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THE DIVINITY OF RĀMA IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA
OF VĀLMĪKI¹

In the introduction to his translation of the critical edition of the Aranyakāṇḍa – the third book of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* – Sheldon Pollock argues in great detail in favor of considering that the Rāma described by Vālmīki was understood by the poet as an incarnation of Viṣṇu in his role of Supreme God.² Scholarly opinion, in general, has adopted the view that Rāma was probably originally a human hero that was later exalted to the status of *avatāra* of Viṣṇu as part of a growing viṣṇuization of the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A good portion of the argument defending this latter reading is derived from textual analysis, and the recognition of the fact that it is primarily in the first and last books of the poem – which are generally considered to be later – that Rāma is explicitly seen in this light.³ In the central five books, Rāma's exploits and adventures are, by and large, portrayed as those of an exceptional human being.⁴ Like any human, he experiences human emotions, and he bleeds when injured.⁵

¹ This article is a revised and enlarged version of a paper presented at the 214th meeting of the American Oriental Society in San Diego, March 2004. I would like to thank R. P. Goldman for reading the article and offering valuable suggestions. I am also thankful to all participants who made comments at the AOS meeting. The opinions expressed here are, of course, my sole responsibility.

² Pollock (1991). I will also make reference to a 1984 article by Pollock that deals with the subject. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to Vālmīki as a real-life person who authored the poem that bears his name. The question of his historicity does not affect the present discussion.

³ For a cogent account of this position, see Goldman (1984: 42–47).

⁴ In this respect, it is noteworthy that Vālmīki's text begins with a question that the author himself poses to the sage Nārada. He enquires if there exists in the world an exceptional man, one that exemplifies all virtues and good conduct. Nārada, after reflecting briefly, replies that such a man is indeed alive, and his name is Rāma (1.1.1–8). All references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are to their respective critical editions.

⁵ In response to this, some of the traditional commentators – who take it as a given that Rāma is an incarnation of the Supreme God – found it necessary to explain that the rage and sorrow displayed by Rāma in certain parts of the story were merely acting on his part, for such behavior could not be exhibited by the Supreme God. For examples, see Pollock's (1991) notes to 3.29.20; 3.58.10, 35; and 3.60.1.

Reacting against this assumption, Pollock posits that a careful look at certain elements of the story should lead to the conclusion that it is erroneous, and make it clear that Rāma is, indeed, portrayed by Vālmīki as an *avatāra* of the supreme god, Viṣṇu, but that his status as such is carefully hidden throughout the majority of the story.⁶ Although Pollock does include some measure of textual analysis, his main argument is a literary one. He invokes the importance of so-called higher-order narrative features such as the logic of the story and the existence of certain motifs and themes in order to make his case.⁷ He finds that the notion of Rāma as a hidden god “construes meaningfully with the central themes of the poem as a whole.”⁸

As a prominent and influential scholar, Pollock’s opinion carries much weight and has already influenced other scholars. In light of this, it is useful to evaluate how strong his case for the early divinity of Rāma is. In what follows, I will look at his main arguments in order to see if they warrant his conclusions.

Pollock makes three main arguments. Since I find the first two of these quite unconvincing, I will discuss them briefly, and will then concentrate more fully on the third argument which is, in my judgment, the best one. The first argument is based, on the one hand, on a general assertion of the importance of traditional commentators and their opinion on this matter; and on the other, on the idea that Indian audiences “have always felt” a “sense of the work as a meaningful whole,”⁹ a unity or wholeness that would depend, to a large extent, on accepting Rāma’s divine nature.¹⁰ This sort of argument is consistent with Pollock’s stated interest in giving more importance to the

⁶ In rather dramatic fashion, Pollock states that “Indological scholarship has probably few parallel cases of such illogical denial in the teeth of evidence as has occurred in the interpretation of Rāma’s divinity over the past 150 years.” Pollock (1984: 241, n. 24).

⁷ Pollock (1991: 19).

⁸ Pollock (1984: 243).

⁹ Pollock (1991: 53–54). It is interesting that he briefly makes these two points at the beginning and the end of his entire argument. By bracketing the whole argument with these two points he seems to give them more importance than it would appear from the short amount of space devoted to them.

¹⁰ This is an interesting point. One could equally argue that the *Mahābhārata* only appears as a meaningful whole when we accept that Kṛṣṇa’s role as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu is a fundamental element of the entire narrative. But it is precisely when divine interventions and hidden explanations are adduced that contradictions and inconsistencies can be explained away, and this is, at least in part, what makes such explanations appealing. This is common in religious hermeneutics.

receptive history of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as opposed to its genetic history. In his view, granting more importance to the text's receptive history, would allow us to see "how it works as a whole" and to understand "what it may have meant in Indian social, intellectual, and cultural history."¹¹

However, there is a major contradiction here if by receptive history we mean post-Vālmīki understandings of the poem, for this would work at cross purposes with the stated attempt to understand what Vālmīki himself thought of Rāma's divine status. Trying to understand the later social and cultural impact of the text is an entirely different proposition than looking at its meaning before such later history had even taken place.

In looking for Vālmīki's view we are searching, mainly, for the genetic history of the text and the point at which it was when Vālmīki composed his poem. If later commentators can shed light on this, that is definitely useful, but the commentators' own cultural and religious context must also be taken into account in order to understand the lens through which they view their received text.¹²

Pollock opens by stating that "nowhere in the history of the indigenous artistic or scholarly appreciation of the poem are arguments ever raised against the divine status of the hero," and continues to say that the portions that explicitly identify Rāma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu were never considered to be "deliberate, unassimilable, sectarian interpolations."¹³ As I have suggested elsewhere,¹⁴ this is hardly a valid argument because religious traditions almost never question their fundamental tenets, and Vaiṣṇava commentators cannot be expected to cast doubts about Rāma's divinity even if there were textual bases for doing so. What we can certainly expect from a devout commentator are ingenious, intricate, and even implausible

¹¹ Pollock (1991: 5–6).

¹² I must, therefore, disagree with Pollock's assertion that the commentarial tradition is "the closest thing we have to an original audience" (1991: 18). In issues that are crucial to the tradition, like the one discussed here, this approach tends to give too much weight to the commentators' attempts at explaining what appears puzzling to them (see above, note 5). Likewise, I find Pollock's assumption (1984: 232) that the traditional medieval interpretation regarding our topic may bring out "trans-historical authentic attitudes" to be extremely speculative.

¹³ Pollock (1991: 15).

¹⁴ González-Reimann (2002: 152–153).

ways to uphold the divinity of his god by reading it into improbable places.¹⁵

On the other hand, when Pollock refers to Indian audiences it is not clear whether he is referring only to audiences of Vālmīki's text or of the many later, popular and influential versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For, in all later versions – from Kampan's Tamil rendering to Tulsi's Hindi one – the divinity of Rāma is certainly a fundamental element of the story that is made clear at the outset.¹⁶ How, then, can the reactions of these later audiences, who listened to highly devotional, Vaiṣṇava versions of the story of Rāma be any measure of what Vālmīki's poem intended?

Moreover, even if we accept the notion that Rāma's divine status was never questioned in the history of the appreciation of Vālmīki's text, it seems probable that there were questions and doubts surrounding the matter in some circles. This is evinced by the framing narrative of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, a Sanskrit rendering of the Rāma story composed centuries after Vālmīki's poem. In this version, Śiva's wife, Pārvatī, is made to ask her husband how Rāma could have forgotten his divine nature and needed to be reminded of it by someone else.¹⁷ If he was aware of it, Pārvatī asks, how come he suffered when he lost Sītā? If he was not aware of it, then he was like any other person and, therefore, not worthy of worship.¹⁸

These doubts allow Śiva to recall Rāma's purported discourse on the identity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the supreme self (*paramātman*), an identity that is obscured by ignorance, *avidyā*.¹⁹

¹⁵ A good, and relevant illustration of this way of reading something into a text is the manner in which commentators – including Śaṅkara – see mentions of Rāma Dāśarathi in the Viṣṇu Sahasranāma (which is part of the *Mahābhārata*), despite the fact that the list of Viṣṇu's 1000 names includes no obvious reference to the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. By contrast, the list alludes to Kṛṣṇa many times, and this seems to argue in favor of taking the connection between Rāma and Viṣṇu to be later than that between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu (see also below, note 44).

¹⁶ And, of course, even Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* has later interpolations that make it clear that Rāma is Viṣṇu, so a later audience of his version is also receiving a text with embedded, post-Vālmīki interpretations. See below for a relevant example of an interpolation in the Southern Recension of Vālmīki's text.

¹⁷ This is surely a reference to Brahmā's revelation to Rāma concerning the hero's divine status soon after Sītā's release (6.105 in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*; see below, note 26).

¹⁸ *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 1.1.13–14. The *Adhyātma* (16th c.?) was translated into Malayalam by Eluttaccan (16th c.) and it became a very popular retelling in that language.

¹⁹ *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 1.1.44–54. This explanation is not found in Vālmīki.

Rāma is the supreme self, and this knowledge constitutes the hidden secret or essence (*hṛdaya*) of Rāma. The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* then recounts the story of Rāma with the understanding that it is only because of such ignorance that his true nature is not easily perceived.²⁰ The fact that the text uses this question to introduce – and to provide a background to – its devotional, Vedantic retelling of the story of Rāma indicates that concerns surrounding the contradiction between his divine status and his behavior in the *Rāmāyaṇa* resonated with the listeners. In other words, doubts about his divine role appear not to have been as uncommon as Pollock suggests.²¹

Pollock's second argument has to do with the nature of the divine king in ancient India.²² Briefly stated, his rationale is the following. The king is often portrayed in early literature as a divine being whose task it is to protect society by maintaining the brahmanical social order. On the other hand, the god Viṣṇu – as he appears in certain sections of the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas – had, similarly, become the protector of society and brahmanical dharma, a role that he fulfils by means of his *avatāras*, his descents to earth. Some Purāṇas explicitly state that the king is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, and, as Pollock points out, some Gupta kings (as well as non-Gupta ones) proclaim to be incarnations of Viṣṇu. So, Pollock writes, at least since the time of the Rājadharmā section of the *Mahābhārata*, the king was seen as a “deity in the form of a man” and a being in which “man-kind and divinity actually meet and combine.”²³ From here he jumps to conclude that, therefore, “the divinity of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* must have been a central feature of the poem from the beginning.”²⁴

It is hard to see how a general identification of the king with Viṣṇu – an identification that could simply be an attempt to legitimize kingship or a Vaiṣṇava appropriation of the institution of kingship – and the eulogies to Gupta and later kings identifying them with Viṣṇu, can be particularized in such a way that they are construed as proof that Rāma, merely by virtue of being a king, had to be an

²⁰ Later commentators would use this argument when trying to explain Vālmīki's text. In this case, even Pollock concedes that “it may strain credibility to suggest that the metaphysical notion linking embodiment and ignorance...fundamentally informed Vālmīki's poem” (1984: 238).

²¹ We must point out that the *Adhyātma* influenced Tulsi's enormously popular Hindi version of the Rāma story (see Whaling, 1980: 229).

²² I have also addressed this argument briefly in González-Reimann (2002: 153).

²³ Pollock (1991: 51).

²⁴ Pollock (1991: 52).

avatāra of Viṣṇu from the beginning. In any case, if we follow this procedure, we would have to conclude that Viṣṇu's *avatāra* in the *Mahābhārata* is not Kṛṣṇa but Yudhiṣṭhira, who is King Dharma himself, for it is his fight for the throne – not that of Kṛṣṇa – that provides the epic with its main story. Conversely, if we apply the argument from another angle, we might conclude that all the kings of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, thereby rendering the whole discussion irrelevant.

It is in his third argument that Pollock makes the best case for the divinity of Rāma in Vālmīki's text, and it probably constitutes as good a case as can be made on literary grounds. Pollock directs our attention to an important narrative element of the story, namely, the boon that Rāvaṇa, king of the demon *rākṣasas* and Rāma's antagonist, had received from the god Brahmā thanks to his intense ascetic practices. Rāvaṇa asked to be invulnerable to the deadly attacks of snakes, birds, different kinds of supernatural beings and gods; but he left out humans, for whose capabilities he felt nothing but contempt.²⁵ This omission proves fatal to the king of the *rākṣasas*, who is slain in the poem by Rāma, portrayed throughout the narrative mainly as a heroic man. It is only after Rāma has dispatched the nefarious Rāvaṇa, that the god Brahmā informs him that he, the great kṣatriya Rāma, is no mere mortal but the great god Nārāyaṇa himself, at once Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and Prajāpati.²⁶

It is here that Pollock makes his central argument. Is the belief that Rāma is the Great God in human form a later interpolation – part of the appropriation of the hero by Vaiṣṇavism? Or are we to understand that he was always a god but must be unaware of it because, otherwise, the boon would prevent him from killing Rāvaṇa? Is being a god without being aware of it equivalent to actually not being a god? Pollock, following an 18th century commentator, thinks that it is, and this would explain why most of the poem describes Rāma as merely a man, someone from whom Rāvaṇa has nothing to fear thanks to the boon.²⁷ As both Rāma and Rāvaṇa are convinced that the hero is only a man, then, for practical purposes – that is to say for the boon to work – he is simply a man, although in reality he is a god.

²⁵ *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.10.17–18.

²⁶ *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.105.14, 25.

²⁷ Pollock (1984), *passim*. The commentator's name is Tryambaka Makhin, and his analysis forms part of a treatise called *Dharmakūṭam*. Pollock translates the relevant section in 1984: 232–237.

This is a very ingenious explanation, but the fact remains that the boon says nothing about awareness – or lack thereof – regarding the divinity of Rāvaṇa’s slayer. The boon grants him protection from being killed by gods, without any further provisions.²⁸ And in similar stories concerning boons, the main narrative element is the fact that the receiver of the boon leaves out the category of being, or the circumstances, that will, eventually, kill him. This means that the listener knows that it has to be one of the boon’s missing elements that will come into play when the plot unfolds. In this case, Rāvaṇa has specifically left out men from his list, and that leaves the door open for Rāma to kill him. Adding a further twist to the boon – a twist of which there is no indication whatsoever in the boon itself – is atypical of boon stories of this sort. On the other hand, the notion of Rāma as a hidden god makes perfect sense when viewed as a Vaiṣṇava procedure for appropriating the hero and including him as one of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu.

Pollock frames the discussion by reducing it to two narrative possibilities: either Rāvaṇa underestimated the power of men at the time of choosing his boon, or Rāma is more than a man. He quickly dismisses the first option by noting that, were men really that powerful, the *Rāmāyaṇa* would be “offering us a paean to man’s endurance and triumph over superhuman adversity.” Vālmīki’s poem couldn’t be giving man such an important cosmic position, he argues, because that would imply that man is the main agent in the fight against evil. For this, he continues, “there is no evidence elsewhere in the epic and nothing in traditional Indian culture that would make such an interpretation credible.”²⁹

I believe this is an incorrect assumption when we consider the overall historical context. When looking at the developments that took place towards the end of the Vedic period, it is clear that there is a general displacement of power from the gods to humans. This is not the place to elaborate on how the growing importance of the priests in charge of the ritual gave them an increasing power over the gods within that sphere, but it is relevant to point to the fact that in the epics there are many stories about exceptional humans, ascetics in particular, that control and humble the Vedic gods.

One of the best examples is, no doubt, the story of Cyavana in the *Mahābhārata*. The powerful Bhārgava ascetic not only outwits the

²⁸ I touched on this briefly in González-Reimann (2002: 163).

²⁹ Pollock (1991: 24).

Aśvins but he also paralyzes Indra – the king of the gods himself – when he dares to refuse to follow Cyavana’s instructions. Indra, overcome by fear, submissively acknowledges the sage’s superiority.³⁰

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself we have a parallel situation when the human sage Gautama, the husband of the beautiful Ahalyā, curses the great Indra and causes his testicles to fall off.³¹ And what could be more humiliating to a prototypical manly warrior god than to be publicly deprived of his manhood?

But these are Brahmins and ascetics, one might point out, not kṣatriyas like Rāma. However, it is well known that, in the Upaniṣads, kṣatriyas are often portrayed as learned men who can surpass Brahmins in knowledge.³² And this is consistent with, for instance, the *Rāmāyaṇa* story of how the great ṛṣi Viśvāmitra, who was helpless in the face of the *rākṣasas* who were interrupting his Vedic sacrifices, had to seek the help of a teenage kṣatriya called Rāma, the son of King Daśaratha, to get rid of the offending demons. And, after all, the central figures of the three main religious traditions that were emerging at the time were kṣatriyas: the Buddha, Mahāvīra and Kṛṣṇa. As we can see, then, the relative power of men and gods – or of Brahmins and kṣatriyas – is not as straightforward as would appear from Pollock’s sweeping statement, and the issue deserves further study.

Pollock’s second narrative possibility, which he considers to be the only viable option, is that Rāma cannot be a man, at least not *only* a man. In fact, Pollock acknowledges that he cannot be a god in the “normal” sense either, so he must be “part god, part man.”³³ He is “a new superordinated power...a god-man.”³⁴ This apparent middle position sounds very reasonable: maybe Rāma is some combination of man and god, a man with divine qualities. After all, this is not unusual for epic heroes. But Pollock states clearly that he does not mean a mortal hero with extraordinary powers.³⁵ In the end, to him this means that Rāma has to be an incarnation of the Supreme God, who happens to be Viṣṇu. However, there is a difference between the prospect of Rāma being a god, which entails several possibilities, and

³⁰ *Mahābhārata* 3.121–4.

³¹ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.47.

³² Such as King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, who claims to teach what Brahmins had never known (*Bṛhad Araṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.8, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.3.7).

³³ Pollock (1991: 29).

³⁴ Pollock (1991: 28).

³⁵ Pollock (1991: 24–5).

him being *the* Supreme God, Viṣṇu. If we think that Rāma might be a god, the question then is, which god is he?

Note that in an epic passage quoted by Pollock to support his interpretation, when the *rākṣasa* women lament over the death of Rāvaṇa and conjecture that Rāma must be a god, they give several options for his divine identity, “it must be Rudra or Viṣṇu, or great Indra... or Death himself [Antaka]...”³⁶ But in another passage Mandodarī, one of Rāvaṇa’s widows, only thinks of one possibility, and it is not Viṣṇu. She thinks it must be Indra, using his powers of illusion (*māyā*).³⁷

Pollock seems to move from the possibility of Rāma being a semi-divine being of some kind to the conclusion that he must be Viṣṇu. At this point, his argument begins to sound like a Vaiṣṇava exegesis. When trying to explain the divine element in Rāma, he seems to be looking for Viṣṇu. He finds Viṣṇu’s “soteriological mission” in as far back as the *Ṛg Veda*,³⁸ and also refers to the Brāhmaṇa story of Viṣṇu as a dwarf.³⁹ While analyzing the boon motif, he frequently draws from the *Harivaṃśa* and some sections of the *Mahābhārata*, both of which have – to put it mildly – a strong Vaiṣṇava component. He discusses how, in Vaiṣṇava mythology, Viṣṇu gradually acquired the role of demon-slayer – a role that, as we know, had earlier belonged to the Vedic god Indra.

But the fact that Vaiṣṇavism absorbed different stories about killing oppressive demons and saving the world by turning their protagonists into *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, does not imply that all such stories must, perforce, be considered to be originally intended as an expression of Viṣṇu’s activities. There is a certain circularity here in the logic.

In any event, regardless of which god or gods are mentioned in these two passages, their purported identity with Rāma doesn’t need to be taken literally. Comparisons of this kind are common in the epics. They could simply be a means of voicing astonishment at Rāma’s prowess in battle, and don’t need to be understood as theological statements. In Book One of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there is a good example that serves to illustrate this when Rāma is compared to Viṣṇu in might, but also to the fire of time (*kālāgni*) in wrath, to the

³⁶ *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.82.24, translated by Pollock in 1991: 27.

³⁷ *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.99.10, translated in Pollock *ibid.* See below, n. 43.

³⁸ Pollock (1991: 40, n. 80), with reference to *Ṛg Veda* 6.49.13.

³⁹ Pollock (1991: 39).

moon in beauty and to the goddess Earth in forbearance.⁴⁰ Note that the mention of the fire of time can easily be construed as a reference to Śiva. A few verses later, Rāma's rule is, similarly, compared to the Kṛta Yuga, the golden age.⁴¹

The epics frequently draw comparisons between a hero, or some other aspect of the narrative, to something deemed to be awesome, powerful or superior in some way. In time, this connection may move from comparison to identification, and the thing compared will end up being the same as the object of the comparison. An important element of Pollock's argument, as mentioned above, is that Rāma must be a hidden god for the boon motif to make sense. In his opinion, the motif of a hidden god would be "singularly odd" as an interpolation, and, therefore must be integral to the narrative.⁴² But, one might ask, what is so odd about such an interpolation? Ironically, Pollock himself unwittingly provides a fine example of how an interpolation of this sort works. He points out that, right after the verse mentioned above in which Mandodarī reasons that Rāma must really be Indra in order to have been capable of killing Rāvaṇa, the Southern Recension inserts an interpolation that has her reconsider her initial assessment, and decide that Indra is too weak to have performed such a feat and that it must have been Viṣṇu.⁴³ Pollock merely mentions the insertion, apparently agreeing with it, but it is a perfect example of an interpolation that injects Viṣṇu into the narrative and appropriates the hero of the story.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.1.17. Goldman (1984: 68) had already drawn attention to this verse.

⁴¹ *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.1.73.

⁴² Pollock (1984: 243).

⁴³ Pollock (1991: 27), n. 45. Vālmiki's text (6.99.10) reads: "...Or no, it must be Vāsava [Indra] come in person in the form of Rāma, exerting his magical powers without warning, to destroy you." The Southern Recension (3114*) inserts the following: "But Indra is too weak: This must have been the great magician (*mahāyogin*) Viṣṇu" (*atha vā...vāsavasya kutaḥ śaktis...vyaktam eṣa mahāyogī...viṣṇuḥ*). We could say that the commentator is here making Mandodarī verbalize his own attempts at understanding the situation. These translations are Pollock's. For the full text of the interpolation – together with a discussion of another interpolation – see the Appendix, below.

⁴⁴ Pollock acknowledges that the motif of the hidden god is common in Vaiṣṇava circles and that it "was adopted as a major component in the mythic representation of Viṣṇu salvatory purpose," Pollock (1991: 40), n. 82. It is worth noting that in the *Mahābhārata* rendition of Rāma's story, he is twice said to be Viṣṇu in disguise (3.147.28, 3.299.18). This might be a useful element to consider when assessing the relative dating of the Rāma story in the two epics, as well as the sequence in which both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa came to be associated with Viṣṇu.

It is not uncommon for appropriations to proceed in this fashion. When something in the text is ambiguous, or if it does not make sense to the commentator/interpolator, he will attempt to clarify it. Something that is not made explicit in the text is sometimes sought to be there in hidden, indirect ways. It is a common feature of religious exegesis/hermeneutics to find hidden meanings and explanations that are not evident in a text. Such explanations are useful – even necessary – when taking the text at face value contradicts the commentator’s deeply held beliefs and suppositions.⁴⁵

As he advances in his analysis of the divinity of Rāma, Pollock’s procedure seems more and more indistinguishable from a Vaiṣṇava interpretation. Initially, his analysis appears to lead to the suggestion that there was something more to Vālmīki’s Rāma than an ordinary human being, and this would have left the door open for several possibilities. However, when he concludes that if Rāma is more than human he must be Viṣṇu, he is, in effect, viewing the character of Rāma through a Vaiṣṇava interpretive lens.

Finally, I shall make a few remarks with respect to Pollock’s discussion of some issues related to textual analysis. Chapter 105 of the sixth book, the *Yuddha Kāṇḍa*, is particularly important in this respect because it is here that Brahmā reveals to Rāma that he is the Supreme God. This chapter has been accepted into the critical edition and can, therefore, be said to have sufficient textual support to be considered part of the early version that all later recensions are based on. Assuming this to be the case, it is important to remember that this early version can, itself, have interpolations. The tenor of this particular chapter, with its praise of Rāma as Supreme God, does not coincide with the general tone of the narrative of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, but is consistent with Vaiṣṇava eulogies like the one included in the interpolation to the Southern Recension discussed above. The mention of Kṛṣṇa as one of the names of the Supreme God seems especially out of place in a text that doesn’t show an

⁴⁵ Pollock writes that commentators often “show a stubborn, almost perverse predilection for the utterly improbable or impossible exegesis, and can seem thoroughly disingenuous in the process,” but that they can, just as often, explain a text in ways that make sense. He obviously considers the hidden divinity of Rāma to be an example of the latter case. Pollock (1984: 232).

awareness of the story told in the *Mahābhārata*, or of Kṛṣṇa's role as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.⁴⁶

While there are passages elsewhere in the text that describe the great power of Rāma, they mainly allude to his prowess as a warrior and his capacity to destroy everything. Such is the case with Lakṣmaṇa's comforting words to Sītā when she fears he is in danger after pursuing the illusory deer she had asked him to hunt. Or Sītā's own words to Rāvaṇa after her abduction by the king of the *rākṣasa* demons. And even Rāma's own declaration to Lakṣmaṇa when he discovers his wife has been abducted.⁴⁷ These passages talk of Rāma's ability to wipe out all enemies, to destroy the threefold world, and even to paralyze the planets and the elements, but they are distant from the theological and devotional tone of Brahmā's disclosure concerning Rāma's divine nature. For, according to Brahmā, Rāma is the origin, essence and end of everything and everyone as well as the god behind all cycles of creation and destruction. Rāma is, likewise, the eternal brahma of the Upaniṣads as well as the Vedas themselves, and he should be the object of intense devotion.

In addition to Brahmā's revelation to Rāma, there are some instances in which Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma's brother, is said to be a part

⁴⁶ According to Brockington's analysis of the layers of the text, this mention of Kṛṣṇa (6.105.14, 25) belongs in the "second stage of growth of the text" (1984: 201), which Brockington defines as the "considerable number of passages in the second to sixth books which suggest from their language and style that they have been interpolated or expanded" (1984: 47–48). In Brockington's opinion, it is only in still later passages, in what he considers the fourth stage, that the identification of Rāma with Viṣṇu becomes frequent (1984: 222). Interestingly, commentators tend to agree in taking the word *kṛṣṇa*, in its two appearances here (6.105.14, 25), as an adjective meaning "black" that refers to Viṣṇu (see notes to both verses in Goldman et al., forthcoming). It is possible that, to the commentators, the word could not mean the god/*avatāra* Kṛṣṇa because – according to the later yuga theory – Kṛṣṇa would not yet have been born. Rāma is traditionally considered to have lived in either the Tretā or the Dvāpara Yuga, and these precede the Kali, which Vaiṣṇavism considers to have been inaugurated by Kṛṣṇa.

⁴⁷ *Rāmāyaṇa* 3.43.10–13, 3.54.10–14, and 3.60.39–52 respectively. See also 6.14.14 ff.

of Viṣṇu.⁴⁸ In cases like these, Pollock considers the possibility of interpolations in the “archetype” – that is the early version represented by the critical edition – to be “self-contradictory,”⁴⁹ apparently dismissing the possibility of relevant interpolations to the text at an early stage. A careful textual analysis of all such passages goes beyond the scope of this article, which is mainly directed at the arguments Pollock makes on literary grounds, but we can remark that such an *a priori* rejection of the possibility of early interpolations by considering them to be self-contradictory reads like an extreme and untenable position.⁵⁰

In his detailed analysis, Pollock raises interesting points and calls our attention to some *Rāmāyaṇa* passages that deserve consideration when addressing the issue of Rāma’s divinity in Vālmīki’s text. His study of the boon motif is, in itself, a valuable contribution to a little-studied subject. However, several of his arguments concerning Rāma’s divine status are based on questionable premises and,

⁴⁸ Pollock discusses 6.47.104 ff., where Lakṣmaṇa is said, more than once, to be a part of Viṣṇu. But Pollock himself points out that there is not full textual support for a couple of these mentions (1984: 241). The idea that Lakṣmaṇa is a part of Viṣṇu goes back to the beginning of Vālmīki’s text. At birth, Rāma is said to be one half of Viṣṇu, while the remaining half is distributed among his three brothers (1.15.25–26 and 1.17.6–9). However, these two passages seem to contradict each other with respect to the proportions assigned to each brother, and this became an important issue with the commentators (see Goldman’s extended notes to both passages, 1984: 313–5, 319–20). Note that this way of understanding Rāma’s divine nature differs from later traditions that consider Rāma to be a “full” incarnation of Viṣṇu, and not a “partial” one, as Vālmīki’s text would suggest. Even after Vālmīki, Rāma’s status as a full incarnation was not automatically taken for granted by all Vaiṣṇava texts and traditions.

⁴⁹ “...as even the most uncompromising of analysts is forced to admit, the passage would appear to present us with yet another of those self-contradictory cases, an archetypal interpolation.” Pollock (1984: 241).

⁵⁰ There are narrative elements to suggest this chapter is a late addition. Among them, in 6.105.12, Brahmā tells Rāma that he (Rāma) is the boar of one tusk – a reference to the boar that lifted the earth from the bottom of the ocean – whereas in 2.102.2–3 Vasiṣṭha had told Rāma that the boar was Brahmā. This transfer of the exploit from Brahmā to Viṣṇu (as Rāma) is consistent with the attested appropriation by Vaiṣṇavism of feats attributed earlier to Brahmā (see below, note 56 and accompanying text, for a similar instance in the *Matsya Purāṇa*). Another element worthy of notice, because it seems to contradict the sequence of events and is reminiscent of Vyāsa’s words to Arjuna after the death of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* (16.9.31), is Brahmā’s declaration to Rāma (6.105.26) that his purpose had been accomplished and he should now return to heaven, something Rāma doesn’t do, and instead returns to Ayodhyā to initiate his righteous rule. By contrast, in the *Mahābhārata* (17.1.7–8), Vyāsa’s words prompt Yudhiṣṭhira to end his reign and prepare to leave the world.

therefore, fail to reach solid conclusions. While he is correct in saying that it cannot be proved on textual grounds that Vālmīki “was ignorant of or indifferent to the equation of Rāma and Viṣṇu,”⁵¹ the opposite is equally true; it cannot be proven that he was aware of such an equation or that it was important to him. Overall, the notion that Vālmīki’s Rāma was, primarily, an exceptional human hero and that his status increased gradually to that of an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu – a process clearly attested to in later versions – still seems to offer the more plausible explanation, even within Vālmīki’s text.

Sheldon Pollock suggests that we approach the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* trying to listen to the text on its own, without drowning it out with what he describes as “our own querulous presuppositions,”⁵² by which he surely means modern Western scholarly presuppositions. However, it would seem that somewhere along the way he has replaced this supposed set of presuppositions with another one – this time largely derived from traditional Vaiṣṇavism.

APPENDIX. TWO INTERPOLATIONS IN THE VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA

1. *Interpolated Passage in the Southern Recension*

When Mandodarī laments the death of Rāvaṇa at the hands of Rāma, she wonders how Rāma could have performed such a feat and exclaims:

...“Or no, it must be Vāsava (Indra) come in person in the form of Rāma, exerting his magical powers without warning, to destroy you.”⁵³

After this verse, the passage below is inserted in the Southern Recension. It reinterprets Mandodarī’s assessment and makes her conclude that instead of Indra, Rāma must be Viṣṇu.

“Could you have been overpowered by Vāsava (Indra)? O mighty one! Where could Vāsava get the strength to even face you in battle? You, who are very strong, of enormous power, an enemy of the gods, and terrifying?”

“This is clearly the great yogi, the supreme soul, the eternal one. The one without beginning, middle or end; greater than the great;

⁵¹ Pollock (1991: 52). See also González-Reimann 2002: 153–154.

⁵² Pollock (1991: 21).

⁵³ *atha vā rāmarūpeṇa vāsavaḥ svayam āgataḥ / māyām tava vināśāya vidhāyāpratitarkitām* // 6.99.10. Pollock’s translation (1991: 27).

beyond darkness (*tamas*).⁵⁴ He is the creator; the holder of the conch, the discus and the mace. He is the one with the Śrīvatsa on his chest, the invincible one of endless majesty, the eternal and constant one.

“He, Viṣṇu — the one of true courage, the lord of all the worlds, the one of great splendor — took on human form as all the gods became his attendant monkeys. He himself killed you and your *rākṣasas* for the benefit of the world.”⁵⁵

The interpolator here uses a familiar Vaiṣṇava procedure, one that enables the appropriation of great heroes by considering them to be forms/*avatāras* of Viṣṇu because – in the author’s mind – no one else could perform such extraordinary feats. Compare Manu’s statement in the *Matsya Purāṇa* version of the flood story, when he witnesses the amazing growth in size of the fish he had rescued, “...who are you, the lord of the asuras? Or are you Vāsudeva? Who else could do this?”⁵⁶ In an earlier version of the flood story, the fish identifies himself as Brahmā,⁵⁷ but the *Matsya Purāṇa* transfers the fish’s identity to Viṣṇu.

2. An Interpolated Verse in the Southern Recension

During the battle that Rāma and his allies wage against Rāvaṇa in order to rescue Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa fall to the ground wounded by innumerable arrows, which turn out to be snakes. Before long, the great eagle Garuḍa appears and, upon seeing him, the snakes flee. Garuḍa heals the two brothers and embraces them. Rāma thanks him and asks who he is. The powerful eagle responds that he,

⁵⁴ My translation. “Beyond darkness (*tamas*),” *tamasah paramo*. Compare *Bhagavad Gītā* 13.17, *tamasah param*, about brahma/ātman; and *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.8, *tamasah parastāt*, about Rudra/Śiva.

⁵⁵ *atha vā vāsavena tvam dharṣito ‘si mahābala | 1*
vāsavya kutaḥ śaktis tvam draṣṭum api saṃyuge | 2
mahāvīryam mahāsattvam devaśatruṃ bhayāvaham | 3
vyaktam eṣa mahāyogī paramātmā sanātanaḥ | 4
anādimadhyanidhano mahataḥ paramo mahān | 5
tamasah paramo dhātā śaṅkhacakraḡadādharaḥ | 6
śrīvatsavakṣā nityaśrīr ajayyaḥ śāśvato dhruvaḥ | 7
mānuṣam vapur āsthāya viṣṇuḥ satyaparākramaḥ | 8
sarvaiḥ parivrito devair vānaratvam upāgataiḥ | 9
sarvalokeśvaraḥ sākṣāl lokānām hitakāmyayā | 10
*sarākṣasaparivāram hatavāms tvam mahādyutiḥ || 3114**

⁵⁶ ...ko ‘pi tvam asureśvaraḥ | athavā vāsudevas tvam anya tdrk katham bhavet || *Matsya Purāṇa* 1.23–24.

⁵⁷ *Mahābhārata* 3.185.48.

the son of the great snake Vinatā, was the only one capable of ridding them of the snake arrows. Those arrows, he explains, were the serpent sons of another great snake, Kadrū.⁵⁸ Garuḍa then declares that he is a friend of Rāma's who came to his aid in a time of need, as friends should. The eagle predicts that Rāma will conquer Rāvaṇa and rescue Sītā, and then flies away at great speed.

Immediately before the verse describing Garuḍa's departure, the Southern Recension inserts the following verse, which would be among Garuḍa's parting words:

“Don't be curious about [this] friendship, Rāghava (Rāma). After completing your task in battle, hero, you will understand it.”⁵⁹

This simple, yet clear statement subtly suggests that there is a hidden reason for their friendship, and that it will be disclosed once Rāma has conquered Rāvaṇa and recovered Sītā. There seems little doubt that this is a reference to Brahmā's words to Rāma concerning his divine nature, which the creator god utters soon after Sītā is presented to Rāma following her liberation.

By adding this verse at a strategic place in the narrative, the interpolator creates the expectation in the listener's mind that a mystery is to be revealed later. Presumably, one must infer that Garuḍa's reason for helping Rāma is that he is Viṣṇu's vehicle/mount, thus implying that Rāma is Viṣṇu himself.

Without this verse, however, there is no lingering mystery, and it makes perfect sense for Garuḍa to come to the rescue due to his

⁵⁸ According to the *Mahābhārata* (1.14) Kadrū was the mother of 1000 snakes. She was also Garuḍa's aunt, which makes the snake arrows his cousins. They are also his half brothers, as both Kadrū and Vinatā were wives of the famed ascetic Kaśyapa. As soon as Garuḍa hatched from his egg, he began feeding on snakes, and this explains their fear of him.

⁵⁹ *na ca kautūhalaṃ kāryaṃ sakhīvaṃ prati rāghava | kṛtakarmā raṇe vīra sak-*
*hīvaṃ anuvetsyasi || 835**. Inserted after 6.40.56. Garuḍa's episode is 6.40.43–59. Brockington (1984: 199) considers 835* to be very late, and places it in his fourth stage of the text. See above, note 46.

well-known hostility towards snakes and his direct connection to the sons of Kadrū.⁶⁰

It is not unusual for interpolators to attempt to explain miraculous events that happen without a stated reason or agent. One of the prime examples is the episode of Draupadī's disrobing in the *Mahābhārata*.⁶¹ In the critical edition, no reason is given for her endless supply of clothing, while later versions attribute the deed to Kṛṣṇa. It then became one of his most popular divine feats in the *Mahābhārata*.

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⁶⁰ Pollock (1984: 239) considers that this verse should have been included in the CE, and supports his claim by pointing to the fact that Northern manuscripts include an equivalent interpolated verse (833*, inserted after 6.40.51), thus making the narrative element present in all versions. He views the rejection of 835* as the result of "an unreflective application of editorial principles." Verse 833* reads: "Don't ask me about the reason for [this] friendship, Rāghava. Once the vile Rāvaṇa is killed, you will understand the friendship, Blameless One" (*kāraṇaṃ ca vayasvatve na praṣṭavyo 'smi rāghava |nihate rāvaṇe pāpe sakhitvaṃ jñāsyase 'nagha |*). A passage included in the CE that mentions Rāma's identity with Viṣṇu is 6.26.31–32. Note that all of these instances are from Book Six.

⁶¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.61.48.

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