

The Figure of Radha in Miniature Paintings: From the Pastoral to the Courtly, from Text to Visuality, from Polyphony to Normativity

NADIA CATTONI*

Abstract

This article analyses how Radha was depicted in miniature paintings between the 16th and 19th century in North India. Interrogating the link between text and image, contrasting poetry, style and historical settings with the visual representations of this central figure, the reflections focus on the changing nature of Radha. Through various examples from miniature paintings of different periods and schools, this article analyses the way the rich personality of Radha was transposed into images. In order to stress the changes brought to this female figure, she will be compared to Krishna, the masculine figure who is always at her side. The main goal of the article is to show the normative power of images on the figure of Radha, with normativity being understood as the simplification, iconisation, aestheticisation and stereotypification of a figure with polysemous references.

Keywords

Radha; icon; visuality; normativity; Indian miniature painting; iconotext.

Author affiliation

Nadia Cattoni is a PhD candidate at Lausanne University and studies the work of the Braj poet Dev (1643?–1745?), specifically his *nāyikābhedas*, the famous genre of the *rītikāla*. Her fields of research are the courtly poetry of pre-modern India in Brajbhasha, its link with Sanskrit literature and aesthetics, and translations from Indian languages.

Introduction

In early modern India (16th–19th century), paintings became an important medium in royal life, especially in North Indian courts. Artists were organised in

*Correspondence: Faculté des lettres, Section de langues et civilisations slaves et d'Asie du Sud (SLAS), Quartier UNIL-Dorigny, Anthropole, 4071, CH-1015 Lausanne.
E-mail: nadia.cattoni@unil.ch.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

ateliers under the patronage of a king and produced hundreds of marvellous miniature paintings. In Hindu kingdoms,¹ the themes represented were generally inspired by Hindu mythological texts and/or courtly love poetry.

At first sight, these two sources of inspiration, Hindu texts and courtly love poetry, seem to be opposites, belonging to two different categories. However, one figure is central to both worlds and thus bridges the gap between them. This figure is the beautiful, amorous Radha, who is simultaneously the vehicle of expressions of devotion and erotic feelings. She is depicted as the model of the perfect lover, situated in various settings, such as courtly palaces or bucolic pastoral landscapes.

In this article, I will study the history of Radha's reception in painting and her visual depictions over time through the analysis of several representations of Radha that were based on various textual backgrounds (that is, texts of different genres that were used as sources of visual representation). My main goal is to identify the consequences of visual representations on the figure of Radha. For this purpose, I will ask the following questions throughout the present study: Why and how was Radha depicted in illustrations based on devotional (*bhakti*) poetry and courtly (*rīti*) poetry? In how far did the texts influence the visual representations of Radha? What are the markers that distinguish the different backgrounds (courtly or pastoral)? Does the perception of Radha remain the same, irrespective of the various settings she is represented in? What is the impact of patronage on the representations of Radha?

These analyses will underline the relationship between visual representation and normativity, which developed over time (four centuries of miniature paintings) and was adjusted to fit various situations and purposes. This can be seen in my example of Radha, a figure that was depicted in various texts before being depicted in images. My main goal is to demonstrate that the passage from textuality to visuality has introduced normativity. Indeed, the multiple levels present in texts, which are poetical texts written by skilled poets, are difficult to translate into images and in particular miniature paintings. Artists choose a particular environment, pastoral or courtly, in which they want to depict Radha and in doing so are confronted with the difficulty of representing this figure in all its complexity (even if some of them attempt to do so). Therefore in this article, normativity is understood as processes of simplification, iconisation, aestheticisation and stereotypification of a figure with polysemous references. These processes take place over time, through the serialisation of images and the loss of the link between text and image.

As the title of the article suggests, this study will focus on the feminine figure of Radha, exploring the changes she faces through visuality. However, it is impossible to talk about Radha without relating her story to the relationship she shares with her passionate lover Krishna, which is also depicted in different texts. Consequently, in images, too, she is most often represented in the company of Krishna and the examples I have chosen all depict a scene where the two lovers are represented. This confrontation between the feminine and masculine figure works as a methodological tool to underline the changes in the feminine figure. Indeed, we will see that although Radha changes over time, Krishna in

¹ I concentrate specifically on Hindu kingdoms, leaving aside many other contexts of production of the time.

contrast remains the same.² This difference between the masculine and feminine figure is due to the different roles given to each. Over time, the artists give priority to the aesthetical aspect of the feminine figure, thus focusing on the representation of the body of Radha as a *nāyikā* (young woman or heroine). In order to understand the transformation of the figure of Radha in visual representations, it is important to be familiar with her literary history.

Radha in Texts

The figure of Radha is fascinating because of her ambiguity and uniqueness. She is complex and modelled in different ways by the literary tradition, representing the incarnation of divine and earthly love. A long and complex history finally shapes her as the incarnation of passion, the eternal lover, Krishna's beautiful favourite *gopī* (cowherdess).³ She is always shown together with her male consort and is not considered outside this relationship, which gives her a divine status. In the literary texts, she slowly becomes a deified *gopī* and is seen by some religious movements as the perfect devotee of the Lord, or becomes an object of devotion herself.⁴

Even if there are some earlier references to her (for example, as the favourite unnamed *gopī* in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*),⁵ Radha truly becomes a fully developed figure in two main textual sources from the 12th and 14th centuries. These two sources, which were produced in the context of Krishna devotion inside the Bengal Vaisnavas circle, contributed most to modelling Radha's character. The first source is the Sanskrit work *Gītagovinda* which was composed by the 12th-century court poet Jayadeva; the second source is formed by the 14th-century songs of the Maithilī poet Vidyapati (Vaudeville 1982: 11).

In order to understand how artists used the image of Radha in their paintings and the skills required by the audience in order to decipher the polysemous references to the figure of Radha, it is important to focus on Jayadeva's text *Gītagovinda*. This poem was a great influence on the development of the ambiguous perception of Radha and the main source of visual inspiration. Indeed, the poem gave birth to numerous interpretations because of the treatment of Radha

² This affirmation is meant in a general sense implying that the changes for Krishna are less visible, even if it is not always the same Krishna who is depicted in images. The ambiguity of his figure between earthly and divine lover is also represented in many images. Nevertheless, one of the points I will focus on in the conclusion is that Krishna is always identifiable as Krishna. On the contrary, Radha loses her specificity over time and is no longer identifiable as an individual.

³ Krishna is known to be a perfect lover who enjoys the company of women, sharing amorous plays (*līlā*) with them in the region of Braj. These women are called *gopī* and Radha is one of them.

⁴ Particularly in the 16th century and around the city of Brindaban in North India (the place of Krishna devotional movements), the figure of Radha was considered as the center of devotion. For example, some movements like the Rādhāvallabhins and Sakhīvallabhins chose to concentrate on Radha more than on Krishna (Kinsley 1986: 94).

⁵ For more information on earlier references to Radha before the *Gītagovinda*, see Pauwels (2012) and Brown (1982: 58).

and Krishna's amorous relationship, which can be read as a description of secular, earthly human love (Radha and Krishna as *nāyikā-nāyaka* [heroine and hero] of courtly love poetry), an allegory of divine love between a god and a goddess or an allegory of divine love between a god and his best devotee.⁶

For example, in this description of Radha joining Krishna in the forest, multiple readings are possible:

I reach the lonely forest hut where he secretly lies at night.
My trembling eyes search for him as he laughs in a mood of passion.
[...]
I shy from him when we meet; he coaxes me with flattering words.
I smile at him tenderly as he loosens the silken cloth on my hips.
[...]
I fall on the bed of tender ferns; he lies on my breasts forever.
I embrace him, kiss him; he clings to me drinking my lips.
[...]
My eyes close languidly as I feel the flesh quiver on his cheek.
My body is moist with sweat; he is shaking from the wine of lust.
[...]
Jayadeva sings about Rādhā's fantasy of making love with Madhu's killer.
Let the story of a lonely cowherdess spread joy in his graceful play (Stoler Miller 1977: 80–81)

Radha can be understood either as a religious figure who is Krishna's consort and has the attributes and properties of a goddess or as the perfect lover, the idealised beauty (*nāyikā*) of Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*), who is used to stimulate the reader's erotic sentiment (*śṛṅgāra rasa*).

When reading the *Gītāgovinda*, another point emerges that is crucial for the understanding of Radha's image, namely her special status in relation to Krishna. Indeed, even if she lives an amorous, sexual story with her beloved Krishna and cannot be seen without him, she is not legally his wife.⁷ Radha is Krishna's favourite *gopī*, his passionate lover, his beautiful, delicate partner, but she remains an independent woman, an illicit love.⁸ This status gives her a special 'power' and 'freedom', which is taken up by painters in their visual representations of Radha.

To continue with the literary history of Radha, the *bhakti* poets Rupa Goswami (1489–1564) and Surdas (1478/79–1581/84?) also contributed to the further development of the figure. Rupa Goswami represents Radha as a model of devotion (Wulff 1982), while in his beautiful braj poetry Surdas raises her to the level of Krishna (Hawley 1982: 48).

⁶ Siegel enumerates the multiple roles of Radha: 'Radha is at once the stereotypical heroine of court poetry, the ideal beauty of the erotic textbooks, the Goddess incarnate, the feminine power emanating from the God, and the female principle, and she also came to represent the devotee' (1978: xii).

⁷ As Stoler Miller (1982: 13) pointed out: 'Jayadeva's heroine is neither a wife nor a worshipping rustic playmate. She is a jealous, solitary, proud female who is Krishna's exclusive partner in a secret love, a union that is contrasted with his communal sexual play with the entire group of cowherdresses.'

⁸ Some theological tendencies tried to change the status of Radha from mistress or another man's spouse (*parakīyā*) to spouse (*svakīyā*) (Hawley 1982: 53; Kinsley 1986: 90).

The poets of the *rīti* school,⁹ who focus on the production of courtly poetry, represent Radha as the perfectly beautiful *nāyikā*. Poets like Keshavdas (1555–1617) or Biharilal (1595–1663) emphasise the more secular aspects of Radha as a courtly heroine. In this context, she represents ‘the supreme model of the woman in love, the *nāyikā* par excellence’ (Schomer 1982: 92).

The textual sources about Radha mentioned here provide us with multiple aspects of her figure, who is placed between the religious and the secular, pastoral and courtly settings, rural and urban spaces, divine and human love. Her strong relation to Krishna is also highlighted and described at length. In their illustrations, painters chose to concentrate on one or several of these multiple aspects in Radha’s textual representation.

Radha in Painting

Context of Production and the Connection of Painting and Textuality

The four examples of Radha’s representation in paintings discussed in detail below are the product of the famous North Indian schools of miniatures, which flourished from the 16th to the 19th century in the Muslim kingdoms of the Mughals and the Hindu Rajput kingdoms in Rajasthan and Punjab Hills (Kossak 1997: 3). The sources of inspiration for the Hindu painters were popular religious stories and writings on love and heroism, in which ‘the Hindu God Krishna and his consort, Radha, often tak[e] the leading role’ (Kossak 1997: 3). The paintings were produced directly on manuscripts,¹⁰ showing that the link between painting and text was very important – even compulsive – to the painters (and patrons). Indeed, scenes depicted in miniature are very often illustrations of texts. This link between text and image is so strong that sometimes there is text within the painting, as I will demonstrate in one of my examples.¹¹

⁹ *Bhakti* and *rīti* are two categories created by Ram Chandra Shukla (1928–1929) in his *Hindī sāhitya ka itihās (History of Hindi Literature)*. He distinguished between devotional poetry and courtly poetry, placing them in two distinct categories with two different time periods. In 2006, Busch formulated a critique of this categorisation (Busch 2006). Indeed, the texts labelled as *bhakti* poems or *rīti* poems are more linked to each other than Shukla’s categorisation allows. References to devotional themes appear in *rīti* poetry, and references to courtly aspects appear in *bhakti* poetry. My use of these two terms in this article is not to build barriers between different kinds of texts, but rather to refer to texts where one aspect is more developed than the other, while keeping in mind the perpetual interchange between the two types of texts.

¹⁰ Each of these different schools from North India had its own style, influences and development, but I consider them as a whole, since they all represent the same kind of texts and use the figure of Radha. In this article, I do not delve into aesthetic considerations.

¹¹ Kossak moderates the importance of the presence of text in these paintings, arguing that the pictorial representation is predominant in comparison to earlier manuscripts, which are mostly Jain and Buddhist: ‘Clearly the function of the manuscript has changed: visual requirements have replaced literary ones, and the artist seeks to inspire rather than inform the imagination of the viewer’ (Kossak 1997: 7). Nevertheless, reference to a text is still present.

This relation between image and text has been extensively studied by scholars from various disciplines – especially, but not only, by western art historians and scholars of literature.¹² In this article, I will mention only two of these studies. First, in his book *Words and Pictures* (1973), Meyer Schapiro notes for instance that some artists rely on an existing illustration to illustrate a text rather than on the text itself, that some painters reduce or add elements in comparison to the text and that they represent figures anachronistically using current ideas about the past (Schapiro 1973: 11–13). Second, Liliane Louvel, a scholar in English literature, also questioned the relationship between text and image in her writings about the modes of insertions of pictorial images in literary texts using the concept of ‘iconotext’.¹³ In the analysis of miniatures below, I will draw on her questions such as: ‘In what form does the ... iconic image appear? Where is it located? Is it located within the text, beside the text, around the text, or outside of the text? What are the referents of this image? Are they “real” or not, or in-between?’ (Louvel 2011: 55). And further, what are the functions of iconotext?

A reflection on the interactions between text and image provides us with the opportunity to study textual and visual media at the same level, equally using the tools of both fields without any subordination link. In the examples discussed here, the images are produced chronologically after the texts. The texts thus have the privilege of anteriority, but this does not imply a hierarchy between one medium and the other. Once it is created, the image takes on a life of its own and can be considered independently from the text.

It is important to note that royal ateliers chose only certain texts as inspirations for paintings.¹⁴ When the different schools are compared, it becomes clear that the same images were linked with the same texts. Indeed, some themes were favoured by the painters, thus leading to multiple depictions of the same scene by different schools. In general, miniature painters were not so much concerned with innovation and faithfully reproduced iconographic motifs.¹⁵

These two points explain how visuality developed in North Indian royal courts between the 16th and the 19th century: one, visuality is strongly related to textuality, and two, visuality is influenced by a process of selecting certain texts.

¹² See also the work of Desai (1995), which interrogates the link between text and image by studying a set of Indian miniature paintings.

¹³ Louvel wrote many books in French; one of them was edited by Jacobs and Petit (Louvel 2011) in English and titled *Poetics of the Iconotext*. It is a translation of *L’œil du texte: Texte et image dans la littérature de langue anglaise* (1998) and *Texte/Image: Images à lire, textes à voir* (2005). Louvel’s main interest is to think about texts and images in a different way by using the term of iconotext which ‘illustrates perfectly the attempt to merge text and image in a pluriform fusion, as in an oxymoron. The word “iconotext” conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity. It is therefore a perfect word to designate the ambiguous, aporetic, and in-between object of our analysis’ (Louvel 2011: 15).

¹⁴ In comparison to the huge production of *bhakti* and *rīti* poets with thousands of poems.

¹⁵ Indeed, this genre of painting is strictly codified. For example, the beauty of a woman corresponds to specific standards and if a painter wants to portray a queen, he will strictly follow specific criteria that underline her beauty, rather than give a faithful description of the real queen.

This selection process reduced artistic possibilities in a normative way: only the works of some authors were illustrated, and specific themes became well-known and were often depicted. Through this selection process, Radha, with her ambiguity and beauty, took on an important role.

Examples of Representations of Radha

The format of this article forces me to choose a limited number of images that represent Radha. In this process, I selected images that, first, allow me to show the different aspects of the figure of Radha, and that are thus representative of the multiple levels she possesses. Second, I chose representations belonging to different moments of the period under review. Third, because of the strong relationship between Radha and Krishna, and because Radha's story is difficult to trace without her lover, I chose images where the two protagonists are depicted.¹⁶ For my sample I used three joint criteria to identify Radha: the title of the image, for example, 'Krishna cleans and adorns Radha's feet'; the link of the image with a text that mentions Radha; and the habit of the audience to identify Radha in specific situations.

The examples studied here are separated into two groups of representations of Radha. In the first group, the representations illustrate Radha in multiple aspects, thus underlining her ambiguity, while in the second group, the representations illustrate only a single aspect of Radha.

The ambiguity of Radha provided space to artists (writers or painters) and their patrons (kings or rich merchants) so that they could develop their own interpretation of the female figure. For example, a poet who was a worshipper of Krishna could write secular courtly poetry using Radha, Krishna's divine consort, as the *nāyikā*. This was the case with the poet Biharilal (1595–1663) in his *Satsaī*. Or a king such as Nagaridas of Kishangarh (1699–1765), who belonged to a specific religious movement, could ask for both illustrations of love poetry and devotional poetry, and consequently Radha would appear in both kinds of illustrations.¹⁷

In my first example, the illustration represents Radha in different aspects (Figure 1). The artist did this in order to be faithful to the text of the *Rasikapriyā*.¹⁸

¹⁶ I also made this choice because, according to my research, the great majority of representations of Radha include Krishna. For future in-depth research on this subject, it would be interesting to include images of Radha alone to see if the results are identical. Furthermore, as I said in the introduction, working on the two figures in parallel offers an interesting comparison of the different treatment of the masculine and feminine figure in the visual representations selected here.

¹⁷ Garimella underlines the existence of the production of illustrations of *bhakti* and *rīti* texts by the same ateliers: '[...] both were produced in manuscript form for the same patrons' (1998: 83).

¹⁸ For a detailed study of the manuscripts of the *Rasikapriyā*, see Desai (1995). By comparing two sets of manuscripts, she shows the secularisation of the illustrations of Keshav's poetry, and the independence achieved by the images vis-à-vis the text, naming them 'icons' instead of 'illustrations'. She also demonstrates the collaborations between scholars and librarians, and between artists and patrons to be able to faithfully render Keshvadas' complex work, with its multiple readings.

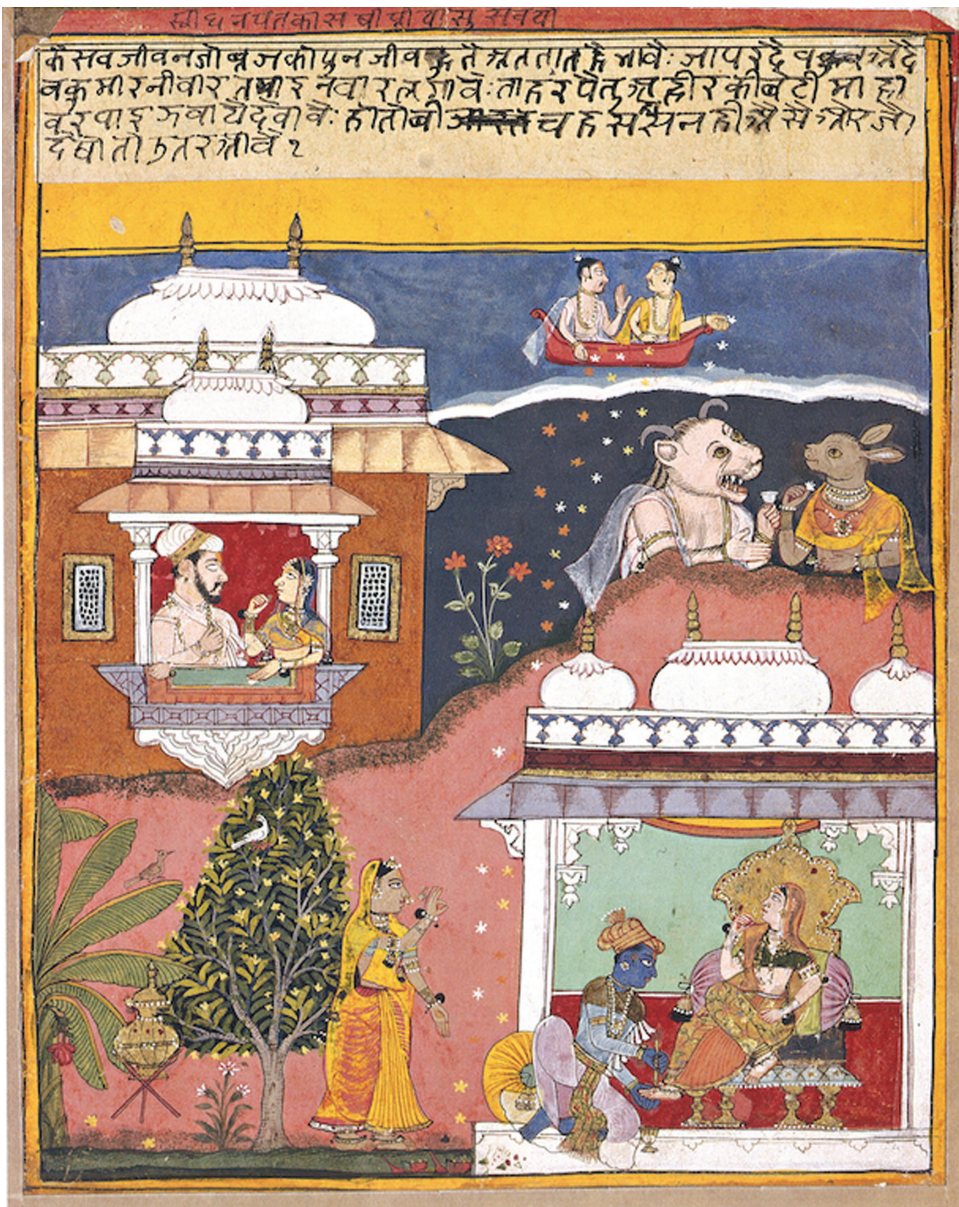


Figure 1: 'Krishna cleans and adorns Radha's feet'

Illustration to the *Rasikapriya* by Keshavdas

Udaipur, Rajasthan, ca. 1660

Opaque watercolour on paper, 27.3 × 21 cm

Hindi verses (RP VII.5) inscribed on added paper at the top of the illustration; Bikaner inventory date on reverse (VS 1751 / 1694 AD).¹⁹

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Polsky collection.²⁰

¹⁹ Published and commented on in Topsfield (2004: 376).

²⁰ I thank Mrs. Polsky for her authorization to use this image.

This famous text was composed by the Orcha court poet Keshavdas (1555–1617) in 1591 and was illustrated in numerous manuscripts, especially at the court of Bikaner (Okada 2003: 94). The text has a courtly and secular flavour and is the most influential text of *rīti* poetry (Busch 2011: 33). It describes the lovers in various situations, their feelings and refers to different types of *nāyikās* (young woman or heroine).²¹ In this text, the name 'Radha' is used to represent the courtly *nāyikā*.

The first element that strikes the viewer is that the text of Keshavdas's poem is included in the painting. Indeed, the text is an inherent part of the painting. This is a very good example of the relationship between text and image and can be helpful to discuss Schapiro's and Louvel's questions to which I referred above.

The text in the red border of the painting explains that the text underneath and the painting are related to a *svādhīnapatikā nāyikā*, a woman whose lover adores her. It is one of the eight kinds of *nāyikās* developed by Keshavdas in the Chapter 7 of his *Rasikapriyā*.²² The poem of Keshavdas gives an example of this kind of *nāyikā*, with explicit references to Krishna and Radha. The poem is as follows:

The bosom companion says to nāyikā:
The very soul of those who live
In Braja; whom more than his own life
His father loves; whose mother will
Readily on him sacrifice
Girls true or false: by that beloved
Kṛṣṇa, Oh! daughter of an *ahīra*!²³
By pumice stone you get your soles scrubbed,
And with red dye get stained your feet!
Oh! dear friend [of] mine, me you dismiss
With a mere laugh, but if some day
Perchance another should see this,
An answer meet you'll have to make!²⁴

The following elements are present in the poem: the description of a specific *nāyikā*, the one whose lover adores her; the presence of the two lovers Krishna and Radha (daughter of an *ahīra*), and the situation they are in, that is, a lover taking care of the feet of his beloved. These elements can be interpreted in two ways. First, the elements can be seen as referring to courtly poetry since there is the description of a specific kind of *nāyikā*, the presence of a *sakhī* (friend) and the act of the lover taking care of his beloved. Second, the elements resonate with devotional poetry since there are references to the Braj region, Krishna and Radha are named and because the *sakhī* expresses enthusiasm towards this

²¹ Poets of this period called *rītikāl* were very interested in writing about typologies of heroines, describing their physical aspects, attitudes, relations to their lovers, and so on. This type of writing is named *nāyikābheda*. For the development of this literature, see Cattoni (2014).

²² This list of *nāyikās* is very well-known to poets. This *nāyikā* in particular is the most famous of the *nāyikās*. It was developed for the first time by the theatre scholar Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* (4th century, 24.210–220) and called the *asta nāyikā*.

²³ *Ahīr* is the name of a caste that keeps cattle (Bahadur 1972: 124, note 2).

²⁴ Translation by Bahadur (1972: 112). Bahadur does not translate from the text in the painting, which is slightly different.

incredible scene of Krishna at Radha's feet. It is clear that the poet is playing with the multiple references attached to Radha (and Krishna).

The challenge for the painter of this poem, assuming that he wanted to illustrate the poem and not just be inspired by it (which appears to be the case here since the text is written on the painting and truly a part of it), was to preserve these two levels of meaning, the devotional and the courtly. In this case, the painter used an ingenious stratagem to visually relate the poem to the main scene of the painting. Under the text of Keshavdas, he placed two celestial deities showering flowers near Krishna. In doing so, the viewer's eyes shift from the text to the petals falling down, and land on the visual representation of the *nāyikā* being adorned by her lover, which is the main purpose of the poem. In the description of the scene, the painter followed the text by describing the two lovers as Krishna and Radha,²⁵ but he framed them in a courtly environment. Krishna is not wearing his usual crown and his yellow cloth; instead he is wearing a rajpout turban and clothes worn in royal courts. Radha does not look like a *gopī* (cowherdess), but rather like an urban lady seated on a throne. In addition, the setting is not the forest of Brindavan, it is a palace. All these elements are the markers of the courtly tone present in the poem of Keshavdas.

Furthermore, for a symbolical reinforcement of the plural aspects of Krishna and Radha, the painter chose to add elements that are not present in the poem. He depicted two other couples steeped in the same atmosphere as the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā*. On the right of the painting, between the celestial deities and Radha and Krishna, a demon and a demoness are engaged in a pleasant chat, and on the left side of the painting, a raja is represented in conversation with a lady on the balcony of a palace. In this way, the three worlds are depicted: the demonic, the human and the divine realm are present, alongside Radha and Krishna. Thus the duality of Radha, which is clear in the poem of Keshavdas, is maintained and even reinforced through the introduction of the demonic in the painting using different tools that are specific to the medium and to the creativity of the painter.

The second example of this group stems from an illustrated manuscript of the *Gītagovinda* by Jayadeva (Figure 2), and shows how the ambiguity of Radha can be used to insert the background of the patron into the representation. The *Gītagovinda* (already discussed above) has twelve separate parts and describes the different moments of the love story between Radha and Krishna, which takes place in the forest of Brindavan in the Braj region. The image discussed is called 'Krishna lies alone in the forest pining for Radha' and depicts the moment in the poem where Krishna and Radha are separated.

This illustration belongs to the school of Kangra and is faithful to Jayadeva's poem, including the multiple readings offered by the text. Krishna (lying on

²⁵ Usually, the way to recognise the Krishna-Radha couple is Krishna's blue hue and the kind of scene in which the lovers are depicted. Radha is generally identifiable through Krishna. The title that comes with the painting, here 'Krishna cleans and adorns Radha's feet', identifying the two lovers, is a convention between scholars rather than a title given by the painter (Garimella 1998: 75).



Figure 2: Illustration of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*

India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, principality of Lambagraon, India, ca. 1825

Opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 24.5 × 31.7 cm

Collection of Jagdish Bhagwati and Padma Desai.²⁶

the right) is longing for Radha who is with her *sakhī* (friend), at the top left.²⁷ The setting is the beautiful nature of the forest of Brindavan: it is bucolic, fruitful and depicted with many details such as flowers and birds on the trees. The Yamuna is flowing and covered by graceful lotuses. A courtly flavour is also present in the clothes worn by the protagonists.

At the top of the painting, the painter depicted a couple that doesn't interact with the figures below. This couple represents the musical mood in which the poem must be sung (in this case, the mood is *varādī rāginī*, as is written above the couple). As Garimella underlines: 'The female *ragini* is always portrayed as a woman who holds off her lover. Here the lover is not a rustic Braj cowherd; rather, his fine dress speaks of his status, and his gestures indicate his refinement as a *rasika* (aesthete and connoisseur)' (Garimella 1998: 80). Because of the ambiguity present in Jayadeva's poem and the complex figure of Radha, this refined couple doesn't seem completely out of place. Courtly life can be part of the story of Radha and indeed, a number of elements show that the Kangra court is part of the illustration. The courtly reference inside the painting, especially the elaborate clothes of the couple at the top and the clothes of Radha and Krishna, reveal the impact of the patronage and the context of production on the rendering of this illustration of the *Gītagovinda*.

Finally, the third example of the first group incorporating representations illustrating the multiple aspects of Radha, is an illustration of the Sanskrit *Rasamañjarī* by Bhanudatta (15th–16th century), where the ambiguity of Radha is used by the patron to deliver a religious message (Figure 3). The *Rasamañjarī* is the first work exclusively devoted to the *nāyaka-nāyikābheda* (typologies of

²⁶ Published in Garimella (1998: 79–81). I thank Prof. Bhagwati and Desai for their authorization to use this image.

²⁷ The painter (or somebody else) chose to identify Radha by adding her name above the woman depicted as Radha. '*Rādhakī*' is written there.

hero and heroine) and its background is the literature concerning *alan'kāra* (ornamentation) and *kāvya* (literature). The work is made up of a series of brief poems that give an example of the *nāyikā* (or the *nāyaka*), divided by definitions of the different *nāyikās* (and *nāyakas*).²⁸

This text was illustrated in various manuscripts. In one of these, the oldest one, the divine couple Krishna and Radha is systematically used to embody the *nāyaka* and *nāyikā*. For example, this is the case in the following illustration of the *madhyā nāyikā*, a woman of an average level of experience.²⁹

As we see in the illustration, the setting is the court, the clothes refer to clothes worn by palace women and men, and the focus is entirely on the relationship between the two lovers. In this extremely courtly context, no reference to Krishna and Radha is needed.

Two readings of this illustration are possible. The first is the one suggested by Isacco who refers to the fact that this set of paintings was produced under the patronage of Raja Kirpal Pal of Basohli. According to Isacco (1982), the choice of representing the *nāyaka* and the *nāyikā* through Krishna and Radha was the patron's desire. Indeed, Isacco argued that the patron was both a connoisseur of poetry, and a devotee of Vishnu, and thus the use of a secular theme such as the love between a *nāyaka* and a *nāyikā* was probably more efficient to relay the patron's *bhakti* message,³⁰ delivered through the figures of the two divine lovers.



Figure 3: Illustration of Bhanudatta's *Rasamañjarī*
Pahari, Basohli, ca. 1675–1700
Opaque watercolour on paper
Dogra Art Gallery, Jammu, n° 374.³¹

²⁸ In such works, the proportion of poems dedicated to the *nāyikā* is more important than the number of poems dedicated to the *nāyaka*.

²⁹ One of the typologies developed by Indian poets is the one dividing the *nāyikā* into *mugdhā*, *madhyā* and *praudhā* (naïve, average and experienced).

³⁰ Isacco (1982: 158): 'Plus qu'à l'inspiration personnelle des artistes, cela correspond probablement aux directives du mécène Kirpal Pal. C'est un lettré et, en fervent du culte de Vishnu, il comprend sans doute que l'essence la *bhakti* est plus largement perceptible par le biais d'un thème séculier mettant en jeu l'amour, qu'il soit divin ou profane.'

³¹ Published in Goswamy (1987: 163). I thank B.N. Goswamy for his authorization to use this image.

A second reading of this illustration attributes more freedom to the painter, who could have chosen Krishna and Radha as the lovers because he thought that they would have a greater impact on the audience than anonymous lovers. In any case, in both readings, the polysemous Radha is the vehicle through which messages can be delivered, whether it is the influence of the patronage or the influence of the artist.

My second group of illustrations shows two examples of representations of Radha where only a single aspect of the figure is used to visually represent her. The first example also comes from the *Gītagovinda*, but from a different manuscript than the one discussed in the first group, and underlines the one-sided treatment of Radha as a *gopī*, a cowherdess (Figure 4). The picture shows Radha in company of her *sakhī* (friend), preparing herself to join Krishna, from whom she is separated.

Radha is on the left side of the image; her *sakhī* is binding bell anklets to her feet and encouraging her to join her beloved Krishna, who is on the other side of the image. Krishna is easily recognisable because of his dark colour and the audience is able to identify the scene because they know the poem of the *Gītagovinda* very well. Radha is also easily recognisable, because she is the one whose skin is clearer, she is facing in the direction of Krishna, and she is preparing herself. The artist chose to represent the rural setting of this scene in a simple manner, without complications or additions: Radha and her *sakhī* are on one side, Krishna is on the other, with plants in the middle which symbolise the separation of the lovers. We are in the region of Braj (where the story is set)

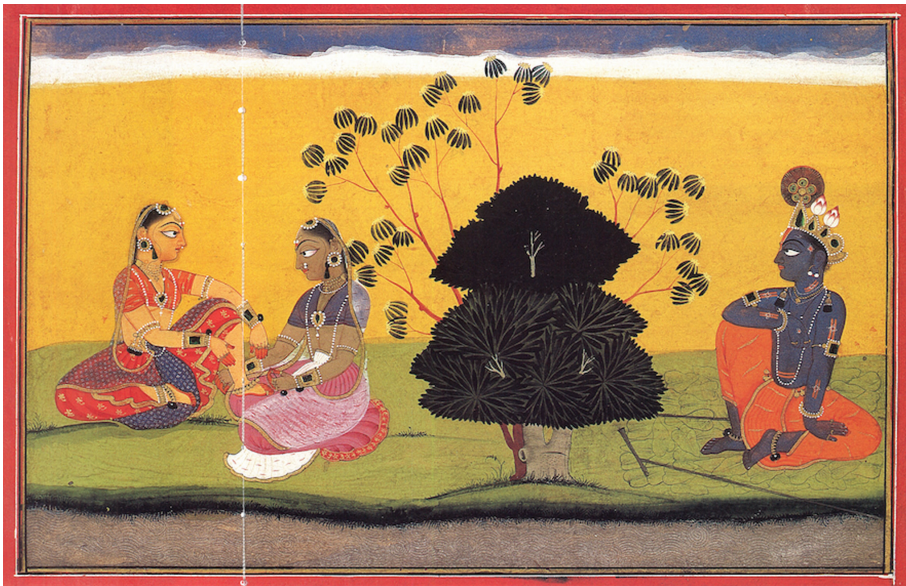


Figure 4: Illustration of Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* by Manaku School of Pahari, Basohli (or Guler?), ca. 1730
Opaque watercolour on paper, 21.4 × 30.8 cm
Collection of Edwin Binney 3rd, San Diego Museum of Art; 1990:1050.³²

³² Published in Okada (2003: 132–133).

and the Yamuna is flowing at the feet of the characters. The environment is the same as in the previous example of the *Gītagovinda* illustrated by the Kangra court, but its treatment is much simpler: both the emphasis on the pastoral setting and the lack of double-entendre mark the one-sided treatment of the scene and of Radha.

In the second example, Radha is portrayed exclusively as a *nāyikā* (a courtly lady) in a painting that has no apparent link to an existing text (Figure 5) – although a connoisseur would be able to relate the illustration to a poem describing the same situation. However, here, the painting is not declared as belonging to an illustrated manuscript.

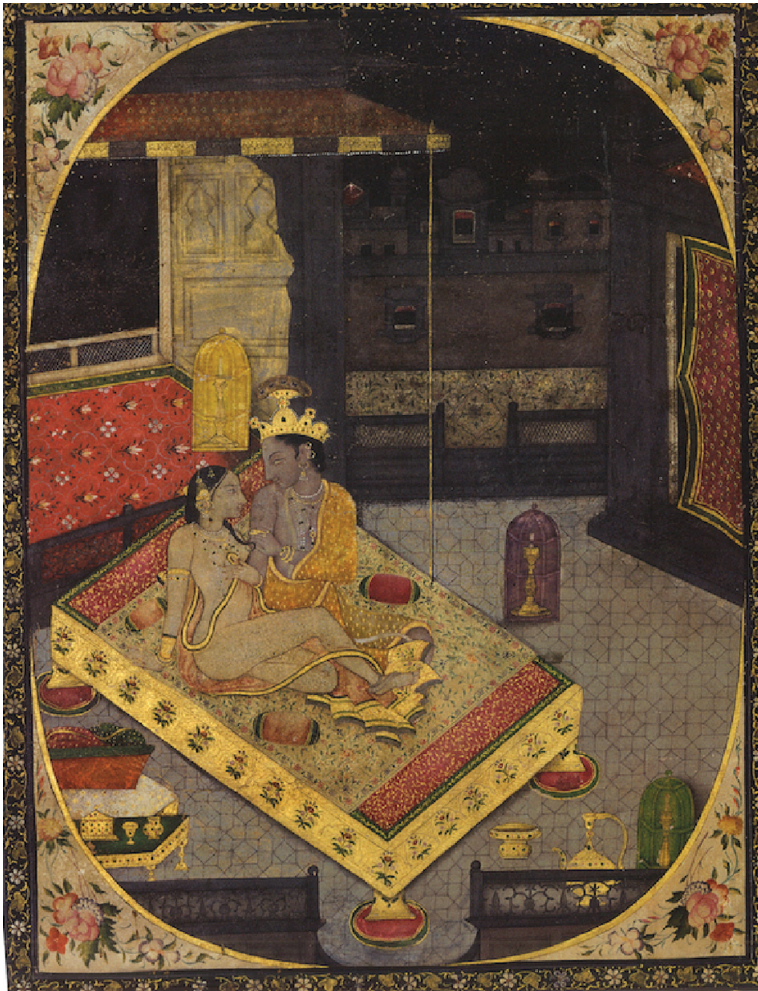


Figure 5: 'Krishna and Radha on a bed at night'
Sirmur (Nahan), Punjab Hills, ca. 1830
Opaque watercolour with gold on paper, 24.8 × 18.7 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky (1985.198.13).³³

³³ Published in Topsfield (2004: 169).

This very sensitive and delicate image of Radha and Krishna on a bed is presented as set in a courtly environment. The only way to identify the couple is the slightly blue colour of Krishna, his crown and his yellow cloth; Radha is only recognisable because of Krishna's presence. The image was created in the first part of the 19th century, at a time when the pair Radha-Krishna had already been represented many times as the two lovers of courtly poetry. The identification of the woman as Radha had become a convention at this time, because she is Krishna's favourite and had been represented with him so often. For the audience, the representation of the couple became such a standard that it is impossible for a contemporaneous viewer not to see Radha in that beautiful woman, even in such a courtly setting.

The illustration is not set in the forest of Brindavan, nor is it represented as a complex place between the divine and human world: rather, the illustration seems entirely secular and very much aestheticised. The fact that the scene is set inside a room emphasises this feeling of aestheticisation, inviting the viewer to enter the room and join the privacy of the lovers. The bed, the domestic objects disposed around it and the style of the drawing are all elements contributing to this feeling. In such a representation, Radha is no longer a *gopī* (cowherdess): she is a beautiful palace woman, an amorous *nāyikā* lying on a bed with her lover after having enjoyed sex.

Conclusion

These five examples reveal that the intrinsic ambiguity of Radha is retained and exploited intensely in visual representations. Painters played with the different possibilities offered by this figure, trying to create the possibility for multiple readings or, on the contrary, emphasising only a single aspect of the figure. Indeed, the two extreme aspects of the figure were treated separately in the two examples of my second group: in the 'pastoral' illustration of the *Gītagovinda*, the artist chose to treat Radha exclusively as the favourite *gopī* of Krishna; in the illustration of 'Krishna and Radha on a bed at night', Radha is exclusively a *nāyikā*. In contrast to this, my first group of examples reveals that painters also chose to explicitly show the complex ambiguity of Radha: in the illustration of the *Rasikapriyā*, the artist chose to be faithful to a complex text in which Radha is simultaneously the divine consort of Krishna and a palace woman adorned by her lover. In the treatment of the *Gītagovinda* by the Kangra school, the context of production is clearly visible in the painting, but without being a completely extraneous element in the frame, a courtly flavour appears also in the text. In addition, the complexity of the figure of Radha allows patrons to deliver specific religious messages or allows the artist to unleash his creativity, such as in the illustration of the *Rasamañjarī*.

In the period under review (16th–19th century), various elements created space for the development of the figure of Radha in paintings: the trend of using krishnaite themes in paintings, the numerous ateliers of North Indian courts patronised by devotees of Vishnu (even though Muslims also used this theme), the development of the Radha-Krishna theme and *nāyikābhedas* in poetry, and the intrinsic ambiguity of the two lovers.

In the end, beyond the richness of Radha's figure, which allows artists to represent her in various settings, and following this long journey spanning four centuries of visual representations, what did Radha gain and what did she lose?

Through visual representations, the texts mentioning Radha were emphasised. This feminine figure with its intrinsic ambiguity was the perfect candidate to be depicted in images for various contexts and used to reach various goals. Therefore, Radha was used as a strong iconographic element in different kinds of paintings. Seeing Radha in a pastoral or courtly context, seeing her as a referent of the religious or the secular, or as a figure that combined all these aspects became normal. Indeed, with her polysemous references and the habituation of the audience to this polyphony, Radha was able to represent all of these aspects. Moreover, the development of secular paintings and the introduction of courtly life into the representation of the divine love between Radha and Krishna allowed Radha to function not only as a religious symbol (I mentioned in the introduction that Radha was seen as the supreme devotee), but also as a strong 'cultural symbol' (Schomer 1982: 89)³⁴ – the symbol of an earthly woman in love with a man who is not her husband. Though this does not allow us to raise Radha to the rank of a model – it is important to remember that society at the time was patriarchal³⁵ – it can still be assumed that she is a counter-model that represents the perfection of the woman in love. Visuality, with its immediate impact on individuals, is a stronger vehicle than textuality for the dissemination of this aspect, especially in the context of erotic depictions of women in love.

This brings us to the aspect of normativity and to the question: what did Radha lose? With the custom developed by artists over centuries to depict the couple Radha-Krishna as the *nāyikā-nāyaka* of courtly poetry and with the loss of the link between image and text (as in our last example), a change occurs in the comprehension of Radha as an iconographic motif. Indeed, when Radha is represented to illustrate the *Gītagovinda*, or when she is used to embody the *nāyikā* of the *Rasamañjarī*, the rich, heavy aspects of her personality are immediately brought forth to the viewer. In the religious context, the story between Krishna and his favorite *gopī* is identified; in the secular setting, the use of the couple Radha-Krishna reinforces the feelings of passion and love between the *nāyaka* and the *nāyikā* that are developed in this kind of literature. It is more difficult to grasp the story of Krishna and Radha when the link between text and image is broken, as in the last example. Radha is less easily identifiable, even if the audience should be able to recognise her. The only way to know that the feminine figure is Radha is through the presence of Krishna who, with his famous symbols (his blue colour, the crown and yellow cloth), can be recognised without a doubt.

Through this separation of text and image³⁴, Radha's evocative power is diminished or at least changes its focus to become one-sided. The main goal of this kind of painting is less to evoke the different levels of the figure of Radha

³⁴ He underlines that if Radha was rejected by the moderns, it is more because she was a cultural symbol of a woman in love, and not so much because she was seen as a religious symbol.

³⁵ Moreover, Hindu society favours the model of the *pativrata*, the married woman possessing all the qualities of the perfect wife. For a discussion of these two opposing models represented by Radha and Sita, see Pauwels (2008).

than to focus the viewer's gaze on her feminine body. Radha's proximity to the masculine figure reinforces this aspect, since, in contrast to Radha, Krishna's representation remains stable over time. Indeed, apart from changes in Krishna's clothes, which follow either the rural or the courtly setting of the paintings, he is treated as more or less the same across different representations. This difference in Radha's and Krishna's treatment stresses the modifications brought to the figure of Radha, especially in the last example. The focus on the feminine body and its aestheticisation are clearly visible here.

This tendency is further accentuated by the process of serialisation. Radha was represented in so many situations, depicted as so many women, that she slowly became a 'nobody'. With this multiplication of situations, she is no longer the ambiguous Radha, but rather the stereotypical woman, the archetypal heroine, a *nāyikā* among others. The more Radha is shown, the less she carries the force of her narrative position with her. She is depersonalised: no longer an individual, but rather a symbol of the woman in love, universalised as the heroines of courtly poetry. These heroines are representations of women in love in general, and not of a particular woman in love. Furthermore, the aim of most of these paintings of heroines was the description of feminine beauty. The focus was on the body of the heroine, which was objectified by the male gaze.³⁶ Radha became the personification of this heroine whose appeal resides mostly in her physical aspects. Thus, the negative impact of visuality for Radha, or in other words, the normative power of images on Radha over time, was her confinement to the role of ideal beauty. In this process, she lost the power she gained as a counter-model as well as the freedom she had in *bhakti* texts.

In the Indian context of this article, visual representations begin as illustrations of texts to finally become independent images. The loss of the link with the text, the independence of the painting, is what leads to the representation of Radha as an icon. However, this path to becoming an icon also leads to Radha's stereotypification and thus to a simplification of the complex figure as which she was previously depicted.

Acknowledgements

I thank Prof. Maya Burger and the reviewers of this article for their fruitful remarks.

References

- Bahadur, K.P. (transl.). 1972. *Rasikapriyā of Keshavadāsa*, Delhi/Patna/Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Brown, C. MacKenzie. 1982. 'The Theology of Rādhā in the Purānas', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 57–71.

³⁶ See the article of Aitken (1997).

- Busch, Allison. 2006. 'Questioning the Tropes about *Bhakti* and *Riti* in Hindi Literary Historiography', in Monika Horstmann (ed.), *Bhakti in Current Research*, Delhi: Manohar, 33–47.
- Busch, Allison. 2011. *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cattoni, Nadia. 2014. 'Le développement des *nāyikābhedas* de la littérature sanskrite à la littérature braj: la naissance d'un genre', *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 68:1, 317–329.
- Desai, Vishakha N. 1995. 'From Illustrations to Icons: The Changing Context of the *Rasikapriya* Paintings in Mewar', in B.N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia (eds.), *Indian Paintings: Essays in Honor of Karl J. Khandalavala*, New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 97–127.
- Garimella, Annapurna. 1998. 'A Handmaid's Tale: *Sakhis*, Love, Devotion, and Poetry in Rajput Painting', in Karen Sagstetter (ed.), *Love in Asian Art & Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 71–95.
- Goswamy, B.N. 1987. *L'Inde du Tendre*, Paris: Mazenod.
- Hawley, John Stratton. 1982. 'A Vernacular Portrait: *Rādhā* in the *Sūr Sāgar*', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 42–56.
- Isacco, Enrico. (ed.). 1982. *Krishna: L'amant divin, mythes et légendes dans l'art indien*, Lausanne: Edita.
- Kinsley, David. 1986. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- Kossak, Steven. 1997. *Indian Court Painting: 16th–19th Century*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Louvel, Liliane. 1998. *L'oeil du texte: texte et image dans la littérature de langue anglaise*, Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail.
- Louvel, Liliane. 2011. *Poetics of the iconotext*, translated by Laurence Petit and edited by Karen Jacobs, Burlington: Ashgate.
- Louvel, Liliane and Scepi, Henri. (eds.). 2005. *Texte/Image: nouveaux problèmes*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Okada, Amina. (ed.). 2003. *Pouvoir et Désir: Miniatures indiennes du San Diego Museum of Art*, Paris: Editions Findakly.
- Pauwels, Heidi. 2008. *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pauwels, Heidi. 2012. '*Rādhā*', in Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar and Vasudha Narayana (eds.), *Brill's Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, accessed on 26 June 2016, http://brillonline.nl/entries/brill-s-encyclopedia-of-hinduism/radha-BEHCOM_1030130.
- Schapiro, Meyer. 1973. *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, Paris/The Hague: Mouton.
- Schomer, Karine. 1982. 'Where Have All the *Rādhās* Gone?: New Images of Woman in Modern Hindi Poetry', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 89–115.
- Shukla, Ram Chandra. 1929. *Hindī sāhitya ka itihās*, Kashi: Nagari Pracharini Sabha.
- Siegel, Lee. 1978. *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in the Gītagovinda of Jayadeva*, Delhi/London/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stoler Miller, Barbara (transl.). 1977. *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītagovinda*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stoler Miller, Barbara. 1982. 'The Divine Duality of *Rādhā* and *Krishna*', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 13–26.

- Topsfield, Andrew. (ed.). 2004. *In the Realm of Gods and Kings: Arts of India*, London: Philip Wilson Publishers.
- Vaudeville, Charlotte. 1982. 'Krishna Gopāla, Rādhā, and The Great Goddess', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1–12.
- Wulff, Donna Marie. 1982. 'A Sanskrit Portrait: Rādhā in the Plays of Rūpa Gosvāmī', in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 27–41.