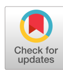

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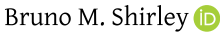

Beyond the masculinity of kingship: The making of a modern queen in early second millennium Sri Lanka

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Abstract
Modern historians have repeatedly cast Sri Lanka's historical female monarchs as 'queens', without critically reflecting on the conceptual limits and nuances of that term. Through a close examination of sources from the early second millennium, and their reception by scholars from the colonial period onwards, I demonstrate that Sri Lanka's female monarchs—particularly Līlāvatī of Poḷonnaruva (r. 1197–1200, 1209, and 1210)—engaged in a more creative and subversive performance of gender than modern 'queenship' allows. In particular, I argue, a discourse of kingship's inherent masculinity, advanced in literary and didactic texts written primarily by male monastics, was too-willingly accepted by colonial-period scholars. Closer attention to the material evidence of Līlāvatī's reign, however, challenges this discourse and further suggests a politics of gender beyond the binary.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; kingship; masculinity; gender; colonial-modernity

Introduction

The colonial roots of modern Asian Studies are well established. It is hardly controversial to claim that colonial-era scholarship on Asia was driven by a colonial agenda and so reflected colonial assumptions about the rightful ordering of the world; it is perhaps slightly more controversial to suggest that these assumptions have continued to haunt modern scholarship.[1] Such hauntings are particularly apparent in scholarly

[1] See, perhaps most influentially, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). On colonial-era European studies of premodern South Asia specifically, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions, or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), Chapter 5; Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: 'Hinduism' and the study of Indian religions, 1600–1776* (Halle: Franckeschen Stiftungen, 2003); Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Rosane Rocher, 'Sanskrit for civil servants 1806–1818', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 122, no. 2, 2002, pp. 381–390; Anand Venkatkrishnan, 'Skeletons in the Sanskrit closet', *Religion Compass*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2021, e12396; and the essays in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The study of Buddhism under colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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treatments of sexuality and gender, which have long projected colonial-modern understandings of these categories onto Asian bodies and into Asian pasts.[2] Colonial scholars sought to make sense of their imperial subjects through the lenses of their own regulatory regimes,[3] and simultaneously to confirm the validity of those lenses through the data—textual, philological, and ethnographic—extracted from the colonies.

The past decades have witnessed a sustained effort by modern scholars to confront and dismantle the legacies of this colonialist project of patriarchal gender binarism. This is particularly true for scholars of modern and early modern Asia, where the impact of colonial intervention is hardly escapable. Such critical introspection is, however, relatively uncommon among scholars of pre-colonial South Asia.[4] We have reassured ourselves, perhaps, that since our field of study by definition predates colonial modernity, we have escaped its legacy and so need not concern ourselves with it. This position is, however, both theoretically untenable and empirically detrimental. The study of premodern South Asia is thoroughly enmeshed with the colonial project in which it was born and is still marked by the assumptions made by those early colonial scholars.

This is particularly true, I argue, when it comes to understanding premodern configurations of gender and power. I demonstrate this with reference to a single sustained case study: the reign of the Sri Lankan monarch Līlāvatī, who ruled from Poḷonnaruva

[2]See, particularly, Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's History of sexuality and the colonial order of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). Asia is by no means unique in this regard; see parallel insights from, respectively, Pacific, American, and African Studies: Elizabeth Kerekere, 'Part of the Whānau: The emergence of Takatāpui identity', PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2017; María Lugones, 'Gender and universality in colonial methodology', *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 8, no. 1–2, 2020, pp. 25–47; Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[3]This terminology is taken from Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality*, (trans.) Robert Hurley, 3 vols (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), vol. 1. For an important correction to Foucault's idealistic understanding of premodern European regimes of gender, see Leah DeVun, *The shape of sex: Nonbinary gender from genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

[4]There are notable exceptions: scholars who have, indeed, directly and explicitly confronted the colonial legacy of patriarchal gender binarism in classical South Asian Studies. These include, but are not limited to, Daud Ali, 'Regimes of pleasure in early India: A genealogy of practice at the Cola Court', PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1996; Alice Collett, 'Buddhism and gender: Reframing and refocusing the debate', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2006, pp. 55–84; Shane Gannon, 'Exclusion as language and the language of exclusion: Tracing regimes of gender through linguistic representations of the "eunuch"', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 1, January 2011, pp. 1–27; Kashi Gomez, 'Sanskrit and the labour of gender in early modern South India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 1, January 2023, pp. 167–194; Sarah Pierce Taylor, 'The [mis]recognition of the wife in Sanskrit drama', presentation, Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin at Madison, October 2022. Tibetan Studies seems to be particularly trail-blazing: see, for example, Amy Langenberg, 'On reading Buddhist vinaya: Feminist history, hermeneutics, and translating women's bodies', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 88, no. 4, 2020, pp. 1121–1153; Alison Melnick, 'Beyond the recovery of women: The evolving study of gender in Tibetan Buddhism', *Religion Compass*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2020, e12287. Although geographically beyond the (modern) area of 'South Asia', Ashley Thompson provides a substantial engagement, on gendered lines, with Pollock's theory of Sanskrit, culture, and power: Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist state: Territory, sovereignty and sexual difference in the inventions of Angkor* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 174–188.

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from 1197–1200, in 1209, and again in 1210.[5] From the colonial period onwards, modern scholars have consistently used the title 'queen' to describe Līlāvatī—and the period's other female monarch Kalyāṇavatī (r. 1202–1208)—a label which prima facie would appear to be perfectly innocuous.[6] A closer inspection of the sources available from Līlāvatī's reign, however, suggests a far more complicated and nuanced politics of gender at work in medieval Sri Lanka. A dominant discourse imagined 'kingship' (*rājya*) to be inherently 'masculine' (*puruṣatva*).[7] This particular ideology of kingly masculinity was, unlike the obvious parallel of celibate monastic masculinity,[8] decidedly hetero-patriarchal: it was largely performed through relations *with* women and was not imagined to be performable *by* women. The (nominal) femininity of monarchs like Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī, therefore, would seem to pose a problem, one which necessitated (as I document below) creative responses.[9] Yet this creativity appears to have been entirely overlooked by modern scholars, who accepted instead only the discourse of kingship's inherent masculinity with no further room for such nuances.

The first part of this article lays out, in general terms, the 'masculinity of kingship' as revealed primarily in literary and didactic texts of the period. I demonstrate that 'to

[5]Regnal dating is contested; I follow Puñchi Baṇdhāra Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya* (Colombo: Cultural Department, 1994).

[6]See, for example, Alastair Gornall and Justin Henry, 'Beautifully moral: Cosmopolitan issues in medieval Pāli literary theory', in *Sri Lanka at the crossroads of history*, (eds) Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 89; Amaradasa Liyanagamage, 'The decline of Polonnaruva and the rise of Dambadeniya (circa 1180–1270 A.D.)', PhD thesis, University of London, 1963, p. 11; Sumana Saparamadu, 'The Sinhalese language and literature of the Polonnaruva period', in *The Polonnaruva period: A special issue of the Ceylon Historical Journal*, (ed.) S. D. Saparamadu, 3rd English edn (Colombo: Tisara Press, 1954), p. 111; Alan Strathern, 'Sri Lanka in the long early modern period: Its place in a comparative theory of second millennium Eurasian history', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, July 2009, pp. 835, n. 77; Keith Taylor, 'The devolution of kingship in twelfth century Ceylon', in *Explorations in early Southeast Asian history: The origins of Southeast Asian statecraft*, (eds) Kenneth R. Hall and John K. Whitmore (Michigan: The University of Michigan Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1979), p. 283. In modern Sinhala-language scholarship, Līlāvatī is called *räjana* or *räjiṇa*: see, for example, Ē. Lagamuva, *Madhyakālīna Rājadhāniya Poḷonnaruva*, 4th edn (Nugegoda: Sarasavi Publishers, 2021), p. 41; Sirimal Ranwella, *Māyā Raṭa Itihāsaya [History of the Māyā country]* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Publishers, 2016), p. 15; Sannasgala, *Siṃhala Sāhityavaṃśaya*, p. 134.

[7]Early second millennium Sri Lanka was intensely multilingual, and these terms (as cognates or loanwords) were varyingly deployed in Sanskrit-, Pali-, Sinhala- (both *eḷu*, 'pure', and Sanskritized dialects) and Tamil-language discourses. For clarity I provide only the Sanskrit variants in-text (so *mahiṣī* instead of Pali *mahesī* or Sinhala *mehesun*), except when attending to the specifics of Sinhala phrasing or in cases where no clear Sanskrit alternative is attested (such as the Sinhala title *bisōva*).

[8]On models of masculinity in Buddhist contexts, see the essays in Megan Bryson and Kevin Buckelew (eds), *Buddhist masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); most saliently, Stephen C. Berkwitz, 'Men of virtue: Reexamining the Bodhisattva king in Sri Lanka', in ibid., pp. 78–102.

[9]It is impossible to judge the extent to which any individual monarch was personally involved in the cultural production of their court. This may be particularly true for Līlāvatī, given that all three of her reigns were supported by powerful military leaders. However, I am unwilling to efface her agency, or at least the potential for her agency, on the *possibility* that she was less involved than her masculine counterparts in decision-making, courtly affairs, and cultural production. No monarch was an island, regardless of their gender; when I speak of 'Līlāvatī' doing or saying X, let it therefore be understood that I am referring to Ali's 'manifestly complex agent' constituted by both the monarch herself *and* her courtiers: Daud Ali, *Courtly culture and political life in early medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5.

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be a king' was positioned by these sources as a particular practice of masculinity, one that necessitated certain hetero-patriarchal relationships with 'women'. In the second part I lay out Poḷonnaruva's complex schema of 'queenly' titles, and demonstrate that these all necessarily referred to what we would call queens *consort*, not queens regnant.[10] Together, these sections make the case that no single title in medieval Sri Lanka appeared to adequately describe the phenomenon of a woman in power—calling into question our common practice of referring to monarchs like Līlāvatī as 'queens'.

The third and fourth sections turn to the figure of Līlāvatī as a case study in how nominally feminine monarchs negotiated the rigid bifurcation of masculine kingship from consortial queenship. I show that the modern reception of Līlāvatī as a 'queen' represents a selective reading of only one strategy of negotiation—that favoured by the monastic chronicles. But material evidence from Līlāvatī's court, I suggest in the fourth part, presents an alternative strategy. It appears that—in certain media and in certain circumstances—Līlāvatī claimed for herself the supposedly masculine title of *rājan*—'king'—in place of these various consortial titles: a crafting of kingship more ambiguously gendered. Attentiveness to these claims, I suggest, moves us beyond the mere 'masculinity of kingship' into a more nuanced relationship between 'gender' and 'power'.

This nuance, I argue by way of conclusion, was flattened by the readings of colonial-modern scholars. The three most influential nineteenth-century accounts of Līlāvatī's reign—those of George Turnour, Edward Knighton, and James Tennent—all seem to ignore this material evidence in favour of only a shallow reading of monastic literary sources. Read through a decidedly Victorian lens, these scholars reiterated and reified the discourse of kingship's inherent masculinity found in textual sources, presenting an interpretation of Līlāvatī's reign that continues to haunt modern scholarship and popular history alike. These hauntings are not mere academic pedantry; in Sri Lanka and beyond, there are very modern stakes in the interpretation of the medieval past.[11] To engage with Sri Lanka's premodern past, I suggest, necessitates that we confront and exorcize such colonialist interpretations, lest we inadvertently further their agenda.

[10]The English language distinguishes between women who exercise royal power—'queens regnant'—from women who are only *associated* with such power by marriage or maternity: 'queens consort' married to ruling kings; 'queens regent' ruling on behalf of a minor; and 'queens dowager' who were the wives of former kings and who keep the title out of courtesy. 'King', meanwhile, almost always refers to a man exercising royal power, while non-ruling consorts are usually given the lower-ranked title 'prince' to clarify their position. Theresa Earenfight has argued that this language serves to '[call] attention to the presumed anomaly of female political power' in order to 'subordinate it' (to male power), and—as is the case for medieval Lanka—'obscures the reality of women's rule'. Theresa Earenfight, 'Without the persona of the prince: Kings, queens and the idea of monarchy in late medieval Europe', *Gender and History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2007, p. 1.

[11]For such stakes in Sri Lanka, see Nira Wickramasinghe, *Producing the present: History as heritage in post-war patriotic Sri Lanka* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2012). More generally, see Mary R. Rambaran-Olm, M. Breann Leake and Micah James Goodrich, 'Medieval studies: The stakes of the field', *Postmedieval*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1 December 2020, pp. 356–370.

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Manly kings, submissive queens

In this first section I document the hetero-patriarchal binary evident in the literary and didactic sources available to our historical actors. Such sources are not merely *products* of courtly culture; they were constitutive of it, in that they laid out 'norms of behaviour [which] formed important "socialising" or "integrating" mechanisms for the ruling classes of medieval society'.[12] Genres like courtly poetry and inscriptional eulogies alike reproduce 'exemplary' performances of specific social roles, which serve as models for re-enactment and reinstatement by living persons—who then, in turn, may create or inspire the production of future creative works. When we turn to the literary and didactic works available to Poḷonnaruva's monarchs—the works which effectively demonstrate how to be an exemplary monarch—we see an explicit and overwhelming concern with the regulation of gender's intersection with power: kings embody, and exercise their power through, explicitly 'masculine' (*puruṣatva*) traits, while women appear almost exclusively as objects of heterosexual desire.[13]

Literary theory (*sāhitya-śāstra*, sometimes called *alaṅkāra-śāstra*) from early second millennium Sri Lanka, which enjoined radically different treatments of men (particularly royal men) and women, offers us a particularly vivid illustration of kingship's assumed masculinity.[14] The *Siyabaslakara*, one of the earliest works of Sinhala literary theory, tells us that kings, even villainous kings, ought to be praised for their virility (*vīrya*) and bravery (*śaurya*).[15] The *rasa* (aesthetic mood) most suited for descriptions of these kings is, appropriately, the *vīra-rasa*, often translated as 'the Heroic' but more

[12] Ali, *Courtly culture*, p. 8.

[13] An increasing body of literature warns us to be cautious about identifying 'gender', let alone specific 'genders' such as masculinity, in historical contexts disconnected from these concepts' European genealogies: see Bruno M. Shirley, 'Thematic overview: Gender', in *Encyclopedia of the global Middle Ages* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2022). None of our medieval languages had a single word that we can simply substitute for 'gender'. Even in modern Sinhala, theorists are divided over the most conceptually accurate translation; Chamila Somirathna, for example, suggests *samājaliṃgikatvaya* (lit. 'being socially marked') over the more common *strīpuruṣabhāvaya* ('being female [or] male'): Chamila Somirathna, 'Vēdikāva Mata Raṅgapǟma Saha Säbǟ Lōkaya Tuḷa Raṅgapäma: Edirivīra Saraccandragē *Manamē* Saha Juḍit Baṭlargē Samājaliṃgikatva Rangakriyākārī Nyāya [Performance on the stage and performance in the real world: Edirivīra Saraccandra's *Manamē* and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity]', unpublished article under review. However, in our specific historical context I suggest that there *are* social categories—respectively, *puruṣa* for 'men' and *strī* for 'women'—which represent strong analogues for our modern 'genders', and which therefore benefit from critical consideration through the lens of modern gender theory.

[14] On 'how fundamentally the social grounds Sanskrit literary theory', see Sheldon Pollock, 'The social aesthetic and Sanskrit literary theory', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 1/2, 2001, p. 199; on the gendered nature of Sanskrit itself, see Gomez, 'Sanskrit and the labour of gender', particularly p. 171. Of course, the social worlds imagined by literary theorists (in Sanskrit or in Sinhala) should not be taken as reflective of historical reality; but by examining the idealized visions of reality they present, we have the opportunity to ask *which* ideals and of *whom*.

[15] 'Lineage, virility, bravery, knowledge of *śāstras*; having praised the enemy king for these, speaking of the Lord's victory over them captures one's mind' (*vas vära suru gatä vaṇā saturu rajanu du | dinīmen ovunisuru da kiyatnu managani tamā*): Vī. Ḍī. Es. Guṇavardhana (ed.), *Siyabaslakara Dīpanī* (Colombo: Samayavardhana, 2003), v. 1:30. It is worth noting that the *Siyabaslakara*'s author seems to frame these as decidedly *kingly* virtues; in the *Kāvyādarśa*, the earlier Sanskrit text which the *Siyabaslakara* otherwise closely follows, there is no mention of 'the enemy's' kingly status: *vaṃśavīryaśrutādīni varṇayitvā ripor api | tajjayān nāyakotkarṣakathanaṃ ca dhinoti naḥ*: Premacandra Tarkabāgīsā (ed.), *The Kāvyādarśa of Śrī Daṇḍin*

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literally 'the Virile'. This virility ought to be expressed through military conquests, the patronage of public rituals, and generous giving of alms—the first two of these activities were generally available only to normative men.[16] And descriptions of such virile, brave kings are rife in the literary works of early second millennium Lanka. This is particularly true of depictions of the Buddha as royalty, either in his youth in Suddhodhana's court or in earlier lives as a king in his own right. The *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, for example, calls the young prince Siddhartha both 'greatly strong' and 'with a body pleasing in youth'.[17] Other kings are praised in the same work for their martial prowess:

> Then the king (Paṇḍu)—like the king of lions, fearless [even] having seen the greatest of elephants enter the door of his cave—approached that [enemy] king who was approaching his (Paṇḍu's) own city, overwhelming him (the enemy) with the great flood of [his] immeasurable force.[18]

And for their piety (*śraddha*):

> Carrying on this custom, these and other Lords of the Earth—led by Buddhadasa and pleasingly adorned with the extraordinary virtues of piety and generosity—venerated the Relic of the Buddha's Tooth in many ways.[19]

The literary king, in other words, was a dynamic and heroic figure, 'to be praised not just for the religious virtues he embodies—e.g. generosity, wisdom, loving-kindness, etc., but especially for the beauty of his physical appearance and of his female subjects, which in turn serve as indices to his own attractive form'.[20]

Literary queens, in contrast, are dutiful and submissive appendages, intended to further exemplify the glory of their respective kings—and, of course, to provide their

(Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1863), v. 1:22. On the importance of the *Siyabaslakara*, and its relationship to the *Kāvyālaṅkāra*, see Charles Hallisey, 'Works and persons in Sinhala literary culture', in *Literary cultures in history: Reconstructions from South Asia*, (ed.) Sheldon Pollock (California: University of California Press, 2003). On the translation of *vīrya* as 'virility', see Kathryn Hansen, 'Heroic modes of women in Indian myth, ritual and history: The Tapasvini and the Virangana', *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, vol. 2, 1992, p. 1.

[16] The *Siyabaslakara* gives us the following verse to illustrate the Virile mood: 'Having not claimed land and sea, having not performed great sacrifices, having not given manifold alms—in what way am I "king"?' (*nodänä saha sayuru deraṇa nokärä mahahunan | nopavatvā mahat dan mihipal vanem ma kesē*), *Siyabaslakara*, v. 2:277. The *Kāvyālaṅkāra* parallel is v. 2:282, with an explanation in v. 2:283.

[17] *yathattha-Siddhatthakumāranāmako mahabbalo yobbanahāriviggaho*…: Thomas William Rhys Davids (ed.), '*Dāṭhāvaṃsa*', *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 1, 1884, v. 1:29.

[18] *karivaram atha disvā so guhādvārayātaṃ paṭibhayarahitatto sīharājā va rājā | nijanagarasamīpāyātam etaṃ narindaṃ amitabalamahoghen' ottharanto 'bhiyāyi, Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 4:2. The author's own commentary glosses *bala* (more literally 'power') as *sena* ('army'); I have used 'force' in my translation above to suggest both meanings.

[19] *cārittam etam itare pi pavattayantā te Buddhadāsapamukhā vasudhādhināthā | saddhādayādhikaguṇābharaṇābhirāmā taṃ sakkariṃsu bahudhā jinadantadhātuṃ, Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 5:68.

[20] Stephen C. Berkwitz, 'Strong men and sensual women in Sinhala Buddhist poetry', in *Religious boundaries for sex, gender, and corporeality*, (eds) Alexandra Cuffel, Ana Echevarria and Georgios Halkias (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p. 65.

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husbands with male heirs.[21] In *practice*, of course, this was not necessarily reflective of reality, in which royal consorts were almost certainly engaged in degrees of co-rulership, 'as part of a greater symbiosis of power and performance'.[22] But on the level of *theory*, our (primarily male monastic) literati understood, and therefore depicted, women as mere objects of manly actions and desires. The literary theorist Ratnaśrījñāna explains, for example, that we can distinguish the literary ornament *preyas* (platonic affection) from the Erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) *rasa* primarily by the gender of the object of affection:

> In the previous ornament *preyas*, happiness and satisfaction were shown with a man (*puruṣa*) as their object. What is given as the following example is pleasure and passion with a woman (*strī*) as their object: a particular state which is the birthplace of the Erotic *rasa*…[23]

In the world of high literature, men may be objects of admiration, but only women were to be depicted as objects of sensual desire.[24] This advice seems to have been heeded well by Poḷonnaruva's poets: compare, for example, the respective introductions of the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*'s co-protagonists, Danta and Hemamālā, who together safely bring the titular tooth-relic to Lanka:

> The prince named Danta, son of the infinitely great King Ujjeni, dedicated to faith from his youth, approached the city of that king (Guhasīva of Kaliṅga) to worship the bodily relic of the Ten-Powered One.

[21]There is a strong parallel here to Doran's description of Tang harem politics, in which 'The virtuous woman is defined as one who rules only in the minority or incapacity of the legitimate male authority and one who places the interests of the Imperial patriline above her own. Appropriate investment in the system includes fulfilment of the roles of both virtuous mother and dutiful wife': Rebecca Doran, *Transgressive typologies: Constructions of gender and power in early Tang China*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monographs 103 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), p. 54.

[22]John Strong, 'Toward a theory of Buddhist queenship: The legend of Asandhimittā', in *Constituting communities: Theravada Buddhism and the religious cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, (eds) John Clifford Holt, Jacob N. Kinnard and Jonathan S. Walters (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 18. See further, on 'co-rulership' in medieval Europe, Katrin Sjursen, 'The war of the two Jeannes and the role of the duchess in lordship in the fourteenth century', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 51, no. 1, 30 October 2015, pp. 4–40; see further the extensive and excellent work of Theresa Earenfight, particularly Earenfight, 'Without the persona of the prince'.

[23]*prāk preyasyalaṅkāre prītistuṣṭiḥ puruṣaviṣayā darśitā. yā punariyamanattaram udāhṛtā, sā tviyaṃratiḥ strīviṣayānuraktiḥ bhāvaviśeṣaḥ śṛṅgārarasayonis…*: Anantalal Thakur and Upendra Jha (eds), *Kāvyalakṣaṇa of Daṇḍin (also known as Kāvyādarśa): With commentary called Ratnaśrī of Ratnaśrījñāna* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1957), commentary on v. 2:279. Ratnaśrījñāna was certainly born in Lanka, but spent most of his career in northern India, possibly Kashmir, and his inclusion here as representative of 'Lankan' thought could reasonably be challenged. See, for biographical details, Sheldon Pollock, 'Ratnaśrījñāna', in *Encyclopaedia of Indian wisdom: Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri felicitation volume*, (ed.) Ramkaran Sharma (Delhi, Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 2005), pp. 637–643; Dragomir Dimitrov, *The legacy of the jewel mind. On the Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhalese works by Ratnamati: A philological chronicle (Phullalocanavaṃsa)* (Napoli: Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo, Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', 2016); cf. Alastair Gornall, 'Ratnamati et Ses Œuvres', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 103, no. 1, 2017, pp. 475–491.

[24]See further Pollock, 'The social aesthetic', p. 212.

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That prince, the abode of all virtues, having pleased that Lord of Kaliṅga through the production of virtue, dwelt [there] giving praise in various great ways and daily venerating the Well-Gone's relic.

The daughter of Guhasīva was named Hemamālā: whose eyes were blossoming water-lilies; whose gait was that of the swan-maiden (Śrī); by whose appearance the lotus was conquered; who bore lovely braided hair; whose body was laden down by [the weight of her] breasts.[25]

We might excuse the poet for dwelling on Hemamālā's hair as foreshadowing the later plot, in which the titular tooth-relic would be hidden in her curls. But no other part of this description was necessitated by the plot, and the stock tropes—which, again, are explicitly theorized as heteronormatively erotic—stand in stark contrast to the pious depiction of her husband-to-be in the preceding paragraphs. Elsewhere royal women are literally reduced to the level of mere decorations: among the many pleasures of kingly life that the Buddha forsakes to become an ascetic, the *Jinālaṅkara* tells us that his body was 'marked with excellent marks, ornamented with divine ornaments, and resplendent with similar[ly ranked] queens'.[26] Early second millennium literary works, in other words, tended overwhelmingly to treat royal women as a means for glorifying the Great Men with whom they shared the page.

These literary works illuminate, particularly brightly, the hard distinctions between royal masculinity and royal femininity, and therefore between the social performances expected of royal men and royal women. These starkly differing expectations would have been sources of considerable tension for Poḷonnaruva's two female monarchs, Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī, who, like any monarch, must have been anxious to provide a satisfactory performance of kingship. This tension, I will suggest in the following section, was perhaps most evident in the problem of royal titles. When the masculinity of kingship was, as I have discussed in this section, so universally taken for granted, (how) could female regnancy be accommodated in the conceptual vocabulary?

Kings by any other name

In this section I turn to the wide variety of titles applied to Poḷonnaruva's noblewomen. These titles, I argue, were deployed in consistent and meaningful ways, even if we cannot always reconstruct the patterns of use. Crucially, I argue that all of the grammatically feminine 'equivalent' titles that we typically translate as 'queen' were only ever used in practice to refer to royal *consorts*, not to women ruling in their own right. These titles were not interchangeable variants on a universal concept

[25]*agaṇitamahimass' Ujjenirañño tanūjo purimavayasi yevāraddhasaddhābhiyogo | dasabalatanudhātaṃ pūjituṃ tassa rañño puravaram upayāto Dantanāmo kumāro || guṇajanitapasādaṃ taṃ kaliṅgādhināthaṃ nikhilaguṇanivāso so kumāro karitvā | vividhamahavidhānaṃ sādhu sampādayanto avasi sugatadhātuṃ anvahaṃ vandamāno || abhavi ca Guhasīvassāvanīsassa dhītā vikacakuvalayakkhī haṃsakantābhiyātā | vadanajitasarojā hāridhammillabhārā kucabharanamitaṅgī Hemamālābhidhānā: Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, vv. 4:7–9.

[26]*sulakkhaṇe h'eva 'bhilakkhitaṅgo pasādhito devapasādhanena | virocamāno samarājinīhi*…: James Gray (ed.), *Jinālaṅkāra or 'Embellishments of the Buddha' by Buddharakkhita* (London: Pali Text Society, 1981), v. 84.

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of queenship; they had very specific meanings, which denoted women's places within a hetero-patriarchal hierarchy of femininities.

This concept draws on Connell's arguments that genders are both plural and hierarchical.[27] Writing in relation to masculinities, she argues that,

> To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, domination and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity.[28]

Similar gender politics, I suggest, was at work within the *femininities* of Poḷonnaruva's nobility.[29] To be clear, the women I discuss here are all very much 'elite' and racial or (writ-large) class hierarchies did not distinguish them.[30] This does not mean, however, that there were no stakes in their own articulations and performances of difference. Such stakes are very apparent when we look to more global studies of queen-consorts. While some polygamous courts were singly ranked, those in South Asia typically contained strict internal hierarchies of consorts, and,

> The ranking and etiquette between these women, the introduction of new and junior brides to the household, and the king's attentions to particular wives, not to mention the other women and attendants of these women, were all serious matters, which formed themes not only of numerous courtly dramas, but also the prescriptive literature.[31]

[27]Connell's analysis is nuanced, and spans works and decades. In a relatively recent work, co-authored with Messerschmidt, she reaffirms that 'The fundamental feature of the concept remains the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities.' R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept', *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, p. 846.

[28]R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 37.

[29]I am far from the first to apply Connell's 'masculinities' to 'femininities'. See, for example, Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, 'Asian American women and racialized femininities: "Doing" gender across cultural worlds', *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, February 2003, pp. 33–53. Pyke and Johnson have been criticized on the grounds that their intersection approach may '…obscure the subordination of white women in the gender order and…deny that racialized femininities might actually empower racial and ethnic minority women in a way that white femininities do not for white women': Mimi Schippers, 'Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony', *Theory and Society*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1 March 2007, p. 89. I am sympathetic to Schipper's desire to foreground the overall subordination of 'women' to 'men', and to her invocation of Butler in service of that desire. However, I do not agree that acknowledging intra-feminine hierarchies, such as Pyke and Johnson's racial hierarchy, must obscure intra-gendered hierarchy; these are not necessarily 'competing concerns', in the language of bell hooks, *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), p. 35.

[30]It would be highly desirable to extend the analysis of this hierarchy into non-elite women, and so consider the royal household in a far more comprehensive manner than is allowed by a myopic focus on royalty alone. However, there is a lamentable paucity of evidence for the activities and agencies of non-elite women in premodern Sri Lanka. Careful reading of that evidence which *is* available might well offer valuable insights, but this would be a significant undertaking in its own right.

[31]Ali, *Courtly culture*, p. 52. See, for similar arguments with reference to Southeast and East Asia, Barbara Watson Andaya, *The flaming womb: Repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University

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I suspect that within the walls of early second millennium Sri Lanka's 'inner cities' (*antaḥpura*), a similar dynamic took place: a strict hierarchy of consorts was defined by specific titles.

The titles with the widest referent range, if with the fewest extant witnesses, appear to have been *antaḥpura-strī* ('woman of the inner city')[32] and *kāminī* ('[woman] of pleasure').[33] These titles may have been interchangeable.[34] We know very little about this group, and no named consorts (let alone female sovereigns) are ever associated with the title. There are two possible interpretations: (1) that one, or both, of these titles referred to all of the women of the royal household, some of whom were also distinguished by 'higher' titles; or (2) that one, or both, of these titles indicated only concubines below the status of formal consorts. The wider South Asian context, and the sexual connotations of '*kāminī*', together suggest that *antaḥpura-strī* may have fallen into the former connotation and *kāminī*, the latter. However, without a wider range of witnesses it is impossible to judge.

Devī (or more frequently *mahādevī*) seems to have the widest range of reference throughout medieval South Asia, analogous perhaps to the generic 'Lady' in medieval Europe. It certainly could refer to royal consorts,[35] but the title seems to have also applied more widely. King Sāhassa Malla, for example, granted the title *mahādevī* to the *mother* of a minister, Duttati Abonavan, in recognition of the latter's assistance in his taking the throne.[36] *Devī* is also attested in literary works of the period, particularly with reference to the Buddha's mother Mahāmāyā, a queen consort,[37] and wife

of Hawai'i Press, 2006), pp. 189–190; Tamara Loos, 'Sex in the inner city: The fidelity between sex and politics in Siam', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2005, pp. 881–909; Keith McMahon, 'The institution of polygamy in the Chinese Imperial Palace', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 72, no. 4, November 2013, pp. 917–936.

[32]Witnessed only, to my knowledge, in *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, V:42. References to inscriptions transcribed in the *Epigraphia Zeylanica* and *Inscriptions of Ceylon* are given by volume and inscription number.

[33]Witnessed only, to my knowledge, in *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 5:10.

[34]The auto-*sannaya* of the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* glosses *kāminī* as *pura-strī*, 'city-women', possibly related to *antaḥpura-strī*. Vägala Piyaratna, *Sanna sahita Dāṭhāvaṃsaya* (Koḷamba: S. Godage and Co., 2008), commentary on v. 5:10. *Pura-strī* could also, however, be a euphemism for prostitute: see Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), s.v. *pura*.

[35]Vikrama I's consort Sundarī (in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:31/34), and Niśśaṅka Malla's two consorts Kāliṅga Subhadra (in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:17; II:29) and Kalyāṇavatī (in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:15; II:17; II:29) are all called *mahādevī*, as are the mothers of both Niśśaṅka Malla (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:14; II:17; II:29) and Sāhassa Malla (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:36). Note, however, that Kalyāṇavatī is *not* called *mahādevī* once she attains sovereignty in 1202, either in her own inscriptions (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:32) or those of her courtiers (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* IV:10).

[36]*Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:36.

[37]See, for example, Kōdāgoḍa Ñaṇālōka Sṭhavira, *Amāvatura* (Colombo: Bauddha Saṃskṛtika Madhyasthānaya, 1998), p. 135. The *Amāvatura* is particularly noteworthy here because of its emphatically non-Sanskritic literary Sinhala, which makes it clear that the *devī* was not only sensible in Sanskrit or Sanskrit-inflected Sinhala. On *Amāvatura*'s deliberate rejection of Sanskritization, see Charles Hallisey, 'In defense of rather fragile and local achievement: Reflections on the work of Gurulugomi', in *Religion and practical reason: New essays in the comparative philosophy of religions*, (eds) Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992); Wasantha A. Liyanage, 'Narrative methods of

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Yaśodhara, a princess whose husband never ascended the throne.[38] However, its usage in early second millennium Sri Lanka seems generally less frequent relative than in other courts on the subcontinent.

More frequent in both inscriptions and literature, but with what seems to be a more restricted sense, is the Sinhala title *bisō*.[39] The most emphatic reference to *bisō*s comes from Niśśaṅka Malla's inscriptions, particularly his Galpota inscription:

> …because the (sons) of kings, [duly appointed to the titles of] *ǟpā* [and/or] *mahapā*, although children, are lord[s] of the world, it is necessary to maintain the *kula* customs [by] giving [these] children to the *rājya*. If they are not [available], it is necessary to protect [by] living according to the order of *bisō*s. If they are not [available], it is necessary to protect the kingdom [by] placing in the position of king even a slipper which has been on the foot of the *mahārāja*.[40]

The wording here—'living according to the order of the *bisō*s'—might indicate merely a support for regency. But a variant of this argument in Niśśaṅka Malla's North Gate inscription (which seems to be an abridged version of his Galpota arguments) suggests that he may be advocating for full succession:

> It is necessary to not be king-less. Therefore, in the case that there is not a person appointed to the *mahārājan*-ship, it is necessary to appoint the *yuvarāja*, or, if there is not (a *yuvarāja*), the royal princes, or, if there is not, the *bisō*s, to the *rājya*.[41]

Here it is clear that the *bisō*s themselves are in Niśśaṅka Malla's intended line of succession, even if as a last resort (although still above footwear!). We might therefore ask who exactly fell into the scope of this title. The *Epigraphia Zeylanica*'s editors translate the second reference as 'princess'. I assume that *they* assumed that some form of male-preference primogeniture was at work—*daughters* of monarchs may inherit, if they have no living brothers—and that therefore *bisō*s, apparently eligible for succession, must therefore be 'princesses'. I am not convinced that this is the case.[42]

Sinhala prose: A historical and theoretical study of Sinhala prose from twelfth century narratives to post-realist fiction', PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin Madison, 2004. Elsewhere the *Amāvatura* also refers to Mahāmāyā by the title *devrājana* (8), an interesting hybrid of *devī* and *rājñī.*

[38]See, for example, *Jīnālaṅkāra*, v. 47.

[39]Ven. Sorata suggests that the derivation of this title is from *abhiṣikta*, literally 'anointed', hinting again at the possibility of *non*-anointed consorts—concubines—within the inner city. Väliviṭiyē Sorata Thera, *Śrī Sumaṅgala Sabdakoṣaya: A Sinhalese-Sinhalese dictionary* (Colombo: P. Abhayawickrama, 1952), s.v. *bisōva*.

[40]*…rājayangē (daru) ǟpā mahapāvan bāla vuvada lokasvāmi (heyin) rājyayaṭa balā genä kula sirit da… kaṭayutu, (ovu)nudu näta(hot) bisovarungē ājñāyehi pävätä rakṣā kaṭayutu, unudu näta maharajun payä lū vahan mātrayakudu rajatan hi tabā rājya räkka yutu: Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:17.

[41]*…arājaka vä da novisiya yutteyä, eheyin maharajatan patvä siṭiyavun näti tänekä yuvaraja vä siṭiyavun ho unudu nätahot rājakumāravarun ho unudu nätahot bisōvarun ho rājyayaṭa täkiya yutteyä: Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:28.

[42]Other terms we might translate more accurately as 'princess' are *kanyā* (Pali *kaññā*, Sinhala *kanyāva*: see, for example, *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 4:51; G. P. Malalasekera (ed.), *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* [London: Pali Text Society, 1977], v. I:305), or *rajaduva* (see, for example, *Dāṭhāvaṃsa sannaya*, v. 1:6)

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The mother of the notorious Prince Ajātaśatru is repeatedly called *bisō* or even *mavbisō* (mother-*bisō*) in the *Amāvatura*'s discussion of his conception and birth, after which point she is never again mentioned in the narrative.[43] And, of course, the only two women to succeed to the throne in this period, Līlāvatī and Niśśaṅka Malla's own consort Kalyāṇavatī, were *consorts* of earlier kings, not daughters.[44] Finally, we might note the many references to 'procuring *bisō*s' from other kingdoms in inscriptions.[45] These women were all, to be sure, daughters or female relatives of other kings—in other words, 'princesses'. But they were also, or at least also became, consorts, and it seems clear that the title *bisō* extended to all noble women, not only the ruling monarch's daughter(s).

The most obvious contender for the translation 'queen' is *rājñī*, the grammatically feminine 'equivalent' to the masculine *rājan*. The Sinhala cognate *räjana* is most commonly used in modern Sinhala to refer to queens regnant, both modern and historical (for example, 'Elizabeth II *räjana*'). But it appears relatively infrequently in either literary works or inscriptions, and is not associated with either Līlāvatī or Kalyāṇavatī. In fact, one of its very few attestations is by Candavatī, a woman who identifies herself—in the very same inscription—as the *secondary* consort of her regnant husband (discussed in detail below). So not only did this title not denote sovereignty, it was not even at the apex of the feminine hierarchy.

That apex position appears to belong to the title *mahiṣī*. Indeed, Dhammakitti's autocommentary on the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* glosses this title (as used by the Buddha's biological mother Mahāmāyā) as the foremost (*agra*) *bisōva*.[46] And even among the *mahiṣī*, there was yet another hierarchy: the *primary* consort of a given king was designated, in turn, as his *agra-mahiṣī*.[47] Notably, even this apex-of-apices title was nearly ubiquitously accompanied by the name of the *mahiṣī*'s husband—the *mahiṣī of* such and

[43] *Amāvatura*, pp. 112–113.

[44] To be clear, I am not suggesting here that the rules of succession, as laid out in Niśśaṅka Malla's inscription, were accepted as normative, or even that Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī necessarily invoked his inscriptions long after his death in support of their own claims. Indeed, if they were generally accepted, then he would have had little need to state them so emphatically in his inscription.

[45] See, for example, *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, II:15; II:17; II:19; II:21; II:22; II:23; II:24; II:42; III:35. Such consortial ties, particularly to powerful South Indian dynasties, clearly held significant rhetoric weight in this period. For the implications of such an emphasis on royal women, see Bruno Shirley, 'Buddhism, gender, and politics in medieval Sri Lanka c. 1050–1215,' PhD thesis, Cornell University, forthcoming, particularly Chapters 2 and 4.

[46] *Dāṭhāvaṃsa sannaya*, v. 1:26. Interestingly, Dhammakitti also calls her Mahāmāyādeviyan; she receives a trifecta of noble titles—*mahiṣī, agra-bisōva*, and *devī*—in a single gloss.

[47] Even in courts with (presumably) multiple *mahiṣī*, the *agra-mahiṣī* could sometimes still be synecdochally represented by the more general title. We see this most clearly in the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, a commentary on the much earlier *Mahāvaṃsa*: Wilhelm Geiger (ed.), *The Mahāvaṃsa* (London: Pali Text Society, 1908). The *Mahāvaṃsa* lists several ancestors of the Buddha, including female ancestors: Kaccānā, the *mahiṣī* of Sīhahanu; Yasodhara, the *mahiṣī* of Añjanasakka; Amitā, the *mahiṣī* of Suppabuddha Sakka; and, finally, Māyā (the Buddha's own biological mother) and Prajāpatī (the Buddha's adoptive mother after Māyā's death): vv. 2:16–22. *Mahāvaṃsa* refers to these latter two collectively as the Suddhodana-*mahiṣī*s, after the Buddha's father. For all but the latter two, the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* glosses *mahiṣī* as *agra-mahiṣī*.

A representative extract is the discussion of Mahāvaṃsa, v. 2:18's *mahesī sā Yasodharā*: 'The meaning is that she, Yaśodharā, the younger sister of King Devadahasakka, was the *agra-mahiṣī* of Añjanasakka in the city of Devadaha' (*sā sīhahanussa rañño kaṇiṭṭhabhaginī* [sic.] *yasodharā devadahamhi nagare añjanasakkassa*

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such—even after that husband had long since passed away. This is true even of Līlāvatī, who used her dowager title in some of her inscriptions even after she was installed on the throne.[48] This means that even the most exalted grammatically feminine title did not—perhaps *could not*—convey regnancy, but only a hetero-patriarchal relation to one's husband. To put it another way: there were no words to describe a 'queen regnant', only a 'queen consort'.

This should immediately suggest a historical problematic. If sovereignty was conceived by many (or, at least, by certain prominent monastic scholars and male monarchs) in early second millennium Lanka to be essentially 'masculine', we ought to wonder how a 'female sovereign' was described. The titles we typically translate as 'queen' referred in practice only to consorts of the male king and so could not express regnancy. Poḷonnaruva's two female monarch—Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī—therefore seemed to operate in a conceptual limbo: neither masculine enough, according to the near-ubiquitous discourse of kingship's masculinity, to be called 'king' (*rājan*), nor adequately described by the many feminine consortial titles discussed above.[49]

In the following sections, I identify two broad strategies for dealing with the 'problem' of female regnancy and the absence of female regnal titles: one most evidenced in textual sources crafted by monks, both during Līlāvatī's reign and in subsequent generations; and one, more subversive, evident primarily in the material culture of Līlāvatī's own court. Modern scholarship, I will argue, has thus far accepted only the first of these strategies, effacing the more nuanced presentation of female regnancy evident in the second.

Līlāvatī as 'queen' in the monastic literature

Līlāvatī took the throne in a tumultuous period. The reign of her husband Parākramabāhu I (r. *circa* 1153–1186) is generally considered to be a 'golden age' of relative stability and kingly authority. After his death, however, a string of untimely deaths and contested successions destabilized, and perhaps decentralized, power, allowing more localized elites to assert their independence and support their own favoured successors to the throne. It is no coincidence that all three of Līlāvatī's reigns began and ended in violent coups. These circumstances perhaps help to explain the rise to prominence of certain non-royal elites—ministers and generals—in our textual and epigraphic sources. They also help to explain how, in apparent contradiction with the norms of kingly masculinity described above, royal widows like Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī (the widow of Niśśaṅka Malla, another former monarch) found themselves

aggamahesī ahosī ti attho), *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* I:135. Presumably the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*'s author understands the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s mention of only a single *mahiṣī* to indicate that they were the primary (if not the only) *mahiṣī*. The Buddha's mothers, however, receive no gloss at all. This may have been because the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*'s author could not distinguish which, if either, was Suddhodana's 'primary' consort; or, perhaps, to reflect that the 'primary' title may have shifted hands after Mahāmāyā's death.

[48] *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:33; *Inscriptions of Ceylon* VI:92.3.

[49] This limbo was hardly unique to Lanka: see Cynthia Talbot, 'Rudrama-Devi, the female king: Gender and political authority in medieval India', in *Syllables of sky: Studies in South Indian civilization in honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, (ed.) David Dean Shulman (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 391–430. Talbot's discussion of 'widow queens' like Ganapamadevī (404–407) is particularly relevant to the case of Līlāvatī (see below).

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so repeatedly on the throne. Between Līlāvatī's first accession in *circa* 1197 and her final deposition in 1210, there was only a single year—1201—in which neither of them was on the throne; this was clearly a period of particular openness to female succession and female rule.

Such openness did not seem to have extended to the period's literary and intellectual elite. Monastic literature seems to have dealt with the problematic absence of female regnant titles, and of the conceptual possibility of female regnancy, by describing this regnancy only through the most oblique phrasing possible and by avoiding clear regnal titles altogether. In such works, Līlāvatī is never explicitly called anything we might accurately translate as 'monarch'. Instead, she remains always in the consortial mode; a pious and devoted wife, who happened to be 'established in the kingdom' by other, more traditionally manly, men. This strategy attempts, in other words, to preserve the masculinity of kingship above all else.

The first strategy is particularly evident in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, upon which all histories of this period still lean heavily.[50] The sections of the *Mahāvaṃsa* dealing with Līlāvatī's reign were almost certainly composed retroactively,[51] and we should therefore treat its vision of the preceding century with some caution. Nonetheless, it provides a representative, and influential, example of how Līlāvatī's three reigns were depicted:

> Then Kitti, the powerful lord of the army, having torn out of the eye of that [former] Lord of Men, having exiled him, ruled through Līlāvatī, the *agramahiṣī* of the pure lord Parākramabāhu, for three years without mishap.[52]

> Then his own general Vikkantacamūnakka, of ill intent, having killed the monarch Anīkaṅga, ruled for one year through the generous Līlāvati, the first *devī* of the king (Parākramabāhu I), by whom rule had previously been done.[53]

> Then the general Parākrama—mighty and powerful, most excellent among those with resolve, born of the Kālanāgara *vaṃśa*—anointed in sovereignty that *mahiṣī* Līlāvatī, who had arisen from the Solar and Lunar *kula*s, who subsequently shone in kingly splendour.[54]

In each of these descriptions, Līlāvatī is merely the grammatical *object*, to and through whom great things are done by great men. She is never named with any royal title, only obliquely ruled *through* or anointed *in sovereignty*. In her last reign—ironically

[50] See critiques of taking the *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *vaṃśa*s in general, as 'history' in the modern sense in Stephen C. Berkwitz, *Buddhist history in the vernacular: The power of the past in late medieval Sri Lanka* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Kristin Scheible, *Reading the Mahāvamsa: The literary aims of a Theravada Buddhist history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Jonathan S. Walters, 'Buddhist history: The Sri Lankan Pali Vamsas and their commentary', in *Querying the medieval: Texts and the history of practices in South Asia* by Ronald B. Inden, Jonathan Walters and Daud Ali (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[51] Sirima Wickramasinghe, 'The age of Parākramabāhu I', PhD thesis, University of London, 1958, p. 14.

[52] *tato tassa narindassa uppāṭetvāna locane | dūrīkatvāna taṃ Kitti senānātho mahabbalo || Līlāvatyā Parakkantabhujindaggamahesiyā | rajjaṃ kārāpayī tīṇi vassāni nirupaddavaṃ, Mahāvaṃsa* 80:30–31.

[53] *atha tass' eva Vikkantacamūnakkacamūpati | hantvāna taṃ Anīkaṅgamahīpālaṃ sa dummati || pubbe pi katarajjāya tāya rājaggadeviyā | Līlāvatyabhidhānāya vassaṃ rajjaṃ akārayi, Mahāvaṃsa* 80:45–46.

[54] *tadā dhītimataṃ seṭṭho mahābalaparakkamo | Parakkamacamūnātho kālanāgaravaṃsajo || Līlāvatiṃ mahesiṃ taṃ candādiccakuloditaṃ | rajje 'bhisiñci pacchā pi rājatejovilāsiniṃ, Mahāvaṃsa* 80:49–50.

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the shortest—her ascension to sovereignty is described in more detail, with an anointing (*abhiṣeka*) and a description of 'kingly splendour' (*rāja-tejas*). This is certainly a more generous treatment than her earlier reigns are given, and we might wonder why the thirteenth-century chroniclers devoted more praise to this reign than to those that preceded it. However, even here we must note that Līlāvatī herself is given no appositional titles beyond being the *mahiṣī of* Parākramabāhu I.

This treatment of Līlāvatī is echoed in later monastic writings. In the *Rājāvaliya*, for example, while all of the period's male monarchs are said to have themselves 'performed sovereignty' (Sinhala: *rājyaya keḷēya*), the reigns of Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī are described with causal verbs: 'sovereignty was made to be performed by' them (*lavā rājyaja karavīya*). The notable exception to this is Līlāvatī's third reign, in which she is finally described as having herself 'performed sovereignty' (*rājyaya kaḷāya*, with a distinctive feminine verb form).[55] No explanation is given for this sudden attribution of grammatical agency, although we might note that this is the same reign in which the *Mahāvaṃsa*, which was certainly familiar to the *Rājāvaliya*'s authors, tells us that Līlāvatī received an *abhiṣeka* ceremony. Perhaps this, at last, qualified Līlāvatī for monarchy in the eyes of the *Rājāvaliya*'s composers. For the most part, however, the strategy established in texts like the *Mahāvaṃsa* remains dominant.

We should note that this strategy was not necessarily a critique of Līlāvatī's unusual position. She patronized at least two high-literary works—the Sinhala-language *Sasadāvata* and the Pali *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*—and their authors include lavish praise of her munificence.[56] This praise, however, emphasizes above all her consortial status, linking her to her then-deceased husband, Parākramabāhu, in order to maintain the conventions of idealized royal femininity we have seen evident in other literary works. It was to the powerful men in Līlāvatī's three courts, meanwhile, that these works attributed the qualities that literary theory tells us to expect of 'kings'.

[55]All references in this paragraph are to Watuwatte Pemananda *bhikkhu* (ed.), *The Rājāvaliya: Or a historical narrative of Sinhalese kings from Vijaya to Vimala Dharma Surya II* (Colombo: Mahabodhi Press, 1923), p. 59.

[56]The *Sasadāvata* is a Sinhala-language elaboration of the canonical *Sasajātaka*, a narrative of an earlier life of the Buddha in which he was a rabbit: Vī. Ḍī. Es. Guṇavardhana (ed.), *Sasadāvata* (Colombo: S. Godage and Co., 2013). It was composed during Līlāvatī's first reign (1197–1200) by an unknown author. The *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* was composed in Līlāvatī's final reign (1210) by a monastic poet named Dhammakitti. Līlāvatī's patronage of these works—which seems to have been a priority of hers, even relative to other courts in this highly productive period—was no doubt a deliberate policy on her behalf, intended to serve her agendas, both political and pious. But we should not dismiss the authors of these pieces as mere puppets of royal expression. They were creative agents, sensitive to the desires of their patrons and benefactors but also possessing complex agendas of their own. In the case of monastic authors (which we know the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*'s author Dhammakitti to have been, and we might reasonably suspect of *Sasadāvata*'s unnamed author), whatever institutional ties they had to the royal court were *at least* matched by their ties to their monastic institutions and to their roles as religious guides. See the nuanced treatment of *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* in Alastair Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism: Pali literature and monastic reform in Sri Lanka, 1157–1270* (London: UCL Press, 2020), Chapter 8; see, more generally, Ali, *Courtly culture*, p. 15. When we read these two works' eulogistic descriptions of Līlāvatī and her courts, we must therefore be very aware that these are not simply 'her' own portrayal repeated verbatim: they are compromise as much as they are compliment, crafted to satisfy a royal patron without sacrificing the aesthetic and soteriological aims—or conceptual coherency—of their authors.

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The *Sasadāvata*, the earlier work composed in Līlāvatī's first court, represented one of the first attempts to fulfil the *Siyabaslakara*'s literary vision. We should not be surprised, therefore, that its opening discussion on poetry's reliance on good kingship so faithfully follows the latter text's gendered dynamics:

> Literary works are made with that [previously described] intelligence,
> [and] with the prosperity of a realm made comfortable.
> That prosperity is brought about by
> the power of a king, accompanied by virtuous and wise ministers.
>
> Thus, filled with compassion,
> with eyes of wisdom [trained upon] the benefit of the world,
> the pride of the thousand Cōḻa elephant-herds
> was broken by the Lion,
>
> bound in adoration to the ruling family,
> forever protecting the wish-gem,[57]
> a flag of the Ruvanpā family:
> the Chief Minister Kit Senevi.
>
> Ornamented only by truth and virtue,
> [a veritable crown of] flowers crowning the solar and lunar families,
> appearing in the manner of lovely Śrī,
> attracting the minds and eyes of the entire world,
>
> furthering the world and the *śāsana*:
> Līlāvatī, the lunar *svāmin*!
> The *dharma* and royal splendour instated [by whom]
> made possible this work.[58]

Here it is Kit Senevit, Līlāvatī's chief minister, who seems to embody the virile mood through his martial accomplishments and leonine imagery. Līlāvatī's dynastic ties, virtues, and physical beauty, meanwhile, are hardly the work of kings; even the 'royal splendour' (*rājaśrī*) she nominally instated in Sri Lanka, which bookends these five verses, seems to have been largely the practical result of Kit Senevi's military triumphs—triumphs characteristic, in the theory of high poetics, only of virile kings.

Above all, these verses say little about Līlāvatī's status as a monarch. She is given the honorific title *svāmin* (Sinhala: *himi*), which is certainly noteworthy. In Sanskrit this is a grammatically masculine title, which can even have the sense of 'husband'

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[57] A symbol of sovereignty.

[58] *bäňdum da eniyen suven vanu desa dana sirin | esiri guṇa nuvaṇäti mäti yut rajakaranu belen || ebävin met sara nuvaṇäsa siṭi lō väṭum | sahadat soḷī gajamuḷu daḷa dap sun kesaravan || himi kula baňda adara niti situmiṇev raknā | rävan pākula keheḷi agamäti Kit senevi yut || hudu pas guṇa baraṇa rivi saňda kula mudun mal | pasak Sirikata vilasin muḷu lō mana nuvan gat || kaḷa lō sasun väḍa Līlāvatī himi saňda | pala kaḷa daham rajasiri meväṭumhi piṭubala vī, Sasadāvata* vv. 10–14.

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in *Dharmaśāstr*ic literature.[59] The Sinhala term is often used in adjectival clauses to mark ownership or possession, including possession of Sri Lanka itself. Neither implication is drawn out in the (almost certainly retrospective) *Sasadāvata sannaya*, however, which simply glosses Sinhala *himi* as Sanskrit *svāmin* and moves on (although see further discussion of this *sannaya* below).[60] Overall, the image with which we are presented is consonant with that of the later *Mahāvaṃsa*: the elaborate praise we would expect for a king—the Heroic *rasa*—is directed towards Līlāvatī's general, while she herself is described in femininized language we do not see elsewhere associated with sovereignty.

Similar dynamics are at play in Dhammakitti's *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, composed in Līlāvatī's third and final court. Here agency is vested even more heavily in Līlāvatī's then-chief minister, a military leader named Parākrama. Mirroring the *Mahāvaṃsa* structure, it is this general who is positioned as the grammatical agent of all actions, while Līlāvatī is only mentioned in an oblique case:

> Having appointed Līlāvatī—born in the lineage of Paṇḍu, which is spotless, shining, and stainless; in whom faith was awakened with respect to the *śāsana* of the king of sages; sweet-worded; always like a mother, a parent, of offspring; following the path of statecraft (*nīti*); the beloved *mahiṣī* of King Parākramabāhu, lord of the earth; endowed with unequalled intelligence; giver of things which are desired—to the royal splendour of the entire land of Lanka…[61]

Līlāvatī is certainly generously eulogized, but in explicitly femininized terms: she is maternal, a beloved wife, of impeccable stock. She *is* praised as being particularly intelligent and well-versed in *nīti*—both indications, perhaps, that the real-life Līlāvatī was a far more skilful political operator than the passive version presented in these texts. But, once again, she is associated with no regnal epithet.[62] We do see *mahiṣī*, but this is again qualified by her husband's name and (kingly) title in the possessive: she was still, above all, a consort. In his auto-commentary, Dhammakitti additionally calls her a *rajaduva*, a 'royal daughter' or princess.[63] This is not inaccurate—her noble birth is emphasized both here and in Līlāvatī's own inscriptions—but it is a strange gloss for

[59]See, for example, *Āpastamba Dharmaśāstra* 2.10.26.24, in which *svāmin*s are the legal guardians (fathers?) of unmarried women; but cf. 2.2.4.13, in which *svāmin* (in dual) refers to a husband *and* his wife; and 2.10.28.6–7, in which *svāmin* (in plural) seems to refer to owners of cattle without a *necessarily* gendered connotation. Y. Ikari and K. Kano, 'Āpastambadharmasūtra', Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages, uploaded 31 July 2020, https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_ApastambadharmasUtra.htm, [accessed 1 February 2024].

[60]*Sasadāvata sannaya*, British Library, Or.6604(109) and Or.6611(95), v. 14.

[61]*sudhāmayūkhāmalapaṇḍuvaṃsajaṃ virūḷhasaddhaṃ munirājāsāsane | piyaṃvadaṃ nītipathānuvattinaṃ sadā pajānaṃ janikaṃ va mātaraṃ || piyaṃ parakkantibhujassa rājino mahesim accunnatabuddhisampadaṃ | vidhāya līlāvatim icchitatthadaṃ asesalaṅkātalarajjalakkhiyaṃ*, *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 1:5–6.

[62]This runs counter to both Coomāra Swāmy's and Gornall's translations, which both insert the title 'Queen' before her name: Mutu Coomāra Swāmy, *The Daṭhávansa, or the History of the Tooth-relic of Gotama Buddha: The Páli Text, and its Translation into English, with Notes* (London: Trubner and Co., 1874), p. 24; Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, p. 171.

[63]*Dāṭhāvaṃsa sannaya*, v. 1:6.

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a woman 'appointed in the royal splendour' and certainly not one we would associate with regnancy.

A further title does occur slightly further into the poem, one which complicates the stark gendered dichotomy that Dhammakitti otherwise appears to be setting up. Verse eight tells us that Parākrama, the general who placed her on the throne, 'dispelled the ill repute which had for a long time befallen the *trisiṃhala* [due to] the absence of a Lord of Men'.[64] 'Lord of Men', a common title for kings is, significantly, grammatically masculine.[65] Who was it who claimed this title and so dispelled the unfortunate absence? It could not have Parākrama, for all that he is cast in the kingly mode throughout this section of the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*. If Parākrama had taken on such an explicitly royal title as *narinda* himself, why would he have needed Līlāvatī as a nominal sovereign at all? I suspect instead that this verse refers to Līlāvatī herself, and it is *her* sovereignty that resolved the 'absence of a lord of men'—even though Dhammakitti is unwilling to explicitly associate her with such a masculine title, either in the verses or his autocommentary. But this is not the only hint available to us that Līlāvatī may have taken more masculine titles than the literary tradition would have us believe.

Līlāvatī as 'king' beyond masculinity

The literary sources, in short, avoid explicitly naming Līlāvatī as a monarch in her own right. This is true even of those composed under her patronage and which seem intended to lavish her with (gendered, maternal) praise. This will not be particularly surprising to those familiar with more global patterns of female regnancy and with what Kathleen Nolan calls the difficulties of '…reading women's lives, especially powerful women's lives, through the words of suspicious male monastics', which 'requires careful sorting through the biases and motivations of the author'.[66] She urges us instead to look to the 'visual imagery of queenship' evident in her subjects' material products, which often reveal '…a dialogue between the calculated use of male emblems of authority and the assertive, even subversive employment of these emblems in a recognisably female sigillographic format'.[67] Following Nolan's lead, I argue that an alternative politics of gender is evident in Līlāvatī's inscriptions and coins, media over which she perhaps had more direct control, than we can perceive by relying on our standard textual sources alone. Without explicitly transgressing her nominal femininity, she draws on tropes of kingly masculinity, including claims to the title *rājan*.

Few of Līlāvatī's inscriptions have survived fully intact and legible. However, those to which we do have access provide us with several interesting pieces of information. One such inscription, for example, contains a complete stylized introductory section (often called a *praśasti*) for Līlāvatī:

[64] *narindasuññaṃ suciran tisīhalaṃ itippatītaṃ ayasaṃ apānudi…*, *Dāṭhāvaṃsa*, v. 1:8

[65] For witnesses of 'Lord of Men', see, for example, the entirety of the *Muvadev Dāvata*'s 'Chapter on kings', in which only six verses (34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 46) do not use some variant of the epithet: Bihesh Indika Sampath, *Muvadev Dāvata Arthadīpanī* (Colombo: Goḍagē Prakāśakayō, 2014). Among those six, only verse 37 does not use one of the similarly gendered epithets 'Best of men', 'Elephant among men', or 'Ultimate man'.

[66] Kathleen Nolan, *Queens in stone and silver: The creation of a visual imagery of queenship in Capetian France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 13.

[67] Ibid., p.163.

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> The head-garland of the auspicious royal lineage of Ikṣvāku; ablaze with a multitude of great virtues; who has reached the far shore of all arts: Abhā Salamevan Līlāvatī *svāmin*, who having herself (*taman*) attained the kingship of the Triple Sinhala (*trisiṃhalarajaya*) out of descent and through *dharma* and equanimity; having brought it under a single canopy; having assembled a circle of ministers possessed of wisdom, vigour, and devotion; having eliminated dangers to her own realm (*maṇḍala*) from other realms; having established the world and the *śāsana* in a state of peace; [thus] like one ruling through the ten royal *dharma*s…[68]

Unlike in the courtly poems discussed above, Līlāvatī is praised in language usually reserved for great kings. Indeed, nothing in this inscription other than her (grammatically feminine) personal name would suggest that she was any different from her male peers. The ministers who take the focus in our literary sources above are still present, but they are no longer the focal point: instead, the inscription emphasizes Līlāvatī's own agency in all acts through the reflexive *taman*, 'by herself'. Notably absent in this inscription, however, is any direct claim to the title *rājan*, which we would expect to see (alongside more grandiose variants such as *mahārājan, rājādhirājan*…) in any inscriptions of male Poḷonnaruvan monarchs. Instead, we see again the use of more oblique language: she has 'attained kingship' and is '*like* one ruling'. Clearly, even in this inscriptional medium she was hesitant to claim outright the title *rājan* for herself.

We might also note that in the inscription above, as in one other,[69] she is referred to by the regnal name (*viruda*) Abhā Salamevan alongside her natal name Līlāvatī. This is a grammatically masculine name, which had until then only been used by normatively male kings.[70] We should provide a caveat on the significance of this name adoption: 'Abhā Salamevan' is never witnessed apart from the natal name 'Līlāvatī', while 'Līlāvatī' *is* witnessed, with great frequency, independently. This is not, therefore, an outright rejection of femininity in favour of exclusive masculinity.[71] It is, nonetheless, a clear indication of the deliberation with which Līlāvatī negotiated her identity as simultaneously feminine ('Līlāvatī') and kingly ('Abhā Salamevan').

And we have good reason to believe that this adoption of a masculine *viruda* was accepted even by Līlāvatī's political rivals. Prior to the Poḷonnaruva period such *viruda*s were adopted in strict rotation: kings and their successors tended to alternate between Abhā Salamēvan and Siri Saṅghabo.[72] The Poḷonnaruva period's frequent usurpations and short reigns disrupted this pattern considerably, leaving long gaps without a

[68]*siribara okāvas rajparapurehi mundun māli visal guṇageṇen duḷu siyalu kalā tera pāmiṇi abhā salamevan līlāvatī svāmin vahanse taman vahanse paramparāyāta trisiṃhalarajaya dhāmin semin pāmiṇā ekātapatra koṭā prajñāvikramabhaktisampanna amātya maṇḍaḷa āti koṭā svamaṇḍaḷaya paramaṇḍaḷayen nirupadrava koṭā loka śāsana semehi tabā dasarājadharmmayen raja karana seyek, Epigraphia Zeylanica* I:14, lines 1–12.

[69]*Inscriptions of Ceylon* VI:91.2.

[70]Kalyāṇavatī would later adopt the same *viruda: Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:32.

[71]I am mindful here of the nuanced discussion around the sensitivities of naming practices, and the importance of avoiding deadnames, in Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (eds), *Trans and genderqueer subjects in medieval hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), Appendix s.v. 'names'.

[72]On a similar pattern in the Cōḻa kingdom, see Whitney Cox, *Politics, kingship, and poetry in medieval South India: Moonset on Sunrise Mountain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 40–42. On Cōḻa influences on Poḷonnaruva's political thought, see S. Pathmanathan, 'Kingship in Sri Lanka: A.D. 1070–1270', *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 8, 1982, pp. 120–145, and Shirley, 'Buddhism, gender and politics'.

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Table 1: Alternating *viruda* titles.

Monarch	Regnal dates	*Viruda* title
Vijayabāhu I	1058–1114	Siri Sañghabo
Jayabāhu I	1114–1116	[no inscriptions extant, but presumably Abhā Salamevan]
	interregnum 1116–1153	
Parākramabāhu I (the Great)	1153–1186	Śrī Saṅghabodhi
Vijayabāhu II	1186–1187	[no inscriptions extant, but presumably Abhā Salamevan]
Niśśaṅka Malla	1187–1196	Siri Sañghabo
	short reigns 1196–1197	
Līlāvatī	1197–1200, 1209, 1210	Abhā Salamevan
Sāhasa Malla	1200–1202	Siri Sañghabo
Kalyāṇavatī	1202–1208	Abhā Salamevan
	short reigns 1208–1209	
Lokissara	1209–1210	Siri Sañghabo

monarch in a position to claim the next *viruda* in sequence (see Table 1).[73] But—if we assume that both Jayabāhu I and Vijayabāhu II continued the sequence by taking the regnal name Abhā Salamevan[74]—it is evident that no monarch *broke* the sequence by repeating the *viruda* name of their immediate predecessor out of turn.

What does the continuation of this sequence indicate about Līlāvatī's place in the lineage of kings? If Sāhasa Malla, who overthrew Līlāvatī's first reign in 1200, had rejected her claim to such a name we might expect him to have taken the *viruda* Abhā Salamevan, identifying himself as the true and direct successor to his half-brother Niśśaṅka Malla. Instead, however, he took the alternate *viruda* Siri Sañghabo, effectively acknowledging that his predecessor—who he himself had deposed violently!—was, in a meaningful sense, an 'Abhā Salamevan'. While the turbulent reigns of Kalyāṇavatī's successors Dharmāśoka (r. 1208–1209) and Äniyaṅga (r. 1209) left behind no inscriptional evidence, it is telling that the first *viruda* of which we have evidence

[73]After Jayabāhu's death, the kingdom was trisected and an interregnum ensued, with no single monarch claiming the higher trappings of kingship. In none of these monarchs' inscriptions are any *viruda* names witnessed; some continue to use the (posthumous) regnal years of Jayabāhu I for dating. See, for example, *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:34. The *viruda* sequence therefore skips these monarchs from Jayabāhu I directly to Parākramabāhu I. Two periods of extremely short reigns follow those of Niśśaṅka Malla and Kalyāṇavatī respectively; none of these monarchs left behind inscriptions and it seems likely that none claimed a *viruda*.

[74]*Epigraphia Zeylanica* II:30 mentions Vijayabāhu II, but does not give him a *viruda* name.

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after her own was, again, the alternative. Both women, it seemed, had their otherwise masculine regnal names acknowledged and upheld, even by their political rivals.

We see evidence too of masculine *titles* in Līlāvatī's *massa* coinage, all of which is minted with the phrase '*śrī rāja līlā vatī*'.[75] We must place particular weight on the rhetorical significance of coins, perhaps the most common means by which both Lankans and those overseas would engage with the visual imagery of a given monarch's sovereignty.[76] Līlāvatī's coins, as with all those of the Poḷonnaruva period, were written in Devanāgarī script, suggesting that they were intended to circulate widely,[77] and perhaps to be read as Sanskrit. But *rāja* as a standalone noun makes little sense in Sanskrit: we would expect to see *rājā* in the nominative or *rājan* in the vocative. It *could* suggest an unusual adjective compound, *rājalīlāvatī* ('royal Līlāvatī'). I suspect, however, that this inscription was meant to be read in Sinhala, in which *rāja* is a viable standalone noun: 'the auspicious *king* Līlāvatī'.

Space on coins was, of course, limited, and we might interpret *rāja* here as merely a contraction of something 'properly feminine' like *rājñī*. However, it is worth noting that the title *rāja* appears in no other coinage of the period (see Table 2). The coins of Līlāvatī's predecessor Coḍagaṅga, for example, read *śrī coḍa ga*[*ṅ*]*ga deva*; if syllable count were truly the deciding factor here, she could have followed suit and inscribed her own coins with the (grammatically feminine) *śrī līlā vatī devī*. Līlāvatī's use of the title *rāja* is exceptional, and so must have been intentional; this was, I believe, an explicit claim to kingship, regardless of grammatical gender.

And we have at least one suggestion that this supposedly masculine title was used in Līlāvatī's own court and possibly survived beyond her reign. There is at least one commentary extant for the *Sasadāvata*, the courtly poem composed in Līlāvatī's first reign. Dating this commentary is difficult: the ephemeral nature of manuscripts in tropical climates means that our only copies are very late, and the text itself could have been composed at any point between the original poem's composition and the surviving manuscripts' nineteenth-century acquisition by British colonists. This commentary tells us that the original *Sasadāvata* was composed 'in the time when, in accordance with the ten duties of kingship, the auspicious *king* Līlāvatī was ruling' (emphasis mine).[78] This is an explicit rejection of the claim that the title *rājan*, 'king', was only available (grammatically and conceptually) to those who were normatively masculine. For this commentator, at least, no ambiguity was necessary: Līlāvatī was not a 'princess', not a 'consort of', nor someone whose proximity to power was best described in multivalent adjectival clauses. Despite her femininity—described so explicitly in the *Sasadāvata* itself—Līlāvatī was a king.

[75] Numismatic data are drawn from H. W Codrington, *Ceylon coins and currency* (Colombo: Printed by A. C. Richards, 1924).

[76] Susan Solway (ed.), *Medieval coins and seals: Constructing identity, signifying power* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

[77] And, indeed, they have been found as far afield as Mogadishu: G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, 'Coins from Mogadishu, c. 1300 to 1700', *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, vol. 3, 1963, pp. 179–200. This speaks to the interconnectedness of the wider Indian Ocean region in this time, on which see the essays in Senake Bandaranayake (ed.), *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the sea* (Colombo: Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO, 1990).

[78] *Śri Raja Līlāvati svāmīn vahansē dasarājadharmmayen rājjaya karaṇa kalhiyaṭa… me buddha stōtraya suvasē karami yi seyi, Sasadāvata sannaya*, v. 14.

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Table 2: Regnal titles inscribed on extant coinage.

Monarch	Regnal dates	Inscription
Vijayabāhu I	1058–1114	śrī | vija | ya bā | hu
Parākramabāhu I (the Great)	1153–1186	śrī | parā | krama | bāhu
Niśśaṅka Malla	1187–1196	śrī | kāle[ṅ] | ga la[ṅ] | keja
Coḍagaṅga	1196–1197	śrī | coḍa | ga[ṅ]ga | deva
Līlāvatī	1197–1200, 1209, 1210	śrī | rāja | līlā | vatī
Sāhasa Malla	1200–1202	śrī | mat sā | hasa | malla
Dharmāśoka	1208–1209	śrī | dharmmā | ṣoka | devaḥ
Parākramabāhu II	1236–1271	śrī | parā | krama | bāhu
Vijayabāhu II	1271–1273	śri | vija | ya ba | hu
Bhuvanekabāhu I	1273–1284	śrī | bhuva | naika | bāhu

These sources together indicate some details about kingship and gender in early second millennium Sri Lanka that have previously been obscured. None of the grammatically feminine terms we typically translate as 'queen' is used appositionally to refer to Līlāvatī, and each of them seems to have a more specific meaning within the hierarchy of royal wives. For Līlāvatī, a regnant sovereign in her own right, these terms therefore did not accurately describe her position. This necessitated a certain creativity in descriptions of her sovereignty. In those sources that were likely to have been most closely controlled by Līlāvatī herself—her inscriptions and coins—we see indications that she claimed for herself some of the trappings of royal masculinity: *viruda* names and kingly titles. However, literary sources—further from her direct control—seem less inclined to repeat this claim. Even in the poems she, or those of her court, patronized, she is not referred to as *rājan.* Retrospective works like the *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Rājāvaliya* find other ways to describe her sovereignty, which do not so clearly attribute otherwise exclusively male terms and titles to her.

To be clear, I am not making here a dichotomist argument for material over literary sources. In the few extant inscriptions of Kalyāṇavatī, Poḷonnaruva's other female sovereign, regnal titles are again suspiciously absent. And autonomous local warlords like Bhāma, even while including both women in lists of those who ruled (*raja kaḷa*) and dating his own reign by that of Kalyāṇavatī,[79] similarly use oblique descriptions such as

[79]This is, significantly, a *posthumous* dating: Bhāma's inscription was made in Kalyāṇavatī's eighth regnal year, while she appears to have died in her sixth or seventh. Such posthumous dating is not unusual. Before Parākramabāhu's 1153 unification of Rohaṇa, Dakkhinadesa, and Rājaraṭa, the rulers of these three kingdoms routinely dated their own inscriptions from the ascension of Jayabāhu I (r. 1114–1116), the last monarch to rule over a unified Lanka. See, for example, *Epigraphia Zeylanica* I:2, in which Gajabāhu dates his own reign to the twenty-fourth regnal year of Jayabāhu I. This indicates that, despite Bhāma's avoiding a regnal title for Kalyāṇavatī, he still perceived her sovereignty to be more valid than that of her successor, even a year or more after her death.

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'she who achieved the highest position within Sri Lanka'.[80] Epigraphy was not, in other words, simply a more 'feminist' medium. Rather, Līlāvatī's use of material culture was a specific and deliberate policy on her own behalf, one which merits careful attention. This policy doubtless played out across other, more ephemeral, media now lost to us: her speech, her dress, her court ceremonial. Nonetheless, what we have available still suggests a particular deliberation and nuance in how she negotiated gendered expectations of sovereignty, one primarily available to us through material evidence.

Taken together, this has several implications for modern scholarship. Most immediately, it necessitates a reconsideration of the language we use to describe and analyse the relationship(s) between gender and power in premodern Sri Lanka, and particularly of the language we use to designate Sri Lanka's monarchs. It seems to me that the title 'queen' is a poor fit for Līlāvatī, as it designates (in both medieval South Asian languages and in modern English) a 'feminine' relationship to power distinct from masculine 'kingship'. Both Līlāvatī and the monastic literati who wrote about her seem to have consistently avoided describing her with such a distinctly 'feminine' title, beyond the strictly limited context of her consortial relationship (as a *mahiṣī*) with her late husband. To continue to refer to Līlāvatī as a 'queen' in our scholarship does not just obscure that nuance, it is an inaccurate representation of the primary evidence we have available to us.

This raises, however, a broader conceptual issue: if Līlāvatī cannot be called a 'queen', how should we refer to her? The use of gender-neutral terms such as 'monarch' or 'sovereign', as in this article, can help to avoid this issue. But, unless we apply this practice broadly, we risk such terms becoming once again a mark of difference. Scholars have long criticized the assumption that 'gender' is 'something which… only "happens" or needs to be taken into account when women are present'.[81] We cannot risk gender-neutral royal titles only being deployed in the 'abnormal' case of women or non-binary persons sitting on a throne, while normatively masculine 'kingship' remains the unmarked default. A third alternative would be to simply call Līlāvatī, and monarchs like her, by the masculine title 'king'.[82] This would serve a heuristically useful purpose of calling attention to the inconsistent gender assumptions implicit in such language.[83] But while some evidence—the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* commentary, and her coinage—does refer to Līlāvatī by the title *rājan*, this term was clearly deployed only in selective contexts: it does not appear in her inscriptions, for example, let alone in the monastic narratives. To call her 'king' in all cases might therefore also be missing Līlāvatī's point; her self-presentation as a ruler appears more nuanced, more ambiguous, than any single term seems capable of capturing.

[80] *…sirilakhi agatän pat Abhā Salamevan Kalyāṇavatī…*, *Epigraphia Zeylanica* V:12.

[81] Katherine Lewis, *Kingship and masculinity in late medieval England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 4.

[82] As advocated by William Monter, *The rise of female kings in Europe, 1300–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[83] Compare here the approach taken by some feminist theologians, who refer to God by female pronouns 'specifically to decenter the default use of the male pronoun that reinforces the idea that God is male and therefore inaccessible' to women: Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered morality: Classical Islamic ethics of the self, family, and society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 251. We might also recall the term 'herstory', which again serves to usefully highlight the feminist critique of androcentric 'histories'. The use of such provocative language can be a powerful tool for initiating meaningful dialogue about hitherto unspoken assumptions.

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The problem is not, in other words, merely a matter of identifying a more 'accurate' term or translation to be applied to a single medieval case study. Rather, the struggle we face in characterizing Līlāvatī's identity as a woman in power is symptomatic of a far broader issue: the extent to which modern thought, and therefore modern languages, conflate masculinity, power, and kingship, and so mark out 'queenship' as something distinct.

Conclusions: The making of a modern queen

Our medieval sources present us with two conflicting accounts of Līlāvatī's sovereignty. In one, preserved in literary sources, she was the consort of a powerful man and, through the agency of other powerful men, she came to occupy the throne—but never at the expense of her 'femininity' (expressed in normatively acceptable ways). In the second, more evident in the material products of her reign, she performed sovereignty in what appears to have been a more masculine-coded fashion, including (in certain circumstances) claims to the otherwise masculine title *rājan*.

This second account, and the more nuanced performance of gendered power expressed therein, appears to have been lost in the transition to modernity. When colonial powers set out to create authoritative narratives of their new possession—'Ceylon'—it was the monastic *vaṃśa*s to which they first turned. Prior to the 'discovery' of these texts by Europeans, colonial scholars had available to them only oral sources, 'wild stories', on which they placed little historical value.[84] But once the *vaṃśa*s were published in translation—first by Edward Upham in 1833 and then by George Turnour in 1837[85]—colonial scholars began to produce historical texts at pace. Turnour's own *Epitome* was soon followed by Knighton's *History of Ceylon* and then Tennant's *Ceylon*,[86] a trio of texts so influential that while 'later Sri Lankan writers challenged particular assessments made by Knighton and Tennent, they did so within the ideological framework put forward by these authors'.[87]

This ideological framework was drawn from the *vaṃśa*s, but read through a decidedly Victorian lens. In these texts Turnour, Knighton, and Tennent found a vision of the

[84]John D. Rogers, 'Historical images in the British period', in *Sri Lanka: History and the roots of conflict*, (ed.) Jonathan Spencer (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), p. 88.

[85]Edward Upham (trans), *The Mahávansi, the Rájá-Ratnácari, and the Rájávali: Forming the Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon: Also a Collection of Tracts Illustrative of the Doctrines and Literature of Buddhism* (London: Padbury, Allen and Co., 1833); George Turnour, *The Maháwanṣo in Roman Characters, with the Translation Subjoined; and an Introductory Essay on Páli Buddhistical Literature*, 2 vols (Ceylon: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1837). On Turnour, Upham, and the agency of Sri Lankan monks in 'presenting' the *Mahāvaṃsa* to its 'discovers', see Jonathan S. Walters and Matthew B. Colley, 'Making history: George Turnour, Edward Upham and the "discovery" of the Mahavamsa', *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 32, no. 1–2, 2006, pp. 135–168.

[86]George Turnour, *An Epitome of the History of Ceylon Compiled from Native Annals, and the First Twenty Chapters of the Mahawanso* (Ceylon: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1836); William Knighton, *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Present Time; with an Appendix, Containing an Account of Its Present Condition* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1845); James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Physical, Historical and Topographical: With Notices of Its Natural History, Antiquities and Productions* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859).

[87]Rogers, 'Historical images in the British period', p. 90.

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world well suited to their expectations: the easy equivalence of power and masculinity, the belief that 'kingship' was necessarily masculine, and the exceptionalization of female regnancy as a phenomenon necessitating explanation with reference to male agency. Turnour provides a useful illustration of the extent to which these men were concerned with 'proper' heteropatriarchal relations, particularly when mapped onto royal women. A verse in the *Mahāvaṃsa* refers to 500 '*kaññā*' ('maidens') and 500 '*antepurikaitthī*' ('women of the inner city'),[88] which Upham refers to collectively as 'sacred virgins'.[89] Turnour seizes on this as evidence of the inadequacy of Upham's translation, on the grounds that these groups constituted '*matron* queens and *pleasure* women'.[90] The proper delimination of queenly ranks, based on their sexual histories, was clearly a high priority to Turnour, as it was to the scholars who followed him.

Līlāvatī, and the other women who laid claim to power in Lanka's long history, were no exception to this concern with proper gender roles. In the brief summaries of Līlāvatī's reign provided by Turnour, Knighton, and Tennent, we can identify two shared interpretive moves.[91] First, all three scholars insist that Līlāvatī ruled in name only, and that the actual work of rulership was carried out by powerful men within her court. This is a plausible interpretation of the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s account, in which (as discussed above) each of her three reigns was initiated by the agency of a general (*senapati*), who then occupied central roles at court (attested in the introductions of the *Dāṭhāvaṃsa* and *Sasadāvata*). But the support of powerful military leaders and other non-royal elites was an increasingly common feature of Sri Lankan royal courts throughout the early second millennium;[92] we should wonder, therefore, that it is only the agency of Līlāvatī which is so effaced. The downplaying of women's agency in premodern, or even early modern, South Asia is hardly a phenomenon of colonial-era scholarship only. As Kashi Gomez notes, scholars confronted with evidence of female agency often express 'remarkable anxiety over its attribution' and are quick to suggest the possibility of male intervention behind the scenes.[93] The second interpretive move of our nineteenth-century scholars is less plausible. All three claim that the first of Līlāvatī's general-cum-ministers not only ruled in her name, but that he was, apparently, her husband, whom she married after the death of Parākramabāhu I. No evidence is provided for Līlāvatī's supposed remarriage, and it is certainly not attested in any of the primary sources I have examined (including the *Mahāvaṃsa*). It seems, in other words, that these scholars simply did not consider it possible that a woman would

[88] *tadā tu anulādevī, pañcakaññāsatehi ca antepurikaitthīnaṃ, saddhiṃ pañcasatehi ca, Mahāvaṃsa* 18:9.

[89] Upham, *Mahávansi*, p. 100.

[90] Turnour, *Epitome*, pp. xviii–xix; emphases in original.

[91] The accounts of Līlāvatī are found at, respectively, ibid., p. 43; Knighton, *History*, p. 150; Tennent, *Ceylon*, p. 411.

[92] On this phenomenon, in the slightly later Gampola period, see, most comprehensively, Philip Friedrich, 'Merchants, ministers, and monks: Making Buddhist power and place in medieval Sri Lanka', PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2020.

[93] Gomez, 'Sanskrit and the labour of gender', p. 171. Gomez suggests, anecdotally, that such suggestions are often among the first made in her presentations on Sanskrit commentaries written by women. I will add to this my own experiences, in which the question of royal involvement in the production of inscriptions seems only to be raised when discussing the inscriptions of Līlāvatī or Kalyāṇavatī, not those of their male peers.

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remain in power, in proximity to a powerful man they assumed to be ruling in her name and not be married.

The great irony was, of course, that Turnour, Knighton, and Tennent were themselves citizens and servants of their own female monarch, Victoria (r. 1837–1901). This was, to be fair, before the death of Victoria's husband, and therefore they had yet to access the undeniable proof that a widow could remain in power, and in association with powerful men, without remarrying. But they could hardly plead ignorance to the politics of gendered titles. Less than a century earlier, the Habsburg monarch Marie-Thérèse (r. 1740–1780) refused to be crowned empress-consort of the Holy Roman empire explicitly because she considered the title to be lower than her *king*ship of Hungary and Bohemia.[94] And yet earlier, Christina (r. 1632–1654) was crowned as *king* of Sweden, specifically to avoid the implication that she was a 'mere' consort.[95] 'Female kings', in other words, were hardly unknown in Europe. In fact, it seems as though the female monarchs of the British empire—from Mary II (r. 1689–1694), who refused to rule independently from her male consort William III, to Victoria herself, who so publicly emphasized her matriarchal qualities and her devotion to her deceased husband—were relative outliers.[96] Britain's imperial rulers, in other words, were particularly engaged in the public performance of binarized gender roles, which reserved 'power' for masculine 'kings'.

This was the context, of course, in which emerged Foucault's great regulatory regime, and the ever-tightening manacles of dichotomous 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.[97] And this was the context in which our colonial scholars laboured to make sense of the history of Sri Lanka, and in which they first came across the literary and didactic texts described above. From that evidence our first modern histories of Sri Lanka were fashioned: histories which reflected back the British empire's assumptions about kingship's inherent masculinity and therefore cast Līlāvatī as a 'queen'. They both misread her coinage and even claimed that she must have married her prime minister. I am not suggesting that such a vision of kingship's masculinity was

[94] Anne-Sophie Banakas, *Les portraits de Marie-Thérèse: Représentation et lien politique dans la Monarchie des Habsbourg (1740–1780)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), p. 366.

[95] Julia Holm, 'How to dress a female king: Manifestations of gender and power in the wardrobe of Christina of Sweden', in *Sartorial politics in early modern Europe: Fashioning women*, (ed.) Erin Griffey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), p. 185. Holm notes that Christina herself preferred this spelling to the more usual Kristina.

[96] Of course, women ruling as 'queens' was hardly unique to Britain: Maria I ruled (1734–1816) as hereditary queen (*rainha*) of Portugal alongside her husband as king (*rei*). But Britain's long succession of female rulers, alongside an increasing minimization of royal authority through constitutionalism, has prompted at least one historian to argue for the British crown's 'feminization', 'emasculation', and even 'castration': David Cannadine, 'From biography to history: Writing the modern British monarchy', *Historical Research*, vol. 77, no. 197, 2004, p. 303. Orr softens this language, arguing instead for the crown's 'domestication' over a slightly longer period: Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'The feminization of the monarchy 1780–1910: Royal masculinity and female empowerment', in *The monarchy and the British nation, 1780 to the present*, (ed.) Andrzej Olechnowicz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 79–107.

[97] Foucault, *The history of sexuality*. For important critiques with respect to Asia, see Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, (eds) Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271–313; Stoler, *Race and the education of desire*; and Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of desire: Male-male sexuality in Japanese discourse 1600–1950* (California: University of California Press, 1999).

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invented wholesale by colonial scholars: it (or, at least, a version of it) was, as I have argued above, certainly widespread in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. But, crucially, it was not held to be universally true, and should never have been taken as a neutral depiction of the natural state of affairs. Like all such social constructions, it could be and *was* challenged, negotiated, and subverted. The near-ubiquity of kingship's masculinity may have *necessitated* such challenges by women who held power in their own right—but it did not dictate the nature of these challenges, nor how they were received.

It is easy to accept the strategies adopted in textual sources as adequate and comprehensive descriptions of the social world, as did Turnour, Knighton, and Tennent. Such strategies present themselves, after all, as timeless and ahistorical, and so paint their critics as dissidents or revisionists. But the dominance of masculinity is far from unassailable, both in history and in the present. As scholars of premodern South Asia, we must embrace such dissidence. The alternative is to simply repeat the colonial-era ideology that a more-or-less stable 'masculinity' has simply always been dominant and always been the default. But this ideology, like all essentialist logics, is ultimately incoherent. It constructs frail boundaries between 'men' and 'not men', between 'those who hold power' and 'those upon whom power may act', which are arbitrary and therefore surmountable. The case of Līlāvatī presents us with, instead, a more transcendent performance of kingship, which serves as a powerful reminder that the politics of gender need not be so binary.

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