

Constructing Artifice, Interrogating Impersonation

Madhavi as Vidūṣaka in Village Bhāmākalāpam Performance

- Satyabhama: Dear Madhavi, a woman's life is a terrible life!
- Madhavi: What's that? A woman's life is the only life. You can wear necklaces and you can wear jewels. You can walk forward and you can walk backwards. You can say, "Oh!" and you can say "Ah!" A woman's life is the *only* life!
- Satyabhama: You think a woman's life is only about wearing necklaces and jewels?
- Madhavi: What's a woman's life to you?
- Satyabhama: A woman's life is like a tender banana leaf.
- Madhavi: Okay, but what's a man's life?
- Satyabhama: A harsh thorn!
- Madhavi: Well said! A man's life is like a harsh thorn. But what's the connection between the two?
- Satyabhama: If the banana leaf falls on the thorn, or if the thorn falls on the banana leaf, the leaf gets torn. Either way, it's bad for the leaf.
- Madhavi: Okay, if the banana leaf falls on the thorn, or the thorn falls on the banana leaf, the leaf gets torn. Can I ask you something else? If a *ladḍu* [round sweetmeat] falls into ghee [clarified butter], or ghee falls on a *ladḍu*, when both end up in my stomach, is it bad for me?

On the evening of January 20, 2011, the packed audience in the D.S.T. Auditorium at the University of Hyderabad erupted into laughter upon hearing this dialogue between Satyabhama and her confidante Madhavi, the primary characters of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama. This humorous exchange, in which Satyabhama describes the terrible state of a woman's life and Madhavi pokes fun at her responses, is paradigmatic of Madhavi's role within *Bhāmākalāpam*. As Satyabhama's female confidante and primary conversation partner, Madhavi is not simply a patiently listening *sakhi* (girlfriend), but rather the dance drama's *vidūṣaka* (clown), whose witty remarks parody Satyabhama's angst of separation from her husband.

Madhavi's comedic role, however, extends beyond verbal jest to sartorial presentation. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Kuchipudi impersonator who portrays Satyabhama takes great pains to perform an idealized understanding of "real" women's bodies through elaborate sartorial guising, voice modulation, and bodily movement. In comparison, the brahmin male dancer portraying Madhavi does not impersonate a woman in the same manner. Instead, the performer triangulates across three distinct roles through the course of a single performance: the *sūtradhāra* (the director-cum-narrator of the dance drama), Madhavi (the female confidante of Satyabhama), and Madhava (the male confidant of Krishna). The male performer who plays these three characters—the *sūtradhāra*, Madhavi, and Madhava—does so with no shifts in costume, voice modulation, or gait. Instead, he transforms his character through subtler cues, such as the utterance of a single vocative or moving to a specific side of the stage. Unlike the case of Satyabhama, the brahmin man becomes the female character of Madhavi without the practice of sartorial guising.

This chapter and the next center on performance analysis of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama, particularly focusing on the *sūtradhāra*, Madhavi, and Madhava. Drawing on the work of scholars of Indian theatre, including David Shulman (1985), Susan Seizer (2005), and Richard Schechner (2015) among others, this chapter provides detailed accounts of the dialogues and performance techniques of *Bhāmākalāpam*. The theoretical centerpiece of the chapter rests on reimagining the term *māyā*, commonly translated into English as "illusion." According to contemporary teachers and dancers within the village of Kuchipudi, it is through *māyā* that a single performer can become the *sūtradhāra* when speaking to the audience, Madhavi when seen through the eyes of Satyabhama, and Madhava when seen by Krishna. Drawing on the interpretations of my interlocutors, I translate *māyā* as "constructed artifice" to theorize the parodic gender enactments of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava in *Bhāmākalāpam* performance. Through the lens of constructed artifice, I analyze how Madhavi, a character serving the dual roles of friend (*sakhi*) and *vidūṣaka* (clown), interrogates both Satyabhama's gender portrayal onstage and the brahmin male body donning her *strī-vēṣam*.

THE *SŪTRADHĀRA* IN *BHĀMĀKALĀPAM*
PERFORMANCE

In contemporary performances of *Bhāmākalāpam* by hereditary brahmin dancers from the village, the *sūtradhāra* is the first character who audiences meet. Standing at the center of the stage, he calls for the audience's attention as a prelude to the start of the performance:

Listen, assembled people! Listen to this story of *Bhāmākalāpam*, which will be a delight and fill your ears with a nectar of sounds. This is a composition of the great Siddhendra. We will present it now. Please enjoy.¹

The *sūtradhāra* (lit., “one who holds the strings”) traditionally leads the supporting orchestra by playing the *naṭṭuvāṅgam* (cymbals) and directs the audience's attention by narrating key events in the drama. While the *sūtradhāra* exists in Sanskrit drama and is referenced in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the character develops regional subtleties in various folk theatrical forms (Varadpande 1992).² In the case of *Bhāmākalāpam*, the *sūtradhāra* is visually portrayed as a brahmin through distinctive markers in dress. Importantly, the *sūtradhāra* functions as a catchall character who transforms into the female Madhavi when speaking with Satyabhama and into the male Madhava when speaking with Krishna. While potentially confusing to the untrained eye, the *sūtradhāra*'s seamless ability to transform into Madhavi and Madhava is a convention understood by Telugu-speaking audiences, particularly from the village of Kuchipudi.³

This convention also extends to other South Indian performance traditions, namely Kutiyattam, in which the method of *pakarnaṭṭam* (lit., “acting with shifting roles”) allows “an actor to impersonate multiple roles in a dramatic situation without any change in makeup and costume” (Gopalakrishnan 2006, 141). These shifts in multiple roles can extend across gender boundaries; for example, an actor portraying Hanuman can also enact Sita and other roles in Kutiyattam drama to convey the story of the Hindu epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (141). In the case of *Bhāmākalāpam*, the *sūtradhāra* (director/narrator) enacts the roles of Madhavi, Satyabhama's *sakhi* who is also the drama's *vidūṣaka* (clown), and Madhava, Krishna's male confidant (*sakha*).

How does the *sūtradhāra*'s transformation happen, and how are audiences able to understand it? In this section, I highlight specific sequences in the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama to analyze the ways in which a single brahmin male performer transitions across these three distinct roles. I draw primarily on the *Bhāmākalāpam* performance staged as part of the International Symposium on *Kalāpa* Traditions at the University of Hyderabad in January 2011, in which Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao played Satyabhama and Chinta Ravi Balakrishna played *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava. As a point of comparison, I also reference a recording of the *Bhāmākalāpam* performance at the annual



FIGURE 12. Chinta Ravi Balakrishna as the *sūtradhāra*. Photo by author.

Siddhendra Mahotsav festival staged in the Kuchipudi village in March 2006, in which Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma played Satyabhama and Chinta Ravi Balakrishna played *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava.⁴ All the performers I discuss in this chapter are hereditary brahmin men from the Kuchipudi village.

THE *SŪTRADHĀRA* BECOMES MADHAVI

The *Bhāmākalāpam* performance at the International Symposium on *Kalāpa* Traditions opens with the sole figure of the *sūtradhāra*, who stands center stage and calls the audience to attention by announcing the commencement of *Bhāmākalāpam*, specifically Satyabhama's entrance (see Figure 12). Once Satyabhama enters onstage and begins her introductory song (*pravēśa daruvu*), the *sūtradhāra* moves to stage right to sit with the orchestra and play the *naṭṭuvāṅgam* (cymbals). Upon completion of Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu*, the *sūtradhāra* gets up from his seated position in the orchestra and comes again to the center of the stage, but this time as the female character Madhavi. Upon seeing Madhavi, Satyabhama beseeches her friend, calling out to her with vocative titles such as *kundara-dana* (woman with teeth as white as jasmynes), *sarōjānana* (woman with a face like a lotus), *takkaka-māyalāḍi* (woman who is clever), and *nīrēja-patrēkṣana* (woman with eyes like lotus petals). By calling out to her friend using these vocatives, Satyabhama establishes the gender identity of her companion to the audience (see Figure 13).



FIGURE 13. Satyabhama (right) addressing Madhavi (left). Photo by author.

Satyabhama then questions her confidante as to the whereabouts of her husband, but Madhavi feigns ignorance as to Krishna's identity. Satyabhama, too shy to speak her husband's name in public, avoids naming Krishna directly and, instead, refers to him as *śaṅkhamu-dharincina-vaṅṭivāḍu* (one who holds the conch), *cakramu-dharincina-vaṅṭivāḍu* (one who bears the discus), and *makarakundanamulu-dharincina-vaṅṭivāḍu* (one who wears earrings shaped like crocodiles). Madhavi cleverly pokes fun at each one of her friend's responses by suggesting that the descriptions of the conch, discus, and earrings indicate a caste status different from Krishna, who belongs to a *jāti* (caste) of cow-herders.

Satyabhama then attempts to identify her husband as the person in between her elder and younger brothers-in-law. A quick gender shift occurs in this part of the conversation as Madhavi briefly switches back to the role of the *sūtradhāra* by addressing a supporting member of the orchestra and asking if he knows the identity of Satyabhama's husband. The switch from Madhavi to the *sūtradhāra* was most clear in the March 2006 *Bhāmākalāpam* performance staged in the Kuchipudi village. In the dialogue regarding the identity of Satyabhama's husband, the male dancer enacting the dual roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi simultaneously converses with Satyabhama and the orchestra. The shifts in their conversation proceed as follows:

- Satyabhama: My husband is in the space (*sandhi*) between my elder brother-in-law and my younger brother-in-law.
- Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi: [*Addressing Satyabhama as Madhavi*]: In the space between your elder brother-in-law and younger brother-in-law?
[*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: Hey, Sastry Garu!⁵ Do you know what this space is?
- Orchestra Member: Please tell me.
- Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi: [*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: In this village, there's the Pasumarti space. There's the Bhagavatula space. There's the Darbha space.⁶ So what's this space between her elder and younger brothers-in-law that she's talking about? You don't get it, do you?
[*Satyabhama exits the stage*].
- Orchestra Member: No, I don't.
- Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi: [*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: I'll tell you. Her elder brother-in-law is Balarama.
- Orchestra Member: Oh ho!
- Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi: [*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: Her younger one is Satyaki.
- Orchestra Member: Aha!
[*Satyabhama re-enters onstage*].
- Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi: [*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: Her husband is the one in between these two. He's not too tall. He is not too short. He's not too fat. He's not too skinny. He's very dark like a black plum.
[*Addressing Satyabhama as Madhavi*]: What do you want with him?

During this conversation between the *sūtradhāra* and the orchestra, Satyabhama exits the stage briefly, which clearly signals that the onstage discussion is between the male *sūtradhāra* and a male member of the orchestra, not between the female Madhavi and the orchestra. These humorous asides between the *sūtradhāra* and the orchestra are similar to direct addresses found in Tamil Special Drama (Seizer 2005) and Shakespearean theatre (Cohen 2016).⁷ By shifting the conversation toward the orchestra and away from Satyabhama, the male Kuchipudi performer transforms his character from the female Madhavi into the male *sūtradhāra* by speaking to the male orchestra member.

The humorous nature of the conversation is carried forth in later dialogues between Satyabhama and Madhavi. When Satyabhama requests that her friend

go in search of Krishna, Madhavi insists that Satyabhama must give her something for her efforts. This evolves into an elaborate conversation regarding Satyabhama's jewels, a section of the dance drama commonly referred to as *sommulapaṭṭu*:

Satyabhama: What do you want me to give you?

Madhavi: Tell me what you have.

Satyabhama: I've got jewels for every day of the week.

Madhavi: So you've got jewels for every day of the week, do you? I also have jewels in my house.

Satyabhama: Oyamma Madhavi, having jewels for every day of the week means that I have one entire jewelry box for each and every day.

Madhavi: So you've got seven boxes? Should I tell you the boxes I have in my house? I have a box for black lentils. A box for yellow lentils. A box for salt. A box for tamarind. A box for cumin. I even have a pantry box to put all those boxes in! Since you have jewels for every day of the week, then give me your Sunday jewels and I'll be happy.

Satyabhama: Hari, Hari, Hari, Hari! My Sunday jewels are dedicated to the sun god.

Madhavi: Shiva, Shiva, Shiva, Shiva! Isn't your husband sitting around with his other wife Rukmini?

Satyabhama: Oyamma Madhavi, she's not letting him come, is she?

Madhavi: So I'll go and bring him. Just give me what I ask.

Satyabhama: I'll give you whatever you want if you bring my husband. Please go and bring him. [*Musical interlude*].

Madhavi: Oyamma Satyabhama! You've given me your Sunday jewels, but there's one more piece of jewelry that I want.

Satyabhama: What's that?

Madhavi: I don't remember the name of it, but I can tell you its shape. Look here, it looks like this. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*].

Satyabhama: [*Looking puzzled*]: Oh ho! Is it tamarind?

Madhavi: What? I said it was a piece of jewelry! What do I want with a pregnancy craving like tamarind at this age? Look at it again. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*] . . .

Satyabhama: Is it my golden belt?

Madhavi: Do you think your belt will fit me? That's not it. It's like this. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*] . . .

Satyabhama: Is it my sun and moon hair ornaments?

- Madhavi: What do I need with sun and moon hair ornaments? I see the sun and moon every day when I get up and go to sleep. There's no roof on my house so I can pray to the sun and moon whenever I want. That's not it!
- Satyabhama: Is it my earrings?
- Madhavi: No, that's not it. It's right next to those. Just right next to those.
- Satyabhama: Is it my anklets?
- Madhavi: What? You went from your head to your foot! I said it looks just like this. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*]. It's right next to your earrings.
- Satyabhama: Is it my nose stud?
- Madhavi: Good, at last you've come to the right place. It's right next to that.
- Satyabhama: [*Shocked*]. Is it my nose ring? I can't give you that!⁸

In this dialogue, Madhavi playfully puns on Satyabhama's words by transforming boxes of jewelry into boxes of lentils, and sun- and moon-shaped hair ornaments into the rising sun and moon, which, as Madhavi states, are visible from her roofless house. This dialogue not only makes evident Madhavi's comedic role, but also establishes her gender and class status. While Satyabhama is a woman with boxes of jewels, Madhavi is a woman with boxes of grain. In positioning her class status as inferior to Satyabhama's, Madhavi uses this dialogue to poke fun at Satyabhama's endless riches, which are thought to arise from her possession of the wealth-giving *syamantaka* gem. Madhavi's specific request for Satyabhama's nose ring, however, takes on further significance, as this particular ornament is indicative of her identity as an auspicious married woman. In asking for her nose ring, Madhavi paradoxically forces Satyabhama to abandon all the ornamental signifiers of her identity as a married woman in exchange for her husband's return. Satyabhama reluctantly agrees and then writes a letter pleading for her husband's quick return; she asks Madhavi to journey to Krishna's palace and deliver the letter, thereby concluding the first and longest scene of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama.

THE INTRODUCTION OF MADHAVA

The delivery of Satyabhama's letter marks a change in scenes in *Bhāmākalāpam* from Satyabhama's abode to the palace of Krishna. After both Satyabhama and Madhavi exit the stage, Krishna enters and introduces himself in his *pravēśa daruvu*. The performer who enacts the roles of the *sūtradhāra* and Madhavi then reenters the stage, but this time as the character of Madhava, the confidant of Krishna. Madhava comes to the center of the stage and calls out to Krishna:

- Salutations to the one who is the entire universe.
Salutations to Hari whose eyes are like lotus petals.

Salutations to the one who is the source of all compassion.
Salutations to you, Krishna!

Madhava then prostrates completely on the ground in a sign of respect to Krishna. The act of full prostration, typically performed by men in the Indian context, signals to the audience the gender shift of this character from Madhavi to Madhava, that is, from female character to male character. This gender shift is further established in the following dialogue, in which Krishna explicitly addresses the character as “Madhava,” the male equivalent of the name “Madhavi.”⁹ The dialogue between Krishna and Madhava from the 2011 *Bhāmākalāpam* performance proceeds as follows:

Krishna: Hey, Madhava! How are you?

Madhava: I’m fine.

Krishna: How’s Satyabhama?

Madhava: Since the day that you abandoned Satyabhama, sitting on her cot made of swan feathers, she’s stopped eating and drinking altogether. She’s eating her clothes and dressing herself in food.

Krishna: What?

Madhava: Forgive me! My mind is distracted since seeing you. Satyabhama has stopped eating and drinking altogether. She’s become so thin that she’s wearing her waist belt as a ring on her finger.

Krishna: [*Looking surprised*]: Madhava, has Satyabhama become that fat?

Madhava: [*Realizing his mistake*]: Forgive me! She’s stopped eating and drinking. She’s become so thin that she is wearing her ring as a belt around her waist. You can read all of her troubles in this letter. [*Hands the letter to Krishna*].

Akin to the character of Madhavi, Madhava’s role serves a comedic purpose in the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama. The clearest example of such humor is when Madhava suggests that Satyabhama has gained so much weight as a result of her separation from Krishna that she is now wearing her waist belt as a ring on her finger. According to Indian literary convention, a woman’s waist should be so thin it is unseen between her large breasts and curving hips (Dehejia 2009, 30). Madhava creatively flips this idealized image by envisioning Satyabhama as a woman who is so large that she wears her belt as a ring on her finger and not the other way around. Notably, Madhava is careful in this conversation to poke fun only at Satyabhama and never direct his jokes toward Krishna; Madhavi and Madhava thus both engage in humorous exchanges but only at Satyabhama’s expense.

After reading the letter, Krishna and Madhava journey back to Satyabhama’s palace for the third and final scene, in which the three characters—the *sūtradhāra*, Madhavi, and Madhava—all appear onstage together. When entering Satyabhama’s

palace, Madhava transforms back into Madhavi and notifies Satyabhama of Krishna's arrival. Then the characters (Madhavi and Madhava) attempt to mediate between Satyabhama and Krishna, who are positioned at opposite ends of the stage and initially avoid speaking to each other. In this mediation, the performer goes to stage left to address Satyabhama as her female confidante Madhavi, and then moves to stage right to speak to Krishna as his male confidant Madhava.

In the context of Tamil Special Drama, Susan Seizer (2005, 208) maps out a complex system of spatial organization in the scene of the buffoon's duet with a teenage girl dancing on the road. Specific parts of the stage are gender-coded in this scene, with downstage left being exclusively used by the male buffoon and downstage right being the place where the dancing girl is confined (222). This gendering of space is equally present in *Bhāmākalāpam* in which spatial movement and proximity to the lead character (either Satyabhama or Krishna) signals a gender shift from Madhavi to Madhava. When the two lead characters finally come together, the male *sūtradhāra* reappears and sits down with the orchestra on stage right to play the *naṭṭuvāṅgam*.

Then, at center stage, Satyabhama and Krishna engage in a lover's quarrel, in which Satyabhama angrily accuses her husband of flirtatious behavior, and Krishna attempts to defend himself. During this exchange, the *sūtradhāra* continues to play the *naṭṭuvāṅgam* with the orchestra. When Satyabhama tries to hit Krishna with her braid, the *sūtradhāra* gets up from his seated position in the orchestra and transforms back into Madhavi. Pulling Satyabhama aside, Madhavi questions Satyabhama's pride and underscores Krishna's divine status. Satyabhama finally repents of her anger and asks Madhavi to bring golden flowers so that she can pray at the feet of her husband. The *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama ends with Satyabhama and Madhavi offering flowers at Krishna's feet (see Figure 14).

MADHAVI'S MĀYĀ: PRACTITIONER ACCOUNTS OF SŪTRADHĀRA/MADHAVI/MADHAVA

In an attempt to understand the gender shifts of the characters *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, I asked my interlocutors in the Kuchipudi village a simple question: Is Madhavi a female character or a male one? I found that this single question, more than any other, generated the most discussion among the performers and teachers I interviewed. Among the many answers I received, the most evocative responses regarding this question were given by individuals known for their performances in the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, namely senior gurus Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma and Pasumarti Venugopala Krishna Sarma, as well as rising Kuchipudi performer Chinta Ravi Balakrishna. All three Kuchipudi performers attributed Madhavi's gender shifts to the Indian philosophical concept of *māyā*, commonly translated into English as illusion.



FIGURE 14. Madhavi and Satyabhama offer flowers to Krishna (performed by Yeleswarapu Srinivas). Photo by author.

The first person to raise the concept of *māyā* to me was Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, a senior guru from the village who has played the character of Madhavi opposite seasoned artists such as Satyanarayana Sarma, as well as younger performers such as Venku (see chapter 2). According to Rattayya Sarma, *māyā* explains how a single performer can be the *sūtradhāra* when speaking to the audience and orchestra, Madhavi when seen through the eyes of Satyabhama, and Madhava when seen by Krishna. Rattayya Sarma states:

Do you know this character of Madhavi? She's a kind of *māyā*. What is *māyā*? This *māyā* is what Krishna has sent. When she comes near Satyabhama, she actually appears like a woman. But when she goes to Krishna, she becomes Madhava. The difference is clear. This is unique to Kuchipudi and is not found elsewhere. If Satyabhama sees her, she says, "Oyamma Madhavi."

The person who does this role is very pure. He is very powerful. He appears like a woman to Satyabhama. That is his talent. It's a gift from god. And when he goes near Krishna, he becomes Madhava. There he appears as a man and here he appears as a woman. For the people who are watching, he appears as the *sūtradhāra*.

For Rattayya Sarma, *māyā* underlies the transformative gender capabilities of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, a trait bestowed by Krishna, god himself.

Similar to Rattayya Sarma's observations regarding *māyā* are the sentiments of Pasumarti Venugopala Krishna Sarma (commonly referred to as P.V.G. Krishna

Sarma), a senior guru from Kuchipudi famous for portraying the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava. Krishna Sarma is a disciple of the late Chinta Krishna Murthy, the most well-known *sūtradhāra* in recent Kuchipudi memory, and has played opposite Satyanarayana Sarma in many performances prior to his retirement from the stage. Krishna Sarma also raises *māyā* when discussing Madhavi's character:

For the *paramātma* [divine soul] of Krishna, Madhavi is a manifestation of *māyā*. She is teasing Satyabhama. It's *māyāvaram* [the gift of *māyā*]. When you can win over Krishna with *bhakti* [devotion], why do you need Madhavi? She has to be there for the sake of the drama . . . Madhavi is *māyā*, right? Since Madhavi is *māyā*, she is actually testing Satyabhama to measure how much Krishna-*bhakti* she has. Like you put a measuring stick to measure petrol, that's how she's measuring. That character is *māyā*, and occasionally in the middle, she is teasing. She's Satyabhama's dearest friend, right? . . . That's how Madhavi's character is a manifestation of *māyā* and the *sūtradhāra*. The *sūtradhāra* has to be able to experience all of the characters' emotions.

Krishna Sarma emphasizes the devotional nature of Madhavi's *māyā* by depicting her character as a measuring stick used to measure the amount of Krishna-*bhakti* that Satyabhama has. Both Rattayya Sarma and Krishna Sarma situate *māyā* within a broader devotional discourse, in line with the Sanskritization of Indian dance (Coorlawala 2004). According to both dancers, the ability to transform genders is infused with religious significance. Krishna Sarma also highlights the humorous aspects of Madhavi's character by suggesting that her teasing is what drives the plot of *Bhāmākalāpam* forward.¹⁰

Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, a younger performer from the Kuchipudi village who usually portrays the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava in contemporary performances of *Bhāmākalāpam*, mirrors the sentiments of Rattayya Sarma and Krishna Sarma by also raising the concept of *māyā*. For Ravi Balakrishna, the *māyā* of *Bhāmākalāpam* is an innovation of Siddhendra himself:

[Siddhendra] created a story between Satyabhama and Krishna, and in the middle is *māyā*, which is Madhavi. He created the character of Madhavi . . . You might ask whether this character is a man or a woman. It is *māyā*. When she's near Satyabhama, she's Madhavi. When the character is near Krishna, he's Madhav[a]. When going near Satyabhama, she acts like a woman and tries to bring her closer to Krishna. And when she is near Krishna, she acts like a man and coaxes him by telling him, "Satyabhama's a young girl and doesn't know what she's doing." That's how Siddhendra created this character.

Ravi Balakrishna, like Rattayya Sarma and Krishna Sarma, employs *māyā* to justify the gender transformations of the characters *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava. It is through the workings of *māyā* that this character becomes Madhavi when approaching Satyabhama and Madhava when going near Krishna.

The fact that all three performers skilled in enacting the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava invoke the concept of *māyā* marks its significance. What is *māyā*, and why is it, opposed to any other Sanskrit term, raised in this context? Modern contemporary interpretations often confine *māyā* to the English term “illusion,” but its evolution in Indian thought expands beyond such a limited definition. The concept of *māyā* is a philosophical category that expresses a range of connotations that span from magic to illusion to deception to creative power. In the Vedas, the earliest canonical Sanskrit texts, *māyā* connotes both positive aspects such as artistic power, marvelous skill, or wisdom, as well as negative aspects such as cunning or trickery (Doniger 1984, 117–18; Pintchman 1994, 88).¹¹ Later interpretations of *māyā*, namely the Indian philosophical school of Vedānta, interpret it as illusion (Radhakrishnan [1927] 2008, 418).¹²

More recently, performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (2015) forges a connection between *māyā* and the related Sanskrit term *līlā*. Drawing on Wendy Doniger’s (1984) interpretations of *māyā* as the artistic power of creation, Schechner (2015, 134) connects *māyā* with the term *līlā*, which he defines as “a more ordinary word, meaning play, sport, or drama.” For Schechner, the dual concept of *māyā-līlā* is a “theory of play and performance” (92) that can be used to understand *rām-līlā*, which are the annual enactments of Tulsidas’s *Rāmcāritmānas* performed, among other places, in Ramnagar, the fort town across the river from Varanasi.¹³ *Māyā-līlā*, as it appears in the context of *rām-līlā* in Ramnagar, is “the playful manifestation of the divine, an ongoing enactment of the convergence of religion and theatre” (81). The *māyā-līlā* of Ramnagar *rām-līlās*, according to Schechner, bridges the mundane and the divine, as humans have the potential to transform into gods during the moment of performance.

My Kuchipudi interlocutors similarly forge a connection between *māyā* and performance. These dancers interpret *māyā* to mean illusion, more generally, likely alluding to popular interpretations of the term.¹⁴ Rattayya Sarma and his counterparts in the village also draw on *māyā* to ground Kuchipudi dance within a religious framework similar to the employment of *jīvātma* (individual soul), *paramātma* (divine soul), and *bhakti* (devotion), as outlined in chapter 1. In comparison to these other Sanskrit terms, however, *māyā* is the only one that is invoked by Kuchipudi dancers to explain an explicitly gendered phenomenon. In fact, the malleability of *māyā* makes it particularly suitable for understanding the complex gender transformations of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava in *Bhāmākālāpam*. Although I am fully aware of the problematic attempts to Sanskritize Kuchipudi dance (Coorlawala 2004), I also take seriously the words that my interlocutors use to describe their dance, particularly when these discourses focus on gender practices. Rather than entirely dismissing the views of Rattayya Sarma and his counterparts as another means of Sanskritizing and/or devotionalizing Kuchipudi, I believe that their invocation of *māyā* to explain the gender shifts of *Bhāmākālāpam* has theoretical possibility. The Kuchipudi performers are on to something when

suggesting that gender can be read through the lens of *māyā*, a term that both means illusion and eludes any single definition. Given *māyā*'s hermeneutic potential, I will dedicate the remainder of this chapter to theorizing *māyā* as a lens for interpreting the artifice of gender in the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama.

CONSTRUCTING ARTIFICE, INTERROGATING IMPERSONATION

Drawing on the observations of Kuchipudi practitioners Rattayya Sarma, Krishna Sarma, and Ravi Balakrishna, as well as Schechner's (2015) interpretations of Ramnagar *rām-līlā* performance, I foreground *māyā* as a theoretical lens for interpreting brahmin masculinity, in particular, and gender performativity, more broadly, in Kuchipudi dance. To distinguish my use of *māyā* from its lengthy inherited history of Advaita Vedanta interpretations, I translate *māyā* not as illusion, but as "constructed artifice."¹⁵ Envisioning *māyā* as constructed artifice highlights the Indian philosophical resonances of the term, while also forging a connection with Judith Butler's ([1990] 2008, [1993] 2011) theories on gender performativity, which interrogate the presumptive reality of gender. In the 1999 preface to her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Butler ([1990] 2008, xxiii–xxiv) writes:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the 'reality' of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks 'reality,' and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is and take the second appearance of *gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion* [emphasis added] . . . When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis.

Like Butler's theorizations on the illusory nature of gender, my reading of constructed artifice (*māyā*) is also disruptive in that it seeks to reimagine the gender performance of the characters on the Kuchipudi stage and, more importantly, to interrogate brahmin masculinity articulated through the body of the impersonator. I juxtapose the enactments of Satyabhama and Madhavi to analyze two fields in which the artifice of gender emerges in *Bhāmākalāpam* performance: speech and parody. By reading gender as constructed artifice, on the levels of both speech and parody, I interrogate not only idealized enactments of "real" women's bodies in Kuchipudi dance, but also hegemonic brahmin masculinity constructed through the processes of sartorial impersonation.

The Artifice of Gender through Speech

"Oyamma Madhavi." With the utterance of these two simple words, Satyabhama not only beckons her confidante, but also genders her into existence. Vocative

addresses such as this one are a critical means through which gender is created and re-created in the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama. The female Madhavi becomes the male Madhava, who in turn transforms into the male *sūtradhāra*, through the speaking of names. This power of speech, which often goes unseen in the context of a highly stylized theatrical tradition such as Kuchipudi, is critical to the gender transformations of the *sūtradhāra*, Madhavi, and Madhava.

How does speech work to construct the artifice of gender in *Bhāmākalāpam*? Through the citational power of language (Butler [1993] 2011), names connote gender identities in South Asian languages. In Sanskrit, for example, a name ending in a short *-a* indicates a male-identified gender, and a name ending in a long *-ā* or *-ī* indicates a female-identified gender. In Telugu, a name ending in *-uḍu* indicates a male-identified gender, and a name ending in a short *-a* or *-i* indicates a female-identified gender.¹⁶ *Bhāmākalāpam*, which is performed in Telugu, a language that draws heavily on Sanskrit linguistic convention, employs “Mādhavi” (Telugu) or, less frequently, “Mādhavī” (Sanskrit) for the name of Satyabhama’s confidante. The names “Mādhavuḍu” (Telugu) or “Mādhava” (Sanskrit) are used interchangeably to refer to Krishna’s confidant.¹⁷ Audiences hearing “Mādhavi” or “Mādhavī” associate the name with a female-identified character, and “Mādhavuḍu” or “Mādhava” with a male-identified character. When Satyabhama calls to her friend by saying “Oyamma Mādhavi,” she constructs the impression of a female-identified character for the audience. Similarly, when Krishna addresses his confidant as “Hey, Madhava!” it creates the impression of a male-identified character onstage.

The use of vocatives to establish gender becomes even more complicated in the case of the *sūtradhāra*. In the *Bhāmākalāpam* performance (referenced above) staged in the Kuchipudi village in 2006, the performer portraying Madhavi shifts back to the role of the *sūtradhāra* by addressing a supporting member of the orchestra in the middle of a dialogue with Satyabhama. This shift is indicated when the *sūtradhāra* calls out to a member of the orchestra, “Hey, Sastry Garu!” and even has a conversation with the orchestra member, despite the fact that Satyabhama is still.

The *sūtradhāra*’s direct address parallels the stage aside, or technique of “theatrical footing,” commonplace in the buffoon’s monologue in the opening act of Tamil Special Drama (Seizer 2005, 178). As Seizer notes, the buffoon’s monologue in Tamil Special Drama is intended to be a humorous, lewd, and gender-segregated conversation between the male actor portraying the buffoon and the male musicians seated on stage right. The direct address, therefore, “allows the Buffoon the ruse of confiding his more intimate thoughts and feelings to these men’s familiar ears alone, rather than to an entire village audience full of unknown persons, women and children included” (179). The direct address works similarly in *Bhāmākalāpam*, in which the *sūtradhāra*’s theatrical aside to the male orchestra member creates a gender-segregated conversation between the male performers

onstage, while excluding Satyabhama. However, unlike Tamil Special Drama, the audience members (presumably both men and women) can be incorporated into the conversation, as is evident in the previous dialogue about the various families (Pasumarti, Bhagavatula, Darbha) in the village.

The transformation of Madhavi to the *sūtradhāra* is evident through gender cues embedded in the context of the dialogue. When calling out, “Hey, Sastry Garu!” the female character onstage, Madhavi, transforms into the male *sūtradhāra* who is speaking to a fellow male member of the orchestra. This gender transformation from female Madhavi to male *sūtradhāra* is also apparent in pronoun use. When Madhavi speaks to Satyabhama, she uses the second-person singular and addresses her as “you.” When the *sūtradhāra* speaks to the orchestra member *about* Satyabhama, he uses third-person singular and addresses Satyabhama as “she.” The audience is signaled to the shift of the *sūtradhāra* back into Madhavi when the performer returns to referencing Satyabhama in the second person. Here, it is not the vocative alone, but the context in which it is uttered that enables the gender transformation of Madhavi into the *sūtradhāra*.¹⁸

Another complex situation arises when both Satyabhama and Krishna are present onstage. In the example of the *Bhāmākālāpam* performance at the International Symposium on *Kalāpa* Traditions cited previously, Satyabhama calls out to Madhavi from stage left while Krishna addresses Madhava from stage right. The spatial movement from stage left to stage right is accompanied by a gender transformation of Madhavi into Madhava, again indicated through the vocative addresses employed by Satyabhama and Krishna. When Satyabhama calls out “Oyamma Madhavi,” she creates the “female” Madhavi onstage; similarly, when Krishna beckons to his friend, “Hey, Madhava!” he creates the “male” Madhava. Speech, in this case the vocative and grammatical gender of the Telugu language, has the power not only to identify a character but also to gender her.

Vocative address and dialogue are crucial particularly for interpreting the character of Madhavi, more so than Madhava or the *sūtradhāra*. While the audience may experience the presumed male gender of Madhava or the *sūtradhāra* through the employment of male-identified costume and gait, comparable external markers of gender are noticeably lacking in the case of Madhavi. Audiences witnessing *Bhāmākālāpam* performances by Kuchipudi village dancers must interpret Madhavi’s gender based on how she is referred to and not how she appears.¹⁹ This creates a disconnect between gender visually performed through the body of the performer and gender linguistically created through the dialogue of the performance. Madhavi’s gender is ephemeral and can be transformed through the utterance of a vocative directed at another character (“Hey, Sastry Garu!”). Here, the vocative can both create and deconstruct gender, thereby rendering gender itself illusory, a form of constructed artifice. The utterance “Oyamma Madhavi” is not simply Satyabhama’s vocative address to her confidante, but also a transformative statement that showcases the artifice of gender through speech.²⁰

The Artifice of Gender through Parody

Although usually interpreted as Satyabhama's female confidante (*sakhi*) enacted by the *sūtradhāra*, Madhavi closely parallels the role of the *vidūṣaka* (clown or jester) of Sanskrit dramatic texts and vernacular theatrical performance. Envisioning Madhavi as a female *vidūṣaka* reframes her gender performance as distinct from the *sūtradhāra* and Madhava, whose humor lacks the disruptive quality of her parody. As a female *vidūṣaka*, Madhavi unmasks the artifice of gender by parodying both the character of Satyabhama and the brahmin male body donning her guise.

The male *vidūṣaka*, or clown, is a stock character in Sanskrit dramatic texts and performances. According to the opening chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 300 CE), the seminal text on Sanskrit dramaturgy, the *vidūṣaka* is one of the primary characters of the drama, along with the *nāyaka* (hero) and *nāyikā* (heroine) (*Nāṭyaśāstra* I.96).²¹ The *vidūṣaka* is invariably present in most Sanskrit plays, including notable works such as Kalidasa's *Vikramorvaṣīya* (ca. fifth century CE) and Shudraka's *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (ca. seventh century CE).²² In terms of characteristics, the *vidūṣaka* serves a comedic (and often parodic) role in drama through humorous appearance and playful dialogues. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* elaborates on the comic and even grotesque attributes of the *vidūṣaka*: "The Jester (*vidūṣaka*) should be dwarfish, should possess big teeth, and be hunch-backed, double-tongued, baldheaded and tawny-eyed" (*Nāṭyaśāstra* XXXV.79).²³ The *vidūṣaka* is also considered, for the most part, a brahmin man who is clumsy and forgetful of how to be a good brahmin.²⁴ Also notable is the *vidūṣaka*'s strong penchant towards food, as most of his conversations are focused on gastronomic affairs:

In the Vidūṣaka's bag of verbal tricks, the most worn and predictable is his attempt to channel any conversation (but especially a high-flown lyrical speech by the hero) into purely gastronomic lines: his similes, more often than not, are taken from the world of kitchen and table, and he is certain to interpret any statement or query as referring to matters of food. He sees the world with the eyes of Tantalus, except that his focus is more narrow, for the Vidūṣaka's true craving is for cakes and sweetmeats, *modakas* (Shulman 1985, 158).

In converting metaphors on love to conversations on food, the *vidūṣaka* redirects the erotic aesthetics of the drama, *śṛṅgāra*, to the *rasa* of humor and laughter, *hāsyā* (157).²⁵

The *vidūṣaka* is not limited to premodern Sanskrit texts but is a stock character in contemporary vernacular theatre including the aforementioned Kerala theatrical form Kutiyattam, which bases its performances on the texts of Sanskrit plays (Shulman 1985, 174–75).²⁶ In Kutiyattam, the *vidūṣaka* speaks in the vernacular language Malayalam and serves as translator of the Sanskrit and Prakrit dialogues uttered by the other characters onstage. By speaking in direct address

to the audience in Malayalam, the *vidūṣaka* fulfills a split function in Kutiyattam performance: he is both a comedic actor within the play *and* an interpreter of the play to the audience. Moreover, the *vidūṣaka* of Kutiyattam satirically inverts the main characters through parodic counter-verses, or *pratiślokas*, delivered in Malayalam that scornfully mock the elevated speech of the Sanskrit verses (*ślokas*) spoken by the drama's hero, *nāyaka* (177–78). The parallels between the *vidūṣaka* in Sanskrit drama and Kutiyattam and Madhavi's character in *Bhāmākalāpam* are remarkable. The *vidūṣaka's* counter-verses in Kutiyattam are mirrored in Madhavi's verbal puns of Satyabhama's dialogues. In the opening scene of the dance drama, for instance, Madhavi reimagines Satyabhama's epithets of Krishna into descriptions of a wandering ascetic or a potter's son. Later on, Madhavi's puns transform Satyabhama's sun- and moon-shaped hair ornaments into the rising sun and moon, visible from Madhavi's roofless house.

The *vidūṣaka's* gastronomic inclinations are evident in Madhavi's playful refiguring of Satyabhama's boxes of jewels into boxes of grains:

Satyabhama: Oyamma Madhavi, having jewels for every day of the week means that I have one entire jewelry box for each and every day.

Madhavi: So you've got seven boxes? Should I tell you the boxes I have in my house? I have a box for black lentils. A box for yellow lentils. A box for salt. A box for tamarind. A box for cumin. I even have a pantry box to put all those boxes in! Since you have jewels for every day of the week, then give me your Sunday jewels and I'll be happy.

This penchant towards food also features prominently in the dialogue between Satyabhama and Madhavi presented in the opening of this chapter:

Satyabhama: If the banana leaf falls on the thorn, or if the thorn falls on the banana leaf, the leaf gets torn. Either way, it's bad for the leaf.

Madhavi: Okay, if the banana leaf falls on the thorn, or the thorn falls on the banana leaf, the leaf gets torn. Can I ask you something else? If a *laḍḍu* [sweet] falls into ghee [clarified butter], or ghee falls on a *laḍḍu*, when both end up in my stomach, is it bad for me?

Just like the *vidūṣaka*, whose "true craving is for cakes and sweetmeats, *modakas*" (Shulman 1985, 158), Madhavi twists Satyabhama's metaphor of the leaf torn by the thorn into one about clarified butter and *laḍḍus*, a sweet very similar in shape to a *modaka*.

The comedic weight of the drama is not carried by Madhavi alone, but also extends to Madhava and the *sūtradhāra*. By employing the mode of direct address and stage asides to the audience/orchestra, the *sūtradhāra* jokes with the orchestra member about Satyabhama by reimagining the word "space" (*sandhi*), not as a

relationship between Satyabhama's brothers-in-law, but as lanes named after the families of the Kuchipudi village:

Satyabhama: My husband is in the space (*sandhi*) between my elder brother-in-law and my younger brother-in-law.

Sūtradhāra/Madhavi: [*Addressing Satyabhama as Madhavi*]: In the space between your elder brother-in-law and younger brother-in-law?

[*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: Hey, Sastry Garu! Do you know what this space is?

Orchestra Member: Please tell me.

Sūtradhāra/Madhavi: [*Addressing the orchestra as the sūtradhāra*]: In this village, there's the Pasumarti space. There's the Bhagavatula space. There's the Darbha space. So what's this space between her elder and younger brothers-in-law that she's talking about? ...

Similarly, Madhava also parodies Satyabhama to Krishna by suggesting that she has gained so much weight that her waist belt is being worn as a ring on her finger. The respective conversations between the *sūtradhāra* and the orchestra, and Madhava and Krishna, are humorously targeted at Satyabhama, who is not present during the dialogues and is referred to indirectly in the third person. Madhavi, by contrast, *directly* interacts with Satyabhama and pokes fun at the heroine's unending wealth, her outward appearance, and her lovesick emotions. This direct interaction clearly positions Madhavi as the parodic foil to Satyabhama, comparable to the relationship between the *vidūṣaka* and the hero (*nāyaka*) in Sanskrit drama. Reading Madhavi as the female *vidūṣaka* of *Bhāmākalāpam* extends her role beyond simple verbal jest to one of parody, and it is through this parody that the artifice of gender becomes apparent.

The single distinguishing factor that separates the *vidūṣaka* of Sanskrit drama and the characters of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava is gender. While the *vidūṣaka* is portrayed, for the most part, as a male character in Sanskrit dramatic texts and regional theatre, the enactment of a *female* clown/jester through Madhavi expands the scope of the *vidūṣaka* beyond Sanskrit dramatic and vernacular performative contexts. A comparable example of a comedic female character akin to Madhavi is Kuli in the Kerala ritual drama known as *muṭiyēttu* (lit., "carrying the crown"). As Sarah Caldwell (2006, 194) notes, "Kūḷi's character is a grotesque caricature of a 'tribal' female who is often shown in advanced states of pregnancy." Kuli functions as a foil to the dark goddess Kali, who is at the center of ritual *muṭiyēttu* performance.

A similar contrast is posited between Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* and Satyabhama-as-*nāyikā* (heroine) in *Bhāmākalāpam*. Gendered female through discourse,

Madhavi's comedic function in the drama is not only to parody Satyabhama's love-sick dialogues, but also to parody the idealized image of womanhood portrayed by Satyabhama, whose name literally translates as "True Woman." This meta-parody is apparent in the opening conversation of this chapter in which Madhavi proclaims that a woman's life consists of wearing necklaces and jewels, walking forward and backward, and saying "Oh!" and "Ah!" It is further compounded in the dialogue of the nose ring, in which Madhavi fashions her index finger into the shape of a hook and demands that Satyabhama guess what she is asking for.

Madhavi: I don't remember the name of it, but I can tell you its shape. Look here, it looks like this. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*].

Satyabhama: [*Looking puzzled*]: Oh ho! Is it tamarind?

Madhavi: What? I said it was a piece of jewelry! What do I want with a pregnancy craving like tamarind at this age? Look at it again. [*Displays index finger in the shape of a hook*] . . .

Satyabhama continues to guess what Madhavi is asking for, pointing to all her ornaments from her head to her feet, alluding to the Sanskrit literary trope in which the various features of a divine figure or human being, often a woman, are described either from head to toe (*śikha-nakha*) or toe to head (*nakha-śikha*). Satyabhama is shocked when she finally realizes that Madhavi desires her nose ring, the one ornament that signifies her marital status. In demanding Satyabhama's nose ring, Madhavi implicitly subverts the idealized image of Satyabhama as an auspicious married woman.

Madhavi's parody, however, does not end with Satyabhama's character onstage, but also extends to the brahmin male body donning the *strī-vēṣam*. As we recall from the previous chapter, the Kuchipudi brahmin must painstakingly alter his guise, voice, and bodily movement to impersonate *as precisely as possible* the age and appearance of Satyabhama's character. The impersonation of Satyabhama is an act of *approximation* of an idealized vision of womanhood made exclusively possible through the brahmin male body. By interrogating Satyabhama's character in the context of the drama, Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* also parodies the idealized womanhood enacted by the brahmin male performer. The lack of visual guising of the performer enacting Madhavi further heightens this parody; as a woman who has become a woman through discursive rather than visual means, Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* calls into question the very need for sartorial impersonation onstage.

The parody extends further if we examine the issue of caste. The *vidūṣaka* in Sanskrit drama is generally considered to be a brahmin ignorant of proper brahminhood, and is even referred to in some contexts as a Brahmandhu or "low" brahmin (Shulman 1985, 165).²⁷ Compounding this is the *vidūṣaka*'s "ineffable gluttony," which serves as a direct critique of the insatiability of brahmins,

a theme commonplace in Indian literatures (Siegel 1987, 199). Through his ignorance of correct brahminhood and his penchant for eating, the *vidūṣaka* implicitly critiques brahminical appeals to authority by positioning upper-caste brahmins as both unlearned and insatiable. Madhavi, the female *vidūṣaka* of *Bhāmākalāpam*, also interrogates brahminical identity through her food-based conversations, which flip Satyabhama's metaphor of the torn leaf into an image of sweetmeats. When Satyabhama is too shy to utter Krishna's name aloud and identifies him as *makara-kundanamulu-dharincina-vaṅṭivāḍu* (one who wears earrings shaped like crocodiles), Madhavi quickly retorts by mimicking the Vedic chants of brahmins, who are also imaged as wearing crocodile-shaped earrings. In doing so, she reminds both Satyabhama and the audience that Krishna, god himself, is *not* a brahmin.

When taken together, Madhavi's parody of gender and caste in the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama works as an implicit critique of not just brahminhood, but specifically of brahmin masculinity constructed through impersonation. Through her humorous dialogues and lack of sartorial guising, Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* parodies both the character of Satyabhama as an auspicious married woman and also the brahmin male body donning her *strī-vēṣam*. In doing so, Madhavi interrogates the very means by which brahmin men achieve, or at least aspire to achieve, hegemonic brahmin masculinity within the Kuchipudi village. The juxtaposition of Madhavi alongside Satyabhama further underscores this parody of impersonation: that a brahmin man can become Madhavi with the utterance of a single vocative interrogates the extensive efforts made by the impersonator to enact Satyabhama's character. In *Bhāmākalāpam* performance, therefore, we find two starkly different enactments of gender on a single stage: the impersonation of a gender ideal in the case of Satyabhama, and the parody of that ideal in the case of Madhavi.

Madhavi's role in *Bhāmākalāpam* must be situated in relation to Christian Novetzke's (2011) notion of the "Brahmin double." According to Novetzke's examination of literary and performative materials from the Marathi-speaking Deccan of the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, the notion of the "Brahmin double" became an important way for brahmins to criticize their own caste authority while also maintaining their authoritative status in public arenas of performance:

The Brahmin double [is] a rhetorical strategy deployed by *Brahmin performers* in public contexts. This 'double' is a result of a very specific context where a Brahmin performer or public figure (real or imagined) performs for an audience, the majority of which are likely not Brahmins. The Brahmin double consists of the character of a 'bad Brahmin', who is portrayed as foolish, greedy, pedantic or casteist, and who serves as a 'double' for a 'good' Brahmin. This 'bad Brahmin' is thus a 'body double', receiving abuse and deflecting polemical attack from the performer, giving legitimacy to a Brahmin performer standing before a largely non-Brahmin audience. (235) [emphasis in original]²⁸

Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* certainly presents the image of the “bad brahmin,” particularly in her ineffable gluttony and parodic dialogues. The “good brahmin,” in this case, is the male dancer donning Satyabhama’s *strī-vēṣam*, adding a layer of gender complexity to the doubling act. Reading Madhavi as the “bad brahmin” double to the “good brahmin” performer enacting Satyabhama interrogates the efficacy of Madhavi’s parody of gender and caste norms. Such a reading suggests that Madhavi’s role does not, in fact, critique Satyabhama, but rather reinforces brahminical power through her public discursive performance. In other words, Madhavi, the “bad brahmin,” upholds rather than subverts the power of the “good brahmin” male body in Satyabhama’s *vēṣam*.

I acknowledge this ambiguity in Madhavi’s role. Like drag performance, Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* “is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (Butler [1993] 2011, 85). Nevertheless, Madhavi expresses the potential for subversion through her parody of gender, which operates on three distinct levels: (1) the parody of the character of Satyabhama in the context of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama; (2) the parody of an idealized womanhood enacted by the brahmin impersonator in *strī-vēṣam* onstage; and (3) the parody of hegemonic brahmin masculinity that ensues in everyday village life. It is on this third level—the interrogation of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the everyday—that gender and caste norms are rendered as constructed artifice, or *māyā*, through Madhavi’s play. In concluding his discussion of the *vidūṣaka*, Shulman (1985, 213) describes the brahmin clown as imbued with the powers of *māyā*:

In a word, [the *vidūṣaka*] exemplifies the world’s status as *māyā*, at once tangible and real, and immaterial; entirely permeable by the imagination, always baffling, enticing, enslaving, and in the process of becoming something new and more elusive. The essence of *māyā* is contradiction—the incongruous wonder of the absolute transformed into sensible form; the innate, mysterious, dynamic contradiction of the clown.

The *vidūṣaka*’s *māyā* extends to the character of Madhavi, whose gender parody onstage works to expose the constructed artifice of gender and caste norms implicit in Kuchipudi performance and everyday village life. Through Madhavi, we are reminded of the ineffable gluttony of brahmins, the humor hidden beneath a woman’s lovesickness, and the possibility of gender transformation through the utterance of a single vocative. The extent of Madhavi’s critique only becomes fully apparent in the next chapter, which moves from the heteronormative spaces of the Kuchipudi village to queer enactments of *Bhāmākalāpam* in urban and transnational Kuchipudi dance.

. . .

Impersonation, as the previous chapter attests, is not simply a sartorial practice circumscribed to the Kuchipudi stage, but also a performance of power that creates hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the everyday life of the village's brahmin *agraharam*. Yet, this gender and caste ideal is itself a form of artifice, rendered unstable through the shifting use of the vocative or the parodic interplay of words. Through humorous words, gestures, and acts, Madhavi, the female *vidūṣaka* of *Bhāmākalāpam*, exposes the constructed artifice, or *māyā* in the words of my Kuchipudi interlocutors, of Satyabhama's character and the brahmin male body impersonating her.

Interpreting Madhavi's character as a subversive critique of Satyabhama alludes not only to the relationship between these two characters, but also the broader performative and political economy of the Kuchipudi village, which gives legitimacy to particular dancers over others. This ambivalent authority is most apparent when examining the figure of Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, a brahmin guru from the village. A contemporary of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and a disciple of the same guru, Chinta Krishna Murthy, Rattayya Sarma has been teaching generations of students in the Kuchipudi village, both in the state-run Siddhendra Kalakshetra and in his home (Jonnalagadda 1993, 117). Although skilled in impersonation, Rattayya Sarma could never match the reputation of his counterpart Satyanarayana Sarma and was always relegated to playing supporting female characters, including Madhavi, while Satyanarayana Sarma ubiquitously performed the lead heroine of a given dance drama, particularly Satyabhama. Some of my interlocutors implied to me that this disparity was on account of Rattayya Sarma's lack of appeal in *strī-vēṣam*, particularly in comparison to the stalwart impersonator Satyanarayana Sarma.

Rattayya Sarma's financial status was also far more precarious than Satyanarayana Sarma's. As Satyanarayana Sarma continued to garner public and financial attention for his impersonation, even in the years following his retirement, Rattayya Sarma had no such following. In fact, after my fieldwork, Rattayya Sarma was forced to retire from the Siddhendra Kalakshetra due to budgetary restrictions and only occasionally teaches students at home, which severely limits his source of income to himself and the family members he supports. Now in his seventies, Rattayya Sarma remains as one of the last gurus of the Kuchipudi village skilled in traditional elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire, namely *kalāpas* and *yakṣagānas*, but he does not receive the opportunities or recognition given to his more famous counterpart.²⁹ Eclipsed from impersonation for decades, Rattayya Sarma is also prevented from achieving the authoritative status of Satyanarayana Sarma, who will always be Satyabhama in the eyes of most villagers. Rattayya Sarma is therefore a critical example of a brahmin man who does not actively participate in the broader economy of hegemonic masculinity in the Kuchipudi village (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018, 41–43).³⁰ Although Rattayya Sarma may adhere to normative brahmin masculinity, which I defined in the previous chapter as an

emergent form of hegemonic masculinity that is always in process, he will never achieve the hegemonic status of Satyanarayana Sarma. Yet, in his failure to impersonate in the manner of his predecessor, Rattayya Sarma opens the possibility for the contingency of brahmin masculinity, particularly through his enactment of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava.

By positing Madhavi as central to interpreting *Bhāmākalāpam* performance, this chapter gives voice to Rattayya Sarma, a Kuchipudi dancer who has resided in the shadows of his performance community. Unlike Satyanarayana Sarma, whose allure in *vēṣam* depends on a visual aesthetics of impersonation, Rattayya Sarma's rapid gender transformations as *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava rest on nonsartorial techniques of verbal craft and parodic gesture. By parodying Satyabhama, Rattayya Sarma as Madhavi as *vidūṣaka* calls into question the authoritative status of Satyabhama and the impersonator performing her. The relationship of Madhavi and Satyabhama in the context of *Bhāmākalāpam* can thus be envisioned as a metaphoric foil for on-the-ground realities of Kuchipudi village life where impersonation is awarded with performative and financial power and the parody of impersonation is awarded with boxes of lentils. Nevertheless, when read as constructed artifice, Madhavi's character provides us with the theoretical means for displacing hegemonic brahminical masculinity through the utterance of a single vocative or playful pun. Taken together, Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka*, the character, and Rattayya Sarma, the brahmin performing her, foreground the playfulness of artifice, or *māyā-līlā* in the words of Schechner (2015), on the Kuchipudi stage.