

The Ramayana of Valmiki

c. 200 B.C.E.

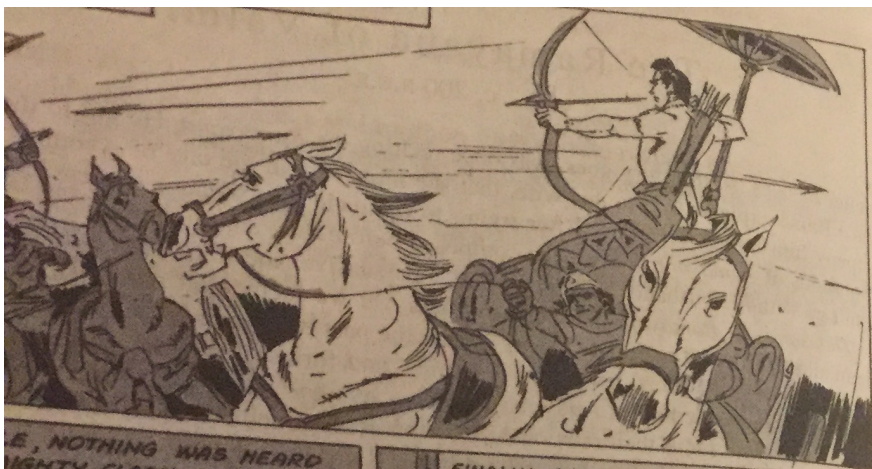
A teller of tales, so the story goes, was once reciting the *Ramayana*. He got to the part where Prince Rama explains to Sita, his wife, that she must stay in the city of Ayodhya and not accompany him into forest exile. After trying to dissuade him without success, Sita cries out, "Thousands of *Ramayanas* have been composed before this, and there isn't one in which Sita doesn't go with her husband!" The argument is persuasive, and Rama agrees to take her along.

Thousands of Ramayanas? Yes, quite likely, if we include all the versions from across Asia in all the different regional languages over the past two thousand years, to say nothing of the countless modern films, performance genres, and forms of popular culture ranging from peasant songs to comic books. And many of these versions are as self-aware as the little story recounted above, as far as their relationship to other tellings and their social, political, or historical location. The fact is indisputable: the story of Rama—his banishment to the forest on the eve of his coronation, the abduction of his wife, Sita, by the demon king Ravana, his defeat of the enemy and recovery of Sita—has had an impact on the literary imagination of India and wider Asia that is more intense and enduring than any other narrative, bar none. *Ramayanas* are found from Kashmir to Tibet to China (a famous Chinese adaptation, Wu Ch'eng-en's *Journey to the West*, can be found in Volume C) and from Sri Lanka to Thailand, Laos, and Java. And it isn't just literary imagination that has been influenced by the story. The different *Ramayanas*, each of them making a particular argument appropriate for its own time and place, have contributed to shaping the spheres of religion, politics, and everyday morality to a degree unmatched by any other work in Indian history.

The version of the *Ramayana* to which many retellings explicitly or implicitly respond—retellings are always responses—is the Sanskrit work of Valmiki. As is so often the case in early Sanskrit literature, we have no reliable historical knowledge about the author, and dating his poem has proved to be difficult. The *Ramayana* contains an account of its own creation: it presents itself as the "first literary work" (*kavya*), a thing said to be previously unknown in Indian culture (see Perspectives: What Is "Literature"?, page 908). But what its newness actually consists of is not entirely clear. The text itself links its novelty with the metrical form of the poem, but the verse structure used for most of the work is far older than the *Ramayana* of Valmiki could possibly be. Its self-identification as the first poem, along with everything else we know about it, suggests a relatively late date. Although tradition holds that the events of the *Mahabharata* took place in the Second Age from the present, whereas the *Ramayana* took place in the third, previous age, the *Ramayana* is later than the core text of the Bharata epic (c. 300 B.C.E.) since Valmiki knows the main story and has used it to deftly structure his own narrative. His thought world has features in common with that of King Ashoka, who issued his inscriptions in the middle of the third century B.C.E. (page 857). And the history of Sanskrit literature, as "literature" comes to be defined in the Sanskrit tradition, begins only around the start of the Common Era. All these considerations point toward 200 B.C.E. or so as the likeliest period of the creation of the poem that came to bear Valmiki's name.

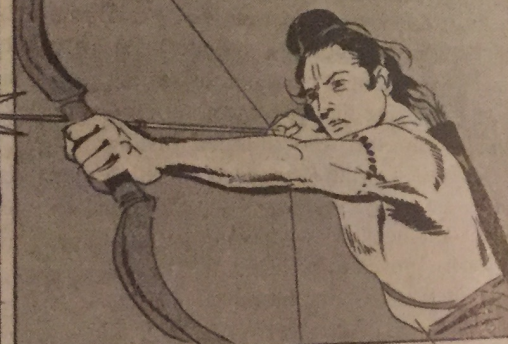
AUTHORSHIP

Some scholars dispute the proposition that any one person created the *Ramayana*. The manuscript history of the work clearly reveals substantial variation owing to a period of oral transmission. And like the *Mahabharata*, Valmiki's text was subject to continual expansion; an entire book, the seventh and last, was added at some point (perhaps along with the greater part of the first). Yet the oral variation of the *Ramayana* remains a variation of one and the same poem. The

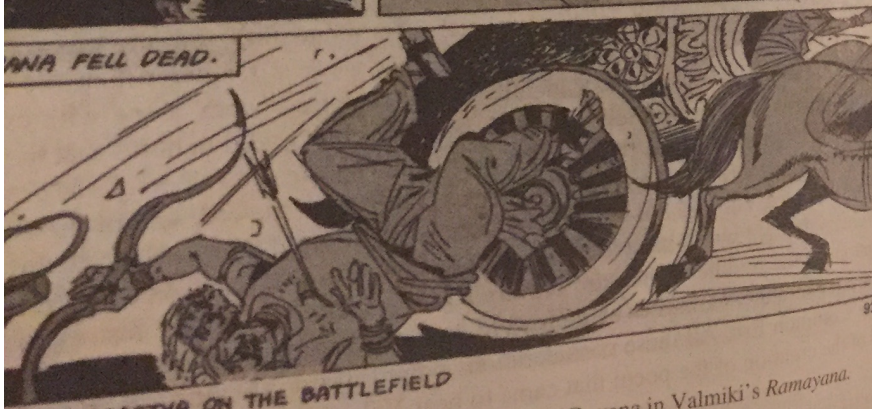


...E, NOTHING WAS HEARD
...IGHTY CLASH OF STEEL
...EEL. DARKNESS SEEMED TO
...THEM AND ONLY THE SPARKS
...STEEL WERE VISIBLE.

FINALLY, RAMA UTTERED A PRAYER * TO
SURYA AND, INVOKING THE BRAHMA ASTRA,
AIMED STRAIGHT AT RAVANA...



...RANA FELL DEAD.



SAGE AGASTYA ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Indian comic book rendering depicts the death of Ravana in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

text was probably more or less memorized (the poem itself says as much) and was committed to writing at different times and places; it was assuredly not composed anew with each telling, as occurred in other oral epic traditions, such as the Serbo-Croatian. A single voice can clearly be heard in Books 2 through 6, a voice of a sort that had never been heard before in Sanskrit.

There is a degree of literary artistry present in every level of the text—from the cohesiveness and sustained momentum of the grand narrative all the way down to the individual image—that is consistent across the poem and quite unlike anything else found in earlier Sanskrit works. One small example of this occurs in Book 3: Rama has gone off to hunt a magic deer, which in reality is a demon sent by Ravana, who had gotten word of Sita's beauty, to lure Rama away from the hermitage where he is living out his exile. Rama's younger brother, Lakshmana, told to guard Sita, has reluctantly left her alone after hearing what he thinks is Rama's cry for help (it is, of course, the demon's cry). This is Ravana's opening, and Valmiki describes his approach with the unobtrusive skill of a meticulous artist, using a half dozen different verbs of motion to bring our apprehension slowly to a climax:

Assuming the guise of a wandering mendicant, he turned his steps toward
Vaidehi . . .

Clad in a soft saffron robe, with topknot, parasol, and sandals . . . he approached
Vaidehi . . .

Both brothers had left her, and in his pride of power he advanced upon her . . .

Ten-necked Ravana had waited for an opening . . . In the guise of a beggar he
drew near to Vaidehi . . .

As Vaidehi sat grieving for her husband, the unholy Ravana in the guise of a holy
man edged closer to her . . .

The blackhearted stalker of the night stole ever closer to Vaidehi

This kind of expressive care is in evidence throughout the poem, and often achieves a level of artistry with which the aesthetic of the *Mahabharata* narrative—powerful, even overwhelming in its own right—has nothing in common.

THE *RAMAYANA* AND THE *MAHABHARATA*

There are many other differences between these two defining works of Indian culture, but the most telling are at the level of argument and ethic. In fact, Valmiki's poem can be read as a response to the apocalyptic vision of social and political disintegration encountered in the *Mahabharata*. The basic narrative problem is identical to that found in the other text: when their aged father, King Dasharatha, declares his intention to abdicate, the two brothers Rama and Bharata would be expected to contest the succession of power. But no struggle ensues, since Rama is ready to withdraw and Bharata is ready to submit to Rama (it is almost as if no one wants the kingship). Again, like Draupadi, wife of the five Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*, Sita is the target of a violent attack. In this case, however, it is not a brother who attacks her but a (literally) demonized outsider, Ravana, king of the *rakshasas*, imaginary beings who embody all that is most feared—and perhaps most desired—by traditional Indian readers. In these two episodes we glimpse a major transformation in the epic narrative tradition that is the ongoing concern of Valmiki's work: the conundrum of power is solved, and its dangerous energies are displaced from brothers to Others.

Key to this transformation is the character of Rama. Almost from their first acquaintance with the poem, Western scholars without exception believed that the hero's divinity was the result of later revision. The original *Ramayana*, they thought, must have been a tale of a simple human hero struggling against evil; the text was eventually appropriated by devotees of the god Vishnu, who turned the work into a theological tract. This long-held interpretation has been shown to be false. The divinity of Rama—not as the major god Vishnu, but as an undoubtedly transcendent being—is a constitutive part of the poem, not only textually but logically. Now that a reasonably complete picture of the manuscript history of the work is available, it has become clear that no

textual criticism allows for the removal of all references to Rama's divinity; it is an inextinguishable part of the text. The logic of the story shows what kind of divinity this is, one similar to the semi-divine status of epic heroes such as Gilgamesh (see page 59) and Achilles (see page 201), but far transcending it. When the demon king Ravana accepts the wish he has been granted from the great god Shiva, he couches it in terms he believes will ensure his immortality: he asks to be invincible to gods, demigods, men, and animals. What he fails to include in his list is what proves to be his undoing: a life-form that is part man and part god. Just such a being is Rama, both man and god at once. And this, as the text powerfully suggests, is what all real kings are supposed to be.

This mode of being also points toward a mode of behaving that enables Rama to escape the paralyzing moral dilemma of the *Mahabharata*, most starkly in evidence in the *Bhagavad Gita* (page 839). Can any acceptable definition of *dharma*—right, law, duty—require the slaughter of one's kinsmen? The *Mahabharata* has no workable answer to this horrific predicament; not even the doctrine of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the disinterested execution of one's *dharma*, seems an adequate response. Instead, the *Mahabharata* only shows what happens when the logic especially of the duty of the warrior is allowed to follow its course. This is precisely what Rama rejects. He juxtaposes the warrior's duty (Kshatriya *dharma*) to a higher law, that of hierarchical obedience—of son to father, younger brother to elder brother. This ethic, already emphasized in the edicts of Ashoka (see page 857) ensures peace among the contestants to power, and, in the end, a utopian reign in the kingdom. Equally important is that those who in any way oppose this vision are not truly human; they are demonic beings and can with justice be destroyed.

Because of its success in framing moral problems, Valmiki's *Ramayana* has long been held to provide models of conduct for the everyday lives of everyday people; even today, opinion polls show that Sita is the most influential figure in the lives of young Indian girls. As an old proverb advises, "Act like Rama, and never like Ravana." No one was ever told to "act like Krishna"; it is what Krishna and other such deities say, not what they do, that readers and listeners are told to follow. But the *Ramayana* offers positive paradigms for life, and no other work remotely approximates it for the didactic force it has exercised throughout India's history.

The story of Valmiki's invention of poetry appears on page 909.

WHO'S WHO IN THE RAMAYANA

Dasharatha: DUH-shuh-RUH-thuh; king of Ayodhya (uh-YOH-dhyah)

His four sons:

Rama: RAH-muh

Bharata: BHUH-ruh-tuh

Lakshmana: LUHK-shmuh-nuh

Shatrughna: SHUH-troo-ghnuh

Kausalya: kow-SUHL-yah; mother of Rama

Kaikeyi: kai-KAY-yee; mother of Bharata

Sumitra: su-MEE-trah; mother of Lakshmana and Shatrughna

Sita: SEE-TAH; wife of Rama

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI from BOOK 2¹

[THE EXILE OF RAMA]

SARGA 7

Now, Kaikeyi's family servant, who had lived with her from the time of her birth, had happened to ascend to the rooftop terrace that shone like the moon.

From the terrace Mantharā could see all Ayodhyā²—the king's way newly sprinkled, the lotuses and waterlilies strewn about, the costly ornamental pennants and banners, the sprinkling of sandalwood water, and the crowds of freshly bathed people.

Seeing a nursemaid standing nearby, Mantharā asked, "Why is Rāma's mother so delighted and giving away money to people, when she has always been so miserly? Tell me, why are the people displaying such boundless delight? Has something happened to delight the lord of earth? What is he planning to do?"

Bursting with delight and out of sheer gladness the nursemaid told the hunchback Mantharā about the greater majesty in store for Rāghava:

"Tomorrow on Pūṣya day³ King Daśaratha is going to consecrate Rāma Rāghava⁴ as prince regent, the blameless prince who has mastered his anger."

When she heard what the nursemaid said, the hunchback was furious and descended straightway from the terrace that was like the peak of Mount Kailāsa.⁵

Consumed with rage, the malevolent Mantharā approached Kaikeyī as she lay upon her couch, and she said:

"Get up, you foolish woman! How can you lie there when danger is threatening you? Don't you realize that a flood of misery is about to overwhelm you?"

"Your beautiful face has lost its charm. You boast of the power of your beauty, but it has proved to be as fleeting as a river's current in the hot season."

So she spoke, and Kaikeyī was deeply distraught at the bitter words of the angry, malevolent hunchback.

"Mantharā," she replied, "is something wrong? I can tell by the distress in your face how sorely troubled you are."

Hearing Kaikeyī's gentle words the wrathful Mantharā spoke—and a very clever speaker she was.

The hunchback grew even more distraught, and with Kaikeyī's best interests at heart, spoke out, trying to sharpen her distress and turn her against Rāghava:

"Something is very seriously wrong, my lady, something that threatens to ruin you. For King Daśaratha is going to consecrate Rāma as prince regent.

"I felt myself sinking down into unfathomable danger, stricken with grief and sorrow, burning as if on fire. And so I have come here, with your best interests at heart.

2. The capital of the kingdom of Kosala, in what is today the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

3. A favorable alignment of the constellation Pūṣya (consisting of the three stars of Cancer) marks an auspicious day on which important ceremonies are held.

4. Rama (literally, "descendent of Raghu," Rama's paternal great-grandfather).

5. A mountain in the Himalayan range, said to be the dwelling place of the great god Shiva.

"When you are sorrowful, Kaikeyī, I am too, and even more, and, when you prosper, so do I. There is not the slightest doubt of this.

"You were born into a family of kings, you are a queen of the lord of earth. My lady, how can you fail to know that the ways of kings are ruthless?

"Your husband talks of righteousness, but he is deceiving you; his words are gentle but he is cruel. You are too innocent to understand, and so he has utterly defrauded you like this.

"When expedient, your husband reassures you, but it is all worthless. Now that there is something of real worth he is ready to bestow it upon Kausalyā.

"Having got Bharata⁶ out of the way by sending him off to your family, the wicked man shall tomorrow establish Rāma in unchallenged kingship.

"He is an enemy pretending to be your husband. He is like a viper, child, whom you have taken to your bosom and lovingly mothered.

"For what an enemy or a snake would do if one ignored them. King Daśaratha is now doing to you and your son.

"The man is evil, his assurances false, and, by establishing Rāma in the kingship, dear child who has always known comfort, he will bring ruin upon you and your family.

"Kaikeyī, the time has come to act, and you must act swiftly, for your own good. You must save your son, yourself, and me, my enchanting beauty."

After listening to Mantharā's speech, the lovely woman rose from the couch and presented the hunchback with a lovely piece of jewelry.

And, when she had given the hunchback the jewelry, Kaikeyī, most beautiful of women, said in delight to Mantharā,

"What you have reported to me is the most wonderful news. How else may I reward you, Mantharā, for reporting such good news to me?

"I draw no distinction between Rāma and Bharata, and so I am perfectly content that the king should consecrate Rāma as king.

"You could not possibly tell me better news than this, or speak more welcome words, my well-deserving woman. For what you have told me I will give you yet another boon, something you might like more—just choose it!"

SARGA 8

But Mantharā was beside herself with rage and sorrow. She threw the jewelry away and said spitefully:

Rāghava were sent off to their maternal uncle's home by Daśaratha himself.

"You foolish woman, how can you be delighted at such a moment? Are you not aware that you stand in the midst of a sea of grief?

"It is Kausalyā who is fortunate; it is her son the eminent brahmins will consecrate as the powerful prince regent tomorrow, on Puṣya day.

"Once Kausalyā secures this great object of joy, she will cheerfully eliminate her enemies. And you will have to wait on her with hands cupped in reverence, like a serving woman.

"Delight is truly in store for Rāma's exalted women, and all that is in store for your daughters-in-law is misery, at Bharata's down-fall."

Seeing how deeply distressed Mantharā was as she spoke, Queen Kaikeyī began to extol Rāma's virtues:

"Rāma knows what is right, his gurus have taught him self-restraint. He is grateful, truthful, and honest, and as the king's eldest son, he deserves to be prince regent.

"He will protect his brothers and his dependents like a father; and long may he live! How can you be upset, hunchback, at learning of Rāma's consecration?

"Surely Bharata as well, the bull among men, will obtain the kingship of his fathers and forefathers after Rāma's one hundred years.

"Why should you be upset, Mantharā, when we have prospered in the past, and prosper now, and shall have good fortune in the future? For he obeys me even more scrupulously than he does Kausalyā."

When she heard what Kaikeyī said, Mantharā was still more sorely troubled. She heaved a long and hot sigh and then replied:

"You are too simple-minded to see what is good for you and what is not. You are not aware that you are sinking in an ocean of sorrow fraught with disaster and grief.

"Rāghava will be king, Kaikeyī, and then the son of Rāghava, while Bharata will be debarred from the royal succession altogether.

"For not all the sons of a king stand in line for the kingship, my lovely. Were all of them to be so placed, grave misfortune would ensue.

"That is why kings place the powers of kingship in the hands of the eldest, faultless Kaikeyī, however worthy the others.

"Like a helpless boy that son of yours, the object of all your motherly love, will be totally excluded from the royal succession and from its pleasures as well.

"Here I am, come on your behalf, but you pay me no heed. Instead, you want to reward me in token of your rival's good luck!

"Surely once Rāma secures unchallenged kingship he will have Bharata sent off to some other country—if not to the other world!

"And you had to send Bharata, a mere boy, off to your brother's, though knowing full well that proximity breeds affection, even in insentient things.

"Now, Rāghava will protect Lakṣmaṇa, just as Sāumitri will protect Rāma, for their brotherly love is as celebrated as that of the Aśvins.

"And so Rāma will do no harm to Lakṣmaṇa, but he will to Bharata without question.

"So let your son go straight from Rājagṛha⁷ to the forest. That is the course I favor, and it is very much in your own best interests.

"For in this way good fortune may still befall your side of the family—if, that is, Bharata secures, as by rights he should, the kingship of his forefathers.

"Your child has known only comfort, and, at the same time, he is Rāma's natural enemy. How could the one, with his fortunes lost, live under the sway of the other, whose fortunes are thriving?

"Like the leader of an elephant herd attacked by a lion in the forest, your son is about to be set upon by Rāma, and you must save him.

"Then, too, because of your beauty's power you used to spurn your co-wife, Rāma's mother, so proudly. How could she fail to repay that enmity?

"When Rāma secures control of the land, Bharata will be lost for certain. You must therefore devise some way of making your son the king and banishing his enemy this very day."

SARGA 9

So Mantharā spoke, and Kaikeyī, her face glowing with rage, heaved a long and burning sigh and said to her:

"Today, at once, I will have Rāma banished to the forest, and at once have Bharata consecrated as prince regent.

"But now, Mantharā, think: In what way can Bharata, and not Rāma, secure the kingship?"

So Queen Kaikeyī spoke, and the malevolent Mantharā answered her, to the ruin of Rāma's fortunes:

"Well then, I shall tell you, Kaikeyī—and pay close attention—how your son Bharata may secure sovereign kingship."

⁷ Kashmir, the kingdom from which Kaikeyī hails.

Hearing Mantharā's words, Kaikeyī half rose from her sumptuous couch and exclaimed:

"Tell me the way, Mantharā! How can Bharata, and not Rāma, secure the kingship?"

So the queen spoke, and the malevolent hunchback answered her, to the ruin of Rāma's fortunes:

"When the gods and *asuras* were at war, your husband went with the royal seers to lend assistance to the king of the gods, and he took you along. He set off toward the south, Kaikeyī, to the Daṇḍakas and the city called Vaijayaṇta. It was there that Timidhvaja ruled, the same who is called Śambara, a great *asura* of a hundred magic powers. He had given battle to Śakra, and the host of gods could not conquer him.⁸

"In the great battle that followed, King Daśaratha was struck unconscious, and you, my lady, conveyed him out of battle. But there, too, your husband was wounded by weapons, and once again you saved him, my lovely. And so in his gratitude he granted you two boons.

"Then, my lady, you said to your husband, 'I shall choose my two boons when I want them,' and the great king consented. I myself was unaware of this, my lady, until you yourself told me, long ago.

"You must now demand these two boons of your husband: the consecration of Bharata and the banishment of Rāma for fourteen years.

"Now go into your private chamber, daughter of Aśvapati, as if in a fit of rage. Put on a dirty garment, lie down on the bare ground, and don't speak to him, don't even look at him.

"Your husband has always adored you, I haven't any doubt of it. For your sake the great king would even go through fire.

"The king could not bring himself to anger you, nor even bear to look at you when you are angry. He would give up his own life to please you.

"The lord of the land is powerless to refuse your demand. Dull-witted girl, recognize the power of your beauty.

"King Daśaratha will offer gems, pearls, gold, a whole array of precious gifts—but pay no mind to them.

"Just keep reminding Daśaratha of those two boons he granted at the battle of the gods and *asuras*. Illustrious lady, you must not let this opportunity pass you by.

⁸ The battle between the gods and *asuras*, or antigods, forms part of many ancient legends. In earlier Sanskrit texts Śambara is the enemy of Indra, the king of the gods, who is also known as Śakra (literally "the one who conquers"). Timidhvaja and the name Timidhvaja are obscure.

"When the great king Rāghava helps you up himself and offers you a boon, then you must ask him for this one, first making sure he swears to it: 'Banish Rāma to the forest for nine years and five, and make Bharata king of the land, the bull among kings.'

"In this way Rāma will be banished and cease to be 'the pleasing prince,' and your Bharata, his rival eliminated, will be king.

"And by the time Rāma returns from the forest, your steadfast son and his supporters will have struck deep roots and won over the populace.

"I think it high time you overcame your timidity. You must forcibly prevent the king from carrying out Rāma's consecration."

And so Mantharā induced her to accept such evil by disguising it as good, and Kaikeyī, now cheered and delighted, replied:

"Hunchback, I never recognized your excellence, nor how excellent your advice. Of all the hunchbacks in the land there is none better at devising plans.

"You are the only one who has always sought my advantage and had my interests at heart. I might never have known, hunchback, what the king intended to do.

"There are hunchbacks who are misshapen, crooked and hideously ugly—but not you, you are lovely, you are bent no more than a lotus in the breeze.

"Your chest is arched, raised as high as your shoulders, and down below your waist, with its lovely navel, seems as if it had grown thin in envy of it.

"Your girdle-belt beautifies your hips and sets them jingling. Your legs are set strong under you, while your feet are long.

"With your wide buttocks, Mantharā, and your garment of white linen, you are as resplendent as a wild goose when you go before me.

"And this huge hump of yours, wide as the hub of a chariot wheel—your clever ideas must be stored in it, your political wisdom and magic powers.

"And there, hunchback, is where I will drape you with a garland made of gold, once Bharata is consecrated and Rāghava has gone to the forest.

"When I have accomplished my purpose, my lovely, when I am satisfied, I will anoint your hump with precious liquid gold.

"And for your face I will have them fashion an elaborate and beautiful forehead mark of gold and exquisite jewelry for you, hunchback.

"Dressed in a pair of lovely garments you shall go about like a goddess; with that face of yours that challenges the moon, peerless in visage; and you shall strut holding your head high before the people who hate me.

"You too shall have hunchbacks, adorned with every sort of ornament, to humbly serve you, hunchback, just as you always serve me."

Being flattered in this fashion, she replied to Kaikeyī, who still lay on her luxurious couch like a flame of fire on an altar:

"One does not build a dike, my precious, after the water is gone. Get up, apprise the king, and see to your own welfare!"

Thus incited, the large-eyed queen went with Mantharā to her private chamber, puffed up with the intoxicating power of her beauty.

There the lovely lady removed her pearl necklace, worth many hundred thousands, and her other costly and beautiful jewelry.

And then, under the spell of the hunchback Mantharā's words, the golden Kaikeyī got down upon the floor and said to her:

"Hunchback, go inform the king that I will surely die right here unless Bharata receives as his portion the land and Rāghava, as his, the forest."

And uttering these ruthless words, the lady put all her jewelry aside and lay down upon the ground bare of any spread, like a fallen *kinnara* woman.⁹

Her face enveloped in the darkness of her swollen rage, her fine garlands and ornaments stripped off, the wife of the lord of men grew distraught and took on the appearance of a darkened sky, when all the stars have set.

SARGA 10

Now, when the great king had given orders for Rāghava's consecration, he gladly entered the inner chamber to tell his beloved wife the good news.

But when the lord of the world saw her fallen on the ground and lying there in a posture so ill-befitting her, he was consumed with sorrow.

The guileless old man saw her on the floor, that guileful young wife of his, who meant more to him than life itself.

He began to caress her affectionately, as a great bull elephant in the wilderness might caress his cow wounded by the poisoned arrow of a hunter lurking in the forest.

And, as he caressed his lotus-eyed wife with his hands, sick with worry and despair, he said to her:

"I do not understand, my lady, why you should be angry. Has someone offended you, or shown you disrespect, that you should lie here in the dust, my precious, and

⁹ *Kinnaras* ("part-men") are obscure mythical creatures; female *kinnaras* are renowned for their beauty.

cause me such sorrow? What reason have you to lie upon the floor as if possessed by a spirit, driving me to distraction, when you are so precious to me?

"I have skilled physicians, who have been gratified in every way. They will make you well again. Tell me what hurts you, my lovely.

"Is there someone to whom you would have favor shown, or has someone aroused your disfavor? The one shall find favor at once, the other incur my lasting disfavor.

"Is there some guilty man who should be freed, or some innocent man I should execute? What poor man should I enrich, what rich man impoverish?

"I and my people, we all bow to your will. I could not bring myself to thwart any wish of yours, not if it cost me my life. Tell me what your heart desires, for all the earth belongs to me, as far as the wheel of my power reaches."

So he spoke, and now encouraged she resolved to tell her hateful plan. She then commenced to cause her husband still greater pain.

"No one has mistreated me, my lord, or shown me disrespect. But there is one wish I have that I should like you to fulfill.

"You must first give me your promise that you are willing to do it. Then I shall reveal what it is I desire."

So his beloved Kaikeyī spoke, and the mighty king, hopelessly under the woman's power, said to her with some surprise:

"Do you not yet know, proud lady, that except for Rāma, tiger among men, there is not a single person I love as much as you?

"Take hold of my heart, rip it out, and examine it closely, my lovely Kaikeyī; then tell me if you do not find it true.

"Seeing that I have the power, you ought not to doubt me. I will do what will make you happy, I swear to you by all my acquired merit."

His words filled her with delight, and she made ready to reveal her dreadful wish, which was like a visitation of death:

"Let the three and thirty gods, with Indra at their head, hear how you in due order swear an oath and grant me a boon.

"Let the sun and moon, the sky, the planets, night and day, the quarters of space, heaven and earth, let all the *gandharvas* and *rākṣasas*, the spirits that stalk the night, the household gods in every house, and all the other spirits take heed of what you have said.¹

¹ The musical skills, *Rakshasas*, often called "stalkers of the night," are

"This mighty king, who is true to his word and knows the ways of righteousness, in full awareness grants me a boon—let the deities give ear to this for me."

Thus the queen ensnared the great archer and called upon witnesses. She then addressed the king, who in his mad passion had granted her a boon.

"I will now claim the two boons you once granted me, my lord. Hear my words, your Majesty.

"Let my son Bharata be consecrated with the very rite of consecration you have prepared for Rāghava.

"Let Rāma withdraw to Daṇḍaka wilderness² and for nine years and five live the life of an ascetic, wearing hides and barkcloth garments and matted hair.³

"Let Bharata today become the uncontested prince regent, and let me see Rāghava depart this very day for the forest."

When the great king heard Kaikeyī's ruthless demands, he was shaken and unnerved, like a stag at the sight of a tigress.

The lord of men gasped as he sank down upon the bare floor. "Oh damn you!" he cried in uncontrollable fury before he fell into a stupor, his heart crushed by grief.

Gradually the king regained his senses and then, in bitter sorrow and anger, he spoke to Kaikeyī, with fire in his eyes:

"Malicious, wicked woman, bent on destroying this House! Evil woman, what evil did Rāma or I ever do to you?

"Rāghava has always treated you just like his own mother. What reason can you have for trying to wreck his fortunes, of all people?

"It was sheer suicide to bring you into my home. I did it unwittingly, thinking you a princess—and not a deadly poisonous viper.

"When praise for Rāma's virtues is on the lips of every living soul, what crime could I adduce as pretext for renouncing my favorite son?

"I would sooner renounce Kausalyā, or Sumitrā, or sovereignty, or life itself, than Rāma, who so cherishes his father.

"The greatest joy I know is seeing my first-born son. If I cannot see Rāma, I shall lose my mind.

² The country of King Dandaka was laid waste by Indra's curse or, according to another source, the curse of Brahman whose daughter was married to him.

³ As a result

"The world might endure without the sun, or crops without water, but without Rāma life could not endure within my body.

"Enough then, give up this scheme, you evil-scheming woman. I beg you! Must I get down and bow my head to your feet?"

His heart in the grip of a woman who knew no bounds, the guardian of the earth began helplessly to cry, and as the queen extended her feet he tried in vain to touch them, and collapsed like a man on the point of death.

SARGA 11

The king lay there, in so unaccustomed a posture, so ill-befitting his dignity, like Yayāti himself, his merit exhausted, fallen from the world of the gods.⁴ But the woman was unafraid, for all the fear she awoke. She was misfortune incarnate and had yet to secure her fortunes. Once more she tried to force him to fulfill the boon.

"You are vaunted, great king, as a man true to his word and firm in his vows. How then can you be prepared to withhold my boon?"

So Kaikeyī spoke, and King Daśaratha, faltering for a moment, angrily replied:

"Vile woman, mortal enemy! Will you not be happy, will you not be satisfied until you see me dead, and Rāma, the bull among men, gone to the forest?"

"To satisfy Kaikeyī Rāma must be banished to the forest, but if I keep my word in this, then I must be guilty of another lie. My infamy will be unequalled in the eyes of the people and my disgrace inevitable."

While he was lamenting like this, his mind in a whirl, the sun set and evening came on.

To the anguished king lost in lamentation, the night, adorned with the circlet of the moon, no longer seemed to last a mere three watches.

Heaving burning sighs, aged King Daśaratha sorrowfully lamented in his anguish, his eyes fixed upon the sky.

"I do not want you to bring the dawn—here, I cup my hands in supplication. But no, pass as quickly as you can, so that I no longer have to see this heartless, malicious Kaikeyī, the cause of this great calamity."

But with this, the king cupped his hands before Kaikeyī and once more, begging her mercy, he spoke:

"Please, I am an old man, my life is nearly over. I am desolate, I place myself in your hands. Dear lady, have mercy on me for, after all, I am king.

... through ascetic discipline reached heaven, only to be expelled by Indra because of his pride.

"Truly it was thoughtless of me, my fair-hipped lady, to have said those things just now. Have mercy on me, please, my child. I know you have a heart."

So the pure-hearted king lamented, frantically and piteously, his eyes reddened and dimmed by tears, but the malicious, black-hearted woman only listened and made no reply.

And as the king stared at the woman he loved but could not appease, whose demand was so perverse—for the exile of his own son—he once again was taken faint, overcome with grief, and dropped unconscious to the floor.

SARGA 16

Rāma saw his father, with a wretched look and his mouth all parched, slumped upon his lovely couch, Kaikeyī at his side.

First he made an obeisance with all deference at his father's feet and then did homage most scrupulously at the feet of Kaikeyī.

"Rāma!" cried the wretched king, his eyes brimming with tears, but he was unable to say anything more or to look at him.

As if his foot had grazed a snake, Rāma was seized with terror to see the expression on the king's face, one more terrifying than he had ever seen before.

For the great king lay heaving sighs, racked with grief and remorse, all his senses numb with anguish, his mind stunned and confused.

It was as if the imperturbable, wave-wreathed ocean had suddenly been shaken with perturbation, as if the sun had been eclipsed, or a seer had told a lie.

His father's grief was incomprehensible to him, and the more he pondered it, the more his agitation grew, like that of the ocean under a full moon.

With his father's welfare at heart, Rāma struggled to comprehend, "Why does the king not greet me, today of all days?"

"On other occasions, when Father might be angry, the sight of me would calm him. Why then, when he looked at me just now, did he instead become so troubled?"

"He seems desolate and grief-stricken, and his face has lost its glow." Doing obeisance to Kaikeyī, Rāma spoke these words:

"I have not unknowingly committed some offense, have I, to anger my father? Tell me, and make him forgive me.

"His face is drained of color, he is desolate and does not speak to me. It cannot be, can it, that some physical illness or mental distress afflicts him? But it is true well-being is not something one can always keep.

"Some misfortune has not befallen the handsome prince Bharata, has it, or courageous Śatrughna, or one of my mothers?"

"I should not wish to live an instant if his majesty, the great king, my father, were angered by my failure to satisfy him or do his bidding.

"How could a man not treat him as a deity incarnate, in whom he must recognize the very source of his existence in this world?"

"Can it be that in anger you presumed to use harsh words with my father, and so threw his mind into such turmoil?"

"Answer my questions truthfully, my lady: What has happened to cause this unprecedented change in the lord of men?"

"At the bidding of the king, if enjoined by him, my guru, father, king, and benefactor, I would hurl myself into fire, drink deadly poison, or drown myself in the sea.

"Tell me then, my lady, what the king would have me do. I will do it, I promise. Rāma need not say so twice."

The ignoble Kaikeyī then addressed these ruthless words to Rāma, the upright and truthful prince:

"Long ago, Rāghava, in the war of the gods and *asuras*, your father bestowed two boons on me, for protecting him when he was wounded in a great battle.

"By means of these I have demanded of the king that Bharata be consecrated and that you, Rāghava, be sent at once to Daṇḍaka wilderness.

"If you wish to ensure that your father be true to his word, and you to your own, best of men, then listen to what I have to say.

"Abide by your father's guarantee, exactly as he promised it, and enter the forest for nine years and five.

"Forgo the consecration and withdraw to Daṇḍaka wilderness, live there seven years and seven, wearing matted hair and barkcloth garments.

"Let Bharata rule this land from the city of the Kosalans, with all the treasures it contains, all its horses, chariots, elephants."

When Rāma, slayer of enemies, heard Kaikeyī's hateful words, like death itself, he was not the least disconcerted, but only replied,

"So be it. I shall go away to live in the forest, wearing matted hair and barkcloth to safeguard the promise of the king.

"But I want to know why the lord of earth, the invincible tamer of foes, does not greet me as he used to?"

"You need not worry, my lady. I say it to your face: I shall go to the forest—rest assured—wearing barkcloth and matted hair.

"Enjoined by my father, my benefactor, guru, and king, a man who knows what is right to do, what would I hesitate to do in order to please him?"

"But there is still one thing troubling my mind and eating away at my heart: that the king does not tell me himself that Bharata is to be consecrated.

"For my wealth, the kingship, Sītā, and my own dear life I would gladly give up to my brother Bharata on my own, without any urging.

"How much more readily if urged by my father himself, the lord of men, in order to fulfill your fond desire and safeguard his promise?"

"So you must reassure him. Why should the lord of earth keep his eyes fixed upon the ground and fitfully shed these tears?"

"This very day let messengers depart on swift horses by order of the king to fetch Bharata from his uncle's house.

"As for me, I shall leave here in all haste for Daṇḍaka wilderness, without questioning my father's word, to live there fourteen years."

Kaikeyī was delighted to hear these words of Rāma's, and trusting them implicitly, she pressed Rāghava to set out at once.

"So be it. Men shall go as messengers on swift horses to bring home Bharata from his uncle's house.

"But since you are now so eager, Rāma, I do not think it wise to linger. You should therefore proceed directly from here to the forest.

"That the king is ashamed and does not address you himself, that is nothing, best of men, you needn't worry about that.

"But so long as you have not hastened from the city and gone to the forest, Rāma, your father shall neither bathe nor eat."

"Oh curse you!" the king gasped, overwhelmed with grief, and upon the guilt couch he fell back in a faint.

Rāma raised up the king, pressed though he was by Kaikeyī—like a horse whipped with a crop—to make haste and depart for the forest.

Listening to the ignoble Kaikeyī's hateful words, so dreadful in their consequences, Rāma remained unperturbed and only said to her,

"My lady, it is not in the hopes of gain that I suffer living in this world. You should know that, like the seers, I have but one concern and that is righteousness.

"Whatever I can do to please this honored man I will do at any cost, even if it means giving up my life.

"For there is no greater act of righteousness than this: obedience to one's father and doing as he bids.

"Even unbidden by this honored man, at your bidding alone I shall live for fourteen years in the desolate forest.

"Indeed, Kaikeyī, you must ascribe no virtue to me at all if you had to appeal to the king, when you yourself are so venerable in my eyes.

"Let me only take leave of my mother, and settle matters with Sitā. Then I shall go, this very day, to the vast forest of the Daṇḍakas.

"You must see to it that Bharata obeys Father and guards the kingdom, for that is the eternal way of righteousness."

When his father heard Rāma's words, he was stricken with such deep sorrow that he could not hold back his sobs in his grief and broke out in loud weeping.

Splendid Rāma did homage at the feet of his unconscious father and at the feet of that ignoble woman, Kaikeyī; then he turned to leave.

Reverently Rāma circled his father and Kaikeyī, and, withdrawing from the inner chamber, he saw his group of friends.

Lakṣmaṇa, the delight of Sumitrā, fell in behind him, his eyes brimming with tears, in a towering rage.

Reverently circling the equipment for the consecration, but careful not to gaze at it, Rāma slowly went away.

The loss of the kingship diminished his great majesty as little as night diminishes the loveliness of the cool-rayed moon, beloved of the world.

Though he was on the point of leaving his native land and going to the forest, he was no more discomposed than one who has passed beyond all things of this world.

Holding back his sorrow within his mind, keeping his every sense in check, and indeed he made his way to his mother's residence to tell her the sad news.

As Rāma entered her residence, where joy still reigned supreme, as he reflected on the sudden wreck of all his fortunes, even then he showed no sign of discomposure, for fear it might endanger the lives of those he loved.

from Book 3¹

[THE ABDUCTION OF SITA]

SARGA 42

After instructing his brother the mighty prince, delight of the Raghus,² strapped on his gold-hilted sword.

He then strapped on a pair of quivers and took up his proper ornament—the bow with triple curve—and set off at a rapid pace.

The deer spied the lord of kings rushing toward him and he led him on, now timorously hiding, now showing himself again.

With sword strapped on and taking up his bow, Rāma ran toward the deer, imagining he saw his form shimmering before him.

At one moment he would spot him running through the deep forest, temptingly near, and would take his bow in hand, only to look once more and find the deer beyond the range of his arrow. In one stretch of forest he came into sight leaping through the air in frightful panic, and then he passed into another stretch and out of sight.

Like the disk of the autumn moon veiled in tatters of cloud, he was seen one instant and gone the next.

Now appearing, now disappearing, he drew Rāghava far away, and helplessly deluded by him Kākutstha³ flew into a rage.

Then the deer halted in exhaustion and withdrew to a shady spot in the meadow, not far away, where Rāma spotted him surrounded by other animals of the forest.

Seeing the deer mighty Rāma was determined to kill him. The powerful prince nocked his sturdy bow and drew it back with power.

Aiming at the deer he shot a gleaming, flaming arrow fashioned by Brahmā⁴ that glared like a snake as it darted forth.

1. Translated by Sheldon Pollock.
2. Rama.

3. Rama (literally, "a descendant of Kakutstha," an ancestor in Rama's lineage).

4. Rama had earlier

The supreme arrow penetrated the illusory deer form and like a bolt of lightning pierced the heart, Mārīca's heart.⁵

The deer leaped high as a palm tree and with a ghastly shriek fell to the ground, tormented by the arrow, his life ebbing away. And as Mārīca lay there dying, the shape he had assumed began to disappear.

Knowing the time had come, in Rāghava's own voice he cried out, "Oh Sītā! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!"

Pierced to the quick by an arrow unlike any other, Mārīca once more took on the form of a massive *rākṣasa*, giving up the deer form and his life.

Struck by the arrow, he became a *rākṣasa* once more, with huge fangs, a necklace of gold, sparkling earrings, and every other ornament to adorn him.

Seeing that dreadful sight, the *rākṣasa* fallen on the ground, Rāma thought suddenly of Sītā and recalled what Lakṣmaṇa had said.⁶

"With his dying breath this *rākṣasa* cried out at the top of his voice, 'Oh Sītā! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!' How will Sītā react to hearing this?"

"And great-armed Lakṣmaṇa, what will be his state of mind?" As these thoughts came to righteous Rāma, the hair on his body bristled with dread.

Then Rāma's consternation gave way to a feeling of fear that shot through him with sharp pangs: The deer he had slain was in fact a *rākṣasa*, the voice it had used was his own.

He killed another dappled deer and taking the meat hurriedly retraced his steps to Janasthāna.⁷

SARGA 43

Now, when Sītā heard that cry of distress, in her husband's own voice, coming from the forest, she said to Lakṣmaṇa, "Go and find out what has happened to Rāghava.

"My heart—my very life—is jarred from its place by the sound of his crying in deep distress that I heard so clearly.

"You must rescue your brother, who cries out in the forest. Run to your brother at once, for he needs help! The *rākṣasas* have him in their power, like a bull fallen among lions." So she spoke, but Lakṣmaṇa, heeding his brother's command, did not go.

premonition that it must be a *rākṣasa*.
7. The region of the Dandaka forest located near Rāma's

Then the daughter of Janaka⁸ angrily said to him, "You wear the guise of a friend to your brother, Saumitri,⁹ but act like his foe, refusing to aid him in his extremity. You hope Rāma perishes, Lakṣmaṇa, isn't that so? And it is all because of me.

"I think you would be happy should some disaster befall your brother. You have no real affection for him, so you stand there calmly with the splendid prince gone from sight.

"For with him in danger and me here, how could I prevent what you came here with the sole intention of doing?"

So Sītā, princess of Videha, spoke, overwhelmed with tears and grief, and Lakṣmaṇa replied to her as she stood there frightened as a doe.

"My lady, there is no one, god or man, *gandharva*, great bird, or *rākṣasa*, *piśāca*, *kinnara*, beast, or dreaded *dānava*—no one, fair lady, who could match Rāma, the peer of Vāsava, in battle.¹

"Rāma cannot be killed in battle. You must not talk this way, for I dare not leave you in the forest with Rāghava gone.

"His power cannot be withstood, not by any powers however vast, not by all three worlds up in arms, or the deathless gods themselves, their lord included.

"Let your heart rest easy, do not be alarmed. Your husband will soon return, after killing that splendid deer.

"That was clearly not his voice, or any belonging to a god. It was the magic of that *rākṣasa*, unreal as a mirage.

"You were entrusted to my safekeeping, shapely Vaidehī,² by the great Rāma. I dare not leave you here alone.

"Then too, dear lady, because of the slaughter at Janasthāna, where Khara perished, we have earned the hostility of the night-stalkers.³

"*Rākṣasas* delight in causing trouble, Vaidehī, they make all kinds of noises in the deep forest. You need not worry."

Though what he said was true, Sītā was enraged by Lakṣmaṇa's words. Her eyes blazed bright red as she made this harsh reply:

8. Sita is the adopted daughter of King Janaka of Mithila in Videha country, where he discovered her as a baby in a furrowed field.

9. Lakṣmaṇa (literally, "son of Sumitra").

1. *Pishacas* and *danavas* are two more categories of

human beings. "Vasava" is an epithet of Indra, king of the gods.

2. Sita (literally, "woman of Vaideha").

3. The night-stalkers are demons who prey on humans.

"Ignoble, cruel man, disgrace to your House! How pitiful this attempt of yours. I feel certain you are pleased with all this, and that is why you can talk the way you do.

"It is nothing new, Lakṣmaṇa, for rivals to be so evil, cruel rivals like you always plotting in secret.

"You treacherously followed Rāma to the forest, the two of you alone: You are either in the employ of Bharata or secretly plotting to get me.

"I am married to Rāma, a husband dark as a lotus, with eyes like lotus petals. How could I ever give my love to some ordinary man?

"I would not hesitate to take my life before your very eyes, Saumitri, for I could not live upon this earth one moment without Rāma."

Such were the words Sītā spoke to Lakṣmaṇa, so harsh they made his hair bristle with horror. But he controlled himself, and with hands cupped in reverence he addressed her:

"I dare not answer, Maithilī,⁴ for you are a deity in my eyes. And yet inappropriate words from a woman come as nothing new.

"This is the nature of women the whole world over: Women care nothing for righteousness, they are flighty, sharp-tongued, and divisive.

"May all the inhabitants of the forest give ear and bear me witness how my words of reason met so harsh a reply from you.

"Curse you and be damned, that you could so suspect me, when I am only following the orders of my guru. How like a woman to be so perverse!

"I am going to Kākutstha. I wish you well, fair woman. May the spirits of the forest, each and every one, protect you, large-eyed lady.

"How ominous the portents that manifest themselves to me! I pray I find you here when I return with Rāma."

Now, when Lakṣmaṇa addressed her in this fashion, Janaka's daughter began to weep. Overwhelmed with tears she hotly replied:

"Parted from Rāma I will drown myself in the Godāvarī,⁵ Lakṣmaṇa, I will hang myself or hurl my body upon some rocky place.

"Or I will drink deadly poison or throw myself into a blazing fire. I would never touch any man but Rāghava, not even with my foot!"

in the southern region of India.

Such were the insults Sītā hurled at Lakṣmaṇa in her sorrow, and sorrowfully she wept and struck her belly with her fists.

At the sight of large-eyed Sītā so deeply anguished and weeping, Saumitri was beside himself and tried to comfort her, but she would say nothing more to her husband's brother.

Then, cupping his hands in reverence and bowing slightly, Lakṣmaṇa, the self-respecting prince, said goodbye to Sītā. And as he set forth to find Rāma, he turned around again and again and looked back at Maithilī.

SARGA 44

Rāghava's younger brother, angered by her harsh words and sorely longing for Rāma, set forth without further delay.

This was the opening ten-necked Rāvaṇa had been waiting for, and he took advantage of it at once. Assuming the guise of a wandering mendicant, he turned his steps toward Vaidehī.

Clad in a soft saffron robe, with topknot, parasol, and sandals, and goodly staff and water pitcher hanging at his left shoulder—disguised like this, as a mendicant—he approached Vaidehī.

Both brothers had left her, and in his pride of power he advanced upon her, like total darkness advancing upon the twilight, when both sun and moon have left.

He gazed at the glorious young princess as ominously as a planet might gaze upon the star Rohiṇī when the hare-marked moon is absent.⁶

At the appearance of the dreaded, evil creature, the trees that grew in Janasthāna stopped rustling and the wind died down.

At the sight of him peering around with his blood-red eyes, the swift current of the Godāvarī river began to slacken in fear.

Ten-necked Rāvaṇa had waited for an opening, and Rāma had given him one. In the guise of a beggar he drew near to Vaidehī.

As Vaidehī sat grieving for her husband, the unholy Rāvaṇa in the guise of a holy man edged closer to her, like the sluggish planet, Saturn, closing in on Citrā, the sparkling star.

Like a deep well concealed by grass, the evil one in the guise of a holy man stood watching Vaidehī, illustrious wife of Rāma—the beautiful woman with lovely teeth

6. The planet is Mercury and the star-cluster Rohini is the beloved of the moon. In Sanskrit literature, dreams are often rendered through astronomical tropes because of the prominence given to astrological rituals and beliefs.