

## Chapter 6

### Given, Taken, Performed: Gender in a Tamil Theopoetics

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There are many challenges to doing philosophy of gender through historical materials. Feminist sensibilities—in whatever manner we interpret them—are a mark of recent modernity, and we would be misguided if we sought to find them in any self-conscious way in premodern texts. This presents a particularly acute problem in cultures of thought, such as the Indic, that experienced a hermeneutic rupture in the course of modernity, where we must rethink their native resources in order to contribute to an intercultural, global philosophy that is not merely Western philosophy gone global. In such cultures of thought, interpreting the ideas of the past becomes necessary to establish what might be original and what might bring fresh perspectives to the project of thinking globally. The past is therefore critical to the constitution of a present philosophy if it is not to be merely presentist. But as many thoughtful explorations of the historical materials of the West from a feminist perspective have shown,<sup>1</sup> we have to be careful to foreground our distinctly contemporary reading of these complex materials rather than read into their historical context ideas that are not the primary concern of those materials themselves.

I will begin by outlining the theological context in which we find the poetry of two related figures in a Hindu tradition. I will then pose some framing questions

arising from contemporary feminist discussions about gender and self-representation, for example from those like Judith Butler. In the second part of the essay, I will explore some of the work of these two devotional poets, Nammālvār and Āṅṅāl, and from that try and tease out implications for contemporary ideas on gender from their very different, literary-historical milieu, one that contributes modes of conceiving of gender to a contemporary debate shaped almost entirely through the ideas of the modern West.

## Two Lovers of God

The distinctive genre of intensely emotional writing on the love of God—*bhakti*, the togetherness wrought by devotion—spreads into most languages and regions of India over a period of a thousand years, but it is generally identified as having begun in the Tamil country around the sixth to seventh century. In Tamil, it crystallizes around two conceptions of the personal God, Śiva and Viṣṇu; I shall look at two key figures who belonged and contributed to the constitution of a community of worship around the latter. This community, due to its later, distinctive theological conception of the divine as Viṣṇu-with-his-consort Śrī (or Lakṣmī), is called Śrīvaiṣṇavism and traces its originary sacred material to the compositions attributed to twelve figures—the *Ālvārs*—who are dated by historical scholarship to between the seventh and tenth century.

I compare here some words of two of these Ālvārs<sup>2</sup> who have remained major figures even in the contemporary reading practices and temple rituals of the community, Nammālvār and Āṅṅāl. Āṅṅāl—“the Lady who Rules [the Lord, but also the devotees of the Lord]”—has always been represented as a woman and writes of herself as Koṭai—“daughter of Viṣṇucittan”—which the tradition explains as her being the adoptive daughter of the Ālvār Periyālvār. It must be noted that the complex process by which the corpus of the Ālvārs was canonized<sup>3</sup> elides independent evidence for who they really were historically. There are, of course, other reasons why we may agree with David Shulman’s wry remark that the speaker of the poems is “Āṅṅāl herself, or an assumed persona—it hardly matters” (2016: 118). Nammālvār is perhaps the most significant of the Ālvārs, given the centrality of his compositions to the sacred corpus. In several poems that are celebrated by the community to this day, he writes in the ancient Tamil voice of “the young woman,”<sup>4</sup> in the symbolic context of *akattiṇai*, the modes of the *akam*, or so-called “inner” genre of love in Caṅkam Tamil poetry (see Hardy 1983: 354, 364). I suggest that we think of the two categories of *akam* and *puram* as “inward” and “outward” rather than “inner” and “outer.” The distinction is not metaphysical; rather, it pertains to the intentional direction of the emotions expressed in each genre—the former toward love and longing, the latter toward war and social norms, with frequent mingling of metaphors, sexual desire, and martial prowess, for example.<sup>5</sup> One might even think of them as a possible framing of the private/public distinction.

The poet-saints write passionately about missing their beloved Lord, including in terms that are both erotic in mood and occasionally sensuous in their specificity—drawing on the tropes of Caṅkam compositions and on the persona of the heroine (*talaivi*) but also moving sharply away from its conventions, in naming the unnamed hero, by naming their God as their hero, and in never having the hero speak.<sup>6</sup> Their revised theopoetics lead us to reflect on the hermeneutic of gendered self-expression.

### Gender and Bodiliness: Reconciling Meaning and Performativity

Let me begin with the tension that has informed critical feminist thought between (1) the apparently pregiven and hence “naturalized” intuitions about the norms for what counts as men and women and (2) the instability of the concepts that inform those intuitions, once they are subject to analysis.<sup>8</sup> This, of course, has taken the form of the discussion over “sex versus gender.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminists sought to use the distinction between biological features and expectations about conduct or capacity to challenge the notion that biology determines what men and woman can do and who, consequently, they are. Kate Millet (1979: 29), for example, articulated the point that gender is “overwhelmingly cultural,” pointing to how aggression in boys is not some inbuilt biological orientation but a pattern of behavior that is encouraged by society. But this idea of using the sex/gender distinction for feminist purposes was subsequently challenged because it was argued that “sex” does not come free of interpretation since

it is already loaded with and coded by the very gender norms that feminists want to challenge. However, there is a continued line of thought that maintains that the sex/gender distinction is an analytic one that allows us to think more carefully and precisely about the concepts that inform the relationship between people.<sup>9</sup>

One key aspect of the retention of the sex/gender distinction is that it is *analytic*—it merely draws attention to such things as the cluster of sex properties that do play a role in medical health, for example, and also engages with ordinary language practices that need to be made sense of and not discarded altogether at the cost of radical unintelligibility. That is to say, retention of this distinction is not a commitment to an *existential* difference between what persons experience as being about their sex and as being about their gender. It is not that one recognizes size as a bare fact and then separately decides whether “size matters” or not, for meaning (whatever its implications) is already there in the adult’s noticing of oneself or another. At the same time, it is not as if it is impossible to have a physical measurement of body parts as such. It is the same with “race.” On the one hand, we cannot deny that people have skin or hair of different colors, but that is not noticed independently of what being that person of color means in any context (including in the company of the mirror alone). Compare acceptance of this analytic link with the existential one in biological determinism, the latter of which might hold that having a vagina simply is indicative of being “hysterical” or “less able to work successfully at large software companies.”

What is notable about the consequence of understanding sex and gender analytically but not existentially is that it permits us to look at the human being whole. Although disagreeing on its implications, many feminists have sought to move around the tension between sex and gender by talking about the “lived body”—that is, bodily subjectivity (what I call here “bodiliness”) as always already suffused with meaning from the time reflexivity dawns on the subject. At the same time, this meaning can also be seen as capable of being reworked creatively. To take an example of a feminist philosopher of the lived body, Toril Moi has eloquently argued for the need to describe the meaning that one finds in such bodiliness through phenomenology.<sup>10</sup>

The meaning found in reflexive attention to the structures of one’s experience is nevertheless not fixed. By the time a person seeks to find meaning in her experience of herself in her environment, she already finds herself with a repertoire of concepts—ideas, expectations, patterns of conduct directed at her, and so on—which are an ineliminable part of her capacity for self-understanding. But not only does this repertoire change through the life course, many of the changes are wrought by her creative agency as much as circumstances. There is a constant percolation of meaning-making of experience and selfhood between what one finds oneself already to be and what one finds oneself becoming through events and effort.<sup>11</sup> In short, phenomenology is not an abstract determination of subjectivity but the constant re/location of that subjectivity in an ecology of action, emotion, affect, and interaction. This “ecological” reading of phenomenology comes most naturally out of

a consideration of classical Indian materials that have a very different orientation to questions of subject, body, identity, gender, and experience than the modern West.<sup>12</sup>

Within such an approach, I suggest that we can still benefit from Judith Butler's application of the philosophical concept of "performativity" to gender, although clearly I am not following her here into her larger theory that all statements about sex are nothing other than gender norms.<sup>13</sup> As Butler puts it,

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body ... Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (1990a: 186)

To state my position bluntly: it is insightful to argue that people constantly act themselves into being in a variety of ways—in speech, gesture, expressions, comportment, clothing, ritual, projection, and reception of the erotic, short-term conduct and longer-term self-narratives. These actions are in constant interaction with whom they are given to themselves and take themselves to be from the dawn of self-consciousness. To recognize how what is given/taken configures people is humane; to acknowledge that people seek creative agency to reconfigure themselves is a profound form of hope. Philosophically, the important point is that this is a description of how people's lives work out and an ethical guide to how we must try to work out life. The

assertion that people have psychological essences—which is the denial of performativity—goes beyond that to a mysterious metaphysical claim. But equally, it seems as if the Butlerian contention that all of a person’s sense of being is a “fabrication” goes beyond observation of oneself and others to a competing metaphysical claim.

Without therefore taking a view on Butler’s fundamental, metaphysical claim that gender “is *real only to the extent* that it is performed” (1990a: 411), we may nonetheless accept her point that although people cannot simply ignore gender norms in one’s society, we may, as Alison Stone puts it, “reflect critically on our own behaviour, to assess and modify it” (2007: 65). This leads Butler to advocate “a proliferation of styles of individual bodily behaviour” that is not constrained by whether one is supposed to be a “man” or “woman” (Butler 1990a: 65). Despite my caution over the radical Butlerian claim, it is worth emphasizing that by no means do I want to say that there is an essence, let alone that that is given by “sex.” If we are sensitive to how performativity points to the continuous construction of identity, then we will spot that “sex” itself comes with conceptual weight, with social meaning. Instead, I want only to say that the assignment of meaning to sex properties is a characteristic part of what is given/taken at the start of one’s lifelong project of performativity. To call someone a man or a woman is an important part of the analytic of communication; it is what makes sense (to us and to others) of what we perform



with or against. What it means to be called thus, it should be clear to our anthropological imagination, is acutely conditioned by cultural time and place.

Now, Butler's main objective in developing performativity as a means of generating genres is to challenge the man-woman binary and what she argues is the dominance of the heterosexual matrix. I should acknowledge straightaway that the world of the Ālvārs that my study explores is one that is unquestioningly founded in just that binary, as is the case throughout the classical world. I will not engage with the objection that Butler's challenge to the gender binary itself reinscribes it, regardless of its worth. Instead, I focus on a perhaps more manageable matter, which is how performativity affects both what one expresses as one's gender and what one expresses as the meaning of that gender. To anticipate the course of this chapter, with some of Nammālvār's poetry, we see that the conventional givenness of the man-woman binary is shown to be labile in the performance of emotion, while in Āṅṅāl we see the exploration of new limits to the givenness of being a woman.

The notion of performative genres of comportment suggests that it is the critical mode by which a person uses creative agency to refashion phenomenology as it is already given. The percolation of subjectivity, as in the performance of the repertoire of emotions we find in the Ālvārs, can also be seen as the movement of self-experience from what is given to what one does with it.<sup>14</sup>

Let me sum up the main points of the somewhat short line I have taken through aspects of contemporary feminist philosophy. While rejecting the pernicious

assumption that sex determines gender, it is possible to retain an analytic distinction between sex and gender and point out that sex characteristics are always found laden with meaning. Given the constant and inescapable meaning-making of human beings, we must respond to the way gender norms have constrained and restricted people by seeing human beings whole, in terms of their lived body or bodily subjectivity. It can easily become question-begging to talk of the particular human being as masculine or feminine, as if normative presuppositions did not already inform our talk. We need to understand the lived body as constituting an ecological phenomenology, in which there is a continual flow of meaning into and out of experience due to the dynamic environment of such subjective responses as emotions. Given that the human being is in possession of concepts about herself that include normative requirements of how to be herself, there must be—given revisionary ways of dealing with the power of social norms—creative, agentive responses to the gendered situation in which that human finds herself. Here, I take agency to be expressed in the literary performance of gendered emotion, either to question what gender one is or how one takes a gender to be.

We have now created a constellation of concepts with which to turn to a closer examination of poems from Nammālvār and Āṅṅāl. The idea that there are men and women is analytically available when making sense of how meaning is found in reflexive understanding of selfhood. At the same time, it is never found without norms constructed around it. But the constructed nature of these norms suggests that

there can be creative responses to them, directed at what one *takes* oneself to be. This taking oneself to be is a form of creativity. When looking at the distant past, we are perforce required to seek such creativity in the formalized expression of it in literary production (and its reception: when we look at our poems, we begin to see how the tradition has received them through its own reception of gender). We can point to ways in which these traditional texts can contribute to a richer understanding of gender, even while recognizing their limitations and lacunae.

### A Bodily Theopoetics

For anyone working through various *bhakti* texts, it is surprising to realize how recent and provocative it has been in Christian theology to think that the infinite desire for God is tied to an irreducible bodily subjectivity. As Rowan Williams had to point out as recently as the early 1990s, “For Gregory [of Nyssa] ... we could say, there is no such thing as the soul in itself; it is always implicated in contingent matter, and even its final liberation ... depends ... upon the deployment and integration of bodiliness and animality” (Williams 1992: 244).<sup>15</sup> The Ālvārs in their expression of the love of God, by contrast, demonstrate a Tamil sensibility that treats the inner as simply part of the topology of lived reality. As a way of indicating this very different configuration of selfhood, I will use “bodiliness” precisely not to mean just a material entity with which subjectivity can be related in some way but rather as the very way subjectivity is expressed, to itself and others. That is to say, “bodiliness” in my usage indicates

that, from the start, we are dealing with the human whole that is enmeshed and constantly reformed within its environment. Such a fluid ecology is manifest in Āṅṭāl's expression of longing:

Cool clouds, water-laden—  
rise high and spread yourself,  
pour down on Vēṅkaṭam,  
home of the one who took the world from the great demon king.

Tell him, the lord of men, of my terrible love-sickness:

For he entered me,  
consumed me,  
took my all,

Like a worm that has entered a wood-apple. (*Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* [NT] 8.6, *viṅ nīla mēlāppu*)<sup>16</sup>

Given our previous considerations about the ecological (and therefore bodily) nature of phenomenology, we can see how natural it is for the Āḷvārs to formulate their theopoetics in terms of intense bodily affect suffused with divine presence and emotional richness. While it is true that if we read a particular ontology—of human subject located within an objective world—into the dense phenomenology of existence, then the rain clouds are a “mere” metaphor for a woman's torrential thoughts of God; the analytic components of our experience—for there is no denial that there are clouds and hills and human beings—do not themselves constitute a rigid distinction between things and people. They inform what it is to experience, and for

Ānṭāl here, there is a phenomenological field in which what it is to be her shifts and changes with her love of the personal yet pervasive Kṛṣṇa. Her bodiliness ranges over her environment, her feelings shape and are shaped by what she knows, senses, imagines, relocates, and immerses her sense of self in. In this, she is exemplary of a much-valued poetic sensibility most evident in Tamil and “Southern” Sanskrit literature, as Steven Hopkins (2004) has shown.

I would therefore like to say, programmatically, that we must always keep in mind this larger picture of what the poet expresses of her body’s ecological livedness. But within it, we cannot think of bodily being without its markers and here—in particular—gender. The relationship between a sense of transcendence and the gendered body is one that has only recently become thematized in contemporary Western thought. As Amy Hollywood says,

The transcendental conditions of subjectivity are bodily ... Whether as sensorially experienced or psychically configured, the body is the very site and support of human transcendence and subjectivity ... As women take on subjectivity as embodied beings, what Irigaray calls the sensible transcendental ... radically reconfigures the conditions and possibilities of subjectivity itself. (2002: 189–90)

This is already the case with the Āḷvārs, for the bodily subjectivity that attends forms of *bhakti* is not only not ignored—it forms the self-evident locus of expression. Fred Hardy (1983) long ago talked of Nammāḷvār as “a mystic of the cosmos of the

senses” (371). We need, therefore, to keep our attention on the role of bodiliness in its generality as well as the way bodiliness is keyed to gender.

Now, bodiliness in the love of God is not always keyed to gender, yet gender gradually emerges in the richly detailed expression of emotion that is the key signifier of the Āḷvārs’ poetry. I will delineate this emergence by looking at the particular salience the notion of “speaking as a young woman” has in the devotional love of Kṛṣṇa.

### Emotion and Bracketing Gender

To reiterate, what characterizes the genre of *bhakti* poetry is an intensity of emotional expression that may not always be keyed to gender. That is to say, the poet-devotees often present loving God as something that is not inflected by the gender of the devotee even while bodily self-awareness is central to that love. We can see this in the case of another celebrated Tamil woman poet-saint, from the Śaiva rather than Vaiṣṇava tradition, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. Her poems are among the oldest of the *bhakti* writings, dating back to the sixth century in all likelihood. Karen Pechilis (2016: 201) has argued eloquently that Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār “only obliquely thematizes the human body, in contrast to the three major male poet-saints of the Tamil Śaiva *bhakti* tradition.” Although her “devotional subjectivity” is sometimes expressed through her body, “the poet chooses not ‘to body’ beyond assuming characteristics common to all human bodies” (Pechilis 2016: 203).

Birth in this body  
enabled me to express  
my overflowing love  
through speech,  
and I reached  
your sacred henna red feet. (*Arputat Tiruvantāti* v. 1)

Pechilis points out that the poet-saint “describes the intersubjectivity of emotion” in a way that “decenters the individuality of the body” (2016: 204). That is to say, while emotions are inescapably expressive of bodily presence, she strives to express them as what anybody could express.

At the same time, the poet-saint implicitly expresses the fact that even the emotion she expresses for the sake of all (devotees of Śiva) nevertheless arises from what she has made of herself. The hagiographies have it that she was a beautiful, married woman but already devout. When her errant husband returned to her only to fall at her feet in respect, she asked Śiva to rid her of her beauty and make her ghoul-like so that she might wander the world singing his praise without drawing the male gaze upon her. This narrative doubtless takes its inspiration from such words as in her signature verse in another composition, which refers to the fearsome location of one of Śiva’s dances: “The ghoul, Kāraikkāl of the blazing mouth and teeth, thrives at this burning ground” (*Tiruvālaṅkāṭṭut Tiruppatikam* 2. v. 11). Karen Pechilis argues that

her use of the third person may provide a protective distance from the controversy of training a detailed descriptive gaze on a body that is human, female, and her own.

But the larger point is that Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār does not train a descriptive gaze on her own body in her poetic corpus; she speaks generally of the human body as that which allows the experience of both painful afflictions and sublime love. (Pechilis 2016: 209–10)

As we will see, by contrast, Āṅṅāl offers exactly a “detailed descriptive gaze on a body that is human, female, and her own” and yet with the same emotional focus on her beloved God. So, we are likely to be persuaded by Pechilis’s argument that the reason why Karaikkāl Ammaiṃār deflects attention from her bodily intensity of devotion is because she wants her emotional expression to be available intersubjectively for other devotees regardless of gender. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention here to how—especially in light of the hagiographic narrative’s exegesis of her words—she has performed a shift—through literal, miraculous bodily reconfiguration—in how her gender is to be interpreted. For, notoriously, the human norms of the gender binary are suspended when it comes to ghouls, even more so of those that then invert their liminality by centering themselves on the presence of God. So, she makes herself a ghoul, observes the ghoul, and has the ghoul’s vivid and very particular bodily self-expression speak nonetheless for the intensity of devotion quite generally.

Nammālṃvār, being given as a man, does not seem to require a comparably elaborate performance of reconfiguration, of blurring the meaning of gender and then coming to speak for all devotees (although we will later see that he too has his own



performance of crossing back and forth). He can often express intense love of God that is not keyed to gender, even while suggesting an erotic intensity. For who, in feeling that way about God, would think there to be a gender that did not permit mingling with the lover?

In truth he mingled with me.

Mingling with my spirit,

the Lord took it as well. (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 1.8.5–6)<sup>17</sup>

In short, while *bhakti* is an expression of sensible transcendence and is richly bodied in its language, it is not always a performance of gender, even if the deflection of gendered language requires a complex reconfiguration on the part of the (woman) poet. Having acknowledged this, we can turn to increasingly precise ways in which the performance of devotional emotion can be revealed as gendered in thought-provoking ways.

### Engendering Emotion within Norms of Perspective

In the *Tiruppāvai*, the poet writes primarily in the first-person plural of a group of questing cowherd girls (*gopīs*) as they wake up and prepare to find their way to the house of their beloved Lord, where he is asleep with his Tamil consort, Nappinnai. Sometimes, a group of them address one of their friends, who has not woken up yet. Very occasionally, the poet's perspective implicitly looks upon the group from the outside. The commentarial tradition interprets this as Āṅṭāl locating herself as one of the *gopīs*. This often-choral voice of women, expressing a sometimes demanding but

always well-mannered and respectful love and longing for their beloved God, is received by the tradition as speaking for all devotees. To this day, it is recited by men as well as women, quite generally, even though it is clearly keyed by gender.<sup>18</sup>

Worshippers today, men and women, take on the persona of the *gopī* and read that as taking on Āṅṅāl's persona as a *gopī* so that a man may sing as a woman singing as another woman.

It would be a different undertaking to trace the reception, history, and contemporary dynamics of Āṅṅāl's figuration in the liturgical imagination of Śrīvaiṣṇava men. The (after) life of a gendered text may have its own implications for performativity, for the situation with the *Tiruppāvai*'s reception is more than a little unusual in religious history. For this essay, however, I only want to draw attention to the fact that the issue of gendered performance may lie not only within the textual expressivity of the poet but also in its reception by the community (of liturgical rather than merely literary readers). It is an open question as to what exactly happens in the liturgical rendition of Āṅṅāl, for it is not merely acting when it comes to the existential tug of devotion. At the least, we can say that the taking on of the *persona* of a poet-saint-goddess for profound spiritual activity does something to conceptions of masculinity, even if it does not make for the shifting of gender binaries.

Returning, then, to what is given within text, this sense that performance is not about a shift in gendered selfhood but a taking on (for howsoever profound a motivation) of a *persona* is conveyed well in the artful experimentation of another

Ālvār, Tirumankai.<sup>19</sup> The tradition itself recognizes this: the hagiography has him chasing after women before his transformation.<sup>20</sup> As Archana Venkatesan has said, he is thought of as the “poet’s poet,” who “experiments with genres, metres and poetic situations” and uses “poetic virtuosity” in “molding his women (*talaivis*) and their maddening predicament” of loving a God who is absent (Venkatesan 2007a: 19). I mention Tirumankai only in order to clarify that not all poetic voices are equally existential in the import of their performance of gender. But we have to be cautious about drawing any hard and fast lines between “mere” *persona* and something more transfigurative. Depending on our criteria, we may read the implications of these theopoetic voices differently.

From a literary perspective, Venkatesan offers this reading:

In contrast to Andal, our two male poets, Tirumankai and Nammālvār, do not juxtapose the material and mythic worlds ... Rather, they employ the full complement of female characters of the *akam* genre to construct and comment on the interior world of their *talaivi* [heroine]. (2007a: 21)

This might indicate that, if we use as criterion the choice of literary *topoi*—which offers one perspective on the ecology of the poet’s phenomenology—we can find a difference in expressiveness between those we already take to be the male poets and their female counterpart.<sup>21</sup>

If we shift our attention to the dimensions of emotional expression in that bodily intense way that characterizes many of Nammālvār’s composition, and

suspend the presupposition of what it means to say that he is a male poet, other aspects of his poetry come to the fore. So, let us look at Nammālvār's expression of love as a woman for the male God and ask if the surface differences in literary tropes that Venkatesan points out overlie a deeper similarity with Āṅṅāl. Here, the distinction between *persona* and character, between literary style and existential performativity, is blurred. For example, consider these verses:

I had not consented, but He came and consumed my life,  
Day after day He came and consumed me  
altogether.  
Except for serving my Lord in southern  
Kātkarai with its dark rain clouds  
Is there anything else that my dear life  
could enjoy? (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 9.5.8)<sup>22</sup>

... The disease of my desire climaxes, deep  
going, melting in a torrent.  
It seemed He would just rule over me,  
But instead He consumed my life, that  
amazing one, and  
Just a little is left after He consumed my  
dear life.  
I had not consented, but He came and  
consumed my life. (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 9.6.7–8)

... He is my Lord Krishna,  
And to Him I have surrendered my  
womanhood.

So what's the use of getting angry, women? (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 7.3.5)

Nammālvār does appear to juxtapose the mythic and the local (the reference is to the temple in Thirukatkarai, near present-day Eranakulam, Kerala). But the important point is that, in doing so, he expresses here an urgency of emotion that goes beyond the literary donning of a *persona*—instead entering into—performing—a gendered genre of being. The woman's voice here follows cultural and literary norms, and we are not to overstate the case and think that nonbinary genders are being imagined into being. Nonetheless, at this point, in this way, Nammālvār is performing the conception of womanhood available to him, not as literary ventriloquism but as existential reconfiguration of the phenomenology of *bhakti*. The poet here feels in a way that can, necessarily, only be articulated through his conceptual repertoire—but there is more to it than mimesis.

Here we need to find a fine balance. When we are exploring what it might mean to understand a classical Indian reworking of gender, we cannot afford to help ourselves to the sexual identity of the poet, as if the culturally given category closes off the agency to perform outside of that identity. We learn nothing about the phenomenology of gender if we say that here is a man writing “as” a woman and leave it at that. But neither can we afford to lose our footing in the culturally given

identity altogether, for then it makes no sense at all to say that the young woman's voice here is Nammālvār's. We will be left with no purchase on the thought that gender can be performed, if we do not start with how performers construe their own bodily self-presence while essaying their performance.

This is why I want to say that here a man is performing womanhood. By which I mean to say that we should try to neither conflate sex and gender nor ontologize a difference. We can gain a sense of what is expressively similar in the performance of gender if we compare Nammālvār with Āṅṭāl, even as the comparison can function hermeneutically only through the terms of thinking of the former's verses as a reconfiguration and the latter's as a figuration of certain (theopoetically transformed) norms of "womanhood." So let us consider Āṅṭāl's invocation of "womanhood" (*peṇmai*).

My tears gather and spill between my breasts  
like waterfalls.

He has destroyed my womanhood.

How does this bring him pride? (*Nācciyār Tirumoli* 8.1, *viṇ nīla mēlāppu*)

Similar too is the invocation of the familiar Tamil tropes of being entered, of being consumed, of being tortured—all of it secret or a secret that, once proclaimed, has the added force of revelation.

My clever and perfect lord  
whose mighty arms easily wield the *śārṅga* bow  
between him and me

a secret has passed

that only he and I know. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi [Maṇṇu perum pukaḷ Mātavan] 5.8*)

I confess I find it mostly difficult to say how the emotional presentation is different in the two cases. But because of the inescapable knowledge that the latter examples are from Āṅṭāl, it seems as if she is impatient of her fate, more ready to quarrel with her beloved, prepared to complain rather than endure. Perhaps here, we see traces of the aetiology of Nammālvār's imagination of himself into womanhood—namely, his normative understanding of what it is to become woman—whereas Āṅṭāl just is, and we need to follow her into an understanding of whatever it is to be woman because she says so. (Better to be hesitant here about drawing hard and fast conclusions about one's own suppositions about gender.) Once we are made sensitive to her readiness to be herself rather than an idea of herself, we see that violent intensity that is as far away as one could get from a demure rendition of masculinist norms of being “woman.”

My perfect lord

who holds the spotless white conch in his left hand

refuses to reveal himself to me.

Instead he enters me, tortures me all day,

toys with my life,

and leads me a merry dance. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi [Maṇṇu perum pukaḷ Mātavan] 5.2*)

## In between: A Note on Nammālvār's Gender Crossings

If we are to press on and ask if there is any noncircular way of asking how Nammālvār and Āṇṭāl express womanhood, we should look more carefully at the role of body morphology in their language, for the greatest trouble for reading around the gender/sex problem is the idea of sex-specific properties. But before that, it is worth looking at a particularly provocative yet much celebrated poem of Nammālvār's. I think it shows that performance works on many levels of signification at the same time, and to be comfortable rather than uncomfortable with the changes implied by performance is an important requirement for those who would wish to be sensitive to gender play in devotional love. These are the two relevant verses from the poem:

Lifting my modesty, stealing my heart,  
The Lord of the deities reaches the highest heavens.  
I swear, my friend!  
I shall shock all the earth,  
Do weird things—ride the palmyra stem like a horse.  
With no sense of shame, I shall ride  
the palmyra stem through every street in town,  
and women from all the lands will cheer me on.  
And I shall demand from the Lord  
a cool blossom from the *tuḷai* plant  
and adorn my head with it. (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 5.3.9–10)<sup>23</sup>

The reference is to the practice of *maṭal ūrtal*, a version of which is traceable to the Caṅkam literature and which is performed in some parts of the Tamil country to this



day. In it, a man who has been spurned by a woman sits in acute discomfort on the sharp fronds of a palmyra stem and pretends to ride it like a horse around town, declaiming his love for her. His public humiliation shows the depth of his love and is meant to convince her to agree to his suit in order to stop the display.

As can be seen straightaway, here Nammālvār writes as a woman who threatens to act as a man and that in a spectacularly mortifying way.<sup>24</sup> Is it a return to his self-understanding as a man, or is it a further move from imagining how a woman may think it properly provocative to be “weird” in order to draw God’s attention? And let us think too: if the ritual is for a man to force a woman to put him out of his misery, does the woman performing as a man—through an act forbidden for women—imply that the beloved is a man or a woman (given the expectation that heterosexual norms apply)? Here we see how heteronormativity and the gender binary themselves become a powerful frame for performative engendering of emotion.

This particular passage from Nammālvār should make us think carefully of the existential force of performativity, especially when it is for the sake of divine love, understood in *bhakti* as the very furthest a human being can go in meaningful emotion.

## Morphology and the Performance of Gendered Emotion

It is true that, apart from a very few instances of invoking symbolic tropes from *akattinam*, Nammālvār does not offer a morphologically keyed view of the woman

devotee in a way that might be seen as merely reducing gender to biological sex. Nammālvār does use the emotional registers and, of course, the psychogeography of the symbolic Tamil landscape. But when it comes to writing as the young woman, his imaginative location is only occasionally—if tellingly—reliant on bodily morphology and much more on these other markers of his sensorium. So, we are made sensitive to the construction of gender within the context of what the tradition takes to be the givenness of his male body.

This is no compassion, no compassion  
at all, Kṛṣṇa.

Every time You touch my full breasts  
There swells inside me a vast flood of joy  
That crests not even in heaven, it surrounds  
and submerges all I know—  
And yet it ends like a dream.

Desire reaches deep deep inside me—  
but, alas, not that a life can bear,  
oh!

Yet separating from You right now is still  
worse,

When You go out to herd the cows:  
It is my ruin. (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 10.3.2)

Our life like wax melting away in fire,

Our bright bracelets and cloth slack and  
slipping down,  
Tears like pearls trickle from our flower  
eyes, our breasts are pale, shoulders  
frail. (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 10.3.7)

Intense love courses through the entirety of the Āḷvār's phenomenology. What is shown here is not a universal mode of devotion to God but the particularity of feeling lovelorn, the whole of oneself brought into an emotional state that is naturally described by the available resources of one's cultural repertoire. By now, surely, it seems otiose even for the critic—let alone the devotee—to seek judgment of whether a man has imagined what it would be like to feel something in breasts that he does not have or whether there is just a field of complex, gendered subjectivity within which the poetic voice has found itself.

The particular use of bodily materiality to express lovelorn (*virāha*) devotion in Āṅṅāl too is accompanied by the symbolic tropes of Caṅkam poetry. She too deploys the symbols of that cultural repertoire. So, for example, in the famous opening song of the *Nācciyār Tirumoḷi*, she says,

O, Ancient God of Love  
I painted your name upon the wall—  
the black sugarcane bow, the banner bearing the shark, the horses,  
and the maidens with their fly-whisks.  
Have you even noticed?

From childhood

I adored the Lord of Dvaraka,

Pledged my swelling breasts to him. Quickly.

Unite me with him. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi* [*tai oru tiṅka!*] 1.4)

The intense love is communicated through sensual experience of the body. Fred Hardy says in this regard,

One only has to look ... at the recurring references to her breasts, to realise how much she is a person “of flesh and blood,” how strongly aware she is of, and accepts positively, her physical nature. No other Āḷvār is so definite about it. ... Though I think it is legitimate to regard many songs of Āṅṅāl as personal expressions, as belonging to the level of mysticism, we must not overlook the close similarities to the symbolic language typical of the girl poems. In other words, even when Āṅṅāl speaks directly about her personal emotions, she does it by resorting to certain typical symbols: her breasts and her abdomen. (Hardy 1983: 427–8)

But by now, we know that it cannot be the mere occurrence of these material symbols of a whole-body phenomenology of love that marks the song of the “woman” (or “girl,” as Hardy has it in the language of a generation ago). Yet it is not entirely out of our aesthetic reach to focus on the poetry while bracketing the poet and ask if perhaps in Āṅṅāl there is a morphological frankness that is peculiarly hers, which is evident in her plea.

Tormented by that Hṛṣikeśa

who is exalted by the gods of every direction

I lost the luster of my pearly white smile

the redness of my full lips,

and my young breasts surrendered their beauty. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi* [*Maṇṇu perum pukaḷ Mātavan*] 5.6)

That frankness is not just the way she returns to gendered symbols but how specific, how frankly aware of the mirror, they appear in the poetry. And it is not just the appearance but other modes of her sensorium.

Are they fragrant as camphor? Are they fragrant as the lotus?

Or do those coral lips taste sweet?

I ache to know the taste, the fragrance of the lips

of Mādhava, who broke the tusk of the elephant. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi* [*Karuppūram Nārumō*] 7.1)

Here, the freshness and immediacy of her language seems less focused on gendering performance and more a recreation of the significance of a gender she takes as given. Of course, there is nothing sensorily “bare” about the “given,” for as soon as any of us speaks of how we feel and what we take our emotions to be, we cannot but take recourse in the lexicon available to us. And, Āṇṭāl is a poet of skill and sophistication who is totally in command of her literary inheritance. But what I think is that the primary lesson about gender we get here is that creative agency in Āṇṭāl is about asserting what the person who takes herself as woman may tell of her emotions rather than about asserting that she is a woman as her culture would have it. Perhaps it is only in Nammālvār’s desperate threat to behave like a lovesick man that we find in him this challenge to what a woman may be in classical Tamil culture.

## Āṅṭāl, Erotic Theopoetics, and Writing “as” a Woman

We have now found our way through how there is a subtle relationship between a given/taken gender that turns on assumptions about sex identity and the performative nature of gender (as found in the textual expression of theopoetics). On the one hand, if we trace all our literary and existential responses to the nature of the poetry back to a simple assumption of which poet is a man and which one is a woman, then we lose sight of the significance of how gender is performed in these works. On the other hand, both the literary skill and the existential urgency of performing gender make little sense if we do not set the poetry against the background of the cultural knowledge of who is given/taken as whom (here, in the hagiographies of the poet-saints).

With that balance in mind, we should also be aware that the salience of gendered performance might vary, and we notice that within and outside the poetic compositions. Inside the poem, we see the literary qualities that may distinguish as well as unite Nammālvār and Āṅṭāl, while outside it, we may ask similarly about what it means that both write “as” young women in love with a personal male God. Not just in the cultured expression of raw emotion but also in the use of symbolic tropes, many things unite the two Ālvārs. But Āṅṭāl has what I call a “morphological frankness” in her *Nācciyār Tirumoli* that is unparalleled. I suggest that this is because she is “starting” with a gendered identity she does not consist, and therefore her creative

agency is directed toward exploring how that identity may be expressed against the limits of cultural norms. This is important. When we talk about what it is to be gendered, we should also mean how we should so. With this consideration in mind, I will finish my study of Āṅṭāl's work with a look at how the erotic dimension of her theopoetics points to the subversive nature of her interpretation of her gender.

We should, of course, recognize the literary relationship of dependence between her employment of, on the one hand, the older *akam* topoi that hold between people and, on the other, her new mythopoetic reformulation of them in her relationship with God. But we should not therefore take the *eros* of the latter as an emotional derivative of the former. Too often, we take “the erotic” to be first a relationship understood between humans that only subsequently gets theologized as a model of a relationship with God. We should not take the desire for God as something parasitic on a secular reality but, instead, as a fundamental expression of *eros*. When Āṅṭāl talks of being married to no man, it is not like, say, her preferring King Ranga to Priest Śekhara but rather a distinction between two orders of being.

She cries out:

Lord of Desire! My ripening breasts swell  
For that Lord who holds the conch and flaming discus  
I could not live,  
If there is even mention of offering my body to men.  
That would be as terrible as a forest-roaming jackal coming in  
and sniffing the offering,

That the learned Brahmins who uphold the Vedas,

Have given up to the gods in heaven. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi* [*tai oru tiṅka!*] 1.7)

Notice the elegant simplicity with which the completely conventional trope of maidenly modesty in front of the male (human) gaze is startlingly inverted by the claim of arousal—that is to say, the yearning to gaze toward the face of the absent God, the God who will not look at her. Here, the very performance of her given/taken gender is an assertion of its changed (albeit theopoetic) meaning. So, we see that creative performance is about what it means to be gendered as much as what it means to engender oneself.

My breasts seek the gaze of the one

whose beautiful hand lifts the discus.

Bound tightly in a red cloth, their eyes

shy away from the gaze of mere mortals

desiring none other than Govinda.

I cannot live here a moment longer

Please take me to the shore of the Yamunā. (*Nācciyār Tirumoḷi* 12.4)

## Learning from the Tradition

Despite this way of thinking about the erotic and gender, we still have a fundamental question: if we are to guard ourselves against the essentialism of taking gender to be what is always and already given/taken even as self-consciousness dawns on the individual with the emergence of personhood, what do we do about the intuition within community and academy that we have here the writings of older-man-as-



young-woman and young-woman-as-young woman? I think an answer that imputes a wholesale false consciousness, in which everyone is trapped in ignorance of gender construction, is not only morally bleak but also epistemologically unviable. So, we must ask what is going on in the reception of Āṅṅāl as herself, the one woman among the Ālvārs and thus “the lady who rules.” Of course, there are the purely poetic characteristics of Āṅṅāl: the unwavering first personalism, the blending of the mythic into the personal, the weight of repeated focusing on bodily morphology, and the community’s own recognition of her use of sexual relationality: as it is clear in Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai’s medieval commentary, there is a straightforward acceptance of her use of sexual metaphors.<sup>25</sup> Her assured frankness and intimate detail takes many forms. This may be in tenderness:

The master of the cowherds,

tends his calves, staff in hand.

He danced too with the waterpots in sacred Kuṭantai.

Bring me the cool blue basil leaf

And place it on my soft, tangled curls. (*Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* [*Kaṅṅaṅ eṅṅum*] 13. 2)

Or it may be in agonistic ferocity that skillfully evokes and radically reworks the imagery of the Caṅkam heroine Kaṅṅaki (who, upon hearing of the unfair execution of her unfaithful husband by the king, in fury tore off her breast and flung it at his city, and set it afire):

I melt, anguished.

But he does not care if I live or die.

If I see that thief,  
that looting lord of Govardhana,  
I shall pluck these useless breasts of mine  
from their roots,  
Will fling them at his chest,  
And stop that raging fire in me. (*Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* 13. 8)

The trouble I have been talking about is the impossibility of disentangling intuitions about the given/taken nature of gender from performative re/construction of it, even when we know that gendered power is encoded in that givenness. But let us think of the significance the tradition attaches to the conflation of the devotee’s poetic “I” and the personal “I” in *Āṅṭāl*, simply by virtue of treating the author of the *Tiruppāvai* and the *Nācciyār Tirumōḷi* “as” a woman. The tradition and scholarship tends to think that because she is a woman, she writes in a particular way that men do not. (As per Fred Hardy, mystical ecstasy for Nammālvār, “in the girl and *gopī* songs” is “clearly connected with eroticism. *Āṅṭāl*, who was herself a girl, was uniquely able to integrate the erotic and the mystical planes” [1983: 369]). This makes sense when we hold normative gender identities for granted and ask only about literary representation and think of such poems as talk about women as—in Martha Selby’s words—“representations of male attempts to aesthetically capture and portray female sexuality” (Selby 2000: 104). But from the perspective of this essay and its concern about the question of how gender is re/constructed, this can seem circular as a general statement. Obviously, if there is a context that invites the reader to see the stylized,

literary expression as a self-conscious replication of a different gendered perspective—  
—as in the case of Tirumankai, whose coming to devotion includes an extravagantly  
heterosexual male identity, as a man who used to chase women—then it is fair enough  
to accept the poet’s word. But absent such a context—and in the case of Nammālvār,  
there is no second-order hagiographic guidance apart from the givenness of an identity  
as a man—then we must let the poetic voice that emerges in the text to remain  
immersed in its gendered performance.

Instead, we should see—through looking at how the tradition takes it that this  
is a woman while Nammālvār is a man—that the imaginative gender location in  
theopoetics (at least) is on a continuum between different modes of gender  
construction: from where the person strives agentively to express identity, all the way  
to where some self-formation has always already been there, especially through a  
morphology that is used in different and fluid cultural contexts to affirm a view of  
one’s gender. We have to make sense of our intuition that we can talk of a man  
writing as a woman and a woman writing as a woman, but we must understand that  
this is inescapably circular; for what we are looking at is how a human being is being  
gendered, always already and yet also by choice. We can neither start with a contrast  
between the given and the constructed nor can we claim to see a pure act of  
construction with nothing given left over.

So, we must see the use of morphological characteristics as lying at the point  
where always already given constructions are taken up and used in creative agency,

not always of “a gender” but what it might mean in the ecology of one’s experience of being oneself. In our contemporary theoretical concern to deconstruct all sense of the given, we tend to ignore the challenge of having to account for the creative bearing that materiality has for our gendered selves. There are powerful reasons why bodily morphology can be the ground of the “first construction,” whose primacy lies in its appeal to an apparent essence. I want to suggest that the contemporary significance of Āṅṅāl lies in her being taken as a woman who speaks of love of God but with a voice resembling that of a man whose work she must have known, a voice, moreover, already heard in a preexisting literary sensibility.

The reception by the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition of her as a woman of authority, appeal, and a virtually unsurpassed relevance to this day shows that even if self-expressions of essence are fundamentally constructed, that emotional power and poetic teleology can evoke in others the possibility of their own narratives through a theoaesthetics of gender: “The passion of Āṅṅāl and the surrender of Nammālvār are the passion and surrender of the devotee” (Narayanan 1987: 150). But, in these subtle ways, sometimes reflexive and at others lost in the sheer force of devotional belonging, the passion and surrender are also gendered and inflect what it means to be gendered when participating in the Śrīvaiṣṇava liturgy. And that participation, I want to say, is a magnifying lens through which to look at more general existential conditions by which representation feed into the gendering of emotion. The theopoetics we have been engaging with is not only of esoteric value to a community

of worshippers; it is indicative of questions of the most fundamental import to lives with very different teleologies.

It may be possible, if one is sensitive to the range of human expression, to look for lessons as much in Ānṭāl as in Gregory of Nyssa, as much in theopoetics as street theatre, as much in classical Tamiḷ as in Spanish, as much in religion as in cinema. But with it comes the responsibility of recognizing the lacunae in one's material. I therefore want to be careful not to overstate the case. To reiterate, this exploration has not got us to looking critically at the gender binary and heteronormativity or at structures of power in language, class/caste, and institutions. Yet it would not be becoming of a student of these Āḷvārs to be too modest about their significance. In their theology, in their poetic power, in the continued if overlooked liturgical significance, they do make us think about how gender may be negotiated between what is given/taken and performed, how boundaries may be acknowledged only to be crossed, and norms symbolically deployed only to reconfigure their meaning. There is still much to be done in thinking through issues of gender through the classical past.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Lloyd (1984); in a very different mode, Zajko and Leonard (2006).

<sup>2</sup> I set aside here the complex question of Āntāl's identity as more a goddess than an Ālvār in the community; see Hudson (1993).

<sup>3</sup> For an evocative summary of the process, see Shulman (2016: 125–8).

<sup>4</sup> The “heroine” in one of the standard persona of the earliest layers of Tamil poetry that falls under the category of “inwardness” (*akam*); Zvelebil (1975: 98 [n. 95]).

<sup>5</sup> See the translations in Ramanujan (1985).

<sup>6</sup> See Cutler and Ramanujan (1999: 249).

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Alison Stone for discussion of these issues. Stone (2007) is an admirably clear and helpful orientation to the issues touched upon here; the original ideas laid out in the book belie its modest claim to be an “introduction” to feminist philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> Plumwood (1989) is a cool and clear statement of this position.

<sup>10</sup> See Moi (1999). Having the notion of an analytic distinction between sex and gender at hand, we need not necessarily follow Moi in saying there should be no “sex/gender” usage at all but only of the “lived body.”

<sup>11</sup> For an exploration of this process with reference to gender in the *Mahābhārata*, see Ram-Prasad (2018), Chapter 2.

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<sup>12</sup> Maria Heim and I term this nonmetaphysical, descriptive, analytic, and contextual approach to experience “ecological phenomenology.” On its application to *dharma* and emotion, see Heim (2018).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Butler (1990 [2007]: 7).

<sup>14</sup> Let me acknowledge that the freedom and potential to self-create are constrained by relationships of power, which requires addressing in ways that this chapter cannot do. When talking of gender, I am talking about *the taking on* of a self-declared first-personal voice. There is different task, “of how a female is conceived” in a cultural context, such as Janet Gyatso has touched upon in her study of Buddhist monasticism (Gyatso [2003: 89]), which I cannot undertake here.

<sup>15</sup> See Williams (1992: 244).

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Archana Venkatesan’s new translation of *Āṅṭāl* and mainly follow her rendition of the Tamil in Venkatesan (2010); but the translation by Vidya Dehejia (1990) is also beautiful and well worth reading. Also, I thank Sudha Chakravarthi for conveying to me over the years the beauty and context of *Āṅṭāl*’s words, with the incense-lit, jasmine-fresh dusky afternoon echoing to the *Tiruppāvai*’s enigmatic refrain, *ēl ōr empāvāy*.

<sup>17</sup> See Narayanan’s (1987: 21) translation.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Younger (1982).

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<sup>19</sup> I follow here Venkatesan’s sensitive exploration in Venkatesan (2007a).

<sup>20</sup> See Venkatesan (2007a), note 11.

<sup>21</sup> Here Venkatesan suggests that she is extending an insight about Āṅṭāl from Dennis Hudson (1996): Āṅṭāl tends to offer the mythographic world of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛṇḍāvana when talking of and as a *gopī* in the Tiruppāvai, whereas she appears to exist in the densely specific—“material”—world of her locale when in the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* she speaks of herself, alone, offering us the contours of a biography.

<sup>22</sup> For the following verses of Nammālvār with one exception, I use the theologically sensitive rendering in Clooney (2014).

<sup>23</sup> For this passage, I use the translation from Narayanan (1987: 43–4).

<sup>24</sup> The practice is also discussed by Tirumankai in elaborate echo of earlier Caṅkam literature. See Hardy (1983: 388–402); also Venkatesan (2007b).

<sup>25</sup> See Venkatesan (2010) for both a study of the commentary and the bibliography for this long-recognized exegetical feature within the Śrīvaiṣṇava community.