

Women at the Margins: Gender and Religious Anxieties in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*

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This paper looks at Vālmīki's use and placement of his female characters as significant markers of religious identity. It argues that Vālmīki conceptualizes and creates specific types of female figures and carefully locates the episodes in which they appear to mark specific narrative transitions and real or imagined anxiety-inducing threats to the author's idealized world. Moreover, Vālmīki provides his audience with potential resolutions to those threats. Thus, in addition to such major figures as Sītā, Kausalyā, and Kaikeyī, characters such as Anasūyā, Śabarī, Svayamprabhā, and even the non-human characters Surasā and Nikumbhilā are demonstrated to have a specific and integrated function within the narrative and are argued to form part of a larger, gendered narrative frame in which the epic action occurs. Each of these characters, I contend, represents a particular level of the feminine intruding into the culture's religious practices in an ever-increasing destabilization of the poet's idealized vedic world or as the means for its reemergence as a stronger, more stable, and less corruptible one. Vālmīki's creation and use of these intriguing figures provide further testament both to the author's genius and the underlying unity of structure of his great epic.

In the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, the very heart of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the hapless heroine, Sītā, pale and dejected, sits raptly meditating on her lord, Rāma, in the midst of the *aśokavanikā*. There, as the heroine awaits rescue and contemplates suicide, she is guarded and tormented by hideous *rākṣasīs*. At this most poignant of junctures, the epic introduces another figure, the goddess Nikumbhilā.¹ About this figure, Vālmīki provides little information. We are told, however, that this goddess delights in offerings of blood and various human and animal body parts and that sacrificial rites dedicated to her appear to include such offerings. The *rākṣasī* wardresses threaten Sītā with taunts that she would be among those offerings and that she would be, literally, "sliced and diced," and then eaten by them as part of their frenzied rites—dancing and making offerings to the goddess. The juxtaposition of the two: Sītā—literally the feminine face of the *ārya* world—and Nikumbhilā—the voracious goddess of the *rākṣasa* world—is not accidental, nor is this the first time, although clearly it is the most dramatic, that Vālmīki introduces his audience to women who participate in religious observances or to devouring goddesslike figures.

In the following discussion, I will suggest that, at one level of this multivalent poem, the poet's alignment of the feminine and religion can be understood as intentional and as marking real or imagined, much-feared threats to the *ārya* world as it is conceptualized and represented by Vālmīki. Moreover, I will argue that Vālmīki provides his audience with potential resolutions to those threats. While this paper will focus primarily on those women who fall outside of the Kosalan ruling family and those events that occur outside of the kingdom of

1. For a detailed discussion of the role of the figure Nikumbhilā in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, see S. J. S. Goldman, "Nikumbhilā's Grove."

Ayodhyā, in light of the broader structural argument put forth, I need to briefly highlight some relevant features and episodes of the first two books of the poem.

AYODHYĀ: THE NOT SO PERFECT WIFE

At the outset of the epic the poet depicts an ideal *ārya*/brahmanic society ruled over peacefully by King Daśaratha with the aid of his ministers.² Vālmīki's construction of this kingdom is so central to his narrative agenda that he expends two entire *sargas* in its description (1.6–7), reconstructing a fantasized and idyllic world that harks back to a utopian and glorious past. Of particular note is the poet's emphasis on the perfect vedic society, which is described through its religious, social, and ethical activities.³ The emphasis the poet places on these very markers of the ideal past indicates a present that has experienced challenges to and even deviation from such ideals.

Immediately following upon this description, the poet reveals a flaw within this society and a tension is introduced: Daśaratha, the perfect *vaidika* king, has no son.⁴ In order to procure the one key element that would ensure the continuation of his lineage, kingdom, and, by extension, the vedic/brahmanic society, Daśaratha resorts to what appear to be extreme measures. Not only must he enlist the aid of a surrogate, here the sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, but he performs two separate rituals to ensure offspring: an *aśvamedha*, the horse sacrifice (1.13), and a *putreṣṭi*, a rite for producing a son (1.14).⁵

The *aśvamedha* is normally undertaken to sanctify a king's hegemony. Nevertheless, it has a strong fertility component encapsulated within it that requires participation of the king's queens.⁶ Moreover, from an early time, it has additionally been associated with purification.⁷ Even so, the seemingly unexpected use of the *aśvamedha* in this context has not escaped the attention of scholars.⁸ The standard, and not unreasonable, rationale is that the sacrifice is needed to remove obstacles that have prevented Daśaratha from fathering a child.⁹

It is during the *aśvamedha* that Kausalyā, Daśaratha's chief queen and the future mother of Rāma, makes her first appearance in the epic narrative (1.13.27). She "unites" with the horse, as do the other wives of Daśaratha (1.13.28). Her actions here are important, since the aspects of sexuality and fertility clearly are foregrounded in the ritual, and it is these very

2. Despite the contention of many, it appears that at least the core narratives of both the *Bāla*- and *Uttarakāṇḍas* are close to, if not of, the same period as the "core books," and that their inclusion is integral to the epic narrative. See Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 391–95, and R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 63, 77.

3. See, for example, 1.6.12–17.

4. 1.8.1.

5. For a discussion of a structural and narrative rationale for the two rites, see S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 58–59.

6. See Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife*, 65–72. It is interesting to note the positions around the horse that wives of the king are assigned: the crowned queen is in the front, the favorite queen in the middle, and the discarded queen at the back of the horse (Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* vol. ii, 1234).

7. On the purificatory function of this rite, see S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 58–59, and R. P. Goldman, *Bālakāṇḍa*, 60, 74, 149–53, 302–9. Rāma's own *aśvamedha*, which is described at *Uttarakāṇḍa sarga* 82–83, one can argue, has just such a purificatory function. See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 114–56.

8. See R. P. Goldman, *Bālakāṇḍa*, 74, and Bulcke, "The Genesis of the *Bālakāṇḍa*." The commentarial tradition is concerned with the issue as well. See, for example, Govindarāja's comments on *Rām GPP* 1.12.2.

9. According to Kane (*History of Dharmaśāstra* vol. iv: 91–92), the *aśvamedha* can function in a variety of ways including as an expiation for the sacrificer of a *mahāpātaka* 'major sin', such as *brahmahatyā* 'murder of a brahman'. This is the very purpose to which Bhatt assigns it (Critical Edition, vol. 1, 331, 334). See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 114–56.

elements that tie the use of the *aśvamedha* to the concerns of the *Bālakāṇḍa*.¹⁰ Although the *aśvamedha* is described in other contexts in epic literature, women are not specifically mentioned as participants.¹¹ In Daśaratha's *aśvamedha*, however, Kausalyā is a major participant. That fertility and impregnation are fundamental concerns of Daśaratha's rationale for undertaking the *aśvamedha* is reinforced by the second ritual, the *putreṣṭi*, which occurs in the following *sargas* (14–15). At verse 2, the text transitions:

iṣṭim te 'haṃ kariṣyāmi putrīyāṃ putrakāraṇāt / 1.14.2ab

In order to procure sons for you, I shall perform the son-producing sacrifice.¹²

This rite is smaller and less imposing than the first and appears to have the same basic functions: the impregnation of the queen and the procuring of sons. In contrast to the *aśvamedha* with its relatively thick description, the mechanics of this rite are passed over.¹³ We are told only that from the sacrificial fire a great being arose bearing a vessel filled with celestial *pāyasa* 'porridge' (1.15.8–13), which will impregnate the three women. Daśaratha divides the *pāyasa* among his three wives (1.15.25–27). The participation of the women here is minimal. They are passive, serving only as the recipients and consumers of the porridge. Nevertheless, their presence at and involvement in the rite are crucial to its successful completion.¹⁴

The women are apparently willing and necessary participants in both rites. They are named but are not given voice. They participate in these ritual activities in order to fulfill a cultural and biological obligation of motherhood and to guarantee the ritually sanctioned production of an heir to maintain the lineage specifically and the vedic tradition in general.

Toward the end of the *Bālakāṇḍa*, as the main narrative reasserts itself, another "rite" is introduced, here a marriage, which, like both the *aśvamedha* and *putreṣṭi*, requires the presence of a woman. It is here that the poem first introduces Sītā, the heroine of the narrative. Sītā's wedding is not described in detail, but is used by Vālmiki to mark his hero's coming

10. S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 58–59.

11. In the *Mahābhārata* the most famous of these *aśvamedhas* is that of Yudhiṣṭhira, which is narrated in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*. The *aśvamedhas* of Yudhiṣṭhira and Daśaratha show clear similarities. Compare *Bālakāṇḍa* 13.4–7; 15–22; 25cd; 29–31 with *Āśvamedhikaparvan* 90.20–22; 24–30; 34cd; 91.3–5. Brockington (*The Sanskrit Epics*, 154, 480, 483) understands the similarities to arise from a similar source rather than borrowing. At the conclusion of Rāma's own *aśvamedha*, Sītā is summoned to take a vow of fidelity, and upon doing so she enters the earth (7.85–88). Sītā's role here is narratively important and will be discussed below, but she does not participate in the actual *aśvamedha* as Kausalyā does.

12. Unless otherwise noted all translations are from the Princeton translation, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*, with occasional minor adjustments. Individual volumes are listed under translators' names. All textual references are to the Critical Edition of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* unless otherwise noted.

13. No performance details are given. Ṛṣyaśṛṅga announces to Daśaratha that in order to procure a son, he must carry out a *putreṣṭi* (1.14.2–3) and that it must be done "in accordance with the injunctions of the ritual texts and rendered efficacious by potent verses set down in the *Atharvaveda*." The *putreṣṭi* is mentioned again at 1.15.8. Here we are told that Viṣṇu chose King Daśaratha to be his father (1.15.7) at the very moment that Daśaratha was performing the rite (1.15.8). Striking, too, is the nature of the texts used for legitimization of each rite. The *aśvamedha* draws upon the ritual tradition of the veda, whereas the *putreṣṭi* specifically calls upon the *Atharvaveda*, a text understood to be later and held in somewhat less esteem than those of the *Ṛg*, *Sāma*, and *Yajur* traditions. The texts have different audiences and functions, as do the rituals they support. The *aśvamedha* harks back to the high brahmanical world of the formal and elaborate sacrifice, while the *putreṣṭi* clearly functions as a domestic, popular rite for obtaining a son. Bulcke understands the *putreṣṭi* as "superfluous" ("Genesis of the *Bālakāṇḍa*," 331), while Goldman argues that it is the *aśvamedha* that is "redundant" (*Bālakāṇḍa*, 74). I would argue that the first functions primarily as a purificatory rite, while the second is more specifically a rite of impregnation (S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 58–59).

14. Given the nature of many of the births in the epic tradition, especially the *Mahābhārata*, the necessity of a woman in procreation is not a forgone conclusion.

of age and sets the stage for the epic adventure to begin in earnest.¹⁵ Thus among its other concerns, through these two sections the *Bālakāṇḍa* marks normative and approved roles of women in the culturally sanctioned rites and religious observances of Vālmīki's world. In addition, the book describes and reflects the idealized role and position of women in traditional brahmanic society, mother and wife.¹⁶

In the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, at its outset, the status quo prevails—the vedic/brahmanic culture is dominant, but there are clear threats to that world from within.¹⁷ While the *kāṇḍa* provides few explicit references to women as participants in religious rites or sacrifices, we are provided a rather detailed description of Kausalyā, who is the senior inhabitant of the *antaḥpuram* 'inner apartments or harem' and is portrayed as intensely religious. In general, Kausalyā is a somewhat shadowy figure through much of the epic, one often mentioned but rarely seen or heard from. Vālmīki has remarkably little to say about the physical appearance of this important figure. Perhaps her most defining moment in the epic occurs toward the beginning of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Rāma, upon hearing of his imminent coronation, goes first to tell her the tidings. Of Kausalyā we are told:

*tatra tām pravaṇām eva mātaraṃ kṣaumavāsīnīm /
vāgyatām devatāgāre dadarśa yācatīm śrīyam // 2.4.30*

There in the shrine-room he saw his mother, clothed in linen, solemnly and silently praying for his royal fortune.

tasmin kāle hi kausalyā tasthāv āmīlīteṣaṇā / 2.4.32ab

...

*śrutvā puṣyeṇa putrasya yauvarājyābhiṣecanam /
prāṇāyāmena puruṣaṃ dhyāyamānā janārdanam // 2.4.33*

At that moment Kausalyā stood with her eyes closed . . . from the moment she received word that her son was to be consecrated as prince regent on Puṣya day, she had been controlling her breathing and meditating on the Primal Being, Janārdana.

tathā saniyamām eva so 'bhigamyābhivādya ca / 2.4.34ab

. . . While she was engaged in these observances, (Rāma) approached her and did obeisance . . .

amoghaṃ bata me kṣāntaṃ puruṣe puṣkarekṣaṇe / 41ab

[and she said] "Truly the vows of self-denial I made to the lotus-eyed Primal Being were not in vain . . ." ¹⁸

The image presented is of a woman who is completely devoted to the welfare of her son and one who is engaged in religious meditative practices and observations. Even her sartorial choice mirrors this self-denial.¹⁹ Vālmīki is silent here on her relationship to her husband.²⁰

15. For an excellent and thorough discussion of Sītā's marriage in Vālmīki's text see Heidi Pauwels, *The Goddess as Role Model*, 163–201.

16. In addition the *kāṇḍa* knows many other women, some of whom actually carry out austerities. See, for example, the stories of Diti (1.45) and Ahalyā (1.47). See S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives."

17. These threats come in the form of Daśaratha's second wife, Kaikeyī, and her maid, Mantharā. See Sutherland, "Seduction."

18. Literally, "Truly my patience in reference to the lotus-eyed Man is not in vain." The commentator Śivasahāya understands the word *kṣāntam* 'patience' here to refer to "austerities that are performed which are characterized by patience" (*kṣāntaṃ tadupalakṣitatapaḥ kṛtam*). Govindarāja understands "patient endurance of the pain of fasting, vows, etc." (*vratoḥpavāsādīkleśasahanam*). One might note the irony in the last line, where, in fact, her vows will prove to be in vain. Pollock (*Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 89.41 and notes) is following the commentators but does not provide a note on the term.

19. See S. J. S. Goldman, "Anklets Away," 132.

20. Sutherland, "The Bad Seed," 25–27.

A few *sargas* later, following his sudden change in fortune, Rāma comes once more to his mother's inner apartments (*antaḥpuram*), this time to tell her that he is being banished. At this juncture, Vālmiki pauses to describe Kausalyā once more, further reinforcing her image as a woman totally immersed in and devoted to religious observances. Here too, the description is of a pious woman who has focused her energies and life on her son, rather than on her husband (2.17.6–8). Hearing of her son's reversal in fortune, she wishes to join him in his sojourn in the forest. That Kausalyā is so intent upon her religious duty and wishes to abandon her husband and follow Rāma to the forest is, in fact, culturally inappropriate. And Rāma must remind her of her primary duty. Thus he says somewhat harshly to her:

*vratopavāsāniratā yā nārī paramottamā /
bhartāram nānuvarteta sā ca pāpagatir bhavet // 2.21.20*

“Even an excellent women, who is devoted to vows and fasts, would come to an evil end, if she does not obey her husband.”²¹

It is this duty to her husband that Kausalyā has ignored. When Rāma finally takes leave of his distraught mother, she again is described and marked by her religious observances (2.21.25).

The intensity of Kausalyā's piety is further emphasized, as the entire following *sarga* is a prayer that she intones for her son's safe journey. The *sarga* comes to a conclusion with Kausalyā bestowing an amulet on her now banished son:

*ośadhīm cāpi siddhārthām viśalyakaraṇīm śubhām /
cakāra rakṣām kausalyā mantrair abhijajāpa ca // 2.22.15*

Then Kausalyā made an amulet, using the *viśalyakaraṇī* (remover of arrows), an auspicious medicinal herb that accomplished its goals, and intoned *mantras* over it.²²

The constant references to Kausalyā's religious practices coupled with the absence of any other descriptions of her are not, I would argue, accidental or haphazard on the part of the epic poet. He has carefully drawn her in this manner to address numerous larger concerns of the epic. Of particular interest here is the amount of attention that Vālmiki feels it is necessary to devote to demonstrating the existence of feminine participation in the vedic/brahmanic religious tradition and its importance within that tradition. At the same time the poet introduces some additional measures, i.e., the amulet and the devotional worship of Viṣṇu (2.4.33), which are more reminiscent of popular practices less directly tied to the traditional vedic ritual practices. The introduction of such additional measures might even suggest the (potential) ineffectiveness of the brahmanical tradition and the necessity of introducing supplementary mechanisms to ensure the desired results.

Playing out here, too, is the fact that Kausalyā is depicted as everything that Kaikeyī, Daśaratha's second and favorite wife, is not. Both, of course, have as their ultimate goal the success of their respective sons, but Kaikeyī uses her sexuality to this end, while Kausalyā uses her religion. But neither has her husband's welfare at heart. The former is seen to lead to the destruction of the brahmanic culture, the latter to its preservation. And yet, as righteous and devoted as Kausalyā is, she has, in fact, neglected her primary religious duty, that of a *pativratā*, or a wife devoted to her lord, and this neglect, too, must be considered as partially underlying the banishment of Rāma.

21. My translation. Throughout this passage, Rāma rather sternly lectures his mother on the duties of a wife; see *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 21, especially verses 7–21.

22. My translation. On *viśalyakaraṇī* as an herb used for the removal of arrows, etc., see 6.40.30; 6.61.32–33; 6.89.24; and notes in R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*.

THE FOREST: LIVING AT THE MARGINS

As the epic story progresses, the action moves to the forest. Unlike the city, only a few women inhabit the forest. Those who do, with the exceptions of Sītā and the *rākṣasīs* Tātakā and Śūrpaṅakhā,²³ are depicted as being engaged in religious practices. At the end of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, prior to the departure of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā from Citrakūṭa for Pañcavaṭī, the threesome visits the *āśrama* of the sage Atri. At this juncture we are introduced to the wife of Atri, a woman named Anasūyā. Vālmīki provides us with a graphic physical description of the virtuous Anasūyā: she is very old, has wrinkled and loose skin, her hair is white with age, and her body constantly trembles.²⁴ Here is a woman, unlike Kausalyā, who has renounced the world with her husband rather than in spite of him.

*anasūyāṃ mahābhāgāṃ*²⁵ *tāpasīṃ dharmacāriṇīm* /
pratigrhṇīṣva vaidehīm abravīd ṛṣisattamaḥ // 2.109.8

This was Anasūyā, an illustrious ascetic who followed the way of righteousness, and the best of seers bade her receive Vaidehī.

rāmāya cācacakṣe tām tāpasīṃ dharmacāriṇīm /
daśavarṣāṇy anāvṛṣṭyā dagdhe loke nirantaram // 2.109.9

yayā mūlaphale sṛṣṭe jāhnavī ca pravartitā /
ugreṇa tapasā yuktā niyamaiś cāpy alaṃkṛtā // 2.109.10

And he told Rāma about his ascetic wife who followed the way of righteousness: “Once when the world was utterly ravaged by drought for ten years, it was she who created roots and fruit and caused the Jāhnavī river to flow, for the ascetic power she has acquired is awesome, and mortifications adorn her.”

Note that Vālmīki has constructed a woman who is respected by her husband and the religious community at large. She is a wife, but so old as not to be regarded as a sexual being. She also functions as the mother of the world. She fed the world during a ten-year drought and she caused the Jāhnavī [Ganges] River to flow. Her power is immense, but it is constructed as positive as it functions within the framework of the vedic society and to the benefit of

23. Rāma encounters the fearsome *rākṣasī* Tātakā as he journeys through the forest with his brother Lakṣmaṇa and the sage Viśvāmitra. We know only that she was originally a *yakṣī*, who was married to Sunda and cursed to become a *rākṣasī*, and that she is the mother of the *rākṣasa* Mārīca. Rāma kills her at the behest of Viśvāmitra (1.23.24–1.15.14). Śūrpaṅakhā, the younger sister of Rāvaṇa, first appears in the epic when she, wandering the forest, comes across the exiled Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā, who are living in the Pañcavaṭī in exile (3.16ff). Neither woman is associated with ascetic practices. For a discussion on the character of Tātakā, see S. J. S. Goldman, “Gendered Narratives,” 62–63; for one on Śūrpaṅakhā, see Erndl, “The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā.”

24. 2.109.18.

25. According to the DCS (s.v.), the term *mahābhāga*, here rendered as ‘illustrious’, is only used adjectively in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, some eighty-eight times. Of those, twenty-four, or slightly more than one quarter (27%), refer to women, and, of those, twelve refer to Sītā. When used of a woman, the term can refer to a married woman, but is not exclusively so used. It is used of both Śāntā (1.10.3) and Sītā (7.17.30) prior to marriage and of Vāruṇī (Surā), the daughter of Varuṇa (and called *kanyā*), when she is produced from the churning of the ocean (1.44.21). It modifies two rivers, the Godāvārī (4.40.9) and the Kauśikī (1.33.11—originally Satyavātī, wife of R̥cika, who upon following her husband to heaven, was transformed into the river). Vedavātī uses the term to speak of her mother, who has followed her husband to heaven (7.17.13). It is used of ascetic women both married and unmarried—Ahalyā (1.48.11, 13), Anasūyā (2.109.8, 19), and Svayamprabhā (4.50.1). Ahalyā’s situation is particularly striking as she has been cursed to a liminal existence for adultery. The term is also used to refer to Kaikeyī (2.9.21) and Kumbhīnasī the younger (7.53.16). To understand Vālmīki’s use of this term it is instructive to consider the relationship of the speaker or narrator to the woman: in each of these cases the speaker stands in a socially subordinate relationship to the woman being addressed or described.

that society. Described as a *pativrata* (2.109.19), who would be better qualified to articulate the traditional values of this role?

*nagarastho vanastho vā pāpo vā yadi vā śubhaḥ /
yāsām strīṇām priyo bhartā tāsām lokā mahodayāḥ // 2.109.23*

“A woman who holds her husband dear whether he is in the city or the forest—whether he is good or evil—gains worlds that bring great blessings.”

(For *vā śubhaḥ* for CE *vāśubhaḥ* see Pollack, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, n. to 109. 23.) While Anasūyā’s words (2.109.23–28) both echo Rāma’s own, albeit somewhat gentler, words to his mother at *sarga* 21 and remind us of Kaikeyī’s failings as well, at the same time they allow for the possibility that Sītā, too, may have to confront similar challenges.

The encounter between Anasūyā and Sītā, with its emphasis on the normative religious/societal role of a wife, further punctuated by Sītā telling the ascetic woman of her own birth and marriage, marks an important transition in the story. As the narrative moves from internal threats and challenges to the kingdom to a world of exogenous threats, Vālmīki uses gender and religion to mark those very threats. The introduction of Anasūyā, an ascetic woman whose role is nurturing and whose powers clearly rival those of the gods, acknowledges the presence of powerful women but also contains that power within a cultural frame.²⁶ Moreover, Anasūyā’s discourse with its emphasis on the *pativrata* clearly foreshadows the forthcoming disruption of and challenge to that cultural ideal. That Vālmīki would mark this crucial narrative transition with the female voice and that the voice and its message clearly disturbed or disrupted the narrative must be viewed as meaningful. Important, too, is that this disruption by a female ascetic is not an isolated occurrence.

Much as the *Ayodhyā* ends with the exiled party arriving at the *āśrama* of Atri and the meeting with Anasūyā, the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, too, ends in an *āśrama* and with an encounter with a female ascetic. Here the ascetic woman is Śabarī, who has been awaiting the arrival of Rāma (3.70). Earlier, in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, the exiled royal couple Rāma and Sītā had met with Atri and Anasūyā. But now, at the end of the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, Sītā has been abducted, leaving Rāma distraught and alone. Searching for his beloved wife, he encounters and kills the demon Kabandha (3.65–68). As Kabandha ascends to heaven in his true form, he instructs the brothers to go to Lake Pampā and to meet with the monkey Sugrīva (3.68.11–22). As Kabandha continues his instructions to the two brothers, he tells them of the *āśrama* of the sage Mataṅga, where the ascetic woman Śabarī still lives (3.69.19–20).

Following Kabandha’s advice, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa travel west to Lake Pampā and shortly arrive at Mataṅga’s *āśrama* (3.70.1–4). There Śabarī, described as an elderly ascetic woman and apparently unmarried, has served the *āśrama*’s inhabitants for years. On the very day that Rāma arrives at Citrakūṭa, those inhabitants who had lived in the *āśrama* have all departed for heaven (3.70.10). Śabarī remains its sole occupant, instructed by the sages to stay until Rāma should arrive (3.70.11–12). She, of course, longs for reunion with those to whom she has dedicated her life, but will only be allowed to join them upon completing her duty toward Rāma (3.70.13–24).

The character of Śabarī is a bit problematic. That she is an elderly ascetic woman is made clear. She is called *siddhā* ‘perfected’, *śramaṇī*²⁷ ‘female mendicant’, *saṃśitavratā* ‘of rigid or fierce vows’, *vṛddhā* ‘old’, and *tāpasī* ‘ascetic or wretched’. She lives in an *āśrama*

26. Anasūyā is by no means the first powerful woman to be encountered in the *Rāmāyana* nor the first woman who lives the life of an ascetic; see, for example, the stories of Tātakā (1.23–24) and Ahalyā (1.47).

27. In his *Mahāvīracarita* Bhavabhūti does not use the name Śabarī, referring to her only by the title *śramaṇā* (V.28.1ff).

and is questioned by Rāma about her many ascetic practices and their fruition (3.70.7–8). Thus her credentials as an ascetic woman who practices numerous religious rites are firmly established. But twice she is also called *paricārīṇī* (3.69.19; 3.70.24), a word that can have a range of meanings such as ‘servant, attendant, or assistant’.²⁸ Śivasahāya in his comments to 3.69.19 is unambiguous in his understanding that the term refers to a *dāsī* ‘slave or servant’. Govindarāja clearly see her as a low class woman, calling her *jātyā hīnā* “low or base through birth or *jāti*,” an interpretation in keeping with later tradition.²⁹ B. C. Law identifies the Śavaras (v.l. Śābaras) as a non-*ārya* tribe.³⁰ According to *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* 7.18, Viśvāmītra’s eldest son is cursed to become the founding father of this tribe. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Śābarī is portrayed by Vālmīki as not only carrying out austerities—an activity seen elsewhere in Vālmīki to be a serious threat to the brahmanical world when practiced by people of low social or ritual status and for which other low class individuals are severely punished³¹—but as being rewarded for such actions with her final ascent directly to heaven.³² Moreover, at 3.70.14³³ we are told she is *vijñāne tām nityam abahiṣkṛtām*. This was translated by Pollock as “clearly not kept in ignorance,”³⁴ but literally means “never excluded from *vijñāna* (knowledge).”

Finally of Śābarī we are told: *tat puṇyaṃ śābarī sthānaṃ jagāmātmasamādhinā*, “Śābarī went to that holy place through her *ātmasamādhi*.” The compound *ātmasamādhi* is ambiguous, and the later tradition is clearly uncomfortable with it as an attribute of Śābarī. The word, as noted by Pollock, can be read to mean “by virtue of [her] meditation on the Self” or “through [her] own meditation.”³⁵ The commentators also take some pains to explain this compound. Nāgeśabhaṭṭa merely glosses *brahmasamādhinā* “through [her] meditation on *brahman*.” Śivasahāya, however, clearly disconcerted by a woman, especially Śābarī, meditating on *brahman*, glosses *svacittaikāgryeṇa* “through [her] own single-minded focus.” Govindarāja, too, is somewhat disturbed by the idea of Śābarī carrying out meditation and understands the term to be used in reference to both the *ṛṣis* and Śābarī, but with slightly different connotations. Thus the *ṛṣis* gain heaven through their yogic concentration that has as its focus the *ātman* (*ātmaviśayayogena*), whereas when the term refers to Śābarī, he understands her to gain heaven through the power of her own meditation (*svasamādhibalena*). Govindarāja clarifies, explaining, “Even in reference to a woman . . . the authority for yogic concentration (*yoga*) is possible” (*striyām api . . . yogādihikāraḥ saṃbhavati*).³⁶

Regardless of how unsettling the character of Śābarī is to the commentators, her participation in the religious activities of the *āśrama*—activities clearly identified as vedic (3.70.18)—does not seem to present an overt threat to Vālmīki or his intended audience. Whether or not Vālmīki understands Śābarī to be a tribal or low caste woman is unclear. However, if he does,

28. Pollock (*Aranyakāṇḍa*) translates it once (3.69.19) as “their servant” and once (3.70.24) as “whom I used to serve.” The term *paricārīṇī* is rare in epic literature, used only in these two instances in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and never in the *Mahābhārata*. The apparently synonymous term *paricārīka-* is used once in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.44.19), where it clearly means ‘attendants’, and nine times in the *Mahābhārata*. In the early literature, the term *paricārīṇī* is apparently known only to the *Chāndogyaopaniṣad*, where it is used twice of Jābalā, the mother of Satyakāma (4.4.2, 5). Olivelle (*The Early Upaniṣads*, 219) translates the term both times as “maid.”

29. Lutgendorf, “Dining Out at Lake Pampā,” 120–21.

30. Law, *Tribes in Ancient India*, 172.

31. For example, see the Śambūka episode (*Uttarakāṇḍa* 64–67).

32. 3.70.27.

33. 3.70.14 = *Rām GPP* 3.74.19.

34. Pollock, notes on *Aranyakāṇḍa* 70.14.

35. Pollock, notes on *Aranyakāṇḍa* 70.14.

36. Govindarāja on *Rām GPP* 3.74.19.

that he allows her participation in such activities is even more remarkable. Vālmīki clearly feels a need to end his *kāṇḍa* with a passage that involves yet another ascetic woman. In the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* Anasūyā's narrative role is relatively clear: she is a supportive and nurturing maternal figure and her words mark Sītā as a *pativrata*. At the same time Anasūyā voices the possibility of disruption of that status. On the other hand, the role of Śabarī in the narrative seems more obscure. She offers no real advice to Rāma nor does she tell him what to expect in the future, as does Kabandha in the immediately preceding *sargas*. Her only real interaction with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is to offer them appropriate hospitality and show them around Mataṅga's *āśrama*, which she does at the behest of her departed *gurus*. The inclusion of the passage, however, is, it appears, consistent within the logic of the narrative, in that it is one of a series of such encounters that mark transitions in the text, marked literally by the *kāṇḍa*'s boundaries and, in the narrative, by the movement of the heroes further into the realm of the unknown. Śabarī is a single female, without a lord or protector, and an ascetic. It is the very uncertainty of her identity and the ambiguity of her status that challenge and disturb the narrative. Her mere presence in a location normally inhabited and dominated by masculine figures but now absent those same markers is disruptive and at odds with the traditional role of a woman.

At the same time that the narrative disrupts the traditional notions of *āśrama* and ascetic, it creates a space for new constructions of religious identity to form. Śabarī has been excluded from the original rewards of the vedic rites—whether because of gender or social status or both—and awaits the arrival of “godlike Rāma,” the mere sight of whom will allow her at last to go to heaven. Rāma's role as god and savior, in general so carefully obfuscated by the poet elsewhere, is here momentarily unveiled to the audience.³⁷ Śabarī's former religious teachers have deserted her; she remains in limbo, awaiting Rāma, who will ultimately free her from her liminal existence, allowing her to transition, as it were, from a path of vedic rites, austerities, and meditation to one, it seems, heavily aligned with that of devotion. Finally, as the heroes move away from the *āryāvarta*, the female ascetic, especially if we understand her as a “tribal,” marks a narrative movement from the edges of the human world to one even more removed, that of the exotic monkey-kingdom of Kiṣkindhā.

ON THE MARGINS OF KIṢKINDHĀ

The episode with Śabarī occurs in the closing moments of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, and following it Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa enter into Kiṣkindhā. Toward the end of the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, once again Vālmīki introduces his audience to a female ascetic figure. The incident here, unlike the episodes of the previous two *kāṇḍas*, does not occur at the very end, but rather just prior (49–52.13) to the culminating events of this short *kāṇḍa*, i.e., the dejection of the monkeys over their seeming failure to find Sītā (52.13–54), the meeting of the monkeys with Sampāti, the elder brother of Jaṭāyus (55–57), and the preparations for Hanumān's jump to Laṅkā (58–66). Nevertheless, with the introduction of the third ascetic women, there can be little doubt that these women are intentionally crafted on the part of the author and carefully integrated into the narrative as markers of disruption and transition.

The monkeys of the southern search party, headed by Aṅgada and including Jāmbavān and Hanumān, have searched the entire southern region for Sītā to no avail. Exhausted from their heretofore fruitless search, Hanumān suggests that they enter a cavern, which appears

37. Recall, too, that Ahalyā is rescued by Rāma in the *Bālakāṇḍa* (*sargas* 47–48). See Gautama's curse of Ahalyā at 1.47.28–32 and her release from the curse at 1.48.13–21. Note, however, that Ahalyā is not offered such redemption in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*'s version of the episode (7.35.34–37).

to have a pool within from which they can sate their thirst (4.49.13–14). The monkeys enter the cave, but once inside they roam about without finding water, food, or an exit, until they are exhausted and desperate. Finally, despairing of their lives, they come across a light, and before their eyes there miraculously appear lovely golden and silver palaces, ornamented with jewels and surrounded by lotus ponds.³⁸ Finally they see an old woman:

*tām dr̥ṣṭvā bhṛṣasamtrastās cīrakṛṣṇājīnāambarām /
tāpasīm niyatāhārām jvalantīm iva tejasā // 4.49.31*

They saw that she was a fasting ascetic clothed in bark garments and a black antelope skin, who seemed to blaze with power, and they were greatly frightened.

Hanumān asks her who she is and where they are. She tells the monkeys that she watches over “this wonderful forest, this golden mansion,” which belongs to the *apsaras* Hemā and was a gift from Brahmā. Further questioned by Hanumān, she tells her own history as well as the history of this magical place. It was made by the *dānava* Maya, who possessed magical powers (*māyā*). He performed austerities for thousands of years and gained the wealth of Uśanas from Brahmā. He created the entire forest and lived there happily for a long time. He was attached to the *apsaras* Hemā, but Indra killed him. Then Brahmā gave this place to Hemā. The woman identifies herself as Svayaṃprabhā, the daughter of Merusāvārṇi (4.50.10–17).³⁹ Hanumān then tells Svayaṃprabhā who the monkeys are and how they have come to this place (4.51.1–17).

The passage once again occurs at a crucial juncture.⁴⁰ Of Svayaṃprabhā or her father Merusāvārṇi we know very little. *Matsyapurāṇa* 9.36 identifies Merusāvārṇi as a son of Brahmā and one of the Manus. Vālmiki appears to intend Svayaṃprabhā to be a semi-divine figure or one who is closely aligned with the divine and of a lofty social status. Her lineage and her association with the *apsaras* Hemā attest to this. In this way she is very different from Śabarī, who is provided with no lineage and whose name and description (viz., *paricāriṇī*) are the only hints to her status and role.

Like Anasūyā and Śabarī, Svayaṃprabhā is described as an elderly ascetic woman. Vālmiki, however, expends much more energy on her description than he does on Śabarī’s. We are told seven times that she is a *tāpasī*.⁴¹ We are also told repeatedly that she is clothed in the garments associated with asceticism (*cīrakṛṣṇājīnāambarā*, *kṛṣṇājīnāambarā*) and that she is a *dharmacāriṇī*, which Lefebvre generally translates as ‘righteous,’ ‘devoted to righteousness’.⁴² She is *niyatāhārā* ‘one who has restricted her intake of food’ (4.41.39; Lefebvre ‘fasting’) and *mahābhāgā* ‘fortunate’ (4.50.1; Lefebvre ‘illustrious’).⁴³ She is repeatedly

38. 4.49.22–24.

39. Compare 7.12.3–13, where Maya tells Rāvaṇa of his love for Hemā and offers their daughter, Mandodarī, in marriage to the *rākṣasa* overlord.

40. The description of the monkeys at a loss as to how to proceed, entering and roaming about lost in a dark, impenetrable cavern from which birds covered in [red] pollen emerge and which is in the possession of an *apasaras* and guarded by an ascetic woman, is striking with its sexualized imagery (4.49.8–9). Once the monkeys emerge from the cave, they will go on to discover Sītā’s location.

41. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* uses the term *tāpasī* fifteen times. In addition to the seven referring to Svayaṃprabhā (4.49.31; 4.50.1, 9; 4.51.1; 4.52.1; 4.52.6, 11), it is used four times of Anasūyā (2.109.8, 9, 20; 6.111.24), once of Śabarī (3.70.9), once of Sītā (5.13.29), and twice generically of the women who reside at the outskirts of Vālmiki’s *āśrama* (7.48.11, 14).

42. The term *dharmacāriṇī* is used thirteen times in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*: three times of Sītā (2.109.21; 5.63.24; 7.87.14), twice of Śabarī (1.1.46; 6.111.18), four times of Anasūyā (2.109.8, 9; 2.110.25; 6.111.24), and four times of Svayaṃprabhā (4.50.1, 9; 4.51.1; 4.52.11). Although not used exclusively of married women in Vālmiki, the employment of the term may well play on a culturally meaningful marital trope found in the *sāstraic* literature. See Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife*, 211.

43. On the term *mahābhāgā* see n. 25.

associated with light; for example her name, *svayaṃprabhā*, means ‘self-radiant’, and she is also characterized by such adjectival phrases as *jvalantīm tejasā* “blazing with her *tejas*” (4.49.32; Lefeber “who seemed to blaze with power”). Furthermore she is *sarvajñā* ‘omniscient’ (4.51.18) and *sarvabhūtahite ratā*, “devoted to the welfare of all creatures” (4.50.9).

Vālmīki makes us fully aware of the ascetic power of this woman. Her power is potentially as dangerous as it is beneficial. He lets us know that the cave in which she dwells is both dangerous and virtually impossible to leave once entered (4.52.6), and it is only by the grace and ascetic power of *Svayaṃprabhā* that the monkeys are allowed to escape from its clutches (4.52.7). Śabarī is said to practice austerities. However, her asceticism is apparently fruitful only for her, as it allows her direct access to heaven. Even so, Śabarī must await Rāma’s arrival before she is allowed to ascend to heaven. *Svayaṃprabhā*’s powers, on the other hand, somewhat like those of *Anasūyā*, are more salvific in nature and can be beneficial to others. She rescues those who placate her appropriately (cf. 4.51.19a “I am well pleased with all of you swift monkeys,” *sarveṣāṃ parituṣṭāsmi vānarāṇāṃ tarasvinām*). As demonstration of this, she promises to save the monkeys through the very power of her austerities.⁴⁴

Equally important to this discussion is *Svayaṃprabhā*’s relationship with *Hemā* and the cave. According to Lefeber, for the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* at least, the term used for cave or cavern here, *bila*, literally ‘cave, hole, or a burrow (of an animal)’, is otherwise employed by Vālmīki exclusively to mark the dwellings of the demons *Maya* and *Māyāvin*.⁴⁵ It is clear that the cave and its elaborate interiors, palaces, gardens, etc., have demonic associations. It was originally fashioned by the *dānava* *Maya* through his *māyā*. That *māyā* is used for this purpose further ties the cave with the demonic nether world.⁴⁶ While *Maya*’s relationship with *Hemā* is given little attention—we are told only *tam apsarasī hemāyāṃ saktam* “(Indra killed) him, who was attached to the *apsaras* *Hemā*” (4.50.14)—it provides an explicit association between the *apsaras* and the demonic, one that is reinforced in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, where *Maya* gives his and *Hemā*’s daughter to *Rāvaṇa* in marriage (7.12.3–13). The nature or duration of this relationship is, however, left to the audience’s imagination. We are told that *Hemā* is *nṛttagītāvisārādā*, ‘skilled at singing and dancing’ (4.50.17), but such talents are expected of an *apsaras*. It is clear though that their relationship is strong enough that *Brahmā* feels it appropriate to give her the golden residence upon her paramour’s death, along with the forest and “ever-lasting enjoyment of the objects of her desire” (4.50.15 *idaṃ ca brahmaṇā dattaṃ hemāyai vanam uttamam / śāśvataḥ kāmabhogaś ca gṛhaṃ cedam hiraṇmayam //*).⁴⁷

It is with *Hemā* that *Svayaṃprabhā* is associated; *Hemā* is her dear friend (*priyasakhī hemā*), and *Hemā* gives her a boon to guard this excellent residence (4.50.17). What stand out in this episode then are the focused (*ekāgrā*) asceticism of an unmarried woman, the powers gained from that asceticism, and the fact that that asceticism—described here in terms generally used of that practiced by normative male (usually brahmanical) ascetics—is used to guard a locus that is clearly aligned with the feminine and the demonic. These powers can be salvific, as evidenced by their eventual release of the monkey party from the cave, but such salvation is rare (4.52.6). The monkeys, fallen into the clutches, as it were, of the demonic, are rescued by the powers of the feminine. While *Svayaṃprabhā* and her lifestyle fall outside of the normative brahmanic tradition, the mechanism through which she is able

44. 4.52.7.

45. See Lefeber, *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, 324 (note to 5–7), who notes that Mankad (p. lix) understands the two principal *bilas* in the *kāṇḍa* to be the same. The term *bila* is used forty-two times in the Critical Edition, all, save for one (1.3.18), are found in the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*.

46. See S. J. S. Goldman, “Illusory Evidence.”

47. Compare Lefeber, *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, translation and annotation to 4.50.15.

to access her powers, i.e., asceticism, and the description of that asceticism appear, as do Śabarī's and Anasūyā's, to fall within a normative frame.

With the introduction of Svayaṃprabhā, the role of the ascetic female, which previously just disrupted the narrative, has, additionally, become aligned with the demonic world. She is fear inspiring—the monkeys at 4.49.31 are described as *bhṛśasaṃtrastāḥ* upon spying her—and yet she can be placated. Moreover, here the ascetic and the asceticism are clearly in the possession of the feminine. There is no male interference or intermediary (only Brahmā's gift of the place to Hemā). We are never in doubt that it is Svayaṃprabhā who is in control of herself and her asceticism. She, like Śabarī, is protecting the location of and for another, but here the possessor is Hemā. There is no lord or husband, there are no *gurus*, and there is no male who comes to the rescue. The womblike world is controlled by the feminine, and it is threatening, dangerous, sexualized (Hemā), and aligned with the demonic. One is delivered, literally uplifted, by the grace of the feminine. Once again the narrative movement is seemingly slowed by the introduction of the ascetic woman, but, very much as do Anasūyā and Śabarī, Svayaṃprabhā fulfills an important narrative function for both the author and audience in providing a transition, this time to the very core of the demonic world, the kingdom of the *rākṣasas*.

LAṆKĀ: WITHIN THE MARGINS

As the movement of the narrative gains proximity to the demonic world, encounters with the feminine as participant in or object of religious practice intensify and multiply. Thus at the beginning of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, as Hanumān leaps across the vast ocean to the realm of the demonic overlord, Rāvaṇa, he is confronted, in succession, by the fanged, devouring demonesses Surasā and Siṃhikā.⁴⁸ The encounters that Hanumān has with these monstrous women not only mark his entry into the demonic world, i.e., the world of the *rākṣasas*, but physically locate the demonic on/within the body of the female. Both these ocean-dwelling giantesses regard Hanumān as food.⁴⁹ Here Surasā is of particular import.⁵⁰

At the end of the opening *sarga* of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, immediately upon Mount Maināka's sinking into the sea, we are introduced to the figure of Surasā. Divine and semi-divine creatures approach Surasā, who we are told is the *nāgamātrī* 'mother of the *nāgas*', in order to solicit her aid.⁵¹ Vālmīki leaves little doubt that we are in presence of divinity. At 5.1.134, he identifies Surasā as a *devī*, 'goddess', who is requested by the *daivatas* ('divinities') to test Hanumān.⁵² In order to do this, Surasā is described as taking on the form of a *rākṣasa*.

48. See 5.1.134–153; 166–179. The narratives belong to a class typed as *vagina dentata*, wherein the womb is represented as having teeth and thus being able to castrate and devour its male victim.

49. S. J. S. Goldman, "Re-siting Sītā," 117–18.

50. On Siṃhikā, see S. J. S. Goldman, "Re-siting Sītā," 118.

51. 5.1.130:

*tato devāḥ sagandharvāḥ siddhās ca paramarṣayaḥ /
abruvan sūryasaṃkāśāṃ surasāṃ nāgamātaram //*

52. 5.1.134:

*evam uktā tu sā devī daivatair abhisatkr̥tā /
samudramadhye surasā bibhratī rākṣasaṃ vapuḥ //*

The full narrative is told at 5.1.130–55. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, unlike its sister epic, expends little energy on these serpentine figures. What we do know about them is that in Vālmīki's epic they are aligned with the *rākṣasa* world and/or associated with the feminine. Cf. the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (7.88.11–14), where Sītā descends into the earth on a *nāga*-supported throne (S. J. S. Goldman, "Gendered Narratives," 54–55). We also see them as aligned with Indrajit, as they become the weapons with which the *rākṣasa* prince binds the two brothers in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (*sarga* 35).

Toward the end of this brief episode Surasā is given one additional epithet, *Dākṣāyaṇī*.⁵³ The term normally refers to any daughter of Dakṣa, including Aditi, Diti, and Kadrū. Since Surasā has also been described as *nāgamātṛ*, it is not unlikely that the reference is to Kadrū, who is said to be the mother of the snakes and is a figure mentioned by Vālmiki elsewhere.⁵⁴ Of Surasā, her divinity, her role as the “mother” of the subterranean creatures, or her association with the *rākṣasas*, we know nothing beyond this passage.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, through the introduction of this female figure, who is identified as a deity onto whom maternity is superimposed and who has assumed the form of a *rākṣasī*,⁵⁶ the episode introduces a relationship between a feminine deity and the demonic world. What is different from previous episodes, however, is that here the feminine and the divine are superimposed upon the same figure.

As we move further into the *Sundara-* and *Yuddhakāṇḍas*, that is to say into the world of the *rākṣasas*, the juxtaposition of the divine, demonic, and feminine becomes explicit. After Hanumān completes his leap, the epic action now moves to Laṅkā, the capital city the *rākṣasas*, a place that seems in many ways to reflect the brahmanic worlds of Ayodhyā and the forests of Citrakūṭa and Pañcavaṭī and yet is clearly different. In the midst of a graphic description of the deformed *rākṣasa* guards of Laṅkā (5.3.26–33), we are told of demonic *yātudhānas* engaged in vedic recitation (*svādhyāyaniratān*) and of *rākṣasas* who are consecrated to perform vedic sacrifices (*dīkṣitān*). Some *rākṣasas* are depicted as ascetic, with matted locks (*jaṭilān*) or shaven heads (*muṇḍān*). Some wear garments of cowhide, while others are naked (*gojināambaravāsasaḥ*). They carry articles for the sacrifice, such as *darbha* grass and vessels for the sacrificial fire (*darbhamaṣṭipraharaṇān agnikuṇḍāyudhāms tathā*).⁵⁷ Significant here is the very commonality between the brahmanic practices of the ascetics of the Pañcavaṭī and those of Laṅkā which these descriptors reflect. The one exception is the wearing of ‘cowhide’ (*gojina-*), which disrupts the notion of Brahmanism. This word is not used elsewhere in the epic corpus and stands in stark contrast to the expected *kṛṣṇājina* ‘black antelope skin’, the normative ascetic garb. The description of the religious practices found in Laṅkā, so similar to those of cities like Ayodhyā and yet framed by the grotesque, along with this subtle but significant shift of vocabulary, provides a clear marker for the audience that the territory is at once familiar but nevertheless alien.

Hanumān searches the city and eventually finds Sītā in the *aśokavanikā* that is attached to Rāvaṇa’s *antahpuram*. It is here in the center of Laṅkā, in the center of the *rākṣasa* kingdom (and at the center of both the *kāṇḍa* and the poem), that Vālmiki situates his heroine, who gives voice to the concerns and ideals of her brahmanic worldview.⁵⁸ It is in this context that the poet will introduce the very antithesis of all that Sītā’s world stands for, the horrific feminine goddesslike figure called Nikumbhilā, who delights in the offerings of flesh and blood and is worshiped by the terrifying, brutal, and deformed *rākṣasī* wardresses of Sītā.⁵⁹

53. Compare R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 40.49 and note.

54. 6.40.49. The commentators only mention the genealogical connection. Thus Govindarāja understands that she is the descendant of Dakṣa (*dakṣasyāpatyaṃ dākṣāyaṇī*), while Nāgeśabhaṭṭa understands that she belongs to the lineage of Dakṣaprajāpati (*dākṣāyaṇī dakṣaprajāpatisaṃtāne*). Hanumān appears to realize Surasā’s real nature, addressing her as *dākṣāyaṇī* before she resumes her true shape (5.1.133–34). For the story of Kadrū and Vinatā, see *Mahābhārata* 1.14ff.

55. The word, which in its masculine form *dākṣāyaṇa* is not uncommonly used as an epithet of Śiva or Viṣṇu, conveys a semantic range of meanings such as ‘capable, able, right, southern’.

56. S. J. S. Goldman, “Nikumbhilā’s Grove,” 259–60.

57. 5.3.26ab, 28.

58. See S. J. S. Goldman, “Sītā Speaks,” 232–38.

59. See S. J. S. Goldman, “Nikumbhilā’s Grove.”

But first Vālmiki will paint a verbal picture of Sītā, as she is first seen through the eyes of the monkey hero in what is arguably one of the most beautifully crafted poetic passages of the epic. But beyond the poetry and numerous other important structural and thematic concerns and devices that thread themselves throughout the epic and *kāṇḍa*, much of the imagery that Vālmiki employs to describe Sītā objectifies her. It is through this objectification that he articulates the very threats, real or imagined, to his fantasized perfect society as well as the xenophobic anxieties of that idealized vedic tradition. Thus, in *sargas* 13 and 17, interspersed with the more standard adjectives used of women, we discover that many of the adjectives and similes employed to describe Sītā invoke ascetic images. Thus, Hanumān saw

*iṣṭām sarvasya jagataḥ pūrṇacandraprabhām iva /
bhūmau sutanum āsinām niyatām iva tāpasīm // 5.13.29*

That lovely woman—cherished by all living things, as is radiance of the full moon— was seated on the ground, like an ascetic woman practicing austerity.

Similarly, for example, Sītā is described as *upavāsakṛṣā* ‘emaciated with fasting’ (5.13.18, 22; 5.17.14,19), she is called *tāpasī* and *tapasvinī* ‘ascetic or wretched’ (5.13.21),⁶⁰ and she is *saṃśītavratā* ‘of rigid or fierce vows’ (5.17.5). Many of these adjectives are multivalent and, additionally, can be descriptive of a woman who is merely wretched or unhappy.

Images eliciting culturally significant tropes abound and are subtly and carefully crafted to contrast the present, filled with loss, failure, and catastrophe, with an idyllic past. We are told that

*śokajālena mahatā vitatena na rājatīm //
saṃsaktām dhūmajālena śikhām iva vibhāvasoḥ /
tām smṛtīm iva saṃdīghām rddhiṃ nīpatitām iva // 5.13.30bc–31*

By virtue of the vast net of sorrow spread over her, her radiance was dimmed like that of a flame of fire obscured by a shroud of smoke. She was like a blurred memory or a fortune lost.

*vihatām iva ca śraddhām⁶¹ āśāṃ pratihatām iva /
sopasargām yathā siddhiṃ buddhiṃ sakaluṣām iva // 5.13.32*

She was like faith lost or hope dashed, like success undermined by catastrophe or intellect dulled.

abhūtenāpavādena kīrtiṃ nīpatitām iva / 5.13.33ab
She was like a reputation lost through false rumors.

The images echo both narrative concerns, through the use of terms such as *apavāda* ‘rumors’⁶² and *kīrti* ‘fame’, and cultural ones, through references to fire obscured, destroyed memory, and lost faith.

Two central cultural markers of vedic society emerge in these images: the sacrifice and the language that preserves and transmits that sacrificial tradition. Fire is a central religious symbol and is at the heart of both the domestic and sacrificial rites. Its continuance is vital to the maintenance of the vedic tradition. Therefore, in a ritual context, the dimming or loss of fire is clearly associated with the loss of that tradition. The word here for fire, *vibhāvasu*, is found

60. See n. 41 above.

61. *śraddhā*, a feminine noun meaning here ‘faith or trust’, resonates with its derivative *śraddham*, a neuter noun that refers to the mourning and funerary observances to the ancestors carried out for the departed.

62. Consider particularly the use of the word *apavāda* in the context of the epic’s concluding *kāṇḍa* (R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 82–104 and *sarga* 44).

only eleven times in Vālmīki. Its use is somewhat restricted and relevant here in mapping a religious imaginary onto the fire. In addition to the two occurrences in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* used to describe Sītā (5.13.19, 31), four of the eleven occurrences are used in battle motifs and one is arguably so,⁶³ while four others are clearly associated with a ritualized use of fire.⁶⁴ Two of the latter are additionally and importantly directly linked to Sītā as she emerges from the fire at her *agniparīkṣā* (6.106.1, 3) and will be discussed below. Given that the passage here has no connection whatsoever with battle imagery and that a ritualized use of the term *vibhāvasu* is employed later in the *kāṇḍa* at one of the most emotionally charged moments of the epic in direct association with Sītā, the use of the word here and at 5.13.19 appears to be intentional and strongly suggestive of a sacrificial fire. Similarly memory and memorization, especially of the vedic corpus, which allow the proper performance of the ritual, are a central feature of the tradition. Loss of memory suggests the loss of what must be remembered. That this is at least a latent concern here is reinforced by the very word employed for memory, *smṛti*,⁶⁵ a term that has strong semantic resonances in the vedic world, as it stands for the collectivity of its traditional memory. Such an understanding is supported by both Govindarāja and Maheśvaratīrtha, who understand *smṛti* to refer to “the pronouncements of Manu, etc.” (*manvādyuktiḥ*).

But these images only hint at the object of such neglect, loss, and decline. At verse 36 Vālmīki finally leaves no doubt whatsoever as to his referent: it is the vedic tradition itself.

*tasya saṃdidihe buddhir muhuḥ sītām nirīkṣya tu |
āmnāyānām ayogena vidyāṃ praśītilām iva || 5.13.36*

As he examined Sītā closely, Hanumān’s mind was once more afflicted with uncertainty; for she seemed barely discernible, like some vedic text once learned by heart but now nearly lost through lack of recitation.⁶⁶

Again Vālmīki has carefully chosen the images and the vocabulary through which he describes Sītā. The simile *āmnāyānām ayogena vidyāṃ praśītilām iva* “[she was] like *vidyā* (knowledge) slackened through the non-use of traditional training of learning sacred texts through repetition” is the clearest indication yet that the poet intentionally uses these similes to equate Sītā to the sacred tradition of the vedas. The word *āmnāya* here, ‘sacred tradition or sacred texts handed down through repetition’, is particularly powerful. This is the only

63. 6.24.24; 6.44.14; 6.45.42; 6.57.65; 6.114.40. Two of these (6.24.24 and 6.57.65) are comparisons using the image of a burning forest fire. The first compares the radiance of weapons to the forest fire, and the second compares Narāntaka’s destruction of the monkeys to the destruction of a forest by fire. One (6.44.14) compares the irresistibility of Hanumān to that of a blazing fire. One (6.45.42) compares Prahasta’s entry into battle with that of a moth entering a fire. One referent is somewhat problematic in its classification (6.114.40). Here Hanumān, narrating to Bharata Rāma’s adventures since his departure from Ayodhyā, compares Rāma desiring to destroy Laṅkā to “Vibhāvasu desiring to destroy all the worlds at the end of a cosmic age” (*jighāṃsur iva lokānte sarvāṃl lokān vibhāvasuḥ*).

64. 3.68.13; 6.106.1, 3; 7.30.40. At 3.68.13 Kabandha instructs Rāma to seek out Sugrīva and make a compact with him in the presence of fire. At 7.30.12 Indrajit requests a boon from Brahmā that he should die only if he fails to complete his worship to Agni, god of fire. For 6.106.1, 3, see below.

65. The term employed is *smṛtīm*, which Rāmānuja, Nāgeśabhaṭṭa and Śivasahāya understand to be an irregular form of *smṛti* (*smṛtīm iveti dīrgha āṛṣaḥ*—so Nāgeśabhaṭṭa in his comments to 5.13.31).

66. The translation is somewhat free for the sake of comprehensibility and renders the term *āmnāyānām* as “once learned by heart . . . of recitation.”

time the word is used in Vālmīki's poem and it unambiguously refers to vedic knowledge and practice.⁶⁷

As the above verse makes clear, central to Vālmīki's world is the language that preserves it and guarantees its continuance.

*duḥkhena bubudhe sītām hanumān analaṃkṛtām |
saṃskāreṇa yathā hīnām vācam arthāntaram gatām || 5.13.37*

It was only with great difficulty that Hanumān was able to recognize Sītā without her ornaments, just as one might make out the sense of a word whose meaning had been changed through want of proper usage.

The words *saṃskāreṇa* and *vācam* and the phrase *arthāntaram gatām* specifically continue and intensify the linguistic imagery of the preceding verse. The word *saṃskāra* 'proper usage' is a polyvalent term and here suggests both ornamentation and grammatical refinement.⁶⁸ Similarly, the word *vāc* 'speech' strongly suggests not just generic speech, but Sanskrit, specifically that of the vedic tradition.⁶⁹ Through the phrase *arthāntaram gatām* "gone to another meaning," the poet reminds us that change, too, is loss.

Vālmīki does not overly burden us with such imagery, clearly allowing Sītā to remain a heroine in distress, but subtly, yet powerfully, he has associated her with vedic language and the tradition of the vedas that are threatened with destruction, that have been abducted, as it were, by alien agents, sadly neglected and in need of rescue.

Nevertheless, Vālmīki is quick to remind us of the threat, and four *sargas* later, as Hanumān spies on Rāvaṇa's entry into the *aśokavanikā*, he returns to a series of images that, in addition to marking Sītā's human frailties, resonate strongly with the same concerns of loss expressed earlier. Here, the poet uses powerful expressions of cultural normativity—a virtuous woman, trust, wisdom, and the like—to call to mind many of the traditional values associated with the lost idyll and locates them on or in the body of the heroine. He then marks each value as compromised.

*vr̥ttaśīle kule jātām ācāravati dhārmike |
punaḥ saṃskāram āpannām jātām iva ca duḥkule || 5.17.9*

She was like a woman born into a righteous and virtuous traditional family who had, through marriage, become part of a bad one.

*sannām iva mahākīrtiṃ śraddhām iva vimānitām |
prajñām iva parikṣiṇām āśāṃ pratihatām iva || 5.17.10*

She was like a fine reputation destroyed, like trust betrayed, like wisdom decayed, and like hope shattered.

67. The commentators support this interpretation. Govindarāja's second alternative on 5.13.36 (= *Rām* GPP 3.15.38cd) understands "like [vedic] knowledge, that is to say, barely perceptible, that is whose words are uncertain or unclear, through non-employment, that is to say through absence, of *āmnāya*, that is to say, of repetition or practice" (*yadvā āmnāyānām abhyāsānām abhāvena praśītilām asthirapadām vidyām iva*). Similarly, Śivasahāya in his comments to this passage understands the phrase to mean "[vedic] knowledge, that is to say, barely perceptible, through non-employment of *āmnāya*, that is to say, of repetition or practice" (*āmnāyānām abhyāsānām ayogena praśītilām vidyām*), while Nāgojibhaṭṭa offers only "'*āmnāya*,' that is to say, 'practice'" (*āmnāyo 'bhyāsaḥ*). In his first alternative, Govindarāja understands somewhat differently, glossing *āmnāyānām* as *vedānām*, "of the vedas," and *vidyām praśītilām* as *aprāptapraśīthām vidyām*, "knowledge, that is to say, without a firm foundation," that is to say, *vedabāhyavidyām*, "knowledge external to the veda" (*āmnāyānām vedānām ayogena sambandhena praśītilām aprāptapraśīthām vidyām vedabāhyavidyām*).

68. See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 394.

69. See S. J. S. Goldman, "Speaking Gender."

*āyatīm iva vidhvastām ājñāṃ pratihatām iva /
dīptām iva diśaṃ kāle pūjām apahṛtām iva // 5.17.11*

She was like one's future destroyed, like a command disobeyed, like the skies aflame at a time of catastrophe, and like divine worship improperly performed.

*padminīm iva vidhvastām hataśūrām camūm iva /
prabhām iva tapodhvastām upakṣiṇām ivāpagām // 5.17.12*

She resembled a ruined lotus pond or an army whose heroes have been slain; she was like a light shrouded in darkness or a river run dry.

*vedīm iva parāmṛṣṭām śāntām agniśikhām iva /
paurṇamāsīm iva niśām rāhugrastendumaṇḍalām // 5.17.13*

She was like a sacrificial altar defiled, a flame extinguished; she was like a full-moon night on which the orb of the moon has been eclipsed by Rāhu.

That specific ideals are constructed in terms of loss and destruction is indicative of the anxiety generated from the threats that the poet understands to challenge and disrupt his tradition. Carefully intertwined with these images are those that specifically mark the tradition that is threatened as sacrificial. Thus at 5.17.11 our heroine is like “divine worship improperly performed” (*pūjām apahṛtām iva*) and at 5.17.13 Sītā is compared to a “sacrificial alter defiled” (*vedīm iva parāmṛṣṭām*). The second line of 5.17.13 compares Sītā to the full-moon night. While the radiance or luster of the full moon is commonly used a mark of beauty as it was above at verse 5.13.29 (*pūrṇacandrāprabhām iva*), here Sītā is instead compared to the full-moon night (*paurṇamāsīm iva niśām*). The image works on a number of levels in addition to that of beauty, as the extended figure reminds the audience of the narrative of abduction and threat of consumption by the demonic (*rāhugrastendumaṇḍalām*).⁷⁰ Additionally, the compound *pūrṇamāsa*, from which the *taddhita paurṇamāsī* is derived, resonates strongly with the important obligatory rites performed monthly on the full moon day. That Vālmiki locates his carefully crafted poetic expressions of these threats in Laṅkā, the capital city of the *rākṣasas*, with its pseudo-vedic society and its brahmans who carry out what appear to be vedic sacrifices, only makes them more pernicious and dangerous.⁷¹

These passages, along with others scattered throughout the *kāṇḍa* and epic, constantly remind us of the heroine's uninterrupted and complete devotion to and absorption in her husband and lord. The ideal wife, as we have heard from the outset of the epic, is expected to do this. But it can be argued that Vālmiki also uses this constant devotion to Rāma (e.g., *rāmam anuvratām*—5.17.7) and meditation on him to provide a mechanism through which his audience might be able to counter such anxieties (cf. 5.13.50; 5.14.25; 5.17.7; 5.17.6, 7, 15, 20).

*naiṣā paśyati rākṣasyo nemān puṣpaphaladrumān /
ekastahṛdayā nūnaṃ rāmam evānupaśyati // 5.14.25*

She does not even notice these *rākṣasa* women or these trees full of fruit and blossoms. For her heart is fixed on just one thing, and she can see only Rāma.

*asyā devyā manas tasmīṃs tasya cāsyāṃ pratiṣṭhitam /
teneyaṃ sa ca dharmātmā muhūrtam api jīvati // 5.13.50*

This lady's thoughts are firmly fixed on him and his on her. It is for this reason alone that she and that righteous man have been able to survive for even a moment.

70. See, for example, 3.54.22 and 5.20.9, where Rāvaṇa threatens to eat Sītā for breakfast, and 5.22.32–41, where the *rākṣasī* wardresses of Sītā graphically describe how they will butcher and consume her.

71. In this context note also the use of *māyā* in the *rākṣasa* realm. See S. J. S. Goldman, “Illusory Evidence.”

*rāmasya vyavasāyājñā lakṣmaṇasya ca dhīmataḥ /
nātyarthaṃ kṣubhyate devī gaṅgeva jaladāgame // 5.14.4*

But this lady knows the firm resolve of Rāma and wise Lakṣmaṇa, and so she is no more excessively agitated than is the river Ganges at the onset of the rainy season.

Recall, too, that such a devotional path for salvation was originally suggested by both Kausalyā's meditations and Śabarī's pious activities.

The danger to Sītā, is, of course, primarily located in the figure of the evil ten-headed *rākṣasa* lord himself. But within this haunt of the *rākṣasa* lord we are introduced to other pernicious figures who threaten the well-being of Sītā and all for which she stands. In the *aśokavanikā* we find Sītā surrounded by hideous and frightful *rākṣasī* wardresses, who stand in stark contrast to the lovely women that inhabit Rāvaṇa's *antaḥpuram* and, of course, to the frail, lovely Sītā.

The density and detail of the description that Vālmīki employs when describing these creatures are in themselves telling.⁷² The *rākṣasīs* are deformed, have masculine characteristics (e.g., they bear weapons), are hideous, and are prone to arguments and fights. Like other *rākṣasas*, they delight in flesh and liquor and blood.⁷³ The picture that Vālmīki presents of these women is one designed to instill fear, loathing, and revulsion. Nevertheless, the obsessive detail with which they are described reveals a fascination, a perverse pleasure, as it were, in their very grotesqueness.

These *rākṣasī* wardresses are brought into the narrative again at *sarga* 20, when Sītā, once again paid suit to by the lovesick Rāvaṇa, rejects him. Frustrated, but still deluded by his infatuation for the beautiful princess, the king of the *rākṣasas* instructs the women to persuade Sītā, through varying means, that it would be in her best interest to become his queen. In a shorter but parallel passage, the *rākṣasīs* are again described in terms that highlight their deformities. Their very ugliness disrupts the narrative, while their grossness and deformity contrast vividly with Sītā's frailty and loveliness. These *rākṣasīs* entreat, cajole, and finally threaten Sītā. If she does not give in to Rāvaṇa's demands, they tell her that they will cut her up and eat her various body parts.⁷⁴ Their threats allow us, the audience, to glimpse the imagined world of these women. They, we learn, like *rākṣasas* elsewhere, crave flesh, particularly that of humans.

At this point the *rākṣasīs* introduce a rationale, it seems, for their ghoulish and macabre threats. These women desire no mere breakfast treat,⁷⁵ but rather to worship Nikumbhilā. The practices of this religion appear truly alien, cannibalistic in nature, centered around what appears to be a goddess, and carried out by the *rākṣasīs*. The character and nature of this divinity is largely left to the imagination:

[The *rākṣasī* Ajamukhā says:]

*vibhajāma tataḥ sarvā vivādo me na rocate /
peyam āṇiyatāṃ kṣipraṃ mālyam ca vividhaṃ bahu // 5.22.39*

"Then we can all have a share. I hate arguments! So quickly bring lots of things to drink and all kinds of garlands."

*tataḥ śūrpaṅakhā nāma rākṣasī vākyam abravīt /
ajāmukhyā yad uktaṃ hi tad eva mama rocate // 5.22.40*

Then a *rākṣasa* woman named Śūrpaṅakhā said, "I agree with what Ajāmukhī just said."

72. Vālmīki uses some sixteen verses (5.15.4–19) in his graphic description of these women. For a detailed discussion of this passage see S. J. S. Goldman, "Nikumbhilā's Grove," 260–63.

73. S. J. S. Goldman, "Re-siting Sītā."

74. 5.22.32–38.

75. See note 70.

*surā cānīyatām kṣipraṃ sarvaśokavināśinī /
mānuṣaṃ māṃsaṃ āśādyā nṛtyāmo 'tha nikumbhilām // 5.22.41*

“So quickly bring wine, the banisher of every sorrow! Let us eat human flesh and dance before Nikumbhilā.”⁷⁶

As I have argued elsewhere, Nikumbhilā is apparently intended to be a goddess figure.⁷⁷ The commentators support this and, anticipating the events of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, understand Nikumbhilā to be the name of or a manifestation of Bhadrakālī, worshiped at a shrine in Laṅkā. Govindarāja understands her shrine to be located at the western gate of the city (*nikumbhilā nāma laṅkāyāḥ paścimadvārapradeśavāsini bhadrakālī*), while Nāgeśabhaṭṭa and Śivasahāya understand her shrine to be located in the western section of Laṅkā (*paścimabhāgavartī*).⁷⁸

In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* the physical location of Nikumbhilā’s worship is not identified, but the *rākṣasīs* who worship her are located in the *aśokavanikā* attached to Rāvaṇa’s *antaḥpuram*. For Vālmīki the *antaḥpuram* is the site of sexual activity, as is its adjacent garden. The epic makes this clear through its erotic descriptions of the women inhabitants and the *aśokavanikā*.⁷⁹ Moreover, it is in the *aśokavanikā* that Rāvaṇa attempts to seduce Sītā.⁸⁰ That it is here that the *rākṣasī* wardresses threaten Sītā and introduce and describe the rite to Nikumbhilā is significant. Rāvaṇa’s *antaḥpuram* with its adjacent *aśokavanikā*, well-established as the locus of the sexualized, but contained, female, is now additionally inhabited by the threatening, devouring, and demonic females and the feminine deity whom they worship.

At last in the midst of the *rākṣasa* world, the central threat to Sītā and the world she represents is identified. Through the introduction of the goddess figure Nikumbhilā, Vālmīki both aligns religion with and locates it within the feminine body. The divinity is feminine, as are her devotees. They are located in the world of the feminine and the demonic and pose a direct threat to all that the brahmanic tradition represents. Within the feminine world of the *antaḥpuram* and its garden, Nikumbhilā—a fierce, horrific consumer of flesh and blood—and her devotees are contrasted with Sītā—gentle, frail, but strong and steadfast in her devotion to her lord, regardless of the danger. The stark contrast leaves no doubt that Sītā serves as a model for all and provides little opportunity to question the path that one should follow.

From the beginning of the second book, the fortunes of the hero and heroine have spiraled downward, only to reverse their path at this central moment of the epic, in the *aśokavanikā* when Hanumān finally finds and meets with Sītā.⁸¹ Parallel but on an inverse course, we can see the rise in power of the demonic world and its associated religious practices that subvert

76. Here we are only told that *rākṣasīs* will consume human flesh and dance to her. We are not, however, told of the locus of either the dancing or the consumption of flesh and wine. It is also of interest to note that several *rākṣasas* have names that include the word *kumbha* ‘pot’, e.g., Kumbha, Nikumbha, and Kumbhakarṇa. Thus, we encounter such figures as Kumbhahanu (6.46.15, 19; 6.62.37; 924*, following notes to 6.63.29), Kumbhakarṇa (*passim*), Nikumbha (6.62.37; 6.64; 7.27.23–24), and Kumbhīnasī (7.5.36 [elder]; 7.25.20, 25 [younger]).

77. See S. J. S. Goldman, “Nikumbhilā’s Grove.”

78. While the name Bhadrakālī is unattested in the Critical Edition, it does know of Kālarātrī (6.23.15; 6.34.15; 6.58.31).

79. For a description of the women of Rāvaṇa’s *antaḥpuram*, see, for example, 5.7.30–67; 5.8.28–45, 5.9.26–32; 5.10.19–23. On the use of the term *aśokavana* and *aśokavanikā*, see S. J. S. Goldman, “Blessed Events.” For a description of the *aśokavanikā*, where the poet maps the garden onto the body of a beautiful young woman, see 5.12.2–39. For a discussion of this passage, see S. J. S. Goldman, “Re-siting Sītā.”

80. See *Sundarakāṇḍa*, *sarga* 18, where Rāvaṇa seduces Sītā in the *aśokavanikā*. On this and surrounding passages, see S. J. S. Goldman, “Sītā Speaks.”

81. Hanumān first spies Sītā at 5.13.18 and initiates conversation with her at 5.28.3.

a true and pure vedic tradition. This trajectory is marked in part by Vālmīki's introduction of progressively more disruptive female ascetics and divinities at critical junctures throughout the text, culminating with the introduction of Nikumbhilā, the most horrific and threatening of all the figures.

RECLAIMING THE MARGINS

As the epic moves toward its denouement, the narrative no longer spirals further into the unknown, but rather reverses direction. Nevertheless, Vālmīki continues to mark the feminine body as a locus of religious ideology and transition. In the final moments of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, Hanumān backtracks and, upon returning to Kiṣkindhā, informs Rāma that Sitā has been found. Now at the opening of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Rāma gathers his simian forces and advances on Laṅkā. The narrative details the preparations for battle, the numerous battles between the forces of Rāma and Rāvaṇa, Rāma's ultimate defeat of the *rākṣasa* overlord, his rescue of Sitā, and triumphant return to Ayodhyā. Thus unlike in the other *kāṇḍas*, there is no need for a female ascetic or goddesses to mark narrative descent, we have already reached the center and found the horrific goddess figure holding captive, as it were, the vedic world. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, then, depicts the very battle to rescue and reclaim that lost tradition.

As its name suggests, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* expends a great deal of energy on the preparations for war and actual battles between the various *rākṣasa* forces on the one hand and Rāma and his monkey troops on the other. Discussions on *nīti*- and *dharmaśāstra* are numerous, with the majority of them articulated through the voices of *rākṣasas*.⁸² With the change in focus, little attention overall is paid to either women or religion, and even less to the juxtaposition of the two.⁸³ However, this is not to say that such an alignment is absent from the *kāṇḍa*.

Toward the end of the *kāṇḍa* Indrajit Rāvaṇi, the son of Rāvaṇa and arguably the most powerful of all the *rākṣasas* (save perhaps his father), is most notable for the magical powers (*māyā*) he possesses.⁸⁴ Of concern here is how Indrajit acquires his *māyā*. The actual source of Indrajit's magical power is problematic and somewhat over-determined. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* tells us that it is derived both from his sacrificial rituals, which he undertakes three separate times in the *kāṇḍa*, and from a boon (6.60.18–25; 6.67.4–10; 6.69.23–24; 6.72.12).⁸⁵ The situation in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* is no clearer.⁸⁶

Indrajit's three sacrifices are specifically said to take place at the Nikumbhilā shrine in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*.⁸⁷ Although the name refers to a site rather than a figure, it is still marked as

82. The use of the *rākṣasas*, especially those aligned with the court, reinforces the notion that Vālmīki has modeled his *rākṣasa* world to largely parallel that of the *āryas*. See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 65–68, for a discussion of class among *rākṣasas* of Vālmīki's epic.

83. Even so, the presence of the feminine is felt. See S. J. S. Goldman, "Sitā's War."

84. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, *māyā* is possessed and controlled by *rākṣasas*; see S. J. S. Goldman, "Illusory Evidence."

85. See 6.36.10 and 7.30.10–13. Cf. translation and/or notes (R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*) to 6.13.5; 6.34.28, 29; 6.35.15; 6.40.4; 6.47.15; 6.67.27; and 6.72.12, 13, 32.

86. At 7.25.9–12 we are told that Śiva gives Indrajit Rāvaṇi numerous boons (a heavenly, virtually indestructible chariot, the power called *tāmasī* to create darkness, two inexhaustible quivers with arrows and an invincible bow, and the divine weapon spell [Pāśupata]), as a reward for his numerous sacrificial undertakings. At 7.30.7–14 Brahmā gives Rāvaṇi (Indrajit) immortality through his valor in order to gain the release of Indra.

87. Indrajit's three sacrifices are described at 6.60.17–28, 6.67.4–10, and 6.69.23–36. At *sarga* 71, Indrajit undertakes but does not complete a fourth sacrifice. The term *nikumbhilā* is used six times in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (6.60.18; 6.69.23; 6.71.13; 6.72.10, 13, 27). At 6.60.18, the Nikumbhilā is unmarked, serving only as the locus of a verb of motion, *gatvā* "having gone to Nikumbhilā." At 6.71.13, however, Nikumbhilā is clearly identified as a shrine (*caityaṃ nikumbhilām nāma*). See S. J. S. Goldman, "Nikumbhilā's Grove."

feminine. The first occurrence, and the most detailed of the rites, is described at 6.60.17–28. Of special concern for our discussion is that the text names the location to which Indra-jit resorts to perform his sacrifice Nikumbhilā (*vīraḥ . . . gatvā nikumbhilām*—6.60.18) and situates it on or near the battlefield (*yuddhabhūmim*—6.60.19). What follows is a somewhat detailed description of a quasi-vedic sacrifice, but with a number of subtle inversions, indicating the *abhicāra* or ‘black magical’ nature of the ritual.

*tatas tu hutabhoktāraṃ hutabhuksadrśaprabhaḥ /
juhuve rākṣasreṣṭho mantravad vidhivat tadā // 6.60.20*

Then to the accompaniment of sacred *mantras* and in accordance with the ritual prescriptions, the foremost of *rākṣasas*, whose splendor was like that of Agni, god of fire, eater of oblations, offered oblations to Agni, god of fire, eater of oblations.

*sa havir lājasamṣkārair mālyagandhapuraskṛtaiḥ /
juhuve pāvakaṃ tatra rākṣasendraḥ pratāpavān // 6.60.21*

The valorous *rākṣasa* lord offered oblations to Agni, the purifier, god of fire, along with ritual offerings of parched grain accompanied by flowers and sandalwood paste.

Of note here is that the ritual, carried out by a male, replicates, although not perfectly, a vedic one. The ritual movement of the poem is away from the feminine, but still located in the feminine, Nikumbhilā. Here, however, the god Agni is introduced. The rite is reminiscent of the vedic sacrifice, with its parched grain, etc., and, much in the same vein as that sacrifice, it seeks specific gains for the sacrificer. But this sacrifice, it is shortly made clear, is no ordinary one.

*śastrāṇi śarapatrāṇi samidho 'tha vibhītakāḥ /
lohitāni ca vāsāṃsi sruvaṃ kārṣṇāyasaṃ tathā // 6.60.22*

Weapons served as the *śarapatra* grass, myrobalan wood⁸⁸ was the kindling. His garments were red and his ladle of black iron.

*sa tatrāgnim samāstīrya śarapatraiḥ satomaraiḥ /
chāgasya sarvakṛṣṇasya galaṃ jagrāha jīvataḥ // 6.60.23*

Having strewn the fire altar there with weapons, including iron cudgels, in place of *śarapatra* grass, he seized the throat of a live, pure black goat.

While the interpretation of the verses is somewhat problematic, what is important for the discussion at hand is the striking familiarity of the ritual and yet the introduction of elements that disturb that familiarity. According to Nāgeśabhaṭṭa, Śivasahāya, Govindarāja, and Maheśvaratīrtha, *śarapatra* grass is a type of *kuśa* grass. This grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*) is generally used for mats and roofs and is personified together with *kuśa* grass (*Poa cynosuroides*) as one of Yama’s attendants. Typically the sacrificial grass is spread over a stretch of ground to serve as the arena for the sacrifice. This very common tall grass is used for other rites, specifically in rituals for the deceased.⁸⁹ The garments of a vedic practitioner would normally be white. The commentators note that red garments (*lohitāni . . . vāsāṃsi*) are probably meant to be associated here with black magic.⁹⁰ The ladle made of black iron (*sruvaṃ*

88. Myrobalan wood (*vibhītakāḥ*) is *Terminalia bellerica*, one of the Myrobalans. The tree is known from the tenth book of the *Rgveda* (10.34.1), as its nuts are said to be used as dice for gambling.

89. See R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, notes to 6.60.22.

90. See 5.25.20, where red garments are tokens of ill omens. See Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 6.59.45–46, 6.58.26, and 6.67.5 and notes. See, too, *Agnipurāṇa* 229.14. On omens, see R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, notes to 6.4.6. On Govindarāja’s suggested connection with vedic priests, see below.

kārṇṣṇāyasam) is considered inauspicious.⁹¹ The pure black goat (*chāga sarvakṛṣṇa*), as the commentators explain, is to be used by Indrajit as the sacrificial offering (*homārtham iti śeṣaḥ*—so Nāgeśabhaṭṭa). The significance of a pure black goat is not made clear by the commentators; however, a female black goat is used in the crematory ritual⁹² and the color black is associated with things that are inauspicious.⁹³ This first description of Indrajit's sacrifice clearly marks the location as feminine, and locates within in it a sacrifice, a pseudo-vedic rite, that is at once is reminiscent and disruptive.

At 6.67.4–10 Rāvaṇa's son performs a second sacrifice. Here the location is not made specific, identified only as *yajñabhūmau*, 'on the sacrificial ground',⁹⁴ although contextually it is likely that the intended location is the Nikumbhilā shrine. Even though a number of the verses are repeated in part or in full from the previous passages, there are some significant differences that relocate the feminine in the vedic.

juhvataś cāpi tatrāgniṃ raktoṣṇīśadharā striyaḥ |
ājagmus tatra saṃbhrāntā rākṣasyo yatra rāvaṇim || 6.67.5

As Rāvaṇi began his oblation into the sacrificial fire, *rākṣasa* women, bearing red turbans, came in haste to where he stood.

The presence of the women at the sacrifice is problematic for both commentators and translators. According to Nāgeśabhaṭṭa and Kataka, these women are actually sacrificial attendants (*homaparicārikāḥ*). Govindarāja and Śivasahāya rationalize that they only bring the turbans for the officiating priests to wear (*rtvigdhāraṇārtham raktoṣṇīśāṇy ānayantya ity arthaḥ*). Govindarāja further substantiates this idea by quoting an untraced vedic passage in which *rtvik* priests are described as wearing red turbans (*lohitoṣṇīśā rtvijāḥ pracarantīti śruteḥ*).⁹⁵ A number of previous translations understand the women themselves as wearing the turbans, but this seems unlikely.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the dissonance created between the women carrying (wearing?) red turbans and the sacrifice appears to be intentional on the part of the poet and again introduces the feminine into the religious sphere in a role that disturbs the narrative. While otherness is clearly marked as demonic, the introduction of the *rākṣasīs* reminds us that it is in addition marked as feminine.⁹⁷ Moreover, the verse serves once again to reinforce the connection among the demonic, the divine or sacred, and the feminine.

A third sacrifice is referred to in *sarga* 69, wherein Indrajit returns once again to the shrine of Nikumbhilā and offers oblations.⁹⁸ The description here is brief, taking up only three verses, but it is telling and leaves little doubt that the sacrifice is intended to challenge the vedic sacrifice. Both earlier sacrifices incorporated an offering of a black goat, and although,

91. For example, at 1.57.9 Triśaṅku's royal ornaments turn to iron when he is cursed to become a *cāṇḍāla*. See *Agnipurāṇa* 230.1–4. Normally, of course, the ladle for the vedic sacrifice would be made of acacia or cutch wood (*Acacia catechu*).

92. See *Āśvalāyanagrhyasūtra* 4.2.7; see also *Śrautakośa* 1.II, p. 1071. The color black is associated with things that are inauspicious; see R. P. Goldman, *Bālakāṇḍa* 1.57.9, and 5.25.18 and notes.

93. As we see, for example, at 5.25.18, where in Trijāṭā's prophetic dream Rāvaṇa is said to be wearing black garments. See, too, R. P. Goldman, *Bālakāṇḍa*, 1.57.9 and notes.

94. Note though that at 6.69.23–24 the *yajñabhūmi* is said to be located at the Nikumbhilā shrine.

95. Both at *sarga* 60 and here Indrajit is said to be wearing red garments.

96. Pagani, for example, renders *raktoṣṇīśadharāḥ* "coiffées de turbans rouges." In her note to this passage (1670) she indicates that the commentators understand the *rākṣasa* women to be carrying out the duties of the sacrificers ("Ces rākṣasī au turban rouge font, d'après les commentaires, office de sacrifiants"). This, however, as noted above, is not correct.

97. It is not clear whether or not these *rākṣasīs* are the same horrific creatures as earlier described, or others. See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, *sargas* 66–67 and 5.15.9–17; 5.20.31–33; and notes.

98. 6.69.23–26.

as was noted, the significance of this particular animal of this specific color is not obvious, the sacrifice of similar animals is not unknown in the vedic tradition. Certainly elsewhere Vālmīki's poem acknowledges the existence of animal sacrifices.⁹⁹ This last sacrifice is not satisfied with the mere offering of a goat, but goes further:

*yajñabhūmyām tu vidhivat pāvakas tena rakṣasā /
hūyamānaḥ prajajvāla homaṣoṇitabhuk tadā // 6.69.24*

The sacred fire, purifier of all things, blazed up fiercely, as, in accordance with the sacrificial injunctions, the *rākṣasa* poured oblations of blood into it there on the sacrificial ground.¹⁰⁰

*so 'rciḥpinaddho dadṛṣe homaṣoṇitatarpitaḥ /
saṃdhyāgata ivādityaḥ sa tivrāgniḥ sumutthitaḥ // 6.69.25*

Glutted with the oblations of blood and swathed in flames, that fierce fire blazed up like Āditya, the sun god, at twilight.

These blood offerings by the *rākṣasas* are not unique. In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* such offerings of blood and flesh as well as their consumption are associated with worship of Nikumbhilā. The pouring of blood into sacrifices, however, up until this point has been limited to a mechanism for the pollution of the vedic sacrifice by *rākṣasas*.¹⁰¹ While the actual offering of blood into the sacrificial fire is unique here, it is not without textual precedent. Much like Vālmīki's description of the ascetics of Laṅkā, who wear garments of 'cowhide' (*gojina-*), his descriptions of these sacrifices are both familiar and disruptive, always harking back to a vedic rite, yet resonating with disharmony.

At *sarga* 71, Indrajit sets out to perform yet another sacrifice, this time to make himself unassailable in battle (verses 13–14). Here the name *nikumbhilā* is used in apposition to the term *caitya* 'shrine',¹⁰² clearly identifying the term as referring to the locus rather than the object of worship, although these need not be mutually exclusive. Indrajit's sacrifice is interrupted before it can be completed. The power of this sacrifice is so great that only its actual prevention allows for the ultimate defeat of Indrajit (6.71.14; 72.10–14; 74.2–6).

Given the shift in emphasis of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, it is not surprising that the term *nikumbhilā* now refers to the site or the locus occupied by Nikumbhilā rather than the figure herself. The shrine takes the name of the divinity that resides there. Vālmīki locates the *rākṣasa*'s sacrifices within this site and thus in the domain of the divinity Nikumbhilā, in a manner similar to how he locates his idealized, but lost, sacrificial world on and within the body of Sītā. The essential marker of this world, that very vedic sacrifice, has been usurped and reinvented, as it were, by a dangerous and powerful figure, Indrajit, who takes full advantage of its power to attack the very tradition it is supposed (in the correct hands) to support, nourish, and empower. The final interruption and destruction of Indrajit's sacrifice

99. According to the commentators, the reference is to the shrine, sanctuary, or sacred grove dedicated to the goddess Nikumbhilā. Nāgeśabhaṭṭa adds as an alternative that it may refer to a (sacred) banyan tree (*nikumbhilām caityam tadākhyādevālayam vaṭavṛkṣam vā*). See R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 22.41 and note, and R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 60.18; 72.13 and notes. According to several commentators, Nikumbhilā is said to be the name of a manifestation of Bhadrakālī, worshiped at a shrine in western Laṅkā (Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, notes to 60.18). Nāgeśabhaṭṭa understands that this visit of Indrajit to Nikumbhilā's shrine takes place on the morning of the tenth day of the battle (*daśamyām pūrvāhne nikumbhilāgamanam*).

100. *pāvakaḥ . . . / . . . prajajvāla homaṣoṇitabhuk*: Literally, "the purifier, enjoyer or eater of oblation-blood . . . blazed up." For a discussion of the verse, see R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa* notes to 6.69.24.

101. See, for example, 1.18.5; 1.29.10–21, where Mārīca and Subhāhu pollute the sacrifice of Viśvāmītra with blood.

102. See nn. 88 and 100 above and R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 5.22.41; 6.60.18; 6.69.23; and notes.

suggests the impending defeat not only of the *rākṣasas* and their control of and insinuation into the vedic world, but of the goddess and her shrine and of the world, with its manifold dangers, from which she emerges.

THE RĀMARĀJYA

That the body or site of the female is again used here to mark religious activity and anxiety follows a carefully developed pattern, as the poet has similarly situated such concerns located in the feminine at every important juncture and transition in the epic. Through this lens, we can briefly examine two vitally important and yet highly controversial events of the epic.

The first of these, which occurs at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*,¹⁰³ is Sītā's *agniparikṣā*, or 'trial by fire' and the second, which occurs in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*,¹⁰⁴ is the *sītātyāga* or 'abandonment of Sītā'. In modernity both these episodes are deeply disturbing and have sparked much debate, while their pre-modern reception is complex and often contentious.¹⁰⁵ For Vālmīki, though, both episodes appear narratively critical.

Once the battle is over and Rāvaṇa is slain, Rāma arrives at the Laṅka court. Rather than immediately reuniting with his wife, Rāma carries out the business of kingship and victory. He orders the funerary rites of his enemy (6.99.30–40), releases the celestial chariot that Indra had loaned him for his final battle against his enemy (6.100.6), returns to his camp, and orders Lakṣmaṇa to consecrate Vibhīṣaṇa in the lordship of Laṅkā (6.100.9–10). It is only at this point that he thinks of Sītā. He now orders Hanumān, with the permission of Vibhīṣaṇa, to enter the palace and tell Sītā that he has come and has slain Rāvaṇa (6.100.21–22). Hanumān is to hear her response and report back to Rāma (6.100.23). Hanumān does so and yet Rāma is reticent to reunite with her. It is only after Hanumān insists that he see Sītā that Rāma, gloomy and tearful, orders Vibhīṣaṇa to have her brought to him (6.102.2–5). Upon her arrival, Rāma cruelly rejects her, as she had lived in the house of another man (6.102.16–36; 6.103). Sītā offers a spirited and strong rebuttal, but is unable to bear such treatment and calls upon Agni, the god of fire, to testify to her purity. She has Lakṣmaṇa build and light a pyre. She enters, preferring death to such treatment (6.104). Agni protects Sītā and, incarnate, emerges with her unharmed from the blazing funeral pyre, testifying to her purity (6.106.1–9).

The passage is intense, distressing, and meaningful on multiple levels. In light of the concerns of this paper, it is the transformative nature of the passage that is particularly significant. Sītā has been culturally marked as defiled from being in the control of a male other than her husband and is no longer acceptable as a dharmic wife. Again many of the terms used in the passage resonate with symbolism that reflects defilement and purification. At 6.104.18 and 22, for example, the term *citā* 'funeral pyre' is employed. Prior to this in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the term is used exclusively to refer to the pyre that is constructed for the cremation the bodies of the dead.¹⁰⁶ Its use here clearly suggests a similar use. Death and its attendant rites are traditionally considered highly polluting, and cremation functions as a purifying process. Thus, it can be argued that the passage makes a clear association between defilement of Sītā at the hands of the *rākṣasas* and pollution suffered through death.

103. *Yuddhakāṇḍa* 101–4.

104. *Uttarakāṇḍa* 43ff.

105. See, for example, Sutherland, "Draupadī and Sītā: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models"; R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 103–4; R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 82–104.

106. 2.63.16; 2.70.16, 17; 2.71.5; 3.64.28, 31; 3.68.2, 4, 5; 4.24.30, 40; 5.11.41; 5.24.24; 5.56.64; 6.104.18, 21.

The kennings used for fire, as earlier, are significant and, perhaps, even more prevalent: *havyavāhana* ‘bearer of oblations’ (6.104.19; 105.5), *hutāsana* ‘eater of oblations’ (6.104.22, 25, 26; 6.106.14), and *pāvaka* ‘purifier’ (6.104.24; 6.106.4), in addition to *vibhāvasu* (6.106.1, 3) discussed above. Each resonates strongly with the ritual and purificatory functions of fire. The ubiquitous term *agni* is used somewhat sparingly in this passage, occurring only twice (6.104.23, 27).¹⁰⁷ Sītā’s actions, too, are ritualistic in nature. At 6.104.22 she makes a circumambulation of Rāma (*rāmam . . . kṛtvā pradakṣiṇam*), while at 26.104.5 she similarly reverently circles the fire (*parikramya hutāsanam*). And again at 6.104.23 she pays obeisance to the gods and brahmins (*praṇamya devatābhyaś ca brāhmaṇebhyaś ca*) and, with her hands cupped in reverence (*baddhāñjalipuṭā*), utters her vow of fidelity and enters the fire. Now Sītā, while still a site of ritual identity, is located in and purified by the sacrificial fire. Her entrance into the fire and re-emergence from it are a symbolic death, purification, and rebirth. She and the tradition that she symbolizes emerge pure and fully in the possession of Rāma. At one level then the *agniparikṣā* can be understood as a transitional juncture through which the vedic tradition, symbolized by the vedic sacrifice and identified with the body of the heroine, is taken back, purified, and reinstated.¹⁰⁸

In the *Uttarakāṇḍa* we can take this one step further. Now back in Ayodhyā Sītā is at long last pregnant and fulfilling her duty as a wife to provide progeny for her husband. In this, she is recapitulating the roles of her mothers-in-law in the *Bālakāṇḍa*. However, Sītā’s abduction by Rāvaṇa calls into question issues of purity, paternity, and legitimacy. Before she can give birth, concerns about her purity and innocence once again raise their ugly heads. Rāma, who has heard rumors among the citizens criticizing his willingness to take her back (7.42.16–19), orders Lakṣmaṇa to take her to the wilderness and leave her (7.44.15–18). Grief-stricken, Lakṣmaṇa does as he is commanded, abandoning the pregnant Sītā in the desolate forest (7.45–47). She is rescued by no less a personage than the sage Vālmiki, now the sole refuge of Sītā, and taken to his *āśrama* (7.48). Here she gives birth to Rāma’s two sons, Kuśa and Lava, who are raised by Vālmiki and then taught by the sage the poetic account of their father’s (and mother’s) adventures. Years later, Rāma decides to perform an *aśvamedha* (7.82–83), during which the two young boys sing the poem in his presence (7.84–85).¹⁰⁹ Rāma, recognizing the two bards as Sītā’s sons, summons her to the sacrifice, demanding that she once again swear to her innocence in the presence of all in attendance (7.86). Sītā, accompanied by Vālmiki, who first testifies to her purity and identifies Lava and Kuśa as Rāma’s sons (7.87.14–20), enters the arena. Rāma acknowledges that the two boys are his sons (7.88.2–4), and Sītā once again swears to her fidelity, but her words are at once a testament to her innocence and a rejection of the world that has turned against her:

*yathāhaṃ rāghavād anyam manasāpi na cintaye |
tathā me mādhavī devī vivaraṃ dātum arhati || 7.88.10*

“As I have never even thought of any man other than Rāghava, so may MādHAVI, the goddess of the earth, open wide for me.”

Sītā’s *satyakriyā* ‘truth act’ uses her last words to reaffirm the purity of the tradition that she represents but also to mark her representation of it as no longer necessary. Sītā, born from the sacrificial ground, now once again returns to it.

107. The word *agni* is used sixty-two times in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. The word *agni* is also used at 6.105.25 and 6.106.16; however, neither of these verses is technically part of the *agniparikṣā*.

108. See R. P. Goldman et al., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, *sarga* 104 and notes.

109. For an analysis of the narrative importance of the *aśvamedha* in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, see R. P. Goldman and S. J. S. Goldman, *Uttarakāṇḍa*, 144–56.

The *aśvamedha*, the very same vedic sacrifice that sets the epic in motion, now marks the beginning of its conclusion. However, the difference between the two *aśvamedhas* is dramatic. In the first, the wives of the king, without voice, participate in that ritual. It is as a result of this (and, of course, the *putreṣṭi*) that Rāma and his brothers are born. But the wives of Daśaratha neglect their duties toward their husband, and each in her own way undermines and weakens the ideal society Vālmīki seems to long for. In the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, at the *aśvamedha*, Sītā, carries out her duty as both wife and mother, but ultimately rejects both roles, using her voice one final time to return to her mother. After this the feminine is silenced and returns to her subterranean world.

Sītā's descent into the earth coincides with the end of Rāma's *aśvamedha*. It is only following upon this that Rāmarājya can truly thrive and Rāma can rule free from obstacles. Although Rāma continues to carry out many sacrifices, they are fundamentally different. For, in them, the feminine component of the sacrifice is replaced by a lifeless, metal image (7.82.19; 7.89.43) which no longer poses a threat.

On one level, then, we can see in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* a reflection of a vedic society that felt the purity of its sacrificial tradition, as symbolized by Sītā, threatened. The fragility of that tradition is highlighted, for, like a wife, it can be abducted, held captive, and defiled. The threat is located in the demonic—the world of the *rākṣasas*—and represented by the devouring, mother-goddess-like figure of Nikumbhilā. Vālmīki's epic recognizes this threat, but rejects, defeats, and finally contains it. Once the threat is contained, the vedic tradition is reclaimed, purified, and subtly reconfigured—to nullify potential future threats of a similar nature while allowing an idyllic society once again to reign supreme.

The conflation of the feminine—with her potential to be taken and defiled by the other, by the demonic—and the sacrifice—which, too, can be possessed and is subject to misuse and defilement—does not, of course, originate with Vālmīki.¹¹⁰ What I suggest that is new is the systematic incorporation of purposefully constructed female figures at significant junctures as harbingers of and markers of this narrative movement and transition within this thematic. Thus we can understand that Vālmīki has systematically and intentionally introduced each of these figures—Sītā, Anasūyā, Śabarī, Svayaṃprabhā, Surasā, and Nikumbhilā—both as markers and loci of the feminine. Each of these characters represents various levels of the feminine intruding into religious practices in an ever-increasing destabilization of the poet's idealized vedic world or as the means for its reemergence as a stronger, more stable, and less corruptible one. Vālmīki's creation and use of these intriguing figures provides further testament both to the author's genius and the underlying unity of structure of his great epic.

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110. See, for example, *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.18–27, 3.2.4.1–6, *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* 1.27, and *Bṛhad-āraṇyakopaniṣad* 6.2.13.

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