

CILAPPATIKARAM (THE LAY OF THE ANKLET)

Ilango Atikal

(c. 500-600 CE)

Reading

The Cilappatikaram of Ilango Atikal: An Epic of South India. translation by R. Parthasarathy (1993). Columbia University Press

Overview

The Lay of the Anklet (Cilappatikaram) is an epic composed in Tamil probably in the 5th or 6th century CE, most likely by a Jain monk named Ilango Atikal. Consisting of more than 5,000 verses, the epic story is divided into three sections, each set in a capital of one of the three Tamil kingdoms: the eastern port of Pukar, capital of the Chola kingdom; Madurai, the inland capital of the Pandya kingdom; and Vanchi, capital of the Chera kingdom on the west coast (modern-day Kerala).

Cultural Significance

The extraordinary significance of this story for south Indian culture begins with the fact that it is an epic composed not in Sanskrit but in Tamil, the classical language of the south. The story of a wronged woman who demands and gets justice from a king has an appeal across cultures, and there are similar stories in Sanskrit, but the element of revenge that transposes the woman into a goddess has made the story extremely popular in the south. The epic is also firmly rooted in south Indian geography, with each of the three sections set in one of the capitals of the three southern kingdoms. The apotheosis of the heroine further localises the story because Kannaki becomes worshipped in hundreds of small temples, in villages and towns throughout the Tamil-speaking region of South India and also in Sri Lanka (where she is called 'Pattini'). Even in areas where she is not actually worshipped, her story is widely known and told in a variety of media, from folk-tale to open-air drama. This is hardly surprising when we consider that the bare bones of the narrative is a satisfying crime story: innocent man killed; victim's wife demands revenge; guilty person punished. So significant is Kannaki to Tamil culture that she has been adopted as a symbol of political regionalism. In recent times, successive governments of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu have erected statues to the heroine. When one of those statues had to be removed, for road reconstruction, and placed in a museum, there was public protest. As a result, the statue was retrieved and placed on the beach front in Madras, where it stands today.

Story

The story begins in the port city of Pukar, not far from modern-day Tanjore on the east coast of south India. The hero, Kovalan, is a young and successful merchant in the city. Kovalan gets married to a young girl, named Kannaki, who is the daughter of another merchant in the same city. The marriage proves to be a happy one, although no children are born. Then the drama kicks off when Kovalan falls in love with a temple dancer named Madhavi, who is older and more experienced than his innocent wife. Kovalan is attracted not only by her beauty but also by her skill in singing and reciting poetry. Soon, Kovalan deserts his wife altogether and takes up living with the dancer. Although such liaisons were not uncommon at the time, especially among the upper classes, Kovalan's parents are disgusted by their son's behaviour. Kannaki, his abandoned wife, however, says nothing against her husband and devotes herself to caring for her aging parents-in-law, something that Kovalan himself should be doing.

Months pass without any change in the situation except that Kovalan has gone into debt after selling his assets, of gold and jewellery, in order to purchase fine things for Madhavi. A decisive moment comes when Kovalan becomes jealous. The whole town is celebrating a Hindu festival, and he is

listening to Madhavi sing as he lounges on soft pillows. Then he hears a particular line of poetry that strikes him as odd. It is a declaration of love by a woman for a man, but the description of the man does not fit him. At first, he is suspicious and then laughs at himself when he finally realises how wrong and stupid he has been to leave his wife. He returns to Kannaki, but there remains the problem of money: Kovalan has squandered everything on the sensual dancer. Meanwhile, when Madhavi discovers that Kovalan has left her, she sends him messages pleading with him to return, but he does not.

While Kovalan regrets his past actions and agonises over a way out of his financial troubles, Kannaki comes up with a solution. She will sell a pair of gold anklets given to her by her mother for her wedding. Kovalan is shocked, but she is adamant, and both realise that, although selling the family heirloom is disgraceful, it is a practical solution to their woes.



(pair of anklets that resemble those described in the story)

Kannaki and Kovalan then decide to leave Pukar and make a new life for themselves in Madurai, which is the setting for the second section of the story. Without any money, the husband and wife pair are only able to make the long journey on foot and only with the aid of local people, particularly several Jain nuns and monks whom they meet on the way. Having reached the outskirts of the city, Kovalan leaves his wife in the care of a cowherd woman and travels alone into the great city, where he hopes to sell her anklets. He takes only one anklet, however, and leaves the other with her, for safekeeping. As Kovalan approaches the city, the author describes in detail its soaring temple, gleaming palace and many bustling streets. It is obviously an affluent city, and Kovalan is confident that he can make a good sale and restart his life there. Walking through the crowded streets, Kovalan finds a goldsmith and shows him the anklet. The goldsmith tells Kovalan that he is interested but that he must first show it to the Queen of Madurai since she is the only person wealthy enough to buy it. In fact, however, the goldsmith himself has previously stolen one of the queen's anklets, which appears to be identical to Kannaki's, and he now sees an opportunity to place the blame for that theft on Kovalan. The scheming goldsmith tells the king that the man who has stolen the queen's anklet is waiting in his shop. The king, who has fallen out with the queen over some undisclosed issue, is anxious to win her back and acts impulsively. Without considering the reliability of the goldsmith's character and his story, he sends his soldiers to the shop. Kovalan is arrested and brought before the king, who is deaf to his protestations of innocence. Kovalan is then executed. When news of his death reaches Kannaki, still waiting outside the city, she flies to the palace. Enraged with the injustice done to her husband, she proves to the king that the ankle in Kovalan's possession was not the queen's missing anklet. It was, instead, her own. In order to convince the king, Kannaki shows him the anklet that she has, which matches the one Kovalan had. The crucial 'evidence' is produced when she breaks her anklet to reveal the rubies inside; by contrast, the queen's anklets hold pearls. Overcome with guilt at his terrible misjudgement, the king dies of grief, followed by a similar demise for the queen.

Their deaths, however, do not satisfy Kannaki, who still wants justice for the execution of her innocent husband. In a final burst of anger, she tears off one of her breasts and flings it at the city, which is then engulfed in flames. Now, the goddess of the city appears to Kannaki and reveals her past life and that of Kovalan. In a previous existence, Kovalan has accidentally killed Kannaki's husband, after which Kannaki committed suicide. Thus, both of them have sinned and that is the reason for their present suffering. After this revelation of the cause of the present tragedy, Kannaki withdraws her curse and the flames eating up the city are extinguished. Kannaki then herself withdraws to a hill in the distant Chera kingdom, where she dies and from where she is lifted up to the sky and reunited

with Kovalan. On earth, the story of her purity and loyalty and righteous anger spreads far and wide. She is worshipped as a goddess.

The final, third section of the story is brief. When the king of the Chera Kingdom hears of the goddess Kannaki, he is impressed, particularly because she was deified in his realm. Determined to honour her in an appropriate way, he undertakes a long journey to north India and into the Himalayas, where he searches for the right kind of stone. Having found it, he fights off several armies and has it brought back to his south Indian kingdom. Then the king has the stone sculpted into a statue of Kannaki, which he places in a newly-built temple on the hill where she died.

Themes

Justice The drama in this epic story is propelled by the need for truth and justice. This theme is, in fact, explicitly stated in the Prologue to the poem, which says (in part): 'I shall compose a poem...to explain these truths: even kings, if they break the law, have their necks wrung by *dharma* [right conduct] and karma ever manifests itself, and is fulfilled. I shall call the poem the *Cilappatikaram*, the epic of the anklet, because the anklet brings these truths to light.' It is significant that the poet here says 'even kings.' Kings in ancient south India were considered the representatives of divinity on earth. The word for 'palace' and for 'temple' is the same in ancient Tamil. Kings are expected to stand for truth and justice. If they falter, the kingdom suffers. The indiscretions of lesser figures, such as the 'hero' Kovalan, who 'cheats' on his wife, can be dismissed as comparatively insignificant. Even lies, the deliberate falsehoods of the villainous goldsmith, are considered less important in the grand scheme of an epic poem: it is noteworthy that the goldsmith's fate is hardly considered at all in the conclusion of the story. It is only the actions of a king who command our attention. And, here, too, we can see that the king does not lie; he is not untruthful. Instead, his crime is his failure to dispense justice. He condemns himself with these words: 'The protection of the subjects of this southern kingdom has failed in my hands, for the first time. Let me depart from this life.' Although the king has failed to dispense justice, it must still be administered, and that obligation falls to Kannaki, the wronged woman. In a violent and disturbing scene, she tears off her left breast and hurls it at the city in a gesture of revenge. But revenge is not justice, and Kannaki soon asks that the innocent people of the city be spared from the flames. From beginning to end, this is a story of justice, of the need for justice, of justice denied and of the consequences of that denial.

Revenge To a modern non-Indian audience, and even to a modern non-Tamil audience, perhaps the most inexplicable aspect of this ancient epic is the scene, just described, in which the heroine rips off her breast and throws it at the city, causing it to go up in flames. This can only be explained by reference to the Tamil term *ananku*, which refers to a divine, female force of fury, revenge and retribution. It is what also explains the transformation of Kannaki from a meek and docile wife, at the beginning of the story, into a woman of ferocious revenge at the end. And it further explains the final act of the story, in which Kannaki becomes a goddess, capable (like most south Indian goddesses) of wreaking revenge on the guilty, be they a king or a peasant. A woman's breast is seen as the symbol of this destructive force of retribution (perhaps because it is also the most obvious symbol of womanhood). In any case, the *Cilappatikaram* is the most powerful literary expression of this theme of revenge by a woman. Kannaki is the prototypical figure of female retribution. When the king fails, she fulfils his role. Even after death, she remains a figure of revenge as a goddess who is capable of striking down wrongdoers, whether they be guilty of sexual abuse, fraud or betrayal. If the king falters, retribution falls to these figures of revenge.

Money Another, less edifying but nonetheless prominent, theme of this epic is the importance of money. The story opens with a description of the affluent merchants' homes in the port city of Pukar on the east coast of south India. Pukar, an historical city, was a key node on the trade routes linking southeast Asia, India, Africa and the Roman Empire, in both its eastern and western divisions. In the story, the wives of the merchants display ornaments of coral and pearl, many encrusted with rubies and other semi-precious stones. Money is also a key factor in many of the significant events of the story. Kovalan, the flawed hero and son of a rich merchant, makes his first of many mistakes when he 'purchases' a mistress by offering '1008 pieces of gold' to buy her garland. It is an outrageous sum, deliberately exaggerated in order to make the point that the hero is a spendthrift. His expenditure on his lover drags him to the brink of bankruptcy, and when he goes back to his wife, he is in financial ruin. His impoverishment is also solved by money, this time in the form of the heroine's golden anklet. But Kovalan's eagerness to sell the anklet leads to trust a treacherous goldsmith,

which leads to his tragic death. Then, finally, in the concluding section of the story, a Chera king (not the Pandyan king who is responsible for Kovalan's death) leads a military expedition to north India in order to find the kind stone with which to make a suitable statue for Kannaki, who is now a goddess. The resources necessary to outfit such a long expedition are detailed by the poet, including the exact number of gold bars and silver coins required. Even the reputation of the goddess, it seems, is a financial transaction.

Characters

Kovalan Kovalan is the hero of the story, the son of a merchant who marries Kannaki, deserts her and then returns to her.

Madhavi Madhavi is a temple dancer, a profession associated with low morality, who ensnares Kovalan, lives with him and bears his child.

Kannaki Kannaki is the heroine and chief character of the story. She is married to Kovalan but is then abandoned when he takes up with Madhavi. After they are reunited, he is killed and she takes revenge against the king and the kingdom responsible.

Kavunthi Kavunthi is a Jain nun, whom Kovalan and Kannaki meet on their travels to the city of Madurai. She plays the role of protector and advisor to the beleaguered couple.

Neduncheliyan Neduncheliyan is the King of the Pandyan empire, with his capital at Madurai. He is an historical figure from the 3rd century CE.

Goldsmith The goldsmith is the villain of the story. Employed by the royal court, he steals one of the queen's anklets and then attempts to frame Kovalan for the crime.



(statue of Kannaki on Madras beach front, holding the famous anklet in her hand)

Kannaki (Avenging)

Character Kannaki (whose name means ‘beautiful eyes’) is the heroine and main character of this tragic epic story. It is her anklet that is celebrated in the title (of which a more literal translation would be ‘The Power of the Anklet’), and it is her tragedy that she avenges and in doing so becomes a woman who is worshipped as a goddess through the southernmost parts of India (even today). When she first appears in the story, she is young and beautiful, the daughter of a prosperous merchant, and the bride of Kovalan, son of another merchant. Kannaki is presented as ‘flawless’, with ‘a beaming face, equal only to the moon’ and with speech that ‘flowed like honey.’ She is the paragon of a wife, sweet, innocent and loyal. As the story unfolds, this naïve girl undergoes a major transformation. First, she faces her husband’s infidelity with stoic submissiveness, refusing to either blame him or give way to anger and pride. Next, she is able to take charge of her husband, when he returns to her, and to chart a path for them as they try to build a new life. Finally, at the end of the story, she emerges as a woman of righteous anger and decisive action, shaming a king and demanding justice for her wrongly executed husband. Many scholars have pointed out that these two widely different images—the docile wife and the avenging wife—are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. That coin is the ancient south Indian concept of chastity (*karpū*). This notion of chastity covers both physical and mental spheres, enjoining the wife to be faithful in word, action and thought. By restraining her physical urges, it is said, Kannaki built up an inner reservoir of strength that she releases in the end, targeting the king who killed her husband. Kannaki is also, at the end, an outspoken and articulate woman, who argues her case well in the royal court of Madurai. From one angle, Kannaki is a typical Hindu widow, who dies after her husband’s death, but from another, she is the polar opposite of the self-sacrificial *sati* (widow on the funeral pyre). She marches right into the king’s assembly and demands justice for the death of her husband. It is for her principled and brave act, which today we might call ‘speaking truth to power’, that she is deified and worshipped.

Activities As the daughter and then the wife of a wealthy merchant with servants, Kannaki has few domestic chores. Instead, she spends time listening to songs and watching dance performances. She also sits in front a mirror and takes hours to adorn herself with ornaments and oil her hair. She sometimes looks outside the latticed windows of her luxurious home and watches the public ceremonies held in the streets (thus allowing the poet to describe these events for the reader). Born into and married into a Jain family, Kannaki observes the ritual of Jainism (which at that period differed little from those of Hinduism). However, when Kannaki and her husband travel penniless and on foot to Madurai, she does the things an ordinary woman would do, cooking and serving food, collecting firewood and sleeping outside.

Illustrative moments

Loyal One of Kannaki’s most admirable characteristic is her steadfast loyalty to her husband, Kovalan. This fidelity does not waver an iota throughout the long epic, but it is most dramatically illustrated when she is abandoned by him. Only months after their marriage, described in glowing terms of bliss, Kovalan finds himself unable to resist the sexual allure of a dancing woman, Madhavi. Although Kannaki is unbearably sad (the poem describes how she no longer dresses with care, how her beautiful eyes are hollow, how her face no long shines, etc.), she never utters a word against her husband. Instead, she slips off her bracelets, dresses in drab clothes and refuses to eat more than a meagre amount of food (in imitation of a widow). Other women in her extended family and neighbourhood urge her not to grieve and to confront the woman who has stolen her husband, but she refuses to do anything that might bring ill-repute to her husband. Here, in this moment, we have a glimpse of the inner strength of a young wife, who appears frail and passive. No one has told her how to act, and she seems instinctively to know what to do and not to do. Even when she hears the news that her rival (Madhavi) has borne Kovalan’s child, Kannaki remains strong and resists the temptation to publicly rebuke both Madhavi and Kovalan. Competing with the dancer would only lower her self-esteem and her image in her network of kin. Standing firm, refusing to take the bait of hatred or jealousy, Kannaki shows us that she is capable of even greater actions.

Practical Despite her dreamy beauty, Kannaki is also a practical-minded person. We have already seen (in the ‘moment’ described above) how she keeps a level head during the terrible torment when her husband left her for a mistress, but an even more important decision is taken when he returns to her. After the happy tears that are shed when the couple are reunited, they have to face a distressing reality—they have no money because Kovalan has spent all his assets (gold and jewellery) on his mistress, including the 1008 pieces of gold he used to buy her a garland for her debut performance in

the royal court. 'Don't worry,' Kannaki says (in so many words), 'you have my anklets. Sell them.' These are not ordinary ornaments. They are made of heavy gold and filled with rubies that ring when she moves her gentle feet. They are a gift from her own mother, given at the time of her wedding. Now, however, Kannaki realises that these anklets can lift them out of poverty, and she gives them up without a second thought. After returning to her, Kovalan, the clever merchant, has constantly complained of their impoverishment, being unable to find a solution. It is the practical Kannaki who knows what is necessary. Even after he says that he cannot take her mother's gift from her, she insists, pointing out that sentiment must sometimes take a second seat to necessity. Kovalan is suitably impressed by her thinking, and so is the reader.

Assertive All this—her loyalty and practicality—would make Kannaki a worthy epic heroine, but there is more. Much more. In the most dramatic scene in the story, Kannaki proves herself to be a decisive and articulate woman. The situation is that she has learned of her husband's death, executed on the word of the king of Madurai. But Kannaki not only knows that he is innocent (he did not, as charged, steal the queen's anklet), she also learns that the king acted on impulse, without any proper evidence or trial or deliberation. Furious, she storms into the king's chamber and astonishes the royal court by her impassioned words. She doesn't speak as a suffering widow but rather as an advocate of truth and justice. 'Are there women here who could endure this injustice done to their husbands? Are there any good people in this city, who look after their children? Can there be a god here, who allows a king to use his sword to slay an innocent man?' Then she speaks directly to the king and accuses him of misjudgement and incompetence. 'You are a murderer,' she says, in effect. To prove her sensational accusation, she shows him her anklet, which matches the one Kovalan had and was mistaken for the one stolen from the queen. Then, in a final gesture, worthy of the best television courtroom drama, she smashes the anklet on the ground, releasing the rubies inside. The queen's stolen anklet had pearls, and now the king knows he has erred. Overcome by grief and shame, the king dies. All as the result of the courageous words and actions of the once-docile Kannaki.

Kovalan (Sensualist)

Character Kovalan in the hero of this tragic epic, but takes a back seat to the heroine and is a very flawed hero, indeed. He has all the advantages in life. He is young, handsome, wealthy, from a high caste and married to a wife who will prove herself to be blameless. Like many privileged young men of classical Indian literature, he is a sensualist, interested in beauty, not only in the arts, especially song and instrumental music, but also in women. Early on in the story, shortly after his marriage to Kannaki, he falls in love with a dancer named Madhavi. He is not, however, irredeemable, and is capable of genuine feelings. Eventually he recognises his error and returns to his wife. But he is also an irresponsible person, spending all his money on his mistress and later leaving his wife all alone when he goes into the city to sell her anklet. In addition, he is gullible, falling for the goldsmith's trick that ends with his execution. Once or twice, he shows admirable traits, such as admitting when he has made a mistake and having the courage to start a new life. Moreover, we do not doubt that he does love his wife, even if he mistreats her at the beginning. Yet, it is his actions that are ultimately to blame for the tragedy that ruins his life and that of his wife. In brief, Kovalan is not a malicious or evil man—no hero could be that—but he is weak, lacks judgement and fails in his chief duty to protect his wife.

Activities Kovalan is the son of an affluent man, who enjoys the privileges of his background. He does not work. Instead, he is a *flaneur*, who derives pleasure from wandering about the port city of Pukar, stopping to visit friends, to attend events and particularly to go to the cultural entertainments at the royal palace. There, relaxing on soft cushions, he likes to chew betel nut leaves as a mild stimulant. He has a special love of music played on the *vina*, an ancient south Indian plucked instrument, something like a zither or a *sitar*.

Illustrative moments

Weak Perhaps the most serious of Kovalan's flaws is that he lacks strength of character. Rich, handsome, a lover of the arts, he is too enamoured of beauty, too saturated with pleasure to make mature decisions. Often we see him lost in contemplation as he listens to music, blissfully aloof from any consideration of realities around him. The best illustration of his weakness occurs when he first falls in love, if love it is, with the dancer Madhavi. The scene takes place in the royal household, where the king and queen preside over sumptuous entertainments. On this evening, a special audience is invited to watch Madhavi dance. Kovalan, who is among the onlookers, watches her

movements, which are described in detail—the gentle steps, the flashing eye and the swaying hips. He is lost, 'as in a mist that sweeps upon the shore and blinds even good men.' Although he is married, apparently happily so, he does not struggle to fight against this infatuation but instead enjoys the pleasure of giving in to it. Worst of all, while he could have simply remained silent about his admiration for the dancer, he actually makes a public gesture of taking her as his mistress. The king has given Madhavi a beautiful garland, which is then offered to anyone in the audience who wishes to purchase it by handing over 1008 pieces of gold. The garland, of course, is not worth that much money, but purchasing it is symbolic of taking the dancer as a mistress. Without hesitation, Kovalan offers the gold and becomes Madhavi's lover. The whole scene—dancing, music, clothing, royal assembly—is filled with poetry, beauty and wealth. Kovalan, unable to resist these attractions, is captivated, with scarcely a thought for the wife he has now abandoned.

Sensitive Although Kovalan's action is cruel to his wife, he does eventually realise his mistake and show true contrition. This sensitivity is the other side of his weak character: he has strong feelings, which can lead him astray but are never false. The best example of this sensitivity is the deep sorrow he feels once he finally recognises that he has mistreated his wife. That contrition is all the more powerful because Kovalan's attraction to Madhavi has not been simply a transient moment or a temporary madness. In fact, he lives with her for several years, neglecting his wife and his aging parents (which some would consider the greater crime). And the only reason he leaves her is misplaced jealousy (another example of his strong feelings). When he comes back to Kannaki and sees her pitiable condition, he is overcome with shame. As the poet says, 'When he saw how pale Kannaki had become, he was stricken with grief.' Critics, especially feminist critics, will point out that his 'grief', however genuine, is a case of 'too little, too late.' And by today's standards, such a judgement seems correct, but it appears that the hero of the best-loved story of ancient south India was judged differently at the time and perhaps since. The same sensitivity that led him to act immorally also enabled him to feel sincere contrition for his error.

Irresponsible The flawed hero, however, is not just weak, he is also irresponsible. We could cite two or three examples of this characteristic, but the most glaring example occurs toward the end of the story. The situation is that Kovalan, having been reunited with Kannaki, has taken his wife south, where he hopes to be able to sell her expensive anklets in order to raise cash for their new life together. Impoverished by his spending on his mistress (Madhavi), Kovalan has accepted his wife's anklet as the solution to their financial troubles and journeyed to the city of Madurai. Once they reach the outskirts, however, he leaves her in the care of an old lady and goes into the city by himself. This is an irresponsible decision. His wife is a practical person, while he is gullible, and, predictably enough, he is hoodwinked by a goldsmith, who convinces the king that the anklet Kovalan has is the one stolen from the queen. Kovalan is also irresponsible for leaving his wife with someone he has just met in a village he has never visited before. More than that, when Kovalan goes into the city, he is distracted from the business of selling the anklet. The old sensualist part of his character resurfaces as he is dazzled by the wealth and beauty of the city's houses and citizens, including a few smiling courtesans. All this leads to the tragedy of him being framed for the theft of the queen's anklet and then executed. If his wife had not been ordered to stay outside the city and had accompanied him, she would have quickly detected the goldsmith's deception and prevented Kovalan's death.

Neduncheliyan (Impulsive)

Character Neduncheliyan is the king of the Pandyan empire, with his capital at Madurai. He is an historical figure from the 3rd century CE, two or three centuries before the epic story was composed. We cannot know what sources the poet used to construct his fictional king, or to what extent he resembles the historical one, but he is a commanding figure. Although he only appears in the concluding section of the story, he is central to its drama. Like the hero, Kovalan, the king has flaws. Unlike Kovalan, however, his limitations do not flow from sensuality but from power, pride and arrogance. And, yet, the king is also capable of recognising his errors, which are catastrophic misjudgements. Of all the major characters in this ancient epic, the king is perhaps the one most governed by convention. He must be powerful and he must represent justice. Only an accomplished poet, such as Ilango Atikal, is capable of creating a king who is both complex and yet conforms to these conventions.

Activities The king does not appear in many scenes, but the poet describes his person and his court in some detail. He sits on a golden throne, of lions and tigers, holding a sceptre and wearing a jewel-crown. Above him, a parasol stands 'as white and cool as the moon.' The king spends his day

receiving courtiers and citizens, listening to their requests and complaints, and dispensing justice. Sometimes, in the evening, he organises banquets or entertainment, such as dancing and singing.

Illustrative moments

Impulsive When we first meet him, the ruler of the Pandyan kingdom is presented as a flawless king. He is said to give protection to his people, to rule with justice and to be compassionate toward the poor. Of course, he is rich and surrounded by sycophants, and he appears to be wise. Until, that is, he is told that the thief of his queen's anklet has been found. This is the moment when he reveals his lack of judgement, his impulsiveness, and wrecks the lives of the hero and heroine (Kovalan and Kannaki). He is presiding in his royal chamber, when his personal goldsmith enters, bows before him, and tells him a lie: 'The thief who stole your wife's ornament is now hiding in a hut near my house.' This is malicious because the goldsmith is in fact the person who has stolen the queen's anklet and now shifts the blame on to Kovalan. Hearing this false accusation, the king immediately orders his men to arrest Kovalan and, if he has an anklet, to execute him. Sure enough, when Kovalan is arrested in possession of his wife's (not the queen's) anklet, he is killed. This hasty execution does not conform to normal judicial procedure at the time. There is no trial, no presentation of evidence, no witnesses, no investigation. Nothing. Just a summary execution. The poet hints that the king was anxious 'to reconcile' his queen (they apparently had a domestic quarrel) and decided that the swift recovery of her missing anklet was the path toward their reconciliation. The price for his impulsive action was the death of an innocent man, which then leads to the death of his wife, and later to the king's demise, as well. Hasty action is dangerous, indeed.

Proud The Pandyan king is not only an impulsive ruler, he is also an extremely proud one. He is proud that his kingdom is prosperous (the poem is full of descriptions of 'fertile fields', 'flowing rivers' and 'wealthy merchants'). He is proud of his beautiful queen sitting beside him on the throne. He is proud of his sceptre, symbol of his righteous rule. He is, in short, too sure of himself to doubt the wisdom of his decision to execute the 'thief' of the anklet. This pride is on display when Kannaki, the now widowed wife of Kovalan, confronts him with her accusations that he has erred. When the king is first informed that there is 'a lady' at the gates who wants to see him, he is unperturbed. 'Who is she?' he asks drowsily. 'She is angry, in a frenzy, calling you a liar,' he is told. 'Well, let her come. Let her speak,' he says, full of confidence that he will be equal to the rhetoric of 'some lady.' Kannaki then unleashes a stinging indictment of the king, accusing him to his face of unjustly murdering her husband. The king takes all this 'hysterical raving' in stride and calmly replies, 'It is not unjust, dear lady, to put to death a thief. Indeed, that is kingly justice.' All his confidence and calm will soon evaporate, but at this moment, his overweening pride is impenetrable. It repels the gossip, rumour and innuendo that any ruler will face in the course of administering his kingdom. Whether in sixth-century south India or twenty-first century America, pride protects rulers from legitimate claims of abuse.

Principled Like the flawed hero, Kovalan, however, the king is not without a sense of justice. Like the hero, the king has a conscience, albeit buried beneath the layers of power and pride that insulate him from the world. This moral conscience is revealed in a dramatic moment that follows not long after he has refused to accept what Kannaki has told him: that he has made a mistake and killed the wrong man. In this scene, Kannaki is able to convince him of the truth of what she says. When she breaks open her anklet, it is full of rubies (proving that it was not the queen's anklet, which was full of pearls), one of which flies up and strikes him in the face. Like a slap that shakes him from his false pride, the king now realises that he has done wrong. Overwhelmed with remorse, he cries out, 'Am I a king? I who have listened to the words of a goldsmith. No. It is I who am the thief. The protection of the subjects of this southern kingdom has failed in my hands, for the first time. Let me depart from this life.' And, with these words, he falls to the ground and dies. It is not a heart-attack (as some modern commentators have suggested); nor is it a suicide (there is no weapon). Instead, it is a case of divine justice striking down the guilty. Now, the symbols of the king's righteous reign falter. His sceptre is bent and his parasol fades. The king must die because he is the earthly symbol of divine justice.