Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, SJ

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I dedicate this book to women
everywhere
who have been silenced, ignored,
denied their rightful place and voice—
particularly
by clergy, religious communities, and religious leaders.
I hope my work contributes
in some small way
to righting the wrongs
we have done, and
to allowing everyone's voice
to be heard,
even listened to.

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Preface

Nearer the Goddesses

Hindu goddesses have fascinated me for many years. I first visited a goddess temple in August 1973, when I traveled to the Dakṣin Kālī temple outside Kathmandu. A year later, at a small village temple far out in the hills of Nepal, I witnessed worship of the goddess Durgā, an occasion all the more vivid because for the first time I observed both spirit possession and the sacrifice of buffaloes. The cult of goddesses was something new and different, and I did not turn away from it.

Over the years, I have noticed goddess devotions and goddess temples all over India, including those at Dakṣiṇeśvara and Kālīghat in Bengal, the Lakṣmī temple in Mumbai harbor, the temple at Kanyā Kumārī at the southern tip of India, the Caṇḍī temple overlooking Mysore, the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai, the Mariyammaṉ temple in Samayāpuram near Tiruchi, and the Apirāmi shrine in the Amṛtaghaṭeśvara temple in Tirukkaṭaiyur near Kumbakonam. In Chennai (Madras), where I have spent much of my time in India, there are goddess shrines everywhere: the popular Aṣṭalakṣmī temple on the beach in Besant Nagar (near the urban center for devotion to our Lady of Health, Our Lady of Vēḷāṅkaṇṇi), shrines to Śrī in each Vaiṣṇava temple and to Parvatī in the Kapaleśvara and other Śaiva temples, and independent goddess temples such as those for Periyapāḷaiyatta Ammaṉ and Muṇṭakakkaṇṇī Ammaṉ. During 1992–1993 I cycled almost daily past the Nāgakkaṇṇi Ammaṉ temple, a small neighborhood shrine where devotees could also worship Muttumāṟi Ammaṉ, Karumāṟi Ammaṉ, and Aṅgaḷaparameśvarī Ammaṉ. I would exchange greetings with the woman who served as

priest and caretaker of the temple. She was happy to show me her goddesses, and I was happy to view them.

What all this might mean, for the scholar and for the observer who belongs to another religious tradition, is not clear, and this book is intended to chart a path back and forth between being a Christian and encountering the faith and cult of goddess traditions. A recollection may help.

On a hot and rainy evening in August 2003, I remember visiting the shrine of Śrī (Tāyār Saṃnidhi) inside the Śrīraṅgam temple just outside Tiruchi, and stopping at the sign that prohibits non-Hindus from entering into Śrī's presence. I was advised to go to the Research Office, during work hours, if I had some particular scholarly points to clarify. But what exactly might my scholarly questions be? I would not have asked about sculpture styles, temple inscriptions, or the details of worship analyzed from the perspective of ritual studies. I was surely interested in the attitudes of women and men who worshiped Śrī on a daily basis, but those attitudes were not at the core of my theological inquiry. Had I gone to the office (as I had previously), I might have asked, "Isn't Śrī supposed to be accessible to everyone?" or, "Will you tell me what She looks like?" In any case, I did not enter Śrī's shrine. But since in India we Americans still tend to be taller than most, I stood on the golden threshold between the inner sanctum and the outer profane space, and looked over the heads of devotees, all the way into the central shrine. Though at a distance, I could see Śrī in the twilight and by the glow of oil lamps.

This happened on August 15, the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven. On the way home from the temple, Sister Margaret Bastin (principal of the respected music college, Kalai Kāvēri) and I passed a Catholic street procession where people were honoring Mary and celebrating her feast by carrying her statue in joyous procession through the streets. I was reminded of older Catholic loyalties and sentiments from my childhood which, though they had become implicit and had as it were receded into a subtle, seed form during my years of theological and Indological study, in fact still lived and accompanied me as I traveled around south India. Mary remained part of my heritage and piety, and now I had seen Śrī, too. I was in a rather modest way on the edge between worlds, insider and outsider at the same time, and I needed to write from that position.

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother is not a book about such experiences, but it is written after and from them, in a space opened because I have seen and thought about such things. It has taken shape over about five years and in various places—Boston, Oxford, Chennai—and in the particular religious situation that gives form to my identity as author. I write as a scholar, professor, and member of the academic community, and accordingly I welcome the reactions of fellow scholars. But I am also Roman Catholic and a Jesuit priest who has studied Hindu traditions for thirty years, and in fact I am most inter-

ested in the response to my work by Christian, Hindu, and other religious intellectuals.

Nor is this a book about temples, rituals, or the nature of religious communities. It is a theological experiment in reading a few texts attentively. As a reader of texts and commentaries, I have channeled my fascination with goddesses accordingly, with regard to just three Hindu hymns: the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* honoring the luminous Śrī, the tantric *Saundarya Laharī* honoring the great Devī, and the Śaiva *Apirāmi Antāti* honoring the beautiful Apirāmi. As I translated and read them closely and in light of their traditional commentaries, I explored how those of us who are not Hindu can learn from them about Hindu goddesses, about what it means to worship a goddess, and about how gender matters in a cross-cultural study of divinity. Out of this pondering, the chapters of this book have arisen.

In keeping with my approach to comparative theology, my return to the Christian theological tradition has also been by way of reading, and so in each chapter I introduce a Marian hymn that creates an interesting tension with the chapter's goddess hymn. There is certainly an abundance of Marian hymns ancient and modern to choose from, but I finally settled on three: the *Akathistos* hymn of the Patristic Greek Church, the medieval Latin *Stabat Mater*, and the nineteenth-century Tamil-language *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*. Reading these Marian hymns after the Hindu hymns, and the Hindu hymns anew in light of the Marian hymns, is a process that fills out the learning dynamic of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*.

I do not think of myself as a feminist scholar, yet I write also with feminist scholarship as another guiding frame to my work. To some postmodern readers my book may seem a kind of classicist or essentialist exercise, and perhaps I have missed insights and questions that will appear obvious to others who will write books more pertinent to feminist concerns. Yet I hope that my work will contribute to the wider discussion of gender and the divine even in feminist theology, by shedding light on what it means to believe in Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi, and to have devotion to them; and how Mary can be seen anew in their light. The particularity of this study, with its focus on three Hindu and three Christian hymns, should make it more fruitful to discuss the merits and disadvantages of "the option for goddesses" and "the option for Mary" in feminist theological discourse. I remain aware of the modest nature of my contribution, but I do hope that this book will play its part in the great rectification of gender imbalances that is taking place today. Accordingly, I hope readers will take the dedication of this volume as seriously as I have intended it.

Much of my own learning about the goddesses and Mary has occurred simply through a careful reading and reflection on the hymns themselves. I have explored commentaries and pertinent secondary literature, but the main thing is always the hymns. In the same way, I hope, readers will engage in

experiments like my own; for this reason, the translations found after chapter 1 are a primary element of this book. They are positioned there, in the midst of the book, to indicate that they are best read, on their own, before chapters 2–4. My goal has been to make this comparative reading possible for readers without access to the primary texts or without the facility to read them in the original languages, so I have made the translations as clear as possible, and unencumbered with notes. There is, however, a small glossary at the end of the book, meant to aid those unfamiliar with the allusions in the hymns. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, *Akathistos*, and *Stabat Mater* are available in a number of translations, some of which I have used in producing my own translations. Although my translations have their own advantages, I do not wish to disparage previous very useful translations, and I urge my readers to look at those listed in my bibliography. At this point I wish also to acknowledge the gracious assistance of Mr. V. A. Ponniah of Okkiampettai, Chennai, who reviewed with me my translation of the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*, and that of Rev. David Gill, SJ, at Boston College, who critiqued my translation of the *Akathistos*.

I have tried to make the task at hand doubly complex by choosing hymns that address the goddesses and Mary directly. I wish this to be a theological work, and in my understanding a good theological study of goddesses ought not to be merely about goddesses; it should also at least take into account the power of words addressed to them. All the hymns clear the way to encounter, removing obstacles and producing intimacy with Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, or Mary. Even in translation, recitation has its effect, leading one into the devotion of which each hymn speaks. Seen in this way, reading hymns is not entirely unlike entering a sacred precinct. Here too, we have to decide what to do with new insights and ideas, and to ask whether stepping back or moving forward into the encounter is the better idea. The hymns can be used in prayer, and I hope that readers will at least think about what it would mean to use them that way.

There are many people to acknowledge and thank for their help in the writing of this book, beginning with the Theology Department at John Carroll University, where I gave a Tuohy lecture on the *Saundarya Laharī* in 1996 and thus in a way began this book. I am grateful for opportunities since then to present parts of the book and versions of its thesis before audiences that have challenged me and raised excellent questions, helping to make this a better book. Those who have hosted me in various venues deserve special acknowledgment: Fr. Gerald Blaszczak, SJ, Jesuit Rector and University Chaplain at Fordham University, March 1999; Prof. Gary Anderson, Harvard Divinity School and the Center for the Study of World Religions, February 2000; Prof. Karin Preisendanz and Prof. Norbert Hintersteiner at the University of Vienna, May 2002; Prof. Julius Lipner, the University of Cambridge, May 2002; Prof. Mathew Schmalz and the Asian Studies Program at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass., September 2002; Prof. Keith Ward and Mrs. Peggy

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Contents

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I

Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary

Who and Why

Perfection,
divinity giving perfection
radiant, supreme power,
benevolence that makes power grow,
liberation for those who toil at penances,
seed of that liberation,
understanding that springs up and grows from that seed,
and inside that understanding dwells
the lady of the cities who protects all this:
isn't this so?

Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn men's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done.[1]

As I have readily admitted in this book's preface, I am fascinated by Hindu goddesses and by the words, images, and practices surrounding them. In part this is because of my visits to India and what I have seen there over the years, but also because goddesses, and the worship and theologies developed in relation to them, pose difficult and fascinating intellectual challenges for all of us who care about religious matters today. Once we begin to think about goddesses, numerous issues of religious concern come urgently to the fore. These have to do with gender as an aspect of human and divine character; the meaning and advantages of imagining God as male,

female (or both or neither); the relations among "body," "self," and "divinity"; and the complexities that arise (for believers, differently in different traditions) in seeking to balance fidelity to traditional theologies of the male deity in light of old and new theologies of goddesses or a (or even the) Goddess.

Goddesses do not fit in easily with the established theological categories of the Western traditions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have for the most part portrayed God as male and as not-female, even when at times going on to assert that God is in truth beyond gender, particularly beyond gender as constituted by physical characteristics. We cannot help but notice that it is a Father who is beyond gender, not a Mother; it is a Father, beyond gender, who sends His Son, and not His daughter, into the world; that Son in turn takes birth as a human male and not a human female. The God who is beyond gender is still called "God" and not "Goddess."

If the divine reality is named and imaged predominantly in male terms to the general exclusion of female terms, our understanding of God will be truncated. Although some men may find it comfortable to think that the divine reality reflects the human image in ways that men find particularly intelligible, many women still find their experience of the divine constricted by an exclusion of female experiences and images, and by the perception that their own gendered identity somehow makes them unlike God as traditionally conceived in Christianity, as God, as Father, as Son. If some men are self-satisfied while many women feel marginalized, we all suffer, since we are left with a diminished set of experiences to draw upon in imagining and addressing God. We are deprived of a whole set of natural, cultural, and religious resources such as might otherwise enrich our understanding of the divine Person.

We can do better, since theologians can learn from religious traditions that prize goddesses—particularly, as *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* suggests, from Hindu traditions. The twenty-first century is the right time for a theological reconsideration—particularly in the Christian tradition—of gender and the divine in light of Hindu theology and practice. Questions relative to gender are now being posed more urgently, and we know more about the answers that have been proposed and lived in religious cultures other than those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Even the most traditional believers will be aware of the questions related to gender, and many are disposed to concede that God can be imagined to have female as well as male attributes. But if so, it should not be possible to rule out on a priori grounds the possibility that goddess language can be heard alongside god language, even Goddess language alongside God language.

It is likely that many theologians in a tradition such as my own Roman Catholic tradition will choose to continue not speaking of the divine person as female as well as male, and not using the language of goddesses. Nonetheless, at least on rational grounds, the theological use of goddess language should now be seen as a real possibility; for such usage is neither naïve, nor prehis-

torical, nor less reasonable than alternatives. Goddess language, particularly when understood according to sophisticated traditions such as those of India, offers a plausible theological option that has to be affirmed or rejected on reasoned grounds, at least by those seeking to be known as thoughtful interpreters of their own and others' religions.

Goddesses are of course not a new topic for academic study. There is an enormous wealth of scholarly research to which we can turn for guidance in thinking about divinity as male and female, about God and Goddess as religious and theological concepts, and about the related practical and theoretical implications. On goddesses in general, particularly regarding the heritage of the prehistoric and historic West, much of what can be said has already been well stated from various angles.[2] I acknowledge this vast ocean of scholarship and the exhaustive work of many scholars across the field; but I conceive of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* as a decidedly noncomprehensive study with a very particular focus. Much of this first chapter is dedicated to showing where I hope to contribute to the obviously larger conversation and why patient attention to particular examples is both necessary and worthwhile. This book intends a series of three reflections on goddesses in the Hindu tradition, such that the several goddess theologies can be glimpsed by way of the study of three particular goddess hymns.

Hindu goddess theologies illumine choices intelligent Hindu believers have made in conceiving and speaking about the divine. Hindu theologians have thought about goddesses for a long time, in well-developed traditions honored in communities where worship of goddesses as well as gods was and has continued to be a real option. For a Hindu theologian to speak of a goddess has always been a choice, balanced against varying intensities of commitment to male deities and to the idea that there is a single ruler of the universe, not a plurality of deities. Even in India, the supreme deity has most often been described and invoked as the supreme male. Accordingly, when Hindu theologians wrote about goddesses, they were making a clear choice to write on this topic, since they were already in possession of complete, developed theologies of a supreme male deity, characterized as the universal ruler and creator possessed of perfections such as omniscience, omnipotence, and so on. These Hindu theologians knew that the transcendent divine reality can only be imperfectly conceived, and ought not be characterized crudely as "just" a man or "just" a woman. Nonetheless, they still chose to speak of goddesses and of particular divine female persons such as we shall be meeting in the following pages.

Hindu Goddesses

To move forward in our understanding of gender and the divine, we do better to attend to particular traditions where goddesses have been worshiped and

whence there come down to us records of that worship and its meaning. India is the most promising location for this specificity. Goddesses have for millennia been prominent and important figures in the Hindu religious life and imagination. Over India's long history, goddesses have appeared as individual, potent deities of destruction and protection in village life, as the consorts of old Vedic gods and later as spouses of popular gods such as Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, or Śiva; they have been idealized as perfect women and wives, or rarified as pure power or energy: they have been portrayed as sovereign all-powerful figures to whom the gods turn in moments of desperation, or as terrifying violent figures whose love is accessible only through the dark and narrow doorway of death and destruction, or as loving mothers. The area is rich and fascinating, and the study of selected goddess hymns will be a real contribution to Hindu studies.

There is already a broad and rich conversation about Hindu goddesses among scholars: excellent introductory information, translations, ethnographic studies, studies of art and music, theological reflection, and feminist critiques are readily available.[3] Multiple studies in varied disciplines show us from many angles how rich, varied, and intelligent goddess beliefs and worship can be, even today, and how this worship can be integrated with the other concerns demanding attention. The cult of goddesses is not exotic or esoteric, and has not been a passing phase in Indian culture, replaced or about to be replaced by other forms of religiosity. I am glad to acknowledge the wider issues and lengthy bibliography already surrounding Hindu goddesses today; such materials are indispensable resources for the fuller conversation that is beginning to occur globally. This research impresses upon us the need to study the Hindu traditions with particular care, and the implausibility of attempting to discuss "Hindu goddesses" in merely general terms. There is no reason to be satisfied with vague discussions of "goddesses" and "the Goddess," as if only by way of conjecture about long-lost beliefs and practices can anything be said on such topics. India awaits the theologian interested in goddesses and divine gender.

In the chapters to follow, I narrow my attention closely by focusing exclusively on just three goddess hymns, two in Sanskrit, one in Tamil: the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* ("Auspicious Treasury of the Jewels That Are Śrī's Qualities") by Parāśara Bhaṭṭar (sixty-one verses; Twelfth century); the *Saundarya Laharī* ("Wave of Beauty") attributed to Śaṅkara (one hundred verses; tenth century or before); and the *Apirāmi Antāti* ("Linked Verses for Apirāmi [the Beautiful One]") by Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar (one hundred verses; eighteenth century). These hymns introduce, respectively, the Vaiṣṇava goddess Śrī, the great tantric Goddess (Tripurasundarī, "the beautiful one of the three cities," henceforth, Devī), and the Śaiva goddess Apirāmi. All three have divine consorts, yet none is inferior to Her male counterpart. The hymns offer lovely poetry, vivid imagery, and elegantly balanced portrayals of powerful goddesses whose spouses tend to recede, at least poetically, into the background. Each is full of insights into

goddess-centered paths of knowledge and devotion, and is enriched by classical and modern commentaries showing us how it has been traditionally understood and valued.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar was an important teacher from the generation after the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition's most honored and influential teacher, Rāmānuja (1017–1137). He wrote *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* in praise of Śrī at the Śrīraṅgam temple in an era when Her cult seems to have become increasingly prominent and central to Śrīvaiṣṇava practice and life but also remained, if we can detect the underlying agenda, still a matter requiring theological justification: if Viṣṇu alone is Lord and perfectly capable of effecting human liberation, why do Śrīvaiṣṇavas also depend entirely on the grace of Śrī? In the hymn's sixty-one verses, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar praises Her as the consort of Lord Viṣṇu, and yet at the same time as the divine woman who is eternally and necessarily integral to the fullness of the divine mystery. The hymn offers a theology of Śrī that pairs Her with Viṣṇu, defending the uniqueness of each while subordinating neither. Śrī and Viṣṇu are worshiped together, as one, even if the differences between them as male and female are intrinsic to their divine identities. Śrī is eternal and Viṣṇu is never apart from Her. Her glories and virtues are innumerable, and even Viṣṇu never has enough of Her beauty. He is the creator and Lord, but She has always been involved in the world as the source of its vitality; She is the mother of Her devotees. She stays close to Her husband Viṣṇu in the transcendent world, but even Viṣṇu's famed descents (*avatāra*) are stimulated by Her compassion and intended to please Her. Śrī is close by on earth as well, especially as accessible each day in the great temple in Śrīraṅgam and other holy places.

The *Saundarya Laharī* is a hymn of one hundred verses, composed in Sanskrit, in the Śaiva tantric tradition, and voiced in praise of the great Goddess, Devī. It is often attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, the renowned eighth-century theologian, although scholars deem its authorship and date uncertain. The hymn praises Devī as the consort of Śiva, Herself the power who creates, sustains, and guides the world. From the tantric perspective, on which we shall say a little more in chapter 3, She is also the vital force pervading the cakras (physiological and spiritual centers of energy in the body) and rising as the kuṇḍalinī energy through them. She is visualized austerely and geometrically in the complex triangles, circles, and other figures comprising the design known as the *śrīcakra*, and She is invoked by many public titles but also by a secret mantra name of sixteen syllables. She is most importantly the supremely beautiful Mother; contemplating Her in loving detail is an efficacious and even supreme religious act. The *Saundarya Laharī* thus appropriates a traditional view of the female form while yet transforming the power relationships related to beauty and insisting that male viewers too become involved in the drama of a world centered on Her. As theology, the hymn makes intellectual claims about Her religious status in relation to traditional tantra. In order to support the

practice of visualization, it argues that the superior mode of approach to Her is to gaze upon Her. As a hymn, it addresses the Goddess directly and teaches devotees how to conceive of Her, see Her, and reach Her.

The *Apirāmi Antāti* is an eighteenth-century hymn consisting of one hundred Tamil-language verses in praise of the goddess Apirāmi, "the Beautiful One," a goddess still worshiped in the popular Tirukkaṭaiyūr temple in south India. It was composed by Subrahmaṇya, who was known familiarly as "Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar" (perhaps "Apirāmi's Brahmin" or even "Apirāmi's devotee"). The introductions to the various commentaries on the *Apirāmi Antāti* usually highlight Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's simplicity, piety, and single-hearted devotion to Apirāmi, as well as the crisis arising from his devotion to Apirāmi and the bliss arising from his contemplation of Her. In the introductions to the small, popular editions of this work, much is made of how Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar was an ecstatic who from youth loved Apirāmi and was graced with visions of Her that took verbal form in his poetry. Deceptively simple, the hymn seems to arise from deep personal experience, and aims at drawing the listener or reader into the luminous joy of that interior bliss.

These are three fascinating hymns worth careful study simply on the grounds that they are literary and religious classics. But there are two additional reasons why I have chosen them. First, all three have commentaries to aid us in reading them. These are invaluable to anyone unfamiliar with the hymns' background, style, and implicit levels of meaning, and they aid us in reading the hymns with the communities of believers that have passed down the hymns. We do well to learn to read along with readers in the traditions, so that our own persisting ways of reading can be assessed and critiqued in light of the interests and interpretations of these respected traditional readers. Second, the hymns differ in interesting ways. Readers familiar with the Western theological and spiritual traditions know that God has been considered from many different perspectives in the West, as authors emphasize one or another aspect of the divine reality, as well as the path toward it and the experience of it. Hindu reflection on goddesses is no less rich and full. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* are complementary texts. In light of my interests in this book, I will distinguish them as emphasizing, respectively, a theology of gender, the path to union with a goddess, and the experience of a goddess's presence within oneself. Though relatively brief compositions, these three hymns are rich in insight and image, and they point interested readers toward the practically unlimited array of other goddess texts meriting study. This book is thus the beginning of a larger investigation readers may wish to pursue in greater detail.

The Goddess as a Person in Feminist Thealogy

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother seeks to render these Hindu goddess hymns a resource for rethinking goddesses in feminist theory and feminist Christian theology, and for fresh reflection on the meaning of God in light of the meaning of goddesses. Before studying the three hymns, therefore, I wish to acknowledge the context into which we, as modern readers and religious intellectuals, receive them. I first consider the contemporary feminist rediscovery of the Goddess, with particular attention to the reception of the Goddess as a person, and then I turn to Christian theological reflection on gender and the divine. In neither case do I intend a survey of the current literature; rather, I refer only to several works that have aided me in thinking through the idea of an encounter with goddesses.

In her *Introduction to Thealogy*, Melissa Raphael surveys some of the ways in which goddesses and goddess discourse matter for feminist theologians. She sorts out various thealogical views on the symbolism of goddesses, their relationship to nature and to human females and males, and the creative, life-giving, and destructive elements of goddess power. Clearly, there is no single feminist position regarding what it means to affirm the existence of goddesses or the Goddess. For some, this affirmation is an act of historical recovery, a retrieval of ancient pre-Christian traditions. For others, goddess thealogy is a conceptual corrective to overly male discourse on divine and human realities as well. Still others see reverence for the Goddess as a way of sacramentalizing a fresh attitude toward life and life-giving, the body and social relationships. For some, however, it is also very important to affirm that the Goddess is, as God is for most theists, a Person to whom one can relate.[4]

In a related essay, Raphael observes that in some contemporary writings goddesses appear as not much more than symbolic confirmations of claims about female being and divinity. There is such a thing as "woman" and "female being" and these are idealized in the Goddess. But in a postmodern context, affirming the actual existence of goddesses as persons can be liberative: "theological realism is not necessarily politically retrogressive or a 'fundamentalist' betrayal of religious feminist freedoms. Goddess feminists should not be indifferent to the possibility of a transcendent, wholly Other Goddess; the *tremendum* of whose real will for change would underwrite the religious feminist struggle more than as its emblem."[5]

Since the Hindu traditions are alive and flourishing, a willingness to think through the idea that the Goddess or goddesses are meant to be taken as real persons facilitates a new conversation with the Hindu believers willing to affirm that goddesses are real, material, and nearby persons to whom one can indeed relate, and in relation to whom one becomes a fully realized person. Accordingly, those of us attentive to feminist discourse profit by inviting knowl-

edgeable Hindu feminist theologians into their conversations on the Goddess, but also by ourselves studying Indian goddess writings, classical as well as contemporary, in detail and depth, to see how female divine persons are imagined and understood. It is to this latter aspect of the larger project that this book contributes.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess*, Carol Christ similarly describes current research and reflection on the place of goddesses in ancient traditions and also the contemporary revival of interest in goddesses. Most of the authors she surveys seem content to view the Goddess as powerful and fundamental in relation to a world that is Her divine body, and in relation to male and female bodies whose physicality, experiences, and pleasures are inseparable from Her own. The meaning of this Goddess can be rendered in various ways: in play across the grid of hierarchical dualisms, or by modulations of categories such as transcendence-immanence, theism-pantheism, and monotheism-polytheism, for example, or with respect to whether there are many goddesses or simply *the* Goddess. Christ, for her own part, acknowledges the symbolic power of reference to the Goddess/goddesses and so too the danger of reifying the Goddess in imitation of the conventional personalism of God-traditions. But she also defends the idea that goddesses are real, and that one may enter into a vital relationship with a goddess.

To take seriously the possibility of divine female persons is no simple task, and it would be easier to read the Hindu goddess hymns simply as symbolic. Difficulties notwithstanding, however, the hypothesis that goddesses are to be thought of as real persons offers an intellectual framework better suited to approaching Hindu goddess hymns. Were we to start with the conviction that Hindus do not really take the goddesses seriously as persons, as if there were only a Divine Reality beyond gender, we would from the start lose hold of the energy of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti*, hymns addressed to specific female divine Persons. Our Hindu authors are taken more seriously if we ourselves adopt a realist view of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi as Persons.

Whatever might be learned from goddess traditions will remain marginal if goddesses are portrayed as merely exotic, or simply as "female gods" who provide only the same possibilities as do male deities. So we must also step back and consider frameworks in which we might profitably think about Hindu goddesses. It is pointless merely to insert the vocabulary or imagery of goddesses into established religious and theological frameworks that have traditionally excluded the very idea of goddesses or even the idea that gender can in some way matter with respect to the divine nature. We need therefore to reconsider and reconstruct the intellectual framework within which our theological deliberations on gender occur. Hindu religious traditions, and particular works such as the hymns considered here, offer such alternative frames of

discourse; for a beginning, though, we can also learn from scholars in the West.

To sketch a direction we might take, I point to a single work, Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Jantzen proposes a plausible and detailed framework for a feminist philosophy of religion, and potentially a feminist theology, to which female images of the divine are integral. She observes that males, consciously or not, have privileged male ways of thinking about issues in the philosophy of religion, to the extent that the discipline not only conforms to the questions men have posed but also takes male perspectives as natural, standard, and complete. In a context where gender is not discussed because male perspectives are assumed to be normative and already inclusive, women's perspectives may appear to lack urgency; all the more, goddesses may appear as trivial, philosophically and theologically irrelevant.

Although Jantzen does not focus on goddesses, she suggests a helpful corrective to overly narrow philosophical worldviews that from the start preclude thinking about goddesses seriously. She attends to women's ways of understanding religion and human life, and explores the values of birth and flourishing in the world. Natality must be respected as at least equal in importance to mortality; the encounter with death and the problem of evil ought not be detached from nor substituted for concerns about how we live and enable others to live in our actual world, now. The good life includes the challenge to grow and to flourish in this world, and a commitment to making the world wholesome for those who live in it. All face death, but we should not neglect or treat as philosophically uninteresting the fact that we are all born and flourish to greater or lesser degrees while alive. Engagement in these life-based tasks is aided by reflection and clear thinking on a range of anthropological, epistemological, linguistic, and theological issues that will contribute to a rejuvenated philosophy of religion. Although many of the values of a feminist philosophy of religion are also found in male-defined and male-governed discourse, only a consistently developed feminist discourse will integrate and give due prominence to a life-validating worldview.

Regarding the specifically religious dimensions of this renewed discourse, Jantzen offers a corrective contrast between a religion built around salvation and one built around flourishing:

> The word "flourish" is etymologically linked with flowers, with blossoming. . . . As a noun form, a "flourish" is the mass of flowers on a fruit-tree, or the bloom of luxuriant, verdant growth. In the more common verb form, to flourish is to blossom, to thrive, to throw out leaves and shoots, growing vigorously and luxuriantly. In the human sphere it denotes abundance, overflowing with vigor and energy and

> productiveness, prosperity, success, and good health. The concept of flourishing is a strongly positive concept; one who flourishes is going from strength to strength. . . . "Salvation," on the other hand, is a term which denotes rescue. One is saved from something: from drowning, from calamity, from loss. These have negative connotations: it would be odd to say that one had been saved from something desirable. To be saved means to be delivered from a situation which was problematic or even intolerable; there is a sense of crisis and of rescue from danger or death which is wholly absent from the notion of flourishing.[6]

She points to the differing theological dynamics thus set in motion: salvation implies a savior, rescue from the outside and dependence on that outsider, whereas "by contrast, flourishing occurs from an inner dynamic of growth, with no need for interference from the outsider. . . . There is a luxuriant self-sufficiency implied in the notion of flourishing, an inner impetus of natural energy and overflowing vigor. A movement or person 'in full flourish' is a movement or person that is vibrant and creative, blossoming and developing and coming to fruition."[7] A birth- and life-oriented perspective also suggests a this-worldly and life-affirming rereading of familiar concepts such as truth, evil and good, salvation and God. Once the field is reimagined, women's experience and a life-oriented inquiry will no longer appear odd or theoretically irrelevant in the philosophy of religion discussion.

Hindu goddess traditions are very much traditions of flourishing. As introduced in the three hymns, Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi infuse the whole world, especially the life of the devotee, with life, vitality, material and spiritual pleasure. Those who seek to live and flourish do so by approaching their goddess; dependence on Her opens the way to human fullness. Suffering and mortality are less prominent themes and not central to the hymns. Moreover, the cult of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi reject definitive dichotomies between the immanent and the transcendent, and between the material and the spiritual; the divine is best thought of as transcendent yet not opposite to the sensible. As we shall see, the hymns abound in natural, individual, and social scenarios for the human flourishing that becomes possible for those worshiping goddesses such as these. Throughout, the hymns also make the case that conventions such as images of female beauty can still be valued, provided they are critiqued and stereotypes uncovered. Physical attractiveness becomes a viable theological topic. So too, the connection between mothers, mercy, and graciousness is successfully affirmed and explored in these hymns; the "female–grace" connection suggests advantages unavailable when grace is attributed to a male or genderless figure. On the whole, Jantzen's *Becoming Divine* serves as a philosophical propaedeutic to our appropriation of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti*. Conversely, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*

may be read as contributing to a complementary interreligious theology that is able to learn from Hindu goddess traditions.

At times feminist concerns and the study of Hindu goddesses explicitly converge, and there are certainly some important feminist studies of issues related to religion in India and Hinduism.[8] For the most part, though, Western feminist theologians do not pay much attention to the traditions of India, particularly the classical and premodern traditions. This omission is in part unsurprising. There is, to begin with, the issue of expertise and a fear of amateurism, and the difficulties related to assessing the quality of various translations and secondary sources, the lack of the requisite knowledge of languages, and so on. Some may also presuppose that the classical traditions of non-Western cultures are no more likely to be liberative than those of the West, while others may worry about whether comparative studies might naïvely essentialize gender, as if there is some static female or male nature that underlies cultural and religious differences.

But even if there are dangers and problems, the risks are worthwhile as we consider the prospect of drawing Indian religious intellectuals into a more inclusive global conversation. This promises to yield more widely viable insights into gendered human being and the meaning of claims about a divine male or divine female; this comparative learning will help correct the cultural and social myopia almost inevitable in research confined to and by a single cultural setting.

To insist that we have much to learn from Hindu writings on goddesses does not require us to deny that Hindu India has had, and still has, its own problems regarding the status of women. There is no single or necessarily positive connection between the worship of goddesses and greater social equality for women. But classic goddess texts, even in Sanskrit and by male authors, can be read to good purpose. Tracy Pintchman rightly argues that the liberative value of goddess traditions depends on how the texts are understood and used within the community—or communities—reading them and passing them down to new generations.[9] A text that might be used to confirm caricatures of female and male identity in one context can also be liberative when read according to a different hermeneutic.

Finding a Place in Christian Theology for Thinking about Goddesses

We must also explore the conditions under which Christians can learn from the praise and theology of goddesses, particularly as expressed in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti*.[10] I readily admit that it is no small matter to recommend that Christian theologians take Hindu goddesses seriously and study these goddess hymns with theological care. Chris-

tian theology is rooted in a biblical tradition deeply dedicated to the one true God and also, it seems, to a dismissal of the idea of goddesses. Although the Christian tradition does include instances of reflection on God as mother, their implications are minimally developed. What seems possible reasonably, in theory and in practice in some traditions outside the West, has been resisted and ruled out by Semitic (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) instinct, on the grounds of revelation and the certainties underlying creeds and normative traditions. Even modest efforts to imagine God with female as well as male characteristics can be resisted, and the word "goddess" is excluded even by moderate Christian feminists. Many theologians seem to prefer a God neatly beyond gender to a God imagined as female as well as male. Frequently, then, more developed feminist reflection on goddesses is presumed to be beyond the limits of the Christian tradition.

Such may be the general situation, but a consideration of particular goddess traditions clears the air by its very specificity. Dealing with three particular hymns attenuates many of the general concerns and questions and shifts attention to more specific and manageable issues. Since no one expects classical Hindu theologians to have written in conformity with Christian doctrine, or even in intentional contradiction to it, Hindu goddess theology can be assessed on its own terms, understood rather than simply judged. Even if we are not Hindus, goddess texts and commentaries are available for study, as well as excellent secondary sources and useful translations. It is hard to justify not reading the theologies of other traditions when they are pertinent and available. Once we have begun reading, we will also be faced with the question of how to respond to the possibilities posed to us. Whatever our conclusions, we will be thinking of three particular goddesses.

Christian theologians across the spectrum have been struggling with issues of gender and divine identity, offering varied estimates of the ways in which the divine identity can or should be reimagined in relation to gender. Here too, I am happy to acknowledge the wide conversation and the important research that has been done, and to express my hope that *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* makes a contribution to a broader global religious conversation where multiple voices are becoming increasingly audible. For now, let us listen to just several of those voices, to appreciate the possibility and risk that lie at the core of this book.

Manfred Hauke's *God or Goddess? Feminist Theology: Where Does It Lead?* seeks to provide a firm Christian theological basis for assessing gender in relation to human and divine natures. He surveys a range of feminist theological positions on gender and the divine, with particular attention to more radical feminist discourse that is interested in goddesses and often inimical to traditional conceptions of God. Hauke rules out what he judges to be incorrect interpretations of gender differences, mistakes about God's nature, and the entirely erroneous and unnecessary appeals to the concept of "goddess." He

judges goddess-language incompatible with the Christian faith, and rejects any reconsideration of human nature and gender that might suggest a need to take goddess traditions seriously. There are no pressing problems regarding the Christian tradition's images of the divine, nor regarding the task of honoring the experience of women and symbolism of the female/feminine in Christian theology and life. Were there a problem, thinking of goddesses would not be a solution to it.

In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson states a significantly different position, but she too refrains from the language of goddesses. The Christian image of God can and should change, she claims, and the experience of women and the concepts and words deriving from the (male and female) honoring of that experience must become integral to our understanding of and language about God's own self. Accordingly, she retrieves the Wisdom tradition of the Bible and early Church, reinvigorates the theology of the Spirit, and thinks anew about God as a Person endowed with attributes of wisdom that are frequently distinctive to female persons. Johnson speaks for many progressive Christian theologians when she writes:

> Predicating personality of God, however, immediately involves us in questions of sex and gender, for all the persons we know are either male or female. The mystery of God is properly understood as neither male nor female but transcends both in an unimaginable way. But insofar as God creates both male and female in the divine image and is the source of the perfections of both, either can equally well be used as metaphor to point to divine mystery. Both in fact are needed for less inadequate speech about God, in whose image the human race is created. . . . The incomprehensible mystery of God is brought to light and deepened in our consciousness through imaging of male and female, beyond any person we know.[11]

Johnson's concerns and insights are timely, but there is room for further exploration and for a broader reflection on gender and the divine, made concrete with reference to living goddess traditions. We can learn from the Hindu theological traditions that have reflected so thoroughly on divine and human gender. Hindu theologians have found ways to take seriously both the divine mystery and a vigorously realist language about divine gender. They speak of both gods and goddesses, and address them both as real persons. They do this without interpreting the divine persons as merely facets of a single deeper or higher reality, and without judging goddess-language to be symbolic in a way that would deprive it of its concrete, material reference. Even if Christian theologians cannot simply imitate their Hindu colleagues, we can learn from how they have articulated their goddess theologies.

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother is closer in spirit to Johnson's work than to Hauke's, and I too seek to take divine gender seriously, particularly by learning

from the particularities of Hindu theology and worship as expressed in three hymns. But I also wish to honor Hauke's concerns, even accentuating the problems that arise as we learn from goddess traditions and allow them to affect our piety and theology. To learn from Hindu goddess traditions is not a casual matter; it requires a systematic reconsideration of a wider array of Christian theological positions, even a reconceptualization of the human-divine relationship. Here too, we can learn much from how respected Hindu theologians—authors of hymns, writers of commentaries—have explained and defended the idea of a supreme Goddess, yet without abandoning coherent positions about divine perfection and the supremacy of a coherent divine reality.

Thinking about Goddesses, Thinking about Mary

The particularity of our attention to Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi must be matched by some particular focus with the realm of Christian theology as well, and we must be clear about where to return to the Christian tradition. A small book must choose its examples carefully. Christian feminist theologians in particular have diligently searched out underutilized and neglected resources in the biblical and Christian traditions in order to reimagine God by analogies drawn from both male and female ways of being. For instance, the Bible's Wisdom tradition portrays Wisdom as a woman, and provides rich reflection on this intriguingly female dimension of the divine. The Holy Spirit, even if not stipulated the female member of the Trinity, is frequently recognized as possessing many of the attributes considered those of a woman and mother: protector, mediator, nourisher, merciful refuge. There are even traditions of "Jesus as Mother" that discover in him attributes conventionally thought of as female.[12] And, finally, for millennia tradition has given us diverse images of Mary—as a young woman in Nazareth who is the mother of Jesus, but also and always too, as the Mother of God, the Mediatrix, Dwelling Place of God, Perfection of Humanity, and so on. For reasons that should become clear in the following pages, I find in the traditions of Mary the most fruitful avenue into deeper encounters with the traditions of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi; she is not a goddess, but she is the foremost female person, fully engendered in a female body, and the center of cult and devotion for countless Christians over the past two millennia.

Much has already been written about Mary from various contemporary perspectives, and here too I will note only several books that have helped me understand the rich and unsettling possibilities of the cult of Mary, and to see how Mary is the one who best helps us to understand Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. For a start, we must admit both the vastness of the Marian traditions and also contemporary skepticism regarding the value of those traditions in relation to

the lives of women. Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* ably tours the traditions surrounding Mary, and reminds us that this tradition has at times distorted the image of Mary, portraying her as an impossibly perfect woman, a mother who is a virgin, an idealized figure no woman could—or would want to—imitate. Attention to Warner's cautionary tale warns us against perpetuating inappropriate traditions of devotion. Even if my intention is to illumine our study of goddesses by attention to Mary, and not the reverse, it would be counterproductive were I in the mean time to move Mary farther away from the lives of living human women and men.

Yet the situation deserves more than caution, because the dangers of the Marian tradition encapsulate its potential as well. Mary is like and unlike other women, and she is like and unlike Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. In the Christian context there are no goddesses, but Mary discloses the power that emerges as the divine and female are envisioned together. Mary Daly's insight into the cult of Mary vividly illustrates this point. In her classic *Beyond God the Father*, Daly is fiercely critical of both patriarchal religion and the (mis)uses to which Mary is invariably put, but she also notes how the Marian tradition, even despite itself, bears radical possibilities. Mary stands forth as a powerful symbol capable of breaking out of "the stranglehold of Christian patriarchalism," managing to convey "a message (partial and blurred) of women's becoming." The tendency to divinize Mary and prize her virgin motherhood reveals the power "the image of Mary has wielded in the human imagination."[13] Her virginity is a reminder that women are not to be defined exclusively in terms of their use to men. The doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption contain (though concealed and suppressed) seeds of radically nontraditional views. The former suggests that Mary, along with other women, is not in need of a male savior. The latter suggests that Mary and other women are indeed ascending to the divine, even while embodied and as female. Daly approvingly cites Henry Adams: "Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn men's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done."[14] The tendency to honor Mary as if she were a goddess—even while then pulling back and denying it—saves a place in the Christian tradition for the otherwise excluded idea of a divine woman.

It is not surprising that more conservative theologians keep their distance from Daly's intriguing but subversive suggestion about Mary. Hauke highly esteems Mary and admits sharing several views he deems agreeable to proponents of a feminist Mariology: the determinative significance of the symbolism of the sexes; the importance of Jesus' maleness and Mary's femaleness; Mary as revelatory of the "female" attributes of God; Mary as receptive of human longings; the human nearness of Mary, our "sister" in faith; the "emancipatory significance of Mary."[15] But he adds that the Church rightly resists efforts to characterize Mary as a goddess or a goddess-substitute, and he denies

that the exaltation of Mary symbolizes the distorted and diminished place of actual women in the Church. Instead, Mary is a prototype of the Church and exemplar of human being and action. Yet even as he rejects the deification of Mary, he acknowledges the complexity underlying the Marian tradition. For instance, near the end of his book, while rejecting the idea that the cult of Mary at Guadalupe preserves an older goddess cult, he prizes her cult:

> And in fact, the picture of Mary that arose miraculously on the visionary's cloak does contain motifs pertaining to the world of the Aztec gods: sun, moon, stars, and serpent. However, through the way that those symbols are arranged, paganism is turned completely upside down. Mary stands before the sun and is thus more powerful than the feared sun god. She has one foot placed on the half-moon, a symbol of the feared serpent god, to whom thousands upon thousands of humans were sacrificed and whose machinations she has overcome. She is more powerful than all goddesses, and gods, than the stars. And yet Mary is no goddess, for she folds her hands together in prayer and bows her head before one who is greater than she. She wears no mask in order to conceal her godly nature—as do the Aztec gods—but quite openly displays her human status. What we see here is a process of simultaneous interlinkage and contradiction: the heritage and longings of humanity . . . are acknowledged yet simultaneously transformed and directed toward God. Should the same thing be impossible in relation to modern feminism? Veneration of Mary signifies the end of the idolization of creaturely values and certainly the day of judgment for any sort of pantheistic self-idolization. Mary points human beings toward Christ.[16]

Parts of this citation are inscrutable; it is not clear, for instance, what goddess cults have to do with "pantheistic self-idolization," and we shall see that the theologies of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi are inimical to both pantheism and self-idolization. But in gladly acknowledging the power of the Marian tradition and how the cult of Mary satisfies deep human instincts that were also tapped in goddess traditions, Hauke points us in the right direction. His suggestion that the Guadalupe cult is "paganism turned completely upside down," indicates a way to learn from goddess traditions. Turning things upside down makes them look different—but without essentially changing the configuration or list of included elements. It is the viewer who turns upside down and learns to see everything from a new perspective. Mary is not a goddess; indeed, she is the only human of whom Christians regularly have to say, "she is not divine."

Caution and fascination with Mary are expressed differently in "Stabat Mater," a well-known essay by Julia Kristeva.[17] Drawing on Marina Warner's work as background, Kristeva briefly traces theological, cultural, and psycho-

logical aspects of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition, and analyzes its idealization of Mary. She introduces insights from contemporary psychoanalytic constructions of female identity in order to analyze how God, Mary, and women have been configured in standard Western religious and cultural traditions. On this basis, she proposes a devastating critique of attitudes and practices toward women in Western, particularly religious—Christian—culture, and warns us against the terrible cost of the extreme rarification of Mary as an ideal woman who is neither God nor someone any living woman could ever be. The paradox of Mary reveals the deep neurosis of the Christian tradition regarding gender. She is exalted as Godlike and utterly conformed to her son, as his bride and daughter as well as mother—and at the same time methodically turned into an exceedingly peculiar nonwoman, an oddity who is unique and universal, but no person, no human. The quintessential Mother, she is also no mother, or rather a mother deprived of maternal experience, a virgin. By the doctrine of the Assumption, she is deprived even of the experience of death. Idealized to the point of alienation, she is disconnected from the experience of other women.

According to Kristeva, the scene portrayed in the medieval *Stabat Mater* hymn distills into ten brief verses what is powerful and also wrong in this Marian tradition. Mary's son becomes a corpse before her eyes, and she is entirely focused on that corpse. She does not speak and has no life of her own. Standing at the cross weeping, Mary is the woman who has become nothing but a mourning mother who cares for the man in her life, even as he dies. While Kristeva offers no thorough exegesis of the hymn, she takes it as an encapsulation of the Marian tradition and its idealization and distortion of what it means to be a woman and mother.

But Kristeva too detects an unexpected survival, the reemergence of a powerful, vital woman from the mythology of Mary. In the *Stabat Mater*, Mary is addressed, amid her tears, as the source of love (*fons amoris*), the giver of life. Entirely given over to her son, as He dies and disappears she steps to the fore as the source of life. Despite themselves, or more likely by design, such hymns contain elements of a richer tradition able to empower women: "But when this cry bursts forth, referring to Mary facing her son's death, *Eia Mater, fons amoris*! ('Hail mother, source of love!')—was it merely a remnant of the period? Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and stead of death and thought."[18] Mary can thus be taken as a fascinating and powerful symbolization of the best and worst in the Western and Christian discourses on woman. Kristeva rightly sees that the whole affair must be taken apart and rewritten, the unsaid allowed to emerge and vex ordinary ways of thinking and speaking. In remedy, she suggests that in addition to a critique of the Marian tradition and its harmful assumptions about women, a fresh perspective is required that draws on other discourses and realms of experience to call into question the entirety of conventional gender discourse.[19]

We shall read the hymn *Stabat Mater* in chapter 3 along with the similarly powerful and contemplative *Saundarya Laharī*, and suggest that the hymn's author uses the given situation, Mary at the cross as her son dies, to enact a powerful devotional scenario in which God has died while Mary, standing there, becomes the person to whom one turns in seeking the salvation God, now in the background, has offered. Kristeva has brilliantly reopened the question of Mary at the cross, and the main point then is to find still other ways to open the question of Mary—as, here, by listening to the discourses told around Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. The Marian encounter does not replicate the three Hindu encounters with goddesses, but it does approximate, as nearly as may be possible in the Christian tradition, what such encounters might possibly mean.

The dangerous possibility of Mary—denying female divinity, keeping the possibility alive in a patriarchal world—also guides my qualified response to recent Catholic feminist writings on Mary, which I represent here by attention to books by Elizabeth Johnson and Sarah Boss.[20] Johnson has critically assessed gender discourse and the Marian tradition in order to provide firm foundations for a feminist theology, a more balanced understanding of God, and at the same time a healthier understanding of Mary. Her image and cult need to be liberated from an overlay of the attributes of a divine female and even divine wisdom. She is not divine, at all; she was a Jewish woman from a village in Palestine, and it is a disservice to our understanding of her and of God if we misplace, onto her, attributes that belong properly to God. Accordingly, for the sake of a proper understanding of the Spirit and a restoration to Mary of her true human womanhood, Mary needs to be understood afresh as a village woman in Nazareth, a wife and mother, a leader in and member of the early Church community. At the same time, then, the Holy Spirit can be appreciated anew, afforded again the biblical and traditional attributes proper to the divine Spirit.

In *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, her fullest consideration of Mary, Johnson argues for a renewed understanding of Mary that is both rooted in Scripture and cognizant of the achievements of Vatican II and postconciliar theology. She describes as culs-de-sac the tendencies to see Mary as "the ideal face of woman" and "the maternal face of God." Underlying the first cul-de-sac is the tendency to a patriarchal dualistic anthropology that reifies gender differences and essentializes men and women. A dramatic shift, as is described in *Truly Our Sister*, is required:

> The position I espouse protests not difference between the sexes but the patriarchal idea that these differences signify masculine and feminine natures equipped with rigidly preassigned characteristics, which fact then assigns women and men to play predefined, separate social roles. Even if the two sexes are theorized to be equal and

> related in a complementary way, the assignment of characteristics in traditional dualism does not grant women an equal say in how the world is run, thus keeping them in the status of a minor. In place of this gender dualism, so influential in theology, an egalitarian anthropology envisions a redeemed humanity with relationships between women and men marked by mutual partnership.[21]

As for the second cul-de-sac, Johnson argues that it does neither God nor Mary nor living women and men today any service to attribute to Mary idealized female divine attributes thereby distanced from God. Rather, and although God "can never be captured literally in finite words or symbols," it is important to assert that "the holy mystery of God can be represented by female symbols in as adequate and inadequate a way as by male symbols."[22] It is therefore necessary to understand how the Marian tradition retains attributes of God that must be restored to God, and particularly to the Holy Spirit. When Mary is understood again as a real, historical woman and not a goddess or divine feminine icon, we profit on all levels.

A book subtitled *Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* might seem contrary in spirit and intent to Johnson's work—a headlong rush into both culs-de-sac as comparison makes Mary a seemingly divine being or a perfect woman unlike any other woman. But my hope is to clear both culs-de-sac at once, by noticing that Mary is the one figure in the Christian tradition who most effectively helps us to see beyond our tradition to where Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi stand as ideal, divine women.

Mary is a both/and figure: she is a human person, and she is the exalted, nearly divine Mother of God. Sarah Jane Boss keeps us most usefully focused on this necessary double reception of Mary. In her *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Boss offers a finely balanced study of the tradition of Mary. She reviews the history of the modern theology and veneration of Mary, considering these critically while yet defending the enduring features of a devotional tradition that recognizes Mary as truly human and truly unique.[23] Balancing the themes of "empress" and "handmaid," Boss explores how devotion to Mary can be socially relevant, able "to provide a more plausible foundation for a radical critique of the social and economic status quo."[24] As long as we do not think of God as simply another person alongside ourselves—in relation to whom we might be free or enslaved—there need be no compulsion to think of Mary as merely subservient to God. In Boss's view, God "is beyond any individuation and therefore beyond the relationships that may follow from individuation, such as domination. Mary's desire coincides with God's will not because she has been coerced into accepting his Lordship, but because the life and the will of God are at the foundation of the life and well-being of all God's creatures, and Mary has recognized that."[25] Mary demonstrates what happens when God works with a human being who willingly

becomes the place where divine power is manifest in a human life; that she is a woman, and not a man, may of course still correspond to gender conventions about what "he does" and "she agrees to." That Mary is decidedly not a goddess but only a human woman—mother of Jesus, Mother of God, the only human to whom divinity must be repeatedly denied—creates a complex and useful counterpart to the Hindu conceptions of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi.

The array of issues raised by attending to Mary as we seek to understand Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi is vast, but I intend neither a full-blown comparison nor sweeping conclusions. Rather, I complement my reading of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* by brief and focused glimpses drawn from this cult and theology of Mary (also expressed in hymns, as explained below). In each chapter I briefly read from the Marian tradition in order to help us understand goddesses—rather than borrowing from goddess traditions in order to help us understand Mary. That the study of goddesses also illumines and brings new life to reflection on Mary is an additional benefit, but consequent upon my determination to learn from Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. Since my own Catholic tradition has not adequately prepared me to encounter and think through the traditions of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi, I have found the Marian traditions a real help in this project; three Marian hymns will serve as portals by which to enter those other, goddess worlds. In the final section of each chapter I review one Marian hymn and explore its strategies for veneration of Mary: the ancient Orthodox Christian *Akathistos* hymn ("[Sung while] Not Seated") to the Mother of God (sixth century); the *Stabat Mater*, picturing Mary standing by the cross of her son (thirteenth century); and the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* ("Antāti Verses in Honor of the Queen among Women, the Goddess [of Mylapore])," a Tamil hymn praising Mary as the (new and real) mother of Mylapore, a center of Hindu orthodoxy in south India (nineteenth century). Each interweaves theology and the practice of devotion to Mary, the best of women who is not God but the Mother of God. She dwells at the center of religious life without directly transgressing the boundary between God-language and Mary-language. Here too I have chosen hymns where direct address is a prominent feature, again to intensify issues of access and the reality of relationship. To whom does one speak when seeking safety and happiness? Is speaking to Mary functionally the same as speaking to a goddess? I venture to move toward answers to such questions by reading goddess and Marian hymns together.

Once a careful comparative reading helps us to cross some boundaries, other such crossings become possible. For instance, we can better implement the nonessentialist and nonseparatist approach to gender promoted by Johnson when we also resist the temptation to essentialize other peoples' theologies or to separate our theological conversations from theirs before we have even listened. As Christian theologians learn from theological colleagues in traditions such as those of Hindu India, we become better theologians because we have

entered a better dialogue; we become better positioned to understand gender and the divine, and God and Mary. If, in the process of learning something of the theologies, practices, and experiences related to Hindu goddesses, we also discover new dimensions of the postbiblical Marian traditions, this is a plus, not a minus.

On Comparative Reading

As in previous books, here too I practice a reflexive back-and-forth reading process, reading each hymn carefully, entering its world as far as possible, but later also rereading it in light of other, similar but interestingly different hymns.[26] Insights occur because we are reading actual texts instead of merely considering concepts about goddesses or Mary. The price is a loss of breadth and conclusiveness, but it is well worth what is gained in depth and specificity. As we immerse ourselves in texts—ideas, images, emotions, insights—of a hitherto unfamiliar tradition, from that newly acquired vantage point we can return home and discern the powers and possibilities latent in our familiar traditions. Thinking remains at the core of any such project, but at every stage this thinking is generated from specific readings, three goddess hymns along with their commentaries and then along with three Marian hymns. The task is not to stand back and read the goddess and Marian hymns from a distance but rather to become implicated, entangled, in hymns read alongside one another, reading our way into a world where the three goddess hymns are heard alongside their Marian counterparts.

Jantzen's *Becoming Divine*, introduced above, also emphasizes the necessity of a new sensitivity to language and the possibilities latent in how we use words in speaking and reading. In a chapter entitled "Language, Desire, and the Divine," she discusses Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" now with particular interest in its complex style. Following the pattern of collage made famous by Jacques Derrida, Kristeva places differently composed but interestingly compared themes in adjacent columns. On the right, Kristeva inscribes reflections on Mary, motherhood, and her opinions regarding virgin motherhood, and so on; on the left she records her own experience of having a baby.

The "right" theoretical discourse on women, the maternal, the Marian tradition, and the distortions of European culture are contested on every page by a "left" discourse, a vividly particular account of a person who is a mother. This two-column juxtaposition of theoretical discourse and autobiographical narrative highlights divisions inherent in Western and more broadly human discourse from and about women's experience. There is no unitary source that captures the entire problem or its solution. While devising a history of the cult of Mary as the Mother, the idealized and abstract, deracinated Maternal, Kristeva is also recounting her own experience of becoming a mother, the trans-

formation of her body and, in her newborn child, of her relationships and obligations.

"Stabat Mater" aims to replicate in writing the situation in which women—and eventually men too, I would add—find themselves once they start to think more lucidly about gender images, expectations regarding mothers, and religious symbols such as those connected with Mary as Virgin Mother. By thus placing together women's experience and reductive ideas about women in a irreducibly plural fashion, Kristeva opens the way to retrieve the power not only of mothers but also, I suggest, of the tradition of Mary as a textual and cultural tradition that can be confronted directly.

What is required of us too, if we honor Kristeva's method, is more than a critique of the Western construction of gender and more than increased attention to simpler, eloquent expressions of particular Western women's experience. More histories need to be explored, texts studied, and voices heard, from outside the bounds of the current conversation. *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* can be taken as double reading where the ideas and practices of Hindu and Marian devotional traditions are problematized and intensified by close proximity. Three Hindu hymns, taking up the bulk of our reflection, show us how certain goddesses are actually thought of and approached. Reading these hymns again later along with Marian hymns complexifies the comparative project and moves it toward a more productive result. In our study of the hymns and the theologies developed around them, we shall be learning a new language that does not sit entirely easily within one tradition or the other. Much is achieved if we can learn from this complex reading. By the sheer fact of the accumulation of juxtapositions, this book makes both traditions more exposed, open to scrutiny, and freed for imaginative experimentation.

It remains the case, however, that reading the hymns together creates familiarity without ruling out differences. It would be neither interesting nor desirable to equate the theologies of Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary, since reading does not naturally favor or expect sameness. Rather, reading according to one alternative ("She is the Goddess, supreme") while still mindful of another ("She is not-God, she is the Mother of God"), or vice versa, allows one to see and hear the power of the alternative one has chosen not to choose, and to see that intelligent choices never fully exclude the paths not taken.

Theology in Direct Address

The ideas inscribed in the hymns give us much to think about, but we must not forget that these are hymns meant to be sung in acts of worship. As addressed in the hymns, Lakṣmī, Devī, Apirāmi, or Mary are also imagined by believers to be listening with us to the singing and likewise participating in the enjoyment. Hymns speak not simply about but also to the one who is

praised and loved. All six hymns are powerful poetic compositions, expressive by skillfully and subtly ordered words that inform us but also guide us in spiritual practice. Rich in images, passionate, highly intelligent, they help chart the path from "discourse about" to "discourse to."[27]

As readers, we are placed in the position of meeting Śrī and Devī and Apirāmi, and Mary as well; and we are in the position of meeting them no longer separately but as it were together, on the same page(s). Over time, such compositions educate readers who see and hear differently, who understand what it means to praise Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi as goddesses or to honor Mary as the woman who is not God but God's Mother. Even first-time readers are invited to participate and enjoy these acts of praise, and to see where moments of appreciation might lead, while all readers can thereafter make different and freer choices about how to imagine the divine and relate to that nearby reality.

Taking the hymns to heart engages us and makes it possible for us to use—or choose not to use—such hymns in direct address, in prayer and worship. To study these hymns—even to read them aloud—and to understand them as intelligent, persuasive religious documents is to risk becoming involved in the religious world they intend, and so to encounter a goddess or to encounter Mary. If the hymns are listened to thoughtfully, readers are drawn by words of praise into acts of praise and into encounter with the deity who is praised. The questions the study of Hindu goddesses poses for Christians then becomes more specific: "What is a Christian is to do with the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* as hymns invoking and worshiping goddesses, in direct encounter? What might it mean to find these hymns persuasive and enjoyable?" If we begin to understand, we may end up praying or doing something very much like praying; at least, we become able to choose whether or not to address Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi directly by the words of these hymns.

All of this is why chapters 2–5 are preceded by a translation of the goddess hymns and Marian hymns. I urge readers to spend time with the hymns, to study them individually and together, even before turning to chapter 2.

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The Translations

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To Śrī: The Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa

Before Śrī—
whose approving glances are making efficacious
Hari's intention to bring into order all sentient and insentient beings—
I offer respectful salutation. (1)

The play of Her briefest glance
as it buds
supports the seven worlds
as they sprout
due to Her splendor, under Her protection;
She is the flame of an auspicious lamp in the Śrīraṅgam palace,
queen of Śrīraṅgam's king,
Śrī,
and with Her we take refuge. (2)

She is the flourishing of Her splendid companion
whose arms branch in every direction,
who is radiant every moment
ever since She first embraced His slender trunk;
Her eyes and breasts are like black bees on clustered flower blossoms:
may She bestow on me
the rich, wish-fulfilling creepers of Her glances. (3)

Her brows accurately measure
the unmoving and moving things fashioned by Mura's enemy,
in Her footsteps on the chest of Mura's destroyer
the Vedānta texts travel and ponder what is real, and
the Lord's experiences of His universal form
are swallowed up in the play that begins in His pleasure with Śrī:
may She cover us with glances encompassed
only by those who can comprehend the flood of ambrosia. (4)

"Our desire to offer praise appropriate to Your glory,
whatever, however great it may be, is out of bounds—
so who are we to praise You?"
Viriñci and others grasped this long ago,

but even so, Goddess,
we honor Your realm—
unknown to the discourse of word and mind—
and we strive to compose fragile words:
so bless this praise, make it excellent. (5)

Goddess, poets enjoy a speaker of praise
who expounds the good qualities of the one to be praised, and now
the burden of praising You rests directly on me;
but although Your good qualities—
patience, generosity, compassion, and the rest—
have accepted my intolerable speech,
O fortunate one,
they still put forth their own fame. (6)

May Lakṣmī herself,
first queen of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
by Her sweet glances
complete my well-spoken verse
and so may
poets drink it up by their thirsty ears,
this garland woven of letters, elegant and deep. (7)

Untainted, unflawed, enclosed by many good qualities,
the well-being of heart pours into the mind
as if familiar, yet hidden,
drawn from a fine fraternity of words,
splendid in sound,
to which ears steadily listen—
You alone, O Śrī, have given me
so versatile a tongue,
this dazzling speech. (8)

O splendor of Śrī,
Lord reclining in Śrīraṅgam,
here we speak of Śrī,
the blessed lady in Your heart,
as loftier even than You:
so hear this,
and when You've heard it,
let Your eyes become waves of joy
and from an excess of delight
let burst a hundred garments on Your shoulders. (9)

Goddess, the foremost men proclaim blessed scripture
a treasure house of gems wherein

Your true auspicious qualities lie massed, while
fit to open its door
are the foremost traditional texts and mythic narratives,
along with epic and logic. (10)

Some say the Vedas are not authoritative,
some, the world has no ruler,
others, it has one,
some, this ruler has qualities,
others, he is bereft of qualities, and
still others, that being a good ruler is the mendicant's part—
the fools! they slap each another around,
but they're not worth a moment's notice,
O golden creeper in Śrīraṅgam's palace court. (11)

In their minds they see You,
eyes cleared by the balm of devotion,
hidden in Scripture's chief part, and
the really fortunate are those
who enjoy Your greatness as if a treasure,
O blessed one:
aren't they the ones "born to a divine fortune"? (12)

"She is the ruler of this world":
thus, Śrī, we know Your prosperity,
for the "Hymn to Śrī" makes it known,
branch by branch, with a skillful tongue;
the one proclaimed in the "Hymn to the Male"—
"some fellow rules the world"—
is remembered in its latter part as Your consort. (13)

It's not just that a single Upaniṣad
lifting high its hands
has described You as controller,
but in Your story the blessed *Rāmāyaṇa* breathes fully,
and so too, our mother,
each and every compiler of tradition
considers the Vedas, along with the myths and epics,
proof of Your greatness. (14)

From the small village's headman
to the lord creator of the cosmic expanse,
whatever lordship there is, greater and greater in quality,
whatever is chief, auspicious, luminous, weighty, virtuous, pure,
fortunate—

O beloved of Śrīraṅgam's ruler,
all that comes from just five or six drops of Your glance. (15)

One man,
whose crest rings with the gems that shake on the pearl umbrella,
sits on an elephant dripping musk and
does not for a second notice even bowing world-protectors;
another man, pitiful and without refuge, stands near him,
flashing his row of teeth:
all this, O beloved of Śrīraṅgam's ruler,
is due to the opening and closing of Your eyes. (16)

O friend, my ambrosia,
toward whomsoever Your creeper-like eyebrows plan to move,
toward that person, O Indirā,
all good qualities—
pleasure, intellect, wisdom, courage, prosperity, accomplishment,
wealth—
take their aim, in many ways, egos out in front,
and if held back
those qualities break their banks and overflow. (17)

Both the immobile and the moving,
Viriñci and the one with nothing,
a tree and Bṛhaspati,
the strong and the distressed,
in every mode,
whatever is or is not, high and low,
all this depends
on the Tāṇḍava dance of Your glance and its absence,
O Lakṣmī. (18)

At the indicated right moment,
when the conscious and nonconscious were still indistinct,
then, with the elements, ego, intelligence,
five sense organs, inner sense, organs of activity,
Your beloved made cosmic eggs and their coverings by the
thousand,
with the worlds Bhuḥ, Bhuvaḥ, and Svaḥ too,
O Goddess of Śrīraṅgam's Lord—
all of them intended for Your sport. (19)

Showing them objects beginning with sounds,
making them forget the glory of service
by His marvelous power composed of the constituents,
Viṣṇu, the first person, confused the multitude of selves,

as a man dressed like a prostitute
He vexed them
as if they were rogues:
O queen of Śrīraṅgam,
in that way He is suited to Your merry play. (20)

Far from mind, beyond darkness,
most amazing, not aged by time,
the goal compared to which the city of the gods is a dreary
destination,
alone the source for intimate union,
hard to grasp by my verses,
Viṣṇu's highest place,
all for Your sake, O Mother:
so the traditions say. (21)

In play—all this, moving or not;
in pleasure—the highest realm;
the fortunate ones—gods looking always to the work of service;
among those carried along by mercy alone—ourselves;
in dependence—the highest male;
all these,
O Goddess of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
are attendants on Your pulsating power. (22)

Where town guards are fearsome in command or tender in favor,
there is the goal for Your devotees,
the "Uncontested" and "Undefeated" town
set higher than the firmament,
filled with beings rich in abundant, wonderful enjoyments that flow
like ambrosia:
O Lakṣmī in the house of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
such is the city people know as the capital for You both, (23)

and there, limitless as Your grace,
an opportunity for people to rest,
and there too, a crowd of attendants,
equipped with bows, discus, sword, and other such things,
urged on by a thirst for service, blissful,
affectionately resolved on protecting You—
though needlessly, since there is no danger—
O Śrī, blessed one;
they call this city
a singular ocean of bliss, a jeweled pavilion for the two of You. (24)

Spread wide lies "Endless Pleasure,"
with a garland rich in scent and to the touch, shining,
his jeweled hood a bright canopy:
upon him lies Your beloved
with a glorious host of innumerable qualities worthy of You,
aroused yet at peace,
ruling the universe under a single umbrella,
but then,
by pleasures rich in a wealth of tastes founded in Your mutual nonduality,
O Goddess, You tie the knot. (25)

Objects of pleasure for You both,
accessories,
like flowers and scents,
when perfected loving overflows,
they are trained to carry it away:
these thousand goddesses suited to You, plus also Nīlā and Mahī:
O Goddess,
by them You praise Your beloved with other breasts, arms, and glances,
as if with Your own. (26)

Mother, the Sādhya deities are
alike in quality, form, dress, activity, proper nature, pleasures,
all as if the same in age,
eternally without the taint of imperfection:
O Śrī,
they are ever intent on massaging Your feet
and those of Śrīraṅgam's Lord too;
urged on by hearts excited into states of love,
their pleasure lies in service. (27)

The Lord's proper nature and His independence,
O moon-faced one,
surely come from His intense union with You;
and when the time comes for interpreting it,
O Mother, Śrī,
it's the same with the glory of Your lover,
even if Scripture does not mention You separately,
because You are inside Him. (28)

O Lotus,
by Your touch "to be auspicious" touches the ruler,
but You are Śrī,

and being so is who You are,
not something adventitious, added on:
those wishing to compose verses
about the rich fragrance by which flowers flourish
do not say,
"This is lovely—because of itself." (29)

The one on whom a multitude of Your glances fell
became the supreme Brahman;
below him, those others on whom only two or three glances fell
became Śatamakha and the rest;
so, Śrī, in affirming both
tradition was actually praising You:
describing a city and its treasury glorifies the king. (30)

Of Yourself You are the splendor of Viṣṇu,
and so he is the blessed Lord;
but even if His prosperity depends on You,
His glory is not dependent on someone else:
by its own brightness
a jewel is of greater value, not less, and
neither is its independence dulled,
nor is it possessed of qualities borrowed from some other. (31)

Creative power, strength, light, knowledge, and
lordliness, victory, fame, condescension, love, security,
plus fragrance, beauty, charm, radiance:
O Indirā,
these multitudes of qualities
are common to You and the Lord. (32)

Other qualities too You hold in common,
beginning with youthfulness,
O victory flag spreading auspiciousness in Śrīraṅgam!
Yours in Him, His in You, both ways
they are displayed as in a mirror,
exceedingly delightful. (33)

You share being young and other such qualities,
but we attribute to the Lord, as more appropriate to males,
qualities beginning with "not being ruled by others," "subduing
enemies," "being steadfast,"
while in You we place qualities distinctive to women
beginning with "tenderness," "being for the sake of one's husband,"
"mercy," "forbearance":

such differences in the self of You two
are there for enjoyment. (34)

A cloud and its golden light,
vigorous young manhood and a girl's charming youthfulness,
the finest ornaments and other things suitable to youth and
tenderness—
these are surely worn in different places,
divided between Hari and Yourself,
as You take Your pleasure in the center of the lotus,
taking delight there. (35)

As Your body
I imagine the most worthy things—
moon, desire-granting creeper, ambrosia, honey,
all pressed from the milk ocean,
all strung with softness, coolness, innocence, sweetness, generosity,
and so on—
but, O Śrīraṅgam's queen,
Your divine form bears no element of artificiality
and does not deserve these confused words. (36)

Inclined by nature to favor those bowing low in reverence
and also desiring familiarity with Her loved one,
with deference She stays to the side,
a gold smear on a touchstone,
a trembling campaka garland—
but so profound a form cannot be the object of my words. (37)

One hanging down, ready for my reverence,
the other tucked underneath—Your lotus feet;
Your seat—the middle of the lotus throne;
gesturing fearlessness—Your lotus hand:
O Mother,
may we see You every moment,
Your sweet, charming face,
wide waves of compassion
flooding from the corner of Your eyes. (38)

May I bow low at Your feet,
they are the high point of the fragrant tradition—
like lotus leaves, O Indirā,
by the rubbing of which,
as if washed in cool water,
the vaijayantī garland on Your beloved's chest
gains freshness. (39)

Polluted with pride by a tiny particle of Your acceptance,
the eyes of kings are hard to describe, and so too
the Veda calls Your husband,
"Lotus-eyed, eyes filled with Your splendor
like bees intoxicated from drinking honey"—
by what path then,
O Mother, O manifest Lakṣmī,
can we describe the glory of Your glance? (40)

Glances made of bliss,
by which the Lord, drenched to the neck in love,
becomes intoxicated and indolent:
because of them
people like us fill up with tender love that overflows its banks
and we drown in compassion;
O lotus,
Brahmā and other such supporting figures are riveted
on each and every drop of those glances
that swell as their lordly power grows:
by such glances protect me, for I have no other refuge. (41)

Lotus pollen wounds Your feet,
the brazen glances of Your maidservants make Your body fade,
O Mother;
to hold a lotus in play counts as startling,
while Your garland swing on Hari's shoulders
causes us to cry, "Alas, danger!"—
how then, Śrī, can Your body,
so very tender,
endure the bruising of my words? (42)

Even now Your breasts have yet to reach unblemished perfection,
nor have Your gestures,
Your glance, brow, and smile,
yet lost their naïve artlessness;
the combination of childhood and young womanhood in Your every limb
imparts a fragrance apt for plunging into the stream of pleasure,
as You hold the hand of Your guide, Your lover. (43)

O Śrīraṅgam's queen, O Goddess,
Your soft limbs are
fragrant, amazing, shining, blooming with tender youthfulness,
unfaded, moist with beauty's ambrosia, cool, threaded with Your charm,

threaded like flowers, and
suited only to adorn Your lover's breast—
but enough from me,
this abrupt, confused poet! (44)

Touching the tender place,
transfixing streams of pleasure,
Your slender form is disheveled
by quivering acts of pleasure with Your lover
like a garland of flowers enjoyed by bees adept in pleasure—
O Goddess,
forever You delight Your Mukunda. (45)

Golden waistband, pearl earrings, necklace,
forehead ornament, garland of jewels, foot ornaments,
and other such things:
by such charming adornments,
You give life to Janārdana, though
by itself Your form is naturally lovely,
bright, awake, shimmering,
milk-and-sugar candy,
a boon-bestowing creeper blossoming into flowers. (46)

Though Your adornments are enjoyed in common,
by Himself Your husband carries with pleasure
the kauṣṭubha gem, the vaijayantī garland,
the five weapons, and other such things,
as if He wishes to spare You the burden of holding them,
O jewel-cluster at home in Śrīraṅgam—
and then
He dives deep inside You. (47)

O Goddess,
had You not descended
in suitable forms each time the Lord was born
in play,
behaving like humans and animals,
then His sport would have lacked its savor;
O Mother,
Your eyes, long, lovely, fine,
are just like slightly opened lotus blossoms. (48)

Wearing jingling bracelets and garlands
Mura's enemy was stirring the milk ocean like churning curds,
but to lessen His exhaustion,
O blessed one,

You appeared from the whirlpool of swirling ambrosia waves
and sprinkled Him
with the nectar of Your smile and Your moonlight eyes. (49)

Mother, daughter of the Mithilā land,
You once protected from the wind's son
those demonesses who were so very guilty toward You,
and thus Rāma's clan became more gentle;
He protected Kāka and Vibhīṣaṇa
only because they were able to cry, "Refuge!"
We ourselves are great, stubborn sinners, but
may Your causeless forbearance make us happy. (50)

Mother, Lakṣmī,
like the people of Mithilā
in that same way we are Yours,
blessed with mind and sentiments that can be pleased only in
serving You,
here and beyond;
in view of our relationship with You—
Your husband is our son-in-law—
may we see Hari,
reach Him,
join His retinue,
take our pleasure there. (51)

Mother, Your beloved is like a father
yet sometimes His mind is disturbed
when He also becomes a font of well-being for totally flawed people;
but by Your skillful words—
"What's this? Who's faultless here?"—
You made Him forget,
You made us Your own children,
You are our mother. (52)

Eternal consort of the ruler,
Mother,
to protect us You came here,
but in this deaf world that fails to note Your glory,
You've suffered much rejection,
injuring Your tender jasmine feet on stones,
in separation, in forest exile,
both of You.—
enough of this compassion!
enough of this unbridled independence! (53)

The Lord reclined on the ocean,
He churned and bound it too,
He broke Hara's bow like a twig,
O Mithilā's daughter,
and after severing the demon's ten heads
He made the body dance;
what might there be
that Your husband
intent on pleasing You
would not do for You? (54)

Thousands of hands, feet, faces, eyes, and more, all this,
the glories of His own universal form,
suitable qualities, descents too—
Your lover enjoys all these,
O Lotus,
but somewhere too
He plunges deep
into the mouth of the wild whirlpool,
into You. (55)

You think highly of the milk ocean,
Your birthplace,
O Mother,
You nourish the supreme heaven out of love for Your husband,
but forgetting both ocean and highest place
You delight all the more in Śrīraṅgam as Your home,
judging it the right place
for protecting people like me. (56)

O Mother,
generosity, compassion, tenderness toward those taking refuge, and more,
all this in such abundance here,
in Your Śrīraṅgam home;
whatever else they mention,
beginning with Your descent as Sītā,
was only practice for this. (57)

After giving wealth, the imperishable place, and the supreme heaven
to whoever endures the burden of joining their hands in reverence,
You still feel ashamed and exclaim,
"Nothing proper has been done for this one!"
O Mother, tell me,
what is this generosity? (58)

"Devoid of knowledge, right action, devotion, wealth,
completely ignorant of right intent, competence, ability, regret,
O Goddess,
I've committed insufferable sins against both of You,
I act the fool, I am insufferable to You," (59)

thus a hundred times over
I've falsely echoed truth-speaking men of old,
but still my arms have not the strength to attain Your lotus feet:
so according to the rule
You alone must count as my refuge. (60)

In Śrīraṅgam
a hundred autumns
amid good-hearted people,
untroubled, sorrowless,
most happy,
enjoying rich prosperity in the savor of service,
may we be dust on Your lotus feet,
may You be our mother, our father,
our entire righteousness,
You alone,
and so
for no reason at all
make us Your own
in Your mercy. (61)

To Mary: The Akathistos

An angel prince was sent from heaven to say "Hail!" to the mother
of God,
and when he saw You, O Lord, take body by his word that had no
body,
he was moved to ecstasy and stood there,
crying to her this greeting—
Hail, by you gladness will shine forth! Hail, by you the curse will
end!
Hail, righting of the fallen Adam! Hail, ransom of Eve's tears!
Hail, height not to be scaled by human reasoning! Hail, depth
inscrutable even to angels' eyes!
Hail, you are the king's seat! Hail, you carry Him who carries all!
Hail, star making the sun to shine! Hail, womb of the divine taking
of flesh!
Hail, by you all creation is renewed! Hail, by you the creator became
a babe!
Hail, unwed bride! (1)

The holy one, seeing herself to be chaste, said boldly to Gabriel:
"The paradox in your word appears to my soul very hard to accept,
when you foretell that I will bear a child conceived without seed,
and you then cry 'Alleluia!' " (2)

The virgin sought to know the unknowable knowledge,
and exclaimed to the minister,
"How can a child be born from my holy womb? Tell me."
To her he responded in fear, crying out—
Hail, initiate into the unspeakable counsel! Hail, faith in what asks
to remain secret!
Hail, the beginning of Christ's wonders! Hail, crown of all tenets
regarding Him!
Hail, heavenly ladder by whom God came down! Hail, bridge
carrying the earthly into heaven!
Hail, marvel much spoken of by angels! Hail, wound much
lamented by demons!

Hail, you mysteriously give birth to the light! Hail, you explain the way to none!
Hail, you surpass the learning of the wise! Hail, you enlighten the minds of the faithful!
Hail, unwed bride! (3)

The power of the Most High
overshadowed the undefiled maid so that she conceived, and
turned her fruitless womb into a meadow sweet to all
who wish to reap salvation by singing "Alleluia!" (4)

With a womb that had received God
the virgin hastened to Elizabeth,
whose child straightaway understood her greetings,
hailed her, and stirring as if in song
cried out to the mother of God—
Hail, shoot of an unwithering stem! Hail, estate yielding untainted fruit!
Hail, you cultivate the cultivator who loves humans! Hail, you plant the planter of our life!
Hail, field producing a rich harvest of mercies! Hail, table bearing a mass of pities!
Hail, you make bloom a meadow of delights! Hail, you prepare a harbor for souls!
Hail, acceptable incense of prayer! Hail, the whole world's redemption!
Hail, God's goodness unto mortals! Hail, humans' freedom to speak before God!
Hail, unwed bride! (5)

With confused thoughts storming in his mind
the discreet Joseph was troubled;
for although he saw you to be unwed he suspected you secretly wed,
O blameless one!
But when he learned that the begetting was of the Holy Spirit, he said, "Alleluia!" (6)

The shepherds heard the angels hymn Christ's appearance in flesh,
and running there as to their shepherd,
they saw Him as a lamb unspotted,
grazing on the breast of Mary whom they hymned, saying—
Hail, mother of lamb and shepherd! Hail, fold for reasoning sheep!
Hail, defense against unseen wild beasts! Hail, opening of Paradise's gates!

Hail, for the heavens with earth rejoice! Hail, for earth joins the heavens in dance!
Hail, the apostles' never-silent mouth! Hail, the prize-winners' unconquered courage!
Hail, firm foundation of faith! Hail, shining token of grace!
Hail, despoiling hell! Hail, clothing us with glory!
Hail, unwed bride! (7)

When the Magi saw the star approaching God,
they followed its shining;
taking it as a torch, by its aid they sought the mighty sovereign,
and having reached the unattainable,
they rejoiced and cried out to Him, "Alleluia!" (8)

The sons of Chaldaea saw in the virgin's hands
the One who fashioned humans by His hand;
and recognizing Him as the Lord
although He had taken the form of a servant,
they hastened to worship Him with gifts,
and cried out to the blessed one—
Hail, mother of the unsetting star! Hail, splendor of the mystic day!
Hail, you quench the furnace of deception! Hail, you enlighten the initiate into the Trinity!
Hail, you drive the inhuman tyrant from his rule! Hail, you show us Christ as a Lord who loves humans!
Hail, redeemer from pagan rites! Hail, rescuer from filthy deeds!
Hail, you stop the cult of fire! Hail, you save from the flame of passions!
Hail, you lead the faithful to wisdom! Hail, you gladden all generations!
Hail, unwed bride! (9)

Having become God-bearing heralds, the Magi went back to Babylon,
fulfilling Your prophecy, preaching You as the Christ to everyone,
and making a fool of Herod, who did not know how to sing "Alleluia!" (10)

Having lit in Egypt the light of truth,
You dispelled the darkness of untruth, O Savior,
and so its idols, unable to endure Your strength, fell down,
while those freed from them cried out to the mother of God—
Hail, restoration of humankind! Hail, downfall of demons!
Hail, treading under foot the wandering of lies! Hail, confounding the fraud of idols!

Hail, sea drowning the reasoning pharaoh! Hail, rock giving drink
to those thirsting for life!
Hail, column of fire guiding those in darkness! Hail, shelter for the
world, broader than the cloud!
Hail, food superseding manna! Hail, server of holy nourishment!
Hail, land of promise! Hail, font of milk and honey!
Hail, unwed bride! (11)

When Simeon was about to depart from this deceitful world
You were brought to him as a baby, and
yet You were recognized by him as the perfect God,
and so he was amazed at Your unutterable wisdom and cried,
"Alleluia!" (12)

The Creator showed a new creation
when He appeared to us who were made by Him,
blossoming from an unsown womb and preserving it as it was,
incorrupt,
so that we, seeing this wonder, might sing to her, crying out—
Hail, flower of incorruption! Hail, crown of chastity!
Hail, you make shine forth the type of resurrection! Hail, you reveal
the life of angels!
Hail, tree of delightful fruit from which the faithful eat! Hail, wood
of welcome shade where many take shelter!
Hail, you suckled the guide of all who stray! Hail, you bore the
ransomer of captives!
Hail, appeasement of the just judge! Hail, reconciliation of many
sinners!
Hail, a stole for those lacking freedom to speak! Hail, love
conquering all desire!
Hail, unwed bride! (13)

Seeing this strange childbirth
let us become strangers to this world, turning our minds to heaven;
for this purpose the Most High appeared on earth as a lowly
human,
wishing to raise on high all who call to Him, "Alleluia!" (14)

Wholly present among those below, but not wholly absent from
those above,
such was the uncircumscribed Word;
a divine condescension, not a change of place, occurred,
a birth from a virgin, rapt by God, who hears this praise—
Hail, boundary of the boundless God! Hail, gate of hallowed
mystery!

Hail, ambivalent tidings for those without faith! Hail, indubitable boast for those with faith!
Hail, most holy vehicle of the one above the cherubim! Hail, most perfect abode of the one above the seraphim!
Hail, you weld opposed qualities in one! Hail, you unite maidenhood and maternity!
Hail, by you transgression was paid for! Hail, by you paradise was opened!
Hail, key to Christ's kingdom! Hail, hope of eternal goods!
Hail, unwed bride! (15)

All those of angelic nature
marveled at the great work of Your becoming human;
they saw the One who is inaccessible as God
become accessible to all as human, dwelling among us,
hearing from all, "Alleluia!" (16)

We see talkative orators became dumb as fish before you, O mother of God,
for they are at a loss to explain how
you could both remain a virgin and still beget a child;
but we, marveling at the mystery, cry out in faith—
Hail, receptacle of God's wisdom! Hail, treasury of His providence!
Hail, you show the wise-lovers to be unwise! Hail, you render wordless the word-makers!
Hail, as the clever enquirers became foolish! Hail, as the makers of myth waste away!
Hail, you tear apart the meshes of the Athenians! Hail, you fill the nets of the fishers!
Hail, you lift from the abyss of unknowing! Hail, you enrich many in knowledge!
Hail, vessel for those seeking salvation! Hail, harbor for life's seafarers!
Hail, unwed bride! (17)

Wishing to save the world,
the maker of all things came spontaneously into it;
although our shepherd as God, for our sake He appeared as a sheep!
Having called like unto like, as God He heard, "Alleluia!" (18)

O mother of God, virgin,
You are a shelter for virgins and for all who fly to you,
for the maker of heaven and earth prepared you, spotless one,
by dwelling in your womb and teaching all to acclaim you—

Hail, pillar of virginity! Hail, gate of salvation!
Hail, leader of spiritual renewal! Hail, bringer of God's goodness!
Hail, for you have newly begotten those conceived in shame! Hail, you instruct those neglecting reason!
Hail, you crush the corruptor of minds! Hail, you beget the sower of chastity!
Hail, bride-chamber of unsown nuptials! Hail, you unite the faithful with the Lord!
Hail, chaste nurse-mother of virgins! Hail, bridesmaid of holy souls!
Hail, unwed bride! (19)

Every hymn fails when it seeks to do justice to the fullness of Your many mercies;
should we bring You as many odes as the sands of the sea, O holy king,
we could do nothing worthy of what You have given
to those who cry out to You, "Alleluia!" (20)

As a light-bearing torch shining upon those in darkness,
so we see the holy virgin;
she enkindles an immaterial light, she leads everyone to divine knowledge,
she is the radiance enlightening the mind, praised with this shout—
Hail, ray of the spiritual sun! Hail, radiance of the never-setting light!
Hail, lightning flash illumining souls! Hail, thunder-clap frightening foes!
Hail, you make manifold splendor rise! Hail, you flood forth an abundant, flowing river!
Hail, you depict the type for the healing pool! Hail, you take away the stain of sin!
Hail, washing basin for cleaning the conscience! Hail, mixing bowl for mingling gladness!
Hail, odor of Christ's sweetness! Hail, life of the mystic festival!
Hail, unwed bride! (21)

Wishing to give credit for the ancient debts,
the payer of all human debts
of Himself came to them who were exiled from His grace;
He tore up the deeds of debt and hears from all, "Alleluia!" (22)

We exalt your childbearing, we all hymn you as a living temple,
O mother of God,
for by dwelling in your womb, the Lord who holds all in His hands
made you holy, honored you, and taught all to cry out to you—

Hail, tabernacle of God and the Word! Hail, holiness greater than the holy!
Hail, ark gilded by the Spirit! Hail, inexhaustible treasury of life!
Hail, precious diadem of pious kings! Hail, solemn boast of holy priests!
Hail, unshakable fortress of the Church! Hail, indestructible bulwark of the kingdom!
Hail, by you they raise up trophies! Hail, by you foes fall!
Hail, my body's healing! Hail, my soul's salvation!
Hail, unwed bride! (23)

O mother hymned by all,
you who gave birth to the Word,
most holy of all holy ones:
Accept the present offering,
keep all of us from every misfortune
and deliver from the chastisement to come
all who cry out in unison, "Alleluia!" (24)

To Devī: The Saundarya Laharī

Only joined with Power has the God power to rule,
otherwise He cannot even quiver—and so
You are worthy of adoration by Hari, Hara, Viriñci, and all the rest,
and so
how dare I
who've done nothing meritorious
reverence and praise You? (1)

Brahmā gathered the tiniest speck of dust from Your lotus feet
and fashioned a world lacking nothing;
with much effort Indra carries the same on his thousand heads;
Śiva pulverizes it and rubs it on like ash. (2)

For the ignorant, You are the island-city of light illumining their
inner darkness;
for the dull-witted, honey streaming from the flower bouquet of
consciousness;
for the destitute, a double for the wish-fulfilling jewel;
for those drowning in the ocean of births, the tusk of Mura's enemy,
the boar lifting them up:
that's how You are. (3)

The league of gods, other than You,
dispels fear and bestows boons with two hands,
and only You have no need
to make boon-bestowing and fear-dispelling gestures—
by themselves Your feet are able
to protect from fear and bestow boons beyond desire,
as You afford shelter to every world. (4)

You bestow prosperity on those who make obeisance before You,
and thus once, after adoring You,
Hari assumed the form of a damsel and fascinated even the
destroyer of cities;
Memory too worshiped You and became powerful enough to
infatuate even great sages,
his frame fit for licking by Pleasure's eyes; (5)

he has no limbs
but carries a bow made of flowers, a bow-string of bees, five arrows,
his servant is spring, the mountain breeze his chariot:
thus armed,
O daughter of the snow-capped mountain,
still he obtains grace only from Your glance, and
by that conquers the whole world single-handedly. (6)

O great pride of the vanquisher of cities,
with jingling girdle
You stoop under breasts like the frontal globes of a young elephant,
You are slim of waist,
Your face like the autumnal full moon,
in Your hands are bow, arrows, noose, and goad:
may You stand forth before us! (7)

There—
in the ocean of nectar,
on the isle of jewels edged by groves of sura trees,
within the pleasure garden of nīpa trees,
inside the mansion built of wish-fulfilling gems,
on the couch of Śiva's own form,
on the cushion that is highest Śiva,
there the fortunate worship You,
O wave of consciousness and bliss. (8)

You pierce earth in the mūlādhāra cakra,
water in the maṇipura cakra,
fire in the svādhiṣṭāna cakra,
wind in the anāhata cakra and the ether above that, and
mind in the cakra between the brows;
thus You pierce the entire kula path
and then take pleasure with Your Lord
in the secrecy of the thousand-petaled lotus. (9)

You sprinkle the evolved world
with a stream of nectar flowing from beneath Your feet, and
from the resplendent abundance of the nectar moon
You descend to Your own place,
making Yourself a serpent of three and a half coils,
and there You sleep again
in the cave deep within the foundation. (10)

Nine base components—
four Śrī-triangles and five Śiva-triangles—
around a distinct center point,

plus lotuses of eight and sixteen petals, three rings and three
bordering lines:
thus, altogether
Your angle-home evolves as forty-three. (11)

Your beauty is such,
O daughter of the snow-capped mountain,
that the foremost poets, Viriñci and others,
strain to match it in some way,
and so too immortal maidens
eager to see You
travel by their minds
along the path to union with that mountain Lord
so hard to attain just by asceticism. (12)

If an old man,
unpleasing to the eye and impotent in play,
falls within the range of Your glances
then hundreds will run after him,
all the young women,
locks disheveled,
clothes falling from their breasts,
girdles bursting with force,
fine garments slipping down. (13)

Fifty-six rays in earth,
fifty-two in water,
sixty-two in fire,
fifty-four in air,
seventy-two in the heavens,
sixty-four in the mind:
but far above them all
are Your lotus feet. (14)

As bright as autumnal moonbeams, as Your crown
You wear coiled hair plaited with the crescent moon,
and by Your hands You show
gestures bestowing boons and protecting from danger,
plus a rosary of crystal beads and a book:
so how could words holding the sweetness of honey, milk, and the
grape
not be at the disposal of those good people
who have bowed before You even once? (15)

Some good people worship You as red Aruṇā,
warm as the morning sun

in the lotus grove of the minds of the chief among poets,
and so by their words,
a deep flood of eros fresher than those of Viriñci's spouse,
they give delight to good people. (16)

Mother,
whoever contemplates You along with the stimulators of words—
the goddess Vaśinī and others resplendent like slivers of moonstone—
becomes the author of great poems
filled with words well crafted in style and
sweet with the fragrance
that wafts from the lotus mouth of the goddess of speech. (17)

If someone recollects the entire earth and sky bathed in redness,
the radiance of the rising sun,
the lustrous graces of Your body—
then who among those courtesans whose songs are like arrows,
and also Urvaśī glancing shyly like the timid wild deer,
would not be ruled by such a one? (18)

Whoever makes Your face the center point
and places under that Your breasts,
and under that a half of Hara,
whoever meditates that way on Your desire portion,
O Hara's queen,
at once he fascinates women, easily, but very soon
he also whirls about even the goddess of the three worlds
who has sun and moon as her breasts. (19)

Whoever contemplates You in his heart,
O essence of ambrosia,
abundant and radiant like an image carved in moonstone,
will quell the pride of serpents
as if he were the king of birds,
he will cure those afflicted by fever
with the streaming nectar that showers from his glance. (20)

Slender as a streak of lightning,
the essence of sun, moon, and fire;
though seated in the great forest of lotuses,
You stand high above even the six lotuses;
if great souls in whose minds impurity and illusion are obliterated
look upon You,
they gain a flood of highest delight. (21)

When someone wishes to praise You by saying,
"Bhavāni tvam—You, O lady—cast Your merciful glance on this
servant!"
to that person,
even as he says, "Bhavāni tvam—"May I become You"—
at that very moment
You grant him the way to innate union,
and he shines with the brilliant crowns
worn by Mukunda, Brahmā, and Indra. (22)

After You've taken the left side of Śiva's body
Your mind is still unsatisfied,
so I wonder if You've taken the other half too:
after all,
Your form appears entirely red,
it bends a bit on account of Your breasts
Your eyes are three,
Your forehead marked with the crescent moon. (23)

The Arranger brings forth the world,
Hari sustains it,
Rudra destroys it,
the Lord conceals it and makes His own form disappear as well,
but Śiva, ever first, graces all this,
obeying the command of Your subtly knit, fresh, gentle brows. (24)

Benevolent one,
may the worship rendered
to the three gods born of Your three qualities
be as worship rendered to Your feet, for
near the jeweled seat on which Your feet rest,
they ever stand,
folded hands adorning their crowns. (25)

Viriñci returns to the five elements,
Hari ceases His delight,
the destroyer meets destruction,
the lord of wealth loses wealth,
the untiring array of great Indras also close their eyes,
and in that great dissolution,
O good woman,
Your Lord plays. (26)

Prayer—my foolish words;
sculpture—all my hand gestures;
circumambulation—my going about;

mode of oblation—my eating and so on;
deep reverence—my lying down;
dedication of self—my complete happiness:
whatever of mine shines forth—let it all be the same as worship of You. (27)

All the sky-dwellers,
Vidhi, Śaṭamakha and the rest,
came to a bad end even after they drank the nectar
that confers immunity to fearsome old age and death, and
if there is no time limit on Śambhu who swallowed virulent poison,
it is due entirely to the great power of Your earrings,
O Mother. (28)

"Avoid the crown of Viriñci there in front of You!
You'll stumble over the hard crest of Kaiṭabha's slayer!
Avoid the headgear of Indra, foe of Jambha!"
All three lie prostrate there, and
thus is the cry of Your servants
when Śiva appears suddenly, coming to Your abode. (29)

You are eternal,
served on all sides by rays of light,
Aṇimā and the others arising from Your own body, so
if someone ever meditates, "I am You"
and treats the wealth of the three-eyed one as mere straw,
then who can be amazed
if even the great, destructive fire
performs the flame ceremony for him? (30)

After deceiving all the worlds by the sixty-four tantras
dependent on the perfections attributed to them
Paśupati rested,
but due to his connection with You
He once again brought down to earth Your tantra
which of its own accord
accomplishes all human goals at once. (31)

"Śiva," "power," "desire," "earth," and
"sun," "cool-rayed moon," "memory," "swan," "Śakra," and
"the higher," "death," and "Hari":
when these syllables are joined together,
and finished with the triple heart syllable,
they become the parts of Your name,
O Mother. (32)

Eternal one,
some people with a taste for great, uninterrupted pleasure
place the triad "memory," "womb," and "flourishing"
before Your mantra and worship You
with rosaries strung with jewels that grant desires,
they offer hundreds of oblations,
streams of butter from the cow Surabhi
flowing onto the fire of Śiva. (33)

You are the body of Śambhu,
the sun and the moon are Your breasts,
my lady,
and I contemplate Your self as the flawless ninefold self;
this relation—that which depends, that on which all depends—
is common to You both,
both of You intent on the highest bliss
in one simple taste. (34)

You are mind, You are air,
You are wind and the rider of wind,
You are water, You are earth,
beyond You as You evolve
there is nothing higher,
there is only You, and
when You transform Yourself by every form,
then You take the form of consciousness and bliss
as a way of being,
O Śiva's youthful one! (35)

I salute the supreme Śambhu who abides in Your ājñā cakra,
shining with the radiance of countless suns and moons,
at His side embraced by Highest Consciousness;
by worshiping Him with devotion,
we begin to live in that region of light
beyond the reach of sun and moon and fire too,
the place no sorrow can touch. (36)

In Your viśuddhi cakra I worship Śiva
as clear as pure crystal,
the source of air itself, and
I also worship the Goddess,
in act the same as Śiva;
by the radiance of these two
as they travel the path to a oneness in form with the moon's rays,

the universe has banished its inner darkness
and dances with joy like a partridge. (37)

I worship the pair of swans
whose only taste is the honey of the blooming wisdom lotus,
who somehow cross the mind lake of the great ones,
from whose chatter emanate the eighteen forms of knowledge,
who extract all quality from what is flawed,
like milk from water. (38)

I glorify the dissolver who, quieted,
sets fire in Your svādhiṣṭhāna cakra,
O Mother,
and also His great Samayā goddess;
when His glance, fueled with great anger, burns the worlds,
Her glance, moist with compassion, serves to cool it. (39)

The rainbow lit with power shining against the darkness,
gems sparkling diversely, set among jewels,
the dark blue cloud finding its only refuge in Your jeweled city and
showering all three worlds scorched by Hara and the sun:
that I worship. (40)

In Your mūlādhāra cakra
I contemplate the one whose self is ninefold,
who dances wildly in all nine moods
with His Samayā goddess also intent on the dance;
these two indicate with compassion the way to ascend,
they rule,
and so this world recognizes its mother and father. (41)

If someone praises Your golden crown
inlaid with every jeweled sky-gem,
O daughter of the snow-capped mountain,
won't he imagine it
the crescent moon made manifold
by the luster spreading from the varied gems set there,
or Śunāsīra's bow? (42)

Benevolent one,
Your locks of hair
thick, shining, and soft,
are a field of blue lilies in bloom:
may they shake off the dark shrouding us;
even the sumanas flowers
on the trees in the garden of Vala's slayer
dwell here

in order to perceive their own fragrance—
or so I imagine. (43)

Wearing deep red
like a ray of the newly rising sun
held hostage by enemy hordes of the dark's most powerful
elements,
the flow of the line parting Your hair
is like a surging torrent,
a flood of beauty from Your face:
may it set forth our welfare. (44)

Surrounded by curls that resemble young bees,
Your face mocks the luster of the lotus, while
Your smile—attractive, delicate, fragrant—
and the sparkle of Your teeth
inebriate those honey bees,
the eyes of Memory's destroyer. (45)

I think of Your forehead,
flawless in its loveliness and radiance,
as a second crescent adorning Your crown;
placed out of order but then becoming one,
together these crescents, seamed with a smear of nectar,
turn into the full-moon goddess. (46)

Ever intent on annihilating the world's fear,
Your slightly knit eyebrows are, I imagine,
the bow of Pleasure's consort,
strung with the bright bees of Your eyes and lifted in His left hand
with the midsection hidden, covered by His wrist and fist,
O Umā. (47)

Your right eye, in the form of the sun,
begets the day,
while Your left eye, in the form of moon,
rules the night and begets its three watches;
Your third,
by a glance bright like a slightly opened gold lotus blossom,
fashions the twilight between day and night. (48)

"Expansive," "auspicious," "open," and "bright,"
"not to be countered in battle by blue lilies,"
"fountainhead of compassion's stream,"
"somehow sweet," "enjoying pleasure,"
"savior," "spread forth, victorious, over many cities":

such is Your glance, worthy of all such names—
may it be victorious! (49)

The poets' anthology,
the honey of a flower bouquet
in which alone Your ears delight,
while Your two eyes never stop glancing,
like bees—
or young elephants—
eager to swallow all nine subtle tastes,
while the eye in Your forehead sees all this
and becoming jealous
turns a bit red. (50)

Soft with love toward Śiva,
scornful of others,
spiteful toward Gaṅgā,
amazed at Giriśa's exploits,
frightened at Hara's snakes,
begetting good fortune for the water-born lotus,
smiling upon Your women friends—
such is Your glance, O Mother—
and compassionate to me. (51)

Your two eyes
with eyelashes like feathers
are crest-buds in the dynasty of the mountain king;
reaching to Your ears
and aiming to disturb the deep mental quiet of the destroyer of cities,
they enjoy playing the part of Memory's arrows, drawn back to the ear. (52)

O beloved of the Lord,
when Your eye shadow smears in play
Your triad of eyes displays three colors distinctly,
and so recreates the three gods—
Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra—
after they'd ceased;
Your eyes shine like the triad of qualities,
sattva, rajas, and tamas. (53)

Your heart is entirely devoted to the Lord of beasts,
yet to make us pure,
by the mercy of Your eyes,
red, white, and dark in hue,

You bring about this firm, flawless confluence of three sacred rivers,
Śoṇā, Gaṅgā, and Tapanatanayā. (54)

Good people say the world dissolves and is created again
as You close and open Your eyes,
O daughter of the mountain king,
but I suspect that to save from dissolution
the world born from the opening of Your eyes,
You've stopped closing them. (55)

O Aparṇā,
the śapharikā fish ever hide themselves under water but,
upset by the gossip whispered by Your eyes to Your ears,
they never close their eyes;
while luster leaves the blue lily at daybreak
when its petals close like doors,
it forces entry again at nightfall. (56)

Benevolent one,
may You graciously bathe me with Your far-reaching glance,
beautiful as the slightly opened blue lily,
for I am helpless and far off;
let this one become fortunate,
it's no loss to You:
the cool-rayed moon sheds the same luster
on a forest and a palace. (57)

Daughter of the king of the unmoving mountain,
to whom would the ridges between Your eye and ear not convey
the eagerness of the bow of that god whose arrows are flowers?
Your passionate glance travels sideways
from the corner of Your eye and along the path of hearing,
and there it gleams,
suggesting the mounting of an arrow. (58)

This face of Yours
and the pair of round earrings reflected in Your shining cheeks:
I think of them as Manmatha's four-wheeled chariot,
on which the great hero Māra mounted
and fought against the Lord of tormenting demons
who had readied the earth-chariot
with the sun and the moon as its wheels. (59)

The well-spoken verses of Sarasvatī grasp the benefits of the
ambrosia flood,
O Śarva's consort, and as
You continuously drink them from the hollows of Your ears,

Your head shakes, astonished at the praiseworthy words, and
all Your ear ornaments seem to echo each word
by sounding notes. (60)

O banner on the bamboo staff of the snowcapped mountain,
Your nose too is a bamboo, and
may it soon bear us our proper fruit—
just as inside it bears
pearls fashioned by Your very cool breath,
and in its abundance
carries a pearl
on the outside too. (61)

Your teeth are very fine, but
to what shall I compare the luster of Your naturally red lips?
not the bimba fruit:
it turns red by reflecting Your form, so
wouldn't it be a little embarrassed
even to mount the scale?
another comparison? first let a coral creeper bear fruit! (62)

When the cakora birds drink up
the smiling light of the moon, Your face,
their beaks go numb by excess of sweetness,
they become eager to taste something sour, and so
they drink the nectar flood of Your coolness,
night after night, freely and ardently,
as if it were a sour gruel. (63)

Mother, glory to Your tongue!
red in hue like a japā flower,
it tirelessly whispers prayers
that recount the host of the Lord's qualities,
while the bright, white crystal form of Sarasvatī seated at its tip
turns ruby. (64)

Mother,
after Viśākha, Indra, and Upendra return
from vanquishing the Daityas in battle
and remove their headgear and armor,
they turn away from Caṇḍa's share—
what's discarded by the three cities' destroyer—
and instead devour finely powdered camphor
bright as the moon and
mixed with betel nut right from Your mouth. (65)

With Her lute Vāṇī sings the manifold legends of Puraripu,
but when, nodding Your head, You begin Your fine words,
Your sweet notes far excel the music of her strings, and so
she puts her own vīṇā back in its case. (66)

Touched affectionately by the snowy mountain Lord with His
fingertips,
lifted once and again by the mountain Lord eager for a kiss,
fit to be handled fondly by Śambhu,
incomparable,
there, at the base of Your mirror face,
is Your chin:
but how can we speak of it,
O daughter of the mountain? (67)

This neck of Yours,
hairs ever on end due to the embrace of the vanquisher of cities,
becomes a stalk for the lotus of Your face;
the pearl necklace under it, though itself white,
is smeared with dark aguru paste profusely applied,
and gains the charm of a tender stem. (68)

You are singularly skilled in mode, undulation, and song;
the three lines on Your neck shine forth
like the threads auspiciously tied at Your wedding,
as if to mark off positions for three scales,
a mine of the various sweet rāgas. (69)

From his four mouths
the lotus-born god praises the beauty of Your four tender,
creeperlike arms;
his first head was torn off,
and so, still afraid of the nails of Andhaka's enemy,
he hopes Your hands will offer safety for the other four,
all at once. (70)

O Umā, tell us,
how can we describe the beauty of Your hands
when Your fingernails alone
outshine the bright hue of a lotus newly in bloom?
yet we can imagine the lotus like them in a small way
as its petals turn red
from the lac dye on the soles of Lakṣmī's playful feet. (71)

Goddess, Your breasts,
ever flowing with milk
are sucked at once by Skanda and the Elephant-faced;

when Herambha noticed this
his heart was unsettled by doubt and
he touched his own frontal globes with his trunk—
thwack!—and provoked laughter;
may they banish our affliction too. (72)

Are Your breasts jeweled vessels
filled with ambrosial essence?
There is no quiver of doubt in our minds,
O standard of the mountain Lord:
Your sons Dviradavadana and Krauñca-breaker drink there,
and do not know the taste of women;
even today they are children. (73)

Mother, Your breasts wear a luminous garment delicate as a creeper
and are strung with pearls made from Stamberamadanuja's skull;
just as the fame of the vanquisher of the cities is enhanced by His valor,
their innate luster is refracted by the radiance of Your red bimba-fruit lips. (74)

Daughter of the earth-bearing mountain,
in Your breasts I picture
the milk ocean of poetry flowing from Your heart;
when by Your compassion the Draviḍa child drinks there,
he becomes the most desired among great poets. (75)

O daughter of the mountain,
the mind-born one plunged himself into the deep pool of Your navel,
his body enveloped by the flames of Hara's anger,
and from there rose a creeper of smoke:
people say it is Your line of down,
O Mother. (76)

Benevolent Mother,
that down undulates like Kālindī River waves
across Your slender waist,
but to those who understand clearly,
it is actually the subtle ether taking form,
entering the hollow of Your navel,
channeled downward by Your breasts,
two bowls pressed one against the other. (77)

A standing eddy in the Gaṅgā;
a trench where the creeper of down grows and buds into breasts;

a sacrificial pit for the fiery brightness of him whose arrows are
flowers;
the garden where Pleasure plays,
Your navel,
O daughter of the mountain,
the mouth of the cave where the mountain Lord's eyes find
perfection:
it conquers all. (78)

Most slender by nature,
nearly worn down by the weight of Your breasts,
its form bending,
seeming slowly to give way at the navel and folds of flesh there,
its condition like a tree
that stands for too long on a crumbling riverbank—
Your waist:
may it be safe,
O daughter of the mountain. (79)

O Goddess,
Your breasts perspire and rub against Your armpits,
then suddenly burst the garment covering them on each side;
to save Your threefold waist from breaking
the slender one binds it three times over,
quite enough,
as if with lavalī creepers. (80)

O daughter of the mountain,
by way of dowry
the king of the mountain has bestowed on You
the heaviness and vastness of his own hips, and so
the sloping mass of Your hips, broad and heavy as well,
conceals the earth but also make it light. (81)

O lady, with Your two thighs You surpass
the trunks of lordly elephants and clusters of golden plantain trunks
too;
by Your perfectly rounded knees,
hardened by prostration before Your Lord,
O daughter of the mountain,
You surpass the two frontal globes of the wise elephant. (82)

To conquer Rudra,
O daughter of the mountain,
Viṣamaviśikha has indeed made Your calves into quivers,
encasing a double set of arrows:

at their crests ten arrowheads are visible,
the nails of Your feet,
sharpened on just one whetstone, the crowns of the gods. (83)

By Your mercy, Mother,
please place Your feet on my head;
they crown the foremost parts of scripture, and
the water washing over them
is the river flowing from the matted hair of the Lord of beasts,
the radiant lac dye on them is the luster
of Hari's red crest-jewel. (84)

We speak words of reverence for Your feet,
so very lovely to the eyes,
bright, freshly painted with lac dye—
even the Lord of beasts grows extremely jealous
of the kaṅkeli tree
in Your pleasure garden
that so ardently desires Your kick. (85)

When Your lotus foot kicked Your husband in the forehead
after He stumbled over Your name and bent low in embarrassment,
then Your anklets jingled, as if the Lord's foe
was joyfully eradicating the prolonged inner rankling caused by his
incineration. (86)

Quite adapted to abide in the snow-capped mountains—
or easily blighted by snowfall;
bright all through the night and its opposite—
or sleeping all night;
lavishing splendor on people of this belief—
or gaining only a little of Lakṣmī's grace:
it's no wonder Your feet outdo the lotus,
O Mother. (87)

The front part of Your foot, O Goddess,
is the seat of praises, not a seat for missteps,
so how could the noble ones compare it to hard tortoise shell?
then again, at the time of Your wedding
the piercer of cities, though compassionate in mind,
somehow lifted it with both hands and placed it on a stone. (88)

Caṇḍī, Your toes are like moons
that make heavenly women fold their lotus hands,
Your feet keep giving blessed wealth to those in need,
and so they mock the divine trees,

that from their slender fingerlike branches
give fruit only to the self-sufficient. (89)

Ever giving wealth to the helpless according to their desire,
quickly scattering honey,
a mass of beauty,
as fortunate as a bouquet of mandara flowers—
such are Your feet:
may I plunge my life into them like the six-footed bee,
my senses as my feet. (90)

As if their minds are engaged in the play of practicing steps,
Your household swans walk, they never stop imitating Your stately
step,
while Your lotus feet impart instruction by their every movement,
by the tinkling of beautiful anklets filled with gems,
O Goddess of fine bearing. (91)

Your servants, Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra, and Iśvara, form Your couch,
and Śiva seems a bedsheet of transparent hue,
as if the subtle erotic sentiment were embodied,
red in desire, reflecting Your radiance,
and milking the pleasure in Your eyes. (92)

Her hair is curly, She is simple in nature, gentle in smile;
in Her frame She is soft as a ṡirīṣa flower yet
in the region of Her breasts hard like rock;
at the waist She is quite slim
but at the hips prodigious:
She triumphs, She protects the world,
Śambhu's grace, Aruṇā. (93)

The moon's dark spot is musk,
while its watery reflection is a canister of emerald
filled with lumps of camphor, its phases;
when day by day this is emptied for Your enjoyment,
Vidhi fills it over and over,
just for You. (94)

You are the inner precinct of the cities' foe and so
the goal of worshiping Your feet is not easily accomplished
by those with feeble senses, and so
the immortals, Śatamakha in front, achieve unequaled perfection—
with Aṇimā and the others who stand at Your doorway. (95)

How many poets have not courted the wife of Vidhaṭṛ?
which poet does not become the Lord of the goddess Śrī, whatever his wealth?
O foremost among good women,
except for the great God,
embracing Your breasts is not easily accomplished
even by the kuravaka tree. (96)

The knowers of the traditions call You
the goddess of letters, the wife of Druhiṇa,
Padmā, wife of Hari,
companion of Hara, daughter of the mountain,
but You are also that fourth state,
unsurpassed and hard-to-attain splendor,
the great Māyā, and so
You make everything unsteady,
O queen of highest Brahman. (97)

I desire wisdom, Mother, so tell me,
when I shall drink
that essence of chewed betel juice reddened with lac dye,
the water that washed Your feet,
the essence of betel from Vāṇī's lotus mouth
that makes poets even of those mute by birth? (98)

Whoever is devoted to You will
play with Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī,
rival Vidhi and Hari,
have a beautiful form that melts even Pleasure's chastity,
live a long life free from the bonds that bind beasts,
and enjoy the taste known as "highest bliss." (99)

Illumining the sun with small flames,
bathing the moon whence nectar flows with drops from moonstones,
satisfying the ocean with its own drops of water—
and me too,
praising You with Your own words,
O Mother of all words. (100)

To Mary: The Stabat Mater

The sorrowful mother was standing in tears
near the cross as her Son was hanging there, and
through her sighing soul
that shared His sadness and was sorrowing,
a sword pierced. (1)

O how sad and afflicted
was that blessed mother of the only-begotten,
as she was bewailing and sorrowing and trembling,
as she stood looking upon
the punishments of her renowned Son. (2)

Who are those who would not weep
should they look upon the mother of Christ in such torment?
Who would be unable to share the sadness of the holy mother,
to contemplate her sorrowing with her Son? (3)

She looked upon Jesus suffering torments,
beaten down with whips for the sins of His own people,
she looked upon her own sweet child, dying, abandoned,
until He sent forth His spirit. (4)

O mother, font of love,
make me feel the force of sorrow,
that I might lament with you,
make my heart burn in loving Christ, God,
that I might be pleasing to Him. (5)

Holy mother, do this—
in my heart firmly fix
the wounds of the crucified,
share with me the punishments
your so worthy, so wounded Son suffered for me. (6)

Make me truly weep with you,
sorrowing with the crucified as long as I live;
to stand near the cross with you,
to be with you willingly, wailing—
this I desire. (7)

Virgin famous among virgins,
be not bitter toward me now, but
make me wail with you,
make me carry the death of Christ,
a share in His passion
as I recollect His wounds. (8)

Make me inflicted by these wounds
and inebriated by this cross
because of love of your Son;
enflamed and on fire,
through you, O Virgin,
may I be defended on the day of judgment. (9)

Make me
guarded by the cross,
protected by the death of Christ,
cherished by grace, and
when this body dies,
make it that my soul be given the glory of paradise.
Amen. (10)

To Apirāmi: The Apirāmi Antāti

Umā is half the king of Tillai,
the holy city adorned with koṉṟai garlands and campaka garlands;
may Her dark-bodied son Gaṇapati
hold ever firm in my mind
these end-to-beginning verses
for excellent Apirāmi
who holds all seven worlds.

"Rising, bright, radiant,
auspicious mark on high,
jewel prized by the discerning,
pomegranate bud,
splendid vine praised by the woman on the lotus,
pool of fragrant kumkum paste"—
thus is Your form described, Apirāmi,
ever my best help. (1)

My help,
the divinity I worship,
my own Mother,
the sacred word's branch, shoot, spreading root,
in Your hands, a fresh-flower club, cane bow, tender net, goad:
O beautiful lady of the three cities,
You're all I know. (2)

I know the secret no one knows, and knowing it
I clasp Your holy feet, O holy one;
afraid, I've kept apart from people
who don't know the greatness of those who love You—
blocked by their own erring hearts,
they tumble into hell. (3)

Humans, gods, undying sages all come near,
their heads at Your lovely feet, O tender one,
even while You stay with the pure one
who put the cool moon, the snake, and the Bhagīratī too
on His garlanded topknot,
even while You're always in my mind. (4)

Jewel dazzling my inmost mind,
lovely one dwelling in the three fine cities,
Your delicate waist is burdened by breasts like jeweled caskets,
O Ampikai, but still
You make ambrosia from the poison
drunk by Śiva, wearer of the topknot;
O beautiful lady standing so elegantly in the lotus,
inner space,
Your feet are on my head. (5)

On my head rest Your shining lotus feet
on my mind, Your holy mantra,
O lady deep red in hue;
joined with Your meditating devotees,
over and again I proclaim the way of Your supreme tradition. (6)

When my soul whirls like butter in a churn,
please see about giving me the path that does not weary;
the one on the lotus,
the smiling one with the moon in His hair,
and Māl too,
all three praise and worship Your radiant lotus feet,
O deep red, beautiful lady. (7)

Beautiful lady, helpmate to my father,
You come and destroy the ties binding me,
You are deep red,
You stand on Mahiṣa's head,
You are the inner space, the dark one, ever virgin,
in Your hand is the skull of the forest texts' lord,
in my thoughts, Your lotus feet. (8)

With our father looking on, reflecting,
by Your great mercy
Your great breasts grew larger than golden hills
with milk for the crying child;
there were garlands too, and
in Your bright hands a bow and arrows, and
Your teeth gleamed like new palm buds:
come, O Mother,
stand right here, before me. (9)

Standing, sitting, lying, walking, thinking,
I'm always worshiping You;
Your lotus feet are the single, rare meaning of the unwritten secret
texts,

grace itself,
O Umā born long ago on the Himālaya peak,
imperishable liberation, bliss. (10)

Composed of bliss,
all that I know, all ambrosia,
Your form is everything and the sky too;
Your lotus feet,
the end of the four secret texts,
garland the head of our Lord
who dances on the stage in the bright grove. (11)

Meditating on Your fame,
learning Your names,
melting at Your feet,
loving them day and night
in the crowd of Your devotees—
what merit must I have gained before,
O Mother blossoming forth seven worlds? (12)

You blossomed forth fourteen worlds,
protected them when they'd blossomed,
and afterwards concealed them,
O elder sister of the unperishing dark-throated one,
O younger sister of Mukunda, the great ascetic:
other than You
is there some other deity to worship? (13)

The heaven-dwellers and Dānava demons worship You,
while the four-faced one and Nārāyaṇa ponder You in their minds,
and there too those whose bliss never dies hold You, but
nonetheless
You are accessible to those encountering You on this earth,
my lady, my tender one. (14)

For Your tender favor they once did billions of penances
but all they got was wealth for ruling the earth,
or perhaps wealth for ruling the heavens as wise gods
or perhaps imperishable release and liberation—
O fragrant Yāmaḷai,
Your voice is so melodious,
O my green parrot. (15)

Parrot,
You are the radiant light shining forth from the minds of Your people,
the place where light becomes light, beyond all reckoning,
O Mother, You spread forth as sky and everything else—

but I am poor, I know so little—
how overwhelming Your gift! (16)

Your form is overwhelming,
Your face triumphant, glorified in every lotus,
O lovely, tender one;
to turn into defeat the victory of His helper, pleasure's master,
with His third eye
the Lord just looked at him—
but haven't You, His left half, conquered His mind too? (17)

You are the Lord's left half,
so may the loveliness in which both of You delight
and Your auspicious wedding design too
come and end the waywardness of my mind,
may Your shining feet rule me,
and when fierce death comes,
may You stand forth. (18)

When I see Your holy body standing forth,
there's no seeing a shore to the joy that floods my eyes and heart—
what is this knowledge that sparkles brightly in my thoughts?
Was it Your idea,
You who dwell amid nine bright angles? (19)

Where is the temple in which You dwell?
is it being half Your spouse?
the foundation of the four recited Vedas—or their end?
the white moon full of ambrosia or the lotus?
my heart or the hidden ocean?
O ever-unchanging auspicious one! (20)

You are auspicious,
Your breasts are like radiant bowls,
O daughter of the mountain,
Your arms wear crystal bracelets,
O peahen of all the arts,
You are half of Him from whose hair races the torrential Gaṅgā,
You are fiery, dark, red, white,
O tender young woman! (21)

Tender one, young bud,
ripe for me, fragrance of the Veda,
You move like an elephant in the snowy mountains,
Mother to the gods, Brahmā and all the rest:
that I might not be born here again after dying this time,
rule me. (22)

I hold no form but Yours in my mind,
I do not abandon the crowd of those loving You.
I take no pleasure in other beliefs,
O Goddess—
You are inside every thing within these three wide worlds
yet outside too,
sweet honey, exhilarating bliss, compassion,
jewel of my eye. (23)

Jewel, jewel's radiance,
ornament threaded with radiant jewels,
the beauty of the ornaments we wear,
disease for those not coming near You
but also the remedy for that disease,
great banquet for the immortals:
after bowing at Your flower feet.
I bow to no one else. (24)

I've wandered after Your devotees and reverenced them,
and before that I worked at penances, to end my births—
O Mother of the three first gods,
rare medicine for the world,
Apirāmi by name,
I don't forget, it's You alone I praise—
so what else is there? (25)

As devotees they praise Your fragrant feet,
those gods who created the fourteen worlds and then
protected, destroyed, wandered through them;
O woman with fragrant kaampu flowers in Your hair,
when skillful words for Your feet arise from my tongue,
then I'm happy. (26)

Breaking down the births that deceive me,
creating love to melt me inside,
giving me the task of uniting with Your lotus feet,
washing all dirt from my mind by the water of Your grace—
O beautiful lady,
what can I say about Your grace? (27)

You are like a word with its meaning,
a fragrant, tender flower,
companion to my dancing, moving Lord;
to those who worship Your fresh flower feet night and day
unperishing rule comes;

the way of penance and world of Śiva
are perfected by them. (28)

Perfection,
divinity giving perfection
radiant, supreme power,
benevolence that makes power grow,
liberation for those who toil at penances,
seed of that liberation,
understanding that springs up and grows from that seed,
and inside that understanding dwells
the lady of the cities who protects all this:
isn't this so? (29)

Once before You set me straight,
so after that, is it a good idea to reject me now?
So whatever I do, even should I fall into the sea,
by Your holy compassion help me to the shore:
let that be Your intent!
You have one form,
many forms,
O formless one, my Umā! (30)

Umā and the one who is half of Umā
have come here in one form
and made me love them;
now there are no belief systems to be reckoned with,
no mothers to give me birth,
my desire for women's bamboo shoulders has been sated. (31)

Caught in the ocean of desire
I fell tormented into the net of merciless death,
but You placed Your fragrant lotus feet on my head
and ruled me firmly—
such love!
what can I say,
O jeweled lady, our Lord's half? (32)

When murderous death firmly summons me
according to the deeds I've done
and makes me tremble,
when I am afflicted,
please say, "Don't be afraid!"
O Yāmaḷai, tender one,
Your fragrant round breasts entirely melt the Lord, our father, within—

when I call You "Mother"
at that moment come running. (33)

In love She gave heaven and earth to devotees who came and took refuge,
and now She's gone
onto the head of the four-faced one,
onto His breast, jeweled and decorated with fresh honey,
onto His side,
onto the golden, bright, honeyed flower,
onto the radiant sun,
onto the moon. (34)

To place our foreheads at Your fine small feet
fragrant with flowers and a slender crescent moon,
such is our unique penance:
can the countless heaven-dwellers obtain this penance,
O Treasure sleeping deeply
on the ocean waves,
on the serpent with fierce eyes? (35)

Things,
enjoyment found in things,
the delusion elusive enjoyments cause, but then too
the clarity that arises amidst delusions,
the radiant light devoid of the darkness that tricks my mind,
and Your grace:
I understand none of this,
O Ampikai in the lotus. (36)

Bamboo and flowers are in Your hands,
a garland of bright jewels on Your lotus body,
a garland of many jewels on the poison snake's hood,
O lady joined to the side of the prosperous one
who wears only the eight directions. (37)

Her radiant mouth blossoms brighter than a coral creeper,
Her pleasing laugh reveals sparkling teeth,
and with the help of this
She melts our Śaṅkara,
Her jeweled breasts bending toward Her tapered waist:
to rule the immortals' world, just worship Her. (38)

Your lotus feet are for ruling,
Your glance rescues from death, so
if I fail to take this seriously,
it's my fault, not Your fault:

Your forehead is radiant,
You live at the side of Him
who shot an arrow and destroyed three cities. (39)

The heaven-dwellers aim to approach, worship, and reverence my
Lord's lady,
Her forehead radiant with its eye,
She is the maiden not to be seen by fools in their hearts—
that I love to see Her,
is that some strategy I'd planned?
it must be the merit of things I'd done before. (40)

We must have done something meritorious before, O mind:
Her eyes are like fresh, lovely, blue kuvaḷai flowers
and because of us
She's come here with Her splendid husband, and
that I might be among Her devotees
She's placed Her lotus feet upon my head. (41)

Adorned with pearls
Your firm yet tender breasts grown as large as hills,
make the Lord's strong heart dance;
Your vagina is a fine cobra's head,
the Veda's cooling words are Your anklet bells,
O excellent lady. (42)

Her feet lovely with anklet bells,
in Her hand the net, goad, and five arrows,
the beautiful lady of the three cities,
Her body is deep red:
to frighten those wicked demons in the cities
who planned evil in their hearts,
that Lord whose body is like fire
bent a mountain as His bow—
and She is His beautiful half. (43)

Ascetic, auspicious consort to our Śaṅkara,
She is mother even to Him, and so
She is a ruler beyond all deities, and so
I will never weary myself in serving other gods. (44)

They don't serve, they don't worship at Your feet but
in past times they rashly did their own will—
aren't there such people?
I've seen what they're like,
so if I act that way
is it deceit or good practice?

but even if I proudly act that way,
afterwards patience is still good,
and rejecting me is not. (45)

Even when their servants misbehave,
great people naturally tolerate them—
that's nothing new;
You've merged into the left side of Him
who drank that rare poison and whose throat is dark,
O golden one,
so even if You reject me,
I will praise You. (46)

I have seen that by which we can live:
there is no way to desire it in one's mind,
no way to speak of it,
it is beyond the reach of the seven worlds,
yet there,
among the oceans and the eight mountains,
among the lights that illumine night and day,
it abides, radiant. (47)

Close to the topknot
where the bright crescent moon rests,
on the mountain, there She is,
a fresh fragrant sprout:
if they place Her in their hearts
even for a moment,
they put aside grief—
and after that
can they ever again get a body,
bowels, fat, blood all mixed together? (48)

When my soul
dwelling in its body
reaches its limit, is whirled about, and cruel death approaches,
then come,
surrounded with Arampai and Your other women,
and with a bangled hand gesture
and say, "Do not be afraid,"
O lady, Your body's like the lyre's notes. (49)

"Lady," "Four-Faced," "Nārāyaṇī,"
"Five arrows in Her lotus hand,"
"Śāmbhavī," "Śaṅkarī," "Cāmaḷai,"
"Wearing a garland of fine snakes with poisonous bites,"

"Cūliṉī," "Mātaṇkī," "my mother".
and so on, such are the names for Her
whose feet are our stronghold. (50)

"A stronghold is the thing,"
the graceless demons calculated,
but their strength withered
when my Lord and Mukunda grew angry,
but then they cried,
"Your feet are refuge!"
and touched the feet of that lady—
and so on this earth
they face neither death nor birth. (51)

Chariots, horses, elephants in heat, great crowns,
palanquins, gifts of gold, costly necklaces—
such are signs of those true ascetics
who earlier on loved the lotus feet of the spouse
of the Lord with the moon in His hair. (52)

Red sari on Her so slender figure,
full breasts,
a string of pearls,
jet black hair woven with jasmine flowers,
three eyes:
place these in Your mind,
see them altogether,
there's no asceticism like that. (53)

If you are planning in your heart
to avoid the disgrace of going around to people and
admitting you have nothing,
then join yourself to the feet of the lady of the three cities;
She'll make sure you never mix with people
who've not learned to do great penance. (54)

She shines,
Her incomparable body is a thousand streaks of lightning,
bliss-creeper, inner joy,
the beginning, middle, and end of the rare Veda,
everywhere She is the first one:
whether we think of Her or not,
nothing else is needed. (55)

Budding as one,
She blossoms forth as many,
filling the whole world everywhere and abiding there, and yet

She leaves it all and abides apart, and yet too
She fills my heart unleaving:
that's how She behaves, and yet
even my Lord who once slept on the banyan leaf
and my Father too
don't understand Her. (56)

Ayaṉ measured out two portions, and then
You did the right thing and raised up a whole world,
and so too You've made me praise You before everyone
with garlands of fresh Tamil verses, and so
You make both true and false sound forth together:
isn't this all Your true grace? (57)

You dwell in the red lotus and in my consciousness,
Your breasts are fine lotuses,
O best among beautiful women,
Your lovely eyes and compassionate face,
Your lotus mouth, lotus hands, lotus feet:
except for these I see no treasure. (58)

"No treasure but this," indeed,
but I failed to realize how nothing suits my heart but Your ascetic
path,
and now You stand there
with Your long cane bow and five arrows—
but remember, even pretty, ignorant, worldly women
do not strike their own children. (59)

Sweeter than milk is Your word,
better than Māl,
better than Your Lord
from whose topknot waters flow and whom other gods worship,
better than the four true seats of learning below there
where the Veda is sung—
yet better still,
place Your feet on this dog's smelly head. (60)

I'm a dog,
but You came and loved this thing,
without a second thought You've ruled me;
though I was a demon
You came and made me know You as You are,
and now I've gained my goal,
O Mother, lady of the mountain,
younger sister of bright-eyed Māl. (61)

With His golden bow,
the bright warrior destroyed the three Dānava cities,
He fought the frenzied, fierce-eyed elephant form;
O lady,
You are known for Your breasts that are like young coconuts,
You are joined with His body, and
in Your red lotus hands are Your cane bow and flower arrows:
all this is ever in my mind. (62)

Just trying to make a few points clear
about the truth of the path to travel
to those fools who still acclaim systems
which people think different from Her
who is chief in all six famed systems:
it's like beating a stick on a rock. (63)

I do not move lovingly toward gods and their useless rites,
but to You I offer my love, and
except for praising You I offer no praise,
I never see anything but the light of Your form
anywhere on the wide earth, in the four directions
and the heavens. (64)

The entire heavens and the sky and earth watched that day
when the great ascetic Lord incinerated Desire's body and his bow—
but after that didn't You still make with Him
a wise son with twelve slender hands and six faces?
O tender one, such is Your strength! (65)

I am small, I know no other strength,
I possess nothing but Your tender lotus feet,
as You reign with Him whose bow is the cool radiant mountain;
I've done deeds,
but even if my woven word is flawed,
it speaks Your names, it is all praise. (66)

Those who don't offer praise,
don't worship,
don't focus their minds even for a moment
on Your lightning appearance,
lose fame, clan, lineage, learning, quality, and
all the time, at every hut,
they carry begging bowls,
they wander the whole earth. (67)

The scent, sweet taste, light, touch, and echoing sound
that pervade earth, water, fire, fierce wind, wide sky—

all this is joined as one,
as the beautiful lady desired by Śiva:
there is no wealth beyond reach
for those ascetics doing the penance of touching Her small feet. (68)

Giving wealth
giving learning
giving a mind that never wearies
giving divine form
giving friends with no deceit in their hearts
giving every good thing
giving abundance to those said to love Her,
Apirāmi with flowered anklets—
all this by the glance of Her eyes. (69)

To the delight of my eyes
I have seen Her in the Kaṭampa forest:
in Her hands a vīṇā sounding delightful rāgas,
Her breasts,
Her fresh hue delighting the earth,
where She appears amid the clan of Mataṅka women,
our great lady, so very beautiful. (70)

In beauty like no one else, a tender shoot,
for Her radiant lotus feet the rare Veda is the familiar rest,
on Her head is the great, cool new moon,
tender Yāmaḷai, slender as a flower stem:
O anxious heart, She is here,
don't grieve,
what more do you need? (71)

To make up for what I lack, I give praise,
so even if I am born again,
as long as I don't lack You, whom would I lack?
Your delicate loveliness and slender waist reveal what lightning lacks
even if it fills the entire wide sky,
while to make up for His lack,
my Lord placed this lotus on His head. (72)

Mother, goddess of the three cities,
She has a kaṭampu-flower garland,
five arrows, and a cane bow for weapons,
and the bhairavas praise Her at midnight;
to us She's given happiness—
Her holy feet
four bright hands

radiant light
and three eyes too. (73)

"The three-eyed Lord, Nārāyaṇa, Ayaṉ,
and the Veda too
all praise tender Apirāmi,
and Her feet are their reward!"
so the women sing and dance
as they dwell in the grove of tamaṉi trees
where couches are of gold. (74)

People will reign in the shade of the kalpaka tree,
have no more mothers,
and be finished with inevitable births on earth—
once they note Her fragrant navel
whence are born the mountains, the salty sea, and the fourteen worlds,
Her flowered hair, Her holy form. (75)

I've noted down Your entire lovely form in my mind,
I know Your thinking,
and so I've blocked the straight path of approaching Death:
You've taken a part of the body of the Lord
in whose hair bees swarm amid honeyed koṉṟai flowers,
You've entered Him intimately,
O Bhairavī with five arrows. (76)

"Bhairavī," "Pañcamī,"
"Holder of the net, goad, and five arrows,"
"Lofty Caṇḍī who consumes as Her offering the life of deceivers,"
"Kāḷī," "Vairavī shining in all directions,"
"Maṇṭalī," "Māliṉī," "Cūlī," "Varākī,"
such are Her names in the flawless four Vedas that people proclaim. (77)

Jewelry box,
golden bowls, splendid breasts rubbed with fragrance,
pearl ear jewels, diamond earrings,
the flourish of Your glance, the coral moon of Your smile:
I've written all this down
in my two eyes,
O tender Apirāmi. (78)

In the eyes of tender Apirāmi there is grace,
along the path spoken in the Veda our heart can follow Her;
but off that path,
whirling in guilt, committing fierce deeds,

deceivers sink into hell's ruinous pit—
how could I join them? (79)

Placing me with Your devotees,
chasing away my cruel deeds
so they rush from me,
showing Yourself
so my mind and eyes dance in exhilaration when they see You,
You dance in my inner lotus—
what's all this, lovely, divine woman? (80)

Divine woman,
all those divine women attend You,
but I do not worship them,
I praise none of them in my heart;
I do not consort with the deceitful
or argue with the few who insist on "mine" and "yours";
what I know is that on me
You've bestowed Your great mercy. (81)

Lovely divine woman in the lotus where bees gather,
I am exhilarated to ponder Your radiant form
that illumines the whole world,
while inside me delight wells up, surging, overflowing:
how can I forget Your way? (82)

Placing manifold fresh flowers at Your lotus feet,
night and day
all those above are steady in meditating,
and that's why the revered place,
the Airāvata elephant, the Bhagiratī River,
the mighty thunderbolt, the kalpaka grove
all belong to them. (83)

She holds me,
She wears soft red silk,
the shining moon is in Her radiant hair,
She does not enter deceivers' hearts;
Her waist is like a slender shimmering thread,
She embraces my Lord's side, and from now on
She'll no longer make me be born here:
that She not make you be born here either,
come, see Her. (84)

In every direction I see
Her net and goad,
the cool fresh blossoms where bees swarm,

five cane arrows,
the holy body of the lady of the three cities who ends all grief,
Her slender waist, girdle,
the kumkum on Her breasts,
the pearl necklace on Her bosom. (85)

Māl and Ayaṉ searched,
the secret text searched,
the heaven-dwellers searched for
Your feet, Your arms with bracelets:
so please appear and show them to me
when fierce Kālaṉ in anger throws his deadly trident at me,
and speak words that refresh
like milk, honey, and sugar. (86)

Inaccessible to word and thought,
Your form appears visibly before my eye and in my mind;
by His eye the chief one destroyed desire,
but You are part of Him still, and so
all the world mocks His "unfailing asceticism,"
O higher than the highest. (87)

When I said, "You are the highest,"
I reached You, though I was alone,
and so
it's not right to rebuke me now,
"He's not fit to be among my devotees";
the one whose mountain bow destroyed the hostile demon city,
whose hand knocked off the head of Ayaṉ in the lotus—
You are half of Him, O excellent one. (88)

O holy one in the excellent lotus,
by placing Your splendid feet on people's heads
You and Your helpmate give release,
You come and give the deep state beyond the fourth;
so when I'm troubled,
when I forget the knowledge that ends the bond of body and soul,
come before me then too. (89)

Lest I be troubled
She comes and enters my mind-lotus,
Her favorite old dwelling place,
and stays there,
so nothing is lacking to me now;
to the gods in heaven
She granted medicine,

ambrosia from the ocean,
that tender one. (90)

Tender, slim of waist,
lightning,
Her soft golden breasts are tightly embraced
by the one whose topknot spreads wide,
She is worshiped in keeping with the Veda
by Her devotees,
and if you worship them
doing so will gain you heaven,
and you can ride up there on a white elephant,
as music resounds. (91)

I hold my mind at Your feet,
it ripens and melts, and as You wish, I flow,
You've made me serve You, and so
I understand nothing of others' beliefs,
I follow not the path they tread;
even the three chief gods and all the rest praise You
when Your smile blossoms. (92)

We say,
"The lady who gives birth to the whole world,
whose breasts blossom like lotus buds,
whose ancient eyes show the doe's glance,
whose birth has no end to it"—
but to speak this way of the daughter of the mountain is flawed,
it's all too much, and so we're blamed:
but meditating on Her nature, that's our pleasure. (93)

Devotees take pleasure in worship,
tears well in their eyes,
hairs stand on end,
like intoxicated bees they lose consciousness, their bliss,
they jumble their words,
and for all this people say they're mad:
such is Apirāmi's religion. (94)

Whether good comes or evil grows,
I know nothing of it—
the burden is Yours,
everything mine is Yours—
that time I gave it all,
O imperishable mountain of qualities,

ocean of grace,
mountain Lord's tender daughter. (95)

She is a tender shoot,
Yāmaḷai living in the lovely lotus temple,
flawless,
hard to describe in writing,
dark green in body,
the peahen knowing all the arts:
yet those who worship Her
as long as they live
will be foremost in all seven worlds. (96)

Sun, moon, fire, Kubera,
the king of the immortals, Brahmā in the lotus,
the destroyer of cities, the enemy of Mura,
the Potiya mountain sage, Skanda holding the sword,
Gaṇapati, Desire,
and the rest too, beyond counting,
all who've achieved merit:
everyone praises our lovely woman. (97)

When Śaṅkara strokes Your lotus feet
and puts them on His head,
where does He hide the fire in His hand, the river from His hair?
Not entering truthful hearts, entering false hearts—
You know nothing of such things,
innocent flower, cuckoo. (98)

Lovely, fine cuckoo in the kaṭampu tree forest,
peahen in the Himālaya,
sun rising in the sky,
swan in the lotus,
You with earrings of radiant gold:
the mountain lord once gave You to Kailāśa's ruler. (99)

O delicate one,
the entwined, tender konṟai flowers on fragrant breasts,
elegant shoulders like bamboo,
cane bow in radiant hands that hold the honeyed arrows that arouse desire,
bright teeth,
doe eyes:
all of this is in my heart
ever rising. (100)

Mother, our tender Apirāmi—
She brings forth the whole world;
the color of a pomegranate flower—
She protects the whole world all at once;
in Her lovely hands are the net, goad, cane bow,
and She has three eyes:
no evil will happen to those who worship Her.

To Mary: The Mātaracamman Antāti

Protect this great hymn of linked verses
honoring the queen among women in Mylapore
where fine flower gardens abound in fine honey,
O great one who extinguishes
by the sun of His great lovely Vedic book
the beginning and end of the darkness
settled in the heart lotus of India's people,
O blameless, astounding one,
who crosses beyond end and beginning.

You bear your jewel, the highest one, jewel of my eye,
the creator, preserver, destroyer of the echoing sea and earth,
the underworld and the pure, bright, jeweled world beyond,
you wear the sky-jewel sun as your garment:
graciously grant my wish
to sing in praise of your feet,
O queen among women in great Mylapore. (1)

The queen among women in Mylapore surrounded by mātavi groves,
Mary, the great mother whose dwelling touches the moon:
if I praise her feet
so honored in this world by great ascetics, then
with eyes like unfading kuvaḷai flowers
that fine fragrant one will glance upon me. (2)

The virgin in Mylapore where fragrant lotuses bloom in broad pools,
mother of our highest beloved one
who dwells in the mind lotus of the twelve faithful companions
who say, "This is the fellowship of faith and friendship"—
she is the wise one in the highest realm:
true realization will come to you
if you think upon her lovely feet. (3)

It ends the confusion of deeds,
dilutes the poison afflicting the mind,
makes bloom the seven virtues that destroy confusion:
worshiping in your broad inner mind

the splendid feet of Mary
untouched by the demon snake's poison,
the virgin in lovely, southern Mylapore
where swans delight in ponds. (4)

They are the true sacred text:
for life—help leading to the broad heavens,
for poverty—great, increasing wealth,
for disease—medicine,
for ending the struggle of craving, desire—the finest way,
here, in Mylapore, flawless city,
white conches in rich pools:
the feet of Mary. (5)

The queen among women
who wears the sun as her garment,
the bright, lovely woman in Mylapore
where bees swarm and enjoy honey,
Mary, mother of the highest one
who nourished the nine women
and gave them grace to drink:
that she might place her feet on our heads,
that we not grow faint,
let us praise those feet. (6)

In Mylapore surrounded by groves thick with many trees
dwells Mary whose feet crushed the serpent to death;
if the little people of this world,
reflect on her purely in their inner minds
while heavenly beings sing her praises
along with the purified ones in heaven too,
then even they will flourish,
their faults banished. (7)

Some say,
"If you venerate the mother of Mylapore
amid pools filled with lotuses,
your soul will rejoice greatly,"
and then join themselves to her closely;
but those who do not reverence the woman
who wears the excellent sky-jewel and stars
will be dragged away by angry, pouncing demons. (8)

Abandoning the bondage of wealth, lovely bride, grieving mother
and relatives,
one goes to the jungle or hills for yoga—

but to what end?
Instead, O despairing heart,
reach that yonder place where people serve Mary of Mylapore
surrounded by gardens where clouds sleep:
be exalted. (9)

I took pleasure in the words of lovely women
whose milk-white foreheads are like bows,
I wandered about enjoying empty pleasures,
I'd forgotten the commandments of the true revelation
spoken by your little child, the highest one:
but now be gracious,
O virgin of sweet Mylapore
where white swans swim in watered paddy fields. (10)

The ruler fought
as if surrounded on all sides by ocean waves,
but then in front of him,
the Lord, the first of all, the lamb,
revealed an unusual form over a stag's head
and gave him the fullness of life in the heavenly place,
and it was Mary of Mylapore who gave us that Lord—
and yet you aren't staying at her feet:
O my mind, let this be my caution to you. (11)

Of the zodiac signs,
she wears the sun,
she is queen among women,
great Mary who crushed the moon in heaven and the earless enemy
snake too,
the mother not to be contained in the mind:
O heart,
venerate her tenderly in lovely, southern Mylapore
before misfortune and stubborn, killing deeds come upon us. (12)

By a trick the demon made Eve eat the fruit, but
by perfect wisdom the good virgin gladly shoved him into hell,
so here in Mylapore surrounded by kings with their armies,
O my heart,
take refuge and say, "Protect me:"
her sure boons are your wealth. (13)

The Lord smote with sulfur
the walled city of the people of deceit, desire, anger strong like iron,
so tell Him, O people of the world,
"This city and all else is yours,"

and then be still:
Mary, the queen among women,
illumines lovely Mylapore,
her great city. (14)

The woman shines
in Mylapore where kuvaḷai flowers bloom in the pools,
her ears are like tender leaves,
her lovely face a broad lotus,
she is slender as a flower stem and
mother of the one
who walked on the wide sea that surrounds the earth, and
everywhere on its shore
gathered fresh conches sound for her. (15)

The queen of elegant, enduring Mylapore
grants devotees their vow,
diminishes their darkness,
grants them ornaments, gold, and jewels, and
those who reach a sweet realization of this mother
form the assembly of her Son's people:
O mind, you've sharply aggravated my human pain,
but join them now. (16)

It's true:
our mother flourishes in Mylapore town
where standards wave in the breeze
amid paddy rich in conches and eels;
her eyes are bees,
her hands lotuses,
her mouth a kumutam flower,
this young woman:
venerate her and
the assembly of heaven-dwellers will bring you a radiant crown. (17)

Potent pleasures,
sound, touch, form, taste, smell,
are the flood purified by the wisdom
she wears as her ornament in peerless Mylapore,
this queen of the good, lofty heaven-dwellers,
so if you venerate her,
O inner self,
then the pleasure of lovely, true wealth in the heavenly world
will be yours, unhindered. (18)

Is it a peerless pool of ambrosia
praised by unstoppable mighty ones and ascetics?
or protection for those in difficult sorrow?
or help in penances?
It is her, radiant as the sacred text
the protector gave on the mountain—
and now she dwells in Mylapore
where flowers bloom in great gardens,
she is the mother of the highest one. (19)

Surrounded by horses, elephants, chariots, infantry,
bearing great wealth, incense, and myrrh,
the three rulers came, worshiped at His feet, and begged,
"Give us the splendid joy, highest goal!"
O loving mother, you bore that highest one,
O Mary of Mylapore, adorned with asceticism. (20)

The king desired Margaret,
but that virgin spurned his sacred text,
so he bound her legs tightly
and locked her in a stout prison—
until Mary of great, holy Mylapore
came and relieved that great pain in her legs:
so think upon her,
serve, praise, reverence, rejoice in her,
O heart. (21)

She is queen among women,
the daughter of clear-minded Joachim,
the joyful mother of the one
who made water into sweet wine
at the lovely, great wedding feast:
O heart, confused by demons and loving sweet tastes,
venerate her now
where she dwells in lovely Mylapore,
loftier than the finest cities. (22)

In the whole world, what could I be lacking?
answer me, O mind:
in Mylapore—our abode,
her two feet—our grace,
her sweet grace—our nourishment,
knowing her—our beauty,
praising her rightly—our vestment,

and all of this
in her eyes—beautiful flowers. (23)

In the vast wilds,
on the mountain,
in the vast heavens,
the pure one
whose brightness shone in the burning thorn bush,
His was the destruction of the great army of pharaoh who inflicted
harsh punishments, and
if you reflect on His mother in Mylapore,
she will give a lovely eye
to your rude inner self,
O heart:
and that is just what you desire. (24)

The Lord ended the crisis of Daniel,
bright, far-seeing, disciplined in mind,
and protected him, and
that Lord's mother is seen in lovely, southern Mylapore
where she removes the evil
that comes from women who sing like parrots;
so meditate on her, praise her, and
experience what is pleasing:
thus comes purity, O heart. (25)

To extinguish the evils of desire
that arise from the three sweet delusions,
she appeared in lovely, southern Mylapore
radiant with pearls and sugar cane
where she honors disciples and bestows liberation;
herself perfect in sweet, radiant liberation
she is queen among women,
devotion's seed. (26)

She gave birth to the father, the wise one,
the grand one who made His people know the ten commandments:
O good, suffering heart,
desire her feet and reverence them,
do not be tainted by impurity;
this mother who rejoices in wisdom
in lovely, expansive Mylapore
will make us great and protect us always. (27)

She thrust into hell
the demon who shook the rich, tall, lovely houses that rise like
tusks,
she raised our distressed ancestors to heaven,
banished the confusion of each,
brought forth the highest one;
she is the queen in Mylapore rich in watered pools,
my mother, my young woman. (28)

Queen of the virtuous wives of martyrs
who were murdered, their bodies tormented unto death,
this woman lives in Mylapore, the elegant city;
those who are like her
invoke her beautifully and with desire
as the jewel box of the promise,
along with gathered crowd of heaven-dwellers—
and so too she is our bliss. (29)

Best among blissful women,
she is the queen among women
who holds in her lovely arms the blissful one
who once granted a thief the precious way,
she is the woman in Mylapore where swans grow angry
at conches in watered pools lovely with lotuses:
at the time of our death,
who but she can sweetly grant us
the golden feet as a crown for our heads? (30)

From the very beginning
the virgin was in the mind of our father, my Lord,
she is queen in Mylapore
where those who love her praise her always:
so meditate on the great, fragrant flowers
that are her lovely, radiant feet,
O heart,
and with the whip of her true grace
beat the demons,
finish off the confusion and turmoil that come with them. (31)

"You did not esteem the love of the virgin of Mylapore
exalted on the earth surrounded by ocean waves,
you did not praise her mighty feet—
so reign now in hell,
your minds in turmoil, poisoned!"
so her Son will declare

when he returns to this world
in its sorrowful Kali age. (32)

Lovely mother of the Lord
whose lotus hands juggled all three worlds,
O virgin in lovely, southern Mylapore,
golden, auspicious throne for our father and Lord:
I do not honor my father and mother,
so you must rule over me. (33)

O unique one,
virgin in Mylapore surrounded by fields of sugar cane,
by your grace
you gave your Son as an offering
for the sake of humans,
He was the one beyond,
the ocean of His father's mercy:
when will I gain that grace?
Settle my doubt on this,
O beautiful one,
my treasure. (34)

If we enter refuge thinking, "She helps even enemies,"
then with heavenly freedom
she will end our stubborn faults and keep us in service,
the beautiful one in lovely, southern Mylapore
where flowers blossom on ponds:
so make flower garlands for her feet,
O heart, gain that ambrosia. (35)

So that James could see it
on account of his devotion
she showed her rare form in a splendid, tall pillar,
free of the sin of the spouse of most famous Adam,
the unfading flower of Mylapore
where the cool moon rises over houses,
beyond even the clouds. (36)

He once destroyed the whole flourishing earth by a great flood,
that pure one, the unmoving one,
whom those above and kings too came to worship,
peering into the mountain cave, and
she gave birth to Him,
and now she dwells in lovely, southern Mylapore
surrounded by ponds where great flowers bloom,
Mary, the maiden. (37)

Great Mary, mother for young women,
she gives everything to those used to her name "Mary,"
she is the virgin cloaked in the lovely sun
who extinguishes darkness in lovely, southern Mylapore:
hands joined,
shout with praise,
praise her lotus feet that stand above the moon,
precious joy in your mind. (38)

That I might reach the highest place,
the inheritance of those who place firmly in their minds
the living one who has no name
and thus end this world and attain happiness—
please think graciously of me,
O star that shines as dawn breaks and birds chatter,
queen among women,
loveliness in visible form,
abiding within lovely, southern Mylapore,
the great and fortified city. (39)

She dwells in Mylapore,
home for devotees and
those with carriages, gardens, and jasmine,
she is the refuge for those who commit cruel sins
learned in their cultured books like boats that ply the sea of great,
fierce sin,
who lust after chaste, decorated women:
they don't know the sorrow caused by their mind's confusion,
they don't know her:
what can they be thinking? (40)

O mother, virgin in Mylapore where swans gather,
you remember fondly how
the child in the womb of that other graceful lady
looked with love on the creator in your womb and worshiped Him;
the greatness of such devotees can hardly be understood
even by the host of those above. (41)

The virgin in Mylapore where bees swarm and sing
has no peer anywhere,
as her garment she wears the sun,
its rays shining in all directions,
she has banished the darkness of this world and
now to our delight she protects us:
realize this, O heart, trust her. (42)

The boy who wore her charm fell into the sea and was about to die,
but to the delight of his pleading mother
the virgin who had trampled to death the demon snake
protected the child;
she is queen of Mylapore
where bees swarm and sing sweetly in gardens reaching the clouds,
she is the jewel of our eye. (43)

The virgin in lovely, southern Mylapore
is radiant, adorned by the stars,
dwelling yonder yet with a gracious eye;
I give to women and not to the poor,
I experience ruin here,
I'm confused in my words:
so come and rule me
without a moment's delay—
it is your duty, O mother. (44)

Without getting angry
she draws to herself and protects
those free of the deeds arising from the three enemies—
body, demons, and the world—
and now she lives among great Mylapore's golden temples
where devotees submit to dry and hard-to-fathom rules,
where fragrant gardens shade elephants dripping ichor:
she is the virgin, our ambrosia. (45)

On this earth surrounded by the sea,
You are your Son's dwelling place,
O beautiful one in great Mylapore,
but we whirl in delusion,
giving flawless, pleasing gold to women
whose dark hair shames the clouds—
so put an end to our excessive faults,
now and forever:
it's your nature. (46)

She dwells in Mylapore where white swans gather,
clear-sighted,
she rose into the sky
as heaven-dwellers strewed fresh, cool flowers;
she does not come near those
who do not think of that higher place;
lovely in her qualities,

clothed in the sun,
she rules those who glory in great, good penances. (47)

Though beyond all, she dwells in Mylapore;
worn on our necks, her scapular gives strength
and wards off the mighty beasts lurking in dark caves,
thunder, wind, fire, and the rest,
it gives grace to renunciants,
so that those who've fallen can see their errors,
O heart. (48)

Women with waists as slender as threads
and gait like that of swans,
cushioned thrones, property, greatness, wealth—
renouncing such things,
kings prosper by thinking upon what mother Mary gives them—
whereas you, O inner self,
keep on enjoying sweet foods, wealth, and abundance
in lovely cool Mylapore—
but why? (49)

Poets, you sing your melodious poems flawlessly and nicely,
to please low people who give you nothing, and so
you weary yourselves and grow bitter inside,
you trouble your bodies, weaken, wither, wander about:
instead, you who compose lovely rhythmic music,
praise our mother, the queen of Mylapore. (50)

In Mylapore where conches and lotuses abound in pools,
the virgin Mary holds in her arms
the rare, unique, pure one
who opened the blind man's eyes
by the blood and water flowing from His side,
just as she destroyed the snake
by her powerful, pure, holy, radiant feet—
when people reach them,
the world stands in awe. (51)

She cast into hell the demons feared in lovely, southern Mylapore
surrounded by pools and channels where swans flock:
when people know this and ponder it and
control the five senses and their objects,
at that very moment
they gain the mother's grace, the lovely good:
so submit, praise her, O heart. (52)

The beautiful one in Mylapore
where tall flowers bloom in ponds,
queen among women,
she comes with power and the enemy cringes:
so cherish the ten commandments given by her Son, and then
the deceptions of the lying demons' sacred texts will give way, and then
the rare fruit, the happy state, the wealth of asceticism,
will be yours. (53)

She brings those who've not turned from happiness
to a happiness excellent but hard to express,
full of grace and sweet to say,
and so the Lord with the six characteristics forever takes delight;
she is our mother
in walled Mylapore where parrots fly the streets,
so supplicate her Son,
O dark, flawed heart,
now, even in this ageing world. (54)

On earth
she is the weapon against the enemies of the Veda and
the conch loved by the true Lord of all
who makes flourish cool, fragrant, slender flowers,
she is the good mother in Mylapore
where mansions are lofty and rice grows tall in paddy fields,
she bore the Lord who spoke the seven words,
she establishes the two right paths. (55)

The virtue of her ascetic path destroys faults,
she is the mother of cool Mylapore,
she enclosed in her womb the Lord,
seed for the earth surrounded by the ocean waves—
so before you gasp your last breath
praise her,
reverence her feet. (56)

"The snake, the tiger, and so on, are the highest"—
that's how you worship,
O carnal sinners,
but instead venerate that lovely lady's lotus feet
that rest upon the waning moon
there in Mylapore where bees swarm and sing sweet melodies,
and so you will reach the fruit and gain what is true. (57)

She is the way to open heaven for those arriving there,
the mother of the yonder one
who makes dead, dry trees grow leaves, flowers, and fruits,
she is the queen of Mylapore amid pools, cows, bulls:
how can I see her
here on this earth
as I face her,
my vision flawed? (58)

O forest-dweller, O virgin,
in fear of that wicked king
you crossed the wilderness with the lovely child
and lived in Egypt;
with musical accompaniment you ascended
on a cloud of light
there in Mylapore
great with trees tall as mountain groves,
perfect, ordered, lovely:
be now my foundation. (59)

She is the throne of the infinite threefold reality, a fine garden, and
she once gave milk to the incomparable lovely child who was crying,
she is the virgin in good Mylapore:
we don't think clearly but still
she is gracious toward us,
she ends the dullness of our minds. (60)

"O mother,
the one who most miraculously stopped the sun during the battle
was your gift,
O wise lady abiding in Mylapore
crowded with immortals, ascetics, temple priests—
be our help in this world!"
O forest-dwelling lady,
the fallen immortals do not speak thus, but
now be pleased
to make them know the sweet good. (61)

The virgin in Mylapore
amid swans, paddy fields, houses,
where lampreys swim the ponds and bees sing in the gardens:
at age three this girl climbed all fifteen steps in the marvelous
temple,
and except for this mother

who could dispel our doubts
as we tread the rare path? (62)

She shows the radiant moon at her feet
and on her spotless bright body wears the sun,
she is queen among women, a radiant flame,
here in lovely Mylapore
surrounded by plentiful lush paddy
where ears of grain grow abundantly,
but still we stray after impure young women—
O mind, what kind of wisdom is this?
what can we be thinking? (63)

"She dwells in the fortified city of Mylapore
surrounded by dark shaded groves of sandalwood,
great Mary, virgin most exalted!"
Speak that way from desire,
and then Mary,
the virgin who carried God in her womb
will grant you her lovely bright lotus feet,
she will protect you like lovely heaven-dwellers. (64)

In my distressed mind
I desired decorated women and said so too,
I am confused, scorched, in dire need,
my mind whirls like a top:
O my queen,
dwelling in lovely Mylapore
where you hold God in your lovely arms as a fine baby,
be gracious, evaporate this ocean of my grief. (65)

"Peter is foremost in the scripture,"
said the ruler,
the Lord whom she bore as her Son
in the stable that night, before the great ascetic;
she is queen of Mylapore,
our mother, our life,
the place radiant with true, splendid realization
wider than an ocean. (66)

With her foot she defeated and destroyed the snake, and
on the bright mountain she bore as human
one of the highest, radiant Three, and
when the immortals, shepherds, and everyone there worshiped,
she rejoiced;
now she dwells in Mylapore,

so write her in the cave of your heart,
worship her. (67)

"Those who take up the sharp sword will die by it,"
said the Lord who submitted to her who raised Him;
she does not hide from the ascetic who worships in Mylapore
where vāḷai fish leap amid crocodiles all in a row,
indeed, she stands before him—and now
I've placed her inside me. (68)

O mother,
whose Son slept on a cushion of straw in the cattle shed,
curse the assembly of those who lust,
but take hold of me and place me in heaven;
now you are here in Mylapore,
famous everywhere, surrounded by walled pools, and
the sacred text is your way,
you are our help—
so let this lustful body suffer, destroy it. (69)

Queen among women,
she wears the sun as a garment,
she is in Mylapore
where three mounts rise as one into the sky and shine there,
where humans and the great ascetic devotees of this mother
of the Lord of all nine primary choirs
give praise: "Mary illumines the earth!" (70)

Lovely flowers filling their hands,
those in heaven and on earth come joyfully to praise her,
shouting in exultation they adorn her feet and abide there, and
with desire they voice worthy prayers before that ocean of
compassion;
O mind, think upon her way,
how she opens the portal of her most auspicious eyes
and rules Mylapore city. (71)

Excellent lady wearing the stars as your crown,
reigning in Mylapore where flowers bloom,
woman making everything new:
my friends have scolded me
and you too have troubled my mind,
you've angrily scolded me as a thief—
but now grace me
by the pleasure of your glance. (72)

The young woman—
there she is in Mylapore bounded by the waters,
where bees swarm in ya trees that touch the clouds,
where smelly ploughmen make fine beds and sleep in cool, muddy paddy fields;
where poets who've learned the pleasing arts and traditions sing,
knowing the lovely grace of her blue-lotus eyes
even when they never mention it. (73)

Bards sing,
"When they compare this to a pearl from inside a conch, they spoil it,"
and of strong, pleasing, rare, lovely coral they say, "Spit it out"—
in front of such comparison-makers
to what will you compare our mother Mary from luxuriant Nazareth town
who dwells now amid the valampuri shrubs and āram trees of Mylapore? (74)

"O sweet, prosperous, virtuous lady in Mylapore
where monkeys bathe and refresh themselves in cool ponds
amid radiant gardens, vilva, cantana, and kāyā trees,
O lovely mother of simple folk,
O tree of fine virtue,
O pure gold,
O great Mary—
be gracious, be never angry!"
Speak this way and live every day. (75)

"My body is food sweet to eat,
my blood the vine's juice," says the Lord
whom the pure, sweet one holds in her radiant arms:
O poisoned, puny heart,
if you meditate daily on her holy name,
here in Mylapore
what ever could distress you? (76)

In my confusion
I did not submit myself to the mind of our guides,
I did not think of approaching your Son
there in your lovely arms,
I did not realize I would burn head to foot in hell fires—
so rule me,
here in Mylapore surrounded by ocean waves
where arava trees sway in the wind,

O sweet word,
O Mary. (77)

Mary,
the divinity of great Mylapore where pools abound in sweet flowers,
whose word makes sweet, rich sugar seem lacking in sweetness;
O hesitant mind,
venerate her, forehead to the ground,
recite her holy mantra and meditate,
then sin will diminish and
your good merit will rise and grow. (78)

She is the rich one in Mylapore
full of wealth, alari trees, paddy fields,
the gentle one wearing the bright sun as a garment,
the bright one destroying by her strong weapons
the lying sacred texts some call true,
the lovely daughter of the eternal one
who does the threefold work:
O inner mind, understand all this. (79)

Lest the nauseating demon poison come near
the tender one has come near,
foremost, lovely as a picture,
splendid in Mylapore amid the rippling pools,
the pure one revealing the secret good one—
O my soul,
she crossed the heavens,
she rejoiced greatly in the assembly within. (80)

For protection
your Son gave Samson strength
by the fine and abundant hair on his head
so he could afflict the bodies of the Philistines and kill them
amid the forests, muddy rivers, and mountains;
O virgin, you bore this Son of the rich heavens,
so hard to comprehend,
and now you are here in Mylapore,
wearing your golden earrings. (81)

"The precinct with conches,"
"the resplendent virgin in the garden"—
leave aside those who do not praise her thus,
get to know her,
for to her belong the arts and the learning of rare righteousness,
she is comely, she does not fade like gold,

she protects us even in our folly:
cherish her here in Mylapore,
reach the wealth of heaven,
rejoice always. (82)

While there is time, do what is right—
wives, good children, beauty, abundant gold are of no help,
so get on the path,
in Mylapore where gardens flower and grow amid the waters and
gentle breezes,
morning and evening
join the crowd there,
with reverence submit to Mary whose words are so sweet. (83)

The virgin of Mylapore, adorned by the new moon's rays:
if you want to survive the anger of her lovely son who
killed the enemy,
divided the rising sea,
extinguished the demons' light—
then enter her temple
and your sinful faults will melt like frost in the sun. (84)

Before disease gets you
and your grieving wife falls upon you in tears,
think upon the splendid woman,
her breasts glowing with trembling garlands of cool, blossoming
flowers,
the heavenly woman of great Mylapore,
the spotless queen among women,
and thus
destroy the garland of sin,
purify your mind. (85)

If you say that something failed due to a bad omen,
then some planet might have wandered without God's marking it—
but no, it's really the mark of your sin;
rather then,
in the Mylapore congregation
mark the feet of the branch that flowers by His grace,
come near to her,
become radiant, praise, reverence,
adorn her feet with your head. (86)

Mother of the one who cursed that woman so she turned into salt,
excellent woman with doe-eyes,
lovely and immortal in body:

meet her in Mylapore amid incomparable flower gardens,
she is the entrance to the gold city,
desire her, recite her praises,
she is our honor,
she ever protects us
just by being near us. (87)

He rubbed on fish balm and gave light to the blind one, and
his mother, the excellent woman,
the garden bearing first fruits,
she dwells in Mylapore
where gardens flower everywhere,
where tuscan jasmine and scarlet ixora flourish:
so think on her in your heart,
give generous alms, flourish—
this will give you the pleasure of splendid liberation. (88)

You gave form to the formless one
who sought out the people He made,
O Mary,
you are the shining mirror of dharma,
our mother in Mylapore
where the liberated in heaven and humans down here,
all your devotees,
worship you and praise you by rāgas on the vīṇā,
where I delight and exult:
what can distress me? (89)

This queen among women
graciously gives comfort to those who languish,
so venerate her,
she is wisdom, the seed of true enlightenment
right here in Mylapore
surrounded by broad, watered ponds that flower and never go dry,
she is the holy mother of all,
helpmate to the ascetic,
her face is a lotus,
she is as lovely as a picture:
draw near to her. (90)

The mother of the one
whose golden feet were wiped with perfumed hair
dwells in radiant Mylapore
surrounded by watered flower gardens in rainy groves;
along the jeweled path

she places lovely, glorious flower crowns
on the radiant heads of those pure ones
who've renounced in their hearts,
and so they shall prosper. (91)

O mother of the Reality that takes form,
the ruler whose miracle protected the great ascetic in the whale's
stomach:
that a boy might sing of your radiance
and your face like the moon
you gave him life again when he was killed by the Jew;
with that finest love you've also protected me,
O blessed one in great Mylapore. (92)

After abandoning life for us on the holy panai tree of the cross,
the Lord who taught the true forest text rose again:
O mother,
turn my mind toward living His way,
for you are righteous and gracious,
wise speech for this old one in Mylapore,
patience itself,
a perfect, lovely picture. (93)

O lovely picture, O mother,
for the five thousand crying in hunger,
your son multiplied the five loaves His devout disciples gave;
we've gained the sure and never bitter way
that fits the sacred text he gave,
we've not loved the evil sacred text
those blind, base ones in Mylapore taught us. (94)

The excellent woman crowned with a circle of stars,
in lovely, southern Mylapore fragrant with lotuses and sandal,
the mother of the one whose lovely throne is the exalted tree,
she is the affliction of enemies:
if you reflect on her,
yours will be consciousness,
your inner darkness dispelled,
yours the good path. (95)

Powerful Mary, dwelling in Mylapore praised to the limit in all
directions:
beauty for liberation,
the warm milk that gives health,
lucid praise,
the shield restraining smell and the other senses,

holy renown,
the boundary mark ending deeds' evil debt,
a star, fragrance:
all of this, excellent and abundant. (96)

By a great lighting bolt
two youths were killed that day,
but the third honored you by your rosary,
O pure one,
and so by your glance you protected him,
O immaculate, flourishing grace,
spotless one wearing the sun as your radiant garment,
queen among women in Mylapore bounded by rivers,
our great love. (97)

A father killed his child because he was ugly,
then went to the king and spoke a false, unjust word,
accusing Thomas of killing him;
but he'd left his little son with the ascetic
who brought him back to life;
and now he shines right here in Mylapore
for all to see,
O peerless Mother. (98)

To end the fault that came by a woman,
she appeared as a flawed woman and so tricked sin,
great Mary of Mylapore amid lovely, ordered fields:
those who meditate on her true, radiant feet with love
and pray her auspicious prayer in fifty-three beads
rise to the heavenly place. (99)

I praise Mary, Joseph, and Jesus the heavenly Lord,
so protect me, rule me,
that there might be for me a share
in the good death of your pure, glorious Son,
O queen of lovely hue,
most perfect one
right here in Mylapore
where gardens bloom and aḷñcil trees touch the clouds,
O my bright gem! (100)

2

Śrī in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*

Divine Equality, Divine Pleasure; in Light of the Akathistos

We begin with the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* ("Treasury of the Jewels That Are Śrī's Qualities"), a Sanskrit-language hymn of sixty-one verses in praise of the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī (henceforth Śrī) along with Her eternal consort, Viṣṇu. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar (twelfth century), the author, was foremost among Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians in the generations immediately after the great, founding guide of Śrīvaiṣṇavism theology and practice, Rāmānuja (1017–1137).[1] Parāśara Bhaṭṭar was the son of Kurattāḻvār, a renowned scholar, and he studied under another respected scholar, Empār. Due to his erudition and poetic skill, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar became better known and more influential than either Kurattāḻvār or Empār. He is revered as an extraordinary teacher and apologist, expounder of the Tamil works of the saints known as the āḻvārs, and a theological leader helping to shape a systematic, integral Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition.[2] He is honored especially in the "southern" (*teṅ kalai*) school and community of Vaiṣṇavism centered in the primary temple city of Śrīraṅgam, near modern Tiruchi, but also in the "northern" (*vaṭa kalai*) school and tradition centered in the important temple city of Kanchipuram, not far from contemporary Chennai.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar has not been thought of as a partisan player in the disputes that would later divide the tradition into the two schools, and his views of the goddess Śrī seem to have been widely accepted. Accordingly, we can use rather freely the three commentaries available in print: the medieval *Vasurāśi* ("Mass of Wealth") of Viraraghavacarya; Tirumalai Nallan's 1954 *Suvarṇakuñcikā* ("The Golden Key"), and Annangaracarya's 1966 *Vidvatpraharṣinī*

("Delight for the Wise").[3] We can assume that both Nallan and Annangaracarya knew of the *Vasurāśi*, and that Nallan knew of Annangaracarya's work. Each commentary offers a careful reading of each one of the sixty-one verses, but none offers a radically divergent reading of the hymn. Rather, they confirm one another and provide nuances, filling out an increasingly clear picture of how the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* has been understood among Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Accordingly, throughout this chapter I have taken into account all three commentaries in my reading of the verses, but mention them by name only when an insight merits special mention.

From the start, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's praise of Śrī would have been received in a context where worship of a supreme God and worship of a supreme Goddess are both established practices, and no one was likely to think he was slighting Viṣṇu by his attention to Śrī in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*. His major works are a commentary on the *Viṣṇu Sahasranāma* ("The Thousand Names of Viṣṇu"), the *Aṣṭaślokī* ("Eight Verses" on the three holy mantras of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition), and the paired hymns honoring the Lord and Lady of Śrīraṅgam—the *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava* ("Praise of Śrīraṅgam's King") and the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*. Our hymn is therefore not meant to stand alone, since it would presumably have been studied by learned Śrīvaiṣṇavas also aware of his other writings and broader theological views. Taken as an integral text, however, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is a complete presentation of Śrī's identity and importance, and a thorough rationale for approaching Her with the same faith as that owed to Viṣṇu. In lieu of a comprehensive study of all Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's works, we can learn much by studying this particular hymn on its own.

The commentators' introductions to the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* make clear how highly they esteemed the hymn and its author. Viraraghavacarya says that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar was specially blessed by the Lord for this task; he was thoroughly versed in Rāmānuja's writings, and likewise blessed by that great teacher; he had studied the works of the Tamil poet saints known as the āḻvārs, and so drew on the full double heritage of Vaiṣṇavism, Tamil as well as Sanskrit; he used all this learning for a goal that is noble and sacred, desiring only "to praise Śrī who makes it possible to gain the Lord who is adept in the play of the arising, continuation, and dissolution of the entire world. He wishes to praise Her by meditating on the very great abundance of significant help She offers, and by the attending to the very great abundance of Her good qualities, mercy, tenderness, and other qualities."[4]

Within the literary and religious confines of the hymnic style, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* gives expression to Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's theology of Śrī and Her relationship to Viṣṇu. It emphasizes Her importance for those seeking safety and bliss, and offers a kind of intellectual map of the path to the inner sanctum of the Śrīraṅgam temple, where one surrenders to Her completely. Although the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is rich in experience and implications for practice, it is distinguished by its theological clarity. Throughout, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar nego-

tiates a fine balance between Śrīvaiṣṇava monotheism—Viṣṇu alone is the one God—and an equal and unambiguous confession of Śrī as the supreme Goddess. Each can and should be loved, without detriment to the other. By contrast, I read the *Saundarya Laharī* (in chapter 3) as highlighting particularly the path of intellectual and spiritual practice as one approaches the great goddess Devī, and the *Apirāmi Antāti* (in chapter 4) as putting into words the experience of a person whose life is entirely illumined by the lovely Apirāmi.

To understand the task facing Bhaṭṭar, a word of background regarding Śrī is in order, since She is a goddess with a complex and interesting history before the time of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar. From a scholarly perspective, it is easiest to say that Śrī was first known outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition.[5] Scholars have attempted to piece together the history of Her rise to prominence, a phenomenon only very incompletely marked by a few references to Her in the Veda, the epics, sectarian traditions, the tantric tradition of the Śrī Vidyā, as well as in Tamil traditions and according to other contextual evidence.[6] It seems that over time theologians and worshipers drew together the traditions of several deities—Śrī, Lakṣmī, and other female givers of material and spiritual well-being—and integrated them into a cult specifically related to Viṣṇu. Śrī was recognized as the single goddess who became prominent in Śrīvaiṣṇavism and of whom Parāśara Bhaṭṭar writes. Her "late" arrival into Śrīvaiṣṇava cult and theology posed intellectual and practical difficulties for Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who believed that there is one supreme reality, the ultimate Brahman who is none other than Viṣṇu, upon whom all sentient and nonsentient beings depend for their continuing existence. The cult and theology of Śrī had to be shown to be in harmony with the religion of Viṣṇu, and the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is dedicated to that demonstration.[7]

The seeming doubling of the single supreme divinity requires coherent explanation so as to avoid the prospect of two competing objects of worship. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar integrates the cult of Śrī with that of Viṣṇu in order to support and encourage devotion to Śrī without setting that cult in competition with worship of Viṣṇu and without reducing it to a subsidiary of His. He offers a high theology of Śrī: She is second to none, a divine person alongside Viṣṇu and "supreme as He is"; She is eternal and Viṣṇu is never without Her; Śrī's glories and virtues are innumerable; She freely consents to be subordinate to Viṣṇu, according to the gender expectations of medieval south India, for the sake of devotees; Her physical beauty is perfect in every detail; She has been, and will be, involved in the world; She is the mother of Her devotees; She accompanies Her husband Viṣṇu in the transcendent world, and She is accessible close by as well, here in the world below, at the great temple in Śrīraṅgam; the world is filled with Her glorious presence, and it is She who renders effective the divine descents of Viṣṇu and even His primordial creative activity.

As we shall see, Śrī and Viṣṇu are spiritual beings who are nonetheless also material, possessed of bodies and freely choosing to be male and female,

for the sake of their own distinctiveness and interrelatedness, for enjoyment, and in order to be comprehensible to human beings. The hymn does not merely apportion the divine reality into two parts—"god" and "goddess"—but rather explores the mutuality in enjoyment of a divine male and a divine female constantly taking deeper delight in one another.

In support of all this, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar draws on conventional gender distinctions to provide a rationale for distinction and unity in the divine reality, a transcendence that becomes manifest within the bounds of a given conventional (medieval, Hindu, south Indian) characterization of male and female. However exalted, Śrī remains an Indian woman imagined in a conservative social milieu. Yet Parāśara Bhaṭṭar reuses conventional representations in order to argue the case for Her primacy, undiminished by maximal claims about Viṣṇu.

The commentators' observations on the purpose of the hymn are worth noting. In his introduction, Tirumalai Nallan reminds readers of the glory of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition and the depth of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's erudition and exemplary devotion to Śrī. He then sums up Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's project theologically:

> First, he expounds the proper nature of the Lady as the one to whom everything belongs, the fullness of Her glory as extolled in the Veda, the definition of Her proper nature, and Her preeminence, which is so great as to give excellence even to the Lord. After explaining these things, he sheds light on aspects of Her proper nature. He then explains the qualities common to the divine proper form, and qualities distinctive [to Him and Her], and, in that connection, the qualities of Her body. After illumining these qualities of the proper self, and after experiencing Her divine auspicious form, he falls at Her holy feet, and in this way explains the glory of Her glance. He also describes the qualities of Her holy body, the pleasure arising from Her union [with Him], and the placement of their respective ornaments. In addition, he explains the instances of separation, Her holy form during times of descent and Her state when appearing from the Milk Ocean.[8]

Nallan takes this lofty description of Śrī as a basis for explaining Her unique role in human liberation. She is an object of exposition (*upeya*) but also the means (*upāya*) of liberation; to know about Her is also to become able to participate in the graces She offers. She represents the ideal of divine and human flourishing, and in Her particular way She makes it possible to obtain the ideal. To begin to know about Her is also to begin knowing Her as the true refuge, and so also to become gradually the beneficiary of Her gracious care. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*'s discourse about Śrī is closely connected to deeper encounter, since knowing Her opens into encounter with Her and thus into

the bliss gained by reaching Her and Viṣṇu. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is heartfelt praise that reveals the tradition's precious truth about Śrī, and it is also an invitation to encounter Her personally.

Annangaracarya emphasizes the desirability of participation in the hymn's realities by stressing how it occasions divine as well as human delight. Referring to verse 9 ("So hear this, [O Viṣṇu], and when You've heard it, let Your eyes become waves of joy and from an excess of delight let burst a hundred garments on Your shoulders"), he draws a comparison with the *Tiruvāymoḻi* of Śaṭakōpaṉ. This ninth-century Tamil devotional classic serves as the foundation for much of Śrīvaiṣṇava piety and practice. By tradition, Lord Viṣṇu Himself was pleased to hear the *Tiruvāymoḻi*; He took great pleasure in the verses of the hymns and when He experienced the taste of them, the Lord was said to react emotionally: "He became me Himself, and sang of Himself in all these sweet melodious verses, crying 'Ah!' " (*Tiruvāymoḻi* X.7.5).[9] So too, Viṣṇu as the Lord of Śrīraṅgam is captivated upon hearing praise of His beloved Śrī in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*: "Similarly, this great Lord makes Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's tongue sing the great glories of His Goddess. Hearing them until His ears are full, He is filled with delight."[10] This hymn of divine and human enjoyment uncovers the ultimately single pleasure shared by Śrī and Viṣṇu, and then by their devotees. Enjoyment flows: from the poet to Her and Him, to the deities and saints, to every listener and worshiper who takes seriously what is heard—and to contemporary readers, possibly even readers of translations.

That devotees might be actually encouraged to come and share that bliss, Nallan tells us, the hymn affirms Her role as mediator, and particularly Her patience with wrongdoers:

> Necessary to Her role as mediator is a patience not connatural to the Lord. As mediator, She is a mother. She follows the Lord closely. Her compassion is immeasurable. Hers is a freedom by which She makes happen what the Lord intends. She makes the Lord subordinate to Her, so that He does everything for Her sake. Hers is the enjoyment capable of binding Him. Her accessibility by appearing in Śrīraṅgam, the fullness of Her qualities in Her temple presence, Her flourishing: all of these are summed up in the mention of Her beauty. And none of it is separable from Her role as the mediator. [Parāśara Bhaṭṭar] meditates on Her continually, and thus gains Her as his own mediator as well.[11]

Śrī is thus the object of a double reading. The devotee studies the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* in order to learn about Śrī, but also to experience Her power in making possible human and divine flourishing and freedom. That the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is a hymn, to be used in worship, appropriately signals this gradual transition from secondary reflection to direct address and participation.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is, of course, rather modest about his own composition,

if we may take the sentiment of the hymn's narrator as his own. He judges his voice a frail one, and his poem an unworthy performance that can succeed only if Śrī blesses him:

> She is the flourishing of Her splendid companion
> whose arms branch in every direction,
> who is radiant every moment
> ever since She first embraced His slender trunk;
> Her eyes and breasts are like black bees on clustered flower blossoms:
> may She bestow on me
> the rich, wish-fulfilling creepers of Her glances. (3)

> Her brows accurately measure
> the unmoving and moving things fashioned by Mura's enemy,
> in Her footsteps on the chest of Mura's destroyer
> the Vedānta texts travel and ponder what is real, and
> the Lord's experiences of His universal form
> are swallowed up in the play that begins in His pleasure with Śrī:
> may She cover us with glances encompassed
> only by those who can comprehend the flood of ambrosia. (4)

His words are feeble,

> "Our desire to offer praise appropriate to Your glory,
> whatever, however great it may be, is out of bounds—
> so who are we to praise You?"
> Viriñci and others grasped this long ago,
> but even so, Goddess,
> we honor Your realm—
> unknown to the discourse of word and mind—
> and we strive to compose fragile words:
> so bless this praise, make it excellent. (5)

but they are still needed if people are to understand Śrī properly:

> Goddess, poets enjoy a speaker of praise
> who expounds the good qualities of the one to be praised, and now
> the burden of praising You rests directly on me,
> but although Your good qualities—
> patience, generosity, compassion, and the rest—
> have accepted my intolerable speech,
> O fortunate one,
> they still put forth their own fame. (6)

Insofar as a poet succeeds, it is due to Her glance, the symbol and quintessence of Her grace:

May Lakṣmī herself,
first queen of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
by Her sweet glances
complete my well-spoken verse
and so may
poets drink it up by their thirsty ears,
this garland woven of letters, elegant and deep. (7)

Untainted, unflawed, enclosed by many good qualities,
the well-being of heart pours into the mind
as if familiar, yet hidden,
drawn from a fine fraternity of words,
splendid in sound,
to which ears steadily listen—
You alone, O Śrī, have given me
so versatile a tongue,
this dazzling speech. (8)

As pointed out above, the hymn is about divine as well as human pleasure, and Parāśara Bhaṭṭar hopes that words honoring Her will also delight Her splendid spouse:[12]

O splendor of Śrī,
Lord reclining in Śrīraṅgam,
here we speak of Śrī,
the blessed lady in Your heart,
as loftier even than You:
so hear this,
and when You've heard it,
let Your eyes become waves of joy
and from an excess of delight
let burst a hundred garments on Your shoulders. (9)[13]

These self-conscious verses set the tone for what follows. From the poet's perspective, they serve to emphasize the mystery at stake in the hymn, a mystery so great that he can barely express it in words. He cannot express what he means, and the reader is accordingly reminded to read beyond the words, relying on grace to intuit what words do not say. Though nothing by themselves, in the end the words miraculously succeed in communicating the reality of Śrī and the value of surrendering to Her. In praise of Her grace, the hymn is the fruit of that grace; to succeed, it dwells on the concrete particularities of Her pleasing nature and Her pleasure as a Goddess, and draws readers into the realities from which the poet has composed his words of praise.

Reading the Theology of Śrī

In the following pages I trace the main lines of thought expressed in the hymn from beginning to end. There is a thematic and logical order to the hymn, but it also has the fluidity of a lyrical work; it flows spontaneously and yet, as the commentators detect, it is everywhere rich in theological import. There are of course no headings in the hymn, but its content supports divisions such as the following:

Surrender at the Śrīraṅgam temple 1–4
The foolishness of venturing to compose verses honoring Śrī 5–9
Testimonies in praise of Śrī's qualities 10–14
Śrī's ruling power 15–20
Śrī's heavenly domain 21–25
The sharing of Śrī's bounty 26–27
Śrī's relation to the Lord, the balancing of qualities 28–35
Śrī's lovely form 36–39
The power of Śrī's glance 40–41
Their mutual pleasure 42–47
Śrī's role in the avatāras 48–55
Śrī's glory at Śrīraṅgam 56–58
Concluding reflection on the author's lowliness and Śrī's greatness 59–61

At the hymn's beginning, the glory of Śrī with Viṣṇu in Śrīraṅgam is declared, and right from the start, reverence before Her is held up as the way to act:

> Before Śrī—
> whose approving glances are making efficacious
> Hari's intention to bring into order all sentient and insentient beings—
> I offer respectful salutation. (1)

The commentators appropriately take this verse as programmatic for all that follows. Meditating on Her divine glance, Viraraghavacarya suggests that in it Śrī expresses Her delight at Her husband's creative act, even as this delight makes creativity satisfying to Him. As the Upaniṣads indicate, the Lord is the cause of the world's arising, and so on, but Śrī's glance of pleasure is what gives it meaning. Nallan notes that Śrī, seemingly shy like a good wife, does not comment on Her spouse's work. Rather, She indicates Her pleasure by a glance, while the Lord, sharing the pleasure of that glance, acts entirely in hopes of receiving it again and again.

According to Annangaracarya, the point of verse 1 is not that She is witness

to all that the Lord does, for that will be explained in verse 4. Rather, Her gaze continually motivates His activity, and it is the same gaze by which She graciously accepts those who come to Her, the Lord included. In a striking sense, Viṣṇu is the exemplary recipient of Her favor, rather than Her master and patron. He models how the devotee is to feel and act, while Her gracious reciprocation fills out the picture of the ideal relationship of devotee and deity, Him and Her.

In verse 2, reverence for Śrī is linked to Her benign, quiet, and luminous presence in the temple, where the listener is invited to take refuge alongside other devotees:

> The play of Her briefest glance
> as it buds
> supports the seven worlds
> as they sprout
> due to Her splendor, under Her protection;
> She is the flame of an auspicious lamp in the Śrīraṅgam palace,
> queen of Śrīraṅgam's king,
> Śrī,
> and with Her we take refuge. (2)

The intense expectation of real transformation is evident also at the hymn's end, where Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and his ideal audience members affirm helplessness, weakness, and utter dependence upon Her:

> "Devoid of knowledge, right action, devotion, wealth,
> completely ignorant of intent, competence, ability, regret,
> O Goddess,
> I've committed insufferable sins against both of You,
> I act the fool, I am insufferable to You," (59)
>
> thus a hundred times over
> I've falsely echoed truth-speaking men of old,
> but my arms have not the strength to attain Your lotus feet:
> so according to the rule
> You alone must count as my refuge. (60)

The hymn is a rational inquiry that begins and culminates in the act of worship. Its entirety has to do with showing the propriety and value of surrender to Śrī at the Śrīraṅgam temple, and the compatibility of this devotion with continuing fidelity to the Lord of Śrīraṅgam. From these framing verses we know that neither surrender to Śrī nor faith in Her special presence at Śrīraṅgam is thought to be novel. She is treated as a well-known person, and Her cult as well established; faith and cult are both to be pondered by faithful practitioners seeking to understand their faith.

Scriptural Evidence for Śrī

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar devotes the major portion of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* to an exposition of Śrī's status as central and appropriate to the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. In proper theological fashion, he begins by assessing what can be learned from revelation (*śruti*), arguing that the exalted Śrī is really at the heart of scripture, the treasure hidden there:

> Goddess, the foremost men proclaim blessed scripture
> a treasure house of gems wherein
> Your true auspicious qualities lie massed, while
> fit to open its door
> are the foremost traditional texts and mythic narratives,
> along with epic and logic. (10)

Nallan notes that the secondary texts alluded to—traditional texts (*smṛti*), mythic narratives (*purāṇa*, combining myth, cosmology, royal narratives, and the deeds of the gods), epic (*itihāsa*), and logic (*nyāya*)—pave the way into the precinct where the treasure that is Śrī abides. Only those able to understand Śrī in these traditional texts and myth, where She is explicitly mentioned, will be able to decode Her presence in the more precious and deeper Vedic and Upaniṣadic revelation, where words include but conceal Her. Annangaracarya, when explaining why the hymn is called a "treasury" (*kośa*), points out that what is most precious is naturally kept hidden from casual public view. Treasures are both precious and hidden, and it is due to their superior value, not inferiority, that they are kept out of view. The Veda too contains and hides away many treasures, and ought not be thought to present its full and true meaning in an obvious fashion; that Śrī is not extensively discussed in the scriptures indicates not Her lack of importance but rather Her extraordinary preciousness.[14] Although a skeptic might see this rationale—the hidden is superior to the explicit—as an attempt to explain away Śrī's relative absence from the oldest scriptures, Annangaracarya speaks for the tradition in discovering here a secrecy superior to any merely evident, merely explicit meaning. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar does not accuse the older tradition of excluding due mention of Śrī; rather, he refuses to allow scripture's near silence on Śrī to be interpreted as indicative of Her secondary or belated importance. What has not been said before need not be a threat to the tradition.

Verses 11 and 12 turn to the question of audience by distinguishing divine and demonic destinies according to who has or lacks a proper understanding of the world—created by Viṣṇu to please Śrī—and, in the same way, who has or lacks the favor of Her glance. Being an insider or outsider to the community has both intellectual and spiritual dimensions:

Some say the Vedas are not authoritative,
some, the world has no ruler,
others, it has one,
some, this ruler has qualities,
others, he is bereft of qualities, and
still others, that being a good ruler is the mendicant's part—
the fools! they slap each another around,
but they're not worth a moment's notice,
O golden creeper in Śrīraṅgam's palace court. (11)

In their minds they see You,
eyes cleared by the balm of devotion,
hidden in Scripture's chief part, and
the really fortunate are those
who enjoy Your greatness as if a treasure,
O blessed one:
aren't they the ones "born to a divine fortune"? (12)

Nallan rightly reads these verses as alluding to *Bhagavad Gītā* 16.5, which is actually cited in part at the end of verse 12: "A divine fortune is thought to mean deliverance, demonic fortune enslavement; but do not grieve, O Pāṇḍava, for you are born to a divine fortune." Those failing to understand the tenets of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition are those not favored by Her glance; those interpreting scripture and tradition properly are those She has already favored. Verse 12 is also paradoxical: Śrī is hidden, She is dazzling, and love for Her is the balm clearing the eye and making it possible to see Her. Those who remain blind and refuse to look upon Her are the only true outsiders; yet She gives sight to the blind who wish to see.

The next two verses refer to specific scriptural texts, "the Hymn to the Male" and the late Vedic "Hymn to Śrī."[15] The former famously describes the primal cosmic male person from whom the world and even its social structures have emerged, and it is taken by Śrīvaiṣṇavas as proof of Viṣṇu's primacy and centrality. The latter expresses the primal importance of Śrī. Probably reversing standard views, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar sees the Hymn to Śrī as the more important:

"She is the ruler of this world:"
thus, Śrī, we know Your prosperity,
for the "Hymn to Śrī" makes it known,
branch by branch, with a skillful tongue;
the one proclaimed in the "Hymn to the Male"—
"some fellow rules the world"—
is remembered in its latter part as Your consort. (13)

Significantly, the revered Upaniṣads and the vastly popular *Rāmāyaṇa* speak of Śrī:

> It's not just that a single Upaniṣad
> lifting high its hands
> that has described You as controller,
> but in Your story the blessed *Rāmāyaṇa* breathes fully,
> and so too, our mother,
> each and every compiler of tradition
> considers the Vedas, along with the myths and epics,
> proof of Your greatness. (14)

In elucidating "in Your story the blessed *Rāmāyaṇa* breathes fully," Viraraghavacarya recalls a saying attributed to Vālmīki, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s author: "The entire *Rāmāyaṇa* is a great narrative about Sītā." Rāma and others at the fore of the action are involved in a narrative centered on Sītā, since She is kidnapped and the war is fought to win Her back; Her centrality is also taken as spiritually truth, since Her presence gives the epic its vitality. As Nallan puts it, the story of Rāma (Viṣṇu) constitutes the external meaning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while the story of Sītā (Śrī) constitutes its inner meaning and the driving force.

The commentators accordingly note that the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be read as illumining three attributes characteristic of Sītā's nature and as undergirding Her role as mediator: compassion, total dependence on Rāma, and determination to be available for no one but Rāma. Viraraghavacarya correlates these to the *Rāmāyaṇa* accounts of Sītā's three separations from Rāma: in Rāvaṇa's prison (where, though a captive, She protects Her captors), in Vālmīki's ashram (where She resides meekly when Rāma sends Her away due to gossip about Her fidelity during captivity), and in Her definitive return to Mother Earth (Her refuge after Rāma sends Her away a final time). Her behavior during these three separations illustrates, respectively, compassion toward enemies who have done nothing to earn forgiveness; continuing docility and dependence even in separation; the inability to live apart from the beloved.

This characterization establishes Sītā as an ideal wife. By the commentators' reading, these virtues are so important that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed in order to showcase Sītā as demonstrating how wives are to act in relation to husbands and how humans are to act in relation to God. Such models are used also to encourage readers spiritually, since Sītā's closeness to the Lord and His concern for Her safety guarantee that He will also be near to those remaining near to Her.

Divine Action and Divine Vision

Verses 15–18 testify to Her enormous impact on the world and on the destiny of individual persons. The fate of individuals, human and divine, is ordained according to Her glance:

> From the small village's headman
> to the lord creator of the cosmic expanse,
> whatever lordship there is, greater and greater in quality,
> whatever is chief, auspicious, luminous, weighty, virtuous, pure,
> fortunate—
> O beloved of Śrīraṅgam's ruler,
> all that comes from just five or six drops of Your glance. (15)

> One man,
> whose crest rings with the gems that shake on the pearl umbrella,
> sits on an elephant dripping musk and
> does not for a second notice even bowing world-protectors;
> another man, pitiful and without refuge, stands near him,
> flashing his row of teeth:
> all this, O beloved of Śrīraṅgam's ruler,
> is due to the opening and closing of Your eyes. (16)

> Both the immobile and the moving,
> Viriñci and the one with nothing,
> a tree and Bṛhaspati,
> the strong and the distressed,
> in every mode,
> whatever is or is not, high and low,
> all this depends
> on the Tāṇḍava dance of Your glance and its absence,
> O Lakṣmī. (18)[16]

Śrī does not perform actions as gods do, and even Her dance occurs only in the liveliness of Her eyes. It is not by action but by the light of Her attentive gaze that all beings realize themselves and work out their destinies. As mentioned earlier, even Viṣṇu's actions occur entirely for the goal of pleasing Her, a point reinforced in the next verse:

> At the indicated right moment,
> when the conscious and nonconscious were still indistinct,
> then, with the elements, ego, intelligence,
> five sense organs, inner sense, organs of activity,
> Your beloved made cosmic eggs and their coverings by the thousand,
> with the worlds Bhūḥ, Bhuvaḥ, and Svaḥ too,

O Goddess of Śrīraṅgam's Lord—
all of them intended for Your sport. (19)

Even ignorance and confused behavior are to be understood in relation to Viṣṇu's desire to please Her, as a peculiar analogy suggests:

Showing them objects beginning with sounds,
making them forget the glory of service
by His marvelous power composed of the constituents,
Viṣṇu, the first person, confused the multitude of selves,
as a man dressed like a prostitute
He vexed them
as if they were rogues:
O queen of Śrīraṅgam,
in that way He is suited to Your merry play. (20)[17]

Annangaracarya suggests an unusual scene from a village festival where, to amuse his wife, the headman dresses up like a prostitute. Then, to her even greater amusement, some of the more lustful members of the audience are attracted to him, oblivious of his real identity. Those already addicted to pleasure are prone to deception; they fail to see through the Lord's disguise, and so act like fools. No one is excepted; even those acting improperly and those outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava community are players in a realm where God is acting and interacting in order to please His Goddess, and their misbehavior smoothly fits into the divine plan.

That the glance is the key symbol of Śrī finely balances the conventional Indian notion of a woman's deference to her husband—he acts, she remains quiet—with the theological insistence that everything is done for Her sake and that She makes action fruitful. The point is nuanced in verses 21–25, as Parāśara Bhaṭṭar depicts the abode where Śrī and Viṣṇu reside in their pleasure and thus too emphasizes how all is focused on Her:

Far from mind, beyond darkness,
most amazing, not aged by time,
the goal compared to which the city of the gods is a dreary destination,
alone the source for intimate union,
hard to grasp by my verses,
Viṣṇu's highest place,
all for Your sake, O mother:
so the traditions say. (21)

In play—all this, moving or not;
in pleasure—the highest realm;
the fortunate ones—gods looking always to the work of service;
among those carried along by mercy alone—ourselves;

in dependence—the highest male;
all these,
O Goddess of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
are attendants on Your pulsating power. (22)

Conscious beings, in all their capacities, are oriented to Śrī, and thus participate in the world of Śrī and Viṣṇu, and in the mutual divine pleasure:

Where town guards are fearsome in command or tender in favor,
there is the goal for Your devotees,
the "Uncontested" and "Undefeated" town
set higher than the firmament,
filled with beings rich in abundant, wonderful enjoyments that flow like ambrosia:
O Lakṣmī in the house of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
such is the city people know as the capital for You both, (23)

and there, limitless as Your grace,
an opportunity for people to rest,
and there too, a crowd of attendants,
equipped with bows, discus, sword, and other such things,
urged on by a thirst for service, blissful,
affectionately resolved on protecting You—
though needlessly, since there is no danger—
O Śrī, blessed one;
they call this city
a singular ocean of bliss, a jeweled pavilion for the two of You. (24)

Verse 25 visualizes their relaxation on the primal serpent known as Endless Pleasure:

Spread wide lies "Endless Pleasure,"
with a garland rich in scent and to the touch, shining,
his jeweled hood a bright canopy:
upon him lies Your beloved
with a glorious host of innumerable qualities worthy of You,
aroused yet at peace,
ruling the universe under a single umbrella,
but then,
by pleasures rich in a wealth of tastes founded in Your mutual nonduality,
O Goddess, You tie the knot. (25)

The goddesses who surround Śrī and Viṣṇu are like fragrant flowers, making the divine realm all the more lovely:

Objects of pleasure for You both,
accessories,
like flowers and scents,
when perfected loving overflows,
they are trained to carry it away:
these thousand goddesses suited to You, plus also Nīlā and Mahī:
O Goddess,
by them You praise Your beloved with other breasts, arms and glances,
as if with Your own. (26)

Similarly, the many gods are eternal because of their unending desire to serve Śrī and Viṣṇu with hearts melting in love:

Mother, the Sādhya deities are
alike in quality, form, dress, activity, proper nature, pleasures,
all as if the same in age,
eternally without the taint of imperfection:
O Śrī,
they are ever intent on massaging Your feet
and those of Śrīraṅgam's Lord too;
urged on by hearts excited into states of love,
their pleasure lies in service. (27)

Phrases in each verse—"By them You praise Your beloved with other breasts, arms and glances, as if with Your own," and "O Śrī, they are ever intent on massaging Your feet and those of Śrīraṅgam's Lord too"—show that His pleasure is generated and enhanced through Hers; indeed, the pleasures of the cosmos and of all its animals, humans, and divine beings are Śrī's. Yet Her primacy never excludes Viṣṇu, since His deeds and primacy are reconstituted in light of Her unfailing attention to Him. The divine mutual bliss, rooted in Her and His gendered identities, also inspires service, which the gods exemplify (27) and fools forget (20). By an implication deeply rooted in Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's sense of his Śrīraṅgam community, Her glance also grounds the pleasure and happiness of the earthly community that serves Her.

Intimacy, Union, and Gender Differences

Verses 28–35, and perhaps 36–37, meditate on Śrī and Viṣṇu as they relax in the lovely pavilion described in verses 25–27. These rich verses form the theological core of the hymn. Here, more than anywhere else, we see the gender stereotypes of medieval south Indian culture accepted but put to a new theological purpose, as Parāśara Bhaṭṭar contemplates the shared qualities of Śrī

and Viṣṇu, distinguished as the divine female and divine male. Gender distinctions are purified and used to ground important theological distinctions. He emphasizes what the divine couple have in common, how Viṣṇu's seeming superiority depends on Her intention that He be supreme, how He is a husband so She can be a wife, and how their gender differences exist for their own enjoyment and then too for the spiritual benefit of those seeking salvation.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar assumes that human males have others depend on them and that males strive not to depend on anyone else. Verse 28 accordingly portrays Viṣṇu, the supreme male, as independent, although we are also told that this essential independence[18] paradoxically depends on Her:

> The Lord's proper nature and His independence,
> O moon-faced one,
> surely come from His intense union with You;
> and when the time comes for interpreting it,[19]
> O Mother, Śrī,
> it's the same with the glory of Your lover,
> even if Scripture does not mention You separately
> because You are inside him. (28)

That males are pictured as naturally independent whereas females are taken to be dependent is certainly open to criticism in any assessment of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and its use today. Yet in accepting the conventional view, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is also arguing that Viṣṇu's sovereign and exclusive independence is paradoxically dependent on His relation with Her, who permits Him to be independent. According to Nallan, it is by this peculiar relationship with Śrī that the Lord is designated as different from other beings, themselves dependent and independent to varying degrees and in varying relations.[20] We might put it this way: He is "the one who is totally independent" because He is also "the one on whom Śrī confers full independence." Because She gives unfailingly, His independence can be counted as of His essence. On this basis, another reason emerges at the verse's end as to why Viṣṇu is mentioned so often in scripture and She so rarely: "even if Scripture does not mention You separately because You are inside him." Being inside indicates privilege, to be sure, but by the same logic the exterior domain is still left to the encompassing person, the male. Śrī is neither an agent nor a public figure. Viṣṇu is nothing without Her, but Her necessary contribution is portrayed in a culturally settled fashion. She is the good wife, pictured as doing nothing open to casual public notice.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar then reminds us again (29) that Śrī has Her influence without acting, since making auspicious all that occurs is simply Her way of being. So too Brahman, the gods, and all lesser beings are what they are in proportion to the fullness of Her glance that they have received:

The one on whom a multitude of Your glances fell
became the supreme Brahman;
below him, those others on whom only two or three glances fell
became Śatamakha and the rest;
so, Śrī, in affirming both
tradition was actually praising You:
describing a city and its treasury glorifies the king. (30)

Accordingly, any mention of Brahman or deities in the Veda is implicitly homage to Her, their source.

He continues his meditation on the divine nature(s) by ruling out a related misunderstanding: the Lord is not diminished by His apparent dependence on Her, for She is not some person standing apart from Him:

Of Yourself You are the splendor of Viṣṇu,
and so he is the blessed Lord;
but even if His prosperity depends on You,
His glory is not dependent on someone else:
by its own brightness
a jewel is of greater value, not less, and
neither is its independence dulled,
nor is it possessed of qualities borrowed from some other. (31)

Since Śrī's dependence is not that of someone who is merely dependent on some other, independence and dependence are free choices made by Śrī and Viṣṇu, without detriment to the divine integrity. Like gender itself, dependence and independence serve to mark the differences by which the divine couple present themselves to those contemplating them. However, the array of secondary cultural expectations surrounding independence and dependence are not to be imported into one's understanding of Śrī and Viṣṇu, as if to tarnish His independence or mark Her as inferior.

Verses 32–35 affirm the commonality of Śrī and Viṣṇu while again reading their distinction in terms of culturally familiar female-male differences:

Creative power, strength, light, knowledge, and
lordliness, victory, fame, condescension, love, security,
plus fragrance, beauty, charm, radiance:
O Indirā,
these multitudes of qualities
are common to You and the Lord. (32)

Other qualities too You hold in common,
beginning with youthfulness,
O victory flag spreading auspiciousness in Śrīraṅgam!
Yours in Him, in You His, both ways

they are displayed as in a mirror,
exceedingly delightful. (33)

Verse 34 makes the conventional allocation very evident:

You share being young and other such qualities,
but we attribute to the Lord, as more appropriate to males,
qualities beginning with "not being ruled by others," "subduing
enemies," "being steadfast,"
while in You we place qualities distinctive to women
beginning with "tenderness," "being for the sake of one's husband,"
"mercy," "forbearance":
such differences in the self of You two
are there for enjoyment. (34)

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar concludes the section with a reflection on their union and perfect complementarity, emphasizing how the gender differences mentioned in verse 34 provide the substance for mutual divine enjoyment:

A cloud and its golden light,
vigorous young manhood and a girl's charming youthfulness,
the finest ornaments and other things suitable to youth and tenderness—
these are surely worn in different places,
divided between Hari and Yourself,
as You take Your pleasure in the center of the lotus,
taking delight there. (35)

Were there no divine gender, the bliss of the divine difference-in-unity as a material and spiritual reality would be bereft of a foundation, merely conceptual or the matter of an impoverished symbol.

At this point, it is worth reflecting briefly on how the commentators view gender in the divine. They seem primarily concerned to emphasize that whatever is attributed uniquely to one divine person not be taken as lacking to the other, and so they reaffirm both the difference and equality of Śrī and Viṣṇu. Characteristics functioning prominently in either Śrī or Viṣṇu must be understood in a manner appropriate to their perfection. Viṣṇu's reality must be explained in a way that affirms His independence, while Hers must be explained with deference to His recognized leading role. Such conditions diminish the glory of neither, at least from the Śrīvaiṣṇava viewpoint. The commentators also believe clearly that the divine gender difference is important, and worth the effort required to give it proper nuance. Viraraghavacarya explains that She and He are differentiated for the sake of meditation, so as to be imaginable to the devotee as male and female. As such, they enhance the pleasurable experience of those who meditate, and who presumably find enjoyment in visualizing the divinity as female as well as male.

Nallan asks why it matters that Śrī and Viṣṇu share most qualities while yet remaining distinct as male and female, and answers his own question by declaring, in direct address to Viṣṇu and Śrī, that gender differences increase both divine and human pleasure: "Instead of experiencing one taste in just one way, it is sweeter to experience various tastes mixed together. Similarly, You differentiate Yourselves as male and female in order to gain the sweet taste of mixing some qualities together with others and experiencing them that way. If there were no such extraordinary differentiation of qualities, differentiating Your proper forms would be pointless."[21] Being female or being male does not rule out any particular virtue, but some virtues are more naturally female or male, and so more pronounced in a woman or man.

If pushed, this line of reasoning leads to the extraordinary conclusion that Śrī and Viṣṇu are not constricted by the stated gender descriptives and limits. Rather, they choose to construct imaginable gender differences simply for their own enjoyment and for the sake of devotees' easier, more pleasing contemplation. Their difference as male and female is grounded in the necessity that they be able to relate to one another, on the basis of some difference. All this is relational; His independence is due entirely to Her, while Her dependence is solely a function of Her free choice to defer to Him.

In turn, the assumed gender difference affects even the further array of qualities they share. Śrī can be said to subdue enemies, but it is only by Her relation to Him that She does this; on Her own, She is dependent, always choosing not to act independently. Viṣṇu can be said to be rich in compassion, but as this is connected to His proper independence and concern for justice, His compassion will never be as evident as is Her compassion. At verse 34, Annangaracarya observes how Śrī and Viṣṇu distribute qualities:

> Previously [prior to verses 34–35], the qualities of the proper form of the divine self and the qualities of the auspicious divine form were described nonspecifically, as common to both of the divine couple. One can ask how there comes about an apprehension of difference by those who experience the various qualities separately as distinct. To settle this, there is this verse (34), in which youthfulness and other qualities are admitted as common to both, whereas for the sake of ease in apprehending difference on the part of those experiencing them, one stipulates certain qualities, unique to a male, as the Lord's, and certain others, unique to a female, as Hers.

Dependence and independence predict the allocation of other qualities, also proposed in light of cultural gender expectations:

> Independence and qualities such as being firm in warding off what is undesired are not appropriate to a woman, but are appropriate to a male, and so are stipulated as appropriate to the Lord. Then, quali-

> ties appropriate to the Lady are mentioned. . . . Tenderness is a quality rooted in both body and soul. It is not said that Her body is youthfully tender but rather that Her heart is youthfully tender. In life men toughen their hearts, but this is not appropriate for women. . . . One may meditate on mercy and forbearance as belonging to the Lord, but as it says, "I ever cast those calamitous people into demonic wombs," and "I will not tolerate . . ."[22] [So, mercy and forbearance] are not the qualities distinctive to him. That is why Bhaṭṭar mentions "qualities distinctive to women."

That divine attributes are male and female enables devotees to imagine Śrī and Viṣṇu distinctly and to relate to each appropriately. Gender distinctions are useful to the devotee, even as Śrī and Viṣṇu employ them to establish their own interrelationship; but to be useful, the distinctions must be substantive and not merely nominal.

Annangaracarya highlights how Śrī and Viṣṇu are like humans and yet dissimilar. They are forever at the brink of that attractive first fullness of boys and girls as they become men and women; in Śrī and Viṣṇu, this perfect attractiveness never wanes over time. Later on, we find this characterization of Śrī's appearance and its effect:

> Even now Your breasts have yet to reach unblemished perfection,
> nor have Your gestures,
> Your glance, brow, and smile,
> yet lost their naïve artlessness;
> the combination of childhood and young womanhood in Your every limb
> imparts a fragrance apt for plunging into the stream of pleasure,
> as You hold the hand of Your guide, Your lover. (43)

According to Nallan, it would be inappropriate to attribute identical states of youthfulness to both Śrī and Viṣṇu, since young men and young women are attractive in different ways. It is fitting that He is admired as a vigorous boy who has just blossomed into full manhood, while She is praised as possessed of a girl's charming youthfulness. The claim of eternal young womanhood and young manhood is daring, and surely uncomfortable to those who fear a crudely material notion of the divine persons. Yet taking gender and its physicality seriously requires some such claim even by the (seemingly) austere commentators; unless beauty has some material form, observations regarding it risk vacuity.

The difference between Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu is analogous to the difference between human women and human men. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar can uses the conventional view of male and female as a resource for explaining the difference between the supreme Śrī and the supreme Viṣṇu. In explaining all this, neither

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar nor his commentators step outside the frame of traditional views of Śrī and Viṣṇu, views that draw on gender conventions. They give no indication of discomfort with tradition and social conventions. Women are different from men, in bodily charm, manner of dress, virtues, ways of acting, and public roles. But in the end, Śrī is in no way inferior to Her spouse even if She plays the role of the good wife. His identity depends on Her, and it is in their differences that they and their devotees find pleasure.

Reprise on Her Gracious Glance and Her Presence

Perhaps to reemphasize the wider context—the community surrenders to Śrī at Śrīraṅgam and receives Her favorable glance there—verses 38–47 reprise the sacred power of Her feet and the graciousness of Her glance. Nothing is more effective than to surrender at Her feet while She gazes benignly:

> One hanging down, ready for my reverence,
> the other tucked underneath—Your lotus feet;
> Your seat—the middle of the lotus throne;
> gesturing fearlessness—Your lotus hand:
> O Mother,
> may we see You every moment,
> Your sweet, charming face,
> wide waves of compassion
> flooding from the corner of Your eyes. (38)

> May I bow low at Your feet,
> they are the high point of the fragrant tradition—
> like lotus leaves, O Indirā,
> by the rubbing of which,
> as if washed in cool water,
> the vaijayantī garland on Your beloved's chest
> gains freshness. (39)

Again, Her consort Viṣṇu is among Her devotees; He too drinks up Her beauty, so that His own beauty shines forth, as if reflecting Hers:

> Polluted with pride by a tiny particle of Your acceptance,
> the eyes of kings are hard to describe, and so too
> the Veda calls Your husband,
> "Lotus-eyed, eyes filled with Your splendor
> like bees intoxicated from drinking honey"—
> by what path then,
> O Mother, O manifest Lakṣmī,
> can we describe the glory of Your glance? (40)

This praise is practical because it reminds the listener to surrender at Her feet and seek Her saving glance.

Verse 41 can be taken as the act of surrender at the center of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, a sudden recognition of who She is and who He is, the consequent confession of total helplessness, and the exquisite pleasure of the surrender that is also a plunge into the divine couple's delight:

> Glances made of bliss,
> by which the Lord, drenched to the neck in love,
> becomes intoxicated and indolent:
> because of them
> people like us fill up with tender love that overflows its banks
> and we drown in compassion;
> O lotus,
> Brahmā and other such supporting figures are riveted
> on each and every drop of those glances
> that swell as their lordly power grows:
> by such glances protect me, for I have no other refuge. (41)

To surrender to Śrī is to be at once shelterless and immersed in the intense enjoyment of Her erotic play with Viṣṇu. Necessity and convention are trumped by pleasure and beauty. Viṣṇu's intense need for Śrī and Her total devotion to Him are enacted in Her determination to give Him pleasure eternally, and His inability ever to tire of it. This ocean of love overflows as the flood into which those loving them plunge.

After the act of surrender and several consequent verses that again confess the poet's inability to express what he has seen (42–44), there follow three more (45–47) focused on the intimacy of Śrī and Viṣṇu. First, there is another description of intense pleasure:

> Touching the tender place,
> transfixing streams of pleasure,
> Your slender form is disheveled
> by quivering acts of pleasure with Your lover
> like a garland of flowers enjoyed by bees adept in pleasure—
> O Goddess,
> forever You delight Your Mukunda. (45)

Nallan observes that this eroticism demonstrates Śrī's instinct as a wife, a sentiment expressed in most traditional terms: "It is significant here that the verse does not highlight Her own pleasure in their intercourse, but rather how She pleases Her husband. Holding the husband's pleasure as primary is the mark of the superior woman." She takes pleasure in His pleasure; Hers is real, but mediated by His. Annangaracarya finds a very erotic and still more spiritual meaning in the verse: "In order to make all guilty conscious beings Her own,

She conquers Her consort by various playful erotic sports; He is gladdened, mingles with Her and reciprocates. In this way the pair is deeply plunged into the flood of bliss." Viṣṇu and Śrī are intimate and in bliss, their relationship is fundamentally accessible to others: in their bliss everyone finds a place of refuge; in gendered divine pleasure, alienation and exclusion are overcome.

The next two verses seem incidental by comparison, as Parāśara Bhaṭṭar visualizes the ornaments belonging to one divine person that please the other, and thus once again asserts the visibility, concreteness, and specificity of gender-based symbolism:

> Golden waistband, pearl earrings, necklace,
> forehead ornament, garland of jewels, foot ornaments,
> and other such things:
> by such charming adornments,
> You give life to Janārdana, though
> by itself Your form is naturally lovely,
> bright, awake, shimmering,
> milk-and-sugar candy,
> a boon-bestowing creeper blossoming into flowers. (46)

> Though Your adornments are enjoyed in common,
> by Himself Your husband carries with pleasure
> the kauṣṭubha gem, the vaijayantī garland,
> the five weapons, and other such things,
> as if He wishes to spare You the burden of holding them,
> O jewel-cluster at home in Śrīraṅgam—
> and then
> He dives deep inside You. (47)

Viraraghavacarya suggests that verse 47 is really about the relative value of external and innate adornments. Viṣṇu wears the famed ornaments, but Śrī is simply Herself, ever more attractive, and so Viṣṇu is all the more passionate as He plunges deep inside Her. According to Nallan, She is overwhelmed by His love, a love depicted somewhat melodramatically in the notion that He suffers the burden of a full array of ornaments. As She melts in love, He dives into Her. By implication, the audience of devotees first watches, and then begins to participate. Certainly one can see here how the dynamics of erotic love invest the originally staid gender distinctions with religious power. No single divinity, only male or only female, or a divinity beyond gender, could similarly enact the love manifest in these verses. Gender specification, even at the risk of stereotype, is part of making the divine female and male into concrete, real beings.

Cooperation in the Work of Divine Descents

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar then returns to the topic of divine action, as if to remind the reader that the mutual immersion of Śrī and Viṣṇu is unselfish, outward looking, and comprehensive. Divine pleasure and divine action both manifest the same divine reciprocity, and both pleasure and action eventuate in the same benefit for all beings. Śrī empowers the work of Viṣṇu within a world created by the cooperation of His activity and Her pleased gaze. When the world is in trouble and a divine descent required, the same pattern applies:

> O Goddess,
> had You not descended
> in suitable forms each time the Lord was born
> in play,
> behaving like humans and animals,
> then His sport would have lacked its savor;
> O Mother,
> Your eyes, long, lovely, fine,
> are just like slightly opened lotus blossoms. (48)

When Viṣṇu churns the ocean to find the ambrosia sought by gods yearning for immortality, it is Śrī who emerges from the waters, Herself the elixir giving life and defeating death, again by Her glance:

> Wearing jingling bracelets and garlands
> Mura's enemy was stirring the milk ocean like churning curds,
> but to lessen His exhaustion,
> O blessed one,
> You appeared from the whirlpool of swirling ambrosia waves,
> You sprinkled Him
> with the nectar of Your smile and Your moonlight eyes. (49)

Verses 50–54 focus on Sītā, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, and exemplify how Śrī is present and influential during a divine descent. Key elements of the plot have to do with Sītā, Her kidnapping, Her liberation, Her final exile and return into the mother earth. Now Parāśara Bhaṭṭar claims that as Sītā, Śrī gives potency to Viṣṇu's descent, making fruitful all that Rāma famously does. She is intimate with Rāma and the range of ordinary people in His home, Ayodhyā, and among Her own family in Mithilā. She is addressed in verse 50 as "daughter of the Mithilā land," to remind the listener of Her birthplace and family:

> Mother, daughter of the Mithilā land,
> You once protected from the wind's son

those demonesses who were so very guilty toward You,
and thus Rāma's clan became more gentle;
He protected Kāka and Vibhīṣaṇa
only because they were able to cry, "Refuge!"
We ourselves are great, stubborn sinners, but
may Your causeless forbearance make us happy. (50)

The commentators stress that the family relation is key to the meaning of this divine descent, for Sītā and Rāma become members of a human community that extends even to contemporary devotees, and She is the central player in weaving that family together. Even if Viṣṇu's descent as Rāma makes Ayodhyā a place where such divine-human connections come alive, in fact it is by way of joining Sītā's extended family that one becomes related to Rāma.

In this same verse, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is also elaborating his thinking on male and female divinities. During various crises in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā repeatedly bestows uncaused, even unsolicited grace; mercy is marked as a quintessential female characteristic. That Rāma is righteous and compassionate is shown in the two scenes alluded to here. Rāma is napping with His head in Sītā's lap. The crow Kāka comes down and hurts Sītā by pecking at Her breast, but She remains motionless, lest She disturb Rāma's sleep. Nevertheless, She jumps to the crow's defense when Rāma is about to kill him, and She advises the crow to take refuge at Rāma's feet. He does, and so Rāma spares his life. In the other scene, Vibhīṣaṇa, brother of Rāvaṇa (the demon king who had kidnapped Sītā) is exiled by Rāvaṇa, who is annoyed at his insistent good advice. Vibhīṣaṇa seeks out Rāma and offers his services to Him. After a debate among His advisors, Rāma accepts Vibhīṣaṇa into His camp, although he is Rāvaṇa's brother, because Vibhīṣaṇa has met the conditions that make him worthy of acceptance: he is truly risking himself, has nowhere else to go, and trusts Rāma entirely.

Rāma is thus noble and compassionate, but Sītā excels Him. She needs no advice on the value of mercy, and sets no preconditions for Her forgiveness. Although the demonesses guarding Her do not take refuge with Her, Sītā still forgives and defends them. Her active and extensive mercy compares favorably with Rāma's, and She tempers His justice. Now too—in Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's time—Sītā keeps offering mercy and unconditional refuge even to those not even inclined to seek Her help.

In verse 52, Sītā's defense of the demonesses is implicitly mentioned again, this time in order to contrast the roles of a mother and a father. When Hanumān comes to liberate Her and is eager to kill the demonesses while he is there, Sītā scolds him vigorously, asking whether anyone is perfectly innocent:

Mother, Your beloved is like a father
yet sometimes His mind is disturbed

when He also becomes a font of well-being for totally flawed people;
but by Your skillful words—
"What's this? Who's faultless here?"—
You made Him forget,
You made us Your own children,
You are our mother. (52)

Sītā's maternal instinct offsets Rāma's less inclusive balancing of a father's compassion with unyielding justice. His desire for the good of His children is unwavering, but since justice is good for them, His paternal instinct shows itself occasionally in anger. He is conflicted: when shall I be stern and just, and when shall I be merciful, overlooking punishable errors? Her role, as a mother, is to assuage that paternal anger; Her questions to Hanumān—"What's this? Who's faultless here?"—make the whole situation appear different. Annangaracarya dramatizes the verse by recounting a conversation between Rāma and Sītā. Rāma is caught between conflicting determinations to be both merciful and just. Sītā argues with Him, finally defusing their argument by stating the rule He should follow: toward sinners refusing to surrender to you, be angry; toward those surrendering, be merciful. This rule is better than unrestrained justice, but it remains more cautious and deliberate than Sītā's instinctive and unconditional mercy.[23]

Verse 53 indicates how Sītā's compassion overflows into a vulnerability that comes to distinguish Rāma as well. Nallan and Annangaracarya both point to the shift from address to Her alone in the first part of the verse to both divine persons at its end, where He is included almost as an afterthought:

Eternal consort of the ruler,
Mother,
to protect us You came here,
but in this deaf world that fails to note Your glory,
You've suffered much rejection,
injuring Your tender jasmine feet on stones,
in separation, in forest exile:
both of You—
enough of this compassion!
enough of this unbridled independence! (53)

Her vulnerability is suddenly also His, and no longer a narrowly defined female trait. This is a commingling of divine attributes, as each is seen to possess attributes that had been primarily the other's. He becomes vulnerable, while Her choice regarding how to act is rooted in an independence that no longer (as in verse 28 above) characterizes only the male. Vulnerability belongs to both, and so too the free choice to be vulnerable.

The section concludes with an affirmation (echoing verse 49 and earlier

verses) that Viṣṇu's activity—generally, and in the descents—is always for Her sake. This is evident at the climax of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when Rāma kills the demon Rāvaṇa:

> The Lord reclined on the ocean,
> He churned and bound it too,
> He broke Hara's bow like a twig,
> O Mithilā's daughter,
> and after severing the demon's ten heads
> He made the body dance;
> what might there be
> that Your husband
> intent on pleasing You
> would not do for You? (54)

Even if at first reading Viṣṇu appears the more famous and central figure, there is no danger that His fame somehow devalues Her role, since His descents revolve around Her. He, like the devotee, is entirely focused on Her, does everything for Her, and so delights in joining the crowd of Her devotees. In keeping with conventional wisdom about women, She does not act on Her own; but nothing is done, even by God, apart from Her.

Surrender to Śrī at Śrīraṅgam, Again

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, worship of Śrī in the Śrīraṅgam temple is presupposed at the start of the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and reaffirmed at its end. Implicit is an observation and question: "We do worship Śrī along with Viṣṇu, the sole Lord of the universe; how is it that we do so?" Properly understood, worship of Her is not at odds with worship of the Lord of Śrīraṅgam; rather, it is the act that most pleases Him and energizes worship of Him too. At the hymn's end, the listener is invited to affirm the importance of worshiping Her and to surrender to Her. A final summation of Her qualities prepares for this surrender, as Viṣṇu's myriad brilliant forms pale by comparison with Śrī, who is the preferred destination and greater delight:

> Thousands of hands, feet, faces, eyes, and more, all this,
> the glories of His own universal form,
> suitable qualities, descents too—
> Your lover enjoys all these,
> O Lotus,
> but somewhere too
> He plunges deep
> into the mouth of the wild whirlpool,
> into You. (55)

The next verses remind the listener that all the preceding verses have to do with the same Śrī who is nearby, every day, at Śrīraṅgam. Her presence there is the apex of Her accessibility to those loving Her:

> You think highly of the milk ocean,
> Your birthplace,
> O Mother,
> You nourish the supreme heaven out of love for Your husband,
> but forgetting both ocean and highest place
> You delight all the more in Śrīraṅgam as Your home,
> judging it the right place
> for protecting people like me. (56)
>
> O Mother,
> generosity, compassion, tenderness toward those taking refuge, and more,
> all this in such abundance here,
> in Your Śrīraṅgam home;
> whatever else they mention,
> beginning with Your descent as Sītā,
> was only practice for this. (57)

Verse 58 reminds Śrī of Her endless generosity:

> After giving wealth, the imperishable place, and the supreme heaven
> to whoever endures the burden of joining their hands in reverence,
> still You feel ashamed and exclaim,
> "Nothing proper has been done for this one!"
> O Mother, tell me,
> what is this generosity? (58)

This reminder in turn prompts Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, modeling the devotee's ideal response, to restate his own surrender with characteristic humility and devotion:

> "Devoid of knowledge, right action, devotion, wealth,
> completely ignorant of intent, competence, ability, regret,
> O Goddess,
> I've committed insufferable sins against both of You,
> I act the fool, I am insufferable to You," (59)
>
> thus a hundred times over
> I've falsely echoed truth-speaking men of old,
> but my arms have not the strength to attain Your lotus feet:
> so according to the rule
> You alone must count as my refuge. (60)

Recognition of Her generosity combines with recognition of his helplessness to bring about his surrender, itself a realization of the truth of about Her and him.

The climactic verse 61 envisions a place—here, on earth—where surrender is simply the way of life, for all, as knowledge and practice converge. Śrī makes up for the deficiencies of every person who surrenders; She becomes their righteousness and draws them together in a perfect community:

> In Śrīraṅgam
> a hundred autumns
> amid good-hearted people,
> untroubled, sorrowless,
> most happy,
> enjoying rich prosperity in the savor of service,
> may we be dust on Your lotus feet,
> may You be our mother, our father,
> our entire righteousness,
> You alone,
> and so
> for no reason at all
> make us Your own
> in Your mercy. (61)

The goal then is to praise Her along with other devotees, here on earth, in the Śrīraṅgam temple. She has come here, and there is no need to yearn for an immediate transition to a heavenly abode. Devotees can remain in Śrīraṅgam, presumably where they were at verse 1, but now with a much fuller and more intense realization of why they are there. Even reaching Viṣṇu's feet is mediated through surrender to Her, for She—as female—is seen as ideally suited to act out of causeless mercy.

The commentators make nothing of the fact that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar addresses Her as both mother and father, but the point is clear: however highly one esteems Lord Viṣṇu, one can and must surrender fully to Her, allowing Her to fill the totality of one's life, as mother but also as father, as everything. At this point, too, ideal readers who have taken the hymn to heart also attain the right frame of mind and become similarly disposed toward surrender to Śrī who becomes their everything. The original situation in which the devotee was worshiping both Śrī and Viṣṇu is now revisited, reaffirmed with a sense that there are good reasons for this worship. Intellectual objections to the seemingly double worship of Śrī and Viṣṇu are removed, and even the devotee hearing the hymn can imagine herself or himself part of this community.

Praising Viṣṇu, Lord of Śrī: A Note on the *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava*

We have seen ample evidence of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's theology of Śrī, and his accommodation of this to a continuing commitment to Viṣṇu as supreme Lord. There is a supreme male, and there is a supreme female. It is important to recall how easily Parāśara Bhaṭṭar moves back and forth between praise of a God and praise of a Goddess, between Viṣṇu and Śrī. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this is not the only hymn composed by Parāśara Bhaṭṭar. The commentators read the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* with knowledge of his *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava*, a longer hymn that lavishly praises Viṣṇu as Lord of Śrīraṅgam, sole ruler of the universe, and possessed of all manner of perfection.[24] The simple fact that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar wrote both hymns reminds us that there is no question here of excluding or diminishing either the male or the female deity. The stark choice—God or Goddess?—that seems to face Christian theologians, for instance, does not preoccupy this Hindu theologian who worships a divine couple.

But balance does matter to Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, and as we have seen, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is laudatory toward Viṣṇu. So too, in the *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava* Parāśara Bhaṭṭar finds it important to praise Śrī. The following verses from the latter typify how his praise of Viṣṇu includes acknowledgment of Her power:

> Salutations to the Beloved of Śrīraṅgam's Lord,
> by the moves of whose eyebrows
> this world is comprised of the lowly and the exalted
> differentiated as rulers and ruled. (I.7)[25]

Viṣṇu Himself is the place of sure refuge, yet He also adorns Her by stretching out on the snake and resting His head in Her lap:

> An ornament resting on Śrī's breast,
> brilliance,
> ruler of Śrīraṅgam,
> like a wish-fulfilling jewel
> settled in the lap of Endless Pleasure:
> there I take refuge. (I.8)

Yet too, Śrī Lakṣmī and the Earth goddess adorn Him:

> May I come near to the Lord of Śrīraṅgam
> like a pool of full blossomed lotuses
> and also near to those at His right and left,
> Lakṣmī, like a royal swan delighting in play, and
> the flourishing Earth, like Her shadow.
> O eye,

drink up,
right here before You,
this pool where lotuses blossom,
famed as the foremost one of Raṅgam, and
see
Lakṣmī playing here like a royal swan,
and so too,
like Her reflection,
the Earth. (II.63–64)

Here too, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar asserts that Viṣṇu's activity in the world depends on the presence of Śrī, His Indirā:

Had Indirā not accompanied You
in form and deed appropriate to each birth,
then surely She would have left Your sportive activity insipid and unpleasing,
O ruler of Śrīraṅgam! (II.49)

In his *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava* commentary, Annangaracarya elaborates II.49 with a citation from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*: "If He takes a celestial form, She appears as divine; if a mortal, She becomes a mortal too, transforming Her own person agreeably to whatever character it pleases Viṣṇu assume" (I.9.143). His elucidation of the verse reinforces their mutuality and Her indispensability: "If She had not descended with Him, then Nārāyaṇa, a celibate, could not have accomplished deeds with force to them. . . . At the foundation of Her being the mediator is that She makes His protective power flourish; without union with Her, His descents would have had results contrary [to those intended]." Parāśara Bhaṭṭar refers similarly to Sītā's captivity in Laṅkā:

You agreed to become human, Lord, and so
You descended along with Your Lotus;
She made a game of hiding Herself in that grove and so
You bound the ocean and tore apart the demon enemy
who had been exalted in accord with the boons of Vidhi and the lord,[26]
You made him into leftovers for the monkey clan—
what's all this? (II.69)

Thus, even in a hymn where Viṣṇu is praised as the supreme deity, Śrī is also praised. Familiar insights recur. Like a good wife, Śrī defers to Viṣṇu, allowing Him the credit and the public notice; and again, this makes all the more precious and necessary Her role—hidden, like a treasure—in His achievements and glory. Here too, Śrī is the source of Viṣṇu's beauty, She is present in His activity and makes it fruitful, and His action on earth is energized by His desire

to please Her. When praising Him, one still thinks of Her; when praising Her, one knows that She is still the consort of Viṣṇu.

What We Learn from the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*

In the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar aims to affirm that Śrī is the one to whom one most appropriately and fruitfully surrenders. Being at Her feet and subject to Her gaze, at Śrīraṅgam, is life's goal. But this can be achieved without diminishing the already established glory of Viṣṇu. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar elucidates their divine harmony and compatibility so that devotees can surrender to Her all the more enthusiastically, perhaps even by reciting the words of the hymn itself. What is already the faith and practice of the community is reaffirmed and deepened. He takes for granted the standard representation of Śrī as a typical south Indian woman of good standing—beautiful, gentle, a tender and loving mother. Her female and maternal qualities intensify Her attractiveness to humans inclined to surrender. Viṣṇu is free while She is dependent. She is a typical wife, and as a wife, She defers to Her husband and concedes the public realm to Him. This is why She is barely spoken about in the more ancient scriptures. She accompanies Him in the descents to earth and gives them their vitality, but it is He who is praised for these descents, not She.

The price Parāśara Bhaṭṭar pays to afford Śrī Her place at the forefront of an integral Vaiṣṇava theology is to take gender seriously, both Hers and His, according to the conventions of his time. As a conventionally imagined woman, Śrī defers to Her husband, but She is not judged secondary, since Her deference is a free choice on her part, and since in their mutual delight Viṣṇu surrenders to Her as well. She lives up to cultural expectations in a spectacular fashion, freely choosing to play a conventional role while making possible Her consort's independence and sovereignty. In Her proper nature Śrī is equal to the Lord and is the source of His qualities, even His independence and supremacy. It is for the sake of devotees that She is distinguished from Him. Verses 28–37, perhaps the theological core of the hymn, explore the qualities of Śrī and Viṣṇu and their allocation; some are shared, while others are unique to either divine person. On the whole, the hymn accommodates basic imaginative capacities, as well as drawing upon standard expectations about male and female qualities. The point is to affirm the efficacy of this divine relationship without diminishing the dignity of either person. The outcome is also imagined and dramatized on a more experiential level as an infinity of divine bliss, signified in the intimate union of the divine female with the divine male.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar also suggests that it is helpful to sort out the divine reality into more active and scripturally explicit, and more serene and implicit, aspects. The explicit-implicit and active-serene distinctions are complementary

to other distinctions such as that between male and female, so that socially constructed gender characterizations and theological characterizations accentuate and give nuance to one another. To say that activity is male both focuses and relativizes action as a particular gender attribute. The serenity of the gaze is female, and this gender identification enables stillness to be understood as characteristic of the Goddess, and not merely a lack of activity. We thus find parallels: what is male, characteristically active, and explicit in the scriptures—alongside what is female, characteristically present, and implicit. Every claim about the divine has to be read along both lines, since in Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's view such differences are complementary and not in competition. We shall see in subsequent chapters how the authors of the *Saundarya Laharī* and *Apirāmi Antāti* likewise accept, transform, and put to good use fairly traditional expectations regarding women, their appearance, maternal functions, and so on.

The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* thus preserves conventional appearances but shifts foundations, in fashioning a theology wherein Śrī is no longer an independent goddess, yet not inferior to the supreme God. There is, of course, only a subtle difference between accepting cultural stereotypes and reinforcing them by hanging deeper religious values on them, and using them in order to make more radical points about the nature and identity of God. We need not insist that Parāśara Bhaṭṭar succeeds perfectly in his theological strategy; whatever his intent, stereotypes are reinforced. Even an imperfect theology can be plausible and worthy of consideration, and both its weaknesses and strengths may turn out to be different from those we have cultivated in our own classical and contemporary theologies.

For Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, conventional gender descriptives can be understood as informative regarding the nature of God/Goddess as persons of material and spiritual identity. This also makes the divine persons imaginable, for the sake of ease in meditation. Gender is rehabilitated and afforded a positive role in the construction of the highest transcendent identity. The insight with which we are left then is not the mere assertion that there are gender differences distinguishing gods and goddesses, but rather that even conventional gender distinctions can be of theological use in conceptualizing and imagining a divine reality in which divinity, body, and gender are real and integral to one another.

The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* was of course not written to contribute to a twenty-first-century theological discussion of gender. It is a hymn intended for a select group of worshipers concerned with certain intellectual issues and their implications for religious practice. The hymn presumes the ongoing life and worship of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, and Parāśara Bhaṭṭar does not present himself as arguing a novel position or campaigning to adjust Śrīvaiṣṇava piety and cult. But this is an intelligent hymn that offers a rationale for its convictions, and makes sense of those reasons. We need not preclude the possibility that it will also make sense to those outsiders who are willing to listen to reason and learn from intellectuals in other traditions.[27] Even contemporary readers

can begin to understand Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's project, imagine with increasing clarity the images of Śrī and Viṣṇu that he proposes, and see the subtle insights informing Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's hymn. Readers who already worship Viṣṇu and Śrī are reassured that it is most appropriate to worship them together, since reverence for the one enhances reverence for the other. Readers from monotheistic traditions are instructed on the plausibility of a male-female supreme divinity. There are no intellectual grounds for an easy dismissal of goddesses or gendered male and female deities, particularly since Parāśara Bhaṭṭar too is concerned with preserving the perfection and sovereignty of God, and argues accordingly, showing that gender duality in the divine is not a defect but a perfection.

As we learn to imagine and think about divinity in accord with (or even in reaction against) Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's exposition, and even if our own traditions have had no place for goddesses, new avenues for theological reflection become available. With fresh vitality we can ask which images of the divine—those to which we are already accustomed or those of the tradition of Śrī—are most theologically cogent today. As the intellectual obstacles are removed, in study and reflection and worship, we may find it quite reasonable and salutary to move from reading about Śrī in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* to speaking to Śrī, even by way of the hymn's verses. Worshiping Her may appear a good and holy practice, and one that is not barred on rational grounds. If so, then we will finally have a real choice whether or not to approach this Goddess whom we have begun to understand.

Not God, but God's Mother: Mary in the *Akathistos* Hymn

In chapter 1, I indicated that I do not attempt elaborately drawn comparisons between the Hindu tradition of goddesses and Christian reflection on gender and the divine. It is not possible to offer a fully developed counterpart to the study of the three Hindu hymns; rather, I propose only to look anew at the particular goddesses in light of the Christian theology and piety of Mary. It is now time for a first comparison with a Marian hymn, similar readings will occur in chapters 3 and 4.

For this first comparison, I have chosen the famous *Akathistos* hymn of the Orthodox Christian tradition.[28] This hymn, from about the sixth century, is still revered and used in liturgical worship.[29] In it we find, elegantly woven together, reflections on God, God's work in Jesus, astonishment at what God has done in Mary, and extended litanies in praise of Mary. It is an alphabetic hymn; each of its twenty-four verses begins with a letter of the Greek alphabet taken in sequence. The hymn alternates prose reflections on God's great deed, the Incarnation, with praise offered to Mary. Here is an overview of the whole:

1 Gabriel is sent to Mary; he salutes her
2–3 Mary addresses Gabriel, who praises her
4 God descends on Mary
5 Mary goes to Elizabeth, who praises her
6 Joseph is perplexed about whether to take Mary as his wife
7 Shepherds see Jesus on Mary's breast, and offer praise
8 The three Magi approach
9 The Magi worship Jesus in Mary's arms
10 The Magi return home
11 Egyptians liberated from darkness acclaim Mary
12 Simeon marvels as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus arrive in the temple
13 God's birth in a virgin womb; she is to be praised
14 God descends into a virgin womb, and the human race is exalted
15 The marvel of divine condescension
16 The marvel of divine accessibility
17 The speechlessness of the eloquent before Mary
18 God appears in the world
19 Mary as virgin, womb, shelter
20 The divine mercy
21 Mary, the luminous virgin
22 Divine redemption
23 Mary's childbearing
24 Mary as deliverer

The hymn combines a retelling of the story of the incarnation as God's work (verses 1–12) that stays close to the Matthaean and Lucan infancy narratives, with further reflection on the meaning of the Incarnation and the marvel of what has God has done in Mary (13–24). As it proceeds thematically, there is growing awe at how God dwells in the womb of Mary who accepted this divine mystery most intimately within herself. She is the recipient, the possessor of the holy womb, the virgin mother, and the salvific sacred place where God accomplishes the divine act in the one who is not-God.

Mary matters first of all due to her position within a narrative about Jesus. The miracle of divine descent is dependent upon and materially symbolized by locating the Son of God in Mary's womb:

> The holy one, seeing herself to be chaste, said boldly to Gabriel:
> "The paradox in your word appears to my soul very hard to accept,
> when you foretell that I will bear a child conceived without seed,
> and you then cry 'Alleluia!' " (2)

> The virgin sought to know the unknowable knowledge,
> and exclaimed to the minister,
> "How can a child be born from my holy womb? Tell me" . . . (3)

The power of the Most High
overshadowed the undefiled maid so that she conceived, and
turned her fruitless womb into a meadow sweet to all
who wish to reap salvation by singing "Alleluia!" (4)

With a womb that had received God
the virgin hastened to Elizabeth,
whose child straightaway understood her greetings,
hailed her, and stirring as if in song
cried out to the mother of God. . . . (5)

The Creator showed a new creation
when He appeared to us who were made by Him,
blossoming from an unsown womb and preserving it as it was, incorrupt,
so that we, seeing this wonder, might sing to her, crying out. . . . (13)

O mother of God, virgin,
You are a shelter for virgins and for all who fly to you,
for the maker of heaven and earth prepared you, spotless one,
by dwelling in your womb and teaching all to acclaim you. . . . (19)

We exalt your childbearing, we all hymn you as a living temple,
O mother of God,
for by dwelling in your womb, the Lord who holds all in His hands
made you holy, honored you, and taught all to cry out to you. . . . (23)[30]

Mary's role may be thought of as largely passive, but there is no rival image of active human men. A woman and virgin mother, Mary also serves as the ideal human recipient of divine grace. Chosen because she is a woman and thus able to be the mother, she is also the one in whom God's plan for humanity can be accomplished.

Against this traditional and conventional background, the most striking feature of the hymn is stylistic. The twenty-four verses weave back and forth as, on the one hand, they acknowledge God's saving power and, on the other, praise Mary in whom the paradox of divine condescension is most vividly evident. The first three verses exemplify the interweaving of a narrative of God's great deed with praise of Mary's paradoxical power:

An angel prince was sent from heaven to say "Hail!" to the mother of God,
and when he saw You, O Lord, take body by his word that had no body,
he was moved to ecstasy and stood there,
crying to her this greeting—
Hail, by you gladness will shine forth! Hail, by you the curse will end!
Hail, righting of the fallen Adam! Hail, ransom of Eve's tears!

Hail, height not to be scaled by human reasoning! Hail, depth
inscrutable even to angels' eyes!
Hail, you are the king's seat! Hail, you carry Him who carries all!
Hail, star making the sun to shine! Hail, womb of the divine taking of
flesh!
Hail, by you all creation is renewed! Hail, by you the creator became a
babe!
Hail, unwed bride! (1)

The holy one, seeing herself to be chaste, said boldly to Gabriel:
"The paradox in your word appears to my soul very hard to accept,
when you foretell that I will bear a child conceived without seed,
and you then cry 'Alleluia!' " (2)

The virgin sought to know the unknowable knowledge,
and exclaimed to the minister,
"How can a child be born from my holy womb? Tell me."
To her he responded in fear, crying out—
Hail, initiate into the unspeakable counsel! Hail, faith in what asks to
remain secret!
Hail, the beginning of Christ's wonders! Hail, crown of all tenets
regarding Him!
Hail, heavenly ladder by whom God came down! Hail, bridge carrying
the earthly into heaven!
Hail, marvel much spoken of by angels! Hail, wound much lamented by
demons!
Hail, you mysteriously give birth to the light! Hail, you explain the way
to none!
Hail, you surpass the learning of the wise! Hail, you enlighten the
minds of the faithful!
Hail, unwed bride! (3)

Mary, who is not God, is the one in whom salvation occurs, and she is the one praised most fervently. Simplified to the place necessary for God's action, suddenly then, in the litanies, she stands forth as the most significant person of all. The final litanies reaffirm her key role:

Hail, ray of the spiritual sun! Hail, radiance of the never-setting light!
Hail, lightning flash illumining souls! Hail, thunder-clap frightening
foes!
Hail, you make manifold splendor rise! Hail, you flood forth an
abundant, flowing river!
Hail, you depict the type for the healing pool! Hail, you take away the
stain of sin!

Hail, washing basin for cleaning the conscience! Hail, mixing bowl for mingling gladness!
Hail, odor of Christ's sweetness! Hail, life of the mystic festival!
Hail, unwed bride! (21)

Hail, tabernacle of God and the Word! Hail, holiness greater than the holy!
Hail, ark gilded by the Spirit! Hail, inexhaustible treasury of life!
Hail, precious diadem of pious kings! Hail, solemn boast of holy priests!
Hail, unshakable fortress of the Church! Hail, indestructible bulwark of the kingdom!
Hail, by you they raise up trophies! Hail, by you foes fall!
Hail, my body's healing! Hail, my soul's salvation!
Hail, unwed bride! (23)

It is in these litanies that we discover the vitality infusing the entire hymn.

The thirteenth invocation in each litany—"Hail, unwed bride"[31]—offers most succinctly the *Akathistos* hymn's understanding of Mary, an interpretation of her that prevailed in Christian piety and theology. Mary is the bride, yet not married; wed to God, she is the mother who remains a virgin. None of this can be mirrored directly in human understanding. Thus is marked the impossibility and miracle of her role as the woman who is not divine. Paradox is key: Mary is merely a human being, not God, and yet it is also quite appropriate, in liturgy and theology, to praise her in the highest terms, addressing to her superlatives that otherwise might seem peculiar to God. In practice, and even if properly worded in deference to Christological and theological claims, it is veneration of Mary that discloses the meaning of salvation and the way to share it. The hymn's rhetoric is also exceedingly spare: God is praised, the womb is noticed with marvel, and Mary appears in splendor, the paradoxical person in whom the fullness of the divine mysteries can be seen.

By the hymn's end, the community reciting the *Akathistos* has repeatedly heard and confessed the divine plan and Mary's role in it. Worshipers have acknowledged divine primacy, and by 160 acclamations acknowledged Mary as mysterious, graced, and paradoxical. Although Mary is finite and not-God, once God has acted in her, there is seemingly no end to what can be said about her or to her. In the litanies, the realities to which the hymn is devoted are dramatized in the language of praise. Their effect is to round out and amplify a rich, multidimensional image of Mary as the paradoxical woman who becomes all the more the center of attention when believers acclaim that God's mystery and power are centered in her. The interaction between her and God is spare, and due entirely to divine initiative. God acts, communicates, and descends; Mary receives. In light of this symbolization of the paradox, other dimensions of her identity—as mother, as woman, and as human, are clearly

secondary, even if the spare description of her still suggests her brilliance. She is theologically and mystically a woman, but of her physical nature only her womb is mentioned. Little is said to explore Mary's gender, just as nothing is said to emphasize the maleness of Jesus. He is male and His mother is female, but this distinction seems merely a necessary implication of the divine decision to be born in human form. By contrast, one might consider the vivid detail of the descriptions of goddesses, such as Śrī, who are beautiful in all their limbs, in every aspect, possessed of a beauty not reducible to any single organ.

Mary is not God, but she is the one nearest to God, nearly divine. God is addressed, and then she is addressed distinctly and passionately. We are not told of her speaking with God—her questioning in verses 2 and 3 is addressed to the angel—or with her son. What matters is simply how she forms that rare space where the paradox of incarnation occurs, where God becomes not-God. Mary is a visible representation of what God has done in the human situation, an icon powerful because of and not despite the fact that she is not-God. Her power lies in the improbability of God entering a human womb. As that iconic location, Mary's task is to be, to conceive and bear a son, and thus do what even God cannot do, give birth to God. As mother, she is paradoxical on every level, most crucially the unexpected place where the divine and human meet most acutely, amazingly. There is no question of equality or independence for Mary, or a mutual dependence of her and God. But once God's sovereignty is recognized, it too serves as a basis for the litanies and their freer, lyrical meditation on Mary's magnificence. Clearly subordinate to God, she becomes the primary focus of veneration and devotion. Second in theology, she is foremost in veneration. As a result, Mary is the only one about whom one has to be reminded, "She is not divine."

Both Śrī and Mary are venerated most highly, and in encountering them humans find access to the divine reality. In both the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and the *Akathistos* praise is directed primarily to the extraordinary woman—Śrī, Mary—in contexts where it is not theologically acceptable either to praise Her as the sole and sufficient savior or to categorize her merely another among nondivine beings. Mary is unlike Śrī because she is not divine, yet she is also singular like Śrī and unlike other women. In both hymns, enduring claims about God and God's activity must be kept in mind, while She is not to be disregarded because of undue attention to the male figure. The solution, in both cases, is to exalt Her in a way that is unlimited, but which also does not diminish claims already made about Him. In both hymns, cultural expectations about gender survive but are reused theologically, either to assert that there is a divine consort (Śrī) not inferior to God, or that there is a human female (Mary) in whom alone God can find a place in the world.

In the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, Śrī is Viṣṇu's beloved, identical with Him in every way except those by which they are differentiated as male and female, by marks including physique, ornaments, and also the conventional subordina-

tion of wife to husband. In the *Akathistos*, Mary is the place where God is made visible to human eyes and where the divine-human paradox actually occurs. For both Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and the author of the *Akathistos*, however, it is through the female—Śrī, Mary—that union with the divine is achieved. Both hymns insist on the love and surrender implied by this recognition. Worshiping the male deity is insufficient, and She/she must be venerated.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar does not allow Viṣṇu ontological or necessary precedence over Śrī. He is indeed precedent according to the roles they freely choose to play, for the sake of human comprehension and for the sake of their mutual pleasure. Śrī chooses to allow Him first place, but He, precisely like Her, depends on their relationship for the enjoyment that most perfectly distinguishes their divine state. Mary and her God are also praiseworthy, Him first and then her, but the point of the *Akathistos* lies in the lack of continuity or any predictable continuity; it is due to impossibility that Mary, in whom the impossible occurs, becomes the primary recipient of praise. The interrelationship of Viṣṇu and Śrī is an unending dance of equal partners, but God and Mary dance in another style. He always leads, she always follows, even if without her there would be no dance at all.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar is able to take a step that the author of the *Akathistos* could not take, even had he desired to do so. By a language akin to the balanced phrasing also developed in Christian Trinitarian theology, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar explains the relationship between Śrī and Her consort in a way that makes possible a divine interrelationship without also positing separable divine realities; Śrī and Viṣṇu remain distinct, yet most intimately related. The exaltation of Śrī is intentionally balanced by a commitment to the supremacy of Viṣṇu, and in that context Her female identity is employed as the preferred means of distinguishing Her divinity from His. By analogy, their gendered relationship stands in continuity with the gendered relationship of all other male and female beings in the world.

The *Akathistos* speaks of divine possibility in tension with human (and female) limitation; the Virgin Birth symbolizes an impossible cooperation of the divine and human. This is the tension wherein salvation is made apparent, where the divine and human meet. If Jesus embodies the mystery of divine action, Mary is where the paradox is most acutely felt. Accordingly, one has to keep reminding oneself that Jesus is divine and Mary not divine. The *Akathistos* reaffirms divine supremacy as an eternal reality that necessarily excludes any particular expectations about human being and doing; then, as if by surprise, it envisages Mary anew in light of her paradoxical status as the womb where God is born, the mother who is a virgin and bride, the human in whom God is to be found. By the hand of the skillful author of the *Akathistos*, Mary's status as not-God is pushed to its limit, so that the "not" becomes all the more urgent, and so actually intensifies the trajectory toward acknowledging her as divine—but then canceling it at the last minute.

What is affirmed of Śrī as divine and also as intimate partner of the divine male cannot be affirmed of Mary. A mother and not a spouse, Mary is almost Śrī, but in interesting ways not a goddess like Śrī. Whereas in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* the distinction is marked as male/divine and female/divine, in the *Akathistos* it is marked as "male/divine" and "female/non-divine."[32] The price of monotheism, here at least, is a displacement of language about the female—which might otherwise have been visualized as the divine female—and the resignification, or reduction, of the female to a single point of contact, the womb that receives the divine visitor. "Male" and "female" are prized and preserved in their difference, as are "divine" and "human."

The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* employs the divine feminine—as a conventional yet theologically extended way of gendered being—to mark all that humans can become, whereas the *Akathistos* meditates on what God is not ("female") and what humans are not ("divine"), but also on what Mary impossibly manages to be ("unwed bride," "virgin mother"). Both hymns acknowledge difference, yet to different effect. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* reads difference by a language of male-female complementarity that applies to deities and humans, whereas the *Akathistos* reads difference by a language of paradox: the divine and human come together, impossibly and paradoxically, in an event sacramentalized in the event of God "speaking/fathering" a child in Mary, the unique woman who is also, always, not-God. Pleasure is central to both hymns, but they differ by their respective paths of continuity and rupture. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*'s language of the superlative and superabundant is perhaps (despite different views of sensual pleasure) matched in the litany portions of the *Akathistos*, but only after the "not-God" dimension of Mary's existence is asserted.

Parāśara Bhaṭṭar could not have composed his hymn on the premise of a "God beyond gender"; it would have served no purpose, and would have had no content. In his theology, the divine male and divine female share a loving relationship with one another; unity is reaffirmed in the enjoyment of difference. In the *Akathistos* too, although God seems not to be materially a male person, the difference between divine and human is marked as respectively male and female, and these serve to make dramatically evident the paradox that is the power and energy vitalizing the hymn. He is divine and above all, while she is the object of all one's love.

The *Akathistos* thus makes all the more vivid how forceful the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is in affirming Śrī as divine even within the frame of conventional gender expectations. Like Mary, Śrī may be thought to begin as a traditional woman to whom culturally standard characteristics are attributed; but in Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's hand, and not in the hand of the *Akathistos* author, conventional feminine characteristics are reimagined to establish Her status as second to none. Śrī is superior; even Viṣṇu stands in the shadow of Her splendor. Gender, with all its cultural and religious fixity, is a useful tool for imagining the

divine. The concrete specificities of being female and being male open into divine realization, and gendered human beings find in the divine persons some inklings of what they are and will become.

As mentioned in chapter 1, I have chosen hymns, because they are informative texts that are also meant to be enacted, recited as praise, in direct address. They instruct but also invite readers to be participants. The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and *Akathistos* educate practitioners in how to worship and approach Her/her and share Her/her bliss. Intellectual obstacles are cleared away. Thereafter, Śrī and Mary are both honored intensely and completely. Direct conversation with either of them is encouraged as the proper response to the information the hymns also give us. The two hymns are prayers, not just theology about prayers. They model and make possible the worship for which they offer theoretical justification. In content and context, both support liturgical practice and in turn are invigorated by an awareness that they are always proclaimed in actual worship. Śrī can be praised fully, without detriment to devotion to Viṣṇu. Mary can be praised fully, without detriment to devotion to God and to Jesus. In both cases, God is glorified when She is the center of attention, for She is the delight of His heart.

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3

Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī*

From Bliss to Beauty; in Light of the Stabat Mater

In the preceding chapter, we examined a rich though relatively straightforward composition of praise theology, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*. Parāśara Bhaṭṭar had a clear project, dealt with pertinent questions, and offered persuasive solutions that, although subtle, yield meaning even to readers from outside his tradition, if they are willing to read carefully. We turn now to a second Hindu hymn, the *Saundarya Laharī*, one hundred verses in honor of the great goddess (henceforth Devī) who, though the consort of the god Śiva, is also Herself the supreme Reality whose domain encompasses even Him. I divide the *Saundarya Laharī* as follows:

1 Thesis
2–7 Introductory meditation and prayer
8–41 Devī in relation to the tantric tradition ("The Flood of Bliss")
42–91 Meditation on Her, head to toe ("The Flood of Beauty")
92–95 Climax
96–100 Concluding meditation

Throughout, I use *Saundarya Laharī* to refer to the whole work, and Flood of Bliss and Flood of Beauty to refer respectively to the two major sections, 8–41 and 42–91.

The *Saundarya Laharī* is attributed to the eighth-century Vedānta theologian Śaṅkara, and as such is one of many learned devotional compositions grouped under his authorship. By one tradition, Lord Śiva gave him the hymn; after the major portion of it was lost, Śaṅkara composed verses 42–100 again. By an-

other tradition, Śaṅkara found the first forty-one verses inscribed on a cave wall, and composed the remainder himself.[1] There is, however, little inclination among modern scholars to accept attribution to Śaṅkara; accordingly, there is also less urgency to take as firm the rather early eighth-century date. However, that one of the most important of all brahmanical teachers is named as its author shows the high esteem in which the hymn has been held—as does the fact that it has been the subject of numerous commentaries that serve to guide and enrich our reading.

In particular, I have benefited from the insights of Lakṣmīdhara (sixteenth century), author of the eponymous *Lakṣmīdharī*, and Kāmeśvara Sūri (henceforth Kāmeśvara), author of the *Aruṇāmodinī*, a commentary indebted to Laksmīdhara's.[2] Today, the *Saundarya Laharī* is widely known, published and translated frequently into numerous Indian languages and into English. It is readily available on tape and CD.

Some additional background will help us read the hymn more easily. The *Saundarya Laharī* is rooted in the context of south Indian tantra. "Tantra" refers to a web of Indian intellectual and ritual systems that are notoriously hard to define, but Andre Padoux has highlighted some distinctive features:

> The ideological aspect of the Tantric vision is the cosmos as permeated by power (or powers), a vision wherein energy (*śakti*) is both cosmic and human and where the microcosm and macrocosm correspond and interact. The ideology is important because it explains such Tantric features as the concept and practice of *kuṇḍaliṇī*, as well as a number of yogic and ritual practices for the use and control of that power. It also explains some aspects of the speculation and practices concerning the power of the word (*vāc*), especially the nature and power of mantras, and so forth. This ideology not only colors, but orientates and organizes, and gives meaning to all Tantric practices and observances.[3]

Padoux notes that in tantra there is a "use of means pertaining to this world for supramundane ends"; desire and pleasure are not renounced but maximized, albeit for ultimately spiritual purposes.[4] Included in this utilization of pleasure are transgressive practices. Sexual desire is often objectified in the attractiveness and potency of a young, unmarried woman, and particularly in the female sexual organ. Other characteristic features of tantra include an emphasis on ritual, great esteem for mantras and their use in meditation, the fashioning of ritual diagrams (*yantras*), and ritual hand gestures (*mudras*). Some of these features will recur in the pages to follow, others not. Although the *Saundarya Laharī* offers a public and "respectable" face for tantra, it is faithful to its tantric heritage by refusing to separate material, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual realities. We should assume that each of the hymn's claims is played out on all four levels.

As tantric, the *Saundarya Laharī* belongs to a tradition that prizes the material and bodily as well as the spiritual and intellectual, external beauty as well as virtue, desire as well as desire's abolition, the female as well as male. Even spiritual advancement is marked according to physical and psychological mastery, particularly with regard to the bodily centers of power known as cakras. These are usually presented as located in the human body, but in the *Saundarya Laharī* they also correspond to divine and human worlds that are themselves included within Devī. On a ritual level, the *Saundarya Laharī* is recognized as an early example of the cult of the goddess Śrī signified by the sacred diagram known as the *śrīcakra*, and as evoked by a sacred name (*mantra*) of sixteen syllables. I return to these below.[5]

Similarly, tantric worship transgresses dominant brahmanical moral norms, and is aimed at overcoming traditionally settled boundaries by strategies such as the "five m's": drinking wine (*madya*); eating meat (*maṃsa*), fish (*matsya*), and fermented grain (*mudrā*); and engaging in extramarital sex (*maithuna*).[6] The *Saundarya Laharī*, however, seems uninterested in any of the actual transgressions that might be thought to arise in its tantric context. No violations of dharma are described. Even the complete physical description of Devī in the latter part of the hymn is modest; it omits reference to Her sexual organ (*yoni*), as the description moves from Her navel to Her hips and knees. Her breasts are described in detail, but primarily as signs of Her maternal role.

The *Saundarya Laharī* also claims superiority to earlier tantric systems, as is clear in its recollection of how Śiva brought Devī's own, final tantra down to earth:

> After deceiving all the worlds by the sixty-four tantras
> dependent on the perfections attributed to them
> Paśupati rested,
> but due to his connection with You
> He once again brought down to earth Your tantra
> which of its own accord
> accomplishes all human goals at once. (31)

One might name sixty-four important tantric traditions—as do the commentators—but the point is primarily to assert the superiority of Her new path over the complex and difficult expert paths of older times. Indeed, the verse in context seems also to be saying that tantra itself is now accessory to an easier, more direct encounter with Her. On the whole, the *Saundarya Laharī* offers a public face for tantra, devotional and accessible to a wider audience. The hymn is in part an argument that approaching Devī as the beautiful goddess is not a lesser form of tantra but rather a path of purification and visualization that more easily and efficiently achieves all that tantra promises.

In support of the idea that the *Saundarya Laharī* invites a wider audience into encounter with Devī, we can note the importance given by commentators

to Śaṅkara's noble intentions in composing it as his gracious gift to a confused world. Honored as a prominent public intellectual and spiritual master, Śaṅkara composes the hymn out of compassion for people drowning in the ocean of confusion and suffering (*saṃsāra*). By his verses of praise, Śaṅkara seeks to illumine Devī's essence, until now hidden in scripture. He employs all his literary skill to illumine Her status as the means to all visible and invisible human goals. The *Saundarya Laharī* presents a goddess who is unfathomably deep and of whom knowledge is precious and rare; yet She is nonetheless luminously visible and available to those willing to gaze upon Her. Devī's names and manifest form do not express adequately who She is, yet attention to appearances opens the way, now, to the deeper realities one seeks. The hymn is itself a beneficent utterance; to hear it enables one to draw on the riches latent within it. Śaṅkara's extraordinary gift intends the widest possible audience: all those willing to look upon Her.[7]

Meeting Devī

Who is the Devī of the *Saundarya Laharī*? The word *devī* means simply "goddess," or "Goddess," but we can say a little more. By tradition (though not notably in the *Saundarya Laharī*), this Devī is usually invoked as Tripurā ("She of the three cities"), Tripurasundarī ("the lovely consort of [the Lord of] the three cities"), or Śrī Lalitā Tripurasundarī ("Lalitā, the lovely goddess of the three cities"), and so is linked to Śiva who (even in the *Saundarya Laharī*) is famously "the destroyer of the three demon cities." But Devī is clearly more than a consort, if "consort" indicates a dependent female being. She is the supreme Deity, Power itself, and the source of the power of other divinities. Such is the thesis stated in the first verse:

> Only joined with Power has the God power to rule,
> otherwise He cannot even quiver—and so
> You are worthy of adoration by Hari, Hara, Viriñci, and all the rest, and so
> how dare I
> who've done nothing meritorious
> reverence and praise You? (1)

Key points are stated succinctly here. That She is Power is announced. That Śiva rules is also affirmed, as is His utter dependence on Her for His ability. She is Power, She is Śiva's consort yet the one on whom He depends, She is transcendent and yet irresistibly approachable to devotees who wish to praise Her. Other deities ornament the scene by their ceaseless worship of Her. The author's admission that he cannot of himself successfully honor Her is both a conventional poetic claim (shared with Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar)

and an acute realization that mere words, such as his, can bear this great burden—communicating knowledge of Her—only by Her grace. The full theological ambition of the *Saundarya Laharī* lies implicit in this first verse, to be elaborated and employed in the verses to follow.

Devī has Her own mythology, of course; for instance, Douglas Brooks details how Lalitā destroys the demon Bhaṇḍa.[8] Such myths may be assumed to have been commonly known to readers of the *Saundarya Laharī*, but it is striking that the hymn itself is decidedly nonmythological and makes almost no mention of Devī destroying demons or, for the most part, of any other such deed; the few that are mentioned recall Her consort, Śiva. The hymn is a meditation in the present tense, not the recollection of a golden past. Most important, Her exercise of power is subtle, akin to Śrī's; She is not primarily a warrior goddess who asserts Herself to gain dominance. Rather, She is life, vitality, beauty, desire, and She conquers accordingly. It is by and in Her pleasure that other beings come to life and find their place in Her world. We shall see below how Her beauty actively creates dramatic scenes in which viewers are inspired by Her beauty to interact with Her and thus be drawn into the drama of Her world.

Everything is subordinate to Her and serves to glorify Her and confirm Her dominance.

> Brahmā gathered the tiniest speck of dust from Your lotus feet
> and fashioned a world lacking nothing;
> with much effort Indra carries the same on his thousand heads;
> Śiva pulverizes it and rubs it on like ash. (2)

She is transcendent and unimaginable, but She is also astonishingly nearby, a woman so beautiful that She satisfies those who behold Her:

> For the ignorant, You are the island-city of light illumining their inner darkness;
> for the dull-witted, honey streaming from the flower bouquet of consciousness;
> for the destitute, a double for the wish-fulfilling jewel;
> for those drowning in the ocean of births, the tusk of Mura's enemy, the boar lifting them up:
> that's how You are. (3)

The last of the opening verses expresses the plea that motivates the hymn:

> O great pride of the vanquisher of cities,
> with jingling girdle
> You stoop under breasts like the frontal globes of a young elephant,[9]
> You are slim of waist,
> Your face like the autumnal full moon,

in Your hands are bow, arrows, noose, and goad:
may You stand forth before us! (7)

This desire to see Her is satisfied in various ways throughout, though perhaps most adequately only at the climactic ninety-fifth verse, to which we shall return below.

As for Her names, Devī is evoked in three ways: conventionally, by Her secret mantra name, and in the intimacy of a simple "You." As we have already seen with reference to the three cities, some of Her names mark Her as the consort of Śiva.[10] She is the "daughter of the mountain Lord,"[11] Umā,[12] the consort of Śarva (Śiva),[13] "Śivā" (the female power belonging to Śiva),[14] and the grace of Śambhu (Śiva).[15] She is indeed marked by the fact of Her relationship to Śiva, but one cannot conclude from this naming that She is dependent on Him. She is occasionally addressed simply as Goddess,[16] and more frequently as Mother.[17]

In several places we find more complex elaborations of Her name. For instance, verse 49 compares Her name and Her face:

"Expansive," "auspicious," "open," "bright,"
"not to be countered in battle by blue lilies,"
"fountainhead of compassion's stream,"
"somehow sweet," "enjoying pleasure,"
"savior," "spread forth, victorious, over many cities":
such is Your glance, worthy of all such names—
may it be victorious! (49)

In verse 97 the poet acknowledges the wider range of Her names:

The knowers of the traditions call You
the goddess of letters, the wife of Druhiṇa,
Padmā, wife of Hari,
companion of Hara, daughter of the mountain,
but You are also that fourth state,
unsurpassed and hard-to-attain splendor,
the great Māyā, and so
You make everything unsteady,
O queen of highest Brahman. (97)

She both owns and transcends all the particular names by which a goddess might be addressed. Verses 32–33 list a series of words that in turn stand for the syllables of an unspoken, secret name; we shall return to these verses below.

Yet Devī is not concealed behind Her names, for She can always be addressed in the most familiar terms. In almost every verse of the *Saundarya Laharī*, She is also simply "You"; however immense Her cosmic presence, She is also nearby and able to be addressed face to face:

You are mind, You are air,
You are wind and the rider of wind,
You are water, You are earth,
beyond You as You evolve
there is nothing higher,
there is only You, and
when You transform Yourself by every form,
then You take the form of consciousness and bliss
as a way of being,
O Śiva's youthful one! (35)

Those who love Her and contemplate Her beauty can and should come close to Her. Learning to purify and deconstruct conventional words and images of Devī, and to make Her mantra name a vehicle of approach to Her are, to be sure, important strategies—but in the end they still culminate in the simple devotional achievement of direct address.

Devī is supreme but never alone; She dwells among a multitude of divine beings. The hymn contains stylized references to Viṣṇu (Hari), Brahmā (Viriñci), Indra, Hara (a lesser form of Śiva), and other lesser deities. Instead of being Her enemies or competitors, they serve and praise Her. Devī provides the foundation for the gods and their worship, as they duly admit:

Benevolent one,
may the worship rendered
to the three gods born of Your three qualities
be as worship rendered to Your feet, for
near the jeweled seat on which Your feet rest,
they ever stand,
folded hands adorning their crowns. (25)

When she closes her eyes, they return to their primal, dormant state; even Śiva forgets Himself, playing within the world She dissolves (verse 26).[18]

The gods' derivative and supportive role is settled in verses 1–41, but in the Flood of Beauty (42–91) they still play a part in the drama of beauty and pleasure surrounding Devī. They exist due to Her glance,

O beloved of the Lord,
when Your eye shadow smears in play
Your triad of eyes displays three colors distinctly,
and so recreates the three gods—
Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra—
after they'd ceased;
Your eyes shine like the triad of qualities,
sattva, rajas, and tamas. (53)

They find their own pleasure even in consuming the crumbs that fall from Her mouth:

> Mother,
> after Viśākha, Indra, and Upendra return
> from vanquishing the Daityas in battle
> and remove their headgear and armor,
> they turn away from Caṇḍa's share—
> what's discarded by the three cities' destroyer—
> and instead devour finely powdered camphor
> bright as the moon and
> mixed with betel nut right from Your mouth. (65)

At the hymn's end, again along with Śiva, the gods still serve Her pleasure:

> Your servants, Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra, and Íśvara, form Your couch,
> and Śiva seems a bedsheet of transparent hue,
> as if the subtle erotic sentiment were embodied,
> red in desire, reflecting Your radiance,
> and milking the pleasure in Your eyes. (92)

That deities exist is thus acknowledged, but they are thoroughly subordinate to Her, supporting actors in the drama of Her glory. Otherwise, they have little to do, and they are marked simply by their relationship to Her.

Goddesses are mentioned less often than gods, but they occupy a serene and harmonious position in Devī's world. They seem rather like sisters, neither competitors nor subordinates. They are simply present, and need no advancement or liberation. While the gods attempt to compete with Her, the goddesses are content to enhance Devī's own beauty and generosity:

> Your beauty is such,
> O daughter of the snow-capped mountain,
> that the foremost poets, Viriñci and others,
> strain to match it in some way,
> and so too immortal maidens
> eager to see You
> travel by their minds
> along the path to union with that mountain Lord
> so hard to attain just by asceticism. (12)

Whoever else praises Her joins the company of these goddesses:

> Mother,
> whoever contemplates You along with the stimulators of words—
> the goddess Vaśinī and others resplendent like slivers of moonstone—
> becomes the author of great poems. . . . (17)

The well-spoken verses of Sarasvatī grasp the benefits of the ambrosia flood,
O Śarva's consort, and as
You continuously drink them from the hollows of Your ears,
Your head shakes, astonished at the praiseworthy words, and
all Your ear ornaments seem to echo each word by sounding notes. (60)

yet we can imagine the lotus like them in a small way
when its petals turn red
from the lac dye on the soles of Lakṣmī's playful feet. (71)

Whoever is devoted to You will
play with Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī . . . (99)

Even in the journey's end, at the door of Her chamber, the celestial women are already there, before the males arrive:

You are the inner precinct of the cities' foe and so
the goal of worshiping Your feet is not easily accomplished
by those with feeble senses, and so
the immortals, Śatamakha in front, achieve unequaled perfection—
with Aṇimā and the others who stand at Your doorway. (95)[19]

Devī's relation to Her consort Śiva is expressed in various ways. We have already seen how Her names often reflect Her relationship with Him, and so too verse 1, cited above, asserts clearly His need for Her: "Only joined with Power has the God power to rule, otherwise He cannot even quiver." Throughout, Śiva's power is real but dependent on Hers. We saw in chapter 2 that Viṣṇu is inspired by Śrī's glance to create the world, the glance that keeps the world vital and fruitful,[20] and here too the divine work is brought to life by Her:

The Arranger brings forth the world,
Hari sustains it,
Rudra destroys it,
the Lord conceals it and makes his own form disappear as well,
but Śiva, ever first, graces all this,
obeying the command of Your subtly knit, fresh, gentle brows. (24)

Still, in some verses She is "His" or "half of Him." For example, verse 23 nicely catches the complexity of their relationship, as She conforms to His reality, yet transforms Him:

After You've taken the left side of Śiva's body,
Your mind is still unsatisfied,
so I wonder if You've taken the other half too:
after all,

Your form appears entirely red,
it bends a bit on account of Your breasts
Your eyes are three,
Your forehead marked with the crescent moon. (23)

Verse 34 introduces another line of thought by stating that She is His body, but also His self. The verse resists any effort to subordinate Her to Him, for in the end they are mutually dependent, unable to live apart, ever intent on the perfect bliss they alone offer one another:

You are the body of Śambhu,
the sun and the moon are Your breasts,
my lady,
and I contemplate Your self as the flawless ninefold self;
this relation—that which depends, that on which all depends—
is common to You both,
both of You intent on the highest bliss
in one simple taste. (34)

Yet at another level Śiva (as a specific god) and His consort (a seemingly reduced form of Devī) are included within Her larger reality, and they are located within the centers of spiritual and material energy known as cakras (to which we shall return below):

In Your viśuddhi cakra I worship Śiva
as clear as pure crystal,
the source of air itself, and
I also worship the goddess,
in act the same as Śiva. . . . (37)

I glorify the dissolver who, quieted,
sets fire in Your svādhiṣṭhāna cakra,
O Mother,
and also His great Samayā goddess. . . . (39)

In Your mūlādhāra cakra
I contemplate the one whose self is ninefold,
who dances wildly in all nine moods
with his Samayā goddess also intent on the dance. . . . (41)

It is not entirely clear how the cakras are related to Devī: are they located in Her body? Are they like the elements of the cosmos, encompassed by Her larger reality? Nor is it clear how this divine Samayā consort is related to Devī: it may be Devī Herself, in a form by which She pairs with Śiva. Perhaps we can say simply that there is an intentional two-level portrayal of Devī here, left

unsmoothed: She is the consort, She and Śiva stand together; and She is the all-encompassing divine reality of which even Śiva—and even Herself in a smaller, imaginable form—are only parts.

Finally, a number of verses in the Flood of Beauty reflect the dramatic interplay and mutual pleasure shared by Śiva and Devī. He tenderly touches Her, and in the mirror of Her face He sees Himself:

> Touched affectionately by the snowy mountain Lord with His fingertips,
> lifted once and again by the mountain Lord eager for a kiss,
> fit to be handled fondly by Śambhu,
> incomparable,
> there, at the base of Your mirror face,
> is Your chin:
> but how can we speak of it,
> O daughter of the mountain? (67)

Verse 85 offers a good example of the dramatized relationship of Śiva and Devī. They seem to have been fond of kicking one other during their frequent lovers' quarrels, but now the kaṅkeli tree, unmoving and fruitless, yearns for the touch of Her feet, so as to become fruitful again:

> We speak words of reverence for Your feet,
> so very lovely to the eyes,
> bright, freshly painted with lac dye—
> even the Lord of beasts grows extremely jealous
> of the kaṅkeli tree
> in Your pleasure garden
> that so ardently desires Your kick. (85)

Śiva, the Lord of beasts, is jealous and wants to be like the kaṅkeli tree, for the kick will enhance His own sexual well-being. These are a husband and wife, but there is no sedate predictability to their relationship.

The end of the hymn reinforces the image of their inseparability. His role and identity are woven in with Hers, and He is as it were a covering for Her:

> Your servants, Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra, and Īśvara, form Your couch,
> and Śiva seems a bedsheet of transparent hue. . . . (92)

Certainly there is no possibility here of imagining Her either subordinate to Him or apart from Him. That She is a wife is simply something that can be said about Her, just as other women are placed in relation to their husbands. But here too, as in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, while She and He play out their socially prescribed roles, their pleasure is mutual, and ultimately it is She who is the source and finality of His desire and desirability, right there amid the community of gods, goddesses, and humans who love them both.

A Flood of Bliss

In the preceding pages I have sketched some basic theological ideas about Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī*. But the hymn most pointedly charts a course by which appropriate ideas clear the path to encounter with Devī. The hymn's core challenge is to show that the most efficacious means to union with Devī occurs through the ostensibly conventional practice of viewing Her loveliness, in a seeing that has been revalorized so as to lead to the desired goal. It is no accident that by tradition "Saundarya Laharī"—"Flood of Beauty"—is the name of the whole as well as of the hymn's second part.

Ordinary conceptions of woman and standard devotional approaches to the divine are reused toward a more nuanced and effective appropriation of the divine reality that discovers in gendered divine reality—male as well as female, to be sure, but primarily female—the superior way to enter the world of divine bliss. By this process, the beautiful divine woman is deconstructed (in verses 8–41) and reduced to Her subtle essence, so that thereafter (in verses 42–91) the conventional appearance of a lovely woman can be reenvisioned for the sake of seeing this captivating divine woman. Let us now examine each section more closely.

In the Flood of Bliss, Devī is addressed and worshiped in the context of traditional goddess worship in its tantric form, and yet also glorified as transcending that context. Here is an approximate outline:

Meditating on Her tantric identity, in the cakras and the śrīcakra (8–14)
The power of meditating on Her (15–22)
Devī, the gods, and Śiva (23–31)
Setting up the contemplation (32–34)
The contemplation of Devī, in the cakras (34–41)

To understand the Flood of Bliss, I highlight three transformations promoted in verses 8–41: the spiritual-material (from the ordinary body to the cakras), the auditory (from ordinary names to Her holy mantra name), and the visual (from Her visible appearance to the śrīcakra).[21] These transformations elaborate the initial insight of verse 1, that Devī is not primarily a mythically imagined expender of power as is Her spouse but, instead, Power itself.

First, the *Saundarya Laharī* situates Devī with respect to the cakras, material/spiritual centers of power usually located within the (human) body at specific locations: anus (*mūlādhāra*), genitals (*svādhiṣṭhāna*), navel (*maṇipura*), heart (*anāhata*), throat (*viśuddhi*), and brow (*ājñā*). Above them, and as the point toward which the goddess energy rises (as *kuṇḍaliṇī*, though this word is never used), is an opening at the top of the head, the thousand-petaled lotus (*sahasrāra*). It is not clear whether the cakras are established as points in Devī's own body or simply established as centers of energy within Her domain. But

in the *Saundarya Laharī* this traditional knowledge is evoked in order to assert Devī's superiority over it, as the elements and cakras are correlated as Her domain and as a path for ascent and descent:

> You pierce earth in the mūlādhāra cakra,
> water in the maṇipura cakra,
> fire in the svādhiṣṭhāna cakra,
> wind in the anāhata cakra and the ether above that, and
> mind in the cakra between the brows;
> thus You pierce the entire kula path
> and then take pleasure with Your Lord
> in the secrecy of the thousand-petaled lotus. (9)

> You sprinkle the evolved world
> with a stream of nectar flowing from beneath Your feet, and
> from the resplendent abundance of the nectar moon
> You descend to Your own place,
> making Yourself a serpent of three and a half coils,
> and there You sleep again
> in the cave deep within the foundation. (10)

Verse 14 indicates Her superiority to the divine and natural elements, here called "rays," and presumably to the cakras, whence come the rays, for above all it is Her feet that one seeks:

> Fifty-six rays in earth,
> fifty-two in water,
> sixty-two in fire,
> fifty-four in air,
> seventy-two in the heavens,
> sixty-four in the mind:
> but far above them all
> are Your lotus feet. (14)

She is beyond the lotuses taken to symbolize the cakras, and in the end salvation depends simply on viewing Her:

> Slender as a streak of lightning,
> the essence of sun, moon, and fire;
> though seated in the great forest of lotuses,
> You stand high above even the six lotuses;
> if great souls in whose minds impurity and illusion are obliterated
> look upon You,
> they gain a flood of highest delight. (21)[22]

In verses 36–41, the cakras are described as belonging to Her, and in Her cakras Śiva and the lesser consort reside. We shall examine those verses below, but

for now we can conclude simply that the cakra physiology is accepted, yet subordinated to Her.

A second strategy aimed at locating Devī with respect to the tantric tradition and purifying conventional appearances comes by way of attention to the refined geometrical form of the śrīcakra diagram. This is a set of nine intersecting triangles, five pointing up (representing Śiva) and four pointing down (and representing Devī), all centered on a single central point. As a complex web of intersecting triangles with bordering margins and a central single point, the śrīcakra symbolizes the interplay of Śiva and Śakti in their cosmic play, and the overall integral harmony of their relationship. Vision is preserved, but distilled to its bare essence. It is standard to state that the *Saundarya Laharī* is rooted in the śrīcakra tradition, but it is referred to rarely and only implicitly in its verses. Verse 11 seems to be describing it as Her abode:

> Nine base components—
> four Śrī-triangles and five Śiva-triangles—
> around a distinct center point,
> plus lotuses of eight and sixteen petals, three rings and three bordering lines:
> thus, altogether
> Your angle-home evolves as forty-three. (11)

Verse 19 seems to suggest a meditation on Her face as imaged in the śrīcakra:

> Whoever makes Your face the center point
> and places under that Your breasts,
> and under that a half of Hara,
> whoever meditates that way on Your desire portion,
> O Hara's queen,
> at once he fascinates women, easily, but very soon
> he also whirls about even the goddess of the three worlds
> who has sun and moon as her breasts. (19)

That the śrīcakra appears so minimally in the *Saundarya Laharī* does not mean that the author dismissed its importance or saw it as unnecessary for practitioners of the *Saundarya Laharī*. We can assume that it is very important. But in the hymn it too ranks below Devī, who is not identical with it and who, as we shall see in the head-to-toe meditation of the Flood of Beauty, can be visualized more efficaciously in another way. Contemplating the cakras is a purification most plausibly taken as propaedeutic to the grand visualization that occupies the hymn's latter portion, the Flood of Beauty. Reference to the śrīcakra seems again to have a practical goal, as the convention of a pretty face is put aside and we are invited to see Her anew, this time in the geometric purity and exactness of the diagram's angles and triangles. Only when one has

learned to see beyond the conventional pretty face—into the pure, distilled beauty of Her śrīcakra face, can one look upon Her beauty and be transformed by it.[23]

We have already seen how the multitude of Her names is secondary with respect to simple, direct invocation, but we can take as a third rarification of the conventional rarification of Devī the reduction of Her name to pure sound, as mantra, in verses 32 and 33:

> "Śiva," "power," "desire," "earth," and
> "sun," "cool-rayed moon," "memory," "swan," "Śakra," and
> "the higher," "death," and "Hari":
> when these syllables are joined together,
> and finished with the triple heart syllable,
> they become the parts of Your name,
> O Mother. (32)

These "syllables" are constituted by meaningful words,[24] but the commentators read these words as stylized markers for traditionally stipulated syllables, to each set of which hrīṃ (the heart syllable) is added: (first line): ka [Śiva] + e [power] + ī [desire] + la [earth] + hrīṃ (= 5), and (second line:) ha [sun] + sa [cool-rayed moon] + ka [memory] + ha [swan] + la [Śakra] + hrīṃ (= 6) and (third line:) sa [the higher] + ka [death] + la [Hari] + hrīṃ (= 4), for a total of fifteen syllables.

Verse 33 extends this divine name by prefixing to it a syllable composed of memory (*smara*), womb (*yoni*), flourishing (*lakṣmī*):

> Eternal one,
> some people with a taste for great, uninterrupted pleasure
> place the triad "memory," "womb," and "flourishing"
> before Your mantra and worship You
> with rosaries strung with jewels that grant desires,
> they offer hundreds of oblations,
> streams of butter from the cow Surabhi
> flowing onto the fire of Śiva. (33)

"Memory," "womb," and "flourishing" suggest desire (*smara*), the sexual female (*yoni*), and flourishing (*lakṣmī*), but in the tantric calculus they too signify syllables, respectively; klīṃ + hrīṃ + śrīṃ. Together, these are taken to compose a single syllable, śrīṃ, which is then placed before the fifteen syllables enunciated in verse 32 in order to supply the needed sixteenth syllable of Her secret name. Thus we have the full sixteen syllables: (from verse 33) klīṃ—hrīṃ—śrīṃ together equally śrīṃ (= 1), plus (from verse 32) ka + e + ī + la + hrīṃ (= 5), plus ha + sa + ka + ha + la + hrīṃ (= 6), plus sa + ka + la + hrīṃ (= 4).

This complex signification and enumeration introduces Her mantra name into the hymn, so as to include it in the repertoire of strategies praising Devī. Most important, this abstraction from ordinary conventional names and their meanings makes it possible to invoke Her most purely, in sheer, simple sound, just as the śrīcakra offers a distilled version of Her visible appearance, and the cakras the essence of Her material form. We may also note that verses 32–33 are near the end of the Flood of Bliss and just prior to its concluding contemplation of Śiva and His consort within Her cakras; in this context, the utterance of Her pure mantra-name may be preparatory for that contemplation, which is itself a preparation for the Flood of Beauty.

This distillation of materiality (by the cakras), visible form (by the śrīcakra), and of sound and name (by the mantra) cumulatively effects a simplification and purification of the conventional representation of Devī as a beautiful female, physically attractive and possessed of familiar names. Materiality, visibility, and name are preserved, but stripped of stereotypical and overly familiar expectations about what She is like.

In the final verses of the Flood of Bliss, once the image of Devī is free from grosser identifications, She can be contemplated in the cakras as centers of physical, psychological, and material power—that comprehend even the fullness of Śiva. First, Devī and Śiva are again affirmed as inseparable, for She is both His body and His self, all one in a single experience:

> You are the body of Śambhu,
> the sun and the moon are Your breasts,
> my lady,
> and I contemplate Your self as the flawless ninefold self;
> this relation—that which depends, that on which all depends—
> is common to You both,
> both of You intent on the highest bliss
> in one simple taste. (34)

We saw in chapter 2 how Parāśara Bhaṭṭar portrayed Śrī as freely choosing to be dependent, while allowing Viṣṇu to be independent; here the conventional roles are adjusted a step further, as both members of the divine couple are dependent and depended upon. Even more intensely, She is His body and self, and together they forever experience a single, essential taste of bliss. In the next verse, She is identical with the very elements symbolized by Her cakras:

> You are mind, You are air,
> You are wind and the rider of wind,
> You are water, You are earth,
> beyond You as You evolve
> there is nothing higher,
> there is only You, and

when You transform Yourself by every form,
then You take the form of consciousness and bliss
as a way of being,
O Śiva's youthful one! (35)

Though She is Śiva's youthful bride, all this is Hers; it is She.

In verses 36–41, the cakras are proposed as a setting for different kinds of interactions between Śiva and (in most of these verses) female counterparts who are less than Devī and included in Her. Here the Flood of Bliss turns to worship, as Śiva is worshiped, full and complete and with a (lesser) consort, within Her cakras. Strikingly, they are meditated on more or less in descending order—ājñā (brow, 36), viśuddhi (throat, 37), heart (heart, 38), svādhiṣṭhāna (genitals, 39), maṇipura (navel, 40), and mūlādhāra (anus, 41). This downward course previews the head-to-toe contemplation to be practiced in the Flood of Beauty. It suffices to cite the first and last:

I salute the supreme Śambhu who abides in Your ājñā cakra,
shining with the radiance of countless suns and moons,
at His side embraced by Highest Consciousness;
by worshiping Him with devotion,
we begin to live in that region of light
beyond the reach of sun and moon and fire too,
the place no sorrow can touch. (36)

In Your mūlādhāra cakra
I contemplate the one whose self is ninefold,
who dances wildly in all nine moods
with his Samayā goddess also intent on the dance;
these two indicate with compassion the way to ascend,
they rule,
and so this world recognizes its mother and father. (41)

Śiva and His consort—here, seemingly not identical with Devī—are now included within the reality of Devī as the all-encompassing "You" to whom the hymn is addressed. She is the divine person beyond male and female, and She includes both Śiva and His consort in Her divine fullness. Devī encompasses the cakras with their accompanying mythology and imagery, and encompasses even the god and goddess as imagined within the world of the cakras. The point of this particular tantric discourse is to demythologize the idea of Devī, and to insert the wider mythology of Śiva and other deities, cosmologically mapped, inside Her domain. The goal is still to see Devī and encounter Her, but this can be realized completely only in the Flood of Beauty, to which we now turn.[25]

The Aesthetic and Dramatic Visualization of Devī in the Flood of Beauty

The Flood of Beauty offers an extensive visualization that is intended as essential to the *Saundarya Laharī*, and comprising its larger part, verses 42–91. In this latter Flood, Devī is contemplated a second time, head to toe. Each verse focuses on a particular detail of Her material form as a sacramental sign expressive of a spiritual reality: Her hair, vermilion forehead mark, eyebrows, eyes and glance, ears, nose, teeth, smile, throat, hands, breasts, navel, waist, hips, thighs, feet, toes, nails, Her manner of walking. Each occasions some direct or oblique praise of Her, usually drawing some comparison and contrast framed in terms of a natural, social, or mythological reference. Most verses offer an opportunity for the appreciative viewer to become involved; as the poet looks intensely and passionately, the attentive listener too is instructed to look closely, to be amazed, and to seek the deeper source of beauty within Her material form. Listeners are invited to see, all the more vividly, everything one may notice only conventionally when agreeing that a goddess is a beautiful woman. Notably, this beauty is not voided by spiritualization; each detail is given a spiritual value and (often) spiritual cause, but the sensual surface is never discarded for a higher, interior reality. Moreover, the contemplation of Devī is dramatized in scenes where She engages other divine and human agents and draws them into Her social domain; no one who looks is allowed to remain a mere spectator.

If the commentators read the Flood of Bliss largely as a treasury of deeper tantric meanings, they read the Flood of Beauty across its surface, appreciative of its literal, literary power. Its words produce subtle figures and meanings that require a sophisticated sense of how poetry works, but no appeal to secret teachings is needed. As poetry, the Flood of Beauty uses myriad strategies to engage the psyche of readers and draw them in, getting them to see beyond settled images and meanings. Commentators such as Lakṣmīdhara, and then too Kāmeśvara, employ figures of speech to honor the literary richness of the poetry, to tease out meanings and moods suggested by the inscribed images, and to disclose what it really means to say that Devī is beautiful. To show the aesthetics of the worship of Devī, I now draw attention to a number of these figures, even if their full meaning and the theory behind them would require much more explanation than can be offered here.[26]

For instance, verse 42 envisions the crown that rests upon Devī's head:

> If someone praises Your golden crown
> inlaid with every jeweled sky-gem,
> O daughter of the snow-capped mountain,
> won't he imagine it

the crescent moon made manifold
by the luster spreading from the varied gems set there,
or Śunāsīra's bow? (42)

The implication is twofold: the outright beauty of the crown, and the way in which the poet's mind is affected by it. Since in the poet's mind what he sees cannot be easily decided, he portrays a shifting visualization, from the crown to the moon, but also from the moon to the rainbow (the bow of Śunāsīra [that is, of Indra]). Lakṣmīdhara detects four figures operative in the verse:

a. metaphorical fancy[27]: the crescent moon is compared with Indra's bow; the crown with its gems suggests the moon with its gems, which in turn reminds the poet of the bow of Indra with its dazzling variety of colors; or,
b. substitution[28]: the crescent moon, itself introduced without preparation, is immediately jostled to the side by the image of a rainbow; or,
c. doubt[29]: the verse voices an uncertainty and poses a question: is that a crescent moon or a rainbow? It thus accentuates the poet's lack of certainty and also the notable similarity—crown, moon, rainbow—which he presents himself as unable to sort out; or
d. exaggeration[30]: what is said is known to be not literally true, since the crown, moon, and rainbow are different, and it is rare that someone would confuse them. But the portrayal of confusion emphasizes the beauty of the crown, its power to provoke new images and associations, and so to dazzle and captivate the viewer's mind and heart.

Lakṣmīdhara honors the convention that one figure always takes precedence over other possible figures by stressing the psychology of doubt (c). The poet is bedazzled and confused as to whether the crown, the crescent moon, is a rainbow or not. Kāmeśvara focuses on the poet's confusion, for he has mistakenly identified the crown on Devī's head with the crescent moon, and in turn confused that with the bow.[31] Dazzled, the poet can barely decide what he is seeing. But neither commentator entirely neglects the other figures, which together add up to a still richer and more interesting reading of the verse. By attention to these figures, the commentators give voice to the hymn's powerful expression of the experience of encountering the beautiful Devī: questions abound, confusion reigns, and alternative assessments compete, none entirely ruling out the others. Such is the appropriate response to an encounter with Her beauty, even if the viewer has seen only the crown on Her head. By reading and visualizing the verse ourselves and savoring it with attention to its figures, we too may begin to share the state of mind of a speaker bewildered enough by what he sees that he plays out the association—Her crown, the crescent moon, rainbow—without determining finally the object of his sight. To see

Her when unprepared unsettles conventional expectations, and this is a good start to the process of fruitfully encountering Her.

A similar dynamic operates in subsequent verses. Verse 50, for example, assumes that Devī's ears are beautiful, but this is just the beginning of a much more interesting scenario:

> The poets' anthology,
> the honey of a flower bouquet
> in which alone Your ears delight,
> while Your two eyes never stop glancing,
> like bees—
> or young elephants—
> eager to swallow all nine subtle tastes,
> while the eye in Your forehead sees all this
> and becoming jealous
> turns a bit red. (50)

Mutual and serial captivation makes the scene liable to reading from different perspectives. The ears are captivated by the poets' praise, and the two eyes by the ears; in turn, the third eye turns red with jealousy when it sees the preoccupation of the first two eyes. Included, too, is a powerful aesthetic appeal, the swallowing of all nine subtle tastes (*rasas*), the whole range of aesthetic and religious moods. Yet even this is ironicized as these tastes become the object of the third eye's jealousy. Kāmeśvara highlights the psychology of jealousy, the inability to endure another's good fortune. Two eyes become sweet through listening, while the third, conventionally red, is now discovered thus to redden due to its jealousy at failing to gain the sweetness experienced by the ears and the other eyes. Images thus accumulate: hymns of praise; Devī's joy as She fills Her ears with them; Her two eyes indulging in the pleasure given to Her ears; Her third eye jealous and red; the redness interpreted as jealousy. As one views the whole scene, a new pleasure arises; it surpasses the nine subtle tastes and the complete array of aesthetic possibilities. Lakṣmīdhara surveys the complexity of the scene.

> Of her three eyes, two have managed to drink the ambrosia, and so the third is jealous. There is a suggestion about the object itself; that is, "The lady is one whose eyes reach to her ears." It is also an exaggeration to say that the two eyes listen: although there is no connection [of the eyes] with the sweetness [of the ambrosia of poetry], we are told there is a connection. Also, to say "like bees—or young elephants" is a further substitution [replacing the eyes and ears with a new image, of bees and flowers]. We may also notice a substantive metaphorical identification, "the eyes never stop casting side glances," which defines them as essentially in such a mode.[32] There

> is yet another exaggeration, since "like bees—or young elephants" exaggerates the honey's sweetness, although there is really no connection [of elephants with the whole scene].

The bees are compared to young elephants, as if they are similarly large, impulsive, maddened with desire, and as if young elephants yearn to taste Devī's sweet praise. Lakṣmīdhara thus savors the improbabilities of the verse in order to highlight the unsettling nature of the scene, as eyes, ears, and mouth seem to mix and trade roles, competing with one another. All of this is in reaction to seeing Her lovely ears and eyes, and all of it enables participation in Her enjoyment for those enjoying Her in hearing hymns such as the *Saundarya Laharī*.

Kāmeśvara also takes up the reference to the subtle tastes (*rasa*)—aesthetic and sensory—and finds erotic overtones in the verse. He says that this poetry is rich in erotic meaning, a honey sought by those desiring pleasure: "For the sake of this sweetness, this taste, the eyes tremble, extremely agitated, and so, after seeing, are focused without cessation on listening." None of this captures what it is like to gaze upon Devī as She is praised, but all of it together begins to suggest something of what it means to say, "She has beautiful ears." In all of this, She is the lead player, and there is nothing about Her merely passive or inert. By Her beauty She keeps recreating the world of those who see and praise Her.[33]

Throughout, the contemplation of divine female beauty remains rooted in detail. In verse 61 an ordinary component of a woman's beauty is taken as spiritually suggestive. Devī's lovely nose is, by a classic trope, smooth and supple like fresh bamboo (such as the staff on which Devī's father flies his banner) and also adorned with a pearl:

> O banner on the bamboo staff of the snowcapped mountain,
> Your nose too is a bamboo;
> may it soon bear us our proper fruit—
> just as inside it bears
> pearls fashioned by Your very cool breath,
> and in its abundance
> carries a pearl
> on the outside too. (61)

The reference to bamboo—the staff, a nose-like-bamboo—helps explain the presence of a pearl as a nose ornament. Pearls were popularly thought to be produced within bamboo, just as the external signs of Her beauty are generated from Her fundamental and interior beauty. Kāmeśvara elaborates the verse's imagery. Devī is daughter to the frigid Himalayas, and so when She breathes, Her chilled breath grows frosty and turns into pearls—the pearls that adorn Her nose. In the same way, Devī generates for devotees the interior and exterior

fruits they desire, fruits Kāmeśvara identifies as the traditional four human goals: the objects of desire, prosperity, righteousness, and liberation. Images thus accumulate: breath in a cold place; pearls generated in bamboo; the pearl that adorns Her nose; liberation and other goals that are easily available to those who trust Devī. Each detail encodes spiritual lessons and each is preserved, as is the entirety of Her lovely female appearance; but the meaning of appearances and details are read on a larger, imaginative scale, as material and conventional beauty discloses divine beauty.

Given our larger concern about the representation of Devī as a divine woman who remains definitely female, it is useful to focus on verses 72–75, where Her breasts are contemplated. Although breasts are taken as quintessential symbols of "woman," both the verses and the comments on them resist the notion that breasts are merely passive objects gratifying the male gaze. Each verse complexifies the reality and power of Her breasts in a different way. In verse 72, contemplation of Her breasts is unexpectedly and amusingly complexified by Her son Gaṇeśa's (Herambha's) doubt:

> Goddess, Your breasts,
> ever flowing with milk
> are sucked at once by Skanda and the Elephant-faced;
> when Herambha noticed this
> his heart was unsettled by doubt and
> he touched his own frontal globes with his trunk—
> thwack!—and provoked laughter;
> may they banish our affliction too. (72)[34]

Gaṇeśa, the elephant child, suddenly compares the frontal globes of his elephant's head—globes round like breasts—to his mother's breasts. Unsure of the difference, he slaps himself in a moment of childlike doubt that provokes those watching to laughter. Lakṣmīdhara notes that the exaggeration, as a standard poetic simile—the breast compared to the elephant's forehead globe—is dramatized by Gaṇeśa's own sudden realization as he looks at his mother. As Gaṇeśa makes his comparison, the reader is drawn into the little drama: Her breasts, a standard simile about them, Her son's innocent surprise, and the eruption of laughter. It is all a bit out of proportion, but serves to good effect in communicating what She is like and what it is like to be near Her. Devī's bountiful breasts nourish, confuse, gladden, and free from affliction. Implied, of course, is that those same breasts entertain and then too enlighten viewers who come, if not to drink, at least to share in the amusement of family and friends gathered around Devī and Her two sons.

Verse 73 makes a puzzle of Her breasts and finds eternal childhood as evidence for its solution:

> Are Your breasts jeweled vessels
> filled with ambrosial essence?

There is no quiver of doubt in our minds,
O standard of the mountain Lord:
Your sons Dviradavadana and Krauñca-breaker drink there,
and do not know the taste of women;
even today they are children. (73)

Are these breasts, or are they jeweled vessels filled with precious elixir? The poet notices the demonstrable effect breast-feeding has had on Her sons, Skanda (killer of the demon Krauñca) and Gaṇeśa (with the elephant head): by tradition, they remain forever children. Ordinarily, drinking from a mother's breasts does not prevent her children from growing to adulthood, so here some special elixir must be on offer. Lakṣmīdhara detects two operative figures of speech here: a hypothetical and ostensibly implausible confusion of breasts and jeweled vessels, and the resolution of a doubt by the deduction that Her breasts are jeweled vessels from which ambrosia is drunk.[35] That Her sons remain children forever is surely a point for analysis, but the key to the verse lies rather in the puzzling itself, as breast, jeweled vessel, ambrosia, and eternal youth crowd into the poet's eye and mind. Such is the intriguing and disconcerting effect of Her beauty on those who participate in it.

By a striking shift in mood and image, verse 74 alludes to a scene of violence, as the observer notices on Her breasts a necklace carved from the bones of an elephant slain by Śiva:

Mother, Your breasts wear a luminous garment delicate as a creeper
and are strung with pearls made from Stamberamadanuja's skull;
just as the fame of the vanquisher of the cities is enhanced by His valor,
their innate luster is refracted by the radiance of Your red bimba-fruit
lips. (74)

Here the emphasis seems to be on the power of Her breasts, now implicitly connected not with eternal youth but with destruction. Adorned with the necklace of the elephant demon, Her breasts are radiant with power, hot like Śiva in battle. The red of Her lips is reflected in the pearls; this matches the red of the elephant's blood, and competes with the red of Śiva's valor. All this intense, radiant power now lies in Her breasts, where Śiva's power combines with Her identity as the divine woman.[36]

In yet another shift, the fourth verse focuses on yet another creative potency found in the abundant milk generated by Her breasts:

Daughter of the earth-bearing mountain,
in Your breasts I picture
the milk ocean of poetry flowing from Your heart;
when by Your compassion the Draviḍa child drinks there,
he becomes the most desired of great poets. (75)

The emphasis is on the life-giving nourishment of Her breasts, their prodigious generosity, and how their milk, rising from Her heart, is generative of poetic virtuosity. The commentators are most interested in the identity of the Draviḍa ("southern," "south Indian") child, whom they identify with Śaṅkara, taken to be the hymn's author.[37] As a boy, they report, one day he brought to the temple the milk required for the worship of Devī, with the understanding that he would get to drink it afterward. But Devī, either pleased by his devotion or in order to test it, drinks all the milk. In response Śaṅkara cries incessantly until She relents and breastfeeds him—with the long-term effect that he becomes the most eloquent among Her poets. This account interestingly complicates the origins of the *Saundarya Laharī*. Śaṅkara, the child, writes the *Saundarya Laharī* because he has already fed at Devī's breasts as a child; the inspiration for the hymn is inscribed into it, as the child poet praises the breasts of his most unusual Mother.

Neither the verses nor the commentaries encourage viewing Devī's breasts in a way that would reduce them and Her to passive objects of the male gaze. Contemplation is not the ogling of detachable body parts, and Her breasts are not mere objects of view. Rather, they energize, empower, give life, and implicate even those who would come just to look. That Devī is a woman is signaled by Her breasts, but they remind us that She is powerful, and in various ways: family humor and confusion (72), unending youth (73), the place where pearls and lips and blood mirror one another in competition with Śiva's valor (74), the milk that inspired the poet to write these verses (75). Listeners are instructed to contemplate Devī in the midst of Her lively world, at play among deities, natural wonders, and desirous humans. By perceiving Her beauty, we view an engaging, pleasurable drama of beauty-in-action, and then become players in that drama.

We can conclude this consideration of the Ocean of Beauty by noting the last verse focused on a part of Her body:

> Ever giving wealth to the helpless according to their desire,
> quickly scattering honey,
> a mass of beauty,
> as fortunate as a bouquet of mandara flowers—
> such are Your feet:
> may I plunge my life into them like the six-footed bee,
> my senses as my feet. (90)

Devī's feet are compared in a straightforward manner to flowers—both are fragrant and auspicious. By literary exaggeration, Her feet are actually identified with such flowers. In turn, the poet's six senses, which enjoy Her feet, are portrayed as the six feet of the bee delving into the flower as the object of its delight. Kāmeśvara notes the sliding comparison here, from flower to the enjoyment of the flower, the poet's six senses as bees, the bees as indulging their

pleasure. He also sees the verses as suggestive of the nature of religious consciousness: just as the senses lose themselves in the lotus of Her feet, one also loses one's narrow, constricted self within Devī. By the mention of his own self and his senses, the poet implicitly invites the listener, after the entire Ocean of Beauty, to enter deeply and with pleasure into the experience of Devī.

In a somewhat fanciful way, verse 91 further emphasizes the need for involvement:

> As if their minds are engaged in the play of practicing steps,
> Your household swans walk, they never stop imitating Your stately step,
> while Your lotus feet impart instruction by their every movement,
> by the tinkling of beautiful anklets filled with gems,
> O Goddess of fine bearing. (91)

By a literary convention having to do with how elegant ladies walk, Devī's way of walking is deemed worthy of imitation by the swans following after Her. The swans thereby model the role of those who walk with Her, following Her path and imitating Her mode of progression. Both Lakṣmīdhara and Kāmeśvara draw out the analogy between the swans and students, Devī and the guru. What is natural—the tinkling of the lady's ankle bracelets, the approach of swans when she is about to feed them—is by literary exaggeration (over)invested with meaning, as the tinkling turns out to be the instruction She offers the swans, that is, the students imitating this divine guru in their way of proceeding. The listener, already challenged in verse 90 to become the bee plunging into the lotus of Her feet, is now invited to become like the swans who walk as does their mistress.

To sum up: Lakṣmīdhara and Kāmeśvara read each verse in the Flood of Beauty as suggestive of moods and insights not directly expressible in prose. What it means to see Devī can be rendered only indirectly, and the words of the verses aim skillfully to provoke elusive insights and moods. Appearances are attentively noted and described elegantly; they are rendered generative of further experiences that draw viewers into apparent and material particularities. Devī is beautiful and a pleasure to behold; the more we look upon Her, the more we experience the powerful pull of Her beauty. Every detail of Her form thus becomes a kind of sacramental sign not to be replaced by any deeper insight. It is not surprising that the verses are read as host to many figures of speech; they are, after all, elegant Sanskrit compositions meriting sophisticated attention by discerning readers who know how to find the unsaid in what is said. It is the genius of this tradition to see these aesthetic effects as religiously significant and expressive of a deeper experience of the beautiful Devī.

Three general features are therefore most notable in the Ocean of Beauty. First, there is a direct and unproblematic focus on the female form as beautiful. Devī's body is detailed as a female form, albeit distinguished by its grandeur and glory from other female forms. Second, the beauty and its visualization

are made more complex by the elaboration of dramatic scenarios for each verse, involving other divine persons and scenes from nature and religion that are transformed in light of Her beauty. As a beautiful woman, Devī is the active and dynamic transformer of the visual process, and not merely its passive object. In Devī's presence, there are no mere spectators. Third, by direct statement and indirect suggestion, extraordinary results are found in these visualizations and the words suggestive of them. The energies underlying Devī's extraordinary beauty and the powers of deities and Śiva who enjoy Her eternally become readily available to humans also willing to look and enjoy.

Climax

Verses 92–95 maximize the achievement of the hymn, recapitulating the meditation on Devī's beauty and bringing it to climax. Verse 92 imagines the lush, sensuous context in which She reclines on Her literally divine couch:

> Your servants, Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra, and Īśvara, form Your couch,
> and Śiva seems a bedsheet of transparent hue,
> as if the subtle erotic sentiment were embodied,
> red in desire, reflecting Your radiance,
> and milking the pleasure in Your eyes. (92)

Verse 93 swiftly reviews the entire Flood of Beauty:

> Her hair is curly, She is simple in nature, gentle in smile;
> in Her frame She is soft as a śirīṣa flower yet
> in the region of Her breasts hard like rock;
> at the waist She is quite slim
> but at the hips prodigious:
> She triumphs, She protects the world,
> Śambhu's grace, Aruṇā. (93)

After this meditation, one stands at the entrance to Her inner sanctum:

> You are the inner precinct of the cities' foe and so
> the goal of worshiping Your feet is not easily accomplished
> by those with feeble senses, and so
> the immortals, Śatamakha in front, achieve unequaled perfection—
> with Aṇimā and the others who stand at Your doorway. (95)

Attentive listeners are brought to the doorway and left there, as if guests invited to enter that precinct, into Her presence, onto Her couch. They have gained this access by working through the preceding verses, both the purification of one's understanding of Devī (8–41) and the revisualization of Her (42–91). It

is left to the person who reaches this point, senses enhanced, to decide whether to enter inside and enjoy Devī there, or to return to other matters. That this choice can be made marks the culmination of the path articulated in the hymn.

In verses 96–100 the hymn concludes by a return to the self-conscious mode of a poet whose vision outruns his word. The language of praise has been dissected, purified, and subordinated to contemplation, turned into an opportunity for encounter, left unspoken as the devotee stands before Her. Now, in the end, the poet concludes with praise that is both conventional and yet, after one hundred verses, deeply reinvigorated, impassioned beyond the cooler observations of verses 1–7:

> I desire wisdom, Mother, so tell me,
> when I shall drink
> that essence of chewed betel juice reddened with lac dye,
> the water that washed Your feet,
> the essence of betel from Vāṇī's lotus mouth
> that makes poets even of those mute by birth? (98)

> Whoever is devoted to You will
> play with Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī,
> rival Vidhi and Hari,
> have a beautiful form that melts even Pleasure's chastity,
> live a long life free from the bonds that bind beasts,
> and enjoy the taste known as "highest bliss." (99)

> Illumining the sun with small flames,
> bathing the moon whence nectar flows with drops from moonstones,
> satisfying the ocean by its own drops of water—
> and me too,
> praising You with Your own words,
> O Mother of all words. (100)

The poet and his ideal audience are now in a new place, right in front of Her, but still where the older language of devotion can be recovered and used again.

Reviewing Devī

In large part, Devī possesses attributes also characteristic of a supreme male figure, such as omnipotence, creative cosmic power and the power to save serene and sovereign rule over the world in its every detail, the power to consume the world and recreate it.[38] It is a goal of the Flood of Bliss to strip away the mythology surrounding a merely lovely goddess, lest She be treated as a lesser goddess, conformed to social conventions. Throughout, though, She

remains also a beautiful woman, mother, and consort. She is marked as not-Śiva, and Śiva's mythology and theology are always nearby, background for Her identity.

Her body is beautiful and erotic, and therein lies the key to the power by which She rules the world, divine beings, and even Her spouse. The supreme Devī is established in a social setting where She interacts with a wide range of familial figures. Devī is certainly a woman, and certainly a goddess. Throughout, She is represented in ways not entirely free from cultural expectations about women and their bodies. But the *Saundarya Laharī* aims to use such expectations to highlight rather than downplay the distinctive nature of Her power and its exercise. That She is female is not a deficiency; from beginning to end, She is both female and supreme. She can be approached only if recognized as a woman. The final and climactic portrayal of Her union with Śiva in Her bedchamber offers an intense, erotic union that makes sense in terms of Her female identity as a counterpoint to His male identity, even if He is only a character in Her drama.

I have suggested that in a sense the hymn seems to assume women already to be with Devī, harmoniously part of Her retinue. Still, we have no evidence that the *Saundarya Laharī* was intended to be a source of liberation for human women. We can nonetheless discover in it strategies by which to recompose contemporary conceptualizations of gender in an affirmation of physicality, pleasure, and beauty as spiritually significant and not just instrumental to the spiritual. In saying this, I am aware that my reading of the *Saundarya Laharī*—a male American scholar who is not a Hindu reading a medieval Sanskrit text written by males for males—cannot be accepted uncritically in a contemporary Indian feminist context. But I do believe that there is much in the *Saundarya Laharī* that can aid us today in understanding what it means to attribute gender to the divine person, and in exploring how contemporary women and men can reimagine their own roles in relation to the divine.

Devī is all that humans already are, in the socially standard ways of human being and relating and the rarified tantric distillations of being and relating; She is a woman who helps males to maximize their potential. She includes all the intermediate gradations of human development up to the satisfaction of the highest human capacity. She is thus the beginning and end of the process of divinization, enabling all beings, gods and humans, to become more, even up to a final blissful immersion within Her. To participate in Her bliss, novice practitioners—including attentive readers—must assent to a gradual but ultimately complete deconstruction and enhancement of their own bodies, sensations, pleasures, and relationships. One loses all of this, regains it, and then is able to see Her directly and completely. The key to entering Her world seems to be a combination of reverence, intellect, and intense curiosity, which together make deepening interior vision possible.

What kind of commitment and practice is required for a reader to enter upon the path of transformation the *Saundarya Laharī* intends? I admitted early in this chapter that the hymn is located within a tradition of tantric expertise, and we can presume that ordinarily it is read and taught with trained teachers who themselves have received training from a preceding generation. The more one appropriates the language and practices of the tradition, the better off one will be. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for the attentive noninitiate reader, because we do have the hymn and its difficult though vastly informative commentaries. Humans can grow in an increasingly unrestricted fashion because Devī Herself insures the continuity of the divine with all else. The hymn is optimistic about the continuity between ordinary human experience and a maximal participation in the world of Devī, and it opens the highest possibilities for the simplest listeners and readers.

By taking the *Saundarya Laharī* to heart, the reader moves from thinking about goddesses and issues of gender in India, to simpler and more subtle reflections on goddess power, to a purified visualization of Her form and, finally, to a face-to-face encounter in which one speaks directly to Her. It is this direct address that gives the *Saundarya Laharī* its force right from the start, when the poet says to Her that he cannot adequately praise Her. Though inadequate, he talks to Her throughout, and only by that speech can he know the inadequacy of his words. The hymn seems profoundly generous in its expectations of Her accessibility to those who invoke Her and imagine Her presence as best they can: for those who can do more, there is much more to do; for those who can only do less, She is here already. The reader is then left to decide what to do about this possibility. But we can give advice only indirectly, by turning now, and more briefly, to a contemplative classic of the Marian tradition.

Flood of Sorrow, Flood of Love: Mary at the Cross in the *Stabat Mater*

For a comparison with the powerful and richly developed one hundred verses of the *Saundarya Laharī* I have chosen the stark, spare, brilliant *Stabat Mater*, a medieval Latin hymn of just ten verses. It begins by contemplating Mary standing in grief at the cross of Her son, and ends by asking her to bestow on the viewer the life and saving power sent forth by Jesus who died.[39] I suggest that this contemplation of Mary offers a lens through which to glimpse more clearly what Christians are (and are not) able to accomplish in visualizing Mary even if choosing not to contemplate Devī.

In the first two verses, the author contemplates Mary standing by the cross of her dying son, sharing His grief:

The sorrowful mother was standing in tears
near the cross as her Son was hanging there, and
through her sighing soul
that shared His sadness and was sorrowing,
a sword pierced. (1)

Oh how sad and afflicted
was that blessed mother of the only-begotten,
as she was bewailing and sorrowing and trembling,
as she stood looking upon
the punishments of her renowned Son. (2)

Verse 3 is, as it were, a step back, an invitation to watch Mary watching Jesus, to contemplate the scene so attentively as to share its grief:

Who are those who would not weep
should they look upon the mother of Christ in such torment?
Who would be unable to share the sadness of the holy mother,
to contemplate her sorrowing with her Son? (3)

Verse 4 completes the simple act of contemplation at the moment of its inevitable conclusion, the death of Jesus, and the completion of Mary's act of standing there, watching:

She looked upon Jesus suffering torments,
beaten down with whips for the sins of His own people,
she looked upon her own sweet child, dying, abandoned,
until He sent forth His spirit. (4)

He is dead. She has seen Him dying and has confronted the finality of that death. But still she stands there by the cross, as it were for an eternity.

His crucified corpse remains powerfully symbolic, but after verse 4, the scene is entirely Mary's, for she is the living presence on Calvary. Jesus, God, provides a backdrop for encounter with Mary. So the author turns to address her directly. She has poured out her tears and has become a font of love, and so she is the one able to connect the onlooker to the divine power flowing from the desolate scene. By the logic of the hymn she alone is now the conveyor of any possible salvific meaning coming forth from the horrific scene before our eyes. The next verses are a series of strongly phrased pleas, even commands, urging her then to make the connections:

O mother, font of love,
make me feel the force of sorrow,
that I might lament with you,
make my heart burn in loving Christ, God,
that I might be pleasing to Him. (5)

Holy mother, do this—
in my heart firmly fix
the wounds of the crucified,
share with me the punishments
your so worthy, so wounded Son suffered for me. (6)

Make me truly weep with you,
sorrowing with the crucified as long as I live;
to stand near the cross with you,
to be with you willingly, wailing—
this I desire. (7)

Virgin famous among virgins,
be not bitter toward me now, but
make me wail with you,
make me carry the death of Christ,
a share in His passion
as I recollect His wounds. (8)

Make me inflicted by these wounds
and inebriated by this cross
because of love of your Son . . . (9a)

The author wants not only to contemplate Mary's suffering and tears, and those of Jesus, but also to join in, to bear the wounds, the piercing, and the grief. Such eventualities alone can satisfy the speaker's deepest desire and open a path beyond death. The final lines of the *Stabat Mater* look to judgment day, the eschatological fulfillment and completion of the dynamics toward damnation or salvation. Here too, as in the *Saundarya Laharī*, the expectation is that this foremost of women is the one to lead the viewer to the final, desired completion:

. . . enflamed and on fire,
through you, O Virgin,
may I be defended on the day of judgment. (9b)

Make me
guarded by the cross,
protected by the death of Christ,
cherished by grace, and
when this body dies,
make it that my soul be given the glory of paradise.
Amen. (10)

The power of the hymn is in part due to the familiar sorrow of the scene itself, but also to the realization that Mary, who stands there, is still here now, as mediator. Having watched her, the onlooker is able to address her, and receive

the desired gift from her; here too, the attentive gaze opens the way to encounter and speech.

There is no claim that Mary saves on her own. Whereas Devī simply gives from Her own fullness, somehow nearby Her Śiva, Mary mediates the benefits of the dead Jesus, who in turn had mediated the graces of His Father. In perfectly orthodox fashion, the hymn is imaginatively positioned before Christ crucified. No thought is given to a Marian alternative that would conceal the cross and the divine power, love, and judgment it represents. But dramatically, it is Mary who matters. She is the one able to link the viewer intimately to the horrifying scene on the cross. She is the one who can connect the deceased and for now unresponsive Jesus to those who would share the fruits of His death. Her grief and preoccupation with her dying and dead son do not render her incapable of taking charge of the process of salvation.

There are other differences, of course. Devī is married to God, Śiva, and Her sons are Gaṇeśa and Skanda; Mary is not-God, she is the mother of the deceased Jesus and only by grace the mother of God. Devī is sexually active, Mary is the mother who remains ever virgin. Devotion to Devī promises bliss here and now, as well as there, later on; bliss floods the body and soul of the one who contemplates Her. Devotion to Mary marks the traversal of suffering as necessary for those seeking the bliss that lies beyond death. Christ saves by His death; she saves by a love that stands with both the living and the dead.

We may connect the *Stabat Mater*'s focus on death with Mary's status as the one who is not-God. There is no continuity between the divine and human, no straightforward, reliable path. Jesus exemplifies such continuity, but He is dead, and now only Mary is able to bridge the chasm between life and death, the human and divine, perhaps even female and male ways of salvation. To find God by going to Mary requires a leap, the discovery of God in her who is not-God. In the *Stabat Mater,* there is a fear of judgment, a hope for a separation of body and soul, death for the former and bliss for the latter. Words such as "death," "virgin birth," and "Mary, the mother of God" evoke rupture and point us to the leap that is to be made across the human-divine divide. In the *Saundarya Laharī*, the bliss is both spiritual and physical, liberation is to be perfected in the future, but at every moment its bliss can be tasted, even sensually. There is little of suffering in the *Saundarya Laharī*, and little of joy in the *Stabat Mater*, and so we have a Mother of Bliss and a mother of sorrows. Yet both are so all-encompassing that in neither do we find the tension between sorrow and bliss entirely absent.

Hearing the hymns together, we thus reflect on the rupture of the cross and not-divine on the one side, and the flow of a continuing and increasing bliss on the other. Eventually, of course, we must give nuance to our readings of both hymns by attention to other writings and other religious evidence, since neither Hindu nor Christian ways of contemplation can be encompassed by

any single text. But the power of these classic hymns lies in their choice to speak to the point, saying certain things while omitting others.

In an odd way, then, Mary standing near her deceased son is in striking parallel with Devī, who is usually seated near or on Her consort Śiva. Jesus has died and Mary still stands there. Śiva is a God bereft of any power or energy apart from Devī. The path of bliss and beauty runs parallel to the path of sorrow and love. Neither the *Saundarya Laharī* nor the *Stabat Mater* denies the enduring importance of the male deity, but in neither hymn is the male able to satisfy the viewer's desire. Śiva had been active and powerful at some earlier time, elsewhere, and now Devī stands before us. Jesus and His Father have been famously active, but now the Father is silent and the Son is dead. Mary stands there, alive and able to mediate the gift.

In neither hymn is the climax fully described. In both, it occurs after the hymn is over, as if praise and direct address are only preliminary to a still further experience too intimate for portrayal by a third party. The bliss in Devī's chamber is left to the imagination, whereas Mary's response and life in Paradise cannot be expressed in a world still signed by the cross. Both dramas engage the spectator as participant, both are completed only after words are finished. Her unimaginable bliss and her unimaginable sorrow transport the viewer somewhere else, somewhere unthought of before.

Like the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and the *Akathistos*, the *Saundarya Laharī* and *Stabat Mater* are hymns of direct address. The contemplative process, the purification and clarification of vision, and entrance into the bliss beyond (or through) sorrow—these are always also about encountering Her/her, She/she who is addressed everywhere in both hymns: the mother, the power, the ocean of beauty, the font of bliss and love. Both are sensitive particularly to the ascetic practice that must precede encountering Her. In the *Saundarya Laharī*, what has already been viewed is reduced to its barest, elemental form; in the *Stabat Mater*, the patient prolongation of an eye- and heart-wrenching viewing of a Son who dies in the presence of His mother makes us look upon the starkest of desolations. In both, vision is necessarily an involvement, a purification, and the initiation of participation in the scene that had been viewed, until one finally sees through it, beyond it.

Those who cannot see their way into an encounter with Devī may, however, choose to see Mary in light of Devī. Either way, to recite—read, sing—the hymns attentively is to become involved in the scenes themselves. One then stands before Her, addressing Her, awaiting Her bestowal of the desired transformative touch. By a single, continuous affirmation that is increasingly a simple pure gaze, one encounters Devī; by a series of ruptures and losses, one finds in Mary the gift conceptually supposed to be God's gift. Which encounter we choose involves issues that go well beyond the hymns and this chapter, too, but as attentive readers we become capable of making a more reflective choice about where we might best look for Her.

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4

Apirāmi in the *Apirāmi Antāti*

Finding Her Within; in Light of the Mātaracammaṉ Antāti

The Hymn, Style, and Meaning

The *Apirāmi Antāti* is a hymn of one hundred verses in honor of Apirāmi, the beautiful goddess, and consort of Śiva. "Apirāmi" is the "lovely one," and She is also known as Ampikai, Tripurī, Sundarī, and by other names commonly used to address Śiva's consort. It is a Tamil-language composition rich in vivid, lush imagery. Its author was Subrahmaṇya, an eighteenth-century south Indian from the town of Tirukkaṭaiyūr. Due to his devotion to the goddess Apirāmi in the Amṛtaghaṭeśvara temple there, he is called by the honorific title Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar (paṭṭar), "Apirāmi's brahmin poet." Given how Sanskrit words are rendered in Tamil letters, *paṭṭar* can also indicate a devotee (*bhakta*).[1] He is the author of several other works too, including the *Apirāmi Ammai Patikam*, a hymn of ten verses praising Apirāmi. The *Apirāmi Antāti* itself remains popular today, easily available in small paperback editions, and on tapes and CDs.

Our previous hymns surely reflected their authors' religious experience, but more obviously and with greater intensity the *Apirāmi Antāti* arises from Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's experience of Apirāmi. In almost every verse he addresses Her directly, as if amazed that She is so lovely and so close by, and he devotes much of the hymn to detailed, vivid glimpses of Her.[2] Here too, I recommend reading the hundred verses carefully before delving further into this chapter, to allow them, even in translation, to communicate something of the energy and luminous inner place from which Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar composed them. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar explores his own encounter with the

beautiful and ever-present Goddess, and so the *Apirāmi Antāti* highlights more vividly than the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* and the *Saundarya Laharī* the dynamic of religious experience and the manner in which words communicate and facilitate such experiences.

For my own reading and for guidance in translating the hymn, I have used seven relatively short, popular commentaries that for the most part briefly explicate the verses.[3] The commentators do not treat the *Apirāmi Antāti* as a technical, doctrinal work, and do not argue points of doctrinal interpretation with one another or against other interpreters. They are attentive and sensitive readers who share their insights into the verses and thus increase our enjoyment of the hymn. As in the preceding chapters, my reading reflects uncontroversial views common to the commentaries, and only rarely will I credit an insight to a particular commentator.

A Story behind the *Apirāmi Antāti*

I suggest two ways of beginning to understand the hymn, one hagiographical and the other related to the hymn's literary style. Let us begin with the former and the story of Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar. Although the *Apirāmi Antāti* does not offer a sequential account of Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's spiritual journey, the commentators establish a context for the hundred verses by telling a standard story of its origins. In his introduction, Jagannathan sets the scene:

> In the Cōḻa country, on the south bank of the Kāvirī river, there is Tirukkaṭaiyūr, one of the holy places mentioned in *Tevāram*. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar was born there approximately 250 years ago into a brahmin family, in the Kauśika gotra, as the son of Amṛtaliṅga Aiyar. His name at birth was Subrahmaṇya. The family was for generations devoted to the art of musical composition and to meditation on Devī, and so this brahmin boy from his youth worshiped with great love the auspicious Apirāmi who had appeared in Tirukkaṭaiyūr. He was well versed in musical composition in both Tamil and Sanskrit. When he sang praise of Apirāmi Ampikai in verses of varied melodies, devotion arose within him, and consequently he also composed many more verses praising his Ampikai.[4]

To describe Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's advanced spiritual state, Jagannathan draws on tantric physiology, wherein the Goddess rises from the cakra at the base of the spine up through his body to the opening on the top of his head.[5] The result is an extraordinary overflow of experience: "As if delirious with pleasure by Her grace, he went about maddened with bliss. Some did not understand his state of experience and complained, 'He must have worshiped some deity and performed deeds forbidden to brahmins, so he is agitated with delirium.' He

did not allow their complaints into his ears, but insisted that the religion of Apirāmi was good. So he rose to a lofty height as a great one, 'intoxicated by a toddy arising within him.' "[6] Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar is thus pictured in the tradition as a tantric practitioner who has actualized the energy of the Goddess within the cakras. Experience of Her is the cornerstone of his identity and the basis from which he composes his songs. He need not seek Her, since he has already found Her—or rather, She has already found him. Rather, the challenge is to compose words that express what he has experienced and captivate his divine and human audience.

Jagannathan's account then focuses on the crisis occasioned by the visit to Tirukkaṭaiyūr of Serfoji, king of Tanjore.[7] Told that Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar is not in his right senses, the king tests him by asking whether the moon will be new or full that night—although the king knows full well that it is only the new moon day. Lost in meditation and dazzled by the brightness of Apirāmi in his mind, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar sees only light, and so mistakenly claims that it must be the full moon appearing that night. The king then threatens to punish him if the full moon does not in fact appear.

Distressed by the crisis he has inadvertently caused, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar hopes that Apirāmi will come to vindicate him. He decides to get Her attention in a rather dramatic fashion. He suspends over a fire a pot tied with one hundred cords, and sits in the pot. Meditating on Apirāmi and expecting Her grace, he begins to sing the verses that were to become the *Apirāmi Antāti*. He defends himself, extols the exalted status of Apirāmi, and exhibits the excellence of his experience of Her. At each verse he cuts another cord, and by verse 79 he is in danger of tipping over into the fire. Then, to the astonishment of all, She reveals herself in an overwhelming light brighter than the full moon. In response, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar sings, "In the eyes of tender Apirāmi there is grace, along the path spoken in the Veda our heart can follow Her." (79). In verse 80 he delights in seeing Her as She shows Herself:

> Placing me with Your devotees,
> chasing away my cruel deeds
> so they rush from me,
> showing Yourself
> so my mind and eyes dance in exhilaration when they see You,
> You dance in my inner lotus—
> what's all this, lovely, divine woman? (80)

The king apologizes to Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar and entreats him to recite the whole *Apirāmi Antāti* again, this time aloud and for the assembled community. As he sings, the temple image of Apirāmi glows. As he repeats verse 80 and thereafter, the remaining cords snap one by one, until finally the pot falls to the ground and shatters, providing mementos for all. The king establishes a festival to celebrate the memory of the remarkable event.[8]

Several elements in this account are particularly striking: the intense tantric meditation that precedes his inner realization and illumination; Her rising up within him, with a luminosity brighter than the full moon; the dramatic use of poetic composition to compel Her to speak; the process by which intense inner experience becomes public, acknowledged officially by the visiting king. I suggest that the *Apirāmi Antāti*, appreciated as the fruit of experience, also charts a path by which readers are invited to journey into the experience.

Antāti: Form and Meaning

A different but converging perspective arises from attention to the hymn's literary features. Individual verses function as discrete and self-contained instances of meditation, juxtaposed rather than argued in a sequence. Verses 15–17 serve as good examples of the interplay of meaning and style. Verse 15 contrasts the difficulty of the search for Her with the simplicity of Her charming presence:

> For Your tender favor they once did billions of penances
> but all they got was wealth for ruling the earth,
> or perhaps wealth for ruling the heavens as wise gods
> or perhaps imperishable release and liberation—
> O fragrant Yāmalai,
> Your voice is so melodious,
> O my green parrot. (15)

The verse begins as a standard devotional claim about the difficulty of the path of those seeking to achieve liberation by their own effort and about the paltriness of the results they achieve, including even liberation. Asceticism, such as one might expect in the quest to find the transcendent divine reality, is disappointing and in fact unnecessary. Rather, She is easily, surprisingly available, pleasing and delightful to those who will seek Her and listen to Her—attractive like the green parrot, Her music sweet to hear and taste, alluring even to smell.

Verse 16 by implication extends the same theme. Apirāmi can be directly addressed as the source of light, beyond reckoning, source of all—and yet She is like a parrot whose sweet voice can be heard by all:

> Parrot,
> You are the radiant light shining forth from the minds of Your people,
> the place where light becomes light, beyond all reckoning,
> O Mother, You spread forth as sky and everything else—
> but I am poor, I know so little—
> how overwhelming Your gift! (16)

The earlier lines cumulatively reinforce one another in a kind of litany accentuating the paradox of a mother who is the source of all living beings, yet at the same time a transcendent and superlative mystery. This paradox is then brought into acute focus by the concluding application to the poet himself: he who has nothing is the one who receives the gift; though She is transcendent mystery, She is also his mother. Verse 17 extends the paradox of Her grandeur and accessibility to include Her relation to Śiva:

> Your form is overwhelming,
> Your face triumphant, glorified in every lotus,
> O lovely, tender one;
> to turn into defeat the victory of His helper, pleasure's master,
> with His third eye
> the Lord just looked at him—
> but haven't You, His left half, conquered His mind too? (17)

This verse divides into three parts: a confession of Her beauty; a recollection of how Śiva, Her consort, destroyed Desire by a glance; and finally, direct address to Her, a recollection of Her ability to conquer even Śiva should He look at Himself—and see Her as an intimate half of Himself. The first lines on Her and His prowess set the stage for the concluding question that suggests Her power over Śiva even as the deity who has conquered Desire. The overall effect is an implicit reflection on the combination of opposite claims: Her pervasive beauty and His conquest of desire by asceticism only set the scene for Her conquest of Her spouse, the great male ascetic.

Taken together, the one hundred verses function as a complex display of an array of images and insights expressive of the experience of seeing Apirāmi and encountering Her. Glimpse by glimpse, each tumbling over the others, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar sees what cannot be seen all at once by the human eye: the total beauty and glory of Apirāmi. Words, images, and ideas stand together in suggestive templates, but not determined in their meanings by a stated thesis argued in a single verse or series of verses. They stand as an array of brilliant and captivating elements and insights consumed by the eyes, darting back and forth. Each verse puts to the fore some interesting insight or intuition about Apirāmi that is then placed alongside a second such insight, and then a third, a fourth, and more.

Rich in images and the subtle but suggestive juxtaposition of images, the verses of the *Apirāmi Antāti* embody a creative tension between thematic freedom and poetic conciseness. On the one hand, in terms of content and thematic sequence, the verses appear loosely connected, proceeding as if by free association. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar most often appears content with simple evocations of what he has seen, as if his eyes are darting here and there across a scene where instantaneous glimpses of beauty keep flashing before him. The emphasis throughout all hundred verses is on presence, the current moment

of experience, and not on action or the advancement of a thesis. What matters most is to recognize immediate encounter and presence. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar reflects on the beauty of the goddess, detailing that beauty by a series of small comparisons.

On the other, the order of verses is not random, as if a redactor might be free to move them around. The thematically varied verses stand precisely in line one after the other, linked stylistically by the formalities of antāti. According to antāti—the "end-beginning" style—the end of each verse is also the beginning of the next.[9] It can be observed clearly in the Tamil where syllables and words are clearly similar, but difficult to demonstrate in translation, since the link may not be evident in the words' meanings. But indications can be given, as with verses 15–17 above, and here is how verses 100 and 1–3 can be rendered:

O delicate one,
the entwined, tender konṟai flowers on fragrant breasts,
elegant shoulders like bamboo,
cane bow in radiant hands that hold the honeyed arrows that arouse desire,
bright teeth,
doe eyes:
all of this is in my heart
ever rising. (100)

"Rising, bright, radiant,
auspicious mark on high,
jewel prized by the discerning,
pomegranate bud,
splendid vine praised by the woman on the lotus,
pool of fragrant kumkum paste"—
thus is Your form described, Apirāmi,
ever my best help. (1)

My help,
the divinity I worship,
my own Mother,
the sacred word's branch, shoot, spreading root,
in Your hands, a fresh-flower club, cane bow, tender net, goad:
O beautiful lady of the three cities,
You're all I know. (2)

I know the secret no one knows, and knowing it
I clasp Your holy feet, O holy one . . . (3)

The pattern continues throughout the entire hymn. Neutral with respect to meaning, antāti tightly binds the verses together, fixing the order of verses, but not for the sake of some particular narrative or thematic progression.

The antāti establishes a nonthematic but settled sequence of verses, so that insights, prayers, and glimpses of Apirāmi occur in just one order, but without any controlling narrative that subordinates them to an overall message that might be easily summarized. The sequence of verses is fixed yet not determined thematically, since antāti highlights assonance and consonance while rendering continuity of meaning merely one available option. The antāti nonetheless requires that the verses be read in one particular order and no other. We are compelled to find our way through the whole of the *Apirāmi Antāti*, hearing and envisioning each verse, without the help of a settled line of thought that might flow independently of literary form. We must therefore see our way through each and every one of the hundred verses to understand properly the simple insight that Apirāmi is radiant everywhere, all at once, in the poet's life.[10]

Although the hymn is not an autobiographical narrative, its antāti style is in keeping with how Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar composed the hundred verses in a single moment, while suspended over the fire in a pot supported by a hundred cords. Though threaded into a great garland of praise, each verse stands foremost and alone, as this moment's experience trumps anything larger that might be said about Her. What matters for the reader is that the hymn produces the fruits of experience rather than simply offering information about experience. Insofar as the verses—and translation—remain powerful, they lead back into the experience from which they arise.[11]

It is not easy, then, to summarize this hymn, since the medium is very much the message. But we can at least examine Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's verses from several angles, to see how he conceives and visualizes his Goddess, and composes a verbal pathway from and to his inner vision of Her.

Understanding Apirāmi

Apirāmi is, first of all, beautiful, possessed of a lovely female body. References to Her physical beauty abound, and since we have seen many instances in the preceding reflections on the visualization of Apirāmi, a few examples must suffice:

> Her radiant mouth blossoms brighter than a coral creeper,
> Her pleasing laugh reveals sparkling teeth,
> and with the help of this
> She melts our Śaṅkara,
> Her jeweled breasts bending toward Her tapered waist. . . . (38)

> Adorned with pearls
> Your firm yet tender breasts grown as large as hills,
> make the Lord's strong heart dance;

Your vagina is a fine cobra's head,
the Veda's cooling words are Your anklet bells,
O excellent lady. (42)

Red sari on Her so slender figure,
full breasts,
a string of pearls,
jet black hair woven with jasmine flowers,
three eyes . . . (53)

You dwell in the red lotus and in my consciousness,
Your breasts are fine lotuses,
O best among beautiful women,
Your lovely eyes and compassionate face,
Your lotus mouth, lotus hands, lotus feet:
except for these I see no treasure. (58)

Unlike Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar does not spell out a theory for the allocation of such attributes to the male and female divinity; unlike the author of the *Saundarya Laharī*, he does not produce a single, ordered reflection on Her physique, head to toe. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar simply notices and rejoices in the details of Her form.

Apirāmi is a goddess invoked by many names: Ammā (mother, 12), Ampikai (5, 36), Ānandavalli ("bliss-creeper," perhaps "flourishing bliss," 55) and Apirāmavalli (beautiful creeper, "tender Apirāmi" or "flourishing beauty," 74, 78), Apirāmi (beautiful, 1, 25, 69, 94), Bhairavī (frightening, 76), Tripurī (Lady of the three cities, 54), Umā (10, 30, 31), Yāmalai (fresh, green, 15, 33, 71, 96). She also has titles such as "lady," "mother," and so forth. Two verses meditate on the fact of this plurality of names:

"Lady," "Four-Faced," "Nārāyaṇī,"
"Five arrows in Her lotus hand,"
"Śāmbhavī," "Śaṅkarī," "Cāmaḷai,"
"Wearing a garland of fine snakes with poisonous bites,"
"Cūliṉī," "Mātaṅkī," "my mother":
and so on, such are the names for Her
whose feet are our stronghold. (50)

"Bhairavī," "Pañcamī,"
"Holder of the net, goad, and five arrows,"
"Lofty Caṇḍī who consumes as Her offering the life of deceivers,"
"Kāḷī," "Vairavī shining in all directions,"
"Maṇṭalī," "Māliṉī," "Cūlī," "Varākī,"
such are Her names in the flawless four Vedas that people proclaim.
(77)[12]

Just as She is named in many ways, so too Her forms are many while She is one:

> Once before You set me straight,
> so after that, is it a good idea to reject me now?
> So whatever I do, even should I fall into the sea,
> by Your holy compassion help me to the shore:
> let that be Your intent!
> You have one form,
> many forms,
> O formless one, my Umā! (30)

The Goddess is in a certain way universalized by this multiplication of names and forms. Instead of abstract or merely maximal claims about Her, the use and repetition of many names and forms impresses upon the reader how She is great and particular at the same time. In addition, the stricture that She has just one form, or no form, reminds devout readers that She is not to be limited even by divine multiplicity or unity.

That the hymn's title mentions Apirāmi accords with Her name in the Tirukkaṭaiyūr temple and fittingly emphasizes Her beauty. The verses themselves, however, do not decisively privilege that name, and Apirāmi ought not to be taken as a proper name. For convenience, though, I refer to Her as "Apirāmi."

We can also note that the hymn is not defined in relation to any particular locality. Given its interior focus and emphasis on the Goddess's presence everywhere, it is not surprising that Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar seems as little interested in geography as he is in myth.[13] Although Apirāmi is worshiped in the Tirukkaṭaiyūr temple where the hymn is said to have originated, neither the temple nor the town is ever named. Of the hundred verses, only verse 70 contains an explicit geographical reference, as Apirāmi appears among the women musicians in the kaṭampu tree forest near Maturai city. Verse 11 probably refers to the Śaiva holy site at Tiruveṇkāṭu. The implication is that She is everywhere. Her presence in particular places matters less in light of the more impressive fact that She dwells within the author and in the hearts of his audience.

References to myth are equally infrequent and sketchy. Only occasionally is it recalled that She has done great deeds such as making ambrosia or turning the poison Śiva had drunk into ambrosia: "to the gods in heaven She granted medicine, ambrosia from the ocean" (90), and "Your delicate waist is burdened by breasts like jeweled caskets, O Ampikai, but still You make ambrosia from the poison drunk by Śiva, wearer of the topknot" (5). She is also the goddess who killed Mahiṣa, the buffalo demon: "You stand on Mahiṣa's head, You are the inner space, the dark one, ever virgin, in Your hand, the skull of the forest texts' Lord, in my thoughts, Your lotus feet" (8). She is powerful and destructive like Durgā, and the hint remains that She can put to effective use the flower

weapons She so attractively carries. Yet still greater is Her power to protect the living even from divine justice, and to turn the dangerous into what is life-giving, even for Her spouse. Like Sītā, She too becomes a secure refuge for those who have earned the Lord's wrath:

> "A stronghold is the thing,"
> the graceless demons calculated,
> but their strength withered
> when my Lord and Mukunda grew angry,
> but then they cried,
> "Your feet are refuge!"
> and touched the feet of that lady—
> and so on this earth
> they face neither death nor birth. (51)

But in any case, all this lies in the realm of tradition and memory, for Her myths seem at most a kind of background for Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's own experience of Her luminous presence in his mind.

Apirāmi's relationships with other deities are generally benign, though Her superiority over them is clear. We notice how the gods, like humans, find fulfillment in worshiping Her: "Humans, gods, undying sages all come near, their heads at Your lovely feet, O tender one, even while You stay with the pure one who put the cool moon, the snake, and the Bhagiratī too on his garlanded topknot" (4); "The heaven-dwellers and Dānava demons worship You, while the four-faced one and Nārāyaṇa ponder You in their minds" (14); "You move like an elephant in the snowy mountains, mother to the gods, Brahmā and all the rest" (22); "As devotees they praise Your fragrant feet, those gods who created the fourteen worlds and then protected, destroyed, wandered through them" (26); "to the gods in heaven She granted medicine, ambrosia from the ocean" (90). Because Apirāmi is superior to the gods, recognizing Her centrality ends devotees' allegiance to lesser deities: "I do not move lovingly toward gods and their useless rites, but to You I offer my love, and except for praising You I offer no praise" (64). Verse 97 nicely summarizes Her dominance over the gods who, in the end, want nothing but to praise Her:

> Sun, moon, fire, Kubera,
> the king of the immortals, Brahmā in the lotus,
> the destroyer of cities, the enemy of Mura,
> the Potiya mountain sage, Skanda holding the sword,
> Gaṇapati, Desire,
> and the rest too, beyond counting,
> all who've achieved merit:
> everyone praises our lovely woman. (97)

That community matters more than competition is seen most clearly in Her relation to female beings, divine and human. She is superior to them, and Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar prefers Her to them: "Divine woman, all those divine women attend you, but I do not worship them, I praise none of them in my heart" (81). Nonetheless, these female beings are not Her competitors, and stand in a closer relationship with Her than do the gods; rather, they seem always inclined to play and dance with Her. Thus Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar sees Her dancing, "amid the clan of Mataṅka women" (70); in praise of Her "the women sing and dance as they dwell in the grove of tamaṉi trees" (74). It is not surprising then that Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar should beg Her to come, at the time of death, "surrounded with Arampai and Your other women" (49). Female beings are with Her in a way that males are not, and with them one finds the way to Her.

The beautiful and dominant goddess is also a mother, first of all to Skanda, Her twelve-handed and six-faced son by Śiva:

> The entire heavens and the sky and earth watched that day
> when the great ascetic Lord incinerated Desire's body and his bow—
> but after that didn't You still make with him
> a wise son with twelve slender hands and six faces?
> O tender one, such is Your strength! (65)

This too is an expression of Her power: Śiva is the ascetic who destroys desire and stands above and beyond it, yet She overwhelms His defenses and so gets him to father Her child.

Her maternal love and grace are symbolized by Her breastfeeding the child the commentators identify as the Śaiva poet Jñānasambandhar:[14]

> With our father looking on, reflecting,
> by Your great mercy
> Your great breasts grew larger than golden hills
> with milk for the crying child;
> there were garlands too, and
> in Your bright hands a bow and arrows, and
> Your teeth gleamed like new palm buds:
> come, O Mother,
> stand right here, before me. (9)

Her generous milk is a sign of Her love and Her grace; as a child takes milk only from its mother, devotees respond instinctively to Her bounty. The reference to Jñānasambandhar indicates that wisdom too is at stake here, for She nourishes mind and heart as well as body, and thus promotes creativity. By extension, the reader too is invited to seek nourishment and inspiration.

In verse 70, cited above, we hear that Her generosity extends to everyone who approaches Her sincerely. She is nearby and transcendent, and thus too

the mother of all beings: "O Mother, You spread forth as sky and everything else" (16). She is mother even to the Veda, imagined as a tree that flourishes in Her vitality: "My help, the divinity I worship, my own mother, the sacred word's branch, shoot, spreading root" (2). Her supremacy lies in this maternal power:

> Ascetic, auspicious consort to our Śaṅkara,
> She is mother even to Him, and so
> She is a ruler beyond all deities, and so
> I will never weary myself in serving other gods. (44)

Her maternal role may also be expressed more philosophically, since this divine mother who gives birth likewise ends birth, and so Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar can accordingly beg that he "not be born here again after dying this time" (22).

As a mother, Apirāmi gives prosperity and vitality to those who love Her; contemplating Her becomes a way of life that offers flourishing and abundance:

> The scent, sweet taste, light, touch, and echoing sound
> that pervade earth, water, fire, fierce wind, wide sky—
> all this is joined as one,
> as the beautiful lady desired by Śiva:
> there is no wealth beyond reach
> for those ascetics doing the penance of touching Her small feet. (68)

She gives everything one can desire:

> Giving wealth
> giving learning
> giving a mind that never wearies
> giving divine form
> giving friends with no deceit in their hearts
> giving every good thing
> giving abundance to those said to love Her,
> Apirāmi with flowered anklets—
> all this by the glance of Her eyes. (69)

By contrast, those who ignore Her are ruined:

> Those who don't offer praise,
> don't worship,
> don't focus their minds even for a moment
> on Your lightning appearance,
> lose fame, clan, lineage, learning, quality, and
> all the time, at every hut,
> they carry begging bowls,
> they wander the whole earth. (67)[15]

Apirāmi is always linked with Śiva as His consort, by a relationship essential to both of them. Although Apirāmi is a wife (20, 62), She actively protects Her spouse: "O Ampikai, but still You make ambrosia from the poison drunk by Śiva, wearer of the topknot" (5). Śiva and Apirāmi are inseparable, because She is Half of him:

> Where is the temple in which You dwell?
> is it being half Your spouse?
> the foundation of the four recited Vedas—or their end?
> the white moon full of ambrosia or the lotus?
> my heart or the hidden ocean?
> O ever-unchanging auspicious one! (20)

> You are auspicious,
> Your breasts are like radiant bowls,
> O daughter of the mountain,
> Your arms wear crystal bracelets,
> O peahen of all the arts,
> You are half of Him from whose hair races the torrential Gaṅā,
> You are fiery, dark, red, white,
> O tender young woman! (21)

She is repeatedly referred to as part of Him or half of Him or on His side. The implication is not that She is secondary, but that neither She nor He is to be considered separately:

> You are the Lord's left half,
> so may the loveliness in which both of You delight
> and Your auspicious wedding design too
> come and end the waywardness of my mind. . . . (18)

> Umā and the one who is half of Umā
> have come here in one form
> and made me love them . . . (31)

Śiva is incomplete without his Apirāmi. By implication too, Her beauty energizes His deeds, and She is never apart from Him:

> Her feet lovely with anklet bells,
> in Her hand the net, goad, and five arrows,
> the beautiful lady of the three cities,
> Her body is deep red:
> to frighten those wicked demons in the cities
> who planned evil in their hearts,
> that Lord whose body is like fire
> bent a mountain as His bow—
> and She is His beautiful half. (43)

Like Him, She can tolerate great evil, and She does so in order to draw devotees to Herself:

> Even when their servants misbehave,
> great people naturally tolerate them—
> that's nothing new;
> You've merged into the left side of Him
> who drank that rare poison and whose throat is dark,
> O golden one,
> so even if You reject me,
> I will praise You. (46)

Śiva is always conquering desire, but His ascetic power is not separate from Her erotic power:

> Your form is overwhelming,
> Your face triumphant, glorified in every lotus,
> O lovely, tender one;
> to turn into defeat the victory of His helper, pleasure's master,
> with His third eye
> the Lord just looked at Him—
> but haven't You, his left half, conquered His mind too? (17)

Verse 62 suggests that it is Her beautiful and powerful presence that gives force even to His destructive power:

> With His golden bow,
> the bright warrior destroyed the three Dānava cities,
> he fought the frenzied, fierce-eyed elephant form;
> O lady,
> You are known for Your breasts that are like young coconuts,
> You are joined with His body, and
> in Your red lotus hands are Your cane bow and flower arrows:
> all this is ever in my mind. (62)

If Śiva can survive drinking the cosmic poison that threatened to destroy the world, it was because Her calming power enabled Him to do so.

Śiva is famously strong, but She conquers him and makes Him dance, as Her physical and sexual power easily overcomes His defenses (38) and gains control of Him:

> Adorned with pearls
> Your firm yet tender breasts grown as large as hills,
> make the Lord's strong heart dance;
> Your vagina is a fine cobra's head,

the Veda's cooling words are Your anklet bells,
O excellent lady. (42)

We have already noted verse 65, where Śiva, renowned for His asceticism, easily defeats Desire—even as His asceticism melts in Her presence, so that He is made to beget Skanda within Her. Accordingly, one is wise to contemplate Her and approach Her, since Her power is dominant:

Inaccessible to word and thought,
Your form appears visibly before my eye and in my mind;
by His eye the chief one destroyed desire,
but You are part of Him still, and so
all the world mocks His "unfailing asceticism,"
O higher than the highest. (87)

Verse 88 nicely encapsulates the relationship of Śiva and Apirāmi, their mutual enjoyment, their complementary and competing power roles—and illuminates what all this means for the poet. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar reminds Apirāmi of Her closeness to Śiva in order to chide Her about Her distance from himself, and to warn Her that She cannot easily get rid of this wayward child:

When I said, "You are the highest,"
I reached You, though I was alone,
and so
it's not right to rebuke me now,
"He's not fit to be among my devotees";
the one whose mountain bow destroyed the hostile demon city,
whose hand knocked off the head of Ayaṉ in the lotus—
You are half of Him, O excellent one. (88)

Her power is most clearly manifest in Her willingness to be present even to those unworthy persons who are nonetheless wise enough to be surprised when She does appear. The *Apirāmi Antāti* is the fruition of the ever-surprising encounter between Her and Her precocious child, this unworthy poet.

Visualizing the Beautiful One

The *Apirāmi Antāti* is the fruit of an experience of Apirāmi rather than a justification or description of the path to that experience. Everywhere in the hymn we find evidence of its contemplative dynamic, the realization that everything comes from seeing the Goddess, the beautiful one. Small, disparate glimpses and insights have to be integrated in contemplative practice as one sees Her more constantly and interiorizes that seeing. In the following pages we shall be collecting these insights from several perspectives.

In almost every verse, the hymn proclaims that Apirāmi is beautiful and most worthy of the contemplative gaze. Verses such as the following show us how Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar looks upon Her lovingly, savoring each detail:

> Bamboo and flowers are in Your hands,
> a garland of bright jewels on Your lotus body,
> a garland of many jewels on the poison snake's hood,
> O lady joined to the side of the prosperous one
> who wears only the eight directions. (37)

> Red sari on Her so slender figure,
> full breasts,
> a string of pearls,
> jet black hair woven with jasmine flowers,
> three eyes:
> place these in Your mind,
> see them altogether,
> there's no asceticism like that. (53)

> Jewelry box,
> golden bowls, splendid breasts rubbed with fragrance,
> pearl ear jewels, diamond earrings,
> the flourish of Your glance, the coral moon of Your smile:
> I've written all this down
> in my two eyes,
> O tender Apirāmi. (78)

The listener is invited, even dared, to experience Her beauty (38), and She likewise dwells in his mind-lotus (58, 90), and even dances there:

> Placing me with Your devotees,
> chasing away my cruel deeds
> so they rush from me,
> showing Yourself
> so my mind and eyes dance in exhilaration when they see You,
> You dance in my inner lotus—
> what's all this, lovely, divine woman? (80)[16]

She is also the *maṉōṉmaṇī*, the jewel that glows intimately within the mind (5), just below the rendezvous where Apirāmi and Her Śiva meet.[17] Upon seeing Her, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar inscribes Her in his eyes—"I've written all this down in my two eyes" (78)—and we may assume that it is from this interior inscription that the verses come forth.[18] His mind and writing are suffused with images of this beauty, and Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar in effect equates experiencing Her beauty with experiencing Her divinity; She is radiant, attractive, eye- and soul-filling, and that is the manner of Her divinity.

That She becomes an object of vision is always entirely Her doing. In a sense She has already been with Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar from the start, yet She still comes to him and just now sets him free:

> Beautiful lady, helpmate to my father,
> You come and destroy the ties binding me,
> You are deep red,
> You stand on Mahiṣa's head,
> You are the inner space, the dark one, ever virgin,
> in Your hand is the skull of the forest texts' Lord,
> in my thoughts, Your lotus feet. (8)

> Breaking down the births that deceive me,
> creating love to melt me inside,
> giving me the task of uniting with Your lotus feet,
> washing all dirt from my mind by the water of Your grace—
> O beautiful lady,
> what can I say about Your grace? (27)

Seeing Her draws the viewer into Her beauty:

> Your form is overwhelming,
> Your face triumphant, glorified in every lotus,
> O lovely, tender one. . . . (17)

This experience elicits total commitment:

> Jewel, jewel's radiance,
> ornament threaded with radiant jewels,
> the beauty of the ornaments we wear,
> disease for those not coming near You
> but also the remedy for that disease,
> great banquet for the immortals:
> after bowing at Your flower feet.
> I bow to no one else. (24)

Near the hymn's end, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar marvels at all She keeps doing for him, and accordingly appeals to listeners to join him in enjoying the experience:

> She holds me,
> She wears soft red silk,
> the shining moon is in Her radiant hair,
> She does not enter deceivers' hearts;
> Her waist is like a slender shimmering thread,
> She embraces my Lord's side, and from now on
> She'll no longer make me be born here:

that She not make you be born here either,
come, see Her. (84)[19]

The devotee shifts commitments and beliefs after uniting with Her: "Now there are no belief systems to be reckoned with, no mothers to give me birth, and my desire for women's bamboo shoulders has been sated" (31). Put positively, this means dwelling in Her community:

I hold no form but Yours in my mind,
I do not abandon the crowd of those who love You.
I take no pleasure in other beliefs,
O Goddess—
You are inside every thing within these three wide worlds
yet outside too,
sweet honey, exhilarating bliss, compassion,
jewel of my eye. (23)

Her appearing as object of vision is characterized by standard iconographic details that mark Her as fierce and lovely at the same time, perhaps lovely in Her fierceness. As we have seen, "female" weapons distinguish her beauty[20]:

in Your hands, a fresh-flower club, cane bow, tender net, goad:
O beautiful lady of the three cities,
You're all I know." (2)

in Your bright hands a bow and arrows, and
Your teeth gleamed like new palm buds. . . . (9)

"Lady," "Four-Faced," "Nārāyaṇī,"
"Five arrows in Her lotus hand . . ."(50)

and now You stand there
with Your long cane bow and five arrows . . . (59)

She has a kaṭampu-flower garland,
five arrows, and a cane bow for weapons,
and the bhairavas praise Her at midnight . . . (73)[21]

Apirāmi is all the more lovely because She holds Her weapons. She is female, and She is a conqueror; formidable, She is a mother to whom one can turn. Verse 85 nicely summarizes how Her power and Her beauty coalesce:

In every direction I see
Her net and goad,
the cool fresh blossoms where bees swarm,
five cane arrows,
the holy body of the lady of the three cities who ends all grief,
Her slender waist, girdle,

the kumkum on Her breasts,
the pearl necklace on Her bosom. (85)

Her weapons are lovely and Her beauty powerful; She captivates those willing to look upon Her with love, and overwhelms those who would move against Her devotees.

As devout listeners follow the encircling antāti, they reinforce and intensify their thinking about Apirāmi and how lovely She appears; and this intensification, though not linear, opens the way into direct encounter with Her and from that direct encounter into the experience of being deeply and personally illumined by Her. To appreciate Apirāmi as a beautiful woman is important, but seeing Her in that way should not be thought of as deferring or sidelining a deeper inner appropriation. Her beauty produces for the viewer a possibility and invitation that must be followed up on. Instead of a path from not-seeing to seeing, we find emphasis on fullness and a total but never completed experience of fullness. It is out of this interior ecstasy that the verses themselves emerge. As "anta-āti" indicates, the end is a beginning, and beginnings keep happening after the climax of encounter has already occurred. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar is simultaneously yearning to see Apirāmi, reflecting on the impact of already having seen Her, lamenting that others do not care for this vision, and urging them to open their eyes and see Her.

Learning from the *Apirāmi Antāti* about Divine Gender

Before reflecting further on Apirāmi in light of a Tamil Christian hymn addressed to Mary, let us recapitulate what we have learned thus far. Themes familiar from the preceding chapters—gender-specific character and physical beauty, moral and spiritual virtues particular to females, being a mother, being a spouse—remain prominent in the *Apirāmi Antāti*, though developed with nuances specific to this hymn and its Tamil language and style. Apirāmi is beautiful, as are Śrī and Devī, but She has Her own distinctive lovely features, Her flower-weapons, Her way of dancing and making music. Her beauty works to a different effect, radiating within devotees and filling them with an overflowing light. She is clearly a powerful spiritual and interior force, and there are still remembrances and echoes of Her ability to destroy demons. That power remains deeply connected to Her beauty, which penetrates the eyes and mind by a nearly irresistible luminosity.

Apirāmi remains decidedly female, but Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar is also determined to ascribe to Her the totality of divine attributes accorded to God in other Hindu traditions—just as a Christian theologian might wish to ascribe to God the Father a variety of maternal qualities. Her female characteristics function as a starting point for recognizing Her as a complete, all-encompassing divine figure.[22] This poetry is immediate, sensual, from and to the heart.

If so, we may ask whether the imagination and passion that so imbue the *Apirāmi Antāti* tell us something unique about this goddess, or rather inform us how any male or female supreme deity might be imagined in the south Indian context. We must be careful not to claim more than is warranted. The *Apirāmi Antāti*'s expression of goddess experience is stylized in accord with more widely shared conventions of Tamil poetry. The sensuality of the hymn and its emphasis on experience are in part due to Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's experience of the beautiful Apirāmi, but also in part due to how life and love are expressed in Tamil. This can be shown by a brief comparison with an antāti hymn to a male deity, the *Tiruvāymoḻi* of the ninth-century poet Śaṭakōpaṉ in praise of Kṛṣṇa. Consider these verses from verses from *Tiruvāymoḻi* II.5:[23]

Though loving the heavenly world,
my Lord joined with my self;
His hair is rich with garlands,
He carries the conch, discus, sacred thread, and necklace,
His red eyes are wide lotuses,
His red fruit mouth like a red lotus,
His feet too are red lotuses—
thus His lustrous gold body. (1)

His body, the radiance of the sun,
His eyes, red lotuses,
His hands lotuses too;
the place for Tiru, His chest,
the place for Ayaṉ, His navel,
and for Hara, whatever's left,
O, all this—
with no spaces left—
is my father's,
the great Lord who has mingled inside me. (2)

He has mingled inside me,
His red fruit mouth a lotus,
He is a dazzling bright mountain,
His eyes, feet, hands are lotuses;
the earth and all seven worlds are in His stomach, so
there is nothing
not mingled inside Him. (3)

These verses share with the *Apirāmi Antāti* the rich imagery, the focus on the deity's beauty, and even the intimacy of the deity's entrance into the poet. It would be unwarranted to suggest that only a goddess can evoke great wonder at beauty, along with sensuality and intimacy; goddesses are not necessarily more evocative of sensual composition. Any deity praised in Tamil might ap-

pear thus, and in a moment we shall see how Mary is similarly praised in Tamil.

Yet a certain difference may be proposed. When Śaṭakōpaṉ writes in the guise of a woman in love, separation and loss often come to the fore as the dominant mode of relationship, as these verses from song IX.9 show:

> The south wind fragrant with mallikai-flower scent splits me in two,
> alas,
> the sound of the splendid kuṟiñci pierces me, alas,
> as light departs, the evening confuses me, alas,
> the fine clouds in the red sky ruin me, alas:
> my Lord, His eyes lovely, tender lotuses,
> my Lord, great bull among the cowherds, great lion, my dark one,
> once clasped my shoulders and breasts, but now
> I don't know where to enter,
> I am alone, alas. (1)
>
> At this point,
> is there a way to protect my life's breath?
> My breasts yielded and my slender waist trembled
> when He plunged inside my body
> and distressed me in our intercourse,
> but then my Kṛṣṇa abandoned me,
> He left me behind, like a thief;
> the solitary young lion, my amazing one, does not come;
> but His lotus eyes, radiant mouth, dark cool hair, four shoulders,
> still split this sinner's mind, alas. (3)

Especially in his female persona, as reflected in these verses, Śaṭakōpaṉ struggles with God's absence and his inability to find God. Śaṭakōpaṉ yearns acutely for Kṛṣṇa, but His arrival is neither inevitable nor predictable. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar is always marveling at Her presence everywhere in his life. *Tiruvāymoḻi* is clearly rich in image and affect, but an element of absence and uncertainty remains: Will He come back, or not? By contrast, there is a richer and surer immediacy to Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's worship of Apirāmi, for She is always nearby, even excessively available to him. Śaṭakōpaṉ has tasted and been touched by Kṛṣṇa, and he hopes to see Him at death. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar sees his Goddess always, here and now; vision and immediacy are not a problem for him, since She is always and overwhelmingly present. Kṛṣṇa's absence drives Śaṭakōpaṉ to the edge of madness; Apirāmi's presence unbalances Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar by an excess of presence. The mood of separation does not appear in the *Apirāmi Antāti*, and I hypothesize (in lieu of further research) that longing is unlikely to appear prominently in a poem addressed by a male to a goddess.[24] Perhaps we can say this: when the divine is the object of intense desire, it is the female

divine, the goddess, who is most immediately available and visible, while the male divinity, the god, is elusive and at least seemingly uncommitted and able to move away to a distance. God is mostly transcendent but surprisingly near on occasion. The Goddess is ever present, amazingly close.

A final way to get at what we learn about goddess theology from the *Apirāmi Antāti* would be to reread the hymn along with the *Saundarya Laharī* and *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, thus making a comparison among the portrayals of goddesses in these three hymns. Here I offer just a few indications of how this might be done, and I will return to the topic in chapter 5. In its Flood of Bliss section, the *Saundarya Laharī* maps the interior path and project of a person willing to deconstruct and purify perceptions of women and of the goddess as the superlative woman. Such a person consequently becomes able to practice the disciplined, detailed learning-to-see that characterizes the hymn's Flood of Beauty section. That hymn climaxes in the prospect of a complete and integral devotion, a tantric bhakti. The *Apirāmi Antāti* begins at such a climax and explores what can be experienced and from the perspective of intimate union: "Rising, bright, radiant, auspicious mark on high, jewel prized by the discerning" (1). It reflects the life of the tantric devotee who has already seen the Goddess and been completely infused with Her light, how She is the one who is near, ever present in the devotee's life.

The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* is more explicitly theological than the *Apirāmi Antāti*, and is aimed at understanding properly how Śrī and Viṣṇu relate to one another without either diminishing the other. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar exemplifies by vivid images how Apirāmi and Śiva relate; that He is always with Her is clear to the poet, and he does not worry much about the proprieties of the divine relationship. For him, experiencing Her is foremost, while theology and even the spiritual path are secondary. She remains most important, all that really matters, illumining and divinizing everything. In the end, She is very much like Śrī, even if the theological frames differ.

Perhaps a key point we can glean from these three goddess hymns is that Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi are different, and theologians who compose hymns for goddesses accordingly write differently for each. There is no one answer to the question, "What are we to learn from goddess theologies?"

Mary in the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*: The Queen Comes to South India

Our third and final Marian hymn is the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*. Composed in Tamil by M. Appacami Mutaliyar and published in 1888, it honors Mary as queen (*araci*) among women (*mātar*) and as the sacred or divine woman (*amman*). Like the *Apirāmi Antāti*, the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* consists of one hundred verses in the antāti style, with similar meters, initial rhyme (but indeed,

with nearly identical syllables at the beginning of each line), end-beginning links among verses, and a similar creative tension between a set literary form and thematic variety. We can assume that Mutaliyar knew the *Apirāmi Antāti* and other antātis.[25]

The premise of the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* is that Mary is queen of Mylapore, a town (within present-day Chennai) taken as representative of Hindu orthodoxy; it is very near to the old Catholic center of San Thome. Mary, and not Hindu deities, is the truly beautiful one who makes Mylapore beautiful and flourishing. In the background are God's ancient deeds in Israel and in the life of Christ, and Mary as the mother of Jesus, but the central focus is that she is now there—or has always been there?—purifying and vitalizing the traditions and culture of that city. Jesus is the God who walked the earth, there in Palestine, and who performed wonders there; His mother is now here in Mylapore. Mary bestows upon Mylapore the same flourishing that occurred through the life and work of her son in biblical times. This dynamic of geographical distances and the image of a sacred but nondivine woman who outshines goddesses contrast with the simpler communicative style of an antāti such as the *Apirāmi Antāti*, where the true religious center lies only in mind and heart.

The first three verses exemplify how the antāti style and theological message are combined. Verse 1 elegantly melds elements from the Hindu and Christian traditions, as the God who creates, preserves, and destroys the world is Mary's child:

> You bear your jewel, the highest one, jewel of my eye,
> the creator, preserver, destroyer of the echoing sea and earth,
> the underworld and the pure, bright, jeweled world beyond,
> you wear the sky-jewel sun as your garment:
> graciously grant my wish
> to sing in praise of your feet,
> O queen among women in great Mylapore. (1)

Mary is garbed in the sun, she is mother, queen, ruler in Mylapore. Sovereign, she also carries a radiant jewel, her divine child who fulfils the duties attributed to primary Hindu deities with respect to the world: creating, preserving, destroying. Her significance cannot be separated from that of her divine child, but the end result is that it is she who is able to grant the desired goal—finding and praising her feet. Verse 2 echoes both the *Apirāmi Antāti* and the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* by emphasizing her glance:

> The queen among women in Mylapore surrounded by mātavi groves,
> Mary, the great mother whose dwelling touches the moon:
> if I praise her feet

so honored in this world by great ascetics, then
with eyes like unfading kuvaḷai flowers
that fine fragrant one will glance upon me. (2)

Mary's credentials are firm: her domain is above, in the heavens; she is accessible, her feet on the earth and honored by the wise; her eyes bestow grace upon her children.

Verse 3 then reflects on the transmission of wisdom from Palestine to Mylapore:

The virgin in Mylapore where fragrant lotuses bloom in broad pools,
mother of our highest beloved one
who dwells in the mind lotus of the twelve faithful companions
who say, "This is the fellowship of faith and friendship"—
she is the wise one in the highest realm:
true realization will come to you
if you think upon her lovely feet. (3)

It is Mary's son who resides in the mind lotuses of the twelve disciples, and in turn it is they who brought the Gospel to places like India and Mylapore. Mylapore is lush with natural beauty because Mary, mother to the transcendent God and dwelling in heaven, also dwells right here.[26] Access to this holy lineage of learning comes now by contemplating her lovely feet.

While focused intensely on Mary, the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* remains theologically orthodox. Holding God in her arms (verse 1), she bears the mystery of the Trinity, of the Second Person who descends:

She is the throne of the infinite threefold reality, a fine garden, and
she once gave milk to the incomparable lovely child who was crying,
she is the virgin in good Mylapore. . . . (60)

on the bright mountain she bore as human
one of the highest, radiant Three. . . . (67)

Jesus is the center of attention and the source of salvation, and indeed He is presented as the agent of all God's saving acts. He is the God who gave the Ten Commandments (53), helped Joshua win the battle of Jericho by stopping the sun (61), enabled Samson to defeat his enemies (81), and saved Jonah (92).[27] He is, of course, the same Lord who did extraordinary things in the Gospels. He walked on the water (5), He invited the good thief into paradise (30), and He offers Himself as nourishment for His people:

"My body is food sweet to eat,
my blood the vine's juice," says the Lord
whom the pure, sweet one holds in her radiant arms:
O poisoned, puny heart,

if you meditate daily on her holy name,
here in Mylapore
what ever could distress you? (76)

This child of hers likewise established the Catholic Church:

"Peter is foremost in the scripture,"
said the ruler,
the Lord whom she bore as her Son
in the stable that night, before the great ascetic;
she is queen of Mylapore,
our mother, our life,
the place radiant with true, splendid realization
wider than an ocean. (66)

Yet as all these verses so clearly indicate, the cumulative effect of a focus on Jesus is to position Him as a foundation for full-hearted devotion to Mary, who in fact turns out to be in practice the mediator of needed graces. He is nestled securely in her arms, and a response to His offer of Himself as food is to "meditate daily on her holy name." In a most glorious and lofty way, He points the listener's attention to her. We can recall here the similar dynamic operative in the *Akathistos*: uncompromising praise of God provides a context for praising her. As Śrī is never without Viṣṇu, and Devī and Apirāmi are never without Śiva, so Mary never stands entirely apart from the larger mystery of the Trinity and the Son. Yet like the three Goddesses, she is never relegated to merely secondary status.

Mary is the mother and nurturer of her son. She does act, but her deeds are only minimally recollected. Perhaps due to the significance of snakes in India's religious traditions, Mary is remembered as the one who destroyed the serpent, as recounted in the biblical books of *Genesis* and *Revelation*. The snake does not hurt her who is "untouched by the demon snake's poison" (4); rather, she destroys it:

In Mylapore surrounded by groves thick with many trees
dwells Mary whose feet crushed the serpent to death. . . . (7)

Of the zodiac signs,
she wears the sun,
she is queen among women,
great Mary who crushed the moon in heaven and the earless enemy
snake too,
the mother not to be contained in the mind. . . . (12)[28]

Her own birth confounds and overturns the rule of sin:

To end the fault that came by a woman,
she appeared as a flawed woman and so tricked sin,

great Mary of Mylapore amid lovely, ordered fields:
those who meditate on her true, radiant feet with love
and pray her auspicious prayer in fifty-three beads
rise to the heavenly place. (99)

This next-to-last verse effectively weaves together an acknowledgment of Mary's extraordinary role in salvation, the ritual of praying the rosary, the cultural motif of taking refuge at her feet, and the promised ascent from lovely Mylapore to the heavenly abode. But from beginning to end, the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* knows very well her primary deed: to bear and nurture her divine Son. The hymn's case for turning to Mary instead of goddesses is implied in the attribution to her of the images of natural flourishing distinctive to Hindu goddesses. The hymn also alludes repeatedly to Hindu religious motifs and values, in order to argue against them or reinterpret their hitherto distinctive roles in relation to Mary. For instance, like Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi, Mary herself subsumes the wisdom of the tradition, learning and arts:

The young woman—
there she is in Mylapore bounded by the waters,
where bees swarm in ya trees that touch the clouds,
where smelly ploughmen make fine beds and sleep in cool, muddy
paddy fields;
where poets who've learned the pleasing arts and traditions sing,
knowing the lovely grace of her blue-lotus eyes
even when they never mention it. (73)

If the true revelation is the Bible spoken by her Son, she is nevertheless the one who enables listeners to attend to that divine instruction:

I took pleasure in the words of lovely women
whose milk-white foreheads are like bows,
I wandered about enjoying empty pleasures,
I'd forgotten the commandments of the true revelation
spoken by your little child, the highest one:
but now be gracious,
O virgin of sweet Mylapore
where white swans swim in watered paddy fields. (10)

It is striking to see how the sacred text and Mary become almost a single object of veneration, as if she is the one giving access to the revelation:

They are the true sacred text:
for life—help leading to the broad heavens,
for poverty—great, increasing wealth,
for disease—medicine,
for ending the struggle of craving, desire—the finest way,

here, in Mylapore, flawless city,
white conches in rich pools:
the feet of Mary. (5)

Is it a peerless pool of ambrosia
praised by unstoppable mighty ones and ascetics?
or protection for those in difficult sorrow?
or help in penances?
It is her, radiant as the sacred text
the protector gave on the mountain. . . . (19)

She embodies the righteousness (*dharma*) brought by her son:

You gave form to the formless one
who sought out the people He made,
O Mary,
you are the shining mirror of dharma. . . . (89)

Consequently, Mary also destroys the false Hindu Veda:

She is the rich one in Mylapore
full of wealth, alari trees, paddy fields,
the gentle one wearing the bright sun as a garment,
the bright one destroying by her strong weapons
the lying sacred texts some call true,
the lovely daughter of the eternal one
who does the threefold work:
O inner mind, understand all this. (79)

This gap between the true Veda and false is emphasized in order that Mary may be praised as the one who crosses it.[29] She is the one who enables the devotee to accomplish effectively the goals offered ineffectively by Hindu deities; she remedies the afflictions of untruth, desire, anger (14), and the three delusions:[30]

To extinguish the evils of desire
that arise from the three sweet delusions,
she appeared in lovely, southern Mylapore
radiant with pearls and sugar cane
where she honors disciples and bestows liberation;
herself perfect in sweet, radiant liberation
she is queen among women,
devotion's seed. (26)

Conversely, she also bestows the bliss associated with liberation:

Some say,
"If you venerate the mother of Mylapore

amid pools filled with lotuses,
your soul will rejoice greatly,"
and then join themselves to her closely;
but those who do not reverence the woman
who wears the excellent sky-jewel and stars
will be dragged away by angry, pouncing demons. (8)

The consequence is that it makes sense for the religiously concerned person, Hindu or Christian, to take refuge at Mary's feet: "true realization will come to you if you think upon her lovely feet," (3) and "[meditating on her feet] ends the confusion of deeds, dilutes the poison afflicting the mind, makes bloom the seven virtues that destroy confusion" (4).[31]

It is no surprise that we find in the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* a concern for place not evident in the *Apirāmi Antāti*. Mary's son Jesus carried out His ministry in the biblical world of Palestine; she, the mother, now lives in Mylapore, as we are reminded in every one of the hundred verses. Indeed, it is basic to the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* that it maps several distances—spatial, temporal, divine, and human—that are to be overcome. The hymn balances spaces to be negotiated: the ancient biblical world in which saving deeds were enacted; Mylapore as a social and cultural setting; the passing over from a Hindu to a Christian economy of salvation, right here in Mylapore. To these can be added the still more metaphorical gaps: between God and humans; between God and Mary who is not-God; between Mary the virgin and Mary the mother; between the realm and power of He-who-is-God and she-who-is-not-God; between Mary who holds the creator in her arms and all other women and men.

By contrast, the *Apirāmi Antāti* counters the flow of ordinary time and space with an acknowledgment that She is everywhere all the time; the only location that matters is the inner place where She is ever-present, gracious and shining. In that inner space Apirāmi's beauty is experienced. There are no theological reasons why Apirāmi should be imagined as a distant figure, or as someone who has come with credentials established elsewhere and in a distant past. Apirāmi is really within, already, and wisdom lies in recognizing this presence. The practices of external vision awaken and recollect an obscured but already existent inner presence. The claim that Mary flourishes in Mylapore in a sense remedies the temporal and spatial divide from the Biblical world of her son, but still the hymn's dynamic differs from that of the *Apirāmi Antāti*. The *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* can approach but not realize completely the intense and completion interiorization that radiates from the center of the *Apirāmi Antāti*. The *Apirāmi Antāti* is about the amazing continuities of all human and divine realities. The *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* is about distances and their traversal, from there to here, from a privileged ancient time to now, from the outside to the interior. With Mary, who is not God, one gains access to the

graces of Jesus who performed great deeds over there, in Palestine, long ago; with Apirāmi, who is Goddess, one experiences now a perfect flourishing already available to those loving Her.

But we must also be careful not to exaggerate the differences. The *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* does very much want to acknowledge the importance of the turn within. The poet speaks frequently to his heart; indeed, "heart" and "mind" appear forty-five times. To venerate Mary and attach oneself to her is indeed the most efficacious religious act, and placing one's head at her feet, and her reality inside one's mind, are necessary steps toward being fully able and ready to receive her grace. Spiritual advancement is all about pondering her in one's mind:

> if you reflect on His mother in Mylapore,
> she will give a lovely eye
> to your rude inner self,
> O heart:
> and that is just what you desire. (24)

> so meditate on her, praise her, and
> experience what is pleasing:
> thus comes purity, O heart. (25)

> O hesitant mind,
> venerate her, forehead to the ground,
> recite her holy mantra and meditate,
> then sin will diminish and
> your good merit will rise and grow. (78)

> Before disease gets you
> and your grieving wife falls upon you in tears,
> think upon the splendid woman,
> her breasts glowing with trembling garlands of cool, blossoming flowers,
> the heavenly woman of great Mylapore,
> the spotless queen among women,
> and thus
> destroy the garland of sin,
> purify your mind. (85)

> she places lovely, glorious flower crowns
> on the radiant heads of those pure ones
> who've renounced in their hearts,
> and so they shall prosper. (91)

> if you reflect on her,
> yours will be consciousness,

your inner darkness dispelled,
yours the good path. (95)

Union with Mary gives one access to a divine grace that is not hers, a grace that is here but not from here; yet one can make this one's own, within one's heart, for she is nearby, right here in Mylapore. As in the *Apirāmi Antāti*, the verses of the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* in the end create a scenario where intense experience is the main prospect.

To know Apirāmi is to experience bliss, and to know Mary is similarly a way to bliss: the wise "invoke her beautifully and with desire as the jewel box of the promise, along with gathered crowd of heaven-dwellers—and so too she is our bliss" (29). So too, "she is queen of Mylapore, our mother, our life, the place radiant with true, splendid realization wider than an ocean" (66), and so one must trust her: "she has banished the darkness of this world and now to our delight she protects us" (42). The reward is great:

If we enter refuge thinking, "She helps even enemies,"
then with heavenly freedom
she will end our stubborn faults and keep us in service,
the beautiful one in lovely, southern Mylapore
where flowers blossom on ponds:
so make flower garlands for her feet,
O heart, gain that ambrosia. (35)

Powerful Mary, dwelling in Mylapore praised to the limit in all directions:
beauty for liberation,
the warm milk that gives health,
lucid praise,
the shield restraining smell and the other senses,
holy renown,
the boundary mark ending deeds' evil debt,
a star, fragrance:
all of this, excellent and abundant. (96)[32]

The theological confinement of Mary in the Christian tradition—she is not God, but God's mother, she is a mother who remains a virgin, glorified because she assents to God's plan—is in a way overwritten by the antāti style. Antāti privileges immediacy and an all-at-once apprehension of the whole over linearity and specificity of place. Each verse in the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* places Mary at the center of attention, and the effect of the hundred antāti verses is to compose an integral reflection ever centered on her lovely, radiant identity. The hymn's claims are tested close up in Mylapore, now revalorized as her dwelling place. Depending on how one reads the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*, one may stress the differences and distances that make Mary very much not a

goddess, or the simultaneities and interiorizations that make her tantamount to a goddess like Apirāmi. We are reminded that Mary used to be there, in Palestine; like Apirāmi, she is now here, where we live.

In both hymns, She—Apirāmi or Mary—is the real center of attention. Whoever the male divinity may be, or whatever She may not be, Her efficacy is nonetheless the point of the hymn. No other divinity is required. Apirāmi, as we saw, remains always connected with Śiva, but in fact He recedes into the background, shadowed by Her prominence. Mary is theologically dependent on God's sovereign action, but it is she who stands in the hymn's foreground, and God's presence exists largely in sacred memory. As in previous chapters, the wife and mother is in the end the primary object of veneration, not the theoretically more important husband or son who may in fact serve to legitimate that veneration. She is mapped in a larger and theologically correct frame of reference, which becomes background to a focus on her—for it is She who is here.

Here too, the power of the two hymns lies in their ability to draw readers into encounter with Her/her: both invite us to find in their words points of entry into the encounters dominant within them. On this level we learn much simply by reading them over and over, one after the other, and then also by reading them together. Both awaken an awareness of the condition of which they speak. Addressing Apirāmi who dwells inside one's mind or Mary who arrives there from afar is in both cases real, direct address. Even if one has no disposition to speak to Apirāmi or has little interest in conversations with the mother of God, the more one reads and allows the words and images to have their effect, the better disposed one may become to the possibilities. We discover Her within, and at Her lotus feet we surrender; what this means, and how it happens becomes clear only when we see through the words, and reach Her where She is to be found: always here, and just arrived.

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5

Three Hindu Goddesses, Mary, and Reading Ahead

Once before You set me straight,
so after that, is it a good idea to reject me now?
So whatever I do, even should I fall into the sea,
by Your holy compassion help me to the shore:
let that be Your intent!
You have one form,
many forms,
O formless one, my Umā!

One might wonder if, in addition, such a flowering is not the result of a *lack* in the Protestant religious structure with respect to the Maternal, which, on the contrary, was elaborated within Catholicism with a refinement to which the Jesuits gave the final touch, and which still makes Catholicism very difficult to analyze.[1]

In the preceding chapters we have explored the meaning of goddesses by studying the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti*. We have noted with care how Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi are described, encountered, and addressed in the three hymns as expressive literary works, as theological statements, and as read in light of their commentarial traditions. To the extent possible in one book, I have attempted to show the complexity and richness of three instances of theological reflection that take gender and the idea of a goddess seriously. A briefer look at the *Akathistos*, *Stabat Mater*, and *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* has helped us to disclose more clearly the meaning of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi in light of Marian piety and the-

ology; it has also enabled us to consider anew the tradition of devotion to Mary as the central female person of the Christian tradition, honored not as God but as the mother of God.

We can begin on a simple level the task of consolidating what we have learned. I hope by now to have dispelled some of the more simplistic notions regarding goddesses—and regarding "Goddess" too—and their meaning in a religious tradition where they have been worshiped communally and pondered theologically. It should now be less easy, if not impossible, to imagine that goddesses are merely archaic survivals of the prehistoric age, rendered exotic or obsolete by the arrival of more reasonable and transcendental understandings of the divine. There is no indication in India that goddess traditions are relics of a distant past, beyond which intellectual discourse has necessarily moved. Goddess traditions can of course be underdeveloped conceptually or aligned with diminished notions of divinity—as can traditions oriented to male deities; but there is nothing necessarily more or less intellectually cogent about god-thinking compared with goddess-thinking, or even about God-thinking compared with Goddess-thinking. There is much to learn in all these instances.

In Hindu India, acknowledging goddesses was not viewed as incompatible with an ordered, centered theistic system, nor as detrimental to divine unity or transcendence, nor as necessarily diminishing the transcendence of the divine or the viability of refined conceptions of divinity. The worshiper of a divine couple does not have to be a polytheist, since Hindu theologians have commonly sought ways to maintain divine and cosmic unity even in light of the gender distinction. There is no reason then to imagine that a concern for credible theological reflection would make it impossible to take goddesses seriously. Those concerned about the inner coherence of ideas about God can make sense of the concept of God—and not just a variety of gods—while still asserting that there is a supreme Goddess as well.

Since the authors of these hymns were choosing to praise goddesses even when gods were amply available, it is instructive to observe how they made theological choices about the words and images that apply to goddesses, the ways in which goddesses are like ordinary women or not, and the strategies by which we move from what we know of ordinary human beings to what can be said of goddesses.

The hymns therefore indicate advantages to thinking of the divine as gendered, as personified and embodied in female and male persons. The turn to a supreme female figure can be achieved without losing sight of the maximal attributes of the divine, and without precluding continuing reverence for a supreme male figure.

No single conclusion need be drawn from this recognition of theological positions and possibilities explicit and latent in the goddess hymns, and there is room for diverse theological responses to these materials. The verses make their meanings clear by all manner of literary device, and what they say is

communicated by a kind of sacramental imagination that is always theoretically underdetermined and irreducible to any particular theological meaning. Moreover, disagreements are to be expected regarding particular conceptions of the divine or particular uses of anthropomorphic conventions about women and men. Some Christian theologians will be more liberal or more conservative than these particular Hindu goddess theologians, since there is nothing inherently liberal or conservative about goddess worship. Some non-Hindu readers who study this material will find it more profitable to converse with Parāśara Bhaṭṭar and his contemporary representatives, or with Śaṅkara and the tradition of the *Saundarya Laharī*, or with Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's heirs. But in all of this there will be no reason to exclude from intelligent conversation about the divine person theologians who worship goddesses and theologize about the meaning of that worship.

The hymns are rich in numerous smaller insights about body and spirit, gender understood in conventional but also more subtle and imaginative ways, the divine role in the world, the richness and limitations of particular images of gods and goddesses, the modes and effects of the (male) encounter with goddesses as an encounter that is embodied, psychological, mental, and spiritual.

For instance, we have seen repeatedly how the body and sense perception are valued positively and not merely subordinated to nonphysical spiritual attributes. The material dimension helps one to conceptualize and imagine a spiritual dimension that rises beyond the material, but without ever leaving it behind. Although the possibilities and problems of divine materiality in themselves form a significant theological topic that cannot be handled in passing here, at least we can also say that these Hindu theologians are proposing in a coherent and convincing manner an understanding of several goddesses that entails admitting gendered divine physicality.[2]

So too, we can observe that portraying goddesses as mothers makes it possible to give greater density and depth to the idea that the divine person is a mother. "Mother" is a term bearing multiple nuances, and it is used in similar but not identical ways in the goddess hymns and Marian hymns. No single portrayal of the mother, divine or human, captures the essential truth of motherhood, whether one is inclined or not to approve of the very idea of distinguishing the divine woman as a mother figure. As we consider the motherhood of Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary, differences in theologies of the mother emerge, and these cannot be adjudicated unless there is an interreligious conversation on gender and the divine, a theological consideration of the divine mother and divine father.

The hymns draw on the possibilities of natural imagery, sense experience, the congruence and differences among male and female bodies, and vividly portray these within the creative constraints of verse form. Although the appeal to experience may also be found in a wider body of literature praising male

deities, the affirmation of materiality, body, and sense experience is more evident in goddess hymns. Image and sound, taste and touch and smell all matter, while pleasure is a carefully nuanced but nonetheless theologically pertinent criterion for significance.

The Marian hymns less vigorously promote the continuity of the material with the spiritual, instead proposing Mary as a paradoxical figure whose role accentuates the necessary rupture between who God is and all that is not God, and the unexpected way in which that rupture is to be negotiated. But in the Marian hymns too, poetic style and devotional fervor communicate more richly than anything that can be reduced to a particular theological conclusion. More than theology can justify, Mary is venerated as the one in whom the divine appears; she is the only Christian to whom we must remember to deny divinity.

As I have admitted from the start, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* are just three hymns. They do not tell us everything that needs to be known about Hindu goddesses. Studying them does not offer sufficient grounds for assuming that one has ascertained what is unique in praising goddesses or why honoring the Goddess is harmonious with or superior to honoring simply God. It will take further, extensive comparative study to differentiate between goddess hymns such as the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* and related, comparable god-focused hymns such as the *Śrīranga Rāja Stava*, *Subhagodaya*, and *Tiruvāymoḻi* mentioned, respectively, in chapters 2, 3, and 4. We can also ambition the still larger task of tracing more surely, by other comparisons, how males approach and write for their beloved divinity differently from the way women do. All these issues need to be studied more widely, in relation to myriad other texts and practices.

Nonetheless, reading the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti* together creates a nexus of theoretical, practical, and experiential possibilities that go beyond the potential of each taken separately. Together the three raise issues of theory, practice, and experience and do reliably introduce us to a canon of works wherein intelligent and effective goddess-speech is the norm. By this triple reading, we have moved beyond any generic discussion of goddesses.

Within the limits of what we learn from these hymns, and with due respect for the larger conversations surrounding goddesses, we can thus venture to say more concretely what it means to be (or not be) a divine woman, "a goddess" and not simply "a deity." Goddesses are possessed of a gender specification as "female," as material and spiritual persons who are truly gendered, and thus in certain ways they are strongly like human women. "Goddess" need not refer only to some immortal female being but it can refer also, and with more rigor, to superlative female persons possessing attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence, and unfailing salvific beneficence. The three hymns stress continuity from the human to the divine, maximalizing human flour-

ishing and highlighting the generation within the devotee of the same power manifest in the goddess. Perhaps (and although I have not found this stated in the hymns) human females who dance and sing with Her may be conceived of as innately divine, whereas human males reach their potential by encountering a goddess.

Goddess discourse is a discourse about human nature and human possibilities. As we saw in chapter 1, Grace Jantzen suggests that the philosophy of religion discourse be thoroughly rethought and revised in light of attention to natality, flourishing, and the array of issues related to living well. Even by its title—*Becoming Divine*—her book suggests the depth of this reconstruction of the intellectual framework within which we think through the nature of the divine and human, and test the potential fullness of human being at the limit where the human and divine meet. We can now see that the goddess hymns exemplify and give a certain concreteness to what Jantzen is suggesting, as they balance reflection on the neediness and frailty of the human condition with attention to the virtually unlimited possibilities that accrue when a human is opened to the divine by encounter with Śrī, Devī, or Apirāmi. These hymns offer an intelligent model of divinization alternative to that theologized around the Son of God, son of Mary, known from the Christian tradition.

These are intelligent theological discourses that must be engaged and discussed critically with respect to particular issues; they cannot be dealt with by simple rejection or benign neglect. There are no plausible grounds for a theologian to suppose that nothing of importance is to be learned from the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa,* the *Saundarya Laharī,* and the *Apirāmi Antāti*; if so, then there is an obligation to think through what they teach us. The study of goddesses and of gender in the specificity of different religious traditions can be taken as a mature topic ripe for deeper study in the Hindu theological community and in interreligious conversations. Although any particular theologian may be unable to pursue these possibilities, the community of Christian theologians does not have the luxury of ignoring so great a theological resource.

Attention to specific instances where goddess worship is voiced and interpreted with theological sophistication should make us rethink standard positions about gender and the divine, pushing us imagine differently—amid a richer set of options—how we (continue to) think and speak and act with respect to God. There is no plausible way for a Christian simply to affirm the existence of goddesses or to participate easily in worship of them. Those of us who are Christian cannot simply incorporate goddess worship and theology into Christian practice, and even to think seriously about goddesses challenges the Christian theologian deeply. The grounds for resistance to learning from hymns such as the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa, Saundarya Laharī,* and *Apirāmi Antāti* may be more instinctual and biblical than rationally cogent, but nonetheless such reasons are real and must be honored. But even so, we cannot merely presume that God is only male or only beyond gender, nor that it is somehow

particularly incoherent to suggest that there could be a female divine person. We must also not fail to notice that we lose something if we deny to the divine person the density of material and spiritual gendered being.

Each hymn makes the case for a careful but positive utilization even of conventional cultural portrayals of male and female. Conventions are taken as viable starting points for sophisticated images of the Goddess and Her spouse. These authors make a plausible case that standard characterizations of female beauty—even as feminine—can be usefully retained and revalued in a more realist determination of the divine as gendered female and male. Real women and real men, understood not simply as essences but also as socially constructed persons, find themselves to be mirrors of the divine woman and divine man, on material, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual levels. This is not to say that the largely male writing of woman and goddess articulated in these hymns—and in this book—do not require critique in light of women's experience and contemporary feminist theory. As for the hymns, any writing from two or four or ten centuries ago requires such critique, and cultural differences must be noticed, respected, transgressed—but the task is retrieval and renovation, not outright dismissal. As for *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, my hope is that it will profit from such critique while at the same time expanding the horizons of those who would critique it on particular points.

Learning from Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi

Once general features are noted, we must still reread each hymn according to its own genius and take stock of what we learn from it about goddesses or, more particularly, about Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. Our study of the hymns and our textual encounter with Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi offer us rich ways of imagining these three goddesses. Let us consider each in turn.

The *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* vividly shows us the possibilities inherent in a richly textured articulation, visualization, and enjoyment of gender complementarity as a feature of divine reality. Conventional gender differences provide a starting point for reflection on the divine nature, and Parāśara Bhaṭṭar manifests no qualms about employing these as his starting point for reflection on Śrī; yet he also makes clear that an appeal to social convention ought not be allowed to diminish the status or centrality of Śrī. Gender differences are necessary if humans are to comprehend the divine person/s in terms humans can understand, since we have no experience of relating to persons whose gender is only metaphorical or entirely nonmaterial. Śrī and Viṣṇu accordingly choose to present themselves in the mode of a south Indian couple, female and male. But neither is this gracious self-representation as male and female merely an appearance adopted for the sake of humans; rather, it is also communicative

of their own inner relationship as female and male, as they complement and enhance each other's pleasure. They are alike in every way, but differentiated according to gender and related social features. They choose to make their relationship more imaginable to humans, and more enjoyable to themselves, by choosing to delight in one another as male and female.

What does this tell us about Śrī as a goddess? She is a spouse; She is devoted to Her husband; She is beautiful; She balances Viṣṇu's justice by what is taken to be a typical female kindness and graciousness. There is no question of ruling out the presence of God, the male divinity. Yet Parāśara Bhaṭṭar has revalorized those standard attributes of the good woman and wife and turned them into strategies of divine graciousness, no less free or potent than those governing the persona and action of Her consort, Viṣṇu. Belief in a supreme God evidently does not rule out, at least on any accessible rational grounds, belief in a supreme Goddess. He and She are different, and that difference is to the benefit of humans. He acts and She does not, yet it is Her presence that gives efficacy and fruition to whatever He might do. He perfectly represents and embodies justice and its enactment, while by the simplicity of Her glance She exemplifies pure graciousness, a mercy that reaches beyond justice. As Lord, He is in charge, but it does not make sense to say that She is "not in charge," since He never acts without due consideration of Her pleasure. While it is central to Śrīvaiṣṇavism to affirm a single supreme deity, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar shows that the divinity accommodates a distinction of male and female that can then be dramatically played out as maximizing both divine and human well-being. In his view, the divine-human community is better off when the richly gendered natures of the divine Persons is recognized and celebrated.

The *Saundarya Laharī* powerfully charts the spiritual path, in a language of praise and direct address that carries devotees closer to the supreme Devī whom they praise. Conventional notions of male and female and gender appearances are again taken as a starting point; but here female body, appearance, and ways of being are analyzed, reused, and revisualized toward a purer, more efficiacious vision of Devī, the divine woman. The ordinary is deconstructed, and retrieved in a distilled, purer form—but then yet again reconstructed in a lovingly detailed contemplation of how Devī appears, head to toe. The *Saundarya Laharī* shows us how vision is not a medium of cool and distanced observation but rather a portal into the world Devī produces from Her bliss and beauty, and in which spectators become participants. To see is to become empowered and then transformed by moments of tasting and sharing in Her bliss and beauty. At the hymn's end, however, it is still left to the listener/reader to decide whether to enter alone and unaccompanied into the pleasure She offers to those looking upon Her with a steady and simple eye.

What does this tell us about Devī as a goddess? Devī, like Śrī, is equipped with the physically and culturally expected attributes of a woman, divine or

human, including a body that men find attractive. Like Śrī, She has a spouse from whom She is inseparable, for Śiva continues to be present and His powers and deeds are remembered. But He has also retreated into that realm of memory, serving as a background for Her vivid presence, just as He is a sheet for Her couch. The *Saundarya Laharī* accordingly recognizes Her de facto independence, Her positioning as the sole object of true devotion, and Her power as the bestower of grace, desire's fulfillment, and liberation. Materiality and body map the way into the spiritual realm, for Her body is the sacramental place where encounter with the divine becomes comprehensible and manageable. Devī is She who maximizes bliss in every realm of experience and who enables all to flourish. To see Her is to enter into a relationship with Her in which the entire array of desires and emotions are maximalized and brought into play. Her beauty creates not only a natural world but also a social world, a divine court and royal chamber where all beings divine and human taste and maximize Her already perfect bliss. All this is what the Goddess naturally, divinely does.

The *Apirāmi Antāti*, rich in myriad images of the goddess, is primarily an expression of an inner world already filled with Her. The hymn aims, indeed primarily, at mapping what it means to have a total goddess experience that is yet necessarily thought and expressed in a linear fashion, over time. Each verse is a contemplation that intends to provoke in the reader/listener a specific glimpse of Her. Places and names, deities and myths, tumble over one another, none explained fully or entirely homogenized, as Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar enunciates Her presence one hundred times over, in recurring, juxtaposed images and insights. The effect of this repetitive process—there is no real advance in the verses, no sequential argument or progress toward some particular goal—is to give those who love Apirāmi multiple vivid images of Her, and so to awaken their imaginations to possibilities that then become actual. Here, indeed, the medium is the message.

What does this tell us about Apirāmi as a goddess? The *Apirāmi Antāti* emphasizes now familiar themes: Her beauty, Her power, Her inseparability from Her spouse and also Her independence and supremacy, and Her status as the sole sure place of refuge. Because Apirāmi is a goddess, She is nearby, She gives endless delight to those not willing to settle for abstractions. Her illuminating presence infuses Her devotees' minds and hearts intensely and completely. She is not portrayed in a settled fashion as is Her spouse Śiva. Rather, the point is that Hers is a pervasive and protean presence affecting even Her devotee's ability to think, imagine, or speak of Her. She is a mother who brings Her devotees to birth but also ends their births; She is a divine visitor who keeps visiting, a guest of whom one never tires as She dwells and shines in one's innermost being. No god could be this way for Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar.

Learning from Mary and the Goddesses

In chapter 1, I argued for the value of comparing what we learn of Hindu goddess traditions with specific strands of the Christian tradition. Important and worthy resources for comparative reading include texts portraying the divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit presented as female or possessed of female attributes, and the tradition of Jesus as mother. Nothing written in the preceding pages should be taken as discouraging such choices, for we can learn much from further comparisons, for instance thinking about Wisdom and Śrī, Jesus and Devī, or Spirit and Apirāmi. In fact, though, I have found Mary, and not the Spirit or Jesus or Wisdom, to be the most promising candidate for reflection on the superlative female. On this point I also find myself in a way simply honoring a long Catholic tradition of Marian devotion that now aids us in appropriating the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, *Saundarya Laharī*, and *Apirāmi Antāti*.

As I indicated in chapter 1, choosing to think of Mary along with Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi does not presuppose that I think her to be a goddess, or "goddess-lite." In the Christian tradition, she is not divine; yet neither is she simply a typical or even extraordinary Christian believer or typical woman, at least insofar as she has been remembered and honored in Christian traditions of theology and piety. Mary has been remembered, encountered, and honored in very particular and striking ways at particular places where she appears. People go to Mary because of her closeness to God, because they know where to find her, and because she finds them first. She is a woman, possessed of a woman's body. She has been singled out as standing in a unique relationship to the Father and the Son, and Christians have regularly sought her help as the paradoxically virgin mother in whom God is paradoxically most present, and as their own mother. In its theological depth, devotional passion, materiality, and odd particularity, this praise of Mary is analogous to Hindu goddess discourse, and we learn much by contemplating her along with Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi, and seeing how these traditions honor their supreme female person.

Resemblance between her and them is material and imaginable—they are all honored as persons with bodies, as mothers, as defined in relation to the males in their lives but also as possessed of their own power, and as willing to get involved in human affairs in particular ways that male divinities do not rival. Differences still matter, too, but it is by attention to both similarities and differences that one becomes able to see Mary and Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi as mutually illuminating female persons. There is of course no generic Mary possessed of a single significance, just as there is no generic "goddess" to whom Mary might be favorably or unfavorably compared. Mary is different from different goddesses in different ways; she is like and unlike Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi in specific ways. Adhering to the particular and textual approach characteristic of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, I have therefore considered a

specific Marian hymn in each chapter, respectively the *Akathistos*, the *Stabat Mater*, and the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*. By a turn to these admittedly different compositions, I have simply tried to map with certain theological coordinates some of the possibilities emerging when Mary's place in the tradition is read carefully according to a few of her particular textual presences. Just as the Hindu hymns richly vary the meaning of "goddess," each Marian hymn suggests particular and useful ways of imagining who Mary is, and how she is related to the larger divine plan and divine action. We have therefore learned also by avoiding generalizations about Mary, instead entering into conversation with these particular poets who have loved her.

The *Akathistos* manages to make very clear the primacy of divine action and God's engagement in the world in Christ; thereafter, unexpectedly, it insists on addressing words of praise to Mary. It keeps reflecting on what God has done, and keeps voicing litanies in praise of Mary, as if she is the tangible, visible point in space and time where God's act is most evident. Mary is the one to whom praise can be directed most vividly, now: acknowledge Him, praise her. The reason for reverencing Mary above all others has little to do with a competition in which she surpasses God or takes over God's role. Rather, it is in Mary—as her individual body and soul, in her identity as a particular woman who becomes a mother for God—that God's action is manifest in a way that is true of no other. The woman who is not God is the one by whom God is most evident. Even Jesus is not taken as manifesting the action so vividly, perhaps because one pictures in Him so strong a continuity of divine action and human becoming that the paradox, so clear with reference to Mary, is diminished. Mary is also not Śrī, in whom the drama of a complete female divinity is clear, but in encountering her we meet the particular female in whom the divine is best known.

In the *Stabat Mater*, the human encounter with death is dramatized in the moment where Mary watches Jesus die; we watch her watching, and then turn and speak to her directly. The centrality of the death of Jesus is properly acknowledged; indeed, the entire scene occurs with His cross in full view. But His visibility becomes background for the turn to Mary, our recognition of her as the person through whom we share the saving power of Christ's death. He has acted, but now she is the living intermediary to whom we speak and from whom we gain a share in eternal love and life. Her tears become fonts of love and life. Mary is not Devī, in whom the logic of contemplating the divine woman is most powerfully clear, but by seeing Mary, the believer progresses in seeing and experiencing the divine and female where they come together. This is the hope expressed in encountering Mary, as in encountering Devī.

In the *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*, a hymn surely in competition with the *Apirāmi Antāti* and similar hymns, the differences between Mary and God matter less than the differences of space and time to be overcome if one is to encounter her where she is now to be found, nearby in Mylapore. The narratives of God,

Jesus, and Mary are rooted in Palestine, in the places and stories of the Bible. But distances are traversed, and subsequent miraculous events occur in India as well, particularly in Mylapore made lovely and fruitful by her presence. Again, God and God's action are first and foremost; but again too, it is at the feet of Mary, the mother, that one shares the fruits of that divine action. Mary is not Apirāmi, whose presence makes most clear what it means to experience the divine intimately and within, but if we face Mary and touch her feet, we approach as near as possible to the divine reality. She is near now, and so too the divine action becomes vividly near. Who God is and what God does is in part defined in reference to this woman who is not-God; it is in her that God's doing and becoming take on a sensible, material form.

In Mary we see the other side of God's becoming human in Jesus. The overall effect is to assimilate Mary to the likeness of God, in a particularly intense fashion. If Jesus is the one Christians must remember to identify as God, Mary is the one Christians must remember to identify as not-God. We say, "Jesus really is God," and "Mary really is not God." In both cases, the insistence is theologically correct, and also revealing of a deep, though constrained dynamic in the Christian tradition, toward his being nothing but human and her being fully divine.

As not-God, Mary is entirely here, all the more powerfully present. She combines the material and spiritual in a way most analogous to the portrayals of the divine feminine in our three Hindu hymns. The "not" in "not-God" is productive in the construction of Mary as a focus of veneration, as the miraculous person in whom the divine is suddenly present. This powerful paradox is not to be overlooked out of a legitimate and worthy desire to locate the imagery of the female as well as male inside God.

After our comparative reading, moreover, we can see that Mary is not merely not-divine, but she is not-divine in particular and interesting ways. She is not-Śrī (and thus not the woman in whom God finds His freedom, pleasure, and meaning), not-Devī (and thus not the woman in whom the world is alive, beautiful, becoming-divine), and not-Apirāmi (and thus not the woman whose beauty illumines every inner place). Yet Mary is in her own way God's best work, the source of life, the most luminously beautiful person we can ever see. We can therefore speak of her more interestingly because we are now more acutely aware of particular ways in which Mary might have been otherwise theologized, not merely as a goddess, but as Śrī or Devī or Apirāmi. It is no longer useful to retreat into a general debate about the merits of imagining Mary as a goddess or not a goddess.

In the goddess hymns, divinization is articulated in terms of specific understandings of goddesses in particular material forms with particular personalities. Encountering a goddess becomes a kind of mirror in which humans see their own untapped capacities, the transcendent dynamism of their own desires, and thus progress on the path toward a perfect life—material, gen-

dered, relational—in encounter with the beautiful goddess. Goddesses are not demythologized and turned into historical women in the Hindu context; rather, the devotee of the goddess is divinized, perhaps remythologized as Her child. By contrast, the Marian hymns accentuate the Christian experience of not being divine, of postulating a Mary who is praised maximally but always marked, a second time, as only human. As one approaches the horizon of divinity, the nondivine nature of Mary is accentuated, placing her foremost in scenarios where God's action is acknowledged as the necessary background context. In the end, the situation is similar: humans, who are not divine, find God and God's saving grace by going to Mary, who also is not God. Humans get what they need from Her, be it Mary, Śrī, Devī, or Apirāmi. Those not permitted to approach the latter three can nonetheless approach Mary, now with a different sensitivity.

The goddesses and Mary serve as mirrors in which humans see their own potential for divinization and its possible fulfillment, and are thus guided toward their fulfillment as complete human and even divinized persons. The Hindu hymns tell us that by grace or inner potential, humans are invited to participate in Her divine bounty and perhaps even to dwell within the divine reality. All of this is for the better. In the Marian hymns there is a cultivation of Mary's paradoxical status as Mother of God and yet not divine as a basis for a transformative life-giving power. Other humans, who also are not divine, discover transcendence by way of the same paradox.

Again, I do not anticipate immediate, substantive changes in the Christian understanding of God and Mary; the language and theology of Goddesses will not become prevalent in Christian communities; the image of God as a supernally beautiful woman will not flourish in Christian circles. Similarly, Hindus are not likely to see a woman who is godlike but not-god as preferable to supreme female figures such as Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. But we can affirm with greater awareness what it means to say that Śrī is Viṣṇu's eternal and equal consort, or Devī the supreme reality in whom even Śiva subsists, or Apirāmi the lovely divine woman who entirely infuses one's life, or Mary God's beautiful mother. Even if Christians do not take so bold a step as to affirm gender differences in God, we can be more aware of the choices made in moving between a God who transcends all matter and is not gendered and a Mary who, though not God, seems to resemble and stand in for the divine female, even as she is declared not divine. Hindus can, I hope, reflect on the value of honoring a powerful mother who is central to the faith even if not also a goddess.

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother thus aims to complicate how we think of Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary. Each figure, in each hymn, is fascinating and worthy of consideration, particularly as illumined by the accompanying commentarial and theological traditions. Heard and read in pairs, triplets, and then all together, these hymns are received more complexly and repositioned as legible

from different angles, their originality and particularity appearing more clearly in light of the other hymns.

Further and more specific comparisons then too become possible, of course, with respect to how religious cultures have identified and related to supreme female figures, negotiate the relationship between such figures and supreme male figures, and make use of conventional expectations about women, their bodies, and their motherhood, in constructing images and concepts of female figures who are, or are not, goddesses. Even more particular comparisons are also possible. For instance, one might reflect further on the nature of motherhood, or on the ways in which Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary offer differing responses to suffering and death as aspects of the human condition. Whatever we decide to make of Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, or Mary today, as we move beyond generic reflection on goddesses or generic comparisons of Mary and goddesses, our decisions are more richly rooted in specific comparisons and the fruitful investigation of related themes. All of them are now available to us, and whatever our theological decisions, Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary will appear as more interesting persons if we meet them in one another's company.

Reconnecting to the Wider Conversation and Imagining the Larger Book(s)

In chapter 1, I admitted that this study is not directly a work of feminist theology, but I also expressed my intention that it be informed by feminist concerns and be of use to feminist scholars and theologians interested in deepening our understanding of particular Hindu goddesses, and of those goddesses and Mary seen anew in light of one another. For this purpose, we have also had to ask how one might reread the obstructions, concealments, incongruities, and also possibilities latent in the tradition of Mary, read in light of the different, more material, and integrally maternal representations of "women" in the Hindu traditions, and in light of a host of other readings and perspectives and from a variety of cultural perspectives.

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother has been a project in retrieval, as we have studied carefully and found useful even classical hymns that were not written to address today's problems. I have attempted to read the Hindu hymns in a liberative fashion, for the sake of a more productive understanding of women in premodern India, of the gendered aspect of the divine, and of three goddesses in particular. Experiments in careful and comparative reading also help us to avoid essentializing the problem and solution, as if there is any unitary problem such as patriarchy or any unitary meaning for words such as "goddess" or "human" or even "mother." My goal has been to show how we might

not just understand the problem of gender but also retrieve and put to new use positions handed down in the Hindu and Christian traditions.

I hope to have persuaded readers that this kind of detailed study is necessary, and that it adjusts the frame within which feminist theological reflection can profitably advance. The conversation is now broader, responsible to the classics of more than one tradition. It is moreover a conversation that will have to be broadened further, as still other voices—textual and classical, oral and present—are introduced. My approach has admittedly been inclusive and optimistic: there is much to be learned, everyone can learn, even very different traditions can be usefully brought into dialogue; both women and men can learn from hymns composed by men for Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary. Naturally, I welcome the reaction of more skeptical readers, who may still wish to raise concerns about my method and conclusions, and about how this kind of reading experiment can yield fruit beyond specific insights into Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary.

Even if fruitful, the process I am recommending possesses no fixed boundaries, and so it may easily become very large and unwieldy. The challenge then is to find a way to read and write with specificity, yet also with room for still wider explorations. For this purpose we can usefully recall Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," introduced in chapter 1, this time focusing on its style rather than its particular judgments about the Marian tradition. Kristeva's doubled writing within and around the Marian tradition—the story of Mary as virgin mother, Kristeva's own story of becoming a mother—models the necessarily unsettled and unfinished project represented by *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*. Here too, as in her account, there is no single, stable perspective from which to make sense of all that needs to be learned, and here too there is no possibility of reaching a final, pure, and simple conclusion. The voices are numerous, and no one of us is in a position to account entirely for what the specific Hindu hymns and specific Marian hymns teach us, or for what we are to learn from the array of further writings beyond those hymns. But just as the Marian tradition is broken open and exposed by Kristeva's parallel and competing account of her own experience, here too the voices of the hymns' authors, their commentators, their modern proponents, and readers such as ourselves, need to be heard and allowed to break open even the most familiar contemporary conversations on gender. Hearing all these voices together creates for us a polyphony that cannot be silenced by any theory that would rule out the learning that is possible when we resolutely refuse to stop listening.

Scholars continuing Kristeva's work need to complicate her writing and reading practice further by writing into their accounts more particular and thorough readings of the *Stabat Mater*, and then still other Marian hymns rich in theology, practice, and experience, such as the *Akathistos* and *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti*. So too, there is now no good reason to omit the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*,

Saundarya Laharī, and *Apirāmi Antāti* from this wider, complex reflection nor, by extension, the wider array of texts one might introduce. All this textual work must of course also be accompanied by accounts of experience, particularly women's narratives of the divine person as male or female, of religious and theological apprehensions of the divine, and of the advantages and disadvantages for full human living of the various ideas we have about the divine. Kristeva's own account of becoming a mother would be juxtaposed with additional columns reflective of the experience of Indian mothers, for instance. A Hindu woman writer might well reflect on motherhood in light of her own experience in a personal and cultural-religious context. Such further reflections will in turn have to be mediated in relation to theories drawn from the psychologies and philosophies of cultures that interpret human experience differently than do modern Western theorists.

We must therefore envision rewriting *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* as a still broader text with an extended number of "columns"—particular, unhomogenized voices—expressive of insights from specific other traditions, in what ultimately will be an almost unlimited set of parallel writings, a kind of global intertext of words addressing gender and the divine. This very large, virtual volume—an expanding theological library of the ideas, words, images, practices of human and divine gender—could then serve as a new and more vital ground for current feminist studies (Hindu, Christian, Western, Indian, and so on), now thought through again on the basis of this much wider Text of goddess and Marian hymns along with other similar resources. It seems likely that by this process a working transition can be made from Jantzen's feminist philosophy of religion—a philosophy of natality as well as mortality, of flourishing as well as salvation, of divinization as well as encounter with the divine—to an analogous theology wherein gender and divinity are felt all the more forcefully.

Reading more widely and listening to still more voices indicates an essentially open theological conversation. But the strictures of faith can still be cherished, defended, and argued, and the limits of what people in a particular tradition accept can still be respected. The reading will be much broader, and faith will not want to evade the wider conversation or preclude the sound of voices heard from other traditions. Whatever choices we make, we will be more acutely aware that we have neighbors who imagine divine gender somewhat differently than we do, and distinguish more sharply, and fruitfully, between our accustomed theologies and practices and those of our neighbors.

These extensions are likely, I suggest, to confirm and undercut Kristeva's dour assessment of the Marian tradition, as the hidden strengths of the tradition are illumined and properly relativized by reflection on Hindu goddesses, and as readers themselves join a much wider conversation and so are deprived even of contemporary academic certainties.

Encountering Her

In this book's preface, I recalled visiting (nearly, liminally) the shrine of the goddess Śrī at Śrīraṅgam. Now, as then, I felt myself to be faced with the prospect of encountering a goddess, even if the Śrīvaiṣṇava community at Śrīraṅgam preferred not to ease the way for such an encounter. Encountering Śrī might well illumine a way of being divine that could be recognized in the Christian tradition only by its denial. While I have not argued that there is a place for goddesses in Christian theology, I have showed that goddess theologies are intelligent, plausible, and attractive, and cannot be dismissed on intellectual grounds. Similarly, I have also suggested that Mary functions analogously to a goddess, as a supreme female person who is not-God, but rather God's Mother. It is supremely worthwhile to encounter Mary.

I have argued all this on the basis of the hymns we have been reading, but in the end this reading raises challenges not liable to a purely textual resolution. Beyond our hymns, can we encounter Her?

If the goddess hymns we have considered promote impermissible encounters—what is theologically plausible may not be religiously acceptable—a response may lie yet deeper, in the power of the hymns to open up the encounters of which they speak. As I have explained elsewhere,[3] when we are not permitted to see or cannot find how to see the person of our desire face-to-face with the eyes we have, we can see through texts, allowing words to open a way for us. In each chapter of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, and according to the choice of texts studied in each, I have noted and even accentuated the difficulties entailed by the fact that the hymns are addressed directly to Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. The hymns facilitate encounter through words, by way of various images, sounds, modes of meditation and worship, and by generating in the hearer a way of seeing Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi and their worlds. To read the hymns and take them to heart makes it more possible that we might be transformed, introduced into actual encounter, even converted. Whether the one addressed is a goddess or Mary, appropriating the hymns leads to a moment where speaking to the unique, privileged female is the wisest thing to do.

The hymns invite us more urgently to participation, and if we do not want to participate, we may first have to protect ourselves by refusing to engage in the reading, thinking, and understanding that open the way to participation. Some readers may choose to resolve the matter rather simply. Even if they are not already Hindus, they may choose to touch the feet of Śrī, Devī, or Apirāmi, and enter into the worship the hymns promote. They may prefer direct encounter to the indirections inscribed in the Christian veneration of Mary, but they may even address Mary as well. They may choose to enjoy all six hymns and to gather where they lead, in a company of women that offers relationships

and not competition because Mary and the three goddesses are friends and not competitors. The hymns are beautiful, and if some of that beauty appears even in translation and has a real effect on readers, we should not be surprised if diligent readers choose to address the particular goddesses directly.

For the Christian theologian, however, the path is steeper; so generous and inclusive solution is unlikely to win acceptance in Christian communities any time soon. We accept the general principle—God works everywhere—but are discomforted at the particular possibilities of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi. We—and now I write as a Catholic Christian—must therefore reflect closely on the opportunities available to us.

Even at this juncture, however, the tensions can to some extent be alleviated. The distinct yet complementary images of the divine in the three Hindu hymns offer a way around the initial, seemingly decisive roadblock that Christians do not worship goddesses—because Christians are monotheists, and because Christian tradition and logic exclude goddesses. By a consideration of what we actually learn from the hymns, this stark, conversation-ending declaration—"Christians do not worship goddesses"—can be transmuted into a more complex theological scenario where smaller choices can be made even as the question of the existence of goddesses is usefully deferred. Questions regarding encounter and response are refracted into a multitude of more particular questions having to do with theological possibilities, and also with particular texts, images, practices, and the conventions of religious and theological discourse. At this point it is better not to speak in general terms about encountering goddesses or the Goddess; rather, we do better to encounter Śrī in reading the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī*, and Apirāmi in the *Apirāmi Antāti*. Each hymn clears away some objections that prevent us from taking to heart what we might learn from Hindu goddess traditions.

Thus, the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* shows a way to think about male-female gender distinctions as operative within the divine reality. That the divine persons are male and female does not, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, compromise divine perfection, but offers a location in the divine for mutuality, pleasure, and a more specific recognition of beauty. By the mutuality of divine pleasure and freedom, Parāśara Bhaṭṭar indicates a way to remove doubts about the notion of a single religious commitment that takes the divine to be distinguished as male and female. The Śrīvaiṣṇava devotee discovers that devotion to Śrī is compatible with continuing devotion to Viṣṇu as Lord of the universe. We, in turn, review and purify some of our oldest theological presumptions about gender and the divine.

The *Saundarya Laharī* allays the fears of those who find much of our imagery about males and females to be conventional, detrimental to women and, if merely sublimated, contributing to counterproductive images of divine perfection. The hymn shows how to deconstruct and reuse conventional images of the beautiful woman, for the sake of an increasingly direct encounter

with Devī, who is encountered precisely in Her female beauty. Spectators do not remain so; those who look upon Her are drawn into the drama generated from Her beauty and Her maternal graciousness. That Devī is a beautiful woman, physically as well as spiritually, does not indicate that She is deficient as a divine person or that once again women are significant merely as the object of a male gaze. Those who look upon Her are captivated and transformed. We, in turn, are taught how to use and pass beyond the edges of the maps by which we have customarily charted the spiritual journeys of our lives.

Finally, Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar's intense poetry places the totality of religious ideas and practices within the realm of a single totalizing experience of Her. The *Apirāmi Antāti* explores what it means to say that She stands within as a infusive, complete presence, and this sense of inner divine presence does not entail a loss of difference or a confusion between the divine and human, even when the awakened consciousness becomes a kind of divine reality, entirely filled with Her. Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar traces the remarkable gracious diffusion of Her divine reality into the mind, heart, and imagination of human beings, where She is exceedingly close—while yet the devotee remains in a devotional relationship to Her. The immediate, even sensual presence of the Goddess need not entail a confusion of the divine and human.

If the Hindu hymns untie some of the religious and intellectual knots and offer multiple, graded opportunities for assent at the several levels each theologian prefers, the same may be said of the Marian hymns. This may be indicated more briefly. The *Akathistos* accentuates the unique and pivotal location of Mary as the paradoxical site where salvation improbably occurs, and thus too where praise of the divine action opens into praise of Mary. The *Stabat Mater* insists that in the face of the most awful suffering and loss, where even God has died, we are able to encounter her and so to see our way beyond death. The *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* argues that Mary, historically and theologically distanced in relation to the events of the Bible and deeds of God, is the one who becomes present here and now, in towns such as Mylapore, where previously goddesses were most devoutly worshiped, and so too in our towns.

If we combine these and similar clues from the Hindu and Marian hymns, then the challenge facing the Christian theologian who would think about goddesses is diffused and transformed into a wider array of smaller and more specific theological possibilities that can be taken up one at a time. Progress can be made, without a final overarching conclusion being drawn. Since we will also stand freer from compulsions encumbering either tradition, choices we may have already made can also be facilitated; we may do a better job of worshiping the Divine Mother, or venerating the Blessed Mother, and with a clearer awareness of the choices entailed.

So what then is a Christian do after reading through the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa* or the *Saundarya Laharī* or *Apirāmi Antāti*? The response may be to venerate Mary more intensely, even while still insisting that she is not-God—

and, now more precisely and interestingly, not a goddess, not Śrī, Devī, or Apirāmi. This may be the nearest approximation to an affirmative response to Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi that is available to the Christian. Is veneration of Mary the same as worshiping these goddesses? No, but it is a measured, consequent way of honoring the invitation to worship a female person possessed of body and spirit, powerful and intensely present in a world where divine males seemingly recede into the background.

I cannot speak for Hindus, but I would like to think that a similar dynamic might well apply as they learn from the *Akathistos*, *Stabat Mater*, and *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* in particular and small ways, and as they ponder how to connect traditional goddess beliefs to the experience of actual women who seek place and voice in Hindu communities today. For Hindus too, the intellectual and perhaps spiritual challenge is to step outside their own traditions for a moment, to put aside generalizations and caricatures about what others believe, and to learn the value of honoring a woman who is not God, but God's mother, and so to think about the divine and human in a new way. Readers who are neither Christian nor Hindu may see their ways into these encounters in accord with their own estimates of how divine and human, male and female, are most sensibly thought together.

That Christians should continue to venerate Mary and Hindus continue to worship their goddesses may seem a cautious conclusion, or a pious letdown, after all the work of the preceding chapters. But reaffirming one's own tradition after coming to appreciate another tradition, and while seeing through both traditions at once, is not a bad thing. Few of us ever really make a radical break with our earliest ideas and devotions; but we can see these differently, as it were for the first time, and make a choice for them, because we know that others have made other choices, intelligently, passionately, in love. Mindful of Śrī, Devī, and Apirāmi, one still venerates Mary; aware of Mary as a human woman, one still speaks to Śrī, Devī, or Apirāmi.

The hymns themselves may still provide the surest way to reach the place where discourse about Śrī, Devī, Apirāmi, and Mary can be well practiced. So in the end too, it is up to readers to start over, rereading each hymn, reading them in pairs, then all together. After that, we may wish to review the chapters of this book for useful insights, write still other, newer chapters, and, in the end, just wait with our eyes open for Her arrival.

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Glossary

This glossary is minimal, meant simply to aid the reader in deciphering names and allusions in the hymns. For fuller and more nuanced explanations the reader is referred to the respective chapters and to standard secondary sources. Names of the Goddesses are explained in the respective chapters.

Airāvata elephant Indra's royal elephant
Ampikai good woman; a name of Apirāmi
Andhaka a demon killed by Śiva
angle-home the Śrīcakra, diagram intricately representing Devī
Aṇimā a goddess attending on Devī
antāti a compositional style in which the last words of a verse also begin the next verse
Aparṇā Devī
Apirāmi the Beautiful Goddess, addressed in the *Apirāmi Antāti*
Aruṇā a goddess, of the dawn
ascetic in the whale's stomach Jonah
Ayaṉ Brahmā; rarely, a name of Śiva
Bhagīratī a river
bhairavas a class of demons
Bhavāni tvam the Sanskrit words which can be translated as "Lady, You . . ." or "May I become You . . ."
Brahmā the creator deity
Bhuḥ, Bhuvaḥ, and Svaḥ the earth, sky, and heaven, in correlation with these three Vedic utterances
Bṛhaspati priest of the gods
cakra one of the psychosomatic centers of spiritual energy in the body; see chapter 3
Caṇḍa a devotee of Śiva

Caṇḍī Devī
cities smitten with sulfur Sodom and Gomorra
Dānava a class of demons
Daityas demons
Daniel the Biblical dream-interpreter and prophet
Devī the great goddess, addressed in the *Saundarya Laharī*
Draviḍa child a child breast–fed by Devī, possibly the theologian Śaṅkara or Tamil poet saint, Jñānasambandhar
Druhiṇa Brahmā
Dviradavadana Ganeśa
Endless Pleasure Ananta Bhoga, the serpent on whom Śrī and Viṣṇu recline in their transcendent state
five weapons bow, conch, discus, mace, and sword
four-faced one Brahmā
Gaṇapati Gaṇeśa, elephant-headed son of Śiva and Devī (or Apirāmi)
Gaṅgā the river
Giriśa Śiva
Guṇa the three strands, or constituents, of reality
Hara Śiva
Hari Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu
Herambha Gaṇeśa
"Hymn to Śrī" the Vedic hymn praising Śrī, the *Śrī Sūkta*
"Hymn to the Male" the Vedic hymn of the cosmic male, the *Puruṣa Sūkta*
Indirā Śrī
Indra king of the ancient Vedic gods
Jambha a demon killed by Kṛṣṇa
James probably St. James, the apostle of Jesus
Janārdana Kṛṣṇa
Kaiṭabha a demon slain by Viṣṇu
Kāka the crow whom Rāma sought to kill because it wounded Sītā, but which was saved by her advice
Kālaṉ Death
Kali age the last, worst, and current age of the world
kalpaka tree heavenly tree that fulfills wishes
Krauñca a mountain demon split by Skanda
Kubera god of wealth
kula path a tantric path; see chapter 3
kumkum a red powder or paste worn by women
Lakṣmī Śrī
Mahī the earth goddess, a consort of Viṣṇu
Mahīṣa demon killed by the goddess as Durgā
Māl Viṣṇu
Manmatha the god Desire
Margaret a martyr saint of the early Church
Mataṅka women women in a clan noted for music
Māyā marvelous divine power

Mithilā native place of Sītā, the avatāra of Śrī
Memory the god Desire
Mukunda Viṣṇu; Kṛṣṇa
Mura demon killed by Kṛṣṇa
Mylapore a city in south India
Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu
Nīlā a consort of Viṣṇu
Paśupati Śiva
Pleasure's master the god Desire
Potiya the sage Agastya
rajas passionate energy; one of the three guṇas
Rāmāyaṇa the epic of Rāma and Sītā, the avatāras of Viṣṇu and Śrī
Rudra Śiva or a form of Śiva
Sādhya class of celestial beings
Śakra Indra
Samayā goddess tantric goddess, consort of Śiva
Śambhu Śiva
Śaṅkara Śiva
Sarasvatī the goddess of wisdom
Śarva Śiva
Śaṭamakha Indra, king of the gods
sattva lucidity, one of the three guṇas
Simeon his life-long hope was fulfilled when he saw the baby Jesus brought to the temple
Śiva consort of Apirāmi
Skanda son of Śiva and Apirāmi
sons of Chaldaea the three magi who came to see the newborn Jesus
Śrī the goddess addressed in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, and the spouse of Viṣṇu
Śrīraṅgam premier temple of the Śrīvaisnavas
Stamberamadanuja an elephant demon killed by Devī
Śunāsīra Indra
Surabhi auspicious cow that fulfils wishes
tamas dark lethargy, one of the three guṇas
Tāṇḍava dance the wild, cosmic dance of Śiva and His consort; also the dance of Śrī's eyes
Thomas the apostle believed to have preached the Gospel in India
twelve faithful companions the twelve apostles
Umā Apirāmi, consort of Śiva
Upendra Viṣṇu; Kṛṣṇa
Urvaśī celestial nymph
Vala's slayer Indra, killer of the demon Vala
Vāṇī Sarasvatī
Vaśinī a goddess connected with the Śrīcakra
Vedānta the Upaniṣads, and the theological schools derived from them
Vibhīṣaṇa brother of the demon king Rāvaṇa who kidnapped Sītā, and famous for taking refuge with Rāma

Vidhāṭṛ Brahmā, the creator god
Vidhi Brahmā
vīṇa a stringed musical instrument
Viriñci Brahmā
Viriñci's spouse Sarasvatī
Viśākha Skanda
Viṣamaviśikha the god Desire
Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa, consort of Śrī
Yamaḷai "the fresh, green one," a name of Āpirāmi

Notes

CHAPTER 1

1. Respectively, *Apirāmi Antāti* 29, and Henry Adams as cited in Daly 1973, p. 91.

2. See Gimbutas 1974, Raphael 2000, and Christ 1997.

3. I am happy to acknowledge the important research that has helped create the context for understanding classical goddess discourse today, though in this note I can mention only a few books I have found helpful over the years. Sir John Woodroffe's studies in tantra opened the way for reflection on Hindu goddesses a century ago, but it is much more recently that the field of Hindu goddess studies has truly begun to flourish. In 1982 John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff published *The Divine Consort*, a still important collection of basic essays. Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (1984) gave us a vivid glimpse of the textual and oral/social traditions marking the life of the goddess Pattini in south India and Sri Lanka. David Kinsley's *Hindu Goddesses* (1986) and *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* (1997) have helped define the field on both scholarly and more popular levels. Thomas Coburn's *Encountering the Goddess* (1991) has established a framework for numerous later studies. Sanjukta Gupta's numerous writings on tantra and her translation of the *Lakṣmī Tantra* (1972), as well as Douglas Brooks's *Auspicious Wisdom* (1992) and *The Secret of the Three Cities* (1990), have greatly deepened our understanding of tantra and tantric goddesses. Pratap Kumar's *The Goddess Lakṣmī* (1997) helpfully unpacks the theology of Śrī Lakṣmī in the south Indian context, while Gerhard Oberhammer gives us reliable and detailed information on a formative period in the Śrīvaiṣṇava cult of the goddess Śrī in *Die Lehre von der Göttin vor Veṅkaṭanātha* (2002). C. MacKenzie Brown's *The Devī Gītā* (1998) excellently translates and annotates a theological goddess text, thus highlighting

the richness of reflective rational discourse in a goddess tradition. His work provides an excellent basis for theological reflection on goddesses, even by those who are not Indologically trained. Sarah Caldwell's *O Terrifying Mother* (1999) vividly describes a goddess cult in Kerala society and explores its psychological underpinnings among men and women. The recent translations by Hugh Urban in *Songs of Ecstasy* (2001) and Rachel McDermott in *Singing to the Goddess* (2001b) and the latter's study of goddesses in Bengal in *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams* (2001a) enrich our understanding of the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of goddess worship.

4. "For some thealogians the Goddess is relatively abstract and functions for them as an emancipatory metaphor or emblem of dynamic cosmic, personal and political energies, the organic relations between all living things within the cosmos, and the divinity of female being. But for other thealogians the Goddess can also be a self-existent female deity with many aspects or hypostases. Thealogy can be at once non-theistic, monotheistic and polytheistic" (Raphael 2000, p. 57). None of the thealogians' ambitions are limited to simply adding the word "goddess" or a goddess figure to a conventional theological and religious system. As Raphael puts it, contemporary believers in the Goddess intend more than "God in a skirt" or "God's wife." Rather, reality is to be reimagined in light of the presence of the Goddess: "Goddess thealogians do not trust or *hope* that the Goddess exists; in some senses, She *is* existence and is therefore available to immediate, self-authenticating, *present* experience. . . . The reality of the Goddess is inseparable from the reality of the self; She *is* the process and the fulfillment of the 'natural' or meta-patriarchal self reborn through feminist consciousness" (ibid., p. 63)

5. Raphael 1999, p. 149.

6. Jantzen 1998, pp. 159–160.

7. Jantzen 1998, p. 160.

8. Among the most important recent works that draw together Indological and feminist concerns are *Seeking Mahādevī* (Pintchman, ed., 2001); *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* (Hiltebeitel and Erndl, eds., 2000); and *Invoking Goddesses* (Chitgopekar, ed., 2002) More generally, *Appropriating Gender* (Basu and Jeffery, eds., 1998) shows the general vitality of Indian feminist reflection. Such volumes make clear the need for sober expectations regarding the liberative effects of goddess cults. See also Gold and Rehejia, eds. 1994, *Listen to the Heron's Words*; Wadley 1985, *Shakti*; and Feldhaus, ed. 1996, *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion.*

9. "Is the Goddess Tradition a Good Resource for Western Feminism?" in Pintchman, ed. 2001.

10. For an insightful reflection on Hindu goddesses from a Christian perspective, with attention to Mary as well, see Carman 1994, chap. 14, "Hindu Goddesses and the Blessed Virgin Mary."

11. Johnson 1992, p. 55.

12. See Bynum 1982.

13. Daly 1973, p. 83.

14. Daly 1973, p. 91.

15. Hauke 1995, pp. 193–196.

16. Hauke 1995, pp. 203–204.

17. Originally entitled "Herethique."

18. Kristeva 2002, p. 327. This positive comment seems inspired more by Pergolesi than the hymn itself. As we shall see in chapter 3, the hymn itself presents a simpler, stronger empowerment of Mary at the very moment of her son's death; she remains standing there, she is the holder of life and hope. She is recognized as the effective agent of salvation, and one can encounter her, speak to her, and hope in her.

19. As Oliver summarizes Kristeva, "we need an image of maternity that can found, rather than threaten, the social relationship. Western images of maternity, especially what [Kristeva] calls the 'cult of the Virgin Mary,' do not allow for an image of the mother as a speaking social being. 'Stabat Mater' is a manifesto of sorts that ends with a call for a reconceived notion of maternity and a heretical ethics, 'herethics' (herethics), based on a reconceived maternity. Insofar as this ethics of maternity would replace the Catholic image of the Virgin bearing her sorrow and baring her breast, it would be a heretical ethics, an ethics that does not reduce women to 'milk and tears' " (Oliver, ed. 2002, p. 297).

20. For an overview of the field of Christian feminist reflection on Mary, I recommend Hines 2001. This compact theological treatise concisely surveys traditional and contemporary theological views of Mary, the problems with the Marian tradition of piety from the perspective of contemporary Christians (particularly feminist Christians), and the possibilities that nonetheless are available to those who wish to retrieve the Marian tradition. See also Ruether 1997.

21. Johnson 2003, pp. 53–54.

22. Johnson 2003, p. 72.

23. Boss 2000 explores the psychology of human dependence on the mother and the ways in which the dynamic of "mother" devotion can alleviate the problems of domination and dependence. When the fuller dimensions of a mother's contribution to the child are lost sight of, Mary will then seem either merely subjugated to God or merely a dated intercessory figure who cannot really help humans meet their deeper needs. Similarly, when the God of the Bible and then of the Christian tradition contained and marginalized the deities of the Near East, that God was unable to fulfill some of the life-giving functions of those deities—functions then attributed instead to Mary.

24. Boss 2000, p. 214.

25. Boss 2000, pp. 218–219.

26. See for instance Clooney 1993, 1996, and 2001a.

27. It is worthwhile to listen to the hymns; tapes and even CDs are available today.

CHAPTER 2

1. For an overview of Parāśara Bhaṭṭar's life and thought, see Padmanabhan 1994, and also Narayanan 1987, chap. 6.

2. See Jagadeesan 1967, p. 103.

3. Tirumalai Nallan in his introduction mentions three classical commentaries: the *Vasurāśi*, plus commentaries by Veṅkaṭācārya and Bhāṣyanārāyaṇācārya. I have not had access to the latter two.

4. P. Bhaṭṭar 1989, p. 2.

5. For observations on Śrī's "prehistory," see Gupta's introduction and also Kumar, who has surveyed the history of Śrī's incorporation into Śrīvaiṣṇava theology and worship in his *The Goddess Lakṣmī* (1997); see also Dutta ("Imaging the Goddess") in Chitgopekar 2002. Kumar shows how Rāmānuja, even while not discussing the role of Śrī at length, mentions Her enough and affords Her a significant enough role that Her importance in the tradition is established even before Parāśara Bhaṭṭar. D. Sushila (2001) has documented the growth of the tradition of devotion to Śrī in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition; her thesis, rich in detailed analyses, is that the turn toward explicit devotion to Śrī is entirely in keeping with the early tradition, even if the latter is admittedly reserved and has little to say about Śrī. On Śrī in general, see also Narayanan ("The Goddess Śrī") in Hawley and Wulff 1982.

6. Śrī Vidyā: the auspicious knowledge, knowledge of Śrī; see chap. 3.

7. For more general background on the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, see Carman 1974, Carman and Narayanan 1989, Clooney 1996, Hardy 1983, and Narayanan 1987.

8. P. Bhaṭṭar [1954] 1971, p. 7.

9. See Clooney 1996, chap. 3.

10. P. Bhaṭṭar 1966, p. 2.

11. P. Bhaṭṭar [1954] 1971, p. 7.

12. Similar prayers are found at verses 36–37 and 42–44, where Parāśara Bhaṭṭar contrasts his inadequate words with Her splendid qualities.

13. That is, let one garment after another burst asunder as his chest swells in delight.

14. P. Bhaṭṭar 1966, p. 2.

15. Respectively, the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (*Ṛg Veda* 10.90) and the *Śrī Sūkta*.

16. See also verses 1–4, 7, 26, 30, 40–41, 43, all of which too mention Her glance.

17. The commentators struggle with verse 20's peculiar image of the Lord playing a prostitute, but they resolutely stick close to what the verse says—the headman vexes them as a cross-dressing male. They rule out interpretations that would soften it—such as moving the "as if," so that it reads, "as if dressed as a prostitute."

18. That is, freedom, self-dependence: *svātāntrya*.

19. That is, when there is some need to distinguish Śrī and Viṣṇu from one another—a distinction the devotee might ordinarily not be inclined to attempt.

20. P. Bhaṭṭar [1954] 1971, pp. 134–135

21. P. Bhaṭṭar [1954] 1971, p. 155.

22. From the *Varāha Purāṇa*, where Viṣṇu speaks to Lakṣmī: "I will not tolerate those who disparage my devotees, even those who are dog-cookers."

23. The commentators push the matter further by exploring difficulties. Lest it appear that Sītā too is demanding a proper attitude from those seeking Her, Viraraghavacarya says, one must distinguish how the demonesses think of Sītā—"if we surrender to Her She will protect us"—from Sītā's own sense of what is in keeping with Her own character—"I will protect them no matter what." By definition, Her compassion requires no pretext for effectiveness, as She rushes to forgive even those who have not even sought forgiveness. What they do matters less than Her determination to save them. Although it is appropriate that Sītā be merciful toward such demon-

esses who turn to Her, the fact that they do seek refuge is not itself a cause for Her compassion. She will be compassionate regardless of what they do.

24. *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava*, with the *Tattvārthacintāmani* of P.B. Annangaracarya 1954, 1974. Kumbakonam, Parvart Accukkutam, 1954 (part 1) and 1974 (part 2).

25. Translations from the *Śrīraṅga Rāja Stava* are my own, but I have profited from the translation in Nayar 1994.

26. Respectively, Brahmā and Śiva.

27. On reason as a bridge between religions, see Clooney 2001.

28. *Akathistos* means "not sitting," that is, sung reverently, while standing.

29. Meersseman 1958, p. 14.

30. Here and below I use Meersseman's Greek text, and I used his translation as the guide and foundation for my own revised translation.

31. *chaire numphe anumpheute.*

32. We can also observe that there is no sense in the *Akathistos* that human males are in a position different from that of human females; Mary is singled out and can thus be praised in the most extraordinary fashion, but in this respect she differs from all other humans, male and female alike.

CHAPTER 3

1. See Brooks 1992, pp. 47–48; see also Tigunait 1998, pp. 56ff. By my reading, the hymn is meant to be taken as an integral whole of one hundred verses.

2. My comments here summarize in nontechnical terms standard positions expounded in the commentaries. Because I have used the *Aruṇāmodinī* of Kāmeśvara Sūri as a primary guide, I also follow his choice as to the authentic one hundred verses. See also Tigunait 1998, p. 57, on theories about the authentic verses. Each translation of the *Saundarya Laharī* rehearses basic information about the text; see for example Brown 1958 and Sastri and Ayyangar 1992. For the general intellectual and religious context of the work, see Brooks 1992, especially chaps. 3 and 4, and also Tigunait 1998, chap. 2. On particular verses, Sastri and Ayyangar 1992 have been invaluable.

3. "What Do We Mean by Tantrism?" Brown and Harper 2002, p. 19.

4. Brown and Harper 2002, p. 20.

5. Brooks notes that the hymn in a sense brahmanizes the śrīcakra tantric tradition to make it accessible and acceptable to mainstream orthodox readers. I suggest it also offers a kind of tantric bhakti, a devotional path inclusive of a wider audience of practitioners. See also Sarah Caldwell's essay in Pintchman 2001, particularly pp. 97–101, for a discussion of the *Saundarya Laharī* in light of parallels in the devotion to Kālī in the Kerala section of India.

6. On the "five m's," see Tigunait 1998, p. 45, and Brooks 1992, p. 155.

7. That the *Saundarya Laharī* offers an accessible and more efficacious way to meet Devī does not rule out the idea that the apparent meanings of the verses may also still conceal deeper meanings. Indeed, I suggest that there is in the hymn no univocal divide between the esoteric and the exoteric; even newcomers to the world of tantric theory and practice can fruitfully understand this hymn, however much it is invested with deeper meanings by tantric experts. The commentator Lakṣmīdhara

goes out of his way to dispute the notion that the tradition is exclusively oral or secret. At verse 32, where the syllables of Devī's name are given, he strikingly claims that whoever reads his commentary is his disciple, and from that person there is no need to hide the sixteenth syllable; it is fine for those blessed with an apt guru to learn the syllable from him; but others will find what they need in his commentary. (Here and throughout, the commentators are cited in reference to the specific verse under discussion, and I do not give page numbers for the commentaries unless the whole comment on the verse is particularly lengthy.) Still later traditions further popularize the hymn, accompanying the one hundred verses with yantra drawings, images of Devī, seed mantras, and prescribed worship routines involving multiple recitations of the verses over many days.

8. As told in a narrative known as the *Lalitopākhyāna*.

9. "Globes," that is, the rounded frontal protuberances on the head of an elephant; see also verse 72 and my comment in n. 35 below.

10. In the Flood of Bliss, the naming is constrained: the great pride of the vanquisher of cities (7), Aruṇā (16), Hara's queen (19), Śivā (25), good woman (26), my lady (34), consort of Śiva (35).

11. Verses 6, 12, 58, 75, 76, 78, 81.

12. Verses 47, 71.

13. Verse 60.

14. Verses 25, 32, 35, 43, 57, 77.

15. Verse 93.

16. Verses 72, 80, 88, 91.

17. Verses 17, 28, 39, 64, 65, 74, 76, 77, 84, 87, 98.

18. The closing of Her eyes is explicitly imagined as the source of dissolution at verse 55, but the idea is implicit in verse 26.

19. Lest we romanticize the place of female beings in Devī's world, however, there are also instances of a more reductive sexual representation of women: "If an old man, unpleasing to the eye and impotent in play, falls within the range of Your glances, then hundreds will run after him, all the young women, locks disheveled, clothes falling from their breasts, girdles bursting with force, fine garments slipping down" (13). But on the whole, a generalization seems plausible: those who venture to compete with Devī end up Her subordinates, like the gods; those who willingly join Her retinue share Her power and pleasures as Her own sisters, like the goddesses.

20. Compare Śrī's glance in the *Śrī Guṇa Ratna Kośa*, for example, in verses 1–4 and 7.

21. On all three of the following points, see Brooks 1992, chap. 6, and Tigunait 1998, pp. 100ff. on the cakras, and pp. 121ff. on the sixteen-syllable mantra name of Devī.

22. And so, there seems also to be a simpler way: simply viewing this Goddess who dwells in the cakras; see also verses 21 and 35.

23. Brooks describes the śrīcakra's function and meaning this way: "In essence, Śakti is the dynamic power of self-differentiation emanating from the primordial Śiva. The *śrīcakra* not only represents the process of creative devolution but is its actual form. Put differently, the *śrīcakra* is a symbol of the universe's primordial structure

and, at the same time, the index of reality that forms its structure. Put theologically, the universe is a projection or reflection (*pratibimba*) of divinity's own self-reflection. The *śrīcakra,* like the universe itself, is both identical to and different from its source. Just as a reflection creates an isomorphic image of its subject and yet is not its subject, so the *śrīcakra* is both reality's form (*rūpa*) and its most perfect reflection (*bimba*). *Śrīcakra* visually mimics its symbolic and indexical functions. Śiva's unified being is represented by the central 'drop' or *bindu* at the *śrīcakra's* center; Śiva's conjunction with Śakti occurs in the form of nine intersecting triangles from which are projected the 'lesser' forms presented by lotus petals and rectangles. Microcosmically, the *śrīcakra* is the human body, itself a 'palace of nine gates,' that is, with nine apertures" (Brooks 1992, pp. 115–116). For an elucidation of verse 11 and an illustration of the śrīcakra, see Sastri and Ayyangar 1992 on verse 11.

24. Respectively, Śiva, Power, Desire, Earth, Sun, Moon, Memory, Swan, Indra, the Higher, Death, Kṛṣṇa.

25. That this further development is distinctive to the *Saundarya Laharī* becomes evident if we notice the older *Subhagodaya* hymn; this model for the Flood of Bliss ends where the Flood of Bliss does, and there is no following visualization. That the Flood of Beauty follows upon the Flood of Bliss required explanation in the tradition. At verse 42, the commentators assess the shift back to "ordinary" description as condescension to those incapable of the rarified meditation proposed in the Flood of Bliss. Kāmeśvara Sūri says that although everything has been made clear in the Flood of Bliss, now Śaṅkara, "gracious toward the small intelligence of those unable to manage the previous meditation, [offers] a meditation focused on the form of each of her parts, aimed at reaching the proper nature of Devī easily." In his *Diṇḍimabhāsyam,* Rāma Kavi says that the meditation in the Flood of Beauty is for people of limited intelligence who seek pleasures and do not want to understand meditation on the unlimited light; the latter is easy only for those seeking liberation. According to the *Padārthacandrikā* (author uncertain), Her true, ineffable form is described in the Flood of Bliss, as in Vedānta, whereas in the Flood of Beauty Her visible form is described.

26. For an overview of the aesthetics involved, see Gerow 1971.

27. *utprekṣā*: "the ascription of a characteristic to a subject, not in terms of an implicit object of comparison simply, but through the relation of that subject and object to a further subject and object which, as a more general simile, justify the first attribution" (Gerow 1971, p. 133). For definitions of figures, I am relying on Gerow.

28. *apahnava* (*apahnuti*): denial, substitution, "a figure in which the object of comparison is affirmed in place of the subject of comparison" (Gerow 1971, p. 109), or "a figure in which the subject of comparison is portrayed as possessing a quality which in nature belongs to the object of comparison" (ibid., p. 110).

29. *saṃdeha*: doubt, "the expression of a similitude through the affection of an inability to decide the relative identity of two things—the subject and object of comparison" (Gerow 1971, p. 312).

30. *atiśaya*: "the exaggeration of a quality or attribute in a characteristic way, so as to suggest pre-eminence in its subject" (Gerow 1971, p. 97).

31. *bhrāntimat*: "a figure in which one thing, usually the object of comparison, is

mistaken for another, usually the subject of comparison. . . . Rudraṭa decrees that the two things confounded are subject and object of an implied simile" (Gerow 1971, p. 221).

32. *rūpaka*: "metaphorical identification; a figure in which the subject of comparison is identified with its object by a specific process of grammatical subordination" (Gerow 1971, p. 239).

33. We can recall here verse 85, where Śiva is similarly jealous of a kaṅkeli tree that grows fruitful by the touch of Devī's foot. He is drawn into the ambit of Her empowering beauty, vying for the touch of that foot. Lakṣmīdhara finds in the verse an exaggeration that echoes the frequent, playful quarreling of Śiva and Devī. She is of course faithful, but the power of Her beauty is made clearer by the suggestion that Śiva Himself is jealous of Her, jealous even of the tree She touches. Kāmeśvara reads Śiva's jealousy as evidence of His extreme devotion to Her feet. By extension, I suggest, the observer is drawn into the scene, as the listener is invited to desire being touched, even kicked, by Devī.

34. See Ingalls et al. 1990, p. 335, on the standard comparison of the elephant's frontal globes and the woman's breasts.

35. *niscayānta saṃdeha*: "a type of *saṃdeha* in which the doubt is resolved by the proper identification of two similar things" (Gerow 1971, p. 314).

36. Lakṣmīdhara notes that in poetry fame is white, valor is red; the elephant's "forehead bosses" are rose-colored, and so Her pearls are a rose color. He also notices how brightness, heat, color, and martial valor all materially reflect one another here. Śiva's hot valor, perhaps the blood of the elephant, and Her rosy lips all mirror one another. Kāmeśvara seems to domesticate the force of the verse by stressing her virtue as a wife: Her breasts glow and take on a red luster in praise of Her valiant husband.

37. For other traditional theories about the child's identity, see also Sastri and Ayyangar 1992, pp. 213–217. On the image of breast-feeding the special child, see also A. Bhaṭṭar, *Apirāmi Antāti* 9, and *Mutaliyar 1888*, 60.

38. On traditional characterizations of divine qualities, see for instance Clooney 2001a, chap. 2.

39. The hymn's authorship is uncertain; it has been attributed to several popes as well as St. Bonaventure (died 1274) and Jacopone da Todi (died 1306). I have used the standard version of the hymn (1915). For a brief introduction to the hymn, see Cuyler 2003; more information is available in Henry 1912. For my analysis I have devised a spare, simple translation, perhaps not ideal for all uses. I urge readers to consult more standard versions available in Christian hymnals and, of course, to hear some choral settings of the hymn.

CHAPTER 4

1. A. Bhaṭṭar 1989, p. 6.

2. The *Apirāmi Antāti* shares theological perspectives with the *Saundarya Laharī*. It has similar (though rather more implicit) tantric resonances and may be said to illustrate the inner life and experience of a person engaged in the contemplation recommended in the *Saundarya Laharī*.

3. I have listed the commentaries in the bibliography. All are in Tamil. Although

brief, each has its own character; Jagannathan, for instance, regularly cites verses from other hymns that the *Apirāmi Antāti* seems to echo. For a literary and thematic appreciation of the *Apirāmi Antāti*, see Muttaiya 1988.

4. A. Bhaṭṭar 1990, p. 5.

5. See my comments on the cakras on pp. 164–166.

6. A. Bhaṭṭar 1990, pp. 5–6.

7. He ruled 1798–1832 (A. Bhaṭṭar 1973, p. 77).

8. Jagannathan mentions variants on the basic plot (A. Bhaṭṭar 1990, pp. 7–8), including the appearance of Apirāmi to the king in a dream, and the bestowal of a land grant on Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar after he is vindicated. See also the account found in Ramasamy 2000.

9. Sampantam (A. Bhaṭṭar 1989, p. 14) explains antāti: " 'Antāti' means that 4 factors—letter (*eḻuttu*), syllable (*acai*), metrical foot (*cīr*), line of poetry (*aṭi*)—at the end of a verse are taken together, carried over, and sung at the beginning of the next verse. If one has fashioned 100 verses as antāti, the final meter, etc., of the last verse also form the beginning of the first verse."

10. One might also sort out the literary antecedents of the hymn. For instance, in his preface Ramanathan (1979) indicates how Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar, writing in the early eighteenth century, clearly drew on the *Maturāpuri Ampikai Mālai* of Kulaśekara Pāṇṭiyaṉ, a hymn probably a century older. This latter work comprises thirty verses honoring Mīṉāṭcī, the goddess of Maturai, invoked as Ampikai. Although not in the antāti style, its verses do share the pattern of initial rhyme, and every verse ends with the evocation, "Maturāpuri Ampikai!" Like the *Apirāmi Antāti*, the *Maturāpuri Ampikai Mālai* does not support any single linear argument. The rhythmic, repetitive praise is crucial, as one finds the hymn's meaning by the interplay between the freshness of each verse and the regular repetition that completes the verse, no matter what its theme. Murukasami points out additional similarities, as well.

11. Most famously, the commentators on another antāti work, the *Tiruvāymoḻi* of Śaṭakōpaṉ, combine hagiography and style by reading the entirety of 1,102 verses of that hymn as charting the saint's spiritual journey. On antāti's effect on the meaning of *Tiruvāymoḻi*, see Clooney 1996, chap. 2.

12. In verse 50: lady (*nāyaki*), consort of Brahmā the four-faced god (*Nānmuki*), consort of Nārāyaṇa (*Nārāyaṇi*); consort of Śiva as Śambhu (*Śāmbhavi*) or Śaṅkara (*Śaṅkari*); green one (*Cāmaḷai*), wearing a serpent as a garland (*Akimālini*), consort of the boar Varāha (*Varāki*), holder of the trident (*Cūlini*), lady of the Mataṅka forest (*Mātaṅki*). In verse 77: frightening one (*Bhairavi*), fifth element (the ether, *Pañcami*), fierce one (*Caṇṭi*), black one (*Kāḷi*), radiant warrior (*Vairavi*), lady of the maṇḍala (*Maṇṭali*), dark one (*Māliṇi*), holder of the trident (*Cūli*), and again Varāha's consort (*Varāki*).

13. The inaugural verse before verse 1 refers to Tillai (Citamparam).

14. Compare *Saundarya Laharī*, verse 75.

15. We cannot explore here the uses of the hymn in ritual performance, but we can note that like the *Saundarya Laharī* the *Apirāmi Antāti* is popularly revered as a hymn of great power. Recited properly, it enables one to receive the gracious gifts of Apirāmi. Subrahmanyam precedes each verse of the hymn with a good result accruing from the pious recitation of that verse. While there seems to be no obviously

necessary link between the verse and the fruit, some slender connections may be found.

16. As in the *Saundarya Laharī*, here too we find reference to the visible form of a secret visualization achieved in tantric practice, apparently the śrīcakra diagram: "When I see Your holy body standing forth, there's no seeing a shore to the joy that floods my eyes and heart—what is this knowledge that sparkles brightly in my thoughts? Was it Your idea, You who dwell and nine bright angles?" (19).

17. *Maṇoṉmaṇī* indicates the "jewel in the mind," or "the jewel uplifting the mind"; it is a name of Devī in the *Lalitā Sahasranāma* (207), indicative of the seat of power (*śakti*) below the *sahasrāra* aperture at the top of the head. On the ascending path, see pp. 164–169.

18. See also verses 53, 67, and 78.

19. As verse 55 indicates, She also chooses to be present even to those who ignore Her.

20. See Brown 1998, pp. 25–26, on these standard weapons connected with Tripurā/Lalitā.

21. See also verses 62, 76, and 100.

22. The commentators have to some extent reflected on how gender is represented in the *Apirāmi Antāti*. In introducing his commentary, for instance, Ramanathan reflects at length on the meaning of female and male (*peṇ*, *āṇ*) in Tamil and in the *Apirāmi Antāti* (A. Bhaṭṭar 1979, p. 17). He takes a rather essentialist perspective, arguing that essential to women are the maternal instinct, nurturing and love, and males are suited to rule. But in his view both sets of characteristics are necessary in the divine as well as human realms, and so Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar should not be understood as praising Apirāmi more than Śiva. Although Ramanathan reflects cultural attitudes operative in the hymn, he seems also more concerned than Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar to preserve the centrality of Śiva. He is also more content with a stable division of identity and work between Her and Him, whereas Apirāmi Bhaṭṭar establishes such a division only to marvel at how She transgresses conventions and rules a yielding and infatuated Śiva.

23. My translation. *Tiruvāymoḻi* is another example of a male-authored text, though now to a male deity. Kāraikkālammaiyār's *Arputa Antāti* is an instance of a hymn composed by a woman, for a male deity. Thus far, I have not found any instance of a Tamil antāti by a woman to a goddess.

24. One might also look to the poetry of Āṇṭāḷ, the sole woman among the āḻvārs, and her relation to Kṛṣṇa; longing is a key element of her poetry.

25. The *Mātaracammaṉ Antāti* by M. Appacami Mutaliyar was published in Madras in 1888 in the *Cattiya Vēta Anucāra Pattirikai* ("Magazine dedicated to the True Veda [the Bible]"). This edition has a brief gloss by A. Jnanaprakasa Mutaliyar, but no preface or other notes to situate the text. At this writing I know no more about the hymn's origins or its author.

26. Her beauty and that of the town are in a mutually enhancing relationship; Mylapore is beautiful, even as its beauty is repeatedly paired with hers. This is a very frequent nuance in the verses, but see for instance verses 4, 15, 17, 45, 55, 59, 75, and 77.

27. See also verses 30, 35, 61, 81, and 92.

28. Verses 13, 52, 53, and 67. Verses 36, 43, and 60 refer to more obscure events.

29. There are other references echoing a Hindu sensibility: this world suffers in the *kali yuga* (32); humans are caught up in *māyā* (46); she protects those free of bad karma from the body, the world, and demons (45); she offers bliss (*ānanda*; 54); the right dharmic paths (renouncing the world, living in the world; 55); she herself is the throne (*āsanam*) of the triune Reality of God (60); her feet mark the "cave of the heart" of the devotee (67); her rosary is her mantra (78).

30. Glossed by the commentator as the world, women, and gold.

31. See also verses 7, 16, 17, 18, and 30.

32. See also verses 39 and 90.

CHAPTER 5

1. Respectively, *Apirāmi Antāti* 30 and Kristeva 2002, p. 317.

2. See Clooney 2001, chap. 4.

3. See Clooney 1996, chap. 5.

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