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## The Story of Rūpāvati: A Female Past Birth of the Buddha

This article is a first attempt at making sense of the *jātaka* of Rūpāvati, a fascinating Indian Buddhist story that has heretofore received very little attention.<sup>1</sup> I first came upon this story while doing research for a Ph.D. dissertation dealing with *jātakas* involving the theme of the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice. Stories involving the bodhisattva's sacrifice of his own body on behalf of others (generally as a manifestation of *dāna-pāramitā*) constitute a major subgenre of Buddhist narrative literature, and my dissertation was a first attempt at making sense of this theme and the prominent place it holds within the Indian Buddhist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Toward that end, I compiled a corpus of relevant stories upon which to base the dissertation and decided to include the story of Rūpāvati, since it deals very prominently with the theme of the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice. Throughout the course of my research, however, I repeatedly found that Rūpāvati's story differed in significant ways from the other stories in my corpus, and that all of these differences seemed inextricably linked with Rūpāvati's *gender*. For Rūpāvati represents one

1. The *Divyāvadāna* version of the story is very briefly summarized in WINTERNITZ 1933: 289-290 and in BURLINGAME 1922: 313-314, but has never, as far as I know, been translated into English in full; see also DAYAL 1932: 184, which briefly summarizes both the *Divyāvadāna* and *Avadānakalpalatā* versions. The *Avadānakalpalatā* version is translated into English in CHANDRA DAS 1893; this translation is so rough, however, that it does not faithfully represent Ksemendra's version. The version found in Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā* has been translated into English by myself and is forthcoming in the Penguin Classics anthology of Buddhist literature (to be edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr.). Published editions of the story are scarce. Susanne MROZIK discusses the story in an unpublished paper (MROZIK 1997) and has an article on the story in the forthcoming volume *Bodily Citations: Religionists Engage Judith Butler*, to be edited by Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville. I have discussed the story in my Ph.D. dissertation (OHNUMA 1997: 226-257) and an unpublished paper (OHNUMA 1998a); the present article is largely based upon these two discussions. For further references to the story, see GREY 1990: 223, s.v. Rūpāvati or Rukmavati.
2. For some discussions of this theme, see OHNUMA 1997, OHNUMA 1998b, OHNUMA 2000, DAYAL 1932: 181-187, BURLINGAME 1922: 297-336, GRANOFF 1990, and GRANOFF [forthcoming].

of the very few instances in the Indian Buddhist tradition in which a previous birth of the Buddha Śākyamuni is depicted as being *female*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, despite the many ways in which Rūpāvati's story fit into the general patterns I found to be characteristic of the bodhisattva's bodily self-sacrifice, nevertheless, her gender became a thorn in my side, constantly "infecting" the story and setting it slightly askew when compared to the other stories in my corpus, all of which involved male forms of the bodhisattva. This led me increasingly to reflect on the significance of gender as an analytical category in interpreting such stories, and eventually caused me to devote the longest chapter of the dissertation to the Buddhist construction of gender and its relationship to stories of bodily sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> The present article has grown out of this attempt.

In this article, I will first undertake a detailed analysis of the *jātaka* of Rūpāvati, relying primarily on the *Divyāvadāna* version of the story and paying special attention to the category of gender and the way in which Rūpāvati's gender is manifested throughout the story and makes it differ in significant respects from those stories involving male bodhisattvas. I will then turn my attention to another version of Rūpāvati's story (from Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā*) and examine the fascinating way in which Haribhaṭṭa uses the gendered imagery of breasts and breastfeeding to materialize and signify the Buddhist values conveyed by Rūpāvati's tale.

### *The Story of Rūpāvati*

The story of Rūpāvati exists in at least three different Sanskrit versions that I am aware of. The earliest version appears as Chapter 32 of the *Divyāvadāna*; this is a long, prose version and refers to its title character as Rūpāvati. The version next in date appears in Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā*; this is an ornate, mixed verse-and-prose version and refers to its title character as Rūpyāvati. Finally, the version last in date appears as Chapter 51 of Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā*; this is a shorter, verse version and refers to its title character as Rukmavati.<sup>5</sup> All three versions

3. In the massive Pāli *Jātaka* collection, for example, none of the Buddha's 550 previous births are female.
4. See OHNUMA 1997: Ch. 5.
5. The *Divyāvadāna* version (*Rūpāvati Avadāna*) is edited in COWELL and NEIL 1886: 469-481. The *Jātakamālā* version of Haribhaṭṭa (*Rūpyāvati Jātaka*) is edited in HAHN 1992: 51-57. The *Avadānakalpalatā* version (*Rukmavati Avadāna*) is edited in VAIDYA 1959a: 2, 316-319. For translations into English, see note 1.

explicitly identify the woman Rūpāvātī as a previous birth of the Buddha Śākyamuni, and develop the basic plotline in similar ways. In this analysis, however, I will be relying primarily on the *Divyāvadāna* version, where the story is referred to as the *Rūpāvātī Avadāna*.

The *Rūpāvātī Avadāna* actually consists of four separate episodes involving four different manifestations of the “same” individual. The initial frame-story opens with the Buddha preaching a short sermon on the virtue of generosity (*dāna*) to his assembled monks. To illustrate the virtue of generosity, the Buddha then launches into a “story of the past” that actually involves four separate episodes. In the first episode, a woman named Rūpāvātī cuts off her own breasts in order to feed a starving woman who is about to devour her own, newly born child. Drawing on the power of her gift, she later performs an Act of Truth by which she abandons her female sex permanently and transforms herself into a man, who is then christened with the name Prince Rūpāvata. In the second and briefest episode, Prince Rūpāvata (formerly Rūpāvātī) is appointed as the new king of Utpalāvātī when the former king dies and leaves no heirs. He rules righteously for sixty years and then dies. In the third episode, the same individual is reborn as a merchant’s son named Candraprabha, who goes to a charnel ground in order to feed hungry beings with his body. At the charnel ground, he has his eye plucked out repeatedly by an inquisitive bird, and is ultimately killed when his body is torn to pieces by a flock of hungry birds. In the fourth episode, the same individual is reborn as a brahmin’s son named Brahmāprabha, who gives his body as food to a starving tigress about to devour her own cubs. Finally, at the end of the story, the Buddha reveals that all four characters were previous births of himself.<sup>6</sup>

The *Rūpāvātī Avadāna* thus involves three separate episodes of bodily self-sacrifice and is full of rich associations and invocations of other such tales. The name of the merchant’s son Candraprabha, for example,

6. In the *Divyāvadāna* version (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 469-481), the episodes may be divided up as follows: Rūpāvātī (470.29-474.6), Rūpāvata (474.7-13), Candraprabha (474.13-476.20), and Brahmāprabha (476.21-479.16). In the *Avadānakalpalatā* version (VAIDYA 1959a: 2, 316-319), where the stories are the same but the names of the characters differ, the episodes may be divided up as follows: Rukmavātī (vv. 6-16), Rukmavān (vv. 17-19), Sattavavara (vv. 20-27), and Satyavrata (vv. 28-49). Finally, the version found in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā* (HAHN 1992: 51-57) includes only the first two episodes: Rūpyāvātī (51-56) and Rūpyāvata (56-57).

recalls the prominent Buddhist story of King Candraprabha, who gives away his head to a greedy brahmin.<sup>7</sup> But whereas King Candraprabha gives away his head, this Candraprabha gives gifts more reminiscent of the famous deeds of King Śibi, having his eye plucked out and using his body to feed hungry birds.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the episode involving the brahmin's son Brahmaṇḍa, of course, constitutes another version of the famous story of the Tigress.<sup>9</sup> It is not altogether surprising that the Tigress story has attached itself to the story of Rūpavātī, since the two stories are obviously parallel – one involving a woman who sacrifices herself to save another woman and her child and the other involving a man who sacrifices himself to save a starving tigress and her cubs. Finally, it is also interesting to observe that the four episodes of the *Rūpavātī Avadāna* involve a woman, a *kṣatriya*, a *vaiśya*, and a brahmin, as if wishing to cover a full range of social positions. This rich complexity makes the *Rūpavātī Avadāna* especially interesting, although here I will be focusing primarily on the episode directly involving Rūpavātī, which is the longest of the four episodes and the one that lends its name to the whole story.

7. This story appears, for example, as Chapter 22 of the *Divyāvadāna* (ed. COWELL and NEIL 1886: 314-328) and as Chapter 23 of the Tibetan *mdo mdzangs blun* (*Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*) (English translation of the Mongolian version in FRYE 1981: 105-114). For further citations, see GREY 1990: 180, s.v. Candraprabha.
8. Two famous episodes of bodily self-sacrifice are associated with the name of King Śibi. In one prominent story, King Śibi gouges out his own eyes and gives them to a blind, old beggar; this story is found, for example, in the Pāli *Jātaka* (No. 499; ed. FAUSBOLL 1875-1897: 4, 401-412; trans. COWELL 1895-1913: 4, 250-256), in the *Cariyāpīṭaka* (No. 8; ed. JAYAWICKRAMA 1974: 2, 5-7; trans. HORNER 1975: 2, 7-8), in Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* (No. 2; ed. VAIDYA 1959b: 7-15; trans. KHOROCHE 1989: 10-17), and in the *Avadānaśataka* (No. 34; ed. SPEYER 1902-1909: 1, 182-186; trans. FEER 1891: 138-142). In another famous episode, King Śibi sacrifices his flesh to ransom a captured pigeon from a hungry falcon; this story is found, for example, in Aśvaghoṣa's *Sūtrāṅkāra* (No. 64; Chinese version translated into French in HUBER 1908: 330-341). For further citations, see GREY 1990: 137, s.v. Sivi, and 227, s.v. Sarvaṃdada.
9. This story appears, for example, in Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* (No. 1; ed. VAIDYA 1959b: 1-6; trans. KHOROCHE 1989: 5-9) and in the Mahāyāna *Suvarṇabhāṣottama Sūtra* (Ch. 18; ed. NOBEL 1937: 201-240; trans. EMMERICK 1970: 85-97). For further citations, see GREY 1990: 248, s.v. Vyāghrī or Mahāsattva; see also FEER 1899.

The story of Rūpāvātī opens in the Northern Country, in the capital city of Utpalāvātī. Though usually prosperous and flourishing, at the time of the story, Utpalāvātī is afflicted by “a famine, a dearth, a scarcity of food,” so bad that it is “difficult to survive in the cramps and convulsions [of hunger].”<sup>10</sup> In this setting, the charming woman Rūpāvātī (whose name denotes physical beauty) goes for a leisurely walk and encounters a woman in another house who has just given birth to a beautiful baby boy. But due to the famine and the difficulty of giving birth, the woman is now “emaciated and seized by hunger, with savage thoughts in her mind ... intending to devour the flesh of her own son.”<sup>11</sup> Alarmed, Rūpāvātī first tries to persuade the woman to eat something else: “But, Sister, is there anything [else] in the house – food or drink or something to eat or something to taste or something to sip? That which we call a son is difficult to obtain in this world.”<sup>12</sup> When the woman replies that she has nothing else to eat – adding that “life, [too], is difficult to hang onto in this world”<sup>13</sup> – Rūpāvātī tries a different tack, telling the woman to wait while she goes back to her own house to fetch food. The starving woman, however, is too far gone: “... My belly has wasted away, the earth seems to split open [before me], my heart is on fire, and the world seems dark to me. No sooner will you go out from this doorway than my vital breaths will rise [out of me].”<sup>14</sup> Rūpāvātī is now faced with a genuine moral dilemma: “If I take her son and go, this woman, emaciated and seized by hunger, will die. But if I leave her son [here] and go, surely she will eat him. So how can I save both of their lives?”<sup>15</sup>

10. ... *durbhikṣam abhūd durjīvaṃ durlabhapiṇḍaṃ na sukaram apatāne pragrahaṇe yāpayitum* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.3-4).
11. ... *kṣutkṣāmaparītā raukṣacittā ... icchati ca svāni putramāṃsāni bhakṣayitum* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.11-12).
12. *tena bhagini niveśane kiṃcid saṃvidyate 'nnaṃ vā pāṇaṃ vā bhojanaṃ vā svādanīyaṃ vā lehyaṃ vā / durlabhaḥ putraśabdo lokasya* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.15-17).
13. ... *durlabhaṃ jīvitaṃ lokasya* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.19).
14. ... *kukṣir me lupyati pṛthivī me sphuṭati hṛdayaṃ me dhūmayati diśo me na pratibhānti / na tāvat tvaṃ dvāraśālāyā nirgatā bhaviṣyasi yāvan me vāyava ākramiṣyanti* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.22-24).
15. *yadi dārakaṃ grhītvā gamiṣyāmi eṣā strī kṣutkṣāmaparītā kālaṃ kariṣyati / atha dārakaṃ apahāya yāsyāmi niyataṃ dārakaṃ bhakṣayiṣyati / yathā kathaṃ punar mama kurvantiyā dvayor jīvitalābhaḥ syāt* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.25-472.1).

It is this situation, of course, that sets the stage for Rūpāvati's bodily gift, and here we might pause to note the gradual manner in which the situation builds. In stark contrast to many other tales of bodily self-sacrifice, Rūpāvati does not set out with any intention to give away her body and completely lacks the martial swaggering and bravado that the male bodhisattva so often exhibits. Unlike a royal hero such as King Śibi, Rūpāvati is not engaging on a heroic mission of generosity, determined to give away her body because she has run out of other gifts to give, or determined to fulfill the perfection of generosity. She is more like the hare (in all versions of the hare story),<sup>16</sup> who is simply confronted with a pathetic situation that arouses her compassion and eventually results in a bodily gift. Unlike even the hare, however, Rūpāvati first attempts to enact a number of *other possible solutions* to the problem, asking the woman if there might be food in the house and offering to fetch food for her if she will only wait for Rūpāvati's return. It is only the starving woman's persistent refusals that place Rūpāvati in the thorny dilemma that eventually spurs her gift. The gift of Rūpāvati's body is thus depicted as something of a last resort.

When Rūpāvati does hit upon the idea of giving away her body, her reasoning is interesting and unique among the stories of bodily sacrifice I have encountered:<sup>17</sup>

It occurred to her: "Even when one's intentions are blameless, many miseries are experienced in *samsāra* over and over again – in the hells, among the animals, in the world of Yama, and in the world of men. The cutting off of the hands, of the feet, of the ears, of the nose, of both the ears and the nose, of the major and minor limbs, and many other similar types of misery are experienced. What good am I to gain from that, when I might [instead] generate power, strength, and energy within myself, satisfy this woman with my own flesh and blood, and [thus] set free her son?"

16. The familiar story of the hare is found, for example, in the Pali *Jātaka* (No. 316; ed. FAUSBOLL 1875-1897: 3, 51-56; trans. COWELL 1895-1913: 3, 34-37), in the *Cariyāpīṭaka* (No. 1.10; ed. JAYAWICKRAMA 1974: 2, 12-13; trans. HORNER 1975: 2, 14-16), and in Ārya Śūra's *Jātakamālā* (No. 6; ed. VAIDYA 1959b: 30-35; trans. KHOROCHE 1989: 32-38). For further citations, see GREY 1990: 129, s.v. Sasa, and 228, s.v. Śaśaka.
17. *tasyā etad abhavat / anaparādhyāśayavati samsāre bahūni duḥkhāny anubhūtāny asakṛṇ narakeṣv asakṛt tiryakṣv asakṛd yamaloke 'sakṛd manuṣyalokeṣu hastacchedāḥ pādacchedāḥ kaṇṇacchedāḥ nāsacchedās kaṇṇanāsacchedā aṅgapratyaṅgacchedās tathānyāni vividhāni bahūni duḥkhāny anubhūtāni / ko mahā tenārtho 'nuprāpto yadāham ātmanaḥ sthāmaṃ ca balaṃ ca vīryaṃ ca saṃjanayitvā imāṃ striyaṃ svena rudhireṇa māmsena saṃtarpya imaṃ dārakaṃ parimocayeyam /* (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 472.1-8).

Thus, Rūpāvati is led to the decision to sacrifice her body by considering the “many miseries ... experienced in *samsāra* over and over again,” specifically the miseries of the body. But the strangeness and uniqueness of Rūpāvati’s line of reasoning can be illuminated by briefly comparing it to similar passages found in other stories of bodily self-sacrifice. In many such stories, it is quite common for the bodhisattva’s decision to give away his body to grow out of a consideration of the body’s inherent worthlessness, impurity, and inevitable suffering. A bodhisattva named Sattvavara, for example, thinks to himself: “The body is worthless and repulsive, attended by misfortune and wasting away in an instant. [Only] when it gives the slightest benefit to others does it attain [any] worth in *samsāra*.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, another bodhisattva, upon deciding to give up his body, thinks to himself: “Now at last, this vessel of countless diseases, this refuge of every kind of trouble resulting from its perpetual suffering, this multitude of evils called the body will [finally] be put to use in acting for the benefit of others.”<sup>19</sup> And a third bodhisattva muses to himself: “This body is devoid of individual existence. It is insubstantial and breaks apart. It is miserable, ungrateful, and always impure. He who would not rejoice upon its being useful to another is a fool.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, many bodhisattvas reason their way to the act of bodily self-sacrifice by considering the body’s inherent worthlessness.

What is striking in Rūpāvati’s line of thought, however, is that rather than invoking the inherent worthlessness of the body, its impermanence, or its propensity to decay, here Rūpāvati invokes the suffering inflicted upon the body *by others*. Instead of imagining a body that naturally succumbs to the forces of old age, death, and disease, here Rūpāvati conjures up the picture of a body that has been hacked up, mutilated,

18. *niḥsāraviraśaḥ kāyaḥ śāpāyo 'yam kṣaṇakṣayī / paropakāraleśena yāti saṃsāratām // (Avadānakalpalatā No. 51, v. 25; VAIDYA 1959a: 317)*. This appears in the version of Rūpāvati’s story found in Kṣemendra’s *Avadānakalpalatā*, but not in connection with Rūpāvati. The quote is spoken by the merchant youth Sattvavara as a hungry bird is plucking out his eyes.
19. *cirasya tāvad bahurogabhājanam sadāturatvād vividhaśramāśrayaḥ / śarīra-saṃjñō 'yam anarthavistaraḥ parārthakṛtye viniyogam eṣyati // (Jātakamālā No. 30, v. 17; VAIDYA 1959b: 211)*. This verse is spoken by an elephant immediately prior to sacrificing his body as food for hungry travelers.
20. *nirātmake bhedini sārāhīne duḥkhe kṛtaghne satatāśucau ca / dehe parasmāyupayujyamāne na prītimān yo na vicakṣaṇaḥ saḥ // (Jātakamālā No. 1, v. 22; VAIDYA 1959b: 4)*. This verse is spoken by a brahmin immediately prior to sacrificing his body as food to a hungry tigress.

and denuded of its various extremities – particularly the hands, feet, ears, and nose. The mention of these specific body-parts is, perhaps, significant. In her discussion of the mutilated female bodies so often encountered in Indian Buddhist narrative literature, Liz WILSON notes:<sup>21</sup>

The display of disfigured female forms [often] exhibits the symbolic logic of corporal punishment Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish ...* [in which] the nature of the crime is iconically inscribed on the body of the criminal.... The use of earrings and nose-rings and the application of henna and cosmetic pastes to the hands, feet, and breasts were conventions used by Indian women of the period to adorn and eroticize the body. Thus amputation of the ears, nose, hands, feet, and breasts of adulterous women (as specified in Indian law books) mortifies the erotic body, punishing and displaying the nature of the crime at the same time.

The mutilation of hands, feet, ears, and nose as a punishment meant specifically for *women who had committed sexual transgressions* is thus attested in Indian law books and occasionally depicted in Buddhist literature. Perhaps the most famous and oft-cited example is the episode of the *Aśokāvadāna* in which a prostitute named Vasavadattā has her hands, feet, ears, and nose cut off after having one lover killed in favor of another.<sup>22</sup> The mutilation of those bodily extremities most commonly adorned and decorated by beautiful women thus serves as a marker for a woman's sexual crimes.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Rūpavātī's attribution of the "miseries" of the body to harmful infliction *by others*, and her specific mention of the mutilation of hands, feet, ears, and nose, perhaps serve to suggest that Rūpavātī gives away her body out of fear of the future sufferings inevitably (perhaps

21. WILSON 1995: 79.

22. The episode is translated in STRONG 1983: 179-184. For some insightful discussions of this episode, see STRONG 1992: 76-85, WILSON 1995: 79-81, and WILSON 1996: 95-105.

23. The same does *not* tend to be true in the case of *men* who have committed sexual transgressions. As WILSON observes, Indian legal discourse tends to focus on the *genitalia* "as the natural site of punitive marking" for sexual crimes committed by men. The punishments for female sexual transgression, however, are less predictable: "The bodies of the female transgressors are punished in a variety of places ... there is virtually no end to the number of female body parts that may, according to Indic legal discourse, legitimately be inscribed with punitive marks. Since women have no external organs of reproduction indicative of sexual arousal comparable to male genitals, it follows that virtually the entire female body is apt to be regarded erotically and subject to punitive measures..." (WILSON 1995: 79-80).

unfairly) undergone by women's bodies, "even when one's intentions are blameless." Although I would not want to over-emphasize the extent to which gender plays a role in Rūpāvati's reasoning, I would, at least, maintain that for anyone who has read a large number of these stories, Rūpāvati's thoughts and her tone of hurtful resignation do stand out as unusual and somewhat puzzling.

Following her decision to give away her body, Rūpāvati then asks the starving woman for a weapon and proceeds to cut off her breasts and feed the starving woman her own flesh and blood. Once the woman has eaten enough to calm her murderous impulses, Rūpāvati tells her:<sup>24</sup>

Sister, be informed that I have purchased your son with my own flesh and blood. I am leaving him with you in trust. By no means may you eat your son while I go back to my house to bring you some food.

Once again, this seemingly innocuous detail of the story is a startling occurrence when read against the context of other tales of bodily self-sacrifice involving the feeding of hungry beings. First of all, Rūpāvati's flesh and blood are not intended to satisfy the woman completely, or even to constitute a real meal; instead, they constitute a very temporary measure, meant to tide the woman over until Rūpāvati can fetch some more appropriate food. This, in itself, is unusual, since most tales of bodily self-sacrifice involving the feeding of hungry beings highlight the idea that the donor's flesh and blood are the *only* proper or available food for the recipient and are intended to satiate the recipient *completely*. In fact, I have never encountered another story of bodily sacrifice in which the bodhisattva first offers up his flesh and then goes off to get regular food.

Even more unusual, however, is the fact that Rūpāvati's gift of her breasts is not a true "gift" at all. Through a clever stratagem, Rūpāvati uses her flesh to "purchase" the woman's son; *in exchange for her flesh and blood*, she gains exclusive control over the boy, such that his mother only holds him "in trust" and cannot rightfully eat him. The idea of "exchange" implicated in this particular bodily gift is completely foreign – and, I would contend, would be completely repugnant – to a male bodhisattva engaging in a similar deed. Male bodhisattvas – especially

24. *yat khalu bagini jānīyā ayaṃ dārako mayā svakena māṃsarudhīreṇa krītaḥ sā 'haṃ tava niḥṣepam anuprayacchāmi mā bhūyo dārakaṃ bhakṣayiṣyasi yāvad ahaṃ niveśanaṃ gatvā tavārtḥāya bhojanam ānayaṣyāmi* / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 472.14-17).

the heroic kings and princes we so often encounter in stories of bodily self-sacrifice – consistently espouse and embody a *kṣatriya*-ethic of unrequited and one-sided liberality that eschews and is repulsed by any hint of reciprocal exchange.<sup>25</sup> In order for the sacrifice of one’s body to constitute a true manifestation of the virtue of generosity (*dāna*), it must be performed altruistically, with no expectation or hope of reward. In this sense, Rūpāvātī’s “purchase” of the baby by means of her flesh is the very opposite of the freely-given gift and distinguishes her strategy significantly from the sentiments expressed by male heroes.

Thus far, I have noted several details of Rūpāvātī’s story that distinguish her gift from that of the standard male bodhisattva hero: the happenstance manner in which the gift comes about, the attempt to enact other solutions to the problem before resorting to the bodily gift, Rūpāvātī’s reasoning and tone of resignation in deciding to give the gift, and the implication that the gift is really a transaction or exchange. It is also interesting to note the elements that are absent: The gift is not preceded by any vow on the part of Rūpāvātī, nor is it followed by any divine praise, earth-shaking, or shower of heavenly flowers – both common elements in stories of bodily sacrifice involving males.<sup>26</sup> I would suggest, then, that the development of Rūpāvātī’s story up to this point reflects a certain pragmatism, prosaic quality, and lack of willful intention not found in the stories of male bodhisattvas. These differences are admittedly subtle, however, and for the most part, Rūpāvātī’s story does conform closely to the standard narrative set-up of the bodhisattva’s bodily sacrifice: a virtuous person, an encounter with someone less fortunate who either demands or could make use of a gift of the body, the donor’s decision to make the gift, and the gift itself. It is in the remainder of Rūpāvātī’s story that we see a more explicit discourse on gender emerging. Before continuing with the story, however, let me

25. On this *kṣatriya*-ethic, see TRAUTMANN 1981: 282-285 and HARA 1974. It is true that the bodhisattva who gives away his body often implicitly desires something in return (such as Buddhahood, a particular kind of body, or a better rebirth). These “ulterior motives” usually remain implicit, however, or they are voiced only in very specific contexts (such as an Act of Truth); in general terms, they remain cloaked by an overlying rhetoric of complete selflessness, generosity, and no expectation of reward. See OHNUMA 1997, esp. 77-84, Ch. 3, and 171-188.

26. On the thoroughly conventional nature of these elements, see OHNUMA 1997: 77-84 and 99-104.

pause to consider one of the subtexts of the story implicit in its choice of characters.

### *A Discourse on Motherhood*

It is interesting to note that the object of Rūpāvati's compassion is another woman and the woman's newly born child. This situation might suggest that Rūpāvati's gift derives as much from her female identification with another woman and her motherly instincts toward the woman's child as from the abstract virtue of generosity. Indeed, I would maintain that the decision to depict a mother and her baby son as the objects of Rūpāvati's compassion is not arbitrary, but has been made in a very deliberate manner.

This initial situation, in fact, seems to set up a kind of subtext concerned with motherhood, and contrasting Rūpāvati and the starving woman as suitable and non-suitable mothers to the baby boy. For example, while the usual gift for starving beings is generalized "flesh and blood," here Rūpāvati resolves to save the starving woman and her son specifically by feeding the woman her *breasts*. This appears to me to be an obvious evocation of the idea of *breastfeeding*, although exactly *who* is being breastfed is open to several different interpretations. On the one hand, by feeding the other woman her breasts, perhaps Rūpāvati is literally "breastfeeding" her. On the other hand, I think it is also possible to suggest that the starving woman is merely a conduit through which the flesh of Rūpāvati's breasts will eventually end up in the baby boy, as if Rūpāvati herself were breastfeeding him and thus constituted his "true mother." The latter interpretation – that Rūpāvati constitutes the boy's "true mother" – is supported by several other details: Rūpāvati and the baby physically look alike, for both are described in exactly the same terms as "pleasing, attractive, and beautiful, endowed with an excellent, bright complexion"<sup>27</sup> – a description that sharply contrasts with the appearance of the starving woman herself. Furthermore, at the very end of the story, Rūpāvati is identified as a past life of the Buddha, whereas the starving woman's son is identified as a past life of the Buddha's son Rāhula (the starving woman herself being identified as the past life of an anonymous young woman named Candraprabhā). *Jātakas* and *avadānas*,

27. Rūpāvati is *abhirūpā darśanīyā prāsādikā śubhavarṇapuṣkalatayā samanvāgatā*; the baby boy is *abhirūpaṃ darśanīyaṃ prāsādikaṃ śubhavarṇapuṣkalatayā samanvāgataṃ* (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 471.5-6 and 471.10-11).

of course, frequently depict genetic or social relationships in “stories of the past” as direct precursors to genetic or social relationships in “stories of the present” – which would further suggest that Rūpāvātī, in some sense, constitutes the boy’s “true mother.” Within this story’s implicit discourse on motherhood, then, the “good mother” (represented by Rūpāvātī) is one who gives her body to the child, whereas the “bad mother” (represented by the starving woman) is one whose love for her own body supersedes her love for her child.

Let me pause to observe that the same discourse on motherhood and contrast of “good” and “bad” mothers also occurs, in a slightly different form, in the *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra*’s version of the Tigress story.<sup>28</sup> As I have already noted, the tigress story is largely parallel to the story of Rūpāvātī, except that it involves a male hero in contrast to a female hero. Because the hero of the story is male, of course, it is unlikely that he should explicitly represent a “good mother” in contrast to the “bad mother” represented by the tigress. In this particular version of the tigress story, however, I would argue that the role of the “good mother” is here displaced from the male hero onto his *own mother*, who plays a very prominent role in the tale.

The hero in this version is Prince Mahāsattva, who goes out into the forest with his two brothers, encounters a starving tigress, evades his brothers, and then sacrifices his body to the tigress – falling down before her, cutting his throat open with a bamboo stick, and allowing the tigress to drink his blood and then devour him. Just as this momentous deed is occurring, Prince Mahāsattva’s *own mother*, the queen, has an ominous dream involving several symbolic elements, including the wrenching out of her teeth and the cutting off of her breasts; upon waking, she further complains to the king: “Not long ago, milk was released from both of the nipples on my breasts. My body is afflicted as if it were being split apart by needles, and my heart is bursting open.”<sup>29</sup> The pricking of the queen’s body by needles, the flow of milk from her breasts, and the splitting open of her heart seem to constitute an exact reflection of Prince Mahāsattva’s deed of cutting his throat with a bamboo stick, flowing with blood, and then being devoured, suggesting an identity

28. *Vyāghrīparivarta*, Ch. 18 of *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra* (ed. in NOBEL 1937: 201-240; trans. in EMMERICK 1970: 85-97).

29. *ubhābhyāṃ stanamukhābhyāṃ kṣīraṃ me pramuktam acireṇa / sūcībhir bhīdyamānam iva me ’ṅgaṃ pīḍyati sphuṭati mama hṛdayaṃ ca* // (NOBEL 1937: 229.1-2).

between Prince Mahāsattva and his mother, as if the queen herself were making a gift (of blood/breastmilk) to the tigress and her cubs. At the same time, of course, the cutting off of the breasts is reminiscent of Rūpāvati's gift, and the production of milk from the nipples evokes the breastfeeding that is characteristic of the "good" mother as opposed to the "bad." In this story, then, I would argue that the same discourse on motherhood that I discerned in the *Rūpāvati Avadāna* and that contrasts the good mother's gift of her body to her child with the bad mother's willingness to eat her own child in order to save herself is here reproduced in the figures of the queen and the tigress.<sup>30</sup>

What is the meaning of this implicit discourse on motherhood? First of all, the "good mother," as depicted in these tales, conforms to the general, pan-Indian idealization of motherhood and its exaltation of the mother's self-sacrificing love, whereas the "bad mother" who ruthlessly devours her own offspring is also a standard Indian trope (exemplified, for example, by the Hindu goddess Kālī or the Buddhist goddess Hārītī). However, the imagery of good and bad mothers is also used here, I would argue, to illustrate a specifically Buddhist (and non-gendered) contrast between selflessness and attachment-to-self. Whereas Rūpāvati as the "good mother" who willingly gives away her body is representative of the virtues of extreme selflessness, the starving woman as the "bad mother" who loves herself more than her child is explicitly invoked as a paradigmatic example or extreme case of the evils brought about by attachment-to-self. In fact, the sight of the "bad mother" ready to eat her own offspring inspires three different heroes and a narrator to generalize on the evils of self-love:

30. Interestingly enough, at the end of the story, the queen is identified as a past life of the Buddha's mother Māyā, whereas the tigress is identified as a past life of the Buddha's aunt and foster-mother (as well as founder of the nun's order) Mahāprajāpatī. Would this suggest, perhaps, that a contrast is being drawn between Māyā as the Buddha's "good mother" and Mahāprajāpatī as the Buddha's "bad mother"? This would seem to accord well with the pattern discerned by several scholars in which Māyā is idealized as the consummate woman and mother, whereas Mahāprajāpatī is treated in an ambivalent – sometimes quite negative – manner. See, for example, the comments on Māyā in PAUL 1985: 63-64, and the comments on Mahāprajāpatī in FALK 1980: 219-220.

Alas! How pernicious is the evil of self-love (*ātmasneha*), such that even a mother seeks to eat her own children! Who would glorify this enemy – self-love – by which one would engage even in such behavior as this!<sup>31</sup>

Alas! Out of regard for one’s own welfare (*svārtha*), one forgets even the love of offspring!<sup>32</sup>

Alas! Because of love for one’s own body (*svadehasneha*), the mind engages in evil!<sup>33</sup>

Look, indeed, how she shows hatred even for her own child! For the self-love (*ātmasneha*) of beings does not recognize right and wrong!<sup>34</sup>

The mother who would devour her own child is thus emblematic of the selfishness and attachment-to-self that keep all benighted people within the realm of *samsāra*. This accords with a general tendency in Buddhist literature to treat the figure of the mother as a particularly potent emblem or “extreme case” of various different abstract qualities: In many Buddhist texts, a mother’s love for her only child is taken as the paradigmatic example of self-sacrificing love, and a mother’s grief at losing her child is taken as the paradigmatic example of the suffering brought about by attachment;<sup>35</sup> similarly, in this case, the mother ready to eat her own offspring is taken as the paradigmatic example of the evils brought about by selfishness.

It is interesting to note that in the *Visuddhimagga*, in the long discussion devoted to meditation on the repulsiveness of food, Buddhaghosa notes that food should be regarded as a necessary evil for the maintenance of the body, but should be viewed with as much repulsion and

31. *aho bhatātikaṣṭeyam ātmasnehasya raudratā / yena mātāpi tanayān āhārayitum icchati // ātmasneham ayaṃ śatruṃ ko vardhayitum arhati / yena kuryāt pada-nyāsam idr̥śeṣv api karmasu //* (spoken by the bodhisattva in the *Jātakamālā*’s version of the tigress story; *Vyāghrī Jātaka, Jātakamālā* No. 1, VAIDYA 1959b: 3, vv. 19-20).
32. *aho vatāsyāḥ svārthena putrasneho ’pi vismṛtaḥ //* (spoken by the bodhisattva in the tigress episode of the *Avadānakalpalatā* version of Rūpāvati’s story; *Rukmavati Avadāna, Avadānakalpalatā* No. 51, VAIDYA 1959a: 318, v. 37b).
33. *aho svadehasnehena matiḥ pāpe pravarttate //* (spoken by Rūpāvati in the *Avadānakalpalatā* version; *Rukmavati Avadāna, Avadānakalpalatā* No. 51, VAIDYA 1959a: 316, v. 8b).
34. *sutam apy aurasam nāma dviṣantam iya paśyatām / ātmasneho hi sattvānāḥ dharmādharmau na paśyati //* (spoken by the narrator in the version of Rūpāvati’s story found in Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālā*, HAHN 1992: 52, v. 11).
35. For example, in the numerous poems of the *Therīgāthā* dealing with mothers who join the Saṃgha out of grief over the death of a child.

distaste as that with which parents, lost in a wilderness, would regard eating the flesh of their only child in order to survive.<sup>36</sup> Thus, just as a mother eager and willing to devour her own child is used as an image of extreme attachment to body and self, so also, a parent repulsed and horrified at the thought of eating her own child is used by Buddhaghosa as an image of the detachment from body and self that should be cultivated by monks and nuns on the Buddhist path. In the figure of Rūpāvati, of course, we go one step further: The bodhisattva carries this selflessness so far that he actually reverses the image – becoming the food that feeds the child instead of eating the child himself.

### *Two Acts of Truth*

After feeding the starving woman the flesh and blood from her breasts, Rūpāvati sets out for her own house in order to fetch more food. The remainder of the story takes place at Rūpāvati's house and involves two separate Acts of Truth and a sex-change. Let us look at the first Act of Truth in full:<sup>37</sup>

Then Rūpāvati approached her own house with her blood gushing and flowing. Rūpāvati's husband saw Rūpāvati with her blood gushing and flowing, and having seen her coming from far away, he said to her: "Rūpāvati, who inflicted such an injury [on you]?"

She told him what had happened in detail. Having told him, she said: "Good Husband, prepare some food for the woman."

"Good Wife," he answered, "you prepare her food. Meanwhile, I am going to speak some words of truth: Good Wife, a marvelous deed such as this has never been seen or heard of anywhere before. By these true words of truth, may both of your breasts appear as they were before!"

As soon as such an expression of truth had been made, at that very moment both of her breasts appeared as they had been before.

36. RHYS DAVIDS 1920-1921: 347.

37. *atha Rūpāvati strī rudhīrenodgharatā pragharatā yena svaṃ niveśanam tenopasaṃkrāntā / adrākṣīd Rūpāvatyāḥ striyāḥ svāmī Rūpāvatiṃ strīm rudhīrenodgharatā pragharatā dūrata evāgacchantīm drṣtvā ca punā Rūpāvatiṃ etad avocat / kenedam evaṃrūpaṃ Rūpāvati viprakāraṃ kṛtam / saitāṃ prakṛtiṃ vistareṇārocayati sma / ārocayitvaitad avocat / prajñāpayāryaputra tasyāḥ striyā bhaktam / sa āha / prajñāpayāryaduhitas tasyā bhaktam api tu satyavacanam tāvat kariṣyāmi / yenāryaduhitaḥ satyena satyavacanenāyam evaṃrūpa āścaryādbhuto dharmo na kadācid drṣto vā śruto vā tena satyena satyavacanena ubhau tava stanau yathāpaurāṇau prādurbhavitām / sahakṛtenāsminn evaṃrūpe satyavacane tasyā asminn eva kṣane ubhau stanau yathāpaurāṇau prādurbhūtau / (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 472.17-29).*

This episode is unique in a number of ways. In a very large sub-set of stories of bodily self-sacrifice, the restoration of the body-part given away by means of an Act of Truth is a thoroughly conventional element.<sup>38</sup> Having willingly sacrificed his body with no expectation of return or reward, the bodhisattva in these stories very frequently ends up *getting his body back* by performing an Act of Truth (which usually attests to the pure intentions and motivations underlying his initial gift). However, it is also thoroughly conventional that the donor always performs his *own* Act of Truth, based on his own meritorious deed. This is the *only* story of bodily sacrifice I have come across, in fact, in which the Act of Truth restoring the body-part is performed by someone *other* than the donor himself. Here, the Act of Truth is appropriated away from Rūpāvātī and performed instead by her husband. Moreover, the forcefulness of this appropriation is indicated by the fact that Rūpāvātī's husband directly refuses Rūpāvātī's request to prepare food for the starving woman, ordering his wife to prepare the food instead, while he performs the Act of Truth.<sup>39</sup> This appropriation of Rūpāvātī's Act of Truth by her husband, I would contend, must be seen as a reflection of a social and cultural milieu in which husbands possess and legally speak for their wives – where wives, in fact, are seen as direct extensions of the male householder's self, such that Rūpāvātī's husband is almost restoring his own "body" by means of the Act of Truth. Moreover, this appropriation strips Rūpāvātī of the full subjectivity she deserves and places her in a position of dependency on her husband.<sup>40</sup>

38. On this convention, see OHNUMA 1997: 57-66.

39. In Haribhaṭṭa's version of the story, in contrast, Rūpāvātī's husband does prepare the food, but he also performs the Act of Truth. In Kṣemendra's version, this entire episode (the first Act of Truth) is eliminated.

40. It is interesting to note how frequently mutilated female bodies are restored by men, rather than by the women themselves. Just as Rūpāvātī's breasts are restored by her husband, so also in the *Therīgāthā*, a nun named Subhā who rips her own eye out in order to stop the sexual advances of a threatening rogue later has her eye restored passively when she gazes upon the excellent body of the Buddha (*Therīgāthā* No. 71, vv. 366-399; ed. OLDENBERG and PISCHEL 1883: 158-162; trans. NORMAN 1971: 38-40; for discussions of this oft-cited story, see OHNUMA 1997: 214-226, LANG 1986, TRAINOR 1993, and WILSON 1996: 165-179). Similarly, in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*'s commentary on verse 53 of the *Dhammapada* (English translation in WARREN 1896: 473-474), a woman named Suppiyā cuts the flesh from her thigh and uses it to make a meat broth for a sick monk in need (as no other meat can be found). Afterwards, the Buddha himself

The same social and cultural milieu that produced this episode did, of course, also produce many Hindu and Buddhist stories in which women themselves performed their own Acts of Truth. The peculiar nature of women's Acts of Truth, however, was noticed already in 1940 by W. Norman BROWN in his essay on the Act of Truth.<sup>41</sup> Examining the collection of Acts of Truth compiled in BURLINGAME's classic 1917 essay on the subject,<sup>42</sup> BROWN first surmises that "the basis of the Truth Act is the singleness with which the performer ... fulfills his personal duty."<sup>43</sup> He then observes that duty in ancient India – particularly in the Hindu ideology of *varṇāśramadharmā* – was relative to one's stage of life and position in society. Thus: "A corollary of this general proposition is that the range of occupations which may provide the basis for a Truth Act is very wide for men, but narrow for women" – generally being limited to wifedom and prostitution (particularly the former).<sup>44</sup> The classic example of a woman's Act of Truth in Indian literature, he contends, is that performed by the maiden Damayantī in the Mahābhārata when she must choose her beloved suitor Nala as her husband in a ceremony of "self-choice" (*svayamvara*), but is confused because four gods have also disguised themselves in forms identical to that of Nala:<sup>45</sup>

As it is true that Nala is destined to be my husband, as it is true that from the first moment when I heard his name I took him for my lord, as it is true that I have instituted this ceremony to win him – by that Truth the gods must reveal him to me.

Damayantī's Act of Truth, then, is based on her complete physical and mental chastity prior to marriage, her complete devotion to Nala, and her future role as an ideal wife. It accords with the traditional duties incumbent upon Indian women and sets the standard, according to BROWN, for other Acts of Truth performed by women in Hindu and Buddhist literature.

In fact, when we examine the forty Acts of Truth compiled by BURLINGAME, we see that BROWN's assertion is generally correct.

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restores Suppiyā's body. The passivity of these women stands in marked contrast to the plethora of male bodhisattvas who restore their own mutilated bodies.

41. BROWN 1940.

42. BURLINGAME 1917.

43. BROWN 1940: 38.

44. BROWN 1940: 39.

45. *Mahābhārata* 3.52-79; quote trans. in BROWN 1940: 40.

BURLINGAME's collection includes twenty-five Acts of Truth performed by women. Of these, the largest single group consists of wives attesting to their love or faithfulness toward their husbands, while another large group deals in some other way with the women's relationships to husbands, sons, brothers, or other men. Many more are simple statements of virtue or simple statements of fact, whereas only three of the twenty-five refer to specific active virtues performed by the women themselves. Thus, while women are sometimes granted full subjectivity in performing their own Acts of Truth, these Acts of Truth are generally based upon women's traditional roles in relation to men.

Perhaps the incidence of Acts of Truth based on virtuous wifedom in BURLINGAME's collection would have been even greater had he not focused so heavily on *Buddhist* Acts of Truth. Though he subtitles his article "A Hindu Spell and Its Employment as a Psychic Motif in Hindu Fiction," his collection in fact contains thirty-five Buddhist examples and only five from the Hindu tradition. In BROWN's opinion (stated in his second article on the Act of Truth),<sup>46</sup> the traditional Hindu Act of Truth – which he traces as far back as the *R̥g Veda* – is usually based on the traditional societal duties of men and women in particular stations of life; whereas Acts of Truth based on specific religious virtues – such as Buddhist Acts of Truth based on the ten perfections, or Jain Acts of Truth based on sexual continence – represent "specialized Buddhist and Jain" usages that "should doubtless be viewed as late sectarian developments."<sup>47</sup> Thus, BROWN seems to suggest that both Buddhism and Jainism appropriated the traditional, particularistic Acts of Truth characteristic of Hinduism and used them to promote universal ethical values (such as generosity or monastic celibacy). From this perspective, we might perhaps interpret the Act of Truth performed by Rūpāvati's husband as transitional or ambivalent in nature: on the one hand, its power is based not on Rūpāvati's traditional, gender-specific role of devoted wife, but rather, on the Buddhist and non-gendered virtue of generosity; on the other hand, this substitution of a universalistic ethical virtue for a particularistic societal duty seems to require that Rūpāvati be divested of her rightful role in performing her own Act of Truth, which is instead performed by her husband.

46. BROWN 1968.

47. BROWN 1968: 176.

The Act of Truth performed by Rūpāvati's husband is followed, however, by a second Act of Truth that makes the story even more intriguing, and perhaps suggests that Rūpāvati's husband is accorded a less exalted position than at first seemed apparent, or that his Act of Truth is preliminary and trivial in nature – though this second Act of Truth is not devoid of ambivalences of its own.

Following the restoration of Rūpāvati's breasts, the god Śakra becomes aware of what is occurring down on earth and starts to worry about where Rūpāvati's extreme virtue might lead her. In a scene that is thoroughly typical of tales of bodily self-sacrifice,<sup>48</sup> he muses to himself:<sup>49</sup>

The woman Rūpāvati, who highly values extreme generosity, has made an extraordinary gift. I fear that the woman Rūpāvati might thus cause Śakra to fall from his palace! Suppose I were to test her?

Taking on the guise of a brahmin, Śakra comes to Rūpāvati's house and begs for food. Their subsequent dialogue leads up to the second Act of Truth and the climax of the story:<sup>50</sup>

48. On the conventional nature of Śakra's involvement in such tales, see OHNUMA 1997: 57-66 and 104-120.
49. *atityāgo 'tityāgagauravatāyā Rūpāvatyāḥ striyāḥ kṛtaḥ / mā haiva sā Rūpāvati strī ataḥ Śakraṃ bhavanāc cyāvayet yan nv aham enāṃ mīmāṃseyam /* (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 473.1-3).
50. *satyaṃ te Rūpāvati dārakasyārthāyobhau stanau parityaktau / sāha / ārya brāhmaṇa satyam / sa tām āha / evaṃ te Rūpāvati ubhau stanau parityajāmīti parityajantyāḥ parityajya vābhūc cittasya vipratīsārah / Śakra āha / atra kaḥ śraddhāsyati / Rūpāvati āha / tena hi brāhmaṇa satyavacanāṃ kariṣyāmi / yena satyena brahman satyavacanenobhau stanau parityajāmīti parityajantyāḥ parityajya vā nābhūc cittasyānyathātva nābhūc cittasya vipratīsāro 'pi ca brahman yena satyena mayā dārakasyārthāyobhau stanau parityaktau na rājyārthaṃ na bhogārthaṃ na svargārthaṃ na Śakrārthaṃ na rājñāṃ cakravartināṃ viṣayārthaṃ nānyatrāham anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambudhyā-dāntān damayeyam amuktān mocayeyam anāśvastān āśvāsayeyam aparinirvṛtān parinirvāpayeyam tena satyena satyavacanena mama strīndriyam antardhāya puruṣendriyaṃ prādurbhavet / tasyās tasminn eva kṣaṇe strīndriyam antarhitam puruṣendriyaṃ prādurbhūtam / atha khalu Śakro devendras tuṣṭa udagra āttamanāḥ pramuditāḥ prītisaumanasyajātaḥ / tata eva 'ddhyā vaihāyasam atyudgamyodānam udānayati Rūpāvatyāḥ strīndriyam antarhitam puruṣendriyaṃ prādurbhūtam / Rūpāvatyāḥ striyāḥ Rūpāvataḥ kumāra iti saṃjñā utpādītā /* (COWELL and NEIL 1886: 473.14-474.6). My translation omits the phrases "he said," "she answered," etc.

“Is it true, Rūpāvati, that you sacrificed both of your breasts for the sake of a young boy?”

“Yes, Noble Brahmin, it is true.”

“Rūpāvati, did your mind feel any regret when you decided to sacrifice, when you were sacrificing, or when you had sacrificed both of your breasts?”

“No, my mind did not feel any regret when I sacrificed both of my breasts.”

“But who will believe such a thing?”

“In that case, Brahmin, I will speak some words of truth: Brahmin, when I decided to sacrifice, when I was sacrificing, and when I had sacrificed both of my breasts, my mind felt no contrariness and no regret. Rather, Brahmin, I sacrificed my breasts for the sake of that young boy [alone] – not for the sake of kingship, not for the sake of wealth, not to go to heaven, not to [become] Śakra, not to [acquire] the territories of kings or Cakravartins, and not for any other reason [except this]: When I have awakened to unsurpassed perfect enlightenment, may I tame those who are untamed, liberate those who are unliberated, console those who are inconsolable, and bring to complete Nirvana those who have not attained complete Nirvana. By these true words of truth, may the bodily faculties of a woman disappear from me, and may I appear with the bodily faculties of a man!”

At that very moment, her female bodily faculties disappeared, and male bodily faculties appeared [in their place].

And Śakra, Lord of the Gods, was satisfied, pleased, delighted in mind, happy, and full of joy and gladness. At that very moment, he rose up into the air by means of his magic power, and uttered a solemn utterance:

“Rūpāvati’s female bodily faculties have disappeared, and male bodily faculties have appeared [in their place]!”

And he gave the woman Rūpāvati the name Prince Rūpāvata.

At this point, the story of the woman Rūpāvati ends, and the *Rūpāvati Avadāna* proceeds with its three remaining episodes involving Prince Rūpāvata, Candraprabha, and Brahmaṇḍa.

Reading the two Acts of Truth together, it seems apparent that Rūpāvati’s Act of Truth constitutes the truly significant one, whereas her husband’s is only a preliminary step. It is Rūpāvati’s Act of Truth that conforms so closely to the standard pattern characteristic of stories of bodily self-sacrifice: an encounter with Śakra, an Act of Truth performed by the donor herself and based on the purity of the donor’s intentions, a statement of the two standard motivations behind the gift (to benefit the recipient and to attain highest enlightenment), a clichéd statement of the lack of ulterior motives (such as kingship, wealth, or heaven), and praise by Śakra when the Act of Truth succeeds. All of these elements are thoroughly conventional in nature<sup>51</sup> and characteristic

51. On the conventional nature of these elements, see OHNUMA 1997: 104-115 (for the encounter with Śakra, the Act of Truth, and Śakra’s praise when the Act of

of Buddhist stories of bodily sacrifice. A contrast seems to be drawn, then, between the husband's trivial Act of Truth – which is brief and simple in nature, contains no explicit religious vows or sentiments, and is accompanied by no supernatural occurrences – and the exalted Act of Truth performed by Rūpāvātī herself. Whereas her husband merely wishes to restore his wife's beautiful body (particularly her breasts), Rūpāvātī reveals herself to be a true bodhisattva, fulfilling the perfection of generosity in order to attain unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment.

Nevertheless, there is, of course, something unique and significant about Rūpāvātī's Act of Truth that makes it different from what we normally find, and that is *what kind* of body Rūpāvātī herself wishes to attain by means of the truth-act. Whereas male bodhisattvas generally use the Act of Truth to restore the body they previously had, or to attain a better body (such as a divine body, a supernatural body, an immortal body, or the body of a Buddha),<sup>52</sup> Rūpāvātī, on the other hand, is

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Truth succeeds) and 77-84 (for the two standard motivations behind the gift and the clichéd statement of the lack of ulterior motives).

52. Sometimes the male bodhisattva wishes to trade in his physical body for a "dharma-body" or some other abstract type of body. In one version of the tigress story, for example, the bodhisattva states: "By abandoning my body, a boil, impelled by hundreds of existences, full of excrement and urine, as insubstantial as foam, full of hundreds of worms, driven forward by its acts, I will obtain a dharma-body, free of grief, free of change, free of [all] attachments [to existence], pure and stainless, full of hundreds of virtues, fully endowed with virtues such as meditation and so forth" (*tyaktvāhaṃ gaṇḍabhūtaṃ bhavaśatakalitaṃ viḍmūtra-bharitaṃ niḥśaraṃ phenakalpaṃ kṛmiśatabhariṭaṃ kāyaṃ kṛtanudam / niḥśokaṃ nirvikāraṃ nirupadhim amalaṃ dhyānādibhir guṇaiḥ sampūrṇaṃ dharmakāyaṃ guṇaśatabharitaṃ prāpsyāmi virajaṃ* // [v. 7 of *Vyāghrīparivarta*, Ch. 18 of *Suvarṇabhāṣottama Sūtra*, NOBEL 1937: 211]). Similarly, another bodhisattva remarks: "[By giving away my body,] I will obtain a dharma-body that cannot be split apart, cut up, or carried away, that is imperishable, unscarred, and unsurpassed" (... *mayāpsyate / abhedyam acchedyam ahāryam avyayaṃ niruttaraṃ dharmāśarīraṃ avraṇaṃ* // [v. 47 of *Sārthavāhajātaka*, *Avadānasārasamuccaya* No. 2, HANDURUKANDE 1984: 46]). And a third bodhisattva says: "Those who abandon their bodies in order to save the lives of others ... have an enduring 'body of fame' brought about by the arising of abundant merit..." (*paraprānatrāṇe ... tyaktavapuṣāṃ yaśaḥkāyaḥ sthāyī bhavati pṛthupuṇyodayamayāḥ* / [spoken by a male bodhisattva in v. 40a of *Rukmavātī Avadāna*, *Avadānakalpalatā* No. 51, VAIDYA 1959a: 318]). In other cases, the male bodhisattva's restored body is a superior version of the physical body he gave away. For example, in the *Mañicūḍāvadāna*, the light emitted by King Mañicūḍa's crest-jewel doubles in size when it is later restored. Likewise, in various versions of King Śibi's story, his restored eyes are supernatural and can

concerned with the body's *sex*: she wishes to get rid of her female body altogether and acquire a normal male body instead. Rather than a transition from "human" to "divine" or "human" to "Buddha," or even from "injured" to "healed," Rūpāvati's Act of Truth results in a *sex-change* from "female" to "male." This would seem to suggest that "female" is to the imperfect "human" as "male" is to the "supernatural/divine/Buddha." In order to understand further the significance of this transformation, however, let us look at previous scholarship on sexual transformation in Indian literature, and especially, the sexual transformation of bodhisattvas.

### *The Theme of Sexual Transformation*

The phenomenon of spontaneous sexual transformation in human beings is clearly recognized in a wide variety of Hindu and Buddhist texts. In Hindu literature, it most commonly comes about through various magical means, such as bathing in an enchanted pool, being cursed or blessed by a deity, exchanging sex with a *yakṣa*, or taking a magical pill. As W. Norman BROWN has noted, in all such cases, "a change from woman to man is always desirable while the reverse is always undesirable."<sup>53</sup> The means of transformation themselves, however, are depicted as morally neutral.

Such is not the case in Buddhist literature, where sexual transformation is often depicted as having some moral significance. For example, the Pāli Vinaya records the cases of a monk who turned into a woman and of a nun who turned into a man. Although the Vinaya itself gives no indication of the reasons for such changes, its commentary observes that they occur on the basis of powerful good and bad moral deeds – an opinion shared by several other Pāli commentaries. More specifically, transformation from male to female occurs as a result of a powerful evil action (such as unfaithfulness to one's wife), whereas transformation from female to male occurs as a result of the weakening of the inferior karma that brought about rebirth as a woman, accompanied by a powerful good action and/or a strong aspiration to become male.<sup>54</sup> Obviously,

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see through walls, rocks, and mountains, and for a hundred *yojanas* on every side. Thus, whether or not the bodhisattva requests it, the restored body is generally greater – in some way – than the body given away.

53. BROWN 1927: 6.

54. All of these points are usefully summarized in BAPAT 1957. The commentaries discussed are the *Samantapāsādikā* (commentary on the Vinaya), *Aṭṭhasālinī*

then, these texts agree upon several basic points: It is better to be a man than a woman; sex change from male to female is unfortunate, whereas sex change from female to male is fortunate; and – most importantly, when contrasted with the Hindu examples – the former is associated with negative moral deeds and is a sign of karmic backsliding, whereas the latter is associated with positive moral deeds and is a sign of karmic progress. We might describe this complex of ideas as one Buddhist model of sexual transformation.

These references to spontaneous (often unintentional) sexual transformation in non-Mahāyāna literature have not received much scholarly attention, however. More prominently represented – particularly in scholarship dealing with women and images of the feminine in the Buddhist tradition – is a group of episodes culled from Mahāyāna sūtras, all reflecting a variation on the general theme of sexual transformation. In the pattern generally found within these episodes, a woman (in some cases just a girl) debates or discourses with various men (including monks, male bodhisattvas, and the Buddha). The woman is depicted as being a very wise bodhisattva, and the statements made by her generally focus on the standard Mahāyāna notions of emptiness, the illusory nature of reality, and the unreality or essencelessness of all dharmas. Sometimes the woman also vows to attain Buddhahood or to practice the bodhisattva discipline. Despite her obvious insight and resolve, however, the woman is then challenged in some way by one of the males, who expresses doubt about the abilities of women to practice the bodhisattva-discipline, be advanced bodhisattvas, or attain Buddhahood. In response to this challenge, she transforms herself into a man (often a young male novice or monk), either spontaneously or through an Act of Truth.

Several scholars have discussed the meaning and implications of such episodes. Perhaps the simplest interpretation is that of Yuichi KAJIYAMA. In an article entitled “Women in Buddhism,”<sup>55</sup> he focuses especially on the traditional dictum that a woman’s body bars her from becoming a Buddha (along with four other states of existence, usually listed as Brahmā, Śakra, Māra, and a Cakravartin). By analyzing the textual occurrences of the dictum, along with other evidence, KAJIYAMA concludes that the dictum arose only in the 1st c. B.C.E.,

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(commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgani*, first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka), and the *Sāratthadīpanī* (sub-commentary on the *Samantapāsādikā*).

55. KAJIYAMA 1982.

and was largely due to the well-established idea that a *mahāpuruṣa* is characterized by thirty-two bodily marks, including the mark of *kośopagatavastiguhya*, or having the penis encased in a sheath (which logically, of course, excluded women). He then interprets the theme of sexual transformation as a strategy used within certain Mahāyāna *sūtras* to refute the dictum by showing that a woman could indeed become a Buddha or advanced bodhisattva within the present life. However, these *sūtras* also made a concession to the prevailing view of the *mahāpuruṣa* by having the woman first transform herself into a man. Thus, in KAJIYAMA's view, the change of sex is a practical yet necessary matter, meant to give the female bodhisattva a male body so that she could become a Buddha.

KAJIYAMA's straightforward interpretation of the theme of sexual transformation was perhaps a result of the fact that he focused primarily on a famous episode from the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which Śāriputra asserts that a woman cannot become a Buddha, and a *nāga*-princess responds by transforming herself first into a male bodhisattva and then into a fully enlightened (male) Buddha.<sup>56</sup> Both Diana PAUL and Nancy SCHUSTER, in their discussions of the subject,<sup>57</sup> distinguish this *Lotus Sūtra* episode from other Mahāyāna episodes of sexual transformation, and interpret it in the same simple terms as KAJIYAMA: In the polemic of the *Lotus Sūtra* episode, Hīnayānist disciples (such as Śāriputra) are depicted as those who hold to the traditional dictum that a woman could not become a Buddha, while the Mahāyānists put forth a new view that champions the abilities of women, refutes the traditional dictum, yet ultimately retains the idea that a male body is a necessary prerequisite to Buddhahood.

What distinguishes the *Lotus Sūtra* episode from other such episodes, in the view of PAUL and SCHUSTER, is the fact that it lacks any emphasis on the notions of emptiness, the unreality of dharmas, and the ultimate irrelevance of all distinctions – all of which are prominent philosophical themes in other Mahāyāna sex-change episodes. In the *Sumatidārikāparipṛcchā*, for example, the girl Sumati precedes her sexual transformation by telling her male challenger that her female body “cannot be apprehended, for dharmas are neither male nor

56. The Sanskrit version of the passage is translated into English in PAUL 1985: 187-190; the Chinese version in HURVITZ 1976: 198-201.

57. PAUL 1985: 166-216; SCHUSTER 1981.

female.”<sup>58</sup> In the *Vimaladattābodhisattvapratibhānaparivarta*, the girl Vimaladattā transforms herself into an eight-year-old boy, but also asserts: “Neither with a female body nor with a male body is true enlightenment attained ... for there is no achieving perfect enlightenment in any way.”<sup>59</sup> And in a famous episode from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, when Śāriputra asks a goddess why she has not changed her female body, the goddess replies that she has looked for the quality of “femaleness” for the last twelve years, but has never been able to find it, for that which is called a woman is like a magical creation.<sup>60</sup> Thus, in all of these episodes, the woman’s sexual transformation into a man is accompanied by statements asserting the ultimate irrelevance of all distinctions such as “male” and “female.”

These latter episodes have been interpreted in largely similar terms by PAUL, SCHUSTER, and Rita GROSS<sup>61</sup> as using the narrative theme of sexual transformation to make larger philosophical points from the perspective of emptiness. In all of the episodes, the woman is obviously already a highly advanced bodhisattva even before she changes her sex. She has attained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* (as several of the episodes mention), and she understands the nonarising and emptiness of all dharmas; in fact, it is only because she understands the emptiness of phenomena that she is able to gain control over them and thus playfully change her sex in order to startle and enlighten a benighted male. Her male challenger, on the other hand, is usually a *śrāvaka* and is depicted as someone who does not truly understand emptiness – someone who clings to distinctions between categories such as “male” and “female,” “magic” and “reality.” Thus, in these episodes, the man’s mistake is not in adhering to the dictum that a woman could not become a Buddha, but in adhering to any ultimate distinction between “man” and “woman,” “Buddha” and “non-Buddha,” at all. Likewise, the sexual transformation of the woman is not primarily depicted as a necessary step or as something that makes the woman better. Instead, it is a magical display – a

58. SCHUSTER 1981: 31. The episode (part of the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*) is translated from Chinese into English in PAUL 1985: 201-211, and summarized in SCHUSTER 1981: 29-31.

59. SCHUSTER 1981: 35. The episode (part of the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*) is summarized in SCHUSTER 1981: 31-37.

60. The Chinese version is translated into English in PAUL 1985: 224-232; the Tibetan version in THURMAN 1976: 58-63.

61. GROSS 1993: 67-73.

transformation-body or *nirmāṇa-kāya* – playfully engaged in for the benefit of the benighted male. As GROSS puts it, “the sex change is a mockery to slow-witted conservatives, who believe in some essence of gender that defines and limits women, not an improvement to the main character ... [who is] already clearly superior to all the males present except for the reigning Buddha.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite these scholars’ recognition of the rhetoric of emptiness underlying these episodes, however, they are ultimately unable to accept it completely. Most of these episodes still involve a permanent transformation from female to male, and that leaves all three scholars uncomfortable. All of them naturally prefer the episode from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, since the goddess, having made her point by taking on the male form of Śāriputra, takes her own female form back again. And all of them compare these episodes with other, more positive texts, in which a woman is challenged but refuses to change her sex, or a woman is simply depicted as an advanced bodhisattva or virtual female Buddha without ever being challenged or having to justify her sex.

Thus, despite the texts’ own invocation of the rhetoric of emptiness, the transformation from female to male still seems to carry some significance that must be accounted for. GROSS, PAUL, and SCHUSTER take different views on this matter. SCHUSTER is the most generous in this regard, maintaining that because women in ancient India were so closely associated with a specific traditional role, the abandoning of a female body was used to symbolize the abandonment of ordinary worldly goals in favor of the Buddhist goal of perfect enlightenment. Thus, the female body stood merely for “traditional roles,” whereas the male body stood for an enlightened Buddhist perspective that perceives the emptiness of all such traditional roles and distinctions – including gender roles and distinctions. “Despite the maleness of these new bodies,” she maintains, “it seems fair to assume from the context that the transformation signifies the transcendence of ordinary worldly life and the sex distinctions that are part of it.”<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, SCHUSTER also observes that the male body preferred in such episodes is generally that of a young boy, a young novice, or a monk – male bodies that have abandoned (or not yet engaged upon) traditional male roles. In SCHUSTER’s formulation, then, the significance of these bodies’ “maleness” is considerably downplayed;

62. GROSS 1993: 71.

63. SCHUSTER 1981: 55. See also BARNES 1987: 120-121.

in fact, “maleness” almost appears as a symbol for the transcendence of all gender categories.

GROSS, on the other hand, believes more pessimistically that these episodes ultimately retain the male body as a necessary prerequisite to Buddhahood – as if a narrative theme involving conventional notions of gender were overlaid with a more radical critique from the perspective of emptiness. Her strategy is to artificially separate the two themes and also hierarchize them, for she argues that the necessity of acquiring a male body is here trivial and secondary to the emptiness-critique, which she sees as constituting the primary significance of these episodes. She states, for example, that the sexual transformation into a man conforms to “androcentric expectations,” but that these expectations “are overcome by sex-neutral ... modes of perceiving and understanding which proclaim that, in truth, at a deep level of understanding, male and female do not really exist.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, it is the irrelevance of all gender distinctions that constitutes the primary message of these episodes “at a deep level of understanding”; nevertheless, GROSS admits, “to some extent the context remains androcentric.”<sup>65</sup> GROSS’ discussion is full of such hierarchizing statements which aim to minimize the significance of the sexual transformation and subordinate it to the emptiness-critique.

In contrast to both SCHUSTER and GROSS, PAUL’s interpretation refuses to explain away or minimize the significance of the sexual transformation. PAUL maintains that, within these episodes, sexual transformation from “female” to “male” is used to symbolize the transition from “delusion” to “enlightenment” precisely because of the traditional connotations of each gender which align the “female” with “delusion” and the “male” with “enlightenment”:<sup>66</sup>

Since the feminine represented the deceptive and destructive temptress or “daughter of evil,” the feminine body represented imperfection, weakness, ugliness, and impurity. Transformation of sex represented a transition from the imperfection and immorality of human beings (the female body) to the mental perfection of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas (the male body). Maleness was an image for the perfection of the mind....

Thus, in PAUL’s formulation, the maleness of the bodies these women acquire is not merely a symbol for the transcendence of all gender, nor

64. GROSS 1993: 73.

65. GROSS 1993: 73.

66. PAUL 1985: 175.

is it an archaic, leftover motif from a more conservative time. Instead, the sexual transformation into a man is significant, and is used deliberately as a symbolic marker for spiritual perfection.

What are we to make of all of this in light of the story of Rūpāvātī? It is interesting to note that in spite of the fact that Rūpāvātī's story shares many elements in common with the Mahāyāna episodes discussed above, none of these scholars mentions it, presumably because it comes from the *Divyāvadāna* – a “Hīnayāna” text – and doesn't quite conform to the general pattern of the other episodes. What is lacking, of course, is any philosophical invocation of the Mahāyāna notions of emptiness, the unreality of dharmas, or the ultimate irrelevance of all conventional distinctions. Rūpāvātī's story might therefore be seen as an episode of sexual transformation devoid of any secondary significance brought about by association with the emptiness-critique. Rūpāvātī's change-of-sex is not the playful, magical transformation of an advanced bodhisattva; rather, like the non-Mahāyāna examples I alluded to earlier, it results from a strong aspiration backed up by a powerful moral deed. Rūpāvātī *does* make a distinction between “male” and “female,” and she *wants* to become a man.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, when we read her Act of Truth within the context of the entire story, it is clear that her sexual transformation is depicted literally as a necessary precursor to Buddhahood. Her husband's Act of Truth first transforms her from a deformed female into a normal female – a necessary precursor to Rūpāvātī's own Act of Truth, which further transforms her from a normal female into a normal male. This male body, in turn, seems to be a necessary prerequisite not merely to her attainment of Buddhahood, but even to her kingship as Rūpāvata and her subsequent bodily sacrifices as Candraprabha and Brahmaṃprabha. In fact, the parallelism between Rūpāvātī's gift to the starving woman and Brahmaṃprabha's gift to the starving tigress seems to suggest that she must perform what is essentially the same deed over

67. Rūpāvātī's desire for a male body is, in fact, presaged by the gift itself; out of all the parts of her body, she chooses to give away her rounded, feminine breasts, as if she were already shedding her female form. The same type of foreshadowing of a sex-change occurs in the *Lotus Sūtra* episode, where the *nāga*-princess gives away the jewel on her head immediately prior to her change-of-sex. As PAUL has noted (1985: 186), *nāga*-princesses were believed to carry a priceless jewel on their heads which male *nāgas* did not possess. In this sense, the *nāga*-princess' gift of her jewel is symbolically parallel to Rūpāvātī's gift of her breasts.

again, this time with the body of a man. Change-of-sex here is, to some extent, a natural and necessary karmic progression.

At the same time, however, Rūpavātī's change-of-sex differs from the non-Mahāyāna model of sexual transformation discussed earlier because of the way in which sexual transformation is explicitly linked with the goal of unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment. What we might borrow from the scholarship pertaining to the Mahāyāna episodes, then, is PAUL's suggestion that transformation from female to male is not merely a technical and practical matter, but is used symbolically as a marker for spiritual perfection. In Rūpavātī's Act of Truth, the aspiration to attain unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment is accompanied by the wish to become a man; the latter is symbolic of the former, just as much as it constitutes its necessary physical precursor.

I would disagree, then, with SCHUSTER's contention that "maleness" can be read as a symbol for the transcendence of gender categories, as well as with GROSS' assertion that the sexual transformation is merely secondary to the more significant emptiness-critique. Rather, like PAUL, I see the two to be intimately connected: The female body here stands for worldly human bondage and suffering, while the male body stands for perfect enlightenment; a transformation from female to male is thus a potent means of symbolizing the transition from bondage to freedom. This accords well with the contention of many feminist theorists that women tend to be associated with the bondage of the body and that "women function as the body for men," thereby leaving men to inhabit a pure, disembodied, and transcendent place of authority that pretends to be gender-neutral (here, the ultimate spiritual authority of the enlightened mind).<sup>68</sup> Thus, as I suggested previously, Rūpavātī's transition from "female" to "male" is symbolically parallel to the male bodhisattva hero's transition from the imperfect "human" to the "divine/ supernatural/Buddha" – as well as its necessary physical prerequisite – because of the traditional connotations of "female" and "male" displayed consistently throughout Buddhist literature.

### *The Veracity of Women's Words*

Finally, I would like to point out one more parallel between the story of Rūpavātī and the Mahāyāna episodes of sexual transformation, a parallel that further supports the connotations of "male" and "female" I have

68. See, for example, GROSZ 1994a: 38 and GROSZ 1994b: 14.

discussed above. As we have noted, in all of the Mahāyāna episodes, the change-of-sex comes about after the woman is challenged in some way by a man. Usually, this challenge consists of the man's doubt in the abilities of the woman. The man's doubt persists even after the woman has gone to considerable lengths to prove herself. In the *Lotus Sūtra* episode, for example, Śāriputra challenges the *nāga*-princess even after she has made a formal vow to attain Buddhahood. In the *Sumatidārikā-paripṛcchā* episode, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva challenges Sumati even after she has performed two Acts of Truth causing various supernatural occurrences; Sumati, in fact, precedes her sexual transformation with the statement that, while dharmas are neither male nor female, nevertheless "I must remove your doubts."<sup>69</sup> It is striking to note here that formal ritual procedures (such as the vow and the Act of Truth) that would normally serve as definite markers of spiritual progress and therefore allay all doubts are, in the cases of these women, still not enough to convince their male challengers – only the change-of-sex can do that. Thus, a persistent element of doubt in the veracity of women's words and deeds – doubt that can only be expiated by change-of-sex into a man – is characteristic of all these episodes of sexual transformation.

The story of Rūpāvātī also conforms to this pattern. The god Śakra is here akin to the male challenger in the Mahāyāna episodes, for even after Rūpāvātī asserts that she felt no regret upon giving away her breasts, Śakra expresses doubt in the veracity of her words: "But who will believe such a thing?" It is this possibility of doubt that induces Rūpāvātī's Act of Truth: "In that case, Brahmin," she says, "I will speak some words of truth." Only after Rūpāvātī proves herself by changing into a man is Śakra "satisfied, pleased, delighted in mind." His doubt allayed, he rises up into the air and utters a solemn utterance in praise of Rūpāvātī's transformation.

This interpretation of the encounter between Rūpāvātī and Śakra, in fact, helps to explain one of the peculiarities of the story's narrative structure. In many stories of bodily self-sacrifice, the supplicant who asks for the bodhisattva's body is really the god Śakra in disguise, his demand for the bodhisattva's body being nothing more than an elaborate test of the bodhisattva's generosity. The "test by Śakra" motif is thus a common and conventional element of many stories of bodily self-sacrifice. Ordinarily, however, the test by Śakra *occasions* the bodily gift,

69. SCHUSTER 1981: 30.

and what is *tested* is the hero's generosity. Only in the case of Rūpāvātī does the test by Śakra *follow* the bodily gift, rather than occasioning it. So what does Rūpāvātī's "test" consist of? In fact, the test here is not a demand for a gift at all, and not a test of generosity, but rather, a challenge to Rūpāvātī to prove the veracity of her words to those who remain doubtful – a proof that can only be accomplished by transforming herself into a man. This gives Rūpāvātī's Act of Truth a somewhat different flavor than those characteristic of male bodhisattva heroes. The male hero's Act of Truth is concerned largely with *himself*, aggressively drawing upon the power of his own moral deed in order to reap his due rewards. Rūpāvātī's Act of Truth, on the other hand, is largely directed toward *others*; its concern with allaying the doubts of others, in fact, makes it somewhat akin to the oath of deliverance performed by an innocent person accused of a crime. Although Rūpāvātī does benefit from the Act of Truth by acquiring a superior body, she also needs this male body to excuse her from the possible sin of speaking falsely of her accomplishments.

Even in the Mahāyāna episodes of sexual transformation, I would argue, despite the high stature of the woman, the stupidity of her male challenger, and the depiction of the woman's sex-change as an act undertaken out of compassion for the man, there still remains an underlying theme involving doubt in the veracity of women's words and the need to expel such doubt by acquiring the body of a man. Once again, this underscores the way in which moral qualities are reflected in the physical form one is endowed with. Just as many scholars have pointed out the tendency in Buddhist literature to perceive women's bodies as deceptive and duplicitous,<sup>70</sup> so also are women's words depicted as unreliable and fickle in nature. Proof of their veracity comes about when it is reflected in the more "truthful" body of a man. What the theme of sexual transformation perhaps suggests, then, is that falsity

70. Women's bodies – much more so than men's – are described as being foul and disgusting on the inside while appearing beautiful and pure on the outside. A woman's beauty is depicted as an external, artificial creation (like a painted puppet or doll) that relies on clothing, perfume, and ornaments to cover up and conceal the foul impurity – the "bag of excrement" – that lies underneath and that constitutes woman's true nature. Thus, the woman's body is perceived as being deceptive and duplicitous in nature. See, for example, LANG 1986: 71-73, BLACKSTONE 1998: 69-75, and WILSON 1996: 93-95.

and female gender are so closely implicated that one must shed the latter in order to allay accusations of the former.

### *Breasts and Breastfeeding in Haribhaṭṭa's Version*

The intimate connection between specific moral values and the kinds of physical bodies that materialize and express them can be further highlighted by turning our attention to Haribhaṭṭa's fascinating version of Rūpāvātī's story.<sup>71</sup> Haribhaṭṭa consistently correlates specific moral values with their physical embodiments, putting forth several striking and contrasting images of female bodies, breasts, and breastfeeding, and using these stark images to impress upon the reader the moral messages of Rūpāvātī's tale.

The story of Rūpāvātī begins with a famine afflicting the normally prosperous city of Utpalāvātī. While the *Avadānakalpalatā* version of the story fails to mention the famine at all, and the *Divyāvadāna* version mentions it only briefly, Haribhaṭṭa's version dwells at great length on the effects of the famine and the way in which it leads to the deterioration of the city, which is described in both physical and moral terms. In physical terms, Haribhaṭṭa mentions dried up rain, withered fields, empty store-rooms, emaciated cowherds, and "thin herds of cows, their ranks thinned by death."<sup>72</sup> This physical deterioration of the city is paralleled by the declining moral quality of the city's inhabitants. Overcome by starvation and crazed with hunger, they become depressed, violent, and desperate for food. The correlation of the famine's physical and moral symptoms is not merely symbolic, as Haribhaṭṭa tells us that the famine itself has been brought about by the country's "diminishing roots of merit,"<sup>73</sup> which manifest themselves physically in a diminishing supply of food.

But particularly striking here is Haribhaṭṭa's description of the *women* inhabiting the city and the effects the famine has upon them in both physical and moral terms. Physically, the women's bodies – and specifically, their *breasts* – become loose and lax, losing their normally rounded feminine form. In addition to his mention of "extremely thin" women with "hollow eyes" and "loose bracelets," Haribhaṭṭa also tells us that "without any food, the heavy breasts of the young women, which

71. For edition and translation information, see notes 1 and 4.

72. *paretāvaśeṣaviralagoṇam* (HAHN 1992: 51).

73. *kuśalamūlakṣayāt* (HAHN 1992: 51).

normally resembled shiny water pots with tiny, lovely nipples, now sagged.”<sup>74</sup> The women’s sagging breasts are also mimicked in the city’s female cows. Haribhaṭṭa observes that “when cows have no grass to eat, they gradually become weak, and their gait becomes sluggish. Their udders become lax, and their milk disappears.”<sup>75</sup>

It seems to me that this loosening and depletion of the female form – and specifically, of the breasts – is used by Haribhaṭṭa as a symbolic marker for the declining morality brought on by the famine. Depleted and sagging breasts suggest a loss of breastmilk, and thus, of the mother-love that breastmilk symbolizes, as well as the general altruism and compassion that both breastmilk and mother-love stand for within the gender imagery of Rūpāvati’s story. In fact, Haribhaṭṭa follows his description of loose and saggy female bodies with several startling depictions of the city’s moral decline: As the famine drags on, women start giving stale food to their children without even caring and watch their husbands starve without feeling any regret, and a cowherd violently throws down one of his cows and sinks his teeth into her hindquarters.<sup>76</sup> Thus, as the moral virtue of the city declines, so also, the women’s bodies lose their feminine form and become more and more *lax* and *saggy*.

These themes are intensified when we get to Haribhaṭṭa’s description of the starving woman. In physical terms, her normally rounded body has, again, become loose and lax. Haribhaṭṭa notes that “her cheeks, eyes, belly, and other bodily cavities were sunken and depressed, and her ribs were clearly visible.”<sup>77</sup> In consonance with this depleted female body, the “bad mother” is also morally corrupted – again, in the specific sense that she has lost all mother-love for her child, refuses to feed the child, and instead wishes to devour the child for her own sake. Moral corruption and the loss of mother-love are thus reflected in a hollow, sunken, and depleted female form; and both are connected to the evils of self-love, which again, the narrator pauses to condemn: “Look, indeed,

74. *vinimagnamanojñācūcukāḥ śucicāmīkarakumbhasaṃnibhāḥ / kaṭhinatvam anandhasaṃ jahuhḥ pramadānāṃ guravaḥ payodharāḥ* // (HAHN 1992: 51, v. 3).

75. *paridurbalatāṃ kramād gatānāṃ aṭṭṇāhāratayā sanairgatīnām / adhikaṃ śītilatvam āgateṣu kṣayam ūḍhaḥsu gavāṃ payo jagāma* // (HAHN 1992: 52, v. 8).

76. See HAHN 1992: 52, vv. 6 and 9. The image of a cowherd actually trying to eat one of his cows is particularly striking because of the sanctity of the cow in traditional India and its status as the preeminent symbol of mother-love (*vātsalya*).

77. *nimnatarakapolanayanakuṣīrandhrām abhivyaktaparsukāpaṅktim* (HAHN 1992: 52).

how she shows hatred even for her own child! For the self-love (*ātmasneha*) of beings does not recognize right and wrong!”<sup>78</sup>

Rūpāvātī, on the other hand, stands in marked contrast to the other females in the story. Rūpāvātī has not declined in morality or in mother-love; in fact, she spends five long verses gushing over the baby boy and admiring his bouncing black ringlets, his glittering teeth, and the bud of his quivering lower lip.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, as we might by now expect, Rūpāvātī’s positive maternal feelings are physically reflected in the description of her breasts. For despite the famine and the lack of food, Rūpāvātī’s breasts have not become loose or lax; in fact, they are compared to “two golden water pots,” which is precisely the rounded female shape that all of the other women are said to have lost.<sup>80</sup> Nor has Rūpāvātī lost the ability to breastfeed – as the female cows have done – for at the climactic moment of the story, of course, she slices off her breasts and very literally “breastfeeds” the other woman.<sup>81</sup>

In short, throughout Haribhaṭṭa’s version of Rūpāvātī’s story, the moral quality of the characters and of the city as a whole is clearly inscribed upon the bodies of the women and female animals. A hollow, sunken, and depleted female form, with breasts that have lost their

78. See note 34 above.

79. See HAHN 1992: 53, vv. 12-16.

80. *stanayugaṃ ... hemakalaśākṛti* (HAHN 1992: 54, v. 20). Compare verse 3 (note 74 above), in which the other women’s breasts no longer resemble “shiny water pots” (*śucicāmīkarakumbha*).

81. It is also interesting to note that the opposition between Rūpāvātī as the “good mother” and the starving woman as the “bad mother” once again finds an analogue in the animal world. At one point, Rūpāvātī says to the starving woman in exasperation: “Even when afflicted with hunger, a mother crow cares for and nourishes her young, who follow her around with their faces lifted up and their beaks wide open, longing for food and uttering a thin cry. So how much more should a virtuous woman do so!” (*vyākoṣatuṇḍakam udānanavikṣamāṇam āhārakāṅkṣiṇam udīritarūkṣaśabdāṃ / puṣṇāti śāvam anugāminam ādarena kākī kṣudhā parigatāpi satī kim u strī* // [HAHN 1992: 53, v. 16]). While the mother crow who feeds her young is here used as an image of the “good” and nurturing mother, a more familiar female animal is invoked by Rūpāvātī as an image of the “bad” and devouring mother: In the very next verse, Rūpāvātī compares the starving woman to “a tigress who devours a baby deer” – thus calling to mind the “bad mother” of the tigress story (*mṛgaśāvam iva vyāghrī bhakṣayitvā*) [HAHN 1992: 53, v. 17]). Women are here consistently likened to female animals, and the opposition of “good” and “bad” mothers and the moral values they embody is thus replicated in the animal world.

ability to produce milk, are a marker for the loss of mother-love – and beyond that, moral virtue, compassion, and altruism. On the other hand, a fully rounded female form, with breasts that both look like water pots and have the same feeding and nurturing qualities as a water pot, are a marker for the continuing presence of selflessness, generosity, and compassion. Thus, the contrast between selflessness and attachment-to-self is played out in Rūpāvati's story not only through the abstract metaphor of "good" and "bad" motherhood, but also upon the very concrete surface of the women's (and female animals') bodies. Many theorists, of course, have written about the body as an inscriptive surface upon which cultural and religious values are inscribed and thus materialized. Many feminist theorists, moreover, argue that this is especially true of female bodies: Women, more so than men, are reduced to their bodies and to their distinctively female-sexed corporeality; therefore, women's bodies constitute an especially effective surface upon which to materialize the Buddhist values being discussed within Rūpāvati's story.

Let me conclude this brief discussion with one final, telling detail of Haribhaṭṭa's version of the story. Once Rūpāvati has been transformed into a man and renamed Rūpāvata, he is then consecrated as the new king of Utpalāvati and ushers in an age of both physical and moral plenitude. In moral terms, the king is said to be virtuous and to rule the country through good government, whereas in physical terms, the rain-clouds give water seasonably and abundantly, natural disasters disappear, the rice grows without being cultivated, and the trees are always laden with flowers and fruit. But perhaps the most telling marker of the golden age ushered in by King Rūpāvata once again has to do with the city's female animals – for Haribhaṭṭa does not neglect to tell us that "the cows gushed forth such abundant milk, they virtually milked themselves."<sup>82</sup>

### *Rūpāvati, the Father?*

Despite the straightforward interpretation of female imagery I have given above, Haribhaṭṭa's version, and the story in general, ultimately resists such a simple formulation. I claimed above that depleted and sagging breasts suggest a loss of breastmilk and mother-love, and thus stand as a marker for moral corruption; whereas full and nurturing breasts suggest an abundance of breastmilk, and thus stand as a marker

82. *uṣṭrāḥ svayaṃ duduhire 'tanudugdhadhārāḥ* (HAHN 1992: 56).

for the continuing presence of selflessness, generosity, and compassion. This seems to be a simple opposition between “breastfeeding” and “non-breastfeeding” women. The starving woman as the “bad mother” has saggy breasts and refuses to breastfeed her child, whereas Rūpāvātī as the “good mother” has full breasts and willingly breastfeeds the child.

But exactly *how* does she “breastfeed” the child? She does not breastfeed in the passive way that ordinary mothers do, by emitting milk from her breasts; instead, she “breastfeeds” in a much more active and heroic manner, by slicing off her breasts and feeding them to the other woman. Within the Buddhist context, the contrast between these two modes of breastfeeding could not be more obvious: Whereas ordinary breastfeeding involves breastmilk leaking and oozing out of the breasts, and thus calls to mind the way in which women’s bodies are generally depicted in Buddhist literature as a mottled array of open orifices continuously oozing all manner of vile substances,<sup>83</sup> Rūpāvātī’s more heroic “breastfeeding” is a dramatic instance of the bodhisattva’s bodily self-sacrifice out of compassion for others. Moreover, this “heroic” mode of breastfeeding actually *gets rid of Rūpāvātī’s breasts* – that which mark her as a woman in the first place – and eventually allows her to transform herself into a *man*.

Ultimately, then, the story does *not* accept a simple opposition between the breastfeeding “good” mother and the non-breastfeeding “bad” mother. Ultimately, the story seems to suggest that even the *best* mother’s breastfeeding is nothing more than a pale reflection of the *true* breastfeeding – which is the bodhisattva’s heroic self-sacrifice. Moreover, this true breastfeeding involves the removal of the female breasts and ultimately transforms its agent into a man.<sup>84</sup> Might this

83. See, for example, LANG 1986, WILSON 1995 and 1996, and BLACKSTONE 1998.

84. The insufficiency of even the most nurturing female breasts to symbolize the bodhisattva’s compassion is strikingly revealed in a verse from Haribhaṭṭa’s version of the story. This is how the narrator describes Rūpāvātī’s transformation from female into male: “And when her two breasts, swollen like the frontal lobes of an elephant in rut, saw just a few beard-hairs as dark as collyrium powder appearing on that moon-like face, they immediately disappeared into a manly chest, as if out of shame” (*śmaśrūdgamaṃ praviralāñjanacūrṇanīlam āvirbhavantam avalokya tad ānenendau / sadyaḥ payodharayugam gajakumbhapiṇam antardadhe pṛthuni vakṣasi lajjayeva* // [HAHN 1992: 56, v. 36]). Thus, Rūpāvātī’s breasts, whose rounded shape and nurturing qualities have been implicitly praised throughout the entire story, now disappear “as if out of shame” when confronted with the superior qualities of a male body.

perhaps suggest that the “good” mother who is opposed to the “bad” mother is ... in fact ... a father?

The suggestion that the true mother is, in fact, the father might be supported by considering another striking characteristic of the way in which Rūpāvātī “breastfeeds” the child. In actual fact, it is the starving woman, and not the child, to whom Rūpāvātī feeds the flesh of her breasts. Nevertheless, I speculated above that several details in the *Divyāvadāna* version of the story seem to suggest that Rūpāvātī constitutes the boy’s “true mother,” and that the starving woman here merely serves as a conduit by means of which the flesh from Rūpāvātī’s breasts will eventually end up in the baby boy. Thus, Rūpāvātī does not feed the child directly, but only through the conduit of his mother. We might say that Rūpāvātī is an “indirect” mother. And an “indirect” mother is ... a father.<sup>85</sup>

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In fact, Haribhaṭṭa’s version of the story is, in general, extremely misogynistic. The story opens with the following verse: “Even as a woman, the bodhisattva cut the flesh from her own body and gave it away. How much more did he do so as a man, for a man is superior in goodness and strength and better at achieving the welfare of others!” (*strīve ’pi bodhisattvaś chittvā māmsam dadau nijād dehāt / kim utādhikasatvbale parārthakuśale manuṣyatve* // [HAHN 1992: 51, v. 1]). After Rūpāvātī has sacrificed her breasts, the people of the city remark in amazement: “How your sharp intellect contrasts with your female sex! How this gift of yours stands in contrast with your delicate form!” (*strīvaṃ kvedam buddhir eṣā kva tīkṣṇā kvāyaṃ tyāgaḥ saukumāryaṃ kva cedam* // [HAHN 1992: 55, v. 28a]). Rūpāvātī herself appears to share these sentiments, for when she transforms herself into a man, she states to Śakra: “O Brahmin, by means of this truth of mine, let my sex become male immediately, for manhood is an abode of virtue in this world!” (*etena dvija mama sūṃṛtena sadyaḥ pumbhāvo jagati guṇāśrayas tathāstu* // [HAHN 1992: 55, v. 34b]). Finally, at the end of the story, once Rūpāvātī has succeeded in transforming herself into a man, he preaches to others about the benefits of generosity, using his own gift as an example: “Look at the magnitude of the fruit resulting from generosity! By means of it, I have gotten rid of my female state right here, in this world, and ... produced the state of a man!” (*dānasya paśyata vipākamahattvam etad atraiva me yuvatitām apanīya yena / udbhāvitam ... idaṃ naratvam* // [HAHN 1992: 57, v. 43]).

85. In November 1998, when I first shared my thoughts on Rūpāvātī within a public forum (see OHNUMA 1998a), someone in the audience made this observation (that Rūpāvātī is an “indirect” mother and an “indirect” mother is really a father). I regret that I did not know who the person was, nor did I later get his name. I hereby thank him for this insightful observation and cite him anonymously. In thinking about the “true” mother being the father, I have also benefited from conversations on this topic with Susanne Mrozik.

Remember, too, that Rūpāvati is a previous life of the Buddha and is thus closely identified with the Buddha. The Buddha, of course, is the father of the Saṃgha, but there are also suggestions in Buddhist literature that this *father* is also the *true mother*. Perhaps the most striking evidence in support of this claim may be found in a few verses of the *Gotamī Apadāna* (part of the Pāli *Apadāna* collection), which has recently been translated by Jonathan WALTERS.<sup>86</sup> In these verses, the Buddha's foster-mother Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī compares her physical nourishment of the baby Buddha through breastmilk with his "spiritual nourishment" of her by means of the dharma:<sup>87</sup>

Well-gone-one, I am your mother;  
 you're my father, O wise one.  
 Lord, you give the truth's pure pleasure!  
 Gotama, I'm born from you!

It was I, O well-gone-one,  
 who reared you, flesh and bones (*rūpa-kāya*).  
 But by your nurturing was reared  
 my flawless dharma-body (*dhama-tanu*).

I suckled you with mother's milk  
 which quenched thirst for a moment.  
 From you I drank the dharma-milk,  
 perpetually tranquil.

Thus, while she nurtured his physical body, he nurtured her "body of dharma"; while she fed him physical milk that satiated his thirst for a moment, he fed her the "milk of dharma" that satiated her thirst forever. Clearly, the Buddha is here depicted as the *true mother* next to which all ordinary human mothers pale in comparison. Likewise, the Buddha's nurturing of beings through the "milk of dharma" is the *true breastfeeding* next to which Mahāpajāpatī's breastfeeding seems trivial. Thus, the Buddha is the *true mother* – and yet, as Mahāpajāpatī observes, "you're my father." The Buddha is the father, and the father constitutes the "true mother." And inasmuch as Rūpāvati is identified with the Buddha, perhaps we can say the same of her.

The gender imagery of Rūpāvati's story is thus neither simple nor straightforward. At times, it draws a simple opposition between the "good" mother who feeds her child and the "bad" mother who devours

86. See WALTERS 1995. For an interesting discussion of this *apadāna*, see also WALTERS 1994.

87. WALTERS 1995: 121.

her child, signifying the former by means of rounded, milk-filled breasts and signifying the latter by means of a hollow, depleted, and ambiguous female form. At other times, however, it seems unsatisfied with this trope, and forces Rūpāvātī to move beyond her female gender completely, suggesting in subtle ways that *true motherhood* is really *fatherhood*, the *true woman* is one who has transformed herself into a *man*, and *true breastfeeding* consists of Buddhist ethical practices such as the bodhisattva's self-sacrifice or the Buddha's preaching of the dharma – practices that are implicitly coded as male. Because the story engages in both of these strategies simultaneously, it ultimately presents us with a rich, complex, and ambiguous gender imagery that is capable of being interpreted in multiple and contradictory ways. Throughout the story, this gender imagery manifests itself in a diverse and sometimes bizarre array of bodies – hollow and sunken women; cows whose udders have gone lax; Rūpāvātī with perky, water-pot breasts; Rūpāvātī with bloody, severed breasts; Rūpāvātī with new breasts restored by her husband; and Rūpāvātī transformed into a man. The complexity of the story's structure and the embarrassing wealth of its imagery make Rūpāvātī's story a fitting miniature image of the complex construction of gender characteristic of Indian Buddhism as a whole.

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