

Greek Poetry and Indic Asceticism As Cures for Lovesickness:  
The Empathy and Enlightenment of Parvati and Polyphemus

In this talk, I will compare Polyphemus — Homer’s ferocious Cyclops turned bumbling lover who unsuccessfully woos a sea nymph in Theocritus’ *Idylls* — and Parvati, the beautiful daughter of the Himalaya, who is in love with the unapproachable ascetic god Shiva in Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhava*. Though Kalidasa’s plays and Indian dramatic/poetic theory have frequently been compared with their Greek counterparts, nothing has been written comparing his other poems with Alexandrian works. Theocritus and Kalidasa, were court poets of powerful monarchs who wrote in multiple dialects with elaborate and learned poetic styles featuring beautiful natural settings, semi-divine beings and erotic themes. Both these poems treat of rejection in love, a recurring theme for both authors.

Their characters seem to have very different responses since the giant one-eyed Sicilian shepherd turns to composing poetry and song on the seashore while the Hindu goddess begins to practice a severe form of asceticism in the mountains. Yet Abhinavagupta, a yogi and Sanskrit commentator on poetics, posits an analogy between the state of aesthetic enjoyment of the *rasika* (the connoisseur who is moved by the *rasa* of a play, poem or work of art) and the state of the yogi who attains enlightenment. The purpose of Indian drama and poetry, *kavya*, is to evoke *rasa*, “aestheticized emotions” in the spectator (Ashton and Tanner 2016 14-18). Of these the romantic is among the most frequent. Yet these are different from normal emotions through aesthetic distancing (6). This can help the audience to acquire empathy and compassion (11, 15). Even further, Abhinavagupta emphasized *śānta* the *rasa* of peace which transcended the others and reflects the inner state of a yogi at the moment of enlightenment.

(Deshpande 1989 96-99). As Ashton and Tanner explain: “[T]he *rasika* experiences a melting—and hence losing—of her personality in the art experience and a subsequent feeling of expansion that approximates “the bliss which is the true nature of one’s own self . . . the bliss that comes from realizing [one’s identity] with the highest Brahman [Ultimate Transcendant Reality]” (2016 20).

On a more down to earth level, Peace and serenity are also key to the bucolic poetry of Theocritus who famously opens his sixth Idyll with the declaration that there is no cure for Eros except the muses. The beautiful settings and their distance from worldly cares and the harsher parts of reality help the characters and perhaps the listeners (maybe Theocritus too!) to find philosophical peace and a reflective distance from their own disappointments (Gutzwiller 2006), though scholars debate on whether Polyphemus cured his lovesickness and how he did so. (Samson 2013 15-16)

Even though his poetry, like his love, is largely self-centered, the cyclops grows in empathy and understanding for others. (He is at least thinking about other people and, in Philostratus’ telling, he does give up human flesh for a while to try to impress Galatea) (Kostopoulou 2007 194). This expansion of empathy could distance him from his own pain and bring him and the readers incrementally closer to the more complete yogic perfection of Parvati. Thus, we can learn things that are psychologically useful from these ancient authors.

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