

King's sons, a hideous hag and a golden stag in Indian epic – *An addendum to McCONE 2020*

I am most grateful to Professor Stephanie Jamison of UCLA for drawing my attention to a parallel from the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the golden deer hunted and killed by king's sons in the medieval Irish story of the five Lugaid brothers (McCONE 2020: 143 and 147–9).

Part II ('Penelope and the svayaṃvara'; JAMISON 1999: 243–58¹) of her important study of key aspects of the *Odyssey* in the light of comparanda drawn from Indian epic, legal and ritual material contains the following note about the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s eponymous hero and his wife:

'The marriage of Sītā and Rāma (R I.65–66) is also explicitly identified as a vīryaśulka svayaṃvara, though the action occurs in two stages. Sītā is described by her father as "one whose bride-price is a manly deed" (vīryaśulkā R I.65.17; 66.23), and in I.65.17–20 he recounts the first stage, the svayaṃvara proper: the assembling of all the kings eager to win her and their collective failure to string the bow, after which they were dismissed. This first stage Rāma did *not* attend. He only came later and performed the feat in private, as it were, without the public spectacle of an organized svayaṃvara (I.66.8–17)'
(JAMISON 1999: 245, n. 45).

Here, then, a bow is central to a test determining 'own choice' (*svayaṃvara*) of husband by a king's daughter or wife, as it was in the cases of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* and Penelope in the *Odyssey* (JAMISON 1999: 252; McCONE 2020: 137–8).²

In two episodes in the *Mahābhārata* where 'own choice' plays a prominent role, namely Draupadī's liaison with the five Pāṇḍava brothers and Damayanti's with Nala after picking him out from five lookalikes, loss of a kingdom

¹ See 248, n. 58 on the likening of *Uṣas* 'Dawn' to a young woman apparently engaged in *svayaṃvara* at RV i, 124, 8, which would tie in well with the argument (McCONE 2020: 150–7) that PIE **H₂eṷsōs* 'Dawn' was viewed as the divine transmitter of sovereignty.

² In *Vǫlsungasaga* ch. 9 (trans. BYOCK 1999) King Hogni's daughter Sigrun effectively exercises 'own choice' in a manner reminiscent of the Welsh Rhiannon (McCONE 2020: 135–6) by telling King Sigmund's son Helgi that she is being betrothed against her will to King Granmar's son Hodbrodd and urging him to fight Hodbrodd and abduct her. Helgi duly fought and killed him, took over his kingdom, married Sigrun and enjoyed a long and successful reign.

to a kinsman in a dice game obliges the losers, Yudhiṣṭhira (accompanied by his four younger brothers) and Nala respectively, to leave for the forest with their wives, both of whom are then lost but eventually recovered (McCONE 2020: 136–7 and 147). A similar fate befell the paragon of virtue and valour Rāma, whose imminent appointment as *yuva-rāja* ‘young king’ (e.g. *R* ii, 1, 41) or heir presumptive to the throne was transmuted into a fourteen-year exile in the wilds through the machinations of his royal father’s youngest wife (ii, 7–19). After Rāma had reluctantly accepted the pleas to accompany him made by his incomparably beautiful wife Sītā and warlike younger brother Lakṣmaṇa (ii, 26–31), the three of them set out (ii, 40). After they reached the Daṇḍaka forest (iii, 1), Sītā was abducted by the powerful demon (*rākṣasa*) Rāvaṇa and only recovered at the cost of much time and effort.

The trouble started (*R* iii, 17) when the surpassingly handsome Rāma aroused the amorous passions of Rāvaṇa’s sister Śūrpaṅkhā, a fearsomely ugly old *rākṣasī* living in the forest who claimed to be a *kāma-rūpiṇī* (17, 22) ‘having (any) desired shape’. Although it would presumably have enabled her to assume a beautiful form in the hope of attracting the object of her desire, this power is an irrelevant detail in the narrative as it stands. Her failure to use it may be a residual reflex of the need for an eligible male’s acceptance of the ugly aspect to trigger metamorphosis into a beauty, as in the Irish story of the Lugaids (see below and McCONE 2020: 143). Whatever about that, when her demand that Rāma make her his wife instead of Sītā was rejected and Lakṣmaṇa too rebuffed her, she made for Sītā with the aim of devouring her but was put to flight by Lakṣmaṇa, who cut off (*ciccheda*) her ears and nose³ (*karṇa-nāsam*; iii, 18, 21). Śūrpaṅkhā turned in distress to another brother, Khara, who led 14,000 warriors against Rāma and was killed along with his whole army. When Rāvaṇa heard the news, he angrily resolved to exact revenge by abducting Sītā. Having appealed to his uncle Mārīca for help and dismissed the latter’s warnings that the enterprise would prove fatal for both of them, Rāvaṇa instructed the luckless Mārīca to become a golden deer with silver spots (*sauvarṇas ... mṛgō ... rajata-bindubhiḥ*) so that, ‘seeing the illusory golden deer (*māyā-mṛgam dṛṣṭvā kāñcanam*)’, the wonderstruck Sītā would ask Rāma to get it for her (iii, 40, 18–19). Mārīca was told to lure Rāma away and then, by imitating his voice in a cry of distress to Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, get the latter to follow at her behest, leaving her alone to be abducted by Rāvaṇa (40, 20–2).

The deer duly appeared and, notwithstanding Lakṣmaṇa’s warning that it was Mārīca in disguise, Rāma yielded to Sītā’s insistent urging by setting off in pursuit of the deer, which he eventually hit in the heart with an arrow. Just before dying, it resumed Mārīca’s demonic form and uttered the Rāma-like

³ In a brief account of the incident in the *Odyssey* (xxi, 295–304), the madly drunk Centaur Eurytion’s outrageous behaviour in the house of the Lapith Peirithous led to his hosts throwing him out ‘after cutting off his ears and nostrils/nose with pitiless bronze (ἀπ’ οὐατα νηλεῖ χαλκῷ ῥίνας τ’ ἀμήσαντες)’ (300–1).

cry (44, 12–20). Seeing that Lakṣmaṇa had been right about the deer's real identity, Rāma's thoughts turned to his wife and, fearing the worst, he hastened back (44, 21–7). Meanwhile she, greatly alarmed by the cry apparently uttered by her husband, relentlessly urged Lakṣmaṇa to go to his older brother's aid, notwithstanding his vigorous protests that Rāma had given him strict orders to stay put and was more than able to look after himself (45). Once her guardian had finally yielded to Sītā's insistence and she had been left completely alone, Rāvaṇa approached her in disguise before revealing himself and carrying her off in his airborne chariot to detention in his island kingdom of (Sri) Lanka (46–57). The rest of the third book and the following three are concerned with the protracted search for Sītā, preparations to attack Lanka and a great final battle resulting in Rāvaṇa's death and Sītā's recovery. Since this coincided with the end of Rāma's fourteen-year exile, his reunion with his wife was directly followed by their return to Ayodhyā, where Rāma was at last ordained king and initiated a reign of general contentment and abundance.

In the aforementioned medieval Irish account, five identically named brothers hunt and kill a fawn with a golden sheen (*lóeg co néim órdai*; ARBUTHNOT 2007: 20, §72, l. 10). A quest for shelter from a snowstorm then brings each Lugaíd in turn to the splendid house of a hideous old woman, but her invitation to share her bed is rejected by all except the fawn's catcher, whose readiness to sleep with her triggers her metamorphosis into a radiant beauty and revelation that she is the sovereignty and he will attain the kingship of Ireland (*flaithius and ríge nÉrenn*; ARBUTHNOT 2007: 22, ll. 4–5). The basic sequence is thus (1) hunt and slaughter of a golden deer, (2) encounter with a hideous supernatural female, and (3) a sexual union transforming her into a beauty and him into a king-to-be. In the Irish narrative, beautiful and ugly appearance are facets of a single female and their alternation is conditioned by a royal male's response to her. In the Indian epic, by contrast, they characterise two rival females, and the ugly Śūrpaṅkhā is not only rejected by both brothers but is also further disfigured by one of them (Lakṣmaṇa) in response to her attack upon Sītā.⁴ Moreover, there is a reverse sequence (2) (1), and (3) Rāma loses his wife to his and her enduring distress. In effect, then, the *Rāmāyaṇa*

⁴ A somewhat diffuse and, in some respects, outdated treatment of 'the loathly bride' by COOMARASWAMY (1945) follows a reference to the Irish story of the Lugaids (392) with arguable Indian parallels (393–6) for twinned unfavourable and favourable aspects of the sovereignty goddess (notably Śrī 'Fortune' and other manifestations such as Lakṣmī and her negative A-lakṣmī). Sītā is alluded to (394, including n. 1), but there is no mention of her abduction and the events leading up to it in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. I am grateful to Riccardo Ginevra for pointing me to a striking instance from the short Norse saga of Grim Shaggy-cheek (*Grims saga Loðin-kinna*: text and translation at germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/GrimLodinskinnaTunstall.html). Ch. 1 tells how Grim, the lord of Halogaland, was betrothed to another powerful lord's daughter but she disappeared a week before their nuptials. In ch. 2 Grim was lying seriously wounded after fighting and killing twelve opponents, when a

presents a negative inverse of the paradigm underlying the Lugaid story, and the grotesque Śūrpaṅakhā undergoes no metamorphosis despite being *kāmarūpiṇī*. It provides previously overlooked eastern support for the death of the golden stag⁵ and, still more importantly, for the juxtaposition of a hideous old supernatural woman and a beautiful young one as key features of a posited PIE prototype (McCONE 2020: 148–9). This myth’s basic meaning would have called for positive conversion from hag to beauty in response to a willing royal bachelor rather than negative rivalry for the affections of an already married king’s son between an ugly female interloper and his beautiful wife.

The article in *ZcP* 67 argued for two somewhat different versions of a PIE sovereignty myth based upon *svayamvara*, according as this resulted in the installation of a new king or the restoration of a former ruler (McCONE 2020: 137–43). It was also suggested (McCONE 2020: 143–9 and 161–2) that the sovereignty myth of concern here had two similarly conditioned variants. The first involved a goddess’s shift from ugliness to beauty on being accepted by and mating with the one of five hitherto undifferentiated bachelor brothers who was destined to be king. In the second, a king seeking to recover a supernatural wife/his sovereignty was challenged to choose the goddess from among five at least optionally identical females, but she underwent no metamorphosis.

Mārica’s transformation into a (presumably male) golden deer in the *Rāmāyana* has a match in the adoption of a golden stag’s form by a (presumably male) divine being in an already discussed (McCONE 2020: 148) Indo-Siamese narrative of appreciably later date. Neither narrative features a change from hideous hag to radiant beauty, but the golden stag does change its appearance from human to animal in both. The medieval Irish story of the five Lugaid brothers is silent regarding the golden fawn’s origins. Although the ‘tall-antlered stag (ὄψικερώς ἔλαφος)’ (*Od.* x, 158) slain by Odysseus prior to the encounter with the divine Circe and her four attendant nymphs is represented as a particularly magnificent but essentially normal animal placed in his way by some god, the turning of men into animals does figure prominently in the episode insofar as Circe gives half of Odysseus’ crew the outward appearance of pigs and vainly tries to do the same to Odysseus before being compelled to restore his men’s original form and becoming his mate (McCONE 2020: 149). The Indian (and

hideous woman approached him and took him to her cave. There she demanded first a kiss for saving him, which was reluctantly granted, and later that he share her bed as the price for healing him. When he again accepted with reluctance, she healed him and he fell asleep. On waking, he found himself beside a beautiful woman looking like his betrothed, who confirmed that she was indeed his lost bride-to-be, said that Grim’s actions had broken a curse laid upon her by her step-mother and asked to be taken back to her father’s home for their wedding.

⁵ The presence of a golden fawn rather than a golden stag in the Irish story can be ascribed to the etymological concerns of the text containing it (McCONE 2020: 161), and both it and the stag encountered on Circe’s island in the *Odyssey* were killed and eaten (McCONE 2020: 149).

Indo-Siamese) evidence raises the possibility that the golden stag originally had an alternative human form, as tentatively suggested in *ZcP* 67 (McCONE 2020: 161; see 152 for a comparable alternation of the Mac Óc's beloved between appearance as a beautiful young woman and a swan in the medieval Irish *Aislinge Óengusso*). If so, rationalisation of the stag in the *Odyssey* may have triggered a transfer of a human/animal switch from it to members of Odysseus' crew as a result of Circe's magical powers.

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- R = *Valmiki Ramayana*, <https://www.valmiki.iitk.ac.in/>.

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