

SPELLING MISTAKES, PHILOLOGY, AND FEMINIST CRITICISM:
WOMEN AND BOYS IN TIBETAN MEDICINE¹

Janet Gyatso

Samten Karmay is a great Tibetologist who has advanced our knowledge of Tibetan culture and history in myriad ways. He has also been for me a wonderful and steadfast friend over many years. In recognition of the major contribution Professor Karmay made in his ground-breaking article on the rGyud bzhi's authorship debate, I offer this study of a few words from that same treatise.

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Now do we determine what the best version of a text originally read? What kinds of things do we consider in so doing? What do we do if the best reading of a work itself displays ambivalence about the correct spelling of a particular phrase? Worse yet, what if this work might even be deliberately ambivalent, displaying a pun which would make any final decision on an “original” or “correct” reading moot? How would we represent such a situation? What philological principles would enable us to come to such a conclusion?

It should not be surprising that a prime example of a phrase that makes for textual ambivalence comes up in the domain of gender politics. It will not be surprising that this phrase, undecidable in spelling but even more so in meaning — or perhaps we might say in its very being — has to do with the status of women, their value, their purpose. For it is hard to think of a basic category in human experience whose very status in the world, its right to exist on its own terms, has been more open to question than that of woman. Tibetan medical writing offers a wonderfully lucid example of this fundamentally fuzzy category.

This essay is an attempt to deploy what I would like to consider feminist philological practices. It considers a particular and relatively anomalous textual problem that I argue requires feminist analysis in order to be most effectively assessed. While the issues it addresses will not pertain to every instance of textual criticism, it does demonstrate how there can be social dimensions at the very heart of the textual and linguistic matters that philology studies. In other cases such contextual considerations of course would by no means be limited to those taken up by feminist criticism. But what might indeed be a generally applicable point is my further claim that the semantic ambivalence the following discussion grapples with is something that feminist analysis is particularly good at recognizing. It would in any event seem that an eye for such

¹ I am grateful to Michael Hahn and Charles Hallisey for reading a draft of this essay closely and raising some very key questions that have helped to make it better. All mistakes in what follows remain my responsibility alone.

things must be a key tool of textual criticism. Discernment of the linguistic play that writers and editors, wittingly or not, often leave in place, even in the most systematic of compositions, is surely an important piece of the practices that allow us best to critically edit — and appreciate — the texts that we study.

My experience in coming across the material to be presented in this essay is a classic case of looking at something many times, assuming that what I am seeing is a typographical or blockprint carver's error, and brushing it aside as unimportant. Followed by an "oh my God" moment.

The problem revolves around the homonyms *bud med* ("woman") and *bu med* ("no son"). Actually *bu med* is itself ambiguous, and can either mean "no child" or "no boy," but either way, it does not affect the basic pun that ensued from the homophony just mentioned, nor the analysis that follows. To explore the significance of this second ambiguity, that is, surrounding the meaning of *bu*, would require too much space for the current essay.² It's neater, and richer, to translate *bu med* as "no son," which is the most plausible reading in this context in any case, and so I will make that choice for the rest of this essay, although more general terms for offspring will be rendered gender-neutrally.³

The issue comes up in the "*ro tsa*," or, virility/fertility section of the *rGyud bzhi*, or "*Four Treatises*," the principal, or root text for Tibetan medicine since around the 12th century C.E.⁴ The etymology of the Tibetan term *ro tsa* is obscure, but it is defined as having two goals, to foster sexual performance – to "be able to perform one's desire" – and to multiply descendants (*bu tsha*)⁵, i.e. to be fertile and multiply.⁶ There are two

² It has to do with the question of whether sons are more desirable than daughters (many statements in the *Four Treatises* indicate that they are), and whether the privileging of the adult male over the adult female in the *ro tsa* chapter has anything to do with that. I argue that there is a connection between these two questions in a book that I am currently completing on the intellectual history of medicine and its relationship to Buddhism in Tibet, one chapter of which explores sex and gender conceptions.

³ At least one commentator indicates explicitly that he is reading *bu* in the *ro tsa* section as "boy," in contrast to *bu mo*, "girl," or "daughter," even if at the same time he signals that the discussion should really be about children of either sex: "...*bu'am de dang 'dra ba'i bu mo ang mi 'byung bas...*" Gling sman bKra shis (b. 1726), *gSo ba rig pa'i gzhung rgyud bzhi'i dka' 'grel* Chengdu: Si khron Mi rigs dPe skrun khang, 1988, p. 454.

⁴ The full title of the work is *bDud rtsi snying po yan lag brgyad pa gsang ba man ngag gi rgyud*. See below for the available blockprints.

⁵ *Bu tsha* is as ambiguous as *bu*. Dar mo sMan rams pa Blo bzang Chos grags, in his completion of Zur mkhar Blo gros rGyal po's great *rGyud bzhi* commentary, clarifies it as *bu dang tsha bo*, which would seem to mean sons and descendants but can also mean children and descendants. Both lexemes often denote males in particular. *rGyud bzhi'i 'grel pa mes po'i zhal lung* [hereafter *Mes po'i zhal lung*], Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1989, vol. 2, p. 517.6.

⁶ The definition given in the *Four Treatises* reads *ro tsa zhes pa 'dod pa spyod nus zhing/ rigs brgyud bu tsha spel bar byed pa ste*: sDe dge, 242a (see n. 10 below.) The 15-16th century

chapters devoted to *ro tsa* in the *Four Treatises*, and together they make up one of the eight main sections, or “branches,” of medical knowledge, an organizing device that the *Four Treatises* borrows from Ayurvedic tradition, particularly the work *Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā*.⁷ The *ro tsa* section of the *Four Treatises* discusses problems in male virility and the reproductive health of both males and females.

While much of the *ro tsa* section of the *Four Treatises* is indebted to the *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya*’s own discussion,⁸ a curious passage at the beginning of the first of its two chapters is absent in that Indian work, and appears to be unique to the *Four Treatises*. It is concerned with proving why the principal (*gtso bo*) topic of concern to the *ro tsa* section of medical knowledge is male sexuality and fertility, and why female reproductive function is but an auxiliary (*yan lag*) question. This amounts to a rather arcane argument regarding sexual performance, patriliney in Tibetan society, and the canned misogyny that women by nature have a low store of merit. In any event, the passage argues, once the male’s sexual functioning has been properly attended to, it is appropriate, or permissible (*rung*) to attend to the female side of the equation. That would be the auxiliary topic of the *ro tsa* teachings.

The philological problem regards the wording with which that topic is described. The text says, “If the man’s semen is flawless and multiplies, then it is permissible to search for a woman [by virtue of whom] sons will multiply.” But when this topic is mentioned again later, the phrase *bud med btsal ba*, “to search for a woman” is on several occasions rendered instead “to search for [cures to the condition of] lacking sons,” *bu med btsal ba*. Most strikingly, while the chapter of the *ro tsa* section that is actually devoted to this “auxiliary topic” announces its subject matter as “how to search for a woman”, the entire chapter talks only about how to medically redress the condition of lacking sons, that is, how to cure various

commentator sKyem pa Tsho dbang provides a Tibetan etymology of the term whereby *ro* denotes the experience of the taste of desire, and *tsa* means to increase or multiply, but it is not terribly convincing: sKyem pa Tsho dbang, *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1999, p. 988. *Ro tsa* is used to translate Skt. *vāji*, which names the section on virility and fertility in the *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya*; a related Sanskrit term is *vr̥ṣa*. The conception of *ro tsa* as pertaining to virility and fertility is closely dependent upon the final chapter of *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya*. See Rahul Peter Das and Ronald Eric Emmerick, ed., *Vagbhata’s Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1998, pp. 346-351. Some have suggested to me orally that *ro tsa* might be connected to the Sanskrit root *ruc*, which can mean “to like,” but I have yet to find evidence of such a Sanskrit word used to denote sexual stimulation.

⁷ This important Indian medical work was translated into Tibetan by Rin chen bZang po (958-1055), and is included in the Tibetan *bsTan ’gyur*.

⁸ The *Four Treatises* also has major sections that are not derived from the *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya* or other Ayurvedic works. The varied sources for the *rGyud bzhi* are the topic of a doctoral dissertation currently being completed by Yang Ga at Harvard University in the Committee on Inner Asian and Altaic Studies.

gynecological and obstetrics problems. In other words, the chapter does not actually address how to search for a woman at all. Indeed, in spite of its opening line, virtually all available versions of the closing colophon to the chapter refer to the chapter's topic as being about searching [for a cure to] the condition of lacking sons (*bu med pa btsal ba'i le'u*).

So which is it? What is the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa* about? This essay will address two dimensions of the dilemma. One regards the method by which we would answer such a question. The other goes beyond philology to reflect on what the very existence of this curious spelling undecidability suggests to us about the sex and gender politics of *ro tsa* medicine as envisioned in the *Four Treatises*.

A text-critical survey of the available blockprint versions of the *Four Treatises* does not readily yield any definitive resolution of which of the two options is the best reading. All of the available prints display variations in spelling between the six occasions where the phrase or a close gloss is used in the text. We further are not in a position now to create a critical edition of the *Four Treatises*, as we are still lacking some of the important early blockprint versions, including the Grva thang, which may have been the first blockprint and reputedly is still in existence, as well as the Potala print.⁹ The blockprint witnesses of the *Four Treatises* that are available to me at present and which were used for this paper are based on these carvings: the sDe dge blocks of 1733, which are said to have been copied from the earlier Potala version of sDe srid Sangs rgyas rGya mtsho from the late 17th century;¹⁰ the Zung cu ze blocks carved in the middle of

⁹ We do have a modern edition of the Grva thang but I am not convinced of its reliability and so I have decided not to use it for this paper: g.Yu thog Yon tan mGon po, *Grva thang rgyud bzhi*. Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing, 2005. An example of what may be either a typographical error or an emendation of the modern editor is the line *bu med yal ga med pa'i shing dang mchungs*: even setting aside the obvious error of *mchungs*, all of our other versions, as well as Kyem pa, *rGyud bzhi'i rnam bshad*, p. 990, spell the first syllable *bud*; in addition, the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* verse on which this Tibetan rendition is loosely based provides the same metaphor as referring to the woman, *bud med*, viz. “*yal gag gcig pa'i shing gcig bzhin/ bud med med mi de dang 'dra!*” : *Yan lag brgyad pa'i snying po bsdus pa*, sDe dge blockprint, f. 332a. All of that makes it likely that the Grva thang blocks read here *bud med*; hence my lack of faith in the modern edition. A block print of the Grva thang is allegedly held in a private collection in Lhasa. The sDe dge version states in its colophon that it is based on the Potala. See TBRC W00EGS1016257, as in note 10 below.

¹⁰ TBRC W00EGS1016257 [this abbreviation and the ones that follow refer to the numbering system of the Tibetan Buddhist Resources Center, which provides access to scanned Tibetan texts: see www.TBRC.org.] The colophon also states that the sDe dge blocks were carved at the order of bsTan pa Tshe ring. A modern edition of the work published in Lhasa is based on the sDe dge blocks: *bDud rtsi snying po yan lag brgyad pa gsang ba man ngag gi rgyud*, Lhasa: Bod ljongs Mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1992.

the 18th century;¹¹ ICags po ri blocks carved in 1888;¹² and the so-called Lho brug version, based on blocks carved at dBang 'dus Pho brang in Bhutan.¹³ A final version of the *Four Treatises* consulted for this essay is a manuscript copy of the full text of the *Man ngag rgyud*, which happens to be the section of the *Four Treatises* in which the *ro tsa* chapters occur. This manuscript, in 282 folia of *dbu med* script, is from a private collection; its date is not known and it is difficult to assess its significance.¹⁴ I will refer to it as MS-I in what follows.

There is reason to hope that scholars will gain access to the other versions of the *Four Treatises* that still appear to be extant. But even if it were to become clear that the spelling variation under discussion in this paper developed only in a later phase of the text's history, such a finding would only indicate that at some moment an attempt was made, however inconsistently, to address the more fundamental semantic discrepancy between the label of the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa* and the actual content of the chapter devoted to that subject. That fundamental semantic discrepancy would in any case have been a problem already in the "original" *Four Treatises*, at least for the form of the text that is known to us now. As for the spelling inconsistency, it is at work as early as the commentary by sKyem pa Tshe dbang (b. 1479), who attempts to address it. I will argue that sKyem pa's comments and all of the evidence to be presented in what follows indicate that the spelling variation is not a mere confusion or result of a scribal error. Rather the ambiguity is inherent to the *Four Treatises'* entire position on the question of female *ro tsa* from the start. This ambiguity is meaningful, even if it is not always entirely logical — let alone fair.

¹¹ TBRC 30137. According to the colophon, these blocks were carved under the leadership of Tā Bla ma sMan rams pa Ye shes dPal 'byor of the medical college at Jehol, and the verses of prayer were signed by A kya Blo bzang bsTan pa'i rGyal mtshan, which would date the blocks to the middle of the 18th century.

¹² TBRC 30134. The colophon indicates that errors were corrected in these blocks in 1892.

¹³ TBRC 30141; date of carving is unknown to me.

¹⁴ A note on its final page in cursive script says that it is based on a copy of the text [belonging to?] Drang srong dPal ldan Phun tshogs. As will be seen below, this manuscript differs from all of the prints of the *Four Treatises* in that all occurrences of the phrase in question in this essay are spelled the same. A cursory look at the text discovered a number of missing syllables and patent misspellings. On the other hand it displays certain old orthographical features, such as the use of 'i instead of yi for the genitive particle, and some of its "misspellings" might betray its age, such as 'khal for mkhal, and 'khris pa for mkhris pa. The story I was told is that the manuscript was handed to a man of European origin trekking in the Himalayas who happened upon the escaping party of the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959; the Dalai Lama's retainers gave the man the manuscript, saying they were not able to carry it. The manuscript is currently in the private collection of B. Lietaer in Belgium.

Here are the six occurrences of references to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa* in the *Four Treatises*:

1. An introductory chapter of the *Four Treatises* lists all of the chapters in the work. All available versions of the text refer to the second *ro tsa* chapter, which is the one dealing with the auxiliary subject, with the abbreviated label *bud med btsal*, i.e., the chapter that deals with the “search for a woman”.¹⁵

2. Towards the beginning of the first of the two *ro tsa* chapters, the text makes the case that there are two sections of medical knowledge concerning *ro tsa*, a principal (*gtso bo*) subject, and an auxiliary (*yan lag*) subject. The man is the principal subject in this area of medical learning, the text argues, for if he can’t perform the sex act, even if he is surrounded by a hundred woman, the purpose will not be accomplished. Then it goes on to state that once a man is virile and fertile, then it is allowable, or appropriate, to “search for a woman,” in order to (or, who can) multiply descendents (*bud med bu tsha ’phel ba btsal du rung*). Again, all available versions of the *Four Treatises* spell the first term in this phrase *bud med*, “woman.”¹⁶ This spelling is confirmed as well by the 16th century commentator sKyem pa, who may have been working from a manuscript edition of the *Four Treatises*.¹⁷ A line later, the text reiterates that for this reason, the man is the principal subject of *ro tsa*.

In remarking on this passage, the late 17th century commentator sDe srid Sangs rgyas rGya mtsho indicates that the phrase “to search for a woman” means specifically “another woman.” In other words, if the male is ready and able, and if one woman will not be able to propagate the family line, then it is alright to find another woman. Again, this in fact is why the principal subject of *ro tsa* is the man.¹⁸ A similar point is made by a sKyem pa, remarking on the next occurrence of our ambiguous phrase.¹⁹

3. Right after Occurrence 2, the *Four Treatises* turns to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa*, which, in accordance with the preceding discussion, it glosses as

¹⁵ sDe dge 5a; Zung cu ze 5b; lCags po ri 6a; Lho brug 5a. We lack this section of the *Four Treatises* for MS-1.

¹⁶ sDe dge 242a; Zung cu ze, 269b; lCags po ri 242b; Lho brug 207b; MS-1 279a. Zung cu ze and Lho brug have *’phil ba* instead of *’phel ba*, but that would appear to be a scribal error; *’phil ba* does not occur in Tibetan.

¹⁷ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, p. 989.9. See note 40 below.

¹⁸ sDe srid Sans rgyas rgya mtsho, *Bai dūr sñon po* [hereafter *Bai sñon*], Leh: T. Y. Tashigangpa, 1973 [print of lCags po ri blocks of 1888-1892], vol. 3, f. 512: *skyes pa’i khu ba de skyon med par ’phel bar gyur na bud med gcig gis rigs rgyud spel ma thub kyang bu tsha ’phel ba gzhan nas btsal du rung bas de’i phyir na ro tsa’i gtso bo ni skyes pa yin no*.

¹⁹ See n. 25 below.

the woman (*za ma bud med*).²⁰ All versions spell that the same way. It continues with the rather convoluted point that since she merely holds his seed, and since females are not able to hold the patrilineal lineage (*pha yi rabs brgyud*), she is not the principal subject of *ro tsa*. Then the text states, “The man can perform with all, but if [her] karma, power, and merit are low there will be no son. In that case, the auxiliary [subject], the means to search for [a cure for the condition of] no son (*bu med btsal thabs*) is valuable.”²¹

This is the first time the text renders the auxiliary subject “no son” (*bu med*) rather than “woman” (*bud med*). It is curious especially in this context, where the immediately preceding sentence faulted not a medical condition that would prevent her from getting pregnant, but rather her religious merit, a condition that medicine cannot address. In fact, more than any of the others, this reference to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa* would really seem set to advise the male unambiguously to seek another, more meritorious consort, rather than offer a medical technique to cure the first one’s infertility. Indeed, the lCags po ri print does say instead “In that case, the auxiliary [subject], the means to search for a woman (*bud med btsal thabs*), is valuable.”²² The same reading is found in MS-1, although it should be noted that MS-1 stands alone in rendering all references to the auxiliary subject *bud med*, and may represent a unilateral attempt to standardize the phrase.²³

This reading of lCags po ri and the MS-1 makes much more sense. If her karma is bad and she can’t bear a man sons, he would do well to find another woman. It is also the reading provided by the commentator sKyem pa, who clarifies the issue by glossing the line as “It is valuable to search for a woman who possesses a glorious boy” (*bu dpal ldan pa’i bud med btsal bar gces*).²⁴ By the phrase “possesses a boy” what he apparently means is that this woman has the capacity to bear the man a son. In this he brings together the two homonyms, *bu* and *bud*, in one meaningful phrase, *bu dpal ldan pa’i bud med*, although he does not thereby solve our problem.²⁵

²⁰ *Za ma* in this context is a synonym of *bud med*. Elsewhere Tibetan *za ma* refers to a kind of third sex, associated with the *ma ning*. For the reasons why a single term can mean either woman or the third sex, see my “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender Conception and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle.” *History of Religions* 43: 2 (2003): 89-115.

²¹ sDe dge 242a; Zung cu ze 270a; Lho brug 207b. That the line “if karma, power, and merit are low there will be no son” refers to *her* karma etc. is implied by the logic of the statement, and is also specified by the commentators, such as sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, p. 989: *bud med de bsod nams dman pa la bu mi ’byung bas...*

²² lCags po ri 242b.

²³ MS-1 279a.

²⁴ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, p. 989.11, see also 989.14 and 994.5.

²⁵ The *Four Treatises* passage itself had already implied as much in Occurrence 2, when it said *bud med bu tsha ’phel ba btsal du rung*. Dar mo sMan rams pa, *Mes po’i zhal lung*, vol.2, p. 517 also juxtaposes the two options in commenting on an earlier line in the

sKyem pa also now goes on to lay out the full ambiguity of the spelling inconsistency that we have identified, representing it as a choice. Commenting on the condition in which a female is not able to bear a son due to her bad karma and merit, he says, “In that case, the auxiliary [topic] — the means to search for another woman, or, to cure the illness in her herself and give birth to a glorious boy, and so on — is valuable.”²⁶ Two points on that: One, the comment makes clear that the rendering *bu med btsal thabs* or variation thereof refers to a medical solution. Two, by saying “her herself” (*mo rang*) sKyem pa is explicitly referring to the original woman, in contrast to the other option he recognizes, namely, to find “another” woman. But by leaving in place as one of the options an effort to cure the first woman’s condition, he is still participating in the illogical argument of this passage as represented in all the versions save lCags po ri and MS-l: the suggestion that medical means could address the woman’s bad karma. It is even possible that his own version indeed accorded with the majority of our witnesses, and his comment was trying to ameliorate its illogical implication. Perhaps the lCags po ri editors were depending on sKyem pa in introducing their change into the text itself.

In any case, the introduction of the alternate spelling “no son” into the mix will recur again, in the next chapter, the one devoted to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa*. Also note that this alternate spelling requires a stretching of the way that the verb *btsal*, a form of the verb *tshol*, functions. Rather than its usual meaning of “search,” or, “look for something” where it takes a direct object, here it would mean “to look for a cure to,” or perhaps we could say, “to look after,” or care for, someone with this boyless condition. Now its direct object is not something desired, but is rather something that needs to be fixed.

4. The rest of the first *ro tsa* chapter is devoted to the man, the principal subject: what will arouse him, and what will cure whatever problems he might have with his reproductive fluids. The next time the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa* is mentioned is at the beginning of the next chapter, the one devoted to it. Here all of the versions of the *Four Treatises* save one open the chapter with the phrase “Auxiliary [topic of] *ro tsa*, the method for searching for a woman” (*ro tsa’i yan lag bud med btsal ba’i thabs*).²⁷ That title of the chapter is also confirmed by sKyem pa.²⁸ But it is especially jarring since the very next line goes on to address the causes of that situation,

passage. But again, it does not solve the problem. To say that one might find a different woman who possesses [the capacity to bear a] a son is a different solution than to provide the first woman with the medical means to bear a son.

²⁶ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, p. 989.18-19: *de la bud med gzhan btsal ba’am yang na mo rang la nad bsal ba dang bu dpal skyed pa sogs kyi thabs yan lag gces so*.

²⁷ sDe dge 243b; Zung cu ze 271b; lCags po ri 244a; MS-l 281a.

²⁸ *rGyud bzhi’i rnam bshad*, p. 990.12; also 994.3. Also so identified by sDe srid, *Bai sngon*, vol. 3, f. 521.6.

which it lists as five – possession by demons, imbalances in the humors, a dead fetus from a previous pregnancy remaining in the uterus, her use of contraception, and barrenness. These clearly are medical conditions (demons are recognized in Tibetan medicine as a common cause of illness, and they can be ameliorated) that interfere with a woman's ability to bear children. They have nothing directly to do with searching for a woman, be that a first consort or a second one.

Again, one of the *Four Treatises* versions available to us, the Lho brug, does indeed provide the other spelling, labeling the chapter as “the means to search for [a cure to the condition of] no son (*bu med btsal ba'i thabs*).²⁹ But if the editor of that version noticed the incommensurability between the announced topic and the actual content of the chapter, he was alone. All the other *Four Treatises* editors we have access to labeled the chapter as if it discusses how to search for a woman.

But the commentator sKyem pa does take the problem up here, even though he accepts the incompatible chapter title. At the beginning of his comment on the second chapter he clarifies that the connection between the topic of how to search for a woman who possesses a glorious boy and the chapter's content is that what follows in the chapter addresses the infelicitous qualities a proper woman will lack (*gang gi mi mthun phyogs dang bral...*). He also specifies several lines later that the material in the chapter is a way to fix these conditions (*'di dag gi bcos thabs*), referring the reader for more details to the female pathology (*mo nad*) section of the *Four Treatises* (a point, it will be noted, that is at odds with his previous claim that the discussion of female malfunctions is simply a list of what is to be avoided in a female mate).³⁰ Finally, at the end of his comment on the second chapter he adds lines from *Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasamhitā* which actually do describe the desirable consort that the man should go and seek.³¹ All of these interventions on the part of sKyem pa indicate that he noticed the discrepancy between the title of the chapter and its content. It is particularly striking that he felt the need to introduce new material from another source that would finally accomplish for the chapter what the root text *Four Treatises* did not.³²

²⁹ Lho brug 208b

³⁰ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi'i nam bshad*, pp. 994.5-6; 994.14. sDe srid, *Bai sngon*, vol. 3, p.522 follows sKyem pa's general lead but simply identifies the chapter as discussing the causes of not attaining a son, which would have been the definitive sign that one has a proper woman: *gang gi mthun pa'i phyogs na mthun phyogs 'grub pa'i nges pa thob bya bu mi 'byung ba de'i rgyu...*

³¹ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi'i nam bshad*, p. 994-5, and repeated by sDe srid, *Bai sngon*, vol. 3, p.525. Cf. Das and Emmerick, p.348, vss. 40.39 - 40.40.

³² While sKyem pa and other commentators often fill out their comments on the *Four Treatises* with quotes from *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya*, they usually restate the *Four Treatises'* point rather than, as in this case, making an entirely different point.

5. Actually one brief moment in the *Four Treatises'* second *ro tsa* chapter does at least make reference to the topic of searching for a new mate, even if it doesn't say *how* to do so. This constitutes the fifth reference to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa*, although here another term is used for "woman" rather than *bud med*. The phrase occurs in the discussion of barrenness (*mo gsham*), the last of the five causes of the condition that the auxiliary *ro tsa* chapter addresses. Here the text baldly maintains that one can try to cure the condition of barrenness through various means but it is not possible to succeed. In such a case, i.e., if one's female partner is barren, one should look for a "friend with the right marks," this being a common euphemism for a suitable female consort.³³ In this case it would imply a consort capable of bearing a child (or son). The commentator sKyem pa adds to the picture of what the implications are for the first consort, the one who is barren, by using the verb *spang*, "reject," or "abandon," to specify what he will do with respect to her.³⁴

Let us also note that the wording of this passage, viz., *de la thabs kyis btsal bar nus ma yin/ des na mtshan ldan grogs su btsal bar bya'o/* confirms the unusual usage of the verb *btsal ba* to mean "look for a cure to a condition," even while it is followed in the next clause by a second sense of the same verb, now explicitly referring to the search for [another] consort. All of our available blockprints as well as MS-1 are unanimous in this reading.³⁵

6. In the final reference to the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa*, which is the colophon to the second chapter, all of the blockprints are unanimous again. Here some semblance of sense has finally been achieved. In spite of the chapter's initial topic heading, its colophon calls the topic of the chapter "searching [for a means to address] the condition of lacking a son," (*bu med pa btsal ba'i le'u*) which is indeed what the chapter talks about.³⁶ For the first time too, "lacking son" has been made into a substantive condition: it is no longer the strict homonym of "woman" (*bud med*), viz., *bu med*, but now clarifies itself as *bu med pa*. Even though there occurs in the chapter one very explicit mention of the possibility of looking for a different female mate, that topic was confined to a single clause; the rest of the chapter is much more reasonably characterized as the medical means to address a woman's infertility so that she might bear a son.

The single exception to this departure from the phrase *bud med btsal ba* in the colophon to the chapter is MS-1. As already mentioned, MS-1 renders

³³ This is a very common term for the female consort also found in tantric writing. We already see "friend" (*grogs*) in the *Four Treatises* as a gloss for "woman," one of the categories pertaining to his arousal: sDe dge 242b.2. sDe srid, *Bai sngon*, vol. 3, p. 514.4 confirms its specific usage as a synonym of *bud med*.

³⁴ sKyem pa, *rGyud bzhi'i rnam bshad*, p. 994.18

³⁵ sDe dge 244a; Zung cu ze 272b; lCags po ri 244b; Lho brug 209b; MS-1 281b.

³⁶ sDe dge 244a; Zung cu ze 272b; lCags po ri 244b; Lho brug 209b. Confirmed also by sDe srid, *Bai sngon*, vol. 3, p. 526.6; not given by sKyem pa.

all forms of the label of the auxiliary subject, including this one, with the spelling *bud med*.³⁷

* * *

There are at least two immediate questions in front of us: Which is the best reading in those cases (Occurrences 3, 4, and 6) where our textual witnesses do not agree? More centrally, should all of the references to the auxiliary subject of *ro tsa* be made consistent? This second question is motivated by that fact that the phrase labeling this subject refers both to a particular chapter and an explicitly identified section of medical knowledge. It seems that such a label should be consistent.

There are a variety of grounds upon which to answer such questions. One would be to try to reconstruct the original author's final best version, and see how that version rendered our phrase. But as already pointed out, we have no access to manuscripts versions of the *Four Treatises*, save one of questionable significance, nor do we have the earliest block prints of the text. The fact that we know at least some of the earlier witnesses are extant makes us reluctant to focus on an "authorial fair copy" as the goal of this analysis for now.

If we turn instead to the internal logic of the text, we are still facing a dilemma: Do we privilege the argument of the first *ro tsa* chapter, which conceives of the auxiliary topic as the pair to the main topic of *ro tsa*, which is the man, and which clearly indicates that the auxiliary topic is about finding a "woman"? Or do we privilege the evidence of the second *ro tsa* chapter, where the actual content of this auxiliary topic is about addressing medical obstacles to a woman's fertility, which would suggest that "no boy" is preferable?

In any event, the discrepancy in what the text tells its readers this auxiliary subject is actually about does make it undesirable that the text should be emended so that all the occurrences of the term are the same. On the one hand, the introduction to the *ro tsa* section strongly suggests that there was a real debate about whether the male or the female — or both — should be the principal subject of *ro tsa* knowledge. The text in fact makes several concessions which indicate its awareness that there are reasons to argue that both male and female are central to the aims of *ro tsa*, and indeed elsewhere in the *Four Treatises* it is repeatedly made clear that both mother and father are responsible in a variety of ways for reproduction of a child.³⁸ And yet the passage contorts this tradition in order to insist that

³⁷ MS-I 282a.

³⁸ One salient example is this statement from the same *Four Treatises*' first *ro tsa* chapter, which admits explicitly that, medically speaking, male and female should be treated equally in the *ro tsa* section: *don snod spyi de bsam se'i nad du bshad/ bcud kyi dangs ma sa bon dkar dmar rten/ de phyir pho mo gnyis ka'i thun mong nad/* (The organ common [to both

the male is primary whereas the female is secondary to both sex and reproduction. There can be no question that this introductory section is arguing that there is an auxiliary topic of *ro tsa*, that it concerns the woman, and that a major part of the reason for rendering it “auxiliary” is to suggest that a man has the power to choose and reject a mate, while a woman does not. On the other hand, the fact that the second chapter is all about medical diagnostics and procedures prevents us from easily concluding that the chapter should be titled “how to search for woman.”

But if that discrepancy makes us pause before maintaining that all references to the auxiliary topic should read “how to search for a woman”, we must also concede that we cannot argue that they should read instead “no boy.” That is, if we were to say that what the auxiliary topic is in fact discussing is how to redress medically the lack of sons, such a label would equally describe the first *ro tsa* chapter, and the principal topic of *ro tsa*, the man, since that chapter too is about how to fix the condition of lacking sons. And so “how to address the condition of having no sons” could not serve as the overall label of the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa* either.

If we can agree that it would be problematic to emend the text so that the phrase is spelled consistently in all of the places where it occurs in the *Four Treatises* (even if in fact MS-1 does that, a point to which I will return), we still have further questions to consider from the perspective of the text’s own logic. How do we explain the patent lack of sense in Occurrence 3, where the majority of witnesses posit a search for medical cures for the condition of no sons as a way to redress a karmic reason for that lack? Moreover, how do we explain the fact that the second *ro tsa* chapter is introduced in almost all cases with a title that is completely at odds with its content (Occurrence 4)? Finally, how do we explain the inconsistent spelling for the title to that chapter between its Occurrence 4 at the beginning of the chapter and in Occurrence 6 in the colophon to the chapter? Which way would we emend the text to get the preferable reading?

One might suggest that we deploy an “eclectic” method and follow the preferable reading in lCags po ri for Occurrence 3 and in Lho brug for Occurrence 4.³⁹ That would effectively separate the two chapters, whereby the first referred consistently to the auxiliary topic as the search for a woman, and the second considered it to consist in the means to cure a

male and female], the *bsam se*, is explained as the [main site of *ro tsa*] illness. It is the basis for the distillate of nutriment, the white and red seeds [i.e. the male and female reproductive seed]. Therefore it is an illness common to both male and female.” *rGyud bzhi*, sDe dge 242a. The next line goes right back to casting the male as the principal subject of *ro tsa* without acknowledging the contradiction.

³⁹ An extremely thorough survey of the eclectic method, as well as an incisive critique of some of its presuppositions, may be found in Eldon Jay Epp, “The Eclectic Method in New Testament Textual Criticism: Solution or Symptom?” in *The Harvard Theological Review* 69.3/4 (July-October 1976): 211-257.

woman's infertility. But that would still not have solved the problem that the first chapter refers to the second chapter in a way that does not match its content; it would also be to favor the minority opinion in both cases, and to adopt solutions that in each instance had only one taker. Most of all, such a resolution would fail to explore what produced the textual discrepancies in the first place.

I would argue that we should not follow lCags po ri and Lho brug merely because they seem to make more sense. They are both relatively late editions; both appear to be struggling with difficult readings that they attempt to set right, but it is possible that in solving a local issue they gloss over a deeper ambiguity in the text that may have value in itself. In any case we can note that the only places where our blockprint witnesses disagree, i.e., where lCags po ri or Lho brug dissent from the majority, are the very spots where we too noticed a dissonance in logic at the local level. This suggests there was probably awareness of the same issues that we are laying out here. What I would like to explore now, then, is the possibility that despite these signs of discomfort there might be value in letting the textual variants as found in our prints stand, and actually respecting the discomfort that they betray.

We might first consider one more option that suggests itself as a way to neatly resolve the problem at hand. Perhaps the two spellings of our phrase really in the end say the same thing. This would entail reading *bud med btsal ba* not as "to search for a woman" but something like "to search for [a cure to] a woman[*'s* condition of having no sons]," or, more elliptically, "to look after the woman" {i.e., with regard to *ro tsa* matters.} But not only would that ignore the commentators who explicitly gloss *bud med btsal ba* as "to search for *another* woman." It would also be a very stretched meaning of *bud med btsal ba*; indeed, it is also a stretch for *bu med btsal ba* to mean "search for [a means to cure the condition of] having no sons." I will return to the verb *btsal ba* once more below. For now let me just say that I am actually not adverse to granting in the most general of ways that actually *bud med btsal ba* and *bu med btsal ba* do in fact name the same general point, but that the difference in spelling teases apart two sides of that point, sides that there was value in disaggregating. I would like to suggest that the appearance in the text of the two spellings mirror these two sides of the auxiliary topic. But there was also something to be gained in holding them together. And the pair of close homonyms exactly accomplish both. But before unpacking this point further, we do need to note that if we grant that *bud med btsal ba* and *bu med btsal ba* actually mean the same general thing but point to two sides of that thing, then we have only succeeded in begging the question. To which side is Occurrence 3 referring? And to which Occurrence 4?

Occurrence 5 explicitly refers to a choice between the two senses of the phrase. We have seen as well the comment of sKyem pa regarding Occurrence 3 which also teases apart the two senses of the phrase and presents them as a choice. Recall, Occurrence 5 says that one can look for a cure to barrenness in a woman but will not be able to find one, and therefore should look for a consort with the right marks. Here the very repetition of the verb *btsal* with two distinct senses underlines the reading that is emerging in this analysis, namely that there are two kinds of “searching,” and a real choice between them. Actually Occurrence 5 is saying that there *is* no real choice, since it is not possible to find a cure to the condition, but it is trading on the assumption throughout the *ro tsa* auxiliary topic that such a choice is at least being held out as an option. sKyem pa’s comment on Occurrence 3 makes the point far more front and central, however, in a way that can govern all the instances of the label for the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa*. Occurrence 3 also occurs at a moment of logical discrepancy, as we have already pointed out: a man whose woman’s bad karma causes her to lack sons is directed to medical methods to address her condition. It would appear that sKyem pa was working from a version of the root text that recommends instead that the man look for another woman. But the fact that sKyem pa presents also the other choice, to attend to the first woman’s medical condition, here either indicates that he knew of the other version of the line,⁴⁰ or that he knew that the phrase labeling the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa* had two possible meanings. Perhaps both are true.

If it is correct that the *Four Treatises ro tsa* section as we have it conceived of the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa* as twofold, a choice between curing the first woman’s infertility or finding a second one, we still have not answered the question of why the phrase is spelled differently in different places in the text. Nor have we settled why in some contexts, where clearly one of the two sides of the auxiliary topic was being discussed rather than the other one, the spelling for the other side was deployed.

I suggest that there was an ambivalence in the very constitution of the *ro tsa* auxiliary topic, an ambivalence which is fundamental to the entire approach that the *Four Treatises* is taking to it. This is as close to a statement about an “original” *Four Treatises* as I am willing to go, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that, as already indicated, much remains unknown about the long and complex history of the *Four Treatises*’ development before it reached the form that it has today. But the case under discussion in this paper adds a further and important

⁴⁰ The Grva thang blockprint of the *Four Treatises* was edited and carved under the direction of Zur mkhar ba Blo gros rGyal po probably during the lifetime of sKyem pa, and it may be that in representing the text this way sKyem pa was weighing in on how he thought it should read.

dimension to why it is sometimes fruitless to search for an original version in any event. In this case, I believe that there was an undecidability at the very heart of the label of the auxiliary *ro tsa* topic. This undecidability is reflected not only in the disparity of ways that the phrase naming the auxiliary topic is spelled. It also may be seen in the entire way that the issue is discussed, such that no matter how the phrase is spelled, the nature of the auxiliary topic is left ambiguous.

I submit that a variety of agendas came together in the constitution of the auxiliary *ro tsa* topic, agendas that in some respects were at odds with each other. On one hand, there was a demonstrable effort to include women's medicine in the *Four Treatises* and to redress some of the medical tradition's evident androcentrism.⁴¹ Hence the impulse to address the issue of *ro tsa* for both men and women. And yet on the other hand, we find in the introductory passage to the *ro tsa* section the concerted argument that the man is the principal topic and the woman is the auxiliary topic. We can see nonetheless that there was considerable discomfort around this argument, especially since the *Four Treatises* elsewhere shows repeatedly that the mother and father are equally responsible for both reproduction as a whole, and the sex of the child. We can only conclude that the effort to label the woman the auxiliary topic – instead of, as would have been very possible, one of two prongs of *ro tsa* medicine, each with equal if separate treatment – reflects a gender politics at work. While unfortunately we lack sociological information about mating, marriage and paternity in most periods of Tibetan history, the concerted tone and special effort to include an entire passage on it give a clear impression that the decision to render male and female primary and auxiliary was participating in a debate. Thus the introductory passage as we have it shows an androcentric, if not patriarchal, wing of medicine insisting that if we must cover her treatment we must still signal rhetorically who is the boss and who is subordinate. *gTso bo* and *yan lag* are strong terms that make such a relationship very, very clear. The implications of this disparity in status is nowhere more overt than in the extremely patriarchal implication of the auxiliary topic that signals male prerogative to find another woman if the first one does not bear him sons. Note that never is the opposite option even hinted at, that the woman might want to seek another partner if her first one was impotent or infertile, which of course is a perfectly plausible scenario. Even if human biology is such that a woman can conceal the paternity of her child in a way that a man cannot do with regard to the mother of his offspring, the fact that his right to seek a different partner is explicitly affirmed while hers is never even mentioned makes it quite clear where the *Four Treatises* stood on mating and paternity patterns.

⁴¹ This is another topic that I am exploring in detail in my current book manuscript.

The listing of chapter titles in the introductory section of the *Four Treatises* positions the *bud med*, or “woman,” version of the label as the main one for the second *ro tsa* chapter. My own reading is that *bud med*, or “woman” is in fact the main taxonomical unit at stake, a pair with that of “man,” *skyes pa*. My guess is that the basic impulse all along was to provide medical means to repair a woman’s reproductive capacities in that second chapter. However, a strong patriarchal will to assert male dominance over women, coupled with a misogynist tendency to blame both lack of children and lack of sons on the woman – despite the *Four Treatises’* own clear recognition to the contrary – conspired to hold out the option of finding a different woman altogether if the first one did not seem worthy, be that in regards to her moral value, her reproductive powers, her sexual attractiveness, or all three.⁴² Having suggested that *bud med btsal ba* refers to the search for a woman in Occurrence 2, the text engages in some dissimulation in Occurrence 3, where it is speaking out of both sides of its mouth, as it were, at once. While the condition it is addressing here, bad karma, is surely only to be redressed by finding another woman — or giving up on the prospects of having progeny altogether — the final statement in the passage looks forward instead to the proper medical content of the following chapter. The overall *ro tsa* message is certainly ambivalent by the time it gets to Occurrence 4, suggesting medical cures to all of the female reproductive problems save one; here when it calls the chapter by the old name of “searching for a woman” it is anticipating – almost cynically, it would seem – the bottom-line outcome, when all of its medical means fails, to resort to the patriarchal prerogative. Occurrence 5 is most honest about that option, while Occurrence 6 faithfully represents the content of the chapter.

I don’t mean to suggest here that this is literally or precisely the logic (or lack thereof!) that the redactors of the *Four Treatises* “had in mind” in each of the six references to the auxiliary topic of *ro tsa*. I only rehearse it as a minimally plausible picture. Nor am I suggesting that the sDe dge rendition as we have it necessarily reproduces an “original” form of a studied undecidability. But while we can consider the possibility that our MS-1 witness, which has no linguistic pun in evidence, represents an earlier version of the text than our blockprints, and might even reproduce some more original or authentic version of the *Four Treatises*, even then we would still have a situation wherein some very reputable printing houses went on to introduce a linguistic ambivalence, which was also taken up by our commentators. Certainly, if the imputed ambivalence for which I am arguing were really only a spelling or copyist’s mechanical error, one would think that at least the ICags po ri edition, the product of the

⁴² Her sexual attractiveness is discussed in the first *ro tsa* chapter as being one of the factors that stimulates virility in him: sDe dge p. 242b.2.

principal medical college of Tibet in its heyday, and also subject to a further set of emendations some years after its carving, would have corrected the problem.⁴³ But even then, even in such a scenario in which the consistent renderings of MS-1 indeed turned out to be the oldest, and the later spelling inconsistencies a mere product of sloppiness, we would still have the deeper problems of sense and consistency in the original two *ro tsa* chapters, as has been explored in this article. We would still have the problem that the text announces the auxiliary topic as “searching for a woman” but then goes on to address that topic with an entire chapter on medical cures to infertility. One might say that even if MS-1 was the original copy written by the *Four Treatises’* author, the apparent confusion introduced by the sDe dge or older exemplar thereof would actually represent a considered effort to emend such an imputed, “original” text, to make better — i.e., more ambivalent — sense.

As for the play on words that we find in the majority of our textual witnesses — whether they are “original” or represent later emendations — more than anything I am suggesting that the pun that we have discerned may have been a fortuitous ambiguity that was deployed only incidentally. But *bu med* as a gloss for *bud med* does turn out to be a good way to express a kind of patriarchal misogyny, whereby alternation between the homonyms reflects quite fittingly the alternating take on the entire question of a woman’s child bearing: either cure her medically or leave her. And while ostensibly the medical treatise should only be concerned with the first option, there is an irresistible urge to hint at the other as well, a wry wink of the eye that says if you can’t fix your *bu med* situation, fix your *bud med* situation.

I am guessing that the pun is fortuitous because despite various attempts to figure out the etymology of the odd term *bud med*, I am not aware of an explicit play on words in Tibetan literature about, say, the impure or debased “*bud med*” who will land you in a situation of “*bu med*” — that is, other than the case examined here.⁴⁴ I think rather that it was

⁴³ See note 12 above.

⁴⁴ dBang ‘dus, *Bod gangs can pa’i gso ba rig pa’i dpal ldan rgyud bzhi sogs kyi brda dang dka’ gnad ‘ga’ zhig bkrol ba sngon byung mkhas pa’i gsung rgyun g.yu thog dgongs rgyan*. Mi rigs dpe skruin khang, Beijing, 1981, p. 363, provides the following, seemingly contrived etymology of the term, which he attributes to sDe srid Sangs rgyas rGya mtsho’s *gSo rig khog ‘bugs*, regarding the origin of the sexes: “During the time of the first aeon, when the male and female organs were close to emerging, at one point a protuberance sort of thing in a lump-like shape grew in some. It became the male sign (*pho mtshan*, i.e., the penis) and thus [he is called] ‘grown’ (*skyes pa*, Skt. *jana*, in Tibetan the common term for a male, or man). In some it fell off (*bud nas*) and so they became ones who possessed a hole that lacked it, and therefore they were known as ‘fell off [and] gone’ (*bud med*).” (*bskal pa dang po’i dus pho mo’i dbang po’i sgo dod par nye ba’i skabs lba ba lta bu’i dbyibs ‘bur po re yod pa re zhig na la la ni skyes te/ pho mtshan du gyur pas skyes pa/ la la ni bud nas med pa’i bug pa can du gyur pas bud med du grags/*” Cf. the definition supplied by Sarat

accidental that the two main topics of concern to the male in the medical treatise with regard to sex and reproduction — i.e., women and sons (or the lack thereof) — are homonyms. I say it is fortuitous because it allowed the text to say things that might have been difficult to say too directly. If there was indeed a dissenting voice or aggrieved party who might have taken issue with the readiness of men to take another wife, it would have been easy to say, oh no, what we are talking about here is how to cure the condition of *bu med*. The text fumbles along awkwardly, shifting back and forth between *bud med* and *bu med*, not always entirely convincingly. But in the end the lucky homophony allows the male subject of *ro tsa* to have it both ways.

I have claimed that the text-critical method pursued in this article is feminist in character for two reasons. It is obvious that a consideration of patriarchal privilege, with its accompanying androcentrism and its not-infrequent misogyny, is central to what we normally think of as feminist analysis. But I would also add that the heightened tolerance for — and interest in — semantic ambiguity that was at the heart of this analysis might be characteristic of feminist criticism as well. This is not only because of the central feminist insight that part of the problem with things like androcentrism and misogyny is that they are frequently covert, and subject to a certain dissimulation. Feminist analysis has had to become good at looking behind masked agendas and pretension in order to do its work. But it is also comfortable, in any event, with a fundamental ambivalence in the location of meaning, given its close alignment with those movements in 20th century philosophy that have subjected the distinction between sign and signified to critical examination.⁴⁵ To be sure, the medical alternation between *bud med* and *bu med* does not achieve the metaphysical proportions of a famous exploration of another pun recognizable only in writing, that between *différance* and *différance*.⁴⁶ But it is probably safe to say that the Tibetan example is made possible by a similar undecidability in the very structure of linguistic signs, even if its politics are quite reversed, and the ambiguity it introduces into the Law of the Father is not necessarily to the advantage of women.



Chandra Das, *A Tibetan English Dictionary* (1902), repr. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1981, p. 872: *mtshan ma phyi la ma bud pas bud med ces pa yin* (“a *bud med* is one who is not put out (*bud pa*) at night outside.”) Das does not indicate his source for this definition.

⁴⁵ One example is sufficient, even if it is cited far too often: Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. French original published in *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, July-September 1968.