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Second-Class Ascetics: Lament and the Problem of Women in Valmiki's *Ramayana*

By

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THESIS

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Second-Class Ascetics: Lament and the Problem of Women in Valmiki's *Ramayana*

Danny P. Dyer

Abstract

This paper presents an examination of feminine virtue in the *Valmiki Ramayana* in light of the epic's dominant patriarchal and misogynistic ideology. Considering Valmiki's male ascetics as exemplars of male-coded *dharma*, I contrast these figures with the precariously positioned female ascetics, women depicted as awesome and frightening unless chaperoned by their male counterparts. Drawing on extensive scholarship about ancient laments, I suggest how the five female-led funerary laments in the epic reveal Valmiki's suspicions about the extent to which women will rely on sensual or pitiable performances to influence patriarchs and disrupt social order, suspicions that likewise motivate the poet's treatment of female ascetics. In doing so, I necessarily appraise the value of dharmic cultivation for correcting disruptive female behavior and find that even cultivated women like Sita must still suffer the moral fallibility parcel to their gender. My argument culminates in a statement about the inescapability of gender in the *Ramayana* in spite of the ascetic imperative to transcend identity and limitations of the body.

For all its ideological inconsistency and problematic treatment of women, the *Valmiki Ramayana* remains a centerpiece of world literature, an epic poem that permeates the vast linguistic, cultural, and spiritual landscapes of South Asia and its diasporic communities. As a primary devotional text of Vaishnava Hinduism, the *Ramayana* offers complex theological themes and characters who serve as exemplars and objects for worship[1] even while its explicit concerns with ethics and social conduct[2] carry it beyond Hinduism into nearly all the prominent Asian religious cultures, including Jainism, Buddhism, and even Islam,[3] cultures that, despite their deep theological differences, continue to enjoy and adapt the tale and even partake in the traditions and holidays it inspires.[4] The great diffusion of the epic, however, owes as much to its ideological richness as its aesthetic generosity and the expansive narrative that permits constant rearticulation across any number of media—prose, theater, dance, film, and visual art—rearticulations that constitute, collectively, the body of the *Ramakatha*, or "Tale of Rama,"[5] and render the epic poem "one of the world's most popular, influential, and widely circulated tales ever told."[6] Along with its religious, philosophical, artistic, and cultural appeal, the epic also serves even as a historical text for its most devoted attendees, those who note in its opening *sargas*, or chapters, the poet's claim to present the factual history of Asia and its inhabitants long ago.[*] All at once a literary icon, instructive codex, devotional object, historical record, and locus of hermeneutic discourse, the *Ramayana* fosters continuous interpretation, commentary, investigation, and speculation among millions of people in Asia and throughout the world.

Parcel to the *Ramayana's* prominence as an instructive text and devotional object, in particular, is its unyielding fascination with *dharma*, or "virtue," introduced in the epic's opening

[*] The last few years have seen lively internet conjecture about alleged geographical discoveries that might prove, once and for all, the manmade origins of Rama Setu, the bridge linking India to Sri Lanka constructed by Nala the monkey in *Yuddhakanda*.

sargas and pursued throughout the narrative. As eminent Indologists Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman note in their introduction to the 2022 English translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, the trials of the epic's various characters serve as opportunities for the poet to test and clarify his treatment of virtuous conduct, a matter that remains central to the *Ramayana's* religious appeal.[7] Writing in Sanskrit around the middle of the first millennium BCE, the elliptical progenitor of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki, frames the narrative as an account of ancient India and the journey Lord Rama, the real-life avatar of Vishnu to whose biography the poet enjoys privileged access given his own authority as *rsi* or divine seer.[8] As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman observe, such framing allows Valmiki to bring together history and cosmology[9] while setting the stage for his primary concern with dharma, particularly its cultivation and the necessary defeat of *adharma* by agents of virtue, particularly Rama.[10] Thus Rama, a practicing ascetic ordained from birth to represent Vishnu and succeed his father as king of Kosala, most exemplifies dharma in the epic, with his ultimate victory over the evil *raksasa*, or demon, Ravana and ensuing inauguration concluding a cycle of the recurring struggle between good and evil.[11] As critics and theologians note, however, Rama is just one of a cast of "towering figures" in the epic, figures who, in their clearly dharmic or adharmic alignments, serve as examples for emulation or contempt for the epic's readers.[*] In such a way, the various characters of the *Valmiki Ramayana* index a multitude of dharmic concerns, with Rama epitomizing the wise king, brave warrior, and loyal son[12] and Sita typifying the virtuous maiden and devoted wife, while the contrast between opposing characters offers opportunities for meditation on

[*] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.4.6-10. Though the poem most commonly bears the title *Ramayana*, or "Rama's journey," Valmiki himself offers two additional monikers in its opening sargas, *Sitayas Caritam Mahat* ("The Great Tale of Sita") and *Paulastyavadhah* ("The Slaying of Pulastya [Ravana]"),[*] each suggesting alternate modes through which one might read the text for enlightenment.

virtuous conduct or vice. Hence, as much as Rama is wise and self-controlled, Ravana proves rash and impetuous, while the female raksasa Surpanakha indulges in the promiscuity and duplicity for which Sita is later accused but clearly innocent.

These sorts of with-the-grain interpretations of the *Valmiki Ramayana* as a treatise on dharma no doubt speak to the epic's continual role in shaping culture and religious practice through Asia even though such interpretations have proven increasingly unsatisfactory for contemporary readers who note contradictory or otherwise problematic aspects of the epic's dominant ideology. Generally speaking, traditional summations of the *Valmiki Ramayana* as a morally edifying text tend to elide features of the work that render it decidedly temporal and, in many ways, resistant to tidy interpretation. As case in point, though Goldman and Sutherland Goldman describe the *Valmiki Ramayana* as a text instructive for virtuous conduct specifically in terms of kingship *and* governance,[13] one might wonder the difference significant enough between those two terms to warrant their pairing. For most of the modern, English-speaking world, kings have given way to more egalitarian forms of governance, such as the election of governors who, by the process of their appointment, should differ from lifelong monarchs, and so it is possible that Goldman and Sutherland Goldman allude to passages in which Rama exhibits tempered, diplomatic qualities that find him a fair-minded, conscientious leader concerned with public opinion.[*] Such an interpretation, however, fails to account for other instances of Rama showcasing the self-substantiating authority of a tyrant by positioning himself as supreme arbiter in dharmic concerns, a sort of king in exile. Though the dying Valin censures

[*] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 2.97.19-24. and 6.11.22-24. These and other sargas illustrate Rama's tendency for collaboration over impulsivity and personal satisfaction, as when he commands his brother Bharata to retain the kingship because it serves the common good and entertains the dissenting council of his ministers regarding the arrival of the defector raksasa, Vibhisana, despite his unwavering disagreement with their position.

Rama for his deception and unjust interference in a feud between brothers and charges him with having acted capriciously and without regard for statecraft,[14] Rama responds by citing the sacred prohibitions against Valin's sexual indiscretion and his lesser status as a monkey as justification for the killing[15] and, in such a way, Rama has characteristically veiled his arrogant sovereignty by deferring to pre-established dharmic codes that he conveniently recalls when tried for wrongdoing. Countless similar moments will arise in the epic when Rama legitimizes the consequences of his desires and impulses through rhetorical deflection, moments that outnumber Rama's diplomatic scenes.

As highly distinguished *Ramayana* scholars, Goldman and Sutherland Goldman lack nothing in their understanding of the epic's contradictions and the social-historic circumstances that shape it and resound throughout, and the critique presented here serves only to illustrate the difficulties of introducing a text as large, multivocal, and subject to recension as the *Valmiki Ramayana*. That said, if Goldman and Sutherland Goldman's curious wording about kings and governance does indicate a conscious (and well-meaning) attempt to present the epic poem as "a kind of morality play" and "illustrative guide to righteous behavior,"[16] it is only to be expected that such a presentation entails this sort of verbal hedging.[*] As Robert P. Goldman admits in a separate, more critical appraisal of the epic, the *Valmiki Ramayana* clearly depicts a hegemonic worldview that endorses Brahminic authority, caste, and patriarchy, yet one that nonetheless allows for "leakages" in the "supposedly hermetic value system" of the poet, opportunities for

[*] See Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "About the Translation," *The Ramayana of Valmiki: The Complete English Translation* (Princeton; Princeton University, 2021), 3-43, 5. It should be noted that Goldman and Sutherland Goldman's presentation of the *Valmiki Ramayana* as ethically congruent appears in the introduction of this rather public-facing translation, one explicitly intended to make the epic available to a general, modern readership.

"against-the-grain" interpretations that "recover some of the voices that the dominant discourse pushes to the margins."[17] As I suspect Goldman and Sutherland Goldman might likely both agree, such ideological leakages arise most noticeably from Valmiki's attempts to present a stable view of dharma when confronted with the problem of women—that is, when the most virtuous (read: male) characters engage with women or when the possibility of female virtue emerges in the narrative. If, for instance, dharma remains the particular domain of ascetics and kings, how might a with-the-grain reader interpret Dasaratha's characterization as the best of kings,[18] a man who followed the path of virtue[19] and ascended straight to heaven,[20] when elsewhere Dasarath appears rather adharmic, a vain and scandalous man guilty of two errors of kingship recited by Rama in *Ayodhyakanda*, sensual indulgence and indiscriminate courtesy to his wife?[21] If Valmiki means for one to regard Sita as dharmic for abandoning the comforts of the city to join her husband in ascetic exile,[22] what can one say when Sita slip-slides suddenly into covetousness by yearning to possess the golden fleece of Marica and make from it a cushion?[23] As with many ancient texts shaped by hermeneutic tradition and innumerable recensions, ideological inconsistencies and contradictions permeate the *Valmiki Ramayana* and allow for any number of interpretations and adaptations that validate dominant, "with-the-grain" readings or push against the text's explicitly regressive social values—namely, caste and misogyny.[24]

As suggested, textual instability that permits contradictory interpretation characterizes ancient, theologically generous texts, texts whose inconsistencies and contradictions (leakages) rupture the dominant ideology while nevertheless provoking the prolonged, hermeneutic discourse that sustains them. What sets the *Valmiki Ramayana* apart, however, is the self-reflexivity apparent in the text itself—that is, the extent to which the epic poem evinces authorial efforts to patch its ruptures through additive revision. Numerous instances of rupture in the

Ramayana accordingly precede immediate attempts at reconciliation through addition, with one of the most notable instance occurring in *Yuddhakanda,* where Rama's uncharacteristically wrathful[25] denunciation and banishment of Sita comes so suddenly, following many sargas of his pining, that it troubles even his closest compatriots[26] but finds sudden amelioration when Rama soon claim that his wrath had only been a test of Sita's purity, one meant to exonerate her in the public eye.[27] This trope of Rama testing Sita appears several times in the epic, as in *Ayodhyakanda,* when Rama claims that his initial refusal of Sita's company to the wild had been a ruse to gauge the sincerity of her commitment,[28] a timely measure to excuse the fact that he had just recently cited a woman's obligation to remain beside her husband as cause for his mother to remain in the city.[29] Though clement critics might fairly accept these instances of narrative (and ideological) amelioration at face value, regarding them as illustrations of Rama's wit and cunning, instances of rectifying addition are not limited to Rama testing Sita and rather seem to coincide with decidedly *feminine* ruptures of the text's ideology. In as much as Dasaratha's guilt of extreme tenderness for Kaikeyi finds exoneration in a belated revelation that the inauspicious boon he granted had satisfied a bridal promise,[30] Rama's ill-fated forgiveness of Sita after her ordeal by fire must likewise find amelioration in the insistence that he had all along anticipated the scrutiny of his people and their eventual taking exception to him as a cuckold[31]—an addition that, regardless of the problem it addresses, ultimately negates the efficacy of Rama's elaborate, public testing of Sita in the first place. Though critics concerned with such glaring correcting have forgivably suggested that the additions contribute supplementary information to enrich reader appreciation for the characters and events in the narrative[32] despite stretching the narrative dangerously thin,[33] I instead insist that such measures illustrate a distressed response to a

perpetual problem of women disrupting their male, ascetic counterparts, female figures with whom Valmiki himself fails to wholly reconcile.

Concentrating on Valmiki's depiction of femininity in the *Ramayana* as women engage with patriarchs, I present this paper as an illustration of the disruptive force of women throughout the epic, particularly in as much as dominant ideas about female sexuality and emotionality position Valmiki's women as challenges to patriarchal order, an order exemplified by male ascetics. As Sally J. Sutherland Goldman observes in "Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space, and Narrative Structures in Valmiki's *Balakanda*," female voices tear the ideological fabric of the *Valmiki Ramayana* as early as *Balakanda,* where the lament of the kraunca bird after the death of her mate "symbolically lets loose upon the epic story . . . an uncontrolled—therefore dangerous—sexual female,"[34] a danger that will appear seven sargas later in the prostitutes who seduce a forest-dwelling ascetic.[35] Interpreting this danger of female sexuality alongside instances of female lament, however, I will insist that the disruptive presence of women in the *Ramayana*, though most often revealed in scenes involving seduction or stereotypically excessive grieving, entails more than sexuality and instead speaks to the poet's profound suspicion about women's inherent, moral fallibility and the need for patriarchal society to regulate women through male guardianship. As I will illustrate, this dominant presupposition of female adharma accounts for the destructive powers of seduction in the *Ramayana* as well as the many instances of excessive emotionality that challenge patriarchal social order by permitting women, momentarily, the political potency otherwise accorded male ascetics. In doing so, I will draw on extant scholarship about lamentation in the ancient world, scholarship that will prove essential in interpreting the funerary laments featured in the epic and their necessary subdual through rearticulation by patriarchs. Coalescing my interpretations of feminine seduction and

grieving, I will end by conjecturing about the extent to which Valmiki's portrayal of women as powerfully disruptive accounts for the incessant marginalization of his female ascetics.

Valmiki's Male Ascetics and the Women who Trouble Them

While a comprehensive survey of Indian asceticism proves untenable in a work of this scope given the impossibility of pinning down the *Valmiki Ramayana* temporally and the vexing multitude of South Asian ascetic practices that may have influenced the epic, some general observations regarding the form of asceticism featured therein nonetheless informs my approach. Indologist Patrick Olivelle conveniently traces the institutionalization of South Asian asceticism to around the middle of the first millennium BCE,[36] roughly when Valmiki (if he even existed) set about composing his great poem. Of these early ascetic traditions, Olivelle observes two distinct forms—anchorites and renouncers—with the former being those who resided in forest hermitages apart from society, where they lived entirely off the land, and the latter those who traveled between wilderness and cities, where they begged for food.[37] Though the lifestyles of ascetics in both traditions likely varied wildly, with some anchorites keeping wives and raising children and others abstaining from relationships entirely, Olivelle confidently marks a fundamental, ideological difference between the two traditions— namely, that anchorites enacted an incidental, merely physical, separation from a society to which they remained fundamentally attached, while the renouncer's more profound renunciation found them present in society but wholly unengaged in any of its matters except when begging.[38] Regarding the anchorites' concern with civic life, Olivelle observes an interplay between the forest dwellers and civic leadership, as the anchorites who remained philosophically suspicious of society might

nonetheless adopt mainline practices, symbols, and ideologies (like dharma) in an effort to obtain "acceptance, legitimacy, and patronage" from social elites and influence the political sphere.[39] Forest-dwelling ascetics served a particular social purpose in exemplifying the culmination of a number of dharmic values important for patriarchal social stability, including the ritual devotion required of married men[40] and the generative power of male leaders.[41] Despite this function, however, anchorites did not always enjoy favor with civic leadership and might often endure marginalization, suspicion, and strict regulation[42] and by the Common Era would disappear almost entirely, resigned as they were to the poetic imagination as important literary figures in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.[43]

Olivelle's writing about Janapada anchorites illuminates the central role of forest-dwelling ascetics as exemplars of male-coded dharma in the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Like Olivelle's anchorites, Valmiki's ascetics occupy a position of social removal that finds them singularly influential on state power, a position that allows them to speak on behalf of the gods, who are ascetics themselves,[44] and with authority enough to censure kings. When the exiled Rama enters the Dandaka forest in *Aranyakanda,* he does so without his earlier guide and mentor, Visvamitra, and it is the forest-dwelling ascetics who assume the moralist's role. Note the directness with which the ascetics lecture Rama on proper leadership:

> As the guardian of righteousness and the glorious refuge of his people, a king is worthy of reverence and esteem. He is a *guru* who wields the rod of punishment. A king is a fourth part of Indra himself and the protector of his subjects, Raghava. Therefore, he enjoys the choicest luxuries and is honored by the world. We are residents of your realm and deserve your protection. Whether in the city or the forest, you are our king and the lord of the people. We have renounced violence,

> your majesty, and have conquered our senses and anger. So you must always protect us ascetics, for we are as your children.[45]

Here, as in many passages, the anchorites advocate the common good by reminding the would-be king the need for restraint and the sacred obligation of sovereigns to protect the most meager and vulnerable even while the content of their speech illustrates their great authority as, by referencing a king's material privilege alongside his responsibilities, they assert that enjoyment of the former hinges on fulfillment of the latter. It is, after all, the very existence of ascetics that speaks to the health of the kingdom, with passage upon passage of the *Ramayana* associating unhindered violence against ascetic communities with disorder and negligent state power.[46] Similarly, in equating a king's duty with parental obligation, the ascetics collapse the difference between civic and filial duty, thereby insisting that a sovereign's private concerns must not supersede public welfare—hence, the obligation even of kings to welcome ascetics into their homes should they come to visit.[47] This point of a sovereign's obligation to prioritize the public good over personal desire necessarily conjugates with the ascetic imperative for self-denial, with ascetics exemplify, ritually and corporally, the virtues they expect to find in sovereigns—impartiality, objectivity, and restraint—virtues that, incidentally, find ascetics and kings susceptible to disruptive women who lure them from dharma through sexual and emotional appeal.

As this latter point regarding the performative self-denial of ascetics indicates, not only do the ascetics of the *Valmiki Ramayana* serve as pronounced checks upon sovereign power through their overt education of leaders but they also serve an instructive function by mirroring the very sovereigns they would instruct. Though the asceticism of Valmiki's forest dwellers entails withdrawal and forbearance, particularly through a life lived in the wild, the adoption of

meager garments,[48] subsistence on roots and fruits,[49] and practices of emotional serenity,[50] the aim of such asceticism is not simply withdrawal for its own sake but rather the cultivation of wisdom and knowledge that might just as well deter a sovereign from tyranny.[51] Little wonder, then, that in countless passages Valmiki associates ascetics with kingly qualities like mercy,[52] restraint,[53] polity,[54] rhetoric,[55] chariot riding,[56] mastery of weapons,[57] and proper treatment of guests,[58] associations that serve to twin the two figures. The epic poem is, after all, the story of Rama's adventures *through* asceticism to his ultimate kingship, the acquisition of emotional stability and wisdom necessary to lead the people of Ayodhya. Just as Olivelle notes how some ascetics in the Janapada period were referred to colloquially as conquerors (*jina*) and monarchs (*cakravartin*),[59] the ascetics in the *Valmiki Ramayana* necessarily illustrate proper leadership as well as the sovereign's susceptibility to fall into despotism, with the clear indication given that ascetic devotion contributes to the accumulation of great powers (*tapas*) that might someday result in devastation should the ascetic abandon ascetic practice. Thus, we find contradictory descriptions of ascetics who abstain from violence[60] despite prowess with martial weapons[61] and suppress the same senses[62] they find heightened through austerity[63] while Ravana plainly illustrates the dangers of an ascetic leader given to excesses of greed and promiscuity.[64] Throughout the *Valmiki Ramayana,* anchorites mirror virtuous kings just as raksasas do tyrants, with the two juxtapositions serving as reminders that dharma is a performance rather than a state of being, a performance that must be maintained by devotion to one's role in the patriarchal social order. A profound problem occurs, however, when such ascetics encounter (or include amongst themselves) women—figures so often depicted as committed to performances that serve not the social order but their own benefit.

This brings us necessarily to one of the epic's most prominent ideological ruptures, that being the female ascetic. If I have been right in suggesting that Valmiki's asceticism, exemplified by the forest-dwelling ascetics, nourishes and maintains patriarchal social order, it might stand to reason that ascetic practice would prove just as effective for taming the women who devote themselves to ascetic lifestyles and that female ascetics could, through extreme devotion, subdue their femininity and transcend their social identities to earn the veneration due their male counterparts. Valmiki, however, consistently shies away from equalizing male tapasaya, or ascetic practice, with that of women and from presenting female ascetics in anything but a subservient, pupil-guru dynamic. Though male asceticism in the *Valmiki Ramayana* correlates with the array of social and kingly virtues noted above, asceticism tends to cultivate in women only fidelity and celibacy—a note that sounds first in *Balakanda,* when the chaste daughters of Kusanabha reject Vayu,[65] and thenceforward resounds throughout the epic, particularly in the trials faced by the ever-faithful Sita. Though male ascetics enjoy sovereignty in the wild that imbues them with authority enough to humble sovereigns, those few female ascetics encountered in the narrative remain subject to the male guardianship necessary for supervising their purity, a vicarious positioning that precludes them from nearly all the social potency otherwise accorded anchorites. Valmiki's overarching concern with women as prone to infidelity and adharma drowns his occasional elevation of certain chaste women like Sita, as even the most well-kept female ascetics elicit distrust from the lay males with whom they engage—males who find the austere women at best "faithful" and "faultless"[66] but just as likely frightening,[67] "fierce" and "dreadful."[68] All of this necessarily results in a confoundingly discordant treatment of female virtue, one that finds women inconsistently dharmic and just as often disruptive for male ascetics and patriarchs. This theme of women as ruptures in patriarchal dharma provides perhaps the only

throughline in the narrative regarding Valmiki's concern with women and, as I will illustrate, appears most prominently in women's sensual and pitiable performances.

Female Sensuality and the Rupture of Lament

A persistent and conspicuous articulation of female disruption in the *Valmiki Ramayana,* the woman temptress haunts the epic's male characters, serving as perpetual challenge to their virtue and instigator of ruptures in the epic's dominant ideology. In *Balakanda,* the fatherly ascetic Visvamitra submits to the temptations of the *apsara* Menaka, whose powers of seduction are so great as to distract the sage from his meditation and disorient his sense of time.[69] Though Visvamitra ultimately manages to break free of Menaka's enchantment and resist the ensuing temptation of another apsara, Rambha, his initial failure sets a precedent for the other wise men who will succumb to the wiles of manipulative women. The direst reiteration of this scenario, of course, occurs in *Ayodhyakanda,* when Dasaratha's great affection[70] for his third wife, Kaikeyi, occasions his foolish granting of the two fateful boons[71] Kaikeyi utilizes to usurp Rama and send him to the forest. Rama, once exiled, likewise endures his own encounter with a female temptress, Surpanakha, the raksasa woman who urges him to abandon Sita and marry her instead,[72] and though Rama rather easily resists the seduction of the unappealing female, the ordeal may still manage to disrupt Rama's dharmic comportment by provoking him to what might seem transgressive cruelty[*] of commanding Laksmana to mutilate her while he holds her

[*] While I remain ambivalent regarding the dharmic implications of Surpanakha's mutilation, the variety of stark renditions of the scene across the many *Ramayana's* indicates the extent to which the potential cruelty has troubled *Ramayana* scholars. See, for instance, Kampan's version, in which he downplays Rama's culpability in the mutilation by attributing the deed exclusively to

still.[73] This sort of disruption will culminate in *Yuddhakanda* when Rama rejects Sita before his subjects for her involuntary domiciliation with Ravana,[74] a scene in which Rama's ascetic composure again proves questionable.[*] Sita's subsequent purification by fire and acquittal by the gods[75] will exonerate both her and Rama, allowing the latter to claim his cruelty had been feigned as a means of testing Sita's fidelity,[76] yet the scene may still prove ambiguous enough to warrant the addition of Sita's second banishment in *Uttarakanda* by later reader who perhaps found the whole explanation unconvincing, instead contriving justification for Rama's excess in the broiling discontent of his subjects.

Despite the narrative importance of scenes that feature female temptation enacted in terms of romantic affection, it is worth noting that the female temptress trope finds articulation in a number of modes throughout the text, with the sensual seductress being only perhaps the most recognizable. Though such sargas that present the female temptress as a threat to male virtue might suggest some overarching condemnation of sexuality on the part of the poet, one should not take for granted the sensual mode of female disruption illustrated in such instances without also considering the role of female emotionality in the epic. In many regards, the *Valmiki Ramayana* rather openly celebrates sensuality in the right circumstances, as time and time again purity in the epic correlates with sexual beauty, exhausting the point of Sita's slender yet voluptuous frame[77] and Rama's long arms, broad chest, and eyes like lotus petals.[78] The most

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Laksmana. Kampan, *The Forest Book of the Ramayana of Kampan,* trans. George L Hart and Hank Heifetz (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 5.91.2919-96.2924.

[*] In as much as Rama's merciful exile of Sita in lieu of stricter punishment might seem to illustrate his development into a temperate leader immune to female seduction, the severity of his rebuke nonetheless troubles his closest companions while the text itself describes his words as "cruel and horrifying."[*] See Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.102.30-32. and 6.104.1-4.

obviously adharmic characters, on the other hand, inhabit bodies described as deformed or ugly, with the maidservant Manthara, who convinces Kaikeyi to utilize her sexuality for evil purposes, suffering from a hunched back[79] and Surpanakha exceeding the raksasas in unattractiveness, as she bears a pot belly, beady eyes, and a sinister voice.[80] Ironically, though all females in the *Ramayana* seem to possess an innate, sensual appeal capable of disrupting men, it is the least conventionally attractive women in the narrative, those most lacking in what one might fairly describe as viable or productive sexuality, who utilize sex to subvert patriarchy. More to the point, numerous scenes of female temptation avoid sex entirely, with such instances instead employing female emotionality as the lure for the male ascetic. It is, after all, Rama's mother, Kausalya, who instigates Rama's first temptation when she forbids Rama from withdrawing to the forest and threatens suicide if he should disobey her.[81] It is, likewise, Surpanakha's outrage, instigated by her humiliation at the hands of Rama and Laksmana, that stokes Ravana to the profane abduction of Sita and ruinous war.[82] In both instances, female temptation traffics not in sensuality but rather in a fraught emotionality complimented by clever appeals to male dharmic concerns, filial piety and the proper conduct of kings respectively. Thus, it is not the female body itself that proves disruptive but the female mind that wields the body as a mechanism for manipulation, specifically through sensual and pitiable performances. The disruptive potential of these latter sorts of performance becomes most apparent in the epic's female-led laments, where the public nature of the performance exacerbates the possibility for rupture while stressing the need for immediate patriarchal control.

Female lamentation in the ancient world became a subject of popular, critical attention during the second half of the twentieth century with the publication of significant works

exploring laments in Classical Greek culture and literature.[*] Lament scholarship has since flourished, with dedicated historians and literary critics investigating the roles women played in public grieving ceremonies of various Mediterranean societies and how these roles speak to the social statuses women held, and manipulated, in early patriarchal societies. As the body of this scholarship now makes clear, the association between women and grieving spanned cultures and distinct ritual and literary traditions, with women featuring prominently in the funerary processes and artistic treatments of grief in the societies of Classical Greece, Rome, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and even South Asia.[83] In literature and art, female lament appears in the figure of a weeping goddess present in all five of the surviving Sumerian city laments[84] as well as Hebrew *Lamentations,* and one can observe in the iconography of Classical Greek funerary urns women caught up with grieving, their arms upraised as they tear their hair and wail beside the men who stand in a starkly well-ordered procession.[85] In terms of lived practice, it seems apparent now that women often took central roles in ancient funerary rites, with the association between women and grief so institutionalized in some societies that specialized grieving classes of women developed,[86] and though men in such cultures likely participated in public grieving, their participation probably entailed emotional restraint,[87] and it was the ritualized, dramatic performances of grief (i.e., lament) that remained the specialty of women.[88] As lament scholarship further indicates, such women-led rituals probably served important social functions in the wake of death, such as by permitting communal catharsis while placating the dead and gods as a sort of religious expedient to draw divine attention to human suffering and ensure ongoing fertility and fecundity.[89] In such a way, women played an important part in a ritual vital

[*] See, for instance, Margaret Alexiou's seminal *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University, 1974) and Gail Holst-Warhaft's *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

to the prosperity of their communities, a part they seemed inherently well-suited, even biologically predisposed, to facilitate.

Though such scholarship has clearly illustrated the important social function invested in women charged with performing lament, it remains a matter of conjecture the extent to which women's ritual administration of lament actually presented opportunity for women to manipulate the occasion for their own benefit. Traditionally, scholars investigating ancient lament have insisted that women used such opportunities to express their concerns and frustrations publicly[90] and influence communal affairs in their own favor,[91] with the ritual instigating momentary points of egress from the female domain, ruptures through which women were "able to cross the boundary between public and private in a more direct and physical way."[92] More recently, however, lament scholars and critics have cautioned not to exaggerate the empowerment of women assigned roles in public lament, observing in particular how such performances of public grieving perpetuated associations of women with life and death—likely derived from women's role in the hazardous endeavor of childbirth—and corroborated ideologies about female emotionality and lack of self-control, "the belief that, if left uncontrolled, women would revert to a wild and untamed condition."[93] As this mode of scholarship further suggests, rather than granting liberation to women from the narratives that portrayed them as morally and constitutionally unsuitable for wielding social power, lament may have instead positioned them as threats to patriarchal authority and, therefore, targets for increased suppression,[*] including removal of women from these positions and appropriation of their powers. Thus, lament

[*] See Bachvarova, 18-19. Bachvarova notes that Greek legislation aimed at regulating female lament coincided with increasing imitation of female lament by male actors on the Grecian stage, while male crossdressing for religious purposes appeared in both Greece and Mesopotamia, where men adopted female attire and lament practices in order to co-opt the power otherwise wielded by women, namely their liminal influence over the community, death, and the gods.

represents something of an ellipsis in ancient studies, a singular phenomenon of apparent female leadership in an all-important ritual navigating the perimeter of life and death[94] but whose social impact remains unclear. It is, if nothing else, a phenomenon best characterized by instability—an instance of madness and vulnerability[95] that blurs the lines between ethical reasoning and affective grieving, between formal, aesthetic performance and raw excess.[96]

While most lament scholarship has concentrated on the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, there exists a small but fruitful discourse about South Asian lament, from which one finds important observations regarding the potential agency and empowerment of those women who facilitated communal grieving. Parita Mukta's work with the laments of ancient India and modern Gujarat proves particularly insightful in this regard. Like other lament scholars, Mukta characterizes lament by its array of turbulent emotions—shock, anxiety, sorrow, fear, anger, and cynicism[97] —and observes a clear gendering of the practice, noting that the Sanskrit word for lament, *vilaap*, indexes, among other things, the female-specific grieving practice of beating one's own breasts.[98] Importantly, Mukta posits that lament likely derives from matriarchal societies that existed before the ascension of patriarchal, clan-based and feudal social orders, early societies in which women served as "custodians of life"[99] (and, one may assume, death) on account of their role in childbirth. Mukta goes on to suggest that this "spectacular theater of grief"[100] that constitutes lament persisted as a necessary "counterpoint" to the "death-valorizing ideology" of patriarchal Indian societies,[101] where it guarded the "social memory of death" in cultures dominated and secured by ideologies that celebrated warriors and self-sacrifice in defense of state power.[102] Thus, as Mukta observes, lament served a precarious social function in checking the patriarchal power it necessarily threatened[103] by offering a "sobering . . . critique of a polity and a culture which saw death as noble and heroic."[104] This sort of critique might

consequently impede the recruitment of young men for war and instigate blood feuds through embittered rhetoric[105] and would thus need to be more strictly regulated as patriarchal society flourished, particularly through rearticulation of lament as overt celebration of warlike culture and the heroes who fell in defense of state power.[106] Tellingly, such measures of control observed by Mukta parallel efforts in Classical Greek society to demote female lamenters from their ritual positions[107] and even reverberate in the 20th century, when state powers guilty of atrocities have sought "to displace mourning, erase the social memory of the dead and harness the force of lament to their own agenda."* As will be illustrated shortly, this effort of male rearticulation of female lament likewise appears throughout the *Ramayana* as a means of subduing and incorporating female laments that threaten to disrupt social order.

Before considering instances of lament as potential rupture in the *Valmiki Ramayana,* it proves necessary to explain what I mean by lament in the context of the sprawling epic, particularly since the 2021 English translation features well over a hundred instances of "lament" as a verb attributed to both female and male characters. Informed by the extant body of lament scholarship, however, I identify the relevant instances of lament in the epic by means of the following criteria. Firstly, given that lament serves a social, religious purpose of addressing and reconciling the social instability brought about by death, I consider only scenes of grieving that occur immediately after a character died or is slain (or appears as such), where lament constitutes a part of the funeral process preceding preparation of the body for cremation. Secondly, in as much as lament permits its female performers a unique, ephemeral social agency, I include only those laments performed in public or, at least, in the presence of non-lamenting witnesses.

* Mukta, 213. Mukta cites the early decades of the Soviet Union, when the mass deaths of Civil War and famine were obscured by the glorification of select "heroes" who died to establish Communist power.

Finally, considering the near-ubiquitous association in the ancient world between women and grief and the significance of lament as an interplay between ordinary female disempowerment and temporary mobility and power, I admit only those laments performed by women. Thus, employing these criteria, I exclude scenes classified by other scholars as lament, such as Sita's self-pity in the asoka grove,[108] and I disregard the countless instances of men adopting stereotypically female emotionality (e.g. fainting) except as a counterpoint. Consequently, I locate only five laments in the *Valmiki Ramayana,* which I address according to the purpose they serve in the narrative—that of the kraunca bird in *Balakanda*, which introduces a sort of proto-lament for the rest of the epic, Tara's lament for Valin in *Kiskindhakanda* and the lament of Ravana's wives for Ravana in *Yuddhakanda,* both of which illustrate a strategic employment of grief, and the laments of Kausalya's for Dasarath in *Ayodhyakanda* and Sita for Rama in *Yuddhakanda,* laments that lack public audience and so find no need for male rearticulation.

The *Valmiki Ramayana's* first lament, that of the kraunca bird in *Balakanda*, prefigures the laments that follow and, given its early position in the epic's opening sargas, emphasizes the disruptive power of female grief explored thereafter. Considering the essential characteristics of lament discussed above, the lament satisfies all three, as it is the female kraunca who, following the death of her mate at the hands of a wanton hunter, laments before the poet and his disciples.[109] What follows is, I suggest, another common, if not quite quintessential, element of female lament—the closure of female grief by a patriarch who rearticulates the lament in terms of male-coded dharma. Inspired by the female bird's anguish, the poet Valmiki, himself a witness at the scene, pronounces a curse upon the hunter before reconfiguring the grief into the first *sloka,* or poetry.[110] In such a way, the riotous grieving of the female bird submits to pacification by a patriarch who transforms it into the *Ramayana,* an epic poem preoccupied almost entirely

with war and heroic death. Notably, this rearticulation occurs only after the lament has affected the political sphere by instigating the hunter's punishment while the grief itself remains untranslated—actually unverbalized—despite the poet's artistic interpretation, perhaps a suggestion that the male voice ultimately fails to completely overwhelm the female autonomy gained, at least momentarily, in lamenting. Though classic *Ramayana* scholars struggled with the passage given what they regard as an apparent misgendering of the surviving bird,* apparently lost on these scholars is the prevalence of female grief throughout the *Valmiki Ramayana* and extent to which this proto-lament, unquestionably added to the narrative at a later date, prefigures similar female disturbances in the epic, moments in which a grieving woman "serves as point of textual rupture, disrupting the narrative, challenging the order."[111]

Regarding the disruptive potential of female lament performed in public, Tara's lament for Valin in *Kiskindhakanda* best illustrates how Valmiki's female characters adopt a stereotypically feminine emotionality to influence patriarchs for their own benefit. After Valin's fall in battle with Sugriva and Rama, Tara embraces her husband, recounting his valor and greatness while bemoaning her own diminished status as a widowed woman.[112] Notably, Tara also upbraids her fallen husband for having brought death upon himself in exiling Sugriva and claiming his wife,[113] and she goes so far as to chastise him for not heeding her advice to make peace with his brother.[114] The tone of the lament vacillates between celebration, self-pity, grief, and condemnation in what is perhaps a satire of female emotionality before Tara necessarily cycles through a second lament[115] as if lost to neurotic repetition. Parcel to this display of emotionality, however, one gleans a shrewd, political strategy, as Tara makes a point of citing

* . . . in as much as it fails to foreshadow Rama's loss of Sita that occupies the ensuing narrative. See Sutherland Goldman, 50.

Kala, the male aspect of Shiva associated with death, as agent of Valin's demise[116] rather than Rama and Sugriva, and wisely addresses her son, beckoning him to look upon his father's body just before she publicly exonerates Rama and Sugriva for his killing. Tara then wishes Sugriva a long and prosperous kingship free from anxiety[117] and resigns herself to lethal fasting,[118] thereby endorsing Sugriva while indicating that neither she nor her son will present a threat to the incoming sovereign. Rama ultimately ends the performance with a statement about the futility of excess emotionality and the inexorability of fate, a recurring metaphor for social order, particularly caste* and the valor of warriors who fall in battle. As Rama exclaims,

> Valin has gone from this world and attained his own true nature. He has obtained the fruit of his actions purified by timely attention to gaining religious merit, wealth, and pleasure, lord of leaping monkeys. By losing his life in battle, that great monkey has now reached the heaven that he won through attention to his own duty. It is surely to the highest destiny that the leader of troops of tawny monkeys has gone. So enough of this lamenting! Attend to the duties at hand.[119]

Rama's statement here pacifies the rupture instigated by Tara's bitter emotionality by balancing her condemnation of Valin's actions with her celebration of his bravery,[120] and he quiets the female voice before any further disruptions might stir the people of Kiskindha—though not before Tara has managed to influence the social domain with her pitiably performance and cunning rhetoric, ensuring Angada's succession and mercy for herself should she resign herself to her son's control.[121]

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* Notice similarities between Rama's fate refrain and his rebuttal to Valin's condemnation as he lay dying, when Rama refers to Valin as "only a monkey" and therefore subject to human supremacy. See Valmiki, *Ramayana*, 4.18.33-36.

Like Tara's lament, the lament of Ravana's wives illustrates a similarly strategic employment of pathos and rhetoric veiled in the trappings of excessive female emotionality. The lament for Ravana occurs in Lanka, when the wives hear of their husband's death in battle and, we are told, grief so overwhelms them that they roll in the dirt or faint.[122] The similes here about female madness and foolishness, of course, are significant, as the women resemble cows whose calves have been slaughtered and elephants without a (male guardian) leader of their herd.[123] Like Tara, the wives embrace their husband's lifeless body[124] and recount his virtues and his flaws, his fearlessness and ferocity in battle along with his cruelty and the covetousness that contributed to his death, yet there is also indignation here that Ravana has been slain by a mere mortal,[125] a tone absent from Tara's lament for Valin. As with Tara, however, there is condemnation of Ravana's poor decisions and his refusal to take wise council, and the wives employ self-pity regarding the sorry state of widowhood to which they have been reduced.[126] Though the raksasa women seem to find their own conclusion without the verbal intervention of a patriarch when they turn to rationalizing about the inevitability of fate,[127] the lament continues when Ravana's senior wife, Mandodari, performs the compulsive second cycle, reiterating praise for Ravana, indignation, reproachment of Ravana's cruelty and rapaciousness,[128] self-pity, and more rhetoric about inexorable fate.[129] Notably, Mandodari closes the lament with deferral to a patriarch, Vasava, lord of the gods,[130] and reiterates the cosmic order that ensures "no creature ever dies without a reason."[131] The lament thus concludes without rearticulation by a patriarch, thereby rendering it something of an oddity, though one might reasonably assume the vanquished state of Lanka, to whom the lament is being performed, poses so little a threat to Rama's conquering army that male interjection proves unnecessary for preserving social disorder. Whatever the case, Rama silences the female voice by dismissing the wives back to their

chambers before ordering construction of the pyre for Ravana, an indication that Mandodari's may have been successful in moving Rama to leniency for the raksasas.

In contrast to the two laments employed strategically by widows to preserve their safety and social standing, the laments of Kausalya and Sita lack the overtly political implications of Tara's and Mandodari's while illustrating how the publicity of lament correlates with its disruptive impact. Kausalya's lament for Dasaratha in *Ayodhyakanda,* following her husband's death from grief, occupies a strangely liminal position between the domestic and public sphere as it occurs in Dasaratha's bedchamber, in the company of the king's other wives and female attendants, eunuchs, and panegyrists, an audience comprised mostly, if not entirely, of women.[132] Though the lament includes the necessary features of the genre as well as other common, though not fundamental, characteristics,[*] the efficacy of the performance remains questionable, if it is performance at all, seemingly artless as it is and delivered in the absence of the patriarchs who most need to be influenced. Perhaps Kausalya's condemnation of Kaikeyi propels the public outrage against Bharata and his mother given that it follows immediately after,[133] yet this outcry fails to stall the ministers from summoning Bharata for his coronation,[134] and so the lament accomplishes nothing in terms of lasting social change. The lack of a male voice to rearticulate the lament with a statement about fate instead suggests the lament remains entirely unincorporated with the funerary process—hardly a ritual at all—and that it never threatened caste or warrior code in the first place. Given Kausalya's precarious position as mother of an heir in exile, the avoidance of endorsement for Bharata seems a glaring misstep, and one can only

[*] Specifically, description of the women as elephant cows bereft of their bull, suicidal ideation, despair for the sorry state of widowhood to which the speaker has been resigned, female embrace of the dead body, and a condemnatory summary of the events leading to the death, namely, Kaikeyi's betrayal. See Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.59.1-5.

assume the lament is genuine, grounded in sincerity and without any cunning. Thus, the lament of Kausalya in the bedchamber illustrates how lamentation offers only the *opportunity* for disruption but one that must be utilized with intention and publicly, a careful critique of patriarchal social values.

As with Kausalya, Sita's lament for Rama and Laksmana in *Yuddhakanda* also stands at odds with Tara's lament and that of Ravana's wives in as much as it lacks clear social impact and rhetorical guile. Sita's lament necessarily occurs outside a funerary process, as she has only spied from a distance the devastated monkey army and falsely interpreted what she believes are the slain bodies of Rama and Laksmana pierced with arrows on the battlefield,[135] while absent entirely are patriarchs for whom performative grieving might prove disruptive. As with the lament for Ravana, Sita expresses indignation, citing with disbelief how Rama and Laksmana secured the divine weapon-spells to allow their victory in battle, and she likewise bemoans her status as a widow and defers to Kala, patriarch of death.[136] Without of a male audience, however, these customary expressions garner little productive pity, and so one may rightly interpret them as entirely genuine, sourced in emotion and without much intention. Possibly, the lament manages to elicit merc from the hostile raksasa women if Sita's condemnation of the Brahmans, whom she denounces as false seers,[137] appeals to the raksasa hatred of priests noted elsewhere in the epic,[138] and Trijata's ensuing affection for Sita[139] might substantiate the case, though the clemency it garners proves inconsequential for improving Sita's fortune as Trijata's revelation of Rama's and Laksmana's survival[140] provides only emotional relief. Regardless, Sita's lament lacks the overt strategy and social impact of Tara's and Mandodari's and instead smacks of genuine emotionality, shifting from self-pity to sympathy for another woman, Kausalya, whom she sympathizes with for having lost her only son.[141] Sita's blame turns inward rather than

toward the fallen Rama, whose warlike tendencies she elsewhere condemned,[142] and so the lament instigates little challenge to patriarchal, warrior culture despite her brief condemnation of the Brahmans, a performance of authentic grieving sterile in the absence of the patriarchal gaze.

Considered together, the five laments of the *Valmiki Ramayana* provoke important insights regarding Valmiki's suspicions about women and the limits he imposes on women's dharmic cultivation. As has been illustrated, lament presents female characters an opportunity to indulge in emotionality capable of bending the will of patriarchs, yet the extent to which the lamenting women will (or can) manipulate that opportunity to disrupt patriarchal power for personal gain correlates with the lamenter's cultivated virtue and the publicity of the lament. To be clear, all five laments illustrate the tendency for women to indulge in emotionality, whether feigned or genuine, and especially so when lamenting in the company of other women. Though there appears a clear difference between the laments of Tara and Mandodari and those of Kausalya and Sita, as the former two lack the dharmic cultivation of the latter, being monkey and raksasa consort of the evil Ravana respectively, all of Valmiki's women possess this innate, disruptive emotionality. Consequently, one may wonder if Kausalya and Sita refrain from cunning rhetoric because of their moral refinement or simply because they lack a male audience to manipulate, and the epic remains stubbornly ambiguous in this regard. In countless other passages, however, Valmiki makes his suspicions about women clear by attributing his female characters with two mechanisms for disruption—sex and emotionality—and a proclivity to utilize these mechanisms for personal gain if lacking careful male guidance and supervision. Hence, even the most cultivated of Valmiki's women must remain carefully scrutinized and controlled lest they unleash their tremendously destructive sexuality and emotionality, while those who, like Sabari, manage to exist without patriarchal guardianship must ultimately be

effaced, as Sabari immolates herself soon after she aids Rama[143] in a move that resounds when Sita commits herself to fire after her first banishment from Rama's side[144] and the earth following the second.[145] Given such dominant concerns about women's nature, it is little wonder that Sita condemns her own body along with her newly abandoned state as a widow deprived of male protection.[146] It is, after all, unavoidable that a woman should remain susceptible to vice or that the more cultivated women, the ones most learned in an explicitly patriarchal society, should imbibe the dominant ideology.

As a final point about female emotionality channeled through ritual lamentation, it is worth considering a typical instance of male lament in the *Ramayana* and how it differs from the female laments already discussed. Taken at a glance, Rama's lament for Dasaratha at the end of *Ayodhyakanda* resembles women's lamentation in the ways Rama expresses grief with his body. The scene finds Rama fainting to the forest floor "like a flowering tree in the forest cut down by an axe" and collapsing like an elephant asleep.[147] In its frenzied excess, the performance proves so troubling that the other sons of Dasaratha rush to pour water on Rama to rouse him to his senses. Once Rama comes to his senses, however, we find the turmoil largely passed, and though Rama continues weeping, absent are the theatrics, the customary disbelief and indignation typical of female laments. Like Tara, Mandodari, and Kausalya, Rama's lament entails public censure, though he turns the blame inward, like Sita. "What good was I," cries Rama, "a wretched son, to my great father? He died of grief for me, and I could not even perform his final rites."[148] Tellingly, Rama avoids denouncing Kaikeyi, the most obvious target for condemnation, and he exonerates Bharata as "blameless,"[149] suggesting little threat of blood feud. After the lament has concluded without neurotic repetition, Rama instigates the customary offerings and libations, which he oversees in an orderly manner, and it is clear Rama has once more assumed the

stabilizing, patriarchal role. He reassures his shaken men with renewed composure[150] before lecturing Bharata about fruitless grieving:

> No creature that draws breath in the world can escape this course of things. There is no cure to be found for it, grieve for the dead all you will. Like a man standing by the roadside and calling out to a passing caravan, 'I too am coming, right behind you'—so did our ancestors take this sure road, our fathers and our forefathers. Why should you grieve when you cannot avoid it, when you are following that very road yourself? . . . Our father abandoned a decrepit mortal body and found the heavenly treasure that awaits one in the Brahmaloka. This man no one should mourn, no one as wise as you, as learned and intelligent. The strong of heart will shun these different griefs, these words of lamentation, this weeping, and hold fast to wisdom in all circumstances.[151]

Here, the necessary refrain about the inevitability of fate[152] appears most obviously as a metaphor for maintaining social order, while female-coded emotionality has been rearticulated once again by male-coded stoicism and the celebration of a fallen warrior. In such a way Rama's grief thus illustrates how the "meaningful intervention within the social political world"[153] offered by female-led lament becomes commodified by a patriarch rearticulating it as propaganda, as "heroes of wars invoke lament that doesn't challenge but shores up state power by buying into its narrative of martyrdom in the service of a cause greater than the domestic."[154] Though Rama will indicate his intention to continue his life in exile, it will become clear that nothing has been permanently disrupted by a lamentation that, though pinched, occurred without the disruptive potential of women prone to bitter emotionality despite ascetic cultivation.

Authentic grieving has offered momentary relief before it is necessarily displaced upon women to allow for the resumption of a warrior's composure.

Valmiki's Second-Class Ascetics

Faced with the problem of female disruption put forward by his own depiction of women as morally inferior, Valmiki offers only male authority as partial solution. In the epic's first two books, the poet stresses the importance of female compliance with male guardianship, decreeing that a virtuous woman should obey her husband[155] as children do fathers[156] and civic subjects their sovereigns[157] and that a wife should regard her husbands as refuge,[158] guru,[159] and deity[160] and desire to end her own life should her husband fall. Conversely, Valmiki positions the epic's most transgressive females, those man-eating raksasa women who antagonize the male ascetics and sovereigns, as illustrations of the dangers of a women devoid of male supervision, as we learn that the raksasa Tataka became twisted with grief after the death of her husband, and Surpanakha's husband was likewise slain by Ravana long before the events of *Aranyakanda*.[161] Widowhood, in particular, carries a dreadful air in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, correlated as it is with adultery[162] and ungoverned or devastated cities,[163] while widows who, like Tataka and Surpanakha, fail to follow their husbands in death become othered figures to be pitied only momentarily before pity turns to suspicion and disdain. These feral, monstrous women represent direct challenges to patriarchal social order, fearsome adversaries necessarily vanquished or mutilated by patriarchs if dharmic order is to be maintained, while even those women who flirt with autonomy after the death of their male guardian or a straining of their marital affections face annihilation. The conversation between Rama and his grief-stricken mother in *Ayodhyakanda*

illustrates a moment of near-rupture, with Kausalya threatening to abandon her marital duties to follow her son into the forest or else end her life before the death of her husband. Rama's response regarding the proper conduct of wives, however, and his three parables elevating fathers over mothers[164] thankfully leads Kausalya back from the brink, reorienting the potentially wild woman to patriarchal hegemony. In such a way Rama assumes the guru's role, employing dharma to rein in the wild woman threatening social order.

But what of Sita in particular, most venerated of Valmiki's female characters and a woman portrayed in the *Ramayana* as something of a dharmic ascetic herself? Valmiki's ambivalence about women becomes most apparent when one contrasts Sita's influence on Rama with that of the patriarch Visvamitra, particularly when they each seek to reform Rama's relationship with violence. Rama's first lesson about violence, which occurs in *Balakanda* when Rama and Visvamitra find the tainted forest of Malada and Karusa[165] scourged by the powerful yaksa Tataka, entails Visvamitra lecturing Rama about his obligation to cleanse the forest by killing Tataka.[166] This is an act Rama initially balks at, seeming disturbed by the thought of harming a woman without provocation,[167] before Visvamitra reminds him the duty of kings:

> Therefore, Raghava, for the sake of cows and brahmans, you must kill this utterly dreadful and wicked yaksa woman whose valor is employed for evil purposes. No man but you in all the three worlds can kill this accursed creature, delight of the Raghus. Nor, best of men, should you be softhearted about killing a woman. A king's son must act for the welfare of the four great social orders. This is the immemorial rule for all men charged with the burden of kingship.[168]

Visvamitra's lesson clearly illustrates a maneuver to draw Rama away from softhearted pacifism toward facility with preemptive violence that he regards as necessary for a sovereign to ensure

order in his kingdom, preparation for Rama's dharmic rule as king, a lesson articulated explicitly in terms of dharma. The passage, however, stands in stark contrast with a strikingly opposite moment with Sita, who lectures Rama on the same subject as they enter the forest together in *Aranyakanda,* when she cautions Rama against wanton violence[169] and the unnecessary brandishing of weaponry.[170] Absent in this lesson is the air of fatherly authority typical of Visvamitra, as Sita instead relies of humility and affection: "It is only out of love and respect that I am reminding—not instructing—you that on no account should you take up your bow and, unprovoked, turn your thoughts to killing the raksasas of the Dandakas. My mighty husband, I disapprove of your killing creatures that have done you no wrong."[171] Here, Sita uses language strategically, in a manner not unlike that of lamentations. More tellingly, for all Sita's genuine or feigned affection, her advice runs exactly contrary to that of the dharmic mentor Visvamitra but proves just as effective in affecting Rama's behavior, in this instance with potentially devastating results—though one might question whether the ensuing mutilation of Surpanakha marks a moment of Rama's self-restraint in that he does not kill her, the terrible consequences of Surpanakha's survival in provoking the great war quickly become apparent.

This juxtaposition between Visvamitra's and Sita's influence on Rama cuts to the very heart of the matter of Valmiki's portrayal of women as unfit for dharmic cultivation and the veneration with which certain cultivated women are nonetheless depicted. As is typical of the *Valmiki Ramayana,* Sita's motive for her unheralded lesson to Rama remains elliptical, obscured by the passage's limited third-person and so left to conjecture. Clearly, Sita's strategic use of language plays a great part in allowing her to supplant the dharmic instructions of Visvamitra and draw Rama from performing his duties as a king by consistently appealing to his identity as a husband. Rather than lecture Rama about the duty of kingship as the forest ascetics have, Sita

avoids the matter of kingship entirely, instead emphasizing Rama's *marital* obligations. In this sarga of 29 lines, the word "husband" appears eight times and "king" just once, when Sita expresses her wish that Rama renounce his kingship entirely and devote his life to peaceful asceticism.[172] This rhetorical tactic might certainly suggest a level of inimical cunning on Sita's part, with her recognizing Rama's liminal position as prince in exile and articulating it in order to divest Rama of his authority and ascetic composure in a grievous undermining of the patriarchal hegemony Visvamitra iterates. And yet, just as likely is the possibility that Sita speaks to Rama earnestly, from a place of love and fear—love for her husband and fear for her own safety should Rama fall in avoidable combat and she find herself alone in forest of flesh-eating demons. Faced with a narrative marred by death and populated by grieving widows, one might sympathize with Sita's appeal to her husband to abjure violence while forgiving her inability to relegate her personal concerns for the greater good. The wisdom to set aside one's desires and emotions for the welfare of the kingdom characterizes Valmiki's male ascetics and kings. It is, however, a capacity left out of reach for Valmiki's female characters, compelled as they are by the base motives of their bodies, the biology that positions them closer to life and death.

Taken as a whole, the tendency of Valmiki's female characters to employ sensuality and emotionality as methods for manipulating patriarchy no doubt speaks to their marginal social position as well as Valmiki's trepidation about base female nature that finds women unfit for ascetic practice. Though Laksmana's rebuke of Sita following Rama's disappearance in *Aranyakanda* lands with a great deal of irony considering Sita's veneration, the scene nonetheless verbalizes ideas about women that course throughout the epic—specifically, that women are fickle, divisive, and inherently uninclined toward righteousness.[173] Though Valmiki's female characters may possess clever minds capable of strategy and discernment, as with

Manthara, who anticipates Kaikeyi's dispossession and machinates to supplant Rama with Baratha for her own benefit,[174] they just as often bend to folly and madness[175] as, for instance, Manthara brims with malevolent rage[176] and Surpanakha's ill-fated pursuit of Rama stems not from a desire to better her status through his seduction but, rather, her genuine, obviously misguided lust and a delusion that Rama might find her desirable.[177] The base natures of Valmiki's female characters, human or otherwise, thus accounts for Rama's need to test the nature and depth of Sita's resolve to accompany him to the forest,[178] as it does the epic's fixation on the problem of male leaders, like Dasaratha,[179] Ravana,[180] and Valin,[181] who allow their affection for women to displace their wisdom. Dasaratha's corruption by Kaikeyi, in particular, sets a cautionary example for Rama, whose censure of Sita in Lanka serves as a public illustration that his rule will not falter similarly through concession to a woman,[182] though this measure will ultimately fail to alleviate the citizenry's fears regarding Sita's influence on their king,[183] so unreliable are the hearts of women. If Sita, for her part, emerges as the most dharmic woman of the *Ramayana* despite such trials, it must be on account of her ability to verbalize the ideology that confines the lives of Valmiki's women, ideology that turns her against her own body in her lament. It is ideology that finds the female ascetic too powerful to be permissible.

The problem of the body as an intractable object parcel to and apart from the moral subject remains a primary concern in most mainline Hindu traditions. Thus, one observes in modern Hindu ascetic orders numerous practices aimed at personal transformation, practices like nudity or the adoption of scant, nondescript clothing to subdue one's social identity, the adoption of new names[184] or elaborate sectarian markers that included colored clothing, patterns painted on the arms or head, and various props[185] to indicate a revision of the former self.[186] In such a way, Hindu ascetic traditions purport to unseat identity from the socially-scrutinized *body-as-text*

and instead correlate it with praxis and affiliation with a community that consists, at least ideally, of relationships no longer determined by one's age, sex, or caste.[187] The reality of this transformation for women who join ascetic orders remains questionable, however, and it is in examining this reality that one finds the *Valmiki Ramayana* strikingly contemporary. The decidedly worldly quality of women, so prone to vice, renders them anomalies among ascetic communities, as few words exist in Hindi or Sanskrit for female ascetics and none for "unmarried woman" or "spinster"[188]—a sign of the female ascetic's status as something of a forgotten figure rather than one particularly novel, like the lamenter who laments without raising suspicion. Though canonical texts like the *Valmiki Ramayana* permit a great deal of interpretation by the various traditions devoted to them, traditions that have spawned a "bewildering variety of practices and beliefs" throughout India[189] and permit female ascetics into their orders,[190] female ascetics still represent, for many, a subversion of traditional moral values and a threat to orderly society, as the domestic life evaded by the female ascetic remains the standard by which men, and especially women, continue to be assessed.[191] In such a way, Valmiki's *Ramayana* represents an early attempt to grapple with this conflict, one that finds no stable satisfaction despite additions and recensions.

Admittedly, this is not a paper in which I have indulged in exploring the possibilities for subversion or incidents of female empowerment within the overwhelmingly patriarchal confines of the *Valmiki Ramayana,* nor does it illustrate a desire, characteristic of much modern scholarship, to "salvage" the epic by reading against it. Clearly, canonical texts like the *Valmiki Ramayana* never speak univocally but necessarily submit themselves to subversive reading,

reinterpretation, and recension and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.[*] As Robert P. Goldman rightly observes, though the *Valmiki Ramayana* originated as a "paean to conformity, obedience, and as a handbook of social integration,"[192] the epic poem remains irrevocably prone to "contingent acts of interpretation"[193] as a work that "has grown with the culture it has served, adding and changing episodes and passages, incorporating and preserving ideologies and, above all, serving as the foundation for a massive cultural edifice of commentary, interpretation, refiguration, and performance."[194] Thus, the *Ramayana* is not just a text but a tradition and genre to itself, one consisting of a myriad of tellings that contain the same central story but nonetheless instigate distinct discourse while emphasizing certain elements therein or putting forward different ideologies entirely. Obviously, there remains plenty said and left to be said regarding how female ascetics in the *Valmiki Ramayana* navigate the strict confines of their narrative and culture and the extent to which characters like Sita have found personal transformation through centuries of reverence and recension. These ambitions remain beyond the scope of this paper, however, in which I concentrate on the way the substance of Valmiki's women limits their full inclusion in ascetic traditions and instead finds them cast as wily temptresses and raving widows. Ultimately, one must ascertain soberly the ideology that motivates any great, lasting work before turning to the matter of subversion, leakages, and resistance.

[*] "We know that a writer never reflects mechanically or rigorously the ideology which he represents even if his sole intention is to represent it: perhaps because no ideology is sufficiently consistent to survive the test of figuration. . ." Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production,* trans. By G. Walls (London: Routledge, 1978), 195.

Notes

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[4] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 6.

[5] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 3.

[6] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 3.

[7] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 5.

[8] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 4.

[9] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 4.

[10] Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, "Introduction," 5.

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[15] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 4.18.6-39.

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[21] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 2.94.56-59.

[22] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 2.27.11-15.

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[25] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.103.1-5.

[26] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.102.30-32.

[27] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.106.10-14.

[28] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 2.27.24-27.

[29] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 2.18.33-34.

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[33] Sutherland Goldman, "Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space, and Narrative Structures in Valmiki's Ramayana," *The Ramayana: Revisited*, 47-86, 47.

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[41] Olivelle, 33.

[42] Olivelle, 294.

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[44] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 1.23.18.

[45] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 3.1.16-22.

[46] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 1.14.21.

[47] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.11.26-29.

[48] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.10.25-29.

[49] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.60.1-4.

[50] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.89.11-14.

[51] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.1.1-5.

[52] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.1.16-22.

[53] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.101.1-31.

[54] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 5.49.14-18.

[55] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.85.19-24.

[56] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.72.10-14.

[57] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.20.16-17.

[58] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.11.26-29.

[59] Olivelle, 28.

[60] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.1.16-22.

[61] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.20.16-17.

[62] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.1.16-22.

[63] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.22.17.

[64] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 7.24.16-17.

[65] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.31.13-19.

[66] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.109.17-20.

[67] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 4.49.30-32.

[68] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.34.18-21.

[69] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.62.4-14.

[70] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.10.1-20.

[71] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.23.18-21.

[72] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 3.16.21-25.

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[75] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.105.9-23.

[76] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 6.106.10-14.

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[80] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 3.16.6-11.

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[113] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 4.20.8-11.

[114] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 4.20.12-16.

[115] Valmiki*, Ramayana,* 4.23.

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[117] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 4.20.17-20.

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[119] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 4.24.9-11.

[120] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 4.24.1-4.

[121] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 4.21.7-11.

[122] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.6-10.

[123] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.1-5.

[124] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.6-10.

[125] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.11-16.

[126] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.17-26.

[127] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.98.17-26.

[128] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.99.1-4.

[129] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.99.17-20.

[130] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.99.10-16.

[131] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.99.17-20.

[132] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.59.

[133] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.60.16-19.

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[135] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.37.16-21.

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[137] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.38.1-8.

[138] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.19.11-15.

[139] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.38.22-28.

[140] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.37.5-10.

[141] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.38.20-21.

[142] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.8.6-10.

[143] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.70.25-27.

[144] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.106.22-27.

[145] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 7.8.11-16.

[146] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 6.38.1-13.

[147] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.95.8-11.

[148] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.95.12-17.

[149] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.95.12-17.

[150] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.95.44-47.

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[156] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.16.44-48.

[157] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.51.6-9.

[158] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.21.7-23.

[159] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.110.1-5.

[160] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.26.11-16.

[161] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 7.24.20-24.

[162] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.2.71-76.

[163] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.45.12-18., 3.54.11-15, etc.

[164] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.18.33-4.

[165] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.24.15-23.

[166] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.24.24-30.

[167] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.24.1-2.

[168] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 1.24.13-19.

[169] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.8.6-10.

[170] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.8.16-21.

[171] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.8.16-21.

[172] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.8.22-25.

[173] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 3.43.25-31.

[174] Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 2.7.14-18.

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