CHAPTER FIVE

THE ARCHETYPAL DESIGN OF THE TWO SANSKRIT EPICS

Thanks to the Critical Editions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is, I believe, possible to demonstrate that they have been pulled into a similar archetypal design.¹ My view of the Critical Editions is that, despite complaints from all sides, they are more dispositive of an archetype than has been appreciated.²

A related matter is the status of the substories in each epic, which the Critical Editions show to be integral. Among *Mahābhārata* substories, the *Rāmopākhyāna* has special implications for thinking through the relation between the two archetypes, since this “Rāma Story” does not have the structural design the two epics share.

Taking in these three texts, I propose that one of our best opportunities to assess the relations between them, and the hands of their “authors,” may lie in their treatments of the chief heroines Draupadi and Sītā. Having explored this suggestion in some detail, I will turn to some intertextual implications beyond the epics.

**A. Common Archetype**

I begin by outlining the epics’ common archetypal design by “Books” (the *Mahābhārata’s* eighteen *parvans*; the *Rāmāyaṇa’s* seven *kāṇḍas*) with reference to the roles of the two heroines, limiting myself to Books 1 and 3, since they will be the focus of this essay.

¹ This chapter keeps much to the oral form in which its was presented in 2008 at the 5th Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas.

² In this chapter, I approach the baseline integrity of this archetypal *Mahābhārata* mainly in terms of themes and content, commenting on recensional history only at footnote 9 to reject the idea that what we have in the Critical Edition results from a second (or as some would put it, only from a late) Gupta recension, and in my closing discussion of Mahadevan 2008. On what I consider to be the pre-Gupta recensional history of the *Mahābhārata* that can be identified, following Mahadevan 2008 and 2010, by looking at early modifications of the Southern Recension, see chapter 7 below, Hiltebeitel 2010b, and Hiltebeitel forthcoming, chapter 1, which critiques some of the Critical Edition’s best known critics.
In each epic, Book 1 introduces Frame Stories involving the poem’s Composition and Transmission. Draupadī is not prominent in the *Mahābhārata’s* Frame, but Sitā is in the *Rāmāyana’s*. The *Rāmāyana* uses the term *carita* (which I will translate “adventure”) four times to describe itself in its short *upoḍghāta* or “preamble,” the second of which calls “the whole *Rāmāyana* poem the great adventure of Sitā” (1.4.6). Once past the Frames, each epic introduces Dynastic Origins connected with Vedic names, and turns to the Youthful Lives and Marriages of the heroes. Each heroine marries, and one learns about their births. Draupadī bears one son with each Pāṇḍava. Sitā as yet has no issue.

Book 3 is in each case about Forest Exile marked by monstrous encounters as the heroes and heroines enter the Forests and leave them. I will call these episodes the Forest Books’ bookends. Unencumbered by children, the couples undergo Forest Trials and continue to receive Instructive Guidance from Great Rṣis. Toward the beginning of these Books, each heroine sounds words of concern: Draupadī, speaking as a lady pandit, tries to prod Yudhiṣṭhira to action (Malinar 2007a); Sitā cautions Rāma that he should not give way to excessive violence in hunting deer. But each is at one point left unprotected, and is abducted—Sitā after Rāma has gone out chasing a magical golden deer she asked him to bring her as a pet, or if he kills it, which he does, to bring its hide. Draupadī’s abduction is brief, and when her husbands recover her, they all sit down to hear the *Rāmopākhyāna*. In Sitā’s case, insofar as it provides the provocation that makes the Great War inevitable, her abduction is the counterpart to the outrage against Draupadī during the dice match in Book 2. Subsequently, both heroines are absent during their husbands’ Forest-exiting transformative encounters with a benign monster, which signals their return to society (in the *Rāmāyana*, a society of monkeys).

Compared with their husbands, the two female leads get more staggered attention at different points and with more contrasting accents. The defining outrage against Draupadī occurs in Book 2, that of Sitā in Book 3. Draupadī has children early, Sitā very late, bearing twins in Vālmīki’s hermitage who, like Vālmīki himself, are never mentioned in the *Rāmopākhyāna*. As fuller discussion would show, the *Rāmāyana* works the common blueprint along most carefully through Books 1–5.3 Such a design cannot be accidental. One epic must have had it first.

---

3 For fuller book-by-book comparisons and discussion of other authors’ work in this direction, see Hiltebeitel 2005a, 460–61 (= chapter 6 below); 2006b.