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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **49 (1995)**

Heft 2

PDF erstellt am: **20.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147185>

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SARASVATĪ'S SONS: BIOGRAPHIES OF POETS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Phyllis Granoff, Hamilton

I. Introduction

Many of the biographies of poets in medieval India have come down to us in the Śvetāmbara Jain collections of biographies, the *prabandhas*, which are mainly accounts of the lives and accomplishments of famous Jain monks. The earliest extant Jain *prabandha* dates to the first part of the 13th century, and the practice of compiling relatively short biographies and gathering them into these larger collections probably does not predate the 11th century. *Prabandhas* were written in verse and prose, in Sanskrit, the elite language of the court, and in the vernaculars.¹ Several of the *prabandhas* contain biographies of poets, not all of whom were Jain monks. Indeed some of the poets the *prabandhas* tell us about were Jain laymen, and others were not even Jain at all. Thus we read side by side of the Jain monk/poets Amaracandra, Bappabhaṭṭisūri and Śāntidevasūri, of the famous Jain monk and hymnist Mānatuṅgācārya; of the lapsed monk/poet Madana, and then of the Jain layman and poet Dhanapāla; but equal prominence is also given to Harihara and Śrī Harṣa, both laymen, and neither of them

1 I have translated a number of biographies from the *prabandhas* in the volume of translations of Jain literature that I edited, *The Clever Adulteress: A Treasury of Jain Literature*, Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press 1990, pp.140-186. I have also written about the genre as a whole and about individual biographies on a number of occasions. For bibliographical information see my contribution, "Jinaprabhasūri and Jinadattasūri: Two Studies from the Śvetāmbara Jain Tradition", in the volume I wrote with Koichi SHINOHARA, *Speaking of Monks: Religious Biography in India and China*, Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1992, pp. 1-97. I have also appended an extensive bibliography on scholarship on the *prabandhas* to an essay on biography writing among the Śvetāmbara Jains that is appeared in the volume on biography in India edited by Winand CALLEWAERT and Rupert SNELL, *According to the Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1994, pp.131-159. Much of my work on these texts has been done under the auspices of grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada that I have held jointly with Koichi SHINOHARA.

Jains.² Śrī Harṣa is perhaps the most famous of all poets in medieval India; his poem the *Naiṣadha Carita* was considered the model for all great poetry, and we know that Jain monks studied it carefully. The monk Devavimalagaṇi, when he went to write the life of his famous teacher Hīravijaya, self-consciously modeled his poem on the *Naiṣadha* of Śrī Harṣa, and in his autocommentary, Devavimalagaṇi takes great pains to show us where and what he learned from the earlier poet.³ Harihara was a direct descendant of Śrī Harṣa according to the biography of him that the Jains told; he was also said to have been responsible for the transmission of Śrī Harṣa's poem in the royal courts of Gujarat.⁴ Śrī Harṣa also wrote one of the most difficult and celebrated texts of philosophy, the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*, and we have evidence that Jain monks also studied his philosophy text and even

- 2 Most of these biographies have now been translated. I have translated the biographies of Śrī Harṣa and Madana in *The Clever Adulteress*. I have translated the biographies of Bappabhaṭṭisūri and Amaracandra in an article, "Ritual and Biography: The Case of Bappabhaṭṭisūri", to appear in a volume I edited with Koichi SHINOHARA, *Other Selves: Biography and Autobiography in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1994, pp. 150-207. The biography of Dhana-pāla has been translated by C.H. TAWNEY from the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, *The Prabandhacintāmaṇi or Wishing-Stone of Narratives*, Calcutta: Asiatic Society 1901, pp. 52ff. The version in the earlier *Prabhāvakacarita* is somewhat earlier and remains untranslated. The text is edited by Jinavijaya Muni, Singhi Jain Series, vol. 13, Ahmedabad, 1940. The account of Śāntidevasūri in the same text is also untranslated. There are other poets who are mentioned in the Jain *prabandhas*, although the poets named here are treated in the most detail. In addition poets biographies circulated in independent *prabandha* texts outside these Jain collections; for example, the biography of Kālidāsa was told in the *Bhojaprabandha*, an account of King Bhoja, which was not a Jain work but dates to the same period as the Jain *prabandhas* considered here. The account of Kālidāsa is very similar to that of Dhanapāla.
- 3 The text is edited by Kāśīnātha Pāṇḍurang PARAB, Bombay: Nirṇaya Sagara Press 1900. I have written about it in a short article, "Authority and Innovation: A Study of the Use of Similes in the Biography of Hīravijaya to Provide Sanction for the Monk at Court", *Jinamañjari*, vol.1, October 1990, pp. 48-61. Unfortunately the paper contains numerous printing errors and a section has been left out.
- 4 In his study of the intellectual climate of 13th century Gujarat Bhogilal J. SANDESARA noted that the earliest manuscripts of the *Naiṣadha* are indeed to be found in Gujarat and that Gujarat may well have been the center of the transmission of this poem. See *Literary Circle of Mahāmātya Vastupāla*, Singhi Jain Series, vol. 33, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidyā Bhavan 1953, p.54.

wrote commentaries on it.⁵ The inclusion of two Hindu poets in the Jain collections thus may have had much to do with the status of one of them, Śrī Harṣa, and the importance of his poem in intellectual circles of the time.

While scholars have tended to read the Jain *prabandhas* as history, my own work has led me to read them as literature, particularly as religious literature. The biographies of poets in the *prabandhas* deal with individuals who actually lived several hundred years apart; if we may say anything about their life styles and life experiences simply from the fact that some were monks and others laymen, it would also be natural to assume that they led very different lives. Finally, the fact that some were pious Jains and others were Hindus might also have been expected to color their experiences. And yet despite this potential for diversity, the biographies of poets we are given are remarkably stable and consistent, so much so that we are tempted to speak not of "biographies of poets" but of a "biography of the poet".

The poet of the medieval "biography" is a scholar, but a certain kind of scholar. Though he is skilled in the traditional branches of learning, he excels not for any mastery of ordinary topics, but because he possesses special knowledge that enables him to perform extraordinary feats. The poet of the medieval biography can compose extemporaneous verses that reveal hidden truths; he can perform prodigious feats of memory and he has knowledge of supersensuous things. All of these poets, regardless of their station in life, laymen or monks, regardless of their religious affiliation, Hindu or Jain, gain this knowledge from the performance of a similar set of rituals that involve worship of the goddess Sarasvatī, the Goddess of Learning. The poets recite spells to Sarasvatī, perform oblations into a fire in her honor, and are vouchsafed a vision of the goddess, who grants them divine wisdom. The favor of Sarasvatī allows the medieval poet to write a special kind of poetry. One of the unique features of the compositions of these "Sons of Sarasvatī", as these specially favoured poets were called, and indeed as they often called themselves, is the gift of originality. Originality was an important issue in medieval poetic texts, and we shall see that it was also central in the biography of medieval poets. Only a great poet could be original, and only the poet who had performed the proper religious rituals

5 See the introduction to my *Philosophy and Argument in Late Vedānta*, Śrī Harṣa's *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*, Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel 1978.

could be great. The medieval biographies in offering their consistent picture of "the poet" also afford us a glimpse of the issues that were considered important in the composing and judging of poetry. We shall see that much of what they say on the issue of originality, for example, can also be found in texts on poetics and handbooks meant for poets. I believe that the convergence between these biographies and the very different genre of texts, the handbooks on poetics, allows us to conclude that at least one of the central themes of the biographies is a treatment of the wider issue, what is good poetry and what kind of person could write it. These biographies are representative of widely held attitudes towards poets and poetry writing.

The medieval poet was also a lone voice in a corrupt world. Seeking the favor of kings, he was nonetheless above the petty corruptions of the court and was often a reminder to a king of higher values in a world obsessed with power and self-aggrandizement. The medieval poet has an ambiguous relationship to his patron, and is superior to the king and his sycophantic courtiers. Wrongly accused, wrongly importuned, the medieval poet abandons an ignorant king without hesitation. In many cases the poet's disillusionment with the court becomes a general disgust with the world: those who are already monks abandon the court and in a more radical act of abandonment, practice the rite of voluntary renunciation of food and die a pious Jain death. Even the layman Dhanapāla makes this radical act of abandoning the world. Others we are told simply renounce their lay status and become monks, having abandoned forever a life of fickle secular pleasures in search of the eternal bliss of religion.

In what follows I should like to explore each of these themes in greater detail, taking my clues from one of the medieval biographies, the biography of Harihara from the *prabandhakośa* of Rājaśekhara, which was completed in 1349 A.D.⁶ I give below a translation of the text and then turn to a discussion of both of these themes: the poet as scholar/wizard and the poet as the conscience of a corrupt world. In my discussion of the first motif I look briefly at texts on poetics to situate the biographies in the broader intellectual discussion on poetry in medieval India; I also look at some poets' autobiographical statements, to show the convergence between the biographical text's depiction of a poet and a poet's self-assessment. When I

6 The text is edited by Jina VIJAYA MUNI in the Singhi Jain Series, vol.6, Santiniketan: Singhi Jaina Pīṭha 1935.

consider the poet as the ethical conscience of society I shall touch upon some aspects of patronage in the medieval Indian court, particularly the poet's resistance to pressure and the limits of the power that a patron might exercise over a poet.⁷

II. The Biography of Harihara from the *Prabandhakōśa*.

Harihara was a descendant of Śrī Harṣa. He was from Bengal. He was a special poet with extraordinary gifts, for he had won over the goddess Sarasvatī through the performance of the prescribed rites. One day he journeyed to Gujarat. He travelled in state: two hundred horses, five hundred men, and fifty camels accompanied him, while he gave lavish feasts for all the inhabitants of every village and hamlet he passed through.

When he reached the town of Dhavalakka, Harihara dispatched a clever youngster with verses of praise to the feudal lord Vīradhavalā, his honored minister Vastupāla, his chief court poet Someśvara, and other high dignitaries. The Glorious Vastupāla was delighted. He took the youngster by the hand and led him at once into the presence of the Glorious Vīradhavalā. He had him show him the verse the learned poet had written in honor of the king and then he praised the greatness of the poet in the most effusive terms. The king asked, "What should I do at this point?" The minister replied, "Lord, tomorrow morning you should usher the learned poet into the city, with great fanfare and much celebration. You should give him great gifts." The king then said, "So be it." At that, the best of ministers and the youngster took their leave.

The youngster then showed the third verse of greeting that Harihara had written to the learned Someśvara. But when he saw the skillfulness of the poetry, Someśvara burned with jealousy. He let out a sigh and looked down at the floor. And he did not say a word in return to that youngster. The youngster got up and went back to Harihara. He told him how the king and

7 There have recently been two excellent articles on patronage, "Poets and Patrons in Tamil Literature and Literary Legend," by David SHULMAN, and "Kings, Gods and Poets: Ideologies of Patronage in Medieval Andhrā" by V. Narayana RAO. They are chapters 7 and 9 in Barbara MILLER, *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press 1992. Many of the trends SHULMAN traces in the Tamil literature are clearly evident in the Jain material. This suggests at least for North India that these patterns of patronage occurred at a much earlier date than the 15th century date SHULMAN suggests from his South Indian material.

the minister had been pleased, and how Someśvara had been displeased with Harihara's greetings. Harihara became angry at Someśvara.

It was the next day. The king along with his minister and all the residents of the city from every walk of life set out with great fanfare to meet the poet Harihara. When they reached Harihara, the poet at once recited these verses to Vīradhavaḷa:

Śiva, though he wears the Ganges, the river of heaven, in his matted locks, stays at Lake Mānasa; Viṣṇu, though he has the Ganges at his feet, nonetheless takes refuge in the ocean; Brahmā, though he carries the Ganges in his water pot, hides in a lotus. It must be that they have all heard how you will burn up the world with the fiery power of your military strength, my hero!

Whosoever has seen the Crest Jewel of the Chālukya Dynasty in battle has seen the Bhārgava, dispatching his arrows one after the other as he rids the earth of the Kṣatriya kings; he has seen great Rāma, in the heat of killing the lord of the demons, Rāvaṇa; he has seen the lord of Subhadrā, mighty Arjuna, in the fray, killing Jayadratha.

The poet then asked his boy, "Is Someśvara among the king's assembly or not?" The boy replied, "He has kept away in his anger." When he heard that, Harihara said no more. He was led into the city with great rejoicing. To show his pleasure, the king gave him a grand mansion, much money, household vessels, clothes, servants, and horses.

Now Harihara went to the home of the minister, where many of the learned and powerful were gathered. The minister rose and greeted him with these words,

There is no need for honey, no need for sweet wine, no need even for the drink of the gods, once a person has tasted the charmed words of the poet Harihara.

The learned poet replied,

My lord! You are like a reincarnation of the great King Bhoja, in your patronage of the arts!! You are like the God Brahmā in your ability to discern the truth, and you are a jewel on the neck of the goddess Sarasvatī in your refined poetic sensibilities! Hear my words. I am a learned man. The goddess of Learning, Bhāratī, is my own mother. And she has the ability to travel throughout the three worlds, on earth, in heaven and in the under world. Now once I went to the court of the king of the gods with Bhāratī. It is called Sudharmā. Indra reigns there in all his splendour. There were three million heavenly damsels in attendance upon him, and 84,000 minor gods who had come there to pay their homage. For it is said,

"The twelve suns, the eight Vasus, the thirteen Viśvedevas, the thirty-six Tuṣita gods, and sixty Bhāsvaras, two hundred thirty-six Māhārājikas, eleven Rudras,

forty-nine Vāyus, fourteen Vaikuṇṭhas, ten Suśarmans, and twelve Sādhyas, these are all known as the gods who attend upon Indra."

Now when I saw all the splendour of Indra's court I was amazed. All I could think of was how great is the fruit of real religious austerities. And as I was thinking this to myself, someone came running in bellowing out these words,

"Lord, King of heaven! Something terrible has happened. Where is the guardian of your garden? Alas! Someone has stolen your wonderful wishing tree right out of your pleasure grove!" "Hmph! Don't you dare say such a thing! In fact, I felt sorry for mankind and I sent that tree down to earth, and there it is, adorning the world, in the form of the minister Vastupāla!"

And after I had heard these words I was dumbstruck and I decided to come with Bhāratī and see you, who are indeed the fifth wishing tree in the universe.

In this way the learned poet finished explaining his verse. As the minister was thinking, "What shall I give him?", the king Bhīmadeva of the Doḍiya lineage brought him in tribute twenty-four of the finest horses that had just been unloaded from a boat and a heavenly necklace. The minister gave all of that to the learned poet. Pleased, the poet said, "You are truly the fifth wishing tree", and with that he retired to his own quarters.

After a few days had passed, the wise and wealthy gathered in the king's court, and this time Someśvara was present. The king addressed the learned Harihara, "O learned man! I had a temple dedicated to Viṣṇu and called "Vīranārāyaṇa Temple" built here in the city. And I commissioned Someśvara to compose a dedicatory inscription of one hundred and eight verses. I would like you to see it, so that all the learned men may be reassured that the verses are well written. You know how people say that the worth of a coin can only be known by having the Goddess of Fortune herself test it to see if it is real or counterfeit." Harihara replied, "Have someone recite those verses." Someśvara himself recited them. And when he heard them Harihara said, "My lord! Indeed these are excellent verses; what's more I have heard them before. When I was in Mālava I went to the city of Ujjayin, and there in the sanctuary of the temple Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharāṇa, "Jewel on the Neck of the Goddess Sarasvatī", I beheld these very verses in praise of King Bhoja inscribed on a slab. If you do not believe me, then listen as I recite them for you in their proper order without any mistake." And with that, he recited all the verses, in their right order, without a single error. The king was distressed. The scoundrels in the court were delighted. The good men, like Vastupāla, were troubled. The court was adjourned. And it was as if someone had struck a mighty blow to Someśvara; he seemed dead; he was

like one bewitched ; he seemed to lack even the slightest trace of consciousness. But then he too went home. In his shame he did not even dare to show his face to his family, and it goes without saying that he kept away from the court of the king.

After some time Someśvara went to the palace of the minster Vastupāla and spoke to him. "Minister! Those really were my verses. I tell you the truth. And you know my abilities. But Harihara has humiliated me like this. What am I now to do?" The minister told him, "Only Harihara can help you. You must go to him. For there is this way of looking at things, too:

"At first the loser, defeated by a mightier rival, flees, but then if he is clever he comes back to join his conqueror. See how the moon, defeated by the face of the lovely lady, is now reflected on her shining cheek."

The learned man then said, "In that case, take me to him." The minister did just that. He left the learned Someśvara outside and went alone to see Harihara. And he said to him, "The learned Someśvara has come to tell you something." Harihara laughed. And he had him brought into his presence. He rose to greet him and embraced him and honored him by offering him a seat. Someśvara spoke, "Wise man! Free me from this stain, this accusation of having stolen the words of another poet. For it is said,

Noble minded men treat even an enemy with respect, if he comes to their homes.
We see that among the constellations Br̥haspati pushes Mīna higher when Mīna falls in its domain.

Harihara was pleased with this verse and said, "Do not worry. I shall restore you to your position of respect." The minister and Someśvara went home. The next morning Someśvara received a summons to come to the court of King Viradhavala. This is how Harihara began: "Praise to the Great Goddess Sarasvatī, through whose grace I have obtained my powers." The Glorious Vastupāla then asked, "What do you mean? What is all of this?" Harihara replied, "Lord, I mastered the spells to Sarasvatī on the banks of the river Kāverī. As I made my oblation into the fire the Goddess of Speech appeared to me in person. She said to me, "Choose a boon". And I said, "O Sole Mother of the World! If you are pleased with me, then give me the ability to remember one hundred and eight verses of all different types and meters." The goddess replied, "So be it." And from that time forth I can repeat any one hundred and eight verses that anyone recites. Just as I repeated the one hundred and eight verses of the poem that Someśvara had composed." The king said, "Prove it." People then recited one hundred and eight verses of

every different type of meter and Harihara repeated them. Everyone was satisfied that he had told the truth. And the courtiers in their eagerness to hear more of Harihara's words forgot that they were hungry, thirsty and hot. The lord of kings said, "In that case, wise man, why did you disgrace Someśvara?" Harihara replied, "Lord of kings! The learned poet had insulted me. And this was the way I chose to pay him back. For it is said,

Those who do not repay in even greater measure either a kindness or an insult done them by another are worse than a field of mixed crops, which at least gives back whatever one sows there.

The king said, "Enough of all this. You two sons of Sararsvatī should be friends." And with this he had them embrace each other. Someśvara was freed from any taint of wrong doing. And the two of them were always in each other's company.

On another occasion Harihara recited some verses from the Naiṣadha-carita which were particularly appropriate. The Glorious Vastupāla liked them very much and said, "Aha! These are marvelous verses. I have never heard anything like them before." Later he asked Harihara, "Learned man! What is this work?" The learned man replied, "This is the great poem, the Naiṣadha-carita." "Who is its author?" "Śrī Harṣā". Vastupāla then asked, "Show me the manuscript." The learned one replied, "There is only one manuscript. I can lend it to you for one night." He gave him the book. That same night the minister commissioned scribes to copy out the whole thing. He had the new book bound with an old rope, and he threw powder on it to make it look dusty. The next morning he returned the original manuscript to the learned poet. "Here, take back your copy of the Naiṣadha." The poet took the book. The minister said, "I think I recall that we have a copy of this treatise in our own library. Let us have a look there and see." And after much searching they brought out the newly copied book. And as soon as the book was opened everyone saw there the opening verses of the Naiṣadha. When he read those verses Harihara said, "Minister, this is all your doing, for no one else would have thought to do such a thing. It is no accident that you have conquered all your enemies. It is no wonder that you have allowed the Jain, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava doctrines to flourish and that you have raised your master's dynasty to new heights. For we can see how brilliant you are."

In the meantime, the lord of Mahārāṣṭra, against whom Vīradhavalā had sent an army, capitulated and sent a million gold pieces in tribute. And the Glorious Vastupāla in his wisdom gave the money to all the poor who

had gathered from every direction. When he saw this Harihara composed the following verse:

Truly he is even greater in his virtues than Viṣṇu, the Highest Lord, for he has wrested many Goddesses of Fortune from the ocean of battle and given them, one by one, to all those who are in need, while Viṣṇu, the Wielder of the Bow, cradles a single Goddess of Wealth in his lap and having made himself small as a dwarf, stretches out his hand to beg.

From this time on Vīradhavalā was sung by his bards as “The One Who Reigns down Millions in Gold.”

Now Harihara went to the city of Devapattana to worship the deity Śiva, known as Someśvara. He remembered how he had behaved badly to the Learned Someśvara and he recited these verses:

O Śiva! Where is a man to go? Where is he to rest? To whom should he recite his poetry? And where can he find the peace just to practice his craft of writing some verses for art's sake alone? Indeed whose court is he to frequent? When the poet Harihara sees how the world is in the clutches of wicked fools, he can do nothing but cry out in despair.

We have tasted drops of the nectar of royal favor; we have caught glimpses of the Goddess of Fortune; we have studied something of the way of words, and even defeated a few rivals with our gifts. But now I know, we have really just patched together quite a quilt of misfortunes. And my mind, having finally come to achieve true clear insight, wants only the waters of the river of heaven.

After he had recited this verse he gave to Someśvara half of his wealth and taking the rest he went to Dhavalakka, where he took his leave of the king and the minister. From there he proceeded to Benaras, where he achieved his true goal.

III. The Poet as Scholar/Wizard

Harihara attracts the biographer's attention first and foremost by an accident of birth: he is the lineal descendant of the famous Śrī Harṣa, and that is how he is introduced to us. The biography seems to be framed by Harihara's relationship to the far more celebrated Śrī Harṣa; Harihara's last major act before his renunciation of the secular world to seek the religious life is his passing on the manuscript of Śrī Harṣa's *Naiṣadhacarita* to the minister Vastupāla. But if his life seems to begin and end in the shadow of Śrī Harṣa, in between Harihara shows some extraordinary independence. He comes as an outsider, a Bengali from the northeast of India, to Gujarat in the northwest.

Regional differences were important in medieval India, and it is one of the leit-motifs of these biographies that the poet who is the biographical subject at times in his career is the outsider.

By medieval times regional languages had begun to emerge as legitimate literary languages and regional/local identity was an important factor in group loyalty. Language is often at the heart of regional conflicts and loyalties in these texts. We shall see below that Śāntidevasūri, a Jain monk who was also a famous poet, distinguished himself in a rather unpleasant way, displaying his supernatural abilities granted him by the Goddess of Learning, Sarasvatī, in order to humiliate a would-be challenger from South India. Śāntidevasūri mocks the Southerner's crude language. We shall also see how the poet Dhanapāla, angry at his royal patron, king Bhoja, leaves the royal city and seeks refuge elsewhere. It is loyalty to his birthplace that finally makes Dhanapāla return to the court of Bhoja and defeat an outsider who is vying with the other local poets for supremacy. In the biography of the monk Devasūri, who is a Gujarati, the king of Gujarat asks Devasūri to defeat a Southern Digambara Jain monk to preserve the reputation of Gujarat. One version of the biography makes it clear that the Southerner was motivated to challenge the Gujarati Śvetāmbara monk in part because he could not bear to have Gujarat proclaimed as a place of learning and Gujaratis praised as learned men.⁸ Śrī Harṣa is also the outsider at a crucial point in his career; having composed his *Naiṣadha* he takes it to Kashmir to seek the approval there of the Goddess Sarasvatī. While he is able to win her over, winning over the mortals of Kashmir is a more difficult task. Again, we may suspect that language was part of his problem. Śrī Harṣa convinces the king of Kashmir of his brilliance by repeating word for word the argument two serving maids were having in a language he could neither speak nor understand!⁹

Like Śrī Harṣa, Harihara must earn approval in a foreign court. His entree to the court is his poetry. As soon as Harihara reaches Dhavalakka, the walled city from which the feudal lord king Vīradhavalā rules, he sends poems in praise of the most important political figures in the city: the king

8 See the biography of Devasūri in the *Prabhāvakacarita*, section 9, p.178 and the *Purāṇanaprabandhasaṃgraha*, edited by Jina VIJAYA MUNI, Singhi Jain Series, volume 2, Calcutta: Singhi Jaina Pīṭha 1936, p.28.

9 See the translation of his biography in *The Clever Adulteress*, pp.156-162.

himself, and his powerful minister Vastupāla. He also sends a verse to the king's court poet and chief priest, Someśvara. The office of *purohita* had always been important in the court; the *purohita* was responsible for the ritual security of the kingdom. He was court astrologer as well as adviser on religious matters. In the case of Someśvara he was also the official court poet and genealogist who was responsible for spreading the fame of the king through his poetic compositions. The office of *purohita* was hereditary, and Someśvara thus represents stable local power as opposed to the freedom of the wandering poet Harihara.¹⁰

Acknowledging the importance of Someśvara's position in the court, Harihara includes him in his initial overtures to the king and minister. But if the king and minister respond favorably to Harihara's verses of praise, Someśvara does not. As the text tells us, he is overwhelmed by jealousy. And no doubt by fear. He does not accept Harihara into the courtly circle and rudely absents himself from the court when Harihara is performing. Harihara takes his revenge in an interesting way. He is asked to judge some verses that the king has asked Someśvara to write on the occasion of the dedication of his new temple to Viṣṇu. He finds the verses perfectly acceptable as poetry, but he insists that he has seen them elsewhere, on a temple dedicated by King Bhoja. Harihara accuses Someśvara of plagiarizing these earlier verses. As proof that he has seen the verses before, Harihara recites them, all one hundred and eight of them, in perfect sequence and without error.

There are several things at play behind Harihara's accusation. The first is local loyalty and regional competitiveness. King Viradhavala is a provincial

10 The wandering minstrel or *gāyana* could come under severe criticism in medieval texts. Kṣemendra, an 11th century poet and scholar from Kashmir, often turned his acerbic wit against wandering minstrels. In the *Kalāvilāsa* Kṣemendra devotes the short chapter seven to warning against rapacious minstrels. He advises kings not to let them enter their kingdoms and urges those in power to protect their wealth from the greedy grasp of itinerant performers of every sort, jugglers, dancers, actors and minstrels (verse 24-25). The text is published in the Sanskrit Academy Series, vol. 7, edited by E.V.V. Rāghavamchārya and D.G. Padhye, Hyderabad: The Sanskrit Academy, Osmania University 1961. My own suspicion is that a part of the distrust of wandering poets and performers is connected with growing ethnic consciousness and regional insularity; in the same text Kṣemendra voices a hearty contempt for and distrust of Bengalis, who he says are given to the practice of deceit in every aspect of life, while people from the Northwest merely lie and Southerners and Easterners are liable to make a false show of observing religious vows and fasts (1.87).

ruler, while Bhoja was one of the most celebrated kings of an empire that included much of central India, an area that was considered to be the center of Sanskrit learning and culture par excellence. Harihara's insult to Someśvara is thus also a rebuke to the king, implying that his court, despite its enthusiastic patronage of learning, was only derivative of that greater court of king Bhoja. The accusation also casts aspersions on the king's ability to judge poetic works. A learned king should have known that the verses were purloined. Harihara seeks in his accusation not just to humiliate a rival who he feels has insulted him, but to arouse the king's strong anger at Someśvara, who is now the cause of the king's humiliation, too. Ultimately Harihara wants to see the king withdraw his patronage of Someśvara.

In order to accomplish this aim, Harihara needs a strong criticism of Someśvara. Perhaps this is why instead of arguing that Someśvara's verses are flawed, he argues that they are stolen. Plagiarism was a serious issue in medieval discussions of poetry. Another Rājaśekhara, not the author of our *prabandha* collection, wrote a treatise on poetry, the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* in the 9th or early 10th century A.D. He devotes three full chapters to the subject of plagiarism.¹¹ The chapters in question are detailed treatments of what constitutes legitimate influence and what should be condemned as plagiarism or outright theft. Many of the criteria for deciding if a poet has been appropriately or inappropriately influenced by an earlier poem are purely mechanical, but there is nonetheless a sense that a poet must be original in his own work.

In chapter 12 on the theft of subject matter, Rājaśekhara introduces a debate on what a poet should study. Some teachers argue that poets should study carefully the works of earlier poets; others fear that if a young poet studies the works of his predecessors he will be condemned to repeat them endlessly in his own work. Too much study will lead to a lack of originality. Still others argue that the study of earlier poets is the only way to avoid plagiarism; only by knowing what previous poets have written can those who came after them avoid copying them too blatantly. Rājaśekhara rejects both of these opinions as too narrow. He maintains that some rare poets

11 The text is edited by Mr. C.D. DALAL and Pandit R.A. SASTRY in the Gaekwad's Oriental Series, no.1, Baroda: Oriental Institute 1934. The chapters in question are 11-13. There is a French translation by Nadine STCHOUPAK and Louis RENOU, Paris: Société Asiatique 1950.

have a unique gift of insight that will insure that they are original. In Rājaśekhara's own words we learn,

The true poetic eye, gained from propitiation of the goddess Sarasvatī, without need of external aid reveals things that have been directly experienced by the poet and things that the poet has never even experienced before, in a process that is beyond the range of human conception and cannot be described in words. For it is said that the Goddess Sarasvatī reveals even to the sleeping poet both the theme of his poem and the language in which to express it. But others though awake are as if blind. For this reason it is said that really great poets are blind to things that have already been seen by others, but possess a kind of divine sight that enables them to perceive that which no one before them has ever seen. Even the Three-eyed God Śiva or Indra with his thousand eyes cannot see that which mortal poets see with their ordinary eyes. In the mirror that is the mind of poets the whole universe is reflected. Words and what they express vie with each other in their rush to be present to great minded poets. Poets expore with their words that which yogins see through the power of their religious accomplishments. And so the words of great poets are potentially infinite.

Rājaśekhara then continues by saying that some poems are truly original, while others are based on earlier works. He then discusses what types of dependence should be avoided.¹² At the conclusion of the next chapter he summarizes his remarks on theft with a verse that praises the poet in whose words there is something original.¹³

Rājaśekhara was not the only medieval theorist who was concerned with originality. Ānandavardhana's work, the *Dhvanyāloka*, was certainly more influential than Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*.¹⁴ Chapter four of the *Dhvanyāloka* deals with the problem of originality. After stating forcefully that not all poetic borrowing is undesirable, Ānandavardhana then concludes that in the rare cases where a particularly gifted poet does not want to be influenced by any predecessor, the Goddess Sarasvatī herself supplies the poet with a subject for his poem.¹⁵

12 *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, pp. 62-63.

13 *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, p. 78.

14 The text has been translated with the commentary of Abhinavagupta by Daniel H.H. INGALLS, Jeffrey Moussaieff MASSON and M.V. PATWARDHAN in the Harvard Oriental Series, volume 49, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. It is edited by Acharya Jagannath PATHAK in the Vidyabhawan Sanskrit Granthamala, vol.97, Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan, 1965.

15 *Dhvanyāloka*, p. 600.

Both Rājaśekhara and Ānandavardhana seem to agree that total originality in poetry is possible and that it is a divine gift, vouchsafed by the Goddess Sarasvatī to a few rare individuals. This, I believe, is the crux of Harihara's accusation against Someśvara. In accusing Someśvara of copying the verses of another poet, he not only accuses him of dishonesty, but accuses him of being a commonplace poet, a hack, who lacks the favour of the Goddess Sarasvatī and therefore the ability to write novel verses.

We know from Someśvara's own words that he considered himself to be among the elect and that his contemporaries concurred. In the colophon to his poem the *Surathotsava*, Someśvara calls himself a son of Sarasvatī, the common term applied to poets said to have been favored by the goddess.¹⁶ Harihara in the biography is challenging this claim in a particularly blatant formulation.

Originality, poetic insight and the ritual propitiation of the Goddess Sarasvatī are frequently linked in medieval biographies about poets and in texts on poetics. The knowledge that the Goddess gives a poet is often compared to the omniscience of the yogin, and it is a knowledge that transcends book learning and gives the poet direct access to everything conceivable in the universe, past, present, hidden and obscure. Moreover, the poet with this power is considered the superior poet. In chapter 6 of the *Kāvya-mīmāṃsā* Rājaśekhara defines different types of poets and lists them in order of their greatness. Among the highest level of poet is the poet who has pleased the Goddess of Learning through the mastery of spells and rituals in her honor. He writes his poetry when he is possessed by the goddess.¹⁷ The final and highest level is that reached by the poet who has

16 The text is edited in the *Kāvya-mamlā* Series, vol. 73 by Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit ŚIVADAS and Kāśīnātha Pāṇḍurang PARAB, Bombay: Nirṇaya Sagara Press, 1902. The verse in question is 15.48. It seems to me possible that Someśvara here is quoting what others have said about himself.

17 A medieval story about a painter, whose gift is also due to his propitiation of the goddess of Sarasvatī, suggests that all extraordinary artistic creation is somehow not under the control of the artist; the best artists are all possessed. In the *Purātana-prabandhasaṃgraha*, section 36, pp. 81-82, we meet the painter Vararuci, who attends upon the king Nanda. The king is very devoted to his wife and never eats without her. While he is away from his wife, Vararuci makes a likeness of the queen so that the king may still have her company at dinner. Vararuci has the favor of the goddess Sarasvatī. While he is making the queen's likeness, a drop of paint falls on the queen's private parts. Vararuci attempts to wipe it off, but it reappears. He comes

propitiated the Goddess Sarasvatī and who can even make others, like young virgins, utter words of poetry.¹⁸

This conception of the poet is reflected in another biography of a poet that is found in the Jain *prabandha* collections, the biography of Śāntidevasūri from the *Prabhāvakacarita*. Śāntidevasūri is repeatedly praised in his biography as a poet who has won over the Goddess Sarasvatī. The following episode makes clear that he was a poet of the highest level in Rājaśekhara's scheme of things, for he is capable of making even an inanimate object speak. In addition the text uses for Śāntidevasūri the very term that Rājaśekhara applies to this foremost class of poets, making the relationship between these biographies of poets and medieval books on poetic theory very close indeed. Here is what the biography of Śāntidevasūri tells us he could do.¹⁹

Now one day someone came from the country of the Dravidians, eager to engage in debate. He muttered something that sounded like the terrifying noises that fearsome gods make, something that no one could quite make out. Śāntidevasūri, though he knew the man's language quite fluently, decided to have some fun with him. He put his hand on the likeness of a horse that was painted on the wall, and said these words, loud and clear. "Why don't you debate with the foreigner? He makes these grunts and growls, just like an animal, and so a beast would be just the right partner for him in debate, I think." Now the master had accomplished all the rituals that made him a poet with the favor of the Goddess Sarasvatī, and he was capable of making inanimate objects speak. As he uttered these words, the likeness of the horse spoke out loud. The would-be-debater from the South was silenced by all the arguments that flowed forth from the horse, arguments so complicated that he was at a loss even to repeat them let alone to refute them.

to the conclusion that the queen must indeed have such a spot. The king draws the obvious conclusion: no one could have known about his wife's beauty mark if he had not himself made love to her. The king orders Vararuci slain, but he is kept alive in secret and eventually justifies himself to the king. Here the painter paints hidden truths despite himself, as it were; he attempts to wipe away the offending drop of paint, but the process of his painting lies beyond his conscious control.

18 *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, p. 20. I have discussed this section of the text in my paper on Bappabhaṭṭisūri which was my first exploration of the religious aspects of poetry writing in the Jain biographies. Much of the material here on the poet as Tantric worshipper of the goddess of Sarasvatī is based on the work I did in that earlier paper.

19 *Prabhāvakacarita*, section 8, p. 136.

And he was made indeed to look like a dumb beast. He took to his heels in his shame and all the people proclaimed, "There is no one who can stand up against this fierce and mighty one who has obtained a boon from the Goddess of Speech."

The poet celebrated in the biography of Śāntidevasūri is the ideal poet of medieval India. More than a scholar, he is a wizard, who has performed rituals to the Goddess Sarasvatī and thereby come to have superhuman power. These powers enable him to know things ordinary mortals cannot know and to write totally original verse.²⁰

We are now at last ready to return to Harihara and his stinging accusation of plagiarism against Someśvara. Harihara, accusing Someśvara of plagiarism, denies him the status of honor that could be accorded a poet in the world of this and related texts. Furthermore, we later learn that Harihara could only succeed in making this accusation, which after all is false, because he was himself a "Son of Sarasvatī", one of those rare poets who had gained the favor of the Goddess and thus gained supernatural powers. Harihara's supernatural feat is his prodigious memory. He can repeat the verses of Someśvara after he has heard them in the court, not because he has read them before and practiced them as ordinary people would have had to do, but because he has the gift of being able to repeat any 108 statements upon hearing them even once. Other poets who have won the favor of the Goddess Sarasvatī are said in their biographies to have other supernatural

- 20 Traditional stories would seem to indicate that while being a favored son of the Goddess Sarasvatī was necessary in order to write original verses, not all favored sons did so. There is a variant version of the biography of the poet Amara that is contained in the *Purāṇanaprabandhasaṃgraha*, p. 78, section 177. We learn there that Amara was a disciple of the Jain monk Jinadattasūri, a monk celebrated for his supernatural powers. Amara cured a foreigner from disease and was rewarded by the foreigner, who gave him the mantra to Sarasvatī. Amara perfected the mantra and eventually composed a poem on the *Mahābhārata*. Someśvara, a rival poet, asked the king to judge the poem, saying that "poets are only the creators of their poems; kings make the poems known." That night the sage Vyāsa, original author of the *Mahābhārata*, and one might add long dead but nonetheless still active, actually comes and steals the lone copy of the *Bālābhārata*. When no one is able to locate the book the next morning Vyāsa announces himself to the king and his court. He asks them why they should be so distressed at the theft of a book when the whole poem was nothing but a theft of his own work to begin with. He further chides Amara for not even citing him. Amara rewrites his poem which eventually gains wide popularity.

abilities. Bappabhaṭṭisūri, for example, can read the king's mind, which insures his victory over all the other poets in contests of linked verses. What the king, who is the judge, is looking for is not skill in writing a verse, but the ability of the poet to convey the king's thoughts, which are hidden to all but the gifted Bappabhaṭṭi.²¹ Śrī Harṣa, like Harihara, has a prodigious memory. He also was made so brilliant by the Goddess that no one could understand his words. He must perform counter rituals at her instruction so that his intelligence becomes sufficiently reduced for other mortals to understand him. This story no doubt grew up from the fact that Śrī Harṣa's philosophy text was considered to be incredibly difficult, something which Śrī Harṣa himself acknowledged.²²

The poet Dhanapāla knows a variety of things he could not know without the gift of supernatural knowledge from Sarasvatī; for example, when the king tries to test his omniscience by asking Dhanapāla to divine by what means the king will leave the palace, and then tricking him by having a hole drilled in the roof, Dhanapāla guesses correctly, proving his omniscience.²³ The exact same story is told of the Jain monk Jinaprabhasūri, although in his case the knowledge has nothing to do with poetry, but is simply the extraordinary (and magical) knowledge of the religious seeker.²⁴

The image of the poet in these biographies as someone possessed of extraordinary knowledge and gifts through the favor of the Goddess Sarasvatī reflects medieval understandings of poetry and the nature of poetic insight that we also see in texts on theory. It is not surprising that the same language is also to be found in poets' statements about themselves, something we have alluded to above. Śrī Harṣa, for example, tells us in his *Naiṣadha* 1.145, that his poem is the result of his meditating on the spell known as the "Wishing Jewel Spell", or the "*Cintāmaṇimantra*".²⁵ The Jain author of the Prakrit *Bhavisayattakahā*, a different Dhanapāla from the poet

21 See the translation and discussion in my article "Ritual and Biography". I give there passages from various medieval religious texts which highlight the nature of this supernatural knowledge that the poet gains from his propitiation of Sarasvatī.

22 See the translation of Śrī Harṣa's biography in *The Clever Adulteress*, pp. 152-162.

23 *Prabhāvakacarita*, p. 144, verse 163-170.

24 See my essay in *Speaking of Monks*, p.26.

25 The text is edited by Mahamahopadhyaya Paṇḍit ŚIVADATTA, Bombay: Nirnaya Sagara Press, 1928.

whose biography has been considered here, calls himself the son of Sarasvatī and says that he has obtained boons from the Goddess.²⁶

The 11th century Kashmiri poet and theorist Kṣemendra in his short text on poetics, the *Kavikaṇṭhābharana*, opens his text with the bold and simple pronouncement that there are two ways to become a poet: through divine means and through human effort. He describes the "divine" means as the worship of the Goddess Sarasvatī, and in the closing verse of the text assures the readers that he has pursued both the divine and human pathways.²⁷ A later poet, Caturbhujā, from the 15th century, continues this tradition. Caturbhujā in his *Haricarita*, a poem recounting the deeds of the God Kṛṣṇa, gives a lengthy account of himself and his family.²⁸ He tells us that his father Śivadāsa propitiated the Goddess Tripurā, a Tantric form of Sarasvatī, by diligently repeating her mantra. Here is what Caturbhujā then tells us of his own birth:

And as soon as the youngest, Caturbhujā, was born, his father carefully wrote the mantra to the Goddess Tripurā on the infant's tongue and there he beheld this verse: "Glory to the great Caturbhujā, who is without equal in the science of grammar and without comparison in knowledge of the smṛti; he is the most learned of all in the field of literature, and foremost of knowers of the philosophical schools and the Āgamas. He is the most accomplished of all in garnering praise in the court of poets, and his mind is given over to the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa; his lips are the abode of ever new Sanskrit phrases, and he is like a lion to the elephants of those who would dare argue with him."

Caturbhujā from birth is the chosen of Sarasvatī, the ideal poet. The poet of the biographies that we have been examining here is the same ideal poet: Harihara, the Hindu, Dhanapāla the Jain layman, or Śāntidevasūri the Jain monk, all possess special knowledge and a special relationship to the Goddess of learning. They also possess a special relationship, less clear cut, to an earthly protector, and it is to this I should like now to turn.²⁹

26 Chapter 1, verse 4; chapter 14 section 20. The text is edited by C.D. DALAL and Pandurang Damodar GUNE in the Gaekwad's Oriental Series, no. 20, Baroda: Oriental Institute, reprinted 1967.

27 The text is edited by E.V.V. RAGHAVACHARYA and D.H. PADHYE in the Sanskrit Academy Series, number 7, Hyderabad: Osmania University, the Sanskrit Academy, 1961, pp. 63-85.

28 The text is edited by Śivaprasad BHATTACHARYA, Bibliotheca Indica, work number 288, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1967.

29 I have not discussed here the poet as hymnist whose words as words of praise to a god have special powers. Thus we read of Mānatuṅga that his hymn, verse by verse,

IV. The poet as the Conscience of Society.

Harihara has two triumphs in his biography. We have already examined the first of these, his triumph over Someśvara and winning entrée into the court of the king Vīradhavalā. His second triumph is less dramatic, at least in the language of the biography, but more lasting. This is his triumph over his desire for worldly gain that comes when he realizes the true nature of worldly pleasures and the uncertainty that is inherent in the life of a wandering poet who must seek and keep the approval of his royal patron. Harihara has a religious awakening when he goes to the temple of Śiva, known as Someśvara, at Prahāsapattan or Devapattan. This was one of the most famous of Śaiva pilgrimage sites in medieval India. We are not told much of what motivates Harihara's sudden religious conversion, beyond the fact that it had something to do with the name of the god, Someśvara, which reminded him of the man Someśvara. That much is clear. What Harihara actually remembered, however, is more problematic. The text admits of more than one interpretation here. A modern Gujarati translator of the passage suggests that what he remembered was how Someśvara had insulted him.³⁰ In this reading of the passage we would have to assume that this then led to reflections on how a good poet, like himself, could be scorned by others out of jealousy and thus how fickle and uncertain royal patronage and acceptance in society could be. I prefer a different interpretation, more favorable perhaps to Harihara's character. I read the passage to mean that Harihara remembered his own ill-treatment of Someśvara, and from a consciousness of his own wrong-doing he generalized to lament what an evil world he lived in, where people were ever eager to slight others and curry favor with

allowed him to break the iron bonds with which he was fettered by the king before being thrown into prison; Mayūra is cured of leprosy by his verses in praise of the sun, while Bāṇa has his hands and feet cut off so that he may show the greatness of his hymn to the goddess Caṇḍī, restoring his body to wholeness with the recitation of the hymn. Such beliefs, while clearly not totally unrelated to the belief that poets, sons of Sarasvatī, have supernatural knowledge and special powers, have more to do with medieval Indian understandings of holy texts and mantras, sacred utterances, which are in fact the deity himself or herself, and thus capable of performing miracles. For this reason I have chosen not to discuss these stories here. For the primary texts see note 2, above.

30 Paṇḍit Hiralal Rasikdas Kapaḍiya in his *Caturviṃśatiprabandhano Gujarātī Anuvāda*, Śrī Forbes Gujarati Sabha Series, vol. 18, Ahmedabad, 1934, p. 109.

those in power for personal gain. In either case, Harihara recites a verse that is familiar in medieval Sanskrit poetry, lamenting the absence of honest men and true connoisseurs of poetry.³¹

Typically the poet who speaks such verses sees himself as the last honest man in a world gone mad with corruption. His response to the evil around him is to recognize the futility of trying to live and succeed in such a world. The poet who knows the corruption of the court and the vanity of the kings he must flatter, their susceptibility to praise and their readiness to anger, renounces the world entirely and becomes a monk.

Texts on poetics stress the honesty of the poet, as this passage from Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* makes clear, but they are less willing to acknowledge the corruption of the court:³²

And the poet should always be pure. Purity is three fold: purity in speech, purity in mind and purity in poetry. The first two result from study and learning; the third involves such things as the following. The poet's toe-nails should be neatly manicured and his breath should be scented with betel. He should use only unguents on his body and should wear expensive but not gaudy clothes. His hair should be adorned with flowers. It is said that the cultivation of purity is the charm that wins over Sarasvatī, the Goddess of Speech and Learning. A poem indeed reflects the state of mind of its creator. For it is often said, "The painting will turn out to be of the same nature as the painter." The poet should speak with a smile and always say something meaningful. He should seek out the hidden meaning in things. When not asked he should not disparage the works of other poets, but when asked he should speak truthfully.

On the king Rājaśekhara has this to say:³³

The king himself should be a poet and should gather poets around himself. If the king is a poet then everyone in his kingdom will follow suit. The king should have his court summoned in order that he may judge poetry.

31 Perhaps the most famous verses in this mode are those of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita in his *Kalividambana*, edited by Pierre-Sylvain FILLIOZAT, *Oeuvres poétiques de Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita*, Pondicherry, 1967.

32 *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, chapter 10, p. 49.

33 *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, pp. 54-55. These passages have been discussed in H.J. TIEKEN, "Style and structure of Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* with special reference to chapter X on the relation between king and poet", in A.W. VAN DEN HOEK, D.H.A. KOLFF and M.S. OORT, eds, *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992, pp.366-375.

And further:

And the king, seated comfortably in the assembly, should begin the discussion on poetry; he should think carefully on the poems and judge them. He should model his behavior on the deeds of the kings Vāsudeva, Śātavāhana, Śūdraka, Sāhasānka and others, all famous leaders of poetic assemblies, seeking to equal them in the honor and gifts he gives to poets. Those in attendance in his court will feel satisfied and pleased, and on occasion may even receive appropriate prizes. The king should properly honor a poem that is exceptional and the poet whose gifts transcend the normal. In between the lively discussions about poetry the king should permit those assembled to engage in scholarly debate.

While in the passage on the purity of poets the emphasis seems to be on externals, the category of *manaḥśuci*, or mental purity is widely known from every basic religious text. Purity of the mind involves what we would consider ethical norms of behavior: the one who is pure in mind does not steal, nor cheat, nor lie; he does not harbour ill will and is never angry; he will never harm any living being, and is always honest and selfless. We might indeed have some difficulty in applying this description to Harihara, who has after all lied, harbored ill-will towards another and even attempted to do his rival harm. It is perhaps for this reason that I prefer my reading of Harihara's conversion; at that moment he realizes less what he was than what he must be.

When we examine other medieval biographies of poets, we find that the topos of the poet's renunciation is handled far more dramatically than is Harihara's quiet conversion here. In other biographies we have a much greater sense of the corruption and egotism of the king and of conflict between poet and patron. Consider this scene from the biography of Dhanapāla, which describes the troubles the poet had when he read his new poetic composition to his patron, King Bhoja:³⁴

And as Dhanapāla was reciting his *Tilakamañjarī*, the king put a golden vessel underneath the book in order to collect the divine nectar that flowed from it. In this way the king first collected that divine poetic nectar that could put an end to all disease and infirmities and that gave rise to eternal happiness. Now when Dhanapāla had finished reciting the work, the king spoke up. "I have something to ask. I am going to request something of you and I beg you not to be angry at me. For one there is something most unpropitious in your opening words: May that corpse protect you! Instead of the letters "sa" "va", which mean "corpse",

34 From the biography of Mahendrasūri, no. 17 in the *Prabhāvakacarita*, p. 145, section 6.

you should have “śi” “va”, “May the Lord Śiva protect you.” Now please change these four things for me. Instead of the city being called Ayodhyā make it my capital, Dhārā. Instead of the Jain holy site of Śakrāvātāra put Mahākāla, the holy place sacred to Lord Śiva. Put the God Śiva in the place of the Jina Rṣabha. And put my name instead of the name Meghavāhana for the hero of the tale. If you do all of this your story will truly be beautiful and bring joy to its listeners; it will reign supreme for all times.”

The wise one replied to the king:

O great king! No good can come of my making these changes; indeed only harm will result. Hear my true words. Just as a pot of milk sitting in the hand of a Brahmin becomes impure even when a single drop of liquor falls into it, so will this tale become impure by these changes. And my family will perish, for sure, and your kingdom and all its subjects will go to ruin. Those who cannot tell the difference between the different sibilants, *sa*, *śa*, and *ṣa*, are like snakes that know only one “s” sound, and hissing they betray their lowly origins. Should they not be ashamed of themselves in the company of learned men?

The king was furious at these words and he threw the book into a burning brazier that had been placed before him to ward off the cold.

This short episode tells us something both about the potential conflict between poet and patron and the limits of royal control over a poet. What the king objects to in Dhanapāla's famous prose tale is its religious orientation. The poem is decidedly Jain in tone, and Bhoja prefers Śaivism. The king pretends to misunderstand the poet's opening verse, which is a benedictory verse in praise of the Jina. The verse reads as follows:

sa vaḥ pātu kṛtsnam iṣate yaḥ pratikṣaṇam /
rupair anantair ekaikajantor vyāptaṃ jagat trayam // 1//

May he who every second beholds the entire universe and the myriad forms of every single living creature protect you.

The king reads the first two letters, actually two separate words, as one word and in addition reads them not as Sanskrit, which they are, but as Prakrit. In Sanskrit there are three sibilants, “sa” “śa” and “ṣa”. Prakrit has only one. In Sanskrit the two words mean “he” and “you”, but in Prakrit, combined together they form the word “sava”, or “corpse”, the most polluting and unpropitious of all things. A benedictory verse, designed to bring blessings on the work and its audience, now becomes something unpro-

pitious and dangerous.³⁵ The king goes on to request that the poet alter the poem to make it revolve around Bhoja himself and to make it praise Śiva and not the Jina. Dhanapāla rejects Bhoja's requests, stands by helplessly while Bhoja burns his work and then returns home in despondency, vowing never to speak to the king again. The episode eventually comes to a happy resolution, however; Dhanapāla's daughter knows most of the work by memory and is able to recite it for him nearly in full. We are told that three thousand verses have been lost, but to anyone who has read the extensive tale as it has come down to us, that may not seem a bad thing. In any event, Dhanapāla does leave Dhārā and the court of King Bhoja. Eventually King Bhoja comes to regret the absence of Dhanapāla from his court. And then one day a poet (and tantric wizard) comes from afar to challenge the learned men in Bhoja's society. The courtiers are all put to shame by the brilliance of the newcomer and Bhoja, himself humiliated by this turn of events, sends trusted men in search of Dhanapāla. Dhanapāla has withdrawn from secular life and is spending his time making pilgrimages to Jain holy sites. At first Dhanapāla is indifferent to the pleas of Bhoja's men; but when he hears how Bhoja begs him to return, not for Bhoja's sake, but for the honor of his country, Dhanapāla agrees. The king humbles himself before the poet; he goes out to meet him on foot, embraces him and begs his forgiveness. Dhanapāla defeats the interloper in a contest of linked verses and agrees to remain at the court of King Bhoja. When he knows his end is near he takes

35 There is a misprint in the printed text which reads "śivaḥ pātu" instead of "śavaḥ pātu". The context of the passage makes it clear that King Bhoja is just misreading the "sa vaḥ pātu" of the original. I have interpreted the misreading as intentional rather than a result of the ignorance of the king. In fact ignorant kings are not unknown in medieval literature, and a famous episode in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* known to all students of Sanskrit by its inclusion in LANMAN's Sanskrit Reader tells the story of a king who is humiliated when he misunderstands one of his queens, since he lacks even a rudimentary knowledge of the principles of euphonic combination in Sanskrit, or *saṃdhi*. Bhoja was celebrated in the tradition as a great scholar, and he is the author of one of the most extensive medieval treatises on poetics. There is no indication that he was regarded as anything but a great scholar and learned man; in the Jain tradition his sole lack of insight is his failure to accept the Jain religion until relatively late in his career. I prefer for these reasons to understand the first remarks of Bhoja as his attempt at humor, announcing the context of his objection to the *Tilakamañjarī*, namely its Jain orientation. Dhanapāla rejects any attempt to make Bhoja's remarks light-hearted by taking the first sentence at its face value; he then upbraids the king for his stupidity.

his leave of the king and goes to his Jain guru, under whose tutelage he engages in the rite of voluntary starvation, although he remains a layman. Upon his death he is reborn in heaven.

Dhanapāla's withdrawal from court life follows upon a quarrel with the king. The issue is the integrity of the artist, and religious freedom, and Dhanapāla refuses to submit. Although he returns once to the court he never again participates fully in court life and he renounces the world by undertaking the religious ritual of voluntary starvation by which pious Jains are supposed to die.

Other poets have encounters with their patrons that are closer to Dhanapāla's and that ultimately lead to their renunciation of the court life and their following the religious path, either anew, or with renewed intensity. Bappabhaṭṭisūri is engaged in a game of linking verses, and when he is able to divine the king's intentions through his divine wisdom and know things about the king's wives that he should not ordinarily know, the king accuses him of violating his harem. Bappabhaṭṭi at once leaves the court and seeks refuge in a rival court. He only returns to his earlier patron when the king comes and humbles himself before him. Eventually Bappabhaṭṭi like Dhanapāla will leave the court and undertake the ritual of voluntary starvation, when he becomes drawn into a mess of political intrigue. Śrī Harṣa too leaves the court to practice the religious life when a new queen insults him.

In all of their biographies, poets come to an ultimate religious awakening and an awareness of the evils of secular court life. While some poets may admonish their patrons from time to time, in the end none of them stays to reform the court; it is inherent in their religious awakening that they know that this is the very nature of transmigratory existence and that nothing can be changed. Poets, as ethical voices, seek their own salvation from the cycle of rebirths and all its inevitable pain, which the court seems to epitomize.³⁶ Finally it is worth noting that once more biography seems to reflect the

36 Not all of the criticisms of poets at the court of a king are so radical, ending with the poet's total renunciation of secular life. Kṣemendra also turned his acerbic wit on his fellow poets. In the *Darpadalana*, chapter 3, verse 7, he tells us that wisdom is praiseworthy only so long as it does not parade itself in the marketplace of the king's court. And further in verse 10 he rails, "The voice of poets raised in service of kings is like a whore, adorned with every ornament and offered out of greed for the delectation of anyone present."

poets's own statements about the course of their lives. The poet Dhoyika summarizes his life in the last verse of his *Pavanadūta*, which was written in praise of the amorous exploits of his patron King Lakṣmaṇasena of Bengal.³⁷

Here is what he says:

I have obtained fame in the assembly of learned men and even composed a few works from which drops of heavenly nectar fell to please the king. And now all I want is to retreat to some cave on the banks of the heavenly river Ganges so that I may spend the rest of my days in deep meditation on Brahma.

V. Conclusions

In this study I have chosen two major themes from medieval biographies of poets: the poet as possessor of supernatural knowledge and the poet as renouncer. Of these two themes the dominant one is of the poet as "Son of Sarasvatī", who has supersensuous knowledge. The biographies present other themes, for the poet is also court jester and spiritual preceptor, but in both of these roles it is his supernatural ability gained from the propitiation of the Goddess Sarasvatī that enables him to instruct and entertain the king. It is also possible to see the poet as renouncer as a natural conclusion to his ritual propitiation of the Goddess Sarasvatī, for renunciation is the ultimate goal of the religious quest in medieval India, and the poet as devotee of Sarasvatī is above all a religious seeker, who may use his gifts for a time in the secular world, but whose natural place is outside that world.

37 Edited by Chintaharan CHAKRAVARTI in the Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat Series, no. 13, n.d. The verse translated is verse 104, pp. 35-36.