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RĀMA'S MADNESS

By Sheldon Pollock, Iowa City

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

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

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

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

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

ḍa shows us a different domain of action where this new valuation of *kṣatradharma* is not always applicable (the shift in focus from the one book to the next is well illustrated by the exchange between Sītā and Rāma on the bearing of arms in a forest where ascetics make their home [III.8–9]). In this realm, the ideal presented to us is that of a king who is prepared to subordinate every consideration of personal welfare and safety to the duty of protecting the brahmanical order of society. In the present scene, however, both the hero's earlier, clearly articulated convictions, and the singleminded sense of royal duty we witness in the "Forest", are not only displaced but, it would seem, inverted or rejected.

The descent into madness is described slowly and carefully by the poet. Rāma has been drawn away on a distant chase by the *rākṣasa* Mārīca in the form of a bejewelled deer. When finally slain Mārīca cries out for help, imitating Rāma's voice. Lakṣmaṇa, who had been left behind to guard Sītā, is forced by the princess to go to Rāma's aid, and with the ashram now unprotected Rāvaṇa comes and abducts Sītā. Returning to find the hermitage empty Rāma scours the surrounding forest for his wife, obsessively and frantically searching, "wandering like a madman" (58.33), his grief giving him "the look of a madman" (58.10), questioning the trees of Janasthāna, the elephants, tigers, mountains, rivers. He then discovers the evidence of Jaṭāyu's fatal struggle against Rāvaṇa (chapter 63), and ascertains conclusively that Sītā has been slain or stolen away. Our growing suspicion of some profound transformation in the hero's character at this point becomes a certainty: Rāma now explicitly renounces the political ethos to which he has hitherto so tenaciously adhered, and implicitly rejects the principal duty incumbent upon him as king, at the same time crying out in maniacal fury and threatening cosmic destruction:

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

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

creature, knowing no better, will despise the man who shows compassion, be he never so heroic, Lakṣmaṇa, the very master of the worlds. The thirty gods themselves must surely think me powerless, all because I have been mild, shown compassion and self-restraint, and striven for the welfare of the world. Look how in my case a virtue has turned into a vice, Lakṣmaṇa. But now I will efface it – as the great rising sun effaces the light of the hare-marked moon – in order to exterminate the *rākṣasas* and all other living things. No *yakṣa*, *gandharva* or *piśāca*, no *rākṣasa*, *kiṃnara* or man shall be left in peace, Lakṣmaṇa. Watch now, Lakṣmaṇa, as I fill the sky with missiles and darts, leaving no space whatever for creatures that move throughout the three worlds. I will bring the host of planets to a standstill, darken the moon that brings the night, paralyse both fire and wind, blot out the light of the sun; I will grind the mountain-peaks to dust, dry up every body of water, uproot every tree, vine and shrub, annihilate the ocean. If the gods do not restore Sītā to me safe and sound this very instant, they shall witness the full extent of my power, Saumitri. Not a single creature, Lakṣmaṇa, shall escape into the sky: The darts shot from my bowstring will form a net without a gap. Behold now the devastation caused by my iron shafts, Lakṣmaṇa, the birds and beasts driven wild and ravaged, the world plunged into chaos from one end to the other. Because of what happened to Maithilī I will shoot my arrows from a full-drawn bow, arrows no one can withstand, and rid the living world of all *piśācas* and *rākṣasas*. Now the gods shall witness the power of my shafts when I ply them in anger, they shall see how far they carry when, my patience exhausted, I release them. No god or *daitya*, no *piśāca* or *rākṣasa* shall survive when in my rage I lay waste the universe. The worlds of the gods and *dānavas* and *yakṣas*, besides that of the *rākṣasas*, shall come crashing down one upon the other as my darts fly wave after wave, smashing them to pieces. I will obliterate the boundaries of all the worlds with my shafts. Like old age or death or time or fate, which no creature has ever defied, in my rage I cannot be withstood – let no one doubt it, Lakṣmaṇa. Unless they show me Sītā, the bright-smiling, faultless princess of Mithilā, I will overturn this mountainous world, with all its serpents and men, all its *gandharvas* and gods.” (60.36–52)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ Rāma begins to recover his characteristic sense of equity by VI.67.37 where, when Lakṣmaṇa wishes to release the "weapon of Brahṁā" (*brahmāstra*) in order to kill Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit, the elder brother dissuades the younger from slaying all the *rākṣasas* on earth because of the crimes of only one of them.

... What good would it do you, bull among men, to cause universal destruction ...?" (III.62.6, 20).

Rāma is calmed, for the time being at least, but the terrific vision of the apocalyptic destruction of which he is capable – as elemental as time, death, fate – so starkly revealed by the passage remains deeply fixed in the contemporary reader's consciousness.

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

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

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

⁶ The scene is narratively a very close adaptation of the Aranyakāṇḍa, but upon re-reading it I find it signally inferior to the epic in one crucial respect: The overwhelming sense of desperation is gone from the hero's search; there is now something almost comedic about it all. And of course, before the fourth act itself is played out, the king has been reunited with the *apsaras*.

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

⁸ It is noteworthy that the theme is absent in the *Harivaṃśa*, and scarcely represented in the *Brahmapurāṇa* (Chapter 189).

been brutally denied. To be sure, the strictly shastric discourse on madness – that of medicine, for example, or law – generally views the phenomenon by and large as physiological in origin (resulting from disturbance of the equipoise of the humors) or as sheer demonic possession, though a more exclusively affective causality is not denied⁹. It is this last, however, that comes to be regarded as the unique source in medieval literary contexts. The *alaṃkāraśāstra* defines madness as “a mental confusion brought about by passion, grief, fear, and the like”¹⁰, and in fact in its fictional representations it is exclusively correlated with the first of these emotions. Indeed, madness ends up being listed as an integral stage in the normal progression of thwarted love, which begins in infatuation and, if allowed to run its course, terminates in death¹¹.

Yet in my view there is considerable difficulty in following these implications and explaining the scene as we encounter it in the Aranya-kāṇḍa primarily on the grounds of the medieval aetiology of madness in its literary environment, that is to say, to see the episode the way its later adaptors in part appear to have done, as an automatic consequence or necessary component of a conventional aesthetic category, what in Indian aesthetic theory is termed the “dominant affective-aesthetic experience” (*rasa*) of “love-in-separation” (*vipralambhaśṛṅgāra*). (Nor is it simply that Rāma has been separated from the woman he loves, whom he has been willing on other occasions to abandon in favor of a higher good; cf. for example II.31.36.) The contrast here with his earlier behavior, indeed, the fundamental conflict with his paradigmatic

⁹ See K. K. BHISHAGRATNA (trans.), *Sushruta Samhita* (Varanasi, 1963 [original ed. 1907]), Vol. III, pp. 387–389. Compare J. JOLLY, *Indian Medicine* (Delhi, 1977 [original ed., 1901]), pp. 147–148. Mitākṣara on Yājñas. II.140 (where those excluded from inheritance are enumerated) neatly summarizes the traditional tripartite aetiology of madness.

¹⁰ SāhiDa. II.160; cf. also RasGaṇ. p. 90, where it is listed under the *vyabhi-cāribhāvas* and defined as follows: “Madness is miscognition [lit., ‘the appearance of something where it actually is absent’] brought about by separation [from the beloved], a terrible calamity, profound bliss, and the like. It is different from [mere erroneous] cognition, insofar as it is originated [by such external causes as those listed], whereas [false] knowledge is innate. Although it is properly one of the illnesses [cf. p. 85], it is here listed separately in order to emphasize its peculiar strangeness in comparison with other illnesses.”

¹¹ The list appears first, it would seem, in Bharata, cf. NāṭyaŚā. Chapter 6 (ed. MADHUSUDHAN SHASTRI [Varanasi, 1971], p. 718), where the ten *kāmā-vasthās* are inventoried (as enunciated by the “authors of the erotological textbooks”), and Chapter 26, vss. 168ff. (ed. M. GHOSH [Calcutta, 1961]), where they are defined (*unmāda*, “madness”, in vss. 183–184).

social and moral authority, seems far too stark to be accommodated by so facile an explanation.

The Indian tradition itself appears clearly to have recognized that the episode was in serious need of interpretation. That offered by the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (c. 10th century) is accepted as conclusive by the majority of medieval commentators. To understand the attitude of the Bhāgavata, we must remember that it unquestioningly accepted as an authentic feature of the poem Rāma's status as an avatar of Viṣṇu. From this perspective it explains that "God's incarnation as a mortal in this world is not simply for slaying *rākṣasas*, but is meant to instruct mortals. How else could it be that the Lord, the Self delighting in Himself, should have suffered so because of Sītā? The Blessed One, Vāsudeva, is the Self... without attachment to anything in the three worlds. He would not [otherwise than for the purposes of such instruction] have experienced that faintheartedness caused by [his attachment to] a woman..." (V.19.5-6)¹². According thus to a major indigenous interpretative tradition (which I discuss briefly elsewhere¹³), Rāma's behavior throughout the poem is to be understood as altogether "mimetic"; it is not in the least supposed to be real but rather a deliberate representation with explicit didactic function. The episode of his madness, consequently, is to be viewed as a cautionary tale, as the Bhāgavata itself elsewhere takes pains to tell us: "The basest of *rākṣasas* came into the woods stealthily, like a wolf, and abducted the princess of Videha. With his brother in the forest [Rāma] acted the part of a wretched man when separated from his beloved, thereby to illustrate what happens to all who are overly attached to women" (IX.10.11).

Again, while such an analysis of this and comparable episodes in the Rāmāyaṇa (as for instance when Rāma is preparing to cross over to Laṅkā, and in a rage threatens to dry up the ocean [VI.14]) seems to have secured widespread approval in medieval India¹⁴, it appears to me once more to show signs of mere expediency, deriving from an almost

¹² The doctrine profoundly influenced the traditional commentaries on Vālmīki's epic. Maheśvaratīrtha cites this very verse in his comment on VI.59.120 vulg.

¹³ POLLOCK, op. cit. (cf. n. 2), notes on II.2.28; 16.57, etc.; *ātmānaṃ mānuṣaṃ manye*: Dharmākūtaṃ on the Divinity of Rāma. JOIB 33 (1984), pp. 231-243.

¹⁴ Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, for example, echoes the sentiment in his poem, Rāmāyaṇasārasaṃgrahaṛaghuvīrastava 17 (cf. the edition of PIERRE-SYLVAIN FILLOZAT, Œuvres poétiques de Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita Vol. I [Pondichery, 1967], p. 185); the poem as a whole is a very interesting one, for it articulates a good number of those questions about certain episodes in the epic that were persistently viewed as enigmatic in the medieval period).

palpable uncertainty about the possible meanings of the scene, and the natural awkwardness before a confusing symbolic structure that demands interpretation.

If there seems, then, to be considerably more meaning in Rāma's frenzied search, madness, and threats of holocaust than the traditional aesthetic or didactic interpretations are able to appreciate, we might ask whether viewing the episode from a less localized cultural-literary perspective could disclose more of its signification. Such a wider vantage point is readily available, since the madness of the hero is a motif not at all uncommon in world literature¹⁵. In Shakespeare, for example, it is introduced into the career of the hero with such remarkable regularity as to appear almost an essential dramaturgical component. It may thus prove instructive to ask what madness in Shakespeare, for example, has been thought to mean.

One of the most perceptive and eloquent discussions of the madness of the Shakespearean hero is that of MAYNARD MACK. In an already classic essay, after plotting the tripartite "cycle of change" experienced by the hero (which in fact well summarizes the career of Rāma) – delineation, conflict-crisis, and recovery or synthesis (all of them in large part witnessing psychic change) – MACK explores what in the second of these phases he finds to be the most intriguing symbolic features, those clustering around the hero's descent into madness, when he turns into "his own antithesis". Minimizing though not dismissing altogether as an explanation "Elizabethan psychological lore", which intimately connected madness with immoderate passion¹⁶, MACK goes on to make the quite reasonable claim that madness is "dramatically useful", among other things providing an intense theatrical experience. More important for him, however, are two other, closely related factors that he sees at work in this motif. Madness can, on the one hand, symbolize the terrible dilemma of the tragic hero, as a mark of both the exceptional punishment to which he becomes liable, and the exceptional insight he commands; on the other, it makes available a voice – the speech of the madman – through which the more acute perception of the nature of things possessed by the poet himself, the possibly dangerous

¹⁵ Two recent full-scale studies of the question are S. FELMAN, *La folie et la chose littéraire* (Paris, 1978), and L. FEDER, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton, 1980).

¹⁶ In fact the aetiology of madness in the Renaissance West is strikingly similar to that of medieval India, for it was thought to originate in the same three ways: humoral dysfunction, possession, or intense love (see FEDER, *op. cit.*, pp. 98ff., especially 114–116).

truths to which he has privileged access, can be expressed with relative impunity¹⁷.

MACK's thoughtful analysis certainly accounts for a great deal of what we find happening in Shakespearean tragedy, and in much Western literature¹⁸. And in fact, what he articulates for us are precisely the kinds of expectations, of *Vorurteile*, we naturally bring with us to Vālmīki's epic. However, leaving aside the larger hermeneutical questions posed by such expectations in the Indian cultural domain, it is readily apparent that all but the most superficial features of the symbolic field of Western literary madness are inapplicable to what we are presented with in the Aranyakāṇḍa. The dramatic intensity of the scene is unquestioned, but Vālmīki has secured such intensity elsewhere and in a variety of less problematic ways. That highly suggestive phrase – "the hero tends to become his own antithesis" (a transformation that generally occurs, as indeed is clearly paralleled in the Rāmāyaṇa, during the course of the "tragic journey" of the hero, as much a psychological journey of self-discovery as a geographical one¹⁹) – this is certainly just what we seem to find in the Sanskrit poem. But to recognize this antipodal character shift is really only to restate the problem, not answer it. It is, again, difficult to see Rāma's madness as any sort of punishment, and it hardly affords him opportunity to exercise any deeper insight; he learns no fundamental verities from the experience itself, nor do we. Finally, what is perhaps MACK's most significant observation, regarding the license accorded the poet by the sharper perspicacity of the madman's vision, seems quite inapplicable in the Indian case; for it enables Vālmīki to enunciate no critique of any sort.

As this excursus is intended to suggest, I believe we must attempt to understand Rāma's behavior first according to Indian presuppositions. And yet, as the brief review of the medieval interpretations likewise urges, these are not necessarily the narrow presuppositions we find articulated in the indigenous tradition. Elsewhere I have argued at

¹⁷ M. MACK, The Jacobean Shakespeare. In: J. CALDERWOOD *et al.* (eds.), *Essays in Shakespearean Criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, 1970), pp. 40–47.

¹⁸ As emerges from FEDER, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ On the traditional – which in my view is the most forceful – interpretation of Rāma's self-discovery, whereby he gains knowledge far different from that attained by Aeneas or Dante, see POLLOCK, *op. cit.* (n. 13). Obviously I am inclined to view the claim to antiquity of much of the scene in Book VI with considerably more favor than other scholars. Taken to be an integral part of Vālmīki's text it can be persuasively explained as a necessary conclusion, while at the same time it explains much of the narrative itself; it is conceptually far more awkward to regard it as an adventitious interpolation.

length that, whatever else it may be about, the Rāmāyaṇa is in the first instance an intensive imaginative enquiry into the nature of kingship, and the peculiar, transcendent nature of the king²⁰. Just possibly this predominant global concern of the poet's is at work in the seemingly utter reversal of Rāma's character in response to the abduction of his wife.

In an earlier piece²¹ I tried to demonstrate in detail that the solution to Rāvaṇa's boon (which is a determinative structural component of the entire narrative) can be provided only by some intermediate, almost composite being, a biological anomaly that alone escapes the comprehensive exclusions of the boon, in fact by the king, that "god who walks the earth in the form of a man" (IV.18.38). But if this is so, then whereas the powers of this consubstantial being are "divine", he must nevertheless remain, "in some measure, a man"²².

This aspect of humanity is certainly at issue in one important theme of the poem, the limitation of Rāma's self-knowledge. The poet follows its ramifications throughout the text, and employs it to great advantage in problematizing the motivation of the hero. At various points in the epic we are shown clear traces of a divine plan governing the action of the Rāmāyaṇa²³. Now one very intriguing aspect of this plan is Rāma's ignorance of it. As I note in the earlier essay, Rāma's conduct in protecting the sages of Daṇḍaka wilderness (which provokes the hostility of the *rākṣasas*, setting in motion the rest of the action of the tale), is his own free choice, a righteous and heroic king's response to violence and evil, and one that he did not know could not fail in its purpose. And so, when near the end of the sixth book Rāma asserts, "I, a man, have overcome the adversity brought on by fate... What a man could do, Sītā, all that he could do, I have done" (VI.103.5, 13), the irony affecting so much of the poem strains to the breaking point.

In just the same way, this irreducible humanity of the king may be thought to impinge on Rāma's emotional response to life in general. And this may be one of the concerns (or, more basically, impulses) behind the creation of the Aranyakāṇḍa episode of madness. Kings, we are perhaps being told, may participate in a divine realm by reason of their preternatural mode of being and by what this directly entails,

²⁰ See POLLOCK, op. cit. (n. 2); The Divine King in the Indian Epic. JAOS 104 (1984) 505-528, especially pp. 522ff.

²¹ JAOS 104 (1984), pp. 509ff.

²² VII. App. I 10.28; cited by HOPKINS as well (The Divinity of Kings. JAOS 51 [1931], p. 312). See also Lakṣmaṇa's words to Rāma in III.61.19: "Be aware of your powers, which are as much divine as mortal...".

²³ JAOS 104 (1984), pp. 514-516.

their transcendent knowledge of, and power to maintain *dharma*. But they are not altogether alien to us; they feel want and need love, and when this is denied them they are hurt and grow wrathful, like the most wretched of us. And by this narrative argument kingship and the king have restored to them a very human face²⁴.

I offer this suggestion, however, only as a kind of *pūrvapakṣa*, or *prima facie* view. For while I should not want entirely to dismiss it, nor in fact the other possible interpretations – we do well to resist all impulse to secure the single correct reading, since no such thing really exists²⁵ – I believe it still fails adequately to explain what is after all a very aberrant episode in Rāma's conduct. There is another explanation, likewise based on the central problem of the nature of the king, that I find to be far more compelling.

I made reference above to the preternatural ontogenesis of the earthly king. This notion is elaborated in a doctrine well represented in the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, that the earthly king is a synthesis of various divine powers. He is not only "a fourth part Indra himself" (III.1.18), but incorporates the essential characteristics of each of the principal

²⁴ By way of a somewhat related exegesis as represented by the tradition transmitted by Maheśvaratīrtha and Tilaka, the scene has indigenously been interpreted in accordance with the doctrine discussed above, namely the mimetic nature of Rāma's avatar. According to Maheśvaratīrtha on III.60.10 (in contrast to the position stated elsewhere in his commentary, that everything that happens in the Rāmāyaṇa is absolutely, literally true; cf., for example, his remarks on II.36.9 [=41.10 vulg.], with my note ad loc.), "In actual fact, the description [of Rāma's madness] is not a description of what really happened to Śrī Rāma. The lamentation for Sītā and all the rest is simply acting on the part of Rāma, in order to instruct people. And it is precisely to demonstrate this that the omniscient blessed Vālmīki here and there has employed words expressing similitude, in vs. 4, for example, as here". For the Tilaka commentary, Rāma's display of grief (which Rāvaṇa would be informed of through spies) is meant to confirm to Rāvaṇa that his adversary is in fact a man, something necessary if the demon's death is to be secured in compliance with the terms of the boon (though as I observe in JOIB [n. 13], it is not made altogether clear in the medieval commentaries whether it is principally Rāvaṇa who must be led to believe in Rāma's human-ness, or rather Rāma himself); negatively, were the king to show no anger at such a moment, Rāvaṇa would be convinced that he is not a man. Furthermore, again according to Tilaka (though somewhat illogically, cf. the Bhāgavata passage cited above), Rāma is afflicted with emotional distress because that is one of the liabilities of corporeal incarnation (a theological-philosophical doctrine other commentators use to explain Rāma's ignorance of his true nature, cf. POLLOCK, op. cit. [n. 13]). See further my translations of Tilaka's comments on III.60.1n., 52n. (and cf. 29.20n.) in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: Araṇyakāṇḍa* (Princeton, forthcoming).

²⁵ Compare the insightful essay of N. RABKIN, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 1–32.

gods. "The power of a king is infinite", we are told, "he is able to take on any of five different forms: He can be hot like Agni, god of fire, bold like Indra, or mild like the Moon; he can exact punishment like Yama, or, like Varuṇa, extend his mercy" (III.38.12). These are not to be thought of simply as shared characteristics, much less mere figures of speech, but as equivalences, or better, substantival identities. In the appropriate circumstances the terrestrial king literally becomes the one or the other god.

This tenet of Indian political theology, which is a very prevalent one²⁶, would appear to be fundamental to our understanding of the present episode. In a passage of the *rājadharmā* section of the *Mahābhārata*, which is otherwise rather cryptic and not altogether related contextually to the problem at hand, the special pertinence of the divine transformations of the king is clearly enough expressed in the following verse:

pāpaiḥ pāpe kriyamāṇe 'tivelam tato rudro jāyate deva eṣaḥ /
pāpaiḥ pāpāḥ samjanayanti rudraṁ tataḥ sarvān

sādhvasādhūn hinasti //

"When evil beings commit egregious evil, then this god [= the king] becomes Rudra himself: By their evil acts evil beings turn him into Rudra, and then he harms all, good and bad alike" (MBh. XII.74.17). Part of the meaning of our scene in the *Aranyakāṇḍa* may well be the suggestion that, under the compulsion of Rāvaṇa's "egregious evil", Rāma has become Rudra-Śiva. Like his prototype he has gone mad²⁷, and like him he is bent on, and capable of, cosmic destruction. The specific catalyst of the god-man's madness may be that which affects normal mortals; it may be that the undifferentiated aggression activated by the frustration of his desire is like that of any mortal, as is

²⁶ Further references may be found in my note on III.38.12.

²⁷ On the madness of Śiva see for example BhāṅP. IV.2.14, and W. O'FLAHERTY, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 65, 278, 307. This is not the place to discuss generally the representation of madness in ancient Indian literature. But it is worth at least noting that, whereas madness is doubtless as common in traditional India as elsewhere (this is indicated in part by the multiplicity of psychotherapies the culture has developed to deal with madness: cf. most recently S. KAKAR, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* [New York, 1982]), it is rarely the subject of interpretation and scrutiny in literary discourse. One is hard pressed to think of other clear examples outside of Rāma and Śiva; the attempted suicide of Vasiṣṭha, for instance (MBh. I.167), or the self-genocide of the Vṛṣṇis (MBh. XVI) seems very different. The contrast with ancient Greek literature and its exploration of madness in its many varieties (Dionysus, Orestes, Cassandra, Ajax, etc.) is instructive, and would seem to suggest a denial, or refusal, of the phenomenon in traditional India.

the proneness of the victim of violence to commit violence himself²⁸. But this may not be the heart of the scene's signification. For that seems to lie rather in the quality and dimension of the king's destructive power when his will is thwarted. We do well to recall the unequivocal warning of the book of *rājadharmā* on the nature of this power, and the larger causes that trigger it:

"The man who even thinks of doing evil to the king assuredly finds affliction in this world, and at death goes to hell. Never should the king be scorned as being a mere mortal: He is great divinity existing in the form of a man. One must be zealous and careful not to contradict the lord, nor grumble against him, if one hopes to acquire righteous merit. A man who acts in opposition to the king never gains happiness [cf. Rām. III.38.20], neither he himself nor anyone close to him – son, brother, friend. Driven onward by the wind, its charioteer, a wild fire yet may leave something in its wake; but to the one who thwarts the king nothing whatever will be left [cf. ArthŚā. 5.4.17]. All that the king owns is to be preserved as his; keep your distance from it. Taking something of his should be seen to be as fraught with terror as death itself; touch it and you perish..." (MBh. XII.68.39–52).

Or again: "Like a very god the king when gratified fulfils one's every need, and when angered, like a very fire he destroys one root and branch" (MBh. XII.83.31).

Rāma's madness, then, from this perspective may present itself less as an anomaly or deviation, where the hero approaches his opposite, than as a "natural" manifestation of those violent and destructive capacities inherent in him as king, which have hitherto lain dormant and which in a sense, like *pralaya* itself, are above (or a part of some superordinated) *dharma*. As one scholar has recently put it, quite pertinently though from a slightly different viewpoint: 'Il y a dans l'exercice de la fonction royale une dimension de violence, de destruction, d'impureté, qui, dans le *Mbh*, fait nécessairement intervenir Śiva.... Rudra-Śiva... exprime ce que l'on pourrait appeler la *dimension terrible* (raudra) *du roi*, ou du roi-avatāra'²⁹. In the Rāmāyaṇa, it would seem, Śiva is made manifest in the person of the divine king, who incorporates this particular god's essence no less than those of other, more benignant, divine powers.

Much of the Araṇyakāṇḍa seems in fact to be enacted under the very banner of Rudra. We have already noticed once above (p. 46) how Rāma is compared to the terrifying divinity; this rhetorical signal will

²⁸ Cf. FEDER, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁹ J. SCHEUER, Śiva dans le Mahābhārata (Paris, 1982), p. 241.

now become frequent³⁰, something all the more significant in that it is unknown in the prior volumes. Moreover, throughout the book the *rasa* shifts repeatedly back to *raudra*, the “terrible”, the presiding deity of which, as our earliest systematic work on aesthetics tells us, is Rudra³¹. And it is the terrible, destructive aspect of the god that will predominate in Rāma for the rest of the poem, until his purpose is achieved with the death of Rāvaṇa.

Such an interpretation of Rāma’s madness, as the manifestation of the transcendent cosmic violence of the earthly king, may be found to re-introduce coherence in what seems otherwise to stand as an incoherent image. And although I cannot detail the full argument here, I would at least close with the further observation that on this analysis, too, the ideological interests of the “Forest” can be seen to construe broadly with those so insistently presented in the more familiar socio-political universe of “Ayodhyā”³². They now appear to be indissolubly linked with a political theology sustained by the notion of a triune god-head to be fully developed in classical Hinduism: The power of a king is infinite indeed, and as easily as he can preserve the world he can, if provoked, annihilate it.

³⁰ Compare my note on III.15.39.

³¹ See NāṭyaŚā. VI.44. One might speculate further and enquire whether there is not some genetic literary link between the scene of Rāma’s madness in the Araṇyakāṇḍa, and Śiva’s madness over the death of his wife Satī. (Vālmīki seems almost to encourage us to draw the parallel when, as we recall, he describes Rāma after the discovery of the loss of Sītā as “raging like Rudra himself when he sought to slay the victim at Dakṣa’s sacrifice” [61.2].) In the Kālikā Purāṇa version of the myth (unfortunately, and rather oddly, no early version seems to survive), Śiva is absent when Satī commits suicide, and returning to his hermitage and finding his wife’s body, he at first refuses to believe what he sees. On learning what had provoked Satī’s act he flies into a rage, destroys the sacrifice of Dakṣa and, filled with grief, “like a common mortal” he bursts into tears. Taking up his wife’s corpse he goes off – as another *purāṇa* phrases it – “wandering like a madman” (DevīBhāP. VII.30.45), and ready to destroy the universe (see Kālikāpurāṇa XVIII.1ff.; BrDharmaP. II.40ff.; H. ZIMMER, *The King and the Corpse* [Princeton, 1948], pp. 296–306; W. O’FLAHERTY, *Eroticism and Asceticism in the Mythology of Śiva* [Oxford, 1973], pp. 298–300. As in the case of the medieval commentaries on the Rāmayaṇa [see above, p. 49, and n. 24], Śaiva sectarian works come to insist that Śiva is not in reality distraught by the death of Satī; it is simply his *līlā*, or divine play, to appear to be so [see O’FLAHERTY, *op. cit.*, p. 147 and references cited there]).

³² POLLOCK, *op. cit.* (n. 2).