This anthology presents the Messenger poems of three Indian poets from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries CE. They range from Kali·dasa’s well-loved “The Cloud Messenger” to two much later variations on the theme of separated lovers and the geography that divides them.

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Numerous more followed, including the third in the CSL selection, the sixteenth-century “Swan Messenger,” composed also in Bengal by Rupa Go·svamin, a devotee of Krishna. Here romantic and religious love combine in a poem that shines with the intensity of love for the god Krishna.

Transcribed by
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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS & JJC FOUNDATION

Sir James Mallinson translates and edits Sanskrit literature full time for the JJC Foundation, co-publishers (with NYU Press) of the Clay Sanskrit Library. He is also the translator of Budhā·svamin’s “The Emperor of the Sorcerers.”
MESSENGER POEMS

BY KĀLIDĀSA, DHOYĪ
& RŪPA GOSVĀMIN

TRANSLATED BY
SIR JAMES MALLINSON

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
JJC FOUNDATION
2006
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RUPA GO·SVAMIN
THE SWAN MESSENGER
4.1 

dalitaḥaritaśāḥ/duṣṭaharaṁ
javāṉupasāreṇī
ruci/rucirapād̐āmbujatalah,
tamālaśyāmāṅgo
daraḥsita[lī]āṅcitamukhaḥ,
par'ānandābhogah

sphuratu ṛḍi me ko 'pi puruṣah!

yadā yāto gopī
hṛdayamadano Nandalasadānān
Mukundo Gāndinyas
tanayam anuvindan Madhupurīṁ,
tad' āmāṅśīc cintā|
sarīti ghanāgarūnāparicayair
aṅgadhāyāṁ vadhā
tapayasi Rādhā virahinī.

kada cī ckhed'āgnim
vigharaṉītum antargatam asau
saḥ' ālibhir lebhe
taralita/manā Yāmunaṭāṭim.

cirād asyāś cittaṁ
paricita[kuṭur]'āvakalanād
avasthā tāstāra

sphuṭam atha suṣupteḥ priyāsakhi.

176
Wearing a gossamer shawl
that outshines crushed orpiment,
the soles of his lotus-feet
as beautiful as a bouquet of China roses,
his body as dark as a tamāla tree,
his face adorned by a playful half-smile,
embracing ultimate bliss,
May a certain person shine forth in my heart!

When Mukunda, the god of love
in the hearts of the shepherd girls,
went from Nanda’s house to Māthura
following the son of Gándini,
into the river of despair,
whose painful waters were unfathomable
by her increasingly intense agitation: massed clouds and whirlpools,
plunged the lovesick Radha.

One day, her mind restless,
she went with her friends
to Yāmuna’s banks
to quench the fire of pain within.
On seeing after so long
the hut she knew so well,
her dear friend, deep sleep,
spread out across her mind.
tadā nispand’āṅgī
kalitajalinī|pallava|kulaih,
parināhāt premṇām
aṅkuśalasaṅgarāṅkijhṛdayaih,
dṛgāmbhoigambhīrī
kṛṣtamihira|putrī|laharibhir
vilīnā dhūlinām
upari parivavre parijanaaih.

4.5 tatas tāṁ nyast’āṅgim
urasi Lalitāyah, kamalini
pālāśiḥ Kālindij
saliṣiṣiśirair vijitaṇum,
parāvṛttasaṅgaśān-
kura|calita|kaṃṭha|ṃ kalayaṭāṁ
sakhūsandohanāṁ
pramadābharajālī dhvanir abhūt.

nidhāy’ ānke paṅke|
ruha|dala|viṭaṅkasya Lalitā
tato Rādhāṃ nir’ā-
haranāsaraṇau nyasta|caraṇā,
milaṇaṃ Kālindij
pulina|bhuv hu kheḷ’āṅcita|gatiṃ
dadaī’ āgre kaṃ cīn
madhurajvirutam śvetagratam.

178
Then, her body lifeless, she melted onto the dust. Her companions, hearts fearful of a hundred calamities, crowded around her forming a forest of lotus stems, encircling her with affection and deepening the swell of the daughter of the sun with their tears.

Then her body was placed on Lálita’s bosom and fanned with lotus leaves cooled by Yâmuna’s water. A germ of breath returned and made her throat move, on seeing which all her friends gave a joyful cry.

Then Lálita put Radha on a bed of heaped lotus leaves and took a step along the path to collect water, when she saw ahead, coming along Yâmuna’s bank with playful gait, singing sweetly, a swan.
MESSENGER POEMS

tadālokaśtokāc-
chvasitaḥśdayā sādaram asau
pranāmaṁ śamsanti
laghu laghu samāśādyā saśvidham,
dhṛśōkaṇṭhā sadyo
Hariśadasi samdeśaharane
varam dūtaṁ mene
tam atilalitaṁ, hanta, Lalitā.

amarṣat premēryāṁ
sapadi dadvatī Kaṃśaṁmathane
pravṛttā haṃśāya
svam abhilaśitaṁ śaṃsitum asau.
na tasyā doso 'yaṁ
yad iha vihaṅgaṁ prārthitavatī:
na kasmin viśrambham
diṣati Hariśbhaktiṣpraṇayitā.

«pavitreṣu práyo
viracayasi toyesu vasatiṁ,
pramodāṁ nālike
vahasi, viśadātmā svayam api:
ato 'haṁ duḥkhārtā
śaraṇam abalā tvāṁ gatavatī.
na bhikṣā sat/pakṣe
vrajati hi kadā cid viphalatāṁ.

180
When the anxious Lālita saw him
her spirits lifted a little.
Uttering a respectful greeting,
she hurried up to him
and realized straightaway
that he was the best
—and oh! how lovely—
messenger for taking word
to Krishna’s house.

Straightaway she petulantly displayed
her jealousy of Krishna’s love
and started to tell the swan
of her own longing.
In such circumstances, she is not to blame
for making a request to a bird:
a yearning for the love of Hari
can make one confide in anyone.

“You mostly make your home in holy waters,
you take delight in lotus flowers
and you are spotlessly white by nature,
so, stricken by sorrow and helpless,
I come to you for refuge:
a request to someone virtuous : with good wings
is never in vain.
ciranta vismṛtya' āsmān
virahajadhanaajvalavikalh,
kalāvān śānandaṁ
vasati Mathurāyāṁ Madhuśīrupuḥ.
tad etam samdeśaṁ
sva' manasi samādhāya nikhilaṁ,
bhavān kṣipraṁ tasya
śravānāpadaviṁ sangamayatu!

nirastapratyūthaṁ
bHAVATU BHAVATO VARTMANI ŚIVAM!
samuttīṣṭha kṣipraṁ
manasi mudamādāhāya sañdayaṁ!
adhastād dhaṅvanto
lāghu lāghu samuttānaṁnayanair
bhavāntāṁ viśaṁtaṁ
kutuṅkātaralā gopaśiśavah!

kiśor'ottamso 'sau
kaṭhinaṁmatinā dānapatinaṁ
yaya niṁye tūṛṇaṁ
paśupajyuvatijīvitaṁpatih,
tayā gantavyā te
nikhilajagadeśkapraṇitaya
padavyā bhavyānaṁ,
tilaka, kila Daśārhaṁnagarī.

182
Crippled by the blazing fire of separation, we have been long forgotten by the enemy of Madhu,* who lives happily in Máthura, perfectly healthy. So, sir, please learn this entire message by heart and quickly make it reach his ears.

May your way be free from obstacles and auspicious! Rise up at once, bearing joy and pity in your heart! Running swiftly below, may the cowherds’ children, frantic with curiosity, lift up their eyes to look at you!

Following the path celebrated as unique throughout the world, by which that finest of lads, the ruler of the lives of the cowherd maidens, was quickly led by the cruel ‘lord of generosity,’* you must, o foremost among gentlemen, go to the city of the Dashárhás.
MESSENGER POEMS

galad|basp'asara
plutajdhavalagañçā mṛgadvśo
vidyante yatra
prabala|Madan'āveśajvivasāḥ,
tvaya viñjñātavyā
Hari|caranāsangajpranayino
dhrusvā sā, ca|kr'āngī
Rati|sakha, śat'āṅgasya padavi.

piban jambuṣṭyañamān
mihiraduhitur vāri madhuraḥ,
mṛṇālir bhuvājana
|hima|kara|kalākomala|rucaḥ,
ksaṇam ह्रतस tiṣṭha
nivedajvite śākhini, sakhe,
sukhena prasthānaṁ
racayatu bhavān Vṛṣṇiṇagare.

4|5 balad akrandanti
ratha|pathikam Akrūrajmitam
vidūrād |abhirī|
tatir anuyayau yena ramaṇam,
tam ādau panthānaṁ
racaya. ca|rit'ārthā bhavatu te
virājantī sarv'|ō-
pari paramahamsāṣṭhitir iyam!

184
O god of love for lady swans,
you are sure to recognize the roadway
of those who long for the touch of Hari’s feet:
along it, their pale cheeks bathed
in a downpour of dripping tears,
arrested doe-eyed girls,
whom possession by Mádana
has rendered helpless.

Drinking the sweet water,
as dark as a jujube fruit,
of the daughter of the sun,
eating lotus stems
as beautiful and soft
as the new moon,
gladly stopping
for a moment
on a tree with dense branches,
make your way to the city of the Vrishnis* in comfort, my friend.

At first, go by the path along which
crowds of cowherd ladies, wailing loudly,
followed their lover at a distance
as he traveled in the chariot with Akrúra.
May your status be confirmed
as a great saint : swan, shining forth over all!
akasmād asmākaṃ
Harir apaharann amśukaçaayaṃ
yam ārūdhho gūḍhaḥ
praṇayalahariḥ kandalayirum,
tava śrāntasyā́ntaḥ
sthagitaśravibimbah kiśalayaiḥ
kadambah, kādamba,
tvaritam avalambaḥ sa bhavitā.

kiranī lāvanyāṃ
dīśi dīśi, sikhandaṭstabakini
dadhanā sādhityah
kanakajimalaḍhyotiti/vasanam,
tamālaśyāṁṭāṅgī,
saralajmuralikutumbita|mukhī
ejagu citram yatra
prakata|param|ānanda|lahari.

taya bhūyahṣkrīḍā
rabhasa|vikasad|ballava|vadhūḥ
vapur|val|bhraśyaṇa
mṛga|mada|kaṇaṣyāmalikayā
vidhātavyo hallī-
sakadalita|mali|latikayā
samantad ullaśas
tava manasi rāsa|sthaliṣṭa|yāṃ.
Before long, o swan,
your perch when you are tired
will be that kadamba tree,
its interior hidden by leaves
from the disk of the sun,
which, to make our secret love
flow forth in waves,
Krishna climbed
after suddenly snatching all our clothes.

Beaming loveliness in every direction,
crowned with peacock feathers,
wearing a gorgeous robe
with the spotless brilliance of gold,
his body as dark as a tamala tree,
his mouth kissing a flute held level,
the wave of ultimate bliss made manifest
sang a wonderful song upon it.

Dark with the drops of musk
dripping from the tendril-like bodies
of cowherd ladies
bursting with excitement
from their exuberant play,
its jasmine creepers
crushed in the circle dance,
utter joy is sure to be produced in your mind
by the place of the rasa dance.
tadānte vāsatī
viracitam anāṅgōtsavakalā
catuḥśālam Šaureḥ
sphurati. na dṛṣau tatra vikireḥ!
tadāloko’dbhedaḥ
pramadaḥbharaḥvimaśīṣaḥkati
kriye jāte āvat
tvayi, vata, hatā gopāvanitā.

mama syād arthānāṃ
dvāraśīt iha vilambād yad api te,
vilokethāḥ sarvaṃ
tad api Hariśkelisthalam idam,
tav’ āyaṃ na vyartaḥ
bhavatu śucitā. kaḥ sa hi, sakhe,
guṇo yaś Caṇḍaḥ
dniṣṭī matīṇiveśāya na bhavet?

sakṛḍvamśīṇādaḥ
śravaṇaṃśūbhāraṃvanitāḥ
rahāḥkrīḍāsākṣi,
pratipadālatāśadmaṣṣābhagah
sa dhenūnāṃ bandhūr
Madhūmathanaḥkaṭāyitaśīlaḥ,
karisyaty ānandaṃ
sapadi tava Govardhanagiriḥ.

188
Nearby stands Krishna's love pavilion,
fashioned from mādhavi creepers.
You must not cast your eyes upon it—
the excessive joy that bursts forth on seeing it
will make you forget
that you have a journey to make
and, alas, the cowherd women will die!

But, even though your lingering there
might thwart my aims,
you should look all around
that place where Hari sported
lest this purity of yours
go to waste, my friend,
for what is a virtue if it does not lead
to the mind's entry into Krishna?

Witness to the secret love-play
of cowherd ladies gathered
on hearing a single strain of the flute,
delightfully covered in huts made of creepers,
friend to the cows,
its rocks made his bed by Krishna,
Mount Go-vardhana will instantly make you happy.
tam ev' adriṣṭa cakr'āti-
kitaikara pariṣvagairasikaṁ
mahīcakre śānke-
mahi śikharināṁ śekharataya.
ajñātiṁ jñātināṁ
Harihayāṁ yaḥ paribhavan
yath'ārtham svamāṁ nāma
vyadhita bhuvi 'govardhana iti.'
tamālaśyā alokād
giriparīsare santi capalāṁ
pulindyo Govinda|
smaranārabhas'ōttapta'vapuṣaḥ.
śanais tāpaṁ tāsāṁ
kṣaṇam apanayan yāsyati bhavān
avaśyaṁ Kālindī
salilāśiraiḥ pākṣapavaiḥ.
tadānte Śrīkānta|
smarasamaraghāṭṭipulakita
ekadambānāṁ vāti
rasikāparipātim sphuṭayati.
tvam āśīnas tasyāṁ
na yadi parīto nandasi, tato
babhūva vyarthā te
ghanātāsā'ṇiveśā'vyasanītā.
THE SWAN MESSENGER

We believe that mountain,
which delights in the touch
of the hand marked with the discus,
to be the best of all peaks in the world.
Conquering Indra, the enemy of his kin,
he made his name, ‘the increaser of cows,’
appropriate on earth.

When they see the tamāla tree,
the bodies of the skittish tribal ladies
around the mountain overheat
with the ardor of their remembrance of Govinda.
On your way, you must, for a moment,
gently remove their fever
with the breeze from your wings,
cooled by Yāmuna’s waters.

Nearby is a grove of kadāmba trees
which, thrilled at the aggressive love-play of Krishna,
is showing the progression of the stages of being a lover.
If, on perching there, you are not overjoyed,
your fondness for indulging in deep emotions : plunging
into deep water
will have been in vain.
MESSENGER POEMS

4.25 śaraṇa|megha|śrenī|
pratibhaṭaṃ Arīṣṭāśura|śīraś
cirāṃ śūkṣaṃ Vṛṇḍā-
vanaparirśe drakṣyati bhavān,
yad āroḍhaṃ dūrān
milati kila Kailāśa|śikharī|
bhram|ākrānta|śvānto
Giri|āṣaḥ|ṛtīḥ|ṛtīḥ kīt|karaigaṇāḥ.

ruvan yāhi svairam:
carama|daśāyā cumbita|ruco
nitambīnyo Vṛṇḍā-
vanābhuvi, sakhe, santi bahavaḥ.
parāvartisyante
tulita|Murajin|ṁ|ṁ|ṁpuṛaṇavāt
tava dhvānāt tāsāṁ,
bahir api gatāḥ, kṣipram asavaḥ.

tvam asināḥ śakhi|ān-
tara|militi|caṇḍa|tviṣi sukhaṃ
dadhīthā Bhāṇḍire
kṣaṇam api ghanā|śyāmala|rucau,
tato hamsam bibhran
nikhila|nabhasa|ca kraTHINGayā
sa vardhisnuṁ Viṣṇuṁ
kalita|dara|ca kraṇa|m tulayiṭā.

192
Looking like a mass of autumn clouds,
you will see the skull of the demon Arishta,
long since dried up,
on the outskirts of Vrinda-vana.
Indeed, a band of Kubéra’s attendants*
has come from afar to climb it,
under the mistaken impression
that it is Mount Kailása.

Call freely as you go, friend:
there are lots of broad-hipped ladies
in the region of Vrinda-vana
whose beauty has been kissed
by a condition approaching death.
At your call,
which is like the sound of Krishna’s anklets,
their life-breaths, though departed,
will quickly return.

Perched for just a moment
on cloud-dark Bhandíra,*
the fearsome sun
filtering through his branches,
you will be happy,
and he, bearing a swan,
will look like Vishnu,
conch and discus in hand,
growing larger in his desire
to traverse the entire sky.
MESSENGER POEMS

tvam aṣṭabhīr netair
vigaladāmalā/premā/salair
muhuḥ siktaṣṭambhāṁ, catura, caturāṣṭrutāḥ/bhuvam
jhīthā vikhyātāṁ.
sphuṭaṁ iha bhavad/bāndhava/rathaṁ
pravishaṁ maṃsyante
vidhim aṭāvī/DEVyas tvayi gate.

udaṅcan/netṛ'āmbhaḥ
prasaralahaṛ/picchilā/patha
skhalatpāda/nyāsa
prāṇiḥita/vilamb'ākula/dhiyāḥ
Harau yasmin magne
tvarita/Yamunā/kūlāgamanā| sprh"ākṣiptā gopyo
yayur anupadāṁ kāṁ api daśām
4.30 muhur/āasya/kriḍā
tramada/miladā/hopuruṣikā
vikāśena bhrāṣṭaṁ
phāṇi/maṇi/kulaṁ dhūmala/rucau,
puras tasmin nipaṁ
druma/kusuma/kīṇjālka/surabhau
tvayā punye peyam
madhum daṇḍa Kāliya/hrade.
Its pillars wet with the tears of pure affection
dripping steadily from his eight eyes,
you should, o clever one, visit the famous pavilion
where four-faced Brahma sings songs of praise.
When you leave, the goddesses of the forest
will think that the creator,
whose chariot is your kinsman,
must have entered within.

When Hari dived into Káliya’s pool,
the cowherd girls were seized by the urge
to rush to Yámana’s banks.
Waves of tears welling up and flooding forth
made the path slippery,
and when they lost their footing
the delay made them distraught;
with every step their condition
went further beyond words.
The sacred pool has a purple hue
from the many jewels
that fell from Káliya’s hooded heads
while Krishna, showing his joy and heroism,
playfully danced on them over and over again,
and it is fragrant with the filaments of
flowers from kadámba trees.
You must drink its sweet water first of all.

4.30
Sanskrit messenger poems evoke the pain of separated sweethearts through the formula of an estranged lover pleading with a messenger to take a message to his or her beloved. The plea includes a lyrical description of the route the messenger will take, as well as the message itself.

In the fifth century CE, Sanskrit’s finest poet, Kali·dasa, composed “The Cloud Messenger.” The beautiful and pure expression of an exiled lover’s longing is among the best known and most treasured of all Sanskrit poems.

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