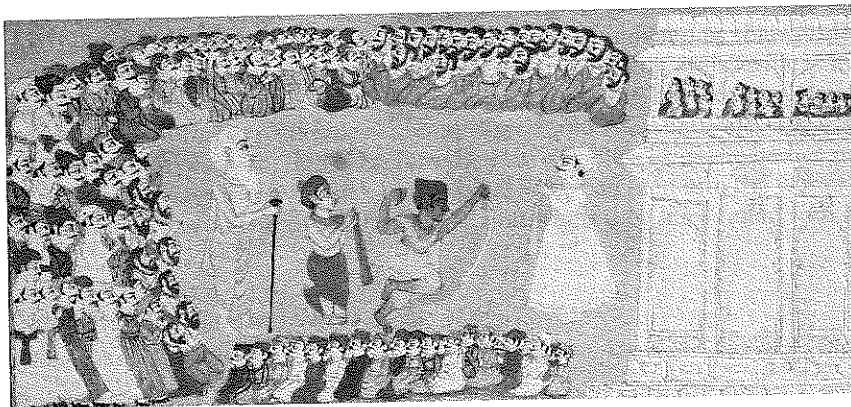


LOST LOVES AND TRAGIC MISTAKES IN THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.

The *Ramayana* may have circulated as a story as early as 750 B.C.E., but it did not reach its present form until between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.. Its world therefore begins in the North Indian world of the Upanishads and continues through the world of the Shastras (ca. 200 C.E.) ("Shastras," p. 210). Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana*, the oldest surviving version of the tale, a text of some 20,000 verses, establishes the basic plot:

Ravana, the ogre (Rakshasa) king of Lanka, was a Brahmin and a devotee of the god Shiva. He had obtained, from the god Brahma, a boon that he could not be killed by gods or anti-gods or ogres or any other creatures—though he neglected to mention human beings, as beneath contempt. The god Vishnu therefore became incarnate as a human being, the prince Rama, in order to kill Ravana. Sita, born of the goddess Earth, became Rama's wife. When Rama's father, Dasharatha, put Rama's younger brother Bharata (not the same person as the Bharata of the *Mahabharata*) on the throne instead of Rama, Rama went into exile in the jungle with Sita and another brother, Lakshmana. Ravana stole Sita and kept her captive on the island of Lanka for many years. With the help of an army of monkeys and bears, and in particular the monkey Hanuman, who leaped across to Lanka and then built a causeway for the armies to cross over, Rama killed Ravana and brought Sita back home with him. But when he began to worry about talk that her reputation, if not her chastity, had been sullied by her long sojourn in the house of another man, he forced her to submit to an ordeal by fire. Later he banished her, but she bore him twin sons who came to him when they were grown. Sita, too, returned briefly but then disappeared forever back into the earth, her mother. Rama ruled for many years, a time of peace and justice.



Rama breaks the bow of Shiva at the court of Janaka, Sita's father. Mid nineteenth-century painting.

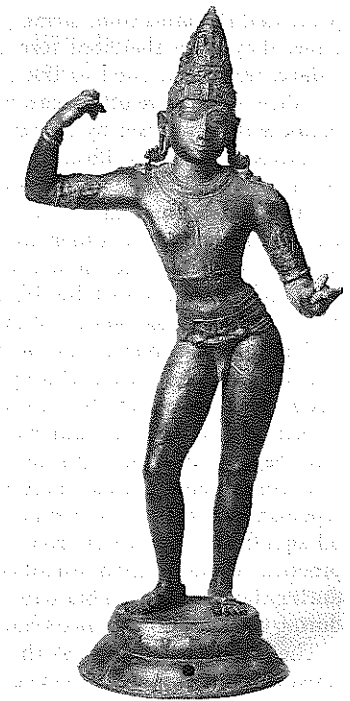
The *Ramayana*, composed at a time when kingdoms were becoming powerful, legitimates monarchy through the vision of the golden age of Ram-raj, Rama's Rule: "There were no widows in distress, nor any danger from snakes or disease; people lived for a thousand years." This vision of a time of peace and prosperity became the template for an ideal of theocracy that haunted Indian politics for centuries. But the actual historical scene of the time, with its parricides and usurpations, also produced a royal paranoia that is revealed in the underside of Ram-raj, surfacing in the palace coups and armed conflicts in the realms of monkeys and ogres.

Valmiki's Rama usually forgets that he is an incarnate god, an avatar (a "crossing-down," from heaven to earth) of Vishnu. He genuinely suffers and despairs when he's separated from Sita. Sometimes Valmiki treats Rama as a god, sometimes not. For the *Ramayana* is situated on the cusp between the periods in which Rama changed from a minor god to a major god. Hindus in later periods often took the devotion to Rama expressed by Hanuman and Lakshmana as a paradigm for human devotion (*bhakti*) to a god. Yet in the *Ramayana* these relationships lack the passionate, often violent qualities that characterize the fully developed *bhakti* of the Tamil texts and the Puranas beginning in the tenth century C.E.

The double nature of incarnation—simultaneously human and not human—can be traced back to the Upanishadic belief that our souls are all incarnations of the immortal *brahman* though our bodies are subject to the cycle of reincarnation. But why do the two great human avatars of Vishnu, Krishna and Rama, appear at this moment in Indian history? Perhaps because an avatar was a way to attach already extant divinities to the growing sect of Vishnu, a way to synthesize previous strands and appropriate other peoples' stories. The avatar was also an answer to the challenge that Buddhism and Jainism posed for Hinduism, for by this time the Buddha and the Jina had successfully established the paradigm of a religious movement centered upon a human being. But Rama and Krishna beat the Buddhists and Jains at their own game of making the human form a locus of superhuman wisdom and power, for Rama and Krishna are humans with a direct line to divinity, drawing their power from a god (Vishnu) far greater than any Vedic god and at the same time, through the incarnations, grounded in humanity.

Buddhism and Jainism were forces to be reckoned with at this time, and they influenced doctrines, narratives, and characters in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The karma theory may have developed many of its crucial details within Jainism, and moved from there to Buddhism and Hinduism. All three religions remained in conversation, their rivalry often spurring them to borrow from one another in a positive way. One of the ideas that they debated together was the treatment of animals, with a great deal of soul-searching about the meaning of *ahimsa*, nonviolence to all living creatures ("The Dog Who Would Be Lion," p. 168; "The Pandavas Go to Heaven," p. 155).

Yet Buddhists and Jains differed from Hindus in significant ways, even in the degree of their engagement with *ahimsa*. The Jains took vegetarianism to the greatest extremes, taking pains to avoid injuring even tiny insects. (This stricter *ahimsa*



Bronze statue of Rama from the Chola dynasty in South India

prevented the Jains from farming, which killed the tiny creatures caught under the plow; they were therefore forced to become bankers and get rich.) Yet, though *ahimsa* was often cited as the reason that Jains and Buddhists abhorred animal sacrifice, there were other reasons, too. They may also have wanted to make a clean break with Hinduism by eliminating the element by which most Hindus defined themselves: Vedic sacrifice. It was factors such as these, as much as compassion for furry creatures, that made Buddhists and Jains abjure animal sacrifice.

But Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains often became rivals for political patronage as well as for the hearts of men and women. It was advantageous for the Buddhists to promote a religion that did not need priests to intercede for individual humans with gods, indeed that denied the effectiveness of gods altogether, scorning them as insignificant and/or ridiculous, and this was the final move that distinguished Buddhists and Jains from Hindus, many of whom may not have employed Brahmins themselves but did not deny their authority for others. Jains and Buddhists also rejected the Veda as revelation, which, with their disregard for Brahminical teachings and Brahminical claims to divine authority, distinguished them even from those Hindus who were beginning to take up some of the new doctrines and practices. The Buddhists also denied the existence of an individual soul and, like the authors of some of the Upanishads, argued that conduct rather than birth determined the true Brahmin—all significant departures from most Hindu doctrines. They differed even in their practice of renunciation: Buddhist monks lived together in monasteries, at first only during the rainy season but later at other times as well, while the Hindu renouncers during this period renounced human companionship and wandered alone.

The Buddhists thrived, as their sources of income shifted to a wider base. Buddhist monuments depict many scenes of popular devotion and were often financed not by dynastic patronage but by individual benefactors, both monks and nuns within the institutions and, outside, merchants increasingly interested in the security and patronage that religious centers offered in an age of political uncertainty. Often the whole community—landowners, merchants, high officials, common artisans—funded major Buddhist projects. Women, including women from marginal social positions (such as courtesans), also patronized Buddhists and Jains. The widespread public recognition of such women both as donors and as renouncers also had an impact on the role of women within Hinduism and on the development of Hindu religious rituals, performed by women, that came to replace the Vedic sacrifice, performed by men.

This was the context in which the *Ramayana* developed the concept of the human avatar and endowed that avatar, Rama, with gentle virtues, many of which owed as much to Buddhism as to Hinduism.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

Agni: ug'-nee
Brahma: bruh-mah'
Daitya: dait'-yuh
Daksha: duk'-shuh
Dasharatha: duh'-shuh-ruh'-tuh
Devarata: day'-vuh-ruh'-tuh
Dhundhumara: doon'-doo-mah'-ruh
Dilipa: dih-lee'-puh
Gandharva: gun-dar'-vuh
Indra: in'-druh
Janaka: juh'-nuh-kuh
Janamejaya: juh-nuh-may'-jah'-yuh
Jatarupa: jah'-tuh-roo'-puh

Kakutstha: kah'-koot'-stuh
Kausalya: kow'-sul-yah'
Krittika: krih'-ti-kuh
Kshatriya: kuh-shah'-tree-yuh
Kumara: koo-mah'-ruh
Lakshmana: luk'-sh-muh-nuh
Marut: muh'-root
Menaka: may'-nuh-kah'
Mithila: mee'-tee-lah'
Naga: nah'-guh
Nahusha: nuh-hoo'-shuh
Nimi: nee'-mee
Raghava: rah'-guh-vuh

Raghu: ruh'-goo
Rama: rah'-muh
Ramayana: rah-mah'-yuh-nuh
Rudra: roo'-druh
Sagara: suh'-guh-ruh
Sarayu: suh-ruh-yoo'
Shaibya: shaib'-yuh
Shashtra: shah'-struh
Shiva: shih'-vuh
Shudra: shoo'-druh
Shukra: shoo'-kruh

Sita: see'-tah
Skanda: skun'-duh
Uma: oo-mah'
Vaishya: vai'-shyuh
Vaivasvata: vai'-vus-vuh'-tuh
Varuna: vuh'-roo-nuh
Vasava: vah'-suh-vuh
Vayu: vah'-yoo
Vishvamisra: vish'-vuh-mit'-ruh
Yama: yuh'-muh

THE BIRTH OF SITA AND THE BENDING OF THE BOW

Rama and Lakshmana, two sons of King Dasharatha, accompanied by their family priest, the sage Vishvamitra, have journeyed from their capital city of Ayodhya to Mithila, the capital city of King Janaka; Janaka is ruler of the kingdom of Videha and father of the princess Sita. They have come to try to win Sita's hand by winning the contest set for all suitors, which consists in bending a certain bow. This bow came into existence when the god Rudra destroyed Daksha's sacrifice ("Daksha's Sacrifice," p. 172); it cannot be bent by anyone among anti-gods (demons, Asuras), spirits (Yakshas), ogres (Rakshasas), horse-headed What?-men (Kinnaras), demi-gods (Gandharvas), or Nagas (great serpents, sometimes cobras, sometimes snake from the waist down and anthropomorphic from the waist up). Significantly, as in the boon granted to Ravana, human beings are not mentioned. Rama alone is able to bend the bow and win the princess.

In the course of the contest, the heroes hear the story of Sita's birth, which took place when Janaka was plowing the sacrificial arena, in preparation for the ceremony of royal consecration. Years later, Sita is scorned and insulted until she goes back down into the earth during Rama's horse sacrifice; thus both her birth and her death are framed by sacrifices. Her life follows the pattern of swan maidens and other animal goddesses: she comes from another world to a mortal king, bears him children (twins), is mistreated by him, and leaves him forever, with only the children to console him. The fact that Rama does not merely string the bow that will win Sita but breaks it foreshadows the way that he will, in a sense, injure her and ultimately lose her.

Ramayana 1.65–66

In the clear light of dawn, King Janaka performed his rituals and then summoned the noble Vishvamitra and Rama and Lakshmana. The king, who was the very soul of dharma, honored the sage and the two Raghu princes, honored them with the ritual set down in the Shastras, and then he said, 'Welcome to you, sir. What can I do for you, sinless one? Command me, for

I am yours to command.' When the sage, who was the very soul of dharma, and also clever with words, heard the speech of the noble hero, Janaka, he answered him with this speech: 'These two Kshatriyas are the two sons of King Dasharatha, and are famous throughout the world. They wish to see that special bow that you have. Do please show it to them, and when they have satisfied their desire by seeing the bow, the two princes will go back home as they please.'

When he heard this, Janaka replied to the great sage, 'Let me tell you the purpose for which that bow is here. The king called Devarata, sixth in descent from Nimi, received this bow in trust from the noble god Rudra, who placed it in his hands. For, once upon a time, when Daksha's sacrifice was destroyed, the mighty Rudra bent this bow and said to the gods, in mock fury, "Since you gods did not set aside any share in the sacrifice for me, and I want a share, I am going to knock your precious heads off with this bow." Then the gods trembled with fear, and they bowed low to Rudra and begged him to forgive them, and he was satisfied by them. In his satisfaction, he restored to their former condition all their limbs that the noble god of gods had lopped off or mutilated or shattered with his bow. That celestial bow remains even today in our family, where it is highly valued.

'Now, one day when I was in the sacrificial grounds, I saw the ultimate celestial nymph, Menaka, flying through the sky, and this thought came to me: "If I should have a child in her, what a child that would be!" As I was thinking in this way, my semen fell on the ground. And afterwards, as I was ploughing that field, there arose out of the earth, as first fruits, my daughter, who has celestial beauty and qualities, and can only be won by one whose bride price is his manliness. Since she arose from the surface of the earth, and was born from no womb, she is called Sita, the furrow.

'In the past, kings kept coming here and coming here, wooing her, and I told those kings, "She will be given to the man whose bride-price is his manliness." Then all the kings who sought my daughter came to my city to prove their manliness. I showed them the bow, to test their manliness, but they could not even lift up that bow. And when I saw how little manliness they had, I refused to let any of them have my daughter. Then all those kings became angry, and they surrounded the city of Mithila on all sides and laid siege to it. For those kings, each individually thinking that he had been insulted, were filled with great anger, and so they oppressed Mithila. For a full year they besieged Mithila, with firm determination, and when, as a result of that siege, all my resources were exhausted, I asked help from the god of gods, (Rudra) the husband of Uma. The lord was satisfied by my propitiation and gave me an army, complete with all four divisions (infantry, cavalry, chariots, and the armored division [elephants]). Then the power of the kings was broken and they went away, for they had little manliness in the courage of their army, and they were too proud of the little manliness that they had. This, then, is the incomparable celestial bow, that I will show to Rama and Lakshmana. And if Rama can string this bow, I will give him Sita, who was born of no womb, to be the daughter-in-law of Dasharatha.'

When the great sage Vishvamitra heard king Janaka's words, he said to him, 'Show the bow to Rama.' Then king Janaka commanded his ministers: 'Adorn the celestial bow with perfume and garlands and bring it here.' At Janaka's command, the ministers entered the city, placed the bow in front of them, and went back out, as the king had commanded. Five thousand

tall, noble men put the chest (containing the bow) on (a carriage with) eight wheels and dragged it, with considerable difficulty. And when they had brought the iron chest that contained the bow, the king's counsellors said to the godlike Janaka, 'Here, king, is the incomparable bow that all the kings revere; if you wish, great king of Mithila, it can be seen.' At their words, the king cupped his hands in reverence and spoke to the noble Vishvamitra, and to Rama and Lakshmana: 'Here is the incomparable bow that the Janakas revere, O Brahmin, and that all those kings with their great manliness were unable to draw. None of the hosts of gods, none of the demons or ogres, or the foremost Gandharvas or spirits, none of the What?-men or great Nagas can bend this bow or string it or fit an arrow to it or pluck the string or even lift it. What chance is there then for men? This bow is the very best; bull of sages, show it to these two sons of the king.'

When the sage Vishvamitra heard what the king said, he said to Rama, 'Rama, my little calf, look at the bow.' And Rama did as the sage said; he opened the chest in which the bow lay and looked at the bow and said, 'I touch this great bow with my hand; now I will make a great effort to lift it, and even to string it.' 'Very well,' said the king and the sage, and as the sage had told him to do, he grasped the bow in the middle, playfully. And then, as many thousands of kings watched him, Rama strung the bow as if he were playing. With his manliness, Rama strung the bowstring and then drew the bow; and that incomparable man of great fame broke that bow right in the middle. It made a loud noise, loud as a thunderclap, and a great earthquake, as if a mountain had been shattered. The noise so stunned all the men that they fell down—all except the great sage, the king, and the two princes descended from the great king Raghu.

When the people revived again, the king—whose worries were over—cupped his hands in reverence and spoke to the bull among sages, for he knew how to make speeches: 'Sir, now I have seen the manliness of Rama the son of Dasharatha; it is surpassingly marvelous, inconceivable; I had no idea what it was like. My daughter Sita will bring great fame to the family of the Janakas when she takes Rama, the son of Dasharatha, as her husband. And so I have kept my promise, that her only bride-price would be manliness; I will give Rama my daughter Sita, who is as precious as life itself. With your permission, please, Brahmin, my counsellors will go quickly to Ayodhya, hastening in chariots. With courteous words they will bring the king to my city and tell him all about the betrothal of the girl whose only bride-price was manliness. And they will tell the king that his two sons are under the protection of the sage; this will satisfy the king, and then they can bring him here right away.' 'Yes,' said Vishvamitra, and the king spoke to his counsellors and gave them orders and sent them to Ayodhya; for he was the very soul of dharma.

DASHARATHA KILLS A BOY HE MISTAKES FOR AN ELEPHANT

When Rama, the eldest son of Dasharatha, and the son of the oldest queen, Kausalya, was about to ascend the throne, a younger queen, Kaikeyi, forced Dasharatha to put her son, Bharata, on the throne instead and send Rama into exile. She achieved her purpose in part by reminding Dasharatha of a promise he had made to her years ago and in part by sexual blackmail (she locked herself into her "anger room," put on filthy clothes, lay down on the ground, and refused to look at the king or speak to him). The besotted Dasharatha was powerless to resist her beauty (2.9.16–19) and complied, though he was deeply unhappy about exiling Rama. Five days after Rama's departure, "there suddenly flashed upon [Dasharatha's] mind an evil deed he had once done, unintentionally, long ago, when he was shooting arrows by the sound of the target alone" (2.56.2). That night, Dasharatha went to sleep with Kausalya and remembered, in a dream, the details of this evil deed.

The connection between blindness (aiming by sound alone at the child of sightless parents) and desire (hunting as the equivalent of taking a cold shower to control premarital desire) suggests that desire was Dasharatha's blind spot long before Kaikeyi manipulated him by locking him out of her bedroom. By the end of this episode, Dasharatha can no longer see Kausalya at all and is, like the father in the story, blind, weak, and grieving for his lost son.

There are strong parallels between Dasharatha's mistaking a boy for an elephant and Pandu's act of killing, while hunting, a sage who had taken the form of a stag and was coupling with a doe (*Mahabharata* 1.90.64; 1.109.5–30). For interrupting this mating couple, Pandu was cursed to be childless ("The End of Female Promiscuity," p. 164). So, too, when "The Gods Interrupt Shiva and Parvati," the goddesses are cursed to be childless. Hunting errors and fatal interruptions are not limited to the sexual arena. Krishna, in the *Mahabharata*, dies when a hunter mistakes him for a deer. And at the end of the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana is forced to break in on Rama and Death when they are closeted together, under strict instructions not to be interrupted, on pain of death. This is the ultimate fatal interruption: interrupting Death himself. All of these themes resonate in this story about Dasharatha.

Ramayana 2.57–58

A short time later, his heart crushed by grief, King Dasharatha awoke, and began to brood once more. Heartache over the exile of Rama and Lakshmana once more swept over him, the equal of Vasava,¹ as the demon's darkness sweeps over the sun. It was at midnight, on that sixth night since Rama's banishment to the forest, when King Dasharatha fully remembered the evil deed he had once done. He then addressed Kausalya, who lay anguished with grief for her son.

"Whatever a person does, be it good or evil, my dear and precious wife, he receives in like measure, the direct result of the deeds he has done himself. One deserves to be called a fool who sets about a deed without understanding the gravity of its consequences, what he stands to gain or lose. A

person who cuts down a mango grove and instead waters flame trees—made greedy for their fruit by the sight of their flowers—would be sorry when that fruit appears. I cut down a mango grove and watered flame trees instead. When the fruit appeared I had to give up Rama, and now, too late, I see my folly and grieve.

"When I was a young man, Kausalya, I earned a reputation as a bowman. It was said, 'The prince can shoot by the sound of the target alone.' But I did an evil deed, my lady, and it has now come home to me, this sorrow that I have brought upon myself. But just as a child might eat something poisonous out of ignorance, so I, too, was unaware of the fruits my shooting by sound would bear. We were not yet married, my lady, and I was still prince regent. The rains had come, the season that quickens lust and desire. After having drawn up the moisture of the earth and scorched the world with its rays, the sun had entered the awful region the dead inhabit. All at once the heat vanished, dark rain clouds appeared, and all creatures began to rejoice—frogs, cuckoos, peacocks. Engulfed by the rain that had fallen and continued to fall incessantly, the mountain with its wild white cuckoos looked like one vast body of water.

"At this most pleasant of seasons I decided to take some exercise, and with bow and arrows and chariot I set out along the Sarayu River. I was an intemperate youth, eager to kill a buffalo at the waterhole in the nighttime, an elephant coming down to the river, or some other wild animal. Now, in the darkness I heard a noise, beyond the range of vision, of a pitcher being filled in the water, but just like the sound an elephant² makes. I drew out a shaft that glared like a poisonous snake. I shot the keen-edged arrow, and it darted like a poisonous snake. And there, as day was breaking, the voice of a forest dweller rang out clearly, 'Ah! Ah!'—the voice of a young man crying there as he fell into the water: 'Why should someone shoot a weapon at a person like me, an ascetic?'

"I came to the deserted river at night only to fetch water. Who has struck me with an arrow? What have I done to anyone? I am a seer who has renounced violence, who lives in the wilderness on things of the wild. Why should someone take up a weapon to kill a person like me? The one burden I carry is my matted hair, my garments are nothing but barkcloth and hides. What could anyone stand to gain by killing me? What wrong could I have done him? No, he cannot have had any purpose at all in what he did; pure malice must have prompted it. No one shall ever forgive him, like the man who violates his guru's bed. But it is not for the loss of my own life that I am grieving so. It is for two others I grieve that am slain, my mother and father. For they are an aged couple and have long been dependent on me. When I am dead what sort of existence are they to lead? My aged mother and father and I all slain by a single arrow! Who can have been so reckless, so malicious as to strike us down all at once?'

"When I heard that piteous voice, I who had always striven to do right, I shuddered and the bow and arrow dropped from my hands to the ground. Desolate to my innermost being, in the depths of misery I went to the place and saw on the bank of the Sarayu an ascetic struck down by my arrow. He fixed me with his eyes—I was beside myself with terror—and he spoke these

TRANSLATED BY Sheldon I. Pollock.

1. Vasava is a name of Indra, king of the gods; the demon of eclipse is Rahu ("The Churning of the Ocean," p. 159).

2. It is in any case against dharma to kill a wild elephant.

harrowing words as though ready to burn me up with his ascetic power: 'What harm have I, living here in the forest, ever done to you, your Majesty, that you should attack me when all I wanted was to fetch some water for my elders? The very same arrow that has pierced me to the quick has also struck down two blind old people, my mother and my father. The two of them are frail and blind; they are thirsty and waiting for me. And now they will have to bear their parching thirst, as long as they can, on the strength of hope alone. I now see there is no reward for austerity or learning, since my father does not know that I lie fallen upon the ground. And even if he knew, what could he do? He is helpless and unable even to move about, as helpless as one tree to save another that is being felled. You yourself, Raghava, must go at once to my father and tell him, lest in his wrath he consume you as a raging fire consumes a forest. There is the footpath, your Majesty, leading to my father's ashram. Go and beg his forgiveness, lest he curse you in his rage. Draw out the arrow from me, your Majesty, the keen-edged shaft is tearing me apart at the quick, as a rushing water current tears a soft riverbank apart. I am not a Brahmin, your Majesty, set your mind at ease. For I was born of a Vaishya father and a Shudra³ mother, lord of the country.'

"So he spoke, in pain, and as he lay doubled over, I pulled out the arrow from where it pierced him to the quick. I stared at him lying there by the Sarayu, his body drenched in water, as he painfully lamented, all the while gasping from his mortal wound; and as I stared, my dear wife, I grew utterly sick at heart.

"It was a great sin I had committed, however unintentionally. I hardly had my wits about me as all alone I put my mind to the question of how might it be righted. At last I took the pot filled with pure water and went along the path he had told me of, until I reached the ashram. There I saw his parents, a frail, blind old couple with no one to guide them, like a pair of birds whose wings have been clipped. They could not move about and were sitting there listless and helpless, talking about him, their one hope that I robbed them of. Hearing the sound of my footsteps the sage spoke: 'Why did you take so long, my son? Bring the water at once. Your mother here was worried, my child, and all because you were playing in the water. Come into the ashram at once. If perhaps your mother or I have offended you in some way, my son, you should not take it to heart. For you are an ascetic, my child. You are the recourse for us who have no other, the eyes for us whose sight is gone. Our very lives are in your hands. Won't you say something to us?'

"The longer I looked at the sage, the more frightened I became, and in a choked voice, stammering and slurring the syllables, I spoke to him. With effort I managed to collect my thoughts and recover the power of speech. Then I began to tell him the frightful story of his son's calamity. 'I am Dasharatha, a Kshatriya, not the great one's son. A sorrowful thing, which all good men would condemn, has happened by my own doing. Holy one, I came to the bank of the Sarayu, bow in hand, eager to kill some animal, an elephant perhaps, coming down to the water hole. There I heard the sound of a pitcher being filled in the water and, thinking it an elephant, I shot an arrow at it. I went to the riverbank and there I saw an ascetic lying on the ground

3. The boy tells Dasharatha that he is of mixed class (his father of the third, merchant class and his mother of the fourth, servant class), to reas-

sure Dasharatha lest he hesitate to pull out the arrow for fear of killing a Brahmin.

with an arrow piercing his heart and his life ebbing away. Holy one, I was aiming at a sound, meaning to kill an elephant. I released the iron shaft toward the water, and it struck your son. When the arrow was pulled out he went to heaven, then and there, grieving for both of you holy ones, lamenting your blindness. It was unintentional, holy one, it was an accident that I struck down your son. Whatever awaits me now may the sage forgive me!

"The mighty sage gasped when he heard these harrowing words, and broken with grief he spoke to me as I stood before him, hands cupped in reverence. 'If you had not told me yourself of this impious deed, your Majesty, your head would have instantly burst into a myriad fragments. If a Kshatriya intentionally commits a murder—and the murder of a forest hermit at that—it topples him from his place, be he Indra himself, the wielder of the thunderbolt. But since this act was unintentional, and for that reason alone, you shall live. Were it not so, the entire House of the Raghavas, not just you, would cease at once to be. Take us, your Majesty, to the place,' he said to me. 'We want to see our son now, to have one last sight of him, his body spattered with blood and his hide garments in disarray, lying on the ground unconscious, under the sway of the King of Righteousness.'⁴

"So all alone I led the sage and his wife to that place, and brought the deeply grieving parents near to where they could touch their son. The wretched couple drew close, they touched their son and collapsed upon his body. And his father cried out: 'My son, don't you love me any more? At least have regard for your mother then, righteous child. Why don't you embrace me, my son? Speak to me, my tender child. Whom shall I hear late at night—how it used to touch my heart—so sweetly reciting the sacred texts or other works? And after the twilight worship, the ritual bath, and offerings to the sacred fire, who will sit down beside me, my son, to allay the grief and fear that anguish me? Who will bring me tubers and fruit and roots, and feed me like a welcome guest—me an invalid, without leader or guide? And how, my son, shall I support your poor mother, blind and aged as she is, wretched and yearning for her son?

"'Stay! Don't, oh don't go, my son, to the abode of Yama. You may go tomorrow, with your mother and me to lend you strength. For we too shall soon be going to the house of Yama, bereft of you and left helpless in the forest, wretched and anguished with grief. And then, when I see Vaivasvata,⁵ I will make this speech: 'May the King of Righteousness forgive me, but this boy is needed to support his parents.' You were free of evil, my son, and were struck down by a man of evil deeds. By the power of this truth may you go straight to the worlds they win who fight under arms. Proceed to the supreme state those heroes reach, my son, who do not turn their backs in battle but die facing the foe. Go, my dear son, to the state attained by Sagara, by Shaibya, Dilipa, Janamejaya, Nahusha, and Dhundhumara.⁶ Go, my dear son, to the state awarded to all holy men for their Vedic study and austerities, to one who donates land, who keeps the sacred fires, who is faithful to his one wife; to those who make a gift of a thousand cows, who support their gurus, who lay their bodies down. For no child of this family ever goes to the state of the accursed.'

4. Yama, king of the dead, the king of dharma because he judges the dead.
5. Another name of Yama.

6. Heroes from the family of Raghu, the ancestor of Rama (who is therefore called Raghava, descended from Raghu).

"So he mourned there, wretchedly and without pause, and then with his wife he set about making the funeral libation for his child. But just then the sage's son appeared in a heavenly form procured by his own good deeds, and for one brief moment he addressed these words of solace to his parents: 'I have attained a high station because I took care of you. And both of you shall soon come into my presence.' With this, the sage's disciplined son ascended straightway to heaven upon a heavenly chariot of wonderful construction. The ascetic and his wife hurriedly made the libation, and as I stood before him, my hands cupped in reverence, the mighty sage said to me: 'Slay me this very moment, your Majesty; dying holds no terror for me. For I had but one son and you have taken him from me with your arrow. Since it was unintentionally that you struck down my pure son, I will only lay a curse on you, though it is a grievous and very dreadful one: Just as I now sorrow over my son's calamity, so you, too, your majesty, shall end your days grieving for a son.'

"The words of the noble sage have thus come home to me, dear wife, for now I am to lose my life grieving for my son. If only Rama could touch me or speak to me now just once. How unlike me it was, my lady, to do what I did to Raghava. I cannot see you with my eyes, Kausalya, my mind is failing. Here, the messengers of Vaivasvata are here, hastening me on! What greater sorrow than this, that in the final moments of my life I cannot rest my eyes on righteous, truthful Rama. They are not men, they are gods who in the fifteenth year will see Rama's face again, that lovely face with flashing earrings. His eyes like lotus petals, his perfect brows, his perfect teeth and lovely nose: how fortunate the men who will see Rama's face, so like the lord of stars, the moon. Like the autumn moon or a full-blown lotus, and so fragrant: how fortunate the men who will see the face of my defender. When Rama has ended his stay in the forest and returns to Ayodhya, what happiness for those who will see him, like the planet Shukra⁷ moving forward on its course. The grief arising here in my very soul has left me helpless and insensible. In its wild rush it is sweeping me away, as a raging river sweeps away its bank. O great-armed Raghava, the one relief of my agony!"

With this last cry of grief King Dasharatha reached the end of his life. And so it came about, just after midnight, when he had finished his mournful tale, that the lord of men, a man of noble vision, anguished by the exile of his beloved son and afflicted with the most profound sorrow, breathed his last.

7. The planet Venus, moving forward auspiciously.

THE GODS INTERRUPT SHIVA AND PARVATI

Like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* weaves into its central tale a number of myths. The sage Vishvamitra, Rama's family priest, tells the following story to Rama and his brother Lakshmana in answer to their question about the river Ganges. In the course of the myth, Shiva places his seed in Fire (Agni), rather than in his wife Parvati, as an anthropomorphization of the Vedic ritual act of throwing butter into the consecrated fire that carries the oblation to the gods, acting out the

Upanishadic equation of the sexual act and the oblation. The curse of childlessness that the frustrated Parvati gives to the wives of the gods explains why so many children of the gods are born to mortal women or from male gods or sages who create children unilaterally merely at the thought, or sight, of a woman, ejaculating into some womb substitute—a flower, a female animal, a river, a furrow—to produce a motherless child "born of no womb" (*a-yoni-ja*). Sita is born of a furrow, and so of the goddess Earth, in this way ("The Birth of Sita").

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Shiva and Parvati twice, first to explain why the wives of the gods were cursed and then to explain why one goddess, the Ganges, was exempt from the curse. The story of the birth of the god Skanda (also called Kartikeya ["son of the Kritikas"]) and Kumara ["the Prince"]) to Shiva (also called Rudra) and Parvati (also called Uma) is told in many texts, including the *Mahabharata* (3.213–16). But the *Ramayana* version is unique in having Parvati curse not merely the wives of the gods in general but the Earth in particular, and to curse her not merely to have no son but to have too many husbands—like Draupadi and Kunti, the heroines of the *Mahabharata* ("The End of Female Promiscuity," p. 164).

The sage Vishvamitra tells this story to Rama.

Ramayana 1.35.6–26, 1.36.1–31

Long ago, Rama, when the great ascetic, black-throated Shiva, had gotten married, he looked with desire upon the goddess and began to make love to her. Thus engaged, the black-throated god passed a hundred years of the gods.¹ But even so, foe-consuming Rama, the goddess conceived no child. By that time the gods, led by Grandfather Brahma, had become alarmed and thought, 'Who will be able to withstand the being who will be born from this union?' Drawing near, all the gods prostrated themselves and spoke: 'Great god, god of gods, you are devoted to the welfare of this world. Please be gracious to the gods who have fallen at your feet. Best of gods, the worlds cannot contain your semen. You should, instead, perform with the goddess the austerities prescribed in the Vedas. For the sake of the three worlds, you must retain your semen in your body. You should protect all these worlds, not destroy them.'

When the great lord of all the worlds heard the words of the gods, he said, 'Very well.' Then he spoke to them further: 'With the help of Uma, I shall retain the semen in my body. Let the thirty gods and the earth rest easy. But tell me this, great gods: who will contain such of my incomparable semen as has already been dislodged from its place?' Addressed in this fashion, the gods replied to Shiva, whose standard is the bull, 'The Earth will bear the semen that has been dislodged.' And so, when they had addressed him in this fashion, the lord of gods released his semen upon the Earth, thereby filling it together with its mountains and forests.

Then the gods spoke to Agni, the eater of oblations, 'You and Vayu² must enter Rudra's abundant semen.' Permeated by Agni, it was transformed into a white mountain on which there was a celestial thicket of white reeds that looked like the sun surrounded by fire. It was there that Kartikeya came into being, born from fire. Then the gods and the hosts of seers were

TRANSLATED BY Robert P. Goldman.

1. A year of the gods equals 360 human years.

2. The god of the wind.

delighted at heart and worshiped Uma and Shiva. But the daughter of the mountain was enraged, Rama. Her eyes red with anger, she spoke to the gods, cursing them: 'Since I have been thwarted while making love in the hope of begetting a son, you shall be unable to father children upon your own wives. From this day forward, your wives shall remain childless.'

After addressing all the gods in this fashion, she cursed the Earth as well. 'O Earth, you shall be manifold in form; and the wife of many.³ Moreover, since you did not want my son, you evil-minded creature, you shall never experience a mother's love for a son, defiled as you are by my anger.' When the lord of gods had seen all the gods thus put to shame, he set out for the west, the direction guarded by Varuna.⁴ There the great lord and the goddess undertook austerities on the northern slope of a mountain peak in the Himalayas. I have told you the story of the mountain's daughter in detail, Rama. Now, you and Lakshmana shall hear from me the tale of the origin of the Ganges.

Long ago, while the god Shiva was engaged in austerities, the gods and hosts of seers, wishing to find a leader for their army, approached Grandfather Brahma. Indra and all the gods made Agni, the god of fire, their spokesman, and prostrating themselves, they spoke these eloquent words to the Grandfather, their lord. 'Lord, he whom you long ago gave us to lead our army has taken to extreme asceticism and is now engaged in austerities with Uma. You know how to arrange things. Arrange something for us to do next in our desire for the welfare of the worlds. You are our last recourse.' Hearing the gods' words, the grandfather of all the worlds comforted them with soothing words, saying: 'What the mountain's daughter said, that you will never father children on your wives, is inviolable truth. Let there be no doubt about this. But here is the Ganges who moves through the sky. Agni, the eater of oblations, will father on her a son who will be a foe-conquering commander for the army of the gods. The eldest daughter of the mountain lord will acknowledge that son. There can be no doubt that Uma will accept this.'

The gods heard Grandfather Brahma's words, and having accomplished their purpose, delight of the Raghus, they all bowed low and worshiped him. Then, all the gods proceeded to Mount Kailasa,⁵ adorned with metallic ores, and charged Agni, the god of fire, with the task of begetting a son. 'You are a god, eater of oblations, and should carry out this task of the gods. Great is your splendor. You must release the semen into the Ganges, the daughter of the mountain.' Agni, the purifier, promised the gods he would do this and so, approaching the Ganges, he said, 'Bear this embryo, goddess, as a favor to the gods.' Hearing these words, she assumed her divine form, and he, seeing her extraordinary beauty, scattered the semen all over. Agni, the purifier, showered it all over the goddess, so that all the channels of the Ganges were filled with it, delight of the Raghus.

Then the Ganges spoke to him, the priest of all the gods. 'O god, I cannot bear your powerful semen. A fire is burning me, and my mind is confused.' The eater of all the gods' oblations replied to the Ganges, 'Let the embryo be placed at the foot of the Himalayas.' When the mighty Ganges heard

3. That is, the Earth gives birth to various soils and crops; and since every king is regarded as the husband of the Earth, she has many husbands, a promiscuity that is regarded as degrad-

ing for a woman ("The Stripping of Draupadi," p. 144; "The End of Female Promiscuity," p. 164).

4. God of the waters.

5. The mountain on which Shiva lives.

Agni's words, blameless man, she released the unbearably brilliant embryo from her channels. Since it had emerged from her, it had the luster of molten gold; and as it touched the earth, it turned to gold and silver, pure and beautiful. From its acrid quality, copper and iron were produced, while its impurities became tin and lead. Thus, when it touched the earth, it turned into the various elements. The moment the embryo was set down, the whole mountain forest was pervaded by its splendor and turned to gold. And ever since that time, Raghava, tiger among men, gold, lustrous as Agni, eater of oblations, has been known as Jatarupa, formed-at-birth.

As soon as the boy was born, Indra and all the Marut hosts⁶ engaged the Krittikas⁷ to provide sufficient milk for him. They offered him milk as soon as he was born, and came to an excellent arrangement, saying, 'He shall be the son of all of us.' It was for this reason that all the gods called him Kartikeya, saying, 'There can be no doubt but that this child will be famous throughout the three worlds.' When the Krittikas heard those words, they bathed the child who had come forth from that outpouring of the embryonic waters shining with the greatest splendor, like fire. And, Kakutstha, since that illustrious and fiery Kartikeya had come forth from that outpouring of embryonic waters, the gods called him 'Skanda.'⁸

Then all six Krittikas put forth wonderful milk, and he grew six heads to take it as it sprang from their breasts. After that lord had drunk their milk for but a single day, he conquered the hosts of Daitya⁹ warriors through his own might, though his form was that of a tender boy. Therefore the hosts of the gods assembled and making Agni, the god of fire, their spokesman, consecrated him whose radiance was unblemished, as commander of the hosts of the gods. Now, Rama, I have told you the detailed history of the Ganges and also of the auspicious and holy birth of Kumara.

6. Storm gods, the entourage of Indra.

7. The six Krittikas (Pleiades) nurse Kartikeya, who gets that name, and his six heads, from them; the seventh Pleiade, often invisible in ancient

India, is said to have refrained from nursing the child.

8. The verb *skand* means "to leap."

9. Anti-gods, cousins of the Asuras.