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Autor: Feller, Danielle
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Danielle Feller*

Puṣpaka in the Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa

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Abstract: The story of the divine flying chariot or palace (*vimāna*) called Puṣpaka, “little flower”, is well-known from the Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa. Created by Brahmā for the god of riches Kubera, the wonderful *vimāna* is then taken by force by the demon Rāvaṇa. Subsequently, it becomes the property of Rāma, who has defeated Rāvaṇa in the war and who uses the chariot to fly back within a day from Laṅkā to Ayodhyā. Puṣpaka has three main functions in the text: narrative – it allows the poet to wind up his story and achieve a quick change of scene, once the war description is over; psychological – Puṣpaka is an object of envy, especially for Rāvaṇa and his rākṣasa family; theological – the possession of the divine flying palace is the visible token that its owner has obtained divine status, or that he has become the master of the world. Puṣpaka itself undergoes a striking metamorphosis in book 7 of the Rāmāyaṇa: whereas it was previously described as an inanimate object, the flying palace appears suddenly as an intelligent being endowed with speech, and even as a deity, thereby contributing to Rāma’s own prestige. Puṣpaka’s three successive owners clearly stand for the three *puruṣārthas*, or aims of human life: Kubera represents prosperity, Rāvaṇa pleasure and Rāma duty. This leads us to the final question: after going from *artha*, to *kāma* and then on to *dharma*, will Puṣpaka ultimately attain *mokṣa*?

Keywords: Puṣpaka-*vimāna*, Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Kubera, Rāvaṇa, Rāma, *puruṣārthas*

1 Introductory

The story of the divine flying chariot or palace (*vimāna*) called Puṣpaka, “little flower”, is well-known from the Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa,¹ a text in which it receives its first, but perhaps also its most detailed literary description. Yet, as far as I know, its identity has not been the object of an in-depth investigation. What, or should we perhaps rather say who, is Puṣpaka really? Is it an object, or an

¹ All the references to the Sanskrit text will be to the critical edition by Bhatt et al. (1960–1975) and the translations are by Goldman et al. (1984–2017).

***Corresponding author: Danielle Feller**, SLAS, University of Lausanne Faculty of Arts, Anthropole, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: Danielle.Feller@unil.ch

animate being, or perhaps even a god? The examination of the linguistic evidence will perhaps throw some light on this point. And what are its functions in the story, as it moves from its first wealthy owner Kubera, on to the lustful *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa, and finally to its last righteous master, Rāma? These are some of the questions we shall try to answer in this paper, along with a final one: after moving from *artha*, to *kāma*, and then on to *dharma*, will the gentle Puṣpaka ultimately attain *mokṣa*?

First, we shall give a brief summary of the divine chariot's story in the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, following the chronological order of events, and not necessarily the order in which they are narrated in the text. Puṣpaka's active role in the plot of the story mainly unfolds in books 6 and 7, even though the chariot is already mentioned and described in the previous books of the Rāmāyaṇa.² But much about Puṣpaka's early history is only told in the last book of the Rāmāyaṇa, the Uttarakāṇḍa, in connection with the history of the *rākṣasas* and of Rāvaṇa's family. The Uttarakāṇḍa's date of composition has been the object of an long-standing debate³ and many scholars hold that, along with the Bālakāṇḍa, it was composed later than the other books of the Rāmāyaṇa. It is indeed true that Puṣpaka's representation in the Uttarakāṇḍa qualitatively differs from its descriptions earlier in the text, while paralleling the internal logic of Rāma's own evolution from man to god. But we should bear in mind that "the book has been uniformly transmitted as an integral part of the manuscripts of the epic in all of its recensions and subrecensions and has been received as such by all commentators on the text."⁴ While allowing that the Uttarakāṇḍa is "theologically more advanced", as Mary Brockington⁵ elegantly puts it, this chapter forms an inalienable part of the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, and especially, it allows us a glimpse into Puṣpaka's final destiny which is quite unparalleled in the rest of Sanskrit literature. The gist of Puṣpaka's adventures is as follows:

2 The story of Puṣpaka

Vaiśravaṇa, better known as Kubera, the son of the ṛṣi Viśravas and of a daughter of the sage Bharadvāja, performs great austerities. When the god

² The only books of the Rāmāyaṇa that contain no trace of Puṣpaka (at least in the critical edition of the text) are books 2 and 4.

³ See the discussion on this topic, with a survey of the relevant literature, in Goldman/Sutherland Goldman 2017: 74–81.

⁴ See Goldman/Sutherland Goldman 2017: 74.

⁵ See Mary Brockington 2010: 42.

Brahmā appears to give him a boon, he requests permission to become a world guardian and the keeper of all wealth, which Brahmā readily grants. Then Brahmā gifts him the *vimāna* Puṣpaka, which – depending on the passage – he has either created himself or through the agency of Viśvakarman, the divine architect. Kubera thus acquires divine status and becomes the fourth guardian of the world. Then, his father Viśravas advises Kubera to settle in Laṅkā, which has been abandoned by the *rākṣasas* and now lies empty. From time to time, Kubera uses Puṣpaka to visit his parents in their *āśrama* (7.3). Later, Kubera's younger brother, Rāvaṇa, moved by envy of his half-brother and instigated by his mother, the *rākṣasī* Kaikasī, performs in turn an extremely rigorous penance and obtains from Brahmā the boon to be invincible to all supernatural beings. Rāvaṇa then manages to wrest Puṣpaka by force from Kubera (7.15.29) and he uses the *vimāna* to tour the various worlds and wage war on the gods and other powerful beings.⁶ Subsequently, during the war against Rāma and his monkey-army, Rāvaṇa resorts to Puṣpaka once more to fly Sītā above the battlefield, so that she will see the inanimate Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa who have been temporarily stunned by Indrajit's magical weapons. Rāvaṇa hopes that Sītā will think them dead and willingly become his wife – a stratagem which of course fails to achieve the expected result (6.37–38). After Rāvaṇa has in turn been defeated and killed in the war by Rāma, the chariot is offered to Rāma, who uses it to fly back quickly to Ayodhyā at the end of his exile (6.110–15). Then he wishes to return it to its first owner, Kubera (6.115.48–50), but Kubera sends Puṣpaka back with a message to Rāma that he should keep it as a reward for killing Rāvaṇa (7.40).⁷ Rāma uses Puṣpaka once more in order to find and kill Śambūka, the *tapas*-practising *śūdra* (7.66). Then he dismisses Puṣpaka

⁶ In Mahābhārata 3.259.34 (all the references are to the critical edition of the Mahābhārata, by Sukthankar et al., 1933–1959), Kubera curses Rāvaṇa when the latter takes Puṣpaka from him, predicting that the chariot will not carry the *rākṣasa* king. To my knowledge, this curse is not mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa, even though Rāvaṇa conspicuously does *not* use Puṣpaka to kidnap Sītā.

⁷ Not so in the Mahābhārata's Rāmopākhyāna, which ends with the heroes' return to Ayodhyā, after which Rāma sends Puṣpaka back to its first owner Kubera (MBh 3.175.68). The god of wealth apparently keeps the chariot, for when the Pāṇḍavas meet him, he is sitting on Puṣpaka (MBh 3.158.35). Kālidāsa, in his Raghuvamśa 14.20 (references are given to Scharf 1964), finds a sort of middle path: Rāma returns Puṣpaka to Kubera, with the provision that Puṣpaka should come to him if needed. The situation arises in 15.45, when Rāma needs Puṣpaka's help to find Śambūka. Although the Mahābhārata's Rāmopākhyāna does not mention the events of the Uttarakāṇḍa, Rāma's murder of Śambūka is briefly referred to in MBh 12.149.62, but this verse says nothing of Puṣpaka.

rather unceremoniously and without any hint that this will be their last meeting (7.73.18).⁸ This is the last we hear of the divine chariot in the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa.

3 Puṣpaka's representation

After this brief summary of Puṣpaka's history in the Rāmāyaṇa, let us now investigate the linguistic evidence and see how the divine vehicle is described in this text. First of all, we must note that the proper noun Puṣpaka is a masculine. Puṣpaka is therefore systematically referred to as “he” in the Sanskrit text. In English, however, for the sake of clarity, we have chosen to use the neuter “it” to refer to the aerial car. Puṣpaka is mostly called a *vimāna* (masc. or nt.), derived from the root vi-MĀ – “to measure, pass over, traverse”.⁹ The term *vimāna* thus literally means “measuring out, traversing”. At times, it designates an “ordinary” earthly palace, and it can appear in this sense in the Rāmāyaṇa. For instance, in 2.30.3 and 2.53.9, it designates the many-storied buildings of Ayodhyā. In 2.82.5, the term is applied to Rāma's palace, and in 3.30.4, 5.8.36, 5.41.10 and 5.51.1, it describes Rāvaṇa's palace. But more frequently, *vimāna* designates a flying palace of the gods and other divine beings.¹⁰ At times, the earthly palaces seem as luxurious as the heavenly ones, and the

8 *ayodhyāṃ prāpya kākutstho vimānād avarohata //*
tato viśṛjya ruciraṃ puṣpakaṃ kāmagaṃinam /
... rāmo 'bravīd vacaḥ // 7.73.17c–18 //

“Kākutstha [...] reached Ayodhyā and descended from the flying palace. After dismissing the resplendent Puṣpaka, which moved at its master's will, Rāma spoke these words...” Here, some manuscripts, whose redactors were apparently dissatisfied with Rāma's lack of courteousness towards Puṣpaka, add a line after 18ab: “And the lord, having caused [the Puspaka] to be dismissed [with the words]: “Go, may all be well with you...” (*visarjayitvā gaccheti svasti te 'stv iti ca prabhuh*). See the discussion on this point in Goldman/Sutherland Goldman 2017: 1072–1073.

9 This term also has other specific meanings in Indian medicine (where its translation is problematic, see Wujastyk 2017) and architecture: in temples of the Southern (*drāviḍa*) type, it designates “a pyramidal form of superstructure that rises over the *garbhagṛha* [sanctum]” (Lorenzetti 2015: 79).

10 In the Ṛgveda, the aerial chariots of the gods are mostly called *ratha*, not *vimāna*. But the *rathas* are sometimes described as measuring out the sky, as for instance in Ṛgveda 2.40.3, in a hymn dedicated to the gods Soma and Pūṣan:

somāpūṣaṇā rajaso vimānaṃ saptacakraṃ ratham aviśvaminvam /
viśūvṛtaṃ manasā yujyamānaṃ taṃ jinvatho vṛṣaṇā pañcaraśmim //

only real distinction between the two types is that the former are stationary. Occasionally (for instance in 7.3.18c and in 6.109.10c), Puṣpaka is also called a *yāna* (nt.), from the root YĀ – “to go”, which literally means “leading, conducting”, and generally designates a vehicle of any kind. Once, it is also called *kauberam paramāsanam*, “the supreme seat (or throne) of Kubera” (6.110.22a).¹¹

There are two slightly different versions of the story concerning Puṣpaka’s origins. Mostly, it is said that Puṣpaka was made on Brahmā’s order by the divine architect Viśvakarman,¹² as for example in 5.7.10a: “[the vehicle] which was fashioned in heaven for the sake of Brahmā by Viśvakarman” (*brahmaṇo rthe kṛtaṃ divyaṃ divi yad viśvakarmaṇā*). Only in one passage it is twice stated that “the flying palace was created by Brahmā, with his mind”: *vimānaṃ puṣpakaṃ divyaṃ manasā brahmanirmītam* (6.115.23c) and *manasā brahmaṇā sṛṣṭe vimāne* (6.115.29).¹³ But we may note that the same, perhaps only apparent, discrepancy holds for creation at large, which is sometimes said to emanate directly from Brahmā (as in Manusmṛti 1.1), whereas at other times Brahmā delegates the actual work of creation to lesser deities or semi-divine beings (for instance to the seven Sages, as in Mahābhārata 3.256, appendix 27). Being a divine creation of Brahmā, Puṣpaka is furthermore said to be unassailable (*anādhṛṣya*, 6.109.27) and indestructible (*akṣaya*, 7.21.15), as shown in the scene when Rāvaṇa attacks the god of death Yama in his own realm, and is assailed by Yama’s furious armies.

Another one of Puṣpaka’s frequent epithets is also derived from the chariot’s history: Puṣpaka is often said to be “won by valour” (*vīryanirjita*, e. g. in 7.15.31a). This *vīrya* is probably the valor of *tapas* in the case of its first owner Kubera, who acquires the chariot by means of severe penance. Rāvaṇa takes the

O Soma and Pūṣan, the chariot with seven wheels and five reins that measures out the airy realm but does not speed everyone, rolling in various directions, being yoked with mind, that do you quicken, you bulls. (Transl. Jamison/Brereton 2014).

The translators suggest that here the term *ratha* may actually designate the sacrifice.

¹¹ As far as I could ascertain, Puṣpaka is never called a *ratha*, whereas by contrast, Rāvaṇa’s other flying chariot, which he uses to kidnap Sītā, is called a *khaga-ratha* or “sky-going chariot” (3.40.6–7).

¹² Since the first meaning of the term *vimāna* is that of “measuring”, we understand why Brahmā appointed an architect to build the divine chariot.

¹³ The Viṣṇupurāṇa (2.2) gives some further interesting details concerning the divine chariot’s origins. According to this text, when Viśvakarman had reduced the Sun god’s excessive splendor by grinding it off on his grindstone, this extra brightness remained suspended in the atmosphere as shiny particles of dust. Viśvakarman then collected them, and out of them he made Viṣṇu’s *cakra*, Siva’s *triśūla*, Skanda’s *śakti* and the *vimāna* Puṣpaka. See Vettam 1975: 623.

chariot by force of arms from his elder brother and Rāma receives the chariot from Vibhīṣaṇa after defeating Rāvaṇa in battle.

Other adjectives that are frequently applied to the *vimāna* are “divine” (*divya*), probably to make it clear that this is no ordinary terrestrial palace, “charming” (*ramaṇīya*), “splendid” (*śubha*), and “quick as thought” (*manojava*), a characteristic which allows the heroes to return to Ayodhyā very quickly after the war. Puṣpaka is likened to a cloud¹⁴ (*meghasaṃkāśa*, 6.109.10a, and *mahāmegha ... yathā*, 6.111.1cd) or to the sun (*sūryasaṃnibha*, 6.109.9a and 7.3.18a). It is decorated with flowers (*puṣpabhūṣitaḥ*, 7.4.11e), a trait which is probably inspired by its name, and adorned with white banners and flags (*pāṇḍurābhīḥ patākābhir dhvajaiś ca samalaṃkṛtam*, 6.109.23a). In 7.15.30c, it is furthermore said to contain “trees whose fruits fulfill all desires” (*sarvakāmaphaladruma*), and which make it similar to a piece of heaven.

Puṣpaka is said to be “decorated with all manner of gems” (*sarvaratnavibhūṣita*), and made of all kinds of costly materials, like gold, silver, crystal, mother of pearl and different varieties of precious stones. The divine vehicle is huge and seems like an architect’s dream come true, with its shining platforms, penthouses, windows and mansions. This can be seen in the following passage towards the end of book 6, where Vibhīṣaṇa offers the divine chariot to Rāma; this provides a pretext for an elaborate description of Puṣpaka:

*tataḥ kāñcanacitrāṅgaṃ vaidūryamaṇivedikam /
kūṭāgāraiḥ parikṣiptaṃ sarvato rajataprabham //*
*pāṇḍurābhīḥ patākābhir dhvajaiś ca samalaṃkṛtam /
śobhitaṃ kāñcanair armyair hemapadmavibhūṣitam //*
*prakīrṇaṃ kiṅkiṇijālair muktāmaṇigavākṣitam /
ghaṇṭājālaiḥ parikṣiptaṃ sarvato madhurasvanam //*
*taṃ meruśikharākāraṃ nirmitaṃ viśvakarmaṇā /
bahubhir bhūṣitaṃ armyair muktārajatasamṇibhaiḥ //*
*talaiḥ sphatikacitrāṅgair vaidūryaiś ca varāsanaiḥ /
mahārḥastaraṇopetair upapannaṃ mahādhanaiḥ //*
*upasthitam anādhṛṣyaṃ tad vimānaṃ manojavam /
nivedayitvā rāmāya tathau tatra vibhīṣaṇaḥ //* 6.109.22–27 //

Vibhīṣaṇa then stood waiting after announcing to Rāma that that unassailable flying palace, as swift as thought, had arrived.¹⁵ Each of its parts was variegated with gold, and its raised platforms were made of lapis. It was covered on every side with penthouses,

¹⁴ Goldman et al. 2009: 1471, note 10, remark, citing a commentary: “The simile is intended to suggest great speed”. But the comparison is perhaps also based on the towering effect of certain types of cumulonimbus clouds.

¹⁵ This first sentence translates the last verse of the passage (6.109.27). While reading or listening to the Sanskrit, we are left to puzzle during the whole passage about the identity of

and it shone like silver. It was adorned with white flags and banners. It was splendid with golden mansions and adorned with golden lotuses. It was covered with masses of tiny bells and had windows of pearl. It was covered with masses of bells on every side so that it made a sweet sound. Fashioned by Viśvakarman, it resembled the peak of Mount Meru. It was adorned with many mansions that shone with pearl and silver. It had floors whose sections were variegated with crystal, and its splendid and costly seats of lapis were spread with expensive coverlets.

From this description, we see that the divine flying palace looks like a piece of heaven come down on earth, as evidenced by the comparison with the peak of Mount Meru, the abode of the gods. But Puṣpaka is not only a wonderful sight to behold: it may also give off a sweet smell, since it is decorated with flowers, and, as we have just seen in the above quote, it produces a charming sound (*madhurasvanam*), since it is “covered with masses of bells on every side”. Thus, Puṣpaka’s presence flatters in equal measure the senses of sight, smell and hearing, and perhaps even of taste, since the trees whose fruits yield all desires grow on it.

Apart from the above-described physical characteristics, Puṣpaka is also endowed with moral or psychological ones. One of the more curious features of the chariot is that it would apparently refuse to carry a widow. This is one of the indices that make the *rākṣasī* Trijaṭā declare to Sītā that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, although they have been rendered unconscious by Indrajit’s weapons, are not actually dead, since Puṣpaka agrees to carry Sītā over the battlefield of Lāṅkā:

idaṃ vimānaṃ vaiidehī puṣpakaṃ nāma nāmataḥ /
divyaṃ tvāṃ dhārayen nedaṃ yady etau gatajīvitau // 6.38.25 //

Moreover, Vaidehī, if those two heroes had really lost their lives, this celestial flying palace, which goes by the name of Puṣpaka, would not be carrying you.

At least, this is how one commentator explains this rather cryptic statement, although it could of course be construed differently.¹⁶

One of Puṣpaka’s most frequent epithets is *kāmaga* or *kāmagāmin* “moving as it pleases”. This is usually translated by Goldman et al. as “which moves at its master’s will”. And it is indeed true that Puṣpaka obeys its master of the moment, by telepathy so to say, and carries him wherever he wants to go. But later in the story, once Puṣpaka is in Rāma’s possession, Rāma allows it to roam about at will and only come to him when he thinks of it – here Puṣpaka really becomes *kāmaga*, and moves about according to its own desires (7.40.11).

the object that is so lavishly described, and which is revealed only at the end. This is a recurring poetic trick.

¹⁶ See Goldman et al. 2009: 807. Another way of interpreting this incident is that Puṣpaka, out of compassion, would refuse to inflict on Sītā the sight of her dead husband.

Mostly, as we read the passages describing the divine chariot, the impression is that Puṣpaka moves about by its own internal power of locomotion. The chariot is never said to be endowed with wings or wheels, but once, in 6.110.23, it is said to be “yoked to geese” (*haṃsa-yukta*),¹⁷ which are the god Brahmā’s own sacred birds and thus serve as a reminder of the chariot’s origins.

In one single instance, Puṣpaka’s flight is obstructed (*puṣpakasya gatiś chinnā*, 7.16.18a) by a higher power, namely, by Śiva who does not want Rāvaṇa to roam over the mountain where he is enjoying himself in the company of Pārvatī. Enraged by what he considers as an affront, Rāvaṇa attacks Śiva, only to be defeated by him in a humiliating fashion.

In book 7 of the Rāmāyaṇa, Puṣpaka appears to be personified to a greater extent than in the previous *kāṇḍas* of the Rāmāyaṇa, and in these passages the divine chariot really differentiates itself sharply from all the other *vimānas* described in Sanskrit literature. In 7.40, it surprises the readers and protagonists of the story alike by suddenly speaking, and in 7.66.7, it bows to Rāma (*praṇato bhūtvā*) and calls itself his servant (*kiṃkara*). These traits clearly evoke a sentient being endowed with an anthropomorphic shape, rather than an inanimate chariot. We see from the above that it is not easy to form a coherent and uniform image of Puṣpaka. Can it move about by itself or is it drawn by geese? Is it just an inanimate object or on the contrary a sentient and intelligent being? It is not surprising that Puṣpaka should be represented in a number of different ways in the visual arts and that no real consensus seems to have been reached as to its final shape.

4 Puṣpaka’s functions in the Rāmāyaṇa

In my opinion, Puṣpaka’s functions in the Rāmāyaṇa-story are threefold:

- Narrative
- Psychological
- Theological

We shall now examine these three points in the above order.

4.1 Puṣpaka’s narrative function

At the end of the war, Rāvaṇa’s virtuous younger brother Vibhīṣaṇa offers the chariot to Rāma, who has just defeated and killed Rāvaṇa in the battle:

¹⁷ The same is said of Puṣpaka in Mahābhārata 9.46.27.

*puṣpakaṃ nāma bhadraṃ te vimānaṃ sūryasaṃnibham /
mama bhrātuḥ kuberasya rāvaṇenāhṛtaṃ balāt //
tad idaṃ meghasaṃkāśaṃ vimānaṃ iha tiṣṭhati /
tena yāsyasi yānena tvam ayodhyāṃ gatajvaraḥ // 6.109.9–10 //*

For, bless you, there is a flying palace, as radiant as the sun, called Puṣpaka, which Rāvaṇa took from my brother Kubera by force. That flying palace, which resembles a cloud, is kept nearby. By means of this conveyance you shall go to Ayodhyā free from anxiety.

The divine chariot allows the heroes' exile to come to a rapid close, since they can fly back to Ayodhyā within a day on Puṣpaka instead of walking back as they came. Now that their adventures in Laṅkā have come to an end, this narrative device allows Vālmiki to achieve a quick change of scene and to wind up his tale. We may note that from the point of view of the bare plot of the story, this trip on board the *vimāna* is the only time Puṣpaka is mentioned in the two short summaries of Rāma's story that are given at the beginning of the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa (1.1.69 and 1.3.27). It can thus be considered as Puṣpaka's single most important feat.

The aerial journey¹⁸ from Laṅkā to Ayodhyā, described in 6.111, serves as a recapitulation of the heroes' adventures, allowing Rāma to reminisce about their journey on the "way down". He shows Sītā from above some of the spots and scenes she has missed after being kidnapped by Rāvaṇa, but also, as they come closer to Ayodhyā, some of the places they visited together. A few samples of this description will suffice to give an impression of this journey:

*atrāhaṃ vānarendreṇa sugrīveṇa samāgataḥ /
samayaś ca kṛtaḥ sīte vadhārthaṃ vālino mayā //
eṣā sā dṛśyate pampā nalinī citrakānanā /
tvayā vihīno yatrāhaṃ vilālāpa suduḥkhitaḥ // 6.111.16–17 //*

It was here that I met Sugrīva, lord of the monkeys, and where I forged a pact, Sītā, with the purpose of slaying Vālin. And there one can see the lotus pond Pampā, with its lovely woodlands where, bereft of you, I lamented in my profound grief.

This rather concise description of the heroes' homeward aerial journey (narrated in a short *sarga* of 31 verses) certainly conveys an accurate idea of the speed at

¹⁸ Not, by the way, the first one in the Rāmāyaṇa. Previously, Rāvaṇa's flight from Laṅkā to the Daṇḍaka forest on board another *vimāna* is similarly described in 3.33. This *vimāna*, even though it can also fly through the air and is, like Puṣpaka, decorated with gold and gems, cannot be Puṣpaka (unlike what Vettam 1975: 624 claims), since it is smashed to pieces during Rāvaṇa's fight with the vulture Jaṭāyus. Besides, it is said to be harnessed to "asses with *piśāca*'s heads" (*piśācavadanair yuktaṃ kharaiḥ*, 3.33.6), which strikes one as singularly inauspicious and does not correspond to what is said of Puṣpaka elsewhere.

which Puṣpaka is traveling. But the thrilling and vertiginous sensation of flying is not evoked,¹⁹ nor do we find in this passage any attempts at describing the landscape from above, with its distorted aerial perspective, which later forms so great a part of Kālidāsa's poetic endeavor.²⁰

4.2 Puṣpaka's psychological function

Puṣpaka is clearly a status-symbol that excites the envy and concupiscence of all those who see it. Before the arch-demon Rāvaṇa was even born, his career was predetermined by the envy provoked in his maternal grandfather Sumālin at the sight of Kubera riding by on Puṣpaka. For these events, we have to turn to book 7 of the Rāmāyaṇa, in which the entire history of the *rākṣasas* is told to Rāma by the sage Agastya. After suffering a decisive rout at the hands of Viṣṇu mounted on Garuḍa, the *rākṣasas*, who used to reside in Laṅkā, take refuge in the underground realm of Pātāla. One day, the *rākṣasa* Sumālin visits the surface of the earth and by chance happens to see Kubera, the son of sage Viśravas, flying by on Puṣpaka to visit his parents (7.9.1). Impressed by the young god's beauty and majesty as he soars by on his dazzling *vimāna*, Sumālin tells his unmarried daughter Kaikasī to visit sage Viśravas, so that he will conceive with her a son as powerful as Kubera. The young girl obeys her father's command, but, due to the inauspicious twilight hour (*saṃdhyā*) at which she approaches the sage, Viśravas informs her that her future son is fated to be evil. Some years later, after bearing her own children, Kaikasī again sees Kubera coming to visit his father, looking very splendid and dashing on Puṣpaka. She then turns to Rāvaṇa and plants the first seeds of hatred and envy in her son's heart:

putra vaiśravaṇaṃ paśya bhrātaraṃ tejasā vṛtam //
bhrātr̥bhāve same cāpi paśyātmānaṃ tvam īdṛśam /
daśagrīva tathā yatnaṃ kuruṣvāmitavikrama //
yathā bhavasi me putra śighraṃ vaiśravaṇopamaḥ /
mātus tad vacanaṃ śrutvā daśagrīvaḥ pratāpavān //
amarṣam atulaṃ lebhe pratijñāṃ cākarot tadā /
satyaṃ te pratijñāmi tulyo bhrātrādhiko 'pi vā //
bhaviṣyāmy acirān mātāḥ saṃtāpaṃ tyaja hṛdgatam /
tataḥ krodhena tenaiva daśagrīvaḥ sahānujaḥ //

¹⁹ Such as is found, for instance, in Mahābhārata 5.110, where the divine bird Garuḍa takes the Brahmin Gālava for a ride in the air.

²⁰ See Raghuvamśa 13.15; 18; 48; 54–57. Kālidāsa, who was obviously very fond of depicting aerial journeys (see also his Meghadūta) dedicates not less than 69 verses to Rāma's flight home on Puṣpaka, in Raghuvamśa 13.1–69.

*prāpsyāmi tapasā kāmam iti kṛtvādhyavasya ca /
āgacchad ātmasiddhyartham gokarṇasyāśramam śubham // 7.9.32c–37 //*

My son, look at your brother, who is haloed with blazing energy. And then, even though your status as his brother makes you his equal, just look at your own condition. Daśagrīva, my son of immeasurable valor, you must exert yourself so that you will quickly become just like Vaiśravaṇa". When powerful Daśagrīva had heard those words of his mother, he was filled with intolerable envy, and he then made this vow: "I swear to you truthfully, mother, that I shall soon be my brother's equal or even his superior. So give up this heartfelt anguish." Filled with that jealous rage, Daśagrīva formed a resolution and vowed. "I will attain my desire through asceticism." Then, together with his younger brothers, he proceeded to the splendid ashram of Gokarṇa in order to accomplish his purpose.

The rest of the story – as the saying goes – is history: Rāvaṇa, after performing a terrible penance, obtains from Brahmā the boon to be invincible to all supernatural beings, drives Kubera out of Laṅkā, subsequently defeats him in battle and takes the divine chariot away from him as a token of victory (7.15.29),²¹ and becomes the bane of the gods and of all the other dharmic beings.

We see that the Rāmāyaṇa develops with some care the psychology of its arch-villain, somewhat in the fashion of a *Bildungsroman*: Rāvaṇa is not of one piece, simply evil from birth. After all, even though he is the son of a *rākṣasī*, he is also the son of a Brahmin sage, and hence cannot be wholly bad.²² Instead, the Rāmāyaṇa carefully depicts the forces at play and the envy provoked in the *rākṣasas'* hearts by the sight of the powerful Kubera looking splendid on Puṣpaka. Adding insult to injury, Kubera himself, who merely soars by, far above the lesser members of his family, seems blissfully unaware of them, and *a fortiori* of the turmoil of jealousy he provokes in their hearts. The depiction of Rāvaṇa's mother Kaikasī,²³ who suffers a younger, lower-caste wife's jealousy towards the son of her senior and upper-caste co-wife is also very effectively rendered and could well be inspired from daily life in the harems of the rich and powerful. Like its sister epic, the Mahābhārata, which offers a psychological explanation of Duryodhana's hatred of the Pāṇḍavas by the torments inflicted

²¹ *tato nirjitya tam rāma dhanadam rākṣasādhipaḥ /
puṣpakaṃ tasya jagrāha vimānaṃ jayalakṣaṇam // 7.15.29 //*

²² That is why, in all likelihood, the story of the inauspicious *saṃdhyā* hour is necessary to explain his evil nature, which needed his own father's stamp of approval. Otherwise, it would be tantamount to saying that *rākṣasa*-blood is more powerful than Brahmin-blood, which would definitely be a paradox, since the Brahmins in the epics are regularly shown to be more powerful than even the gods. See Feller 2004: 295–297.

²³ Kaikasī's behaviour is of course reminiscent of another younger co-wife's envy, that of Kaikeyī, Bharata's mother, who is also jealous of Rāma and schemes to exile him for that reason. This similitude is even apparent in the names Kaikasī and Kaikeyī.

on him by Bhīma during their childhood plays,²⁴ the Rāmāyaṇa explores the psychology of its villain, and takes pains to explain his devious behavior as shaped by certain decisive events that happened during his youth.

Later on in his career, Rāvaṇa in turn, and very deliberately, uses his flying palace as a means of seduction to attract others to him. Thus, when Rāvaṇa meets Sītā in the Daṇḍaka forest, he first tries to entice her to follow him willingly. To this end, he brags about how he won Puṣpaka by force from his elder brother (3.46.5–6). Failing to impress her, he abducts Sītā and takes her to Laṅkā. There, he forces her to admire his palace and all his riches, among which Puṣpaka holds pride of place:

*puṣpakaṃ nāma suśroṇi bhrātur vaiśravaṇasya me /
vimānaṃ sūryasaṃkāśaṃ tarasā nirjitaṃ mayā //
viśālaṃ ramaṇīyaṃ ca tad vimānaṃ manojavam /
tatra sīte mayā sārḍhaṃ viharasva yathāsukham //* 3.53.29–30 //

Puṣpaka, the sunlike aerial chariot I took by force from my brother Kubera, is spacious, lovely, and swift as thought. Use it to your heart's content, shapely Sītā, in my company.

As we see, Rāvaṇa uses Puṣpaka in much the same way as a present-day Don Juan would use a fast and expensive car in order to impress the girls and take them for rides! The *vimāna* does not only function (or rather fail to function in this case) as a seduction device on Sītā, but subsequently, and rather more successfully, also on the monkey Hanumat, and even on us, the readers or listeners of the tale, and pervasively helps to spread Rāvaṇa's web of power and seduction. In book 5, when the monkey Hanumat reaches Laṅkā, he searches Rāvaṇa's palace during the night in the hope of finding Sītā in his harem, unaware as yet that she is staying in the *aśoka*-grove. The monkey sees halls stacked with powerful weapons and storerooms overflowing with treasures, dining halls filled with the remnants of delicious and rich foods and liquors; he sees Rāvaṇa's bedroom occupied by the majestic and powerful – and luckily sleeping! – Rāvaṇa himself and by the exquisite ladies of his harem, all under the sway of sleep.²⁵ And within the palace, the impressed

²⁴ MBh 1.119.13–23. On this topic, see Feller 2012: 71–73.

²⁵ Rāvaṇa, as 5.8 makes it clear, is very handsome and attractive (perhaps the proverbial bad boy's charm?) and all the ladies in his harem are in love with him and have come to him of their own free will. This is corroborated in 6.98, where they all come out of the city, and mourn and wail most piteously over his dead body – a description which of course sharply contrasts with the picture given of Rāvaṇa in some passages of the Uttarakāṇḍa (see esp. 7.26), in which he appears as a despicable rapist.

monkey also sees the wonderful Puṣpaka *vimāna*, which provides us with one of the first²⁶ elaborate descriptions of the divine vehicle:

*ihāmrgasamāyuktaiḥ kāryasvarahiraṇmayaiḥ /
sukṛtaiḥ ācītaṃ stambhaiḥ pradīptam iva ca śrīyā //*
*merumandarasaṃkāśair ullikhadbhīr ivāmbaram /
kūṭāgāraiḥ śubhākāraiḥ sarvataḥ samalaṃkṛtam //*
*jvalanārkapratikāśaṃ sukṛtaṃ viśvakarmaṇā /
hemasopānasaṃyuktaṃ cārupravaravedikam //*
*jālavātāyanair yuktaṃ kāñcanaiḥ sthāṭikair api /
indranīlamahānīlamanīpravaravedikam /
vimānaṃ puṣpakaṃ divyam āruroha mahākapiḥ //* 5.7.12–15 //

It was supported by finely wrought pillars that were fashioned of gold and silver and embossed with an animal motif. It seemed ablaze with splendor. It was adorned everywhere with exquisite penthouses, which, resembling Mount Meru and Mount Mandara, seemed almost to scrape the sky. The great monkey then climbed the heavenly flying palace Puṣpaka, which had been finely wrought by Viśvakarma and which, with its golden staircases and its lovely raised platforms, resembled the blazing sun. Its ornamental skylights and windows were of gold and crystal; and its raised platforms were set with lovely emeralds and sapphires.

The elaborate, sensuous and erotic description of Rāvaṇa's luxurious mansion, in which Puṣpaka is only one item, albeit a significant one, is of course meant to impress the reader/listener, and to drive home the point that Rāvaṇa is the master of the world. Then as now, delicious food and drink, deadly weapons, riches and gems, beautiful women and fast cars made for a heady seductive mixture, and were the anapanage of the rich and powerful.

4.3 Puṣpaka's theological function

Even though the term *vimāna* can also be used to designate an ordinary many-storied mansion, it is mostly used in both epics to designate divine flying

²⁶ Shortly before this passage, in 5.7.5–14, there is another description of what could also be Puṣpaka, though it is not quite clear whether Puṣpaka is meant, or only a part of Rāvaṇa's palace. The description seems to begin as that of a "fabulous palace" (*grhottama*, 5.7.5), described as "looking like heaven fallen to earth" (*mahītale svargam iva prakīrṇam*, 5.7.6) and as "having the splendor of a flying palace [...] drawn through the air by splendid *haṃsas*" (*haṃsapravekair iva vahyamānaṃ śrīyā yutam [...] vimānam*, 5.7.7). What starts as mere comparisons between the earthly palace and a flying one then suddenly seems to become the description of the *vimāna* Puṣpaka itself – here, strangely enough, only called Puṣpa: "The great monkey gazed upon that vast and resplendent flying palace called Puṣpa." (*puṣpāhvayaṃ nāma virājamānam... mahākapis tatra mahāvimānam*, 5.5.11). This shift of meaning is here facilitated by the ambiguity of the term *vimāna*, which can be applied to both terrestrial immobile, and celestial mobile, mansions.

palaces. In the latter sense, the use of *vimānas* is the prerogative of the gods and of other denizens of heaven.²⁷ For instance, in 6.105.3 and 7.100, the deities come down on earth in their *vimānas*, respectively to hail Rāma as Viṣṇu and to witness Rāma's departure from the world. *De facto*, Puṣpaka bestows on its owner divine, or at least quasi-divine status. In the case of Kubera, this is clearly expressed by the god Brahmā himself, who gifts him the *vimāna* after appointing him as the fourth world guardian:

*etac ca puṣpakaṃ nāma vimānaṃ sūryasaṃnibham /
pratigṛhṇīṣva yānārthaṃ tridaśaiḥ samatāṃ vraja // 7.3.18 //*

And please accept this flying palace called Puṣpaka, as radiant as the sun to be your vehicle. You shall be the equal of the thirty gods.

As we see, the acquisition of Puṣpaka goes hand in hand with that of divine status. Rāvaṇa, it is true, does not turn into a god, since he is the anti-god *par excellence*, but in effect he becomes the master of the universe after coming into the possession of the heavenly chariot. We now understand why he was not content with ousting his elder brother from Laṅkā, but had to pursue him even to his new realm in the north and wrest Puṣpaka from him. And we also understand how he can brag about this very feat, or why it is mentioned by others as a signal act of bravery, when it should be considered despicable on all counts²⁸: Rāvaṇa needed Puṣpaka as the visible token of his newly acquired position. Inversely, when both his powerful position and his life are about to be taken from him, he clings to Puṣpaka as to the last remnant of his soon-to-be-lost status. During the war, Kumbhakarna, who has just been summoned from his long sleep into Rāvaṇa's presence, sees his elder brother despondently sitting on the divine chariot, brooding over his fate in a rare moment of lucidity:

*so 'bhigamya grhaṃ bhrātuḥ kakṣyām abhivigāhya ca /
dadarśodvignam āsīnaṃ vimāne puṣpake gurum // 6.50.5 //*

Now that he had arrived at his brother's house and had entered its innermost chamber, he spied his elder seated dejectedly in the flying palace Puṣpaka.

²⁷ This also applies to former humans who have won celestial abodes by their good deeds. For instance, in 6.107.7, King Daśaratha, comes down from heaven in his *vimāna* to greet his son.

²⁸ Not only does Rāvaṇa fight against his elder brother and take his kingdom and his chariot from him, but he does so against their father's explicit command (see 7.11.29–32). Such behavior would probably be frowned upon in all times and places, but especially so in the Rāmāyaṇa, where it forms a striking contrast to the dharmic behavior of Rāma and his younger brothers, who always follow their father's / elder brother's commands and wishes without demurring.

Already before the war, the *rākṣasī* Trijaṭā, one of Sītā's guardians, tells the other *rākṣasīs* about a dream she has had in the night, in which she foresaw Rāma's victory and Rāvaṇa's defeat and death:

vimānāt puṣpakād adya rāvaṇaḥ patito bhuvi /
[...] rathena kharayuktena raktamālyānulepanaḥ /
prayāto dakṣiṇām āśāṃ praviṣṭaḥ kardamaṃ hradam // 5.25.18–19 //

Rāvaṇa had just fallen from his flying palace, Puṣpaka, and was lying on the ground. [...] Then he was traveling toward the south in a chariot yoked to donkeys. He was covered with red garlands and unguents, and he was plunging into a pool of mud.

The description goes on, but this short passage clearly shows that Rāvaṇa's fall from Puṣpaka and his southward journey in a chariot drawn by asses – which forms a sharp contrast to Puṣpaka's splendor – announce his imminent defeat and death in the war,²⁹ while the pool of mud probably prefigures the foul hell into which he is doomed to fall.³⁰ Rāvaṇa's gain of the divine chariot goes hand in hand with his rise to power, whereas his fall from the same, even if it is only foretold in a premonitory dream, announces his defeat.

As for Rāma, his ownership of Puṣpaka likewise starts at a very crucial moment, right after Sītā's ordeal, when the gods come down on earth and reveal to him that he is no mere mortal – as he thought he was³¹ – but in truth the Supreme God himself, and that his consort Sītā is Śrī-Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and good fortune personified (6.105). Actually, as we know, he has really been a god since his very conception (see 1.14), but it is only at the moment when he is officially recognized and hailed as such by the other gods that he comes into the possession of Puṣpaka, which again signals Rāma's divinity. Thanks to the divine chariot, there could not be a greater contrast between the moment when Rāma leaves Ayodhyā – apparently a mere mortal, disgraced, exiled, on an ordinary chariot, soon doomed to walk – and the moment when he returns from his adventures – flying on board an aerial palace, victorious, a god.³² His flight on Puṣpaka marks Rāma's apotheosis:

²⁹ When Bharata dreams of Daśaratha's death, he similarly sees his father going south on a chariot drawn by asses and adorned with red garlands (see 2.63.14).

³⁰ Though admittedly, as Mary Brockington (2010: 41) rightly notes, the text says nothing about Rāvaṇa's destiny after death and there is no clear hint that he will be punished for his sins in hell.

³¹ When Brahmā discloses to him his divine nature, Rāma replies with moving simplicity: "I think of myself only as a man, Rāma, the son of Daśaratha." (*ātmānaṃ mānuṣaṃ manye rāmaṃ daśarathātmajaṃ*, 6.105.10ab)

³² Although he does not specifically mention Puṣpaka, the seer Bharadvāja makes a similar comment when he meets Rāma on his way back from exile (see 6.112.4–8).

tad etad dr̥ṣyate dūrād vimalaṃ candrasaṃnibham /
vimānaṃ puṣpakaṃ divyaṃ manasā brahmanirmitam //
rāvaṇaṃ bāndhavaiḥ sārḍhaṃ hatvā labdhaṃ mahātmanā /
dhanadasya prasādena divyam etan manojavam //
etasmin bhrātarau vīrau vaidehyā saha rāghavau /
sugrīvaś ca mahātejā rākṣasendro vibhīṣaṇaḥ //
tato harṣasamudbhūto nisvano divam aspr̥ṣat /
stribālayuvavṛddhānāṃ rāmo 'yam iti kīrtitaḥ //
rathakuñjaravāḥibhyas te 'vatīrya mahīm gatāḥ /
dadṛṣus taṃ vimānasthaṃ narāḥ somam ivāmbare //
prāñjalir bharato bhūtvā prahṛṣṭo rāghavonmukhaḥ /
svāgatena yathārthena tato rāmam apūjayat //
manasā brahmaṇā sṛṣṭe vimāne lakṣmaṇāgrajaḥ /
rarāja pṛthudīrghākṣo vajrapāṇir ivāparaḥ //
tato vimānāgragataṃ bharato bhrātaraṃ tadā /
vavande praṇato rāmaṃ merustham iva bhāskaram // 6.115.23–30 //

And there in the distance one can see the bright celestial flying palace Puṣpaka, which looks like the moon and was created by the mind of Brahmā. Through the grace of Kubera, bestower of wealth, great Rāma obtained this celestial flying palace, as swift as thought, after killing Rāvaṇa together with his kinsmen. In it are the two heroic Rāghava brothers, together with Vaidehī as well as Sugrīva of immense blazing energy and Vibhīṣaṇa, the lord of the *rākṣasas*. Then a great clamor of joy arose reaching to the heavens, as the women, children, youths, and elderly cried out, “There’s Rāma!” The men got down from their chariots, elephants, and horses and, standing on the ground, gazed at Rāma, who, in his flying palace resembled the moon in the sky. Cupping his hands in reverence and facing Rāghava, Bharata joyfully honored Rāma with a fitting welcome. In that flying palace, which Brahmā created with his mind, the elder brother of Lakṣmaṇa, with his long and wide eyes, looked as splendid as a second Indra, wielder of the *vajra*. Then Bharata humbly praised his brother Rāma, who stood atop the flying palace, like the sun, maker of day, on the summit of Mount Meru.

We see how effectively Rāma’s divine status is stressed by means of comparisons with various gods and luminaries: standing on Puṣpaka, the home-coming hero looks like a second thunderbolt-wielding Indra, like the moon in the sky or like the sun on Mount Meru.

Interestingly, Puṣpaka’s development in the course of the text is parallel to that of Rāma. Under the ownerships of Kubera and Rāvaṇa, Puṣpaka is represented as an inanimate, though of course extraordinary, object. When he does not use it, Rāvaṇa simply parks Puṣpaka in his palace. But it soon turns out that the *vimāna* is also endowed with a certain amount of responsiveness, for when Rāma, after returning from Laṅkā, tells it to go back to Kubera, it obeys at once and flies off to the northern direction (6.115.48–50). But the real surprise comes some time later, in a passage which is very significant as far as Puṣpaka’s metamorphosis is concerned:

athāparāhṇasamaye bhrātr̥bhiḥ saha rāghavaḥ /
 śuśrāva madhurāṃ vāṇīm antarikṣāt prabhāṣitām //
 saumya rāma nīr̥kṣasva saumyena vadanena mām /
 kailāsaśikharāt prāptaṃ viddhi mām puṣpakaṃ prabho //
 tava śāsanam ājñāya gato 'smi dhanadaṃ prati /
 upasthātuṃ naraśreṣṭha sa ca mām pratyabhāṣata //
 nīr̥jitas tvaṃ narendreṇa rāghaveṇa mahātmanā /
 nihatya yudhi durdharṣaṃ rāvaṇaṃ rākṣasādhipam //
 mamāpi paramā prītir hate tasmin durātmani /
 rāvaṇe sagaṇe saumya saputrāmātyabāndhave //
 sa tvaṃ rāmeṇa laṅkāyāṃ nīr̥jitaḥ paramātmanā /
 vaha saumya tam eva tvaṃ aham ājñāpayāmi te //
 eṣa me paramaḥ kāmo yat tvaṃ rāghavanandanam /
 vahe lokasya saṃyānaṃ gacchasva vigatajvaraḥ //
 tacchāsanam ahaṃ jñātvā dhanadasya mahātmanaḥ /
 tvatsakāśaṃ punaḥ prāptaḥ sa evaṃ pratigṛhṇa mām //
 bādham ity eva kākutsthaḥ puṣpakaṃ samapūjayat /
 lājāḥkṣataiś ca puṣpaiś ca gandhaiś ca susugandhibhiḥ //
 gamyatām ca yathākāmam āgacches tvaṃ yadā smare /
 evam astv iti rāmeṇa viśṛṣṭaḥ puṣpakaḥ punaḥ /
 abhipretāṃ diśaṃ prāyāt puṣpakaḥ puṣpabhūṣitaḥ // 7.40.2–11 //

In the afternoon Rāghava, together with his brothers, heard sweet words that were spoken from the sky: “Gentle Rāma, please look upon me with a gentle countenance. Know, O lord, that I am the Puṣpaka, who has come from the summit of Mount Kailāsa. After receiving your command, I went back to Kubera, the bestower of wealth. And he, O best of men, told me to wait upon you, saying: “You were won by the great Rāghava, the lord of men, after he had slain in battle Rāvaṇa, the unassailable lord of the *rākṣasas*. And I, too, gentle one, experienced the greatest delight when the evil-minded Rāvaṇa was slain, along with his hosts, his sons, his ministers, and his kinsmen. You were won in Laṅkā by Rāma, who is the Supreme Spirit. And thus I command you, “Gentle one, you must carry him.” It is my greatest desire that you should carry the delight of the Raghus on his journeys through the world. So go, free from any anxiety.” Having received that command of great Kubera, the bestower of wealth, I have returned once again to your side. Therefore please accept me.” And saying, “So be it!” Kākutstha worshipped the Puṣpaka with parched grain, unhusked rice, flowers, and extremely fragrant perfumes, saying: “Now you must depart as you wish. But you must return whenever I call you to mind.” Then, having said, “May it be so!” the Puṣpaka was dismissed once again by Rāma. Adorned with flowers, the Puṣpaka departed in the direction of its choice.

As we see, Puṣpaka can suddenly speak, whereas so far, the chariot had never given the slightest indication that it was endowed with the power of speech. The text itself offers no explanation as to how a *vimāna*, apparently devoid of organs of locution, can articulate sounds. On this point, Goldman and Sutherland Goldman remark: “The commentators agree that the voice is uttered by some being moving through the sky. [...] Cg further specifies that the speaker is the

presiding divinity of the Puṣpaka (*puṣpakābhīmānidevatayoktām ity arthaḥ*).³³ Rāma then worships Puṣpaka “with parched grain, unhusked rice, flowers and extremely fragrant perfume”. This would indeed seem to corroborate the fact that Puṣpaka has become a god, and one who is worshipped, either in its own shape or – by means of a splitting of personality – in the form of its presiding deity, by the Supreme God himself. Like Rāma, who evolves in the course of the story from a supposedly mere mortal into a god, Puṣpaka undergoes an even greater parallel metamorphosis, from a mere object into an intelligent, and even divine being. Rāma seems not in the least astonished by this, unlike Bharata who remarks to Rāma after Puṣpaka’s departure:

*atyadbhutāni dṛśyante tvayi rājyaṃ praśāsati /
amānuṣāṇāṃ sattvānāṃ vyāhṛtāni muhur muhuḥ // 7.40.12-13 //*

Extraordinary things are seen when you are ruling the kingdom. Again and again nonhuman creatures are speaking.

Bharata considers this event to be nothing short of miraculous (*atyadbhuta*) and he attributes it to the virtues of Rāma’s equally extraordinary reign. Puṣpaka’s rise in the hierarchy of beings of course directly contributes to Rāma’s own prestige.

5 Puṣpaka and the *puruṣārthas*

After examining Puṣpaka’s importance in the Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa on a narrative plane, as well as the divine chariot’s impact on its owners on the level of psychology and theology, we shall now study in closer detail the personae of Puṣpaka’s three successive masters, Kubera, Rāvaṇa and Rāma. We soon realize that these embody the three *puruṣārthas* or “aims of human life”: its first owner Kubera, the god of riches, clearly stands for *artha* (prosperity); Rāvaṇa, the lustful demon who is governed by his desires, embodies *kāma* (pleasure); and finally, Rāma, the righteous king, represents *dharma* (duty). Puṣpaka thus moves from *artha*, to *kāma* and finally on to *dharma*. If we imagine that the chariot is following an ascending trajectory, a logically more satisfying order in increasing degree of importance would perhaps have been: *kāma*, then *artha*, then *dharma*. For, as Manusmṛti 12.38 states:

³³ See Goldman/Sutherland Goldman 2017: 838. Kālidāsa, in his *Raghuvamśa* 13.68, likewise imagines that Puṣpaka has an *adhidevatā* – a presiding deity who reacts according to the desires of the chariot’s master.

*tamaso lakṣaṇaṃ kāmo rajasas tv artha ucyaṭe /
sattvasya lakṣaṇaṃ dharmah śraiṣṭhyam eṣāṃ yathākramam //*

Pleasure is said to be the mark of Darkness; Profit, of Vigor; and Law, of Goodness. Each later one is superior to each preceding. (Transl. Olivelle 2005)

Even the Kāmasūtra, a text in which we would expect *kāma* to hold pride of place, states in 1.2: *eṣāṃ samavāyo pūrvaḥ pūrvo garīyān*, “When these three aims – religion, power, and pleasure – compete, each is more important than the one that follows.” The same hierarchy is already visible in the very first *sūtra* of the collection: *dharmārthakāmebhyo namaḥ*, “We bow to religion, power and pleasure”. (Transl. Doniger & Kakar 2002).³⁴

This correspondence between Puṣpaka’s owners and the three aims of human life is rather obvious and needs but little corroboration from the text. Kubera performs his *tapas* precisely in order to become the god of riches (*dhanada*, *dhaneśa*), the fourth protector of the world. After leaving Laṅkā, his first abode, he resides on Mount Kailāsa in the beautiful city of Alakā and watches over his vast hoard of treasures. Rāvaṇa, after becoming the king of Laṅkā, leads a life entirely dedicated to pleasure, and his epicurean nature is amply underscored by the description of his city and palace seen through Hanumat’s eyes in the Sundarakāṇḍa. Rāvaṇa’s addiction to *kāma* is also stressed when his sister Śūrpaṇakhā takes refuge with him after being mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa in the forest. She upbraids him rather sternly in order to instigate him to avenge her:

*pramattaḥ kāmabhogeṣu svairavṛtto niraṅkuṣaḥ /
samutpannaṃ bhayaṃ ghoram boddhavyaṃ nāvabudhyase //
saktaṃ grāmyeṣu bhogeṣu kāmavṛttaṃ mahīpatim /
lubdhaṃ na bahu manyante śmaśānāgnim iva prajāḥ // 3.31.2–3 //*

Drunk as you are on sensual pleasures, so licentious and unbridled, you overlook the one thing you must not, the presence of terrible danger. When a lord of the earth is lustful, addicted to vulgar pleasures, a slave to his passions, his subjects see him as no better than a cremation fire.

Her scolding goes on in a similar vein for the whole chapter. As we can see, her chief reproach to him is that he is too addicted to *kāma* and neglects the affairs

³⁴ On the topic of the respective preeminence of each “aim of human life”, see also Mahābhārata 12.161, which contains a discussion between the Pāṇḍavas as to which of the *puruṣārthas* is the most important. Each brother defends a particular *puruṣārtha*. *Mokṣa* is king Yudhiṣṭhira’s favoured aim of human life, which stands opposed to the other three. On this topic, see Bowles 2009.

of the state.³⁵ The fact that this reproach is kept in the mouth of a member of Rāvaṇa's family, and not of an enemy, lends it even more weight.

As for Rāma, it is well-known that he is the most virtuous of all kings. At the beginning of the text, Vālmīki is looking for a perfect man, in order to write a poem about him. In the description of this paragon of virtue, who will of course turn out to be Rāma, the term *dharmajña* (knower of *dharma*) is frequently mentioned.³⁶ After Rāma's return to Ayodhyā, his perfectly dharmic reign is synonymous with natural harmony and unadulterated bliss for all his subjects. This is how Bharata describes it:

*anāmayāc ca martyānām sāgro māso gato hy ayam /
jīrṇānām api sattvānām mṛtyur nāyāti rāghava //
putrān nāryaḥ prasūyante vapuṣmantaś ca mānavāḥ /
harṣaś cābhyadhiko rājañ janasya puravāsinaḥ //
kāle ca vāsavo varṣaṃ pātayaty amṛtopamam /
vāyavaś cāpi vāyante sparśavantaḥ sukhapradāḥ //
īdṛśo naś ciraṃ rājā bhavatu iti nareśvara /
kathayanti pure paurā janā janapadeṣu ca // 7.40.14–17 //*

More than a month has passed since there was any illness among the people, and death has not befallen even the aged creatures, Rāghava. Women are giving birth to sons, and men have splendid bodies. Joy abounds among the people who dwell in the city. At the proper time, Vāsava sends down rain that is like the nectar of immortality. And the winds blow softly to the touch, giving pleasure. And, Lord of men, the people in the city and the folk in the country-side say, "May such a king be ours forever."

In short, everything is going so smoothly under Rāma's just governance that the premature death of a young Brahmin boy in 7.64 appears as something absolutely unheard-of and symptomatic of a lapse in *dharma* – the *śūdra*-ascetic Śambūka's penance.

In view of the above, the correspondence between Puṣpaka's owners and the three *puruṣārthas* leaves little room for doubt. But do these owners make use of Puṣpaka in a way that corresponds to, or reflects, their main aim in life? This question, unfortunately, does not receive such a straightforward answer. The

³⁵ Śūrpaṇakhā is of course rather self-contradictory, for she was herself under the sway of *kāma* when she propositioned first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa earlier in the story; and subsequently she does not hesitate to use to her own advantage her brother's addiction to pleasure when she stresses Sītā's great beauty and encourages him to abduct her (see 3.32.14–20).

³⁶ "Who is there who is mighty and yet knows both what is right and how to act upon it? Who always speaks the truth and holds firmly to his vows?" (*kaś ca vīryavān dharmajñaś ca kṛtajñaś ca satyavākya dṛḍhavrataḥ*, 1.1.2); "[Rāma] knows the ways of righteousness and is always true to his word. The welfare of his subjects is his constant concern." (*dharmajñaḥ satyasamḍhaś ca prajānām ca hite rataḥ*, 1.1.12), etc...

Rāmāyaṇa does not contain much concerning Kubera, the god of riches. But as far as we can tell from the information we have, Kubera's use of Puṣpaka mainly serves to project an image of absolute opulence and power. Whether he does so consciously or not is another question; but this is certainly how his spectators, three consecutive generations of down-trodden *rākṣasas*, view his behavior, which would undoubtedly come under the heading of *artha*. But what is the main purpose for which Kubera travels about on his *vimāna*? To visit his parents in their *āśrama* – undoubtedly a very dharmic deed reflecting his filial devotion.

Rāvaṇa, it is true, once uses Puṣpaka to carry Sītā over the battlefield so that she will see the apparently dead Rāma and therefore agree to become his wife – a deed which, we would agree, is steeped in *kāma*.³⁷ But when we read the story of his early exploits in book 7, we realize that the *rākṣasa* king mainly uses Puṣpaka to achieve his conquest of the world. Were it not that Rāvaṇa is going against the gods, consolidating his territory and subduing his enemies would of course be considered very proper behavior for a king looking for prosperity and stability, and come under the heading of both *artha* and *dharma*.

As for Rāma, we have seen that he uses Puṣpaka to fly home at the end of his exile, in order to be more quickly reunited with his mothers and brothers and fulfil his promise to return at the end of fourteen years, in conformity with his dharmic nature. But he next uses the *vimāna* to find and kill the *śūdra*-ascetic Śambūka. Although the Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa whole-heartedly condones this deed, which is precisely accomplished in order to restore *dharma* (cf. 7.65), we know that it appeared very problematic to some of the later Rāmāyaṇa tradition³⁸: while Kālidāsa still mentions the incident without any qualms in Raghuvamśa 15.51–52, Bhavabhūti, in his Uttararāmacarita 2.10, has Rāma perform the deed with utmost reluctance.³⁹ From the above, we realize not only that Puṣpaka's owners do not exclusively use the divine chariot in the pursuit of their favoured *puṇyārtha*, but also that they all (mis)use – to a lesser or greater extent – the divine flying palace in a fashion bordering on *adharma*.

This investigation into the *puṇyārthas* leads us to one last question: after going from *artha*, to *kāma* and on to *dharma*, will the gentle Puṣpaka ultimately

³⁷ We may well ask the question why Rāvaṇa does not use Puṣpaka to abduct Sītā. Being indestructible, Puṣpaka would not have been destroyed by the vulture king. Perhaps the author(s) of the story shied away from involving the Brāhmic heavenly chariot in such an adharmic deed? Or perhaps, as suggested above, it might be a vestige of Kubera's curse on Rāvaṇa?

³⁸ For a detailed study of the story of Śambūka, see Sherraden (2019).

³⁹ Not to mention the fact that many versions of the Rāma-*kathā*, such as the Rāmopākhyāna found in Mahābhārata 3.257–276, Bhaṭṭi's Bhaṭṭikāvya, Tulsidas' Rāmacaritamānasa, etc., do not at all touch upon the subject-matter of the Uttarakāṇḍa, in which the Śambūka episode is not the only problematic one, being greatly overshadowed by the Sītāyāga episode.

attain *mokṣa*? A priori, a flying chariot looking like the abode of immortals, and drawn, at least according to one passage, by *haṃsas*, symbols of the liberated soul, should be more intimately connected to final release than to any of the other *puruṣārthas*. But here again, we hit a snag. For *mokṣa* in the sense of “final liberation” is not really a key-concept in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As Brockington remarks, the term *mokṣa* itself occurs very rarely in the *Rāmāyaṇa*⁴⁰ and its corollary, *saṃsāra* or transmigration, seems by and large unknown in this text.⁴¹ Mary Brockington similarly notes that: “The text tells us little about what happens after death. The general assumption is that dead people go either to heaven or to hell.”⁴²

But Rāma – unlike Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata* – does not even need a divine chariot to go to heaven, whereas Brahmā himself comes down from paradise to welcome him “accompanied by hundreds of millions of celestial flying chariots” (*vimānaśatakoṭībhir divyābhir abhisamvṛtaḥ*, 7.100.3). This would have been the ideal occasion for a grand final departure on board the majestic Puṣpaka⁴³ – admittedly, to go to heaven, not to *mokṣa*.⁴⁴ But at the end of the story, Rāma and his brothers merge back into “the blazing energy proper to Viṣṇu” (*vaiṣṇavaṃ tejaḥ*, 7.100.10), without requiring Puṣpaka’s assistance. Puṣpaka’s true release probably occurs earlier in the story, when Rāma allows it freedom to move about at will, after giving the divine chariot full reverential treatment (7.40.10–11). Here we find a radical break from the whole of Puṣpaka’s previous existence, during which the divine chariot used to remain captive, parked in Rāvaṇa’s garage when not in use. Of course, we may imagine that

⁴⁰ See Brockington 1998: 451: “The term *mokṣa* in fact occurs just four times in total in the text [...] and even so not in its religious sense, which appears only occasionally in the fourth stage.” Brockington then quotes some passages found in the appendices. See also Mary Brockington 2010: 42.

⁴¹ As Mary Brockington (2010: 43–44) remarks, the only unambiguous exception is the story of Vedavati: polluted by Rāvaṇa’s touch, she leaps into the fire and vows to be reborn as Viṣṇu’s wife and to bring about the demon’s destruction (7.17).

⁴² See Mary Brockington 2010: 40. Hells figure in several passages of the epics as the *post mortem* destination for evil-doers: for instance, we have seen above how Rāvaṇa visits the infernal abodes and attacks Yama, the god of death. For this topic, see Tiefenauer 2018: ch. 4.

⁴³ In *Raghuvamśa* 15.100, Kālidāsa likewise feels the need to explain why Rāma does not use his Puṣpaka to go to heaven, even though it is at hand: the *vimāna* would apparently not have been spacious enough to carry Rāma’s subjects, who all want to follow him to heaven; that is why Rāma makes the river Sarayū into a ladder for them to climb up.

⁴⁴ In any case, as some Upaniṣads like the *Kauṣītaki* show, the concepts of paradise and of liberation do not always, at least initially, seem to be clearly distinguished.

Puṣpaka is still roaming the skies as it pleases waiting for Rāma to remember it, but the Rāma-*kathā* is open-ended in this regard.⁴⁵ After serving Rāma for the last time and helping him to locate Śambūka, the divine chariot simply vanishes into thin air without leaving a trace – which might, after all, be one way of defining *mokṣa* ...

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⁴⁵ Quite unlike what happens in the case of Vibhīṣaṇa and Hanumat, whom Rāma requests to remain alive, respectively as long as the *rākṣasas* / the tale of Rāma endure (see 7.98.22–25).

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