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ARTICLE

Kṛṣṇa the Magician: metapoesis and ambivalence in Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat*

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the vilification of Kṛṣṇa as a deceitful sorcerer in the Mughal poet-laureate Shaikh Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak, or 'Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat* and his correspondent apotheosis as the 'essence of the True God' in the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*, a treatise also ascribed to Faiḍī. As I argue, this inconsistency, or ambivalence, is a common and overlooked facet of the elite Islamicate engagement with religious diversity and difference in early modern Hindustan. In the case of the *Mahābhārat*, however, Faiḍī's portrayal of Kṛṣṇa as a deceitful illusionist reflects not only an Islamic discomfort with Vaishnavite theology, but Faiḍī's own performative insecurities as a Hindustani writer of Persian poetry and literary prose. Kṛṣṇa's so-called 'magic' lies in large part in his way with words: the verbal and social manipulation he uses to stoke the flames of conflict. The character thus becomes a kind of shadow or double of Faiḍī himself-a demiurgic author of the *Mahābhārat* upon which the poet can displace the classical Islamicate association of poetry with sorcery and deceit.

Keywords: metapoesis; occult sciences; Persian literature; political theology; South Asian religions; translation

Introduction: a tale of two fires

A *tadhkira* dedicated to the eighteenth-century Naqshbandī poet-saint, Mirza Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar, relates the following anecdote:

> They say that one day some person in their venerable presence—that is, in the presence of [Maẓhar's teacher], Ḥājī Muḥammad Afḍal—said, 'I saw in a dream that there was a plain, full of fire. Kṛṣṇa was in the midst of the fire, and Ram Chandar on the edge of the fire.' Another person, interpreting that dream, remarked, 'Kṛṣṇa and Ram Chandar are noted men from among the unbelievers. They are being tortured in the fire of hell.'[1]

[1] *mī-farmūdand rūzī shakhṣ dar ḥuḍūr-i īshān yaʿnī Ḥājī Muḥammad Afḍal guft ki dar khwābī dīda-am ki ṣaḥrāʾī ast pur az ātish u Kishan darūn-i ātish ast u rām chandar dar kināra-yi ān ātish. shakhṣī dar taʿbīr-i ān khwāb guft ki kishan u rām chandar az kubarāʾ[ʾ]ī-yi kuffār-and. dar ātish-i dozakh muʿadhdhab-and.* Maulvi Abdul Wali, 'Hinduism according to the Muslim Sufis', *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal N. S.* 19 (1923), p. 248. I have principally relied on the Persian text provided in the above. Translation is my own, though I also consulted Maulvi Abdul Wali's translation.

Hearing this blunt verdict, Mirza Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar is moved to object:

> My humble self [i.e. Mirza Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar] replied, 'This dream has a different interpretation. To pass a verdict of infidelity upon any person among the ancients, without said person's infidelity being confirmed canonically, is not lawful. As to these [i.e. Kṛṣṇa and Rāma], both the Book and the Tradition are silent.'[2]

Having established these fundamental epistemic limitations, Maẓhar goes on to frame the subject differently. He notes that the Qur'ān has proclaimed that 'there is no town through which a warner had not passed',[3] and thus it stands to reason that warners must have been sent to Hindūstān as well: 'Given this,' he concludes, 'it is probable that these persons were saints or prophets.'[4] This line of reasoning unfolds into a series of speculations concerning Kṛṣṇa and Rāma—their chronologies, temperaments, and the divergent nature of their ministries—as the saint demonstrates his ability to hermeneut even the particulars of Indic religion:

> Ram Chandar, who emerged at the onset of the creation of the Jinn, in the time when lifespans were long and powers considerable, gave the people of that age instruction with regard to proper conduct. Kṛṣṇa is the last of these grandees; and in his time, in comparison with the former, life was short, and powers weak. Thus he gave the people of his own age guidance with reference to passion. The excess of song and rapt attention to music attributed to him is an indication of his relish for what is passionate.[5]

Having finished setting the table, so to speak, Maẓhar is ready to offer his own reading of the dream. The field of fire in which Kṛṣṇa stands is not hell, but rather the all-consuming fire of divine love. 'Kṛṣṇa,' Mirza Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar declares, 'being completely immersed in the various states and stations of love, [thus] appeared in the middle of the fire. And Ram Chandar, who held to the path of proper conduct, manifested at its edge.'[6] Maẓhar's teacher is pleased and approves his disciple's interpretation.

The story above has sometimes been told as a way of underscoring the power of Sufic irenicism—the decisive triumph, in other words, of Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar over his unnamed antagonist.[7] I contend it is more productively understood as a story of

[2] *faqīr guftam īn khwāb rā ta'bīre-yi dīgar ast. bar shakhṣe-yi mu'aiyan az gudhishtigān bī-ānki kufr-i u az shar' thābit shawad ḥukm ba-kufr jā'iz nīst. az aḥwāl-i īn har dū kitāb u sunnat sākit ast.* Wali, 'Hinduism according to the Muslim Sufis', pp. 248–49.

[3] Qur'ān 35:24.

[4] *dar īn ṣūrat muḥtamal ast ki īshān walī yā nabī bāshand.* Wali, 'Hinduism according to the Muslim Sufis', p. 249.

[5] *rām chandar ki dar ibtidā'-yi khilqat-i jinn paidā shud dar ān waqt 'umr-hā darāz u quwwat-hā bisyār būd. ahl-i zamāna rā ba-nisbat-i sulūkī tarbiyat mī-kard. u Kishan ākhirīn buzurgān-i īnhāst u dar ān waqt nisbat ba-sābiq 'umr-hā kotāh u quwwat-hā ḍa'īf gardīd. pas ahl-i zamāna-yi khud rā ba-nisbat-i jadhabī hidāyat mī-kard. katharat-i ghinā' u samā' ki az wī manqūl ast dalīl ast bar dhoq u shoq-i nisbat-i jadhba. Ibid.*, p. 249.

[6] *Kishan ki mustaghriq-i kaifiyat-hā-yi maḥabbat būd, darūn-i ātish ẓāhir gardīda. u rām chandar ki rāh-i sulūk dāsht, dar kināra-yi ān padidār shud. Ibid.*, p. 249.

[7] Wali himself introduces this incident as part of a litany of evidence of Islamic tolerance. 'To a Westerner,' he writes, 'everything eastern is barbarous. To a conqueror, anything that a vanquished foe may offer is hateful. But to this universal law, I am happy to note that there are honourable exceptions'—among them, Mirza Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar and Dārā Shukoh. *Ibid.*, p. 237. For an example of the wider popular reception of this anecdote, see the following, which incorrectly attributes the incident to 'Abdur Rahim Khan-e-Khanan': Chishti, 'The interpretation of a dream', The Sufi Tavern (blog), 11 March 2018, https://sufi-tavern.com/sufi-stories/the-interpretation-of-a-dream/ (accessed 25 January 2024). The incident is also discussed in the following article,

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ambivalence[8]—of the ambiguity of the dream, so to speak; the ambivalence of its imagery; and the unsettled nature of the questions it provokes, which allow and are expressed by the subsequent play of contrasting understandings.

This ambivalence is an overlooked facet of the elite, Islamicate engagement with religious diversity and difference in early modern Hindustan. In their drive for determinate meaning and eagerness to champion certain authors and sources as emblems of precocious tolerance, contemporary scholars have sometimes turned a blind eye to the significance of inconsistency, of things found where they are not supposed to be. In what follows, I highlight a few arresting instances of this ambivalence through a consideration of understudied products of the so-called 'Mughal translation movement'. In particular, I treat the literary reworking of ʿAbd'l Qādar Badāʾūnī and Naqib Khān's previous rendering of the *Mahābhārata* into Persian—a translation carried out by the sixteenth-century poet laureate of Akbar's court, Shaikh Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak, or 'Faiḍī'. While the initial translation—christened the *Razmnāma*, or 'the Book of War', by Akbar—was a complete, if unadorned, rendering in plain Persian prose, Faiḍī's retranslation covers only the first two books or *parvans*, adding *saj'*, or rhyming prose, and many original couplets.

Like a dream, the *Mahābhārata* that Badāʾūnī and Faiḍī translated contained arresting imagery; like a dream, its significance was to be grasped only in the dynamic act of translation and interpretation. As I demonstrate, the polarities introduced in the anecdote above—between hell-fire and love-fire, theological inclusivism and exclusivism, Kṛṣṇa-the-deceiver and Kṛṣṇa-the-saint—could occur within the output of a single court, the oeuvre of a single author, or even the contents of a single text.

Kṛṣṇa the Magician: Faiḍī's *Mahābahārat*

The first mention of Kṛṣṇa in Faiḍī's *Mahābahārat* translation is odd and inauspicious. It occurs early on, in the 'Anukramaṇikāparvan', the opening chapter of the first book, in the midst of an abbreviated rendering of the Sanskrit text's proleptic summary:

> He [i.e. Vaiśampāyana] recounted the splendour and greatness of Yudhiṣṭhira, and Arjuna's martial leadership and victory in battle, and the noble family of Nakula, and the pure birth of Sahadeva; and it is evident that these all were [mutual] kin, relatives, well-wishers, graciously minded towards each other. All of this wickedness and corruption and hostility and enmity which came between them and forced them into bloodshed and quarrel—the kindler of this fire was Kṛṣṇa, who was the chief of the enchanters [*sar- daftar-i fasūn-sāzān*] and the ring-leader of the sleight-of-handers [*sar-ḥalqa-i shaʿbada- bāzān*]—as will be committed to writing in the contents of the [coming] passages and [in the] course of the allusions [to follow].[9]

which provides a nuanced account of Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar's views on religious difference: Y. Friedmann, 'Medieval Muslim views of Indian religions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95. 2 (1975), pp. 214–21.

[8] There may be a better word. I do not mean that every participant in this engagement had 'mixed feelings' about Indic religion. While mixed feelings may certainly be ascribable to some—to the Sufi Sheikh and translator of the *Bhagavadgīta*, ʿAbd al-Rahman Chishtī, for instance—in the anecdote above, both Jān-i Jānān Maẓhar and his antagonist seem very sure of themselves and their positions. The point is a broader one: that both of these responses to the dream, and to Kṛṣṇa, were thinkable and arguable in the early modern South Asian context. Rather than the elite Islamic engagement with religious difference being definitively characterised by irenicism, tolerance, and theological inclusivism or, on the other hand, agonism, prejudice, and exclusivism, I see vacillation, a play of polarities, and contrasting attitudes.

[9] *wa az far u shukoh-i judishtar u sipah-sālārī wa fīroz-jangī-yi arjun wa nek-nithādī-yi nakul wa pāk-goharī-yi sahadew takrār karda, wa pedāst ki īnhā hama paiwand u khwesh u kher-khwāh u nek-andesh-i yikdīgar būdand, wa īn hama fitna u fasād u khuṣūmat u ʿinād ki darmiyān āmad wa kār ba-khūn-rezī u siteza-gārī kashīd, shuʿla- afroz-i īn ātish kishan shud,*

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Faiḍī's framing of Kṛṣṇa as a deceitful enchanter responsible for the *Mahābhārata* war is particularly startling given that it is entirely absent from the equivalent passage in the *Razmnāma*: it seems to be the poet laureate's own invention. As such, however, it is atypical of Faiḍī's modus operandi of retranslation, which is not characterised by major departures from the narrative structure of his predecessor text.

While Kṛṣṇa does not play a major role in the 'Ādiparvan', the poet manages to reprise such language many more times throughout the first book, employing phrases similar or identical to those cited above. The next such instance occurs in the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan', where Vaiśampāyana recounts for Janamejaya in abbreviated fashion the births of various of the prominent actors in the *Mahābhārata* narrative. In the Sanskrit text, the mention of Kṛṣṇa's birth prompts a series of lines praising the incarnation of Viṣṇu, here acknowledged as Lord and Creator of the Universe. The *Razmnāma* instead remarks briefly and with a note of scepticism: 'and Kṛṣṇa would say, "I am the avatar of Narayan—whom they also call Viṣṇu; I am born of Vasudeva".'[10] Faiḍī, for his part, while not casting doubt upon Kṛṣṇa's parentage, makes explicit the *Razmnāma*'s suggestion of dishonesty: 'Kṛṣṇa, the son of Viṣṇu,' the poet writes, 'was a Yadava [*jādavan*][11], and possessed in his nature, constituentially, charm and deceit [*fireb u fusūn*]. He would make claims distant from the actual matter.'[12]

Faiḍī's expressions of antipathy toward Kṛṣṇa are not restricted to unflattering epithets. In an apparent attempt to substantiate his initial charge that the Yādava prince is responsible for the *Mahābhārata* war, the poet laureate also makes a few limited alterations to the *Razmnāma*'s narrative. While he does not, for instance, rewrite the story of the burning of the House of Lac or, on the other hand, change the *Razmnāma*'s rendering of the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan's account of the macrocosmic cause of the war, he does his best in certain key instances throughout the 'Ādiparvan' to portray Kṛṣṇa as a schemer and a gossip, scurrying around behind the scenes, spreading mischief and encouraging conflict.[13]

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ki sar-daftar-i fasūn-sāzān u sar-ḥalqa-i shaʿbada-bāzān būd, chunānchi dar ḍimn-i ʿibārat u ṭai-yi ishārat raqam-padhīr khwāhad shud. Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak 'Faiḍī', 'Mahābahārat' (Manuscript, n.d.), I.O. Islamic 761, British Library, folio 3a.

[10] *wa Kishan mī guft ki man awtār-i Nārāyin-am ki u rā bishnu ham mī gūyand, az basudew mutawallid shuda-am.* J. Naini, N. S. Shukla, and M. Riza (eds.), *Mahābhārat: buzurgtarīn manẓuma-yi kuhna-yi maujūd-i jahān ba-zabān-i Sanskrit*, vol. 1 (Tihran, 1358), p. 60. I read scepticism into this quotation as it seems to be the only case in which the *Mahābhārata*'s account of the divine ancestry and (partial or full) avatāra-status of its characters is, as Dipesh Chakrabarti puts it, 'anthropologized'—i.e. converted into a belief or claim rather than asserted directly. The account of Karna's parentage from the Sun that precedes this is reported without any scare quotes.

[11] I first misread this word as *jādū-zan* (magician). The suggestive similarity of *jādawan* (Yadava) and *jādū-zan* (magician) in Persian sparks another explanation for Faiḍī's mischief-making: pure free-floating wordplay and association, the prospect of poetic creativity for its own sake. While I do not think this is convincing as a total explanation for the vilification of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārat* retranslation, I have been encouraged by Professor Thibaut d'Hubert to take this line of inquiry seriously.

[12] *wa Kishan pisar-i wiṣṇu dew jādawan būd, wa az āb[o]khāk fareb o fasūn dar sarisht-i khud dāsht, daʿwa-hā-yi dūr az kār mīkard.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 52a. Shortly before this, towards the beginning of the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan', Vaiśampāyana provides a summary of the Mahābhārata story that similarly lays the blame squarely on Kṛṣṇa: 'In the first instance,' he tells Janamejaya, 'a kind of dice-game occurred between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. The Pāṇḍavas were exiled in mountain and wilderness, wandering in the desert of disappointment and bewilderment; and afterwards, a great war arose between them, and enmity ensued, and the Pāṇḍavas killed all of the Kauravas. And Kṛṣṇa stirred up the dust of discord among both [parties], and sifted the soil of evil with [his] every breath.' *Ibid.*, folios 50b–51a.

[13] As Wendy Doniger has pointed out to me, such a statement can be made of Kṛṣṇa at various points throughout the *Mahābhārata*—particularly in the context of the events of the sixteenth *parvan*. A similar objection was voiced by one of my anonymous reviewers per an earlier draft of this article. I address Kṛṣṇa's misdeeds in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and their relation to Faiḍī's interventions explicitly later on. For now, however, I will point

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The first and most extensive effort occurs during the episode of Draupadī's *svayaṃvara*, where the reader finds the following incredible paragraph:

> And Kṛṣṇa, the slight-of-hander, the player at prestidigitation, whose constitution was full of sorcery and incantation, was making the rounds in the middle of the gathering, instigating the whole succession of riotous and grievous events. At one point, when the arrow [fired by Arjuna to win Draupadī] had not yet reached its target, he said to Duryodhana, 'These Brahmans resemble the Pāṇḍavas—for these five brothers have made every effort to change their appearance and conceal themselves'—but no one believed him. And at that time when [the Pāṇḍavas] were successful in their aim and prevailed in the battle, he again said, 'I had told you that these are that same little group of mine: firm resolve is incumbent upon the will of every man, that they be zealous in their task [of defeating the Pāṇḍavas], and not be dishonoured.' And in the same way, speaking riotous things [to the Pāṇḍavas] as well, he inflamed [the anger] of these five persons, and himself enjoyed the spectacle.[14]

Faiḍī punctuates the above with a series of couplets that reinforce his portrayal. As above and in other instances, Kṛṣṇa's power is concretised in the image of a destructive, magical fire:

> Disgrace ensued from sedition—[this] incendiary
> burned down [i.e. disgraced] the whole world's house, through magic
>
> A calamity, caused by the trick of a magician!
> A sorcerer, setting the universe aflame![15]

After the *svayaṃvara*, Kṛṣṇa reunites with the Pāṇḍavas and approaches Kuntī, who falls at his feet, weeping—'unaware,' as Faiḍī indefatigably interjects, 'that all this wretchedness [i.e. the Pāṇḍavas' exile] was at the instigation of the malignity of this conjurer, who provoked [the conflict] between these brothers and kin through thousands of charms and deceits.'[16] Following this, Kṛṣṇa speaks to Yudhiṣṭhira, advising him to come out of hiding or, as he puts it, 'emerge from this costume of asceticism'—advice that Faiḍī once again chooses to paint in the most sinister light, again through a pyromaniac metaphor. 'This magician,' he writes, '… in such a manner made incitement, and sent words to Duryodhana by means of some other sorcery, and set the flame of rancour burning in

out that, though Kṛṣṇa's reputation as a trickster and a perpetuator of deceitful stratagems is well founded, none of the incidents that Faiḍī uses to substantiate Kṛṣṇa's deceit occurs in the Sanskrit composition, or in any other Indic text or tradition that I am aware of. As such, in my judgement, Faiḍī's portraiture of Kṛṣṇa, while it can certainly be related to tensions surrounding Kṛṣṇa extant in the Sanskrit source text, cannot be reduced to them, and demands a separate explanation—which I have taken it upon myself to offer. For a sensitive discussion of Kṛṣṇa that involves his conduct in the 'Masaulaparvan', see W. Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions 6 (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 260–71.

[14] *wa kishan ḥaqa-bāz shaʿbada-sāz, ki mizāj-i o ba-jādū-garī wa afsūn-ṭarāzī sirishta būd, dar ān hangāma mīgasht, u taḥrīk-i silsila-yi fitna u ashob mīkard. yik-martaba waqtī ki tīr hanūz ba-nishān narasīda būd, ba- Jarjodahan guft, ki īn brahmanān pāndawān-and, chūn īn panj barādar dar taghaiyur-i ṣūrat koshish-i tamām namūdand, u pai gum karda.' hechkis bāwar na-kard. wa dar īn martaba ki ba-maqsūd kām-yāb shudand, u dar īn jang ham ghalaba namūdand, bāz guft ki al-bata īnhā hamān jamāʿat-i andak-i man gufta-am, hama rā bar dhimma himmat lāzam ast, ki ghairat ba-kār barand u bar bī-nāmūsī qarār nadahand, wa hamchūnīn īn ṭaraf ham sukhanān-i fitna angez gufta īn panj kis rā tez mīsakht u khud tamāshā mīkard.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 162a.

[15] *khasī būd az fitna ātish-furoz / jahān-rā ba-afsūn-garī khāna-soz.* Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. *Ibid.*, folio 162a.

[16] *ghāfil ki īn hama āwāragī taḥrīk-i fitna-yi īn shaʿbada-bāz ast ki darmiyān barādarān u khweshān ba-hazārān fareb u fasūn angīkhta. Ibid.*, folio 162b.

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the fire-grate of the chests of each.'[17] Faiḍī makes sure to remind his readership that when Yudhiṣṭhira reacts positively to Kṛṣṇa's counsel, he does so 'out of an excess of naiveté'.[18]

A similar incident occurs soon after, in the aftermath of the Pāṇḍavas' marriage to Draupadī. In the *Razmnāma*, as in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, 'spies [*jāsūsān*] from Duryodhana and other kings' carry back news of this event to Duryodhana.[19] In Faiḍī's text, the spies are replaced by Kṛṣṇa himself, who again informs the Kaurava prince by way of writing.[20]

As in the Sanskrit text, the triumphant re-emergence of the Pāṇḍavas is received with consternation by the Kauravas generally and Duryodhana in particular, who comes to his father to discuss strategy. In an effort, perhaps, to make the Kauravas less overtly villainous, and the conflict between the cousins less a *fait accompli*, Faiḍī takes it upon himself to rewrite and expand the *Razmnāma*'s abbreviated rendering of this exchange. In Faiḍī's version, Dhṛtarāṣṭra gently admonishes his son for his hostility against his cousins, making vague reference to an unknown conspiratorial force (Kṛṣṇa?) behind the feud. While the Pāṇḍavas may really bear Duryodhana malice, the blind king lectures that 'love and hatred are two-sided'. 'You as well,' he insists, 'are not unpolluted by the impurity of resentment of them; and I have not settled upon who the stirrer-up of dirt is.'[21] Duryodhana, in response, associates his cousins with exactly the characteristics that Faiḍī has been associating with Kṛṣṇa all along: 'I, for my part,' he remarks, 'can restrain myself from what I am—but the Pāṇḍavas are intensely enmitous. Learning spells and sorceries, they hold ever in their minds thoughts of deceit.'[22]

After Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Vidura persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra to invite the Pāṇḍavas back to the capital, the Pāṇḍavas leave the decision of whether to accept to Kṛṣṇa, who does so, afterwards accompanying them to Indraprasha—'[bringing] with himself,' as Faiḍī asserts, 'world upon world of deception and sorcery.'[23] Faiḍī here pens another couplet on the subject of the 'cunning magician's malignancy:

> Deceiving the heart[s] of commoners
> he excites uproar, though magic
>
> Through spell-craft and incantation he
> brings the sorcery of *dev* and *pari* to perfection.[24]

The claim that Kṛṣṇa outshone the *dev*-s and *pari*-s in sorcery is not just arresting on its face: it is one of many instances in which the Persian *Mahābhārat* forges what Audrey Truschke has called 'cross-cultural' linkages or equivalencies, juxtaposing elements from Islamicate theology or Persophone mythology alongside those native to the Sanskrit text. Here, the comparison is somewhat equivocal: the more positive *pari*-s are paired with the more malevolent *dev*-s, both underscoring Kṛṣṇa's unheimlichkeit.

[17] *wa īn fasūn-sāz ba-īnhā chunīn taḥrīkāt kard, u ba-jurjodhan sukhanān rā ba-nairang-i dīgar rasānīd, u ātish-i kīna dar kānūn-i sīna-yi yikdīgar afrokhta sakht. Ibid.*, folio 163a.

[18] *Judishtar az sukhanān-i fareb-āmez-i ān fitna-gar az rūy-i kamāl-i sādah-lauḥī khwush-waqt shud. Ibid.*, folio 163a.

[19] Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, p. 192.

[20] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 167b. This incident is explored in the penultimate section of this article.

[21] *ammā maḥabbat u 'adāwat az jānibain mī bāshad. dil-i tu nīz az gird-i kudūrat-i īshān ṣāf nīst u ta'īn-manīst ki ghubār-angez-i īn rāh kīst. Ibid.*, folios 167b–168a.

[22] *Jurjodhan guft, man khud mī tawānam khud rā az ānchi hastam bāz āward, amā pāndawān jamā'at-i shadīd 'l-'adāwat-and, u afsūn u nairang yād girifta, khiyāl-hā-yi maḥāl dar sar dārand. Ibid.*, folio 168a.

[23] *wa kishan fasūn-sāz ba-īshān ham-rāh raft u jahān jahān-i fareb u nairang bā khud ham-rāh burd. Ibid.*, folio 170b.

[24] *dar ānjā fareb-i dil-i 'āmma rā / zi afsūn bar-angekht hangāma rā bajādū-ṭarāzī wa afsūn-garī / bar āward nairang-i dew ū parī*. Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. *Ibid.*, folio 170b.

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As the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan' winds to a close, however, and Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna's friendship is cemented through various adventures, culminating in the burning of Khāṇḍava Forest, Faiḍī seems to tire of his revisionism. Epithets such as *fasūn-sāz shaʿbada-bāz* ('the magician, the juggler', or 'the deceitful magician') are no longer appended to every mention of the Yādava prince. The deference that the Pāṇḍavas show Kṛṣṇa at the beginning of the 'Sabhāparvan', similarly, meets with none of the earlier editorialising. But just, perhaps, when Faiḍī's readership has begun to forget that there was ever any issue at all with Kṛṣṇa, the whole subject is abruptly forced to a head—by the narrative itself.

The death of Śiśupāla: a radical aporia

The episode that acts as both crucible and catharsis for Faiḍī's anti-Kṛṣṇa sentiment is the story of the confrontation with Śiśupāla, told in the two final chapters of the 'Sabhāparvan'. An abbreviated summary of the incident, the basic outline of which both Faiḍī and the authors of the *Razmnāma* render straightforwardly, goes something like the following:

> *Śiśupāla, king of Chedi, is possessed by an irrational and all-pervading hatred for Kṛṣṇa, his maternal cousin. When Kṛṣṇa is given the seat of honour at Yudhiṣṭhira's* rājasūya *ceremony, Śiśupāla is outraged. He attacks the Yadava prince and all who defend him, rudely rebuffing Bhīṣma's attempts to de-escalate the situation. In an aside to Bhīma, Bhīṣma tells the story of Śiśupāla's birth: when the king was born, he had an extra eye and arm. A heavenly voice declared these would disappear when the child came into contact with his future slayer. Śiśupāla was placed on the laps of various persons; when he touched Kṛṣṇa, the third arm and eye vanished. Śiśupāla's terrified mother requested her nephew to pardon any offences that her son might commit, and Kṛṣṇa promised to forgive 100 offences.*
>
> *As the situation at the* rājasūya *continues to deteriorate, Śiśupāla and his allies threaten violence, and Śiśupāla challenges Kṛṣṇa directly to fight him. Kṛṣṇa hurls his discus, slicing off the Chedi king's head. A light emerges from the headless corpse and enters Kṛṣṇa's body; the earth shakes, and rain pours out of a cloudless sky.*

A comparison of Faiḍī's translation of this episode with Naqib Khan and Badā'ūnī's *Razmnāma* yields some interesting results. While they do, in the main, translate the passage faithfully and in detail, the authors of the *Razmnāma* depart most notably from the Sanskrit in foregrounding Śiśupāla's objections to Kṛṣṇa's divinity.[25] 'What sort of intelligence or wisdom could it be,' the Chedi king demands, 'to affix the title of God to a man among men?'[26] 'If you were God,' he later mocks Kṛṣṇa, 'would it have been necessary to sneak over the fort wall, over Jarāsandha's head? If you were God, why did you not move against Jarāsandha on the basis of your own strength and ability?'[27] Śiśupāla's story

[25] The Clay Sanskrit edition of the 'Sabhāparvan', for instance, includes a verse (42.6) in which Śiśupāla refers to the Pāṇḍavas' belief that Kṛṣṇa 'is the creator of human beings [jagataḥ kartā]' and others in which their veneration of him is questioned and Kṛṣṇa's Puranic deeds are mocked. The *Razmnāma* translation, however, harps on this theme far more than the original does. Importantly, Śiśupāla's rejection of Kṛṣṇa is also related to the generalised inappropriateness of worshiping a human being—an idea I do not find in the Sanskrit composition. P. Wilmot, *Mahābhārata Book Two: The Great Hall*, (ed.) I. Onians and S. Vasudeva, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York, 2006), p. 292.

[26] *wa īn chi 'aql u dānish būda bāshad ki kasī ādamī az ādamīyān rā, khudā nām nihād?* Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, p. 239.

[27] *agar tu khudā mī būdī, chi lāzam būd ki bar sar-i jarāsandah az dīwār-i qal'a bālā raftī?* Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, p. 240.

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seems to become a flash point for the same discomfort that prompted the translation team to play down the 'Adivansavataranaparvan's account of Kṛṣṇa's incarnational birth and the *Bhagavadgīta*'s theophany.[28]

Faiḍī's adaptation, for its part, removes these full-throated challenges to Kṛṣṇa's godhood, choosing rather to put into the mouth of Śiśupāla language that is identical to that which the poet had himself employed in the 'Ādiparvan'. Again and again, the Chedi king denounces Kṛṣṇa as an illusionist, a magician, and a deceiver. When, for instance, Śiśupāla calls his followers to arms, Faiḍī renders it as a call to 'split asunder this company of hypocrites, assembled through incantation [*afsūn*] and sorcery [*nīrang*] and malice and squabble'.[29] A little later, as Śiśupāla makes an impassioned speech repudiating Kṛṣṇa's heroic achievements, he derides him as '[a] head-strong cow-herder, beguiling to the heart and full of deceitful enchantments'.[30] Two couplets follow, in apparent approval of these assertions:

> They planted understanding and wisdom in [human] nature
> for the recognition of what is well, and what is foul
>
> This cradle of collyrium black[31] needs no canopy;
> with fables and enchantments, one is sure to sleep.[32]

'All [of Kṛṣṇa's heroic feats]', Śiśupāla declares, are tricks, 'merely apparent, without real existence, [produced] through spells and incantations, which are the balance-sheet [*kār-nāma*] of the untruthful, computed from sickly articles of faith [*ʿaqīd-hā-yi sust*] and vacuous beliefs [*iʿtiqād-hā-yi bāṭil*]'.[33] At the moment of truth, as the Chedi perpetuates his fatal, hundredth offence, he asks why Pāṇḍavas should worship 'Kṛṣṇa the Trickster [*karishan shaʿbada-bāz*]'—one of the precise phrases that Faiḍī used formerly. 'Come,' he calls to his followers, 'let us scatter the blood of this magician upon the earth.'[34]

Śiśupāla's subsequent slaughter is received matter-of-factly, even positively, by the text. Where the *Razmnāma* refrained from comment, Faiḍī affirms the legitimacy of the

[28] Audrey Truschke previously mentioned the *Gītā*'s abridgment in the *Razmnāma* in her *Culture of Encounters*. A complete transcription and translation of the abridged Gītā section can be found in the dissertation of Roderic Vassie cited below. A. Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York, 2016), p. 116. R. Vassie, 'Persian interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā in the Mughal period: with special reference to the Sufi version of 'Abd Al-Raḥmān Chishtī' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 1988).

[29] *u īn majmaʿ-i riyā[']* *rā ki ba-afsūn u nairang u siteza u jang farāham āmada, bar-ham zanīm*. Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 216b.

[30] *wa andāza-i ʿaql u idrāk-i tu īnast ki īn gāwbān-i shakh-i nā-shakasta rā ki dil-fareb u fasūn sarishta ast, purastish mīkunī. Ibid.*, folio 217a.

[31] The cradle, or *mahd*, of the second couplet is the sky or firmament, as employed in other lexicalised literary phrases such as *mahd-i mīnā* ('the azure cradle'). The reference here, however, is to the sky at night or twilight, so dark that those lacking discrimination sleep easily, like children, with the help of enchantments (*afsūn*) and untruthful tales (*afsāna*)—such as, of course, the Puranic stories of Kṛṣṇa Śiśupāla here disdain. The language of collyrium black echoes not only the well-known general Persophone association of Hindūstān with blackness, but also vernacular poetry contemporary to Faiḍī's moment, including the following Braj composition of Sūr, which revels in the darkness of Kṛṣṇa's complexion. Many thanks to Jack Hawley for drawing my attention to this aspect of the composition. J. S. Hawley, *Into Sūr's Ocean: Poetry, Context, and Commentary*, vol. 83, Harvard Oriental Series (Cambridge, MA, 2016), p. 636.

[32] *nihādand hosh u khirad dar sarisht / zi bahr-i shināsā-yi khūb u zisht nashāyad dar īn mahd-i kuḥlī niqāb / ba-afsūn u afsāna raftī ba-khwāb*. Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 217a.

[33] *hama namūdīst bī-būd, u az ṭalismāt u nīranjāt ki kār-nāma-yi nārāstānast, maḥsūb az īn ʿaqīdhā-yi sust u iʿtiqādhā-yi bāṭil. Ibid.*, folio 217b.

[34] *bi-āyad ki khūn-i īn fasūn-sāz bar khāk bi-rezīm. Ibid.*, folio 219b.

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signs and wonders that follow the renegade king's death. 'The onlookers were all astonished,' the poet writes, 'at [such] marvels of divine power [*qudarat-i īzidī*]'[35]—afterwards penning two verses punning on the (literally) head-spinning quality of these fantastical events:

None could remedy the act of the Wheel
the heavens [*gardūn*] or remove their head from the circle [*chanbar*] of the sky

The wondrousness of this spin of the disk [*chanbar*]
gave the wise a headspin.[36]

The couplets rely on a double entendre—an implicit comparison of Kṛṣṇa's deadly discus with the wheeling motion of the sky—which also makes light of the character's seemingly divine or 'heavenly' nature. Yet, for any reader who took Faiḍī's earlier assertions about Kṛṣṇa seriously, this incident would have been head-spinning in another way. Śiśupāla's defeat, spiritual as well as corporeal, appears to demonstrate decisively that Kṛṣṇa was more than a mere illusionist—thus demoting the Persian text's own past assertions to 'vile abuses [*dush-nām-i zisht*]' in the mouth of a moribund villain.[37]

This aporia presents one possible explanation—over and above sheer attrition—as to why the poet laureate chose not to push on to the other *parvan*-s. The text, in a real sense, had failed. At issue was not simply consistency in the understanding of an Indic deity and critical character, but the authority of Faiḍī himself as translator-cum-virtuoso reader and poetic commentator. As Faiḍī no doubt came to understand, his interpretation could not be maintained without both an undue degree of effort and an inappropriate amount of violence to the source text. His reading of Kṛṣṇa as arch-villain was radically *à rebours*.

'A riddle': Kṛṣṇa in the (Sanskrit) *Mahābhārata*

Or was it? In my argument thus far, I have treated Faiḍī's portraiture of Kṛṣṇa in an intentionally maximalist mode. I have, in other words, introduced it as something foisted upon the text of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* from the outside, rather than a notion that bubbles up from the narrative itself. Similar characterisations of Kṛṣṇa, however, can be cited, most immediately from modern *Mahābhārata* criticism and commentary. The field of *Mahābhārata* studies has for the last several hundred years struggled mightily to come to terms with the figure of Kṛṣṇa, generating phrases that are sometimes reminiscent of Faiḍī's own in the process.

Kṛṣṇa is, in the summary of the great Bimal Krishna Matilal, 'an enigma', 'a riddle, a paradox', a 'devious diplomat' guilty of 'behind-the-door manipulation', and a 'devious manipulator'[38]; according to V. S. Sukthankar, the Yādava was again a morally suspect figure: 'a paradox, a riddle, to say the least.'[39] While Matilal wrote in defence of 'the devious deity' and Sukthankar adopted a spiritualised, metaphorical view of the *Mahābhārata* that made light of Kṛṣṇa's violations, Indologists of the previous century often spoke in harsher terms, proposing an 'inversion theory' according to which the Pāṇḍavas were

[35] *naẓar-giyān hama ḥerān-i gharā'ib-i qudarat-i īzidī shudand. Ibid.*, folio 220a.

[36] *kasī chāra-yi kār-i gardūn na-kard / sar az chanbar-i charkh bīrūn na-kard khiradmand rā dāda girdān-sarī / shigarfī-yi īn gardish-i chanbarī.* Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. *Ibid.*, folio 220a.

[37] *Ibid.*, folio 219b.

[38] B. K. Matilal, 'Kṛṣṇa: in defense of a devious divinity', in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma, x, 489 vols., Brill's Indological Library: 1 (Leiden, 1991), pp. 401, 403, 405.

[39] My attention was drawn to this quotation by one of the anonymous reviewers. V. S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay, 1957), p. 96.

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the villains of an originary epic. Evidence for this thesis was supplied by Kṛṣṇa, whose misdeeds were held to be obvious.[40]

These judgements would be irrelevant if they could be shown to be wholly the product of Eurocentric morays, foisted upon the *Mahābhārata* in rupture with text and tradition. Something of this argument has in fact been made by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, who dispute the virtues of 'the historical-critical method' in the context of Western scholarship on the *Bhagavadgīta*, the *Mahābhārata*, and, in particular, Kṛṣṇa.[41] Adluri and Bagchee's critiques follow a turn in *Mahābhārata* scholarship towards an appreciation of the Sanskrit text as an intentional composition. Yet, whatever one's position on the deliverances of text-critical methods, it would be impossible to maintain with a straight face that the idea of Kṛṣṇa as a deceitful figure responsible for the war is without any basis in the Sanskrit original.[42] Qualitative analyses of the *Mahābhārata* that accept the narrative as a piece have produced their own meditations on Kṛṣṇa's 'guile'.[43]

That Kṛṣṇa sometimes employed deceptive or morally questionable stratagems is, in fact, admitted in Vyāsa's text by the Yādava prince himself. The issue is dealt with most directly in the 'Śalyaparvan', after the episode of Bhīma and Duryodhana's duel with clubs. After Bhīma illegally strikes Duryodhana on the thigh on Kṛṣṇa's advice, the defeated and dying Duryodhana assails the Vṛṣṇī prince with a bitter recital of his misdeeds—summarisable under the heading of 'deceitful stratagems [*jimair upāyair*]' (61.29). 'Having killed thousands of kings upright in battle' through deception, he remarks, 'you [still] possess neither compassion nor shame'.[44]

Kṛṣṇa, in response, denies culpability for the war, reminding Duryodhana of his own injustices and unwillingness to compromise. With respect to the matter of deception, however, Kṛṣṇa's response is to embrace the charge—in effect affirming the Kaurava's claim that the Pāṇḍavas would never have been victorious had they fought fairly (61.37). 'If you had fought fairly in battle,' the Yādava tells his friends,

[40] A. Hiltebeitel, 'Krsna and the Mahābhārata (a bibliographical essay)', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 60.1/4 (1979), pp. 65–107. Inversion theory was spearheaded by the two Adolf Holtzmanns (the younger a nephew of the elder). In the more baroque version of the theory crafted by the younger Holtzmann, the *Mahābhārata* was originally Buddhist in orientation; Karṇa was imagined as the hero of the first Brahmanical revision of the tale, which preserved the Kauravas as the party of good but now elevated Karṇa's father, the Sun god, Sūrya (p. 69). The total reversal of polarities and of the side of good and evil was accomplished in another subsequent revision that glorified a 'new' god, Viṣṇu—no resemblance to the Vedic deity. Holtzmann spoke of a 'monstrous identification' through which Kṛṣṇa, 'a deified tribal hero of a non-Brahmanical people with a taste for drunkenness and sensuality … [who originally gave] crafty and dishonorable advice to the more ignoble party', gradually became identified with the cult of a recently minted 'high' god (p. 70).

[41] V. Adluri and J. Bagchee, 'Paradigm lost: the application of the historical-critical method to the Bhagavad Gītā', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 20.2 (2016), pp. 199–301.

[42] It also seems relatively clear that there are traces of anxiety in Indic tradition regarding Kṛṣṇa's actions, which can be noted without hermeneutical violence to tradition or text. As Wendy Doniger writes of the story of Dvāraka's destruction: '[t]he multiplicity of explanations—the curse of the Brahmins and of Gandhārī, the repeated and desperate recourse to fate, and the final release that he grants them all as a favor—shows that the author felt the need to apologize for Kṛṣṇa's behavior, and to find someone else to blame.' Doniger, *Origins of Evil*, p. 263.

[43] For an example in public-facing literature, see the chapter on 'Kṛṣṇa's guile' in G. Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New York, 2010), pp. 183–212. For a recent thorough-going scholarly analysis of various ethical dilemmas and metaphysical puzzles posed by the figure of Kṛṣṇa, see E. T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, AAR Religions in Translation viii, 268 (Oxford, 2013), pp. 198–205.

[44] Above is my own translation, from transliteration in the following: J. Meiland, *Mahābhārata Book Nine: Shalya, Volume Two*, The Clay Sanskrit Library (New York, 2007), p. 346.

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> you could never have killed swift-weaponed Duryodhana or all these great and courageous warriors. … In my desire to benefit you, I have killed every one of these men in battle by using various ploys and repeated deception. How could you have your victory if I had not performed such crooked acts in battle? … When enemies are numerous and too many, they should be killed through deception and ploys.[45]

The phrase translated in the above by Justin Meiland as 'repeated deception' is more literally rendered 'through the use of illusion, repeatedly [*māyāyogena asakṛt*]'—a phrase that can carry a connotation of magic or sorcery.[46] Kṛṣṇa justifies his recourse to deception by declaring that such a method (*mārga*) was formerly adopted by the deva-s in their war against the demons, and that 'the path followed by the good is followed by all'.[47]

What, then, of the accusation that the Vṛṣṇī prince is singlehandedly responsible for the war? In Vyāsa's composition, the clearest case to be made for blaming the conflict on Kṛṣṇa *en toto* comes as an entailment of the *Mahābhārata*'s divine frame. The metaphysical cause of the internecine strife, and the justification for the descent of the Kṛṣṇa avatar, is the overpopulation of Earth, which is burdened both by ordinary human beings and animals, and by asuras who have taken human and animal form. Viṣṇu consents to descend to relieve this burden—in effect, to start the great war. This causes something of an arguable conflict of interest, however, for Kṛṣṇa the avatar, human being, and/or character, who is tasked by the Pāṇḍavas with the diplomatic mission for peace and who aspires at times to an official neutrality.

Kṛṣṇa's dilemma is not emphasised by the *Mahābhārata*, except in a few key moments. The most famous of these comes in the 'Strīparvan', or *Book of Women*, when the grieving Gandhārī is gifted with divine sight; upon viewing the fallen bodies of her children, she is overwhelmed with sadness and curses Kṛṣṇa in terms that clearly reference his ability but lack of will to stop the war:

> Krsna, the sons of Pāṇḍu and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra hated each other. Why did you ignore them as they perished, Janārdana? You who were able to do something, who had many retainers, who stood in the midst of an extensive army, who had an equal interest in both sides, who had heard all that was said? *And since you neglected the destruction of the Kurus, O Slayer of Madhu, because you wanted it*, O man of mighty arms, now take the result of that.[48]

While Faiḍī, of course, does not himself translate the 'Strīparvan', the above speech is included in the *Razmnāma*. There, Gandhārī addresses the Yādava with the following words:

[45] Here I defer to Meiland's translation. *ibid*., p. 353.

[46] *Ibid.* Monier-Williams's definition reads: 'the application or employment of illusion, employment of magical arts.' M. Monier-Williams, 'Māyāyoga', in *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899* (Oxford, 1899), p. 811.

[47] *Sadbhiś c' anugataḥ panthāḥ sa sarvair anugamyate*. My own translation. *Ibid*., p. 352. The *Razmnāma*, for its part, translates Duryodhana's litany of accusations underscoring Kṛṣṇa's deceit (*daghā*) but does not reproduce Kṛṣṇa's justification for these tactics by reference to divine duplicity. In response to the shower of petals and heavenly voices that follow Duryodhana's self-justificatory speech, the Persophone 'Krishan' blows a trumpet and proclaims that the Pāṇḍavas have fulfilled their warrior calling; they should now rule justly so that God will reward them. J. Naini, N. S. Shukla, and M. Riza (eds.), *Mahābhārat: buzurgtarīn manẓuma-yi kuhna-yi maujūd-i jahān ba-zabān-i Sanskrit*, vol. 2 (Tihran, 1358), p. 475.

[48] Emphasis added. Translation above from the Fitzgerald volume. J. L. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata: Book 11. The Book of the Women: Book 12. The Book of Peace, Part One* (Chicago, 2004), p. 70.

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> Oh Kṛṣṇa! All these sons of mine, and the other kings from our side, and from the side of Yudhishthira, have fallen on this ground; and none of your people [*kasān-i tu*] have fallen in this field. You yourself have such an army, and [so many] relatives, that if you wished, you could have restrained this host, so that they should not fight one another, and [so that] so many famed persons should not have been killed. *And I know that* [*of*] *all the men that have been killed, you were the reason for them all, and you gave them up to be killed.* Now I ask from the Lord that that very thing which came down upon my head, will come down upon yours as well. And you will not depart from this world until you see all of your children and relations killed before your eyes.[49]

Notably in neither the Sanskrit nor the translation does Gandhārī directly reference the super-human frame, which Vidura had brought up to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the Sanskrit text earlier in the *Book of Women*. Gandhārī does declare, however, that Kṛṣṇa wanted this slaughter[50]—more directly in the Sanskrit, however, than in the Persian, where Kṛṣṇa's responsibility appears to be tied more to his unwillingness to stop the war than to a secret wish to perpetuate it.

These differences of emphasis aside, it is not a stretch to see how Faiḍī, reading the previous translation and/or perhaps informed by pandits of his own, could have come to the conclusion that Kṛṣṇa was responsible for the fraternal conflict. Such a possibility takes on more plausibility in view of the fact that Gandhārī's curse seems to have been emphasised in contemporaneous Mughal summaries of the *Mahābhārata* narrative. In Abū'l-Faḍl's *dībācha* to the *Razmnāma*—which Faiḍī presumably would have acquainted himself with before beginning his (re)-working of the text—the 'Strīparvan' is described in the following way:

> The eleventh *parab* is the *Strīparvan* [*astrī-parab*]: in description of the weeping of the women of both sides for their dead, and Gandhārī the mother of Duryodhana's cursing [*bad-duʿā kardan*] of Kṛṣṇa, and her declaring that, 'After thirty-six years, all of your tribe will perish in your presence in the most terrible circumstances, and after many misfortunes, you will be killed in the worst way,' and other things besides.[51]

The above text is quoted in the summary of the *Mahābhārata* included in the opening indexical section of the independent recension of Sabzawarī's universal history, the *Rauḍat ut-Ṭāhirīn*—compiled long after Faiḍī's retranslation, of course, but still a part of the extended reception history of the story at court.[52] In the full-length section retelling the *Mahābhārata*, the curse is worded even more strongly. Here, it is preceded by an attempt on the part of

[49] Emphasis added. *ay krishan! īn hama farzandān-i man u dīgar rāja-hā az jānib-i mā wa az jānib-i judhishtar, dar īn zamīn uftāda- and, wa hech-kis az kisān-i tu dar īn maidān nī-[u]ftāda-and. tu khud ān qadr lashkar u khweshān dāshtī ki agar mīkhwāstī, mītawānistī ki īn lashkar rā manaʿ kunī ki bāham jang nakunand wa īn hama nāmdārān kushta na- shawand, wa man mīdānam ki īn hama mardum ki kushta shuda-and, hama rā tu bāʿith shuda-ī wa ba-kushtan dāda-ī? ḥālā az khudāwand mīkhwāham ki ānchi bar sar-i mā āmada ast bar sar-i tu ham hamīn bi-yāyīd. wa tu dunyā na-rawī tā hama farzandān wa khweshān-i khud rā dar naẓar-i khud kushta bi-bīnī.* Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 2, pp. 501–2.

[50] *icchatā upekṣito nāśaḥ kurunām madhusūdana / yasmāt tvayā mahābāho phalam tasmāt avāpnuhi.*

[51] *parab yāzdaham astrī-parab ast. dar sharḥ girīstan-i zinān-i jānibain bar murda-hā-yi khud o dūʿā-yi bad kardan Gandhārī, mādar Jarjodahan-i Kishan rā o guftan-i u ki baʿd az chandīn musibat ba-badtarīn wajuh tu kushta shawī wa ghair dhalika.* 'Razmnāmah' (Dhū al-Ḥijjah AH [1599 CE 1007]), BL Add. 5641, British Library, folio 27a. Image of the above is reproduced in M. Willis, *Translation and State: The Mahābhārata at the Mughal Court, Beyond Boundaries* (Berlin, 2022), p. 241.

[52] Ṭ. M. Sabzawārī, 'Untitled [extract from Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn]' (AH [1759 AD 1173]), I.O. Islamic 753, British Library, folio 2a.

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Kṛṣṇa to comfort Gandhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra—a scene that does not seem to occur in Vyāsa's treatment.[53] Kṛṣṇa declares that the Kauravas achieved a good end because of 'the warfare and combat which came into being because of them'.[54] As a result of the latter, 'Almighty God has granted them a lofty station in high paradise equal to Indra, the ruler of the world above; they are [there] seated joyfully and happily upon chairs inlaid with gold'.[55] This fact, however, fails to placate Gandhārī, who, in a momentary loss of self-control (*bī-khudī wa bī-qarārī*), blames the war squarely on Kṛṣṇa's deceit (*sitaba*):

> Though Dhṛtarāṣṭra's heart was somewhat comforted by these statements, Gandhārī still wept and mourned just as before; and, completely losing control, she turned to Kṛṣṇa, and said, 'This [war] is a deceitful ploy [*īn kār sitāba-est*], which occurred because of your deliberation; and despite this, you come to advise and counsel me! I ask God to wipe out any sign or indication of your children and offspring from the page [of existence].'[56]

In light of this understanding of the plot, an interpretation of Kṛṣṇa as a deceiver and despoiler would come as no surprise—it would not even, strictly speaking, be untrue to the Sanskrit composition.

Here, however, a careful consideration raises several complications. It makes sense, in the logic of the *Mahābhārata*, to say that Kṛṣṇa wanted the war—and even the later destruction of his own people—mainly when speaking of the Yādava as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, who, after all, deigned to descend in fleshly form to lighten Earth's burden.[57] Faiḍī himself does translate the key passage from the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan' in which the Devta-s come to Viṣṇu at the behest of Earth to ask him to incarnate himself. In the original text, Earth is overburdened for two reasons: first, because of a general increase in kind among the world's creatures, brought on by the restoration of the just rule of the Kṣatriyas after Paraśurāma's slaughter of the men of this varṇa; and second, because asuras defeated in Heaven begin to descend to Earth.

In both the *Razmnāma* and in Faiḍī's text, however, the first rationale for the overpopulation—the good times brought on by just rule—is excised. The dilemma is simplified, smoothed into a contrast between just and heavenly, and unjust or demonic kings, the latter of whom oppress Earth:

> And a group of Dev-s, who formerly had been slaughtered at the hands of the Devta-s, their evil spirits entered into the children of the Kṣatriyas, and those Dev-s took on the form of human beings. And when they grew up, and became Kings, and laid the foundation[s] of tyranny and corruption, and girded up their

[53] In the Sanskrit text as represented in modern editions, Yudhiṣṭhira later relates to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in the midst of a discussion on the number of slain inhabitants, that 'those truly courageous men who enthusiastically offered their bodies in the supreme war have gone to celestial worlds equal to that of the king of the Gods'—i.e. Indra. This is reminiscent of the quotation in Sabzawārī, though this statement does not reference Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons in particular. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 72.

[54] *az nibard u kārzāre ki az īshān ba-ẓuhūr rasīda*. Ṭ. M. Sabzawārī, 'Untitled [extract from Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn]', folio 86b; Ṭ. M. Sabzawārī, 'Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn', folio 425b.

[55] *dar fīrdaus-i barīn dar barābar- indar ki farmān-farmā-yi 'ālam-i bālast, ba-khurramī wa shādmānī bar kursīhā- yi zar-nigār nishasta-and*. Sabzawārī, 'Untitled', folio 86b. Sabzawārī, 'Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn', folio 425b.

[56] *īn kār sitāba-est ki az fikar u andīsha-hā-yi shumā ba-ẓuhūr rasīda wa bāwujūd-i īn ḥāl ba-naṣīḥat u andarz-i man āmada-īd. khwāsta-am ki az farzandān u aulād nīz athare wa nishāne bar ṣafḥa ghabrā' na-manad*. Sabzawārī, 'Untitled', folios 86b–87a; Sabzawārī, 'Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn', folio 425b.

[57] For a salient discussion of moral quandaries in the *Mahābhārata* and other texts with respect to Kṛṣna and his role in the destruction of the Kauravas and the Yadus, see Doniger, *Origins of Evil*, pp. 258–71.

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> loins for unjust bloodshed, [they] became [veritable] standards of indecent action, [so that] the world itself was nearly made desolate by injustices. At that point, the world, taking on the appearance of a cow, went before Brahma, and brought petition through one of the Devta-s, who announced her arrival to Brahma.[58]

Faiḍī here pens an original series of couplets that cast the conflict as one between (metaphorical) demons and (genuine) kings:

> For the world was not destroyed by oppression
> since within it there is both Dev and King
>
> In this wide arena of war and peace
> few among the Dev-s would not be oppressors of men.[59]

In the scene that follows, Earth's complaint before Brahma is seconded by Indra, Shiva, and the other Devta-s, who all chime in. 'Because of the cruelty and violence of the Dev-s,' they tell Brahma, 'the lower world [has] set its face towards ruin, and the people of the world [are] fed up with living, and close to perishing.'[60] Brahma sends the Earth away and, afterwards, convinces various of the Devta-s to descend to Earth. In the Sanskrit text, this culminates in a lengthy dramatisation of the resolution of Viṣṇu, Lord of the Universe, to deign to take human form. Faiḍī, however, merely notes in passing: 'Viṣṇu also agreed to this.'[61] 'Thus,' he concludes, 'each one of the Devta-s were begotten in the household of some one among men, and they began to kill the Dev-s.'[62]

Not only does Faiḍī himself here not mention Kṛṣṇa in light of Viṣṇu's decision; the only line I have come across explicitly connecting Kṛṣṇa to Viṣṇu in the hundreds of pages of Faiḍī's text appears in passing, a few folios earlier in the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan', and happens to once again demean the Vṛṣṇī. 'And Kṛṣṇa, the son of Viṣṇu,' the text declares, 'was a Yādava, and held in his nature, constituentially, charm and deceit. He would make claims far from the actual matter.'[63] By contrast, the birth of Karṇa, son of the Sun, which directly precedes this statement, is related in the following manner:

> And Karṇa was the object of the grace and attention of His Majesty, the Greater Luminary [*Karan naẓar karda-yi haḍarat naiyir-i aʿẓam būd*],[64] and was birthed by Kunti, the daughter of the King of the city of Kunwala [?], who had the name of

[58] *wa jamāʿat-i dewān ki pīsh az ān bar dast dewtahā kushta shuda būdand, arwāḥ-i khabītha-yi īshān dar farzandān-i chatriyān dar mī āmad[and], wa ān dewān ba-ṣūrat-i ādmiyān bar āmdand. wa chūn buzurg shudand wa rāja gashtand, wa bunyād-i ẓulm u fasād kardand, wa kamar ba-khūn-i nā-ḥaq bastand, wa ba-kārī-yi nā- shāyista ʿalam shudand, nazdīk būd ki dunyā az bīdād-garī-hā-yi īshān khirāb shawad. pas dunya ba-ṣūrat-i gāwe bar āmad, pīsh-i brahmhā raft, wa ba-yakī az dewta-hā iltijā' burd ki az āmadan-i u ba-ʿarḍ-i bramhā rasānad.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 57b.

[59] *jahān az sitam chūn nagardad tabāh / ki bāshad dar u dew u bādshāh dar īn pahn maidān-i ṣulh u nabard / kam az dew nabuwad sitamkār-i mard*. Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. *Ibid.*, folio 58a.

[60] *ʿālam-i suflī az ẓulm u jaur-i dewān rū ba-kharābī nihāda wa ahl-i ʿālam az zindagānī ba-tang āmdand u nazdīkast ki halāk shawand. Ibid.*, folio 58a.

[61] *bishan ham īn maʿnī rā qabūl kard. Ibid.*, folio 58a.

[62] *pas har yak az dewtah-hā dar khāna-i yake az ādmīyān mutawallid shudand wa dewān rā kushtan giriftand. Ibid.*, folio 58a.

[63] *wa Kishan pisar-i wiṣṇu dew jādawan būd, wa az āb[o]khāk fareb o fasūn dar sarisht-i khud dāsht, daʿwa-hā-yi dūr az kār mīkard. Ibid.*, folio 52a. Also quoted in the initial body section of this article.

[64] This is Faiḍī's characteristic way of discussing parentage that occurs by way of the Sun through the text.

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> Kuntibhoja. At the time when he attained the felicity of birth, he had a coat of mail of gold on his body and two golden earrings in his ears.[65]

While Karṇa's (Akbar-like) connection to the Sun is rendered in reverent terms, Kṛṣṇa's parentage is associated with deceit and magic (*fusūn*).[66] It is not clear from the translation how one so bad to the bone could possibly be on the side of just kingship against demonic insurrection—particularly when, in many places after this in Faiḍī's Persian *Mahābhārat*, Kṛṣṇa is shown to be secretly in league with Duryodhana and the Kauravas.

A tale of two prefaces: Kṛṣṇa in the *Razmnāma*'s *dībācha*

Further reason to avoid reducing Faiḍī's reception of Kṛṣṇa to an unproblematic translation of the Sanskrit sources comes from overlooked evidence from his predecessor text.

In 995 AH (12 December 1586–2 November 1587), Abū'l Faiḍ 'Faiḍī's brother, the historian and hagiographer Abū'l Faḍl, composed a lengthy *dībācha* to the *Razmnāma* that opened with praise of Akbar and culminated in a summary of the *Mahābhārata*. Towards the conclusion, the courtier turns his attention to the eight personages on the Pāṇḍava's side who survived the *Mahābhārata* war: the five Pāṇḍava brothers; Satyaki, the Yādava chief; Yuyutsu, the half-brother of Duryodhana; and Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa, Abū'l Faḍl remarks, was the best of them all: the 'prince of the world's grandest [*sarwar-i buzurgān-i ʿālam*]', and the 'title page [*sar-waraq*] of [the book] of the righteous among the children of Adam'.[67]

There follows a 'short summary [*mujmale*]' of Kṛṣṇa's 'narrative of auspicious issue': King Kaṃsa's attempt to kill Kṛṣṇa at the warning of his astrologers, the Yādava's miraculous birth in prison, his occultation in the home of the cowherd Nanda, and his eventual confrontation with Kaṃsa. Kṛṣṇa, Abū'l Faḍl clarifies, was not only opposed by a king; he himself was a king—of sorts:

> Slaying King Kaṃsa out of boldness and manliness, [Kṛṣṇa] gave the kingdom to his [i.e. Kaṃsa's] father, Ugrasena; and himself attended to the spiritual reality [*maʿnī*] behind [merely] external [*ṣūrī*] sovereignty [*ḥukūmat*]. And since he found the manners of the men of that age to be empty of the decoration of intellection and the pith of [spiritual] aspiration [*himmat*]—by the power of [his] singular nature [*fiṭrat*]—rather, by intelligence alone—he made claim [to be] the *crème de la crème* [*khulāṣa*] of the Creator's creation; and a great company of the wise and those with perfect natures, believing what he said, set their hearts upon his acts, and elected to follow him.[68]

[65] *wa Karan naẓar karda-yi haḍarat naiyir-i aʿẓam būd, wa az kuntī ki dukhtar-i rāja-i shahr-i kūnwāla* [???] *ki kunt [i]-bahoj[a] nām dāsht, mutawallid shud. waqtī-ki saʿādat-i wilādat daryāft, zirihe az ṭalā dar badan u dū goshwārah-yi zarīn dar gosh dāsht.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 56a.

[66] Although I have shied away from making the case in this article, it would be possible to deem the Persian adaptation of the *Mahābhārata* story a kind of Akbari 'inversion theory' in the rough. Just as the younger Holtzmann posited an earlier epic that centred on Karṇa and his father, the Sun god Sūrya, so Karṇa's birth from the Sun is treated in reverential terms in both the *Razmnāma* and in Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat*. As Audrey Truschke has argued, Karṇa seems to be implicitly identified with Akbar—himself a Sun king. In both Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat* and the Kṛṣṇa-sceptical recension of Abū'l Faḍl's *dībācha*, which I address in the following section, there are, moreover, cautious and partial attempts to soften the Kauravas' villainy. I am not sure, however, that much can ultimately be made of these resonances. Both the Mughal translators and the German Indologists seem to follow certain genuine points of fissure and ambiguity in the plot of the *Mahābhārata*: from there, however, each makes of the riddle of Kṛṣṇa what they will. A. Truschke, 'Translating the solar cosmology of sacred kingship', *The Medieval History Journal* 19.1 (2016), pp. 139–40.

[67] *sar-i waraq-i nekū-kārān-i afrād-i ādam*. There is a possible pun here, given that *sar-i warq* means 'title page' and *afrād* can, according to Steingass, mean 'sheet of paper'. Naini et al. *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, xxxii.

[68] *az tahauwur u mardāngī rāja kans rā kushta, sulṭanat rā ba-ugrasen[a] pidar-i u dād wa khud ba-maʿnī-yi ḥakūmat-i ṣūrī mī-pardakht wa chūn auḍāʿ-i mardum-i ān zamāna rā az perāya-yi ʿaql u sarmāya-yi himmat khālī yāft, ba-dastyārī-yi*

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It is perhaps not too much to see, in the above, a kind of distant and incomplete echo of Abū'l Faḍl's description of his patron, Jalāl ud-Dīn Akbar, as a sacred king. Kṛṣṇa's divinity is here handled gingerly, as a claim to be merely the most perfect created being—precisely how Abū'l Faḍl frames Akbar's own sacrality in the *Akbarnāma*. Both have a singular nature, and both acquire disciples.

Yet there is also an implicit contrast. Kṛṣṇa's birth is a sign that threatens kings—and yet his kingship is not of this world. Akbar is generally contrasted by Abū'l Faḍl with conventional rulers, concerned only with 'external', secular, or *ṣūrī* affairs: as he writes earlier in the preface, kings are concerned only with 'the outward affairs of common people', not 'affairs pertaining to religion' that would involve 'investigating the hidden recesses of … minds', like Akbar.[69] In this case, however, with Kṛṣṇa, Abū'l Faḍl paints a picture of a paradoxical figure: a purely spiritual sovereign. While Akbar takes upon his person both worldly and spiritual authority—both *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī*—Kṛṣṇa hands off external rule of the kingdom to another, devoting himself entirely to *maʿnī*, and thus to direction over disciples.[70]

Abū'l Faḍl concludes with a brief and somewhat idiosyncratic account of Kṛṣṇa's death. Attacked by King Jarāsandha and Kālayavana, Kṛṣṇa is unable to overcome them: he flees and ends up dying in a fortress in Ahmadabad at the age of 125. King Kālayavana, the preface notes, was king of the 'malīciyān [*mleccha*-s]'—that is, 'a group which has no religion [*dīn*] and no code of laws'.[71] Some, it pointedly adds, consider him a king of Arabia.[72]

The Persian text for the above is taken from the printed Iranian edition of the *Razmnāma*—a text without much in the way of critical apparatus but purporting to draw upon several manuscripts, the oldest, according to its own testimony, from 1615 CE, or Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1023. Pre-existing scholarship on the *Razmnāma* often cites this edition, assuming that it is authoritative and representative of the manuscript tradition.[73]

Yet, in what seems to be the oldest publicly available copy of the *dībācha*, from Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1007 (1599 CE)—a manuscript that, moreover, bears the seal of Akbar's library—the biography of Kṛṣṇa appears much altered.[74] Kṛṣṇa is introduced not as the foremost of the world's greatest, but as 'chief of the world's liars [*sar-daftar-i muzawwirān-i ʿālam*]', the 'prince of the deceivers of the human race [*sarwar-i muḥīlān-i*

fiṭrat, bal maḥḍ-i faṭānat, daʿwa-yi khalāṣa-yi āfirīnish-i afrīdagār namūda wa jamaʿe-yi kathīr az kamāl-i fiṭrat u dānāyī taṣdīq bar aqwāl-i u namūda bar-kārhā-yi u dil nihādand wa pairawī-yi u ikhtiyār namūdand. Translation my own. I follow here the reproduction of the Persian text in the Naini and Shukla edition. I have also consulted Hajnalka Kovacs's recent translation of the same. Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, xxxii; H. Kovacs, 'The preface to the Razmnāma', in *Translation and State*, (ed.) Willis, p. 110.

[69] Above is taken from Kovacs's recent and brilliant translation. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[70] For a helpful discussion of *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī* in the Mughal context, see H. Franke, 'Emperors of Ṣ ūrat and Maʿnī: Jahangir and Shah Janah as temporal and spiritual rulers', *Muqarnas* 31 (2014), pp. 123–49.

[71] *yaʿnī az ṭāʾifa ki dīn wa āyīn nadāshta bāshad.* Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, xxxii–iii.

[72] Naini et al., *Mahābhārat*, vol. 1, xxxiii.

[73] Audrey Truschke, the scholar of this generation who first broke ground on the study of these translations, cites various manuscripts in her seminal *Culture of Encounters*. In various journal articles, however, including at least 'Translating the solar cosmology', pp. 136–41; 'A Padshah like Manu: political advice for Akbar in the Persian Mahābhārata', *Philological Encounters* 5.ii (2020), pp. 112–33; and 'The Mughal book of war: a Persian translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31.2 (2011), pp. 506–20, Truschke cites the Naini and Shukla printed edition as representative of the text.

[74] The manuscript in question is BL Add. 5641–5642. My attention was drawn to this passage by the recent volume edited by Michael Willis, which provided a reproduction and translation of the preface from this manuscript in conjunction with the printed Iranian edition. Evidence for the manuscript belonging to the Mughal library from 1599 to 1609 CE is provided in the citations below. BL Add. 5641–5642 contains the royal seal and the names of various of Akbar's librarians. R. B. Koshtely et al., 'Translation and state', in *Translation and State*, (ed.) Willis, p. 33; J. Seyller, 'Notations in British Library Razmnāma Add. 5642', in *Translation and State*, (ed.) Willis, pp. 179–80.

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afrād-i ādam]'. 'A little of his narrative of noxious issue,' the text begins, 'is [the following]':

> [He] was the son of Vasudeva, of the Yādavas. His birthplace was Mathura. Out of fear, King Kaṃsa, the chief of the Yādavas, ordered him to be killed because of [his] astrologers who, perceiving his infelicities in the letter of his horoscope, had informed the aforementioned King. Keeping hidden in the home of Nanda, whose occupation was the keeping of cattle and the selling of [milk], he remained concealed in the house of the aforementioned for eleven years. Finally, through trickery and fraudulence and sorceries and sleight of hand, he killed his own king, who was the aforementioned Kaṃsa, and gave the mere title of sovereignty to his [i.e. Kaṃsa's] father, Ugrasena, and himself became devoted to the spirit of external kingship.[75]

While the above retains much the same structure as the passage in the printed edition, many of the key details are changed or excised. Kaṃsa's litany of infanticides, for instance, is erased: the astrologers warn Kaṃsa not of a threat on his own life, but of 'infelicities [*bī-saʿādatī-hāʾe*]' or evils that Kṛṣṇa will perpetuate. While the other version recounts the falling-away, at the moment of his conception, of 11 locks from the 11 doors that kept his mother, Devakī, confined—a sign that implies confirmation of Kṛṣṇa's special status—this miracle is here elided. Kṛṣṇa's killing of Kaṃsa, rather than being evidence of his manliness, is implied to be an act of treason, perpetuated through sorcery and deceit.

The final line, on the nature of Kṛṣṇa's kingship or authority, is by contrast almost exactly the same. The above differs from the pro-Kṛṣṇa passage only in a single added word—*ism* or 'name': Kṛṣṇa no longer gives 'sovereignty [*sulṭanat*]' to Ugrasena, but the 'name' or title of sovereignty (*ism-i sulṭanat*). This minor addition, however, radically alters the sense of what follows: the purport now seems to be not that Kṛṣṇa devoted himself to a spiritual reality related to but distinguished from external kingship, but that he assumed the real essence, as opposed to the mere title, of external kingship.

On the question of Kṛṣṇa's divinity, the looking-glass text does not mince words. Kṛṣṇa no longer claims merely a privileged place within the great chain of being, but rather, vulgarly, godhood (*ulūhīyat*) itself:

> And since he found the manners of the men of that age to be empty of the decoration of spiritual ambition, through sorceries, indeed, rather, through bare falsehoods, he made claim to divinity. And a great company, whether out of beastliness or a lack of intellect, or out of greed and baseness, or out of cowardice and a lack of natural sense, believing his empty claim, were deceived on the basis of [his] juggling tricks. And without consulting their own intellect or attending to their own basic beliefs,

[75] *wa kishan ki sar-daftar-i muzauwirān-i ʿālam u sarwar-i muḥīlān afrād-i ādam būd, wa mujmale az aḥwāl-i wakhāmat-māl-i u ānast ki pisar-i pasdew jādawan būd. maulid-ash mathurah ast. az tars-i rāja kahans, raʾis-i jāwadān ki ḥukm-i kushtan-i u karda būd chi akhtar-shināsān bī-saʿādatī-hāʾe īn rā dar nāmchi-yi ṭāliʿ-yi u dīda khabar ba-rāja-yi madhkūr karda būdand. dar khāna-yi nand[a] nām ki shiʿār [shīr]-firoshī wa gāw-dārī dāshta, [mukhtafī] dāshta būdand yāzdah sāl dar khāna-i madhkūr mutawārī būd. ākhiru 'l-amr, ba-makr wa gurbuzat wa ṭilismāt wa shuʿ-badat rāja-yi khud rā ki kans-i madhkūr bāshad kushta ism-i salṭanat rā bi-ūgrasen[a] pidar-i u dād wa khud ba-maʿnī-yi ḥakūmat-i ṣūrī mī pardakht.* The above (with some emendations in brackets) is from BL Add. 5641, folio 25b. I have accessed this manuscript through the reproduction in Michael Willis's edited volume, cited below. I have also again consulted Kovacs translation of the above, which she, however, relegates to a footnote on the page also cited below. The correction of Nanda's profession from the selling of camels (*shutur*) to milk (*shīr*) follows Kovacs's. Willis, *Translation and State*, p. 245; Kovacs, 'Preface to the Razmnāma', p. 111.

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> [they] elected to follow him. Lost to *ṣūrat* and *maʿnī*, ruin of religion and worldly affairs became their fate.[76]

Both versions conclude with a reference to the 'strange wonders' and 'marvellous tales' told of Kṛṣṇa. In the above, however, this is preceded by a reference to the Yādava's reputation for sensualism, and the 'period of thirty-two years' he spent 'in debauchery [*bi-aubāshī*]' after entering Nanda's household.

The account of Kṛṣṇa's death also differs in certain minor details and emphases. While King Kālayavana, Kṛṣṇa's nemesis, is still said to be a king of Arabia (*'arabistān*), the *mlecchas*, or by implication, the (pre-Islamic?) Arabs, are now said to be a people or sect (*ṭā'ifa*) 'not of the religion or laws of the Indians [*hunūd*]', not one that lacks any *āyīn* or *dīn* whatsoever.

In the absence of more information, it is impossible, of course, to know which version came first. Upon reading the two passages together, however, it is easy to see how various tales about revision and emendation could be told. Whatever the order assumed, there are clear parallels between the two accounts: the idea, in the 'pro-Kṛṣṇa' version, that the populace's lack of ambition and intellect enabled Kṛṣṇa to claim exalted status is relatable to the stupidity and lack of common sense (*bī-fiṭratī*) of Kṛṣṇa's followers in the above.

What is one to make of this play of polarities? On its own, of course, the vilification of Kṛṣṇa could be dismissed as the work of a rogue scribe or patron—though, given the origins of this manuscript in the Mughal court, this in itself would not be without significance.[77] The lack of commentary in the scholarship on this passage is peculiar, however, given that the anti-Kṛṣṇa passage is represented in multiple manuscripts and seems to have been noticed by none other than Sir Charles Wilkins.[78]

The existence of these dueling portraitures gains a whole new importance when considered in conjunction with the presence of markedly similar language in Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat*. While Kṛṣṇa, according to Faiḍī, is 'the chief of the enchanters [*sar-daftar-i fasūn-sāzān*]' and 'the ringleader of the slight-of-handers [*sar-ḥalqa-i shaʿbada-bāzān*]', in Abū'l-Faḍl's words, he is 'chief of the world's liars [*sar-daftar-i muzauwirān-i ʿālim*]' and the 'prince of the deceivers of the human race [*sarwar-i muḥīlān-i afrād-i ādam*]'. In both texts, Kṛṣṇa is also said to be a magician and a deceiver. These formulations are close enough to clearly imply mutual influence—all the more plausible given that the purported authors were brothers, political allies, and members of the same court.

Yet there are also differences between the two (negative) portrayals owing, perhaps, to the distinct textual basis that each draws upon. While Faiḍī's book-length portraiture, confined as it is to the initial books of the *Mahābhārata*, frames Kṛṣṇa more generically

[76] *wa chūn auẓā'-i mardum-i ān zamāna rā az perāya-yi himmat khālī yāft, ba-dastyārī-yi nairanjāt, bal maḥḍ tazwīrāt, daʿwa-yi ulūhīyat kard. wa jamʿ-i kathīr, chi az bī-ʿaqlī wa bahā'imī, wa chi az ḥirṣ wa la'īmī, wa chi az kam-fiṭratī wa bīdilī, taṣdīq-i daʿwā-yi [bāṭil]-i u namūda bar bāzī-garī-hā-yi u firīfta shudand. wa bī ān-ki ba-ʿaql- i khud mashwarat numāyand yā ba-badīhiyyāt-i khud multafat shawand, pai-rawī-yi ān rā ikhtiyār namūd[and]. gumrāh-i ṣūrat wa maʿnī shuda kharābī-yi dīn u dunyā naṣīb-i shān shud.* The above (with some emendations in brackets) is from BL Add. 5641, folio 25b. Willis, *Translation and State*, p. 245.

[77] Hajnalka Kovacs, in her translation of the preface drawing on the Naini and Shukla printed text and BL Add. 5641–5642 manuscript, translates the anti-Kṛṣṇa passage, but chooses to relegate it to a footnote. 'It is possible,' she writes, 'that either the commissioner of the manuscript or the copyist was averse to Kṛṣṇa and his worship.' Kovacs, 'Preface to the Razmnāma', p. 110, footnote 184.

[78] I have inspected three other manuscripts of the preface thus far, all from the British Library: I.O. Islamic 979, I.O. Islamic 2517, and I.O. Islamic 1641. All contain the anti-Kṛṣṇa version of this passage. Of these, I.O. Islamic 979 is the oldest, dating to 1687 CE; I.O. Islamic 2517 is dated to 1774 CE; and I.O. Islamic 1641 contains various dates across its multiple volumes, all from the 1770s CE. The copy owned by Sir Charles Wilkins, I.O. 2517, includes a marginal comment on the relevant page, which reads simply 'account of Krishna'.

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as a conniving and gossiping member of court,[79] his brother, Abū'l Faḍl, draws here on the narrative of the *Harivaṃśa*—a text apprehended by the Mughals as a book of kings. Abū'l Faḍl therefore relates the Dark Lord's perniciousness more directly to a negative political theology. Kṛṣṇa's claim to be God is part of a destabilising political programme: he not only kills a rightful ruler, but, the *dībacā* implies, even undermines the authority of Ugrasena, the successor. Insodoing, Kṛṣṇa becomes not a king, but a kind of anti-king, anti-*mahdī*, or even an anti-Akbar. While, in Abū'l-Faḍl's framing, Akbar's totalistic fusion of religion and politics, imminence and transcendence, spiritual insight and worldly experience, guarantees order and harmony, Kṛṣṇa's unstable admixture does just the opposite: his adherents lose both '*ṣūrat* and *maʿnī*'—both religion and the world.

On one point, however, the two brothers are aligned: both the Kṛṣṇa-sceptical version of the preface and Faiḍī's text treat Kṛṣṇa as a natural person—a magician—something other than an unambiguous divinity. In the *dībācha*, indeed, the Yādava's great deception is not the war, but his claim to godhood. Like Kṛṣṇa's deceitful stratagems in the *Mahābhārat*, this misdeed leads to political instability—in this case, brought on by the murder of Kaṃsa, the rightful ruler. Kṛṣṇa's deception in Faiḍī's text, while murky in its motivations, appears equally detached from questions of theodicy. Kṛṣṇa is not a deceiver because he is a god—just the contrary. Rather than a divine deceiver manipulating both sides for the sake of a necessary slaughter—'the secret of the gods [*rahasyam devānām*]', as Vidura calls this justification for the conflict—the Persophone Kṛṣṇa in his negative aspect is a petty human schemer, an archetype of anarchy, and a sower of chaos for selfish ends.

While it is possible to concoct all kinds of second-order rationalisations about how Kṛṣṇa might be playing both sides and acting deceitfully in order to start a war in order to kill *dev*-s so that Earth would be delivered from unjust rule, Faiḍī's translation does not anywhere connect these dots. It does not link Kṛṣṇa's purported desire to stir up strife to this heavenly frame narrative or, for that matter, to Kṛṣṇa's divine parentage, which it plays down to the point of near-erasure.

There is no reason, of course, why one could not come to an understanding of the *Mahābhārata* in which Kṛṣṇa was both a pretender to divinity *and* the cause of the war. However, such a reading would be definitely *à rebours*, and would take careful reworking of the narrative to execute successfully. The interventions of the two brothers—Abū'l Faḍl and Faiḍī—more haphazardly pull on the already tangled skein of a complex text from two opposing ends, partially secularising what was originally a troubling undercurrent in the *Mahābhārata*'s theodicy. It is easy to see, in this context, how a plot point like the killing of Śiśupāla that seemed to confirm Kṛṣṇa's divinity could unravel Faiḍī's narrative and throw the whole project into disarray.

'Kṛṣṇa Dev': a reversal

To Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat* and Abū'l Faḍl's dueling *dībācha*-s, however, there exists a curious postscript. The Śiśupāla incident is rehashed in some detail by another text ascribed to Faiḍī—the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*, or *Sun of Gnosis*. While Faiḍī's authorship of the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* is uncertain, it resonates intertextually with his *Mahābhārat* in a number of tantalising ways, and I therefore follow Carl Ernst in provisionally accepting it as a genuine work of the Sheikh's.[80]

[79] The single exception, discussed in the earlier section, occurs during the confrontation with Śiśupāla, who draws upon broader Puranic tales of Kṛṣṇa to directly assail him as a pretender to divinity.

[80] The *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*'s striking claim, in its opening section, that Vyasa was connected to Plato through the latter's teacher, the enigmatic 'Tumtum the Indian', directly echoes the tenth couplet in the preface of Faiḍī's

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Though the *Sun of Gnosis* is, in general, a Sufic treatise on breath exercises—a token of a certain type—its first and last chapters depart from this mould in being devoted to the person of Kṛṣṇa. The Śiśupāla episode is given immediate pride of place:

> First Flash[81]: *In Description of the Greatness of Krishan Dev, [his] Employment of Yoga, and of [the fact] that Krishan Dev was the very essence of the true God*: How could his praise and commendation and compassion and magnanimousness be expressed by anyone? For his wrath and displeasure bring the sublime in rank to a remote degree—as [they did] Śiśupāla, King of Chanderi, who was exceedingly powerful, strong, majestic, magnificent, and to whom the greater part of Kings upon the earth's face made obeisance. When, out of an extremity of foolishness and illiteracy, Śiśupāla did not recognize the esteemed merit of the sign of that Incomparable of the Age, then, continually speaking ill of Kṛṣṇa Dev, he remained far from virtue, and propelled himself into evil—until such day when, in an assembly in which all the Kings of the earth had gathered, and [to which] Kṛṣṇa Dev had also betaken his own honorable self, in the presence of them all, he made himself a slanderer by his slander.[82]

Faiḍī—if it is Faiḍī—appears to have undergone a conversion. Kṛṣṇa is no longer a deceitful illusionist whose tricks rival the *dev* or demonic entity of Persianate mythology; nor is he the pious or perfect man of Abū'l Faḍl's (positive) preface. He is now a *dev* of a different sort—a *deva* or god against whom Śiśupāla (and, by implication, Faiḍī himself) blasphemed.

Yet, the poet also gives himself—and Śiśupāla—an out. As Kṛṣṇa was a perfect reflection of divine charity, Faiḍī explains, he attempted to overlook Śiśupāla's affronts. Yet, ultimately, when the king challenged him—'[making] pretence of power against him whose power is without limit'[83]—Kṛṣṇa fashioned a *chakra* from a brazen goblet[84] and 'set [his adversary's] body free of the burden of his head'.[85] This, Faiḍī hastens to make clear, was really a kind of salvation:

> In spite of the fact that [Śiśupāla] merited the punishment of severe torture—being a mine of sin—since he attained the degree of death at the hand of the Holy One, he received the pearl of salvation—[of that kind] which of the four forms of salvation is

Mahābhārat: 'And that Plato, whatever he had learned / Tumtum the Indian was his teacher.' Such evidence suggests that, at the very least, whoever wrote the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* was familiar with Faiḍī's text. *wa ān falāṭūn kih ānchi yādash būd / ṭumṭum-ī hindī ūstādash būd*. In an article on the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*, Carl Ernst provisionally accepted it as a work by Faiḍī. C. W. Ernst, 'Fayzi's illuminationist interpretation of Vedanta: the Shariq al-Ma'rifa', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30 (2010), p. 358. Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 1a. *Majmuʿa-i Rasaʾil* (Lucknow, 1294 AH/1877), p. 3.

[81] As Ernst notes, the practice of appending 'flash [*lamʿa*]' to the sections of works has a long series of precedents in Sufic literature, dating back to Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d. 988 AH)'s seminal *Book of Flashes*. Ernst, 'Fayzi's illuminationist interpretation of Vedanta', p. 351.

[82] *lamʿa-yi auwal: dar waṣf-i buzurgī-yi Krishan Dew u istiʿmāl-i ʿamal-i jog ānki krishan dew ʿain-i dhāt-i ḥaq būdand. taʿrīf u tauṣīf u marḥamat u karamat-i īshān kasī chigūna adā tawānad kard ki qahr u ghaḍab-i īshān muntij-i marātib-i ʿulwī ba-durja-yi aqṣa ast chunānki Sisupāl rāja-i chanderī ki ba-ghāyat ṣāḥib-i quwwat u qudrat u shaukat u ḥashamat būd u akthar rājhā-yi ru-yi zamīn muṭāwaʿat-i u mīkardand. az ghāyat-i ḥamāqat u jahālat, chūn qadar-i ḥamīda-yi athar-i ān waḥīd al-dahr na-mī-dānist, hamīsha dar bad-gūʾī-yi Krishan Dew, dūr az nekoʾī mānda khud rā dar badī mī afgand; mādām ān-rozī ki dar majlasī hama rājhā-yi ru-yi zamīn ḥāḍir āmdand u Krishan Dew ham ānjā tashrīf burdand, ba-ḥuḍūr-i hama ānhā, ba-bad-guftan-i khud rā bad-gū sākht. Majmuʿa-i Rasaʾil*, pp. 4–5.

[83] *istidʿā'-yi qahr az qāhir-i mutlaq. Ibid.*, p. 5.

[84] *Ibid.*, p. 5. A curious detail, absent from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, the origins of which I have not been able to discover.

[85] *tan-ash rā az bār-i sar-ash khilāṣ dādand. Ibid.*, p. 5.

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> most beatific; which, in Hindi, they call *Sājūj* [*sāyujya*], that is, 'the joining of light to the enlightened'—and was absorbed evidently into the pure light of Kṛṣṇa Dev.[86]

Though the truth will never be known, I would suggest it is possible that Faiḍī composed the above—and perhaps, the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* as a whole—in order to reframe his engagement as a translator in the aftermath of the *Mahābhārat*. He redounded on the figure of Śiśupāla as a kind of shadow self: a cipher through which he could reconcile himself to Kṛṣṇa while acknowledging, implicitly, his past *jahālat* or illiteracy.[87]

Such an interpretation would explain not only the text's foregrounding of the Śiśupāla story, but also the allusions to 'Swami Vyāsa' that bookend the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*'s introduction and first chapter. In the first, Faiḍī introduces himself as a *ṭālib*—a seeker, mendicant, or student—whose explicitly Akbari search for truth culminated in his acquaintance with Vyāsa's Word (*kalām*)—that is, implicitly, the *Mahābhārata*:

> When this seeker of the science of the True, in accordance with the intent that he kept centered in his heart; keeping in view, in [his study of] the treasured subtleties of philosophers from every religious community [*millat*], the order of the part and of the Whole, by means of [the doctrine of] Universal Peace [*ṣulḥ-i kul*], became absorbed in [contemplation of] the Whole, which consoles through certain knowledge—in short, the explication of that Word [*kalām*] which ends in tranquillity, which is founded upon the truth, which is acquainted with the Real, … which is contiguous with Unity, which is initiated into the most rarefied of rare mysteries—which belongs to Swami Vyāsa.[88]

The above is a more strident formulation of the *Mahābhārata*'s spiritual merit than is found in the *Mahābhārat* translation itself; the second such proclamation, coming towards the chapter's end, is even more of a departure. Here, Faiḍī reframes his translation as a missionary project, undertaken to bring Vyāsa's account of Kṛṣṇa to those without Sanskrit ability:

> Praising his [i.e. Kṛṣṇa's] utterances, reciting his signs [*āyāt*], these—i.e. the threads which Swami Vyāsa strung upon the string of verse—were translated into Farsi, only so that all those with no dexterity with the Sanskrit tongue—[or] at the least, those

[86] *bāwajūdī ki u liyāqat-i siyāsat-i ʿuqūbat-hā-yi ʿaẓīm dāsht ki kān-i ʿiṣyān būda, chūn az dast-i sharīf ba-pā-yi mamāt rasīd, gohar-i nijāt ki az har chār nijāt aḥsan ast ki ānrā hindawī sājūj khwanand yaʿnī paiwastan-i nūr ba- munauwar daryāft u ba-ʿiyān dar nūr-i pāk-i Krishan Dew maḥw gasht. Ibid.*, p. 5. Faiḍī's explanation of the theology of the above is mostly conventional—including his association of Śiśupāla's fate with *sāyujya* in particular. His gloss of *sāyujya-mukti*, the most impersonal form of union, as the most beneficent is curious but better explained in the opinion of this author by a tendency toward literary hyperbole than, as Ernst argues in his short piece, by a preference for more intellective Vedantic intellectual currents and more impersonal forms of union over devotional forms.

[87] There are precedents for the creation of proxy selves or doubles in Persian poetic literature. One of the anonymous reviewers for this article suggested that a suitable comparand to Faiḍī might be found in Nizāmī Ganjavī's detectible identifications with his characters in some of the works of his quintet, or *Khamsa*: with Majnūn, in *Lailī u Majnūn*, and with Simnār and Shidā in *Haft Paikar*. As Faiḍī attempted to compose an answer to Ganjavī's *Khamsa*, the comparison is apropos; a thorough treatment of Faiḍī's oeuvre alongside Nizāmī Ganjavī, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

[88] *chūn īn ṭālib-i ʿirfān-i ḥaq rā ba-ḥasb-i irādatī ki markūz fī 'l ḍamīr dārad ba-nikāt-i arjmand-i muḥaqqaqān-i har millat, az rūy-i ṣulḥ-i kull, maddi-naẓar bar maʿrifat-i niẓām-i juz u kull dāshta, mashghala-yi kul būd ki ba-ʿilm 'l-yaqīn taskīn-padhīrāʾī shawad, fī 'l-jumla bayān-kalām-i rāḥat-injām-i ḥaq-asās-i ḥaqīqat-shināṣ-i maʿrifat-[i?] [bī-?]qiyās-i waḥdat mumās-i maḥram-i asrār-i khāṣ al-khāṣ-i sawāmī biyās. Majmuʿa-i Rasaʾil*, p. 3.

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> who know the Farsi tongue, which is current to the age—would not remain bereft, but become beneficiaries.[89]

While Ernst takes the 'translation' referenced above to apply unproblematically to the matter of the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*, it would arguably make more sense read in the context of Faiḍī's experience with the *Mahābhārata*—an experience Faiḍī himself here seems to be laboring to foreground. As such, it marks a significant departure from the poet's self-representation in the *Mahābhārat*. While Faiḍī did there praise Vyasa as a philosophically astute bard and the *Mahābhārata* as a 'heavenly book', his general approach was to treat the Sanskrit composition as either contiguous with his own translation—both being expressions of a universal and semi-divine *sukhan*—or, alternatively, a source of exotic fuel from a distant literary land, furnished to kindle a fresh (*tāza*) poetic flame. The *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*'s subordination of Farsi to Sanskrit, translation to original, and Faiḍī to Vyāsa signals a significantly different rubric of language and translation.

The most startling claim of the passage, however, in light of all that has preceded it, is its suggestion that the *Mahābhārata* is principally a kind of Kṛṣṇa gospel—a text composed by Vyasa to recount the Blessed Lord's own utterances and sacred acts (*āyāt*). Far from being the villain of the piece, Kṛṣṇa has become its lodestar.

This heel turn, so to speak, is repeated in the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*'s concluding chapter, which once again departs from the primary, technical matter of the text to address the mercy and grace of Krishan Dev. The opening lines of the section stress this theme while establishing the deity's translational equivalence to the Islamic God:

> The Twelfth Flash [*lamʿa*]: the worshipper of the genuine object of worship, [i.e.] Allah, reaches perfection, and by no means remains deficient; and will surely be united with the True Creator, who is merciful, the [one most to be] honored among the honored, the most merciful among the merciful; the forgiver of the greatest sinners—and [so the worshipper] will by no means be lost.[90]

From here, the author launches directly into two short and apparently original stories, each of which emphasises Kṛṣṇa's kindness. The first of these is particularly relevant. The tale begins, as do so many *dāstān*, with 'a King, lofty in honor, [who] had a daughter of great beauty'.[91] Although she is of age, no royal suitor equal to her is found, and so the girl remains unmarried. An unnamed man, already melancholy—or, quite literally, 'mad in the head [*āshufta-dimāgh*]'—catches sight of the girl on a nearby palace rampart and becomes mad with love. An old woman delivering flowers to the palace harem eventually witnesses his lovesick wanderings and takes pity on the man, giving him the following advice: The princess, the woman explains, is chaste and pious, and, as such, would not be interested in the prospect of an amorous rendezvous. As she is 'a follower of the face and form of the superior knower of the innermost heart, Kṛṣṇa', there is only one way to definitively win her heart.[92] 'If you strenuously worship that object of worship,' the old

[89] *maqālāt sitūda, āyāt farmūda-yi īshān ki sawāmī biyās dar silk-i naẓam-i sulūk munsalik sakhta tarjuma-yi ān dar fārsī maḥḍ ba-wāsiṭa-yi ān darj yāft ki hama kis rā ba-zabān-i sanskrit dastī nīst, bārī zabān dānāyān-i fars ki rā'ij 'l-waqt ast maḥrūm na-mānda u bahra-war shawand. Ibid.*, p. 6.

[90] *lamʿa-yi duwāzdahum: ʿābid maʿbūd-i ḥaqīqī-yi allāh ba-kamāl mīrasad u har giz nāqiṣ namīmānad u bi'l-jazam ba-āfrīdgār-i bar-ḥaq ki raḥīm u karīm al-mukramīn arḥam al-raḥmīn bakhshanda-yi gunāhgārān-i aʿẓam ast wāṣil mīshawad u qaṭʿ-an ḍā'iʿ na-gardad. Ibid.*, p. 41.

[91] *bādshāhī būd ʿālī-shān dukhtarī dāsht bi-ghāyat ṣāḥab-i jamāl. Ibid.*, p. 42.

[92] *u muʿtaqid-i ṣūrat u shakal-i dānā-yi bahtar-i bāṭin krishan ast. Ibid.*

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woman explains, '… then, in accordance with [the fact] that whosoever habitually satisfies [Kṛṣṇa], wishing for some thing beyond man, certainly meets with his desire, you also should arrive at your goal.'[93]

Our hapless hero, however, doubts this counsel—why would Kṛṣṇa help a sinner like himself? Taking to heart, however, the knowledge that his object of desire is a devotee of the Dark Lord, the man hatches the following plan:

> 'In this city,' [he thought], 'there is a genuine sort of fellow [*shakhṣe-yi rāst*], who possesses mastery over all sorts of talismans and charms [*ṭilismāt u afsūn*]—and he knows a talisman, such that whosoever wishes to go to a certain place, will be able to reach there. I shall learn that talisman from him, and, clothed in the garb and appearance of Krishan Dev, will take myself to her that we might obtain our desire.' He did just this and satisfied his desire.[94]

The king, hearing that someone has slept with his daughter, is, of course, furious and takes a company of soldiers to the harem to kill the wretch. At this point, however, the fake Kṛṣṇa—the deceitful lover, a beneficiary of borrowed magic—finally pleads for mercy to the real deity. 'By virtue of human nature,' he prays, 'I have become guilty of perpetrating this shameful act. Now, besides your unrivaled Self, I, captive and despairing, have no [other] savior.' Although this man is—like Śiśupāla—'a mine of sin', his plea is not in vain. 'As Kṛṣṇa Dev is the Coverer of Faults, and the Forgiver of Errors', the text announces, 'he appeared there, armed, and praised the faith of that laudable [man].'[95] The real Kṛṣṇa protects his imitator, slaughtering the king's guards and taking the king himself captive. The king himself then begs for mercy and Kṛṣṇa, ever merciful, forgives him as well, giving the sovereign 'dominion over the whole earth'. The lovers are married and live happily ever after.

In its incorporation of a counterfeit Kṛṣṇa, this tale bears some distant resemblance to the Puranic story of Paundraka Vāsudēva, the king who imitated the deity, claiming Kṛṣṇa himself to be the copycat, and subsequently met with a violent death at the hands of the god. In others of its features, however—particularly, the incorporation of the theme of magical trickery—it arguably hearkens back to Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat*. Here, however, the association of Kṛṣṇa with magic and deceit is cited only to be dispelled, displaced onto a double. It is not Kṛṣṇa who is a magician, but rather the rogue lover, who, moreover, uses borrowed magic to do the deed.

Though it might seem extravagant, I would suggest that the figure of the lover is, once again, a possible cipher for Faiḍī himself. The fraudulent imitation of Kṛṣṇa that Faiḍī has perpetuated is not of course any actual mimicry, but the villainous depiction of Kṛṣṇa that he crafted in the *Mahābhārat*. Yet, the poet laureate, again, seems sure of redemption, of a sort less violent than Śiśupāla's. 'Oh ignorant sleeper,' the text asks at the chapter's close, 'what friend is the guardian of your soul? / You, dead-drunk, don't know [that] Kṛṣṇa is your protector!'[96] Even ostensible enemies, the text makes clear, are shielded by Kṛṣṇa's

[93] *agar tu ba-ʿibādat-i ān maʿbūd chunān ijtihad numaī ki bandagī khwushnūdī kunī, pas ba-muqtaḍā-yi ān ki har kis ba-ʿādat-i tamām rāḍī sākhta ārzū-yi chīzī bīsh-i insān mīkunad al-batta ba-kām-i khud mīrasad tu ham ba- murād khwesh rasī. Ibid.*

[94] *ammā dar īn shahar shakhṣī-yi rāst ast ki bar anwā-yiʿṭilismāt u afsūn dastgāh dārad u ṭilismī mīdānad ki har ki ba-ān ṭilism jāyī raftan [khwāhad], tawānad tā ānjā rasīd. az ū ān tilism rā biyāmozam u ba-shakal u labās-i karishan dew malbus shuda khud rā ba-ū rasānam tā kāmyāb shawīm. hamchunān kard u ba-kām-i khud kāmrān gardīd. Ibid.*

[95] *az ānjā ki karishan dew 'aib-posh u khaṭā-bakhsh and, khud mussalaḥ dar ānjā ḥāḍar shudand u āfarīn bar iʿtiqād-i ān ḥamīda kardand. Ibid.*, p. 43.

[96] *ay khufta-[e] ki dūst nigahbān-i jān-i tust? / tu mast ghāfil-ī krishan pāsbān-i tust*. Metre: – – u – u – u u – – u – u –. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

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mercy. The *Mahābhārat*'s interpretational impasse has now been transformed into the equivalent of a gospel song.

Translation as a process of mirroring

What accounts for this reversal? Once again, while the question is unanswerable, three overlapping explanations could be offered—none, in my view, absolutely satisfying.

First, it may be that Faiḍī's anti-Kṛṣṇa sentiment met with a cool reception from his royal patron, or from others among its Hindustani audience with influence at court—perhaps the staunchly Vaiṣṇavite Kachwāha Rajputs. Faiḍī's self-presentation as a seeker of truth operating under the aegis of *ṣulḥ-i kull*, after all, seems pointedly politic. Moreover, from the (admittedly surly) testimony of Badāʾūnī, Akbar could be scathing in his critiques of the translation of religious material.

According to this interpretation, the negative version of Abū'l Faḍl's *dībācha* may have come first, with the positive recension written afterward—at around the same time, perhaps, as the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*. This interpretation gathers more strength in the face of an examination of the historian Ṭāhir Muḥammad Sabzawārī's *Rauḍat ut-Tāhirīn* (*Garden of the Pure*), commissioned late in Akbar's reign (1603 CE). *Garden of the Pure* reproduces the same image of Kṛṣṇa as an Akbari sacred king earlier suggested by Abū'l Faḍl's *dībacha*. The Yādava prince is lauded as 'the greatest of the avatars [*buzurgtarīn-i awatar-hā*]',[97] a 'manifestation of [divine] light [*maẓhar-i anwār*]'[98] in a royal bloodline tasked with defending Hindustan against the 'riotous and wicked'.[99]

Alternatively, at the other extreme, the discrepancy could be purely a matter of genre—in effect, a non-issue. Perhaps Kṛṣṇa the Magician was appropriate to the one text, Kṛṣṇa the Divine[100] to the other. This response gathers force from the fact that Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat* and the *Razmnāma* stand in seeming contradiction not only to one another and to the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat*, but also to Naqīb Khān's *Haribans*, produced in the 1580s. The latter—a close and unassuming translation—treats Kṛṣṇa as a direct manifestation of Jagadīśa, the True God and 'Creator of all beings [*khāliq-i kull-i maujūdāt*]'.[101] The Akbari 'translation movement', it seems, clearly made room for interpretational pluralism.

Thirdly, and finally, at least some of the aforementioned contradictions could be the product not of controversies local to Akbar's time and context, but of the intervention of later scribes. I have already mentioned that Faiḍī's authorship of the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* text is uncertain: as Carl Ernst has noted, it is not mentioned in any other contemporaneous text.[102] The work could be understood as an attempt by a later author—possibly a 'Hindu' Khatri writer—to affirm Kṛṣṇa's divinity in absolute terms. In this reading, the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* could still be considered in relation to the Akbari translation movement—albeit as a part of its reception history.

Such an interpretation resonates with some of what can be noticed in the manuscript record. As I have observed,[103] scribes often retained Faiḍī's accusations, while removing his hostile language. Insulting epithets are excised, while major points of plot are

[97] Ṭ. M. Sabzavārī, 'Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn', folio 384b.

[98] Ṭ. M. Sabzavārī, 'Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn' (n.d.), 9017/256, Kitāb-khāna-yi majlis-i shūra-yi millī, folio 366a.

[99] Ṭ. M. Sabzavārī, 'Untitled [extract from Rauḍat Ut-Ṭāhirīn]' (AH 1173), I.O. Islamic 753, British Library, folio 3a.

[100] Ernst's translation of 'Krishan Dev.'. Ernst, 'Fayzi's illuminationist interpretation of Vedanta', p. 359.

[101] N. Khān, 'Haribans' (Shahjahanabad, 12 December 1723), I.O. Islamic 1777, British Library, folio 36a.

[102] Ernst, 'Fayzi's illuminationist interpretation of Vedanta', p. 358.

[103] My observations in this section are tentative and anecdotal. While references to differences among manuscripts occur in the writings of Audrey Truschke, a complete and systematic account of discrepancies in the manuscript record of the Akbari translation movement remains to be written.

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retained. In one case from the 'Ādivaṃśāvatāraṇaparvan', a sentence introducing the Yādava as full of 'sorcery and deceit [*fareb u fasūn*]'[104] is rewritten in a nineteenth-century manuscript so as to eliminate all negative import.[105] In the same manuscript, however, Kṛṣṇa is still to be seen, for instance, sending messages about the Pāṇḍavas to Duryodhana at Draupadī's *svayaṃvara*,[106] albeit without the title *shaʿbada-bāz* ('conjurer' or 'sleight-of-hander') appended as in the original.[107] The cause of the conflict is still blamed entirely on the machinations of Kṛṣṇa, but the Dark Lord himself is now addressed respectfully as 'Sharī Krishan Jio',[108] and not as 'the chief of the enchanters and the ring-leader of the conjurers [*sar-daftar-i fasūn-sāzān u sar-ḥalqa-i shaʿbada-bāzān*]'.[109] Clearly, the idea that Kṛṣṇa may have started the *Mahābhārata* war was admissible for this scribe; negative or insulting titles were not. Another, undated manuscript from Yale's Beinecke Rare Book Library provides a sweeping theological explanation for the attribution of the conflict to Kṛṣṇa:

Beinecke Manuscript +188 [rewrite]	I.O. Islamic 761
All of this wickedness and corruption and hostility and enmity which came between [the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas] and forced them into bloodshed and quarrel—[it] came into being because of Shrī Kṛṣṇa—for, that is to say, [he] is the enacter of all things, good and evil.[110]	All of this wickedness and corruption and hostility and enmity which came between [the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas] and forced them into bloodshed and quarrel—the kindler of this fire was Kṛṣṇa, who was the chief of the enchanters and the ring-leader of the sleight-of-handers.[111]

The *Mahābhārata* here is not a story about a deceitful courtier; it has been transmuted into a tale about theodicy. Faiḍī's text thus falls in line with Indic tradition —when reframed, that is, so as to make it clear that Kṛṣṇa was not a monster, but a god.

All three of the above considerations add welcome nuance; yet none should be embraced as a totalising explanation. The impulse to disaggregate these translations into pristine categories—earlier and later, 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'—betrays an understandable scholarly preference for what is orderly. Such a strategy, however, risks missing the significance that often lies in what is in motion: namely, in this case, the inter- and intertextual tensions revealed when one reads these compositions in tandem. Whether the *Shāriq al-maʿrifat* was written by Abū'l Faiḍ 'Faiḍī' or not, it was clearly composed by someone familiar with Faiḍī's body of work—someone who wished, perhaps, to pass himself off as Faiḍī in order to renegotiate Faiḍī's portrait of Kṛṣṇa.

[104] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat' (Manuscript, n.d.), I.O. Islamic 761, British Library, folio 56a.

[105] Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak 'Faiḍī', 'Mahābahārat' (Manuscript, 1850), Persian Manuscript +94, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, folio 38b.

[106] *Ibid.*, folio 102a.

[107] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 162a.

[108] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', Persian Manuscript +94, folio 4b.

[109] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 3a.

[110] *wa īn hama fitna u fasād u khuṣūmat u ʿinād ki darmiyān āmad wa kār ba-khūn-rezī u siteza-gārī kashīd, sabab sharī kishan ba-ʿamal āmad, ki tā yaʿnī kunanda-i jamʿ-i umūr-i nek u bad ust.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat' (Manuscript, n.d.), Persian Manuscript +188, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, folio 3a.

[111] *wa īn hama fitna u fasād u khuṣūmat u ʿinād ki darmiyān āmad wa kār ba-khūn-rezī u siteza-gārī kashīd, shuʿla-afroz-i īn ātish kishan shud, ki sar-daftar-i fasūn-sāzān u sar-ḥalqa-i shaʿbada-bāzān būd.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 3a.

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Evidence of controversy of some sort is surely confirmed in the dueling copies of Abū'l Faḍl's preface, both originating from the Akbari court. And there are, again, signs of tension within Faiḍī's *Mahābhārat* on the question of Kṛṣṇa.

These contradictions and resonances become meaningful in light of an analysis that focuses not on disaggregation, but on the dynamism of Mughal translation. Rather than a method of rendering that keeps the translator invisible and the text pristine—or, on the other hand, a 'transcreation' without any regard for accuracy—Faiḍī's *Mahābhārata* exemplifies a mode of translation as virtuoso reading: 'translation as the recording of a reading experience', as Thibaut d'Hubert has argued in the case of another early modern author-renderer.[112] This method brought text and translator into intimate and constant dialogue, as Faiḍī interjected rhyming prose and many original couplets in response to the narrative.

Understood in this way, the poet's portrait of Kṛṣṇa was neither an act of hermeneutical violence imposing on the *Mahābhārata* from without, nor an unproblematic reading reducible to the source text. Rather, as text and translator interacted, the tensions relating to Kṛṣṇa in Vyāsa's composition were intensified. Kṛṣṇa's deceit and immorality were exaggerated; yet Faiḍī's method did not allow him to erase all evidence of the Yādava's good deeds, his friendship with Arjuna, or, for that matter, his divinity. The result was a kind of a slowly widening fissure: a gap that allowed Faiḍī's own anxieties to bleed in. The *Mahābhārata* and its characters became a mirror for the translator—a reflection, in their polarities, of his own literary self-image, and the tempestuous backdrop of the Akbari court.

Something similar is true for Abū'l Faḍl's preface. In this case, however, the mirror 'reflected' the patron. As I have already shown, the portraitures of Kṛṣṇa in the *Razmnāma*'s introduction mirrored Jalāl ud-dīn Akbar, reflecting ambitions and anxieties connected to his project of 'millennial sovereignty'. The affirmative Kṛṣṇa stood for the promise of the sacred king as Perfect Man and Hindustani ruler, the villainous and sorcerous one for the accusations hurled at Akbar for his supposed pretence to divinity. Read together, the dueling portraitures draw boundaries and set limits for Mughal sacred kingship—effectively rendering Indic texts and theology into a *speculum principum*.[113]

There is a danger, however, in reducing Kṛṣṇa's deceit to a purely political symbol—particularly in a court in which the theological, the political, and the literary were apprehended as overlapping and interlocking domains. Though Abū'l Faḍl's portraiture of Kṛṣṇa rewards an analysis that foregrounds Mughal political theology, Faiḍī's, I contend, also reflects more personal anxieties. The more one revisits the sketchy figure of Kṛṣṇa the Magician in light of Faiḍī's concerns as a poet and a writer, the more the sorcerous antagonist of the *Mahābhārat* begins to seem more dynamic and meaningful than he first appeared. As I will show, Kṛṣṇa the Magician was not, primarily, a parodic device by which to criticise Vaiṣṇavite theology—akin, in this way, to the famous Talmudic references to Jesus as a sorcerer[114]—but rather an artefact of deeper insecurities—about the truthfulness of the *Mahābhārat* and the spiritual value of its contents, but also, ultimately, about the value of Faiḍī's own literary activity, and the nature of *sukhan* itself.

[112] T. d'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan*, South Asia Research (New York, 2018), pp. 213–18.

[113] I have elsewhere written on how Abū'l Faḍl's preface directs the reader to the Rājadharma section of the 'Śāntiparvan', where one finds a series of mirrorings in the way of the stories of Vena and Pṛthu, similar in many respects to the dueling portraitures of Kṛṣṇa. My attention was drawn to this by Audrey Truschke, although my analysis of the salient features of that text departs from hers in several respects. Truschke, 'Padshah like Manu', pp. 6–7.

[114] M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York, 1993).

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Faiḍī the Magician

Early into the preface of his Divan, Faiḍī makes the following plaintive parenthetical lament:

> Subḥāna'llāh! Where [on the one hand] is my station, a Hindustani with this twisted speech, and where is Pahlavani, and [true] knowledge of Pahlavi? It [i.e. my skill with Farsi] could be akin to the sorcery of the magicians of Hind [*siḥr-i jādūgarān-i hind*], who with acts of enchantment, make as if present imaginary forms and objects with no external existence.[115]

The phrasing here is reminiscent of certain passages in the *Mahābhārat* in reference to Kṛṣṇa —most closely, Śiśupāla's declaration that the god's Puranic deeds were 'merely apparent, without real existence'. As has been established, Kṛṣṇa, for Faiḍī, was also an Indian magician. Yet, what, after all, is a magician, and why does Faiḍī liken himself to one?

The *jādūgarān* the Faiḍī seems to have in mind most directly here were entertainers—regular visitors to every Mughal court, including Akbar's. They not only performed physical and acrobatic feats, but, according to many accounts, could also make objects disappear and materialise out of thin air. Jahangir, in his memoirs, tells of witnessing trees growing from seed to sprout at breakneck speed only to disappear into the earth, and a rope trick involving a parade of animals up a chain that hung suspended above the ground.[116] Such displays were not necessarily understood to involve only naturalistic skill. As John Zubrzycki has emphasised, street performers could reproduce the authentic feats of Sufi pīr-s or yogi-s—'vanish[ing] objects, pass[ing] skewers through his body or walk[ing] on hot coals'.[117] The performing magician was an ambiguous double of the saint: a miracle worker who used his power to dazzle rather than to reveal divine truth.[118]

In comparing himself to a Hindustani magician in this sense, Faiḍī was condescending to his imagined extra-Hindustani Persophone audience through an old stereotype. The figure of the Indian magician was not only familiar to Faiḍī through first-hand experience; it was also represented in well-known travelogues such as Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*. Part of a traditional Persophone and Islamicate ethnographic understanding of Hindūstān as a land of marvels, this invocation of the *jādūgarān-i hind* was part of an interrogation of Indian-ness: indeed, by the logic of the passage, Faiḍī was a magician, in some sense, simply because he was from Hindustan. Like a sorcerer manifesting unreal objects, his work manifested a sophistication in the Persian language that he, as an Indian, could not authentically possess. Not a true poet, he was in fact an illusionist.

Yet, the reverse was just as true: Faiḍī was an illusionist *because* he was a poet. While the passage in question does not use any word for 'magic', Faiḍī had already once, in the Divan's first true paragraph, compared his writing to illusion. Here, the opposition is not between Iranian and Hindustani Farsi, but between speech devoted to the praise of God and the Prophet, and literary prose and poetry *in toto*:

> Yet after this [i.e. Faiḍī's exordial praise of God and his Prophet], these [words and poems] are but several grains of sand from the desert of fancy, a mirage of [only

[115] *Subḥāna'llāh! kujā pāya-yi man hindūstānī bā-īn-hama kaj maj zabānī u kujā īn pahlawānī u pahlawī-dānī? hamānā ki siḥr-i jādūgarān-i hind tawānad būd ki ba-'amal-i sīmyā, ashkāl u ashbāḥ-i mauhūma rā ki dar khārij wujūd na-dārand, maujūd-numā sakhta, ba-naẓar mī dar ārand.* Abū'l Faiḍ bin Mubārak 'Faiḍī', in *Dīwān-i Faiḍī (954–1004): Buzurgtarīn Shā'ir-i Sadah-'i Dahum-i Sarzamīn-i Hind*, (ed.) E. D. Arshad (Intishārāt-i Furūghī, 1983), Chāp-i 1, b–j.

[116] J. Zubrzycki, *Empire of Enchantment: The Story of Indian Magic* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 3–6.

[117] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[118] *Ibid.*

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> apparent] meaning. When desert-treaders, dry of lip, and blister-footed wanderers from the valley of yearning glimpse them suddenly, from afar off, then fancying [these sparkling grains] to be the billowing of the ocean, they venture out. Yet when they take in this glittering [of sand in the Sun] with a more careful gaze, kindled to wrath, with burning feet, they turn back.[119]

Faiḍī's plaint here is, again, performative. A few sentences later, he reverses course to insist that his words are not, indeed, desert sand, but rather hewn diamonds. True connoisseurs and spiritual searchers, 'speedy travelers of the King's Highway of the heart',[120] 'sojourners over land and sea, word and import',[121] must confront the mirages of literature head on if they hope to penetrate to the 'fountainhead of divine grace'. Yet, the association of poetry with frivolity and deceit that Faiḍī here parries runs deep.

In Islamicate tradition, poetry, like sorcery, belonged to a liminal realm—a borderland between the sacred and profane. The *locus classicus* for this point of view is Qur'ānic. In its twenty-seventh sura, entitled 'The Poets', the Qur'ān answers the charge of those who dismissed the Prophet as a jinn-mad poet by producing a long litany of previous prophets who faced disbelief—including, first, the Prophet Mūsá or Moses, who is understood by the Pharaoh to be simply a skillful sorcerer before his genuinely miraculous display overpowers the Egyptian magicians' 'trickery'. The close of the chapter condemns the titular 'poets' as 'lying sinner[s]' led astray by jinn. 'Only those who are lost in error follow the poets,' the speaker concludes. 'Do you not see how they rove aimlessly in every valley; how they say what they do not do?'[122] Poetry, while not equated with magic, is set in parallel to it.

Faiḍī's own defence of poetry does not deny the conjunction between magic and the latter. Indeed, apparently favourable comparisons between the two occur many times in the poet's *Mahābhārat*: Vyāsa, for instance, is first introduced as 'a learned man acquainted with subtleties, and a poet of magical utterance [*'ārif-i nukta-dān u shā'ir-i jādū-bayān*]'.[123] In one couplet in the conclusion of the 'Ādiparvan', Faiḍī refers to the *Mahābhārata* as an ancient grimoire, full of 'a hundred incantations'.[124] In another, he implicitly declares the supremacy of his poetic speech to magic: 'Magicians laid down their hands [a gesture of respect or submission] / in that place [where] my pen fashioned speech.'[125]

The point of these associations is to appropriate for poetic speech (*sukhan*) the undeniable power of sorcerous utterance. Faiḍī's word is efficacious, like incantation (*afsūn*)—and thus Faiḍī, insofar as he is an authentic and powerful poet, is also a magician. Indeed, as the verse above implies, Faiḍī, being a poet, is a magician of a higher calibre than ordinary magicians.

With this formulation, Faiḍī alludes to the solution offered by the seminal Hindustani poet and literary theorist, Amīr Khusrau. In the *dībācha* to his third Divan, the *Ghurrat al-Kamāl* [*Full Moon of Perfection*], Khusrau mounted an elaborate defence of poetry against the Qur'ānic accusation: poetry, or *shi'r*, far from being the speech of jinn-addled liars, is synonymous with *'ilm* or knowledge. This Khusrau proves etymologically by quoting

[119] *ammā ba'd, īn dharra[-yi?] chandīst az reg-i biyābān-i khayāl ki sarāb-i jahān-i ma'nīst. chūn bādiya- paimāyān-i tishna-lab u ābila-pāyān-i wādī-yi ṭalab nā-gahān-ash az dūr bīnand, tamauwuj-i daryā angāshta, tawajjuh numāyand, u chūn ān lama'ān rā ba-naẓar-i im'ān dar ārand, bar-afrokhta u pā sokhta bar gardand.* Faiḍī, *Dīwān-i Faiḍī (954–1004)*, i.

[120] *garam-rawān-i shāhrāh-i dil. Ibid.*, i.

[121] *musāfirān-i bar u baḥr-i alfāẓ u ma'ānī. Ibid.*

[122] M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Qur'an: English Translation with Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford, 2010), p. 377.

[123] Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 2a.

[124] *kuhan-nāma-ī bā-ṣad afsūn-garī / zi hindī bar-am dar zabān-i darī. Ibid.*, folio 186a.

[125] *ba-jā-yi ki kilkam sukhan naqsh bast / nihādand jādū-garān pusht-i dast.* Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. *Ibid.*, folio 186b.

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Qur'ānic verses that employ verbal derivatives of the former root, *shīn-ʿain-rāʾ*, for knowing or perceiving. Every poet (*shāʿir*) is also a 'knower', a scholar, or sage (*ʿālim*).[126] Various sayings of the Prophet, Khusrau argues, demonstrate his affection and reverence for poetry; indeed, it is not altogether incorrect to attribute poetic qualities to the Qur'ān itself.[127]

While Khusrau's argument does not address magic in detail, magic does crop up as the poet explicates a well-known hadith which asserts that 'philosophy [*ḥikmat*] is from poetry, and rhetoric [*bayān*] is from magic'.[128] The directionality implied by this statement—that philosophy comes out of or falls under poetry, and not vice versa—is what is salient to the argument. Poetry cannot be suspect, after all, if the Prophet has deemed it the ur-category from which knowledge unfolds. Collapsing rhetoric or utterance (*bayān*) into poetics, Amīr Khusrau relates the remaining three nouns to each other according to an overlapping hierarchical schema: 'Poetry [*shiʿr*],' Khusrau argues, 'must be superior to philosophy [*ḥikmat*], and philosophy would fall under poetry; and [so] one might call a poet a philosopher, [but] one could not designate a philosopher a poet.'[129] Similarly, 'Magic [*siḥr*], one is pleased to clarify, is from narration [*bayān*]; not narration from magic. Thus one can call a poet a magician, but one cannot reckon a magician a poet.'[130]

While Khusrau does not unpack the meaning of this relation in prose, he does develop it in poetry, in the form of a few interjected couplets, which begin: 'Come, behold manifest magic; what want you with poets / after all of their Dīwān[s]' inconsequent conjuration[s].'[131] However, in the midst of defending poetry, Khusrau cannot help but follow this declaration with two couplets that blame poetry itself for any untruthfulness in the verses he might pen:

> If I made utilisation [of poetic speech], [then] in keeping with the Prophet's word
> its construction and expression will not be devoid of two qualities:
>
> If truthful, then this single [quality] is due to [my] perfection of character
> If error, then that [quality] owes to the falsehood of verse [*shaʿr*] [itself].[132]

For Khusrau as for Faiḍī, the relationship between magic and the poetic word has to do mostly with power, while the broader tension between poetry and (religious or philosophical) prose has to do with truthfulness. Yet, each has to do with each, as should now be clear; poetry (*shaʿr*), even more so than magic (*siḥr*), is a capricious category. Faiḍī, insofar as he is a Hindustani poet writing in Farsi, is by his own attestation less than a poet, and simply a magician-cum-poet; yet, insofar as his poetic word manifests actual power, he is a poet-cum-magician more than he is a mere poet. Khusrau, in the midst of defending poetry, playfully demeans (other) poets and promises to entertain the reader with

[126] According to Steingass, *shāʿir* can mean 'one who finds out; one who knows'. F. J. Steingass , 'Shāʿir', in *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to Be Met with in Persian Literature* (London, 1892), https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/steingass_query.py?qs=%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B1&searchhws=yes&matchtype=exact (accessed 25 January 2024).

[127] A. K. Dihlawī, *Dībācha-Yi Dīwān-i Ghurrat al-Kamāl: Muḥtawī-i Maṭālib-i Zabān-Shināsī Wa Shiʿr- Shināsī-Yi Fārsī Wa Sharḥ-i Aḥwāl Wa Muʿarrifī-i Baʿḍī Az Athār-i Fārsī-Yi Khud-Ash*, (ed.) S. ʿAlī Ḥaidar Nayyar (Patnah, 1975), pp. 17–20.

[128] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[129] *pas dar īn ṣūrat shiʿr bālā-tar az ḥikmat bāshad, u ḥikmat dar tah-i shiʿr dākhal būd, u shāʿir rā ḥakīm tawān khwānd u ḥakīm rā shāʿir na-tawān niwisht. Ibid.*, p. 19.

[130] *u siḥr rā az bayān mī farmayad na bayān rā az siḥr. pas shāʿir rā sāḥir tawān guft u sāḥir rā shāʿir na-tawān shumurd. Ibid.*

[131] *bi-yā u siḥr-i mubīn bīn chi khwāhi az shuʿarā / pas az ʿazīmat-i dīwān-i nā-muʾaththir-i shān. Ibid.*

[132] *agar ba-qol-i payam-bar taṣarrufī kardam / na az dū ḥāl birūnast ān banā u bayān agar ṣawāb, yikī az kamāl-i ṭabʿ ast īn / u gar khaṭāst, yikī az durogh-i shiʿr ast ān. Ibid.*

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'manifest magic', divesting blame for his own creations onto the nature of poetry (*sha'r*) itself. One is reminded of Derrida's famous formulation of writing as *pharmakon* that 'cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates' and 'cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws'—yet is disciplined and defined by oppositions.[133]

Kṛṣṇa the (anti-)poet

Yet, if Faiḍī's sorcery is poetical, what about Kṛṣṇa's? The final question is: What makes Kṛṣṇa a magician?

Surprisingly, aside from the aforementioned speech of Śiśupāla, the designation does not seem to be used by Faiḍī to cast aspersions upon miraculous powers that the character possesses. Neither, for that matter, is the Yadava prince portrayed as swallowing swords or performing tricks. Rather, Kṛṣṇa's 'magic' is, in every concrete instance, like Faiḍī's—verbal. It denotes his skill in instigating courtly intrigues—a skill portrayed as stemming from a way with words.

In order to see this, let us revisit an episode from the *Mahābhārat*'s 'Vidūragamanaparvan'. Faiḍī's language here is notable in that it explicitly emphasises verbal and compositional skill as the key element in Kṛṣṇa's incendiary genius—so much so that, by the end of the passage, the war itself is actually blamed on speech (*sukhan*):

> Kṛṣṇa, the fomenter of mischief, wrote to Duryodhana about these occurrences [i.e. the Pāṇḍavas' marriage to Draupadī], and having put them into proper order *with many words* [*bā chandīn sukhanān*], made [the Prince] aware [of them]. Duryodhana grew heavy at heart, and Bhīṣma Pitāmaha and Vidura and Droṇācārya and other friends [of the Pāṇḍavas], hearing the news of their well-being and esteem, were gladdened. And by virtue of the instigation and deception of Kṛṣṇa, which had taken place from the beginning of the affair until this time, the hearts of Duryodhana and these brothers were turned away from each other *through words* [*ba-sukhanān*], so that, through right elucidation and mortal hatred and hidden rancour, [the feud] had taken root *in words* [*ba- sukhanān*], as is borne out in [these] volumes.[134]

Not simply a trickster, Kṛṣṇa is here portrayed as a kind of second and sinister author of the *Mahābhārat*. He is the author of the *Mahābhārata* war, not the literary work, but an author nonetheless, who engenders conflict through skillful use of rhetoric. In this way, he is a double for the poet who cannot lay claim to that title. While poetry is sometimes described in Persianate tradition as a 'licit magic [*siḥr-i ḥalāl*]', Kṛṣṇa is the reverse: an illicit (anti-)poet. He is a distillation of the negative aspect of *sukhan*—a manifestation of the power of the word to deceive.

There is some precedent in Arabic and Persian literature for such a figure. Abu'l-Fatḥ al-Iskandirī, the anti-hero of al-Hamadhānī's infamous *Maqāmāt*, for instance, is a hustler, an aesthete, and a cheat whose power comes from his verbal acrobatics. In an early chapter, he advises the narrator to 'spend [your] life in deceiving / men and throwing dust in

[133] J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, (trans.) B. Johnson (Chicago, 1981), p. 103.

[134] Emphases added. *īn waqā'i' rā tamām Kishan fitna-sāz ba-Jorjodhan niwisht u sar u sāman-i īshān rā ba-chandīn sukhanān sakhta ma'lūm-i u sakht. Jorjodhan rā bar dil girān āmad, u bahīkam pitāma u bidura [u] drona-chāraj u dīgar dūstān az shunīdan-i khabar-i salāmat u i'zāz-i īshān khwush-ḥāl shudand. u ba-sabab-i fitna-garī u ḥīla-pardāzī Kishan, ki az ibtidā-yi ḥāl tā īn zamān wuqū' yāft, dil-i Jorjodhan u īn barādar az yikdīgar ba-sukhanān ramīda būd, ki ba-sharḥ-i rāst u 'adāwat-i jānī u niqār-i pinhānī, ba-sukhanān istiḥkām yāfta būd, ki ba-dafātar gunjad.* Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 167b.

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their eyes'.[135] The broader identification of poets with all manner of vice and debauchery is summed up in Hafez's canonical self-application of the term *rind*, or rogue—a term that was used in prose to denote actual cheats and highway robbers.[136] Verse itself is often ascribed a power to bewitch, to effect change in the listener, which can be put to evil ends.

The most regular epithet that Faiḍī applies to Kṛṣṇa—*shaʿbada-bāz*, 'deceitful', or, more literally, 'a performer of jugglery'—is not bereft of reference to literary skill. Niẓāmī Ganjavī (d. 1209), in his *Makhzan al-asrār*, for instance, describes his writing as a 'fresh sleight-of-hand [*shaʿbada-yi tāza*]' in a passage that explicates this sleight of hand as a kind of magical puppet play—a conjuring, like Kṛṣṇa's according to Śiśupāla, of insubstantial forms, shadow against the liminal illumination of early morning light:[137]

I awaken fresh prestidigitation [*shaʿbada-yi tāza*]
I cast an image of new form

[the puppets] rosy-faced and mannered
the curtain sown from the sorcery of dawn.[138]

While this is a positive image, a more ambiguous idea of a play of shadow against light—that is, of truth with some element in speech, poetry, or writing that obscures truthful meaning (*maʿnī*)—is echoed repeatedly in Faiḍī's writings. In yet another passage in the Divan, he compares this less pristine element of speech to the blackness of the ink a poet necessarily uses to write—also to mud or dirt or the planet Earth itself during a lunar eclipse, when, through obstruction, Earth—that is, the blackness and materiality of ink—deprives the moon of *sukhan* from the Sun's light. Writing, for Faiḍī, is a 'chess match' of white against black, and skillful speech—by analogy, a 'night-illuminating jewel' whose relationship to the divine light of truth or meaning (*maʿnī*) is not ruptured even as it necessarily involves ink, blackness, and obscurantism.[139]

According to Faiḍī's brother, Abū'l-Faḍl, similar views were held by Faiḍī's patron, the emperor himself. In a famous passage in the A'in-i Akbari prefacing a description of various poets at court, Faḍl asserts that Akbar 'does not care for poets'. The reason is not that he disdains poetry itself, which, as Faḍl assures us, manifests the radiance of a 'divine grace'. It is rather the frivolous and evil use to which poets put their verbal intelligence: they misuse their talents for the sake of greed, gossip, and flattery, 'pass [ing] their time in praising the mean-minded, or soil[ing] their language with invectives against the wise'.[140]

I suggest that Kṛṣṇa (the 'dark Lord') became, for Faiḍī, a concretisation of and scapegoat for this tendency—a symbol of the frivolous, sorcerous aspect of discourse (*sukhan*) in general, and the darkness in the *Mahābhārat* in particular. It is evident from many of the *bait*-s that Faiḍī wrote for his *Mahābhārat* that he was concerned to be understood

[135] Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī and W. J. Prendergast, *The Maqámát of Badíʿ Al-Zamán al-Hamadhán* (London, 1915), p. 32.

[136] B. J. Christoph, *The Feather of Simurgh: The 'Licit Magic' of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York, 1988), pp. 64–65.

[137] My attention was drawn to this passage by the mention in the aforementioned monograph: J. C. Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh* (New York, 1988), p. 58.

[138] *shaʿbada-yi tāza bar-angekhtam / haikale az qālib-i nū rekhtam ṣubḥ rūy-i chand adab āmokhta / parda zi siḥr-i saḥarī dokhta.* Metre: – u u – – u u – – u –. N. Ganjavī, *Makhzan Al-Asrār. Bā Taṣḥīḥ Wa Hawāshī-yi Ḥasan Wahīd Dastgirdī*, Chāp Sawam ([Tehran] Elmi, 1964), p. 35. My interpretation of these verses follows Dastgirdi's footnote.

[139] Faiḍī, *Dīwān-i Faiḍī (954–1004)*, b.

[140] Quoted in S. Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), p. 21.

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to be among those enlightened poets separating white from black—or, as his brother put it, 'truth [from] falsehood, wisdom [from] foolishness, pearls [from] common shells'. I close my examination of his translation by sampling a related sequence of verse from the 'Paulomaparvan':

> Take care, oh listener of tale[s]
> when you hearken to ancient saying[s]
>
> At the table of knowledge, you should be a weigher of words
> a chooser of the real article from this treasure-house
>
> The wine of the feast of meaning is not all pure
> you cannot be sure that the dregs of embellishment are not in it
>
> Submerge yourself into the ocean of speech
> but distinguish potshards from pearls.[141]

Conclusion: the magician and the king

In an earlier section of this article, I cautioned against a reduction of the Akbari translation movement's reception of Kṛṣṇa to mirrorings of the political situation. In so doing, I followed the advice of Audrey Truschke who, in her *Culture of Encounters*, spoke out against not only 'a stale form of legitimation theory that privileges political claims above all else', but also the dangers of simply 'transport[ing] our language for political hegemony into the aesthetic realm'.[142]

I agree that these are unappealing choices. A reduction of the Akbari translation movement to realpolitik risks the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It imposes contemporary assumptions about what is real, valuable, and motivating on the sources, blinding historians to the presence of other understandings—particularly other understandings of art and politics.

Yet, the equal and opposite approach—cleaving literature from political claims and considerations entirely—would surely be at least as damaging. The autonomy of art is an ideal whose liberal underpinnings are at least as alien to the early modern Mughal court as those of legitimation theory. Indeed, a careful reader will have noted that my interpretation of the Persophone Kṛṣṇa depends on the possibility of transfers between the aesthetic and political domains. Faiḍī's Kṛṣṇa—a deceitful wordsmith who started a war with words—is a political actor and can be read as an (anti-)poet only on the basis of an understanding of poetry as a political art.

This notion, while it might seem outlandish to the contemporary reader, would not have seemed strange at all to Abū'l Faḍl or Abū'l Faiḍ 'Faiḍī'. In the early modern Islamic(ate) world, the idea of poetry as a political science could boast venerable precedents. In Niẓāmī ʿArūḍī's celebrated *Chahār Maqāla* (*The Four Discourses*), *shāʿirī* is lauded as a powerful discipline, linked to illusion, but also world-historic achievement. Nizāmī writes:

[141] *alā-yi niyūshanda-yi dāstān / ki dārī sar-i gufta-yi bāstān ba-mezān-i dānish sukhan-sanj bāsh / guzīnanda-yi naqd-i īn ganj bāsh may-i bazm-i maʿnī hama ṣāf nīst / nadānī dar-ū durdī-yi lāf nīst ba-baḥr-i sukhan khwesh rā gharq kun / wa lekin khazaf az guhur farq kun.* Metre: u – – u – – u – – u –. Faiḍī, 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folio 18a.

[142] Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, p. 141.

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> Poetry is that art through which the poet joins together imaginary premises and brings together inferential analogies in such a way that he may make a small thing great, and a great thing small, and exhibit the good in a hideous costume, and dress up the hideous in the form of the good; and through insinuation, stir up the powers of anger and lust, so that, through this insinuation, the temperaments [of men] contract or relax. And [thereby] [the poet] becomes a cause of great things in the order of the world.[143]

Niẓāmī ʿArūḍī's definition draws on an Avicennian defence of poetry also developed by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, the mathematician, astronomer, and ethicist. As Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī argued, the efficacy of poetry derives from a non-assertive form of syllogism that works on the imagination, rousing its listeners to action rather than gaining their assent (*taṣdīq*).[144] *Shāʿirī*'s ability to inspire great deeds is one of the reasons why ʿArūḍī names the *shāʿir* as one of the four kinds of professionals essential to the royal court, alongside scribes, physicians, and astrologers. Yet, by implication, such an understanding also makes the rogue poet a dangerous man. In its emphasis on the power of illusion, ʿArūḍī's definition of poetry could moreover easily double as a description of magic.

In the Mughal court, I suggest, verbal power and political power were even more inextricably and ambivalently intertwined. At the apex of this intersection was magic. Rather than always referring concretely to occult arts,[145] or, for that matter, serving as a metaphor for poetry or 'fluent speech [*sukhan-i faṣīḥ*]',[146] magic within the Akbari corpus performed a more complex role as a bridge category: a way of linking aesthetic and literary concerns, theories of speech and language, on the one hand, with metaphysical and theological notions and theories of sovereignty on the other.[147] Applied alternatively to Akbar,

[143] *shāʿirī ṣināʿatest ki shāʿir ba-dān ṣināʿat ittisāq-i muqammāt-i mūhimma kunad wa iltiʾām-i qiyāsāt-i muntajja bar ān wajh ki maʿnī-i khurd rā buzurg gardānad wa maʿnī-yi buzurg rā khurd, wa nekū rā dar khilʿat-i zisht bāz numāyad wa zisht rā dar ṣūrat-i nekū jilwa kunad, wa ba-īhām quwwat-hā-yi ghaḍabān u shahwānī rā bar angezad tā ba-dān īhām tibāʿ rā inqibāḍī u inbisāṭī būd wa umūr-i ʿuẓẓām rā dar niẓām-i ʿālam sabab shawad.* Translation above is my own. I have also consulted the translation cited below. Aḥmad bin ʿUmr bin ʿAlī Niẓāmī Samarqandī, *Chahār Maqāla*, (eds.) M. Qazwīnī and M. Muʿīn (Leiden, 1327), p. 62; N. Arūẓ ī, *Revised Translation of the Chahár Maqála ('Four Discourses') of Nizámí-i-ʾArúdí of Samarqand, Followed by an Abridged Translation of Mírzá Muhammad's Notes to the Persian Text*, (trans.) M. Qazvīnī (London, 1921), p. 27.

[144] J. Landau, 'Naṣīr Al-Dīn Ṭūsī and poetic imagination in the Arabic and Persian philosophical tradition', in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, vol. 6, Iran Studies, (ed.) A. A. Seyed-Gohrab (Boston, 2012), pp. 15–66.

[145] The interest of the Mughals in the occult sciences—most prominently, Lettrism and astrology—took place in the context of what Matthew Melvin-Koushki has called an 'occultist arms race … for messianic and sacral forms of political legitimacy' beginning in the fifteenth century. Occultism was central to the post-Mongol Islamicate political projects of Tīmūr and Shāh Ismāʿīl, who each sought 'saint-philosopher-kingship and universal cosmic imperialism'. Safavid and Timurid precedents, in turn, as Azfar Moin has detailed, formed the backdrop for Akbar's own 'millennial science'. M. Melvin-Koushki, 'Early modern Islamicate empire: new forms of religiopolitical legitimacy', in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, (eds.) A. Salvatore et al. (Hoboken, NJ, 2018), pp. 360, 354; A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship & Sainthood in Islam*, South Asia Across the Disciplines (New York, 2012). A. A. Moin, 'Millennial sovereignty, total religion, and total politics', *History and Theory* 56.1 (2017), pp. 89–97.

[146] For this broader definition see e.g. the entry for *ṣihr-i ḥalāl* in the following sixteenth-century Persian dictionary: A. F. Sarhindī, *Madār Al-Afāḍil*, (ed.) B. Muhammad, vol. 2, 4 vols, Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Panjāb Bi-Sarmāyah-'i I'ānah-'i A'lā-Ḥaḍrat-i Humāyūn Shāhanshāh-i Īrān (Lāhaur, 1337), p. 443.

[147] Analogies between a Lettrist understanding of creation as a process of pronunciation and an idea of Akbar as Perfect Man ala divine word form a major substrate in Abū'l Faḍl's hagiographical portraiture. While speech in the *Āʾīn-i Akbarī* is a 'talisman' of divine light composed of an outer form (*ṣūrat*) and an inner meaning (*maʿnī*), Akbar is, according to the *Akbarnāma*, a combination of 'the elemental indwelling [*tarakkub-i 'unṣurī*] and the material body, i.e., the precious coinage and the sublime pearl': divine light manifested in the body of a man, just as it manifests in a collection of letters or sounds. Akbar's nature gives him a special relationship with writing. 'The imperial order,' Abū'l Faḍl declares, 'is a charm for oratory, and a talisman which illumines knowledge

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to elements and operations of language, and to Abū'l Faḍl himself in his role as a hagiographer, terminologies of magic picked out the overweening power of language, its strangeness and superlative quality, and related this to the equally strange, semi-divine power of Akbar's sacred kingship.[148]

Such a holy hybridity made Akbar magical or miraculous (*ṭilismātī*); it did not, however, make him a magician. The opposition between magician and king is brought out in a key passage of Abū'l Faḍl's *Āʾīn-i Akbarī* in which the 'whirlwinds of uproar' that arise from the 'ocean of orderlessness' are tied to the 'the absence of the dread and the hope of a leader'—particularly a sacred king, or 'receiver of God's splendor [*padhīranda-yi far-i īzidī*]'. 'And additionally,' Abū'l Faḍl concludes, 'in that burning desert [*ātishīn dasht*], the magician and the sorcerer and the sleight-of-hander have entry.'[149] The images of disorder that Abū'l Faḍl contrasts with the nomos of state power—the sorcerer (*ṭilism-kār*), the magician (*nairanjī*), and the sleight-of-hander, juggler or swindler (*shaʿbada-bāz*) who hold sway in an anarchic wilderness—bring to mind the invectives applied to Kṛṣṇa in both Faiḍī's *Mahābaharat* and Abū'l-Faḍl's introduction to the *Razmnāma*. To again paraphrase the comment of Amir Khusrau cited earlier: one can call a sacred king a magician, but one cannot call a magician a king.

In the Akbari translation movement, magic, despite its associations with deceit,[150] served as an ambivalent term: a multivalent way of expressing liminality, mystery, power, or difference across multiple domains.[151] The magician, on the other hand, cut

[*farmāyish-i shāhinshāhī afsūn-i sukhan-sarāʾī u ṭilism-i dānish-afrozī ast*].' Abul-Fazl-i-ʾAllāmī, *The Āīn-i-Akbarī*, vol. I, (ed.) H. Blochmann (Calcutta, 1872), p. 111; Abu'l-Fazl, *The History of Akbar*, vol. 1, Murty Classical Library of India, (trans.) W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA, 2015), pp. 2–3; Abul-Fazl-i-ʾAllāmī, *The Āīn-i-Akbarī*, (ed.) H. Blochmann, vol. II (Calcutta, 1877), p. 253. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the *Āʾīn-i Akbarī* are my own.

[148] As Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern have discussed, sacred kingship involves a certain liminality or strangeness, whereby the human leader is 'pushed part way into the sphere of the divine in order to intercede on our behalf'. A. Moin and A. Strathern, 'Sacred kingship in world history: between immanence and transcendence', in *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence* (New York, 2022), p. 14.

[149] The quotations above are taken from my translation of the passage in question, which reads in full as the following: 'Should house and precinct experience the absence of the dread and the hope of a leader, and not become integrated into a political order, [then], without the awe of the receiver of God's splendor, how would the uproar of [this] hornet's nest of a world ever come to rest? In what way would there be protection of the Life and Property and Nomos [*nāmūs*] and Religion of the people? If some world-deniers, by virtue of [their] violation of custom, take up this task, still, without the aid of lofty princes, good management would not take hold. And additionally, in that burning desert [*ātishīn dasht*], the magician and the sorcerer and the sleight-of-hander have entry. Whirlwinds of uproar arose from this ocean of orderlessness, and would continue to arise.' *har gāh khāna u maḥalla bī-bīm-i peshwāʾī dīda dar muntaẓam na-gardad, bī-saṭwat-i ān padhīranda-yi far-i īzidī shorish-i zanbūr-khāna-yi dunyī chigūna farū nashīnad? nigāh-bānī-yi māl u jān u nāmūs u dīn-i jahāniyān chi-sān shawad? agar-chi barkhī tajarrad-guzīnān ba-dast-āwez-i khāriq-i ʿādat īn ʿazīmat dar sar giriftand, lekin bī-yāwarī-yi salāṭīn-i wālā, ḥusn-i intiẓām na-girift. wa nīz dar ān ātishīn dasht, ṭilism-kār u nairanjī u shaʿbada-bāz rāh dārad. wa ṭūfān-hā-yi shorish az īn daryā-i bī-tamīzī bar-khāst u bar-khezad*. In a 2009 article, Irfan Habib attributes 'a theory of social contract' to Abū'l Faḍl on the basis of the above paragraph, interpreting the reference to 'world-deniers' (as I have translated above) to refer to Islamic prophets. I. Habib, 'Two Indian theorists of the state: Barani and Abū'l Faḍl', in *Mind over Matter: Essays on Mentalities in Medieval India*, (eds.) D. N. Jha and E. Vanina (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 33, 37.

[150] The idea that occult arts in general, and magic in particular, have deceptive uses is not simply scriptural, metaphorical, rhetorical, or conservative. It is attested to even by texts that glorify the occult sciences, such as the *Ghāyat al-hakīm* or the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*. C. Burnett, 'The three divisions of Arabic magic', in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, (eds.) L. Saif et al. (Leiden, 2021), p. 52; L. Saif, 'A study of the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ's epistle on magic, the longer version (52b)', in *Islamicate Occult Sciences*, (eds.) Saif et al., p. 189.

[151] While I have not emphasised this point in this article, in the Akbari translation movement as I have observed it, magic was often used to apprehend religious difference—and in particular elements of Indic religion, ritual, and/or literary achievement. Thus. for Faiḍī, the *Mahābhārata* became an 'ancient tome, with a hundred incantations [*kuhan-nāma-yi bā ṣad afsūngarī*]', Vyāsa a 'poet of magical utterance [*shāʿir-i jādū-bayān*]', and the

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a consistently negative figure as a sinister double or shadow self for poet, writer, and king. On the one side of the mirror was the occultist sovereign, identified in the *Akbarnāma* with the power of speech to order the world and to bridge Earth and Heaven; and on the other side of the looking glass there was the magician—a figure also often linked to the power of the word, yet here linked to its power to throw up dangerous illusions. The king orders the hermeneutico-ontological domain; the magician unsettles it.

Akbar revealed occult truths; the magician occulted truth through hidden knowledge. The writer of poetry or prose, so long as he uses his art to shore and support just imperium,[152] could escape the accusation of being a conjurer or deceiver, becoming a paragon of magic but not a magician.

Kṛṣṇa the Magician was not a creature of literature or politics, but rather a product of his milieu: a translation movement in which artistic, political, and religious concerns intertwined. By examining previously understudied and prominent texts, I have suggested that the image of Kṛṣṇa presented in them was not stably positive or negative, theologically irenic or exclusive, political or religious; neither was it a product of random, unrecoverable private motivations or the free play of artistic whims. It was, to borrow a phrase and concept from Walter Benjamin, a 'dialectical image', a 'constellation saturated with tensions'[153] at the apex of different oppositions, a product of 'mirroring and misrepresentation'[154] that conducted tensions of various sorts along various axes and that still has the ability to surprise in the present: in the words of Benjamin, 'the [quintessential] historical object'.[155]

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chants of the Brahmins engaged in Janamejaya's snake sacrifice 'charm[s]' or 'incantations [*afsūn*]'. It is only in the mouths of the unfortunate snakes themselves, however, that the brahmin priests abetting Janamejaya's holocaust were termed 'magicians [*jādu-fanān*]'. 'Faiḍī', 'Mahābahārat', I.O. Islamic 761, folios 186a, 2a, 46a, 36a.

[152] Of his own art, for instance, Abū'l Faḍl writes: 'And whosoever recognizes this talisman of understanding, and knowledge-seeking charm, and this pen of imagination [*khayāl*], and licit magic [*jādū-yi ḥalāl*], recognizes at least so much: that my preoccupation is to bring awareness of these two far-reaching [*dūr u nazdīk*] noble pillars of Imperium [*shāhanshāhī*], and to set down a select basis for a foundation for everlasting dominion.' *har ki īn ṭilism-i hoshmandī u afsūn-i khirad-pizhūhī dar yābad u īn raqm-i khayāl u jādū-yi ḥalāl bar-shināsad, īn- qadr dānad ki marā andīsha ān ast ki az īn dū pāya-yi wālā-yi shāhinshāhī-yi dūr u nazdīk rā āgāh gardānad, wa asās-i daulat-i jāwīd rā guzīn-bunyādī nihad.* Abul-Fazl-i-ʾAllāmī, *The Āīn-i-Akbarī*, vol. II, p. 250.

[153] W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (trans.) H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, 1999), p. 475.

[154] I here perform bricolage, mixing and matching Benjamin's concept with Hugh Urban's gloss on the latter. Of Tantra, Urban wrote that '[i]t is a dialectical category—similar to what Walter Benjamin has called a dialectical image—born out of the mirroring and mimesis that goes on between Western and Indian minds'. H. Urban , *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*, p. 3.

[155] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 475.

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