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**Karṇa Within the Net of the *Mahābhārata*:
Reading the *Itihāsa* as Literature**

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Abstract

Historically, Western scholarship has used an analytical, text-critical methodology to study the *Mahābhārata*, treating the great Sanskrit *itihāsa* as an unwieldy mass of religious, philosophical and mythological accretions covering an ancient epic core. Indic tradition, however, has always considered the *Mahābhārata* a unified literary work. The renowned aestheticians of the 9th and 10th centuries, Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, cited the *Mahābhārata* as a supreme example of poetic unity. Reader-response criticism provides a vocabulary in harmony with contemporary scholarship whereby the tradition from which the *Mahābhārata* has arisen may be respected and the insights of that tradition preserved. According to reader-response criticism, the role of the reader is embedded in a text; questions as to what a work *means* cannot be separated from questions as to what it *does* and *how* it does it -- concerns shared by the *rasa* theory of the Indian aestheticians. A focus on the audience and author of a narrative impacts on our understanding of history. In the Indian case, that audience and author are accessible almost exclusively as the "implied audience" and "implied author" articulated by reader-response theory. The history of India *is* its literary history. Kṛṣṇa is the *Mahābhārata*'s pivotal character and distinctively embodies the *itihāsa*'s concerns; the implied author signals this repeatedly through a sophisticated use of narrative strategies. Kṛṣṇa stands for the human experience and uniquely represents the audience who receives the *Mahābhārata* and is constructed by it. Through Kṛṣṇa the *Mahābhārata* explores its overarching themes of fate, time, and death, of salvation, of class and lineage. Through this fascinating character we may begin to appreciate how the *Mahābhārata* constructs its vast "net."

Contents

Chapter One	
The Net of the <i>Mahābhārata</i>	1
<i>A Book-by-Book Summary of the Mahābhārata</i>	5
<i>What do we mean by "the" Mahābhārata?</i>	27
<i>Mahābhārata Scholarship</i>	34
<i>Indic Approaches to the Mahābhārata</i>	46
<i>Reader-Response Criticism and the Mahābhārata</i>	50
<i>Chapter Outline</i>	56
 Chapter Two	
The Shape of the <i>Mahābhārata</i>	59
<i>Rasa and the Shape of the Mahābhārata</i>	75
<i>Karṇa's Place within the Shape of the Mahābhārata</i>	85
Narrative Strategies: Ekalavya and the Show of Weapons	85
Narrative Strategies: Karṇa Absent	88
Narrative Strategies: The Golden Earrings	94
Narrative Strategies: the <i>sūtas</i> Karṇa and Saṃjaya	99
 Chapter Three	
Upholding the Self: Class, Lineage, and Karṇa	109
<i>The Earthly Origins</i>	115
<i>The Solar Kula: Vedic Origins</i>	123
<i>The Solar Kula: the Harivaiṣṇa</i>	136
<i>Karṇa and Bhiṣma</i>	141
<i>Karṇa and Draupadī</i>	157
<i>Karṇa and Sāvitri</i>	175
<i>Sūtas</i>	180
 Chapter Four	
Fate and Human Initiative: Karṇa and Arjuna	183
<i>Sauptikaparvan</i>	191
<i>Dhṛtarāṣṭra</i>	194
<i>Yudhiṣṭhīra and Draupadī</i>	196
<i>The Story of Mahākarnī</i>	200
<i>Father's and Sons: The Robbing of the Earrings</i>	203
<i>Fathers and Sons: The Drilling Woods</i>	212
<i>Karṇa and Arjuna</i>	215

Chapter Five	
Fate, Death, and Time: Karna and Kṛṣṇa	235
<i>Time's "Temptation"</i>	237
A <i>Gitā</i> in Negative	247
<i>Prelude to Fratricide: Fratricide Interrupted</i>	252
<i>The Death of Karna</i>	259
<i>Mṛtyu</i>	266
Kāla: <i>Coming (almost) Full-Circle</i>	274
<i>The After-Song</i>	279
Uttaraka (P)revisited	281
Yudhiṣṭhira (Re)validated	284
Retreat to the Forest	286
Time Cooks Creatures....	288
Chapter Six	
The Belly of the Lord	297
Bibliography	318

**To Anne Monius
for her unsparing generosity and unfailing inspiration**

and

**To Alain
for being there**

Karṇa Within the Net of the *Mahābhārata*:

Reading the *Itihāsa* as Literature

Chapter One

The Net of the *Mahābhārata*

The *Gandavyūha Sūtra* contains an image that has inspired the title of this dissertation.¹ The Sanskrit scripture describes the Net of Indra, *indrajāla*, a net of fine filaments stretching in every direction with a single brilliant jewel at each interstice. Each jewel reflects all the other jewels, and thus each reflects the reflections in all the other jewels, and so on to infinity. In it, gleaming "towers of great jewels [illuminate] the cosmos, particles of a web of light beams radiating in all directions."² The *Sūtra* tells of shining golden light in ruby lands, shining ruby light in gold lands, shining golden light in emerald lands, shining emerald light in gold lands, shining light the color of sun-filled jewels in sapphire lands, shining sapphire light in lands made of sun-filled jewels, shining light the color of jewels containing networks of moonbeams in red pearl lands...³

¹ The *Gandavyūha Sūtra* is the final book of the *Avatārsaka* (Garland) *Sūtra*, the founding text of Hua-yen, a school of Buddhism developed in seventh-century China, but it is known in Sanskrit as an individual scripture. This third century Buddhist text uses tales of pilgrimage to describe the path to enlightenment. Throughout, the Net of Indra is used as a metaphor to suggest the Reality that underlies the apparent. See Thomas Cleary, *Entry Into the Realm of Reality: A Translation of the Gandavyuha, the Final Book of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989); Richard H. and Willard L. Johnson Robinson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), 190.

² Cleary, *Gandavyuha*, 19.

³ Cleary, *Gandavyuha*, 76-77.

... and on and on. Here is a concept of "unity" quite unlike the organic, Aristotelian concept, and one that, I believe, may appropriately be applied to the longest narrative in the world, the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* has been described variously as a "motley pile"⁴ of accretions, as a set of narratives "nested like Chinese boxes one within the other,"⁵ as an Indian temple, functioning as the "rhetoric of a manifold and rich religious system."⁶ I would rather suggest the metaphor of the Net of Indra, king of the gods, cast blazing across the universe. The net is a thing of countless multiplicity encompassing an essential oneness. Like the *indrajāla*, each segment of the *Mahābhārata*'s complex structure, each of its vivid poems and stories, while discreet in itself, reflects the others and is connected to them in an intricate pattern. One may be interested in identifying the jewels of this net, comparing and classifying them — rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and so forth; the net of the *Mahābhārata* is so large as to make it all but impossible to examine it whole. Yet I am convinced that by looking attentively at a single part of it, and to what is reflected in that part, we will, in some sense, *experience* the whole net of the *Mahābhārata*.

My interest in the great *Bhārata* began long before I encountered its Sanskrit recensions. I had read condensations of its stories in comics and novels, watched it

⁴ E. Washburn Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India* (1901. Reprint. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1969), 58.

⁵ Barend A. van Nooten, *The Mahābhārata, Attributed to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 46.

⁶ James L. Fitzgerald, "The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric: A Fresh Look at the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 4 (December 1983): 612.

broadcast on Indian television each Sunday for more than a year, seen the film of Peter Brooks' stage production. I had learned the fine nuances of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters from numerous Indian friends who bore their names: Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, Bhīma, Karna.... As is often said in India, "nobody comes to the *Mahābhārata* for the first time." It is a living part of South Asian culture. I was eager to begin its academic study. However, I soon found myself confronted with a scholarly approach to the text that reduced it to a bewildering assortment of apparently unrelated passages, mostly read out of order and used to support a myriad of often conflicting, albeit fascinating, theories having to do with history, myth, and religion. The *Mahābhārata* was a vast archaeological dig. Thus began a search to integrate the cacophony of academic voices with an intuition that the *Mahābhārata* was a unified narrative

My first in-depth work on the *Mahābhārata* involved *nāgas*, snakes. The mythical *nāga* is, like the *Mahābhārata* itself, an ambiguous creation – dangerous, beautiful, semi-divine, capable of changing appearance at will. The *Mahābhārata* begins and ends with a long *sarpasattra*, snake sacrifice (see Chapter Two), and is supposed to have been recited during the intervals of that sacrifice. A number of humans and *nāgas* share the same name. Some characters are *nāgas*, like Arjuna's beautiful lover Ulūpi; and some characters are like snakes – Aśvatthāman wearing a jewel in his forehead, Karna skinning his congenital golden breastplate from his body, Duryodhana hissing like a cobra. My explorations entailed following the *nāgas* from *Adiparvan*, "The Beginning," to the final eighteenth book, *Svargārohanaparvan*, "The Ascent to Heaven." I came away

with a strong, if rather unformed, impression that the huge narrative was delicately and deliberately held together as if by some overarching literary "net."

Subsequent studies strengthened that conviction. In a recent exploration of the fifth book, *Udyogaparvan*, "The Effort," I found that hearing certain apparently unrelated passages as if in dialogue with one another lead to unusual conclusions and to a deeper understanding of the total book.⁷ I began to approach the *Mahābhārata* as literature. I learned that Indian poetics centuries ago had singled out the *Mahābhārata* as an example of poetic unity, and I concluded that recent reader-response criticism provided a vocabulary whereby India's theological aesthetics might be articulated in terms apprehensible to Western scholarship.

This dissertation will explore ways of listening to the *Mahābhārata* as a literary whole. It will assume that the *Mahābhārata* is a work of creative genius addressed to a sophisticated audience and, putting aside questions of historical genesis, allow the *Mahābhārata* to speak for the *Mahābhārata*. The approach will facilitate new perspectives on such important questions as what the *Mahābhārata* is saying about

⁷ The paper examined three important sections of *Udyogaparvan*: the advice given on the eve of battle by Vidura to his brother, blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra; the advice given to Dhṛtarāṣṭra by Sanatsujāta; and the advice given by the *ksatriya* woman Vidurā to her son, as related by Kuntī to her sons. I argued that these passages were in dialogue with one another, and could be understood only in the context of that discourse. Thus, for instance, we observe an embedded critique of the teachings of Sanatsujāta, in a passage traditionally taken out of context and named the *Sanatsujātiya*, a sort of holy *Upaniṣad*. What the immortal youth has to say to the king is ineffective and untimely. The audience is compelled to listen to these conflicting voices, and to reflect upon the great dilemma of the impending internecine battle. Patricia M. Greer, "Ethical Discourse in

dharma, about class and lineage, about fate and human initiative, about time and death -- in short, about the deep concerns of the Indian individual and community struggling in a difficult age to integrate self, world, and divinity. Thus, we may come closer to understanding how the *Mahābhārata*'s audience received the great narrative.

My focus is the character of Karna, the *Mahābhārata*'s most fascinating and complex character. Although little scholarly work has been devoted to Karna, he distinctively embodies the narrative's concerns. He is the child of Sūrya, the Sun god, and Kuntī, mother of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, the "heroes" of the narrative; yet Karna grows up believing he is the son of low-class parents. The *Mahābhārata* takes place at the twilight between two *yugas*, ages, when the *dvāpara yuga*, an age of partial truth, is ending and the *kali yuga*, the age of ignorance, beginning. While the *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa helps Karna's brothers to stride that painful transition, Karna struggles in *kali*'s darkness. He is a thoroughly "contemporary" man -- in the sense that humanity supposedly still dwells today in the *kali yuga* -- alone, ignorant of his destiny and of his true self. Karna, I will argue, represents the *Mahābhārata*'s audience, which reads and hears the *Mahābhārata* from within the Kali age.

A Book-by-Book Summary of the Mahābhārata

What follows is a brief outline of the major narrative thread of the *Mahābhārata*. Although this thread must be understood in the context of the mass of material that

Udyogaparvan," paper presented at the International *Mahābhārata* Conference (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001).

surrounds it -- stories, digressions, didactic passages -- a general grasp of the "plot" and the principle characters is essential. I have chosen to tell this narrative book-by-book in order to give some sense of how its elements are distributed over the eighteen *parvans*. Those familiar with the narrative details may wish to go on to the next section.

1. *Adiparvan*, The Beginning (7196 verses and 156 prose units in 225 *adhyāyas*, "chapters")⁸

Adiparvan begins with genealogies, summaries, lists of contents, introductions to human and divine dramatis personae, and stories that return to the origins of all creation. One of these stories relates how Viṣṇu and other gods agreed to descend to relieve the goddess Earth who had complained of being burdened with an excess of *asuras*, "demons," and humans. The gods decide to effect Earth's relief through the carnage of a great war in which the entire race of *ksatriyas*, the warrior class, will be exterminated. Viṣṇu incarnates as Kṛṣṇa to see that this is accomplished. The background and course of that war comprise the central narrative, which begins one day when King Śāntanu walked along the shores of the River Ganges. From the water emerged the beautiful goddess Gaṅgā, who agrees to marry the enamored Kuru king. She gives birth to an heir to the Kuru dynasty, a boy called Gaṅgādatta, "Gift-of-the-Ganges." After the goddess withdraws again to her watery source, Śāntanu falls in love with a lovely fisher girl (in reality the child of a king and an *apsarā*, "divine nymph") named Satyavatī. Her fisherman father refuses to bestow her hand unless the King promises that Satyavatī's

offspring alone will be the king's legitimate heirs. Śāmtanu cannot agree to the condition; he grows weak with pining for Satyavatī. When Gaṅgādatta learns the reason for his father's unhappiness, he renounces his right to the kingdom and takes a terrible vow: he will remain celibate for life so that no child of his may lay claim to the Kuru throne. From the skies celestial beings rain flowers on the young man and name him Bhīṣma, "the Terrible." In gratitude his father grants him a boon: Bhīṣma will die only when he wills to die.

Śāmtanu and Satyavatī have two sons. When Śāmtanu dies, Bhīṣma places the eldest, Citrāngada, on the throne, but he soon is killed in battle. Bhīṣma then consecrates young Vicitravīrya as king and abducts three princesses to be his brides. When one of the sisters, Ambā, claims to be betrothed already to another, Bhīṣma allows her to return. The two sisters marry the handsome king; after seven years of connubial bliss, Vicitravīrya dies of an excess of pleasure. There is no heir-apparent, the kingdom is in crisis. Satyavatī begs Bhīṣma to beget heirs upon the princesses according to the prevailing laws of levirate, but he refuses to break his vow of celibacy. Satyavatī, however, has a secret. Long ago the fisher-maiden once had ferried a powerful brahmin ascetic across the river. The ascetic seduces her and takes her to an island where, shrouded in a magical mist, she gives birth to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, who grows up on the spot and takes to the forest for a life like his father's. It is this Vyāsa who will author the *Mahābhārata*. He acts as the narrative's *eminence grise*, appearing suddenly and

⁸ The figures for the lengths of the *parvans* are taken from John Brockington, *The*

intervening at critical moments throughout the story. Called upon now by Satyavatī to produce royal heirs, the unsightly ascetic performs his duty by begetting three sons, one upon each princess and one upon a servant girl acting as stand-in for a squeamish princess. Because the first princess had shut her eyes during intercourse, her son, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is born blind. Because the other turns pale at the very sight of Vyāsa, her son, Pāṇḍu, is born sickly pale. The servant girl performs well and gives birth to Vidura, wise but of mixed caste. Thus the Kuru kingdom is fated not to pass to a physical heir of Śaṃtanu. Complex mixings of lineages and castes will occur throughout the narrative. Nothing is purely as it seems.

Because blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra is considered unfit, Pāṇḍu becomes king. Pāṇḍu marries two princesses, Kuntī and Mādrī. After a series of lucrative wars, Pāṇḍu, not unlike his titular "father," Vicitravīrya, retires to the forest for a life of pleasure with his two wives. One day while hunting for sport he shoots two mating deer, which are in reality a sage and his wife who have assumed animal form to better enjoy their lovemaking. The dying sage curses Pāṇḍu: if ever again he makes love, he will die in the act. This curse is especially severe because the king has no children.

Kuntī, however, is another woman with a secret. In her girlhood she had acted as hostess to a *saṃnyāsin*, "wandering ascetic," to whom her father had offered hospitality. The *saṃnyāsin* is pleased with her ministrations and awards her a magic mantra with to summon any deity she wishes. To test the mantra, the maiden calls upon Sūrya, the Sun

god. The resplendent deity arrives and despite Kuntī's protests makes love to her, promising that her virginity will be restored. The result of their liaison is a splendid boy born, like his father, wearing a golden breastplate and golden earrings. He is Karna. Terrified at being found out, a tearful Kuntī places the infant in a basket and sets it afloat upon the river. Karna is discovered among the reeds by a low-class charioteer and his childless wife who lovingly raise him.

The cursed Pāṇḍu yearns for sons. When he learns about Kuntī's secret mantra, he asks her to use it to produce the heirs he is forbidden to sire. She calls upon the gods Dharma, Vāyu (the Wind-god), and Indra, giving birth in successive years to Yudhiṣṭhīra, Bhīma, and Arjuna. Mādrī entreats Kuntī for the mantra so as not to be left childless, then calls down the two Aśvins, and gives birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. These five boys are the Pāṇḍavas, "sons of Pāṇḍu," the "heroes" of the narrative. Some years thereafter the heady airs of springtime so torment Pāṇḍu that, ignoring the sage's curse, he takes Mādrī into a passionate embrace and dies in her arms. Mādrī follows her husband on the funeral pyre, and desolate Kuntī returns to the court city of Hāstīnapura with the five brothers.

Meanwhile, Dhṛtarāṣṭra has married the princess Gāndhārī who, in sympathy with her sightless husband, has blindfolded her eyes for life. After two painful years of pregnancy, a desperate Gāndhārī attempts to abort the fetus. To her horror she discharges a single ball of flesh. Vyāsa arrives and divides the ball among one hundred and one clay pots from which are born the Kauravas, one hundred sons and one daughter. The eldest,

Duryodhana, although conceived before Yudhiṣṭhira is born after him, making Yudhiṣṭhira the rightful heir to the Kuru kingdom. The two groups of cousins are raised together under the tutelage of their uncles Bhīṣma and Vidura. The enmity between them augments with the years as an obsessively jealous Duryodhana schemes with his brothers against the Pāṇḍavas. They all are trained in the arts of war by Kṛpa and Drona, brahmins who have turned to the ways of *ksatriyas* and become gurus of combat and weapons.

When the young men are judged prepared, the population of Hāstīnapura is called to a show of their martial prowess. Towards the end of the display, a splendid stranger with golden earrings and golden armor enters the arena and challenges Arjuna to a contest of skill in archery – it is Karṇa. Learning that the unknown warrior is the son of a low-class *sūta* the Pāṇḍavas insult Karṇa and Arjuna arrogantly refuses to engage with him. Duryodhana, however, recognizes Karṇa's natural royalty and anoints him as king of the land of Anga. Karṇa swears to Duryodhana his eternal loyalty and friendship.

Eventually, after Duryodhana makes an especially vicious attempt on their lives, the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī go into hiding disguised as brahmins. They hear that king Drupada is hosting a *svayamvara*, "marriage contest," for the princess Draupadi's hand. The Pāṇḍavas decide to attend the contest, as do many princes and kings of the realm. Here the Pāṇḍavas first meet Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, son of Kuntī's brother, therefore their cousin, as well as the incarnation of Viṣṇu. Arjuna wins the contest and takes home his prize. Kuntī, whose back is turned when they enter, instructs him to share whatever it is

he has won with his brothers. Thus Draupadī becomes the wife of all five Pāṇḍavas.

They agree that she will live with each of them in turn for one year; during that time she and her partner never must be disturbed when alone.

When the five brothers return to Hāstīnapura with their bride, Dhṛitarāṣṭra offers them the undeveloped territory of Khāṇḍava as their share of the kingdom. There they establish their capital city of Indraprastha. One day Arjuna inadvertently intrudes upon Yudhiṣṭhīra and Draupadī, and to make amends goes into exile for twelve months. During that time he has various amorous encounters, forges alliances, and, with Kṛṣṇa's complicity, kidnaps and marries Kṛṣṇa's sister, Subhadrā. The marriage forges an alliance between the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa's people, the Vṛṣnis. Back in Indraprastha, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa embark on a violent adventure with which the first book closes. Instructed by Agni, the god of Fire, they set ablaze the great Khāṇḍava forest and deliver it and its myriad creatures into Agni's ravenous maw. *Adiparvan* ends on this ominous note presaging the great carnage to come.

2. *Sabhāparvan*, The Assembly Hall (2390 verses in 72 *adhyāyas*)

The important and relatively short second book begins with the magical Asura Maya, a survivor of the Khāṇḍava burning, building for Yudhiṣṭhīra a fabulous *sabhā*, "assembly hall," at Indraprastha. Upon Kṛṣṇa's urging, Yudhiṣṭhīra performs a lavish *rājasūya*, "royal consecration," thereby asserting his universal kingship. Rulers from across the land attend and swear allegiance to Yudhiṣṭhīra. Duryodhana is bitterly jealous of Yudhiṣṭhīra's extravagant display. He is humiliated further when he is tricked

into making a fool of himself by Maya's architectural illusions -- he falls into a pond he takes for a floor, crashes into a wall he takes for an open door, and so forth. Back at Hāstīnapura he builds a *sabhā* of his own and persuades his reluctant father, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, to invite the Pāṇḍavas there for a game of dice. Dice are said to be Yudhiṣṭhīra's great weakness. With the crooked Śakuni, Queen Gāndhārī's brother, dicing on Duryodhana's behalf, throw by throw Yudhiṣṭhīra first loses his wealth and his kingdom, then his brothers, and finally himself. Duryodhana challenges Yudhiṣṭhīra to wager his last remaining possession, Draupadī. Draupadī is dragged before the court, her hair undone, her garment stained with menstrual blood. Duryodhana speaks to her crudely, and suggestively slaps his bared left thigh. Bhīma, enraged, vows to one day break the thighs of Duryodhana. Egged on by Karna, Duryodhana's brother Duḥśāsana attempts to disrobe Draupadī, but miraculously her garment keeps renewing itself. Bhīma vows that one day he will kill Duḥśāsana and drink his blood. Finally Dhṛtarāṣṭra, scandalized by his sons' behavior, grants Draupadī a boon. She secures her husbands' freedom and they depart for Indraprastha.

Wrathful Duryodhana cannot accept this outcome. He convinces his spineless father to call back Yudhiṣṭhīra for one last, winner-takes-all, throw of the dice. The loser is to embark upon twelve years of exile in the forest, and a thirteenth year in disguise. If the disguise is exposed before the year has ended, the exile is to be extended for another twelve years. Yudhiṣṭhīra loses. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, dressed in the coarse garb of ascetics, depart for the forest. Draupadī vows not to bind up her disheveled hair until

her humiliation is avenged. Exacting retribution for the dishonoring of Draupadī will be the goad that drives the Pāṇḍavas for their thirteen years of exile.

3. *Āranyakaparvan*, The Forest (10,141 verses and 84 prose units in 299 *adhyāyas*)

Āranyakaparvan is the *Mahābhārata*'s longest book. Twelve years of exile provide ample occasion for adventures, pious teachings, and some of the *Mahābhārata*'s most famous stories, including those of Nala and Damayantī, Rāma and Sītā,⁹ and Sāvitrī. Yudhiṣṭhīra spends sleepless nights worrying about Karna's superiority in archery, and sends Arjuna to the heavenly abode of Indra to obtain celestial weapons. Along the way Arjuna encounters the god Śiva and obtains from him the invincible *pāśupata* weapon. Indra bestows magical weapons as well.

Nonetheless, Indra is concerned that his son Arjuna is the inferior warrior. Disguised as a brahmin, the god approaches Karna during his noonday prayers to the Sun, during which Karna has vowed to grant any brahmin whatever he might ask. Indra asks for Karna's congenital earrings and armor that render him invincible. Karna obliges by flaying them from his body; he obtains in return a weapon capable of killing Arjuna, although it can be used once and once only. At the end of the twelve years, after passing

⁹Which came first, the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the story of Rāma as told in the *Mahābhārata*? The question still is debated. The most accepted answer is articulated by van Buitenen: "It is more profitable and also more interesting to see the story of Rāma, as preserved in the *Mahābhārata*, as the happy documentation of a stage in the development of The *Rāmāyaṇa* very close to the point in time when the main story of this text was given the form in which we now know it." J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall; The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 214.

a severe test, his divine father Dharma guarantees Yudhiṣṭhira that the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī will remain incognito during the critical thirteenth year.

4. *Virāṭaparvan*, King Virāṭa (1834 verses in 67 *adhyāyas*)

The Pāṇḍavas find refuge in the kingdom of Virāṭa, king of the Matsyas. Yudhiṣṭhira goes disguised as a brahmin dicing master (he has learned the art during the forest exile). Bhima, famous for his voracious appetite, becomes a cook. The lusty Arjuna dresses as a eunuch and dancing teacher. The twins pose as experts in horses and cattle. Haughty Draupadī offers her services as a ladies maid. When the year is almost complete, Duryodhana with his brothers and Karna go to Virāṭa's kingdom on a cattle raid. In an obvious spoof of the *Bhagavadgītā* to come, Arjuna, still dressed as a transvestite, acts as charioteer to Virāṭa's frightened son, Uttara. Eventually Arjuna reveals his identity and roundly defeats the Kauravas. The grateful Virāṭa offers his daughter Uttara to Arjuna, who accepts her for Abhimanyu, his son by Kṛṣṇa's sister Subhadrā. The book ends with a celebration of the union of the marriage. Another important alliance is sealed.

5. *Udyogaparvan*, The Effort (6063 verses in 197 *adhyāyas*)

The "effort" to which the name of this *parvan* refers is the effort on the part of Kṛṣṇa, acting as the Pāṇḍavas' ambassador, to mediate peace between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. However, Kṛṣṇa's manipulations and trickery leave the question open as to whether he wants to avoid the war or to abet it. Yudhiṣṭhira, returned from exile, claims half of the kingdom, and when Duryodhana refuses to relinquish even a pinprick of

territory, the two sides prepare for battle. Both Duryodhana and Arjuna seek alliance with Kṛṣṇa, who theoretically is neutral; he tells them to choose between himself as a non-combatant advisor and charioteer, and his thousands of armed troops. Arjuna chooses Kṛṣṇa, and Duryodhana is delighted to accept Kṛṣṇa's army. Kṛṣṇa makes a series of peace embassies to the Kaurava court, but Duryodhana is not moved. Ruefully, Bhīṣma, Drona, and Kṛpa join the Kaurava side, for they have accepted Dhṛtarāṣṭra's hospitality for years and owe the king allegiance. Karna, whom Bhīṣma repeatedly has insulted, vows not to take part in the battle while Bhīṣma lives. Kṛṣṇa goes secretly to Karna, reveals to him his true parentage, and attempts to persuade him to join his brothers against Duryodhana. Karna refuses. Then Kuntī goes to Karna with the same plea. In an emotional scene, Karna refuses to renounce his adoptive parents and his friend Duryodhana, but promises his mother that whether he kills Arjuna, or Arjuna kills him, she will have five sons at the end of the war. Finally, in this book of revealed secrets, Bhīṣma, who is to be general of the Kaurava troops, reveals that he has one great weakness. Śikandīn, brother of Draupadī, in a previous life was Ambā, the one among the three princesses Bhīṣma had kidnapped for his brothers and later released. When her chosen husband had rejected Ambā as a used woman, Bhīṣma had refused to take her back as his wife. Ambā performs terrible austerities in the forest until the god Śiva grants her dearest wish: in her next life she will kill Bhīṣma. Ambā throws herself upon a pyre and later is reborn as the child of King Drupada. The invincible Bhīṣma will not defend himself against Śikandīn, knowing that Śikandīn once was a woman.

6. *Bhīṣmaparvan*, Bhīṣma (5406 verses in 117 *adhyāyas*)

Vyāsa gives divine eyesight to Saṃjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer, that he may observe all the events of the war and report them to the blind king. In an abrupt flashback, on the tenth day of the battle Saṃjaya rushes to the king to report that Bhīṣma, general of the Kaurava armies, has fallen. Saṃjaya then relates the events leading to this unexpected disaster. As the armies faced one another on Kurukṣetra, the Kuru-field, Arjuna is overcome by the thought of the impending slaughter – brother against brother, cousin against cousin, pupil against guru. He puts down his bow: "I will not fight." Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer, attempts to enlighten Arjuna on the error of his feelings, and their dialogue is the *Bhagavadgītā*. Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to uphold the *dharma* of the *ksatriya*, assuring Arjuna that he will accrue no blame since those who are to die have already been killed by him, Kṛṣṇa, Time incarnate, the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. In a great theophany, Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna his awesome divinity and promises that he will protect and save Arjuna; Arjuna only needs to take refuge with Kṛṣṇa. The possibility of liberation through *bhakti*, "devotion" to the supreme Lord, is the *Bhagavadgītā*'s central and enduring teaching.

A heartened Arjuna takes up his bow again. The eighteen-day war is recounted in great detail in this and the following three *parvans*. Both sides suffer tremendous losses. On the tenth day, invincible Bhīṣma decides that the time has come for him to die and tells Arjuna the secret of his vulnerability. Arjuna places Śikandīn-Ambā, in front. Bhīṣma stops fighting and falls upon the numerous arrows riddling his body. He does not die; resting upon his bed of arrows he awaits the auspicious moment for his soul to

withdraw. At night Karna goes to Bhīṣma and the two are reconciled. Now Karna is free to enter the battle.

7. *Dropaparvan*, Drona (8112 verses in 173 *adhyāyas*)

Drona is asked to lead the Kaurava army. This is the longest of the four battle books. Kṛṣṇa becomes increasingly active in manipulating events, and both sides display cowardice and duplicity. Young Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna and Subhadrā, is killed in a particularly dastardly fashion. Ghaṭotkaca, the monstrous *rākṣasa* son of Bhīma, wreaks havoc among the Kauravas, but Karna eventually slays him with Indra's magic weapon, the one he had intended to use against Arjuna. On day fifteen, Drona is killing great numbers of Pāṇḍava troops. Kṛṣṇa tells the Pāṇḍavas that the only way to stop Drona is to lie to him and say that his beloved son Aśvatthāman has been slain. Bhīma kills an elephant named Aśvatthāman, and Yudhiṣṭhira, who has never told an untruth, reluctantly goes to Drona and says, "Aśvatthāman is dead," muttering "the elephant" under his breath. The wheels of Yudhiṣṭhira's chariot, which always have hovered above the ground, abruptly touch the earth. Utterly dejected, Drona withdraws into a yogic trance and allows his spirit to quit his body. Then Draupadi's brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna lops off Drona's head and throws it before the Kauravas. Aśvatthāman is so enraged at this unrighteous murder of his father that he vows to destroy all the Pāṇḍavas. The Pāṇḍavas themselves are unsettled by these events, and begin to recriminate with one another.

8. *Karṇaparvan*, Karṇa (3871 verses in 69 *adhyāyas*)

Karṇa is anointed Kaurava general. He asks to have King Śalya, an ally of the Kauravas, as his charioteer. Śalya is insulted to be asked to drive the low-class Karṇa. Honoring a promise he had made earlier to Yudhiṣṭhira, as he drives Karṇa to the battlefield he praises Arjuna and insults Karṇa, undermining Karṇa's fragile self-confidence. The parallels between Karṇa driven by Śalya and Arjuna driven by Kṛṣṇa are drawn with bitter irony. Karṇa feels the hand of *daiva*, "fate," upon him. He relates to Śalya certain calamitous events of the past that had led to his twice being cursed: to forget the mantra for launching a weapon at the moment he most needs it, and to have the wheel of his chariot become mired in the mud at a moment of great peril.

Bhīma kills Duḥśāsana and, as he had promised Draupadī, tears open Duḥśāsana's chest and drinks his blood in the sight of Duryodhana and Karṇa. Karṇa fights with Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Nakula and Sahadeva, but spares their lives because of his promise to Kuntī. He all but kills Yudhiṣṭhira, who is forced to retire to his tent and nurse his wounds. There he and Arjuna engage in a bitter argument, forcing Kṛṣṇa to intervene to prevent Arjuna from killing Yudhiṣṭhira. At last Karṇa and Arjuna engage in combat. As had been foreseen, the wheel of Karṇa's chariot sinks in the mud. When Karṇa appeals to Arjuna to follow the warriors' code of battle and allow him to extract the wheel, Kṛṣṇa laughs at Karṇa and prompts Arjuna to shoot an arrow that severs Karṇa's head. A distraught Duryodhana grieves for his beloved friend. It is day seventeen.

9. *Śalyaparvan, Śalya* (3293 verses in 64 *adhyāyas*)

Duryodhana, determined to fight to the end, asks Śalya to be general. On day eighteen, the final day of the Kurukṣetra war, Yudhiṣṭhīra kills Śalya. Of the one hundred sons of Dhṛitarāṣṭra only Duryodhana survives. Wounded and sick at heart, he submerges himself in a lake and magically solidifies the waters. Hunters alert the Pāṇḍavas to his hiding place, and Yudhiṣṭhīra makes Duryodhana an offer: Fight any one of us, and the winner takes the kingdom. Duryodhana and Bhīma face off for a brutal fight with maces, a weapon at which each excels. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that Bhīma cannot win in a fair fight. Arjuna slaps his thigh, reminding Bhīma of the vow he had taken on the day of Draupadī's humiliation. Bhīma takes the cue and strikes Duryodhana ferociously, shattering both his thighs. This is one more terrible breach of the *ksatriya* code, which forbids striking below the navel. Mortally wounded, a bitter Duryodhana lists the many violations of the warrior code of which Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas are guilty. Celestial flowers rain down upon Duryodhana.

The Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa return to the deserted Kaurava camp, which is full of booty. Kṛṣṇa suggests that he and the five brothers spend the night outside, while the other *ksatriyas* remain in the occupied camp. Meanwhile, Duryodhana lies mortally wounded. Aśvatthāman, Kṛpa, and Kṛtavarman, the only surviving Kaurava warriors, rush to be with him. Aśvatthāman asks Duryodhana for permission to kill all the remaining Pāṇḍavas. Duryodhana says this would not be a violation of *ksatriya dharma*.

and has Kṛtavarman anoint Aśvatthāman as the last Kaurava general. The three leave Duryodhana alone on the field at night, in pain, his thighs shattered.

10. *Sauptikaparvan, The Night Massacre (772 verses in 18 *adhyāyas*)*

Aśvatthāman, Kṛpa, and Kṛtavarman nurse their wounds, hearing the shouts of victory from the Pāṇḍava camp. Watching an owl attack and kill a flock of sleeping crows, Aśvatthāman is inspired to slaughter. Approaching stealthily the gate of the Pāṇḍava camp Aśvatthāman is confronted by a formidable being. Failing to overcome it, believing it a projection of his own evil intentions, he decides to offer himself as a sacrifice. A golden altar appears and as Aśvatthāman mounts it, the great being reveals that he is the great god Śiva himself. Śiva gives Aśvatthāman a sword and possesses his body. Instructing Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman to guard the gates and kill anyone who attempts to escape, Aśvatthāman enters the camp with a troupe of demonic helpers. The massacre is brutally swift. Possessed by Śiva, Aśvatthāman spares no one, slaughtering without mercy the sleeping warriors, including the five sons of Draupadī. The implication here is that Kṛṣṇa, who knew Aśvatthāman's intentions, protected the Pāṇḍavas but allowed the massacre in order to fulfill the mandate of Time that the destruction of the entire *kṣatriya* race was at hand. As the demons feast on the mangled flesh, Aśvatthāman sets the camp afire. Then he and his two companions return to Duryodhana. The broken prince hears their news joyfully and dies.

Yudhiṣṭhira, his brothers, and Draupadī are devastated. Draupadī vows to fast unto death if Aśvatthāman is not brought to justice and his congenital gem wrested from

his forehead. Bhīma sets out in hot pursuit, and Kṛṣṇa and others catch up with him at the banks of the Ganges, where they find Aśvatthāman seated in the company of Vyāsa and other forest sages. Dressed as an ascetic, Aśvatthāman has resumed his brahmin identity. When he sees the Pāṇḍavas he launches his invincible *brahmaśiras*; "Brahmā's head," weapon, and Arjuna launches his own. Knowing the whole earth is threatened with destruction, Vyāsa commands them to recall the weapons. Arjuna does so, but Aśvatthāman, lacking the discipline to recall his own, redirects it into the wombs of the Pāṇḍava women, killing their unborn fetuses. There will be no Pāṇḍava heirs. Kṛṣṇa curses Aśvatthāman to wander the earth for 3000 years, friendless and miserable. The jewel is seized from his forehead and handed to Draupadī, who gives it to Yudhiṣṭhira to wear in his crown. Kṛṣṇa assures Yudhiṣṭhira that nothing could have been done to stop Aśvatthāman since Śiva's force was within him.

11. *Strīparvan*, The Women (730 verses in 27 *adhyāyas*)

Vidura and Vyāsa attempt to comfort Dhṛtarāṣṭra with philosophy: all is impermanent, Time generates and destroys everything, humans are caught in a meaningless, illusory wheel of existence because they do not understand the truth of their own existence. The warriors' women now come mourning to the battlefield. Grieving Draupadī, Gāndhārī, and Kuntī comfort one another. Vyāsa grants divine vision to Gāndhārī. (Samjaya had lost his divine vision when Duryodhana had died.) The queen describes heartrending scenes as the women from both sides discover and weep over the bodies of their sons, husbands, and lovers. Gāndhārī blames Kṛṣṇa's duplicity for all that

has happened, and pronounced a terrible curse: in thirty-six years Kṛṣṇa will be the cause of the slaying of all his kinsmen, and will die alone in the wilderness. Knowing that this is as things must be, Kṛṣṇa lets the curse stand.

Kuntī now openly confesses the secret of Karna's birth. Yudhiṣṭhira says that his grief at knowing he is responsible for the death of his own brother is a hundred times greater than his grief at the death of Abhimanyu or the sons of Draupadi. Together with Karna's women and family members, Yudhiṣṭhira performs sacred water rites for Karna.

12. *Sāntiparvan*, The Peace (12,890 verses and 57 prose units in 353 *adhyāyas*)

Books Twelve and Thirteen, the so-called didactic books, comprise a sizeable portion of the *Mahābhārata*. Yudhiṣṭhira burns with grief over Karna. He curses his mother: from this day forth no woman will be able to keep a secret. He feels the meaninglessness of all they have fought for, comparing the battle to a pack of dogs fighting over a piece of meat. Yudhiṣṭhira speaks lovingly of the life of renunciation and longs for *mokṣa*, "permanent liberation" from the cycles of existence. Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he must go to Bhīṣma for the answers to his burning questions. Before doing so, Yudhiṣṭhira enters the city to accept the throne, appointing his brothers to various positions in the court. Then he and Kṛṣṇa go to Kurukṣetra where the old warrior still lies on his bed of arrows. In a state of illumination granted by Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma teaches Yudhiṣṭhira. The bulk of *Sāntiparvan* is devoted to Yudhiṣṭhira's search for the meaning of existence and for the path in life he should adopt. Through Bhīṣma, various voices are heard discussing and comparing fine points of philosophy and theology,

recounting anecdotes and stories, yet always returning to insist that Yudhiṣṭhīra's *dharma* is not renunciation but kingship.

13. *Anuśāsanaparvan*, The Teaching (6536 verses in 154 *adhyāyas*)

This book is a continuation of *Sāntiparvan*. A striking aspect of both *parvans* is the great variety of teachings presented: the supremacy of brahmins and the equality of all the classes; the way of the warrior and the path of non-violence; the virtues of vegetarianism and the benefits of meat-eating; the preeminence of Viṣṇu and the superiority of Śiva; *pravṛtti mārga*, "the path of turning towards" the world, and *nivṛtti mārga*, "the path of turning away" from active life. At last, Bhīṣma, who has lain on the field for fifty-eight days, sees that his time has come; he instructs Dhṛitarāṣṭra to treat the Pāṇḍavas as his own sons, praises Kṛṣṇa as the supreme Lord, asks his permission to die, and consciously leaves his body through the crown of his head. The goddess Gaṅgā comes to mourn her son and Kṛṣṇa comforts her.

14. *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, The Horse Sacrifice (2862 verses 94 *adhyāyas*)

Despite all the teachings and advice, Yudhiṣṭhīra still is disconsolate at the deaths of Karna and Bhīṣma, for which he feels responsible. Vyāsa scolds him and instructs him to prepare for the *āśvamedha*, the Vedic "horse sacrifice." Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa journey to the wonderful *sabhā* built for Yudhiṣṭhīra by Maya many years ago. In this evocative setting, Arjuna confesses to Kṛṣṇa that he has forgotten what Kṛṣṇa had said to him on the battlefield, the *Bhagavadgītā*. Annoyed and disappointed, Kṛṣṇa proceeds to recount

an old, brahminical teaching focusing not on *bhakti* but on *mokṣa*. This is the *Anugītā*, the "After-Song."

Uttarā delivers Abhimanyu's stillborn child who had been struck in the womb by Aśvatthāman's weapon, but Kṛṣṇa restores life to the infant. With Parīkṣit the Pāṇḍavas will have an heir after all. Yudhiṣṭhīra prepares for the *āśvamedha* by letting loose the sacrificial horse. Arjuna follows it across the land in a journey poignantly reminiscent of his earlier adventures as a young warrior. There is a strong sense of coming full-circle, although now the heroes have grown old. Arjuna returns tired and thin. The *āśvamedha* is celebrated on a grandiose scale.

15. *Āśramavāsikaparvan*, The Stay in the Forest Hermitage (1062 verses in 47 *adhyāyas*)

Fifteen years have passed since Yudhiṣṭhīra assumed kingship. Sad and tired, Dhṛtarāṣṭra yearns to retire. He, Gāndhārī, Vidura, and Saṃjaya decide to depart for a hermitage in the forest. Kuntī also expresses a desire to leave worldly life -- she still feels guilty about Karna and mourns for him. Later, the Pāṇḍavas, in the company of a huge retinue including the widows of the fallen warriors, go to visit them. Vidura, an incarnation of Dharma, has become a naked ascetic; he uses his yogic powers to leave his body and enter the body of Yudhiṣṭhīra, King Dharma himself. Kuntī relates again the story of her invocation of Sūrya and Karna's birth and abandonment. Vyāsa grants everyone the vision to see the dead Kurukṣetra warriors, whose spirits seem to rise from the river. The Pāṇḍavas reconcile with Karna, and when the vision disappears the widows follow their husbands' spirits into the waters of the Ganges.

Two years later, Dhṛitarāṣṭra's abandoned sacrificial fires ignite the surrounding forest, and the old king, Gāndhārī, and Kuntī are consumed in the conflagration. Only Samjaya escapes and departs for the Himālayas. Eighteen years have passed since the *Kurukṣetra* battle

16. *Mausalasparvan*, The Battle with Clubs (273 verses in 9 *adhyāyas*)

Thirty-six years have passed since the Kurukṣetra war and ominous portents are everywhere. The Pāñdavas receive news that Gāndhārī's battlefield curse has been fulfilled. In Daāraka, the Vṛṣṇi people, grown wanton and lawless, had attempted to trick some holy sages by disguising one of Kṛṣṇa's sons as a woman. The sages curse him to give birth to an iron club that will be the destruction of the people. The club is ground up and thrown into the sea. Society sinks into chaos. When a drunken brawl breaks out, all the blades of grass become iron clubs, which the people take up and use to kill one another. Alone, Kṛṣṇa departs for the forest. As he sits in meditation a passing hunter mistakes him for a deer and shoots him.

Arjuna goes to Dvāraka to rescue the remaining survivors and Kṛṣṇa's widows. After burning the bodies of Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarāma, Arjuna sets out for Hāstīnapura as the ocean swallows up Dvāraka. On the return journey robbers attack the retinue but Arjuna discovers that he now lacks the power to protect the women. Broken and bereft without Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna travels to the hermitage of Vyāsa where the sage tells him that his work in the world, like Kṛṣṇa's, is finished; it is time for the Pāñdavas to depart.

17. *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, The Great Departure (106 verses in 3 *adhyāyas*)

Yudhiṣṭhīra anoints Parīkṣīt king and sets out with Draupadī and his brothers, as they had so long ago, dressed as ascetics. A dog follows them. One by one, they fall along the way. Draupadī is the first to go, and Yudhiṣṭhīra is told that this is because she was secretly partial to Arjuna. Sahadeva falls because he felt superior to others in wisdom, and Nakula because he considered himself the most handsome of men. Arjuna falls because he had failed in his promise to slay all his foes in one day of battle. Bhīma falls due to his gluttony and boastfulness. Indra invites Yudhiṣṭhīra to ascend with him to heaven, but Yudhiṣṭhīra refuses to go without the dog. The dog reveals that it is Dharma himself, Yudhiṣṭhīra's father. Without having to abandon his body, Yudhiṣṭhīra attains heaven where he asks to see his brothers and Draupadī.

18. *Svargārohaṇaparvan*, The Ascent to Heaven (194 verses in 5 *adhyāyas*)

In heaven, Yudhiṣṭhīra is outraged to find Duryodhana happily enjoying himself. He wants to see his brothers and wife. Suddenly their voices, including Karna's, are heard wailing from hell. Yudhiṣṭhīra revolts against all the gods and renounces *dharma*, preferring an eternity in hell with his family members to heaven without them. Nārada explains that it is the destiny of all great kings to have the vision of hell before gaining the vision of heaven. Yudhiṣṭhīra suddenly finds himself with the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas in heaven. The characters who were divine and demonic incarnations merge into the beings of whom they were parts. The *Mahābhārata* now closes its various frames. We return to the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, where Vyāsa's great poem had

been recited. The sacrifice is interrupted and all participants return home. The final verses list the boons bestowed upon those who hear and recite the *Mahābhārata*.

Thus is the major narrative thread of the *Mahābhārata*. Nonetheless, were a reader to open almost any one of the *parvans* at random, the passage she falls upon might well seem to have little or nothing to do with these events, so voluminous are the apparently ancillary stories and didactic passages. Only three *parvans*, the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth, have no sub tales. This dissertation will argue that very little in the text that has come down to us is truly extraneous or irrelevant to the whole. If that is the case, we must question whether "epic" is the *Mahābhārata's* most appropriate classification. What indeed *is* the *Mahābhārata*?

What do we mean by "the" Mahābhārata?

The *Mahābhārata*, estimated to be nine times the length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, consists of tens of thousands of verses divided into eighteen *parvans*, "books," of widely varying lengths. The *parvans* are sub-divided into *adhyāyas*, chapters. The narrative itself claims 100,000 verses, the approximate length of the Kumbakonam Edition (Southern Recension).¹⁰ The Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* has about

¹⁰ Professor P.P.S. Sastri, editor of the Southern Recension, wrote emphatically: "We are driven to the irresistible conclusion that *Mahābhārata* text-tradition, as we have it now in the Southern Recension, is quite authentic and reliable, that the final redaction of the story from the beginning of the first chapter as narrated by Sūta is equally trustworthy and the extent and scope of the *Mahābhārata* even during Sūta's time consisted of eighteen main *parvans* with one hundred sub*parvans*, divided into two thousand chapters and comprising one hundred thousand stanzas." (*The Mahābhārata [Southern Recension]* [Madras], 1931], vol. 2, *Ādi Parvan* -- Part II, xxi-xxii) Cited in

75,000 verses. Generically, the *Mahābhārata* is *itihāsa*, and calls itself that.¹¹ *Itihāsa* — literally, "so indeed it was" — frequently is translated as "history." In the case of the *Mahābhārata*, "narrative" might be more apt, although there are other types of Indic narratives: works of imagination (*kathā*), mythology (*purāṇa*), and poetry (*kāvya*). The *Mahābhārata* is a uniquely different sort of narrative.

In the ancient tradition of Sanskrit literature, *itihāsa* is classified under the larger category of *smṛti*, "that which is remembered," as opposed to *śruti*, "that which is heard." The four sacred Vedas (the *Rg*, *Yajur*, *Sāma* and *Ātharva*) are *śruti*, verses "heard" by the *r̥sis*, seers, of old. Considered not of human origin, the Vedas are too sacred to be written down. Texts classified as *smṛti*, on the other hand, are considered to have been transmitted by human memory. The sage Vyāsa, whose name means "compiler," is said to have compiled the four Vedas at a time when the world was moving into the *dvāpara yuga*, an age when the four-footed cow of Truth teetered on only two legs. To Vyāsa also is attributed a "fifth Veda": the *Mahābhārata*.

Over time, the emphasis shifted from the evocative or invocative powers of the Vedic prayers to the ritual context in which they were recited. The concern was no longer with the meaning of the lines so much as with what was going on cosmically and ritually as they were recited. The corpus had to be memorized syllable-perfect and the meaning of the verses was not emphasized. For its audience — restricted to males from

John Dunham, "Manuscripts Used in the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*: A Survey and Discussion," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 12.

the three upper classes — imaginative interpretation was not an option. The Vedas do not tell a person in a changing world how life is to be lived, they provide no practical ethical compass.

While the Vedas were not public, other genres existing side by side with them were. In later Vedic texts there are references to *itihāsa purāṇam*, "ancient tales," categorized as the fifth erudition.¹² We can only guess from later examples what were the contents of this ancient literature, but certainly they contained mythological lore, ballads, and stories of heroic achievements, the stuff out of which the *Mahābhārata* weaves its net.¹³ Where *śruti* discourages imagination, *itihāsa* requires it. Where the Vedas are unalterable, *itihāsa* is mutable. Where the length of a Vedic text is fixed down to the last syllable, an *itihāsa* is elastic. The *Mahābhārata*'s genre *invites* imagination, delights in accretion, renders meaning through a grand malleability. A number of perplexing aspects of the *Mahābhārata* may be accounted for in terms of the very nature of *itihāsa*. Nineteenth century European scholars, trained in the Greek and Latin classics, classified the *Mahābhārata* as an "epic." The word necessarily carried with it certain expectations that encourage a perception that many mythic digressions and didactic

¹¹ See, for instance, I.1. 25, and I.1.53. (All references are to the Critical Edition.)

¹² See, for instance, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.1.2: "The Ṛgveda is name, and so are the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda, and Atharvaṇa as the fourth, [and] the corpus of histories and ancient tales [*itihāsapurāṇa*] as the fifth Veda among the Vedas...." Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157.

¹³ Consult Edward C. Dimock, et. al., *The Literatures of Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 48.

portions of the extant *Mahābhārata* were accretions covering an original epic core. This dissertation will favor "*itihāsa*" over "epic" to designate the *Mahābhārata*'s genre.

Still, we have not answered the question: What do we mean by "the" *Mahābhārata*? The ethnographer William Sax, who studies folk versions of the *Mahābhārata* in performance, insists on dropping the "the" and speaking only of "*Mahābhārata*." What "*Mahābhārata*" is, says Sax, is an indeterminate number of historical, cultural, and psychological factors. The assumption that it is a "text" is proof of our "bibliocentric academic culture."¹⁴ Nevertheless, most scholars must rely upon a textual recension of the *Mahābhārata*. This dissertation will argue, moreover, that in the centuries before the Common Era, the *Mahābhārata* was committed to writing.

The first complete edition of "the" *Mahābhārata* was edited by pandits attached to the Education Committee in Calcutta and published between 1834 and 1839. The Bombay Edition, or Vulgate, published in 1862 and 1863 along with the eighteenth-century commentary by Nilakantha, followed this. The large Kumbakonam Edition, or Southern Recension, was published between 1906 and 1910. Professor P.P.S. Sastri, editor of the Southern Recension, surely expressed the sentiments of the editors of the other regional recensions when he confidently claimed: "It will be clear that the main text-tradition of the *Mahābhārata* is one that has been preserved with remarkable

¹⁴ William S. Sax, "Who's Who in the Pāṇḍav Līlā?" in *The Gods at Play*, ed. William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 132-33.

accuracy and that the whole work as we have it now in 18 Parvans is the work of a single author, Vyāsa."¹⁵

Western scholars, however, did not accept the single-author claim and considered all three recensions unreliable and inflated. As far back as 1897, Moriz Winternitz had called for a critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* that would serve as "the only sound basis for all *Mahābhārata* studies, nay, for all studies connected with the epic literature of India."¹⁶ In 1919, Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, head of the Oriental Research Institute (B.O.R.I.) that still bears his name, and a student of Winternitz, inaugurated the colossal work, to be carried out in Pune by a group of Indian Sanskritists trained in European universities. V. S. Sukthankar, the first editor of the Critical Edition, described the task:

In the *Mahābhārata* we have a text with about a dozen, more or less independent, versions, whose extreme types differ in extent, by about ... 26,000 lines; a work which, for centuries, must have been growing not only upwards and downwards, but also laterally, like the Nyagrodha tree, growing on all sides; a codex which has been written in nearly a dozen different scripts assiduously but negligently copied, chiefly as a source of religious merit, through long vistas of centuries...; a traditional book of inspiration, which in various shapes and sizes, has been the cherished heritage of one people continuously for some millennia.¹⁷

The editors of the Critical Edition spent almost fifty years searching for manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata*. They claim to have examined 1,259 manuscripts, out of

¹⁵ Cited in Dunham, "Manuscripts," 12.

¹⁶ Vishnu S. Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," in *The Ādiparvan: Being the First Book of the Mahābhārata*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), 1.

which they used 734.¹⁸ The aim was to reconstruct the oldest possible form of the text. The method of its editors was to leave out regional variants and to include as far as possible only the common denominators (which are not necessarily all of the oldest common denominators) of all versions. Thus the text of the *Mahābhārata* as it appears in the Critical Edition cannot be regarded as a version known anywhere in India at any time in the past. For this reason it has been and continues to be the subject of much debate and criticism.

J.A.B. van Buitenen from the University of Chicago, translator of the *Mahābhārata's* first five *parvans*, praises the Critical Edition for taking us back to a text from about the sixth century, "the earliest one recoverable [and] an invaluable source of information."¹⁹ Madeleine Biardeau disagrees: "There is no reason to hold that one version is more authentic than the other because its manuscript is shorter and earlier."²⁰ And indeed, there is a danger that in dismissing variations of one or another tradition as being "later" we will dismiss material central to the *Mahābhārata's* meaning. Even if a

¹⁷ Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," lxxvii.

¹⁸ Dunham, "Manuscripts," 11.

¹⁹ J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 3: The Book of Virāta; The Book of the Effort* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 152-53.

²⁰ Madeleine Biardeau, "Some Remarks on the Links Between the Epics, the Purāṇas and Their Vedic Sources," in *Studies in Hinduism*, ed. Gerhard Oberhammer (Wein: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 87. Biardeau accuses the editors of the Critical Edition of having employed a western scientific method "not meant for that kind of literature," and having introduced an historical dimension into the realm of myth where it cannot exist. "The approach of historical philology will never be suitable for an oral tradition, which has no essential reference to its historical origin," she says. Madeleine Biardeau, "Some More Considerations About Textual Criticism," *Purāṇa* X, no. 2 (July 1968): 122-23.

convincing case cannot be made for accepting certain features as being part of the earliest phases of the *itihāsa*'s development, we should bear in mind that they may be part of a pattern peculiar to that branch, yet of ancient origin.²¹ J.C. Jhala, who wrote the preface to *On the meaning of the Mahābhārata*, a collection of lectures given by V.S. Sukthankar, relates a telling anecdote. When Sukthankar delivered those lectures he used for his references and quotations the Calcutta edition, *not* the Critical Edition he had edited! Jhala gives evidence to support this observation, and notes with not a little astonishment that "a scholar of Dr. Sukthankar's eminence, who spent a life-time in practicing the Analytical approach to the study of the *Mahābhārata*, appears to end up with what is tantamount to its negation!"²²

What cannot be denied is that the Critical Edition offers a common starting point for *Mahābhārata* scholarship, and provides a map and coordinates for navigating through the vast amount of text. Van Buitenen's useful translations are based on the Critical Edition, as is the *itihāsa*'s easily searchable electronic text, now in Devanāgarī as well as Roman script.²³ A CD ROM of the Critical Edition is currently being marketed by an Indian company in collaboration with B.O.R.I.²⁴ The editors of the Critical Edition must be credited for their careful work of including many of the variants in copious footnotes,

²¹ Dunham, "Manuscripts," 18. John Dunham has made a very useful study of the manuscripts used in the Critical Edition.

²² G. C. Jhala, "Introductory Note," in *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957), ix.

²³ See <http://bombay.oriental.cam.ac.uk/john/mahabharata/statement.html>

²⁴ The CD ROM is available through Spectrum Business Support Ltd., 309 Shah & Nahar Ext., off Dr. E. Moses Road, Worli, Mumbai - 400 018, India.

appendices, and appendices to appendices. Furthermore, as Biardeau has pointed out, if we go from one version to another "we are struck much more by the identity of the narrative than by its variant readings."²⁵ In dealing with the character of Karna, for instance, there are but a few significant variants in his story from edition to edition. This dissertation will adopt the approach taken by most contemporary scholars: to begin with the Critical Edition but to consider relevant variants; to, as Wendy Doniger advises, always "look below the line" where the Critical Edition prints the variants.²⁶

Mahābhārata Scholarship

In the last decades of the twentieth century, three names have dominated *Mahābhārata* scholarship, two French, one American: Georges Dumézil, Madeleine Biardeau, and Alf Hiltebeitel. Each has approached the *Mahābhārata* as myth. Each has argued that its meaning is concealed behind some sort of symbolic code. All three treat the *itihāsa* implicitly as a unified whole, although in each case the focus has been the code.

Dumézil's work is the earliest, and it would be difficult to overstate the influence it has had on the study of myth and epic.²⁷ It claims to be corroborated by the discovery of

²⁵ Biardeau, "Some Remarks," 87. Most of the material that has "inflated" the Southern Recension, for instance, is didactic, and has little bearing upon the present investigation.

²⁶ Remarks made at the November 1999 Conference of the American Academy of Religion in Boston.

²⁷ Dumézil's publications on the *Mahābhārata* were preceded by a short study of Stig Wikander, who claimed that there was a mythic structure to the *Mahābhārata*, and put forth the theory of the "three functions" that Dumézil would develop extensively.

a fourteenth-century BCE manuscript in which the king of Mitani, a kingdom near the Euphrates, swears his adhesion to a treaty on the names of gods whose names are strikingly Vedic: Mitra-Varuna, Indra, and the twin Aśvins. This Treaty of Mitani would be used as persuasive confirmation of Dumézil's theory of the "three functions" of society found throughout Indo-European mythology, from the Indus River to Greece and Ireland: the sacerdotal-legislative, the martial, and the populist-fertile. Dumézil draws on the *Mahābhārata* as the great mother lode of evidence for the theory, claiming that it is, *pour l'essentiel*, a transposition of a vast system of mythic representations onto the world of humans.²⁸ Yudhisṭhīra (Mitra-Varuna) represents the first function, Bhīma (Vāyu) and Arjuna (Indra) the second, Nakula and Sahadeva (the Aśvins) the third.

There are a number of problems with Dumézil's theory. It is difficult to justify that so vast a narrative is essentially an extended allegory, the transposition of an Indo-European myth of universal destruction and renewal, a schema into which any number of other works of literature could be made to fit.²⁹ Moreover, Dumézil fails to explain what might have motivated the transposition of *tout l'ensemble* of traditional mythology onto the *Mahābhārata*; he concludes, incredibly, that an entire school of savants was all but compelled to carry it out, "sans y choisir."³⁰ Dumézil's theories are intriguing.

Dumézil translated Wikander's article in: Georges Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus IV: Explication de Textes Indiennes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), 37-53.

²⁸ Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

²⁹ Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 69.

³⁰ Dumézil, *L'idéologie Des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées Des Peuples Indo-Européens*, 239. Dumézil's theories have spawned a virtual cottage industry devoted to identifying the "transpositions" of Vedic gods onto *Mahābhārata* characters. Bruce

Nonetheless, van Buitenen was right to caution that when attempting to understand any particular element of the *Mahābhārata*, we should exhaust all other possibilities before resorting to Dumézil.³¹

Madeleine Biardeau, stimulated by Dumézil while departing from him significantly, also sees the *Mahābhārata* as a great eschatological myth. Her focus is not backward in time towards Vedic and pre-Vedic mythology but forward towards the Purāṇas and a Hinduism defined by *bhakti*. Biardeau identifies herself with the structuralist school of Claude Levi-Strauss and her approach is essentially a-historical. In her view, history is an inadequate guide for understanding Hinduism; Indian culture expresses itself in myth and it is by studying myths that we penetrate to the heart of the Hindu religion.³² Biardeau is particularly interested in the coming of the *avatāra* and *bhakti*. She attempts to transpose onto the events of the *Mahābhārata* a Purāṇic cosmology concerned with *pralaya*, the cosmic destruction that occurs at the end of a *kalpa*, a vast cycle of ages. The problem here is that Biardeau insists on an a-historical

Sullivan, for instance, recently devoted a book to identifying Bhīṣma with Brahmā. Bruce M. Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1999). Hiltebeitel, Puhvel, and others, following Dumézil, have drawn extensive parallels between the Sanskrit *itihāsas* and the epics of the Norse and Irish. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

³¹ van Buitenen, Vol. 3, 163.

³² Madeleine Biardeau, *Études de Mythologie Hindoue: Tome I: Cosmogonies Purāṇiques* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981), 6. For a thorough analysis of Biardeau's methodology, see; Julian F. Woods, "Hinduism and the Structural Approach of Madeleine Biardeau," in *Hermeneutical Paths to the Sacred Worlds of India*, ed. Katherine K. Young (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 160-85.

approach only to construct a sweeping "history" of Hinduism. By reducing the vast narrative to eschatological allegory -- thereby neglecting entire huge portions of the narrative -- Biardeau weakens her argument that the *Mahābhārata* is a unified whole.

In recent decades Alf Hiltebeitel has set about the task of bridging Dumézil and Biardeau, arguing that both the Indo-European perspective of the former and the Purānic perspective of the latter are, in the main, "right," and can be reconciled.³³ Building upon their work, he analyzes structural parallels between Hindu and Indo-European myth and the *Mahābhārata*, attempting to resolve the inherent problem in Dumézil's and Biardeau's reductions of the *Mahābhārata* to myth, and to something less than what it is.³⁴ Hiltebeitel proposes that the Hindu goddess, figured in the character of Draupadī, illustrates how Dumézil's Vedic and pre-Vedic view and Biardeau's Purānic view can be bridged. In Dumézilian terms, Draupadī is the Vedic goddess Śrī, symbol of royal prosperity, and thus intimately associated with the first and second "functions"; but she also anticipates Purānic Durgā, Kālī, and all of the Hindu Goddess's subsequent manifestations.³⁵ In his latest book Hiltebeitel announces a "turn" in his thinking, leading

³³ Hiltebeitel, *Ritual of Battle*, 15.

³⁴ For a cogent analysis of Hiltebeitel's work in relation to the work of Dumézil and Biardeau, see Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 71-75.

³⁵ In *The Ritual of Battle: Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata* (1976), Hiltebeitel explores mainly the world of Indo-European mythology in relation to the *Mahābhārata*. In his later work, Hiltebeitel turns his sights to South India and to the traditions of the goddess as Draupadī. Hiltebeitel's working hypothesis is that the Draupadī cult was consolidated in the fourteenth century, in the Gingee area of Tamil Nadu by a process, "worked out in narrative, dramatic, and ritual modes, whereby the *Mahābhārata* is transposed into local, and for the most part village, South Indian traditions." His task is to explore this "transposed" *Mahābhārata*, the *Mahābhārata* of the Draupadī cult. (Alf Hiltebeitel, *The*

him to consider the *Mahābhārata* above all a work of literature composed as a written text.³⁶ *Mahābhārata* scholarship will be greatly enriched when Hiltebeitel develops that hypothesis.

Dumézil and Biardeau meet their severest critic in another figure of the last half of the twentieth century who also looms large in the world of *Mahābhārata* scholarship: J.A.B. van Buitenen. Before his untimely death, van Buitenen had translated the first five *parvans* as part of the University of Chicago's grand project to translate the *Mahābhārata*'s entire Critical Edition.³⁷ Van Buitenen rejects a methodology that treats the *Mahābhārata* as a unity, and argues forcefully for an analytical and historical approach. He criticizes Dumézil for mining the *Mahābhārata* "for a treasure of reminiscences" of a pre-Vedic, Indo-European inheritance, while Biardeau "takes the *Mahābhārata* to be part and parcel of a Hinduism stretching indefinitely futureward." Neither, he says, "shows great respect

Cult of Draupadi, Vol. 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 131.) The result is a massive, two-volume work, including the analysis and comparison of a huge number of collected myths, textual study, history, and minutely detailed ethnography. In his latest book, originally conceived as a third volume of *The Cult of Draupadi*, Hiltebeitel sets out to "understand how the Draupadi cult *Mahābhārata* and regional martial oral epics rethink India's classical epics." (Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi Among Rajputs, Muslims, and Dalits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.) It is, in large part, a study of Rajput and Rajput-Muslim cultures, and sheds light not so much upon the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as upon what regional oral traditions make of it.

³⁶ Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*, 7.

³⁷ The project stopped with van Buitenen's death. At the 1999 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Boston, a group of scholars, including Alf Hiltebeitel, James Fitzgerald, David Gitomer, John Smith, and Wendy Doniger, announced a resumption of that much-anticipated work. No timetable was given.

for, or even much interest in, the possible integrity of the *Mahābhārata* as a unique product in the growth of Indian civilization...."³⁸

Van Buitenen divides the *Mahābhārata* into three "perimeters," three distinct historical layers. The first perimeter represents the central "epic" story; with the second perimeter (the layer where Dumézil and Biardeau work), divine and demonic identities were attributed to the central characters through what van Buitenen deems a lot of "inept" mythification; with the third, most recent, perimeter, he maintains that the text was brahminized by the addition of huge amounts of didactic and philosophical material.³⁹ Van Buitenen is interested primarily in the first perimeter and all but ignores his perimeters two and three. In fact, van Buitenen has been influenced powerfully by the analytical approach to the *Mahābhārata* developed by European scholars of the nineteenth century.

The *Mahābhārata* was "discovered" by the West in the late eighteenth century,⁴⁰ and with one or two notable exceptions⁴¹ was assumed to reflect an ancient epic tale that

³⁸ van Buitenen, Vol. 3, 163.

³⁹ J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 1: The Book of Beginnings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xiii-xxiii.

⁴⁰ The first scholarly translation of part of the *Mahābhārata* -- and of any Sanskrit text -- was the translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* by Charles Wilkins in 1785. *The Bhāgavat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kr̥eeshna and Arjooon*, translated by Charles Wilkins (London: C. Nourse, 1785).

⁴¹ The Jesuit Joseph Dahlmann (1861-1930) found a "unitary diaskensy" in the *Mahābhārata*, and spoke of it as the work of a single poetically active power. (Joseph Dahlmann, *Die Genesis Des Mahābhārata* (Berlin: Dames, 1899).)

Dahlmann's "synthetic" theory caused a great stir in Indological circles and the author was pilloried. He was dismissed as being at the level of "orthodox Hindus," naively believing that the *Mahābhārata* was the work of a single author who was at one

had been inflated mechanically by "manifold modifications, expansions and mutilations"⁴² into a "huge and motley pile"⁴³ consisting of

colorful descriptions of bloody battle-scenes, pious priestly poetry with frequent interesting discussions on philosophy, religion and law and gentle ascetic poetry full of serene wisdom and overflowing love towards man and beast, all these by the side of one another and intermixed with one another to a confusing degree.⁴⁴

Early efforts to extract the "epic core" from its mountains of accretions proved unsatisfactory.⁴⁵ E. Washburn Hopkins, in his *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and*

and the same time "a great sage and an idiot, a talented artist and a ridiculous pedant." (Moriz Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, translated by S. Ketkar (1881. Reprint. New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1972), 442)

Van Buitenen opines that Dahlmann's position "is bit like arguing that The Iliad, the Gospels, and the Church fathers form one contemporaneous text." (van Buitenen 1973: xxxii)

However, V.S. Sukthankar, first editor of the Critical Edition, held that Dahlmann "of all foreign critics of the *Mahābhārata* may be said to approach nearest to any true understanding of the Great Epic of India." (Vishnu S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957), 19.)

For recent evaluations of Dahlmann's contribution, see J. W. de Jong, "The Study of the *Mahābhārata*: A Brief Survey, Part I," *Hokke Bunka Kenkyū* 10 (1984): 1-19; James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*'s Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 150-70.

⁴² These are the words of Adolf Holtzmann Sr. (18180-18970) cited in: Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 306.

⁴³ Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*, 58.

⁴⁴ Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 300.

⁴⁵ Søren Sørensen (1848-1902), for instance, eliminated what he considered "recent" additions, arriving at about 27,000 verses from 100,000. From these he eliminated a further 20,000 based on names he believed were not present in the original, among them Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa. Søren Sørensen, *Om Mahābhārata'a Stilling i Den Indiske Literatur, I. Forsøg På at Udskille de Aeldste Bestanddele* (Copenhagen: Rudolf Klein, 1883).

Sørensen did make a lasting contribution to scholarship with his *Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata*, which remains an indispensable guide through the massive

Origin, which marked the culmination of nineteenth century scholarship, broadly divided the *Mahābhārata* into epic and later didactic elements. Hopkins' analysis, supported by his impressive erudition, received wide acceptance. Three quarters of a century later, van Buitenen would adopt the premise that there was once a true epic around which a pseudo-epic gradually agglutinated. Van Buitenen claims that Hopkins' views "have since been largely, if tacitly, accepted by scholarship,"⁴⁶ and his own "perimeters" illustrate vividly how thoroughly van Buitenen himself accepted them.

The problem with the analytic theory is not its basic premise that an analysis of language indicates that different portions of the *Mahābhārata* were composed in a wide range of styles from widely separated eras. Problems arise when the dating and delimiting of sections or "perimeters" becomes the central focus, leading to an assumption that centuries of all but unconscious accretions produced the various recensions we have today. If this is true then the *Mahābhārata*, while being an unparalleled archaeological dig, cannot be treated as a unified narrative. This nineteenth-century conviction has been difficult to dislodge. The great contribution of Dumézil, Biardeau, and Hiltebeitel is to have challenged that conviction, if not directly then at least tacitly. The weakness is that their arguments hinge upon understanding the *Mahābhārata* as based upon some sort of symbolic code, one that only twentieth-century Western scholarship has been able to uncover. Dumézil de-codes mythic transpositions. Biardeau

text. Søren Sørensen, *An Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata with Short Explanations and a Concordance to the Bombay and Calcutta Editions and P. C. Roy's Translation* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904 - 1925).

deciphers a kind of mythic necessity (involving Time and the *avatāra*) lying behind the *Mahābhārata*'s meaning. Hiltebeitel attempts to bridge the two by adding a third key: the Goddess. One anticipates Hiltebeitel's announced move beyond the powerful influence of his notable predecessors to an examination of the *Mahābhārata* as literature. Recent articles already reflect the "turn" in his thinking (see Chapter Two).

In recent years a few scholars have begun to focus on close readings of the extant text of the *Mahābhārata*, respecting its literary unity. David Shulman defines his task as not to "disembowel" but to "listen to" the text.⁴⁷ At its best, his "listening" has produced sensitive insights and enlightening interpretations. Shulman attempts to articulate the larger themes woven throughout the *Mahābhārata*, themes like fate, time, and the fragmented self.⁴⁸ Yet because his studies, contained in articles and chapters of books, focus on discrete segments of the *itihāsa*, Shulman fails to address the central question of how that thematic wholeness is constructed overall. Moreover, his assumptions are at times so psychological that we are left wondering if the messages he finds are primarily

⁴⁶ van Buitenen, Vol. I, xxxiii.

⁴⁷ David Dean Shulman, "On Being Human in the Sanskrit Epic: The Riddle of Nala," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (March 1994): 6.

⁴⁸ In separate articles, Shulman has dealt specifically with themes of *daiva* (fate) (David Dean Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*, ed. D. H. A. Kolff A. W. van den Hoek, M.S. Oort (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 350-65.), time (David Dean Shulman, "Towards a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics," *International Folklore Review* 8 (1991): 9-17.), and the fragmented self (Shulman, "On Being Human.").

in the text or in Shulman.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, his is some of the most eloquent and provocative *Mahābhārata* scholarship of the last two decades.

David Gitomer argues against an understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as "encyclopedic" and "historic" -- a misunderstanding that has supported the excavation and mining of the text. The role of a literary narrative is only incidentally historical, he observes, insofar as it "constitutes the past unfolding of a public discourse, a discourse that is formative of, as well as formed by, social behaviors and self understandings, that is formative of, as well as formed by, textual tradition, and that is obstreperously multivocal."⁵⁰

I believe that Hildebeitel, as well as Shulman and Gitomer, are pointing *Mahābhārata* scholarship in the right direction. This dissertation will listen closely to the narrative, to its themes and its multivocal discourse, and in so doing will attempt to discover how the *Mahābhārata*'s unity is constructed and how it wants to be received. This necessarily will entail examining how the main narrative thread, as recounted earlier, is reflected in and reflective of the material everywhere surrounding it, for the *itihāsa*'s "discourse," like the net of Indra, is non-linear and uncircumscribed.

⁴⁹ Shulman's avowed assumption is that there is a permeable border between "out" and "in," or, "in the more prosaic terms of our modern theories: we construct our reality even as it constructs us." David Dean Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 7.

⁵⁰ David Gitomer, "Rākṣaṣa Bhīma: Wolfbelly Among Ogres and Brahmins in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the *Venisamhāra*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvin Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 222-23.

James Laine makes an eloquent case for a methodology that goes beyond both the analytic and the synthetic. He faults the analysts for ignoring the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative unity; he faults Hiltebeitel, Biardeau, and Dumézil for treating it as myth rather than as literature, and for emphasizing methodology over the text's actual content. Laine aims to answer both literary and historical questions: What are the text's nature, form, and structure? How did the text come to exist in that form? He does this through an exploration of the narratives of theophany found throughout the *Mahābhārata*. However, Laine seems to feel that as an historian of religion he ought to approach those narratives chronologically, thereby inadvertently illustrating a problem he wants to avoid. By treating literary parts of a literary whole as datable historical evidence, Laine overlooks the possibility that they may be in deliberate, simultaneous discourse. In other words, he misses the dynamics of the text's *present*.⁵¹

This dissertation will argue that because the *Mahābhārata* is primarily a work of literature, the best tools for understanding it are to be found in the methods of literary criticism. Asking the right questions about the narrative's nature, form, and structure will suggest answers as to *why*, perhaps *how*, it came to exist in that form. If a particular passage, the popular story of Sāvitri for instance, is not simply a haphazardly inserted myth, if, to the contrary, its position in *Āranyakaparvan* is significant and deliberate, then

⁵¹ Laine concludes that the *Mahābhārata* is a repository of narratives that reveal changing theological concerns over time, and indicate the "newly apologetic, inclusivistic, and theologically universalistic" type of literature that characterizes post-Āśokan Hinduism. James W. Laine, *Visions of God: Narratives of Theophany in the Mahābhārata* (Vienna: Institute für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1989), 273.

reading it in context, as reflecting and reflective of what surrounds it, necessarily will impact our interpretation of the tale. The same can be said of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Anugītā*, and of numerous other passages that, because they can stand alone, so often are examined as discrete and independent. In other words, a literary approach to the *Mahābhārata* will avoid the danger inherent in constructing a chronology of its parts -- the danger that we will fail to hear the *itihāsa*'s multi-vocal discourse. Listening to the *Mahābhārata* as a unified narrative will make a significant contribution to the history of religion by clarifying that discourse, thereby revealing some of the intentions of its narrator and its audience. Henry James once remarked that the elements in Flaubert's work were "always so related and associated, so properly a part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, or page, that the simple may enjoy it for the least bearing and the initiated for the greatest."⁵² The same may be said of the *Mahābhārata*.

Nonetheless, viewing the *Mahābhārata* through the lens of contemporary literary theory might be faulted as anachronistic to the *itihāsa*'s times and context. In the following section I hope to show that such a methodology resonates with Indic approaches to the *Mahābhārata*, and to poetry and art in general, dating back many centuries, and that it can provide those ancient theories with a vocabulary both appropriate and accessible.

⁵² Cited without reference in A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 426.

Indic Approaches to the Mahābhārata

While western scholars have been busy for close to two centuries attempting to interpret the "Great Epic," the tradition that produced it unapologetically continues to keep the *Mahābhārata* alive and dynamic. The profusion of recensions that vex the academic is vibrant testimony to the text's powerful vitality. V. S. Sukthankar had good reason to ask,

Is it not passing strange that, notwithstanding the repeated and dogged attempts of Western savants to demonstrate that our *Mahābhārata* is but an unintelligible conglomerate of disjointed pieces, without any meaning as a whole, the epic should always have occupied in Indian antiquity an eminent position and uniformly enjoyed the highest reputation?⁵³

As A.K. Ramanujan remarks, there always has been a certain "native intuition" that there is an "intricate sense of structure and unity in this terrible monster of a work."⁵⁴ Although much has been lost irretrievably, a long tradition of Indian poetics attests to an ancient and abiding concern with the forms and purposes of literature. The theories articulated by that tradition have been applied to the *Mahābhārata* in such a way as to mount an impressive foundation for a serious claim that the seemingly disparate elements of the *Mahābhārata* actually work together towards a single goal.⁵⁵ Moreover, those theories, as I hope to show, are not unlike the theories of recent reader-response criticism.

⁵³ Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, 29.

⁵⁴ Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 421.

⁵⁵ Gary A. Tubb, "Śāntarasa in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 201.

There are signs of an Indian poetics in Yāska's *Nirukta* (6th century BCE?), an etymology of Vedic words, and in Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (2nd century BCE). However, we first observe a fully developed esthetics with Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra*, "Treatise on the Dramatic Arts," and its theory of eight *rasas*, "flavors." The *Nātyaśāstra* is dated no later than the 6th century CE, with parts going back as early as the 2nd century BCE. References to *rasa* in earlier literature make it very unlikely that poetics emerged full-blown with Bharata, but the *Nātyaśāstra* is the earliest extant text to put forth the theory in detail.⁵⁶

How, asks Bharata, does a work of art (in this case *nātya*, drama) create a unified effect? It does so, he contends, through producing in the audience one of the eight *rasas*: *śṛigāra*, the amorous flavor; *hāsyā*, the comic flavor; *karuṇā*, the compassionate flavor; *raudra*, the violent flavor; *vīra*, the heroic flavor; *bhayānaka*, the terrifying flavor; *bibhatsā*, the disgusting flavor; *adbhuta*, the wondrous flavor. A *rasa* is a mood, an emotional consciousness, very different from ordinary emotions. Each *rasa* is based on one of the eight "stable emotions," *sthāyibhāva*, of everyday life -- "stable" because when experienced a person loses awareness of everything else. Successful actors depict one of those stable emotions on stage, provoking in the audience the corresponding *rasa*. A *rasa* is, so to say, something grasped by the refined mind as a result of the drama, "a medium of experience, emotional awareness, 'taste' that is first and foremost in or of the

⁵⁶ The word *rasa* goes back to the *Rgveda* where it often designates the power of the magically intoxicating, sacrificial drink, the *soma*. The Buddhist Aśvaghoṣa (1st or 2nd century CE) mentions *rasa*, in the compound *rasāntaram* (*Buddhacarita* 3,51). See Edwin Gerow, *Indian Poetics* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 222, note 21.

audience.⁵⁷ The "in or of the audience" is what interests us here. Bharata's *rasa* theory is concerned with audience-response.⁵⁸

The *Nātyaśāstra*, which is roughly contemporaneous with the great flowering of the arts under the Gupta kings, from the fourth through the sixth century, did not seek to propound a universal theory of art. Following Bharata, a series of theorists (much of whose work survives only in later accounts) demonstrated a change of emphasis and a progression of concern towards a single theory of expression.⁵⁹ *Rasa* theory came to be applied to poetry and eventually to art in general. The first extant attempt to apply *rasa* theory to poetry is the ninth-century *Dhvanyāloka*, in which Ānandavardhana reevaluates poetics and redefines its subject matter. Bharata had left the connection between the stable emotions and *rasa* rather mysterious. Ānandavardhana answers the problem of how the experience of savoring a *rasa* differs from the emotions of everyday life with his theory of *dhvani*, suggestion. The most characteristic function of language, says Ānandavardhana, is *dhvani*, and the subject matter which *dhvani* is most suited to express is *rasa*. He adds a ninth *rasa* to Bharata's list of eight: *sāntarasa*, the peaceful flavor, which, he claims, is the dominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, Ānandavardhana holds up the *Mahābhārata* as a prime example of poetic unity. Despite

⁵⁷ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 247.

⁵⁸ Bharata says that the success of a drama is of two kinds: divine (*daiviki*) and human (*māniṣī*) (XXVII.2). The former is related to the deeper aspects of the drama, and is appreciated only by the "superior" members of the audience. Bharata, *The Nātyaśāstra, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, Vols. 1& 2, translated by Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Granthalaya Private Limited, 1967), 515 and 111.

⁵⁹ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 251.

its huge size, the *Mahābhārata* exhibits the "secret of all good poets' poetry,"⁶⁰ Ānandavardhana says, and he accepts the *itihāsa*'s claim to have a single author with a clear artistic intention.

The great sage who was its author, by his furnishing a conclusion that dismays our hearts by the miserable end of the Vṛṣṇis and Pāṇḍavas, shows that the primary aim of his work has been to produce a disenchantment with the world and that he has intended his primary subject to be liberation (*mokṣa*) from worldly life and the *rasa* of peace.⁶¹

The great Kashmiri Śaivite and theologian Abhinavagupta agreed with Ānandavardhana. Abhinavagupta wrote a commentary, *locana*, on the *Dhvanyāloka* in which he investigated the relation between concrete structure and *rasa* awareness. His perceptions had the effect of bringing all art forms, not only drama and poetry, under a universal principle. Abhinavagupta saw *rasa* as a "non-denotative state of awareness,"⁶² a form of general emotional consciousness that, not unlike the *ātman* itself, is rarely experienced in its pure state. The work of art does not *cause* the *rasa*, rather, it permits the individual to clarify his implicit emotional propensities, propensities that the person brought to the work and will take away again. Because Abhinavagupta brings all art forms under the notion of *rasa*, differences between one form and another are not

⁶⁰ *Dhvanyāloka* 1.1e, in: Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana, with the Locana of Abhinavagupta. Edited with an Introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls*, translated by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson Daniel H. H. Ingalls, and M.V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 68.

⁶¹ *Dhvanyāloka* 4.5, in: Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyāloka*, 690-91.

⁶² Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 267. I base this brief analysis of Abhinavagupta on Gerow's exposition.

particularly important. Art is no more than an "excitant" -- *rasa* "awaits" the work of art, as it were.⁶³ We have here a theory far removed from Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* in which an audience observes an actor "imitating" an action. For Abhinavagupta, the audience of a successful work of art is absorbed so thoroughly in a *rasa* as to lose all awareness of a separate psychological identity; the *rasa* is not understood as being "out there," but rather recognized as something within oneself, in the *ātman*, where it truly is.⁶⁴

I will argue that these theological concepts of the aesthetic can be articulated without resorting to some eternal "non-denotative state of awareness" by employing the vocabulary of reader-response criticism. This method, I contend, is in harmony with Indian poetics and imminently appropriate for an exploration of the *Mahābhārata*. However, as will be taken up again in Chapter Six, I submit that the search for a dominant *rasa* in the *Mahābhārata* is problematized by the fact that the universe of the *Mahābhārata* is ultimately conceived of as the very body of god, of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, in whom all the *rasas* are subsumed.

Reader-Response Criticism and the Mahābhārata

In the discussion that follows I will understand "reader" in the sense of "audience," those who receive the *Mahābhārata*, whether in oral or written form. However, this dissertation will not deal with the myriad dramatic and ritual forms the

⁶³ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 268.

⁶⁴ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 267.

itihāsa has taken over the centuries, but with the *Mahābhārata* as it has been handed down in textual recensions. As noted above, the *itihāsa* may well have been committed to writing in the centuries before the Common Era.

"The illusion is endlessly reborn," observes Paul Ricoeur, "that the text is a structure in itself and for itself and that reading happens to the text as some extrinsic and contingent event."⁶⁵ For instance, according to Aristotle, *katharsis* is produced by the drama; the drama is the efficient cause of the *katharsis* experienced by the audience. As we saw above, *rasa* theory as articulated by Abhinavagupta denies that relationship. For him, the work of art is no more than a material cause; the *rasa* is more real than the art that causes it.⁶⁶ Reader-response theory would say that meaning is an "event," something that happens, not on the page or stage, but "in the interaction between the flow of print (or sound) and the actively mediating consciousness of a reader-hearer."⁶⁷ The method's concern is not genetic; it does not ask how a text came about. Rather, it takes as its point of departure the narrative as it has come down to us.

Much of the work of reader-response criticism of the last three decades has been to examine closely Ricoeur's "endless illusion" by posing the double question, "who reads?" and "what is reading?"⁶⁸ Reader-response theory is interested not so much in the empirical author/narrator as in the "implied" or "model" author, not so much in the

⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, translated by Kathleen Blamey and Devid Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 164.

⁶⁶ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 267.

⁶⁷ Vincent B. Leitch, "Reader-Response Criticism," in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (New York: Longman, 1995), 36.

empirical reader/audience so much as in the "implied" or "model" reader. Umberto Eco describes the model author as a "narrative strategy, ...a set of instructions which is given to us step by step and which we have to follow when we decide to act as the model reader."⁶⁹ The "model" or "implied" reader or audience is "a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create."⁷⁰ The role of the reader is *embedded* in a text; questions as to what a work *means* cannot be separated from questions as to what it *does* and *how* it does it.⁷¹ Bharata, Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta share these concerns.

Early reader-response theory was strongly phenomenological and psychological, tending to ignore explicit questions concerning aesthetic values or the role of history. That changed, however, as literary critics as well as scholars in other fields began to recognize that the implied audience, or "interpretive community," as it also was described, necessarily has social and historical implications.⁷² Readers, it was proposed, have certain "horizons of expectations" within which they expect a text to function, and

⁶⁸ Andrew Bennett, ed., *Readers and Reading* (New York: Longman, 1995), 1.

⁶⁹ Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15.

⁷⁰ Eco, *Six Walks*, 9.

⁷¹ In the terms of speech-act theory, in reading we must be aware of the simultaneous working of *locution*, what is said, *illocution*, what is meant, and *perlocution*, the effect of an utterance on its audience. Michael Kearns, *Rhetorical/Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 12.

⁷² Edward Said first challenged Stanley Fish, one of the earliest exponents of reader-response theory, to expand Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" in order to show "what situation, what historical and social configurations, what political interests are concretely entailed by the existence of interpretive communities." Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 26.

criticism needs to be sensitive to establishing the historically specific horizons of the audience's expectations, knowledge, and presuppositions.⁷³ Umberto Eco would explore the "common woods" through which readers travel. The world of a narrative, he says, brackets the larger "real world." In the narrative world, the "implied author" tells the "model reader" what she needs to know to walk through that world. The model reader's profile is designed by and within the text.⁷⁴ Therefore, observing what that reader is expected to know, and what she is assumed not to know, can reveal a good deal about the audience foreseen by the author and the "real world" their fictional woods brackets. The interdisciplinary explorations stimulated by reader-response criticism describe an arena in which *Mahābhārata* criticism has much to learn. They point the way for that criticism to make a contribution to the history of religion. A focus on the *audience* of a narrative impacts on our understanding of history. In the Indian case, that audience is accessible to us almost exclusively as an "implied" or "model" audience constructed by the literary work.⁷⁵ We are not the first to remark that the early history of India *is* its literary history.⁷⁶

⁷³ The German Robert Jauss specifically developed these views. See Bennett, *Readers and Reading*, 239.

⁷⁴ Eco, *Six Walks*, 93.

⁷⁵ Jacques Le Goff, a historian of medieval Europe, calls for a "history of the imagination" that would eschew conventional methods of scouring literature for information relevant to the subject matter of traditional history. We must, he says, take into account "the unique nature of works of the imagination, which were not produced to serve as historical documents but are a historical reality unto themselves." Ideas of beauty and aesthetic values are historical constructs, for "the imagination nourishes man and causes him to act. It is a collective, social, and historical phenomenon." By looking at the artistic legacy of a society, we learn about the profound mental images of its

Eco describes how the model author within a text tries to create the model reader. That "trying to create" is the substance of a narrative's multivocal discourse because the very structure of a narrative expresses certain preferences and priorities. My assumption is that the so-called "huge and motley" form of the *Mahābhārata* is the result of deliberate choices on the part of its model author; it is a narrative strategy. As such, the *itihāsa* is ripe ground for exploring the theories and interdisciplinary implications of reader-response criticism. As discussed above, early Indian poetics, so acutely interested in understanding how a unified work of art produces *rasa* in the audience, held up the *Mahābhārata* as a model of sublime poetic unity. This view has proved difficult for many western critics to countenance. Aristotelian poetics, in which reception is subordinate to composition, has dominated western literary criticism and powerfully influenced our notions about what attributes characterize a unified literary work. Aristotle wrote that a narrative should imitate a living organism in that "its parts ... should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work's wholeness."⁷⁷ Based on Aristotle's definition, it is difficult to find unity in the *itihāsa*. The *Mahābhārata*, however, claims unity on another basis: it simply contains *everything*. "Whatever is here may be found elsewhere, but what is not here does not exist

people. Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3-5.

⁷⁶ Gerow, *Indian Poetics*, 217.

⁷⁷ *Poetics*, Ch. 8, in Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, translated by Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 40.

anywhere," declares the *itihāsa* in both its first and final *parvans*.⁷⁸ This is a kind of unity that subsumes and accounts for all variants.⁷⁹ Reader-response criticism provides us with a vocabulary whereby we can express and better understand the theories of the Indian aesthetic theoreticians, and explore how they may be applied to the *Mahābhārata*. In this way, we will both respect the tradition from which the *Mahābhārata* has arisen, while applying a methodology relevant to and in harmony with contemporary scholarship.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kva cit* (1.56.33 and 18.5.38) Here and in the first five books of the *Mahābhārata* I have consulted van Buitenen for translations, making changes where I felt precision warranted them. The *Mahābhārata* is composed primarily in *śloka* meter, also known as *anuṣṭubh*, an unrhymed verse form in which each two-line verse contains thirty-two syllables, sixteen syllables per line, each line further divided into two *pādas*, "feet," of eight syllables. Like van Buitenen, I have chosen to translate passages in prose form, since prose seems to best capture the natural flow of the Sanskrit poetry. A two-line *śloka* verse in most cases translates into one sentence, and I have tried to respect that regularity in sentence length, as well as the regularity of certain syntactical forms.

⁷⁹ Says the Indian scholar A. K. Ramanujan: "Scholars have often discussed Indian texts (like the *Mahābhārata*) as if they were loose-leaf files, rag-bag encyclopedias. Taking the Indian word for text, *grantha* (derived from the knot that holds the palm-leaves together), literally, scholars often posit only an accidental and physical unity. We need to attend to the context sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of models (tale, discourse, poem) and materials. The manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence seems to be the end." A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" in *Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42.

⁸⁰ Reader-response theory has had a profound impact on Homeric scholarship, which shares with *Mahābhārata* scholarship a long history of analytic methodology. In 1960 Albert B. Lord published his seminal *The Singer of Tales*, whose hypothesis of *orality* was based on a massive collecting project he undertook with his teacher Milman Parry among South Slavic *guslari*, epic singers. See Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

Chapter Outline

Chapter Two will focus on the shape of the *Mahābhārata*, and on placing Karṇa within that shape. The character of Karṇa is threaded throughout the *Mahābhārata's* eighteen *parvans*. He is present even when absent. Karṇa more than any other reflects and illuminates the narrative's other major characters, namely his five brothers, Draupadī, and Kṛṣṇa. Through him, the *Mahābhārata's* sophisticated literary techniques and structural integrity are made clear, as well as the subtle manipulations of *rasa*. Chapter

Lord concluded that Homer was a poet who composed orally, under the pressure of performance, for whom the ready-made idiom, the *formula*, was of the utmost importance. Parry and Lord's work led to a divide – texts versus oral works – and placed almost exclusive emphasis on composition over reception. Their theories influenced scholars of the Sanskrit *itihāsas*, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, who used these insights to facilitate their own attempts to account for repetition in the *Mahābhārata's* poetry, to separate layers of accretions, or to uncover an orally composed "core" *Mahābhārata*. (See for instance: Daniel H. H. Ingalls, and Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "The *Mahābhārata*: Stylistic Study, Computer Analysis, and Concordance," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 19-56.)

Mary Carroll Smith, acknowledging the influence of Parry and Lord, reduces the *Mahābhārata* to 2000 verses in non-regular *trīṣṭubh* meter. This, she says, represents the non-brahminical bardic core of the epic, which has close thematic ties to Homer and the Beowulf singer. Mary Carroll Smith, *The Warrior Code of India's Sacred Song* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

Recent Homeric scholarship, however, while acknowledging the immense contribution of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, has moved on. Informed by reader-response criticism and its offshoot of narratology, a number of Homerists are deliberately ignoring the oral-formulaic background of the Greek epics and taking the finished text as the point of departure. A more nuanced scholarship indicates that cultures are not simply oral or literate; rather, they employ a spectrum of communicative strategies, some associated with texts, some with voices, and some with both. See John Miles Foley, "Introduction: What's in a Sign?" in *Signs of Orality*, ed. E. Anne Mackay (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1-27; John Miles Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999). Indic scholarship may discover usefully borrowings in contemporary Greek scholarship.

Two will suggest a general method of approach to the *Mahābhārata* that can be applied to other characters and themes.

The remainder of the dissertation will have a thematic orientation, for Karna embodies and defines the *itihāsa*'s main themes and concerns. Chapter Three will take up the central problems of *dharma*, *kula*, "lineage," and *varṇa*, "class." *Dharma* is a complex concept that includes rules of traditional morality and class duty, as well as the laws that uphold cosmological order. Karna's confused identity -- he grows up believing he is a low-class *sūta* -- makes the problem of identifying and following *dharma* particularly acute for him. Chapter Three also will discuss how the *Mahābhārata* draws upon older Vedic material and assumes an audience competent to grasps the references. Through his father, Sūrya, Karna is part of a solar *kula* with a rich mythology that resonates in his life and in the lives of other characters. Karna's vexed relationship with Draupadi will be examined in that context.

Chapter Four will focus upon Karna and Arjuna, brothers with antithetical destinies. They figure importantly in the *itihāsa*'s intense exploration of whether *daiva*, literally "that which comes from the gods," or *purusakāra*, "human initiative" is most powerful in the world. Divine Kṛṣṇa protects the Pāṇḍavas; Karna, ignorant of his parentage, is solitary and self-reliant. Arjuna frequently is rewarded and praised for actions that when performed by Karna are condemned and punished. The instinctive enmity between the brothers is a narrative strategy through which the *Mahābhārata* addresses profound ethical and philosophical problems.

Chapter Five will focus upon Karna and Kṛṣṇa. The two have a particularly complex relationship. Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* identifies himself as Kāla, meaning both "Death" and "Time." In some sense, the entire *Mahābhārata* is a discourse on the terrors of *kāla*. Kṛṣṇa as Kāla is embodied Daiva, working inexorably to uphold an ambiguous *dharma* that dictates victory for the Pāṇḍavas. The Kurukṣetra battle represents a cosmological crisis as the world passes into an age of darkness, the *kali yuga*. The death of Karna, more than any other, is a pivotal event in the narrative -- as anticipated, as carried out by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, and as remembered. The chapter will close with an examination of the uses of Time in the *parvans* following the Kurukṣetra battle.

Chapter Six will draw conclusions from the previous chapters, then explore the question of whether Karna is a "tragic hero" and whether the overall message of the *Mahābhārata* is "tragic." This will entail a reexamination of *rasa* in the *itihāsa*. I will argue that tragedy is impossible in terms of the universe of the *Mahābhārata*. In the *itihāsa*, Karna stands for the human experience. As a solitary figure in a hostile universe, confronted with tremendous ethical and emotional choices, he uniquely represents the audience who receives the *Mahābhārata* and is constructed by it. If this is so, then Karna is, indeed, the *Mahābhārata*'s pivotal character, its central "narrative strategy," as it were. He provides the most striking example of how the *Mahābhārata* constructs its "net."

Chapter Two

The Shape of the *Mahābhārata*

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. In the first part, I will focus upon literary qualities exhibited in the shape of the *Mahābhārata*, to indicate how paying attention to the way the text is constructed will lead to a greater understanding of the narrative as a whole. Decades of text critical methodology (see Chapter One) have obscured the literary nature of the *itihāsa*. I will illustrate how the early sections of *Adiparvan* are constructed so as to prefigure the shape that the entire *itihāsa* will take. Part two will illustrate that three *rasas* – *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuna* – are particularly important in the *Mahābhārata*, working together in complex structural patterns large and small to produce a unified aesthetic experience. In part three I will explore how the narrative strategies by which Karna has been placed within the shape of the *Mahābhārata* emphasize his significance as a reference point for understanding the *itihāsa*'s major themes. The remaining chapters of this dissertation will take up some of those themes as they are reflected in the character of Karna.

The Shape of the Mahābhārata

The philosopher and ethicist Martha Nussbaum, whose work is deeply informed by reader-response theory, finds that there is an organic connection between a narrative's form and its meaning.

The telling itself -- the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole matter of addressing the reader's sense of life -- all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections.⁸¹

Because the author makes formal choices that express a view of what life is and what has value, a carefully conceived and fully imagined narrative necessarily seeks to transform its audience, and in that sense takes an ethical stance.⁸² Therefore, says Nussbaum, we must be sensitive not only to the characters' feelings and imaginings, but to the sorts of feelings and imaginings the very *shape* of the text calls into being, about what sort of "readerly activity" is built into the narrative's form.⁸³ Nussbaum's work suggests that a "history of the imagination" necessarily includes a "history of ethics."

"An ethical discourse addressed to the soul," says Nussbaum, "expresses certain ethical preferences and priorities in its very structure; it represents human life as being this way or that; it shows, well done, the shape of a human soul."⁸⁴ The Greek tragic poets were aware that they were engaging in forms of communicative activity they called *psuchagōgia*, "leading of the soul," in which methodological and formal choices were extremely important for the eventual result.⁸⁵ The same sort of awareness is everywhere evident in the *Mahābhārata*. "That which concerns the soul is heard here," it says; "the

⁸¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

⁸² Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 6.

⁸³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.

⁸⁴ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 17.

⁸⁵ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 17.

unmanifest cause and its products are sung here, and that One who transcends it -- that which the greatest of mystics ... see abiding in their own souls, as an image in a mirror."⁸⁶ That the *itihāsa* is a soul-shaping text is reflected in its prodigious shape and structure.

In his seminal work *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter demonstrates how a literary reading of the Bible will lead to profound insights that conventional, excavative, scholarship has overlooked. He writes:

A coherent reading of any art work, whatever the medium, requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates. ... [A]n elaborate set of tacit agreements between artist and audience about the ordering of the art work is at all times the enabling context in which the complex communication of art occurs.⁸⁷

Alf Hiltebeitel pays tribute to Alter. While not all points between biblical and epic analysis transfer, he says, *Mahābhārata* scholars would do well to mark the important turn in scholarship that Alter's work represents. "I believe that the largest inadequacy in *Mahābhārata* scholarship, including my own up to 1991, is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature."⁸⁸ How, then, we must ask, does *Mahābhārata*'s "grid of conventions" structure communication between model author and

⁸⁶ adhyātnam śrūyate ... avyaktādi param yac ca sa eva parigīyate
yat tad yati varā ... pratibimbam ivādarśe paśyanty ātmāny avasthitam
(1.1.196-97)

⁸⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), 47.

⁸⁸ Alf Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," in: *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 156.

audience? What kind of "tacit agreement" do they share, and what does that agreement reveal about audience and author?

Alter explains literary analysis as paying "minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else...."⁸⁹ The *Mahābhārata*'s first book, *Adiparvan*, calls for that kind of disciplined attention, for its shape points to the manner in which the narrative will construct its complex whole. After an invocation, *Adiparvan* begins:

The son of Lomaharṣana, Ugraśravas, bard of ancient tales, came to the twelve-year ritual session of Śaunaka, the family chieftain, in the Naimiṣa forest....⁹⁰

Thus opens the *itihāsa*, in a dense forest. The forest, *aranya*, is the setting of a good deal of the *Mahābhārata* and a recurring image of the mysterious, unpredictable, and dangerous, in contrast to the safe and predictable, imagined by the town, *grāma*. "Naimiṣa," from the verb *mīṣ*, "to blink," denotes momentariness or transience, something that happens in the twinkling of an eye. *Mīṣa* is "deceit" or "false appearance." Ugraśravas means "of dreadful renown," and his father's name, Lomaharṣana, means something like "the Horripilator," he who makes one's hair stand on end. These *sūtas*, a class that includes both charioteers and bards (Kṛṣṇa will believe

⁸⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12-13.

⁹⁰ lomaharṣaṇaputra ugraśravāḥ sūtaḥ paurāṇiko naimiṣāraṇye śaunakasya kulapater dvādaśavārṣike satre (1.1.1) These opening lines are composed in prose, not *śloka* meter.

himself to be one of them), are hardly reassuring figures!⁹¹ Ugraśravas discloses that he has recently come from a great *sarpasattra*, "snake sacrifice," performed by King Janamejaya, where he heard the sage Vaiśampāyana recount stories from Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*.⁹² When the forest hermits attendant at Śaunaka's *sattra* – who clearly have heard of Vyāsa and his Great *Bhārata* – ask Ugraśravas to recount those tales, the *sūta* goes back to the very beginning of everything, to the primordial Egg, source of all beings. From there he moves to the genealogy of the Sun, Vivasvat, progenitor of the *ksatriya* dynasties that will figure in the *Mahābhārata*, to a masterful, ominous summary of the huge story to come (1(2)), and on to the strange tale of *Pausya* (1 (3)), which circuitously leads to Janamejaya's decision to perform the Snake Sacrifice.

Then, at *Adiparvan*'s fourth *adhyāya*, "chapter," the *Mahābhārata* curiously seems to begin all over again:

⁹¹ Manu (10.9) says that the misogynous son of a *ksatriya* man and *śūdra* woman is of the "dreadful," *ugra*, class. *Sūtas* come from the union of a brahmin woman and *ksatriya* man.

⁹² The violent snake sacrifice, *sarpasattra*, that frames the *Mahābhārata* has Vedic precedents. There is a vast body of snake lore in Vedic literature, much of it intended for the practical purpose of protecting from snakebite. The *Atharva Veda* contains many charms against serpents and recognizes the creatures as gods. Ritual antecedents of Janamejaya's sacrifice are found in the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *śrautasūtras*. *Sattras* were great soma sacrifices that typically lasted more than twelve days, often sixty-one or one hundred days, and sometimes, as in the case of the *Mahābhārata*'s sacrifice, as long as twelve years. Snakes were not thrown into the fire in the Vedic *sattras*, for their purpose of the rituals was not to rid the world of snakes but rather to obtain blessings for those who performed them. For more on this, consult C. Z. Minkowski, "Snakes, Sattras, and the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 384-400; C. Z. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattrā and Ritual Structure," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 3 (July - September 1989): 401 - 420.

The son of Lomaharṣana, Ugraśravas, bard of ancient tales, came to the twelve-year sacrifice of Śaunaka, the family chieftain, in the Naimiṣa forest....⁹³

When Ugraśravas asks the hermits what they would like him to recite, they, though eager to hear the *sūta*'s full repertoire, defer to Śaunaka. Śaunaka asks not for Vyāsa's *Bhārata*, but for the descent of the Bhṛgus, the illustrious family of brahmins of whom Śaunaka presently is chief. Ugraśravas obliges, and this thread, too, leads obliquely to the *sarpasattra*, then spirals back in time to another creation tale, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, and onwards again to Janamejaya's sacrifice of the snakes. After hearing all that, Śaunaka asks Ugraśravas to recite the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa. Only now in the sixth *adhyāya* is heard the voice of Vaiśampāyana, student of Vyāsa, who has been directed to recite the *itihāsa* as he heard it from its original composer. Henceforth Ugraśravas will recite Vaiśampāyana's narration, a narration built of stories within stories upon stories, shrinking and expanding, replicating and transmuting like some bewildering Mandelbröt pattern in which we are never exactly sure where we are.

The *Mahābhārata*'s double beginning has given rise to a good deal of speculation. For V. S. Sukthankar it was "an old conflation of two different beginnings. They were not harmonious in juxtaposition, but each was too good to lose in the opinion of the ancient redactors. They therefore put both in, making but a poor compromise."⁹⁴ Nonetheless, both beginnings are found in the oldest *Mahābhārata* manuscripts,

⁹³ lomaharṣana putra ugraśravāḥ sūtah paurāṇiko naimiṣāraṇye śaunakasya kula pater dvādaśavārṣike satre.... (1.4.1)

indicating their presence in the archetype from which those manuscripts derived. True to the principles of textual criticism, Sukthankar admitted both "above the line" in the Critical Edition. He then went on to formulate a general theory about the composition of the *Mahābhārata* based upon the double beginning, a theory that has received wide scholarly acceptance. Sukthankar contends that the second "beginning," in which Śaunaka asks for stories of the Bhṛgus, alerts us to an "ulterior motive" behind the "surreptitious addition" of a large number of Bhārgava legends in *Adiparvan*. The Bhārgavas are an ancient brahmin family or *gotra* descended from the *r̥si*, "inspired poet or sage," Bhṛgu. In the *itihāsa* The Bhārgavas stand particularly close to *ksatriyas* and kings as specialists and consultants in occult practices and as teachers in the arts of war. Sukthankar contends, erroneously I believe, that their legends, which appear throughout almost all eighteen parvans, have "not even the remotest intrinsic connection with the story of the epic."⁹⁵

There should be, therefore, in my opinion no hesitation in concluding that in our version of the *Mahābhārata* there is a conscious -- nay deliberate -- weaving together or rather stitching together of the Bhārata legends with the Bhārgava stories.⁹⁶

In other words, in Sukthankar's view, early in its formative period the *Mahābhārata* was "bhṛguized," and the addition of legends of the Bhārgava brahmins accounts in part for

⁹⁴ V. S. Sukthankar, *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1944), 110.

⁹⁵ Vishnu S. Sukthankar, "The Bhṛgus and the Bhārata," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 18 (October 1936): 67.

⁹⁶ Sukthankar, "The Bhṛgus and the Bhārata," 70.

the huge size of the *Mahābhārata*, as distinct from the smaller *Bhārata* of the non-Bhārgava brahmin Vyāsa.⁹⁷

Sukthankar's insights into the important role of the Bhṛgus -- among them Paraśurāma, Drona, and Kṛpa⁹⁸ -- are hedged by his assumption that it must be explained in terms of historical accretion. As Hiltebeitel aptly remarks, Sukthankar is caught between two irreconcilable worlds, his world of Indian literature, and his world of Germanic text criticism. Hiltebeitel prefers to tackle the Bhārgava problem by looking for an *interior*, literary motive, treating the Bhṛgus "simply as characters in the *Mahābhārata*."⁹⁹ The results of Hiltebeitel's creative explorations shed new light on the significance of these inherently violent figures who appear right from the *itihāsa*'s primary frame. The Bhṛgus are brahmins appropriate to the degenerate age in which the events of the *Mahābhārata* take place. The Bhārgava cycle, Hiltebeitel contends, "is inseparable from the 'work' ... of the non-Bhārgava 'author' Vyāsa (who is a Vāśistha). It can hardly be kept apart as a separate strand of authorship or a layer of textual history."¹⁰⁰ By paying discriminating attention to *Adiparvan*'s double beginning, Hiltebeitel

⁹⁷ In 1973, Mahesh Mehta published a paper which, while not challenging Sukthankar's "bhṛguization" theory, demonstrated that the *Mahābhārata*'s double beginning must have been constructed, if not composed, by the same hand. He hypothesizes an archetypal redactor who "must have found another different version of the introduction to the epic and ... it was he who felt somehow compelled to juxtapose both...." Mahesh Mehta, "The Problem of the Double Introduction to the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, no. 4 (1973): 550.

⁹⁸ In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa declares himself Bhṛgu among the great *r̥sis*. *maharsinām bhṛgur abam* (6.32 [10].25)

⁹⁹ Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," 161.

¹⁰⁰ Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," 166.

illustrates how approaching the *Mahābhārata* as literature, unfettered by genetic, text-critical concerns, may begin to untie some of the eighteen *parvans*' most intriguing "knots."¹⁰¹ There is an artistic reason for the doubling of the *itihāsa*'s primary frame.

James Hegarty maintains that the *Mahābhārata* uses multiple narrative framing to prompt and direct reader response. He analogizes the *Mahābhārata*'s framing or embedding technique to a set of steps leading down to a temple pond. You may step down as you may step up. An embedded narrative presupposes its position within the greater structure; introducing a story within a story institutes a new layer of commentary about the story. In this manner, the series of concentric narrative framings comes to include the audience and its potential "metanarrational" commentary. Implied here, says Hegarty, is a certain "narrative competence" that "structures and directs audience response and which is precisely derived from the range of dialogic references built into the text that relate to ritual, myth, cosmology and ethics."¹⁰² Hegarty's formulation resonates with Alter's "set of tacit agreements" between a work of art and its audience.

The very structure of the *Mahābhārata*, its length, its framings and embeddings, its ambiguities and multi-vocal viewpoints, suggest a highly sophisticated audience. Individuals who share a set of assumptions born from their similar situations form

¹⁰¹ The word *parvan* itself has the primary meaning of "knot." It also means "node," as in the nodes on the stalk of a lotus flower, thus by extension any whole divided into sections.

¹⁰² James M. Hegarty, "An Apprenticeship in Attentiveness: Narrative Patterning in the Dyūtitarvan and the Nalopākhyāna of the *Mahābhārata*," in *Indian Epic Traditions - Past and Present*, chair John L. Brockington, Sixteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, September Edinburgh, 2000, 4.

"interpretive communities," to borrow a term from reader-response criticism, bringing their particular interpretive strategies to a narrative.¹⁰³ To approach the *Mahābhārata* as literature is to surmise a *literate* interpretive community. There is a tacit assumption that the audience is already familiar with the characters and storyline. There is also an assumption that the interpretive community shares an ability to appreciate the narrative's allusions to other literary traditions, the *upanisadic* and Vedic, for instance. This dissertation holds, with Hiltebeitel, that the *Mahābhārata* should not be reduced to a byproduct of a long historical period of synthesis. Rather, the *itihāsa* serves to ground intertextual projects of that synthetic period in a new historical periodization of its own.¹⁰⁴ The audience is expected to receive the *Mahābhārata* entire, to appreciate the project's weaving of narratives both old and original into something challenging and new.

C. Z. Minkowski demonstrates that with the doubled frame story at the beginning — Śaunaka's twelve-year *sattra* inside Janamejaya's snake sacrifice — the *Mahābhārata* discloses its "narrative intention to interlock different levels of the story by the process of embedding,"¹⁰⁵ a technique that will be used not just at the borders, but throughout. Minkowski agrees with Michael Witzel that the *itihāsa*'s framing techniques have precedents in the Vedic period, when "rites were assembled and put into a complicated, interdependent, and mutually interactive framework of their own by merging larger or

¹⁰³ See Stanley E. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 318.

¹⁰⁴ Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," 155.

¹⁰⁵ Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattra," 406.

smaller units of various rites in an additive fashion characterized by framework-like insertions.¹⁰⁶ While Witzel makes a traditional, diachronic argument, from ritual to epic, implying long centuries of gradual development, Minkowski argues synchronically -- that from the *itihāsa*'s frames we can move back to ritual. Witzel's and Minkowski's significantly different approaches have important implications regarding the "narrative competence" of the *Mahābhārata*'s author and audience. "Narrative competence" is not a concern for Witzel. Minkowski's work, on the other hand, supports the view that the *itihāsa*'s innovative use of framing and embedding indicates an audience capable of appreciating its references to things past, while remaining alive to a discourse that forever requires and structures multiple responses.¹⁰⁷ This is a significant aspect of its grid of conventions.

From the start, then, the *Mahābhārata* invites the audience into a narrative knot. Vyāsa composed the *Mahābhārata*, having witnessed the events it describes, then taught it to his students. Ugraśravas hears the student Vaiśampāyana recite it at Janamejaya's sacrifice and recites what he heard to the hermits of the "twinkling" Naimiṣa forest. But whose is the voice that describes Ugraśravas entering the Naimiṣa? Minkowski asserts that in an ideological system like the *Mahābhārata*'s, which includes an absolute transcendent reality, there can be no indefinite regression. Setting the primary frame in the sacred Naimiṣa forest, and attributing the composition to Vyāsa, arranger of the four

¹⁰⁶ M. Witzel, "On the Origin of the Literary Device of the 'Frame Story' in Old Indian Literature," in *Hinduismus und Buddhismus: Festschrift Fur Ulrich Schneider*, ed. Harry Falk (Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987), 413.

Vedas, "serves the purpose of fixing the text at a level beyond which, as the texts say, one cannot go further."¹⁰⁸ I suggest, however, that the unnamed voice speaking of Ugraśravas's entrance is a narrative strategy that alerts the implied audience to the voice of the implied author.

Some manuscripts tell a charming story -- excluded from the Critical Edition as a late interpolation¹⁰⁹ -- in which Vyāsa goes to Ganeśa, the elephant-headed god of learning, and asks him to act as scribe while he, Vyāsa, recites.

Hearing that, the Lord of Obstacles replied, "If my pen does not for a moment stop writing, then surely I shall be the scribe." Vyāsa said to that deity, "Do not write anything that you do not understand." Giving his assent to that, Ganeśa did indeed become the scribe. Then the sage, for the sake of diversion, mysteriously wove knots into the composition, but in so doing, the sage Dvaipāyana [Vyāsa] recited it according to the agreement.¹¹⁰

This story argues for a single, inspired authorship -- Vyāsa's -- and makes a powerful claim for the unity -- albeit a "knotty" one -- of the narrative. The story also implies a tradition of a *written* text. "This passage presents a deliberately developed conception of

¹⁰⁷ Hegarty, "An Apprenticeship in Attentiveness," 10.

¹⁰⁸ Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Satra," 420.

¹⁰⁹ The passage occurs in *Adiparvan* (1.55-87) of the Vulgate or Bombay Edition, and is cited in Appendix I of the Critical Edition's first volume.

¹¹⁰ śrutvaitatprāha vighneśo yadi me lekāni kṣaṇam
likhito nāvatiṣṭheta tadāsyām lekhako hyaham
vyāso 'pyuvāca tam devamabuddhvā mā likha kvacit
omityuktvā ganeśo 'pi bhabhūva kila lekhakah
granthagranīmya tadā cakre munirgḍam kutūhalāt
yasminpratijñayā prāha munirdvāipāyanastvidam (1.78-80) I have followed here the translation of Bruce Sullivan. Bruce M. Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsiādass, 1999), 118.

the fixed written text of the *MBh* as a distinct cultural entity," remarks James Fitzgerald.

"It makes certain claims about the *MBh* as a whole, as a unitary composition...."¹¹¹

Following Fitzgerald and Hiltebeitel, who says that he now considers the *Mahābhārata* to have been *written* by brahmins, and over a far shorter period than usually is advanced,¹¹² this dissertation will assume that the shape of the *Mahābhārata* indicates a community that could receive it by reading. From the first few *ślokas*, that audience is thrust headlong into a challenging, multi-vocal universe of which the author is firmly in control.

Having established its double ritual frame, the *itihāsa* names most of its significant male *dramatis personae* quite suddenly in the first chapter of *Adiparvan*, the *anukramāṇi*, "List of Contents." Ugraśravas is describing how Vyāsa first composed the *Bhārata* and revealed it to mankind, the seers, and the celestials. Abruptly shifting from *śloka*, the *itihāsa*'s predominant meter, to *trīṣṭubh*,¹¹³ the *sūta* delivers two dramatic verses:

Wrathful Duryodhana is the great tree, Karṇa the trunk, Śakuni its branches, Duḥsāsana the abundant fruits and flowers, the root unwise King Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

Righteous Yudhiṣṭhira is the great tree, Arjuna the trunk, Bhīmasena its branches, the sons of Mādrī the abundant fruits and flowers, the root Kṛṣṇa, Brahman, and the brahmins.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*'s Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 156.

¹¹² Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," 155.

¹¹³ *Śloka* meter consists of four *padas* or quarter verses of eight syllables each (two lines of sixteen syllables). *Trīṣṭubh* consists of four lines of eleven syllables each.

¹¹⁴ duryodhano manyumayo mahādrumah; skandhah karṇah śakunis tasya śākhāḥ duḥsāsanaḥ puṣpaphale samṛddhe; mūlam rājā dhṛtarāṣṭro 'manīśī yudhiṣṭhīro dharmamayo mahādrumah; skandho 'rjuno bhīmaseno 'sya śākhāḥ

The declaration is both an ominous foreshadowing and a masterful poetic condensation of what is to come, and marks a clear example of how the audience is assumed to be familiar with these characters: an old story is about to be told, but now through the vision of a great seer and through the voices of *sūtas* who have heard it recited in most extraordinary circumstances, a violent *sarpasattra*, and a twelve-year Vedic session conducted in the middle of a forest. Moreover, the symbolically loaded image alerts the audience to a hierarchy of parallel relationships among the characters with powerful ethical implications involving death, time, fate, human agency, and their "fruits." Those ethical concerns will be the weft of the *Mahābhārata*'s great net and will be discussed in following chapters.

Pervasive in Indian art and literature is the figure of two trees, celestial and terrestrial. The terrestrial tree is rooted in and draws its sap from the life-giving waters; it pushes its roots downward and its branches upward. The celestial tree, the ficus or *asvattha*, has its roots in the sky and draws its energy from the element of fire; it is mentioned in the *Rgveda*, in the *Upaniṣads*,¹¹⁵ and in the *Bhagavadgītā*. "Among all the trees I am the Aśvattha," says Kṛṣṇa;¹¹⁶ and later:

mādrī sutau puṣpaphale samṛddhe; mūlam kṛṣṇo brahma ca brāhmaṇāś ca (1 (1)65-66)

¹¹⁵ See, for example, RV I, 24, 7: "In the unfathomable space king Varuṇa, he of purified intelligence, upholds the tree's crest; its ground us up above; (its branches) are below; may their rays be planted deep in us." *Katha Upaniṣad* VI, 1: "With the root above and branches below is the everlasting Aśvattha. That is the Pure; that is Brahman; that indeed is called the Immortal; therein all the worlds are set; beyond it nonesoever

They speak of the eternal Aśvattha tree whose roots are above, whose branches below, and whose leaves are the hymns: he who understands it understands the Veda.¹¹⁷

In the *sūta*'s image, the Yudhiṣṭhīra-tree is the celestial and the Duryodhana-tree the terrestrial, the former rooted in divinity and the later in unconsciousness. However, the dichotomy, like most of the *Mahābhārata*'s dichotomies, is merely superficial. Do those *trīṣṭubh* verses refer to *two* trees, or to one that may be described in different terms, or to one that contains the two? Indian sculptures dating back as early as the third century BCE, with exemplars throughout the subcontinent and Java, show the two trees growing so close together as to form an indivisible cosmic unit.¹¹⁸ In *Anuśāsanaparvan*, Viṣṇu declares that the *asvattha* is his very form, and that the one who worships the *asvattha* is considered as adoring the entire universe, including the celestials, the *asuras* (demons), and human beings.¹¹⁹ Both the Dhārtarāṣṭras and the Pāṇḍavas originate from the seed of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, son of watery Satyavatī (a fisher girl born from a fish) and the brahmin sage Parāśara, an emanation of fiery Śiva. These two foreboding verses early in *Adiparvan* establish ambiguous parallels between the wrathful and the righteous, between the divine and the unwise, and between the trunk(s) of the tree(s), Arjuna and Karna. The *skandha*, "trunk," of the tree, rising upward to the heavens,

goeth. This truly is That." Translated in F. D. K. Bosch, *The Golden Germ: An Introduction to Indian Symbolism* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1960), 66-67.

¹¹⁶ *asvatthāḥ sarvavṛksāṇām* (10.32[10]26)

¹¹⁷ īrdhvamūlam adhahśākham aśvatthām prāhur avyayam
chandāṁsi yasya parṇāni yas tam veda sa vedavit (6.37[15] 1)

¹¹⁸ Bosch discusses such a stone tree from Besnagar dating probably from the third century BCE. See Bosch, *Golden Germ*, 78 and ff.

plunging downward into the waters, with all that implies of masculine energy (the word probably derives from the verb *skand*, to spurt out, as semen), is the pivot and fulcrum of this magnificent image; and that duality is both emphasized and negated in Karna, chold of the Sun, brother of the Pāṇḍavas, support of Duryodhana. In the kind of masterful use of repetition found throughout the *itihāsa*, in *Udyogaparvan*, the *Mahābhārata*'s pivotal book, Kṛṣṇa will utter all but identical *trīṣṭubh* verses (see Chapter Five).

After that brief interruption, *Adiparvan* returns to *śloka* meter and the brooding lament of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, speaking to Saṃjaya at the end of the Kurukṣetra battle. Dhṛtarāṣṭra enumerates many ominous events, from Arjuna's winning Draupadī at the *svayamvara* to Kṛṣṇa's cursing of Aśvatthāman after the war. Each verse begins, "When I heard that..." and concludes, "...then I lost hope of victory, Saṃjaya."¹²⁰ In this manner, by the end of *Adiparvan*'s second *adhyāya*, the audience has been reminded of events to come and has been directed to contemplate their complexity and ambiguity. Details about the Pāṇḍavas, Kauravas, and other important characters have been introduced minimally. Deliberately, however, little about Karna has been made explicit. His "secret" -- to which the audience is privy -- is unuttered.

The structure of the *Odyssey* has been compared to a symphony, a weaving together of patterns both small and very large.¹²¹ The *Mahābhārata* might be compared to the classical Indian *raga* -- intricate, dazzling, at once structured and improvised, a

¹¹⁹ 13.126.4-6, in the Vulgate. Cited in Bosch, *Golden Germ*, 190.

¹²⁰ *tadā nāśamse vijayāya saṃjaya* (1.1.102-157)

journey in which the listener becomes lost, only to retrieve, again and again, a unifying undersong. As scholars continue to study the *Mahābhārata* as literature, the intricacies of its shape will become progressively evident. The sheer size of the *itihāsa* makes the task of understanding its structure a daunting one, all the more so because perceptions of the *Mahābhārata* have tended to be mediated through Western historicist lenses. However, as remarked in Chapter One, there has been a persistent "native intuition" that the *Mahābhārata* is a literary whole and indeed a soul-shaping text, a perception evidenced in the earliest extant writings about the *itihāsa*. The intuition is based upon the overwhelming experience produced by reading the entire narrative, an experience Indian aestheticians, writing several centuries after the composition of the *itihāsa*, have explained in terms of *rasa*. In the next section I will explore a few ways in which *rasa* is structured into the *Mahābhārata*'s shape and partially serves to account for the unified experience it produces.

Rasa and the Shape of the Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* itself speaks of three beginnings: Some poets learn the Bhārata "manvādi," from Manu onward, it says -- that is, from the very first *adhyāya* of *Adiparvan*; some learn it "āstikadi," from the story of Āstika at *adhyāya* thirteen; others learn it "upāicarāri," from the tale of Uparicara, at *adhyāya* fifty-four.¹²² Madhva, a

¹²¹ Bruce Louden, *The Odyssey: Structure, Narration, and Meaning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 54.

¹²² manvādi bhārataṁ kechidāstikādi tathāpare
tathoparicarādyanye vīprā: sabhyagadhiyate (1.1.50)

thirteenth-century dualist theologian, takes the statement as indicating that the *Mahābhārata* has three layers of meaning:

The meaning of the *Bhārata*, in so far as it is a relation of the facts and events with which Śrī Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas are connected, is *āstikādi*, or historical. That interpretation by which we find lessons on virtue, divine love, and the other ten qualities, on sacred duty and righteous practices, on character and training, on Brahmā and the other gods, is called *manvādi*, or religious and moral. Thirdly, the interpretation by which every sentence, word or syllable is shown to be the significant name, or to be the declaration of the glories, of the Almighty Ruler of the universe, is called *āuparicara* or transcendental.¹²³

In the twentieth century, V.S. Sukthankar would argue that the *Mahābhārata* operates on three planes: a mundane plane consisting of the epic story, an ethical plane emphasizing *dharma*, and a metaphysical plane embodying "the spirit of Yogic Idealism," in which the "Superman" (Arjuna) gains knowledge of his individual self (*ātman*) under the guidance of the "Superself" (Kṛṣṇa).¹²⁴ In Chapter Five I will return to a discussion of these "planes," arguing for a "horizontal" rather than "hierarchical" approach. Madhva's and Sukthankar's hierarchical triple division of the text's meaning brings to mind Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra*. Bharata describes three sorts of individuals in the audience: the superior, the middling, and the inferior. Each experiences and expresses any given *rasa* in a different manner. While Madhva and Sukthankar focus on *meaning* as an inherent property of the text, Bharata is more concerned with *reception*, with discovering

¹²³ In *Mahābhāratātparyanirṇaya*. Cited in Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism (Second Edition)* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 84-85.

¹²⁴ Vishnu S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957), 121.

how the work of art itself accomplishes its literary task and elicits, through its predominant *rasas*, the desired response from its intended audience.¹²⁵ In other words, for Bharata the different planes of meaning observed by Sukthankar and Madhva are highly dependent upon the audience receiving it.

Ānandavardhana claimed that the *Mahābhārata* was designed to produce *sāntarasa*, a ninth *rasa* beyond Bharata's traditional eight (see Chapter One). Both he and Abhinavagupta suggest that this flavor of peace, which leads to *mokṣa*, is related to or brought about by a subtle combination of other *rasas*, particularly *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuṇa*.¹²⁶ Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta attest to a natural connection between the heroic and the cruel, *raudra*, which often are combined, the effect of *raudra* being *karuṇa*, compassion or pity.¹²⁷ However, Ānandavardhana specifies that only *vīra* with egoism leads to *raudra*; there exists a heroism of compassion, *karuṇavīra*, which results from heroism free of egotism. Abhinavagupta explains that *karuṇavīra* is simply another name for *sānta*. That *sānta rasa* subsumes, as it were, other *rasas*, indicates the emphasis the Indian aesthetic thinkers place on audience reception: a successful work of art

¹²⁵ For example, Bharata observes that *hāsyarasa*, the comic flavor, is manifested in the superior individual by a slight smile, by the average individual with gentle laughter and the laughter of ridicule, and by the inferior type by vulgar and excessive laughter. *Nātyaśāstra* VI, 53. See Bharata, *The Nātyaśāstra, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni*, Vols. 1 & 2, translated by Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Granthalaya Private Limited, 1967), 111.

¹²⁶ The discussion here is based on Dhv 3.24, in: Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana, with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Edited with an Introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, translated by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson Daniel H. H. Ingalls, and M.V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 506-07.

produces, through suggestion, the *rasas* in the audience; the finest work of art arouses *sānta*. "Suffice it to say," says Abhinava, "that as the *rasa* of peace leads to *mokṣa*, which is the highest aim of man, it is the most important of all the *rasas*."¹²⁸ As Gary Tubb notes, it seems clear "that what Ānandavardhana considers the primary end of the *Mahābhārata* is a *state of mind in the reader* (italics mine)."¹²⁹

A thorough study of *rasa* and the *Mahābhārata* would be the subject of a separate and extensive research. What I wish to point out here is that the *itihāsa* exhibits just the kind of delicate and intricate weaving of *rasas* to which Abhinavagupta and Ānandavardhana attest. Although all eight of Bharata's *rasas* are to be found in the *Mahābhārata*'s vast net, those that predominate are precisely *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuṇa*. They are made explicit in the two sacrificial scenes that bracket *Adiparvan* – Janamejaya's *sarpasattra* and the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest -- preparing us for the great battle to come and revealing the *itihāsa*'s obsession with the Kurukṣetra holocaust as a dark cosmic sacrifice. Like the Kurukṣetra war, the scenes begin with heroic impulse, rush swiftly to horrific violence, and conclude in pathos. Nonetheless, as will be seen in chapters to follow, the *itihāsa* will surprise its audience in the end by strongly suggesting that the laughter of Kṛṣṇa dominates the *itihāsa*'s universe -- and thus, the *rasa* of *hāsyā*.

¹²⁷ Ingalls translates *karuṇa rasa* as the "tragic" flavor. However, I believe there are Aristotelian assumptions in the word "tragic" not appropriate to Indian poetics.

¹²⁸ Dhv 3.26 b, in Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyāloka*, 525. Gary Tubb's richly suggestive article, "Śāntarasa in the *Mahābhārata*," discusses this topic in detail. Gary A. Tubb, "Śāntarasa in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 171-211.

¹²⁹ Tubb, "Śāntarasa in the *Mahābhārata*," 198.

Janamejaya's declaration -- "I shall go and avenge my father!"¹³⁰ -- seems justly heroic after he learns that Parikṣit had been killed by the wily *nāga* Takṣaka, who had coiled around Parikṣit's neck and bit him while the unwary king was still laughing.¹³¹ However, the plan he resolves upon -- a long *sattra* in which all the snakes of the kingdom shall be offered into the sacrificial fire¹³² -- turns out to be a sinister affair. The black-garbed Bhṛgu officiants are more like sorcerers than conventional brahmins, their eyes red from smoke as they mutter their spells above the fire, offering the snakes into Agni's flaming maw.¹³³

The snakes began to drop into the blazing flames, writhing and wretched and crying out to one another. They darted and hissed, wildly coiled about with tails and heads as they fell into the radiant fire -- white, black, blue, old and young -- screeching terrifying screams, they fell into the high blazing flames, hundreds of thousands and millions and tens of millions of helpless snakes were destroyed, O best of brahmins.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ *yāsyāmy apacitīm pituḥ* (1.46.41)

¹³¹ 1.39.33.

¹³² The *śrauta* texts give instructions for performing a *sarpasattra*. For a thorough discussion of the *sarpasattra* in the light of the *Mahābhārata*, see Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattra."

¹³³ Bharata mentions red eyes as sign of *raudra rasa*. (BhNS 6.63) Bharata, *The Nātyaśāstra, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni, Vols. 1& 2*, 113.

¹³⁴ *tataḥ sarpāḥ samāpetuḥ pradipte havyavāhane
viveṣṭamānāḥ kṛpaṇā āhvayantāḥ parasparam
visphurantāḥ śvasantaś ca veṣṭayantas tathā pare
pucchaiḥ śirobhiḥ ca bhṛṣam citrabhānum prapedire
śvetāḥ kṛṣṇāś ca nilāś ca sthavirāḥ śiśavas tathā
ruvanto bhairavān nādān petur dipte vibhāvasau
evam śatasahasrāṇi prayutāny arbudāni ca
avaśāni vinaṣṭāni pannagānāṁ dvijottama* (1.47.17-20)

The tone is all the more ironic for the fact that Taksaka himself escapes with the help of his friend Indra. This violent session is the *itihāsa*'s primary frame in which all the rest is embedded, in which all the rest is reflected.

The *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sutra* locates the site of the original *sarpasattra* at Khāṇḍavaprastha, a synonym for Indraprastha, capital of the Pāṇḍavas, built upon the land cleared when Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna burned down the Khāṇḍava Forest.¹³⁵ Here, at the end of *Adiparvan*, is a scene that both hearkens back to the *sarpasattra* and prefigures the Kurukṣetra battle. A ravenous Agni, black-garbed and red-eyed (like Janamejaya's Bhṛgus), approaches Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, who are sporting with their women by the river, and requests the two champions to give him the Khāṇḍava Forest to devour. Arjuna asks in return for weapons equal to his and Kṛṣṇa's strength, thereby obtaining his famed Gāndīva bow, celestial chariot, and deathless horses. Kṛṣṇa obtains the divine discus, *cakra*. Thus armed, Arjuna cries heroically, "Now I am up to the task of conquering the worlds in a war, O fire god!"¹³⁶ That task is eerily similar to the *sarpasattra*; *vīra* grows swiftly to *raudra*, as Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, celestial weapons in hand, see to it that nothing escapes Agni's hunger:

Eyes blazing, tongues blazing, the huge, gaping maw blazing, the erect hair blazing, drinking the fat of the living with reddish eyes, the oblation-

¹³⁵ *Baudhāyana* (17.18) asserts that the first *sarpasattra* was performed by the snakes themselves, who became biters and obtained their poison as a result. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattrā," 415.

¹³⁶ gāndīvam dhanur ādāya tathākṣayyau maheśudhī
aham apy utsahe lokān vijetum yudhi pāvaka
sarvataḥ parivāryainam dāvena mahatā prabho
kāmam samprajvalādyaiva kalyau svah sāhyakarmanī (1.216.29-30)

eater feasted on the elixir that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna had procured, and became glad, satiated, supremely happy.¹³⁷

The narrative describes in chilling detail the fate of the defenseless forest creatures:

Many were burning in one spot, others were scorched, eyes split open, shattered, confused, swooning. Some embraced their sons, others their fathers and mothers, unable to abandon them, and thus went to their annihilation. Others with maimed faces, rolling hither and thither, dropped into Agni's mouth. Hither and thither, creatures with scorched wings, eyes, and paws were seen writhing on the ground until they perished.¹³⁸

The mother of the snake Aśvasena, Taksaka's son, attempts to protect her child by swallowing him, but Arjuna severs her head with an arrow; as Aśvasena escapes, Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, and Agni curse him: "You shall never be safe!"¹³⁹ Taksaka himself is not present at the Khāṇḍava burning; he is away, says Vaiśampāyana, at Kurukṣetra. Thus the narrative weaves its tight web. The furious burning of the forest concludes with the curiously pathetic story of the baby Sārṅgaka birds, still in egg cases as their mother

¹³⁷ diptākṣo diptajihvaś ca diptavyāttā mahānanaḥ
diptordhvā keśah piṅgāksah pīban prāṇabhṛtām vasām
tām sa kṛṣṇārjuna kṛtām sudhām prāpya hutāśanah
babhūva muditas tṛptah parām nirvṛtim āgataḥ (1.219.33-34)

¹³⁸ dagdhaika deśā bahavo niṣṭaptāś ca tathāpare
sphuṭitākṣā viśīrṇāś ca viplutāś ca vicetasah
samālingya sutān anye piṭān mātṛmān tathāpare
tyaktum na śekuḥ snehena tathaiva nidhanam gataḥ
vikṛtair darśanair anye samupetuḥ sahasraśah
tatra tatra vighūrṇantah punar agnau prapedire
dagdhapakṣākṣi caranā vicesānto mahitale
tatra tatra sma dṛṣyante vinaśyantah śarīriṇah (1.117.5-8)

¹³⁹ apratiṣṭhō bhavediti (218.11) In the Bombay Edition, Aśvasena will seek his revenge at Kurukṣetra by entering an arrow Karṇa aims at Arjuna; through Kṛṣṇa's trickery the nāga is foiled and gleefully slain, thus providing ample motivation for Taksaka to kill Parikṣit, the Pāṇḍavas' sole heir. (8.90)

frantically attempts to protect them from the flames. Eventually they escape, joining Aśvasena and the architect Maya (who will build Yudhiṣṭhira's magical *sabha*) as the sole remainders of the Khāṇḍava sacrifice.¹⁴⁰

This same progression, from *vira rasa* to *raudra rasa* to *karuna rasa*, characterizes the great battle prefigured by the *sarpasattra* and Khāṇḍava burning. As the lengthy battle books progress and hero after hero is dismembered until the field is a river of blood, descriptions of the beauty of battle —

Men lay on the field with limbs crushed by maces, heads smashed by clubs, crushed by elephants, horses, and chariots. And the earth, strewn everywhere with the bodies of slain horses, men, and elephants, looked beautiful, O king, as if covered with hills.¹⁴¹

-- sound increasingly gruesome despite their poetry. It all will culminate in the paroxysm of violence in Book Ten, the Night Massacre, when Aśvatthāman is possessed by Rudra. After the long battle books, the Bhārgava son of Drona, bearing a congenital jewel in his forehead like a great *nāga*, accomplishes his violent deed in but a few brutal *ślokas*. The sleeping warriors are as defenseless as Janamejaya's snakes and the Khāṇḍava creatures:

Terrified by his sword, jumping up sick with fear, blinded by sleep and befuddled, some hid wherever they could, legs paralyzed, and drained of strength by despair. Crying out harshly in fear, they crushed one another.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ 1.220.

¹⁴¹ gadā vimathitair gātrair musalair bhinnamastakāḥ
gajavājirathakṣunṇāḥ śrāte sma narāḥ kṣitau
tathaivāśvanṛnāgānām śarīrair ābabhau tadā
saṁchannā vasudhā rājan parvatair iva sarvataḥ

¹⁴²tatas tac chastra vitrastā utpatanto bhayātūrāḥ

This apotheosis of *raudra rasa* is followed immediately by the exquisite pathos of *Strīparvar*, The Women, as the women of the warriors of both sides discover the bodies of their dear ones scattered on the Kuru field. As the Night Massacre is a condensation of *raudra*, *Strīparvan* is suggestive of *karuṇa rasa*.

Some seeing their brothers, some their husbands, and some their sons fallen dead upon the earth seizing the arms of the slain, those fair-armed women are themselves falling down. Hear, O unvanquished one, the loud wails of those elderly women and those others of middle age at the sight of this slaughter!¹⁴³

The play of *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuṇa* are structured into the *Mahābhārata*'s multiple layers. Abhinavagupta and Ānandavardhana believed that the effect would be to arouse in the audience *sānta rasa*. J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, in their book *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics*, describe that experience as envisaged by the two great Indian aestheticians:

As unhappiness and doom succeed one another in a seemingly endless display of the vanity of this world; as we slowly become aware of the folly of trusting to the external world to bring happiness; as one after another the heroes of the epic whom we have come to know over volumes and volumes fade from existence and everything seems to desiccate and near its end, the reader is invaded by a sense of doom, a sense of the uselessness of strife, and he is eventually instilled with a craving for tranquility, for an end to human suffering and misery. If our reading is

nidrāndhā naṣṭasamjñāś ca tatra tatra nililyire
 ūrustambhagrhitāś ca kaśmalābhīhataujasāḥ
 vinadanto bhrāṣṭāḥ samnyapesāṇ parasparam (10.8.75-6)

¹⁴³ bhrāṭīmś cānyāḥ patīmś cānyāḥ putrāmś ca nihatān bhuvi
 drṣṭvā paripatanty etāḥ pragṛhya subhujā bhujān
 madhyamānām tu nārīnām vṛddhānām cāparājita
 ākrandām hatabandhūnām dāruṇe vaiśase śīṇu (11.18.7-8)

extensive enough, concentrated enough, with no distractions from the outside world, then we can induce in ourselves a profound imaginative experience of tranquility, *sāntarasa*.¹⁴⁴

I will return to the question of *sānta rasa* in Chapter Six. Although reading the entire *Mahābhārata* is indeed conducive of a profound experience of tranquility, I would be cautious in reducing the *itihāsa* to that effect alone, for it seems to me that the narrative is conducive to much more. In the end, its effect will be to turn the audience *towards* the world, not away from it. What I would like to suggest here is that this play of three *rasas* is structured similarly into the character and life of Karna, who, I contend, uniquely embodies the *itihāsa*'s concerns. He, more than Arjuna, embodies the three elements of heroism specified by Bharata: *dānavīra*, "generous heroism," *dayāvīra*, "compassionate heroism," and *dharma-vīra*, "righteous heroism."¹⁴⁵ However, driven by *daiva* and *kāla*, "Fate" and "Time," to make certain radical choices, his world collapses in violence and pathos. In the next part of this chapter, I will examine how the manner in which the character of Karna is woven into the *Mahābhārata*'s structure articulates his particular significance just as the overall structure of the *Mahābhārata* determines how the audience shall contemplate its contents.

¹⁴⁴ J. L. Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan, *Sāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969), x.

¹⁴⁵ (BhNS 6.79) Bharata, *The Nātyaśastra, Ascribed to Bharata-Muni, Vols. 1& 2*, 117.

Karṇa's Place within the Shape of the Mahābhārata

The literary qualities of the *Mahābhārata*, its subtle and sophisticated use of rhetorical devices, are difficult to study simply because of the *itihāsa*'s huge size. Necessarily, one must limit one's inquiry, and here the character of Karṇa is the chosen delimiter. By focusing on a character rather than one story or one *parvan*, we may appreciate better the manner in which the narrative sustains its techniques over tens of thousands of verses, and we may get a glimpse of how it constructs its single net. In the following sections, I will examine certain narrative strategies by which the *itihāsa* sustains the reader's focus on Karṇa, strategies that equally could be examined with different foci.

Narrative Strategies: Ekalavya and the Show of Weapons

Oblique references to Karṇa throughout the early sections of *Adiparvan* have greatly increased dramatic tension, so that when Karṇa does, quite emphatically, stride onto the scene, at the Show of Weapons, the model audience is as stunned as the audience at the arena.¹⁴⁶ Immediately preceding the Show of Weapons is the disquieting story of Ekalavya, in which the *rasas* of *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuna* are combined to great effect.¹⁴⁷ This tale of the virtuous son of the chief of the Niṣādas, a non-Aryan tribe of hunters, challenges Arjuna's claim to heroic and martial preeminence. For their training in weapons, the youthful Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas have taken Drona as guru. Arjuna

¹⁴⁶ 1.124-126.

¹⁴⁷ 1(7) 123.

ingratiates himself and becomes Drona's favorite; the teacher vows that no archer on earth ever will be Arjuna's equal. The *sūta*'s son Karna also goes to learn from Drona, and Karna and Arjuna jealously compete with one another. The Niṣāda Ekalavya approaches Drona as well, but is rejected because of his low class. Disappointed but undaunted, Ekalavya retires to the forest where he constructs a clay figure of Drona, worships it as his *guru*, and achieves supreme skill with the bow. One day the Pāṇḍavas and Drona happen through the forest and see evidence of his expertise. Realizing that Arjuna's superiority faces a challenge, they ask Ekalavya for the name of his teacher. When the youth reveals the clay figure, Drona demands a gruesome *guru daksīna*, "teacher's fee" -- the thumb of Ekalavya's dominant hand. Without hesitating, the boy pulls out his knife and places the severed member at his *guru*'s feet. Never again can Ekalavya pose a challenge to Drona and his favorite apprentice, or to the social order they represent.¹⁴⁸ *Kṣatriya* supremacy in arms is preserved by the mutilation of the earnest tribal boy. As a prelude to the Show of Weapons, the story of Ekalavya is a skillful strategy for alienating the audience from Arjuna and preparing the audience to favor the low class *sūta* who next will challenge the ambidextrous Pāṇḍava.

At the show, Arjuna makes a bravura demonstration of bow, club, and sword. Suddenly from the gateway a sound is heard of arms being slapped in challenge, loud as a thunderbolt:

¹⁴⁸In *Udyogaparvan*, we learn that Ekalavya becomes king of the *Niṣādas* and is slain in battle by Kṛṣṇa (5.47.71). For a discussion of the story of Ekalavya, see S.

As the people, wide-eyed in wonder, gave way, Karṇa, conqueror of enemy cities, strode into the broad arena. Bearing his congenital armor, his face lit by two earrings, with his bow and bound-on sword, he was like a walking mountain. Karṇa, of great renown and wide eyes, had been born of the maiden Pṛthā [Kuntī] and the fiery-rayed Sun, of which he was a portion. Equal in strength to a lion or elephant, like the sun and moon in effulgence, beauty and splendor, bright as a golden palm tree, lion-like, youthful – countless were the qualities of this glorious son of Bhāskara [the Sun].¹⁴⁹

When Karṇa challenges Arjuna to a contest, the Pāṇḍavas demand that he make public his pedigree. Who is this stranger? Is he a *kṣatriya*? Duryodhana, in one of his finest moments, recognizes Karṇa's natural nobility and anoints him king of Aṅga, thereby bestowing a proxy *kṣatriya*-hood on Karṇa and earning his pledge of eternal friendship. But when the humble charioteer Adhiratha steps into the arena to embrace his son, Bhīma mocks Karṇa for his obviously low-class origins. Karṇa has no right to fight someone as highborn as Arjuna, says Bhīma. Karṇa silently casts a rueful eye at the sun and the crowd disperses.¹⁵⁰ However, a seed of dread is planted that will torment

Shankar, "The Thumb of Ekalavya: Postcolonial Studies and the "Third World" Scholar in a Neocolonial World," *World Literature Today* 68 (Summer 1994): 479-87.

¹⁴⁹ datte 'vakāśe puruṣair vismayotphullalocanaiḥ
viveśa raṅgam vistūrṇam karnāḥ parapuramjayah
sahajaṁ kavacam bibhrat kundaloddyotitānanaḥ
sadhanur baddhanistrīṁśah pādacārīva parvataḥ
kanyā garbhah pṛthu yaśāḥ pṛthāyāḥ pṛthulocanah
tikṣṇāṁśor bhāskarasyāṁśah karṇo 'rīgaṇasūdanah
śimharśabha gajendrāṇāṁ tulyaviryaparākramah
diptikānti dyutigunaiḥ sūryendu jvalanopamah
prāṁśuh kanakatālābhaḥ śimhasaṁhanano yuvā
asamkhyeyagunah śrīmān bhāskarasyātmasambhavaḥ (1.126.1-5)

¹⁵⁰ Shulman characterizes this moment, when Karṇa, his head still wet from the water of his anointing as king sees his aged father, as a sudden reversal akin to

Yudhiṣṭhīra's nights for years: no archer on earth, he suspects, is Karna's equal; Karna, now Duryodhana's sworn supporter, is superior to Arjuna. A similar suspicion is planted in the *itihāsa*'s audience by this powerfully rendered scene. The Ekalavya story anticipates the Show of Weapons, and foreshadows a central event in Karna's life, the Robbing of the Earrings, to be discussed in Chapter Four. Drona, for Arjuna's sake, appealed to Ekalavya's sense of duty, his *dharma-vīra*, to obtain the youth's severed thumb, thereby neutralizing his challenge to Arjuna's superiority with the bow. Indra will appeal to Karna's unfailing generosity, his *dāna-vīra*, to obtain his severed congenital armor and earrings, thereby rendering Karna vulnerable to Arjuna's potent weapons and to Kṛṣṇa's machinations.

Narrative Strategies: Karna Absent

Karna is woven into the shape of the *Mahābhārata* by means of a rich array of narrative strategies that sustain the audience's interest in this character, even when he is absent. Subsequent chapters will examine the scenes -- among the *itihāsa*'s most poetic and powerful -- in which Karna dominates: the dicing, the theft of the earrings, Karna's temptation by Kṛṣṇa, Karna's battle with Arjuna. This chapter will examine narrative strategies by which the *itihāsa* ensures that Karna is present to the audience even when he is physically absent.

Aristotelian *peripeteia*. David Dean Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 382.

Book Three, *Āranyakaparvan*, The Forest, describes the Pāndavas' twelve-year exile. The great length of the book serves to emphasize the passage of time.¹⁵¹ The Pāndavas' twelve long years of exile are for the most part uneventful. A series of sages and seers visits the Pāndavas to instruct them with stories within stories of past heroes and villains; framing and embedding are especially complex here.¹⁵² *Āranyakaparvan* illustrates how the inclusivity of the *Mahābhārata*'s discourse, requiring and structuring multiple responses, dictates the *itihāsa*'s encyclopedic size.¹⁵³

The exile begins with an oblique tribute to Karna when Dhaumya, the Pāndavas' family priest, proclaims the one hundred and eight names of Sūrya, Karna's father.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Although van Buitenen can "hardly imagine that in a more original form *The Book of the Forest* had the same size as in the present," he still allows that "twelve years is a long time, and as one goes on reading he does get a sense of the length of time that the Pāndavas were exiled from their kingdom." J. A. B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall; The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 177.

¹⁵² For example, at one point we hear Ugraśravas relating what Vaiśampāyana told Janamejaya about what Nārada told Yudhiṣṭhira about the sage Manakanaka's conversation with Śiva. (3.81)

¹⁵³ In a recent paper delivered at the Sixteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies at Edinburgh, September 2000, James Hegarty makes precisely this argument through an analysis of the *Nalopākhyāna*, the story of Nala, and the *Dyūtāparvan*, the dicing match in *Sabhāparvan*. Hegarty, "An Apprenticeship in Attentiveness."

¹⁵⁴ Sūrya is arguably the most glorious deity among those summoned by Kuntī's mantra. Yudhiṣṭhira's father Dharma is a shadowy presence; when he does appear he assumes animal form. Dharma speaks to his son disguised as a crane in *Āranyakaparvan*'s final chapter, and in the *Mahābhārata*'s final book disguised as a dog. Arjuna's father Indra, mighty king of the god in the Vedas, is represented in the *Mahābhārata* as a weak, even ludicrous, deity. See, for instance, 5.9-18, where Indra must be saved from a series of un-heroic mishaps, including being swallowed by the monster Vṛtra. Indra's heroic slaying of Vṛtra is famously celebrated throughout the *Rg Veda*.

Among Sūrya's names are the names of the fathers of Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Bhīma — Indra, Dharma,¹⁵⁵ and Vāyu. The fathers of Nakula and Sahadeva, the Aśvins, are said to be sons of Sūrya. The Sun is pleased with Dhaumya's recitation and appears to the Pāṇḍavas "in his body, aflame like a blazing fire."¹⁵⁶ Sūrya promises to provide ample food during the twelve years of exile. Thus opens *Āranyakaparvan*, with a vivid reminder of Karna and the secret of his solar *kula*, "family," a secret known by the audience but not yet by Karna's brothers. (See Chapter Three for a discussion of Karna's solar *kula*.)

The days of the exile are fraught with bitter recollections of Karna. Draupadī stubbornly nurses her resentment: "Never ever will my grief be assuaged that some Karna laughed at me!"¹⁵⁷ Karna's derisive laughter, far more than Duhśāsana's manhandling or Duryodhana's vulgarity, has deeply wounded Draupadī; she cannot forgive her husbands or Kṛṣṇa for allowing it to occur and repeatedly berates Yudhiṣṭhira for his unmanly unwillingness to act. Yudhiṣṭhira finally confesses the reason for his hesitation: "I cannot sleep from fretting about the dexterity of the *sūta*'s son who surpasses everyone in handling the bow."¹⁵⁸ Ever since the Show of Weapons, Yudhiṣṭhira has seen clearly a fact that Kṛṣṇa conceals from Arjuna to the end: Karna is the foremost warrior of the land. After Yudhiṣṭhira's candid admission of his fears,

¹⁵⁵ Dharma is named in the compound *Dharmadhvaja*, "Banner of Dharma."

¹⁵⁶ tato divākarah pṛito darsayām āsa pāṇḍavam
dpyamānah svavapusā jvalann iva hutāśanah (3.4.1)

¹⁵⁷ na hi me śāmyate duḥkham kārṇo yat prāhasat tadā (3.13.113)

¹⁵⁸ na nidrām adhigacchāmi cintayāno vṛkodara

Vyāsa makes one of his sudden interventions. Appearing as if out of nowhere, he takes Yudhiṣṭhīra aside and advises him to send Arjuna on a search for divine weapons. Arjuna enthusiastically embarks upon the quest. His famous journey during which he encounters and obtains weapons from both Rudra and Indra is, unbeknownst to him, motivated by Yudhiṣṭhīra's concern, apparently shared by Vyāsa, that Arjuna on his own cannot defeat Karṇa in the approaching battle. After Arjuna departs, Yudhiṣṭhīra admits the truth:

He [Karṇa] has the might of a horse, the violence of a gale, he roars from the hearth fire that sparks his arrows, he is the dust cloud, the affliction of weapons raised up by the wind of the son of Dhṛitarāṣṭra. He has been sent forth as the fire at the end of a *yuga* is sent forth by Time; without a doubt he shall set afire my concealed troops. Only with mighty clouds of divine weapons raised up by the Kṛṣṇa-wind, wearing his white horses like cranes, ablaze with the rainbow of the Gāṇḍīva bow, shall he [Arjuna] ever quench the burning fire of Karṇa with his deluge of arrows.¹⁵⁹

Yudhiṣṭhīra's anguish resonates throughout the Book of the Forest, in Karṇa's absence. From the eulogy to Sūrya at the beginning to the "Robbing of the Earrings" at the end, Karṇa brackets this longest of the *Mahābhārata*'s eighteen *parvans* and haunts its center. In the later books, after the battle and Karṇa's death, he still inhabits the narrative.

ati sarvān dhanur grāhān sūtaputrasya lāghavam (3.37.18)

¹⁵⁹ so 'svavegānila balah śarārcis talaniṣvanaḥ
 rajo dhūmo 'strasamṛtāpo dhārtarāṣṭrāniloddhataḥ
 nisṛṣṭa iva kālena yugāntajvalano yathā
 mama sainyamayam kakṣam pradhaksyati na samśayah
 tam sa kṛṣṇāniloddhūto divyāstrajalado mahān
 śvetavājibalākā bhṛd gāṇḍīvendrāyudhōjjvalah
 satatam śaradhārābhiḥ pradiptam karṇa pāvakam
 udīrṇo 'rjuna megho 'yam śamayisyati samyuge (3.84.9-12)

In the short eleventh book, *Śrīparvan*, the Women, Karna's decapitated body is described lovingly in words recalling Yudhiṣṭhira's anguished poetry during the exile: "There lies Vaikartana [Karna], the great warrior and Bowman, in battle a blazing fire, extinguished by fierce Arjuna. ... He was invincible to foes in battle, like Maghavān [Indra] himself, like the fire at the end of a *yuga*, immovable as the Himālayas."¹⁶⁰ When the women go to the Ganges to offer oblations for their fallen men, Kuntī erupts in grief:

There is no equal of his in heroism anywhere on earth. Offer water oblations to your brother, so firm in truth, valorous, ever steady in battle, unweary in action. Yes, he was your elder brother, born from me by Bhāskara, the Sun. With his inborn earrings and armor he was as equal in splendor to Bhāskara.¹⁶¹

Yudhiṣṭhira is devastated, and declares that had Kuntī revealed her secret earlier all the carnage might have been prevented. For the rest of his life, Yudhiṣṭhira will mourn for Karna. In the *itihāsa*'s remaining *parvans*, the audience repeatedly is reminded of Karna by the grieving of Yudhiṣṭhira and Kuntī; we grieve with them for him.

Book twelve, *Śāntiparvan*, The Peace, opens with Yudhiṣṭhira making a confession: at the dicing match Karna's insults to Draupadī had kindled fury in him. Then, he suddenly became transfixed at the sight of Karna's feet -- they resembled

¹⁶⁰ eṣa vaikartanah śete maheśvāso mahārathah
jvalitānalavat saṃkhye saṃśāntah pṝtha tejasā ...
anādhṛṣyāḥ parair yuddhe śatrubhir maghavān iva
yugāntāgnir ivārciṣmān himavān iva ca sthiraḥ (11.21.1,8)

¹⁶¹ yasya nāsti samo virye pṝthivyām api kaś cana
satyasamāndhasya śūrasya saṃgrāmeśv apalāyinah
kurudhvam udakam tasya bhrātūr akliṣṭakarmaṇah
sa hi vāḥ pūrvajo bhrātā bhāskarān mayy ajāyata

Kuntī's! Taken aback by the inexplicable similarity, his anger had cooled. Yudhiṣṭhīra says he cannot forgive himself for missing that opportunity to discover Karṇa's identity, nor can he forgive Kuntī for concealing the truth. He pronounces a curse: Henceforth no woman shall succeed in keeping a secret!¹⁶² Yudhiṣṭhīra's overwhelming remorse for Karṇa's death -- a sentiment apparently not shared by his brothers -- above all influences Yudhiṣṭhīra's longing to renounce the world. Bhiṣma's efforts to change that resolve and to educate Yudhiṣṭhīra in the *dharma* of a king constitute *parvans* twelve and thirteen, the lengthy didactic books. That mass of teachings does little to blunt Yudhiṣṭhīra's grief for Karṇa. Book fourteen, *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, The Horse Sacrifice, opens with Yudhiṣṭhīra again asking to be allowed to retire to the forest; he can find no peace, he says, having slain "Karṇa, that tiger of a man, who never fled from battle."¹⁶³ Fifteen years later, Kuntī still mourns: "My heart must be made of steel, for it does not shatter into a hundred pieces at not seeing that little child of mine born of Sūrya."¹⁶⁴ Even at the very end, after entering heaven, Yudhiṣṭhīra remembers Karṇa's feet, so like Kuntī's. "Wherever that child of Sūrya is, I want to be with him," Yudhiṣṭhīra says.¹⁶⁵ He discovers Karṇa in hell, united at last with the four Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī (see Chapter Five). References to

kundalī kavacī śūro divākarasamaprabhah (11.27.10-11)

¹⁶² bhavatyā gūḍhamantravāt pīdito 'snīty uvāca tām
śāśāpa camahātejāḥ sarvalokesu ca striyah

na guhyam dhārayiṣyantīty atiduhkhasamanvitah (12.6.10)

¹⁶³ karnam ca puruṣavyāghram samgrāmeṣv apalāyinam (14.2.12)

¹⁶⁴ āyasam hṛdayam nūnam mandāyā mama putraka
yat sūryajam apaśyantyāḥ śatadhā na vidiryate (15.22.12)

¹⁶⁵ tam aham yatra tatrastham draṣṭum icchāmi sūryajam
avijñāto mayā yo 'sau ghātitāḥ savyasācinā (18.2.9)

Karṇa after the battle are few and widely scattered throughout the *Mahābhārata*'s final seven books. The persistent memories of Karṇa act as a dramatically effective strategy for pulling the audience back to the narrative thread and for placing Karṇa directly in its center.¹⁶⁶

Narrative Strategies: The Golden Earrings

The net of the *Mahābhārata* is constructed of an elaborate fabric of motifs and symbols. This dissertation argues against or beyond an historic, diachronic analysis that moves from symbol to myth and thereby understates the *itihāsa*'s narrative competence. A synchronic analysis, however, allows an exploration of the multiple parallelisms that enrich the *itihāsa* and are part of the "tacit agreements" between author and audience.¹⁶⁷ Consider the motif of golden earrings. Karṇa's earrings, the shining *kundalas*, are the emblem of this son of Sūrya, the god who wears golden earrings and armor. The theme of stolen earrings is woven throughout the *itihāsa* and is richly suggestive of Karṇa's ambivalent nature, his innate royalty, and his dark attraction to Duryodhana.

The word *karṇa* means "ear," and the fact that Karṇa was born wearing golden earrings may account for what is, in fact, a curiously pedestrian name. According to

¹⁶⁶ Individual *parvans* frequently are bracketed with references to Karṇa. Karṇa appears at both the beginning and end of *Vanaparvan*, at the end of *Udyogaparvan*, at the beginning and end of *Bhīṣmaparvan*, at the start of *Dronaparvan*, which leads on to *Karṇaparvan*. *Śtriparvan* begins and ends with Karṇa; *Sāntiparvan* begins with him, and *Svargārohaṇaparvan* begins with Karṇa and ends when, at last, he is united with his brothers and Draupadī in heaven.

¹⁶⁷ Hiltzebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," 161.

Monier-Williams, the word has two possible derivations, *kṛt* or *kṛī*.¹⁶⁸ *Kṛt*, "to cut off" or "to tear asunder," suggests what Karna eventually will do with his divine ornaments. *Kṛī*, "to cast off from oneself," carries a similar nuance. *Kṛī* is also the verb from which is derived *karuṇa*, "causing pity or compassion," a dominant *rasa* in Karna's story. Karna frequently refers to himself as Rādheya, "the son of Rādhā," his foster mother. Rādhā and Adhiratha call their adopted child Vasuṣena, from *vas*, "to shine," because of the child's golden effulgence.¹⁶⁹ "Karna," however, is the name most often used to refer to the firstborn son of Kuntī.

The earring motif can be traced from the story of Uttanka early in *Adiparvan*, to "The Cattle Expedition" and "The Robbing of the Earrings" in *Āranyakaparvan*, to "The Suing for Peace" in *Udyogaparvan*, and to Kṛṣṇa's encounter with Uttanka in *Āśvamedhikaparvan*.¹⁷⁰ Uttanka's is a haunting and complex tale full of symbolism and cosmological references; its alleged purpose is to explain why Janamejaya determined to perform the Snake Sacrifice, the occasion for Vaiśampāyana's recitation of the *Mahābhārata*. This is one of the few portions of the *itihāsa* composed in prose. Because of its formal and linguistic qualities, van Buitenen considers it very ancient, deriving

¹⁶⁸ Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, New Edition (1995) Greatly Enlarged and Improved (Delhi: Motilal Banarsiādass, 1995), 256.

¹⁶⁹ The name Vasuṣena has an intriguing association with the Vedic Vasus, a group of eight gods. Bhīṣma is said to be an incarnation of one of the Vasus, Dyaus, "Sky," and Karna and Bhīṣma are related in significant ways emphasized by mythological references that the audience was expected to notice (see Chapter Three).

¹⁷⁰ *Pausya* (1.3); *Ghoṣayātrā* (3.224-244); *Kuṇḍalāhara* (3.284-294); *Yānasīndhi* (5.46-69).

"from some old Vedic brahmin lore."¹⁷¹ Certainly, the unusual form emphasizes its bizarre and mysterious contents. In the tale, the student Uttanika, having completed his Vedic studies, repeatedly requests his teacher to assign an appropriate *guru daksina*, "teacher's fee." At last the guru tells him to go to the queen of King Pausya and obtain her earrings. Uttanika ventures forth on his quest. Along the way he meets an oversized man riding an oversized bull. "Uttanika, eat my bull's dung!" commands the imposing man.

- Overcoming his reluctance, Uttanika eats some of the bull's dung and drinks its urine. Shortly thereafter, he enters the chambers of Pausya's queen but is unable to find her, for the queen cannot be seen by anyone in an unclean state. Uttanika ritually purifies himself and the queen becomes visible. She gives him the requested earrings with the warning that they are desired by the great *nāga* Takṣaka, the very snake who had bitten King Parikṣit. Sure enough, while Uttanika is on his way back to his guru's ashram, Takṣaka uses his power of *māyā*, "illusion," to take the form, alternately visible and invisible, of a naked *sāpnyāśin*. When Uttanika puts down the earrings for a moment, the *sāpnyāśin* seizes them, drops his disguise, and disappears into a fissure in the ground with Uttanika in pursuit. After a series of symbolically charged encounters, Uttanika persuades Takṣaka to surrender the plunder. Later, Uttanika's guru reveals the occult meanings of his adventures. Uttanika gains knowledge of many remarkable things, among them that the dung he had eaten was the Elixir of Immortality. The oversized man was Indra in disguise; he had given Uttanika the dung-elixir so that he would not perish in the *nāgas'*

¹⁷¹ van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 1, 2.

underground kingdom. Uttanka leaves his guru and journeys to Hāstīnapura. There he advises King Janamejaya to wreak vengeance on Parikṣit's killer by immolating Taksaka in a Snake Sacrifice.

The story of Uttanka and the earrings, with significant variations, is told again in *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, the Horse Sacrifice, the book that brings the *Mahābhārata* full circle (see Chapter Five). In this episode Kṛṣṇa grants Uttanka a vision of his divine form, the *avatāra*'s final theophany. The repetition of the symbolic tale, particularly in the context of Kṛṣṇa's theophany, argues against the view that the two stories are haphazard insertions. Let us see how Uttanka, the elixir, Indra, the nether world, *nāgas*, the earrings, and Karṇa (who, snake-like, sheds his congenital golden "skin") are continued in *Āranyakaparvan*.

As the twelve-year exile is nearing its end, Karṇa, to please Duryodhana, proposes an expedition to the forest to observe the humiliated Pāṇḍavas and gloat over their wretchedness.¹⁷² The plan is foiled, however, when celestial Gandharvas, friends of the Pāṇḍavas, defeat Duryodhana, take him prisoner and bring him before the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhīṣṭhīra admonishes the humiliated prince before setting him free. Mortified, Duryodhana sinks into a black depression and determines to fast unto death, despite Karṇa's attempts to hearten him. In this dejected condition, Duryodhana has a strange experience: demons usher him to the nether world. There they tell him that they have devised a means to counteract his fear of Arjuna: the soul of a slain demon, Naraka by

¹⁷² *Ghōṣayātrā*, the Cattle Expedition (3.224-243).

name, has entered Karna's body in order to kill Arjuna.¹⁷³ A reinvigorated Duryodhana is then returned to the spot where he had been fasting; he thinks it all has been a dream. Yet Karna, we are told, "with the inner soul of Naraka possessing his mind and spirit,"¹⁷⁴ now renews his vow to Duryodhana to kill Arjuna. Was it a dream? Has Karna been possessed by the *asura* Naraka? The narrative reveals nothing further; but more details about Naraka are disclosed later, in *Udyogaparvan*. Naraka, it seems, had stolen from the goddess Aditi, mother of the *devas*, her divine earrings that had emerged from the primordial Elixir. The *devas* had appealed to Kṛṣṇa for help. Kṛṣṇa attacks Naraka's impregnable city, slays the demon, retrieves the earrings, and returns them to Aditi's heaven.

The stories of Uttanika and Naraka emphasize the divinely precious value of the jewels, desired by humans, demons, and gods. Having emerged from the Elixir, the golden *kundalas* are a condensation of that substance of immortality for which the gods and demons have fought since the churning of the Ocean of Milk at the dawn of creation. The development of the motif, then, calls attention to Karna's role as a representative human individual, the ultimate battleground upon which the forces of heaven and hell are forever in conflict.

¹⁷³ yac ca te 'ntargatam vīra bhayam arjuna sambhavam
tatrāpi vihito 'smābhīr vadhopāyo 'rjunasya vai
hatasya narakasyātmā karṇa mūrtim upāśritah (3.240.18-19)

¹⁷⁴ karṇo 'py āviṣṭa cittātmā narakasyāntar ātmanā
arjunasya vadhe krūrām akarot sa matim tadā (3.240.32)

Narrative Strategies: the *sūtas* Karna and Samjaya

Repetition, framing, foreshadowing, allusion, motifs, symbolism, mythological references are among the rhetorical devices used throughout the eighteen *parvans* to weave the character of Karna into the *Mahābhārata*'s net. They alert the audience to Karna's central importance, provoke sympathy for the lonely hero, rouse curiosity, and develop dramatic tension. Karna's centrality is made explicit in the elegant narrative structure of *Udyogaparvan*. Here, as nowhere else in the *itihāsa*, the audience is directed to pay attention to what the text *does*, for its segments are engaged in a dynamic discourse that is expanded rhetorically and symbolically far beyond the immediate events of the *parvan*.

The Effort is a book of revelations. Here Kṛṣṇa reveals to Karna the secret of his solar birth. Here Bhīṣma reveals that Prince Śikandīn is the key to Bhīṣma's vulnerability. Here Kṛṣṇa manifests his divinity before the Kaurava court.

Udyogaparvan is also a book of fateful choices: in the face of war, Arjuna chooses the aid of Kṛṣṇa alone; Duryodhana prefers Kṛṣṇa's army. Duryodhana refuses peace by yielding to Yudhiṣṭhīra even a pinprick of land. Karna refuses to unite with his Pāṇḍava brothers. Bhīṣma agrees to lead the Kaurava army and Karna refuses to fight while Bhīṣma lives. Śalya pledges to fight on the Kauravas' side but to undermine Karna. The revelations and decisions of "The Effort" are a culmination of what has gone before and prelude to all that is to come. The *parvan* begins directly after the marriage of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu and Uttarā, parents-to-be of Parikṣit. It ends as the two great armies assemble for war.

Early on in the following book, *Bhīṣmaparvan*, comes the climax of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, which *Udyogaparvan* anticipates, and after which all is battle and denouement. In the rising and falling action of the *itihāsa*, this fifth book is all ascent.

The very name of the *parvan* is enigmatic: *udyoga*, "strenuous effort." Whose effort is indicated? To what end is that effort? The greatest effort appears to be Kṛṣṇa's embassy to the Kaurava court to sue for peace. Yet Kṛṣṇa as *avatāra* is committed to the necessity of war, for the Kurukṣetra battle has been divinely foreordained. *Udyoga* also means "active preparation," and indeed the ambiguous conflation of efforts for peace and preparations for war characterizes this fifth *parvan*. *Udyogaparvan* is a complex and condensed presentation of a crucial ethical dilemma: how can the horrendous holocaust of the impending war be justified? That dilemma necessarily raises issues of *dharma*, death, fate, and human initiative, but behind all these a more profound question, suggesting that the "yoga" in *udyoga* may anticipate the *yoga* taught by Kṛṣṇa in the approaching *Bhagavadgītā*. That question centers upon the condition of the isolated individual in the dawning *kaliyuga* and the necessity of *bhakti*. To whom is *bhakti* accessible? For whom is it possible? *Udyogaparvan* addresses the question through two members of the *sūta* class: Samjaya and Karna. (The *sūtas* and *vāṇī*, "class" or "caste," will be discussed in Chapter Three.)

Udyogaparvan announces its pivotal position in the total structure of the *Mahābhārata* not only by anticipating what is to come but also by evoking and clarifying earlier passages. As noted above, *Adiparvan's* very first *adhyāya* abruptly flashes

forward to the end of the battle, and to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's dark laments over what has passed; each of his bitter memories closes with the refrain, "Then, Saṃjaya, I lost hope of victory."¹⁷⁵ In *Udyogaparvan*, Saṃjaya, returning to Hāstīnapura from his embassy to the Pāṇḍavas, reports Arjuna's dire predictions of the coming war. Those predictions closely resemble Dhṛtarāṣṭra's memories, and each ends with the refrain, "Then the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra shall rue the war."¹⁷⁶ The two grimly poetic passages resonate over the *itihāsa* like a single dirge.

Udyogaparvan also repeats some of *Adiparvan*'s more intriguing lines, discussed earlier. Their repetition here illuminates their presence in *Adiparvan* as a kind of advance echo and ominous foreshadowing. In *Udyogaparvan*, it is Kṛṣṇa who speaks them:

Wrathful Suyodhana¹⁷⁷ is the great tree, Karṇa the trunk, Śakuni its branches, Duḥśāsana the abundant fruits and flowers, the root unwise King Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

Righteous Yudhiṣṭhira is the great tree, Arjuna the trunk, Bhīmasena its branches, the sons of Mādrī the abundant fruits and flowers, and the root is the *brahman* and the brahmins.¹⁷⁸

This remarkable image of two trees that are a single tree communicates both an evident dichotomy and a calculated similarity between the celestial (the Pāṇḍavas and

¹⁷⁵ *tadā nāśaṃse vijayāya saṃjaya* (1.1.102-157)

¹⁷⁶ *tadā yuddham dhārtarāṣṭro 'nvatapsyat* (5.47.14-60)

¹⁷⁷ Suyodhana, "fighting well," is an epithet of Duryodhana, "fighting malevolently," and another play on apparent dualities.

¹⁷⁸ *suyodhano manyumayo mahādrumah; skandhah karṇah śakunis tasya śākhāḥ duḥśāsanah puṣpaphale samṛddhe; mūlam rājā dhṛtarāṣṭro 'maniṣī yudhiṣṭhīro dharmamayo mahādrumah; skandho 'rjuno bhīmaseno 'sya śākhāḥ mādriputrau puṣpaphale samṛddhe; mūlam tv aham brahma ca brāhmaṇāś ca* (5.29.45-46)

Kṛṣṇa) and the terrestrial (the Kauravas and Karna). It reinforces the *itihāsa*'s tendency towards ethical complexity and ambiguity. *Udyogaparvan* highlights that ambiguity by suggesting both physical and philosophical parallels to the *Bhagavadgītā*. In the physical (terrestrial) image, Śalya and Karna in one chariot are posed against Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in another (to be discussed in Chapter Five). In the metaphysical (celestial) parallel, *sūtaputra*, "sūta's son," Karna and *sūtaputra* Samjaya are the antipodes.¹⁷⁹

Udyogaparvan prepares the reader for the *Bhagavadgītā*'s central teaching of *bhakti*, devotion to Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, by establishing a dichotomy between Duryodhana's philosophy of life born of his titanic egoism, and humble Samjaya's simple devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Duryodhana expresses that philosophy in an angry speech to his father, spurred by what the prince sees as craven capitulation to Kṛṣṇa couched in reverently courteous niceties masking the king's blind terror. Duryodhana insists adamantly that there is no cause to fear that the Pāṇḍavas will be invincible, even if the gods join them. The gods are gods precisely because they ignore human sentiment, claims the prince. The gods never are motivated by desire or greed, compassion or hatred, as are humans; they concern themselves exclusively with divine affairs. Therefore, reasons Duryodhana, when it comes to acting in the world, his own human power is greater than the power of

¹⁷⁹ A number of parallels to the *Bhagavadgītā* are woven throughout the narrative. One, remarked upon by Shulman and Ramanujan appears directly before *Udyogaparvan*, in the comical scene in *Virāṭparvan* when Arjuna, disguised as a eunuch, acts as charioteer to young prince Uttara in a fight with cattle-raiding Kauravas. See Shulman, *King and Clown*, 262; A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 426.

the indifferent gods; he will defeat the Pāṇḍavas and their allies simply because he is a stronger and wiser man than any of them.¹⁸⁰

Duryodhana does not deny the existence of the gods, only their relevance to life in the world. He privileges power above human sentiments and cannot conceive of a divine sort of love that is at once free of desire and materially efficacious. This speech of Duryodhana's provides an insight into what it is about him that so magnetizes Karna. Karna, unsure of his identity and his *dharma*, is torn between an instinctive piety -- he prays daily to the Sun god -- and a bitter sense of being abandoned and alone in the universe. Karna is attracted to Duryodhana at least partially because Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son exhibits such self-confident individualism; however *sūtaputra* Karna, not his spoiled and arrogant *ksatriya* prince, is the narrative's single truly isolated individual. In this respect, Karna's antithesis is the *sūtaputra* Samjaya. To reinforce the parallel, Samjaya is described in terms strongly evocative of Karna: when Samjaya returns to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court after his peace mission, the "*sūtaputra*" jumps off his chariot "wearing his earrings."¹⁸¹ Because nothing ever is said about Samjaya's earrings, their mention here serves to set up a parallel with Karna that will be developed further.

As ambassador from Dhṛtarāṣṭra to the Pāṇḍavas, Samjaya is prepared for the role he will perform during the Kurukṣetra war as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's eyes and Vyāsa's surrogate

¹⁸⁰ 5.60

¹⁸¹ 5.46.14

voice.¹⁸² Samjaya is the personification of the ideal *sūta*, the king's charioteer and personal helper, well versed in *kṣatriya* lore and the warrior's code of honor, ready to give advice when asked or to preach a sermon when he sees his chariot fighter flag in performing his duty. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blindness prevents him from going to the battlefield, so Samjaya performs his *sūta*'s role within the confines of the court and as the king's messenger. His loyalty to Dhṛtarāṣṭra is paired with a blistering honesty; Samjaya tirelessly attempts to convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the folly of going to war with the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa. At one point in *Udyogaparvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra solicits his *sūta*'s frank assessment of the two armies: which will succeed and which perish? Samjaya asks for witnesses to be present so that he may speak without fear. Vyāsa appears out of nowhere -- a sure sign that something important is at stake -- and instructs Samjaya to reply fully to the question. Samjaya's answer focuses upon the divinity of Kṛṣṇa:

The Supreme Person, Janārdana, sets in motion the earth, the middle regions, and heaven, as if in play. ... Hari, although he rules the entire world, undertakes acts as if he were merely a powerless peasant. Thus Keśava deceives the worlds by the magic of yoga, but men who surrender to him are not deceived.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Samjaya describes the gift he has been given by Vyāsa in *Bhīṣmaparvan*. By Vyāsa's grace, he tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra, "I have obtained unsurpassed divine knowledge, I have vision beyond the range of the senses, O king, and hearing from afar, and knowledge of others' thoughts, of things past and to come, and awareness of prodigious occurrences, and the ability to move through the ethereal regions. By the gift of that great soul's boon, I am impervious to weapons in battle."

yasya prasādād divyam me prāptam jñānam anuttamam
 dṛṣṭiś cātindriyā rājan dūrāc chraṇam eva ca
 paracittasya vijñānam atītānāgatasya ca
 vyuṇhitotpattivijñānam ākāśe ca gatih sadā
 śastrair asaṅgo yuddheśu varadānān mahātmanāḥ (6.16.6-9)

¹⁸³ pr̥thivīm cāntarikṣam ca divam ca puruṣottamāḥ

"Where there is Kṛṣṇa, there is victory," declares Saṃjaya.¹⁸⁴ Dhṛitarāṣṭra asks Saṃjaya how it is that he recognizes Kṛṣṇa as the Lord of the Universe while he, the king, does not. What is the *bhakti* by virtue of which he has that knowledge? "I do not cherish illusion," replies Saṃjaya. "I do not practice *dharma* wrongly. Being purified by *bhakti*, I know Janārdana from the sacred teachings."¹⁸⁵

Free from the *māyā*, "illusion," that imprisons the king and king's son, certain of his role in life as councilor and charioteer, loyal, simple, and pious, Saṃjaya is a type of model devotee. Karna is loyal, but he has devoted himself to substantiating Duryodhana's illusions. If his role as councilor befits a *sūta*, his *kṣatriya* ambitions do not. Yudhiṣṭhira refers to him as "councilor Karna ... whose guidance that dolt Suyodhana follows,"¹⁸⁶ but the relationship of Duryodhana and Karna is symbiotic. Karna indulges Duryodhana's dark fancies; Duryodhana supplies a philosophy of life for Karna to follow. In one of *Udyogaparva*'s most gripping scenes,¹⁸⁷ when Kṛṣṇa attempts to draw Karna to the side of the Pāṇḍavas, the side favored by the gods, he

vicesṭayati bhūtātmā kṛidann iva janārdanah (5.66.10)
 iśann api mahāyogī sarvasya jagato harīḥ
 karmāṇy ārabhate kartum kīnāśa iva durbalaḥ
 tena vañcayate lokān māyāyogena keśavah
 ye tam eva prapadyante na te muhyanti mānavāḥ (5.66.14-15)

¹⁸⁴ yataḥ kṛṣṇas tato jayah (5.66.9)

¹⁸⁵ gāvalgaṇe 'tra kā bhaktir yā te nityā janārdane
 yayā tvam abhijānāsi triyugam madhusūdanam
 māyām na seve bhadrām te na vṛthādharmam ācare
 śuddhabhāvam gato bhaktyā sāstrād vedmi janārdanam (5.67.4-5)

The reference here to *sāstras* claiming Kṛṣṇa's divinity is worth noting.

¹⁸⁶ karṇo 'mātyaḥ kuśalī tāta kac cit; suyodhano yasya mando vidheyah (5.23.13)

appeals to Karna on a purely human level, manifesting not a hint of his divinity. Karna in turn refuses to change sides for the thoroughly human reason that the *sūta* Adhiratha and his wife Rādhā took him in and cared for him out of the goodness of their hearts, *sauhārdāt*.¹⁸⁸ Such good-heartedness is the closest thing to love that Karna ever has known, and Kṛṣṇa offers him nothing more: "You speak to me out of good-heartedness, *suhrdān*," says Karna, but this sudden kindness is not sufficient to weaken his sworn loyalty. (Kṛṣṇa's temptation of Karna before the Kurukṣetra battle will be discussed further in Chapter Five.)

The parallels established in *Udyogaparvan* between Samjaya and Karna suggest that *bhakti* simply may not be available to everyone. Samjaya possesses *bhakti* because of his pure and simple heart; he is the true *bhakta*. Arjuna receives *bhakti* all but unwittingly because Kṛṣṇa requires Arjuna's devotion in order to fulfill his mysterious purposes. However, Kṛṣṇa conceals his true nature from Karna, choosing to encounter him man-to-man, as it were. Karna rises nobly to the occasion, yet the audience knows that he is being tricked. At the close of their conversation, Kṛṣṇa asks Karna to see to it that the battle starts in precisely seven days, on the new moon, the Day of Indra. Karna complies, and it is he who orders messengers into the Kaurava camp crying, "The Yoke before sunrise!" on the day dedicated to the god who has stripped him of his invulnerability, of his elixir-born *kundalas*. That Karna orders the "yoke," *yoga* (another nuance of the *parvan's* name) is all the more poignant for the fact that he, the greatest

¹⁸⁷ 5.23.

archer of the land, has vowed not to fight in the battle. The rivalry between Karna and Bhīṣma has made it impossible for either to countenance fighting side-by-side with the other. When Bhīṣma is consecrated marshal of Duryodhana's army, Karna makes a promise: "While the son of the Ganges is alive I will not fight in any way whatsoever," "*nāham yotsye*."¹⁸⁹ As the armies march out on the Day of Indra, Karna remains behind, alone and unarmored.¹⁹⁰

In *Udyogaparvan*, the structure of the *Mahābhārata*'s net becomes fully illumined, the facets of the jewels at the interstices begin to display radiantly their intricate reflections, and everywhere is the face of Karna. And where Karna is, so too is Arjuna, for they are the trunk(s) of the great terrestrial/celestial tree(s). *Udyogaparvan*'s second *adhyāya* is the *Bhagavadgītā*. The chapter opens with Saṃjaya rushing into the presence of Dhṛtarāṣṭra to announce that Bhīṣma has fallen. Loud and clear behind these lines is the unspoken announcement that Karna at last will fight, on the tenth day of the eighteen-day war. At the blind king's urging, Saṃjaya then recapitulates all that has occurred leading up to the fall of *Pitāmaha*, "Grandfather," Bhīṣma. He describes that first fateful morning when, with the two armies facing one another, brother against brother, cousin against cousin, father against son, Arjuna has lost heart, lay down his bow, and declared to his charioteer — in words nearly identical to Karna's — "I will not fight," *na yotsye*.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ 5.139.5

¹⁸⁹ *nāham jīvati gāngeye yotsye rājan katham cana* (5.153.25)

¹⁹⁰ The similarities here between Karna and Achilles cannot go unmentioned.

¹⁹¹ 6.24.9

These, then, are but a few examples of that "grid of conventions" upon which and against which the *Mahābhārata* operates. The complex shape of the *itihāsa* attests to a set of tacit agreements between a highly competent narrator and a highly competent audience that is capable of experiencing the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, as a written text, and of tasting its *rasa*. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the *Mahābhārata* takes up, explores, and complexifies the themes of *varna*, *kula*, and *dharma* through the character of Karna.

Chapter Three

Upholding the Self: Class, Lineage, and Karna

Arjuna's "*na yotsye*," "I will not fight," prompts the *Bhagavadgītā*. Karna's "*nāham yotsye*," "I will not fight," is unchallenged. Thus, the Kaurava troops assemble on the Kuru field without the mighty warrior who had called Duryodhana's troops to the yoke. He is not there when the two armies face one another. He is absent when Arjuna renounces his *ksatriya dharma* and lays down his bow. Karna is not there when both armies wait while the royal charioteer, the divine *sūta*, disputes Arjuna's declaration, reveals to his friend their human-divine twin-ship as Nara-Nārāyaṇa, and delivers the *itihāsa*'s central teaching on *dharma*, the *Bhagavadgītā*. For ten days Karna is alone, tormented, perhaps, by the demon whose name, Naraka, seems an ironic play on Nara-Nārāyaṇa. *Naraka* is a word for hell, the hell-on earth, *bhaumam narakam*, to which souls in the cycles of ignorance return life after life.¹⁹² Here may be the referent to which Karna's possession points. Karna is a fragmented being caught in a hellish conflict between his *svabhāva*, inherent nature, and the *svadharma* imposed by his *sūta* parents. Pledged in friendship to incarnate Kali, he is a man of the *kali yuga*, excluded from the twilight privileges enjoyed by his brothers who are lead by incarnate Viṣṇu from an age of partial truth into the age of dark ignorance. The *Mahābhārata* addresses an audience many centuries into the age of Kali; as such, Karna is their, our, representative. The *itihāsa*'s comprehensive exploration of *dharma* is nowhere more acutely focused than in

this unknowing son of the Sun. This chapter will take up some of the issues of *dharma* that the *itihāsa* addresses through Karna. *Dharma* will be examined specifically in relation to *kula*, "family," and *varṇa*, "class." Karna is kept ignorant of his *kula* and his *varṇa* until he has constructed for himself an identity impossible to abandon. Karna is indeed a lost soul; not knowing himself, his is a lifelong struggle to know his "self."

"All in all, one would probably prefer to have a self," begins David Shulman in his stunning analysis of the story of Nala, which is told to Yudhiṣṭhira during the twelve-year exile as part of his "education" in selfhood and kingship. Shulman continues:

Something minimally integrated and not wholly discontinuous, where memory, or its more powerful and personal multi-form, forgetting, could reside. Something to hide and veil, if need be, in the interests of preserving ultimacy in some residual, individual form. Even a fictive self might do — for however quixotic the investment in this nebulous entity, the anxiety attendant on denying its existence is, for most of us, surely worse.¹⁹³

Nala, with his addiction to dicing and consequent loss of -- and salvation through -- his wife, Damayantī, is a mirror of sorts for Yudhiṣṭhira. The *Nalopākhyāna*, "Story of Nala," is also a condensation of the themes that are the *itihāsa*'s overall concerns: the divided self, human agency and fate, the possibility of real self-knowledge -- all of which are implicated in the individual's search to know and manifest *svadharma*.¹⁹⁴ Nala is fragmented when he is possessed by the *asura* Kali; he is brought back to himself through

¹⁹² This process of transmigration is described by Yayāti in 1. 81-88.

¹⁹³ David Dean Shulman, "On Being Human in the Sanskrit Epic: The Riddle of Nala," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (March 1994): 1.

¹⁹⁴ The "ultimacy" of unified selfhood is, of course, the union of self and Self: *mokṣa*.

the agency of his wife, Damayanti, as the Pāṇḍavas are saved from slavery to incarnate Kali, Duryodhana, by Draupadi. Karna's choice of friendship with Kali-Duryodhana, and, we shall see, his rejection by Draupadi, trap him in the hell-on-earth, *naraka*, of those who know neither themselves nor what they know.

Dharma, says P. V. Kane, is one of those words "that defy all attempts at an exact rendering in English or any other tongue."¹⁹⁵ However, its centrality is everywhere affirmed. Says the *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*:

Dharma is the foundation of the whole universe. In this world people go unto a person who is best versed in *dharma* for guidance. By means of *dharma* one drives away evil. Upon *dharma* everything is founded. Therefore, *dharma* is called the highest good.¹⁹⁶

What, then, is *dharma*? In its traditional sense, *dharma* is essentially *varṇāśramadharma*, "the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Āryan community, as a member of one of the castes [varṇas] as a person in a particular stage of life [āśrama]."¹⁹⁷ However, the word is subtle, slippery, multifaceted. Manu defines *dharma* as that which is "constantly followed and assented to in the heart

¹⁹⁵ Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. I, Part I (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968), 1. Consult Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁹⁶ *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka* 10.79; Cited in: Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1: *From the Beginning to 1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 217.

¹⁹⁷ Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. II, Part I, translated by J. P. Sinha (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), 3.

by learned men, good men who have neither hatred nor passion."¹⁹⁸ One suspects that Manu intends to imply how uncommon is the man without passion or preference, how rare the man who follows *dharma*. Certainly one would look far for the man who knows in his heart the labyrinth of rules that is the *Manusmṛti*, "Laws of Manu."

Van Buitenen translates *dharma* uniformly as a capitalized "Law," not because "Law" is adequate or appropriate, he allows, but in order that the scholarly reader may recognize the original word and keep track of the vast scope of its meanings -- "and there is hardly a concept more fundamental to the epic."¹⁹⁹ Wilhelm Halbfass looks for *dharma*'s essence in its root, *dhṛ*, "to uphold," and the derivatives *dhāraṇa*, "upholding," and *dhārya*, that which "is to be upheld." *Dharma* refers to a "reciprocity of upholding," says Halbfass. It is "that upholding which is incumbent on qualified men, but it is also the condition under which such upholding is possible. It protects its protectors. ... Those who fulfill their *dharma* uphold the condition which upholds them."²⁰⁰ Kṛṣṇa tells the despondent Arjuna that his *dharma* is to act "while looking only to what holds together the world."²⁰¹ The reciprocal action, then, of "upholding" or "holding together" implies an agent who knows his *dharma* and is himself "held together," in possession of a unified self.

¹⁹⁸ Wendy and Brian K. Smith Doniger, trans. and eds., *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 17.

¹⁹⁹ J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. I: The Book of Beginnings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xli.

²⁰⁰ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 318-19.

²⁰¹ lokasamgraham evāpi sampaśyan kartum arhasi (6.25.20)

Dharma is central to the *itihāsa*'s discourse; the meaning and application of the concept is wrestled with throughout the eighteen *parvans*. Arjuna is instructed in fulfilling his *ksatriya dharma* – an enterprise that demands from him an unquestioning obedience and leads to terrible violence. Yudhiṣṭhīra is instructed, all but endlessly, on what his *rāja dharma* demands – an enterprise to which he only reluctantly agrees.²⁰² For Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhīra the challenge is deceptively straightforward: they must learn to assume the duties and privileges conferred by birth into a particular *varna*. The fact is, however, that by the time of the events described in the *Mahābhārata*, the four original *varṇas*, created, as the *Rgveda* famously recounts, with the very first sacrifice of the primordial *Purusa*,²⁰³ have become thoroughly intermixed. Yet, the very foundation of *dharma* includes the correct relationship between the four *varṇas* along with the correct relationship between the "three worlds" -- the "triple world," *trilokya*, consisting of the heavenly abode of the gods, the nether world of the *asuras*, and the earth. When anything goes wrong on earth, the relationship between the three worlds is damaged. Because they are the gods' elder brothers, the *asuras* are always stronger than the gods, so much so that

²⁰² In fact, as Brockington notes, it is symptomatic of the *Mahābhārata*'s approach to *dharma* that Yudhiṣṭhīra, referred to as Dharmarāja, King Dharma, is the least decisive of the five brothers, as Draupadi is quick to point out on various occasions. John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 242.

²⁰³ "His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior [*ksatriya*], his thighs the People [*vaiśyas*], and from his feet the Servants [*sūdras*] were born." (*Rgveda* 10.90.12), in: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 31.

dharma is drawn repeatedly towards disintegration.²⁰⁴ As recounted in the *Mahābhārata*,²⁰⁵ the *asuras* are forever attempting to drive the gods out of heaven by taking hold of the earth, becoming powerful *ksatriyas* and causing disorder. When the Earth, *Bhūmi*, becomes overburdened with these human-born demons, she appeals to Brahmā for relief. Then Brahmā commands the other gods to take birth with a portion of themselves. Most importantly, he sends Viṣṇu to earth as the *avatāra*. Then comes a great destruction. The powerful Bhṛgu Paraśurāma, says Vaiśampāyana, fulfilling Brahmā's will, already has had cause to clear the earth of *ksatriyas* twenty-one times over. Each time, the surviving *ksatriya* women mated with brahmin men, thereby revitalizing the warrior class, and establishing a practice of *varpa* intermixture down through the generations.

The ancient writers on *dharmaśāstra* strove mightily to account for the bewildering ramifications of the four *varṇas* spoken of in the *Rgveda*. The *śāstras* are unanimous that the numerous classes found in the country resulted from the unions of males of various *varṇas* with women of different *varṇas*.²⁰⁶ The *Mahābhārata* is concerned with this issue, and addresses it by raising the question of the inherent relationship between conduct and birth. How important is conduct? Can it modify *varṇa*? To what extent is conduct influenced by *varṇa*? How important is *skula*, "lineage?"

²⁰⁴ Madeleine Biardeau, "Some Remarks on the Links between the Epics, the *Purāṇas* and Their Vedic Sources," in *Studies in Hinduism*, ed. Gerhard Oberhammer (Wein: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 75-76.

²⁰⁵ 1.58.

²⁰⁶ Kane, *Vol. II, Part I*, 50.

Some of the *Mahābhārata*'s didactic passages suggest that conduct is most important, as in the dialogue between of the brahmin and the hunter, where the assertion is that when a man, even a *śūdra*, abides by righteousness he lays claim to brahminhood.²⁰⁷ However, such assertions are primarily theoretical. In the *itihāsa*'s "relentless, bleak vision"²⁰⁸ of reality, the truth is far more complex. The Pāṇḍavas, for instance, are especially sensitive to their class purity and its privileges. They cannot countenance Arjuna stooping to fight *sūtaputra* Karna, they see no wrong in arranging for a lowly *Niśāda* woman and her five sons to be burnt alive in the lacquer house in order to save their own *ksatriya* lives,²⁰⁹ nor do they balk at Drona's request for the *Niśāda* Ekalavya's thumb in order to protect Arjuna's *ksatriya* superiority and *amour propre*.

The Earthly Origins

On the battlefield, a disheartened Arjuna expresses to Kṛṣṇa his grave concerns about the evil caused by the destruction of family, *kula kṣayakṛtam dosam*. The destruction of eternal family laws, *kula dharmāḥ sanātanāḥ*, he says, results in the corruption of family women, *kula striyāḥ*, and then class miscegenation, *varṇa samkaraḥ*.²¹⁰ Issues of *kula dharma* and *varṇa dharma* are significant themes in the *itihāsa*'s multivocal discourse, and particularly as concerns the blurring of lines between *ksatriyas* and brahmins. The martial teachers of the Pāṇḍavas, Kṛpa and Drona, are

²⁰⁷ 3.203.10-12

²⁰⁸ The adjectives are David Shulman's. David Dean Shulman, "Towards a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics," *International Folklore Review* 8 (1991): 11.

²⁰⁹ 1.124-38.

brahmins who have taken up weapons. On two occasions, to be discussed below, the Pāṇḍavas disguise themselves as brahmins. Now, according to the *dharmaśāstras*, one kind of *varṇa saṃkara*, "intermixture of castes," is considered to be in the natural order of things. A woman may marry a man of a higher *varṇa*. When the *ksatriya* women mate with brahmin men after one of Paraśurāma's periodic destructions, the union is considered *anuloma*, "with the grain," whereas the union of a woman with a man of lower caste is considered *pratiloma*, "against the grain." Chapter Ten of *Manusmṛti* details the classes that result from *pratiloma* unions, and all of them are considered outside the traditional four-class hierarchy of brahmins, *ksatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras*. Members of these groups, says Manu, can be recognized by their own "innate activities,"²¹¹ whether they reveal or attempt to conceal their identities. The union of a brahmin woman with a *ksatriya* man produces the *sūta*, the class to which Karna believes he belongs. In this light, then, let us turn to Yayāti. His is a complex and subtle tale, befitting the progenitor of the *kulas*, both noble and base, that populate Bhāratavarṣa, the land of the descendants of King Bharata, including the *Mahābhārata*'s main characters.²¹²

The complexities of the lineages originating from Yayāti are introduced in *Adiparvan*, and are a narrative strategy that prepares the audience for the *itihāsa*'s examination of class and family through its main characters, particularly Karna, whose confused parentage is developed as a central theme. Yayāti's story calls into question the

²¹⁰ 6.23.39-41. (*Bhagavadgītā* 1.39-41)

²¹¹ Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, 240.

²¹² 1.70-80

caste "purity" of the Pāñdavas and Kauravas, and of the *ksatriya* class in general at the time of the events the *itihāsa* describes. In ages past, relates Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya, in the on-going feud between *devas* and *asuras*, the gods had chosen Bṛhaspati as their priest, and the demons had chosen as theirs Śukra Uśanas Kāvya. Śukra, a powerful Bhṛgu brahmin (see Chapter Two), possesses the knowledge of revivification, giving the demons a tremendous advantage over the gods. The *devas* request Bṛhaspati's son Kaca to study with Śukra and attempt to gain his secret knowledge, but the *asuras* discover Kaca's identity and kill him. Meanwhile, Śukra's daughter, Devayāni, has fallen in love with Kaca. She pleads with her father to restore his life. The young man is revived by Śukra's occult knowledge, only to be killed once again by the *asuras*. This time the demons grind up Kaca and slip his remains into Śukra's wine. When Śukra learns what he has drunk, he realizes that he will split wide open and die if Kaca is brought back to life; there is no solution but to reveal the precious secret of revivification to the man inside him. Then, when Kaca explodes from Śukra's stomach he is able in turn to revivify the priest. Kaca, now in possession of Śukra's knowledge, is ready to return to his home among the *devas*, but Devayāni confesses her love and pleads with him to marry her. Kaca refuses the girl on grounds of *dharma*. He is Devayāni's brother, he says, since he has emerged from the belly of her father. When Devayāni is unable to shake his resolution, she curses Kaca that his magic will never be

successful. Kaca in turn curses Devayānī that her desire never will be fulfilled, for no brahmin ever will take her hand.²¹³

Some time after Kaca's departure, brahmin Devayānī is conversing with the *ksatriya* princess Śarmiṣṭhā, the daughter of the *asura* king Vṛṣaparvan, in whose dependence is Śukra, Devayānī's father. Devayānī insists on her superiority as a brahmin by birth. Śarmiṣṭhā retorts witheringly that a priest must beg and flatter to gain his living from a king, and proceeds to throw the brahmin girl into a well, where she abandons her. Fortuitously, King Yayāti rides by, discovers Devayānī, and offers his right hand to pull her out of the well. She rushes off to her father and insists that to pay for her cruel deed, the *asura* princess must become her slave. Later, when Devayānī and the enslaved Śarmiṣṭhā are out in the woods, Yayāti again rides by. Devayānī confronts him and insists that since he once had taken her by the right hand he is bound to marry her.²¹⁴ Like Yama and Kaca before him, the king resists what he judges a brazen proposal. "From one body have sprung the four *varṇas*," he says, "their *dharma* and their purity vary, but the brahmin is the best."²¹⁵ Yayāti will not marry a woman of a higher class.²¹⁶ In the end, Devayānī, whom Kaca cursed never to marry a man of her own brahmin

²¹³ 1.72.18-19

²¹⁴ Taking a woman by the hand is an important part of the Vedic marriage ceremony, signifying the woman's adoption into the realm of a man's property, as it were. See Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press), 216, 224.

²¹⁵ *ekadchodbhavā varṇāś catvāro 'pi varāṅgane*

prthag dharmāḥ prthak śaucāḥ teṣāṁ tu brāhmaṇo varah (1.76.19)

²¹⁶ Manu says that the "ritual of taking the bride by the hand is prescribed for women of the same class." 3.43, in Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, 47.

varṇa, wins over the king and convinces her brahmin father to accept this *pratiloma*, "against the grain," marriage.²¹⁷ Šukra agrees on one condition: Yayāti never must sleep with Šarmiṣṭhā.

This sexual prohibition anticipates the inevitable: Šarmiṣṭhā seduces Yayāti. The king begets five sons. The two born from Devayāni, Yadu and Turvaśu, are legitimate heirs to the throne but produced through a *pratiloma* union and technically low-caste. Šarmiṣṭhā clandestinely bears Druhyu, Anu, and Pūru – illegitimate offspring but born *anuloma*, "with the grain," and thus legitimate *kṣatriyas*. Already the purity of Yayāti's *kula* is compromised. Eventually the king's double life is exposed. Outraged, Šukra curses Yayāti to immediate old age, with one mitigating condition: Yayāti may pass on his decrepitude for a time to whomever will accept it. Beginning with the eldest, the king pleads with each of his sons to assume the curse, promising to take back the old age after a millennium. One by one, the sons refuse, each thereby earning a curse -- curses that will be passed down for generations.

To Yadu, Devayāni's firstborn, Yayāti says: "You were born of my heart, but because you will not give me your youth there will be no share of the kingdom for you

²¹⁷ The marriage of Bhārgava Šukra's daughter Devayāni to the *kṣatriya* Yayāti is the only *pratiloma* marriage on record in brahminical literature. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 162.

and your descendants."²¹⁸ Upon Turvasu, the second son from Yayāti's *pratiloma* marriage, Yayāti calls a more terrible curse:

Turvasu, you were born of my heart, but because you will not give me your youth, your descendants will face utter destruction. You, fool, will be king over a people whose *dharma* and behavior are "against the grain," who eat meat, fornicate with their gurus' wives and with beasts. You will rule over evil barbarians with the *dharma* of cattle.²¹⁹

Śarmiṣṭhā's eldest son, Druhyu, is cursed that as a non-*kṣatriya* he and his line "will acquire the title of Bhojas in a land where the only water conveyance is raft or ferry."²²⁰ Anu, Śarmiṣṭhā's second, is cursed to old age and ritual impurity: "Your descendants will die in their youth, and you will violate the sacred fire."²²¹ At last, the youngest, Pūru, agrees to assume his father's curse. "My dear son," says Yayāti, "I am pleased with you, and because of my pleasure I will grant that your descendants will succeed in all their desires and rule the kingdom."²²² After a thousand years, Yayāti, sated with pleasure and

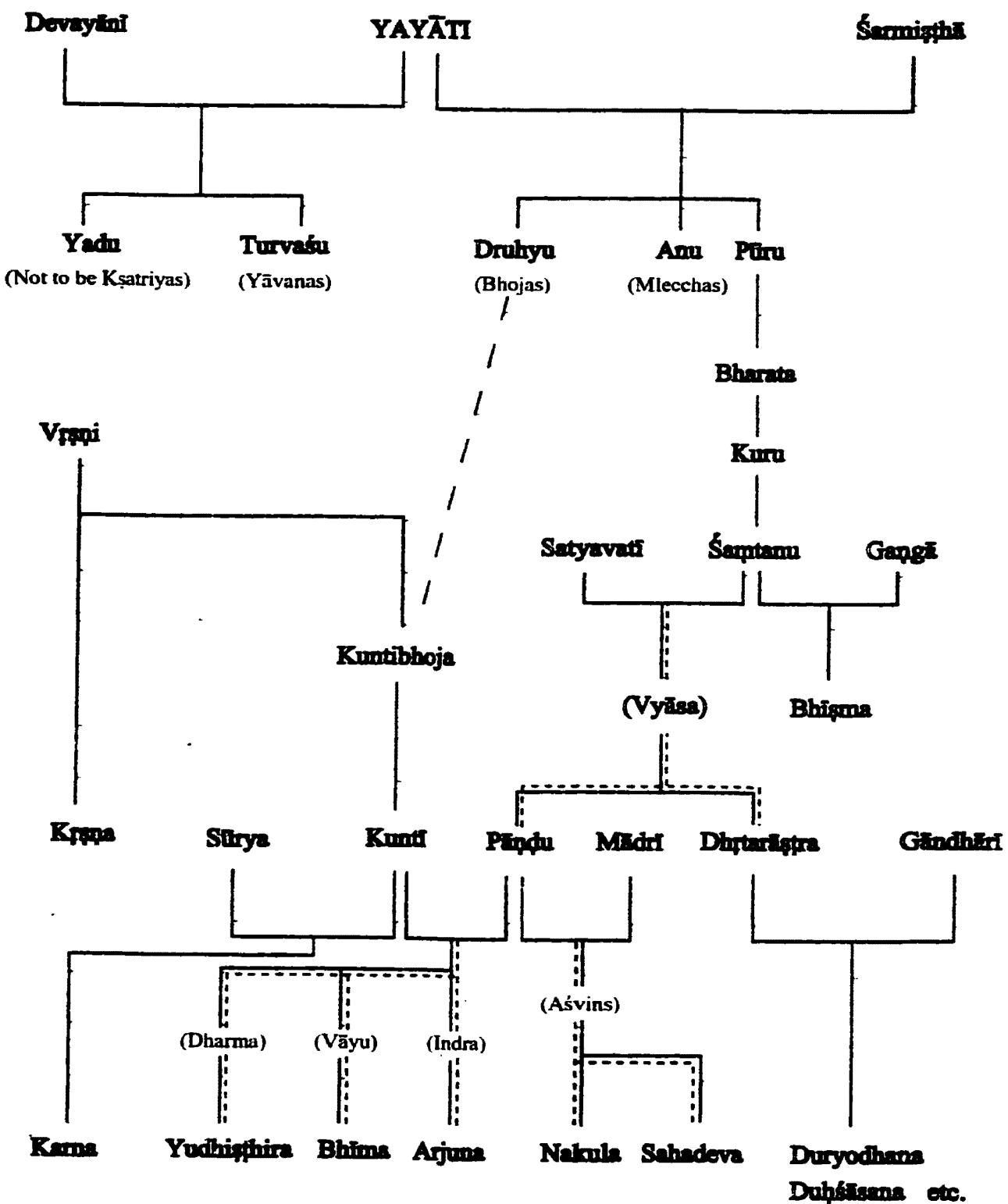
²¹⁸ *yat tvam me hṛdayāj jāto vayaḥ svam na prayacchasi tasmād arājyabhāk tāta prajā te vai bhavīyati* (1.79.7)

²¹⁹ *yat tvam me hṛdayāj jāto vayaḥ svam na prayacchasi asmāt prajā samucchedaṁ turvaso tava yāsyati samkīrṇācāra dharmeṣu pratiloma careṣu ca piśitāsiṣu cāntyeṣu mūḍha rājā bhavīyasi guru dāraprasakteṣu tiryagyonyigateṣu ca*
pasudharmiṣu pāpesu mleccheṣu prabhavīyasi (1.79.11-13)

²²⁰ *uḍupa plava samtāro yatra nityaṁ bhavīyati arājā bhojaśambdaṁ tvam tatrāvāpsyasi sānvayaḥ* (1.79.19)

²²¹ *prajāś ca yauvanaprāptā vinaśiṣyanty ano tava agnipraskandana paras tvam cāpy evam bhavīyasi* (1.79.23)

²²² *pūro prīto 'smi te vatsa prītaś cedaṁ dadāmi te sarvakāmasamṛddhā te prajā rājye bhavīyati* (1.79.30)



good to his word, rewards Pūru with youth and sovereignty over the central Indian kingdom.

Yayāti's eldest and youngest sons, Yadu and Pūru, father the lineages that will come to dominate Bhāratavarṣa. Yadu, born of a brahmin woman and a *ksatriya* man, is, according to the *dharmaśāstras*, a *sūta*.²²³ In the Yādava lineage are the Vṛṣnis, Kṛṣṇa's people; Kṛṣṇa's role as Arjuna's charioteer seems an ironic nod to his *sūta* lineage. Kṛṣṇa is, properly, a chieftain, not a king, a fact that will become mortally important at Yudhiṣṭhīra's *rājasūya*, "Royal Consecration" (see below). Of the offspring of Śarmiṣṭhā's two eldest sons, Druhyu's Bhojas are exiled to the backwaters, while Anu's descendants are ritually impure. The worst curse of all is Turvaśu's: his *kula*, the Yāvanas, are the *mlecchas*, "barbarian" Greeks and other westerners.²²⁴ Yet even the blessed Paurava *kula* of the youngest son, Pūru, from which King Bhārata will be born seventeen generations later, originates from an *asura* princess who is a king's concubine.

Both the Bhoja and Yādava *kulas* come together in Kuntibhoja, the father of Kuntī. Kuntī's sons bring the blood of exiles and *sūtas* into the *kula* of Pūru and Kuru. Moreover, the Pāṇḍavas belong to the Kaurava *kula* only by convention. Their nominal

²²³ Kane notes that the *Atharvaveda* already attests to the *sūta* caste (AV III.5.7). Kane, *Vol. II, Part I*, 43.

²²⁴ Bruce Lincoln has written a delightful analysis of Yayāti's story. The nineteenth British Orientalist Sir William Jones, it seems, took the claims of Indian pandits that Westerners descended from Yayāti son Turvaśu as a compliment, entirely missing the densely coded and complex allusions of that story, thus misapprehending the none too flattering intentions and the sly subtlety of his Indian interlocutors who considered the British *pratiloma mlecchas*, "against the grain barbarians." Bruce Lincoln,

father, Pāṇḍu, although he claims Kuru lineage, is the son of Ambālikā, a princess from Vārāṇasī, and Vyāsa, illegitimate son of Satyavatī. By blood, through Kuntī, the Pāṇḍavas belong to the cursed lineages of Yadu and Druhyu. When Yudhiṣṭhīra is planning his Royal Consecration, Kṛṣṇa makes a curious statement that appears to confirm the *varṇa samkara*, "confusion of castes," that has gone into forming contemporary *ksatriyas*. Kṛṣṇa refers to the tradition that Paraśurāma has destroyed the *ksatriya* race many times over. From the remnants of the last destruction, says Kṛṣṇa, "comes that inferior order known as the *ksatriyas*. Their *kula* was determined by the *ksatriyas* on the authority of their word, as you know, O Bull of the Bharatas."²²⁵ Kṛṣṇa indicates that the *ksatriyas* of the present age can claim *ksatriya* purity only through their "authority" – that is, through verbal assertions backed by strength of arms. These, then, are the complex and polluted bloodlines of the *Mahābhārata*'s *ksatriya* characters. In this context, Karna's manifest confusion about his *varṇa*, *kula*, and *dharma* appears more transparent and honest than his brothers' arrogant, and baseless, claims to a pure lineage.

The general belief that Karna belongs to a base *kula* and *varṇa* causes Karna intense suffering and humiliation. In particular, Bhīṣma and Draupadī seem to despise Karna on account of his low birth, and the dynamics of Karna's relationships with these

Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 192-206.

²²⁵ jāmadagnyena rāmene kṣatram yad avaśeṣitam
tasmād avarajam loke yad idam kṣatrasamjñitam
kṛto 'yam kulasamkalpah kṣatriyair vasudhādhipa
nideśavāgbhis tat te ha viditam bharatarsabha
(2. 13. 2-3.)

two will be a focus of this chapter. Draupadī's belief that Karna is a *sūta* influences her behavior towards him, although in truth Karna belongs to the human *kula* of Draupadī's five husbands. However, Karna belongs to another *kula* through his divine father, Sūrya, a *kula* Bhīṣma as well can claim. The following section will look beyond the narrative proper to examine how the *Mahābhārata* includes Karna's paternal, solar *kula* in its net. Thereafter, I will examine the *itihāsa*'s focused exploration of *varpa*, *kula*, and *dharma* through Karna's human relationships and friendships, which cannot be understood adequately without reference to divine lineages.

The Solar Kula: Vedic Origins

As discussed above, this dissertation assumes that the *Mahābhārata*'s model audience or interpretive community is highly literate; it is an audience whose narrative competence renders it alert to allusions to other literary traditions, including the Vedic and *upanisadic*. Rather than assuming centuries of accretion during which mythic themes and figures were interpolated into the *Mahābhārata*, we assume that the *itihāsa*'s author was deliberately synthetic, drawing upon a rich tradition to add ever more texture and complexity to the poem. Therefore, we may ask what the audience brought to the text in the way of shared interpretive strategies. I follow Biardeau in granting, if only as a hypothesis, that the *itihāsa* has a single author who was a brahmin living in dependence of a royal court.²²⁶ This helps to account for the *itihāsa*'s double "frame," the *kṣatriya sarpasattra*, and the brahminical twelve-year session in the Naimiṣa forest. I contend that

it is written for a model audience familiar with the ancient material and capable of appreciating literary references to it. The *Mahābhārata*, notes Barbara Gombach, "uses a capacious notion of the Vedas... as a repository of treasured and ancient authority that enables us to make sense of even the most unthinkable human events."²²⁷ Agreeing with Gombach, and reading synchronically, from *itihāsa* to myth, I will argue that Vedic tales about the children of Sūrya provide a framework for understanding significant but at times obscure dimensions of Karna's life, and the lives of other characters as well. I will argue that this mythology is a crucial subtext in understanding the *Mahābhārata*'s pragmatic exploration of *kula* and *varṇa*, and the adequacy of *dharma* to deal with life situations.

The *Mahābhārata* presents itself as a "fifth Veda," sprung from the mind of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, himself a *brahmarsi*, a "seer of the *brahman*." The *itihāsa* opens with a group of brahmins asking the *sūta* Ugraśravas to recite Vyāsa's work, now joined to the collection of the four Vedas, which is "imbued with *dharma* and wards off all danger of evil."²²⁸ In other words, at its very beginning the *itihāsa* presents itself first and foremost as respected by a community of brahmins as a quasi-Vedic text that, in some essential way, reveals the ultimate pattern of the cosmos and the proper place of human beings in

²²⁶ Biardeau, "Some Remarks," 87-88.

²²⁷ Barbara Gombach, "How Did the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* Become Old?" Paper presented at the International Conference on the *Mahābhārata* (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001).

²²⁸ *vedaiś caturbhiḥ samitāṁ vyāsasyādbhuta karmaṇaḥ
saṁhitāṁ śrotum icchāmo dharmaṁ pāpabhayāpahām* 1.1.19

that pattern.²²⁹ However, the bard makes it clear that Vyāsa's "Veda" is something *new*. For one thing, while it is sanctioned by brahmins, it deals with *ksatriya* stories and was recited by the *sūta* Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya and men of arms like himself.²³⁰ The *sūta* claims for the *itihāsa* the kind of mantric power proper to the *samhitās* — simply hearing all or parts of the *Mahābhārata* brings long life, fame, and entrance to heaven.²³¹ Moreover, it is a "sacred Upaniṣad," *upaniṣadām puṇyām*.²³² The *Mahābhārata* names itself a very particular kind of Vedic work: it is the "Veda of Kṛṣṇa," *kārṣṇām vedam*.²³³ This "Veda" is available not only to twice-born males, but to all members of society, including women and *sūdras*. Thus, the *itihāsa* claims for itself an extraordinary authority, permitting it to appropriate Vedic metaphors, teachings, philosophy, and mythology, and to cast these in its own terms. The assumption of the narrative is that the events recounted within it established a new social and political order, as well as a new religious order, characteristic of the *kali* age. This dissertation argues that the *itihāsa* appropriates Vedic mythology and gods, as well as *upaniṣadic* philosophy, in particular the *Upaniṣads'* valuation of renunciation of the world as a path to *mokṣa*, using it all as a

²²⁹ James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*'s Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 164.

²³⁰ James Fitzgerald points out how the *itihāsa* cleverly portrays the discrepancy in the interests of the two groups, the Naimiṣa sages and those present at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. The brahmins are shown as completely ignorant of the make-up of a *ksatriya* army, *akṣauhiṇī*, and when Ugraśravas mentions the eighteen *akṣauhiṇīs* that fought in the Bharata war, the sages interrupt him and demand to know what an *akṣauhiṇī* is. (1.2.13-19) Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda," 164, note 26.

²³¹ yaś cemamś ūṇuyān nityam ārṣamś ūraddhāsamanvitah
sa dīrgham āyuh kīrtim ca svargatim cāpnuyān naraḥ (1.120.7)

²³² 1.1.191

part of its great exploration of the dilemma of human beings lost in the dark ignorance and attempting to comprehend self, world, and divinity.²³⁴ An exploration of the myriad Vedic and *upanisadic* references in the *Mahābhārata* is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, beginning from the premise that such references are present, this chapter will explore how the *itihāsa* carries out that appropriation through the character of Karna by bringing many conflicting viewpoints into play, studying their points of congruence and tension, and usually failing to resolve them into any unilateral position.²³⁵

The *Rgveda* is a work by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women, who frequently appear in the hymns, not so much as agents as troubling and dangerous objects.²³⁶ In the *Mahābhārata*, women continue to be troubling and dangerous, but now they are powerful agents, working behind the scenes, initiating and manipulating events. Karna's solar *kula* helps to account for the significant shift in attitudes towards women to which the *Mahābhārata* attests. It also provides a

²³³ 1.1.205

²³⁴ There are numerous instances in the *Mahābhārata* devoted to the subject of gaining salvation, *mokṣa*. Some, such as Sanatsujāta's teaching to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, teach a monistic Vedantic philosophy. Other instances, notably the lengthy "*mokṣa-dharma*" segment of *Sāntiparvan*, while decidedly *upanisadic* in flavor, advocate a dualistic *sāṃkhyan* worldview in which matter, *prakṛti*, is distinct from soul, *ātman*. I would argue that each of these various sections demands to be read within its context if it is to be integrated into the *itihāsa*'s wholeness.

²³⁵ Shulman, "Towards a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics," 11-12.

²³⁶ See O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 245. For a comprehensive study of women in ancient India consult: Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press); Stephanie

reference point in coming to terms with Karna's troubled and troubling relationships with Kuntī and Draupadī, and helps to account for the behavior of these and other powerful female characters.

Āditya, Sūrya, Vivasvat, Mārtāṇḍa, and Savitṛ are among the names of the Sun god. In the *Rgveda* they refer to different aspects of the Sun, but in the *itihāsa* these distinctions are blurred and the epithets are used interchangeably.²³⁷ The Sun is Āditya, son of Aditi, primordial progenitress of the gods, whose Elixir-born golden earrings are worn for a time by Karna (see Chapter Two). Aditi had eight sons; seven became immortal, but Aditi threw the eighth, Mārtāṇḍa, aside, for he was born an unformed mass.²³⁸ Later Mārtāṇḍa's brothers pare him down and shape him into the solar disc.²³⁹ *Mārtāṇḍa* means "sprung from a lifeless egg," a reference to miscarriage and mortality.²⁴⁰ Elsewhere the *Rgveda* identifies the parents of the Sun as Sky and Earth, Dyaus and Pṛthivī,²⁴¹ another lineage to which the *Mahābhārata* will allude.

Jamison, *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

²³⁷ A look at Sörensen's *Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata* amply illustrates this point. Søren Sörensen, *An Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata with Short Explanations and a Concordance to the Bombay and Calcutta Editions and P. C. Roy's Translation* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904 - 1925), 636, 662, 751.

²³⁸ *Rgveda* 10.72.

²³⁹ *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.3.3.

²⁴⁰ Mārtāṇḍa, like Yama and Manu, his sons, is an ancestor of humanity and born to die. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 40.

²⁴¹ For example, see *Rgveda* 1.160.

The Sun as Sūrya is personified in the *Rgveda* as a resplendent charioteer, driving his shining car across the sky.²⁴² One of Sūrya's earliest known representations, a terra-cotta medallion from Bihar, dates from the late third century BCE, during the Maurya period, when the *Mahābhārata* may have been taking its written shape. Here Sūrya carries a bow and drives a chariot drawn by four horses.²⁴³ A relief at Bodh Gāya from the first century BCE depicts Sūrya driving a one-wheeled chariot, the wheel representing the solar disc.²⁴⁴ In the *Rgveda*'s single myth about Sūrya, he is defeated in battle by Indra, who steals his chariot wheel.²⁴⁵ When, in the *Mahābhārata*, the wheel of Karna's chariot sinks into the bloody Kuru Field and Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna, son of Indra, to shoot the fatal arrow, the obvious Vedic reference emphasizes the dramatic irony. However, over-zealous attempts to read Vedic parallels systematically into the *itihāsa* obscure its literary nature. Georges Dumézil seized upon the parallel chariot wheel stories as an example of the mythic "transpositions" that, in his view, crept into the *Mahābhārata*.

²⁴² For example, see *Rgveda* 1.115; 4.13; 5.29; 10.37, and 1.50.

²⁴³ The art historian Stephen Markel believes that the four horses reveal a Hellenistic influence; in the Vedas, the solar chariot is almost always drawn by seven horses. Stephen Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, Studies in Asian Thought and Religion, vol. 16 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 22, and Figure 4.

²⁴⁴ B. N. Chapekar, "Sūrya in Mahābhārata: A Study in Iconography," in *Studies in Indology and Medieval History*, ed. M. S. Mate and G. T. Kulkarni (Poona: Loshi & Lokhande Prakashan, 1974), 35, Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, Figure 5.

²⁴⁵ A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (1912; reprint, Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1963), 31.

tvā yujā ni khidat sūryasyendraścakram sahasā sadya indro

over the centuries, even pre-Vedic centuries, at the hands of whole schools of *savants*.²⁴⁶

My contention is that the *Mahābhārata*'s author, through a masterful and deliberate use of allusion, addresses a knowledgeable audience capable of appreciating the references. In Dumézil's rigorous scheme, Karna must *be* Sūrya, just as Arjuna *is* Indra, Yudhiṣṭhīra *is* Dharma, and so on. However, the *itihāsa* rather indicates that Karna is *like* Sūrya, as son is like father and father's father. Karna is pictured gazing up at the Sun, worshipping the Sun, and the Sun is shown to be solicitous of Karna's well being. Karna's enmity with Arjuna -- who is *like* his father, Indra -- may continue a vendetta of the older generations. If we are to understand the narrative's Vedic allusions, we must look to the *kula* of Sūrya.

Sūrya's marriage and progeny are mentioned throughout the early literature.²⁴⁷

None of the accounts represents the story in detail, but the basic elements are these:

Tvaṣṭṛ, architect of the gods, gives his daughter Saranyū in marriage to the Sun Vivasvat. Saranyū is the twin sister of three-headed Trisiras, a great enemy of Indra. Male-female twinship continues in the *kula* and is a significant motif throughout the *itihāsa*. Saranyū gives birth to the twins Yama and Yami. Then the gods decide to hide the immortal woman from her inferior mortal husband.²⁴⁸ A double of Saranyū is fashioned to whom

adhiṣṭunā bṛhatā vartamānam mahō druho apa viṣvāyu dhāyi (*Rgveda* 4.28.2) cakram... muṣāya indra sūryam (*Rgveda* 4.30.4); muṣāya suryam kave cakram (*Rgveda* 1.175.4)

²⁴⁶ Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 131.

²⁴⁷ *Rgveda* 10.17.1-2; *Nirukta* 12.10; *Bṛhaddevatā* 6.162-3. Translated in: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed. and trans., *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 60-61.

²⁴⁸ The apparent anomaly of the sun being both divine and mortal surely is because the sun is reborn and "dies" each day.

the twins are entrusted. The real Saranyū then flees, disguised as a mare. Before Vivasvat becomes aware of the deception he begets Manu upon the substitute wife. When he discovers the switch, he changes himself into a stallion, pursues Saranyū, and mates with her, producing the twin Aśvins. These themes of deception, disguise, mutilation, twinship, and rejection by the mother continue to haunt the solar *kula* and will haunt the figures in the *itihāsa* to whom that *kula* points, particularly Karṇa; but Karṇa is not the only character those themes point to, as we will see. This chapter will develop the idea that issues raised with Yama and Yami, the abandoned twins of Sūrya and Saranyū, are particularly relevant to the *itihāsa*.

One of the *Rgveda*'s most curious stories or "conversation hymns"²⁴⁹ is the dialogue of the twins Yama and Yami.²⁵⁰ It compellingly recalls – or anticipates, we might say -- Kaca's and Yayāti's conversations with Devayāni. Yami feels desire for Yama; she argues that they two were created man and wife in their mother's womb – to unite sexually would be as legitimate as the union of Sky, Dyaus, and Earth, Pṛithivī, spoken of in a dual compound, *Dyāvāpṛithivī*, emphasizing their inseparability.

Desire for Yama has come upon me, Yami, the desire to lie with him [Yama] upon the same bed. Let me open my body to him as a wife to her husband. Let us roll about together like the two wheels of one chariot.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ O'Flaherty points out that this genre is particularly associated with fertility, and that all the dialogues with women deal with situations in which one member is trying to persuade the other to engage in some sort of sexual activity. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 245.

²⁵⁰ *Rgveda* 10.10.

²⁵¹ yamasya māyamyam kāma āgan samāne yonau sahasheyāya jāyeva patye tanvam riricyam vi cid vṛheva rathyeva cakrā (10.10.7)

Yama refuses.

Never will I mingle my body with your body. They call a man who unites with his sister a sinner. Arrange your lustful pleasures with some other man, not with me, lovely lady. Your brother does not want this.²⁵²

Yamī is angry and frustrated. "Alas, Yama, how feeble you are. I have not been able to find any mind or heart in you."²⁵³ The dialogue ends in an impasse.²⁵⁴ Yama's refusal to be a twin-wheel of one chariot brings to mind the solitary wheel of the chariot driven by his father, the Sun.

In the early literature, little more is heard of the twins. However, Yamī does appear under another name, Nirṛti, "destruction," an epithet she alludes to in her dialogue with Yama: "What use is a brother when there is no protection? What use is a sister when *nirṛti* enters?"²⁵⁵ In the Vedas, to lie in the "lap of Nirṛti" is a terrible curse, a punishment for the worst kinds of sins.²⁵⁶ As a goddess, Nirṛti represents the opposite of

I follow here the translation by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 247-49.

²⁵² na vā ute tanvā tanvām sām papṛcyām pāpamāhuryaḥsvasāram nigachāt
anyena mat pramudāḥ kalpayasva na tebhrāta subhage vaṣṭyetat (10.10.12)

²⁵³ bato batasi yama naiva te mano hṛdayam cāvidāma (10.10.13.1)

²⁵⁴ The *Maitrāyaṇi Samhitā* contains a touching story about the bereavement of the immortal sister at her mortal brother's death. To help Yamī forget her grief, the gods create night and it becomes yesterday. Cited in: Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology From the Vedas to the Puranas* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1978), 96-99.

²⁵⁵ kim bhrātāśad yad anāthām bhavāti kim u svasā yan nirṛtir nigacchāt (*Rgveda* 10.10.11)

²⁵⁶ Thus the worshipper prays to be protected from the lap of Nirṛti, *nirṛter upupasthāt*. (10.18.10) See also *Rgveda* 7.104.9; 10.95.14.

the blessings a sacrificer prays for. She is decrepitude, decay, anger, need, and death.²⁵⁷ Thus, we can hear the veiled threat in Yami's words to her aloof twin: "What use is a sister when *nirṛti* enters?" By rejecting his loving "other," his twin self, he is doomed to lie in a more terrible lap. In the *Brāhmaṇas*, as the character of Yama grows more complex and malevolent, his partner, still identified as his twin sister, is always the malign goddess *Nirṛti*.²⁵⁸ A bringer of pain, dark and in dark clothing, she is said to live, like Yama, in the south, the direction of the dead. *Nirṛti* is given offerings to keep her away from the sacrifice and the affairs of humans in general.²⁵⁹ "May *Nirṛti* depart to distant places," says one prayer.²⁶⁰

Sukumari Bhattacharji suggests that the conversation hymn of Yama and Yami had to end abruptly, in order to avoid the inevitability of incest.²⁶¹ The Vedas express deep unease with the apparent inevitability of incest to bring about the first act of creation. In order to procreate, the primordial, solitary male necessarily must create a second by dividing himself. "When the father shed his seed in his own daughter, he spilt his seed on the earth as he united with her."²⁶² By the time of the *Upaniṣads*, the physical act of "incest" is subsumed in concerns about the self, *ātman* -- that is, concerns about the

²⁵⁷ David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 178.

²⁵⁸ Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, 96-99.

²⁵⁹ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 178.

²⁶⁰ parātaram su nirṛtitir jihitām (*Rgveda* 10.59. 1-4)

²⁶¹ Bhattacharji contends that the *Rgveda* dialogue has its roots in the *Avesta* story of Yimi and Yimak, which does end in incest. Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, 93.94.

²⁶² pitā yat svār̄p duhitaramadhiṣkan kṣmayā retaḥsamjagmāno ni śiñcat (*Rgveda* 10.61.7.1)

human experience of a divided self and the individual's desire and pursuit of the whole.

In the beginning, says the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

...this world was just a single body (*ātman*). He looked around and saw nothing but himself. ... He found no pleasure at all; so one finds no pleasure when one is alone. He wanted to have a companion. Now he was as large as a man and a woman in close embrace. So he split (*pat*) his body into two, giving rise to husband (*pati*) and wife (*patni*). Surely this is why Yājñavalkya used to say: 'The two of us are like two halves of a block.' The space here, therefore, is completely filled by the woman. He copulated with her, and from their union human beings were born.²⁶³

The passage seems to affirm the legitimacy of the union of male and female "twins," "two halves of a block," two wheels of one chariot. Elsewhere, however, the *Upaniṣads* warn forcefully against the pursuit of anything other than a return to the *ātman*'s primordial singularity. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, it is Yama himself, become the stern lord of death,²⁶⁴ who teaches Naciketas to distinguish between the "good" and the merely "gratifying." Yama praises the youth for having firmly rejected "things people desire,

²⁶³ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-3. I have followed here the translation of Patrick Olivelle. Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13-14. We cannot help but hear Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*: "So when the original body was cut through, each half wanted the other, and hugged it; they threw their arms round each other desiring to grow together in the embrace.... so you see how ancient is the mutual love implanted in mankind, bringing together the parts of the original body, and trying to make one out of two.... And so the desire for the whole and the pursuit of it is named Love." Plato, *Symposium*, 190A-11E, in: W. H. D. Rouse, *Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Mentor, 1984), 87-88.

²⁶⁴ Apparently, Yama becomes an immortal *after* he has died. Thus, he is the Lord of the Dead. Bhattacharji asserts; "It is evident that Yama had not always been an immortal like the other gods... [that] he wrested power and authority and was raised to the rank of a god." Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, 48.

lovely and lovely to look at.²⁶⁵ In his instruction to Yudhiṣṭhīra, Bhīṣma will echo Yama's teaching to Naciketas:

I will tell you, Bull of the Bharatas, how Brahmā created wanton women, and for what purpose, O Lord of the Earth. There is nothing more wicked than women, my son. A wanton woman is a blazing fire, and the illusion born of *Māyā*. She is a dagger's sharp edge; she is venom, a snake, and death in one body. Mankind once was full of *dharma*, we have heard; they were becoming gods all by themselves, so the gods became afraid. ... Knowing what was in the gods' minds, the Grandfather produced women in order to delude the minds of men. ... The Grandfather gave women all the desires to be desired, and those wanton women, excited by lust, began to excite men. Then the lord of gods produced anger as the companion of desire, and all mankind, under the sway of desire and anger, turned to evil.²⁶⁶

However, as will be discussed below, the *Mahābhārata* also offers a sort of double of the *Kathā Upaniṣad*, and therefore a critique of it, in the story of Sāvitrī, in which Yama is defeated by a human woman.

A detailed analysis of the variety of philosophical positions presented in the *Mahābhārata* is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, because they impact the

²⁶⁵ *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.11, 3. Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 233-34.

²⁶⁶ pramadāś ca yathā sṛṣṭā brahmaṇā bharatarṣabha
yadartham tac ca te tāta pravakṣye vasudhādhipa
na hi strībhyā paraṇ putra pāpiyāḥ kiṁ cid asti vai
agnir hi pramadā dipto māyāś ca mayajā vibho
ksura dhārā viṣam sarpo mṛtyur ity ekūtāḥ striyāḥ
imāḥ prajā-mahābāho dhārmikā iti naḥ śrutam
svayam gacchanti devatvam tato devān i-yād bhayam ...
teṣām antargatam jñātvā devānām sa pitāmahāḥ
mānavānām pramohārtham kṛtyā nāryo 'sṭjat prabhuh ...
tābhyaḥ kāmān yathākāmān prādād dhi sa pitāmahāḥ
tāḥ kāmalubdhāḥ pramadāḥ prāmathnanti narāṇāms tādā
krodham kāmasya deveśāḥ sahāyaṇ cāsrjat prabhuh

material being examined here, a few words about these positions are in order. Numerous passages in the *Mahābhārata* are devoted to the quest for salvation, *mokṣa*. Some, such as Sanatsujāta's instruction to Dhṛitarāṣṭra, teach a monistic *upaniṣadic* philosophy. Other passages, notably lengthy segments of *Sāntiparvan*, *Anuśāsanaparvan*, and *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, while decidedly *upaniṣadic* in flavor, advocate the dualistic *sāṃkhyan* worldview in which matter, *prakṛti*, is essentially distinct from soul, *ātman*. Whether monistic or dualistic, however, these teachings are centered on *nivṛtti*, a turning away from the illusions of the world with the aim of release from the painful cycles of death and birth and re-death. The value systems designated as *pravṛtti*, on the contrary, are turned towards the world, emphasize the importance of an individual's *svadharma*, and have as their goal *svarga-loka*, the heaven of the gods. The *Mahābhārata* recognizes that the *śruti* contains both of these apparently contradictory teachings. We can sympathize with Yudhiṣṭhīra when he complains: "I know the superior and the inferior scriptures; the words of the Vedas say that one should both perform acts and renounce acts. The scriptures are confusing and embellished with different kinds of reasoning."²⁶⁷ The path of *bhakti*, devotion to and salvation through a personal deity, developed most famously in the *Bhagavadgītā*, adopts both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* positions.²⁶⁸ I would argue

asajjanta prajāḥ sarvāḥ kāmakrodhavaśām gatāḥ (13.40.3-10)

²⁶⁷ vedhāham tāta śāstrāṇi aparāṇi parāṇi ca
ubhayāṇi vedavacanām kuru karma tyajeti ca
ākulāṇi ca śāstrāṇi hetubhiś citritāṇi ca (12.19.1-2)

²⁶⁸ For a comprehensive and well-argued exploration of these and other religious doctrines in the *ītihāsa*, see Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrine in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 2000).

that passages expounding these different positions must be read within their context to discover how they reflects and are reflected in other passages. Only in that way can conflicting positions be integrated into the *itihāsa*'s wholeness.

In terms of the present discussion, I submit that the *Mahābhārata*'s numerous references to *śruti* material is a deliberate and essential part of its exploration of the validity and relevance of that material -- whether monistic or dualistic, whether turned towards or away from the world or directed towards a personal deity -- to the individual human being in the *kali yuga*, Karna being the *itihāsa*'s representative of such a person. More specifically, this chapter will argue that the *Mahābhārata* continues the ancient discourse about sex, sin, and woman, particularly through allusions to the *ku/a* of Sūrya and to stories of Yama and his twin sister. In the early material, Yami, rejected and solitary, becomes Nirṛti, the malign goddess of destruction. In the *Mahābhārata*, Yami reappears as Yamunā, doubly a human woman and the river of dark waters.

The Solar Kula: the Harivamśa

The *Harivamśa*, the *Mahābhārata*'s *khila*, "supplement," retells the Vedic story of Tvaṣṭṛ, his daughter, and the solar deity.²⁶⁹ The *Harivamśa*, "The Genealogy of Hari [Kṛṣṇa]," is a generally overlooked but most interesting portion of the *itihāsa*. Its Critical Edition was published only in 1969. The word *khila* has tended to foster the idea that the *Harivamśa* is later and optional and can be ignored, which it has been by Western scholarship. Actually, "supplement" ought rather to imply that it is something needed to

²⁶⁹ *Harivamśa* 8.1-48

complete the work to which it belongs.²⁷⁰ Traditionally, it is dated to the third or fourth century CE, but there are a good many referenced in the *Mahābhārata* to episodes in the life of Kṛṣṇa that are developed in the *Harivamśa*. Biardeau, for one, emphasizes the close relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivamśa*; she asserts that there are compelling reasons to believe that the *itihāsa* deliberately does not repeat material that could be found in the *khila*.²⁷¹ There are sound arguments for the position that the *Harivamśa* took shape concurrently with the main period of growth of the *Mahābhārata* and therefore ought to be considered as completing the *itihāsa*.

The *Harivamśa* opens with Śaunaka telling Vaiśampāyana that there is something missing from the narrative so far. The *Mahābhārata* has spoken of the origin of the Kaurava *kula*, he says, but not the *kula* of the Vṛiṣnis, Kṛṣṇa's people. The *sūta* goes on to relate the birth of Kṛṣṇa, his life and deeds, as well as the lives of his brother, Saṃkarṣaṇa/Balarāma, his son, Pradyumna, and his grandson, Aniruddha. It includes many of the most well known stories about Kṛṣṇa and his family. Genealogies are significant components of the *Harivamśa*, for example, the *Sūryavamśa*, "The Genealogy of Sūrya," from which the story below is taken.

²⁷⁰ Here I follow Brockington. See Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 313–44.

²⁷¹ Madeleine Biardeau, "Études de Mythologie Hindoue (V)," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 65, no. 1 (1978): 237.

Here the name *Samjnā* replaces the Vedic name *Saranyū*.²⁷² *Yamī* is named *Yamunā*. So, *Tvaṣṭṛ* marries his daughter *Samjnā* to the Sun, referred to variously as *Mārtāṇḍa*, *Āditya*, and *Vivasvat*.

Young and beautiful, she was not satisfied with the form of her husband *Mārtāṇḍa*, for *Samjnā* was endowed with her own fiery *tapas*, "ascetic heat." Because the very limbs of *Āditya Mārtāṇḍa* were scorched by his own *tejas*, "fiery energy" or "semen," his form was not excessively lovable. The three worlds were burnt by *Vivasvat*'s excessive *tejas*. He had three children by *Samjnā*, one daughter and two sons – first *Manu*, then the twins *Yama* and *Yamunā*. Because *Vivasvat*'s form was dark in color, *Samjnā* could not bear it. She created from herself a shadow of herself, *Savarnā*, consisting of illusion.²⁷³

Instructing *Savarnā* -- whose name means a "look-alike" -- to remain there and care for the three children, *Samjnā* changes herself into a mare. *Vivasvat*, mistaking the

²⁷² *Saranyū* means quick, fleet, or nimble. *Samjnā* means to cause to acquiesce, euphemistically said of a sacrificial victim, which should not be led forcibly to its death. For a discussion of these names, and of the *Harivamśa* story in general, see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 43-55.

²⁷³ sā vai bhāryā bhagavato mārtāṇḍasya mahānmanah
bhartṛtūpeṇa nātuṣthadrūpayauvanaśālinī
samjnā nāma svatapasā diptencha samanvitā
ādityasya hi tadrūpaṇī mārtāṇḍasya svatejasā
gātreṣu naridagdham pariṇāmāya iti snehādabhāṣata
na khalvayam mṛto'ndasya iti snehādabhāṣata
ajānankāśyapastasmānmārtāṇḍa iti cocyate
tejastvabyadhikam tāta nityameva vivasvath
yenātināpayāmāsa trīṇīlokānkaṣyapātmajah
trīṇyapatyāni kauravya samjnā tapatām varah
ādityo janayāmāsa kanyām dvau ca prajāpati
manurvaivavasvataḥ pūrva śrāddhadevaḥ prajāpatiḥ
yamaśca yamunā caiva yamajau sambabhūvatuḥ
śyāmavarnam tu nadrūpaṇī samjnā dṛṣṭvā vivasvath
asahanti tu svām chāyām savarnam nirmame nataḥ

"shadow" for his wife, begets on her a son. Savarnā favors that child and neglects Manu and the twins. Yama grows angry. In childish rage -- and through "the power of inevitable destiny"²⁷⁴ -- Yama threatens Savarnā with his foot. She in turn curses him: "May that foot of yours fall off!" Yama begs his father to remove the curse. Vivasvat replies that although Yama knows *dharma* and speaks the truth, it is not possible for a mother's word to be broken.²⁷⁵ Worms will take flesh from Yama's foot and go to the surface of the earth -- a reference to mortality. "Thus your mother's words will be made true, and you will be protected from the curse."²⁷⁶ When Savarnā confesses that she is merely a look-alike of Samjñā, the Sun is furious. After Tvaṣṭṛ has trimmed his solar son-in-law on a lathe to remove his excessive *tejas* and make him better looking, Mārtāṅḍa finds his mare-wife, becomes a stallion, and mates with her, as in the Vedic story, producing the twin Aśvins.

The name change in the *Harivamśa* from Yami to Yamunā makes explicit her identification with one of the three sacred rivers of Bhāratavarṣa, along with Gaṅgā and Sarasvatī. The three sacred rivers hearken back to the Vedic Waters, an expression of the goddess in which her various aspects are depicted collectively as the primordial

māyāmayī tu sā samjñā sasyāśchāyā samutthitā (8. 2-8)

²⁷⁴ bhāvino'rthasya balāt

²⁷⁵ Here the audience cannot but be reminded of Kuntī's fateful words that, because a mother's word cannot be untruth, give a common wife, Draupadī, to her five sons.

²⁷⁶ kṛtamevaṁ vacasnathyam mātustva bhavisyati
śāpasya parihārena tvam ca trāto bhaviṣyasi (8.27)

foundation of physical creation.²⁷⁷ These and other rivers figure importantly in the *Mahābhārata*. Rivers frequently are associated with and personified as women. Three of these women are particularly important as powerful agents who significantly initiate and manipulate events. The river-woman is cunning and inscrutable in Gaṅgā and Satyavatī, the river-mothers of Bhiṣma; she is violent and treacherous in the complex character of Ambā/Śikhandī/Śikandīn, herself associated with two rivers, the Yamunā and the barren river Ambā. She appears in Draupadī, who is identified both with fiery Śrī, who takes birth from Agni -- a god who takes birth from the Vedic "Waters" -- as well as with the goddess Vāc, whom the *Rgveda* identifies with Sarasvatī,²⁷⁸ the mystic river said to flow underground at Kurukṣetra. In these watery guises, then, the rejected twin of the Vedas returns to haunt her solar "other" through two deeply conflicted and deeply related male characters, Bhiṣma and Karna. However, I will argue that the female "twin" manifests most positively through Sāvitri, daughter of the Sun, "friend" and conqueror of

²⁷⁷ Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 23. It is an ancient belief that the mystical Sarasvatī joins the Gaṅgā and Yamunā at their confluence at Allahabad, in north India. In tantric traditions, the three rivers become a metaphor for the Goddess as *kundalini*. The right and left channels of the subtle body are styled as the Ganges and Yamunā rivers, while the central *suṣumnā*, "channel," is the Sarasvatī. David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 225-29.

²⁷⁸ *Rgveda* 1.164. 49. Georges Dumézil makes much of the "transposition" of Vāc in Draupadī, basing his argument on *Rgveda* 10.125, in which Vāc claims to "carry" a list of gods within her which somewhat matches the divine father's of the five Pāṇḍavas. Dumézil, *L'idéologie Des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées Des Peuples Indo-Européens*, 107.

Yama. Sāvitrī is like a brilliant star in the *Mahābhārata's* net in which other major female figures and members of the solar *kula* are reflected.

Karṇa and Bhīṣma

As seen above, Yadu's descendants were cursed not to be *ksatriyas* and Yadu was denied a claim to Yayāti's throne. Yayāti's curse on his firstborn son initiates the cycle of the "disqualified eldest" that revisits the Kaurava *kula*. In later generations, Bhīṣma will relinquish his claim to the throne in favor of his younger half-brothers; the elder Dhṛtarāṣṭra will give precedence to his sighted brother Pāṇḍu; Karṇa will be slain before being recognized as the senior Pāṇḍava. The theme of the "disqualified eldest" is one of a number of motifs that link Karṇa and Bhīṣma. These formidable and incomplete male figures are connected with deft artistry from their river origins to their deaths upon the *dharma*-field, Kurukṣetra. The argument set forth here is that evocative literary allusions are one of the *Mahābhārata's* most prevalent narrative strategies and indicate an implied audience competent in the stories and teachings of the *śruti*. Madeleine Biardeau remarks that the *Mahābhārata* keeps strong ties with "the mythic and ritual tradition of the *Vedas*, when at the same time it completely changes their perspectives or their values."²⁷⁹ References to the ancient literature compel a reexamination of the actions and motivations of individual characters and a reevaluation of apparently didactic passages and of the conflicting traditions upon which that didacticism is based. A number of the allusions linking Karṇa and Bhīṣma hearken back to the stories of the Sun, his wife, and

²⁷⁹ Biardeau, "Some Remarks," 84.

the twins Yama and Yami. Paying attention to these literary links leads to new insights about the particularly intense relationship between the *sūta* who would be a *ksatriya*, and the prince who renounces his *ksatriya* privileges to live an ascetic life as a dependent in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's corrupt court. These insights lead in turn to a deeper understanding of what these characters communicate to the audience about *varṇa*, *kula*, and *dharma*.

Bhiṣma's earthly *kula* as well as his divine *kula* bind him to treacherously powerful women. The mundane story begins one day when Bhiṣma's grandfather, King Pratipa, had walked along the banks of the Ganges. Emerging from the water, the goddess Gaṅgā in the form of a beautiful woman had sat down seductively upon the King's right thigh and made that ancient proposition: "I desire you, king, best of the Kurus. Take me! Abandoning women who are in love is forbidden to the wise."²⁸⁰ Pratipa rejects her advances on grounds of *dharma*, protesting that the law reserves the right thigh for a man's children and daughters-in-law. "Be my daughter-in-law, lovely girl. I choose you for my son."²⁸¹ Allusions here to the stories of Yama, Kacan, and Yayāti and their rejected would-be seducers is a narrative strategy adding ominous overtones to Gaṅgā's acquiescence. Years later, Pratipa's son, King Śaṃtanu, walks along the same Ganges banks. When the waiting goddess emerges from the waters, Śaṃtanu falls so helplessly in love that he makes her his queen. Gaṅgā demands unquestioning devotion from her husband in return for her favors. Śaṃtanu's resolve to

²⁸⁰ tvām aham kāmaye rājan kuruśreṣṭha bhajasva mām
tyāgah kāmavatīnām hi strīnām sadbhir vigarhitah (1.92.5)

²⁸¹ snuṣā me bhava kalyāṇi putrārthe tvām vṛṇomy aham

please her wavers only after he has watched his wife kill seven of their newborn sons by drowning them in her own waters. When he pleads for the life of the eighth, she grants his wish but disappears for good, taking the boy with her.²⁸² Gaṅgā "educates" her son, Gāngeya, then returns him to his father; and the waters have still more in store for Śamtanu.²⁸³

Long before these events, it seems that a wise mountain had fallen in love with a river and begotten male and female twins.²⁸⁴ Male and female twins always must bring to mind Yama and Yamī, whose mother, Saranyū, also had a twin brother. The mountain-river twins are presented to a king, Vasu by name, who makes the boy his general and marries the girl, Girikā. One day, Vasu, gone hunting in the forest, pines so ardently for his beautiful queen that he spills his seed. Collecting what he can in a leaf, he asks a passing eagle to carry the semen to Girikā, but the bird drops the packet into the river Yamunā. There a fish, actually an *apsarā*, "celestial nymph," under a curse, swallows the royal emission and conceives. Fishermen catch the fish and pull from its belly human twins — a boy and a girl. The boy is presented to King Vasu; he grows up to become King Matsya, "Fish." The girl remains among the fisher people and plies a ferry

snuśāpekṣaṇ hi vāmoru tvam āgamya samāśritā (1.92.11)

²⁸² There is a curious parallel here with the story of Aditi, who bears seven sons and then attempts to destroy the eighth, Mārtānda.

²⁸³ Alf Hiltebeitel deals with the "education" of Bhīṣma as a part of his ongoing project of arguing for a literary reading of the *Mahābhārata*. He argues that the erudition Bhīṣma displays in the later books can be explained only by remembering these years of education. In other words, the earlier *parvans* anticipate the later ones. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Bhīṣma's Sources," paper presented at the International Mahābhārata Conference (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001).

across the Yamunā. She is beautiful but reeks of fish, so is called Matsyagandhī, "Fishy-smell." Because she is dark of complexion, she also is called Kālī, "black." Kālī is a doubly appropriate name for the ferry-girl; another name for the river from which she was born, the Yamunā (Yamī's river), is Kalindī, the dark river of Yamī as Nirṛti. Fishy-smell also is named Satyavatī.

Satyavatī is one of the *itihāsa*'s most enigmatic characters, and arguably its most influential woman. Without her manipulations, the narrative as it is could not have unfolded, and her motives inscrutable. Satyavatī's story opens with a scene that anticipates Sūrya's seduction of Kuntī, itself an allusion to Vivasvat and Samjñā (see above).²⁸⁴ One day, the ascetic Parāśara catches sight of the ferry girl. He is smitten and immediately attempts to make love with her. Matsyagandhi's only reservations are that people may observe them and that she will anger her father by losing her virginity. The eager Parāśara wraps the island in a magical fog, promises that her virginity will remain intact, and as a reward for her favors makes the smell of her voluptuous body permanently delicious. Fishy-smell becomes Gandhavatī, "odoriferous as jasmine." This precipitate act of sex on a fog-shrouded island is arguably the *Mahābhārata*'s most seminal event. Recounts Vaiśampāyana:

²⁸⁴ The story is told in *Adiparvata* 1.57.33-75.

²⁸⁵ When Satyavatī has completed her shadowy task, the *itihāsa*'s creator, who happens to be her son Vyāsa, dispenses of her in one deft literary stroke. After King Pāṇḍu has died and his śraddha, funeral rites, has been completed, Vyāsa tells Satyavatī that evil times are now upon them and that she must go to live in the wilderness as an ascetic, lest she witness the destruction of her family. Satyavatī complies, taking along her widowed daughters-in-law, and they are not heard of directly again. (1.119.5-8)

Then the blessed lord Parāśara went to his own dwelling place, and joyful Satyavati, having obtained her unsurpassed boon, gave birth on the very day she made love with Parāśara. The mighty son of Parāśara was born on an island in the Yamunā. Standing before his mother, he set his mind on *tapasya*, and said, "When remembered, I will appear ready to do your bidding." Thus, Dvaipāyana was born of Satyavati by Parāśara. Because he was laid down on an island, he became Dvaipāyana ["Island-born"]. Knowing that from age to age the law is crippled in one foot, and that the strength and longevity of mortals attends on the law of the ages, and wanting to confer benefits on the Brahmaṇa and brahmins, he divided the Vedas and thus is remembered as Vyāsa ["Arranger"]. He, great lord and granter of boons, taught the [four] Vedas and the *Mahābhārata* as the fifth....²⁸⁶

Shortly after this fruitful dalliance – Vyāsa will be the progenitor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas – with her now delicious odor wafting leagues about, Satyavatī attracts the passions of lonely King Śaṃtanu, whom Gaṅgā long since had abandoned. When he asks for her hand, her adoptive father sets one condition: "The son born from her shall be anointed king and lord of the earth. None other shall inherit, O King."²⁸⁷ Śaṃtanu, torn between desire for the fragrant woman and loyalty to his son and heir, grows sad and

²⁸⁶ parāśaro 'pi bhagavāñ jagāma svām niveśanam
iti satyavatī hṛṣṭā labdhvā varam anuttamam
parāśareṇa samyuktā sadyo garbhām suśāva sā
jajñe ca yamunā dvīpe pārāśaryah savīryavān
sa mātaram upasthāya tapasy eva mano dadhe
smṛto 'ham darśayiṣyāmi kṛtyeṣv iti ca so 'bravīt
evam dvaipāyano jajñe satyavatyām parāśarāt
dvīpe nyastah sa yad bālas tasmād dvaipāyano 'bhavat
pādāpasāriṇām dharmaṇām vidvān sa tu yuge yuge
āyuh śaktiṇ ca martyānām yugānugam avekṣya ca
brahmaṇo brāhmaṇānām ca tathānugraha kāmyayā
vivyāsa vedān yasmāc ca tasmād vyāsa iti smṛtaḥ
vedān adhyāpayām āśa mahābhārata pañcamān.... (1.57.68-74)

²⁸⁷ asyām jāyeta yaḥ putraḥ sa rājā pṛthivīpatih
tvad ūrdhvam abhisektavyo nānyah kaś cana pārthiva (1.94.51)

listless. When devoted prince Gāngeya discovers the reason for his father's despondent mood, he goes to the fisherman and vows: "From this day forward, I will remain celibate. Although sonless, mine shall be the imperishable worlds in heaven." ²⁸⁸ Then from the spaces between heaven and earth, the gods and seers rain blossoms upon him, and say: "He is *Bhiṣma* ["the Terrible"].²⁸⁹ Having renounced the throne and sworn himself to a life of celibacy, Bhiṣma delivers beautiful Satyavatī to his father. Bhiṣma is condemned to a loveless life during which he repeatedly will play the role of matchmaker for others.²⁹⁰ His indeed is a "terrible" vow for a *ksatriya* whose *dharma* prescribes producing sons. Śamtanu, however, is exceedingly pleased with his son's self-effacement and bestows a boon: Bhiṣma will die only at a time of his choosing. For himself Bhiṣma assumes a role usually reserved for Yama-- he will determine the moment of his own death. Satyavatī bears the king two sons and heirs.

Now, Bhiṣma, we have learned earlier in the *Mahābhārata*, incarnates the Vedic deity Dyaus, god of the sky, one of the Vasus.²⁹¹ Bhiṣma's divine *kula* accounts for much that occurs in his human *kula*. In times past, Dyaus' wife had spied the sage Vasiṣṭha's

²⁸⁸ adya prabhṛti me dāśabrahmacaryam bhaviṣyati
aputrasyāpi me lokā bhaviṣyanty akṣayā divi (1.94.86)

²⁸⁹ tato 'ntarikṣe 'psaraso devāḥ sarṣigānāś tathā
abhyavarṣanta kusumair bhiṣmo 'yam iti cābruvan (1.94.90)

²⁹⁰ Not only does Bhiṣma facilitate his father's marriage to Satyavatī, he also arranges the unions of their two sons, his half-brothers, then the purchase of Mādrī for Pāṇḍu, and the marriages of Dhṛitarāṣṭra with Gāndhārī and Vidura with King Devaka's bastard daughter. See 1.105.5; 1.103.11; 1.106.1

²⁹¹ (1.93) We note here another of the *Mahābhārata*'s intriguing plays on names. King Vasu's seed impregnates the fish who gives birth to Satyavatī, Bhiṣma's step-mother. Karna is known as "Vasusena."

wish-fulfilling cow and plead with her husband to steal it. Unable to deny her, he and his brothers take the cow. When the ascetic discovers the theft, he curses the Vasus to take human birth for a year -- all except Dyaus, who is cursed to spend many long years in the world. "This great-minded being will have no progeny among mankind. He will be virtuous and skilled in all weapons, devoted to his father's well-being-- but he will forego the pleasures of women."²⁹² Dyaus's buxom wife is not named, but in the *Rgveda* Dyaus usually is mentioned in a dual compound with his consort Pṛthivī: *Dyāvāpṛthivī*, the inseparable Sky-and-Earth. This Vedic allusion emphasizes the cruel sting of Vasiṣṭha's curse and of Bhīṣma's terrible vow that leaves him bereft of all that is feminine; come to earth, Dyaus is separated from his twin "other," the Earth herself, emblem of all womanhood. The allusion alerts the audience that human Bhīṣma too will live separate from a female "other" -- that woman is, as will be seen, Ambā, "mother."²⁹³

Like Yama, Bhīṣma is separated from his real mother and bound to a shadow-mother. Ironically, the woman Bhīṣma addresses as "mother" is the agent of his curse to a life of celibacy. Satyavatī-Kālī, girl twin born from Yami-Nirṛti's river, the Yamunā-Kalindī, appears to embody in her relation with her step-son the ancient vengeance of Yami/Yamunā/Nirṛti towards Yama. Bhīṣma, master of his own death, through the

²⁹² na prajāsyati cāpy esa mānuṣeṣu mahāmanāḥ
bhavisyati ca dharmātmā sarvaśāstravīśāradāḥ
pitūḥ priyahite yuktaḥ strī bhogān varjayiṣyati (1.93.38-39)

²⁹³ Dyaus is said to be the father of Sūrya, making him the grandfather of a number of solar children. Bhīṣma is addressed as *pitāmaha*, "paternal grandfather," during his long years in Dyaus Dhṛitarāṣṭra's court, although he is really the childless

watery machinations of Gaṅgā and Kālī, fulfills Vasiṣṭha's curse upon Dyaus by choosing, like Yama, to be "pure." However, Bhīṣma is not the only man in Satyavatī's dark orbit to die without leaving an heir. The same fate is true for her husband. Both sons of Śaṁtanu and Satyavatī die issueless. Satyavatī urges Bhīṣma to service the widows according to the tradition of *niyoga*, similar to the medieval practice of levirate (from the Latin *leviratus*, "brother-in-law"), whereby a man may beget children on his deceased brother's widow. Bhīṣma will have nothing to do with *niyoga*, of course; he will not break his horrible vow. The queen then calls upon her illegitimate son, Vyāsa. The fearsome ascetic complies, impregnating the terrified widows with the seeds destined to continue the Yādava *kula* -- blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra and "pale" Pāṇḍu. However, after Pāṇḍu has married two wives, an angry sage curses him to forsake sex on pain of death. Tormented by years of abstinence, Pāṇḍu expires while succumbing to the charms of his wife Mādrī. Thus, Satyavatī's dark womb fructifies only in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's benighted *kula*.²⁹⁴

"uncle" of the sons of Kuntī and Gāndhārī, and that by convention, not seed. In the solar *kula*, Bhīṣma is more aptly the "grandfather" of Kāma, son of the Sun.

²⁹⁴ The Pāṇḍavas' human *kula*, through their mother, is that of Yadu, the eldest son of the *pratiloma* marriage of Yayāti and Devayānī -- the Yādavas and Viṣṇis. The law and custom here is somewhat confused. Pāṇḍu urges Kuntī to produce sons by means of her magic mantra, and cites Manu to claim that her sons would be his own (1.111.30-33). Manu himself is ambivalent. While he declares that the husband can claim the sons born in his own "field," i.e., his wife (9.48-52), he says elsewhere that children born of the seeds of another man belong to the owner of the seed (9.181). See Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, 203, note 58.

Satyavatī's lineage, however, may be preserved as well through the Pāṇḍavas. Arjuna's son Abhimanyu will marry Uttarā, daughter of Virāṭa, the Matsya king. Is Virāṭa Satyavatī's twin brother who becomes "King Matsya?" (*tayoh pumāpsam jagrāha rājoparicaras tadā / sa matsyo nāma rājāśid dhārmikah satyasamgarah* (1.57.51)) It may well be so. The child of Abhimanyu and Uttarā is Parikṣit who succeeds Yudhiṣṭhīra to

This tortuous genealogy must have made a profound impression upon an audience composed primarily of *ksatriyas* dependent upon brahmins for legitimacy, and of brahmins dependent upon *ksatriyas* for their livelihood – all acutely aware of the *dharmaśāstras'* injunctions for the maintenance of caste purity. The *itihāsa* makes wide use of Vedic allusions, and these allusions are nowhere more finely effective than when dealing with the mythology of the Sun in order to question a social and religious system that so highly valued *varṇa* and *kula*.

Satyavatī is not the most destructive female figure in Bhiṣma's life, however – that role is Ambā's. Recognizing Bhiṣma's links to the *kula* of Sūrya and the parallels with Yama illuminates his relationship with this unhappy princess.²⁹⁵ Ambā reflects Yāmī become Nirṛti; the meaning of her name, "mother," underscores the catastrophe of her life -- she never will have a mate or know motherhood. Ambā is, indeed, a twin of sorts to Bhiṣma. Bhiṣma tells Duryodhana the strange story of Ambā in the closing *adhyāya* of *Udyogaparvan*. Bhiṣma's determination to fulfill the *dharma* of his *adharmaic* vow of celibacy only seems to ensnare him further in a ruthless fate stalking him from

the throne and whose son is Janamejaya, Vaiśampāyana's interlocutor in the recitation of the *Mahābhārata*. Paule Lerner bases her fascinating *Astrological Key in the Mahābhārata* upon the supposition that King Matsya is Satyavati's twin. Lerner argues that there is a hidden astrological meaning in the *itihāsa*: it contains a record of the precession of the equinoxes from the age of the Ram, *aja* or Ares, to the Age of the Fish, *matsya* or Pisces. Paule Lerner, *Astrological Key in the Mahābhārata: The New Era*, translated by David White (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1988).

²⁹⁵ It also argues forcefully against van Buitenen's contention that the "positively droll" and logically "absurd" story of Ambā represents half a millennium of storytellers' attempts to tie up one of the *Mahābhārata*'s loose ends. J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and

life to life. When King Śaṃtanu dies, Bhiṣma installs Citrāngada, eldest of Satyavatī's sons, on the throne; but Citrāngada soon dies, and the voluptuary Vicitravīrya becomes king. Bhiṣma sets about finding a bride for his surviving half-brother. Determined to assure heirs to his father's dynasty, Bhiṣma attends the *svayamvara* of three princesses and kidnaps them all: Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā. When Ambā tells him that she is betrothed to king Śālva, he sets her free; but Śālva rejects her -- she has been carried away by another man and is no longer fit to be his bride. As Stephanie Jamison has shown, a man causing a maiden to mount his chariot figures in the marriage ceremony all the way back to the *Rgveda*.²⁹⁶ Despite Ambā's pleading, Śālva casts her off "as a snake its worn-out skin."²⁹⁷ Ambā wanders lamenting into the wilderness, brooding upon her hateful destiny. Her transformation from a beautiful innocent into a dangerously vengeful ascetic mirrors the transformation of Yamī into dark and destructive Nirṛti, "nature's revenge on the offender against *ṛtu*," "what is right and fit."²⁹⁸ She curses Śālva and herself. Above all, she curses Bhiṣma, the cause of her calamity. She finds asylum among forest ascetics and takes up their practices. Eventually she is brought to Paraśurāma, ancient destroyer of the *ksatriyas* and Bhiṣma's preceptor. The fierce Bhṛgu is moved by her tale and decides that the only solution is for Bhiṣma to take back Ambā

trans., *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 3: The Book of Virāṭa; The Book of the Effort* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 173-78.

²⁹⁶ Marriage by abduction is designated by Manu as a form of marriage called the *rākṣasa* rite (MDS 111.33). Jamison shows that important ceremonial elements of the *rākṣasa* rite figure in the *Mahābhārata*'s story of Bhiṣma and Ambā. Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife*, 221-226.

²⁹⁷ *tvacam jīrṇām ivoragah* (5.172.17)

for himself, but Bhīṣma refuses: "What man ever would allow a woman in love with another man to lodge in his house like a snake, knowing the dark wickedness of women?"²⁹⁹ He asserts that he is "a *ksatriya* who stands by *ksatriya dharma*,"³⁰⁰ and will not be moved. He and Paraśurāma engage in a twenty-three-day combat that ends in a draw, each man exceedingly pleased with himself and his opponent, Ambā all but forgotten.

This final humiliation, more loathsome than her abduction and Śalva's rejection, destroys Ambā's last hope of fulfilling her womanhood. She resolves to accomplish through *tapasya*, "religious austerities," what the great Paraśurāma could not achieve: the death of Bhīṣma. Bhīṣma confesses to Duryodhana how the weight of Ambā's hatred began to eat into his being. "From the very day the girl departed for the forest set on austerities, I became agitated, depressed, and all but lost my mind."³⁰¹ He sends spies after her and learns to his horror that she is performing superhuman self-mortification. Like some terrible Nirṛti, Ambā stands in the dark River Yamunā for a full year.

Going without food, emaciated, coarsened, with matted hair, caked with dirt, she lived for six months on air, a stock-still ascetic. Repairing to the bank of the Yamunā she wore through another year standing in the water, without food, glowering. Another year she spent in subsisting on one withered leaf, ferocious in her wrath, while standing on tiptoe. For fourteen years she set heaven and earth aglow....³⁰²

²⁹⁸ Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, 83.

²⁹⁹ ko jātu parabhāvām hi nārīm vyālīm iva sthitām

vāsayeta grhe jānan strīnām̄ doṣān mahātyayān (5.178.21)

³⁰⁰ kṣatriyāṇām̄ sthito dharme kṣatriyo 'smi tapodhana 95.178.28

³⁰¹ yadaiva hi vanam̄ prāyāt kanyā sā tapase dhṛtā

tadaiva vyathito dīno gatacetā ivābhavam (5.187.14)

³⁰² sā tu kanyā mahārāja pravīśyāśramamāṇḍalam

At one point, Gaṅgā, concerned for her son Bhīṣma, attempts to frighten Ambā into abandoning these practices. When her threats are ineffective, Gaṅgā curses the maiden to become the River Ambā, crooked in its course, teeming with hideous crocodiles. By the power of her austerities, however, only half of her body changes into the wretched river. The other half lives on to accumulate a wealth of *tapas* for attaining the single thing that can bring her peace: the righting of the wrong against her womanhood, the death of Bhīṣma. She now has grown disgusted with her own gender. At last, Lord Śiva, pleased with her austerities, grants her wish: she will attain manhood in a next life and, retaining the memory of everything of her former existence, kill Bhīṣma in battle. Ambā lights a pyre and throws herself upon it, crying, "For Bhīṣma's annihilation!"³⁰³ Thus dies the woman who should have been Bhīṣma's partner, earth to his sky.³⁰⁴ Ambā's violent

yamunātīram āśritya tapas tepe 'timānuṣam
 nirāhārā kṛṣā rūksā jaṭilā malapaṅkini
 ṣan māsān vāyubhaksā ca sthāṇubhūtā tapodhanā
 yamunātīram āśādyā saṃvatsaram athāparam
 udavāsam nirāhārā pārayām āsa bhāminī
 śīrṇaparṇena caikena pārayām āsa cāparam
 saṃvatsaram tīvrakopā pādāṅguṣṭhāgradhiṣṭhitā
 evam dvādaśa varṣāṇi tāpayām āsa rodasī
 nivartyamānāpi tu sā jñātibhir naiva śakyate
 tato 'gamad vatsabhūmīṇi siddhacāraṇasevitām
 āśramam puṇyaśīlānām tāpasānām mahātmanām
 tatra puṇyeṣu deṣeṣu sāplutāngī divāniṣam (5.187.18-24)

³⁰³ *bhīṣmavadhbāya* (5.187.18)

³⁰⁴ Biardeau remarks that being the eldest of the three sisters – whose names, Ambikā and Ambālikā, are diminutives of Ambā – Ambā by rule should have been the first queen. As first queen, says Biardeau she "should have been at the same time the symbol of the sacrificial altar of the king and his kingdom, that is, of the whole earth. In

rejection of her womanhood demonstrates what may befall the man who is doomed to "lie in the lap of Nirṛti." She is reborn into the house of king Drupada as the elder sister of Draupadī. The king and queen pretend she is a boy, eventually marrying her to a princess. Nonetheless, she manages eventually to change her sex. Śikhaṇḍī becomes Śikhaṇḍīn, a strange, bisexual creature, a kind of monstrous twin to herself, Yami/Yama dedicated not to love but to death. "Wise" Bhīṣma's confidences about Ambā on the eve of the war are a pathetic testament to a life blighted irretrievably by the unbearable knowledge from which most mortals are protected: he can see both the hour and the instrument of his death. Ambā, now Śikhaṇḍīn, cannot kill him until he allows her to do so, but kill him she must, on the Kurukṣetra plain.

Now, Karna and Bhīṣma are closely related through their solar *kula*, Bhīṣma/Dyaus being the father of Sūrya and grandfather of Yama, Yamī, and Karna. The *Mahābhārata*'s audience is directed to notice these sorts of parallels. As in other complex creations of world literature, allusions to symbols, themes, and characters from other literary works is a frequent narrative strategy in the *Mahābhārata*'s grid of conventions, a significant part of its ethical and religious discourse. Yama, Bhīṣma, and Karna are similarly fated to an existence deprived of a man's most meaningful relationships. Each is abandoned by his mother. Yama and Bhīṣma reject their proper mates, while Karna is rejected by his. Karna rejects his biological mother as Yama does the "look-alike" Savarnā. None of the three is destined to have mother or mate.

short, Ambā should have been the main queen of king Bhīṣma, the true heir to Śaṃtanu."

In Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court, Karna and Bhīṣma are bitter rivals. Karna's *na yotsye*, "I will not fight," is in response to Bhīṣma's condition for his leading Duryodhana's armies: "Either Karna must fight first, or I, O lord of the earth [Duryodhana], for that son of a *sūta* always tries to rival me in battle."³⁰⁵ Bhīṣma is unusually antagonistic towards Duryodhana's friend, that "low-born son of a *sūta*," as he calls him.³⁰⁶ Bhīṣma tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the approaching war is all the fault of the "wicked son of a *sūta*."³⁰⁷ For ten days, the *sūtaputra* remains inactive while Bhīṣma leads the armies, during which time the Pāṇḍava armies suffer terrible losses. Arjuna finally approaches the *pitāmaha*, "grandfather," and asks how he can be defeated. Bhīṣma then discloses the sole method that can slay him: put the warrior Śikandīn in front, for Bhīṣma has vowed never to kill a woman. Arjuna does so, Bhīṣma lays down his arms, and from behind Śikandīn/Ambā, Arjuna fires the fatal arrow.

Only after Bhīṣma has fallen, thus opening the way for Karna to fight, do the two long-standing antagonists reconcile. Karna's night visit to the dying Bhīṣma links these solar kin with yet another startling image. Karna comes to the spot where Bhīṣma has fallen on arrows protruding so densely from his back that they resemble a "bed of reeds," *sāratāpa*.³⁰⁸ The allusion to the bed of reeds makes vividly present the story of the birth

Biardeau, "Some Remarks," 97.

³⁰⁵ *karṇo vā yudhyatāṁ pūrvam ahaṁ vā pṛthivīpate*

spardhate hi sadātyarthāṁ sūtaputro mayā rāṇe (5.153.24)

³⁰⁶ *dūrjāteḥ sūtaputrasya* (5.48.28) See also 5.21 and 5.61, where Bhīṣma is annoyed by Karna's bragging, and reminds him that he is inferior to Arjuna.

³⁰⁷ *sūtaputrasya durmāteḥ* (5.48.34)

³⁰⁸ The encounter between Karna and Bhīṣma closes *Bhīṣmaparvan* - 6.117.

of Skanda,³⁰⁹ who is named, like Bhīṣma, Gāṅgeya, son of the Ganges.³¹⁰ It is said that Agni, god of fire, swallowed semen emitted by Lord Śiva. Agni then united with Gangā and caused her to conceive. The river was unable to bear the fiery burden and cast it up, where the embryo grew and was discovered lying upon a "forest of reeds," śāravana.³¹¹ Skanda is described as shining like the rising Sun, *sūrya ivoditah*.³¹² He wears golden armor, *hiranyakavaca*,³¹³ and when he is attacked by Indra (!), who is jealous of his splendor, from Skanda's body emerges another golden youth wearing divine earrings, *divyakundalaph*.³¹⁴ The similarities with Karna, discovered among the reeds of the Ganges wearing golden *kavaca* and *kundalas*, are strongly evocative. When Adhiratha pries open the basket Kuntī has set afloat on the river, he finds "a little boy, bright like the rising Sun, wearing golden armor, his face illumined by polished earrings."³¹⁵ Later, when Karna is anointed general of the Kaurava army, thrice he is likened to Skanda surrounded by the celestials.³¹⁶ Says Gāndhārī, mourning over Bhīṣma's body: "Having spread his excellent bed with barbed and barbless arrows, Bhīṣma has fallen upon it like

³⁰⁹ The story is recounted in *Anuśāsanaparvan*, 13.84-85.

³¹⁰ The translator K. M. Ganguli notes that Bhīṣma's bed of reeds evokes Skanda. Unfortunately, the reprinted edition of Ganguli's translation of the *Mahābhārata* omits many of the interesting notes as well as the useful line numbers, which do appear in the original. Ganguli: *Bhīṣma Parva*, CXXIV, 336.

³¹¹ 13.84.75

³¹² 3.214.19

³¹³ 3.218.1

³¹⁴ 3.216.16

³¹⁵ *taruṇādityasamkāśam hemavarma dharam tathā
mr̥ṣṭakunḍalayuktena vadanena virājita* (3.293.6)

³¹⁶ 8.6.29, 35, 46.

Lord Skanda upon his forest of reeds, *śaravaṇam*.³¹⁷ These allusions to a resplendent being borne upon the Ganges and discovered among the reeds unites Bhīṣma and Karna in birth as well as in death.

Now, on the field of death, Kurukṣetra, Karna approaches Bhīṣma in the darkness, falls at his feet, and identifies himself not as Kuntī's but as Rādhā's son, "who in your eyes was always utterly despised."³¹⁸ Embracing Karna, the old warrior reveals what Karna has already learned from Kṛṣṇa: "You are Kuntī's son, not Rādhā's, without a doubt. Nārada told me so, as did Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana [Vyāsa] and Keśava [Kṛṣṇa]."³¹⁹ This is a surprising admission: how long has Bhīṣma known of Karna's identity? Have his barbed insults directed against the "*sūtaputra*" been candid? Below the line in the Critical Edition, Bhīṣma adds this telling comment: "You were born contrary to *dharma*, that is why your mind is as it is."³²⁰ To celibate Gāngeya, who is convinced that women are dangerous and evil, Karna's fondness for Duryodhana is due to illicit sex between Kuntī and Sūrya. Because that liaison could not be revealed, Bhīṣma had scorned Karna for his alleged low-class birth. Lying on his bed of reeds, Bhīṣma makes the same appeal as had Kṛṣṇa, Kuntī, and Sūrya: Karna must join the side of the Pāṇḍavas. As before, Karna refuses:

³¹⁷ karṇinālīkanārācair āstūrya śayanottamam
āviśya śete bhagavān skandah śaravaṇam yathā (11.23.18)

³¹⁸ rādheyo 'ham kuruśreṣṭha nityam cāṣki gatas tava
dvesyo 'tyantam anāgāḥ sann iti cainam uvāca ha

³¹⁹ kaunteyas tvam na rādheyo vīdito nāradān mama
kṛṣṇadvaipāyanāc caiva keśavāc ca na samśayah

³²⁰ jāto'si dharmalopena tataste buddhiridṛṣī (6.117.11, note)

I know that everything you say is true, O wise one. I am Kunti's child, not the son of a *sūta*. But I was cast off by Kunti and raised by a *sūta*. Having enjoyed Duryodhana's riches, I will not break my word. O gift-giver, riches, my body itself, my sons, fame, all I abandon for the sake of Duryodhana. ... Forgive me for any harsh words spoken in anger or any offense I have committed against you.³²¹

Bhiṣma absolves Karṇa and grants him permission to fight. "Fight free from egoism," he says, "relying on your own strength, for no greater glory is known to a *ksatriya* than a battle fought according to *dharma*."³²² The old warrior's open acknowledgement that Karṇa is a *ksatriya* seems far more important to Karṇa than Kunti's or Kṛṣṇa's acknowledgement. With his solar "grandfather's" blessing, Karṇa now is free to fight, to assume his *ksatriya dharma*.

Karṇa and Draupadī

Yama, Bhiṣma, and Karṇa are deserted by biological mothers and the first two suffer at the hands of "shadows." To Karṇa, the "shadow" is the mother who deserted him. When Kunti comes to plead with her eldest son to join his brothers in the battle, Karṇa defiantly identifies himself as the son of Adhiratha and Rādhā — Rādhā, whose breasts had poured forth milk when she first saw him, who handled his urine and

³²¹ jānāmy aham mahāprajña sarvam etan na samśayah
yathā vadasi durdharsa kaunteyo 'ham na sūtajah
avakīrṇas tv aham kuntyā sūtena ca vivardhitah
bhuktvā duryodhanaiśvaryam na mithyā kartum utsahe ...
duruktam vīpratipam vā samṛambhāc cāpalāt tathā
yan mayāpakṛtam kim cit tad anukṣantum arhasi (6.117.21-22, 28)

³²² yudhyasva nirahamkāro balavīrya vyapāśrayah
dharma hi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate (6.117.32)

excrement.³²³ He berates the woman who deserted him in his infancy and left him to float at the whim of the waters, from the River Aśva to the River Carmanvatī to the Yamunā and the Ganges.³²⁴ It cannot be incidental that Kuntī herself was an abandoned child. She and Vasudeva, Kṛṣṇa's father, are children of King Śūra. Śūra's sister married Kuntibhoja, king of the backwater Bhojas, the lineage begun with Yayāti's curse on Druhyu (see above). Because Kuntibhoja is childless, Śūra promised to give him his first-born daughter. Thus, Kuntī comes to be raised in an adoptive family. Shortly before the war, Kuntī complains to Kṛṣṇa of the suffering she has borne in the past.

I reproach my father, not myself or Suyodhana [Duryodhana]. Like a gambler, he awarded me as a prize to Kuntibhoja. I was a little girl, playing with my ball, and your grandfather gave me to Kuntibhoja, friend to magnanimous friend! I have been cheated by my father and my fathers-in-law, O scorch of foes; I am miserable beyond limits! What good has life brought me, Kṛṣṇa?³²⁵

Kuntī's words to Kṛṣṇa resemble the words Karna speaks to her, in response to her pleadings:

The irreparable wrong you have done me by casting me out has destroyed the renown and glory I could have had. Born a *kṣatriya*, I have not

³²³ mat snehāc caiva rādhāyāḥ sadyaḥ kṣiram avātarat
sā me mūtrāṇ् purīṣāṇ ca pratijagrāha mādhava (5.139.6)

³²⁴ 3.292.16-27

³²⁵ pitārāṇ tv eva garheyāṇ nātmānām na suyodhanām
yenāhaṇ kūntibhojāya dhanāṇ dhūrtair ivārpitā
bālāṇ mām āryakas tubhyāṇ kriḍāntāṇ kandu hastakām
adadāt kūntibhojāya sakha sakhye mahātmane
sāham pitrā ca nikṛtā śvaśuraiś ca paramātapa
atyantaduḥkhitā kṛṣṇa kiṁ jīvitaphalām mama (5.8.61-63)

received the respect due a *ksatriya*. What enemy could have done me greater harm that you have?³²⁶

Karna blames Kunti for his debilitating ignorance of his true *varpa*, *kula*, and *dharma*. Sūrya now intervenes, speaking from the sky to instruct his son to obey his mother. Still Karna refuses.³²⁷ Having learned the truth of his *kula*, he rejects it; *ksatriya varpa* was awarded to him with the kingship of Anga; as for *ksatriya dharma*, he always has embraced it. How cruelly dishonest ring Kṛṣṇa's words when Karna dies: "Today the earth drinks the blood of the *sūta*'s son, that vilest of men, who laughed at the dice-won Kṛṣṇā."³²⁸ In some final, divine, analysis, Karna's brutal death is attributed to the humble *kula* in which he was fated to be raised, and to his laughing at the woman who despised him for being a *sūta*.

The contention of this dissertation is that the many allusions to the solar *kula* shared by Karna and other characters are narrative strategies to foster specific expectations in the audience. One of those expectations stems from the Vedic story of Yama and Yami as the dangerous rejected female turned to destruction, *nirṛti*. Kaca and Devayānī, Yayāti and Devayānī, evoke the twins, as do Ambā and Bhīṣma. Satyavatī-Kālī, separated at birth from her twin brother, evokes Nirṛti. The old stories also help to clarify the intensity of the antipathy between Karna and Draupadī, another "dark"

³²⁶ akaron mayi yat pāpam bhavatī sumahātyayam
avakīrṇo 'smi te tena tad yaśāḥ kīrtināśanam
aham ca kṣatriyo jāto na prāptah kṣatrasatkriyām
tvatkṛte kim nu pāpiyah śatruḥ kuryān mamāhitam (5.144.5-6)

³²⁷ 5. 144.3-4

³²⁸ yah sa dyūtajitām kṛṣṇām prāha satpuruṣādhamah

woman, *kṛṣṇā*, like dark, *kālī*, Satyavatī. Draupadī was born parthenogenetically, out of her father's sacrificial fire: "And when she was born an incorporeal voice spoke: 'Supreme among women, this dark woman, Kṛṣṇā, will lead the *ksatriyas* to their doom."³²⁹ "Draupadī" means simply "daughter of Drupada;" Kṛṣṇā is the woman's proper name.³³⁰

For a critical piece of the puzzlingly hostile relationship of Karna and Draupadī we must once again look "below the line" in the Critical Edition. Let us set the stage. The first encounter between Karna and Draupadī takes place at Draupadī's *svayamvara*, "bridegroom choice." The Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī have managed to escape from the lacquer house, built dangerously flammable by Duryodhana with the intention of eliminating his rival cousins. Remorselessly leaving behind the charred bodies of a low-caste Niṣāda woman and her five sons who have been lured into the house to act as the Pāṇḍavas' doubles, Kuntī and her sons go to live among potters disguised as brahmins. In this disguise, they attend the *svayamvara* that King Drupada is holding for his daughter, Kṛṣṇā Draupadī. The King has had constructed a large bow, devised a difficult test of

tasyādyā sūtāputrasya bhūmih pibati śonitam (8.69.17)

³²⁹ tāṁ cāpi jātāṁ suśronīm vāg uvācāśarīriṇī³³¹
sarvayosid varā kṛṣṇā kṣayam kṣatram niniṣati (1.115.44)

Draupadī's is one among a number of parthenogenetic births in the *Mahābhārata*. For a discussion of this phenomenon, See Mary Carroll Smith, "Epic Parthenogenesis," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 84-100.

³³⁰ Alf Hiltebeitel has written extensively bout the shared names of Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇā, and Arjuna, also frequently called "Kṛṣṇa." See, for instance: Alf Hiltebeitel, "Two Kṛṣṇas, Three Kṛṣṇas, Four Kṛṣṇas, More Kṛṣṇas: Dark Interactions in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 101-09.

strength and skill, and invited the *ksatriyas* of the land to compete for the princess's hand. Among those attending are Duryodhana and his brothers, accompanied by Karna, the *sūta* humiliated at the Pāṇḍavas' show of arms, then anointed King of Aṅga, still bearing his congenital earrings and armor. It is not a stretch to imagine that Karna's fame, or infamy, had spread abroad. Now, the Calcutta and Vulgate editions include a passage that has so imprinted itself in the Indian imagination that V. S. Sukthankar found it necessary to write a lengthy apology for its omission from the Critical Edition.³³¹ Sukthankar includes, even, a floridly poetic yet rather accurate rendering of the omitted lines, from *Epic of the Bharatas* by Ramesh Chandra Dutt:

Uprose Karna, peerless archer, proudest of the archers he,
And he went and strung the weapon, fixed the arrows gallantly,
Stood like Sūrya in his splendour and like Agni in his flame, --
Pandu's sons in terror whispered, Karna sure must hit the aim!
But in proud and queenly accents Drupad's queenly daughter said:
'Monarch's daughter, born a Kshatra, Suta's son I will not wed.'
Karna heard with crimsoned forehead, left the emprise almost done,
Left the bow already circled, silent gazed upon the Sun!³³²

³³¹ Vishnu S. Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," in *The Ādiparvan: Being the First Book of the Mahābhārata*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), LX-LXI.

³³² sarvāṇṇapāṁstānprasamīkṣya karṇo
dhanurcharāṇāṁ pravaro jagāṁ
uddhṛtya tūrṇāṁ dhanurudyatāṁ
tansajyāṁ cakārāśu yuyoja bāṇān
dṛṣṭvā sūtāṁ menire pāṇḍuputrā
bhittvā nītaṇi laksyavaraṇāṁ dharāyām
dhanurdharā rāgakṛnapratijñā
matyagnisomārkamathārkaputram
dṛṣṭvā tu tam draupadi vākyamuccair-
jagāda nāhaṇi varayāmi sūtām
sāmarṣahāsām prasamīkṣya sūryam
tatyāja karṇaḥ sphuritaṁ dhanustat (1.178, note 17)

For Sukthankar, the scene is "a palpably *faked and thoroughly unreal* situation [italics his]."³³³

If one thinks about it at all, one fails to understand how Draupadī, who was, after all, then only an unexperienced maiden in her teens, had recognized the King of Angas (whom she had probably never seen before) and known him for the son of a coachman, unfit to wed a princess.³³⁴

Sukthankar's doubts seem misplaced. Draupadī's *nāham varayāmi sūtam*, "I will not marry a *sūta*," seems not only psychologically appropriate, but quite in keeping with what the entire *svayamvara* expresses about *varna*, *kula*, and *dharma*. Draupadī, said to be a portion of the goddess Śrī, may be young of body, but why should we assume that she is unaware of the *ksatriya* world she lives in, including the remarkable story of the low-caste *sūta* made king? Moreover, the *itihāsa* insists repeatedly that Karna's prowess is equal if not superior to Arjuna's, and in all editions, Karna is named among those who come to attempt the test. Given the chance, Karna could not have failed to string the bow and hit the mark.

Draupadi's public abasement of Karna at the *svayamvara*, structurally parallel to Arjuna's humiliation of Karna at the show of arms, rings true to the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. After this disconcerting incident, and after the other *ksatriya* suitors have failed, Arjuna, still in brahmin disguise, strides forward and easily wins the prize. Curiously, King Drupada seems delighted at the unexpected turn of events, and an eager Draupadi

³³³ Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," LXI.

quickly garlands the unknown brahmin as her chosen husband. Have the Pāṇḍavas been recognized? Kṛṣṇa certainly has divined the ruse; he whispers to his brother, "Saṃkarṣaṇa, that man who strides like a bull, who strung the great bow as high as a palm, is none other than Arjuna, sure as I am Vāsudeva!"³³⁵

However, the other *kṣatriya* contestants are furious at being bested by a brahmin. Citing the law that *svayamvaras* are meant only for their royal class, the *kṣatriyas*, led by Duryodhana and his company, attack the brahmins, led by the disguised Pāṇḍavas. Karna goes straight for Arjuna. What transpires between the two brothers encapsulates the complex themes that make them such bitter opponents. Arjuna, unreflectively self-confident of his *kṣatriya* identity, feels no compunction at assuming a brahmin disguise and using it to his advantage. *Sūtaputra* Karna, who has just been humiliated for his low class, nonetheless demonstrates that his *svabhāva*, "inherent nature," is royal. He addresses Arjuna:

You please me, eminent brahmin, with the strength of your arms in combat, with your brave persistence and your discipline with weapons. Are you the embodied art of archery, or Paraśurāma, O best of brahmins? Or are you bay-horsed Indra himself, or imperishable Viṣṇu? ... When I am angry, no man can resist me in battle, no one but Indra or the diademed Pāṇḍava!³³⁶

³³⁴ Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," LXI.

³³⁵ ya esa mattarṣabha tulyagāmī; mahad dhanuh karsati tālamātram
eso 'rjuno nātra vicāryam asti; yady asmi saṃkarṣaṇa vāsudevah (1.180.18)

³³⁶ tuṣyāmi te vipramukhyabhujaviryasya saṃyuge
aviṣādasya caivāsyā ūastrāstravinyasya ca
kim tvam sākṣād dhanurvedo rāmo vā vipra sattama
atha sākṣād dhari hayaḥ sākṣād vā viṣṇur acyutah ...
na hi mām āhave kruddham anyaḥ sākṣāc chaci pateḥ
pumān yodhayitum śaktah pāṇḍavād vā kiriṭinah (1.181.15-18)

Arjuna lies: "No, Karna, I am not the art of archery or splendid Rāma; I am a brahmin, the best of fighters, most excellent among those who bear arms."³³⁷ Upon hearing those words, Karna respectfully withdraws from the fight, "believing the *tejas*, 'fiery energy,' of brahmins to be invincible."³³⁸

Where, then, does one turn for the "ultimacy" of selfhood in this inherently deceptive universe where no one and nothing is as it seems, even oneself? How distressing it must be for Karna when he learns that his instinctive respect for brahmins has rendered him vulnerable to the duplicity of his greatest rival. Arjuna's lying about his *varṇa* appears to be rewarded richly; later, when Karna lies about his *varṇa* he will reap the curses that lead to his death (see Chapter Four). Moreover, Draupadi's insulting refusal to allow a *sūta* to compete for her hand has denied Karna the prize that actually is his due -- as Ambā should have been Bhīṣma's queen, so Draupadi should have been Karna's.³³⁹ As it turns out, of course, Kuntī's apparently unwitting command that her sons share what Arjuna has won makes Draupadi the common wife of Karna's younger brothers. The *svayamvara*, including the incident of Draupadi's insult to Karna that is excluded from the Critical Edition, prepares the audience for the calamitous game of

³³⁷ nāsmi karṇa dhanurvedo nāsmi rāmaḥ pratāpavān
brāhmaṇo 'smi yudhāṁ śreṣṭhaḥ sarvaśastrabhr̥tāṁ varah (1.181.19)

³³⁸ brahmam tejas tadājayyaṁ manyamāno mahārathaḥ (1.181.21)

³³⁹ Even Arjuna acknowledges that according to *dharma* the first to marry should be the eldest; after he brings Draupadi home he offers her to Yudhiṣṭhira. (1.182.8)

dice, particularly for the behavior of Karṇa that, without the former scene, would appear uncharacteristically vile.

The proximate cause of the fateful dice game is the *sabhā*, the great hall of illusion built for Yudhiṣṭhira by an architect-asura named Maya. The construction of the *sabhā* is connected with Yudhiṣṭhira's rather breathtaking ambition to have himself declared *samrāj*, "all-king," a supreme ruler to whom other princes of the land must pay allegiance. "Illusion is built into the very structure of the *sabhā*," observes David Shulman, "and there is every reason to imagine that this *sabhā* is a model of the Epic universe, which must also, then, contain inherent elements of deceit."³⁴⁰ If this be so, the deceit, applauded consistently by Kṛṣṇa, is primarily his and the Pāṇḍavas'.

In preparation for Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*, Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma, and Arjuna set out to neutralize a certain king, Jarāsāṃdha by name, who is a personal enemy of Kṛṣṇa and the single ruler who poses an obstacle to Yudhiṣṭhira's suzerainty.³⁴¹ They go disguised as *snātakas*, "bathed ones," a term for young brahmins who have just marked the completion of their Vedic studies with a ritual bath. The arrogant threesome dress inappropriately (for *snātakas*), forcibly snatch garlands from a humble flower seller, and bully their way into the king's presence. Jarāsāṃdha receives the *snātakas* respectfully; he genuinely is taken aback when they reveal their *ksatriya* identities and challenge the king to one-on-one combat. Jarāsāṃdha and Bhīma then fight for a full thirteen days, at the end of

³⁴⁰ David Dean Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*, ed. D. H. A. Kolff, A. W. van den Hoek, M.S. Oort (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 359.

which, upon strong hints from Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma throws the fatigued king across his knee, breaks his back, and tramples his body into the ground.

With Jarāsandha eliminated, Yudhiṣṭhīra's brothers depart on a *digvijaya*, a conquest of the four quarters of the land, during which they win submission of the remaining rulers. All is in place for the celebration of the royal unction. The violence provoked by the Pāṇḍavas' brahminical disguises had tainted Draupadī's traditional *svayamvara*. Now Yudhiṣṭhīra's solemn Vedic ritual is more seriously defiled by the murder of King Śiśupāla of Cedi, Jarāsandha's erstwhile general.³⁴² Śiśupāla objects strongly when Kṛṣṇa is designated first in merit before all the attendant kings. As a Vṛṣṇi, in the *kula* of Yadu, Kṛṣṇa is properly a tribal chieftain, not a king. In the course of the ensuing argument, Kṛṣṇa summarily kills Śiśupāla; the *rājasūya* is interrupted for funeral rites. Van Buitenen argues rather convincingly that the whole of *Sabhāparvan* is a reenactment of the Vedic *rājasūya*.³⁴³ Van Buitenen, however, does not consider what this transformation of a solemn Vedic ritual might have meant to the *itihāsa*'s audience. Once again, the perspectives and values of Vedic tradition are being put into question. Upon what does genuine sovereignty rest in the *kaliyuga*? When is duplicity dharmic,

³⁴¹ 2.18-22

³⁴² 2.33-42

³⁴³ "I wish to submit that *The Assembly Hall* is structurally an epic dramatization of the Vedic ritual." J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed. and trans., *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 6. See also: David Gordon White, "Dogs Die," *History of Religions* 23, no. 4 (May 1989): 283-303.

when adharmic? Yudhiṣṭhīra's royal unction is a perverted and polluted ritual, with human sacrifice at its center and a *real*, not ritual, dice game at its close.³⁴⁴

Duryodhana is among the guests at Yudhiṣṭhīra's *rājāsūya*. Wandering through the marvelous *sabhā* he makes a fool of himself by falling into pools he mistakes for marble floors, crashing into walls that seem to be doors, and so forth. Humiliated, furious, and deeply jealous, Duryodhana returns to Hāstīnapura, brooding: "Fate, I think, reigns supreme, and man's acts are in vain, when I see such splendid glory brought to the sons of Kuntī."³⁴⁵ Pondering a means to revenge, and urged on by his cunning uncle Śakuni, Duryodhana builds a *sabhā* of his own and invites Yudhiṣṭhīra for a game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhīra, so recently glorified as world sovereign, accepts the invitation. "Fate robs our wisdom as fire blinds the eye," he muses; "the Ordainer's will is followed and men are bound as by nooses."³⁴⁶ (Issues of fate, *daiva*, and human initiative, *puruṣakāra*, will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.)

Yudhiṣṭhīra's passive acquiescence to Duryodhana's patently invidious invitation cannot be explained adequately by his supposed weakness for gambling or his alleged vow never to refuse a challenge. The dicing scene emphasizes emphatically similarities between Dharma's son Yudhiṣṭhīra and Sūrya's son Karṇa, whose solar *kula* links him to

³⁴⁴ Śiśupāla, in fact, is the child of Kṛṣṇa's paternal aunt. When Kṛṣṇa lists Śiśupāla's misdeeds in preparation for killing him, prominent among them is the fact that Śiśupāla once had proposed to marry Rukmini, Kṛṣṇa's beloved wife. (2.42.15)

³⁴⁵ *daivam eva param manye pauruṣam tu nirarthakam
drṣṭvā kuntisute śubhrām śriyam tām āhṛtām tathā* (2.43.32)

³⁴⁶ *daivam prajñām tu muṣṇāti tejaś cakṣur ivāpatat
dhātuś ca vaśam anveti pāśair iva narah sitāḥ* (2.52.18)

Yama – both Yama and Yudhiṣṭhira are given the epithet *Dharmarāja*, "King Dharma."³⁴⁷ Karna and Yudhiṣṭhira are indeed brothers in the similar conflicts they experience between *svabhāva*, an individual's inherend disposition, and *svadharma*, an individual's proper rule of conduct -- a conflict conducive in each brother to extreme, self-destructive "generosity." *Sūtaputra* Karna feels like a *ksatriya*, King Yudhiṣṭhira feels like a brahmin.³⁴⁸ Yudhiṣṭhira's impulsive behavior at Duryodhana's *sabha* can be comprehended only by taking into account his deep-seated urges towards asceticism. Perhaps in reaction to the extraordinary riches and honors heaped upon him at his unction, Yudhiṣṭhira compulsively gambles away everything: his wealth, his army, his kingdom, his people. He then wagers his brothers, praising each as he stakes him, as if to demonstrate how precious is the wager and how thorough his detachment.³⁴⁹ Finally, he

³⁴⁷ We note as well that it is Yudhiṣṭhira who first suspects some family connection with Karna; he attributes his passivity during the dicing match to being stunned by the fact that Karna's feet looked just like Kunti's (see Chapter Two). Yudhiṣṭhira mourns Karna's death as the death of a brother, a sentiment that the four younger Pāṇḍavas never seem to share. This insistence on Karna's feet evokes the story of Yama, who threatens his shadow mother with his foot and thus is condemned to die.

³⁴⁸ In fact, the bulk of the *itihāsa*'s lengthy didactic books is aimed at persuading Yudhiṣṭhira to accept his *rāja dharma* and not retreat to the forest in search of *mokṣa*.

³⁴⁹ Yudhiṣṭhira's compulsive gambling away of his possessions, his family, and his status as king is strongly akin to the behavior of Prince Vessantara from the *Vessantara Jātaka* composed around the fifth century BCE. Fitzgerald remarks that the *Mahābhārata* must have strongly rivaled "the pre-eminent and relatively new textual corpus of the day... the biography of the *bodhisattva* and Gotama the Buddha." (James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*'s Presentation of Itself," 167) Gombrich holds that the Pali text of the *Vessantara Jātaka* is more comparable to the *Mahābhārata* than to anything in Pali. At least one passage of the *Jātaka*, a long catalogue of fauna and flora, is closely modeled on a passage in the epic. (See Cone, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, xxix) Moreover, there are sufficient similarities

stakes, and loses, himself -- is he condemned to total slavery, or has he won the freedom of utter self-loss? Śakuni reminds him that there is one last possession to gamble, Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhīra responds with a beautiful, and chilling, eulogy to his queen -- he knows he is going to lose her.

She is neither too short nor too tall, neither too dark nor too red, and her eyes are red with love. I play you for her! Eyes like the petals of autumn lotuses, a fragrance as of autumn lotuses, a beauty that waits on autumn lotuses -- the peer of Śrī! ... Her waist shaped like an altar, hair long, eyes the color of copper, not too much body hair -- such is the woman, king, such is the slender-waisted Pāñcāli, for whom I now throw, the beautiful Draupadī. Come on, Saubala [Śakuni]!³⁵⁰

They throw. *Jitam*, "We have won!" cries Śakuni.

The incidents that follow are filled with references to *varṇa*, and particularly to *sūtas*. Duryodhana immediately sends a messenger, a *sūta*, into the women's quarters to fetch Draupadī. The *sūta* crawls up to her like "a dog in a lions' den."³⁵¹ He tells her she

between the *Vessantara Jātaka* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* to suggest a shared influence there as well.

³⁵⁰ naiva hrasvā na mahatī nātikṛṣṇā na rohiṇī
sarāga raktanetrā ca tayā dīvyāmy aham tvayā
śāradotpala patrākṣyā śāradotpala gandhayā
śāradotpala sevinyā rūpeṇa śrīsamānayā
tathaiva syād ānṛṣamṣyāt tathā syād rūpasampadā
tathā syāc chila sampattyā yām icchet puruṣaḥ striyam
caramaṇaṁ samviśati yā prathamam pratibudhyate
ā gopālāvi pālebhyah sarvam veda kṛtakṛtam
ābhāti padmavad vaktram sasvedam mallikeva ca
vedimadhyā dīrghakesī tāmrākṣi nātiromaśā
tayaivam vidhayā rājan pāñcālyāham sumadhyayā
glaham dīvyāmi cārvāṅgī draupadyā hanta saubala (2.58.32-37)

³⁵¹ śveva sa simhagoṣṭham (2.60.3)

has been lost by Yudhiṣṭhira to Duryodhana. Draupadī asks how he, a servant, dare speak to her, and haughtily commands him: "Sūta, go to that gambler in the *sabhā* and ask, 'Whom did you lose first, Bhārata, yourself or me?' Having found out, return and take me, son of a *sūta*!"³⁵² He delivers the message, and Duryodhana orders him again to fetch her, but the terrified servant protests that he, a *sūta*, dare not speak to one such as Draupadī. We wonder how these class references might have sounded to the silent Karṇa. Then Duryodhana's knavish brother Duḥśāsana rushes to the women's quarters and drags Draupadī by the hair before the assembly, calling her the Kauravas "slave," *dāsi*. The princess is wearing one simple garment stained with menstrual blood. The sight of Draupadī seems to excite Karṇa: "And Karṇa was utterly delighted by his word [*dāsi*], and approved of it laughing loudly."³⁵³ Karṇa will pay with his life for that laughter.

Karṇa, Duryodhana, and Śakuni cheer on Duḥśāsana, while the other men in the assembly remain miserably impotent. Even "wise" Bhīṣma equivocates, protesting that *dharma* is indeed "subtle"; he is unable to answer Draupadī's question as to whether Yudhiṣṭhira, having already lost himself, could gamble her away.³⁵⁴ Then one man stands up and declares courageously that in his opinion Draupadī has *not* been won. It is one of Duryodhana's brothers, Vikarṇa by name, "Earless" or "Deaf." The ironic play on

³⁵² gaccha tvam kitavam gatvā sabhāyām pṛccha sūtaja
kiṁ nu pūrvam parājaiśir ātmānam mām nu bhārata
etaj jñātvā tvam āgaccha tato mām nayasūtaja (2.60.7)

³⁵³ karṇas tu tad vākyam ativa hrṣṭah; sampūjayām āsa hasan saśabdām (2.60.38)

³⁵⁴ na dharmasaukṣmyāt subhage vivaktum; śaknomi te praśnam imāṁ yathāvat

names clearly is intended, for Vikarṇa's righteous intervention infuriates Karna beyond measure. All but fainting with fury, he rages:

If you think that it was against *dharma* to bring her into the hall clad in one piece of clothing, listen to my reply. The Gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, O descendent of Kuru. *This woman is subject to many men and most certainly is a harlot!*³⁵⁵

Karṇa then says to Duḥśāsana, "This Vikarṇa is only a child, babbling of wisdom! Strip the clothes from the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī!"³⁵⁶ Draupadī is saved by a miracle: each time Duḥśāsana pulls off one garment, another appears.³⁵⁷

Draupadī, by rejecting *sūtaputra* Karṇa at the *svayamvara*, denied herself to him as his rightful queen. He cannot forgive her for the insult, nor for garlanding Arjuna, nor for marrying the haughty men towards whom he feels such deep rivalry. Karṇa's insults are excessive, obsessive. Still, he desires her. "Quickly choose another husband, beautiful woman," he proposes.³⁵⁸ But Duryodhana intervenes; he looks invitingly at

(2.60.40)

³⁵⁵ manyase vā sabhām etām ānītām ekavāsasam
adharneṇeti tatrāpi śṛṇu me vākyam uttaram
eko bhartā striyā devair vihitā kurunandana
iyam tv anekavaśagā bandhakīti viniścītā (2.61.26-28, 34-35)

³⁵⁶ duḥśāsana subālo 'yam vikarṇah prājñavādikah
pāṇḍavānām ca vāsāṁsi draupadyāś cāpy upāhara (2.61.38)

³⁵⁷ The stripping of Draupadī by Duḥśāsana is another much loved scene held vividly in the Indic imagination, with a variant allowed only below the line in the Critical Edition, although the Poona editors do include a colorful illustration of the scene. The Vulgate and Bombay editions describe how Draupadī prays to Kṛṣṇa, and it is he who effects the miracle of the endless saree. See Critical Edition, p. 303-4, notes to line 40.

³⁵⁸ anyam viniśva patim āśu bhāmini (2.63.3)

Draupadī, exposes his left thigh, and slaps it invitingly.³⁵⁹ We have learned from Bhīṣma's grandfather Pratīpa what the left thigh indicates (see above)! Duryodhana's suggestive gesture seems a preemptive measure to stop Karna from expressing his own desire.³⁶⁰

Throughout the dicing scene, while the Pāṇḍavas and members of the court stand by helplessly, commenting upon niceties of *dharma* even while every norm of *dharma* is being shattered, Karna is alive to the hypocrisy. Moreover, he pays tribute to Draupadī's true salvific value. After she has won back her husbands' freedom, Karna speaks:

We do not know of one women famous for her beauty among mankind who has accomplished such an unheard-of deed! While the Pārthas and the Dhārtarāṣṭras are filled with anger, Kṛṣṇā Draupadī has become the good fortune of the sons of Pāṇḍu! When they were boatless, sinking, drowning in dangerous waters, Pāñcāli became the Pāṇḍavas' boat to bring them to the farther shore.³⁶¹

Karna grasps the worth of what he was denied at the *svayaṁvara*; lacking his mate, he will drown while the Pāṇḍavas are saved.

The dicing has a sequel. Rescued Yudhiṣṭhira is offered another chance to attain the renunciant's life for which he apparently yearns. In one last, winner-takes-all throw,

³⁵⁹ 2.63.11-12

³⁶⁰ Biardeau also reads Duryodhana's gesture as a "hands-off" message to his friend Karna. Biardeau, "Some Remarks," 107.

³⁶¹ yā nah śrutā manusyeṣu striyo rūpeṇa sammatāḥ
tāsām etādṛṣṭāṁ karma na kasyāmp caṇa śuśrumāḥ
krodhāviṣṭeṣu pārtheṣu dhārtarāṣṭreṣu cāpy ati
draupadī pāṇḍuputrāṇām kṛṣṇā śāntir ihābhavat
aplave 'mbhasi magnānām apratiṣṭhe nimajjatām
pāñcāli pāṇḍuputrāṇām naur esā pāragābhavat (2.64.1-3)

Yudhiṣṭhīra earns twelve years of exile in the forest, and a thirteenth in mandatory hiding. He, his wife, and his brothers set out for the wilderness dressed in ascetics' clothing. In the lead goes their priest, Dhaumya, chanting hymns to Yama, having fashioned the *kusa* grass that is dedicated to Nirṛti – the solar twins head the procession to exile!³⁶² Draupadī with her loose disheveled hair seems to embody that dark and dangerous immortal; the unbound hair is an emblem of her commitment to revenge Duḥsāsana's manhandling and *sūtaputra* Karna's laughter. As the incarnation of the goddess Śrī, Draupadī is queen to Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhīra; as Nirṛti, she is sister of Dharmarāja Yama. In *Adiparvan*, Vaiśampāyana identifies a dark shadow of the god Dharma named Adharma, "Lawlessness." Adharma's wife, he says, is Nirṛti; their sons are Fear, Panic, and Death.³⁶³ When, on the eve of battle, Kṛṣṇa tempts Karna to abandon Duryodhana and join his brothers, the greatest reward he offers is that "at the sixth turn you shall lie with Draupadī."³⁶⁴ In choosing to refuse that offer, Karna is doomed to lie "in the lap of Nirṛti."³⁶⁵

³⁶² kṛtvā tu nairṛtān darbhān ghorō dhaumyah purohitah
sāmāni gāyan yāmyāni purato yāti bhārata (2.71.21)

³⁶³ 1.60.53

³⁶⁴ ṣaṣṭhe ca tvām tathā kāle draupady upagamisyati (5.138.15)

³⁶⁵ Kuntī as well may be using Draupadī as a temptation when she pleads with Karna to join his brothers. Hiltebeitel examines her words, "Enjoy that prosperity (śrī) belonging to Yudhiṣṭhīra," *bhuñkṣva yaudhiṣṭhiram śriyam* (5.143.8), noting that the *śrī* must refer, even if not solely, to Draupadī. Moreover, he observes that these words to Karna are reminiscent of those earlier fateful words to her sons after the *svayamvara*: "May you all enjoy [it (her)] together," *bhuñkteti sametya sarve* (1.182.2) "In each passage," says Hiltebeitel, "the use of the root *bhuj*, 'eat, enjoy,' carries a sexual overtone. Do we not honor the poets most if we assume that these coincidences -- all concerning words of Kuntī to her sons about Draupadī -- are 'real' and intended?" Alf

The final assessment of the dicing episode is, not inappropriately, the *sūta* Samjaya's. Always honest with his king, the faithful charioteer tells Dhṛitarāṣṭra bluntly:

A great feud will follow, and the total destruction of everyone and his followers shall befall. Thus warned by Bhīṣma, Drona, and Vidura, your foolish and shameless son Duryodhana sent the son of a *sūta* as his usher, to bring in Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas' beloved wife, who walked in *dharma*.³⁶⁶

For the *sūta* Samjaya, the day's vilest deed was not Karna's laughter, nor Duhśāsana's attempt to disrobe Kṛṣṇa, nor Duryodhana's baring his left thigh, but the fact that the princess was summoned to the assembly by a *sūta*. Draupadī will undergo a parallel humiliation during the time when the Pāṇḍavas live disguised in the court of King Virāṭa. The king's wife has a brother, Kīcaka by name, who is not only vile in his being but a *sūta* by class.³⁶⁷ He lusts after Draupadī who is disguised as a ladies maid. When she repulses his advances, addressing him haughtily as *sūtaputra*, he grabs her by the hair, throws her to the floor, and kicks her. Draupadī complains bitterly of this insult in the presence of her disguised husbands, repeating like a refrain the detail of the incident that

Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 226-27.

³⁶⁶ tavedam̄ suktam̄ rājan mahad vairam̄ bhaviṣyati
vināśah sarvalokasya sānubandho bhaviṣyati
vāryamāṇo 'pi bhiṣmeṇa dronena vidureṇa ca
pāṇḍavānāṁ priyāṁ bhāryāṁ draupadīṁ dharmacāriṇīm
prāhiṇod ānayeheti putro duryodhanas tava
sūtaputraṁ sumandātmā nirlajjaḥ prātikāminam (2.72.5-7)

³⁶⁷ The Killing of Kīcaka, 4.13-23. There is an intriguing theme dealing with brothers of queens in the *itihāsa*. Besides Kīcaka, there is Mādrī's brother, vain Śalya, who allies with Duryodhana and betrays Karna, and Gāndhārī's brother, wicked Śakuni.

she finds most hideous: "A *sūtaputra* kicked me with his foot!"³⁶⁸ We note here that for haughty Draupadī, Kīcaka's crime lies not in assaulting a defenseless servant, but in the fact that the servant is in fact *ksatriya* Draupadī. The insult is avenged in one of the *itihāsa*'s most violently comic scenes: Bhīṣma hides under the covers of a bed, pretending to be Draupadī. When Kīcaka attempts to make love to the "princess," Bhīṣma grabs him and beats him to a bloody pulp. Through details like these, the *itihāsa* emphasizes the complex status of the *sūta*, and Draupadī's especial aversion to them, in thus developing Karna's social predicament, and his vexed relationship with the woman who should have been his queen.

Karṇa and Sāvitrī

Because of Draupadī's cold rejection, Karna remains without a female partner. The *itihāsa* indicates that he does have wives and sons; his women weep over his headless body in *Strīparvan*.³⁶⁹ However, no individual partner ever is identified.³⁷⁰ This last section will take a brief look at the female figure who seems to represent Karna's solar "other," a woman who is the antithesis of Yāmī and Nirṛti. Sāvitrī is the daughter of the Sun, therefore in some sense a sister or double of Karna. Her story is told to Yudhiṣṭhīra by the sage Mārkandeya as a reminder that Draupadī will be the Pāṇḍavas'

³⁶⁸ *tesām mām māninīm bhāryām sūtaputraḥ padāvadhit* (4.15.14,16,17,18,19)

³⁶⁹ 11.21

³⁷⁰ The same holds true for Duryodhana. Neither man is celibate like Bhīṣma, but neither has a mate the *itihāsa* deems worth naming. Karna observes to Kṛṣṇa that in the great sacrifice of war to come, Duryodhana will act as Sacrificer and the role of sacrificer's wife will be his army. 5.139.42

salvation. "Sāvitri" appears immediately before *Kundalāharanaparvan*, the "Robbing of the Earrings," *Āranyakaparvan*'s penultimate *adhyāya*, which recounts Karna's birth, abandonment, and self-mutilation (to be discussed in the following chapter). This elegant juxtaposition of stories demands that they be read as reflecting one another.³⁷¹ Sāvitri, child of the Sun, is a kind of foil to Karna, his solar "other." Hers is the tale of the defeat of the Sun Vivasvat's son Yama by the Sun Savitṛ's daughter. Sāvitri, as no other female in the *itihāsa*, is independent, powerful, and thoroughly in control. Her tale is rich and complex, and this chapter will treat of it only cursorily. On one level, it is a reworking of the story of Naciketas and Yama in the *Katha Upaniṣad* (see above), now with a woman for protagonist and the goal not the renunciation of *māyā* but liberation in life and in the body.³⁷² A few of those parallels will become evident in the following brief outline.

King Aśvapati is virtuous and pious, but childless. For eighteen years, he observes rigid vows and prays to the Sun Savitṛ. At last, Savitṛ's daughter, Sāvitri, appears to the king and promises that his wife will give birth to a splendid girl. The child, named after the Sun's daughter, resembles incarnate Śrī (an obvious parallel to Draupadī). Sāvitri grows up beautiful and wise, but possessed of such fiery splendor that

³⁷¹ Ancillary stories are found throughout the Critical Edition, except for the final three short *parvans*, and frequently are clustered. *Adiparvan* contains 84 stories, *Āranyakaparvan* contains 80, and *Sāntiparvan* contains 158. Understanding those clusters and their themes is a work that begs to be done, and one that will shed much-needed light on the literary nature of the *Mahābhārata*.

³⁷² Sutton shows that the *Mahābhārata* demonstrates an awareness of the *Upaniṣads* as a body of literature. Some *Upaniṣads* are directly quoted in the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Kathā* is one of the two most frequently quoted, along with the

no man dares to choose her, for her *tejas* keeps him away.³⁷³ Whereas in the Vedic and *Harivamśa* stories, Saranyū/Samjnā was overpowered by the *tejas* of her solar husband, and Kuntī is overwhelmed by the *tejas* of Sūrya, here it is a solar *female* who stuns men with her *tejas*. To find a mate, Sāvitri sets out into the world on her chariot, another solar reference.³⁷⁴ One day Aśvapati is sitting with the sage Nārada when his daughter returns to announce that she has chosen a husband, Satyavat, "Truthful."³⁷⁵ Satyavat's father, King Dyumatsena, has gone blind and been driven from his kingdom. Dyumatsena, his queen, and Satyavat live in a forest hermitage. Nārada, who can see into the future, discloses that Sāvitri has made a grievous mistake, for Satyavat has one fatal flaw: he is doomed to die in precisely one year. Sāvitri cannot be dissuaded: "Long-lived or short-lived, with virtues or without, my husband once chosen, I will not choose another."³⁷⁶ Sāvitri's resolve recalls Karṇa's obdurate, self-destructive generosity and Bhīṣma's horrible vow, but with a difference: Sāvitri is master of her destiny. She marries

Śvetāśvatara. As far as I am aware, no one has studied the obvious structural and literary parallels between "Sāvitri" and the *Kathā Upaniṣad*.

³⁷³ tāṁ tu padmapalāśākṣīṁ jvalantīm iva tejasā
na kaś cīd varayām āsa tejasā prativāritah

³⁷⁴ Stephanie Jamison shows that Sāvitri's independent action in finding her own husband has a Vedic precedent. The *Rgveda* and other other Vedic texts describe *pativedāna*, "husband finding," rituals. According to the *dharma* texts, a father has a limited amount of time -- between three months and three years -- to fulfill his duty to find a husband for a daughter of marriageable age. What is unusual in Sāvitri's case is that she is forced into independent action because her father makes no effort on his own. Then Aśvapati urges her to hurry to find a husband so that he will not incur blame! After she has chosen Satyavat, however, both fathers ratify the marriage. Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife*, 240-247.

³⁷⁵ Satyavatī is the feminine form of the name!

³⁷⁶ dīrghāyur atha vālpāyuh saguṇo nirguṇo 'pi vā

Satyavat and settles in the forest. Putting aside her fine clothing, she dresses in ascetics' garb. She is a flawless *pativrata*, "wife and daughter-in-law," but Nārada's words are present night and day in her grieving mind.

When the fateful hour draws near, Sāvitrī takes a special vow, fasting and standing upright for three days and nights.³⁷⁷ On the final day, she accompanies Satyavat into the forest when he goes to chop wood. When they are deep into the forest, he collapses. Sāvitrī takes his head in her lap and sees approaching a figure clad in a yellow robe and turban, "like Āditya in his fiery splendor."³⁷⁸ It is Yama, "King Dharma," son of the Sun, Lord of Death. He tells Sāvitrī that her husband's time has run out, then draws from Satyavat's body "a person the size of a thumb,"³⁷⁹ and proceeds in a southerly direction. Sāvitrī follows, insisting against Yama's objections that she will go wherever her husband is led. She addresses Yama as "friend," as Yāmī addresses Yama in the *Rgveda*.³⁸⁰ Sāvitrī pleases Yama with a series of wise observations, each of which earns her a boon. She wins eyesight for her father-in-law and the return of his kingdom, and one hundred sons for her father, Aśvapati. When she praises Yama as "the glorious son

sakṛd vṛto mayā bhartā na dvitīyam vṛṇomy aham (3.278.26)

³⁷⁷ As Naciketas waits for Yama for three days.

³⁷⁸ *Ādityasamatejasam* (3.281.8)

³⁷⁹ *āṅguṣṭha māṭram puruṣam* (3.281.6)

Says the *Kathā Upaniṣad* (4.12):

A person the size of a thumb
resides within the body (*ātman*)

The lord of what was and what will be --

from him he does not hide himself. Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 242.

³⁸⁰ *Rgveda* 10.10.1

of Vivasvat,"³⁸¹ he grants her a fourth boon, and she cleverly requests one hundred sons begotten by herself and Satyavat. When Yama unwittingly agrees, Sāvitri triumphantly claims the one boon that can make those sons possible: Satyavat's life. Yama admits defeat and loosens the nooses with which he has bound the young man. Sāvitri lifts up her husband, shoulders his axe, and leads him back to his mother and newly sighted father.

With Sāvitri's triumph over the inexorable will of Death, the old story of Yāmī, the dependent, rejected female turned to destruction, comes to a kind of resolution. Sāvitri's going out in her golden chariot to seek her mate is in counterpoint to Ambā's abduction in the chariot of Bhīṣma. Sāvitri accomplishes her will with confident determination; her actions are the antithesis of Satyavati's manipulations or Draupadi's subtleties and underground emotions. Bhīṣma's willed death at the moment of the winter solstice, Karna's self-mutilating generosity, Sūrya's mournful setting when his son dies on Kurukṣetra, are reflected in Sāvitri's victory over her solar "friend" and brother. Another name for the goddess Sāvitri is Gāyatri, a Vedic synonym for Vāc/Sarasvatī, not the subterranean river but the river of the Word. In her is a confluence of symbols that have been set into play by the *itihāsa*'s allusions to the Vedic solar *kula*, and a kind of resolution effected by one simply reversal: the Sun with its fiery *tejas* has become female.

The placement of Sāvitri's story directly before "The Robbing of the Earrings" is a narrative strategy inviting such comparisons. As discussed previously, the structure of

³⁸¹ vivasvatas tvam tanayah pratāpavāṁs (3.281.40)

the *Mahābhārata*, its juxtapositions and reflections, are a large part of the *itihāsa*'s discourse. Sāvitrī refuses traditional *strīdharma*, "women's' rules," for a higher *dharma*. She, perhaps alone among the *itihāsa*'s characters, is "held together," in possession of a unified self, capable of upholding the *dharma* of life over the *dharma* of death.

Sūtas

This chapter has examined some of the literary techniques used in the *Mahābhārata* in addressing the issues of *varna*, *kula*, and *dharma*. Complex allusions, plays on names, mythic and ritual references, are integral to the *Mahābhārata*'s intricate net. Not to recognize these is to impoverish the text and to fail to recognize its literary mastery. Not to explore them, to study their patterns and intersections, is to misapprehend the author's nuanced communications. This dissertation has agreed with Biardeau's position that we should, at least hypothetically, allow the *Mahābhārata* a single author, probably a brahmin dependent on the patronage of a *ksatriya* court. The lines of separation between these two higher *varnas*, by the time of the events of the *Mahābhārata*, have been blurred. There are brahmins who adopt *ksatriya* ways, like Kṛpa, Drona, and Aśvatthāman. There are *ksatriya* who behave like brahmins, like celibate Bhiṣma, and even the would-be ascetic Yudhiṣṭhira. The *ksatriya* Viśvāmitra even manages to *become* a brahmin. The *Mahābhārata* introduces a third element into the brahmin-*ksatriya* equation: the *sūta*.

This chapter has argued that the *Mahābhārata*'s author explores lineage, class, and rules of right conduct through the character of Karna and his earthly and solar families.

We have seen how importantly the *sūta* figures into that exploration. Clearly, this class was a major presence in the milieu from which the *itihāsa* developed -- priests, kings, and warriors who had, from the earliest generations, intermixed, be it in *anuloma* marriages or *pratiloma* liaisons. The *itihāsa* presents *sūtas* as acting in a myriad of roles: as bards, like Vaiśampāyana, as servants, like the groveling *sūta* sent to summon Draupadi; as simple charioteers, like Karna's adoptive father, Adhiratha; as advisors and confidants of kings, like Saṃjaya; as generals of a king's army, like Kaca, brother of Virāta's queen; even as kings, like Karna himself, king of Aṅga. The *kṣatriya* characters of the *Mahābhārata* have conflicting attitudes towards *sūtas*, yet clearly have grown dependent on their services. The *itihāsa* claims that it first found expression through *sūtas*. It cannot be irrelevant that Vyāsa, when asked at Janamejaya's sacrifice to tell his Great Bhārata, demurs to his student, the *sūta* Vaiśampāyana.

If, as is contended here, Karna is indeed the representative of the *Mahābhārata*'s model audience, then the fact that he is a *sūta* must color our understanding of that audience. Perhaps the intention is to underscore to the educated members of the court capable of *reading* the *itihāsa* that any pretensions to class purity were long ago invalidated -- the confusion begins with Yayāti's "against the grain" marriage to a brahmin and his prohibited union with the daughter of an *asura* king. The *sūta* becomes the emblem of all men, whatever class they may claim, who never can be certain of their blood line. However, if there is one powerful indication that the *itihāsa* draws special attention to the *sūta* class, perhaps even to identify himself with it, is that Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu's

avatāra, is not a *ksatriya*, as a descendent of Yadu, born of a *ksatriya* man and brahmin woman, Kṛṣṇa is a member of a *sūta kula*. The five sons of parthenogenetically pure Draupadi, arguably stainless *ksatriyas*, all are slaughtered in the Night Massacre after the great war.

What, then, are the implications for an individual seeking to fulfill *varṇāśramadharma*? Is that search feasible if one is unsure of one's *varṇa*? Manu says that people born from the confusion of castes, *varṇasamkara*, may be recognized by their own "innate activities."³⁸² Yet, the "innate activities" of a Kaca, a Samjaya, or an Ugrasravas are decidedly different. Karṇa demonstrates that the only valid path to holding together the self, and holding together the world, involves seeking to discover one's *svadharma*, the law of one's own being. Yet in his case, that ardent search leads to a painful, lonely, death.

There is another crucial element in the *kula*, *varṇa*, *dharma* nexus, and that is Daiva, Fate. In the end, the *itihāsa* will ask, just how autonomous *is* the individual? Is Sāvitrī a lone exception in her defeat of Yama's inexorable will? If the divine *kulas* of the characters provide motivations and explanations for what occurs on earth, how deterministic are those events? The next chapter will take up the issues of Daiva and human initiative, particularly as explored through the character of Karṇa.

³⁸² 10.40, see above.

Chapter Four

Fate and Human Initiative: Karna and Arjuna

Arjuna is the antithesis of Karna. Throughout most of the *itihāsa*, the ambidextrous archer, Savyasācin, seems oblivious to the kind of tortured soul-searching that haunts his eldest brother. With the exception of his loss of heart at the start of the battle -- a dejection that Kṛṣṇa soothes -- Arjuna is in the main untroubled by questions of *svadharma*; he meets most situations with blithe self-confidence. Nowhere is this more evident than in his relationships with women. Not for Arjuna are the peevish denials of a Yayāti, Yama, or Bhiṣma when confronted with feminine importunities. Consider his encounter with Ulūpi. The five brothers have promised one another that when one of them is alone with Draupadī the couple's privacy is sacrosanct. If another brother should intrude, he must live apart for one year as a forest ascetic.³⁸³ One day, early on in their common marriage, Arjuna inadvertently interrupts a private moment between Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī; despite Yudhiṣṭhira's protests, he insists on fulfilling the promise. One suspects that Arjuna is grateful for an excuse for adventure. Arjuna rides forth, eventually camping on the banks of the Ganges. From the water emerges a beautiful *nāga* -- a snake-woman with the power of taking human form. At the first sight of Arjuna, she confesses, she had gone mad with love. "Gladden this unique woman today, O King, with the gift of yourself!"³⁸⁴ Smiling, Arjuna protests that he is supposed to be

³⁸³ 1.204.28

³⁸⁴ ananyāṁ nandayasvādya pradānenātmāno rahaḥ (1.206.20)

living the life of an ascetic, but his half-hearted scruples are quickly overturned. The only woman he need avoid, reasons Ulūpī, is Draupadī. Soon Arjuna is beneath the waters in Ulūpī's arms. The child produced from their union, Irāvat, will return at Kurukṣetra to fight for his father. Soon thereafter, Arjuna begets another son, Babhruvāhana, on the beautiful princess Citrāngadā, then abducts and marries Subhadrā with the connivance of her brother, Kṛṣṇa. Subhadrā will bear Abhimanyu. Overall, it is quite a productive year.

There is a deeper issue here, however. Why, we are forced to wonder, are some lives, like Arjuna's, so fortunate while others are so calamitous? Sexual dalliance, lying, breaking the *kṣatriya* code of war -- numerous *adharmaic* actions that bring catastrophe, disgrace, and death to some, to Arjuna bring success. If there is no justice in the world, how is the individual to comprehend his place within it? Where does he look for an ethical compass? The *Mahābhārata* wrestles with this problem. The "fifth Veda" is caught in the tension between the older Vedic faith in *rta*, an overarching cosmic order in which human beings could participate actively, and the skepticism voiced in the *Upaniṣads*. In the older literature, a person as a member of a particular *varṇa*, through proper ritual activity, helped to uphold *rta* and could expect in return a prosperous life and some sort of heaven after death. However, the *Upaniṣads* express doubts about a

person's ultimate goal. Says Naciketas to Yama: "There is this doubt about a man who is dead. 'He exists,' say some; others, 'He exists not.' I want to know this...."³⁸⁵

The doctrine of *karman* attempts to answer that ontological and soteriological question while preserving the proper order of things. According to this doctrine, a person's actions have consequences, if not in this life then in a future existence. The circumstances in which a person finds himself are attributable to previous deeds. In the *Mahābhārata*, Yayāti explains:

Having died and breathed his last, his good and bad deeds go before him, following the spirit to another womb. Having died, he takes another body, O lion among kings. Those who have done good go to a good womb; those who have done evil go to an evil womb.³⁸⁶

he who finds himself in woeful circumstances -- having been born a *sūdra* or a *sūta*, for instance -- must accept patiently his lot, follow the *dharma* of his class, gender, and stage of life, and trust that in a future life conditions will improve. Nonetheless, what the individual in the *kali yuga* experiences in this life is incontrovertible: human existence is marred by pain and followed by death. In the end, by pushing the fructification of one's

³⁸⁵ *Kathā Upaniṣad* 1.20, in: Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 234.

³⁸⁶ hitvā so 'sūn suptavan niṣṭhanitvā; purodhāya sukṛtam duṣkṛtam ca anyām yonim pavanāgrāṇusāri; hitvā deham bhajate rājasimha puṇyām yonim puṇyakṛto vrajanti; pāpām yonim pāpakṛto vrajanti (1.85.18-19)

However, Yayāti, like most characters in the *Mahābhārata*, has conflicting views about the powers of *Karman* versus the powers of fate. He says: "Be it happiness or suffering, a person finds it is dependent on *daiva*, not on his own powers. Therefore, understanding the power of destiny, *diśta*, he would neither grieve nor rejoice."

sukham hi jantur yadi vāpi duḥkham; daivādhinam vindati nātma śaktyā tasmād diśtam balavan manyamāno; na samjvaren nāpi hrṣyet kadā cit (1.84.7)

deeds beyond even several births, the doctrine of *karman* is rendered an unknowable and unknown quantity, virtually non-existent and conceptually ineluctable.³⁸⁷ In the world of the *Mahābhārata*, there seems to be no justice at work, "no arbiter, no accepted code of uniform law which explains the diversity of punishments and the discrepancy between the offence and the crime."³⁸⁸ The *Mahābhārata* demands that its audience confront that conundrum. As will be examined below, Karna in particular is punished for behavior that is rewarded in his brother Arjuna.

One tale in the *Mahābhārata* tackles this problem in a particularly direct manner. The circumstances of its telling are these: lying upon his bed of arrows, in what must be the world's longest death-bed oration, Bhiṣma expounds to Yudhiṣṭhira the vast compendium of philosophy, theology and myth that makes up the *itihāsa*'s large twelfth and thirteenth books, the *Sānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans*. As the latter *parvan* opens, Yudhiṣṭhira still has not assimilated all that has occurred; he feels personally responsible for the war and cannot embrace his duty, as victor, to assume kingship. "What is in store for us and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra," he asks the *pitāmaha*, "now that we have committed that abhorrent deed, driven by time and fury?"³⁸⁹ Bhiṣma responds with the story of the conversation of an old brahmin woman, Gautamī, with a hunter named Arjunaka, "Little

³⁸⁷ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Baulmon Prakashan, 1995), 40.

³⁸⁸ Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India*, 273.

³⁸⁹ vayam hi dhārtarāṣṭrāś ca kālamanyuvaśānugāḥ
kṛtvedam ninditam karma prāpsyāmah kām gatiṁ nṛpa (13.1.6)

Arjuna," Mṛtyu (Death), and Kāla (Time).³⁹⁰ One day the old woman finds her beloved son dead from the bite of a serpent. The hunter catches the reptile and brings it to Gautamī, proposing to hack it to death. Gautamī replies that such violence would not only be sinful, it would also be senseless, for it would not bring back her son. Arjunaka protests: the serpent must be punished for the evil it has wrought and others must be protected from its bite.³⁹¹ The unfortunate snake speaks up: "I have absolutely no will of my own. Mṛtyu incited me to the deed. I bit the child according to his directions, not from anger or desire. Hunter, whatever sin there is in this matter is Mṛtyu's."³⁹² Arjunaka insists that even if the snake was not the primary cause, he was the instrumental cause of the child's death and bears responsibility for it. Mṛtyu then comes on the scene. He claims that neither he nor the snake is to be blamed, because he, Death, had acted under the influence of Kāla, "Time." "All beings, moving and immovable, in heaven or on earth, depend upon Kāla. The whole universe, serpent, depends upon Kāla."³⁹³ The hunter is not convinced; in his view, both the snake and Kāla are responsible for the child's death and both deserve to be punished. Now Kāla arrives and addresses the hunter: "Neither I nor Mṛtyu nor the snake is guilty in causing the death of the child.

³⁹⁰ 13.1.8-75

³⁹¹ Once again, the *itihāsa* appears to be playing deliberately with names. The literal-minded Arjunaka, for whom right and wrong are so white and black, must remind Yudhiṣṭhira of his younger brother.

³⁹² asvatantram hi mām mṛtyur vivaśam yad acūcudat
tasyāyam vacanād daśo na kopena na kāmyayā
tasya tak kilbiṣam lubdha vidyate yadi kilbiṣam (13.1.28-9)

³⁹³ jangamāḥ sthāvarāś caiva divi vā yadi vā bhuvi
sarve kālātmakāḥ sarpakālātmakam idam jagat (13.1.46)

The child's *karman* is what excited us, Arjunaka. The cause of his death was nothing other than his own *karman*.³⁹⁴ Kāla explains that all human beings are subject to the influence of their past deeds. Gautamī agrees with him, adding that her own past actions also must have contributed to her son's death. The serpent, Kāla, and Mṛtyu return to their domains.

Bhiṣma ends his story with apparently contradictory conclusions. "Having heard this tale," he tells Yudhiṣṭhira, "be tranquil and do not brood. Know that a person's own *karman* leads him to one of the three worlds." This seems clear enough, but then Bhiṣma adds: "This [the evil of the war] was not your doing, nor the doing of Duryodhana. Know that all those lords of the earth were slain by the doings of Kāla."³⁹⁵ Which was it, then — Kāla or *karman*? Yaroslav Vassilkov finds in the story's double ending evidence of a "surgical operation" -- the references to *karman*, he contends, are later additions. For Vassilkov, the doctrine of time, *kālavāda*, and omnipotent fate, *daiva*, are the very quintessence of the *Mahābhārata*'s worldview, a worldview encapsulated in the story of Gautamī and the hunter -- minus the closing reference to *karman*.³⁹⁶ Allowing a more

³⁹⁴ naivāhaṁ nāpy ayam mṛtyur nāyam lubdhaka pannagah
kilbiṣī jantu maraṇe na vayam hi prayojakāḥ
akarod yad ayam karma tan no 'rjuṇaka codakam
pranāśa hetur nānyo 'sya vadhyate 'yam svakarmaṇā (13.1.63-4)

³⁹⁵ etac chrutvā śamam gaccha mā bhūś cintāparo nṛpa
svakarma pratyayāmī lokāṁś triṁ viddhi manujarṣabha
na tu tvayā kṛtaṁ pārtha nāpi duryodhanena vai
kālena tat kṛtaṁ viddhi vihitā yena pārthivāḥ (13.1.74-75)

³⁹⁶ Yaroslav Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda* (the Doctrine of Cyclical Time) in the *Mahābhārata* and the Concept of Heroic Didactics," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts*,

"literary" reading, we might rather conclude that Bhiṣma's contradictory remarks are a narrative strategy to underscore the *itihāsa*'s ambiguity about the theory of *karman* inherited from the *Upaniṣads* -- a theory that for humans caught in the brutal realities of life is neither comforting nor ascertainable. Daiva and Kāla, "Fate" and "Time" (which I frequently will express with capital letters, to suggest their cosmic and omnipotent nuances) are the forces that seem to drive the discernable world.

After Karna has refused Kuntī's plea to join the side of his brothers, she ruefully predicts that the Kauravas are certain to go to their destruction, for "fate is more powerful," *daivam tu balavattaram*.³⁹⁷ Her words beg the question: more powerful than what? More powerful, clearly, than the individual's efforts to direct or govern the course of life.³⁹⁸ The audience of the *Mahābhārata* is confronted with a great dilemma, caught between two fears: the skeptic's fear that nothing one can do can bring about a hoped-for result because events are not regularly connected; and the fatalist's fear that nothing one can do can alter what is bound to occur.³⁹⁹ By putting off the results of one's actions possibly for lifetimes, the theory of *karman* risks appearing very much like another manner of expressing the omnipotence of Fate and the power of Time.

Karna, like his mother, realizes what the author of the *itihāsa* and the audience know as well -- that life in the *kali* age appears arbitrary, that there is some

Techniques and Relationships, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 25-26.

³⁹⁷ 5.144.24

³⁹⁸ Consult Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India*, 306 ff.

³⁹⁹ Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India*, 46-47.

incomprehensible principle at work stronger than the individual, which the individual must confront alone. The *Mahābhārata* expresses that principle in a variety of ways. It is *bhāgya*, "luck;" *niyati*, "necessity;" *disti*, "fortune;" *distā* "destiny; *vidhi*, "rule;" " *kṛtānta*, "inevitability;" *acintya*, "the unthinkable;" *adr̥ṣṭa*, "the unforeseen;" *yadṛcchā*, "chance;" *bhavitavya*, "what must be." Most importantly, it is *kāla*, meaning both "time" and "death," and *daiva*, literally, "that which comes from the *devas*, the gods," that is, inexorable "Fate." In the world of the *itihāsa*, *daiva* operates as "the connecting link between microcosm and macrocosm," observes David Shulman; *daiva* represents "the individual's situation within the deeper structure of reality." Its essence is "negativity, in the sense of destructive, dis-integrating, crooked and unbalancing forces...."⁴⁰⁰ Kṛṣṇa will offer a solution to counter the negative, dis-integrating, and destructive forces of Time and Fate. But is the solution proposed in the *Bhagavadgītā* available to everyone? Is it either appropriate or possible for a man like Karna, like ourselves, the audience? How can one ever be certain? This chapter will examine the *itihāsa*'s explorations of these issues through Karna, particularly as in opposition to his nemesis, Arjuna. The forces at work in Arjuna's life are not destructive or dis-integrating, for they are embodied in Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa protects Arjuna. How does Kṛṣṇa guide Arjuna? What are Kṛṣṇa's motives? How does Kṛṣṇa "guide" or "use" Karna? I will argue, again, that the *itihāsa* is not simply a collection of various philosophies and points of view haphazardly collected together over time. Rather, the *Mahābhārata* structures its explorations into its net.

⁴⁰⁰ David Dean Shulman, "On Being Human in the Sanskrit Epic: The Riddle of

Questions of fate and human initiative, fate and divine grace, fate and salvation, fate and death, are explored through Karna as the *itihāsa*'s representative human. By examining how they play out in his life we can see how they are assumed to play out in the lives of all people caught within the *kali yuga*, in the lives of the *itihāsa*'s audience. However, before we turn to specific events in Karna's life that illuminate the workings of *daiva* and *kāla*, we will look briefly at how these issues are variously articulated, by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Draupadī, and Yudhiṣṭhīra, and in the important discussions and events of book ten, *Sauptikaparvan*, the Night Massacre.

Sauptikaparvan

The *Mahābhārata*'s most powerfully rendered discourse about *daiva* and *puruṣakāra*, "human effort," occurs in the early sections of *Sauptikaparvan*. The conversation of Aśvatthāman and Kṛpa is particularly effective because of the hideous action that follows: the massacre of the sleeping Pāṇḍava troops the night the war has ended.⁴⁰¹ When this short and hard-hitting *parvan* opens, Aśvatthāman, crazed with grief over the slaying of his father, Droṇa, watches an owl sweep down upon a flock of sleeping crows and kill them all. Thus, he is inspired for his nocturnal raid upon the Pāṇḍava camp. When they hear of his plans, his companions, Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman, consider him mad, and Kṛpa attempts to dissuade him by ruminating about *daiva* and

Nala," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (March 1994): 359.

⁴⁰¹ David Shulman argues that their discussions, "reported with a vicious verisimilitude [are] characteristic of comedy in its cruel or mocking aspect." David Dean

*puruṣakāra.*⁴⁰² Fate, reasons Kṛpa, is like the rain that falls on a field, human effort like the proper preparation of the field that it may bear fruit.⁴⁰³ While he extols the importance of human exertion, Kṛpa's aim is to dissuade Aśvatthāman from an action he says would be comparable to "splattering blood on a white cloth."⁴⁰⁴ Aśvatthāman cannot be deterred from his plan. Yet while he believes he is taking initiative here, the *itihāsa* makes it clear that Aśvatthāman is acting as an instrument of Daiva. When he nears the camp of the sleeping warriors, he finds a towering being guarding the gates – it is Rudra, Śiva in his frightful aspect. Aśvatthāman determines to sacrifice himself to that being, but Rudra praises him, gives him a shining sword, and possesses him.⁴⁰⁵ Aśvatthāman becomes embodied Daiva, the tool of a cosmic plan that no human could prevent or alter. As Kṛṣṇa had said to Arjuna at the start of the Kurukṣetra battle, all those warriors "really have been slain already," *nihatāḥ pūrvam eva*.⁴⁰⁶ Significantly, on the night of the Massacre, upon Kṛṣṇa's suggestion, he and the five Pāṇḍavas are spending the night away from the camp.

Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 132.

⁴⁰² Kṛpa is one of the martial preceptors of both Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. Born a brahmin, he adopts the ways of a *kṣatriya*. His twin, Kṛpi, is married to Droṇa. Kṛtavarman is a king of the Vṛṣnis, Kṛṣṇa's people, who sides with Duryodhana in the battle.

⁴⁰³ *pravṛṣṭe ca yathā deve samyak kṣetre ca karsite
bijam mahāguṇam bhūyāt tathā siddhir hi mānuṣī
tayor daivam viniścitya svavaśenaiva vartate
prājñāḥ puruṣakāram tu ghaṭante dākṣyam āsthitāḥ* (10.2.7-8)

⁴⁰⁴ *śukle raktam iva nyastam bhaved* (10.5.15)

⁴⁰⁵ (1.7.64) Aśvatthāman in fact is said to be a partial incarnation of Rudra.

⁴⁰⁶ 6.63.33 (*Bhagavadgītā* 11.33)

Among the warriors killed early on by Aśvatthāman is Śikaṇḍin. In the previous chapter, Ambā turned Śikaṇḍin turned Śikaṇḍin was discussed in relationship to solar Yami, the rejected twin of Yama who turns to Destruction, Nirṛti. Ambā had propitiated fierce Śiva and immolated herself as sacrifice to that god. Reborn as the sister/brother of Draupadī, she brings about the death of Bhīṣma. Now, in the camp at night, Aśvatthāman and Śikaṇḍin begin to fight. "Then mighty-armed Aśvatthāman, filled with rage, closed with Śikaṇḍin and with his sword cleaved him in two."⁴⁰⁷ No sooner has Śikaṇḍin been split asunder -- the male and female halves severed, as it were -- than the warriors of the Pāṇḍava camp have a horrific vision. Ambā, the man-woman, now physically becomes Kāla, Time, as Nirṛti, Destruction.

Dark, with bloody mouth and eyes, anointed with a bloody unguents,
wearing a single bloody garment, with noose in hand, they saw her,
Śikaṇḍinī, the Night of Time (*kālarātri*), standing there smiling. ... On
nights past those foremost of warriors had seen her in their dreams,
leading the sleepers away and Droṇa's son forever killing them.⁴⁰⁸

This passage has been read -- misread, I believe -- as a late interpolation, an anachronistic reference to *purāṇic* Durgā or Kāli. Hiltebeitel calls the lines an "intrusion" that the *parvan* can do without.⁴⁰⁹ Again, however, the *Mahābhārata* reveals the complex

⁴⁰⁷ sa tu krodhasamāviṣṭo dṛṇaputro mahābalah
śikaṇḍinam samāsādya dvidhā ciccheda so 'sinā (1.8.60)

⁴⁰⁸ kāliṇ raktāsyayanām raktamālyānulepanām
raktāmbaradharām ekām pāśahastāṇi śikaṇḍinim
dadṛṣuh kālarātrīm te smayamānām avasthitām ...
svapne suptān nayantīm tām rātriṣv anyāsu māriṣa
dadṛṣur yodhamukhyās te ghnantām drauṇīṇ ca nityadā (10.8. 64-66)

⁴⁰⁹ Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 326.

wholeness of its net. Ambā, continuing the curse of Yamī turned Nirṛti, at last fulfills her purpose, and the purposes of Daiva. Why else would the *itihāsa* give a name to this monstrous female? For these doomed warriors, Kālarātri -- Night of Time, Night of Death -- is Śikhaṇḍī.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Dhṛtarāṣṭra is arguably the most "fatalistic" of the *itihāsa*'s main characters. He is, as Georges Dumézil aptly puts it, "*à la fois la victime, le doctrinaire et l'agent d'un destin en apparence aussi aveugle que lui.*," "at once the mouthpiece and the agent of a destiny apparently as blind as he is."⁴¹⁰ The blind king dwells in a dark world ruled by inscrutable Dhāṭṛ, the "Ordainer," personified Fate. When Duryodhana demands that his father invite Yudhiṣṭhīra to play the game of dice, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, foreseeing disaster, but with "his mind clouded by *daiva*," *daivasarpaṇmūḍhacetāḥ*, yields to his son's plan, deeming it "invincible fate," *dustaram daivam*.⁴¹¹ "Everything obeys the commands of Dhāṭṛ," he says to excuse the dice game; "the world acts through compulsion, not self-will."⁴¹² Later, witnessing the Kurukṣetra battle through the eyes of Saṃjaya, he tells his *sūta* that "everything has been arranged by Dhāṭṛ" and therefore cannot be otherwise.⁴¹³ Faithful Saṃjaya counsels Dhṛtarāṣṭra to take responsibility for the fruit of his actions, not to blame the devastation on fate but to accept "here or hereafter" the *karman* created by his own deeds, according

⁴¹⁰ Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 162.

⁴¹¹ 2.51.16

⁴¹² dhāṭrā tu diṣṭasya vaśe kiledam sarvam; jagac ceṣṭati na svatantram (2.51.25)

⁴¹³ purā dhāṭrā yathā sṛṣṭam tat tathā na tad anyathā (6.72.26)

to the reality of his sins.⁴¹⁴ However, once the war has been fought, Samjaya advises resignation in the face of the unbearable devastation.

What must be must be, do not grieve over it. Who can prevent Fate even with the greatest wisdom? No one at all can step beyond the path bestowed by the Disposer. All is rooted in Time: being and nonbeing, happiness and unhappiness.⁴¹⁵

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's obsessive fatalism generally is supported by those around him. "The way of *daiva* cannot be controlled by anyone at all," Vidura tells his half-brother.⁴¹⁶ Up to the end of his life, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is reassured that the war was not his or his family's fault; it was brought about by irresistible Fate: "Daiva cannot be resisted by human effort."⁴¹⁷ Clearly, the efforts of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and those around him to transfer responsibility for the war's the horror to blind destiny betray a deep unease. To admit that human effort, *puruṣakāra*, can be effective in producing results is to accept, according to the doctrine of *karman*, that those results will pursue the individual in this life or another. The *Mahābhārata* challenges its audience to examine that doctrine; only the truly sighted may have the courage to embrace it. At the same time, the *Mahābhārata* everywhere supports

⁴¹⁴ tvam evādyā phalaṁ bhunkṣva kṛtvā kilbiṣam ātmanā
ātmanā hi kṛtam karma ātmanaivopabhujyate
iha vā pretya vā rājāṁ tvayā prāptam yathātatham (6.73.2-3)

⁴¹⁵ bhavitavyam tathā tac ca nātah śocitum arhasi
daivam prajñā viśeṣena ko nivartitum arhati
vidhātṛvihitam mārgam na kaś cid ativartate
kālamūlam idam sarvam bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe (1.1.86-87)

⁴¹⁶ na ca daivakṛto mārgah śākyo bhūtena kena cit (11.8. 18)

⁴¹⁷ na tad duryodhanakṛtam na ca tad bhavatā kṛtam
na karṇa saubalābhyaṁ ca kuravo yat kṣayam gatāḥ
daivam tat tu vijānīmo yan na śākyam prabādhitum

a view that there is a universal cosmic order that must be, and will be, upheld. There is a plan. Humans participate in that plan; either willingly or despite themselves they act to fulfill it.

Yudhiṣṭhīra and Draupadī

Yudhiṣṭhīra is not unlike Dhṛtarāṣṭra in his conclusions about fate. "Everything is controlled by Dhāṭṛ," he muses, as he sets out for the dice game.⁴¹⁸ *Sabhāparvan* tells us that Daiva is a force that drives and intoxicates; in Shulman's analysis, neither Dhṛtarāṣṭra nor Yudhiṣṭhīra are able to hold out against it.⁴¹⁹ However, as discussed in the previous chapter, Yudhiṣṭhīra appears almost eager to divest himself of everything that keeps him bound to his *dharma* as heir to the throne. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is too weak even to wish to be cured of his blindness; his mind is clouded by Daiva; Yudhiṣṭhīra, one might say, has a mind clouded by *dharma*. Early in their exile, Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhīra engage in an intense discussion in which Draupadī berates Yudhiṣṭhīra for his weakness and passivity.⁴²⁰ It is high time he stands up to the Kauravas, she insists. Yudhiṣṭhīra responds that the eternal law, *dharmaḥ sanātanah*, of the wise is to be patient and gentle; he intends to obey that law.⁴²¹ Draupadī will have none of it. She reminds him of his defeat at the dicing match. Yes indeed, she says, men follow the commands of Dhāṭṛ like

daivam puruṣakāreṇa na śakyam ativartitum (15.16. 1-2)

⁴¹⁸ dhāṭrā tu diṣṭasya vaśe kiledam (2.52.14)

⁴¹⁹ David Dean Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*, ed. D. H. A. Kolff, A. W. van den Hoek, M.S. Oort (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 359.

⁴²⁰ 3.30-33

⁴²¹ etad ātmavatām vṛttam esa dharmaḥ sanātanah

bulls led by nose ropes.⁴²² Having witnessed the Pāṇḍavas' suffering and the success of Duryodhana, she declares, "I condemn Dhāṭr, who sanctions such misfortune."⁴²³ Yudhiṣṭhīra pleads with her not to revile the Ordainer; he claims that his own behavior is driven only by *dharma*. "I do not act seeking the fruits of *dharma*; I give because I am compelled to do so, I sacrifice because I am compelled to do so!"⁴²⁴ Indeed, he admits, his mind by its very nature, *svabhāvāt*, is possessed by *dharma*.⁴²⁵ *Dharma* and *daiva* are conflated in Yudhiṣṭhīra's mind. Draupadī rejects Yudhiṣṭhīra's worldview. "What comes to a man through absolute necessity, *hāthāt*, through fate, *daivāt*, through his very nature, *svabhavāt*, or through action, *karmaṇas*, is all the fruit of his previous actions," she says.⁴²⁶ The importance of positive action is what Draupadī would teach Yudhiṣṭhīra. "The one who holds that the supreme thing in the world is destiny, and the one who holds it is absolute necessity, are both outcasts. The faculty of *action* is praised!"⁴²⁷ Yet even Draupadī must allow that the artifices of the gods are inscrutable.⁴²⁸

Everything, whether it comes from destiny or absolute necessity, is inscrutable. What we perceive as coming either from necessity or from destiny is actually the chain of cause and effect. Some comes from fate,

kṣamā caivānṛśamsyāpi ca tat kartāsmi aham añjasā (3.30.50)

⁴²² manīḥ sūtra iva proto nasyota iva govṛṣah

dhāṭur ādeśam anveti tanmayo hi tad arpaṇāḥ (3.31.25)

⁴²³ dhāṭārāpi garhaye pārtha visamām yo 'nupaśyati (3.31.39)

⁴²⁴ nāham dharmaphalānvesi rājaputri carāmy uta

dadāmi deyam ity eva yaje yaṣṭavyam ity uta (3.32.2)

⁴²⁵ dharma eva manāḥ kṛṣṇe svabhāvāc caiva me dhṛtam (3.32.4)

⁴²⁶ evāpi hāthāc ca daivāc ca svabhāvāt karmaṇas tathā

yāni prāpnoti puruṣas tat phalam pūrvakarmaṇāḥ (3.33.18)

⁴²⁷ yaś ca diṣṭa paro loke yaś cāyam haṭha vādakah

ubhāv apasadāv etau karma buddhiḥ praśasyate (3.33.11)

⁴²⁸ gūḍhamāyā hi devatāḥ (3.32.34)

some from the stars, some from a person's own actions; thus a man obtains the fruits, there is no fourth way.⁴²⁹

Draupadī does not reject determinism outright, but urges that in the structure of causality the preordaining force of *daiva* is not absolute; human effort is also a significant factor.⁴³⁰ In her view, Yudhiṣṭhīra is too ready to surrender passively to some imagined will of Dhāṭ.

Yudhiṣṭhīra, however, may not be as fatalistic as Draupadī imagines. His struggle rather centers on the conflicting life-ethics of *pravṛtti*, a turning towards the world, and *nivṛtti*, a turning away from the world in search of *mokṣa*. Suspecting the illusory nature of so-called reality, his instinct is to turn away from the world and to find final release from its cycles. During the exile, he has the opportunity to question the great sage Mārkaṇḍeya. Observing that the evil sons of Dhṛitarāṣṭra seem to prosper while he and his wife and brothers suffer hardships, he wonders how it can be said that humans reap their just rewards. How does Īśvara, the Supreme Being, operate? Do a man's good and evil deeds follow him into another birth? How so?⁴³¹ Mārkaṇḍeya explains that a man's actions follow him from womb to womb. Those who believe that *kṛtāntavidhi*, "the law of inevitability," governs everything are ignorant. A person who lives a virtuous life

⁴²⁹ asti sarvam adrśyam tu diṣṭam caiva tathā haṭhaḥ
drśyate hi haṭhāc caiva diṣṭāc cārthasya saṃtatiḥ
kim cid daivād dhaṭhāt kim cit kim cid eva svakarmataḥ
puruṣaḥ phalam āpnoti caturtham nātra kāraṇam (3.33.31-2)

⁴³⁰ Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrine in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsiādass, 2000), 374-75.

⁴³¹ 3.181.4-8

usually, prayaśah, will be reborn from a noble womb.⁴³² How much hangs upon that "usually"! In the end, even the great Mārkaṇḍeya equivocates, using words almost identical to Draupadi's: "Some of what men acquire comes from *daiva*, some from the stars, some even through their own actions, O king. Don't give it another thought."⁴³³ Yudhiṣṭhira, of course, will continue to give it a good deal of thought.

What is most striking in the *Mahābhārata*'s numerous dialogues dealing with the relative merits and demerits of human action and the power of *Daiva* is the lack of agreement on the effectiveness of human action. The belief that human exertion is effective stands in an unresolved state of tension with the claims that the will of Īśvara or Dhātṛ, or the inscrutable machinations of fate and necessity are the primary causative forces at work in the world.⁴³⁴ This dilemma is further complicated when the doctrine of *karman* is added to the equation. On one hand, *karman* places responsibility for the suffering and pleasures of life squarely upon the individual human being. Fate can be influenced precisely because it is not arbitrary. On the other hand, the individual can be perceived as being helplessly bound by the results of his past actions; in this sense, fate is not "blind," but it is inexorable.

The *Mahābhārata*, then, offers its audience any number of arguments about *daiva*, *karman*, *kāla*, and *puruṣakāra* through discourses in which nothing ever is resolved. A

⁴³² 3.181.24-30

⁴³³ kim cid daivād dhaṭhāt kim cit kim cid eva svakarmabhiḥ
prāpnuvanti narā rājan mā te 'stv anyā vicāraṇā (3.181.32)

further element that must be considered is that so many of the *itihāsa*'s characters are said to be partial incarnations of *devas* or *asuras*. To what extent can these characters be said to have "past lives"? Are they subject to the laws of *karma* or the workings of *daiva* in the sense that ordinary humans are? This important question is dealt with, I believe, through the character of Karna. The remainder of this chapter will look at Karna's attitude towards *puruṣakāra* and *daiva*, and examine how these forces play out in his life.

The Story of Mahākārṇi

After Duryodhana's plan to have the Pāṇḍavas burn to death in the lacquer house fails, after Arjuna wins the prize at the *svayamvara* and the brothers have jointly married Draupadi, Duryodhana returns to Hāstīnapura shamed, jealous, and eager to plot revenge. When Drona, Bhīṣma, and Vidura advise reconciliation, Duryodhana and Karna argue that the Kauravas must devise methods to break their cousins' burgeoning strength. Duryodhana imagines devious schemes to alienate the brothers from one another and Draupadi from her husbands. Karna now assumes the role of advisor -- a role appropriate to a *sūta* -- and he is blunt: "Duryodhana, I don't think you have your wits entirely together!"⁴³⁵ The Pāṇḍavas, he says, cannot be overcome by trickery, bribery, or corruption, for they are protected by destiny, *dīṭha*.⁴³⁶ There is but one course of action: to make war before the Pāṇḍavas have struck roots. Above all, Karna counsels,

⁴³⁴ Bruce J. Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 44.

⁴³⁵ duryodhana tava prajñā na samyag iti me matih (1.194.1)

Duryodhana must act *before* Kṛṣṇa arrives on the scene. "There is nothing that Kṛṣṇa would not sacrifice for the sake of the Pāṇḍavas!"⁴³⁷

Bhiṣma, Drona, and Vidura are scandalized by Karna's suggestion. To Karna's and Duryodhana's great disgust, they convince Dhṛitarāṣṭra to seek not war but reconciliation by ceding to the Pāṇḍavas part of the kingdom. The older generation wins the argument. Nonetheless, Karna's advice will prove to have been prescient. Had the Kauravas waged war on the Pāṇḍavas before Kṛṣṇa arrived, before Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa cleared the Khāṇḍava tract, before Yudhiṣṭhira built his *sabha*, performed his *rājasūya*, and won the allegiance of so many princes and kings, Duryodhana might easily have secured his place on the throne with a short, minimally destructive war. This is the first, but far from the last, instance where Karna is thwarted in acting as his instincts dictate and reviled for what in another would win praise.

When Karna realizes that his advice will not be heeded, he bitterly lashes out at the elders whom he deems hypocrites. Is it not amazing, he sneers, that men who live at the king's largesse should give advice to the disadvantage of the king's son! Yet perhaps it could not be otherwise, Karna muses: "In difficult times friends are neither for better nor for worse. Be it misery or happiness, everything happens according to rule!"⁴³⁸ He proceeds to tell a curious little story. Because this is his first speech of any length, it must play a significant part in our understanding of Karna.

⁴³⁶ 1.194.1-10

⁴³⁷ nātyājyam asti kṛṣṇasya pāṇḍavārthe (1.194.16)

⁴³⁸ na mitrāṇy arthakṛcchreṣu śreyase veterāya vā

It is said that once upon a time in Rājagrha a certain Ambuvīca was king of the princes of Māgadha. He was lacking in all abilities, he could only breathe in and out, and in all matters was dependent on his minister. The minister, Mahākarṇi, soon became the sole lord. Thinking his power was secure, he began to behave contemptuously. The fool took for himself all the pleasures, women, jewels, riches, and powers of the king. Having taken what he coveted, his avariciousness only increased; having taken everything, he wanted to take the kingdom. The king was lacking in all abilities, he could only breathe in and out, yet it is said that the minister, for all his striving, was unable to take the kingdom. What then was the king's sovereignty if not destined to be? If your sovereignty is destined to be, O lord of the people, in the eyes of the whole world it will remain with you forever. And if it is not destined to be, for all your striving you will not obtain it. Knowing this, consider the good and bad intentions of your ministers and pay attention to the words of the evil ones as well as the good ones.⁴³⁹

Karṇa's story is cynically fatalistic, as the play on names, Karṇa and Mahākarṇi, underscores. A *karṇī* is a kind of arrow whose tip is shaped like an ear. The pun with his name betrays a certain grim humor on Karṇa's part. Although the tale is an attack on

vidhipūrvam hi sarvasya duḥkham vā yadi vā sukham (1.196.15)

439 śrūyate hi purā kaś cid ambuvīca iti śrutah
 āśid rājagrhe rājā māgadhānām mahikṣitām
 sa hīnāḥ karāṇāḥ sarvair ucchāsa paramo nṛpāḥ
 amātyasamsthāḥ kāryeṣu sarveṣv evābhavat tadā
 tasyāmātyo mahākarṇīr babhūvaikeśvaraḥ purā
 sa labdhabalām ātmānam manyamāno 'vamanyate
 sa rājña upabhogyāni striyo ratnadhānāni ca
 ādade sarvaśo mūḍha aiśvaryam ca svayam tadā
 tad ādāya ca lubdhasya lābhāl lobbo vyavardhata
 tathā hi sarvam ādāya rājyam asya jihirṣati
 hīnasya karāṇāḥ sarvair ucchvāsaparamasya ca
 yatamāno 'pi tad rājyaṁ na śāśāketi naḥ śrutam
 kim anyad vihitān nūnām tasya sā puruṣendrātā
 yadi te vihitām rājyaṁ bhaviṣyati viśām pate
 miṣataḥ sarvalokasya sthāsyate tvayi tad dhruvam
 ato 'nyathā ced vihitām yatamāno na lapsyase
 evam vidvann upādatsva mantriṇām sādhv asādhutām

Bhiṣma, Drona, and Vidura, Karna includes himself in the critique. "Listen to us all, Duryodhana," Karna seems to be saying, "but understand that whether or not you keep the kingdom will be determined in the end by Fate."

Father's and Sons: The Robbing of the Earrings

As the son of a great *deva*, Karna is akin to his brothers. In *Āranyakaparvan*, Karna will encounter his divine father, Sūrya, as will Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Bhīma encounter their fathers, Indra,⁴⁴⁰ Dharma,⁴⁴¹ and Vāyu, here in his incarnation as the great monkey Hanuman.⁴⁴² Arjuna is identified repeatedly as Nara, counterpart of Kṛṣṇa Nārāyaṇa. In *Āranyakaparvan*, after Arjuna has set off in search of divine weapons, he is told by Śiva himself that in a previous existence he was Nara, together with his friend Nārāyaṇa.⁴⁴³ Then Arjuna sees Yama, who, acknowledging his shared solar *kuṇḍa* with Karna, makes Arjuna a promise: "Karna, a particle of my father, the god who sends heat to all the world, the mighty hero Karna, will be slain by you, Dhanamjaya."⁴⁴⁴ Thereupon, Arjuna is transported to Indra's heaven where he lives in his father's palace for five years.

Daiva dictates a different sort of course for Karna, who from infancy is deprived of the privileges of high class enjoyed by his brothers. Karna is a sensitive yet eminently

duṣṭānāṁ caiva boddhavyam aduṣṭānāṁ ca bhāṣitam (1.196.17-25)

⁴⁴⁰ 3.43-49

⁴⁴¹ 3.295-299

⁴⁴² 3.146-150

⁴⁴³ naras tvam pūrvadehe vai nārāyaṇa sahāyavān (3.41.1)

⁴⁴⁴ pitur mamāṁśo devasya sarvalokapratāpinah

realistic man, who must struggle to live the *ksatriya* identity forbidden to him by Fate. Ignorant of his paternity, he nonetheless is attracted instinctively to the Sun and worships Sūrya daily. Moreover, there is the fact of his golden armor and earrings. As long as Karna bears these, he is invulnerable. Karna's loss of divinity with the robbing of his congenital *kundalas* and *kavaca* signals his birth into mortality. He now must rely upon his unaided human effort while remaining vulnerable to *daiva*. This had to be if Karna was to be representative of the audience of the *Mahābhārata*.

Kuṇḍalāharana, "The Robbing of the Earrings," penultimate *adhyāya* of *Āranyakaparvan*, immediately follows the story of Sāvitri, discussed in Chapter Three. The Sāvitri story represents a singular overcoming of Kāla and Daiva, perhaps even of the laws of *karman*, for Sāvitri defeats Death, and her dead husband is reborn into the same body in the same lifetime. Sāvitri, daughter of the Sun, is related to Karna through the solar *kula*, a link stressed by the dramatic proximity of her tale and Karna's. "The Robbing of the Earrings," is among the *Mahābhārata*'s most moving and poetically rendered chapters. It begins with a question, is interrupted with another question at its moment of highest tension, flashes back many years, then takes up again the original narrative. It is a story of fathers and sons. It is prompted by a question Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana, in reference to words spoken by the sage Lomaśa to Yudhiṣṭhira early in the exile, and early in *Āranyakaparvan*. Here is another instance of how the *itihāsa* constructs its net and manipulates time. As discussed above, Yudhiṣṭhira had confessed

to spending sleepless nights worrying about Karna, for whom he feels a certain great fear. Having heard the story of Sāvitri, Janamejaya now wants to hear more about that great fear concerning Karna. Vaiśampāyana obliges. "When the twelfth year had passed and the thirteenth arrived," the bard begins.⁴⁴⁵ The exile is ending. The Pāṇḍavas need to pass one more year in disguise and then they can return to press their claim to the kingdom. Meanwhile, says Vaiśampāyana, out of love for his son Arjuna, Indra had devised a scheme to weaken Karna, reckoning, it seems, that the divine weapons given to Arjuna will not be sufficient to defeat the *sūtāputra*. Sūrya is aware of Indra's plan and, filled with compassion and affection for his son, appears to Karna a dream to warn him that Indra will disguise himself as a brahmin and beg for the golden earrings and armor.

Karna, if you give away your beautiful congenital earrings, your life will be destroyed and you will fall under the control of Death, Mrtyu. Honorable one, with your armor and earrings, in battle you are inviolable to your enemies -- mark my words. Your two jewels have arisen from the Elixir; they must be protected, Karna, if life is dear to you.⁴⁴⁶

Karna tells Sūrya that he cannot be kept from his life's vow: to give to any brahmin whatever he asks. "Fame like a mother gives life to a man in the world. Infamy kills the living even when the body is alive," he says. "By giving away these congenital

⁴⁴⁵ dvādaśe samatikrānte varṣe prāpte trayodaśe (3.284.5)

⁴⁴⁶ yadi dāsyasi karna tvāṁ sahaje kundale śubhe
āyur aḥ prakṣayam gatvā mr̄tyor vaśam upesyasi
kavacena ca samyuktah kundalābhyaṁ ca mānada
avadyas tvāṁ rāṇe 'rīṇāṁ iti viddhi vaco mama
amṛtād utthitām hy etad ubhayām ratnasam̄bhavam
tasmād rakṣyam tvayā karna jīvitam cet priyam tava (3/284.18-20)

objects I will obtain eternal fame."⁴⁴⁷ The Sun responds tartly, "The fame of a dead mortal is like a garland on a corpse!"⁴⁴⁸ Karṇa, however, is strongly attracted to the idea of posthumous "fame." It may be all he has to win. The Sun does not reveal his paternity, but he hints to Karṇa that there is something higher and "god made" within him of which Karṇa is unaware.

A secret of the god cannot be known to you, bull among men, so I will not tell you the secret. In time you will know it. I repeat again, Rādheya, listen: do not give your earrings to the mendicant! ... With your earrings, Arjuna cannot defeat you in battle even if Indra himself were his arrow. Therefore do not give your beautiful earrings to Indra, Karṇa, if you want to vanquish Arjuna in combat.⁴⁴⁹

Karṇa is unmoving. "I do not fear Mṛtyu as I fear falsehood, ... and I *will* vanquish Arjuna in battle. Sanction my vow, O best of gods. If Indra comes begging I will give him my life itself!"⁴⁵⁰ Realizing his son will not bend, Sūrya advises him to ask in return

⁴⁴⁷ kīrtir hi puruṣaṁ loke samjivayati māṭṛvat
akīrtir jīvitāṁ hanti jīvato 'pi śarīriṇaḥ (3.284.32)
so 'ham śarīraje dattvā kīrtim prāpsyāmi śāśvatīm (3.284.35)

⁴⁴⁸ mṛtasya kīrtir martyasya yathā mālā gatāyur aḥ (3.285.6)

⁴⁴⁹ asti cātra param kiṇ cid adhyātmam devanirmitam
atas ca tvāṁ bravīmy etat kriyatāṁ aviśaṅkayā
deva guhyāṁ tvayā jñātum na śakyāṁ puruṣaśabha
taṣmān nākhyāmi te guhyāṁ kāle vetyati tad bhavān
punar uktāṁ ca vakṣyāmi tvāṁ rādheya nibodha tat
māsmai te kuṇḍale dadyā bhikṣave vajrapāṇaye (2.285.8-10)
na tu tvāṁ arjunaḥ śaktāḥ kuṇḍalābhyaṁ samanvitam
vijetum yudhi yady asya svayam indraḥ śaro bhavet
taṣmān na deye śakrāya tvayaite kuṇḍale śubhe
saṅgrāme yadi nirjetum karṇa kāmayase 'rjunam (3.285.16-17)

⁴⁵⁰ bibhemi na tathā mṛtyor yathā bibhye 'nṛtād aham ...
... vijeśyāmi raṇe 'rjunam ...
idam tvam anujānīhi suraśreṣṭha vrataṁ mama

the boon of Indra's unfailing spear. When Karṇa awakens from the dream, he prays to Sūrya and tells the god his dream. With a slight smile, the Sun replies, "So be it."⁴⁵¹

At this dramatic moment, Janamejaya interrupts the story to ask Vaiśampāyana, "What was the secret that the hot-rayed one did not tell Karṇa?"⁴⁵² The bard then sweeps the audience back into the past, and into earlier sections of the *itihāsa*. The story of Karṇa's conception already has been told briefly in *Adiparvan*.⁴⁵³ Now we hear in beautiful and moving detail about the visit of the irascible ascetic to the palace of King Kuntibhoja and its fateful outcome. Vaiśampāyana does not name the ascetic, but earlier he was identified as Durvāsas, the "Unclothed One," whose terrible demands are documented throughout the *itihāsa*. In *Anuśāsanaparvan*, Kṛṣṇa relates an encounter with the naked Durvāsas, who wanders about asking for hospitality threatening, "He who would give me shelter should not anger me."⁴⁵⁴ Durvāsas goes so far as to have Kṛṣṇa's wife Rukminī pull him about while yoked to a chariot, while Kṛṣṇa remains nonplussed. Both husband and wife earn boons for their "hospitality."⁴⁵⁵ This, then, is the figure to whom the "child-loving" Kuntibhoja "gives" Kuntī.⁴⁵⁶ Kuntī submits: "It is my very

bhikṣate vajriṇe dadyām api jīvitam ātmanaḥ (3.286.6-9)

⁴⁵¹ uvāca tam tathety eva karṇam sūryah smayann iva (3.286.19)

⁴⁵² kim tad guhyam na cākhyātam karṇāyehoṣṇa raśminā (3.287.1)

⁴⁵³ 1.104

⁴⁵⁴ yo mām kaś cid vāsayeta na sa mām kopayed iha (13.144.14)

⁴⁵⁵ 13.144. During this same visit, Durvāsas tells Kṛṣṇa to smear himself with some rice-milk, *pāyasa*, but Kṛṣṇa neglects to smear the soles of his feet. The ascetic tells him that all the parts that have been covered in the sweet will be invulnerable. Indeed, the arrow that ends Kṛṣṇa's life on earth strikes the *avatāra* in the foot.

⁴⁵⁶ pṛthām paridadau tasmai dvijāya sutavatsalah (3.289.12)

nature to honor the twice-born.⁴⁵⁷ She will pass on this trait to Karṇa. Nonetheless, we wonder if Kuntibhoja's "hospitality" towards Durvāsas is what Kuntī remembers when years later she bitterly complains to Kṛṣṇa that "like a gambler" her father had awarded to his friend -- only for the friend to give her to an ascetic (see Chapter Three).

Despite Durvāsas' demands, faultfinding, and abusive speech, Kuntī is never displeasing. After a year of servitude, the ascetic rewards her with the secret mantra that is, among the many boons recorded throughout the *Mahābhārata*, surely the most portentous. "Whichever god you call with this mantra, my dear girl, will have to obey your will."⁴⁵⁸ What follows after Durvāsas leaves is a tender love story unique in the *itihāsa*. Kuntī's first menstrual period has started, and she feels ashamed that she still is unmarried.

Then Pṛthā [Kuntī] saw the thousand-rayed orb rising, ablaze, and she was not satiated by the beauty of the Sun come at the juncture of night and day. Her eyesight became divine and she beheld the divine-looking god, wearing armor and adorned with earrings.⁴⁵⁹

Kuntī uses her mantra to call the Sun, and he, by the power of his yoga, splits himself in two.⁴⁶⁰ Still shining in the sky, he comes to her in the form of a resplendent man. Tenderly he asks her what he should do for her, and when Kuntī timidly attempts to send

⁴⁵⁷ esa caiva svabhāvo me pūjayeyam dvijān iti (3.288.2)

⁴⁵⁸ yam yam devam tvam etena mantrēṇāvāhayiṣyasi
tena tena vaśe bhadre sthātavyam te bhavisyati (3.289.17)

⁴⁵⁹ athodyantam sahasrāṁśum pṛthā diptam dadarśa ha
na tatarpa ca rūpeṇa bhānoḥ samdhyaṅgatasya sā
tasyā dṛṣṭir abhūd divyā sāpaśyad divyadarśanam
āmuktakavacam devam kuṇḍalābhyām vibhūṣitam (3.290.4-5)

⁴⁶⁰ yogat kṛtvā dvithātmānam (3.290.9)

him away, he reads her inmost thoughts. "Your intention, lovely girl, was to have by Sūrya a son whose heroism is unequalled in the world, wearing armor and earrings."⁴⁶¹ She worries about propriety and *dharma*, about what her father and mother will think; still, she is unable to resist Sūrya's attraction. "Having given myself to you, dangerous one, I will remain virtuous. In you are the *dharma* and glory, fame and life of embodied beings."⁴⁶² Sūrya promises that after making love with him her virginity will be restored, and that their son will wear divine armor and earrings given by Aditi made from the Elixir. Kuntī surrenders.

"Utterly, lord god, will I make love with you, if my son will be as you say, lord of stars," said Kuntī. "So be it," replied the sky-goer, and possessed Kuntī with his yogic self, penetrating her to the navel. Then she was shaken by Sūrya's splendor, and the princess fell upon her bed in a swoon.⁴⁶³

The story of Kuntī's seduction and its aftermath is crafted with great poetic care, including finely rendered details about traits of Kuntī and Sūrya that their child will inherit. None other of the Pāṇḍavas is born from passion or tenderness. When Kuntī uses her mantra again it is to please Pāṇḍu, who has been cursed to an existence where death and sex are one. No details are given of Kuntī's union with Dharma, Indra, and

⁴⁶¹ tavābhisaṁdhīḥ subhage sūryāt putro bhaved iti
viryenāpratimo loke kavacī kundalīti ca (3.290.13)

⁴⁶² ātmapradānam durdharsa tava kṛtvā satī tv aham
tvayi dharma yośo caiva kīrtir āyuś ca dehinām (3.291.11)

⁴⁶³ paramāṁ bhavagan deva saṁgamiṣye tvayā saha
yadi putro bhaved evaṁ yathā vadasi gopate
tathety uktvā tu tāṁ kuntīm āviṣeṣa vihaṁgamaḥ
svarbhāṇu śatruḥ yogātmā nābhyaṁ pasparśa caiva tāṁ
tataḥ sā vihvalevāsīt kanyā sūryasya tejasā

Vāyu, nor of Mādri's union with the two Aśvins. Those impersonal and functional encounters are in stark contrast to Kuntī's ravishment by Sūrya. Karna is a love child.

The infant is as beautiful as his father had promised, yet as soon as he is born, Kuntī, upon the advice of her nurse, sets him adrift on the river Aśva in a little basket, finely covered and sealed with beeswax. Her lamentations and adolescent longings are heartbreakingly.

May you be safe from the beings of the earth, the middle regions, and heaven, little son, and from the creatures of the deep. May your pathways be benign, blessed, and unobstructed, and may those who approach you, son, be free from malice. ... May your father, light of lights, guard you everywhere, he who gave you to me, son, surely by divine direction. ... All the gods must guard you in the smooth and in the rough. I will know you even in a foreign land by the armor that identifies you. Fortunate is your father, the wide-shining Sun, who, with his divine eye, will see you floating along. Fortunate is the woman who will adopt you as her son, at whose breasts you will drink thirstily, O son of a god.⁴⁶⁴

Karna's basket floats from river to river, until it is found in the Ganges by the sūta Adhiratha and taken home to Rādhā, his childless wife. When the boy grows up, his loving father recognizes his son's martial aspirations and sends him to Hāstinapura, where

papātātha ca sā devī śayane mūḍha cetanā (3.291.22-4)

⁴⁶⁴ svasti te 'stv āntarikṣebhyaḥ pārthivebhyas ca putraka
divyebhyaś caiva bhūtebhyas tathā toyacarāś ca ye
śivāś te santu panthāno mā ca te paripanthināḥ
āgamāś ca tathā putra bhavantv adroha cetasāḥ ...
pitā tvāṁ pātu sarvatra tapanas tapatāṁ varah
yena datto 'si me putra divyena vidhinā kila ...
rakṣantu tvāṁ surāḥ sarve sameṣu viṣameṣu ca
vetsyāmi tvāṁ videṣe 'pi kavacenopasūcītam
dhanyas te putra janako devo bhānur vibhāvasuḥ
yas tvāṁ drakṣyati divyena cakṣuṣā vāhini gatam
dhanyā sā pramadā yā tvāṁ putratve kalpayiṣyati

Karṇa learns archery from Drona. "He always competed with Arjuna... and Arjuna with Karṇa from when he first set eyes upon him."⁴⁶⁵ Karṇa also prays daily to Sūrya, and at those times brahmins were wont to approach him for alms, for Karṇa would not refuse anything. One day, "Indra, become a brahmin, approached him and said, 'Give me alms.' And Rādheyā replied, 'Welcome!'"⁴⁶⁶ The tale has been brought back masterfully to the point where it had been interrupted by Janamejaya's question.

The brahmin asks, as Karṇa had been forewarned, for the armor and earrings. Karṇa offers him land, women, cows, anything, but the brahmin is adamant. Karṇa, laughing now, tells him he knows who he is and demands a barter: "In exchange for the armor and earrings, give me the unerring spear, Indra, that kills hoards of enemies in hostile encounter."⁴⁶⁷ The god agrees, with one stipulation: "In your hand the spear, having killed one powerful, roaring, shining enemy, will then return to me, son of a sūta."⁴⁶⁸ The god presciently adds that the enemy Karṇa wants to destroy is protected by Kṛṣṇa.⁴⁶⁹ He assures Karṇa, however, that he will not look loathsome after the self-mutilation. Accepting the spear, Karṇa takes his sharp sword and flays his body. The poet now breaks into *trṣṭubh* meter, surely to do justice to this intensely moving moment.

yasyās tvāṁ trṣitah putra stanam pāsyasi devaja (3.292.10-17)

⁴⁶⁵ sadā hi tasya spardhāśid arjunena viśāṁ pate

arjunasya ca karṇena yato dṛṣṭo babhūva sah (3.293.19)

⁴⁶⁶ tam indro brāhmaṇo bhūtvā bhikṣāṁ dehīty upasthitah svāgatam ceti rādheyas tam atha pratyabhāsata (3.293.23)

⁴⁶⁷ varmaṇā kūṇḍalābhyaṁ ca śaktiṁ me dehi vāsava amoghāṁ śatrusaṁghānāṁ ghātinīṁ pṛtanā mukhe (3.294.21)

⁴⁶⁸ seyam tava karam pṛṣṭya hatvaikam ripum ūrjitam garjantarp pratapantam ca māṁ evaisyati sūtaja (3.294.25)

Then heavenly kettledrums resounded and flowers rained from heaven at the sight of Karna flayed by his own sword, while the hero among men kept smiling. Then, having cut the armor from his limbs, he gave it, still wet, to Vāsava, then cut off the earrings and gave them, too. For this deed, Karna is known as Vaikartana, "He who has Flayed Himself."⁴⁷⁰

When they learn of Karna's self-mutilation, the Kauravas are deeply dejected, while the Pāṇḍavas, whose twelve years of exile have ended, rejoice. Daiva has prevailed over Karna's human efforts to protect himself.

Fathers and Sons: The Drilling Woods

Āranyakaparvan does not close with *Kundalāharanaparvan*. As the "Robbing of the Earrings" was bracketed on one side by the story of Sāvitri's conquest of Yama, it is bracketed on the other with the curious episode called "The Drilling Woods."⁴⁷¹ The themes of this story, again, are *daiva*, *dharma*, and the conquest of death. It resonates with both the Sāvitri tale and with book seventeen, *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, "The Great Departure." In that penultimate book, the god Dharma tests his son Yudhiṣṭhira by taking the form of a dog. In the Drilling Woods, Dharma comes to test his son in the form of a crane. The *adhyāya*'s title refers to the fire-drilling sticks of an old brahmin which have been carried away in a deer's antlers. The Pāṇḍavas set out in hot pursuit. They lose the deer and find themselves deep in the forest, exhausted and thirsty. Why, demands

⁴⁶⁹ tena kṛṣṇena rakṣyate (3.294.29)

⁴⁷⁰ tato divyā dundubhayaḥ praṇeduh; papātoccaiḥ puṣpavarsaṁ ca divyam
drṣṭvā karṇaṁ ṣastra samkṛtagātram; muhuś cāpi smayamānaṁ nṛvīram
tato chitvā kavacaṁ divyam aṅgāt; tathaivārdram pradadau vāsavāya
tathotkṛtya pradadau kuṇḍale te; vaikartanaḥ karmanā tena karṇaḥ (3.294.37-8)

⁴⁷¹ 3.295-99

Sahadeva testily, must they bear more hardship and danger? Bhīma, Arjuna, and Nakula immediately blame their plight upon their own cowardly behavior at the dicing match, in other words, upon *purusakāra*. Yudhiṣṭhira has a different explanation: "Misfortune has no limit, motive, or cause. *Dharma* distributes it here, both the good and the evil."⁴⁷² Again, we find Dharm's son attributing to *dharma* the attributes of *daiva*; for Yudhiṣṭhira, *dharma* is not an abstraction but an active force in the world. Nakula spies a lake inhabited by cranes and goes there seeking water. As he approaches, an awesome voice speaks from the sky, claiming that the lake is his. The crane's voice commands Nakula to answer some questions before drinking, but Nakula is unable to control his thirst. He rushes to the lake, drinks, and collapses. The scene repeats itself with Sahadeva, then Bhīma. When Arjuna hears the crane, he makes a fool of himself by wildly pelting the entire area with futile arrows; but he too succumbs to thirst, drinks, and collapses.⁴⁷³ Finally, Yudhiṣṭhira comes to the lake only to find his brothers lying lifeless on the shore. Ignoring his grief and thirst, he replies courteously to the crane and answers a long series of semi-philosophical questions the voice poses.⁴⁷⁴ At last, the voice reveals

⁴⁷² nāpadām asti maryādā na nimittam na kāraṇam
dharmaḥ tu vibhajaty atra ubhayoh puṇyapāpayoh (3.296.1)

⁴⁷³ 3.296.20-32

⁴⁷⁴ For example, the voice asks, "What makes the sun rise and what are its companions? What makes it set and on what is it founded?" Yudhiṣṭhira answers: "Brahman makes the sun rise and its companions are the gods. It is founded on truth."

kim svid ādityam unnayati keca tasyābhitaś carāḥ

kaś cainam astam nayati kasminś ca pratitiṣṭhati

[Y]

brahmād ity amun nayati devās tasyābhitaś carāḥ

dharmaś cāstam nayati ca satye ca pratitiṣṭhati (3.297.26-27)

that it is not a crane or a nature spirit, but Yudhiṣṭhira's father, Dharma in person. The four brothers are restored to life and Yudhiṣṭhira is granted, like Sāvitri, three boons. He asks that the drilling woods be restored to the brahmin, that he and his brothers and Draupadī not be recognized during the thirteenth year of exile, and that he may always be of a lofty moral character.

The *itihāsa* displays a fine symmetry here, bracketing the crucial "Robbing of the Earrings" with "Sāvitri" and the "Drilling Woods," both of which deal with the overcoming of death. At the same time, the father-and-son stories -- Sūrya and Karna, Indra and Arjuna, Dharma and Yudhiṣṭhira -- emphasize the active role of the gods, of Daiva, in the lives of the characters. Sūrya, in order to preserve Kunti's secret, can intervene in only in dream-form and is ineffective in protecting his son. Indra stoops to deceit by adopting a brahminical disguise -- a disguise Arjuna uses to fine effect at the *svayamvara* and at Jarāsandha's court -- and his intervention, taking advantage of Karna's generosity, is effective. Effective as well is Yudhiṣṭhira's conflation of *dharma* and *daiva*; Dharma's son gives substance, as it were, to the concept of *dharma*. For Yudhiṣṭhira, *daiva* is not merely the impersonal, dis-integrating force that appeared to be operative at the dice game; rather, it is an integrating power, personal, revivifying, protective. In the world of the *itihāsa*, *daiva* works to uphold *dharma*, a *dharma* that requires the survival of Dharma's son and his brothers. However, the fact that Sūrya's will to protect Karna is frustrated indicates a certain hierarchy of *daivas*. A higher "Daiva" assures Sūrya's failure and Indra's success.

At the end of *Āranyakaparvan*, then, the Pāṇḍavas, through the moral courage of Yudhiṣṭhīra, have gained new life, and this rebirth on the shores of Dharma's lake surely represents an initiation of sorts. They must endure one year in disguise, but Dharma has assured its success. The five brothers emerge from the liminal existence of exile prepared to face the challenges of the war to come. The sixth brother, Karna, has been reduced. Stripped of his divine invincibility and physical glory, he is alone, vulnerable, even more liminal, as it were, and subject to Daiva's apparently arbitrary workings. Karna's world is the world of the *kali yuga*. For him it is indeed a world that, when it reveals its hidden depths at critical moments of transition, proves hostile and disintegrative.⁴⁷⁵ However, Daiva is neither a disintegrative, nor deceptive, nor particularly subtle force in the life of Karna's nemesis, Arjuna, who is under Kṛṣṇa's protection.

Karna and Arjuna

During the Pāṇḍavas' year at Virāṭa's court, Karna and Arjuna have one intense encounter. Duryodhana, looking for adventure, has set out with Karna and a good-sized army to rustle King Virāṭa's cattle.⁴⁷⁶ We are not the first to note that the comical scene of the cattle raid appears to be a self-conscious parody of the opening scene of the *Bhagavadgītā*.⁴⁷⁷ Arjuna is still in disguise as a eunuch named, appropriately,

⁴⁷⁵ Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," 359.

⁴⁷⁶ 4.24-62

⁴⁷⁷ See Shulman, *King and Clown*, 262.; Dumézil, *L'idéologie Des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées Des Peuples Indo-Européens*, 93; J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed.

Bṛhannadā, "Big Reed" (!). When the raid is discovered, Virāṭa and his men, including disguised Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhima, and the twins, ride out to counter it. Duryodhana then attacks on the opposite side of the town where the king has no defenses. Young Prince Uttara is alone in the town and Bṛhannadā urges him to defend his father's property. Still in female garb, Arjuna takes the reigns of Uttara's chariot. The prince, for all his adolescent bragging, proves to be a coward and his *sūta* Bṛhannadā admonishes him to accept his *ksatriya dharma* and fight like a man. Finally, to save the day, Arjuna reveals his identity, recovers his hidden divine weapons, has Uttara take the chariot's reigns, and single-handedly faces the Kaurava troops. In the skirmish that follows, Arjuna puts to flight the entire army, including Bhīṣma, Drona, Kṛpa, Duryodhana, and even Karṇa. The scene is improbable and hyperbolic, but one deed rather seriously prefigures events to come. With a single arrow, Arjuna cuts off the head of Karṇa's brother, as he will do to Karṇa in the grimly realistic Kurukṣetra battle. In ways such as this, the *itihāsa* subtly constructs its universe, a universe governed by inscrutable Fate and the inexorable progression of Time towards Death. For all its "comedy," the cattle raid is a harbinger of far grimmer things to come.

Book Five of the *Mahābhārata*, *Udyogaparvan*, the Book of the Effort, chronicles Kṛṣṇa's efforts as peace ambassador from the Pāṇḍavas to the Kauravas, although the real effort here appears to be to take control of the outcome of an inevitable war (see Chapter Three). The Kurukṣetra battle must take place if Kṛṣṇa is to fulfill his role of *avatāra*. In

and trans., *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 3: *The Book of Virāṭa; The Book of the Effort*

order for Kṛṣṇa to assume such absolute control, at least a modicum of *puruṣakāra* is required on the part of his instruments. Arjuna as Nara is the "man" whom Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa must use to assure the victory of "dharma" with the victory of the divinely sanctioned side. As representative of that side, Arjuna is asked to make but one decisive choice.⁴⁷⁸ The Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas are desperately seeking allies. Duryodhana and Arjuna both go to Kṛṣṇa to seek his help. Kṛṣṇa lies sleeping upon his couch, prefiguring *purāṇic* Viṣṇu upon the endless coils of the serpent Ananta. Awaking, he first casts eyes upon Arjuna who is sitting at his feet, and offers a choice: himself as an unarmed noncombatant, or his armies, fully equipped, obedient, eager to fight. Arjuna makes the right decision, choosing Kṛṣṇa alone, and Duryodhana is delighted with his mighty share. Kṛṣṇa agrees to be Arjuna's charioteer.

Moments before Yudhiṣṭhira arrays his troops against Bhīṣma's on the Kurukṣetra field, Arjuna, to encourage him, recites a parable. At the start of the primordial battle between the *devas* and *asuras*, says Arjuna, Brahmā had told Indra that wars are won not by force, but by mercy and truth, for "where there is *dharma* there is victory," *yato dharmaḥ tato jayah*.⁴⁷⁹ This maxim would be appropriate to Yudhiṣṭhira who clings so fiercely to *dharma*, but Arjuna wants to change the formula. The Pāṇḍavas victory is assured, he says, because "where there is Kṛṣṇa there is victory," *yataḥ kṛṣṇas tato*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 15-16.

⁴⁷⁸ 5.7

⁴⁷⁹ 6.22.11

*jayah.*⁴⁸⁰ The war will be fought by a new set of cosmic parameters that include very little mercy or truth. In Kṛṣṇa's world, a world moving from the *dvāpara* to the *kali yuga*, *dharma* can be ignored or even deliberately set aside. Kṛṣṇa assumes the role of Dhātṛ, the Ordainer; Kāla and Daiva work towards victory through his will. The real "battle" is Kṛṣṇa's effort to manipulate people and conditions in order to give advantage to the Pāṇḍavas. Karna proves to be his primary obstacle. This lonely man who relies on his own human effort, *puruṣakāra*, tests the god's ability to control and direct his primary instrument, Arjuna.

The battle hinges upon two fateful friendships: Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Duryodhana and Karna. In *Udyogaparvan*, these friendships are modeled in parallel images. When Kṛṣṇa enters the Kaurava court to sue for peace, he finds "Karna and Duryodhana, noble and reckless, sharing the same seat."⁴⁸¹ When Saṃjaya as Dhṛitarāṣṭra's ambassador goes to the Pāṇḍavas, he finds Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, drunk with honey-wine, seated together on a golden bench. "I noticed," Saṃjaya reports, "that Kṛṣṇa's feet were resting in Arjuna's lap, and Arjuna's feet in the laps of Kṛṣṇa and Satyabhāmā," Kṛṣṇa's favorite wife.⁴⁸² Female partnership is not an active element in the lives of Karna and Duryodhana; the prince, says Karna, has his army for his wife; and Karna is denied Draupadī. As Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa recline at ease on their golden bench, feet in one another's laps, it is significant

⁴⁸⁰ 6.22.12

⁴⁸¹ avidūre 'tha kṛṣṇasya karnaduryodhanāv ubhau
ekāsane mahātmānau nisīdatur amarsaṇau (5.92.48)

⁴⁸² arjunotsaṅgamau pādau keśavasyopalakṣaye
arjunasya ca kṛṣṇāyām satyāyām ca mahātmanah (5.58.7)

that a female is present to complete the unbreakable union of Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa, Nara-Nārāyaṇa, on the eve of the war.

The *Mahābhārata*'s war books by their very structure emphasize that Kurukṣetra's horrendous events have been determined in advance. Appropriately, the war is related in flashback. Vyāsa gives divine sight to the *sūta* Saṃjaya so that he may describe what he has seen to Dhṛtarāṣṭra.⁴⁸³ When Saṃjaya rushes from the field to the blind king, it is always to report devastating news, a succession of disastrous reversals: Bhīṣma has fallen, Droṇa has fallen, Karṇa has fallen, Duryodhana has fallen, the war has been lost. In each instance, Saṃjaya recounts to the grieving king what had led up to the calamity in question. In one of the *Gītā*'s more famous lines, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna not to fret over killing his relatives: "I myself have slain them already," asserts the divine charioteer.⁴⁸⁴ The use of flashback to relate the battle reinforces these words and the inevitability of the outcome of a struggle in which so many men will strive futilely against the will of the *avatāra*. An oppressive burden of Daiva blankets the long, detailed, battle *parvans*, one devoted to each of the generals of the Kaurava armies: Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Śalya.

Because Karṇa has vowed not to fight as long as Bhīṣma is engaged, he is absent from the field throughout *Bhīṣmaparvan*. When the old warrior falls and reconciles with Karṇa from his bed of reeds (see Chapter Three), he passes on to the *sūta* a weighty

⁴⁸³ Saṃjaya describes his gift to Dhṛtarāṣṭra at 6.16.7-9, saying that he can see beyond the range of the senses, can hear from afar, and has knowledge of what people think and feel. Saṃjaya becomes, as it were, Vyāsa's surrogate author for the duration of the battle.

⁴⁸⁴ mayaivaite nihatāḥ pūrvam eva (6.11.33)

mantle of responsibility. "Like the ocean to the rivers, like the sun to astrology, like the righteous to truth, like a fertile soil to seeds, like the clouds to all creatures, be you the support of your friends."⁴⁸⁵ The Bombay Edition adds another line: "Be to the Kauravas as Viṣṇu is to the dwellers in heaven."⁴⁸⁶ Not infrequently hereafter, Karna will seem to fulfill for Duryodhana's armies the role that Kṛṣṇa fulfills for the Pāṇḍavas'. When the Kauravas learn that Bhīṣma has fallen, their panic-stricken thoughts go out to Karna "like the thoughts of drowning men to a boat," and they cry out, "Karna, Karna! ... Only he is able to protect us from great danger, as Govinda Kṛṣṇa always protects the heaven-dwellers from very great danger."⁴⁸⁷ The Kauravas, without the *avatāra* to protect them, turn to the *sūtaputra*. When he learns that grandfather Bhīṣma has been struck down, Karna is dejected and says, using words that echo Kṛṣṇa's, "I consider all these warriors already slain."⁴⁸⁸ "This ephemeral universe is constantly flowing," Karna muses. "Reflecting upon this, I consider everything uncertain."⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁵ samudra iva sundhūnām jyotiṣām iva bhāskarāḥ
satyasya ca yathā santo bijānām iva corvarā
parjanya iva bhūtānām pratiṣṭhā suhṛdām bhava
bāndhavās tvānujīvantu sahasrākṣam ivāmarāḥ (7.4.2-3)

⁴⁸⁶ kauravānām bhava gatiryathā viṣṇurdivaikasām (7.4.5, Bombay Edition)

⁴⁸⁷ karnām hi kuravo 'smārṣuḥ sa hi devavrātopamāḥ
sarvaśastrabhr̥tām śreṣṭham rocānānam ivātithim
bandhum āpad gatasyeva tam evopāgaman manāḥ
cukruṣuḥ karna karneti tatra bhārata pārthivāḥ
rādheyām hitam asmākam sūtaputraṁ tanutyajam ...
sa hi śakto rāṇe rājāṇi trātum asmān mahābhayāt

tridaśān iva govindāḥ satataṁ sumahābhayāt (7.1.30-32,44)

⁴⁸⁸ sa cet praśāntaḥ paravīra hantā; manye hatān eva hi sarvayodhān (7.2.5)

⁴⁸⁹ jagaty anitye satataṁ pradhāvati; pracintayann asthiram adya lakṣaye (7.0.11)

Karṇa's uncertainty is well founded; he will enter the battle stripped of his protective armor and earrings. He does have Indra's invincible spear, but he may use it only once. Later, he will confess to his charioteer Śalya (more about this unkind *sūta* below) that he bears a heavy burden of curses incurred during the years of the Pāṇḍavas' exile in the forest. Early in the exile, to calm Yudhiṣṭhīra's sleepless anxiety about Karṇa, Vyāsa had revealed secret mantras to help Arjuna obtain divine weapons with which to slay the *sūta*'s son.⁴⁹⁰ At Kurukṣetra, Karṇa reveals to Śalya that he, too, had sought divine weapons.⁴⁹¹ In the heat of the battle, Śalya hears a condensed version of stories Nārada will develop in greater detail in Book Twelve, *Sāntiparvan*. With an eye to defeating Arjuna one day, Karṇa had solicited the *brahmāstra*, the infallible weapon of Brahmā, from the fierce Bhṛgu Paraśurāma, whose legendary exploits include repeatedly destroying the *ksatriya* race. Aware that the brahmin never will accept a *sūta* or even a *ksatriya* as a student, Karṇa pretends to be a brahmin. Arjuna (see Chapter Three) had twice used a brahminical disguise to his great advantage. As a brahmin he wins Draupadī at the *svayamvara* while avoiding combat with Karṇa, who refuses to fight a member of the highest *varṇa*. Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, and Bhīma dupe Jarāsaṅdha by pretending to be *snātakas*. Daiva is kind to Arjuna when he practices deception, but unkind to Karṇa. As Nārada tells it:

Karṇa went to Paraśurāma on Mount Mahendra. Approaching Rāma, he bent his head and said, "I am a Bhārgava brahmin." This earned him

⁴⁹⁰ 3.37.25-30. And see above.

⁴⁹¹ 8.29

respect. Informed all about Karna's lineage, Rāma received him kindly and said, 'Welcome!' at which Karna became extremely happy.⁴⁹²

The Bhṛgu is pleased with Karna and teaches him everything about the *brahmāstra*, including its mantras.

One day, when Paraśurāma falls asleep with his head in his pupil's lap, a frightful blood-sucking worm begins to bore into Karna's thigh. In *Sāntiparvan* it is said that the worm was a demon under a curse, but in *Karṇaparvan* it is said that Indra created the worm for the sake of his son Arjuna and in order to destroy Karna.⁴⁹³ As he had when he robbed the armor and earrings, Arjuna's father is pictured intervening directly to protect his son by playing upon Karna's "weaknesses": courage and generosity. Although Daiva often may be inscrutable to the characters in its power, to the *itihāsa*'s audience the workings of Daiva are made transparent. Karna bears the excruciating pain caused by the worm so as not to disturb his guru. When Paraśurāma awakens and sees the pool of blood around Karna's leg he is aghast. No brahmin could bear such torment, he says, and demands the truth. Karna responds, "O Bhārgava, know me for a *sūta*, born from the intermixture of brahmins and *kṣatriyas*. People call me Karna, son of Rādhā. Be gracious to me, Bhārgava; I came out of desire for the Brahmā weapon."⁴⁹⁴ Furious at

⁴⁹² jagāma sahasā rāmam mahendram parvataṁ prati
sa tu rāmam upāgamyā śirasābhipranamya ca
brāhmaṇo bhārgavo 'smīti gauraveṇābhyagacchata
rāmas tam pratijagrāha pṛṣṭvā gotrādi sarvaśah
usyatām svāgatam ceti prātimāṁś cābhavad bhr̄sam (12.2.14-16)

⁴⁹³ tatrāpi me devarājena vighno; hitārthinā phalgunasyaiva śalya (8.29.4)

⁴⁹⁴ brahmakṣatrāntare sūtaṁ jātaṁ māṁ viddhi bhārgava
rādheyah karna iti māṁ pravadanti janā bhuvi

the lie, the Bhṛgu pronounces a curse: when Karna is engaged in mortal combat and most in need of the unfailing weapon he will forget the mantras for evoking it.⁴⁹⁵

That is not the only curse Karna earns during his stay with Paraśurāma. While out hunting, Karna accidentally shoots a brahmin's sacred cow. He begs forgiveness, but the angry brahmin curses Karna:

When fighting the one you always want to challenge, you wretch, and for whose sake you are striving so hard every day, the earth will swallow the wheel of your chariot. And while the earth is swallowing up your chariot wheel, your enemy will use his prowess to cut off your head, while you remain befuddled.⁴⁹⁶

Karna keeps these curses secret. When he returns to Hāstinapura, he reports simply to Duryodhana, "I have obtained the weapon."⁴⁹⁷

Karna is loath to succumb to despair or self-pity, despite the blows dealt to him by what he can only perceive as the occult power of *daiva*. Not for him the paralysis Arjuna experiences when faced with the horrors of war. Once Karna is free to fight, he fights whole-heartedly -- except when engaging one of the Pāṇḍavas. He fights man-to-man with Bhīma (7.114), Sahadeva (7.142), Nakula (8.17), and Yudhiṣṭhira (8.33), letting

prasādaṁ kuru me brahmann astralubdhasya bhārgava (12.3.26)

⁴⁹⁵ 12.3.29-32

⁴⁹⁶ tarṇ sa vipro 'bravīt kruddho vācā nirbhartsayann iva
durācāra vadhr̄has tvam̄ phalam̄ prāpnuhi durmate
yena vispardhase nityam̄ yadartham̄ ghaṭase 'niśam
yudhyatas tena te pāpa bhūmiś cakram̄ grasisyati
tataś cakre mahigraste mūrdhānam̄ te vicetasah
pātayisyati vikramya śatrur gaccha narādhama (12.2.23-25)

⁴⁹⁷ duryodhanam̄ upāgamyā kṛtāstro 'smīti cābravīt

each of them off lightly, wounding them more by his insults than his weapons. There is a reason for this. Before the battle, Karna had rebuffed Kunti's plea that he return to his brothers; but he had made her one promise:

Although it is possible for me to slay them in battle, I will not kill your sons -- not Yudhiṣṭhira or Bhīma or the twins, excepting Arjuna. ... You never will have fewer than five sons, illustrious woman: either without Arjuna but with Karna, or with Arjuna if I am killed.⁴⁹⁸

Karna keeps that promise at great cost. Had even one of the Pāṇḍavas been slain, their forces would have been dispirited and weakened. As it is, he exhausts himself in futile engagements with his brothers making it all the more probable that Kunti will remain with Arjuna and without Karna.

Space does not permit an examination of all the numerous parallels between Karna and Arjuna illustrating Daiva's disintegrating effects on Karna's struggle and its protective effects on Arjuna's. Karna is reviled -- and ultimately punished in painful death -- for behavior that wins praise, victory, and long life for his brother. Consider, for example, the slaying of Arjuna and Subhadra's son Abhimanyu, which is spoken of as one of Kurukṣetra's most shameful episodes.⁴⁹⁹ Arjuna has been lured away to fight at a far corner of the field while the Kaurava armies march upon the remaining Pāṇḍava troops in an invincible circular formation. At its head is Drona, who has replaced Bhīṣma as the Kaurava general, and at its center stands Duryodhana protected by Karna,

⁴⁹⁸ vadhyān viṣahyān samgrāme na haniṣyāmi te sutān ...
na te jātu naśisyanti putrāḥ pañca yaśasvini
nirarjunāḥ sakarṇā vā sārjunā vā hate mayi (5.144.20-22)

Duhśasana, and Kṛpa. With Arjuna absent Yudhiṣṭhira feels helpless and begs Abhimanyu to help penetrate the enemy formation. As a child, Abhimanyu had overheard his father repeat the *mantra* for gaining entry into the invincible circle. Yudhiṣṭhira promises to protect Abhimanyu and the youth, with all the reckless courage of his sixteen years, plunges into the formation. The circle closes quickly behind him. Abhimanyu had not heard the formula for getting back out -- he is trapped. Nonetheless, he fights furiously, killing great numbers of men, including Karna's younger brother. Karna and Abhimanyu engage one another until Karna is sorely wounded and inquires of Drona how the seemingly invincible youth can be beaten. Drona replies that the only method is somehow to deprive him of his bow. Karna uses his arrows to shatter the bow while the others destroy his chariot and armor. Abhimanyu then picks up the wheel of his broken chariot and wields it against the Kauravas, like Viṣṇu with his *cakra*. The repeated motif of the single chariot wheel resonates with the fate that will befall Karna's wheel due to the brahmin's curse, as well as with the wheel stolen from Sūrya by Indra in the *Rgveda* myth and the single wheel of the chariot Sūrya is said to drive across the sky (see Chapter Three). Abhimanyu has not a chance against his heavily armed opponents who, indeed, are violating the rules of warfare that dictate one-on-one combat. When Duhśasana's son strikes the fatal blow, Samjaya recalls, "creatures cried out from the heavens upon seeing the stricken hero fallen like the moon from the sky, lamenting, 'This

lone man lies dead on the field, slain by six of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's mighty warriors, headed by Drona and Karna. This is not *dharma*!"⁵⁰⁰

The slaying of the brave youth is undeniably shameful. It is only the first in a long series of *adharma* acts, many if not most of which are initiated by Kṛṣṇa and executed by Arjuna or another of the Pāṇḍavas. Karna had asked Drona to reveal Abhimanyu's vulnerability, then used that knowledge to destroy his enemy. Arjuna had asked Bhiṣma to reveal his vulnerability and used that knowledge to similar effect. Kṛṣṇa, however, requires no outside information; he knows each man's weaknesses including the curses he bears; moreover, Kṛṣṇa is not inhibited by scruples concerning *dharma* or truthfulness. For instance, when the Kaurava general Drona begins to make great progress against the Pāṇḍava armies, Kṛṣṇa gives this advice:

Adopt a new means of victory, sons of Pāṇḍu, casting aside *dharma*, so that everyone is not slain in the battle by Drona on his golden chariot. My idea is that with [Drona's son] Aśvatthāman dead, he will stop fighting. Let some man tell him that Aśvatthāman has been killed in battle.⁵⁰¹

Whereupon Bhīma kills an elephant named Aśvatthāman, and Yudhiṣṭhira lies to Drona, "Aśvatthāman is dead," muttering under his breath, "the elephant."⁵⁰² Drona despairs. "O Karna, Karna, great archer, O Kṛpa, O Duryodhana," he cries, "I repeat again and

⁵⁰⁰ abhikroṣanti bhūtāni antarikṣe viśāṇi pate
dṛṣṭvā nipatitam vīraṇ cyutaṇ candram ivāmbarāt
dronakarṇamukhaiḥ ṣaḍbhīr dhārtarāṣṭrair mahārathaiḥ
eko 'yam nihataḥ śete naiṣa dharmo mato hi nah (7.48.20-21)

⁵⁰¹ āsthīyatām jaye yogo dharmam utsṛjya pāṇḍava
yathā vaḥ samyuge sarvān na hanyād rukmavāhanāḥ
aśvatthāmni hate naiṣa yudhyed iti matir mama
tam̄ hatam̄ samyuge kaś cid asmai śāmsatu mānavāḥ (7.164.68-69)

again, 'Act carefully in battle.' May you be protected from the Pāṇḍavas. I am laying down my weapons."⁵⁰³ While Drona sits in yogic meditation in order to leave his body consciously, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Draupadi's brother, decapitates Drona, and hurls the head in front of the Kaurava troops.⁵⁰⁴ Kṛṣṇa's instruction to the Pāṇḍavas to "cast aside *dharma*" is a narrative strategy that recalls for the audience his instruction to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā* to "abandon all *dharma* and take refuge in me alone."⁵⁰⁵ The abandonment of *dharma* and subsequent loss of innocence or any pretense to righteousness weigh heavily upon the warriors from both camps. "Where have the games of our childhood gone, Sātyaki, and how has this battle come about?" muses Duryodhana to his old friend who now is fighting against him. "It is surely the becoming of insurmountable Time."⁵⁰⁶

There are no heroes or villains in the battle of Kurukṣetra, except in some absolute divine perspective. It is the will of the gods that the Pāṇḍavas win, for this

⁵⁰² 7.164.73

⁵⁰³ karṇa karṇa maheśvāsa kṛpa duryodhaneti ca
saṃgrāme kriyatāṁ yatno bravīmy eṣa punaḥ punaḥ
pāṇḍavebhyaḥ śivam vo 'stu śastram abhyutsjāmy aham (7.165.33-34)

⁵⁰⁴ Dhṛṣṭadyumna, like his sister Draupadi, was born parthenogenetically, from his father King Drupada's sacrificial fire, specifically for the purpose of killing Drona, his father's bitter enemy (1.156.37-40). During the battle, Drona slays Drupada before Dhṛṣṭadyumna slays Drona; later, Aśvatthāman, Drona's son, slays Dhṛṣṭadyumna. Malamoud cites this series of acts of vengeance as just one example of what "the *Mahābhārata* shows us in a thousand different ways, that the desire for vengeance is a vital ambition, an essential passion that needs no justification outside of itself, being that which gives meaning to human action. The narrative fabric of the epic is, indeed, a network of tales of vengeance." Charles Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, 1989, translated by David White (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 156-57.

⁵⁰⁵ sarvadharmaṇ parityajya mām ekam̄ śaraṇam̄ vraja (6.40.66)

⁵⁰⁶ kva sā kṛidā gatāsmākam̄ bālye vai śinipumgava

earthly battle mirrors the sempiternal battle between *devas* and *asuras*, first fought when creation emerged from the churning of the Ocean of Milk. Daiva, the efficient principle behind human existence, preserves cosmological cycles and soteriological principles that are inscrutable to humans, at least to humans in the age of *kali*. The tool of Daiva is Kāla, "time-and-death," to which the immortals are immune -- unless they assume human bodies. The *Mahābhārata*'s battle books, despite their great size, demonstrate a remarkable literary unity. These repetitive *parvans*, so lengthy they seem to play out in real time, constitute an essential element in the *itihāsa*'s discourse about time, death, fate, and human responsibility. Nowhere is that exploration more condensed than in the life, and death, of Karṇa.

Karṇa will assume the generalship of the Kaurava armies after Drona dies. Prior to that, however, Daiva will inactivate the weapon Karṇa had obtained from Indra in exchange for his armor and earrings -- an "exchange" that proves to have been exceedingly unfair. Again, Karṇa's magnanimity and courage prove to be his undoing. Years before, Bhīma had married a *rāksasī*, a goblin-like female, who had taken a fancy to him and assumed a desirable form. Their son is Ghaṭotkaca, monstrous, fantastically powerful, and utterly devoted to his father. In *Adiparvan*, as part of that first book's construction of dramatic tension, it is said, before the story of Bhīma's son has been told, that Indra created Ghaṭotkaca "for power's sake, for the destruction of invincible, great-

spirited Karna.⁵⁰⁷ Daiva, we see, manipulates the outcome of the Kurukṣetra battle long in advance. Ghaṭotkaca does not kill Karna, but he does indeed bring about his death.

Karna is fated to encounter the mighty *rāksasa* on the fourteenth day of the war. That day he affirms again his reliance upon his own human initiative in the face of Fate by promising his dear friend Duryodhana: "Whatever a devoted and ever solicitous person can do, that I will do for you, Kauravya. Victory depends upon Daiva. Today for your sake I will fight with Arjuna relying upon my own manly strength. Victory depends upon Daiva."⁵⁰⁸ Karna and Arjuna do fight that day, but inconclusively. Arjuna then engages Duryodhana's ally King Jayadratha.⁵⁰⁹ When Arjuna's victory appears doubtful, Kṛṣṇa intervenes. He tells Arjuna that he is going to use his yogic powers to conceal the sun; because the *dharma* of battle dictates that fighting must cease when the sun sets, Jayadratha is sure to lay down his arms. When Jayadratha was born, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, his father had been told that his son one day would lose his head in battle. The father had cursed the man who caused Jayadratha's head to fall to the ground to have his own head shatter into a thousand pieces. Kṛṣṇa magically darkens the sky and, as predicted, Jayadratha, in obedience to *dharma*, disarms himself. Now, at Kṛṣṇa's prompting,

⁵⁰⁷ sa hi sṛṣṭo maghavatā śaktihetor mahātmanā
karṇasyāprativiryasya vināśāya mahātmanah (1.143.38)

⁵⁰⁸ yat tu śaktimatā kāryam satataṁ hitakāriṇā
tat karisyāmi kauravya jayo daive pratiṣṭhitah
adya yotsye 'rjunam ahaṁ puruṣam svam vyapāśritaḥ
tvadartham puruṣavyāghra jayo daive pratiṣṭhitah (7.120.28-29)

⁵⁰⁹ The Sindhu king Jayadratha had attempted to abduct Draupadī during the exile in the forest (3.248-256), thus the deep enmity felt towards him by Arjuna. For the slaying of Jayadratha, see 7.121.

Arjuna shoots one perfectly aimed arrow that severs Jayadratha's head and sends it into the lap of his now aged father who is sitting at his evening prayers. When the head rolls from his lap to the ground, the head of the devout old man shatters into a thousand pieces.

The conduct of the battle continues to degenerate. When the sun actually does set, the enraged troops continue their mutual slaughter, now fighting, against all rules, by the light of oil lamps. The image of the two armies fighting in the bloody penumbra is a powerful metaphor for the dimming of truth and *dharma* in the *kali yuga*. Karna reassures the Kauravas that with Indra's invincible spear he is confident of slaying Arjuna. "I shall strive to the utmost of my strength to contend in battle for Duryodhana's good," he swears, then adds his usual caveat: "Victory depends on Daiva."⁵¹⁰ In the obscure half-light, Karna begins to kill great numbers of Yudhiṣṭhīra's men. Arjuna tells Kṛṣṇa to drive the chariot in Karna's direction, but Kṛṣṇa, who worries that Karna will defeat Arjuna, suggests they send Ghaṭotkaca instead. The faithful *rākṣasa* is eager to do Kṛṣṇa's bidding.⁵¹¹ With his "copper-red eyes, gigantic body, red face, sunken belly, hair standing upward, bristly beard, pointy ears, huge jaw extending ear to ear, sharp tusks, and gaping maw," Ghaṭotkaca paralyzes all with fear.⁵¹² Ghaṭotkaca also possesses a powerful magic by which he can make himself disappear and reappear, take on various forms, and conjure up the images of multiple goblins. Karna alone is not frightened and

⁵¹⁰ *yatiṣye 'ham yathāśakti yoddhūm tajh saha saṃyuge
duryodhanahitārthāya jayo daive pratiṣṭhitah* (1.133.64)

⁵¹¹ The fight between Karna and Ghaṭotkaca extends from 7.150 through 7.154.

⁵¹² *lohitākṣo mahākāyas tāmrāsyo nimnitodaraḥ
ūrdhvaromā hari śmaśruḥ śāṅkukarṇo mahāhanuḥ*

fights him furiously. After prolonged combat, Ghaṭotkaca creates a kind of gigantic fireball that rains down weapons, thunderbolts, and boulders. The Kauravas panic and flee in every direction, certain that all is lost. Faced with this crisis, Karna directs "his mind inward"⁵¹³ to know what he should do. The dazed troops plead with him to use Indra's spear. Thereupon, taking up the weapon he had "obtained and worshipped for years for the destruction of Phalgunā [Arjuna], that foremost of weapons given to the sūta's son by Indra for the sake of the earrings," Karna hurls it at Ghaṭotkaca.⁵¹⁴ The huge *rākṣasa* crashes dead upon the battlefield, crushing a great many men beneath his gigantic body. The Pāndavas are brokenhearted at the loss of Bhīma's son and weep bitter tears. Kṛṣṇa, however, is in raptures; roaring like a lion he embraces Arjuna.

I feel great joy! Listen to me, Dhanamjaya [Arjuna], and your heart will feel the greatest delight. Know, splendid Dhanamjaya, that with his spear foiled through Ghaṭotkaca, Karna is already slain in battle! ... How fortunate the armor was stolen! How fortunate the earrings were taken away! And how fortunate the unfailing weapon was foiled through Ghaṭotkaca! With his armor and earrings, Karna single-handedly could have vanquished even the immortals in the triple worlds.⁵¹⁵

ākarmād dāritāsyāś ca tīkṣṇadāmṣṭrah karālavān (7.150.4-5)

⁵¹³ antar manāḥ kuruṣu prādravatsu (7.154.47)

⁵¹⁴ yāsau rājan nihitā varṣapūgān; vadhyājau satkṛtā phalgunasya
yām vai prādāt sūtāputrāya śakrah; śaktim śreṣṭhām kūṇḍalābhyaṁ nimāya
(7.154.53)

⁵¹⁵ atiḥarṣam imām prāptam śīṇu me tvam dhanamjaya
atīva manasāḥ sadyaḥ prasādakaram uttamam
śaktim ghaṭotkacenemām vyāṁsayitvā mahādyute
karmām nihatam evājau viddhi sadyo dhanamjaya ...
diṣṭyāpanīta kavaco diṣṭyāpahṛta kūṇḍalaḥ
diṣṭyā ca vyāṁsītā śaktir amoghasya ghaṭotkace
yadi hi styāt sa kavacas tathaiva ca sakūṇḍalaḥ
sāmarān api lokāṁs trīn ekaḥ karṇo jayed bali (7.155.13-15)

The anaphora here, the repeated "how fortunate," *distyā*, emphasizes Kṛṣṇa's celebration of the successful working of Fate. Directed by his will, Daiva truly is *disti*, "auspicious good fortune."

Śaṁjaya relates to Dhṛitarāṣṭra how, during the previous days of battle, he and other Kuru warriors had pleaded with Karna to hurl Indra's spear at Arjuna or Kṛṣṇa; but, through the action of Daiva, Karna always forgot his resolution. Muses Śaṁjaya:

I think Daiva is supreme since Karna, with spear in hand, did not kill either Pārtha [Arjuna] or Devaki's son Kṛṣṇa in battle. Surely because his mind was weakened by Daiva, Karna, with the weapon of doom in hand, but deluded by divine illusion, did not hurl it at Kṛṣṇa or for the destruction of Arjuna, powerful as Indra, O king.⁵¹⁶

Kṛṣṇa explains to Sātyaki Karna's failure to hurl the infallible weapon in more explicit terms:

Killing Arjuna, wielder of the Gāṇḍīva bow, was always in Karna's heart. I would always delude Rādheya so that the weapon was not thrown at the white-horsed Pāṇḍava. As long as I could not thwart that means of Phalgunā's death, I had neither sleep nor joy in my heart, Sātyaki.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶ daivam eva param manye yat karṇo hastasamsthayā
na jaghāna rāṇe pārtham kṛṣṇam vā devakī sutam
tasya hastisthitā śaktih kālarātrir ivodyatā
daivopahatabuddhitvān na tāṁ karṇo vimuktavān
kṛṣṇe vā devakīputre mohito deva māyayā
pārthe vā śakra kalpe vai vadhr̄tham vāsavī prabho (7.158.7-9)

⁵¹⁷ hṛdi nityam tu karṇasya vadho gāṇḍīvadhanvanaḥ
aham eva tu rādheyam mohayāmi yudhām vara
yato nāvasjac chaktim pāṇḍave śvetavāhane
phalgunasya hi tāṁ mṛtyum avagamya yuyutsataḥ
na nindrā na ca me harṣo manaso 'sti yudhām vīra (7.157.36-38)

Karṇa has been deprived utterly of his heritage as the son of Sūrya. While Arjuna still enjoys Indra's protection as well as the infallible guidance of Kṛṣṇa, the hand of Daiva — not so inscrutable after all — has rendered vulnerable Arjuna's greatest enemy. Kṛṣṇa's explanation to Sātyaki recalls what he had said to Arjuna earlier, in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

Bound by your own karma born of your inherent nature, son of Kuntī, you will inevitably do what you do not wish to do out of delusion. The lord of all beings abides in the region of the heart, Arjuna, causing all beings to move as if mounted on a machine through his power of illusion.⁵¹⁸

Like Karṇa, Arjuna too acts under the power of Daiva; but for him that power is not impersonal, unknowable, and dis-integrating, but rather personal, constructive, and divine. In *Udyogaparvan*, Kṛṣṇa has this to say to Bhīma:

However well advised, well-guided and well-performed, human action (*karman*) may be obstructed by Daiva. ... Human action also may interrupt what Daiva leaves undone. ... The world has no other way of existence than action, Pāṇḍava. Knowing this, a man will carry on, whatever be the fruits of both *karman* and Daiva.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁸ svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmanā
kartum necchasi yan mohāt karisyasy avaśo 'pi tat
iśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ hṛddeṣe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati
bhrāmayan sarvabhūtāni yantrārūḍhāni māyayā (6.40.60-61)

⁵¹⁹ sumantritaṁ sunītaṁ ca nyāyataś copapāditam
kṛtam mānuṣyakām karma daivenāpi virudhyate ...
daivam apy akṛtam karma pauruṣeṇa vihanyate ...
lokasya nānyato vṛttih pāṇḍavānyatra karmanāḥ
evam buddhiḥ pravarteta phalaṁ syād ubhayānvayāt (6.75.8-11)

We end this chapter, then, with a provisional answer to the questions posed with the story of Gautami, Arjunaka, Mṛtyu, and Kāla: If behind the material cause of misfortune – the proverbial serpent – there seems to be some powerful controlling agency, can we ever know for certain what it is? Is it the inexorable power of Time and Death, a power controlled by the gods for their inscrutable purposes – that is, Daiva? Or is it the power of *karman*, an individual's actions bearing fruit? The incidents of Karna's life strongly suggest the former. Karna, for all his initiative, despite his solar origins, despite his noble character, cannot withstand the deceptions of Indra or the manipulations of Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna, on the other hand, whatever he is or does, cannot but succeed. That, at least, is how Karna must perceive things as he prepares to assume generalship of the Kaurava army. The following chapter will continue this exploration, concentrating on *Karnaparvan* and Kṛṣṇa's efforts, as incarnate Time, Kāla, to bring about Karna's death.

Chapter Five

Fate, Death, and Time: Karna and Kṛṣṇa

From one perspective, the *Mahābhārata* may be understood as a monumental assemblage of religious and philosophical doctrines. There is room for everything, and individual concepts almost always are articulated in absolute terms. At times the emphasis is *nivṛttimārga*, the path turned away from the world; at times it is *pravṛttimārga*, the path turned towards the world. Both paths embrace any number of practices and beliefs. The focus of this dissertation is the literary -- not theological or philosophical, not eschatological or mythological -- nature of the *Mahābhārata*. What prevents the *itihāsa* from being little more than that infamous "motley pile" of nineteenth-century Orientalists is the manner in which the authorial voice comments on the diversity of concepts through a masterful use of narrative strategies. Thus, a comprehensive evaluation of dissimilar doctrines and points of view is effected through an artful examination of how those doctrines might impact in the life of the individual and in the lives of groups of individuals. The focus of this dissertation is on how the *Mahābhārata*'s model audience receives and is led by the model author's narrative strategies to find the *itihāsa*'s "meaning" or "meanings."

In that context, the story of Gautamī and the hunter discussed in the previous chapter may be seen as a template for one of the *Mahābhārata*'s large projects. The story expresses a doctrine or worldview that subsumes all others: *kālavāda*, the doctrine of cyclical Time (as opposed to "time"). Yaroslav Vassilkov has demonstrated that

kālavāda passages are widely scattered throughout the *Mahābhārata*. If those passages "are examined against the background of the whole body of the [*Mahābhārata*] and not in isolation, one can see that the teaching on the omnipotence and vicissitudes of Time is inherent in [the *itihāsa*'s] world outlook."⁵²⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, Kāla and Daiva are closely associated -- Fate and Death are implied in the workings of Time, and all are subsumed in Nārāyaṇa Kṛṣṇa: Kala, Daiva, and Kṛṣṇa are one and the same.⁵²¹ Gautamī is told that the snake, the material cause of her son's death, is not to blame -- Mṛtyu bears more responsibility; but the ultimate responsibility is Kāla's. As an afterthought, it seems, *karman*, the past actions of both Gautamī and her son, is identified as the -- or a -- culprit. The doctrine of *karman* is problematic in the *Mahābhārata*; the text recognizes *karman* as a possible explanation for the mysteries of human existence, but never is the point made emphatically. We may take this to indicate, as does Vassilkov, that many passages mentioning *karman*, including the lines in Gautamī's story, testify to later "surgical operations."⁵²² Or we may take these passages at face value. In the latter case, the impression conveyed is that *karman* is a weak and unsatisfactory explanation for Time's vicissitudes. The Gautamī story's template may be applied to the

⁵²⁰ Yaroslav Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda* (the Doctrine of Cyclical Time) in the *Mahābhārata* and the Concept of Heroic Didactics," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 25.

⁵²¹ Julian Woods argues this point emphatically: "There is no longer any doubt: Nārāyaṇa, time (*kāla*), and *Daiva* are one and the same." Julian F. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 39.

⁵²² Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda*," 30.

larger *itihāsa*. Where does the audience identify in this story? Clearly with the three humans: the grieving mother, the well-intentioned hunter, the dead child. Death is the means by which Time and Fate effect the destruction of the world. Gautamī and the hunter are representative humans, left behind to pick up the pieces of Time's annihilations. Karna represents the individual to whom the wider *Mahābhārata* is addressed. This chapter will deal specifically with the impact of Time and *kālavāda* on the lives of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters, Karna in particular. I understand Kāla and Daiva as nuances of one concept. Vassilkov does not view *kālavāda* as systematic philosophy. Rather, following the Russian Indologist V. Lysenko, he considers the doctrine of cyclical time, *kālavāda*, "a poetic expression of an ordinary man's feelings in the face of outer forces he was unable to perceive or control by his cognition or senses; the forces that had acquired the form of Time."⁵²³ This chapter will argue that because the *itihāsa* conflates Kāla, Daiva and Kṛṣṇa, Time is more than a poetic expression, and that if its movements are cyclical, those cycles are multidimensional. The action of Kṛṣṇa upon the destiny of Karna illustrates that argument.

Time's "Temptation"

In the previous chapter we remarked that in the *Mahābhārata*'s universe a certain modicum of *puruṣakāra* is exacted of an individual before Daiva -- or Kṛṣṇa, as the ultimate expression of Daiva -- assumes absolute control. Because Arjuna chooses Kṛṣṇa alone and unarmed while Duryodhana chooses the Vṛṣṇi army, Arjuna is destined to be

⁵²³ Translated from the Russian, in Vassilkov, "Kālavāda," 26.

protected by Kṛṣṇa, and Duryodhana is destined to be destroyed. Kṛṣṇa also will offer Karna a choice. However, the *itihāsa* leaves open the question as to whether Karna really has a choice, any more than he had a *choice* not to give his armor and earrings to Indra, or to pledge eternal friendship to Duryodhana.

Karna, the isolated individual in the darkness of the *kali* age, embodies an irresolvable tension between an inherent ethical sensibility that impels him to certain actions, and an intuition of an inexorable fate manipulating those actions and determining their outcome. On a wider level, the *Mahābhārata* asks, through Karna, whether an individual's sense of ethical responsibility is an illusion — or worse, whether is it a ruse by which Daiva can determine the course of events. If Time and Daiva are determinative, then the ethical alternatives are twofold: either the individual must give up all action as futile, or he must pursue endeavors while cultivating disinterestedness in their fruits.⁵²⁴ Kṛṣṇa will preach the latter alternative in the *Bhagavadgītā*, but by promising Arjuna certain victory in battle he effectively vitiates Arjuna's yogic disinterestedness. Karna, however, when faced with the choice, chooses the path of disinterested endeavor, knowing that death is more certain than victory and that victory depends upon Daiva.

Kṛṣṇa's temptation of Karna is the *avatāra*'s final effort to prevent -- or prepare for -- the war. The question begged here is *why* the *avatāra*, incarnate Viṣṇu, the Supreme Lord, should have to make any "effort" at all. Why does Kṛṣṇa not use his divine power

⁵²⁴ Vassilkov, "Kālavāda," 25.

to determine the outcome of events once and for all? In fact, Kṛṣṇa never claims to be omnipotent. Apart from the few moments of theophany and certain inspired speeches, like the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa acknowledges his human limitations. In his conversation with Uttanika after the war, to be discussed further below, Kṛṣṇa admits how powerless he was to prevent the great carnage. Although, Kṛṣṇa tells Uttanika, "there is nothing beyond me, the eternal god of gods,"⁵²⁵ he accepts the limitations of whichever form he takes in his many incarnations, in order to uphold *dharma* -- when a god he acts as a god, when a demon he acts as a demon; now, as a man, he acts as a man.⁵²⁶ In his illuminating examination of Kṛṣṇa's ambiguous role in the *Mahābhārata*, Bimal Krishna Matilal concedes that Kṛṣṇa represents "the most confusing kind of moral enigma."⁵²⁷ To uphold *dharma*, Kṛṣṇa both practices and recommends breaches of *dharma*. Perhaps one key to understanding this "devious divinity" is Kṛṣṇa's self-identification as Kāla, Time. As Time, the deity is "passionless, free from any human virtues. Here, if not anywhere else, end justifies the means."⁵²⁸

Now, taking Karna upon his chariot, Kṛṣṇa reveals in private the unspoken secret: Karna is not the son of a *sūtī*.

Those who have studied the scriptures teach that a son born to an unmarried maiden is considered as much the son of her husband as the sons she bears in marriage. You have been born like that, Karna; you are

⁵²⁵ *tatāḥ param nāsti caiva devadevāt sanātanāt* (14.53.7)

⁵²⁶ 14.53. 15-19

⁵²⁷ Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defense of a Devious Divinity," 401.

⁵²⁸ Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defense of a Devious Divinity," 414.

the lawful son of Pāṇḍu. According to the binding *Dharmaśāstras*, come, you will be king!⁵²⁹

Kṛṣṇa promises that when Karna is anointed king, Bhīma will hold the umbrella above his head, his brothers will touch his feet, and he will attain to great wealth and honor. Then he offers an additional enticement: "At the sixth turn, Draupadī will lie with you."⁵³⁰ Kṛṣṇa's temptations are not appropriate for a man of Karna's ethical sensibilities; to be sure, they appear rather base. Karna refuses the offer on the grounds that his adoptive parents have reared him with great affection, *sauhṛdāt* (see Chapter Three). He owes them his loyalty; he will renounce neither them nor the *sūtas* with whom he always has performed his sacrifices.⁵³¹

Neither for the whole earth nor a heap of gold, neither from happiness nor fear, Govinda, will I be made to break my word. ... Neither death nor capture, neither fear nor avarice, Janārdana, can make me break my word to the wise son of Dhṛitarāṣṭra⁵³²

Karna's response cannot come as a surprise to Kṛṣṇa. Karna, moreover, indicates that he suspects Kṛṣṇa's duplicitous play, and is aware of the "secret." Note that Kuntī's

⁵²⁹ kānīś ca sahodhaś ca kanyāyām yaś ca jāyate
voghāram pitaram tasya prāhuḥ śāstravido janāḥ
so 'si karna tathā jātah pāṇḍoh putro 'si dharmataḥ
nigrahād dharmasāstrāṇām ehi rājā bhaviṣyasi (5.138.8-9)

⁵³⁰ ṣaṣṭhe ca tvām tathā kāle draupady upagamisya (5.138.15)

⁵³¹ iṣṭam ca bahubhir yajñaiḥ saha sūtaiḥ mayāsakṛ
āvāḥāś ca vivāḥāś ca saha sūtaiḥ kṛtā māyā (5.139.14)

⁵³² na prthivyā sakalayā na suvarṇasya rāśibhiḥ
harṣād bhayād vā govinda anṛtam vaktum utsahe ...
vadhād bandhād bhayād vāpi lobhād vāpi janārdana
anṛtam notsahe kartum dhārtarāṣṭrasya dhīmataḥ (5.139.12, 17)

maternity is mentioned first by Karna, not by Kṛṣṇa. "I understand everything," says Karna. "By law I am the son of Pāṇḍu. ... An unmarried maiden was impregnated with me by the Sun, Janārdana, and on the advice of the Sun she cast me away when I was born."⁵³³ Karna strives to make the encounter with Kṛṣṇa a meeting of equals; he speaks to Kṛṣṇa man to man, not man to god. "Without a doubt," he says, perhaps with a touch of irony, Kṛṣṇa "means well."⁵³⁴ However, he continues, if *dharma*-minded Yudhiṣṭhira were to learn that Karna is the son of Kuntī, he would give the kingdom to Karna. In that case, Karna says, he would in turn offer the kingdom to Duryodhana. It would be best, then, if Kṛṣṇa kept their encounter secret and let Yudhiṣṭhira remain king.⁵³⁵ In this way, Karna affirms that he deliberately has decided upon, or accented to, a course of events foreordained by Daiva. To emphasize that he already "knows everything," Karna foresees the war's disastrous course. Duryodhana will hold a great "sacrifice of battle," *śastrayajña*, to which Kṛṣṇa will be witness, and in which warriors from both sides will perform the parts prescribed in a proper Vedic sacrifice.⁵³⁶ Says David Shulman of this moment, "The world is, in Karna's eyes, an altar, a meeting point of life and death; the true hero, like Karna himself, is a sacrificer, an archetypal Vedic *yajamāna*, and also a potential victim at this rite. ... Karna's chooses his death — in effect, freely choosing not

⁵³³ *sarvam caivābhijānāmi pāṇḍoh putro 'smi dharmataḥ ...
kanyā garbhāḥ samādhatta bhāskarān māṁ janārdana
ādityavacanāc caiva jātam māṁ sā vyasarjayat* (5.139.2-3)

⁵³⁴ *asāṁśayam hitārthāya brūyās tvam madhusūdana* (5.139.19)

⁵³⁵ 5.139.19-23

⁵³⁶ 5.139.29-44

to be free."⁵³⁷ Karna goes so far as to describe his own death: "Kṛṣṇa, when you see me cut down by the ambidextrous archer [Arjuna], it will be a piling anew of their sacrificial fire."⁵³⁸

After listening to Karna's predictions, Kṛṣṇa does something that generally is "a sure sign that some horror is in the offing"⁵³⁹, he smiles and laughs: "So, Karna, you are not tempted by the offer of the kingdom; you do not want to rule the earth I am offering you!"⁵⁴⁰ In that case, Karna's premonitions certainly will materialize and then "there will be no more *tretā* nor *kṛta* nor *dvāpara*."⁵⁴¹ The age of *kali* will be fully upon them. Seven days from thence, says Kṛṣṇa, is the new moon, an auspicious time for commencing a battle. Karna is to go to the Kaurava elders and suggest they launch the war on that "Day of Indra."⁵⁴² Although a day consecrated to the god who protects Arjuna and has stolen Karna's armor and earrings might seem highly inauspicious, Karna does not refuse. He simply wonders:

Why did you want to delude me, strong-armed one, when you knew already? Utter annihilation looms for the entire earth caused by Śakuni, me, Duḥsasana, and King Dhṛitarāṣṭra's son Duryodhana. Without a doubt,

⁵³⁷ David Dean Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 386.

⁵³⁸ yadā drakṣyasi māṃ kṛṣṇa nihataṃ savyasācinā
punaś citis tadā cāsya yajñasyātha bhavisyati (5.139.46)

⁵³⁹ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 384.

⁵⁴⁰ kārṇasya vacanām śrutiḥ keśavāḥ paravīrahā
uvāca prahasan vākyām smitapūrvam idam tadā
api tvām na tapet kārṇa rājyalābhopapādanā
mayā dattām hi pṛthivīm na praśāsitum icchasi (5.140.1-2)

⁵⁴¹ The phrase is repeated five times, *na tadā bhavitā tretā na kṛtaṃ dvāparām na ca*, as Kṛṣṇa describes what will occur in the war, at 5.140. 6 -15.

⁵⁴² 5.141.18

Kṛṣṇa, a great war looms between the Pāṇḍavas and Kurus, frightful and mired in blood.⁵⁴³

Karna relates to Kṛṣṇa a terrifying dream in which he had seen the Pāṇḍavas wearing white turbans and most of the Kauravas wearing red turbans.⁵⁴⁴ He had watched as Kṛṣṇa draped a bloody earth with entrails, and seen Yudhiṣṭhīra mount a pile of bones and eat from a golden platter.⁵⁴⁵ Karna also describes ominous cosmic portents. He takes these signs as true indicators of the future. In the world of the *Mahābhārata*, Daiva not infrequently announces itself through portents. Evil signs are witnessed before and after the dice game, before the deaths of Drona and Bhīṣma, and before the death of Kṛṣṇa, to name but a few instances. At significant moments a disembodied voice is heard speaking from the heavens, jackals howl, horses and elephants weep, meteors flash, blood falls as rain, unforeseen eclipses darken the sky, and planets move into malign conjunctions. At such moments Daiva seems to lift its veil, *kālavāda* becomes transparent. The omens reinforce Karna's conviction that "everything depends on Daiva." What he cannot, or does not want to recognize is that Kṛṣṇa has offered him a means to influence Daiva -- he may ally himself with the god who controls it. Karna suspects that Kṛṣṇa knows everything in advance. The "temptation" is not a temptation at all. Rather,

⁵⁴³ jānan mām hiṁ mahābāho samṁohayitum icchasi
yo 'yam pṛthivyāḥ kārtsnyena vināśaḥ samupasthitāḥ
nimittam tatra śakunir ahaṁ duḥśāsanas tathā
duryodhanaś ca nṛpatir dhṛtarāṣṭra suto 'bhavat
asaṁśayam idam kṛṣṇa mahad yuddham upasthitam
pāṇḍavānām kurūnām ca ghoram rūdhirakardamam (5.141.1-3)

⁵⁴⁴ The only Kauravas not in red turbans are Aśvatthāman, Kṛpa, and Kṛtavarman, the three who will survive the war to carry out the night massacre.

it is a fulfilling of some power, opaque to those it controls, that demands, however unjustly, that the individual be held responsible for his actions. Karna must "choose" his future. Kṛṣṇa's final words to Karna are a dark warning: "Today the utter annihilation of the earth assuredly is at hand, Karna, because my words do not touch your heart."⁵⁴⁶ We must wonder if Kṛṣṇa truly intended to touch Karna's heart. The temptation to defect really is no temptation to a heart as loyal as Karna's. Karna responds ruefully that if they two do not survive the battle, surely they will meet in heaven.⁵⁴⁷ He embraces Kṛṣṇa and dismounts from the chariot.

Kṛṣṇa will attempt one more manipulation. He will give Karna another opportunity to choose the "wrong" path over the "right," impossible, alternative. Immediately before the fighting begins, Kṛṣṇa approaches Karna on Kurukṣetra to make an outrageously implausible proposition.

Karna, I have heard it said that out of hatred for Bhīṣma you will not fight. Choose our side, Rādheya, for as long as Bhīṣma lives. When Bhīṣma is slain, Rādheya, then you can enter the battle again and help Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son, if you view all things impartially.⁵⁴⁸

Karna does not, as Kṛṣṇa well knows, view all things impartially. He replies: "I will not do anything displeasing to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son, Keśava. Know that I am Duryodhana's

⁵⁴⁵ 5.141.28-43

⁵⁴⁶ upasthita vināśeyāṇ nūnam adya vasuṇḍharā
tathā hi me vacaḥ karna nōpaiti hṛdayāṇ tava (5.141.43)

⁵⁴⁷ 5.141.46

⁵⁴⁸ śrūtaṁ me karna bhiṣmasya dveṣṭat kila na yotsyasi
smāṇ varaya rādheya yāvad bhiṣmo na hanyate
hate tu bhiṣme rādheya punar eṣyasi saṃyuge
dhārtarāṣṭrasya sāhāyyāṇ yadi paśyasi cet samam (6.41. 85-6)

friend even unto death."⁵⁴⁹ The fact that Kṛṣṇa addresses Karna as Rādhaya, son of Rādhā, is both insult and warning. To be recognized as the son of Sūrya he must change allegiance. Although Kṛṣṇa knows who Karna is, he will refer to him disparagingly as the *sūtputra* whenever he speaks of him to the Pāṇḍavas. Here again, Kṛṣṇa reveals the limitations of the humanity he, as *avatāra*, has accepted. Kṛṣṇa is genuinely concerned about the ability of the Pāṇḍavas to win the war. The means permitted to him exclude divine omnipotence; he acts in the world and in the lives of humans through the means of Daiva and Kāla, as well as by manipulating the "law" of *karman*, which in the *itihāsa* is a weak law, to be sure.

That final "temptation" directly follows the *Bhagavadgītā*, through which the *avatāra* prevented Arjuna from making a wrong choice, a choice not to fight and not to kill. By revealing his divine form, Kṛṣṇa assured Arjuna's binding devotion, his *bhakti*. Arjuna will not remember for long what Kṛṣṇa had said to him during their intense dialogue, but that is irrelevant. The divine charioteer controls the destiny of his warrior; Arjuna will be guided and protected at Kurukṣetra, for Time requires a human instrument. The *Mahābhārata* appeals to a number of dissimilar doctrines in explaining the causative forces operative in the world, and that latitude nowhere is more evident than in the *Gītā*.⁵⁵⁰ Even in regard to men of action like Arjuna and Karna, the messages are

⁵⁴⁹ na vipriyām kariṣyāmi dhārtarāṣṭrasya keśava
tyaktaprāṇām hi mām viddhi duryodhanahitaiṣṇam (6.41.87)

⁵⁵⁰ See Bruce J. Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 48.

mixed. On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa teaches forcefully that an individual is not a free agent; he is an instrument, willing or unwilling, of Daiva, of Kāla, of Kṛṣṇa. "Deluded by the notion of his own individuality, he will think, 'I am the doer.'"⁵⁵¹ On the other hand, Kṛṣṇa indicates that what the individual is by his inherent nature, *svabhāva*, is the product of his own deeds. "Fettered by your *karman* born of your inherent nature, son of Kuntī, from delusion you will do even what you do not want to do."⁵⁵² In fact, the doctrine of *svabhāva* turns out to be not unlike *kālavāda*. A man's behavior, be it moved by Daiva or his own inherent nature, is subject to Time's delusions, a fact underscored by Kṛṣṇa's handling of Karna.⁵⁵³ Karna is tempted with things he does not want. In choosing to refuse, all the pain and humiliation he is destined to suffer are justified. Publicly, Kṛṣṇa will blame Karna's fate on his "evil actions" and will use that argument to convince Arjuna to kill "the *sūtaputra*." When "there will be no more *tretā* nor *kṛta* nor *dvāpara*," individuals like Karna will be left alone and unprotected. The fortunate few, like Arjuna, will be chosen in time by Time to choose rightly.

When, at the moment of theophany, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa who he truly is, Kṛṣṇa replies, "I am Time."

I am ancient Time, the cause of the destruction of the world, come here to annihilate the world. Except for you, all these warriors arrayed in

⁵⁵¹ ahamkāravimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate (6.25.27)

⁵⁵² svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhah svena karmanā

kartum necchasi yan mohāt kariṣyasya avaśo 'pi tat (6.40.60)

⁵⁵³ Vassilkov remarks the "*svabhāvavāda*, the doctrine of 'inherent nature' as the highest principle not infrequently figures in the MBh as a doctrine closely related to *kālavāda*." He cites examples when the two doctrines are juxtaposed, one following upon the other. Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda*," 19-20.

opposing ranks shall cease to exist. Therefore rise up, seize glory! Having conquered your enemies, enjoy sovereignty! These men already are struck down by me; be merely the instrument, O ambidextrous archer. Drona, Bhiṣma, Jayadratha, Karna, and other heroic warriors as well, are killed by me. Kill them, do not hesitate! Fight! You will conquer your rivals in battle.⁵⁵⁴

Kṛṣṇa does not demand disinterestedness from Arjuna, he is told to "enjoy sovereignty," and promised that he will slay his greatest enemy, Karna, who is, in fact, already slain by Time. In the lifelong duel between Karna and Arjuna, Karna alone is faced squarely with the ethical problems posed by *kālavāda*.

A Gītā in Negative

The parallels the *Mahābhārata* establishes between Arjuna and Karna are reflected in the *itihāsa*'s structure. One fine example of this is Karna's experience of a "Bhagavadgītā" in reverse. While the raid on Virāṭa's cattle (see Chapter Four) is the *Gītā*'s comic prelude and the *Anugītā* its denouement (see below), Karna's experience in a chariot driven by Śalya is an image in negative of Arjuna's experience in a chariot driven by Kṛṣṇa. Śalya, king of the Madras, is the brother of Mādrī, mother of the Pāṇḍava twins, Nakula and Sahadeva. By all rights he should be an ally of the Pāṇḍavas, and when Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana send out calls for allies, Śalya marches forth with a

⁵⁵⁴ kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho; lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttah
ṛte 'pi tvā na bhaviṣyanti sarve; ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣu yodhāḥ
tasmāt tvam uttiṣṭha yaśo labhasva; jitvā śatrūn bhunkṣva rājyam samṛddham
mayaivaite nihatāḥ pūrvam eva; nimittamātram bhava savyasācin
droṇam ca bhiṣmam ca jayadratham ca; karṇam tathānyān api yodhavirān
mayā hatāms tvam jahi mā vyathiṣṭhā; yudhyasva jetāsi rāṇe sapatnān (6.33.32-34)

large army to join the Pāṇḍavas. But Śalya is a vain and self-indulgent man. During the march he comes upon one opulent lodge after another, all built especially in his honor, where he is provided with excessive homage and certain "superhuman" thrills (alas, they are not enumerated), which only augment his conceit.⁵⁵⁵ After repeatedly relishing these pleasures, Śalya, who has assumed they were provided by Yudhiṣṭhira, inquires to whom he may give thanks -- whereupon Duryodhana springs from his hiding place, reveals that the hospitality was his, and claims a reward: "Be the commander of my entire army!"⁵⁵⁶ Nonplussed, Śalya cheerfully agrees, then rides off to inform Yudhiṣṭhira of the unfortunate mix-up. Yudhiṣṭhira receives the news stoically, but asks a favor in return. Since Śalya is "the equal of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa in battle,"⁵⁵⁷ he surely will be called upon to act as Karna's charioteer when Karna and Arjuna fight. When that occurs, says Yudhiṣṭhira, "if you wish to please me, protect Arjuna, and by quenching the splendor (*tejas*) of the *sūta*'s son, bring us victory."⁵⁵⁸ To cement the promise, Yudhiṣṭhira makes the same request shortly before the battle, and Śalya renews his false-hearted pledge to undermine the greatest warrior on the side he is sworn to support.⁵⁵⁹ This is the man, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa's "equal," who will act as Karna's *sūta* when, after the unjust killing of Drona (see Chapter Four), Karna is appointed general of the Kaurava armies. More than

⁵⁵⁵ 5.8.9

⁵⁵⁶ *sarvasenā prañetā me bhavān bhavitum arhati* (5.8.12)

⁵⁵⁷ *vāsudeva samo yudhi* (5.8.26)

⁵⁵⁸ *tatra pālyo 'rjuno rājan yadi matpriyam icchasi*

tejovadhaś ca te kāryah sauter asmaj jayā vahah (5.8.27)

⁵⁵⁹ 6.41.80-82

once in the battle books, Śalya is said to be "the equal of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa in battle."⁵⁶⁰

This curious comparison is a narrative strategy not so much to elevate Śalya as to underscore Kṛṣṇa's deviousness. In battle, Kṛṣṇa is indeed "the equal of" Śalya in duplicity; like Śalya, Kṛṣṇa understands how crucial it is to the battle's outcome that Karna be dispirited and weakened.

Sitting together the night before Karna is to assume generalship of the Kaurava armies, Karna and Duryodhana experience uncharacteristic remorse. "Reflecting upon the pain they had caused Draupadī at the dicing, their hearts were heavy with sorrow. Thinking about the pain they had inflicted on the Pāṇḍavas, the night seemed a thousand years long."⁵⁶¹ Their contrition merits no tempering of what Time has in store for them. Next morning, Karna boasts that he is superior to Arjuna in everything but charioteer and as foreseen requests King Śalya for his driver. Vain Śalya is insulted and insults Karna in turn: *sūdras* and *sūtas* "are meant to be the servants of brahmins, *ksatriyas*, and *vaiśyas*, and not the other way around!"⁵⁶² Duryodhana reiterates his intimations of Karna's nobility: "I do not think Karna possibly could have been born a *sūta*. I think that strong-armed warrior with his golden armor and earrings is the son of a god born into the

⁵⁶⁰ vāsudeva samo yudhi (5.8.26)

⁵⁶¹ sahitās te niśāyām tu duryodhana niveśane
atipracāṇḍād vidveśāt pāṇḍavānām mahātmanām
yat tad dyūtāparikliṣṭām kṛṣṇām āninyire sabhām
tat smaranto 'nvatapyanta bhṛśam udvignacetasaḥ
cintayantaś ca pārthānām tān kleśān dyūtakāritān
kṛcchreṇa kṣaṇadām rājan ninyur abda śatopamām (8.10.6-8)

⁵⁶² brahmakṣatraviśām śūdrā vihitāḥ paricārakāḥ
brahmakṣatrasya vihitāḥ sūtā vai paricārakāḥ

ksatriya kula. How could a tiger be born from a deer?"⁵⁶³ After a good deal of flattery, the Madras king is persuaded to take up, reluctantly, the reigns of Karna's chariot.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna had grown despondent and flung down his bow. Kṛṣṇa had used persuasions both human and divine to encourage him to fulfill his *ksatriya dharma*, and then promised him victory. Now, no sooner do Karna and Śalya set out, than the charioteer begins to denigrate his warrior. "Well then, *sūtāputra*," he sneers, "how can you treat the Pāṇḍavas with contempt, all of them great warriors and great archers who know all the weapons!"⁵⁶⁴ Their entry onto the field is marked by evil portents. Meteors shower, thunderbolts crash, violent winds blow, bones rain from the sky, Karna's horses stumble and fall.⁵⁶⁵ However, "stupefied by Daiva," the Kauravas do not notice the portents. "Seeing the *sūta*'s son setting out, the lords of earth cried, 'Victory!' The Kauravas considered the Pāṇḍavas already slain."⁵⁶⁶ In reality, Kāla already has slain the Kauravas.

Unlike Arjuna, when Karna enters the battle he does so enthusiastically, with extravagant self-confidence. "Even if Yama, Varuṇa, Kubera, and Indra along with their

na vīś śūdrasya tatraiva śīru vākyam mamānagha (8.23.35-36)

⁵⁶³ nāpi sūta kule jātma kārṇam manye kathaṁ cana
devaputram aham manye kṣatriyāṇam kulodbhavam
sakūṇalam sakavacām dīrghabāhūm mahāratham
katham ādityasadṛśam mrgī vyāghram janisyati (8.24.159-60)

⁵⁶⁴ sūtāputra kathaṁ nu tvam pāṇḍavān avamanyase
sarvāstrajñānān maheśvāsān sarvān eva mahārathān (8.26.27)

⁵⁶⁵ 8.26.34-37

⁵⁶⁶ na ca tān gaṇayām āsuḥ sarve te daivamohitāḥ
prasthitām sūtāputram ca jayety ūcur narā bhuvi
nirjītān pāṇḍavāmś caiva menire tava kauravāḥ (8.26.38-39)

attendants come to protect the Pāṇḍava in the great war," he boasts, "why mince words, I will vanquish him and them!"⁵⁶⁷ "Stop! Stop your bragging, Karna," laughs Śalya. "You are beside yourself and saying preposterous things."⁵⁶⁸ Śalya reminds Karna that Arjuna had defeated him during the raid on Virāṭa's cattle -- why should it be different now? Karna is not daunted. Ordering Śalya to drive onto the field, he offers rich rewards to any of Yudhiṣṭhīra's men who will lead him to Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. Duryodhana's troops are heartened by his words, but Śalya is contemptuous. He compares Karna's plan to that "of a man tied to a heavy rock who wants to cross the ocean using only his two arms, or of one who wants to leap down from the summit of a mountain!"⁵⁶⁹ Karna calls Śalya "an enemy with the face of a friend" who is trying only to frighten him.⁵⁷⁰ Retorts Śalya: "You'll think yourself a lion until you see the two Kṛṣṇas standing together in one chariot. You always will be a jackal and Dhananjaya always a lion!"⁵⁷¹ An irresolute Arjuna had heard his divine *sūta* exhort: Rise up! Seize glory! Enjoy sovereignty! Karna enters the battle guided by a disloyal *sūta* who wants to weaken him. Adding more pathos to this *Gītā* in negative, Karna's anger is short-lived and tempered with candor. "What Vasudeva and Arjuna are, I know,"⁵⁷² he admits, and divulges to his *sūta* the troubling

⁵⁶⁷ yama varuṇa kubera vāsavā vā; yadi yugapat saganā mahāhave
jugupiṣava ihaitya pāṇḍavāṇ; kim u bahunā saha tair jayāmi tam (8.26.6)

⁵⁶⁸ virama virama karna katthanād; atirabhaso 'syati cāpy ayuktavāk 8.26.62)

⁵⁶⁹ samudratarāṇāṇ dorbhyāṇ kāṇṭhe baddhvā yathā śilām
giryagrād vā nipatanāṇ tādṛk tava cikirṣitam (8.27.25)

⁵⁷⁰ tvām tu mitra mukhāḥ śatruṇ māṇ bhīṣayitum icchasi (8.27.28)

⁵⁷¹ vyāghram tvām manyasa ātmāṇāṇ yāvat kṛṣṇau na paśyasi
samāsthitāv ekarathē sūryacandramasāv iva (8.27.47)

⁵⁷² yathāvidhāv arjuna vāsudevau (8.29.1)

events leading to Paraśurāma's and the brahmin's curses. In the face of Śalya's deprecations, Karṇa chooses to face Daiva and Kāla with heroic disinterestedness.

I have called Karṇa's experience in his chariot with Śalya a "*Gītā* in negative," for what a negative calls to mind is its positive -- the two are simultaneously opposite and identical. Like the *Gītā* parody in *Virāṭaparvan*, with Arjuna acting as Uttara's charioteer, and the *Anugītā* (to be discussed below), the episode of Karṇa and Śalya is a narrative strategy that directs the audience to consider, or reconsider, the *Bhagavadgītā* in the light of the similar/dissimilar event.

Prelude to Fratricide: Fratricide Interrupted

In *Karṇaparvan*, immediately preceding Arjuna's and Karṇa's final battle, there occurs a startling scene, a clash between brothers that seldom is mentioned in *Mahābhārata* studies -- a curious omission, for it is one of the *itihāsa*'s most psychologically revealing episodes. It exposes repressed resentment in Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna; and it reveals the extent to which the outcome of the war is dependent upon Arjuna defeating Karṇa. On the field, Karṇa has a number of opportunities to keep his promise to Kuntī that she will have five sons at the end of the war. He fights with each of his brothers, excepting Arjuna, and allows each to escape. He and Yudhiṣṭhira engage in particularly bitter combat, which cumulates with Yudhiṣṭhira seriously wounded, his chariot shattered, and his charioteer slain. As he attempts to flee the field, Karṇa touches his shoulder condescendingly, and laughs:

How is it, pray tell, that you, born into a noble *kula* and into the *dharma* of a *ksatriya*, are escaping your foes in battle to protect your own life? Sir, I don't think you are properly acquainted with *ksatriyadharma*. You are attached to brahmin powers, to reciting the Vedas and performing sacrificial rites. Do not fight with me, son of Kuntī, and do not approach heroes!⁵⁷³

Karṇa's evaluation of Yudhiṣṭhīra's divided nature is devastatingly perceptive. A shaken Yudhiṣṭhīra escapes to the camp to nurse his wounds, while Karṇa continues to fight valiantly, killing multitudes.

Meanwhile, Kṛṣṇa has been arranging matters so as to protect Arjuna from a premature encounter with Karṇa; Karṇa first must exhaust himself. When Yudhiṣṭhīra is wounded, Kṛṣṇa suggests that Arjuna retire from the field to comfort him. They find Yudhiṣṭhīra lying in pain on Draupadi's bed. Assuming they have come to announce Karṇa's death, he feels he can voice at last his deep-rooted obsession:

For thirteen years, Dhanamjaya, for fear of him I have had neither sleep at night nor joy by day. Filled with hatred for him, I burn, Dhanamjaya. ... Awake or asleep, son of Kuntī, I always see Karṇa here, there, everywhere! Here, there, wherever I go, Dhanamjaya, from fear of Karṇa I seem to see Karṇa standing before me.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷³ katham nāma kule jātaḥ kṣatradharme vyavasthitah
prajahyāt samare śatrūn prāṇān rakṣan mahāhavē
na-bhavān kṣatradharmeṣu kuśalo 'sīti me matih
brāhmaṇe bale bhavān yuktaḥ svādhyāye yajñakarmanā
mām sma yudhyasva kaunteya mā ca vīrān samāsadaḥ (8.34-36)

⁵⁷⁴ trayodaśāham varṣāṇi yasmād bhīto dhanamjaya
na sma nidrām labhe rātrau na cāhāni sukhamप kva cit
tasya dveṣṇā samyuktaḥ paridahye dhanamjaya (8.46.16-17)
jāgrat svapamś ca kaunteya karṇam eva sadā hy aham
paśyāmi tatra tatraiva karṇa bhūtam idam jagat
yatra yatra hi gacchāmi karṇād bhīto dhanamjaya
tatra tatra hi paśyāmi karṇam evāgrataḥ sthitam (8.46. 19-20)

Yudhiṣṭhīra is mortified that Karna allowed him to live; his sole consolation, he says, is that Arjuna finally has killed the *sūtāputra*. When Arjuna admits that he has left the field with Karna still alive and fighting, Yudhiṣṭhīra is furious. Frightened and weakened by his wounds, he lashes out with uncharacteristic acerbity, reproaching Arjuna for deserting the field and fleeing to the camp. Arjuna should hand over his mighty Gāndīva bow to a better warrior, he says, one who knows how to fight. "If you had given this bow to Keśava [Kṛṣṇa], you wicked man, Keśava would have killed the dreadful Karna in battle, like Indra slaying Vṛtra with his thunderbolt."⁵⁷⁵ Better for Kuntī to have aborted Arjuna in the fifth month, Yudhiṣṭhīra raves, than for Arjuna to have left Karna undefeated on Kurukṣetra⁵⁷⁶ -- whereupon Arjuna draws his sword.

The scene would be comic were it no so painfully revealing. Kṛṣṇa attempts to calm Arjuna, but "breathing like an angry snake," Arjuna retorts,

If any man would say, "Give Gāndīva to another," my secret vow is that I would cut off his head. This king has spoken those words, Parākrama, in your very presence, Govinda. I dare not forgive him. Therefore, I will slay this *dharma*-fearing king. I will keep my promise by killing this excellent man.⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷⁵ dhanuś caitat keśavāya pradāya; yantā bhaviṣyas tvam rāṇe ced durātman
tato 'hanisyat keśavāḥ karṇam ugraṇ; marutpatir vṛtram ivātta vajraḥ (8.48.14)

⁵⁷⁶ māse 'patisyāḥ pañcame tvam prakṛcchre; na vā garbho 'py abhaviṣyāḥ
prthāyāḥ

at te śrāmo rājaputrābhaviṣyan; na samgrāmād apayātum durātman (8.48.15)

⁵⁷⁷ arjunaḥ prāha govindam kruddhaḥ sarpa iva śvasan

dada gāndīvam anyasmā iti māṁ yo 'bhicodayet

chindiyām abhaṁ śiras tasya ity upāṁśu vrataṁ mama

tad ukto 'ham adinātman rājñāmita parākrama

samakṣaṇ tava govinda na tat kṣantum ihotsahe

tasmād enaṁ vadhiṣyāmi rājānaṁ dharmabhirukam

pratijñām pālayiṣyāmi hatvemāṁ narasattamam (8.49.8-11)

Kṛṣṇa rebukes Arjuna for giving way to wrath. He says there are only certain circumstances in which a person may be killed. "To kill a man who has withdrawn from battle, is without weapons, Bhārata, one who has turned his face away, is running away, or seeking shelter, or is joining his palms in surrender, is not respected by the wise."⁵⁷⁸ (These words will take on added relevance shortly, when Karna is killed.) However, Kṛṣṇa continues, *dharma* is subtle; there are circumstances under which only untruth can preserve the truth. "It is good to speak the truth. Nothing is considered higher than the truth, but it is very difficult to understand the principles of a particular truth in practice. In certain circumstances truth is not to be spoken and untruth is to be spoken."⁵⁷⁹ Arjuna has an obligation to keep true to the vow he has taken about his bow, Kṛṣṇa reasons. Nonetheless, when a person is shown disrespect, he is as good as slain. Arjuna should insult Yudhiṣṭhira, thus fulfilling his vow while avoiding the sin of fratricide.⁵⁸⁰

Kṛṣṇa's somewhat tortuous reasoning proves effective; it gives Arjuna an excuse to vent years of repressed resentment. Arjuna scoffs at Yudhiṣṭhira for unjustly criticizing his brothers from his safe position upon Draupadi's bed. As had Karna, Arjuna accuses Yudhiṣṭhira of being more like a brahmin than a *kṣatriya*, more forceful in speech than strong in arms. "I have never derived any happiness from you whatsoever," Arjuna

⁵⁷⁸ ayudhyamānasya vadhas tathāśastrasya bhārata
parānmukhasya dravataḥ śaranām vābhigacchataḥ
kṛtāñjaleḥ prapannasya na vadhaḥ pujyate budhaiḥ (8.49.22)

⁵⁷⁹ satyasya vacanām sādhu na satyād vidyate param
tattvenaitat sudurjñeyam yasya satyam anuṣṭhitam
bhavet satyam avaktavyam vaktavyam anṛtam bhavet (8.49.27-28)

avows.⁵⁸¹ "I do not rejoice at your sovereignty, since you are addicted to the evil practice of dicing. Having yourself practiced an evil act, you now want to vanquish your enemies with others' help in battle! Only the unrighteous are addicted to dicing."⁵⁸²

After unburdening himself, Arjuna, deeply ashamed of himself, draws his sword. "What is this again?" cries Kṛṣṇa.⁵⁸³ "I am going to kill myself," replies Arjuna.⁵⁸⁴ Kṛṣṇa suggests a less drastic alternative: "Brag about your own good qualities, Pārtha; in that way your self-esteem will be restored immediately!"⁵⁸⁵ It is not difficult for Arjuna to eulogize himself: "No other archer like me is known, O god-king, except the god who bears the trident [Śiva]. I am even approved of by that great being. In an instant I can destroy the universe of mobile and immobile creatures!"⁵⁸⁶ He continues in this vein, and ends by professing a whole-hearted intent to kill the *sūtaputra* Karna.⁵⁸⁷

The emoting does not end there -- now it is Yudhiṣṭhira's turn. He claims he is the worst of human beings; Arjuna should behead him immediately.⁵⁸⁸ "Sinner that I am, I am retiring to the forest this very day. Live happily without me! Mighty Bhīma is fit to

⁵⁸⁰ 8.49.64-71

⁵⁸¹ tvattah sukham na vayaṁ vidma kim cit (8.49.82)

⁵⁸² na cābhīnandāmi tavādhīrājyam; yatas tam akṣeṣv ahitāya saktah svayam kṛtvā pāpam anāryajuṣṭam; ebhir yuddhe tartum icchasy arīm̄ tu akṣeṣu doṣā bahavo vidharmāḥ (8.49.85-86)

⁵⁸³ tam āha kṛṣṇāḥ kim idam punar bhavān (8.49.89)

⁵⁸⁴ aham hanīṣye svaśārīram eva (8.49.90)

⁵⁸⁵ prabṛūhi pārtha svagūnān iḥātmanas; tathā svahārdam bhavatīha sadyah (8.49.91)

⁵⁸⁶ na mādṛśo 'nyo naradeva vidyate; dhanurdharo devam ṣte pinākinam ahaṁ hi tenānumato mahātmanā; kṣaṇena hanyām sacarācaram jagat (8.49.93)

⁵⁸⁷ sarvātmanā sūtaputraṁ ca hantum (8.49.99)

⁵⁸⁸ tasmāc chiraś chinddhi mamedam adya (8.49.102)

be king. Eunuch that I am, what use for me is sovereignty?"⁵⁸⁹ After listening patiently to Yudhiṣṭhīra's self-deprecation, Kṛṣṇa calms him down by promising: "Today the earth will drink the blood of the wicked Rādheya, I swear truly to you; know that the *sūta*'s son is killed today!"⁵⁹⁰ Yudhiṣṭhīra now begins to sing the praises Kṛṣṇa: "I am guided, Govinda, and carried across by you today, Mādhava. Today you have saved us two from a terrible disaster, Acyuta."⁵⁹¹ A repentant Arjuna falls weeping at Yudhiṣṭhīra's feet. "Then the king, King Dharma, raised up his brother Dhanamjaya, and embracing him affectionately, wept aloud, O lord of the earth. The two resplendent brothers, tigers among men, having wept for a long time, purified, became joyful."⁵⁹²

Kṛṣṇa has manipulated this cathartic unbosoming to prepare Arjuna for the great duel that faces him. He has fulfilled the role of a perfect *sūta* by encouraging, admonishing, and praising his warrior while denigrating the enemy. Nonetheless, after flattering Arjuna a bit further, Kṛṣṇa finds it necessary to end with a caveat: "In all events, I must say what is for your benefit, Pāṇḍava. Do not, strong-armed one, underestimate Karna, that splendor of battle."⁵⁹³ Karna is strong, proud, an accomplished

⁵⁸⁹ gacchāmy ahaṁ vanam evādyā pāpah; sukhaṁ bhavān vartatāṁ madvihināḥ yogyo rājā bhīmaseno mahātmā; klibasya vā mama kiṁ rājyakṛtyam(8.49.104)

⁵⁹⁰ rādheyasyādyā pāpasya bhūmiḥ pāsyati śonitam
satyam te pratijānāmi hatam viddhy adya sūtajam (8.49.112)

⁵⁹¹ anūnīto 'smi govinda tāritaś cādyā mādhava
mokṣitā vyasanād ghorād vayam adya tvayācyuta (8.49.114)

⁵⁹² utthāpya bhrātaram rājā dharmarājo dhanamjayam
samāśliṣya ca sasneham praruroda mahipatiḥ
ruditvā tu ciram kālam bhrātarau sumahādyutī
kṛtaśaucau naravyāghrau pṛīmiantau babhūvatuḥ (8.50.12-13)

⁵⁹³ avaśyam tu mayā vācyam yat pathyam tava pāṇḍava

warrior; he also is "evil-natured, turned to wickedness, and cruel."⁵⁹⁴ No one, not even the gods, can defeat him, none but Arjuna. "So kill the *sūta*'s son today!"⁵⁹⁵ Arjuna claims he is ready:

Today, Kṛṣṇa, I will free myself from the debt I owe to all archers, to my own wrath, to the Kurus, to my arrows, and to Gāṇḍīva! Today I will be freed from the grief I have cherished for thirteen years, Kṛṣṇa, by slaying Karna in battle like Indra slaying the demon Śambara!⁵⁹⁶

The moment for which Kṛṣṇa has prepared his instrument has come, and Karna does not have a chance. It is the seventeenth day. Meanwhile, Karna is exhausting himself in battle.

This scene of suspended fratricide, placed in the midst of the battle books, is both shocking and effective on a number of levels. As a relief from the concentrated descriptions of battle, it sweeps the audience into a wholly unexpected and fascinating psychological dimension. As a narrative strategy, it arouses pity for Yudhiṣṭhira's weaknesses, disdain for Arjuna's braggadocio, and sympathy for Karna's vulnerability. The episode, initiated and manipulated by Kṛṣṇa, emphasizes the extent to which the *avatāra* will go to prepare his imperfect instrument, Arjuna, to defeat Karna. Daiva is shown once more to be more powerful than human initiative, yet dependent upon it.

māvamamsthā mahābāho karnam āhavaśobhinam (8.50.57)

⁵⁹⁴ durātmānam pāpamatiṁ nṛṣāṁsaṁ (8.50.64)

⁵⁹⁵ ṣte tvām iti me buddhis tvam adya jahi sūtajam (8.50.62)

⁵⁹⁶ adyāham anṛṇah kṛṣṇa bhavisyāmidhanur bhṛtām
krodhasya ca kurūṇām ca śarāṇām gāṇḍīvasya ca
adya duḥkham aham mokṣye trayodaśa samārjitam
hatvā karnam rāṇe kṛṣṇa śambaram maghavān iva (8.52.23-24)

The Death of Karna

David Shulman suggests that the entire *Mahābhārata* can be regarded "as an extended essay, carried along on a complex narrative frame, on time and its terrors."⁵⁹⁷ This dissertation has taken the net of Indra as a metaphor for that "complex narrative frame" and argued that only by examining and appreciating the *itihāsa*'s fine literary structure do we begin to understand its multivocal discourse. We have argued that the *Mahābhārata*'s model author has used multiple narrative strategies to suggest that Karna, for all his flaws, is not unlike the *itihāsa*'s audience; he is a solitary human in an age of darkness. However we articulate Karna's dilemma -- he is deluded by Kāla, condemned by Daiva, manipulated by Kṛṣṇa -- his is an existential dilemma born of an irresolvable conflict between his own inherent nature, *svabhāva*, and the vicissitudes of Time. Certainly no other figure within the *itihāsa* is more conscious of, more subject to, "time and its terrors." Karna is keenly aware that inscrutable destiny ultimately will prove more powerful than human effort. He is, by nature and through Daiva, incapable of the absolute surrender demanded of a *bhakta* of Kṛṣṇa. As such, he presents to the *itihāsa*'s audience a model of the isolated individual crying, as it were, to a deaf heaven. His heroism is far more genuine and more inspiring than Arjuna's, but his proud individuality is pathetic as well.

⁵⁹⁷ David Dean Shulman, "Towards a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics," *International Folklore Review* 8 (1991): 11.

Arjuna has been protected and prepared while Karna undergoes his "Gītā in negative," with a faithless *sūta* leading him into fruitless skirmishes. To emphasize the doom awaiting Duryodhana's general and his armies in comparison to the victory guaranteed to their adversaries, an extended analogy is developed between Karna and Kṛṣṇa. It begins with Bhīṣma's last blessing to Karna, which sings like the *Gītā*:

Like the ocean is to rivers, like the sun to astrology, like the righteous to truth, like a fertile soil to seeds, like the clouds to all creatures, be you the support of your friends. Let your friends follow you as the immortals follow thousand-eyed Indra.⁵⁹⁸

And the Bombay Edition adds this line: "Be to the Kauravas as Viṣṇu to the dwellers of heaven!"⁵⁹⁹ Karna will fulfill that role until he dies. When the terrified Kauravas rush to Karna for shelter on the battlefield, he tells them, "Do not fear, come to me,"⁶⁰⁰ echoing Kṛṣṇa's call in the *Bhagavadgītā*: "Take refuge with me alone ... do not be distressed."⁶⁰¹ By choosing to remain alone and unrecognized, Karna must bear a double burden, fulfilling for Duryodhana's armies the role that the "two Kṛṣṇas on one chariot" fulfill for the Pāṇḍavas. Karna believes that victory depends upon Daiva, yet fails to recognize that Daiva, as Kāla, is Kṛṣṇa.

⁵⁹⁸ samudra iva sindhūnām jyotiṣām iva bhāskarāḥ
satyasya ca yathā santo bijānām iva corvarā
parjanya iva bhūtānām pratiṣṭhā suhṛdām bhava
bāndhavās tvānujīvantu sahasrākṣam ivāmarāḥ (7.4.2-3)

⁵⁹⁹ kauravānām bhava gatiryathā viṣṇurdīvaukasām (7.4. 4)

The Bombay Edition insists on parallels between Karna and Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa in a number of passages that are omitted from the Critical Edition.

⁶⁰⁰ tān śoṇitapariklinnān viṣamasthān śarātūrān
mā bhaiṣṭety abravīt karṇo hy abhito mām iteti ca (8.59.41)

⁶⁰¹ mām ekam śaraṇam vraja ... mā śucaḥ (6.40.66)

Lengthy, brutal descriptions of battle precede Arjuna and Karna's final combat.

Bhīma fulfills the promise he had made at the dicing to slaughter Duḥśāsana and rip open his chest. "I am drinking your blood from your throat, O vilest of men!" Bhīma gloats.⁶⁰² Thereafter, Arjuna kills Karna's son Vṛṣasena before Karna's eyes, first severing the young man's arms, then his head.⁶⁰³ When Arjuna and Karna at last prepare to fight, each warrior turns to his charioteer with a question. "If the Pārtha kills me at some point today in combat," asks Karna, "tell me truly, friend, what will you do then?" Śalya gives a bold but unconvincing reply: "Karna, if Arjuna of the white horses kills you today in combat, alone on the chariot I will kill both Mādhava [Kṛṣṇa] and the Pāṇḍava."⁶⁰⁴ When Arjuna asks the same question, Kṛṣṇa replies with an ominous laugh:

The sun may fall from the sky, the earth may split into a thousand pieces, fire may grow cold, but Karna will not kill you, Dhananjaya. But if such a thing should occur, it means universal destruction. Then I will kill Karna and Śalya in battle with my own two arms.⁶⁰⁵

Fortified with this promise, Arjuna engages Karna.

⁶⁰² eṣa te rūdhiraṁ kkaṇṭhāt pībāmi puruṣādhama (8.61.11)

⁶⁰³ 8.62

⁶⁰⁴ yadi pārtho rāṇe hanyād adya mām iha karhi cit
kim uttaraṁ tadā te syāt sakhe satyaṁ bravīhi me
(Zalya)

yadi karṇa rāṇe hanyād adya tvāṁ śvetavāhanāḥ
ubhāv ekarathenāhaṁ hanyām mādhava pāṇḍavau (8.63.73-74)

⁶⁰⁵ evam eva tu govīṇḍam arjunah pratyabhāṣata
tam prahasyābravīt kṛṣṇah pārtham param idam vacaḥ
pated divākaraḥ sthānāc chiryetānekadhā kṣitih
śaityam āgnir iyān na tvā karṇo hanyād dhananjayam
yadi tv evam katham cit syāl lokaparyasanam yathā
hanyām karnam tathā śalyam bāhubhyām eva samyuge (8.63.75-77)

The fight between the two brothers is prolonged and agonizing.⁶⁰⁶ At one point, Karna aims a special arrow at Arjuna, a weapon that has taken him years to master. Śalya tells him it will never succeed. Karna is furious and shoots the arrow in spite of his sūta's insults, shouting, "You are dead, Phalgun!"⁶⁰⁷ The arrow certainly would be deadly, but Kṛṣṇa is at the ready. He presses down on the chariot and the arrow just misses Arjuna's head. It strikes instead Arjuna's golden crown, which falls to the earth "like the sun setting behind the Western Mountain,"⁶⁰⁸ the same metaphor used when Karna's head falls from his body,⁶⁰⁹ suggesting poetically that but for Kṛṣṇa's interference, the roles of killer and killed might have been reversed.⁶¹⁰

Now Karna's curses begin to take effect. As the mantra for the Brahmā weapon slips from his memory, the wheel of his chariot sinks into the mud. Below the line in the Critical Edition are lines included in the Vulgate: at this moment, Kāla, embodied Time, desirous of telling Karna his death is at hand, comes to him invisibly and whispers maliciously, "The earth is swallowing your wheel."⁶¹¹ Śalya is not mentioned; Karna's sūta does not help him in this moment of greatest need. Karna jumps down to extricate the wheel and, weeping in frustration, pleads, "Be patient for a moment, Pāṇḍava, seeing

⁶⁰⁶ 8.66-67.

⁶⁰⁷ hato 'si vai phalguna ity avocat (8.66.9)

⁶⁰⁸ papāta pārthasya kiriṭam uttamam; divākaro 'stād iva parvatāj jvalan (8.66.16)

⁶⁰⁹ astam gacchānty athādityah prabhām ādāya gacchati (8.67.32)

⁶¹⁰ The Bombay Edition elaborates this scene by explaining that Karna's deadly arrow is inhabited by the snake Aśvasena, who wants to revenge his mother's beheading by Arjuna during the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest so many years ago.

⁶¹¹ kālo hyadrśyo nṛpa vipraśāpānnidarśayankarnavadham bruvāṇah
bhūmistu cakraṇ grasaṭītyavocatkarnasya tasminvadhakāle 'bhyupete

that my wheel has been swallowed up because of *daiva*.⁶¹² He reminds Arjuna of the very rules Kṛṣṇa had cited earlier: It is forbidden to kill a person who has turned his face away, or is joining his hands in surrender, or is without weapons.⁶¹³ Despite his dilemma, Karna continues to address his brother and foe with dignified courtesy:

You are a hero, son of Kuntī, so be patient for a moment while I raise this wheel from the earth, Dhananjaya. Don't kill me while you are on your chariot and I am standing on the ground. I am afraid of neither of Vāsudeva nor you, son of Pāṇḍu. You are born a *ksatriya*, sprung from a great *kula*. Recalling the precepts of *dharma*, be patient for a moment, Pāṇḍava.⁶¹⁴

Before Arjuna can waver, Kṛṣṇa interjects from upon the chariot: "Rādheya, how propitious that you are remembering *dharma*! When base men fall into a terrible plight they normally blame it on *daiva* and not their own misdeeds."⁶¹⁵ Where had Karna's *dharma* gone when he let Yudhiṣṭhira be cheated at the dice game, Kṛṣṇa asks rhetorically. Where had his *dharma* gone when he laughed at the menstruating Draupadi in the clutches of Duḥsāsana? Where had his *dharma* gone when, because he coveted the

(8.66.1122*)

⁶¹² prasta cakras tu rādheyah kopād aśrūṇy avartayat
so 'bravīd arjunam cāpi muhūrtam kṣama pāṇḍava
madhye cakram avagrastam drṣṭvā daivād idam mama (8.66.60-61)

⁶¹³ 8.66.61-63

⁶¹⁴ tvam ca śūro 'si kaunteya tasmāt kṣama muhūrtakam
yāvac cakram idam bhūmer uddharāmi dhananjaya
na mām rathastho bhūmiṣṭham asajjam hantum arhasi
na vāsudevāt tvatto vā pāṇḍaveya vibhemy aham
tvam hi kṣatriya dāyādo mahākulavivardhanāḥ
smṛtvā dharmopadeśam tvam muhūrtam kṣama pāṇḍava (8.66.63-65)

⁶¹⁵ athābravīd vāsudevo rathastho; rādheya diṣṭyā smarasīha dharmam
prāyena nīcā vyasaneṣu magnā; nindanti daivam kukṛtam na tat tat (8.67.1)

kingdom, he relied on evil Śakuni to defeat the Pāṇḍavas.⁶¹⁶ Kṛṣṇa's words have the intended effect. Arjuna grows enraged and begins to shoot arrows furiously at Karṇa, who struggles to protect himself. Finally, at Kṛṣṇa's urging, Arjuna takes the powerful *anjalika* weapon, places it on his Gāṇḍīva, and shouts, "May this arrow bring victory! Vengeful, glorious as a conjunction of sun and moon, may it guide Karṇa into the presence of Yama!"⁶¹⁷

When his wheel had sunk into the earth, and the mantra escaped his mind, Karṇa had reflected that while he always had been devoted to *dharma*, and while wise men say that *dharma* protects its devotees, in the end *dharma* was protecting him no longer.⁶¹⁸ At the moment of death, Karṇa feels abandoned by the very principle he had striven to uphold throughout his difficult life. Kurukṣetra, the so-called field of *dharma*,⁶¹⁹ signifies for Karṇa a total collapse of *dharma*, the annihilation of whatever might provide an ethical compass. "There will be no more *tretā* nor *kṛta* nor *dvāpara*...." In the darkness, what Karṇa does not know is that Kṛṣṇa has changed the rules. The great

⁶¹⁶ yadā sabhāyāṁ kaunteyam anakṣajñāṁ yudhiṣṭhiram
akṣajñāḥ śakunir jetā tadā dharmah kva te gataḥ
yadā rajasvalāṁ kṛṣṇāṁ duḥsāsana vaśe sthitāṁ
sabhāyāṁ prāhasaḥ karṇa kva te dharmas tadā gataḥ
rājyalubdhah punaḥ karṇa samāhvayasi pāṇḍavam
gāndhārarājām āśritya kva te dharmas tadā gataḥ (8.67.3-5)

⁶¹⁷ bruvan kiriṭi tam atiprahr̥ṣṭo; ayam śaro me vijayāvaho 'stu
jighāṁsur arkendusama prabhāvah; karṇām samāptim nayatām yamāya
(8.67.22)

⁶¹⁸ dharmapradhānān abhipāti dharma; ity abruvan dharmavidah sadaiva
mamāpi nimno 'dya na pāti bhaktān; manye na nityam paripāti dhārmah
(8.66.43)

final teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* is a secret the Lord shares only with the chosen.

"Abandoning all *dharma*s, take refuge with me alone. I will deliver you from all evil, do not be distressed."⁶²⁰ Karna, refuge of the Kauravas, not having abandoned *dharma*, now feels abandoned by *dharma*. Daiva, Kāla and Mṛtyu -- Fate, Time, and Death -- govern the *kali yuga*. Arjuna's *añjalika* strikes its mark.

With his limbs pierced all over with arrows, bathed in a torrent of blood, Karna's body shone with its own light as if with sunbeams. Having scorched the enemy armies with light rays for arrows, the Karna-sun was made to set by the mighty Arjuna-time.⁶²¹

As the Kauravas watch in horror, Karna's head is torn from his body. "Like the head of Indra with its thousand eyes, like a splendid lotus of a thousand petals, like the sun of a thousand rays at the close of day, thus did Karna's head fall to the earth."⁶²² From the fallen body a light streams forth and enters the sun.⁶²³

Duryodhana weeps over the bloody remains of his general and friend. Śalya, once more on the scene, attempts to comfort him: "Do not be distressed, Bhārata. It is

⁶¹⁹ Dharmakṣetre kuruketre, "On the field of dharma, the Kuru field," are the famous opening words of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

⁶²⁰ sarvadharmaṇ parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇam vraja
aham tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ (6.40.66)

⁶²¹ śarair ācitasarvāṅgah śonitaughapariplutah
vibhāti dehah karnasya svaraśmibhir ivāṁśumān
pratāpya senām āmitrīṇ dīptaiḥ śaragabhasṭibhiḥ
balinārjuna kālena nito 'stān karna bhāskarāḥ (8.67.30-31)

⁶²² sahasranetra pratimānakarmaṇaḥ; sahasrapatra pratimānanam śubham
sahasraraśmir dinasamkṣaye yathā; tathāpatat tasya śiro vasuṁdharam
(8.67.37)

⁶²³ dehāt tu karnasya nipātitasya; tejo dīptam kham vigāhyācireṇa (8.67.27)

destiny."⁶²⁴ There is no more affecting scene in the *Mahābhārata*. A succession of narrative strategies has developed great sympathy for Karna and a wary skepticism towards Kṛṣṇa and his human instrument. As Shulman remarks, Karna "falls victim to his own innocent faith in ... a universe infused with the possibility of meaning."⁶²⁵ Our distress at the fall of this lonely hero is only augmented when Yudhiṣṭhīra comes to the field to view the corpse and, rejoicing, cries out to Kṛṣṇa, "Today I am king of the earth, together with my brothers, Govinda!"⁶²⁶

Mṛtyu

After the war, Yudhiṣṭhīra, sitting beside the dying Bhīṣma, struggles to come to terms with the terrible calamity of war and the intolerable knowledge that Karna was his elder brother. He asks the *pitāmaha* about death: "What is Mṛtyu?" he wants to know. From where does Mṛtyu come? From whom is Mṛtyu born?⁶²⁷ Bhīṣma answers with a story.⁶²⁸ When Brahmā first created the universe, says Bhīṣma, it was populated by a great multitude of living beings. Those beings multiplied so rapidly that the goddess Earth went before Brahmā and pled with him to lighten her burden. The god grants her wish. From the orifices of the creator's body emerges a woman, "a dark woman, *kṛṣṇā*, dressed in red garments, with red eyes and red palms, wearing divine earrings, adorned

⁶²⁴ *tan mā śuco bhārata diṣṭam etat* (8.68.12)

⁶²⁵ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 387.

⁶²⁶ *adya rājāsmi govinda pṛthivyāṁ bhrātṛbhiḥ saha* (8.69.31)

⁶²⁷ *kasya mṛtyuh kuto mṛtyuh kena mṛtyur iha prajāḥ* (12.248.6)

⁶²⁸ 12. 248. The story of *Mṛtyu* is told as well in *Dronaparvan* (7.72) of the Bombay Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, after the killing of Abhimanyu.

with divine ornaments."⁶²⁹ Brahmā commands her — she is Mṛtyu — to unburden the Earth by bringing death to all living creatures. Mṛtyu begins to weep; folding her hands in supplication, she entreats Brahmā to release her from the ghastly task. She flees into the wilderness where she performs extreme austerities for numberless years. Still, the creator will not be moved: Mṛtyu must unburden the Earth. However, Brahmā makes a concession: "Eternal *dharma* will enter into you,"⁶³⁰ he says, and Mṛtyu will incur no sin. Rather, the tears Mṛtyu sheds will become terrible diseases. Then, when a person's hour has come and he is struck by disease, Mṛtyu is to send forth desire and wrath, *kāmakrodhau*. Those dual sins, not Mṛtyu, will be the agent of the person's death. Mṛtyu will be absolved of responsibility; when desire and wrath enter a man, he will be held responsible for his own death. The origin of *kāmakrodhau* is left unexplained; it must be a creation from Brahmā.

It is not clear how the story of Mṛtyu might have comforted Yudhiṣṭhīra. The story is, however, similar to Gautamī's. Disease, like the snake, is Death's material instrument, and Death herself is absolved from direct responsibility by *kāmakrodhau*. Mṛtyu, born from the mind of Brahmā, is a form of embodied Daiva; desire-and-anger, also created by Brahmā, are an impersonal *daiva* that insinuates itself into the human individual and manifests as if through that individual's initiative. The story, particularly as it is strategically placed, raises a significant ethical dilemma inherent in a world

⁶²⁹ kṛṣṇā raktāmbaradharā raktanetratalāntarā
divyakuṇḍalasāmpannā divyābharanābhūṣitā (12.249.16)

⁶³⁰ dharmaḥ sanātanaḥ ca tvām ihaivānupravekṣyate (12.250.28)

governed by *kālavāda*, by Kāla. Death's chosen victims, all mortal creatures, are deliberately deluded. The burden of a person's acts performed from his deluded intelligence is his own to bear, while the evils that follow "appear as natural consequences, retribution for his own misdeeds."⁶³¹

It cannot be unintentional that dark Mṛtyu shares an epithet, Kṛṣṇā, with Draupadī, who is born from fire to "accomplish the work of the gods in time, *kāle*," by leading "the *ksatriyas* to their doom."⁶³² Mṛtyu and Kṛṣṇā share their names with the dark Lord, Kṛṣṇa, who is Time, and with Arjuna, who, as one of the "two Kṛṣṇas upon a single chariot" acts as the material agent of Time and Death. Therefore, when Arjuna performs the essential action of killing his brother, Karna falls at the hands of "mighty Arjuna-time," *balinārjuna kālena* (see above). When an individual has been chosen by Kṛṣṇa to choose to take refuge with Kṛṣṇa, he is safe both physically and morally. He is freed from all sin, as Kṛṣṇa says; and as Mṛtyu's story attests, to be free from sin is to be free from death. Death comes through *kāmakrodhau* -- for Karna, but not for Arjuna.

Karnaparvan ends with Karna's death. The ninth book, *Śalyaparvan*, opens with Saṃjaya rushing to Dhṛitarāṣṭra with the devastating news of the final two days of battle and their horrendous aftermath. "Most of the survivors are women, for the world has been deluded by Time."⁶³³ Duryodhana is dead. Karna is dead. Only ten *ksatriyas*

⁶³¹ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Baulmoor Prakashan, 1995), 306.

⁶³² sarvayośid vata kṛṣṇā kṣayam kṣatram niniṣati
surakāryam iyaṁ kāle kariṣyati sumadhyamā (1.155.44-45)

⁶³³ prāyah strī śeṣam abhavaj jagat kālena mohitam (9.10.33)

survive: the five Pāṇḍavas with Kṛṣṇa and Sātyaki, and the three Kauravas who have carried out the night massacre: Kṛpa, Kṛtavarman, and Aśvatthāman. Dhṛitarāṣṭra faints with grief. After he recovers, Saṃjaya relates the details of the seventeenth and eighteenth days of the Kurukṣetra war: how Śalya is made commander of the devastated Kaurava armies and is killed by Yudhiṣṭhīra; how Duryodhana hides himself in a frozen lake; how the Pāṇḍavas discover Duryodhana and challenge him to fight with Bhīma; how Bhīṣma, urged on by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, breaks all norms of battle by striking Duryodhana below the waist, shattering his thighs. When Duryodhana falls in agony, Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas shudder with delight and roar like lions. Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's brother, arrives upon the scene and angrily accuses the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa of an outrageous breach of *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa tries to excuse the deed: "Know that the *kali yuga* has arrived," he tells his brother.⁶³⁴ Balarāma is not persuaded.

Duryodhana, lying crippled on the ground, assails the Pāṇḍavas for their unconscionable misdeeds. "If you had fought me, Karṇa, Bhīṣma and Droṇa fairly in battle, victory never would have been yours. By your repeatedly ignoble and deceitful methods, princes and kings observant of their *dharma* are slain, and we as well."⁶³⁵ Nonetheless, Duryodhana faces death with proud resignation, and makes a rueful (and accurate) prediction for the living.

⁶³⁴ prāptam kaliyugam viddhi (9.59.21)

⁶³⁵ yadi mām cāpi karṇaṁ ca bhīṣmadroṇau ca samyuge
ṛjunā pratiyudhyethā na te syād vijayo dhruvam
tvayā punar anāryena jihmamārgeṇa pārthivāḥ
svadharmaṁ anutīṣṭhanto vayam cānye ca ghātitāḥ (9.60.37-38)

I have attained human pleasures worthy of the gods difficult even for kings to attain, and the highest sovereignty. Who then is more fortunate than I? With my friends and relations I am going to heaven, Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa]. All of you, expectations shattered, grieving, will go on living.⁶³⁶

Flowers rain down from the sky and celestial voices sing the praises of Duryodhana, attesting that he, Bhīṣma, Drona, and Karna were killed unrighteously. The Pāṇḍavas are distraught and ashamed. Kṛṣṇa is uncharacteristically blunt with the Pāṇḍavas:

They all were courageous warriors swift with weapons. It would not have been possible for you to kill them in a fair fight. Therefore I used improper stratagems; otherwise the Pāṇḍava armies never would have been victorious. ... Don't take it to heart that those princes have been killed. There must be deceitful killing by skillful means when your enemies are superior.⁶³⁷

Śalyaparvan closes with Duryodhana making a startling declaration. "I am not ignorant of the glory of Kṛṣṇa with his boundless splendor. He has not caused me to fall from the proper observance of *ksatriya dharma*. I have attained him. I am not to be lamented at all."⁶³⁸ *I have attained him* -- what are we to make of Duryodhana's claim? As discussed above (Chapter Two), before the war Duryodhana had flaunted his self-

⁶³⁶ devārha mānuṣā bhogāḥ prāptā asulabhā nṛpaiḥ
aiśvaryam cottamam prāptarpī ko nu svantataro mayā
sasuhṝt sānubandhaś ca svargam gantāham acyuta
yūyam vihatasamkalpāḥ śocanto vartayiṣyatha (9.60.49-50)

⁶³⁷ naiṣa śakyo 'tiśighrāstras te ca sarve mahārathāḥ
rju yuddhena vikrāntā hantum yuṣmābhir āhave
upāyā vihitā hy ete mayā tasman narādhipāḥ
anyathā pāṇḍaveyānāṁ nābhaviṣyaj jayaḥ kva cit ...
na ca vo hṛdi kartavyam yad ayam ghātito nṛpāḥ
mithyā vadhyās tathopāyair bahavah śatravo 'dhikāḥ (9.60.57-61)

⁶³⁸ manyamānah prabhāvam ca kṛṣṇasyāmita tejasah
tena na cyāvitaś cāham kṣatradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt
sa mayā samanuprāpto nāsmi śocyah katham cana (9.64.28-29)

confident individualism and denied that the blessings of the gods gave the Pāṇḍavas any advantage over the superior Kauravas. The gods do not care about human sentiments, Duryodhana had argued, nor do they interfere in human affairs. Therefore, when it came to acting in the world, he deemed his manly power greater than the power of the gods; he would defeat the Pāṇḍavas purely because he was a stronger and wiser man than any of them.⁶³⁹ As it turns out, Duryodhana is right, but only partially so. Kṛṣṇa has admitted that in a fair fight the Pāṇḍavas could have defeated neither Duryodhana nor Karna. However, as the world moves from *dvāpara* to *kali*, the gods, and Viṣṇu in particular, do indeed take an interest in human affairs. Daiva and Kāla are sovereign in this universe, and the fight is not fair. If, at the last moment, Duryodhana has "attained" Kṛṣṇa, thus been *chosen* to attain Kṛṣṇa, then the lonely end of Karna is all the more unsettling.

Later, when Yudhiṣṭhīra asks Nārada why Karna met with such a harrowing end, Nārada gives a list of reasons: because of the two curses; because, stupefied by Daiva, he gave his earrings and armor to Indra; because he granted the boon of five sons to Kuntī; because Bhīṣma disdained him; because Śalya undermined him; because Kṛṣṇa plotted against him; because Arjuna obtained celestial weapons with which to kill him. Thus, says Nārada, Yudhiṣṭhīra's elder brother, cursed and deceived by many, was slain by Arjuna.⁶⁴⁰ Nārada does not mention the list of Karna's misdeeds that Kṛṣṇa recounted at Kurukṣetra to provoke Arjuna's fury (see above). While Kṛṣṇa insists on attributing personal responsibility, Nārada's explanation is an expression of pure *kālavāda*. Sitting

⁶³⁹ 5.60

with Nārada, a weeping Yudhiṣṭhira appears to have forgotten his obsessive dread of Karna. All he recalls now is that at the dicing Karna's feet had reminded him of Kuntī's; the thought of Karna's feet prompts in him the desire to give up the kingdom and retire to the forest. Arjuna finds Yudhiṣṭhira's grieving deplorable: "Oh, how painful, oh how miserable, oh how extremely feeble-minded" are Yudhiṣṭhira's words, he says.⁶⁴¹ Arjuna never will express remorse for killing his brother.

Arjuna is not a bad man, but he is impulsive, unreflective, proud, forgetful, and somewhat self-indulgent. In comparison, Karna, while exceedingly proud, is a model of self-discipline, courage, and truthfulness. Nonetheless, while Kṛṣṇa calls attention to Karna's abundant transgressions of *dharma*, he is unwilling to admit a single flaw in Arjuna. This discrepancy in the god's valuations is illustrated in one of the *Mahābhārata*'s most delightfully comic and slyly ironic scenes. It occurs in book fourteen, *Āsvamedhikaparvan*, the "Horse Sacrifice." A weary Arjuna has just returned from an arduous adventure in pursuit of Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrificial horse (more of that below). Yudhiṣṭhira asks Kṛṣṇa why it is that the great hero Arjuna has had to suffer so much hardship, discomfort, and pain. Kṛṣṇa reflects for a long time, then replies: "I do not observe anything at all wrong with this prince -- except that the man-lion has an extraordinarily large penis. That is why this tiger among men always has to be on the road. I really see no other reason why he should experience pain."⁶⁴² The *itihāsa* adds

⁶⁴⁰ 12.5.8-15

⁶⁴¹ aho duḥkham aho kṛcchram aho vaiklavyam uttamam (12.8.3)

⁶⁴² na hy asya nṛpate kim cid anisṭam upalakṣaye

that upon hearing these words, "Kṛṣṇa Draupadī cast Kṛṣṇa a withering sidelong glance."⁶⁴³

This comic exchange raises intriguing questions. Why is Arjuna considered virtually flawless? His large *pindika* has played a not insignificant role in his earlier adventures on the road, but in a *kṣatriya* this is a manly virtue. Kṛṣṇa's "criticism" is, in fact, praise. Arjuna's very lack of complexity, his cheerful willingness to plunge into any fray, his ability to offer Kṛṣṇa a simple devotion, make him the *avatāra*'s ideal instrument. Karna, on the other hand, is complex, tormented, hypersensitive, made so by the circumstances of his life from the moment of birth. Nārada's list of reasons "why" Karna met his painful fate prompts the audience to pursue a deeper "why." *Why* are Kāla and Daiva so unfavorable to the son of Sūrya? Is there any justice at work in the world? Indeed, from the point of view of the isolated individual, there appears to be no arbiter or code of uniform law to explain "the diversity of punishments and the discrepancy between the offence and the crime."⁶⁴⁴

ṛte puruṣasirphasya piṇḍike 'syātikāyataḥ
tābhyaṁ sa puruṣavyāghro nityam adhvāsu yujyate
na hy anyad anupaśyāmi yenāsau duḥkhabhāg jayah (14.89.7-8)

Our appreciation of Kṛṣṇa's assessment of Arjuna's single inauspicious mark is heightened by the fact that in the K. M. Ganguli translation of the *Mahābhārata* from the nineteenth century, *pindika*, "penis," is translated as "cheekbones:" Kṛṣṇa finds Arjuna's cheekbones just "a little too high"! Pratap Chandra Roy, ed., *The Mahābhārata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, translated by K. M. Ganguli (1883-1896. Reprint. Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Company, 1955), Volume XII, p. 165.

⁶⁴³ kṛṣṇā tu draupadī kṛṣṇām tiryak sāsūyam aikṣata (14.89.10)

⁶⁴⁴ Bhattacharji, *Fatalism in Ancient India*, 273.

Kāla: *Coming (almost) Full-Circle*

Yudhiṣṭhīra's deep remorse for the death of Karna and so many others at Kurukṣetra, and his urge to renounce the throne and the world, prompts the *Mahābhārata*'s lengthy twelfth and thirteenth books, the *Sānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans*. These books may be and frequently have been read as inflated compendiums of religion, philosophy, and myth. However, it is important to keep in mind their narrative context – they bring solace to comfort Yudhiṣṭhīra and educate him in the *dharma* of kingship. Bhīṣma's improbably long deathbed oration demonstrates how individuals may take solace in religion at times of great suffering or despair. For all the teachings about *mokṣa* contained in the two huge *parvans*, there never is any intention to encourage Yudhiṣṭhīra along the path of *nivṛtti*. The apparent conflict between the teachings of *nivṛtti mārga* and *pravṛtti mārga*, by the very fact that it is not resolved, is rendered irrelevant. Even the eulogies to Śiva as the highest god are not strictly in opposition to those extolling Viṣṇu. The end result of all the discourse is that Yudhiṣṭhīra is comforted, which is what he desperately needs. He asks the same questions over and over again, telling Bhīṣma that he cannot hear enough and wants to hear more. Taken as a whole, the two so-called "didactic" books represent the rich tradition from which the *Mahābhārata* springs; their very breadth and variety pose a deliberate challenge to non-Vedic, *nāstika*, traditions, and an affirmation of the tradition from which the *itihāsa*'s audience springs.⁶⁴⁵ Who could

⁶⁴⁵ In ancient India, the *nāstikas* (those who say, "It [the Veda] is not" true, *nāsti*) were considered heterodox by the "orthodox" brahminical tradition. The *nāstikas* included in particular the Buddhists, Jains, and Ājivikas. The ancient grammarian

need more than what is offered to Yudhiṣṭhira? He, the son of Dharma, is the consummately "religious" man, and he revels in it all. In books twelve and thirteen, the *Mahābhārata* demonstrates once again that it contains "everything." In the end, however, Bhīṣma dies and Yudhiṣṭhira is still the same person, ridden with guilt and longing to retreat to the forest.

Julian Woods argues that the *itihāsa* demonstrates an inability to resolve the tension between *daiva* and *puruṣakāra*, drawing heavily upon the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana* *parvans* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, as well as the commentaries of later writers like Rāmānuja and Śaṅkara, in his exploration of the two worldviews. He concludes that the *Mahābhārata*'s author

does not appear to be aware of the basic contradiction posed by the juxtaposition of a finalistic teleology that permeates the course of the world, and our God-given freedom to choose between the good (*śreyas*) and our own self-indulgence (*preyas*). In the light of the cosmic determinism of *Daiva*, human self-determination is reduced to a groundless phantom.⁶⁴⁶

Woods critiques the *Mahābhārata*'s author for a somewhat unformed or unthoughtful treatment of the issue. However, he concedes, following Biardeau, that the author "would have tended to see the issue in the context of the practical needs of his reader/listeners, not as a problem to be solved intellectually."⁶⁴⁷ This dissertation would

Patañjali referred to the attitude between the two groups as that between a mongoose and a snake. Cited in: Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82.

⁶⁴⁶ Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 149.

⁶⁴⁷ Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 152.

disagree with the first assertion. A close examination of the *itihāsa* reveals that its author is quite aware of that "contradiction," and has employed a number of narrative strategies to focus on the problem. As for Wood's and Biardeau's conclusions about the author's concerns for his audience, we would concur perhaps even more forcefully than either of them, both of whom read the *itihāsa* as myth and symbol rather than as literary narrative.⁶⁴⁸

These considerations bring to mind Madhva and Sukthankar's observations, discussed in Chapter Two, concerning three "levels" or "planes" on which the *Mahābhārata* may be read: an "historical" or "mundane" plane, a "religious" or "ethical" plane, and a "transcendental" or "metaphysical" plane. We observed that both of the great commentators on the *itihāsa* emphasized the *meaning* of the text, whereas Abhinavagupta and Ānandavardhana, following Bharata, emphasized reception. For Madhva and Sukthankar, as well as for scholars like Woods, there is an implied hierarchy, the third plane being decidedly "higher" or "deeper" -- and inherently more interesting -- than the second or first. However, a reader-response approach to the *Mahābhārata* must turn that hierarchy not upside down but on the level, must position it horizontally. The *Mahābhārata*'s characters exist on all three planes, some being

⁶⁴⁸ Woods concurs with Biardeau's attempt to account for problems that arise when Karna is interpreted as the *Mahābhārata*'s mythic anti-hero. Why, then, is his father Sūrya, the Sun, a high and powerful *deva*? Biardeau reads the *itihāsa* as an eschatological myth dealing with the end of the world, the end of an eon. In this structure, then, Karna is interpreted as the "replica of the dreadful sun, which rises at the end of a cosmic period to destroy the world by fire." Cited in: Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 43.

stationed more firmly in one plane than another. For instance, sages like Mārkandeya and Nārada operate from a transcendent realm and are able see the truth of things both divine and mortal. Others, like Vidura and Bhīṣma, are inclined to act as mouthpieces for morality and *dharma*. While few characters are simply human -- most claim divine or demonic paternity -- the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas operate primarily on a human plane. The great difference between men is that some are under the protection of Kṛṣṇa and some are not. Karna exemplifies the latter sort of human being. His resentfulness, ambition, and aggressiveness are mitigated by a respect for truth and an adhesion to the ethical code of a *varṇa* he believes is higher than his own. Karna's longings for the transcendent are expressed in his daily worship of the Sun. The irony here is that Karna, not having been chosen by Kṛṣṇa, prays to the "wrong" deity, one that cannot protect him and will not reveal his paternity. Kṛṣṇa operates on all three planes. As *avatāra*, incarnation of the transcendent Viṣṇu, he assumes human limitations in order to uphold *dharma*.

To approach the three perspectives in a "horizontal" or "literary" manner is to understand them in relationship to time -- or Time, Kāla, the *avatāra* who, like the *itihāsa*'s "author," Vyāsa, moves everywhere at will. Kṛṣṇa/Kāla, mediated by Vyāsa, determines the vision of the world available to beings in the world at any given moment.⁶⁴⁹ The literary expression of time in the *Mahābhārata* has three distinct

⁶⁴⁹ This is underscored by the exceptional cases when characters are given supernatural vision by Kṛṣṇa or Vyāsa. Arjuna, Bhīṣma, Drona, Saṃjaya, Vidura, and Uttanka are given glimpses of Kṛṣṇa's divine form. Saṃjaya and Gāndhārī are granted a

movements. In the first five *parvans* leading up to the war, the principle characters are relatively young and the narrative is crowded with activity. The passage of time is compressed and intensified. Even the twelve years of exile pass at an almost breathless pace, interrupted as they are by inspiring stories and stirring adventures. The rapid pacing slows with the dicing, which is told in deliberate, realistic detail, almost in slow motion. In contrast, the battle books, *parvans* six through eleven, are told as if in "real" time. The exquisitely and excruciatingly detailed descriptions of battle serve to blur, almost stun, our perceptions, much as the perceptions of those fighting in such a gruesome battle, while heightened, are blurred and stunned. Two episodes stand out in the battle books, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the killing of Karna. In both, time doubles. For the two armies time stands still as Kṛṣṇa gives his great teaching to Arjuna, and as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa fell Karna; on the other hand, for the central figures -- Arjuna, Karna, and Kṛṣṇa -- time is wrested (by Time) into another dimension. In books twelve and thirteen, the "time" it takes Bhīṣma and others to give their advice to Yudhiṣṭhira is improbably lengthened. Time is stretched, expanded to accommodate all that must be said in a relatively short period of "time." In contrast, the last five *parvans* are so brief as to be contained in a single volume.⁶⁵⁰ These books cover thirty-six years, from the end of the war to the deaths of the Pāṇḍavas, and time has changed. The characters are growing old,

kind of tele-vision by Vyāsa. In *Āśramavāsikaparvan*, Vyāsa allows all the survivors of the war, including the widows of the fallen warriors, to see the forms of their dead loved ones.

the world has grown old, and the age of *kali* has begun. This is the position in time from which the audience experiences the *Mahābhārata*. The mood of these books is markedly poignant. The absence of Karna is a palpable presence.⁶⁵¹

The After-Song

The great fourteenth book, *Āsvamedhikaparvan*, "The Horse Sacrifice," the first and longest of the five books that (almost) bring the *Mahābhārata* full circle opens with Yudhiṣṭhira declaring, "I can find no peace, being responsible for the slaying of the *pitāmaha* [Bhiṣma] and that man-tiger Karna who never evaded combat."⁶⁵² Vyāsa scolds Yudhiṣṭhira for forgetting all he just has been taught. "Your mind is still unprepared, son, you are bewildered by childishness."⁶⁵³ Vyāsa suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira

⁶⁵⁰ Using Brockington's figures, the eighteen books of the Critical Edition contain 73,560 verses. The final five books contain 4479 verses, total. John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 60-61.

⁶⁵¹ John Brockington, reporting on a wide survey of *Mahābhārata* iconography, makes this interesting observation: "It is also noteworthy that among the many *Mahābhārata* relief narratives there is never any depiction of anything after the end of the battle. There is nothing corresponding to the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* (the rare depiction of Bhiṣma on his bed of arrows belongs in reality to the battle scenes rather than being an allusion to this post-battle teaching) -- which perhaps is not surprising -- but also nothing corresponding to the visually more promising *Āsvamedha* or *Mahāprasthānika parvans*. Some relief sequences concentrate on the earlier parts of the narrative, while others show mainly scenes from the battle books; the factors influencing this probably vary." John Brockington, "Visual Epics," in *Indian Epic Traditions - Past and Present*, chair John L. Brockington, Sixteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, September Edinburgh, 2000.

⁶⁵² na hi śāntim prapaśyāmi ghātayitvā pitāmaham
karnam ca puruṣavyāghram samgrāmeṣv apalāyinam (14.2.12)

⁶⁵³ akṛtā te matis tāta punar bālyena muhyase (14.2.15)

prepare himself for kingship by celebrating the *āśvamedha*, the Vedic horse sacrifice.⁶⁵⁴

With the encouragement of Kṛṣṇa, Nārada and Vyāsa, Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to the enormous undertaking, and the Pāṇḍavas perform funeral rites for Bhīṣma and Kārṇa.

Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna now ride out together into the pacified kingdoms. "The two great souls, Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍava, stopped at Indraprastha, entered the beautiful assembly hall and enjoyed themselves."⁶⁵⁵ They, and we, have returned to the magical *sabhā* built so many years ago for Yudhiṣṭhira by the asura Maya. We imagine that it has long been deserted, the jungle grown around it again. The two old friends speak about the past, about loved ones lost, and delight in one another's company. Then Arjuna speaks candidly to Kṛṣṇa: "Strong armed one, at the approach of the battle your greatness became known to me, son of Devaki, as well as your supreme form. But what words you spoke to me out of the goodness of your heart, Keśava, all of it, lion among men, has disappeared from my damaged mind."⁶⁵⁶ Arjuna has forgotten the *Bhagavadgītā*! Kṛṣṇa is appalled. Arjuna assuredly is "faithless and dim-witted,"⁶⁵⁷ he scolds. It is not possible for him to repeat the eternal mysteries he had spoken while

⁶⁵⁴ Vyāsa also suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira prepare for the *sarvamedha*, or ten-day "universal sacrifice," and the *naramedha*, an interesting indication that "human sacrifice" was at one time practiced. The *Mahābhārata* does not describe Yudhiṣṭhira as having performed more than the horse sacrifice: 14.3.8.

⁶⁵⁵ indraprasthe mahātmānau remāte kṛṣṇa pāṇḍavau
praviśya tāṁ sabhāṁ ramyāṁ vijahrāte ca bhārata (14.15.5)

⁶⁵⁶ vidiṭam te mahābāho samgrāme samupasthite
māhātmyam devakī mātas tac ca te rūpam aiśvaram
yat tu tad bhavatā proktam tadā keśava sauḥṛdāt
tat sarvam puruṣavyāghra naṣṭam me naṣṭacetasaḥ (14.16.5-6)

⁶⁵⁷ nūnam aśraddadhāno 'si durmedhāś cāsi Pāṇḍava (14.16.10)

absorbed in yoga. However, he will tell Arjuna another "story," *itibāsa*, which Arjuna should try to remember. The verses that follow, *adhyāyas* sixteen through fifty-one, comprise the *Anugītā*, the "After-Song." Its contents intensify the pathos of its circumstances, for the After-Song is dry, philosophically technical, and arguably inappropriate for a "damaged mind" incapable of retaining the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Anugītā* deals primarily with renunciation of the world and *mokṣa*. Once, Kṛṣṇa says, a brahmin had related it to him; it was told to that brahmin by a sage, who had formulated it while speaking to his wife. The multiple narrative frames remove the teaching quite far from Kṛṣṇa. The *Anugītā* does not speak of *bhakti* or of action in the world as legitimate paths to salvation. In other words, this After-Song is a distant, dim, reflection of the *Bhagavadgītā*. It certainly does not describe a path to liberation appropriate to a man whose *dharma* is that of a warrior and prince.

Uttaraka (P)revisited

The episode raises a number of questions for the audience. Why was the *Bhagavadgītā* taught to Arjuna in the first place if his mind was too weak to retain it? Is this condition representative of all humans lost in the darkness of the *kali yuga*? Is true action based on true knowledge and true love possible for that individual? After hearing the *Anugītā*, Arjuna begins an emotional paean to Kṛṣṇa.⁶⁵⁸ He says he knows who Kṛṣṇa is because he has been told as much by Vyāsa, Nārada, and Bhīṣma: Can he not recall Kṛṣṇa's theophany during the *Gītā*? Arjuna's mind does indeed appear to be

⁶⁵⁸ 14.51.6-23

"damaged." The largest question raised, then, is the very efficacy of the *Bhagavadgītā* to transform Arjuna -- and, by extension, to transform us, the audience, who live in a broken age, indeed.

The final books of the *Mahābhārata* amplify the pathos. The After-Song is the first of a series of reprisals that will bring the *Mahābhārata* (almost) full circle. Episodes from the early years and particularly from *Adiparvan* are skillfully woven into these books. Time continues its repetitive cycles, but time has changed, and everything and everyone along with it. Kṛṣṇa leaves for his city of Dvāraka. Along the way, whom should he meet in the desert but Uttanika, whose fabulous adventure in the underground world of the *nāgas*, "snakes," in pursuit of the queen's earrings is described in *Adiparvan* (see Chapter Two). The tale, repeated here with a number of variants, effectively brackets the *itihāsa* with its mysterious themes dealing with death and time (see below). In fact, placing Kṛṣṇa's meeting with Uttanika in *Āśvamedhikaparvan* turns time inside out. For the audience, the reader, *Adiparvan* seems to have taken place "long ago." However, we know that Uttanika's encounter with the wily *nāga* Taksaka is what prompted him to urge king Janamejaya to perform the snake sacrifice to avenge Taksaka's killing of King Parikṣit, Janamejaya's father and Arjuna's grandson. Therefore, in terms of linear time, Kṛṣṇa's encounter with Uttanika must take place long *before* Uttanika's encounter with the *nāga*. In the desert, Uttanika asks Kṛṣṇa if he has reconciled the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas; when he hears that there has been a devastating war he is furious and threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa averts the curse by, as discussed above,

explaining the limitations of the *avatāra*, and then by revealing his divinity: " I am existence, nonexistence, existence-and-nonexistence, and that which transcends existence and nonexistence. Nothing is beyond me, and I am the eternal god of gods."⁶⁵⁹ Kṛṣṇa grants Uttanika a vision of his universal form -- the same vision, says Vaiśampāyana, that had been given to Arjuna -- then proceeds to Dvāraka. Kṛṣṇa will return to Hāstīnapura for the *āśvamedha*.

It is fitting that Uttanika appears near both the start and the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata*, for his story is associated with the concept of cyclical time, *kālavāda*. When he goes to the underworld of the snakes, Uttanika has a vision. He sees two women at a loom weaving a cloth from black and white threads, and a wheel being turned round by six boys. Uttanika sings mantras to charm the snakes:

Three hundred and sixty spokes are fixed to the pole of this eternal wheel, moving always in a cycle of twenty-four half-months, which the boys turn round and round. The two young women are weaving this multi-colored loom, constantly turning their threads back and forth, turning them from black ones to white ones, forever the creatures that have died and those that exist.⁶⁶⁰

Night and day, the dead and the living, the fabric of time, black and white... we even discern here an allusion to the "black" and "white" signified by the names Kṛṣṇa, "black," and Arjuna, "white". Vassilkov observes that the Wheel of Time, *kālacakra*, has a

⁶⁵⁹ asac ca sad asac caiva yad viśvam sad asataḥ param
tataḥ param nāsti caiva devadevāt sanātanāt (14.53.7)

⁶⁶⁰ trīṇy arpitāny atra śatāni madhye; ṣaṣṭiś ca nityam carati dhruve 'smi
cakre caturvīṁśatiparva yoge ṣaḍ; yat kumārāḥ parivartayanti
tantrām cedām viśvarūpām yuvatyau; vayatas tantūn satatām vartayantyau
kr̄ṣṇān sitāmś caiva vivartayantyau; bhūtāny ajasram bhuvanāni caiva

reciprocal image in the World-Tree.⁶⁶¹ As discussed in Chapter Two, the *itihāsa* twice refers to two great trees, mirrors of one another, one with Arjuna for trunk, one with Karna. The trunk of the tree is akin to the pivot or axel around which time wheels. Here too is an example of how the *itihāsa* weaves its net, of how its parts reflect one another. The *Mahābhārata* as a whole is not unlike Uttanka's fabric of time.

Yudhiṣṭhīra (Re)validated

The *āśvamedha* is a recapitulation of the *digvijaya*, conquest of the world, undertaken by the youthful Pāṇḍavas to prepare for Yudhiṣṭhīra's *rājasūya*, as well as of Arjuna's lusty twelve-month exile (see Chapter Four). The attentive audience of the *itihāsa* cannot but notice the correspondences. Now, years later, as the *āśvamedha* prescribes, the sacrificial horse is set loose; whichever kingdoms it enters in its wanderings are to be claimed for Yudhiṣṭhīra. Arjuna is sent in pursuit of the horse and to obtain submission from the various rulers. His solitary adventure takes him to places he had visited long ago. He comes again to Maṇipūra, where once he had married the princess Citrāngadā and given her a son.⁶⁶² The child has grown now. He greets his father warmly, but Arjuna scolds him for shunning *ksatriyadharma*: Babhruvāhana should challenge the intruder who is following the sacrificial horse. If Arjuna had intended a minor skirmish in which to impress his son with his prowess, the plan fails miserably. In

(1.3.150-151)

⁶⁶¹ Vassilkov notes that the images of *kālacakra* and World-Tree, "follow each other in rapid succession in many Vedic hymns (e.g. AV 10,7-8; 13, 1-4 etc)." Vassilkov, "Kālavāda," 20.

⁶⁶² 14.78-81

a protracted fight he is unable to withstand the youth's superior skill and strength; Arjuna succumbs to Babhruvāhana's arrows. The older generation has given way to the younger; Arjuna lies dead -- for a while. His salvation arrives in the person of another woman he had impregnated during that same long-ago adventure, the *nāga* princess, Ulūpi.⁶⁶³ The snake-woman emerges from a fissure in the ground, finds Citrāngadā and Babhruvāhana mourning over Arjuna, and evokes the *sarpjivana*, "life restoring," gem possessed by the *nāgas*. When Ulūpi places the stone on Arjuna's chest, he revives and gazes around in wonder. He has been struck down by his young son in the presence of the boy's mother, and saved by the still vibrant powers of a woman whom he once had seduced. Proceeding on his way, Arjuna finally returns to Hāstinapura exhausted and emaciated.⁶⁶⁴

The *āśvamedha* itself is immoderately opulent, as was the *rājasūya*. Is Yudhiṣṭhira overcompensating for his instinctive asceticism? Like other rituals in the *Mahābhārata* -- the *rājasūya*, the *sarpasattra*, the *svayamvara* -- the *āśvamedha* is interrupted and somewhat spoiled.⁶⁶⁵ A mongoose with a golden head emerges from a hole and loudly declares that Yudhiṣṭhira's grand sacrifice is not worth even a few grains of barley offered by a pious brahmin. Half the mongoose's body had been changed to gold by such an offering; he has come to Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrifice in hopes of transforming the remainder, but to no avail. Despite its splendor, the *āśvamedha* is lacking in spiritual merit, for the intention and sincerity of the sacrificer are what count, says the mongoose.

⁶⁶³ The son of Ulūpi and Arjuna, Aśvasena, is slain early in the Kurukṣetra battle.

⁶⁶⁴ 14.88.9

⁶⁶⁵ 14.92-93

Vaiśampāyana reveals to Janamejaya that the golden-headed mongoose was in fact Yudhiṣṭhira's father, the god Dharma, in his form of Anger.⁶⁶⁶ Thus ends *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, with a condemnation by Dharma of his son's *āśvamedha*. Dharma once had manifested to Yudhiṣṭhira as a crane, but in that bygone time he had expressed approval of his son and restored Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers to life.

Retreat to the Forest

Āśramavāsikaparvan, "The Stay in the Forest Hermitage," continues the sad spiral of time. Fifteen years have passed since the war, but old wounds have not healed. A learned brahmin attempts to bring solace by declaring in public that the destruction was not brought about by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, or Duryodhana, or Karna, but by Daiva. Daiva cannot be countermanaged, he says, "Daiva cannot be overcome by human effort."⁶⁶⁷ Aged and miserable, Dhṛtarāṣṭra decides to retire to a forest hermitage, taking with him Gāndhārī, Saṃjaya, and Vidura. Kuntī, burdened with guilt about Karna, resolves to join them, musing sadly to Yudhiṣṭhira, "My heart surely is made of iron, my son, that it is not rent into a hundred pieces at not seeing that child born of Sūrya."⁶⁶⁸ After the departure of the old generation, the Pāṇḍavas feel joyless; they worry about their mother and brood over their dead kinsmen. At last they set out on a visit to the hermitage, taking with them a huge retinue, including the widows of Kurukṣetra's fallen warriors. Sitting together

⁶⁶⁶ 14.96

⁶⁶⁷ daivam tat tu vijānīmo yan na śakyam prabādhitum
daivam puruṣakāreṇa na śakyam ativartitum (15.16.2)

⁶⁶⁸ āyasam hṛdayam nūnam mandāyā mama putraka
yat sūryajam apaśyantyāḥ śatadhā na vidiryate (15.22.12)

with Vyāsa in the forest, all mourn the years gone by and express their longing to see their dead loved ones. Kuntī sorrowfully recalls the past, which still is "burning" her.⁶⁶⁹ Once again, but for the first time through the mother's voice, we hear the story of Karna's conception, birth, and abandonment.⁶⁷⁰

There follows here an extraordinary episode. Vyāsa, assuming the author's prerogatives, summons a fabulous vision.⁶⁷¹ From the Ganges arise the forms of all the warriors killed at Kurukṣetra, dressed now in celestial garments, happy and grown wise. Even blind Dhṛitarāṣṭra is granted the apparition. The relatives, living and dead, pass one splendid night together, during which the Pāṇḍavas reconcile with Karna.⁶⁷² Then Vyāsa's conjuration disappears in the twinkling of an eye. The widows of the fallen warriors follow their husbands beneath the waters of the Ganges. Time once more turns inside out. Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana if the same boon cannot be bestowed upon him. Vyāsa appears in this frame now, and we are back at the (future) snake sacrifice. Vyāsa grants Janamejaya the vision of Parikṣit, whereupon Janamejaya takes his final ritual bath. The *sattrā* is completed. Āstika addresses Janamejaya: "O son of the Pāṇḍavas, you have heard a wonderful story. The serpents have been consumed into

⁶⁶⁹ tan māṁ dahati (15.38.16)

⁶⁷⁰ 15.38

⁶⁷¹ The section is known as the *Putradarśanaparvan*, The Vision of the Sons, 15.36-41.

⁶⁷² 15.41.4

ashes and have followed the path of your father. ... Having heard this sin-destroying story, you have attained great virtue."⁶⁷³

Just as the *Mahābhārata* seems to be drawing to a close, Vaiśampāyana continues the narrative. The *itihāsa* has more than one "beginning" and appropriately multiple "ends." Two years after the vision from the Ganges, relates the bard, the Pāṇḍavas receive word that the elders have perished in a forest fire. Only Samjaya has escaped, and has fled to the Himalayas. This sorry disaster recalls the rash optimism of the Khāṇḍava burning. Then, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa had defied Indra himself to feed the Fire god and clear land for a new kingdom. Now, Dhṛitarāṣṭra's inadvertently abandoned ritual fires have started a real fire. "Curse the kingship, curse our power, curse *ksatriyadharma*," cries Yudhiṣṭhīra. "Though alive, we really are dead. The march of Time is indeed subtle, O best of brahmins."⁶⁷⁴ Eighteen years have passed since the Kurukṣetra conflagration.

Time Cooks Creatures....

Another eighteen years pass, unrecorded. The *itihāsa*'s manipulation of time in the final *parvans* is an effective evocation of the experience of time as a person grows old -- time "flies," and much is unremarkable and unremembered. When *Mausalaparvan*, the Battle with Clubs, opens, thirty-six years have gone by since the violent start of the *kali*

⁶⁷³ śrutam vicitram ākhyānam tvayā pāṇḍavanandana
sarpāś ca bhasmasān nītā gatāś ca padavīṁ pituḥ ...
prāptah suvipulo dharmah śrutvā pāpavināśanam (15.43.13, 15)

⁶⁷⁴ dhig rājyam idam asmākaṁ dhig balaṁ dhik parākramam
ksatradharmaca dhig yasmān mṛtā jīvāmahe vayam

yuga. Ominous portents are heralding a terrible calamity. Meteors shower, rivers change course, the sun is eclipsed, and the hearts of the people are filled with apprehension. Messengers come to Yudhiṣṭhīra with the staggering report that the Vṛṣnis are exterminated and Kṛṣṇa is dead. It seems the Vṛṣṇi people had grown lawless and evil. Omens similar to those observed before the Kurukṣetra war afflict the land. By day, embodied Kāla is seen wandering around the houses, "a hideous, monstrous man with shaven head and dark-brown in color,"⁶⁷⁵ At night the Vṛṣṇi women dream of a black female, *kāli strī*, who laughs at them and steals the auspicious threads from their wrists.⁶⁷⁶ Society is in chaos. Kṛṣṇa watches as the blades of grass turn into iron clubs, with which his people, drunk and violent, bludgeon one another. Then Kṛṣṇa wanders alone into the forest. "Thinking that the time of his departure had come, Kṛṣṇa restrained his senses, speech, and mind, and lay down in high yoga."⁶⁷⁷ A fierce hunter, Jara by name, comes along; mistaking Kṛṣṇa for a deer, he shoots him. The arrow pierces Kṛṣṇa's heel, his one vulnerable spot, and Kṛṣṇa leaves his body.

When he learns of all this, Arjuna rushes to Dvāraka to help the survivors, including Kṛṣṇa's 16,000 women (!).⁶⁷⁸ After burning the bodies of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma, he and the huge retinue set out for Hāstīnapura; behind them the sea rushes in to swallow

susūkṣmā kila kālasya gatir dvija varottama (15.46.8-9)

675 kālo grhāṇī sārvenāṁ paricakrāma nityaśah
karālo vikāṭo mundah purusah kṛṣṇapingalah (16.30.1-2)

676 16.4.1-2

677 mene tataḥ saṃkramāṇasya kālām; tataś cakārendriya saṃnirodham
sa saṃniruddhendriya vān manās tu; śiṣye mahāyogam upetya kṛṣṇa (16.15.18-19)

up Dvāraka. "Alas, Daiva!" cry the people as they flee the flood.⁶⁷⁹ Arjuna's heroic intentions, however, are not to be fulfilled. Robbers attack his procession. Ignoring his threats they begin to carry off the women. Arjuna has great difficulty stringing the Gāndīva, and when he attempts to conjure up his celestial weapons the mantras flee his mind (we are reminded of Karna). His heretofore-inexhaustible quiver quickly empties of arrows, and Arjuna is reduced to beating the robbers with his bow in vain. Humiliated and spent, Arjuna helplessly watches the bandits kidnap Kṛṣṇa's women. Then "Pārtha grew dejected, thinking 'It is Daiva.' He stopped even trying, O king, saying, 'I am not as I used to be.'⁶⁸⁰

Arjuna retreats to the hermitage of Vyāsa where he mourns the death of Kṛṣṇa and the demise of his powers. Vyāsa attributes everything to Kāla:

Time is the root of all this, Time is the seed of the world, Dhanamjaya, and Time takes away everything unexpectedly. Having become powerful, a man again becomes weak. Again, becoming a world ruler, it disappears in a day. Your weapons have achieved their purpose and have gone where they came from; they will come to your hands when time comes round again.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁸ ṣoḍaśaḥ strisahasrāṇi vāsudeva parigrahaḥ (16.6.6)

⁶⁷⁹ tūrnāt tūrnataram jagmūr aho daivam iti bruvan (16.8.41)

⁶⁸⁰ babbūva vimanāḥ pārtho daivam ity anucintayan
nyavartata tato rājan nedam astīti cābravīt (16.8.64)

⁶⁸¹ kālamūlam idam sarvam jagad bijam dhanamjaya
kāla eva samādatte punar eva yadṛcchayā
sa eva balavān bhūtvā punar bhavatī durbalāḥ
sa eveśaś ca bhūtvēha parair ājñāpyate punaḥ
kṛtakṛtyāni cāstrāṇi gatāny adya yathāgatam
punar eṣyanti te hastām yadā kālo bhaviṣyati (16.9.33-35)

Vyāsa's description of *kālavāda* is closely similar to one found early in *Adiparvan*.

There, Saṃjaya is speaking. Saṃjaya, as noted before, occasionally speaks as a kind of surrogate author for Vyāsa. He says to Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

Even with the greatest wisdom, who can stop Daiva? The path ordained by the Ordainer cannot in any way be averted. Time is the root of all this, existence and nonexistence, happiness and unhappiness. Time cooks creatures, Time destroys creatures, Time again extinguishes the Time that burns up creatures. Time annihilates all beings in the world, good and evil. Time compresses all creatures and spews them forth again. Time moves in all beings unrestrained, impartial. Whatever beings have passed away will return in the future; they are all created by Time. Knowing that, do not lose your wits.⁶⁸²

It is time, says Vyāsa, for the Pāṇḍavas to depart for a higher world. Arjuna returns to his brothers.

Mahāprasthānikaparvan, The Great Departure, opens with Yudhiṣṭhira reflecting on Arjuna's account of Kṛṣṇa's death and his failed rescue of the women: "Time cooks all creatures, great-minded Arjuna," he says, adding, according to the Critical Edition, "I think it is the impress of *karman*, you also should consider it so."⁶⁸³ However, in the

⁶⁸² *daivam prajñā viśeṣena ko nivartitum arhati
vidhātṛvihitam mārgam na kaś cid ativartate
kālamūlam idam sarvam bhāvābhāvau sukhāsukhe
kālah pacati bhūtāni kālah saṃharati prajāḥ
nirdahantām prajāḥ kālam kālah śamayate punaḥ
kālo vikurute bhāvān sarvānīl loke śubhāśubhān
kālah saṃkṣipate sarvāḥ prajā visṛjate punaḥ
kālah sarveṣu bhūteṣu caraty avidhṛtaḥ samaḥ
atītānāgatā bhāvā ye ca vartanti sāṃpratam
tān kālanirmitān buddhvā na saṃjñām hātum arhasi (1.1.186-190)*

⁶⁸³ *kālah pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇy eva mahāmate
karma nyāsam aham manye tvam api draṣṭum arhasi*

place of "the impress of *karman*," *karma nyāsam*, we find in the Bombay Edition "the noose of Kāla," *kāla pāśam*. Vassilkov observes, rightly I believe: "Which of the two readings is original and which is but a later miscorrection can be seen from the lines that follow: Arjuna, sighing, replies to Yudhiṣṭhira: 'O Time, Time!'"⁶⁸⁴ In this case the Vulgate reading is to be preferred. That part of the *avatāra* that is human and mortal is subject to the noose of Kāla, but not to *karman*.

The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī set out on their last exile, as they had on their first, dressed in the clothing of ascetics. There is no need to recapitulate the well-known tale of their journey up the mountain. When Yudhiṣṭhira reaches the top, he alone survives, and the dog that has followed him. After he refuses to abandon the dog to gain entrance to heaven, the dog reveals it is Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's father, once more in animal guise. Yudhiṣṭhira enters heaven, only to find Duryodhana enjoying the pleasures reserved for *kṣatriyas* fallen in battle. Yudhiṣṭhira calls out for his brothers, wife, and friends, but the one for whom he yearns most is Karna. Even in heaven Yudhiṣṭhira is not liberated from guilt and grief. "I burn again and again over this, O gods: that when I saw that the feet of that boundless soul resembled my mother's, I did not become the follower of Karna, the unsurpassable warrior."⁶⁸⁵ Only after Yudhiṣṭhira has discovered

⁶⁸⁴ ity uktaḥ sa tu kaunteyah kālah kāla iti bruvan (17.1.3-4) Vassilkov, "Kālavāda," 31.

⁶⁸⁵ mātūḥ hi vacanāṁ śrutvā tādā salilakarmanī
karnasya kriyatām toyam iti tapyāmi tena vai
īdām ca paritapyāmi punaḥ punar aham surāḥ
yan mātūḥ sadṛśau pādau tasyāham amitaujasāḥ
drṣṭvaiva tam nānugataḥ karnām parabalārdanam (18.2.6-8)

all five of his brothers and Draupadī suffering in hell, and has chosen to remain there with them, does a happier vision unfold. Yudhiṣṭhira sees everyone now in splendid, celestial forms.

In a reader-response analysis of the end of the *Mahābhārata*, Emily Hudson has argued that what the *itihāsa* "has shown the careful reader is that the distinction between heaven and hell is a *ruse*."⁶⁸⁶ By presenting the reader (Hudson uses this term in the sense of the "model reader") with a heaven that contains Duryodhana and a hell that contains the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, says Hudson, the text manipulates the audience to feel a sense of disappointment and outrage. We are not confident that the heaven that Yudhiṣṭhira finally enters with his brothers and wife is really heaven at all; in fact, contends Hudson, heaven and hell both are shown to be illusions. The careful and courageous reader, then, will recognize the *Mahābhārata*'s "tragic theodicy"⁶⁸⁷: "that suffering exists simply and totally and that there are no conceptual frameworks within which one can make sense of this suffering."⁶⁸⁸

However, Hudson's assertions neglect the fact that although the main story seems to end with Yudhiṣṭhira and his family entering "heaven," the *itihāsa* does not end here. Janamejaya finds that conclusion as puzzling as we do, and the narrative attempts to address that puzzlement. What happens next? Is an identical *kṣatriya* heaven the resting

⁶⁸⁶ Emily T. Hudson, "Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick: Theodicy and Narrative Strategies in the *Mahābhārata*," paper presented at the International Conference on the *Mahābhārata* (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001), 13.

⁶⁸⁷ Hudson understands "theodicy" to refer to any rationale for explaining suffering.

place for heroes and villains alike? Does no one find *mokṣa*? Will some be reborn in another of Time's cycles? Have they earned good or bad *karman*? So much is unresolved. Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana, "For how long a time did they remain in heaven? Tell me that. Did they remain there forever, best of brahmins? When their *karman* was exhausted, where did those great men go?"⁶⁸⁹ Vaiśampāyana acknowledges that this is a good question; he can only relate what he was told by Vyāsa. As Vyāsa would have it, then, many were absorbed into the entities of which they were portions. Bhīṣma rejoins the Vasus; Kṛṣṇa's 16,000 women become Apsarās; Karna enters Sūrya; Kṛṣṇa enters Nārāyaṇa, and so forth. The bard appears eager to wrap things up: "Now I have told you everything at length, about the deeds of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas," he says.⁶⁹⁰ Janamejaya, filled with amazement, returns to Hāstīnapura, and Āstika is glad, having saved at least some of the snakes. However, the sacrifice actually has not been completed. The *nāga* Takṣaka, killer of Parīkṣit, bane of Uttāṅka, still is suspended in his fall from the skirts of Indra, as last we saw him in *Adiparvan*, frozen in mid air, fixed athwart the middle regions with a pounding heart.⁶⁹¹

What, then, *has* occurred at the end of the *Mahābhārata*? In the *parvans* following the battle, time has stretched, contracted, turned round upon itself, exceeded itself,

⁶⁸⁸ Hudson, "Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick," 14.

⁶⁸⁹ svarge kālāṁ kiyantāṁ te tāsthus tad api śāmsa me
āhōśvic chāśvatāṁ sthānāṁ teśāṁ tatra dvijottama
anye vā karmaṇāḥ kām te gatām prāptā nararśabhbāḥ (18.5.4-5)

⁶⁹⁰ etat te sarvam ākhyātāṁ vistareṇa mahādyute
kurūṇārpi caritām kṛtsnam pāṇḍavānām ca bhārata (18.2.55)

⁶⁹¹ vitasthe so 'ntarikṣe 'tha hṛdayena vidūyatā (1.53.6)

preceded itself, and now has frozen. The snake Taksaka, remnant of the great sacrifice with which it all began (there always must be a remnant) is poised as if on some magical event horizon beyond whose blackness (*kṛṣṇa!*) none can penetrate. Within it the "everything" that the *itihāsa* contains has been absorbed, "compressed" by Time, as Samjaya says, into Time's infinite singularity. All we can know for certain, in the universe of the *Mahābhārata*, is that at some moment in time, Time will again spew forth everything into Time.

The *Mahābhārata* does not answer Janamejaya 's, and our, question: What happens next? What happens after Daiva, Kāla, and Mṛtyu have caught creatures in their noose? The *itihāsa* does not answer the question because the question precisely represents the ignorance brought with the *kali yuga*. By leaving the question unanswered, the audience is turned back towards life. The penetration of early parts of the *Mahābhārata* into the final books seems not so much to close the circle as to compel us to begin again a journey which is never really new and never the same. We can only examine *life*. Through the Great *Bhārata* the audience is assisted in that examination, but the question never is resolved definitively: Can an individual choose to be chosen and to be saved "from all sin and evil"? If Arjuna is the ideal devotee, we can only observe that he and Kṛṣṇa are Nara-Nārāyaṇa, two Kṛṣṇas on one chariot, the white and black threads of Time's fabric. Arjuna is not an "individual." Karna, however, is an individual. He chooses to be alone because he *is* alone. His splendid disinterestedness is

both inspiring and disconcerting. In the end... but there is no end to this *itihāsa*. In the concluding chapter we will attempt to summarize the *Mahābhārata*'s universe; we will reflect upon "tragedy;" and we will ask whether Abhinavagupta and Ānandavardhana were right -- that the *Mahābhārata* suggests an entirely new flavor, *śānta rasa*, the *rasa* of Peace, the urge towards *mokṣa*.

Chapter Six

The Belly of the Lord

"Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters," says Martha Nussbaum. "Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content -- an integral part, then, of the search for the statement of truth."⁶⁹² If, as I contend, the *Mahābhārata* is a work of literature and should be treated as such, then methods of literary criticism are the best means of approaching it. Nonetheless, as argued in Chapter One, new paradigms are needed to understand the form, the shape, of the *Mahābhārata*, and thereby to apprehend its content and "statement of truth." To name the *Mahābhārata* an "epic," to apply to it Aristotelian standards of "unity," is to approach it with instruments incapable of grasping the *Mahābhārata's* unique wholeness. I have used the Net of Indra, *indrajāla*, as a metaphor for the kind of unity inherent in the vast *itihāsa*. Indra's net itself, with its myriad reflecting and self-reflecting jewels, figures the starry heavens, and it expresses a universe that, like the heavens, is curved both in substance and in time. The kind of literary analysis to apply to such a vast and complex work is one that *pays attention* to the text, to its use of language and style, to its shifting play of concepts, its compositional units and their juxtapositions, and much more. In this dissertation, I have used methods of reader-response criticism as I find them most amenable to such a minute paying-attention.

Umberto Eco describes the "model author" of reader-response theory as a set of instructions that must be followed step by step if we choose to act as the model reader or model audience. The model author is not a historical *person*, but a "*narrative strategy*."⁶⁹³ Eco envisages the model audience as a kind of "ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create" through its narrative strategies.⁶⁹⁴ In other words, the model audience is embedded in the text. The *rasa* theory that the sixth-century aesthetician Bharata applied to drama, *nātya*, is itself a kind of audience-response theory. Bharata examined how a drama suggests certain *rasas*, "flavors," based on certain "stable" emotions already present within the audience, and draws them forth. The ninth- and tenth-century aestheticians Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta applied *rasa* theory to art forms other than drama and cited the *Mahābhārata* as a supreme example of poetic unity (Chapters One and Two). Throughout this dissertation, we have explored how reader-response theory may enable us to respect the traditions from which the *itihāsa* has emerged, to *listen* to what the literary form of the *Mahābhārata* expresses about the *Mahābhārata*.

The character of Karna has been used as the point of focus -- firstly, because the *itihāsa*'s great size demands a set of self-imposed limitations, and secondly because this character is so centrally important to the narrative, and is an example of how the

⁶⁹² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

⁶⁹³ Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15.

⁶⁹⁴ Eco, *Six Walks*, 9.

Mahābhārata makes use of myriad narrative strategies to direct and structure audience response. Karna, I have argued, uniquely expresses the *itihāsa*'s audience. Through him we can learn about the author's concerns and the concerns of the audience that the text itself helps to construct. Karna is the human individual in the darkness of the *kali yuga*, the age ushered in with the Kurukṣetra war. A good deal of the *Mahābhārata* is shaped around Karna (Chapter Three). Throughout long passages in which he is not actually present, including the ten *parvans* following his death, Karna still is woven skillfully into the *Mahābhārata*'s net. He is never absent. He appears in the thoughts and dreams of other characters, and otherwise is structured into the text through allusion and symbolism.

The complex shape of the *itihāsa* suggests a highly competent author and a highly competent audience capable of experiencing, of *reading*, the *Mahābhārata* as a whole and of tasting its *rasas*. That audience clearly is expected to notice among the *itihāsa*'s narrative strategies the weaving of older, Vedic material into the central narrative to create something challenging and new. The Vedic references surely must be understood as important components in the *itihāsa*'s project of claiming authority, of appropriating for itself the status of a "fifth Veda." However, they are more than that. For instance, the text assumes a knowledge of Karna's solar *kula*, "family." Old stories about the Sun, his wife, and his children are revisited and reevaluated through the lives of Karna and other characters. To be attentive to those references is to gain important perspectives on the motives and behavior of the characters, as well as on the major issues the text works to address. Among other things, Karna's solar *kula* helps us to understand the

Mahābhārata's attitude towards women, and why women are placed in positions of great power and agency.

From another perspective, the *Mahābhārata's* repeated reference to *śruti* material is part of its exploration of the relevance of the Vedic worldview to the individual lost in the *kali yuga*. Karna is a member of the solar lineage, but grows up ignorant of that fact, believing he is a low-class *sūta*, a *varṇa* created by the misogynous union of a brahmin woman and a *kṣatriya* man (Chapter Four). He is despised for his origins, and struggles with the conflicts inherent in his attraction to the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya* and the *dharma* that an intensely class-conscious milieu wishes to impose upon him. What is more, his brothers themselves, so haughtily self-confident of their pure *kṣatriya* blood, are shown to be the products of a tortuously complicated and ancient genealogy in which distinctions among the *varṇas* have been thoroughly blurred. All this must have made a strong impression on an audience composed of *kṣatriyas* dependent on brahmins for legitimacy, and brahmins dependent upon *kṣatriyas* for their livelihood. Pretensions to caste-purity, the *itihāsa* indicates, were invalidated long ages ago with the ancestor King Yayāti, who married "against the grain" a brahmin woman, and begat sons not only upon her, but also upon her *kṣatriya* servant, daughter of an *asura*. Through Karna, then, the *sūta* becomes the type of all humans in the age of darkness, whatever *varṇa* they may claim, who never can be certain of the purity of their *kula*, nor of who they are and what they know. We must note as well that Kṛṣṇa's clan, the Vṛṣnis, is descended from Yayāti's *pratiloma* marriage -- technically, Kṛṣṇa and his people are the descendants of *sūtas*.

Karṇa, the *Mahābhārata*'s most complex character, is used throughout the text to illuminate other characters. Karṇa himself is a narrative strategy; viewing the *itihāsa*'s universe through him expands our understanding of his brothers and Draupadī, of Kṛṣṇa, of Bhīṣma and the Kauravas, and of the burning philosophical and ethical issues with which the *Mahābhārata* struggles. Characters and concepts that might tend towards the one-dimensional are problematized when placed in Karṇa's ambit. Through Karṇa, the *Mahābhārata* complexifies its ongoing discourse about *dharma* and *varṇa*, about Daiva, "Fate," and *puruṣakāra*, "human initiative," about Kāla, "Time," and Mṛtyu, "Death." Arjuna is Karṇa's greatest rival and the two brothers are the antithesis of one another (Chapter Four). Arjuna's life, protected as it is by the *avatāra*, when viewed in the light of Karṇa's life, forces us to wonder *why* there come to be such disparities. The *itihāsa* tells us little or nothing of the past lives of Arjuna and Karṇa. Thus, the audience is directed to find an explanation for the pain or grace each experiences either in actions performed in the present life or in Daiva, that which comes from the gods. Karṇa's fate is to suffer repeatedly because of actions that when performed by Arjuna win rewards. (The most striking, although far from the single, example of this being Arjuna's winning of Draupadī, who should, by right, be Karṇa's queen.) Here, if we are attentive, we hear the *Mahābhārata*'s deliberate ambiguity about the theory of *karman* inherited from the *Upaniṣads* – a theory that, as the *itihāsa* amply illustrates, is neither comforting nor ascertainable for humans caught in the brutal realities of a hostile universe. Daiva, not human initiative, operates as the connecting link between micro- and macrocosm. Karṇa

is acutely aware that life is governed by some impenetrable principle that is stronger than the individual, which supercedes both his capacities and intentions and must be confronted alone. For Karna, fate is a disintegrative power, but this is not so for Arjuna, who has Kṛṣṇa for refuge and guide.

Kṛṣṇa offers Arjuna — and by implication all humans — a solution to the negative, destructive forces of Time, Fate, and Death (Chapter Five). The *Mahābhārata* uses Karna to prod us to inquire if that solution truly is available to everyone as the *Bhagavadgītā* claims. Is *bhakti* possible or appropriate to a person like Karna, like us, the audience? Kṛṣṇa reveals — and other voices claim — that he, the *avatāra*, takes birth from age after age to uphold *dharma*. The *Mahābhārata*'s universe is governed by *kālavāda*, the doctrine of cyclical time, or Time, which is Kṛṣṇa. As supreme Lord and thus the supreme expression of Daiva, Kṛṣṇa has chosen Arjuna (and his brothers) as his primary instrument to uphold *dharma*. However, Kṛṣṇa teaches his instruments that in a world in transition from the *dvāpara* to the *kali* age, *dharma* can be set aside deliberately for the sake of victory. Karna's father, the radiant god Sūrya, attempts to protect his son from destruction by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa; his failure to do so indicates an inherent hierarchy of conflicting *daivas*. Kṛṣṇa's power surpasses Sūrya's. The true "battle," then, centers on Kṛṣṇa's efforts to manipulate events and individuals to assure victory for the Pāṇavas. Karna is Kṛṣṇa's main obstacle, but the contest of man and god is no contest at all. Like Karna, Arjuna is moved by Daiva, yet for him what comes from the god, from incarnate Viṣṇu, is neither impersonal, hostile, nor disintegrative, but rather personal, constructive,

and divine. Through Karna and Arjuna, then, the *Mahābhārata* asks whether an individual's sense of ethical responsibility (Karna is arguably the *itihāsa*'s most "ethical" character) is an illusion -- or worse, is a ruse by which Daiva influences the course of events.

Kṛṣṇa and Karna have a particularly interesting relationship. Kṛṣṇa tempts Karna with kingship and a "turn" with Draupadī; he reveals to Karna the truth of his parentage; he even acknowledges him as the greatest warrior, Arjuna's superior. Yet in public Kṛṣṇa denigrates Karna and emphasizes his base roots as the *sūtaputra*, son of a *sūta*. Karna suspects that Kṛṣṇa is more than man, yet he insists on interacting with Kṛṣṇa man-to-man. Karna never succumbs to the *avatāra*'s divine lure; he does not choose Kṛṣṇa because Kṛṣṇa does not choose him. However we articulate it, Karna's is an existential dilemma born of an irresolvable conflict between his own inherent nature, *svabhāva*, and the vicissitudes of Time. By nature and through Daiva, Karna is rendered incapable of the absolute surrender demanded by Kṛṣṇa of his *bhaktas*. At Karna's moment of death, he believes himself abandoned by the very principles of *dharma* he has striven to uphold. Karna's lonely heroism is far more genuine and inspiring than Arjuna's; he presents to the *Mahābhārata*'s audience a sympathetic portrait of the isolated individual in an uncertain, darkened universe. Karna's manipulation by Kṛṣṇa as Kāla illustrates how human lives are subject to Time's delusions.

Karna has been called the *Mahābhārata*'s tragic hero. David Shulman discusses Karna in these terms. Although Shulman claims that his concern "is not with fitting

Karṇa into a Western model of tragedy,"⁶⁹⁵ he goes on to mount a persuasive argument for such an interpretation, and it will be useful to consider some of his positions. The classic Western definition of tragedy comes, of course, from Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, the philosopher describes tragedy (he is speaking of theatre) from the point of view of plot structure and of the emotions produced in the audience. The two most important elements of plot structure are identified as reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*). Recognition, says Aristotle, "is a change from ignorance to knowledge, bringing the characters into either a close bond, or enmity, with one another, and concerning matters which bear on their prosperity or affliction. The finest recognition occurs in direct conjunction with reversal."⁶⁹⁶ Shulman identifies four moments of *peripeteia* in Karṇa's life: the Show of Weapons, when Duryodhana anoints Karṇa king of An̄ga and binds him forever "in the tragic bond of faithfulness"⁶⁹⁷; the Robbing of the Earrings, when Karṇa ignores his father's warning and flays his divine ornaments from his body; Kṛṣṇa's temptation, when Karṇa insists on "the freedom to choose a meaningful death," thus making "the drive towards tragedy ... irresistible"⁶⁹⁸; and the moment of his death, "the natural culmination of a lonely, tragic life," when Karṇa "dies resentful,

⁶⁹⁵ David Dean Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 382.

⁶⁹⁶ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, translated by Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 43.

⁶⁹⁷ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 382.

⁶⁹⁸ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 384.

angry, and alone."⁶⁹⁹ Shulman implies that some form of *anagnorisis* accompanies each of these moments of reversal.

In a successful tragedy, the change from ignorance to knowledge coupled with a hero's reversal of fortune (Aristotle gives Oedipus' discovery of his true identity as the supreme example) arouses terror (*phobos*) and ruth (*e/eos*) in the audience, effecting a *katharsis* of those emotions. Shulman holds that terror and ruth are aroused as we witness Karna fall "victim to his own innocent faith in fate, in sacrificial order, in a universe infused with the possibility of meaning."⁷⁰⁰ Nonetheless, Shulman recognizes that Karna's "personal tragedy" is also related to the obscure workings of *dharma*, *daiva*, and *karman*. Here, I believe, is precisely where and why the *itihāsa* cannot be said to have a "tragic hero" or a tragic worldview. To the Greek mind, fate, *moīra*, absolutely cannot be influenced. The very helplessness implied in *moīra* is what makes tragedy possible. However, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, Daiva, while apparently inexorable, can be influenced by *karman*.⁷⁰¹ In a universe where the supreme Lord takes birth among humans as the *avatāra* and offers humans the possibility of salvation through devotion to him, tragedy in the Greek sense is impossible. This may help to account for the subtle yet profound difference between *phobos* and *e/eos* on the one hand, and *bhayānaka* and *karuna* on the other. The *rasas* of terror and pity do not arouse *katharsis* in the audience

⁶⁹⁹ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 385.

⁷⁰⁰ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 387.

⁷⁰¹ Klostermaier contends that "Indian literature does not know tragedy: *karma* can be influenced or even totally neutralized through religion!" Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism (Second Edition)* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 216.

because the concept of *katharsis* does not exist in *rasa* theory. *Rasa* is not something that is produced or that "happens"; it is already there in the audience, constant, subject only to apprehension (See Chapters One and Two).⁷⁰² Karna does arouse strong "flavors" of terror and pity; but the *Mahābhārata* does not end with Karna's death, and we must pay attention to the *wholeness* of the *itihāsa*'s net.

Lee Siegel, in his study of the comic tradition in India, concludes that "Western categories fail in the Indian context. In Western terms there is no tragedy in India."⁷⁰³ Siegel goes on to argue that there is only *comedy* in India, for in the end, stories end well and the world rolls on. "The comic sentiment is not understood in India as a dichotomous principle in relation to a tragic one; it is rather a mood which arises out of an opposition to, or parody of, any of the aesthetic flavors."⁷⁰⁴ In reference to a South Indian telling of Karna's story, Shulman concludes that while tragedy may inhere in a hero's beginnings, in the end "the seductive tragic mode" is precluded by the comic.⁷⁰⁵ Both Shulman and Siegel relate the comic mode, *hāsyā rasa*, to the presence of the god. Shulman speaks of "the divine clown's savage mercies, his disastrous playing with the world."⁷⁰⁶ Siegel describes a merciless divine laughter, a "roaring of paradise," that is the response to all tragedies as comedies: "The laughter of the gods is at the ignorance and folly of men, the

⁷⁰² Edwin Gerow, *Indian Poetics* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 250.

⁷⁰³ Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 8.

⁷⁰⁴ Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, 8.

⁷⁰⁵ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 400.

⁷⁰⁶ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 399.

laughter which comes with the suspension of compassion that is concomitant with a conviction that there is no difference between the murdered and murderer."⁷⁰⁷

Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta claimed that the *Mahābhārata* was designed to produce a ninth *rasa* beyond Bharata's traditional eight: *sāntarasa*, the flavor of peace. The two great aestheticians believed that *sāntarasa* was brought about by a combination of other *rasas*, namely *vīra*, the heroic, *raudra*, the violent and cruel, and *karuṇa*, the compassionate. In Chapter Two we discussed how *vīra*, *raudra*, and *karuṇa* are structured into the *Mahābhārata*'s multiple layers. There are numerous instances of a scene of heroic action turning cruel and violent, only to be followed by a scene of great pathos. The overall shape of the *itihāsa* exhibits that pattern, as we follow the protagonists from optimistic heroism into brutal warfare and on to a pathetic (and perhaps illusory) journey to heaven. What is the effect of this upon the audience? Does it provoke, as has been claimed,⁷⁰⁸ a craving for tranquility that Abhinava says leads to *mokṣa*, "the highest aim of man"?⁷⁰⁹ Is this structure a narrative strategy to turn the audience away from things of the world, from *māyā*, and towards an ultimate reality experienced only in the ineffable

⁷⁰⁷ Siegel, *Laughing Matters*, 381. Says Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā*: "He who thinks that this being is a killer and he who thinks it is killed, neither of them know. Neither does it kill nor is it killed."

ya enamp vetti hantāram yaś cainam manyate hatam
ubhau tau na vijānito nāyam hanti na hanyate (6.24.19)

⁷⁰⁸ J. L. Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan, *Sāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969), x. See chapter Two.

⁷⁰⁹ Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana, with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Edited with an Introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls,

unmanifest? To attempt to answer those questions, we must take another look at the *Mahābhārata*'s ambiguous ending.

In the seventeenth book, *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, Yudhiṣṭhīra, followed by a dog, climbs the mountain towards heaven as, one by one, his wife and four brothers fall dead. As Emily Hudson has pointed out, it is strange that the Pāṇḍavas do not mourn Draupadī when she dies, and curious that there is no mourning, either by characters or text, as the five Pāṇḍavas are reduced to one. This is, says Hudson, "a narrative strategy that serves to disengage the reader from the narrative world of the text, because the reader feels a sense of grief and loss that is neither shared nor satisfied by it."⁷¹⁰ Hudson holds that at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, multiple narrative strategies prepare the "courageous" reader for the *itihāsa*'s final message: that the universe is filled with tremendous human suffering -- and that is it. This point of view is in consonance with the view that the final result of the *Mahābhārata* is to turn the audience away from the world; Hudson foresees no escape through *mokṣa*.

Gerald Larson's interpretation of the "meaning" of the *Mahābhārata* seems to agree with Hudson's. Larson, like Madhva and Sukthankar (see Chapter Two) interprets the *Mahābhārata* on three levels. He names them the *ādhidaivika*, "pertaining to the gods, the *ādhibhautika*, "pertaining to ordinary beings," and the *ādhyātmika*, "pertaining to

translated by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson Daniel H. H. Ingalls, and M.V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 525.

⁷¹⁰ Emily T. Hudson, "Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick: Theodicy and Narrative Strategies in the *Mahābhārata*," paper presented at the Internation Conference on the *Mahābhārata* (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001).

oneself."⁷¹¹ The first two levels, says Larson, are "tragically dehumanizing." On the first, Vedic mythology and ritual are deconstructed, the sacrifice just does not work any more, and the war to re-establish *dharma* becomes a reprehensible holocaust. On the second, we learn that that the Kurukṣetra battle is not simply "a tragedy for all concerned. It is a tragedy wrought by God himself!" Finally, on the third level of self-understanding, the meaning Larson finds is "stark" — so stark that he expresses it by citing immortal lines singing a supremely tragic worldview:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more; it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing (Shakespeare's *Macbeth* V,v,17)

Nothing? I would argue that the *Mahābhārata* no more signifies "nothing" than it signifies *mokṣa* (another face of "nothingness"). The *itihāsa* is not a tragedy, and its universe is not tragic, although its flavors certainly taste of *bhayānaka*, *rauḍra*, and

⁷¹¹ Gerald James Larson, "Kim Akurvata, Samjaya?": The Great War in the Night of a Thousand Suns," Keynote Address presented at the International *Mahābhārata*

karuṇa. Consider the fact that Vyāsa, the *itihāsa*'s purported teller (no idiot, he), is repeatedly said *not* to attain *mokṣa*. In *Sāntiparvan* we hear the story of how Vyāsa was granted by Śiva the boon of a son.⁷¹² Soon thereafter, Vyāsa catches sight of a lovely *apsarā* and spills his seed, from which is born Śuka. Śuka follows the path of *nivṛtti* and much to his father's chagrin attains *mokṣa*. Vyāsa grieves when his son vanishes from the earth for good, and must be comforted by Śiva. Vyāsa, then, represents the path of *pravṛtti*. Subject to desire, passion, attachment, and grief, this teller of the fifth Veda never could attain *mokṣa*, nor does he strive for it.⁷¹³ Vyāsa himself is a narrative strategy. By creating the *itihāsa* and engendering many of the characters within it (he is the biological grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas), then telling himself into his own story, Vyāsa points the audience to a worldview that, I believe, is the *Mahābhārata*'s widest "statement of truth," to use Nussbaum's terminology.

That worldview is articulated explicitly in one of the *Mahābhārata*'s most wondrous, terrifying, and moving passages: the session Yudhiṣṭhira spends with Mārkaṇḍeya during the exile in the forest.⁷¹⁴ Mārkaṇḍeya, like Vyāsa, is a sage who does not leave the world for *mokṣa*, although the ancient seer has witnessed, as Yudhiṣṭhira says, "the end of many thousands of *yugas*."⁷¹⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira asks Mārkaṇḍeya to recount

Conference (Montreal: Concordia University, May 18-20 2001).

⁷¹² 12.310-320

⁷¹³ For a discussion of Vyāsa and Śuka, see Bruce M. Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsiādass, 1999), 39-42.

⁷¹⁴ 3.179-221

⁷¹⁵ nāīke yugasahasrāntās tvayā dṛṣṭā mahāmune (3.186.2)

what occurs at the end of a *yuga*, when all is annihilated and then reborn. This provides an occasion for a description of the *kali yuga*, the very age in which the audience is situated, an age that, like all ages, returns again and again in Time's cycles.⁷¹⁶ After one great destruction, says Mārkaṇḍeya, there comes a new *kṛta yuga*, followed by a *tretā*, a *dvāpara*, and then another *kali*. This entire cycle of twelve thousand years is a Day of Brahmā. As the *kali* proceeds, conditions on the earth degenerate from bad to worse. The four *varṇas* cease practicing their appropriate *dharma*s; *mleccha*, "barbarian," kings rule the earth (the descendants of Yayāti's son Anu in our *itihāsa*); people are short-lived and lawless. The women have too many children at too young an age and the earth grows overpopulated. Vedic students drink alcohol and copulate with the wives of their gurus; hermitages disappear, lands and forests are ravaged. The seasons are disrupted; rain does not fall when it should. Mārkaṇḍeya gives many more details to picture an age that sounds surprisingly contemporary to us, and must have seemed so to the *itihāsa*'s audience. At last, says Mārkaṇḍeya, a drought scorches the land, rivers dry up, and the great world-destroying fire turns all to ashes, including humans, *devas*, and *asuras*. A violent storm and flood follow. "Then the self-existent Lord, ruler of men, drinks up those terrible winds and lies sleeping on the Lotus of the Beginning, O Bhārata."⁷¹⁷

Mārkaṇḍeya then, at the end of a *yuga*, wanders alone over the desolate total ocean, finding no resting place. One day he comes upon a great *nyagrodha*, a banyan

⁷¹⁶ 3.186

⁷¹⁷ tatas tam mārutam ghoram svayambhūr manujādhipa
ādi padmālayasi devaḥ pītvā svapiti bhārata (3.186.76)

tree. This is the tree with roots above and branches below described in the *Bhagavadgītā* (and, by analogy, the great double-tree with Arjuna and Karna for trunks -- see Chapters Two and Five). Sitting upon a branch of the tree he sees a beautiful child with "a face like a full moon, eyes like a lotus in bloom,"⁷¹⁸ and skin the color of cornflowers.⁷¹⁹ Mārkandeya is amazed; mustering all his ascetic powers, still he cannot comprehend the marvelous child. Then the boy speaks sweetly, inviting the sage to enter his body. He opens his mouth wide and, says Mārkandeya, "powerlessly I am transported into his mouth by an act of Daiva."⁷²⁰ Inside he beholds the whole earth, overspread with kingdoms and cities and mighty rivers. The oceans are there, the heavens and celestial bodies, and the various classes of men performing their proper tasks. All the gods and the foes of the gods move within the belly of the child. Mārkandeya prostrates in surrender to the great being, when suddenly a wind propels him out of the mouth, where he finds the same child sitting in the *nyagrodha* and beginning to laugh. The laughter alerts us to who he is! The child identifies himself as Nārāyaṇa, as Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Brahmā, as Prajāpati from whose bodies the four *varṇas* are formed. All, in fact, is he. Desire, anger, fear, joy and confusion are his forms, as well as all that is good and auspicious. "My injunction is decreed for all beings who wander in bodies; they act with their minds controlled by me, not by their own free will. ... Whenever *dharma* is

⁷¹⁸ upaviṣṭam mahārāja pūrṇendusadṛśānanam
phullapadmaviśalākṣam bālam paśyāmi bhārata (3.186.83)

⁷¹⁹ atasī puṣpavarṇābhāḥ (3.186.86) This is van Buitenen's poetic translation.

⁷²⁰ tasyāham avaśo vaktrām daivayogāt praveśitāḥ (3.186.91)

exhausted, O most virtuous one, and *adharma* rears up, then I create myself."⁷²¹ In the *kṛta* age, says the god, he is white, yellow in the *tretā*, red in the *dvāpara*, and black -- *Kṛṣṇa*! -- in the *kali*.

Thus, worthy sage, I have imposed myself completely upon all creatures, best of brahmins, yet no one knows me at all. Whatever pain you have felt while within me, O twice-born, is all for your greater happiness and good, sinless one. And whatever you have seen in the world, moving and standing still, was in every way but myself set up there, O worthy sage.⁷²²

Here, I submit, is the *Mahābhārata*'s most explicit description of its universe. Indeed, it is a universe characterized by tremendous suffering, but that is not "it." Painful as it is, arbitrary and unfathomable as it seems, the universe is the body of God, the body of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa, and *that* is "it." We are challenged, then, not only to accept such a God -- malicious, murderous, mocking -- but to approach him in loving surrender. Moreover, I suspect, Mārkandeya's description of the world is a description of the *Mahābhārata* itself. We enter into the *itihāsa*'s great maw and find within it simply *everything*. We wander within it, experience pain, joy, bewilderment; and if for a moment we take a step out of it or back from it, we are confronted with the laughter of Kṛṣṇa, the eternal child.

⁷²¹ madvidhānena vihitā mama dehavihāriṇah
mayābhībhūta vijñānā viceṣṭante na kāmataḥ ...
yadā yadā ca dharmasya glānir bhavati sattama
abhyusthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sājāmy aham (3.187.22, 26)

⁷²² evam praṇihitaḥ saṃyan mayātmā munisattama
sarvabhūteṣu viprendra na ca mām vetti kaś cana
yac ca kiṃ cit tvayā prāptam mayi kleśātmakam dvija
sukhodayāya tat sarvam śreyase ca tavānagha
yac ca kiṃ cit tvayā loke dṛṣṭam sthāvara jaṅgamam

The very strangest thing about the end of the *Mahābhārata* is the (apparent) absence of Kṛṣṇa. Why is he not standing at the mountaintop to usher Yudhiṣṭhira to heaven? Why does Yudhiṣṭhira not find him in heaven with Duryodhana, or in hell with his brothers, wife, and mother, or in the second heaven finally attained by Draupadī, Kuntī, and the six sons of Kuntī? What about Kṛṣṇa's promises in the *Bhagavadgītā* to protect and save his devotee? When Yudhiṣṭhira enters heaven, we are astounded not only by the absence of Kṛṣṇa but also by Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of concern for Kṛṣṇa. He still nurses one great sorrow (Yudhiṣṭhira brings all his human passions into this curious heaven): his failure to recognize Karna's feet (see Chapter Five). He expresses an overwhelming yearning to see his brothers and wife, but does not yearn for Kṛṣṇa. What Yudhiṣṭhira stands for in death, then, is a passionate affirmation of *kula*, of the human affection shared by family and friends. This human-heartedness, *sauhṛda*, is, as discussed in Chapters Three and Five, what Karna had chosen when he refused to renounce his loving adoptive *sūta* parents for the sake of the kingship and royal prerogatives offered by Kṛṣṇa. In the *Mahābhārata*'s final *parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to renounce his own family for the sake of the pleasures of Duryodhana's heaven offered by the gods. Out of affection for his family, he chooses to remain with them in hell. In what for him is a supreme act of renunciation, Yudhiṣṭhira angrily renounces *dharma*.⁷²³ Immediately,

vihitah sarvathaivāsau mamātmā munisattama (3.187.35-37)

⁷²³ krodham āhārayac caiva tīvram dharmasuto nṛpah
devāṁś ca garhayām āsa dharmam caiva yudhiṣthirah (18.2.50)

Dharma comes before his son and tells him he has passed a final test.⁷²⁴ Yudhiṣṭhīra instantly finds himself in another "heaven," reunited with his beloved family. Karna had performed similar actions when he affirmed his loyalty to his *sūta* family at Kṛṣṇa's temptation, and when he bitterly accused *dharma* of deserting him as he fell to Arjuna's arrows. Those acts, however, prompt no rescue.

What, then, of Karna? Shulman describes Karna as

a peculiarly attractive character both in his own right and in comparison with the rogue's gallery that surrounds him — the deeply flawed epic heroes from *both* sides of the battle, as well as the deceitful and murderous deity who uses them for his designs.⁷²⁵

This certainly is true, but Karna is *not* a "tragic hero," for tragedy is impossible in a world that roars with the laughter of that murderous, deceitful deity. Karna's place at the end of the *Mahābhārata* among his brothers, in hell or in heaven, forces us to reconsider his death. While he does die angry and resentful, his death still is an affirmation that, as he so frequently has affirmed, "victory depends upon Daiva." Daiva-Kāla-Kṛṣṇa triumphs over Karna's lonely human will. Thus, Karna does not die alone, for he dies at Kṛṣṇa's pleasure in Kṛṣṇa's presence. And what had happened to him next? Had he gone directly to hell, where his brothers join him thirty-six years later? Had he hung about in heaven for the interim with Duryodhana? Although the *itihāsa*'s silence on those issues is a

⁷²⁴ The first test, says Dharma, was the challenge of the crane-Dharma in the episode of the Drilling Woods. The second test was posed by the dog-Dharma. Yudhiṣṭhīra had passed those tests as well.

⁷²⁵ Shulman, *King and Clown*, 380.

narrative strategy to make us pose precisely those questions, they sound meaningless, even comic -- and implicitly unanswerable.

In the end, does the bard's explanation that the characters simply were absorbed into the divine and demonic beings of which they were a part signify any sort of "salvation" for those characters? Clearly it does not, for the heavens of the gods and the gods themselves are, as Mārkandeya has shown us, part of the universe, endlessly created and destroyed by Kāla, by Kṛṣṇa, who is the very substance of that universe. Up to this point, the *itihāsa* had strategically kept its audience within its universe. There, we rejoiced and suffered with its characters and were instructed by its teachings. We found a counterpart in Karna, a human being facing a hostile universe with all the courage, grace, and generosity he, alone, could muster; and we had seen that magnificent hero brought down by an unworthy opponent manipulated by a devious god. The curiously perfunctory manner in which the *Mahābhārata* comes to a close is a narrative strategy that distances the audience from the text, allows us to be blown, as it were, out of its maw. Here we are confronted with the cornflower-blue child's wicked smile. The child opens his mouth again, and inside we see the whole universe, including the *Mahābhārata*, its teller, and ourselves, the audience. The net of the *Mahābhārata*, like the belly of the child, structures this multiple stepping into and out of and back from, as it structures the stepping up and down the lattice of its frames, and the journey through the dizzying vortex of its Time. The *itihāsa* creates an audience willing to take those journeys, to

collaborate in that project. To ignore that strategic structure is to misapprehend the *Mahābhārata*.

Much more work can be done, far more insights achieved, by looking attentively at the *Mahābhārata*'s shape and style, by paying attention to its narrative strategies, by listening to its multivocal discourse, in search of its author and audience, and its "statement of truth." There is great scope for applying reader-response theory to the *Mahābhārata* -- to various characters, episodes, *parvans*, themes. More work, too, is demanded on *rasa* theory and its application to the great *itihāsa*. Finally, the towering character of Karna hardly can be grasped in a few chapters. These chapters contain some, although certainly not all, of the possible musings that result from wandering within and without the net, and the belly, of the *Mahābhārata*.

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