

## Ravana Visits Sita at Night in the Ashoka Grove, from Kamban's Tamil *Ramayana*

### TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND TEXT

The *Ramayana* is one of India's two great epics; the other is the *Mahabharata*, in which the stories of Nala (told in unit 1) and Girika (told later in this unit) are found. The *Ramayana* tells the story of the war waged by the god Rama (also called Raghava) to regain his wife, Sita (also known as Janaki, the daughter of Janaka), who has been kidnapped by Ravana, a demon king who terrorizes the entire universe. Kamban's Tamil version of the *Ramayana* (Irāmāvatāram) probably belongs to the twelfth century, when the Chola empire, based in the Tamil country, was at its height. Kamban himself is linked to the village of Teralundur in the Kaveri delta, whose verdant landscapes he loves to describe. The selection shows us Ravana's doomed attempt to seduce his prisoner, Sita, as the monkey Hanuman ("Anjana's son"), a divine ally of Rama's, watches from his perch in the tree. Kamban's *Ramayana* is possibly my favorite Tamil book.

KAMBAN'S *RAMAYANA*, VERSES 5.425–51, 5.453–54

He came—the demon king—sighing  
fierce sighs that scorched the golden garden,  
buds, branches, flowers, roots,  
and turned it black at every step.  
Although he knew exactly where the goddess  
was sitting, his mind was scattered and,  
like a snake of many heads that has lost  
its great jewel, he was looking for her  
in every nook and cranny. (425)

He was powerful, no doubt about it.  
 Anjana's son could see it clearly, watching  
 calmly as the demon came near. He thought  
 to himself: "His crooked nature, his deeds,  
 and all that has to happen will now  
 become clear." Reciting the name of Rama  
 of the chiming anklets, he hid himself nearby. (426)

Now the demon arrived at the spot  
 where *she*, a lamp to all womanhood,  
 was staying. The crowd of dancing girls  
 and others turned aside. And now she  
 was scared, trembling as if the breath of life  
 was leaving her, crying like a young doe  
 about to be eaten by a striped tiger,  
 raging in fury, eyes blazing smoke. (427)

Hanuman saw it all with his own two  
 perfect eyes. Saw her, her very life  
 fleeing in dismay. Saw him, adrift,  
 befuddled by desire, and soon  
 to die. His heart swinging back and forth,  
 the monkey whispered: (428)

"A blessing on Janaki, blessings on Raghava,  
 blessed be the four Vedas, blessed are the Brahmins,  
 blessed be the good Way!" No wonder the fame  
 of this monkey of blessings lives on  
 age after age. (429)

The monster came near. What he wanted to say  
 was just this: "When, oh my cuckoo  
 whose waist is aching under the weight  
 of your breasts, will you give me your  
 sweet love?" It was like someone  
 who mistakes poison  
 for the nectar of life. (430)

His mind had lost not an ounce  
 of its self-satisfaction, not even  
 after Shiva himself had humiliated him.  
 But now, tormented both by desire  
 and by diffidence, he shyly started  
 to speak. (431)

“All our todays are gone,  
 and our tomorrows too.  
 Look how you’re treating me,  
 oh my girl with fierce eyes that reach  
 to your earrings!  
 Are you going to wait till I’m dead,  
 till you’ve killed me,  
 to join me in bed? (432)

I’m the one who looks after  
 this singular world and the two others.  
 There’s no limit to my wealth and royal  
 power. But you, oh my jewel,  
 apart from the storm you’ve stirred up  
 in me, loving you, are you going to give me  
 anything more than disgrace? (433)

My golden bow, my long-haired beauty,  
 you’ve scorned the luxury of long-lived fame.  
 That lover of yours, sweet to your spirit,  
 is still alive, wandering through wilderness.  
 Is the life he lives—that lousy  
 human business—anything  
 like living? (434)

Have a look at what great Yogis  
 and sages of subtle understanding  
 think is the best they can do,  
 sweet woman whose breasts  
 burst their bounds: they want only  
 the happiness of serving me together  
 with my other godly slaves. (435)

When you speak, your gentle murmur  
 drives to distraction  
 all that has meaning, the music of the lute  
 and the haunting Vilarī raga,  
 the mumblings of the mynah bird.  
 The Creator with his four heads must have worked  
 very hard to fashion your mind  
 with its odd kindness  
 and your waist, fleeting  
 as a flash of lightning. (436)

Your days, your youth  
 will never come back.  
 Little by little they're wasting away.  
 When they're gone, when days  
 meant for delight are a void,  
 when will you start to live?  
 Or will you go on drowning  
 in this great sorrow? (437)

I may lose the breath of life.  
 Let it go.  
 It's all because your mind  
 is warped, as anyone can see  
 by your sad face.  
 But what then? Do you think  
 you'll ever find a man worthy  
 of your character and your beauty,  
 a match for your desire—  
 a man like me? (438)

Feminine grace and beauty,  
 firmness of spirit—you've got these  
 and other virtues. But what about  
 empathy and generosity rooted in kindness?  
 Have they died out in Janaka's noble line? (439)

You heard that voice, *his* true voice, crying for help  
 just before he died.<sup>1</sup> And yet you keep on thinking  
 you'll see him again. The truth is, my little cuckoo,  
 that your lucky time has come, but instead of reveling  
 in it you scorn it. Does that make sense? (440)

Let's say I'll die (because of you). Without delay,  
 all my wealth will die with me. But no—you, you're one  
 of a kind. You could have gone along and had  
 all the wealth and fame in the world. Instead,  
 you've lost everything. You're left with nothing  
 but blame. (441)

You could have ruled the three deathless worlds,  
 gods and goddesses worshiping at your feet.  
 All this was yours, and you threw it away.  
 Is there anyone—and I mean *anyone*—  
 as senseless as you? (442)

Accept me—king over all who live  
 in all three worlds—as your lowly servant.  
 Have a heart!” He cupped his hands over his head  
 and fell full-length at her feet on the ground,  
 heedless of disgrace. (443)

His words were like iron rods heated in flames.  
 They scorched her ears even before  
 she heard them. Her heart wobbled,  
 her eyes poured blood. She had no mercy  
 on her own life’s breath as she started  
 to speak, in a way no woman should or could. (444)

She was hoping to move the heart of that brawny,  
 crooked monster. “You’re no more to me  
 than a blade of grass,” she began, burning  
 with rage. “Your words are rough, unspeakable  
 in the presence of a married woman.  
 There’s nothing like a woman’s loyalty in love  
 to turn her heart to stone. Now listen. (445)

If you would like to split open Mount Meru,  
 or to cleave the sky so you can walk beyond it,  
 or to put an end to all fourteen worlds,  
 then my noble lord’s arrow  
 can do it. Even you know all this, ignorant  
 as you are. And still you use these lusterless  
 words, as if you wanted to cast off  
 all ten heads. (446)

You were scared to death of my lord, so you waited  
 till he was away, sent that seductive golden deer  
 and only then came to me, hiding your true self.  
 If you want to go on living, you’d better  
 set me free, because when you face in battle  
 that one who is poison to your whole clan,  
 your eyes will no longer see. (447)

Your ten heads and all those arms  
 will be only too lovely a target, a happy game,  
 for *him*, skilled archer that he is, with his many  
 arrows. It seems you still believe  
 you have the guts to do battle. Remember  
 Jatayus, who threw you to the ground?<sup>22</sup> (448)

The truth is, you were defeated that day  
 by a bird. Only with the sword you got from the god  
 who holds a gushing river on his head did you  
 manage to win. Without it, you'd have died.  
 So the long life you were promised because of your  
 harsh vows and all the wishes you were granted  
 and all the clever thoughts you've had—  
 all of them belong, now, to Death. A hero's arrow  
 has taken aim. (449)

So there's the sword, and the long life, and the strength  
 you were born with, and all the other things that Brahma  
 and the others said they would give you. As soon as Rama  
 strings his bow, you can throw them away, and all that's left  
 will be to die. That's the truth. Can darkness  
 stand before light? (450)

When you lifted up his mountain, Lord Shiva squashed you  
 with his toe. And it was his great bow, made from Mount Meru  
 to burn the Three Cities with a single arrow, that my husband  
 snapped in two that day—though it seems that *you*, Sir,  
 never heard the sound it made that echoed  
 through the cosmos.<sup>3</sup> (451)

Idiot! My prince—god bless him—knows  
 where you're hiding. He'll be here soon,  
 and on that day the ocean and Lanka  
 will perish. But his rage won't stop at that.  
 Time itself will change its course  
 and die, together with your life's breath. (453)

You've chosen a crooked way. His generous fury  
 won't be satisfied by killing off a few fierce demons.  
 I'm afraid the whole universe will be wiped out,  
 obliterated, leaving  
 no trace, as the God of Goodness  
 is my witness." (454)

#### KAMBAN'S TAMIL AS A KIND OF SANSKRIT

*Whitney Cox (Near Reader)*

One dominant way to understand the relationship between languages in premodern India sees Sanskrit existing in a privileged place. On account of its precocious systematization and its career as a timeless and placeless medium of learned

culture, so the argument goes, Sanskrit played a generative role within the Indic language order. As other literary languages began to emerge from the many local speech-forms of the subcontinent beginning in the second half of the first millennium CE, the cosmopolitan standard set by Sanskrit provided a crucial impetus: the resources of Sanskrit's grammar, lexicon, metrics, literary canon, and poetics provided conditions of possibility for these languages' emergence. But these took shape as entities conceptually and ontologically distinct from Sanskrit; typically, this was seen as a matter of declination from Sanskrit's unchanging, purportedly divine prototype.

From this perspective, to claim Kamban's Tamil as a kind of Sanskrit doesn't make much sense. Tamil already presents a historical anomaly within the Sanskrit cosmopolis: by its own antiquity and its dogged independence at the level of grammatical theory and literary practice, Tamil stands outside of (or perhaps alongside) the millennia-long historical arc of cosmopolitan Sanskrit. But here I am less interested in the relation between the languages over the long term, and more in thinking about how Kamban challenges us to radically rethink this relationship. To find Sanskrit within Kamban's Tamil *Ramayana* is not to claim that the northern origins of his narrative make him derivative of a Sanskritic model or source. Nor does it mean that Kamban's poetic idiom is unusually suffused with borrowings, whether lexical or figurative, from a putatively separate tradition. Instead, this long poem enacts an argument about the kind of thing it is. This is never stated outright by the poet, but I think it is worth lingering over for a moment, before turning to the verses that David Shulman has translated.

The idea of Kamban's Tamil as a kind of Sanskrit presents a model of language order that is quite starkly opposed to the usual cosmopolitan language-vernacular language binary. The model of language Kamban's work enacts resonates with, and is indeed an inspiration for, the view of language that Shulman has implicitly argued for throughout his career. Such a view of language leads us to usefully question the supposedly firm boundaries that separate out one speech-form from another. In the conventional view, "Tamil" denotes one such entity, "Sanskrit" another; "Hebrew," "French," "Bahasa Java," and "Wolof" are all further tokens of the type. In historical and sociolinguistic terms, these conventional delimitations of the domain of language prove to be full of crossings and exceptions, with hybrids and creoles (or, in south India, *maṇipravāḷams*) proliferating everywhere. So there are good empirical reasons to be suspicious of them. But even if we accept these conventions as useful fictions, each language-continuum is itself stretched along a cline, from the simplest communicative act up to language at its most intensified and self-reflexive. The latter is the language of poetry, above all: it might also be said to be the point at which any given language extends into its own kind of Sanskrit: "Intensified" is, after all, a fairly good literal translation of *saṃskṛta*.

If Tamil thus harbors Sanskrit within itself, this is the Sanskrit that Kamban's *Ramayana* presents in such luxuriance. Kamban makes relatively little use of direct

borrowings of Sanskrit vocabulary in the excerpted passage: the scattering of nouns and (much less frequently) verbs that are Sanskrit-derived are all domesticated into distinctly Tamil forms. But some of the passage's carefully wrought intensities are direct adaptations from Sanskrit prototypes. The passage actually begins at the tail end of a long verse sequence sharing a single syntax—a *kulakam*—that is an inheritance of the Sanskrit tradition of long poems (*mahākāvya*). The opening words of the first verse (“He came—the demon king”) correspond to words actually occurring eighteen and nineteen verses earlier in Kamban's original. This sort of long descriptive parataxis was omnipresent in earlier classical Tamil, but here it is projected across the segments of Kamban's stanzaic *viruttam* verses. This metrical form itself bears a resemblance to its namesake, the *vr̥tta* meters that form the mainstay of classical Sanskrit literature. But there are more differences than similarities. Where Sanskrit *vr̥tta* meters are invariant in their scansion, the Tamil *viruttam* allows much more freedom in its patterning. And while the classical Sanskrit long poem usually employs a single meter for each canto, leaving aside a few concluding verses, Kamban is free to shift between different varieties of the *viruttam*, in order to mark significant shifts in the narrated story, or to signal a shift in the poet's or the reader's attention.

Kamban's idiom effortlessly slides along the scale of intensity that marks out the continuum we may call “Tamil.” Here is one of the great strengths of vernacular poetry: Kamban's Tamil or Shrinatha's Telugu—or for that matter, Shakespeare's English—can move between the rigorously formal pole of its most intensified diction and the poet's own language of everyday life. In Kamban's case, this is made even more complex by the availability of the old idiom of the Sangam, the morphology and thematic repertoire of which he freely draws upon. This pendulation between distinct registers is very clear from the outset of the passage. Immediately after ramping up the listener's expectation by the long linked series of verses, Kamban turns his attention to Hanuman and his thoughts. The style here is balanced, austere, classicizing, exemplified by the second verse's pivotal third quarter (“He thought / to himself: ‘His crooked nature, his deeds, / and all that has to happen will now become clear’”). This is Kamban's Tamil-as-Sanskrit, where every single word in the original is Dravidian in origin. As Ravana draws close to Sita, Kamban continues to frame the hidden monkey hero. The poet shortens his metrical reins with a series of heavy syllables, while sharply simplifying his style—the description of Hanuman reads practically as spoken prose (the translation of 428, “Hanuman saw it all,” beautifully captures the shift.)

Ravana's attempted seduction of Sita, which follows over the next thirteen verses, is full of surprises. The barrage of compliments he aggressively pays to Sita—“oh my cuckoo whose waist is aching under the weight of your breasts” (430), “oh my girl with fierce eyes that reach to your earrings” (432), “whose breasts burst their bounds” (435), and so on—is conventional: Rama showers her with much the same praise before her abduction. A leitmotif of Ravana's speech is the theme

of worldly transience, which fell within the public (*puṛam*) division of Sangam Tamil literature, and was prominent in the didactic poetry of other late-classical texts. This world-weariness, of course, is here subordinated to Ravana's erotic designs. The ensuing cognitive dissonance—the art of seduction as a lecture that all things must pass—is intended by Kamban: by speaking in the public *puṛam* manner to a private *akam* end, Ravana's effort is doomed from the start. All of this is reminiscent of Sanskrit poetics' category of "false feeling" (*rasābhāsa*) or the semblance of literary emotion, the product of an ethical or ontological mismatch between would-be lover and beloved. For critics writing in Sanskrit, Ravana's love for Sita provides the paradigmatic example of a false feeling; Kamban domesticates this problem of Sanskrit literary theory within the resources of the classical Tamil past, fusing the two registers into something new.

For all his fumbling, Kamban's Ravana possesses considerable powers of eloquence. In one of the long vocative periods he offers to Sita—*pōruḷum yālum viḷariyum pūvaiyum / maruḷa naḷum maḷalai vaḷuṅkuvāy* (5.436: "When you speak your gentle murmur / drives to distraction / all that has meaning, the music of the lute / and the haunting *vilari* raga, / the mumblings of the mynah bird")—the play of labial and liquid sounds (all those *p*-s, *v*-s, *m*-s, and *l*-s) imitate the sweet voice that Ravana describes. Elsewhere, he is cosmically arrogant, in another instance of Kamban's chaste classicism:

Have a look at what great Yogis  
and sages of subtle understanding  
think is the best they can do,  
sweet woman whose breasts  
burst their bounds: they want only  
the happiness of serving me together  
with my other godly slaves. (435)

Sita's response to all this is signaled by a shift in the meter. The lines grow longer, with a recurrent rhythmic cadence introduced at the end of each: a final drumbeat, iconizing Sita's rage and resolve. She is not remotely swayed by Ravana's pledge of love. The first of these verses ("They scorched her ears . . .") lights up Sita with a series of staccato flashes, quickly passing over her ears, her heart, her blood-red eyes, and her inner being before coming to rest on her unwomanly words. The following verse begins with the poet speaking in his own voice, its opening line coolly composed ("She was hoping to move the heart of that brawny, crooked monster"). What follows is a wrenching contrast: what Shulman renders as "You're no more to me than a blade of grass" translates a single word in the Tamil, the final word in Sita's rebuke. This is a totally accurate translation, but English cannot quite capture its connotation: the word possesses a humiliating casteist undertone, and its use by Sita is jarring. She throws Ravana's string of compliments back at him—448 ends with the long vocative phrase: literally, "you who were once cast on the earth by Jatayus." Kamban fuses elements of a perfectly naturalist stream of invective with

the intensifications of theme and diction that belong to his long elevated poem. To give only a single example:

When you lifted up his mountain, Lord Shiva squashed you  
with his toe. And it was his great bow, made from Mount Meru  
to burn the Three Cities with a single arrow, that my husband  
snapped in two that day—though it seems that *you*, Sir,  
never heard the sound it made that echoed  
through the cosmos. (451)

Once again, the sting is in the tail—the ironic *aiya* (“Sir”) at verse’s end sounds drawn from life; the strong contrast with the verse-opening nonrespectful pronoun *nī* (“When *you* lifted up . . .”) is surely deliberate. Between these poles of dismissal and mock respect, the poet juxtaposes two earlier myths—Ravana’s humiliation by Shiva and Rama’s breaking of Shiva’s bow—into a breathless rush of action. Yet for all its density, the verse is easy to follow. It wasn’t even that big a deal, breaking the bow, yet the whole world—except befuddled Ravana—could hear the result.

Sita’s words frustrate the dichotomy between the elevated language of poetry (Tamil-as-Sanskrit) and the spoken speech of everyday life. This breakthrough is something that Kamban achieves over and over again: bear in mind that in producing just his monumental *Irāmāvatāram*, he is the most prolific Tamil poet, ever. Tamil’s master poet, in his work of astonishing breadth and depth, staged moment after moment where his language is at once close at hand and self-transcending.

CAN DARKNESS STAND BEFORE LIGHT?  
ENCOUNTERING AN EPISODE FROM A MEDIEVAL  
TAMIL MASTERPIECE

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Thousands of handwritten texts of late antique and medieval Hebrew poetry have survived in the Cairo Genizah, typically fragmented and often barely readable: a great many of them still await identification and evaluation.<sup>4</sup> A philologist dealing with such documents on a daily basis is bound to be haunted by an urge, as well as an obligation, to decipher these long-forgotten, precious pieces of verse as precisely as possible, so that the very text is accurately reconstructed. This is obviously an essential prerequisite for adequately interpreting the often elusive and highly allusive lines of verse, continuously conversing with biblical verses and other writings of old. Hardly could such a philologist avoid a poignant self-doubt, while facing the unusual opportunity to make a comment on a work rooted in a civilization much remote from the one(s) more or less familiar to him or her.

Pondering over David Shulman’s English translation of an episode from Kamban’s *Ramayana*, the nocturnal scene of Ravana’s visit to Sita in the Ashoka Grove,

one wonders if any (poetic) justice can indeed be done to this captivating passage through a foreigner's gaze, devoid, alas, of familiarity with the text's cultural milieu. Might such a far reading be likened to Ravana's "fierce sighs" as he approaches the grove, at the very beginning of our episode, scorching "the golden garden, / buds, branches, flowers, roots," and turning it black at every step? Admittedly, the local colors, sounds, and odors, the landscape, its fauna and flora, and the specific timbre of voice and diction are well beyond the reach of such a gaze from the outside, and this lack is surely a significant one. As Shulman himself has put it in a recent journal note written at "the Koneru pond, where we sat reading Telugu poems": "Is there any other place to read them? Only in that light and fragrance can I understand them. A goddess turned up to bless us."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, such a view from the outside might also bring to mind Hanuman's position in our scene. Though hidden "nearby," distinctly outside of the encounter of Ravana and Sita, their dramatic rendezvous is followed closely and emphatically by "this monkey of blessings," who, in a sense, may be representing here an ideal, deeply alert "sensitive reader" of the encounter. Hanuman sees "her [Sita], her very life fleeing in dismay . . . [sees] him [Ravana], adrift, / befuddled by desire, and soon / to die," while his own heart is "swinging back and forth." Indeed, though situated quite farther, and with no pretension of having "two perfect eyes," such as Hanuman's, I was also drawn into the deeply expressive account of Ravana and Sita's confrontation. And as if in compensation for my lack of familiarity with its original echo chamber, at some points the passage brought to mind, by way of association, some scenes, topoi, and segments of early writings with which I am a little bit more familiar.

The meeting of Sita, "a lamp to all womanhood," with Ravana, the demon king, whom the narrator compares to "a snake of many heads that has lost / its great jewel," takes place at an idyllic "golden garden." To a biblically oriented reader's mind, such a scene is almost bound to recall the fatal encounter that took place, according to the Book of Genesis's third chapter, at the primordial Garden of Eden, between Eve, "the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20) and the devious serpent, who "was more crafty than any beast of the field" (Gen. 3:1). *Mutatis mutandis*, of course: the narrative contexts are essentially different. Still, it is interesting to note that, quite unlike Eve, whom the cunning serpent rather easily persuades to disobey God's command, Sita remains unwaveringly faithful to Rama, her absent companion, despite all of Ravana's ceaseless efforts to seduce her ("There's nothing like a woman's loyalty in love / to turn her heart to stone"; 445).

In other instances, specific phrases and motifs evoked comparable utterances. Ravana's address to Sita as "my cuckoo / whose waist is aching under the weight / of your breasts" (430), for example, can bring to one's mind the Lover of the biblical Song of Songs, picturesquely addressing his Beloved as "my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock (Cant. 2:14) . . . thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes" (Cant. 7:8). Perhaps it is even more reminiscent of

Andalusian Hebrew erotic verse (roughly contemporaneous to Kamban's epos) and its typically hyperbolic depictions of the feminine figure.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, while urging Sita to accept his courtship, Ravana presents her with the argument that the days of youth "will never come back. / Little by little they're wasting away. / When they're gone, when days / meant for delight are a void / when will you start to live?" (437) and so on. Quite unmistakably, this is an expression of the *carpe florem* theme, a prevalent element in the European tradition of love poetry from Greco-Roman Antiquity to the age of Baroque.<sup>7</sup>

Ravana's appeal to Sita indeed appears to overflow with stock phrases and clichés of courtship discourse, some of which may be of cross-cultural prevalence. But the most captivating feature in this passage is probably the paradoxical contradictions of strength and weakness embodied in the figures of both Ravana and Sita. The former is portrayed as "powerful, no doubt about it" (426), "king over all who live in all three worlds" (443), whereas the latter, his helpless captive, as "crying like a young doe / about to be eaten by a striped tiger, / raging in fury, eyes blazing smoke" (427). But the seemingly clear-cut balance of power between omnipotent Ravana and feeble Sita is gradually revealed as intrinsically ambiguous. Addressing Sita, the mighty Ravana is described as "tormented both by desire / and by diffidence" (431). He asks her to accept him, "king over all who live in all three worlds," as her "lowly servant," and then falls "full-length at her feet on the ground, / heedless of disgrace" (443). The frightened Sita, in contrast, replies to her captor most daringly, speaking, as the narrator puts it, "in a way no woman should or could" (444). Referring to Ravana as "no more to me / than a blade of grass" (445), she bluntly refuses to accept any of his offers and declares her total devotion to Rama, her absent husband. Much more than the various details of Rama's deeds that she counts, what is most significant and striking in her address is probably the fervor of her clear moral conviction, so powerful that it turns her inferiority as a vulnerable captive into immense power: "That's the truth. Can darkness / stand before light?" (450).

"Darkness" clearly stands here for the presence of the threatening Ravana, whose fierce sighs "scorched the golden garden, / buds, branches, flowers, roots, / and turned it black at every step" (425). Light represents delicate Sita, whose waist was "fleeting / as a flash of lightning" (436). At the same time, light symbolizes truth, which by its essence defeats falsehood. This may bring to mind the biblical association of light, truth, and righteousness. The Psalmist turns to God, calling "O send out thy light and thy truth, let them lead me" (Ps. 43:3), and in the Book of Proverbs the juxtaposition of light and darkness symbolizes the contrast of the path taken by the righteous, which eventually leads to success, and the way of the wicked, that is doomed to fail: "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. / The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble" (Ps. 4:18–19). Sita's last words in our passage are "the God of Goodness / is my witness" (454). Notably, this declaration

can also be paralleled to biblical phrases such as “The Lord is witness against you” (1 Sam 12:5) or “my witness is in heaven, and my record is on high” (Job 16:19). One can detect here remarkably similar manifestations of the human yearning, at crucial moments of crisis, for an undoubtable clarity that can be found only in the realm of the divine.

Beyond betraying the present reader’s cultural horizons, specific resemblances of expression, as the ones observed between Kampan’s lines and passages from ancient Hebrew sources, may reflect a rather far-reaching truth: boundaries of culture and civilization can be transcended by a universal, deeply humane ideal, such as the aspired victory of moral conviction over tyrannical oppression. Be that as it may, I am genuinely grateful for the poet-translator’s resonant passage, for making it possible for me (alongside many other “distant readers”) to be enchanted by such masterly verse from afar.