

Introduction

God with an Axe

Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms.

—Jeremiah 51:20

Thine axe is bloody; what hast thou done?

—*Njals Saga*

The Paraśurāma Cycle

What follows is my own telling of the Paraśurāma cycle incorporating as many elements as possible taken from all of its collected variants. It is what Wendy Doniger calls a “macromyth” (1998, 93). The immediate purpose of this synoptic macromyth is to serve as a thematic key to the available corpus of Paraśurāma literature. First in this list is the *Mahābhārata*, a massive Indian epic composed between 500 BCE and 500 CE that tells the story of a dynastic war between the noble Pāṇḍavas (the brothers Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, Sahadeva, and their shared wife Draupadī) and their treacherous cousins the Kauravas. Second is the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the other great Sanskrit epic, composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, that tells the story of the heroic Rāma Dāśarathī’s quest to rescue his wife Sītā from her kidnapper, the demon king Rāvaṇa. These are followed by the Sanskrit and vernacular regional compendia of myth, legend, and liturgy called the Purāṇas; subsequent temple legends and collected oral traditions; as well as modern plays, poetry, novels, films, television mini-series, and comic books.

The summary below will serve to introduce the figure of Paraśurāma along with the main characters and the basic sequence of events in his mythology. Some of the elements in this admittedly artificial telling of the story take significantly different forms in other versions (sometimes, for reasons that will become clear later, it is the king Kārtavīrya instead of the *gandharva* Citraratha who distracts Reṇukā at the river; sometimes the two women embrace the wrong trees instead of eating the wrong bowls of rice pudding, etc.), but all of the major episodes are present.

There was once a king named Gādhi who was the incarnation of Indra, the king of the gods, who had decided to take human form after Gādhi's pious father prayed for a divine son. In time, Gādhi had a beautiful daughter named Satyavatī, who one day caught the eye of the Brahmin ascetic Ṛcika. Although Ṛcika was a priest of the famous and powerful Bhārgava clan, Gādhi thought that an ascetic (even a Bhārgava ascetic) was too poor to marry his daughter, a member of the royal Kṣatriya class. After Ṛcika made two requests for Satyavatī's hand in marriage, Gādhi finally said that Ṛcika could marry his daughter only if he could pay the bride price of one thousand fast white horses each with one black ear. To Gādhi's surprise, Ṛcika paid the price (with help from the god Varuṇa), married the princess, and took her to live with him in the forest.

After their marriage, Ṛcika's clan patriarch Bhṛgu came to visit the couple. As a wedding gift to his new daughter-in-law, Bhṛgu offered Satyavatī whatever she desired. Satyavatī asked that she might give birth to a righteous Brahmin son, and that her mother might give birth to a son who would be a powerful Kṣatriya warrior. Bhṛgu agreed and for Satyavatī he infused a *caru* (a bowl of rice pudding) with saintliness, piety, wisdom, and all the qualities that make a good Brahmin. For her mother he infused another *caru* with valor, strength, martial prowess and all the attributes of a brave warrior. He then told each woman to take her *caru* and consume it after performing the ritual for giving birth to a son.

The women did what they were told, but they accidentally mixed up the dishes and each ate the rice pudding meant for the other. Some time later when Bhṛgu had returned, he perceived their mistake and predicted that Satyavatī would give birth to a Brahmin who would act like a Kṣatriya and her mother would

give birth to a Kṣatriya who would act like a Brahmin. Satyavatī was horrified and begged Bhṛgu to defer the prediction for one generation, to her grandson. Bhṛgu agreed and Satyavatī gave birth to the Brahmin Jamadagni, while her mother gave birth to Viśvāmitra, a king who would later become a Brahmin ascetic.

Jamadagni, like his father, married a princess. Her name was Reṇukā and after they were wed she went to live with him in his forest hermitage, where she gave birth to five sons, of which Paraśurāma, inheritor of the mixed nature intended for his father, was the youngest. One day Reṇukā went out to the stream to collect some water, and as she was filling her pot, she saw a *gandharva* (a celestial musician or forest spirit) named Citraratha bathing in the water and engaging in erotic play with his concubines a little farther downstream. Distracted by her momentary attraction to Citraratha, Reṇukā spilled the water she was collecting and left a wet spot on the front of her clothes.

When she returned to the hermitage Jamadagni saw the wet spot on his wife's clothes and deduced her mental infidelity. He became enraged and one by one he ordered each of his sons to cut off his mother's head. The four oldest were too horrified at their father's words to speak, let alone obey, so Jamadagni cursed them to become dumb like animals. Only Paraśurāma obeyed his father's command without hesitation and cut off Reṇukā's head with his axe (*paraśu*). Pleased with his son's loyalty, Jamadagni granted the boy whatever he desired, and Paraśurāma asked him to resurrect his mother, lift the curse on his brothers, and cause everyone to forget the entire incident. Jamadagni granted all this, along with long life and victory in battle.

Some time passed and a Kṣatriya king named Arjuna Kārtavīrya, who had received one thousand arms as a boon from the gods, came to the hermitage of Jamadagni while on a hunting trip and demanded hospitality from Reṇukā. With the help of her husband's divine "Wishing Cow" that could magically provide anything its owner desired, Reṇukā was able to provide the king and his hunting party with an elaborate feast. Impressed with her abilities, Kārtavīrya decided he wanted the cow and stole it from the hermitage.

Paraśurāma, who was away on a journey, returned to find the cow missing and went after Kārtavīrya to avenge the theft. When he caught up to him, Paraśurāma cut off Kārtavīrya's thousand

arms with his arrows before finally killing him. But while he was still away and the hermitage was unprotected, the slain king's sons sneaked in and killed Jamadagni in retaliation. When Paraśurāma returned to find his father dead, he swore revenge on all Kṣatriyas, vowing to wipe them out twenty-one times over. In fulfillment of his vow, he killed twenty-one generations of Kṣatriyas and filled five lakes with their blood before, his rage spent, he made a sacrifice in which he gave away the earth that he had conquered and went into exile to spend the rest of his days in meditation. Meanwhile, Brahmin men impregnated the Kṣatriya widows to produce a righteous generation of kings.

Some of the Kṣatriyas had been saved by sages or animals that hid and protected them in the forest. And when Paraśurāma was through killing, they came out of hiding and repopulated the earth, which had been suffering with no warriors left to protect it. Later, Paraśurāma intervened in the events of the great *Mahābhārata* war that would once again nearly wipe out all the Kṣatriyas on earth. He trained the warriors Bhīṣma and Drona in the martial arts and the use of magical weapons. He also trained the warrior Karṇa, but cursed him to die in battle after learning that Karṇa had hidden the fact that he was a Kṣatriya during his tutelage.

Forced into exile because he had given away the earth in sacrifice, Paraśurāma went to the ocean and hurled his axe out into the water, forcing the ocean to recede and create a new strip of land on which he could live, since it had not been part of the earth when he gave it away. Paraśurāma settled the new place by establishing temples, bringing in Brahmins to perform the Vedic rituals, and setting up schools to teach martial arts. Eventually he returned to his meditations and withdrew from the world, where he has the status of an undying *cirañjīvin* (immortal).

The Argument, Purpose, and Structure of This Book

ARGUMENT

The first part of my argument is this: The Paraśurāma myth was created by Brahmins as a narrative response to the decline of sacrificial performance and the rise of post-Vedic sectarian religions after the Buddhist Mauryan empire

collapsed in the second century BCE. It provided a fantasy of Brahmin power with which the mythmakers could identify and a model of the proper Brahmin-Kṣatriya relationship that they hoped Kṣatriyas would emulate. But this is the beginning of an understanding, not the totality of it. Every Paraśurāma myth is not adequately explained by tracing it straight back to this historical genesis. Myth transmission is not like a row of dominos; it is a diffusion through language, theology, ritual, state formations, psychology, natural philosophy, folklore, life patterns, institutional authority, religious experience, technology, and collective identity. Understanding a myth means understanding its place in these discourses, which is at least as important as where it began.

The raw material for the Paraśurāma myth is drawn from elements of the Vedic worldview. This is significant because by the time of the Paraśurāma myth, the Vedic tradition encompassed its own commentarial literature, produced by generations of sustained reflection on the meaning of the text employing an exegetical practice based on homology and analogy. Thus, it was already the case that mythic symbols and tropes of the Vedic tradition had multiple referents in an array of domains that included the ritual, the natural, the somatic, and the divine, resulting in the Paraśurāma myth being dense with overlapping (and imported) meanings from the start.

This brings us to the second part of my argument: After the end of the period of epic composition (around 500 CE), subsequent variants of the Paraśurāma myth expanded, elaborated, and sometimes inverted its thematic content, providing the narrative equivalent of an exploded-view drawing of the myth with an open-ended structure (there is no conclusion for a figure who never dies). These expansions, elaborations, and inversions of the myth reflect the particular needs of actors according to their social, political, religious, and economic situations, such as the Citpāvan Brahmins in eighteenth-century Maharashtra or early medieval Vaiṣṇava theologians in Kashmir. But they also illuminate certain cross-culturally relevant concerns and psychic structures, such as a personality formation André Green has identified as the “Dead Mother Complex” and the general fear of rebounding, retributive violence, made more acute as technologies of war have grown more sophisticated.

Finally, let me be clear on one point. The Vedic worldview that I will be referring to throughout this book is just that—a view of the world, not a world itself. Chauvinistic colonial historians and Hindu nationalists alike have made the mistake of taking the textual evidence we have of how a small class of educated intellectuals saw the world from the little corner of it in which they were ensconced and presenting it as the essence of a Hindu civilization,

which these colonial historians and Hindu nationalists then compare to (or conflate with) the South Asia of their own day. The texts and traditions I will treat in this book are significant not because they provide some kind of a window into the fundamental nature of the Indian mind or the true form of its civilization, but rather because they demonstrate the conflicts, contestations, and ambiguities that marked the movement of ideas across diverse South Asian cultures over a period of two thousand years.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this book is to serve as a guide to the Paraśurāma myths for those who want to learn something about this comparatively little-studied figure and also to provide some interpretations of this mythos proceeding from my central argument. In this respect, the *raison d'être* of book is not the argument itself, but a question, namely, “Why is Paraśurāma an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu?” Of course, we could ask this of any *avatāra*, but so much the better! Asking why Narasiṃha the Man-Lion, Kurma the Tortoise, or Matsya the Fish are *avatāras* would no doubt lead to some wonderful insights about the development of Viṣṇu worship. But the question of Paraśurāma’s *avatāra*-hood raises a different set of issues than would most. Paraśurāma’s heroism is characterized by behavior that is excessive, and the tradition seems to have seen it this way for a long time.

The unavoidable question of why it matters what anyone thinks or has thought about Paraśurāma also deserves an answer. It matters because answering that question is an opportunity to make a series of bigger and more broadly applicable observations. A close reading of Paraśurāma’s mythology as it develops over the centuries will illuminate the social tensions and religious ferment that have shaped that development and thereby enrich our picture of Indian intellectual history. Specifically, understanding Paraśurāma’s enduring role in Indian mythology will lead us to some important insights about the complexity of Indian attitudes toward women’s bodies and retributive violence. But the Indian mythmakers who created and propagated stories about Paraśurāma were not naive agents. They did not unknowingly reproduce their social structures in myths in the same way that dinosaurs left behind their fossilized bones, all so that these myths could then be interpreted and explained to their descendants by later Western scholars. To the contrary, they were often perspicacious and sublimely creative observers of the human condition who may well have as much to say about us (in the broadest sense) as we have to say about them.

STRUCTURE

To make organization of the material easier, I have identified three major motifs that belong to the structure of the myth. The first is Paraśurāma's mixed nature as a Kṣatriya and a Brahmin, almost always as the result of a ritual mistake. The second is matricide, that is, Paraśurāma's decapitation of his mother, the Kṣatriya princess Reṇukā, who is herself worshipped as a goddess in parts of India. The third motif is the vengeful annihilation of the Kṣatriyas in an act of mass extermination often characterized as "genocide," which is in many ways the defining characteristic of Paraśurāma's mythos.

In chapter 1, "The Brahmin Warrior: Paraśurāma *in Extremis*" I will employ a trope originated by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek to explore three levels or aspects of Paraśurāma's split identity: the universal-ontological, the particular-sexual, and the singular-subjective. At the universal-ontological level, I will focus on the cosmic implications of Paraśurāma's overcoming of dualities, beginning with Phillip Lutgendorf's characterization of the Hindu notion of the *avatāra* as a "compression' of infinitude into a mortal frame" and a *cirañjīvin* ("long-lived one") as "just the reverse: an endless extension of corporeal life" (2007, 279). As both an *avatāra* and a *cirañjīvin*, Paraśurāma is a mythicization of the simultaneous compression and extension of time, something like a narrative counterpart to the infinite set of numbers between zero and one.

The particular-sexual level of the myth, I will show, is best illustrated in stories of Paraśurāma's coming into being as a hybrid figure, so I will focus on myths of his conception (which I will refer to, following Freud, as "primal scenes") modeled after fertility rites involving the hugging of trees and the ingestion of rice pudding. To understand Paraśurāma on the singular-subjective level, I will turn to the late-twentieth-century Malayalam poem *Maḷuvinte Katha* ("The Story of the Axe"), which endows him with both individuality and interiority. In the poem, Paraśurāma's hybridity binds him to his problematic actions irrevocably and defines him as a unique figure. Paraśurāma has the power of a Brahmin and the temper of a Kṣatriya, and that causes all the trouble.

Another point I will consider is what *kind* of Brahmin Paraśurāma is. He is a member of the Bhārgava clan that includes the warlike Brahmins Aurva, Śukra, and Cyavana, all of whose stories are used to illustrate prominent themes in the epic without actually being integral to its plot. Next, I will examine the concept of *varṇa*, the ancient Indian class system whose boundaries Paraśurāma transgresses, balancing the normative concepts expressed

in the Sanskrit law texts against what we know about ancient Indian realities, including the reign of Puṣyamitra Śunga and what some historians have claimed was a Vedic restoration that followed the Buddhist Mauryan empire.

Returning to a philosophical reading, I will next explore the Paraśurāma myth's elaboration of the concepts of dislocation, excess, and becoming by analyzing it alongside those of three other liminal figures from Hindu mythology: Droṇa, Dattātreya, and Viśvāmitra, each of which illuminate a different facet of Paraśurāma. Droṇa's story, I will argue, illuminates Paraśurāma's temporal and spatial exceptionalism; Dattātreya's story illuminates his embodiment of excess; and Viśvāmitra's story illuminates his embodiment of the vanishing mediator of "becoming." To see how Paraśurāma exemplifies the "sovereign exception" of the lawmaker beyond the law, I will examine the discussion of sovereignty in the Hindu myth of the first king Vena as well as the writings of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century European political philosophers Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben. Finally, I will use another idea from philosophy, that of the double negation, to reread Paraśurāma alongside the European myth of the Wandering Jew.

The second chapter, "Matricide I: The Broken Pot," is the first of two chapters devoted to Paraśurāma's decapitation of his mother. Because the story of Reṇukā's decapitation is so popular in its own right and is so significant a part of her own separate but related mythology, it seems proper to treat the episode as a myth in itself. Therefore, this is the approach I will take in the matricide chapters, beginning with establishing the form of the matricide "micromyth":

1. A married woman sees an attractive man, becomes sexually aroused involuntarily and loses control, after which her husband sees evidence of her arousal and perceived infidelity.
2. The sons refuse their father's command to kill their mother and are cursed to become animals or idiots as a result, losing the power of speech.
3. The youngest son obeys his father's command to behead his mother.
4. The father/husband restores and resurrects the mother/wife, and the youngest son asks for the whole incident to be forgotten.

In "The Broken Pot," I will focus on the first element of the matricide micromyth, looking at the ways in which Reṇukā's perceived incontinence at

the river—imagined by the seventeenth-century *Mahābhārata* commentator Nilakaṇṭha as a reference to the involuntary production of vaginal lubrication when a woman becomes sexually aroused—reflects ancient Indian values and anxieties that come together in notions of the fluidity of female sexual desire, defined against the yogic ideal of semen retention. I will also look at Reṇukā's ordeal in light of the topic of split identity treated in the previous chapter, since she is the nominal source of Paraśurāma's Kṣatriya half. To explore some nonobvious but significant aspects of this trope, I will analyze it through the lenses of the Aristotelian concept of *akrasia*, or self-control; the Indian folkloric motif of the woman waylaid at the well; myths about the nonhuman beings known as *yakṣas* and *gandharvas*; and the Sanskrit sexological literature. I will also think about the breaking of Reṇukā's water pot in terms of the symbolic significance of the pot in Indian poetry and philosophy. Finally, I will compare the story of Reṇukā's encounter with the bathing prince with two Indian rituals: the Vedic *varuṇapraghāsa* rite and a contemporary Tamil exorcism.

Chapter 3, “Matricide II: The Severed Head,” focuses on the other elements of the matricide micromyth: the curse Jamadagni places on the sons who refuse his command to behead Reṇukā; the matricide itself; and Reṇukā's recapitulation and resurrection. To fully explicate these episodes, I will follow in the footsteps of venerable scholars such as Girindrasekhar Bose, Sudhir Kakar, Robert Goldman, A. K. Ramanujan, Gananath Obeyesekere, Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey J. Kripal, and Alf Hiltebeitel in applying the tools of psychoanalysis to the study of South Asian religion. Specifically, I will employ the theories of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Stanley M. Kurtz, and André Green to examine the psychological aspects of Paraśurāma's matricide.

The chapter begins with the fate of the disobedient sons who either are cursed to die, are rendered dumb “like animals,” are reduced to beggary, or else become renouncers. Following Kristeva's explanation of matricide as the developmental moment in which a child must reject the mother and submit to the law of the father, I will look at variations of the consequences suffered by Paraśurāma's brothers in Vaiṣṇava *purāṇas* and South Indian temple legends. Next, I will address the matricide itself by returning to “The Story of the Axe” before looking at some condemnations of and parallels to Paraśurāma's matricide from Śaiva traditions in Tibet and Tamil Nadu. I will also give a lengthy treatment of the episode in which Paraśurāma's mythic trajectory most deeply penetrates the Śaiva universe: Paraśurāma's fight with Śiva's adopted son Gaṇeśa.

Following that is a digression in which I look at the myth of Cirakāri, another son who is ordered to decapitate his mother by his father, but spends

so long considering the matter that it gives his father a chance to cool off and withdraw the command. As I will show, this myth, found in the epic and the *Skanda Purāna*, combines elements of the story of Indra and Ahalyā with that of Reṇukā in order to make an implicit critique of Paraśurāma's hasty matricide. In the next section, I will spend some time with myths from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu focusing on Reṇukā as a goddess in her own right, often identified with the headless goddesses Chinnamastā and Lajjāgauri. In the last part of the chapter, I will use the psychoanalytic theories of Green, Lacan, and Kurtz to understand the matricide micromyth and put forward my most developed interpretations of the decapitation of Reṇukā.

Like the matricide episode, the annihilation of the Kṣatriyas is also at the core of the Paraśurāma myth cycle, and so it will also require two chapters to fully explicate. The mass killing the myth describes, I will argue, deserves its own nomenclature. Since the criterion Paraśurāma uses to select his victims is their membership in the second tier of the fourfold hierarchy of *varṇa*, I have chosen to call it "varṇicide."

The book's fourth chapter, "Varṇicide I: The Extermination of the Kṣatriyas and Its Aftermath," will address the varṇicide itself, beginning by contextualizing the episode in the larger myth cycle of the rivalry between the Bhārgava Brahmins and the Haihaya kings. Then I will look at discussions of Paraśurāma by contemporary Hindus on internet message boards to examine how the modern reception of the myth, shaped by notions of race, genocide, total war, and terrorism, has given Paraśurāma a new relevance while also giving us new lenses through which to view him. Next, I will compare Paraśurāma to Aśvatthāman, the epic's other immortal, accursed, father-avenging, Brahmin warrior figure, with special attention to the modern depiction of the latter in a twentieth-century Bengali play.

The second half of the chapter will treat the sanitization and theologization of Paraśurāma's varṇicide in the literature produced by the early Vaiṣṇava sect called the Pāñcarātrins in Kashmir around 500 CE. I will argue that, along with developing their theology of a personal and omnipotent deity, the Pāñcarātra variant of the Paraśurāma myth, which turns his human victims into demons, serves the purpose of connecting local and regional sacred history to the late Vedic mythic structure of the war between the gods and the demons. I will conclude with a look at a "countermyth" produced by the Śvetāmbara ("White-Clad") Jains in the twelfth-century Gujarati *Trīṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacarita*. For the Jains, Paraśurāma represents the dangers of excessive wrath and, for the benefit of an audience transitioning from Śaiva to Jaina hegemony, they portray him as a cruel killer of men whose actions lead to the Brahmins (not

the Kṣatriyas) being annihilated twenty-one times by the eighth world ruler of Jaina mythology, Subhūma.

In the next chapter, “Varṇicide II: Blood and Soil in Malabar and Maharashtra,” I will begin by weighing the strengths and weaknesses of D. D. Kosambi’s Marxist reading of the Paraśurāma myth as pure Brahmin ideology. Then, using the Vedic idea of the sacrificial remainder as starting point, I will look at some of the ways in which mythmakers imagine the Kṣatriyas to have survived the varṇicide campaign in order to rise again. As part of this discussion, I will examine the myth-histories of some of the castes in India that trace their descent from this surviving remnant, including the Fire Clan Rajputs and the Khaṇḍelvāl Vaiśyas of Rajasthan. Next, I will discuss the land creation submotif in which Paraśurāma uses his axe or some other projectile to drive back the sea and create a new strip of land to settle. I will argue that this event functions as what Lacan has called a *point de capiton*, or “quilting point,” being the intersection and knotting together of the fluid motif from the matricide stories and the sacrificial remainder motif from the varṇicide stories.

I will then look at Paraśurāma’s role in the Sanskrit *Keralamahātmya* and the Malayalam *Kēraḷōlpatti*, in which he is celebrated as a culture hero of Kerala’s Malabar coast, the same piece of land he is most often said to have reclaimed from the sea with his axe. Paraśurāma is also credited with originating some of the region’s most distinctive cultural features: matrilineal succession; the political institution in which a provisional king called the Perumal serves at the pleasure of the Brahmins for a period of twelve years; and the practice of *kalarippayattu*, a system of kicks, throws, punches, blocks, pressure points, healing techniques, and the use of various weapons that is a mixture of Tamil martial traditions and northern *dhanurveda*. We shall see that in Kerala, at least, Paraśurāma’s myth is also an indisputable piece of propaganda used to legitimize the land rights of the Nambudiri Brahmins.

Finally, I will argue that this is also the case in Maharashtra. With a close reading of the *Paraśarāma Caritra*, a semihistorical account of the rule of the Brahmin Peśwās, or Prime Ministers, composed around 1772, I will show how Paraśurāma’s story is used to lend legitimacy to the Brahmins of the Citpāvan clan who ruled Maharashtra in the eighteenth century. In concluding this chapter, I will examine exactly how Paraśurāma’s violent act of destruction became an act of creation in places like Malabar and Maharashtra, where new stories were needed to undergird new power structures, and compare the ideology of these Paraśurāma myths with other recent “blood and soil” mythologies from the United States.

In my conclusion, I will attempt to tie all of these re-descriptions, observations, analyses, and interpretations together with some graphic representations and three arguments. First, I will argue that the “doubling” of Paraśurāma’s conception narrative (first appearing in the story of the ritual mistake, then in the story of Jamadagni and Reṇukā’s Brahmin-Kṣatriya marriage) is intentional, meant to establish an “analogic key” that we can represent as *Paternal : Maternal :: Brahmin : Kṣatriya*. Second, I will argue for the existence of four subcycles within the Paraśurāma myth that I identify as the cycle of the primal scenes, the Kārtavīrya cycle, the *kṣatra* cycle, and the *avatāra* cycle. Third and finally, I will argue that the open-ended structure of the Paraśurāma cycle is a mythogenetic element that contributes to the different paths taken in the variants.

Those who want to get straight to the Paraśurāma myths can do so by proceeding to the first chapter. The remainder of this introduction is dedicated to methodology and it mostly sticks to examples not taken from the Paraśurāma cycle in order to demonstrate what I think is the broader applicability of my approach. I will lay all my cards on the table with respect to what I think myths are, what I think we can learn from them, and why I think comparison and psychoanalysis are valid tools for reading Indian myths in general and the Paraśurāma myth in particular.

A NOTE ON METHOD: HOW MYTHS MAKE SENSE

In 2008, Jonathan Z. Smith was asked why he studied religions. He answered: “Because they’re funny. . . . They relate to the world in which I live, but it’s like a fun house mirror: Something’s off” (Sinhabu 2008). Smith’s somewhat glib, but no doubt honest, characterization of the study of religion is useful here. When I am reading Paraśurāma’s story, I find that it is *strangely familiar* in the literal oxymoronic sense. On one level, the themes of the myth are deeply rooted in the conflicts and concerns of the very different world that was ancient India: class identity versus clan identity; temporal power versus spiritual authority; sacrificial religion versus devotional religion. But on another level, Paraśurāma’s story revolves around the familiar perennial and cross-cultural issues of mothers, fathers, and the desire for revenge. And on still another level, the myth of Paraśurāma’s protracted repetitive campaign of killing seems to speak directly to our own modern world in which every victory in war only demoralizes the populace further and creates a power vacuum in which a new enemy can and usually does arise. What are we now to make of the strangely familiar story of Paraśurāma that has been delivered

to us from a different time and place? And just as important, how do we unpack it without damaging it in the process?

By comparing a wide array of variants, we will trace the intertwining developmental arcs of the three motifs I have identified above (mixed birth, matricide, and genocide/varṇicide) and seek to draw some conclusions based on the transformations the myth undergoes. We will see that some transformations are of limited significance and serve only to clarify an underlying outline (such as whether the curse Jamadagni inflicts on Paraśurāma's disobedient brothers causes them to die or become mute), while other transformations are of great significance and speak to something specific about the myth's structure (such as the myths that identify the bathing man Reṇukā sees at the river as Jamadagni's killer Arjuna Kārtavīrya).

At this point the reader may rightly ask: Does it not seem capricious to say that the changes in one variant speak volumes while another variant is just one among many? Am I not picking and choosing which parts of the myth to read maximally and which ones to read minimally in order to support any interpretation I want? Ultimately, the reader will answer those questions for herself. I will only reply that I make these decisions informed by the myth's larger cultural and historical context. But this explanation is not enough to fend off all further questions on method. So, before we proceed, I will turn away from Paraśurāma in order to outline the theory and method of comparative mythology as I practice it. But first, a preemptive warning and a critique.

A WARNING: THE POLITICS OF SPECULATIVE ARGUMENTS

In the introduction to *Man into Wolf: An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism and Lycanthropy*, the Austrian polymath Robert Eisler prepares his readers for the coming onslaught of (highly) speculative arguments he is about to unleash upon them with this borrowed quote: "If I am in the wrong, my errors may set the minds of others at work, and may be a means of bringing both them and me to a knowledge of the truth" (Macaulay 1910, 568–69 in Eisler 1978, xxiii). Eisler is one of my favorite authors and *Man into Wolf*, flawed as it is, is one of my favorite books.¹ Even so, I find that there is something deeply disingenuous in this quote. At first glance, the line appears to express the very spirit of intellectual humility, of being a worker among workers in the production of knowledge. It suggests offering up outrageous ideas that may be wrong and humbly accepting it if they prove to be so, all in the interest of shaking an intellectual community

out of its stupor and forcing it to creatively rethink the issues at hand. And I have no doubt this is what Eisler intended when he quoted it. But on closer inspection we can see how it can easily be used as a ploy to muddy the waters of good-faith scholarship with arrant nonsense like “intelligent design,” racial pseudo-science, and Hindutva history. Not all errors bring one closer to the truth, after all. Some just waste everyone’s time and cheapen the discourse.

Even more problems arise when we consider the source of the quote: the nineteenth-century British peer, politician, and scholar Thomas Babington Macaulay. The line comes from a letter Lord Macaulay wrote from Calcutta on November 26, 1836, to his friend Macvey Napier, the editor of *The Edinburgh Review*. The letter accompanied an essay Macaulay had written on the sixteenth-century English philosopher Francis Bacon in which he disputed the degree to which the Baconian method (often considered the start of the scientific method) was truly an original use of inductive reasoning. But as the line suggests, when it came to Bacon, Macaulay may well have been prepared to amend or even reverse his contrarian position if presented with better arguments. On the subject of the Baconian method, Macaulay was prepared to be corrected by other white men with whom he considered himself on equal footing. He even took the trouble to establish his authority with scholarly *bona fides*, announcing that his opinion was formed “not at second hand, like nine tenths of the people who talk about Bacon, but after several very attentive perusals of his greatest works, and after a good deal of thought” (568).

In other matters he was much less open-minded. On the subject of Indian religion, for one, he did not hold himself to the same standards and had no such compunctions about “second hand” knowledge. His opinions on matters of Indian religion were unexamined, unassailable, and backed up with considerable political power. One year earlier, he had famously written:

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. (1835, 10)

Macaulay's imperious attitude would have been one thing coming from an armchair scholar, but Macaulay was more than that, serving as a member of the Council of India, a board created by charter in 1833 to advise the Governor-General of India. In a letter he had written to Napier in August, Macaulay informed him about the goings-on in the subcontinent that year:

You have probably heard of the *Thugs*, a species of robbers and murderers who infest this country. Vigorous efforts have lately been made to put them down; and in the course of these efforts, the real nature of their confederacy has for the first time been discovered. I think that you will agree with me in pronouncing the long existence and the vast extent of this fraternity to be a phenomenon without parallel in history. The government here have printed, but not published, a volume of papers respecting this strange race of men. The book is so ill arranged that, even if it were published, few people would read or understand it. But the information which is dispersed through it is in the highest degree curious and amusing. Lord Auckland observed to me the other day that it would be a matchless subject for a review. (567–68)

The writings of William Sleeman to which Macaulay refers and which accompanied this letter were introduced to the world in the pages of *The Edinburgh Review* the next year, kicking off the feverish British Thuggee suppression campaign in earnest. It was likely Macaulay himself who subsequently penned legislation allowing the British to imprison any suspected Thug for life on the basis that the Thuggee cult was a religion (not to mention a threat to the opium trade) and its murderous practices an inherent aspect of its members' personalities (Rappaport 2012, 22n14 and Rushby 2002, 178).

Macaulay's double standard should serve as a warning to Western scholars. Making a speculative argument and challenging others to disprove it is rarely done in good faith (how many scholars have we ever seen rejoicing at the success others have attained by proving them wrong?). And even when it is, it presupposes that others are in a position to do so. While contemporary Western scholars' writings are nowhere near as consequential as Macaulay's were, we should keep in mind that we are still writing from his side of the table. This does not mean, however, that we should steer clear of Indian religion unless we are affirming its irreducible particularity (or its objective supremacy as some might want), for we should also keep in mind that the

Indian prisoners Macaulay deemed to be irremediably evil would have certainly been better off if he had placed less emphasis on cultural differences and more on commonalities.

CRITIQUES OF COMPARISON

The Macaulay case is an extreme example of comparison being used as cudgel by an arrogant colonial power. But some scholars have made a case against comparison *tout court*. Bruce Lincoln and Cristiano Grottanelli's critique represents such a case that requires addressing. Of their twelve "Theses on Comparison," number six really sums up the argument: "Wide-ranging comparison—comparison of the strong sort—has consistently disappointed" (Lincoln 2018, 25–26). It has done so, they contend, because its practitioners "consistently misrecognized products of their own imagination and desire ('the human mind,' 'tripartite ideology,' 'homo religiosus') for objects having historic, prehistoric, and/or transhistoric actuality" (26). Leaving aside the question of *who* exactly has been "disappointed" (more than once, apparently) by Lévi-Strauss, Dumézil, and Eliade—the three strong comparativists named in the essay—I will address the idea of misrecognition because it raises a very important question.

I should begin by noting that Lincoln makes no distinction between organizing principles and what we might call "master discourses." But we should make that distinction, because they are very different things. The former are ways of partially analyzing a narrative whose meanings are so dense and multifaceted as to defy any description that does not resemble the prose of James Joyce. The latter are overarching metanarratives that subsume and exhaustively explain all other narratives. Master discourses are a virtual guarantee of misrecognition on the part of the interpreter, but I would submit that it is much harder to characterize an organizing principle as a product of the scholar's own imagination and desire, misrecognized as an object with "historic, prehistoric, and/or transhistoric actuality."

Constellations may be misrecognitions of random groupings of stars seen from particular point in space, but they have guided sailors for millennia. That does not mean, however, that they are never the occasion for conflict. According to the anthropologist and historian Marshall Sahlins, just such a conflict occurred in the winter of 1779, when Captain James Cook arrived in Hawai'i as the Pleiades appeared on the horizon at sunset, marking the start of the Makahiki festival and setting off a chain of events that led to his murder—a "historical metaphor" for the "mythical reality" of the death

of the god Lono at the end of the season (Sahlins 1981, 17–28). This old conflict then became the basis of a new conflict in the 1990s between Sahlins himself and fellow anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere over who has the authority to explain how “natives” think and whether the story of Captain Cook should be viewed through the lens of Hawai’ian or European mythology (see Borofsky 1997).

Constellations are organizing principles, albeit organizing principles loaded with meanings (astrological and otherwise) that one has to contend with in order to navigate with them. Throughout this book, I will use organizing principles originated by Lévi-Strauss, Dumézil, Freud, and Kristeva to highlight certain features of the myths in question. The danger, I admit, is that one could misrecognize the Oedipus complex or tripartite ideology as essential and ahistorical features of myth. But picking out patterns is not, in itself, either essentializing or reductive. It is instead a simple necessity when one tries to drink from the proverbial firehose of myth.

“Weak” comparison, the good kind, according to Lincoln and Grotanelli, “refrains from imagining that universal themes, a shared prehistory, or a process of diffusion are responsible for the similarities between mythic narratives” (129). Instead, the two myths being compared are understood to be situated in their respective historical and cultural contexts. Lincoln continues: “Such common features as they share are not accidental, however. Rather, they reflect similar points of tension in the social structure of the peoples among whom these stories circulated” (*ibid.*). This seems to me to be inarguable, but it leaves us asking: Are we not now comparing something else? Are we incurious enough not to ask about the origins of the parallel “points of tension” that give rise to these similar myths? Are social hierarchies supposed to be less historically contingent, less interested, less idiosyncratic, and more concrete than myths? Surely they are not. So how does this get us past whatever problems are created by comparing myths?

Another line of critique, that comparison always employs a “muted third term” (e.g., “the sacred”) and never fails to find exactly what it is looking for, is not wrong. But neither is it devastating. We can separate our epistemology from our ontology and remain agnostic about the real-world correlates of our heuristic devices. The humanities, at least in my mind, are meant to creatively re-describe the world rather than explain it. These two aims are confused when Aaron W. Hughes, also criticizing comparison, describes it as “a literary conceit: an activity that selects, juxtaposes, and manipulates two or more *unrelated objects* that an individual perceives to share one or more similar or overlapping characteristics” (2017, 9; my emphasis).

This understanding of comparison rests on an unexamined use of the word *unrelated* and its nominal root form, *relation*, which is a property held symmetrically or asymmetrically between two things (a concept that philosophers have been attempting to understand since the *Phaedo*). In this sense, “unrelatedness” is a specific type of relatedness rather than the absence of it. In other words, unrelatedness is also a relation. Simply put, there is no real definition of what *unrelated* means in the study of religion. Are two religions (the kind of “objects” here under discussion) unrelated because they do not overlap in mental or physical space? If we could find two religions unrelated in that way, then the situation would end at that same moment in the mind of the observer, something like Lévi-Strauss’s fabled attempt to find an uncontacted South American tribe. Are two religions unrelated because they do not share a time or place of origin? That seems like an arbitrary distinction and if true, it would make modern Asatru unrelated to the practices of pre-Christian Europe that it emulates.

If two things can be compared (and any two things can be compared), they are comparable by definition, which is not the same thing as saying they are the same or even analogous. Those who want to see a more rigorous, context-attentive, and theoretically grounded practice of comparison in the study of religion (and I count myself among them) may object to this characterization or they may want to insist upon a narrower range of comparable objects and add their own qualifications in order to disallow questions like, “How is a raven like a writing desk?” That is all to the good, but I think this will always be an exercise in arbitrary rule making if it is done outside of the context of a particular project. As I understand it, any comparison can be fruitfully made if it illuminates some new aspect of the myth one is creatively re-describing.

I am also wary of the idea that comparison is a kind of experimental laboratory where one can test hypotheses, as Ivan Strenski has suggested in his otherwise illuminating article on the subject (2016, 51). Testing hypotheses is a way to construct, by process of elimination, an objective account. And, beyond a very circumscribed realm that would include the relative dating of texts and establishing the earliest uses of ideas such as “karma” and “rebirth,” I do not think the humanities are best equipped to do that. I will therefore spend more time re-describing these myths than testing my hypotheses on them.

This is not a step back from relevance, however, since imaginative re-description is at least as important a form of knowledge production as hypothesizing is. The physicist Phillip Ball has written of contemporary works of science fiction based on more or less accurate understandings of quantum

physics that, while there will always be hits and misses, “it is right that there should be imaginative responses to quantum mechanics, because it is quite possible that only an imagination sufficiently broad and liberated will come close to articulating what it is about” (2018, 10). And when it comes to being counterintuitive, obscure, and mystifying, religion may not beat quantum physics, but it certainly gives it a run for its money.

The comparative method is the proper exercise of the training one receives as an historian of religions. One may well argue that just because one has been trained to do something is no reason to do it, or even to assume it has any use at all. This is true in many cases, but does not apply to the project of the humanities, which is to gain a better understanding of what it is to be human. In this project, any disciplined way of thinking that is rigorously self-critical and is practiced among a group of sufficiently diverse scholars (diversity being not a mere sop to public relations in our case, but a vital necessity for the well-being of the field) will produce insights and perspectives that will be of use to others. But the proof, ultimately, is in the pudding. Now, on to the nuts and bolts of the kind of re-descriptions and comparisons I will be doing in this book.

MYTH/MYTHS/MYTHOS/MYTHOLOGY

Throughout this book, I will be using the terms *myth*, *myths*, *mythos*, and *mythology* (as well as *myth cycle*) interchangeably to spare the reader from ploddingly repetitive prose. But they all mean the same thing in my usage. The word *myth* can both refer to something that is commonly believed but is not true and to a story that, while fictional, nonetheless is held to contain some profound truth about the human experience. This double meaning of myth is the product of an argument that goes back to Ancient Greece and Plato’s distinction between the truth of *logos* and the falsity of *mythos*, the latter of which he admits may nonetheless be useful in indoctrinating children too young to appreciate a good argument.² This idea of myth as falsehood more or less held until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was overturned by humanist thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Giambattista Vico, who saw myth as an important category for understanding human thought and culture.

In the interest of compressing an enormously complicated narrative better treated elsewhere (e.g., Feldman and Richardson 1972; Lincoln 1999; Johnston 2018), we can quickly move on to the early nineteenth century when Georg Friedrich Creuzer developed a psychological theory of myth,

writing that its purpose was “to transpose what has been thought into what has happened” (1819–21, 99).³ Continuing into the twentieth century, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer understood comparative mythology as a way to explore the human capacity for creating symbols. For Cassirer, understanding myth was tantamount to understanding the workings of the mind. This idea was shared by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom myth was not merely fanciful but instead employed the sophisticated manipulation of symbols to resolve the binary contradictions of social life, which are an expression of the binary nature of human consciousness. Taking a different view of the myth-mind connection, the psychoanalysts Freud and Jung saw myths as representations of personality development, with Freud focused on the Oedipal conflict while Jung built his theory around mythic archetypes as expressions of the collective unconscious.

We do not need to go any farther to establish that the study of myth, indeed the very idea of myth, is a product of the Western tradition stretching from fifth-century-BCE Athens to twentieth-century Europe. So what purpose can it have in looking at Indian myths? Is there even such a thing as an Indian myth? The Paraśurāma stories we will be reading were not “myths” to the people who made them, but *itihāsa* (“history”), or *purāṇa* (“ancient tales”), or something else. Why call them myths then? And why compare them with non-Indian myths?

To answer the last question first, I would say that the study of myth is always-already comparative; even if one is studying a single variant in isolation, studying myth is always an implicitly comparative enterprise because designating a story as “myth” requires one to place it in the same category alongside stories already accepted as mythological. It would be nonsense to say that Kwakiutl myths are nothing like Egyptian myths, since one is already referring to them both as “myths.” To my mind, being explicitly comparative is a more transparent way to go about it.

As to the question of nomenclature, we can call these Paraśurāma stories “myths” for practical reasons. We need not presuppose the psychic unity of humankind to see that using the category of myth allows for some creative re-descriptions that would not be possible otherwise. I will therefore call the Paraśurāma stories “myths” because they fit my definition, which I freely admit is purely heuristic and will not enable one to pick a myth out of a lineup when it is presented alongside folktales, legends, and tragedies. Nevertheless, here it is: *A myth is a narrative about events not witnessed by the teller or the audience, existing in more than one variant, that expresses the values, anxieties, and worldview shared by the group of people who receive and reproduce it.*