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Review of Parasarathy's translation of the Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal

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The recent translation of Ilanko Atikal's Cilappatikaram (The Ankle Bracelet), a South Indian epic dating from the second or third century c.e., by R. Parthasarathy is indispensable for anyone who wishes to have an accurate rendering of the text into English.

Parasarathy's brief introduction, with its analysis of Kannaki as both limited (unable to define herself, under patriarchy, independently of the men to whom she is connected) and heroic (finding her own voice once she has "nothing to lose," having lost her man) whets the appetite for the text and aids ahead of time in understanding it. His explanation of the meaning of her breaking open her ankle bracelet (as "unsexing" herself) underscores the "nothing to lose," and prepares us for the disturbing action of Kannaki's ripping off her breast and hurling it against the towers of the town in which her husband was wrongly killed, an action which is part of her transformation into the goddess Pattini.

With his extensive postscript, Parasarathy adds more valuable information, and gives a sample of Tamil with word-by-word translation, so one can understand the process, and the merits, of his rendering the epic into English. One of the features of the Tamil is that though a sentence may take several lines, there is a sense of grammatical completeness to the lines (except that the verb is held to the end, as in German), as information is added, phrase by phrase, to fill out an initial picture. In this respect Tamil, like Homeric Greek, offers considerable challenge to the translator. (The fixed order of adjective-noun in English makes it especially difficult to convey this sense of completeness in translation.) Parasarathy succeeds admirably given the constraints. His translation conveys some of the grammatical flow of the Tamil; his word choice is accurate and, within the limits of accuracy, often elegant.

This reviewer, a classicist, was first introduced to the epic by a Tamil friend, who told her, with great pride, that it was his people's greatest work and had much to say to the West. (As Parasarathy states, the Cilappatikaram is for Tamils what the Iliad was for Greeks.) She read it in the Danielou translation and found that it did have much to say to the West, particularly on the subject of sensuality and sexual pleasure. Reading it she realized that it made the Greeks seem chaste as nuns. Not that there is no lovemaking in ancient Greek literature--there is plenty; but the lovemaking is connected far more to power than pleasure. There is rarely any sign that the Greeks enjoyed lovemaking: desired it, yes; enjoyed it, rarely. For example, Achilles sleeps with Briseis in Iliad 34, as Hera with Zeus in Iliad 1, but there is no word of pleasure. Later European literature continues to contaminate sex with domination but now with an admixture of guilt and sin. (Note that in the original Don Juan play by Tirso de Molino, there is not a single sign that Don Juan enjoyed lovemaking, though there is ample evidence that he enjoyed the trickery and triumph.) The frank enjoyment of sensuality and sexuality shown in the Cilappatikaram makes the West seem full of pleasure-eunuchs.
It is refreshing not only to see such full and guiltless enjoyment of
the senses, but to see it in the context of marriage. Let me give an example
and at the same time compare translations. (Danielou's Shilappadikaram (New
York) is chosen for comparison because it is the most easily available; there
is also Subramanyam's The Anklet Story (New Delhi) [1977]. For help with the
Tamil I thank William Harman of De Pauw University.)

"The bees murmured songs to their ears while they lay on a bed strewn with
fragrant pollen. On the naked shoulders of his bride, Kovalan traced the form
of a sugar cane... Kovalan was wearing a garland of jasmine buds, their
hearts forced open by the bees; Kannaki, a wreath of blue lotus. In the ardor
of their embraces the garlands became entangled. When he was satiated by
love's pleasures, Kovalan looked fondly at the radiant face of his new bride,
and said tenderly... " (Danielou)

Bees gorged themselves
On the fresh blossoms that strewed their bed.
On Kannaki's broad shoulders
35 Kovalan drew a sugarcane ...
... He wore
A wreath of jasmines in bloom: their white petals,
40 Opened by bees, was a broad expanse
Of moonlight. Hers was a garland
Of shimmering red and purple water lilies
In flower. As they embraced, their wreaths
Became entangled. His passions still unspent
45 Kovalan looked Into the radiant face
Of Kannaki and spoke his mind to her...
" (Parasarathy)

The most momentous difference is in the form itself. Parasarathy had
to translate in line form for full accuracy (to form as well as meaning).
However, there is something about line form which seems to make it harder for
the mind to excerpt what is important or arresting. The difficulty is
multiplied in the Cilappatikaram because there are many songs set within the
epic without introduction. In Danielou and Subramanyam the songs are in line
form; the rest in prose. In Parasarathy one cannot tell at a glance whether
one is in the narrative or in a song. A reprinting should use italics for
the songs.

Besides the difference in form, there are many smaller differences in
word choice which add up to an effect. To name some:

(a) D has bees "murmurming" (sound) P has them "gorging" (taste). P is more
accurate.

(b) In D Kovalan "traced the form" of the sugarcane; in P he "drew" a
sugarcane. D's "traced" represents the Tamil verb perfectly and avoids
making the reader pause to wonder whether Kovalan had a marker.

(c) D has "naked" shoulder; P has "broad," which may suggest an unfeminine
quality to western readers. (The Tamil is "lovely." Subramanyam chooses
"bare.")

(d) "Their hearts forced open by bees" has a more sexual flavor than the
matter-of-fact "opened by bees." D goes perhaps too far in his sexual suggestion (the violence), P not far enough. (The opening of flowers by bees often has a sexual suggestion in Tamil; Subramanyam uses "pierced." "Penetrated" is another possibility.)

(e) D's "Kannaki, a wreath of blue lotus" is a lot simpler than P's "Hers was a garland of shimmering red and purple water lilies in flower." The Tamil has three words. P is perhaps too accurate here.

(f) D's "In the ardor of their embraces, their wreaths became entangled" is more imagination-provoking than P's "As they embraced, their wreaths became entangled." P is too matter-of-fact. The Tamil is more exciting, using a single verb for both nouns: "Their passions and their garlands mingled." Subramanyam probably captures it best with "Their close embrace tangled their garlands."

(g) D's "when he was satiated by love's pleasures" is quite different from P's "his passions still unspent" (although both actually work to suggest the passion of the moonlit night). There is an ambiguous double negative in the Tamil; P is more accurate.

(h) D's "looked fondly" and "spoke tenderly" suggest more affection than P's "looked" and "spoke his mind." D is more accurate with "looked fondly" (there is an adverb "gently"); P is more accurate with "spoke his mind" (the verb is matter-of-fact).

Perhaps the final word is simply that Parasarathy is more accurate and there can be no question of preferring Danielou to Parasarathy. But perhaps there is a scope for fidelity that goes beyond vocabulary and form. (We are entering the realm of the "spirit of the law" rather than the "letter.") If the Tamil original is easy and flowing for a Tamil reader and releases the imagination to fly and follow along, should not the English match it? And if precision ("shimmering red and purple water lilies in flower" rather than "blue lotus") creates so much difficulty that the energy which could have fueled imagination is consumed by the mind as it deciphers meaning, and if understatement ("opened by bees" rather than "forced open" or "pierced") leaves imagination grounded, then is the accurate translation any more faithful?

The Cilappatikaram falls into three parts: the first (Kovalan and Kannaki; Kovalan and Matavi) fascinating, the second (the tearing of the breast) disturbing, the third (on kingship and ritual) uninteresting except to the most ardent of scholars. Those interested in literature in general will concentrate on the first part; in feminism on the first and second; and in Tamil history, religion, and literature on all three.

If one wishes to capture the interest of non-scholars, the Danielou translation is probably a more suitable introduction to the Cilappatikaram (easier in its form, brevity, and word choice; also more suspenseful since it holds the preamble until the end). Once the reader is interested, Parasarathy is the natural follow-up, both for its accurate translation and its excellent set of comments.