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Introduction

What Is the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa?

When contemplating a reading of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, it might well occur to a reader unfamiliar with the work to ask, “What is a *Rāmāyaṇa*, and who or what is Vālmiki?” If one were to be told that *Rāmāyaṇa* is the title of a famous and influential Sanskrit epic poem of ancient India, that Vālmiki is the name of its author, and that the work is in many ways similar to epic poems like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, one might then ask, “Why don’t we refer to these latter works as ‘The Homer *Iliad*,’ ‘The Homer *Odyssey*,’ and ‘The Virgil *Aeneid*?’” And thereby hangs a tale—or rather, many, many versions of the same tale.

The name *Rāmāyaṇa*, “Rāma’s Journey,” is actually a generic term that, over the last two and a half millennia, came to be applied, either specifically or generically, to the innumerable versions of the epic’s central story that proliferated across the vast geographical, linguistic, cultural, and religious range of southern Asia from antiquity to the present day. The collectivity of these versions in poetry, prose, song, drama, cinema, and the visual arts is sometimes referred to as the *Rāmakathā*, “The Tale of Rāma.” Thus, although specific versions of the tale, such as those found in Sanskrit and many other languages, may use the term *Rāmāyaṇa* in their titles, many others do not. Indeed, the massive diffusion of texts, art, and performance based on the Rāma story found throughout the nations of southern Asia makes the *Rāmāyaṇa*, writ large, arguably one of the world’s most popular, influential, and widely circulated tales ever told. In this it can only be compared with two works that have been equally pervasive and influential, but far less variable and religiously adaptable—the Bible and the Qur’an.

The oldest surviving version of the great tale of Rāma, and the one that is doubtless the direct or indirect source of all of the hundreds and perhaps thousands of other versions of the story, is the monumental, mid-first millennium BCE epic poem in some twenty-five thousand Sanskrit couplets attributed to Vālmiki. In several respects this poem is also, as we shall see, unique among all versions of the tale.

In its own preface the text calls itself by three titles: *Rāma’s Journey* (*rāmāyaṇam*), *The Great Tale of Sītā* (*sītāyāś caritaṃ mahat*), and *The Slaying of Paulastya* (i.e., *Rāvaṇa*) (*paulastyavadhaḥ*). The first title reflects the salience in the story of its hero, while the second features its heroine and the third its villain. In modernity, in order to distinguish this work from its legion of later versions, many of which are called simply *Rāmāyaṇa*, scholars and others tend to name it for its author. Thus, in keeping with Sanskrit’s predilection for nominal compounds, the poem is often referred to in that language as the *Vālmikirāmāyaṇa*, “Vālmiki’s

Rāmāyaṇa.” In English we tend to separate the two parts of the compound: the name of the author and the name of his work.

Like other *Rāmāyaṇas*, Vālmiki’s work purports to be a poetic history of events that took place on the Indian subcontinent and on the adjacent island of Laṅkā (popularly believed to be the modern nation of Sri Lanka). Indeed, along with its reputation as a great literary composition, and like its sister epic, the *Mahābhārata*, it is regarded by numerous Indian commentators, as well as by the Indian literary critical tradition and many pious Hindus today, as belonging to the genre of *itihāsa*, “historical narrative.” Also like the *Mahābhārata*, but unlike most other versions of the Rāma story, Vālmiki’s epic is believed to be the work of a divinely gifted *ṛṣi*, “seer,” who was endowed with an infallible and omniscient vision enabling him to witness directly all the events recounted in his poem. Thus, his version of the tale is widely regarded as the first and most authentic and unfalsifiable historical account of the life of its hero, Rāma, and all the other characters—human, simian, avian, divine, and demonic—with whom his career intersects.

A unique characteristic of Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* is that it is almost universally revered in the Indian literary tradition as the veritable *fons et origo* of the entire genre of *kāvya*, “poetry,” or what we would call *belles lettres*: texts whose purpose, among others, is to stimulate our aesthetic sensibilities. Thus, the work is widely revered as the *Ādikāvya*, “The First Poem,” from which all later poetry derives, while its author is venerated as the *Ādikavi*, “The First Poet.” Indeed, the poem’s tale of the life of its hero, Rāma, has come down to us with a prologue in the form of a meta-narrative about exactly how Vālmiki came to learn the story of Rāma and how he was inspired to craft it into a massive musical and poetic history. In that prologue, we read that Lord Brahmā, the creator divinity himself, inspired the sage to compose the tale of Rāma in metrical verse, “to delight the heart.” In other words, in addition to its other merits, Vālmiki’s magnum opus is a grand entertainment filled with emotional scenes, romantic idylls, heroic warriors, beautiful princesses, monstrous villains, comical monkeys, and cataclysmic battles. And so, along with the innumerable subsequent retellings it has inspired throughout the countries and cultures of southern Asia, the work has both delighted and edified its audiences for millennia.

But the work is not merely a literary account of a legendary hero’s life and struggles. It also functions on two other critical levels, the devotional and the ethical. We learn at the very outset of the poem that, despite appearances, its protagonist is no ordinary human. Together with his three brothers, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, and Śatrughna, he is, in fact, an incarnation of one of the supreme divinities of Hinduism, Lord Viṣṇu, who takes on various earthly forms over the long, recurring cycles of cosmic time when the righteous and righteousness (*dharma*) itself are imperiled at the hands of some mighty, demonic being or beings who are too powerful for even the lesser gods to resist. Thus, the warrior prince and righteous monarch Rāma is regarded as one of the principal *avatāras*, “incarnations,” of the Supreme Being and therefore an object of veneration, worship, and devotion for hundreds of millions of Hindus worldwide from deep antiquity to the present day. In this way, Vālmiki’s epic poem is one of the earliest sacred texts of the Vaiṣṇava tradition of Hinduism and stands at the head of

all the many Hindu versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹ Although it has sometimes been superseded in the affection of many of Rāma's *bhaktas*, "devotees," by later, regional versions of the epic, Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* remains a central scripture for some schools of Vaiṣṇavism to this day, and most Hindus revere both the poem and the poet. Indeed, the day traditionally regarded as Vālmiki's birthday is a "restricted," or optional, holiday on the Hindu calendar.

The epic narrative is constructed as a kind of morality play, an illustrative guide to righteous behavior, in the face of the most dire challenges and ethical dilemmas. At the same time, it is a grand cautionary tale of the downfall of the unrighteous, no matter how mighty they may be. Thus, the work, along with its role as a historical and literary text, functions as both a guide to moral and religious conduct (*dharmaśāstra*) and a political treatise on the proper exercise of kingship and governance (*nītiśāstra*). It fulfills these roles through the creation of (in some cases literally) towering figures whose characters and actions represent positive and negative exemplars for its audiences to emulate or to shun. In this way, the epic hero Rāma serves as the model for the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal warrior, and the ideal king. Thus, not only is he a god come to earth, but he is the ideal man. Other central figures serve similarly in their specific roles. The heroine, Sītā, is the ideal wife, a *pativrata*, a woman perfectly devoted to her husband for better or for worse. Lakṣmaṇa is the ideal younger brother, utterly faithful to his elder, Rāma. The monkey-hero Hanumān emerges as the very paragon of selfless devotion to one's lord. Then there is the anomalous figure of Vibhiṣaṇa, the virtuous *rākṣasa* brother of the epic's villain, who abandons his family and his people to take refuge and ally himself with Rāma.

On the "dark side," as it were, there is the monstrous, ten-headed *rākṣasa* king, Rāvaṇa, a ruthless conquistador who terrorizes all creatures, even the gods themselves. Rāvaṇa is a defiler of all sacred rites and a prolific sexual predator who rapes and abducts women throughout the three worlds until he meets his downfall at Rāma's hands. There is also Rāvaṇa's sinister and terrifying son, the sorcerer-warrior Rāvaṇi Indrajit, who, through his powers of illusion and magical rites, can make himself both invisible and invincible. Rāvaṇa's colossal younger brother is the horrifying, if almost comically grotesque, Kumbhakarna, who must be aroused from his perpetual sleep to wreak havoc on Rāma's army of semidivine monkeys (*vānaras*).

In opposing these sets of figures, the righteous and the unrighteous, the epic narrative establishes itself as a major episode in the grand and never-ending struggle between the forces of *dharma*, "good or righteousness," and the forces of *adharma*, "evil or unrighteousness," for control of the universe—a struggle that, as noted earlier, occasionally necessitates the divine intervention of the Supreme Being to resolve it in favor of *dharma*. In the end, once Rāma has been victorious in his battle with Rāvaṇa and his evil minions, recovered his abducted wife, and established himself on his ancestral throne, he inaugurates a millennia-long

¹ It should be noted that the immense popularity and influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has extended to virtually all the religious cultures of Asia, many of which do not subscribe to the *avatāra* theory of the Vaiṣṇava Hindus. So, in the many Jain versions of the tale, Rāma is regarded as a virtuous Jain layman; for the Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia, he is a *bodhisattva*, a future Buddha; and for the peoples of the Malay-Indonesian world, he is portrayed as an ideal Islamic prince.

utopian kingdom, the so-called *Rāmarājya*, “Kingdom of Rāma,” which lives on in the political imagination of India to this day. This morality play, reenacted annually across much of India in the *Rāmīlā*, “The Play of Rāma,” a rather more cheerful popular celebration than the European Passion Play it parallels, continues to entertain and edify hundreds of millions who worship Rāma and Sītā (*Sītārām*). At the drama’s conclusion, vast crowds of devotees and onlookers celebrate as a giant effigy of the demonic Rāvaṇa, packed with fireworks, is set ablaze for a glorious celebration of the triumph of good over evil.

Vālmiki’s Epic: The Text

The original Princeton University Press translation of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* (PVR), which forms the basis of the present volume, is based, with a number of revisions and emendations, on the seven-volume critical edition of the poem produced by the scholars of the Rāmāyaṇa Department of the Oriental Institute of Baroda, India, between 1960 and 1975 under the general editorship of a series of distinguished experts in the field of Sanskrit epic studies.² But before we delve into the translation, it will perhaps be helpful for the reader to understand exactly what the critical edition is, how it relates to the many other published editions (and their corresponding translations) of the poem, and something of the textual history of this remarkable work.

The poem’s *upodghāta*, “prologue,” which presents an account of its creation and early performance, describes it as having been composed by the sage Vālmiki, who subsequently taught it to two of his disciples, the twin bards Lava and Kuśa, who turn out actually to be Rāma’s long-lost children. They have been living, unbeknownst to their father, in exile with their banished mother, Sītā, in the sage’s ashram. The brothers literally take their show on the road and sing the poem, with musical accompaniment, on the highways and byways of India until, as the tale goes, they present it as a command performance at their father’s court, where they are recognized as his long-lost sons.

Such is the legend. But it is not implausible that, at least in its earliest stages, the work was orally composed as a sort of bardic lay, transmitted aurally from master to disciple and performed aloud to popular audiences, the vast majority of whom would almost certainly have been illiterate and thus unable to imbibe the work in any other way even had it been available in written form. Nonetheless, as the celebrity of the poem spread in antiquity, it would surely at an early date have entered into the rich and emerging manuscript culture of the Indian subcontinent. And it is here that problems arise with regard to our efforts to

² Throughout the translation, despite our admiration for and gratitude to the editors and scholars who produced the Baroda critical edition for their monumental achievement, we, as translators, have occasionally found ourselves in disagreement with some of their specific choices. In these cases, we have emended the critical text in accordance with our own readings of the manuscript evidence. These emendations are particularly noticeable in the seventh book of the epic, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. There, in keeping with our reading of what we believe to be compelling manuscript evidence, we have inserted two relatively lengthy passages that were relegated to the appendices of the volume by the editor of this volume. These passages are to be found at PVR 7: 348–359 and 421–424. All these emendations are marked as such in the present edition. Readers interested in our rationale for these emendations can consult the introductions and notes to the relevant passages in the various volumes of the PVR.

understand what the text of the poem was like in its earliest form or forms. For one thing, orally composed and performed tales, as we know from much more recent examples, may change to greater or lesser extents in different performances by the same bard and in performances by different singers, either through failures of memory or as a result of improvisation in response to different times, places, occasions, and audience reactions.³

Then, too, there are similar problems with manuscripts depending on the diligence and competence of the copyists. Such issues are particularly weighty in the case of the scribal transmission of Sanskrit texts in India because Sanskrit, although a highly conservative and grammatically regulated language for the most part, has never had a single principal script in which it was written, unlike, say, Greek or Latin. Thus, as the manuscript tradition of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* developed over time, the work came to be copied in a wide variety of regional scripts from all parts of India, from the Śāradā script of Kashmir to the Grantha and Malayalam scripts of the deep south and the scripts of many others in between. These various regional scripts in turn contributed to a sort of graphic game of “telephone” in which scribes copying a manuscript from one script into another for their local audiences might well make significant errors or alterations.

As a result of these factors and the very popularity of the work itself, the poem has undergone numerous and complex textual changes that have resulted in the formation of a number of primary and secondary recensions, or textual variants. Basically, there are two large recensional versions—manuscripts from northern India in northern scripts and manuscripts from southern India in southern scripts—along with many manuscripts in the widely written and printed Devanāgarī script. The textual differences between these two large recensions are significant: in a word-for-word, verse-for-verse, passage-for-passage comparison between the northern and southern versions, only about one-third of the text is textually identical in the two versions.

Even this north-south division does not fully reflect the textual variation of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. Within each major recension, there are further regional sub-recensions. Modern printed editions of the poem represent one or another of the recensions or sub-recensions. Thus, there is Gaspare Gorresio's edition of the Gauḍīya (Bengal) recension, Vishva Bandhu's “Lahore” edition of the north-western recension, and the numerous editions of the southern recensions such as the “Kumbakonam” edition and those of the Gujarati Printing Press, the Nirnaya Sagara Press, the Gita Press, and the Venkateshwara Steam Press. All existing translations of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, with the exception of ours and the subsequent one of Bibek Debroy, are based on one or another of the existing published editions.⁴ For this reason, readers familiar with other published editions or translations based on them will note that, in many places, ours is different from those they may have read and been led to believe are the “authentic” text of the epic.

Yet another factor here is the question of time and the perishability of manuscript media in South and Southeast Asia. Sanskrit manuscripts, depending on

³ For the classic study of oral epic composition and transmission, see Lord 2000.

⁴ Debroy 2017.

period and region, have been written on a variety of media, including prepared palm leaves, birch bark, and various forms of paper. These materials have generally had relatively short life spans in the hot and humid environment of monsoon Asia. Manuscripts succumb to mold, insects, general neglect, and even, in some cases, a form of pious destruction: religious texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* have sometimes been consigned to bodies of water in the practice of *visarjana*, “release,” of sacred images, icons, or texts.

The plethora of recensional variants and the loss of perishable manuscripts over time thus presents the scholar of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with a serious problem when it comes to understanding what the poem may have been like in its early stages. The core of the work appears to have been originally a product of the middle of the first millennium BCE, but because of the factors just mentioned, its oldest known manuscripts are dated no earlier than the twelfth or thirteenth centuries CE, leaving a period of some seventeen centuries from which we can recover virtually no written record of the poem.

This is where the critical edition of the poem comes in. Basically, what the scholars at the Oriental Institute of Baroda did was to select exemplars from the various recensions and sub-recensions and compare them in an attempt to determine what might be the oldest recoverable readings. Using established, scientific philological principles—such as privileging text that is common to both the north and south; giving preference to the south, which gives evidence of being the older of the two recensions; and, when there is disagreement between the two recensions, rejecting passages that appear in only one recension—the Baroda scholars reconstructed an archetype of the existing manuscripts of Vālmiki’s epic.⁵ The final product of such a process is, of course, a text found nowhere else, but one that is nevertheless a scientific attempt to approximate, we must stress, not the original *Rāmāyaṇa*—a goal that is beyond the power of scholarship—but the archetype of the existing manuscripts, taking us perhaps to a reconstructed stage in the text’s history somewhere in the medieval period. We should note that, because of the excision of verses and passages that did not meet the editorial criteria of the creators of the critical edition, this text is somewhat shorter than the other printed editions.

The Epic: Its Structure and Its Narrative

As the poem has come down to us in all of its recensions and variants, it is a very lengthy narrative account of the life of its hero, Rāma, and of those with whom he interacted during his long and often challenging career. This narrative is presented throughout in metrical Sanskrit couplets. These are overwhelmingly of the type known as *śloka* or *anuṣṭubh*, verses of thirty-two syllables divided up into four equal *pādas*, “metrical quarters,” consisting of eight syllables each. This is an enormously popular meter in many genres of Sanskrit text—poetic, scientific, didactic, religious, and so on. As in the other great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, these verses are sometimes varied with an assortment of

⁵ For those who may be interested in the principles adopted by the editors of the critical edition, see the first volume of Bhatt 1960: xxxiv. Further information can be found in the introductions to each volume of the series.

one or more longer poetic meters, often to mark more richly figurative passages or, as in many later poetic narratives, to mark the closure of a *sarga*, “chapter.”⁶

The poem is divided into seven discrete *kāṇḍas*, “books,” of varying length, which in turn are divided into a varying number of *sargas*. The chapters are numbered sequentially in each book starting from one, while each of the books has its own title, which sometimes differs in various recensions. The books are generally named for stages in the life of the epic hero, for the locales in which the principal actions are set, or for those actions themselves. The books are:

- The *Bālakāṇḍa*, “The Book of the Child”
- The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, “The Book of Ayodhyā”
- The *Aranyakāṇḍa*, “The Book of the Forest”
- The *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, “The Book of Kiṣkindhā”
- The *Sundarakāṇḍa*, “The Beautiful Book”
- The *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, “The Book of the War”⁷
- The *Uttarakāṇḍa*, “The Last Book”

The Bālakāṇḍa

The epic’s first book begins with an *upodghāta*, “prologue,” which provides a highly compressed account of the epic narrative and tells how its author came to compose the poem and, in the process, create the very genre of poetry. It also describes how the work was first transmitted and performed and provides a brief table of its contents. According to this framing narrative, the sage Vālmiki, while hosting a visit from the celebrated divine seer Nārada, asks his guest if there is any truly great, heroic, and righteous man living in their world. After a moment’s thought, the seer responds with a brief, seventy-two-verse laudatory description of Rāma, including the major events of his career and the utopian conditions that prevailed during his idyllic eleven-thousand-year reign. Although this concise and decidedly prosaic narrative makes no explicit reference to Rāma’s status as an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, it does conclude with a brief statement of the worldly, spiritual, and heavenly rewards that accrue to anyone who reads, recites, or hears the tale of the hero, an example of what is known in Sanskrit as a *phalaśruti*, “fruitful hearing,” that is regularly found at the end of Hindu religious texts.

Following Nārada’s departure, Vālmiki wanders into the woodlands to take his ritual bath. There, as he raptly watches a pair of mating *sārasa* cranes, a tribal hunter emerges from the forest and kills the male bird. In an access of compassion for the grieving female, the sage curses the hunter, the words pouring from his mouth in metrical form suitable for musical rendition and accompaniment. Upon his return to his ashram, he is visited by the creator god, Lord Brahmā, who tells him that he had granted the sage the gifts of poetic inspiration and clairvoyance and commissions him to compose a great and moving poem about the life of Rāma, greatly expanding upon the concise version of it he had heard

⁶ In the *Mahābhārata*, these sections are called *adhyaṃyas*.

⁷ Manuscripts of the northern recension generally entitle the sixth book the *Laṅkākāṇḍa*, “The Book of Laṅkā.”

from Nārada. Vālmiki teaches the poem to his disciples, the twin sons of Rāma and Sitā, and the boys, acting as bards, sing it on the highways and byways of the region until, at last, they perform it before their father, King Rāma, who recognizes them as his long-lost sons and heirs.

The epic story proper begins in the fifth *sarga* of the *kāṇḍa*. It tells us of the mighty and prosperous kingdom of Kosala, whose king, the wise and powerful Daśaratha, rules from the beautiful and impregnable city of Ayodhyā. The king possesses all that a man could desire except a son and heir. On the advice of his ministers, and with the somewhat obscure intervention of the legendary sage R̥ṣyaśṛṅga, the king performs a pair of sacrifices, as a consequence of which four splendid sons are born to him by his three principal wives. These sons, Rāma, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, and Śatrughna, we are given to understand, are infused with varying portions of the essence of the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu, who, in response to a plea from the gods, has agreed to be born as a man in order to destroy a violent and otherwise invincible demon, the powerful king of the *rākṣasas*, Rāvaṇa. To assist him in this vital mission, the vedic gods also incarnate themselves in the form of immensely powerful monkeys, gifted with human speech and able to take on any form at will. The mighty ten-headed *rākṣasa* has long been oppressing and assaulting the gods and holy sages with impunity, for, by virtue of a boon that he has received through his austerities from Lord Brahmā, he is invulnerable to all supernatural beings. This last point is critical to our understanding of Vālmiki's version of the Rāma story and it is why, unlike in many later, more floridly devotional versions of the tale, Viṣṇu must not only take on the appearance of a man to accomplish his mission but also remain essentially ignorant of his own true, divine nature, so as not to violate Brahmā's boon.

Daśaratha's sons pass a pleasant and uneventful childhood, which the poet glosses over in a few brief couplets. There we learn that the four brothers basically divide themselves into two pairs, the foremost being Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, with Bharata and Śatrughna forming a somewhat secondary pair. In each pair, the older brother is dominant while the younger functions largely as a sort of esquire, as it were, to his elder.

One day, however, when the princes are still mere adolescents, the powerful and irascible sage Viśvāmitra arrives at court and asks the king to lend him his eldest and favorite son, Rāma, for the task of destroying a pair of demons, the *rākṣasas* Mārīca and Subāhu, who have been harassing his ashram and disrupting his vedic sacrifices. With great reluctance, and only out of fear of the sage's curse, the doting king permits Rāma to go. Then, accompanied by the sage and his inseparable companion, his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa, the prince sets out for the sage's ashram. On their journey, Rāma is told—in response to his questions—a number of stories from Indian mythology that are associated with the sites through which the party passes. At one point, on the orders of the sage, Rāma somewhat hesitantly kills a terrifying *rākṣasa* woman (*rākṣasi*) named Tāṭakā and, as a reward for his valor, receives from the sage a set of supernatural weapon-spells. At last the princes reach the hermitage of Viśvāmitra, where, with his newly acquired weapons, Rāma puts an end to the sages' harassment by the *rākṣasas*, killing one and hurling the other, stunned, to a great distance.

But it turns out that Viśvāmitra has another plan in mind for his protégé. Rather than returning directly to Ayodhyā, he takes the brothers along with him

to the city of Mithilā, where Janaka, the king of the country of Videha, is said to be in possession of a massive and mighty bow that had once belonged to the great god Lord Śiva. No earthly prince has ever been able to wield or even lift this divine weapon, and the king has set this feat as the bride-price for the hand of his beautiful foster daughter, Sitā, the daughter of the earth goddess. After arriving at Mithilā, Rāma easily lifts the bow and breaks it with a thunderous crash. Marriages are then arranged between the sons of Daśaratha and the daughters and nieces of Janaka. Prior to the ceremonies, the text provides a fifteen-chapter, well-known mini-saga of the early career of Viśvāmitra, his rivalry with the sage Vasiṣṭha, and his accomplishment, through long and fierce austerities, of the all-but-impossible feat of transforming himself from a kshatriya king into a brahman-seer.

The weddings are celebrated at Mithilā with great festivity, and the wedding party returns to Ayodhyā. On the way, Rāma meets and faces down the fierce warrior-brahman, Rāma Jāmadagnya (Paraśurāma), the legendary nemesis of the warrior class who, like Rāma himself, is regarded as an *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu. At last the brothers and their brides settle in Ayodhyā, where they live in peace and contentment. The *kāṇḍa* thus serves as a sort of bildungsroman of the epic hero, outlining his education into traditional lore, his initiation into the secrets of supernatural weaponry, his boyhood feats, and his marriage.

The Ayodhyākāṇḍa

The second book of the epic is set, as the name suggests, mostly in the city of Ayodhyā. Here we find that, in the absence of Prince Bharata, who is away on a visit to his maternal family, Daśaratha has decided to retire from the kingship and consecrate Rāma as prince regent in his stead. The announcement of Rāma's impending consecration is greeted with general rejoicing, and elaborate preparations for the ceremony are begun. On the eve of the auspicious event, however, Kaikeyī, the middlemost of the king's three wives and his favorite, is roused to a fit of jealousy and resentment by her maidservant, Mantharā, under whose guidance she claims two boons that the king had once granted her long ago but never fulfilled. In his infatuation for the beautiful Kaikeyī, and constrained by his rigid devotion to his given word, the king, although heartbroken, accedes to her demands and orders Rāma exiled to the wilderness for fourteen years while allowing the succession to pass from him to Kaikeyī's son, Bharata.

Despite the rebellious rage of his loyal brother Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma, exhibiting the stoicism, adherence to righteousness, and filial devotion for which he is widely revered, expresses no distress upon hearing of this stroke of malign fate and prepares immediately to carry out his father's orders. Sitā resists Rāma's initial instructions to remain behind in the capital and vows to follow him into hardship and exile. Rāma gives away all of his personal wealth and, donning the garb of a forest ascetic, departs for the wilderness, accompanied only by his faithful wife, Sitā, and his devoted brother, Lakṣmaṇa. The entire population of the city is consumed with grief for the exiled prince, and the king, his cherished hopes for Rāma's consecration shattered and his beloved son banished by his own hand, dies of a broken heart.

Messengers are dispatched to summon Bharata back from his lengthy stay at the court of his uncle in Rājagṛha. But the prince indignantly refuses to profit by the scheming of Mantharā and his mother. He rejects the throne and instead proceeds with a grand entourage to the forest in an effort to persuade Rāma to return and rule. But Rāma, determined to carry out the order of his father to the letter, refuses to return before the end of the fourteen-year period set for his exile. The brothers reach an impasse that is resolved only when Bharata agrees to govern as regent in Rāma's name. In token of Rāma's sovereignty, Bharata takes his brother's sandals to set on the throne in his stead. He vows to remain outside the capital until Rāma's return and to serve as regent from a village near the capital. Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa then abandon their pleasant mountain-top dwelling as being too close to the city and move south into the wild and *rākṣasa*-infested Daṇḍaka forest.

The *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* is noteworthy in a number of respects. For one thing, it raises ethical questions about the actions of the old king Daśaratha. For, although he is portrayed as the model of a righteous king, it appears that, as hinted at in the opening of the book and, in fact, confirmed near its end by Rāma himself, the king had once promised the royal succession to Kaikeyī's son as a prenuptial agreement. Moreover, it shows the king as subordinating his royal duty to his infatuation for the beautiful junior queen in his efforts to placate her even before she mentions the matter of his two unfulfilled boons. In this way, it constructs the old king as a kind of foil for Rāma and helps us understand the hard choices the latter will later make in service of his ideal of righteous kingship. In addition, the book gives us a certain insight into how the author understood the gendered politics of the royal women's quarters as Mantharā explains to the naive and malleable Kaikeyī how her status as the king's favorite will come to haunt her should her rival Kausalyā become queen mother upon the consecration of Rāma.

The Aranyakāṇḍa

The epic's third book recounts the dramatic events that occur during the long years of Rāma's exile in the forest (*araṇya*). The prince and his two companions have now pushed on into the Daṇḍaka forest, a wilderness peopled only by pious ascetics and fierce *rākṣasas*. The former appeal to Rāma to protect them from the depredations of the latter, and he promises to do so. Near the beginning of the book, Sītā is briefly carried off by a *rākṣasa* called Virādha in an episode that prefigures her later abduction by Rāvaṇa, the central event of the book and the pivotal episode of the epic.

While the three are dwelling peacefully in the lovely woodlands of Pāncavaṭī, they are visited by a *rākṣasa* woman, Śūrpaṇakhā, the sister of the *rākṣasa* lord, Rāvaṇa. She attempts to seduce first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa, but failing in this, she tries to kill Sītā. The *rākṣasa* woman is stopped by Lakṣmaṇa, who, acting on his elder's orders, mutilates her. She runs shrieking to one of her kinsmen, the powerful *rākṣasa* Khara, who sends a small punitive expedition of fourteen fierce *rākṣasas* against the princes. When Rāma annihilates them, Khara himself comes at the head of a large army of fourteen thousand terrible *rākṣasas*, but the hero once more exterminates his attackers. When these tidings come

to the ears of Rāvaṇa, he resolves to destroy Rāma by carrying off Sītā. Enlisting the aid of the *rākṣasa* Mārīca, the *rākṣasa* whom Rāma had stunned during the *Bālakāṇḍa* battle at Viśvāmitra's ashram, the demon king comes to the Pāncavaṭī forest. There Mārīca, using the *rākṣasas*' power of shape-shifting, assumes the form of a beautiful golden deer, in order to captivate Sītā's fancy and lure Rāma far off into the woods in an effort to catch it for her. Finally, struck by Rāma's arrow, the dying *rākṣasa* imitates Rāma's voice and cries out as if in peril. At Sītā's panicky urging, Lakṣmaṇa, disobeying Rāma's strict orders to guard her, leaves her alone and follows him into the woods.

In the brothers' absence, Rāvaṇa, assuming the guise of a pious brahman mendicant, approaches Sītā and, after some increasingly inappropriate sexual comments, carries her off by force. Daśaratha's old friend, the vulture Jaṭāyus, attempts to save her, but after a fierce aerial battle, he falls, mortally wounded. Sītā is carried off to Rāvaṇa's island fortress of Laṅkā where she is kept under a heavy guard of fierce and bloodthirsty *rākṣasa* women.

Meanwhile, upon discovering the loss of Sītā, Rāma laments wildly and, maddened by grief, wanders through the forest, vainly searching for her and threatening the plants and animals if they do not return her to him. At length, pacified by Lakṣmaṇa, and, after meeting several beings who have been cursed to become *rākṣasas*, he is directed to the monkey prince Sugrīva at Lake Pampā. This brings the *Aranyakāṇḍa* to a close.

In addition to its narrative centrality, the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, like the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* that follows it, has a number of passages of great poetic beauty in which the seasonal changes in the forest are described. Further, as has been noted by several scholars, it differs sharply from the preceding book in leaving the relatively realistic world of political intrigue in Ayodhyā for an enchanted forest of talking birds, flying monkeys, and fearsome *rākṣasas* with magical powers.

The Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa

The fourth book of the epic is set largely in and around the monkey (*vānara*) citadel of Kiṣkindhā and continues the somewhat fairy-tale-like atmosphere of the preceding book. Searching in the forest for Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa meet the son of the wind god, Hanumān, the greatest of monkey heroes and an adherent of Sugrīva, the banished pretender to the throne of Kiṣkindhā. Upon meeting Rāma, Sugrīva tells him a curious tale of his rivalry and conflict with his elder brother, the monkey king Vālin, and his own banishment by the latter. He and Rāma conclude a pact according to which the latter is to help the former kill the more powerful Vālin and take both his throne and his queen. In return for this, Sugrīva agrees to aid Rāma in his search for the abducted princess.

Accordingly, Rāma shoots Vālin from ambush while the latter is engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Sugrīva. Finally, after much delay, procrastination, and threats from Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva musters his monkey warriors and sends them out in the four directions to scour the earth in search of Sītā. The southern expedition, under the leadership of Vālin's son, Aṅgada, and Hanumān, has several strange adventures, including a sojourn in an enchanted underground realm. Finally, having failed in their quest, the southern party is ashamed

and fearful of returning to Sugrīva empty-handed. They resolve to fast to death but are rescued from this fate by the appearance of the aged vulture Sāmpāti, elder brother of the slain vulture Jaṭāyus, who tells them of Sītā's confinement across the sea in Laṅkā. The monkeys discuss what is to be done, and in the end, Hanumān, the only monkey powerful enough to leap across the ocean, volunteers to do so in search of the princess.

The book has given rise to a continuing controversy within the receptive community of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in that the tradition has expressed ambivalent feelings about the way Rāma killed Vālin from ambush while the monkey was engaged in a hand-to-hand battle with his brother Sugrīva. The issue is first argued out between the hero and the dying monkey in the text itself and continues to this day to be discussed in ephemeral texts on the epic in one or another of its variants and in questions during religious discourses on the story. It also serves to move the ethical and moral register of the narrative from the generally strictly dharmic, or righteous, kingdom of Kosala to the rather more louche world of the monkey kingdom of Kiṣkindhā, with its fratricidal violence and sensual excess.

The Sundarakāṇḍa

The fifth book of the poem is called, for reasons that are not wholly clear, the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, “The Beautiful Book,”⁸ and it is centrally concerned with a detailed, vivid, violent, and often amusing account of Hanumān's adventures in the splendid fortress city of the island Laṅkā.

After a heroic and eventful leap across the ocean, Hanumān arrives on the shores of Laṅkā. There he explores the *rākṣasas'* city and spies on Rāvaṇa. The poet's descriptions of the city and the *rākṣasa* king are colorful and often finely written, as is his description of the forlorn Sītā in captivity. Held captive in a grove of *aśoka* trees, Sītā is alternately cajoled and threatened by Rāvaṇa and the *rākṣasa* women who guard her. When Hanumān at last finds the despondent princess, he comforts her, giving her Rāma's signet ring, which Rāma had bestowed upon him to serve as a token of his bona fides. He offers to carry Sītā back to Rāma, but she refuses, reluctant to allow herself to be willingly touched by a male other than her husband, and argues that Rāma must come himself to avenge the insult of her abduction.

Hanumān then wreaks havoc in Laṅkā, destroying groves and buildings and killing many servants and soldiers of the king. At last, he allows himself to be captured by Indrajit, Rāvaṇa's fearsome son, and is brought before Rāvaṇa. After an interview during which he reviles the king, he is condemned and his tail is set afire. But the monkey escapes his bonds and, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, sets fire to the city with his tail, ensuring that the conflagration spares both him and Sītā. Finally, the mighty monkey leaps back to the mainland and rejoins his companions. Together they make their way back to Kiṣkindhā, drunkenly raiding on the way a grove belonging to Sugrīva. Hanumān reports his adventures and the success of his mission to Rāma and Sugrīva.

⁸ For a discussion of the name of this book, see PVR 5: 75–78.

The *Sundarakāṇḍa* is considered by many to be the *bīja*, “seed”—or, as we might say, the heart—of the epic poem. This is probably because it is in this book that the tragic trajectory of the narrative begins to reverse itself with Hanumān’s discovery of the abducted heroine and her renewed hope of rescue and reunion with her husband. Thus, ritualized formal recitations (*parāyaṇa*) of the complete text of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* are traditionally begun with this book and not the first one, the *Bālakāṇḍa*. In some Hindu communities for which the work is a central scripture, the book is used as a prognosticative text, somewhat in the manner of the *I Ching*, and its recitation is believed to help in the solution of many worldly problems. For this reason, the book is often printed and sold separately from the epic as a whole, like the *Bhagavadgītā* of the *Mahābhārata*.

The Yuddhakāṇḍa

As its name suggests, the sixth book of the poem, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, “The Book of War,” is chiefly concerned with the war that takes place before the walls of Laṅkā between the forces of Rāma, his monkey allies, and a few defector *rākṣasas* on one side, and the *rākṣasa* hordes of Rāvaṇa on the other. The book contains elaborate descriptions of the monkey (*vānara*) forces and many detailed accounts of both single combats and mass melees between the various leading warriors and their troops. As a result, it is the longest of the poem’s seven *kāṇḍas* and nearly twice the size of the next-longest.

Having received Hanumān’s report on Sītā and the military defenses of Laṅkā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa march with their simian allies to the southern coast of India. There they are joined by Rāvaṇa’s renegade brother Vibhīṣaṇa, who, repelled by his brother’s outrageous abduction of Sītā and unable to reason with him, has defected, with a handful of retainers, to the side of his enemies. He is accepted as an ally by Rāma and provides him with vital intelligence and assistance throughout the war.

Under the direction of their engineer Nala, the son of the divine architect, Viśvakarman, the monkeys construct a bridge across the ocean by means of which the princes and their army cross over to Laṅkā and lay siege to the city. A protracted and bloody, though far from realistic, series of battles rage, with the advantage shifting from one side to the other. After an initial encounter with Rāma, Rāvaṇa is humiliatingly dismissed by his foe and withdraws from the battlefield for a time. He then dispatches, one after another, his foremost warriors, each of whom is killed in turn by Rāma or his allies. Noteworthy among these are his gargantuan and narcoleptic brother Kumbhakarna and his terrifying son Rāvaṇi Indrajit, who is both a mighty warrior and a fearsome sorcerer. Finally, all his champions slain, Rāvaṇa rides forth to battle and, after a mighty and prolonged duel, Rāma finally kills him. Rāma then installs Vibhīṣaṇa on the throne of Laṅkā and sends for Sītā. But Rāma initially expresses no joy in recovering her. Instead, he abuses her verbally and refuses to take her back on the grounds that she has lived in the house of another man. Only when the princess is proved innocent of any unfaithfulness by submitting herself to a public ordeal by fire does the prince accept her.

At last, his enemy slain, his wife recovered, and his fourteen years of exile passed, Rāma returns home in Vibhīṣaṇa’s flying palace, the Puṣpaka. Upon his

return to Ayodhyā, Rāma relieves Bharata, who had been administering the kingdom as an ascetic during his absence, and celebrates his long-delayed royal consecration, inaugurating a millennia-long utopian reign, the famous *Rāma-rājya*. In many later influential versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the tale ends here, leaving it with a “happily ever after” ending. But this is far from the case in Vālmiki’s poem.

The Uttarakāṇḍa

The seventh and final book of Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, entitled simply the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, “The Last Book,”⁹ is more heterogeneous in its contents and controversial in its reception than any of the epic’s other six books. Of the nature of an extensive epilogue, it contains three general categories of narrative material. The first category includes legends that provide the background, origins, and early careers of some of the outstanding and endlessly fascinating characters in the epic drama whose antecedents were not fully described in the first six books. Interestingly, nearly the entire first half of the book is devoted to a lengthy account of the history and genealogy of the *rākṣasas* and the early career of Rāvaṇa and, to a much smaller extent, to an account of the childhood deeds of Hanumān. In this section many of the events of the central portion of the epic story are explained as having had their roots in encounters and curses in the distant past during Rāvaṇa’s wild career of rape, conquest, and carnage.

The bulk of this portion of the text concerns Rāvaṇa’s birth and early years and his many campaigns of world conquest, during which he defeats and assaults many kings, gods, sages, and demons and rapes and abducts their womenfolk. Some of the curses he incurs during his wild and violent rampage through the three worlds serve to explain a number of conditions that face him later on, during the lifetime of Rāma. First, he is cursed prenatally by his own father to be an evildoer. Subsequently Vedavati, a brahman woman whom he molests, immolates herself, vowing to be reborn one day (as Sītā) for his destruction. After he rapes a semidivine woman, her lover curses him to die should he ever again take a woman by force. Similarly, he is cursed by the collectivity of the many women he has abducted to meet his death on account of a woman, and he is cursed by a king of the lineage of the Ikṣvākus—whom he kills—to be himself slain by a future prince (Rāma) of that lineage. Even the destruction of Rāvaṇa’s hosts by powerful, semidivine monkeys is explained by a curse on the part of Lord Śiva’s attendant Nandin, who, enraged at Rāvaṇa for mocking him in his simian form, curses him to that effect.

But despite his boon from Brahmā and his long string of conquests, the narrative shows that no one is ultimately invulnerable. The biography of the seemingly invincible *rākṣasa* ends with two accounts of battles in which he emerges as the loser: he is defeated and captured first by the mighty thousand-armed human king Arjuna Kārtavīrya and then also defeated by the powerful monkey king Vālin. These episodes, narrated by the sage Agastya, serve to show that even the mightiest can meet their match and to foreshadow Rāvaṇa’s

⁹ For a discussion of the name of this book, see PVR 7: 88*20 and note (p. 1179).

ultimate defeat at the hands of a “mere man,” Rāma. This is all in keeping with Vālmiki’s adherence to the boon of Brahmā according to which the *rākṣasa* king would be invulnerable to all supernatural beings, but not to humans or animals.

The second category of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*’s narrative material consists of a series of exemplary myths and legends that are only thematically related to the epic story and its characters. This material is largely made up of cautionary tales told to or by Rāma to illustrate the dire consequences that befall monarchs who fail to strictly uphold the duties of kingship. They are placed in the text at the points, as we discuss later, where Rāma has become prey to dejection after feeling obligated by kingly duty to exile his beloved wife, where he is contemplating a sacrifice, and when he visits the ashram of the sage Agastya. These episodes also generally serve to bolster the poem’s reputation as a textbook on *rājadharmā*, “royal duty,”—a kind of mirror for kings that presents its hero as the model of the ideal monarch.

The last, and in several ways the most interesting, category of material in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* directly concerns itself with episodes from the final years of Rāma, his wife, and his brothers. These episodes are interspersed among the largely cautionary tales of the second category mentioned earlier. With struggle, adversity, and sorrow seemingly behind him, Rāma settles down with Sītā to rule in peace, prosperity, and happiness. We see what looks to be the perfect end to a fairy tale or romance as Rāma and his queen begin their long-delayed rule of their utopian kingdom—the legendary, eleven-thousand-year *Rāmarājya*. But as it develops, there is yet trouble in paradise, and the joy of the hero and heroine is to be tragically brief.

After dismissing his allies in the Laṅkan war with due honors and gifts, Rāma, to his delight, learns that his beloved Sītā is pregnant. But now it suddenly comes to his attention that, despite her fire ordeal in Laṅkā, the people of Ayodhyā are grumbling that the king is corrupt in that, in his lust for the beautiful queen, he has taken back into his house a woman who has lived in the household of the lecherous Rāvaṇa. They fear that, since a king sets the moral standard for his kingdom, they too will have to put up with misbehavior on the part of their own wives.

Fearing a scandal, and in strict conformity to what he sees as the stern duty of a sovereign, Rāma, under the pretext of an excursion, banishes the queen despite her pregnancy and though he knows the spreading rumors about her are false. Abandoned in the wilderness by Lakṣmaṇa, the hapless queen is taken in and sheltered in his ashram by none other than the poet-seer Vālmiki. There she gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kuśa, who will become the sage’s disciples and the bards who will perform their master’s poetic creation, the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rāma’s separation from his beloved wife casts him into deep grief and depression, which are alleviated only through the hearing and telling of cautionary tales about the terrible fate of kings who neglect their royal duties.

During Rāma’s otherwise ideal reign, two anomalous but significant events occur. First, in a kind of mini-reprise of the central theme of the epic, Rāma receives a delegation of sages from the region of the Yamunā River, who have come to complain about the depredations of a terrible and monstrous demon called

Lavaṇa. Rāma deposes his youngest brother, Śatrughna, who has heretofore had almost no active role in the epic, to deal with this assault on *dharma*, “righteousness.” Śatrughna sets forth and, on his journey, stays over one night in the ashram of Vālmiki—the very night when Sītā gives birth to Lava and Kuśa. He then proceeds to the Yamunā, where, after a fierce battle, he dispatches the monster and founds the prosperous city of Madhurā (Mathurā) in the region of Saurāṣṭra, where he rules as a virtuous king. After twelve years, longing to see his beloved elder brother, he returns to Ayodhyā with his army, once more staying overnight at Vālmiki’s ashram. During this brief visit, he and his troops hear the *Rāmāyaṇa* beautifully sung by the twin bards. Although Śatrughna is eager to remain at his brother’s side, in keeping with the tenor of the book as a guide for kings, Rāma sternly orders him to return to his kingdom to govern his people righteously.

Shortly after Śatrughna’s departure, there is another troubling incident, this time in the capital city itself. A grieving brahman father arrives at Rāma’s palace holding in his arms the body of his young son. This is particularly troubling as, according to the tradition—stated multiple times in the epic, and continuing to be a fundamental element of the legacy of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—the long period of Rāma’s millennial reign was a true utopia. Thus, all classes of people strictly observed their proper societal duties, wives always obeyed their husbands, and there was no crime, no disease, and no natural disasters. One point that is stressed repeatedly is that in this paradisiac kingdom, no child ever predeceased its parents. In such a world, the fact that an unthinkable thing—the death of the brahman child—has occurred can only mean that some violation of the social and ritual order is taking place and that it is the responsibility of the king to remedy it. Rāma must therefore find and punish the transgressor. In this he is advised by Nārada, the same seer who first told Vālmiki the story of Rāma. Nārada tells the king that somewhere in his realm a *śūdra*—that is, a member of the lowest of the four traditional social classes of brahmanical society—is practicing religious austerities that are exclusively reserved (during that cosmic era, the Tretā Yuga) for the members of the three higher social classes, the so-called “twice-born.”

Rāma summons and mounts the Puṣpaka, the flying palace he had received from Vibhiṣaṇa, and conducts an aerial surveillance of his kingdom. Near the southern border he finds a man hanging from a tree by his feet. Questioned, the man says that he is practicing austerities with the aim of entering heaven in his earthly body. When he identifies himself as Śambūka, a *śūdra*, Rāma summarily beheads him. The moment the *śūdra* dies, the dead brahman child miraculously returns to life in Ayodhyā. The gods praise Rāma and shower him with heavenly blossoms.

Rāma then pays a brief visit to the ashram of the great sage Agastya, who had narrated the history of the *rākṣasas*, Rāvaṇa, and Hanumān earlier in the book. There Rāma hears a series of additional cautionary tales about kings and kingdoms that suffered ghastly punishments for failure to live up to the code of royal conduct. Rāma then returns to Ayodhyā. Having had a golden image of his banished wife created to serve as her surrogate in the performance of the royal sacrifices, Rāma performs a great *aśvamedha*, “horse sacrifice.”

During the rite, two handsome young bards appear and begin to recite the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It turns out that these two, the twins Kuśa and Lava, are in fact the sons of Rāma and Sītā, who have been sheltered for twelve years with their mother in Vālmiki's ashram. Rāma sends for his beloved queen, intending to take her back. But despite Vālmiki's attestation of her absolute fidelity, Rāma demands that Sītā take a solemn public oath before the assembled populace. She complies, but declares that if she has indeed been faithful to her husband in word, thought, and deed, Mādhavī, the earth goddess, her mother, should receive her. As the ground opens, the goddess emerges on a bejeweled throne, places her long-suffering daughter beside her, and vanishes into the earth.

Consumed by an inconsolable grief, Rāma performs sacrifices and rules for many years and sends his brothers out to conquer kingdoms for their sons. At last, urged by a messenger of the gods to resume his true heavenly form as Lord Viṣṇu, he is forced to banish Lakṣmaṇa, who abandons his earthly body in the Sarayū River. Rāma then divides his own kingdom between his sons and, followed by the inhabitants of Ayodhyā and most of his erstwhile allies, enters the waters of the Sarayū and returns to his heavenly abode. These events bring to a close both the book and the epic.

There are some features of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* that set it apart from the other books of the poem. For one thing, much of the narrative focuses on figures other than Rāma and is narrated only indirectly by Vālmiki, being placed in the mouths of other figures such as Agastya. Scholars of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have also noted that much of the text shows linguistic and rhetorical differences from the rest of the poem, especially books 2 through 6, while some have even argued that the entire book is a later addition to the work and that the "original" poem ended with the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and the consecration of Rāma. This is a complex issue, and we will not go into the details of the arguments here.¹⁰

The philological issue aside, there is another reason that the book has been the object of controversy: virtually the only two actions that Rāma is represented as taking in the book have come to be matters of concern and contestation over the long history of the poem among particular segments of its audience, characterized by region, social class, religion, and gender. The first of these is the banishment of Sītā despite her innocence with regard to any infidelity or wrongdoing; Sītā's banishment and her fire ordeal at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* have been sources of discomfort for many later authors writing on the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme, and an object of outrage on the part of modern feminists and women's rights groups. The second issue is Rāma's cold-blooded execution of the *sūdra* ascetic Śambūka, which has drawn veiled critique from poets and playwrights in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and, of course, the anger of modern Dalit rights activists and progressive political groups. These responses are in harmony with social and political pushback against the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole by such regional political movements as the Dravidian movement in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

As a result of all this, many influential regional language versions of the Rāma story simply eliminate the *Uttarakāṇḍa* entirely, while even some modern

¹⁰ Those interested in this issue should consult PVR 7: 54–81.

translators similarly excise the book, either on philological grounds, in light of the textual issues noted here, or, in the case of some Hindu devotees of Rāma, in their discomfort with the two episodes mentioned here and the criticism they have engendered.¹¹

The Major Characters of the Rāmāyaṇa

Unlike the vast *Mahābhārata* with its large cast of ambivalent and intimately related characters, its theme of an ugly intrafamilial civil war, and its complex framing of moral and ethical ambiguities, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a shorter, simpler tale constructed around a sharply defined binary of *dharma*, “good,” and *adharma*, “evil.” Correspondingly, its major characters tend to be drawn as paradigmatic examples of one or the other of this pair of opposites and are often clearly intended to serve as models for behavior that its audiences are urged either to emulate or eschew. Ignoring for the moment issues of social class, which we discuss later, the qualities of ethical and moral behavior and the culture’s prized virtues of familial solidarity, discipline, and control of the senses are broadly shown—with some notable exceptions—as possessed differentially by the three species of figures who collectively make up the bulk of the epic’s dramatis personae. These are the humans, the animals, and the demons. In this way, one might regard the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as something like “A Tale of Three Cities: Ayodhyā, Kiṣkindhā, and Laṅkā.” Let us briefly examine the principal figures belonging to these species—both those who serve as exemplary of their kind and those who go against their supposedly innate natures.

The Humans

Rāma

As the title of the poem suggests, Rāma is unquestionably the central and most compelling of the epic’s characters. With the exception of his early childhood, the narrative closely documents his life from birth to death. He is “on stage,” as it were, playing a significant role in the action of all of the epic’s books, with the exception of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*. But even there, much of the book’s discourse centers on him. The entire work is filled with passages praising his physical, mental, and emotional qualities; his virtually perfect adherence to the norms of filial piety, the warrior code (*kṣatriyadharma*), and the duties of a king (*rājadharma*); and his compassion and deference to brahmins and elders. In short, with the exception of what are regarded in some quarters as a few ethically controversial episodes involving his treatment of his wife, his killing of the monkey king Vālin, and his execution of Śambūka, Rāma is held up as a paragon of virtue, both for Vālmiki and for his audiences down to the present day. He is, of course, one of the principal incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu, the Supreme Being, who in age after age comes to earth to rid the world of some enormous evil. But on the human plane—the one on which we, as fellow humans, are supposed to emulate him—he is chiefly admired for his disciplined act of self-sacrifice in cheer-

¹¹ For a full discussion of these issues, see our extensive introduction to the book at PVR 7: 74–113.

fully abandoning his right to his ancestral throne in order to preserve the truth of his father's word. His forbearance and adherence to the rules of chivalry are also evident in his strict adherence to the rules of combat even in the face of defeat and death, as well as in his willingness to spare even his monstrous arch-enemy, should the latter abandon his evil ways.

Rāma is rather unusual, however, when compared with the other principal incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu, most of whom appear on earth for one brief moment to accomplish a single critical mission, such as the rescue of the gods, the salvation of the earth, or the salvation of the virtuous through the destruction of an evil tyrant. Once they have completed their respective missions, they return to their primordial divine form. Among the well-known standard list of the ten incarnations (*daśāvatara*s), only Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha, and the two Rāmas (Rāma of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Rāma Jāmadagnya, or Paraśurāma) remain for very long periods on earth. Of the two most popular and widely worshiped incarnations, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the latter, having accomplished his two avatāric missions of killing the demonic tyrant Kaṃsa and relieving the earth of its burden of demons and demonic kings—as described in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa*, and many *purāṇas*—returns to his heavenly form only a few decades thereafter.¹² Rāma, on the other hand, having extracted, as it were, the *lokakaṇṭaka*, “the thorn of the world,” Rāvaṇa, then inaugurates and rules a millennia-long kingdom of God on earth.

Sītā

There can be no doubt that Sītā, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is its most poignant and long-suffering figure. As a consequence of her long years of generally uncomplaining hardship, captivity, suffering, and heartbreak, her journey has captivated audiences from the moment of the epic's earliest circulation. Indeed, in terms of her centrality to the narrative, even when she is not the direct focus of the poet's attention, her wrenching reversals of fortune and her great fortitude under terrible duress make her one of the literature's most compelling figures. These are doubtless the reasons, as noted earlier, that the author proposed *The Great Tale of Sītā* (*sītāyāś caritaṃ mahat*) as a possible alternative title of his work.

Rescued from a ploughed furrow (*sītā*) as a foundling by King Janaka of Vi-deha, Sītā grows to be the most beautiful princess in the land, one so extraordinary that only the mightiest and most valorous of princes can win her hand through a test of superhuman strength. Of note is that Sītā's prehistory is mentioned only in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. There we are told that she is the reincarnation of the pious brahman woman Vedavatī, who, in the long ago Kṛta Yuga, was sexually molested by Rāvaṇa and who, to preserve her honor, immolated herself, vowing to be reborn as the daughter of a virtuous man but not from a human

¹² According to the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa abandoned his earthly form just thirty-six years after the end of the Bhārata War, the management of which constituted the second of his major avatāric missions. His incarnation ends immediately after the internecine slaughter of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas in Dvārakā. See the *Mausalaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. The chronology is given in the first *adhyāya* of the *Mausalaparvan* (MBh 16.1.1). Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the *Mahābhārata: Critical Edition* (1933–1970).

womb. Vedavati is ultimately reborn in the Tretā Yuga as Sitā for the destruction of Rāvaṇa, who had violated her.

Vālmiki's Sitā is not quite as passive and submissive as she is often thought to be in the popular imagination. She can be strongly outspoken, as, for example, when she sharply criticizes Rāma, who, upon being banished by his father, tries to persuade her to stay behind in Ayodhyā, and also when she is treated harshly either by him or by Rāvaṇa. Nonetheless, as a result of her long and patient endurance of the many hardships she faces—and especially her widely applauded and rather fierce insistence on accompanying her exiled husband into fourteen years of poverty and harsh conditions in the forest despite Rāma's initial resistance to her doing so—Sitā has come to be regarded as the model of ideal Indian wifely conduct, a *pativrata*, a woman completely devoted to following her husband no matter what fate may allot him.

Lakṣmaṇa

One of the twin sons of King Daśaratha's junior-most wife, Sumitrā, Lakṣmaṇa has long stood as a prime exemplar of a particular type of idealized behavior that is expected of a younger brother with regard to his elder. From childhood onward, he serves as Rāma's inseparable companion. In fact, it appears that his relation to his elder as a kind of esquire is mirrored in the relationship of his much less foregrounded twin, Śatrughna, to the second eldest of the four brothers and co-*avatāras*, Bharata. Vālmiki describes Lakṣmaṇa as "a second life breath" outside Rāma's body and observes that without him by his side Rāma could neither sleep nor eat.¹³

Thus, it is virtually axiomatic that Lakṣmaṇa will accompany and assist Rāma in his long exile and in the hard-fought battles with the *rākṣasas* where he distinguishes himself as a formidable warrior, slaying the most dangerous and fearsome of their demonic foes, Rāvaṇi Indrajit, Rāvaṇa's son. It is particularly noteworthy that his devoted service to Rāma and Sitā is highlighted by the southern textual tradition's emphasis on his dogged refusal to gaze on the body of his sister-in-law, as demonstrated several times by his asseveration that during all their long years of living closely together he has never raised his eyes above Sitā's feet.¹⁴

Rāma's powerful emotional bond with Lakṣmaṇa is made apparent in the epic by the depictions of his extravagant grief when he believes that his brother has been mortally wounded in battle. In the end, Lakṣmaṇa sacrifices his life for the well-being of his beloved brother and the salvation of his family, becoming the only one of Rāma's brothers to precede him in returning to their common divine source, Lord Viṣṇu.

Lakṣmaṇa also serves as a kind of emotional foil for his brother, showing a fiery and rebellious spirit where Rāma is calm and self-controlled, and acting as a calming and encouraging influence on those few occasions when his brother gives way to rage or despair.

¹³ VR 1.17.17.

¹⁴ PVR 4: 213, notes to 4.6.19; R. Goldman 1980: 168; and PVR 7: 885, insert passage following notes to 7.17.14.

Bharata

The son of Daśaratha's favorite, his middle wife, Kaikeyī, Bharata presents another aspect of the idealized younger brother. The natural rival of his brother and the intended beneficiary of the scheme of Kaikeyī and her maid Mantharā to make him prince regent in place of Rāma, Bharata refuses to accept his consecration. Instead, he implores Rāma to return and rule despite the reluctant command of their father. When Rāma denies his request, Bharata vows to serve only as regent in his brother's name. He places Rāma's sandals on the throne as a symbol of his brother's authority and lives an extremely ascetic life outside the capital during the fourteen years of Rāma's exile. In so doing, he serves as a model of both Rāma's self-sacrifice and Lakṣmaṇa's fraternal devotion.

Śatrughna

The youngest of the four sons of Daśaratha who incarnate, to differing degrees, the divine essence of Lord Viṣṇu, Śatrughna has only a relatively minimal role in the epic drama. In his devotion to his older brother Bharata and in the way he serves as that brother's emotional foil, he mirrors the relationship of his twin, Lakṣmaṇa, to Rāma. This is evident when, returning to Ayodhyā with his brother to find his father dead and Rāma exiled as a result of the plot of Mantharā and Kaikeyī, Śatrughna physically assaults the maidservant until Bharata orders him to desist, reminding him of Rāma's disapproval of such conduct. Śatrughna's only significant, independent action in the poem is his slaying of the demon Lavaṇa and the founding of the city of Madhurā, as described in the poem's final book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

Daśaratha

Although Daśaratha is depicted in the opening chapters of the poem as a grand and righteous monarch, in its second book the aged king is shown to have a fatal flaw. There we see that his sexual infatuation for his beautiful junior queen, Kaikeyī, makes him vulnerable to her wiles, so that even before she mentions the famous boons he once gave her, he vows to do anything she wants, no matter how outrageous, in order to pacify her. Later in the same book, we learn from the lips of Rāma himself that the king had actually promised the royal succession to a son of Kaikeyī as part of a prenuptial agreement with her father. This is a promise that he breaks in order to consecrate Rāma while Bharata is away from the capital.

In this way, Daśaratha serves as a foil for his ultra-righteous eldest son Rāma, and the old king's flaws may be seen as explaining the latter's almost obsessive concern with maintaining his reputation for incorruptibility, which leads to his harsh treatment of Sītā in the *Yuddha-* and *Uttarakāṇḍas*.

Kausalyā

Kausalyā, Daśaratha's chief queen and Rāma's mother, is portrayed as an ideal maternal figure: ascetic, pious, and utterly devoted to her son and her husband. But as the narrative makes clear, she no longer excites the king's passion, and so he devotes himself to her younger rival, with catastrophic results. When she

learns of her son's sudden reversal of fortune, she vows, against the cultural norm of the devoted wife (*pativrata*), to follow her beloved son into exile, only abandoning her plan when Rāma reminds her of her wifely duty.

Kaikeyi

The story of Daśaratha's bewitching but ultimately treacherous junior wife serves as one of the traditional Indian patriarchy's cautionary tales about the seductive and corrupting influence of women. Initially portrayed as an innocent and trusting young woman delighted to learn of the impending consecration of her senior wife Kausalyā's son, Kaikeyi is easily persuaded by her cunning maid-servant, Mantharā, of the danger to her and her own son should Rāma be inaugurated as prince regent. She then allows herself to be manipulated into using her feminine wiles, as well as some unfulfilled vows of her husband, to force him to order the banishment of Rāma and the inauguration of Bharata in his stead. Although she appears to be quickly rehabilitated in the epic, she remains in the popular imagination a prime example of the shrewish wife who betrays and ultimately causes the death of her husband.

The Animals

It will be recalled that a particular feature of the Rāma legend is that the story's archvillain, Rāvaṇa, had received a boon of invulnerability from all the various races of supernatural beings. He remained, however, vulnerable to "lower" beings, that is to say, humans and animals. It is for this reason (as well as the curse of Nandin) that, during the course of his campaign against Rāvaṇa, Rāma's principal allies, apart from his brother Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa's renegade brother Vibhiṣaṇa, are a vast horde of semidivine and partially civilized monkeys (*vānaras*).

The sometimes fairy-tale-like tenor of the poem also allows a few birds to enter the plot on specific occasions to assist Rāma. These include the great vulture Jaṭāyus, an old friend and ally of the Kosalan court who, in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, gives his life in a vain attempt to rescue Sītā from the clutches of Rāvaṇa and who gives Rāma some information about the abduction; and Jaṭāyus's older brother, Sampāti, who tells the monkeys' southern search party where Rāvaṇa has taken Sītā. Also, at one point in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, when both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have been rendered *hors de combat* through the power of Indrajit's sinister serpent-weapons, the divine bird Garuḍa makes an appearance as a sort of *avis ex machina* to drive away the snakes, whose nemesis he is.

But aside from the boon of Rāvaṇa and the entertainment value of having the sometimes fearsome and sometimes comical monkeys as Rāma's often erratic sidekicks, there is, it seems, a higher thematic value in the introduction of the alternately valorous and cowardly simians. For the monkey kingdom of Kiṣkindhā represents a contrast to the predominantly righteous world of Ayodhyā, with its supremely deferential and self-disciplined heroes like Rāma, Bharata, and Lakṣmaṇa, who always subordinate their personal interests and desires to their sense of duty, righteousness, and familial harmony. By way of contrast, in the kingdom of the monkeys we encounter the perhaps more realistic themes of sibling rivalry, fraternal violence, and sensual excess that the poet tries to keep

as far away as possible from the scions of the solar dynasty. The monkeys also occasionally exhibit cowardice in battle, fleeing from formidable *rākṣasa* foes.

Sugrīva

Sugrīva is a critical figure in the epic story. Without his assistance Rāma would have been hard-pressed to locate his abducted wife and would have found it virtually impossible to recruit a force capable of confronting the supernaturally powerful and heavily armed forces of Rāvaṇa. Nonetheless, as an epic hero, Sugrīva is portrayed as cruel, impetuous, self-serving, somewhat cowardly, and something of a libertine.

Banished by his elder and more powerful brother, the monkey king Vālin, Sugrīva is forced to cower on a secure hilltop with only a small coterie of loyalists. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, searching for the abducted Sītā, come near, he is terrified and sends his counselor Hanumān in disguise to see who they are and what they want. After hearing Rāma's story, Sugrīva sees an opportunity to dispose of his feared brother and seize his kingdom and his wife, who was stolen from him, he claims, by Vālin. He tells Rāma a self-serving story about how he came to be exiled when, after falsely believing his brother dead, he took over his throne and his harem, only to be roughly handled and expelled when Vālin returned. Sugrīva forges a pact with Rāma to the effect that if the prince will kill his mighty elder brother for him and place him on the throne, he will place the vast hordes of monkeys, whom he will then command, at Rāma's service. He will then order the monkeys to scour the world for the abducted Sītā and to assist in the campaign to defeat her abductor and bring her back. To fulfill his part of the bargain Rāma instructs Sugrīva to challenge his brother to a single combat, during which Rāma will shoot Vālin from ambush. The brothers fight and Sugrīva is beaten, but Rāma, claiming that he could not tell the two apart, refrains from acting. He then equips Sugrīva with a floral garland to distinguish him from his brother. As the brothers fight a second time, Rāma mortally wounds Vālin. He then engages in a debate with the dying monkey in an effort to justify his action.

Because of his troops' inability to move freely during the rainy season, Sugrīva is unable to carry out his part of the agreement until the autumn. However, even when the rains have ceased and the roads are passable, he shows no inclination to discharge his obligation, instead immersing himself in the sybaritic pleasures of sex, food, and drink. Finally, his patience exhausted, Rāma sends Lakṣmaṇa to remind the monkey, under threat of death, to rouse himself to action and fulfill his sworn oath. Only then does Sugrīva send out search parties and, once Sītā has been located, muster the simian hosts for battle. We learn that the somewhat undisciplined monkey is also cruel: when his southern search party, thinking that they have failed, decide not to return to Kiṣkindhā, they make this choice because they fear that their master will put them to death. During the war in Laṅkā, however, Sugrīva fights valiantly and performs various heroic feats.

Vālin

This remarkable figure cannot be fully described independently of his brother and mortal enemy, Sugrīva. For it is only through Rāma's somewhat controversial killing of this king of the monkeys that he is able to secure the promise from

Sugrīva to use his control of the monkey forces, once he is installed on the throne of his dead brother, to scour the world to find the abducted princess Sītā.

But Vālin has his own history that helps us to understand Rāma's decision to act on behalf of Sugrīva without ever meeting Vālin or hearing his side of the story of the rift between the simian brothers. That story is yet another example of the theme of violent or sublimated fraternal conflict and disinheritance of an older claimant to a throne that runs like a thread through both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. In this, it not only echoes the deflected succession struggle between Rāma and Bharata but foreshadows as well the parallel conflict in the royal family of the *rākṣasas* between Rāvaṇa and his younger brother Vibhīṣaṇa, which, like the conflict in *Kiṣkindhā*, will end only when Rāma kills the elder and installs the younger on the throne.

Vālin is not only the elder brother and, by the normative practice of primogeniture, the rightful king of the monkeys. He is also, as the son of the king of the gods, Indra, more powerful than Sugrīva, the son of Sūrya, the sun god. In fact, he is represented in the epic as one of only two individuals powerful enough to best Rāvaṇa himself in combat. At the end of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*'s lengthy account of the mighty *rākṣasa*'s victorious campaigns against human kings, supernatural beings, and even the gods themselves, Rāma inquires of the sage Agastya, who had been narrating this account, if there were no beings anywhere powerful enough to overcome the might of the ten-headed lord of the *rākṣasas*. In reply, the sage tells him of two individuals who accomplished this all-but-impossible feat. The first is the legendary thousand-armed king of Māhiṣmatī, Arjuna Kārtavīrya, who bested the *rākṣasa* in a wrestling match and made him his prisoner. The second is Vālin, who, when Rāvaṇa attempts to take him by surprise, whirls around, pinions him, and, tucking the *rākṣasa* lord in his armpit, flies to the four oceans to perform his ritual baths. In both of these stories, the vanquishers of Rāvaṇa end up forging a firm friendship with him. In the latter case, this may explain why Rāma chose to ally himself with Sugrīva instead of the far more powerful Vālin.

When Rāma finally intervenes in a battle between the monkey brothers and mortally wounds Vālin from ambush, the dying monkey rebukes him for shooting him in such a fashion, and the two hold an extensive debate on the propriety of such an attack. This goes back and forth on different grounds until Vālin acknowledges the authority of Rāma as the representative of the royal power of Kosala and dies reconciled to the justice of his death. Some hint of uneasiness with the whole proceeding may be divined from the fact that even after the consecration of Sugrīva in place of his slain elder, Rāma sees to it that the heir apparent to the monkey throne is Aṅgada, Vālin's son, and not any offspring of his successor.

Hanumān

Hanumān, the swift and powerful son of the wind god, is one of the towering figures in the *Rāmāyaṇa* writ large, and he is an important divinity in his own right in Hinduism and in other related Asian religious traditions. For Vālmiki and later authors on the Rāma theme, he is the ultimate devotee of Rāma and Sītā and the exemplar of what is known in Vaiṣṇava theology as *dāsyabhāva*, the emotive stance of devotional service to one's chosen divinity.

Introduced first in the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* as a clever counselor of Sugrīva, Hanumān is uniquely entrusted with Rāma's signet ring as a token of recognition when he is included in the southern search party under the leadership of Aṅgada, Vālin's son. As the son of the wind god, he is also the only monkey powerful enough to leap across the vast expanse of the ocean to search Laṅkā for the abducted princess. Once there, he finds and comforts Sītā, causes general havoc on the island, and defeats many of Rāvaṇa's warriors. Finally, he allows himself to be captured by Indrajit so that, when dragged in front of the *rākṣasa* king, he can rebuke him. As a punishment, Hanumān's tail is set alight, but he then uses it to set fire to the city before returning to the mainland to report to Sugrīva and Rāma.

During the war, Hanumān performs many feats of valor in battle and, most iconically, twice flies from Laṅkā to the Himalayas and back to fetch a mountain of healing herbs to cure and restore Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and the monkeys in general when they are wounded or struck down by the fearsome Indrajit. After the war and the consecration of Rāma, he proves himself to be the most passionate of Rāma's devotees but is denied the privilege of following his lord to the heavenly realm, as he is instructed to remain in the world as long as the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to be sung among the people. As the epic tale remains current in its many versions until the present day, Hanumān is regarded as one of the Indian tradition's group of seven *cirajīvins*, "long-lived ones," who live on from one cosmic era to another. In addition to the account of his feats in service of Rāma, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* provides a charming account of the monkey hero's mischievous childhood.

The Lesser Monkeys

Among the hundreds of millions and even billions of monkeys that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tells us made up Rāma's expeditionary force, there are a number who, if not of the level of significance of Sugrīva and Hanumān, still occupy specific important roles in the course of the great war. Among these are Prince Aṅgada, son of Vālin and the leader of the southern search party, who launches a solo attack on Rāvaṇa's palace; the monkey engineer and architect Nala, who designs and supervises the construction of the epic's famous bridge across the ocean, enabling the monkey army to cross over to Laṅkā; Jāmbavān, the aged king of the *rākṣas* (in later versions of the story he is often represented as a bear), who directs Hanumān to the Himalayas in search of medicinal herbs; and the simian physician Suśeṇa, who similarly instructs Hanumān before his second flight to the Himalayas and who employs the herbs to save the life of the mortally wounded Lakṣmaṇa.

The Rākṣasas

As the epic action shifts from the realm of the monkeys, which, as we have seen, represents a moral universe more like the "natural," observable condition of humanity, with its power struggles, sensual excess, violence, and fraternal rivalries, to the island kingdom of Laṅkā, we see yet another and, indeed, ultimate shift in and degradation of the norms of *dharma*, "righteousness," as it is observed and practiced in Ayodhyā. Laṅkā is the kingdom of the *rākṣasas*, violent,

bloodthirsty, and sexually promiscuous parodies of the ideals of Aryan culture and society that the epic seeks to preach. These are the blood-guzzling (*rudhirāśana*), night-roaming (*niśācara*) *rākṣasas* under the tyrannical rule of their king, Rāvaṇa, who is the radical opposite of Rāma and the trampler of all the norms and values of vedic-Hindu civilization.

That said, it is noteworthy that not all of the *rākṣasas* and their female counterparts, the *rākṣasa* women (*rākṣasīs*), are monolithically evil. Some of the womenfolk actually aid and support Sitā in her terror and desolation, while one of the *rākṣasa* princes comes to be revered as the epitome of righteousness and devotion to Rāma. Even the very worst of them, Rāvaṇa himself, is allowed a certain amount of justification for his evil nature and, in the end, once dead, is given a surprisingly sympathetic send-off by his enemy Rāma.

One might also keep in mind that the poet portrays two rather different categories of *rākṣasas*, both of which are seen as a menace to the society, culture, and civilization of the Aryans. On the one hand, there are what we might think of as the aristocratic urban elite of the race, who inhabit the glittering palaces and mansions of Laṅkā and who appear to share the political and even religious norms of their human foes. These include Rāvaṇa and his relatives as well as his ministers and his generals. On the other hand, the poem also shows us an even more horrific and feral type of solitary forest *rākṣasa*—those who haunt the wilderness, gorging themselves on the flesh and blood of humans and animals that cross their path.

Rāvaṇa

Rāvaṇa, the towering and monstrous antagonist of the epic hero, is, at least in Vālmiki's portrayal, a more interesting and complex figure than the crude, brutal, and lecherous villain of countless later texts and performative media as well as in the popular imagination. Thus, in spite of his overweening arrogance, lust, and sexual predation, as well as the havoc his aggression wreaks throughout the three worlds, he is nonetheless represented in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* as a rather glorious potentate, a passionate lover, a husband mourned by his many wives, and, at one point in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, a figure who finally comes to realize the folly of his ultimate transgression. But in the grand account of his career in the epic's final book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, we see different aspects of the character of this monstrous but fascinating antihero and are given, interestingly, some insight into its formation.

The very first things we learn about Rāvaṇa in this account take place before he is born or even conceived, and they are highly determinative of his character. Rāvaṇa's mother, Kaikāsī, was the child of the powerful *rākṣasa* ascetic Sumālin. Sumālin, uninterested in negotiating a marriage for his daughter, sends the innocent girl off on her own to ask the brahman sage Viśravas, the son of the seer Pulastya and grandson of Lord Brahmā himself, to marry her. At her father's command, she approaches Viśravas although he is in a state of consecration as he performs the vedic *agnihotra* rite. The poet describes the moment as "that fearsome hour (*dāruṇā velā*)."

Viśravas determines, through his supernatural mental powers, that Kaikāsī wishes to marry him and bear his children. He consents to this but warns her that, since she approached him at such a fearsome hour, she will give birth to

fearsome and cruel *rākṣasa* children. Horrified by this pronouncement, she pleads that such horrible sons would not be worthy of a descendant of Lord Brahmā, Viśravaś's grandfather. The sage partially relents, promising that her youngest son alone, Vibhīṣaṇa, will be righteous and worthy of his noble lineage. Thus, in due time, Kaikasī gives birth to three sons, Rāvaṇa, Kumbhakarṇa, and the righteous Vibhīṣaṇa, as well as a daughter, Śūrpaṇakhā. The birth of her eldest, Rāvaṇa, is accompanied by dire omens, as recounted later by Agastya:

After some time, Rāma, the young girl, who had been addressed in this fashion, gave birth to a horrendous and very fearsome child, who had the form of a *rākṣasa*. He had ten heads, huge fangs, and he looked like a heap of black collyrium. He had coppery lips, twenty arms, huge mouths, and hair that glowed like fire. The moment he was born, jackals, their mouths emitting flames, and other carnivorous beasts circled in a clockwise direction. The god rained down blood, and the clouds made a harsh rumbling. The sun vanished from the sky, and great meteors crashed to the ground.¹⁵

The episode is a curious and disturbing one in which an innocent error of timing on the part of a young girl has hideous consequences for her yet-to-be-conceived children, imposed by their own father. Thus, according to the tale, Rāvaṇa is hardly to be held wholly accountable for his evil nature, which stems largely from his mother's minor and unintentional transgression and his father's horrible and excessively cruel overreaction to it. Moreover, Rāvaṇa's parental difficulties do not end with his father's prenatal curse. Although he is cursed to be born with an inherently evil nature, it is his mother who, in her greed and ambition, goads him into a state of bitter envy and ultimately hostility toward his glorious elder half brother, Kubera, the god of wealth. In a fit of sibling rivalry, Rāvaṇa vows to equal or surpass Kubera in power and glory, and it is this mission that sets him on his course of fearsome asceticism so that he can acquire the boons that will enable him to conquer and terrorize the triple world, starting with Kubera himself.

Rāvaṇa's aggressiveness and martial exploits are legendary, and he does not hesitate to challenge any representative of masculine power and authority, whether a king, a god, a great serpent, a demon, or even supreme deities such as Lord Śiva. And it even makes little difference to him if they are his kinsmen: he defeats and slays Kubera, and in the mad frenzy of battle he kills his brother-in-law, the *dānava* Vidyujjihva, the husband of his sister, Śūrpaṇakhā. Neither does he hesitate to molest, seduce, abduct, and rape any woman he encounters. True to his cannibalistic *rākṣasa* nature, he also does not scruple to devour a messenger and a group of great seers who have assembled for a holy sacrifice.

There is no space here to list all of Rāvaṇa's many battles, rapes, and evil deeds. But the epic is sometimes at odds with itself in its accounts of his abductions of women. For example, in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, when the poet describes the beautiful women of the *rākṣasa*'s harem, he says that none of them had been taken against their will but had been won over by his virtues and had never previously belonged to another man. Yet in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, he is represented

¹⁵ PVR 7.9.21–24.

as having brutally ripped his women, wailing and crying, from their husbands, brothers, and fathers. They then collectively curse him to ultimately die on account of a woman as requital for his depredations.

Yet despite Rāvaṇa's lengthy career of murder, rape, and mayhem and his brutal abduction of the epic hero's beloved wife, Rāma treats him remarkably gently. Not only does he offer to spare the *rākṣasa* if he returns Sītā willingly, but during their first encounter in battle the righteous prince, seeing that his foe is tiring, merely shoots off his diadem and dismisses him from the battlefield to rest up for the next encounter. Finally, once he has slain Rāvaṇa, Rāma orders Vibhīṣaṇa to give him full funerary honors according to the vedic cremation ritual, praises him as a great warrior, and declares an almost fraternal regard for him.

It is also worth noting that, although the fearsome king of the *rākṣasas* is generally regarded as a figure inimical to and dominant over all other powerful beings in the three worlds and ultimately vulnerable to the Supreme Divinity, Viṣṇu, alone, the *Uttarakāṇḍa* records three occasions on which he is outmatched by a superior rival with whom he then forges a friendly alliance. The first and best known of these occurs when Rāvaṇa, flying across the Himalayas, finds the motion of his vehicle arrested as he tries to pass over a grove where Lord Śiva is dallying with his wife. Enraged, the *rākṣasa* tries, in his unparalleled strength, to uproot the entire mountain. Śiva, however, is amused at the *rākṣasa*'s presumption and playfully presses down on the summit with his toe, crushing his mighty arms and causing him to utter a tremendous roar of pain. Pleased with the demon's strength and daring, and in commemoration of his mighty cry that reverberated throughout the universe, the god confers upon him the name Rāvaṇa, "He Who Makes the Worlds Reverberate with His Cries," thus replacing, for all practical purposes, the *rākṣasa*'s birth-name Daśagrīva, "Ten-necked." This episode, along with a single reference later in the book to Rāvaṇa's worship of a golden *liṅga*, is probably the inspiration for the tradition—not explicitly mentioned by Vālmiki—that Rāvaṇa was a devotee of Śiva.

Rāvaṇa also meets his match in the persons of the monkey king Vālin and the Haihaya monarch Arjuna Kārtavīrya, both of whom best him in wrestling matches and take him prisoner. Both episodes end with Rāvaṇa forming alliances with his new friends. In the former case, this may explain why Rāma forms an alliance with Sugrīva rather than with Vālin, his more powerful brother and Rāvaṇa's friend and ally.

Vibhīṣaṇa

The only virtuous child of Kaikasī, Rāvaṇa's youngest brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, is one of the relatively few, but important, examples in the literature of a figure who is supposed to be evil, even demonic, by nature, but who turns out to be a paragon of virtue through first taking refuge (*śaraṇam*) with and then devoting himself to one or another of the forms of Viṣṇu, the Supreme Divinity. In this the *rākṣasa* ranks as an equal to the famous *asura* devotee, Prahlāda, who worshiped the Lord at the time of the Man-Lion (Narasimha) *avatāra*. Unable to tolerate his brother's evil ways and particularly his abduction and imprisonment of Sītā, Vibhīṣaṇa has the courage to speak truth to power in rebuking Rāvaṇa. This provokes a furious response: the *rākṣasa* king expels him from the court.

Vibhīṣaṇa then flies with four retainers across the sea to the southern shore of India, where Rāma and his army are encamped. He takes refuge (*śaraṇam*) at Rāma's feet, becoming, up until the present day, a paradigmatic example of salvation through this act. Once accepted, he renders many vital services to Rāma in the battle through his understanding of the military strength and defenses of Laṅkā, and especially through his innate ability to see through the many illusory devices and tricks of the *rākṣasas*. Rāma consecrates him as the king of the *rākṣasas*, even before defeating and killing Rāvaṇa, and the grateful *rākṣasa* grants him the use of his flying palace, the Puṣpaka. In the end, like that other great devotee of Rāma, Hanumān, Vibhīṣaṇa is denied permission to follow his Lord into the heavenly world, as Rāma orders him to remain on earth to govern the unruly *rākṣasas*. In this way, Vibhīṣaṇa, like the great monkey, joins the select group of the seven immortals of Indian legend, the *cirajīvins*, “long-lived ones.”

Vibhīṣaṇa's character, however, is not without a touch of ambivalence. Although he is highly regarded for his righteousness and courage in going over to Rāma's side in the war, he also earns a certain degree of censure in the Indian cultural context—which places a high premium on clan and family loyalty—for his betrayal of his own elder brother, no matter how evil he may have been. Thus, even in modernity, he is sometimes used as metaphor for a traitor to his own family, as in the Bengali saying “*ghore śotru bibhīṣon*,” “[he is] an enemy in the house, a Vibhīṣaṇa”).

Kumbhakarna

Rāvaṇa's gargantuan brother Kumbhakarna is an example of Vālmiki's spectacular linking of the terrifying and comedic in a single character. He is so catastrophically voracious that the gods fear that, should he succeed in gaining additional powers through a boon for his austerities, he might literally devour the entire world. To avert this calamity, they trick him by getting the goddess of speech, Sarasvatī, to enter the giant's mouth, seize control of his vocal organs, and choose a boon for him. She chooses perpetual sleep, a boon the Creator happily confers.

During the war, when almost all of Rāvaṇa's champions have been slain, the *rākṣasa* king is forced to awaken the sleeping giant. His awakening is described in a grotesque and comically hyperbolic scene representing the extraordinary violence required to rouse the monster and the absurd amount of food and drink required to get him up and going. Once awake, he reports to his brother Rāvaṇa for his orders and, rather surprisingly, lectures him on statecraft, righteousness, and the folly of his ways. This elicits Rāvaṇa's only admission in the poem that it was a fatal error to abduct Sītā and to refuse Rāma's demand for her return. Nonetheless, as a dutiful brother, Kumbhakarna marches off to war and wreaks enormous havoc on the monkey army before being cut to pieces by Rāma's arrows. Even in his death he is massively destructive, his severed head and body, in the poet's hyperbolic description, causing enormous damage as they fall.

Indrajit

The most powerful and terrifying of Rāvaṇa's allies—and indeed, his ultimate recourse other than his own immense martial power—is his son Meghanāda Rāvaṇi, who is often referred to by his nom de guerre, Indrajit, “Conqueror of

Indra.” This is a figure who combines the skill and strength of a superb warrior with the magical powers of a sorcerer. Indeed, when a group of seers and sages arrives to congratulate Rāma on his consecration, they remark that they regarded Indrajit as a more fearsome adversary than his father. Deriving his powers both from boons and from weapons granted him by Brahmā and through a series of dark parodies of the vedic sacrifice, he is able to capture Hanumān, bind Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the deadly coils of his serpent-weapons, and invisibly strike down the heroic brothers and their entire army from a flying chariot. It is only when Lakṣmaṇa is able to interrupt the dark ritual that grants Indrajit his powers that the prince can finally dispatch him after a lengthy and horrific duel.

This extraordinary figure, sinister though he is, has to a certain extent captured the imagination of India, where the name Indrajit is often conferred by parents on their sons and who was made the wronged and tragic hero of his own epic poem by the nineteenth-century Bengali poet and playwright Michael Madhusudana Dutt in his epic poem the *Meghnad Badh Kāvya*, “The Killing of Meghanāda.”

The Minor Rākṣasas

Aside from the towering figure of Rāvaṇa and some of his principal kinsmen, generals, and ministers, a number of other *rākṣasas* play various roles in the epic story from outside the Lāṅkan court. One group constitutes a sort of military outpost of the *rākṣasa* kingdom in the Daṇḍaka forest of the Indian peninsula. It is these *rākṣasa* forces, led by Rāvaṇa’s relatives Khara, Dūṣaṇa, and Triśiras, that directly harass the holy forest sages, whom Rāma has vowed to protect. And it is they and their hosts who, seeking to avenge the mutilation of Śūrpaṇakhā, are slaughtered by Rāma. One noteworthy figure is Mārīca. Along with his brother Subāhu, Mārīca harasses the ashram of Viśvāmitra in the *Bālakāṇḍa*, thus providing the rationale for Viśvāmitra’s fateful journey to Ayodhyā. His life is spared by Rāma when his brother is slain, but he returns to the narrative in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*. There, under the threat of death from his master Rāvaṇa, he is compelled to take on the form of the famous golden deer to lure first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa away from their forest home, only to be finally slain by the former.

In addition to these figures, there is also a class of grotesque, solitary *rākṣasas* who haunt the forest, gorging on game and even humans. Some of these are represented not as true *rākṣasas* by birth but rather as celestial beings who, laboring under curses, inhabit their degraded forms until they are released through death at Rāma’s hands and return to their respective celestial forms. These *rākṣasas*, encountered in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, include the monstrous Virādha, who for a brief moment seizes and tries to run off with Sītā, in a foreshadowing of her abduction by Rāvaṇa; and the deformed Kabandha, who, before his death, directs Rāma to the monkey prince Sugrīva for assistance in locating and recovering his stolen wife. The poem’s final book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, shows us another example of the solitary *rākṣasa* in the terrifying Lavaṇa, who is slain by Śatrughna.

The Rākṣasa Women

Like their menfolk, the *rākṣasa* women (*rākṣasīs*) show a marked diversity of character among themselves. Rāma’s first test of valor is his task of killing the monstrous forest *rākṣasa* woman Tāṭakā, who blocks the path of Viśvāmitra and
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