

THE FIFTY STANZAS OF A THIEF

*A translation of the
Caura-pañcā-sikā,
attributed to Bilhana,
by Richard Gombrich*

The Fifty Stanzas of a Thief are traditionally attributed to Bilhana, who was active in the second half of the eleventh century A.D. A Kashmiri Brahman, he travelled to various Indian courts, and probably settled in Kalyāṇa (in modern Hyderabad), where he wrote a long historical poem celebrating his patron the Cālukya king Vikramāditya VI Tribhuvanamalla (1076-1127).

The thief has stolen the affections of a princess, and the poem in detached stanzas describes their clandestine love. Evidently extrapolated from the poem itself (especially stanzas 31, 28, 49, 27) is the legend surrounding its composition: the poet had fallen in love with the daughter of a royal patron; when her pregnancy was noticed he was caught, imprisoned, and condemned to death; but as he was led to execution in the king's presence, he recited these reminiscences of his happier days, and the king was so moved that he ordered his release and formally gave him his daughter in marriage.

The poem is a straightforward and unelaborate example of a major genre of Sanskrit literature called *kāvya*. *Kāvya* corresponds precisely to no English term; but the one-word English translation is "poetry." *Kāvya*, like poetry, is usually in verse but not coextensive with verse; not all verse is *kāvya*, nor is all *kāvya* in verse. The ancient Indians were prolific in theories of poetics and hence in definitions of *kāvya*; but perhaps the commonest definition is in terms of a quality called *rasa*. This word is a metaphor from tasting, and means "flavor." The English word used in corresponding context is probably "atmosphere," and the nearest approximation within our tradition is "mode." But both these lack the correct connotations, so I shall go on using "flavor." *Kāvya* then, or poetry, is any coherent speech or writing which is informed by flavor. A flavor is an emotion or sentiment, not experienced directly as in real life, but esthetically, so that it affords a calm enjoyment, a dispassionate pleasure in the passions. This esthetic transfiguration is described as the "universalization" of our passions so that we experience them without being involved in a real situation: a man who sees two lovers in real life, it was said, might undergo emotions of lust, repulsion, or envy; but in reacting to a work of art, he experiences their passion as the type of his own experience of love. There are usually held to be eight basic flavors: love, mirth, grief, anger, heroism, fear, loathing, amazement. Some of these are subdivided; our poem has both the subdivided flavors "love in separation" and "love in

enjoyment." Each work of literature will theoretically have one flavor dominant throughout; and there are rules stating which ancillary flavors may be used in a work dominated by each particular flavor without disrupting the total effect. The word *rasa* is used in a conceit at the end of stanza 24, and I owe the ingenious translation to Michael Coulson.

Poetic theory also recognizes the use of "ornaments," corresponding to our "figures." Ornaments can be of sense or of sound, and include simile, metaphor, zeugma, etc. In early theory *rasa* was merely one such ornament. According to another theory, which came to be held in conjunction with the *rasa* theory, true *kāvya* is literature in which that meaning which is suggested not directly expressed, is the more important.

I made this translation while studying Sanskrit literature under Professor Daniel H. H. Ingalls at Harvard in 1962-63, when there were hardly any readable translations of *kāvya* in print. At that time Professor Ingalls was putting the finishing touches to his monumental work of translation and exposition, *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry*,¹ which came out in 1965. Since then Dr. Barbara Stoler Miller has published her translation of Bhartrihari's *Centuries*,² and Professor John Brough his *Poems from the Sanskrit*.³ I can, therefore, refer the reader who is further interested in the theory and practice of *kāvya* to these excellent books; in particular, Professor Ingalls' introductory essay, "Sanskrit Poetry and Sanskrit Poetics" (pp. 2-29), makes it unnecessary for me to say more on this topic. Professor Ingalls and Dr. Miller present only the single-stanza genre of *kāvya*; Professor Brough, too, concentrates on isolated verses, though he also gives longer extracts from a play and from a major poem in many cantos (*mahākāvya*). The poem here translated is a specimen of the medium-length poem, or *khanda-kāvya*, of which Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* (*cloud messenger*) is the most famous example.

Unfortunately no authoritative text of this poem exists* and I have had to edit my own. The poem has been published in three main recensions, but between these the choice was simple, for only one has just the fifty stanzas of the title, and these all beginning with the same word, plainly an original feature. However, even of this recension not all editions have the same fifty stanzas. Forty-eight of my stanzas are from one text which seemed to me the best; I have emended it where necessary. My stanzas 12 and 40 are from another text. Stanza 40 in the best text is corrupt beyond intelligibility or redemption; stanza 44 is hardly better; but my translation, numbered 44, combines all intelligible content from both main extant versions. My stanza 12 is introduced for another reason: stanzas 12 and 13 of the best text are so empty and repetitious, partly of notions difficult to render tasteful to a European, that I have combined them in my stanza 13. This is the only place where I have allowed myself such a liberty,

*Editor's note: Barbara Stoler Miller's critical edition of the text, in two recensions, was published since the writing of this article, in April, 1971 (New York: Columbia University Press).

though even here I have omitted no idea which is in the Sanskrit. Otherwise, this translation is literal. It contains virtually every word of the original and adds almost nothing, though I have on occasion over-translated what in Sanskrit has become a cliché in order not to forfeit the exoticism of a foreign culture.

The original Sanskrit is in four-line stanzas, each line having fourteen syllables. My stanzas of six iambic pentameters are, thus, almost the same length as the Sanskrit. All Sanskrit meters are quantitative and most are composed of a fixed pattern of long and short syllables without division into feet. (In recitation, the voice dwells on the long syllables.) This poem is in a common lyric meter called *vasanta-tilaka*, which means "ornament of spring." It scans -- v- vvv- vv- v--, four times. Like other meters of its type, it has no alternative forms (though the last syllable of each line is common, as in all Indo-European meters). I have attempted to convey something of this formal strictness by adopting a rather exacting rhyming scheme and rigid meter. In this I differ from my colleagues, especially my American colleagues. Partly it is a question of national and individual taste. In translating Sanskrit, the "elaborated" language, I do not think it necessary to eschew poetic diction, even to the extent (*pace* Professor Brough) of calling a wild goose a swan. The difference is also one of material: I have chosen a poem which depends hardly at all on punning, alliteration, or other "ornaments of sound," and little on suggestions which might elude a non-Indianist. This has allowed me to try to make an impression on the readers of this translation at least analogous to the impression made on its Indian audience by the recitation of the Sanskrit. I hope that my translation, which is likewise designed to be read aloud, portrays both the matter and the manner of the original as nearly as may be.

Most of the allusions which need explanation are mythological. The Indian god of love (1, 2, 20, 29, 32, 42), equivalent in function to Cupid, is called Kāma, which means "passion" or "sexual love"; any synonym can also be used as his name. He shoots people with flower arrows (20) which inflict the fire of love (2,42); he is married to Rati (Pleasure; 29,32). The trinity of gods mentioned in 30 are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. They bear no resemblance or relation to the Christian Trinity; any one of them can be seen as supreme. Brahmā is the Creator in 39. Viṣṇu had several incarnations; one was as a tortoise (50); the most famous was as Krishna. His wife Lakṣmī or Śrī (both words mean "good fortune"; 3,39) is also the goddess of beauty, and was born at the churning of the ocean (see below). At birth she either held a lotus in her hand or floated on the expanded petals of a lotus. Śiva (39,50; the name means "kindly" and is euphemistic) is married to Pārvatī (39), daughter of Mount Himālaya. His wild *tāṇḍava* dance, which he dances at the periodic dissolution of the world, is compared in 7 to the motions of love-making. Indra (39) was in very ancient times an extremely important god, but later became merely the god of sky and storm, lord of the

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1. Still I recall her, golden as a wreath
Of *campak* flowers, her full-blown lotus face,
Her slender line of down, her limbs confused
By Passion, faint from passionate embrace;
I recollect her as she rose from sleep
Like knowledge carelessness has failed to keep.

Still when I see the richness of her youth,
The moon her face, the swelling of her breast,
Her beauty's pallor, and her every limb
By Kāma's fire-bearing darts distressed,
Even today as I recall that sight
My limbs grow cold and shiver with delight.

Still when her eyes, as lotus petals long,
Like Fortune's, goddess lotus-born, I see,
And see her wearied by her bosom's load,
With both my arms clasping her close to me
As honey bee his darling lotus sips,
I would grow drunk on mead within her lips.

Still I remember how her body lay
Exhausted by our love, her pale cheeks lined
With tumbled locks of hair, and round my neck
The tendrils of her arms she tightly twined;
Held me so close as if she bore within
Her heart concealed some secret deed of sin.

5. Still I remember sleepless nights we passed
In pleasure; her long eyes at break of day,
Tremulous roving stars, threw sidelong looks
Towards me, as in shame she turned away.
A swan princess into a lotus bed
Upon a lake of love inclined her head.

Still, could I once again behold my love,
Her eyes so long they seemed to touch her ears,
Could I behold my darling's slender form,
Long racked by parted lovers' tender fears,
I'd clasp that body wasted by love's fever
And close my eyes, and never more would leave her.

Still I recall that lovely full-moon face,
The disarray of her dishevelled tresses,
The weight of ample hips and bosom, which
Her dainty, passion-weary limbs depresses;
These attributes her leading role enhance
In love's ecstatic, earth-dissolving dance.

Still I recall the grace of her repose
As she reclined, with perfume all around
Arising from the fragrant musk of deer
Blended with smoothest sandal finely ground.
Her eyes in lovely fluttering imitate
A curve-beaked wagtail billing with his mate.

Still I recall her flushed with love and wine,
Great eyes in which the darting pupils swim,
Her slender body and her sportive lips;
On a ground of Kashmir saffron every limb
With figures in black deer-musk ornamented;
Her mouth with camphor and with betel scented.

10. Still I remember my beloved's face
Gleaming with pearls of sweat and saffron's gold;
The abundant moisture and her wandering eyes
All the fatigue of love's fulfillment told.
No brighter does the full-faced moon appear
When from Eclipse's jaws she frees her sphere.

Still I remember how one night, offended,
The princess would not speak, and so refrained
When I had sneezed from the auspicious words
"Long life," by which such omens are restrained,
But wordlessly upon her ear reset
The golden leaf which was her amulet.

Still I remember, ringed with curls, her face,
A rotund moon on whose cool rays were fed
Two swift *cakora* birds, her restless eyes;
Her lips as the *bandhūka* bloom were red;
She bowed with heavy breasts as prominent
As temples of a rutting elephant.

Still I recall the graceful coquetry
Of those curved limbs, the loving sidelong look,
The golden earrings beating on her cheeks
As sweat-pearl glistening her body shook.
Her slipping garment showed her lovely breast;
Her lip was dented where my teeth had pressed.

Still I recall my darling's hands, as red
As when the *asoka* tree new buds unfurls.
Her gait was gentle, stately as a swan's;
Her nipples kissed by necklaces of pearls.
Her pallid cheeks my memory beguile:
They blossomed into dimples with her smile.

15. Still I recall the gold-anointed thigh
On which her gold-embroidered garment glinted.
As she got up I tugged it to reveal
The marks which my love-frenzied nails had printed.
Then in embarrassment she would not stay
But hid them with her hand and ran away.

Still I remember when I am alone
The jet-black eyes collyrium had kissed;
Her braided hair, one mass of full-blown flowers;
And golden bangles dangling from each wrist.
Sweet betel juice had tinged her teeth with red --
A string of pearls smeared with vermilion lead.

Still when alone I recollect the smile
Which tasted nectar-sweet upon her lip;
I see the fastenings of her braided hair
Slip from their place, and see the garlands slip;
The wandering gaze, the string of pearls which rests
Kissing a pair of full uplifted breasts.

Still I recall how wreaths of jewel lamps
Garlanded round us in that palace white,
Fragmented darkness with their mass of rays;
Her eyes were pained in modesty and fright
When I surprised her bending over me
To spy her sleeping lover secretly.

Still I remember in her slenderness
The only vessel of my tender pleasure,
Her limbs on fire with separation's flame,
Her teeth as lovely as the various treasure
Of ornaments with which her body shone;
Eyes of a deer, and movements of a swan.

20. Still I recall my darling as she came,
Bent by her bosom's weight, to pleasure's bower,
House of the god who wounds with fiery darts,
Herself a beautiful and full-blown flower.
Her smile at me was radiance to bedeck
The clustered pearls which gleamed upon her neck.

Still I recall how my beloved spoke
When weary with our play; her tongue, confused,
Wished to assure me of her wild delight
But stumbled on the flatteries she used.
With timid murmurings and accents blurred
How charmingly she jumbled every word.

Still in another life I shall recall
What I recall at this my hour of dying:
The slender body of my royal swan
Amid love's lotus clusters languid lying;
Her eyes were closed in pleasure as we revelled,
Her garment loosened and her hair dishevelled.

Still, could I see once more, as day declines,
My loving mistress of the fawn-like eyes,
Carrying like two nectar-laden jars
Her swelling breasts, I would for such a prize
Renounce the joys of royalty on earth,
Heavenly bliss, and freedom from rebirth.

Still I recall my darling, whom the shafts
Of love, the flower-arrowed god, distress;
Above the choicest beauties of the earth
She shines with rays of flawless loveliness
As the new moon, the cup from which I savor
Where love is played the play's essential flavor.

25. Still I recall her, clinging close to me
As a wet garment, while the furious flame
Of passion seared her body, a mere girl
Who more to me than life itself became.
No moment fails the piteous recollection
Of her distress, who lacks her lord's protection.

Still when I think of those of lovely form
My thoughts turn first of all to the princess
Whose tender limbs were surely formed to be
The sole recipients of my tenderness.
My fellow men, this absence from my fair
Burns me with fiercer flame than I can bear.

Still, though I know this is my final hour,
O my bewilderer - what can I do? -
My thoughts are ever and again constrained
To leave the thirty gods and fly to you.
My constant one, I think of you alone
As dearest, as beloved, as my own.

Still I recall her in whose eyes I saw
The shy mobility of a gazelle.
When she had heard that I must go from her
Her tongue would falter on the word "Farewell";
From brimming eyes water of tears would flow,
And with the weight of grief her head hung low.

Still, though my eye may diligently search
This world, which is so full of every kind
Of comely woman, yet the counterpart
Of my beloved's face I cannot find.
She conquers by the beauty of that face
Both Love's beloved and the moon in grace.

30. Still I recall the white-toothed girl, from whom
It was poison for a moment to be parted;
Then in renewed embrace anointing me
With copious nectar, she new life imparted,
Herself fatigued by love; if she is mine,
Why do I need the trinity divine?

Still my mind flinches at the memory
How from the royal palace I was led
By fearsome men, who, ineluctable,
Seemed envoys from the ruler of the dead.
In grief I cannot tell how for my sake
There was no effort that she did not make.

Still does it pain my heart by night and day
That I before me may no longer see
At every step I take my darling's face
In full-moon beauty shining upon me.
The god of love is wounded in his pride,
For she is far more charming than his bride.

Still I keep all my wavering thoughts on her,
That in my next life she may be my lot,
The essence of whose youth no other man
Has tasted, maiden pure without a spot,
My only hope in this life, and my sum
Of aspirations for the life to come.

Still I recall how when a swarm of bees,
Allured by perfume from her lotus face,
Paused in their wanderings to kiss her cheeks,
In self-defence with agitated grace
She waved her bud-like hands, whose bracelets swinging
Distract my mind, for still I hear their ringing.

35. Still I recall how when I had grown drunk
Upon the wine with which her mouth was filled
Into her rounded breast I pressed my nails
And left a mark at which her body thrilled,
But she would try to watch and be alert,
Seeking to guard herself from further hurt.

Still I remember when in angry mood
She turned her face away and made to go.
I spoke to her, but she would not reply;
I kissed her, and her tears began to flow.
Freely she wept; then at her feet I fell:
"I am your slave, my dearest; love me well."

Still does my mind run on - what can I do? -
To well-loved rooms in which my darling lay,
Rooms to which lovely women gave their charm
With song and laughter, dance and mime and play.
Where my own love lives with her maiden friends,
There would I pass my time till my time ends.

Still there is no one in the whole wide world
Able to give the picture of my wife,
For on this earth her like has not been seen.
Nor shall be seen in this or any life,
And he alone, if even he, could catch
Her likeness, who had seen her beauty's match.

Still I am doubtful: is she Pārvatī,
Lord Śiva's consort? Sacī, Indra's bride?
Or Lakṣmī, Lady Fortune, Krishna's wife?
Did the Creator form her to misguide
The triple world, or with a whim to see
The purest jewel of virginity?

40. Still when I think, as I have often thought,
To make comparison between the luster
Of timid glances from her fawn-like eyes
And a wreath woven from a jasmine cluster
Which honey-drinking bees have agitated,
Drowned in the blooms, my mind is captivated.

Still now that face of golden loveliness,
A spotless moon upon an autumn night,
That mouth of nectar which absolves from death
Would steal the senses of an anchorite;
So what of me? Could I those lips regain
I'd kiss them, and no more feel parting's pain.

Still, could I but attain once more that mouth,
Passion's one consecrated bathing place,
Watered by her affection to assuage
Love's scorching heat, and by her lotus face
Scented with pollen, surely I'd resign
My life in forfeit to preserve it mine.

Still is my heart despondent, for I see
The world, alas, so crowded to excess
With beauties and their noble qualities;
Yet even in this myriad loveliness
Not one to serve me for comparison
To her perfection whom I dote upon.

Still now my dear princess, a royal swan,
Causing my tender lotus heart to quiver,
Stirs from the mud of our separation
As in my mind she flows on like a river;
Her slender body coruscates with thrills,
Like sand banks glittering beneath the rills.

45. Still I recall that wanton rolling eye
Intoxicated by the prime of youth;
Her father is a very diadem
To crown the kings of men, but she in truth
More like a princess of celestial might
Fallen from heaven to grace our earthly sight.

Still neither night nor day may I forget
My loving mistress as she rose from sleep,
Her varied show of brilliant ornament,
Her breasts so close together, tall and steep,
As if above her altar-slender waist
Twin jars of milky nectar had been placed.

Still I recall the physic of my life,
That languid body in its golden charm;
She was uneasy for her modesty
And passion made her tremble with alarm,
Till gradually as I pressed limb to limb
My fervent kisses made her senses swim.

Still I recall her sweet tenacity
In pleasure's sport, the battle without arms,
In which we varied our embraces as
We rose and fell, and struck with open palms,
Till teeth pressed into lips, and raking nails
Left drops of blood to mark out scarlet trails,

Still in no other fashion can I live,
Nor other profit in this life can find
Than in enjoyment of love's ecstasies
Shared with the dearest of her gentle kind.
Death only, brother, can my pain allay,
So cut me off, I plead, without delay.

Still Viṣṇu's tortoise back upholds the earth
As when the gods for nectar churned the seas;
Poison and fire then threatened all the world;
One Śiva drank and still will not release,
One Ocean still retains within his deep;
For what the noble have made theirs, they keep.