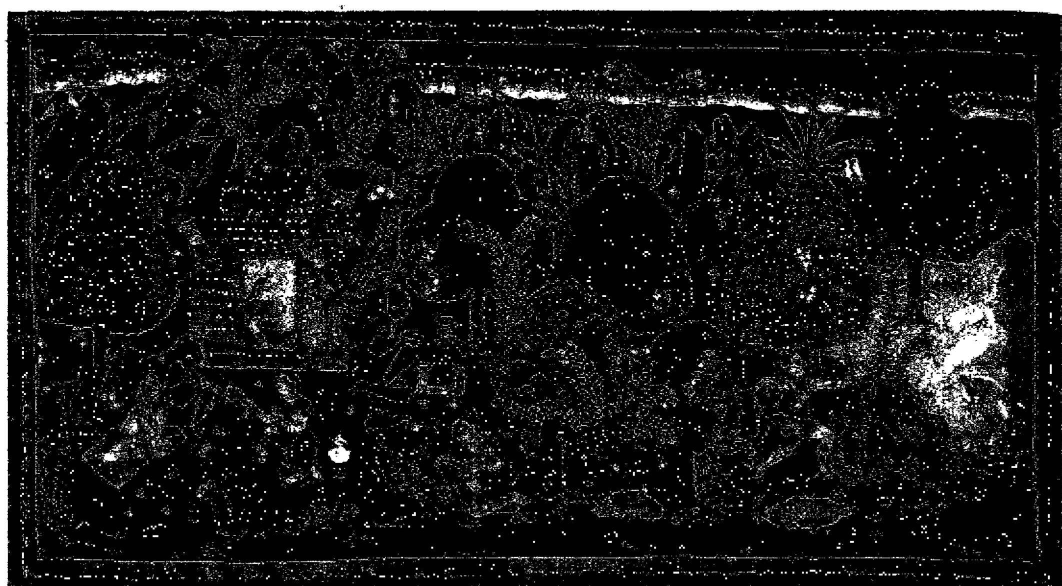

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki

AN EPIC OF ANCIENT INDIA

Volume III *Araṇyakāṇḍa*

Introduction, Translation, and Annotation by

Sheldon I. Pollock * Edited by Robert P. Goldman

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This book is for my beloved daughters, Mica and Nira

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Frontispiece: Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa dwelling on Mount Citrakūṭa. From the "Jagat Singh Rāmāyaṇa," 17th c. British Library Add. 15296. By permission of the British Library

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India

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pāpam ācaratāṃ ghoraṃ lokasyāpriyam icchatām
aham āsādito rājā prāṇān hantuṃ niśācara

I come as king, nightstalker, to end the life of evildoers
and all who wish the world ill.
—*Rām* 3.28.10

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List of Abbreviations

Manuscripts, Commentaries, and Editions Used in Volume III, Following the Conventions Established in the Critical Edition of the Araṇyakāṇḍa (see pp. ix–xi)

I. MANUSCRIPTS

Northern Manuscripts (N) forming the Northern Recension (NR) (14 MSS, including 5 Devanāgarī)

NW Northwestern Manuscripts
- i. Ś Śāradā
  - Ś1 undated

NE Northeastern Manuscripts
- i. Ñ Nepālī
  - Ñ1 A.D. 1020
  - Ñ2 A.D. 1675
- ii. V Maithilī
  - V1 undated
  - V2 1675
- iii. B Bengālī
  - B1 undated
  - B2 undated
  - B3 A.D. 1833
  - B4 undated
  - D Devanāgarī manuscripts allied with N
  - D1 A.D. 1773 NW
  - D2 A.D. 1659 NW
  - D3 A.D. 1731 NW
  - D5 undated NE
  - D7 A.D. 1829 NE

Southern Manuscripts (S) forming the Southern Recension (SR) (15 MSS, including 6 Devanāgarī)
- i. T Telegu
  - T1 undated
  - T2 undated
  - T3 undated
- ii. G Grantha
  - G1 A.D. 1818
  - G2 undated
  - G3 undated
- iii. M Malayālam
  - M1 A.D. 1690
  - M2 A.D. 1823
  - M3 undated
- iv. D Devanāgarī manuscripts allied with S
  - Dg1 the version of Govindarāja A.D. 1774
  - Dt1 the version of Tilaka undated
  - Dm1 the version of Maheśvaratīrtha A.D. 1698
  - D4 A.D. 1766
  - D6 A.D. 1795
  - D8 undated

II. COMMENTARIES

(Note: Spelling follows the conventions established by the critical edition, see vol. 7, pp. 655–56.)

Cg	the commentary called *Bhūṣaṇa* (the name of the commentary on the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* is the *Ratnamekhalā*) of Govindarāja
Ck	the commentary called the *Amṛtakataka* of Kataka Mādhav Yogīndra
Cm	the commentary called *Tattvadīpikā* of Maheśvaratīrtha
Cnā	the commentary of Sarvajña Nārāyaṇa (as cited by Lokanātha Cakravartī)
Cr	the commentary called *Śiromaṇi* of Bansidhara Śivasahāya*
Crā	the commentary of Rāmānuja*
Cs	the commentary of Satyatīrtha
Ct	the commentary called Tilaka of Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, composed in the name of Rāmavarmā
Ctr	the commentary called *Dharmākūtam* of Tryambakarāya Makhi(Yajvan)
Ctś	the commentary called Taniślokī of Ātreya Ahobala
Cv	the commentary called *Vivekatilaka* of Varadarāja Uḍāli (Uḍāri)

* The critical edition uses Cr for the commentary of Rāmānuja, and gives no abbreviation for that of Bansidhara Śivasahāya.

III. EDITIONS

GPP	Gujarati Printing Press (also called the vulgate). *Rāmāyan of Vālmīki.* 7 volumes. Bombay: Gujarati Printing Press, 1914–1920. With three commentaries called Tilaka, Shiromani, and Bhooshana. Edited by Shastri Shrinivasa Katti Mudholkar.
VSP	Veṅkateśvara Steam Press. *Śrīmadvālmīkirāmāyaṇa*. 3 volumes. Bombay: Lakṣmīveṅkateśvara Mudraṇālaya, 1935. Edited by Gaṅgāviṣṇu Śrīkṛṣṇadāsa.

Journals

ABORI	*Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*
ALB	*Adyar Library Bulletin*
Annales	*Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
HR	*History of Religions*
JA	*Journal asiatique*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JAS	*Journal of Asian Studies*

JBBRAS	*Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JIP	*Journal of Indian Philosophy*
JOIB	*Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda*
KZ	*Kuhns Zeitschrift*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
WZKSA	*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*
WZKSOA	*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd-und Ostasiens*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

Other Important Abbreviations

App.	Appendices to the critical edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*
crit. app.	critical apparatus
crit. ed.	critical edition
PW	Petersburg Wörterbuch: Böhtlingk, Otto and Rudolph Roth. *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*. St. Petersburg: Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1855–1875. Reprint in seven volumes, Osnabrück/Wiesbaden, 1966.
pw	Petersburg Wörterbuch (abridged): Böhtlingk, Otto. *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch im kürzerer Fassung*. St. Petersburg: Kaiserliche Akademie de Wissenschaften, 1879–1889. Reprint in three volumes, Graz, 1959.
v.l.	varia lectio (a variant reading)

Sanskrit Texts Cited

AhirbuS	*Ahirbudhnyasaṃhitā*
AmaK	*Amarakoṣa*
ĀpaŚS	*Āpastambaśrautasūtra*
ArthŚā	*Arthaśāstra*
Āru	*Āruṇikopaniṣad*
ĀśvaGS	*Āśvalāyanagṛhyasūtra*
ĀśvaŚS	*Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra*
AtriSm	*Atrismṛti*
AV	*Atharvavedasaṃhitā*
Bālrā	*Bālarāmāyaṇa*
BaudhDS	*Baudhāyanadharmasūtra*
BhagGī	*Bhagavadgītā*
BhāgP	*Bhāgavatapurāṇa*
BhāGS	*Bhāradvājagṛhyasūtra*
BrahmP	*Brahmapurāṇa*
BṛĀraU	*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*
BṛDharmaP	*Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*
BṛSaṃ	*Bṛhatsaṃhitā*

BuddhaC	*Buddhacarita*
ChāndoU	*Chāndogyopaniṣad*
DaśKuC	*Daśakumāracarita*
DevīBhāP	*Devībhāgavatapurāṇa*
Dhvanyā	*Dhvanyāloka*
DūtVā	*Dūtavākya*
GautDS	*Gautamapraṇītadharmasūtra*
HariVaṃ	*Harivaṃśa*
KālikāP	*Kālikāpurāṇa*
KāmSū	*Kāmasūtra*
KāśiVṛ	*Kāśikāvṛtti*
KāṭhU	*Kāṭhakopaniṣad*
KātyŚS	*Kātyāyanaśrautasūtra*
Kirātā	*Kirātārjunīya*
KumāSaṃ	*Kumārasaṃbhava*
KūrmaP	*Kūrmapurāṇa*
LaṅkāSū	*Saddharmalaṅkāvatārasūtra*
LiṅgaP	*Liṅgapurāṇa*
MahāBh	*Vyākaraṇamahābhāṣya*
MahāN	*Mahānāṭaka*
MaiS	*Maitrāyaṇīsaṃhitā*
MaiU	*Maitrāyaṇyupaniṣad*
MālaMā	*Mālatīmādhava*
ManuSm	*Manusmṛti*
MatsyaP	*Matsyapurāṇa*
MBh	*Mahābhārata*
Meghdū	*Meghadūta*
Mitā	*Mitākṣarā*
Mṛcch	*Mṛcchakaṭika*
MudrāRā	*Mudrārākṣasa*
MūlaMākā	*Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*
NalaCarNā	*Nalacaritranāṭaka*
NaraP	*Narasiṃhapurāṇa*
NāraSm	*Nāradasmṛti*
NāṭyaŚā	*Nāṭyaśāstra*
NītiSā	*Nītisāra*
Pā	*Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī*
PadmaP	*Padmapurāṇa*
PañcBr	*Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa = Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa*
ParaS	*Paramāsaṃhitā*
PrasaRā	*Prasannarāghava*

RaghuVa	*Raghuvaṃśa*
RahaTrSā	*Rahasyatrayasāra*
Rām	*Rāmāyaṇa*
RāmāCam	*Rāmāyaṇacampū*
RāmS	*Rāmāyaṇasaṃgraharaghuvīrastava*
RāmU	*Rāmopākhyāna*
RasGaṅ	*Rasagaṅgādhara*
RatiRaha	*Ratirahasya*
ṚV	*Ṛgvedasaṃhitā*
ṢaḍviBr	*Ṣaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa*
SāhiDa	*Sāhityadarpaṇa*
Śāk	*Abhijñānaśākuntala*
ŚāstDī	*Śāstradīpikā*
ŚatBr	*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*
SkandP	*Skandapurāṇa*
SubhāRaBh	*Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra*
SūktiRa	*Sūktiratnahāra*
SuśruS	*Suśrutasaṃhitā*
TaiBr	*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*
TaiS	*Taittirīyasaṃhitā*
TaiU	*Taittirīyopaniṣad*
TāṇMaBr	*Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa* = *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa*
UnmaRā	*Unmattarāghava*
UttaRāC	*Uttararāmacarita*
VāsiDS	*Vāsiṣṭhadharmaśāstra*
VāyuP	*Vāyupurāṇa*
Vikramo	*Vikramorvaśīya*
ViṣṇuP	*Viṣṇupurāṇa*
ViṣṇuSm	*Viṣṇusmṛti*
YājñaSm	*Yājñavalkyasmṛti*

Preface

A SENIOR FELLOWSHIP from the American Institute of Indian Studies enabled me to prepare the first version of the translation and commentary of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* in India in 1979–1980. The research for the book and most of the writing were finished by summer, 1984.

Robert Goldman proved again to be a wonderful colleague and friend. I thank him for his patience with the delays caused by my other research commitments and for his many suggestions on ways to improve the work. Sally Sutherland expertly dealt with all our electronic communications and labored hard to ensure editorial consistency. I am grateful to the late V. W. Paranjpe, Professor Emeritus of Deccan College, Pune, for checking files of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Sanskrit* on my behalf, and to Pt. Srinivasa Sastri, with whom I discussed some of the problematic passages in the text.

Two-thirds of my way through this volume, my second and last of the Translation Project, I received much needed encouragement from my friends U. R. Ananthamurthy and A. K. Ramanujan, who not only taught me a great deal about the meaning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* but also reminded me how profoundly important this poem has been, and continues to be, to the social, religious, and literary life of India.

The last of countless passes through the translation was reading it aloud, commas and all, to the poet Judith Kroll. I appreciate her goodwill enormously and her many fine suggestions. My colleague at the University of Iowa, Paul Greenough, as ever was willing to read through my essays and share his learning and critical intelligence with me. Susan Oleksiw did a good job copy-editing a complicated work.

The Introduction brings together in abbreviated and revised form essays that have appeared elsewhere: "The Divine King in the Indian Epic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984), pp. 505–28; "Rāma's Madness," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 29 (1985), pp. 43–56; "Rākṣasas and Others," *Indologica Taurinensia* 13 (1985–86), pp. 152–67. I want to thank Ernest

Bender, Gerhard Oberhammer, and Oscar Botto for their suggestions.

My daughters were the greatest source of joy and support while I worked on this book. If it has any merit, it is mainly because I wanted them to like it.

Sheldon Pollock

Guide to Sanskrit Pronunciation

The pronunciation of Sanskrit is usually not very difficult for English speakers. A few guidelines will serve to clarify the basic pronunciation of the sounds. English examples are based on hypothetical "dictionary" pronunciaton.

Vowels

a like the u in "but"
ā like the o in "mom"
i like the i in "bit"
ī like the ee in "beet"
u like the first u in "suture"
ū like the oo in "pool"
ṛ something like the ri in "rig"
e like the a in "gate"
ai somewhat like the i in "high"; this sound becomes a diphthong to glide slightly into an "i" vowel.
o like the o in "rote"
au somewhat like the ou of "loud" with a similar lip-rounding glide.

Consonants

k like the k in "skate"
kh like the k in "Kate"
g like the g in "gate"
ñ like the n in "sing"
c like the ch in "eschew"
ch like the ch in "chew"
j like the j in "jew"
ñ like the n in "cinch"
ṭ like the first t in "start"
ṭh like the first t in "tart"
ḍ like the d in "dart"
ṇ like the n in "tint"
t
th
d } like the four preceding sounds, but with the tip of the tongue touching or extending slightly between the teeth
dh
n

p like the p in "spin"
ph like the p in "pin"
b like the b in "bin"
m like the m's in "mumps"
y like the y in "yellow"
r like the r in "drama"
l like the l in "lug"
v produced generally with just the slightest contact between the upper teeth and the lower lip; slightly greater than that used for English w (as in "wile") but less than that used for English v (as in "vile")
ś like the sh in "shove"
ṣ produced with the tongue-tip further back than for ś, but giving a similar sound
s like the s in "so"
h like the h in "hope"
ṃ a nasalization of a preceding vowel
ḥ an aspiration of a preceding vowel pronounced, almost like an echo, as an "h" followed by the short form of the preceding vowel. For example: devaḥ, pronounced deva(ha)

INTRODUCTION

1. The Problem of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*

CONTEMPORARY readers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when leaving behind "Ayodhyā" (Book Two) and entering the "Forest" (Book Three), are likely to have the impression that they have suddenly fallen down the rabbit hole into the world of Wonderland. Although this is not something traditional audiences seem to have felt (the commentators certainly give no hint of feeling discontinuity), from their first acquaintance with the *Rāmāyaṇa* westerners have always found something highly problematic about the transition between the two books and between the two major portions of the epic they represent.

We are certainly justified in believing that the perspective has changed dramatically and the emphasis shifted. The intensely didactic, even homiletic, discourse of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*—its almost obsessive concern with the foundations of correct sociopolitical behavior, with *dharma* ("righteousness") as the necessary condition of communal life, and its recognition of the human predicament before *dharma*'s often conflicting and always imperious demands—has given way in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* to what seems the entertainment of a romance. In the "Forest" we no longer encounter the problems most humans must confront and solve, those so thoroughly explored in the prior book; we seem no longer to be in a human realm at all.

This may be overstating the case, for the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* maintains an interest in many of the central concerns of the previous volume. Yet the problem of what unifies these two very different sections of the poem remains a challenging one. The epic genre, at least as far as we are able to characterize it on the basis of those examples preserved for us (the *Mahābhārata*, *Vessantarajātaka*, *Nalopākhyāna*, *Harivaṃśa*), seems to have required such a transitional episode within the social, political, and ethical problematic they all share. But most scholars have paid little attention to this convention of the epic and so have not moved very far beyond highly subjective first impressions. In the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, consequently, the view persists that the poem is a fusion or amalgamation of two very different and in fact unrelated stories.

This idea was first expressed with conviction and force by the great nineteenth-century Indologist Hermann Jacobi. "One can recognize at first glance," he tells us, "that [the saga of the *Rāmāyaṇa*] is composed of two utterly different and distinct parts. [In the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*] everything is human, natural, totally free from fantasy. . . . The case is quite otherwise in the second half of the saga, where everything is marvellous and 'fantastic.' "[1] Since Jacobi had determined, with an *a priori* certitude that is arresting, that the epic is essentially the reworking of an ancient "nature" myth, it is not surprising that in his interpretation of the poem he was compelled to leave the first half of it entirely out of consideration.

Most discussions of the problem of *Rāmāyaṇa* unity since Jacobi's time have taken as their point of departure what he had recognized "at first glance" and have only sought to provide additional evidence in support. A particularly tenacious argument of a literary-historical sort is that derived from the *Dasaratha Jātaka*. This text, found in the Pali collection of stories about the Buddha's former births, recounts a tale very similar to that of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*—and nothing further. By a mechanical logic it has come to be viewed as representing an archaic version of the poem, which accordingly "must have" ended, like the Buddhist text, with the prince's return directly from the forest and "must have" known nothing of the demon-king Rāvaṇa and his abduction of Sītā. According to this analysis, the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* stands revealed as exogenous to the "original" tale of Rāma.

How little cogency there is to this argument, which draws chronological inferences from what is merely thematic variation, should be apparent, although it has taken years for anyone to provide an adequate demonstration.[2] Yet the dichotomous view of the structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that is derived from arguments based on the *Dasaratha Jātaka*, along with highly subjective impressions of what counts as narrative coherence and a conviction that an archaic nature myth formed the original foundation, remains dominant in almost all critical discussion of Vālmīki's epic. The need to develop

[1] Jacobi 1893, pp. 126–27.

[2] Goldman 1984, pp. 32ff.; see also Gombrich 1985, who dismisses the notion that the *Dasaratha Jātaka* can be taken seriously as an early version of the Rāma legend.

a unitary understanding of the poem was eliminated by eliminating the perception of the poem as a unitary work.[3]

What is striking about this literary criticism, beyond the frailty of its arguments, is the cultural arrogance that underlies it. The presumption of the truth of a Western vision is coupled with an implicit dismissal of the entire tradition that produced and preserved the epic. What in this tradition has been considered the first and greatest poem, and venerated as such for two thousand years, is now declared to be, not a meaningful whole—as Indian audiences have invariably taken it to be—but a congeries of utterly distinct and unrelated materials.

Suppose we were to take seriously what generations of performers and audiences have felt, not to speak of the composer, that the monumental poem is not made up of two heterogeneous and uncombinable narratives, but forms a meaningful whole? One of our principal critical tasks would then be to ponder how the work functions as a unit, how its parts fit together to establish a large and coherent pattern of signification. A provisional readiness to posit meaningful unity of the work is at the very least a hermeneutical necessity. If we begin with the hypothesis of meaningless, irrational disunity, we cannot ask meaningful and rational questions. But we face more than a necessity. We face also a postulate authorized by the tradition itself, which has always regarded the poem as of a piece.

Another way to think of this shift in critical perspective is to distinguish between two kinds of history of the poem. If earlier criticism concentrated on the epic's "genetic history" and dismembered the work in the search for its primal components, we might now want to take its "receptive history" more centrally into consideration: Approaching the epic as a whole, in conformity with the tra-

[3] See for example Keith, who speaks of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as "the blending together of two distinct legends, the court intrigues of Ayodhyā and the legend of Rāma's war on Rāvaṇa for the rape of Sītā—in ultimate origin a nature myth." By an almost perverse logic, Keith then argues that the very skill with which the poet has blended together the two heterogeneous parts is evidence of his aesthetic genius (Keith 1920, p. 43). The opinion continues to be transmitted with vigor, by Miller (1974, pp. 132–33), Warder (1975, p. 176), and most recently Smith, who shows how far *Rāmāyaṇa* scholarship continues to be bedeviled by the *Dasaratha Jātaka* (Smith 1980, pp. 62, 73, 76 note 7).

ditional mode of reception, and seeing how it works as a whole can reveal a dimension of the poem's meaning easily as significant as any derived from considering the elements of its genesis. For understanding the work includes, and maybe principally so, understanding what it may have meant in Indian social, intellectual, and cultural history.[4]

[4] For one helpful statement on the distinction between genetic and receptive history (*Entstehungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*) see Weimann 1978.

2. Summary of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*

SOON AFTER ENTERING Daṇḍaka wilderness, Rāma is welcomed by the sages living in the forest. They entertain him and ask that, as king, he fulfill his obligation of ensuring their safety. Rāma pushes on deeper into the forest, on the way encountering and killing the monster Virādha, who had tried to abduct Sītā. He then makes his way to the sage Śarabhaṅga. The holy man directs Rāma to the sage Sutīkṣṇa, and before the prince sets out, he watches as Śarabhaṅga immolates himself in a ritual fire and thereupon attains the world of Brahmā. Rāma is then visited by a throng of ascetics, who again beg his protection against injury at the hands of the *rākṣasas*. After seeking out Sutīkṣṇa, Rāma visits the ashrams of the different sages who had been accompanying him and thus passes the first ten years of his fourteen-year forest exile (*sargas* 1–10).

Rāma then returns to Sutīkṣṇa and is directed by that sage to the ashram of the great seer Agastya. The prince is heartily welcomed by Agastya, who provides him with magical weapons and directs him to the lovely region of Pañcavaṭī, where he is advised to establish his ashram and live out the remaining years of banishment. En route to their new home, they encounter an old acquaintance of Rāma's father, Daśaratha, the vulture-king Jaṭāyus, and he is invited to come live in Pañcavaṭī as well (*sargas* 10–14).

One day, while Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā are living peacefully in Pañcavaṭī, they are approached by a *rākṣasa* woman named Śūrpaṇakhā, the sister of Rāvaṇa, king of *rākṣasas*. Śūrpaṇakhā is attracted to Rāma, who jokingly directs her to his brother, and he back to Rāma. Eventually, the *rākṣasa* woman becomes enraged and attacks Sītā. Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to cut off Śūrpaṇakhā's ears and nose as punishment. Seeking vengeance, Śūrpaṇakhā hastens to her brother Khara, who dispatches fourteen *rākṣasa* warriors against Rāma. After these are slain in combat, Khara himself leads an army of fourteen thousand to do battle. Rāma annihilates the entire demon force, Khara and his generals included (*sargas* 15–29).

Śūrpaṇakhā in despair makes her way to Laṅkā, the island-fortress of her brother Rāvaṇa. She first reproaches him for his dis-

solute ways and utter ignorance of the assaults made upon the *rākṣasas*. She then explains in detail what Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa did to her and Khara, tantalizingly describing Sītā to the demon-king. Devising a plan, Rāvaṇa sets off on a sky-going chariot to the mainland and the residence of the *rākṣasa* Mārīca, who is living the life of an ascetic. Mārīca has had two previous encounters with Rāma and both times barely escaped alive. He listens in terror, therefore, as Rāvaṇa reveals his plan: He asks that Mārīca turn himself into a bejeweled deer, explaining that when Sītā sees the deer, she will send Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to capture it. In their absence the demon-king will abduct Sītā and ultimately be able to slay the two brokenhearted princes. Mārīca's attempt to dissuade Rāvaṇa proves fruitless, and he is compelled to cooperate (*sargas* 30–40).

Arriving at Rāma's ashram, Mārīca takes on the form of a jewel-studded deer and wanders around the grounds. At the sight of the magical deer Sītā begs Rāma to capture it, and the prince sets out after it. Mārīca leads Rāma far from the ashram until finally, exhausted, he is within range of the prince's arrow and is shot. As he lies dying, he cries out in Rāma's voice for Lakṣmaṇa to come to his aid. Sītā hears the cry and in panic insists that Lakṣmaṇa go to Rāma. When Lakṣmaṇa hesitates to leave her alone and unguarded, Sītā questions his motives. He then leaves in a rage. Waiting nearby, Rāvaṇa seizes this opportunity and approaches Sītā in the guise of a wandering mendicant. She welcomes him hospitably and tells him the story of Rāma's exile. The demon-king then reveals himself and begs Sītā to come away with him and be his queen; when she refuses, he carries her off (*sargas* 40–47).

The vulture-king Jaṭāyus, awakened by the commotion, rushes to Sītā's aid. He valiantly struggles with Rāvaṇa, only to be slain in the end. Rāvaṇa flies off with Sītā, who from midair lets fall her wreath of flowers, her golden silk shawl, and her lovely ornaments—the last retrieved by five monkeys on a mountain peak. Reaching Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa again asks Sītā to be his wife. At her stubborn refusal, he has her confined in a grove of *aśoka* trees, guarded by ferocious *rākṣasa* women (*sargas* 48–54).

Rāma, meanwhile, finally recognizing the trap into which he has fallen, is filled with worry. On the way back he sees Lakṣmaṇa coming toward him despondently, and so becomes even more fearful. When he reaches the ashram he finds it empty and spots the evi-

dence of Sītā's struggle. He begins wildly to search the woodland for his wife, like a madman, asking the trees and animals if they know what happened to Sītā and threatening to destroy the world unless he is told. In due course he comes upon the flowers dropped by Sītā, sees the signs of the battle between Jaṭāyus and Rāvaṇa, and finally discovers the vulture-king himself. With his dying breath the bird tells him it was Rāvaṇa who abducted Sītā, but he can say nothing more. Out of filial piety Rāma cremates Jaṭāyus and then continues his search for Sītā (*sargas* 55–64).

In the course of their search the brothers encounter the colossal, headless Kabandha, a monster whose massive arms they sever in battle. When at his request they cremate him, Kabandha arises from the pyre in the wondrous form of a celestial being. He instructs them to go to Lake Pampā and Mount Ṛśyamūka, where the monkey-king Sugrīva is living in exile: He will help them find Sītā. The brothers accordingly set out. On the way, they encounter Śabarī, an old female ascetic who has long been awaiting Rāma's arrival and who shows them warm hospitality. After giving them a tour of the wondrous sights in the ashram of her long-dead spiritual masters, she performs a ritual self-immolation and enters the world of Brahmā. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, eager to find Sugrīva, push on and come at last to the shores of Lake Pampā (*sargas* 65–71).

3. The *Rāmāyaṇa*: Myth and Romance?

WHEN I ASSOCIATE the *Rāmāyaṇa* with the genre of romance, I use the term advisedly. Perhaps the dominant critical opinion concerning the section of the epic that begins with the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* holds it to be primarily a fabulous adventure tale, displaying many of the features we associate with the romance genre from its beginnings in the early Greek novel. Although not actually using the word *romance*, the German scholar Pax was the first to look at the work morphologically and identify motifs in this book and those that follow that suggest a generic similarity with European Märchen and ultimately with romance. These include, according to Pax, the abduction of a beautiful woman by a monstrous creature (often the woman's father), her imprisonment in a labyrinthine castle, and her rescue by a hero with the help of animals and by means of a sky-going conveyance.[5]

In fact, the inventory of techniques and motifs representative of European romance and present in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* and later books could be substantially extended beyond what Pax noticed.[6] For example, in terms of narrative, the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* has the episodic quality of romance, making it quite unlike the narrative in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* with its unwavering attention to the storyline. The genre characteristics of the *tīrthayātra* or "tour of pilgrimage sites," which was to find such massive expression in the forest book of the *Mahābhārata*, may be present here only in embryonic form (the stories of the Pañcāpsaras Pond and of Vātāpi and Ilvala, *sarga* 10, for instance, or that of Mataṅga's forest, *sarga* 70). Yet the overall structure of the narrative, particularly in the first half of the book, reveals the fascination of all romance with the individual sensational episode, and thus employs a discontinuous, catenic way of storytelling markedly different from the previous volume.[7]

[5] Pax 1936 (the work is unfortunately vitiated by bizarre conclusions about the original homeland of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tale). Rāvaṇa becomes the father of Sītā in numerous South and Southeast Asian *Rāmāyaṇas* (Pax had in mind particularly the Kashmiri version). For further remarks on the almost constituent motif of father-daughter incest in European romance, see Frye 1976, p. 44.

[6] For a convenient catalog, on which the comparative observations here and in the following paragraph largely draw, see Dean 1979, pp. 3–13.

[7] A useful distinction between the "hence" narrative of realism, such as is found in

More strictly thematic features of the romance genre found in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* include marvels and wonders encountered only in an alien environment (*sarga* 4, for example, or 70); the piety of the protagonist and the idealized love relationship between himself and the heroine (and the sexual aggressiveness and deviance of the "others," *sargas* 16ff., 44ff.); the loss of the beloved, the hero's wanderings and the dimension of quest, and the gods' role in the unfolding adventure (*sargas* 55ff.); tokens of recognition (Sītā's ornaments, 52.1ff. and 4.6.1ff.; Rāma's ring, 4.43.1ff. and 5.34.1ff.; Sītā's hair ornament, 5.36.1ff. and 5.64.1ff.); the hero's triumph and, what is most intriguing, his final experience of self-discovery (*sargas* 102–7), which in some respects forms the preeminent message of this category of literature.

So there are an appreciable number and provocative set of convergences between Books Three through Six of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the European romance genre. And though they have not as yet been cataloged or analyzed, these shared characteristics have made themselves felt and have led many scholars to conclude that the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole is best understood as a form of romance.[8] Nevertheless thinking of Vālmīki's poem in this way, however justified it may appear to be by certain surface resemblances, has clear drawbacks. For one thing it stimulates inappropriate, if not false, expectations; for another, it makes some readers less receptive to the product of a very different literary culture, closing off instead of providing access to a whole range of topics in which Vālmīki seems to be deeply interested. Adventure, love, and service, staples of romance that have little broad social significance, are certainly part of his poem, but so are those patterns of "public behavior" that are the central concern of a very different species of literature.[9]

How may we conceptualize this different species of literature that stands in opposition to romance? Here the reflections of Northrop Frye on the distinction between romance ("folktale") and what is not romance—what he terms myth—are valuable:

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the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, and the "and then" narrative of romance is drawn by Frye 1976, pp. 47ff.

[8] See for example van Buitenen 1974, p. 70.

[9] This contrast between romance and epic is well drawn in Jackson 1974, pp. 17–18.

> The difference between the mythical and the fabulous is a difference in authority and social function, not in structure. If we were concerned only with structural features we should hardly be able to distinguish them at all. . . . There are only so many effective ways of telling a story, and myths and folktales share them without dividing them. But as a distinctive tendency in the social development of literature, myths have two characteristics that folktales, at least in their earlier stages, do not show, or show much less clearly. First, myths stick together to form a mythology, a large interconnected body of narrative that covers all the religious and historical revelation that its society is concerned with, or concerned about. Second, as part of this sticking-together process, myths take root in a specific culture, and it is one of their functions to tell that culture what it is and how it came to be, in their own mythical terms.[10]

It is this characteristic quality of "authority and social function," of didactic interest in paradigmatic collective values (rather than idiosyncratic personal ones), that informs the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For all its fabulous diversions, the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* fully shares this interest, and we should review this briefly before turning to consider just what sort of myth Vālmīki's great poem embodies.

What most strongly suggests to us the element of romance in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* is the situating of the action in the forest. This locale is almost emblematic of romance, supplying an "ancient symbol of uncertain fate," as one of the foremost contemporary scholars of romance puts it.[11] For the traditional India of Sanskrit literature, the forest has additional, more complex connotations. As we saw in the introduction to the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, the forest is viewed in stark opposition to the town or city; it is a place prior to, or at least exterior to, many of the claims and obligations of the social world. Life in the forest is not bounded by the confines of family existence; on the contrary, it is precisely where those escaping such confines come to find peace and transcendence—the renouncer, the ascetic, the seer—and, indeed, those who are forced out of collective existence, exiles like Rāma himself. There is in India an ancient link between the spiritual quest and the forest (perhaps crystallized in the name given texts of the later vedic corpus, the

[10] Frye 1976, pp. 8–9.
[11] Vinaver 1966, p. 8.

Āraṇyaka-s, "Forest Books," which pondered doctrines too holy or dangerously mysterious for village life).[12] In this place outside the socialized and the humanized, all that a human is not can be found—monstrous subhuman creatures as well as beings of an almost superhuman spirituality; it is a place where demons, men, *ṛṣis*, demigods, and gods all mingle. More than anything, it is these "interrelated layers of integral powers" that serve to create the "restless and imaginative world" of romance.[13]

Yet certain features of the forest that are almost archetypal in the West are noticeably absent from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Meditating on the literary image of the wilderness, W. H. Auden speaks of it as "the place where there is no community, just or unjust, and no historical change for better or for worse. . . . Therefore the individual [in the wilderness] is free from both the evils and the responsibilities of communal life."[14] For the ancient Indian king, whether he is on the throne or in exile, there is no freedom from the "responsibilities of communal life." There remains incumbent upon Rāma the obligation of protecting the sages of the wilderness. The ascetics themselves declare this in the very first *sarga* and thereby set the tone for the rest of the book:

> We are residents of your realm and need your protection. Wherever you may find yourself, in city or forest, you are our king, the lord of the people. . . . You must always protect us ascetics, for we are as your children.[15]

From the very beginning of the "Forest" there is a continuous "intrusion" of the central problems of the "Ayodhyā," so resolutely antiromantic in their fundamental significance, so heavily laden with "authority and social function." This in part is what makes it difficult to agree that the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* and what follows is romance in any but a superficial sense.

Just as there is nothing intrusive about the appeal of the ascetics, so there is nothing intrusive about the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* in the epic as a whole. Far from signaling a departure from the previous narra-

[12] Oldenberg 1923, p. 128. See also Parpola 1981, p. 162 and note, who stresses the rites in the *āraṇyakas* that are associated with Śiva, "the dread god of the forest and death" (something pertinent to the discussion of Rāma's "madness" below).
[13] Dean 1979, p. 9.
[14] Auden 1967, p. 15.
[15] 3.1.19–20.

tive, let alone generic discontinuity, this book provides an essential complementarity that helps identify its function in the larger whole of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. One of the more productive ways to think of this unitary product—that is, one producing more interesting and denser layers of meaning—is as a sustained and elaborate "myth" exploring the nature of king, the character and quality of his powers, and every domain in which these powers are manifested. The forest was one such domain, where a fundamental dimension of the kingly function could be illuminated. To appreciate the vision of the king in the forest, however, we need to know how kingship was thought of in traditional Sanskrit culture. And this leads us to confront the basic question of the interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the divinity of the hero. For the divinity of Rāma and the nature of the king are inseparably related problems, and together they reveal not only principal concerns of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* but also a major structural feature of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

4. The Divine King of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

THE PROBLEM OF RĀMA'S DIVINITY

THE TRADITIONAL readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki—including both the countless literary adaptations and the interpretations of the medieval commentators—never questioned the epic's fundamental "organic" unity. Consequently, there was never any doubt that the divinity of the hero formed an integral and authentic feature of the poem and, as such, a fundamental condition of its meaning. Although a wide range of other kinds of interpolations were identified, and a good deal of the narrative itself was felt to pose serious problems of exegesis, nowhere in the history of the indigenous artistic or scholarly appreciation of the poem are arguments ever raised against the divine status of the hero; never, for example, was the suspicion ever voiced that those portions of the epic explicitly positing Rāma's status as an incarnation of Viṣṇu were deliberate, and unassimilable, sectarian interpolations.

Such, however, were the arguments and suspicions of Western scholars from their earliest acquaintance with the poem. Wilson in 1840 noted quizzically, and with evident impatience at the inconsistency, that "Rāma, although an incarnation of Vishnu, commonly appears in his human character alone." The first editor of the epic in Europe, A. W. von Schlegel, questioned the authenticity of those passages that recount the *avatāra*, and his student Lassen argued the matter on far wider narrative grounds, commenting,

> In the epic poems Rāma and Krishna appear, it is true, as incarnations of Viṣṇu, but at the same time as human heroes. These two conceptions are so poorly combined that both generally behave merely like exceptionally gifted men: They act in accordance with human motives, and do not assert their divine superiority at all. It is only in a few sections, interpolated precisely to inculcate their divinity, that they appear as Viṣṇu. One cannot read either poem carefully without having one's attention called to these later interpolated sections of deification, often awk-

wardly inserted, loosely connected with the development of the story, and quite superfluous.[16]

Predictably, attention was soon directed to these interpolations, which Lassen had felt to be self-incriminating. Homeric analysts had already shown how much easier it is to drop a given passage without harm to the "story" than to demonstrate its legitimacy, not to say necessity (for little in the end is necessary).[17] In the same spirit, John Muir marshaled a host of examples that by their contrariety, narrative inconsequentiality, illogicality, or redundancy were thought to prove that the divinity of Rāma could not have formed part of the "original" poem.[18]

If Gorresio and Weber could still call the question an open one, with the publication of Jacobi's book on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in 1893 the issue was to be decided once and, apparently, for all.[19] The theme of Rāma's being a divine incarnation, we are told, was not an original part of the poem but a later addition restricted to the "attached" passages and in no way informing the entire work. Jacobi attributes the deification of Rāma to a process of euhemerization whereby the hero of a (quasi-historical) saga is merging with a popular local divinity, the resulting demigod finally coming to be reckoned an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. But the divinity of the hero remains a conception that cannot be demonstrated for the five "real" books of the poem; "quite the contrary, there Rāma is thoroughly human."[20]

This in brief is the opinion that has been generally embraced in Western scholarship with respect to the central problem of inter-

[16] Lassen 1866, pp. 586–87 (1st ed.,1843 pp. 488–89). Lassen remarks on his teacher Schlegel's misgivings (apparently never expressed in writing) on p. 587 note of the 1866 edition. For Wilson's puzzlement, see 1840, p. ix.

[17] The medieval Indian scholiasts understood the problem here, cf. Ck cited in the note on 2.73.16.

[18] Muir 1872–1874, vol. 4, pp. 441–81. The traditional interpretation of a good part of this material, for example, the exemplary synthesis of the eighteenth-century scholar-commentator Tryambakarāya Makhi in his monumental *Dharmākūtam*, adequately responds to most of Muir's problems (see Pollock 1984a). The traditional interpretation is not, as a rule, reading alien material into the poem at all; on the contrary, it is reading out what is already there.

[19] Gorresio 1843–1848, vol. 5, pp. xliv–xlviii (soberly concluding, *sub judice lis*); Weber 1870, p. 6.

[20] Jacobi 1893, pp. 61, 65.

pretation bearing on Vālmīki's poem.[21] It is a notion of peculiar tenacity and prevalence, which now, through the operations of what is referred to rather darkly as *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein* (that interpretive consciousness shaped by past interpretations), conditions the response many readers will have to the text.

There is no denying that portions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as we find it in the medieval manuscripts upon which the critical edition is based are later interpolations. Perhaps as much as one-quarter of this vulgate did not form part of the monumental oral poem of "Vālmīki," from which all our recensions and versions derive.[22] For all that, it is striking that a substantial number of the passages long under suspicion have received text-historical vindication from the critical edition. Far from corroborating prevailing scholarly opinion, this edition raises questions about the development and interpretation of the poem that are more complex than earlier scholars realized and that cast serious doubt on the interpretations they offer.

Even though the critical edition reveals interpolations in Books Two through Six touching on the divinity of the hero, they are still

[21] Representative is the standard literary history of Winternitz 1904–1920, pp. 496, 501: "Only in Books 1 and 7 is Rāma throughout considered as a divine being, an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. In Books 2–6, apart from a few passages which are doubtless interpolated, he is always only a mortal hero"; "in the genuine books Rāma is merely a human hero" (cf. p. 478), or the more recent statement of Botto, that Rāma, "a national hero, whose behavior in the course of the poem is essentially human, is at a certain moment [in the history of the transmission of the text] divinized" (1969, pp. 64–65; cf. p. 69); Goldman and Masson regard Rāma as a "great, but strictly human warrior-prince" (1969, p. 95). In the most recent discussion Brockington (1984) stubbornly reaffirms Jacobi's view: "Far from being a Vaiṣṇava epic, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is no religious epic at all. It is lamentable that misunderstanding of this point . . . should still persist so long after Jacobi's explicit declaration" (p. 13). Brockington employs an elaborate five-stage scheme of text evolution to demonstrate the developing conception of the hero (from one who is "thoroughly human" to a god, pp. 218–25). There have been dissenting voices, but few new counterarguments (for example, Whaling 1980, pp. 82–92). Whereas Smith seems to accept the received opinion that it is only in Books One and Seven that Rāma is identified with Viṣṇu (1980, p. 50), elsewhere he makes an important if terse counter-claim: "the later material . . . was added to satisfy a need, not to propose an aggrandisement of the hero; it really makes no sense to suggest that the composition of a few thousand lines of verse can, of itself, confer deity on a man, however heroic he may have been" (p. 72, and note 31, where he reasonably suggests that later sectarian revisionists would have done their job more thoroughly).

[22] I discuss the question in Pollock 1984b.

strikingly rare.[23] The complete textual history of the epic, therefore, tends only to strengthen an argument made by Walter Ruben more than fifty years ago (though wholly ignored thereafter): Since so many interpolations in Books Two through Six that are clearly later than the presumed late deification of Rāma say virtually nothing of his divine status, its absence from the five "authentic" books need not indicate its late date. A more cogent explanation might be that mention of it was suppressed in those books "for one reason or other."[24] Below I will discuss what some of these possible reasons might be. A number of them are already identified in the traditional interpretation of the epic. What this interpretation richly demonstrates is that the commentarial tradition—the closest thing we have to an original audience—was entirely aware of the necessity of eliminating explicit reference to the divine identity of Rāma.[25] This suggests that Ruben's hypothesis cannot be dismissed by assuming that "some unspoken but uniformly observed agreement among generations of *Rāmāyaṇa* scribes and reciters" is unwarranted or inherently implausible.[26]

If text criticism leaves open the question whether Rāma's divinity is original to the monumental poem, "higher criticism" as usually practiced has not brought us much closer to a solution. In the first place, the reasons for identifying as insertions materials authenticated by manuscript testimony have never been clearly spelled out. What seems detachable need not, of course, have been attached, for little of this or any other poem is not finally detachable. Anyway, who decides on the criteria for judging what is narratively essential and appropriate in a Sanskrit epic? Moreover, the nature of interpolation itself is complicated (though this has yet to be adequately theorized), and different kinds of motivations underlie it. Interpolation often serves, not to introduce altogether new narrative material, but instead to expand or make manifest the elliptical or latent; what at first sight might appear to be inno-

[23] See for instance 3.423*; 5.1048*.5ff., especially lines 14–21; 6.254*; 6. App. I, No. 32.

[24] Ruben 1936, p. 63.

[25] A representative example is Cg on *sarga* 4.183–19 below; see the note there.

[26] Thus Goldman 1984, p. 43 note. There certainly was "agreement," and it was not in the least unspoken. But why should this be conspiracy, rather than a function of the literary, mythological, and in fact theological sensitivity of artists participating more authentically in a work of art of their own culture?

vation may in reality be amplification or elucidation. The interpolations referring to Rāma's divinity might thus be elaborations of themes embedded in the text—perhaps deeply or structurally embedded, but there nonetheless—which we have been ignoring or doubting because of suspicion provoked by materials that are, admittedly, later insertions. This would provide one reasonable answer to a basic question, though one rarely raised, about the history of the poem: Why should it have proved so perfectly easy to "transform" fundamentally a "heroic epic" according to a later theological program, and to do this without a trace of resistance?[27] Perhaps it has not been transformed at all.

The meaning of a text, as we know, is not just a function of its most literal signification, of what is directly expressed in any given set of verses (unstable as they are). The meaning is also inscribed in higher-order (and more stable) narrative features, in the logic of the story, for example, or in larger motifs and themes. These can generate meaning by their implications, for instance (in the case of narrative logic), or (in the case of motifs) by their literary-historical associations. If there is any truth to this observation, then the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* cannot be eliminated by the facile excision of any portions of the text. It pervades the tale and is constitutive of it.

Much of the argument against the divinity of Rāma, furthermore, is based on a sense of the "divine" that is unthinkingly ethnocentric. What is "contradictory" in the behavior of "human incarnations," as Lassen would have it, may be so only according to a narrow theological rationalism. What, again, are the standards for deciding whether behavior is reasonable and logical in the case of a being so resolutely unreasonable and illogical as a human embodiment of divinity? Even in passages that are widely held to be interpolations, such as Rāma's interview with his long-dead father, Daśaratha, a curiously ambivalent, "contradictory" attitude is entertained toward the hero: The old king, at the same time as he acknowledges that Rāma is in fact "the heart of the gods, their deepest secret" (6.107.31; cf. verse 30), can still speak to him as if

[27] The interpretive history of the Homeric poems offers an interesting contrast here. The attempts from Theagenes to the Stoics and Neoplatonists to reread the Greek epics as religious allegories not only left the text of the poems completely unaffected but also met with challenge or ridicule in their own times and were ignored thereafter.

he were nothing more than his human son, wishing him "long life" (107.23; similarly Śiva, 107.4–6).[28] Unless we are obstinate enough to postulate interpolations in our "interpolation" here, we must rethink our own sense of what constitutes contradiction and propriety in a text at times very foreign to a modern western reader. It is worth remembering, too, that it was precisely these "contradictory" aspects in the nature of Rāma that have so often been the source of religious mystery and the object of theological reflection.[29] In the Indian tradition, at least, the unity of the "divine savior" and the "ideal human" was easily accommodated.[30]

If the theme of the divine king is authentic to the monumental poem of Vālmīki, obviously it will fundamentally change the way we understand the work as a whole and the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* in particular. We may come closer to deciding the issue in question if we direct our attention to the poem's "structured" message residing in certain higher-order narrative features. One of these is the boon of Rāvaṇa, which is inextricably meshed with the divine status of the hero.[31] The logic of the terms of the boon necessitates the agency of a transcendent entity, one both god and man, for only such a being can confront the power of cosmic evil Rāvaṇa embodies. This is confirmed by the poem itself in various explicit references to the divine plan underpinning the whole action. It is also the conclusion we are compelled to draw by the morphology of the boon motif throughout the history of Indian mythology. The nature of the divine king in ancient India and its historical connection with early Vaiṣṇavism provide further evidence and suggest some new interpretations of the poem on a more global level.

The meaning of a literary text is admittedly not a set of brute

[28] This applies equally to what are evidently later insertions in the *Mahābhārata*, where Kṛṣṇa figures centrally as the supreme deity. He too displays an oddly "inconsistent" nature—now divine, now human—that is not easily explained as a result of interpolation (see for instance much of the earlier portion of Book Twelve, especially chapters 51ff., or a passage such as 6.102.59–70).

[29] We are told, for instance, that in the eyes of Rāmānanda, the important religious reformer of the fifteenth (or fourteenth) century, "History does not afford a better example of a great ruler, loyal husband, and merciful Lord than Rāma" (Srinivasachari 1970, pp. 545–46; cf. Gonda 1963, p. 169).

[30] Cf. Gonda 1963, p. 169.

[31] Although as "genuine" an element of the narrative as any that one could point to, the boon, like the divine status of the hero, has been widely (though mistakenly) believed to be a later insertion (see for example Miller 1974, pp. 132–33).

facts waiting to be assembled, but neither can it be said to be totally, let alone arbitrarily, constituted by the receiver. Texts make promptings and suggestions, have claims of logic and literary-historical associations, and all of this takes place within a finite and to a degree accessible cultural context. The text seems sometimes to be speaking to us on its own and to raise its own questions. Perhaps it is possible to discover these questions and listen to this speech rather than drowning it out with our own querulous presuppositions.

RĀVAṆA'S BOON IN THE *RĀMĀYAṆA*

The first mention of Rāvaṇa's boon in Books Two through Six of the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurs here in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, when the *rākṣasa* is introduced to us for the first time:

> It was he who long ago in the great forest had practiced austerities for ten thousand years and unflinchingly cut off his own heads as offering to the Self-existent Brahmā. It was he who had no longer to fear death in combat with any beings—gods, *dānavas, gandharvas, piśācas,* great birds, or serpents—any beings but men.[32]

The causal connection between these two verses will be obscure to the reader unfamiliar with the whole story. It remains so throughout the poem, illuminated elsewhere only dimly, as in the sixth book:

> Then the overlord of the *rākṣasas*, in a towering rage, spoke in the midst of the *rākṣasas*, to encourage them to battle: "For a thousand years I practiced the most intense asceticism, in one holy place and another, until the Self-existent Brahmā was propitiated. In reward for this asceticism Brahmā graciously granted that I need never fear gods or *asuras*."[33]

There may well have been aesthetic reasons for the partial, almost grudging revelation of Rāvaṇa's boon; nowhere in Books

[32] 3.30.17–18. See the notes on these verses concerning the variants in the northern recension and related matters. The commentator Cs here remarks, "Rāvaṇa neglected to include men [in his request], since he considered them nothing more than his food." On this see below, pp. 22–23.
[33] 6.80.22–24.

Two through Six is the whole story told consecutively and straightforwardly.[34] This is what has misled many scholars into doubting the authenticity of the theme. But in addition to manuscript testimony, which is unanimous in those places I have already cited, the boon is mentioned in passing at strategic junctures in the story. Indeed, we are never permitted to forget the conditions under which the hero is operating. Sītā, for example, says to Rāvaṇa in the dramatic moment after he has abducted her, "Even if *asuras* or gods cannot kill you, Rāvaṇa, you have now aroused the bitter enmity of someone you cannot escape alive."[35] In fact, Rāma himself knows of the boon, for prior to his battle with Rāvaṇa he sends him the following message: "Surely today, at last, your pride has been crushed that came from the gift of Brahmā's boon. For here I stand at the threshold of Laṅkā, bearing a staff to punish you who gave me such sorrow by carrying off my wife."[36]

The theme of the boon functions in part to elevate the narrative to the realm of mythic event. It does this by the structural affinity it bears to the many other epic boons that require a divine solution, and I shall come back to this. What I want to consider now are the terms of the boon itself, in isolation from its literary-historical associations. What do these terms imply?

By means of his ascetic mortifications Rāvaṇa has forced the hand of Brahmā and been awarded a boon that makes him invulnerable to all divine and semi-divine beings. The inference to be drawn from the terms of the boon, therefore, is that given by Rāvaṇa's general Prahasta in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*: "Gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, divine birds, and serpents are utterly incapable of harming you in battle—what of monkeys!" (6.8.2): And what indeed of men? In Book Seven and elsewhere in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition it is stressed that Rāvaṇa did not bother to request invulnerability from men and other lower forms of life; it was superfluous.

[34] The only detailed account is in 1.14.12ff. and 7.10.10ff. Cf. also *MBh* 3.259.22ff.

[35] 3.54.8. Cf. 52.18, "mighty Rāvaṇa, deluded by the boon he had been granted, spoke."

[36] 6.31.53. In 6.28.28 Rāma speaks of Rāvaṇa as being "filled with power by reason of the gift of a boon," a line that might appear to be merely formulaic were it not for the passage just cited. See also 4.61.6, where Saṃpāti relates the prophecy he received from Niṣākara: "The demon [*nairṛta*] shall carry off his wife from Janasthāna—the lord of *rākṣasas*, whom neither gods nor *dānavas* can ever slay."

They were harmless in his eyes, nothing more than food.[37] But what is excluded from the boon is, of course, the only thing that could become the means of his destruction. Therefore Hanumān's inference is the very opposite of Prahasta's. He warns Rāvaṇa, "Because you are invulnerable to gods, *dānavas, gandharvas, yakṣas*, and *rākṣasas*, you could defeat them. Still, monkeys pose a danger to you."[38] Yet the true conclusion of the inference, already hinted at in the passage cited above (3.30.18), is drawn in the fifth book, when Hanumān again addresses Rāvaṇa:

> All the *dharma* [here "power"] you came to possess by your intense practice of austerities it would be most imprudent to destroy—and the life, too, that you possess. You rely on the invulnerability you secured by your ascetic practices, invulnerability with respect to gods and *asuras*. But there is one all-important consideration with respect to that:[39] Sugrīva is not a god or *asura* or *rākṣasa*, not a *dānava, gandharva, yakṣa*, or great serpent. Rāghava is a man, your majesty, and Sugrīva the king of monkeys. How, therefore, do you hope to save your life?[40]

In the end, with clear if futile insight, Rāvaṇa himself grasps this bitter fact:

> Seated upon his heavenly golden throne Rāvaṇa glanced at the *rākṣasas*, and then spoke: "In vain, all in vain were the intense austerities I practiced. The equal of Indra I may be, and yet a man has defeated me. Here, at last, those terrible words of Brahmā have come home to me: 'Know that men still pose a danger to you.' I had become invulnerable to gods, *dānavas, gan-*

[37] See for example *Yuddhakāṇḍa* App. I, No. 32.55; *MBh* 3.265.28. Note also Rāvaṇa's scarcely figurative threat to eat Sītā for breakfast, in 3.54.22.

[38] 6.47.53; compare the insertion of the southern recension, 6.547*.

[39] I substantially agree with Cg (*ayaṃ vakṣyamāno hetuḥ*, though he goes on to gloss *bhavadvadhahetuḥ*), against most of the other commentators in my interpretation of the verse.

[40] 5.49.23–26. There are several textual problems in verses 25–26, though none major. I read with the vulgate in verse 25, for as the northern recension serves to corroborate and one of the oldest commentators, Crā, affirms, the reading *mānuṣaḥ* in *pāda* b is false. Note too that although much of the southern recension (though not the vulgate) omits verse 26ab, the idea is attested in the parallel tradition preserved in 1045*. Its absence in part of the southern recension may have resulted from the belief that clarifying to Rāvaṇa the danger posed by Rāma (who, unlike Sugrīva, will indeed kill him) was unaesthetic or narratively improper.

dharvas, yakṣas, rākṣasas, great serpents; but I had never asked to be invulnerable to men."[41]

If for the moment we consider just the terms of Rāvaṇa's boon and the gradual revelation of its single yet critical flaw, only two interpretations seem possible: (a) Rāvaṇa with fatal hubris underestimated the power of man, and he learned this in the hardest way possible, by being killed by one; (b) Rāvaṇa's view of man's power was correct; such creatures, along with all other lower forms of animal life, had no possibility of slaying him: Men are weak and powerless by nature, but especially in the face of the magnitude of evil Rāvaṇa represents, and consequently, he who killed the overlord of *rākṣasas* could not have been a man at all.

It is worth stressing the importance of this central paradox, whichever interpretive option we choose, that runs like a red thread through the poem. Man was not included in the wish because he was judged too insignificant to count. His association with other animals only enhances this estimation. But by that very exclusion, man becomes the sole being who *might* destroy Rāvaṇa and, in that respect at least, becomes more powerful than the gods themselves.

Both explanations of the boon motif entail larger interpretations of the poem. The first one implies that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is offering us a celebration of human potentiality, a paean to man's endurance and triumph over superhuman adversity in an almost Sophoclean mode ("So many awful wonders, yet none more wonderful than man," etc.). This presupposes a man-centered cosmos, since it is exclusively to man that, in the poem's central, insistent question, all efficacy in the struggle against evil is ascribed. But there is no evidence elsewhere in the epic to support this supposition and nothing in traditional Indian culture that would make such an interpretation credible.

If Rāvaṇa's boon does not implicitly exalt the powers of man, then what is it telling us? To my mind it implies that we cannot be dealing with the simple story of a mortal hero, however powerful he may be, struggling with and overcoming a demonic creature (as a genetic literary history of "Indo-European epic," comparing the stories of Theseus, Beowulf, or Siegfried, might urge). If that had been the conception of the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there would

[41] 6.48.4–7; see also the lament of the *rākṣasa* women, 6.82.29, cited below, p. 27.

have been no reason whatever to build into the story the motif of the boon. This theme serves no other purpose than to "problematize" the human dimension of the hero. In addition to linking the narrative and its hero with the ancient mythic paradigm I describe below, the motif raises questions about the hero's nature that never would be raised were this nature not intended as matter for speculation, interrogation, and wonder in itself. Everywhere the poem indicates that Rāvaṇa's assessment was correct; we are continually reminded that a man can never slay Rāvaṇa and the other *rākṣasas*. What the events of the story are forcing us to conclude is that Rāma cannot, in fact, be a man.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* allusion is constantly made to the presumed mortality of the hero. This is partly a function of the boon itself, but the effect of the repeated reference to Rāma's human limitations is to engender incredulity in the audience, as in the characters themselves, about his status as a human:

> (Śūrpaṇakhā to Khara:) You are no hero, but a braggart making false claims of valor if you cannot kill Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, mere human beings the two of them. (3.20.16)
>
> (Khara:) Should the king of the gods himself come on his rutting elephant Airāvata and attack with thunderbolt in hand, in my rage I could kill him in battle. What then of two human beings! (3.22.24)
>
> Fighting all alone on foot, one man, Rāma, killed fourteen thousand awesome *rākṣasas*. (3.25.22; cf. 31.11, 34.8)
>
> (Rāvaṇa to Mārīca:) You cannot dissuade me from doing battle with Rāma—a man, after all, an evil, foolish man. (3.38.4–5)
>
> (Rāvaṇa to Sītā:) Enjoying not only the pleasures mortals enjoy [cf. 3.45.1], lovely lady, but divine pleasures, too, you shall soon forget that short-lived mortal, Rāma. (3.46.14; cf. 47.12 and *MBh* 3.265.28)
>
> (Vinatā to Sītā:) Give your love to Rāvaṇa . . . and give up Rāma, a wretched mortal. (5.22.18–19; cf. verses 3–4)
>
> (Rāvaṇa:) Rāma is a wretched mortal, all alone with only monkeys to aid him. How can you think him capable of doing any-

thing . . . ? And I am lord of *rākṣasas*, a source of terror to the gods themselves! (6.27.4–5)

(Rāvaṇa to Indrajit:) You defeated Indra in combat, one whose deeds have no peer. Shall you prove incapable of slaying two mortals when you face them in combat? (6.67.3)

(The wives of Rāvaṇa:) He who filled Śakra and Yama with terror, who stripped Vaiśravaṇa of the aerial chariot Puṣpaka, who struck wild terror into *gandharvas*, seers, and the great gods, here he lies slain in battle. He who knew no reason to fear *asuras*, gods, or great serpents had this to fear, and from a man. Gods could not kill him, nor could *dānavas* or *rākṣasas*, yet here he lies slain in battle by a mere man, fighting on foot. He whom gods could not slay, nor *yakṣas* or *asuras*, has found his death, like some impotent creature, at the hands of a mortal. (6.98.12ff.)

(Mandodarī laments Rāvaṇa's death:) But surely it was true, great-armed brother of Vaiśravaṇa, that even Indra himself, the breaker of fortresses, feared to stand face to face with you when angered. Surely the seers, veritable gods on earth, the glorious *gandharvas* and the *cāraṇas* took to the horizons in dread of you. And here you are, defeated in battle by Rāma, a mere man. Do you feel no shame, your majesty? What can this mean, greatest of *rākṣasas*? You bestrode the universe in all your royal majesty and might, no one could withstand you, and yet you have been slain by a man, a hermit of the forest. You could take on any form at will and moved beyond the realm of mortals. It makes no sense that Rāma should have destroyed you in combat. (6.99.3ff.)[42]

Gradually, from passages such as these, the mystery of Rāma's nature begins to emerge. "It makes no sense" that Rāma, "a mere

[42] In this category should be placed the repeated, and to my mind curious, epithets applied to Rāma: *gatāyuḥ* (for example, 3.46.14, 53.21; 5.22.21); *parimitāyuh* (for example, 3.47.13); *kṣīṇajīvitaḥ* (for example, 3.2.10, 21.3, 34.10). The paradox (that a "mere man, fighting on foot," a "hermit of the forest," should become the slayer of Rāvaṇa) is used with masterful effect in the *Harivaṃśa*, especially in Kaṃsa's frenzied monologue in chapter 65 ("On the one hand there is this wretched cowherd, this man whose powers are sapped by death; and on the other, those wonders performed in my pasturelands that only someone powerful as a god could perform," verse 34). It may be that like many of its other literary characteristics (see Ingalls 1968, p. 393), the *Harivaṃśa* borrowed here also from the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

mortal," should destroy Rāvaṇa in combat. Of course it makes no sense. This is the conclusion the characters gradually draw:

> (Aviddha to Rāvaṇa, as reported by Saramā to Sītā:) Restore Sītā to the lord of men, and show him high honor. The miraculous events at Janasthāna are surely sufficient evidence for you. . . . What man on earth could have slaughtered those *rākṣasas* in battle? (6.25.21–22)

> (Malyavān to Rāvaṇa:) We believe that Rāma is Viṣṇu in a human body.[43] Powerful Rāma cannot be a mere man, not he who bridged the ocean, a most miraculous accomplishment. Rāvaṇa, make peace with Rāma, the king of men. (6.26.31–32)[44]

> (The lament of the *rākṣasa* women:) It must be Rudra or Viṣṇu, or great Indra, god of the hundred rites, or Death himself who has taken on the form of Rāma and is killing us. . . . No god or *gandharva*, no *piśāca* or *rākṣasa* can save a creature attacked by Rāma in combat. (6.82.24ff.)

> (The lament of Mandodarī:) I cannot believe this deed was Rāma's that was done at the forefront of the army, that he should defeat you who were fully prepared for any challenge. Long ago you conquered, first, your senses, and then the three worlds: Your senses remembered that enmity, and it is they who must now have conquered you. Or no, it must be Vāsava come in person in the form of Rāma, exerting his magic powers without warning, to destroy you.[45] For the very day your brother Khara, accompanied by all those *rākṣasas*, was killed in Janasthāna, I knew Rāma could not be a man. (6.99.8–11)[46]

If such references as these served only to show that Rāma is in fact a god, then the terms of the boon come into play, and Rāvaṇa

[43] The northeast version reads "in the deceitful form of a man."
[44] Ck and, following him, Ct call the verse an interpolation. But it is only the Telugu tradition (to which Ck belongs) that does not transmit it.
[45] Cf. the insertion of the southern recension, 3114*: "But Indra is too weak: This must have been the great magician [*mahāyogin*] Viṣṇu."
[46] To encourage this doubt is certainly the effect of *sargas* 19–29 of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (the northern recension of the passage from the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* cited above adds similar verses about Rāma's slaying of Vālin and Mārīca, 6.3115*). Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣīta, the learned seventeenth-century poet, makes this point in his *Rāmāyaṇasārasaṃgraharaghuvīrastava* 12.

need have had nothing to fear: A god cannot slay him. A mere man, pure and simple, could not possibly kill Rāvaṇa, but neither could a god, pure and simple—and yet Rāvaṇa lies dead. By the logic of the narrative we are encouraged if not compelled to conceive of some intermediate being that partakes of both existential realms, combining the nature derived from each into a new, superordinated power—to conceive, in fact, of a god-man.

There are explicit statements in the poem, in addition to its narrative logic, that foster this conception. When Śūrpaṇakhā describes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to her brother Khara, saying, "Two handsome young men have arrived, delicate yet powerful. . . . They are the image of the king of *gandharvas* and bear all the signs of royalty. Whether they are gods or men I cannot tell for certain" (3.18.11–12); when Sītā refers to Rāma as having "divine powers" (3.54.14) or Lakṣmaṇa speaks of him as "my brother, who has the powers of a god" (3.66.11), we might be inclined to dismiss it as so much epic hyperbole, like the many tags (*devopama-*, "godlike," and so on) that have been generally viewed as mere ornamental epithets. But it becomes increasingly difficult not to take these statements at face value when we encounter more pointed expressions of this idea, as for example Lakṣmaṇa's words to Rāma later in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* when he is ready to destroy the worlds in a rage over the loss of Sītā: "Your thoughts are too profound for even the gods to fathom, wise brother. . . . Be aware of your powers, which are as much divine as human."[47]

To be sure, we encounter in other epic traditions frequent reference to what might be judged no more than a semi-divine status of the hero—*theoeikelos axilleus* ("godlike Achilles,"), for example, to go no further afield than the *Iliad*. Yet in such cases the descriptions are purely rhetorical, and this is made quite clear when Homer is compelled to explain, "The first of men [Achilles], but not a match for Gods" (*Iliad* 21.264, in Pope's epigrammatic version). It is precisely the asymmetry between the hero's aspiration to divinity and his irreducible humanity that lies at the core of Homeric and much other epic poetry. As one of the wisest of contem-

[47] 3.62.18–19. *Rām* 2.17.26 adds an intriguing detail. With the sole, and inconsistent, exception of northeast manuscripts (which misunderstood and revised, see Pollock 1986, pp. 358–59), the tradition unanimously makes Rāma twenty-five years old (3.45.10), "and that, they say," as Rāma himself explains for us, "is invariably the age of gods" (3.4.14).

porary Hellenists put it in describing just this contrariety (what he has termed "the heroic paradox"), allusions such as these epithets frame "imply a kind of absolute status which the hero strives to gain," although at the same time he possesses "a desperate self-knowledge" that he is ineluctably mortal.[48] The comparable passages in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, taken in the all-important context of Rāvaṇa's boon, which categorically debars gods and implicitly debars men, acquire a peculiarly mythic resonance absent from the Greek epic with its pervasive tragic humanism. And although there are moments when Rāma's human frailties are stressed, much of the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* serves principally to amplify this mythic resonance till such point as Rāma's unique status as a being of a second order—part god, part man—forces itself unmistakably upon our awareness.

THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE BOON MOTIF

The theme of Rāvaṇa's boon, considered morphologically, opens a similar window, through which we see more than a simple human aspect in Rāma, more too than a "superhuman" aspect. He eludes both because, as the unfolding narrative itself urges us to recognize, he must be a new order of being.

Just as the thematic structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa* moves the narrative to the level of mythic struggle, so too does the very character of the antagonist. In no other respect does Vālmīki's poem so depart from the conventions of the epic as represented by the *Mahābhārata* as in the dimensions of the struggle in which the hero is engaged. The demonic power of the foe is formidable and vast, on an altogether unearthly scale:

> [Śūrpaṇakhā] found Rāvaṇa in his splendid palace, radiant in his power. . . . A hero invincible in combat with gods, *gandharvas*, spirits, or great seers, he looked like Death himself with jaws agape. He carried lightning-bolt wounds received in clashes with gods and *asuras*. His chest was seamed with scars where Airāvata's pointed tusks had gored him. He had twenty arms and ten necks. . . . In combat with gods his body had been wounded in hundreds of places, by blows from Viṣṇu's discus and all the other weapons of the gods. He could effortlessly perturb the im-

[48] Whitman 1982, p. 22.

> perturbable seas, level mountaintops, and vanquish the gods. . . . It was he who had gone to the city of Bhogavatī, defeated Vāsuki and Takṣaka. . . . It was he who had gone to Mount Kailāsa and conquered the man-borne Kubera. . . . It was he who in a mighty rage would destroy the gardens of the gods. . . . It was he who, tall as a mountain peak, would extend his arms and prevent the glorious powers, the sun and moon, from rising. . . . He was Rāvaṇa, "he who makes all creatures wail," the terror of all the worlds.[49]

The scale of evil envisioned by the poet, spanning the universe from the nether regions to the heavens, is well beyond the familiar world of most epic literature, where the powers of the antagonist generally retain recognizably human dimensions. The lord of *rākṣasas* exceeds the human capacity for evil to an even greater degree than he exceeds, with his ten heads and twenty arms, the physical power of human beings:

> I am he who terrifies the worlds, with all their gods, *asuras*, and great serpents. I am Rāvaṇa, Sītā, supreme lord of the hosts of *rākṣasas*. . . . In fear of me the gods, *gandharvas*, *piśācas*, great birds, and serpents flee in terror, as all things born are put to flight by fear of Death. . . . At the mere sight of my face, Maithilī, once my anger has been provoked, the gods with Indra at their head flee in terror. In my presence the wind blows cautiously, and the sun's hot rays turn cold in fear. The leaves on the trees stop rustling, and the rivers slacken their current wherever I am, wherever I go. . . . I can lift the earth in my arms while standing in the sky; I can drink up the ocean, I can slay Death in battle. I can shatter the earth with my sharp arrows . . . or bring the sun to a halt.[50]

In Indian intellectual and cultural history, the question of evil seems generally to be conceived and represented as a mythic problem on a cosmic plane. The demonic is hardly formulated in hu-

[49] 3.30.4–20. On the name Rāvaṇa, see the note on 3.30.20; the popular etymology and its cosmic dimension are corroborated by so (relatively) early a text as the *Harivaṃśa*, *trailokyarāvaṇaṃ krūraṃ rākṣasaṃ rākṣaseśvaram* (31.123).

[50] 3.45.22; 46.3, 7–9; 47.3–4. Cf. 3.60.6–9, and 5.21.16. It is instructive to compare the last verse cited above (3.47.4) with Sītā's description of Rāma later in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*: "He who could destroy the moon in the sky, send it crashing down to earth, or dry up the ocean, shall come here and set Sītā free" (54.11).

man terms at all; it defines itself only against the divine, as the latter defines itself only against the demonic.[51] The struggle against such evil, in Indian mythology, lies as a rule outside the sphere of human participation. This is plainly the case with Rāvaṇa, whose existence imperils the universal no less than the terrestrial order of things, and whose extermination is therefore a matter of divine concern and intervention. This is something of which the poet takes pains to remind us at critical moments throughout the narrative.

The first intimation that Rāma's personal tragedy—his exclusion from succession to the kingship and his banishment—is part of a greater plan occurs in the second half of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. En route to visit Rāma, Bharata meets the seer Bharadvāja, who admonishes the young prince, saying, "Bharata, you must not impute any fault to Kaikeyī. The banishment of Rāma will turn out to be a great blessing."[52] The notion that any "great blessing" could come about as a result of the tragic events in Ayodhyā—the death of the king, the bitter divisions in the palace, the disaffection of the entire populace—had to strike an "original" audience as paradoxical. Not until the end of the second book is some clarification offered, when for the first time in Books Two through Six Rāvaṇa's name is mentioned. Bharata has stubbornly refused to accede to Rāma's wishes to accept the kingship, in contrast to Rāma, who is prepared to accept his own lot. It is the intervention of semidivine beings that seems to turn the balance: "Then all at once the hosts of seers, eager for the destruction of ten-necked Rāvaṇa, spoke to Bharata, tiger among kings."[53]

What had appeared to be a localized, circumscribed, self-contained set of social and political problems in "Ayodhyā" is now seen to be part of a divine initiative made necessary by the periodic recrudescence of demonic evil. The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, given the peculiar focus of its social vision, was an inappropriate arena for anything more than fragmentary revelations. The present book, where Rāma finds himself in a realm that transcends the human world to the same degree that it descends to the demonic, is quite different.

[51] See further O'Flaherty 1976, pp. 9, 58.

[52] 2.86.28.

[53] 2.104.4. See my note on this verse. Although I still find the passage inferior on aesthetic grounds, I am now much less certain of the text-critical judgment I reached there.

The gods themselves acknowledge the heavenly plan that the hero's sufferings advance; and the demons present themselves to permit the plan's advancement.

While proceeding to the ashram of the sage Śarabhaṅga,

> Rāma beheld a great marvel. He beheld Indra himself, lord of the wise gods. His body was luminous as fire or the sun. . . . Seeing Rāma drawing near, Indra, lord of Śacī, took leave of Śarabhaṅga, then turned to the wise gods and said: "That man approaching is Rāma. Before he can address me, conduct me to my residence; hereafter he may see me. When he has accomplished his task and gained victory, I will see him without delay. For he has a great deed to do, impossible for anyone else to accomplish." So Indra spoke, wielder of the thunderbolt.[54]

Besides suggesting a crucial point that the traditional interpretation has always understood—the incarnate god is, or in this particular case must be, ignorant of his divinity—this passage increases our suspicion of a vaster, even cosmic, background of the action of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This suspicion is finally confirmed by what happens when Sītā is abducted:

> When Vaidehī was assaulted, a blinding darkness enveloped the world, the whole world from end to end, all things that move and do not move. With his divine eye, the majestic Grandfather Brahmā saw the outrage upon poor Sītā, and murmured, "What had to be done has been done. . . ."[55] As [Rāvaṇa] carried Vaidehī over Varuṇa's abode, the waves heaved in agitation, and the

[54] 3.4.4–5, 17–20. Later on, in 3.29.29–32, after the defeat of Khara and the fourteen thousand *rākṣasas*, the "royal seers and supreme seers" will assemble and tell Rāma, "It was to this end that the great and mighty Indra . . . paid his visit to the holy ashram of Śarabhaṅga. The great seers contrived a means of bringing you to this place in order to slay these savage, evil *rākṣasas*." But Indra does not, as promised, appear to Rāma here and will not until after the death of Rāvaṇa (Book Six, *sarga* 105), when the seers virtually repeat what they have said ("You have done what we required, son of Daśaratha [champion of righteousness]," 3.29.32, cf. 6.105.26). The story of Khara prefigures that of Rāvaṇa, and the poet of *Araṇyakāṇḍa* 4 may, in fact, have had the latter rather than the former in mind when composing this Indra episode. For further remarks on this passage, especially the traditional interpretation of Indra's reluctance to converse with Rāma, see the annotations on these verses.

[55] It is typical of the unreflective impressionism ruling in *Rāmāyaṇa* criticism when the editor of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* remarks that "reference to Brahman here disturbs the narration and therefore seems to be an interpolation" (Bhatt 1963, p. 409).

> fish and serpents were trapped deep below. Then, celestial musicians hovering in midair raised a clamor, and perfected beings cried out, "This is the end of Rāvaṇa!"[56]

Sītā herself will later tell Rāvaṇa, "I know for certain I could never have been stolen away from the wise Rāma, were it not that Fate had destined it—to bring about your death."[57]

In light of these passages it is worth reconsidering two others that, although unimpeachable on textual grounds, have often been called into question on the grounds of "higher" criticism, as being somehow out of keeping with the overall character and concerns of Books Two through Six.[58] The first occurs late in the sixth book: After the defeat of Rāvaṇa, Rāma's long-dead father appears before him on a celestial chariot and says, "Now at last I understand, dear son, how it was by the gods' doing that [you], supreme among men [*puruṣottama*],[59] were destined for this, for bringing about the death of Rāvaṇa. . . . You have completed your stay in the forest, and kept your promise; you have fulfilled the wishes of the gods by killing Rāvaṇa in battle."[60] The second forms part of the lament of the *rākṣasa* women, just before Rāvaṇa is slain:

> The Grandfather had once been won over by Rāvaṇa and granted that he should never suffer harm at the hands of gods, *dānavas, and rākṣasas*. But he had never asked for that with re-

[56] 3.50.9–10, 52.9–10. Malyavān, the venerable great-grandfather of Rāvaṇa, later urges the demon-king to restore Sītā to Rāma and make peace with him; since "the gods and seers and *gandharvas* wish him victory," it is useless to fight him (6.26.10).

[57] 5.20.21.

[58] The first from at least as early as Muir ("this chapter, as it now stands, could not have formed part of the original *Rāmāyaṇa*," 1874, p. 178), to most recently van Daalen ("In 6.105 the gods call Rāma the foremost of the gods. . . . Rāma's divinity is obviously inconsistent with the concept of Rāma as a truly human hero; we can safely assume that Rāma was utterly human in the original *Rāmāyaṇa*," 1980, p. 139; cf. p. 190). These are mere assertions. Both passages are fully represented in every recension and version of the poem; additionally they (or the environment in which they are embedded) show precisely those sorts of inter-recensional variants that speak in favor of their existence during the period of the oral transmission of the poem (see Pollock 1984b, pp. 85ff.; cf. 6.1864*, 1865*, 1866*, etc.; 6.3278*, 3298*, etc.).

[59] Or indeed, "Supreme [that is, Primal] Being"; on this see further below. Both Cm and Cg read the vocative here (not reported in the crit. ed.). The northern recension gives for the second half-verse "that you incarnated yourself in this world [or, on earth]."

[60] 6.107.17, 22.

spect to men, and now it is from a man that harm is coming, we are certain, terrible harm that shall take the life of Rāvaṇa and of every *rākṣasa*. . . . When the *rākṣasa* had got his boon, he began to oppress the gods with his power. They went and paid homage to the Grandfather where he sat blazing with ascetic splendor. The Grandfather was gratified, and for their welfare the great one spoke these great words to the deities: "Forevermore from this day forth all *dānavas* and *rākṣasas* shall eternally roam the universe overmastered with fear." . . . The gods then convened and under the lead of Indra they all propitiated the great god, the bull-bannered destroyer of the Triple City.[61] The great god was propitiated and said to the deities, "For your welfare there shall come into being a woman, to bring destruction upon the *rākṣasas*" [cf. 3.52.6, 11]. . . . And Sītā must be she, employed now by the gods to slay the *rākṣasas*—as once, long ago, Hunger slew the *dānavas*—and she shall devour us and Rāvaṇa as well.[62]

In the total context of Books Two through Six, there is clearly little that argues against the authenticity of these last two passages, and much that speaks in their favor. Viewed comprehensively, they show themselves to be, not afterthoughts or isolated allusions, but part of a design. The cumulative impact of such periodic revelations is to transform the perspective from which we view the story. Once more the assumption is encouraged that the human narrative is intricately meshed with, and finally subsidiary to, a divine plan in which Rāma (along with Sītā) has for some reason been appointed the principal actor.[63] The character of Rāvaṇa, as we have seen, reinforces this assumption, as does the boon motif. For the formula by which this motif is constituted posits this signification, and at the same time clarifies why this "mere man" should have become the instrument of a cosmic purpose.

The boon was granted to Rāvaṇa by Brahmā in consequence of

[61] Ct remarks that Brahmā had ordained only that the *dānavas* and *rākṣasas* live in terror; Rudra would provide for their annihilation.

[62] 6.82.29–36. Cf. 3.35.5, where Sītā is suspected of being "born to take [Rāvaṇa's] life." The theme probably contributed to the creation, or absorption, of the story of Vedavatī at *Uttarakāṇḍa* 17.

[63] As has long been maintained, on the basis of Sītā's birthstory (*Bālakāṇḍa* 65; *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 110) and the radical signification of her name (literally, "furrow," or maybe even "crown land"), she would represent an earth goddess, perhaps specifically the Earth goddess joined by a *hieros gamos* to the sacral king.

the intense asceticism the *rākṣasa* had performed over thousands of years, and it provided that he could never be slain "by gods, *dānavas, gandharvas, piśācas,* great birds, or serpents." In Sanskrit epic and purāṇic literature the performance of austerities almost mechanically compels the gods to fulfill any demand of the claimant. They are invariably asked to grant the gift of immortality, but they themselves won this only with great effort when they churned the empyreal ocean, and it is the one gift they cannot bestow.[64] Yet like so many others, Rāvaṇa seeks to achieve the same result by a gambit widely familiar in folklore: attempting to frame the perfect wish. The sheer impossibility of an exhaustive catalog, however (in this case overdetermined by Rāvaṇa's scornful dismissal of man), immediately implies that a solution is assured; the very provisions of the boon make it inevitable that a proxy will be found. Not a god, since the gods have become, so to speak, contractually impotent; nor yet a man, men being constitutionally impotent, the "food" of *rākṣasas*. Instead it must be an unprecedented combination of the two.

These thematic implications are in part manifested in the divine plan sketched above. In addition, the way the boon is formulated—which turns out to be an ancient building block of Indian myth—necessarily entails this: The formulation ensures that the boon will be counteracted, and what will counteract it is a previously nonexistent being, either a purely deceptive being or, more usually, one entirely outside the catalog of natural possibility. Before tracing the roots of this "morpheme" into the vedic tradition and the special association it later comes to have with the corpus of Vaiṣṇava mythology, let us examine its function as a structural feature in epic myth-making.[65]

In *MBh* 1.201 is found the "old tale" (*itihāsa purātana*) of Sunda and Upasunda, brothers born in the line of the "great *asura*" Hi-

[64] As the *Mahābhārata* often tells us (1.201.20ff.; 8.24.6ff., etc.).

[65] The motif of the boon granted in recompense of asceticism has never been examined in detail, despite its prevalence in the literature. In fact, I am unable to find much outside Hopkins's observation that "the weakness of the gods mentally continually leads to their giving boons to their cunning foes" (1915, p. 43). Hopkins misunderstands the mechanistic dynamic that is of the very substance of *tapas* and yoga (for it is a commonplace in Indian texts that ascetic renunciation, if once undertaken, must inevitably bear fruit): The gods grant boons under a compulsion that is beyond their control, yet the terms by which they grant them demonstrate, precisely, their comprehensive foresight.

raṇyakaśipu. Inseparable companions and deeply devoted to one another, they resolve to conquer the universe, and set off for the Vindhya Mountains to practice austerities. The gods come to fear their growing ascetic power and try to disrupt their mortifications by tempting them with precious objects, women, and the like. But the gods are unsuccessful, and in the end the Grandfather must appear before the two and grant them a boon. In addition to magic powers, they seek immortality, the one thing Brahmā must withhold. "But," says Brahmā, "you may choose some way of dying that will make you as good as deathless."[66] They reply, "Let us have nothing to fear from anything existing [*bhūtam*] in the three worlds, anything that moves or does not move—anything, Grandfather, but ourselves."[67] There must of course be an omission in their request for invulnerability, otherwise they would indeed be immortal, and so they choose what alone seems to them unthinkable as a source of danger. Brahmā agrees, and in the possession of their boon the demons attack the gods, conquer heaven and the netherworld, and, coming to earth, slaughter kings and brahmans, on whose sacrifices the power of the gods depends. The seers appeal to Brahmā, who reveals the way to slay the demons. Viśvakarman is asked to create a woman, and gathering "every existing thing in the three worlds, everything that moves and does not move that was beautiful," the divine craftsman fashions a new creature whose beauty was unlike that of any female in the three worlds.[68] Sunda and Upasunda see her, fall to fighting over her, and so kill each other.

The cosmic dimension of the story is worth singling out first. The boon activates a power that throws the universe—the triple world of heaven, earth, and the underworld—into turmoil, making divine intervention unavoidable. The catalog of conditions in the boon requested by the *asuras* is familiar, as is the use of a ruse to obviate them. The demons had aimed at and nearly achieved the exhaustive list; what they neglected to include was a combination of already existing substances into some hitherto nonexistent being, emanating from the gods and yet not one of them. And it

[66] 1.201.20; on this often misunderstood line see Nīlakaṇṭha.
[67] 201.23.
[68] 203.14.

is this, and this alone, that is able to trigger the necessary yet seemingly unattainable event, the fratricidal conflict.

A second epic example of the motif is contained in the well-known story of the demon Tāraka and the birth of Skanda.[69] When after their marriage the divine couple Śiva and Umā begin their lovemaking, the gods grow fearful lest the offspring of such a union bring about universal destruction and therefore implore Śiva to withhold his seed. He agrees, but Umā, furious that the chance of her bearing children is ruined, curses the gods to be childless themselves. Agni, the god of fire, was absent at the time of the curse. A drop of Śiva's seed, moreover, had fallen from him and into Agni, where it grew great. Now, at this time, oppressed by the demon Tāraka, the gods and all other divine creatures seek the aid of Brahmā, explaining, "The Blessed One gave the *daitya* a boon, and he has become overweening in his power. The gods cannot kill him. How then is he to be quelled? For the boon he acquired from you, Grandfather, was this: 'Let me be invulnerable to gods, *asuras, rākṣasas*.' And the gods have now been cursed by Rudrāṇī when we ruined her chance of bearing children. She said, 'You shall never have offspring,' lord of the universe."[70] And Brahmā replies, "Agni was not there at the time of the curse, best of gods. He shall produce a child to slay this enemy of the gods. And that shall be a creature transcending the gods, *dānavas*, and *rākṣasas, gandharvas*, men, serpents, and birds" (84.8–9). Skanda is later born and slays Tāraka.

As before, in addition to the boon, the catalog of exclusions, and the cosmic peril, a being of an entirely new order is required, different from and greater than any existent divinity, since its origin is unique and in fact is antinomic: It is the seed of Śiva, borne by Fire (Agni), fertilizing Water (the Ganges), and brought forth simultaneously by six different mothers, whereupon its several parts miraculously merge.

Especially suggestive is the myth of the *asura* Hiraṇyakaśipu and his death at the hands of Viṣṇu in the form of a man-lion.[71]

[69] The version to which I refer here is found in *MBh* 13.83–86. See also *Bālakāṇḍa* 36.

[70] 13.84.5–7 (translated thus *pace* the unidentified commentary cited in the critical notes).

[71] The earliest version is contained in the *Mahābhārata* tradition, *MBh* 3.27*.53–62 (cf. Hacker 1959, pp. 25–26 and note 1.1). The story must already have been

> Long ago, in the Kṛta Age, the haughty enemy of the gods, the Primal Being of *daityas*, practiced austerities for ten thousand years, and ten hundred years, and five. . . . Brahmā was pleased with his asceticism and acts of self-denial, and appeared before him in person. . . . "Please choose a boon," he said, "and fulfill whatever desire you wish." Hiraṇyakaśipu replied, "O best of gods, let me never be slain by any gods, *gandharvas, yakṣas, rākṣasas, piśācas*, or men." The great-armed Viṣṇu then took on a form that had never before existed: The Lord made one-half of his body a man's, the other half a lion's, and rubbing his hands together he went to the assembly hall of the lord of *daityas*. The Primal Being [*ādipuruṣa*] of the *daityas*, the enemy of the gods, the delight of Diti, saw that form, one never seen before, and his eyes blazed red in anger. Hiraṇyakaśipu . . . closed with the man-lion, the far mightier lord of beasts . . . and with its razor-sharp claws the man-lion's body tore the demon to pieces.[72]

Demonic evil on a cosmic scale can be neutralized by none of the available divine powers.[73] The supreme god Viṣṇu must contrive "an embodiment that had never before existed," again a miraculous life form necessitated by the comprehensive exclusions of the boon.

We can now see that these narratives are offering us an established constellation of mythological components: a boon awarded as a result of ascetic practices; an ensuing threat of cosmic evil; the intervention of the divine and its transmutation into a preternatural form that circumvents the boon's apparent all-inclusiveness—

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known in a fuller form given, first, the elliptical quality it has here; second, the need for an answer to the central question, why the form of a man-lion (the one question Hacker oddly does not ask, 1959, p. 26); and finally, that it supplies material for paradigmatic reference in the old battle books of the epic (see for example *MBh* 7.164.146, 168.21; cf. 3.100.20). I thus include in the synopsis that follows this necessary elaboration, the earliest version of which is found in the *HariVaṃ* tradition (especially 31.32–43).

[72] *HariVaṃ* 31.32–43. The text and interpolations here, as in later versions of the myth, extend the list to exclude death by any weapon, by anything wet or dry, neither by night nor by day, in the sky or on the ground, inside or outside (see also *MBh* 2.21*.194–99), which together result in the elaboration in later renditions that Viṣṇu slays the demon at sundown, emerging from a pillar in his palace, and so on.

[73] Cf. also *HariVaṃ* 31.63; the connection with the *rāmāvatāra*, 31.123, can hardly be missed.

implying above all how impossible it is to contain the divine within any ordinary category of life.

That this has to be seen as a very ancient and invariant pattern of expectation is made probable by the evidence of vedic mythology. One example attesting to the existence of the formula from earliest Indo-Aryan times, as well as an ancient association with Viṣṇu, will suffice.[74] The narrative of the dwarf incarnation of Viṣṇu is alluded to frequently in the earliest strata of vedic literature, although the first connected narrative is that of the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā*:[75]

> [The gods wanted to recover their realm from the demons.] They turned Viṣṇu into a dwarf and brought him [to the demons]. "Whatever he might cover in three strides shall belong to us [the rest to you]." He strode first over this, then this, then that [that is, earth, sky, heaven].[76]

The vedic texts are very spare in their narratives and do not tell how the demons had acquired the power to seize control of the universe. Early epic and purāṇic literature supplies the necessary background. Here the demon Bali replaces the anonymous horde of *asuras*, and the standard motif resurfaces:

> Bali, the great *asura*, had become invulnerable to all creatures, and you [Viṣṇu] took on the form of a dwarf and ousted him from the triple world.[77]

> Brahmā, the granter of boons, granted that you [Bali] attain the power of Indra, that you be deathless and unconquerable in battle.[78]

[74] The widespread and antient myth of Indra and Namuci fits perfectly into this pattern: a cosmic struggle with soteriological meaning (cf. Gonda 1960, p. 58), a boon, a catalog of exclusions, a divine ruse that violates natural laws (soft foam becomes the weapon used to decapitate the demon, etc.). See *RV* 1.53.7 and 8.14.13, *MaiS* 4.3.4, *TaiBr* 1.7.1.6 (and cf. Bloomfield 1893, pp. 143–63).

[75] See Tripathi 1968, where most of the relevant data is collected.

[76] *MaiS* 3.7.9. Cf. Tripathi 1968, p. 35.

[77] *MBh* 3.100.21.

[78] *HariVaṃ* App. I, No. 42B, lines 2325–27 (vulgate 3.63.5–6). When Indra attacks Bali he hears a divine voice that tells him, "Desist, you cannot slay Bali in combat. . . . He is superior by reason of the gift of the boon. . . . Only the Blessed One [Viṣṇu] shall be able to slay him" (*HariVaṃ* 64.21–25). When the gods come to supplicate Viṣṇu, they explain, "By reason of the gift of the boon from Brahmā,

The motif is thereupon subject to a slight inversion; it is now the demon Bali who dispenses a boon to Viṣṇu. The dwarf is given as much land as he can cover in three steps, and as the *Mahābhārata* tradition puts it, "Hari took on a divine, utterly miraculous form as he strode out, and with three strides he took all the earth."[79]

From the beginning, this act of Viṣṇu's has been associated with his divine mission. Concomitantly, Bali—exactly like Hiraṇyakaśipu and Rāvaṇa—is regularly represented as a power of cosmic dimensions.[80] And the miraculous transformation, far from being a trickster's "stratagem to avert the suspicion of the asuras," fits squarely into the pattern I have been tracing.[81] In that environment the pattern recovers something of its centrality to ancient myth and to the understanding of the divine in early Indian thought: As in the case of the man-lion and all the others, an attempt is made to give expression to the incomprehensible character of the divine, whereby we can begin to understand that it does not exist within the world of nature, "the realm of necessity," that it is not constrained by the limits of the possible. No inventory of the physical world, however exhaustive, can subsume the capabilities of what transcends all natural categories. On the one hand, then, the divine may be what it certainly seems not to be (the dwarf, for example), and on the other, it can indeed be what has never been seen to be (the man-lion).[82]

[Bali] seized the whole world from us. . . . And it is said he is invulnerable to us all" (70.46–47; cf. also Tripathi 1968, pp. 81ff., especially p. 88).

[79] *MBh* 3.27*.79.

[80] Explicitly only from the epic period on (*MBh* 12.216.5–6; cf. *HarVaṃ* App. I, No. 42B, lines 2322–24 [vulgate 3.63.4]), but likely to derive from ancient material. On Viṣṇu's soteriological mission, see *ṚV* 6.49.13, "Three times did Viṣṇu measure out the terrestrial realms for the afflicted Manu," that is, again, man; cf. Tripathi 1968, p. 4.

[81] Macdonell 1897, p. 41; see also Gonda 1969, p. 146.

[82] Further consideration of the development of the *avatāra* doctrine, to which these theological reflections lead, is not possible here (preliminary speculations are offered by Hacker 1960, pp. 47–70). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in Vaiṣṇava circles—along with notions of immanent divinity, of a present god whose *vibhūtis* empower the world and yet who remains a *deus absconditus*, a god hidden by the vast powers of his *māyā* and deceit—the motif was adopted as a major component in the mythic representation of Viṣṇu's salvationary purpose. In the cosmogony of *MBh* 12, for example, during Brahmā's demiurgic activity Viṣṇu reflects, " 'Brahmā has created all these creatures, *daityas, dānavas, gandharvas, rākṣasas*. . . . There are many of them on the earth, and they are powerful. They shall practice asceticism and

I suggest that the figure of Rāma, from the time the full narrative took shape in the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, has been conceived after the model furnished by these ancient morphemes of Indian myth.[83] Neither a man nor even a "simple" god, he incorporates the two and so, in a sense, transcends them both.

When I use the term "myth" here, I have in mind a patterned representation of the world, with continuing and vital relevance to the culture, which furnishes a sort of invariable conceptual grid upon which variable and multifarious experience can be plotted and comprehended. It is this essential power to interpret and explain reality—and I mean social reality in the first instance—that has gone largely unappreciated in previous mythic interpretations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[84] Having assembled the essential building blocks, we are in a position to explore the mythological map of experience charted by the *Rāmāyaṇa*, to discover what Frye might call the myth's "authoritative social function," how, that is, it "tells a culture what it is." A point of entry is provided in the last example of the theme I want to look at.

In the tale of Dhundhumāra the protagonist is an earthly king (in fact, like Rāma, a member of the Ikṣvāku dynasty) but stands in a special and intriguing relationship to divinity:[85] The aged

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acquire ultimate boons, and driven mad by their boons all without fail shall harass the gods, the seers, the ascetics. . . .' So [Viṣṇu] reflected, and he created many forms in order to make himself manifest [*prādhurbhavabhavāya*]: the boar, the man-lion, the dwarf, and the man [that is, Rāma Dāśarathi]. 'With these I shall slay the evil enemies of the gods' " (verses 337.29–36).

[83] Although I am primarily concerned here with a structure of thought, not a matter of literary history, it should be mentioned that Vālmīki knew well both the Bali and Namuci myths (3.27.3, 29.28; see also my note on 2.12.8 and references there, and 6.47.119) and exploits them to telling effect in similes, as when Lakṣmaṇa says to Rāma, "My wise brother, you shall recover Janaka's daughter Maithilī as surely as great-armed Viṣṇu recovered the earth and left the demon Bali in chains" (3.59.22, recurring at 5.19.24; a later rhapsode reveals the paradigm fully when he has Mārīca attempt to dissuade Rāvaṇa by saying, "The delight of the Raghus could slay Bali, or Namuci," 3.738*).

[84] These for the most part have been either mechanical or completely reductive. (I am thinking less of Jacobi's own theory of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a vedic myth *redivivus* [1893, pp. 126–39] than of its present-day reaffirmation from the Dumézilian perspective, for instance, Puhvel 1974, and the direct application to the *Rāmāyaṇa* of the *idéologie* in its pure, Procrustean form, [Dubuisson 1979, expanded in 1986]).

[85] The oldest version is contained in *HariVaṃ* 9.46–77. As is the case with the man-lion myth, this archaic version is at times so elliptical that it must presuppose a fuller

Ikṣvāku king Bṛhadaśva, having set his son Kuvalāśva on the throne, retires to the forest. The sage Uttaṅka tries to stop him, seeking the king's protection from the *rākṣasa* Dhundhu, who lies beneath the sands of the ocean Ujjanaka practicing austerities in order to destroy the worlds, the thirty gods, and Viṣṇu himself. "For the gods cannot slay him," Uttaṅka explains, "nor can *daityas* or *rākṣasas*, great serpents, *yakṣas*, or *gandharvas*—no one, for he once received a boon from the Grandfather of the world." The king is asked to slay the demon "for the good of the worlds," and Uttaṅka tells him further that Viṣṇu shall augment his power by means of his own divine might, thanks to a boon the god once granted the sage. But the aged king, having renounced all violence, declines to do the deed himself and directs the sage to his son. Kuvalāśva and Uttaṅka proceed to the ocean and then, "The Blessed One, Lord Viṣṇu, entered into Kuvalāśva with his fiery power at the direction of Uttaṅka, and for the good of the world." By drinking up the tidal wave caused by the demon's earthquake, and with the water putting out the fire within it, the king, "a great yogin by means of Viṣṇu's yoga," kills the volcanic Dhundhu (and so receives the name Dhundhumāra).

Once again a situation is contrived that points up the incapacity of the gods, or of any other divine or semi-divine being, to confront and master evil on their own (whether moral or natural evil makes no difference). Another creature—man—is required; but being naturally powerless man needs the infusion of Viṣṇu's power. Filled with the divine potency, this extraordinary new creature, the earthly king—and only he, no god or man—can protect the brahmanical world order (here represented by Uttaṅka) by destroying evil.[86]

Here as in other versions of the motif, the catalog of the boon

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narrative. The derivative version of the *Mahābhārata* (3.192–95) provides necessary elaboration.

[86] Similar in structure and concept are the stories of Arjuna's defeat of the Nivātakavaca demons (*MBh* 3.169) and his destruction of the demon city Hiraṇyapura (*MBh* 3.170) Discussing the Nivātakavaca tale Scheuer refers to the "familiar schema of the king-*avatāra* delivering the gods and the worlds from the domination of *asuras*," and asserts that, "exactly like the *MBh* as a whole, or again, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is but another episode in the war of the gods and *asuras*, the reconquest of the gods" (Scheuer 1982, p. 227). If this is so, one wonders why it is not the gods themselves, *in propria persona*, who are fighting. What is above all significant about the tales is the modification they introduce in the ancient theme.

does not imply that the slayer can be merely a creature inadvertently omitted from the list. If explicitly excluded, he must then be charged with divine potency; if not, he must belong to a new order of being, in substance not comparable to any hitherto conceivable life forms. Dhundhumāra, like Rāma, is clearly not the sort of hero familiar to us from Western epic, for such heroes are men who do more than ordinary men, not more than gods. These two, by contrast, are men who do what, for some reason, gods cannot. Not merely more than human, they are in some way more than divine. Finally, what makes the adaptation of the ancient motif particularly suggestive, complex, and powerful in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that this second-order being, this divine human or mortal god, is here coupled with a sociopolitical representation of everyday life in traditional India: Such intermediate beings, gods who walk the earth in the form of men, are kings.

THE ANCIENT INDIAN KING

The divine nature of the earthly king has been a matter of dispute among students of early Indian thought. Most contemporary scholars, however, agree that the conception was present from the time of the vedas and continuously gained in importance thereafter.[87]

There is no need to invoke the strong concomitance between authority and the supernatural in *pensée sauvage* in order to establish this, nor the sacred status of the king elsewhere in the Indo-European cultural domain.[88] In the vedic hymns kings, or better chiefs, share certain major activities with the gods, Indra in particular, and they play as well a role of cosmic significance; they are called not only "half gods" (*ṚV* 4.42.8–9) but also "gods among men" (*AV* 6.86.3).[89] Additional evidence is provided by the ritual prose texts discussed below. By the time of the epics, lawbooks, and, later, the first *purāṇas*, the documentary evidence becomes overwhelming. We can look at one representative epic text from

[87] See for example Spellman 1964, pp. 27, 37; Gonda 1969, p. 103.
[88] On the first see Gonda 1969, p. 9; the sacral king of Indo-European antiquity is discussed in Dumézil 1948, pp. 19ff.; a detailed and instructive recent study of a particular Indo-European tradition is that of Chaney on the "Woden-sprung kings" of Germanic paganism (Chaney 1970, especially pp. 7–42).
[89] See further in Gonda 1969, pp. 109, 54 and note 368.

our most important source of traditional Indian political theology, the *Rājadharma* section of the *Mahābhārata*. This offers a strikingly forthright expression of attitudes and beliefs about kingship, and in several respects seems almost a gloss on the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

> If kings did not exist, no creatures anywhere could exist, and because kings exist, other creatures do. Who dares refuse them homage? Whoever bears the burdens imposed by the king, which bring happiness to all the world; whoever strives to please and benefit him, wins both this world and the next. But whoever even thinks of doing evil to the king assuredly finds affliction in this world, and at death goes to hell. Never should the king be scorned as being a mere mortal: He is great divinity existing in the form of a man. He can take on any of five different forms, as occasion demands: He may become Fire, the Sun, Death, Vaiśravaṇa, or Yama. One must be zealous and careful not to contradict the lord, nor grumble against him, if one hopes to acquire righteous merit. A man who acts in opposition to the king never gains happiness; neither he himself nor anyone close to him—son, brother, friend. Even when driven onward by the wind, its charioteer, fire might leave something in its wake; but to the one who thwarts the king nothing whatever will be left. All that the king owns is to be preserved as his; keep your distance from it. Taking something of his should be seen to be as fraught with terror as death itself; touch it and you perish. . . . The king is the very heart of hearts of his subjects, their foundation, refuge, and ultimate happiness. Putting their reliance in their king, people never fail to win this world and the world to come.[90]

Passages like this make it evident that kings—or more precisely, righteous kings—were invested with the status, the powers, all the ontological meaning and significance of divinity. But can we be certain the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* shared this conception? For though the *Rājadharma* discourse seems representative for much

[90] *MBh* 12.68.37–59; cf. *MBh* 12.65.29, "A king of men is an eternal god; the gods themselves hold him in honor." That happiness depends on obedience to the king is stressed in the *Rām*, see 38.20 below, and note the close parallel in 38.12 regarding the functions of the several divine forms (explained in the *Rājadharma* passage, verses 41–47).

of the epic period, it has often been noted that stony silence if not outright contradiction with respect to the king's divinity can be found elsewhere; some early lawbooks, for example, seem indifferent or even hostile to the notion.[91]

The silence encountered in the early *dharmaśāstras* need not, of course, be interpreted negatively, and the denials of a king's divinity need not belong to the historical period of the monumental poet. And even if contemporary with him, denial of kingly divinity indirectly implies that for some it was an article of belief (a verse from the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* discussed below makes this clear). In any case, the orientation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is hardly in doubt. Whether or not this reflects widespread consciousness may be a matter of secondary importance. At times, Vālmīki's poem leaves the impression that the political theology is a doctrine in the making and that its consolidation is a principal objective of the poet.

Although we cannot expect to find in a poetic text like the *Rāmāyaṇa* the discursive plenitude of the *śāstra* portions of the *Mahābhārata*, we can still assemble sufficient evidence to determine its understanding of the divinity of kings. A passage strategically placed at the beginning of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, for example, setting the tone for all that follows, nicely expresses the bivalent nature of the earthly king. Here the seers are addressing Rāma: "As guardian of righteousness and glorious refuge of his people, a king is worthy of reverence and esteem. He is a guru who wields the staff of punishment. A king is a fourth part Indra himself and the protector of his subjects, Rāghava. Therefore he enjoys the choicest luxuries and is held in honor by the world" (3.1.17–18).

These verses imply a divinity of a "functional" sort, referring in particular to the king's protectorship through his exercise of legitimate force. Something similar occurs in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Here Bharata is urging Rāma to return to the city and take up the duties of kingship, which he sees himself incapable of shouldering. For, he argues, "some say a king is but a mortal; I esteem him a god. His conduct in matters of righteousness and statecraft, it is rightly said, is beyond that of mere mortals" (2.95.4). If the divine status of the king may have been subject to public questioning, its existence would by the same token be confirmed, and its truth, too, in

[91] Some of these are cited in Hopkins 1931, pp. 309–16 (his translation of *Rām* 2.95.4 [p. 313], however, follows the inferior text of the northern recension).

the eyes of the authorial arbiter whose voice is plain to hear in these lines. But there is more than just inferential evidence. In the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* the poet flatly states his own view, through the character of Rāma himself: "It is kings—make no mistake about it—who confer righteous merit, something so hard to acquire, and precious life itself. One must never harm them, never criticize, insult, or oppose them. Kings are gods who walk the earth in the form of men"[92] (4.18.37–38).

What does it signify to make this claim of divinity? What does it mean that the king is a god? The few scholars who do not ignore it have been prone to minimize the importance of divine kingship in ancient India. For one thing, it is claimed that the element of divinity inheres in the office, not the person, of the king.[93] For another, kings were not the only such beings in existence. Brahmans, too, were "gods on earth." Thus in a way comparable to no other culture India was "prolific of human gods." In fact, as though we were in the grip of a market economy of the sacred, divinity in India is said to be "cheap."[94]

Neither of these claims has much force. First, the dichotomy between king and kingship finds little support in Indian epic texts. That distinction itself is a juristic concept belonging primarily to the European medieval period and derived ultimately from Christian symbolism.[95] Moreover, even though there is no suggestion whatever in Books Two through Six of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that the divine king has any competition from a divine brahman, who is simply ignored, I do not believe such a law of supply and demand is

[92] It may be that *naradeva-*, a common word for "king," carries in the *Rāmāyaṇa* a still-vital radical signification, and indeed perhaps as a *karmadhāraya* compound ("man-god," just like *narasiṃha-*, "man-lion"; this seems to be the interpretation in the *BhāgP*, for example, 1.3.22), rather than *tatpuruṣa* ("god among men"; cf. Gonda 1969, p. 63). Thus when Hanumān says to Rāvaṇa, "There is no one in the three worlds who, having once offended Rāghava, could ever find happiness. . . . Show proper respect to this man-god [*naradeva-*]; give back Jānakī" (5.49.19), it may be that we are to hear this subtle resonance in the compound and to understand that Rāvaṇa is being given one last chance to comprehend the inherent, and inevitably fatal, limitations of his boon.

[93] A representative paper is Basu 1959. See also Lingat 1973, p. 208 and note 7, and p. 211.

[94] The first quote is from Frazer (cited in O'Flaherty 1976, p. 9), the second, from Basham 1954, p. 86.

[95] Kantorowicz 1957 is a magisterial exposition of the concept.

applicable in the domain of political theology; the question of quantity need have no impact whatever on the value of the representation. This value is constituted by, and directly proportional to, the quality of being of the divine king, irrespective of its quantity. And the quality of his being is unique in two respects: the king's function and his origin.[96] The king is functionally a god because like a god he saves and protects; he is existentially or ontologically a god because he incorporates the divine essence.

The king, we are told in the *Rājadharma* section of the *Mahābhārata*, is the root of the three ends or needs of human life (the *trivarga*); *dharma* itself is "rooted" in the king. The exercise of kingship is thus the highest manifestation of *dharma* and the refuge of every living soul on earth. All beings depend on *dharma*, and *dharma* depends on the king. But what is the core of *rājadharma*? "The age-old *dharma* of kings consists of protection, and it is this that maintains the world itself." The king provides security, in particular to brahmans and ascetics, who are usually, as in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, represented as those most threatened with violence. This is a "gift of life" (cf. *Rām* 4.18.37, cited above, p. 46), equal to no other, and by means of it alone the entire brahmanical order and the sacrificial cult by which it sustains the universe are preserved.[97]

Although the king has other functions besides protecting his subjects (which his possession of other divine substances enables him to execute),[98] it is his providing welfare, in the widest sense of the term, that remains his special trait. The god who increasingly in Indian religious history comes to discharge this soteriological function and whose substance is later said to be fused with that of the earthly king is Viṣṇu. For although Viṣṇu does not himself occupy the position of king in the Indian pantheon—that is held by Indra—he has a unique role in the preservation of the cosmos that proved to be a far more compelling political-theological determinant. From the time of the earliest hymns of the *Ṛgveda* and with

[96] These were the principal categories later adopted by the authors of the *purāṇas* in their analysis of the sources of the king's authority. See Ghoshal 1966, p. 330.
[97] The verse quoted (*MBh* 12.57.42; cf. 32.2) may be by Bhārgava, that is, Vālmīki (cf. the variants noted in the critical apparatus on verse 40a). For the king as root of the *trivarga*, cf. 12.137.95; as the root of *dharma*, 12.68.8, with 56.2; and see further 63.21, 25, 64.20, 29, 56.3, and 91.5. Gonda argues that the semantic value "protect" is a radical signification of Indo-European *reg-* (Gonda 1956, pp. 151–67).
[98] See *MBh* 12.68.40 quoted above, p. 44, and the references noted there.

growing frequency thereafter, Viṣṇu's preeminent task is to aid suffering mankind by reestablishing the righteous brahmanical organization of society.[99]

This "parity of functions" at an early date entailed an equivalence of being. Suggestive testimony is to be found in a ritual textbook of the Taittirīyas (a branch of the vedic tradition with which Vālmīki may have had particular affinities).[100] During the royal consecration ceremony the king "takes the [three] strides of Viṣṇu, he becomes Viṣṇu himself and thereby triumphs over all these worlds."[101] In the epic period the texts become even more numerous and explicit. We have already seen how Dhundhumāra was able to execute his protective activities only by absorbing the power of Viṣṇu. Perhaps the best representation of the doctrine of substantive identity between king and divinity, and one of the most important expository texts in the epics on the origin of kingship, is the tale of the birth of Pṛthu, the first righteous king. Once created, the king vows righteousness and promises to protect "the earthly brahmans" and preserve the brahmanical social order. The gods perform his consecration, and thereupon,

> The eternal Viṣṇu himself established the law that no one was ever to transgress against the king. And by means of his ascetic power the Blessed Viṣṇu entered into the king, so that the world would bow in homage to these gods of men, like very gods. . . . For why otherwise would people stand at the bidding of a king—who is no different from them in his body or sense powers—were it not for this quality of divinity?[102] . . . When his merit has

[99] We have glimpsed this already in the myth of the dwarf incarnation. See also Tripathi 1968, pp. 1–26, and Gonda 1969, pp. 164ff., where much of the pertinent information is made available.

[100] Cf. Pollock 1986, p. 37 and note 3.

[101] *TaiBr* 1.7.4.4. Cf. also Gonda 1969, pp. 58–59, 164–65. It is irrelevant that, technically, Rāma is not yet a consecrated king, for his status is hardly ambiguous. Not only do Rāma's sandals occupy the throne of Kosala, but he is regarded as king throughout his forest exile, in fact, as "king" or "master" "of all the world" (cf. 3.11.27, 28.10, 35.13, 48.4, 5, 14; 5.32.27).

[102] Cf. 12.59.6–12: "His hands and head and neck, his intellect and senses, his sperm and bone and marrow, his flesh and blood, are like any other man's; like any other man he feels joy and sorrow . . . like any other man is born and dies. Why then does this one rule over all the earth? . . . It must be for no small reason that all the world bows before one man, as before a god" (a passage strikingly reminiscent of *Richard II* 3.ii.174ff.).

> been exhausted, a king comes from heaven to earth to be born. . . . Endowed then with the greatness of Viṣṇu on this earth, he becomes endowed with intelligence and attains greatness. No one transgresses against the law established by the gods. All stand at the bidding of one, and conform to his behavior.[103] Therefore, best of kings, wise men in this world have forever declared that gods and gods of men are equal.[104]

The identification of the earthly king and Viṣṇu becomes so thoroughgoing that by the time of the earliest *purāṇas* "every emperor, in every cosmic age both past and future, is born on earth with a portion of Viṣṇu within him."[105] The reality of the representation is brought home to the contemporary reader by, for example, the inscriptions of the imperial Guptas, particularly the description of King Samudragupta as the "Inscrutable Being" [that is, Viṣṇu], "a man only insofar as he conforms to social convention, but in reality a god who has taken up residence in the world."[106] Or by Viśākhadatta's great play, the *Mudrārākṣasa*, at the end of which the poet eulogizes his patron (possibly Candragupta) by asserting that Viṣṇu, who once took on the form of a boar to save the earth, has now assumed the form of this king.[107] In the epic and post-epic period texts proliferate that affirm and elaborate on the essential unity of the earthly king and Viṣṇu. Representative of the medieval view of the king as savior is the important Vaiṣṇava sectarian work, the *Ahirbudhnyasaṃhitā*:

> The king is the ultimate being, a lord consisting of [parts of] all the gods. He is the locus of the effective energy of Viṣṇu, he consists of the Blessed One Himself. The Lord God created the king long ago, emitting him from His own head; consecrated on the head, therefore, the king is placed far above all other creatures. The king is twice so great as a brahman, and his praises are sung in the *vedas* and *śāstras*. The fool who in delusion hates the king, hates Hari; the man who in delusion hates Hari, hates

[103] I read this line with the southern recension; the doctrine that all follow the actions of a king is an old one, see *Rām* 2.101.9 and note.
[104] *MBh* 12.59, 129–41.
[105] *VāyuP* 57.72.
[106] The Allahabad Pillar Inscription c. A.D. 370 (Sircar 1965, pp. 266–67, lines 25–28).
[107] *MudrāRā* 7.19.

> Lakṣmī; and the foolish hater of Lakṣmī is lost to all *dharma*, is driven from all worlds, is excluded by all the gods, and exists forevermore in blinding, bottomless darkness. But the wise man who seeks earthly and heavenly prosperity will esteem the king, the supreme deity of all worlds.[108]

The divine king is a spiritual redeemer (not necessarily, as represented here, a function of his identification with Viṣṇu), who not as an intercessor with the gods but directly secures the spiritual welfare of his people. He is "guru of the world to come"; show him contempt and all one's religious works prove fruitless (*MBh* 12.65.28). He is, according to a passage already cited, "the very heart of hearts of his subjects. . . . Putting their reliance in their king people win this world and the world to come" (*MBh* 12.68.59, above, p. 44). This reflects not a cult of king worship in the strict sense—kings in India did not often usurp the position of the gods in the all-important sacrificial rites—but a spiritual function symmetrical with and finally indistinguishable from his social function, which the king exercises by reason of the divine substance he incorporates. It seems to be precisely this power to effect spiritual emancipation that underpins much of the action of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*. What I have in mind is illustrated by the structurally comparable narratives of Śarabhaṅga and Śabarī, Virādha and Kabandha.

These episodes, which celebrate the liberating power of the king, frame Book Three of the epic. At the beginning and end of the volume Rāma encounters two evil monsters imprisoned in horrific forms as a result of curses, and immediately thereafter two people of extraordinary holiness. The king slays the monsters, thereby releasing them from their confinement and allowing them to recover their proper place in heaven. Both Śarabhaṅga the ascetic and the mendicant woman Śabarī commit ritual suicide after their encounter with Rāma. Śarabhaṅga had put off departing for the world of Brahmā, which he had won by his asceticism, until he had experienced Rāma; but "now that we have met," he tells the king, "I will go to the highest heaven, where the gods reside" (3.4.26), whereupon he immolates himself. Śabarī has also been waiting for Rāma, having been told by her gurus, "One day Rāma shall come to this holy ashram of yours. You are to receive him.

[108] *AhirbuS* 16.14–19; cf. *BhāgP* 1.18.42.

Once you have beheld him you shall go to the highest imperishable worlds" (3.70.11–12). After providing him hospitality she, too, destroys herself in the sacrificial fire.

By direct intervention, then, or by his mere presence, Rāma, "the one to whom all creatures pay homage,"[109] offers freedom from the miseries of this world. For the holy ascetic and mendicant, there is nothing further to live for having once experienced him; the *darśana* of the divine king functions as both the ratification of their holiness and the mechanism of their release. The evil monsters for their part are cleansed by the royal punishment exacted by Rāma, and so made fit again for heaven. Punishment as a divine institution and instrument of emancipation is standard doctrine not just for traditional Indian political theology but for Vālmīki himself: "When men who have done evil deeds are punished by the king, they are purified and go to heaven, just like men of virtue" (4.18.30).[110]

Thus, from the time of the *Rājadharma* discourse of the *Mahābhārata* and probably much earlier, the king was widely characterized as a "deity in the form of a man," a being in which "mankind and divinity actually meet and combine."[111] On these grounds

[109] *sarvabhūtanamaskṛtam* (3.69.20). The phrase, which is authenticated text-critically, is used elsewhere in epic literature almost exclusively of Brahmā and Śiva.

[110] Cf. *MBh* 12.56.7 (vulgate): "Just as the rising sun dispels the evil darkness, so the righteous acts of a king [that is, his exercise of punishment] save from lightless and evil hell." See also the unidentified *smṛti* text cited there by Nīlakaṇṭha: "People who have [committed crimes and so] become polluted are purified when punished by kings; they are thereby fulfilled and go to heaven, no less than the good." On the "divine institution" of punishment see Lingat 1973, p. 214 (cf. p. 67), who refers in particular to *VāsiDS* 19.48. One possible reason why the ancient legend of Indra and Ahalyā (cf. *ŚatBr* 3.3.4.18 etc.) was drawn into the *Rāmāyaṇa* corpus (1.48) was the opportunity it offered to demonstrate precisely this salvational capacity of Rāma's. This is, in fact, how the later tradition interpreted it, especially Tulsī Dās (cf. Whalen 1981, p. 242, also p. 18; the story remains a major spiritual moment in contemporary Rāmlīlā performances). That this particular episode was selected to illustrate the king's emancipatory power no doubt has to do with its content, the theme of adultery, which is one of the poem's obsessions. Rāma later will actively punish the adulterous Śūrpaṇakhā (here in *sarga* 17; see also pp. 78ff. below), a pivotal event of the story, and at the climax of the poem demand the purification of his queen (6.103ff.).

[111] Gonda 1969, p. 54. This political theology, according to Kauṭilya, was to be actively inculcated: Intelligence agents were to encourage the belief among the people that kings occupy the position of Indra and Yama; to scorn them is to invite divine punishment, and so on (*ArthŚā* 1.13.5ff.).

alone we might be justified in concluding that the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* must have been a central feature of the poem from the beginning. The morphology of the boon motif also compels this conclusion (and at the same time accounts for the absence of any clear reference to Rāma's divine nature), since it invariably requires a transcendent fusion of existential categories.[112] Indeed, the extraordinary synthesis here of the numinous and the human—the divine man who is king of men, the human god—is a particularly brilliant contribution of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to an old and venerable mythopoetic tradition, which renews the force of this myth by tapping into a vital reservoir of everyday representations and beliefs concerning kingship.[113]

Gradually, however, the conception of the divine king basic to the story of Rāma was influenced by two factors already mentioned. First, the god Viṣṇu came to be associated—perhaps initially as a result of their functional identity—with the earthly king. Second, in Vaiṣṇava theological circles there developed the theory of the *avatāra*, a doctrine of vast absorptive, syncretistic force, which views every manifestation of divine power as testimony to the omnipotence and immanence of Viṣṇu.[114] These factors have so fundamentally conditioned the transmission of the poem that it cannot be proved on textual grounds that the composer of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, from which all versions and recensions of the work derive, was ignorant of or indifferent to the equation of Rāma and Viṣṇu. And there are additional features, narratological

[112] The traditional interpretation understood this well. If it were emphatically expressed—if Rāma himself were shown to know—that he is a "divine mortal," the terms of the boon would not, in fact, be honored. I discuss this traditional exegesis in detail in Pollock 1984a (the translation of Tryambaka's commentary runs from the third paragraph on p. 232 through the first paragraph on p. 238).

[113] What these might have meant on the level of everyday life in traditional India is suggested, for instance, by the brief description of the Balinese divine king, the "Great God," found in Geertz 1983, p. 178.

[114] The first factor is captured in the old formula *nāviṣṇuḥ pṛthivīpatiḥ*, "No king exists without [or perhaps better, "is not"] Viṣṇu," which provided a sufficient condition for the identification; the second is captured in the statement of the *HariVaṃ*, *nāsty āścaryam avaiṣṇavam*, "No miraculous power but that it comes from Viṣṇu" (113.75), which provided a necessary condition. For the first formula cited, see Ck on *Rām* 2.5.1; Ḍhuṇḍhirāja on *MudrāRā* 7.19; cf. Kane 1962–1975, vol. 3, pp. 24–25. The second point is touched on by Hopkins 1931, pp. 313–14.

and aesthetic, which, far from challenging this equation, make it seem as "authentic" as any dimension of the poem.

Nevertheless, the hypothetical effects of the appropriation of the text by early Vaiṣṇavism has finally no bearing on the question of the divine status of Rāma as it was originally conceived, or on our interpretation of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, which accordingly is obliged to view this status as a constitutive and determinative feature of the poem. How does such a perception affect our interpretation of the poem in a more global sense?

Let us review the passage in which, in order to convince Rāma to return to Ayodhyā, Bharata argues that even if some people think a king but a mortal, "I esteem him a god. His conduct in matters of righteousness and statecraft, it is rightly said, is beyond that of mere mortals." This verse distills what Book Two, the first "movement" of the poem, goes to such great lengths to exemplify. The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* is a profound study in the righteousness of the king and his authority. Rāma possesses these attributes in a measure that only a divine being can.[115] This is also the case with his protective and punitive activities, the exercise of legitimate force, which forms the subject of Book Three and the rest of the poem.

Here we return to the problem that confronted us at the very beginning of our analysis of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*: Are the two halves of the poem really genetically incompatible, one part epic myth, the other romance? Is there any unity to this work? I suggest that the nature of kingship itself provides the unifying theme and the impulse to explain the "divine" power of the king as comprehensively as possible. Whether we accept the speculative notion that the forest is the very source of royal authority, or regard it more as an "extrasocial sphere" where the violence of the kingly warrior could be exhibited, a realm of *artha* (or *daṇḍa*) complementing that of *dharma* (especially necessary in the idealized world of "Ayodhyā"), the world outside the settled town seems essential in the kingly narrative of power and legitimacy in premodern India.[116] Looking at the *Rāmāyaṇa* from this perspective, we can regain a sense of the work as a meaningful whole, which Indian audiences

[115] It is precisely his sense of righteousness, *dharma*, that makes it impossible for Rāma to go back to Ayodhyā, thereby demonstrating how naive is the younger brother's argument.

[116] See Falk 1973 and Heesterman 1985, pp. 108–27.

have always felt. What we may have been inclined to view as "romance" elements threatening to shatter this unity serve instead to enlarge the site of the narrative, so that the full range of the divine king's activities may be contemplated.

This perspective may also enable us to view in another and more revealing light one of the most startling episodes in the poem, one that seems to contradict everything we have so far learned about the hero's character.

5. Rāma's Madness

THE MOST POWERFUL scene of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*—next to Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā—and one of the more problematic of the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* is Rāma's madness over the loss of his wife (*sargas* 58–62, with *sargas* 50–57 as prelude). The problem in this episode is that the hero contradicts virtually everything the poet, up to this point, has encouraged us to believe about him.

The whole force of the preceding narrative is directed to creating a character inhabiting an emotional and ethical realm far removed from that of normal mortals. If there is any single virtue that characterizes the hero's conduct through the first two and a half books of the poem, it is his equanimity, a trait deriving from his ability to eliminate all personal concerns from every social or ethical calculation. In the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* Rāma is one who "never grows angry, whatever the insult" (2.36.3); one who would "ignore a hundred injuries, so great was his self-control" (2.1.16); it is said that "benevolence, compassion, learning, good character, restraint, and equanimity—these are the six virtues that adorn" Rāma (2.30.12).[117] Yet what we are presented with in this deeply moving passage of the third book negates this hitherto consistently drawn portrait. This seems less the exploration of another side of his character than a complete reversal.

The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* seeks to establish an innovative definition of the *dharma*, the code of conduct, of kshatriyas: Violence as far as possible is to be eschewed in the realm of sociopolitical action.[118] The *Araṇyakāṇḍa* shows us a different domain of action where this new valuation of *kṣatradharma* is not always applicable (the shift in focus from the one book to the next is well illustrated by the exchange between Sītā and Rāma on the bearing of arms in a forest where ascetics make their home, *sargas* 8–9). In this realm, the ideal king is prepared to subordinate every consideration of personal welfare and safety to the duty of protecting the brahmanical order of society. In the mad scene, however, both the hero's earlier

[117] Cf. also 2.1.15 and 2.21.

[118] See for example 2.18.32ff., especially verse 36; *sarga* 101, in particular verses 19ff., and for a discussion, Pollock 1986, pp. 64ff.

convictions in "Ayodhyā" and his single-minded devotion to royal duty in the "Forest" seem to be not only displaced but inverted or rejected.

The descent into madness is described slowly and carefully. Rāma has been drawn away on a distant chase by the *rākṣasa* Mārīca in the form of a bejeweled deer. When finally slain, Mārīca cries out for help, imitating Rāma's voice. Lakṣmaṇa, who had been left behind to guard Sītā, is forced by her to go to Rāma's aid, and with the ashram now unprotected Rāvaṇa abducts the princess. Returning to find the hermitage empty, Rāma scours the surrounding forest for his wife, frantically searching, "wandering like a madman" (58.33), his grief giving him "the look of a madman" (58.10), questioning the trees of Janasthāna, the elephants, tigers, mountains, rivers. He then discovers the evidence of Jaṭāyus's fatal struggle against Rāvaṇa (*sarga* 60), and concludes that Sītā has been slain or stolen away. Our growing suspicion of profound transformation in the hero's character at this point becomes a certainty: Rāma now explicitly renounces the political ethics to which he has hitherto so tenaciously held, and implicitly rejects the principal duty incumbent upon him as king, at the same time crying out in maniacal fury and threatening cosmic destruction:

> Since Vaidehī has been devoured or carried off, who in this mortal world—or which god—has thought it possible to injure me? But then, any creature, Lakṣmaṇa, knowing no better, will despise the man of compassion, however heroic he may be, the very master of the worlds. The thirty gods themselves must surely think me powerless, because I have been mild, compassionate, and self-restrained, striving for the welfare of the world. Look how in my case, Lakṣmaṇa, a good has become an evil. But now I will efface it—as the great rising sun effaces the light of the hare-marked moon—in order to exterminate the *rākṣasas* and all living things. No *yakṣa, gandharva,* or *piśāca,* no *rākṣasa, kinnara,* or man shall be left in peace, Lakṣmaṇa. Watch now, Lakṣmaṇa, as I fill the sky with missiles and darts, leaving no space whatever for creatures that move about the three worlds. I will bring the host of planets to a standstill, darken the moon that brings the night, paralyze both fire and wind, blot out the light of the sun; I will grind the mountain peaks to dust, dry up every body of water, uproot every tree, vine, and shrub, annihi-

late the ocean. If the gods do not restore Sītā to me safe and sound this very instant, they shall witness the full extent of my power, Saumitri. Not a single creature, Lakṣmaṇa, shall escape into the sky: The darts shot from my bowstring will form a net without a gap. Behold now, Lakṣmaṇa, the devastation caused by my iron shafts, the birds and beasts driven wild and ravaged, the world plunged into chaos, from one end to the other. Because of what happened to Maithilī I will shoot my arrows from a full-drawn bow, arrows no one can withstand, and rid this mortal world of all *piśācas* and *rākṣasas*. Now the gods shall witness the power of my shafts when I ply them in anger; they shall see how far they carry when, my patience exhausted, I release them. No god or *daitya*, no *piśāca* or *rākṣasa* shall survive when in my rage I lay waste the universe. The worlds of the gods and *dānavas* and *yakṣas*, besides that of the *rākṣasas*, shall come crashing down one upon the other as my darts fly wave after wave, smashing them to pieces. I will obliterate the boundaries of all the worlds with my shafts. Like old age or death or time or fate, which no creature has ever defied, Lakṣmaṇa, so in my rage I cannot be withstood; let no one doubt it. Unless they show me Sītā, the bright-smiling, flawless princess of Mithilā, I will overturn this world, mountains and all, its great serpents and men, its *gandharvas* and gods." (60.36–52)

The profound sense of injury expressed here is attributed to precisely the ethical code that had marked the hero's character in the previous book. Not only does he seek to exact vengeance on the *rākṣasas*, but he is prepared to slay "all living things," from serpents to gods, including men; the whole cosmos is threatened with annihilation. Besides this startling negation of Rāma's emblematic self-possession, there is at the same time a terrible violence here—in fact, a terrible "unrighteousness" (*adharma*) in him who is the "champion of righteousness" (*dharmabhṛtāṃ varaḥ*). For the king's paramount duty is to offer protection, and this is an obligation articulated in Book Three no less than in the poem as a whole. At the very beginning of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* we are told that the king is supposed to be "guardian of righteousness and glorious refuge of his people," "the protector of his subjects" (3.1.17, 18). Rāma himself is deeply conscious of this duty:

> I may repeat the words you yourself uttered, my lady: "Kshatriyas only bear bows lest any voice be raised in distress." (3.9.3)

> I come as king . . . to end the life of evildoers and all who wish the world ill. (3.28.10)

Lakṣmaṇa, in an interesting reversal of roles (contrast for instance 2.18–20), recognizes and tries to apprise his brother of the deviation in his behavior and its unrighteousness:

> Anguished and tormented by the abduction of Sītā, Rāma was prepared to annihilate the worlds, like the fire that comes on doomsday. He kept glancing at his taut-strung bow, racked incessantly with sighs, raging like Rudra himself. . . . At the sight of such rage in Rāma as he had never seen before, Lakṣmaṇa cupped his hands in reverence and addressed him through a mouth gone dry with fear: "You have always been mild in the past, self-restrained, and dedicated to the welfare of all creatures. Do not abandon your true nature, yielding to rage. The splendor of the moon, the radiance of the sun, the movement of the wind, the patience of the earth—all this is constant, so too your incomparable glory. . . . You must not destroy the worlds because of one single being. Lords of earth must be gentle and cool-headed, and must mete out just punishment. (3.61.1–9)[119]

> If in your sorrow you consume the worlds with your might, tiger among men, where are your subjects to find relief from their torment? . . . What good would it do you, bull among men, to cause universal destruction? (3.62.6, 20)

Rāma is calmed, for the time being at least, but the terrific vision of the apocalyptic destruction of which he is capable—as elemental as time, death, fate—is a stark revelation that remains fixed in the contemporary reader's consciousness.

This has also been true for traditional Indian audiences. One index of the power this scene (in particular Rāma's search for Sītā through the woods of Janasthāna, especially *sarga* 58) has exercised in Indian literary culture is its influence on later Sanskrit lit-

[119] Rāma has recovered his characteristic sense of equity by 6.67.37. When Lakṣmaṇa wishes to release the "weapon of Brahmā" in order to kill Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit, the elder brother dissuades the younger from slaying all the *rākṣasas* on earth because of the crimes of only one of them. See also Goldman 1980 for reflections on the complementarity of the two heroes' characters.

erature. The greatest poet of classical India, Kālidāsa, adapted it for his *Vikramorvaśīya* (where in act 4 the mad king Purūravas searches frantically through Kumāravana for his beloved, the *apsaras* Urvaśī), thus inaugurating a series of adaptations in court literature.[120] The most impressive of the popular adaptations is found in the cycle of Kṛṣṇa legends (the *gopīs'* wild quest for the lover who has abandoned them). The motif is introduced first in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (5.13.25–41) and then reworked, with brilliant amplification, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (10.30).[121]

In addition to helping us gauge the dramatic effect of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* episode in court and popular culture, these later adaptations might appear to suggest an interpretation. For what they all emphasize is that irrational behavior such as Rāma's in the mad scene is a natural consequence of a deeply felt love that has been brutally denied. In pre-modern India, the scientific (śāstric) discourse on madness—that of medicine, for example, or law—generally views the phenomenon as physiological in origin (resulting from an imbalance of the humors) or as sheer demonic possession, without, however, denying that emotional disturbance can play a causal role.[122] It is this last, however, that comes to be regarded as the unique source in medieval literary contexts. For the rhetoricians, madness is "a mental confusion brought about by passion, grief, fear, and the like."[123] In fictional representations it is exclu-

[120] The scene closely follows the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, but it is palpably inferior to the epic in one crucial respect: The sense of overwhelming desperation is gone from the search; there is now something almost comedic about it all. And of course, before the fourth act itself is played out, the king has been reunited with the *apsaras*. Yet another extended treatment is found in Bhavabhūti, *Mālatīmādhava* act 9, although by this time the effectiveness of the theme in belles-lettres has been virtually exhausted. The one Rāma play of later medieval times to deal specifically with the scene is Bhāskara Bhaṭṭa's *Unmattarāghava* (which is based, however, not on the *Rāmāyaṇa* passage itself but on Kālidāsa's adaptation of it). Rājaśekhara's *Bālarāmāyaṇa* (act 5) and Jayadeva's *Prasannarāghava* (act 6) appear to look to both predecessors.

[121] The theme is absent from the *HariVaṃ*, and scarcely represented in the *BrahmP* (chapter 189).

[122] See Bhishagratna 1907–1916, vol. 3, pp. 387–89. Cf. Jolly 1901, pp. 147–48. *Mitākṣarā* on *YājñaSm* 2.140 (where those excluded from inheritance are enumerated) neatly summarizes the traditional tripartite etiology of madness.

[123] *SāhiD* 3.160; see also *RasGaṅ* p. 90, where madness is listed under the *vyabhicārabhāvas* and defined as follows: "Madness is miscognition [literally, "the appearance of something where it actually is absent"] brought about by separation [from the beloved], a terrible calamity, profound bliss, and the like. It is different from [mere erroneous] cognition, insofar as it is originated [by such external causes as those

sively correlated with the first of these emotions and, in fact, comes to be listed as an integral stage in the normal progression of thwarted love, which begins in infatuation and, if allowed to run its course, terminates in death.[124]

Yet there is considerable difficulty in understanding the scene in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* primarily on the basis of the medieval etiology of madness in its literary environment. That is to say, it is hard to see the episode the way its later adapters appear to have done, as an automatic consequence or necessary component of a conventional aesthetic category, what in Indian aesthetic theory is termed the "dominant affective-aesthetic experience" (*rasa*) of "love-in-separation" (*vipralambhaśṛṅgāra*). (Nor is it simply that Rāma has been separated from the woman he loves, whom he has been willing on other occasions to abandon in favor of a higher good; compare for example 2.31.36.) The contrast here with his earlier behavior, indeed, the fundamental conflict with his paradigmatic social and moral authority, seems far too sharp to be accommodated by so facile an explanation.

The Indian tradition appears to have acknowledged that the episode was in serious need of interpretation. That offered by the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (c. tenth century) is viewed as authoritative by the majority of medieval commentators. Accepting as an authentic feature of the poem Rāma's status as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the *purāṇa* explains, "God's incarnation as a mortal in this world is not simply for slaying *rākṣasas*, but is meant to instruct mortals. How else could it be that the Lord, the Self delighting in Himself, should have suffered so because of Sītā? The Blessed One, Vāsudeva, is the Self . . . without attachment to anything in the three worlds. He would not [except for the purpose of such instruction] have experienced that faintheartedness caused by [his attachment to] a woman."[125] Thus, according to one widespread understanding of

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listed], whereas [false] knowledge is innate. Although properly one of the illnesses [cf. p. 85], it is here listed separately in order to emphasize its peculiar strangeness in comparison with other illnesses."

[124] The first appearance of the list seems to be *NāṭyaŚā* chapter 6 (1971–1983, p. 718), where the ten *kāmāvasthas* are inventoried (as enunciated by the "authors of the erotological textbooks"), and chapter 26, verses 168ff., where they are defined (*unmāda*, "madness," in verses 183–84).

[125] 5.19.5–6. The doctrine profoundly influenced the traditional commentaries on Vālmīki's epic. Cm cites this verse in his comment on vulgate 6.59.120. See also Cm's remarks in the note on 60.10 below.

the poem, Rāma's behavior throughout is to be taken as altogether "mimetic"; it is not real, but a representation with explicit didactic function.[126] The episode of his madness, consequently, is to be viewed as a cautionary tale, as the *Bhāgavata* itself elsewhere takes pains to spell out: "The basest of *rākṣasas* came into the woods stealthily, like a wolf, and abducted the princess of Videha. With his brother in the forest [Rāma] acted the part of a wretched man when separated from his beloved, thereby to illustrate what happens to all who are too much attached to women."[127]

The *Bhāgavata*'s analysis of this and comparable episodes in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (as for instance when Rāma is preparing to cross over to Laṅkā and in a rage threatens to dry up the ocean, 6.14) secured widespread approval in medieval India and is thus an index of at least one domain of indigenous understanding.[128] Far from exhausting the meaning of the scene, however, this interpretation, too, shows signs of expediency, deriving from an almost palpable puzzlement in the face of a symbolic structure for which nothing in the earlier part of the poem has prepared us.

If, then, Rāma's frenzied search, madness, and threats of holocaust present us with more questions than some traditional aesthetic or theological interpretations can answer, we might ask whether viewing the episode from a less localized cultural-literary perspective could disclose other, more interesting meanings. Such a wider vantage point is readily available, since the madness of the hero is a common motif in world literature.[129] In Shakespeare, for example, it is introduced with such remarkable regularity into the

[126] See further in Pollock 1984a and 1986, notes on 2.2.28; 16.57.

[127] 9.10.11.

[128] Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita, for example, echoes the sentiment of the *Bhāgavata* in his *Rāmāyaṇasārasaṃgraharaghuvīrastava* 17 (one of a series of reflections on particular episodes of the epic viewed as enigmatic in the medieval period).

[129] Two recent full-scale studies of the question are Felman 1978 and Feder 1980. This is not the place to go into detail on the representation of madness in ancient Indian literature. Whereas madness is as common in traditional India as elsewhere (this is indicated in part by the multiplicity of psychotherapies the culture has developed to deal with madness; cf. Kakar 1982), it is rarely explored in literary discourse. One is hard pressed to think of other examples than Rāma (and Śiva; see below); the attempted suicide of Vasiṣṭha, for instance (*MBh* 1.167), or the self-genocide of the Vṛṣṇis (*MBh* 16) seems very different. The contrast with, say, ancient Greek literature, which investigates madness in so many varieties (Dionysus, Orestes, Cassandra, Ajax, etc.), is instructive and might suggest psychic denial of the phenomenon in traditional India.

career of the protagonist as to appear almost an essential dramaturgical component.

Like Rāma, Shakespearean heroes pass through a "cycle of change," including a descent into madness whereby they turn into their own antithesis. Besides providing intense theatrical experience, madness in Shakespeare can symbolize the terrible dilemma of the tragic hero, as a mark of both the exceptional punishment to which he becomes liable and the exceptional insight he commands. It also makes available a voice—the speech of the madman—through which the more acute perception of life possessed by the poet himself, and the possibly dangerous truths to which he has privileged access, can be expressed with relative impunity.[130]

What we find happening in Shakespearean tragedy and in much of Western literature may also supply the expectations and "prejudgments" that westerners bring to Vālmīki's epic. But it should be evident that few of the symbolic features of Western literary madness are applicable to what takes place in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*. The dramatic intensity of the scene is unquestioned, but Vālmīki has secured such intensity elsewhere and in less problematic ways. Rāma does seem to become his own antithesis here; the transformation does occur during the course of the "tragic journey" of the hero (at once a psychological journey of self-discovery and a geographical one).[131] But this is only to restate the problem, not answer it. Rāma's madness is certainly no punishment, and it affords him no opportunity to exercise deeper insight. The poet does not take advantage of the madman's clearer vision to enunciate any critique.

If comparison between literary cultures offers little help in understanding what Rāma's madness means in Vālmīki's epic, we do

[130] The above paragraph derives from the classic essay of Mack 1970, especially pp. 40–47. On the etiology of madness in the Renaissance West (which is strikingly similar to that in medieval India, originating in the same three ways of humoral dysfunction, possession, or intense love) see Feder 1980, pp. 98ff., especially pp. 114–16.

[131] On the traditional—and in my view the most forceful—interpretation of Rāma's self-discovery at the end of Book Six, whereby he gains knowledge far different from that attained by Aeneas or Dante, see Pollock 1984a. Clearly I am inclined to view the claim to antiquity of that scene far more favorably than other scholars. As an integral part of Vālmīki's text, it can be persuasively explained as a necessary conclusion; at the same time it explains much of the narrative itself. Far more awkward is the view that is it an interpolation.

best to remain as close as possible to Indian presuppositions. Yet the narrow presuppositions of the medieval interpretations do not take us very far, either. It is here, perhaps, that the central concerns of the epic should guide our interpretation of its parts. If, in the first instance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an imaginative inquiry into the nature of kingship and the peculiar, transcendent nature of the king, it may be useful to think of the apparent reversal of Rāma's character in response to the abduction of his wife as an extension of this concern.

The solution to Rāvaṇa's boon can be provided only by an intermediate, almost composite being, the "god who walks the earth in the form of a man." But if the powers of this being are divine, he nevertheless remains, "in some measure, a man."[132] The problem of the god-king's humanity is certainly at issue in one important theme of the poem, the limitation of Rāma's self-knowledge. The poet follows its ramifications throughout the text and employs it to great advantage in problematizing the motivation of the hero. At various points in the epic, as we have seen, evidence is given of a divine plan governing the action of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and one very intriguing aspect of this plan is Rāma's ignorance of it. His conduct in protecting the sages of Daṇḍaka wilderness, which provokes the hostility of the *rākṣasas* and sets in motion the rest of the action of the tale, is presented as his own free choice, a righteous and heroic king's response to violence and evil, and one that he did not know could not fail in its purpose. Consequently, when Rāma asserts near the end of the sixth book, "I, a man, have overcome the adversity brought on by fate. . . . What a man could do, Sītā, all that he could do, I have done" (6.103.5, 13), the irony affecting much of the poem strains to the breaking point.

In the same way, this irreducible humanity of the king could impinge on Rāma's emotional response to life in general and be at work in the poet's creation of the episode of madness. Kings, we are perhaps being told, may participate in a divine realm by reason of their preternatural mode of being, and by what this directly entails, their transcendent knowledge of and power to maintain *dharma*. But they are not altogether alien to us; they feel desire and

[132] *Rām* 7. App. I, No. 10.28 (cited also by Hopkins 1931, p. 312). Recall also Lakṣmaṇa's words to Rāma in 3.62.19, "Be aware of your powers, which are as much divine as human."

need love, and when this is denied them they are hurt, grow wrathful and finally mad, like the most wretched of mortals. By this narrative argument kingship and the king recover a human face.[133]

There may be some validity to this interpretation, and indeed to some of the others, indigenous and comparative, that we have examined. We should be reluctant to dismiss any of them entirely, resisting all impulse to secure the single "correct" reading, since, as so much recent scholarship reminds us, no such thing really exists.[134] I am offering this interpretation only as a counterpoint to another one, also based on the central problem of the nature of the king, that I find to be more compelling.

We have observed that the unique nature of the earthly king is frequently explained by a doctrine well known to the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, too: The king is a synthesis of various divine powers. He not only is "a fourth part Indra himself" (3.1.18), but also incorporates the essential characteristics of each of the principal gods. "The power of kings is infinite," according to one formulation in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, "they are able to take on any of five different forms: They can be hot like Agni, god of fire, bold like Indra, or mild like the Moon; they can exact punishment like Yama, or be gracious like Varuṇa" (3.38.12). These are not to be thought of simply as shared characteristics, much less mere figures of speech, but as equivalences or, better, substantival identities. In the appropriate circumstances the terrestrial king literally *becomes* the one or the other god. This very prevalent tenet of Indian political theology offers another way of thinking about this problematic epi-

[133] Some of the commentators, interpreting the scene in accordance with the doctrine of the mimetic nature of Rāma's *avatāra*, reach a related conclusion. Ct, for example, argues that Rāma's display of grief (which Rāvaṇa would be informed of through spies) is meant to confirm to Rāvaṇa that his adversary is, in fact, a man, something necessary if the demon's death is to be secured in compliance with the terms of the boon; if the king were to show no anger at such a moment, Rāvaṇa would conclude that he is not a man. (It is not, however, at all clear that it is Rāvaṇa who must be convinced of Rāma's humanness rather than Rāma himself.) An alternative explanation for Ct is that Rāma's being afflicted with emotional distress is a result of his fleshly embodiment (a theological-philosophical doctrine other commentators use to explain Rāma's ignorance of his true nature). See further in the notes on 60.1 and 52 (and cf. 29.20 note).

[134] A point effectively reiterated in Rabkin 1982, pp. 1–32.

sode.[135] A passage again from that central text on kingship of the epic period, the *Rājadharma* section of the *Mahābhārata*, brings out the pertinence to our scene of the transformations of the god-king. One verse especially merits close attention:

> When evil beings commit egregious evil, then this god [that is, the king] becomes Rudra himself: By their evil acts, evil beings turn him into Rudra, and then he harms all, good and bad alike.[136]

Some portion of the meaning of our scene in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* may be to suggest that, under the compulsion of Rāvaṇa's "egregious evil," Rāma has become Rudra-Śiva. Like his prototype, the dread god of the forest and death, Rāma has gone mad, and like him he is bent on, and capable of, cosmic destruction.[137] The specific catalyst of the god-man's madness may be that which affects normal mortals; it may be that the undifferentiated aggression arising from the frustration of his desire is like that of any mortal, as is the tendency of the victim of violence to commit violence himself.[138] But what I think brings us to the heart of the scene lies rather in the quality and dimension of the king's destructive power when his will is thwarted. We have seen the *Rājadharma* warn about this power and the larger causes that trigger it:

> A man who acts in opposition to the king never gains happiness, neither he himself nor anyone close to him—son, brother, friend. Even when driven onward by the wind, its charioteer, fire might leave something in its wake; but to the one who thwarts the king nothing whatever will be left. All that the king owns is to be preserved as his; keep your distance from it. Tak-

[135] For further references on this doctrine, see the note on 3.38.12. It is attested in the inscriptions of historical kings, too. Samudragupta, for instance, claims to possess the powers of the gods Kubera, Varuṇa, Indra, and Yama (Sircar 1965, p. 267, line 28). On the substantival identity between king and gods, cf. the text cited by Vallabha on *RaghuVa* 3.11: "A king's body is made by taking the power of Indra, the fire of Agni, *the anger of Hara* [Śiva], the wealth of Vaiśravaṇa, and the gentleness of the Moon.

[136] *MBh* 12.74.17.

[137] On the madness of Śiva see for example *BhāgP* 4.2.14; and cf. O'Flaherty 1976, pp. 65, 278, 307, and Kinsley 1974, pp. 274ff. For Śiva as god of the forest and of death, cf. Parpola 1981, p. 162.

[138] Cf. Feder 1980, p. 21.

ing something of his should be seen to be as fraught with terror as death itself; touch it and you perish.

Like a very god the king when gratified fulfills your every need, and when angered, like a very fire he destroys you, root and branch.[139]

From this perspective, Rāma's madness seems less an anomaly or deviation whereby the hero approaches his opposite than a "natural" manifestation of those violent and destructive capacities inherent in him as king, which have hitherto lain dormant and, in a sense, like fiery *pralaya* itself—final cosmic destruction—are above (or a part of a superordinated) *dharma*. "In the exercise of kingship," according to one recent study, "there is a dimension of violence, of destructiveness, and impurity, which in the *Mahābhārata* makes Śiva's intervention necessary. . . . Rudra-Śiva . . . expresses what one might call the dimension of terror (*raudra*) of the king or kingly *avatāra*."[140] In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śiva seems to be made manifest in the person of the divine king, who incorporates this particular god's essence no less than those of other, more benign, divine powers.

Much of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* seems to be enacted under the very banner of Rudra. We have already noticed once how Rāma is compared to the terrifying divinity; this rhetorical signal, absent from the preceding volumes, now becomes frequent.[141] Moreover, throughout the book the *rasa* shifts repeatedly back to *raudra*, the "terrible," the presiding deity of which, as our earliest systematic work on aesthetics tells us, is Rudra.[142] And it is the terrible, de-

[139] *MBh* 12.68.39–52; *MBh* 12.83.31; cf. *ArthŚā* 5.4.17.

[140] Scheuer 1982, p. 241.

[141] Cf. the note on 3.15.39.

[142] See *NāṭyaŚā* 6.44. There may actually be a genetic literary link between the scene of Rāma's madness in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* and Śiva's madness over the death of his wife Satī. Vālmīki encourages the parallel when he describes Rāma after the discovery of the loss of Sītā as "raging like Rudra himself when he sought to slay the victim at Dakṣa's sacrifice" (61.2). In the *KālikāP* version of the myth, Śiva is absent when Satī commits suicide, and on returning to his hermitage and finding his wife's body, he at first refuses to believe what he sees. After learning what had provoked Satī's act, he flies into a rage, destroys the sacrifice of Dakṣa, and, filled with grief, "like a common mortal" he bursts into tears. Taking up his wife's corpse he goes off—as another *purāṇa* puts it—"wandering like a madman" (*DevīBhāP* 7.30.45) and ready to destroy the universe (see *KālikāP* 18.1ff.; *BṛDharmaP* 2.40ff.; Zimmer

structive aspect of the god that will predominate in Rāma for the rest of the poem, until his purpose is achieved with the death of Rāvaṇa.

The interpretation of Rāma's madness as a manifestation of the transcendent cosmic violence of the earthly king reveals coherence in an otherwise incoherent image. On this analysis, too, the ideological interests of the "Forest" are again seen to construe broadly with those so insistently presented in the more familiar sociopolitical universe of "Ayodhyā."[143] They now appear to be indissolubly linked with a political theology sustained by the notion of a triune godhead to be fully developed in classical Hinduism: The power of a king is infinite indeed, and as easily as he can preserve the world, he can, if provoked, destroy it.

1948, pp. 296–306; O'Flaherty 1973, pp. 298–300). Like the medieval commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śaiva texts come to insist that the god is not in reality distraught by the death of Satī; it is simply his *līlā*, or divine play, to appear to be so. See O'Flaherty 1973, p. 147 and references cited there.

[143] Cf. Pollock 1986, pp. 9–24.

6. *Rākṣasas* and Others

THE *Araṇyakāṇḍa* presents interpretive problems that, so far, have been best addressed by a "mythic" reading of the narrative. This derives largely from the Indian tradition itself—from the political theology of pre-modern India—and from more general ideological functions of literary production. But Vālmīki is not only concerned with kingship and the king's mysterious nature and activity as a "consubstantial" god-man. The fantastic creatures, for example, the *rākṣasas* and others that we encounter for the first time in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* and that occupy the center of attention for much of the rest of the poem, have little to do in themselves with the larger theme of kingship and seem less easily accommodated by the interpretive strategies used so far. Whereas conceptions of kingship are culture-specific and so require considerable effort on the part of outsiders to understand, the monstrous presences may seem more familiar to westerners. To some extent they do fit into a pattern of signification known to Western imaginative literature. But they also offer a specific vision of the Other in traditional India, and that is what makes them uniquely interesting to us.

The "city" books of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* develop in strikingly similar ways.[144] And it is precisely these many similarities that make the particular divergences so intriguing. One of the salient differences between the two narratives concerns the outrage perpetrated against the heroine. In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī is dragged half naked into the assembly hall by her husbands' "brothers"; the outrage is virtually a public one, its location eloquently symbolic of the intense political struggle between the two sets of claimants to the throne; and the perpetrators are the kinsmen of the Pāṇḍavas and all too human as antagonists. Everything from context to antagonist serves to sharpen the political reference of the assault.

The parallel event in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. Here, however, the outrage is for all purposes a private one; it occurs in the forest with only the trees, streams, mountains, and animals of Janasthāna to witness it. As if by design it is empty of

[144] See Pollock 1986, pp. 33–36.

the localized political content that pervades the scene in the other epic. This narrative alteration seems in keeping with the focus of the poem—kingship as cosmically envisioned, as it were, *sub specie aeternitatis* and with none of the *Mahābhārata's* insistent specificity. Finally, and most important, the antagonist is not only not a political rival of Rāma's (the idealized world of Ayodhyā neither permits nor acknowledges the existence of any rival that could provoke the desperate, self-destructive political response of the *Mahābhārata*) but hardly belongs to the same biological order as the hero.

We have seen that, by the morphology of much of the story, it is easy and necessary to assimilate Rāvaṇa into a venerable line of demonic antagonists (Hiraṇyakaśipu and the rest), and that consequently he often seems to represent the power of cosmic evil incarnate. But this transcendence is far from constant, and certainly what Rāvaṇa signifies seems much richer and more complex than any such cosmic status would allow. This is true in general of the *rākṣasas* that so thickly inhabit the world of the "Forest" and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole. They are such striking and enigmatic creatures that we cannot help asking who they can be and what meanings they might bear.

These questions have been posed often in the past, and Grierson's remark typifies the answer still usually given: "Most people admit that behind the mythical Rakṣasas and Asuras, there were memories of, or allusions to, very real personalities [that is, "human beings obnoxious to the authors of the passages in which their names occur"]. . . . Rakṣasas have often been identified with this or that aboriginal tribe, and no one has ever objected to this on principle."[145] The predilection for historicizing the monstrous beings of epic (and vedic) texts in this manner is widely shared, and if scholars have mostly been too circumspect to frame specific equations, a number of possible identifications have nonetheless been offered.[146] Thus *rākṣasas* have been viewed as cannibals, primitive

[145] Grierson 1912, pp. 67–69.

[146] With respect to pre-epic literature, Gonda has reiterated the long-held view that "it is not always possible to decide whether a definite name belongs to an aboriginal enemy or to a demon. Śambara, for instance, seems to be a demon in part of the corpus [the *ṚV*], but may elsewhere be a human chief" (Gonda 1975, p. 129; cf. Macdonell and Keith 1912, vol. 2, p. 355). Hillebrandt is also unsure; the *rakṣas* (as presumed, for example, to be referred to in *ṚV* 7.104) may be the gods or heroes

cave-dwellers; theriomorphic shamans, masked dancers in totemic rites of a sort still found among the Gond and other tribes, or historical ethnic groups whose descendants still bear cognate names (for instance, several subtribes and subcastes in modern Bihar).[147] They have even been identified—here we find a specific equivalence, which has secured a measure of Indological notoriety for the very disdain with which it was greeted—with the Sinhalese Buddhists, the opponents and finally victims of a hegemonic Brahmanism, represented in this rigid allegory by Rāma.[148]

Perhaps, as Grierson asserts, this mode of historicization is not in principle objectionable. After all, people do make their fictions out of their facts and treasure their stories because they help make comprehensible their own histories. There is also evidence that Indians like anyone else are prone to interpret their stories in historicizing ways. For the more xenophobic of the late medieval commentators on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for instance, the *rākṣasas* of the Kali Age are Muslims; the representations of the epic miniaturists are largely demonizations of various tribal peoples.[149] The problem with this perspective, however, is that it obstructs any view of what the *rākṣasas* might signify in the imaginative world of the epic poem itself. To explore this, narrow historical constraints seem out of line; whether or not the *rākṣasas* ever had concrete, local identity, this is not what interested the composer of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*. Attempting to recover that sort of historical specificity,

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of enemy tribes (1927–1929, vol. 2, pp. 413–14). Keith finds it impossible to determine the "precise nature" of vedic *rākṣasas* with any certainty (Rapson 1922, vol. 1, p. 106).

[147] So Ruben 1939, p. 299, summarizing the views of Hopkins (1915, pp. 38ff.) and of Macdonell (1897, pp. 162ff.), and citing the ethnography of Risley (1891, see particularly vol. 2, p. 194). Similar in spirit are the more recent observations of Thapar: "The concentration of the term *rākṣasa* in the Vindhyan region would perhaps identify them with the chalcolithic cultures and the Black-and-Red ware people of the second and early first millennium B.C." (Thapar 1978, p. 19).

[148] See Wheeler 1869, vol. 2, pp. 249ff. (cited in Weber 1870, pp. 4–5). Jacobi ridiculed Wheeler's allegorical equation first because of its historical improbability and second (a point made in part already by Weber) because it is essentially meaningless, having been for 2000 years inaccessible to all but a lone Victorian Englishman (Jacobi 1893, pp. 89–90). He does not himself, however, hazard any interpretation of the *rākṣasas*.

[149] See the note on 3.3.24 for Ck's, Ct's equating Muslims (Yavanas) with *rākṣasas* (an equation encouraged by the burial customs of the demons). The pictorial demonizations await study.

consequently, is one of the least interesting and productive of the critical operations we can undertake.

Though by abandoning the search for concrete referentiality beyond the text, we are not abandoning the task—the essential task, in my view—of historicization. What these creatures represent or refer to within the confines of the poem still has an irreducible portion of historicity—but it is the historicity of a mentality. It is as generalized imaginative representations, large symbolic responses to important human problems, that the *rākṣasas* may yield their richest signification. And what are these, after all, but the responses and representations of specific historical people, the traditional Indians who created and experienced the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as a way of interpreting their problematic historical world.

Rākṣasas are not the only fabulous creatures we confront in the "Forest"; the entire epic from the end of *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* through the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* takes place in regions inhabited by creatures fundamentally alien to the city of Ayodhyā. As if mapping out the boundaries of the expanded, extra-human domain of the narrative that begins with the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, the poet frames the book with symmetrical episodes in which the hero confronts the monstrous, first in the person of Virādha (*sargas* 2–3) and later of Kabandha (65–69). These two incidents point up variations in the poet's representation of the fantastic that help us distinguish some instructive traits marking the *rākṣasas*.

Both Virādha and Kabandha are, with epic imprecision, called *rākṣasas*, but what among other things differentiates them from *rākṣasas* is that they live permanently in the forest, alone and without community.[150] Moreover, they are each locked into a physical form that provides a graphic objective correlative of their geographical and sociological marginalization. First Virādha:

> And there, in the heart of the forest that teemed with ferocious animals, Kākutstha beheld, towering before him like a mountain peak, a roaring, man-eating monster. Sunken-eyed, huge-mouthed, his belly deformed, he was massive, loathsome, deformed, gigantic, monstrous, a terror to behold; clad in a tiger

[150] The text is somewhat uncertain about what species of being Kabandha is. In 65.24, before his life history is made known to the audience, he is referred to as "foremost of *dānavas*" (a class of beings usually kept distinct from *rākṣasas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

> skin dripping with grease and spattered with blood, as terrifying to all creatures as Death with jaws agape. On an iron pike he held impaled three lions, four tigers, two wolves, ten dappled antelopes, and the massive head of an elephant, complete with tusks, and smeared with gore. And he was roaring deafeningly. (3.2.4–8)

And then Kabandha:

> As they carried on their relentless search through the entire forest, a tremendous noise broke out that seemed to shatter the forest. The deep wood seemed altogether enveloped in wind; the noise coming from the forest seemed to fill the heavens. Seeking the source of the noise, Rāma and his younger brother came upon a mammoth, huge-chested *rākṣasa* in a thicket. The two of them drew near and there, facing them, stood the giant Kabandha, a creature without head or neck, his face set in his belly. The hair on his body was bushy and wiry, he towered before them like a mountain, a savage creature like a black storm cloud and with a voice like thunder. And in his chest, darting glances, thick-lashed, tawny, prodigious, wide, and terrible, was a single eye. Ravenously licking his massive lips and massive fangs, he was devouring tremendous apes and lions, elephants and deer. Contorting his two dreadful arms, each one of them a league in length, he would seize all sorts of animals in his hands—apes, deer, flocks of birds. He pulled in countless animals and pulled them apart limb from limb as he stood there blocking the path the two brothers were taking. (3.65.12-20)

The unchangeable physical deformity of these two creatures is an index of their moral deformity. The symbolic concomitance between physical and moral qualities has already made itself felt on several occasions in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* : in the malevolent servant Mantharā, who is wicked and ugly; in Sītā, who is good and beautiful; in Kaikeyī, who is beautiful and corruptible, and thus powerfully ambivalent. We shall encounter it again in the polymorphic ambiguity of the *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā.[151] The life histories of the two monsters make this relationship clear. Both are in reality celestial

[151] Cf. Pollock 1986, p. 50 and note 2, where I try to show that this formulation of concomitance is old and becomes a commonplace in classical literature. See also the note on 8.5 below.

(and relatively benign) beings who were cursed to enter monstrous bodies as a consequence of moral transgression.[152]

Virādha and Kabandha can easily be compared with other fantastic creatures familiar from *Weltmärchen.* Kabandha in particular recalls the first monster in European literature, the one-eyed cyclops Polyphemus, a devourer of men, who

> did not range with
> others, but stayed away by himself; his mind was lawless,
> and in truth he was a monstrous wonder made to behold, not
> like a man, an eater of bread, but more like a wooded
> peak of the high mountains seen standing away from the others.
> (*Odyssey* 9.188–92)[153]

Or consider the later monsters of Pliny, the Blemmyae, notably, that for millennia have fascinated westerners—Shakespeare, for example, whose Othello describes them as "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.iii.144–45). To a large extent creatures like Virādha and Kabandha seemed to have functioned for traditional Indians as the Plinian monsters for Romans and later Europeans. The Sanskrit epic poet tells of the monstrous races in the unexplored, exotic lands to the south precisely as Pliny writes of those in North Africa and "Ethiopia" (indeed, of the "Bragmanni" themselves). The fascination such creatures hold for both is evident. Their appeal is based on such things as "fantasy, escapism, delight in the exercise of the imagination, and—very important—fear of the unknown."[154] The religious-ethical dimension of the monsters of the European Middle Ages is also coded in the

[152] The *gandharva* Tumburu became Virādha as punishment for neglecting his duties toward Kubera (his negligence was itself a result of his sexual incontinence), and the *dānava* Danu became Kabandha after arrogantly attacking Indra, the king of gods. There is some textual uncertainty in the two stories. Kabandha's exposition of his history in 3.67 seems to be a fusion of two separate tales, one contained in verses 1–6, the other in verses 7–16; a situation also present, apparently, in the Virādha story, cf. 3.5–6 and 18ff. See further in the note on 67.1.

[153] What gives the cyclops his particularly inhuman and offensive quality in the eyes of the Greeks is precisely his asocial existence. Further interesting reflections on the cyclops are offered in Page 1966, pp. 1–20. The translation quoted is Lattimore 1967.

[154] Friedman 1981, p. 24 (for Pliny's Bragmanni, cf. pp. 164ff.). This interesting book helped to focus much of my thinking about the Indian version of Pliny's teratology.

Indian epic species: Their appearance and behavior result from transgressions committed in a previous embodiment; their existence is literally a curse. They are fallen creatures who, as I suggested earlier, can be liberated only by the spiritual sword wielded by the god-king Rāma.[155]

Several of these traits and a somewhat comparable "appeal" are possessed by Rāvaṇa and the other *rākṣasas*.[156] But they diverge in a number of crucial respects. The *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā may also inhabit a region at great remove from the human; their island-fortress is situated at the edge of the geographical—and moral—world of traditional Indians. But this is not exactly the antiworld usually associated with monsters.

The land of the *rākṣasas* is in many respects a carbon copy of Ayodhyā itself. The description of their city—its layout, architecture, palaces, and mansions—which is given in vivid and often luxuriant detail, could as easily be applied to Rāma's: Like Ayodhyā it is "as grand as Amarāvatī," the city of Indra, "equal to the city of the gods in heaven," a "happy and delighted city."[157] Admittedly cities in Sanskrit texts are regularly described in such ways.[158] What is noteworthy is that the poet felt no compulsion to deviate from the formula in the case of the *rākṣasas*. Similarly, their social organization seems indistinguishable from that of Ayodhyā. The same holds true in the political sphere, which has all the distinctive features of the traditional Indian polity, with monarchical sovereign, ministerial apparatus, and all the rest. Even the most pronounced aberration from the world of Ayodhyā, the tyranny of the king, seems a peculiarly human excess. In the domain of religious life, we find a close—if sometimes inverted—approximation to brahmanical society: There exist, for example, *brahma-rākṣasas*, who know the *vedas* and *vedāṅgas*, and who perform sacrifices.[159]

[155] Cf. Friedman 1981, pp. 89–103, 187, where he notes that the monstrous races are viewed as cursed and so may function as "theological warnings."

[156] The word *rākṣasa* itself is puzzling. Avestan cognates seem to authenticate the radical signification "an injurious being or thing," though little more than this is certain (Mayrhofer 1956–80, vol. 3. pp. 30–31; see also the earlier discussions in Macdonell 1897, p. 164, and Hopkins 1915, p. 38).

[157] Detailed descriptions of Laṅkā are found at 3.46.9–12, 53.7–12; 5.2.6ff., 48ff.; 3.3ff. For the comparison with Ayodhyā (for instance, 1.5.15), cf. 3.46.10, 5.2.17, 6.3.9.

[158] Cf. Schlingloff 1969, especially pp. 5–9.

[159] For example, 5.16.2, though the sacrifices are often inverted, black-magic rites, like Indrajit's in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*.

Unlike the monsters of the forest, then, the *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā inhabit a sociopolitical domain fully comparable to that of the human community of Ayodhyā and familiar to the poem's audiences at large.[160] The significance of this sociopolitical normality can be gauged when we try to be precise about what constitutes the "otherness" of the creatures. Among the key factors of this status—diet, speech, clothing, weapons, customs, and social organization—only the first shows deviation in the case of the *rākṣasas* (they eat human beings).[161] The large pool of signs of recognizability, in addition to the existence of several good *rākṣasas* capable of responsible moral choice (Vibhīṣaṇa, Trijaṭā, and others), serves almost to humanize these creatures. The consequence of this, however, is only to make them more threatening, and their deviations from the human all the more frightening and expressive, because all the more imaginable.

Among the more significant if obvious deviations is the violence of the *rākṣasas*. The ferocity of Virādha and Kabandha may first come to mind, but *rākṣasa* violence does not have the brute, blind, and feral quality of the two monsters. On the contrary, the violence of *rākṣasas* is in large part informed with elements of mind—with hatred. We find it directed specifically against those who in the traditional elite view represent the fundamental values of the ethical-religious domain and preserve this domain and the cosmic order that depends upon it by means of their sacred rites—namely, the brahmans.[162] The specter of this violence haunts the poem from the end of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*:[163]

> The *rākṣasas* have been molesting the ascetics. They show themselves in every form of deformation, loathsome, savage, and terrifying forms, a horror to behold. Enemies of all that is noble, they defile some ascetics with unspeakable impurities and strike terror into others by suddenly appearing before them. Stealthily they prowl the ashram sites, one after the other, and take a mad delight in harassing the ascetics. They scatter the ladles and the

[160] They would appear to inhabit such a domain from as early as the *Atharvaveda* (cf. Oldenberg 1917, p. 267; Macdonell 1897, p. 163 and references cited there).

[161] Cf. Friedman 1981, pp. 27ff. on the factors of "otherness."

[162] The association of the *rākṣasas* in particular with disturbances of the sacred rites is an ancient one, going back to the *ṚV* (as noted first, I believe, by Hillebrandt 1927–1929, vol. 2, p. 414).

[163] To be sure, we encounter this already in Book One, in the episodes of Mārīca/Subāhu and Tāṭakā.

> other sacrificial implements; they douse the fires with water and break the vessels when the oblations are under way. (2.108.13–17)

In the "Forest" their depredations are described considerably more horrifically: We find brahman ascetics being brutally tormented by the *rākṣasas*, the many corpses of those whom they have killed in every way imaginable lying about, and so on (3.5.14ff.).[164] In the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* this violence is directed at the brahmans' protector, Rāma. The first third of the book is dominated by the attack of the "eaters of raw flesh" on the prince and his wife, and the image of the vengeful Śūrpaṇakhā lusting to drink their "foaming blood" as they lie dead on the field of battle.[165]

A second notable deviation from the humans they so closely resemble (and from Virādha and Kabandha, too) is the deeply ambiguous physical nature of the *rākṣasas*. They are the most labile creatures, formulaically described (curiously enough, like the monkeys that appear later in the poem) by the epithet *kāmarūpin*, "able to take on any form at will." Monsters like Virādha and Kabandha are trapped within their horrific bodies; only marginally less so are human beings, for it requires superhuman perseverance to tap the transformative power of asceticism and so transcend the embodied state (as only a rare sage like Śarabhaṅga can do, *sarga* 4). *Rākṣasas*, by contrast, have the natural ability to change their form whenever they wish: Vātāpi could become a sacrificial ram (3.10.53ff.; 41.39–42), Mārīca a golden deer dappled with brilliant gems (*sargas* 40–42), or Rāvaṇa a brahman (*sargas* 44–47). "Māyā is a power inherent in *rākṣasas*," says the *Mahābhārata*, "their age and form are whatever they want them to be" (6.86.60).

The metamorphic power of the *rākṣasas* no doubt introduces an important element of suspense and drama into the tale. The possibility that one's interlocutor may not be what one believes him to be is profoundly disturbing. But the mystery of metamorphosis is a substantial theme in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole, reaching beyond the *rākṣasas* perhaps to the heart of the poem, if there is any truth to the suggestion that the peculiar nature of the god-king under-

[164] See also 3.37.4–6. One of the more graphic descriptions of slaughter is to be found in the *MBh* 3.100 (the demons described, called Kāl[ak]eyas, though technically not *rākṣasas*, are virtually identical with them).
[165] 3.18.15–16; 21.5, etc.

lies the narrative. For one thing, gods like demons have the natural ability to metamorphose.[166] For another, an *avatāra* (even in the relatively unelaborated form of the god-king) is by definition delusive; on top of this, the god-king consists of portions of many gods, any one of them—for instance, Rudra—able to become dominant at any time. It is probably appropriate and necessary, then, to include the hero himself as an essential component in this theme.

Vālmīki has substantially enriched the common epic motif of demonic transfiguration and intensified the features that make the *rākṣasas* the fascinating and terrifying beings they are. In the case of Rāvaṇa, the motif of the sham ascetic, which becomes common in later Hindu fiction, can sustain a variety of interpretations.[167] It can function, as it often does elsewhere, as little more than a banal ethical admonition ("evil can masquerade as good," for example, as Lakṣmaṇa says to Rāma in Book Two, "There are cunning people who wear the guise of righteousness," 2.20.8). Or, again, it may result from sheer dramaturgical necessity. The only way Sītā can readily converse with Rāvaṇa is if he appears as a character that, in the Indian context, will not compromise her: the guest who visits her is a brahman (not a handsome young kshatriya) who might curse her should she refuse him.[168] She therefore admits Rāvaṇa into the leaf hut and speaks with him—for it is in such dramatic artifice that fiction lives. And the transformation of the *rākṣasa* back into his "true" form is unquestionably spectacular drama:

> Then suddenly Rāvaṇa, younger brother to Vaiśravaṇa, abandoned the kindly form of beggar and assumed his true shape, one such as Doom itself must have. With eyes flaming bright red, with earrings of burnished gold, with bow and arrows, he became once more the majestic ten-faced stalker of the night. He had thrown off the guise of mendicant and assumed his own

[166] As Indra, who, in a way disturbingly similar to Rāvaṇa, seduces Ahalyā by adopting the form of a sage (1.47.15ff., after "waiting for an opening," verse 17; cf. 3.44.2, 8), or here in Book Three takes on the form of a soldier in order to destroy the austerities of an ascetic, 3.8.13–19.

[167] On the motif in general, see Bloomfield 1924. The thief regularly disguises himself as an ascetic, and so does the "ardent lover . . . in order to win or carry off his lady love" (p. 230). Both aspects seem to be present in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* episode, which unfortunately Bloomfield does not mention.

[168] Cf. 3.44.33, 45.2.

> form again, the colossal shape of Rāvaṇa. . . . With his long arms and sharp fangs he resembled a mountain peak; seeing him advancing like Death himself, the spirits of the forest fled overpowered by fear. (3.47.6–8, 17)

But beyond the dramatic and ethical dimensions, there is a pronounced and significant strain of irony here. Not only are brahman ascetics the primary target of *rākṣasa* violence (3.5.20), which makes Rāvaṇa's adopting such a disguise especially despicable, but in addition, the renouncer with his rigorous sexual self-control embodies an ethos fundamentally antithetical to Rāvaṇa. For we shall find that in his "real" nature Rāvaṇa is not only the colossal many-limbed monster but also the exquisite lover.

The other *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* exercise their transformative powers less frequently; they are generally pictured as embodiments of absolute terror, bearing only faint traces of physical likeness to humans (thus Triśiras the "Three-Headed" and other warriors in Khara's army, or the demons that guard Sītā in the *aśoka* grove, *sarga* 54). This is unremarkable except in the case of Śūrpaṇakhā. It is a nearly invariable motif in Sanskrit literature that female *rākṣasas* assume forms of stunning beauty to seduce men (as Hiḍimbā, to cite an instructive parallel, does in the *Mahābhārata* story recounted below). Śūrpaṇakhā tells us herself that as a *rākṣasa* woman she can take on any form at will (16.18), yet she appears before Rāma in her horrific shape:

> Rāma was handsome, the *rākṣasa* woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she misshapen and potbellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the color of copper; he always said just the right thing and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young, attractive, and well mannered, she ill mannered, repellent, an old hag. And yet, the god of love, who comes to life in our bodies, had taken possession of her. (3.16.8–10)

In view of the literary convention, it is puzzling that the *rākṣasa* woman should retain her real form here.[169] Although this provides

[169] Vālmīki's treatment is followed in few other *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions. In the Tamil adaptation of Kampan, for example, Śūrpaṇakhā comes before Rāma in a form beautiful as "soft ambrosia." In many folk versions, as in the Balalata theater of Karnataka, Śūrpaṇakhā also appears as a lovely woman; when she is subsequently

undeniable; albeit cruel, humor, it borders on the absurd. The poet has taken something of a risk, which the overall sexual-political orientation of the poem may help us understand.

The feature of *rākṣasa* otherness that, next to violence, most decidedly excludes them from the human universe of Vālmīki's poem is their intemperate and aggressive sexuality, something associated with them from the time of their earliest appearance in Indian literature.[170] This is a dominant characteristic of the *rākṣasas* from their first appearance in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* and supplies the principal motivation for the book's two principal—and very symmetrical—events, Śūrpaṇakhā's attempted seduction of Rāma and Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā.

The unrestrained sexuality of the *rākṣasas* (to which their metamorphic powers are a useful adjunct) is repeatedly emphasized throughout the poem. The whole care of the *rākṣasas*, we are told, is "to master the sports of lovemaking" (3.36.20). Though Śūrpaṇakhā clearly needs considerable practice in these sports, her attempt to seduce first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa (*sargas* 16 and 17) discloses an assertive sexuality that recognizes no restraints of family ties ("I am prepared to defy them all [her brothers], Rāma, for I have never seen anyone like you," 16.21), or of shame in general, as is pointedly asserted later in the epic (6.82.6ff.). And she is punished by Rāma not so much in accordance with a primal urge toward "the unsexing of the bad mother," much less as "an act of apparently senseless violence," but because it is Rāma's duty as king to exact punishment in general, and specifically punishment for infringement of the sexual code.[171]

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disfigured, she regains her natural form. The "comedy" of the scene is thus without actual violence.

[170] Cf. *ŚatBr* 3.2.1.40, "The *rakṣas* pursue women here on earth . . . and implant their seed therein." This aggressive libidinousness is coupled with transformative powers, as in *ṚV* 10.162.5, where the *rakṣas* are said to take on the form of brother, husband, lover, and thus approach women unsuspected. See the useful discussion and collection of citations in Oldenberg 1917, pp. 264ff.

[171] For the king's obligation to punish, cf. *MBh* 12.63.28, 70.31, etc.; the king is responsible for punishing sexual transgressions, too (cf. for example *ManuSm* 8.371). Facial mutilation is prescribed as a punishment for fornication/adultery in *ArthŚā* 4.10.10, the offending woman is to have her ears and nose cut off; cf. 4.12.33; and also Parāśara cited by Haradatta on *GautDŚ* 3.5.35: "As for she who commits fornication/adultery and out of a perverse nature does not do penance . . . she is to have her nose, etc., cut off.") Recognizing these cultural presuppositions

This is a harsh sexual-political message in itself, even more so when juxtaposed to other similar epic narratives. A parallel incident in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Hiḍimbavadhaparva* (1.139–43), for instance, affords a provocative contrast. The *rākṣasa* Hiḍimba catches the scent of the Pāṇḍavas while they are asleep in the wilderness during their forest exile. His sister Hiḍimbā is sent to bring back their flesh for him to eat, but she is smitten with love the moment she sees Bhīma, who is standing guard. She refuses to do her brother's bidding, takes on the seductive form of a beautiful woman, and forthrightly and unashamedly confesses to Bhīma her infatuation (" 'We shall dwell forevermore in the mountain fastnesses—be my husband,' she exclaimed, compelled by the bodiless god that moves within our bodies").[172] Hiḍimba comes to investigate and finds his sister, and in response to his reproaches, Bhīma argues in support of the *rākṣasa* woman's romantic love for him. After killing Hiḍimba, Bhīma is ready—or at least pretends he is ready—to slay the sister as well. She appeals to Kuntī and Yudhiṣṭhira, claiming that she has abandoned her loved ones, her people, and her *svadharma* for Bhīma. Yudhiṣṭhira allows the two to marry, although they are permitted to make love only during the day: Bhīma must return every night. The two share an idyllic love, until the narrative gently removes Hiḍimbā from the scene.

The basic plan of the episode is comparable with the Śūrpaṇakhā scene of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*; the two narratives agree even in several verbal details. But the attitude toward the *rākṣasa* women is radically different: Hiḍimbā is not only regarded as a possible mate for Bhīma but, after what appears to be a blissful romance, actually bears him a son, whom he grows to love dearly (and who will die fighting on his father's side in the Bharata war).

The differences in the treatment of the theme reflect a deeper disagreement in the two epics about the social constraints on sex-

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behind the incident saves us from the mistake of Smith (1980, pp. 66–67, "... senseless violence," since "there is no implicit compulsion ... upon Rāma to act virtuously: [his] job is battle"), or of Kakar (1981, pp. 98–99, "unsexing the bad mother," though the micro-interpretation remains compelling, that through "the well-known unconscious device of the upward displacement of the genitals," this becomes "a fantasied clitoridectomy, designed to root out the cause and symbol of Śūrpaṇakhā's lust").

[172] Compare *MBh* 1.139.25 with *Rām* 3.16.21, 24; *MBh* 1.141.4, 142.8 with *Rām* 3.16.10.

ual relations. The male fantasy of the fairy bride, as the *Mahābhārata* presents it, is stripped of all its gratification in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: here Śūrpaṇakhā is as if transmuted into the *churel*, the succubus of the Indian male's nightmare world, who threatens him with death through sexual depletion and must therefore be suppressed.[173] The details of an interpretation along these lines are certainly debatable, but it seems unlikely we can avoid the general conclusion that such narratives are aesthetically processing a fundamental male fantasy, and in very different ways.

Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, too, fits into this category. It is allegedly undertaken in revenge for Khara's death.[174] But it is quickly shown to be devoid of any but sexual significance. The fires of lust are lit in the *rākṣasa* when Śūrpaṇakhā first describes Sītā to him:

> Rāma has a lawful wife named Sītā, princess of Videha. And what a glorious woman she is, with her large eyes, slender waist, and full hips. No goddess, no *gandharva* woman, no *yakṣa* or *kinnara* woman, no mortal woman so beautiful have I ever seen before on the face of this earth. He who claims Sītā as wife and receives her delighted embraces has more reason to live than anyone else in all the worlds, the breaker of fortresses, Indra himself, included. She is a woman of good character, with a form beyond all praise, a beauty unequaled on earth. She would make a perfect wife for you, and you a perfect husband for her. How broad her hips, how full and high her breasts, how lovely her face. Why, I all but brought her back to be your wife. The moment you saw Vaidehī's full-moon face, you would find yourself at the mercy of the arrows of Manmatha, god of love. (3.32.14–20)

Rāvaṇa resolves at once to abduct her, as he has abducted any number of women, human and divine (33.3; cf. 45.24, 7.24.1ff.).

Later in the poem, however, we are told that the women in Rāvaṇa's harem—the daughters of royal seers, of the *pitṛs*, *daityas*, *gandharvas*, *rākṣasas*—are present not just because they were phys-

[173] The *Rāmāyaṇa* may be expressing a wider anxiety: women in general are sometimes figured as female *rākṣasas*, as in the anonymous verse, "With a look she consumes your heart, with a touch she consumes your power, and in the act of love she consumes your every drop of manly strength—woman is a *rākṣasī* in her very person" (*SubhāRaBh* p. 348, no. 9).

[174] Cf. 3.34.20, 52.21–24; cf. 38.6.

ically abducted but also because they were enchanted by Rāvaṇa's charms and now love no one but him (5.7.66). Elsewhere in the same book the king of *rākṣasas* is discovered resting after making love with the women of his harem: he is lounging on a sheepskin-covered couch, strewn with flowers, perfumed with incense, fanned with rare yak-tail fans; he is dark, with flashing earrings, clothed in silvery clothing, anointed with precious sandalwood cream. "He is extraordinarily handsome, he who could take on any form at will" (*surūpaṃ kāmarūpinam*), so much so that Hanumān watching him says to himself, "What beauty, what fortitude, what strength and splendor. . . . Had the mighty lord of *rākṣasas* not been unrighteous, he would instead have justly been made protector [*rakṣitṛ*] of the world of the gods, Śakra included" (5.47.17).

Like Milton's Satan, Rāvaṇa has to be endowed with substantial "merit," since great evil presupposes the perversion of great virtues. But also like the representations of the devil in Western literature, with whom desire is ever present, Rāvaṇa's sexuality and seductiveness are a fundamentally dominant trait.[175] What the *rākṣasas* in general seem largely to signify is the very antithesis of the sexual canons—so strict, and at times so bloodless, with an almost strident insistence on monogamy—of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[176] If this is not already perceptible in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, it becomes transparent later in the epic, especially in Book Five. There we are shown the private life of the *rākṣasas*, a continuous orgy of drink, food, and lovemaking. The poet dwells on the evidence of their luxurious dissipation with the evident satisfaction of a skillful artist manipulating the most illicit fantasies of his audience.[177]

When we ask who, then, the *rākṣasas* are and what they mean in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we are presented with a number of possibilities. Certainly they have a dimension that is more or less universal. Beyond the sheer satanic, they seem to channel fear of the foreign—of what is different though shockingly recognizable—and specifically that "ancient fear that 'they' will take away 'our' women."[178]

[175] On the Western devil and desire, cf. Todorov 1973, pp. 127 and 143.

[176] For further discussion see Pollock 1986, pp. 53–57.

[177] See especially *sargas* 3–9. Friedman also has noted that the sexual license of the Plinian peoples was the primary focus of westerners' abhorrence of them (1981, pp. 203–4).

[178] The *ārya* or member of brahmanical society distinguished himself categorically

Sexual theft of the *rākṣasa* sort could be viewed, thus, as a metaphor for interracial strife (mixed with a deep anxiety about the limits of exogamy, for which a creature like Rāvaṇa represents an extreme). In Indian literary imagination, too, the foreign may easily have been transmuted into the monstrous.[179]

The objects of this transmutation resist localization and chronological fixity. Of any original racial, ethnic, or geographical specificity, none remains in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Their one reality seems to be that of fantasized aliens, who are both feared and desired, threatening mortal danger at the same time that they attract with an extraordinary, unsocializable sexuality, and whose very otherness is the source of both the fascination and the repulsion.

Fascination and repulsion, however, are always responses to categories of our own construction, brought to bear on objects of our own construction. If the fantastic in literature concerns the relation of man with his desire, these remain historical men and women, with, so to speak, historical desires.[180] And it is herein that we encounter the cultural specificity and, in a general sense, historicality of the *rākṣasas*. They are the imaginative product of the confrontation of traditional Indians with their particular forms of desire—in its two primary forms, libidinal and aggresssive—representing all that traditional Indians most desired and most feared. *Rākṣasas* are creatures polluted by violence, blood, and carnivorous filth, who kill and eat those they kill and, what is maybe worse, threaten the very foundation of human life, the brahmans who maintain the cosmologically essential sacrifice (and perhaps by reason of their very privilege and power provide a focal point for aggression). At the same time, in their libidinized forms, they enact

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from the outsider, the *anārya* (a word applied to Śūrpaṇakhā in 17.19), with whom he could in no way see himself as equal (cf. *ManuSm* 10.73).

[179] Here I am adopting ideas from a recent analysis of Dracula, with whom obviously Rāvaṇa has much in common (Protean mutability, for example, or the identity of food and sexual object; see Stevenson 1988 and p. 145 for the quote). But Dracula's social and political world is very different from that of the Englishmen, and to that degree the threat he poses seems far more distant than Rāvaṇa's. For a superb review of a specific historical instance of the sexual focus of interracial conflict, which provides striking parallels to the literary instance of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, see Jordan 1968, especially pp. 136ff.

[180] See Todorov 1973, pp. 124ff., particularly p. 139, who, however, ignores the historicality of the fantastic. For Stevenson, by contrast, the vampire, "a reflection—however uneasy and strange—of ourselves," is much more securely situated in time.

the deepest sexual urges—total abandonment to pleasure, as well as absolute autonomy and power in gratifying lust. Since they are broadly humanized in so many features, their deviance in others becomes not only a scandal but also a risk: Enacting the repressed desire, and perhaps rage, of the traditional Indian, they are what he might become were the barrier of conscience—or that of fear inspired by the dark shadow of royal punishment—eliminated.[181] From this perspective, we may see the *rākṣasa* as an index of traditional Indian primal terror and desire, objectified together in a single symbolic form.

[181] As Derrett points out, theft and adultery were viewed as the two most reprehensible crimes in traditional India, and it was felt that only the presence of political authority keeps all men from becoming thieves and fornicators (Derrett 1975, pp. 127, 139).