Choice of the word “manipulation” for inclusion in the title of this paper implies on the part of the author of which it is used a strong and singular motivation concerning his compositional work and also implies a capacity for scholars to define this motivation within the framework of possible forces acting upon Bhartrhari as part of the process of composing his collection of poetry, the Satakatrayam, if it were not simply composed as an expression of artistic virtuosity. Implication it can only be because in one sense there is no such author as Bhartrhari. The poems are merely attributed to him and even if we might argue that any unifying force which can be located in the collection of poems, a unity which may be a reflection of the poet’s originality in demonstrating a creativity expressed through, but going beyond, the formal conventions of what were subsequently catalogued in the treatises on Sanskrit poetics, the author is simply a fiction. Nothing can be known about him as a person. All we can know are the legendary interpretations made about his persona in later texts. These legendary biographical fragments have played an important role in their own right for they have fed into the interpretative task applied to the poems by later, especially modern, interpreters, such that the poems and the biographical fragments have come to mirror each other.

Nonetheless, various kinds of unities do occur in his poems and to the collection as a whole they lend a certain measure of coherence. One such unity, if it can be defined as such, is the perceptible strategy — at work in the majority of his poems — of manipulating traditional symbols drawn from the culture of his time. The symbols in question derive their evocative power as much from the extent of their capacity to bring instantly to mind classical Indian ideologies as from the readiness with which they are depicted in a strongly hyperbolic mode and, finally, because they derive a specific interpretative significance within a widely known dialectical opposition. The ideologies which they symbolize, principally those of which the dominant signifiers are the variously articulated forms of the tri- and caturvargas, had been in various stages of development and modification for up to one thousand years before Bhartrhari’s poetry was composed, that is, if we can assume a likely date for him of the fourth century AD. Symbols clash along the syntagmatic axis of the single stanza and one can assume this clashing
could only have been a deliberate strategy of the poet. Repeated confronta-
tion of symbols produces in the poems the perception of a totally frag-
mented fictional world created out of a finite and rather narrowly based set
of images, the ultimate referents of which exist always in a kind of dialectical
interplay. The very narrowness of the range of imagery is conducive to
repetition and hyperbole, permitting the assumed reader to sense a range of
possible ideological options defined as such within the thought world from
which the poet is composing his work. Use of the symbols becomes subser-
vient to two functions then: (1) to facilitate the exposition of the principal
points of focus for the respective ideological positions of which the symbols
themselves are illustrative products, and (2) for the intellectual demolition
of these very ideological positions through the demonstration of their inner
contradictions and their incapacity to exist in any kind of essentialist
isolation. Bhartrhari's constant use of the image of woman and his evocation
of conventional feminine affectations means that the symbol of woman is
placed at the centre of his poetic strategy.

If only because of frequency of occurrence, it is well known that woman,
especially woman in youth, is one of the most dominant symbols in
Bhartrhari's poetry. Yet women never speak. Always they are presented as
object. But objects of what? Of the senses, or of the ascetic's scorn? What
is most striking is the association advanced between women and the senses
— both always with a tinge of ambivalence —, especially the visual sense, an
association rehearsed constantly in the poems. Woman is never more than
an image, one which is apprehended involuntarily and, as a result, is either
yearned for or rejected, and is still yearned for even if the image should
receive a negative evaluation and be subsequently rejected. Yet it is not just
the broad opposition implied in the latter which is the only interest of a
thinker as subtle as Bhartrhari. It is rather those nuances, considered in an
important epistemological sense, which measure the attraction towards and
repulsion from women and, in so doing, signify tendencies seemingly
inherent in men, irrespective of the cultural positions by which they
define themselves, whether householder/ascetic or something else in
between.

In this paper I will analyse Bhartrhari's image of the feminine mostly
utilizing examples drawn from the Śrīgāraśataka (ŚŚ), a strategy which
requires no explanation. However, it would be methodologically naive to
focus just on women without a simultaneous exploration of the image of
men in Bhartrhari's poetry. Men are always the implied subject of the
poems in the ŚŚ and an appropriate control on an analysis based purely on
this šataka would be to analyse the poetic construction of both men and