

2009

Storytelling as Soul-Tuning: The Ancient Rhetoric of Valmiki's Ramayana

Mari Lee Mifsud

University of Richmond, mmifsud@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mifsud, Mari Lee. "Storytelling as Soul-Tuning: The Ancient Rhetoric of Valmiki's Ramayana." In *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetoric*, edited by Roberta Binkley and Carol Lipson, 223-39. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2009.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Rhetoric and Communication Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

9 Storytelling as Soul-Tuning: The Ancient Rhetoric of Valmiki's *Ramayana*

Mari Lee Mifsud

In an ancient Hindu world, circa 500 BCE, the poet Valmiki composed an epic of the travels (*ayana*) of Rama. Rama was born the son of King Dasaratha, young prince of idyllic Ayodha, as an avatar of the god Vishnu. As an avatar, Rama is human, but filled with the strength of the gods. With this strength, he is to kill the demon (*rakshasa*) Ravana, and to save the universe from evil.¹

Audiences of this epic, entitled *Ramayana*, experience the ways that norms of culture are created, communicated, reinforced, and obeyed; the ways that personal and public relations are constituted and negotiated; the ways decisions are made in the face of dilemmas; and the ways that meaning-making is orchestrated. Moreover, because the *Ramayana* proceeds through the guiding context of the universal divine, masters and gurus from antiquity to contemporary times state that experiencing the *Ramayana*, whether as audience or reader, tunes one's soul, bringing it into harmony with the divine. Translator Ramesh Menon writes that listening to or reading the *Ramayana* "serves to exorcise one's sins, from this life and others, and to purify one's soul." (2001, xi).

In this essay, I illuminate rhetorical dimensions of storytelling as soul-tuning in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.² I explore how the story's historical, reflexive, and paratactic rhetoric invites experiencing it not just as Rama's story, but as the *telling* of Rama's story. The *telling* is the tuner of the soul, as it creates an indelible impression on human memory of divine revelation.

Through this illumination emerge additional questions related to the history and theory of rhetoric. How is it that Valmiki's *Ramayana* can be considered rhetoric? How can the history and theory of rhetoric be guided by cultural pluralism, rather than by continued dominance of Greek models? What particular textual considerations should be given to reading the rhetoric of the *Ramayana*? These questions ought to be addressed first for the sake of orientation.

ORIENTATIONS TO THE *RAMAYANA* AS AN ANCIENT RHETORIC

This is an inquiry into rhetorical dimensions of storytelling as soul-tuning in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. By "rhetorical dimensions," I mean those practices of symbolic exchange and influence that constitute and orchestrate individual and cultural meanings, understandings, actions, identities, and relations. For the purpose of focus in this study, I narrow my definition of these practices to storytelling.

Storytelling is a (if not *the*) primary means by which ancient Hindu culture initiates exchange, whether of goods, ideas, actions, or relations. By "exchange," I do not mean to call forth notions of speech being a transfer of ideas as goods in the most mechanistic, abstract, dyadic kinds of ways.³ Rather, by "exchange" I call forth notions of the gift. Gift exchange is what Marcel Mauss identifies as a total cultural phenomenon. From Mauss's classic anthropological study of archaic gift cultures, a total cultural phenomenon is defined as one that constitutes and orchestrates legal, economic, moral, religious, spiritual, political, interpersonal, epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic dimensions of culture.⁴ In ancient Hindu culture, speech, in particular storytelling, is such a gift. The god Brahma, the creator himself, gives Valmiki both the story of Rama, as well as the sacred *sloka* verse in which to tell the story (Menon 2001, 6). In exchange for these gifts of story and style, Brahma requests Valmiki to compose the epic of Rama through the *sloka* meter into the first story of the earth (*Adi Kavya*) (6–7). This story is given (revealed) as a means of bringing ancient Hindu culture into harmony with *dharma*, a notion as old as the Indian tradition, with meanings ranging from divine "duty, work, righteousness, morality, justice, cosmic law and harmony, and eternal truth" (x). This symbolic exchange of speech for divine harmony is a rhetorical phenomenon shaping ancient Hindu culture.

Dharmic speech, though, should not be so quickly rendered "rhetoric." Inquiry into the *Ramayana* as rhetoric requires a disruption of an

assimilative orientation comparing and judging what is other to what has been the norm, namely ancient Greek rhetoric. In place of an assimilative orientation must be an aggregate one, so that ancient Hindu rhetoric can be recognized as distinct from yet equal to ancient Greek rhetoric. Such an experience requires a certain figuration of thought and speech, what the classical Greeks called but did not embrace as a rhetorical norm—*parataxis*.⁵ An awareness of parataxis emerges from reading ancient epic poetry like the *Ramayana*.⁶ Audiences can experience the rhythm of the paratactic speech: the way this speech weaves together ideas without the aid of logical connectors beyond *and*, mixing big stories with small, equalizing the importance of side stories and the central story. Because the rhetoric of the *Ramayana* is itself paratactic, something I will illuminate more fully in the next section of this essay, a paratactic approach to inquiry into this text seems appropriate and fitting. To start, a paratactic approach would inquire into this text as a distinct rhetoric, adjacent to ancient Greek rhetoric, the latter neither assimilating nor subjugating the former, the two being a part of the multiplicity of the unity of what rhetoric can be.

Of course, such an inquiry is a challenge considering the dominance of ancient Greek norms in the study of rhetoric at large. The ancient Greeks offer the language of rhetoric, not only the term *rhetorike* but the philosophical vocabulary for the idea and practice of rhetoric, including the aforementioned *parataxis*. To recognize the Greek norm of rhetoric, though, does not necessitate that all rhetorics be judged through these norms. We can recognize the distinctions and similarities between rhetorics without having to judge one in terms of the other.

Let's consider a prominent dimension of ancient Hindu rhetoric, as distinct from ancient Greek. The ancient Greeks favored argumentation and persuasion about probabilities; the ancient Hindus favored exhortation and didacticism about dharma. Sanctioned speakers in Hindu culture speak the dharma as a way of instructing and teaching others the way of and to the divine. There is no room for probability in dharma. Dharma is dharma, unquestionable and absolute. Yet, the human experience of probability persists. The rhetoric of dharma is designed to halt the weighing of probabilities and to guide experience to the dharmic way. Dharma is spoken, primarily, in deliberative passages, where characters facing a dilemma speak to themselves and others about the dilemma and work to achieve a dharmic resolution.

A dharmic resolution is a decision in the face of a dilemma that recognizes the way of and to the divine. An example from the *Ramayana* will help to illuminate this point.

When Rama is sixteen, the great brahmarishi Viswamitra visits Rama's father, King Dasaratha. Dasaratha, in quintessential gift culture practice, initiates the ritual of guest/host relating by speaking as host, showering Viswamitra with praise, and offering to grant the brahmarishi whatever he wishes. But when Dasaratha hears Viswamitra's request for the young Rama to go kill two rakshasas, Dasaratha regrets having given his word. Dasaratha recognizes his dharma to honor his word, yet, not knowing his son is an avatar, he cannot resolve himself to sending Rama on such a dangerous journey. He is wrought with conflict over his dilemma: either break his word to Viswamitra, or risk his beloved son's life. In his turmoil, he decides to get more information. He goes through a period of questioning Viswamitra about the rakshasas and their reign of terror, searching for a way out of the dilemma. He opts to break his word, with a slight adjustment: he will not send Rama, but he will go in Rama's place.

In response to this negotiation, Viswamitra speaks in a voice like doom announcing Dasaratha's vice: his broken word and his speech filled with empty flattery. To bring Dasaratha into a dharmic resolution, Viswamitra amplifies the poles of Dasaratha's dilemma: "I will return from where I came, and you can live in your fool's paradise, until Ravana arrives at your gates one day. But I say to you, Dasaratha, if you want to tread the path of destiny written in the stars, send Rama with me!" (17).

Dasaratha is driven back into confusion by Viswamitra's speech. Blind with a father's love, he hardly knows what he has done or what he needs to do. He is enveloped with fear of both poles of his dilemma. So his guru Vasishtha gives him counsel: Dasaratha should fear only one of the poles of his dilemma, namely breaking his word. He should not fear the other because Rama is not a normal human boy, and clearly Viswamitra makes his request with a wisdom and divine plan beyond what Dasaratha knows. With this culminating counsel, finally "the light of reason dawn[s] on Dasaratha" (17). He announces his resolve to send Rama and asks Viswamitra for forgiveness.

Dasaratha's dharmic resolution is based on a rhetorical feat, namely of exhortative and didactic speech. Three speeches, each with their own way of leading Dasaratha to dharma must be given before he can

see and accept the way: 1) Dasaratha's speech to himself on the sacredness of having given his word; 2) Viswamitra's speech amplifying the poles of Dasaratha's dilemma, in particular the dharmic pole; and 3) Vashishta's counsel. Dasaratha cannot resist his desire to protect his son when he has only his own recognition of his dharmic obligation to honor his word. Viswamitra must offer an exhortation to amplify the poles of Dasaratha's dilemma and to advise that the dharmic pole is the only choice. Because Viswamitra's exhortation has universal power, the urgency of selecting the dharmic pole has the rhetorical tone of necessity. But still, Dasaratha is incapable of accepting his dharma. Visishta must speak, as Dasaratha's guru, to show Dasaratha the way. This speech is didactic, teaching Dasaratha how breaking his word would corrupt destiny, not only the destiny of the Ikshvaku line to remain noble, but of Rama to serve as he is meant to serve in accordance with dharma.

Dasaratha's resolve is brought about by both exhortative and didactic rhetoric to urge, advise, teach, and guide him to dharma. Even Dasaratha's own reflections on the sacred gift of his word to Viswamitra take on an exhortative rhetorical quality, as these reflections urge him to act in accordance with what he knows to be the truth. Whereas Dasaratha attempts to discern probabilities in the face of dharma, dharma refuses such attempts. Rhetoric, then, is employed as a means not to judge and persuade among probabilities, but to advise, teach, and guide one to accept dharma.

This rhetoric is not a lesser rhetoric, or a proto-rhetoric, simply because it operates outside of the Greek norm of probabilistic argument and persuasion. It is, however, a different rhetoric, and difference matters. Inquiry into rhetoric as a human and cultural phenomenon requires a multiple and diverse understanding of its various performances, the many ways it constitutes and orchestrates meanings, understandings, identities and relations, whether on an individual, interpersonal, or cultural level. Those of us fascinated with rhetoric as a way of studying, better yet *imagining*, what it can mean to be human must do more than just study the Greeks and their rhetorical theory and practice.⁷ And when we study rhetorics beyond the Greeks, we must recognize that while the legacy of the Greeks cannot and should not be abandoned—for their language and theories are not only unavoidable but useful—we must engage this legacy in paratactic style.

The final orienting issue is that of the text. Valmiki's *Ramayana* is an oral, Sanskrit, epic poem that I am reading as a literary, prosaic, English translation. So many differences separate these respective "texts." One is oral, the other written; one is performed, the other read; one is ancient, the other contemporary; one is Sanskrit, the other English; one is verse, the other prose, etc. We do not have a stable text in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. What we have is a tradition. This tradition consists of multiple layers of textualization, from layers upon layers of ancient Sanskrit oral storytelling sung in meter for live audiences, to the multiple translations of these stories into the written word as literature for an audience of readers both within and beyond Hindu culture, to the many diverse performances of the *Ramayana* that range from plays, to dances, temple carvings, comic strips, television shows, and syndicated newspaper columns.

The multiple textualities of the *Ramayana* are elaborated further when we recognize that Valmiki's is just one among many tellings of Rama's story. There exist, in addition to Valmiki's, tellings throughout Southeast Asia, to Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia (Menon xiii). Besides Valmiki's, four tellings of the *Ramayana* into other Indian vernacular languages are classics: Kampan's *Iramavatara*, the Tamil *Ramayana* (twelfth century); the Bengali *Ramayana* of Krittibas Ojha (late fourteenth century); Tulsidas's *Ramacharitmanas* in Hindi (sixteenth century); and Exhutthachan's *Aadhyatman Ramayanam* in Malayalam (sixteenth century) (Menon 2001, xiii).⁸ As translator Ramesh Menon comments,

The epic has come to us through countless generations of gurus and sishtyas, masters and disciples, transmitted through the ages in the ancient oral tradition. Since its original composition there have been many interpolations and embellishments by numerous, now nameless, raconteurs—from saints and bards to grandmothers passing the story on to their grandchildren during long summer nights—in many languages and traditions. (xii)

Moreover, each telling of the Rama story relates to particular theological, social, political, regional, performative, and/or gender contexts (Richman 1991, xi). Each telling is ideological, so, for

example, in Valmiki's *Ramayana* we encounter the ideology of Brahmin Hindu culture, not all Hindu culture.

The challenges of textuality are many, but embracing paratactically the resources of multiple notions of textuality, we can see that these challenges are not so much problems to overcome, as possibilities. Paula Richman describes the approach used in *Many Ramayanas*, her collaborative project with leading *Ramayana* scholars:

We accept the idea of many *Ramayanas* and place Valmiki's text within that framework. Some scholars assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that Valmiki has written *the* definitive *Ramayana*. Hence, the diverse non-Valmiki *Ramayanas*—the “other *Ramayanas*”—have often been assessed against that standard, according to their angle of divergence from Valmiki's version. While Valmiki's importance is undeniable, we learn more about the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition when we abandon the notion of Valmiki as the *Ur*-text from which all the other *Ramayanas* descended. We need instead to consider the “many *Ramayanas*,” of which Valmiki's telling is one, Tulsi's another, Kampan's another, the Buddhist *jataka* yet another, and so forth. Like other authors, Valmiki is rooted in a particular social and ideological context. His text represents an intriguing telling, but it is one among many. (1991, 9)

The singular privilege of Valmiki's version is being questioned in indology, as is the privilege of studying the epic from the Sanskrit critical editions. Drawing from the work of noted scholar A. K. Ramanujan, contemporary indology questions the appropriateness of a singular privilege of Sanskrit texts for scholarly work on the ancient Hindu epics (Kaskikallio 1996, 146). Ramanujan writes of the *Mahabharata*, companion epic to the *Ramayana*, “No Hindu ever reads the *Mahabharata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit (A. K. Ramanujan, as quoted in Kaskikallio 1996, 146).”

The diversification of *Ramayana* texts points to the resourcefulness of “going local” rather than “universal” when encountering the *Ramayana*. Indian epics as a source of tales or teachings have been

experienced primarily through local language for a long time (146). As a result, a Sanskrit scholar and a folklorist or anthropologist or rhetorician or average audience might have very different ideas about the world of Indian epic, and each of these ideas needs to be paratactically ordered to show the aggregation of ways to experience the epic. The privilege of scholarly methods defining as the norm, or the original, the Sanskrit texts of Valmiki's *Ramayana* comes undone in paratactic style. The *Ramayana* is not so much a "text" as a "tradition," one that should be entered locally, but recognized as bigger than the local, so big as to constitute a magnificent array of diverse cultures and ideologies. To experience the *Ramayana* paratactically would be to recognize the locality of one's entrance, along with the proliferation of possible entries into the tradition. This proliferation of possibilities creates the grand paratactic multiplicity in the unity of the *Ramayana* tradition.

So I, too, experience the *Ramayana* tradition locally. This means using the version of the *Ramayana* most prevalent in my local culture of western scholarship on the *Ramayana*, namely an English translation of Valmiki's version of Rama's story. The English translation I use, too, comes from my local culture. The translation I use is the translation selected by a group of my faculty colleagues for inclusion in our university's year-long humanities seminar for first-year students: Ramesh Menon (2001), *The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic*. I recognize that this translation does not represent the whole of the *Ramayana* tradition, but rather Menon's telling of various tellings of Valmiki's telling. Menon admits that, though he has taken few liberties with the story or its sequence as it has come down in India, his *Ramayana* is not a scholar's translation, but a novelist's recreation of the legend according to Valmiki. His telling does not work from a Sanskrit text, nor a critical edition, but rather from other English versions (xiv). In using Menon's telling of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, I do not mean to continue the privilege of Valmiki's version, but only to enter the *Ramayana* tradition locally, in a paratactic style. In eliminating hierarchy, parataxis does not eliminate those norms ruling at the top of the hierarchy, but rather situates these norms alongside other norms, in an equal, horizontal style. Valmiki's version and Menon's telling are, for me, not *the Ramayana* but my local entrance into the tradition.

With these orientations, let's begin our inquiry into the rhetoric of storytelling and its soul-tuning qualities, including its historical,

reflexive, and paratactic style. Because this inquiry is suggestive rather than exhaustive, I will focus, primarily, on the first book of the *Ramayana*, the *Bala Kanda*. This book will give us insight into the whole of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, as well as offer the most striking example of reflexivity in the poem, namely Valmiki's story of his coming to tell the *Ramayana*.

STORYTELLING AS SOUL-TUNING

Valmiki's *Ramayana* is a repository and memory bank of Hindu culture. It is a history and is categorized as such within the canon of Hindu scripture. Its scriptural category is called *Itihasa*, which literally translates, "so indeed it was," and has meaning ranging from talk, to legend, tradition, history, traditional accounts of former events, and heroic history. *Itihasa* is a sub-category of the *Smriti* scriptures.¹⁰ *Smriti* scriptures are one of two categories of Hindu scripture; the other category is called *Sruti*. *Sruti* scripture is that which is heard, akin to revelation. *Smriti* is that which is remembered, akin to tradition, not revelation. *Sruti* scripture is constituted by the Vedas. *Smriti* scripture is Post-Vedic. In other words, in Hindu scripture, first the truth is revealed, then the story of the revelation is told. This historical storytelling serves to tune the soul to divine revelation.

The telling, then, is a defining characteristic of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Indeed, we know this not only from the poem's categorization as *Smriti* scripture, that which is told, but also from its elaborate reflexive stories about storytelling. These stories offer details about the rhetorical situation of storytelling: how the tellers speak, how audiences listen, how hospitality figures the occasion, how content is shaped, and how effects are, in short, soul-tuning.

We know from these reflexive passages, that storytellers are sanctioned speakers for a culture—primarily kings and rishis, as well as messengers. The audiences consist of everyone and everything, from royalty, to commoners, to devas, gods, and rishis, to the stars in the sky, and the jungle, always in the background. The occasions for storytelling arise as part of an elaborate ritual of hospitality, a primary feature of archaic gift cultures. To be a guest was as much of an honor as to be a host, and the occasion of being either set forth an elaborate ritual of gift-exchange, largely orchestrated through speech performances, primarily storytelling. We are told as well that these stories are compositions of the past, designed to make present that which has

fallen into oblivion. The effect is a soul-tuning memory of posterity, of all prior descendants and all future generations, that creates an indelible impression on the memory of the human race.

In a string of reflexive passages in the *Bala Kanda*, we are told as much. When Rama arrives at the Kamasrama he is “regaled with stories” by his host (20). In other scenes of host practice, both King Janaka, Sita’s father, and Sadananda offer stories to guests as a form of proper hosting. Stories are told to guests by hosts not for entertainment only (but certainly for entertainment), but as a ritual way of creating general relations. These stories are intimate gifts given by the host that will allow guests to know the divine past, and to carry this past, along with the host as storyteller and his people, into future generations. As Sadananda announces, he will tell the story of Viswamitra’s life to his guests “for the sake of posterity” (46).

We are told that stories speak of a long-ago, near forgotten, past. The stories at the Kamasrama, for example, were of times out of mind, of the bygone millennia. Viswamitra’s story of the Ganga bore his audience “back to primeval times, dim and magnificent, when sovereigns of unearthly lineage ruled the kingdoms of the earth” (38). By these stories, we are told, audiences are captivated, amazed, and impacted in the most meaningful and awesome ways. During the storytelling at the Kamasrama, “the Stars traversed the sky ever so slowly, for their keenness to eavesdrop on the shining tales” (20). Viswamitra’s story of the Ganga, “held princes and rishis in thrall (38)” ; in addition, “Whenever he paused, the others sat with bated breath, lest they disturb his flow of inspiration beside the holy river” (38). We are told, as well, that Viswamitra’s audience of kshatriyas and munis sat in silence long after Viswamitra had finished speaking, for they were “claimed by the past,” and “they sat unmoving by the mystic river that once fell from their sky, and the whispering of her currents bore them far from themselves” (41–42). And we are told of how the audience listened to Sadananda’s story of Viswamitra: “Twilight fell and the audience didn’t stir from their listening to Sadananda. Encouraged by their eager silence, he continued until darkness fell, and lamps were brought out, and it was late when the Brahmana finished his extraordinary tale” (46). The impact of these stories on audiences might be most powerfully expressed in the description of Dasaratha listening to the stories of Rama and Lakshmana upon the return of the boys to Ayodha. Dasaratha is described in terms of a guest at the feast of sto-

rytelling. We are told he made the boys tell their stories over and over again, and each time he listened as if the stories were food, drink and air to him (53).

Perhaps the most striking reflexive story on storytelling in the epic is the elaborately detailed story of how the *Ramayana* comes to be told. This story merits a closer look for the meta-rhetoric of its offerings—its illumination of the speaker, audience, occasion, composition, and effects of the telling of Rama's story.

Narada, the God Brahma's son, is sent by his father to visit Valmiki. Upon his arrival, Narada initiates the guest/host ritual of exchange by granting his host, Valmiki, a blessing for his thoughts. Valmiki responds by asking if any man born into the world was blessed with all the virtues. After naming the virtues for Narada—integrity, bravery, righteousness, gratitude, dedication, flawlessness of character, compassion for all the living, learning, skill, beauty, courage, radiance, control over anger and desires, serenity, and lack of envy (4)—Valmiki is granted a blessing from Narada. This blessing, this gift, is the story of Rama, the man who is blessed with all the virtues.

Narada's storytelling begins with a beckoning to Valmiki and his disciples to come close for the story. The audience sits entranced, as heedless of the time that passed as they were of the flowing river. Valmiki sits in the lotus posture with his eyes shut to listen to the tale. Darkness comes, then twilight turns to night, then moonlight to darkness, then darkness to scarlet dawn, all the while he and his disciples sit entranced. Narada tells not of the Ramarajya, when Rama ruled Ayodhya as the world's very heart, but of a time before, during the exile of Rama. Of those years he speaks for their "indelible impression upon the memory of the race of men" (5). When Narada finishes, not a dry eye could be found among his listeners.

Valmiki is so affected by the story that even months after hearing it he continues seeing images of Rama. We come to learn that Brahma is preparing Valmiki to be the first poet of Rama's story. As mentioned earlier, Brahma visits Valmiki and reveals that he blesses his tongue with the sloka verse, and his eyes with the vision to tell the tale: "You will see clearly not only into the prince's life, but into his heart; and Lakshmana's, Sita's, and Ravana's. No secret will be kept from you and not a false word will enter your epic" (6–7). Brahma's gift of speech to Valmiki is so significant that it will carry with it immortality, something Brahma pronounced he was unable to grant to mortals when Ra-

vana asked him for that boon. But, to Valmiki, unlike Ravana, Brahma grants immortality: "As long as Rama is remembered in the world of men, so shall you be. The epic you are going to compose will make you immortal" (7). By creating such memory, storytelling creates Valmiki's immortality. Immortality, like the achievement of nirvana, means that his soul lives on in perfect and everlasting divine harmony.

Valmiki accepts Brahma's gifts (blessings), and sets out to compose the tale of Rama. Elaborate details of his epic composition continue the introduction of the *Bala Kanda*. First, the setting for Valmiki's creativity is described. He sits on the banks of the Tamasa, facing east on a seat of darbha grass, his "mind still as the Manasa lake upon the northern mountain, so the images of Narada's inspiration played on it like sunbeams" (7). The noble words spring in a crystal stream from his heart, as his disciples sit around him, listening breathlessly (7).

We are told his composition takes one week, and eventuates in 24,000 verses. This great composition, which is sometimes what the *Ramayana* is called, comes to him as if he were just an instrument, and the real poet were another, far greater than himself (7). He divides the poem into six books, and five cantos, and names it the *Ramayana* upon completion of "his work of genius" (7). Valmiki's genius is his telling. The revelation is the genius of the gods.

Upon finishing, two handsome young men appear to Valmiki, as twins of heaven, with voices like gandharva minstrels. He teaches them the poem, and they learn it, immediately and perfectly, just as they hear it from the Valmiki's lips. They sing it as Valmiki himself could not, for Brahma had chosen them to tell the story throughout the sacred land. The twins go from asrama to asrama, clad in tree bark and deerskin, their voices matching as one, speaking the *Ramayana* in a stream that flows like another Ganga. Rishis who hear them are enchanted and bless the beautiful boys. The twins eventually sing the poem to a king, who turns out to be Rama, who turns out to be their father.

This elaborately detailed, extensive story about how Rama's story comes to be composed and told helps us to experience the *Ramayana*, not just as a story of Rama, but as a story of storytelling. We are audience to a story about the sanctioned speakers of stories, the enthralled audiences, the guest/host occasion for stories, the content and form of composition, and the overall effects. And of the composition we are given the most elaborate details of what would be known in classical

western canons of rhetorical creation and performance: invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery. Valmiki tells us that storytelling is not so much invented by the speaker as inspired by the divine, that the speaker's agency lies more in shaping the formal rhetorical dimensions than in inventing the story, that the story's composition consists of 24,000 verses organized into six books and five cantos, that its style is a sacred verse and metre placed on Valmiki's tongue by Brahma, and that it is delivered by Rama's twins in perfectly voiced song, from memory created instantly upon the boys' hearing the poem.

The story of the telling of Rama's story offers a meta-rhetoric of storytelling as soul-tuning. Story and style are divine gifts that must be repaid with a great composition, an *Adi Kavya*, and told throughout the lands and generations of people. We know this telling is of the highest importance to the gods, for Brahma repays the telling with immortality, the greatest of all gifts. This telling allows audiences to know and remember the divine past, and to know and remember the model of the man with perfect virtue. The effects of the story make an indelible impression on human memory of divine harmony.

To illuminate further how this memory is rhetorically created, let's consider again the paratactic style of the story. Alongside the telling of Rama's story are told dozens upon dozens of other ancient Hindu stories. These stories are placed at the side of the Rama story, yet no overt logical connections are given. The general introduction of a story other than Rama's begins with a question, such as when Rama asks Viswamitra upon approaching the Kamasrama, "Whose asrama is this?" (20). Rama's question leads Viswamitra to tell the story of the Kamasrama, the sacred land of the rishis made from the ashes of the love Deva Kama when Siva glared open his third eye on her for piercing him with shafts of lust. When Viswamitra finishes the story, no commentary is given, and Rama and Viswamitra enter the asram. Rama's story continues from there. No overt connection between the story of the Kamasrama and Rama's story is articulated. The logic of their relations, or the lesson of the Kamasrama beyond its being an answer to Rama's question, is left unspoken.

In addition to the story of the Kamasrama, the *Bala Kanda* tells the tale of the Rakshasa Tataka, a woman once beautiful cursed for shamelessness by rishi Agastya and turned into a flesh-feasting monster, hated by all the creatures of the earth, void of speech, capable only of making vile noises.¹¹ The legend of Vamana, too, is told, namely

how his evil rule is ended by a trick played upon him by the dwarf boy Mahabali, an avatar of Vishnu. The magnificent story of the Ganga, and how she was brought down to flow upon the earth is told, as well as the story of the great Viswamitra's kingdom, the myth of Siva's bow, the story of Sita being discovered as a baby, and the legend of Indra's thousand phalluses as his punishment for being an adulterer.

The interplay of Rama's story with other stories creates a paratactic style of storytelling. This style holds multiple related and divergent things in mind simultaneously, not as one unified entity, but as an aggregate. A paratactic style allows for aggregation, and in turn creates a cultural memory of general relations.¹² Multiple and divergent things can be seen as touching. The possibilities of connection proliferate. An intimacy emerges in the process, a feeling of connection and connectedness, a feeling of closeness, and both particular and general awareness of one's situation. This intimacy is a creation of gift exchange and forges a memory of general relations. Exchange cannot be studied in isolation as an independent act, and we could learn from the practices of ancient gift cultures the way in which a general economy of relations is always at work in exchange. Gifts always bear the traces of others, hence of the past. When exchange is wrought through the gift, memory proliferates. To consider the general economy of relations at work in exchange is to consider not just the particular operations of an action, but the more general economy in which the action is situated (Bataille 19). Cultural memory presupposes a cultural intimacy where elements on which action is brought to bear are not isolated from the whole of the world, but are brought into contact with the whole, brought into presence from oblivion—and a memory is forged of general relations, not merely of operations, at play in action.

Rama's entering the Kamasrama with Viswamitra is not merely about Rama's next action that he will take on his dharmic path of duty. It is about the whole of that space in which the action will take place, the whole which is brought out from oblivion by the story of the Deva Kama. We are not told the lesson Rama is to learn from this story, nor are we told in any overt and stable way how the action Rama is about to take upon entering the Kamasrama is related to the story, or how it will—if it will—be shaped by the story. The two stories are just placed, side by side, equally, in an aggregative, not assimilative, way. Their touching creates cultural intimacy and memory, and leaves to the audience the logic(s) and lesson(s) to be learned. In a paratactic

style, Valmiki's tale of Rama is of his actions in their general economy of relations, rather than in their isolation as virtuous acts. The memory forged through such telling is of general relations, not merely operations. Such a memory in an audience comes with great responsibility, to see fully these general relations, to carry them forward, and to allow them to guide one to dharma.

The historical, reflexive, paratactic rhetoric of Valmiki's *Ramayana* offers to audiences the virtues of storytelling, along with the virtues of Rama. This storytelling tunes the soul by creating a cultural memory of general relations, and an indelible impression of revelation on this memory. Yet, storytelling does not eclipse human agency in finding the way to this revelation. The audience must discern the logic(s) and lesson(s) of these general relations and acquire the vision requisite for achieving dharma. Moreover, storytelling is the principal means of symbolic exchange of speech for divine harmony. This exchange is part of the general economy of the gift, and gives rise to the tradition of storytelling as soul-tuning in ancient Hindu culture.

NOTES

1. See Goldman (1984, 1, 23); Parpola (2002, 361); Brockington (1998, 379). The dating of the *Ramayana* is a debatable issue. Goldman makes the case that the old core is dated c. 750–500 BCE, and Brockington makes the case that the old core is dated c. 500–300 BCE.

2. Thus far scholars of rhetoric have done little with ancient Hindu texts including the *Ramayana*. Only Oliver (1971) and Kennedy (1998) make mention of the *Ramayana* in their studies, and both do only that, namely make brief mention of the epic as a significant rhetorical text. Oliver and Kennedy attend more to the *Mahbharata*, just as most Western scholars of rhetoric attend more to the *Iliad* than the *Odyssey*. The *Mahbharata* and the *Iliad* are both epics of war, with ample speeches orchestrating the public and personal spheres in a time of war. The *Mahbharata* speeches offer the protocol of negotiations and diplomacy, and instructions for call to arms, conciliation, subversion of allies, bribery, and punishment. In the *Mahbharata* we also find speeches of lamentation and debate among nobles on political issues.

3. See Peters (1999) for a history of theories problematizing the notion of speech as exchange.

4. For a linguistic study of gift exchange in ancient Hindu culture, see Beneveniste (1997).

5. It is worth noting that while the classical Greeks identified this rhetorical style, they did not sanction it for civic speech. Instead, they sanctioned hypotaxis, or vertical thought/speech that structures meaning through overt logical connectors. In sanctioning hypotaxis as the proper style of civic speech (speech that constitutes and orchestrates culture), the classical Greeks were rejecting their archaic epic past, which was styled paratactically.

6. See Lord (1960) for the foundational study of parataxis in oral epic poetry.

7. For critical essays addressing and responding to the need for rhetorical scholarship beyond the Greeks, see Lipson and Binkley (2004).

8. For critical essays on the many *Ramayanas*, see Paula Richman (1991), (1995), (2001).

9 In addition to Richman see also Kaskikallio (1996, 145); Sullivan (1990, 13–21); Doniger (1992, 28).

10. The other text in the category of Smriti scriptures is the *Mahbharata*.

11. Perhaps most striking for rhetorical interests is the punishment of Tataka in the form of removing her speech and replacing it with the vile noises of a monster. Speech is told through this story to be a virtue of beauty, and its absence a condition of the monstrous.

12. I have addressed this issue in other writings: Mifsud (2006), and Mifsud, Sutton, Fox (2005).

WORKS CITED

- Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- Beneveniste, Emile. "Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary." *The Logic of the Gift*. Ed. Alan Schrift. New York: Routledge, 1997, 33–42.
- Brockington, John. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Vol. 12. Handbuch der Orientalistik. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1988.
- . "The Textualization of the Sanskrit Epics." *Textualization of Oral Epics*. Ed. Lauri Hanks. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000, 193–215.
- Doniger, Wendy. "Deconstruction of the Vedic Horselore." *Ritual, State, and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*. Ed. A. W. van den Hoek, D. H. A. Kolff, and M. S. Oort. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1992. 275–308.
- Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975.

- Kennedy, George. *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Koskikallio, Petteri. "From Classical to Postclassical: Changing Ideologies and Changing Epics in India." *Oral Tradition* 11.1 (1996): 144–53.
- Lipson, Carol and Roberta Binkley. *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*. Albany: SUNY P, 2004.
- Lord, Albert Bates. *Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.
- Menon, Ramesh. *The Ramayana*. New York: North Point Press, 2001.
- Mifsud, Mari Lee. "On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39.4 (2006): 89–107.
- Mifsud, Mari Lee, Jane S. Sutton, and Lindsey Fox. "Configurations: Encountering Ancient Athenian Spaces of Rhetoric, Democracy, and Woman." *Journal for International Women's Studies*. 7.2 (2005): 36–52.
- Oliver, Robert. *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1971.
- Parpola, Asko. "Pandaic and Sita: On the Historical Background of the Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.2 (2002): 361–73.
- Peters, John Durham. *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Ramanujan, A. K. "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*." *Essays on the Mahābhārata*. Ed. Arvind Sharma. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991. 429–43.
- Richman, Paula and Thapar, Romila, eds. *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001.
- Richman, Paula. "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana." *Public Culture* 7.3 (1995): 631–54.
- , ed. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.
- Sullivan, B. M. *Kṛṣṇa Dvāipāyana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata. A New Interpretation*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1990.