shrine. Instead of being locational, this 'everywhere' implies that he is above specific physical jurisdictions and locations. In addition to this critique of pilgrimage, also seen in poem 1, Lalla discusses how she was able to "distill the truth from a hundred pieces of talk." Instead of gaining her spiritual insights from one teacher or from one text, she refers to a process of distillation of many voices through which she is able to glean true realization.

In the final line of the poem, Lalla issues a command to her audience. She draws the audience into the thematic material of the poem as she encourages her audience to listen "and go mad!" We have already seen from Cutler that performance poems from the *bhakti* era maintained a conversational structure between poet, audience and god, and like both Nammalvar and Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Lalla's poems can be laid over Cutler's framework. While this poem specifically addresses the audience, drawing them into her experience of devotion madness, most of her poems do not specify her audience although they almost always specify the speaker of the poem as herself.

This concrete authorial designation is very different from the lack of self-identification seen in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems. Not only does Lalla repeatedly use the first person pronoun 'I,' but this 'I' always refers directly to herself. While Nammalvar also

uses 'I' within his poems, he both identifies himself as a speaker while at times identifying or assuming authorial voices, such as the female voice, which are not his own. While all three poet-saints use a rhetoric of the feminine as the speaker within their devotion poems, they articulate this voice through their particular or unique paradigms of *bhakti*. These paradigms overlap as they are all performed, and in that they all use vernacular languages for devotion, however they are also disparate as they are separated by time and geographic region and different styles of poetics.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar, as the one the earliest *bhakti* poet-saints relied heavily on Cankam imagery within her poems, and yet that imagery became subverted through her use of it to represent an entirely different lexicon of meaning from Cankam poetics. While images of the cremation ground and *pey*, were paired with descriptions of the battle ground and heroism in most Cankam tropes, Karaikkal Ammaiyar used them as a metaphor for her divine relationship with Siva. Like Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Lalla redirects the importance of already popular literary images as she effectively unnames them and then renames them for her own literary practice. Although later hagiography does not entirely dislocate Lalla from the Siva tradition with which she identifies in her poems, they do equate elements of her practice with Islamic traditions. Lalla writes:

15  
 Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.  
 All day I looked for You  
 and when I found You hiding inside me,  
 I ran wild, playing now me, now You.<sup>91</sup>

As with both Nammalvar and Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Lalla shows her participation with Siva through her poems. While Karaikkal Ammaiyar becomes obsessed with Siva's dance, and

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<sup>91</sup> Hoskote, 17.

Nammalvar discusses the takeover of his girl who has just learned to speak, in this poem, Lalla sets up a framework of participation with Siva which is based inside herself. Although both Nammalvar and Karaikkal Ammaiyar use the girl and the *pey* respectively to express their relationship to Siva, Lalla uses her own body as the meeting place between worldly and divine knowledge. Through Lalla's repeated use of the first person pronoun, 'I,' she constructs the most obviously personal devotion narrative out of the three saints.

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