The Story of the Horse-King and the Merchant Siṃhala in Buddhist Texts[1]

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ABSTRACT: The Aśvarāja story relates the adventures of a caravan of merchants ship-wrecked on an island of demonesses and rescued by a flying horse, the *aśvarāja*, 'king of horses'. The Siṃhala story continues this narrative to include the chief merchant, Siṃhala, being followed home by a demoness, who tries to get him back before seducing and eating the king. Siṃhala is crowned king and invades the island. Each story has many versions, both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna. This paper examines five key versions: birth story with 'ocean of *saṃsāra*' metaphor; political and quasi-historical narrative of the invasion of Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese; warning that 'all women are demonesses'; glorification of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara; and Newar warning of the dangers of travelling to Tibet. Each version reveals some of the issues that its community is preoccupied with.

The Aśvarāja story, and its extended version the Siṃhala story, are found in over twenty versions in Buddhist texts alone, in many different languages and both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna forms. Like many Buddhist narratives, the stories have received rather uneven scholarly attention. Translators and editors of individual versions have freely commented upon their own text, with some interesting suggestions, but without a sufficiently broad awareness of the different versions. The only comprehensive study of any one version is by Lewis, who examines the tradition surrounding the Siṃhala story in Nepal (Lewis, 1995, 2000). Lienhard too addresses this in his translation of a painted Nepalese scroll of the story, where he also indulges in a broad survey of the story's occurrence within Asian literature, although his comments in this area are predominantly descriptive rather than analytical (Lienhard, 1985). To my knowledge no scholar has attempted a full comparison of the different versions, although Grey and Panglung both offer

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1. This article is drawn from my MPhil. thesis and has seen several incarnations as conference papers, including one presented at the 2006 UKABS conference. My thanks go to everyone who has commented on both the thesis and earlier versions of this article, but most especially to my inspiring and ever supportive supervisor Dr Andrew Skilton.

incomplete concordances of versions (Grey, 2000; Panglung, 1981). Grey's list of sources is indicative of the lack of scholarly interest in the story: most references are either to studies of Asian art, or to the *Valāhassa-jātaka* of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, which is frequently but erroneously cited as the 'original' version.[2]

In this article I will not provide a comprehensive analysis of this story cycle,[3] but I will briefly present the development of the plot and characters over time, focusing upon five particularly revealing forms that the stories take. First I will present the basic form of the Aśvarāja story, which is a standard Buddhist birth story with an ocean of *saṃsāra* metaphor. Secondly I will look at how the Siṃhala story presents a political and quasi-historical narrative of the invasion of Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese people, which forms an alternative origin myth to that found in the chronicles of the island. Thirdly I will examine the declaration within some versions of the story that 'all women are demonesses'. Fourthly I will examine the appropriation of both stories by Mahāyāna Buddhism in order to glorify the compassionate *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara. Finally I will present the Newar versions, which geographically transplant the story in order to transform it into a warning to merchants of the dangers of travelling to Tibet, and in particular the folly of taking a Tibetan woman as a wife.

In *The Folktale*, Stith Thompson (1977: 10) observes that 'the plot structure of the tale is much more stable and more persistent than its form'. This statement forms the backbone of this article, which will examine how the subtle changes in detail, in a story where the main events are fixed, can reveal the needs and preoccupations of the redactors and audiences. Such preoccupations include some of the most fundamental issues that humanity has to deal with, relating to soteriology, self-control, the need for a saviour, gender, politics, and race. Even by restricting my study to five versions and a text-historical methodology, I hope to demonstrate that narrative can reveal much about social, cultural and religious contexts, and thus that a study of narrative is a crucial ingredient in the study of Buddhism.[4]

Before we begin our analysis of the narrative cycle through its five significant forms, it will be helpful to outline the stories and the texts that contain them. Any categorisation of this cycle of narratives will be in some way inadequate, since there is great variation between versions. The drawing of boundaries between this and other cycles of narrative drawn from common elements is a delicate endeavour, and to complicate matters further, some texts contain more than one version. However, the stories do broadly fall into two categories, the short and the long form, which I term the Aśvarāja and Siṃhala stories respectively. Each of these also has a Mahāyāna form, thus we have four basic stories contained within the cycle.

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2. See note 9 below.

3. To a certain extent this is found in my MPhil thesis, although it is also an ongoing project. For example, Dr Ulrike Roesler recently brought two more versions to my attention, in Tibetan commentaries from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

4. My text-historical approach is partly limited by the lack of evidence about the uses of versions of the stories in Buddhist societies, with the exception of the Newar situation, studied by Todd Lewis (1995, 2000).

In the Aśvarāja story, some merchants are shipwrecked on an island where they are seduced by demonesses who are disguised as beautiful maidens. They unwittingly settle down with the demonesses as wives, and enjoy the riches of the island. The chief merchant is suspicious at a prohibition to take the road south and, upon taking it, discovers a fortress imprisoning many merchants. These reveal to him the danger he and his men are in. The chief merchant leads his companions to the shore where they find a magical horse, the *aśvarāja*, 'horse-king', who is the *Bodhisatta*. The horse tells them not to look back towards the island, and carries them safely to India. The Aśvarāja story in this form is found in the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra*,[5] and the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.[6] In the versions in the *Mahāvastu*[7] and the *Lie Du Ji Jing*[8] some of the merchants look back and fall into the ocean to be devoured by the demonesses. In the *Valāhassa-jātaka* of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, some merchants instead stay behind, refusing to believe their chief's declaration about the true nature of their new wives.[9] In addition to these full tellings, there are references to the Aśvarāja story in the *Lalitavistara*,[10] *Rāstrapālaparipṛcchā*,[11] and Khotanese *Jātakastava*,[12] as well as two verses in the *Udānavarga*[13] that parallel those in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* and *Mahāvastu*.

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5. This primarily biographical text was translated into Chinese (T190) from a Sanskrit original in the sixth century (Beal, 1985 [1875]: 332–40).

6. This is available in Tibetan; the Sanskrit is not extant. A summary is found in Panglung (1981: 41–2).

7. A Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit text containing a mixture of biographical stories, probably compiled between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE (Senart, 1882–97: III, 67–90; Jones, 1949–56: III, 70–93).

8. This is a collection of *jātaka* stories exemplifying the *Bodhisatta*'s acquisition of the six perfections which were translated into Chinese (T152) in the third century CE (Chavannes, 1962: I, 224–6 [no. 59]). The above title is in the Pinyin form (Wade-Giles form *Liu Tu Chi Ching*); Chavannes transcribes it using the French EEEO method, as *Lieou Tou Tsi King*.

9. Only the verses of this Theravāda text are considered to be canonical, though the text as a whole, which reached its final form in the fifth century, is held in high regard (Fausbøll, 1877–96: II, 127–30; Cowell, *et al.* 1895–1907: II, 89–91). Although perhaps the best known version, the *Valāhassa-jātaka* contains a barely coherent narrative with several indications that it is in fact a crude and clumsy abbreviation badly affected by confusion between different versions. One piece of evidence for this is the fact that the merchants' refusal to listen to their chief is inconsistent with the (canonical) verse, which speaks of merchants refusing to listen to the horse. A full discussion of this may be found in my thesis (Appleton, 2004: 61ff.).

10. A primarily biographical text from around the first century CE that survives in Sanskrit and Tibetan (Bays, 1983: I, 253).

11. This is a Mahāyāna text in a mixture of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit verse and Sanskrit prose from around the sixth century. The text as a whole deals with what it means to be a good and bad monk, but the first chapter contains 50 verses each relating a *jātaka*, to illustrate the virtues acquired by the Buddha (Finot, 1957: 26; Ensink, 1952: 27). There are also two Chinese translations (6th and 10th century), one Tibetan, and one Mongolian.

12. This Khotanese verse text, probably translated from a (lost) Sanskrit original in around the tenth century, consists of fifty jātaka stories, told briefly (in a couple of verses each), with a prologue and words of homage to the Buddha (Dresden, 1955: 425, vv. 24–6).

13. Bernhard (1965: 282, vv. 14–15); Rockhill (1883: 92, vv. 10–11). The full story is apparently found in the Chinese commentary (T212) although I have not been able to access this.

The Siṃhala story begins in the same way as the Aśvarāja story, but the chief merchant, who is called Siṃhala, is the *Bodhisatta*. He is the only merchant steadfast enough to make it home; all his companions weakly look back, fall into the ocean and are devoured by their former wives. Siṃhala is followed home by a demoness, who poses as his wife and creates an illusory child to garner sympathy from his parents. When she fails to win him back, she goes to the king and seduces him, before summoning her friends and devouring the entire royal household. Siṃhala chases the demonesses from the palace, is crowned king and invades the island, expelling or killing the demonesses. The Siṃhala story is found in almost identical versions in the *Vinayavibhaṅga* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and the *Divyāvadāna*, though in the latter text the Aśvarāja story is abbreviated.[14] The *Xiyou-ji*[15] by Xuanzang tells a simpler version as part of a narrative of the arrival of the Sinhalese people on Sri Lanka, whereas the *Lie Du Ji Jing* contains a version that omits the invasion of the island altogether.[16] The *Rāstrapālaparipṛcchā* contains a reference to the Siṃhala story, in addition to its reference to the Aśvarāja story.[17]

The Mahāyāna Aśvarāja story is much the same as the non-Mahāyāna form, except that the merchant is identified as the Buddha-to-be and the horse is the compassionate *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara. Rather than discovering it for himself, the truth about the women on the island is revealed to Siṃhala by either Avalokiteśvara or one of the demonesses.[18] The Mahāyāna Aśvarāja story is first found in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*,[19] which then forms the source for versions in the *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long*[20] and *Ma-ni bka'-'bum*.[21] It is clearly told in awareness of

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14. An edition of the *Divyāvadāna* is provided by Cowell & Neil (1886: 523–8), and the partial translation by Tatelman contains this story (2005: 309–415). Huber (1906: 22–4) and Schlingloff (1988: 257–63) provide summary translations based on both the *Divyāvadāna* and *Vinayavibhaṅga*, the former as part of an argument that stories in the *Divyāvadāna* are extracted from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.

15. A seventh-century travelogue by a Chinese pilgrim (Beal, 1981 [1884]: II, 240–46).

16. Chavannes (1962: I, 122–6 [no. 37]). The version of the Siṃhala story in the *Lie Du Ji Jing* also omits the crowning of the chief merchant – who is not named – as king. It is possible that this represents the story mid-point in its development from Aśvarāja to Siṃhala story, although it could equally easily be an abbreviation. The frame story is the same as in the *Vinayavibhaṅga* and *Divyāvadāna*, though the characters are not named.

17. Finot (1957: 23); Ensink (1952: 24).

18. In the earlier Mahāyāna versions Avalokiteśvara appears in a lamp to warn Siṃhala. However, when the story (in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*) was translated into Tibetan there was some confusion over the term used for lamp (*ratikara*) so the Tibetan versions instead have either a voice from nowhere or a demoness speaking in her sleep. Regamey (1965) and Lienhard (1993) provide a full discussion of the etymology of the term, and the whole situation is discussed in full in my thesis (Appleton, 2004: 90–93).

19. A Sanskrit prose text from no later than the sixth century (Burnouf, 1890; Mette, 1997: 50-60 [1607b–1612b]; Vaidya, 1961: 284–8). A critical edition and translation of the story from this text may be found in my thesis (Appleton 2004: 21–52).

20. A fourteenth-century chronicle by Bla-ma dam-pa bSod-nams rgyal-tshan (Kuznetsov, 1997: 36–41; Sørensen, 1994: 117–24; Wenzel, 1888: 504–9).

21. An apocryphal (*gter-ma*) text from around the twelfth century, ascribed to Srong-btsan sgam-po.

the Siṃhala story, and may even be a conscious abbreviation of a version such as that in the *Vinayavibhaṅga* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*.[22]

The Mahāyāna Siṃhala story again identifies the horse with Avalokiteśvara, who also appears in a lamp to warn Siṃhala of his predicament. The story continues as in the non-Mahāyāna form. This version is first found in the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, which borrows much of its content from the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, although in this case it must also have used a version of the Siṃhala story.[23] The *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* became a source for many re-tellings by the Newars of the Kathmandu valley,[24] whilst Xuanzang's travelogue inspired Japanese versions in the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* and *Konjaku Monogatari*.[25]

THE *JĀTAKA* OF THE HORSE-KING

We may begin our survey of versions with the simple birth story, or *jātaka*, which is the basic form of the Aśvarāja story. As a *jātaka*, one of the characters must be identified as the *Bodhisatta*, and in this case it is the horse who is the Buddha-to-be. He is not only compassionate in offering the merchants a way of leaving the island, but is also a teacher, warning the merchants that they can only escape if they remain un-tempted by the demonesses (*rakkhasīs)* and steadfastly look ahead. The (canonical) verses of the *jātaka* in the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* read:

> Those people who will not observe the Buddha's instructions,
> shall have misfortune, as the merchants did on account of the demonesses.
> And those who will observe the Buddha's instructions,
> shall go safely to the other shore, as the merchants did by means of
> Valāha.[26]

Sørensen (1994) provides some comment on the ways in which this version differs from that in the *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long.*

22. The likely sources for the story in the Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra and Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra are discussed in my thesis (Appleton, 2004: 86ff.).

23. A fifteenth-century Sanskrit verse text (Chandra, 1999: 158–202; Iwamoto, 1967: 321–36). Iwamoto's edition is much more reliable. See Tuladhar-Douglas (2006) for a discussion of the sources for the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* and its relation to the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra.* I suspect the *Vinayavibhaṅga* or *Divyāvadāna* is the source for the extra material in this story (see previous note).

24. Lewis (1995: 153–69; 2000: 54–80); Lienhard (1985). Lienhard's bibliography contains references to more versions in later Newari texts.

25. The *Uji Shūi Monogatari*, a compilation from the thirteenth century (Mills, 1970: 266–9), and its twelfth-century predecessor the *Konjaku Monogatari*, contain practically identical versions of the Siṃhala story.

26. Valāha is the name of the horse in this version (my translation from Fausbøll, 1877–96: II, 130: *ye na kāhanti ovādaṃ narā Buddhena desitaṃ / vyasanan te gamissanti rakkhasīhi va vāṇijā // ye ca kāhanti ovādaṃ narā Buddhena desitaṃ / sotthiṃ pāraṃ gamissanti vālāheneva vāṇijā /*). The verses have parallels in the *Mahāvastu* (Senart, 1977: III, 89) and *Udānavarga* (Bernhard, 1965: 282). These verses differ from the Pāli in two main ways: the people 'have faith in the word of the Buddha' (*śraddhāsyanti ... buddhasya śāsanam* (UV) *śraddadhiṣyanti vacanaṃ dharmarājino* (MV)) rather than

The metaphor here is obvious to any Buddhist or scholar of Buddhism, and is one frequently utilized in stories about merchants. As Joel Tatelman (2000: 114) notes:

> The ceaseless churning of the waves, the vastness, the danger, the sudden and unpredictable storms, the shoals and reefs – even, for traders, the attraction – are all, by analogy, properties of the endless cycle of birth-and-death.

Thus the island represents *this* world, with all its temptations that seem great at the time but ultimately lead only to suffering. The further shore is *Nirvāṇa*, and the way to it is across the ocean of *saṃsāra*. The Buddha can help you to get there, as long as you relinquish your attachment to the things of this world. When, in some versions, a number of the merchants look back, they prove that they still desire the demonesses, and thus cannot reach the further shore, instead falling into the ocean to be devoured by the forces of *saṃsāra*.

This *jātaka* story in some ways also mirrors the traditional account of the Buddha's life: as a prince his senses are indulged by every kind of delight, and measures are taken to ensure he is never exposed to the true and horrific nature of the world. He outwits these measures, and there is a period of disillusionment when he realises the truth. Following this realisation he chooses to quit the world, to cross the ocean of *saṃsāra*. To point out that the Buddha even has a special horse who helps him renounce the world may perhaps be pushing the comparison too far, yet it is still a striking one[27]. This should be no surprise, however, for many Buddhist narratives echo the renunciation that Gautama demonstrated, through his own experiences, was necessary for reaching the further shore.

A POLITICAL AND QUASI-HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The Siṃhala story is formed by combining the Aśvarāja story with another *jātaka*, which we might conveniently term the Demoness story. The latter tells of the *Bodhisatta*'s resistance to the charms and ploys of a demoness who follows him pretending to be his wife, before giving up on him and seducing and devouring the king, allowing the *Bodhisatta* to take the throne.[28] Thus the basic formation of the Siṃhala story is very easily explained. However, the very end of the story – the invasion of the island – is completely new. The question of why this was added is therefore begging to be asked. The names in the Siṃhala story give us some clue: the Island of Siṃhala, of course, is an old name for what is now Sri

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'obey/observe the instruction taught by the Buddha'; in addition, the promised goal is not the further shore but an escape with *svasti* – 'fortune, happiness'.

27. Editor: Note also that at *Saṃyutta Nikāya* V.98–102, there is an implied parallel (made explicit in the commentary) between the horse-treasure of a *Cakkavatti* emperor and the awakening factor (*bojjhaṅga*) of energy (*viriya*).

28. Versions of this story are found in the *Dharmalabdha jātaka* of the *Mahāvastu* (Jones, 1949–56: III, 274–87) and the *Telapatta-jātaka* (96) of the *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* (Cowell, 1895–1907: I, 232–7).

Lanka, so by adding many connected names – Siṃhala the merchant; Siṃha, his father; King Siṃhakeśarin; and the city of Siṃhakalpa[29] – the Siṃhala story is attempting to ground itself in a historical and racial framework. This was presumably prompted by the fact that the Aśvarāja story was already geographically associated with Sri Lanka – a place traditionally full of riches but populated by demons. Thus the story was transformed into a narration of the arrival of the Sinhalese people.

The *Vaṃsa*s, or chronicles, of the island describe the invasion of the Sinhalese people in less flattering terms than our story, however. The story in the *Mahāvaṃsa* tells that an Indian princess is abducted by a lion. She falls pregnant and gives birth to a son and a daughter. The son kills his father for a reward and sets up a kingdom with his sister as chief queen. Their eldest son, Vijaya, is a bit of a troublesome child and eventually the people demand his exile. He ends up on Sri Lanka, where his men are trapped by the demoness Kuveṇi. He makes her free them, and with her help he defeats the demons of the nearby city and becomes king. He later rejects her in favour of a lady more suitable to his new position.[30] He calls his kingdom 'Siṃhala' because he is descended from a lion-race.

These stories relate basically the same events – the invasion of Sri Lanka by an Indian tribe, the subduing or expulsion of the native demons, and the renaming of the island (or parts of it). In the Sri Lankan chronicles, however, the Sinhalese people are wild and fierce, whereas in our story they are noble and courageous. What we appear to have, therefore, is two explanations of the same event from different ethnic or political viewpoints. The fact that only the Vijaya story is present in the *Vaṃsa*s should not be seen as evidence that the Siṃhala story was not familiar in Sri Lanka, however, for as scholars such as Jonathan Walters have argued, the *Vaṃsa*s tell only one side of Sri Lankan 'history'.[31] In fact, the writings of the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang contain versions of the Vijaya and Siṃhala stories side by side, without an indication of either being more popular or true. They are simply linked by the statement:

> The men of the Siṃha kingdom are small in stature and black-complexioned; they have square chins and high foreheads; they are naturally fierce and impetuous, and cruelly savage without hesitation. This is from their inherited disposition as descended from a beast; but another version of the story is that they are very brave and courageous. (Beal, 1981: 241)

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29. These names are found in the *Vinayavibhaṅga* and *Divyāvadāna* versions. In the *Xi-you-ji* only the merchant is named, and even he is nameless in the *Lie Du Ji Jing*.
30. *Mahāvaṃsa*, chapters 6 and 7. In the *Dīpavaṃsa* (chapter 9) there is no mention of the demons – Vijaya and his companions merely found cities and send to the mainland for wives. The Buddha had apparently already cleared the island of *yakkha*s and *nāga*s during two previous visits. The *Xi-you-ji* also omits the demons, and conflates the narrative so that it is the murderous son who is banished.
31. Walters (2000). It is curious that only the unflattering version should be present in the texts of the Mahāvihāra, since they presumably wished to portray the Sinhalese in a positive light.

A historical analysis is in any case flawed, for although the political intentions behind each narrative are clear, the stories are still situated in a religious setting. The Vijaya story is an attempt at a historical account, and situates itself at the time of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. However, the merchant Siṃhala is said to be the Buddha in a previous birth, and cannot, therefore, be the founder of the Sinhalese kingdom and bringer of Buddhism to the island, at least not in the present Buddha dispensation.

"ALL WOMEN ARE DEMONESSES!"

It is a striking feature of the Siṃhala story as it occurs in the *Vinayavibhaṅga*, *Divyāvadāna*, *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* and the Newar versions, that Siṃhala should find it so difficult to persuade people that the demoness who is pursuing him is not to be trusted. His frequent protests that:

> ... this is not the daughter of a king, nor indeed my wife,
> and this child is not my son, but a magically created illusion.
> She is a man-eating demoness, dwelling in Tāmradvīpa,
> come here from Tāmradvīpa to destroy us.[32]

fall on deaf ears. In fact, neither his parents nor the king seem to find this assertion of her true nature at all unusual, replying:

> But all women are deceitful demonesses ...
> By all means forgive her transgressions.[33]

These 'transgressions', however, include tricking him into marriage, eating his companions, flying across the ocean to pursue him, and magically creating a baby to help persuade people of her authenticity. Even the strongest denunciations of women do not usually say that they can fly and perform magical transformations, nor that they physically devour men. However, this characterisation is not just a simple fiction, but an expression of a complex web of attitudes towards women.

One such occurrence of the statement that all women are demonesses, perhaps indeed the earliest, is in the Siṃhala story in the *Vinaya* of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* school.[34] This is a monastic text, and so the intention here may well be to encourage monks to abandon any desire they have for women. This idea is supported by the frame story, which tells us of an occasion when the Buddha refused to marry the beautiful daughter of the ascetic Mākandika. A monk expressed his wish to marry her and the Buddha told the Siṃhala story as an example of how

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32. My translation of the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha* from Iwamoto (1967: vv. 469–70): *tāta naiyaṃ sutā rājñaˑ bhāryāpi ca na me khalu | dārako'yaṃ na me putro nirmito māyayānayā || rākṣasīyaṃ narāhārā Tāmradvīpanivāsinī | asmān api samāhartuṃ Tāmradvīpād ihāgatā ||.*

33. My translation of the Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha from Iwamoto (1967: v. 472): *sarvā api striyaˑ putra rākṣasya eva māyikāˑ | tenāsyā aparādhatvaṃ kṣantum arhasi sarvathā ||.*

34. In the *Vinayavibhaṅga* – see note 14 above.

women (and this one in particular) had caused his downfall before: the king was the monk, Siṃhala the *Bodhisatta* and the demoness the daughter of Mākandika. Focussing on the idea that all women are demonesses, and thus are dangerous, cannibalistic creatures whose apparent beauty is merely an illusion they have created, might prevent a few monks from breaking their vows of celibacy. However, the method here is slightly flawed, for the simple reason that the declaration is not true – in the story the joke is on the king who makes this declaration, for it is he who is devoured. Siṃhala is steadfast, and correct, in his insistence that she is not a woman at all, but an entirely different creature – a demoness. It is he who inherits the throne and defeats the demonesses.

There are three possible explanations for the incongruous nature of this declaration. The first option is that the declaration plays upon the differences between specific statements of truth (as in Siṃhala's case) and wider social truths, or statements of folk wisdom (as in the case of the declaration). Thus the story acts as a vehicle for conveying different ideas about different truths, and can reasonably successfully convey more than one contradictory piece of social wisdom at one time. Our second option is a less flattering one, that it was a thoughtless interpolation, designed to emphasise the destructive nature of woman, or to get an audience reaction (such a declaration is sure to get a laugh) but with little thought for the context. However, our final option is that there is a greater subtlety at play.

Although the declaration itself is not found in the Demoness story (the *jātaka* that is combined with the Aśvarāja story to form the Siṃhala story), the events surrounding the demoness's attempts to win the merchant are similar, and can assist us here. In the Demoness story as found in the *Mahāvastu,* when the merchant tries to insist that she is in fact a demoness, she cries out in her defence:

> This is just like those men who have gained their desire. When they are enamoured of a woman, then they talk about her hundreds of good qualities. But when their passion is spent we are made out to be Piśācanīs, and Rākṣasīs, and reviled on the score of a hundred blemishes.[35] (Jones, 1949–56: III, 279)

Here the demonisation of women is portrayed as an excuse used by men for abandoning their wives. Although the merchant insists that this is a lie in terms of his situation, the notion is not dismissed as nonsense. As we have seen, the arguments of the demoness tend to persuade people, and this suggests that there was some truth in this assertion that the people could see, in other words that this really occurred, and was not to be tolerated. This seems, therefore, to be a more subtle examination of the issues surrounding the nature and treatment of women. If we accept that this is the case in the Demoness story, it is not a huge step to suggest the same in the Siṃhala story. This greater subtlety

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35. In the *Telapatta jātaka* (96) the demoness simply says 'anger will drive men to say anything that comes into their heads' (Cowell, 1895–1907: I, 235).

perhaps takes the form of a double bluff, and to see it we must look more care-fully at the *male* characters: the hero can control his lust, so he succeeds; the king cannot, so he is devoured. Once again we return to the idea that the demo-nesses represent the forces of *saṃsāra*, capable of devouring anyone who cannot resist their charms. The emphasis is on the capabilities of the men to resist such charms in order to achieve their goals, whether these are religious or worldly. The story seems therefore to be working on two levels: on the one hand it dem-onstrates the danger of desire for women; on the other it distinguishes between ordinary decent women (such as Siṃhala's mother) and demonesses. In this way it reflects the dual nature of women in classical Indian society (as at once destructive and creative – as represented for example in the goddesses Kālī and Pārvatī), except that the dangerous and destructive side is removed completely from 'woman' and placed on 'demoness'. In a sense, therefore, the story demon-strates a very positive attitude towards women, even if the most obvious mes-sage is misogynistic.

MAHĀYĀNA *BODHISATTVA* GLORIFICATION

I mentioned above that the Siṃhala story is partly the result of two birth stories being merged. In *jātaka* stories, one of the key features is the *samodhāna* (Pāli) or *samavadhāna* (Sanskrit), where the characters in the story of the present are identified with those in the story of the past. At the very least, this section will identify which character is the Buddha in a previous life, and often his family or disciples also play a part. This feature of *jātaka* stories causes a major problem when the two stories are combined, for in one the *Bodhisatta* is the horse, and in the other he is the merchant who resists the temptation of the demoness. The longer versions are therefore left with two options, two possible identifications of the *Bodhisatta*, but each is problematic. If the Buddha-to-be is the horse, then the whole of the latter part of the story is irrelevant, as he does not play any part. However, if he is the merchant, he should display his heroic qualities right from the start, and the horse is relegated to status of animal again, causing his magical qualities to require some explanation. This latter option is obviously the more desirable, and so the one chosen. In fact, even in the Aśvarāja story the chief merchant is really the hero of the piece, as he exhibits the traditional heroic qualities of courage and leadership, as well as qualities which all Buddhists try to emulate, for example sagacity, vigour, compassion, and resistance to tempta-tion and attachment. The horse in all tellings is more the saviour than the hero, and the ability of the *Bodhisatta* to be either character clearly demonstrates flex-ibility in his portrayal.

The saviour-like nature of the horse is perhaps why the story has become so popular in Mahāyāna Buddhism, where a neat solution to the problem of identifying the births is found. In these versions, the horse is identified with Avalokiteśvara, a key *Bodhisattva* in Mahāyāna Buddhism who is said to embody

compassion and is traditionally associated with saving merchants from dangers at sea. This leaves the position of chief merchant free for the Buddha-to-be, who tells this story to show how even he has been saved by Avalokiteśvara's compassion. In the early Mahāyāna transformations of the story, Siṃhala, the Buddha-to-be, has less of a chance to exhibit his heroic qualities, for he only realises his predicament after Avalokiteśvara appears to him in a lamp and informs him. The purpose of the story – the glorification of Avalokiteśvara – is therefore very clear.

THE DANGERS OF TRAVELLING TO TIBET

The Mahāyāna version of the story in the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* has been adopted and adapted by the Newari communities of Nepal, and these adaptations have been outlined and analysed by Lienhard (1985) and Lewis (1995, 2000). Since these studies are very thorough, and – in the case of Lewis – easily available, I do not intend to go into great detail here, though the transformation is a particularly fascinating one. According to Todd Lewis, at the time of the text's early redactions (around 1400 CE) the Newar Buddhists had long been the dominant merchants in the Kathmandu valley. They led trading expeditions to Tibet, and many merchants there took a Tibetan wife, who was often younger and more beautiful than the wife at home. The journey often kept merchants from their families in the Kathmandu valley for years at a time, and was very perilous. One of the most dangerous aspects was the crossing of the Brahmaputra river. The Siṃhala story of the Newars has been geographically transplanted to reflect the real-life situation of those Newar Buddhist merchants, ensnared by the charms of the beauties beyond the Himalayas, and thus neglecting their duty to their original families. Although the demonesses are still said to live on Tāmradvīpa ('Copper Island': another old name for Sri Lanka), the ocean is replaced by the 'oceanlike Brahmaputra River' (Lewis, 2000: 55). Therefore, although the saviour in the story, as in the other Mahāyāna tellings, is Avalokiteśvara, the emphasis of the story is not his veneration. Instead, as Lewis rather succinctly puts it:

> [it] provides a graphic cautionary tale: to wed non-Newar women who are alluring and sensually adept is an illusion, as it entails forgetting one's primal loyalty to Newar wife and kin while introducing the danger of enslavement, drowning, and being cruelly eaten alive by the foreign mistresses. (2000: 84)[36]

The story implies that a loyalty to one's home and family is crucial to one's survival. This is of course true in terms of the continuation of trade, for a threat

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36. Will Tuladhar-Douglas, when reviewing an earlier version of this article, pointed out the irony of such a polemic, since the links with the Tibetan government created by Newar merchants turned out to be a crucial line of support for Newar Buddhism after the Hindu Shah monarchy rose to power in the eighteenth century.

to trade is a threat to whole communities who depend upon it for their livelihood. Such a threat appears to have been strong enough to inspire the wholesale appropriation by Newar Buddhists of a story originally associated with an entirely different region and ethnic group.

A LIFE OF ITS OWN

This cycle of narratives is clearly very revealing and full of meanings. However, the story is also just a story, and one final version can show that ultimately the story can resist any attempt to use it for a religious or political purpose. This final version is that found in two Japanese story collections from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* and *Konjaku Monogatari*. Mills gives the source of the stories as the *Xi-you-ji*, and certainly the detail of the plot seems to match, as does the historically grounding statement at the end that 'Tradition has it that Sōkyata's descendents still rule the country' (Mills, 1970: 269). However, Mills also notes the important difference between the tales, that the horse is:

> In this and the *Konjaku* story a transformation of Kannon [Avalokiteśvara]. The *Hsi-yü-chi* story, however, is a jātaka tale; Sōkyara is a previous incarnation of the Buddha, and Kannon does not figure at all. (Mills, 1970: 267, n. 2)

Thus the redactor(s) must have also been aware of Avalokiteśvara's association with the story, but this is hardly surprising considering the widespread popularity of the Siṃhala story within Buddhist texts.[37]

Both the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* and *Konjaku Monogatari* are compilations, containing a mixture of religious and secular stories, yet even the religious aspects of the 'religious' stories have been minimalised so you end up with descriptions which are very human and rather comic, at least in Mills' thoroughly enjoyable translation:

> 'And then another shipload of merchants arrived, and here you see how the women treated their former husbands – making meals out of them. The same thing will happen to all of you, too, if another ship arrives. Find some way to escape before it is too late. ... We are enclosed here with a ring of iron, and in addition the sinews of our knees have been cut, so that there is no escape for us'. 'I felt sure there was something peculiar about this place', said Sōkyata to himself. (Mills, 1970: 267)

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37. There is, for example, what appears to be a reference to the Mahāyāna story in the *Lotus Sūtra* (Watson 1993: 299) and even though this is not an explicit reference, the chapter which contains it is often illustrated with pictures of the rescue of merchants from a demon-infested island by Avalokiteśvara in the form of a horse (see Meech-Pekarik [1981] for examples).

The story is told here primarily for entertainment value. The narrative is quick and to the point, so for example the lone demoness eats the king (there is no need to draw the narrative out to include the many demonesses being informed and feasting on the royal family). The narrative is also very violent and gruesome: in addition to the cutting of the merchants' knees, the demoness who eats the king leaves 'nothing left, nothing at all except a blood-covered head' (Mills, 1970: 269). The demonesses do get proper comeuppance, however, when the army invades their island:

> For a while the women tried looking pathetic and reproachful. But as Sōkyata ran around giving orders at the top of his voice, they turned into demons and attacked, with mouths agape, only to have their heads split open and their hands and feet lopped off with swords, and to be shot down with bows when they tried to fly away, till not one of them was left. (Mills, 1970: 269)

This is a stark contrast to, for example, the *Divyāvadāna*, where the demonesses fall on their knees before Siṃhala, and he grants them their freedom on condition that they leave the island. Despite the presence of Avalokiteśvara and the historical links, therefore, the story in the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* and *Konjaku Monogatari* is an example of story-telling for the sake of entertainment, and it clearly demonstrates that the story has a life of its own.

I began this article with a statement by Stith Thompson. His observation about folktale in general can be complemented by Ramanujan's analysis of the many *Rāmāyaṇa*s to be found in South Asia. Ramanujan talks of a pool of signifiers, including 'plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships' (Ramanujan, 1991: 46), and continues:

> Every author ... dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context. ... In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling a mere retelling – and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. (Ramanujan, 1991: 46)

His comments apply equally to the story – or cycle of stories – that is the subject of this article. Each crystallization tells us a little about the author(s) or redactor(s) who dipped into the pool, and the community they formed part of, as well as the pool they dipped into. This study of a narrative cycle has highlighted two closely-linked questions: why were stories included in so many Buddhist texts, and why might we wish to study them? I hope I have shown that there are at least as many reasons as there are versions of the Aśvarāja and Siṃhala stories.

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