Vatsyayana's Kamasutra

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The Kamasutra is perhaps the world's most famous work on erotics. However, it is much more than that. As its opening definition of Kama indicates, it is about all types of desire. It defines Kama as the mental inclination toward the pleasures of the senses—touch, sight, taste, and smell. Contrary to texts that identify procreation as the aim of sexual activity, the Kamasutra, while giving procreation due importance, states that Kama "finds its finality in itself."²

Although probably a composite text, the Kamasutra is attributed to Vatsyayana, who appears to have been a Brahman scholar residing in the city of Pataliputra (modern Patna) around the fourth century A.D., during the reign of the Gupta kings.³ This was a period of great material and cultural prosperity for the region. Vatsyayana states that his Kamasutra is a compilation of several earlier texts on erotic science. At the outset, he outlines a genealogy of authors on erotics. He traces the science ultimately to the lord of all creatures, Prajapati, to the primal sages Manu and Brihaspati, and to Shiva's companion, the bull Nandi. Among the human scholars he names are the Babhravyas, or disciples of Babhru, Charayana, Suvarnabha, Gonardiya, Ghotakamukha. The section on courtesans in the Kamasutra purports to be a reproduction of a work by Dattaka, which he composed with the aid of a famous courtesan.

In the course of the text, Vatsyayana constantly cites the differing opinions of several scholars on particular issues, before giving his own opinion. Thus, at every point, he emphasizes that different points of view are possible and that no one opinion can claim absolute validity.

1. I am particularly grateful to Kumkum Roy for her helpful comments and corrections of my mistakes in this essay.
2. KS I. 2:12. Alain Danielou, The Complete Kama Sutra (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1994), 29. Unless otherwise indicated, this is the translation quoted throughout, both of the Kamasutra and of Yashodhara's Jayamangala commentary. I do not always agree with Danielou's translation but have quoted it when it appears to be satisfactory.
3. For convenience, I follow the convention of referring to Vatsyayana as the author.
He also repeatedly refers to the varying customs of different regions, times, communities, and the preferences of individuals, stressing that all these must be taken into account before choosing or judging a course of action.

The text commences by placing Kama in perspective as one of the three aims of life, pursued by all living beings. Vatsayana advocates the study of this text by both men and women. He emphasizes that not just courtesans but other women too must study the Kamasutra, and that young girls should be instructed by older, more experienced women, in its theory and practice. He lists sixty-four arts as necessary to be studied by all people in order to be attractive. These include vocal and instrumental music, dancing, needlework, cooking, gardening, woodwork, flower arrangement, word games, and decorating the home and oneself. He states that a man who knows these arts is attractive to women and that a woman who knows these arts can always earn a living as well as be successful in love.

Thus, although specific portions of the Kamasutra, such as the sections on how to win other men’s wives, are largely addressed to the cultivated adult male city dweller, the text does attempt to outline a more general theory on the arts of life and love. It also specifically addresses and incorporates the points of view of particular agents, such as young and inexperienced boys and girls, younger and older courtesans, younger and older cowives, males of the “third nature” attempting to seduce other men, and so on.

The text is constituted of sutras, which are brief, almost cryptic statements, accompanied by verses from literature that are illustrative of the types of activity described. In a recent essay, Kumkum Roy draws a distinction between the prose and verse sections of the text, reading the former as more normative and the latter as more descriptive. The difference is between recommending and permitting. It is important to note that variations which are not recommended may be permitted and that, as Roy points out, this text, unlike the Manusmriti and Arthashastra, is not punitive even when it attempts to delineate ideals. No sanctions are pronounced for deviations.

The Kamasutra attempts to catalog types of sexual behavior and also to categorize those who are given to these types of behavior. To begin with, a normative adult male city dweller’s