

THE DANCE BETWEEN TANTRA AND MOKSHA: ON THE “EROTIC” DIMENSION OF THE *Gītagovinda* AND KRISHNA BHAKTI THEOLOGY

Graham M. Schweig

The purpose of this essay is to illuminate the function and place of eroticism in the theology in the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism. Essentially, I seek to answer the following question: How does the orthodox school of Caitanya Vaishnavism see, understand, and even revere the erotic world of the divine as expressed in some of India’s sacred texts? The essay will be an exploration of some of the main issues that arise when the amorous or romantic dimensions of Krishna *bhakti* are encountered. My focus here is primarily on Jayadeva’s employment of these themes in his famed work, *Gītagovinda*. First, I will review some scholarship on the erotic that sees it as morally and emotionally questionable or even transgressive. Then I will explore the kinds of precautions scholars and practitioners make with regard to the erotic elements in Krishna’s *līlās*. I will also show how Jayadeva’s poetic work, the *Gītagovinda*, presents a powerful blend of both devotional and erotic expression. Further, I will review the Caitanya Vaishnava school’s interpretation of the erotic, and finally, I will suggest a redefining and broadening of the very term *erotic* by drawing from a modern Western psychoanalytic theorist.

What is explored here is a subtle balance that must be sustained within *bhakti*, a balancing act that I urge my reader to keep in mind when moving through this essay. This balancing act not only generally distinguishes or defines the place of *bhakti* within Hindu traditions, but it is a necessary precondition for sacred eroticism within *bhakti*. Practitioners in *bhakti* are invested in neither just this world nor just the transcendent realm. Rather, they are invested in both worlds at once; they move in and between both worlds—and beyond them as well. They value both the ways this world reveals the divine and the ways a transcendent world reveals the superlatives of the world we see around us. This divine interconnectedness between both worlds, and the *bhakta*’s movement

between and beyond them, forms the necessary metaphysical foundation for understanding a sacred eroticism.

Without sustaining this delicate balance within *bhakti*, a major shift away from its essence occurs. When *bhakti* becomes something that brings too much of the divine into this world, when practitioners identify themselves as the divine to the point that they ritually imitate the erotic acts of the divine, it becomes dangerously close to *tantra*, as seen in the *Sahajiyā* approach to the erotic. And yet when *bhakti* becomes something that is overly invested in another world, or in a transcendent level of reality into which one is to escape, when asceticism become unrelated to the life of the heart and is valued above all else, *bhakti* is undermined. When there is a nihilistic denial of this world in which nothing is valued and love is something that is only transcendent and virtually unreachable, it becomes dangerously close to traditions that emphasize the selfish pursuit of *mokṣa*. Without sustaining this delicate tension between *tantra* and *mokṣa*, the understanding of the erotic becomes either something pursued excessively or something avoided or denied. In either case, *bhakti* is lost.¹ Thus, *bhakti* is a specific “dance” between the two, because it selectively employs elements contained within the visions of each, and sustains a delicate balance between the two.

The Erotic as Emotionally and Morally Transgressive

The “erotic” has a central place and function within Krishna *bhakti* theology. The orthodox tradition of the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism recognizes the romantic, the amorous, and even the erotic at the very center of its divine revelation, and it is considered the highest and most sacred part of it. Esoteric depictions and descriptions of the exchanges between Krishna as the supreme masculine divinity and his beloved Vraja Gopikās and/or the superlative Vraja Gopikā, Rādhā, as the supreme feminine divinity, are found in poetic and dramatic literature filled with erotic imagery and a highly charged erotic mood. These romantic or erotic narratives are declared by sacred texts and the traditions following them as *līlā* or divine acts. Moreover, the vision of the amorous divine, engaging passionate or even sexual imagery, is developed and endlessly celebrated in poetry, drama, music, and art over many centuries. This erotically charged theological and poetic expression is especially, and perhaps most vividly demonstrable, in Jayadeva’s great poem, the *Gitagovinda*.

However, the presence of the amorous or erotic dimensions of Krishna’s divinity has been troublesome and challenging to persons outside of the tradition

over the past century. It is something challenging even to those on the inside of the tradition. Indeed, my own work on the specific *līlā* of Krishna's interactions with the Vraja Gopikās culminating in the famous Rāsa dance has shown that the place of passionate love for Krishna and the specific ethical issues related to it became a concern many centuries ago. Such issues were incorporated as interludes of theological discourse within the *Bhāgavata*'s narration of the story itself, whereas such questions were absent and unaddressed in earlier purāṇic versions of story.² Furthermore, one detects some hesitation or subtle trepidation on the part of medieval theologians of the Caitanya school and even modern exponents of the tradition in explaining or perhaps even justifying the amorous elements within the tradition's ultimate vision of supreme love.

Almost twenty years ago, David Haberman sought to understand by way of critical inquiry the colonialist influences on the various voices that have criticized what has been considered by Brāj Vaishnava traditions to be the most intimate erotic and yet the most precious revelations of Rādhā-Krishna *līlā*. Just prior to Haberman's inquiry, author Krishna Chaitanya published his nonacademic book in India, entitled, *The Betrayal of Krishna*,³ which speaks from outside of any Vaishnava tradition. Indeed, the author strongly and vehemently condemns the portrayal of Krishna as a divine lover. Haberman identifies what a "betrayal" is for Krishna Caitanya: it is the perception of Krishna as a divine lover in purāṇic description and poetic expression that is a betrayal of Vyāsa's vision of Krishna as he is in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

Needless to say, Krishna Chaitanya rejects the Krishna of Brāj as an illegitimate form of divinity. His purpose for writing the book is to cleanse Krishna of his dirty associations with Brāj—and that means most particularly with Radha—and restore him to the pristine state of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The Krishna of the *Gita*, and only the Krishna of the *Gita*, he tells us, "can still save India."⁴

Haberman further points out that Krishna Chaitanya holds the *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva especially responsible for this betrayal. Haberman states, "Jayadeva, the poet of the *Gita-Govinda*, is identified as a major culprit in the betrayal of Krishna. . . . More than any other factor, the downfall of the pure and chaste Krishna had to do with the 'bad luck' of his association with Radha."⁵ While Haberman lends a very understanding and patient ear to the outside voices that criticize the amorous deity of Krishna, he points out that most of the authors he examines in his study were unaware or do not acknowledge the numerous works of the theologians of the Brāj Vaishnava traditions, who produced highly sophisticated theological treatises of Krishna *bhakti*.⁶

The understanding of the erotic elements within Brāj Vaishnavism also challenges Western and Indian scholars alike. One of the most important scholars of Caitanya Vaishnava studies, S. K. De, who lived in the past century, expresses well the challenges of interpreting the erotic. Despite his great erudition and indisputed place as the original scholar of the early history and literature of Bengal Vaishnavism, De himself struggles with the meaning and function of eroticism in the theology of the Caitanya school. De oscillates between an appreciation of the school's cultural contributions, on the one hand, and what he feels are the emotional dangers of its erotic theism, on the other. De understands what he terms positively in one part of his work as "ecstatic religious emotion," and yet elsewhere in his work he considers it to be a "psychological and ethical aberration." He claims that such aberrations find their source within the school's erotic allusions and imagery:

All this has been severely condemned by some critics as an emasculated ritual of emotional debauchery; but without going so far, it should be admitted that the intimate subtilizing of erotic details, however mystically transfigured, is bound to be characterised as a psychological and ethical aberration rather than as a healthy ennobling religious mood.⁷

Clearly, De is troubled by the erotic element in Vaishnava theology. De's conviction is that "there can be little doubt that eroticism as a devotional principle is perilously liable to religious and moral excess."⁸ De is appreciative of the morally upright orthodox tradition of Caitanya, but he questions the potential imitative response to such an erotic theology:

... the danger comes not so much from erotic portrayal of the divine sport, which may be (but is not) symbolically understood, as from the excess of exclusive emotional strain involved in the imaginative experience of the erotic sentiment, and from actual practice of erotic situations as a religious rite.⁹

Undoubtedly De refers here to the heterodox *Sahajiyā* traditions, with which he was undoubtedly familiar as both a scholar and as a Bengali citizen himself.

De's concern is understandable in light of the practices of several unorthodox Bengali sects such as the so-called *Sahajiyā* Vaishnavas, which often include sexual rituals that also engage erotic images. Such heterodox traditions practice sexual reenactments of Rādhā-Krishna *līlā*, thus applying the textual images of the erotic in a way that is unthinkable by the orthodox school.¹⁰ Although De acknowledges that Caitanya himself "held to an ascetic type of morality and expressed strict views regarding sexual relationship,"¹¹ he expresses

apprehension about the Caitanya school's ideals. While De states that he does not intend to condemn the tradition for all of its dangers, religious or psychological, and while he admits that "it is not always true that religious rapture, however erotically inclined, leads to moral default," he nonetheless expresses grave doubts about the dangers of such a religion.

At times, De demonstrates that he is not uncomfortable with amorous imagery. However, he expresses frustration that he cannot interpret this imagery exclusively as religious symbolism, because, as he states in the following, the tradition does not accept this:

If this were only a symbol or allegory of the soul's longing for the divine lover, it would be a legitimate use of erotic imagery and erotic impulse in the service of religious symbolism. But the works of the sect make it quite clear that the erotic contemplation is not merely symbolical or figurative but, as we have said, vivid and literal.¹²

Yet De also recognizes the purpose or the desired effect of this "erotic imagery" when he states that "the utter self-abandonment of the Gopis, the romantic love of the mistress for her lover, becomes the accepted symbol of the soul's longing for God; and the vivid realization of the eternal sports of Kṛṣṇa in an imaginative Vṛndāvana is supposed to lead to a passionate love and devotion for the deity."¹³ Thus, De represents well the ambivalence and tension in the intellectual realm toward this tradition's most treasured revelation of divine love, as well as a degree of understanding of it.

Expressed Precautions Regarding the Erotic

Scholars and Vaishnava practitioners alike have cautioned readers to understand and interpret the erotic passages of Rādhā-Krishna *līlā* correctly. Vaishnavas speak about cultivating the *bhakti* practice to such a degree as to prepare and qualify one for reading such *līlās*.¹⁴ A. K. Majumdar acknowledges the difficulty of interpreting the erotic imagery connected with Krishna and the Gopis when he states that, "The most well-known episode of the Bh.P. is the *Rāsa-līlā* described in the tenth canto. It is also the most misunderstood episode."¹⁵ Indeed, scholars and general readers of the *Rāsa Līlā* have been at times confounded as to how to understand the *Līlā* as a religious text because of its erotic tenor. Some scholars are without the ambivalency that we find in De's view. Majumdar, for example, states that the *Rāsa Līlā* "describes in poetic terms the ultimate state to which love for God can lead His devotee. Arriving at that stage of supreme bliss he sheds all egotism. There is no demand, no expectation, no

acceptance: only love . . .”¹⁶ Here Majumdar acknowledges the theopoetic and psychological aspects of the erotic.

Only a few years after De published his comprehensive work on the Bengal school of Vaishnavism, his Bengali contemporary A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896-1977), a modern exponent of Caitanya Vaishnavism, took the teachings and practices of the sect throughout the globe, and this included the worship of Rādhā and Krishna as the very focal point of most of the temples that he and his disciples established. In his writings, Prabhupāda expresses grave concern that the confidential acts, *līlās*, of Krishna and the Gopīs not be misunderstood or mistaken as something worldly. He presents the more intimate Tenth Book of the *Bhāgavata*, in which some erotic imagery can be found, to a modern world experiencing far more wide-spread promiscuity than that of the traditional Indian culture out of which he came; yet, he also clearly takes a position on the *Sahajiyā* practices found within Bengal itself.

Prabhupāda makes the claim that such intimate, confidential information about the divine should be transmitted by a spiritually qualified teacher from within the Vaishnava *paramparā*, and should be received by the spiritually qualified and more advanced *bhakta*, as well as understood and realized in light of the theological doctrine as a whole. He goes so far as to say that any outsider who misinterprets the confidential knowledge of the *Bhāgavata* as worldly should not have access to this literature.¹⁷ In relation to the Rāsa Līlā passage itself, he expresses concern that outsiders not misinterpret it, for such misinterpretation, he warns, leads a person to hell:

The activities of Kṛṣṇa are not ordinary but divine. If we can understand this, we immediately become liberated. We need only understand the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopīs*. These pastimes are not ordinary. In the material world, a young man wants to dance with many young girls, but Kṛṣṇa’s dancing with the *gopīs* is different. Because people cannot understand Kṛṣṇa, when they hear about Kṛṣṇa’s dancing with the *gopīs*, they take this as some kind of concession, and say, “Now let us dance with young girls.” In this way they go to hell. Therefore we have to learn from the proper person about Kṛṣṇa’s activities. We should not immediately try to understand Kṛṣṇa’s dealings with the *gopīs*, for they are very confidential.¹⁸

From the above passage, it is clear that Prabhupāda shares some of the same concerns that De had. However, he is a practitioner on the path who insists that the story of Krishna and the Gopīs is the highest revelation of divine love, and that this love must be understood and realized in the correct way. We must ask, then, what is the correct vision of the Rāsa Līlā story or the love of Rādhā and

Krishna for this school? Let us now review how scholars on the tradition positively interpret the esoteric nature of works on divine love and eroticism.

Lee Siegel explores “the meanings of love” in his extensive study of the *Gītagovinda*.¹⁹ He states that the text is not an allegorical work even though it has been interpreted allegorically by many in the West. It has been compared to the biblical *Song of Solomon*, the latter as an often allegorically understood text. Many try, as Siegel shows, to “explain away” the erotic tenor of the text:

... in Indian traditions, there is a little basis for an analogy between the ‘soul’ and the lover. The ‘transports of sensual love’ could however, in the Kṛṣṇaite tradition, have a ‘mystical religious sense’, but not in the same way as the *Song of Songs* has in the Judeo-Christian exegetical tradition. Kṛṣṇa, as the personal God, was considered by medieval Vaiṣṇavas higher than Brahman precisely because Kṛṣṇa, unlike Brahman, could be loved. Kṛṣṇa does not ‘stand for’ the Absolute, as the bridegroom ‘stands for’ Jahweh, God, or Christ; Kṛṣṇa is not an allegorical *potentia animae*—the cowherd lover is God.²⁰

Siegel then goes on to illuminate how the erotic longings of Rādhā relate to the *bhakta*’s devotional longings, insisting further that the *Gītagovinda* was taken allegorically:

Kṛṣṇa was loved by Rādhā, is loved by her in the *Gītagovinda*, and he should be loved by the *bhakta*—it is loving that makes the person a *bhakta*. Rādhā does not ‘stand for’ or personify the *bhakta* or his ‘soul’ in the Bengal Vaiṣṇava teaching but their attitudes are the same; Rādhā’s sexual longing for Kṛṣṇa runs parallel to the devotee’s religious longing. The *bhakta* places Kṛṣṇa in his heart as Rādhā did. It is *rasa* theory rather than allegory ... which invests the *Gītagovinda* with its sacred dimension—the *bhakta*, the devotional *rasika*, tasting the flavour of the poem, experiences the great joy of love, the loving relationship with Kṛṣṇa, in its various phases. The *Gītagovinda* was a favourite text of Caitanya, not because it allegorically described the ‘human soul’s pilgrimage up the path of glory’, not because of any abstract concept, but because it possessed and conveyed the ‘sweet sentiment’ of love of Kṛṣṇa.²¹

Clearly, Siegel sheds light on the Caitanya school’s vision of divine eroticism when stating that “it is the loving that makes the person a *bhakta*.” To this end, Siegel resonates what Rūpa Gosvāmin himself expresses in the following words:

It is the interactions of true lovers by means of their playful and graceful movements within *līlā* that constitute what is pleasurable, and not necessarily those interactions which occur through their joining together in sexual union—this the *rasikas*, or connoisseurs of divine relations, know.²²

While Siegel offsets well any tendency to give Rādhā-Krishna *līlā* any allegorical sense by emphasizing the literal dimension of the sacred world of the *līlā* and the divine figures within it, he goes on to understand further the vision of the Caitanya school. He distinguishes the vision of the Caitanya school from the Sahajiyā vision. Siegel essentially points out that the Sahajiyā vision considers the human form as fully identified with the divine:

The followers of Caitanya insisted that the only sacred love was that which had Kṛṣṇa as its object; the goal, for a man or a woman, was to long like Rādhā for union with Kṛṣṇa. But in the Sahajiyā school all men were considered embodiments of Kṛṣṇa and all women embodiments of Rādhā; the goal then for a man was realization of himself as Kṛṣṇa together, in love, with a woman whose goal was realization of herself as Rādhā. (190-1)

Siegel quotes Edward C. Dimock saying that “. . . the love between man and woman duplicates, not symbolically but actually, the love between Rādhā and Krishna, the nature of which is transcendent joy.”²³ Herein lies the difference between the Sahajiyā and Caitanya sects: the former sees the human males and females as “actually” little Rādhās and Krishnas, whereas the latter sees the human males and females as “symbolically” related to the ultimate divine couple, Rādhā and Krishna.²⁴

Devotional and Erotic Aspects of the Gītagovinda

The *Gītagovinda* is one of the most celebrated love poems from Hindu India. It was composed in the twelfth century by the poet Jayadeva, a renowned scholar in the royal court of the Bengali king Maharaja Lakshman Sena. This work of late classical Sanskrit poetry also engages some of the popular and oral poetry of its time, making it the most famous religious lyric of Sanskrit literature. It was written three centuries prior to the appearance of Caitanya in the 15th century, and it presents the sacred love story of Krishna, the supreme divinity, with his beloved consort Rādhā. It is perhaps the most influential work of Rādhā-Krishna poetry.

The *Gītagovinda* is the one of the most emotionally and poetically expressive works from the esoteric literature of the Caitanya school. Indeed, it was one of the few texts to which Caitanya would delight listening and one on which he would deeply contemplate, establishing its authority.²⁵ The poem acknowledges and reflects themes from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s Rāsa Līlā chapters and shares many of the traits common to Sanskrit *kāvya* love poetry. In particular, the text develops the Krishna-Gopī theme, refers to the *rāsa* dance, and recalls some of the behavior of the Gopīs occurring during the Rāsa Līlā episode.²⁶

The *Gītagovinda* is arranged into twelve chapters or acts, which consist of twenty-four songs. This poem is by far the most popular and influential continuation of an older Puranic theme, the *Rāsa Līlā*, which focuses on the autumnal romantic play of Krishna and the cowherd maidens of Vraja. The *Gītagovinda* is based on *Rāsa Līlā* themes that take place some time after the autumnal episode of the *purāṇas* during the spring season.

The plot of the *Gītagovinda* is deceptively simple, for Jayadeva relies almost entirely upon a network of complexities that arise directly from the psychology of love, rather than the unfolding of external events. At first, we are introduced to Rādhā, craving for Krishna as she searches for him in the forest. When she finds him or imagines him playing with other beautiful cowherd maidens, she leaves in a huff, only to weep in remembrance of the glorious love they had shared in a previous *Rāsa Līlā*. Krishna famously abandons the other maidens to search for Rādhā, but he is unable to find her in the dense forest. At that point, Rādhā's friend takes up the role of a mediator, going back and forth between them several times to report their avowed love for one another and coordinate a rendezvous. When Krishna finally arrives at Rādhā's sylvan dwelling, she rejects him with scornful words, having convinced herself of his infidelity, and then retreats into an internal state of emotional paralysis for which there seems to be no cure. Even Krishna's best flattery, humor, logic and pitiful supplications all fail. Finally, Rādhā's anger abates on its own, and she agrees to be alone with him. An incredibly explosive festival of erotic bliss ensues, leaving Krishna in a state of utter amazement. Jayadeva concludes the episode with Rādhā happily ordering Krishna to arrange her disheveled hair and decorate her once again with fresh cosmetics.

It is significant that Jayadeva launches his work with a strong initial section of invocational verses, consisting of songs of praise for Krishna's principal *avatāra* forms and many themes from Krishna's *līlās*. This initial focus in Jayadeva's work on the various dimensions of Krishna's powerful identities, acts, and divine might, or *aiśvarya* manifestations of divinity, forms a "frame" within which to enter into the "picture" of *mādhurya* or passionate loving interactions between Rādhā and Krishna. In fact, there are a few verses describing the intimate or more erotic interactions of the divine woven into that initial frame, again, to infuse the erotic acts of the deity with a divine status and intention.²⁷ Also, adding to this initial framing of the work, Jayadeva uses the natural sounds, sights, scents and sensations of Spring, and shows how the passion and torment of love is exhibited through them, as is the practice in conventional Sanskrit love poetry, or *kāvya*.

Throughout the story, the poet explores a vast range of emotional responses within the two primary dynamics of the “erotic mood” or *śringāra rasa* within divine love or *premā*: (1) *vipralambha*: the dynamic between two lovers in which the experience of being or feeling apart from one another is dominant; the intense longing of the lover to be closer to the beloved; the state of the lover when feeling so very alone and far away from the beloved (*viraha*); characterized often simply as “separation”; (2) *sambhoga*: the dynamic in which the lover experiences the joyful union or reunion with the beloved; the passionate meeting of two lovers; the sexual union of lovers.

The first verse of the *Gitagovinda* immediately establishes the erotic mood or *śringāra rasa* of the work, and a strong sense of its two primary dynamics of *vipralambha* and *sambhoga* within it. As in much fine *kāvya*, the first verse establishes the main players of the whole work as well as the *rasa* of the text. In the following translation of the first verse, I attempt to provide an accurate and faithful translation along with a rendering that is sensitive to the poetic ambiance and *rasika* ethos of the original:

“Clouds cover the sky;
the floor of the forest is
darkened by Tamāla trees.
Tonight he is fearful—
Now, O Rādhā, you must
lead him to the forest dwelling!”
Thus being obedient to joy,
they move quickly along a path,
toward a tree deep within a grove—
Both Rādhā and Mādhava are conquered there,
on the banks of the river Yamunā,
by the secret ways their divine love plays.²⁸

The four primary elements of Jayadeva’s work are found in the first half of the opening verse, which follow in sequential order: (1) The verse immediately opens with spoken words that reveal the other three elements of the story; (2) words that describe the scenery of the dark night in the forest; (3) words that convey a state of fear on the part of Krishna, the hero of the story, and (4) words which are spoken to the heroine of the story, who is invoked by the name Rādhā.

These spoken words in the first half of the verse convey the state of *vipralambha* in which Rādhā and Krishna find themselves, while the second half of the verse describes how they achieve *sambhoga*. First Rādhā is apart from

Krishna, and she must find him and take him to their forest dwelling. Then, in the third quarter of the verse, we learn that they come together as they find their forest dwelling. Finally, in the fourth quarter of the verse the ultimate state within *śringāra rasa* is declared: the state in which both Rādhā and Krishna become truly “obedient to joy,” and they become “conquered (*jayanti*) by the secret ways their divine love plays (*rahah-kelayah*)” there on the banks of the Yamunā (*yamunā-kūle*). This last quarter verse delivers the ultimate achievement within *sambhoga śringāra*, and delivers a sense of the culmination of the whole poem. Thus Jayadeva’s first verse presents the very seed or *bija* of the poem and all the primary components therein.

A different interpretation of an important element in this powerful first verse, however, can dilute the erotic tone of the work and make incomplete the poet’s introduction of the primary components that function throughout the poem’s drama. If the spoken words in the first half of the opening verse are attributed to the person of Nanda, the foster father of Krishna, then the reader is deprived of the very prominent, unnamed friend who aids the work’s heroine. Instead, this interpretation introduces a personage whose relationship to Krishna has nothing to do with *śringāra-lilā*. It is the word *nanda* that is at issue here. The word in Sanskrit means “joy” or “happiness.” But commentators often take the word *nanda* in this verse to refer to the person Nanda, the name for Krishna’s foster father (and therefore so have modern Western scholars who have translated the text). The justification for this identification of *nanda* as a personal name is likely to be informed by the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, as S. K. De suggests, since it is there that Krishna’s foster father Nanda is pictured with Rādhā in her relationship with Krishna.²⁹ Might the understanding of *nanda* as Krishna’s foster father be an expression of the tradition’s unconscious attempt to soften the erotic tone of Jayadeva’s work?

However, my translation of the first verse presented above is a departure from some English translations, indicating an important consideration in maintaining a consistency of *rasa*. While the expressive power of poetry naturally works on many levels and the multivalent meanings should never be limited, my argument for understanding the initial spoken words of the first verse as coming from Rādhā’s friend is several-fold. First, it is important to note that nowhere in the *Gītagovinda* is Krishna’s foster father involved in the story line of the work.³⁰ Why would Jayadeva wish to introduce a personage in the first very important seed verse of the work who does not play a major role in the poem’s story, or someone who virtually does not appear anywhere else in the text? Secondly, would Nanda be complicitly involved, even knowingly

or unknowingly, in enabling the *śrīgāra-lilā* of Rādhā and Krishna? Even if Jayadeva were to justify his introduction of Nanda only in this one instance because of an inspiration derived from the purāṇic sources, the name's meaning as "joy" makes more sense in the context of the particular verse as well as in the work as a whole. After all, it is this beautiful image of being obedient to joy, or being at joy's command, that both Rādhā and Krishna find one another, as they run off together to find love in a secluded area of the Vraja forest. The way that both the hero and the heroine are overtaken by the joy, or the *nanda* of passionate love, is a powerful expression of the poem's eroticism, and Jayadeva's message to the reader that this is, indeed, the very *rasa* of the whole text. Moreover, this state of joy for both hero and heroine presented in the first verse anticipates and is reinforced by the state of joy spoken of in the refrain occurring in the climactic section of the whole work, in which the passionate interminglings of Rādhā and Krishna are described:

She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him.
—*Gitagovinda* 11.24-31³¹

In order for the first verse to be the *bīja* verse for the whole text, the cowherd maiden who is the intermediary throughout the entire work, communicating between Rādhā and Krishna, would have to be present. It is this voice that brings Rādhā together with Krishna. The importance of this messenger Gopī friend cannot be emphasized enough. Indeed, the soteriological strategy of the *Gitagovinda* lies in the central role of Rādhā's unnamed anonymous friend who provides the reader of the poem with a paradigmatic individual to emulate in deeper realms of devotional meditation. In this respect, Jayadeva's work inspires the techniques of *bhakti-yoga* later developed in great depth by the Caitanya school, who were to appropriate the verses of his *Gitagovinda* to illustrate their ultimate vision in practice and contemplation. Thus, the presence of this female friend of Rādhā who assists her in reuniting with Krishna is a most powerful component that must not go unrecognized at the poem's start, for her presence in the poem's initial verse fulfills its role as the powerful seed for the whole work.

The first verse of the *Gitagovinda*, I would also argue, actually mirrors more the first verse of the *Bhāgavata*'s *Rāsa Līlā* than it draws from other purāṇic sources, such as the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*. I would even venture to say that Jayadeva drew more inspiration from the *Bhāgavata* than any other source, especially from the exceptional poetic power and eloquence present in the language and story of the *Rāsa Līlā Pañcādhayāī*. Although it is beyond the

scope of this study to demonstrate all the ways that Jayadeva must have drawn from the *Bhāgavata*, let us at least look at the significant first verse of the *Rāsa Līlā* in comparison to Jayadeva's. I would argue that the elements of the *Rāsa Līlā*'s first verse illuminate further the elements of Jayadeva's first verse:

Even the Beloved Lord,
seeing those nights
in autumn filled with
blooming jasmine flowers,
Turned his mind toward
love's delights,
fully taking refuge in
Yogamāyā's creative powers.³²

—*Bhāgavata Purāna* 10.29.1

Some of the differences between the two verses, of course, are obvious: the above verse is found in the common purāṇic *anuṣṭubh* meter; while Krishna is not mentioned by name, he is presented as *bhagavān*; and Rādhā is not mentioned, nor is her name present in any of the five chapters, what to speak of the *Bhāgavata* text; furthermore, the verse consists solely of narration without any spoken words; and finally, there is the dramatic mention of Yogamāyā, and in Jayadeva's work the name or term does not appear.

Element:	Rāsa Līlā First Verse:	Gītagovinda First Verse:
<i>Hero</i>	Bhagavān (Krishna)	Mādhava (Krishna)
<i>Scenery</i>	The natural scenery during the autumn season: forest at night decorated with flowers which inspires love in the hero;	The natural scenery (during unspecified season): forest at night with forest floor darkened by Tamāla trees; during which the hero is fearful of losing Rādhā;
<i>Heroine(s)</i>	The Vraja Gopikās: subtly indicated by complex metaphor w/ imagery in scenery;	Rādhā, the supreme Vraja Gopikā (the most beloved of cowherd maidens, Vraja Gopikās);
<i>Agency</i>	Yogamāyā ("the power of union," which has an intermediary function).	The words spoken to Rādhā (the unnamed female friend who mediates and communicates).

Figure 1. Four Elements Present in Rāsa Līlā and Gītagovinda First Verses

Upon closer inspection, however, we find powerful correspondences between the two initial verses. The four primary elements of the *Rāsa Līlā* as they appear

in its opening verse correspond to the primary elements in the *Gītagovinda*'s opening verse, as seen in the chart on the previous page.

In both verses, the scenery reminds Krishna of what is beloved to him. In the *Rāsa Līlā*, the beauty of the night forest conveys that of the Gopīs and their exceptional love for Krishna through the verse's complex telescoping metaphor. Here Krishna is reminded of his love and desire for the Gopīs by the beauty of the night forest decorated with night-blooming jasmine. In the *Gītagovinda*, the gloominess of the cloud covering and the darkened forest floor by Tamāla trees triggers a state of fear that Krishna may lose Rādhā's love, and conveys Krishna's intense feelings of apprehension and longing. Thus, immediately within each verse, the erotic mood of Krishna's intense yearning and passion is established, even if by distinctly different forms.

There are still other remarkable parallels. In the *Rāsa Līlā*, Krishna takes refuge in the agency of Yogamāyā, whereas, in the *Gītagovinda*, Rādhā is dependent upon the guidance of her friend. In both stories we find that hero and heroine(s) are dependent on this mediating agency that moves them from the state of separation to a state of union. The mediating friend in the *Gītagovinda* functions as a "force that brings about union" (the literal meaning of *yoga-māyā*), that very force to which Krishna in the *Rāsa Līlā* takes refuge for arranging his meeting and reunion with the cowherd maidens. And in both narratives, we find the hero and heroine(s) being conquered by love, by "the secret ways that divine love plays." Thus the *Gītagovinda* is not only a sequel to the *Rāsa Līlā*, which Jayadeva makes clear in the second chapter of the text, but its essential themes are derivative and reflective of those occurring in the *Rāsa Līlā*. And each narrative establishes the erotic mood with the four elements and their own expressions of the conquering power of love through the erotic passion.

In the *Gītagovinda*, the force of love consumes both Rādhā and Krishna, and it has the power to subsume them to the point where they become fully and intensely absorbed in the sustained tension between the two dynamics of feeling so lost and far away from the beloved and feeling ever closer to the beloved as well. After establishing the divinity of Krishna in the first two songs, Jayadeva introduces Kāmadeva—often translated as "Love"—a character whose ubiquitous presence will dominate the drama. Kāmadeva is Eros, the mischievous Cupid, who, though invisible, shoots his flower-arrows into the hearts of all, inflaming them with uncontrollable passion. Jayadeva delights in this conquering power of Love in places throughout his work. This conquering power of love places divinity in a subordinate position to Kāmadeva, a force that is not intended to be literal, as is commonly misinterpreted. Rather, Kāmadeva stands for the conquering

power of love, as spoken of in the work's first verse, and how Rādhā and Krishna's experience of love becomes an irrepressible power to which they are both helplessly victim.

The authors of both the *Rāsa Līlā* and the *Gītagovinda* proclaim the benefits of hearing their erotic tales. The following appears as the benedictory last verse of the former:

This is the divine play of Vishnu
with the fair maidens of Vraja.
One who is filled with faith,
who hears or describes this play,
Having regained the highest
devotion for the Beloved Lord,
Has lust, the disease of the heart,
quickly removed without delay—
such a person is peaceful and wise.³³

—*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.40

The phrase “lust, disease of the heart” translates the Sanskrit *kāmarūpa-hṛd-rogam*. Here, *kāma* refers to “selfish wordly desire,” which opposes the selfless love cultivated in *bhakti*. Similarly, Jayadeva assures his reader that by reading his poem, the bad effects of the age will be destroyed:

May the delight of Hari as sung by Śrī Jayadeva cause the evil of the Kali [Era]
to be destroyed!³⁴

—*Gītagovinda* 7.20

The above verse follows a stream of erotic descriptions that begin with erotically charged lines, as if to remind the reader of the devotional value of the work and perhaps the homeopathic effect of Jayadeva's poetry. And just several verses from the end of the final chapter of his work, the author provides what appears to be a verse parallel to the *Bhāgavata*'s final verse of the *Rāsa Līlā*:

Skill in the arts of the Gāndharvas, meditation consecrated-to-Viṣṇu,
playful-creation in poems which are literary-works on the truth of the
discrimination in erotics—may wise-people joyfully purely-understand
all that according to the Śrī-*Gītagovinda* of the poet and scholar Jayadeva
whose soul is directed to Kṛṣṇa.³⁵

—*Gītagovinda* 12.28

The *Bhāgavata*, in its last chapter within a narrative discourse, seeks to point

its reader to the right understanding of its erotically charged love story as sacred. In fact, the *Bhāgavata*'s work has king Parīksit questioning Krishna's promiscuous act of attracting married women to the forest for a nighttime dalliance.³⁶ Similarly, Jayadeva insists that his work is for wise persons, and that his verses arise out of his own devotion, almost as if to provide a disclaimer or a defense of his erotically focused work.³⁷ But there is no doubt that Jayadeva addresses Krishna's divine sensuality with unprecedented intensity, making all previous accounts far milder by comparison. Most significantly, Jayadeva identifies and powerfully establishes the identity of Krishna's favorite lover, Rādhā, whose persona in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is described but remains unnamed. It is Jayadeva who is likely to be the first to identify this unnamed Gopī in the *Bhāgavata*'s Rāsa Līlā as Rādhā as he does within the *Gītagovinda* itself. By doing so, he indelibly planted in the minds and hearts of practitioners Rādhā's essential and unique role in that foundational *līlā* from which he himself drew so much inspiration and intention for his own poetic vision.

In Jayadeva's work, however, the focus is exclusively on her relationship with Krishna throughout the poem. And whereas the *Bhāgavata*'s passage focuses far more on the inner emotional feelings of the Vraja Gopikās and very little on Krishna's emotional involvement, here in the *Gītagovinda* Krishna's emotions of longing for Rādhā within the state of *vipralambha* are revealed in verses that are reminiscent of the longings of the Vraja Gopikās for Krishna in the Rāsa Līlā:

She left having seen me surrounded by the group of women, she was not
stopped by me [for I was] truly guilty and very frightened;
Hari! Hari! Because her respect [for me] is destroyed, she is gone,
apparently angry.

What will she do? What will she say [after] separation [from me for such]
a long-time? What use have I for relatives [or] wealth? for life [or] home?
Hari! Hari! . . . she is gone . . .

I think of her face, her brow bent with an excess of anger, [her face] like a
red lotus agitated by a bee flying-about above it;
Hari! Hari! . . . she is gone . . .

She is united [with me] in [my] heart, incessantly and vehemently I make-
love to her [there]; why do I search-for her here in the forest? Why do I
lament in vain?
Hari! Hari! . . . she is gone . . .

O slender-woman! I suppose your heart is distressed with jealousy—I

cannot calm you for I do not know where you have gone;
Haril Haril . . . she is gone . . .

You appear before me; you really do make me run around; why don't you
give an eager embrace as before?

Haril Haril . . . she is gone . . .

—*Gitagovinda* 3.3-8³⁸

Here, the initial stage of remembrance (GG 3.5) intensifies into a dynamic internal vision (GG 3.6), which culminates in a direct external perception (GG 3.8). The essence is that *premā* in separation opens the door to supernatural experiences of meeting; opportunities to see, feel, and discover one's lover in a new light. After all, the intensity of emotion and passion on the part of the Vraja Gopikās (including the unnamed Gopī with whom Krishna runs off, who later traditions identify as Rādhā) for Krishna in the *Bhāgavata*'s Rāsa Līlā far outweighs the disclosure of Krishna's passionate feelings for the cowherd maidens. In Jayadeva's poem, however, not only does Rādhā's emotional expressions represent a further intensification of those expressed by the group of Gopīs in the Rāsa Līlā, but those of Rādhā in the *Gitagovinda* are now reciprocated with and balanced by a dramatically greater disclosure of Krishna's inner feelings in relation to Rādhā, far more than any revelation of Krishna's emotions found anywhere in the *Bhāgavata*. Thus, in the *Gitagovinda*, a perfect balance and reciprocation between divine lovers is achieved. Perhaps the most intense expression of Krishna's love for Rādhā is in his desperate plea:

Place your foot on my head—
A sublime flower destroying poison of love!

Tradition has it that Jayadeva, overwhelmed with emotion, was unable to write this line. Yet Krishna, eager to proclaim his submission to the power of all-conquering love, personally appeared to complete the verse:

Place your foot on my head—
A sublime flower destroying poison of love!
Let your foot quell the harsh sun
Burning its fiery form in me to torment Love.
Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

—*Gitagovinda* 10.8³⁹

In turn, Jayadeva conveys the intensity of Rādhā's obsession for Krishna as a kind of loving madness that precipitates a sort of paranoia in which she invariably interprets the natural features of the springtime forest to be the unbearable taunting of Kāmadeva. For Rādhā, the vines seem to be embracing the trees, who, in turn, horripilate with pleasure in the form of newly sprouted buds. The honeybees seem to be kissing the flowers, and the cooing of the cuckoo seems to be an exclamation of sensual pleasure.

Krishna's emotional state is further enhanced by words coming from Rādhā's messenger friend. She attempts to give Krishna reassurances with these words:

Secretly she sees you everywhere, drinking the sweet honey of her lower-lip; O Lord Hari! Rādhā sadly waits in her bed-chamber.

She has a bracelet made of spotless lotus fibres and she lives henceforth [solely] by your skill in love-making; O Lord Hari! . . .

—*Gitagovinda* 6.2, 4⁴⁰

Here Jayadeva portrays one of the many heartrending nuances of love in separation. Rādhā's absorption in Krishna collapses into a role-reversal so complete that she begins to think, "I am Krishna, anxiously awaiting Rādhā's arrival," again reminiscent of the Gopīs' behavior in the Rāsa Līlā.

The Caitanya School's Interpretation of the Erotic

The school of Caitanya Vaishnavism views these levels collectively as various stages of love that souls can experience with God, which seem natural in that they resemble or mirror relationships found among human beings. As humans, we appreciate others' accomplishments, we engage in service, either voluntary or obligatory, we share feelings and experiences with one another as friends, we care for and protect our dependent fellow humans, and we give ourselves completely to each other in amorous relationships. Thus, in a similar way, it is natural to appreciate God's greatness, to serve God, to share with God, to care for God, or to love God passionately with one's whole being.

These five *rasas* are to be viewed, says Krishnadāsa, as progressively greater levels of intimacy. Yet they are also recognized as diverse perfectional levels of love for God. He states that each of the four *rasas* is a perfection, but the *śṛigāra-rasa* has the greatest sweetness of all as well as the greatest intensity of love.

However, theologians go to great lengths to underscore the purity of divine love as *premā*, and its categorical difference from worldly love, or *kāma*. The passionate love of the Gopīs for Krishna is always understood by the Caitanya

school as pure, and should not be mistaken as the passionate worldly love of ordinary lovers. Early theologians of the school make a sharp distinction between worldly love and divine love. For example, Krishnadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmin makes a distinction between *kāma* and *premā*:

There is *kāma*, and there is *premā*—
there are different qualities
between them;
Just as the qualities
of both iron and gold
are different in essence.

—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.4.164

Thus *kāma* and *premā* are seen, at one level, as worlds apart, as it were, or virtually opposite of one another. Krishnadāsa elaborates further:

The desire to please one's own senses,
in my opinion, is called “*kāma*,”
The desire to please the senses of Krishna,
is called “*premā*.”

The intention within *kāma* is
only one's own pleasure,
Whereas one's intention
within *premā* is only
the happiness of Krishna,
and thus it is very powerful.

Therefore a great difference exists
between *kāma* and *premā*:
Kāma—is blind darkness;
premā—is the pure light of the sun.

—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.4.165, 166, and 171

There are a good many statements along these lines by Krishnadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmin himself, many of which refer to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as well. In all of these statements is expressed the categorical difference between worldly love and divine love, or *kāma* and *premā*, respectively. The former is selfish, and the latter is selfless. The former is marked by desiring one's own pleasure and satisfaction, and the latter is marked by desiring only the pleasure and satisfaction

of the beloved. As the *Bhakti Sūtra* states, “there is certainly no happiness for a lover who is without concern for the state of happiness of the beloved.”⁴¹

Other theologians of the Caitanya school also make claims regarding the purity of *premā* as they focus on the *Vraja Gopikās* in the *Bhāgavata*’s *Rāsa Lilā*. Viśvanātha Cakravartin, a leading theologian of the Caitanya school, reflects the school’s vision of the erotic in his *Bhāgavata* commentary.⁴² He explains that the Gopīs demonstrated the highest level of pure love for God because every action of body and mind—every thought—was for the sole purpose of pleasing Krishna. Even their words of intense desire, which may appear to be selfish or selfserving, were spoken only for the sake of serving the supreme, and despite any appearances to the contrary, they had no interest in avoiding unhappiness or gaining happiness for themselves. Thus, Viśvanātha speaks of a selfless love.

This purity can first be understood as without any self-interest, desire or lust. Krishnadāsa states emphatically and repeatedly that “there is no trace of *kāma* or worldly desire exhibited among those who are in the category of the Gopīs,” and insists that in their relationship with Krishna there is only the desire for the happiness of Krishna (*kṛṣṇa-sukha*). He provides a simple hermeneutic for interpreting the behavior and emotions of the Gopīs in the following verse:

So whatever affection (*prīta*) is observed
in the Gopīs’ own bodies (*nija-dehe*),
Know for certain that
it must be for Krishna only.

—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.4.181

Theologians of the school were certainly aware that the love of the Gopīs had the appearance of worldly passionate love. Erotic passion can also appear to be mixed rather than unconditional love, and therefore Krishnadāsa repeatedly claims that the love of the Gopīs assumes the form of *kāma*, or erotic passion:

The love of the affectionate Gopīs
is well known as *kāma*,
or the passion for God.
Thus even Uddhava and
those associated with him,
as well as all those who are
intimate with God (*bhagavat-priyāḥ*),
desire (*vāichanti*) this love (*kāma*).
—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.4.163⁴³

It is significant that *kāma* becomes a way to refer to an intensified passionate form of *premā* for the Caitanya theologians. Indeed, Rūpa Gosvāmin himself uses the word *kāma* in the compound term *kāmānuga* (“the following of those with *kāma*”), referring specifically to the intense love of the Vraja Gopikās.⁴⁴ Later on in his work, Krishnadāsa speaks of the nature of *premā* as it appears in the form of *kāma*:

The love, or *premā*, of the Gopīs is natural—
for it is not the passionate love
of this world (*prākṛta-kāma*).

Because it is the same [in appearance] as
the acts of passionate love in this world,
I will call their passionate love “*kāma*.”

—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 2.8.215

In the above verse, we see that worldly love is better termed with a modifying adjective to *kāma*, as we see when the phrase *prākṛta-kāma* is engaged. Now the simple term *kāma* refers to an *aprākṛta-kāma* or the pure love for the divine. The *prākṛta* has the general sense of “the ordinary,” referring to this world. It can also mean, however, “vulgar,” “low” or “unrefined.”⁴⁵ Clearly, *prākṛta-kāma* and *kāma* are related and connected. The former, we can infer, is subject to the *traiguṇya*, manifesting anything from the darker or very low forms of love (as effected by *rajas* or *tamas guṇas*, respectively) to the more purely loving and even selfless forms of love (as effected by *sattva-guṇa*) at the other end of the spectrum. The latter form of love as *premā* and its intensified form, *kāma*, are perfectly pure, perfectly selfless, unending and unconditional, and always increasing.⁴⁶

Thus, when the Gopīs appear to be demanding or needful, even selfish or lamenting in their love, these emotions are to be taken as *actual* expressions of their intense love for Krishna, which are felt and exhibited only for his pleasure. The motives of the Gopīs are defined in the following:

The Gopīs have renounced everything
for the sake of worshipping Krishna.

Their only motive (*hetu*) is
the happiness of Krishna (*krṣṇa-sukha-hetu*)
which manifests in the service
they perform with *premā* (pure love).

—*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.4.169

Jīva Gosvāmin also agrees that *kāma* as displayed in the Rāsa Līlā is pure love and not worldly desire. Again, he claims that there may be the appearance of worldly desire or need in Rādhā, specifically, but such an appearance is actually pure spiritual passion. Every emotion, thought and action is only for the sake of Krishna, for his happiness. This is also confirmed by Krishnadāsa:

The Gopīs are not concerned for
their own happiness or suffering
(ātma-sukha-duḥkhe).
Their behavior, actions, and thoughts
are meant solely for
the happiness of Krishna
(kṛṣṇa-sukha-hetu).

They [the Gopīs] give up everything
for the sake of Krishna.

The motive of their pure
and passionate love
is the happiness of Krishna.

—Caitanya Caritāmṛta 1.4.174, 175

While the early theologians of the Caitanya school go to great lengths to emphasize the categorical difference between divine love and worldly love, they also admit a connection between the two: *kāma* and *premā* can have the same appearance, but yet contain an entirely different motive. The former is egocentric while the other is theocentric. Love that is even slightly conditioned or tainted with selfish intentions is worldly, what to speak of a love filled with selfishness. On the other hand, a love that has for its object the divinity has only the intention to make the divine beloved happy. The early teachers go into great detail about the variety of emotions that the Gopis exhibit for Krishna's pleasure, which often appear worldly. They explain these emotions in light of an eternal and intimate love for God.⁴⁷

While all this is to be acknowledged, *kāma* and *premā* do indeed have properties in common. As we have seen, they both contain expressions of passionate love, albeit with lesser or greater levels of purity behind them, as, one could say, both iron and gold are in fact different types of metal, but yet they both are metal. Thus *kāma* and *premā* are intimately related enough to the point that Caitanya theologians, in the end, utilize the word *kāma*—the word initially rejected as describing pure love—to then describe an especially intense form of passion for the divine within *premā*. Here we begin to see how this world and the transcendent world are intimately and inextricably connected within *bhakti*.

Reconsidering the Meaning of the Erotic

What is at work here, then, is what has always been the concern for Hindu traditions in the broadest sense: Precisely what humans do in this world, while itself is certainly an important factor, is not as important as *how* humans do things in this world, or with what consciousness humans do them. So it is essentially the quality of consciousness that distinguishes worldly passion from divine passion for the Caitanya school. This world is real and it has value, and the tāntric vision calls our attention to this. On the other hand, its value derives in large part from the fact that it is intimately connected and therefore relatable to the sacred world. Indeed, the divine perhaps is even dependent upon this world for extending its embrace to humans. The divinity's reliance on this world can also be seen in the function of divine descents to this world, as *avatāra*. Additionally, such reliance can be observed in how this world, in its superlative creations or manifestations, reflects and mirrors the divine, expressed by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* in his numerous "I am" declarations.⁴⁸

Elsewhere I have argued that such passages declaring the presence of the divine in this world, etc., express a passionate yearning on the part of the divine for souls, as in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.⁴⁹ Such expressions of divine yearning occurring in the *Gītā* can also sound like erotic longings, in the many verses in which Krishna speaks of souls coming to him, and in the many verses expressing his deepest and most abiding love for souls. Despite these expressions of divine love sprinkled throughout the text, any role of human or divine emotion or feeling in the *Bhagavad Gītā* has often been ignored in favor of seeing the text as a very mokṣic work. The important point here is that within the *Gītā* itself, one discovers that its teachings highlight the value of both this world and the divine world, and also the divine interconnection between the two. The tāntric and mokṣic visions must be connected and combined within *bhakti*.

Whatever nuanced or subtle erotic expression may be there in the *Gītā*, it is certainly carried further in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, I have argued, is a text that not only introduces *bhakti* in a dramatic way but also presents divine love as its most powerful and climactic message.⁵⁰ It is in the *Bhāgavata* that we can observe human emotion as especially important in *bhakti* beyond the practices leading to *mokṣa*. The value of human emotion in *bhakti* is powerfully conveyed in a verse within the Rāsa Līlā passage itself:

Desire, anger, fear, and
certainly loving attachment,
intimacy and affection

Should always be directed toward Hari;
 by doing so, persons become
 fully absorbed in God.

—*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.29.15

Later, the Caitanya school would develop a systematic theology that focused on the human offering of love to the divine. As Klaus Klostermaier states, “perhaps the most subtle and detailed system of gradual ascent to God by means of love has been developed in the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism.”⁵¹

The tradition’s vision of love was established by the school within an extended development of *rasa* theory. The history of the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa* certainly culminates with Rūpa Gosvāmin. The idea of *rasa* was not merely aesthetics, or an analysis of emotion and relations within drama and poetry for Rūpa. The history of *rasa* theory culminates in Rūpa Gosvāmin’s application of *rasa* theory to *bhakti*, distinguished as *bhakti-rasa*.⁵² Thus, just as “The concept of mood, *rasa*, is at the heart of all Indian artistic expression,”⁵³ as Barbara Stoler Miller writes, we must also affirm that *bhakti-rasa* is at the heart of all devotional expression for the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism.

Texts such as the *Gītagovinda*, or for that matter the Rāsa Līlā passage in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, both mature works of exquisite poetry in their own ways, employ a mechanism that is at the heart of all poetry: metaphor. The *Gītagovinda* is indeed a love story and is love poetry, but it is more—it is sacred poetry, sacred drama, or *līlā*. Metaphor, therefore, functions not just poetically but also metaphysically, at the same time. Within the sacred context, metaphor depends upon the intimate connection that this world has to the divine world, for it is the job of metaphor in sacred poetry to bring these two worlds even closer. The theopoetic mind engages ordinary finite language within poetry to envision infinite beings, infinite realms and divine acts, language that is usually limited to describing finite beings, finite realms and worldly acts.

It is already the function of metaphor to convey a powerful sense of one thing—the *tenor* of metaphor—through a sense of another thing—the *vehicle* of metaphor. Both vehicle and tenor must have certain qualities in common between them—those qualities shared between vehicle and tenor constitute the *grounds* of metaphor. However, metaphor in the sacred context takes on a dimension that sets it apart from other forms of metaphor. In sacred poetry, metaphor depends on a metaphysical background from which both vehicle and tenor draw for revealing infinite realms to souls in this world. This world imagery, after all, finds its very existence and origin in the sacred world, such

that the grounds of both vehicle and tenor in metaphor take on an ontological interdependence. Thus, the erotic love that exists eternally in the sacred world of Rādhā and Krishna is not something that could have been revealed through Jayadeva's poetry to persons of this world unless the erotic sacred exists in some form here in this world such that the erotic can be appreciated as sacred. The converse is also the case: The erotic love that exists in this temporal realm could not ultimately be something most desirable, beautiful, or wonderful, etc., if it did not exist in some ultimate form within the sacred. In the sacred metaphor, both vehicle and tenor are transpositional simultaneously, which intensifies the grounds of the metaphor, infusing sacred metaphor with a powerful sense of revelation.

This revelational power of the metaphor engages imagery from the finite amorous interactions occurring in this world as its vehicle to move the *rasika* to the infinite and boundless love and passion occurring within the most intimate part of the divine world. Here, within the erotic metaphor the value of amorous relations in this world must be acknowledged in order for them to be a worthy vehicle in relation to the metaphorical tenor within the divine intimacy of Rādhā and Krishna. And this *tantra*-like value accounts for the vividness or realism, the very human or worldly quality, of erotic sacred poetry such as the *Gītagovinda*. This kind of erotic realism has understandably caused persons such as De and even practitioners to be fearful that it is degrading of the sacred and dangerously close to promoting sexual promiscuity on the part of practitioners.

But the eroticism of this sacred poetry depicting Rādhā-Krishna or Krishna-Gopī *līlās* is beautifully set in the exquisite realm of *rasa* as well as *bhakti-rasa*. Lee Siegel understands the power of sacred poetry and how it is simply not a profane expression though it may draw from the realm of the profane:

Any song about Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*, about his love-making with Rādhā, would be sacred. Nothing connected with Kṛṣṇa could be profane. But the sacredness, the power and the meaning are enhanced by Jayadeva's skill as a poet; the enchanting, enrapturing rhythms of the songs invest the story with magic—devotees are drawn to Kṛṣṇa by the sweet sounds of the *Gītagovinda*, just as the cowherd-women were drawn from their homes by the mellifluous notes from Kṛṣṇa's flute.⁵⁴

Siegel's observation that sacred *bhakti* poetry functions in the practitioner as Krishna's flute music does with the Vraja Gopikās, as we find at the very start of the *Rāsa Līlā*, is a beautiful analogy: poetry draws the mind and heart of the *bhakta* into the depths of the ultimate and most intimate realms of the godhead

the way Krishna's flute music inexorably draws the Gopīs from this world to the divine world.

What offsets any danger of being just the worldly interaction of lovers is this power of poetry and poetic metaphor. To reduce Jayadeva's expressions merely to a literalism or realism that strips the poem's metaphorical tenor from its metaphorical vehicle, essentially eliminating the poem's tenor, indeed would move the work into a *tāntrika* or *Sahajiyā* vision only. Barbara Miller cautions us with her words: "The theorists dictated that the gestures exposing a character's mental states must be subtle, expressive enough to arouse a sensitive audience but never so crudely detailed that they stimulate wanton desire. In the *Gitagovinda*, this restraint functions to make potentially pornographic subject matter the material of esthetic and religious experience."⁵⁵ Thus it is the power of *rasa* poetics that keeps the integrity of metaphorical vehicle and tenor intact, keeping it from being merely a *tāntric* expression.

We have seen the dangers of stripping the metaphor of its tenor. But there are also instances of stripping the metaphor of its vehicle, which effectively turns metaphor into what is sometimes called an *extended metaphor*, or most commonly known as *allegory*. An example of this allegorical interpretation is Geoffrey Parrinder's claim that Sufi and Christian forms of divine union, including its erotic imagery, are effectively allegorical. Parrinder makes the sweeping statement that the Vaishnava presentation "employs an erotic metaphor to explain the relation of humans to God and to encourage *bhakti*, in the manner of the Sufi mystics and the biblical *Song of Songs*".⁵⁶ While Parrinder acknowledges that these traditions present forms of divine revelation through imagery of the amorous love of this world, he moves too hastily to interpret all of these stories as mere allegory. Obliquely referring to allegory as *metaphor*, Parrinder thus misses the power of the poetic and dismisses the metaphorical vehicle when he claims that "the metaphor remains only a metaphor."⁵⁷

When the tenor of metaphor is taken as the whole expression, and when the vehicle is dropped completely, this changes metaphor into allegory. To turn metaphor into allegory is to lose the aesthetic power, energy and vitality of the poetry. Once one has uncovered the allegorical message of the poem, what the poem is *really* saying beyond its ostensive language, the words have done their job and one moves on and leaves the poem's verses behind. The action of reading poetry allegorically effectively allows the reader to transcend or go beyond the poetry itself. Allegory devalues the vehicle of metaphor and sees its value only as purely transitive or vehicular; once one has arrived at the intended message, the vehicle is discarded. In the realm of the sacred, this

allegorical action of the reader is analogous to the ascetical Hindu tradition that denies this world of any value, and in extreme cases, of any true existence whatsoever. The one seeking the perfection of *mokṣa* wishes to be liberated from this world of *samsāra* and transcend it. Allegory in the sacred context treats metaphor by orienting it toward *mokṣa* or a release from this world completely, whether it be poetic or metaphysical.

To consider the erotic elements in Rādhā and Krishna *līlā* actual or identifiable in and as the human love of this world, to consider females as Rādhās and males as Krishnas, represents the extreme *tantra* identification of this world with the divine world. This is one extreme that is not representative of the *bhakti* school of Caitanya. However, to consider the erotic elements or amorous dimensions of the human male and female relationships in this world as something degraded, or something leading to bondage and opposing perfection in *mokṣa*, is the other extreme. While the tantric or more specifically Sahajiyā vision invests too much divine value in this world, imputing too much divine presence in the here and now, the mokshic or more ascetic Vaishnava traditions may invest too much value in rejecting and being released from this world, a world that is illusive and entangling. This latter view can be observed in portions of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, where, for example, women are seen, for the most part, as “erotic” distractions from liberation, and even the embodiment of the energy of illusion itself.⁵⁸ In this *mokṣa* scenario, this world has nothing to do with the ultimate world into which one strives to be released. The only value of this world is its status as something worth transcending and relinquishing, thus fueling potentially any one of a variety of visions within world-denying traditions centered upon asceticism.

Thus the very heart of the theology of Krishna *bhakti* must be characterized neither as a tradition or practice of *tantra* or as a tradition or practice of *mokṣa*—rather, *bhakti* engages the very different approaches and relationships to the worldly and other-worldly realms extolled by these two, but is invested fully in the vision of neither. Therefore, *bhakti* is best described as the “dance” between the two. It is this dialectical movement between both *tantra* and *mokṣa* in *bhakti* that makes its practices and its ultimate vision something continuous with much of Hindu traditions generally, and yet something completely autonomous from them as well. (See Figure 2 on the next page.)

To identify the amorous love among humans in this world as *only* degraded, dark, and full of lust, or of the nature of *taṇas*, without recognizing those that are of the nature of *rajas* and *sattva* gradations, inadvertently and unknowingly, undercuts a theological vision of divine intimacy that involves the erotic. Such a theology that engages the metaphor of the erotic necessarily involves the

careful balancing of “the erotic love of this world,” or *laukika śrīgāra*, with “the otherworldly love,” or *alaukika-śrīgāra*. Moreover, the erotic metaphor depends upon and draws from such amorous interactions in this world that are beautiful, that are of the nature of *sattva*, that exhibit the most intense and exclusive feelings arising from the depths of one’s heart in order to express effectively in metaphor their divine counterparts. Otherwise, if the amorous imagery of this world is seen as utterly negative and repulsive, the erotic metaphor of sacred poetry simply falls apart. To preserve the components of metaphor in poetry allows its power to move delightfully, continuously, and deeply into the heart of the reader.

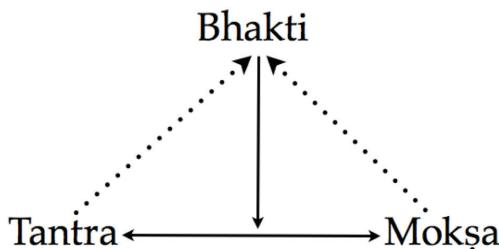


Figure 2. Bhakti is nourished by aspects of the tantra and mokṣa visions of the world (indicated by the dotted lines), and yet it remains a distinct vision from them as the continuous dialectical movement or “dance” between them (indicated by the downward arrow pointing to the balanced center of the tantra-mokṣa axis).

Finally, when speaking about the erotic character of the *Gītagovinda*, we must ask, What is meant by the erotic? In the context of such a theopoetic text, the word *erotic* obviously means much more than the denotative gloss from the English lexicon: “of, relating to, or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement.”⁵⁹ The word in Sanskrit that comes closest to having this very specific meaning that we find in English is *śrīgāra*. The Sanskrit word can mean “love,” “sexual passion or desire or enjoyment.”⁶⁰ These meanings certainly are echoed by other similar words in Sanskrit. Words such as *kāma* and *rati*, though, carry more meanings that go beyond the realm of the sexual.⁶¹ However, the word’s noun stem *śrīga* has to do with “any peak or projection or lofty object” or “highest point, acme, height or perfection of anything.”⁶² Thus *śrīgāra* is considered the ultimate peak experience among all relationships with the divine, and as a *rasa*, it is certainly regarded as the highest and ultimate *rasa*.

Significantly, however, *śrigāra* can also possess a meaning that is ostensibly unrelated to the sexual, which sets the Sanskrit word apart from its English counterpart, as the word *erotic*. While the word *erotic* in English narrowly focuses on the amorous or sexual only, the word *śrigāra* can also mean the following: “a dress suitable for amorous purposes,” or more broadly, “elegant dress” or “fine garments.” It can even mean “any mark.”⁶³ So while *śrigāra* certainly refers to “the erotic” or the sexual, it can at the same time move into a realm of the decorative and the beautiful. These two meanings of *śrigāra* taken together perhaps suggest the outer *vaidhi* practices and prescribed disciplines of *bhakti-sādhana* as they “clothe” the internal appreciation of the erotic, which is developed in the more advanced stage of *rāgānuga-bhakti*.⁶⁴ The twofold meaning of *śrigāra* can also reflect the outer life of the *bhakta* while living a life within the innermost heart. But moreover, perhaps these two meanings are to be equated with one another in this way: the erotic is the decorative garments within *śrigāra-rasa*. In other words, perhaps the erotic element itself functions as the metaphorical vehicle to move one to the divine tenor.

Concluding Reflections

I would like to suggest that Erich Fromm’s ideas about erotic love allow us to discover a newly revealed tenor of the erotic, because his definition of the erotic goes beyond the narrow lexical definition. In writing about the nature of erotic love between humans, Fromm makes some important observations. He eloquently states that, “Erotic love, if it is love, has one premise. That I love from the essence of my being—and experience the other person in the essence of his or her being.”⁶⁵ Of course, what is referred to as “the essence of one’s being” could certainly include the sexual but not only the sexual. Here *essence* for our purposes refers to the true self, the *ātman*. Fromm goes on to distinguish unselfish exclusive love from narcissistic selfish love, where two people only love each other in isolation from all else:

Erotic love is exclusive, but it loves in the other person all of mankind, all that is alive. It is exclusive only in the sense that I can fuse myself fully and intensely with one person only. Erotic love excludes the love for others only in the sense of erotic fusion, full commitment in all aspects of life...⁶⁶

Indeed, Fromm insists that erotic love engages the essence of one’s own self and connects exclusively with one other person only, and yet such a love gives rise to a universal love that connects with all of humanity and all of life.⁶⁷ Here the sexual becomes the vehicle in the metaphor, it becomes epiphenomenal, expres-

sive, and subordinate to the idea of the exclusive and inclusive dance of love and divine love. Fromm opens up deeper dimensions, therefore, of what the erotic is—deeper than that which is simply related to the sexual. It is a love that exclusively focuses on one being which, on another level, deepens one's love that is inclusive of all beings and all of life, and the synergistic movement between the two. This expanded definition constitutes a new way to appreciate the erotic dance that is cultivated in the practice and vision of Krishna *bhakti*.⁶⁸

From the foregoing, it is clear that there is great or subtle trepidation with regard to the presence of the erotic dimensions of the *bhakti* theology of Caitanya Vaishnavism. We saw that it was a well-founded fear not only from the outside of the religious community but also from within it. We saw that when the metaphorical vehicle of erotic poetry is embraced apart from the tenor toward which it is to move, then it takes on tāntric or Sahajiyā leanings. Extracting a literalist reading of the poem loses the divine tenor of the text. On the other hand, embracing the tenor to the exclusion of the erotic imagery, which would at least tacitly involve the dismissal of any validity and meaningfulness to the relationships of this world, get dangerously close to a counterintuitive nihilism that ultimately denies any value or even reality to this world. In *bhakti* there is something drawn from both the *tantra* and *mokṣa* visions. Yet *bhakti* transcends both with a dance between them, combining them in its own unique formulation.

This blend of both *tantra* and *mokṣa* can be found in one of the oldest Upaniṣads. In the passage below, the intense love between a man and a woman is seen as the appropriate analogue for appreciating the powerful relation between divinity and humanity, and the all-encompassing embrace of the divine for souls:

As one fully embraced
by a dearly beloved woman
knows nothing
that is without or within,
so a person fully embraced
by the Intelligent Self
knows nothing
that is without or within.
For one whose desire
is truly to reach this state,
whose desire is from the self,
whose nature is without desire,
there is no sorrow within.⁶⁹

—*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.21

The word *desire* translates the Sanskrit word *kāma*, expressing how *kāma* is something positive for reaching the ultimate state of selfhood, again, carrying the sense of *tantra*, even something that comes from the true self. And yet the nature of the self remains desireless, carrying the sense of *mokṣa*. These positive and negative states of desire eradicate suffering within the self.

Again, as we saw in the Caitanya school's interpretation of the *Vraja Gopikās'* erotic moods, behavior, and interactions with Krishna, both in his presence and in his absence, *kāma* becomes a form of *premā*, or "purest love." The school recognizes many stages to arrive at *premā*, and further, the many steps within *premā* to arrive at its very intensified forms, often identified as *kāma*.⁷⁰ Once a *bhakta* achieves this level of *premā*, the intensity of that love increases more and more to the point that it takes on the characteristics of *kāma* or *rati*. And just to reiterate, it should not be surprising that there is such reciprocity between this world's eroticism and the divine world's, since each one participates at some level in the other. The very fact that Rūpa Gosvāmin adopted and adapted Bharata's *rasa* theory which revealed the inner psycho-social dealings and interactions of this world for the sake of the worldly stage in order to reveal the inner workings of the divine is telling. There is, for the Caitanya school, an intimate relationship between the two, a level of participation of the one in the other, aesthetically and metaphysically, worldly and otherworldly, but not without a very delicate "dance" between them. Only then can this dance become a dance of divine love.

Much more can be said about the school's vision of the erotic in Krishna *bhakti* theology. Here we are only scratching the surface. But in doing so, it would perhaps be prudent to redefine or widen the meaning of the word *erotic*, especially as it has been applied in the context of Rādhā-Krishna *līlā*. As we presented above, the word *śrīgāra* itself suggests such a widening with its twofold meaning. An understanding of the erotic necessarily pushes the metaphorical nature of the sacred erotic within poetry to an onto-existential grounding of it in its theology. That is, the erotic metaphor has to be understood as specifically a "telescoping metaphor," in which what was once the tenor now becomes the vehicle, and this new vehicle reveals yet a newer, deeper tenor in the world of the poetry. If the worldly erotic served as the vehicle for revealing the tenor consisting of the divine intimacy of Rādhā-Krishna *līlā*, then now the latter reveals a new metaphorical object, a new tenor that takes us more deeply into the mystery of the text.

The tradition employs the erotic to celebrate the ubiquity of love in the universe and its ultimate achievements in the divine. The erotic element

represents the divine capacity to draw the *bhakta* into an elevated state in which he or she becomes unendingly absorbed in the deepest meditation and is overtaken by an uncontrollable ecstasy of divine love and divine intimacy. It is the overwhelming boundlessness and intensity of divine love and the ever-increasing closeness and felicity of divine intimacy that is sought. The components within the metaphorical-metaphysical structure of the erotic, to which Jayadeva's poem is inextricably tied, infuse sacred eroticism with an unusually intense and elevated symbolic power.

Endnotes

1. In this study, I will focus more on the tantra side of eroticism in *bhakti* theology than its *mokṣa* side because this is where scholars and practitioners have voiced different concerns regarding the subject. But I also raise some questions with regard to the tendency to lean too much toward asceticism and the demonizing of women on the part of scripture and renunciates.

2. See "Synoptic Analysis of the *Rāsa Līlā*," Appendix 3, in my *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, India's Classic Sacred Love Story Introduced, Translated, and Illuminated* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), page 344-5. Here a synoptic analysis shows that the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Harivaiṇśa* texts do not reflect on the erotic longings of the Gopīs (Act 1, Scene 2) as does the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, nor do these two texts seek an understanding of Krishna's apparently amoral behavior (Act 5, Scene 3).

3. "Divine Betrayal: Krishna-Gopal of Braj in the Eyes of Outsiders" *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Volume 3, No. 1 (Winter 1994).

4. "Divine Betrayal: Krishna-Gopal of Braj in the Eyes of Outsiders," by David Haberman. Page 87.

5. "Divine Betrayal: Krishna-Gopal of Braj in the Eyes of Outsiders," by David Haberman. Page 85.

6. "Divine Betrayal: Krishna-Gopal of Braj in the Eyes of Outsiders," by David Haberman. Page 105.

7. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), 551-2.

8. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 551. Again, De offers words of concern and warning: "All worship and salvation are regarded as nothing more than a blissful enjoyment of the divine sports, involving personal consciousness and relation, direct or remote, between the enjoyer and the enjoyed. But in the emphasis laid on the erotic sentiment in the sports of Kṛṣṇa, the attitude borders definitely upon sense-devotion, and leans perceptibly and dangerously towards the erotic passion. The ultimate felicitous state is conceived as a an eternity of enjoyment of the erotic sports of Vṛndāvana, in which the faithful serve Kṛṣṇa as did the Gopīs. The corrective is, no doubt, supplied by theologically representing the erotic relationship as the sport of the Śaktimat with his own Śaktis or Energies, in their Hlādinī or blissful state; but, however,

figuratively or philosophically the doctrine is interpreted, the erotic emotionalism is essential and prominent in the the devotional writings as a literal fact" (*Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, 222). Again, De observes the literalness of the Krishna myth: "The precarious Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend, on which its whole system of devotion is based, is taken not as a symbol but as a reality, not as religious myth but as religious history" (*Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, 549).

9. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 551.

10. The history of the Caitanya sect indeed includes theologically and ritually differing Sahājīyā sects, traditions owing their origin to a form of tantric Buddhism, specifically that of the Vrajrayāna sect, which flourished in Bengal centuries before the appearance of Caitanya. Some of the practices of certain Sahājīyā sects became quite prominent in the Bengal region and consisted of sexual "re-enactments" of Krishna's activities with the Gopis. Even scholars have mistakenly identified these non-Vaishnava sects with the orthodox school of Caitanya. Victor Turner's work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), blatantly and mistakenly identifies the Caitanya Vaishnava movement with the Sahājīyā Tantric movement (cf. page 157).

11. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 551-2.

12. S. K. De, *ibid.*, 551-2.

13. S. K. De, *ibid.*, 6-7.

14. I write about how a true interpretation of the erotic narratives, according to the Caitanya school, requires the development of a certain type of vision, that is, the "eye of purest love," or *prem-netra*. See *Dance of Divine Love*, 4.

15. A. K. Majumdar, *Concise History of Ancient India*, vol. III, *Hinduism: Society, Religion and Philosophy* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983) 591.

16. A. K. Majumdar, *Concise History of Ancient India*, vol. III, 591.

17. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, Second Canto, Part Two (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972), 2.9.37 purport.

18. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Teachings of Lord Kapila* (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977), vs. 29 purport, 177-182. Another similar statement is found in his introductory remarks when presenting a summary study of the episode. He states that less advanced devotees or persons outside the tradition might mistake the rāsa dance to be "like the ordinary dancing of young boys and girls" (*Kṛṣṇa, The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, vol. 1 [Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1970], 189).

19. *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in The Gītagovinda of Jayadeva*, by Lee Siegel (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978). Chapter 5, 178-205.

20. *ibid.*, 183-184.

21. *ibid.*, 184.

22. *Ujvala Nilamani*, 15.253 (translation mine).

vidagdhānāṁ mitho līlā-vilāsena yathā sukham
na tathā samprayogeṇa syād evāṁ rasikā viduḥ

The subject noun of this sentence is the Sanskrit word *mithas*, which I have translated above as “interaction,” but also carries the sense of an interpersonal exchange, mutuality, a back-and-forth, etc. See *Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

23. *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love*, 191.

24. The Caitanya school sees all souls, whether they be male or female, as “feminine” in relation to the supreme masculine, Krishna, or as *prakṛti* in relation to *purusa*, respectively. My point here is simply that the school also sees everything in this world as a partial reflection of what is there in the divine world, and thus there is a symbolic relationship to male and female, not a metaphysical one.

25. This *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* establishes the *Gītagovinda* as authoritative, among four other works that are also considered authoritative for the school. The literature that is most important and respected is that which Caitanya himself accepted and enjoyed, as described in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*:

Caṇḍīdāsa, Vidyāpati,

the songs of the drama of [Rāmānanda] Rāya,
the [Kṛṣṇa] *Karṇāmṛta* [of Līlāśuka Bilvamaṅgala],
and the *Gītagovinda* [of Jayadeva];

With Svarūpa and Rāmānanda,

Mahāprabhu [Caitanya],
during the day and the night,
would hear these poetic songs

with the greatest pleasure. —*Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 2.2.77

26. For an extensive discussion on the relationship between the Caitanya school’s exoteric literature to esoteric literature, see my *Dance of Divine Love*, in the section entitled, “Symbolism in the *Rāsa Līlā*,” 175-178.

27. It is a temptation here to compare this *aiśvarya* frame of the *Gītagovinda* to the biblical context in which the *Song of Solomon* appears: What makes the *Song* a sacred song is not its literal amorous or erotic content, but its sacred context.

28. Translation is mine. My attempt here, as with much of my translation work, is to follow the unfolding sequence and rhythm of ideas in the translation of the verse as they are experienced in the original. The transliterated verse is as follows:

meghair meduram ambarai vana-
bhuvah syāmās tamāla-drumair
naktaṇi bhīrur ayāṇi tvam eva
tad imāṇi rādhe gṛhaṇi prāpaya
ittham nanda-nideśataś calitayoh
praty-adhvā-kusja-drumam
rādhā-mādhavayor jayanti
yamunā-küle rahaḥ-kelayah

29. See *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, 11. Barbara Stoler Miller acknowledges one commentator on the *Gītagovinda* who removes the identification of Nanda from the first

verse: “Caitanyadāsa explains that the words spoken by Rādhā’s friend are intended to bring joy (*nanda*); Krishna’s foster father is thus removed from any involvement with the erotic relationship between Rādhā and Krishna and is replaced by the conventional figure of the *sakhi*” (*Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda*, edited and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller [New York: Columbia University Press, 1977], 50).

30. In the original text that Miller utilized, there is no such mention of *Nanda* anywhere. However, in the Siegel translation, *Nanda* appears in Chapter 6 Verse 12, the last verse of that chapter. Interestingly, Miller’s translation only presents eleven verses in Chapter 6. I believe my argument for understanding the word *nanda* as an emotional state rather than a personal name still holds either way.

31. Miller translation. Although the specific word *nanda* is not the word that appears in Jayadeva’s refrain, both Miller and Siegel translate the word *harṣa* in the refrain as “joy.” I believe this further supports my argument for the translation of the word *nanda* in the first verse, strengthening the idea that the “heavy joy” that Krishna experiences in the climactic portion of the text is anticipated by Rādhā and Mādhava being conquered by the ways of love and Rādhā’s obedience to joy. However, the word *harṣa* constitutes an intensification of the sense of joy in the word *nanda*, conveying a strong erotic sense of climactic joy, which is absent in *nanda*. In this way, the *śringāra rasa* is not disrupted or mixed by the introduction of an element from *vātsalya rasa*, which mention of Krishna’s foster father’s name *Nanda* brings to the verse if the word was not understood otherwise.

32. This translation of the *Rāsa Līlā* first verse is taken from my *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, India’s Classic Sacred Love Story Introduced, Translated, and Illuminated* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). The transliteration of the famous first verse of the *Rāsa Līlā* is as follows:

bhagavān api tā rātrih
śāradotpulla-mallikāḥ
vīksya rantum manāś-cakre
yoga-māyām upāśritah

33. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.40. See *Dance of Divine Love*.

34. *Gitagovinda* (GG) 7.20, from *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love*, by Lee Siegel (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

35. GG 12.28, Siegel translation.

36. See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* verses 10.33.27-36. *Dance of Divine Love*, 73-76.

37. See *Gitagovinda* 12.29.

38. Siegel translation.

39. From *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda*, edited and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

40. Siegel translation.

41. *The Bhakti Sūtra*, Aphorism 24.

42. Viśvanātha’s vision of selfless love can be observed throughout his commentary, known as the *Sārārtha Darśinī*, on the *Rāsa Līlā* chapters.

43. This verse is quoted from Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.2.285-6.

44. See *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.2.299. The term *kāmānuga* refers either to the *bhakta* who is united with Krishna as the Gopīs are, or who desires to serve those Vraja Gopikās who are supremely devoted to Krishna.

45. *Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

46. In a spirit of ascetical renunciation, one sometimes finds a total denunciation of loving human relationships between men and women in marriage within Vaishnava communities. And thus the senses of *prākṛta* as “low” and “vulgar” are often invoked by both the *Bhāgavata* as well as by renounced persons. But these prominently expressed attitudes should not be understood as precluding the *sāttvika* relations possible in this world. Indeed, even in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I have shown that there are multiple instances of applying the word *premā*, and derivative related words, to human interactions with other humans, and even animals, despite the fact that the early theologians of the Caitanya school reserve the term for the highest and purest love attainable for the divine. For more on this, see my *Dance of Divine Love*.

47. There is a good amount of scholarly discussion on the nature of *kāma* in comparison to *premā*. See David Haberman's *Journey Through the Twelve Forests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 160-165; *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan*, by John Stratton Hawley in association with Shrivatsa Goswami (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 186-187; Frédérique Appel Marglin's “Types of Sexual Union and their Implicit Meanings,” especially the section entitled, “Kāma and Prema,” in *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1984), 298-315; and my extensive discussion in *Dance of Divine Love*, especially sections “Ethical Boundaries and Boundless Love” and “The Vision of Devotional Love,” 158-152.

48. See Chapters 7, 9, and 10 in the *Bhagavad Gītā* for the “I am” expressions.

49. See my *Bhagavad Gītā: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song* (New York: Harper Collins, 20007/2010), especially the section “The Secret Love Song,” 272-278.

50. See my *Bhagavad Gītā: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*, in which I argue that Krishna's *viśva-rūpa* is clearly not the climactic expression of the text. Rather, it is the eighteenth and last chapter that delivers the climactic message in the form of Krishna's secret declaration of his intense love and yearning for humans and their love and devotion.

51. See Klaus Klostermaier, “*Hṛdayavidyā*: A Sketch of a Hindu-Christian Theology of Love” (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies* [1972]), 765.

52. See “Rasa Theory,” coauthored by David Buchta and Graham M. Schweig (*Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Vol. 2, edited by Knut A. Jacobsen, 2010).

53. *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, 14.

54. *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love*, 185.

55. *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, 15.

56. Geoffrey Parrinder, *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts On File Publications, 1985 [1st pub. 1971]) 233.

57. Parrinder, *World Religions*, 233.

58. For an extensive discussion on the negative vision of women in relation to liberation and *mokṣa*-oriented practices within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, see *Tales for the Dying: The Death Narrative of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, by E. H. Rick Jarow (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). See especially the chapter entitled, “*Stri Naraka Dvāra: Woman as the Gateway to Hell*” (Chapter 5).

59. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

60. *Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

61. The word *kāma* can mean “wish,” “desire,” “longing,” “pleasure,” “enjoyment,” “love,” and “especially sexual love or sensuality.” And the word *rati* has the following meanings: “pleasure,” “enjoyment,” “delight in,” “fondness for,” “the pleasure of love,” “sexual passion or union,” and “amorous enjoyment” (*Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

62. The word *śṛigāra* is likely the derivative of the word *śṛiga*, which means “the horn of an animal,” or refers to “a horn used for various purposes (as in drinking, for blowing, drawing blood from the skin, etc.).” How this may be related to *śṛigāra* is discussed: “the horn as a symbol of self-reliance or strength or haughtiness . . . the rising of desire, excess of love or passion.” (*Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

63. *Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

64. The term *rāgānuga* refers to the advanced stage of *sādhana-bhakti* in which *bhaktas* are absorbed in appreciating and contemplating the *rāga* or “passionate” or “erotic” *rasa* exhibited within the divine *līlās*. The word *rāga* can mean “love,” “affection,” “vehement desire of,” “delight in,” etc. (*Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*).

65. *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper Collins [1956], 2000), 50.

66. *ibid.*, 50.

67. Here I am reminded of the *Metta Sutta*, which has a very similar expression of applying one’s exclusive love for a child to the love for all beings: “Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings” (*What the Buddha Taught*, by Walpola Rahula [New York: Grove Press [1959], 1974], 97). In this instance, however, much of Buddhism (and I would argue that there are a few exceptions) does not promote the exclusive side of the equation to the degree that one finds in *bhakti* traditions.

68. In my *Dance of Divine Love* I interpret the *rāsa-maṇḍala* as a great symbol of the very dance between divine love’s inclusivity and exclusivity. The divinity’s inclusive love is a more understated theme in the *Gītagovinda* as compared with the *Rāsa Līlā* in which it was a major theme. Therefore in the latter we find a heroine in the plural, more befitting a picture of the universal, inclusive love in this new definition of the “erotic.”

69. This two-sentence Upanishadic passage is unique. There is perhaps no other passage from the Upanishads that directly indicates the positive value of the love between a man and a woman, even if just to function within a metaphor in order to appreciate the

divinity's powerful embrace of souls. Note that not only the love a man has for a woman is valued, as in the phrase "a dearly loved woman," but also a woman's love for a man in the form of "a full embrace." This highlighting of the feminine is certainly a departure from the world-transcending ascetic spirit of Hindu traditions in general, as well as the kind of expression one typically finds or expects in the Upanishads.

70. To see these various stages leading up to *premā* and the various intensified forms within *premā*, see my chapter entitled, "Conclusion: *Premā*, Purest Love: *Prayojana*," in *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda*, by Tamal Krishna Goswami, Edited with Introduction and Conclusion by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200–203.