

## SHELDON POLLOCK

### RĀKṢASAS AND OTHERS

*For Ute Gregorius*

The « city » books of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* develop in strikingly similar ways, something that suggests a closer than generic tie between the two works. But in the multitude of similarities it is precisely the divergences that are most intriguing<sup>1</sup>. It has seemed to me that one of the salient differences between the two narratives concerns the outrage perpetrated against the heroine. In the *Mahābhārata* Draupadī is dragged half-naked into the assembly hall by her husbands' « brothers » (specifically Duḥśāsana acting on orders of Duryodhana); the outrage is a public one, its location eloquently symbolic of the intense political struggle that is raging between the two sets of claimants to the throne; and it is perpetrated by human antagonists, indeed, the very kinsmen of the Pāṇḍavas. The parallel event in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. Here, however, the outrage is for all purposes a private one (bearing, one is tempted to say, the hallmarks of a fantasy); it takes place in the forest with only the trees, streams, mountains, and animals of Janasthāna to witness it. As if by design it is emptied of the particularized political content that fills to overflowing the scene of the *Sabhāparva*, a narrative alteration

---

1. For a full discussion see *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*, Vol. II *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, Princeton, 1986, Introduction, Chapter 5.

required by what would appear to be the major interest of the poem, a meditation on kingship envisioned cosmically, as it were, *sub specie aeternitatis* (and not locally as in the *Mahābhārata*)<sup>2</sup>. Finally, and what is most important to the matter at hand, the antagonist is not only not a political rival of Rāma's — the idealized world of Ayodhyā neither permits nor even acknowledges the existence of any rival that could provoke the desperate, self-destructive political response of the *Mahābhārata* — but he does not seem even to belong to the same biological order as the hero.

I have elsewhere suggested that Rāvaṇa is easily assimilable into a venerable line of demonic antagonists (Hiraṇyakaśipu and the like), and so fundamentally represents an incarnate power of cosmic evil<sup>3</sup>. But this interpretation is not altogether competent to explain the rich and complex significance of the demonic beings so densely inhabiting the world of the « Forest » and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a whole. Who are these *rākṣasas*, and with what meanings are we to invest them?

The questions, of course, have been posed before, not once but repeatedly. And the attitude generally encountered is perhaps best summarized in the following remarks of Grierson's: « Most people admit that behind the mythical Rākṣasas and Asuras, there were memories of, or allusions to, very real personalities [that is to say, « human beings obnoxious to the authors of the passages in which their names occur »]... Rākṣasas have often been identified with this or that aboriginal tribe, and no one has ever objected to this on principle»<sup>4</sup>. This predilection for historicizing the demons of our epic (and Vedic) texts is very widely shared, and if scholars are sometimes too circumspect to frame specific equations<sup>5</sup>, a good

---

2. See *The Divine King in the Indian Epic*, in JAOS, 104 (1984).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 513 ff.

4. G. GRIERSON, *Paiśāci, Piśācas, and Modern Piśāca*, in ZDMG, 66 (1912), pp. 67-69.

5. On the problem of the meaning of demons in pre-epic literature, Gonda most recently reiterates the long-held view that « It is not always possible to decide whether a definite name belongs to an aboriginal enemy or to a demon. Śambara, for instance, seems to be a demon in part of the corpus [sc., the RV], but may elsewhere be a human chief » (J. GONDA, *Vedic Literature [Samhitas and Brahmanas]*, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 129). Cf. Macdonell and Keith: «It is impossible to say with certainty whether Śambara

number of possible identifications have none the less been offered. Thus the *rākṣasas* have been viewed as cannibals, primitive cave-dwellers, theriomorphic shamans, masked dancers in totemic rites of a sort still found among the Gond and other tribes; or as referring to actual historical ethnic groups, whose descendents yet bear cognate names, as do various sub-tribes and sub-castes in modern Bihar<sup>6</sup>. They have even been identified — here we find a specific equivalence, and one that has secured a measure of Indological notoriety for the very disdain with which it was greeted — with the Ceylonese Buddhists, the opponents and finally victims of a hegemonic Brahmanism, represented in this rigid allegoresis by Rāma<sup>7</sup>.

Now, such historicization is not in itself unreasonable. After all, people do make their fictions out of their facts, and come to treasure their stories precisely because they are significant constructions and interpretations of their own histories, and thus deeply and immediately meaningful to them. But the line of enquiry I wish

---

was a real person or not ... though quite possibly » (*Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Reprint, Delhi, 1967, Vol. II, p. 355). Hillebrandt likewise is not altogether sure: The *rakṣāṃsi* may be the gods or heroes of enemy tribes; RV VII.104, which deals ostensibly with *rakṣaḥ*, points in his view to a fight with real enemies (*Vedische Mythologie*, Breslau, 1927, Vol. II, pp. 413-14; cf. also Keith's remarks: «... the Rākshasas, demons conceived as in animal as well as human shape, who seek to destroy the sacrifice and the sacrificers alike, but whose precise nature cannot be definitely ascertained » (*Cambridge History of India*, Cambridge, 1922, Vol. I, p. 106).

6. So W. RUBEN, *Eisenschmiede und Dämonen in Indien*, Leiden, 1939, p. 299, who summarizes the earlier views of E. W. HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1915, pp. 38 ff., and of A. A. MACDONELL, or at least Macdonell's implications, *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1897, pp. 162 ff., and cites the ethnography of H. H. RISELY, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1891-1892, see particularly Vol. II, p. 194. Similar in spirit are the more recent remarks of R. Thapar: «The concentration of the term *rākṣasa* in the Vindhyan region would perhaps identify them with the chalcolithic cultures and the Black-and-Red ware people of the second and early first millennium B.C. ». (*Exile and the Kingdom*, Bangalore, 1978, p. 19).

7. See TALBOYS WHEELER, *History of India*, London, 1869, Vol. II, pp. 249 ff. (cited in WEBER, *Über das Rāmāyaṇa*, Berlin, 1870, pp. 4-5). Jacobi ridiculed Wheeler's allegorical equation first on the grounds of its historical improbability, and second (a point made in part already by Weber), because of the fact that it is essentially meaningless, having been for 2000 years inaccessible to all but a lone Victorian Englishman (H. JACOBI, *Das Rāmāyaṇa*, Bonn, 1893, pp. 89-90). He does not himself, however, hazard any interpretation of the *rākṣasas*.

to follow here seeks to determine the signification of the *rākṣasas* in the imaginative world of the epic poem itself, and in this enterprise narrow historical constraints are quite out of order; the significance of these beings evidently transcends all such limits. For if the *rākṣasas* ever did have any specific, local habitations, they had utterly and irretrievably lost them by the time Vālmīki came to compose his poem, and the attempt to reclaim these habitations is perhaps the least interesting and productive of the critical operations we can undertake. This is not, however, to say that we are in any important sense abandoning the task — the essential task, in my view — of historicization; what these demons represent, what they refer to still has an irreducible element of facticity. But the facts are in the first instance to be viewed as *ideational* ones. It is as generalized imaginative representations, large symbolic responses to important human problems, that the *rākṣasas* seem to be richest in signification, yet what are these but the responses and representations of a specific historical people — the traditional Indians.

The *rākṣasas*, to be sure, are not the only fabulous creatures we confront in the « Forest »; all the rest of the *Rāmāyaṇa* after the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (at least through Book VI), takes place in regions populated by beings altogether alien to the City of Ayodhyā. It is as if the author were mapping out for us the boundaries of the new, non-human domain of the narrative that begins with the *Aranyakāṇḍa* when he frames the book with two symmetrical episodes in which the hero confronts the monstrous, first in the person of Virādha (Chapters 2-3), and later of Kabandha (65-69). It is worth considering these two incidents a moment because they point up some variations in the poet's representation of the fantastic that may help us focus on several important peculiarities displayed by the *rākṣasas*.

Both these creatures are called *rākṣasas*<sup>8</sup>, but among the various traits that, as we shall see, distinguish them sharply from

---

8. The text is somewhat uncertain about Kabandha. In III.65.24, before his life-history has been made known to the audience, he is referred to as « foremost of the *dānavas* » (a class of beings usually kept distinct from *rākṣasas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

other rākṣasas is that they live permanently in the forest, alone and without community. Moreover, with respect to human beings, they are as different in their physical appearance as they are in their geographical and sociological marginalization. First Virādha:

*And there in the very heart of the forest teeming with ferocious animals, Kākutstha saw, towering before him like a mountain peak, and roaring, a man-eating monster. His eyes were sunken, his mouth was huge, his belly rough. He was massive, loathesome, rough and tall, monstrous and a terror to behold. Clad in a tigerskin dripping with grease and spattered with blood, he was as terrifying to all creatures as Death with its jaws agape. On an iron pike he held transfixed three lions, four tigers, two wolves, ten dappled antelopes and the massive head of an elephant, smeared with grease, its tusks still intact. And he was roaring deafeningly<sup>9</sup>. (III.2.4-8).*

And then Kabandha:

*As they carried on their relentless search through the entire forest, a tremendous noise broke out that seemed to shatter the forest. The deep wood seemed altogether enveloped in wind; the noise coming from the forest seemed to fill the heavens. Seeking the source of the noise, Rāma and his younger brother came upon a mammoth, huge-chested rākṣasa in a thicket. The two of them drew near and there, facing them, stood the giant Kabandha, a creature without head or neck, his face set in his belly. The hair on his body was bushy and wiry, he towered before them like a mountain, a savage creature like a black stormcloud and with a voice like thunder. And in his chest, darting glances, thick-lashed, tawny, prodigious, wide and terrible, a single eye. Licking his massive lips from which protruded massive fangs, he devoured tremendous apes and lions, elephants and deer. Contorting his two terrible arms — each one of them a league in length — he would seize all sorts of animals*

---

9. My translation, as are all the rest in this essay unless otherwise noted. Abbreviations of Sanskrit texts, and the particular editions used (again, unless otherwise noted), are those of the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sanskrit*, Poona, 1976- .

*in his hands, apes, deer, flocks of birds. He pulled in countless animals, and pulled them apart limb from limb, as he stood there blocking the path the two brothers were taking. (III.65. 12-20).*

The physical deformity of these two creatures — which, note well, is unchangeable — is in large part an index of their moral deformity. This is a symbolic concomitance we see operating on several important occasions in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (in the malevolent servant Mantharā, who is wicked and ugly; in Sītā, who is good and beautiful; in Kaikeyī, whose characterization — as beautiful and corruptible — draws on this concomitance to activate a powerful ambivalence)<sup>10</sup>, and shall encounter again vividly in the *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā. In fact, the concomitance is made explicit in the life-histories of the creatures themselves: both are divine (and relatively benignant) beings who were cursed to enter monstrous bodies as a consequence of moral transgression, the *gandharva* Tumburu becoming Virādha as a result of negligence in performing his duties for Kubera (brought on by his sexual incontinence)<sup>11</sup>, and the *dānava* Danu becoming Kabandha after hubristically attacking Indra, the king of gods<sup>12</sup>.

Virādha and Kabandha are doubtless related to other monsters with which we are familiar from a host of *Weltmärchen*. One thinks, with respect to Kabandha in particular and for obvious reasons, of the first monster in European literature, the one-eyed cyclops Polyphemus, a devourer of men, who

---

10. POLLOCK, *op. cit.*, (note 1), p. 55, where I try to show that this formulation of concomitance is tolerably old, and becomes virtually a *topos* (cf. *KuṁāSam.* V. 36; *Sāk.* IV.0.7-8 [Pischel], *Mṛcch.* IX. 16).

11. Raghavan has suggested that the story of Virādha supplied the narrative model for Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* (V. RAGHAVAN, *The Rāmāyaṇa in Sanskrit Literature*, in « The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia », ed. V. Raghavan, New Delhi, 1980, p. 8), but I see no evidence for this other than the admittedly somewhat similar plot.

12. There is some textual uncertainty regarding the story of Danu's curse. Kabandha's exposition of his history in III.67 is evidently a fusion of two separate stories, one contained in vss 1-6, the other in vss. 7-16 (a state of affairs that curiously enough seems to occur also in the case of Virādha's story, cf. III.3.5-6 and 18 ff.). For further particulars see my note on 67.1 in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki, Vol. III: Aranyakāṇḍa*, Princeton, forthcoming.

... did not range with  
 others, but stayed away by himself; his mind was  
 lawless  
 and in truth he was a monstrous wonder made to  
 behold, not  
 like a man, an eater of bread, but more like a  
 wooded  
 peak of the high mountains seen standing away from  
 the others.

(Odyssey IX.188-192)<sup>13</sup>.

Or we may consider all the later Plinian monsters, the Blemmyae notably, that for millenia have fascinated Westerners — Shakespeare, for example, who has Othello describe them: « men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders » (I.iii.144-145). In fact, to a large extent these beings function for the traditional Indian in just the same way as the Plinian monstra functioned for the Roman and medieval European. The Sanskrit epic poet tells of the monstrous races in the unexplored, exotic lands to the south precisely as Pliny writes of those in North Africa and « Ethiopia », indeed, of the « Bragmanni » themselves. The fascination such creatures hold for both is evident. Their appeal is based, as one scholar recently summarized it, on factors such as « fantasy, escapism, delight in the exercise of the imagination, and — very important — fear of the unknown »<sup>14</sup>. There is additionally an important religious-ethical dimension to these particular Indian monsters (interestingly one not altogether absent in the monsters of the European Middle Ages)<sup>15</sup>. Their appearance and behavior are a result of transgressions committed in a previous embodiment; their exist-

---

13. What makes the cyclops particularly inhuman and offensive to the Greeks is precisely this asocial existence. For some further reflections on the cyclops see D. PAGE, *The Homeric Odyssey*, Oxford, 1966, pp. 1-20. The translation quoted is that of R. Lattimore, New York, 1967.

14. See J. B. FRIEDMAN, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, p. 24 (on Pliny's Bragmanni see pp. 164 ff.). This interesting book helped to focus much of my thinking about the Indian version of Pliny's teratology.

15. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 89-103, 187 (the monstrous races, he points out, are viewed as cursed, and so may function as « theological warnings »).

ence is literally a curse; they are fallen creatures who, as I try to demonstrate in another context, can be liberated only by the spiritual sword wielded by the god-king, Rāma <sup>16</sup>.

Rāvaṇa and the other *rākṣasas* <sup>17</sup> of Laṅkā share several of these traits, and offer a somewhat comparable « appeal », but they diverge in a number of major and crucial respects. We do observe no less in the case of the *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā a similar geographical distantiation, functioning as a symbolic measure of social-ethical deviance — the island fortress is really to be looked for on no map; it is simply at the edge of the world, the moral no less than the geographical world, the Indians knew or could conceive of. But this locus is far from constituting the anti-world we usually associate with monsters. The particular habitation of the *rākṣasas*, for instance, is in many respects a carbon copy of Ayodhyā itself. The description of their city — its layout, architecture, palaces and mansions — which is given in vivid and often luxuriant detail (cf. III.46.9-12, 53.7-12; V.2.6 ff., 48 ff., 3.3. ff., etc.) could as easily be applied to Rāma's: Like Ayodhyā (I.5.15, for example), it is « as grand as Amarāvati » (III.46.10), « equal to the city of the gods in heaven » (V.2.17), a « happy and delighted city » (VI.3.9). Admittedly all cities in Sanskrit texts are uniformly described by means of a set of formulaic phrases <sup>18</sup>. What is noteworthy here is that the poet felt no compulsion to deviate in any way from the formula. Similarly the social organization of the *rākṣasas* seems indistinguishable from that of Aryan India. The same holds true in the political sphere, which has all the distinctive features of the traditional Indian polity, from the ministerial staff on down. Even its most evident aberration, the pronounced tyranny of the king, seems a peculiarly human excess. Likewise in the domain of their religious

16. POLLOCK, *op. cit.* (n. 12), Introduction.

17. The name itself is something of an enigma. Avestan cognates clearly authenticate the radical signification « an injurious being or thing », though not much more than this can presently be affirmed (M. MAYRHOFER, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, Heidelberg, 1956-1980, Vol. III. pp. 30-31; earlier discussions in MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 164, and HOPKINS, *op. cit.*, p. 38).

18. See D. SCHLINGLOFF, *Die altindische Stadt, Eine vergleichende Untersuchung*, Mainz, 1969, especially pp. 5-9.



life, we find a close — if sometimes inverted<sup>19</sup> — approximation to brahmanical society: there exist, for example, *brahma-rākṣasas*, who know the *Vedas* and *Vedāṅgas*, and who perform sacrifices (cf. for example V.16.2).

In short, it strikes me as a matter of no little importance that, wholly unlike the monsters of the forest, the *rākṣasas* of Laṅkā inhabit a socio-political domain altogether comparable to that of the human community of Ayodhyā, and thoroughly familiar to the poem's audiences at large<sup>20</sup>. For we may note that, among the several key factors of « otherness » — diet, speech, clothing, weapons, customs, and social organization<sup>21</sup> — only the first is marked by any significant anomaly in the case of the *rākṣasas* (they eat human beings). And one effect of this immediate recognizability — in addition, of course, to the existence of good *rākṣasas* capable of responsible moral choice, such as Vibhīṣaṇa and his four allies, or Saramā and Trijaṭā, who befriend Sītā in captivity — is to humanize the demons. They thereby become considerably more threatening, and their deviations from the human all the more frightening and expressive, because all the more thinkable.

And these deviations are real and significant. Among the more obvious is the violence of the *rākṣasas*. This may be reminiscent of the devouring ferocity of Virādha and Kabandha, yet what is peculiar about *rākṣasa* violence is that it is not brute, blind, and feral like that of the other monsters, but is in large part informed with elements of mind — with hatred. We find it directed specifically and by preference against those who in the traditional view represent the fundamental values of the ethical-religious domain,

---

19. As for example in the case of Indrajit's black-magic Vedic sacrifices in Book VI.

20. And they appear to inhabit such a domain from as early as the *Atharvaveda* (cf. H. OLDENBERG, *Die Religion des Veda*, Stuttgart, 1917, p. 267; MACDONELL, *op. cit.*, p. 163, and references cited there).

21. FRIEDMAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 ff.

and preserve this domain and the cosmic order with it by means of their sacred rites — namely, the brahmans<sup>22</sup>. We are confronted with this violence already at the end of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*<sup>23</sup>:

*The rākṣasas have been molesting the ascetics. They show themselves in every form of deformation, loathesome, savage and terrifying forms, a horror to behold. Enemies of all that is noble they defile some ascetics with unspeakable impurities and strike terror into others by suddenly appearing before them. Stealthily they prowl the ashram sites, one after the other, and take a mad delight in harassing the ascetics. They scatter the ladles about and the other sacrificial implements, they douse the fires with water and break the vessels when the oblations are under way. (II.108.13-17)*

In the « Forest » their depredations are described considerably more horrifically: The brahman ascetics are being brutally tormented by the *rākṣasas*, the many corpses are lying about of those whom they have killed in every way imaginable, and so on (III.5.14 ff.)<sup>24</sup>.

Another important trait by which the *rākṣasas* deviate from the human paradigm they otherwise so closely conform to (and again from the monsters Virādha and Kabandha as well) concerns their physical nature, which is shot through with ambiguity. For they are highly labile creatures, characteristically described (curiously enough, like the monkeys that appear later in the poem) by the standing epithet *kāmarūpin*, — « able to take on any form at will ». Monsters like Virādha and Kabandha are trapped within their horrific bodies; rather less so human beings, who if they persevere can tap the extraordinary transformative potentiality of asceticism, which enables them to transcend their embodied state,

22. The association of the *rākṣasas* in particular with disturbances of the sacred rites is a very ancient one, going back to the *RV* (as noted first, I believe, by Hillebrandt, *op. cit.*, Vol. II. p. 414).

23. Likewise in the older strata of the *Bālakāṇḍa*, as in the episodes of Mārīca/Subāhu and Tātakā that form the basis of much of the narrative development of the book.

24. One of the more graphic descriptions of slaughter is to be found in the *MBh.* III.100 (the demons described, called Kāl[ak]eyas, though technically not *rākṣasas*, are virtually identical to them).

as does Śarabhaṅga (III.4). *Rākṣasas*, however, by nature can change their form whenever they wish: Vātāpi could become a sheep (III.10.53 ff.; 41.39-42), Mārīca a golden deer dappled with brilliant gems (chapters 40-42), or Rāvaṇa a brahman (chapters 44-47). « *Māyā* is a power inherent in *rākṣasas* », says the *Mahābhārata*, « their age and form are as they will them ... » (VI.86.60).

The metamorphic power of the *rākṣasas* no doubt introduces an important element of suspense and drama into the tale. There is something profoundly threatening about the absence of a stable, perdurable personality; one's interlocutor may never be what one believes him to be. The mystery of metamorphosis is a substantial theme in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, with a wider application than would emerge from a consideration of the *rākṣasas* alone. In a real sense it is one that runs through the tale and may reach to its very heart, if there is validity to the suggestion that the peculiar antinomic nature of the god-king underpins the narrative<sup>25</sup>: On the one hand gods as well as demons can naturally exercise such metamorphic powers<sup>26</sup>; on the other, essential to the notion of the *avatāra* (even in the relatively primitive form in which we find it in the case of the god-king), is the very delusiveness of its phenomenalized form. And thus it is probably appropriate, and necessary, to include the hero himself as an essential component in this theme.

With specific reference to the *rākṣasas*, it is evident that Vālmīki has substantially enriched the common motif of demonic transfiguration in Indian epic literature and intensified the currents that make the *rākṣasas* the fascinating and terrifying beings they are. The case of Rāvaṇa is instructive, and we may consider in some detail the motif of the sham ascetic, one that becomes common in later Hindu fiction<sup>27</sup>. In the present instance as elsewhere

25. POLLOCK, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 527-28.

26. As Indra, who, in a way disturbingly similar to Rāvaṇa, seduces Ahalyā by adopting the form of a sage (I.47.15 ff., after « waiting for an opening », vs. 17; cf. III.44.2, 8), or here in Book III takes on the form of a soldier in order to destroy the austerities of an ascetic, III.8.13-19.

27. M. BLOOMFIELD, *On False Ascetics and Nuns in Hindu Fiction*, in JAOS, 44 (1924), pp. 228 ff., discusses the motif in some detail. The thief regularly disguises himself as an ascetic, and so does the « ardent lover ... in order to win or carry off his lady love » (p. 230). It would seem that both aspects are present in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* episode, which unfortunately Bloomfield does not mention.

this may be understood in part as a rather banal ethical admonition (« evil can masquerade as good », for example, as Lakṣmaṇa says to Rāma in Book II [« There are cunning people who wear the guise of righteousness », II.20.8]), or, again, as sheer dramaturgical necessity: The only way Sītā can talk with Rāvaṇa, is if he were to come to her in some fashion that, in the Indian context, will not compromise her. Since the guest who visits her is a brahman (rather than a handsome young kṣatriya), who might curse her should she refuse him (cf. III.44.33; 45.2), she admits Rāvaṇa into the leaf hut and speaks with him — as she must, since it is in such dramatic artifice that fiction lives. His transformation back into his « original » form is no doubt spectacular:

*Suddenly the kindly form of the beggar disappeared, and Rāvaṇa ... took on his own, a form such as Doom itself must have. With eyes flaming bright red in each of his ten faces, with earrings of burnished gold, a bow and arrows, he had once more become the majestic stalker of the night. He had thrown off the guise of the mendicant and taken on his own form again, the colossal Rāvaṇa ... like Death itself, with his sharp fangs and long arms, towering like a mountain peak ... (III.47.6-8, 17).*

And yet there is a pronounced and meaningful strain of irony running through the episode. Not only are brahman ascetics the primary target of *rākṣasas* violence, a fact that makes Rāvaṇa's adopting such a disguise particularly despicable. But in addition, the renouncer with his rigorous sexual self-control embodies, indeed foregrounds, an ethos fundamentally antithetical to Rāvaṇa. For in his « real » nature Rāvaṇa appears before us not only as the colossal polybracchic monster; he is also the exquisite lover, as we shall have occasion to observe below.

The other *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are generally pictured as embodiments of absolute terror, with only faint traces bespeaking a biological kinship with humans, as in the case of Triśirāḥ and other warriors in Khara's army, for example, or the demons who are set to guarding Sītā in the *aśoka* grove. Although female *rākṣasas* for their part as a rule assume breathtaking forms of beauty in order to seduce men, as Hiḍimbā does in the *Mahābhārata* (on

which more below), it is noteworthy that Śūrpaṅakhā is brought before us in her horrific shape:

*Rāma was handsome, the rākṣasī was ugly, he was shapely and slender of waist, she misshapen and gross; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was fine, and hers like copper; he always spoke pleasantly, and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young, attractive and well-mannered, she was ill-mannered, repellent and frightfully old. And still, the god of love, who comes to life in our bodies, had taken possession of her ... (III.16.8-10)*

It is no doubt counterproductive - puzzling and illogical if not downright silly - for the *rākṣasī* to fail to change her shape here. Why the author risks absurdity (though he does thereby gain an undeniable, albeit cruel, humor), may be explained, as I shall suggest, by the overall sexual-political orientation of the poem.

The material so far examined illustrates yet one more major aberration separating the *rākṣasas* from the human universe of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, one that, I believe, is the most significant of all: their intemperate and aggressive sexuality (something associated with them from the time of their first appearance in Indian literature)<sup>28</sup>. This is a predominant characteristic of the *rākṣasas* in *Rāmāyaṇa* III-VI from our initial acquaintance with them in the person of Śūrpaṅakhā, and supplies the principal motivation for the central narrative event, Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā.

Although it may accord rather poorly with the overall impression one generally has of the *rākṣasas* — as night-stalking, blood-drinking ghouls smeared with the gore of their victims — their unrestrained sexuality is in fact repeatedly called to our attention, and of course it does construe well with, and is generally attended by, their fascinating metamorphic powers. The whole care of the

---

28. The aggressive libidinousness of the *rākṣasa* (*rakṣaḥ*) is mentioned in Indian texts likewise from a very early date, e.g., *SatBr.* III.2.1.40 («The *rakṣāṃsi* pursue women here on earth . . . and implant their seed therein . . .»). And this is similarly coupled with their transformative power, as in *RV.* X.162.5, where the *rakṣaḥ* are said to take on the forms of brother, husband, lover and thus approach women unsuspected. See further the useful discussion and collection of citations in Oldenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-275.

*rākṣasas*, we are told, « is to master the sports of love-making » (III.36.20). Though Śūrpaṅkhā clearly needs considerable practice in these sports, her attempted seduction of first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa (III.16-17) gives evidence of an altogether unfettered sexuality, which knows no restraints of family ties (« I am prepared to defy all [my brothers], Rāma, for I have never seen anyone like you », 16.21), or of shame in general, as we are specifically told later in the epic (VI.82.6 ff.). She is punished by Rāma — the king whose duty it is to punish<sup>29</sup> — for her adulterous infringement of the normative sexual code, although this is one neither she nor any other *rākṣasa* recognizes<sup>30</sup>.

The parallel incident in the *Mahābhārata* (the *Hiḍimbavadha-parva*, I.139-143), supplies an instructive contrast<sup>31</sup>. The basic plan

29. Cf. the general admonitions of the *Rājadharmā* section in *Mahābhārata*: all *dharma* depends on the correct use of punishment (XII.63.28); the ultimate *dharma* is that a king make correct use of punishment (XII.70.31), etc. The king is furthermore the principal executive in judicial punishments. In the case of adultery, for example, one *dharmasāstra* enunciates the rule that « If a woman . . . violates the duty owed to her husband, the king shall cause her to be devoured by dogs in a place frequented by men » (*ManuSm.* VIII.371). For the same reason Rāma must later test Sītā (VI. 103 ff., and thus perhaps « pardons » Ahalyā [I.48]?). His slaying of Rāvaṇa should be seen in this light, too. Cf. n. 38 below.

30 For the mutilation of Śūrpaṅkhā as the shastric punishment for fornication/adultery, see *Arthśā* IV.10.10 (the offending woman is to have her ears and nose cut off; cf. IV.12.33), and also Parāśara cited by Haradatta on *GauDhs.* III.5.35 (« As for her who commits fornication/adultery and out of a perverse nature does not do penance: 'The man is to be killed [in a *pratiloma* relationship] and the woman is to have her nose etc. cut off'»). It is quite wrong, I believe, to call the mutilation « an act of apparently senseless violence »; such a conclusion is drawn from a premise altogether incorrect for the *Rāmāyaṇa*, that « there is no implicit compulsion . . . upon Rāma to act virtuously: [his] job is battle » (J. D. SMITH, *Old Indian (The Two Sanskrit Epics)*, in « Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry », Vol. I: *The Tradition*, ed. H. T. Hatto, London, 1980, pp. 66-67). Nor am I fully persuaded by Kakar's analysis of the episode, which he sees as « the unsexing of the bad mother »: « In accordance with the well-known unconscious device of the upward displacement of the genitals, this becomes a fantasied clitoridectomy, designed to root out the cause and symbol of Śūrpaṅkhā's lust » (S. KAKAR, *The Inner World*, 2nd ed., Delhi, 1981, pp. 98-99).

31. The story is briefly as follows: The *rākṣasa* Hiḍimba catches the scent of the Pāṇḍavas while they are asleep in the wilderness (during their first forest exile). His sister Hiḍimbā is sent to bring back their flesh for him to eat, but is smitten with love the moment she sees Bhīma, who is

of the episode is obviously quite comparable to the Sūrpaṅkhā scene of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*; the two narratives agree even in several verbal details. But how very different the attitude towards the *rākṣasī* herself: Hiḍimbā is not only regarded as a possible mate for Bhīma, but after what appears to be a blissful romance actually bears him a son, whom he grows to love dearly.

The discrepancies in their treatment of the theme, however, seem to con-  
 strue with the very notable difference the two epics elsewhere present with respect to their acceptation of the character of and constraints on human sexuality. The male fantasy of the fairy bride as represented in the *Mahābhārata* is in the *Rāmāyaṇa* stripped of all its gratification: Sūrpaṅkhā becomes the *churel*, the succubus of the Indian male's nightmare world, who threatens him with death through sexual depletion, and must therefore be suppressed<sup>32</sup>. But however debatable such an interpretation may

---

standing guard. She refuses to do her brother's bidding (139.15), takes on the seductive form of a beautiful woman, and forthrightly and unashamedly confesses to Bhīma her infatuation (« We shall dwell for evermore in the mountain fastnesses - be my husband», she exclaims [I.139.25; cf. *Rām.* III.16.21, 24, etc.], compelled by the bodiless god that moves within our bodies [141.4; 142.8; cf. *Rām.* III.16.10 cited above, p. 275]). Hiḍimba comes to investigate the reason for his sister's delay, discovers and reproaches her, Bhīma replying vigorously (and with wholly specious arguments) in support of the *rākṣasī*'s romantic love for him. After killing Hiḍimba, Bhīma is ready - or at least pretends he is ready - to slay the sister as well. She appeals to Kuntī and Yudhiṣṭhira, claiming that she has abandoned her loved ones, her people, and her *svadharmā* for Bhīma (143.7). Yudhiṣṭhira allows the two to marry, although they are permitted to make love only during the day: Bhīma must return every night. The two share an idyllic love, and after bearing him a son, Hiḍimbā leaves Bhīma permanently. (The son is Ghaṭotkaca, deeply loved by Bhīma, who proves to be instrumental in the death of Karṇa during the Bharata war. Interestingly a sept of the Rajputs of Allahabad traced the origin of their lineage to this union, cf. W. CROOKE, *The Tribes and Castes of North-West India*, Calcutta, 1896, Vol. IV, p. 327 [cited in Ruben, *op. cit.*, p. 294]).

32. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is not alone in this. Women in general are sometimes figured as female *rākṣasas*, as in the following anonymous verse: « With a look she consumes your heart, with a touch she consumes your power, and in the act of love she consumes your every drop of manly strength — woman is a *rākṣasī* in very person » (*Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* ed. Narayan Ram Acharya, Bombay, 1952, p. 348, no. 9). See also Vibhāṇḍaka's description in *MBh.* III.113.1 ff., which no doubt refers more to the courtesans than to *rākṣasīs*.

be, it seems clear that the most meaningful way to address the incident is to view it as encoding and processing some fundamental fantasy.

Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, on the terms of the surface narrative, is undertaken in revenge for Khara's death (III.34.20, 52.21-24; cf. 38.6), but it hardly functions that way. It seems clearly to be an act devoid of any but sexual significance. The fires of lust are lit in the *rākṣasa* when Śūrpaṅkhā describes Sītā to him — such of course is her main purpose in doing so (« She would make a fitting wife for you, and you a fitting husband ... Why, I was even prepared to bring her back to be your wife », III.32.14-20); and he straightway resolves to abduct her as he has abducted any number of women, human and divine (46.24).

It is very curious, however, that later in the epic we should be told that the women in Rāvaṇa's harem — the daughters of royal seers, of the *pitṛs*, *daityas*, *gandharvas*, *rākṣasas* — are present not merely because they were physically abducted, but because they were enchanted by Rāvaṇa's charms, and now love no one but him (V.7.66). Elsewhere in the same book we discover the king of *rākṣasas* resting after making love with the women of his harem: He is lounging on a sheepskin-covered couch, strewn with flowers, perfumed with incense, fanned with rare chowries; he is dark, with flashing earrings, clothed in silvery clothing, anointed with precious sandalwood cream: « He is extraordinarily handsome, he who could take on any form at will » (*surūpaṇi kāmārūpinam*), so much so that Hanumān watching him says to himself, « What beauty, what fortitude, what strength and splendor ... Had the mighty lord of *rākṣasas* not been unrighteous, he would instead justly have been made protector (*rakṣitṛ*) of the world of the gods, Śakra included » (V.47.17). (One is hereby reminded of nothing so much as Satan — first Milton's Satan, by reason of the fact that Rāvaṇa too possesses undeniable « merit » — Vālmiki must supply his hero with an antagonist of comparable stature, albeit of a negative sort, both out of a sense of aesthetic equipollence, and also because great evil presupposes the perversion of great virtues; and second, the devil more generally, because of the concomitance



both the [Western] devil and Rāvaṇa show with libidinous desire.)<sup>33</sup>

We perhaps ought not to be surprised at such passages; on the contrary, the character of Rāvaṇa as the extraordinarily seductive lover — his seductiveness something that is generated by his very otherness and difference — is constitutive of the tale. And this would suggest another kind of reading of the central event in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa's attack on Sītā in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, which is so sharply distinguished from its *Mahābhārata* parallel noticed at the beginning of this essay. For does it not seem that we are here confronted with yet another incarnation of the pirate or gypsy of that archetypal female fantasy of seduction — or, more properly no doubt, of the male construal or rendering of such a fantasy<sup>34</sup>? Are we not to see in Rāvaṇa the mysterious and seductive outsider who, by taking direct action altogether indifferent to the conventional code of sexual behavior, decides for the woman, thereby freeing her from the complex and finally paralyzing arithmetic of moral calculation? For no less in traditional India than elsewhere illicit love poses substantial risks, and these are clearly enunciated in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the stories of Reṇukā (decapitated by her son as punishment for adultery [*Rām.* II.18.29; cf. *MBh.* III.16, etc.]), and Ahalyā (*Rām.* I.47; in later versions of the story, by a curious inversion of the theme of metamorphosis, Ahalyā is transfigured into stone by her husband's curse). Correspondingly we should expect to find a disconcerting ambivalence in the woman, which must be neutralized by some overpowering agent of intervention<sup>35</sup>.

The *rākṣasas* with their voracious sensuality seem in large part designed to represent just this alternative to the sexual canons — so

---

33. See T. TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, Cleveland, 1973, pp. 127 and 143, where he speaks of the « co-presence » of the devil and desire.

34. Found richly represented in the work of D. H. Lawrence, for example (in such tales as « The Virgin and the Gypsy », « Jimmy and the Desperate Woman », and so on).

35. This ambivalence need not be made explicit for us to entertain an interpretation based on this sort of literary processing of sexual fantasy. Sītā is not required to enact the ambivalence. On the contrary, her total repudiation would seem to be necessary if the dangerous fantasy is to be allowed any treatment.

strict, and at times so bloodless — of the *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>36</sup>. If this is not already perceptible in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, it becomes transparent later in the epic, in particular in the fifth book, the *Sundarakāṇḍa*. There we are shown the private life of the *rākṣasas*, a continuous orgiastic indulgence in drink, food, and love-making. The poet dwells on the evidence of their luxurious and lush dissipation (especially chapters 3-9) with the evident satisfaction of a skilful artist aware that he is manipulating the deepest fantasies of his audience<sup>37</sup>.

For such, to conclude, is what it would seem the *rākṣasas* fundamentally represent: all that the traditional Indian most craves and, given their dimension of terror, most fears. They are creatures whose lives are plunged in the pollution of violence, blood, and carnivorous filth; anarchic creatures who take on repulsive forms and threaten sexual death or even more horrific destruction, in particular destroying the very foundation of human life, the brahmins who maintain the cosmologically essential sacrifice. At the same time, in their libiditized forms, they enact some of man's - and perhaps woman's - deepest sexual urges, total self-abandonment to pleasure, as well as absolute autonomy and power in gratifying lust. Broadly humanized as they are in so many features, their deviance in others becomes not only a scandal but also a risk; enacting the repressed desire, and perhaps rage, of the traditional Indian, they are what he might become were the barriers of conscience — or, may be, of the fear inspired by the dark shadow of *daṇḍa*<sup>38</sup> — to be eliminated.

Like many other monsters of world literature, the *rākṣasa* is in essence the Other, the Stranger coming from a time and place it is altogether unnecessary, and probably wrong, for us to try to

---

36. For further discussion see POLLOCK, *op. cit.* (note 1), Introduction, Chapter 8.

37. Friedman likewise remarks on the sexual licence of the Plinian peoples, which was what the West found particularly abhorrent about them (*op. cit.*, pp. 203-4).

38. As Derrett points out, theft and adultery were viewed as the two most reprehensible crimes in traditional India, and it was felt that only the presence of political authority keeps all men from becoming thieves and fornicators (J. D. M. DERRETT, *Social and Political Thought and Institutions*, in « A Cultural History of India », ed. A. L. Basham, Oxford, 1975, pp. 127, 139).

determine. For again, if there once attached to him some racial, ethnic, or geographical specificity, none of this remains to him in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His one reality is that of the fantasized alien, who at one and the same time is both feared and desired, who threatens mortal danger and yet is invested with an extraordinary, unsocializable sexuality. It may be his very otherness that provides the source of both the fascination and the repulsion. But when confronted with something that repels and fascinates what we learn about is nothing so much as ourselves, since both responses are to categories of our own construction, brought to bear on objects of our own construction. It is thus precisely one's Self — often as here with particular reference to those two primary instinctual aims, the libidinous and the aggressive — that is seen to be reflected in the Other<sup>39</sup>. From this perspective, it would appear that one important meaning of *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would be as an index of the traditional Indian's primal terror and desire, objectified both together in a single symbolic form.

---

39. A notion that to some degree converges with Lacan's analysis, « L'inconscient, c'est le discours de l'Autre ». Cf. further in Todorov, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-139, according to whom the « themes of the other » in fantastic narratives concern « the relation of man with his desire — and thereby with his unconscious » (p. 139). For some recent thoughts on the « psychic economy » and compensatory value of the literary representation of the fantastic, see L. RABKIN, *Fantastic Worlds*, New York, 1979, pp. 32 ff.