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Garlanding as sexual invitation: Indian Buddhist evidence

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In ancient India, the act of garlanding may indicate a sexual invitation, especially if the offering is from a woman to a man. It may also represent an offer of marriage, especially if the offer is made by a man to a woman, the connection between the two significations being, in some respects, quite evident. One well-known instance of the act, associated with marriage although an inversion of the apparently general pattern, occurs in the context of the so-called self-choice or *svayamvara*, in which a young woman indicates the selection of the man she will marry through an offering of a garland. Indian Buddhist narrative literature, on the other hand, provides several clear examples of the offering of a garland from a woman to a man as an explicit sexual invitation, as well as instances of the opposite pattern.

A clear example of the former occurs in a story found in the *Pravrajyāvastu* (Section on Monastic Ordination) of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. This tale, illustrating the prohibition of matricides from ordination, tells of a young man being raised by his mother alone after his father's death. The text narrates:¹

so pareṇa samayena vayasyakena sārddham anyatamasya gr̥hasamīpe gacchati | tasmim̐ gr̥he dārikāvatiṣṭhati tayā tasyopari sragdāmaṁ kṣiptam | tena sā dr̥ṣṭā

I am grateful to Stephanie Jamison and Dan Martin for their valuable suggestions.

¹Nāther (2003: 30.19-24); the Tibetan translation is edited in Eimer (1983: 309.17-24); the Chinese is found in T. 1444 (XXIII) 1039a3-8 (juan 4)—the last appears to be rather free, or perhaps based on a somewhat different original. I have treated the story in greater detail in my forthcoming book *Riven By Lust: Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography* (University of Hawaii Press).

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*vayasyakenābhihitāḥ vayasya mā tvam asmiṁ grhe kṛtasamketāḥ
sa kathayaty āma kṛtasamketo haṁ |
sa kathayati vayasya viśamam etad grhaṁ mā pravekṣyasi mā anayena
vyasanam āpatsyāma iti |*

On one occasion, accompanied by a friend, [the son] went to someone's nearby house. A young girl was living in that house, and she threw down a garland to him. And he saw her.

His friend said to him: "Friend, I hope you have not made an assignation in this house."

He said: "Yes, I have made an assignation."

He said: "Friend, this house is dangerous. You must not go in, lest we meet with disaster."

Although I follow the conservative course here and translate the term *dārikā* in its most usual sense, "young girl," it is possible that it implies something more. The same word may even have the figurative meaning of "whore,"² and indeed the friend's concern over association with the woman seems to indicate something unusual. Were the girl an ordinary young woman, the danger of mere association would be less obvious. (While the choice of terminology, which implies in the first place that she is unmarried, renders moot any fear of the revenge of a cuckolded husband, she might, of course, still fear her father's or her brother's anger.) On the other hand, it is true that the very rich vocabulary of Sanskrit would certainly be capable of supplying a less ambiguous word if some nuanced meaning were called for.³ What is nevertheless plain from the passage is that the young woman offers a sexual invitation to the young man by throwing him a garland, and that this is considered by others in the story to be dangerous. The key expression here is *sragdāmaṁ kṣiptam*, tossed a garland.⁴

We find precisely the same expression in the *Cīvaravastu* (Section on Garments) of the same Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya,⁵ when a young wife invites King Bimbisāra up to her room: *tayā ca vātāyanasthayā rajñā(h ?) [s]ragdāmaṁ kṣiptam*, "seated at a window, she threw down a garland to the king." (Since the king is riding by on his elephant, presumably she is in a second or higher story.) He invites her down but, claiming she is embarrassed, she instead invites him up (no word on where he parks the elephant), after which without further ado they have sex, *sa tayā sārđhaṁ paricārayati*,

²Böhrtlingk and Roth (1855–1875: III.595) "Hure," apparently on the authority of Wilson, who refers to the *Dharaṇīkoṣa*. The definition, therefore, cannot be considered secure.

³Likewise, for what it is worth, nothing elliptical is implied by the standard Tibetan and Chinese equivalents, *bu mo* and *shānū* 少女, both of which have the ordinary meaning of "young woman."

⁴As Insler (1989) has pointed out, in classical sources the verb is often $\sqrt{srj}$. Note that in the important Junāgaḍh rock inscription of Rudradāman (Kielhorn 1905–1906: 1. 15), which dates to 151/152 C.E., the king is spoken of with the expression *narendrakannyāsvayaṁvarānekamālyaprapṭadāmanā*, one "who has been wreathed by many garlands at the *svayaṁvaras* of kings' daughters." I do not know if *dāman* is preferred to the probably equivalent *sragdāman* here as a play on the king's name. This inscription was kindly brought to my attention by Oskar von Hinüber.

⁵Dutt (1939–1959: iii.2.23,9–10); Raghu Vira and Lokesh Chandra (1974: folio 801 = 244b7–8). In my transcription of the manuscript, I indicate the first letter of a line in bold type.

as a result of which she becomes pregnant.⁶ In a passage from the *Vinayavibhaṅga* of, once again, the same Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, unfortunately not now available in Sanskrit, we have what seems to be the same expression. In order to prove her seduction of a perfume vendor, the protagonist, a prostitute named Utpalavarṇā, publically “fastening a garland around his head and wrapping it around his neck, led him to her house.”⁷

The offering of a garland by a man to a woman appears to have different nuances or resonances. In this connection, we may note that Lamotte has drawn attention to the term *mālāguṇaparikṣiptā* (Pāli *mālāguṇaparikkhittā*), the literal meaning of which is a woman around whom a garland has been placed.⁸ He quotes Buddhaghosa’s *Majjhima-Nikāya* commentary *Papañcasūdanī* as saying that a woman is so designated when a man garlands her in signification of an engagement to marry.⁹ This seems also quite clearly to be the meaning of the term in a Pāli Vinaya passage:¹⁰ “A woman is said to be ‘under protection’ when she is already spoken for before she is born by one who says ‘she is mine,’ or when she is engaged to be married by having had a garland placed upon her.” At least one additional commentary passage confirms this use.¹¹

Although the term *mālāguṇaparikṣiptaḥ* (masculine!) appears in Sanskrit in the *Mahāvvyutpatti* (§9463), I have not yet found it in any text. Citing only this source, the Petersburg dictionary defines the word as “mannbar geworden,” fit for marriage,¹² but this may be too imprecise or indefinite, since the implication seems rather to be that the marriage is already arranged, as noted above for the Pāli correspondent compound. The Tibetan equivalent of *mālāguṇaparikṣiptaḥ* in the *Mahāvvyutpatti* is interesting. Even in the relatively recent critical edition, the Tibetan text reads *skyes kyi dus btab pa*.¹³ Following the suggestion of Dan Martin, however, we might emend this to read *skyes kyi dus btab pa*, which would mean, literally, “time appointed by

⁶For a translation of the whole episode from Tibetan, see Ralston (1882: 91). Note the change in agency—she invites him up, but he has sex with her.

⁷For convenience, see Ralston (1882: 211–212). The text reads *des de’i mgo la phreng ba btags te gnya’ ba bsgriḥ nas khyim du khrid pa*.

⁸Lamotte (1944–1980: ii.800, n. 2).

⁹ii.330.13 = Burmese Sixth Council edition, Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā 16 (Dhammagiri, Iḡatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1995): 226.13–14: *antamaso mālāguṇaparikkhittāpī yā sabbanti-mena paricchadena esā me bhariyā bhavissatī ti saññāya tassā upari kenaci mālāguṇaṃ khipantena mālāguṇamattenāpi parikkhittā hoti*.

¹⁰Oldenberg (1879–1883: iii.139,33–35): *sārakkhā nāma | gabbhe pi pariggahitā hoti mayham esā ti | antamaso mālāguṇaparikkhittāpī*. The passage was misunderstood by Horner (1938–1966: i.237): “With protection means: she is appropriated in the womb, saying ‘She is mine,’ even if she is betrothed.” This Vinaya passage parallels that of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, the comment on which is cited in the previous note.

¹¹In the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the commentary to the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*, we find (Burmese Sixth Council edition, Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā 41 [Dhammagiri, Iḡatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1995]: 302.15–16) in reference to the woman Visākhā *tassā upari mālāguḷaṃ khipiṃsu*, “(The messengers of the merchant Migāra) threw a garland over her.” She responds to this by thinking to herself: *ahaṃ pubbe apariggahitā idāni pana pariggahitāmhī ti*, “before I was unmarried, but now I’m engaged to be married.”

¹²Böhtlingk and Roth (1855–1875: V.752).

¹³Ishihama and Fukuda (1989).

means of a gift,” where “time” refers to an opportunity for sexual relations.¹⁴ This would seem to be supported by the use of the words *bud med dus btab* to translate *striyāye saṃketa kṛtva* in the following half verse from the *Prajñāpāramitā-Ratnaḡaṇasamcayagāthā*: “As a man full of lust, having made an assignation with a woman but not meeting her, might obsessively think [of her, etc.].”¹⁵ The same is found in the prose parallel in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā*.¹⁶ But there may be something more here too. While Tibetan *dus gdab pa* is defined by dictionaries as “a certain set time,”¹⁷ the feminine form *dus gdab/btab*¹⁸ *ma* has the sense of “lustful woman,” *bud med ’dod ldan ma*,¹⁹ an expression which in its turn is used to translate Sanskrit *kāminī*.²⁰ It is not unreasonable to suppose, then, that the corresponding masculine form *dus btab pa* might have the sense of a lustful man, giving us *skyes kyis dus btab pa* to be understood in a sense something like “a man made sexually available by means of gift,” namely, the gift of a garland. Such an expression was necessary since the Tibetans had no corresponding cultural construct similar to the Indian offer of a garland. Finally, in this regard, we may note that contextually, the words among which *mālāḡaṇaparikṣiptaḡ* is arrayed in the *Mahāvīyutpatti*, particularly those following it, closely point to a meaning associated with marriage or similar liaisons.

Despite what appears to be the relatively clear meaning of this Indic terminology, confusion seems to have arisen in some modern sources. *The Pali Text Society’s Pali–English Dictionary* defines *mālāḡaṇaparikkhittā* as “a marriageable woman or a courtesan.”²¹ But this neither conforms to its usages in canonical Pāli,²² nor follows Buddhaghosa’s understanding, both of which clearly point to a woman engaged

¹⁴The natural first thought, that *skyes* is an abbreviation of *skyes bu*, man, raises the question of why this would need to be abbreviated at all. If *skyes* were to be taken in this sense, however, the term might be understood as something like “a man whose time has been fixed,” namely, for becoming a husband?

¹⁵See verse 18.3ab in Yuyama (1976: 67, 175): *yatha rāḡadharmacarito puruṣo striyāye saṃketa kṛtva alabhanu vitarkayēdā* = (Dunhuang MS A) *dper na ’dod chags chos la spyod pa’i skyes pa zhig || bud med dus btab de dang ma phrad nram rtog pa ||*.

¹⁶Wogihara (1932–1935: 700.4–8): *tadyathā ’pi nāma subhūte kaścid eva puruṣo rāḡacarito vitarkacaritaḡ | tasya puruṣasya rāḡacaritasya vitarkacaritasya striyā abhirūpayā prāsādika darśanīyayā saha saṃketaḡ kṛto bhavet | sā khalu punaḡ strī paraparigrhītā bhavet | na vaśayed ātmānam agārān niṣkramitum |*. Derge Kanjur 12, *brgyad stong, ka*, 189a1–3: *rab ’byor ’di lta ste dper na | skyes bu ’dod chags la spyod pa nram par rtog pa la spyod pa la la zhig yod la skyes bu ’dod chags la spyod pa nram par rtog pa la spyod pa des | bud med zgugs bzang ba mdzes ba blta na sdug ba zhig dang dus btab par gyur la | bud med de yang gzhan gyis yongs su zin pa zhig yin te | bdag nyid khyim nas ’byung zhing ’ong ba’i dbang med na |*

¹⁷For instance, Zhang (1985: 1273b).

¹⁸The form *gdab* is technically the future, and *btab* the past, of the root *’debs*.

¹⁹In Btsan lha Ngag dbang tshul khrims (1997: 326a), the definition is attributed to *Tā sis bsgrigs pa’i Bod rgya skad gnyis shan sbyar gyi legs bshad tshig gter mdzod* (that is, as Dan Martin informs me, a work of Si tu Rin po che VIII Chos kyi ’byung gnas, alias Si tu Paṇ chen [1700–1775]). The same definition is found in Zhang (1985: 1273b) and Chos kyi grags pa (1981: 398b).

²⁰See for instance verse 210 of the *Abhidhānaviśvalocana* of Śrīdharasena, edited in Jamspal and Wayman (1992: 36).

²¹Rhys Davids and Stede (1921–1925: 530), s.v. *mālā*.

²²It appears virtually always in the same set phrase, found for instance in the *Anguttara-Nikāya* v.264, 18–19, 267, 1, 283, 11, 284, 25, etc., *Majjhima-Nikāya* i.286, 21, 287, 36, and so on.

to be married, and therefore not to one either marriageable or sexually available, as is a courtesan. An additional complication may be due to a slip by Lamotte himself. The passage in the *Da Zhidu lun* 大智度論 upon which Lamotte's remark cited above comments reads:²³ 如是種種 乃至以華鬘與婬女爲要。如是犯者、名爲邪婬。Lamotte translated this as follows: “Le commerce avec ces femmes, y compris les courtisanes (*gaṇikā*, *veśyā*) couronnées d'une guirlande de fleurs (*mālāguṇaparikṣiptā*) en signe de fiançailles, est nommé pratique illicite de l'amour.” This interpretation implies that the term *mālāguṇaparikṣiptā* may be applicable to a prostitute. But I believe this to be incorrect, and due here to an error in Lamotte's understanding of the Chinese text.²⁴ Rather, we should translate as follows: “Regarding such actions (previously discussed), up to and including offering a garland to a prostitute as (an invitation to) play around (*shuǎ* 耍): transgressions like this are called ‘improper sexual perversity.’” There is no reference here to marriage or engagement to marry; however, this reference does provide an example of a man offering a garland as a sexual invitation, an instance contrary to the general pattern. We may notice as an aside that this text's apparent rejection of the propriety of sexual relations with a prostitute is not universal: a number of classical Buddhist sources make explicit their acceptance of sex with a prostitute—of course, for lay people only.²⁵

The offering of a garland as a proposal for engagement to marry, and the capsualization of this act in the technical term *mālāguṇaparikṣiptā* / *mālāguṇaparikṣiptaḥ*, must be distinguished from the fundamentally identical physical act of offering a garland as an invitation to sexual dalliance. It appears that the basic distinction generally, although not invariably, turns on whether the offer is made by a man or by a woman, that from a man to a woman as a rule constituting an offer of marriage, the inverse a sexual invitation. This distinction appears to be based in fundamentally misogynistic notions: in an almost overly obviously structuralist manner, males represent order and control, females disorder and tempest. One and the same act can indicate either culture or chaos: carried out by a man, the offering of the garland represents the respectable execution of one paradigmatic cultural act, the proposal to marry, while carried out by a woman the same action stands for the opposite, an antinomian invitation to dalliance outside the socially sanctioned bonds of marriage. The very fact that the physically identical practices must share an origin, and that the signification as an offer of betrothal is indisputably a formalization and rationalization of an originally more casually symbolic gesture, only reinforces the stark contrast in cultural significances.

²³T. 1509 (XXV) 156c9–10 (juan 13).

²⁴There is no problem with the word *yinnü* 婬女, which is widely attested in the meaning prostitute, variously translating *vāramukhyā* (in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* IX.12a), *veśyā* (T. 1447 [XXIII] 1051c19 [juan 1]: 時、長者子又往彼婬女之處 = Cowell and Neil (1886: 16.19–20): *sa tasyā veśyāyāḥ sakāśam upasaṃkrānta*), *veśya* (T. 1447 [XXIII] 1051b7–8 [juan 1]: 我有一女、在彼村中爲婬女 = Cowell and Neil (1886: 14.19–20): *śroṇa gamiṣyasi tvaṃ vāsavagrāmakam tatra mama duhitā veśyam vāhayati*), and so forth.

²⁵See Silk (Forthcoming) for a discussion of such passages.

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