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5 Abdul Rahman's Pretexts

Andrew Ollett

Abdul Rahman's *Sandēśarāsaka* is one of the best-known poems in the Apabhramsha language.¹ Nothing is known for certain about its time and place of composition (the *terminus ad quem* is 1408 CE), but it was popular already in the early modern period.² About a dozen manuscripts of it are known, most of them including a Sanskrit commentary, making it one of the most copied and most commented-upon Apabhramsha works available.³ While most Apabhramsha works were, for lack of a better word, "religious" and circulated within specific communities (Śvētāmbara Jain in western India, Digambara Jain in southern India, and Buddhist in eastern India), the *Sandēśarāsaka* was a love poem that appealed to diverse audiences. It was composed by a Muslim, and it was copied and commented upon mostly by Śvētāmbara Jain monks, one of whom claimed to have "written down whatever explanation I heard from the mouth of the Kṣatriya Gāhaḍa."⁴ In the modern period, it was rediscovered in the manuscript archives of Patan by Jinavijaya Muni in 1912, and published in 1945, at a time of intense debate about the early history of vernacular literature in North India. Since then, it has attracted scholarly attention, largely because it is the only surviving example of popular love poetry in Apabhramsha and the only surviving poem in Apabhramsha composed by a Muslim, as well as because of its contested status as a "missing link" between literature in Apabhramsha and literature in the North Indian vernaculars.

This attention, however, has almost exclusively focused on the linguistic and metrical *forms* of the poem. But presumably it was the poem's *meanings* that were responsible for its unlikely survival into the age of print. A cursory reading of the poem, especially in translation, gives the impression that it is repetitive and highly conventional. I do not want to deny that readers have different tastes, or that some readers would certainly have appreciated the very predictability of the text. At the same time, I was never quite convinced by explanations like this. Is there something more to Abdul Rahman's poem?

In this chapter, I will explore the suggestion of Bronner and Shulman that one of the points of messenger poetry is to reflect on poetry itself as a message. To write a poem on the model of Kalidasa's *Cloud Messenger* is, in part, to pose a similar set of questions to those that Kalidasa had posed—about the distance that separates the speaker from the addressee, about the power of the imagination to close that distance, and about the mediation afforded by non-sentient objects—but with a different set of literary values and ambitions. In other words, within the parameters that Kalidasa has laid down, the message is real, existing in and mirrored in the poem itself, even if the world to which it belongs is one of fantasy and imagination, and even if it never reaches, and could never have reached, its destination.

The *Sandēśarāsaka* seems very far from messenger poems modeled on the *Cloud Messenger*. Some of the reasons are formal and obvious: it is in Apabhramsha, rather than Sanskrit; it uses a relatively large repertoire of Apabhramsha meters, rather than being composed throughout in the *mandākrāntā* meter; it has three sections rather than two. But in my reading, Abdul Rahman is less interested in exploring these formal aspects that we have come to associate with messenger poetry. He is, rather, interested in exploring a very different question: what if the message isn't a message at all? If the message is merely a *pretext*, as it seems to be in the poem, then none of the elements in the "act of verbal communication" sketched by Jakobson (1987: 65)—the sender, the recipient, the context, the channel, the code, and of course the message itself—are what they seem.

Abdul Rahman poses this question on two levels. The first is within the narrative, where the message itself very often seems to be a pretext for the characters to flirt with each other. Here the prospect of a sexual encounter is strongly suggested not just by the words and actions of the characters themselves, but by another kind of "pre-text," namely the whole preceding history of Prakrit (and presumably Apabhramsha) literature. Of course, such an encounter would render the message unnecessary, if not null and void: imagine a man receiving a love letter from his beloved, only to receive another message the next day informing him that she's left him! But as we find out at the end of the poem, the message was never actually necessary in the first place: imagine, once again, a woman meeting her beloved, just returned from a trip, on the way to the post office to send him a message. The second level is that of the poem itself, where the conceit of the message poem seems to be a pretext for the poet to compose set-pieces on a variety of themes. Here, too, we see "pre-texts" at work, in the bits of poetry that are quoted, very often with a sense of humor and irony. In fact, these two levels are intertwined, since the characters are figured as poets, and the main character, the woman, seems to be a proxy for the poet himself in certain key respects.

5.1 The Messenger Poem as a Pretext

Abdul Rahman is not exactly shy about his own pretextual use of the messenger poem genre. He calls his own composition a *sannēhaya-rāsaya*- (vv. 4, 19), "a *rāsaka* in the form of a message." The typical title in the genre is rather X-*sandēśa*, "a message sent by X." Abdul Rahman's poem is a *rāsaka* first and a messenger poem second. But what is a *rāsaka*? In fact the *Sandēśarāsaka* is the only surviving example of the old *rāsaka* in Apabhramsha, which is described in metrical handbooks only as a polymetric composition wherein a meter called the *rāsaka* or *ābhāṇaka* figures prominently.⁵ This is true of the *Sandēśarāsaka*, of which about a third is composed in the *rāsaka* meter, and the rest in various other Prakrit and Apabhramsha meters, such as *gāthā*, *dōhā*, *aḍillā*, *paddhaḍiyā*, *vatthuya*, *cuḍālā*, *phullāya*, *ḍumilā*, *raḍḍā* (a strophic meter consisting of a *mātrā* and a *dōhā*), *vatthu* (a strophic meter consisting of a *vatthuya* and an *ullālā*), and one *mālinī*.⁶ Almost no other genre in Prakrit or Apabhramsha exhibits such metrical diversity.⁷

The *Sandēśarāsaka* has three parts. We don't know whether *rāsakas* in general had this structure, but it appears to be a variation on the bipartite structure of the messenger poem genre. In a typical messenger poem, based on Kalidasa's example, the first part describes an encounter between the sender and the messenger and has the sender describe the route that the messenger will take, while the second part describes what the messenger will do when he, she, or it finally reaches its destination, including the text of the message that is to be delivered. Messenger poems are well-known for starting *in medias res*, without much of a

preface. The curtain rises, so to speak, on an act of verbal communication occurring in the diegetic world: a *yakṣa* addressing a cloud, for instance. And the curtain typically falls with an *envoi*, wherein the unidentified narrator breaks through the diegetic frame and pronounces a blessing for the reader/listener.

The *Sandēśarāsaka* diverges from this model first by including a “pre-text,” an introduction. The two opening verses call the blessings of the creator (*kattāram*) upon the readers. The next two introduce the poet and his work.⁸ What follows is a *captatio benevolentiae*, wherein Abdul Rahman modestly expresses his hesitation about composing a poem (vv. 5–17).⁹ All of these verses are Prakrit *gāthās*. When he finally proclaims his intention to compose the poem (vv. 18–19), he does so in two *radḍā* verses in Apabhramsha. The second of these is remarkable for foregrounding Abdul Rahman’s relatively low caste and social status as a pretext for highlighting his literary achievements:

ṇia-kavittaha vijja-māhappu
paṇḍitta-pavittharaṇu
maṇujaṇammi kōliya-payāsiu
kōūhali bhāsiaū
saralabhāi sannēharāsaū
taṁ jāṇavi ṇimisiddhu khaṇu
buhayaṇa karavi saṇēhu
pāmara-jaṇa-thūlakkarahī
jaṁ raīyaū ṇisuṇēhu

The greatness of knowledge on the part of his own poetry,
the expanse of his learning, brought to light among men
by a weaver, and uttered with earnestness and simplicity—
knowing this about the *Sandēśarāsaka*,
please be kind, wise people, for half a moment
and listen to what I have composed
in the unwieldy letters of a peasant.

He then reflects on his ideal audience (vv. 20–21): he hopes that his poem will be heard by a “middling” (*majjhaāru*, v. 21) person, neither too learned to overlook his mistakes, nor too uneducated to understand it at all. After this he recommends the poem to potential listeners by its good qualities (vv. 22–23). There he heavy-handedly underlines the poem’s erotic theme and seemingly returns to the ideal listener: “it’s a clever man who can take this poem and get the aim of its meaning, one who is skilled in lovemaking.”¹⁰ These statements about the audience seem to be in tension with each other: does Abdul Rahman want a “middling” listener or a “clever” one? But I read the first, in line with the *captatio benevolentiae* noted above, as a relatively standard display of vernacular modesty, while the second imagines a listener who is capable of reading subtle cues and “reading between the lines,” skills, Abdul Rahman suggests, that are as useful for understanding poetry as they are for lining up romantic encounters.

The introduction figures the poem itself as the message, “published” (*payāsiu*) for a potentially limitless audience of human beings (*maṇujaṇa-*), who are expected to notice and appreciate Abdul Rahman’s poetic skill. Abdul Rahman also notes the “code” in which the message is sent by remarking on his own facility in Prakrit verse and song (v. 5), which is soon implicitly expanded to include Apabhramsha, or to use his own term (v. 6), Avahaṭṭha.¹¹

The second section approaches the equation from the other direction, by presenting the message as poetry. Here the curtain rises on “a certain beautiful woman” (*kāvi vararamaṇi*, v. 24), whom readers of messenger poetry will immediately recognize as the sender. Like Kalidasa’s *yakṣa*, she is anonymous (*kāvi [kāpi] ≈ kaścit*). She is in Vijayanagara, likely a town in western Rajasthan, perhaps today’s Jaisalmer. She sees a traveler, rushes out to meet him, and they have a conversation, in the course of which they discover that the traveler is going from Multan to Cambay (v. 65). She asks the traveler to deliver a message to her husband, who is also on a business trip to Cambay (v. 67). But the woman keeps adding to the message, despite the traveler’s impatience. When the traveler finally asks how long it has been since her husband left, she delivers the *Sandēśarāsaka*’s third and final section, a description of each of the six seasons. At the end of this description, the traveler goes on his way (v. 222), and immediately afterward, the woman’s husband returns home (v. 223).

One critical feature of the *Sandēśarāsaka* is that the characters actually speak in poetry. Kalidasa’s *Cloud Messenger* is in Sanskrit *mandākrāntā* verses throughout, but this is a feature of the poem. Within the world of the poem, does the *yakṣa* actually speak in Sanskrit *mandākrāntā* verses? If this seems like a strange question, it’s because the poet never invites us to ask it. In the *Sandēśarāsaka*, the speech of the characters is very often explicitly said to be in certain verse forms, either by the narrator or by the characters themselves.¹² Hence when the traveler first sees the woman, he describes her beauty in eight *gāthās* (*gāhā ... aṭṭha*, v. 31). His speech here is a head-to-toe description of the woman (*śikhā-nakha-varṇanā*), a mini-genre that is absolutely ubiquitous in South Asian poetry. This initial exchange establishes the first principle of the *Sandēśarāsaka*: the characters must speak in poems, drawn from well-known genres or subgenres of South Asian literature.

If you were to guess that this principle would have comic consequences, you would be right. As Mayrhofer (1998: x) observes, much of the *Sandēśarāsaka* has a parodic tone. That is partly because the speech of the characters, which would otherwise be seamlessly integrated into the poem itself, is broken out into dozens of miniature poems. The somewhat “pathetic and ironic” (1998: x) monologue that makes up the classical messenger poem turns, in Abdul Rahman’s hands, into a performance of the “greatest hits” of South Asian love poetry. This strategy is most obvious when it comes at the cost of narrative coherence. Two examples should suffice. When the woman asks the traveler where he is coming from and going to, he responds with twenty-four verses that describe Multan, including nine verses that simply list all of the types of trees to be found in its parks. We, the readers, are certainly meant to recognize this passage as a conventional and idealized description of a city (*nagara-varṇana*-). When listening to the names of dozens of trees, we are probably meant to think about how impatient the woman must be. We are probably also meant to recognize a certain irony in the description: Multan was historically an Islamic city, having been important to several caliphates and emirates since the rule of Muhammad ibn Qasim in 712 CE, but the Muslim poet describes it as if Islam never existed, and refers instead to Brahmins and the Veda, and the recitation of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. I don’t think it’s giving Abdul Rahman too much credit to think that he is winking when putting this description into the traveler’s mouth, as if to acknowledge that it is conventional and say: “look, Multan is as Islamic a city as Abdul Rahman is an Islamic name, but I can’t even put these facts into language, because the conventional language of Indian poetry does not acknowledge them as facts.”

Another example is the third section of the poem. In the second section, the traveler repeatedly says that he is eager to get back on the road before the sun sets (vv. 82, 91, 117). The woman keeps detaining him with the “I just thought of one more thing” trick, which

we'll reexamine below. But then he asks her when her husband left (v. 124), knowing that her answer—ninety-two verses, the entirety of the third section—will ruin his travel plans. (The device of constantly deferring a task at hand by reciting poetry, or telling stories, resembles the frame story of the *Śukasaptati*.) Once again, the *Sandēśarāsaka* showcases poetry in a way that is in humorous tension with the story that provides the occasion for it, as if the story is a self-consciously flimsy pretext for the poetry. In this case, the poetry occasioned by the traveler's question is a longer set-piece: a description of the six seasons (*ṣaḍṛtu-varṇana*-), though not as close to the *Collection of Seasons* (*R̥tusamhāra*) in Sanskrit ascribed to Kalidasa as it is to compositions in North Indian vernaculars known as *bārahmāsā*, “twelve months.” This genre was already prevalent in folk literature by the time of the *Sandēśarāsaka*, and it would become a fixture of subsequent literary texts in Gujarati and Hindi.¹³

The inclusion of an entire *ṣaḍṛtu* song in the *Sandēśarāsaka* provides Abdul Rahman with an occasion for taking his pretextual use of literature to the next level. Instead of dropping in the song as a unit, as he had done with the traveler's description of the city, he has the woman compose the song at the current narrative time (t_0) about an earlier narrative time (t_{0-n}) using verses that she had allegedly composed in that earlier narrative time (t_{0-n}). In other words, the traveler's question provides the woman with a pretext for reciting a poem, which in turn provides her with a pretext for reciting *still other* poems. As an example, let's turn to a series of verses at the end of the woman's description of the winter (*śiśira*), vv. 196–199:¹⁴

kēvi dīnti riuṇāhaha uppattihe dīniḥī
ṇiyavallaha kari kēli janti sījāsaniḥī
itthantari puṇu paḥiya sījī ikkalliyae
piu pēsīu maṇa-dūaū pimmagahilliyae

Some gave gifts on the days marking the birth of the Lord of Seasons
 and went to bed after enjoying love-games with their beloveds.
 Meanwhile I was all alone, traveler, in my bed,
 and crazy with love, sent my heart as a messenger to my husband.

maī jāṇīu piu āṇi majjha santōsīhī
ṇahu muṇiyāū khalu dhiṭṭhu sō vi mahu milhahī
piu ṇāviu ihu dūu gahivī tattha vi rahīu
saccu hiyaū mahu dukkha-bhāri pūriū ahiu

I thought it would bring back my husband, to my delight.
 What I didn't know is that that bastard, too, would leave me.
 My husband didn't come back. He just took my messenger
 and stayed there.
 A load of suffering filled my heart even more than before.

ṇaṭṭhu mūlu piyasaṅgi lāhu icchantiyae
ṇisunī paḥiya jaṁ paḍhiu vatthu vilavantiyae

I was hoping for a profit when it met my husband
 but I lost my capital instead. Listen, traveler,
 to the *vatthu* I recited as I wept:

māi ghaṇu dukkhu sahappi muṇivi maṇu pēsiu dūaū
ṇāhu ṇa āṇiu tēna su puṇu tattha vi raū hūaū
ēma bhamantahu sunnahiyaya jaṇi rayāṇi vihaṇiya
aṇiraī kīyāī kammi avasu maṇi pacchuttāṇiya
māi dinnu hiyaū ṇahu pattu piyu
huiya uvama iha kahu kavaṇa
siṅgatthi gāīya uvvādayaṇi
pikkha harāviya ṇiya savaṇa

I endured great suffering, and I had the idea to send my heart as a messenger.
 My husband did not come back; in fact my messenger fell in love with him.
 As it was running off, I was empty at heart when the night turned to day.
 When you do something without thinking about it
 of course you are going to feel regret in your heart.
 I sent my heart and didn't get my husband: what can I compare this to?
 A she-ass went out for a horn, and look, she got her own ears taken away.

Here the woman is speaking to the traveler in the current diegetic time (t_0) about what she experienced at the end of winter (t_{0-n}) and recites a *vatthuya* verse that she said she composed at that earlier time (t_{0-n}). And in fact, the *content* of the verse is almost identical to what the woman has just told the traveler in *ābhāṇaya* verses. This is almost, but not quite, a Barthesian situation in which the character recites, as a quotation, the *exact same* verse she had just spoken to him. Or perhaps it is more comparable to the trope in cooking shows where the cook goes to the trouble to make something, only to pull out a dish that he or she had already prepared before filming began. The verses are therefore “pre-texts” of each other in different ways: in the poem itself, the *ābhāṇayas* precede the *vatthuya* and provide a kind of commentary on or framing of the latter; in the diegetic time of the poem, the *vatthuya* precedes the *ābhāṇayas* and make the latter seem less like a spontaneous outburst and more like a repeat performance of a literary artifact composed at an earlier time. Finally, this sequence also evokes several of Abdul Rahman's “pre-texts,” namely the central conceit of messenger poetry in general, and the specific trope of sending one's heart as a messenger.¹⁵

Readers will notice two things about the woman's *vatthuya* verse. The first is her awareness of it *as verse*, not just in her framing of it, but in the way that she talks about searching for an appropriate comparison. She is a poet herself, and in this sense a reflection of Abdul Rahman himself: the “message” sent by the woman overlaps in very large part with the “message” sent by the poet. This mirroring effect is strengthened by the second point, namely the woman's citation of, or perhaps even invention of, a folksy proverb at the end of the *vatthuya*. With this she makes the same maneuver that Abdul Rahman did in the verse quoted above: I may be rustic and uneducated, but I can still spin out a good verse.

The woman's description of herself as “crazy with love” (*pimmagahilliyae*) is a callback to Abdul Rahman's introduction. The poet there listed a number of comparisons for the modesty and simplicity of his own work in contrast to the sophistication of other poems. One of them is (v. 15):

jai bharaḥabhāvacchandē ṇaccaī navaraṅgacaṅgimā taruṇī
tā kiṇi gāmagahillī tālisaddē ṇa ṇaccēi

If a young woman dressed in fine clothes dances
 in accord with all the feelings described by Bharata,

does that mean a crazy village girl
can't dance to the clapping of hands?

By the time we read verse 196, we are able to recognize the woman as the “crazy village girl” of this introductory verse, and to recognize this introductory verse not merely as a comparison, but a preview of the poem to come, and a hint at Abdul Rahman’s identification with this rustic feminine voice. The identification is reaffirmed at the poem’s conclusion (v. 222):

jaī aṇakkharu kahiū māi pahīya
ghanadukkhāunniyaha
mayāṇaaggi virahiṇi palittihi
taṃ pharasaū milhi tuhu
viṇayamaggi pabhañjja jhattihi
timi jampiya jima kuvaiṇaḥu taṃ pabhañiya jaṃ juttu
āsīsi vi varakāmiṇihi vaṭṭāū paḍiuttu

“Traveler, if I have spoken **impolitely**, a lonely woman
full of agony and inflamed by love’s fire,
then leave out what is harsh, and speak straightaway
within the confines of propriety.
Speak so that he doesn’t get angry. Speak what’s proper.”
With a blessing, that lovely woman sent him on his way.

The woman recognizes that, in her loneliness and agitation, she might have said something *aṇakkharu*, which I understand in this context to have its extended sense, namely “impolite,” “rude.” But it also clearly evokes its primary sense of “unlettered,” especially given the priming we have received so far. And in this sense, *aṇakkharu* is not necessarily a bad thing. It names the aesthetic that Abdul Rahman, and his proxy in the poem, identify with (recall “the unwieldy letters of a peasant” in v. 19). The woman *does* suggest that she is illiterate (v. 88, “I cannot write a letter,” *lihivi na sakkaū lēhu*), but only as an explanation, or indeed a pretext, for reciting dozens of verses to the traveler in lieu of simply handing him a letter. It might bear mentioning, too, that the woman’s send-off can be read in the same spirit as a colophon, asking the reader to correct any blatant mistakes that have snuck into the text. There are several other parallels between the woman and the poet, including their shared interest in Prakrit song (vv. 4, 157).

Let us briefly return to the “two times” (t_0 and t_{0-n}) that intersect when the woman recites for the traveler verses she had allegedly composed earlier. Who is the audience for these “ready-made” verses? It would appear that the woman composes them all by herself, and then keeps them in her memory in case a traveler happens to pass through and ask her how she has spent her time over the last year. If the scenario itself does not alert us to the pre-textual character of the message, there are a few places where Abdul Rahman seems to deliberately conflate the two times. Nobody appears to have noticed that several “ready-made” verses (95 [discussed below], 148, 150, 183) actually address the traveler, who of course is not present when they are composed.¹⁶ There are several possible explanations for this, all of which destabilize the distinction between the message and the poem. One explanation is that we can imagine the woman *imagining herself* speaking to a traveler when she writes the verses, which would call attention to the fact that Abdul Rahman’s traveler and

the woman's are equally imagined, and that the woman and the poet are equally adhering to the discursive conventions of love poetry. The traveler is the conventional addressee of this kind of love poetry, and hence he is a proxy of sorts for the "audience," whether the poem itself is composed by a character, or by the poet, or both.

5.2 The Message as a Pretext

On a "straight" reading of the *Sandēśarāsaka*, the woman asks the traveler to deliver a message to her beloved in Cambay, in the form of a collection of verses that she recites on the spot. The following verse (v. 88) would seem to be a typical set of instructions in that vein:

tuhu puṇu kajji hiāvalāi lihivi na sakkaū lēhu
dōhā gāha kahijja piya paṇthiya karivi saṇēhu

But you seem to be preoccupied with your task.
 Since I can't write a letter, please feel some love
 and recite a *dōhā* and a *gāthā* to my beloved, traveler.

But here a "clever" reader (*viyakṣhaṇu*, v. 23) might see hints of something else.¹⁷ Context might suggest a meaning like "tell them *to* my beloved," but in that case we would expect a direct case form of the word for "beloved" (*piu*) and in fact we have the stem form (*piya*), which is properly used for a vocative or at the beginning of a compound. If we were fastidious about the grammar, we might think that the woman is actually calling the traveler "beloved." That can't be, can it? Better, it would seem, to say that the stem form can be used as the direct case in Abdul Rahman's Apabhramsha. Exactly the same considerations apply to a phrase that follows a few verses later (v. 92, *kahiya pahiya piya*). But then we have the phrase "feel some love" (*karivi saṇēhu*). Sure, the woman might be asking the traveler to convey *her* love to her husband. But she could be asking the traveler to feel some love *for her*. Is this a way of asking for a favor? Or is she trying to say something else?

These suspicions are grounded in the conventions of South Asian love poetry. Perhaps no situation is quite as common, especially in the Prakrit literature that Abdul Rahman was obviously steeped in, as the encounter between a lonely traveler and a lonely housewife. Hence, in a very clear departure from the model offered by Kalidasa, Abdul Rahman introduces erotic tension between the sender and the messenger. And he does not try to hide it, either. As soon as the woman sees the traveler, she runs toward him and trips over herself, falling and exposing herself to the traveler. As we have already seen, the traveler responds with a head-to-toe description (*śikhā-nakha-varṇana*-) of her beauty. Could the woman have *intended* to elicit this response? Did she trip on purpose?

The nature of the relationship between the sender and the messenger puts a question mark over the identity of the addressee. The verses are ostensibly meant to be delivered to the woman's husband. But in a few places Abdul Rahman subtly indicates that this, too, might just be a pretext. Verse 95 is a *ḍōmilaū* verse that the woman tells the traveler to recite to her husband. And indeed the pronouns and vocatives in the verse do suggest that the "sender" is the woman and the "addressee" is her husband: "My husband, a thief has robbed the storehouse and left" (*maha sāiya vakkharu hari gaū takkharu*). But it is followed by an address to the traveler! "Tell me, traveler, who I can take refuge with" (*jāu saraṇi kasu*

pahiya bhaṇē).¹⁸ This final part of the verse can't be intended for the woman's husband, unless she has suddenly decided to refer to him as a "traveler" as well. And once we start thinking about the "real" addressee of this verse, an alternative interpretation of the earlier part becomes available: reading *sāiya* as the first part of a compound, rather than as a vocative, we get: "A thief has robbed my husband's storehouse and left." The pre-modern commentaries, followed by all modern translations, take this to mean that the thief is separation and the storehouse is the woman's beauty. But this is merely a guess based on the preceding part of the verse. The woman might, instead, be telling that traveler that *he* is the "thief," and that he has stolen her husband's property, namely, her own heart.

This might seem like the kind of interpretation that a reader would ultimately dismiss as overly suspicious or far-fetched. Yet we are encouraged to keep this interpretation in play by the following verses. In verse 96, the woman is described by the narrator as staring motionless, "like a painted picture on a wall" (*citti bhitti ṇaṁ lihiya*). Nothing is said here about her motivation. In other words, nothing stops us from imagining that she is thinking about her husband. But neither does anything stop us from imagining that she is eagerly waiting for the traveler to understand her true intentions. The following verse, 97, begins by retaining the ambiguity: she is "pieced by the love-god's arrows" (*vammaha-sara-paḍibhinna*) as she "remembers the pleasures of lovemaking with her beloved" (*saravi piya-saṅgama-suha*). But it ends with the woman casting a furtive sidelong glance at the traveler (*dara-ti-racchi*), which can only mean one thing. Tellingly, in the last part of the verse, the poet compares the woman to a deer who hears the sound of a hunter's bowstring. The hunter can only be the traveler.

All of this leads us to ask: is the entire scenario simply a pretext? The woman is reciting love poetry, allegedly for her husband. But is she actually reciting it for the traveler? When the woman says or thinks "beloved" (*piya-*), is she looking *ahead* to an encounter with the traveler, rather than looking *back* to her relationship with her husband? I noted earlier that the woman cannot stop reciting poetry for the traveler. He keeps encouraging her to draw her message to completion, and she keeps saying, "there's just one more thing." Beyond the humor of this dynamic, there is the hint that the woman is not really sending a message at all, but rather just trying to keep the traveler from leaving.

One exchange would appear to confirm this interpretation. In verse 113, the woman explicitly tells the traveler to spend the night with her:

*gayaū divasu thiū sēsu pahiya gamu milhiyāi,
 ṇisi atthamu bolēvi divasi puṇu calliyāi
 bimbāhari diṇa bimba junha gōsihi balai
 rayaṇi tōi jāihaū kajji haū āvalai
 jāi na rahahi iṇi thāi pahiya icchahi gamaṇu
 cūḍillaū khaḍaḥaḍaū piyaha gāhā vi bhaṇu*¹⁹

"The day is gone. Not much remains.

Forget about going, traveler.

Stay for the night and set out again in the day."

"Red-lipped girl, the sun's disc begins to blaze at dawn,

so I will travel at night: I am anxious about my task."

"If you won't stay here, traveler, and if you really want to go,
 then tell my love a *cūḍillaka*, a *khaḍaḥaḍaka*, and a *gāthā*."

The traveler seems to be reluctant to accept the offer and claims that his task does not allow him to stay. But this is revealed as a pretext by a subsequent interaction. The woman keeps reciting love poetry, ostensibly for the traveler to recite to the woman's husband in Cambay, although (in this interpretation) really intended to win over the traveler's heart. Eventually it works. After the twenty-fourth verse she recites, the traveler seems to have a change of heart. Rather than trying to end the interaction and get back on the road, he suddenly asks the woman to tell him, at length, how long she has been waiting for her husband. But the verse where this happens seems to protest too much (v. 121ab):

khandhaü duvai suṇēvi aṅgu rōmañciyaü
ṇēya pimma-parivaḍiu pahiu maṇi rañjiyaü

On hearing this *skandhaka* and *dvipadī*,
 the traveler's hair stood on end. But of course it wasn't
 because he was in love.²⁰ His heart was just charmed.

The *Sandēśarāsaka* is, as we saw in the first section, a pretext for poetry, so the traveler's response leads not to a sexual encounter with the woman, but a further exchange of poetry. The difference is that, after this point, there is no pretense that the poetry will be delivered to the woman's husband; it is simply a performance for the traveler himself.

I say "pretense" because, in another radical departure from the generic conventions of messenger poetry, Abdul Rahman actually says at the end of the poem that the message never reaches its destination. In the very last verse, we are told that just after the woman abruptly takes her leave of the traveler, her husband arrives (v. 223):

taṁ paḍuñjivi caliya dīhacchi
aī turiya itthantariya
disi dakkhiṇa tiṇi jāma darasiya,
āsanna pahāvariu
diṭṭhu ṇāhu tiṇi jhatti harasiya
jēma acintiu kajju tasu siddhu khaṇaddhi mahantu
tēma paḍhanta suṇantayaha jayaü aṇāi aṇantu

The long-eyed girl took her leave of him
 and left, very quickly. In the meantime,
 as she looked toward the south,
 she saw her husband right there,
 and she thrilled with pleasure.
 As something inconceivable and grand
 turned out for her in half a moment,
 so, too, may it be for those who read and listen to this.
 Victory to the one without beginning or end.

This is a trope called *samāhitam*, akin to a *deus ex machina*, where "assistance is obtained unexpectedly."²¹ Here it provides the story with a happy ending and provides an occasion (I refrain from saying "pretext") for the poet to wish success on his listeners. But there is, as we have now come to expect, a certain irony about describing this outcome as "unexpected" (*acintiu*). From one perspective, the eventual reunion of the separated lovers is not just expected; this "bond of hope" (*āśābandha*, as Kalidasa had called it, *Mēghadūta* v. 10)

constitutes the very basis of messenger poetry. But maybe the woman (and us, the readers) simply didn't expect him to return so soon? Indeed, it seems that she might have wanted him to take his time. No, what seems "unexpected" about the husband's arrival is that we had been led to think, over the course of the poem, that the "traveling husband" was a pretext, a trope of vulnerability and availability, and then, "suddenly," he appears in the flesh. His appearance is "unexpected" within the conventions of messenger poetry: does the addressee ever just show up at the end of a messenger poem? Of course not—that would, in some sense, undermine the very notion of a messenger poem. Is a message that never reaches its destination even a message? Is a message that was never *meant* to reach its destination a message? Was the traveler the addressee of the woman's message the whole time? Is the addressee even the addressee if he doesn't *realize* he is?

Notes

- 1 The author gives his name as *addahamāṇa* in verse 1.4; Dvivēdī & Tripāthī (1965: 13) unconvincingly suggests that this form is used for the sake of a double meaning.
- 2 Jina Vijaya Muni guessed that it was composed in the middle of the twelfth century (1945: xii–xiii), on the grounds that (i) it mentions Cambay as a prosperous city, which he says ceased to be the case after the reign of Kumarapala (r. 1143–1172); it describes Multan, too, as a "flourishing city," which he says ceased to be the case after it fell to Muhammad Ghori in 1175. I don't find this argument convincing (nor does Mayrhofer 1998: xii). The *terminus ad quem* is 1408/1409 CE, when Lakshmichandra composed his commentary.
- 3 The most recent edition (Bhayani 1999) lists fourteen manuscripts. Of those, only one—the manuscript that Jinavijaya found at Patan in 1912 and first kindled his interest in Apabhramsha literature—lacks a commentary. (Bhayani does not actually say whether the seven manuscripts in the collection of Agarchand Nahta in Bikaner have the commentary or just the text, but at least one of them contains the *avacūrikā*.) There are two "families" of commentaries found in the manuscripts, one identified as a set of "notes" (*ṭippa*-) by its author, the Jain monk Lakshmichandra, who wrote it in 1408/1409 CE, and another identified as an *avacūrikā* or *avacūrī*. There are variations across manuscripts within each "family" of commentaries.
- 4 In the *envoi* to Lakshmichandra's commentary (Jina Vijaya Muni 1945: 90): *kintu kṣatriyagāhaḍasya mukhatō yā yā ca vṛttiḥ śrutā sā sā hy atra mayā vimūḍhamatinā vārttā nibaddhā nanu*.
- 5 See Bhayani in Jina Vijaya Muni and Bhayani (1945: 76–78), who summarizes the view of Virahanka (ca. 8th c.) and Svayambhu (9th c.). A *rāsaka* includes verses in the *rāsaka* meter, as well as the *aḍilā* and *duvahaā* (= *aḍillā* and *dōhā*), *mattā*, *raḍḍā*, and *dhōsā* meters (Virahanka). See Bhayani's "Critical Study" for more on the meters of the text. The Apabhramsha *rāsaka* is not obviously related to either the circle dance, also called the *rāsaka* (Mayrhofer 1998: xi), or the Old Gujarati/Old Rajasthani *rāsō*, which is narrative and makes use of the *caṭṭipā* rather than the *rāsaka* as its carrying meter. See also Tripathi in Dvivēdī and Tripāthī (1965: 59–71) and Munshi (1935: 86–89).
- 6 The *Sandēśarāsaka* also refers (v. 43) to the recitation of *rāsaka* poems in Multan, where they are described as "multiform" (*bahurūvi*).
- 7 The Apabhramsha *sandhibandha* probably has more meters, but each *sandhi* maintains the same metrical pattern throughout, whereas in the *Sandēśarāsaka* the meters are varied freely.
- 8 Verse 3 has attracted much attention, since it appears to say that Abdul Rahman's grandfather, Mīrasēna, was born in "the land of the Mlēcchas" (*micchadēso*) in the west (*paccāḍēsi*); for another interpretation, see Dvivēdī and Tripāthī (1965: 11–14).
- 9 For tropes of humility in North Indian vernacular poetry, see Busch (2004).
- 10 V. 23 (*lai lahai viyakḥaṇu, atthaha lakkhaṇu, surāisaṅgi ju viadḍhanarō*). Note that I read and translate *lahai* with Bhayani (1999), rather than *lihai* (earlier editions). Bhayani's translation (1999 pt. 2: 60) of the first part of this verse is:

"So now listen to this flawless poem, the pleasure house to the lovers, the charmer of the amor[ous], of [sic] the road-illuminator to the love-minded, the variable [veritable?] god of love to the love-lorn women, the revivifier of love to the lov-sensitivie [sic]. Recited passionately and redolent with amorous ideas".

- 11 For this term, see Nara (1979).
- 12 Mpu Tanakun's *Vṛttasañcaya*, a fifteenth-century Javanese poem, similarly foregrounds the identity of the character as a poet (indeed the poet of the work), as discussed by Danielle Chen Kleinman in her contribution to this volume.
- 13 For this genre, see Vaudeville (1986), which however does not take the *Sandēśarāsaka* into consideration (the only place in the book where it is mentioned, n. 33 on p. 20, incorrectly claims that it does not "combine the *viraha* theme with the description of the six seasons").
- 14 Vv. 196–197 are in the *rāsaka* (*ābhāṇaya*) meter; v. 198 is (strangely) half of a *rāsaka*; v. 199 is, as noted in the text, a *vatthu* (i.e., a *vatthuya* followed by an *ullāla*). Dvivedī's suggestion (Dvivedī and Tripāṭhī 1965: 54) to read *vāḍavvaṇi* instead of *uvvāḍayaṇi* in 199 is metrically impossible.
- 15 The latter is found, for example, in the well-known verse of Dharmakīrti (*Subhāṣitaratnakōṣa* 478): *napuṃsakam iti jñātvā tāṃ prati prahitaṃ manaḥ ~ ramatē tac ca tattraiva hatāḥ pānininā vayan ~* "I sent her my heart, thinking it was neuter, but it just stayed with her. You win this time, Panini."
- 16 Perhaps it was for this reason that Bhayani did not translate *pahiya* in v. 148 (Bhayani 1999: 80) and reads *pāiya* instead of *pahiya* in v. 150 (although I cannot tell whether and how he translates it).
- 17 I skip over the word *hiāvalaū*, which has been taken as "preoccupied" (*hṛdaya*[*vy*]ākula-) by pre-modern commentators and modern translators, although the derivation is not clear to me.
- 18 Once again (see fn. 16 above), Bhayani has simply omitted "traveler" (*pahiya*) from his translation.
- 19 With Dvivedī's corrections (Dvivedī and Tripāṭhī 1965: 45) to read *rayaṇi tōi jāihaū kajji haū āvalai*; Jinavijaya reads *tō jāiai a kajji māi āāvalai*. Some interpretive problems remain with this line.
- 20 For this phrase I follow Mayrhofer (1998: 29), "he was not of course overcome by love." Bhayani (1999: 75) takes it differently: "He was happy in that her love (for her darling) has not disappeared."
- 21 According to the *Alaṅkāradappaṇō* (*aṇavekkhiapattasahāsaṃpāḍe samāhiō hōi*, v. 71ab).

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