Csaba Dezső and Dominic Goodall (editors and translators)


This is a beautiful edition of a beautiful work. After a short, informative introduction and a detailed summary of the plot (necessary because of the work’s ornate narrative structure), the reader discovers a magnificent bilingual edition. Printed on the left page in a clear and elegant Devanāgarī font is the first critical edition of the Kuṭṭanīmatam, and an excellent edition it is. It is based on newly discovered manuscripts and allows many improvements vis-à-vis earlier printed editions (all the variants are recorded at the bottom of the page in a highly reader-friendly manner). On the right is the first English translation of Dāmodaragupta’s work, accompanied by occasional subtitles that help the reader navigate the many speakers and events. Topping off the folio-size volume are concise, useful annotations, a solid bibliography, and a handy glossary of proper names. All in all, this edition has the potential finally to liberate the Kuṭṭanīmatam from the silly disrepute it enjoys among modern scholars, as discussed in the introduction (pp. 26–28). Those already familiar with snippets from Dāmodaragupta’s work can now examine it in all its genius, and those not yet acquainted with it are offered a pleasant introduction. Csaba Dezső and Dominic Goodall have done an excellent service to the community of Indologists and to lovers of literature at large.

One outstanding feature of the Kuṭṭanīmatam is its intricate structure. Ostensibly an orderly lecture delivered by a madam named Vikarālā (Ms. Dreadful) to a young and aspiring prostitute, the delicate Mālatī, the text does not miss an opportunity to switch to a different narrator’s voice. In fact, the madam rarely speaks directly and prefers to deliver her counsel through the mouths of numerous fictional characters, who, in turn, are just as eager to invoke more deeply embedded imagined personas, and so on. The result is an amazing cacophony wherein the voices of prostitutes, customers, madams, husbands, wives, and their watchful neighbors, as well as actors and actresses, are particularly prominent, although this is by no means an exhaustive list. They talk among themselves, cite what they have heard from others, and stage small dramas to be seen or heard by one another. The work even includes an elaborate staging of a whole act from Harṣa’s Ratnāvalī, sandwiched between discussions that precede and follow the performance of this classical play. This episode is part of the affair of Prince Samara and the lead actress-cum-courtesan Mañjarī that occupies the second half of the work. The first half is
dominated by the story of noble Sundarasena and the prostitute Hāralatā, who fell in love despite all warnings, and in between the reader comes across smaller vignettes from life in the brothel, all purportedly meant to teach Mālatī, the work’s inner listener, the dos and don’ts of the profession.

In reality, however, both the complex structure and the conceit of the madam’s lecture enable an in-depth meditation on a set of questions that have always fascinated people of all cultures: Can the love of prostitutes ever be genuine, or are all their emotional expressions calculated and artificial? More generally, can love be pure and entirely free of consideration for material concerns, or is every exchange of feelings eventually reducible to some financial transaction? To use the words of the poem itself, “Can this be just the power of love? / Or is it boundlessness of greed?” (kiṃ premṇo ‘yaṃ mahimā kim utānantyaṃ dhanaṃ pralobhasya; verse 600; translation, p. 232). To realize how Dāmodaragupta pursues his investigation, we have to understand its connection to the labyrinth of embedded voices he created. The line just cited, for example, is found in the section about winning over men through various ruses and scams. In this case, a prostitute has a go-between recite to a sought-out customer the fictitious hardships she has undergone because (she claims) she is in love with him. These include not only a made-up attempt to reach his home on a cold and dangerous night, against the expressed will of the madam, ending in a traumatic highway robbery that cost her all her jewelry, but also having to suffer constant doubts about her true motivations and suggestions that what she really seeks is not him but his money. On the face of it, then, the cited doubt is strongly validated by its placement in the midst of an entirely bogus speech, one more scheme for bewitching clients that Mālatī is to master. But even in this rather simple example, the straightforward solution is not fully satisfactory, and there is a residual complexity in the fact that the suspicion about the motivations of prostitutes is expressed (and denied) through the mouth of one (as she is imagined by the madam to be speaking though her go-between).

This sort of complexity has the potential to expand and create highly confusing effects. For instance, when the prostitute insists, in the same section of the poem, that fiscal profit is no profit, and that only union with the one you love counts as such (no dhanalābho lābho lābhatāh khalu vallabhena samsargah; 547), the poem invites contradictory interpretations. At first, one is again struck by the context-created irony: how is one to take her words at face value when they are uttered in a fake, staged argument in which the madam warns the prostitute to be true to her profession, while she angrily retorts that money isn’t everything, all meant to be overheard by the man and delude him into believing that her feelings for him are genuine? Then, however, one notices the deliberate confusion or substitution of material and emotional gains—a constant theme