Danielle Feller

Rivers of *rasa* and Hearts of Stone: The Female Voice of Pathos in Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*

Bhavabhūti's[1] *Uttararāmacarita* (URC) is a play of the *nāṭaka*-type,[2] composed in seven acts. The play is mainly based on events described in the last book of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (Rm),[3] the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, from which it derives its name.[4] In this, Bhavabhūti's play differs from many other versions of the *Rāmakathā*, which often end the narrative at the point when the heroes return to Ayodhyā after their long exile. Thus, they end on a happy note and avoid the tragic events of the last book.[5] Bhavabhūti, on the other hand, does not hesitate to tackle the

1 From the prologue of his play *Mālatīmādhava*, we learn that Bhavabhūti was born in a distinguished family of learned and traditional Brahmins, in the country of Vidarbha (nowadays northern Maharashtra). According to V.V. Mirashi (*Bhavabhūti*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974: chapter 1), he was in all likelihood active as a playwright at the court of King Yaśovarman of Kanauj between c. 700 and 730 AD. Bhavabhūti is the author of three (known) plays: the *Mahāvīracarita*, the *Mālatīmādhava*, and finally the *Uttararāmacarita* (probably composed in this order). On the order of composition of Bhavabhūti's plays, see Gary Tubb, 'The Plays of Bhavabhūti', in *Innovations and Turning Points. Toward a History of Kāvya Literature*, ed. Yigal Bronner, David Shulman and Gary Tubb, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 403–410.

2 A *nāṭaka* is a heroic comedy composed in five to ten acts, based on a theme borrowed from *itihāsa*; see Lyne Bansat-Boudon, *Théâtre de l'Inde ancienne*, Paris: Gallimard, 2006, p. 1498. Its hero is either a king or a supernatural being.

3 References will be given throughout to the text of the critical edition established by Govindlal Hargovind Bhatt, et al. (ed.), The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, 7 vols, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–1975.

4 Unless mentioned otherwise, the text and the translations of the URC are by Sheldon Pollock (tr.), *Rāma's Last Act by Bhavabhūti*, Clay Sanskrit Library, New York: New York University Press and the JJC Foundation, 2007, but with the diacritics maintained. As far as we can tell from the extant literature, Bhavabhūti was the first playwright to bring the story of Rāma onto the stage. See Pollock, *Rāma's Last Act by Bhavabhūti*, p. 30, and Tubb, 'The Plays of Bhavabhūti', p. 397.

5 This reluctance may also have been shared by the visual arts. See John Brockington's article 'Stories in Stone: Sculptural Representations of the Rāma Narrative' in this volume (p. 49): '*Uttarakāṇḍa* scenes are virtually unknown before the Vijayanagara period'.

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heart-rending subject-matter of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, but, bound by the laws of the dramatic genre, he introduces some interesting twists in the tale.

In the URC, the story unfolds as follows:

> When Rāma comes to know that the people are murmuring against Sītā[6], he orders his brother Lakṣmaṇa to abandon her in the wilderness, despite her advanced state of pregnancy. Then, there is a gap of twelve years in the plot, during which time Rāma remains convinced that Sītā is dead, devoured by wild beasts. In reality, and this is revealed to him only at the end of the play, Sītā gives birth to twins in the waters of the river Ganges, and is rescued by the goddess Gaṅgā and by her own mother, the goddess Earth. She takes refuge in the Earth with her two babies. When they have been weaned, the two boys are handed over to the sage Vālmīki for their education, but Sītā remains in her mother's underground realm.
>
> Twelve years after these tragic events, Rāma starts the performance of a horse-sacrifice. He then goes to the Daṇḍaka forest and slays, though with outmost reluctance, the *śūdra* ascetic Śambūka who is unlawfully performing austerities (*tapas*).[7] Rāma recognizes the forest-environment in which he had spent many enjoyable moments with his beloved Sītā during their exile, and breaks down during a conversation with Vāsantī, the goddess of the forest. Meanwhile, Sītā herself arrives on the scene in the company of the river-goddess Tamasā, sent by the Goddess Gaṅgā who is afraid that the memory of happier days will revive Rāma's grief. Sītā remains invisible, thanks to a boon of the Gaṅgā, but a touch of her hand can be felt by Rāma who revives from his fainting-fit.
>
> Then the scene shifts to Vālmīki's hermitage, which is just then being visited by all the elders, Sītā's father King Janaka, and Rāma's mothers with Vasiṣṭha and his wife Arundhatī, who have all just returned from a twelve-year sacrifice tended by the sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. At the same moment, Rāma's sacrificial horse arrives at the hermitage protected by an army, and Rāma's son Lava challenges the passage of the horse. Lava fights with great valour alone against many, with the help of the Jṛmbhaka-*astra*s which Rāma had made over to his sons before their birth. Then the elders recognize Lava and Kuśa as Rāma's children, and Rāma himself, who arrives shortly afterwards, gradually recognizes them too. The play ends with a 'play within the play', which Vālmīki has been composing, and which is staged in front of a distinguished audience comprising gods and other semi-divine beings. This inserted play explains what happened to Sītā after she was sent to the forest and the birth of her twins in the waters of the Ganges. At the end of the play, Sītā in person comes out of the

6 Implying, of course, that she has been unfaithful to her husband during her captivity in Rāvaṇa's palace, and that Rāma should not have taken her back. This is never mentioned in so many words in the play, since it would be deemed improper. Whenever certain characters allude to this event, they whisper about it in each other's ears.

7 In the Rm 7.76, Rāma likewise kills Śambūka, though without any qualms, and then visits Agastya's hermitage. But there are no reminiscences of his stay near the Godāvarī.

> Ganges, fiction thus merging with 'reality'[8], supported by the Gaṅgā and the goddess Earth, and is returned to Rāma with the goddesses' commendation and Arundhatī's solemn testimony as to her purity.[9]

As we see, Bhavabhūti's play significantly differs from the Rm's *Uttarakāṇḍa*. My purpose here is not to list these quite numerous changes, since this has already been done before,[10] nor to address the somewhat vexed question of Bhavabhūti's sources.[11] Clearly, Bhavabhūti was thoroughly acquainted with the Rm, since he quotes five verses directly from it in his two plays based on the *Rāmakathā*, the *Mahāvīracarita* and the *Uttararāmacarita*.[12] But it is equally obvious that he did not feel bound to follow this particular model.[13] Rather, he consciously remodelled the *Rāmakathā* to suit his time and age, and his chosen genre, the drama. Thus, in the URC, the sage Vālmīki does not compose an epic

8 On this merging of fiction with reality, see David Shulman ('Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', in *Questioning Ramayanas. A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 63 and 76) who remarks: 'In this respect, the *Uttara-rāma-carita* is situated firmly within the Ramayana tradition, where the 'story', or the text that embodies it, always has an autonomous quality superseding any external reality; at critical points, the overt reality of the narrative tends to fuse mysteriously into its own frame, which hereby swallows up sequential notions of time'. And further: 'The embedded play becomes fully convergent with its external setting which, for want of a better word, we might call "reality"'.

9 In Rm 7.87.14–20, it is sage Vālmīki who testifies to her purity before the ordeal, putting at stake all the merit gained by his austerities. As we shall see below, it is quite significant, and in accordance with the overall importance of women in the play, that a woman should assume this authoritative role in the URC.

10 See e.g. Mirashi, *Bhavabhūti*, pp. 260–261.

11 See Mirashi, *Bhavabhūti*, pp. 264–265, for the question of whether the URC is not rather based on the *Rāmakathā* as told in the *Padmapurāṇa* (that also contains the episode in which Rāma's sons oppose the passage of the sacrificial horse). Mirashi on the contrary argues that it is the *Padmapurāṇa* which borrowed from Bhavabhūti's play, for, as he notes, there is no proof that the *purāṇa* is older than the URC.

12 According to Mirashi (*Bhavabhūti*, pp. 258–259), he drew from the northern recension of the Rm.

13 See the remark by Mary Brockington in her article 'Showing What Is Not: The Use of Illusion in Classical Sanskrit Rāma Plays' in this volume (p. 92): 'These tellers were not interested in telling the old, well-loved story "the right way"; they did it "my way"'.

but a play,[14] which clearly becomes Bhavabhūti's own play,[15] and the *dénouement* of the story takes place on a stage,[16] and not on a sacrificial ground.[17] Most importantly, of course, he introduces a happy end, imposed by the rules governing the dramatic genre, in which Sītā, instead of disappearing forever in the Earth, emerges out of the Ganges in the final 'play within the play' and is reunited with her husband and her two sons.

What I propose to do in this paper is to examine the way in which Bhavabhūti 'feminizes' the story, and why he has recourse to this narrative strategy of 'feminization'. I suggest that he does so for two main reasons.

In the first place, the numerous female characters of the play unite their voices[18] in blaming Rāma for his cruel deed of abandoning the pregnant Sītā in the forest and in challenging this decision.

Secondly, as a playwright, Bhavabhūti was of course especially interested in the aesthetic experience. Giving rise to pathos (*karuṇa*), the primary *rasa* of the URC, was crucial to his play. In my opinion, the many female voices precisely contribute to the production of pathos. This is achieved not only because these women characters themselves manifest grief (*śoka*), but also because they allow the emergence of grief in the male characters—first and foremost in Rāma himself. We shall tackle these two points in the above order.

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14 Furthermore, according to the prelude of the URC, the play was being shown at the festival (*yātrā*) of Kālapriyanātha. On this point, see Shulman, 'Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', pp. 61 and 79.

15 'Bhavabhūti, the master-poet, seems to have been subsumed within the persona of the first poet, Vālmīki, and (…) Bhavabhūti's *Uttara-rāma-carita* has merged into Vālmīki's text'; Shulman, 'Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', pp. 77–78.

16 The scene of Sītā's disappearance into the earth already has clear dramatic value in the Rm: all the people belonging to the four *varṇa*s (7.96.8), besides *rākṣasa*s, monkeys (7.96.7), gods (7.97.6–8), sages (enumerated in 7.96.1–6), *nāga*s, *suparṇa*s, *siddha*s (7.97.8), etc., assemble to witness the event. As if they were watching a theatrical performance, they applaud, shouting 'bravo, bravo!' (*sādhu*, *sādhu*!), and rain flowers. Everybody, except Rāma, is highly pleased and rejoices.

17 The Vedic sacrificial ritual was certainly waning in Bhavabhūti's times, even though *aśvamedha*s continued to be performed occasionally until a very late date. The last on record (not counting of course modern-day revivalist performances) was undertaken by the Maharaja of Amber, Jai Singh II (the famous astronomer king), in 1716.

18 On the question of the female voice in the Rm, especially Sītā's voice unmediated by male voices, see Sally Sutherland Goldman, 'The Voice of Sītā in Vālmīki's Sundarakāṇḍa', in *Questioning Ramayanas*.

As far as the first reason is concerned, what particularly intrigued me, while reading the play, is its plethora of female characters—eleven in total.[19] Some of them play very little or no role at all in the Rm, which in any case is not primarily about women and their worldview. As Sutherland Goldman puts it: 'The concerns of Vālmīki's epic prove primarily masculine, leaving little opportunity for expression by women of feminine concerns'.[20] What is more, in the URC, all the female characters, with the exception of a doorkeeper (*pratīhārī*), are persons of authority, such as queens, elderly Brahmin ladies, and even goddesses, and many of them speak Sanskrit, a clear sign of high standing.[21] Their roles are evenly distributed throughout the URC, and there is hardly an act in which they do not play an important role, except perhaps act 5, a concession to the martial spirit of the initial *Rāmakathā*, which describes the battle between Lava and the protectors of Rāma's sacrificial horse.[22] Here is the list of the female characters in the URC, first human, then divine, in order of increasing hierarchical importance:

Pratīhārī—a door-keeper (speaks Prakrit);
Sītā—the heroine, queen (speaks Prakrit);
Kauśalyā—Rāma's mother (speaks Prakrit);
Ātreyī—a female ascetic (*tāpasī*) (speaks Sanskrit);
Arundhatī—Vasiṣṭha's wife (speaks Sanskrit);
Vidyādharī—the wife of a *vidyādhara* (speaks Prakrit);
Vāsantī—a sylvan goddess (*vanadevatā*) (speaks Sanskrit);
Muralā—a river goddess (speaks Sanskrit);
Tamasā—a river goddess (speaks Sanskrit);

19 In this regard, we may notice an interesting progression in Bhavabhūti's three successive plays—*Mahāvīracarita*, *Mālatīmādhava* and *Uttararāmacarita*—in which the women characters increase in number and importance.

20 Sutherland Goldman, 'The Voice of Sītā in Vālmīki's Sundarakāṇḍa', p. 224.

21 Tubb ('The Plays of Bhavabhūti', p. 402) comments on Bhavabhūti's 'brahmanically intellectual way' of composing plays and on his reluctance to use traditional Prakrit metres, remarking that even Prakrit-speaking women in the URC switch to Sanskrit whenever they utter a verse. On Bhavabhūti's Prakrit, see the interesting remarks made by R.G. Harshé, *Observations sur la Vie et l'Oeuvre de Bhavabhūti*, Thèse pour le doctorat de l'Université, Paris: Éditions littéraires de France, 1938, pp. 60–63.

22 Although a woman has one of the leading roles even in this act, since this battle is not enacted on stage but indirectly narrated in a dialogue between a *vidyādhara* and his *vidyādharī* wife. However, we should note that the dictate against enacting battles and death on stage was not an absolute one, as shown by B. Śliwczyńska in 'Death on the Stage in Sanskrit Classical Theatre: A Long-Sustained Misinterpretation', in *CEENIS Current Research Series*, ed. Danuta Stasik and Anna Trynkowska, Warsaw: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2013, pp. 68–75. For instance, at the beginning of act 2, Rāma apparently slays Śambūka on stage.

Bhāgīrathī/Gaṅgā—a river goddess (speaks Sanskrit);
Pṛthivī—Sītā's mother, the goddess Earth (speaks Sanskrit).

Among the prominent characters, we may note that Sītā, Kauśalyā and the Earth play the same role as in the Rm.[23] On the other hand, Ātreyī, Muralā, the *vidyādharī* and Vāsantī do not appear at all in Vālmīki's text. Arundhatī's name is cited a total of three times in the Rm, but only in the context of comparisons in which she figures as the ideal virtuous wife. She plays no role in the story. The two river goddesses Tamasā and Gaṅgā of course appear in the Rm as rivers, as does the Godāvarī, which is mentioned in the URC but does not appear in person on stage. In the Rm, Sītā prays to all the rivers they ford on their way into exile: to the Gaṅgā (2.52), then to the river Kālindī (= Yamunā; 2.55). The rivers are clearly considered as goddesses, but are not personified. In 3.64, Rāma, who is desperately looking for Sītā whom the demon Rāvaṇa has just abducted, talks to the Godāvarī and asks her if she knows where Sītā has gone. But the Godāvarī is scared of Rāvaṇa and does not dare to reply. The river appears as a sentient being, but she is not given a voice. The Tamasā (the river of darkness) is particularly well chosen in the URC as Sītā's companion, since Sītā in this text is said to spend her exile underground. In the Rm, the Tamasā is of course the river near Vālmīki's hermitage, not far from the Gaṅgā (cf. Rm 1.2.3), on whose shore the sage witnessed the pitiful scene of the *krauñca*'s murder and pronounced his first *śloka* emanating from his grief (1.2.14).[24] The Tamasā is thus a perfect choice as the river of pathos, and as the presiding deity of act 3 of the URC which positively drips with *karuṇa-rasa*.

Thus, by the sheer number of female characters, as well as by their high standing, we see that Bhavabhūti has given special prominence to the female voices and opinions in his play. In choosing to retell the inauspicious events of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, he was of course faced with the unavoidable problem of accounting for Rāma's cruel deed of abandoning the pregnant Sītā in the wilderness—a problem which all the interpreters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, whether ancient or

23 However, in the Rm, the Earth does not utter a word when she takes Sītā with her to her underground regions.

24 According to Biardeau and Porcher, Vālmīki, the sage 'from the termite-hill' (termite hills, as is well known, communicating with the underworld), living near the 'obscure' river Tamasā, is a consort of the Earth and hence a father-figure for Sītā herself'; Madeleine Biardeau and Marie-Claude Porcher (tr.), *Le Rāmāyaṇa de Vālmīki*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999, p. 1692.

modern, have faced.[25] To excuse Rāma, he gives the standard answer, namely, that Rāma was forced by circumstances—the famous *vox populi* which should always be heeded—to behave as he did.[26] Furthermore, in the scheme of the triple path (*tri-varga*), consisting of religious duty (*dharma*), profit (*artha*) and pleasure (*kāma*), *dharma* necessarily comes first,[27] and ruin awaits a king who is too lustful and attached to sensory objects.[28] But the URC also raises another, more original question in this connection. It does not only ask, 'How could Rāma have done it?', but also, 'How could the elders, especially the *female* elders of the family, have allowed it?'. Thus, the sylvan goddess Vāsantī exclaims in act 2, when she comes to know of Sītā's sad fate:

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25 For a survey of the various literary responses to the abandoning of Sītā (*Sītātyāga*), see Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume VII. Uttarakāṇḍa*, Introduction, Translation and Annotation, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 82–104. Other deeds of Rāma are also criticized in the URC. Thus, Rāma's own son Lava sarcastically enumerates the list of Rāma's less than admirable actions in 5.35.

26 Even before the unhappy events unfold, there is a series of portents in act 1 that announce them and even predispose Rāma to act as he did. Thus, the elders send Rāma the following message: 'We have been detained at the sacrifice of your brother-in-law (Ṛṣyaśṛṅga). You are but a child and your kingship has just begun. Dedicate yourself to the conciliation of your subjects since reputation is a treasure more precious than life itself' (1.11: *jāmāṭṛyajñena vayaṃ niruddhās tvaṃ bāla evāsi navaṃ ca rājyam / yuktaḥ prajānām anurañjane syās svasmād yaśo yat paramaṃ dhanaṃ vaḥ*). To this, Rāma replies: 'Affection, compassion, pleasure… indeed, Jānakī herself I wouldn't scruple to renounce to propitiate the people' (1.12: *snehaṃ dayāṃ ca saukhyaṃ ca yadi vā jānakīm api / ārādhanāya lokasya muñcato nāsti me vyathā*). Admiring the wall-paintings in the royal pavilion which narrate their adventures in exile, Sītā innocently and yet prophetically remarks: 'I feel like visiting the unspoiled deep forest and bathing in the pure, placid, cool waters of the Bhāgīrathī' (act 1, after 33: *jāṇe puṇo vi pasaṇṇagambhīrāsu vaṇarāisu viharissaṃ pavittasommasisirāvagāhaṃ ca bhaavadiṃ bhāīradhiṃ avagāhissaṃ*). As Shulman ('Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', p. 71) notes, she uses the simple future tense, which makes her statement sound more like a prediction than like a wish.

27 See for instance *Manusmṛti* 4.176ab: 'He should renounce profit and pleasure if they should conflict with religion' and 12.38: 'Pleasure is the mark of darkness, profit is said to be the mark of energy, and religion the mark of lucidity, and each is better than the one before it'; Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (tr.), *The Laws of Manu*, London: Penguin Books, 1991.

28 See *Manusmṛti* 7.27 and 7.30.

> How awful. How could such a thing have happened with Arundhatī and Vasiṣṭha presiding over the Raghu clan, and the aged queens still alive?[29]

The answer is that all the elderly people had just left Ayodhyā to attend Ṛṣyaśṛṅga's sacrifice. The prelude to act 1 already takes care to stress the elders' absence. And we see that, excepting the sage Vasiṣṭha, all these elders are women:

> The queen mothers of Rāma have gone off—watched over by Vasiṣṭha and following Arundhatī—for a ritual at their son-in-law's ashram.[30]

Thus, the ill-starred couple were left alone in a deserted household, and Rāma acted rashly for lack of proper guidance. The fact that Bhavabhūti is so insistent on this point of course indirectly shows the power wielded by the women, at least in the family sphere, and implies that in normal circumstances, in the presence of the older ladies, Rāma would never have been allowed to abandon his wife—at least not in this extremely cruel fashion. The elderly women are thus white-washed, and the responsibility for abandoning Sītā squarely falls on Rāma's shoulders, whose own guilt is, however, tempered by his lack of experience: he is a mere youth (*bāla*).[31] In contrast, the Rm shows us a Rāma who acts as the omnipotent monarch, cowing from the start his brothers into silence (7.45) —which, of course, indirectly shows not only that his brothers, if allowed, would

29 *hā kaṣṭam. arundhatīvasiṣṭhādhiṣṭhiteṣu raghukadambakeṣu jīvantīṣu ca vṛddhāsu rājñīṣu katham idaṃ jātam*; prelude to act 2, after verse 6.

30 *vasiṣṭhādhiṣṭhitā devyo gatā rāmasya mātaraḥ*; 1.3. Again, repeated in the prologue, after 4: 'Out of deference to him (Ṛṣyaśṛṅga) the elders have gone on a visit, leaving behind their daughter-in-law Jānakī, though she is far advanced in pregnancy' (*tadanurodhāt kaṭhoragarbhām api vadhūṃ jānakīṃ vimucya gurujanas tatra gataḥ*).
In the URC, Śāntā, the wife of the sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, is said to be King Daśaratha's daughter.

31 As Mary Brockington remarks in her paper in this volume 'Showing What Is Not' (p. 82): 'In many respects, the composers of Rāma *nāṭya*s stand outside the conventional understanding of the figure of Rāma developing from epic hero to supreme deity. They do not portray him with increasing reverence; their portrayal is more likely to arouse scorn and exasperation in his audience than the wonder and admiration evoked by the warrior of the epics, or the devotion evoked by the *bhakti* movement'. While things are clearly not carried so far in the URC as to 'arouse scorn and exasperation', it is clear nonetheless that Rāma appears very human in this text. But to be fair to Bhavabhūti, the Rm passages likewise abound in which Rāma laments and gives free vent to his grief after Sītā's abduction, behaving less than heroically.

have voiced dissent,[32] but also that Rāma did not trust himself not to yield to their entreaties. The elder queens and their reaction are not mentioned in the Rm, and we never hear what they have to say on the topic.[33]

The URC is quite harsh in its evaluation of Rāma's deed—harsher, as Goldman notes,[34] than Kālidāsa in his *Raghuvaṃśa*. Throughout the play, many reproaches are levelled at Rāma for abandoning Sītā: even Rāma's spy, the inauspiciously named Durmukha, who comes to give him the sad news of the townspeople's whispers, is shocked at Rāma's decision: 'The queen, already purified by fire, is purified the more by the continuation of the Raghu line she carries in her womb. How can my lord have reached such a decision on the basis of malicious gossip about her?'.[35] Later, Sītā's father Janaka feels anger mixed with grief as he remembers what happened: 'How dare anyone speak like this and insult us more when Rāma has already insulted us enough!'.[36] As Goldman rightly notes,[37] Rāma is equally hard on himself. His laments at the end of act 1, after taking the hard decision to abandon Sītā, are especially moving and reveal that he considers himself a monster. He calls himself a miserable wretch (*mandabhāgyaḥ*, after 41), a cruel man (*nṛśaṃsaḥ*, after 45), a butcher who slaughters his own pet bird:

> From childhood my delicate love fed on delicacies and was never parted from me because of our deep affection. And now I am ready to use deceit and deliver her over to death, like a man who butchers a small pet bird.[38]

His self-abusive vocabulary grows even more shocking in the subsequent lines: he calls himself an untouchable (*asparśanīyaḥ*), an outcaste, (*pātakī*), a pariah (*caṇḍāla*, verse 1.47), a poison tree (*viṣa-druma*, verse 1.47). Even twelve years

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32 See Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki ... Uttarakāṇḍa*, p. 84.

33 Rāma's mothers are of course still alive at that time, and nothing is said in the Rm about their being away from court. They die much later at the very end of the Rm (7.99).

34 Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki ... Uttarakāṇḍa*, p. 88.

35 *kahaṃ dāṇiṃ aggiparisuddhāe gabbhaṭṭhidapavittarahuulasaṃtāṇāe devīe dujjaṇavaaṇādo evvaṃ vavasidaṃ deveṇa*; act 1, after verse 44. To this, Rāma replies: 'Silence! How dare you call the people of the city and countryside malicious?' (*śāntam. kathaṃ durjanāḥ paurajānapadāḥ*).

36 *kaṣṭam, evaṃvādinā janena rāmabhadraparibhūtā api vayaṃ punaḥ paribhūyāmahe*; act 4, after verse 10.

37 Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki ... Uttarakāṇḍa*, p. 88.

38 *śaiśavāt prabhṛti poṣitāṃ priyaiḥ sauhṛdād apṛthagāśayām priyām / chadmanā paridadāmi mṛtyave sauniko gṛhaśakuntikām iva*; 1.46.

later, several descriptions of his physical decrepitude show that he is still consumed by remorse.[39]

But certainly, the women characters in the URC are the ones who heap the severest reproach on Rāma. Thus, in act 2, when Vāsantī, the goddess of the Daṇḍaka forest who used to be Sītā's dear friend, learns about Sītā's sad fate from the ascetic Ātreyī, she laments and cries out: 'Oh my beloved friend and most honorable woman, that such should be your lot in life. Dear Rāma, dear Rāma… No, enough of you!'.[40] She cannot even bring herself to talk about Rāma again. And when subsequently she meets Rāma in person, she does not hesitate to upbraid him sternly, telling him that he is ruthless (*dāruṇaḥ*, act 3, after verse 26), and quoting his own words of blandishment to Sītā back at him, with the irony of despair:

> 'You are my life, you are my second heart, moonlight to my eyes, nectar to my limbs', and so on—with countless honeyed words you charmed her, that simple girl… But enough, why bother saying more? (She faints).[41]

But soon recovering, she continues her scolding, not without reasoning, as we see:

> Ah, heartless man, you prize your reputation, they say, but what ill repute is worse than this? What can have become of the fawn-eyed woman in the woods, do you suppose? Tell me, my master.[42]

To this, Rāma can only reply that he believes she has been killed by beasts of prey (3.29). We may note that Rāma behaves perfectly meekly during the whole conversation, and fully confesses to his guilt, never once trying to justify himself or explain away his deed.

Sītā, who is invisibly listening in to the whole conversation, scolds Vāsantī *in petto*, because her words make Rāma suffer: 'You are cruel, Vāsantī, so

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39 The river goddess Muralā, act 3 after 1, says that he is exceedingly emaciated (*parikṣīṇaḥ*). Sītā in act 3, after 8, and Vāsantī in 3.23 make similar comments on his paleness and weakness. In 6.41, his mothers and Janaka even swoon when they see him so changed after 12 years.

40 *hā priyasakhi, hā mahābhāge, īdṛśas te nirmāṇabhāgaḥ. rāmabhadra, rāmabhadra… atha vālaṃ tvayā!*; act 2, after 6.

41 *tvaṃ jīvitaṃ tvam asi me hṛdayaṃ dvitīyaṃ tvaṃ kaumudī nayanayor amṛtaṃ tvam aṅge*; 3.27.

42 *ayi kaṭhora yaśaḥ kila te priyaṃ kim ayaśo nanu ghoram ataḥ param / kim abhavad vipine hariṇīdṛśaḥ kathaya nātha kathaṃ bata manyase*; 3.28.

cruel'.[43] But Sītā herself, who is still very much in love with Rāma and understands his reasons, is not above reproaching him—though not directly to his face. Hearing Rāma lament and call out to her, she says (her voice breaking with anger): 'My husband, really, this is hardly in keeping with all that has happened'.[44] Further, she tells her confidante, the river Tamasā: 'He disowned me like that so groundlessly'.[45] As for Rāma's mother Kauśalyā and the other queens, they express their disapproval and anger, not in words, but in deeds: they were so upset with Rāma's behaviour and Sītā's banishment that, not wishing to see Rāma's face ever again, they decided to go and live in Vālmīki's hermitage instead of returning to Ayodhyā, once the sacrifice was over.[46] Finally, in act 7, in the play within the play, Sītā's mother, the Earth herself, is unsparing in her words against Rāma, and her behaviour shows how extremely angry and pained she is by what happened to her daughter. Pṛthivī even swoons, which causes the Gaṅgā to remark: 'Even Earth who bears all can tremble—what force love for a child exerts'.[47] The Earth is supposed to be the hardest and most enduring of all beings, since she has to bear the weight of the creatures and witness their sufferings.[48] Yet even she feels sorrow and resentment. She remarks disparagingly about Rāma:

> To pay no heed to the hand he grasped in childhood, when he was a child, or to me or Janaka or Fire or her deference or his progeny.[49]

As we understand from her words, Rāma, by his action, did not only hurt Sītā, but he deeply insulted and offended all the elders and divine powers, besides hurting his own children. And when Sītā talks of Rāma, calling him 'my husband' (*ajjaütta*), Pṛthivī retorts with obvious scorn and disdain: 'Ha, do you have a husband?'.[50] We may note that the 'earth(l)y' goddesses of the Forest and of

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43 *dāruṇāsi vāsanti dāruṇāsi*; after 3.38.

44 (*samanyugadgadam*) *ajjaüta asarisaṃ khu edaṃ imassa vuttantassa*; act 3, after verse 12.

45 *ṇikkāraṇapariccāiṇo vi edassa evvaṃvidheṇa daṃsaṇeṇa*; act 3, before verse 13.

46 See act 2, after verse 6; act 4, after verse 10.

47 *viśvaṃbharāpi nāma vyathata iti jitam apatyasnehena*; act 7, before verse 4.

48 In act 4, between verses 4 and 5, Janaka calls the Earth very hard (*atidṛḍhā*) and in 4.5 cruel (*dāruṇe*), since she could bear all that happened to Sītā. As Shulman, Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion, p. 81, remarks: 'There is even a somewhat sinister resonance, throughout this play, between the chiming notes of *karuṇā*—all that is compassionate and empathic—and *dāruṇa*, 'harsh, terrible, cruel'.

49 *na pramāṇīkrtaḥ pāṇir bālye bālena pīḍitaḥ*; 7.5.

50 *āḥ kas tavāryaputraḥ*; act 7, after verse 5.

the Earth are harder against Rāma than the river-goddesses, who rather try to defend him and explain away his deed, as does the Gaṅgā when the Earth speaks harshly against him:

> The dreadful infamy had spread abroad and the purifying trial by fire took place on Laṅkā; how were people here to be expected to give it credence? The ancestral wealth of the Ikṣvākus lies in propitiating all the world. So, in these straits, truly dreadful straits, what was my child supposed to do?[51]

Thus, as can be seen from the above quotations, Bhavabhūti makes skilful use of the female characters of his play to voice direct or indirect reproach at Rāma's actions, and to promote dialogues or discussions—either with Rāma, or about him—concerning his decisions. We may surmise that the events of the *Rāmakathā*, especially the *Sītātyāga*-episode, were indeed a common matter of debate and controversy among the womenfolk in Bhavabhūti's own times, and that his play reflects their preoccupations. Certainly, the playwright shows sympathy with the women's cause, and we may even go a step further and imagine that to give voice—of dissent—to the female characters of his drama was perhaps a way of pleasing and attracting his female public—even though the last point would of course deserve further investigation.

Let us now turn to the second reason why, in my opinion, Bhavabhūti gave pre-eminence to the female characters in the URC—namely, in order to favour the production of the *karuṇa-rasa* or pathetic sentiment, which is the dominant *rasa* (*pradhāna-rasa*) of the play.[52] Since Rāma logically imagines that Sītā is dead (cf. 3.29), devoured by ferocious beasts, the dominant *rasa* of the URC is clearly the *karuṇa-rasa* and not the *vipralambhaśṛṅgāra-rasa* or sentiment of love in separation, because there is no hope left.[53] As Bharata in his *Nātyaśāstra* notes on the distinction between *karuṇa* and *vipralambhaśṛṅgāra*:

> The pathetic sentiment relates to a condition of despair owing to the affliction under a curse, separation from dear ones, loss of wealth, death or captivity, while the Erotic sentiment based on separation relates to a condition of retaining optimism arising out of yearning and anxiety. Hence the pathetic sentiment and the erotic sentiment in separation differ from each other.[54]

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51 *ghoraṃ loke vitatam ayaśo yā ca vahnau viśuddhir laṅkādvīpe katham iva janas tām iha śraddadhātu*; 7.6.

52 Other *rasa*s in the play include *hāsya*, *vīra* and *adbhuta*.

53 See also the discussion on this point in Mirashi, *Bhavabhūti*, pp. 280–282.

54 NŚ 6.45; Manomohan Ghosh (tr.), *The Nāṭyaśāstra (A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics) ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, 2 vols, Calcutta: Granthalaya Private Limited, 1967 (1st published 1951).

On Sītā's side, things may be a little different, since she, of course, knows that Rāma is alive. This is illustrated by the following verse in which the river goddess Tamasā describes Sītā. Like Kālidāsa before him, Bhavabhūti was fond of alluding to the literary theory of *rasa* within his poetry itself, which of course also shows how important the topic was to him:

> Her face covered by her disheveled hair, all the more beautiful for her wan and sunken cheeks, the very image of pity, the embodiment of the pain of love's parting, is Jānakī entering the woods.[55]

As we see, Sītā is both the 'image of pathos' (*karuṇasya mūrtir*) and the pain of separation incarnate (*śarīriṇī virahavyathā*). She knows that Rāma is alive and longs for him, and yet she has no hope of ever being reunited with him.

Sorrow or grief (*śoka*), the durable psychological state (*bhāva*) giving rise to the *karuṇa-rasa*, seems to be narrowly connected with the female element, and this is already stated in so many words by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* 7.14: 'Sorrow relates to women, persons of the inferior type, and it has its origin in affliction (of any kind)'. Now, according to Ānandavardhana (in his *vṛtti* on *Dhvanyāloka* 4.5), the overall *rasa* (*pradhāna-rasa*) of the Rm is likewise the *karuṇa-rasa*.[56] It is of course clear that Ānandavardhana (9th century AD) composed his work much later than the Rm, and it is doubtful whether Vālmīki's concern with *rasa* was as central to his work as Bhavabhūti's. Nevertheless, the Rm's opening scene already stresses the importance of *karuṇa*: Vālmīki's first poetic utterance (the curse on the Niṣāda[57] who killed the amorous *krauñca* bird[58]) is the pure expression of grief, and the *śloka* which spontaneously bursts from his mouth to curse the hunter has its origin in the sage's *śoka* (grief). However, we should not forget that even before Vālmīki's voice, the first voice that is raised in grief in the Rm is that of the *krauñcī*, the female crane:

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55 *paripāṇḍudurbalakapolasundaraṃ dadhatī vilolakabarīkam ānanam / karuṇasya mūrtir atha vā śarīriṇī virahavyatheva vanam eti jānakī*; 3.4.

56 On this point, see the discussion in Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki … Uttarakāṇḍa*, pp. 60–63.

57 Rm 1.2.14: *mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṃ tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ / yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam*; 'May you not obtain a position of honour for all eternity, Niṣāda, since you killed one of this pair of cranes, the male, who was intoxicated by love' (translation mine). Bhavabhūti quotes this verse in URC 2.5.

58 The Indian sarus crane (*Grus antigone antigone*), according to the detailed investigation by Julia Leslie, 'A Bird Bereaved: The Identity and Significance of Vālmīki's Krauñca', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 26, 1998, pp. 455–487.

> Seeing him (the male *krauñca*) struck down and writhing on the ground, his body covered with blood, his mate uttered a piteous cry.[59]

Thus, the *krauñcī*'s primeval and inarticulate cry of grief sounds as a foreboding of Sītā's own voice, which will be raised in anguish several times in the course of the story. Indeed, more than Vālmīki's sorrow, and more than the *krauñcī*'s, it is really Sītā's lasting grief which allows the pathetic flavour to emerge durably from the Rm.

We see from the above examples that Bhavabhūti's choice of female voices to produce the *karuṇa-rasa* is not unprecedented in Sanskrit literature[60] and Sanskrit literary theory. This is not to say, of course, that Rāma himself feels no pain: there is no doubt that the hero and heroine of the play are the primary sources of *rasa*—the so-called *ālambana-vibhāva*s. Clearly, *śoka* is felt first and foremost by Rāma and Sītā themselves. But the female characters, in that they give free vent to their own grief—by crying, lamenting, swooning, scolding, etc.—in turn allow the male characters to express theirs. We might say that the women in the play have a maieutic function: by their expressions of grief, no less than by their questions and challenges, they allow the hidden and long-denied emotions to resurface through the hardened carapace of conventional behaviour.

Thus, Rāma breaks down when he enters the environment of the forest, which is overwhelmingly feminine, being embodied in, and personified by, the *vanadevatā* Vāsantī—the vernal one.[61] This forest is described at considerable

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59 Rm 1.2.11: *taṃ śonitaparītāṅgaṃ veṣṭamānaṃ mahītale* / *bhāryā tu nihataṃ dṛṣṭvā rurāva karuṇām giram*; tr. Robert P. Goldman: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume I. Bālakāṇḍa*, Introduction, Translation and Annotation, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. In the whole description, the two birds are talked of in human terms, which heightens our feeling of empathy towards them. The *krauñcī* is the bird's wife (*bhāryā*). The male bird is repeatedly called *dvija* ('twice-born'), a term which can be applied to a bird but also to a Brahmin, thus opposing him starkly to the untouchable Niṣāda. This makes the latter's crime even worse, perhaps equal to murder of a Brahmin (*brahmahatyā*), and explains the harshness of the curse and the doom pronounced on the Niṣādas.

60 In this connection, we can also mention the highly pathetic and rightly acclaimed act 4 of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, in which Śakuntalā bids a tearful good-bye to the long-familiar and beloved world of the forest-hermitage, before leaving for king Duṣyanta's capital. A well-known anonymous verse quotes this act, among all dramas, and four verses within it (whose exact identity is a matter of dispute), as the acme of *kāvya*: *kāvyeṣu nāṭakaṃ ramyaṃ tatra śākuntalaṃ varam* / *tatrāpi ca caturtho 'ṅkas tatra śloka-catuṣṭayam*.

61 Spring (*vasanta*) is of course the season of love, the most sensuous of all seasons, and as such, more capable than any other of reviving the sparks of Rāma's passion for Sītā.

length (2.18–25),[62] and the aim of this depiction is clearly to plunge Rāma (and the readers and spectators of the play with him) into a sensuous environment infused with sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations which remind him of a happier past, and quite literally dissolve his composure.

> Here mountain streams run with water cold and clear and fragrant with the flowers of vines and rushes shaken by the lusty birds, and their strong currents noisily tumble amidst the arbors of rose-apple trees dark with their ripened loads of fruit.[63]

Reading the verse, we visualize the wild and charming forest, we feel the touch of cool waters, we smell the scent of wild flowers, hear the song of birds and taste the fruit of the rose apple-trees. When she sees Rāma, Vāsantī displays her command over the forest-environment by a welcoming verse in which she orders the woods to give him offerings that flatter all his senses:

> Let the trees offer a welcoming gift of flowers and fruits, drizzling them with honey. Let the forest breezes blow, bearing the full scent of freshly blooming lotuses. And let the birds begin a sweet unbroken song in full-throated warbling. For once again King Rāma himself has come on a visit to this forest.[64]

Even though he is described by the title 'king' or 'god' (*deva*), Rāma quickly loses his kingly, courtly, stiff and conventional composure, and is as overcome and helpless as any ordinary human being to resist this assault on his senses which reawakens his fondest memories:

> Maithilī would give these trees and birds and deer water, seeds, and grass from her lotus hand, and to see them again a certain emotion rises within me as if it were the liquid of my heart and capable of breaking even a stone.[65]

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62 As Manomohan Ghosh (*The Nāṭyaśāstra*, p. lix) remarks, long verbal descriptions also functioned in the stead of painted scenery, which did not exist in the Sanskrit theatrical tradition. He quotes as an example 'the grand description of the Daṇḍaka forest in the *Uttararāmacarita*'.

63 *iha samadaśakuntākrāntavānīravīrutprasavasurabhiśītasvacchatoyā vahanti / phalabharapariṇāmaśyāmajambūnikuñja-skhalanamukharabhūrisrotaso nirjhariṇyaḥ*; 2.20.

64 *dadatu taravaḥ puṣpair arghyaṃ phalaiś ca madhuścyutaḥ sphuṭitakamalāmodaprāyāḥ pravāntu vanānilāḥ / kalam aviralaṃ rajyatkaṇṭhāḥ kvanatsu śakuntayaḥ punar idam ayaṃ devo rāmaḥ svayaṃ vanam āgataḥ*; 3.25.

65 *karakamalavitīrṇair ambunīvāraśaṣpais taruśakunikuraṅgān maithilī yān apuṣyat / bhavati mama vikāras teṣu dṛṣṭeṣu ko'pi drava iva hṛdayasya prastarodbhedayogyaḥ*; 3.26.
In 3.26 c-d, I have followed the reading and translation found in M.R. Kale, (ed. and tr.), *The Uttararāmacharita of Bhavabhūti*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1934, verse 3.25.

Rāma's own hardened heart is of course the stone that is breaking. Bhavabhūti is renowned for his metaphor of the breaking or weeping stone. Similarly, in 1.28d, while showing a wall painting depicting Rāma's despair when Sītā was abducted, Lakṣmaṇa remarks that his behaviour 'can still make a stone shed tears and break a heart of diamond!'.[66]

Further on, Rāma tells Vāsantī:

> The various objects of long familiarity move me; and so being helpless, I weep today; please forgive me.[67]

Sītā herself is similarly overcome and melts into tears when she sees Rāma again after their long separation. This is how her companion, the river-goddess Tamasā, describes her:

> A flood of tears surging in spate arising from your bliss and grief is released by your eyes wide with longing, and your glances flowing with love, white and sweet and innocent, are drenching the lord of your heart as if they were a stream of milk.[68]

As Shulman notes, 'Throughout this play (…) we find a preference, even a powerful yearning, for states of melting, flowing, flooding, heating, softening, depetrifying, weeping, bathing, soaking through a frozen or calcified surface'.[69] As we see, tears are not only painful, they also bring solace and, like milk or rain, sustain and nourish and ultimately revive the afflicted, hardened and deadened heart. As Tamasā remarks: 'So surely to weep is a blessing!'.[70] Grief, and the resulting *karuṇa-rasa* (and we remember of course that the term *rasa* primar-

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66 *api grāvā rodity api dalati vajrasya hṛdayam*; tr. Pollock, *Rāma's Last Act by Bhavabhūti*, modified.
As Shulman ('Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', p. 80) aptly remarks: 'This is an inner drama of water at war with stone'.

67 *ciraparicitās tv ete bhāvāḥ paridravayanti mām idam aśaraṇair adyāpy evaṃ prasīdata rudyate*; 3.33c-d.
Similarly, Janaka at the beginning of act 4 complains that he has not even been able to cry after Sītā was unjustly exiled: 'One is too ashamed even to weep to one's full' (*lajjayā svacchandam ākranditum api na śakyate*; act 4, before verse 4). But then he allows himself to be overcome by grief when he speaks with the older queens for the first time in 12 years, letting long pent-up emotions overflow.

68 *vilulitam atipūrair bāṣpam ānandaśokaprabhavam avasṛjantī tṛṣṇayottānadīrghā / snapayati hṛdayeśaṃ snehaniṣyandinī tedhavalabahalamugdhā dugdhakulyeva dṛṣṭiḥ*; 3.24.

69 Shulman, 'Bhavabhūti on Cruelty and Compassion', p. 73.

70 *bhavati nanu lābho hi ruditam*; 3.31d.

ily means 'juice' or 'sap', something liquid, that can flow) result into overall melting and sinking. Not less than three times in the play, we come across the metaphor of pathos (*karuṇa*) compared to a stream or flood of water (3.37; 3.48; 4.8.) In 3.36, Rāma declares:

> Every attempt I made with the greatest effort to control the intensification of pity as it was stirred to the point of wild frenzy, was thwarted within, each and every one, by an indescribable transformation of consciousness that then poured out in full strength, as flood water surging unabated pours through a dam of sand it has destroyed.[71]

The term *vikāra* (lit. change, alteration, emotion, deviation from the natural state) is already used by Rāma in 3.26 (quoted above). Clearly Rāma realizes that he is no longer himself, no longer master of his emotions and unable to keep up appearances. Continuing the same metaphor of the stream-like pathos, Tamasā exclaims in act 3:

> There is only a single *rasa*—pity—but it takes different forms since it changes in response to circumstances that are changing, just the way that water forms into whirlpool, bubble or wave though in the end it all remains the same: nothing but water.[72]

We see how aptly this verse is spoken by a river goddess, who, if anyone, knows all about 'eddies, bubbles and waves', and in particular by the river Tamasā, who knows everything about the many manifestations of pathos, having witnessed on her own shores the *krauñca*'s pitiful murder and Vālmīki's first *śoka*-born *śloka*. From the prologue to act 3 and the discussion between the two rivers, Muralā (a

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71 *helollolakṣubhitakaruṇojjṛmbhanastambhanārthaṃ yo yo yatnaḥ katham api mayādhīyate taṃ tam antaḥ / bhittvā bhittvā prasarati balāt ko'pi cetovikāras toyasyevāpratihatarayaḥ saikataṃ setum oghaḥ*; 3.37.
This verse composed in the Mandākrāntā metre contains manifold echoes (both lexical and semantic) of Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*: 1.3; 1.13; 1.20; 1.28, etc… The *Meghadūta* is of course the poem *par excellence* on pain brought about by love in separation.
At the end of the drama, while watching the play within the play, Rāma is likewise plunged in 'waves of pity', *karuṇormayaḥ*, and is reduced to 'some condition that is impossible to describe', *kām api daśām* (7.12).

72 *eko rasaḥ karuṇa eva nimittabhedād bhinnaḥ pṛthak pṛthag ivāśrayate vivartān / āvartabudbudataraṅgamayān vikārān ambho yathā salilam eva tu tat samagram*; 3.47.
In a similar vein, Arundhatī remarks in 4.8: 'A person's sorrows from the loss of a dear kinsman may be flowing in spate but the very sight of a beloved friend makes them unbearable as if augmented by a thousand streams' (*saṃtānavāhīny api mānuṣāṇāṃ duḥkhāni sadbandhuviyogajāni / dṛṣṭe jane preyasi duḥsahāni srotaḥsahasrair iva saṃplavante*).

tributary of the Godāvarī) and Tamasā (a tributary of the Ganges), we learn that the Gaṅgā herself, forewarned of Rāma's visit to the Daṇḍaka-forest by the river Sarayū, had sent Sītā and Tamasā to the forest, so that Sītā in person could tend to Rāma who would surely be deeply affected by the familiar sights. And Muralā herself is carrying a similar message from Lopāmudrā, Agastya's wife, to the Godāvarī river, to ask her to revive Rāma, should he fall into fainting fits:

> The breeze off your waves cooled with water droplets and wafting the scent of lotus filaments—ever so gently direct it toward dear Rāma and soothe his soul if ever he grows faint.[73]

As we see, the rivers form a densely communicating grid over the Indian subcontinent, from the northern Sarayū to the southern Godāvarī, allowing the 'juice of pity' (*karuṇa-rasa*) to flow around and at the same time bringing with their cooling and perfumed streams solace to burning grief. Unlike the rather hard and unrelenting Earth, and the 'cruel' goddess of the forest Vāsantī, the rivers are mellifluous and soothing in their caring gentleness. We understand now why Bhavabhūti, who as a playwright was essentially interested in producing *rasa*, included in his play so many river-goddesses—fluidity personified, so to say—and how meaningful a role they are made to play in his metaphor of the stream-like pathos: like real rivers which can overcome the hard-crusted earth and even eat through rock, the river-goddesses are able to melt the Earth's righteous anger and dissolve hearts of stone. They make the characters and the audience alike melt into tears, however hardened by grief they may be, while simultaneously soothing their pain. At the same time, these divine personages embodying the forces of nature[74]—the earth, the forest, the rivers, even stars, like Arundhatī[75]—convey a sense of the cosmic and indeed elemental importance of the events that are unfolding on stage and lend an incomparable grandeur to the theatrical performance.

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73 *vīcīvātaiḥ śīkarakṣodaśītair ākarṣadbhiḥ padmakiñjalkagandhān*; 3.2.

74 Who are at the same time profoundly human, as Harshé (*Observations sur la Vie et l'Oeuvre de Bhavabhūti*, p. 42) rightly notes.

75 Arundhatī, this epitome of chastity and embodiment of good wifely behaviour, is the star Alcor, which forms a double star with Mizar (identified as her husband Vasiṣṭha) in the constellation Ursa Major. This stellar nature explains why the couple often appear in the play in a leading role, at the head of a group (e.g. in 1.3), since stars are used as guides to cross the night, ocean, desert or even *saṃsāra*.

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