

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 66 (2012)  
**Heft:** 3  
  
**Artikel:** On a recent translation of classical tamil love poetry  
**Autor:** Tieken, Hermann  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-389353>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 27.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# ON A RECENT TRANSLATION OF CLASSICAL TAMIL LOVE POETRY

Herman Tieken, Leiden University\*

Within a very short period translations have appeared of the *Narriṇai*, *Kuruntokai* and *Aiṅkurunūru*, all three anthologies of classical Tamil love poetry. Eva Wilden's translations of the *Narriṇai* and *Kuruntokai* appeared in 2008 and 2010 respectively<sup>1</sup>, the translation of the *Aiṅkurunūru*, by Martha Ann Selby, in 2011<sup>2</sup>.

The *Aiṅkurunūru* has traditionally been divided into five sections of one hundred poems each, each section presenting situations set in one of the five natural settings distinguished in the indigenous literary theory. The poems dealt with below have all been drawn from the first section presenting situations set amidst the paddy fields (the words *kaḷaṇi* and *paḷaṇam*, '[wet] paddy field', are indeed found only in this section). Poems of this type, traditionally called *marutam* poems, after a tree typical of that eco zone, are supposed to deal with scenes showing the husband enjoying himself with women other than his wife, and the latter sulking and refusing to allow him to come near her again. The hundred poems are in turn divided into decads, which may, for instance, have a whole line in common.

Though Selby has worked on her translations for more than twelve years the relation between them and the original text is frequently far to seek. To illustrate this point right away I would like to discuss poem 87. In it a woman complains to her lover about his wife, who is blaming all the women around her for her husband's unfaithfulness. In the last line of the poem the woman says to her lover:

\* I wish to thank Peter Khoroché and my wife Ingrid for their suggestions.

1 Eva Wilden, *Narriṇai. A Critical Edition and an Annotated Translation of the Narriṇai*. Vols I–III. *Critical Texts of Cankam Literature* – 1.1–3. Chennai 2008; ead. *Kuruntokai. A Critical Edition and an Annotated Translation of the Kuruntokai*. Vols I–III. *Critical Texts of Cankam Literature* – 2.1–3. Chennai 2010.

2 Martha Ann Selby, *Tamil Love Poetry. The Five Hundred Short Poems of the Aiṅkurunūru*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Your wife is angry with everybody (around her), but (*marṛu*) why (*evaṇḍō*) is she angry with me (*emmai*)?<sup>3</sup>

According to her his wife has no reason to be angry, as they both share the same unfaithful lover. Thus, the clue of the poem is that while the mistress appears to be complaining about her lover's wife, she is actually complaining about her lover, who every day duly returns to his wife. Now, what does Selby make of it?

O Man from the town of fresh wealth,  
where herders rich in cows  
and wrapped in jalap garlands  
drum ripe mangoes from the trees  
with sticks of sugarcane,

your wife will get angry with anyone;  
why should I be exempt?

The only word the last line of this translation has in common with the text is 'why' (*evaṇḍō*). The remaining words in fact turn the meaning of the original into its complete opposite. Selby's translation is due to a failure on her part to grasp the relationship between the words spoken in the poem and the situation in the love life of the three persons involved, on the one hand, and what I can only interpret as a paralysing panic about what to make of this verbless sentence, consisting of an object 'me', adversative 'but' and interrogative 'why', on the other.

As we will see, this is just a simple case: strictly speaking, only two words were misrepresented. In many cases, however, the situation is much more drastic. As a result of misunderstanding either the language or the situations alluded to in the poems or both, the translations abound in *ad hoc* solutions. When, in what follows, I discuss a number of Selby's translations, the aim is mainly to show how Tamil poetry might be tackled, linguistically as well as poetically, without recourse to forced solutions.

From the relatively simple example discussed above I would like to turn to a highly complex one, poem 20. Selby's translation runs as follows:

Thinking of that man  
from the place near the riverbank  
where tubular reeds as hollow as bamboo

3 [...] *niṇ maṇaiyōḷ // yāraiṇu pulakkum emmai marṇevaṇḍō*.



rip out eggs laid in a hundred-petaled lotus  
by a tiny-legged dragonfly with iridescent wings,

the beautiful, gleaming bangles  
slip from my wrists.<sup>4</sup>

Let me begin by drawing attention to Selby's translation of the regular word for 'bee' (*tumpi*) with 'dragonfly'. Going by the *Tamil Lexicon*, the latter meaning is only attested in other dictionaries. Of course, in the present context Selby had to come up with something better than "bees", as bees do not lay eggs in flowers. However, neither do dragonflies, who lay their eggs in the water. In fact, Selby's problems go back to her analysis of the words *tumpi nūrritaḷt tāmaraip pūccinaḷ* in *tumpi // nūrritaḷt tāmaraip pūccinaḷ cīkkum* as one long compound, meaning something like "egg (*cinai*) (of) bee (*tumpi*) (in) the flower (*pū(c)*) of the hundred-petaled (*nūrritaḷ*) lotus (*tāmaraḷ*)". While the aim of the poets seems indeed to have lain in the artful exploration of the possibilities of compounding, compounding is itself governed by strict rules, and the analysis of *tumpi* [...] *pūccinaḷ* as "egg of bee(s) in flower" definitely does not comply with any of these rules. *pūccinaḷ* cannot mean anything but "the *cinai* of the *pū*", that is, "the swollen pistil of the flower". Furthermore, the bee is not part of the compound but the subject of the verb *cīkkum*, 'brushing against, grazing' (not 'ripping out'): the bee is brushing against the swollen pistil of the flower. Finally, the participle *cīkkum* is to be linked, not, as Selby has it, to the immediately following reeds (*vēḷattu*), but to the *ūr*, the husband's town, or village, "the village full of reeds resembling bamboo, where bees brush against [...]". With this description of a bee, lotus and reeds the speaker in the poem is commenting on a husband (the bee) who is unwilling to leave his pregnant wife (lotus), or the mother of his son, for his mistress(es) (reeds).

The verb *cīkku-* occurs also in poem 19. Selby's translation of the first four lines runs as follows:

That man is from the place  
where white reed flowers in cool groves  
tear (*cīkkum*) at the pale threads  
of the mango tree growing in a dune,  
its thick branches reeking  
of the scent of lovers' bodies.<sup>5</sup>

4 *aṟuciḷ kālav aṇciṟait tumpi // nūrritaḷt tāmaraip pūccinaḷ cīkkum // kāmpukaṇṇaṇṇa tūmpuṭai vēḷattut // tuṟaināṇiy ūraṇaiy uḷḷiy eṇ- // ṇiṟaiy ēṟvaḷai nekiḷpōṭummē.*

In this translation all the words and phrases of the original text have for some reason been jumbled. Literally, the text reads (in paraphrase):

The white plumes (*veḷḷuḷai*) of the white flowers of the reed (*vēḷa veṇṇū*), like fans, blow away (*cīkkum*) from the grove (*tanṇolil*) the scent of the love-making of the lovers who had met (*puṇarntōr*) under the wide branches of the mango-tree (*māattu* [...]) *peruñciṇai*).

It should be added that the word for love-making (*maṇam*) also means ‘smell, fragrance’.

The same disregard for the order of the words and phrases in a poem is found in Selby’s translation of 76, which runs as follows:

As she bathed with you in these chilly freshets,  
she became all the more radiant,  
that woman with the glinting armlets,  
hair thick as a cluster of sedge grass,  
her freckles like new flowers,

and even to heavenly women  
she looked just like a goddess.<sup>6</sup>

Selby construes *ninṇōtu* in line 3 with the verbal participle *āti* in *āti mēmpattanaḷ* in line 2, “she became radiant (*mēmpattanaḷ*), as she played (in the river) (*āti*) with you (*ninṇōtu*)”. Furthermore she takes the two descriptive passages, the one before *āti mēmpattanaḷ* in line 1 (*pañcāyk kūntar pacumalarc cuṇaṅkir*) and the other before *ninṇōtu* in line 3 (*onṇōti maṭavarāṇ*), as describing the radiant bathing girl. In doing so, however, she overlooks the fact that the second passage, of which, by the way, she translates only the first half (*onṇōti* “with the glinting armlets”), is grammatically unmarked. Therefore it cannot describe the bathing woman mentioned in the preceding line but must, instead, be taken as a description of the “you” in immediately following *ninṇōtu*. So there are two women involved, one, a natural beauty (flowing hair, flowerlike spots on her skin), and the other whose beauty is brought about by ornaments (shining armlets) and artfulness (elegant walk). The latter is beaten by the

5 *ekkar māattup putuppūm peruñciṇai // puṇarntōr meymmaṇaṅ kamaḷun tanṇolil // vēḷa veṇṇū veḷḷuḷai cīkkum // ūraṇ* [...].

6 *pañcāyk kūntar pacumalarc cuṇaṅkir // raṇṇuṇal ātit tanṇala mēmpattanaḷ // onṇōti maṭavaraniṇṇō- // ṭantara makaḷirkkut teyvamum pōṇṇē*.



former, who, when bathing in the river, offers a particularly attractive spectacle. The first part of the poem reads, in outline:

When that girl with hair flowing like long grass and a skin covered by natural spots bathes in the river she surpasses (*mēmpaṭṭaṇaḷ*) you (*niṇṇōḷu*) by her beauty, you, who wear shining armlets and walk elegantly.

A similar misinterpretation of the grammatical construction seems to underlie the translation of poem 54:

If you drive off in your chariot  
as the choice bangles slip off the wrists  
of this woman who is like Tēṇūr  
in the good lands of the Pāṇṭiya king with strong chariots  
where cool floods flow even in summer,

then I fear what will happen  
to the women who come  
bringing you garlands of sedge grass  
if you go to them in turn.<sup>7</sup>

To begin with, I fail to understand the translation. I have the impression that we are silently expected to read the text as: “if, when you drive away, the bangles of this woman slip off, then I fear what will happen to the women [...]”. However, even if this were possible, which it is not, I still do not understand what the person speaking in the poem intends. To understand what is said in the poem it is necessary to have a closer look at its grammatical construction. In Selby’s translation it is the girls who brought (*tara vanta*) garlands of sedge grass to the man. She links *nī*, ‘you’, in *nī tara vanta pañcāyk kōtai makaḷirkku aṇcuval ammaṇṇai varinē* to *varinē*, “if you (*nī*) come (*varinē*)”. However, this is impossible because of the first person singular verb *aṇcuval* found between *nī* and *varinē*. *nī* has instead to be construed with the immediately following *tara vanta pañcāyk kōtai makaḷirkku*, “girls wearing garlands of *pañcāy* grass, which you (*nī*) have given to them”. Before offering a paraphrase of the poem which accounts for this new fact, two remarks may be made. The first concerns the word *ūriṇ*. Selby takes this word as the conditional of the verb *ūr-*, ‘to drive’: “if

7 *tiṇṇērti tēṇṇavaṇṇaṇṇāṭṭuḷḷatai // vēṇilāyinuṇ tanpuṇaḷ oḷukun // tēṇūr aṇṇav ivāṭerivaḷai nekiḷav // ūriṇ ūraṇai nī tara vanta // pañcāyk kōtai makaḷirk- // kaṇcuval ammaṇṇai varinē.*

you drive off in your chariot”. Apart from the fact that no chariot has been mentioned with this verb, we could also be dealing with the noun *ūr*, ‘village, town’, followed by the suffix *-in*. Below I will come back to this word. The second remark concerns *varin*, “if you go”. Selby has supplied the words “to them”, that is, the girls wearing the sedge grass garlands. This, however, is just her interpretation. Note that I have instead supplied “to us”, the reasons for which will become evident from the paraphrase:

I am worried what will happen to the girls who wear garlands of sedge grass, which when you gave these to them, caused the bangles of this woman (your wife) to slip off her arms, – I am worried what will happen to these girls if next (*ammurai*) you come to us (and give us garlands).

The man goes from one woman to the other, with each new conquest hurting the previous one. And this is exactly how he is described: *ūrīn-ūraṇai* is the phrase *ūrīn ūrīn*, “from village to village”,<sup>8</sup> turned into a personal noun (*-aṇ*) of the second person singular (*-ai*), “you who are a man who goes from village to village”.

A typical example of how Selby proceeds if she appears not to understand the poem, either the grammar or the situation, is poem 81:

O Man of the town  
where the pond is decked with flowers at its gates,  
and where expert drummers  
set by as their supper  
the flesh of a tortoise,  
its wide, white belly torn open  
and sampled by a stork –

if your wife hears that  
you’ve said you want me,  
she will suffer greatly.<sup>9</sup>

Even without comparing it to the original, the translation raises several questions. For instance, what could be the function of the gates of the pond? Drum players may be low-caste but are we really to believe that for supper they eat

8 An instance of this phrase is found in *Kuruntokai* 130.

9 *kurukuṭaittuṇṭa veḷḷakattiyāmai // aripparai viṇaiṇar alkumicaikkūṭṭu // malarāṇi vāyir poykaiy ūra nīy // eṇṇai nayantaṇeṇ eṇri niṇ // maṇaiyōḷ kēḷkiṇ varuntuvaḷ peritē.*

meat left by cranes? If we next turn to the text, the translation becomes even more curious. To begin with, *aripparai viṇaiñar* does not mean “*aripparai*-drum players” but “craftsmen making *aripparai*-drums”. Furthermore, the text simply says that the cranes have eaten the tortoises after ripping open their bellies. “Sampled”, that is, as if they had left some meat for the others, is entirely Selby’s choice of word. If I understand her translation correctly, “supper” corresponds to *alku micai*, “midday (*alku*) food (*micai*)”. I am unable, however, to find anything in the original corresponding to the verb ‘set by’ in “set by as their supper”. In fact, in her interpretation the whole first line, *kurukutaittuṇṭa vellakattiyaṁmai(y)*, is grammatically unconnected with the rest of the poem. Therefore another solution must be looked for, one which integrates the tortoises (*yāmai*) in the rest of the poem. A possibility is to make the tortoises, or rather their empty shells, the object of the non-past participial noun *viṇaiñar*, ‘craftsmen, persons who make’. At the same time I would suggest analysing *alku micai* as *alku(m) micai*, with the participle *alkum*, ‘where live’, and to translate *vāy(ir)* not with ‘gate’ but with another of its regular meanings, namely ‘surface’. This results in the following paraphrase:

The surface (*vāyir*) of the pond, which is a storehouse (*kūṭṭu*) of food (*micai*), along which live (*alkum*) craftsmen making (*viṇaiñar*) *aripparai*-drums from tortoise-shells eaten empty by cranes, is covered by flowers.<sup>10</sup>

By pointing out that its beautiful surface cannot hide the fact that the pond is just a storehouse of food, the woman tells her lover what she thinks of his declarations of love: did he not make the same pledges to his wife, whom he now deserts for her?

Selby clearly did not know what to do with the word *ollā* and the phrase *ceyta viṇaiya manra* in poem 93. So she simply ignored them. It is difficult to reconstruct or describe the way in which she next tried to circumvent the holes in the text, but here is the result:

The bees disdain the honey  
from all those groves,  
spoiled by herds of sturdy bull buffalos  
as they feed in new red ebony  
along with water lilies.

10 Whether the *aripparai* is a drum specifically made of tortoise-shell will require a further study. Unfortunately, the word is relatively rare in classical Tamil poetry.



They prefer to swarm about this girl,  
her hair decked with budding flowers,  
to feed on the sweetness there.<sup>11</sup>

As noted, the translation does not account for *ollā*, which is a negative participle, ‘which do(es) not combine’. As such it is to be construed with *palpolir*, ‘many groves’. Between *ollā* and *palpolir* the phrase *ceyta vinaiya manra* is found, which, as follows from the presence of the particle *manra*, is an interjection. It means “they are subject to actions (*vinai*) done (*ceyta*) (in former lives)”. The phrase is mentally to be taken with the groves, that cannot help what has happened to them. The poem may be paraphrased in the following way:

Many groves (*palpolir*), because (*eṇa*)<sup>12</sup> buffalos have grazed (*mēyal aruntu*) there, no longer have lilies next to (*ollā*) *mōrōṭam* trees. They can’t help it, but the bee is no longer interested in their nectar<sup>13</sup> (which lacks variation) and buzzes instead around the girl’s hair full of budding flowers.

We have already seen how Selby’s treatment of the text can lead to a meaning completely the reverse of the one intended. Another example of this is poem 51:

O Man of the place  
where the water hen,  
her claws sharp,  
keens for her blue-feathered mate,  
  
her desire for raw tamarind  
is more of a cure for this girl’s cravings  
than the broad expanse of your chest.

This translation does not account for the meaning of the form *vēṭkaiṭtu*, ‘which has a desire’.<sup>14</sup> This adjectival noun, formed on the basis of *vēṭkai*, ‘desire’, has for its subject the *vayāa nōy(kku)*, “the sickening cravings experienced by

11 *erumai nallērrina mēyal arunteṇa // pacumōrōṭamōṭāmpal ollā // ceyta vinaiya manra palpolir // rātuṇa verukkaiyav ākiy ivaḷ // pōtaviḷ mucciy ūtum vaṇṭē.*

12 For *eṇa*, ‘because’, see, for instance, Thomas Lehmann, *Grammatik des Alttamil unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Caṅkam-Texte des Dichters Kapilar*. Stuttgart 1991, p. 125.

13 It is apparently not superfluous to note that flowers produce nectar, not honey.

14 The last two lines of the poem read: [...] *vēṭkaiṭtaṇru niṇ // malarnta mārpivaḷ vayāa nōykkē.*

pregnant women”, mentioned in the following line. Furthermore, *anru* in *vētkai-ttanru* means “it is not”. The last two lines of the poem mean literally:

They (the cravings your pregnant wife experiences) are not (made up of) a desire for tamarind. (The object) of these sickening cravings of hers is your chest.

In the following instance, poem 89, it is not immediately clear, at least not to me, how the translation is supposed to relate to the text. The translation reads:

Look here, Bard, and live long:

they say that the man from the town  
where bees suck honey from the fields  
showers Little Sister with favors;  
why is that?

Not because of her womanly ways  
but for her disposition.

I suppose that Selby analyses *virumpinru(u)* in the last line, *peṇṇa virumpinrivaṭaṇ paṇpē*,<sup>15</sup> as a noun *virumpu*, ‘desire’, followed by *inru*, ‘without’. However, there is no noun *virumpu*: *virumpu* is a verb stem. *virumpinru* simply means “it desired, wanted” and has as its subject *paṇpu*, ‘quality, capacity’ (compare Sanskrit *guṇa*). The poem may read, in paraphrase:

People ask why the man is showing so much favour to our Little Sister. It’s her quality (*ivaṭaṇpaṇpu*) as a woman (*peṇṇa*) which requires it of him.<sup>16</sup>

The answer presents a typical paradox, coming as it does from women whom the man does not shower with similar favours.

In translating poem 73 Selby appears to have overlooked a word, as a result of which the poem has lost its meaning:

When that woman,  
her brightly coloured leaf dress shimmering,

15 With the sandhi resolved: *peṇṇu eṇa virumpinru ivaṭaṇ paṇpē*.

16 *virumpinru* is actually a past tense, so maybe we had better translate: “People ask why the man was showing so much favour to our Little Sister. It’s her quality (*ivaṭaṇpaṇpu*) as a woman (*peṇṇa*) which required it of him.”

her jewels bright and forehead gleaming,  
dashed into the freshets,

that rush of water in the broad ghats  
became refreshing  
as the blue lilies let go their scent.

The word overlooked is *kaṇ*, ‘eye’, in the compound *kaṇṇarunkuvaḷai*,<sup>17</sup> “the fragrant (*ṇarum*) lilies (*kuvaḷai*) of her eyes (*kaṇ*)”. The word refers to the girl’s eyes which resemble lilies and which lend the water their fragrance, or so at least it seems to the enraptured lover. This poem has an interesting counterpart in poem 72, which in the text itself actually precedes it:

Wearing her shimmering leaf dress,  
laced together with the tender stems of lilies that bloom in the fields,  
her mound mottled and her tresses swinging,  
that soft beauty with eyes like blue lilies  
became my boon companion  
as we played in the freshets  
as the swelling flood came,  
its waters crammed with flowers.

On one essential point Selby’s translation does not agree with the original. Thus, the phrase *vanteṇa* does not mean “as (the [...] flood) came” but “because (the [...] flood) came”:<sup>18</sup> “because the water came in a great flood, carrying with it many flowers, the girl joined me in it”. This construction casts a different light on the description of the girl as bedecked with flowers, having eyes resembling lilies and long hair which undulates (like waves in the water). The idea seems to be that she could easily join her lover without compromising him or herself because she would not be noticed in the water full of flowers (in paraphrase):

With her skirt made of leaves and laced through with lilies, her mound of venus decorated with spots, her long undulating hair and her eyes resembling blue lilies, – because the river was equally full of flowers, she could join me in the water (unnoticed).

In the following poem, 75, yet again an essential word has been left unaccounted for in the translation. The poem consists of two sentences. The first is *palar ivan ovvāy*, literally: “To many people (*palar*) here (*ivan*) you do not agree”, or more

17 With the sandhi resolved: *kaṇ ṇarum kuvaḷai*.

18 For causal *eṇa*, see above, note 12.



freely: “There are many people here who think you are a nasty fellow”. The second sentence begins immediately after this with the word *ataṇāl*, ‘therefore’. This ‘therefore’ is essential. The poem is a reply to a man who has claimed that he does not understand where the gossip comes from which says that he has bathed with a certain woman in the river. He has denied having bathed with the woman. His refusal to stand up for his mistress and admit that he bathed with her has angered the speaker, who next calls him a nasty fellow, adding that because of that the village must have started spreading gossip about him. Instead we get Selby’s rather flat translation, in which *ataṇāl* has been left untranslated and *palar*, ‘many’, has been transferred to the second sentence:

This is not the place for you, Lord:

many have started a rumor in town  
that she bathed with you in the chilly freshets  
of the wide ghat  
where an ancient myrobalan  
stands in full blossom.

The phrase “her eyes reddened from bathing” in the following translation of poem 79 is entirely of Selby’s own making:

Lord, you caught her, asking,  
“whose daughter is this,  
her eyes reddened from bathing  
in the new floods?”

You wouldn’t know whose daughter she is,  
and just whose son are you  
to be grabbing us like this?<sup>19</sup>

“Her eyes reddened from bathing in the new floods” translates *putuppunaḷ āṭiy amartta kaṇṇaḷ*. However, *amartta* does not mean ‘reddened’, but ‘battling’. The woman described as *amartta kaṇṇaḷ* has “battling eyes”, that is, “rejects (a man’s advances) with her eyes”.<sup>20</sup> In this context the preceding phrase *putuppunaḷ āṭi(y)*, “bathing in the river”, need not be construed with *amartta kaṇṇaḷ*,

19 *putuppunaḷ āṭiy amartta kaṇṇaḷ // yār makaḷ ivaḷ eṇap parriya makiḷna // yār makaḷ āyiṇum ariyāy // nī yār makaṇaiy em parriyōyē.*

20 Possibly Selby arrived at the meaning ‘red’ indirectly, from ‘battling’ through ‘anger’ to, finally, ‘red’.

as Selby does, but could equally well be linked to *parriya makilna*, “man who took hold (of us) [...] while bathing in the river”. The poem is about social inequality and in outline reads:

When during the festivities in the river she frowned angrily at you, you stopped us, asking whose daughter she is (that she thought she could reject you). Whoever her father is, you would not know him (for he is too high on the social ladder for you to know him). Whose son are you that you think that you can take hold of us?

In the translation of poem 46 it is again one word which has been misunderstood. As a result the poem has entirely lost its biting tone:

It is good not only for you,  
but good for us, as well.

Holding fast to your desire  
for the woman with the good forehead  
who, in turn, desired your chest,  
you need not favour us,  
so go stay there with her.

The passage “Holding fast to your desire for the woman with the good forehead who, in turn, desired your chest”, apart from introducing an element which is not there (“in turn”) and being somewhat laborious, does not do justice to the text. The text has “you, who are the object (*kurippu*) of your wife’s desires (*arivai vēṇṭiya kurippinaiy āki*)”. So what the speaker actually says is that the man had better stay with his wife, who loves him; she in any case does not.

In poem 50 a woman is telling a man that she and her friends are suffering on his account. She begs him to give them a place where they can rest, a really safe place (*tañcam*), not his heart. For the girl who “has received your heart” (*nin neñcam perra*), that is, whom you have given your heart to live in, that is, to whom you have offered your love, does nothing else than cry. She actually asks the man to leave them alone. Selby’s translation, apart from being incorrect (‘mercy’ for *tañcam*, and “the girl who keeps you in *her* heart” instead of “the girl who has received *your* heart”) seems to miss the point:

O Man from the place of fresh wealth  
and looming willows,  
my dear friends and I, we suffer.

Please show us some mercy:  
the girl who keeps you in her heart  
does nothing but cry.

Sometimes the clue to a poem lies in the order in which the information is presented step by step, a process which Selby seems to be unaware of. By way of example I will take poem 34. Selby's translation, in which the order has been more or less reversed, runs as follows:

Listen, Friend, and live long:  
  
My eyes have swallowed  
and are now the color of the pollen  
of the water lily, blooming on its hollow stalk  
in the tank in our town,  
  
and it's all because of that stranger.

Following this translation the girl was unhappy about the new colour of her eyes, even though it resembled that of the pollen of the water lily. This is odd. A completely different reading of the situation is, I believe, called for. The order of things seems to be central to reconstructing this situation. Thus, the girl first says that her eyes have acquired a new colour. Next, and only in the very last line, she tells us how this has happened, namely because her lover has turned into a stranger, that is, pretends not to know her or because he is no longer interested in her. Obviously, a paradox is intended here, with the girl naively congratulating herself on the new colour of her eyes as part of the attempt to see something positive in a painful situation.

In her translation of poem 88 Selby seems to have lost her way in transferring direct into indirect speech. Her translation reads:

That man from the cool ghats  
loved by everyone  
where the refreshing banks of the pond  
are lush with flowers –  
Little Sister says that I want him close to me.  
Though we act as if we didn't want him,  
we will make him come.<sup>21</sup>

21 *vaṇṭurai nayavarum vaḷamalarp poykait // taṇṭuraiy ūraṇaiy evvaiy emvayin // varutal vēṇṭutum eṇṇa- // tollēm pōl yām atu vēṇṭutumē.*



However, the accusative *ūraṇai*, “the man (from the cool ghats)”, cannot simply be taken as the subject with *varutal*, ‘to (come) close’ in Selby’s translation. It is the object of *enpatu*, “Our Little Sister says to the man”. This implies that what she says, *envayin varutal vēṇṭutum*, is in the direct speech form: “I want you to come to me”. The women speaking in the last line employ a different tactic: they reject the man in the hope that this will make him all the more eager to come to them.

While, as we have seen in many of the translations discussed here, Selby seems to stand with her back towards the texts, her translation of 67, by contrast, may well be too literal. It runs as follows:

Listen:

That woman you’ve taken now is gullible.

They say that she’s proud  
of her own great beauty  
which rivals mine,  
but I cannot rival her.  
Many have dulled her hair  
and her bright forehead,  
more than there are bees  
sucking honey from budding flowers.

If I understand the translation correctly, the word ‘many’ in “many have dulled her hair [...]”. is supposed to refer to the many lovers the girl has had before, who have all deserted her, leaving her with dull hair and a pale forehead. As I see it, however, something else is the matter here. The poem is about rival beauties. The girl is proud of her beauty when comparing herself to her lover’s wife (*ennōtu nikari*). The wife agrees that the girl is more beautiful than she is (*tannōtu nikarā*), but adds that if the girl took into consideration other women beside her she would be bound to find many with hair and foreheads which make hers seem dull. In the poetic language of the poems *pacapittōr*, “person who makes something dull”, may also be translated as “persons who make something appear dull”. As to Selby’s translation of *matavaḷ* as ‘gullible’, in the present context “fooling herself” may be more appropriate.

Poem 68 plays on a common motif, namely the division of labour between the lily, which blossoms during the night, and the lotus, which blossoms during the day:

O Man from the place  
 where a hollow-stemmed lily  
 blossoms like a lotus at early dawn,  
 has your woman no respect?

I've tried to make her submit to me,  
 but she will not be tamed.

According to Selby the last two lines of the poem would indicate that wife, husband, and mistress are living under the same roof. Even if that is the case, that is not the point of the poem. The poem is about two women, wife and mistress, time-sharing a man. The mistress (the lily) enjoys him during the night and the wife (the lotus) during the day. At dawn, however, there is a brief moment when the blossoming of the lily overlaps with that of the lotus. Or, the mistress does not seem to stick to her part of the deal, which allows the husband to return every morning to his wife. The poem may be paraphrased as follows:

At dawn the lily blossoms (for yet another brief period) like the lotus. Your mistress does not stick to the deal. While I submit myself to her rules she does not to mine.

The same phenomenon of two women sharing between them one man according to a fixed timetable is to be understood in poem 95:

The man from the town circled by waters  
 where a black-horned buffalo  
 snaps his fetter, bolts, and grazes  
 at dawn on long beards of paddy –

he's given me a rare sickness:  
 lush grief, even in broad daylight.

Selby appears to have missed the point. The phrase “even in broad daylight” in her translation should be “also during the day”.

In two translations we come across a riverbank god. This particular god is not otherwise known and I doubt if he exists. Let us have a closer look at the two poems, beginning with 53. Selby's translation runs as follows:

O Man of the paddy fields  
 where a lotus is jostled  
 and blossoms in a field  
 when fresh floods roll over the bunds –

why do we need a riverbank god  
to plague us with some illness  
when we have your promises.<sup>22</sup>

The word translated by ‘riverbank god’ is *turai*, ‘ghat’. However, we are clearly dealing with a case of metonymy here, ‘ghat’ standing for “the women at the ghat”. So the line concerned, the first line of the original text, means “How can my sickness be the cause of the affliction of the women at the ghat?” The last line of the poem reads: “It is due to the promises you made (and broke)”. So we do not have to do with a riverbank god here.

The god’s supposedly female counterpart is found in the translation of poem 28:

If her lingering illness  
is the fault of some fierce water goddess,  
then why is she so thin  
that her bright bracelets slip off?

Why, Mother, do her tender shoulders grow fallow  
over that man from the place  
where a crab leaves its traces  
in the cool mud?<sup>23</sup>

“Water goddess” is a translation of *unturaiyaṇṇaku*. *aṇṇaku* is indeed a word for a godlike spirit or demon, in particular one causing affliction. Selby seems to divide the compound into the verbal stem *un-*, ‘eating, taking possession’, and *turaiyaṇṇaku*, ‘riverbank demon(ess)’. However, the phrase could equally well, or even had better, be divided into the verbal participle *untu*, ‘having eaten, having taken possession’, the verb stem *urai*, ‘staying, remaining’ and *aṇṇaku*, ‘demon(ess)’ or ‘affliction’. Compare *uraiyaṇṇaku* with *urainōy*, in Selby’s translation “lingering illness”. The woman seems to have told everybody that the affliction she suffers from has already been with her for a long time and is a per-

22 *turaiy evaṇ aṇṇakum yām urra nōyē // ciṛaiyaḷi putuppūṇal pāynteṇak kalaṇkik // kaḷaṇit tamarai malarum // paḷaṇav ūra nī urra cūḷē.*

23 The same water goddess is also found in Ramanujan’s translation of this poem. The first part reads: “If you think, mother, // she’s tormented by that goddess // of sweet-water places, // why then // is she growing so thin // that her ornaments come loose, // her soft arms grow fallow?” See A.K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War from the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil*. New York, 1985, p. 99.



manent affair. How then, people ask, can it be explained that it flares up whenever that particular man comes close to her:

If the sickness she is suffering from is (caused by) a demon which, after having taken possession of her, has decided to stay, why then do her shoulders sag (the moment she stands in front of) that man?

The first hundred poems in the *Aiṅkuranūru* have been brought together under the title *marutam*, and would as such all exemplify situations of unfaithfulness and sulking, featuring the wife, her husband and his mistress. However, poem 19, discussed above, about the plumes of the reed plants blowing away the scent of the love-making of the lovers, who had met under the wide branches of the mango-tree, could easily have been included among those dealing with the first secret meetings of lovers, or the so-called *kuriñci* poems, which form the third century in the *Aiṅkuranūru*. What would set it apart among poems of the latter category is that the scene has been set in a typical *marutam* landscape, with wet fields and waving reeds. The *kuriñci* poems are instead typically set in mountainous areas. To what extent this mixing of love situation and landscapes is found in the *Aiṅkuranūru* will have to be further investigated.<sup>24</sup> Selby, for her part, tends to read each and every poem of the first hundred as a *marutam* poem, that is, as dealing with unfaithful husbands and mistresses. If they are not there in the text, she may even add them, as in the following poem, 13:

That man from the cool riverbank  
where the reeds on its slope  
put forth white blooms  
like the cresting plumes  
of finely gaited horses –

even at midnight  
as the town drowns,  
his other women do not know sleep.

- 24 On the relationship between the Tamil literary theory, which ties particular developments in people's love lives to specific landscapes, seasons, times of the day and related features, and the *jāti* theory of music as found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the later Rāgamālā classification, see Herman Tieken, "Early Tamil Poetics between *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Rāgamālā", forthcoming.

There is no word in the text corresponding to ‘other’ in the phrase “his other wives”. The text just has *peṇṭir*, ‘women’, that is, the women of the village, or ‘wife’, that is, his wife. If one really wants to add a word, one could add ‘his’ in the phrase “of (his) finely gaited horses”. For all we know the poem could refer to a woman unable to sleep as she is anxiously waiting for her warrior-husband to return. Each time she sees the white plumes of the reed she thinks it is him coming towards her on his horse.

Another example is the translation of poem 55:

You married the good beauty  
of this girl who resembles Tēṇūr,  
that city of the king who is rich in chariots  
and where the cane presses roar  
with the sound of a bull elephant.

Because you have left,  
her forehead has paled  
in front of everyone.

The text does not speak of marriage. It is about making love (*nayantu*), and probably making love in secret: for, when subsequently the man was no longer interested in the woman her forehead lost its brightness “so that now everybody knows” (*pallōr aṛiya*). Except for the *marutam* landscape in which the scene has been set, this poem is a typical *kurin̄ci* poem. Of course, also in certain circumstances a married man may conduct his affairs in secret. On the other hand, there is in the text no indication that the man was married, nor is there any reference, directly or indirectly, to his wife.

The *Aiṅkurunūru* opens with ten poems which are all divided into two parts. In the first part a mother (*yāy*) prays that the king and his land may prosper, in the second part a woman, who is evidently the daughter, prays that her lover may prosper and come to her soon. As an example poem 2 may be quoted:

“May Ātan live long, long life to Avin̄i!  
Let the fields be bountiful;  
let the beggars come!”  
So my mother wished.

“Let the love of that man from the cool riverbank  
where the water lily equals the many-petaled lotus

grow as each day passes.”  
So did I wish.

The situation in this poem seems fairly straightforward. Mother and daughter, or the older and younger generation, pray for different things. The daughter is mimicking, and ridiculing, her mother here. It is amazing to read what Selby made of this. According to her all the ten poems are spoken by the girl’s friend and confidante, and the “mother” she refers to is her friend. After this strange and unnecessarily convoluted interpretation of the very first set of poems I wondered if what followed would get any better; but it did not, at least not in the first hundred poems which I checked.

In the introduction to her book, Selby deals with, among other things, the dating of the *Aṅkurunūru*, the internal organization of the text and the function of plants and animals in the poems. On the other hand, she does not really explain how we should read the poems. While writing (p. 5)

[b]ecause of their brevity, the majority of these poems are constructed around an empty center of obliquity, and, taken in tandem with the skills of educated readers, this is how their emotional effects are successfully conveyed,

she forgets to properly “educate” the reader. I do not know what exactly Selby means by an “empty center of obliquity”; the fact is that each poem is a monologue. In it we hear a person addressing another person or else speaking to herself (in a vast majority of the poems the speaker is a woman). The task set before the reader is basically to determine who may be speaking under what circumstances, what the speaker’s motive may be and, for instance, whether we are dealing with a shrewd, clever woman or a naive, innocent girl. The poems offer puzzles which the reader has to unravel, and the reward is the pleasure of having solved a riddle. The compilers of the texts, the traditional commentaries (of which for the *Aṅkurunūru* only some fragments have been preserved) and the modern editors in their annotations have done some of this work for us. But often, on closer inspection, their solutions appear to be only partial or to have been based on a misunderstanding of the text of the poem. Therefore we should always be prepared to explore alternative interpretations.<sup>25</sup> In all cases, how-

25 For the *Sattasaī*, which presents a related poetic tradition in Sanskrit literature, we have quite a number of commentaries, which do indeed occasionally differ in the identification of the speaker in the poem, her motives and other such issues.



ever, we should, as I hope to have shown, start from a proper grammatical understanding of the text as it stands.

Finally a word about Selby's dating of the *Aiṅkurunūru*. According to her the latest possible date of this text is 210 A.D. Her argument runs as follows (p. 3): the *Aiṅkurunūru* must be pre-Pallava because the Pallavas do not occur in it; the text would have been commissioned by a king of the Irumporai branch of the Chera dynasty, namely Cēramāṇ Yāṇaikkaṭ Cēy Māntaraṇ Cēral Irumporai, who in turn is the subject of a poem in the *Puranānūru* (17); the Irumporai branch of the Cheras is mentioned in the Tamil-Brāhmī inscriptions from Pugalur, which have on paleographical grounds been dated to approximately 200 A.D.; the *Aiṅkurunūru* opens with ten poems mentioning a king Ātaṇ. The only Irumporai king with such a name, Kō Ātaṇ Cel Irumporai, is mentioned in the same second-century inscriptions from Pugalur; and, as additional evidence, Selby refers to the "just Kuṭṭuvaṇ" mentioned in *Aiṅkurunūru* 178. "If", as Selby writes, "this is the same Kuṭṭuvaṇ as the Cēra king of that name depicted on a silver portrait coin of the third century C.E., then an early date for the *Aiṅkurunūru* is assured". As to the king who according to the colophon to the *Aiṅkurunūru* would have commissioned this anthology, he is known only from this colophon and the one to *Puranānūru* 17. The name Cēramāṇ Yāṇaikkaṭ Cēy Māntaraṇ Cēral Irumporai is not found in the text of *Puranānūru* 17. In the latter poem the king is not addressed by name. So all we can conclude from this is that the colophon traditions of the *Puranānūru* and *Aiṅkurunūru* have in their respective contexts come up with the same king. Furthermore, Selby herself is already hesitant about the identifications of the Ātaṇ and Kuṭṭuvaṇ of the poems with the kings of the inscriptions ("is anyone's guess") and the coin ("if") respectively.

While indeed nobody would deny the existence of Irumporai kings in the second century A.D., there is no evidence that these kings were promoting and supporting classical Tamil poetry other than the occurrence of their names in some colophons. The fact that these kings supported scribes who composed and inscribed texts on rocks on their behalf does not automatically make them patrons of a highly sophisticated poetry. In fact, there is no evidence of royal patronage of classical Tamil poetry, also known as Caṅkam poetry, before the Pandya inscriptions of the seventh or eighth century. On the other hand, presenting Irumporai kings as supporters of Tamil poetry agrees with the aim of this poetry – and I refer here specifically to the historical or so-called Puram poems –, which is to depict an ancient, indigenous literary tradition in Tamil, dating from before the rise of the Pallavas and the wholesale introduction of Sanskrit culture into South India. However, Selby rejects "out of hand" (p. 3) the idea that Caṅ-

kam poetry was an invention of the late, that is, post-*Caṅkam*, Pandyas.<sup>26</sup> In fact, she does not “at all understand what is to be gained from such assertions”.<sup>27</sup> If the late dating of classical Tamil literature is controversial, it is for a large part because of the important role assigned to North Indian Sanskrit literature in its origin. It has been argued that *Caṅkam* poetry started as an offshoot of the Sanskrit *Kāvya* tradition, specializing in village scenes and local history. Selby asks herself what might be gained from all this. I think that looking at Tamil poetry through Sanskrit glasses might for instance suggest a solution for the problematic last part of poem 15. Selby’s translation runs as follows:

That man from the ancient town  
where reeds give aid as companions  
to women who yearn for gleaming leaf dresses  
as they bathe in the sandy floodwaters –

even though he is from these parts  
he is not a local man.<sup>28</sup>

In the last two lines of the poem the word *ūraṇ*, ‘man from (a/the) town’, is found three times: “that man from the ancient town (*ūraṇ*), even though he is from these parts (*ūraṇ*), is not a local man (*ūraṇ*).”<sup>29</sup> As said, a clue as to what is meant here might be found in Sanskrit literature. However, before going into

26 See my *Kāvya in South India: Old Tamil Caṅkam Poetry*, Groningen 2001. Typically, Selby ignores everything I have written subsequently on the dating of *Caṅkam* poetry and related topics, among which “A Propos Three Recent Publications on the Question of the Dating of Old Tamil *Caṅkam* Poetry”. *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 62/2 2008: 575–605.

27 It is not clear if Selby has understood some of my findings correctly. For instance, I did not characterize classical Tamil poetry as rustic at all. On the contrary: the poetry was characterized by me as highly sophisticated. What I did write is that the scenes depicted in the love poems – village poetry would definitely be a better term for them – are rustic. Furthermore, I did not declare Old Tamil a *Prākṛit*. What I wrote is that Tamil in *Caṅkam* poetry stands in the same relation to Sanskrit as a *Prākṛit* does to Sanskrit. In fact, as I have tried to argue elsewhere, Tamil was not the only vernacular which started its career as a literary language as a *Prākṛit*. See in this connection my “The Process of Vernacularization in South Asia”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 2008: 338–383, esp. 345–346.

28 *maṇalātu malirniṇṇai virumpiya veṇṭalaip // puṇalātu makaḷirkkup puṇartuṇaiy utavum // vēḷa mūtūr ūraṇ // ūraṇ āyiṇum ūraṇ allanṇē.*

29 Compare Ramanujan’s translation (A.K. Ramanujan, *op.cit.* n. 23, p. 95): “In the full river // that plays with the sands // play the women in bright leaf-skirts // and our man of the old cane town // plays partner in their love play: // he belongs to our town, // yet he does not.”

this it is necessary to establish exactly what is said in the first part of the poem, for I do not believe that Selby has got it right. The first part may be paraphrased as follows:

The man (*ūraṇ*) from Mūtūr, where reeds abound, who joined the women bathing in the river to help (*utavum*) them as their leaf dresses (*talai*) were about to be ripped off (lit. desired, *virumpiya*) by the strong current of the water (*malirniṛai*).

Clearly, the man who offered the women support is just a peeping Tom, waiting for an opportunity to take hold of them. Given this situation, the last line could mean something like:

Though from a town he does not behave like a man from a town.

With the last *ūraṇ* we seem to come very close to its Sanskrit synonym *nāga-raka*, the term for that polite, suave lover who does not need such low tactics to find a cooperative companion.