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RĀMA'S MADNESS

By Sheldon Pollock, Iowa City

From a dramatic point of view perhaps the most powerful scene of the Aranyakāṇḍa – next to that containing Rāvāṇa's abduction of Sitā, Chapters 44–47 – and no doubt one of the most effective, memorable, and problematic in the entire Rāmāyaṇa is the extended representation of Rāma's madness over the loss of his wife (Chapters 58–62, though the premonition of loss, 50–57, is an essential prelude). What makes this episode so troubling, and fascinating, is that the image of the hero we are here shown is altogether at odds with everything the poet has so far encouraged us to believe about him.

The formulaic encomia of the earlier books as well as the dramatic action itself reveal to us a man inhabiting an emotional and ethical realm far removed from that of normal mortals. If there is any single virtue to which one could point as essentially characterizing the hero's conduct through the first two and a half books of the poem, it would have to be his equanimity, a trait deriving principally and expressly from his ability to eliminate all personal concerns from every social or ethical calculation. In the Ayodhyākāṇḍa Rāma is described as one who "never grows angry, whatever the insult" (II.36.3); he would "ignore hundreds of injuries, so great was his self-control" (1.16); it is said that "Benevolence, compassion, learning, good character, restraint, and equanimity – these are the six virtues that adorn Rāma" (30.12)¹. Yet what we are presented with in this deeply moving passage of the third book is virtually the denial of this hitherto consistently drawn portrait; not simply the exploration of another side of his character, but an utter reversal.

The Ayodhyākāṇḍa seeks to establish an innovative definition of the *dharma*, the code of conduct, of *kṣatriyas*: Violence as far as possible is to be eschewed in the realm of socio-political action². The Aranyakāṇ-

¹ See further II.1.15, 2.21, *et passim* in that volume. The translations here are my own, as are all the rest in this essay. Abbreviations of Sanskrit texts, and the particular editions used, unless otherwise noted, are those of the Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sanskrit (Poona, 1976ff.).

² See for example II.18.32ff., especially vs. 36; chapter 101, in particular 19ff., and for a full discussion, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (Princeton, 1985).

da 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 [III.8-9]). In this realm, the ideal presented to us is that of a king who is prepared to subordinate every consideration of personal welfare and safety to the duty of protecting the brahmanical order of society. In the present scene, however, both the hero's earlier, clearly articulated convictions, and the singleminded sense of royal duty we witness in the "Forest", are not only displaced but, it would seem, inverted or rejected.

The descent into madness is described slowly and carefully by the poet. Rāma has been drawn away on a distant chase by the *rākṣasa* Mārīca in the form of a bejewelled 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 the princess to go to Rāma's aid, and with the ashram now unprotected Rāvaṇa comes and abducts Sītā. Returning to find the hermitage empty Rāma scours the surrounding forest for his wife, obsessively and 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 Jaṭāyu's fatal struggle against Rāvaṇa (chapter 63), and ascertains conclusively that Sītā has been slain or stolen away. Our growing suspicion of some profound transformation in the hero's character at this point becomes a certainty: Rāma now explicitly renounces the political ethos to which he has hitherto so tenaciously adhered, and implicitly rejects the principal duty incumbent upon him as king, at the same time crying out in maniacal fury and threatening cosmic destruction:

"Who in this mortal world, or what gods dare think it possible to injure me³, that Vaidehī should be devoured or carried off? But then every

³ *ke hi loke 'priyaṃ kartuṃ śaktāḥ saumya mameśvarāḥ*. Rāma is blaming his tragedy on someone's having the temerity to underestimate his power. We must, as I have done, read *'priyaṃ* in *pāda c* (so the commentators Rāmānuja, Govindarāja, Kataka; there would, presumably, be no perceptible difference during an oral delivery). The verse will otherwise make no sense with respect to the argument advanced in vss. 37-39. Moreover, I believe this emendation to be validated by 61.11 below, *nātaṃ te* [sc. *devādayaḥ*] *vipriyaṃ kartuṃ* ("[the gods...] would no more do you an injury..."; cf. also 18.4 for a similar sentiment). Maheśvaratīrtha, reading with the critical edition, explains: "No god can do him any 'kindness'; had they been able the gods would have offered protection before Sītā had been abducted, and therefore, obviously, they are incapable". The gods could not be of help, Tilaka notes, because they are

creature, knowing no better, will despise the man who shows compassion, be he never so heroic, Lakṣmaṇa, the very master of the worlds. The thirty gods themselves must surely think me powerless, all because I have been mild, shown compassion and self-restraint, and striven for the welfare of the world. Look how in my case a virtue has turned into a vice, Lakṣmaṇa. 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 other living things. No *yakṣa*, *gandharva* or *piśāca*, no *rākṣasa*, *kimnara* 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 throughout the three worlds. I will bring the host of planets to a standstill, darken the moon that brings the night, paralyse 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, annihilate 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 the devastation caused by my iron shafts, Lakṣmaṇa, 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 the living 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, in my rage I cannot be withstood – let no one doubt it, Lakṣmaṇa. Unless they show me Sītā, the bright-smiling, faultless princess of Mithilā, I will overturn this mountainous world, with all its serpents and men, all its *gandharvas* and gods." (60.36-52)

ineffectual in a matter that cannot be achieved by *dharma* (see the previous verse). One other interpretation, suggested by a Northern version [App. I 15.16-18]: if Sītā is dead, nothing any god might do or give could assuage Rāma's grief and anger – any act of kindness, as VENKATANATHACHARYA notes, would be as useless as watering a tree after cutting it off at the roots (Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa with the Commentary of Kataka [Mysore, 1965], p. 444n.).

The profound sense of injury expressed here is attributed to precisely the ethics that had constituted as it were the hero's emblematic quality in the previous book. Not only does he seek to exact vengeance on the *rākṣasas*, but he is prepared to slay "all other living things" from serpents to gods, including men; indeed, the whole cosmos is to be annihilated. Besides this startling contradiction of Rāma's characteristic (and almost pathologically rigid) self-possession, there is at the same time a terrible and incommensurate violence here – in fact, it would seem, a terrible "unrighteousness" (*adharmā*), in him who is the "champion of righteousness" (*dharmabhṛtām varāḥ*). This unrighteousness is exacerbated by the fact that it is the king's paramount duty to offer protection, an obligation frequently enunciated throughout the poem as a whole and in Book III no less (the king is "guardian of righteousness and glorious refuge of his people" [III.1.17]; "he protects his subjects" [III.1.18], and so on), and one Rāma himself is deeply conscious of:

"I may repeat what you yourself said, my lady: 'Kshatriyas only bear bows lest the cry of the distressed be heard'." (III.9.3)

"I have come as king . . . to take the life of anyone who commits terrible acts of evil and wishes the world ill." (III.28.10).

Lakṣmaṇa, in an interesting reversal of roles (contrast for instance II.18–20)⁴, recognizes, and tries to apprise his brother of, both the deviation in his behavior, and its unrighteousness:

"Anguished and tormented by Sītā's abduction Rāma was prepared to annihilate the worlds, like the fire that comes on doomsday. He kept glancing at his taut-strung bow, heaving with sighs incessantly, raging like Rudra himself . . . At the sight of such rage as he had never seen before in Rāma, 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 yield to rage and abandon your true nature. The splendor of the moon, the radiance of the sun, the movement of the wind, the patience of the earth – all this is constant, and so is your incomparable glory . . . You must not destroy the worlds because of one single being. Lords of earth must be gentle and cool-headed, and mete out just punishment.'" (III.61.1–9).

"If in your sorrow you consume the worlds with your might, tiger among men, where are your subjects to find relief from their torment?"

⁴ Rāma begins to recover his characteristic sense of equity by VI.67.37 where, when Lakṣmaṇa wishes to release the "weapon of Brahmā" (*brahmāstra*) 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.

... What good would it do you, bull among men, to cause universal destruction . . .?" (III.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 – so starkly revealed by the passage remains deeply fixed in the contemporary reader's consciousness.

And this would appear to be no less the case with the traditional Indian audience. One index of the power that this scene (in particular Rāma's search for Sītā through the woods of Janasthāna, especially Chapter 58) has exercised in Indian literary culture⁵ is the impact it has had on later Sanskrit literature. As is well known, the greatest poet of classical India, Kālidāsa, adapted it for his Vikramorvaśīya, where in Act IV the mad King Purūravas searches frantically through Kumāra-vana for his beloved, the *apsaras* Urvaśī⁶. Yet another extended treatment is found in Bhavabhūti, Mālatīmādhava Act IX, although by this time the effectiveness of the theme in *belles lettres* has been virtually exhausted⁷. Perhaps the most impressive of the popular adaptations occurs in the cycle of Krishna legends (the *gopīs* in their wild quest for the lover who has abandoned them), the motif being introduced first in the Viṣṇupurāṇa (V.13.25–41)⁸, and then reworked, with brilliant amplification, in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (X.30).

In addition to helping us gauge the dramatic effect of the Aranya-kāṇḍa episode in both literary and popular culture, these later adaptations also suggest an interpretation. For what they all seem rather clearly to emphasize is that irrational behavior as is figured in such scenes is altogether a natural extension of a deeply felt love that has

⁵ Though not always appreciated in the West. For example, it was presumably to this scene that HOPKINS was referring when he spoke of the "childish laments and pious reflections" of Rāma (Cambridge Ancient History Vol. I [Cambridge, 1922], p. 264).

⁶ The scene is narratively a very close adaptation of the Aranyakāṇḍa, but upon re-reading it I find it signally inferior to the epic in one crucial respect: The overwhelming sense of desperation is gone from the hero's 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*.

⁷ One Rāma play of later medieval times to deal centrally with the scene is Bhāskara Bhaṭṭa's Unmattarāghava (Bombay, 1889). But by a rather curious (if minor) irony of literary history Bhāskara based his play, not on the Rāmāyaṇa passage itself, but on Kālidāsa's adaptation of it. Rājasekhara's Bālarāmāyaṇa (Act V), and Jayadeva's Prasannarāghava (VI) appear to look to both predecessors.

⁸ It is noteworthy that the theme is absent in the Harivaṃśa, and scarcely represented in the Brahma-purāṇa (Chapter 189).