

Literary Techniques in Old Tamil Cankam Poetry

The Kuruntokai

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Eva Wilden

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I. INTRODUCTION

The question as to what a Caṅkam love poem is and how it works has been put repeatedly, but has not yet found an answer really sufficient. One of the reasons why this is the case is that the answer seemed to lie at hand. There is a vast and impressive poetological tradition, starting roughly from the times of the classical anthologies themselves and dealing with many aspects of content and structure of the poems, and this tradition has been generally taken to be authoritative in any question of exegesis. But quite a lot of what happens in the poetry itself has not attracted the attention of the traditional approach. A similar debate has been and is still being held in Sanskrit studies with respect to Kāvya and Alaṃkāraśāstra. But in the case of Caṅkam the situation is much worse. For one thing, both the *explicandum* and the *explicans* are much less well studied and understood than would be necessary for definite judgements on their interrelation. Secondly, otherwise than Alaṃkāraśāstra, where we have in the *dhvani* theory a sophisticated if late account of one of the most conspicuous lyrical features, namely ambiguity, Tamil poetics doesn't pay heed to this equally prominent characteristic of the poems themselves.

The present work is based on three presuppositions:

1. In order to understand any text properly it is first of all necessary to try to understand it literally.

The language of the Caṅkam anthologies, i.e. Old Tamil, is difficult and has not yet been described in a satisfactory manner. While quite an amount of work has been done in morphology, next to nothing is available on semantics and very little on syntax. This might be one important reason why the reading of the texts has been guided to such a high extent by commentators and poetics. Very few are the translations with at least a minimum of notes philological in the continental sense of the term. With the aim of gaining a textual base for literary questions, a complete and annotated translation of one of the anthologies has been prepared, i.e. of the Kuṟuntokai, generally held to be one of the oldest. In the meantime it has been published together with an up-to-date glossary containing morphological analysis [Wilden 2005 (forthcoming)]. This is the text that will be constantly drawn upon for examples.

Since one of the most severe problems when reading the poems of the Kuruntokai has turned out to be the structure of main sentences, chapter II will be devoted to the means for marking off sentences, not only with respect to their endings but also with respect to mode. In the view of the present author, the main means of doing so consists in the use of particles, most of which have been generally explained, in accordance with the grammatical tradition, as expletives.

2. The current understanding of the poems is based on assumptions taken from the poetological tradition, which in their turn have been shaped by the interpretation of the basic texts of that tradition on the part of the medieval commentators.

The present view of a single, uniform poetological tradition is not very helpful. It is necessary to distinguish between several sources and different approaches and layers, that is, parts of the Tolkāppiyam Poruḷatikāram (TP), the Iṟaiyaṇār Akapporuḷ (IA), the *kiḷavi-s* (a kind of mini-commentary to the individual poem revealing the speech situation) and the commentaries. So we are rather faced with several mutually influential traditions, and the main aim of chapter III.1+2 will be to lay a foundation for a historical stratification. As for the poetry itself, it can be described as drawing on different sets of conventions. Two of them are clearly connected with poetological approaches, namely a regional orientation (the famous *tiṇai* concept) and a basic conception of dialogue-like mode organized around a set of speakers, listeners and thematic situations. The strategies for constructing a poetic universe out of these elements will be discussed in III.3. One further clearly conventional feature, the formulae, is unknown to poetics. Their impact on the syntactical structure and also the content of the poems will be pursued in III.4.

3. The categories of interpretation, which can be derived from the poetological tradition, are not sufficient to fully understand the poems as poems.

The issues dealt with so far are preliminary in character. The, to my mind, fundamental question to be asked is how is it that the poems are original, individual, in spite of rather rigid conventional preconditions. There are several techniques to be observed in operation, partly, of course, forming just another set of conventions (one basically not described by poetics), partly also for circumventing convention. All these will be included under the heading of "style" in chapter IV; in fact they concern different levels of poetic design.

IV.1 will be concerned with the formal side of the poetry. While metre and tonal means of embellishment like assonances are a common basis, it is possible to distinguish between several stylistic types, based on peculiar syntactical

structures or kinds of “narrative” framing. IV.2 will deal with the coordination of the figurative and the emotive level (a distinction introduced in III.3). This is the one area where there are a few starting points in the poetological tradition with regard to which some remarks can be found in secondary literature. IV.3 will face the phenomenon of deliberate use of ambiguity, on the one hand as downright *double entendres* (well-known from Sanskrit and Prākṛit poetry, but not yet suspected in Caṅkam poems), on the other hand as a kind of symbolic code (which has been noticed and approached, but not treated systematically). IV.4 will introduce the problem of intertextual references, a feature which can be traced and yet remains to be discussed with respect to its chronological and conceptual implications, besides being perhaps the clearest trace of individuality in a conventional system.

In conclusion chapter V will discuss the relation between convention and individuality, which can be described as a productive tension.

As for general comprehensibility, in the present volume the highly technical analysis of sentence structures in chapter II and the explorations of textual history in chapter III.1+2 will be of interest mainly for specialists, while the outlines of the poetic universe in III.3, the description of the use of formulae in III.4 as well as the whole of chapter IV, devoted to the different literary techniques employed by the poets, might hopefully also appeal to Sanskritists/Prākṛitists concerned with Kāvya (because there are many interesting parallels) and perhaps even to some scholars of comparative literature. The introduction too is written with a view to “outsiders”, though presupposing some acquaintance with the basic facts and data.

I.1 CAṆKAM LITERATURE

Caṅkam literature has come to be, admittedly somewhat inadequately, the common designation for the earliest, classical poetry in Tamil including the corresponding grammar and poetics. The corpus consists mainly of two anthologies, the Eṭṭuttokai, which is a hyper-anthology of 8 anthologies of poems, and the Pattuppāṭṭu, which is a collection of 10 long poems. Besides these there are the grammar and poetics named Tolkāppiyam¹ and the so-called minor works which include the old epics Cilappatikāram and Maṇimēkalai.²

1 In this traditional enumeration of works we ought to include on the poetological side the Irāiyanār Akapporuḷ (generally viewed as a later poetics) and the *kiḷavi-s*, short commentaries on the single poem and the first testimony of an exegetical tradition, as will be argued extensively in chapter III, 1+2.

2 A detailed exposition of the characteristics of Caṅkam literature will not be given here, because, although still a subject far from popular, in the last years several major contributions

Caṅkam philology can be characterized as having two features: it had to start from very little and there have always been only few scholars working in the field. Since most of the texts had been virtually forgotten until nearly the end of the 19th century, scholars were confronted with a whole corpus of texts partly endowed with at least medieval commentaries, but with no living tradition of exegesis.³ For those isolated individuals trying to gain a footing in such a vast area it was undoubtedly necessary to build up working hypotheses in order to be able to do anything at all. The problem today is that many of these working hypotheses have long since become scholarly “knowledge” without having ever been scrutinized again and matched with newly arising facts. Paradigmatic for this state of affairs is the latest publication to date in the field, Tieken 2001, who proposes to re-date the whole chronology of the Caṅkam from the beginning of the Christian era to the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. I do not think he is right in doing this, but he is certainly right in questioning the basis of the generally accepted dating, consisting in quite a number of weakly justified presuppositions.⁴

The consequence of this can only be to ask once again, and very minutely, what is known today, what can be known and what should be known in order to achieve real progress in understanding Caṅkam texts and their historical surroundings. The questions as to the present textual knowledge will be posed in the following paragraphs.

I.1.1 The State of Research⁵

Since Caṅkam literature had to be regained, towards the end of the 19th century, from the oblivion it had virtually fallen into, Old Tamil Philology is a relatively young field of research. And since Tamil philology has never been very popular compared to Sanskrit philology, the stream of contributions has

have been made to it (Takahashi 1995, Hart/Heifetz 1999, Dubianski 2000, Selby 2000, Tieken 2001), and anyhow nearly every publication from the end of the sixties until now contains more or less extensive introductions. Readers totally unacquainted with the subject are referred to Ramanujan 1967 (a reprint available in paperback) which does not only give the most comprehensive outline, but also the most beautiful and convincing translations of a selection of the poems.

- 3 This fact has to be stressed because many modern scholars have been (and still are) treating the newly arising commentary tradition on a par with real, surviving traditions like parts of the North Indian Vedic tradition or that of South Indian *bhakti*.
- 4 A review article of Tieken 2001 by the present author has come out as Wilden 2002. [See now also Tieken 2003, 2004.]
- 5 The following survey will be only illustrative and thus far from complete. Completeness, however, besides taking up too much space, would for several other reasons be not wholly desirable.