## Muddupalani (Mid-eighteenth Century)

In Nayaka and Maratha Tafijäviir, women were prominent literati. Rangdjarnma, the courtesan-wife of Vijayaräghava Nayaka, composed several virtuoso works, which also attest to her knowledge of many languages (this multilingualism was taken for granted in the courtly life of this period). A century later we find the poetess Muddupalani, a courtesan at the court of the Maratha king of Tafijäviir, Pratapa Singh (1739-63), to whom she dedicated her book, *Radhikei-santvanamu*. The work must have enjoyed a considerable popularity through the nineteenth-century, for a Telugu scholar employed by C. P. Brown, Paidipati Venkata Narusu, wrote a commentary on it. By the end of the nineteenth century, such works were, however, already proscribed by the government, driven by Victorian moral standards, as obscene.

Muddupalani's *irilgezra-kiivya—an* elaborate love-poem on the theme of Krsna's love for his new wife Ila and the consequent jealousy of his senior wife, Radha—offers a rich expression of a woman's sensibility and self-perception in the domain of sexuality. Such a focus *is* not unique to women poets of this period, since male poets, too, adopted a female voice: Ksetrayya is a major example. Muddupalani's poetry is, on the whole, very close to that of such poets, although not of the same calibre. She is interesting in her own right for the unmediated articulation of a courtesan's view of love and for the inventiveness she brought to bear upon a rather routinized Krsna-theme.

Following the model of Krsnadevaraya, Muddupalani reports that Krsna came to her in a dream as a little boy and asked her to compose this work on 'Appeasing RAdhika.' She reported her dream to her guru, Viraraghava-degika, in the company of other scholars, and they confirmed the revelation and advised her to compose the book and dedicate it to the god. Muddupalani also cleverly puts her own family genealogy in the mouths of these pandits, in the preface to her book; as a courtesan, she was reluctant to describe her family herself, as other poets usually did. It remains striking that this courtesan does possess a publicly accessible genealogy, as if she were a queen.

## How to Read a Book'

When you are reading, and you come to a thorn, pull it out. Use your knowledge to heal the book. Don't meddle with poets who make a living out of finding fault. They're bad news.

## Radha Instructs Krsna's New Bride, in the Arts of Love2

[Radha has dressed up the young bride, as Krsna waits in the bedroom.]

'How will the lips of this young girl suffer his bites? He *is* the killer of the demon Kaitabha. How will her breasts bear his clawing? He's a lion of a cowherd. Can her tender thighs take his vigour? He wrestled Cantlra to the death.

Will her smooth body survive? He's an elephant-killer.'
All the women were joking like this, and lla bowed her head in shyness, her face all red. Radhika drew close to her and offered comfort:

*Radhika-santvanamu* [Madras: Emesco, 19721 *Avatlirika* 6. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 1.65-8, 70-1, 74-6.

## 398 Classical Telugu Poetry

When your husband holds you, push him gently with your breasts. If he kisses your cheek, touch his lips with yours. When he gets on top of you, move against him from below. If he gets tired while making love, quickly take over and get on top. He's the best lover, a real connoisseur, extremely delicate. Love him skilfully, and make him love you. That's my advice. But you know best.

Loving has its own laws.' And she taught her. Then she said, 'Go quickly. The good hour is passing. Meet your lover. Don't delay.' And she led her gently to Krsna, and said to him:

Her breasts are tender as young buds. Unlike mine, they won't hold up if you claw at them. Her lips are like leaves. Mine are full-blown coral. Don't bite too hard.

My thighs are used to wrestling with you, but hers are soft as bananas.
Her whole body is a fragile vine. Mine is tough as gold. In a word, she's not me.
Not equal to you in love.

Innocent. New to the art.
You have to know how to handle her.
Do you need me to tell you?

You're good with women.

Just touch her lips with the tip of your tongue.

Don't squeeze.

Kiss her cheeks lightly.

Don't scratch.

Caress her nipples with your fingertips.

Don't crush.

Make love very very gently.

Don't be wild.

I must be crazy to talk like this.

When you and she are deeply in it,

wrestling with each other,

these rules of mine won't hold.'

Then she handed 'la over to Krsna.

But really she wanted to come too,
and held on to Ila's sari. Ila loosed her fingers:
be back soon,' she said.

And Rddha went, her mind a jumble
of misery and joy.

Lying on her bed, alone, she thought to herself:

You can give money.
You can give away your own family.
You can give your very life, that isn't easy to give up.
But to give your own husband
to another woman—what woman can do that?

By now I'm sure she's sucking at his delicious lips. Or already pounding his naked chest with her breasts. Probably moaning like doves. He's on top of her, and she's pressing against him. She's quite skilled to begin with. Maybe a bit shy, but by now he's won her over, freed her from any reticence. He's brought her close,

touched her everywhere. Taught her everything.'

She kept thinking. Tortured by love, she couldn't close her eyes. Inside her, she was burning. As for Krsna, he was busy with the girl.