



Karen Pechilis, *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry and Legacy of a Female Bhakti Saint of India*

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THE VOICES and lives of female saints across the world's religions have often been represented through the eyes of their male biographers, and the same may be said of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the earliest known saint (and poet) in the history of Indian devotional (*bhakti*) traditions. But how, and to what extent, would scholarly and popular understandings of female saints change if their lives were seen through

their own eyes and heard through their own voices, rather than only through those of their biographers? Similarly, is it the case that female saints make gender and other social conditions of embodiment as defining and determinative a lens with which to view their religious lives and commitments as their biographers have in the past? These are the kinds of probing questions that historian of religion and *bhakti* expert Karen Pechilis asks in her compelling and accessible new monograph, *Interpreting Devotion*. Erudite, deftly argued, and thoroughly researched, Pechilis's book succeeds in its sensitive humanistic effort to understand and, by implication, to make known to a wide English-speaking audience interested in religion and literature the complex lifeworld of Karaikkal Ammaiyar by means of the categories, events, and images that the poet-saint herself prioritized in the compositions—two poems and two hymns—attributed to her. *Interpreting Devotion* consists of six chapters, a detailed bibliography and index, and further provides two excellent appendices. The appendices will be useful primary resources for scholars and students interested in studying the poems thought to have been composed by the first (and possibly female) *bhakti* poet-saint of India, and women's voices and poetic contributions to the history of *bhakti* movements in South Asia.

In chapter I, "Gestures of Interpretation," Pechilis introduces the persona and personage of the poet-saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar, drawing on an integrated complex of gendered, historical, and literary contexts in an attempt to conceptualize new theoretical possibilities for interpreting and understanding the life, poems, and illustrious religiosity of Karaikkal Ammaiyar in a manner that honors her own voice and what she felt was important for others to know about her and her relationship to Śiva. Building on the provocative insights of Hans H. Penner, whose research on interpretation as illustrative of an analytic model of language as communication has been instrumental to religious scholars' reconceptualizing what the field (and its assumptions) are about, Pechilis explicates that "religious utterances are able to be understood across time, region, tradition, and other markers of the specific positions of the person who makes the utterance and the person who hears or reads the utterance" (6). Just as significant, Pechilis takes the potential suggested by a "language as communication" model further than Penner imagines by claiming a valid (and vital) space for the role of experience and what it creates as possibilities for human knowledge in the challenging cultural work of interpretation. Pechilis brilliantly synthesizes a "language as communication" model à la Penner with what she characterizes as "the experience model" (140) as demonstrated in the work of Norman Cutler and Jeffrey Kripal on *bhakti* mysticism. With this as her objective, Pechilis draws on the classical Indian philosophy of Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism) that was systematized in the eighth century by Ādi Śankarācārya as a framework to argue for her idea of "not one and not two." By this she promotes the understanding that communication represents and thus interprets experience and that comprehension, which, in her appropriation of the language of Vedānta, Pechilis refers to as the (experience of) "union" and/or "communion" between a speaker and a hearer, is created via communication. What Pechilis contributes to the two models of interpretation, which she concedes are synergistic rather than opposing, "is that communication *has a communion aspect* that in specific ways is comparable to the mystical" (21; italics in original).

Guided by a critical vision of a “shared humanity through communication,” and, therefore, a “not one and not two” model, Pechilis translates and analyzes the poems attributed to Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the subjects dealt with in chapters two and three of the monograph. Entitled “The Poet’s Voice,” chapter 2 familiarizes an English-speaking audience with Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s words, her stylized and sophisticated use of both Tamil and Sanskrit languages as “rhetorical strategies” and, through that language selection, what the poet-saint herself considered significant for her audience to know about herself and her personal relationship to Śiva. The translations Pechilis provides were crafted to appeal to the “target language” (English) of the book’s audience and are slightly different from the translation that appears in Appendix A, which leans on the side of the “source language” (Tamil). Specifically, the poems Pechilis has chosen from Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s corpus are: *Arputat Tiruvantāti* (“Sacred Linked Verses of Wonder”; hereafter “Wonder”); *Tiruvirat-tai Manimālai* (“Sacred Garland of Two Gems”; hereafter “Garland”); and her two poems on Tiruvalankatu (*Tiruvāḷankāttut Tiruppatikam*, “Sacred Stanzas on Tiruvalankatu”; hereafter “Decade-1” and “Decade-2”). In presenting these poems, Pechilis makes known her prioritization of *Wonder*, because it is the longest of Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s poems, consisting of one-hundred (*antāti*) stanzas and a signature verse. In Pechilis’ words, “the ‘Wonder’ is her magnum opus,” and it is thematically as well as stylistically representative of the poems attributed to Karaikkal Ammaiyar. In chapter 3, “The Poet’s Vision,” Pechilis suggests that Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s principal concern with creating and embodying the divine presence of Śiva in the present may help to explain why she accentuates, particularly in her “Decade-1” and “Decade-2” hymns, an aesthetics of the repulsive through the use of controversial imagery of the cremation ground, the dark and secret place where Śiva, drunk on blood, dances wildly on human corpses and is surrounded by his retinue of predominantly female ghouls (*pey*). An aesthetics of the disgusting, Pechilis persuasively contends, pushes the mind to engage actively, instead of assimilate easily, its subject—in this context, Śiva and his ghastly creation dance at the cremation ground. This is an important point, because, as Pechilis spends a lot of time discussing, scholars and the tradition itself both conflate Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s use of *pey* in her signature verses with the body of the female *pey* described in the opening verses of “Decade-1.” Such conflation has consequently given rise to the dominant assumption that Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s poetry unambiguously represents her as being female. Pechilis, though, interrogates this widely-held theory of Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s presumed *pey* embodiment as illustrative of “evidence” of her gendered femininity by pointing out the disjuncture evident between the thoughtful, loving, and compassionate devotional subjectivity that Karaikkal Ammaiyar traces in her poems and the erratic, hateful, and selfish mental state of the female *pey*. The disjuncture indexes that Karaikkal Ammaiyar distinguished herself as an accomplished poet and, hence, a speaking subject by invoking the “stock image” of the female *pey* that was characteristic of early Cankam-period poetics, that she wanted to construct a non-gendered subjectivity in which the widest spectrum of human devotees could participate, and that the female *pey* imagery embodies/encodes the development of a devotional subjectivity that has been “othered” by engagement with the frightful appearance of the Lord.

Unlike the poet-saint who directs her energies toward describing Śiva's embodiment in her desire to make the deity's presence present in her (and others') heart-mind, her biographer, Cekkilar, constructs a concrete and influential image of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's embodiment in his narrative of her life, which consists of sixty-five verses and is featured in the Periya Purānam, the twelfth and culminating volume of the Tirumurai. His narrative of the poet-saint's life and work, in fact, mediates the predominant view of who and what she was in the Tamil public imagination, and, while Cekkilar's construction of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's identity embodies the devotional subjectivity she inscribes in her poems, he develops it in a manner that prioritizes his patriarchal concerns. His discomfort with the controversial representations of Śiva depicted in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poems is assuaged by his transferring those ghastly characteristics to the body of the poet-saint herself. But even as his reconstruction of Śiva as the loving and beautiful father responds to the acerbic critiques of his religious interlocutors, Cekkilar blunts the theological challenge that Karaikkal Ammaiyar presents in her poetic use of an aesthetics of the disgusting to encounter God in the present. The tensions between the social and the devotion apparent in Cekkilar's representation of Karaikkal Ammaiyar as a *pey* whose disturbing appearance, on the one hand, evokes fear as well as awe from on-lookers, and on the other hand, communicates the achievement of salvific wisdom and communion with Śiva points to what Cekkilar may have seen as, Pechilis explains, the "fiction of femaleness in the sense of revealing the contours of a socially constituted feminine life and the obstacles specific to it. Cekkilar was, in a sense, backed into this disclosure by the contours of his own discourse" (143).

Cekkilar's biography of the saint mediates dominant notions of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's identity to Tamils, but it too competes with another equally significant (and distinctive) arena for telling her life story as it occurs in the contexts of public festivals. Chapter 5, "A Public's Vantage," describes the similarities and differences between the textual and performative representations of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's life. The two festivals Pechilis describes and analyzes, in which she herself participated, have to do with the celebration of Karaikkal Ammaiyar's saint-day celebrated over the course of two days at the Tiruvalankatu temple, "which is officially known as the Vatāraneyēśvara Cuvāmi Tirukōyil ("Holy Temple of the Lord of the Banyan Forest"), and the mango festival that is celebrated in the coastal town of Kāraikkāl, the place of the saint's birth and life. In her thick descriptions of these festival performances Pechilis highlights the ways in which they change and not simply reproduce Cekkilar's biography in important ways. Unlike the textual representation, which, by virtue of the genre itself, crafts a linear vision of the saint's life, the festivals accentuate the multi-dimensional nature of her life; her story is told "in multiple ritual venues across the town." Whereas the festival celebrated in Tiruvalankatu emphasizes Karaikkal Ammaiyar's spiritual liberation, the Karaikkal festival puts weight on her marriage (as Punitavati). Despite the fact that Cekkilar mentions her marriage in only two verses, the Karaikkal festival dramatizes in traditional fashion, and with pomp and circumstance, her marriage. The festivals constitute not only visual performances, but also ritual storytelling in motion. Here, Pechilis says, "the ritual becomes the way that the story is told. Ritual storytelling changes the story:

it brings to the fore elements such as the visual, material, and public experience that are distinct from the written narrative” (125).

The last chapter, “Concluding Thoughts,” cogently summarizes the book’s main arguments, all the while driving home the crucial point that religious discourse constitutes normative human (and humanistic) discourse that represents an interpretation of experience and, as such, can be interpreted by others. In sum, *Interpreting Devotion* makes a substantial contribution to religious studies scholarship; to scholarship on Tamil Śiva-*bhakti* and on the life and poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar; and to the established and emerging scholarship on women and ethnography, a sub-field in which the buried voices, lives, and work of women, religious specialists and lay, from the past as well as from the present, take center stage, and whose worlds offer an alternative lens with which scholars may rethink normative models and/or paradigms of the human condition and conditions of human embodiment. What I appreciate most about Pechilis’s book is that she has made it accessible to primarily, but not exclusively, non-experts. Religious studies involves the difficult but ultimately rewarding work of interpreting how humans have imagined and created purposeful lives, and these interpretations that scholars craft are themselves actively mediated by the frameworks that are used to see and understand other cultures. New interpretations require questioning old and often static assumptions. In my view, Pechilis’s *Interpreting Devotion* provides an excellent example of how to study religion academically and with integrity, and I intend to use it in the classroom. More globally, though, Pechilis’s book will definitely appeal to scholars and students interested in religious studies, global and area studies, history, gender and women studies, and Asian studies.

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