



The *Rāmāyaṇa*

THE NORTON
ANTHOLOGY

WORLD
LITERATURE

VOLUME A

FOURTH EDITION

Optional: View animated version of RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA2BYSivPXA>

Vālmīkias as recounted in his poem, was an ascetic spiritual practitioner who lived in a hermit's enclave on the banks of a river. -



The prior picture depicts a **hermitage** in a bucolic setting that matches the rich poetic descriptions in the text. On the left, the youthful, divine messenger Narada, with golden “vina” beside him, is seated in conversation with the elderly, bearded Vālmīki, whose purity is conveyed by his whiteness.

In accordance with the continuous mode of narration, we are shown the scene of farewell on the right, and finally, Narada floating off to the celestial regions on the clouds. It is generally considered that this series was painted for Samsar Chant of Kangra (ca. 1775–1823). The Walters Art Museum, Gift of John and Berthe Ford, 2002. Accesssion W.909

Hinduism

- the Vedas
- salvation
- karma
- practice of *dharma*
- theodicy

“Rāma’s rule of kingdom was characterized by the effortless and spontaneous prevalence of ***dharma***. People were free from fear of any sort. There were no widows in the land: people were not molested by beasts and snakes, nor did they suffer from diseases. There was no theft, no robbery, nor any violence” (1185–86).

Attributing the “supreme *dharma*” to Rāma—or Viṣṇu—is potentially troubling for the issue of the nature of good and evil (theodicy), for a larger conception of *dharma* understands it as “all that is,” and attributes evil to Rāma as well as the good.

Similarly, on the basic level of plot, in mocking and cutting off the nose of Śūrpaṇakhā (thereby beginning the entire war with Rāvaṇa), Rāma may be culpable, and thus the originator of such evils that he subsequently overcomes.

Elements of Epic Writing

- length
- content: historic, mythic
- motifs
- divine intervention
- heroic flaw
- orality and performance, writing
- Language

**Epics are long poems that narrate important historical or cosmic events using elevated language, a multitude of actions, and large casts of protagonists, both human and divine. Invocations to the gods, long speeches, and repetition (for mnemonic benefit to the performer) are prevalent characteristics.*

Form

- śloka
- couplets
- books (*kāṇḍas*)
- chapters (*sargas*)

“This holy epic Rāmāyaṇa composed by the sage Vālmīki, promotes dharma, fame, long life and in the case of a king, victory. He who listens to it is always freed from all sins. He who desires sons gets them, and he who desires wealth becomes wealthy, by listening to the story of the coronation of Rāma” (1186).

Since writing systems did not exist in Vālmīki's society, he must have composed the work orally, using mnemonic devices and formulas of 24,000 couplets divided into seven books with long chapters in each.

Śloka is a form of versification used in early Sanskrit poetry, better translated as “song,” which acts as the primary form for Indian epic verse, which are formed as couplets.

The first and last books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* seem to have been added later; they explicitly interpret Rāma as an avatar of Viṣṇu and provide a multilayered narrative frame for the five books in the middle.

Society

- caste society (priests, warriors, traders, servants)
- arranged marriages
- moral codes (*dharma*)

“The brāhmaṇas had got everything ready for the coronation ceremonies. Gold pots of holy water from all the sacred rivers, most of them gathered at their very source, were ready. All the paraphernalia like the umbrella, chowries, an elephant and a white horse, were ready, too” (1176).

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- The caste structure was maintained primarily by a system of arranged marriage, in which, ideally, the bridegroom and bride belonged to the same caste but not the same clan.
 - Each caste-group had its own laws and moral codes (*dharma*), which defined its members' duties and obligations.
 - Laws were not made by human beings; they were given by the gods and contained in scripture. The brāhmaṇas (priests) belong to the highest caste in India, here quoted in the opening of Book 2.

**Ayodhyā-Manu, the law-giver, founded the city, and it is known in Indian epics as a city of the gods.
*The picture is of the waterfront of Ayodhya.**



Dharma

“[T]he deity presiding over the ocean wishes to return the service as a token of gratitude: thus to show one’s gratitude is the eternal dharma” (1160).

“The commands of the guru, the king, and one’s aged father, whether uttered in anger, cheerfully, or out of lust, should be obeyed by one who is not of despicable behavior, with a view to the promotion of dharma” (1131).

Chariot: Vimāna

- “measuring out” or “traversing”
 - flying palace
 - chariot of the gods
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- Rāvaṇa seizes the chariot Puṣpaka from Kubera. What are some (false) assumptions we make about ancient technology? Scholars with an interest in ancient mysticism and alien life forms contend that these chariots are actually flying spaceships. Does this claim hold any validity, given the description of these flying objects in the epic?

Anthropomorphosis-The image shows a statue of monkeys in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, in honor of Professor Samuel Eilenberg, 1986. Accession 1986.507



The vānaras (monkeys), as well as other animals throughout the tale, are not simply domesticated or conquered servants of the humans.

With speech, political kingdoms, and armies, *the vānara under Sugrīva and Hanumān are strikingly similar to humans*, and Hanumān is furthermore an object of religious devotion as a deity himself.

Rāma also experiences significant help from Jaṭāyu, a minor deity in the form of a vulture.

Women- The image is a painting of Rāma and Sītā.



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- *The work may be an attempt to elevate the position of women in society, focusing more on monogamy and the loving relationship between Rāma and Sītā than on the general polygamy and infidelity practiced in Vālmīki's culture.*
 - *Sītā is considered the perfect embodiment of womanhood, is of central importance, and reminds readers of Helen's abduction by Paris, which prompted the Trojan War.*
 - *Rāma's war with Rāvaṇa takes its direct cause from the abduction of Sītā. Sītā's nobility is shown not only in her resistance to Rāvaṇa, but also in her own proofs of virtue and suffering.*

Rāma

“[H]e is the protector of people of different occupations, of good conduct, and he himself adheres to good conduct. He is mighty, friendly, well-versed in scriptures and devoted to the holy ones. He is endowed with all the characteristics of the best among men: broad shoulders, strong arms, powerful neck, lovely face . . . the four pairs of his limbs . . . are symmetrical” (1176).

Consider the ideal description of a hero with heroic physical characteristics of beauty: *Rāma is the seventh avatar of the god Viṣṇu, and named king of Ayodhyā.*

Rāvaṇa

“He is known as Rāvaṇa because he makes his enemies cry. It is a great honor to accept his proposal” (1171).

“He disguised himself as an ascetic. . . . His very presence in that forest was inauspicious: even the trees and waters of the rivers were frightened of him” (1143).

**Rāvaṇa is a Brahmin king who kidnaps Sītā, and who attempts to vindicate his sister, Śūrpaṇakhā, whose nose has been cut off by Rāma and his brother.*

Hanumān

““This mighty Hanumān who is the god-child of the wind-god himself, will swiftly cross this ocean; for he desires to cross the ocean in order to achieve the mission of Rāma and the mission of the vānaras” (1159).

The Ramayana of Valmiki - Outline of Book 2

- *The Brahmanas prepare for the coronation of Rama.*
- *Rama is summoned to the King, receives the news that he is to be exiled to the forest because of “two boons” that his father had promised. Bharata is to be crowned in his stead.*
- *After speaking with his mother, wife and faithful servant, he heads to the forest.*

The Ramayana of Valmiki - Outline of Book 3

- *Meets a friend (in the form of a vulture-Jatayu) of his father's on his way to the forest.*
- *Adventures whilst there include the demoness that falls in love with him, and as a result he has to defend himself and Sita.*
- *Ultimately, he loses Sita as she is abducted by the brother of the demoness that he refuses. Additional adventures includes his quest to retrieve his wife Sita.*

The Ramayana of Valmiki - Outline of Book 6

- *The Fight to retrieve Sita, where he(Rama) is assisted by a tribe of monkeys.*
- *Sita proves her loyalty/fidelity and innocence by entering into the fire.*
- *Rama is reunited with his wife and is made the rightful ruler of his kingdom.*

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- Form: Epic
- Country of Origin: India
- Key Themes: Religion, Power, Agency, Personal Virtue, Good and Evil, Theodicy, *Dharma*, Gender, Natural World, Politics
- Summary: Tells the story of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa: their struggles, their exile, and their grief.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

Key Passages:

- “Quickly, Sītā took off the stole she had around her shoulders and, removing all her jewels and putting them in that stole, bundled them all up and threw the bundle into the midst of the vānaras, in the hope that should Rāma chance to come there they would give him a clue to her whereabouts”
- “During the period of Rāma’s reign, there was no poverty, no crime, no fear, and no unrighteousness in the kingdom”

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- **At the beginning of our selection the disinheritance and banishment that Rama experiences illustrate the major theme of power—both that which is retained and that which is lost—that is a hallmark of the *Ramayana*.**
- Rama “was not affected at all by this sudden turn of events” (p. 1130), but his mother was greatly distressed and had counted on his assumption of power as the path to easing her own troubles. One might well wonder whether she or Rama has the more appropriate reaction, for Rama’s own disinterestedness might be considered either noble or negligent.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- *Power remains a central issue throughout the work, as Rama challenges evil powers and is aided by good powers. So, too, power is presented in various forms, for while Rama loses his political power at the beginning, he maintains and amplifies his personal power of strength, courage, and various other virtues.*
- Thus the disinherited Rama can still properly be described as having “a world-destroying mood”, though from outward appearances his wife is stolen and he seems particularly powerless. Such a contrast between the power of personal virtue and the power of political situation is a consistent theme in this work.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- A second important theme throughout this text *is the nature of good and evil*, particularly as it relates to the gods, and this is further emphasized by the fact that this is a religious work as well as a work of literature.
- The *Ramayana of Valmiki* is a work of tremendous influence as the central epic of Indian literature, but it has long had a similarly wide-reaching impact on the Hindu religion. As such, its presentation of issues of theodicy and the nature of good and evil is extremely important.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- While Rama is consistently portrayed as a force for good, he is described by Brahma as “lord Narayana. You are the imperishable cosmic being. You are the truth. You are eternal. You are the supreme dharma of the worlds”
- In mocking and cutting off the nose of Fur-pajakha, and thus beginning the entire war with Ravaja, Rama himself may be culpable, and thus seen as *the originator* of such evils that he subsequently overcomes.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- Questions concerning the origins of evil and the moral qualities of the divine figures might be profitably discussed in comparison to other religious traditions; for example, many of these issues are also raised in the Book of Job (p. 187) in the Hebrew Bible.
- **Similar to other epic works, including *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*, the *Ramayana of Valmiki* places great importance on the role that women play in the work.** Sita is obviously of central importance and reminds a Western reader of Helen's abduction by Paris, which prompted the Trojan War. Rama's war with Ravaja takes its direct cause from the abduction of Sita, who is not only loved by Rama but also respected. Sita's nobility is shown not only in her resistance to Ravaja but also in her own proofs of virtue and suffering through Rama's worries and suspicions.

THE *RAMAYANA* OF VALMIKI

- It might even be said that the *Ramayana* of Valmiki attempts to elevate the position of women in society, for in contrast to the general polygamy practiced—which, in fact, was the source of the conflict that led to Rama's disinheritance in the first place—the work focuses on a monogamous, loving relationship between Rama and Sita that does not allow for affairs with Furpajakha.

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- While the alliance between the vanara (monkeys) and Rama in part is an anthropomorphizing of the animals, it also suggests a certain harmony between the humans, guided by the gods, and the rest of nature.
- Rama also experiences significant help from Jafayu, a minor deity in the form of a vulture, who gives his life in a desperate attempt to save Sita. Such remarkable devotion from an anthropomorphized animal is indicative of a deeper appreciation for *harmony between human culture and the natural world*. Thus Rama's lament for a vulture is heartfelt sorrow: "Today I have forgotten all my previous misfortunes: I am extremely tormented by the loss of this dear friend who has sacrificed his life for my sake"

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- **An epic work that demonstrates religious beliefs, narrates mythic origins, and hails the devotion of true love, the *Ramayana of Valmiki* is also a work with profound questions and insights concerning political philosophy.**

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- *The question of who has the right to rule the kingdom is raised immediately in our selection, with Rama having been disinherited.* Yet political questions are raised at many other points as well. When Hanumana sees Ravaja's many wives, none of whom he had abducted because all were truly in love with him, he reacts, "Ravaja would indeed have been a good man if he had thus got Sita too to be his wife: that is, before she had married Rama and if he had been able to win her by his valor or by his charm" .

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

- *At what point, then, would Ravaja be properly considered a tyrant? How does this political power correspond to his relationship toward women?* The political strife between the vanara similarly raises important questions, and so too, when *Rama finally takes the throne, he is presented as the ideal political ruler, though the reader might be skeptical of the idealism enunciated: “Rama’s rule of the kingdom was characterized by the effortless and spontaneous prevalence of dharma. People were free from fear of any sort”*

THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

Response Question/s:

- **SELECT ONE** of the following 3 questions and respond to that question in no more than a page (double spaced). You must use **SPECIFIC EXAMPLES** from the text in your response.
- **Your response is due by 11:59 pm tonight to the appropriate box.**

Response Questions

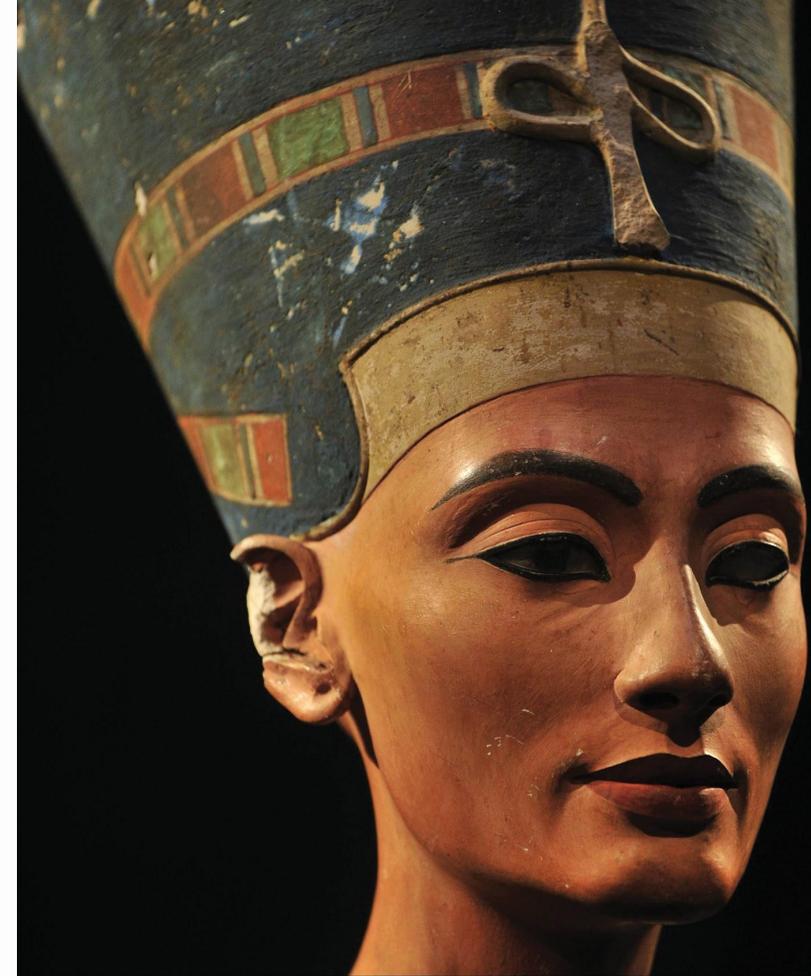
1. Is Rama presented as an ideal? If so, craft an argument that demonstrates the primary ways in which he embodies ideals. If not, craft an argument that identifies and explains his failings and how they damage his character.
2. Is Ravaja completely evil? In your argument, be sure to address specific passages in which characters encounter, think about, and discuss the nature of Ravaja's character.
3. Is Sita simply a passive character? In what ways is she potentially more powerful than Rama, and in what ways is she negligently passive? How does she compare to Furpajakha?

For Further Discussion

- What distinctions might be made between the presentations of the city and the woods, or wilds, in this text, and how is this important?
- How do humans come to know the gods in the *Ramayana of Valmiki*, and what purposes do the gods have? In what ways do gods care for humans, and in what ways do they bother them? Are the gods ultimately a force for good or for evil?
- Consider Rama's various brothers, allies, and friends in this epic. What is their role, and how are they to be understood? Is their assistance necessary? How do they help a god? Was their friendship to Rama fated, or did they have a choice concerning whether they would help him or not?

This concludes the Lecture PowerPoint presentation for

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