On the premier performances of the *Rāmāyana* of Vālmīki

I

'If like a dvija I address Sītā using samskṛta speech, she may think I am Rāvana, and will be frightened.'

Thus does Hanumān think aloud in the *VR*: Rāvana had disguised himself as a brāhmaṇa and abducted Sītā. Sugrīva's monkeys had been sent out in all directions to search for her. When at last Hanumān locates Sītā, he wonders which language he should speak to her in. The *VR* is in Sanskrit, and that is the language the vānara uses in the text. However, the verse quoted above indicates that Sanskrit was associated with dvijas, that is, those belonging to the three higher varṇas, especially brāhmaṇa men. That said, in this chapter, I argue that the *VR* may have had a more varied audience than one suspects. The text contains some clues that suggest how it may have been transmitted even to people who could not have followed the language in which it is composed.

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1 *VR* V.28.18.

2 Rāma's tale as found in the *VR* would also have been recounted in the vernacular for popular consumption. However, a rendering in the vernacular is unlikely to have been a word for word translation of Vālmīki's text - it perhaps involved recounting the main contents of the *VR* and an explanation of these. For the transmission of Sanskrit epic-Puranic texts in the vernacular, see Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 26, 263-67, 270-72.
I argue that the *VR* suggests that it was not meant to be read by people silently by themselves – it was to be shared with others, to be recounted aloud before an audience that heard it and reacted to it. This is significant, for in the early Indian context of limited literacy, a very small section of the audience that the *VR* envisages for itself would have been in a position to actually read it. I examine what the text tells us about its presentation by Kuśa and Lava. Rama’s *Aśvamedha* – the main context of Kuśa and Lava’s performance in the *VR* – is discussed. This spectacular sacrifice, which is described in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, involved the participation of an enormous range and number of people. I ask and seek to answer questions about what different sorts of people might have made of different aspects of Rāma’s *Aśvamedha*, including Kuśa and Lava’s performance. I am aware that the evidence I cite from within the *VR* must be used with caution in making generalizations about how that text and those of its ilk were actually disseminated. I merely suggest one way of coming to terms with people’s awareness of their contents and their extraordinary popularity. I also argue that, while the *Aśvamedha* is depicted as an event at which the might and majesty of the *yajamāna* were made evident to a wide range of people even in texts that predate the *VR*, this *yajña* is refashioned somewhat by the period of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*’s composition. In Book VII of the *VR* it provides an occasion for the transmission of some new messages. Rāma’s character changes, so does the character of the text that tells his tale.
In this chapter, I will focus on some sargas (chapters) of the Bālakāṇḍa and Uttarākāṇḍa. I shall also briefly discuss a few portions of the Yuddhākāṇḍa (Book VI). As has been mentioned in Chapter 1, J.L. Brockington assigns Books I and VII to the third layer of the evolution of the VR, and dates that to the first to third centuries A.D. In Righteous Rāma, Brockington tells us that the chapters of the Yuddhākāṇḍa which we will draw on – sargas 102 to 107 – may be dated to a period ‘perhaps two to four centuries after the first stage’, and he associates his first stage with the fifth-fourth centuries B.C.3 In Epic Threads we are told that these portions of Book VI ‘may be regarded as spanning the second and third stages’ of the VR’s growth.4 As was noted in Chapter 1, Brockington writes that Rāma is equated with Viṣṇu only at the end of the second stage and in the third stage.5 It seems likely that passages in which Rāma is explicitly identified with Viṣṇu date from the very end of the pre-Christian era, or even the first couple of centuries A.D. The transformation of the VR into a Vaisnava text is an aspect that will be highlighted in this chapter. And the cusp of the pre-Christian and Christian eras was also the time when much more emphasis was placed than in the earlier stages on the four-varna model and on Rāma’s responsibility to enforce this system.6 Given the belief in Rāma’s righteous rule and the appeal of his tale, this is a significant point.

3 Brockington, Righteous Rāma, pp. 49-50, 345.
4 Brockington, ‘Rāmo dharmabhrtām varah’, p. 250 n. 2.
5 Ibid., p. 264.
6 Brockington, Righteous Rāma, p.320.
The first *sarga* of the first book of the *VR* ends thus:

Whoever reads this history of Rāma [*yāḥ pathedrāmacaritam*], which is
purifying, destructive of sin, sacred, and the equal of the *Vedas*, is freed
from all sins.

The man who reads this Rāmāyaṇa story [*etadākhyānam...pathanrāmāyaṇam
narah*], which leads to long life, will after death rejoice in heaven together
with his sons, grandsons, and attendants.

A ṛvidia who reads [*pathandvijō*] it becomes eloquent, a ksatriya becomes
a lord of the earth, a trader [*vanigjana*] prospers in trade, and even a lowly
śūdra attains greatness.⁷

Derivatives of *path*, the verb root for reading, are used in all three verses. But words
derived from *path* rarely occur in the text as a whole.⁸ This said, one can note that *path*
does not only mean ‘to read’, it can also be translated as ‘to ... repeat aloud, to recite’.⁹

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⁷ *VR* I.1.77-79. Here, as in *VR* V.28.18 (the verse with which this chapter begins), ‘dvija’ means
‘brāhmaṇa’.

⁸ Brockington also writes that references to reading and writing (or, more accurately, words derived from
the roots *path* and *likh*) date from the third stage of the evolution of the *VR*. One such reference appears in
the context of Kuśa and Lava’s performance of Vālmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa, which is described as ‘a novel form

And reading can, in any case, involve reading aloud. Indeed, the VR does not seem to have been regarded as a text that people read silently by themselves. Its frame story, for instance, suggests this.

In the first sarga of the Bālakāṇḍa, when the sage Vālmīki asks the divine seer Nārada whether a truly exemplary man exists in their times, Nārada tells him about Rāma. Nārada ends his answer with a phalasṛuti, a promise of rewards to all those who read or recite Rāma’s tale. Phalasṛuti literally means ‘the fruit of hearing’, and the term implies that the narrative was meant to be heard by an audience. Nārada’s terse oral rendering of Rāma’s tale has an audience – Vālmīki. Vālmīki goes on to expand and embellish the story he hears. He transforms it into the ādīkāvyya, the first kāvyya, a performable, musical work. The phalasṛuti verses do not make any explicit Vaiṣṇava reference, but they presuppose Rāma’s divinity and the innate power of his tale to produce specific results.

The early Indian audience is unlikely to have otherwise believed that hearing the

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10 Pāṭhaka denotes ‘a reciter, reader...a public reciter of the Purāṇas or other sacred works’. See Monier-Williams, Sanskrit --English Dictionary, p. 615.

11 The VR is classified as a ṛāvyakāvyya, ‘a poem that is intended to be heard’. Even today, the text is read aloud or chanted. This is generally not done mechanically, but in an aesthetically pleasing manner, in a variety of gānarūtis or traditional musical chants. And the text is often actually sung in classical rāgas. See Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, Vol. 1, p. 110.

12 VR 1.1.77-79 (see translation above).

13 Goldman discerns the brahmanical hesitation in permitting the lowest varṇa direct access to the sacred in the fact that several Northern Manuscripts of the VR do not allow śūdras to read or recite (path) Rāma’s tale, and instead use the expression śrṇvan hi (‘hearing’). Additionally, Maheśvaratīrtha’s commentary glosses the word pathan (‘reading/reciting’) as brāhmaṇac śrṇvan (‘hearing from a brāhmaṇa’) in the case of śūdras. See Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, Vol. 1, p. 279 n. on 1.1.79.

For us, however, the more important point is that the narrative was meant to be heard, and that its audience could include members of all four varṇas.
narrative would destroy their sins and conduct them, with their descendants and retainers, to heaven.\(^\text{14}\)

In the second \textit{sarga}, we watch Vālmīki going to bathe in the Tamasā river near his āśrama accompanied by his disciple Bharadvāja. We find Vālmīki moved to compassion when he witnesses the grief of a female bird whose mate has been killed without reason by a hunter. His compassion expresses itself spontaneously in a verse that he utters aloud in a new metre.

\begin{quote}
mā nisāda pratisthām tvamagamah śāsvatīh samāh/ yatkrauncaṃ ithunādekamavadhīh kāmamohitam//
\end{quote}

‘Hunter, since you killed one of this pair of kraunca birds while it was overcome with passion, you shall never again know peace.’\(^\text{15}\)

No sooner has Vālmīki produced this verse than he is filled with amazement: ‘What is this I have uttered?’, we find him saying. Upon reflection, Vālmīki realizes that the verse has been produced through an unconscious process involving the transformation of the

\(^{14}\text{Brockington observes that it may be ‘too simple’ to associate the figure of Nārada in the first sarga of the VR with the beginnings of the concept of bhakti in the text. However, he points out that Nārada is closely linked with bhakti in the roughly contemporary Nārāyanīya, which is located near the end of the didactic twelfth book of the Mbh, and in later texts. See Brockington, Righteous Rāma, p. 212 n. 31; see also Brockington, ‘The epics in the bhakti tradition’, p. 35.}\)

\(^{15}\text{VR I.2.14.}\)
emotion of śoka (grief) into śloka, a metrical form.\textsuperscript{16} This is an aesthetic form which can even be sung to music, 'to the rhythm of strings' (tantrīlayasamanvita).\textsuperscript{17} And Vālmīki tells Bharadvāja this.\textsuperscript{18} We learn that the disciple memorized his guru’s utterance even as the sage was making it.\textsuperscript{19} Vālmīki’s creation already has an audience and, beginning with its very first verse, it is transmitted unchanged.

Vālmīki has his bath and goes back to his āśrama. Brahmā, the Creator of the worlds, comes to see him there. But even though the god is seated before him, Vālmīki loses himself in his thoughts and sings\textsuperscript{20} the verse he has composed. Again, note the presence of an audience. Note also that the verse is sung. The term used is jagau (‘sang’), which is derived from the verb root gai (‘to sing’). Brahmā says: ‘Brahman, it was by my wish alone [macchandādeva] that you produced this refined utterance [sarasvatī].’\textsuperscript{21} The Creator encourages Vālmīki to compose Rāma’s entire carita\textsuperscript{22} in his new metrical form,

\textsuperscript{16} Almost a millennium later, Abhinavagupta visualizes the situation something like this: So long as Vālmīki is simply feeling the primary emotion of sorrow, he does not have the necessary ‘artistic distance’ to create poetry. At some point, he stops feeling sorrow, and ‘it is as if he were witnessing a drama in a play-house’. It is then that he utters his famous curse. When he contemplates what he spoke out (when he asks, ‘what is this I have uttered?’), he is the sahṛdaya, the rasika, the spectator, the audience of his own verse. This interpretation adds another layer to the audience of Vālmīki’s creation. See J.L. Masson and M.V. Patwardhan, Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta’s Philosophy of Aesthetics, Poona, 1969, pp. 83-84 n. 4.

\textsuperscript{17} VR 1.2.17.

\textsuperscript{18} VR 1.2.16.-17.

\textsuperscript{19} VR 1.2.18.

\textsuperscript{20} VR 1.2.28.

\textsuperscript{21} VR 1.2.30.

\textsuperscript{22} Note the use of the term ‘carita’. The word is found in Vedic literature, and refers to heroic exploits. By the early centuries of the Christian era, it is used in such works as the Buddhacarita, and may be translated as ‘history’. See Barbara Gombach, ‘Ancillary Stories in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata’, unpublished PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2000, pp. 120-21.
and tells him that his *kathā* will be told among men so long as the mountains and rivers endure upon the earth. The use of the term *‘kathā’* is significant. The Sanskrit verb root *kath*, from which that noun is derived, means ‘to tell... narrate... speak about’. The terms ‘telling’ and ‘narration’ imply the presence of a listener, someone who reacts to what he/she hears; and they suggest the meaning of *‘kathā’* more accurately than ‘story’ – the translation of the word we most often encounter.

After Brahmā leaves, Vālmīki’s disciples sing the verse again, and we are told that ‘the *śoka* that the great seer sang in four metrical quarters of equal syllables has become *śloka* by virtue of being repeated after him.’ The repetition of the verse (not mentally, but aloud) seems important in the transformation of the emotion of *śoka* into *śloka*. Then Vālmīki announces that he will compose Rāma’s entire story in the metre he has created. He goes on to do so. And the third *sarga* lists several of the episodes of Rāma’s tale that Vālmīki turns into poetry: even those events that had not yet occurred are rendered in Vālmīki’s new metrical form.

In the fourth *sarga*, Vālmīki looks for students most likely to do justice to his poem. He teaches it to Kuśa and Lava, Rāma’s sons who are being brought up in his hermitage.

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1. *Carita* is thus used, at roughly the same time, to describe the lives of two heroes who are associated with two very different kinds of dharma. To provoke a comparison between the two?
23 *VR* I.2.30,35.


26 *VR* I.3.29.

27 *VR* I.4.4. One may ask whether the *krauñca*-vadhā’s cry at being separated from her mate affects Vālmīki as it does because he has witnessed Sītā’s anguish at being separated from Rāma. Can the *krauñca*-vadhā
and they learn it by heart. These two perform the text, not just for themselves or Vālmīki, but before a larger audience. Kuśa and Lava and their rendering of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyana are discussed in some detail in Sections III and V of this chapter. For the time being, one can note that the upodghāta of the VR, the introductory ‘frame’ in four sargas, ends with Rāma coming across the two performers, who are by now quite well known, and whom he fails to recognize as his own sons. He asks them to sing Vālmīki’s poem. And, as they do so, Rāma slowly loses himself in his desire to experience his own story. The stage has been set for the unfolding of the main narrative of the VR. The origin of the text has been linked with the career of its hero through Kuśa and Lava, who are both Vālmīki’s disciples and Rāma’s sons.

episode be understood as suggesting that Sītā is staying at Vālmīki’s āśrama? In the fourth sarga of the Bālakāṇḍa, we find her children being raised in his hermitage. And, later, Kuśa and Lava are referred to as munidārakau, ‘sons of the muni’, Vālmīki’s sons (VR VII.84.9,17,19). See Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, p. 320.

28 The Sanskrit is vāco vidheyam ... krtvā. VR I.4.11.

29 VR I.4.21-27. While it is generally held that the upodghāta indicates that Vālmīki’s Rāmāyana was originally an oral performative work, Sheldon Pollock has argued that ‘[f]rom the first, kāvyā was almost certainly composed and circulated (though not typically experienced) in writing’. Pollock states that, ‘[t]he carefully constructed image of a purely oral culture in the prelude’ is ‘not a realist depiction but a sentimental “fiction of written culture”’. See Sheldon Pollock, The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India, Delhi, 2006, pp. 13, 78.
In the fourth sarga of the Bālakānda, we find Vālmīki wondering who should perform (prayuñjijyāt) the poem he has composed. Prayunjijyāt is derived from pra-yuj, which may be translated as ‘to utter, pronounce, speak, recite’, ‘to represent on the stage, act’, ‘to show, display, exhibit’ and ‘to perform’. Note the distinction between pra-yuj and gai. As mentioned earlier, the latter term means ‘to sing’, it may also be translated as ‘to speak or recite in a singing manner’. As Vālmīki ponders over who he should accept as students of his kāvyā, the twins Kuśa and Lava (kuśilava) appear, and Vālmīki decides to teach them his Rāmāyana. Kuśa and Lava are described as Rāma’s glorious, blameless sons. We are told that they were familiar with the ways of righteousness and well-grounded in the Vedas, and that they understood the essence of the narrative they were taught. We gather that they had excellent memories and sweet voices, and that they had mastered the gandharvas’ musical art. They were also well-versed in mime. These qualities and skills are invaluable to performers. In addition, the twins were

30 VR 1.4.2.
32 VR 1.4.3-6. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the names Kuśa and Lava together make up the noun kuśilava, which means ‘bard’.
33 VR 1.4.4,11.
34 VR 1.4.4-5,12.
35 VR 1.4.4-5,9. Gandharvas, attendants in the court of Indra, the king of the gods, are a class of semi-divine beings known for their musical abilities and their good looks.
36 VR 1.4.10. The term used is rūpa...sampannau. I have understood rūpa as mime here, as some commentators on the VR too have done. Rūpasampannau can also mean ‘gifted with beauty’. See Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, Vol. 1, p. 287 n. on 1.4.10.
beautiful as *gandharvas*\(^{37}\) and marked by every auspicious sign\(^{38}\), and attractive artistes tend to make a favourable initial impression on an audience.

After learning Vālmīki's poem by heart, Kuśa and Lava sing it\(^{39}\) at a gathering of seers, *brāhmaṇas* and virtuous men (*ṛṣīnām ca dvijātinām sādhūnām ca samāgame*).\(^{40}\) When the twins sing the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the presence of some pure-minded *ṛṣis*\(^{41}\), the seers weep with joy at hearing the work.\(^{42}\) The sages praise Kuśa and Lava: 'O the sweetness of this singing, and especially of the poetry. Even though all this happened long ago, it is as if we have been shown it right before our eyes.'\(^{43}\) Vālmīki's exemplary *kāvya* comes alive through the twins' performance. And applauded by the great seers, who were themselves to be honoured for their spiritual power, Kuśa and Lava sing still more sweetly and with more feeling.\(^{44}\)

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37 *VR* I.4.9.

38 *VR* I.4.10,12.

39 As taught to Kuśa and Lava, and as sung by them, Vālmīki's *kāvya* is described using the technical vocabulary of classical vocal music. For instance, according to *VR* I.4.7:

> 'It is sweet both when recited and when sung in the three tempos [pramāṇaisthirānvyutam] to the seven notes of the scale [jātibhiḥ saptahīryuktam], and it can be sung to the rhythm of strings [tantrīlayasamanvyutam].'

Vālmīki's creation is presented as a work that lends itself to being sung in the formal, classical mode.

40 *VR* I.4.12.

41 The terms *ṛṣi* and *muni* are used interchangeably in *VR* I.4.13-15,18-19. *ṛṣi* is used in I.4.13,18, and *muni* in I.4.14-15,19. One may note that words derived from the verb root *gai* are used in connection with Kuśa and Lava's rendering of Rāma's story before this audience. See *VR* I.4.13, 15-18.


43 *VR* I.4.14-16.

44 *VR* I.4.18.
We have already noted that Valmiki’s kāvya has Brahmā’s endorsement. It seems significant that brāhmanas, rṣis and other spiritually attained men are depicted as the first to witness Kuśa and Lava’s rendering of his Rāmāyaṇa. So does the fact that it is specifically mentioned that some sages were deeply moved at hearing the work, and that they praised both Valmiki’s poem and the twins’ performance of it. Rṣis are revered figures in Sanskrit literature. We are told that Brahmā reveals the Veda to the seven primeval rṣis at the beginning of each cycle of creation, and that these seers pass that sacred utterance on to human beings. Sages are also credited with the composition of texts, sometimes those that are venerated. Rṣis wander through the three worlds, they wander in and out of texts, giving wise counsel, blessing or cursing. The performance of rites and austerities enables them to accumulate spiritual power, often to the point where their potency poses a threat to the gods, especially to Indra, the king of the gods. And it is rṣis, together with the high gods, who appoint Nahuṣa as king when Indra commits brahmaṇicide, and oppressed by his sense of guilt, begins to live concealed in the waters. ⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Mbh V.11.1-5 ff.

⁴⁶ See, for example, John W. Spellman, Political Theory of Ancient India: A Study of Kingship from the Earliest Times to Circa A.D. 300, Oxford, 1964, p. 15.
neither decrepitude nor famine, nor calamity nor disease on earth. That king made dharma supreme in the world, and because he gratified (rañjita) his subjects, he was called rājā.⁴⁷ And Viṣṇu himself enters the body of the ruler.⁴⁸ Veṇa’s story has been used to argue that a number of Sanskrit texts espouse the view that it is essential to have a king to avoid anarchy – an unrighteous ruler can be dethroned but a successor has to be found, or else there will be no one to maintain dharma, to protect small fish from being devoured by bigger ones. But this narrative also implies that rsis were believed to have the authority not only to teach dharma, but also to adjudicate on who was or was not worthy of kingship.⁴⁹

That Rāma had been a truly virtuous man and an exemplary monarch is evident even before the fourth sarga of the Bālakānda. Nārada’s phalaśruti implies more – it suggests a belief in Rāma’s divinity and in the power of his tale to produce specific results. Like mantras, which are held to be most effective if used in the right way (if pronounced correctly, if accompanied by certain ritual gestures, if preceded by ritual cleansing through bathing or fasting, for instance), it seems that Vālmīki’s Rāmāyana too was thought to release its power fully when rendered in a particular way. Kuśa and Lava present it as it was meant to be. The rsis who witness their debut applaud Vālmīki’s kāvya and the twins’ performance. Rāma’s status as the perfect man/ideal ruler/god born on earth is affirmed. So is the status of Vālmīki’s Rāmāyana as a poem worthy of that

⁴⁷ Mbh XII.59.127.
⁴⁸ Mbh XII.59.130.
⁴⁹ For other examples that suggest that either kingship or kings could be established by rsis, see Spellman, Political Theory of Ancient India, pp. 16-17.
exemplary hero. Perhaps one can also argue that the *rṣis*’ approval of Kuśa and Lava could only stand the twins in good stead in their later role as kings of the realm that their father had ruled over so righteously.\(^{50}\)

The power of Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* and of Kuśa and Lava’s rendering achieve a more poignant result at the end of the fourth *sarga* of the *Bālakānda*. Now Rāma sees the twins who were being praised everywhere on the roads and royal highways (*rathyāsu rājāmārgesu*).\(^{51}\) He brings them to his own dwelling\(^{52}\) to sing the *Rāmāyaṇa*.\(^{53}\) They do so, not just in Rāma’s presence, but before a group of people. We are told that ‘right there in the assembly [*parīśad*]’, Rāma allows himself to be drawn into the tale in order to experience it fully.\(^{54}\) He gradually becomes oblivious to his surroundings and is completely absorbed as he listens to his own story, recounted by his sons, whom he has

\(^{50}\) One can note that Kuśa and Lava have been praised by the assembled *rṣis* only for their presentation of Vālmiki’s kāvyā. The twins certainly possessed some attributes that were considered necessary for being good kings – we have been told, for example, that they were familiar with *dharma* and versed in the *Vedas*. But, amongst other things, Rāma is described as being trained in rājāvidyā (royal learning) and knowing the *dhanurveda*, ‘the science of the bow’. These are important fields of learning for ksatriyas, parallel to the three or four *Vedas* of brāhmans. For Rāma’s education, see, for instance, Brockington, *Righteous Rāma*, pp. 180-81.

Rāma’s slaying of the man-eating rākṣasī Tālākā and his protection of Viśvāmitra’s sacrifice from villainous rākṣasas mark the beginning of his exploits. The latter may be seen as that hero’s first public performance before an audience similar to the one present at Kuśa and Lava’s debut. However, while Rāma was ‘honoured by the *rṣis*’ for defeating rākṣasas with awesome weapons, Kuśa and Lava’s first public performance has no obvious ksatriya connotations. For Rāma’s unleashing of potent *astras* to protect Viśvāmitra’s sacrifice, see *VR* 1.29.13-20; see also Section IV of this chapter.

\(^{51}\) *VR* 1.4.21.

\(^{52}\) *VR* 1.4.22.

\(^{53}\) *VR* 1.4.27.

\(^{54}\) *VR* 1.4.27.
not yet recognized. The Critical Text does not tell us exactly when and where Rāma hears Kuśa and Lava’s recitation. But in most of the Northern Manuscripts used in preparing the Critical Edition, the time and place is clearly stated to be Rāma’s Aśvamedha.\footnote{Goldman, \textit{The Rāmāyana of Vālmiki}, Vol. 1, p. 288 n. on 1.4.21.}

At the end of the fourth \textit{sarga} of the \textit{Bālakānda}, we also get a glimpse of a second group (the gathering of \textit{rsis}, \textit{brāhmaṇas} and virtuous men being the first) that witnesses the twins’ performance. After bringing Kuśa and Lava to his dwelling, ‘seated on a celestial throne of gold with his \textit{sacivas} and brothers sitting nearby’, Rāma asks Laksmaṇa, Śatrughna and Bharata to listen to the tale the twins have been singing. And, at a word from the king, Kuśa and Lava begin their recital before the \textit{parisad}.\footnote{\textit{VR} 1.4.22-27.} Two terms are of interest here – \textit{saciva} and \textit{parisad}.

In the \textit{VR}, \textit{saciva} stands for a prominent official at the king’s court. The word may be translated as ‘minister’, and the traditional number of ministers is eight.\footnote{Brockington, \textit{Righteous Rāma}, p. 131.} In the Vedic corpus, terms such as \textit{samiti}, \textit{sabhā} and \textit{parisad} denote assemblies of clansmen that could effectively check the \textit{rājā’s} power. The Vedic \textit{samiti} appears to have been a more open gathering than the \textit{sabhā}. The \textit{parisad} seems to have had an even more select membership. While these names survived into texts of a later period, the functions of the assemblies changed.\footnote{Thapar, \textit{From Lineage to State}, pp. 55,57.} In the \textit{VR}, the \textit{sabhā} and the \textit{parisad} serve as advisory bodies to the \textit{rājā}, who appears to have been the final authority in matters of state. The \textit{parisad’s}

\footnote{55 Goldman, \textit{The Rāmāyana of Vālmiki}, Vol. 1, p. 288 n. on 1.4.21.}
role is evident, for instance, when Daśaratha decides (with his sacivas' endorsement) to proclaim Rāma his heir. He announces this to the parisad. Here, the parisad comprises leaders of the community and also kings, presumably subordinate rulers. The kings, we gather, 'broke into cries of joy, like peacocks do when they see long-awaited rain clouds'. It appears that ministers and the parisad had to be consulted on major matters, including succession to the throne. Might it be significant that Kuṣa and Lava perform before this group? This was, after all, a political elite that had some say in who could or could not be king, whose support would buttress a ruler's authority, and whose disapproval could undermine it. The twins sing before this audience in the mārga style. Mārga, 'the high road', is the formal, refined mode of recitation/singing used for works composed in Sanskrit. Not everyone can appreciate it. Only the connoisseur can. Rāma, his brothers, his sacivas and the parisad seem to have formed part of the cognoscenti.

IV

This section attempts to bridge the gap between Sections III and V. Section III discusses the Bālakāṇḍa's version of Kuṣa and Lava's presentation of Vālmīki's Rāmāyana. That account ends with the twins' performance of the kāvyya before its central character. And, according to several of the manuscripts used in preparing the Critical Edition, this occurs at Rāma's Aṣvamedha. Section V draws on the Uttarakāṇḍa's description of the same

sacrifice at which the two boys appear and present Vālmīki’s poem. Focusing on those portions of the *VR* which are relevant for the argument presented in this chapter, Section IV deals with what happens in between *sarga* 4 of the Bālakāndā and *sarga* 82 of the Uttarakāndā, the chapter with which the account of Rāma’s Aśvamedha begins.

The main narrative of the *VR* begins with the fifth *sarga* of the Bālakāndā, in which we are introduced to the righteous and powerful Daśaratha, ruler of Kosala. Later, we are told that the monarch possesses all that a man could desire except a son and heir. So, he resolves to perform the Aśvamedha. In the Sanskrit epics, that *yajña* generally sanctifies a king’s acquisition of sovereignty over the realms of others, especially his neighbours.⁶¹ From later Vedic texts we know that a horse was symbolically identified with the sovereignty of the rāja, and set loose to wander for a year, accompanied by guards. Wherever the horse went, it represented the *yajamāna*’s sovereignty and therefore compelled the rājā of any realm through which it passed either to submit or to fight. If the horse survived the year, it returned to the place of sacrifice, and the *yajña* was completed with a three-day rite. Ritual activity had been taking place throughout the year at the sacrificial site. With the return of the horse, it reached a climax. The Aśvamedha was believed not only to extend and confirm the sovereignty of the rājā, but also to ensure the well-being of his realm. Further, it could be conducted to free someone from an impure or undesired state and, as a preamble to Rāma’s *yajña*, two such Aśvamedhas are mentioned in the *VR*. In VII.77, the gods perform this sacrifice on behalf of their king, Indra, to free him from the sin of brahmanicide. In VII.81, the sage Marutta and a group

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⁶⁰ *VR* 1.4.27.
of brāhmaṇas hold this yajña on behalf of King Ila, who has been transformed into a woman by Śiva. The officiants win Śiva’s favour, and he agrees to restore Ila’s masculinity.

In addition, in texts of the later Vedic corpus, the Aśvamedha is seen as a means of ensuring procreation (praajanana). When the sacrificial horse returned to the place of sacrifice after its wanderings, it was killed. The mahiṣṭ, the rājā’s chief wife, was led up to it. She was accompanied by other wives of the rājā – the vāvātā or favourite wife, the parivṛkṣṭī or abandoned wife and the pālāgalī or low status wife. And each wife was accompanied by a hundred female attendants. The chief wife mimed sexual intercourse with the dead horse. As she lay beside the animal, the mahiṣṭ and the rājā’s lesser wives engaged in ‘bawdy banter’ with the priests; and their female attendants circled the horse and the mahiṣṭ, singing, dancing and slapping their thighs. This spectacle has been interpreted as an attempt to promote fertility, and more specifically, to ensure the birth of offspring, especially sons. However, according to Robert Goldman, nowhere in the Sanskrit epics, except in Daśaratha’s case, is that sacrifice staged to obtain a son. And Daśaratha also performs the Putresti rite for the same purpose.

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62 Roy, The Emergence of Monarchy, p. 120.

Kumkum Roy points out that Daśaratha’s Aśvamedha is in keeping with the prescriptions of the later Vedic tradition. Kausalyā spends one night with the horse, Daśaratha’s other wives also copulate with the slaughtered animal. See Roy, The Emergence of Monarchy, p. 120 n. 29.
Shortly after the commencement of Daśaratha’s son-producing sacrifice, the gods ask Viṣṇu to divide himself into four parts and take birth as that monarch’s sons. ‘When you have become a man, you must kill Rāvana in battle’, the gods tell Viṣṇu, for that villainous rākṣasa, having become invincible to gandharvas, yaksas, gods, dānavas and rākṣasas, indeed to all beings other than humans, through a boon granted by Brahmā, has been making the three worlds tremble in fear. Viṣṇu agrees. And as Daśaratha is performing the yajña to obtain a son, a celestial being rises from the sacrificial fire, bearing a vessel filled with a divine pāyasa, and this vessel he gives to the king. Daśaratha divides the heavenly food among his three principal wives. Rāma and his brothers are born in due course, after the completion of the Horse Sacrifice. We are told that Rāma is one-half of Viṣṇu, and Bharata, Laksmana and Īstraṇa too are infused with portions of that god. Note that when the gods petition Viṣṇu to descend to earth, the yajña is the occasion at which the pāyasa containing the god’s essence is given to Daśaratha. The sacrifice acquires a Vaiṣṇava colour. The account of the other gods generating sons in the form of various kinds of monkeys in order to assist Viṣṇu is also regarded as evidence of the Vaisnavization of Rāma’s tale.

One may note that Rāma too acquires his sons at his Aśvamedha, although we are not told that the yajña was performed for that reason, and Rāma’s Horse Sacrifice does not involve the exhibition of public sexuality described above. See Section V of this chapter.

66 VR I.15.7.
67 VR I.15.9-19.
68 VR I.15.24-27.
69 VR I.17.1, 6-9.
Rāma begins his career as a warrior and a protector of dharma and dharmic people when he is hardly past his childhood. Lakṣmanā and he accompany the rṣi Viśvāmitra to that sage’s hermitage in order to destroy the rāksasas who have been obstructing a sacrifice there. On the way, Rāma receives instruction in certain magical spells and celestial weapons, and kills the man-eating rāksa Tātakā. On reaching Viśvāmitra’s āśrama, he defeats the rāksasas who have been harassing the sage. Viśvāmitra’s goal accomplished, Rāma, Lakṣmanā, Viśvāmitra and a party of seers set off for Mithilā, whose ruler, Janaka, possesses a mighty bow that once belonged to Śiva. After arriving at Mithilā, Rāma wields the divine weapon, breaks it, and wins Janaka’s daughter Sītā as his bride. Marriages are also arranged between Daśaráthā’s other sons and Janaka’s second daughter and his nieces. After the weddings, on the way back to Ayodhyā, Rāma meets the sage Rāma Jāmadagnya, who challenges the prince to put an arrow to a bow that he possesses. This bow, which once belonged to Viṣṇu, is even mightier than the one Rāma broke at Mithilā. The prince strings Viṣṇu’s bow and fits an arrow into it. Rāma Jāmadagnya stands watching Daśaráthā’s son, rooted to the spot, deprived of his strength by the younger Rāma’s valour. And the sage speaks thus to the prince:

I know you to be Viṣṇu, lord of the gods, the invincible slayer of the demon Madhu, from the way you wield the bow.... All the hosts of gods gathered here bear witness that you are unparalleled in your deeds and in battle. And it is not a matter of shame for me to have been defeated by you, lord of
Apart from the account of Rāma’s birth, this episode is the only one in the Bālakānda in which Rāma is categorically identified with Viṣṇu.

Rāma Jāmadagnya leaves after circling Daśāratha’s son reverently, and the wedding party proceeds towards Ayodhyā. The brothers and their wives live in that city in peace and contentment for a while. Then come Rāma’s consecration as Daśāratha’s heir-apparent, his banishment to the wilderness for fourteen years, his life in the forest with Sītā and Laksmana, Sītā’s abduction by Rāvana, and Rāma’s alliance with the vānaras in his mission to rescue his wife. At the end of a bloody war, Rāvana is killed and Sītā reunited with her husband. This reunion is preceded by some sargas that are important for the argument presented in this chapter. And it is these that we will now discuss briefly.

After Rāvana is slain and Vibhīṣana crowned king of Laṅkā, the latter brings Sītā into Rāma’s presence. Instead of the joyous reunion we expect, we find Rāma speaking coldly, harshly to his wife in front of all the rākṣasas and vānaras. He tells her that the war was not fought for her sake, but to vindicate his honour and to save his family from disgrace. Rāma says that he has terrible suspicions about Sītā’s conduct: How can a man born in a noble family take back a woman who has lived in the house of another man? How can he take Sītā back when Rāvana has touched her and when she has lived under the rākṣasas’s lustful gaze? Rāma announces that he doesn’t want Sītā any more. She can

\[71 \text{VR I.75.17-19.}\]
go where she likes – to Laksmana, Bharata, Sugrīva or Vibhīsana, or to anyone else who
pleases her. Sītā protests about Rāma’s insinuations and his repudiation. She tells her
husband that she could not help it if her body was touched by another man, she did not
want that. The part of her that was wholly under her control – her heart – was always
with her husband. If Rāma was going to abandon her, why did Hanumān not tell her that
when he found her? If she had known what her husband intended, she would have killed
herself at once, before Hanumān’s eyes. This would surely have saved Rāma a good deal
of trouble. Sītā asks Laksmana to light a pyre for her, and he does so. She calls upon the
god of fire, the witness of all that happens in the world, to protect her if her heart has
never strayed from Rāma. She then enters the flames. A big crowd is watching, a huge
wail rises from the vānaras and rāksasas.

Kubera, Yama, Indra, Varuna, Śiva and Brahmā arrive in sarga 105 of the Yuddhakāṇḍa.
They ask Rāma how he – the most enlightened being – could let Sītā walk into the fire.
Doesn’t he know that he is the greatest among the gods? They tell him that, long ago he
was Tadāmā Vasu; that he is the self-born Prajāpati, the creator of the three worlds. He
is the eighth Rudra and the fifth of the Sādhyas. The Aśvins are his ears, the sun and
moon his eyes. He exists at the end and the beginning of the worlds; and yet, he has
humiliated Sītā as an ordinary mortal would. Hearing this hymn from the gods, Rāma is

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72 VR VI.102.30.
73 VR VI.103.
74 VR VI.104. Note the presence of a large audience in VR VI.104.26-27.
75 VR VI.105.1-8.
puzzled and says, 'I know myself as a man – Daśaratha’s son, Rāma. Tell me who I really am.'

Brahma now discloses Rāma’s real nature and the cause of his human incarnation. The Creator tells Rāma that he is none other than Nārāyaṇa, and identifies him with some of Visnu’s avatāras, including Krṣṇa and Varāha. Brahmā reveals that Rāma is the imperishable brahman, the supreme dharma, Puruṣa, the essence of the Veda, the sacrifice. Nothing can exist without him. He is the creator. He is the upholder of the earth, of the mountains and of all creatures. At the end of the world, he is visible reclining on the great serpent on the waters, supporting the three worlds, the gods, gandharvas and demons. He is manifest in everything – in brāhmanas, in cows, in the directions, in the sky, mountains and forests. His beginning and end are unknown. No one can fathom him. Brahmā tells Rāma that Sītā is Laksī and that he is Visnu, that he has been born as a human for the purpose of killing Rāvaṇa. Now that this has been accomplished, Rāma can return to heaven. Brahma ends by proclaiming that those who are steadfast in their devotion to Rāma, those who praise him shall always be successful.

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76 VR VI.105.10.
77 Compare Brahmā’s revelation with Krṣṇa Vāsudeva’s self-revelation in the Bhagavadgītā.
78 VR VI.105.12-25.
80 VR VI.105.27-28. The expression used is [ye na驾驭 kīrtayiṣyanti]. The term is derived from the root kīr, i.e., ‘to…tell, …recite,…communicate, …celebrate, praise, glorify’. See Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 285.

The word kīrtana, which denotes the singing of hymns, is derived from the same root. Kīrtana is generally a collective activity. It arouses devotional fervour and bonds god’s worshippers, at least temporarily, overcoming caste and gender divisions. See Julius Lipner, Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, London and New York, 1998, p. 293.
Now Agni, who has heard Brahmā’s hymn to Rāma as Viṣṇu, appears holding Sītā – unsinged, unscathed, radiant. The god of fire declares that Sītā is totally pure, Rāma should take her back. Rāma announces that he knew his wife had remained true to him, but he had to establish her chastity before the eyes of the world – if he had not subjected her to a test, people would have said that Daśaratha’s son Rāma was ruled by his desire for a woman. The chapter – sarga 106 of the Yuddhakāṇḍa – ends with Rāma’s reunion with his beloved. The episode of Sītā’s public vindication also results in Rāma being reunited with his forgotten self, his divine identity. The spectators witness this too. In sarga 107, Daśaratha descends from heaven and restates some of what Brahmā has said – that Rāma is the eternal brahman, the essence of all the gods incarnated as a man to slay Rāvana. Now that the period of his exile is over, Daśaratha asks Rāma to return to Ayodhyā and reclaim his kingdom. The Yuddhakāṇḍa closes with Rāma’s coronation and a description of his righteous rule.

The two reunions achieved at the end of Book VI – of Rāma with Sītā, and of Rāma with his divinity – are temporary. They are undone in the Uttarakāṇḍa. Continuing rumours about his wife’s infidelity cause Rāma to banish her from his realm, even though she is pregnant. He sees this as his dharma as a ruler: a righteous monarch must always be above reproach, as must everyone connected with him. Rāma sacrifices his love for Sītā to uphold his rajadharma – his dharma as defined in narrow, human terms. Here, Rāma does not act as an all-knowing, all-powerful god.
In exile under Vālmīki’s protection, during a night that Rāma’s brother Satrughna spends at the sage’s hermitage, Sītā gives birth to Rāma’s twin sons. Vālmīki names the infants after the upper (kuśa) and lower (lava) parts of the grass used at sacrifices.\(^{81}\) In the same sarga, we are told that Satrughna hears of the birth of his brother’s sons.\(^{82}\) Might Satrughna’s presence at Vālmīki’s asrama on this particular night be significant? At least one member of Rāma’s family now knows of the birth of the king’s sons. Can we argue that, in the eyes of sceptics, this could only make Kuśa and Lava more acceptable as the successors to Rāma’s throne?\(^{83}\) But their coronation comes later in the text. Before that, at Rāma’s Aśvamedha, Vālmīki vouches for Sītā’s chastity and confirms that the twins are indeed the king’s sons. And it is to Rāma’s Aśvamedha that we now turn.

\[\text{V}\]

After narrating Iīa’s tale\(^{84}\) to two of his brothers, in sarga 82 of the Uttarakāṇḍa, Rāma asks Laksmana to call Vasistha, Vāmadeva, Jābali, Kaśyapa and all the other brāhmaṇas learned in the Aśvamedha. The king tells them of his decision to perform the Horse

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\(^{81}\) Book VII, thus, provides its own etymology for the names of Rāma’s sons. Here (in VR VII.58.4 – 7), Kuśa and Lava’s names are not connected with the bardic function that the twins perform in the VR.

\(^{82}\) VR VII.58.9-10.

\(^{83}\) From VR VII, App. 7 we gather that Satrughna and his army kept the news of the boys’ birth from Rāma. See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 285 n.19.

\(^{84}\) See Section IV of this chapter.
Sacrifice, and they endorse that. Rāma now asks Laksmana to send for Sugrīva – he and his mighty monkeys are to share in the celebrations of the Aśvamedha, the best melā of all. Vibhīsana and his rākṣasas are called too. Rulers who wish to be of help to Rāma are to come with their retinues. Righteous brāhmaṇas who have gone to other lands, and great sages as well as their wives are invited.

Rāma commands Laksmana to have a sacrificial enclosure constructed in the sacred Naimiṣa forest along the Gomati. Laksmana also has to have the materials required for the yajña sent to its site – vast quantities of superior rice and sesame seeds, for instance, have to be carted there. Additionally, Laksmana is to tell Bharata to go ahead with heaps of gold and silver. And Bharata is to assemble the congregation with which he will proceed to the place of sacrifice – caravans of merchants and shopkeepers, actors and dancers, young and old people, brāhmaṇas, artisans and artists, Rāma’s mothers and others from the inner apartments, a golden image of Sītā, and skilled sacrificers are mentioned in the Critical Text.

In sarga 83, Rāma releases the sacrificial horse after ensuring that the preparations for his Aśvamedha have been made. Entrusting the horse to Laksmana and some priests, the

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85 VR VII.82.1-8.
86 VR VII.82.9. The expression used is makhottamam (foremost makha). Makha may be translated as ‘a sacrifice’ or as ‘a feast, festival, any occasion of joy or festivity’. See Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 772. Makhottamam is replaced by mahotsavam (great utsava) in VII.91.10 of the Gita Press Edition (henceforth GPE). And the word utsava, again, denotes a festive event, very likely with extravagant eating, enthralling entertainments and much merry-making. See Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 182.
87 VR VII.82.8-13.
king sets off for the Naimiṣa forest with his army. A great many rulers from different lands come to Rāma while he is installed in that forest. Arrangements are made for their stay – appropriate dwellings are constructed for them and for their retinues; food, drink and clothes are provided; Bharata and Satrughna are put in charge of their hospitality and entertainment. Sugrīva and the vānaras attend to the needs of the brāhmaṇas while Vibhiṣana and his rākṣasas look after the rsis. Vast quantities of gold, silver, gems and clothes are continuously distributed at Rāma’s Aśvamedha. Those in need and those who ask are given what they desire, so that the splendid sacrifice is filled with joyous and prosperous people. No one there is poor, no one is hungry. Even the long-lived sages cannot remember a yajña quite like this one – not Indra’s or Soma’s or Varuṇa’s or Yama’s sacrifices measure up. And Rāma’s Aśvamedha continues even after the end of a year, never waning in its zeal and enthusiasm.

In sarga 84, Vālmīki and his disciples arrive at the yajña. After they have settled down, Vālmīki asks Kuśa and Lava to sing the Rāmāyaṇa on roads and royal highways, in the sacred enclosures of rsis, in the dwellings of brāhmaṇas, in the homes of kings, at the door of Rāma’s pavilion, as well as at the place where the sacrifice is being conducted.
and especially before the priests.\textsuperscript{92} The twins are to eat the sweet fruit that grow on mountains – these will keep their voices melodious. They are to sing the poem from the beginning, twenty cantos a day, sweetly and in accordance with the musical training they have received. They are told not to hanker after wealth. Vālmīki instructs them to calm their minds and collect their thoughts before singing the \textit{Rāmāyana} to the rhythm of strings.\textsuperscript{93} At dawn, the twins bathe, perform the morning worship and, then, sing as their \textit{guru} had directed.\textsuperscript{94}

As Rāma listens to the \textit{kāvyā}, his curiosity grows. During an interval in the sacrifice, he convenes great sages, kings, learned \textit{naigamas, paurānikas}\textsuperscript{95} and elderly \textit{brāhmaṇas} who are experts in the science of words to hear the twins.\textsuperscript{96} In other words, Rāma assembles a discerning, select group. The sages and kings are delighted (with the poem and its

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{VR VII.83.10-16.}
\footnote{VR VII.84.4-5. We know from sargas 82 and 83 that \textit{rsis, brāhmaṇas}, kings and priests were invited to Rāma’s Āsvamedha and that they had assembled in the Naimisa forest. They may be said to comprise an elite audience. Might ‘roads and royal highways’ (\textit{rathyāsu rājamārgēṣu}) suggest a less select audience – all those who trod the path to the place of sacrifice, perhaps? The merchants and shopkeepers, actors and dancers, young and old people, artisans and artists mentioned in \textit{sarga} 82, or indeed, all those ordinary people who came to witness the spectacular \textit{melā} sponsored by Rāma could be implied.}
\footnote{VR VII.84.6-15.}
\footnote{VR VII.85.1.}
\footnote{Here, \textit{naigama} seems to denote an interpreter of the \textit{Vedas}. See Monier-Williams, \textit{Sanskrit-English Dictionary}, p. 569. The term \textit{paurānika} has been discussed in Ch. 5 of this dissertation.}
\footnote{VR VII.85.4-5.}
\footnote{In the footnotes of the Critical Edition, we have Rāma summoning many more people, such as those learned in phonetics, metrics, poetics, ritual detail, in argument and debate, singing and dancing. See Brockington, \textit{Righteous Rāma}, p. 183.}
\footnote{Note that this list of invitees does not tally completely with the information in \textit{VR} I.4 (see Section III of this chapter).}
\end{footnotes}
presentation?), and they gaze at the boys as if to drink them in with their eyes. We find all those present at the sacrificial site (not just Rāma’s select invitees) murmuring that Kuśa and Lava resemble Rāma so much that if the twins had not had matted hair and been dressed in bark garments, they would have looked no different from the king.\(^97\) We are also told that those who hear the singers cannot be sated with their ethereal music.\(^98\) Rāma asks Kuśa and Lava about the kāvyā and its composer. The twins tell the king that the poem recounts the story of his life and that it was composed by Vālmīki who has come to attend his Āsvamedha. At the end of sarga 85, the boys promise Rāma that he can hear the Rāmāyana during the intervals of the sacrifice.\(^99\)

In sarga 86, we find Rāma listening to the story of his life in the company of sages, kings and vānaras.\(^100\) He learns from Kuśa and Lava’s performance that they are Sītā’s sons.\(^101\)

\(^{97}\) VR VII.85.6-8. GPE VII.94.16 mentions that pauras and jānapadas (city and country folk) speak thus. Does this imply a considerably larger and more varied audience than the one Rāma assembles in VR VII.85.4–5? Is it important that city and country folk comment on Kuśa and Lava’s appearance, on their likeness to Rāma, and not on the composition the boys sing or the finer points of their rendering of it? \(^{98}\) VR VII.85.10.

\(^{99}\) Sheldon I. Pollock calculates the period of time over which the twins’ performance would have extended: They are to sing 20 sargas per day (VII.84.9). Excluding the Uttarakānda, there are 500 sargas, according to VII.85.20. The Uttarakānda has 100 sargas. Thus, the performance would go on for approximately a month. See Sheldon I. Pollock, ‘The Rāmāyana text and the Critical Edition’, in Goldman, The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, Vol. 1, p. 82 n.1.

\(^{100}\) VR VII.86.1. As we have noted earlier, the first two form part of the Rāmāyana’s discerning, elite audience. Might the vānaras represent the other component of the audience – the uninitiated? However, one may note that a few vānaras were, very likely, connoisseurs. Hanumān seems to have been one such. For Hanumān as one who knows speech and is skilled in its use (vākyajño vākyakusālaḥ; VR IV.3.24-7), see Robert P. Goldman, ‘Language, gender and power: The sexual politics of language and language acquisition in traditional India’, in Julia Leslie and Mary McGee, eds, Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 87-89.
The story has been working powerfully on the king and he now swings into action. He sends emissaries to Valmiki with the message that Sītā should prove her chastity publicly. Valmiki agrees and Rāma invites ṛṣis and their disciples, kings and their retinues, and whoever else wishes to, to witness Sītā’s oath.\footnote{VR VII.86.2.} Does this suggest that Rāma is especially keen that sages and rulers be present, for no one else is specifically mentioned? Or is the expression yaścaiva nyobhiṇīkṣte, ‘whoever else wishes to’, equally significant? Does that term indicate that even nameless, seemingly inconsequential people, who only fill the crowd scenes of this tale about larger than life main characters would have a role to play, the important role of witnesses? From sarga 87 we learn that all the great sages including Vasistha, Vāmadeva, Jābāli, Viśvāmitra, Mārkaṇḍeya and Cyavana gather, eager to see Sītā take her oath of purity. So do kings, rākṣasas, vānaras and thousands of kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and śūdras.\footnote{VR VII.87.2-7. GPE VII.96.8 adds the missing varṇa – the brāhmaṇa varṇa – to the list.} And that immense multitude is absolutely still, like a mountain.

Taking Sītā with him, Valmiki arrives where the crowd has gathered. A roar goes up from the people when they see Sītā following the sage. Some shout her praises, others praise Rāma, and still others praise them both.\footnote{VR VII.87.8-12.} Making his way through the throng, Valmiki addresses Rāma. He declares that the queen is without blemish and that Kuśa and Lava are Rāma’s sons.\footnote{See Ch. 4 of this dissertation.} In sarga 88 Rāma accepts the twins as his sons publicly. He
also admits that he knows his wife is chaste.\textsuperscript{106} The gods and other celestial beings now assemble to hear Sītā speak and to see her. Vāyu releases a breeze redolent with divine perfumes. As it wafts through the big and varied crowd, it fills everyone with joy. People of all lands marvel at this, thinking that such a wonderful thing could only have happened long ago, in the Kṛtayuga. Sītā asks the earth goddess, Mādhāvī, to receive her if she has been totally faithful to her husband,\textsuperscript{107} and the goddess does so.

The entire gathering watches as Sītā descends into the earth seated on a splendid throne amidst praise from the gods and a shower of celestial flowers. The sages and kings at the site of sacrifice express their amazement. We are told that all beings in the three worlds are deeply moved – some shout for joy, others go into a meditative trance, some gaze at Rāma and others at Sītā. They are all completely awed. It seems as if the whole world is spellbound.\textsuperscript{108} The point to note here is not that there is a blurring of the fantastic and the possible, but rather that the Āśvamedha is presented as an occasion for the transmission of messages to a large and heterogeneous audience – messages about Rāma and Sītā, and indeed, about Vālmīki's \textit{Rāmāyana}, for it is a text about Rāma and his wife. The spectacle of Sītā's descent into the earth especially sends out powerful messages. It is clearly something more than a mere mortal can achieve. The audience does not remain

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{VR} VII.88.2-4.
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{VR} VII.88.5-10.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{VR} VII.88.11-20.
passive. Its members -- from high gods to lowly śudras to unmoving creatures -- react to what they see and hear.\textsuperscript{109} So does the text's external audience.

Within the \textit{VR}, Rāma's reaction is a very human one -- of grief and anger.\textsuperscript{110} He threatens to destroy the earth unless she returns Sītā or allows him to enter the nether world with her. Now Brahmā consoles Rāma. Brahmā asks Rāma to remember his origin in Viṣṇu (\textit{smara tvam janma vaisnavam}),\textsuperscript{111} and tells him that he will be united with Sītā in heaven. The verb root \textit{smr}, from which \textit{smara} is derived, can suggest different shades of remembering. Here Rāma recalls his identity with Viṣṇu, an aspect of himself he seems to be oblivious of in the central books of the \textit{VR}.\textsuperscript{112} And might it be significant that \textit{smr} in devotional texts has also been understood as 'to contemplate an object or being'? The devotee is asked to 'remember' the divinity by concentrating his/her thoughts on it and thus making it manifest.\textsuperscript{113} Does Brahmā's exhortation to Rāma imply the latter's transformation into an object of devotion -- are the audiences of Vālmīki's \textit{Rāmāyaṇa},

\textsuperscript{109} Can we say that the audience gets a \textit{darsana} of a deity? And that it responds accordingly -- devotionally, with wonder, with reverence? See David Smith, \textit{Ratnākara's Haravijaya: An Introduction to the Sanskrit Court Epic}, New Delhi, 1985, p. 81.

\textsuperscript{110} The GPE inserts an important episode between \textit{sargas} 88 and 89 of the Critical Text of the \textit{VR}. This paragraph and the first six sentences of the next one draw on that (GPE VIL98 and VII.99.1-2). Brockington assigns these lines to the fourth stage of the \textit{VR}'s evolution. See Brockington, \textit{Righteous Rāma}, p. 198.

\textsuperscript{111} GPE VII.98.13. Here, as in the \textit{sargas} of Book VI that we discussed in Section IV, Sītā's ordeal precipitates Brahmā's revelation of Rāma's divinity.

\textsuperscript{112} See Section IV of this chapter for Rāma's temporary recovery of his real, divine identity in Book VI.

both internal and external, including the hero himself, being granted a vision of the divine as Rāma remembers himself?

In sarga 98 of the GPE, Brahmā also tells Rāma that he had heard the Rāmāyaṇa earlier in the company of the gods, and describes the kāvyā as divine and truthful.114 So, the poem has the endorsement of none other than the Creator of the worlds,115 and of other deities. Brahmā urges Rāma to listen, with the sages of Brahmaloka, to the rest of the Rāmāyaṇa — to what will happen in the future. The Creator specifies that this portion of the text must not be heard by anyone else.116 And, according to the first two verses of sarga 99 of the GPE, Rāma brings Kuśa and Lava before the great sages to sing the remaining part of his tale the following morning. We experience the final sargas as the Rāmāyaṇa’s hero and a very select audience within that text do — with the future narrated in the past tense.117 The twins’ audience learns that Rāma continues to rule for a long time until Death announces that it is time for him to return to the world of the gods.118 At Bharata’s suggestion, the king anoints Kuśa and Lava rulers of Kosala.119 Rāma walks to

114 GPE VII.98.19.
115 Note also that the last verse of the Critical Text informs us that the Rāmāyaṇa is revered by Brahmā. And see VR I.2.30-36, as well as Section II of this chapter.
116 GPE VII.98.20-22.
118 VR VII.94.13,15.
119 VR VII.97.7,17-19.
the river Sarayū, and there he enters Viśnu's body with Bharata and Śatrughna (Laksmana had reverted to his original state some sargas before this happens).

The Uttarakāṇḍa closes with hints of bhakti. When Rāma declares that he wants to abdicate, his subjects are devastated. They throw themselves on the ground at his feet. They tell Rāma that they will go wherever he goes. Rāma sees the people's firm devotion (drāḍhabhakti), and he agrees to their plan. As he walks to the Sarayū, a growing procession of sages, brahmaṇas, women, children, the elderly, high officials, lowly servants, townspeople, country folk, vānaras and rākṣasas trails Rāma with deep bhakti. In the second half of the last sarga of the Critical Text, Viśnu tells Brahmā that his bhaktas must be provided for. They have, after all, even been willing to give up their lives for him. The Creator assures Viśnu that anyone who gives up his/her life thinking of Rāma and is devoted to him will go to heaven. All those who enter the waters of the Sarayū do indeed attain heaven, and Rāma’s vānara allies are reunited with the deities from whom they were born. Thus, Rāma’s recovery of his own self has continued with

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120 VR VII.100.10.
121 VR VII.96.15-18.
123 VR VII.97.2-4,12-16.
124 VR VII.99.9-18.

Bhakti is generally translated as ‘devotion’, and is understood as a person’s devotion to his/her chosen deity. However, it is important to note that the etymology of the term implies a two-way relationship. Bhakti is usually derived from the root bhaj, meaning ‘to divide’, ‘to share with’, ‘to obtain as one’s share’. The object of bhakti is bhagavat. The latter word is generally translated as god, but also denotes ‘the one who possesses and shares bhāga [literally, good fortune or bliss]’. The devotee – bhakta – shares his/her chosen deity’s bhāga. See, for instance, Lipner, Hindus, pp. 308-9.

The mutuality of the bhagavat-bhakta relationship is evident at the end of the Uttarakāṇḍa.
the twins' narration of his future.\textsuperscript{125} At the end of their performance (and the close of the \textit{VR}), the audience – both within the text and outside – is left in no doubt about Rāma's divine identity. He emerges as a \textit{bhakti} god – a god who inspires such devotional fervour that his \textit{bhaktas} willingly renounce their lives to follow him, and a god who shares his \textit{bhāga} with his devotees.

This said, one must note that only a select few would have been sensitive to the nuances of Vālmīki's \textit{Rāmāyana} and the twins' rendering of it. Vālmīki's poetry is described as \textit{sarasvatī} (elegant utterance).\textsuperscript{126} Kuśa and Lava sing his \textit{kāvya} in the \textit{mārga} style. As mentioned earlier, this is the formal, refined mode of recitation/singing used for works composed in Sanskrit. And as we have noted repeatedly, access to this language was restricted. Only those who were considered pure or cultured (\textit{samskrta}) were entitled to learn it, to attempt to master it in all its complexity, down to the details of pronunciation and accentuation. They were set in opposition to those who were branded ordinary, even vulgar (\textit{prākṛta}).\textsuperscript{127} And only the cultivated, the cognoscenti could have fully appreciated the twins' performance. Similarly, not everyone would have followed the nuances of the sacrificial ritual, nor would all and sundry have been entitled to participate in this. But while they are very unlikely to have completely understood the intricacies of the \textit{yajñā} or the merits of Vālmīki's poetry and Kuśa and Lava's rendering of it, many sorts of people – people other than the real connoisseurs – would have witnessed the ritual from afar as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Shulman, 'Toward a historical poetics of the Sanskrit epics', p. 37.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{VR} 1.2.30. See Section II of this chapter.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} \textit{VR} 1.4.27. See Section III of this chapter. See also Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, 'Speaking gender: \textit{Vāc} and the Vedic construction of the feminine', in Leslie and McGee, eds, \textit{Invented Identities}, p. 57.
\end{itemize}
also the twins’ performance, or at least parts of it. We have caught glimpses of these people already, and one can visualize the scene at the place of sacrifice.

The solemn ritual, requiring the ordered participation of a number of priests, would have been at the heart of the Āṣvamedha in the Naimiṣa forest. Additionally, many ṛṣis, brāhmaṇas, rājās and high court officials are likely to have monitored the oblations offered, mantras uttered, actions performed, implements used – in other words, followed the progress of the rites closely. But the Āṣvamedha has also been described as ‘the biggest bazaar anyone had ever seen’.128 Or, perhaps, one can think of it as a mammoth melā. A populous settlement would have hurriedly come up in the forest to host the rājās expected at the yajñā, each with his retinue; to offer shelter to brāhmaṇas and ṛṣis and their families; and indeed, to others who would come. The settlement site would have been cleared; its layout planned; several types of dwellings constructed, decorated and maintained; provisions brought; servants arranged; stalls displaying, distributing, and perhaps selling, different items set up and constantly replenished; food cooked; entertainments organized. A large variety and number of people would have been involved in all this – some have been mentioned, and others’ presence implied, in sargas 82 and 83. And there would have been children playing, gambolling, eating, inspecting the goings-on; women minding the children, chatting, singing; the elderly discussing the yajñā, recounting stories of times gone by, giving advice. The Āṣvamedha meant work and business to many, a holy duty to others. It might well have been seen as an extended outing with free board, lodging and gifts by many others.

One can go on speculating about what different sorts of people – the learned, non-literate, rich, poor, servants, their masters, śudras, Vedic scholars and many more – would have done while preparations for the yajñā were on and during the sacrifice, what they might have seen and heard, how they might have reacted to it. What did they make of news of the unchallenged wanderings of the sacrificial horse? How did they react to mighty rājās marking attendance at the Aśvamedha, acknowledging Rāma’s suzerainty? What did people think about the melā sponsored by the king; the arrangements made; the ceaseless distribution of gold, silver, gems, clothes, food and much else; Rāma’s ability to commandeer resources, his power; the opulence of it all? Did they discuss these things among themselves? Did they speak about them to those who had not come to the place of sacrifice? Did their account of the Aśvamedha persuade others that they too must see the spectacle, sample the delicacies on offer, join the festivities? Did those who were unable to attend the sacrifice discuss it nevertheless?

What might people have made of Kuśā and Lava’s performance at the Aśvamedha, and of them? As suggested earlier, the connoisseur’s ear, trained on the nuances of fine literature and the mārga style, would have discerned the quality of the kāvya they sang and the skills displayed by them. We have already noted the reactions of the cognoscenti. Needless to say, this audience would also have followed the contents of the Rāmāyaṇa. But what of the uninitiated? Just as those who are not themselves painters might still react to an array of bold and subdued colours or a cubist painting, they too are likely to have had a general sense of good storytelling, of an accomplished performance. Indeed,
one can ask whether derivatives of both gai and pra-yuj are used deliberately in the VR –
to suggest that the twins’ audience comprised those who could appreciate the finer points
of their singing as well as those who followed the performance only in very general
terms. The latter too would have understood something of the Rāmāyana – several
names, many incidents would have been familiar, and they are likely to have attempted to
piece together the rest of the narrative. They might also have picked up a little of what the
more discerning members of Kuśa and Lava’s audience were saying about Vālmīki’s
kāvya – its contents, its literary merits and its presentation by two of the sage’s disciples.
And, in sarga 85 of the Uttarakānda, we find all of the twins’ audience murmuring about
their resemblance to Rāma.

The king learns that Kuśa and Lava are his sons during the course of the Aśvamedha, and
he accepts them publicly. So, that yajña is the event at which heirs to Rāma’s throne are
found – worthy heirs raised by a revered sage, born of an exemplary ruler and his queen.
But Rāma and Sītā are, in fact, much more than that, and this too is affirmed during the
course of the Aśvamedha. The episode of Sītā’s descent into the earth especially
establishes the couple’s divinity. A Vedic institution has been transformed in the VR. It
has metamorphosed into an occasion for Rāma + āyana, ‘the coming of Rāma’ into
prominence as an embodiment of the sacred.129 By the first couple of centuries of the
Christian era, the VR begins to reflect a religious shift. Even though the yajña is the
occasion of Visnu’s descent to earth as Daśaratha’s sons, and while Rāma endorses Veda-
based sacrifice by protecting sages who practise it and by conducting the Aśvamedha, he

129 Lipner, Hindus, p. 127.
also takes over the religious concern of the *Rāmāyana* in his person. The seeds of Rāma-
bhakti have been sown. The Āśvamedha is the event at which the episodes that suggest
this religious shift are recounted, unified in a single narrative. And devotional faith
gradually emerges as a powerful alternative to *yajñā*-based religion.