Midnight Soliloquies

Poetic Parallels in Classical Tamil and Greek Lyric

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Abstract

This paper compares two verses from different times and places, the older one a fragment by the Greek poet Sappho; the more recent, a lyric poem by the classical Tamil poet Patumanār. The two resemble each other in content, as well as structurally and stylistically. A historical connection cannot be proven, but their similarities suggest more than coincidence, and the well-known economic exchange between South India and the Graeco-Roman world makes the idea of literary exchange plausible as well.

The speaker of each verse is a woman, alone. Both contain four lines;¹ the first three lines speak of midnight and tell us that all others have retired for the night. Both poems use the imagery of sinking or setting to connote sleep, albeit in opposite ways. The similarities come to a triple head in the last line of each poem, where meaning, grammar, and sound highlight the speakers’ solitude in similar ways. As each narrator proclaims her loneliness, the lexical choices of both poets emphasize the first person singular pronoun, and likewise employ rounded back vowels to great onomatopoeic effect.

The differences between the two poems are as compelling as the parallels. My paper shows how comparisons of the two poems’ form, substance, and diction illuminate both.

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¹ Sappho’s lines may be one verse of a longer work.
Introduction

Two verses, worlds and centuries apart, bear a striking resemblance. The older of the two is a famous fragment by the Greek poet Sappho; the other a lyric poem by the classical Tamil poet Patumaṇār. A historical connection cannot be proven, so this paper will not assert one, but their similarities suggest more than coincidence, and the well-known economic exchange between South India and the Graeco-Roman world makes the idea of literary exchange plausible as well. This paper will first address the evidence for cultural contact, then offer an introduction to classical Tamil lyric poetry as background, and finally analyze and compare the two verses.

Tamil is spoken by about sixty-six million people in India and Sri Lanka, and over a million more among the South Asian diaspora around the globe. It is one of the two classical languages of India, the other being Sanskrit. Along with Greek and just a handful of other languages, Tamil has one of the longest continually attested traditions in the world. Between about the second century before the Common Era and the fifth century CE, literature flowered in South India—gorgeous lyric poetry of love and war. It was a time of great scholarly and artistic achievement all over India.

But like the classical Mediterranean world, civilization there mingled with savagery: kings and emperors who patronized the arts and learning waged brutal wars on each other. South India was dominated by three great dynasties, the Paṇḍiyas, Cholas, and Cheras, fierce warriors and patrons of the arts.

Evidence for Extensive South Asian-European Contact

We know from archaeological, historical, epigraphic, and literary evidence that at this time there was extensive trade between the Mediterranean world and South Asia: modern-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan. Known as Yavanas in India, merchants from the west brought gold and silver, which they exchanged for spices, jewelry, indigo, and other exotic items. Contact was most intensive with southern India. The Tamil city of Karur, the capital of the Chera kings, was known to Ptolemy, who mentions it in his great treatise on geography (Ptolemy/McCrindle 1885). This city was at the crossroads of the ancient eastern, western, and southern trading routes of South India, routes we know were traveled by westerners because of the large number of gold and silver Roman coins that have been found around the city. At least eleven of the classical Tamil poets are said to have come from this city; we can imagine that they grew up with Roman traders a familiar sight (Mahadevan 2003).

And these merchants did not simply trade; they put down roots on both ends of this global trade route. Contemporary Indian texts speak of Roman settlements in South India called yāvana paḍis (Nagaswamy 2005), and Roman artifacts of all kinds have been found in copious quantities in South India: not only coins, but jewelry, amphorae, and potsherds. Likewise, travelers from India visited the Roman world and in some cases stayed. There are inscriptions in Egypt in both Tamil and Prākrit; the Prākrit is written in what looks like a southern Indian version of the Brahmi script (Salomon 1991).
The interchange was cultural as well as economic. Yavanas appear several times in the Tamil poems, where they are admired for their fierceness, their artistry, and their wine. (You know if they were drinking together, they were singing poetry together!) Moreover, this cultural exchange was ample and far-reaching, entering into the spheres of religion, art, and language, with a hint of literary interaction as well. We see religious contact in an inscription found in Egypt that is a dedication—in Greek—to the god Pan, by someone who describes himself as an Indos, an Indian (Salomon 1991). Indian literature of the time demonstrates abundant artistic interaction with its descriptions of the beautiful pavilions, sculptures, and jewel-bedecked chariots created by Yavana artisans. There was also linguistic exchange: a description in a later Tamil epic, the Perunikatai, tells of Indian men and women learning the Yavanas’ language.

Most relevant to our discussion is the evidence of cross-cultural literary contact between the Mediterranean and south Indian worlds. Fragments of a second-century Greek play, known as the Charition Mime and preserved in an Oxyrhynchus Papyrus from Egypt, reveal a farce that retells Euripides’ play Iphigenia at Tauris, but with the setting changed to India. The play features an Indian chorus as well as other Indian characters who speak words that look like they represent a south Indian language related to Tamil—probably early Kannada (Hultzsch 1904; Salomon 1991).

So... while we cannot know whether the author of this Tamil poem knew Sappho’s verse, it is not only possible, it is quite plausible.

Cankam Poetry

The works of classical Tamil are called the Cankam poems, from legends of a center of art and learning, called a Cankam, that was patronized by the south Indian kings. The literature is rightly called classical, as the poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan observes, because they are both ancient and ‘they are works that have stood the test of time, . . . the founding works of a whole tradition, a major poetic achievement of Indian civilization’ (Ramanujan 1985).

We have well over two-thousand of these poems, ranging in length from three lines to about eight hundred, probably only a fraction of what was actually composed. They were preserved on palm leaf manuscripts, which are susceptible to humidity, fire, and insects; and because of their largely secular and often erotic content, they have also been subject to human negligence and even malice as well. We have in addition a contemporary grammar, the Tolkāppiyam, which describes both the language of the poems and the elaborate semiotic and aesthetic system on which their descriptions draw. There were about four-hundred poets, of whom some two dozen were women, a classical rarity.

We might not have these poems if not for the great Tamil scholar U.Ve. Cāminathaiar. Along with the Tamil epics Maṇimekalai and Cilappatikāram, the Cankam lyric poems had been largely forgotten for several hundred years.

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1 The same group of papyri also contain some Sappho fragments.
when in the mid-nineteenth century this young prodigy of Tamil studies was embarrassed by an older scholar who made him feel ignorant when asking him what he knew of the ‘ancient texts.’ With his curiosity aroused, Cāminathaiar went to the library of his Saivite mutt and there found six of the eight anthologies in a bundle of palm leaf manuscripts. They were in terrible shape, falling apart. He decided to devote his life to hunting for more manuscripts and preserving and interpreting them, and he ended up writing thorough commentaries on five of the anthologies, partly inspired by an English-language biblical concordance he had seen, so—in addition to the traditional commentarial practices of providing a detailed context for each poem and paraphrasing then interpreting it and explaining individual obscure usages—he also incorporated, for example, the ideas of variant readings from differing texts, and of citing parallels from other poems.

Singlehandedly Cāminathaiar started the modern tradition of Tamil commentary and launched what became known as the Tamil Renaissance. In the beginning there was a good bit of resistance, because the poetry was still thought to be too secular and bordering on pornographic: pamphlets of protest circulated, and a policeman neighbor of his showed up wanting to burn all the texts. If we did that, Cāminathaiar told him, ‘we would have to dump the whole of Tamil and Sanskrit literature into the sea and smash all temple statues and idols.’ That stopped the man.

The poetry of the Cankam anthologies is divided into two groups, akam and puram, based on subject matter. Puram means ‘outside or exterior, outer parts of the body, the yard, public,’ and so puram poems deal with all aspects of public life: they praise kings, describe war, sing of tragedy, lament the dire poverty of poets.

The poem under discussion here is an akam poem, from the word meaning ‘interior, heart, household, or private’ Akam poems address our inner life—the life of home and heart—they are love poems, composed under the guidelines of an intricate and highly structured system. Always the voice is in the first person: the poet speaks in the persona of one of the characters in a generic love story: the young woman and her man, her friend, his several friends, her mother, her nurse, occasional passersby, and, in the poems that take place after marriage, his mistress. Each poem depicts one of the five stages of love as well as certain moods, emotions, and situations of those stages.

No one is ever named in the akam poems; they are all types, abstractions of the people usually caught up in any tale of young, romantic love. (Puram poems always give names of kings and so on; for that reason they are more useful for dating the poems.) The hero and heroine are known simply as the talaivan and talaivi, the ‘main man’ and ‘main woman.’ This anonymity emphasizes the universality of the events and emotions of the poems.

Each poem is a single soliloquy in the voice of one character, spoken to one of the other characters or sometimes to the moon or the world at large, never to us. We the audience are always in the role of eavesdropper. The focus is usually on the woman’s experience of love; the most frequent speakers are
the heroine and her girlfriend confidante; common themes are her grief, anxiety, suffering, and most of all helplessness in the absence of her lover. The poems make it clear, however, that her helplessness arises from societal constraints; hers is not an emotional or physical helplessness. She has to stay put, most of the time: we see her confined by village gossip, parental control, and later, motherhood.

There has recently been some wonderful comparative work on the Cankam poets by Martha Ann Selby, who has written two books juxtaposing ancient Tamil, Sanskrit, and Prākrit love poems. Her work has opened the door to a world of fruitful comparisons. Other Indian erotic poetry is an obvious starting point, because not only is the similarity of genre a springboard for comparative work, but all the obvious questions of influence, provenance, and shared cultural values are raised: Selby discusses the notion of a ‘Pan-Indian classical love lyric.’ But all of the world’s lyric poetry awaits comparison with these poems, to the improved understanding of both. The poems of the troubadours of medieval France leap to mind. It has been claimed, thoughtlessly, that those poems reflect the beginnings of the notion of ‘romantic love’ in literature, but that notion was alive and well in ancient India.

The Tamil poem under discussion in this paper has, in abundance, the eternal theme of romantic love poetry. Separation and waiting predominate in all the Cankam love poems; even most of the poem types whose theme is premarital, clandestine love speak less about the trysting and more about the eternal waits between meetings.

The Poems

Our two poems follow—Greek and Tamil respectively.

Sappho 168B: 1
Δέδυκε μὲν ἀ σελάννα
καὶ Πληίαδες μέσαι δὲ
νύκτες, παρὰ δʼ ἔρχετ’ ὄρα
ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατεύδω.

*deduke* *men* *a* *selanna*
has sunk  [part.]  the  moon

*kai*  *Pleiades*  *mesai*  *de*
and  Pleiades  middle  [part.]

*nuktes*  *para*  *de*  *erkheto*  *ōra.*
night  by  [part.]  is  going  time/season

*egō*  *de*  *mona*  *kateudō*
alone  [part.]  fall  asleep

1 By the Voigt numbering system.
Lady the moon is set and gone
And the Seven Sisters, and Midnight; passing by is the Hour’s bloom,
And I? Alone, I fall asleep.¹

Kuruntokai 6:

The time is droning midnight: words
Are quenched; all have succumbed to sweet sleep.
Why, the whole wide world sleeps, rancorless.
I alone—of course—sleep not.²

Analysis

The poems are similar in structure and organization, in content, and in language. Where they do diverge from each other, even the differences seem to speak to each other. Let us go through these parallels one by one.

The speaker in each poem is understood in both traditions to be a lovelorn woman. Both poems are four lines; in the first three lines each speaker tells us that the time is around midnight and that all others have retired for the night. For Sappho, those others are the speaker’s heavenly companions; for the Tamil narrator, they are her human fellows. The fourth and last line of each poem heartbreakingly proclaims the aloneness of the speaker.

¹ Translated by A.P. David.
² My translation.
Both poems use the imagery of sinking or setting to connote sleep, but in opposite ways. For the moon and the Pleiades, Sappho uses the word δέδυκε, the perfect of δύω, meaning, in the case of heavenly bodies, ‘to sink’ (that is, into the ocean—the semantics of this makes eminent sense in the Mediterranean world). But in comparing the setting moon and stars with herself, she implies that they are metaphorically falling asleep. The Tamil verse, on the other hand, speaks of people, rather than stars, sinking or setting into sleep with the word aṭaŋku, ‘to settle or set,’ which is usually used with astronomical bodies.

Along with this semantic parallel, three grammatical similarities lie in the final line of both poems. In another Tamil love poem (Kuruntokai 4), one hears what I call ‘onomatopoeic moaning.’ The line nōm en neıcē, ‘my heart aches’ is hauntingly repeated three times. Note that the consonants of that thrice-uttered sentence are primarily nasals and there are six long vowels, ō—ē, ō—ē, ō—ē: the sounds of these nasal consonants and long vowels highlight the intense sense of grief by conveying a sense of moaning, of keening. (Notice, by the way, that the English word moan is also onomatopoeic.) We see here, by the way, one of the most straightforward reasons lyric poetry cannot really be successfully translated. The use of sound symbolism to foreground the form of a message, thereby drawing attention to the message itself, is necessarily language-specific.

In these two poems we also see onomatopoeic moaning. Line 4 of the Greek poem contains three rounded vowels, two long, one short, as she bewails her loneliness and settles down to sleep: ἑγὼ δὲ μόνα κατεύδω. Likewise, the Tamil poem begins with a long rounded vowel, ō, in the phrase Ōr yān, ‘I alone,’ and ends with two long front vowels in a row ē—ē: ōryān manṛa tuṅcā tēnē.

A second similarity in the final lines is that each poem highlights the first person singular pronoun and places it at the line’s opening. The Greek poem highlights it by explicitly including the pronoun—in Greek ἑγὼ is optional, and when it is used, it is for emphatic effect. The Tamil poet finds a way to underscore the pronoun with that curious phrasing in Ōr yān—literally, ‘one I’ or ‘one me,’—a highly unusual collocation that appears only one other time in the entire Cankam corpus. The effect of both poets’ lexical choices here is twofold: first, the long rounded moaning vowel in the first foot of the last line aurally reflects her sadness, and second, emphasizing the pronoun I foregrounds the speaker in relation to those others of the previous three lines.

The third grammatical parallel is in both poets’ use of particles to define their relationship to others. In closing, then, let us look more closely at how the two speakers view their connection to the other denizens of the world they describe; for even though the form and subject matter of the Greek and Tamil poems resemble each other, the diction here conveys a sharp contrast in tone. Sappho’s speaker seems reconciled to her lot, while the Tamil speaker is defiant in her loneliness.

Sappho’s speaker uses the μὲν...δὲ construction, to rhetorically partner her first subject in her verse—the moon—with the others, including herself in the final line. In addition, all of the nouns in Sappho’s poem are feminine (a conceit Tamil is not capable of, since nouns that refer to non-humans are not marked for gender). So Sappho’s lonely woman sees herself in a sorority with the cosmos (David 2006). She
is alone, yet she implies an affinity with the nighttime companions who have just departed, and in the end, mateless also, she joins them in sleep.

In the Tamil poem, the final line contrasts strongly with the three previous: the heroine is in opposition to the other inhabitants of her world, and the particle manrā emphasizes the antagonism. Those others are sunk in the sweetness of sleep, free of anger. Anger—we can imagine that she has been arguing with someone—her lover, or perhaps her parents: so now while the rest of the world has left anger behind and sleeps, she cannot. In this complaint that she cannot sleep, the emphatic particle comes across as almost sarcastic: ‘Naturally, I can’t sleep.’ The tone is defiant rather than resigned as in Sappho’s poem. The more common meaning of the verb she chooses for the people who have gone to sleep—ataŋku—is ‘to yield, to submit.’ (It only means ‘to sink or set’ by extension.) In other words, they may have given in and fallen asleep, but she will not. It is highly significant that one frequent use of this verb in Cankam poems is as a negative participle to describe those fierce kings and warriors of the puram poems, who are ‘unyielding’ or ‘relentless’ in battle. Like them, she too will not yield.

References


