INTRODUCTION
1. The Position of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*

In a number of ways the *Sundarakāṇḍa* lies at, and even constitutes, the very heart of Vālmiki’s monumental epic. Although the book stands fifth among the *Rāmāyana*’s seven *kāṇḍas*, the unusual length of the sixth book, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, situates the opening verse of *Sundara* close to the midpoint of the poem. According to the traditional tally of the vulgate in the version known to the commentators Govindarāja, Mahēśvaratirtha, and Rāmānuja, wherein the text has twenty-four thousand *ślokas* corresponding to the twenty-four syllables of the sacred *Gāyatrīmantra* (*Rgveda* 3.62.10), *Sundara* 1.1 contains the twelfth of the twenty-four.¹

But its physical location in the epic is perhaps the least important of the ways in which this fascinating book is central to the design and significance of the great epic. For the *Sundarakāṇḍa* also marks the narrative center of the poem, the point at which the progressive decline in the fortunes of Sītā and Rāma that has been detailed in Books Two through Four, the unrelenting series of crises—from the abrupt cancellation of Rāma’s consecration and his banishment to the wilderness in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, through the assaults on Sītā and her abduction and imprisonment in the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, to the resigna-

1 According to Cm, the syllable in question is “va” in the word Rāvana corresponding to the “va” of *devasaya* in the *mantra*. Actually, since according to this reckoning the first syllable of the *Gāyatrī* occurs in the opening stanza of the poem, our opening verse marks the end of eleven thousand *ślokas*. Nonetheless, in keeping with this traditional and significant homology between the *mantra* and the epic, the twelfth syllable must be seen as marking the midpoint. Even in the critically constituted text, which differs substantially from the vulgate and omits many vulgate passages, there are approximately as many verses following *Sundara* 1.1 as preceding it. According to the verse totals given by *sarga* (and sometimes also by *kānda*) in the volumes of the critical edition, the extent of the edition is 18,775 verses of which 9,155 precede 5.1.1 and 9,619 follow it. The position of the opening of *Sundara* is slightly different in most northern versions of the poem since their *Sundarakāṇḍas* are somewhat longer than those in the southern versions and the vulgate. The northern versions begin with the closing *sargas* of the *Kiskindhā* and extend some fifteen *sargas* into the critical edition of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* as those chapters are constituted in the south. For a learned discussion of the tradition of counting the verses of the *Rāmāyana* by the syllables of the *Gāyatrī*, see B. N. Bhatt 1976. On the extent of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, see Jhala 1966, p. xxx; Vaidya 1971, p. xxix; and Agrawala and Krishnaṭhas 1962.
tion to failure and death on the part of Aṅgada’s search party at the end of the Kīśkindhākānda and Hanumān’s growing despair in the early chapters of this book—has reached its nadir and turning point. With the discovery of the beleaguered but steadfast queen in the aśoka grove, the momentum of the narrative is suddenly reversed. The downward spiral of tragedy is arrested. Through the feats of the extraordinary monkey hero, hope is restored to Sītā, fear and grief is inspired in the hearts of the rākṣasas, and joy and martial vigor are returned to the sorrowing heroes and their monkey allies.

The reader or hearer of the Sundarakānda, too, cannot but be moved by the general exuberance of the book. It begins literally on an uplifting note with the long and richly imaged description of Hanumān’s colossal leap over the mighty ocean in his gargantuan form and of the cataclysmic effects this leap has on Mount Mahendra, his springboard, and its denizens. During the course of his flight, the audience is regaled with tales of the monkey’s marvelous encounters, extraordinary powers, clever ruses, and miraculous escapes. This is followed by the account of Hanumān’s exhaustive search for Sītā, which provides the poet with an opportunity to render an extensive and detailed description of the fortress city of Lāṅka, the unimaginable opulence of the palace of the demon king, and the unearthly delights of his harem. Through the eyes of the concealed monkey, we witness Sītā’s stern rejection of Rāvaṇa’s blandishments, her heroic defiance of his threats, and her torment at the hands of the grotesque rākṣasī (female rākṣasa) wardresses.

Following Hanumān’s dramatic meeting with Sītā and their exchange of tokens of identity, an episode to which we shall return shortly, the audience is treated to a lively account of the monkey’s destruction of the aśoka grove, his slaughter of many of Rāvaṇa’s foremost warriors, his capture, his bold lecture to the demon king, his escape, and his fiery destruction of the citadel with his flaming tail. Finally, after a brief reunion with Sītā, Hanumān makes his return leap, reports his success to the ecstatic search party, joins them in their Rabelaisian orgy of drunkenness and destruction in Sugrīva’s honey grove, and dispels the grief and uncertainty of Rāma and Laksmaṇa with his account of his adventures. With its underlying themes of success, hope, and reunion and a pervasive tone that is optimistic, exuberant, charged with irrepressible energy, and often broadly comical, the book presents a striking contrast to the preced-
ing sections that are suffused with feelings of loss, separation, grieving, madness, and despair.  
If the Sundarakānda can be said to lie at the heart of the Rāmāyāna, then the heart of the Sundara itself must be the meeting of Sītā and Hanumān. For not only does this meeting mark the precise turning point of the narrative, the fulfillment of the first essential stage of the quest set in motion by the abduction of Sītā; it also—most significantly—serves, through the reassurance it inspires in both parties and through the symbolic exchange of Rāma’s signet ring and Sītā’s hair ornament, as a powerful precursor of the longed-for reunion of the grief-stricken couple, the theme of whose bitter separation has haunted the poem from the moment in its prologue when the ḍāsi Vālmiki cried out in sorrow and compassion for the grieving kraunica hen.  
Thus, it is that for many lovers of the poem its most central and thrilling moment occurs when Sītā, taking Rāma’s ring from the hand of his monkey messenger, experiences a great access of joy as if she had been reunited with her beloved husband himself:

\[
gṛhitvā preksamāṇāṁ sā bhartuh karavibhūsanam /
   bhartāram iva samprāptā jānaki muditābhavat //\n\]

Taking her husband’s ring and examining it, Jānaki was as joyous as if she had rejoined her husband.  

From this moment on, whatever the further vicissitudes of the epic’s hero and heroine, it is clear that the momentum of the story has changed and that in the face of all adversity and against all odds Rāma will defeat the evil Rāvana and recover his lost love.  

Thus, the Sundarakānda lies at the textual, narrative, and emotional centers of the Rāmāyāna while its central episode, Hanumān’s discovery and reassurance of the lost queen, has, as we shall see below, lent the book a significance and a popularity greater than that of the other books, even those like Ayodhyā, Aranya, and Tuddha, some of which may be much longer and filled with incidents of equal or greater pathos, drama, and gravity.

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2 For detailed and learned discussions of these themes in the Ayodhyā and Aranya kāndas, see Pollock 1986, pp. 6–73 and 1991, pp. 55–84.
4 5.34.3. We have several times heard this verse serve as the pivot upon which a discoursers on the Rāmāyana, such as a performer of Harikālaṣeṣa in Madras, will turn an exposition of the tale.