

## Gift, gender and genesis: rethinking the story of Agastya and Lopāmudrā

At first sight the story of Agastya and Lopāmudrā (*Mbh* 3.94ff) would appear to lend itself rather obviously to an interpretation based on issues of gender and the subordinate role of women: Agastya is himself *ayonija*, a form of parthenogenetic male birth which clearly relates to ideas of the impurity of the womb; he needs a wife for progeny for his patriline but cannot find a woman his equal, so must make one (again a form of parthenogenesis that asserts the superiority of the male); and the product of this, Lopāmudrā, appears to be shown as subservient and grasping, only agreeing to have sex with Agastya in return for riches. Previous studies of the story have focussed on these issues, with Patton, for example, arguing that different versions of the myth are 'arguments for specific ideologies of gender', with the epic version portraying Lopāmudrā as 'entirely derivative of [the] male' (Patton 1996:34-5).

However, when the structure of the epic story is looked at more closely, and read within the broader context of the stories that border it, a distinctive pattern begins to emerge that calls into question this reading of the story and of Lopāmudrā's role. The episode proceeds in a number of successive tiers: the opening story of Ilvala and Vātāpi killing brahmins; Agastya's meeting with his ancestors and subsequent need for progeny; his creation of Lopāmudrā and marriage to her; his quest to find riches to fulfil her conditions for sexual union. Each of these tiers is conspicuously marked by a series of problematic desires and equally problematic gifts which, when analysed further, makes up a sequence that suggests the story is being presented as a movement from an initial problem stage, in which *dharma* and power relations are in imbalance, to a concluding resolution stage in which balance is restored. In this paper, I examine this sequence of desires and gifts in some detail, and argue that when Lopāmudrā's actions and character are read in the light of this, the 'ideology of gender' that the episode puts forward is perhaps less oppressive than it at first appears.

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