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THE WAR THAT WASN'T: THE *VIRĀṬAPARVAN*, THE *PAÑCARĀTRA*, AND THE
FANTASY LIFE OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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NELL SHAPIRO HAWLEY

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Abstract

The Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* (300 BCE–300 CE) paints an irresistibly complex, dark narrative landscape. Its central story of fratricidal war and pyrrhic victory exerts a gravitational pull on South Asian literature and religion. Retellings of the *Mahābhārata* fill South Asia's languages, artistic genres, and religious communities, and each telling answers the violent, disorienting world of the Sanskrit epic in its own way. In this rich and crowded field, one work stands out for its highly unusual reconstruction of the epic story: *Pañcarātra* (*The Five Nights*, ca. 800 CE), an anonymous Sanskrit play with a long if opaque performance history in Kerala. At the conclusion of the drama, the epic's famously antagonistic cousins agree to share rulership of their kingdom, thereby averting the great war that is the hallmark of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Pañcarātra* transforms the epic on a monumental, outrageous scale. How ought we to make sense of a *Mahābhārata* where the war never happens?

The *Pañcarātra*'s approach is radical, but it represents a deeply perceptive interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* itself. This becomes clear when we consider how thoughtfully the *Pañcarātra*'s vision is filtered through the *Virāṭaparvan* (*The Book of Virāṭa's Court*). This is the fourth book of the *Mahābhārata* and its self-designed concave mirror. While the *Virāṭaparvan* is part of the *Mahābhārata*, it also stands apart from it. It encapsulates the epic's plot and reflects the whole epic back on itself—as if it were a play within a play. But it works obliquely. Throughout the *Virāṭaparvan* the signature horrors of the greater epic are reimagined and turned upside-down. It is the only place in the *Mahābhārata* where everything appears to go according to plan for the protagonists; therefore it is the only place in the epic where we discover

periods of resolution, satisfaction, and comic relief. Growing out of the *Virāṭaparvan*, the *Pañcarātra* takes its upward turns at an even steeper angle.

Fantasy offers us one way of understanding the *Virāṭaparvan*'s relationship with the broader epic around it—and by extension the *Pañcarātra*'s. Both texts present fully developed alternative visions of the *Mahābhārata* that self-consciously embody extraordinary possibilities as opposed to realities. Through a technique I call “veiled narration,” these works depict the epic stereoscopically. On one level, we follow the action toward a compelling sense of integration. This is the veil, ever so elegantly woven. But the *Pañcarātra* and the *Virāṭaparvan* pull back this veil at key moments, reminding us of the tragedies they have forestalled. Resolutions, then, are temporary—deceptive, even—part of the performances that both texts stage, one literal and one metaphorical. Yet a happy ending, even in irony, conveys its own constructive truth—an auspiciousness yet more striking because of the tragic raw material from which it is forged. This may be the power of fantasy. It propels the *Virāṭaparvan* into a uniquely auspicious position in the world of the *Mahābhārata* and therefore into countless tellings. Of these, the *Pañcarātra* remains the most inventive—and perhaps the most insightful.

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Anyone who works with the *Mahābhārata* must have an appreciation for the good that comes from the collaboration of multiple authors, many editorial hands, and a diverse group of readers over a long period of time. I am lucky that the process of working on my thesis allowed me to experience that good directly, even if it necessarily played out on a different scale from that of the epic itself. Wendy Doniger's scholarship inspired so much of this project to begin with, and it has been a joy to talk with her about it on a near weekly basis for these last years. Her encouragement was constant; she would respond to even my most underdeveloped ideas with enthusiasm, respect, and deep engagement. Her incisive vision, her sense of humor, and her ability to think so expansively across texts will remain my greatest teachers as long as I am working in the field of South Asian religions and literatures. It is an immense honor to be Wendy's student and mentee, and to be part of a long line of scholars who have begun their dissertations with heartfelt *māngalas* praising her.

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Introduction

There is a captivating tension in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* (300 BCE–300 CE) between a commitment to realism—a determination to tell the unvarnished truth about human life and all that it touches—and a pull toward fantasy. At first glance, fantasy seems to win out. The epic story unfolds in a highly imaginative world of narrative, characterological, and ideological hyperbole: warriors are able to withstand being pierced by thousands of arrows; kings are perfectly dharma-knowing; slain loved ones return from the dead; heaven and hell materialize in stunning detail. What is strange becomes familiar and what is familiar, strange. The hypothetical—what might be, what could be, what should be—is given space to expand and flourish. Yet all this is balanced by a set of powerful realisms. The *Mahābhārata* is where emotional, political, and ethical ideals come to be questioned, and often dismantled entirely. Violence is almost always the answer. At its core, the *Mahābhārata* narrates the story of a catastrophic fratricidal war and the disintegration of a ruling dynasty. The victories are pyrrhic and the curses inescapable. For all their superhuman (and indeed fantastic) qualities, the central figures in the epic feel and fail in ways that would likely have seemed as easily recognizable to audiences in early South Asia as they do to readers and listeners today. The literary design of the *Mahābhārata* amplifies these themes. Looking at the text from a formal perspective, we find multiple narrators, a labyrinthine structure, and a complex anatomy of repetitions and mirrors. How better to express the conflicts and dilemmas that animate the narrative itself? In the end we hear a brutally realistic story told in a very lifelike way—chaos within chaos.

Chaos belongs here. After all, by its own much-quoted claim, the epic contains “whatever exists.” It speaks of nearly everything in early Indian mythology, philosophy, and story

literature. It is an attempt to tell the whole story of humanity. But to work toward completion turns out to be a dangerous endeavor. The world that the *Mahābhārata* conjures is kaleidoscopic, unsettling, and deeply violent—qualities so profoundly menacing that in India it is sometimes considered inauspicious to keep the whole text inside one’s house, or to read it from beginning to end. In these practices it is the *whole*, or perhaps the mere threat of it, that seems to pose the real hazard. As Lawrence McCrea writes, “To tell the real story, the whole story—of a life, a reign, a dynasty, or a kingdom—is, almost inevitably, to tell a tragic story.”¹ A story that is both real and whole, then, would seem too tragic to withstand.

The human urge to complete something is, however, deep. A step out of the realm of realism and into that of fantasy allows the possibility of completion—resolution, conclusiveness, integration—to emerge. As we shall see, the *Mahābhārata* opens the door to that, too. And the broader literature of the *Mahābhārata*—that is, not only the epic itself but the multitude of works that retell it—opens still more doors of its own. These openings are possible because realism and fantasy represent complementary, symbiotic responses to the same problem. They are bold, forthcoming ways of dealing with the most emotionally and intellectually challenging parts of human life—through art. They do not gently mold that life into something else, nor do they merely experiment with seeing things differently; they either dive right in (realism) or imagine something else entirely (fantasy). That the *Mahābhārata* would engage both approaches—and deeply—is therefore less surprising than we might think.

In some ways it also explains the intimate but oblique relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the practical and textual traditions of Hinduism. By contrast with its sister epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* (200 BCE–200 CE), the *Mahābhārata* is often kept at a distance from

¹ Lawrence McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājataranṅiṇī*: History, Epic, and Moral Decay,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50 (2013): 198.

temple life, and indeed from religious life in general. (We hear echoes of the proscription against having a *Mahābhārata* inside one's house!) Yet there is no Hindu, and likely no person belonging to South Asia, who does not know the contours of the *Mahābhārata*—and often in great detail. The *Mahābhārata* offers those who step into it an alternative path to the commonplace, a profoundly different way of seeing the world—as if one were floating above or beside it. At the same time, however, it leads its participants into the deepest and most uncomfortable truths of that world. Religion does this, too. The countless retellings of the epic that flood South Asia's languages, locales, artistic media, and interpretive communities suggest that since its inception the *Mahābhārata* has been something of a religion unto itself—a literary cult whose complex, highly developed, and continuously developing ontologies, theologies, mythologies, ethics, and emotional dynamics are constantly being practiced and negotiated by its adherents: its readers, hearers, and retellers.

In the religion of the *Mahābhārata*, anything resembling an ending—a resolution, the closing of a narrative loop—naturally invites suspicion. And so it is that the epic's own conclusion cannot quite be called that. Hell, it turns out, is an illusion; and heaven, in its own way, is illusory, too—a landscape where the main figures in the epic merge with their mythological counterparts in service of the outermost narrator's suddenly urgent need to wrap things up. Yudhiṣṭhira, characteristically, tries to ask one more question—he tries to keep the story going—but Indra (and through him, the narrator) cuts him off.² This is not to say that the epic's conclusion is neither crucial nor deeply fitting. As Naama Shalom argues, if for different

² *Mahābhārata* 18.4.8: *athaināṃ sahasā rājā praṣṭum aicchad yudhiṣṭhiraḥ | tato 'sya bhagavān indraḥ kathayāmāsa devarāt* || Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Mahābhārata* are to the critical edition: V. S. Sukthankar et al., eds., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, 19 vols. (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66).

reasons, it is surely both.³ Rather, I mean to say that the epic constructs for itself an ending that calls into question the very idea of endings. Yudhiṣṭhira never has the chance to ask his question, but in this moment, by this token, the epic asks a huge question of its own.

In a cycle-centric culture such as early South Asia's, perhaps this should come as no surprise; we are used to seeing all kinds of things—souls, relationships, stories—recycle rather than conclude for good. Still, in essential ways, the epic's abundant retellings answer the question of its ending (or non-ending). For one thing there is the very fact of their existence—they keep the story going because it was never concluded in the first place. We know a complete *Mahābhārata* has its risks: to conclude such a story in its own terms is tragic beyond the bounds of comprehension. Each retelling counters such a risk by insisting that the whole story has not yet been told. But there is also the fact that retellings of the *Mahābhārata* tend to bend the most dramatically around endings, whether they trumpet their own transformations or not. Following the trail blazed by two influential Indian theorists toward the end of the first millennium CE, we will explore this idea in detail in chapter 1, but for now let us simply appreciate the fact that the epic's retellings rarely end where the epic does, and that their conclusions often represent the most dramatic divergences from the epic's plot. This is especially true in the first millennium, and it is especially true of works that were composed in Sanskrit. By and large, early Sanskrit retellings capture self-contained stories within the broader epic—often changing the endings of those miniature stories as well—or strongly curtail the main plot, such as by concluding at the end of the great war and refusing to go further. The way that the *Mahābhārata* constructs endings—even the endings of the smaller stories within its scope—does not seem to be desirable in other literary contexts, however, especially early Sanskrit ones. Thus the seed of discontent is

³ Naama Shalom, *Re-Ending the Mahābhārata: The Rejection of Dharma in the Sanskrit Epic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 10.

sown—not just by the epic’s own threats and feints, but by the broader world of literature and performance in which it participates.

As we will see in chapter 1, we might frame this conflict in terms of genre—as a contrast between the powerful entropic bent of the *Mahābhārata* and the highly organized world of *kāvya*, that is, classical Sanskrit poetry and drama. *Kāvya* is often described as working toward integration. Of Sanskrit drama, Barbara Stoler Miller argues that the foremost goal of the genre is “to re-establish emotional harmony in the microcosm of the audience by exploring the deeper relations that bind apparent conflicts of existence.”⁴ Meanwhile, on the specifically poetic side of things, Gary Tubb makes the point that “*kāvya*, like comedy, aims at producing the surprise of sudden recognition, and each verse... is intended to present some such achievement, even if on a small scale.”⁵ Indeed, it is almost as if the *Mahābhārata* and *kāvya* move in opposite directions: the epic breaks connections; *kāvya* makes them. David Gitomer has described this conflict as a “tension between epic and aesthetic values.”⁶ There we have it in purely analytic terms. But is this also, at a deeper level, a tension between realism and fantasy?

I suspect that if we were to listen closely to the conversation between the *Mahābhārata* and her *kāvya* retellings, however, we would hear many more harmonies than we might expect—a highly productive expression of any tensions between them. This thesis provides an account of one such conversation. In many ways it is a conversation about endings; it is also about the interplay of realism and fantasy on the road thereto. The most important thing to note

⁴ Barbara Stoler Miller, introduction to *Theatre of Memory: The Plays of Kālidāsa*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 14.

⁵ Gary Tubb, “*Kāvya* with Bells On: *Yamaka* in the *Śiśupālavadha*: Or, ‘What’s a flashy verse like you doing in a great poem like this?’” in *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature*, ed. Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, and Gary Tubb (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147.

⁶ David Gitomer, “The ‘*Veṅīsaṃhāra*’ of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa: The Great Epic as Drama” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1988), 265.

immediately is that there are not two voices in this conversation but three. As we might guess, one is the *Mahābhārata*'s—the epic as a whole. Another belongs to one of the epic's retellings: *Pañcarātra*, or *The Five Nights*, an anonymous and (as we shall soon see) highly enigmatic Sanskrit play that could have been composed anytime between 200 and 800 CE. The third voice mediates between them: it is that of the *Virāṭaparvan* (*The Book of Virāṭa's Court*), the fourth book of the *Mahābhārata* and the epic's self-designed concave mirror. While the *Virāṭaparvan* is part of the *Mahābhārata*, it also stands apart from it. It encapsulates the epic's plot and reflects the whole epic back on itself—as if it were a play within a play. Like a literary Janus stationed above a threshold, then, the *Virāṭaparvan* has one face turned backward and the other forward. The *Virāṭaparvan* echoes the *Mahābhārata* but it also leaps forward, serving as the segment of the epic that the *Pañcarātra* retells most directly. In chapters 3-5 of the dissertation we will see in detail how this happens. Chapter 2 will explore the performative contexts that made it possible.

The reason I became attuned to this particular conversation, over and above the many that unfold between the *Mahābhārata* and her other Sanskrit retellings, is the *Pañcarātra*'s conclusion. Consider the *Mahābhārata*—a giant story about a giant war. Now imagine: What if no one showed up to fight? (The question relocates Charlotte Keyes' 1966 anti-war slogan halfway across the world and many centuries before its time: “Suppose They Gave a War and No One Came?”⁷) What if, instead of killing one another by the thousands, the two sides agreed to resolve their disputes peacefully, skip the war entirely, and live happily ever after? That strange hypothetical—that mind-bending alternative, a version of the *Mahābhārata* where the warring

⁷ Charlotte E. Keyes, “Suppose They Gave a War and No One Came?,” *McCall's*, October 1966, 26–27.

cousins make peace and avoid going to war at all—is the conclusion and indeed the entire premise of the *Pañcarātra*.

During the *Virāṭaparvan*, the Pāṇḍavas are living out their final year of exile in disguise in the court of King Virāṭa. After this year the Pāṇḍavas are supposed to get their kingdom back; Duryodhana refuses to return it to them, and this ushers in the great war for which the epic is famous. But in the *Pañcarātra*, this final year of exile does not end in the same impasse that we find in the epic. Instead, Duryodhana actually gives the Pāṇḍavas their share of the kingdom, saying:

So be it: I'll give the kingdom
To the Pāṇḍavas, just as they had it before.
For all men stay strong, even in death,
So long as the truth endures.⁸

By all counts, this resolution leads us to envision a *Mahābhārata* without war, without death, where the Pāṇḍavas return from exile and the cousins live in harmony thereafter. How are we to keep apace with such a vast imaginative leap? What are we to make of a form of the *Mahābhārata* that puts a peaceful resolution where a near-apocalyptic fratricidal war used to be? How ought we to make sense of this unexpected turn—a *Mahābhārata* where the war never happens?

⁸ *Pañcarātra* 3.26: *bāḍhaṃ dattaṃ mayā rājyaṃ pāṇḍavebhyo yathāpuram | mrte 'pi hi narāḥ sarve satye tiṣṭhanti tiṣṭhati* || All quotes from the Sanskrit text of the *Pañcarātra* are taken from the digital version, critically edited by the Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg: *Pañcarātra*, ed. Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg, Multimediale Datenbank zum Sanskrit-Schauspiel, 2007, <http://www.bhasa.indologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/rahmen.html>.

Veiled narration in the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*

The play's approach is radical, to be sure. At first glance it seems to stand utterly apart from the epic—its antithesis. Yet in the chapters that follow, we will come to see that the *Pañcarātra* represents a deeply insightful, carefully orchestrated interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* itself, particularly as it is filtered through the concave lens of the *Virāṭaparvan*. The play's felicitous conclusion is not quite intended to be taken at face value—or rather, that is not the only way in which it is intended to be understood. (Faces, masks, and all sorts of outer layers are immensely important, after all.) I have come to think of it as a pseudo-happy ending, in the sense that it is both falsely happy and falsely an ending. It is falsely happy because, as we shall see, the *Pañcarātra* is in fact committed to telling the “real” story of the *Mahābhārata*—to retelling the epic at its most realistic level. This happens when, at heightened moments, the play lifts its comic veil to expose in full view what the epic leaves broken and unresolved. The play's actual ending, too, has a deceptive bent. As we shall discuss in chapter 2, a performance of the *Pañcarātra* would have been closely followed by performances of other *Mahābhārata*-themed plays—plays in which the epic's great war is taken very seriously indeed—revealing the *Pañcarātra*'s conclusion to have been a powerful but temporary exercise in imagining an alternative path for the epic. But even without these sister plays, the *Pañcarātra* undermines the conclusiveness of its own conclusion. That is what we shall see in chapter 5. It is a testament to the depth of the conversation between the play and the epic that in being both falsely happy and falsely an ending, the play's denouement mirrors the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata* itself. For that matter, it also reflects the ending of the *Virāṭaparvan*, in which comedy (a wedding, the promise of political reconciliation) melts away to reveal tragedy (preparations for the great war).

The mirrors between the three works—again, separating out the *Virāṭaparvan* from the broader *Mahābhārata* of which it is a part—are strikingly focused.

What could precipitate such an ending? It is crucial to appreciate everything that paves the way for the *Pañcarātra*'s unusual outcome, and it is just as important to understand how all of that is actually presented to the audience. I call this manner of presentation “veiled narration.” On one level, we follow the action of the play in its archetypal *kāvya* (poetic) motion from a set of compelling tensions—tensions between the protagonists, between conflicting ideals of power, between secrecy and openness—to an equally compelling sense of integration, wholeness, and resolution. We land on a kingdom shared, a wedding arranged, and various social bonds affirmed—father to son, teacher to student, brother to brother. And given the expectations that have been set up for us by the play itself, this conclusion makes perfect sense. This is the veil, ever so elegantly woven. But neither the *Pañcarātra* nor we can afford to stop there, because the play also conjures the silhouette of the war averted—the war that wasn't, perhaps the whole epic that wasn't—and any *Mahābhārata*-knowing audience would be able to see it peeking out from underneath. The play not only expects this but enables it. Time and again the *Pañcarātra* pulls back the veil and reminds us of the tragedy it has forestalled.

This, too, is a tribute to the *Virāṭaparvan*, where we find an epic style of veiled narration (explored in chapter 4) that parallels the *Pañcarātra*'s. In both works, this mode of literary expression emerges from a profound interest in what it means to stage a performance. The fourth of the epic's eighteen books and its self-designed concave mirror, the *Virāṭaparvan* stages a jewelbox miniaturization of the great epic. Here we find the protagonists living in disguise for a year, costumed as flagrantly, deliciously self-aware versions of themselves. Throughout the *Virāṭaparvan* the signature horrors of the greater epic—the attack on its heroine, the catastrophic

war, the bitter aftermath—are reimagined and turned upside-down. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, our heroine gets her revenge, the battle is bloodless, and it all ends not with limitless death but with a wedding, the ultimate symbol of regeneration. The *Virāṭaparvan* takes the epic’s rivers of blood, its fallen ideals, and its endless cycles of disastrous attachment—in short, it takes the death-stalked tragedy, grandeur, and unknowable scope of global humanity—and distills it all into something that can actually be swallowed, inverting certain elements and resolving others in such a way that an audience might be able to take it in. If the dark realism of the *Mahābhārata* makes the epic something like “real life,” then the *Virāṭaparvan* plays the role that theater so often does in real life: it investigates, molds, and represents—re-presents—that life. It separates itself from the epic’s world in crisis and at the same time offers the audience powerful insights into that world. It makes a great deal of sense, then, that the *Virāṭaparvan* is not only structured as a performance—the epic’s play within a play—but is explicitly about performance. We find costumes, roles, and scripts at every turn. We even get to sneak backstage, eavesdropping on the protagonists as they discuss their approaches to the production.

Veiled narration is a mode of storytelling in which one story is disguised as another, and in which the disguise is recognized for what it is. Veiled narration crystallizes the *Virāṭaparvan*’s theme of performance into literary form. It facilitates a powerful interplay between factual and counterfactual, actual and alternative, real and fantastical, such that the *Virāṭaparvan* develops the capacity to express both at once. The *Pañcarātra* intentionally follows in its footsteps, adding new dimensions to the self-aware fantasy that the *Virāṭaparvan* paints over the *Mahābhārata*. Veiled narration transmogrifies the idea of disguise, whether actual (as in a performance of the *Pañcarātra*) or thematic (as it animates both the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*), into a literary expression of fantasy through which the reader or the audience remains conscious of the

fantasy’s status as the hypothetical, the alternative, the could-have-been-but-wasn’t. We always know when the veil is in place, and we are always aware of when it is being pulled back. In this way veiled narration ensures that however tightly realism and fantasy may be interwoven in a given work, they remain separate entities. The separation between them is not only palpable but essential. We need that tension, and veiled narration provides it.

The *Virāṭaparvan* as a constructive force

It is no accident that the *Pañcarātra*’s extraordinary remodeling of the epic story unfolds in the context of the *Virāṭaparvan*. This turns out to be the ideal place to turn things upside-down. Most readers recognize the *Virāṭaparvan* as an elegantly inverted microcosm of the *Mahābhārata* within the *Mahābhārata*. The entire *parvan* presents the epic in an unusually felicitous light: Draupadī takes her revenge, none of the protagonists face death, and the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas results not in a war but a wedding. This is precisely the ethos that the *Pañcarātra* will go on to adopt.

It is also part of why J.A.B. van Buitenen characterizes the *Virāṭaparvan* as a “masquerade” or a “burlesque.”⁹ Such labels highlight the playfulness of the many disguises and doubles that we find in this part of the epic—Yudhiṣṭhira’s disguise as Virāṭa’s gambling companion, for example, which van Buitenen likens to “a reformed drunk electing to become a bartender.”¹⁰ The Pāṇḍavas’ deliberately self-reflexive costumes then become part of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s pronounced sense of revolution—the feeling of freedom that comes from revealing oneself. As Wendy Doniger writes, “hiding in plain sight is a particularly good way to

⁹ J.A.B. van Buitenen, introduction to *The Mahābhārata: 4. The Book of Virāṭa, 5. The Book of the Effort*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 5.

¹⁰ van Buitenen, introduction, 7.

reveal something that you secretly want to reveal but must pretend to want to conceal.”¹¹ Alf Hildebeitel makes the same argument, if in more grave terms: “It is in their disguises that the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī reveal their ‘deepest’ symbolism.”¹²

Hence van Buitenen connects the exuberant nature of the Pāṇḍavas’ masquerade with a specific ritual meaning—rebirth—and their symbolic rebirths with cyclical renewal at large.¹³ Here he draws on McKim Marriott’s account of Holi, the inversion-filled celebration of the vernal “new year.” Thus beautifully, implicitly, he raises the question of whether colleagues and friends such as van Buitenen and Marriott are a double unto themselves. In the passage below Marriott is retelling his own experience of a Holi in which he himself became a vivid character, with the “original” story experienced and filtered through a vivid veil of *bhāṅg*, but he is being quoted by van Buitenen:

Who was in that chorus singing so lustily in the potter's lane? Not just the resident caste fellows, but six washermen, a tailor, and three Brahmans joined each year for this day only in an idealistic musical company patterned on the friendship of the gods...

Who was it who was made to dance in the streets, fluting like Lord Krishna, with a garland of old shoes around his neck? It was I, the visiting anthropologist, who had asked far too many questions, and had always to receive respectful answers.

¹¹ Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220.

¹² Alf Hildebeitel, “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 153.

¹³ In a similar way several scholars raise the point that the *Mahābhārata* describes the Pāṇḍavas as *garbhavāsa iva prajāḥ*, “like infants in the womb,” during the year in Virāṭa’s court. For example: David Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 267; Kathleen Garbutt, introduction to *Mahābhārata: Book Four: Virāṭa*, trans. Kathleen Garbutt (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 19; and Hildebeitel, 149.

At this point van Buitenen signals the end of his quotation of Marriott with a modest footnote—just a number in the text and a few words at the bottom of the page—and continues directly into his own voice, as if Marriott’s foggy memory of his own *bhāṅg*-hazed engagement with Holi the previous year were now the perfect excuse for van Buitenen to haze into the world of the epic, whose words he translates. The reader sees no disjunction on the page:

“And what will you do, King Pāṇḍava?” asks Arjuna two thousand years earlier.
“How will you pass through this misfortune that has befallen you?”

“Hear ye, scions of Kuru, what work I shall do!” Yudhiṣṭhira replies. “I shall be the Royal Dicing Master of the king!”

“Wolf-Belly,” he continues, “what kind of a job will you play at?”

“I shall be a kitchen chef and wait on King Virāṭa. I’ll make him curries! I am good in a kitchen.”

“What shall Arjuna do?” asks Yudhiṣṭhira.

“Sire, I’ll be a transvestite! I’ll hang rings from my ears that sparkle like fire, and my head shall sport a braid!”

“Nakula, what will you do?”

“I shall be King Virāṭa’s horse groom.”

“Sahadeva, how will you amuse yourself at Virāṭa’s?”

“I shall be the cow teller of King Virāṭa. Don’t worry, I’ll do quite well!”

“And what will Draupadī do?”

“I’ll call myself a chambermaid with a skill in hairdressing.”¹⁴

¹⁴ van Buitenen, 6–7. The citation to Marriott is to “The Feast of Love,” in *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966), 211–12.

In the spirit of Marriott’s account, van Buitenen writes that he personally—“I myself”—“would like to think that [the *Virāṭaparvan*] is inspired by the frivolities with which the change from one year to the next is celebrated.”¹⁵ Here is the *Virāṭaparvan* as two-faced Janus, again, taking stock of what has passed—whether a year or a story—before remolding it into something new. Is this Janus perched on the threshold between epic and drama? And here is the *Virāṭaparvan* as *Twelfth Night*, too—the ultimate comedy of disguise in a foreign land, all staged in service of the new year.

Hiltebeitel, for his part, offers a more mythologically involved reading of all this, though his understanding, too, is based on new-year rituals, and in particular the caste-play that occurs during Holi. Using an earlier piece by Madeleine Biardeau as a jumping-off point (and giving us another doubling of scholarly characters), Hiltebeitel argues that the Pāṇḍavas’ and Draupadī’s disguises are “tinged with impurity, in connection with both their caste identities and their roles as sacrificers.”¹⁶ Even this impurity, however, results in a ritually positive outcome: through their costumes, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī enact in various complicated ways the roles of Rudra-Śiva “who takes on the impurity of death in the classical brāhmanical animal sacrifice” and the Goddess, here “in her destructive aspect.”¹⁷ These views—Hiltebeitel’s (following Biardeau’s) and van Buitenen’s (following Marriott’s)—do not contradict one another but, rather, reflect different points on a sliding scale. Both hold that the *Virāṭaparvan* plays a uniquely constructive, auspicious role within the ecosystem of the larger epic. van Buitenen brings out the whimsical nature of that role, whereas Hiltebeitel reminds us of the destruction that must precede any sense of construction or reintegration in the world that the *Mahābhārata* inhabits.

¹⁵ van Buitenen, introduction, 20. So, too, does Hiltebeitel, following Biardeau, emphasize “the element of play (*krīḍa*, *līlā*) in the ‘sports’ of [Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna]” (Hiltebeitel, 150).

¹⁶ Hiltebeitel, “Śiva,” 170.

¹⁷ Hiltebeitel, “Śiva,” 172–74.

There is a great deal to treasure in this way of thinking about the *Virāṭaparvan*. In addition to showing that there is a part of the *Mahābhārata* where even the *Mahābhārata* doesn't take itself so seriously (for van Buitenen) and that a deeply reparative impulse underlies the *Virāṭaparvan*'s many mirrors (for Hildebeitel), it also helps to explain why the *Virāṭaparvan* seems to take on a special ritual significance in various practices connected with reading and performing the *Mahābhārata*. Hildebeitel writes:

The [Pāṇḍavas'] period in disguise is immensely popular throughout India, as is evidenced by the fact that 'Virāṭanagar'—the city of their concealment—is locally identified in numerous and far-flung places. . . [And in the South Indian fire-walking cult of Draupadī] the recital and *terukkūttu* enactment of the period in disguise are popular and imaginatively carried out, and mark the important transition to themes of war and revenge for the festival as a whole.¹⁸

To this we might add David Shulman's recollection that "in Tamil Nadu, Villipūtūr's Tamil version of the *Virāṭaparvan* is recited in times of drought, as a ritual attempt to bring down rain."¹⁹ Here an auspicious *Virāṭaparvan* is being used not only to invert the current state of things (as Shulman writes) but also, relatedly, for the purpose of regeneration and growth. In other words, there is a strongly creative aspect in play—here literal more than figurative—and this reflects the power of the *Virāṭaparvan* to invert (or perhaps reverse) a destructive bent, whether in the *Mahābhārata* or in agrarian life.

This brings us to a vital part of the *Virāṭaparvan*'s cultural life. The *Virāṭaparvan* plays a uniquely important role in the way the *Mahābhārata* has entered many South and Southeast Asian languages and artistic media. The epic, we know, is often considered dangerous, especially

¹⁸ Hildebeitel, "Śiva," 152.

¹⁹ Shulman, *King and the Clown*, 257.

in its complete form; its tale of large-scale fratricide constantly threatens to escape the pages and break into the lives of its readers. Yet the *Virāṭaparvan* has been welcomed in such a way that it seems to exert an almost magical, even salvific effect—as if it were genuinely auspicious. And so we encounter *Virāṭaparvans* at the beginnings of things, serving as inaugural amulets. Take, for example, the custom of inaugurating one’s reading of the *Mahābhārata* not with the epic’s actual first book, the *Ādiparvan*, but with the *Virāṭaparvan*.²⁰ Why? It is a way to avoid enfolding oneself proleptically in the *Mahābhārata*’s ending—that darkest, most mystifying, most inconclusive of endings.²¹ One begins at a different beginning and the end is therefore no longer preordained. Thus the *Virāṭaparvan* becomes a protective seal against the epic’s famous curse. It is a mirror, yes, but also a prophylactic. Like a vaccine, it carries a vital kernel of something dangerous, but in such a form that it does no harm—rather, it prepares us to be exposed to the real thing.

Virāṭaparvans are often used specifically to spark something creative. That creative endeavor could be a telling of the *Mahābhārata*, as we have seen, but it could also be a new literary genre or a new mode of artistic expression. Look at the beginning of South Indian cinema and you’ll find a *Virāṭaparvan*—the 1916 silent film *Kīcaka Vadham*, directed by R. Nataraja Mudaliar and featuring a Tamil cast.²² Meanwhile, in the case of Telugu, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath has argued that the classical Telugu *Virāṭaparvam*, composed by the

²⁰ As noted by Raghu Vira, introduction to *The Virāṭaparvan, Being the Fourth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India*, ed. Raghu Vira, vol. 5 of *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar et al. (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1936), xxvii.

²¹ Further: Wendy Doniger, introduction to *After the War: The Last Books of the Mahabharata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 28–38; Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai, “An Introduction to the Literature of the Mahābhārata,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Hawley and Pillai (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 1–34.

²² S. Theodore Baskaran, “The Roots of South Indian Cinema,” *Journal of the International Institute of the University of Michigan* 9, no. 2 (2002), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jii/4750978.0009.206/--roots-of-south-indian-cinema>.

thirteenth-century poet Tikkana, enshrines the moment when literary Telugu truly comes into its own.²³ Tikkana wasn't the earliest classical Telugu poet—there was Nannaya before him, and certainly others in between—but it is Tikkana who, as Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman put it, “reveals an activist, imaginative drive toward fashioning the universe of Telugu literature and culture.”²⁴ The *Virāṭaparvan* initiates the process of fashioning that universe.

Even the editors of the monumental critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* began with the *Virāṭaparvan*. They published an edition of the *Virāṭaparvan* in 1923; it would be ten more years before they would publish the actual first book of the epic, the *Ādiparvan*. When these scholars began to prepare their critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in 1918—an undertaking so large we might call it “unimaginable” but for the fact that they actually accomplished it—the first book to emerge from their labors was what they called a “tentative” edition of the *Virāṭaparvan*. This initial edition of the *Virāṭaparvan* was not intended to serve as the be-all, end-all critical edition of the text—that would come later, along with the rest of the *Mahābhārata*—but, rather, as an experiment, a promise of what lay ahead. Narayan Bapuji Utgikar, the editor in charge of the early *Virāṭaparvan* project, took great care to attribute this choice to practicality, not superstition:

Towards the middle of 1920, the idea occurred that instead of working with a view to prepare any part of the contemplated critical edition itself in its final form, to be produced after evidently a great preparation and lapse of time, it would be desirable for various reasons to publish some part of the *Mahābhārata* on lines, which though indeed not quite so elaborate as contemplated for the final edition, should approximate these as far as possible . . . It was also decided that it should be the *Virāṭaparvan* which was to be thus published: tentatively by way of a foretaste and a forecast, and experimentally to feel the ground, and gain first hand

²³ Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, “Three Poets, Two Languages, One Translation: The Evolution of the Telugu *Mahābhārata*,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Hawley and Pillai, 191–212.

²⁴ Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, eds., *Classical Telugu Poetry: An Anthology*, trans. Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 23.

acquaintance with the [Mahābhārata's] problems, and also with a view to invite helpful suggestions and criticisms to be utilised in the preparation of the main edition.²⁵

Utgikar points out that the actual collation work involved in the BORI project as a whole began with book 2, the *Sabhāparvan*. In accounting for the group's chosen point of departure—the *Sabhāparvan* as opposed to the *Ādīparvan*—he invokes the idea that “there prevails a certain orthodox prejudice against beginning any work on the [Mahābhārata] with the *Ādīparvan*.”²⁶ Still, then, why publish book 4 first, and not book 2, if the editorial work on the *Sabhāparvan* was already underway? Utgikar refrains from revealing the exact logic involved, but we might wonder whether the decision really was made entirely from the standpoint of practicality. The *Virāṭaparvan*, after all, is only a handful of chapters shorter than the *Sabhāparvan*; Utgikar and his team still had some hundred manuscripts of the *Virāṭaparvan* to manage. In the absence of further explanation from Utgikar, I imagine that it really was the propitious atmosphere long associated with the *Virāṭaparvan* that prompted the BORI editors to select it as a starting point. In any case, it is telling that the collation of the *Sabhāparvan* manuscripts lingered in the background while the group's editorial work on the *Virāṭaparvan*, “tentative” as they may have deemed it, came to the fore.

The idea of the *Virāṭaparvan* as the *maṅgala* of the *Mahābhārata*—the auspicious, beneficent part of it that ought to proceed before the rest—has quite a long history. This becomes especially apparent if we travel eastward to Central and Eastern Java in the tenth century. Here the *Virāṭaparvan* would serve to inaugurate something huge: the literature of the *Mahābhārata*

²⁵ Narayan Bapuji Utgikar, introduction to *The Virāṭaparvan of the Mahābhārata: Edited from Original Manuscripts as a Tentative Work with Critical and Explanatory Notes and an Introduction* (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1923), ii.

²⁶ Utgikar, i.

in Old Javanese. Episodes from the *Virāṭaparvan* were likely being performed in Central Java as early as 907 CE—to my knowledge this is the earliest known manifestation of the *Mahābhārata* in Southeast Asia.²⁷ But it is what happened a century later that really seems to have shifted the literary landscape. Dharmawangśa Tēguh Anantawikramottunggadewa, ruling in eastern Java in the late tenth century, commissioned three books of the *Mahābhārata*—the *Virāṭaparvan*, the *Ādiparvan*, and the *Bhīṣmaparvan* (book 6)—to be composed in Old Javanese prose. Not translations, quite, these Old Javanese *parwas* are condensed and highly creative tellings of their Sanskrit counterparts. Certain verses are preserved in their Sanskrit forms, others seem to have been carefully transposed into Old Javanese prose, and still others seem to condense and summarize what one finds in the Sanskrit.²⁸ At times the events and timbre of the story change completely so that they blend more smoothly into the backdrop of medieval Javanese culture and literature.²⁹ You might think that all this could best be done by beginning at the beginning, proceeding in chronological order from book 1. And yet all evidence suggests that Dharmawangśa’s commission began with the composition that would become the *Wirāṭaparwa*—the Old Javanese *Virāṭaparvan*—and not the *Ādiparwa*.³⁰

The key is that the *Wirāṭaparwa*’s unique framing sets it apart from the other two early *parwas*. (Ubiquitous in South Asian literature, frame stories are the classic way to avoid

²⁷ S. Supomo, *Bhāratayuddha: An Old Javanese Poem and Its Indian Sources* (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1993), 2.

²⁸ Often the *parwas* inventively reworked their antetypes so that the stories they told would align with the precepts of medieval Javanese culture and literature as best they could. There was no “original,” rather, the whole endeavor was creative. See Willem van der Molen, “Dharmawangśa’s Heritage: On the Appreciation of the Old Javanese Mahābhārata,” *Wacana* 12, no. 2 (2010): 386–98, especially pages 389–90.

²⁹ Willem van der Molen, “Dharmawangśa’s Heritage: On the Appreciation of the Old Javanese Mahābhārata,” *Wacana* 12, no. 2 (2010): 386–98, see especially pages 389–90.

³⁰ S. Supomo makes the same argument, though for somewhat different reasons, in “Indic Transformation: The Sanskritization of Jawa and the Javanization of the *Bhārata*,” in *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Peter Bellwood, James J. Fox, and Darrell Tryon (Canberra: Australian National University, 2006), 302–32.

beginning at the narrative-chronological beginning. Does this give them an automatically auspicious air?) The first frame tells the story of the birth of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, the *Mahābhārata*'s mythical author. In a big metonymic way, then, the *Wirāṭaparwa* marks itself as the place where Vyāsa, and therefore the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, will come to life once more.³¹

The second frame brings us to the literal creation of that text under the auspices of Dharmawangśa Tēguh,

. . . named Anantawikrama (Endless Victory), who would join the auspicious occasion (*manggala*) of making Vyāsa's thought (*mangjawākĕn byāsamata*) into Javanese, so that this might be the starting point (*tĕwĕk*) for brilliant poets, a lineage heard long into the future.³²

In this—*mangjawākĕn byāsamata*—the *Wirāṭaparwa* becomes the self-acknowledged starting point of the *Mahābhārata* in Old Javanese literary culture specifically. Not only that, but it marks itself as the starting point (*tĕwĕk*) of what appears to have been an entirely new genre—the *parwa* style of literary prose, quite a step away from the poetic *kakawin* style that had preceded it. And note the word that is used to describe this process of beginning with the

³¹ This is quite different from the invocations of Śiwa and Pārwatī and the creation of the universe that begin the *Ādiparwa*. There, too, the second frame references the creation of the text at hand, but the word for the language is *prākṛta* there—not as localized as the “*jawā*” that we see in the *Wirāṭaparwa* frame. I refer to the text and translation of the *Ādiparwa* frame as featured in van der Molen, “Dharmawangśa's Heritage,” 392.

³² *Wirāṭaparwa*, ed. H. H. Juynboll (The Hague: Martinus Mijhoff, 1912), 8: . . . *anantawikrama ngaran ira, umilwa manggala ning mangjawākĕn byāsamata, yatanyan sira tĕwĕka sang kawi n utsāhabuddhi, mwang parampara karĕngō tĕkeng anāgatakāla*. See also Thomas M. Hunter, “A Distant Mirror: Innovation and Change in the East Javanese *Kakawin*,” in *Innovations and Turning Points*, ed. Bronner, Shulman, and Tubb, 741, where the same text is given as follows: *anantawikrama ngaran ira, umilwa manggalā ning mangjawākna byāsamata, yatanyan sira tĕwōka sang kawin utsāhabuddhi, mwang parampara karĕngō tĕkeng anāgatakāla*. As per Hunter, Dharmawangśa would “‘join in the auspicious process of giving a Javanese form to the work of Wyāsa’ with the aim of ‘founding a lineage of poets of energetic spirit that will be renowned far into the future.’”

Wirāṭaparwa: manggala.³³ The *Virāṭaparvan* is used consciously as an auspicious starting point, so that it might be the seed from which a truly massive creative endeavor would grow. It is a much more pronounced version of what we see with Tikkana in Telugu: to have an entire vernacular literary culture begin not only with a *Mahābhārata* but with a *Virāṭaparvan*.

There is something additionally special about the use of the term *manggala* here. Willem van der Molen has argued that *manggala* invocations—that is, benedictory verses—were first used in the *parwas* of the Old Javanese *Mahābhārata* before they came to be used in *kakawins*, the classical longform poems of Old Javanese. Permit me to take van der Molen’s idea a little bit further. If the *Wirāṭaparwa* was the first *parwa*, then its framing verses about Vyāsa and Dharmawangśa may have been the first *manggala* invocations in Old Javanese literature, period. And so the first *manggala* verses in Old Javanese emerge in conversation with the fact that the *Virāṭaparvan* is the truly *manggala* book of the *Mahābhārata*—the auspicious book, the book that comes first, the book that makes it beneficial to read, hear, perform the rest.³⁴

If the tradition of beginning with the *Virāṭaparvan* so as to harness its auspicious power—whether it was for the purpose of inaugurating a robust, truly regional form of expression (Old Javanese, classical Telugu, Tamil film), conquering the lands of eastern Java (Dharmawangśa’s political aim), or building an authoritative, nation-defining *Mahābhārata* (BORI)—does indeed stretch as far back as the turn of the second millennium, it would be a remarkable testament to the idea that the *Virāṭaparvan* serves as a uniquely constructive force within the darker and more destructive world of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. The *Virāṭaparvan* pushes us to take a step back, look at that massive and complicated whole, and ask ourselves

³³ This represents another distinction from the *Ādiparwa* frame, which is indeed a *manggala* but does not use that word to describe itself.

³⁴ van der Molen, “Dharmawangśa’s Heritage,” 394.

how we want to rearrange things—how we want to do it differently this time. This, after all, is the work of performance: to rearrange. Viewed through the wide-angle lens of the cultural history of the *Virāṭaparvan*, the *Pañcarātra*'s surprising conclusion is maybe less surprising than we thought when we began. Its fantastical projection of a miniature *Mahābhārata* where the war is averted and everyone lives happily ever after now seems but the most extreme statement of the newness and creativity that *Virāṭaparvans* were expected to impart.

Interruption and creation

The *Virāṭaparvan* is not the only upside-down, out-of-place beginning in the literature of premodern South Asia. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, for instance, has a *Virāṭaparvan* equivalent: its fifth book, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* (*The Book of Beauty*), which is often recited before the rest.³⁵ In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* we discover a new *Rāmāyaṇa* entirely: that of Hanumān, who redirects our gaze from Rāma to the glories of Rāvaṇa, the antagonist, and the virtues of his kingdom, Laṅkā. Here the *Rāmāyaṇa* inverts its customary perspectives (now we see things through the eyes of Hanumān, Sītā, and Rāvaṇa) and, like the *Virāṭaparvan*, draws attention to the artistry of it all: the mural-like nature of Hanumān's visions; the depth of Sītā's song of grief. Or, to take a side-step away from Sanskrit epics, consider the *bansī corī līlā*—the theft of the flute—which is customarily the first of the *līlā* plays to be performed in the pre-Janmāṣṭamī season in Vrindavan, though its proper place in the narrative chronology of Kṛṣṇa's adolescent life comes later. As in

³⁵ Robert P. Goldman, personal correspondence, January 25, 2022. See also Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, introduction to *Rāmāyaṇa, Book Five: Sundara*, by Vālmīki, translated by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (New York: New York University Press, 2006), where we read that the *Sundarakāṇḍa* “has a receptive history that has conferred upon it something of the status of a separate text apart from its contextualiation as a chapter or section of a larger work. ‘Sundara’ is also accorded a special treatment in connection with a set of beliefs and practices centered on the reading and recitation of the epic poem. It is frequently recited in its entirety in hopes to overcome obstacles in any sphere of life and achieve any desired object.” (25)

the *Virāṭaparvan*, gender inversion and the shift in perspective that it encodes are a centerpiece there: Mansukha wishes to be—and is—transformed into a woman so that he can join the *gopīs*' circle. And here, too, we find an overt reflection on artistry: the flute, musicality, the roles being performed.³⁶ Why do all of these expansive, beloved creative projects begin with inversions? Why do these opening acts of inversion so often involve an overt appreciation of performance—or of the very fact of art itself? And why does this entail beginning in the middle?

The theme, here, is interruption. Inversions interrupt the normal course of things; they break whatever order we thought belonged to the world. So, too, does art—performance especially—rupture everyday life, breaking it into pieces and rearranging it so that we experience it as something quite new. Works such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *rās līlā* performances make literal the idea of interrupting-to-begin: they interrupt their own natural order by taking something from the middle and using it to begin. They also ensure that even if one were to take in such a work in “correct” narrative order, that narrative would still be interrupted somewhere in the middle—book 4 of the *Mahābhārata*, book 5 of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *bansī corī līlā* among the *rās līlās*—to turn upside-down whatever had been established so far. This draws our attention to the fact that *all* we have experienced in the work thus far is an intentional rearrangement, a performance of some sort, and that it is therefore separate from real life. In large-scale, all-encompassing works such as the two great epics, that recognition of artificiality (a word that I use in the most positive sense) might come as a welcome reminder. It might feel like a relief, or it might give rise to questions about the artistry of everyday life. Are our lives longform creative works that are interrupted from time to time by actual art—art that, like the

³⁶ John Stratton Hawley with Shrivatsa Goswami, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 106–54.

Virāṭaparvan or the *Sundarakāṇḍa* or the *bansī corī līlā*, is there to make us realize the power of all that artifice?

Creation often begins with an act of rupture, since something must be broken in order for anything to be built anew. Even in Genesis the standard model is not for God to create anything from scratch, but rather to divide up and rearrange what is already there—the waters, the animals, and so on. (Then there’s the Big Bang: is there more to be learned?) The *Puruṣa Sūkta* of the *Ṛg Veda* seems to know all this: it is the story of the breaking apart of the Primal Person to create the world we know. Sanskrit dramaturgy knows it, too, for every Sanskrit play begins with an interruption, a sound from offstage that distracts the *sūtradhāra* (the director) in the middle of his opening address to the audience.³⁷ It is a striking enactment of the way in which the play itself is intended to interrupt everyday life, to make us change course in the middle of whatever we thought we wanted to say or do. The *Mahābhārata* knows this, too. In both of the epic’s outer frame stories, the epic is told at interval moments of a long ritual, such that the epic interrupts the ritual and the ritual interrupts the epic.³⁸ In the *Rāmāyaṇa* we discover the same principle. The story of the creation of the first short verse poem—the *śloka* that Vālmīki would spin out into the entire *Rāmāyaṇa*, which itself is known as the First Poem (*ādikāvya*)—begins in a moment of rupture, namely, the killing of a bird. All poetry emerges from the separation, in death, of that bird and his mate. And fittingly even that origin story is told as an interruption of sorts: it comes in *sarga* 2, when the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself is already underway, thanks to the existence in *sarga* 1 of another, quite separate origin story that is internal to the epic frame.

³⁷ This is the observation of Amanda L. Culp, personal correspondence, March 2020.

³⁸ And in the epic’s own creation myth—likely conceived many centuries after the epic’s compilation—Vyāsa every once in a while interrupts his dictation to Gaṇeśa by giving him particularly complicated passages to chew on. See Hawley and Pillai, “Introduction to the Literature of the Mahābhārata,” 4–5.

And so, to return to our own epic subject, a great many creative endeavors begin with the part of the *Mahābhārata* that is the most disruptive, that stages the greatest intervention in our perception of reality. The *Virāṭaparvan* serves as a powerful constructive force precisely because it interrupts our understanding of how things work. That is why, when it comes to the *Pañcarātra*, it makes sense that the play’s utterly disruptive *Mahābhārata*—an account of the epic that calls into question its entire premise—would be contained within a retelling of the *Virāṭaparvan* story.

Repetition, digression, and the awareness of artifice

The three texts before us—the *Mahābhārata*, the *Virāṭaparvan*, and the *Pañcarātra*—are mirrors of one another. What are the effects of all that mirroring? Let us begin with the *Mahābhārata*’s own internal mirrors: repetitions of all kinds that spread far beyond the large-scale reflections of the *Virāṭaparvan*. A. K. Ramanujan draws attention to the immense web of repeated relationships, characterizations, and situations in the epic, especially as they are distributed across generations of characters: a series of women have one human and one supernatural lover; three men’s connections to the river Gaṅgā symbolize a great deal more than those three men have in common; warriors lose their nerve before battle; women give birth outside of marriage; there are multiple deadly fires, fraught successions, and periods in exile or disguise.³⁹ What transpires between two characters in one generation will inevitably transpire between their offspring—or subsequent lives, as the case may be. These patterns “[punctuate] the continuity of narrative,”⁴⁰ Ramanujan writes: they make it more disorderly, not so strictly linear.

³⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, “Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 422–26, 437.

⁴⁰ Ramanujan, “Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*,” 423.

The *Mahābhārata* not only frames itself as re-narration, then, but is also designed to facilitate, on the audience's side, a feeling of re-reading—or re-listening, as the case may be. For the reader or listener, the epic is never a new experience (hence Ramanujan's aphorism: "No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time"⁴¹) but an old one brought to life again, like a memory.⁴²

This palpable effect of re-reading or re-listening heightens the audience's awareness of the epic's literary qualities. When the audience learns something it already knows, there is, James Phelan writes, a "redundant telling" that "foreground[s] the synthetic component of the narrative [rather than preserve] a mimetic explanation for the telling."⁴³ In the *Mahābhārata*, which presents what is probably the most sophisticated execution of redundant telling in world literature, repetitions create this sense of artificiality by relentlessly posing alternatives to the audience. One hears a certain story from one narrator, and then it is retold, in a different way, inside the same story, right after it, or indeed chapters or whole books later.⁴⁴ Which version is most fitting? One sees a particular word used in one sense, and then it appears again a few verses later, and again a few verses after that, but it quietly shifts in meaning each time.⁴⁵ What does that word really mean? Repetitions pretend to affirm ("This thing is so true we're saying it twice!" "This thing happens all the time!"), but actually interrogate ("If this thing were true, why

⁴¹ Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 419.

⁴² Recalling the connection between memory and creativity, Thomas M. Greene describes Vico's conception of memory as "an instrument of the creative imagination" in *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 31.

⁴³ James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 24–26.

⁴⁴ One example of many: Vaiśampāyana, the second frame narrator, tells the story of the secret birth of the warrior Karna in book 3 (*Mahābhārata* 3.284–94); the story emerges again, in shortened form and largely as thoughts in Kuntī's mind, in the interaction between Karna and Kuntī in book 5 (*Mahābhārata* 5.142–44). And it is told again in book 15.

⁴⁵ As in Śakuntalā's description of her father, the sage Viśvāmitra, which is filled with variations on the word *tapas* ("heat," or the practice of extreme religious austerity)—having it, creating it, burning it—until her tale turns to Viśvāmitra's instant seduction at the sight of the nymph Menakā, Śakuntalā's mother. *Mahābhārata* 1.65.20–1.66.7.

would we need to say it twice?” “Why does it happen slightly differently the second time?”). The self-questioning effects of repetition in the *Mahābhārata* echo Claude Lévi-Strauss’ suggestion that one tells the same story over and over again because it is impossible ever to get it “right.”⁴⁶

In making us aware of similarity, therefore, repetition also brings our attention to divergence. The sneaky instability of language that purports to describe sameness—metaphors, copulae, and repeated words themselves—inspires Thomas Greene’s study of *imitatio* in the Renaissance: Renaissance writers, he argues, held a deep concern about the changeable, “ungrounded contingency” of language; for them, “the recognition of linguistic mutability was a source of authentic anxiety.”⁴⁷ Greene’s study could prove relevant to the intellectual world of the *Mahābhārata*, which represented a separation from, and possible anxiety about losing, the perceived clarity of an older language and an older corpus, the Sanskrit of Vedic literature. Is this anxiety the source of the *Mahābhārata*’s many repetitions?

The digressive aspect of repetition comes to play a similarly important role in Robert Alter’s analysis of techniques of repetition in the Hebrew Bible. He speaks of an “extremely spare narrative,” but I believe what he says holds true for our famously ample one:

When you are confronted with an extremely spare narrative, marked by formal symmetries, that exhibits a high degree of literal repetition, what you have to look for more frequently is the *small but revealing differences in the seeming similarities*, the nodes of emergent new meanings in the pattern of regular expectations created by explicit repetition. (Emphasis added.)

⁴⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 24. Similar references may be found in Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 112n14.

⁴⁷ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 5–6, 11–17 (on Derrida’s “radicalization of linguistic drift” at work in the Renaissance), and 22 (on metaphors and copulae).

Alter recognizes several types of repetition at work in the Bible,⁴⁸ most of which find clear corollaries in Ramanujan’s thought: motifs (recurring images or objects that lend coherence to a story), themes (repeated narrative articulations of the work’s “value-system”), sequences of actions (patterns of escalation in a story), and type-scenes (standard combinations of motifs). One mode of repetition, however, finds no counterpart in Ramanujan’s discussion: the use of *Leitwörter*, or specific word-roots that are semantically explored within a given story.⁴⁹

But *Leitwörter* also form part of the *Mahābhārata*’s apparatus of repetition, and they, too, participate in its digressive aspects. Take, for example, the variation on the verb root *drś* (to see) in the scenes that lead to the catastrophic game of dice that takes place in book 2 and that catalyzes the fratricidal war at the core of the epic. For the better part of six chapters, we hear about the wonders that the Kaurava prince Duryodhana saw when visiting his Pāṇḍava cousins’ glamorous capital city: “he saw,” “he saw,” “never-before-seen,” “seeing this,” “seeing that,” and then, from Duryodhana’s perspective, many iterations of “I saw.”⁵⁰ In fact, the entire scene begins with Duryodhana seeing things that aren’t there: he steps into a pond, seeing it as land; he hurts his forehead on a closed door that he sees as open. The Pāṇḍavas’ mockery of him for these missteps, combined with Duryodhana’s desire for the riches he sees at their palace, are what prompt Duryodhana later to invite his cousins to play a game of dice he knows they’ll lose—but by showing us the situation through Duryodhana’s faulty eyes, the *Mahābhārata* primes us to see things as he does. In seeing along with Duryodhana, the audience becomes complicit in the

⁴⁸ Edmund Leach’s collection *Genesis as Myth: And Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969) also analyzes repeated narratives in the Bible.

⁴⁹ Alter himself builds on Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig’s initial conceptualization of the idea. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, new and revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 116–30.

⁵⁰ *Mahābhārata* 2.43–49. All references to the *Mahābhārata* are to the critical edition, *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, ed. by V. S. Sukthankar et al., 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66).

failures of moral vision that eventually plague the dice game.⁵¹ The variations on *drś* in these chapters lead to a total dismantling of what it means to see at all.

The pre-dicing scenes conclude with Duryodhana telling his (yes, blind!) father that his miserable visions have made him into a miserable vision himself. The short verse develops *drś* from Leitwort to motif. It contains three different “to see” verbs: *drś*, *vid* (“to find,” “to seek out,” “to look for”), and *pari+īkṣ* (“to look around”), each of which I mark in italics here:

I *find* no comfort, *seeing* what I did
Though I *look* all over for it.
Because of it I’ve become so thin,
Colorless, sorrowful.⁵²

The narrative’s constant manipulations of *drś* transform the act of seeing first into a failure to see (any comfort), and then into an inability to be seen (because he is thin and colorless). We can witness the full evolution of *drś* from a Leitwort to a motif near the end of the game of dice, when moral clarity has escaped everyone but the Pāṇḍavas’ wife, Draupadī, and it is her cutting gaze (*kaṭākṣa*⁵³)—her ability to see to the heart of things—that does the most damage to the Pāṇḍavas’ spirits.⁵⁴

The itinerary⁵⁵ of *drś* in these scenes demonstrates the destabilization of words, themes, ideas, and story arcs that can be hard at work in instances of repetition. On the level of what

⁵¹ Further, Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), see especially 74–144.

⁵² *Mahābhārata* 2.49.25: *evam dr̥ṣṭvā nābhivindāmi śarma parīkṣamāṇo ’pi kurupravīra | tenāham evaṃ kṛṣatām gataś ca vivarṇatām caiva sakośatām ca ||*

⁵³ *Kaṭākṣa* is itself a layered term. In addition to signifying a sense-organ, often an eye, *akṣa* also indicates a die used in gambling.

⁵⁴ *Mahābhārata* 60.35–36: *tathā bruvantī karuṇam sumadhyamā kākṣeṇa bhartṛṇ kupitān apaśyat | sā pāṇḍavān kopa-parītadehān saṃdīpayāmāsa kaṭākṣapātaiḥ || hṛtena rājyena tathā dhanena ratnaiś ca mukhyair na tathā babhūva | yathārtayā kopasamīritena kṛṣṇākaṭākṣeṇa babhūva duḥkham ||*

⁵⁵ To use Derrida’s term, via Greene, *The Light in Troy*, 16.

actually happens in the *Mahābhārata* narrative, it is hard to miss this kind of destabilization: the characters' endless agony over the meaning of dharma, for instance, amounts to a full-scale breakdown of the concept over the course of the narrative; many have pointed out that if the epic is about any one thing, it is about the dharma dilemma.⁵⁶ But aesthetically speaking, such destabilization reinforces the artificiality of the composition by evoking a sense of choice on the part of the narrator and indeed on the part of the listener: a story could be told (or heard) any number of ways; a word could drift in any number of directions. Things never "have" to be the way they are; there are always alternatives.⁵⁷

All this prevents us from giving into the temptation of thinking that the events of the epic narrative are solidly predetermined. It is true that there is a strong attachment to the idea that the epic relates "what was" (*itihāsa*): the epic classifies itself as *itihāsa* (though that is not the only genre it names for itself); its internal listeners ask to be told one story or another "just as it happened."⁵⁸ With that said, it is important to note that the presence of the particle *iti*, which marks the end of a verbally or mentally spoken utterance in Sanskrit, within the word *itihāsa*.

⁵⁶ As in Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 435; Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); James L. Fitzgerald, "Dharma and Its Translation in the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 671–85; Wendy Doniger, "How to Escape the Curse," review of *The Mahabharata*, trans. John Smith (*London Review of Books*, October 8, 2009); Bailey, "Suffering," 111; and Shalom, *Re-ending the Mahābhārata*, 5–9.

⁵⁷ Multiplicity and alternatives also play major roles in the construction of what Gitomer (in "The 'Veṅīsamhāra' of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa," 512) calls "hypercausality" in the epic: "There is a difference, however, in the concatenation of explanatory strategies in non-discourse epic texts: they are not so much co-identified as piled on top of each other, a feature which might be termed 'hypercausality.' Thus Karṇa's destruction when his chariot wheel becomes enmired and he forgets the missile-empowering mantra is presented as the karmic consequence of not one but two cursing narratives. Likewise, Duryodhana is defeated by the illegal blow to the thigh because of Bhīma's vow, because of the karmic boomerang of Draupadī's sexual humiliation, because Lord Krishna 'permits' it through encouraging Arjuna to give the reminder to Bhīma, and because it was fated."

⁵⁸ Christopher Minkowski makes this point and gives several examples (*yathāvṛttam*, *purāvṛttam*) in "Janamejaya's Sattrā and Ritual Structure," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1989): 405, 411.

This already offers a clue that the term *itihāsa* refers to the articulation of reality through narrative, rather than through bare facts alone. Its frequent coupling with the term *purāṇa*—“old things,” but *told* from particular and often genealogical points of view—reinforces the point. Still, in a view that often amounts to a political judgment, many uphold the historical reality of the events of the *Mahābhārata*. Indian nationalist scholars debated the exact dates of the epic’s great battle;⁵⁹ today’s Hindu nationalists seek to teach the *Mahābhārata* “as historical fact.”⁶⁰ “According to this author,” wrote the anthropologist Irawati Karve, “and to Indians in general this is not an imaginary, made-up story, but represents a real event which took place about 1000 B.C.”⁶¹

Such understandings of the *Mahābhārata* might make it seem strange, even heretical, to attribute what Brian Richardson would call an “acknowledged fictionality” to the epic, but I would like to try. In his introduction to “antimimetic” or “unnatural” narrative theory, Richardson recalls how

Henry James once objected to Anthony Trollope’s narrators’ unnatural practice of suggesting to the reader that the events in the novel did not really happen and that they

⁵⁹ See Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 72.

⁶⁰ Yellapragada Sudershan Rao’s initiative, as head of the Indian Council of Historical Research, in 2015. See Mandakini Gahlot, “India’s new school textbooks favor Hindu nationalist themes, making minorities uneasy,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2015.

⁶¹ Irawati Karve, *Yugānta: The End of an Epoch* (Poona [Pune]: Sangam Press, 1974), 3. In her essay on Draupadī in the same volume, Karve speaks of the “reality” of the *Mahābhārata* from a different perspective when she argues that the epic “is a record of human beings with human weaknesses.” (45) To show an example of *Mahābhārata* historicity in more recent scholarship, James Hegarty anchors his study of the epic in the idea that it is “a story about the past written by peoples from the past” and that its most obvious purpose is “to tell its readers and hearers about the significant past and the world in which that past unfolds.” See James Hegarty, *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia: Past and Place in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2. Gitomer connects the idea of epic historicity to character development: “In the traditional transmission of the epic, the necessary living presence of a reciter (who calls upon other reciters within the text) conspires with the ascription to the *Mahābhārata* of the status of *itihāsa*, ‘history,’ rather than *kāvya*, ‘literature,’ to impart a particularly compelling *reality* to its characters” (“*Veṅṣaṃhāra*,” 337).

could therefore give the story any turn they chose; James felt such admissions were “a betrayal of a sacred office”... But of course the author of a work of fiction can give the events any turn he or she prefers; at these moments Trollope is following instead the more playful, antimimetic role of the anti-illusionistic writer who acknowledges the fictionality of the fiction.

The *Mahābhārata*'s many modes of repetition insist that there is no one story, no single accurate depiction of events. By insisting instead on multiplicity, divergence, shifts in focus, and changes in perspective, they make a case from the inside that narration is a matter of choice. Despite the Hindu right's Jamesian objections, the teller can construct the story as he sees fit, and the listener can hear it as she pleases, for she has options, too. This foregrounding of the synthetic (to loop back to Phelan's terms) serves as a much-needed balance to the many elements of the *Mahābhārata* that really are mimetic—the violence, for instance, or the shockingly recognizable depictions of the central characters' emotional lives. The same combination stands out in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, a performance tradition of Sanskrit drama in Kerala, in which the heightened artificiality of the actors' oversized and elaborate costumes and makeup—to say nothing of their intricate, highly stylized gestural language—balances the emotionally intimate, near-mimetic acting in which they engage frequently and at great length.⁶² We will explore the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of the *Pañcarātra* in chapter 2.

When Richardson describes “acknowledged fictionality” as inherently “playful,” he touches upon the performative element of repetition in the *Mahābhārata*. Like a performance, everything re-narrated in the epic has been rehearsed. Richard Schechner's definition of performance as “restored behavior” highlights the same gestures of artificiality and divergence

⁶² Heike Oberlin (Moser) has compiled a thorough bibliography of major publications on Kūṭiyāṭṭam since 2000. See Heike Moser, “New Literature on Kūṭiyāṭṭam Since 2000 (Main Publications),” *Indian Folklife* 38 (2011).

that we see in the *Mahābhārata*'s repetitions: "Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed... They have a life of their own... Restored behavior is 'out there,' separate from 'me.'"⁶³ When we think about retelling as a costume or a disguise, we grow more attuned to the process of self-separation that lies underneath self-iteration.

This becomes clear in the *Virāṭaparvan*, and in the *Pañcarātra* after it. When we come to chapter 3, we learn how in both texts Arjuna—dressed as Bṛhannalā—switches between modes of self-presentation by telling different stories about his target persona. Is he Arjuna or is she Bṛhannalā? As we will see, thus, there is no "real" Arjuna; there are only the stories that he tells about himself—or is it she and herself? What if there were nothing of substance, no single identity, behind the *Mahābhārata*'s many elaborate narrative disguises? In each retelling, the *Mahābhārata* dresses up as itself—but what if there were no self, only the dressing up?⁶⁴

Retellings of the *Mahābhārata* as fan fiction and fantasy

What follows from this hypersensitivity to artifice—the serious business of dressing up and down—is the great measure of freedom that retellings of the *Mahābhārata* enjoy in regard to the task of defamiliarizing (and eventually re-familiarizing) their audiences with even those elements of the epic that they might consider stable. Initially the most striking distinctions between the *Pañcarātra* and its epic source involve the play's rearrangements of plot features (the most obvious example being the existence of the war itself) and its rearrangements of characters into new relationships. For instance, as we will discover in chapter 5, the *Pañcarātra* puts Arjuna's son Abhimanyu in the middle of the Pāṇḍavas' costumed escapades in Virāṭa's

⁶³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 28.

⁶⁴ On all kinds of self-disguise, see Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was*.

court. The *Pañcarātra*'s sister plays—the five other short *Mahābhārata* dramas that seem to share its performance history—make similar moves. The *Dūtaghaṭkaca* places Ghaṭkaca amid the Kauravas; the *Karṇabhāra* makes Karṇa's charioteer a witness to the robbing of Karṇa's earrings; the *Ūrubhaṅga* lingers on Duryodhana's final farewell to his son, an essentially new character. It can be hard to know what to make of these mutations: sometimes it seems as if the authors of these dramas, whoever they were, were experimenting with different combinations of characters to see which ones ignited sparks. But maybe the initial strangeness of these combinations is exactly the point. They estrange the audience from familiar character profiles, relationships, and storylines and force the audience to make new sense of them. It is almost as if these inventive rearrangements of *Mahābhārata* plots and relationships push the audience into a recognition meta-drama. Will we be able to recognize old friends from the epic underneath their new *nāṭya* (drama) costumes?

The emerging field of fan fiction studies, or the study of “derivative creative artworks”⁶⁵ that “[elevate] subtext to text,”⁶⁶ introduces a range of analytical insights from the more popular end of the literary spectrum that might be useful here.⁶⁷ In her 2013 book *Fic*, Anne Jamison pictures fan fiction as a “web” that “reads around” a particular source text, borrowing characters and mixing plot threads—just as the *Pañcarātra* and her siblings do. Discussing the huge body of fan literature around the figure of Sherlock Holmes, Jamison observes that Sherlock Holmes fan authors mimic Sherlock himself. Thinking of themselves as detectives, they pick apart the prose of their source texts for clues about Sherlock and Watson's inner lives and untold

⁶⁵ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 1.

⁶⁶ Lev Grossman, introduction to *Fic: Why Fan Fiction Is Taking Over the World*, by Anne Jamison (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2013), xiii.

⁶⁷ The term “fan fiction” originated in John Bristol Speer's *Fancylopedia* (1944), on science fiction fan literature. See Hellekson and Busse, 5.

adventures.⁶⁸ Like Sherlock, they read deeply into and then make new meaning out of what has become familiar.⁶⁹

So, too, do retellings of the epic defamiliarize and then refamiliarize the *Mahābhārata* for their audiences.⁷⁰ For instance, a major subplot of the *Pañcarātra* evokes the story of the death of Abhimanyu by presenting Abhimanyu in a parallel series of events, namely, a battle followed by a dignified defeat. But at the end of this parallel arc, Abhimanyu doesn't die; instead, he lives and is reunited with Arjuna. The familiar circumstances of Abhimanyu's death become signposts of survival: a capture becomes an embrace; an unguarded boy becomes protected. This particular sideshadow⁷¹—an alternate version of events wherein Abhimanyu lives and Arjuna never has to mourn him—still allows the audience to experience Abhimanyu's death, but from a distance.

This process of defamiliarization and refamiliarization is a hallmark of fantasy literature, and key to the strong ties between the genres of fantasy and fan fiction. (There is a reason that some of the works that have inspired the most fan-fictional fervor in recent decades have also fallen within the genre of fantasy—or its close cousin, science fiction.) So, too, does the awareness of artifice become an essential component of the creation and consumption of fantasy literature, just as it does that of fan fiction. In reading fantasy, one experiences a fully developed alternate world that is internally consistent and, crucially, aware of the fact that it is being offered as an alternative. That defining feature is often enshrined in the work itself in the form of a portal crossing: a moment early in the narrative when the protagonist crosses over from everyday life

⁶⁸ Roberta Pearson, "It's Always 1895: Sherlock Holmes in Cyberspace," in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Hellekson and Busse, 45.

⁶⁹ Jamison, *Fic*, 55–56.

⁷⁰ On defamiliarization, see Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edition, ed. David Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 775–85.

⁷¹ I take the term from Gary Saul Morson, "Sideshadowing and Tempics," *New Literary History* 29 (1998): 602.

into the world of the fantasy—the Pevensie children stepping into Narnia through a wardrobe, or Harry Potter passing through the wall of Platform 9 ¾ to board the Hogwarts Express, or Alice stepping through the looking glass.⁷² The portal-crossing event serves as a signpost of the fantasy’s self-consciousness. It moves the reader along with the protagonist from a standard world to a second, alternative world—one that is just as broad, consistent, and, by the end of the work, familiar as the first. Yet the two realms remain separate.

Fantasy offers us one way of understanding the *Virāṭaparvan*’s relationship with the broader epic around it—and then, *pari passu*, the *Pañcarātra*’s. Specifically, the *Virāṭaparvan* pitches the story of the whole *Mahābhārata* as a eucatastrophic fantasy, a term that I take from J.R.R. Tolkien’s lecture series titled “On Fairy-stories”:

The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy. . . is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance.⁷³

If we can manage for a moment to set aside the Christian soteriological underpinnings of Tolkien’s idea, the concept of eucatastrophe offers insights into certain aspects of the way the *Virāṭaparvan* and its extraordinary spinoff, the *Pañcarātra*, serve as constructive forces within the world of the *Mahābhārata*. As we shall see in chapter 4, we find in the *Virāṭaparvan* a fully fleshed-out alternative vision of the *Mahābhārata* that recognizes itself as embodying

⁷² On the portal-quest fantasy, see Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 1–58.

⁷³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories: Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 75, 78. “On Fairy-stories” was originally published in 1947 by Oxford University Press on the basis of a lecture that Tolkien delivered at the University of St. Andrews on March 8, 1939.

extraordinary possibilities as opposed to realities; this it achieves through the technique of veiled narration. In chapter 5, we come to understand that the same dynamic is at work in the *Pañcarātra*. Moreover, the *Virāṭaparvan* is characterized by a series of unexpected “upward turns”: Draupadī without her longlasting suffering, the war without the major deaths, the continuation of the dynasty without the death of Abhimanyu. The *Pañcarātra* takes its upward turns at an even steeper angle. There we have Duryodhana without his familiar jealousy; Abhimanyu without his tragic death; the *Mahābhārata* itself without its devastating war. Thanks to veiled narration, the presence of the “sorrow and failure” of dyscatastrophe—that is, the presence of the actual broader *Mahābhārata*—remains palpable for the reader or listener even as she experiences the “upward turns” of the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*. Nor does the ending of a eucatastrophic fantasy necessarily read as final, “for there is no true end to any fairy-tale.”⁷⁴ This is precisely what we discover in the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* as well: resolutions are temporary, and indeed deceptive. We shall return to the fantasy literature framework as the dissertation concludes.

Plot summary of the *Pañcarātra*

It is the thirteenth year of the Pāṇḍavas’ exile. Act 1 opens in Duryodhana’s court. There Karṇa, Śakuni, Droṇa, Bhīṣma, and a range of kings have gathered in honor of a large ritual that Duryodhana is conducting. (While the play never specifies precisely which ritual it is, there is reason to believe it is a *vaiṣṇava yajña*: see chapter 2.) Many royal figures arrive to greet Duryodhana—including Abhimanyu, who has not been exiled. Everyone speaks of what a successful king Duryodhana has been so far. Droṇa and Bhīṣma take this auspicious opportunity

⁷⁴ Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, 78.

to urge Duryodhana to give the kingdom back to the Pāṇḍavas. Droṇa goes so far as to ask that Duryodhana do it as a gift to him, as a dakṣiṇā—a gift in exchange for his services as a teacher. Being a devoted student, Duryodhana is tempted, but Karṇa and Śakuni advise him to resist. Then Śakuni suggests that if the Pāṇḍavas can be found within five nights—something he clearly believes is impossible—then Duryodhana will return their half of the kingdom to them.

Readers who are familiar with the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* will note that the terms of this agreement contradict those of the arrangement that is articulated at the end of the second dice game. In book 2, the terms of the Pāṇḍavas' exile are that they must live in the forest for twelve years, followed by a year living out in the open but incognito (which turns out to be the year in Virāṭa's court). If they are discovered before the year is up, then they must go back into exile for another twelve years. If they manage to remain hidden, then they will regain their kingdom. But according to the bargain that Śakuni proposes in the *Pañcarātra*, the Pāṇḍavas would actually stand to gain from being discovered within five nights—that is, before their full year living in disguise has passed. While this interesting incongruity between the epic and the play is never addressed in the play itself, perhaps it never needed to be. In my understanding there could have been at least two (unspoken) thought processes in place here. One possibility: The new agreement is supposed to supplant the previous one. Another possibility: Śakuni believes that Duryodhana is never going to return any part of the kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas under any circumstances—whether they are discovered within five nights or not.

A message arrives from Virāṭa's court. Virāṭa, they learn, is unable to attend Duryodhana's sacrifice because he is currently mourning the deaths of the hundred Kīcaka brothers. They had been killed by someone who used only his bare hands. Bhīṣma immediately understands that this must be Bhīma, and therefore that the Pāṇḍavas must be somewhere in the

vicinity of Virāṭa’s kingdom. This gives Bhīṣma an idea. He urges Droṇa to accept the challenge of the “five nights.” Then he suggests that Duryodhana raid Virāṭa’s cattle (in retaliation for Virāṭa’s absence at the sacrifice), hoping that the Pāṇḍavas will reveal themselves in the course of the skirmish. Duryodhana agrees. They head off to Virāṭa’s kingdom accompanied by all the kings who had gathered to attend the ritual. One of the royal figures who joins them is Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadrā (the sister of Kṛṣṇa).

The second act takes place in Virāṭa’s court. Virāṭa learns that the Kauravas are in the process of raiding his cattle. He expresses guilt over not having participated in the defense himself. He calls for his chariot, only to be told that his son Uttara has taken it for himself, and that he is using the palace dancing teacher, Bṛhannalā (that is, Arjuna), as his charioteer. News arrives that Virāṭa’s side has managed to fend off the attackers, and Virāṭa summons Bṛhannalā so that she might share some of the details first-hand. She is about to give her report when a soldier rushes in with some new, surprising news: Abhimanyu, who had been fighting alongside the Kauravas—we remember that he had been paying his respects to Duryodhana just as Duryodhana embarked on the cattle raid—has been captured by one of Virāṭa’s soldiers. Everyone is shocked to hear of Abhimanyu’s capture, especially Arjuna/Bṛhannalā. The soldier reporting this news explains that someone walked up to Abhimanyu’s chariot and swept him away using only his arms—no weapons—and that the person who did this remarkable thing is one of the palace cooks (Bhīma, though he remains unnamed). Arjuna realizes that Abhimanyu hasn’t been captured at all; rather, Bhīma lifted him off the chariot and brought him back. “It wasn’t a capture at all,” Arjuna/Bṛhannalā says quietly, “it was an embrace.”

Abhimanyu and Bhīma are brought in, and a recognition comedy ensues. Arjuna, Bhīma, and Yudhiṣṭhira—all of them in costume—are delighted to see Abhimanyu, but because they do

not wish to give themselves away, they insult him. It is a clever move, because their way of insulting Abhimanyu is to address him in intimate, familiar terms. Abhimanyu interprets this as disrespect, but from his father and uncles' perspectives they are merely treating him as they would if they were able to act as their normal selves. Abhimanyu slowly comes to suspect that these servants are indeed Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna.

Virāṭa's son Uttara enters and reports that the person responsible for winning back the cattle is none other than Br̥hannalā. Arjuna admits that it is indeed him under those bangles and that dress, and Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira reveal themselves as well. Arjuna and Abhimanyu embrace. Virāṭa wants to marry his daughter Uttarā to Arjuna, but Arjuna suggests that Abhimanyu take his place.

The third act returns us to the Kauravas. Everyone is upset that Abhimanyu has been captured—none more so than Duryodhana and Karṇa, who fret about Abhimanyu's young age and regret not having done their duty to protect him. They pick up an arrow from the ground and see that it has Arjuna's name on it. This proves that the people they had been fighting with were the Pāṇḍavas. Virāṭa's son Uttara arrives to invite them to the wedding of Abhimanyu and Subhadrā, confirming that the Pāṇḍavas—including Abhimanyu—are alive and well. With that, they have discovered the Pāṇḍavas within five nights. Droṇa asks Duryodhana to respect the terms of the agreement, and the play concludes with Duryodhana pledging to give half of the kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas.

Chapter descriptions

Our starting point in the pages that lie ahead is the fact that the *Pañcarātra* stands as an extreme expression of an otherwise common occurrence: many retellings of the *Mahābhārata*

offer dramatic shifts away from the Sanskrit epic’s familiar ground. Chapter 1 examines those shifts from the perspective of two major Kashmiri theorists, Ānandavardhana (ca. 850 CE) and Kuntaka (ca. 950 CE). Each of the two scholars forms a different theory of what is happening during—and importantly about—the process of adapting the Sanskrit epics. Both of them, however, interpret adaptations of the *Mahābhārata* as attempts to find a sense of integration in an epic where it is so often *disintegration* that matters more. While neither theorist appears to have known the *Pañcarātra*, their accounts of how and why the epics are retold—and, crucially, how major transformations of well-known stories can have profound effects on audiences and readerships—help us to understand the sea change of the *Pañcarātra* as a deliberate move, one that an audience would have been primed to appreciate.

In chapter 2 we take stock of the fact that the *Pañcarātra* is not only an interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* but one that was explicitly designed to be performed. This means that the performative aspects of the *Pañcarātra* deeply inform the play’s approach to the epic. By “performative aspects” I refer to features of the *Pañcarātra* that are expressly tied to the play’s enactment on stage—an enactment that has not only been theorized in dramaturgical texts but has actually taken place in Kerala within the last century. We begin on the dramaturgical side: What insights can the formal qualities of the play offer into the *Pañcarātra*’s strong interpretive choices—especially those that might initially seem surprising to us? When we place the *Pañcarātra* in conversation with works of Sanskrit dramaturgy, the theme of deception rises to the surface as a major feature of the play. Our discussion of dramaturgy leads us to the history of the play’s performance in Kerala. While we know frustratingly little about this history, it is important that it unfolded in Kerala, for that is where the *Pañcarātra* and its fellow short, anonymous *Mahābhārata* dramas were first introduced to Indologists in India and in the West. I

hypothesize that the *Pañcarātra* was once staged in a *Mahābhārata* performance cycle, and that it would have been performed first. Not only does the manuscript evidence, limited though it may be, suggest this ordering, but the broader cultural position of the *Virāṭaparvan* backs it up. Seeing the *Pañcarātra* set in this way between its epic precursor and the five dramas that must have followed it in performance, we see ever more clearly how the *Pañcarātra* represents a real beginning, or even a rebirth—no matter how persuasively its felicitous conclusion may lead us to imagine that we are seeing just the reverse: some kind of resolution or ending.

The regenerative capacity of the *Pañcarātra* becomes clear in a different but complementary way when we consider the play against the backdrop of Kerala's Kūṭiyāṭṭam theater tradition, a mode in which *Pañcarātra* is still performed today. To appreciate that, we explore a recent production of the play's second act that was choreographed by Painkulam Narayana Chakyar and staged between 2015 and 2020. This part of the chapter is informed by my correspondence with Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar, the actor who performed the role of Bṛhannalā in this production, and with the scholar-practitioner Heike Oberlin. Through those conversations I have come to understand that the play's extraordinary retelling of the epic makes it represent, for those who enact it, a broader and perhaps unexpected disposition toward what is classical and what is inherited. In a way that is anything but commonly anticipated, classics—by virtue of their very classic-ness—become a special, indeed dramatic vehicle for the generation of something new and radical. In the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of *Pañcarātra*, the character of Bṛhannalā becomes an icon of that deep commitment to transformation. Specifically, she comes to provide her twenty-first century enactors with a new vantage point on third-gender identity. This was a central concern for Painkulam Narayana Chakyar and Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar, and the driving force behind their production of *Pañcarātra* Act 2.

Chapter 3 shows how the central themes of disguise and performance crystallize in that very figure: Bṛhannalā. The *Pañcarātra*'s Arjuna is utterly transformed by his experience of performing Bṛhannalā. In this play, a costume has immense power. What ultimately comes to the surface is the play's sheer attentiveness to the epic's portrayal of Arjuna-Bṛhannalā, and the fact that the play stages a subtle but deliberate departure from the *Virāṭaparvan*'s own implicit theory of costuming. That is one measure of how seriously the drama takes the epic. But the play's exploration of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā also prompts us to take a step back and reflect on the idea of disguise as it applies to the drama as a whole. Approaching the *Pañcarātra*, we think we know Arjuna—indeed, Arjuna *himself* thinks he knows Arjuna. But his remarkable monologue in Act 2, in which he reflects on his experience playing Bṛhannalā, rattles that belief. So, too, does the *Pañcarātra*—a *Mahābhārata* in a most unusual disguise—unsettle our ideas about what a *Mahābhārata* is and does. Bṛhannalā continues to prompt us to rethink major categories, to live more creatively and perhaps more inclusively too. The chapter concludes by discussing a miniature case study in that important aspect of Bṛhannalā's longevity: a third-gender rights organization in Dhaka named—what else?—Brihannala.

Chapters 4 and 5, which form a coordinate whole, explain the feature of the *Pañcarātra* that modern interpreters have found most bewildering: the felicitous conclusion. To resolve the tension between what we expect of a *Mahābhārata* and what we see before us in the *Pañcarātra*, we must come to understand that the *Pañcarātra*'s “happy ending” is not what it seems. Rather, this extraordinary conclusion represents the peak of a specific narrative technique at work in the play—the effort to project two stories at once. According to this mode, which I call veiled narration (see above), the principal course of action veils a second narrative arc. The audience remains aware of this underlying story even if it appears blurred and indistinct. At intervals the

veil pulls back to reveal this underlying plot in full. When we come to the play’s “pleasing and heroic” conclusion (to adopt the words of one of its translators, C. R. Devadhar) we also maintain our consciousness of the tenebrous epic story that lies beneath. The *Pañcarātra* adds to its own comedy by interrogating the ground from which our human compulsion to comedy springs. All this is explored in chapter 5.

But to see all this with knowing eyes we must first appreciate the depth and artistry of the model of veiled narration that the *Pañcarātra* is following—and that is the veiled narration that appears in the *Virāṭaparvan* itself. This is what I lay out in chapter 4. The *Virāṭaparvan*’s elegant, clever transformations of the darkest parts of the epic constitute its “veil”—the glossy, captivating outer layer of the narration. But from time to time the veil is pulled back. We find lying beneath it profound reminders of those very same catastrophic moments from the epic, this time with nothing to cover them up. In full view we see Draupadī’s suffering and Yudhiṣṭhira’s neglect thereof. The *Virāṭaparvan* encourages us to take her perspective, and for her, the stakes remain high as ever. This will become our case study of veiled narration in the *Virāṭaparvan*. But we could just as well go on to argue, for instance, that the *Virāṭaparvan*’s boisterous revision of the *Bhagavadgītā* brings out the fear, humiliation, and impenetrable mystery that encase the real thing. This too has a veil-like aspect: it forecasts its own unveiling. Taking all this into account, we come to see the *Virāṭaparvan*’s seemingly harmless battle not as an all’s-well-that-ends-well recreation of Kurukṣetra but as a foreboding dress rehearsal of the deadly eighteen days that are soon to come.

Of the ingenious ways in which the *Virāṭaparvan* reworks the major traumas of the wider *Mahābhārata* story—the inversions, the miniatures, the role-reversals, and so on—perhaps the most brilliant move of all is the way the *Virāṭaparvan* never lets us forget that it’s all a show. We

are still in the *Mahābhārata*, after all. The alternation between “veiled” and “unveiled” moments is the epic’s way of keeping us in touch with the tragedy that undergirds all of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s comedy. A happy ending, even in irony, conveys its own constructive truth—an auspiciousness yet more striking because of the tragic raw material from which it is forged. The epic’s own *Virāṭaparvan* is the crucial stimulus, providing the quartzite lode that clearly remains to be mined—a substance surprisingly stronger and denser than the narrative logic of the epic itself. In concluding the dissertation we ask whether we might call this the power of fantasy. The *Pañcarātra* is the ornament that results.

Chapter 1

Early Theories of Retelling the Sanskrit Epics

An ocean of creative literature engulfs the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* (200 BCE–200 CE) and the *Mahābhārata* (300 BCE–300 CE).¹ Narrative, dramatic, lyric, and visual expressions of the epics fill every South Asian language and region; they reach almost as far back as the centuries in which the epics themselves were composed and compiled. Today, the large number of academic studies of different *Rāmāyaṇas* and *Mahābhāratas* testifies to the force with which these works flood the history of South Asian arts and cultures. Like that of an ocean, the particular magic of this body of literature emerges not only from its sheer size but also from its polychromatic and ever-shifting inner workings. As A. K. Ramanujan and many others have shown, the literature of the Sanskrit epics constitutes an elaborate ecosystem in which texts relate and respond to one another and themselves. Ramanujan emphasizes the heterogeneity of this literary environment when he explains why he calls *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives “tellings”:

I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original *Ur*-text—usually Vālmīki’s Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all.²

For Ramanujan, “versions” and “variants” imply a linear course of influence that grants cultural priority to older, more classical works. In Ramanujan’s estimation, the notion that all *Rāmāyaṇas*

¹ This chapter was published substantially as “Literature in Layers: An Early Theory of Retelling the Sanskrit Epics,” *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History* 3 (2020): 1–33.

² A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,” in *Many *Rāmāyaṇas*: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 24–25.

respond to the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* attributed to the poet Vālmīki (or, indeed, that all *Mahābhāratas* respond to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* attributed to the mythical sage Vyāsa) fails to capture the full spectrum of reflexivities that characterize this body of literature. Accordingly, many of today’s scholars follow Ramanujan in using the terminology of “tellings” to describe different *Rāmāyaṇas* and *Mahābhāratas*.

I believe that it is time to put Ramanujan’s long-admired theory of “tellings” into conversation with the ways in which much earlier scholars conceptualized the relationships between South Asia’s many *Rāmāyaṇas* and many *Mahābhāratas*.³ I do so not to remove any of the enduring brilliance of Ramanujan’s formulation, but to show how his particular interpretive “telling” of the great epics relates in intimate ways to creative interpretations of the Sanskrit epics that emerged in Sanskrit literary theory and criticism (*alaṃkāraśāstra*) about a thousand years before his own time.⁴ Yet there is a difference. Unlike Ramanujan, these early Sanskrit literary critics confined their attention to the numerous classical Sanskrit plays and poems (*kāvya*) that portray the stories and characters of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This, however, was a substantial field. By the end of the first millennium, Sanskrit *kāvya* literature included many well-known works—Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (*Śakuntalā and the [Ring of] Recognition*, ca. 450 CE), Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* (*Arjuna and the Hunter*, ca. 575 CE), Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s *Veṅīsaṃhāra* (*The Binding of the Braid*, ca. 700 CE), and Bhavabhūti’s *Uttararāmacarita* (*Rāma’s Last Act*, ca. 725 CE), for example—as well as works that may be

³ The proposal is in keeping with Ramanujan’s own commitments to context-sensitivity as a mode of intellectual engagement. See A. K. Ramanujan, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23 (1989): 41–58.

⁴ In doing so, I take my cue from other scholars who have adopted this perspective. Three who make it a point of focus are Lawrence McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*: History, Epic, and Moral Decay,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50 (2013): 179–99; V. Raghavan, *Some Old Lost Rāma Plays* (Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1961); and Naama Shalom, *Re-Ending the Mahābhārata: The Rejection of Dharma in the Sanskrit Epic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

less familiar to us, such as Māyurāja's *Udāttarāghava* (*Exalted Rāma*, ca. 725 CE.). As it happens, they do not address the *Pañcarātra* or any of the other so-called “Trivandrum” plays, but as I hope to show, their insights bear just as importantly on these as on the works they specifically site.

How then did premodern interpreters envision the relationships between these *kāvya* compositions and the Sanskrit epics with which they shared so much narrative substance? As a way of entering the subject, let me turn to the *Vakroktijīvita* (*The Spirit of Oblique Expression*⁵), a work of literary theory and criticism by the tenth-century Kashmiri scholar Kuntaka. In the *Vakroktijīvita*, Kuntaka gives what is to my knowledge an unprecedented amount of thought to the questions of how and why *kāvya* authors manipulate narrative material from the Sanskrit epics. Like his predecessor, the influential literary theorist Ānandavardhana (ca. 850 CE), and like Ramanujan over a millennium later, Kuntaka takes a keen interest in the ways in which works of literature reflect one another. Unlike Ramanujan, however, Kuntaka envisions these *kāvya* compositions not as tellings but as *retellings*—explicit engagements with, responses to, and adaptations of the Sanskrit epics whose stories and characters they portray.

The *Vakroktijīvita* describes the two goals of *kāvya* literature in unambiguous terms. To begin with, *kāvya* charms an audience: “A work of literature creates delight in the hearts of the well-born.” But in all its charm, *kāvya* also serves as an instrument of moral instruction: “Unfolding in a beautiful arrangement, it is a means of cultivating dharma (and the other aims of human life, too).”⁶ For Kuntaka, it is hardly a throwaway claim that literature should contribute

⁵ Sheldon Pollock translates the title as “The Vital Force of Literary Language.” For his analysis and translation of selections from the *Vakroktijīvita*, see *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*, ed. by Sheldon Pollock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 98–106.

⁶ Kuntaka, *Vakroktijīvita*, ed. by K. Krishnamoorthy as *The Vakrokti-jīvita of Kuntaka* (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1977), 1.19: *dharmādisādhanopāyaḥ sukumārakramoditaḥ | kāvyabandho 'bhijātānām hṛdayāhlāda-kāraḥ ||*

to the ethical self-cultivation of a high-powered audience. “We all know princes have inherited their powers,” he continues,

and they are well on their way to controlling the whole earth. If they lack respectable instruction and can do whatever they want, they could put an end to all proper, customary conduct in the world. That is precisely why poets compose stories about kings of the past who acted correctly: to show princes what good behavior is—to educate them.⁷

When it comes to *kāvya* portrayals of narrative material from the Sanskrit epics, these two broad goals—to charm, and to educate by example—are accomplished in a unique way. In Kuntaka’s understanding, *kāvya* retellings present literature in layers. The audience (or reader, as the case may be) experiences the *kāvya* version layered over the epic version; the audience comes into contact with two works of literature, the *kāvya* creation and the epic counterpart, at the same time. According to Kuntaka’s account of the aims of *kāvya* literature, it is the experience of the two layers together that generates both the composition’s charm and its moral import. First, charm: The *kāvya* retelling delights the audience with its new, unexpected take on a familiar epic story; and in order for the work’s charm to take effect, the audience must compare the familiar story to the transformed version.⁸ Then, crucially, education: *Kāvya* retellings educate an

⁷ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 1.3: *rājaputrāḥ khalu samāsāditasvavibhāvāḥ samastajagatīvyavasthākāritāṃ pratipadyamānāḥ ślāghyopadeśasūnyatayā svatantrāḥ santah samucitasalakavyavahārocchedaṃ pravartayitum prabhavantīty etadartham eva tadvyutpattaye vyatītasaccaritarājacaritaṃ tannidarśanāya nibadhnanti kavayah |*

Shiv Subramaniam offers a vivid and helpful reading of this passage: “Princes assume power with a dangerous but constitutive weakness: entrusted with huge responsibilities like maintaining the treasury, arbitrating disputes, and leading military campaigns, they yet lack the rich store of experiences that would give them a sense of what does and doesn’t work in a given situation. Literature can help fill this lack, introducing princes to a range of situations they may face in the future while shielding them from the real-life consequences of being involved in those situations.” See Shiv Subramaniam, “Poetry’s Afterthought: Kalidasa and the Experience of Reading” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2019), 44.

⁸ David Shulman writes that the idea of rearranging something familiar contributes to Kuntaka’s account of poetic imagination or “illumination” (*pratibhā*): “*Pratibhā* underlies the gift of transfiguration,” Shulman explains, in which “the systemic relations operating among known, perhaps conventional

audience by resolving, right before their eyes, the moral ambiguities that characterize many familiar narratives from the Sanskrit epics. Again, Kuntaka proposes that the audience's work is innately comparative. *Kāvya* retellings present straightforward moral lessons to the audience, and they do this by showcasing positive examples of kingly behavior—just as other works of poetry do. But in a *kāvya* retelling of an epic story, such a lesson takes shape in the audience's mind because it *contrasts* with the more complicated, opaque message about moral conduct that the retelling's epic counterpart conveys. Here, too, it is the layered experience of the two stories that matters. Adaptation is education.

The present chapter focuses on Kuntaka, but to set the stage for his vision of epic adaptation in *kāvya*, I turn first to Ānandavardhana's account of the same topic. This is important not only because Ānandavardhana in his *Dhvanyāloka* (*Light on Suggestion*) presents the most thorough discussion of epic adaptation predating Kuntaka's, but because Ānandavardhana's analysis seems to have marked Kuntaka's in certain ways.⁹ In the *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana frames the issue of epic adaptation in terms of how a retelling—a work of literature that explicitly draws upon another work of literature—can, despite its fundamentally composite nature, convey a single overall *rasa* (aestheticized emotion).¹⁰ This idea is powerfully explicated by Lawrence McCrea in his 2013 article “Śāntarasa in the *Rājataranṅinī*: History, Epic, and

components of the poet's world will be jumbled and reconstituted, thus changing the terms of their internal composition.” See David Shulman, “Illumination, Imagination, Creativity: Rājaśekhara, Kuntaka, and Jagannātha on *Pratibhā*,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36 (2008): 497.

⁹ McCrea offers a comprehensive account of the relationship between the *Dhvanyāloka* and the *Vakroktijīvitā* in *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 331–38.

¹⁰ To the eight *rasas* of early classical drama—desire (*śṛṅgāra*), amusement (*hāsyā*), grief (*karuṇā*), anger (*raudra*), determination (*vīra*), fear (*bhayānaka*), revulsion (*bībhatsa*), and amazement (*adbhuta*)—the ninth-century Kashmiri scholar Udbhaṭa added a ninth, that of “peace” or “tranquility” (*śānta*). This is the *rasa* that Ānandavardhana famously attributes to the *Mahābhārata* and that Kuntaka will go on to critique. Many volumes have been written on the concept of *rasa* in Sanskrit literature and literary theory. Pollock's *Rasa Reader* is the most recent and helpful; on the origins of *rasa* theory and Ānandavardhana's revolutionary development of it, see McCrea, *Teleology of Poetics*, 19–25.

Moral decay.”¹¹ I revisit this terrain in the interest of going on to show that Kuntaka’s perspective on epic adaptation speaks to certain elements of Ānandavardhana’s, but also fundamentally reorients and broadens it.

I then argue that Kuntaka makes a firm if implicit categorical distinction between the epics and *kāvya*. He paints the epics as secretive texts: they conceal their true intentions; they never quite mean what they say. Despite the many recognizable artistic differences between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kuntaka attributes this feature to both of them. Today’s readers might identify this strategy of concealment in the epics and brand it unreliable narration—by any number of narrators—but Kuntaka frames it differently. For him, something else is involved: an inbuilt property of the genre whose narrative opacity is actually *intended* to prevent the epics from conveying moral lessons straightforwardly. This is something that, in his view, *kāvya* retellings must remedy. While a certain ambiguity may well characterize the epics’ narrative ethics, such uncertainty has no place in *kāvya*. Instead, Kuntaka claims, ethical ambiguities function as the central points to which *kāvya* adaptations of the epics respond. Defiantly multiplex, the epics’ stories and characters raise the principal problems that *kāvya* must resolve. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, Kuntaka’s analysis, refining Ānandavardhana’s, lays out just the sort of critical framework we need to appreciate the distinctive ways in which the *Pañcarātra* displays and subverts the *Mahābhārata*.

Ānandavardhana: *Rasa* and retelling

¹¹ McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” 182–85.

In a famous passage in the *Dhvanyāloka*, Ānandavardhana observes that each of the two Sanskrit epics demonstrates an important thematic coherence: the *Mahābhārata* evokes *śānta-rasa* (the “peaceful” or “dispassionate” *rasa*), while the *Rāmāyaṇa* evokes *karuṇa-rasa* (the “mournful” or “compassionate” *rasa*).¹² The assertion that each of the remarkably long and complex Sanskrit epics is unified around a single *rasa* bolsters Ānandavardhana’s larger claim that the individual literary components of a work—no matter how many or disparate—must function as a unit in order to evoke one principal *rasa*.¹³ But this argument raises new questions for poets who choose to retell all or parts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Should a composition based on one of these epics preserve the epic’s overall *rasa*? In other words, should all *Rāmāyaṇa* plays suggest *karuṇa-rasa* and all *Mahābhārata* poems *śānta-rasa*? And if a composition does *not* evoke the overall *rasa* of its source, will the source *rasa* linger in the narrative material of the adaptation, effectively (and undesirably) making the new work evoke two different *rasas*?

Ānandavardhana further complicates the issue by emphasizing the stunning artistic variety of the Sanskrit epics. The epics are “havens of stories;”¹⁴ they contain within them vast numbers of fully-formed narratives. Through subordinated forms of suggestion (*dhvani*, the chief subject of Ānandavardhana’s treatise), these narrative episodes work to convey the overarching *rasa* of the epic as a whole while still communicating their own individual, subordinate *rasas*, which often differ from the principal *rasa* at hand. But what happens when a poet transforms one of those individual episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* into a full-fledged

¹² Ānandavardhana, *Dhvanyāloka*, edited by K. Krishnamoorthy as *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana* (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1974), *vṛtti* on 4.5. On Ānandavardhana’s explication of the *Mahābhārata*’s *śānta-rasa*, see Gary A. Tubb, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 171–203.

¹³ On this theory’s sway over the field of *alaṃkāraśāstra*, see McCrea, *Teleology of Poetics*, 19–25.

¹⁴ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 3.11: *kathāśraya*.

composition of its own? To which *rasa* should the poet be loyal, the *rasa* of the particular story or the *rasa* of the entire epic to which it contributes? Or is the poet bound to neither?

Ānandavardhana answers that a poetic adaptation of an epic should not work to convey the overall *rasa* of the entire epic, but, rather, should strive to evoke the *rasa* of the particular narrative episode that it focuses on:

Abandoning established material that is governed by the epic plot (*itivr̥tta*) but that does not in any way conform to the *rasa* [of the individual story], or, on the other hand, re-imagining that material (*punar utprekṣyāpy*), a poet should take up story material that is appropriate to the *rasa* intended for that particular episode (*antarābhīṣṭa-rasocita-kathonnayo vidheyah*).¹⁵

My interpretation of this sentence hinges on the enticingly multivalent word *antara*. I believe that here, *antara* (as a noun rather than an adjective: “internal [thing],” “interior part,” “interval”) refers to a self-contained story that is internal to a larger epic narrative; hence I translate it as “particular episode.” Given this specific sense of *antara*, I read the final clause as asserting that an adaptation ought to evoke the *rasa* governing the individual epic sub-story it retells—not the *rasa* governing the epic as a whole. If Ānandavardhana is making this point, then it is well suited to the many *kāvya* compositions that develop only a single episode from one of the Sanskrit epics and do not seek to recast either epic in its entirety. So when a *kāvya* composition retells a single story from within an epic, Ānandavardhana claims, it should maintain the *rasa* of that individual story, which usually diverges from the *rasa* of the epic as a whole. And sure enough, the Sanskrit poets who retold stories from the epics in *kāvya* seem to have composed within this exact framework. Their poems and dramas tend to be, in McCrea’s words, “uplifting” portrayals of successful love (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*, the erotic *rasa*) and successful heroism (*vīra-rasa*, the heroic

¹⁵ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 3.10–14: *itivr̥ttavaśāyātām kathañcid rasānanugūṇām sthitiṃ tyaktvā punar utprekṣyāpy antarābhīṣṭarasocitakathonnayo vidheyah* |

rasa)—a far cry from the epics’ more sobering evocations of lost love (the *Rāmāyaṇa*) and emotional detachment (the *Mahābhārata*).¹⁶

Before I continue, let me point out that my understanding of *antarābhīṣṭa-rasocita-kathonnayo vidheyaḥ* (“[a poet] should take up story-material that is appropriate to the *rasa* intended for that particular episode”) is not self-evident. One could read *antara* and therefore the whole clause in several different ways, two of which are given in the translations of K.

Krishnamoorthy and Daniel H. H. Ingalls. Moreover, when Ānandavardhana uses the term *rasa* earlier in the sentence—and, for that matter, everywhere else in the passage that surrounds it—he does not say whether this *rasa* is the overall (singular) *rasa* of the source text or one of the other, subordinate (plural) *rasas* that govern the source text’s inner narrative arcs. Accordingly, in their translations of this passage, both Krishnamoorthy and Ingalls seem to interpret the passage’s “*rasa*” as the overall *rasa* of the source text.¹⁷ Their translations imply that here,

Ānandavardhana is advising poets who portray the *Rāmāyaṇa* in *kāvya* to maintain *karuṇa-rasa* (and so, too, to maintain *sānta-rasa* for any *Mahābhārata* adaptations). Ānandavardhana himself seems to be stepping in that direction when he warns that “one’s own inventions are not to be added to works [like the *Rāmāyaṇa*] that are havens of stories to begin with, since it has been stated: ‘There should be no overstepping the story’s path.’”¹⁸ This last quotation—of a verse from the prologue of Yaśovarman’s *Rāmābhyudaya* (*Rāma’s Success*), an eighth-century play that supposedly adheres more tightly to the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative than do other Rāma

¹⁶ McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” 188.

¹⁷ Krishnamoorthy, *Dhvanyāloka*, 143–45; *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, ed. and trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 434. For example, *antara* often serves as an adjective that means “other” or “interior.”

¹⁸ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 3.10–14: *teṣu [rāmāyaṇādiṣu] hi kathāśrayeṣu tāvat svecchaiva na yojyā | yad uktam—“kathāmārga na cātikramaḥ”*

plays of its time¹⁹—lends color to the idea that Ānandavardhana wants poets to maintain the broader artistic frameworks that govern their epic sources.

Other parts of this passage, however, indicate that Ānandavardhana believes a poet must preserve the *rasa* of the particular segment of the epic that the poet’s work portrays, not the *rasa* of the epic as a whole. The strongest evidence to support this reading lies in the examples that Ānandavardhana cites as successful *kāvya* retellings of the epics: the works of Kālidāsa (such as *Abhijñānaśākuntala*), Sarvasena’s lost *Harivijaya* (*Kṛṣṇa’s Victory*), and another lost *mahākāvya*, the *Arjunacarita* (*The Adventures of Arjuna*), which Ānandavardhana himself composed.²⁰ Of the *Mahābhārata* retellings that Ānandavardhana references here, none, as far as we know, maintains the *śānta-rasa* that he will go on to claim is the overall *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata*: all are *vīra-rasa* (heroic) or *śṛṅgāra-rasa* (erotic, romantic) compositions; none suggests *śānta-rasa*.²¹ But we can recognize how Ānandavardhana might see these works evoking subordinate *rasas* from the *Mahābhārata* instead. For example, it could be argued that in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Kālidāsa builds a full *śṛṅgāra-rasa* drama on elements of *śṛṅgāra-rasa* that appear its source, a short but foundational sub-story in the first book of the epic. And although we know little about Sarvasena’s lost *Harivijaya*, the poem’s title, at least, suggests that the *Harivijaya* primarily thematizes heroism, not peace or dispassion.²² The same could be said of the *Arjunacarita*: alongside Bhīma, Arjuna is the figure whose heroism in combat the

¹⁹ Raghavan, *Some Old Lost Rāma Plays*, 4.

²⁰ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 3.10–14: *yathā kālidāsaprabandheṣu | yathā ca sarvasena-viracite harivijaye | yathā ca madīya evārjunacarite mahākāvye |*

²¹ As McCrea argues in “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” that endeavor will have to wait until Kalhaṇa writes the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* a few centuries later. Nonetheless, David Gitomer makes the point that there is something about the *Veṅṣaṃhāra* that truly captures the aesthetics of the *Mahābhārata*. See Gitomer, “*Veṅṣaṃhāra*,” 426–27.

²² On the *Harivijaya*, see V. M. Kulkarni, “The *Hari-Vijaya* of Sarvasena,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 58/59 (1977–78): 691–710. The poem’s source episode, in which Kṛṣṇa steals the *parijāta* tree, is not included in the current critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, but it may well have appeared in versions of the epic to which Ānandavardhana had access.

Mahābhārata references most relentlessly; a work depicting his “adventures” or “doings” (*carita*) would likely illustrate some sort of heroic victory on Arjuna’s part.

Of course, neither the *Rāmāyaṇa* nor the *Mahābhārata* consists of a series of precise, thematically straightforward stories for poets to translate into *kāvya*. Indeed, the individual episodes within the epics can be just as complex as the longer epics themselves. Not every line of dialogue or turn of plot within a single story may support what a poet determines is the appropriate *rasa* for the episode (and therefore for the retelling). Ānandavardhana argues that poets, when presented with such roadblocks, must reconstruct epic narratives around the evocation of the episode’s target *rasa*:

There are havens of stories such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* that gleam with established *rasa*[s].²³ The poet should not impose his own inventions on them if they contradict [those] *rasa*[s]... A poet who is composing *kāvya* should be wholeheartedly under the spell of *rasa*. So were he to see some narrative element in the epic that does not conform to the *rasa* [of the particular story], then, having shattered it, he should independently take up other narrative material that works with the *rasa* [of the chosen episode]. After all, it is not the poet’s job to recapitulate nothing but the [various] epic plot[s] (*itivṛtta-mātra*); one gains that much from the epic (*itihāsa*) itself.²⁴

²³ Were it not for Ānandavardhana’s reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa* by name, here, and the possibility that “the works of Kālidāsa” includes the *Raghuvamśa* (*The Lineage of Raghu*), a *mahākāvya* that draws upon the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I would be tempted to think that this passage refers to works that retell the *Mahābhārata* specifically. The *Mahābhārata*, after all, incorporates more self-contained individual stories than the *Rāmāyaṇa* does; its major narrative arc is less centralized than the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s. Regardless, the fact that Ānandavardhana names the *Rāmāyaṇa* here and proceeds to name only compositions that retell the *Mahābhārata* makes me think that the *-ādi* (“and so on”) at the end of *Rāmāyaṇa-ādi* refers to the *Mahābhārata*, and that Ānandavardhana is placing the two in the same analytical category.

²⁴ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 3.10–14: *santi siddharasaprākhyā ye ca rāmāyaṇādayaḥ | kathāśrayā na tair yojyā svechā rasavirodhinī ||...kavinā kāvyam upanibadhnatā sarvātmanā rasaparatanreṇa bhavitavyam | tatretivṛtte yadi rasānanuṅaṇāṃ sthitim paśyet tāṃ bhāṅktvāpi svatantratayā rasānuṅaṇā kathāntaram utpādayet | na hi kaver itivṛttamātranirvahaṇena kiñcit prayojanam itihāsād eva tatsiddheḥ |* For McCrea’s translation, see “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājataranṅinī*,” 186.

I use brackets in order to be transparent about my interpretations of terms (*rasa*, *itivṛtta*) that Ānandavardhana’s text leaves ambiguous: Are they singular or plural? But if we read a plurality of *rasas* instead of a singular *rasa*, if we read many epic plots (*itivṛtta*) instead of a single plot, and if, as I suggested above, we read “*rasa*” as the *rasa* that a particular narrative episode (rather than an entire epic) embodies, then we can see that Ānandavardhana’s guidelines conform to many well-known compositions that retell epic stories in *kāvya*. Take, for example, Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadha*. In the corresponding story in the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa decapitates Śiśupāla before the royal court in the middle of a ritual occasion. (It answers a long string of insults that Śiśupāla hurls at Kṛṣṇa; it also fulfills a promise that Kṛṣṇa makes earlier in the story.) Ever pluralistic, the epic offers multiple perspectives on the event. These the listener experiences through the reactions of the gathered kings:

At that, some of the kings there said nothing, watching Kṛṣṇa now that the time for all Śiśupāla’s talk was in the past. Others, impatient, squeezed their fingers together. Others, swelling with anger, bit their lips, but some of the kings secretly praised Kṛṣṇa. But still, some were furious, still others remained undecided.²⁵

McCrea argues that in Māgha’s interpretation of the story, the poet frames the event as a cosmic inevitability—a point of fulfillment in the poem and a marker of Kṛṣṇa’s particular brand of heroism. In this, Māgha turns away from the *Mahābhārata*’s more tangled narration of the event, in which Kṛṣṇa’s behavior invites mixed reactions and generates a sense of tension for the

²⁵ *Mahābhārata* 2.42.26–28: *tataḥ kecin mahīpālā nābruvaṃs tatra kiṃcana | atītavākpathe kāle prekṣamāṇā janārdanam || hastair hastāgram apare praṭyapīṣann amarsitāḥ | apare daśanair oṣṭhān adaśan krodhamūrchitāḥ || rahas tu kecid vārṣṇeyaṃ praśaśaṃsur narādhipāḥ | kecid eva tu samrabdhā madhyasthās tv apare ’bhavan ||*

reader.²⁶ Furthermore, in the *Śiśūpālavadhā*, Kṛṣṇa decapitates Śiśupāla in an arena more appropriate to bloody displays of heroism, the battlefield. Were Māgha to adhere more closely to the story as the *Mahābhārata* tells it, the resulting *mahākāvya* would neither present an unwavering vision of heroism nor would it offer anything new to the literary world. And that is precisely the poet’s charge according to Ānandavardhana: “It is not the poet’s job to recapitulate nothing but the plot[s]” of epic stories.

It seems contradictory that when it comes to this specific category of literary works—*kāvya* retellings of the epics—Ānandavardhana would demand “no overstepping the story’s path” and then, almost in the same breath, conclude that it is not the poet’s job to recapitulate that story. Yet this is just what we see, and I believe it demonstrates a certain attunement to the same kind of literary layering that Kuntaka will go on to explore in the *Vakroktijīvitā*—the way in which a *kāvya* retelling of an epic story can generate, for an audience, the vision of two narrative trajectories at once. When Ānandavardhana invokes the “no overstepping” maxim, he reveals an awareness of what an audience—whose experience the *Dhvanyāloka* otherwise de-emphasizes, at least when it comes to *rasa*—would have brought to a retelling of an epic story in *kāvya*.²⁷ If the retelling were to stray so far from the familiar version of the episode as to suggest a different *rasa* from that which seems to govern the original, then the audience might grow distracted or confused.

²⁶ Lawrence McCrea, “The Conquest of Cool: Theology and Aesthetics in Māgha’s *Śiśūpālavadhā*,” in *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature*, ed. Yigal Bronner, David Shulman, and Gary Tubb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 123–41.

²⁷ See Sheldon Pollock, “What was Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka Saying? The Hermeneutical Transformation of Indian Aesthetics,” in *Epic and Argument in Sanskrit Literary History: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Goldman*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Delhi: Manohar, 2010), 145: “Ānandavardhana, too, is completely silent on how the reader knows of *rasa* or experiences it. He is concerned only with textual, even formalistic, processes when arguing that *rasa* is something that can never be directly expressed but only suggested or implied (*vyañjanāpakṣa*).”

This reading is also advanced by the eleventh-century Kashmiri scholar Abhinavagupta in his commentary on the passage in question. “If one were to make Rāma the hero of a romantic comedy (*nāṭikā*)—the kind of character for whom courage and flirtatiousness would be appropriate—then that would be totally inconsistent.”²⁸ To rephrase Abhinavagupta’s point in positive terms, the Rāma character necessarily carries with him the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*’s narrative of sorrow and the lasting separation of lovers, even if he then goes on to appear in any number of literary works beyond the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A poet cannot ask the audience to divorce a figure or a story from its pre-existing literary context without risking some kind of (in Abhinavagupta’s words) inconsistency. So, to return to Ānandavardhana: In order to account for an audience’s prior exposure to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, there must be a certain thematic continuity between a particular epic narrative and its reimagination in *kāvya*. Within these bounds, however, the poet’s sole responsibility is to evoke the pre-existing *rasa* of the chosen sub-narrative—not to place every single detail of it in his own composition.

But with the exception of this gesture toward the audience’s layered experience of literature, Ānandavardhana’s frame of reference for epic adaptation remains largely internal to the world of the text. If the poet makes a change to an epic story, it is not because he must rid it of, say, something unbecoming to the hero that might give the audience wrong ideas about kingly behavior, but rather because his most important job as a poet is to bring out a specific *rasa* over the course of the composition. Of course, we should acknowledge, as Sheldon Pollock urges us to, that social ideals feature implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) in Ānandavardhana’s

²⁸ Abhinavagupta, *Dhvanyālokalocana*, ed. C. M. Neelakandhan as part of *Dhvanyālokalocana: Kerala Commentaries*, vol. 2 (Kochi: Centre for Heritage Studies, 2011), 161 [on *Dhvanyāloka* 3.10–14]: *yathā rāmasya dhīralalitavyojanena nāṭikānāyakaṭvaṃ kaścit kuryād iti tv atyantāsamañjasam* | On the *nāṭikā*, see Wendy Doniger, introduction to Harṣa, “*The Lady of the Jewel Necklace*” and “*The Lady Who Shows Her Love*”, ed. and trans. Wendy Doniger (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 37.

rasa-dhvani teleology.²⁹ But is this Ānandavardhana’s intention? He does not draw the reader’s attention to the social, moral, and artistic complexities that the epics present—nor to the complex inner workings of their retellings in *kāvya*—in the way Kuntaka will do a century later. The *Vakroktijīvita* takes the next step: Kuntaka takes a second look at Ānandavardhana’s concessions to the experiential realities of retelling epics and advances them to the level of explicit analysis.

Kuntaka: Literature in layers

Whether they are composed in the seventh century or the twenty-first, literary adaptations of the Sanskrit epics often seek to make sense of the morally unsettling aspects of their source narratives. As V. Raghavan observes in the case of early Sanskrit plays based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the “originality” of the retelling frequently consists of an attempt

to save, so to say, the character of the dramatis personae whose behavior, on some occasions, in the original story, has been the subject of controversy and criticism: Daśaratha and Kaikeyī on the occasion of the proposed coronation and eventual exile of Rāma; the episode of Rāma going after the palpably illusory golden deer; Sītā’s unbecoming words to Lakṣmaṇa, ... Rāma killing Vālin and in the end repudiating Sītā who undergoes the fire-ordeal.³⁰

Kuntaka advances a conceptual framework for adaptations of the epics into *kāvya* that reflects this widespread practice. His theory of adaptation emerges from a concern about what the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* depict—and, just as important, the way in which they depict it—that plays no role in Ānandavardhana’s deliberations. I imagine that this is because Kuntaka

²⁹ Sheldon Pollock, “The Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no. 1/2 (2001): 197–229, esp. 200–208.

³⁰ Raghavan, *Some Old Lost Rāma Plays*, x–xi. Sheldon Pollock offers a wider perspective in “The Divine King in the Indian Epic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 505–6.

brings into play a focus on audience experience that is quite different from what we see in Ānandvardhana's work. If part of our experience as audience members (or readers) is to identify in some way with the central characters in a work of literature—the figures to whose behavior and experiences the composition grants the audience the greatest exposure, and for whom the composition therefore generates the deepest sympathy—then Kuntaka has good reason to worry that audiences might identify too much, or too easily, with the famously flawed protagonists of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The magic of a *kāvya* retelling, we learn, is that it can redraft those same characters into more appropriate role models.

But Kuntaka's concern rests on the epics' distinctive mode of narration as much as it does on the characterizations that result from it. Kuntaka engages with the narrative ethics of the texts—that is, the articulation and cultivation of moral values within the context of storytelling³¹—but it is the “narrative” component he alights on when discussing, for example, on the “unseemliness” (*virūpakatā*) of a particular story in the *Mahābhārata* or the “impropriety” (*anaucitya*) of Rāma's behavior as it is described in a certain part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The problem is the story itself, the description itself, which generates something dangerous and unwelcome. Specifically, in Kuntaka's reading, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* seldom seem to narrate in a straightforward manner. But what, exactly, falls short? What are the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* concealing?

In order to illustrate both this narrative indeterminacy and the ethical ambiguities that arise from it, Kuntaka directs our attention to instances in which the *Mahābhārata* or the *Rāmāyaṇa* describes a central character as virtuous, but then shows that figure behaving in an

³¹ A detailed introduction to the concept of narrative ethics can be found in James Phelan, “Narrative Ethics,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, created 2013 and revised 2014), accessed via <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics> on July 19, 2022.

unvirtuous manner. In this, he foreshadows the argument that Emily Hudson would make about the *Mahābhārata* over a millennium later:

The text directly states one thing and then down the road contradicts what it has said with no literal, explicit acknowledgement that it is doing so. In these instances meaning is created by the emotional experience of the disjuncture between explicit saying and the implicit contradicting or “doing.”³²

Likewise, Kuntaka is interested in the fact that the epics set up emotional and ethical expectations and then proceed to undermine them. Kuntaka’s idea is that the epics themselves present us with two contrasting narrative layers. (Yes—the layers have layers!) One epic layer reflects an idealism, an ethics of heroism; the other a cynicism, an ethics of whatever-it-takes success. When Kuntaka points out aspects of epic narratives that he considers “incongruent” (*asamīcīna*), “deformed” (*virūpaka*), “dispirited” (*virasa*), or “unimaginable” (*asam̐bhāvanīya*), he draws our attention to the discrepancy between these two narrative layers within the epics themselves.

Kuntaka then goes on to show that *kāvya* retellings of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* respond to this rift between the idealistic and the cynical aspects of their epic sources. In his account, *kāvya* retellings of epic stories are aesthetically valuable because they create continuity between what their epic sources express on each of these narrative levels. This realignment means that *kāvya* retellings can openly reform, excuse, or otherwise correct the morally questionable behavior of certain epic figures. For Kuntaka, it is not merely the retelling itself but rather the reparative *relationship* between the retelling and its source that allows the composition to convey a moral lesson. By reformulating epic stories the way that they do,

³² Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 70.

Kuntaka argues, *kāvya* compositions layer positive moral lessons (to model one’s actions on those of the heroes of the play or poem in question) over implied negative ones (not to behave as those same figures do in their original epic settings). A significant measure of a *kāvya* retelling’s success depends on the contrast between the two interrelated genres. The creative force with which *kāvya* adaptations of the epics refigure their source narratives thus amounts to a large-scale expression of obliqueness—the major topic of the *Vakroktijīvita*—and this obliqueness, Kuntaka claims, is what makes literature delightful to those who consume it.

So how exactly does Kuntaka characterize “oblique expression” (*vakrokti*)? As McCrea observes, Kuntaka holds back from explicit definitions of this basic concept, even as he enshrines it in his title. Kuntaka prefers, instead, to illustrate how it works on the levels of the phoneme, word stem, suffix, sentence, episode, and composition.³³ Pointing out that these subdivisions of *vakrokti* correspond to the subdivisions of *dhvani* that Ānandavardhana outlines in the *Dhvanyāloka*, Krishnamoorthy argues in a parallel way that Kuntaka’s concept of *vakrokti* is “identical in spirit” to Ānandavardhana’s *dhvani*,³⁴ which is to say that it refers to mechanisms of creating non-explicit meaning.³⁵ But when Kuntaka analyzes *vakrokti* on a larger scale—namely, when he comes to discuss the obliqueness of an extended episode that may appear in a work of *kāvya* or, indeed, the obliqueness of an entire *kāvya* composition—he begins to speak of *vakrokti* in terms of characterization and plot. Here the whole category of “*kāvya* retellings of the

³³ McCrea, *Teleology of Poetics*, 338–39. As Anne Monius points out, other Sanskrit literary theorists adopt a similar structure for their arguments. See Monius, “‘And We Shall Compose a Poem to Establish These Truths’: The Power of Narrative Art in South Asian Literary Cultures,” in *Narrative, Philosophy and Life*, ed. Allen Speight (Springer: Dordrecht, 2015), 152.

³⁴ K. Krishnamoorthy, introduction to *The Vakrokti-jīvita of Kuntaka*, xvi.

³⁵ I take the term “non-explicit meaning” from Whitney Cox, *Modes of Philology in Medieval South India* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 78.

epics” comes back into play, supplying Kuntaka’s most prominent examples of large-scale *vakrokti*.

The characters’ activities should express their “inner natures” (*svāśaya*), he writes. In other words, a poem or a play about Rāma should attribute to him the kind of behavior that openly reflects the kind of social and ethical superiority that is ascribed to him in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—at least on its idealistic layer. But despite the predictability of the characters’ actions, Kuntaka says, the audience shouldn’t be able to tell from the beginning where the story is going to end up.³⁶ The apparent contradiction between predictable characters and unpredictable plot is resolved in the context of *kāvya* retellings of the epics, many of which Kuntaka draws upon as evidence to support his argument. If the audience knows how the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* end, then a *kāvya* composition that adopts narrative material from the epics but leads that material toward a different conclusion offers a plot that an audience might consider surprising.

For Kuntaka, retellings of the epics in *kāvya* do a particularly effective job of demonstrating how both features—characterization and plot—count as an expression that is “oblique,” or non-explicit, in longer segments of literary works. Since *kāvya* adaptations of the epics portray their characters from the epics in such a way as to make them better moral exemplars than they appear to be in the epics, these transformations would read as “oblique”—non-obvious, unpredictable, or simply new—to an audience that would doubtless be familiar with those characters as depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, in

³⁶ *Vakroktijīvitā* 4.1–2: *yatra nīryantraṇotsāhapaṇispandopāśobhinī | pravṛttir vyavahartṛṇām svāśayollekhaśālinī || apy āmūlād anāśaṅkyasamutthāne manorathe | kāpy unmīlati niḥśimā sā prabandhāmśavakratā ||* “When the behavior of the characters abounds with expressions of their own true natures and is beautified by the maintenance of unrestrained strength, and also when the work has a captivating conclusion that cannot be conjectured from the beginning, then some sort of boundless oblique expression unfolds on the level of a single part of the composition.”

Kuntaka's understanding, *kāvya* compositions transform epic characters by taking epic stories in new directions; an audience would not be able to predict those developments, and therefore this misdirection would register as “oblique” from the audience's perspective.

Māyurāja's *Udāttarāghava* and the problem of acting like Rāma

Let us take a closer look at how *kāvya* compositions' relationships with the Sanskrit epics motivate Kuntaka's understanding of large-scale *vakrokti*. One of Kuntaka's chosen examples of episode-level *vakrokti* is a scene in the second act of Māyurāja's *Udāttarāghava* that transforms its corresponding narrative in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*.³⁷ Here Kuntaka claims that the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode in question exhibits not only an ethical problem—that Rāma leaves Sītā in order to chase the illusory golden deer—but also a split in layers of meaning in the narrative. The narrative disjuncture emerges, in Kuntaka's analysis, from the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* describes Rāma as superior to everyone else but then shows Lakṣmaṇa rushing to his rescue. Of course, Rāma doesn't “really” need to be rescued. As centuries of *Rāmāyaṇa*-philes know, Lakṣmaṇa races off when he hears what he believes to be Rāma's cries of distress, but these cries are the products of Mārīca's *māyā* and all part of Rāvaṇa's grand plan to capture Sītā. Still, in Kuntaka's reading, the text opens up the possibility that Lakṣmaṇa must rescue Rāma. The story has offered two illusions already (first the deer, then Rāma's cries for help), so the possibility of Rāma's vulnerability is the story's unspoken third illusion—except that now it is the audience who might fall for it.

³⁷ See Māyurāja, *Udāttarāghava*, ed. by V. Raghavan as *Udātta Rāghavam of Māyurāja* (Chennai: Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for the Performing Arts, 2016).

Kuntaka argues that the *Udāttarāghava* responds to these ethical and literary ambiguities in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s account of the story:

Obliqueness in an episode of a literary work is as follows. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, King Janaka's daughter Sītā admonishes Lakṣmaṇa and sends him off to save Rāma's life. She shows no regard for the protection of her own life; her heart despairs hearing the pitiful wails of Rāma, who had followed the deer made from Mārīca's magic. All of this is exceedingly inappropriate, since it is unimaginable that such an important person as Rāma would behave like this with his subordinate, Lakṣmaṇa, so close at hand. And Rāma is one who has already been described as someone whose actions are superior to everyone else's, because of which the possibility of his life being saved by a younger brother is utterly incongruent. Having pondered all of this, the clever poet Māyurāja has rearranged it in the *Udāttarāghava*: It is Rāma who is sent by the despairing Sītā to rescue Lakṣmaṇa, who has left to hunt Mārīca's deer. And here, the obliqueness is this very invention that pleases the knowledgeable.³⁸

Kuntaka begins by defining the narrative and ethical hurdles that the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s depiction of this episode presents to its audience. The first problem is that Rāma, the most important (or "primary," *pradhāna*) character, abandons Sītā, his wife and his ward, to chase a magic deer when he could have easily sent Lakṣmaṇa (his younger brother, and therefore his subordinate) to do it. Here Rāma fails to fulfill the role that the *Rāmāyaṇa* creates for him. The other problem is that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, having stated that Rāma is better than everyone else, then proceeds to show us that his wife thinks he might need to have his life saved by his social inferior. Here, too, there is a narrative inconsistency: the *Rāmāyaṇa* promises that Rāma will be better than everyone else,

³⁸ *Vakroktijīvita*, vṛtti on 1.21: *tatra prakaraṇe vakrabhāvo yathā—rāmāyaṇe mārīcamāyāmayamāṇikyamṛgānusārīṇo rāmasya karuṇākrāṇḍakaraṇanakātarāntaḥkaraṇayā janakarājaputryā tatprāṇaparitrāṇāya svajīvita-parirakṣānirapekṣayā lakṣmaṇaḥ nirbhartsya preṣitaḥ | tad etad atyantam anaucityayuktam yasmāt anucara-saṃnidhāne pradhānasya tathāvidhavyāpārakaraṇam asaṃbhāvanīyam | tasya ca sarvātīśāyicaritayuktatvena varṇyamānasya tena kanīyasā prāṇaparitrāṇasambhāvanety etad atyantam asamīcīnam iti paryāloca udāttarāghave kavinā vaidagdhyaśena mārīcamṛgamāraṇāya prayātasya paritrāṇārthaṃ lakṣmaṇasya sītayā kātaratvena rāmaḥ preritaḥ ity upanibaddham | atra ca tadvidāhlādakāritvam eva vakratvam |*

but then fails to deliver on that promise. So, in Kuntaka’s understanding, what the epic *does* with Rāma’s character fails to line up with what the text *says* about Rāma.

Kuntaka then invites us to picture Māyurāja “pondering” the flaws of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s narrative and assembling the scene so that it conveys a more virtuous characterization of Rāma and a more straightforward display of his social importance. Māyurāja’s solution—to have Lakṣmaṇa go after the deer and to have Rāma rescue him—models for the audience what proper behavior should be in an ideal social order. It also creates a newly coherent narrative around Rāma’s virtue: the play describes this king in superior terms and then shows him acting in a superior manner. In Kuntaka’s view, the play’s construction of the story, and the more virtuous characterization of Rāma that emerges from it, overtly edits the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s version.

Kuntaka ties the obliqueness of the scene to the fact that the audience experiences a patent layering of the *Udāttarāghava*’s portrayal of the story *over* the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s well-known account of the episode. For Kuntaka, what makes this scene oblique, and therefore artistically valuable—a value that compounds the narrative-ethical value I have just described—is the fact that it is “invented” (“rearranged” or “reworked,” *upanibaddha*). The inventiveness of Māyurāja’s version depends on the audience’s previous knowledge of how the *Rāmāyaṇa* portrays Rāma. The audience experiences the layering of the new, unexpected narrative of Rāma’s virtue over the old, familiar one that presents significantly less moral clarity. In Kuntaka’s understanding the play makes not only an ethical repair but an artistic, emotional one. Like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Udāttarāghava* cultivates the expectation that Rāma will behave better than everyone else, which is to say that he will protect his wife and rescue his younger brother—but unlike the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Udāttarāghava* fulfills those promises. By actualizing the expectations that it sets for the audience, the *Udāttarāghava* creates a continuity in the

audience’s experience of Rāma and the Rāma story. Kuntaka’s brain-teasing point is that in meeting the expectations that it constructs for the audience, the *Udāttarāghava* ultimately does something *unexpected*—something oblique—with the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. This unexpectedness emerges only because the *Udāttarāghava*’s audience has an awareness of the two versions of the story, one layered over the other, and can therefore appreciate the novelty of the retelling. And, to tease the brain one last time, its narrative obliqueness consists precisely in causing Rāma to behave *less* “obliquely”—that is, more straightforwardly—from an ethical or characterological point of view than he does in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself.

Kuntaka’s analysis of the *Udāttarāghava* resonates with a larger claim about the didactic value of retellings of the epics. Kuntaka makes this broader claim when he discusses obliqueness on the level of an entire composition. We already know from an the first chapter of the *Vakroktijīvita* that Kuntaka believes that one of the purposes of literature is to cultivate dharma in a well-born audience, and that a work of literature does so by conveying positive examples of ethical behavior. Later in the chapter, Kuntaka details what this kind of education should look like:

Obliqueness in an entire literary work is as follows. In some compositions by great poets that rework the story of Rāma—plays and so on—what initially appears is a description of great men that steals the hearts of connoisseurs, beautiful in all of its elements because of the five kinds of obliqueness. But ultimately, what results is a moral lesson (*dharma-upadeśa*) that consists of an instruction and a prohibition (*vidhi-niṣedha*): “Act like Rāma (*rāmavad vartitavyam*), not like Rāvaṇa (*na rāvaṇavad*).”³⁹

³⁹ *Vakroktijīvita*, vṛtti on 1.21: *prabandhe vakrabhāvo yathā kutracin mahākaviviracite rāmakathopanibandhe nāṭakādau pañcavidhavakratāsāmāgrīsamudayasundaram sahr̥dayahṛdayahāri mahāpuruṣavarṇanam upakrame pratibhāsate | paramārthas tu vidhiniṣedhātmakadharmopadeśaḥ paryavasyati rāmavadvarti[ta]vyam na rāvaṇavad iti |*

It is easy to see how Kuntaka would argue that a play such as Māyurāja’s, with its forthright depiction of Rāma’s moral virtue, teaches an audience to “act like Rāma.” But while the *Udāttarāghava* surely paints Rāvaṇa as an antihero, it is interesting to note that Rāvaṇa himself does not appear in Kuntaka’s analysis of the play. Instead, in Kuntaka’s interpretation, the figure whom the audience learns *not* to emulate is Rāma from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. That is the Rāma at whom the *Rāmāyaṇa* hints when it shows him leaving Sītā and—maybe—needing to be rescued. From this angle, we can see that Kuntaka’s analysis of obliqueness in the *Udāttarāghava* opens the door to an intriguing idea. The instruction and prohibition that are central to the audience’s lesson about dharma have a different set of referents: “Act like Rāma in the *Udāttarāghava*, not like Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.” As Kuntaka frames them, the play’s explicit interventions with the *Rāmāyaṇa* story and the Rāma character are what allow this moral lesson—this “ultimate” (*paramārtha*) result—to reach the audience.

In calling upon the implicit command to “act like Rāma, not like Rāvaṇa,” Kuntaka conveys the idea that a work of literature needs to be functionally unified around a single import. This is also what Ānandavardhana does with his *rasa* teleology, except for Ānandavardhana, the ultimate takeaway is a *rasa*, not a moral lesson.⁴⁰ Both Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka borrow this idea from the Mīmāṃsā theory of Vedic exegesis. Kuntaka, for his part, applies to literary texts the Mīmāṃsā notion that many utterances in the Veda fall into one of two categories, “instruction” (*vidhi*) or “prohibition” (*niṣedha, pratiṣedha*).⁴¹ But for Kuntaka, the epic retelling—as a specific category of *kāvya* composition—plays a crucial role in that Mīmāṃsā-inspired concept of narrative ethics. To see this, let us compare Kuntaka’s dictum “act like Rāma, not like Rāvaṇa” with the scholar Bhoja’s use of the same phrase (and, behind it, the same

⁴⁰ McCrea, *Teleology of Poetics*, 27; 63–70.

⁴¹ On Bhoja’s use of this same idea, see Pollock, “Social Aesthetic,” 218.

analytical framework of *vidhi* and *niṣedha*) a generation later. In the eighth chapter of the *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* (*Light on Passion*), Bhoja writes that there arises a special kind of supposition on the part of someone who has “innate receptivity” (Pollock’s term for *upahita-saṃskāra*⁴²) when this person turns his attention to the meanings of whole compositions such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and that this supposition concerns “an instruction and a prohibition” (*vidhi-niṣedha*) such as “act like Rāma, not like Rāvaṇa or others like him.” “Available to everyone,” says Bhoja, “it is the single cause of achieving the four aims of human life (*puruṣārtha*).”⁴³ Here Bhoja speaks of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* itself teaching its audience to “act like Rāma, not like Rāvaṇa.” Kuntaka could have made a similar point—in some ways, it might have been an easier point to make—but instead, he restricts the “act like Rāma” lesson to compositions that *modify* the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For Kuntaka, the moral lesson emerges from the audience’s awareness of the layers of literature at hand; the audience must listen to the conversation between the epic and the retelling.

The unsettling ends of kings and queens: Bhavabhūti’s *Uttararāmacarita* and Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s *Veṅṅsaṃhāra*

The idea that *kāvya* retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* repair both the ethical and the narrative ambiguities of their sources weaves through the *Vakroktijīvitā*’s final chapter, when Kuntaka returns at some length to the subject of how best to adapt the epics. As McCrea argues, Kuntaka’s key innovation here (at least with respect to the ground laid by

⁴² Pollock, “Social Aesthetic,” 217–18.

⁴³ Bhoja, *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*, ed. Venkatarama Raghavan as *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa of Bhoja* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 271: *yas tu tadrūparāmāyaṇādīprabandhārthānām avadhāraṇenopahitasamskārasya rāmavad vartitavyam na rāvaṇādivad ityādividhiniṣedhapratibhāviṣeṣa upajāyate sa samastaviśvavyāpī caturvargaikahetuḥ* |

Ānandavardhana) is to make it abundantly clear that poets ought to be praised for “‘abandoning’ the *rasa* of the epic itself and substituting another, more upbeat and more uplifting, one” in their own retellings. McCrea observes that this process of substituting one *rasa* for another involves making one specific change to the overall narrative of either epic: avoiding its disheartening ending.⁴⁴ “Producing an ending by making use of some different, pleasant, audience-pleasing *rasa* that belongs to a single story within an epic source,” Kuntaka explains, “and thus forsaking the path of the *rasa* that results from the conclusion of [the entire] work, the poet puts a special sort of obliqueness in his composition.”⁴⁵ Here Kuntaka places at center stage Bhavabhūti’s *Uttararāmacarita* and Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s *Veṅṅisaṃhāra*, both of which, in his estimation, benefit from modifying the endings of their source texts to evoke markedly different *rasas* from the ones of the epics. He draws special attention to the fact that the *Uttararāmacarita* “inverts” (*viparyasta*) the ending of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, transforming the *karuṇa-rasa* final separation of Rāma and Sītā into a conclusion of “love in union” (*saṃbhoga-śṛṅgāra*). He similarly applauds the way in which the *Veṅṅisaṃhāra* cuts short the *Mahābhārata* narrative so as to avoid depicting what Ānandavardhana terms “the dispiriting end” (*virasa-avasāna*)⁴⁶ of the Pāṇḍavas.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” 188. At the risk of making too obvious a point, the idea that certain endings not only invite but demand revision is one that echoes far beyond medieval India. In 1748, a reader of Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa* wrote to its author to share a new version of the ending—one that she herself had written. On this and fan fiction as a genre, see Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fan Fiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2013), 29–30. A few more glimpses into the long life of the alternate ending include Nahum Tate’s *The History of King Lear* (1681); Rossini’s *Otello* (1816), the 1820 revival of which was performed with a *lieto fine*; and the 1960 film *Never on Sunday*, in which the leading lady regularly rewrites the Greek tragedies. (The end of *Medea*: “Everybody is happy and they go to the seashore.”)

⁴⁵ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 1.16–7: *itivṛttāntarvṛttāyāḥ kasyāścid ekasyāḥ kathāyāḥ kavis tannibandhanirvahaṇagatarasapaddhatim parityajyābhijātānām āhlādakāriṇā kāmanīyakena kenāpy anyena rasenopasaṃharaṇam upapādayan prabandhe kam api vakrimāṇam ādadhāti |*

⁴⁶ *Dhvanyāloka*, *vṛtti* on 4.5: *virasāvasāna*.

⁴⁷ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.16–7: *kāmāntarakavalitasakalabhāvabhāvanāvāritaniḥsārasaṃsāravāsānāmahimani mahābhārata śāntarasavināśinā [vīreṇa rasena] |*

Just as when he discusses the *Udāttarāghava*, Kuntaka frames his thoughts on the virtues of these adaptations in terms of pointed critiques of their sources, which he paints as misleading. The *Uttararāmacarita* “brings joy to the audience by taking up love-in-union between Rāma and Sītā, and by showing Rāma’s gladness at the sight of his sons’ skills in divine weaponry”—but it is only in the retelling, and not in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, that we find this heart-warming resolution. Kuntaka explains that Bhavabhūti must completely rework the *karuṇa-rasa* of the original. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he reminds us, “Rāma, the lord of the Raghus, accompanied by his brother, falls into the belly of a river because Sītā, the daughter of King Janaka, had entered a hole in the earth, so pained was she by cruel separation.”⁴⁸ (He refers to Rāma’s death, which follows Sītā’s: rejected by Rāma and heartbroken, she demands that the earth swallow her.) A closer look at Kuntaka’s language makes it clear what, exactly, he finds problematic about the conclusion of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The ends of Rāma and Sītā are not flawed in themselves; rather, they are flawed as the ends of noble lives (“the lord of the Raghus,” “the daughter of King Janaka”). Kuntaka’s point, I believe, is that the *Rāmāyaṇa* spends a great deal of time communicating that Rāma and Sītā are powerful, even divine figures. Why then, Kuntaka asks, does it show them in such despair? The *Uttararāmacarita* resolves this discrepancy by substituting a socially appropriate ending: Rāma and Sītā live happily ever after, gazing contentedly at the next generation. “One should think about other stories in a similar way,” he concludes.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.16–7: *rāmāyaṇe ’py aṅginā karuṇena dāruṇavirahavedanābhājanajana-karājaputrīpātālapraveśāt pravāhodaratitasya sodarasahitasya raghupater nibandhanīrvahaṇa-viparyastakathāyāḥ sakaladivyastrakuśalalavabaladarśanotsavāntaropabṛṃhitatvena videhana-ndinīsambhogaśṛṅgārah upasaṃharaṇamātre vicchittiviśeṣapoṣaṇapadavīm bhajan abhijātānām abhinandanīyo bhavati |*

⁴⁹ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.16–7: *evam anyad api svayam ūhyam |*

The *Mahābhārata* is one of them. Kuntaka holds up the *Mahābhārata*-themed drama *Veṅṅisaṃhāra*—which, for all of its artistic complexities,⁵⁰ does end with the killing of the epic’s antagonist, Duryodhana, and the ascent of its protagonists, the Pāṇḍavas, to rulership—as a prime example of a composition whose obliqueness involves undoing the complicated ending of the original and replacing it with an inspiring, heroic conclusion.⁵¹ Like the *Uttararāmacarita*, the *Veṅṅisaṃhāra* deliberately reworks the narrative of its source in order to create a more straightforward model of kingly behavior. When Kuntaka describes the *Veṅṅisaṃhāra*’s new ending, he zeroes in on the terms *rāja-dharma*—“royal dharma,” or the right way to behave as a king—and *dharma-rāja*, the “Dharma King,” another name for Yudhiṣṭhira, whose father is Dharma himself. The play’s ending, Kuntaka argues, “results in the success of the Dharma King, his royal dharma established, a sovereign whose enemies are all slain on the battlefield.”⁵² The *Mahābhārata* paints a very different portrait of the Dharma King’s “success.” After winning the great war, Yudhiṣṭhira lingers in such a deep state of conflict about the violence he has exerted that his brothers, his wife, and Kṛṣṇa spend many chapters persuading him to take up the instruments of kingship and to rule.⁵³ By calling attention to the terms *rāja-dharma* and *dharma-rāja*, Kuntaka recalls that the *Mahābhārata* dwells on the Pāṇḍavas’ kingly roles (*rāja-dharma*) and martial trials before and during the war, but ultimately reveals that this much-lauded *rāja-dharma* lands its most prominent standard-bearer in a great deal of moral conflict. For Kuntaka,

⁵⁰ Gitomer, 341; 512–13.

⁵¹ McCrea explains that for Kuntaka, this shift marks “a complete reversal” in the didactic function of the *Mahābhārata*. Of special relevance for us is his discussion of the role of the audience in Kuntaka’s understanding of the *Veṅṅisaṃhāra* vis-à-vis the *Mahābhārata*. See McCrea, “*Śāntarasa* in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*,” 187–88.

⁵² *Vakroktijīvitā*, *vṛtti* on 4.16–17: *raṇaprāṅgaṇanihatākhilārāticakradhārādhiṣṭhitarājadharmadharmarājābhyudayasampāditām*.

⁵³ As, for example, in the early chapters of book 12. David Shulman presents an analysis of this scene in *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 28–30.

the *Veṅīsaṃhāra* resolves this tension by “establishing” (*adhiṣṭhita*), once and for all, a *rāja-dharma* that the *Mahābhārata* promises but never really delivers.

The Arjuna of Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya*

If the *Veṅīsaṃhāra* responds to the *Mahābhārata*’s complex portrayal of Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rāja-dharma*, then the *Kirātārjunīya*—Bhāravi’s sixth-century *mahākāvya* depicting the mountainside encounter between Arjuna and Śiva—answers certain inconsistencies that the *Mahābhārata* presents when it comes to Arjuna. Kuntaka contends that the brilliance of the *Kirātārjunīya* lies in its choice not to address Arjuna’s more unsavory behavior during the epic’s great battle, and focuses instead on his heroism during a single, early portion of the narrative. For “a work has radiant obliqueness,” Kuntaka argues,

when a good poet, wanting to rid his work of the dispiritedness (*virasatva*) that exists in an epic story beyond a particular episode, would create an ending for his work using a single part of the epic that fosters the cosmic eminence of the hero through fresh descriptions.⁵⁴

Here, the “dispiritedness that exists in an epic story beyond a particular episode” refers to the fact that an audience might grow disheartened upon recognizing the gap between Arjuna’s storied heroism and the “reality” of his behavior in battle:

When this man, Arjuna, places Śikhaṇḍin in front of him (in order to shield himself as he shoots at Bhīṣma, his grandfather), Arjuna’s grandfather, despite his years, shuns him with words of great pity, saying “These are Arjuna’s arrows, not Śikhaṇḍin’s.” Here, the sage (Vyāsa) implies that Arjuna’s behavior is more vile than even that of a dog-cooker. So, too, the fact that Arjuna, in a moment of

⁵⁴ *Vakroktijīvitā* 4.18–19: *trailokyābhinavollekhanāyakotkarṣapoṣiṇā | itihāsaikadeśena prabandhasya samāpanam || taduttarakathāhartivirasatvajihāsayā | kurvīta yatra sukaviḥ sāvicitrāsya vakratā ||*

weakness, cuts off the arm of the great king Bhūriśravas while Bhūriśravas is distracted with other matters—it would be disgraceful to weave such an event into a poem that embraces a thriving *vīra-rasa* according to established notions of propriety. So, too, is the fact that Arjuna beheads Karṇa, the king of Aṅga, while Karṇa is busy lifting up his chariot that had sunk in the mud. He does this although told that the rules of war prohibit such things.⁵⁵

In this passage, Kuntaka highlights Arjuna’s three major deceitful acts in the *Mahābhārata*’s great war. Arjuna hides behind Śikhaṇḍin, which earns him the disapproval of his “grandfather”—a term that may well refer to Vyāsa, who is his almost-biological grandfather, as well as to Bhīṣma, who occupies the position of grandfather to both sets of cousins in the epic and who actually does the shunning here. He violates the rules of war by severing Bhūriśravas’ arm while Bhūriśravas is attending to other matters. He similarly oversteps the rules of battle when he kills Karṇa while Karṇa is trying to lift his chariot out of the mud. As an Indologist, one becomes used to both characters in the epic and historical readers falling over themselves to explain why these kinds of behaviors ultimately reflect the sound moral judgment of the characters who execute them, but Kuntaka makes no such excuse. He lets Arjuna’s actions stand as the *Mahābhārata* describes them—vivid and vexed.

The “dog-cooker” comment lends a colorful touch. Here Kuntaka argues not only that the *Mahābhārata* portrays Arjuna in a negative light, but that the epic communicates that portrayal in an indirect, concealed manner. Kuntaka points out that the epic’s author never condemns Arjuna outright; rather, it is “implied” (*sūcīta*) by Vyāsa, through Bhīṣma’s condemnation, that

⁵⁵ *Vakroktijīvita*, vṛtti on 4.18–19: *puraskṛtaśikhaṇḍinaḥ parānmukhe varṣīyasy api pitāmahe mahādayāloḥ arjunasya ime bāṇāḥ neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ityādinārṣeṇa vacasā sūcitam śvapacād api (nṛśaṃsavṛttācāraṇam) | aucityapradhānapaddhatipravardhamānavīrasaparivṛḍhāprabandhanibadhyamānam ayaśasyam evānyathā vyāpṛtasya pṛthivīpateḥ bhūriśravaso ’py adhīravartmanā bhujadaṇḍocchedanam | tadvan medinīmagna-syandanābhyuddharaṇavyāpṛtasya vyāhṛta-virodhitāhavapaddhater apy aṅgabhartur uttamāṅgakartanam* | I am grateful to Lawrence McCrea for suggesting an important adjustment in my translation of this passage; his suggested language appears in the last sentence of the translation above.

Arjuna’s behavior is immoral. Kuntaka’s analysis earlier in the passage highlights the incongruence between what the epic says about Arjuna explicitly—that Arjuna is “one for whom three-eyed Śiva had become visible,” whose “discus-bearing charioteer [Kṛṣṇa] is his protection against misfortune’s fall,” who “has stood in the best chariot of its kind,” who “has been surrounded by row upon row of armies,”⁵⁶ and so on—and what the epic implies about his moral character when it reports time and again that he strays from the conventions of war. But Bhāravi’s *vīra-rasa* poem aligns Arjuna’s famous heroism with his behavior, and once again, the poem’s obliqueness ironically emerges from this literary straightening-out.

Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and what the *Mahābhārata* leaves unsaid

Careful omission is one way to bring order to the conflicting narrative elements and ethical messages of an epic source. But as we have already seen, it is far from the only way. Recall what Kuntaka says about the *Udāttarāghava* and the *Uttararāmacarita*, both of which rework the *Rāmāyaṇa*: there, Kuntaka encourages poets to rearrange or add to an epic story so that the narrative results in a clear moral lesson for the audience. To further illustrate the desirability of such “artificial arrangements,”⁵⁷ he turns to what is arguably the best-known example of a *kāvya* composition that reworks the *Mahābhārata*: Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. Here Kuntaka himself uses the image of layering as a metaphor for the interaction between epic and retelling—comparing the relationship between *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the *Mahābhārata* to the placement of a fresh coat of paint on an old painting.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.18–19: *taysa pratyakṣīkṛtatrayakṣasya. . . vyāpadāpātarakṣaṇavicakṣaṇa-cakradhara-sārathes tathāvidharathottamam āsthitasya. . . anīkinīparamparāparivāritasya.*

⁵⁷ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *kṛtrimasamvidhānakāmanīyaka.*

⁵⁸ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *prabandhe 'pi pravaranavasamskarakāraṇaramaṇīyakāntiparipoṣaḥ rekhā-rājamānapurātanatruṭitacitradaśāspadasaubhāgyam anubhavati | abhijñānaśākuntale nāṭake*

Sometimes, Kuntaka explains, it is difficult to disentangle the negative (that is, morally ambiguous) aspects of a well-known epic story from its more positive (i.e., morally straightforward) elements. The Śakuntalā story from the *Mahābhārata* prompts him to ask: What if the story’s conclusion serves the audience well, but the narrative journey toward that conclusion proves problematic? Omission doesn’t quite work in these cases because the various parts of the original story—what Kuntaka calls its “superior” and “inferior” elements—are wound together too tightly. You can’t extract one part without misshaping the whole thing. Nor is it necessary to change the story’s ending, which already provides a fulfilling resolution.

Rather, the poet must refurbish an epic story such that the retelling (a) preserves the original resolution and (b) manufactures a morally satisfactory path of events that would lead toward such a conclusion. As Kuntaka describes it, the poet must take the major narrative “effect”—the story’s conclusion—and work backward to formulate a new string of causes:

Here the real point is this. Works like the *Mahābhārata* are, so to say, baskets full of well known, fascinating, and lovely stories. When it comes to such a story, which has already been stamped by an ocean of *rasa*, one lacks the option of separating the story’s inferior elements from its superior ones. As a result, one must compose narrative causes (*nimitta*) that are clearly visible (*unmīlita*), appropriate (*samucita*), and unique (*nirupamāna*)—and one should do this in such a way that these causes look extremely charming on their own. These new narrative causes are created (*jāta*) from the original story’s results (*kārya*), which already produce wonder—wonder that generates distinctive *rasas* and emotional states (*bhāva*).⁵⁹

itarataruṇītiraskāra-kāraṇāvirodhakatvena ikṣaṇakṣaṇākalitalalitalāvanyaalakṣmīlālāmanirupamarūpa-rekhāsukhapratyabhijñā samujjṛmbhate |

⁵⁹ *Vakroktijīvita*, vṛtti on 4.3–4: *tad ayam atra paramārthaḥ vikhyātavicitarucirakathākaraṇḍakāyamāne mahābhāratādau rasantamudramudritāyām api kathāyām kasyacid uttarādharavicchittikāraṇa-vikalpakābhāvāt saviśeṣarasabhāvajanakāścaryajananakāryajātāny atibandhuranijapratibhāsam unmīlitasamucitanirupamāna-nimittāni nibandhanīyāni iti* | Many thanks to Whitney Cox for allowing me to share his translation (personal communication, 2015) of the first phrase in this passage.

One can see how closely this analysis follows Kālidāsa’s famous refashioning of the Śakuntalā story. The original story’s result (*kārya*)—the marriage of Duṣṣanta and Śakuntalā—contains the seeds of the “distinctive” *śṛṅgāra-rasa* that Kālidāsa will develop in his play. In order for the protagonists’ union to serve as a moment of fulfillment, it must be preceded by a separation—i.e., Śakuntalā’s split from the king—and this separation, too, is a feature of both the epic story and Kālidāsa’s play, where it generates a whole new set of *rasas* and *bhāvas*. Here, of course, we run into trouble. The separation emerges from the king’s disavowal of Śakuntalā—a major event in both the epic and the play, and one that cannot be extricated from its results. For Kuntaka, there cannot be a Śakuntalā story in which the king does not repudiate Śakuntalā.

As Kuntaka describes it, the disavowal is in itself morally neutral. What makes the event an “inferior” element of the *Mahābhārata*’s story—and therefore ripe for poetic reimagination in Kālidāsa’s play—is that the epic refuses to state a cause for Duṣṣanta’s repudiation of Śakuntalā. The problem, Kuntaka explains, is that the king *does* recognize Śakuntalā when she arrives at his court. In fact, he recognizes her “at an inkling of a glance” (*īkṣaṇa-kṣaṇa*). And even if this initial recognition weren’t enough, Kuntaka argues, recognition would have come easily (*suprāpta*) after “hearing her explain at great length the events of their mutual love’s secret delight” and “the extent to which she had put her trust in him.” But even after giving the king every reason to remember his former lover, “the epic says nothing (*agadita*) about a cause for his forgetfulness.”⁶⁰ What’s more, there is “no obstacle, such as her being another man’s wife, that causes [the king] to cast her aside.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *visrambhasaṃbhāvanāsanāthakathārahasyaramyaparaparānurūpa-premaprakaṣṣapravartitacirataravicitraviharaṇavyāpārasuprāptapratyabhijñāṃ tām śakuntalām prati duṣyantasya vismarānakāraṇam itivṛttāgaditam |*

⁶¹ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *itarataruṇītiraskāraṇaavirodhakatvena.*

Kuntaka’s analysis points to a tension between two features of the narrative. The epic plainly articulates a whole range of circumstances that demonstrate Duḥṣanta’s recognition of Śakuntalā, but then it goes on to tell us that Duḥṣanta dismisses her. For Kuntaka—indeed, for a great many readers—the tension between these two elements of the story puts Duḥṣanta in a position of moral failure. But the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* creates a kind of narrative continuity that is not present in its epic source. The *Mahābhārata* leaves the cause for the king’s behavior “unstated” (*agadita*); the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* expresses it plainly through Durvāsas’ curse. In doing so, it eases the tension between the king’s “mutual love” with Śakuntalā and his repudiation of her. Just as we have seen in Kuntaka’s discussions of other retellings, this kind of narrative realignment allows the retelling to conjure a moral clarity that its epic equivalent lacks. Behold the lacuna in the epic story where (Kuntaka believes) a reason for the king’s disavowal of Śakuntalā “should” exist, at least if we are to continue to have faith in the king’s position as a moral exemplar. In this place, Kuntaka claims, Kālidāsa “has invented the curse of the sage Durvāsas, whose cruel anger is set off by even the slightest offense.”⁶²

Kuntaka then tells us what the play would look like if Kālidāsa hadn’t reworked the story so as to bring this unstated element into view. The lacuna in the *Mahābhārata*’s Śakuntalā story amounts to an “unseemliness” (*virūpakatā*)—a deformity, even—that begs for intervention:

But if this episode of the curse, which is marked by a trace of charm in the poet’s reimagination of the work, were not present, the dispiriting nature (*vairasya*) of such causeless forgetting would certainly result in the play’s being caused to incur the frightful unseemliness (*virūpakatā*) that is present in the same segment of the *itihāsa*, the *Mahābhārata*.

⁶² *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *alpamātrāparādhapravartamānagrūrakrudhaḥ karuṇāparāṇmukhasya muner durvāsasaḥ śāpam utpāditavān kavīḥ* |

I should explain the “trace of charm in the poet’s reimagination of the work” as being twofold: when something that doesn’t exist in the original work is brought into being; and when something that does exist, but is abandoned because of propriety, is brought about in another way in order to gladden the hearts of connoisseurs. Take, for example, the killing of Mārīca in the *Udāttarāghava*—an episode I have already discussed. The reader may call to mind examples of this special kind of obliqueness that can be found in the works of great poets.⁶³

Let us put the first sentence of this passage into conversation with Kuntaka’s earlier reading of the *Kirātārjunīya*, and specifically with the aspects of the *Mahābhārata* that he notices the poem omits (“...when a good poet, wanting to rid his work of the dispiritedness [*virasatva*] that exists in an epic story beyond a particular episode...”). Buried underneath Kuntaka’s analyses of the *Kirātārjunīya* and the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* is a theory of precisely how the “dispiritedness” (*virasatva*, *vairasya*) of the *Mahābhārata* actually works. Recall that Ānandavardhana is the first to name this feature, and that he ties it specifically to the “dispiriting end” (*virasa-avasāna*) of the story of the Pāṇḍavas. But when Kuntaka discusses the *Kirātārjunīya* and the *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, we see that it is much more than the discouraging conclusion of the Pāṇḍavas’ narrative arcs that gives the *Mahābhārata* its famous *virasatva*. Instead, something is happening on the level of the narration that makes the epic “dispiriting.” Kuntaka draws our attention to two instances of misalignment between the epic’s descriptions of a particular character’s behavior or experience—illustrating Arjuna’s various heroic qualities and then describing him transgressing the customs of battle, or telling us about Duṣṣanta and Śakuntalā’s mutual love and then showing us how Duṣṣanta rejects her—and then frames these

⁶³ *Vakroktijīvita*, vṛtti on 4.3–4: *avidyamāne punar etasmin utpādyalavalāvanyalalāmni prakaraṇe nişkārāṇa-vismaraṇavairasyam itihāṣāṃśasyeva rūpakasyāpi virūpakatāpattinimitatām avagāhate | utpādyalavalāvanyād iti dvidhā vyākhyeyam yathā kvacid asad evotpādyam kvacid aucityatyaktam sad apy anyathāsampādyam sahrdaya-hṛdayāhlādanāya | yathā udāttarāghave mārīcavadhaḥ | tac ca prāg eva vyākhyātam | evam anyad apy asyā vakratāvicchitter udāharaṇam mahākaviprabandheṣu svayam utprekṣaṇīyam |*

misalignments as instances of *virasatva*. It seems that for Kuntaka, the literary quality of “dispiritedness” in the *Mahābhārata* emerges in places where the narration prevents the audience from identifying with a consistent moral ideal. (As we have seen, Kuntaka makes similar critiques of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but it is only in his discussions of the *Mahābhārata* that he uses the term *virasa*.) So perhaps it is no wonder Kuntaka reads the entire *Abhijñānaśākuntala* as a critique of the Śakuntalā story in the *Mahābhārata*: It reconfigures the epic’s most distinctive literary quality, its *virasatva*.

Moving on to the second part of the passage, it makes good sense that Kuntaka would contend that the invented curse of the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and the reversed roles of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the *Udāttarāghava* serve similar functions. Both “artificial arrangements”⁶⁴ make overt changes to their source narratives (rather than “merely” omitting parts of them), and these changes consist of creating new narrative pathways to a pre-existing feature in the story—the repudiation of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata* and the hunting of Mārīca’s magical deer in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. And of course, the two plays’ reinventions remove the moral culpability from the primary character, the king.

On the point of kingly virtue (or lack thereof), it is worth mentioning that Kuntaka never cites the behavior of the women in question as grounds for reworking these epic stories. He makes reference to Sītā berating Lakṣmaṇa for his reluctance to rescue Rāma and recalls Śakuntalā’s protests to Duṣṣanta—in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, respectively, these speeches are really something to behold⁶⁵—but in neither instance does he say that these ways of

⁶⁴ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *kṛtrimasamvidhānakāmanīyaka*.

⁶⁵ *Mahābhārata* 1.68.20–1.69.28 and *Rāmāyaṇa* 3.43.1–24. See, for reference, *The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa Critically Edited for the First Time*, vol. 3: *The Aranyakāṇḍa*, ed. by P. C. Divanji (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1963), 219–23.

speaking are unbecoming to high-born women characters and that they therefore require tempering in *kāvya*.⁶⁶

Unlike the *Udāttarāghava*, though, the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* does not teach the audience a moral lesson through the figure of the king. After all, it is not that Kālidāsa’s Duṣyanta does anything different from the *Mahābhārata*’s Duṣanta, but rather that he can no longer be blamed for acting in the way that he does. (Śakuntalā herself bears no blame for the curse, Kuntaka writes.⁶⁷) Instead, in Kuntaka’s understanding, the audience’s moral education emerges from the very fact that Kālidāsa needs to rework the story in the first place. In the minds of the audience members, the superimposition of Kālidāsa’s version over the *Mahābhārata*’s creates an awareness that Duṣanta’s behavior in the original has been “abandoned [by Kālidāsa] because of propriety” (*aucitya-tyakta*). Perhaps there is no real “positive instruction” (*vidhi*) here—no ideal model of behavior. But Kuntaka’s analysis suggests that in experiencing the distinct layering of the play’s “propriety” (*aucitya*) over the epic’s lack thereof, the audience might still perceive a certain prohibition (*niṣedha*) against acting as Duṣanta does in the *Mahābhārata*. In a larger sense, it is only through comprehending each epic’s implicit self-critique—as Kuntaka does—that the audience can come to an awareness of what constitutes immoral behavior. The

⁶⁶ On instances in which Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala* has indeed been interpreted this way, see Amanda Culp, “Searching for Shakuntala: Kalidasa’s Masterwork on the World Stage, 1857–Present” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018).

⁶⁷ *Vakroktijīvita*, *vṛtti* on 4.3–4: *śakuntalā kila prathamapriyapravāsavāsaravitīrṇavirahaduḥsahaduḥkhāveśavivaśāntaḥkaraṇavṛttir uṭaja(samnihita)paryākulena prāṅgaṇaprānte sthite na maharṣiṇā manyusaṅgāt* “vicintayantī yam ananyamānasā taponidhiṃ vetsi na mām upasthitam | smarīṣyati tvām sa na bodhito ’pi san kathām pramattaḥ prathamam kṛtām iva” *ittham śaptā* | “Śakuntalā herself – the operations of her mind powerless ever since entering into unbearable sorrow at distant separation while living far away from her most beloved – out of confusion while laid up in her hermit’s hut when the previously-described sage is standing just outside, is thus cursed by this sage out of his propensity for wrath: ‘That man you were thinking about so single-mindedly that you didn’t see me—an ocean of austerity!—standing here? Like a drunk who can’t remember a story he once knew, this man might be reminded, but he won’t remember you.’” (Quoting Kālidāsa, *Abhijñānaśākuntala* IV.1. See, for reference, *The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, ed. M. R. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 122.)

work of a *kāvya* retelling, then, is to transform this awareness into a “prohibition”—a lesson about what *not* to do—by overlaying it with an ethically straightforward narrative that instructs this audience about what they *should* do.

An anthology of layers

For Kuntaka, this layering shapes the ethics of *kāvya*. It gives him a way to talk about how literature communicates—or, in the case of the Sanskrit epics, fails to communicate—lessons about noble conduct. Moreover, the whole category of retellings of the epics clears a path toward a critical understanding of the epics themselves.⁶⁸ When Kuntaka gives voice to the ethical ambiguities of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, arguing that the epics convey those complexities by opening up gaps between different layers of meaning in the narration, he suggests that classical *kāvya* can be a key to developing deeper, more complex readings of the Sanskrit epics. We might read Kuntaka’s critique of the epics’ narrative ethics as something like the “hidden transcript of *adharmā*” that Wendy Doniger traces through early Hindu instructional texts: All conviction on the surface; all curiosity underneath. Beneath Kuntaka’s analyses of retelling after retelling runs a strong current of interest in what the Sanskrit epics do and say—and a sense that their methods of literary expression operate by quite a different set of rules from those that govern Sanskrit *kāvya*. Every time Kuntaka discusses a retelling, his fascination with its epic source bubbles to the surface. In short, the *Vakroktijīvita* has layers of its own.

⁶⁸ Wendy Doniger, *Against Dharma: Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 21–22. The three texts in question are Manu’s *Dharmaśāstra*, Kautīlya’s *Arthaśāstra*, and Vatsyāyana’s *Kāmasūtra*, all composed at the beginning of the first millennium CE.

And so these passages in the *Vakroktijīvita* pay as much attention to the Sanskrit epics themselves as they do to the epics' many reconstructions in *kāvya*. But Kuntaka also reads these remarkable plays and poems in conversation with one another: the *Uttararāmacarita* and the *Veṅṅīsamhāra* conspire to subvert the endings of their respective source narratives; the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* recalls the *Udāttarāghava*, then goes beyond it. In "Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections," Ramanujan writes that "Reflexivity takes many forms: awareness of self and other, mirroring, distorted mirroring, parody, family resemblances and rebels, dialectic, antistructure, utopias and dystopias..."⁶⁹ Despite the distance between Kuntaka and Ramanujan, these passages in the *Vakroktijīvita* stand as early, serious probes into some of the complex literary relationships that Ramanujan would point out to an English readership over a millennium later. If Ramanujan's essay looks "toward" an anthology of reflections, then I suppose the present chapter looks backward to an earlier anthology: It is Kuntaka's anthology of layers, but it can be ours, too.

The view from Kashmir

A great geographical (and perhaps temporal) distance separates the theories of Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka from the *Pañcarātra* and its sister plays, the other five "Trivandrum" dramas that recast scenes from the *Mahābhārata*. Neither the *Dhvanyāloka* nor the *Vakroktijīvita* makes a reference to any of them; the most likely scenario is that neither Ānandavardhana nor Kuntaka knew about these plays at all. In this the two theorists are not alone. We know of no early or medieval works of Sanskrit literary theory that make note of these

⁶⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, "Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections," *History of Religions* 28 (1989): 189. In discussing literary reflection, Ramanujan categorizes texts into three major but generally open categories: "responsive," "reflexive," and "self-reflexive."

dramas. Instead, we find the earliest (and, as far as I know, the only) reference to the *Pañcarātra* in the fifteenth-century *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā*, an anonymous Kerala commentary on *Abhijñānaśākuntala*.⁷⁰ Why, then, ought we to situate ourselves in medieval Kashmir and look southward—perhaps peering back in time, and perhaps forward? Together, Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka offer an absorbing, sensitive, and undeniably emic way of understanding what it meant to participate in an activity that was utterly ubiquitous in Sanskrit literary culture: capturing an epic story in poetry or drama. (This alone recommends medieval Kashmir as a point of origin: Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka certainly approach the historical context of the *Pañcarātra* and the other *Mahābhārata* plays of the Trivandrum set—no matter how little we know of it—more closely than, say, theories of intertextuality from the modern West.) So while the two Kashmiri scholars may ground their analyses in compositions that stand at some stylistic and structural distance from the *Pañcarātra*, their visions of what is involved in retelling an epic story—and what is at stake in undertaking such a project—nonetheless speak to the essential features of the relationship between the *Pañcarātra* and the *Mahābhārata* (and the *Virāṭaparvan* within it).

From both Ānandavardhana and Kuntaka we hear a simple yet valuable acknowledgment of just how common it is for a play or a poem (in our case, a play) to retell a part of the larger epic that has its own story arc, particularly one that embodies a more “uplifting” ethos than that of the epic as a whole. By all counts the *Pañcarātra* takes part in that trend: by portraying the events of the *Virāṭaparvan* specifically—and not the *Mahābhārata* as a whole—it captures a self-contained segment of the epic, one whose entire atmosphere is certainly more jovial and

⁷⁰ *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā—a Commentary on the Śākuntala*, ed. K. Raghavan Pillai (Trivandrum [Thiruvananthapuram]: University of Kerala, 1977), 14. The author cites the *Pañcarātra* as an example of a drama of several acts—in other words, a play that is neither a one-act play nor a full *nāṭaka*—in which the *sūtradhāra* appears on stage by himself without a scene partner (such as the *naṭī*) during the *sthāpanā*. I will discuss this reference in chapter 2.

perhaps more socially restorative than that of the larger epic in which it stands. This is just the sort of creative short-circuiting that Ānandavardhana sometimes seems to recommend. Yet at the same time Ānandavardhana points to some of the narrative and aesthetic tensions that are involved in retelling even a short portion of a longer epic narrative. In organizing one's composition around *rasa*, he says, one does not wish to alter so many elements of the source narrative as to distort the spirit of the episode that the composition is retelling. Still, the composition must have its own internal aesthetic cohesion—something that makes it stand necessarily separate from its source. The process of developing that cohesion will (and should, for Ānandavardhana) require careful adjustments to the plot of the original episode. We can see this tension at work in the *Pañcarātra*. In fact I would argue that the drama quite knowingly plays on it. At times the play seems to be consciously manipulating the audience's expectations of what a *Mahābhārata* (in any form) should look like, and using that to unfold its fantastical vision of the epic.

Kuntaka, meanwhile, teaches us to notice the ethical and aesthetic features of retelling—how it can be desirable to reframe the epics' protagonists so that they serve as moral exemplars, and how on an aesthetic level this can entail a transformation of epic catastrophe into dramatic and simultaneously poetic eucatastrophe. In certain respects the *Pañcarātra* appears to follow Kuntaka's model of retelling. To use Raghavan's language we might say that it “rescues” certain characters, Duryodhana being the first among them: the figure who most clings to power in the epic ends up sharing it in the play. While Duryodhana may not be the type of character that Kuntaka has in mind when he speaks of the ethical (and narratological) rehabilitation at work in retellings of the epics, this seems to be precisely what occurs in the *Pañcarātra*. The result is the kind of success story that Kuntaka highlights in so many of the retellings he discusses: it is a

success story from the Pāṇḍavas’ perspective, to be sure, but it is also a success story from the perspective of Duryodhana himself, who successfully keeps his word. Moreover, Duryodhana’s gift to the Pāṇḍavas—that is, the fact that he ultimately returns to them their rightful portion of the kingdom—represents exactly the sort of novel twist that Kuntaka seeks out when he addresses himself to works of *kavya* that draw upon the epics and adapt them to a new mode.

Most important for our purposes is the fact that Kuntaka ultimately seems to see a play such as the *Pañcarātra* as itself a work of literary criticism. Admittedly, this does not mean he perceives it as belonging to the same genre that encompasses his *Vakroktijīvita*: that is clearly a work of *alaṃkāraśāstra* belonging to the critical lineage established by Ānandavardhana and many others before him. Yet Kuntaka is mesmerized by a certain natural connection between the object of his study (or rather, the examples he chooses to prove his formulations) and the literary criticism he practices and provides. Some of the greatest critics worldwide take sustenance from the belief that there is an internal connection of this sort—something to be appreciated and elaborated, not defamed. They thrive in the process of bringing it to light. In any case, Kuntaka finds in his *kāvya* subjects implicit but powerful dissections of their epic sources, dissections similar to his own. Undoubtedly he regards these as self-conscious acts. Such poems and dramas do not simply “tell” epic stories, nor are they merely “based on” their sources. Rather, for Kuntaka, retellings of this sort actively engage with previously accepted tellings; they draw out and complicate their source material, showing an audience what’s really there and bringing subtextual features to the surface. The *Pañcarātra* may not level the same kind of critique at the *Virāṭaparvan* (or indeed the *Mahābhārata*) that Kuntaka describes in the *Vakroktijīvita*—I’m not sure that the play is explicitly bent on portraying ethical behavior in contrast to its epic source, though one might well see it that way—but the larger idea remains. In the *Pañcarātra* we find

much more than a simple mirror or organic development of an epic story. Here we have, rather, a definite interpretive “sharpening.”⁷¹ The *Pañcarātra* demonstrates a deep awareness of the ethical, emotional, symbolic, and narratological dynamics at work in the *Virāṭaparvan*, particularly the stance that the *Virāṭaparvan* takes in relation to the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. The play draws out these dynamics in a series of unexpected ways—using the Kauravas’ perspectives to frame the major events, for example, and carrying the *Virāṭaparvan*’s semblance of a happy ending to its furthest extreme. Kuntaka helps us see all of that. I cannot help believing that, if he had known the *Pañcarātra*, he would have understood it as literary criticism in action—precisely his kind of literary criticism.

In other ways, however, the *Pañcarātra* deviates considerably from Kuntaka’s understanding of what retelling ought to involve—and I would argue that many of the compositions that serve as evidence for Kuntaka’s argument do, as well. Many *kāvya* retellings of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are more ethically and aesthetically complex than Kuntaka makes them out to be—the *Veṅṛisaṃhāra*, for example, or the *Uttararāmacarita*. As David Gitomer argues of the *Veṅṛisaṃhāra*, works like these have darker threads woven in; they often interpret the epics in a way that is not so focused on character ethics as on other elements of their source narratives—themes, structures, images, emotions. Of course when it comes to the *Pañcarātra* such deviations are no surprise. These medieval Kashmiri theories of retelling demonstrate no awareness of the *Pañcarātra* and were orchestrated at a considerable distance (physically, at least) from the environment in which the play was written. If a drama like the *Veṅṛisaṃhāra* fails to fall entirely within the realm of what Ānandavardhana or Kuntaka wishes to establish, it’s no wonder that the same might also be true for the *Pañcarātra*. Indeed, it often

⁷¹ I thank Whitney Cox for the language of “sharpening,” which he used in conversation on May 2, 2021.

steps well outside the bounds of what these two critics describe and prescribe. To be sure, the *Dhvanyāloka* and the *Vakroktijīvita* lend valuable theoretical context to our reading of the *Pañcarātra* and its relationship with the *Virāṭaparvan* within the epic itself, but the path to an appropriately emic understanding of the play's interpretive work does not run solely through medieval Kashmir. "Emic" too has its layers.

For a deeper contextual understanding we must move toward the region that evidently served as home for the play itself—Kerala. That will be our goal in the chapter that follows. There we will examine the five plays that join the *Pañcarātra* in the so-called Trivandrum (or nowadays more properly Thiruvanthapuram) *Mahābhārata* series. We will account for the obvious but crucial fact that the *Pañcarātra* was designed to be performed, and will grapple with what little we know of its performance history in Kerala. In doing all this we will be complementing the more theoretical view that emerges in Kashmir with the more practical perspectives that reveal themselves when we travel to its far-flung literary neighbors.

Chapter 2

The *Pañcarātra* in Performance

In the previous chapter we saw that Kuntaka (ca. 975 CE) unfolds in his discussion of the Sanskrit epics and their retellings an implicit theory of genre. Kuntaka suggests that literary language works in a very distinctive way in the epics: it can be misleading, secretive; it prompts the reader to question, or perhaps even distrust, the depictions of any ethically-minded characters we might find there. *Kāvya* mends those fissures, ushering the reader toward a sense of narrative and moral integration that renews the reader's trust—even as the imaginative details of a composition may grow in ever more surprising directions. As *kāvya* readers grow close to the characters and the language alike, epic estrangement turns to poetic intimacy. While Kuntaka shows no awareness of the *Pañcarātra* or the five short anonymous *Mahābhārata* plays that are its closest relatives, his theory of retelling frames our study because it elevates to a new level of critical appreciation the careful interpretive work that often happens in the transition between genres—epic to *kāvya*.

But when it comes to the *Pañcarātra* there is another genre with which we must contend, one that Kuntaka wraps into his broader understanding of *kāvya* but that in practice (and often in theory as well) is guided by its own rules and expectations: drama. *Pañcarātra* is not only an interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* but it is one that was explicitly designed to be performed. This means that the performative aspects of the *Pañcarātra* deeply inform the play's approach to the *Mahābhārata*. They offer their own answers to our central questions of why the *Pañcarātra* upends the well-known epic story so profoundly. At the same time these considerations of performance help us discover ways in which the *Pañcarātra* may be showing us what was right there in the epic the whole time.

When I say “performative aspects,” I refer to features of the *Pañcarātra* that are expressly tied to the play’s enactment on stage—an enactment that has not only been theorized in dramaturgical texts but that has actually taken place in Kerala within the last century. I begin on the dramaturgical side: What insights can the formal qualities of the drama offer into the *Pañcarātra*’s strong interpretive choices—especially those that might initially seem surprising to us? In this discussion my primary points of reference will be the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 200 CE?), the earliest known treatise on Sanskrit dramaturgy, and Dhanamjaya’s *Daśarūpaka* (975 CE), a highly influential rearticulation of what the basics of Sanskrit dramaturgy looked like nearly a millennium after the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. While it is unlikely that the play’s authors were familiar with the version of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that is available to us today—and the *Pañcarātra* may have predated the *Daśarūpaka* entirely—many formal elements of the play conform to what we find in these two standard-bearing works on theater. This suggests that the play’s authors were at least working within the broad dramaturgical tradition that linked the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Daśarūpaka*, even if they were also aware of other dramaturgical traditions as yet unknown to us—or even if, for them, dramaturgical theory served as more of a general cultural backdrop than a blueprint. When we place the *Pañcarātra* in conversation with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Daśarūpaka*, we begin to envision the play in performance and we begin to make important thematic connections based on that vision. Deception, in particular, rises to the surface as a major trope.

Our discussion of dramaturgy leads us to the history of the play’s performance in Kerala, for it is in the *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā*, an anonymous fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Kerala commentary on Kālidāsa’s drama *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (ca. 400 CE), that we find the earliest

known reference to the *Pañcarātra* by name.¹ While the author mentions *Pañcarātra* only in passing, the context of that brief reference is revealing: it is located in a discussion of technical choices around staging—rather than, say, literary meaning, to the extent that we can separate that from the technicalities of performance. This highlights the *Pañcarātra*'s history in performance specifically—perhaps over and above its presence as a work of literature to be read and studied—and also suggests that the play was staged in Kerala during the medieval period.

From there we fast-forward to the turn of the twentieth century, when the *Pañcarātra* and its fellow short, anonymous *Mahābhārata* dramas were first introduced to Indologists in India and the West. This, too, happened in Kerala, and the manuscript data connected with this (re)discovery of the dramas says a great deal about their performance history there. Based on these data, I hypothesize that the six *Mahābhārata* plays that were introduced into international scholarly circles at that moment—*Pañcarātra*, *Madhyamavyāyoga*, *Dūtavākya*, *Dūtaghaṭokaca*, *Karṇabhāra*, and *Ūrubhaṅga*—were once staged in a *Mahābhārata* performance cycle, with the *Pañcarātra* being performed first.

Why might this have been important and appropriate? To answer that question, it becomes essential to appreciate the affective, thematic, and formal dynamics of the *Pañcarātra* within the context of these other five plays. If we imagine the *Pañcarātra* being performed as a preface to the other plays, how does our understanding of the drama, and its relationship with the *Mahābhārata*, shift? Themes that it shares with the subsequent five now crystallize: antagonism, fractures of self and society, and the affirmation of bonds between generations. What's more, in this broader performance context, we come to see that the *Pañcarātra*'s relationship with the

¹ On this date, see: K. Raghavan Pillai, ed., *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā—a Commentary on the Śākuntala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala University, 1977), and Heidrun Brückner, "Manuscripts and Performance Traditions of the So-Called 'Trivandrum-Plays' Attributed to Bhāsa—A Report on Work in Progress," *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 1, no. 17–18 (1999–2000): 504n9.

Mahābhārata is tied to the special power of its direct precursor within the epic, the *Virāṭaparvan*—that is, the capacity of the Virāṭa story to signal creative beginnings. Seeing the *Pañcarātra* set in this way between its epic precursor and the five dramas that must have followed it in performance, we see ever more clearly how the *Pañcarātra* represents a real beginning, or even a rebirth—no matter how persuasively its felicitous conclusion may lead us to imagine that we are seeing some kind of resolution or ending.

The regenerative capacity of the *Pañcarātra* becomes clear in a different but complementary way when we consider the play against the backdrop of Kerala’s Kūṭiyāṭṭam theater tradition, a mode in which *Pañcarātra* is still performed today. To appreciate this, we explore a recent production of the play’s second act that was choreographed by Painkulam Narayana Chakyar and staged between 2015 and 2020. This part of the chapter is informed by my correspondence with Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar, the actor who performed the role of Bṛhannalā in this production, and with the scholar-practitioner Heike Oberlin. Through those conversations I have come to understand that the play’s extraordinary retelling of the epic makes it represent, for those who enact it, a broader (and perhaps unexpected) disposition toward what is classical and what is inherited. In a way that is anything but expected, classics—by virtue of their very classic-ness—become a special, indeed dramatic vehicle for the generation of something new and radical. In the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of *Pañcarātra*, the character of Bṛhannalā—that is, the great warrior Arjuna in his chosen disguise of a dance teacher, a woman—becomes an icon of that deep commitment to transformation. Specifically, she comes to provide her twenty-first century enactors with a new vantage point on third-gender identity: a central concern for Painkulam Narayana Chakyar and Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar, and the driving force behind their production of *Pañcarātra* Act 2.

Desire and deception: Dramaturgical perspectives on the *Pañcarātra*

Throughout this thesis I argue that while the *Pañcarātra*'s extraordinary twist on the *Mahābhārata*'s essential conflict might initially register as a surprise, in fact it represents a carefully considered interpretation of the play's immediate source—the epic's fourth book, the *Virāṭaparvan*. To some degree this can be anticipated on the basis of the content of the *Virāṭaparvan* itself. Yet there is another context in which the *Pañcarātra*'s felicitous conclusion makes a great deal of sense, and that is the fact of its being a play in the first place. Sanskrit dramas have their own expectations about plot structure, and against the backdrop of those expectations it comes as far less of a surprise than it otherwise would that the play concludes with the cousins looking out onto a harmonious, prosperous future. This may seem preposterous in relation to the epic, but it conforms to the expectations that guide the experience of a Sanskrit play. To paint in broad strokes, there are basic principles of plot progression on which Sanskrit dramaturgical treatises generally agree. As Edwin Gerow writes, the important question is *how* the dramatist makes use of the inventory of conventions—a kind of map of the audience's expectations—in achieving the ends proper to his play.² By examining the *Pañcarātra* in light of Sanskrit dramaturgical theory, then, we might understand how the play's author(s)—whoever they might have been—deployed the conventions of Sanskrit drama in order to further their own highly idiosyncratic project.

A principle at work here is *autsukya*, the “intense desire” that sets the entire plot of a drama in motion. There is a direct connection between this *autsukya* and the *phalāgama*, the “arrival of the result” that concludes the play. According to the *Daśarūpaka*, the whole point of the first stretch of a drama—the *ārambha* (“beginning”) stage—is to embody this feeling of

² Edwin Gerow, “Plot Structure and the Development of *Rasa* in the *Śakuntalā*, Pt. 1,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 no. 4 (1979): 560.

intense desire (*autsukya*) to achieve a certain result (*phalalābha*).³ Events are supposed to unfold and obstacles are supposed to get in the way, but in the fifth and final stage of the plot—the same *phalāgama*⁴—that desire will be fulfilled. From the beginning of the play, then, one will have a good idea of how things are going to end.⁵ In the *Pañcarātra* this intense desire is articulated by Droṇa and Bhīṣma, who, throughout Act 1, express a general longing for Duryodhana to show compassion toward the Pāṇḍavas and a specific wish that the cousins ultimately settle their differences and share political power. As knowers of the epic, of course, we realize this is impossible, and yet whoever designed the *Pañcarātra* seems to take it at face value. The opening stretch, the *ārambha*, allows the person who enjoys this play to experience the force of Droṇa and Bhīṣma’s desire in its own terms. This requires that the character of Duryodhana himself come into play already at this point. When Duryodhana offers Droṇa a *dakṣiṇā*—the student’s gift to a teacher—Droṇa asks specifically for him to split the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas:

Listen, my son, for twelve years we have seen no trace of the Pāṇḍavas. They have nowhere to take refuge. You must give them their share of the kingdom. This is what I beg of you, and this is what I ask of you as your teacher.⁶

³ *Daśarūpaka* 1.19: *autsukyamātram ārambhaḥ phalalābhāya bhūyase* | See Dhanamjaya, *Daśarūpaka* [published as *The Daśarūpaka of Dhanamjaya with the Commentary Avaloka by Dhanika and the Sub-Commentary Laghuṭīkā by Bhaṭṭanṛsiṃha*], edited by T. Venkatacharya (Madras [Chennai]: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1969), 16. Note that the nāṭaka type of drama sets the standard for these five stages; shorter types of play may have fewer stages, but the basic structuring principles remain the same. See Edwin Gerow, “Bhāsa’s *Urubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985): 408.

⁴ The *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s equivalent for *phalāgama* is *phalayoga*, “connection with the result,” and its equivalent for the *Daśarūpaka*’s *ārambha* is the synonym *prārambha*.

⁵ Further, David Gitomer, “Venīsamhāra,” 266.

⁶ *Pañcarātra* 1.31: *putra śrūyatām | yeṣāṃ gatiḥ kvāpi nirāśrayāṇām saṃvatsarair dvādaśabhir na dṛṣṭā | tvam pāṇḍavanāṃ kuru saṃvibhāgam eṣā ca bhikṣā mama dakṣiṇā ca* || All quotes from the Sanskrit text of the *Pañcarātra* are taken from the digital version, critically edited by the Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg: *Pañcarātra*, ed. Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg, Multimediale Datenbank zum Sanskrit-Schauspiel, 2007, <http://www.bhasa.indologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/rahmen.html>.

Building on Droṇa’s request, Bhīṣma appeals to Duryodhana’s duty as an elder brother and as a respected member of the family to protect the Pāṇḍavas,⁷ doubling down on the fact that they “have nowhere to take refuge” (*nirāśraya*):

Look, my grandson, they’re weak, the poor things—they have nowhere to take refuge. They aren’t prideful—they seek protection from you. You are the eldest. They love you. You’ll support them in this family. Must they live among the beasts of the wild?⁸

Concluding this *outsukya* trio, Bhīṣma returns to the point in a more explicit way:

It doesn’t matter if they are found in a year or a hundred years—you must give the Pāṇḍavas their share of the kingdom. And so, my hero, you must make your promise true. Kurus always keep their promises.⁹

As this verse suggests, what makes this “intense desire” for Duryodhana to share the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas something that could actually be fulfilled in the *phalāgama* stage of the drama is the character of Duryodhana himself. Duryodhana has every intention of giving Droṇa the *dakṣiṇā* he asks for. Not only is Duryodhana vocally intent on keeping his promise, but Bhīṣma and Droṇa themselves speak to his moral rectitude. Duryodhana “relies on dharma,” says Droṇa.¹⁰ Bhīṣma says more: “He worships dharma—he’s a vessel serving out good deeds. At long last, he glows with the light of his own moral beauty.”¹¹

⁷ In this context there is little to no difference between brother and cousin (Duryodhana’s actual relationship to the Pāṇḍavas). The war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas is therefore truly *fratricidal*: they are all brothers.

⁸ *Pañcarātra* 1.37: *paśya putra | ye durbalās ca kṛpaṇās ca nirāśrayās ca tvattās ca śarma mṛgayanti na garvayanti | jyeṣṭho bhavān prañayinas tvayi te kuṭumbe tān dhārayisyasi mṛgaiḥ saha vartayantu ||*

⁹ *Pañcarātra* 1.47: *varṣeṇa vā varṣasatena teṣāṃ tvaṃ pāṇḍavānāṃ kuru saṃvibhāgaṃ | tasmāt pratijñāṃ kuru vīra satyaṃ satyā pratijñā hi sadā kurūṇām ||*

¹⁰ *Pañcarātra* 1.18.7: *dharmam ālambamānena duryodhanenāham evānugṛhīto nāma |*

¹¹ *Pañcarātra* 1.20cd: *niṣevya dharmam sukṛtasya bhājanam sa eva rūpeṇa cirasya śobhate |*

At this point the only obstacle to the *phalāgama* is the question of whether the Pāṇḍavas can be located within a period of five nights. Śakuni, believing it will be impossible to find them within such a short time frame, places this particular restriction on Duryodhana's promised *dakṣiṇā* (1.45.7). Since Droṇa and Bhīṣma have figured out exactly where the Pāṇḍavas are, they agree to it. The audience, meanwhile, is aware of Droṇa and Bhīṣma's thought process the whole time. This gives us a strong sense—if not outright assurance—that Droṇa's and Bhīṣma's wishes will eventually be fulfilled. At this very early moment, then, we come to understand that the play will conclude with the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas sharing the kingdom. Given the setup in Act 1, neither the fact that the Pāṇḍavas are discovered within the allotted time frame nor the fact that Duryodhana returns half of the kingdom to them would come as a surprise.

But let us also consider the actual opening of the play—the moment just after the director's introduction¹² when we are introduced to the central characters and step into the action. In this segment of the play, called the *viṣkambhaka*, a group of outlying characters—observers, really—set up the scene for the audience.¹³ Not only does the *viṣkambhaka* bring the audience up to speed on what has happened prior to the present act, but it often serves to narrate elements of the plot that cannot be represented on stage.¹⁴ This is very much true of the *viṣkambhaka* in *Pañcarātra* Act 1, where three unnamed *brāhmaṇas* describe a ritual that is being performed in honor of Duryodhana. The name of the ritual is not specified in the play

¹² Consisting of an opening blessing (*nāndī*) and a short scene (*sthāpanā*) in which the director (*sūtradhāra*) responds to the commotion surrounding the ritual that Duryodhana is conducting. The *nāndī* and *sthāpanā* set the scene for the audience. The *Pañcarātra*'s *sthāpanā* is unusually short, even within the oeuvre of the *Mahābhārata* plays attributed to Bhāsa; usually the *sthāpanā* involves at least one other character beyond the *sūtradhāra*.

¹³ Not only the first act but subsequent acts have *viṣkambhakas*.

¹⁴ This I learned from Dr. Amanda Culp, a theater historian who focuses on Sanskrit drama. Much of the present section of this chapter emerges from our conversations about the *Pañcarātra* in April and May 2020. Her insights have been invaluable to my understanding of the play.

itself, but it seems to parallel the *vaiṣṇava yajña* that Duryodhana performs in book 3 of the epic during the twelfth year of the Pāṇḍavas’ exile. In the epic, Duryodhana initially wants to do a *rājasūya*—the major consecration ritual that would represent a total consolidation of royal power—but is advised that it would be inappropriate to conduct a *rājasūya* when both his father (king Dhṛtarāṣṭra) and Yudhiṣṭhira (Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s “true” heir) are still alive. He quickly agrees to do a *vaiṣṇava yajña* instead. In the epic, this *vaiṣṇava yajña* is easy to overlook: everything goes smoothly; the princes and *brāhmaṇas* who gather for the event are duly fed and honored; the various members of Duryodhana’s family express their joy.¹⁵ Narratively speaking, it’s a blip on the radar. Its only purpose seems to be to demonstrate Duryodhana’s eagerness to supplant Yudhiṣṭhira—and, at the same time, to show how capable he is of ruling the kingdom as long as his jealousy has been tamed. (Many classical retellings of the *Mahābhārata* bring out this very same capable, *rājadharma*-abiding Duryodhana: we find him in Bhāravi’s sixth-century poem *Kirātārjunīya*, for example, and in Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s seventh-century play *Veṅīsaṃhāra*, and in Ranna’s Old Kannada *Sāhasabhīmavijaya*, from the early eleventh century.)

The *Pañcarātra*’s *viṣkambhaka* makes much more of this *vaiṣṇava yajña* than the epic does. No sooner have our three onlooking *brāhmaṇas* begun to describe the success and virtue of the ritual than they notice that Duryodhana’s sacrificial fire is burning out of control. Fanned by the wind and fed by fresh grass, the fire envelops the ritual cart (*śakaṭī*) full of ghee, scares away snakes and birds, burns through the trees, and consumes even the ritual instruments that were used to create it, until it finally dies out. As I see it, this vignette from the *viṣkambhaka*—all of it narrated by the three *brāhmaṇas* who watch it happen—presents the basic arc of the plot in

¹⁵ *Mahābhārata* 3.241–43.

miniature, transposed onto the drama of a ritual gone wrong and a fire burning out of control until at last it burns itself out.

As the *brāhmaṇas* describe it, the sacrifice starts out just as it should. The lions stop killing and the tigers graze alongside the deer (1.3); kings gather and honor the aged *brāhmaṇas* (1.5), who are surrounded by wealth (1.4); the whole world “ascends to heaven, thundering with Duryodhana’s virtues” (1.4). In all this, the sacrifice demonstrates Duryodhana’s moral leadership and consolidates his political power. So, too, does Duryodhana begin Act 1 proper (that is, after the *viṣkambhaka* ends) in a position of exceptional moral and political leadership. Thus the beginning of the *viṣkambhaka* parallels the beginning of the play proper. Yet before Duryodhana can step out of the purifying bath that ends the ritual (again, this is all described in the *viṣkambhaka*), the fire begins to spread. So, too, does Duryodhana overextend himself in the play proper by orchestrating a raid on Virāṭa’s cattle that escalates until it ends in his own defeat. That loss, coupled with the fulfilment of his promise to return to the Pāṇḍavas their share of the kingdom, is encapsulated in the ultimate quelling of the ritual fire at the end of the *viṣkambhaka*. No one extinguishes the fire—rather, it burns itself out, just as Duryodhana himself is the one to grant the Pāṇḍavas their kingdom.

The verse in the *viṣkambhaka* that describes the gradual quelling of the fire foretells Duryodhana’s gift to the Pāṇḍavas at the end of Act 3:

Now that the kindling has been used up, the force of the fire has dwindled. A noble person will keep giving until he has no wealth to give.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Pañcarātra* 1.15: *etad agner balaṃ naṣṭam indhanānāṃ parikṣayāt | dānaśaktir ivāryasya vibhavānāṃ parikṣayāt ||*

Duryodhana will not quite “keep giving until he has no wealth to give,” but his gift to the Pāṇḍavas, and the fulfilment of his promise to Droṇa, will nonetheless speak to his nobility (in line with Bhīṣma’s insistence that “Kurus always keep their promises”). Seen through the lens of this fire that burns itself out, the fact that Duryodhana ultimately shares the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas seems to signify an appropriate, almost natural taming of Duryodhana’s political power. After all, in the *Mahābhārata*, the problem with Duryodhana’s kingship is never what he does with it—the kingdom thrives under his rule—but rather that he always wants more of it. The play’s conclusion thus represents not only the realization of Droṇa and Bhīṣma’s wish that the Pāṇḍavas regain their kingdom, but a more universal achievement: a healthy rebalancing of political power that benefits Duryodhana just as much as it does the Pāṇḍavas.

The kind of opaque miniaturization that we find in the early stages of the *Pañcarātra* would be appropriate at this point in the drama. Gerow notes a parallel situation in Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala*: “In the preliminaries of Act I—the hunting scene, the entry into hermitage grounds—before Śakuntalā is even mentioned, is contained the entire play . . . The play thus appears as a structure of circles extending from this kernel-result (‘*bīja*’).”¹⁷ Taking the term *bīja* from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Gerow argues that the five “essential matters” (*arthaprakṛti*) of a drama that are outlined in that text—the “seed” or stimulus (*bīja*), the development and complication of those motivating factors (*bindu*), the elements of the play that run parallel to and reflect the main action back on itself (*patākā*), the supporting subplots (*prakarī*), and the realization of everything that motivates the drama (*kārya*)—appear more or less together throughout a given play as “the basic material worked over and over and given subjective shape.”¹⁸ With this in mind, it makes

¹⁷ Gerow, “Plot Structure and the Development of *Rasa*,” 565.

¹⁸ Gerow, “Plot Structure and the Development of *Rasa*,” 563.

sense that even at so early a point as the *viṣkambhaka* the central elements of the drama would appear in abstract form—the essential melody soon to meet its variations.

By nature the *Pañcarātra* often reaches beyond itself to the expansive (and ever-expanding) galaxy of the *Mahābhārata*, and the *viṣkambhaka* is no exception. Not only does the spreading fire of these early verses locate us in this drama specifically, but it also paints a large-scale epic backdrop for the action. As the three *brāhmaṇas* describe the fire burning out of control, their similes pointedly reference events that transpire in the Sanskrit epic—many of which will later be reworked in the play. One simile refers to “a family in which good conduct has been upended” (1.7)—the Kurus, to be sure.¹⁹ Another refers to “a family burned by a person who has abandoned good behavior” (1.12)—Duryodhana?²⁰ The sacrificial cart full of ghee is sprinkled with water yet continues to burn “just as a woman whose child is dead would continue to burn with love for that child, despite being sprinkled with the water of her own tears” (1.8)—perhaps a reference to Subhadrā mourning Abhimanyu, the archetypal child killed in the war.²¹ The fire burns the anthills in such a way that “all at once, five snakes are expelled” from them (1.10): the Pāṇḍavas’ exile.²² Eventually the fire, dying down, consumes the ritual instruments that were used to make it “like a man who consumes his own property when his addiction-prone nature has reduced him to nothing” (1.16)—Yudhiṣṭhira in the game of dice, perhaps?²³ Here, too, the *viṣkambhaka* serves to depict what cannot reasonably be presented on stage: the major narrative arcs of the *Mahābhārata* itself.

¹⁹ *Pañcarātra* 1.7c: *kule vyutkrāntacāritre*.

²⁰ *Pañcarātra* 1.12cd: *kulaṃ cāritrahīnena puruṣeṇeva dahyate*.

²¹ *Pañcarātra* 1.8: *śakaṭī ca gṛhṭāpūrṇā sicyamānāpi vārinā | nārīvoparatāpatyā bālasnehena dahyate ||*

²² *Pañcarātra* 1.10: *valmīkamūlād dahanena bhūtās tatkoṭaraiḥ pañca samaṃ bhujāṅgāḥ . . . viniḥsṛtāḥ |*
An additional reference point here: the burning of the snakes in Janamejaya’s sacrifice.

²³ *Pañcarātra* 1.16: *srugbhāṇḍam araṇīm darbhān upabhuṅkte hutāśanaḥ | vyasanitvān naraḥ kṣīṇaḥ paricchadam ivātmanaḥ ||*

Yet beyond all of these pointed references, the fire itself stands as the most powerful evocation of the wider *Mahābhārata*.²⁴ In the *Mahābhārata*, the epic’s great battle is often compared to a great sacrifice: a period of extreme destruction in the service of much-needed regeneration, all of it carefully orchestrated and intended for a divine purpose. The *Pañcarātra* offers a more realistic version of that metaphor, one that takes into account the scope of suffering that the epic itself presents: if the epic’s battle is a sacrifice, then it is one in which the ritual fire escapes its confines and burns everything around it to the ground. The play has its own *bīja*, *bindu*, *kārya*, and so on—the *arthaprakṛtis* or “essential matters” that will be, in Gerow’s words, “worked over and over” in the different stages of the drama—all of which emerge and interact in this early moment. But here, at the same time, it’s almost as if we sense another layer of *arthaprakṛtis*. In this layer, the essential thematic material comes directly from the epic—bad behavior, battle, lament, substories and all—and is itself “worked over and over” throughout the *Pañcarātra*. From one perspective, then, the *viṣkambhaka* looks forward: it encapsulates the essential shifts in power that we will soon see play out in the drama, driving toward a point of appropriate balance. But from another perspective, the *viṣkambhaka* looks backward, recalling the epic’s the most painted and violent extremes. In this way the *viṣkambhaka* serves both to reassure and to unsettle. It is not only the expectations of classical dramaturgy but the themes and events of the *Mahābhārata* itself that solidify into the dramaturgical backbone of the *Pañcarātra*.

What shape does this backbone take? The majority of Sanskrit plays to which we have access today are *nāṭakas* and *prakaraṇas*—long, usually six- or seven-act dramas. *Pañcarātra* is

²⁴ This is true in a more direct way as well, since the fire also evokes the other great fires that bookend the *Mahābhārata*: the Khāṇḍava forest fire (at the beginning), Janamejaya’s sacrificial fire (also at the beginning), and the forest fire in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī, and Kuntī die (at the end).

much shorter. The genre that seems best to complement the *Pañcarātra* is one that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Daśarūpaka* call *samavakāra*, a play in three acts that depicts a large cast of well-known mythological figures engaged in various kinds of deception (*kapaṭa*), exciting challenges or, more accurately, disaster situations (*vidrava*), and erotic love (*śṛṅgāra*). The *Pañcarātra* does not line up perfectly with the treatises' descriptions of the *samavakāra*: the three acts are different lengths than the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Daśarūpaka* would have them be, *śṛṅgāra* hardly plays a role in the drama at all, and the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas are not quite the same as the *devas* and the *asuras*, much as they are often said to embody them.²⁵ Still, it is useful to look at the *Pañcarātra* in light of the formal qualities of the *samavakāra*. One reason is that it puts in perspective elements of the *Pañcarātra* that fail to line up with the expectations of Sanskrit dramas that we might have cultivated based on the longer *nāṭakas* and *prakaraṇas* with which we are often more familiar—the ensemble cast, for instance, or the minimal number of women characters. These are two features that are typical of the *samavakāra* (according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Daśarūpaka*) but that are rare in longer dramas, which tend to have obvious heroes and heroines and which tend to involve more women characters. Another reason for examining the *Pañcarātra* through the lens of the *samavakāra* is that this perspective allows important themes that we might not have noticed otherwise to crystallize. Here the motif of deception (*kapaṭa*) comes to the fore.

What does it mean for a *samavakāra* to foreground deception, and in what ways does the *Pañcarātra* speak to that feature of the genre? The *Nāṭyaśāstra* specifies three types of deception that might be involved, a scheme that is echoed in the *Daśarūpaka*:

²⁵ On which, see Wendy Doniger, *After the War*, 24–38.

In the case of a *samavakāra*, we know that there are three kinds of deception: deception that is necessary in one’s progress toward a valuable object, deception that is fated, and deception that is used by an enemy. One engages in deception so as to incite happiness or sorrow.²⁶

The *Pañcarātra* revolves around a grand act of deception—the Pāṇḍavas’ impersonations of servants in Virāṭa’s court, which deceive not only the Kauravas and those in Virāṭa’s orbit (as they do in the epic) but also Abhimanyu (as happens only in the play). One might call this the “fated” type of deception—that is, if the dice game and the terms of the *détente* that demanded their year in disguise were themselves fated, as the *Mahābhārata*’s events are often said to be. Or one might call it a necessary step on the path to the Pāṇḍavas’ reclamation of their kingdom, either after the war (as it happens in the epic) or at the end of the year itself (as it happens in the play). From the Kauravas’ perspective, the Pāṇḍavas’ deception is certainly the kind that is practiced by an enemy. It is almost as if the *Pañcarātra*’s author or authors are taking inventory of the various kinds of deception that might characterize a *samavakāra* play—fated, necessary, and enemy-driven—and doing all of this within the (admittedly elastic) confines of the *Virāṭaparvan* story.

Other instances of deception are sprinkled throughout the play as well. We might say that Bhīṣma deceives Śakuni when he agrees to the condition of the five nights knowing full well that he will be able to procure the Pāṇḍavas within that time. Later on, Virāṭa’s son Uttara contends with his own moment of fraud when he is credited for driving back the Kaurava army; it was in fact the work of Arjuna, as Bṛhannalā (2.60, discussed in chapter 3). Finally, we might say that in

²⁶ *Nāṭyaśāstra* 18.71: *vastugatakramavihito daivavaśād vā paraprayukto vā | sukhaduḥkhotpattikṛtas trividhaḥ kapaṭo ’tra vijñeyah ||* See *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni: With the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī by Abhinavaguptācārya: Chapters 8–18*, vol. 2, ed. M. Ramakrishna Kavi, revised by V. M. Kulkarni and Tapasvi Nandi (Vadodara: University of Baroda, 2001), 439. The *Daśarūpaka* largely preserves these categories in 3.66cd: *vastusvabhāvadaivārikṛtāḥ syuḥ kapaṭās trayah |*

concealing the “truth” of the epic story—the war, the death, the suffering—the play represents a deceptive view of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. The treatises’ close attention to deception as a defining theme of the *samavakāra*—over and above love (*śṛṅgāra*), or even thrilling adventures (*vidrava*)—helps explain why the author(s) of the *Pañcarātra* might have selected the genre of the *samavakāra* specifically to bring the story of the *Virāṭaparvan* to life. The other plays in the *Mahābhārata* set belong to shorter genres (the *vyāyoga*, for example); the *Pañcarātra* is the only one that approaches the *samavakāra* mold. I suspect that the *Pañcarātra*’s author(s) wanted to tell the *Virāṭaparvan*’s story of deception on a grand scale—costumes, disguises, performances, tricks, and all—in a genre that was made for precisely that subject.

There is another reason that the *samavakāra* may have been a meaningful choice for the author(s) of the *Pañcarātra*. As I discuss in my introduction to the thesis, *Virāṭaparvans* often come first. Despite the fact that the *Virāṭaparvan* is the fourth book of the *Mahābhārata*, it seems that when the epic is recycled—that is, when the whole epic is read or recited, but especially when it is retold in a new language or genre—the *Virāṭaparvan* often serves as a starting point, as if it has a special capacity to herald the spirit of a larger creative endeavor. At this point, similarly, I would argue that the *Pañcarātra* may well have followed the same pattern in its life on stage, being performed as the first in a cycle of short *Mahābhārata* dramas, namely, the other plays in the Trivandrum set. (I explore that argument in more detail in the third section of this chapter.) The *samavakāra* came first, too, in a sense. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the dramatic tradition actually begins with this very type of play: a *samavakāra*—composed by Brahmā, no less—depicting the myth of the churning of the ocean.²⁷ As the legend of the birth of

²⁷ Told in *Nāṭyaśāstra* chapter 4. On the *samavakāra* and the churning of the ocean as the beginning of the dramatic tradition, see Elisa Ganser, *Theatre and Its Other: Abhinavagupta on Dance and Dramatic Acting* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 95.

theater goes, this *samavakāra* play was first performed for the gods and *asuras*, who loved watching themselves battle it out on stage. When it comes time for the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to offer an example of a *samavakāra*, then, the text immediately turns to the churning of the ocean (*amṛtamanthana*).

The story of the churning of the ocean—or, rather, a play depicting it—continues to be the stock example of a *samavakāra* drama: in the *Daśarūpaka* it is called *ambhodhimanthana*; in the twelfth-century *Sāhityadarpaṇa* of Viśvanātha, it is called *sāgaramanthana*. It is not clear to me whether these are three different plays (*Amṛtamanthana*, *Ambhodhimanthana*, and *Sāgaramanthana*), three different names for the same play, or three ways of referring to the myth of the churning of the ocean itself.²⁸ Regardless, if one knows the story it becomes clear that the essential features of the *samavakāra*—deception, exciting challenges, erotic love, gods and *asuras* as the central figures—were derived from that story specifically. As a *samavakāra*, could the *Pañcarātra* be reflecting back on the story of the churning of the ocean that seems to have been the standard-bearing plot for that genre? The connections are subtle but, I think, palpable. For example, one way of understanding the relationship between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas—a way of understanding that is modeled in the *Mahābhārata* itself, but also in commentaries and retellings well beyond it—is to think of the opposing sides as the gods (Pāṇḍavas) and *asuras* (Kauravas) rehearsing their perpetual struggle for power, a struggle that is at its most iconic in the *samudramanthana* myth.²⁹ In this way the story of the churning of the

²⁸ Viśvanātha's autocommentary on *Sāhityadarpaṇa* 6.234-40 suggests that *Samudramanthana* was the name of a specific play. See Viśvanāthakavirāja, *Sāhityadarpaṇa with the Author's Vasudhākāra, Anantadāsa's Locanā, and Maheśvarabhaṭṭa's Vijñāpriyā* (Delhi: Indian Book Corporation, 1998), accessed via the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL), input by members of the Sansknet Project: http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_vizvanAthakavirAja-sAhityadarpaNa-comm.htm.

²⁹ See Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit* (London: Penguin, 1975), 270–80.

ocean both appears within the epic (it's told in book 1) and forecasts the epic in broad strokes. The gods win the *amṛta* only through the deceit of Viṣṇu—just as, when the Pāṇḍavas win the war, it is only because they've slain their opponents through deceitful strategies designed by Viṣṇu in the form of his *avatāra*, Kṛṣṇa. In the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* specifically, the central agent of deceit is not quite Kṛṣṇa, but rather his closest ally: Arjuna, dressed as Bṛhannalā—who, in his own way, parallels Viṣṇu becoming the (female) Mohinī.

But why should the first-ever drama (as described by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*) depict this particular story? In my understanding, it is because the story of the churning of the ocean is the story of the secondary creation of the world, and dramas are in the business of secondary world-creation.³⁰ A play reorders the world—and creates a new world of its own at the same time. To perform a play is to bring the known world into being again. As a *samavakāra*, therefore, the *Pañcarātra* represents a chain of creative “firsts”: the creation of a *Mahābhārata* performance cycle, the creation of performance, and the creation of the world. But this goes in the opposite direction, too. It is not only that dramas recreate the world but that the cosmos itself is understood to be dramatic in nature. What the *Pañcarātra*'s bifocal vision of the *Mahābhārata* shows us is that this is true in a plural way as well. We do not find ourselves within one stable universe so much as we find ourselves within a field of interrelated possible universes (one deeply scarred by war, one where reconciliation is possible, and who knows how many more?) that have to be imagined after the fashion of drama.

³⁰ As Whitney Cox notes (personal correspondence, July 2022), there is also a direct connection between the mirrored nature of the *Virāṭaparvan*'s and the *Pañcarātra*'s relationships with the *Mahābhārata*—and with each other—and the mirrored nature of the first drama, in which the gods *see themselves* on stage. For the *Pañcarātra* to take the form of a *samavakāra*, then, would be for it to take the form of the “original” funhouse mirror-type play—that which reflected back to the gods their own activity in the churning of the ocean.

We can even join the final link in the chain to the first. Given that the *Mahābhārata* aims to encompass all of human experience (hence the epic’s famous claim that “when it comes to the four aims of human life, what is not here cannot be found anywhere else”), to create a *Mahābhārata*—or, as was likely the case for the *Pañcarātra*, an entire *Mahābhārata* performance cycle—is to create a world. Sure enough, it seems to me that for the only world we know—the world of human attachment, desire, and suffering—the *Mahābhārata* is the real creation story. It analyzes the actual form of the *amṛta* for which all mortals (so hopelessly) strive, following the pattern of the gods and the *asuras*. The choice of *samavakāra* makes that link explicit.

The *Pañcarātra* in the *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā* and in the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series

The world that the *Pañcarātra* projects is in many ways far-reaching—there is its use of the transregional language of Sanskrit, and the fact that it brings to life the most self-consciously universal of works, the *Mahābhārata*.³¹ But in performance it is truly local: what we know of the *Pañcarātra*’s performance history begins and ends in Kerala. As we learned earlier, the earliest written reference to the play appears in a work from Kerala, the *Abhijñānaśakuntalacarcā*. The *Carcā* cites the *Pañcarātra* merely in passing. It is noted as an example of a play in which the *sūtradhāra* (that is, the character who acts as the play’s director) appears alone on stage during

³¹ As per its own account (*dharme cārthe kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabhaḥ | yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit* || MBh 1.56.33) as well as in Pollock’s analysis: “There exists, the narrative insists, a recognizable geosphere where the *Mahābhārata*’s communicative medium, the Sanskrit language, and its message, the possibility as well as predicament of a sole royal power, have application. It is a space that has coherence, however blurred at the edges, and political content, however unrealizable the tragic tale shows it to be... The *Mahābhārata*’s narrative construction of a supraregional domain was complemented, or perhaps better, enacted, by a range of material-cultural practices relating to the text, including the spread and distribution of manuscripts, the creation of editions, and the various modes of popular dissemination.” Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 228.

the *sthāpanā* (the prologue). At a certain point in the discussion of the prologue to

Abhijñānaśākuntala the author's imagined interlocutor objects:

But isn't it true that in plays like *Dūtaghaṭokaca*, the *sthāpanā* is performed with only the *sūtradhāra*, who appears on stage without any other supporting character—for instance, the “actress” character? If you were to say that this happens only in plays that are one act long (for example, *Dūtaghaṭokaca*) then how do we see the same thing . . . in *Pañcarātra*, a multiple-act play?³²

This reference, however brief, conveys something important about the history of the play. The *Pañcarātra* was clearly circulating—in written form, as a performance, or both—in the same cultural circles as the other short *Mahābhārata* dramas with which it was eventually published and popularized in the early twentieth century. One such play, the *Dūtaghaṭokaca*, appears in the very passage above, and the others are mentioned throughout. Given that the author of the *Carcā* cites each of these other short *Mahābhārata* plays, we might imagine that the set of six share not only a cultural and intellectual history in Kerala but also a performance history there—perhaps being staged, as I suggest later on, as a *Mahābhārata* performance cycle in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam style.

The other plays that the *Carcā* cites are similarly revealing. The same dramas that appear alongside *Pañcarātra* in the *Carcā* reappear alongside the *Pañcarātra* three hundred years later in the only extant codices containing the play. It is therefore likely that these dramas—*Kalyāṇasaugandhika*, *Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa*, *Bālacarita*, and *Svapnavāsavadatta*, among others—have lived with the *Pañcarātra* in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance repertoire since the fifteenth century, however much the actual Kūṭiyāṭṭam style may have changed over that long period of

³² *Abhijñānaśākuntalacarcā*, 14: *nanu dūtaghaṭotcakādaṅ natyādirahitena sūtradhāreṇaiva sthāpanā kriyate | ekāṅkarūpakeṣv evam iti cet katham kalyāṇasaugandhikādaṅ [-ikādiṣu?] anekāṅkeṣv apy evam drśyate katham pañcarātre | anāṭaka evam iti cet katham bālacarite |*

time.³³ Perhaps the *Pañcarātra* was not only part of Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s theater of the *Mahābhārata* specifically, but part of the larger artistic worldview embodied by the Kūṭiyāṭṭam interpretation of Sanskrit drama: deeply classical on the one hand, boldly expansive and polyglossic (involving Sanskrit, Prakrit, Malayalam, and the gestural language of Kūṭiyāṭṭam) on the other.

Without wanting to overread the point, I do think it is worth noting that the *Carcā* zeroes in on the *Pañcarātra*’s *sthāpanā*, which is the most self-referentially performative part of a Sanskrit drama. Herman Tiekens believes this is evidence that the *Pañcarātra* and its sister plays belonged to a “‘literary’ tradition,”³⁴ but I read the *Carcā*’s reference to the *Pañcarātra*—and, for that matter, to the other *Mahābhārata* dramas—slightly differently. I think it is important that the *Carcā* discusses highly technical elements of these plays that were directly related to the texts’ understandings of themselves *as performances*. This makes sense because all of these citations appear in the context of a discussion about the dramaturgical structure of the beginning of *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. When the *Carcā* turns to matters of poetic imagery and emotional development, however, we don’t see a trace of the *Pañcarātra* or the other *Mahābhārata* plays. At such points the major intertexts become Kālidāsa’s other works—a literary tradition, in other words, that extends well beyond Kerala and the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage. This is all to say that for me, the *Carcā*’s reference to the *Pañcarātra* speaks more to its presence as a performance specifically than it does to the play’s presence on the literary landscape more generally. Its real

³³ See Heidrun Brückner, “Manuscripts and Performance Traditions,” in general; and Heidrun Brückner, “New Light on ‘Bhāsa’? The Würzburg Multimedia Databank on Sanskrit Drama and Theatre,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 60, no. 2 (2007): 380–91. See also *Two Masterpieces of Kūṭiyāṭṭam: Mantrāṅkam and Aṅgulīyāṅkam*, ed. Heike Oberlin and David Shulman, with Elena Mucciarelli (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁴ Herman Tiekens, “The So-Called Trivandrum Plays Attributed to Bhāsa.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie* 37 (1993): 21.

breakout moment as a work of literature (that is to say, as a text that is read in addition to being performed) would apparently not come until the early twentieth century.

Pañcarātra is best known for being one of thirteen anonymous Sanskrit plays that were first published between 1912 and 1915 as part of the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series.³⁵ The plays' editor, T. Ganapati Sastri, attributed them to the early Sanskrit playwright Bhāsa—a poet who is believed to have lived in the early centuries of the Common Era. In the introductory essay of *Bhāsa's Plays: A Critical Study* (1925), Sastri described his “acquisition of a rare collection of plays” as follows:

In the year 1909, when the Department for the publication of Sanskrit manuscripts was organised under my charge by the Government of His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore, I came across a palm-leaf manuscript of Natakas in the *Manalikkara Matham* near Padmanabhapuram. It was found to contain 105 leaves with ten lines of twenty granthas in each page written in old Malayalam characters. Though the manuscript seemed to be more than three hundred years old, there was no defacement of characters except in certain parts of the first twelve leaves. The style and dignity of conception appeared to me to be such as characterise the great works of the Rishis, and superior to what we find in famous works of the great poets. On examination, the manuscript was found to contain the following ten *Rupakas*:

1. Svapnavasavadatta
2. Pratijnayaugandharayana
3. Pancharatra
4. Charudatta
5. Dutaghatokaca
6. Avimaraka
7. Balacharita
8. Madhyamavyayoga
9. Karnabhara
10. Urubhanga

³⁵ See: Mahamahopadhyaya T. Ganapati Sastri, *Bhāsa's Plays: A Critical Study* (Trivandrum [Thiruvananthapuram]: Sridhara Power Press, 1925), 1-2.

Besides, there was also an [incomplete] eleventh *Rupaka*. . . During a subsequent tour, from one Govinda Pisharodi, an astrologer of Kailasapuram, near Kaduthurutti, were obtained two *Natakas* of a similar character, named *Abhishekanataka* and *Pratimanataka*. It was subsequently discovered that the Palace Library also contained a manuscript of each of these works. All these manuscripts written in Malayalam characters were on palm-leaves, probably three or four centuries old. Thus were obtained twelve or rather thirteen *Rupakas*, neither seen nor heard of before.³⁶

Sastri's Trivandrum Sanskrit Series brought these plays into circulation among Sanskritists in India as well as in the West, and immediately a heated debate sprung up over whether these plays could fairly be attributed to Bhāsa—and therefore to that very early period in classical Sanskrit literature—or not.

In *Bhāsa—A Study* (1940), A. D. Pusalker wrote that when it comes to determining historical facts about Indian literature, “one is rather tempted to quote the oft-repeated utterance of a celebrated American orientalist [William Dwight Whitney (1827–94)]: ‘All dates given in Indian literary history are pins set up to be bowled down again.’”³⁷ Whitney's bowling match unfolded in the pages of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* and the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in the decade following Sastri's 1912–15 publication of the plays he attributed to Bhāsa. The matter had become such a “problem”³⁸ in Indological circles that in 1924, L. D. Barnett introduced yet another article on the subject with the following apology: “The readers of this Bulletin are doubtless as weary of the *dis crambe repetita* of the Bhāsa-controversy as I am, and I must crave their indulgence for returning to it. . . .”³⁹

³⁶ Ganapati Sastri, *Bhāsa's Plays*, 1-2.

³⁷ A. D. Pusalker, *Bhāsa – A Study* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1940), 63.

³⁸ And continued to be considered a “problem” well into the twentieth century: “Bhāsa – Problem” is the title of the second chapter of V. Venkatachalam, *Bhāsa* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986).

³⁹ L. D. Barnett, “Abhasa-Bhasa,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 3 (1924): 519.

Sastri's argument about the plays' authorship emerged from three important points. First, Sastri recalled that the tenth-century scholar Rājaśekhara had discussed a play named *Svapnavāsavadatta*—the same title as that of one of the plays Sastri had found.⁴⁰ That play (Sastri continues) has since been lost, alas, but according to Rājaśekhara, it was composed by a poet named Bhāsa.⁴¹ Centuries earlier, Kālidāsa, in the prologue to *Mālavikāgnimitra*, had praised a great poet named Bhāsa. From this a general understanding emerged: Rājaśekhara's Bhāsa was the same as Kālidāsa's Bhāsa, and the *Svapnavāsavadatta* would have predated Kālidāsa's works. Sastri believed that if he had discovered a play named *Svapnavāsavadatta*, then it must be the very same *Svapnavāsavadatta* of Bhāsa that Rājaśekhara had discussed—and, crucially, that this Bhāsa must have lived prior to Kālidāsa. That was Sastri's first point. Second, the seventh-century poet Bāṇa had noted a poet named Bhāsa whose plays begin with the *sūtradhāra*'s entry.⁴² This seemed to line up with the fact that the plays Sastri discovered began with the simple stage direction *nāndyante tataḥ praviśati sūtradhāraḥ*: “At the end of the benediction, the *sūtradhāra* enters.”⁴³ Given how they begin, could Sastri's plays have been the same ones that Bāṇa mentioned? Finally, Sastri argued that all thirteen plays must have had the same author—Bhāsa—not just because they all shared these initial stage directions in more or less the same form, but because they also shared similar or identical *bharatavākyas* (closing benedictions) and because, at a more interior level, certain lines and verses appeared to be shared

⁴⁰ This may have actually been titled *Svapnanāṭakam*, according to A. Krishna Pisharoty. See his *Bhāsa's Works: A Criticism: Translated from 'Rasikaratnam' (A Quarterly Malayalam Journal) Vol. I, Nos. 2 & 3, 1923* (Trivandrum [Thiruvananthapuram]: Sridhara Power Press, 1925), 8.

⁴¹ Also discussed in F. W. Thomas, “The Plays of Bhāsa,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1922): 80.

⁴² Bāṇa, *Harṣacarita* 1.15: *sūtradhāraḥ kṛtārambhair nāṭakair bahubhūmikaiḥ | sapatākair yaśo lebhe Bhāso devakulair iva* || See *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa*, 7th ed. (Bombay [Mumbai]: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1946. Accessed via the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL); input by Jens Thomas and Willem Bollée. Thanks to Whitney Cox for locating this reference.

⁴³ Pisharoty (10) responds to this point by citing various dramas with known authors that have the same beginning.

between the plays.⁴⁴ For Sastri, this aligned with the fact that Rājasekhara had made reference to a *Bhāsanāṭakacakra*, or “wheel (i.e., collection) of Bhāsa’s plays.”

Certain scholars, including Sastri himself, have asserted that Bhasa lived as early as the fourth or even the fifth century BCE⁴⁵—a claim that Sheldon Pollock calls “fantastical.”⁴⁶ Others place Bhāsa and the thirteen plays Sastri attributed to him somewhere between 200 and 400 CE. This would account for, on the one hand, Bhāsa’s “worthy”⁴⁷ (read: classical) poetic abilities yet still accord him a date prior to Kālidāsa.⁴⁸ This is the time frame that made the most sense to V. S. Sukthankar, who was somewhat agnostic on whether the “Bhāsa” of Rājasekhara and Kālidāsa was the author of Sastri’s Trivandrum plays, but who did believe that all thirteen plays had the same author and that this author lived in the centuries immediately preceding Kālidāsa. The Prakrit of the plays, he noted, resembled that which one finds in the works of Aśvaghoṣa (ca. 200 CE), and was “much older than any we know from the dramas of the so-called classical period.”⁴⁹ Similarly, he noted, “the Sanskrit of the metrical portions of our plays is found to be linked with the language of the epics.”⁵⁰

With that said, however, Sukthankar was careful not to foreclose the possibility that the plays had been composed later in the first millennium or even in the second. In that case the Prakrit would seem to have projected certain “archaisms,” but such quirks would be “met with

⁴⁴ Sastri, 16–17.

⁴⁵ Venkatachalam makes this claim (*Bhāsa*, 29) in addition to Sastri in “The Works of Bhāsa,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 3 (1925): 631.

⁴⁶ Sheldon Pollock, “Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 85.

⁴⁷ V. S. Sukthankar, *Analecta*, vol. 2 of *V. S. Sukthankar Memorial Edition*, ed. P. K. Gode (Bombay [Mumbai]: Karnatak Publishing House, 1945), 83.

⁴⁸ Also the position taken in A. Banerji-Sastri, “The Plays of Bhāsa,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (1921): 382.

⁴⁹ Sukthankar, *Analecta*, 91.

⁵⁰ Sukthankar, *Analecta*, 112.

also in Malayalam manuscripts of classical dramas and of even later southern productions.”⁵¹ Sukthankar thus allowed a great deal of space for the fact that the plays formed part of Kerala’s centuries-long Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatrical tradition and were therefore wrapped up in the cultural life of Sanskrit works in Kerala specifically. In a Kerala context, he allows, seemingly older types of Prakrit were sometimes preferred, and would therefore naturally have been inserted into manuscripts as they were being copied. As the primary orchestrator of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute’s critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, an epic undertaking in every sense, Sukthankar surely appreciated the fact that a given manuscript would likely display new features—including new text—alongside the “original” source material. He believed, for instance, that the prologues and final benedictions of the Trivandrum dramas were “all unauthentic and comparatively modern.”⁵² It seems to exemplify the free-ranging nature of the debate around the provenance of these plays that Sukthankar saw evidence of modernity in the exact same features where Sastri found evidence of antiquity.

A. Krishna Pisharoty, a contemporary of Sastri’s and a scholar of both Sanskrit and Malayalam at the Maharaja’s College of Science, Trivandrum, was one of the earliest scholars to be passionately committed to understanding Sastri’s plays in the context of Kerala’s intellectual culture and, more specifically, Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance. In 1923 he published a point-by-point rebuttal of Sastri’s initial argument that the thirteen plays had been composed by the early poet Bhāsa. For Pisharoty the dramas had neither specific dates nor specific authors. He believed that they were, however, an integral part of Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance history:

These dramas are really compilations, not independent compositions; they are works compiled for the stage, into which were freely incorporated ideas borrowed

⁵¹ Sukthankar, *Analecta*, 169.

⁵² Sukthankar, *Analecta*, 183.

from Kalidasa and other great poets, with or without alterations in wording, and, wherever this free incorporation was not feasible, were added passages newly composed to suit the context. And the reason why their *compilers* did not give themselves out as their *authors*, must be that dramas so compiled could not rightly be regarded as the works of any or all of them . . . We have reliable evidences to indicate that circumstances were very favourable in Kerala for the rise of such a species of Samskrit [Sanskrit] dramas.

Certain reforms, peculiar to Kerala, came to be effected in very early times in the acting and staging of Samskrit dramas. The reformed acting and stagecraft, though not very common nowadays, are not totally extinct thanks to the Chakkiyars, Nambiyars and Nangiyars—the professional actors and actresses of Samskrit dramas in temples [i.e., Kūṭiyāṭṭam]. . . The thirteen dramas in question were also among the pieces compiled and edited for the reformed stage, and select Acts and scenes from them have always been very popular. . . Collections of such dramas are not after all so very rare in Kerala. Many old families, and Chakkiyar families in particular, possess manuscripts of some or most of those [Trivandrum plays] named above. We ourselves have a few of them.⁵³

It was a testament to Pisharoty's deep rootedness in Kerala that he published this piece in *Rasikaratnam*, the Malayalam journal of which he was the editor. (The quote above is Pisharoty's own translation of his original study.) Most of the early scholarship on Sastri's Trivandrum plays, however, is in English; Sastri, for example, published his research on the plays exclusively in English.⁵⁴ The catholicity of English seemed to be mirrored in the scholarly dispositions of scholars who preferred to use it: they thought first and foremost in pan-Indian terms. Thus they attended to what were apparently mysterious inconsistencies between the Trivandrum plays and the other extant classical Sanskrit dramas, leading them to believe the

⁵³ Pisharoty, 37–40. The occasional use of italic print for emphasis appears in the original.

⁵⁴ With the exception of the Sanskrit *prastāvanās* (prefaces) to his editions.

dramas had come from an earlier period in South Asian literary history. Pisharoty, by contrast, saw them within the context of the living and ongoing history of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.⁵⁵

Others, departing from the scholars I have just mentioned with respect to both date and regional provenance, have dated the majority of the thirteen plays to the seventh or eighth century—and to what is now Tamil Nadu, not Kerala. Barnett, a very early advocate for this theory, noted the similarities between the plays Sastri attributed to Bhāsa and a seventh-century Sanskrit *prahasana* (farce or satire) composed by the Pallava king Mahendravarman I (r. 610–30 CE) called *Mattavilāsa* (*The Madman's Games*). He thought that both plays had emerged from a school of drama that had not yet awoken to the “universal” style of Kālidāsa.⁵⁶ Barnett was also convinced that Mahendravarman's other *prahasana*, *Bhagavadajjuka* (*The Saint and the Courtesan*),⁵⁷ was written by the same author of the plays attributed to Bhāsa. Whether his claims are accurate or not, Barnett's comparison of the Trivandrum dramas to plays like the *Mattavilāsa* and the *Bhagavadajjuka* speaks to what kind of a reader Barnett was. He clearly heard a great deal of comedy in these plays—whereas his peers, Sastri first among them, heard more serious tones.⁵⁸ On top of all that, *Mattavilāsa* and *Bhagavadajjuka* also form part of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire.

Herman Tieken makes a similar argument but dates the plays to the court of the Pallava king Narasiṃhavarman II (r. 690–720 CE). His claim is grounded in the play named *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇa*, one scene of which, Tieken argues, is borrowed from *Mattavilāsa*,

⁵⁵ See also: A. Krishna Pisharoti [Pisharoty] and K. Rama Pisharoti, “‘Bhāsa's Works'—Are They Genuine?,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 3 (1923): 107–17.

⁵⁶ L. D. Barnett, “The Matta-Vilāsa and ‘Bhāsa,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 1 (1920): 38.

⁵⁷ A translation of the play can be found in Michael Lockwood and A. Vishnu Bhat, *Metatheater and Sanskrit Drama* (Madras: Tambaram Research Associates, 1994).

⁵⁸ Barnett, “Abhasa-Bhasa,” 520.

the comedy authored by Mahendravarman I—Narasimhavarman II’s great-great-grandfather. The benediction of this play, he notes, invokes a king called Rājasimha, who is surely Narasimhavarman II himself. Finally, he draws attention to the fact that the play is about a king named Udayana who has a special talent for working with elephants. This he relates to inscriptions that point to Narasimhavarman II’s similar expertise in that realm:

Thus, on the one hand, we have a play, the *Pratijñā*, on [the mythological king] Udayana, an expert on elephants, a play in which a scene has been inserted based on the *Mattavilāsa* by the Pallava king Mahendravarman I, and which is dedicated to a certain Rājasimha; on the other hand, we have a Pallava king [namely, Narasimhavarman II] known as Rājasimha, who is the great-great-grandson of, and worthy heir to, the author of the *Mattavilāsa* and who is literally compared to Udayana [in inscriptions] in his capacity of being an expert on elephants.⁵⁹

Tieken expands his argument about *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇa* to include the other dramas in Sastri’s Trivandrum set, but here he points out that the plays need not have been historically exclusive to Kerala. “The manuscripts of the Trivandrum plays, although indeed restricted to Kerala or else of Kerala origin,” he writes, “have been available in much wider circles than those families of temple servants, or *ambalavāsis*, directly connected with the performance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, i.e., the *cākyār*, their wives the *nāṇṇyār*, and the *nāmbiyār*. . .”⁶⁰ (While he does not say this explicitly, Tieken is likely also drawing on the fact that Tamil Nadu and Kerala were not always regarded as discrete entities in the way they came to be in later centuries.) Furthermore, Tieken argues, the Prakrit and the one-act *vyāyoga* genre in the dramas find counterparts in other South Indian Sanskrit dramas from the Pallava period.⁶¹ Echoing Sukthankar, Tieken writes that

⁵⁹ Herman Tieken, “On the So-Called Trivandrum Plays Attributed to Bhāsa,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 37 (1993): 28.

⁶⁰ Tieken, “On the So-Called Trivandrum Plays,” 21.

⁶¹ Tieken, “On the So-Called Trivandrum Plays,” 33–36.

elements of the plays that other scholars had considered evidence of an early origin in fact “represent a learned restoration of the practice [of drama] as described in, e.g., the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.”⁶² Overall, Tieken tells a story linking the theater of the Pallava Tamil land with that of medieval and premodern Kerala. The Pallavas brought Sanskrit *kāvya* literature to Tamil Nadu, Tieken writes, and it spread to Kerala land from there; moreover, *Mattavilāsa*’s presence in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire speaks to a connection between Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance and “the dramatic and theatrical tradition of the Pallavas.”⁶³

As may have become obvious in the way I have parsed these debates, my sense is that the early discourse around the so-called Trivandrum plays and the figure of Bhāsa speaks powerfully to the way in which the field of Sanskrit literature was being articulated, and perhaps claimed, in the decades leading up to Indian independence and especially by Indian scholars, particularly those local to Kerala. Tieken is the exception, both by nationality and by period, but he follows a thread already laid out by Barnett. What is striking about the Indian scholars is the powerful effects that seemed to follow from their diverse relationships with traditional models of Sanskrit learning, with Western-infllected scholarship on Sanskrit literature, and with Kerala’s own deep historical attachment to Sanskrit as expressed in its language practices, literary circles, scholarly communities, and performance traditions. The litigation of that long (and living!) history really mattered. Did Sastri’s Trivandrum plays lay bare the strongly connective tissue that tied early twentieth-century Kerala with the great classical Sanskrit literary tradition? This was an artistic and intellectual history that was gaining powerful nationalistic traction in the final decades of the Raj, a classical aspect of which would come to be called “national integration” and that we might call the *Mārga* (“great path”) impulse. But where there is *Mārga*, there also is *Deśī* (“local”): the

⁶² Tieken, “On the So-Called Trivandrum Plays,” 36.

⁶³ Tieken, “On the So-Called Trivandrum Plays,” 24.

idea that the Trivandrum plays reflect back on Trivandrum—or, more accurately, Thiruvananthapuram. This was the terrain upon which Pisharoty stood, and for him it was hardly less parochial than the *Mārga* alternative—just better focused and more fully articulated, more fully performed, we might say.

Personally, I have found it helpful to take my cues from a group of scholars who have made an effort to achieve a new balance between these positions by orienting themselves particularly toward perspectives that are notably articulated within the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance tradition. I am referring to N. P. Unni, for example, and Heidrun Brückner, Heike Oberlin, Karin Steiner, and Anna Esposito—really, the whole group of scholars who have been involved in the Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg. They generally balance an appreciation for the arguments pointing to a relatively later period of composition (per Tieken’s thesis) with a deep respect for the fact that contemporary Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers seem to have wholeheartedly embraced the idea that these dramas were written by the early poet Bhāsa. In doing so, they accept the view that in many aspects of its cultural history Kerala forms a part of a classical Indian cosmopolitanism that ties it especially to the broader southern traditions that we see in Tamil Nadu. On the other hand, however, they see the force of a deep sense of cultural identity that comes into focus only in Kerala, as if Kerala’s littoral location on the shores of the Arabian Sea and near the southern extremity of the Indian landmass granted it a position of cultural independence that endures as its own particular right—a sensitivity to the past that is thus explicitly local and implicitly universal.

The uncanny relationship between the tightly focused *Pañcarātra* and its more diffuse epic host seems to partake in the same mysterious set of vectors. This is not quite the same as believing that Bhāsa was early—and early acclaimed across the Sanskrit-knowing world—but

the performers' instinct seems to reflect something of the dynamic between *Mārga* and *Deśī*, cosmopolitan-universal and cosmopolitan-local, that I have tried to sketch.

A *Mahābhārata* performance cycle

Without taking away from Tieken's argument, which has been broadly accepted by scholars today, I want to suggest that we would benefit from thinking about the plays just as much in terms of their content—and the thematic relationships between them—as from the point of view of the strictly technical elements that seem to ground so many theories about their common authorship. When we do this, we find that the technical commonalities uniting the thirteen plays mask impressive strands of diversity with respect to structure and content. Furthermore, they are found in such varied arrangements—in any given manuscript some dramas may be included, others missing—that I am not sure we should insist that the thirteen plays share the same author, or even the same performance history. We have, for example, the two longer *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas, *Abhiṣeka* and *Pratimā*, that clearly reflect each other; and we have the two longer plays based on the Udayana story, *Svapnavāsavadatta* and *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇa*, that live in the same world, narratively and aesthetically. These two duos could have lived out completely different performance histories before being joined together within the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire and developing similar technical characteristics over the course of many decades, even centuries, of performance—similarities that would then be reflected in the manuscripts to which we currently have access, all of which are linked to the Kūṭiyāṭṭam tradition.

Most important for our purposes, there are six *Mahābhārata* dramas in Sastri's Trivandrum set, all much shorter than the other plays and each seemingly more inventive than the last. These six dramas are united not just by their focus on story lines that develop in the

Mahābhārata but by the fact that they concern themselves primarily with characters such as Bhīma, Ghaṭotkaca, and Karṇa, who are the focus of particular attention elsewhere in South India and especially in Indonesia.⁶⁴ A sense of this distinctive ecumene helps us reevaluate the meanings of the other five *Mahābhārata* dramas that figure among the Trivandrum plays. Let us begin with *Ūrubhaṅga* (*The Breaking of the Thighs*), a one-act drama depicting Duryodhana’s ultimate downfall at the hands of Bhīma—an event that takes place in book 9 of the *Mahābhārata*. In this play, as Edwin Gerow has demonstrated, Duryodhana emerges as a compassionate hero who embodies “discipline over self, compassion for the enemy, reconciliation within the family.”⁶⁵ This portrayal aligns with the way he is figured in the *Pañcarātra*—that is, as a respectful student and an honest king—but it is a dramatic departure from the way in which Duryodhana is often portrayed in retellings of the *Mahābhārata*, and indeed in many parts of the epic itself. But does the fact that Duryodhana is depicted as a moral exemplar in this play lead to a more uplifting structure for the play as a whole? Bruce Sullivan writes that it does. He argues that while the *Ūrubhaṅga* does not depict “the more typical goal of the *nāṭaka* [full-length drama] and its hero, namely, to attain worldly success, especially in terms of love (*kāma*) and profit (*artha*),” it does bend toward “reintegration and wholeness—precisely the goal of all Sanskrit dramas” when it shows how its hero “triumphantly attains his goal of heaven and peace within the family.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Note, for example, that placing Abhimanyu’s death before Ghaṭotkaca’s, as happens in *Dūtaghaṭotkaca*, is a feature of the Old Javanese *Bhāratayuddha* (1157 CE). See S. Supomo, *Bhāratayuddha: An Old Javanese Poem and Its Indian Sources* (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1993).

⁶⁵ Gerow, “Bhāsa’s *Ūrubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics,” 406.

⁶⁶ Bruce Millen Sullivan, “Dying on Stage in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*: Perspectives from the Sanskrit Theatre Tradition,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 24 (2007): 429.

I would counter this assertion by arguing that things are more complex: the *Ūrubhaṅga* contains not one ending but two.⁶⁷ After Duryodhana dies, one of his compatriots announces that he will avenge that death by going on to murder nearly all of the remaining fighters in their sleep. This is the famous night massacre in book 10 of the epic. So if Duryodhana’s noble death in the *Ūrubhaṅga* offers at one level a resolution to the epic’s ethos of disintegration, it is only a temporary resolution. In fact, the *Ūrubhaṅga* takes brokenness as its starting point and its endpoint. The first half of the drama unfolds through the eyes of three soldiers⁶⁸ who witness the breaking of Duryodhana’s thighs (and, along with it, the figurative breaking of dharma⁶⁹), and the second half features a series of emotional separations that Duryodhana and his close family undergo. He separates from his teacher, from his parents, from his child, and from the very idea of the war (“Let go of your bow!”⁷⁰). While Duryodhana’s character in the *Ūrubhaṅga* may exhibit far more remorse for the war than the epic Duryodhana does—Gerow, Gitomer, and Sullivan all remark on this feature⁷¹—the *Ūrubhaṅga*’s focus on the Kauravas’ familial bonds emerges directly from the *Mahābhārata*’s portrayal of their close emotional attachments to one another.⁷² The series of tender separations in the play evoke these epic bonds and then break

⁶⁷ In this it reflects another Sanskrit drama about the tension between Bhīma and Duryodhana: Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa’s seventh-century *Veṅṛisaṃhāra*. See Gitomer, “The ‘Veṅṛisaṃhāra’ of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa.”

⁶⁸ On which, see Herman Ticken, “Three Men in a Row (Studies in the Trivandrum Plays, II),” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie* 41 (1997): 17–52.

⁶⁹ *Ūrubhaṅga* 24: *bhūmau pāṇitale nighṛṣya tarasā bāhū pramṛjyādhikaṃ sandaṣṭoṣṭhapuṭena vikramabalāt krodhādhikaṃ garjatā | tyaktvā dharmaghṛṇām vihāya samayaṃ kṛṣṇasya saṃjñāsamaṃ gāndhārītanayasya pāṇḍutanayenorvor vimuktā gadā* || Access to all six of the Kerala *Mahābhārata* plays is via the *Multimediale Datenbank zum Sanskrit-Schauspiel: Texte, Manuskripte und Aufführung klassischer indischer Dramen*, prepared by the Bhāsa Projekt Würzburg, 2007, available at <http://www.bhasa.indologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/rahmen.html>.

⁷⁰ *Ūrubhaṅga* 61: *dhanur muñcatu bhavān*.

⁷¹ Gerow, “Bhāsa’s *Ūrubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics,” 405; David Gitomer, “King Duryodhana: The *Mahābhārata* Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992): 228–32; Sullivan, “Dying on Stage,” 435.

⁷² As, for example, the friendship between Karṇa and Duryodhana (*Mahābhārata* 1.126), or Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s love for Duryodhana (*Mahābhārata* 1.107.33).

them all over again, displaying an intimate involvement in all things Kaurava that is a distinctive feature of these plays' depiction of the events surrounding the *Mahābhārata*'s great war.⁷³

Pañcarātra explores this Kaurava experience in a different way. As we have seen, its first and third acts unfold among the Kauravas: Duryodhana, Śakuni, and Karṇa all have their views to project. Not only does the drama foreground the Kauravas' perspectives in this way, but it also mimics the narrative structure of the battle books—going right to the heart of things—where the story is similarly framed through the eyes of the Kauravas. Their loss in the war is given a powerful specificity in the *Karṇabhāra* (*Karṇa's Burden*), a third drama in this set, which dramatizes the episode in which Indra disguises himself as a *brāhmaṇa* and begs for Karṇa's inborn earrings and armor as alms—events that ensure his death at the hands of the Pāṇḍavas during the war.⁷⁴ The *Dūtavākya* (*The Messenger's Words*), a fourth “Kaurava” play, reimagines a scene from book 5 of the epic in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana, and Kṛṣṇa rehearse the events that have led their respective sides of the family to the brink of war. In some versions of the play Kṛṣṇa ultimately reveals his cosmic powers to Duryodhana, but the revelation only leads them closer to war.⁷⁵ That is the tragedy, but our point here is that the whole thing unfolds from Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana's point of view.

⁷³ Speaking of the dramas as a group, Sullivan notes that they are “linked to each other by similarities of form and content” but that they were most likely “staged as independent dramas, not as acts comprising a comprehensive telling of the *Mahābhārata*.” See Bruce Millen Sullivan, “Kerala's *Mahābhārata* on Stage: Texts and Performative Practices in Kūṭiyāṭṭam Drama,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (2010): 126. Gerow maintains that the overwhelmingly Kaurava perspective of these plays does not reflect an earlier “Kaurava epic” (Holtzmann's “epic reversal” thesis) but, rather, engages with the presentation of the Kauravas in the *Mahābhārata* as we have it (“Bhāsa's *Ūrubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics,” 405).

⁷⁴ Based on *Mahābhārata* 3.284–294. See also: Barbara Stoler Miller, translator's note to “*Karṇabhāra*: The Trial of Karṇa: A One-Act Play Attributed to Bhāsa, Based on Episodes from the *Mahābhārata*,” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20 (1985): 47–50.

⁷⁵ Based on *Mahābhārata* 5.83–129. On the interpolation of Kṛṣṇa's personified weapons in the *Dūtavākya*, see Anna Aurelia Esposito, “The Two Versions of *Dūtavākya* and Their Sources,” *Bulletin d'études indiennes* 17–18 (1999–2000): 551–62.

A fifth play in this series—and the second to be focused on the figure of the messenger (*dūta*)—also unfolds from a Kaurava perspective. Its title is *Dūtaghaṭotkaca* (*Ghaṭotkaca the Messenger*), and it follows Ghaṭotkaca, Bhīma’s half-*rākṣasa* son, as he enters the Kaurava camp near the end of the war. The Kauravas have already killed Abhimanyu, and Ghaṭotkaca is now warning them that revenge will come quickly. The play’s unusual plot—namely, the fact that Abhimanyu dies before Ghaṭotkaca, a direct reversal of what happens in the epic—seems to anticipate a striking feature of the *Bhāratayuddha* of Mpu Sēḍah and Mpu Panuluh, an Old Javanese *kakawin* (poetic) account of the *Mahābhārata* story from the twelfth century. There, too, Ghaṭotkaca outlives Abhimanyu, and in many ways his death outshines Abhimanyu’s.⁷⁶ In *Dūtaghaṭotkaca*, the anger of the *Dūtavākya* morphs into a series of laments shared by the Kauravas and Ghaṭotkaca over the war’s many deaths. If the Kauravas are the major “others” of the *Mahābhārata*—that is, the antagonists, and even by some accounts the incarnations of the *asuras* (the “un-gods”)—then Ghaṭotkaca, as half *rākṣasa*, is the most “other” of the Pāṇḍavas. The *Mahābhārata* plays seem to be fascinated not only by the Kauravas but by all kinds of deviations from the standard human-divine model.

Ghaṭotkaca also takes center stage in the *Madhyamavyāyoga* (*The Middle Brother*), but this time the dramatic action follows only the Pāṇḍavas—or, rather, two of them: Ghaṭotkaca and Bhīma.⁷⁷ Although the source narrative of this play does not appear in the critical edition of the

⁷⁶ See S. Supomo, *Bhāratayuddha*, 199–204 (that is, cantos 18–19). See also Mpu Panuluh, *Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, ed. and trans. Stuart Robson (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2016). Working in the latter half of the twelfth century in eastern Java, Mpu Panuluh wrote both the section of the *Bhāratayuddha* in which Ghaṭotkaca is killed and the *kakawin* (longform poem) *Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, whose characters come from the *Mahābhārata* but whose plot seems to be unique to Java.

⁷⁷ The story does not appear in the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*. On the possible sources of the play, see Richard Salomon, “Like Father, Like Son: Poetic Strategies in ‘The Middle Brother’ (Madhyama-vyāyoga) Attributed to Bhāsa,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 53 (2010): 7–8. See, also, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, “The Monstrous Feminine: *Rākṣasīs* and Other Others—The Archaic Mother of

Mahābhārata, it is set in the Pāṇḍavas’ forest-dwelling period in book 3 and parallels an episode in book 1 in which Bhīma prevents a *rākṣasa* from dining on human flesh.⁷⁸ Here, the offending *rākṣasa* is Bhīma’s own son, and a recognition drama ensues. The *Madhyamavyāyoga*’s closest conversation partner in this respect is the second act of the *Pañcarātra*, which also features a recognition drama between a Pāṇḍava brother (Arjuna) and his son (Abhimanyu).⁷⁹

What is remarkable to me about the six plays as a group, if we look beyond their overwhelming sympathy for the Kauravas’ struggles as against the Pāṇḍavas’, is the way in which they engage with themes of absence, emptiness, entropy, and disintegration that emerge in the epic. As Sullivan’s and Gerow’s research on the *Ūrubhaṅga* suggests, the very fact of centering five these plays around Kaurava characters and Kaurava stories means that loss—and specifically the loss of kingship and the abandonment of kingly behavior—emerges again and again as a major part of these plays’ emotional designs. I would add that the plays’ invocation of Kṛṣṇa as divine contributes an extra layer of absence, or maybe distance. For the Kaurava protagonists, as Kṛṣṇa’s star rises, God is always on the other side.

If this overwhelming Kaurava sympathy is one way in which these Kerala plays effectively exploit the ambiguity or instability of the *Mahābhārata*—adopting the perspective of the antagonist—there are also more formal ways in which we see this happening. One of the most prominent of these is their collective focus on constructing, within a single play, separate dramatic arcs that reflect on one another and stimulate a sense of struggle within that particular play. In the *Karṇabhāra*, for example, the interaction between Karṇa and Indra is set against the

Bhāsa’s *Madhyamavyāyoga*,” in *On Meaning and Mantras: Essays in Honor of Frits Staal*, ed. George K. Thompson and Richard K. Payne (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 229–56.

⁷⁸ The slaying of Baka the *asura*, *Mahābhārata* 1.145–152.

⁷⁹ And its focus on Bhīma’s *rākṣasa* aspect finds close parallels in the *Veṅṣaṃhāra*. See Gitomer, “The ‘Veṅṣaṃhāra’ of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa,” 382–425.

backdrop of two other tense relationships: one with Karṇa’s charioteer, Śalya, who supplants him as the general of the Kaurava army, and one with the *brāhmaṇa* warrior Paraśurāma, whom Karṇa tricks into becoming his teacher. In each relationship, Karṇa begins with a certain kind of power and then loses it. With Paraśurāma, Karṇa disguises himself as a *brāhmaṇa*—Paraśurāma refuses to teach anyone who isn’t—but his disguise eventually fails, and Paraśurāma curses him. With Indra, Karṇa relinquishes his armor and earrings and the magical protection they once conferred upon him. With Śalya, Karṇa loses his position at the head of the army. The layering of his three losses—disguise, earrings/armor, and leadership—casts a spell of inevitability on Karṇa’s downfall. But the asymmetries of the three arcs break the spell in certain places, as, for example, when Indra’s disguise (as a *brāhmaṇa*) succeeds while Karṇa’s own period in disguise (also as a *brāhmaṇa*) fails. The parallels between the multiple storylines of the *Karṇabhāra* prime us to see not only similarities but differences—places where the stories fall out of alignment and come into tension with one another. Here the technique of narrative mirroring proves as disorienting as it is elegant.

Another shared feature of these six *Mahābhārata* plays is the way in which they give new inflections to the sense of revenge that hovers over the epic itself. In the *Mahābhārata*, as A. K. Ramanujan writes, repeated relationships seem to reinforce a sense of causality in the narrative. What transpired between two characters in one generation will inevitably transpire between their offspring—or subsequent incarnations, as the case may be.⁸⁰ From time to time narrators in the *Mahābhārata* itself suggest that the entire war is the inevitable consequence of the fundamental conflict between the gods and the *asuras*, and that everyone who participates in it does so as an incarnation of one otherworldly figure or another. Yet plays like the *Pañcarātra* disrupt and twist

⁸⁰ A. K. Ramanujan, “Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*,” 437.

those notions of causality. There, as we know, the events of book 4—the Pāṇḍavas' year in disguise, the cattle raid, and so on—lead not to a great war but to a great peace between the cousins. The play invites us to ask: Was the war really as inevitable as the epic often makes it seem? I discuss this further in chapters 4 and 5.

Initially, the most striking distinctions between the *Mahābhārata* dramas and their epic source involve the plays' rearrangements of plot features, particularly their rearrangements of characters into new relationships. The *Pañcarātra* puts Arjuna's son Abhimanyu in the middle of the Pāṇḍavas' costumed escapades in Virāṭa's court; the *Dūtaghaṭokaca* does something similar, but in reverse, placing Ghaṭotkaca amid the Kauravas; the *Karṇabhāra* makes Karṇa's charioteer a witness to the robbing of Karṇa's earrings. It's hard to know what to make of these mutations. Sometimes it seems as if the authors, whoever they were, were experimenting with different combinations of characters to see which relationships ignited sparks. But the initial strangeness of these combinations may be exactly the point: they estrange the audience from familiar character profiles, relationships, and storylines and force the audience to make new sense of them. It's almost as if the rearrangements of *Mahābhārata* plots and relationships in these plays push the audience into what we might call a recognition meta-drama. Will we be able to recognize old friends from the epic underneath their new costumes? In this way the six Trivandrum plays that deal with *Mahābhārata* themes bear down even harder on the element of distancing and rethinking that their general focus on the Kauravas announces in such evident thematic terms. It's not just a characteristic shift of perspective but what I would call an experimental taste for mutation.

We might think of this in vaguely tectonic terms—as a new way in which southern hearings of the epic often challenge its northern priorities. Or perhaps we can imagine this as the

littoral “periphery” of South Asia answering back to its Madhyadeśī “core.” But there are more strictly structural ways to appreciate what is going on, as well, and some of these are given new expression by the recently emerging field of fan fiction studies, the study of “derivative creative artworks”⁸¹ that “[elevate] subtext to text.”⁸² Here we find a range of analytical tools from the more popular end of the literary spectrum that are useful in helping to understand the intricate yet remarkably open set of relationships that develop between the epic *Mahābhārata* and her dramatic children.⁸³ In her 2013 book *Fic*, Anne Jamison pictures fan fiction as a “web” that “reads around” a particular source text, borrowing characters and mixing plot threads—just as these *Mahābhārata* dramas from Kerala do. Discussing the huge body of fan literature around the figure of Sherlock Holmes, Jamison observes that Sherlock Holmes fan authors mimic Sherlock himself. Thinking of themselves as detectives, they pick apart the prose of their source texts for clues about Sherlock and Watson’s inner lives and untold adventures.⁸⁴ Like Sherlock, they read deeply into and then make new meaning out of what has become familiar.⁸⁵ So, too, do these six short *Mahābhārata* dramas defamiliarize and then refamiliarize the epic for their audiences.⁸⁶ For example, a major subplot of the *Pañcarātra* evokes the story of the death of Abhimanyu by presenting Abhimanyu in a parallel series of events, namely, a battle followed by a dignified defeat. At the end of this parallel arc, Abhimanyu doesn’t die—as he does tragically in the epic—but reunites with Arjuna instead. The familiar circumstances of Abhimanyu’s death

⁸¹ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 1.

⁸² Lev Grossman, introduction to *Fic: Why Fan Fiction Is Taking Over the World*, by Anne Jamison, xiii.

⁸³ The term “fan fiction” originated in John Bristol Speer’s *Fancylopedia* (1944), on science fiction fan literature. See Hellekson and Busse, 5.

⁸⁴ Roberta Pearson, “It’s always 1895: Sherlock Holmes in Cyberspace,” in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Hellekson and Busse, 45.

⁸⁵ Jamison, 55–56.

⁸⁶ On defamiliarization, see Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edition, ed. David Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006), 775–85.

in the epic become, in the play, signposts of survival: a capture becomes an embrace; an unguarded boy is suddenly now protected. This particular sideshadow⁸⁷—an alternate version of events wherein Abhimanyu lives and Arjuna never has to mourn him—allows the audience to experience Abhimanyu’s death from a distance. The dynamic between defamiliarization and refamiliarization makes that distance a safe one, as we shall see in chapter 5, when we study this part of the play in detail.

The interplay between fan loyalty and fan invention is one productive frame for appreciating what happens in the six Trivandrum *Mahābhārata* plays, but the tight thematic and structural bonds that exist between these six plays point to something stronger: not only a shared ancestry but the fact that they may once have been staged in an actual *Mahābhārata* performance cycle. Sukthankar and Unni make suggestions that move in this direction. Sukthankar writes: “The five one-act Mahābhārata pieces form a closely related, homogeneous group; they appear in fact to be single acts detached from a lengthy dramatized version of a complete Mahābhārata saga.”⁸⁸ I appreciate his implicitly noting the special status of the *Pañcarātra*—the three-act outlier—but as I will shortly explain, I would understand its separateness from the larger group of plays in a specific way.

What interests me most among these performance hypotheses, however, is the perspective provided by N. P. Unni. He writes that while it may be difficult ever to know the details, it is likely that the *Mahābhārata* plays were performed annually in the context of the necessary ritual life (*aṭiyantiram*) of a temple:

⁸⁷ I take the term from Gary Saul Morson, “Sideshadowing and Tempics,” *New Literary History* 29 (1998): 602.

⁸⁸ Sukthankar, *Analecta*, 183.

Stage manuals [*āṭṭaparakārams*] dealing with these plays are extremely rare since they were guarded as treasures by the professional [Kūṭiyāṭṭam] actors. Even now the few who may know something are reluctant to give information on these aspects. The [Kūṭiyāṭṭam] performances on the Kerala stage consist of three kinds, namely Aṭiyantirakkūttu, Kāḷcakkūttu and Valiyavāṭukkūttu. The first variety is that which is enjoyed to be performed annually in temples like Vennimala and Kīlvaḷḷūr. The second is the occasional performance in various temples with an aesthetic interest. The third group is instituted by pious devotees to beget issues, etc. The Mahābhārata plays come under the first group since some of them are ordained to be performed annually.⁸⁹

If that is true, then I think it follows that the *Pañcarātra* would have played a very important role in an annual performance cycle. An intriguing feature of the play's manuscript presence is that in each of the four codices in which the *Pañcarātra* appears, all of which are estimated to be around 300 years old, it is the first of the *Mahābhārata* plays to be featured in that codex. You don't find, for example, *Dūtaghaṭotkaca* before *Pañcarātra*, or *Ūrubhaṅga* before *Pañcarātra*. One doesn't even find *Madhyamavyāyoga* or *Karṇabhāra* before *Pañcarātra*, despite the fact that the major activities in those dramas take place prior to the *Virāṭaparvan* in the epic. Instead, *Pañcarātra* always comes first.⁹⁰ Now this may mean absolutely nothing—one of the benefits of a codex is random access—but to me, this signals a presumption that the *Pañcarātra* would have been the first of the *Mahābhārata* plays to be staged at any given time,⁹¹ just as we have seen that the *Virāṭaparvan* usually inaugurates recitations and performances of the *Mahābhārata* itself.

⁸⁹ Unni, *New Problems in Bhāsa Plays* (Trivandrum [Thiruvananthapuram]: College Book House, 1978), 267.

⁹⁰ This is true even in Unni's scholarship on the plays: When he addresses the *Mahābhārata* dramas individually, he begins with *Pañcarātra*.

⁹¹ The manuscripts originate in Kerala. Aside from two that use Grantha characters, all are written in (old) Malayalam script, with some Grantha variations. There are 166 manuscripts in total, of which the *Mahābhārata* dramas are the least well represented. The four *Pañcarātra* manuscripts are: TVM 22848 C, held in the University Manuscript Library, Tiruvananthapuram, and perhaps more than 400 years old; TVM 17622 B; TRIP 834 K, held at the Sanskrit College Manuscripts Library, Tripunithura; and

To inaugurate the cycle with the *Pañcarātra* up front may reflect the uniquely auspicious role of the *Virāṭaparvan* within the greater *Mahābhārata*, a point that I have made in introducing the dissertation as a whole. But I think it makes even more sense to have the *Pañcarātra* up front for reasons of performance itself. As I discuss in chapter 4, the *Virāṭaparvan*—and therefore the *Pañcarātra*—is in quite a direct way *about* performing the larger epic story. I can't think of a better way to begin a cycle of *Mahābhārata* performances than with a drama that actually explores what it means to perform the *Mahābhārata* in the first place. Performance begins with performance: the *Virāṭa* story becomes a powerful invocation for the creative work that is to come. And in that context, I think, the more creative, the better. To completely upend the epic story like this—to avert the war, to essentially put the *Mahābhārata* in its most unusual costume yet—would set the stage almost literally for the vigorous reinventions that the other five *Mahābhārata* plays would go on to present. Remarkably, this act of performative novelty seems at the same time to put into play the doctrine of the *samavakāra* that we saw in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Daśarūpaka*. It is one of the most fundamental perceptions of early Sanskrit dramaturgical theory: deception is a cardinal element of generation. All the deceptions of the *Pañcarātra*, small-scale and large, generate a new *Mahābhārata*—a new world—in which a Kūṭiyāṭṭam audience would live for weeks and perhaps months at a time.

***Gograhaṇāṅkam* and the new classical mainstream**

MADRAS SR 1714 D, which was purchased from an owner in Kochi. On all of the above, see: Heidrun Brückner, “Manuscripts and Performance Traditions.”

None of this is lost in present-day performances of the *Pañcarātra*. While the play is not the most popular in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire,⁹² the mode in which it *has* been brought to life in the last century speaks to its enduring strength as an icon of creativity and renewal. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, each act of a play is presented as a drama in itself and unfolds over the course of days to weeks, with performances taking place each night. For the *Pañcarātra*, the second of the play’s three acts was the most frequently staged, or so the evidence suggests. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam this act is called *Gograhaṇāṅkam* (*The Cattle Raid*). Acts 1 and 3 have their own Kūṭiyāṭṭam titles—*Bhīṣmadūtāṅkam* (*Bhīṣma’s Message*) and *Vēṭṭāṅkam* (*The Wedding*)—and Unni wrote in 1978 that they had indeed been performed, though he does not say where or when.⁹³ Act 2 seems to have been by far the most popular, and I suspect this is because, whereas Acts 1 and 3 focus on the Kauravas’ experiences, Act 2 tells the story of the Pāṇḍavas living in disguise. It therefore explores the themes of mistaken identity, fluid selfhood, and performance in the greatest depth, and would perhaps appeal the most to the actors as an exploration of their own craft.⁹⁴

That the character of Arjuna as Bṛhannalā is the leading figure in this act is not particularly obvious from the text of the play as it is presented in published editions, but it becomes clear on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage. This is a conscious choice. There are many important characters in the second act—Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Virāṭa, Abhimanyu—any one of whom could

⁹² Manuscript numbers suggest that the *Rāmāyaṇa* plays, for example, have been more popular by far.

⁹³ Unni writes, “The Cākyār tradition informs us that all Mahābhārata plays ascribed to Bhāsa were put on the Kerala stage” (*New Problems*, 34). He also notes that “Pañcarātra seems to have been one of the popular plays in Kerala. However detailed information regarding the staging of the different acts is not available.” (266–67) With that said, however, contemporary scholars of Kūṭiyāṭṭam such as Sudha Gopalakrishnan and Heike Oberlin have reported (in personal correspondence, 2021–22) that they were unaware of the *Pañcarātra* ever being performed in recent decades.

⁹⁴ As Gary Tubb notes (personal correspondence, January 2022), this could even be a reflection on the Cākyār actors’ own practice of imitation above and beyond the characters they inhabit, namely, the way in which they imitate the Vedic recitation style of Nambūdiri *brāhmaṇas*.

ground the play. But Bṛhannalā is the role that everything else seems to be choreographed around, and hers is the role that the major Kūṭiyāṭṭam actors seem to want to take for themselves. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam she becomes the play’s center of gravity. I would argue that this is not only because her disguise is the most extreme, and therefore the most evocative of the very idea of performance—besides, let’s not forget that in the *Virāṭaparvan* and *Pañcarātra* Bṛhannalā herself is a performer: a dancer, singer, and storyteller—but also because she is the character who most openly reflects on the experience of being in disguise, living in costume, and playing a role. (For more on that idea, see chapter 3.) What’s more, the figure of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā instatiates the shift between roles that is a distinctive marker of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, where one actor embodies multiple characters over the course of a performance.⁹⁵

It says a great deal about the prominence of Bṛhannalā in *Gograhaṇāṅkam* that in Mani Madhava Chakyar’s sweeping account of Kūṭiyāṭṭam practice, written in Malayalam in 1975 and titled *Nāṭyakalpadrumam*, there are quotations of two verses specifically about Arjuna as Bṛhannalā that would have been added into the text of *Pañcarātra* Act 2 for its performance as *Gograhaṇāṅkam*.⁹⁶ The first of these verses would serve as an opening benediction for the audience at the beginning of *Gograhaṇāṅkam*:

He resigned from battle, but with alarm
 Heard the clang of the Kuru army,
 Took hold of Uttara, the Mātsya prince
 As he ran off
 And made him stand on his chariot.

The bowman defeated
 Bhīma, Droṇa, Suyodhana, those great warriors,

⁹⁵ Thanks to Whitney Cox for this insight.

⁹⁶ The benedictory verse for *Gograhaṇāṅkam* and the *ālāmasloka* for Bṛhannalā’s entry can be found in Mani Madhava Chakyar, *Nāṭyakalpadrumam* (Kottayam: Kerala Kalamandalam, 1975), 174-75.

And took their power, their clothes,
Their jewelry, their weapons.

That very same Pāṇḍava,
May he now protect you all.⁹⁷

I want to emphasize the time gap between the moment when this verse would have been performed—that is, close to the very beginning of the production, likely on the first night—and the moment when Arjuna (as Bṛhannalā) would have actually appeared on stage, two scenes later. A full 28 verses would have been performed between those two moments: that could be one, two, or even three weeks in “Kūṭiyāṭṭam time.”⁹⁸ (Without access to an *āṭṭaparakāram* for *Gograhaṇāṅkam*, it is impossible to know for sure.) No matter what unfolds in that time, then, the audience knows from the beginning that the major figure in the play will be Arjuna, dressed as Bṛhannalā, and the anticipation of seeing her only grows in the interval between the benedictory verse and her actual entrance. The verse above therefore frames Arjuna-Bṛhannalā as the *raison d’être* for *Gograhaṇāṅkam* as a whole—and the entire play as a means through which the audience connects to this figure, becoming deserving of his (and her) protection.

Specifically, the verse recalls Arjuna’s victory over the Kauravas during the cattle raid—a victory that he claims while dressed as Bṛhannalā. I keep returning to the costumed element of the character because it is crucial to the way in which the benediction sets the tone for the whole

⁹⁷ *yaḥ śrutvā kuruvāhinīkalakalaṃ bhīṭyā vihāyāhavam dhāvantaṃ pravigrhya mātsyatanayaṃ samsthāpya dhanvī rathe | bhīṣmadronasuyodhanādyatirathān nirjitya teṣāṃ balam vastraṃ bhūṣaṇam āyudhaṃ ca hr̥tavān pāyāt sa vaḥ pāṇḍavaḥ ||* Changed *kalahala* (as in Chakyar and Unni, I believe) with *kalakala* as per Rajagopalan’s account: L. S. Rajagopalan, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam: Preliminaries and Performance* (Chennai: Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, 2000), 176. Rajagopalan also has *pratigrhya* here. See Mani Madhava Chakyar, *Nāṭyakalpadrumam*, 174; Unni, *New Problems*, 267; Rajagopalan, *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, 176. Also note that *bala* could mean “army” as opposed to “power.”

⁹⁸ I make this comment based on present-day practices, but want to note that it is unclear how much the modern conventions of Kūṭiyāṭṭam reflect earlier forms of a *Nāṭyaśāstra*-inspired performance style.

play. In this verse, Arjuna dresses up to dress other men down—to rob the Kauravas of their power and all the accoutrements that convey it (“And took their power, their clothes, / Their jewelry, their weapons”⁹⁹). Disguise is as much about what it reveals as what it conceals. And, as this verse has it, it is fundamentally an act of rupture—an idea I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation. As Bṛhannalā, Arjuna not only turns himself upside-down but does the same to everything around him. He makes a scared boy into a warrior (“Took hold of Uttara, the Mātsya prince / As he ran off / And made him stand on his chariot”) and “great warriors” into scared boys. And if Arjuna-Bṛhannalā can do this for Uttara, Droṇa, Bhīṣma, and Duryodhana, imagine what (s)he is about to do for the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. The verse signals that the meta-theater of the *Gograhaṇāṅkam* will scramble the expected mythological and literary world-orders and present them anew, perhaps so new that we struggle to recognize them as part of the cosmos of the *Mahābhārata*: Abhimanyu alive, Duryodhana true to his word, the war averted.

The second verse that Mani Madhava Chakyar quotes—and again, this would have been an addition to the inherited text of *Pañcarātra* Act 2 and used specifically for the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of *Gograhaṇāṅkam*—closely precedes Bṛhannalā’s entry onstage and essentially introduces her into the performance. Like the benedictory verse, the introductory verse tells the story of Bṛhannalā’s victory over the Kauravas in the cattle raid. In contrast to how Bṛhannalā will describe the experience on her own terms mere verses later (see chapter 3), this introductory poem emphasizes the effortlessness and playfulness of her behavior:

She crossed the ocean
The army of the Kauravas, with their
Elephants, chariots, horses, footsoldiers,
As if it were a mere puddle

⁹⁹ As earlier, please note that *bala* could mean “army” (not “power”).

And with her mighty strength
Brought the cattle home
As if it were a few steps for them.

The same Bṛhannalā
Set foot in the assembly hall
Of the Mātsya king, Virāṭa,
Carrying the enemies' clothes, their finery:
Dresses and costume jewelry
For the princesses' dolls,

And went there playfully, shamelessly,
As a serpentess slithers in a thicket of reeds.¹⁰⁰

Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar, one of Bṛhannalā's present-day enactors, intentionally captures the combination of playfulness and strength that we see in the verse above. Rajaneesh played Bṛhannalā in a production of *Gograhaṇāṅkam* that was staged a number of times between 2015 and 2020 (and would presumably have continued on if the pandemic had not interfered). The production featured all-new choreography by Painkulam Narayana Chakyar, the student of Painkulam Rama Chakyar—who was one of the first Kūṭiyāṭṭam actors to perform outside of temples. As he explains it in a February 2020 interview hosted by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Narayana sought to emphasize the purportedly masculine qualities of boldness and valor in Bṛhannalā, and to bring those into balance with the playfulness—even the flirtatiousness—that

¹⁰⁰ *tīrtvā hastirathāśvapattisahitam kauravyasainyārṇavam gobhir goṣpadavad balena mahatāpy ānīya gomaṇḍalam | yoṣāveṣavilāsabhūṣaṇavatī mātsyasya rājñah sabhām saiṣā yāti bṛhannalā nalavanaṁ nāgīva helāgatā* || See Chakyar, 175; Unni, 267. A more descriptive, less narrative-based reading of the compound *yoṣāveṣavilāsabhūṣaṇavatī* would be “possessing charming ornaments and women’s dress”—a clear portrait of Bṛhannalā. Thanks to Whitney Cox for that observation, and also for noting that Mani Madhava Chakyar may have written this verse with the eighth opening verse to Devabodha’s (eleventh-century) commentary on the *Ādiparvan* in mind: *yāny ujjahāra māhendrād vyāso vyākaraṇārṇavāt | śabdaratnāni kiṁ tāni santi pāṇinigospade* ||

would be expected to emerge as part of the (stereo)typically feminine side of her character.¹⁰¹ Bṛhannalā’s entrance verse sets the stage for that dynamic between boldness and playfulness to unfold, and in stills and short clips of Rajaneesh playing the role—which were, unfortunately, the only way I could get a sense of this performance—one can see how that dynamic animates his creative decisions.

To create a new Kūṭiyāṭṭam production is a massive undertaking, especially if there is no existing *āṭṭaparakāram* for the drama in question, and Narayana must have had a strong reason to chose to stage *Gograhaṇāṅkam*. The choice is all the more remarkable given how infrequently the play seems to have been performed over the last century. Why pick this play over any other in the substantial Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire? In the same interview that I mentioned above, Narayana explains that when he was young performer, he traveled with his teacher, Rama Chakyar, all over India, from city to city, staging shorter, demonstration-type productions of Kūṭiyāṭṭam dramas. On one of these trips Narayana encountered a group of third-gender individuals for the first time. This prompted an important conversation in which Rama Chakyar told Narayana that Kūṭiyāṭṭam had a third-gender character of its own—Bṛhannalā. This is what first sparked Narayana’s wish to bring the second act of *Pañcarātra* to life. In the interview he talks at some length about the power of representation. He wanted the figure of Bṛhannalā, in all of (what he calls) her “boldness” and “valor,” to bring third-gender individuals—whom he had seen being pushed to the margins in all kinds of ways—into the classical mainstream. Narayana’s production therefore took various classical elements—Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Sanskrit drama, the *Mahābhārata*—to create

¹⁰¹ “Deeksha: Classes on Kutiyattam by Guru Shri Painkulam Narayana Chayar,” interview hosted by the Sangeet Natak Academy, posted December 9, 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/sangeetnatak/videos/1020148771804670>.

something completely new in response to an injustice that Narayana had observed in his own life.

Narayana had to create everything from the ground up: the choreography, the inner emotional states, the *nirvāhanam*-flashbacks that would be added into the inherited text of the *Pañcarātra*, the costume design, the makeup design—and still more. The fluidity of gender seems to have been a point of emphasis throughout. When Narayana designed Bṛhannalā’s costume and makeup, for example, he actually kept in mind the appearance of third-gender folk he had seen in the real world. Narayana, Rajaneesh, and others who were involved in the production were apparently quite open about the fact that they wanted their *Gograhaṇāṅkam* to cultivate support among the audience for the third-gender community. Generally speaking, Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s audience is intellectually and socially elite, and in certain respects it is quite conservative. In January 2022 I spoke with Rajaneesh Chakyar, the actor who played Bṛhannalā, about the production. He told me that while the play drew a good deal of attention, the fact that it foregrounded Bṛhannalā as a reclaimed classical icon of third-gender personhood was “not well accepted by Malayali *sahṛdayas* (connoisseurs of classical literature and theater).”¹⁰² Narayana and Rajaneesh, then, are developing a new mode of connoisseurship and a new way of being classicists. For them, it is not that the modern responds to the classical but that the classical responds to the modern—and indeed has the capacity to *transform* the modern. To be committed to the lasting value of the classics is to be committed to their power not only to preserve things but to change things. Narayana and Rajaneesh are classicists in that sense—renegade classicists.

It is important to underline the fact that Narayana and Rajaneesh’s portrayal of Bṛhannalā as a triumphant answer to the present-day marginalization of third-gender individuals comes

¹⁰² Personal correspondence, January 2022.

from their perspectives as (to my knowledge) cisgender, *cākyār* performers, and not from the perspectives of third-gender individuals themselves. As far as I know, neither Narayana nor Rajaneesh has mentioned consulting or interacting with third-gender folk in the process of producing and staging *Gograhaṇāṅkam*. I would find it hard to imagine that third-gender individuals were present at the play’s performances, either, given what Kūṭiyāṭṭam audiences typically look like—though I could certainly be wrong. But I don’t think that this takes away from the boldness of Narayana and Rajaneesh’s project. As I understand it, Narayana and Rajaneesh see themselves as doing socially constructive work that someone inside the relatively elite community of Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers and audiences would be well positioned to do. For more on Bṛhannalā as an icon within third-gender communities themselves, see chapter 3.¹⁰³

For all of Narayana’s innovations, this was not the first time that *Gograhaṇāṅkam* had been performed in the modern era. Sometime between 1970 and 1990, it was choreographed by the legendary actor Mani Madhava Chakyar, the author of *Nāṭyakalpadrumam*, the manual on Kūṭiyāṭṭam that I mentioned above. He played Bṛhannalā. This, too, was a new production. Mani Madhava Chakyar would have written the *āṭṭaparakāram* himself, detailing the choreography and storytelling, and adding new Sanskrit verses for the performance. It says a great deal that this major figure in Kūṭiyāṭṭam would so intentionally draw the *Pañcarātra* into the twentieth-century Kūṭiyāṭṭam revival to which he was so committed. This is a provocative play, both because of what it does to the *Mahābhārata* and because of the gender-bending character at the center of it. *Gograhaṇāṅkam*—and the *Pañcarātra* beyond it, too—harnesses the special power that comes from using the classical to express something completely new, and I suspect that was

¹⁰³ On culturally contextual understandings of gender, and drag in particular, see Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 4–8.

precisely the spirit that Mani Madhava Chakyar wanted to bring into Kūṭiyāṭṭam’s grand rebirth. I spoke earlier of how the *Pañcarātra* would have likely been performed at the beginning of a longer *Mahābhārata* cycle. In recent decades, it seems, productions of the *Pañcarātra* still play that role, even if they are performed as stand-alone dramas now. They turn over the old; they inaugurate what is new and important.

They do this not despite but precisely because they carry the weight of the classical with them. I think there is a uniquely Kerala “flavor” to all this—or at least I think it’s no accident that *Pañcarātra*, and Bṛhannalā, would come to life so powerfully in a region that has historically been both extremely classical (which is to say, in this case, conservative) and extremely progressive at the same time. Take, for example, the extreme rigidity of caste in Kerala and the biting humor that has historically been directed at it in Kerala’s theater traditions.¹⁰⁴ Both the classical and the progressive feed on distance. In classical endeavors, both in art and in scholarship, there is a distancing in time—an awareness that what we are engaging in is not of our current moment. And in progressive endeavors there is a moral and aesthetic distancing: looking at yourself and others from the outside and using that distance to level critique, often doing this through humor. Both the *Pañcarātra* and its performance as *Gograhaṇāṅkam* participate in these kinds of distancing, leading the audience to new vantage points on gender, on the articulation of self through performance, and, perhaps most strikingly, on the *Mahābhārata* that provides the structure for it all. The old story looks ever so different now.

¹⁰⁴ See Sudha Gopalakrishnan, “What Are the Goals of Life? The *Vidūṣaka*’s Interpretation of the *Puruṣārthas* in Kulaśekhara’s *Subhadradhanañjaya*,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Hawley and Pillai, 135–50; Sivan Goren-Arzon, “On Brewing Love Potions and Crafting Answers: Two Literary Techniques in an Early Modern Maṇipravāḷam Poem,” forthcoming; Donald R. Davis, Jr., “Satire as Apology: The *Puruṣārthakkūttū* of Kerala,” in *Irreverent History: Essays for M. G. S. Narayanan*, ed. Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis, Jr. (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), 93–109.

Conclusion

By reading the *Pañcarātra* as a performance text, we gain a new understanding of the play's unique (and initially mystifying) choices about recasting the events of the *Mahābhārata*. I have introduced several angles from which we might think about the play as a performance: we began from the perspective of Sanskrit dramaturgical theory; we continued into the *Pañcarātra*'s life in Kerala before the contemporary period; we placed the play in conversation with the short *Mahābhārata*-themed dramas that seem to have been its companions from the very beginning; and we concluded by discussing a very recent production of the play that was staged by contemporary Kūṭiyāṭṭam artists. As the chapter progresses we move closer to temporal, geographical, and cultural specificity; we also move from the idea of performance in theory and in scholarship to something that we would straightforwardly recognize as performance—an actual production of the play itself. However the parameters of the term may vary, performance becomes key to answering the question of why the play upends the *Mahābhārata* so dramatically. Each conception of the *Pañcarātra* as (or in) performance provides its own rationale.

Dramaturgically speaking, the play would be designed in such a way that its conclusion—while radically divergent from what happens in the epic itself—represents a logical fulfillment of the intense desire (expressed at the beginning by Bhīṣma and Droṇa) for Duryodhana to share the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas. The *viṣkambhaka* or opening section of Act 1, in which Duryodhana's ritual fire burns out of control before finally coming to rest, encapsulates the essential themes of that long plot arc. It primes the audience to see Duryodhana's eventual gift to the Pāṇḍavas as a natural, even mutually beneficial balancing of political power. While such a conclusion might seem shocking to anyone familiar with the epic,

the expectations of Sanskrit dramaturgy provide a framework in which the play's denouement feels perfectly aligned with the rest of the world the drama projects—and they do so in a way that extends far beyond the (overly simplistic) idea that a Sanskrit play must have a happy ending. This is especially clear in the way that the *viṣkambhaka* not only encapsulates what remains of the play but also reflects back on the epic *Mahābhārata*. Through the image of the aggressive sacrificial fire, the *viṣkambhaka* evokes a powerful image of the very war that the *Pañcarātra* will go on to avert. All this is made possible by the expectations of what a *viṣkambhaka*, as a minor but essential element of a Sanskrit drama, should be and do. Finally, in looking at the general structure of the drama as a *samavakāra* we find another way of thinking about the play's initially surprising plot. The very purpose of the *samavakāra* is to foreground acts of deception. What could be more deceptive than a *Mahābhārata* in which the great and brutal war appears to be averted entirely?

The play's long history in Kerala, especially in conversation with the other five *Mahābhārata* plays that would likely have joined it in an annual performance cycle, leads us to a separate but complementary set of ways to understand the *Pañcarātra*'s unique take on the epic. Together the *Mahābhārata* plays work to invert common perspectives on the epic story. One major way they do this is by presenting the events of the epic largely in sympathy with its antagonists, the Kauravas. (The Sanskrit epic often does the same, but the plays put that choice in sharp focus.) If, as I hypothesize here, the *Pañcarātra* was the first of the six plays to be performed in the cycle, then its extreme inversion of the epic's narrative arc would have set the tone for the pointed and deeply creative rearrangements of the *Mahābhārata* that would follow in the other plays. Wendy Doniger has argued that the *Virāṭaparvan* begins from a place of

powerful suspension of disbelief (an idea that I explore further in chapter 4).¹⁰⁵ In keeping with the *Virāṭaparvan*'s mandate—the most important mandate in all performances, one could say—the *Pañcarātra* truly challenges the audience to suspend their disbelief. We know that the *Pañcarātra*'s *Mahābhārata* is not the “real” *Mahābhārata*, just as we know that actors are not the characters they portray, but we go along with it nonetheless. Stationed at the beginning of a longer *Mahābhārata* performance cycle, the *Pañcarātra* would invite—and perhaps even demand—that the audience suspend their disbelief for the remainder of the cycle. It would usher them into a world that is self-consciously performative, separate from everyday life, and indeed separate from the “everyday” *Mahābhārata* that captures the painful realities of human life with remarkable commitment.

In Painkulam Narayana Chakyar's present-day Kūṭiyāṭṭam production of *Pañcarātra* Act 2, we find a heightened sense of the play's capacity to invert, change, and renew. This time those energies are not only directed inward toward the play's epic source—offering a complete change in direction from the original—but also, at the same time, outward to the real world of India in the twenty-first century. Framed as an explicitly third-gender character, Bṛhannalā brings the self-consciously fantastical world of the *Pañcarātra*—a world where the battle of Kurukṣetra never happens, a world where Abhimanyu lives on, and so on—pointedly down to earth. She becomes a symbol of the ability of the *Mahābhārata*—and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and perhaps anything broadly classical—to look forward as well as backward. Through Bṛhannalā, Narayana Chakyar makes the point that new, quite progressive ideas about gender might in some crucial way come from a very old place. In a sense this is also true for the larger combination of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Pañcarātra*, and the structure of Kūṭiyāṭṭam that brings both of them to life—and that does

¹⁰⁵ Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth: And Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 313–14.

so, I should say, in a way that aims to be both universally meaningful and locally inflected. Presented with the particular self-awareness of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam style as having both classical expanse and Kerala specificity, one finds in the *Pañcarātra* something old and special that is at the same time self-consciously innovative, following from the *Mahābhārata*'s own charge as expressed in the *Virāṭaparvan*.

Chapter 3

The Remembered Self: Arjuna as Bṛhannalā in the *Virāṭaparvan* and in *Pañcarātra* Act 2

The many *Mahābhāratas* of premodern South Asia form a notoriously prismatic landscape, but even against that landscape the *Pañcarātra* stands out as extreme.¹ Through plot and poetry, the play adds layers of complexity to the (already, and famously) fraught *Mahābhārata* story: rituals are mismanaged, battles go awry, relationships deteriorate, gambles are lost, and disguises become reality. The *Pañcarātra* adopts the epic’s polyperspectivity—a central feature of its “interrogative” style, or its “poetics of dilemma”²—by allowing the audience to experience its fourth book, the *Virāṭaparvan*, through the eyes of multiple figures. Duryodhana, Śakuni, Bhīṣma, Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Abhimanyu all have their stories to tell. Not only does the play reframe the narrative in this way, but it supplies it with a new and extraordinary conclusion. At the end of the *Pañcarātra* the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas split the kingdom and avert the very war that is the *Mahābhārata*’s defining feature. Yet even this unusual ending is faithful to the *Virāṭaparvan*’s ethos. Just as the *Virāṭaparvan* encapsulates the epic’s central story in a series of inversions that allow it to layer an impression of harmony over the *Mahābhārata*’s more pressing

¹ An earlier draft, incorporating much of this chapter, was published as “The Remembered Self: Arjuna as Bṛhannalā in the *Pañcarātra*,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 91–115.

² David Gitomer makes a similar observation about the drama *Veṅīsaṃhāra* (“The Binding/Catastrophe of the Braid,” ca. 700 CE) in “Veṅīsaṃhāra,” 341. On “poetics of dilemma,” see David Shulman, “Toward a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics,” in *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24. On the *Mahābhārata* as an “interrogative” epic, see Shubha Pathak, *Divine Yet Human Epics: Reflections of Poetic Rulers from Ancient Greece and India* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014), 174. Gregory Bailey points out that fundamental dichotomies of values and worldviews might be granted theoretical resolutions in the *Mahābhārata*, but that such resolutions are never “in consonance with what happens on the narrative level of the epic.” See his “Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*: Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira,” in *Inde et Littératures: Études réunies par Marie-Claude Porcher*, ed. Marie-Claude Porcher (Paris: Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1983), 124.

ethical and emotional discordances, so too does the *Pañcarātra* offer its audience the illusion of a resolution, one that masks a more fragmented interior.³ Like the story of the *Virāṭaparvan*, then, the *Pañcarātra* is fueled by the imagery of disguises, costumes, and performances from start to finish.

The figure of a character in disguise—an utterly ubiquitous, transhistorical, world-literary trope—presents an array of interpretive knots for readers and audiences to untangle. New selves blanket old ones, outer layers of selfhood contradict inner ones, fragmented selves find surface-level expression, and so on down the hall of mirrors. In this chapter I study the *Pañcarātra*'s portrayal of a famous character in disguise, the epic hero Arjuna posing as a dance teacher named Bṛhannalā. This, we recall, is the mantle that Arjuna elects to adopt while the Pāṇḍavas live in Virāṭa's court for the final year of their exile.⁴ What makes the play's expression of Arjuna as Bṛhannalā so distinctive is that it lends a real sense of interiority to the *Mahābhārata*'s depiction of the same disguised figure. While it is of course impossible to know which telling(s) of the *Mahābhārata* story the *Pañcarātra*'s author(s) had in mind when orchestrating the play—nor would a tracing of “influence” necessarily amount to the most valuable analysis of the work⁵—I would argue that the way in which the play untangles the knot of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā represents a studied reflection on the portrait of this figure that is given in the *Virāṭaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* itself. It is exegesis, then, not eisegesis.

³ In this respect, it is worth noting one more mirror. The entire *Mahābhārata* has a false ending of its own: Yudhiṣṭhira goes to hell, only to discover that it is an illusion. On the ending of the *Mahābhārata*, see Bruce M. Sullivan, “The Mahābhārata – Perspectives on its Ends and Endings,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 1–7. On the deceptively felicitous conclusions of the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*, see chapters 2, 4, and 5.

⁴ On the epic's narrative rationale(s) for Arjuna's particular disguise, see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 280–81.

⁵ On intertextuality and the idea of influence, see Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was*, 6–7.

Anyone who knows how Sanskrit names are formed is already aware that Bṛhannalā is a woman. The matter is quite crucial, since in the *Pañcarātra*, Arjuna expresses a sense of becoming Bṛhannalā on the inside—in his body, in his mind—in addition to pretending to be her on the outside. His limbs lose their familiar qualities, so his body changes; as he forgets his old self, his mind changes too. Even after Arjuna recovers the parts of himself that he loses over the course of being Bṛhannalā, the play continues to present Arjuna as a bifurcated character, a person split between two personae. The *Mahābhārata*'s *Virāṭaparvan*, by contrast, presents Bṛhannalā (or, as she is called there, Bṛhannaḍā) as an extrinsic costume that Arjuna layers over himself. This still-very-present self is Arjuna the Pāṇḍava, who consciously performs the role of Bṛhannaḍā. The *Virāṭaparvan* evokes this sense of costumery and its companion, performance, by drawing the audience's attention to Arjuna's changes of jewelry, clothes, and hairstyles as he transitions between his familiar self, Arjuna, into his pretend self, Bṛhannaḍā. These transformations unfold on the surface of Arjuna's body but remain external to it. It is all quite different in the *Pañcarātra*.

The *Pañcarātra* takes this idea of disguise as a performance—something that Arjuna directs toward others, an audience—and turns it into an expression of disguise as an experience, something that Arjuna feels unfolding within himself. The representation of “himself” becomes a particularly important point on which the *Pañcarātra* responds to the *Virāṭaparvan*. The *Virāṭaparvan* ascribes to Arjuna a selfhood that remains consistent throughout the narrative—even while performing Bṛhannaḍā—whereas the *Pañcarātra* transforms Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā into a splintered self. David Shulman writes of Nala, another famously doubled character in the *Mahābhārata*, that “Nala's primary experience...is that of watching reality—his reality, inner and outer—splinter and reproduce itself... Nala is driven into a series of utterly alien

dislocations, of disjointed *vaiṣamya* [‘unevenness’] states.”⁶ Shulman’s analysis points to the idea that doubled characters can embody certain negativities; they can reveal losses of self and fragmentations of self rather than abundances of self—or selves, as it were.⁷ I believe that this is true of the *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna.

Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā in the *Virāṭaparvan*

To appreciate the ways in which the *Pañcarātra* counters the *Virāṭaparvan*’s vision of Arjuna in disguise, let us turn to the passages in the *Virāṭaparvan* that most vividly articulate the idea that Arjuna performs Bṛhannaḍā while retaining an intact sense of self. I want to begin with the most literal expression of this idea, the place where the narrative describes Arjuna as “self-possessed” (*ātmavān*) during his time as Bṛhannaḍā:

So Dhanamjaya lived in disguise:
Self-possessed, doing sweet things with the ladies.
No one at the palace, inside or outside it,
discovered who he really was.⁸

Although there is an obvious subtext to this *ātmavān*, which is that Arjuna (here called Dhanamjaya, “Wealth-winner,” an epithet) remains sexually unavailable—self-controlled, if you will—to Virāṭa’s daughter and her friends, the rest of the verse demonstrates that Arjuna’s self-possession represents more than sexual unavailability. The verse posits a self that is accessible to

⁶ David Shulman, “On Being Human in the Sanskrit Epic: The Riddle of Nala,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (1994): 14–15.

⁷ As David Shulman writes elsewhere, there is a gleam of “intense self-alienation” in each of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s main personalities. See *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 259.

⁸ *Mahābhārata* 4.10.13: *tathā sa sattreṇa dhanamjayo ’vasat priyāṇi kurvan saha tābhir ātmavān | tathāgatam tatra na jajñire janā bahiṣcarā vāpy atha vāntarecarāḥ* || Note that *tābhir*, in this verse, refers to Uttarā and her ladies-in-waiting.

Arjuna alone (“no one discovered who he really was”). The sentiment lingers in the narrative. Later in the *Virāṭaparvan*, Arjuna reminds Draupadī that she “doesn't know” Bṛhannaḍā.⁹ I believe there is a significance to the verse's final image, too, the one that describes the “outsiders” and “insiders” of the palace—that is, those who work around the periphery of the palace and those who live inside it—going about their business while remaining unaware of who Arjuna “really is” (*tathāgata*). As I see it, this last part of the verse invites the reader (or listener, as the case may be) to picture Arjuna as if he were somewhat like the palace in which he resides. He has a kind of multi-layered dynamism that emerges from his transformations from Arjuna to Bṛhannaḍā and back again, but there is something immovable to him—like the structural foundation of the palace itself—that withstands all of the commotion and that might well go unnoticed.

Finally, the verse describes Bṛhannaḍā not as a character or an identity but as a costume. For Arjuna, to be Bṛhannaḍā is to “live in [literally ‘through’] disguise” (*sattreṇa avasat*). The text does not equate Arjuna with the disguise; rather, the disguise becomes a mode (in Sanskrit's instrumental case *sattreṇa*), a way of living that exists separately from Arjuna and that he can harness as he wants, for his own benefit, just as he does everything else—his bow, Gāṇḍīva, and his arrows and various celestial weapons. Mythologically speaking, he inherits this capability from his father, the god Indra, who frequently appears in disguise in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁰

Here, in Arjuna's voice, the epic describes his transfiguration into Bṛhannaḍā as a matter of finding the right costume:

My lord, this is my vow: I'll dress in drag

⁹ *Mahābhārata* 4.23.23.

¹⁰ Three examples of Indra's disguises in the *Mahābhārata*: a *brāhmaṇa* in the story of the robbing of Karṇa's earrings (2.284–94); a *brāhmaṇa* in the story of Arjuna's encounter with Śiva as a *kirāta* (3.38); a hawk in the story of Śibi (3.131).

Since my great bowstring scars are hard to disguise.
Fastening rings bright as fire to my ears,
And doing up my hair into a braid,
I will take the name Bṛhannaḍā.¹¹

In this passage, Arjuna narrates a series of changes that take place on the surface of the body. He speaks of how he'll wear ornaments—which we later discover to be bangles, an image that the *Pañcarātra* will go on to spotlight—that cover the bowstring scars on both of his forearms. (Another aspect of Arjuna's doubled identity: his ambidexterity.) He describes himself putting on dazzling earrings. (Might it be more than a coincidence that Arjuna introduces his costume in terms of doubles—the two bowstring scars, the two earrings?) And once we see him put his hair into a braid, the transformation is complete: we arrive at Bṛhannaḍā, the last word in the passage. It is important to note that while the text describes this transformation as an external one, we ought not to consider it superficial, at least not in the sense of being meaningless. Costumes, jewelry, and hair always matter. (This is especially true in the world of Sanskrit literature, where poetic figures are described in theoretical texts as *alaṃkāras*—ornaments, decorations.) As James McHugh observes, “The way we normally use the word ‘superficial’ reflects our ‘depth ontology,’ according to which our being is inside us and opposed to our exteriors. This metaphorical way of understanding the inner self might not be the same everywhere... Clothes are not mere symbols but can constitute the self.”¹²

¹¹ *Mahābhārata* 4.2.21–22: *pratiññāṃ ṣaṅḍhako 'smīti kariṣyāmi mahīpate | jyāghātau hi mahāntau me saṃvartuṃ nṛpa duṣkarau || karṇayoḥ pratimucyāhaṃ kuṇḍale jvalanopame | veṅīkṛtaśirā rājan nāmnā caiva bṛhannaḍā ||*

¹² James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4. Here, McHugh draws upon the arguments of the anthropologist and scholar of material culture Daniel Miller.

Nowhere does this idea shine through more clearly than at the end of the *Virāṭaparvan*, when Arjuna—still dressed as Bṛhannaḍā, at first—must fight to protect Virāṭa’s cattle from a Kaurava raid. Here we learn that even for the self-possessed Arjuna, “Arjuna” is a costume. As Arjuna prepares for battle, the narrative returns to images of ornaments and hair. And once again we see Arjuna undergo an external transformation. But here, Arjuna sheds one costume (Bṛhannaḍā’s ornaments, Bṛhannaḍā’s hair) and puts on another one (Arjuna’s ornaments, Arjuna’s hair):

Then the hero loosened the bangles from his arms
 And fastened shining, splendid guards to his forearms—
 Like kettledrums they boomed.
 He tied up his dark curls with a white cloth,
 Quickly strung Gāṇḍīva, and drew the bow.¹³

The passage reiterates the idea that Bṛhannaḍā is a costume—this time a costume that can be taken *off*, bangles loosened and braid taken out. But crucially, the passage also sets up Arjuna’s customary garb (forearm guards, hairstyle, Gāṇḍīva) as a second costume. In that second costume “Arjuna” takes the place of “Bṛhannaḍā.” On one level, this turn of the narrative deconstructs (with a wink, perhaps) the trope of the epic hero donning his armor: warriors don’t typically have to move their bangles out of the way.¹⁴ More specifically, however, it uses the figure of Bṛhannaḍā to defamiliarize the iconography of Arjuna. It does this by describing Arjuna’s transformation *into Arjuna* in such a way that it closely parallels his transformation into

¹³ *Mahābhārata* 4.40.23–24: *tato nirmucya bāhubhyāṃ valayāni sa vīryavān | citre dundubhisamṇāde pratyamuñcat tale śubhe || kṛṣṇān bhaṅgīmataḥ keśāñ śvetenodgrathya vāsasā | adhijyaṃ tarasā kṛtvā gāṇḍīvaṃ vyākṣipad dhanuḥ ||*

¹⁴ For example, Achilles arming himself for battle in *Iliad* 19.368–79. See Homer, *Iliad*, vol. 2, *Books 13–24*, trans. A.T. Murray, rev. William F. Wyatt, Loeb Classical Library 171 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 360–61. In the *Mahābhārata*, see, for example, 5.71.35–39.

Bṛhannaḍā, which we witnessed in the previous passage. Both of these costume-change passages begin with the image of his arms; both passages show him fastening (with the same word, *prati√muc*) two bright ornaments to his body, first earrings and now forearm guards; in both passages, he manipulates his hair. By the time we reach Gāṇḍīva, we realize that this weapon, too, is an ornament, a crucial part of Arjuna’s “Arjuna” costume.¹⁵ Arjuna’s body stays the same throughout; it’s only the costume that changes.

The adverb “quickly” (*tarasā*) suggests that Arjuna maintains control of these costumes—that he switches between them with ease, never getting stuck in any one of them for too long. (The *Pañcarātra*’s figuration of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannaḍā will hinge on distorting this feature.) We see this dexterity most plainly when Arjuna pretends not to have it. Compelled to go into battle to defend Virāṭa’s cattle, Arjuna acts as if he has never worn armor before:

The Pāṇḍava made a great game of it in front of princess Uttarā.
 (Listen, tamer of enemies: in fact, he knew how to do it all!)
 He set up his armor upside-down¹⁶ and fastened it to his body—
 All the princesses, wide-eyed, saw him there and laughed.¹⁷

Here the *Virāṭaparvan* frames the figures of Bṛhannaḍā and Arjuna not as costumes but as full performances. To begin with, there is an audience: Virāṭa’s daughter Uttarā and her friends, in front of whom Arjuna puts Bṛhannaḍā on display and through whose wide eyes we take in the

¹⁵ The construction of this costume begins in an earlier passage, when Uttara holds up Arjuna’s hidden weapons and asks of each one “Whose is this?” See *Mahābhārata* 4.38.20–36.

¹⁶ J.A.B. van Buitenen interprets the line as Bṛhannaḍā donning the armor upside-down (*ūrdhvam*), but it could also be that Bṛhannaḍā tries on the upper part (*ūrdhvam*) of the armor and jokingly parades around in it. See *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, 4. *The Book of Virāṭa*, 5. *The Book of the Effort*, trans. J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 81.

¹⁷ *Mahābhārata* 4.35.17–18: *sa tatra narmasaṃyuktam akarot pāṇḍavo bahu | uttarāyāḥ pramukhataḥ sarvaṃ jānan arimḍama || ūrdhvam utkṣīpya kavacaṃ śarīre pratyamuñcata | kumāryas tatra taṃ dṛṣṭvā prāhasan pṛthulocanāḥ ||*

spectacle. Then the passage sketches Arjuna playing a role, Bṛhannaḍā, for that audience: he plays at not knowing how to wear armor, when really he knows how to do everything. But “Arjuna,” too, becomes a production. He fastens the armor on top of his Bṛhannaḍā costume and in doing so creates a new character, the warrior. (Again the term *prati√muc* signals the costume change.) The image of him layering the armor over the clothes that he wears as Bṛhannaḍā sets up the later point in the narrative at which Arjuna will put on his “Arjuna” costume in earnest. This moment was described in the passage that I cited earlier: “Then the hero loosened the bangles from his arms...”

As it happens, when the princesses laugh at Arjuna’s double performance here—Arjuna pretending to be Bṛhannaḍā pretending to be a warrior—the scene prefigures one of the most memorable vignettes in the *Virāṭaparvan*. Later, during the narration of the cattle raid, the *Virāṭaparvan* describes Arjuna (still dressed as Bṛhannaḍā) running after the terrified prince Uttara, whose chariot Bṛhannaḍā is supposed to be driving. In a marvelous inversion of the *Bhagavadgītā*, here it is Arjuna who plays Kṛṣṇa, the humble charioteer who must persuade his charge to fight. (The *Virāṭaparvan* unfurls the *Bhagavadgītā* reflection on a broader scale. Following the chasing and urging, there is a theophany of sorts—Bṛhannaḍā reveals herself to be Arjuna the Pāṇḍava—for which Uttara, mimicking Arjuna’s role in the *Gītā*, serves as the amazed and initially disbelieving witness.) As Arjuna-Bṛhannaḍā races after Uttara, admonishing him to take up arms, we see him through the eyes of the soldiers watching him: “Arjuna scampered after the running prince, expertly tossing about his long braid and his red dress. Not knowing that it was Arjuna running and tossing his braid about, some of the soldiers laughed.”¹⁸

¹⁸ *Mahābhārata* 4.36.27–28: ... *tam anvadhāvad dhāvantaṃ rājaputraṃ dhanamjayah | dīrghaṃ veṇīṃ vidhunvānaḥ sādhu rakte ca vāsasī || vidhūya veṇīṃ dhāvantaṃ ajānanto ’rjunaṃ tadā | sainikāḥ prāhasan kecit...* || Note that some of the soldiers recognize Arjuna beneath (or above) the costume.

And so, as the *Virāṭaparvan* continues, Bṛhannaḍā’s audience only grows larger; her stage broadens from the inner rooms of the palace to the pastures that become her battlefield.

Amid these more subtle cues, we ought not to forget that the *Virāṭaparvan* explicitly integrates the motif of performance into its representation of Bṛhannaḍā—after all, she is a dancing teacher. Here Arjuna describes Bṛhannaḍā’s livelihood to his brother, Yudhiṣṭhira (the “Kaunteya” of the last line):

Over and over, as a woman—telling little stories, you see—
I’ll delight the king and everyone else in the women’s quarters, too.
Songs and dances of all kinds, and so many musical instruments,
Your majesty, will I teach the women in Virāṭa’s palace—
While I talk at length of his people’s triumphs, won by their own deeds.
Listen, Kaunteya: Through illusion, I will disguise myself with myself.¹⁹

It is a vivid passage, and two of its features will prove particularly relevant to our study of the *Pañcarātra*. If we look at the phrase in the first line “over and over, as a woman” (*strībhāvena punaḥ punaḥ*), we find the image of Arjuna behaving repeatedly and consistently as a woman does. The phrase expresses an idea that eventually appears among the founding principles of performance studies, namely, that performance involves behavior that has been rehearsed.²⁰

Note, however, that the *Virāṭaparvan*’s Arjuna repeatedly behaves as a woman while still being able to switch back into his “Arjuna” costume at the end of it all. The *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna, quite by contrast, will find it difficult to unlearn this behavior.

¹⁹ *Mahābhārata* 4.2.23–25: *paṭhann ākhyāyikāṃ nāma strībhāvena punaḥ punaḥ | ramayiṣye mahīpālam anyāṃś cāntaḥpure janān || gītaṃ nṛtaṃ vicitraṃ ca vāditraṃ vividhaṃ tathā | śikṣayiṣyāmi ahaṃ rājan virāṭabhavane striyaḥ || prajānāṃ samudācāraṃ bahu karmakṛtaṃ vadan | chādayiṣyāmi kaunteya māyayātmānam ātmanā ||* Note that in the line following this one, Arjuna compares himself to Nala. In making this comparison, Arjuna frames himself as the double of a double.

²⁰ See, for example, Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

As a culmination to all this, if we look at the very end of the passage, we find a direct articulation of the idea that Bṛhannaḍā represents a full, second self with which Arjuna disguises his “Arjuna” self. Arjuna announces that “Through illusion, I will disguise myself with myself” (*chādayiṣyāmi kaunteya māyayātmānam ātmanā*). The two reflexives in a row (*ātmānam ātmanā*) cannot possibly be a coincidence. The two *ātman*s represent a doubled self, one *ātman* (“self”) piled on top of another—Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā. Through *ātmānam ātmanā*, the *Virāṭaparvan* frames Arjuna’s experience in disguise not in negative terms (i.e., as a self-splintering or self-fragmentation) but in positive ones. He gains an additional self during his period as Bṛhannaḍā; the second self attaches in some sense to the first. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, this is the special magic of playing pretend.

Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā in the *Pañcarātra*

The *Pañcarātra* adopts these two expressions from the passage—both the concept of “over and over, as a woman” and the language of *ātman*—when it approaches the matter of Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā. This, we recall, is the *Pañcarātra*’s name for her, slightly different from the *Virāṭaparvan*’s Bṛhannaḍā (although they mean the same thing: “Big-Reed,” a phallic joke and thus a nod to the idea that Arjuna becomes a drag-queen-like figure, a persona that explicitly invokes layers of gender expression and performance).²¹ But the distance between the two extends far beyond the matter of names. If the *Virāṭaparvan* presents a self-controlled Arjuna who wears Bṛhannaḍā as a costume, performing her at will, then the *Pañcarātra* responds to this depiction by evoking a deeper ambivalence about the stability of Arjuna’s selfhood during his time in disguise. In the *Pañcarātra* Arjuna describes the experience of being doubled not as a

²¹ See Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 281.

state of convergence, which is to say, being two things at the same time, but rather as a state of divergence—being split, being neither one thing nor another. The *Pañcarātra*'s Arjuna gives full expression to the internal dimensions of this divergence. The transitions between Arjuna and Bṛhannalā unfold on the interior, both in Arjuna's body and in his mind, rather than on the exterior—that is, through costumery and ornamentation—as they do in the *Virāṭaparvan*.

We can hear these dynamics most clearly in a four-verse soliloquy that Arjuna voices when he first arrives on the *Pañcarātra*'s stage—verses 2.29–32. Other verses in the play speak to Arjuna's experience in disguise, and I will make use of some of them later in my analysis, but these four verses offer what I believe is the play's most intimate portrait of this doubled and, in this case, truly split character. The soliloquy evokes in stunning detail Arjuna's experience of being both Arjuna and Bṛhannalā at the same time. This imagining of what it actually *feels* like for a character to live as a doubled figure is unique in the play. Neither Yudhiṣṭhira nor Bhīma, the other disguised Pāṇḍava brothers who play significant roles in the drama, reflects on the feeling of living in costume.²² Such introspection belongs only to Arjuna. His soliloquy also lends a depth to the affective expression of the Arjuna character, whose emotional landscape the *Virāṭaparvan* tends to cloud over. In the epic we know how Arjuna, as Bṛhannadā, makes *others* feel—delighted, amused, bewildered, brave—but the epic imparts little of how Arjuna himself feels. The *Pañcarātra*, by contrast, dives right in.

The first three verses of the soliloquy relate Arjuna's experience in disguise as a series of self-separations. In the first verse, Arjuna talks about the feeling of no longer being Arjuna. He recalls the moment in the cattle raid at which he first strings Gāṇḍīva and speaks of the difficulty

²² Perhaps because the play presents Yudhiṣṭhira as continuous with his costumed self (an idea that I discuss in the final paragraphs of this section) and presents Bhīma as essentially uncostumed. The play positions Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā in a middle ground.

of inhabiting Arjuna’s body after living as Bṛhannalā for nearly a year. He describes this experience through images of loss and contrast. Different parts of Arjuna’s body disarticulate themselves from their familiar qualities; Arjuna’s weapons turn against him; he forgets Arjuna and then remembers him. Then, in the following verse, Arjuna talks about not really being Bṛhannalā, either. Having “remembered himself” at the end of the first verse, Arjuna goes on to describe the experience of pretending to be Bṛhannalā—while presumably still feeling more like Arjuna on the inside. Here he captures some of the performative aspect of his disguise that we see in the *Virāṭaparvan*. The third verse envisions another self-separation, namely, the gap between Arjuna’s appearance of success in battle and his feeling that he has missed a more important target. And the fourth verse introduces a new perspective: Arjuna contrasts his experience in disguise with what he understands to be Yudhiṣṭhira’s experience in disguise. Whereas Arjuna undergoes these various self-alienations, Yudhiṣṭhira—in Arjuna’s imagination—embodies a continuity between his “real” self and his disguise. In this way, as if in a final twist, Arjuna evokes yet another separation, this one not a self-separation but a separation between brothers.

So, to begin with, what does it feel like for Arjuna not to be Arjuna? Arjuna recounts this experience largely but not exclusively in terms of his body, which, in his account, has separated from its conventional characteristics. His fist is neither compact nor efficient; his forearm has no skill; his stance has none of its natural grace. Here, then, is the first of our four verses (2.29):

When I stretched Gāṇḍīva’s string,
There was a moment when it fought me.
My fist was not clenched enough,
Not deft enough, to spin the arrows.
Skill escaped my forearm;
Balance was stolen from my stance.

Because I had become a woman,
Practicing it for so long, I grew soft—
But later, I remembered myself.²³

Notably, the verse does not describe Arjuna's body in positive terms but articulates these instances of separation in negative particles (*na*), negative prefixes (*a-*), and in other kinds of negative vocabulary (for instance, *hṛta*, “stolen”). All this illustrates Arjuna’s sense of loss. Thus the *Pañcarātra* takes a transformation that the *Virāṭaparvan* presents as eminently external—nothing changes about Arjuna except for his jewelry, clothes, and hair—and shows how it unfolds internally, in the musculature and carriage of Arjuna’s physical body. The language of motion (“balance was stolen,” “I grew soft”) adds further dynamism to the internal metamorphosis that the verse evokes.

This verse also serves to illuminate a second kind of division, one between Arjuna and his most familiar weapons, the bow *Gāṇḍīva* and the arrows of his inexhaustible quiver. Not only do Arjuna's body parts lose their distinctive features but his weapons refuse to cooperate: *Gāṇḍīva*’s string fights back against his pull; the arrows won’t release. The passage inverts the epic’s description of Arjuna seamlessly (“quickly,” *tarasā*) stringing *Gāṇḍīva* and asks: “What if it weren’t so easy?” Or perhaps it asks: “What if, for Arjuna, it’s never quite as easy as it seems?” The image of Arjuna’s weapons failing him is a striking one, especially considering how the *Mahābhārata* devotes chapter after chapter to Arjuna’s acquisition and manipulation of weapons. It reminds us of a handful of stories in the Sanskrit epic where we are prompted to

²³ *Pañcarātra* 2.29: *gāṇḍīvena muhūrtam ātataguṇenāsīt pratispardhitam bāṇānām parivartaneṣv aviśadā muṣṭir na me saṃhatā | godhāsthānagatā na cāsti paṭutā sthāne hṛtam sauṣṭhavam strībhāvāc chithilīkṛtaḥ paricayād ātmā tu paścāt smṛtaḥ ||* N. P. Unni, drawing upon Mani Madhava Chakyar’s *Nāṭyakalpadrumam*, writes that in the *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* performance of *Pañcarātra* Act 2 as *Gograhaṇāṅkam* (*The Cattle Raid*), Arjuna/Bṛhannalā’s entrance would have been marked by an *ālāmasloka*, or verse that is recited to introduce a new character. I discuss that verse in chapter 2. See Unni, *New Problems*, 267.

think twice about Arjuna’s skills. For instance, there is the time when Arjuna discovers that the tribal prince Ekalavya can shoot arrows faster than he can. There’s also the famous moment when he loses his nerve at the beginning of the war (this occasions the *Bhagavadgītā*); or when he shoots at opponents who are unable to fight back (Karna, Bhīṣma, Bhūriśravas); or even when he exhausts his inexhaustible quiver—first in combat with Śiva, and again when he is overcome by sadness at Kṛṣṇa’s death. On that occasion, too, he fails to string Gāṇḍīva.²⁴ All of these stories come naturally to mind when the *Pañcarātra* presents its audience with an Arjuna who doesn’t quite live up to his own mythology.

Even more powerfully, perhaps, the image of Arjuna being unable to use his body and his weapons inverts a *Virāṭaparvan* sketch to which we are far more accustomed—Arjuna, as Bṛhannaḍā, pretending not to know how to use the armor of a warrior:

He set up his armor upside-down and fastened it to his body—
All the princesses, wide-eyed, saw him there and laughed.

The *Pañcarātra* captures this image and takes the joke out of it. Instead of Arjuna pretending not to be able to use his battle apparatus while really “knowing everything,” the *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna struggles with this same task. What the *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna knows is the state of “being a woman” (*strībhāva*), to which he has grown accustomed after long practice (*paricaya*). With Arjuna’s concession that “Because I had become a woman, practicing it for so long,” verse 2.29 recalls the way in which Arjuna in the *Virāṭaparvan* describes the things that he will do “over and over, as a woman” (*strībhāvena punaḥ punaḥ*). But in harnessing the *Virāṭaparvan*’s image of performance as rehearsed behavior, the *Pañcarātra* presents Arjuna’s womanly body as a

²⁴ *Mahābhārata* 3.40.35–39 and 16.8.63.

reality that offers more immediacy than the firmness of his fist or even Gāṇḍīva’s string: “I grew soft” is the first positive statement about Arjuna’s selfhood that we hear in this verse.²⁵ The *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna actually becomes the thing that he is pretending to be.

We might call him one of the “actors who become the characters they impersonate” that Wendy Doniger recalls in *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was*:

Some films depict actors who become the characters they impersonate... In *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (Robert Aldrich, 1968), an actress becomes possessed by the spirit of the actress whom she is portraying and repeats in her own life the fatal errors of the film character. Someone in the film comments, “Actors don’t know who they are until someone writes some lines to tell them who they are,” and his companion replies, “But we are all impersonating an identity.” Some of us more than others, perhaps.²⁶

The *Pañcarātra* anticipates such films. Instead of Arjuna being possessed of himself (*ātmavān*) during this period of living in disguise—this, we have seen, is how the *Virāṭaparvan* depicts him—the *Pañcarātra* gives us something like the actress above. Possessed by the spirit of Bṛhannalā, he becomes the actress (or dancer, if you will) whom he is portraying. After all, the transformation turns out to be as much mental as it is physical. The verse’s final phrase, “But later, I remembered myself,” suggests that so long as these features—the qualities of being compact, dextrous, skillful, or steady on his feet—depart from Arjuna’s body, and so long as his familiar ornaments—Gāṇḍīva and the arrows—fail to attach to him as they are supposed to, then something happens in Arjuna’s mind, too: he loses or forgets himself. Thus we come to feel that Arjuna’s entire sense of self is wrapped up in the particular qualities of his body and the relationship with his weapons. Without those qualities and those weapons, he forgets himself.

²⁵ The *cvi* formation *śithilīkṛta* communicates its own sense of loss: “I grew soft (when I wasn’t before).”

²⁶ Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was*, 21.

Looking back, we can see that the verse displays Arjuna’s internal transition to Bṛhannalā in three stages. It begins with repeated, rehearsed behavior; it seeps into the musculature and carriage of his body; and it spills over into Gāṇḍīva and his arrows. At the end of this transition, Arjuna’s self lands in the quiet corner of the mind where memories go to wait until they can be recovered. “I remembered myself,” *ātmā smṛtaḥ*, he says.²⁷

This conclusion (“I remembered myself”) takes the *Pañcarātra*’s presentation of Arjuna in a more familiar direction. The following verse finds Arjuna no longer in the state of not being Arjuna, but rather in the state of not being Bṛhannalā. Instead, he *pretends* to be her (verse 2.30):

Assuming this appearance among the kings of men,
I drew the bow as if I were bashful about it.
But the next thing we knew, there was war, in a storm of arrows—
Quickly the dust settled and bloodied.²⁸

Here we can see more immediate reflections of the Arjuna-as-Bṛhannaḍā that we know from the *Mahābhārata*. He makes use of a costume or a dress (*anena veṣeṇa*, reflecting the *Virāṭaparvan*’s *sattreṇa*); he pretends to be bashful when he isn’t. Gāṇḍīva, the subject of so much distress in the first verse, becomes almost an afterthought here. This second verse grants us a new perspective in another way, too. We see not only a different Arjuna but a different world (“there was war, in a storm of arrows”) because Arjuna no longer looks inward, searching for a lost self, but outward, past his costume—just a costume once more—and over the bloodied

²⁷ One could construe *paricayāt* with *ātmā tu paścāt smṛtaḥ*—i.e., that Arjuna remembers himself because of his previous “long practice” as *Arjuna*—but my reading takes into account the *Mahābhārata*’s “over and over again, as a woman” and also accounts for the caesura.

²⁸ *Pañcarātra* 2.30: *mayā hi | anena veṣeṇa narendramadhye lajjāyamānena dhanur vikṛṣṭam | yātrā tu tāvac charadurdineṣu śīghraṃ nimagnaḥ kaluṣaś ca reṇuḥ ||*

landscape. Putting Bṛhannalā back on the exterior allows Arjuna, and therefore the audience, to awaken to a whole world outside.

In this way the second verse really sets up the third in the series, which takes the outside world to which the second verse leads—the field of battle, or in this case, a pasture of battle—and suggests to the audience that Arjuna puts on a certain kind of performance there, too (2.31):

Winning cattle,
Winning victory for the king—
In all this winning
My heart doesn't feel a single thrill.
No taking Duḥśāsana today,
No capturing him at the battle's head.
Still, I entered Virāṭa's city.²⁹

Here Arjuna expresses an inconsistency between the victory that he wins on the outside (that is, his defense of Virāṭa's cattle) and the loss that he feels on the inside (in his heart, *manasi*), the missed opportunity to capture his enemy Duḥśāsana during the conflict. If the previous verse conveys the idea that Arjuna pretends to be Bṛhannalā while “really” having been restored to Arjuna on the inside, then this verse implies that there is a discontinuity even within Arjuna's “Arjuna” self. The external victory (*vijaya*) masks an internal numbness (*naivāsti me... manasi praharṣaḥ*, “my heart feels not a single thrill”).

As I see it, this verse lends a certain complexity to the phrases in the *Virāṭaparvan* that position “Arjuna as a warrior” as a costume that replaces “Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā.” The present verse carries forward the idea that “Arjuna as a warrior”—at least a warrior who wins—represents an external layer of Arjuna's experience. But here the *Pañcarātra* does something that

²⁹ *Pañcarātra* 2.31: *jītvāpi gāṃ vijayam apy upalabhya rājño naivāsti me jayagato manasi praharṣaḥ | duḥśāsanaṃ samaramūrdhani sannigrhya baddhvā yad adya na virāṭapuram praviṣṭaḥ ||*

the *Mahābhārata* does not. It tells us what might lie beneath this layer: a warrior who lacks something, who fails to do something. In this sense the verse echoes the first we heard in the soliloquy (“When I first stretched Gāṇḍīva’s string, there was a moment when it fought me”), which also presents us with an Arjuna who expresses a feeling of having failed to fulfill his storied heroism.

I believe that the verse’s play on the verbal root \sqrt{ji} (“to win”)—which emerges twice in the first line (*jītvā, vijayam*) and once in the second (*jayagata*)—is intended to convey this idea, too. *Vijaya* is a common word for victory, yes, but it is also one of Arjuna’s ten names.³⁰ When Arjuna says that he “won victory” (*vijayam upalabhya*) for the king, he also, in this subordinated sense, expresses the sentiment that he has found himself: *vijayam upalabhya*, “I found Vijaya.” The verse’s triple use of \sqrt{ji} draws our attention to the word *vijaya*—it might have slipped under the radar otherwise—and then fragments it, just as the *Pañcarātra* does to other aspects of Arjuna’s character. In the second line, we find that Arjuna feels no thrill that is “*jayagata*”—“in (or connected to) the victory.” This is surely true, but the phrase could also mean that he finds no joy “in being [*Vi*]jaya,” that is, in some sense, himself.

And who is this Vijaya? In the *Virāṭaparvan* of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, Arjuna takes on the name Vijaya as the secret name that his brothers and wife use to address him while they live incognito in Virāṭa’s court.³¹ In the *Virāṭaparvan* “Vijaya” becomes the piece of the “old” Arjuna that he carries with him into Virāṭa’s court. To me it seems to symbolize the way Arjuna holds on to his “real” self while living in disguise. Recall that in the *Virāṭaparvan* he remains

³⁰ These names play an important role in the *Virāṭaparvan*. Before Arjuna can emerge in battle as Arjuna, he must recite to the doubtful Uttara the stories of how he earns each of his ten names. The narration of his names—a performance in its own right—makes it possible for Arjuna to take up his weapons and perform “Arjuna” once again. See *Mahābhārata* 4.39.

³¹ *Mahābhārata* 4.5.30. In fact, all of the Pāṇḍava brothers’ secret names involve \sqrt{ji} . Arjuna’s, however, is the only secret name that is used both in Virāṭa’s court and in the Pāṇḍavas’ “real” lives.

ātmavān—self-possessed, self-controlled, self-aware. This verse in the *Pañcarātra* calls exactly that into question. Here Arjuna is no longer able to retain the old self named “Vijaya” on an interior level of experience. He may perform “Vijaya” in his defense of Virāṭa’s land, but he also makes it clear, afterward, that the thrill of the victory—the thrill of “being [*Vi*]jaya” (*jaya-gata*)—escapes his heart (*manasi*).

By illuminating a part of Arjuna that is somehow missing, the third verse in the series returns to the theme of the first. Both verses communicate the challenge of moving between selves: certain parts get lost or forgotten along the way. Where the first verse expresses a divergence between a past and a present self—the old Arjuna and the current Bṛhannalā—the third verse expresses a divergence between a present self and a future self. In the first *pāda* we see the current Arjuna, who enacts a limited “Vijaya,” or victory; but in the other three *pādas*, we see the future Arjuna, an imagined Arjuna, who will fulfill the promise of that name when he captures Duḥśāsana.

The final verse in the soliloquy creates a different kind of split from the previous three. Here, instead of expressing contrasts between Arjuna’s various expressions of self, the *Pañcarātra* juxtaposes the fragmentation of Arjuna’s experience in disguise against what Arjuna perceives to be a remarkable sense of unity or consistency in Yudhiṣṭhira’s experience of disguise. Arjuna looks at Yudhiṣṭhira and notices that his present disguise—a *brāhmaṇa*³²—reflects an element of Yudhiṣṭhira’s character that has been present since his youth. Arjuna tells us in verse 2.32:

When he was a boy, he desired

³² Yudhiṣṭhira does not take on the name Kaṅka in the *Pañcarātra* (as he does in the *Virāṭaparvan* and some other retellings). In the play, Yudhiṣṭhira is only ever called Bhagavān (“the blessed one”), a name that suggests he represents a more generalized *brāhmaṇa* figure.

Only the lovely *tapas* groves.³³
Now a lord of men, he finds solace
In a *brāhmaṇa*'s ways.
He let his kingdom go—
Still he grows in royal glory.
He holds a triple staff,
And wields no scepter.³⁴

Shulman calls Yudhiṣṭhira the “reluctant ruler” of the *Mahābhārata*, for the epic depicts him as uneager to engage in conflict. It is not an admirable trait. Time and again he must be persuaded to rule.³⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira's choice of disguise in the *Virāṭaparvan* forms a part of this pattern. It reflects his disinclinations toward *kṣatriya* responsibilities (martial power, social power) and his identification, instead, with a kind of idealized renunciant *brāhmaṇa* lifestyle in which power is redirected toward the self through enacting control over one's own body and mind. The “triple staff” takes note of this shift of weight; it marks the renunciant *brāhmaṇa*—a wanderer, an ascetic—rather than the householding *brāhmaṇa*, who carries a single staff. In the *Virāṭaparvan* the façade of ascetic *brāhmaṇa*-hood falls away quickly for Yudhiṣṭhira. Rather than letting him move into this idealized role and therefore somehow enjoy his period in exile, the *Virāṭaparvan* awards Yudhiṣṭhira the disguise of being a different kind of *brāhmaṇa*: the king's dicing master. He becomes a comic figure, the king's *brāhmaṇa* sidekick—a standard figure in the literature of kingship in early South Asia.³⁶ Once again the *Pañcarātra* takes a second, more reflective look at the scene. Arjuna gives voice to what he sees as Yudhiṣṭhira's long-awaited ability fully to

³³ “*Tapas* groves” being forested areas in which renunciants engage in ascetic practice (*tapas*).

³⁴ *Pañcarātra* 2.32: *sayauvanah śreṣṭhatapovane rato nareśvaro brāhmaṇavṛttam āśritaḥ | vimuktarājyo 'py abhivardhitaḥ śriyā tridaṇḍadhārī na ca daṇḍadhāraḥ ||*

³⁵ Shulman, *King and the Clown*, 28–30.

³⁶ On which, see Shulman, *King and the Clown*, 152–54.

express this idealized *brāhmaṇa* side of himself. He restores Yudhiṣṭhira to his inner nobility—an expression, perhaps, of the depth of Arjuna’s own feeling.

But there is a bittersweet taste to all this. Arjuna’s observations deliberately contrast Yudhiṣṭhira’s experience in disguise with his own. In Arjuna’s eyes Yudhiṣṭhira loses his kingdom but still manages to grow in the essence of kingship—*śrī*, the divine kind of royal glory that attends a king as if it (indeed, She) were a consort to him. In other words, Yudhiṣṭhira looks even more royal and even more glorious without a kingdom there to distract whoever might be looking at him. Arjuna, however, gains nothing; he only loses. He loses his strength, his skill, his balance, himself. Arjuna presents the icon of Yudhiṣṭhira’s disguise, the renunciant’s triple staff (*tridaṇḍa*), as a kind of natural outgrowth of the centerpiece of Yudhiṣṭhira’s royal apparatus, the scepter (*daṇḍa*). For Yudhiṣṭhira, *daṇḍa* becomes *tridaṇḍa*. For Arjuna, by contrast, the apparatus always stands apart, whether it is the bowstring that resists his pull or the women’s ornaments that slightly discomfit him: “I’m a little embarrassed for the kings to see me like this, decked out in the ornaments that Uttarā gave me so affectionately,” he says to himself just before he notices Yudhiṣṭhira.³⁷ Likewise, in the previous verse, Arjuna says that he feels no joy (*naivāsti me... praharṣaḥ*), which marks a striking difference from his description of Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira is doing what he has always loved and desired (*rata*). While both Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna become, in some way, the people they are pretending to be, Yudhiṣṭhira’s transition—as Arjuna sees it—lacks the fragmentation and self-forgetfulness of his own. What is it to be a brother but to be distant from one’s brother? Here we find a mark of the complex and heightened interiority that the *Pañcarātra* discovers in Arjuna.

³⁷ *Pañcarātra* 2.31.1: *uttarāprītidattālaṅkārenālaṅkṛto vrīḍita ivāsmi rājānaṃ draṣṭum* |

Arjuna as Śiva, Arjuna as śleṣa

Taken together, the final three verses of the monologue demonstrate that even once Arjuna “remembers himself” at the end of the first verse, he continues to experience a series of disjunctions—between his remembered self and his disguised self Bṛhannalā (in the second verse), between an external victory and an internal lack thereof (in the third), and between himself-as-Bṛhannalā and Yudhiṣṭhira-as-a-*brāhmaṇa* (in the fourth). But if the *Pañcarātra* allows the audience to survey the full panorama of self-fragmentation that the play creates for Arjuna in disguise as Bṛhannalā, then it also grants the audience certain ways of making sense of this splintering—ways of rendering it more expected and more familiar than it seems when we compare it with the self-possession that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* sketches for its own Arjuna-in-disguise.

One of these methods calls upon the audience to see Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā through the lens of the mythology and iconography of Śiva.³⁸ This becomes a motif as the play continues its second act, the one where our soliloquy appears. One might draw many parallels between Arjuna and Śiva, but the most important for our present purposes, and for the *Pañcarātra* as a whole, is that the image of being split is baked into the mythology of both Arjuna and Śiva. In both cases, the split is dramatic: one side of the character directly contradicts the other.

The *Pañcarātra* takes clear notice of this. It invokes two distinct correspondences between its split Arjuna and a split Śiva. The play invites the audience to compare Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā with the image of Śiva merged with his consort, the goddess Pārvatī. We see this likeness from the perspective of Arjuna’s son Abhimanyu, whom the play introduces as a central

³⁸ Alf Hiltebeitel offers an extremely detailed account of the corresponding mythologies of Arjuna and Śiva in “Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī,” *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 147–74.

character.³⁹ Abhimanyu sees Arjuna for the first time in twelve years and remarks, without quite recognizing him, that (2.44):

With your women's ornaments that don't quite fit,
You're like an elephant bull, painted like an elephant cow!
Light in clothes, hefty in muscle,
You're resplendent. Like Śiva—dressed as Pārvatī!⁴⁰

His remark suggests that in his disguise as a woman, Arjuna reflects Śiva Ardhanārīśvara (“the lord who is half woman”), the iconic formulation of the intermingling of Śiva and the goddess.⁴¹

An oft-retold story (commonly called the *Kairātaparvan*, “The Tale of the Hunter”) in the third book of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* connects a paradoxical Arjuna to a paradoxical Śiva more explicitly. In the story, Arjuna, a virile figure in two senses—he is both a warrior and a ladies' man—lives as an ascetic in order to win the favor of the original “erotic ascetic,” Śiva.⁴² Their encounter results in a battle of increasingly pedestrian weapons until the two figures, both of whom now represent not only erotic ascetics but also warrior-ascetics,⁴³ wrestle one another. When Arjuna reveals himself to Virāṭa in the *Pañcarātra*, he identifies himself as the Arjuna of the *Kairātaparvan*, whose body was “licked by Śiva's arrows” (verse 2.65):

If I am Arjuna the Bhārata,
My body licked by Śiva's arrows,
Then isn't it just as clear
That Bhīmasena is this man here?

³⁹ This feature presents a fascinating contrast with Abhimanyu's peripheral role in the *Virāṭaparvan*. On Abhimanyu's expanded role in the *Pañcarātra*, see chapter 5.

⁴⁰ *Pañcarātra* 2.44: *ayujyamānaiḥ pramadāvibhūṣanaiḥ kareṇuśobhābhir ivārpito gajah | laghuś ca veṣeṇa mahān ivaujasā vibhāty umāveṣam ivāśrito haraḥ ||*

⁴¹ For more on this idea, see Hildebeitel, “Śiva.”

⁴² On Śiva as the archetypal erotic ascetic, see Wendy Doniger, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁴³ On the figure of the warrior ascetic, particularly in its more recent incarnations, see William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

And this one is Yudhiṣṭhira, the king.⁴⁴

There are countless descriptors that the *Pañcarātra* could have used to illustrate Arjuna in this pivotal moment of self-revelation. This one links our fragmented Arjuna to another splintered Arjuna, the *Kairātaparvan*'s erotic-warrior-ascetic, whose contradictory aspects fade into the background only once they meet their divine doubles in Śiva. In this phrase, the *Pañcarātra* offers the audience a way to see Arjuna's various internal conflicts as familiar, even essential parts of his character. The mythology and iconography of Śiva, which are themselves charged with the imagery of contrast and paradox, prompt the audience to find a cosmic—and therefore familiar—resonance in Arjuna's fragmentation.

The play's second way of showing the audience how to make sense of Arjuna's splintered self is quite different. It turns away from the mythological and toward the literary. It invites the audience to see the bifurcated Arjuna as a kind of personified *śleṣa*—a pun, or, as Yigal Bronner calls it in his book on this ubiquitous feature of Sanskrit literature, an expression of “bitextuality.”⁴⁵ In an incidence of *śleṣa*, a verbal expression—whether it is a word, a phrase, a verse, a passage, or a multi-chapter work—can be read in at least two ways at once such that each reading remains meaningful within the expression's broader context. Although the *Pañcarātra* does not, as far as I can tell, make use of *śleṣa* as a literary device, I believe that the play calls for us to use the concept of the *śliṣṭa* (bitextual) expression to bring a sense of coalescence to the figure of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā.

⁴⁴ *Pañcarātra* 2.65: *rudrabāṇāvalīḍhāṅgo yady ahaṃ bhārato 'rjunah | avyaktam bhīmaseno 'yam ayam rājā yudhiṣṭhirah ||*

⁴⁵ Bronner connects the work of *śleṣa* to the exploration of fragmented selfhood in Sanskrit literature specifically and to the expression of multivalence in classical South Asian art forms more generally. See Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1–19, 57–90, 122–54, and 242–46.

The play extends this invitation by taking a single image, Arjuna’s bowstring scar, and using it in two successive verses, each of which tells a different story about what the scar signifies, and each of which therefore gives a different account of who Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā “really” is. Initially, Uttara points to the scar as proof that Bṛhannalā is actually Arjuna (2.63):

Tucked inside his forearm:
The scar struck by Gāṇḍīva’s string.
After twelve years
It still hasn’t lost its color.⁴⁶

But Arjuna, in response to Uttara, tells a different story about that same scar. For him, the scar proves that he is Bṛhannalā, not Arjuna (2.64):

Oh, this? My bracelets turned
And made the scar.
The pressure left its mark—
Just the spot for a leather guard.⁴⁷

Arjuna’s account of the scar—that it was created by his bracelets—recalls the reasoning that the *Virāṭaparvan*’s Arjuna uses to support his choice of costume: “My lord, this is my vow: I’ll dress in drag / Since my great bowstring scars are hard to disguise.” But it resonates with the *Virāṭaparvan*’s depiction of Arjuna in another way, too. The *Virāṭaparvan* shows Arjuna preserving a kind of core identity as he transitions into his “Bṛhannaḍā” costume and then back into his “Arjuna” costume—the self stays the same (*ātmavān*) while the costume changes. So, too, do these verses prompt the audience to see a certain consistency in the Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā

⁴⁶ *Pañcarātra* 2.63: *prakoṣṭhāntarasāṅgūḍham gāṇḍīvajyāhatam kiṇam | yat tad dvādaśavarṣānte naiva yāti savarṇatām ||*

⁴⁷ *Pañcarātra* 2.64: *etan me pārihāryāṇām vyāvartanakṛtam kiṇam | sannirodhavivarṇatvād godhāsthānam ihāgatam ||*

figure. The scar stays the same, but the story one tells about it can change. Together the two verses position the scar as a *śliṣṭa* image, a single shape that conjures two different target meanings.

Since the scar constitutes a significant part of Arjuna’s iconography, these two verses cast Arjuna in the same mold—a figure who might look the same on the outside but about whose inner workings very different stories might be told. By now these stories are familiar to us. They are the stories that Arjuna tells when he first comes on stage and speaks of forgetting himself, remembering himself, hiding himself, enacting himself, and splitting himself from himself. Just as the dynamics of *śleṣa* unfold underneath the surface of a verbal expression, so Arjuna narrates various shifts that he feels on the inside but that other characters cannot perceive. This framing of Arjuna inverts the one found in the *Virāṭaparvan*. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, as we have seen, Arjuna remains the same on the inside but changes on the outside. In the *Pañcarātra*, Arjuna remains the same on the outside but expresses a series of dramatic changes and self-separations on the inside.

So when the *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna picks this exact moment—the moment at which everyone on stage gathers around to look at this bivalent bowstring scar—to reveal himself as “Arjuna the Bhārata, my body licked by Śiva’s arrows,” the play makes a very powerful statement. It implies that if there is a “real” Arjuna in the drama, an Arjuna who would remain consistent with his self-presentation earlier in the play, then it is an Arjuna who, like his bowstring scar and like the variegated literature of the *Mahābhārata* itself, brings multivalence to life. But it takes a side-step into drama—a move into a different refractive world—to make the point in a way you can’t forget.

Retelling through a single character

Among the countless modes of retelling we find in premodern South Asian literature (subversions, inversions, contractions, expansions, translations, and so on), one of the most recognizable is the method of retelling that draws the audience into the world of a single character from a broader literary universe.⁴⁸ Many premodern compositions take this approach to the *Mahābhārata*, reframing the audience’s perspective on the epic by focusing in on a single figure such as Karṇa (*Karṇabhāra*), Duryodhana (*Ūrubhaṅga*), Bhīma (*Kalyāṇasaugandhika*), Arjuna (as Arjuna this time: *Kirātārjunīya*), or Kṛṣṇa (*Śiśupālavadhā*). Sometimes a work will dive into a famous pair—Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā (*Abhijñānaśākuntala*), for example, or Nala and Damayantī (*Naiṣadhīyacarita*). This approach stretches beyond Sanskrit, of course: take the Old Javanese *Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, large stretches of which explore the character of Ghaṭotkaca, the half-*rākṣasa* son of Bhīma and Hiḍimbā,⁴⁹ or the Kaṭṭaikūttu production of the drama *Karṇamokṣam*, which largely revolves around the relationship between Karṇa and his wife (now with the Tamil name Poṅṅuruvi).⁵⁰ And it extends well into contemporary genres such as film (one of dozens if not hundreds of examples: the 1933 Telugu film *Sati Sāvitrī*), the graphic novel (for instance, *The Vengeance of Ashwatthama*, part of Campfire’s futuristic *Kaurava Empire* series, published in 2015 and written in English⁵¹), and the short story (such as the character-driven *Mahābhārata* stories of Mahasweta Devi, written in Bengali and set in her contemporary

⁴⁸ A technique that readers of contemporary derivative literature (of both the published and fan varieties) would recognize instantly, too, especially as it applies to retelling the classics—see, for example, Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* (2005) and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). On the analytical function of fan fiction, see *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, 22–23.

⁴⁹ See Mpu Panuluh, *The Kakawin Ghaṭotkacāśraya*, ed. and trans. Stuart Robson (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2016).

⁵⁰ See *Karna’s Death: A Play by Pukalentippulavar*, trans. Hanne M. de Bruin (Pondicherry: Institut français d’Indologie, 1998).

⁵¹ On this series, see Philip Lutgendorf, “A Long Time Ago in a Galaxy Far, Far Away: The Mahābhārata as Dystopian Future,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Hawley and Pillai, 361–84.

India⁵²). While the force of this particular mode of retelling doubtless shifts across historical periods, languages, regions, and genres—it is likely that no two authors adopt the “character accentuation” approach (as I call it) for exactly the same reasons—it is worth considering what such an immensely popular way of retelling the *Mahābhārata* might have to offer. I do so now in the interest of exploring the formal aspects of the bright spotlight that we find pointed at Arjuna as Bṛhannalā in the *Pañcarātra*. The play as a whole is not organized around Arjuna, it’s true, but I would argue that the Bṛhannalā-focused segment of Act 2 strongly reflects the principles of character accentuation that we find in works that really *do* organize themselves around a single figure.

Restricting our scope to premodern *Mahābhāratas* in Sanskrit, we might name three general rationales for zooming in on a single character when retelling the epic. One is interpretive. By elaborating on the features of a single epic figure and the central events surrounding him or her, the retelling presents a new account of the meaning or value of that character in the epic and what he or she does there. When these interpretation-minded compositions “fill the gaps” that are left in the epic’s account of a given figure, they allow us to see that character in a newly cohesive way. They show us the underlying connections between the character’s features or actions; they might explain why a character makes a certain choice or behaves in a certain manner. They accomplish these functions in part by encouraging the audience to develop new sympathy with the protagonist in question—sympathy that the *Mahābhārata* itself often resists or destabilizes. After reading the *Śiśupālavadhā*, for example, we return to the epic with a deeper understanding of Kṛṣṇa as a figure whose involvement in the

⁵² On two of these stories, “Pañcakanyā” and “Kuntī o Niṣādī,” see Sucheta Kanjilal, “From Excluded to Exceptional: Caste in Contemporary Mahābhāratas,” in *Many Mahābhāratas*, ed. Hawley and Pillai, 343–60.

main action of the *Mahābhārata* is primarily indirect or otherwise set apart.⁵³ We see that it is intentionally so: when Kṛṣṇa is removed (or removes himself) from the central events of the epic, this is in part the epic’s way of experimenting with the concepts of objectivity and detachment—a serious point of contrast in a work that generally swims in subjectivity and is deeply committed to exploring various kinds of attachment. Such ideas remain subliminal or merely suggested when we look at the text of the epic itself, but they come to life when we encounter the *Śiśupālavadha*.

Another broad rationale—the ethical—is closely related to the interpretive. Certain retellings that use “character accentuation” foreground the ethical dimensions of a certain figure’s behavior in the epic. Such works often draw out, curtail, and adjust any activities associated with that character in the *Mahābhārata* in the interest of positioning him or her as a sympathetic ethical actor. This is different from portraying that figure as a moral exemplar (as Kuntaka would have it: see chapter 1). Rather, these ethically-minded compositions use “character accentuation” to highlight an ethical sensibility in the protagonist that an audience would be able to understand and sympathize with, even if they may not wish to emulate that character’s behavior or choices. In *Ūrubhaṅga*, for instance, we encounter Duryodhana as a highly conscientious warrior, one who is deeply attuned to the ethics of conflict and committed to making decisions within that framework.⁵⁴ The play develops and refines features of his character that the *Mahābhārata* calls into question just as often as it brings them to the forefront.

⁵³ On Kṛṣṇa as the unusually disengaged hero of the *Śiśupālavadha*, see Lawrence McCrea, “The Conquest of Cool: Theology and Aesthetics in Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadha*,” in *Innovations and Turning Points*, ed. Bronner, Shulman, and Tubb, 123–41.

⁵⁴ See Edwin Gerow, “Bhāsa’s *Ūrubhaṅga* and Indian Poetics,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3 (1985): 405–12.

We might see modern retellings that explicitly reframe the epic from the perspectives of its underwritten characters (such as the women, dogs, and anonymous soldiers of Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions*) as extensions of these earlier, ethically-minded works that focus on a single character. Such compositions do powerful interpretive work, too, of course, but we might argue that their very premise remains an ethical one—even if it is eventually overshadowed by everything else in play. Character accentuation has long been an important instrument of subversion in the literature of the *Mahābhārata*, but in the modern and contemporary periods it has become especially so.

A third and equally broad rationale behind this mode of character accentuation stands at a greater distance from the epic. We might simply call it creative. Whereas interpretive and ethically-minded retellings depend more or less on the epic's depiction of a particular character for interpretive context, "detached" retellings separate the individual epic character (or pair of characters) and his, her, or their stories from the larger narrative context in which they first emerged. In such compositions the greater meaning or import of the work emerges almost solely from the retelling itself; its connection with the *Mahābhārata* enhances it only minimally. We might take *Abhijñānaśākuntala* as a prime example of a creatively-minded character accentuation: in a few important respects the work engages in conversation with the *Mahābhārata*, yes, but for the most part it lives in (indeed, creates) its own world, and generations of audiences have appreciated the play in precisely that way—as less of a comment on its epic source than its own literary entity, one that lends total rebirth to the characters of Duḥṣanta/Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā.

It should go without saying that this is in no way a complete or strict typology of character accentuation in the early literature of the *Mahābhārata*. There is surely more nuance to

add; it is quite obvious that even the three different underlying sensibilities that I've outlined here blend into one another. Often all three take shape in a given text and it is only a question of which is dominant, or perhaps which is dominant in a certain part of that text. More important, I think, is to recognize that each of these different modes of character accentuation is present in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as well as in its retellings. The epic is phenomenally good at drawing in the reader or listener so that she focuses on a single character for a limited but momentous stretch of the narrative. In these periods the reader develops a more cohesive understanding of that character, grows to sympathize with that character, learns to see the epic through the eyes of that character, and in doing so is able to paint a more complex picture of the epic as a whole. One example is when, near the end of book 3, the epic tells its most extensive version of how Kuntī comes to give birth to Karṇa. The story helps to explain Kuntī's actions elsewhere; it allows the reader to adopt her viewpoint even when the narration unfolds from quite a different perspective later on; it allows us to see her as a conscious and ethical decision-maker; and it complicates our view of other characters (primarily Karṇa) as well.

The *Mahābhārata* has its own version of “creative” character accentuation, too, and in abundance—what else might we call the epic's many journeys into the experiences of one figure or another (Sāvitrī, for example, or Sukanyā, or Śibi) that have only the barest of threads connecting them with the epic's central plot? Such stories work to develop and complicate the *Mahābhārata*'s core themes, to be sure, but their interpretive value generally emerges at some distance from the story of the Pāṇḍavas, the Kauravas, and the battle at Kurukṣetra. We don't need the whole expanse of the *Mahābhārata* to appreciate these figures and their stories; rather, they live as little creations in their own right—the epic's independent children.

I say all this because we have just discussed two instances of character accentuation, one that comes from the epic itself—that is, the deeply thoughtful but somewhat dispersed portrayal of Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā in the *Virāṭaparvan*—and one that takes place in the *Pañcarātra*, when Arjuna (as Bṛhannalā) comes onstage and delivers his four-verse monologue about the experience of living in disguise. It is important that we appreciate how, on a formal level, the epic’s exploration of Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā gives rise to the *Pañcarātra*’s equally absorbing and much more concentrated vision of that same figure. The latter accentuation responds in many ways to the former. And when it does, it reveals (at different points) the various approaches that I have outlined here. Often we see the work of interpretation—and critical interpretation, at that, since the *Pañcarātra* not only expands and deepens the *Virāṭaparvan*’s vision of Arjuna as Bṛhannaḍā/Bṛhannalā but also, in developing it, pushes back on it. At other points we see ethical forces in play: when Arjuna describes being totally immersed in his disguise, for instance, it lends an emotionally sympathetic (and not merely a strategic) explanation for why he demonstrates such a strong resistance to revealing himself later on, even with the prospect of a reunion with Abhimanyu right in front of him. And sometimes the *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna lives entirely on his own—a pure creation of the play and, if we take a fuller view of it, the actor portraying him. In chapter 2 I explore the limited but intriguing textual evidence that suggests that the character of Arjuna-Bṛhannalā formed the centerpiece of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance of *Pañcarātra*; I suspect that the truly self-inventive side of things would have taken off in performance.

Disguise, deceit, and self-doubt

But why does the *Pañcarātra* accentuate this particular character, and why does it do so at this point in the play? Arjuna-Bṛhannalā’s four-verse monologue in Act 2 is the only one of its

kind in the drama; no other character speaks at such length or with such evident introspection. I suspect that Arjuna’s monologue serves as a way for the *Pañcarātra* to explore what it means (or at least *can* mean) to live in disguise. This, after all, is one of the central themes of Act 2, where the drama takes great care to show how each of the main characters, the three elder Pāṇḍava brothers, lives in a unique relationship with the new persona that he adopts. As we learn from Arjuna-Bṛhannalā in 2.32, Yudhiṣṭhira is utterly absorbed by his disguise, so much so that the text of the play never refers to him as “Yudhiṣṭhira” but always labels him with the general title “Bhagavān,” a nod to his newly adopted *brāhmaṇa* status. There are only three verses in which Yudhiṣṭhira speaks as himself (2.7, 2.9, and 2.10). At every other point—and he is on stage for nearly all of Act 2—he seems fully to inhabit his role as Virāṭa’s dicing master and the resident *brāhmaṇa*. Bhīma (who is always labeled “Bhīma” or “Bhīmasena” in the text) sits at the other end of the spectrum: he appears hardly to be in disguise at all, and indeed speaks so freely that Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira must scramble to prevent him from revealing their secret. These characterizations reflect the way in which the epic presents Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma as opposites, or perhaps complements—Yudhiṣṭhira with all his opacity and Bhīma with all his sincerity to match. As we will see even more clearly in chapter 4, the *Virāṭaparvan* amplifies that dynamic: Yudhiṣṭhira will do anything to maintain his cover, whereas Bhīma proves more than willing to risk his. The *Pañcarātra* builds on that. Arjuna, in both instances, occupies a middle space: he finds himself totally engrossed in Bṛhannalā and at the same time maintains an awareness of Arjuna. This makes him uniquely well suited to give voice to the fluid experience of living in disguise. It is tempting to picture how, in a performance context, Arjuna’s monologue—delivered by an actor portraying Arjuna, who is dressed as Bṛhannalā, who in turn is recalling her

experience pretending to be a warrior—could be interpreted as a reflection on the nature of performance itself.

Act 2 seems to be particularly interested in the fallibility of (or perhaps the instability involved in) disguise, and this lends additional weight to Arjuna’s monologue, which so clearly expresses that very kind of mutability. In Act 2, three different characters come onstage and almost immediately communicate the tension between a “costumed” identity—the persona that character is known to inhabit, or is expected to inhabit—and a perceived self-identity, that is, who that character believes himself to be. Arjuna-Bṛhannalā is one of them, of course. But Virāṭa is the first in the sequence. Here is a moment early in Act 2:

At this point the king enters.

King Virāṭa: It can’t be—my cattle taken away,
The little calves scattered, panicked,
Fearful at the chariots’ roar.
Here’s my arm, meanwhile:
Round-shouldered, immodest,
Wet with sandal paste, armlets slipping,
Reaching for sweets.

Jayasena!

Jayasena, a soldier and messenger, enters.

Jayasena: May you be successful, great king!

King Virāṭa: Enough of this “great king” talk—I’ve lost what made me a
kṣatriya.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ *Pañcarātra* 2.3–2.3.5: (*tataḥ praviśati rājā*) *rājā— mā tāvad vyathitavikīrṇabālavatsā gāvō me ratharavaśaṅkayā hriyante | pīnāṃśaś calavalayaḥ sa candanārdro nirlajjo mama ca karaḥ varāṇi bhūṅkte || jayasena | (praviśya) bhataḥ— jayatu jayatu mahārājaḥ | rājā—alam mahārājaśabdena | avadhūtaṃ me kṣatriyatvam |*

As Virāṭa comes onstage, he grapples with failing to guard his cattle (and therefore his kingdom’s wealth), despite his capable arms (“round-shouldered, immodest”), as he was participating in the rituals connected, as we soon learn, with his birthday—hence the sandal paste, the arms that, in fasting, would become more slender and let the armlets slip down, and the *prasāda* sweets that he would enjoy at the conclusion of the ritual. In Virāṭa’s estimation, his negligence of the cattle, and in particular his failure to protect the calves, means that he no longer deserves the title of *mahārāja* nor even the social marker of *kṣatriya*. Here he articulates a separation between outward appearance and self-perception; being king—and even being a *kṣatriya* at all—is, for him, a matter of playing a role or, in this case, neglecting to play it.

At the end of Act 2, Uttara voices a similar tension. He returns to court after the cattle raid knowing that Arjuna fought on his behalf, but that he (Uttara) is the one who will get credit for the victory:

False praise is a terrible thing, they say.
 But those who receive it must love false words,
 Since here I am, being spoken of
 As part of this battle,
 And I go along with what they’re saying,
 Feeling shame with my heart.⁵⁶

When Uttara draws a contrast between others’ perception of him (as victorious) and his own, his sentiments reflect not only his father’s at the beginning of Act 2 but also Arjuna’s in 2.31 (“No taking Duṣāsana today, / No capturing him at the battle’s head. / Still, I entered Virāṭa’s city”). All three figures express the feeling that they are not quite living up to their warrior personae;

⁵⁶ *Pañcarātra* 2.60: *mithyāpraśamsā khalu nāma kaṣṭhā yeṣāṃ tu mithyā-vacaneṣu bhaktiḥ | ahaṃ hi yuddhāśrayam ucyamāno vācānuvartī hṛdayena lajje ||*

they highlight the deceptive side of disguise, the part of it that can elicit shame. The outpouring of self-doubt—from Virāṭa at the outset, Arjuna-Bṛhannalā in the middle, and Uttara at the end—becomes something of a refrain in Act 2. It defines Act 2 as a stretch of the play that will explore disguises, costumes, and roles of all kinds, and that will explore with just as much intensity the emotional consequences of such unrelenting performance.

Bṛhannalā

I want to close with a word of appreciation for Bṛhannalā’s long life as an icon of the fluid, performative nature of selfhood. Bṛhannalā is a widely recognized figure in South Asia, and one who seems to be represented with special enthusiasm in visual media—reliefs of Bṛhannalā on the walls of temples, for instance, appear in regions as far separated as Tamil Nadu and Assam. (Bṛhannalā’s connection with the Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva would be especially resonant in a temple context.) When it comes to the *Mahābhārata* specifically, however, I have the impression that she has become a kind of stand-in for the *Virāṭaparvan* as a whole: when that part of the *Mahābhārata* is portrayed visually, such as on posters or in illustrations, Bṛhannalā often takes center stage. For example, the first illustration that appears in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute’s 1923 proto-critical edition of the *Virāṭaparvan*—one of several images painted by Bhavanrao Pant Pratinidhi (the Raja of Aundh and a major financial contributor to the critical edition project) and inserted into the text at key points—depicts Bṛhannalā. She initiates the reader into the world of the *Virāṭaparvan*.

An image of Bṛhannalā on a similar scale takes up a large panel—one with minimal text, such that the image dominates—in the 2011 Amar Chitra Katha standalone version of the *Virāṭaparvan*, titled *The Pandavas in Hiding*. Broad-chested, buxom, and blue, she towers over

Uttarā and her other pupils. Her height, the sharp angles of her face, and the spikes on her headdress (or is it Arjuna’s diadem?) seem intended to convey masculinity—and, given the blue, divinity—but they also subtly reflect the feelings of intimidation and fear that transvestism and transgenderism, with their hybrid qualities and disregard for limits, have historically provoked in those who encounter them (hence Susan Stryker’s “I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster”).⁵⁷ Indeed, in the *Mahābhārata*, hybrids often wield terrifying physical strength: Śiva in the guise of a Kirāta mangles Arjuna so that he looks like a lump of flesh; Bhīma in the guise of Ballava (and in the guise of a woman, in many accounts of the story) similarly pounds Kīcaka into a ball of flesh; Bṛhannaḍā herself incites overwhelming fear in Uttara when she pushes him to fight against the Kauravas.

It is clear that the image of Bṛhannalā has come to do a great deal of work in lending cultural legitimacy to different forms of performance, including gender performance, in the modern period. The idea that Arjuna spends a long stretch of the *Mahābhārata* story living as a performer—and as a woman—has turned out to be an immensely powerful matter. Hari Krishnan writes that the image of the Bharatanāṭyam performer Krishna Iyer playing Bṛhannalā in the 1939 Tamil film *Cairantiri* “has been reprinted hundreds of times in publications on Bharatanāṭyam,” where “the juxtaposition of the *Mahābhārata* narrative of Arjuna-Bṛhannalā with the courtly *tillāṇā* dance augments the scripting of a new, religious genealogy for Bharatanāṭyam.”⁵⁸ In Krishnan’s analysis, Bṛhannalā serves as the key link between the (re)invention of Bharatanāṭyam and a distinctly Hindu credo.

⁵⁷ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994): 237–54; this line appears on page 240.

⁵⁸ Hari Krishnan, *Celluloid Classicism: Early Tamil Cinema and the Making of Modern Bharatanāṭyam* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 102.

Bṛhannalā's cultural reach in fact extends far beyond Hinduism—a fitting turn for a figure who is defined by the way in which she crosses boundaries. A third-gender services organization in Dhaka named “Brihannala” garnered a significant amount of press coverage for its volunteer work at local hospitals at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Dhaka Tribune* reported that the head of the organization, Sadiquul Islam, “said that the organization had been named Brihannala because the powerful Arjun in Mahabharata had once assumed the role of a Brihannala (third gender).”⁵⁹ The adoption of the name Bṛhannalā to designate this group situation seems to give evidence not just of the cultural authority associated with the expansive *Mahābhārata* tradition but also to the importance of Bṛhannalā within it, at least in the perception of this group. She is an extension of “powerful Arjun in Mahabharata” that transcends or erases ordinary markers of religious identity. As a final note, I would point out the definite article in that sentence: “*a* Brihannala” (emphasis mine). I would like to investigate this further, but on the surface of it, it seems that in certain circles the word *Bṛhannalā* has become a general term for a third-gender person.

In this, Bṛhannalā appears to have crossed over from one kind of “character”—that is, an individualized figure depicted in a story—to another, namely, the “stock” or “pure type” character such as those that arose in the context of masque performances in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century England. It was during this period, indeed, that the English word “character” took on its current meaning. These “characters” were generalized, often idealized, fictional or allegorical identities; they were roles into which amateurs—for amateurs were the

⁵⁹ Marium Sultana and Fahim Reza Shovon, “Third gender volunteers step up to help Covid-19 patients at DMCH,” *Dhaka Tribune*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2021/04/27/third-gender-volunteers-come-forward-to-help-covid-19-patients-at-dmch>.

ones who performed early-seventeenth century masques—could step.⁶⁰ The women of Dhaka’s Brihannala are, in some ways, these very amateur performers: ordinary individuals adopting the oversized character of Bṛhannalā, now a type in her own right—a conventional version of the unconventional. The *Pañcarātra*’s Arjuna participates in that ongoing drama. He is Bṛhannalā, yes, but he is also *a* Bṛhannalā—one of what would turn out to be a great many.

⁶⁰ Martin Wiggins, “Masque,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; current online version 2005). See also Martin Wiggins, *Drama and the Transfer of Power in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Chapter 4

Veiled Narration in the *Virāṭaparvan*: Draupadī and the *Kīcakavadha*

The *Pañcarātra* pushes the limits of what a *Mahābhārata* can be. In the play, the main characters forestall the fratricidal war that sits at the very center of the epic’s great narrative web. “The dramatist has taken unconscionable liberties with the epic story,” claims C. R. Devadhar in the introduction to his 1957 translation.¹ “The poet has suppressed, modified and invented a good deal to make of it quite a pleasing and heroic comedy”² And indeed, the *Pañcarātra*’s vision appears to distort the epic on a monumental, almost outrageous scale. The *Pañcarātra* is not entirely alone in what it does. Many retellings of the *Mahābhārata* in Sanskrit literature “suppress” or “modify” parts of the epic—to use Devadhar’s words—or “invent” new material to insert within its frame. Broadly speaking, we might interpret such adaptations as attempts to find a sense of integration in an epic where it is so often *disintegration* that matters, though this is hardly the only way to understand the adaptive work performed by Sanskrit literary retellings of the *Mahābhārata*. What we have surveyed in chapters 1 and 2 gives us a sense of the range. Yet the *Pañcarātra* makes its adaptive moves on an unusually large scale. While it is true that all retellings of the epic emend it in some way, few make their transformations so explicit on the level of the epic as a whole. The *Pañcarātra* takes the epic’s broad story and hollows it out at the core. A *Mahābhārata* whose warring cousins never go to war: Can we even call it a *Mahābhārata*?

¹ C. R. Devadhar, *Pañcarātram: A Sanskrit Drama in Three Acts Attributed to Bhāsa, Critically Edited with Introduction, Notes and Translation*, Poona Oriental Series 94 (Poona [Pune]: Oriental Book Agency, 1957), 8.

² Devadhar, *Pañcarātram*, 11.

So far I have tried to show that, despite its radical approach, the *Pañcarātra* takes the *Mahābhārata* quite seriously indeed. In the introduction we came to understand that while the *Pañcarātra*'s closest companion piece is the fourth book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Virāṭaparvan*, the play ultimately reaches far beyond that relatively small portion of the epic story.³ Indeed, throughout the *Pañcarātra* we find echoes of the broader *Mahābhārata*. To begin with, the play shadows the epic in using the theme of an interrupted sacrifice as a narrative framing device. The hook, just as in the epic, is a high-stakes wager—made and lost. And when it comes to the *Mahābhārata*'s burning core, the battle at Kurukṣetra, the *Pañcarātra*'s strange resolution prompts the audience to ask the same question that more than one of the epic's characters poses once the war is over: Was it worth it? Some of the epic's darkest threads are thus woven into the *Pañcarātra*'s “pleasing and heroic comedy.”

In chapter 1 we discovered how, at a theoretical level, such adaptations were understood to be entirely defensible, even necessary, though the Kashmiri critics we reviewed apparently did not know the *Pañcarātra* itself. In chapter 2, however, where we explored the play's major literary contexts, we saw how these close engagements with the epic—performative engagements—take on its narrative burdens explicitly. There the epic's *Virāṭaparvan* emerged as having a special role to play. We saw too that the *Pañcarātra*'s sister plays—the other five short, anonymous *Mahābhārata* dramas in the “Trivandrum” (Thiruvananthapuram) set—demonstrate a powerful command of the epic's more general organizing principles. They explore the darker waves of the story—the fraught killings, the tormented decision-making, the revenge cycles, the

³ Karin Steiner makes a similar argument, though for somewhat different reasons. See Karin Juliana Steiner, “Ritual(e) im Drama: Spurensuche im Sanskrit-Schauspiel Pañcarātra,” in *Indisches Theater: Text, Theorie, Praxis, Drama und Theater in Südasien*, vol. 8, ed. Karin Steiner and Heidrun Brückner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 155–69.

doomed mirroring between generations. Set at intervals throughout the great war, they carry forward the epic's longer narrative arcs. And they largely insist on telling it from the vantage point of the "losers," the Kauravas—just as the *Mahābhārata* does.⁴ The five sister plays prime us to find a similar perspective at work in the *Pañcarātra*.

Yet we also saw in the introduction, and in chapter 2, that a counternarrative was simultaneously taking shape. When we consider the *Pañcarātra* in light of our knowledge of the broad literary and performance history of which it became a part, not just in Sanskrit or Kerala but wherever the *Virāṭaparvan* was retold—in Old Javanese, Telugu, and Tamil, for instance—we begin to tell quite a different story about the *Pañcarātra* and its unusual conclusion. It all hinges on the uniquely auspicious position of the *Virāṭaparvan* in relation to the rest of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Virāṭaparvan* stages a jewelbox miniaturization of the great epic. It takes the epic's rivers of blood, its fallen ideals, and its endless cycles of disastrous attachment—in short, it takes the death-stalked tragedy, grandeur, and unknowable scope of global humanity—and distills it all into something that can actually be swallowed, inverting certain elements and resolving others in such a way that an audience might be able to take it in. If the dark realism of the *Mahābhārata* makes the epic something like "real life," then the *Virāṭaparvan* plays the role that theater so often does in real life: it investigates, molds, and represents (re-presents) that life; it separates itself from the epic's world in crisis, and at the same time offers the audience a way into the deepest truths of that world. This, it turns out, has an almost magical, even salvific force. A happy ending, even in irony, conveys its own constructive truth—an auspiciousness yet more striking because of the raw material from which it is forged. The epic's own *Virāṭaparvan* is the

⁴ This is not to say that the *Mahābhārata* is always sympathetic to the Kauravas—far from it—but, rather, that for long stretches of the epic the events are framed by the Kauravas' perspectives on, and experiences of, the action.

crucial stimulus, providing the quartzite lode that clearly remains to be mined, a substance surprisingly stronger and denser, one might argue, than the narrative logic of the epic itself. Told in any number of languages and genres, the story of the year in Virāṭa’s court becomes a constructive force, the propitious springboard for creative endeavors rooted in the *Mahābhārata* but ultimately reaching far beyond it—a cycle of *Mahābhārata* dramas (in Sanskrit, in Kerala), a literary culture (Old Javanese), a truly vernacular mode of expression (Telugu), a new performance genre (Tamil cinema), a massive publication project (the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute’s critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*).

For the *Virāṭaparvan* unfolds as a play, even while it is narrated as part of the larger epic. It has its own dramatic structure—a prologue, distinct scenes, “characters” (namely, the Pāṇḍavas playing their parts), settings in court and in the wild (and then back in court), plots that are brought to fulfillment—and crucially it embraces the premise underlying most theater: the suspension of disbelief. The *Mahābhārata* knows this and accounts for it. At the end of book 3—right before the Pāṇḍavas are due to spend the following year living out in the open, but disguised—Yudhiṣṭhira earns a boon from a *yakṣa* (eventually revealed to be his father, Dharma) whom he encounters in the forest. “Even if you should roam this grand earth looking exactly like yourselves,” the *yakṣa* says, “no one in the three worlds will recognize you.”⁵ This is exactly what happens when the Pāṇḍavas disguise themselves *as themselves* in Virāṭa’s court: Yudhiṣṭhira, the gambler, becomes a gambler; Bhīma, the wrestler, becomes a wrestler; Arjuna, a well-decorated performer (on the battlefield) becomes a well-decorated performer (in the dance pavilion), and so on. There they are utterly, poignantly themselves; perhaps, as David Shulman

⁵ *Mahābhārata* 3.98.17: *yady api svena rūpeṇa cariṣyatha mahīm imām | na vo vijñāsyate kaścit triṣu lokeṣu bhārata ||*

and Alf Hiltebeitel argue, they are even *more* themselves than they were before.⁶ Yet no one recognizes them. That is why Wendy Doniger links the *yakṣa* story's exploration of the suspension of disbelief to the special power of myths:

In a fantastical story in the *Mahabharata*, [unreasonable] non-recognition is justified by a boon that the god Dharma grants to his son, King Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira tells Dharma that he and his brothers have been forced to go into exile in disguise and will lose their kingdom if they are recognized. He asks the god to promise that they will not be recognized, and the god agrees. This boon justifies the shallowness of the disguises that the king and his brothers subsequently adopt, parodies of their well-known characters. Magical though it is, the god's promise does interject a reasonable, if not realistic, explanation of how they got away with such obvious and playful masquerades. The Hindu god's explicit boon is implicit in every recognition plot in every culture: no matter how poor your masquerade is, no one will recognize you.

[. . .] Myths revel in the violation of reason. Lewis Carroll's White Queen, perhaps quoting Tertullian ('Credo quia impossibile [I believe it because it is impossible]'), chides Alice when she says she can't believe impossible things, and advises her to practice: 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' In the heat of the myth, cold reason has no more chance than a snowball in hell.⁷

In that framework, the *Pañcarātra*'s "impossible" *Mahābhārata*, a *Mahābhārata* where the war never happens, becomes a natural extension of the suspension of disbelief that pervades the *Virāṭaparvan*—and indeed performances of all kinds.

But as we saw in chapter 3, a costume is no small matter. It can transform the inner as well as outer self of the one who wears it. When the *Pañcarātra* dives into Arjuna's experience of living in disguise, what ultimately comes to the surface is the play's sheer attentiveness to the

⁶ Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, 256–69; Hiltebeitel, "Śiva," 153.

⁷ Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth*, 313–14.

epic’s portrayal of that same figure. That is one measure of how seriously the drama takes the epic. But the play’s exploration of Arjuna-as-Bṛhannalā also prompts us to take a step back and reflect on the idea of disguise as it applies to the drama as a whole. Approaching the *Pañcarātra*, we think we know Arjuna—indeed, Arjuna *himself* thinks he knows Arjuna—but his monologue in Act 2 rattles that belief. So, too, does the *Pañcarātra*—a *Mahābhārata* in a most unusual disguise—unsettle our ideas about what a *Mahābhārata* is and does.

The present chapter takes the first step in explaining the feature of the *Pañcarātra* that modern interpreters have found the most bewildering in its divergence from the epic: its felicitous conclusion. At the end of the play, Duryodhana returns half of the kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas. By all counts, this resolution leads us to envision a *Mahābhārata* without war, without death, where the Pāṇḍavas return from exile and the cousins live in harmony thereafter. How are we to keep apace with such a vast imaginative leap? What are we to make of a *Mahābhārata* that puts a peaceful resolution where a near-apocalyptic fratricidal war used to be? To resolve the tension between what we expect of a *Mahābhārata* and what we see before us in the *Pañcarātra*, we must come to understand that the *Pañcarātra*’s “happy ending” is not what it seems. Rather, this extraordinary conclusion represents the peak of a specific narrative strategy at work in the play—the effort to project two stories at once. According to this strategy, which I call “veiled narration,” the principal course of action veils a second narrative arc. The audience remains aware of this underlying story even if it appears blurred and indistinct. At intervals the veil pulls back to reveal this underlying plot in full. When we come to the play’s “pleasing and heroic” conclusion, to use Devadhar’s phrase, the playwright not so secretly exhorts us to remain conscious of the tenebrous epic story that lies beneath. It isn’t really all comedy, as Devadhar

seems to suppose. The *Pañcarātra* adds to its own comedy by interrogating the ground from which our human compulsion to comedy springs.

On one level, we follow the action of the play in its archetypal *kāvya* motion from a set of compelling tensions—tensions between the protagonists, between conflicting ideals of power, between secrecy and openness—to an equally compelling sense of integration, wholeness, and resolution. We land on a kingdom shared, a wedding arranged, and various social bonds affirmed—father to son, teacher to student, brother to brother. And given the expectations set by the play itself, this conclusion makes perfect sense. This is the veil, ever so elegantly woven. But neither the *Pañcarātra* nor we can afford to stop there, because the play also conjures the silhouette of the war averted—the war that wasn't, perhaps the whole epic that wasn't—and any *Mahābhārata*-knowing audience would be able to see it peeking out from underneath. The play not only expects this but enables it. Time and again it reminds us of the tragedy it has forestalled.

We will examine this pivotal aspect of the play in chapter 5. But to do so with knowing eyes we must first appreciate the depth and artistry of the *model* of veiled narration that the *Pañcarātra* is following—and that is the veiled narration that appears in the *Virāṭaparvan* itself. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, signature traumatic events from the larger *Mahābhārata* story appear in inverse, often with the stakes lowered. What results in catastrophic violence, death, destruction, social disintegration, and moral conflict elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* finds gratifying resolution in the *Virāṭaparvan*. Nowhere is this more evident than when the *Virāṭaparvan* takes *Sabhāparvan*'s game of dice and remakes it as the story of Draupadī and Bhīma's revenge on Kīcaka. That is what I will discuss for much of the current chapter, but it is important to note in beginning that the same inversions are also present elsewhere in book 4. Arjuna's ethical-emotional crisis at the beginning of the war and the (not uncomplicated) response that it

occasions from Kṛṣṇa are transformed into a remarkable scene in the *Virāṭaparvan* where Arjuna plays the role of Kṛṣṇa and, in doing so, finds all the certainty that he will go on to lose in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*. The devastating eighteen-day battle of Kurukṣetra—told in excruciating detail in books 6-9 of the epic—becomes, in the *Virāṭaparvan*, a uniquely harmless armed conflict in which no one dies or is even injured, and indeed the greatest consequence for the losers is that the winners steal their clothes. In the *Virāṭaparvan* you even find echoes of the killing of Abhimanyu—which will eventually be narrated in book 7—but here the events are refigured so that the story’s arc lands in Abhimanyu’s wedding (to Uttarā, Virāṭa’s daughter) and not in his death. All of these elegant, clever transformations constitute the *Virāṭaparvan*’s “veil”—the glossy, captivating outer layer of the narration.

But from time to time the veil is pulled back. Lying beneath it, we find profound reminders of those very same catastrophic moments from the epic, this time with nothing to cover them up. In full view we see Draupadī’s suffering and Yudhiṣṭhira’s neglect thereof; the *Virāṭaparvan* encourages us to take her perspective, and for her, the stakes remain high as ever. This will become our case study of veiled narration in the *Virāṭaparvan*. But we could just as well go on to argue that the *Virāṭaparvan*’s boisterous revision of the *Bhagavadgītā* brings out the fear, humiliation, and impenetrable mystery that encase the real thing. (This too has a veil-like aspect: it forecasts its own unveiling.) Taking all this into account, we come to see the *Virāṭaparvan*’s harmless battle less as an all’s-well-that-ends-well recreation of Kurukṣetra and more as a foreboding dress rehearsal of the deadly eighteen days that are soon to come. All is *not* well that ends well, because nothing actually ends here.

Indeed, for all of the ingenious ways in which the *Virāṭaparvan* reworks the major traumas of the wider *Mahābhārata* story—the inversions, the miniatures, the role-reversals, and

so on—perhaps the most brilliant move of all is how the *Virāṭaparvan* never lets you forget that it’s all a show. We are still in the *Mahābhārata*, after all. The alternation between “veiled” and “unveiled” moments is the epic’s way of keeping us in touch with the tragedy that undergirds all of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s comedy.

Veiled narration

Before setting out to explore the dynamics of veiled narration in the *Virāṭaparvan* (in this chapter) and the *Pañcarātra* (in the next), I want to speak a little more about the idea itself. Veiled narration is an approach to story-telling and performance that allows a “text” to tell a story and retell it simultaneously. In the general course of things, it is the retelling that the audience focuses on. Alongside this focus, the audience maintains a hazy awareness of the original story. But at key moments, the text strongly privileges the audience’s consciousness of the original story (which I will call the “base”) over the retelling. Thus the veil is lifted.

But what is this veil? What makes the retelling seem specifically veil-like? It is that the retelling simultaneously conceals and reveals that over which it is spread. In addition, because this retelling has its own distinctive textures, it has the possibility of smoothing the surface of the base—or so it seems to someone watching the process. Thus the veil’s opacity has its own weight, even if, as in retellings of the *Mahābhārata*, its purpose often seems to be to lighten the enormous weight of the original. In veiling, the base and the retelling emerge as questions to each other, heightening the effect achieved by the smooth, self-consistent surfaces provided by the two levels that participate in *śleṣa* (bitextual expression), where precision rules supreme. With veiled narration, by contrast, the narration itself becomes more nebulous, its shifting perspectives drawing the audience into the uncertain distance that pertains between base and

retelling. Veils not only veil—and, in being pulled back, reveal—but they also breathe and flutter.

In the case before us, what do these two surfaces, the base story and its retelling, look like? To begin by stating the obvious, we ought not to be fooled by the “re-” in “retelling:” a retelling is not a precise repetition of a preexisting story. A retelling may adopt features that are wildly different from those of a base narrative; it may be governed by markedly different aesthetic principles as well. In the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*, we will see that the base-level story is grounded in the central characters’ expressions of suffering, betrayal, and fear. The events of the plot drive wedges between and within the main figures; because of this, we might say that some of the major themes in the base narrative are separation, disintegration, and conflict (both social and internal). In each of these texts, the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*, the retelling is propelled by sophisticated inversions, epitomizations, and displacements of what happens in the base. Characters who were separated find reunion, what was disintegrated falls back into alignment, and conflicts move toward resolutions. This means that despite having the same essential “ingredients,” the retellings at work in the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* can look and feel dramatically different from their bases. In veiled narration, the retelling is able at considered intervals to shift in such a way that the audience re-apprehends the base. Veiled narrations use the phenomenon of veiling itself as a way to express the base story at the same time as its quite distinct retelling, and do to so in an intrinsically interconnected way.

How exactly do the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* manage their bases and retellings? How does the phenomenon of veiled narration allow each of these texts to pull together base and retelling into one coherent, nuanced package? Let me outline two central features of this strategy as they impinge on the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*—first layering and then co-location. In

doing so I hope to set veiled narration apart from other modes of dual or iterative narration in Sanskrit literature.

Let us begin by acknowledging the distinct layering of what I have been calling the “base” and the “retelling” in a text that uses veiled narration. The term “layering”—indeed the whole metaphor of veiling—describes a depth hierarchy in the two tellings of the same story. We ought not to take this depth hierarchy for granted. As I mentioned in chapter 1, A. K. Ramanujan’s scholarship on South Asian literary multiples—not to mention the whole *Many Rāmāyaṇas* project, of which his scholarship formed a cornerstone—has made it common to speak not of “retellings” but of “tellings.”⁸ The language of “tellings” helps us avoid granting a kind of cultural priority to older, usually Sanskrit and supposedly orthodox works. So we call both the Doordarshan television serial *Ramayana* and the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* “tellings” of the Rāma story, rather than terming the serial a “retelling” of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. As the logic goes, the word “retelling,” when applied to the Doordarshan serial, would unfairly and inaccurately position the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* as some kind of “original” *Rāmāyaṇa*. The terminology of “tellings” exerts a powerfully democratizing force on our understanding of iterative literature. It helps us to rethink—or at least to develop a heightened consciousness of—the premises that structure that understanding, particularly anything that is directional about it. If we have two tellings of the same story, what does it mean for one to come “first,” and for the “second” one to “retell” the first? Even the idea of chronology poses its problems: for example, if we call the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* the “first” *Rāmāyaṇa* (which is historically unlikely), it is hardly the first *Rāmāyaṇa* that most people hear. Take historical chronology too seriously and you run the risk of discounting experiential chronology, which might matter more. At any rate,

⁸ Ramanujan, “Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*, 22–49.

are we not living in a literary world that is more cyclical than it is linear—where vectors bend into circles? And must a more recent telling always respond to an earlier telling? Do such works always position themselves in dialogue, or can they speak monologues? Must every *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Mahābhārata* have this particular anxiety of influence hanging over it? The language of “tellings” invites us to raise these important questions and provisionally to give them answers. But I think it is crucial to adopt a different way of thinking when it comes to the literary landscape at hand—that of the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*.

This is a conscious decision, one that is informed by Kuntaka’s theory of epic adaptation, which I discussed at length in chapter 1. For Kuntaka, a dramatic or poetic retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* is truly a *retelling*: it explicitly responds to the Sanskrit epic it is portraying. What’s more, its literary value rests on the audience’s experience of the (new and exciting) retelling layered over the (familiar) epic. While my understanding of the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* and indeed many retellings of the Sanskrit epics often diverges from Kuntaka’s—for instance, Kuntaka argues that retellings mend the ethical and aesthetic flaws of the epics they portray, whereas I argue that in an important sense they do exactly the opposite—we share common ground here. Both of us see the Sanskrit epic as the point of origin, and we see certain retellings responding directly to it. Both of us wish to account for the audience’s layered experience of the two works of literature, the epic and the retelling, in our understanding of what makes the adaptation so important as an entire category of literature, or as a genre unto itself.

In the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*, the layers matter. Each text embodies both the (Sanskrit epic) *Mahābhārata* and a studied, self-conscious reflection of that *Mahābhārata*. Veiled narration creates a depth hierarchy between the two stories that are being told in each text, the *Mahābhārata* and its reflection, in which the *Mahābhārata* forms the base level—the

real, human face beneath the veil, if you will—and the elegant reimagining of it (the *Virāṭaparvan*'s masquerade, the *Pañcarātra*'s fantasy of family reunification) forms a layer floating just above. This second layer is not perfectly opaque—you can always see through it, if you look hard enough—and sometimes it is removed entirely. In other words, in veiled narration, a “base” story undergirds its retelling, which may take narrative priority (or not) at any given moment in the audience's experience. Whether it dominates or simply lingers in a dark corner of the audience's imagination, the base has an enduring presence.⁹ When we read the *Virāṭaparvan*, the story is told such that we have a constant awareness of the broader *Mahābhārata*—the story that the *Virāṭaparvan* is retelling—no matter how inventively the *Virāṭaparvan* reimagines it. Taking in the *Pañcarātra*—which reworks the *Mahābhārata* to the extent of forestalling its signature plot feature, the great war—still we maintain an awareness of the most disturbing parts of that base narrative, including the events of the war. The *intensity* of this awareness varies, and that variation is what gives these two works of veiled narration their incredible texture. At times the *Virāṭaparvan*'s marvelous retelling takes over and our attention lands on that gauzy veil—the costumes, the revenge, the humor!—and at other times the broader, darker *Mahābhārata* comes to the fore. Much of the *Pañcarātra* leads us to believe that Arjuna and Abhimanyu have been reunited, that Abhimanyu will live on, that Duryodhana will give half of the kingdom to Yudhiṣṭhira. But at important moments the veil pulls back and we see the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* lying just beneath: the war, the violence, the death, the perceived betrayals, the social fractures. By varying and manipulating our attention to one layer over another, or one layer beneath another, as the case may be, the technique of veiled narration teaches the audience

⁹ There is a joke that gets at the heart of this experience. Someone took a friend to see a performance of *Hamlet* for the first time, and when they left the theater the host asked the friend if the play had pleased. “Very much,” said the friend, “but it did have so many *quotations* in it.” Thanks to Wendy Doniger and David Grene for this.

to distinguish between reality—literary reality—and pure fantasy. It means that the audience will never stay in a retelling so long as to forget the “real” story.

Another defining feature of a text using veiled narration is that the base story will be *co-located with* the retelling. This is not uncommon in Sanskrit literature—see my note on *śleṣa* below—but it is important enough to deserve a brief discussion here. Frequently two tellings of the same story will live separately, as entirely discrete literary entities: think of the story of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, and its famous counterpart in Sanskrit drama, the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* of Kālidāsa; or consider the aesthetic, material, and temporal distance between the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and Bhavabhūti’s *Uttararāmacarita*. Even when two tellings of the same story are located within the same larger text, they are often told in series, as opposed to being intertwined from the get-go. This is the case for the repeated accounts of Karṇa’s birth in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, and also (in a slightly different mode) for the banishment of Rāma followed by the banishment of his simian mirror, Sugrīva, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In veiled narration, by contrast, the two tellings are not told in sequence but, rather, at the same time.

Another popular mode of retelling against which I wish to define veiled narration is embedding. “Embedding” happens when a retelling is planted inside the story that it retells. One famous example of embedded retelling is the story of Nala, a king who loses his kingdom and his wife in a game of dice (and eventually regains them), which is told to Yudhiṣṭhira, a king who loses his kingdom and his wife in a game of dice (and will eventually regain them).¹⁰ Drawing again from the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, we might recall the story of Kuntī, who, as a young woman, encounters two powerful male figures, Durvāsas and Sūrya, each of whom wants something from her. This story is told right in the middle of the story it mirrors: the tale of how

¹⁰ *Mahābhārata* 3.50–78.

Kuntī's firstborn son, Karṇa, comes into conflict with Indra, who wants something from *him*—his magical inborn armor and earrings. In an effort to persuade Karṇa to bargain with Indra, Sūrya tells Karṇa the story of his mother, Kuntī, and her careful bargain.¹¹ To add just one more instance of embedded retelling to our list, in the vulgate *Mahābhārata* the story of guilt-ridden Death is told to guilt-ridden Yudhiṣṭhira as he tries to make sense of his role in Abhimanyu's death.¹² In all of these cases the embedded story echoes the embedding story, often under the auspices of deepening, or shifting, the perspective of the listener, who can be either a figure in the text, the text's imagined audience, or both. But when the retelling is being expressed, there is a sustained line of imagination therein. Despite the obvious reflections between the embedding story and the embedded story, the inner story often takes off on its own; it's as if the embedding story is suspended for a time in order to make space for the retelling implanted within it. This allows us—and whatever character(s) is/are listening—to linger there, to get lost in that embedded story, and perhaps even temporarily to lose track of the fact that the inner story recalls the outer story.

But in veiled narration we do not forget the base-level story while experiencing the retelling; on the contrary, from time to time we are explicitly called back to it. During the retelling, the base narrative maintains a palpable presence. Occasionally the base narrative emerges from the background and dominates the retelling such that it (and not the retelling) is what the audience experiences primarily. Then it releases its grip on the listener and recedes into the background once more. So the two stories—the base and the retelling—take up the same space; one is not told before or after another, nor is one embedded within another. We can apply

¹¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.284–94.

¹² Told in the vulgate edition, *Mahābhārata* 7.52.20–7.54.50. See Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar, ed., *Shrīman-Mahābhāratam with the Commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha* (Poona [Pune]: Chitrashala Press, 1929).

this model slightly more easily to the *Pañcarātra*—a single, self-contained three-act play—than we can to the *Virāṭaparvan*. That is because the *Virāṭaparvan*, which retells the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, is quite obviously embedded within the very same story that it reimagines: it is the fourth book of the epic. And yet because of the veiled narration at work within it, the interweaving of base (*Mahābhārata*) and retelling (*Virāṭaparvan*) is more intricate than narrative embedding in the epic typically allows. The embedded story, the *Virāṭaparvan*, never quite removes itself from the dark matter of the *Mahābhārata*. The same could not be said, I think, of the stories of Nala (vis-à-vis Yudhiṣṭhira), or Kuntī (Karna), or guilty Death (Yudhiṣṭhira once more).

At this point I should make it clear that the interweaving involved in veiled narration is not nearly so tight as it is in *śleṣa* (bitextual) literature, which offers the most intimate kind of narrative collocation. There two or more narrative strands are expressed using the very same language, which could be read two or more ways. That is decidedly not what is happening in the *Virāṭaparvan* or the *Pañcarātra*, where the connections between the two stories being told in each work are looser and more thematic, and where the base deliberately weaves in and out of the retelling. But with that said, some of the intellectual framework around *śleṣa* may help us to think through the dynamics of veiled narration. A great many *śleṣa* texts have been beautifully explicated by Yigal Bronner in *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (2010), and his analysis shapes the following thoughts.

First of all, *śleṣa* shows us that collocation is just as likely to bring out the differences—even the polar opposition—between two narrative strands as it is to draw a reader’s attention to the similarities between them. This is true, Bronner writes, of certain lyrics by the sixth-century author Subandhu, where a verse simultaneously praising a king and Viṣṇu “underscore[s] their

differences. . . suddenly [leaving] the reader with an unsettling cognitive dissonance.”¹³ It is also true of Dhanañjaya’s *Dvisandhānakāvya* (*Poem of Two Targets*, ca. 800 CE), which co-narrates the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. There the poet initially uses *śleṣa* to construct parallels between characters from the two epics—Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira will be Bronner’s examples here—only to go on to “[use] the device of *śleṣa* to contrast the similar plotlines strongly and to present Rāma and his allies as superior to the Pāṇḍavas.”¹⁴ This side of *śleṣa* teaches us to remain alert to the highly contrastive possibilities of veiled narration—the way in which, for example, the *Pañcarātra* will depict Abhimanyu’s survival alongside his death and, in doing so, plunge the audience into a powerful state of tension. We see two very different narrative arcs at once; we feel the separation of the literary “real” (his death) from the “possible” (his life). Such possibilities may quickly turn into fantasies.

Second, the layered quality of veiled narration sometimes appears in *śleṣa* literature. Bronner highlights several instances in which one side of the poetic “embrace” (*śleṣa*) dominates the other: the *vyājastuti* (“false praise”) section of Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadhā* (ca. 700 CE), for example, where Śiśupāla’s insults to Kṛṣṇa clearly outweigh the praise that is their poor disguise; or the fact that Dhanañjaya’s *Dvisandhānakāvya* ultimately puts the *Rāmāyaṇa* “at the forefront of the poem, while a leaner *Mahābhārata* forms an intermittent background.”¹⁵ Two stories might share the same literary space, but they do not have to share it equally.

As a final step on *śleṣa*’s path, let us return to the narrative environment that is common to the present objects of study and a certain number of the *śleṣa* lyrics that Bronner discusses: the story of the *Virāṭaparvan*. Drawing upon two of David Shulman’s essays on Sanskrit literary

¹³ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 40.

¹⁴ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 111.

¹⁵ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 115.

characters’ journeys of self-fashioning,¹⁶ Bronner proposes a theory of “selfing” in Sanskrit literature according to which “subjects are split apart from important portions of their selves during ‘standard time’ but are prone to ‘re-member’ these aspects of their psyche in abnormal temporal settings”¹⁷—the year in Virāṭa’s court being prime among such times outside of time.¹⁸ For Bronner, the condition of temporal abnormality points to a broadly cyclical quality in selfing: “Split subjects are buds late to bloom. . . Union among the different aspects of the self is achieved internally through the reintegration of repressed memories, feelings, and powers and then is manifested through some kind of external reunion.”¹⁹

The second crucial component for “selfing” is disguise, “typically of a second order.”²⁰ This is of course present in any telling of the *Virāṭaparvan* story, where the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī disguise themselves as themselves—as for example, Arjuna’s telling line in the *Mahābhārata* that “through illusion, I will disguise myself with myself,” which I discussed in the previous chapter. But it is the second-order type of disguise that we have already seen at work in the *Pañcarātra*. Recall our study of Arjuna as Bṛhannalā in chapter 3: in Bṛhannalā’s remarkable monologue in the second act, the play spotlights precisely this remembering of self (*ātmā smṛtaḥ*). What are the conditions under which Arjuna’s self-recollection occurs? The year in Virāṭa’s court, for one. But note the fact that Arjuna remembers himself in the context of a second-order disguise: it is only when Arjuna pretends to be Bṛhannalā *pretending to be*

¹⁶ David Shulman, “Embracing the Subject: Harṣa’s Play Within a Play,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (1997): 69–89; and David Shulman, “Toward a New Theory of Masks,” in *Masked Ritual and Performance in South India: Dance, Healing, and Possession*, ed. David Shulman and Deborah Thiagarajan (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2006), 17–58.

¹⁷ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 74.

¹⁸ See, for example, Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 75 and 288n50. See also J.A.B. van Buitenen, introduction to *The Mahābhārata: 4. The Book of Virāṭa, 5. The Book of the Effort*, ed. and trans. J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3–10.

¹⁹ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 74.

²⁰ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 74.

Arjuna—that is, when he wears a warrior’s armor layered over a dancing skirt—that he “remembers himself.” Bronner, for his part, goes on to show that in Nīivarman’s *Kīcakavadha* (ca. 600 CE), *śleṣa* heightens and deepens the poem’s ability to portray the Pāṇḍavas’ and Draupadī’s disguises, and accordingly to convey their transformations, fractures, and coalescences of self during that strange year in Virāṭa’s court. I would argue that when it comes to the *Virāṭaparvan* itself, and to the *Pañcarātra*’s highly unusual account of it—indeed, the play’s highly unusual account of the entire *Mahābhārata*—veiled narration has a similar role to play. The conditions are the same: the year in Virāṭa’s court, which marks a point of cyclical renewal; the second-order disguises; and, most important of all, the colocation of narratives as a way to shine light on the colocation of selves.

But veiled narration, being completely different from *śleṣa* from a language standpoint, also acts differently from *śleṣa* when it comes to its ability to reflect processes of selfing. Bronner remarks on *śleṣa*’s unique power to express “the evolution of the subject”—“the acute split and the final embrace, the beginning and the end of selfing.”²¹ For Bronner and for Shulman before him, the “subject” and the “self” belong to literary characters: Draupadī, Arjuna, Udayana. These figures speak in *śleṣa*; their fused poles of self are expressed perfectly by their bivalent language. Now let us ask: What if the “self” in “selfing” were not the individual character but *the story*? Veiled narration is something that happens on the level of the whole composition. In veiled narration, it is the whole story (and not an individual character) that is disguised. Specifically, the base narrative is disguised, in the retelling, as itself. Veiled narration allows both of these selves—that is, both of these stories—to be expressed simultaneously. David Shulman writes of Udayana’s experience speaking in *śleṣa* as follows:

²¹ Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 75.

The king is actually expanded into himself, a subject bursting out of the constricting borders of his earlier, heavily determined roles. At the same time, he seems to be retracting an image of his own form; playing at himself, he is, as it were, becoming more and more like himself, impersonating his own impersonators, merging with his own infiguration... This is probably as close as he can get to a living self that acts and knows and flows.²²

As an experiment, let us take that passage and replace “the king” (and his assorted pronouns) with “the *Mahābhārata*.” I think we would land on an accurate description of the metaliterary forces at work in the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*. In each of the two texts, the *Mahābhārata* “bursts out of the constricting borders of its earlier, heavily determined roles” and all along “plays with itself,” “becomes more and more like itself,” and “merges with its own infiguration.” Just as *śleṣa* can enable a reader to develop a truly stereoscopic vision of a single character, so, too, can veiled narration allow us to adopt a stereoscopic vision of a single story. Through veiled narration, the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* give us the *Mahābhārata* at its most self-evolved.

Allow me to make one final point about veiled narration, this one simply on terminology. One might object to my using the word “narration” (or variations thereof) to describe the formal literary qualities of the *Pañcarātra*, which is clearly a play, not a story, and therefore cannot be “narrated” in the same way that we would speak of the *Virāṭaparvan* or any other part of the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* being narrated. While I take into account the important genre distinctions between the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* in what follows, I still prefer to use “narration” to describe what is happening in both works. In a dramatic context, I would argue, “narration” may refer to the structure and action of the plot; it may also refer to the speeches of the different characters, which advance and deepen the imaginative world of the play. Here I take

²² Shulman, “Toward a New Theory of Masks,” 27–28, quoted in Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 75.

my cue from Thomas Pavel, who writes in *The Poetics of Plot* that “narratology cannot be limited to narrative, just as poetics does not study just poetry.” He goes on to explain that

The object of a discipline does not follow from its name. As the study of both story and discourse, narratology must feel free to examine plays, films, narrative music and painting: Thus, even though the objects of my grammar are *dramatic* plots and not those of folktales, short stories, or novels, I shall occasionally use the adjective *narrative* to refer to the action of a play. Expressions like narrative domains, narrative syntax, narrative trees, and so on should accordingly be understood as related to plot as a general structuring principle, common to drama and prose fiction.²³

While embracing this overall perspective and seeking to align it with the *Mahābhārata*, I would hasten to add that the label of “narration” is not a particularly straightforward one when it comes to the *Mahābhārata* itself. Exactly who narrates the Sanskrit epic, and to whom? We could begin with Vyāsa, the epic’s imagined composer-compiler. Or we could hazard our best guess as to a historical storyteller: a bard, perhaps, basing his performance on written text? But ultimately the complex framing structure of the work means that we have dozens of narrators to contend with—Vaiśampāyana, Ugrasravas, Sañjaya, Lomaśa, Mārkaṇḍeya, Gāndhārī, Bhīṣma, Satyawatī, Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira, and numerous other characters all perform “narrator” roles at one point or another in the epic—and we have dozens of listeners to go along with them. At any given point in the epic, we might say that a particular passage is being “narrated” by two or more figures: the speaker to whom it is directly attributed and also the frame narrator beyond him (and the frame narrator beyond *him*, and so on). To add an additional layer of complication, we might note that on paper the *Mahābhārata* actually looks much more like a script than a story. Rarely

²³ Thomas G. Pavel, *The Poetics of Plot: The Case of English Renaissance Drama*, vol. 18, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), 15.

do we have an omniscient voice telling us what is happening; rather, we have characters *speaking to one another*; everything that unfolds in the epic happens through the voices of those individual characters.²⁴ So I ask: Where does narration stop and monologue begin? Where does narration segue into conversation—into dialogue—between the speaker and the listener? What about when multiple characters all have their points to make during the same scene? (Note the word “scene.”) If we use “narrative” in the context of the *Pañcarātra*, then we might just as well use “drama” in the context of the *Mahābhārata*—and nowhere more so than the *Virāṭaparvan*, which is self-consciously styled to serve as the epic’s play-within-a-play. The idea of veiled narration points to just such features. While narration is surely going on—overriding or obscuring familiar categories of Sanskrit literary analysis—veiling and multiplicity are essential to the process.

Veiled narration in the *Kīcakavadha* story

As we have come to appreciate, the *Virāṭaparvan* serves as the *Mahābhārata*’s own exposition of the process I am designating “veiled narration.” But as if to carry this expository process one step further, one step closer to perfection, the *Virāṭaparvan* also offers us one segment of its own narrative where we are able to see these complex dynamics with special clarity. In the remainder of this chapter we will become witnesses to this exemplary passage as it unfolds early in book 4, witnessing veiled narration in its own exemplarily epic way. This body of text recounts and dramatizes the inglorious death of Kīcaka (the chief of Virāṭa’s army and the brother of Virāṭa’s queen, Sudeṣṇā) at the hands of Bhīma and somewhat more indirectly Draupadī. Many *Mahābhāratas* recognize the special coherence of this segment of the

²⁴ Similarly, Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) on the enactment of *kathā* in Hindi.

Virāṭaparvan by calling it the *Kīcakavadha* (“the slaying of Kīcaka”). I will follow their example in what follows.²⁵ While I focus on the first part of the *Kīcakavadha* narrative, which culminates in Draupadī fending off Kīcaka in the middle of Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, his royal assembly hall, I will also draw upon other moments in the *Kīcakavadha* story, primarily the aftermath of Kīcaka’s death, when Kīcaka’s relatives threaten to set fire to Draupadī and Bhīma must preemptively kill them all instead.

Before I begin, let me offer a brief summary of the *Kīcakavadha* episode. (Here, as elsewhere, I base my reading on the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*.) Kīcaka holds a high status in Virāṭa’s court: he is the brother of Sudeṣṇā, Virāṭa’s wife, and he is also the head of Virāṭa’s army. Kīcaka catches sight of Draupadī—in disguise as Sudeṣṇā’s maid—and propositions her. Draupadī dismisses him, saying that she is already married to five *gandharvas* and that they will not look kindly upon anyone who makes advances toward her. Undeterred, Kīcaka asks Sudeṣṇā for help. She agrees to send Draupadī to Kīcaka’s quarters, ostensibly to bring back some liquor for her. Draupadī resists the errand but eventually goes to Kīcaka’s house, stopping along the way to do two things: (1) vow not to betray her husbands and (2) pray to Sūrya. Sūrya listens to her troubles and sends an invisible *rākṣasa* to guard her. When she arrives, Kīcaka tries to assault her once more. She fights him off and races from his quarters, flinging him on the ground. She runs to the *sabhā*, where Virāṭa, Yudhiṣṭhira (in disguise as Virāṭa’s gambling master), and Bhīma (as Virāṭa’s cook and wrestler) are all stationed. Kīcaka catches up with her and grabs her by the hair. At that moment the *rākṣasa* grabs Kīcaka and knocks him out. In the middle of the *sabhā*, Draupadī laments to Virāṭa about the way she has been treated. Virāṭa claims he does not know enough about the situation to take decisive action.

²⁵We ought not to confuse the section of the *Virāṭaparvan* known as the *Kīcakavadha* with Nīivarman’s seventh-century poem of the same name, which I mentioned earlier.

Yudhiṣṭhira dismisses her concerns and urges her to leave. Sudeṣṇā offers to have Kīcaka executed, but Draupadī insists that he will soon be killed anyway.

That night, Draupadī goes to Bhīma. She speaks at length of her misery in Virāṭa’s court, blaming Yudhiṣṭhira in particular. She holds out her hands, which are worn out by her labors. Bhīma weeps in sympathy but encourages her to stick it out for the rest of the year. Draupadī insists that he kill Kīcaka and Bhīma eventually agrees. The next day, Draupadī goes to Kīcaka and arranges to meet him in the empty dance hall that same night. Kīcaka goes to meet her only to find Bhīma waiting for him in the dark. The two wrestle, and Bhīma disfigures him so severely that when the guards discover his dead body, they cannot tell apart his head from his limbs. Everyone believes that this is the work of a *gandharva*—one of the mysterious chambermaid’s celestial husbands.

When Kīcaka’s 105 kinsmen learn what has happened, they plan to capture Draupadī so that they might burn her alive along with Kīcaka’s dead body. Virāṭa gives them the go-ahead. They begin to take her away, but Draupadī shouts for the Pāṇḍavas, using the secret names that they had established for themselves before entering Virāṭa’s city. Bhīma makes his body swell up, uproots a tree to use as a weapon, and goes to slay the Upakīcakas. They see him coming and set Draupadī free, but still Bhīma kills them all. Again everyone believes that this is the work of a *gandharva*, or perhaps several. Virāṭa realizes that Sudeṣṇā’s maid has caused the deaths of all of these powerful Kīcakas and advises Sudeṣṇā to send her on her way. Bṛhannaḍā and the princesses ask Draupadī to tell them the story of what happened, but she refuses. Finally Sudeṣṇā does indeed try to dismiss Draupadī, but Draupadī asks to stay in her service for thirteen more days.

Obviously the *Kīcakavadha* self-consciously echoes the story of the dice game in book 2, but crucially it provides a sense of resolution that the actual dicing story lacks. It also mirrors slivers of the great war—specifically, the conflict between Bhīma and Duryodhana (and his many brothers)—in such a way as to mask any sense of loss for the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. In the Kīcaka story, as in the dice game, Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to protect Draupadī from unwanted sexual advances; but here, she loudly protests Yudhiṣṭhira’s inaction and takes action herself. We see her express her anger at her attacker: this time, when a man (Kīcaka) touches her without her permission, she throws him to the ground—and when he grabs her by the hair and kicks her, a magical *rākṣasa* knocks him unconscious. She directs an even more pointed rage toward the bystanders, her supposed protectors, who remain silent throughout the scene—Yudhiṣṭhira most of all. Finally, here Draupadī has a chance to finish the job. In the *Kīcakavadha*, she persuades Bhīma to take immediate and decisive revenge on Kīcaka. He goes on to kill him and his 105 kinsmen, just as he will eventually slay all one hundred Dhārtarāṣṭra brothers in the battle of Kurukṣetra.

All this is presented with a sense of humor that we would never dream of finding in the dicing scene, nor any of the battle books. Kīcaka’s over-the-top attempts to rape Draupadī become a particular selling point in that regard, since Kīcaka is socially beneath her and therefore an inappropriate sexual partner: a queen-goddess would never fall for a *sūta* like him, even if she were not already wed to the Pāṇḍavas.²⁶ While the social mismatch between

²⁶ This is the first of several places where the *Virāṭaparvan*—even as it is presented in the critical edition—captures elements from the greater *Mahābhārata* story that are commonly available in accounts of the epic beyond the critical edition. In this case, Kīcaka’s *sūta* status reflects Karṇa’s. Draupadī’s rejection of Kīcaka—a rejection that largely hinges on his being a *sūta*—mirrors the story that many *Mahābhāratas* (if not the critical edition) tell of Draupadī’s *svayaṃvara*. Karṇa, a *sūta* by adoption, shows up at the event only to be dismissed by Draupadī off hand because of his social status. The critical edition does not offer this vignette, but its *Virāṭaparvan* encapsulates it none the less.

Draupadī and Kīcaka presents a significant threat to our heroine at times (and we’ll return to that idea), the text also uses the imbalance between them to experiment with the idea of precisely how threatening Kīcaka really is. He holds all the power, here, and it is surely his lust talking, but when he repeatedly says “Forget the wives I already have! They will be your slaves—no, it’s as if *I* will be your slave. I’ll be under your control forever,”²⁷ the text is giving us a taste of what it might be like if Kīcaka were to lose all power when it comes to Draupadī. Here the *Virāṭaparvan* draws a powerful contrast between what Kīcaka says to Draupadī—even in lust, and even if he ultimately intends to rape her—and what Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa say to her in the *sabhā* in book 2. There they refuse to let go of the image of Draupadī being a slave (*dāsī*) to them, returning to it constantly in order to torment her and the Pāṇḍavas further.

And so the *Virāṭaparvan* makes much of Kīcaka’s unrequited lust, and through that, it takes great care to experiment with the extent of the power that Draupadī holds over him. We hear, for example, a wonderfully detailed description of the food and drink he prepares for her: “Kīcaka raced home and ordered liquor so expertly distilled it was fit for a king. He had his expert chefs cook up a glorious feast: a goat and lamb dish, powerfully flavorful, and a smorgasbord of game meats—all different kinds!”²⁸ So, too, does the *Virāṭaparvan* linger over the image of Kīcaka primping in anticipation of their evening rendezvous. Here Kīcaka finds himself in a true “strange, stout, in yellow stockings, and cross-gartered” situation, if one that anticipates Shakespeare’s Malvolio by some thirteen hundred years. The narration grants us easy entry into Kīcaka’s mind and heart, inviting us to ridicule the very figure who will soon become

²⁷ *Mahābhārata* 4.13.12: *tyajāmi dārān mama ye purātanā bhavantu dāsyas tava cāruhāsini | ahaṃ ca te sundari dāsavat sthitaḥ sadā bhaviṣye vaśago varānane ||*

²⁸ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.7-8: *kīcakas tu grhaṃ gatvā bhagīnyā vacanāt tadā | surām āhārayāmāsa rājārhām suparisrutām || ājaurabhraṃ ca subhr̥ṣaṃ bahūṃś coccāvacān mrgān | kārayāmāsa kuśalair annapānaṃ suśobhanam ||*

the *Virāṭaparvan*'s central villain. We watch him fall so deeply into a Draupadī-inspired reverie (“drowning in joy”²⁹) that he loses all sense of time (“To him, the afternoon felt like a month”³⁰—and yet “in a rush he piled on all kinds of perfumes, jewelry, garlands”³¹) and deludes himself into thinking that he is physically deserving of her affection (“It’s not for nothing that the women of the house are always complimenting me, saying ‘You’re so well dressed! So handsome! There isn’t a man in the world who looks like you!’”³²).

All this is set at a distance from the reality of the situation, which is expressed when Vaiśampāyana, our narrator, editorializes: “The fool didn’t recognize that Death had taken the form of a maidservant.”³³ Here it is as if the narrator himself exerts power over Kīcaka, for rarely does Vaiśampāyana let the sound of his own judgment—and the fact that he knows what is to come in the story—rise to the surface like that. Usually he lets the story proceed on its own, and without any moralistic overlay. If one character or another is called a “fool,” as happens here, it tends to be because another character within the same narrative frame is describing him that way, not because Vaiśampāyana is making a pronouncement from a position of narrative omniscience. (While rare, this is not the only time that Vaiśampāyana’s personal voice pierces through the narration; we will discuss it again soon.) Draupadī and Bhīma, for their parts, wield so much power over Kīcaka that when it comes time for them to kill him, Bhīma can even afford to play along for a moment, allowing Kīcaka to stroke him and speak to him in the dark before Bhīma finally reveals himself (“Lucky you to be so handsome, and good thing you hold yourself in such

²⁹ *Mahābhārata* 4.21.19: *harṣapariplutaḥ*.

³⁰ *Mahābhārata* 4.21.18cd: *divasārdham samabhavan māsenaiiva samaṃ nṛpa ||*

³¹ A partial translation of *Mahābhārata* 4.21.20: *gandhābharanamāyleṣu vyāsaktaḥ sa viśesataḥ | alaṃcakāra so ’tmānaṃ satvaraḥ kāmamohitaḥ ||*

³² *Mahābhārata* 4.21.45: *nākasman māṃ praśamsanti sadā grhagatāḥ striyaḥ | suvāsā darśanīyaś ca nānyo ’sti tvādrśaḥ pumān ||*

³³ *Mahābhārata* 4.21.19cd: *sairandhrīrūpiṇaṃ mūḍho mṛtyuṃ taṃ nāvabuddhavān ||*

high esteem! But you’ve never felt *this* kind of a touch before”³⁴)—maintaining the illusion for Kīcaka right up until the last moment.³⁵ To kill Kīcaka is to exercise one kind of power over him, but to laugh at him—for Draupadī, Bhīma, Vaiśampāyana, and the audience alike—is quite another. Perhaps it is not the death but the gallows humor surrounding it that forms this series of events into the ultimate revenge story.

In the tale of Kīcaka’s failed seductions and death we find all the moral and narrative satisfaction that the dice game—and perhaps the whole *Mahābhārata*—denies us. We begin to see why the *Kīcakavadha* is, by my count, the most oft-retold story in the epic (other than perhaps the *Bhagavadgītā*). As early as the first millennium we find *Kīcakavadhas* in Sanskrit and Apabhramsha, to begin with; in the medieval and early modern periods they appear in regional languages as distant as Telugu and Old Hindi. This abundance of *Kīcakavadhas* shows us just how tempting it is—indeed, how tempting it has always been—to tell the *Mahābhārata* as a revenge story. Every triumphalist contemporary *Mahābhārata* belies that same instinct.

But the epic’s *Kīcakavadha* is more complicated than that. The Kīcaka story gives us what we might call a happy ending, yes, but it never lets us have it completely. At intervals the Kīcaka story draws us back into the dark, tense, “original” dice game and its aftermath. Some of these intervals take up a passage or more of the narration while others last only for a verse or two. Such moments are presented in alternation with the parts of the *Kīcakavadha* that lighten, resolve, or otherwise lend an emotional uplift to their source texts. The oscillations between these two visions of the *Mahābhārata*, the familiar downward spiral and the broadly comic

³⁴ *Mahābhārata* 4.21.46: *diṣṭyā tvam darśanīyo ’si diṣṭyātmānam praśamsasi | idr̥śas tu tvayā sparśaḥ spr̥ṣṭapūrvō na karhicit ||*

³⁵ In fact, this mirrors the narration of the early *Dyūtaparvan* (*Dicing Scene*) chapters in book 2. Duryodhana goes to Indraprastha: we see everything through his eyes; we feel his humiliation (there, too, the result of an illusion) when the others laugh at him. On all of this, see chapter 2 of Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*. The *Virāṭaparvan* takes the same approach to Kīcaka.

overlay, give this part of the *Virāṭaparvan* incredible depth and texture. The long stretches of disguise-play allow us to experience the breadth of the *Mahābhārata* in a completely different way from that to which we are accustomed, while the moments of “unveiling” prevent the comedy from falling into anything obvious or slapstick. They remind us of the whole world of the epic that lies underneath the costumes and that stretches far beyond the bounds of book 4. This is the complex work of veiled narration.

Draupadī’s misery

One such moment of “unveiling” inaugurates the *Kīcakavadha* section of the *Virāṭaparvan*. This should serve as a signal that the story to come will have layers, and that the narration is going to let us experience each layer on its own terms. Recall that at the very beginning of the *Virāṭaparvan*, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī select their disguises and are admitted into Virāṭa’s service. From there, the text fast-forwards through the year with descriptions of the Pāṇḍavas’ successes in their various roles: Yudhiṣṭhira always wins at dice, Bhīma (in addition to cooking) emerges victorious in wrestling matches, Arjuna teaches the princesses to dance, Nakula trains the horses well, and Sahadeva’s care for the cows earns him various rewards from Virāṭa. When it comes to the men, then, time passes quickly and well. Their roles in exile represent ironic continuations of their stations and passions back home. Draupadī’s experience is presented in stark contrast. Here is how the *Virāṭaparvan* shows us the difference between the brothers’ pleasure and their wife’s distress:

Yudhiṣṭhira gambled as often as he wanted, for he knew the heart of the dice. . .
Virāṭa showered Bhīma with prize money in the wrestling ring. . . When the sons
of Kuntī, who were actually great warriors, were living in disguise in Virāṭa’s
city, ten months flew by. But Draupadī, the daughter of Yajñasena, was left

carrying out the wishes of Sudeṣṇā. She deserved to be waited on herself, and she was miserable.³⁶

In this passage, the *Virāṭaparvan* articulates a distinction between the Pāṇḍava brothers' experience of social inversion—which is largely (if not always³⁷) rooted in pleasure and reward—and Draupadī's, which only brings her misery. Her suffering is a distinctly social suffering: “She deserved to be waited on herself.” It results from what she perceives as the humiliation of waiting upon Sudeṣṇā when she herself, a princess of no mere human birth, is the very embodiment of *śrī*—royal glory.

Structurally, too, Draupadī is identified with her new social status in a way that her husbands are not. Yudhiṣṭhira gives all five of the Pāṇḍava brothers special, secret names to use for one another during their year in disguise (all variations on “victory”—Jaya, Jayanta, Vijaya, Jayatsena, and Jayadbala); Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna give their alter egos public-facing names as well (Kaṅka, Ballava, Bṛhannaḍā). Yet Draupadī uses no secret name for herself, nor does she adopt one for her work as Sudeṣṇā's maidservant. In place of an individual name the text calls her only by the name of her profession, *sairandhrī* (the feminine version of *sairandhra*, a domestic servant). In this way the text subtly conveys the idea that compared to the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī finds herself quite restricted by her social rank.

There is a powerful intratextual resonance to the feelings of social and moral injury that Vaiśampāyana attributes to Draupadī in the passage quoted just above. When Draupadī enacts her role as a servant in Virāṭa's court, she fulfills the foreboding visions that Duryodhana,

³⁶ *Mahābhārata* 4.12.4abc: *sa hy akṣahṛdayajñas tān krīḍayāmāsa pāṇḍavaḥ | akṣavatyāṃ yathākāmam;* 4.12.25abc: *saṃharṣāt pradadau vittaṃ bahu rājā mahāmanāḥ | ballavāya mahāraṅge;* 4.13.1–2: *vasamāneṣu pārtheṣu matsyasya nagare tadā | mahārathēṣu channeṣu māsā daśa samatyayuh || yājñasenī sudeṣṇāṃ tu śuśrūṣantī viśāṃ pate | avasat paricārārhā suduḥkham janamejaya ||*

³⁷ As when they are described as “immensely sorrowful” (*atiduḥkhita*) early in the *Virāṭaparvan*; see *Mahābhārata* 4.11.13d.

Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa paint for her repeatedly at the end of book 2, when Yudhiṣṭhira stakes and loses her in the game of dice:

Duryodhana said:
Go bring me the Pāṇḍavas' wife, Draupadī,
Who commands their love and respect.
She'll clean the house and scurry around
With the other slave girls. That will amuse us.³⁸

Duḥśāsana said: I don't care
If you're bleeding, princess,
Wear a single cloth
Or wear nothing at all.
You were won in the game of dice—
You'll be our slave,
And with slaves, well,
We take our pleasure as we please.³⁹

Karṇa said:
There are three ways to be poor:
Be a servant, a student, or a woman
Who has no power of her own.
Everyone knows that.
You're the wife of a servant—you're his wealth,
“My lady!”
The lords you had, you've lost,
And you're a servant's wealth now:
A slave.

You'll come into our house,
Supply us with your services, let's say.
That will be the job given to you
When you come into our house.
Oh, princess,
No more the sons of Pṛthā but we

³⁸ *Mahābhārata* 2.59.1: *ehi kṣattar draupadīm ānayasva priyāṃ bhāryāṃ saṃmatām pāṇḍavānām | saṃmārjātām veśma paraitu śīghram ānando naḥ saha dāsībhir astu ||*

³⁹ *Mahābhārata* 2.60.27: *rajasvalā vā bhava yājñaseni ekāmbarā vāpy atha vā vivastrā | dyūte jitā cāsi kṛtāsi dāsī dāsīṣu kāmas ca yathopajoṣam ||*

Are are your lords now—
Sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, all.⁴⁰

While the Pāṇḍava brothers find themselves on the receiving end of some of the same “slave” language in the aftermath of the dice game, we can see from the speeches above—each spoken during a different stretch of the *sabhā* scene—that the imaginative force of the idea lands most heavily on Draupadī. In particular, it abounds in not-so-subtle suggestions that she will be sexually under the power of her new masters. In this way the *Mahābhārata* differentiates between the Pāṇḍavas’ and Draupadī’s specific experiences of loss during the dice game. Through the voices and imaginations of Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa, the narration makes the consequences for Draupadī seem extremely vivid in a way that it never quite does for her husbands.

Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa cannot stop talking about what it would be like for her to be their “slave” (*dāsī*). They utter the word again and again.

The *Mahābhārata* augments that repetition by laying out in intimate detail their vision of what it means to be a “slave.” The three men imagine Draupadī being present in their private space (“She’ll clean the house. . . You’ll come into our house. . . When you come into our house”), an idea that brings out her sexual vulnerability. Elsewhere their obsession with her sexual vulnerability barely manages to stay in the subtext (something I have tried to reflect in my translation of *naḥ paricārair bhajasva* as “Supply us with your services, let’s say”) and at times bursts straight out into the open (“Or wear nothing at all”). Part of the humiliation of it all is that they strip Draupadī of her individuality. Instead of retaining her highly specific, lauded place in the familial-mythological web—the daughter of a king, the embodiment of Śrī, born

⁴⁰ *Mahābhārata* 2.63.1–2: *trayaḥ kileme adhanā bhavanti dāsaḥ śiṣyaś cāsvatantrā ca nārī | dāsasya patnī tvam dhanam asya bhadre hīneśvarā dāsadhanam ca dāsī || praviśya sā naḥ paricārair bhajasva tat te kāryam śiṣṭam āveśya veśma | iśāḥ sma sarve tava rājaputri bhavanti te dhṛtarāṣṭrā na pārthāḥ ||*

supernaturally—she is grouped with nameless others (“scurry around / With the other slave girls. . . And with slaves, well, / We take our pleasure as we please. . . There are three ways to be wealthless”). Finally, they describe her servitude as cause for their own merriment (“That will amuse us. . . We take our pleasure as we please”).

We can see two ways in which the evocation of Draupadī’s suffering in the *Virāṭaparvan*, even at this early stage in the narrative, loops back—quite intentionally, I would argue—to the description of her interactions with Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa in the *sabhā* after the dice game. One emerges from that last point about pleasure. Recall how the passage in the *Virāṭaparvan* that we saw earlier (“Yudhiṣṭhira gambled. . . Virāṭa showered Bhīma with prize money. . . But Draupadī [was] miserable”) drew a contrast between the Pāṇḍavas’ playfulness and Draupadī’s misery in servitude. We can observe a striking and perhaps unexpected parallel to the passages from the *Sabhāparvan* that I quoted just above, which juxtapose the merriment of the Kauravas—who, like the Pāṇḍavas in Virāṭa’s court, cannot quite claim to be Draupadī’s “lords”—with Draupadī’s suffering. Moreover, for the men, that state of play leads to monetary gain: this is true of both the Dhārtarāṣṭras in the dice game and the Pāṇḍavas in Virāṭa’s court. In both *parvans* the epic highlights the difference between the men—who play games, find amusement, and win wealth—and Draupadī, whose hardships in one way or another make that enjoyment possible. In the *Virāṭaparvan* it is not only Kīcaka and his brothers who “play” the Kauravas; the Pāṇḍavas “play” them, too.

The second resonance of Hāstinapura at the court of Virāṭa is that in both sections of the epic, the primary cause of Draupadī’s suffering is the notion that she is occupying (or will soon occupy) a position of household servitude and therefore stands to lose a great deal of social power. To be fair, we can distinguish between the kind of slavery that the Kaurava men envision

for Draupadī and the type of work that Draupadī performs for Sudeṣṇā, and accordingly, the text uses a different word for each of them: *dāsī* (slave, slave girl) in book 2 but *sairandhrī* (chambermaid or maidservant) in book 4. In this way Draupadī’s role in the *Virāṭaparvan* is still, formally speaking, a lighter or less consequential version of the dark future that the Kaurava men imagine awaits her. That is precisely the kind of comic twist we have been taught to expect in the *Virāṭaparvan*. A carnivalesque “lightening” of (narrative) reality would never be out of place here. But if we look closely, we can see that the epic pushes us to take Draupadī’s servitude in the *Virāṭaparvan* much more seriously, in a way, than the threats leveled against her at the end of book 2. For it is here in the *Virāṭaparvan*, and not in the *Sabhāparvan*, where the force of her social suffering and sexual vulnerability is brought to full expression.

In the *Sabhāparvan* we hear a great deal from the men speaking to and about Draupadī, but the epic gives us only a pointillist sense of her emotional trajectory in those chapters. Indeed, our lack of access to her inner workings for much of the dicing scene is part of what gives that scene its moral and emotional impact. It is only by resisting a public show of anger that Draupadī is able to maintain enough social capital to press the gathered kings on her riddle-question (“Whom did Yudhiṣṭhira lose first, himself or me?”) and ultimately earn the boons from Dhṛtarāṣṭra that will set her husbands free. With the exception of her quiet protest to Duḥśāsana (2.60.29–34) and her more public outburst later in the scene (2.62.1–2, 4–13), Draupadī reveals little of her personal indignation throughout; instead, it comes through in a somewhat indirect manner. We might see it as a subtext in her speeches about dharma, perhaps, or in her physical demeanor (her weeping, for example), or in her pointed looks at the Pāṇḍavas. But in the *Virāṭaparvan* Draupadī—with the help of the narrator—will hold nothing back. Over the course of these chapters the epic grants us intimate access to her thoughts and emotional states. In this

sense Draupadī does not gain a costume in the *Virāṭaparvan* but, rather, sheds one. She is presented as exactly the same Draupadī we know from book 2—still experiencing the weight of social powerlessness, still framed by the narration in such a way as to compel the audience to believe this this is unjust—but here in book 4 she describes her experience loud and clear; she is quite vocally herself. Her self-expression paints for the audience a broad mural of her emotional state, and this allows us to peer back into the dice game from a new angle. Beginning from those first lines of the *Kīcakavadha* (“She deserved to be waited on herself, and she was miserable”), Draupadī’s social agony anchors the *Virāṭaparvan* to the rest of the *Mahābhārata*.

I want to take a moment to highlight an important formal way in which the *Mahābhārata* presents Draupadī’s experience in the *Virāṭaparvan* as an opening and a deepening (rather than an inversion or a “lightening”) of what we see of her in the *Sabhāparvan*’s fraught dicing scene. Earlier we observed that Vaiśampāyana’s voice comes through with its own characterological sound when he describes how Kīcaka prepares for his rendezvous with Draupadī: “The fool didn’t recognize that Death had taken the form of a maidservant.” When that happens, Vaiśampāyana’s perspective is privileged over those of the characters whom he is describing. This is not to say that Vaiśampāyana’s voice is totally objective or omniscient there. On the contrary, I would argue that the epic is set up precisely so as to *avoid* painting a veneer of absolute objectivity or omniscience onto any single voice or perspective—ever. But what we do have in that instance is a place where Vaiśampāyana’s individual opinion and relative narrative omniscience clearly stand out, and that has the effect of drawing the audience into Vaiśampāyana’s particular way of seeing things. Rather than experience the action of the story from the ground up, as it were, we see it from above. And rather than leaving us to make sense of the action for ourselves, Vaiśampāyana tells us exactly how to interpret what is happening. In the

case of Kīcaka, the result is a kind of doubled comedy: we watch Kīcaka walk into a trap on the level of the action (Bhīma waiting for him instead of Draupadī) as well as on the level of the narration (Vaiśampāyana knowing what Kīcaka does not).

To go a step further, it is important to acknowledge that turning up the volume on Vaiśampāyana’s voice attunes the audience to the narrator’s presence, making us pointedly aware of the fact that all of this is being narrated to us in the first place. It makes a great deal of sense that the *Virāṭaparvan* would push the audience to a hyperawareness of the narration *as narration*—as an artistic object, something crafted, something shaped and performed—since the *Virāṭaparvan* not only thematizes performance, generally speaking, but also self-consciously positions itself as a refashioning and performance of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. When the epic draws the audience’s attention to the artificial quality of it all, this already pulls back the veil, albeit in a different, metaliterary sense.

The very same knowing voice comes through at the beginning of the *Kīcakavadha*, when Vaiśampāyana remarks that Draupadī “deserved to be waited on herself” (*paricārārhā*). In overtly expressing what Draupadī “deserves” or “is worthy of” (*arha*), the narrator again acts in the somewhat unusual capacity of moral arbiter. The term *arha* brings us back once again to the game of dice, where Vaiśampāyana—again on a kind of narrative loudspeaker—uses a variation of it to describe the unjustness of what happens to Draupadī, “who deserved none of this” (*atadarhamāṇa*).⁴¹ Elsewhere in the *sabhā* scene we find that *arha* reflects the same sentiment—Draupadī “does not deserve” (*anarhatī*) the treatment leveled at her, for example, and Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhīma “do not deserve” (*anarhat*) to be gambled away—although in those cases the opinion is filtered through the voice of one character or another (Bhīma in the first instance,

⁴¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.60.47: *tām kṛṣyamāṇāṃ ca rajasvalāṃ ca srastottarīyām atadarhamāṇām | vṛkodaraḥ prekṣya yudhiṣṭhiraṃ ca cakāra kopam paramārtarūpaḥ ||*

Yudhiṣṭhira in the second⁴²), instead of coming straight from the mouth of Vaiśampāyana.⁴³ Draupadī herself puts the word at the center of her attempts to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira that he should cut short their time in the forest and take immediate revenge on Duryodhana. This is during their forest exile in book 3: “Arjuna had to come to the forest. He doesn’t deserve to suffer (*aduhkhārha*); he should have had an easy life. The fact that you can look at him and not feel the anger of revenge—it mystifies me.”⁴⁴

The force of that whole ethical-emotional trajectory bursts out in book 4 when Vaiśampāyana says of Draupadī that she “deserved to be waited on herself.” In an epic where nearly everything seems to be subjective, unstable, up for debate, or presented through the lens of one character or another, Draupadī’s worthiness—and the suffering she experiences when others fail to honor that worthiness—is an unusual site of narrative stability, a moral and emotional linchpin. It is as close as the *Mahābhārata* gets to an objective view. The fact that Vaiśampāyana should be the one to voice it, here, reflects that turn toward objectivity. In this moment the *Virāṭaparvan* presents us with something that approaches a lasting truth. We arrive at the *Kīcakavadha* to discover a state of things that rests directly on the moral-emotional groundwork that was laid down so skillfully in books 2 and 3. Nothing could be further from a “retelling”—rather, it is a deeply inlaid part of the old, familiar base narrative itself.

⁴² For Bhīma describing Draupadī as *anarhatī*, see *Mahābhārata* 2.61.5 For Yudhiṣṭhira staking the “undeserving” Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhīma, see *Mahābhārata* 2.58.14, 20, 24.

⁴³ Draupadī completely changes the emotional resonance of the term in 2.63.34, at the end of the *sabhā* scene, when she says that she “does not deserve” three boons from Dhṛtarāṣṭra. For fear of greed, she says, she ought to have only two: *lobho dharmasya nāśāya bhagavan nāham utsahe | anarhā varam ādātum tṛtīyaṃ rājasattama ||*

⁴⁴ *Mahābhārata* 3.28.26: *dṛṣṭvā vanagataṃ pārtham aduhkhārhaṃ sukhocitam | na ca te vardhate manyus tena muhyāmi bhārata ||* Note the similar use of *aduhkhārha*- elsewhere in the same speech: *Mahābhārata* 3.28.6, 18.

So we begin the *Kīcakavadha* with this profound reminder of the stark and ever-present truth of Draupadī’s social suffering. How then do we return to a state of play? How does the *Virāṭaparvan* bring us back to, well, the *Virāṭaparvan*? How does the epic put the veil back in place? Here Kīcaka is our answer. Through him, an idea that begins as a direct reflection of the wider *Mahābhārata* (“She deserved to be waited on herself, and she was miserable”) becomes a refraction. Kīcaka bends this very same image of “deserving to be waited on” into comedy.

Coming across Draupadī for the first time, he exclaims to Sudeṣṇā:

My god, this beautiful woman is your *servant*?
She looks absolutely stunning.
She should over rule me and everything that’s mine
Because it makes no sense that she runs errands for *you*!⁴⁵

It is one of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s many brilliant ironies that Kīcaka, the supposed villain in all this, should be the only man to share—immediately and unquestioningly—Draupadī’s outright indignation over her social status. His motives may not be pure, but he gets the point. And he goes on to say that he feels utterly powerless around her: “She should rule over me and everything that’s mine.” Thus he wholeheartedly adopts Vaiśampāyana’s “objective” view that Draupadī hardly deserves a life of servitude, but the sentiment no longer seems so painful or discouraging. Much of the humor, I think, comes from his disbelieving comparison of Draupadī and Sudeṣṇā: “This lady works for *you*?” Framed this way, the “undeserving” one is Sudeṣṇā, and Draupadī’s social superiority seems to be restored in contrast to hers. Kīcaka—again: our villain!—gives us the uplifting retelling that we have been waiting for, and that the *Virāṭaparvan* has promised to deliver.

⁴⁵ *Mahābhārata* 4.13.8: *aho taveyaṃ paricārikā śubhā pratyagrarūpā pratibhāti mām iyam | ayuktarūpaṃ hi karoti karma te praśāstu mām yac ca mamāsti kiṃcana ||*

Anger, pride, and the lack of pretense

Draupadī’s distinctly social distress bursts through the *Virāṭaparvan*’s jovial veneer again just two chapters later, when Kīcaka attacks her—in full view of Virāṭa, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Bhīma, at that—and Draupadī raises her voice in protest. The scene marks a period of narrative “unveiling” in which the distorted social architecture of the dice game is questioned and explicitly reconstructed. Socially speaking, Draupadī’s attackers in both scenarios tread on much of the same ground: Kīcaka’s position at the head of Virāṭa’s army mirrors that of both Karṇa and Duryodhana at the head of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s; his being the first of more than a hundred brothers reflects Duryodhana’s having nearly that many brothers himself. The most pronounced symbolic continuity between the antagonists is that they share a social class. Both Kīcaka (from book 4) and Karṇa (from book 2) are *sūtas*—individuals who would typically attend a king in the role of charioteer, bard, or both. For that matter, both Kīcaka and Karṇa are unusually powerful *sūtas*: Kīcaka is the queen’s brother and serves at the head of Virāṭa’s army, while Karṇa, who but for his adoptive parents would not be a *sūta* at all, becomes a king and eventually leads the Kaurava army himself. When it comes to Karṇa, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī pay no heed to that exceptionalism: throughout the great war and its even longer preamble, the Pāṇḍavas scorn Karṇa for being a *sūta* who walks among royalty. In book 4, too, the fact that Kīcaka is a *sūta* will become the centerpiece of Draupadī’s remonstrance. Far more than Kīcaka’s physical aggression itself, what matters to Draupadī is the fact that the offender comes from a class considerably beneath hers.

Even beyond the figure of Kīcaka himself, this part of the *Kīcakavadha* story preserves the social setup of the earlier *sabhā* with exactitude. In both scenes, Draupadī is the wife of men

who were formerly kings and are now servants; she is treated as if she were a servant herself. In both scenes, various kings look on and fail to intervene: two of those kings are Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma; another onlooker king (Dhṛtarāṣṭra in book 2, Virāṭa in book 4) has control over the primary attacker (initially Duryodhana, now Kīcaka); and finally, in both scenes, action unfolds in a highly public, royal, and masculine space, namely, the *sabhā*. The exposed nature of the location sits at the core of Draupadī’s protest in book 2: “What could be more deplorable than this: for a woman—the right kind of woman, a virtuous woman, *me*—now to find herself right in the middle of the *sabhā*? What has become of the dharma of kings?”⁴⁶

Even though Kīcaka’s attack on Draupadī in book 4 is quickly foiled, her feeling of social injury still goes on to take up a great deal of expressive space in the narrative. Draupadī’s words of protest—which she directs to Virāṭa, though they are also intended for Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma’s ears—draw the reader’s attention to this highly social aspect of her indignance. She hangs her objections on the perceived distance between the political and ethical loftiness of the men to whom she bears the closest attachment (her husbands: “these men” in the quote that follows) and the comparatively low station of Kīcaka, whom she further diminishes by calling him only “the son of a *sūta*”:

These men—an enemy of theirs does not sleep
If he so much as brushes the earth with his foot—

I am their wife, and I still have my pride,
And the son of a *sūta* struck me with his foot.

These men—how they would give and never beg,
How pious they are, how honest—

⁴⁶ *Mahābhārata* 2.62.8: *kiṃ tvataḥ kṛpaṇaṃ bhūyo yad ahaṃ strī satī śubhā | sabhāmadhyaṃ vigāhe ’dya kva nu dharmo mahikṣitām ||*

I am their wife, and I still have my pride,
And the son of a *sūta* struck me with his foot.

These men—you always hear them
Beating their drums, snapping their bowstrings—

I am their wife, and I still have my pride,
And the son of a *sūta* struck me with his foot.

These men—who have brilliance and patience
And power and self-respect—

I am their wife, and I still have my pride,
And the son of a *sūta* struck me with his foot.

They would slay this whole world, these men,
If dharma didn't have them by the neck—

I am their wife, and I still have my pride,
And the son of a *sūta* struck me with his foot.⁴⁷

Draupadī's refrain overwhelmingly seeks to contrast her social status as the wife of such imposing men—and the pride (*māna*: self-regard, really) that such a status affords her—with Kīcaka's class identity as a *sūta*.⁴⁸ It is an obvious point, but note the frequency with which she reiterates it. An urgent epistrophe, it forms the entire second half of each of five consecutive verses. This should serve as a signal of its heightened importance, since it is rare in the epic for an entire line to be repeated several times over the course of a short passage. Such concentrated repetition tends to happen at moments of intense emotional expression or dramatic tension. We

⁴⁷ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.15-19: *yeṣāṃ vairī na svapiti padā bhūmim upaspr̥śan | teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt || ye dadyur na ca yāceyur brahmaṇyāḥ satyavādinah | teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt || yeṣāṃ dundubhinirghoṣo jyāghoṣaḥ śrūyate 'nīsam | teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt || ye te tejasvino dāntā balavanto 'bhimāninaḥ | teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt || sarvalokam imam hanyur dharmapāśasitās tu ye | teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt ||*

⁴⁸ Vaiśampāyana is aligned with her in this respect as well, repeatedly calling Kīcaka “that *sūta*.”

hear it when Śakuni claims his victories in the game of dice (“All that Śakuni said to Yudhiṣṭhira was ‘I have won!’”), when Draupadī tries to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to go to war with the Kauravas (“How can you not feel vengeful anger?”), and when Arjuna mourns the loss of Abhimanyu (“I will die if I do not see my son again”).⁴⁹ Here we find another instance of concentrated repetition, and despite the fact that it is positioned at the heart of the *Virāṭaparvan*, there is no playfulness about it.

Something else contributes to the pronounced lack of “play” at this point in the narrative: Draupadī almost completely abandons her cover in this speech. Her alter ego, the maid, is supposed to be married to five *gandharvas*. When Kīcaka initially approaches her, she uses precisely that story to fend him off, issuing a warning that her *gandharva* husbands will kill him if he touches her. It is notable that even there she describes those husbands as *devasutas*, or “the sons of gods”—a term that would seem to apply much more naturally to the Pāṇḍavas than it would to a family of *gandharvas*, who are not typically considered the offspring of deities so much as celestial beings in their own right. But all pretense seems to fall away here when she describes her husbands as politically powerful, unyielding in battle, morally unimpeachable, and locked in conflict with dharma. The pronouns are opaque enough—the Sanskrit text doesn’t use the word “men” but, rather, a series of masculine pronouns (*yeṣām, ye, teṣām*) that could theoretically refer to *gandharvas* as well as they could to the Pāṇḍavas—which means that, yes, technically Draupadī sticks to her cover story. The descriptive context, however, makes it clear that all of these masculine pronouns refer to a very earthly set of husbands (hence my translation “these men”). Draupadī does not sketch the typical features of *gandharvas*, who, in the *Mahābhārata* at least, spend their time amusing themselves in Indra’s heaven and are rarely if

⁴⁹ Throughout *Mahābhārata* 3.38 we hear Draupadī’s refrain: *kasmān manyur na vardhate*. On Arjuna’s lament for Abhimanyu, see chapter 5.

ever described in terms of their personal ethics, political prowess, or interior lives. Rather, she points to the features of earthly rulers: figures who conquer their enemies, carry a great deal of social power, and have active ethical-emotional lives. The individuals whom Draupadī describes beat their war-drums and twang their bowstrings—it’s quite a step away from the musical talents often attributed to *gandharvas*. Her portrayal of “these men” would stand up to many an idealized description of the Pāṇḍavas elsewhere in the epic.⁵⁰

Indeed, when Draupadī argues that her husbands would stand to conquer everything and everyone “if dharma didn’t have them by the neck,” it reflects precisely what Bhīma says about *himself* during the dicing scene: “But dharma has me by the neck—I can’t do any damage.”⁵¹ In both cases, “dharma”—always a slippery term—works as a double-entendre. On one level, it refers to the (intentionally opaque) concept of ethical behavior that would prevent Bhīma and in fact Yudhiṣṭhira from protecting Draupadī in both *sabhās*: that is dharma as an idea, or perhaps an ideal. But on another level, it refers to Dharma as a person—that is, Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma—who can be said to “have [Bhīma] by the neck,” since his failure to intervene on Draupadī’s behalf is the most pronounced in both scenarios. As a result, Draupadī’s protest carves an imaginative pathway back to the earlier *sabhā*, and in doing so, it powerfully recalls Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira as their former selves. She refuses to cater to their new personas or, indeed, to hers. Through all this, she speaks much less as a maidservant and much more as Draupadī, the self-respecting wife (*māninī bhāryā*) of the men she has described. Her protest temporarily does away with the playful veneer of the *Virāṭaparvan* altogether.

⁵⁰ From Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 64–71, we learn that in Nīivarman’s *Kīcakavadha*, the intentionally vague pronouns that Draupadī uses in her *Mahābhārata* speech become an actually bitextual (*śleṣa*) passage. It can be read two ways: one reading maintains everyone’s disguises, while the other speaks to their “real” situation.

⁵¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.62.36ab: *dharmapāśasitas tv evaṃ nādhigacchāmi saṃkaṭam |*

She speaks with so little guise that Vaiśampāyana must work overtime to reassure the audience that she hasn't given the Pāṇḍavas away. In order to do that, he carefully points out that even while voicing her lament, she keeps her (or, rather, their: the Pāṇḍavas') "promise"—this presumably refers to their agreement to remain in disguise until the end of the year—and that she remains conscious of her own appearance:

Beautiful as ever, she reached the doorway of the *sabhā* and wept. She spoke to Virāṭa but studied her husbands. Their hearts sank. Draupadī was almost consumed by the act of looking at them, so furiously did she look. But she was careful of her expressions and stayed true to the promise they had made. It was all tied up in dharma.⁵²

Those final observations would be unnecessary for Vaiśampāyana to share, I think, if in her protest Draupadī had truly adopted the voice of her alter ego. But because she speaks so clearly as Draupadī there—something that is augmented by the fact that even though she speaks to Virāṭa, she visibly describes her husbands *as themselves*—the text needs to spell out the fact that her sincerity has limited effects. It does not result in Draupadī abandoning her costume entirely, nor does it result in anyone recognizing them. (Recall that this is the magic of the *yakṣa*'s boon.) She is still playing it by the book, but just barely; she comes so close to stepping out of bounds that Vaiśampāyana has to step in and show us where the boundary actually lies. After Draupadī's protest, Yudhiṣṭhira goes on to do the same thing *inside* the world of the story that Vaiśampāyana does *outside* of it: he re-establishes Draupadī's cover—"Off to Sudeṣṇā's house,

⁵² *Mahābhārata* 4.15.13–14: *sā sabhādvāram āsādyā rudatī matsyam abravīt | avekṣamāṇeva suśronī patīṃs tān dīnacetasah || ākāram abhirakṣantī pratijñāṃ dharmasamhitām | dahyamāneva raudreṇa cakṣuṣā drupadātmajā ||*

you maid (*sairandhri*)! You can't be here any longer"⁵³—ushering her back onstage, in a sense, to perform her role as a maidservant, just as he ushers her out of the *sabhā*.

When Vaiśampāyana anchors the narration on Draupadī's gaze, above, it mirrors the way he describes her in the *sabhā* in book 2. There, as she speaks to Duḥśāsana under her breath, protesting his treatment of her, she looks at the Pāṇḍavas:

As the beautiful woman whispered in such distress
She looked at her husbands with a blistering gaze.
They were irate.
Her sideways looks fell on them, burning them,
Making their bodies twist in anger.

It wasn't their kingdom taken
Their wealth drained
Their precious jewels stolen
That gave rise to their suffering.

It was Draupadī's sideways look—
That look cast in anger
By their tormented wife.⁵⁴

On one level, then, Draupadī's angry gaze in book 4 directly repeats her withering looks in book 2. The geometry of the two scenes is exactly the same. Draupadī addresses someone else—a more immediate tormenter—while looking furiously at her husbands, whom she ultimately blames for all of it. This alone makes for a striking moment of narrative “unveiling” in book 4. But note the shift in emotional emphasis between the two scenes. In book 2, the narration gives significant weight to the Pāṇḍavas' feelings—their suffering, especially. The narration “stays

⁵³ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.31cd: *gaccha sairandhri mātra sthāḥ sudeṣṇāyā niveśanam* ||

⁵⁴ *Mahābhārata* 2.35–36: *tathā bruvantī karuṇaṃ sumadhyamā kākṣeṇa bhartṛṇ kupitān apaśyat | sā pāṇḍavān kopaparītadehān saṃdīpayāmāsa kaṭākṣapātaiḥ || hrtena rājyena tathā dhanena ratnais ca mukhyair na tathā babhūva | yathārtayā kopasamūritena kṛṣṇākatākṣeṇa babhūva duḥkham* ||

with” them, in a way, even while it posits Draupadī’s looks and her anger as the source of their suffering. In book 4, however, the narration stays with Draupadī: *she* is the one who is “almost consumed” (*dahyamānā iva*) by her own furious gaze. This prompts us to reconsider our understanding of Draupadī back in book 2: was she “almost consumed” by her anger then, too? Here book 4 steps beyond the point of unveiling. It shows us the emotional landscape beneath Draupadī’s anger in book 2 as well as in book 4. The *Virāṭaparvan* brings to the surface what remains subtext in the *Sabhāparvan*.

One more observation: All this happens after Kīcaka has been forcefully brought down by the *rākṣasa*. This is important because it reflects the way that the *Kīcakavadha* oscillates between reframing the earlier *sabhā* scene as an uplifting revenge story (e.g., Draupadī throwing Kīcaka to the ground and the *rākṣasa* decisively knocking him out) and returning to the same troubling elements of the “base” narrative that it reworks elsewhere. Kīcaka’s defeat, and even his ultimate slaughter by Bhīma, does nothing to subdue Draupadī’s indignation; it cannot prevent the narration from powerfully evoking the most strained moments in the game of dice. What we initially believe to be a satisfying conclusion—Kīcaka’s defeat—turns out to be a ruse. This will happen repeatedly in the *Virāṭaparvan* right up until the end, which will conclude with a wedding only to leave us on the brink of war. The dark shadow of the “real” *Mahābhārata* always looms just beyond the frame.

Ritual interruptions and the suspension of resolution

Where *do* we find a sense of resolution—if only a temporary one—in the *Kīcakavadha*? I would argue that we arrive at points of satisfying conclusion when Draupadī takes revenge on those who seek to demean her, just as when she throws Kīcaka to the ground in the segment of

the story discussed above, and that this newfound feeling of resolution is made all the more meaningful by the strength and extent of the parallels between the two Draupadī-in-the-*sabhā* scenes—the one in book 2 and the one in book 4. I will address several of these parallels here—some of them involving Kīcaka and his attack on Draupadī, others involving the wider setup in Virāṭa’s *sabhā*—in the interest of showing how the *Virāṭaparvan* takes hold of some of the most powerful tensions in the dicing scene and then goes on to resolve them. From there we will return to the idea that the *Virāṭaparvan* uses the voice of Draupadī to unsettle whatever sense of resolution it seems to offer.

We have already seen how the *Virāṭaparvan* crafts its antagonist, Kīcaka, as a symbolic amalgamation of Draupadī’s primary antagonists two books earlier. But he is designed to capture the behavior of those earlier antagonists, too. Just like Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, and Karṇa in book 2, Kīcaka demonstrates extreme sexual aggression toward Draupadī here in book 4. The two scenes sketch the apex of that aggression differently, but I would argue that these are variations in shape, not intensity. In the dicing scene, the Kaurava brothers’ aggression reaches one peak in the famous moment when Duḥśāsana attempts to disrobe Draupadī (2.61.41–43), yet it finds a second apex when Duryodhana stages a second disrobing later in the same scene: his own, exposing his thigh to her (2.63.11–12). In book 4, however, the arc of Kīcaka’s aggression finds its highest point when Kīcaka throws Draupadī on the floor and kicks her (4.15.7). The two scenes also share an image that vividly illustrates Draupadī’s social and sexual vulnerability and that has long been part of the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative iconography—namely, the event of Duḥśāsana pulling Draupadī’s hair in book 2 (2.60.21–23), which has its double when Kīcaka

pulls her hair in book 4: “She fled for safety to the *sabhā*, where King Yudhiṣṭhira was—but as she was running, Kīcaka seized her by a tress of her hair” (4.15.6–7).⁵⁵

Not only do these instances of hair-pulling constitute, in Hildebeitel’s words, “a form of sexual assault, and a symbolic prelude to rape,”⁵⁶ but when they unfold earlier, in book 2, they also disrupt two ritual processes. One, as Hildebeitel explains, is the course of Draupadī’s period. Given that menstrual blood brings the woman in question to a state of ritual impurity, it becomes “essential for a woman’s period to go through its natural course, and especially, while it is doing so, for her to be unmolested.”⁵⁷ That is one of the reasons that Duḥśāsana’s interference with that process in book 2 carries so much weight in the narrative: it brings the image of the interrupted ritual—a theme that looms large in the *Mahābhārata* and serves as one of the epic’s organizing principles—to life on the most intimate grounds possible. Although Draupadī is not described as menstruating at this point in book 4, I would argue that the concept of the interrupted ritual resonates just as much here as it does in book 2. Hildebeitel, drawing upon the work of Biardeau, helps to tell us why. During their forest exile the Pāṇḍavas, he reports, “are prophetically described in some manuscripts as *dīkṣitas* [initiates]. The thirteenth year. . . would thus mark the completion of their *dīkṣā*, the ‘consecration’ through which the sacrificer is ‘reborn’ in the *dīkṣā* hut and thereby consecrated to perform sacrifice.”⁵⁸ Through her role as Sudeṣṇā’s hairdresser—an “occupation [that is] most deeply bound up with impurity”—Draupadī in particular channels “the taking on of ritual danger, death, and impurity” that is required of initiates on the road to

⁵⁵ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.6ef-7ab: *sabhāṃ śaraṇam ādhāvad yatra rājā yudhiṣṭhira || tāṃ kīcakahaḥ pradhāvanīṃ keśapakṣe parāmrṣat |*

⁵⁶ Alf Hildebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” in *When the Goddess Was a Woman: Mahābhārata Ethnologies—Essays by Alf Hildebeitel, Volume 2*, ed. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 26.

⁵⁷ Hildebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” 26.

⁵⁸ Hildebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” 16.

consecration.⁵⁹ When Kīcaka pulls her by the hair, then, he is symbolically interrupting this process of consecration, this *dīkṣā*.

Back in book 2, Duḥśāsana’s grasp on Draupadī’s hair implicitly spoils a second ritual—that of Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya*. This lends an additional (if allegorical) depth to Draupadī’s suffering, the emotional gravity of which anchors the narration:

She stood up in deep distress
Took her hand and smoothed
Her face, drained of color,
And, pained, ran over to the wives
Of old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, bull of the Kurus.
But furious, thundering
Duḥśāsana rushed to storm her.
He caught the queen by her hair—
Her long, dark wave of hair,
Hair showered with the water
That *mantras* had purified
When Yudhiṣṭhira took his last ablutions
At the *rājasūya*, that momentous rite.
He stroked it, domineering,
Paying no heed to the Pāṇḍavas’ manly pride.⁶⁰

By taking great pains to describe Draupadī’s hair as having been sprayed by the water of Yudhiṣṭhira’s ritual bath at the conclusion of the *rājasūya*, the narrator makes it seem as if Duḥśāsana, in touching Draupadī’s hair, were interrupting, toying with, and indeed polluting the *rājasūya* itself. That idea gives the last line all the more force: not only is Duḥśāsana

⁵⁹ Hildebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” 16–17.

⁶⁰ *Mahābhārata* 2.60.21-23: *tataḥ samutthāya sudurmanāḥ sā vivarṇam āmṛjya mukhaṃ kareṇa | ārtā pradrudrāva yataḥ striyas tā vṛddhasya rājñāḥ kurupuṃgavasya || tato javenābhisāsāra roṣād duḥśāsanas tām abhigarjamānaḥ | dīrgheṣu nīleṣv atha cormimatsu jagrāha keśeṣu narendrapatnīm || ye rājasūyāvabhṛthe jalena mahākṛatau mantrapūtena siktāḥ | te pāṇḍavānām paribhūya vīryaṃ balāt pramṛṣṭā dhṛtarāṣṭrajena ||*

“unmanning” (in van Buitenen’s memorable translation⁶¹) the Pāṇḍava brothers by dominating their wife, but he is also dismantling their claim to royal supremacy by symbolically obstructing, and therefore delegitimizing, the *rājasūya*.

Part of what gives the passage its specific sway is its masterful use of water as a theme and metaphor. The pure, consecrated water that makes Yudhiṣṭhira a sovereign (“water / that mantras had purified / When Yudhiṣṭhira took his last ablutions / At the *rājasūya*”) is then delicately showered (*sikta*) onto Draupadī’s hair, where it is figured into a wave (*ūrmi*) that is itself overpowered when Duḥśāsana rushes to attack her—a metaphorical thundering, or rumbling (*abhigarjamāna*) storm (*abhi*√*sr*—“flow towards”). We are left with the image of a thunderstorm (Duḥśāsana’s grasp) falling on dark ocean waves (Draupadī’s hair). But oceans always withstand storms; so, too, will Draupadī’s power outlast Duḥśāsana’s. The more pointed comparison, rather, is between the two kinds of water that touch upon those waves. What’s a sprinkle of bathwater in the face of a thunderstorm?

All this comes to the surface when Kīcaka grabs Draupadī by the hair two books later, in Virāṭa’s *sabhā*. But that is also where the two *sabhā* scenes begin to diverge. Indeed, the most significant narratological difference between the two scenes lies in the nature of the *consequences* of the moral fracture and emotional letdown that are so central to these sections of book 2 and book 4. What matters is not the fact that disturbing things happen to Draupadī—in a work as committed to moral and emotional realism as the *Mahābhārata* is, that must be a constant—but, rather, that the *response* to them changes between book 2 and book 4. The *Sabhāparvan*’s dicing scene offers little by way of vengeance against Draupadī’s attackers, at least in any concrete or immediate sense. Each of the Kaurava brothers’ two major offenses—the

⁶¹ J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata: 2. The Book of the Assembly Hall, 3. The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 141.

attempted disrobing and the exposure of the thigh—prompts a vow from Bhīma, which is to say that in place of immediate action we have words that promise future action. The attempted disrobing occasions Bhīma to declare that he will rip open Duḥśāsana’s chest and drink his blood; the exposure of the thigh, meanwhile, gives rise to Bhīma’s vow to smash that very same thigh with a mace.⁶² Both vows include language that lays out the circumstances under which Bhīma will fulfill them: not right then and there—though the epic takes care to ensure the reader knows he would be capable of it—but later, “in battle” (*yudhi, mahāhave*).

At this point one might recall the series of offenses against Draupadī and ask: How do the Pāṇḍavas respond to Duḥśāsana laying his hands on Draupadī’s hair? Here the expansive *Mahābhārata* tradition gives us an answer where the epic’s dicing scene remains silent. Aside from Bhīma’s vows it is not an answer provided by the men in the story. In many tellings of the story Draupadī comes forward. She vows not to tie her hair into a braid again—sign of her marital virtue and social encompassment—until she has anointed it with the blood of Duḥśāsana’s chest, or in certain cases Duryodhana’s thigh. It’s a gruesome inversion of the image of her hair sprinkled with the pure waters of Yudhiṣṭhira’s ablutions at the *rājasūya*. But in this case, too, vengeance is projected into the narrative future. By predicting action rather than delivering it immediately, all three vows—Bhīma’s two vows in the Sanskrit epic and Draupadī’s third vow articulated in many other *Mahābhāratas*—create a feeling of suspense, a pause along the story’s trajectory. Draupadī’s suffering hangs in the balance.

This is not to say that these vows fade into the background. In the *Mahābhārata*, where vows and curses function almost as if they were the beams and columns holding up the narrative architecture, Bhīma’s two vows carry significant weight. For the plot, they perform important

⁶² *Mahābhārata* 2.61.43–46 and 2.63.13–14.

work, namely, to clear a causal path for Bhīma’s behavior down the line. That is because the power of speech in the *Mahābhārata* is so rigidly construed that once a character has vowed to do something, he or she must and will do that thing; there is no way out of it.⁶³ There is an ethical component to this narratological work. When Bhīma eventually does drink Duḥśāsana’s blood and smash Duryodhana’s thigh—actions that are described by others in the epic as running contrary to dharma—the fact that Bhīma has earlier *vowed* to perform them renders them ethical, for, as Kṛṣṇa explains in the crucial moments, a warrior must keep his word. The logic is quite provocative: something that would otherwise be considered *unethical* becomes ethical as long as you’ve already sworn to do it.

As it arises in the dice game, this combination of narrative inescapability and ethical complexity ushers in a particular ethos, one that will haunt the epic until the very end. Emily Hudson describes it as a “weight of affliction:”

At the conclusion of the dice game, there is a sense of impending doom. Almost every character knows that war between the two sets of cousins is inevitable; it is only a matter of time. Further, a sensibility that I call the “weight of affliction” enters the text in this episode and is sustained throughout the remaining sixteen books. Before the game of dice, suffering, particularly the Pāṇḍavas’ suffering, is punctuated by resolution; misfortune is followed by periods of happiness and fruition. . . [However,] from here on out there is no end to the Pāṇḍavas’ misfortune, just as there is no end to their despair. This is borne out in the narrative by the continuous line of travails that they undergo during and after the game: loss of kingdom, exile, failed peace negotiations, war, victory at unthinkable cost, a joyless return to power as rulers of an empty kingdom, and death.⁶⁴

⁶³ At the same time, the *Mahābhārata* frequently exposes the reader or listener to arguments *against* this rigidity.

⁶⁴ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 77.

And so, as Hudson’s analysis suggests, even the actual vengeance—the eventual slaying of Duḥśāsana and Duryodhana—brings little relief. The feeling of pyrrhic victory crystallizes in the case of Karṇa, another figure whom a Pāṇḍava brother (Arjuna) vows to strike down. Yudhiṣṭhira mourns his death from the instant he learns they had been brothers the whole time. The *Mahābhārata* narrates the grisly end of the war and its emotionally crushing aftermath in such a way as to prevent the reader from experiencing the fulfillment of each of Bhīma’s vows as the denouement that the dicing scene leads us to believe it will be. Resolutions, where we find them, are complicated to begin with: Duḥśāsana’s and Duryodhana’s deaths become sites of fraught ethical debate, and at least in Duryodhana’s case we find a great deal of sympathy for him in the narration of his death. But even then they do not mark the end of suffering. For the Pāṇḍavas there is always more to mourn, more to struggle with, down the line. Any narrative ends that can be tied together can and eventually will be untied. Rituals are interrupted and resolutions are suspended: this is a world in which conclusions remain out of reach.

The way in which the epic sets up its audience to expect a sense of resolution or conclusion—such as at the fulfilment of a vow, as we see here—and then goes on to call into question any sense of conclusiveness is one of the *Mahābhārata*’s many aesthetic achievements. We see this tendency operate almost in overdrive in the second half of the epic—in the final days of the war and the decades thereafter—but we see it at work in the *Virāṭaparvan*, too. This happens through veiled narration, for that precisely is its point. Veiled narration shows the audience, through the “retelling” portion of the narration, which diverges dramatically from the “base,” what resolutions might look and feel like. Yet it does so while every so often revealing, through an evocation of the “base” portion of the narration, the limitations of these resolutions. In a different way from the base story, then, these retellings accomplish a similar aim. They

show that resolutions are temporary at best and were perhaps illusions to begin with. To have to live through this second-level dissolution is to be baptized in tragedy a second time—a second that actually precedes the first (book 4 before book 18). Or should we see this interlocking drama of levels not in sequential terms but in gendered ones? Draupadī’s centrality, ever a mystery for the men in the story, is key.

Reassurances and the privileging of Draupadī’s perspective

But let us return to the scene itself, without forecasting its ultimate effect. How does the *Virāṭaparvan* mend the open wounds left by the dice game, if only temporarily? In the earlier *sabhā*, in the epic’s second book, Draupadī’s experience is largely met with inaction (on the parts of Yudhiṣṭhira and the gathered kings) and with vows to act in the future (on the parts of Bhīma and Arjuna). In Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, however, Draupadī takes immediate action against her attacker. First she throws Kīcaka to the ground (4.15.6); then he is knocked out by the magical *rākṣasa* whose services Draupadī earns from Sūrya just a few verses earlier (24.14.18). Here we begin to appreciate the *Virāṭaparvan*’s account as a true “retelling”—which is to say a revision—of the earlier *sabhā* scene.

To show how this happens, let me bring forth two key passages from the *Kīcakavadha* story. We begin when Sudeṣṇā sends Draupadī to fetch a drink from Kīcaka—a plan that Sudeṣṇā had arranged with him in an effort to give him time alone with Draupadī, who had rejected his advances earlier:

Sudeṣṇā gave Draupadī a goblet of gold and a lid to go with it. Still distrustful, Draupadī went crying to the gods for help. As she set out for Kīcaka’s quarters to get the liquor, she said: “*I recognize no man other than the sons of Pāṇḍu*. By the force of that truth, may Kīcaka fail to get me in his clutches when I arrive.” The

lady then took a moment to make her reverence to Sūrya, and he learned from slender-waisted Draupadī everything that had happened to her. He commanded a *rākṣasa* to protect her—to stay invisible, and never to abandon her no matter what situation the irreproachable woman should find herself in.⁶⁵

Later, in Kīcaka’s quarters,

The son of a *sūta* clutched her by her right hand. But with the hand he grabbed, she tossed him around and threw him to the ground. She fled for safety to the *sabhā*, where King Yudhiṣṭhira was, but as she was running, Kīcaka seized her by a tress of her hair, and though the king was watching, he pushed her down and struck her with his foot. Just then, like a gust of wind, a *rākṣasa*—the very same *rākṣasa* whom Sūrya had entrusted to protect her—carried him off. Pummeled by the force of the *rākṣasa*, he tumbled to the ground. Like a tree cut from the root, he wobbled and then lay motionless.⁶⁶

These passages build carefully upon the base story—what happens to Draupadī in the *sabhā* in book 2—to achieve the inverted, uplifting retelling that we expect the *Virātaparvan* to proffer. The construction happens almost verse-by-verse, as the story takes some of the most disturbing elements from the dicing scene—Draupadī’s uneasy state of mind, the hair-pulling, the fact that she is attacked in a highly public space while her husbands do not intervene, the idea that she just barely escapes from it all—and leads them to newly felicitous ends. This time, by contrast, we

⁶⁵ *Mahābhārata* 4.14.17–20: *vaiśampāyana uvāca | ity asyāḥ pradadau kāmasyaṃ sapidhānaṃ hiraṇmayam | sā śaṅkamānā rudatī daivaṃ śaraṇam īyuṣī | prātiṣṭhata surāhārī kīcakasya niveśanam || draupady uvāca | yathāham anyam pāṇḍubhyo nābhijānāmi kaṃcana | tena satyena māṃ prāptāṃ kīcako mā vaśe kr̥thāḥ || vaiśampāyana uvāca | upātiṣṭhata sā sūryaṃ muhūrtam abalā tataḥ | sa tasyās tanumadhyāyāḥ sarvaṃ sūryo ’vabuddhavān || antarhitam tatas tasyā rakṣo rakṣārtham ādiśat | tac cainām nājahāt tatra sarvāvasthāsv aninditām ||*

⁶⁶ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.6–9: *vaiśampāyana uvāca | ity enām dakṣiṇe pāṇau sūtaputraḥ parāmr̥śat | sā gr̥hītā vidhunvānā bhūmāv ākṣipyā kīcakam | sabhām śaraṇam ādhāvad yatra rājā yudhiṣṭhiraḥ || tāṃ kīcakaḥ pradhāvantīm keśapakṣe parāmr̥śat | athainām paśyato rājñāḥ pātayitvā padāvadhīt || tato yo ’sau tadārkeṇa rākṣasaḥ saṃniyojitaḥ | sa kīcakam apovāha vātavegena bhārata || sa papāta tato bhūmau rakṣobalasaṃhataḥ | vighūrṇamāno niśceṣṭaś chinnamūla iva drumah ||*

have the certainty of Draupadī’s vow, the fact that she throws her attacker to the ground, and the *rākṣasa* that Sūrya sends to protect her.

We begin with Draupadī’s distrustful “crying” (*rudatī*), an element common to the description given her in those critical moments in the game of dice. We have it here once again. But this unswerving recollection of her earlier state of mind quickly evolves into an imaginative elaboration on what happens in book 2—a complete re-imagining of the prior *sabhā* scene and in that way a “true” retelling. In book 2, Draupadī enters the *sabhā* without any kind of protection; in fact, we see hardly anything of Draupadī in this part of book 2 before Yudhiṣṭhira stakes her in the game. So when Duṣṣāsana attempts to disrobe her in front of everyone, she appears extremely vulnerable; at this point in the narration she has been silent for over a chapter. What’s more, the event occurs without her speaking, which has the effect of putting the text’s audience in the position of watching all this happen *to* her, rather than aesthetically experiencing it *with* her. This perceived vulnerability is what makes the miracle of the endlessly replenishing garments such a surprise, “the most wondrous event in the world” (*adbhutatamaṃ loke*) both to the audience inside the text as well as to any audience outside it.⁶⁷ In book 4 Draupadī is narratively seasoned and therefore not so vulnerable. This time we can be sure she will survive whatever her antagonist throws at her, for not only does she make a vow to that effect but Sūrya sends a *rākṣasa* to protect her. All this happens well before Draupadī enters Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, and indeed before she meets Kīcaka alone. This means that in the *Kīcakavadha*’s retelling of the dice game, the audience experiences a kind of reassurance from the get-go—something that the dicing scene of book 2 never provides. If we know anything at this point in the epic, it is that truth-

⁶⁷ *Mahābhārata* 2.61.42: *tato halahalāśabdāḥ tatrāsīd ghoranisvanah | tad adbhūtataṃ loke vīkṣya sarvamahīkṣitām ||*

speaking of the kind in which Draupadī engages when she stakes her safety on her virtue can be leveraged in such a way as to afford the speaker measureless power.

So that is one kind of reassurance: the certainty of knowing what will happen later. But to that we must add the particular mode of narration in the passages we quoted above. They provide the reader with newly firm ground. The earlier *sabhā* scene tells the story from a range of characters’ perspectives—Duryodhana, Yudhiṣṭhira, Vidura, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Draupadī, Bhīma, and kings who are gathered there—and that method of narration results in a kind of moral and emotional dizziness or “disorientation,” to use Emily Hudson’s key word. But we find something much more stabilizing here. Like the passage that we discussed in the previous section, the passages above encourage the reader to “stay with” Draupadī over the course of events: we are privy to her emotions, we hear her voice, we see what she sees. So if we saw things happen *to* Draupadī back in book 2, the text pushes us into quite a different habitat now. We see things happen *with* her, and that puts her in a position of narrative privilege. She seems far less vulnerable than she did before, even if very similar events unfold around her. We, the audience, feel less vulnerable as interpreters, too, because the text gives us more stable ground on which to stand. That is part of the magic of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s “veil”—where we find inversions of plot we sometimes also find inversions of narrative mode, perspective, and affect. Speaking of the *Kīcakavadha* section specifically, we might say that the very privileging of Draupadī’s perspective during those chapters—the elevation of her thoughts, her vision, and her voice above all others—constitutes one of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s most radical inversions. This inversion is specifically gendered.

In book 4, the main source of Draupadī’s protection—the invisible *rākṣasa*—is framed as the result of Draupadī’s own efforts. He enters the scene because of her vow, her reverence for

Sūrya, her resilience in the face of everything that has happened to her. This combines, of course, with Sūrya’s intervention on her behalf, and this element of combination is crucial. But this is a multilayered thing. It does not just transpire in present time. In my understanding, the verses that narrate Draupadī’s vow, her prayers, and Sūrya’s instructions to the *rākṣasa*—and then the moment when the *rākṣasa* comes to her rescue—merge two divergent accounts of what happens when Duḥśāsana attempts to disrobe Draupadī in book 2. There is, of course, the account given in the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, by which Draupadī’s dress multiplies itself entirely on its own. If there is a hint of any divine intervention beyond that of Draupadī’s own power, it is seriously underdetermined: “Violently, Duḥśāsana ripped Draupadī’s dress and began to pull it off her in the middle of the *sabhā*. But as he pulled off Draupadī’s dress, a different dress appeared in its place—again and again he tried, and again and again a new dress appeared.”⁶⁸ The *Kīcakavadha* captures this version of the event through Draupadī’s vow, which positions her virtue (that is, virtue in marriage and virtue in speech) as the essential source of her protection. But it also takes into account the popular story—also present in the *Mahābhārata*’s manuscript history—by which Draupadī cries out for Kṛṣṇa in the crucial moment. In certain manuscripts she also offers him extensive words of praise. According to that version of the story, Kṛṣṇa comes to her aid by continuously replenishing her garments as Duḥśāsana pulls them off. In book 4, I would argue, Draupadī’s homage to Sūrya, coupled with the invisible *rākṣasa* that he sends to protect her, perpetuates the idea that some kind of divine force is at work.

⁶⁸ *Mahābhārata* 2.62.40-41: *tato duḥśāsano rājan draupadyā vasanaṃ balāt | sabhāmadhye samākṣipyā vyapakraṣṭuṃ pracakrame || ākṛṣyamāṇe vasane draupadyās tu viśāṃ pate | tadrūpam aparaṃ vastraṃ prādur āsīd anekasaḥ ||* For an account of the manuscripts that integrate passages about Draupadī calling out to Kṛṣṇa here, see *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar et. al., vol. 2 (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1943), 304. See, also, Franklin Edgerton’s defense of the editors’ choice in his introduction to that volume (xxviii-xxix).

Yet the interaction between Sūrya and Draupadī in book 4 embodies none of the devotional energy that those Kṛṣṇa-centric *Mahābhārata* manuscripts attribute to the scene in book 2. Thus it seems to keep the “critical edition” version of the story alive. It works in either telling, which may be part of the secret of its own longevity and force. In book 4, Sūrya’s intervention is framed not as a response to Draupadī’s worship (which is only “momentary” anyway—*muhūrtam*) but, rather, as a response to her resilience in the face of everything that has befallen her. What’s more, the *rākṣasa* himself is described in such a way as to suggest the presence of Bhīma, whom Draupadī will eventually persuade to bring down Kīcaka once and for all. Thus the action remains intrinsic to the epic. Not only does Bhīma have a long association with *rākṣasa*-like qualities, but this particular *rākṣasa* acts with the swiftness of the wind—a common metaphor, yes, but one that is doubly resonant here, since Bhīma is the son of Vāyu, the wind god. In these respects, even the *Kīcakavadha*’s gesture toward the notion of divine intervention ultimately points to Draupadī’s *own* power to intervene when others threaten her. That power bursts into the narrative foreground when Kīcaka grabs Draupadī by the hand, only for her to toss him to the floor (*bhumāv ākṣipyā*)—a sharp and immediate act of revenge the likes of which Draupadī never brings against her attackers in book 2. It is one of the most satisfying moments in the *Kīcakavadha*’s re-imagining of the dicing scene because it prompts us to envision Duṣṣāsana in Kīcaka’s place. What if she had thrown *him* to the ground in Hāstinapura?, we wonder. We’ll never know, but now, thanks to the *Virāṭaparvan*, we can picture it.

Bystanders in the two *sabhās*

Let us return to a verse we have already heard and consider it from a different angle: “She fled for safety to the *sabhā*, where King Yudhiṣṭhira was—but as she was running, Kīcaka seized her by a tress of her hair, and though the king was watching, he pushed her down and struck her with his foot.” Beyond the fact that both crises unfold in a *sabhā*, that discomfitingly masculine and public space, and the repeated element of hair-grabbing as a precursor to further assault, we ought to take special note of how the *Kīcakavadha* portrays Yudhiṣṭhira throughout this scene, for this too echoes the fraught final chapters of book 2. In the *Kīcakavadha* Yudhiṣṭhira materializes out of a subclause (“where King Yudhiṣṭhira was”) to become the focal point of the passage to come. This attention emerges straight from the *Sabhāparvan*’s game of dice, and this time we find no inversions of roles nor reversals of fortune in the *Virāṭaparvan*’s telling of it.

Sūrya’s *rākṣasa* may sweep Kīcaka away in the very next verse—“Like a tree cut up by the root, he wobbled and then lay motionless”—but the story is laid out so that even when this quite momentous event happens, it does not function as a point of resolution or conclusion. Instead, Draupadī defeats her most obvious antagonist only to confront a more subtle adversary: Yudhiṣṭhira. That is why we see Kīcaka lying motionless on the ground for only a moment before the narration invites us to turn to Yudhiṣṭhira once more. This is the passage that directly follows Kīcaka’s defeat:

Bhīmasena and Yudhiṣṭhira sat there and watched her. When Kīcaka struck Draupadī with his foot, they didn’t bear it patiently. Bhīma with his big heart wanted to kill him (that evil Kīcaka!) and ground his teeth out of exasperation.

But Yudhiṣṭhira, the Dharma King, pressed his thumb against Bhīma’s, forbidding him. He feared Bhīma would give them away.⁶⁹

Note how, in order to retrain our focus on Yudhiṣṭhira, the narration actually doubles back on itself, returning us to the moment when Kīcaka kicks Draupadī and making it seem as if the *rākṣasa*’s intervention never happens. Instead we see the kick for a second time (“When Kīcaka struck Draupadī with his foot, they didn’t bear it patiently”), and with that, the physical action is largely suspended. From there, the text spotlights the ethical, emotional, interpersonal, and rhetorical dynamics at work in the scene—first by illustrating Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma’s emotional experience of the attack on Draupadī (narrated in the short passage above), and then by voicing Draupadī’s excoriating speech to all of them (which I will discuss in a short while). This has the effect of minimizing much of the work that the *Kīcakavadha* has already done to bring some of the most troubling elements of the dicing scene to a satisfying denouement—the antagonist put in his place, by Draupadī no less, with her victory being a sure thing from the start—and calling into question whether we will find, in the *Virāṭaparvan*, any sense of resolution that actually lasts. So rapidly does Kīcaka fade into the background in this passage that it’s almost as if he never mattered.

This is one place where the *Virāṭaparvan*’s implicit theory of disguise really begins to crystallize. We have already seen how, in certain respects, the narration frames Kīcaka’s viewpoint in close alignment with Draupadī’s. Kīcaka says outright that *she* is the one with the power, someone who should rightfully be ruling over Sudeṣṇā and indeed Kīcaka himself; in

⁶⁹ *Mahābhārata* 4.15.10–12: *tām cāsīnau dadṛśatur bhīmasenayudhiṣṭhirau | amṛṣyamānau kṛṣṇāyāḥ kīcakena padā vadham || tasya bhīmo vadhaprepsuḥ kīcakasya durātmanah | dantair dantāṃs tadā roṣān niṣpīpeṣa mahāmanāḥ || athāṅguṣṭhenāvāmrṇnād aṅguṣṭham tasya dharmarāt | prabodhanabhayād rājan bhīmasya pratyaśedhayat ||*

some sense, he sees her in the same light as she sees herself. This slightly destabilizes his position as the antagonist. Not that he is harmless; on the contrary, the text does a magnificent job of constructing Kīcaka’s whole storyline so that he seems menacing in one verse and the butt of the joke in the next. But this may be the text’s way of suggesting that Kīcaka plays the role of a villain more than he actually is a villain. It’s almost as if, in keeping with the *Virāṭaparvan*’s theme of disguise, Kīcaka is wearing a villain costume—something that he can and does wear, only to remove it every now and then. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, disguises hold sway, but they never go unexamined. They can be put on and taken off; they can be changed and manipulated; they can be found on unexpected figures.

Something similar happens to Yudhiṣṭhira. Draupadī sees him as an ally (“She fled for safety to the *sabhā*, where King Yudhiṣṭhira was”) but then experiences him as an opponent, someone who consciously if reluctantly refuses to give her the help she seeks. There is a significant gap between the expectations that the text, adopting Draupadī’s point of view, places on Yudhiṣṭhira and the behavior that it shows him directing toward her. That gap encourages us to question whether, for Yudhiṣṭhira, the role of “protector” is precisely that—a role to play, a costume to wear—rather than an enduring state of being, something that would be stable within the world of the text. With that in mind, we can read a certain irony in the passage just above. Initially we think that Yudhiṣṭhira prevents Bhīma from intervening because he wishes to preserve the facades they have erected (Kaṅka, Ballava) and keep their real selves (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma) a secret. But now we begin to see “protector” as something of a facade in its own right. Draupadī’s appearance in Virāṭa’s *sabhā* forces the two different characters that Yudhiṣṭhira has taken on, “protector” and “Kaṅka,” into conflict with one another. By clinging to “Kaṅka,”

Yudhiṣṭhira does away with the mantle of “protector.” In a sense, he (or the text) removes one of his disguises here.

I use the word protector to translate the Sanskrit word *nātha*, a term that broadly means “lord” but that takes on a highly specific resonance when it is used in certain circumstances in the *Mahābhārata*. When violence is inflicted on a character who is socially vulnerable—usually a woman but sometimes a child—that character is often described as *anāthavat*: existing in such a way that it is as if (-*vat*) she “has no lord” (*anātha*). The phrase implies that if such a character really did have “a lord,” that is, a powerful man to whom she were bonded, then he would have prevented anyone else from inflicting violence on her.⁷⁰ The hypothetical does a lot of work to point a finger at the *nātha* in question: he might very well exist, but because he has failed to protect someone, it’s as if (-*vat*) he doesn’t. Sometimes *anāthavat* is presented in ironic contrast with the descriptor *nāthavatī*—“having a lord,” here in its feminine iteration—where the *vat* suffix is used in the sense of possession, as opposed to indicating a comparison or a counterfactual, as before. That is exactly how the narrator describes Draupadī when Duḥśāsana first grabs hold of her in the dicing scene at the end of book 2:

He led her to the *sabhā*,
Laid his hands on her,
Her hair was so dark—
He was like the wind, Duḥśāsana,
Rattling a plantain tree
Rattling Draupadī, who had her *nāthas*,
As if she had none.⁷¹

⁷⁰ The term *anāthavat* applies to Abhimanyu as well; see chapter 5.

⁷¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.60.24: *sa tām parāmrśya sabhāsamīpam ānīya kṛṣṇām atikṛṣṇakeśīm | duḥśāsano nāthavatīm anāthavac cakarṣa vāyuh kadalīm ivārtām ||*

One of the most intriguing things about the phrase *anāthavat* is that it reverses the positions of “real” and “hypothetical” in the narrative. At the moment she is being attacked, the vulnerable character in question *has* a “lord” or “protector” *only hypothetically*; in immediate reality, as she experiences it, there is no “lord” or “protector” at all. Because of that reversal, *anāthavat* has a slippery quality. It calls into question what is real and what is not.

When Draupadī runs into Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, then, and neither Yudhiṣṭhira nor Bhīma nor Virāṭa—each of them her *nātha* in one way or another—steps in to protect her, the narrative puts Draupadī in a specifically *anāthavat* situation, one that finds its parallel at the end of book 2. There is a sense in which the categories of “real” and “hypothetical” break down here, too. (In fact we might say the entire *Virāṭaparvan* is about that.) In the exact moment when Yudhiṣṭhira attempts to preserve the “hypothetical” (which is to say: not the real, but the imaginable) element of his situation—that is, his persona as Kaṅka—in that very same moment the text allows us into his interior. We know what he is feeling (impatient, fearful) and we know what he is thinking (that Bhīma will give them away). We know more about the “real” Yudhiṣṭhira here than we ever do in the dicing scene, where his inner workings remain stubbornly opaque.⁷² Yudhiṣṭhira maintains his costume but Vaiśaṃpāyana, in his own way as the narrator, takes it off. On the whole, the figuration of Yudhiṣṭhira here—and particularly Draupadī’s understanding of him—becomes a site of “unveiling” where the text pushes aside the elements of satisfaction and resolution that it fosters elsewhere in the *Kīcakavadha* story and instead reveals the same kinds of ethical and emotional tensions that define the final chapters of book 2. In fact, if anything, book 4 dives deeper into those tensions than book 2 does: yet another way in which the *Virāṭaparvan* is only pretending to play pretend.

⁷² Which is intentional; see chapter 2 of Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*.

The passages that I discussed earlier (“The son of a *sūta* clutched her by her right hand. But with the hand he grabbed, she tossed him around and threw him to the ground. She fled for safety to the *sabhā*. . .”) adopt Draupadī’s perspective in order to show us the beginnings of those tensions. The text implies that Draupadī runs to the *sabhā* for “safety” (*śaraṇam*—refuge or help)—and that she does this despite having said, earlier, that nothing could have been more inappropriate than for her to appear in such a space—precisely *because* Yudhiṣṭhira is situated there, and he, being king (“King Yudhiṣṭhira,” *rājā yudhiṣṭhirah*), will use the power of his position to defend her against Kīcaka. It would be easy to overlook the fact that the narrator refers to him as “King Yudhiṣṭhira” here—that is his name, after all, and he’s famously a king, if at this point a dispossessed one—but I would argue that this is no run-of-the-mill *rājā yudhiṣṭhirah*. Until now, most references to “Yudhiṣṭhira” in the *Virāṭaparvan* have been made in jest, since the Pāṇḍavas use his name as part of their cover story (that is, when they tell Virāṭa that they used to work for him). And in the other “court” scenes in the *Virāṭaparvan*, the text refers to him by the name of his (new) courtly persona, Kaṅka, dice master to King Virāṭa. But by calling him “King Yudhiṣṭhira” in this particular passage, Vaiśampāyana aligns the narration with Draupadī’s point of view, for that is precisely how she sees Yudhiṣṭhira: not as his alter ego—Virāṭa’s servant—but as a king in his own right, and a king whom she expects to provide her with safety (*śaraṇam*).

The text suggests that at this moment neither the element of disguise itself nor the imperative that the Pāṇḍavas stay unrecognized matters to Draupadī. When she looks at Yudhiṣṭhira she sees Yudhiṣṭhira, not Kaṅka, and she expects his behavior to align with who he “really” is. This is not the first time Draupadī refuses to “play along” with the Pāṇḍavas’ masquerade. We have already seen that Vaiśampāyana described her as “miserable” in pointed

contrast with the Pāṇḍava brothers, and in that instance, too, Vaiśampāyana’s voice emerged as a sympathetic force—singing in harmony with hers, almost. Now that we have arrived in Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, Draupadī’s understanding of Yudhiṣṭhira anchors yet another “unveiled” phase in the narration. It is *her* vision and experience of Yudhiṣṭhira to which the reader is the most exposed, and that therefore take priority. And rather than subvert or invert the portrayal of Yudhiṣṭhira that we recall from book 2, which is what we might otherwise expect from the *Virāṭaparvan*, this viewpoint adds to it space and depth.

So both for the audience and for Draupadī the *Kīcakavadha* story cultivates the expectation that Yudhiṣṭhira, being king, will somehow protect Draupadī when she runs from Kīcaka’s quarters to the *sabhā*. No sooner is the expectation set up than it goes unmet: “but as she was running, Kīcaka seized her by a tress of her hair, and though the king was watching, he pushed her down and struck her with his foot.” Both the expectation that Yudhiṣṭhira will take action and the fact that he fails to meet that expectation carry over from the earlier *sabhā*, where in the face of several requests to address Draupadī’s subjugation Yudhiṣṭhira remains silent. The clause “though the king was watching” (*paśyato rājñah*, a genitive absolute construction) does a great deal of work to convey the emotional weight of those unmet expectations as they are reflected here in book 4. The verse would narrate the action perfectly well without the *paśyato rājñah*—a different five-syllable phrase would not be hard to find—but its well-timed presence allows Vaiśampāyana to paint Yudhiṣṭhira as an intentionally passive figure, a sovereign who chooses not to use his power even when his wife demonstrates a great need for it.⁷³

⁷³ Granted, the “king” in this phrase could refer to Virāṭa, which would recalibrate the moral culpability so that it falls on him, as well as on Kīcaka: How could Kīcaka behave in so undecorous a manner as to kick a woman right in front of *his* king—Virāṭa—and how could Virāṭa stand back and allow it to happen? This is one interpretive possibility, to be sure, but I believe the text intentionally leaves the phrase equivocal. The previous verse labels Yudhiṣṭhira—not Virāṭa—as the “king” (*rājā*) in this context,

In this, Vaiśampāyana’s narration once again falls into step with Draupadī’s mindset, for she herself uses the same phrase or slight variations of it later in the *Virāṭaparvan*, when she privately bemoans her situation to Bhīma:

Kīcaka kicked me—all while that gambler was watching! (*tasya dhūrtasya paśyataḥ*)—right in front of Virāṭa, king of the Matsyas. How could a woman like me go on living? . . . Kīcaka struck me with his foot, though the Dharma King was watching (*paśyato dharmarājasya*)! And right in front of you, too, Bhīmasena, with all your strength.⁷⁴

You will notice that Draupadī does not restrict the scope of her outrage. She levies blame on Virāṭa and Bhīma as well as on Yudhiṣṭhira: all three are kings who looked on as she suffered and did nothing to help her. But it is important to observe that she reserves the genitive (absolute) participle *paśyataḥ* for Yudhiṣṭhira each time. She describes Bhīma’s and Virāṭa’s roles with the adverb *samakṣam*, which means that the action is happening “right in front” of them such that they can see it “with their own eyes” (to take the adverb more literally). But Draupadī always describes Yudhiṣṭhira as “watching,” which places him cognitively closer to what is happening to her. He has a direct, personal, mindful relationship with her experience; Virāṭa and Bhīma, by contrast, have a more spatial relationship with it—they were in the same place at the same time. They can see what she is experiencing, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira actively *watches* it.

By reintroducing this line of thinking in Virāṭa’s *sabhā*, Vaiśampāyana’s narration ushers in a renewed focus on Yudhiṣṭhira as a bystander. Like everything else, the idea comes to us

which makes Yudhiṣṭhira a much more likely antecedent than Virāṭa, whom Vaiśampāyana has not yet told us is present. The audience’s imagination would therefore land on Yudhiṣṭhira first.

⁷⁴ *Mahābhārata* 4.17.5: *matsyarājñāaḥ samakṣam ca tasya dhūrtasya paśyataḥ | kīcakena padā sprṣṭā kā nu jīveta mādrśī || Mahābhārata* 4.20.29: *paśyato dharmarājasya kīcako māṃ padāvadhūt | tava caiva samakṣam vai bhīmasena mahābala ||*

straight from the game of dice at the end of the *Sabhāparvan*, where Draupadī levels a similar accusation against all of the gathered kings, and her husbands in particular:

It used to be
If a breeze touched me
In my own house
The Pāṇḍavas could not bear it.
Now they're fine with it
As this evil man touches me.

And all these Kurus!
It must be Time's dark turn, since
They're fine with it—
Their daughter-in-law (and I was a daughter to them)
Tortured like this, not deserving it.⁷⁵

When Draupadī delivers her protest, above, near the conclusion of book 2, her words speak to an entire program of “bystanding” that unfolds during those final chapters of the *Sabhāparvan*. Not only does Yudhiṣṭhira become the ultimate bystander, there—he follows Śakuni's lead to stake Draupadī in the game, he refuses to answer the riddle-question that would have freed her, and he fails to intervene when she is attacked—but so do all of the other kings and elders present, many of whom are her own family members.

When we take into account a greater span of the *Mahābhārata*, we discover that Draupadī is not the only one to use this kind of “bystander” rhetoric against Yudhiṣṭhira. Back in book 3, during the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile, Bhīma attempts to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to take revenge on the Dhārtarāṣṭras: “At your command we stood back and watched (*naḥ paśyatām*) while our kingdom was taken from us—a kingdom that was guarded by Arjuna, who wields the

⁷⁵ *Mahābhārata* 2.62.6-7: *yām na mṛṣyanti vātena sprśyamānām purā grhe | sprśyamānām sahante 'dya pāṇḍavās tām durātmanā || mṛṣyante kuravaś ceme manye kālasya paryayam || snuṣām duhitaram caiva kliśyamānām anarhatīm ||*

bow Gāṇḍīva. A kingdom that couldn't even be taken by Indra himself!"⁷⁶ We have already seen how the part of the dicing scene to which Bhīma refers here—that is, Bhīma being prevented from taking action—has its double in the *Kīcakavadha* story. There, of course, Draupadī is being threatened, not the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom. But on a symbolic level the distinction between the two entities blurs. In the world of the *Mahābhārata* kingdom and queen, the two bodies that the king both controls and depends on, are figuratively aligned such that to overpower one is to overpower the other. So when Draupadī comes under attack in book 4 and the Pāṇḍava men fail to take action (whether by choice or by force), the story loops back not only to book 2 but to stretches of book 3 as well. Veiling and revealing are complex acts.

As a final facet of our examination of the role played by bystanders in the *Virāṭaparvan*'s performance of veiled narration, let us return to Draupadī' long, impassioned monologue in the middle of the *Kīcakavadha* in which she persuades Bhīma to slay Kīcaka once and for all. I cited a short excerpt from this speech above: "Kīcaka kicked me—all while that gambler was watching!" but Draupadī's monologue goes on for nearly one hundred verses. Here Draupadī speaks entirely and freely as herself, enacting her own "unveiling" at length. She remains so committed to the seriousness of the threats against her—the sexual threat that Kīcaka represents, for one, but also the social threat posed by their poverty in exile and the hardships of their current positions as servants—that when Bhīma encourages her to take comfort in stories of women such as Sukanyā and Sītā, who followed their husbands into all kind of trying situations (4.20.7–13), she refuses to align herself with those narratives. She resists enacting the role of the Sītā in her own story. She insists on playing only herself. Seen in context, this is a powerful disavowal of the kind of bystanding she protests in the passage we heard above: "Now they're

⁷⁶ *Mahābhārata* 3.34.6: *bhavato 'nuvidhānena rājyaṃ naḥ paśyatāṃ hr̥tam | ahāryam api śakreṇa guptaṃ gāṇḍīvadhanvanā ||*

fine with it / As this evil man touches me.” Rather than help another *Rāmāyaṇa* to unfold—another tale of a faithful wife who follows her husband into exile only to be attacked by a threatening stranger who is her social inferior and suffer the consequences—Draupadī demands that a new story be told. It’s a complex dance of veils indeed, but this time she insists the dancing stop.

The story as a bystander

Being a bystander means having the opportunity to intervene in a crisis and consciously or unconsciously choosing not to. For Draupadī it involves a specific emotional condition: having an inappropriately placid reaction to the crisis taking place (what I am translating as “being fine with it,” $\sqrt{mrś}$)⁷⁷—that is, being able to endure a situation that should be unbearable. It’s the *should be* that is the crucial element, for that is what makes the entire category of “bystanding” bring to mind paths not taken. As a bystander, one asks after the fact: What if I had intervened? What if I had done something differently? Hypotheticals swirl around all of the various bystanders in the game of dice, but especially Yudhiṣṭhira. At nearly every turn Yudhiṣṭhira is presented with a way out: Vidura warns him not to accept the offer to play, but Yudhiṣṭhira disregards it; again and again Śakuni encourages him to raise the stakes, but he agrees to it every time; and even after Draupadī’s boons have bought them their freedom, Yudhiṣṭhira accepts Duryodhana’s offer to play one final throw. Every one of those moments—

⁷⁷ When the reader imagines alternatives and Yudhiṣṭhira does not—remember, we never see him be anything other than totally committed to the game of dice—this distances the reader from him emotionally and psychologically, as per Hudson’s argument. That distance is further heightened in book 4, which returns Yudhiṣṭhira and the reader to the same ground. There is, however, one significant difference between the two scenes. Note that we have *mrśyanti* in 2.62.6 whereas we have *amrśyamānau* in 4.15.10: the *Virāṭaparvan* gives the reader access to Yudhiṣṭhira’s emotional state (and it is quite different from Draupadī’s perception of it) in a way that the *Sabhāparvan* does not.

especially each individual throw of the dice, which is narrated in nearly the exact same language as the ones that precede it—returns Yudhiṣṭhira to the same fork in the road and the reader to the same imaginative state. At each dark turn we ask: “What if?”

In this respect Yudhiṣṭhira’s bystanding comes to symbolize something that is happening on a literary level. For many readers, what makes the Sanskrit epic’s game of dice so agonizing is the way it relentlessly prompts the hearer or reader to imagine other ways the story could have gone. What if Yudhiṣṭhira had declined the invitation to dice? What if he had walked away at any one of over a dozen throws? What if he had declared that Draupadī was not his to stake? What if he had intervened on Draupadī’s behalf? What if he had declined the *second* invitation to dice? Such questions apply to other figures, too, though never as persistently as to Yudhiṣṭhira. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, for example, initially discourages Duryodhana from the whole scheme, but then changes his mind and agrees to it. What if he *hadn’t* changed his mind? The overall effect is to tell the story of a disaster that could have been averted by almost anyone—but particularly by Yudhiṣṭhira—at almost any point. All the while, the story prevents the reader from ever exploring those alternatives within the scope of the “reality” of the narrative itself. It leaves the reader bound to what is actually happening in the story while the possibility of what could happen floats just out of reach. The reader too is a bystander.

The idea of bystanding speaks to an important aspect of the literary relationship between these two *sabhā* scenes, and that is why the sound of Draupadī’s protest in book 2 resonates so powerfully here in book 4. In the *Kīcakavadha* story, the characters have an opportunity that never presents itself to most bystanders: they get to return to the moment of crisis—or at least a similar one—and do things differently. But do they? There are times when the *Kīcakavadha* comes close to reifying what the dicing scene only holds out as a possibility. Take the fact that

Bhīma kills Kīcaka soon after Kīcaka attacks Draupadī. This plays out an alternative ending to the dicing scene that Bhīma’s reactions there strongly suggest—he says in no uncertain terms that he wishes to intervene—but never actually deliver. Ultimately, however, it is Draupadī, and not any of the dice game’s bystanders, who truly acts differently in the *Virāṭaparvan* from the way she does in the dice game. Her vow, her physical rebuke of Kīcaka, and her quick and decisive revenge on him all bring to life scenarios that the dicing scene does not even prompt the audience to imagine as possibilities. Instead they come to us as completely new here, and that is part of why it is so thrilling to watch them unfold. But Yudhiṣṭhira behaves in much the same way that he does at the end of book 2—he is a bystander in book 2 and he remains a bystander in book 4—and in the end that renders the second *sabhā* scene a literary bystander to the first. Not only Yudhiṣṭhira but at a different level the story itself fails to do things differently this time around. We expect a revision, but in this crucial aspect we get a repetition.

In her expostulation at the end of book 2, quoted just above, Draupadī talks about “Time’s dark turn” (*kālasya paryaya*). The word I am translating as “dark turn,” *paryaya*, means “revolution” (it comes from the verbal root \sqrt{i} , “go,” attached to the prefix *pari*, “around”), but it can take on a negative tint—an inauspicious or unwanted passage of time, or a perversion of time, as when Draupadī privately laments to Bhīma in book 4:

Look at my standing, you Pāṇḍava—
 I don’t deserve it and I’m here even so.
 Look at how time turns (*paśya kālasya paryayam*)
 While all of you just go on living.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ *Mahābhārata* 4.19.19: *paśya pāṇḍava me ’vasthāṃ yathā nārhāmi vai tathā | yuṣmāsu dhriyamāṇeṣu paśya kālasya paryayam ||*

When it is used in other contexts (both within the *Mahābhārata* and without), *kālasya paryaya* can be much more neutral—simply “spending time” or “the course of time.” But when Draupadī uses it, it is never to describe anything good. At the risk of making too much of this phrase, let me say that I believe Draupadī’s conception of *kālasya paryaya* has something important to contribute to our understanding of the repetition between the two *sabhā* scenes in book 2 and book 4. In the thought-world of the *Mahābhārata* we often come across the idea that the passage of time (a) moves in cycles and (b) entails certain kinds of disintegration—social, ethical, political, environmental. The four-*yuga* system, for example, by which the world enters progressively chaotic eras until things can’t get any more disordered and the whole cycle is repeated, reflects this mindset as it applies to the cosmos. Draupadī’s vision of *kālasya paryaya* tells us something very interesting about what the disintegrative passage of time actually looks like on an individual (rather than cosmic) level. Her concept of “how time turns” might well be “how time turns *for me*.” For individuals, too, time is circular. It revolves, it moves in cycles, even if in cycles much smaller and shorter than those of the four *yugas*. In Draupadī’s view, that very repetitive element—*paryaya*, the revolution—is what makes time so treacherous. (Consider the English phrase “downward spiral.”) The circular part of the image is what matters most: it conveys the idea that on an individual if not a cosmic level it is especially dangerous or inauspicious to come back to the same situation multiple times. To tread on the same ground is treacherous.

That is precisely what the *Kīcakavadha* does with the game of dice—just once, perhaps, but it has a real impact. When Draupadī contrasts “how time turns [for me]” (*kālasya paryaya*) with the way that all of her husbands “just go on living,” she is speaking not only to the part of her misery that comes from being in a position of servitude once again, but to the fact that a great

deal of the circumstances that gave rise to her subjugation in the first *sabhā* have repeated themselves. Most of all she is speaking to the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira remains a bystander yet again.⁷⁹ The way she describes her husbands, as *dhriyamāṇa* (from √*dhṛ*—being held, supported, or maintained) foregrounds their stability relative to hers. She goes in and out of the same circumstances—that is, servitude, violence, and bystanding, all wielded against her—twice through, and the revolution of that cycle of actions forms an integral part of her suffering therein. For her husbands, time seems simply to continue in the same mode—or so it seems, at least, from her perspective. But for her time stands still. She is ever and again at its center.

Earlier in this chapter we discussed the idea (advanced by Biardeau, Hildebeitel, Marriott, and van Buitenen, each in her or his own way) that the *Virāṭaparvan* narrates a phase of “rebirth” for the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, one that performs a uniquely auspicious function within the epic. When we look only at the Pāṇḍava brothers, perhaps that is indeed what we find: a constructive cycle, a cycle that maintains and supports—since they “just go on living (√*dhṛ*),” after all. But when we adopt Draupadī’s point of view, we awaken to the destructive, disintegrative elements of cyclical time—“Time’s dark turn.” For Draupadī, as for any number of renunciant approaches to the problem of human suffering, rebirth broadly construed is a *bad* thing. At this moment in the *Virāṭaparvan*, just as at nearly every other point in the *Kīcakavadha* story, the narrative follows Draupadī, magnifying her vision and amplifying her voice. Her understanding of time—cyclical, relentless—is the only one that matters. Time is the cruelest bystander of all, and she is the one who lifts the veil to say so.

⁷⁹ The lasting problem of Yudhiṣṭhira’s “bystander” instincts is really a problem about the tension between action and non-action. The tragedy of non-action is addressed and developed elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*: it is the central problem of the *Gītā*; it is the main problem addressed in the *Śāntiparvan*. It is important to see Draupadī’s erudite rage as a precursor to the *Gītā*, to the *Śāntiparvan*; her arguments essentially pave the way for the arguments against non-action that would eventually flow from the mouths of Kṛṣṇa and Bhīṣma.

Resolutions

But this is not the end. Draupadī’s moment of truth is re-enfolded and the rest of the *Kīcakavadha* largely unfolds in the same pattern of oscillation that I have sketched above. We have retelling, then base, then retelling again; or inverted *Mahābhārata*, real *Mahābhārata*, then inverted *Mahābhārata* once more. We have already observed that Draupadī throws Kīcaka to the floor but then he comes back to kick her; the magical *rākṣasa* drives him away but then Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Virāṭa watch and do nothing. Later Draupadī and Bhīma kill Kīcaka but then his kinsmen come for her, threatening to burn her on Kīcaka’s funeral pyre. All those “but thens”!

A final oscillation awaits us at the end of the *Kīcakavadha*. When Bhīma comes to Draupadī’s aid in the face of Kīcaka’s venge-filled relatives, the text dips back into the “inverted,” dramatic retelling of it all. Draupadī calls out for her husbands by their play-names—Jaya, Jayadbala, and so on; Bhīma calls her Sairandhrī, not Draupadī; and the narrator at last describes her “having protectors”—*nāthavatī* (4.22.11)—which, during this run of the play, she does.⁸⁰ These small but significant touchpoints in the narrative have the effect of drawing us firmly back into the *Virāṭaparvan*’s fantastical revision of the *Mahābhārata*—an account of the epic where the Pāṇḍavas really are victorious (*jaya*), where Draupadī melts into her disguise (*sairandhrī*), and where the Pāṇḍavas perform their roles as her protectors (*nātha*). So we hear, but what do we believe?

⁸⁰ In fact she is also described as *nāthavatī* immediately before she commences the long speech expressing her misery and entreating Bhīma to kill Kīcaka (*Mahābhārata* 4.16.5d). The term predicts her success, and indeed Bhīma’s success in becoming her *nātha* once more.

After Draupadī has been rescued, the *Kīcakavadha* pulls back the veil briefly one more time. The victory fades into the background and the costumes fall away. We find Draupadī weeping and downcast:

After he had freed her, Bhīma helped her catch her breath. Invincible Wolf-belly with his strong arms spoke to Draupadī, the princess of Pāñcāla, who was still upset (*dīnā*). Her face was covered in tears (*aśrupūrṇamukhī*). “I killed them all, those men who tormented you—you who feared them, and were never to blame. Go back to the city, Kṛṣṇā. You have nothing to be afraid of.”⁸¹

Note how in this moment, the narrator calls her Draupadī and Pāñcālī, and Bhīma himself calls her by her given name, Kṛṣṇā—terms that point directly at the familiar Draupadī, the one who resists stepping into her “Sairandhrī” costume. Just as it does earlier in the story, Draupadī’s suffering grounds the narrative in the emotional landscape of the greater *Mahābhārata*, preserving continuity between the *Virāṭaparvan*’s masquerade and the painful (maybe even impossible) challenges that the protagonists face elsewhere. Moments of uncovering in the narration match up with instances of uncovering in the characters themselves: at intervals, the protagonists go back to being “themselves,” and then they return to their costumes. For most of the characters, as for the narration itself, disguises are unstable things; they can be taken off and put on again.

This is certainly true of Bhīma, who, at the moment when he decides to kill Kīcaka, rhetorically rips off his costume:

I’ll crush that Kīcaka whether I’m in hiding or in plain sight—and I’ll kill the Matsyas, too, if they find out. Then I’ll slay Duryodhana and I’ll get back the

⁸¹ *Mahābhārata* 4.22.26–27a–d: *tata āśvāsayat kṛṣṇāṃ pravimucya viśāṃ pate | uvāca ca mahābāhuḥ pāñcālīṃ tatra draupadīm | āśrupūrṇamukhīṃ dīnāṃ durdharṣaḥ sa vṛkodaraḥ || evaṃ te bhīru vadhyante ye tvāṃ kliśyanty anāgasam | praihi tvāṃ nagaraṃ kṛṣṇe na bhayaṃ vidyate tava |*

earth for us. Yudhiṣṭhira, “Kuntī’s son,” should serve Virāṭa. He enjoys it, after all.⁸²

Here it’s as if Draupadī’s insistence on “playing” only herself finally rubs off on Bhīma, and he joins her in refusing to embrace their new personas. It no longer matters whether he is seen as his alter ego, Ballava the cook, or whether he is ultimately revealed to be his former self, Bhīma the Pāṇḍava: “I’ll crush that Kīcaka whether I’m in hiding or plain sight.” The characterological uncovering—that is, Bhīma’s willingness to be seen “in plain sight” for the Pāṇḍava he is—extends to a narrative uncovering, namely, an instance in which the *Virāṭaparvan* is revealed to be continuous with the rest of the *Mahābhārata*. He promises: “I’ll kill the Matsyas, too, if they find out. Then I’ll slay Duryodhana and I’ll get back the earth for us.” For Bhīma there is no distinction between the kinds of things that must happen in the context of the year in Virāṭa’s court (violence, revenge, death) and the kinds of things that happen elsewhere (violence, revenge, death)—at least now that Draupadī has persuaded him that it must be so. Bhīma’s speech makes the *Virāṭaparvan* take its place in the larger *Mahābhārata*, its muted streams of violence spilling into the epic’s roaring river.

After all these pointed recollections of the “real” *Mahābhārata* that pepper the *Kīcakavadha* story—these moments of pulling back the veil—what would finally constitute a sense of conclusion, or a note of integration? This, after all, is what the *Virāṭaparvan* ultimately has to offer: a *Mahābhārata*, but this time with a felicitous resolution. Let us approach the question by way of Draupadī and Bhīma. We have now seen Bhīma inhabit two very different

⁸² *Mahābhārata* 4.21.33–34: *taṃ gahvare prakāṣe vā pothayiṣyāmi kīcakam | atha ced avabhotsyanti haṃsye matsyān api dhruvam || tato duryodhanam hatvā pratipatsye vasuṃdharām | kāmam matsyam upāstām hi kuntīputro yudhiṣṭhiraḥ* || Note that in the verse immediately following these two, Draupadī does insist that Bhīṣma maintain his guise. It makes for a notable—and, I would add, intentionally implausible—contrast to all the resistance to her (and their) costumes that she voices up until this point.

relationships with his disguise. One is conciliatory, if occasionally begrudging: in the *sabhā*, Bhīma can be restrained from taking revenge on Kīcaka; and when Draupadī initially tries to persuade him to kill Kīcaka once and for all, his first response is not to jump to action but rather to encourage her to take comfort in the stories of faithful, long-suffering wives such as Sītā. On the other hand, as we see in the passage above, Bhīma ultimately demonstrates a great willingness to cast off his disguise and bring down the Pāṇḍavas’ whole charade; indeed, he scorns Yudhiṣṭhira for continuing to play the part, and even more for enjoying it. In the final chapters of the *Kīcakavadha* story the *Virāṭaparvan* offers a solution to this tension. Bhīma steps into a third character: not Virāṭa’s cook (and wrestler) and not his own self, but a *gandharva*—the very figure whom Draupadī makes him out to be in her very own cover story.

In a testament to the cohesion between Bhīma and his *gandharva* self, Bhīma’s physical body changes as he adopts this new character. “Bloodthirsty” (*jighāṃsayā*) for the Upakīcakas, who are about to kill Draupadī, Bhīma “expanded himself” (*vyāyatam kṛtvā*), “ballooning” (*vijajṛmbhe*) so much that he totally “alters his appearance” (*veṣam viparivartya*).⁸³ Rather than take his real self and make it fictional—Bhīma disguising himself as Ballava—here Bhīma takes his fictional self, a *gandharva*, and makes it into his own real body. The narration makes much of the unity between Bhīma and this *gandharva*. In the verses that follow, we see him from the perspective of the Upakīcakas, who panic: “A ferocious *gandharva* is coming! He’s angry, he’s swinging trees around! Quick, let go of the maid! A huge menace has come for us!” When the narration switches like this so that Bhīma appears completely as his new *gandharva* self, it’s as if we (in the position of the Upakīcakas below him) are watching him on a stage. We may well know that he is “really” Bhīma, but his new persona is so all-consuming that we see him and

⁸³ *Mahābhārata* 4.22.17: *ity uktvā sa mahābāhur vivajṛmbhe jighāṃsayā | tataḥ sa vyāyatam kṛtvā veṣam viparivartya ca ||*

believe he has actually become a *gandharva*. Note that Bhīma steps fully into a disguised self only through Draupadī: it is *her* make-believe world—the world in which she is a maid protected by her *gandharva* husbands—that he brings to life, and it is her cry for help that causes him to do so. In the *Virāṭaparvan*, disguises are relational.

It certainly seems to be that way for Draupadī. Only after Bhīma embraces his new *gandharva* self is Draupadī truly able to inhabit her role as the maid. He realizes her cover story, which makes it possible for her to do the same. After Bhīma (or, rather, his *gandharva* self) kills the Upakīcakas, Draupadī seems to become her maid’s self (*sairandhrī*) in full. On the way back to the city she bathes and washes her clothes (4.23.12ab)—a symbolic rebirth, and a way for her to try “putting on her costume” a second time. When she encounters Bhīma shortly thereafter, she addresses him as “the *gandharva* king who freed me” (4.23.15) even though she speaks to him under her breath. In short, she plays along—even when there is no audience to hear them. Aware that the year has not yet passed in full, she asks for more time to work for Sudeṣṇā—a request that would have been unthinkable at the beginning of the *Kīcakavadha* story—maintaining the façade of her *gandharva* husbands all along: “Let the king put up with me for just thirteen days more. There is no question that those *gandharvas* will achieve their aims.”⁸⁴ Even Vaiśampāyana plays into her new guise. From this point on, our narrator introduces her speech not with *draupadī uvāca* (“Draupadī said”) but with *sairandhrī uvāca* (“the maid said”). At last Draupadī joins the performance.

This means that in the *Kīcakavadha*, the famous denouement—that is, the death of Kīcaka—does not provide the resolution that it initially seems to. Much of the *Mahābhārata* lies beneath and beyond. Through veiled narration, the *Virāṭaparvan* teaches us not to trust the

⁸⁴ *Mahābhārata* 4.23.27: *trayodaśamātraṃ me rājā kṣamatu bhāmini | kṛtakṛtyā bhaviṣyanti gandharvās te na saṃśayah ||*

moments when promises are fulfilled, enemies are slain, and so on. We come to understand that the various “happy endings” we see therein—not only the killing of Kīcaka, but also the *Gītā* that makes you laugh, the battle where no one dies, and the wedding of Abhimanyu and Uttarā—ultimately present faux resolutions of their own. In the *Kīcakavadha*, at least, it is only later—once Bhīma and Draupadī agree to play along in one another’s dramas—that the veil the *Virāṭaparvan* casts over the *Mahābhārata* can truly be put back in place and the show can go on. The enactment of the deep attachment between these two figures, each of whom struggles with disguise in his or her own way but who somehow manage to perform together, is what actually brings the *Kīcakavadha* narrative to a point of fulfillment. And that is where it must end.

Bhīma and Draupadī: a couple that would go on to honeymoon in *Mahābhārata* after *Mahābhārata*. But we must leave them here, for the *Pañcarātra*—the subject of the next chapter—paints in vivid colors one half of the *Virāṭaparvan*’s rather more muted couple, Abhimanyu and Uttarā. There Abhimanyu will move to center stage. The *Kīcakavadha* and the *Virāṭaparvan* in which it is embedded set the stage for a very different repertoire of retellings, following their lead without the threat of reabsorption. This new independence awaits us in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Veiled Narration in the *Pañcarātra*: The Death of Abhimanyu

The *Mahābhārata* is filled with worst-case scenarios. But even in the epic's world in crisis, one such scenario looms over the rest—a devastating narrative event that lives inside the epic's broader catastrophe and yet at times seems to dwarf it. That event is the death of Arjuna's son, the young warrior Abhimanyu, on the eleventh day of the battle at Kurukṣetra. Abhimanyu's death is as essential to the narrative scaffolding of the *Mahābhārata* as the war itself; one can hardly imagine a *Mahābhārata* without it, and as far as I am aware, the epic's retellers hardly ever did. There seems to be only one telling of the *Mahābhārata* in which Abhimanyu is purposefully made to survive the events of the epic story, and by now it will come as no surprise to you that this outlier is the *Pañcarātra*.

On a basic level the play achieves this striking divergence from the epic's plot by circumventing the war altogether. Without the great battle at Kurukṣetra there is no way for Abhimanyu to die—at least not within the familiar boundaries of the epic story—nor is there even a reason for him to be killed. But what is so fascinating about the *Pañcarātra* is that even as the play has Abhimanyu survive in the end, it nonetheless insists on retelling—subtly, and very much in its own way—the story of Abhimanyu's death in the *Mahābhārata*. How does the play accomplish this, especially when it forestalls the great war in which we are accustomed to seeing Abhimanyu be killed? It takes key elements of the story of Abhimanyu's death at Kurukṣetra and transposes them onto the central martial conflict of the *Virāṭaparvan*, the cattle raid, which unfolds during Acts 2 and 3 of the play. This time, however, Abhimanyu lives. Not only that but the entire narrative trajectory of his death in the epic is inverted and turned upside-down, piece by piece: in the play he is rescued rather than left to be killed, reunited with Arjuna rather than

painfully lamented by him, and married off to Virāṭa's daughter, Uttarā, for good rather than for only a brief period. All these events take place within the framework of the *Virāṭa* story—a framework that the *Pañcarātra* has demonstrated to be extremely elastic. This marks another significant departure from the epic, since in the epic's *Virāṭaparvan* Abhimanyu appears only at the very end, when he marries Uttarā. To place him at the very center of the *Virāṭa* episode, therefore, is to take a broad leap to begin with.

That Abhimanyu should survive the events of the *Mahābhārata* is as improbable as it is wonder-inducing. The *Pañcarātra* anticipates this disbelief. For even as the play offers its own account of Abhimanyu's survival and reunion with Arjuna, it never lets the audience forget how Abhimanyu's death and subsequent separation from Arjuna unfold in the *Mahābhārata*. The play does this by using the technique of veiled narration, a bivalent mode of literary expression that is drawn directly from the epic's *Virāṭaparvan*. This is to say that the play presents both narrative paths at once, with the new story of Abhimanyu's rescue and survival layered over the familiar story of his death. At key intervals the upper and more easily accessible layer of the narration—the veil—pulls back and reveals a fundamental part of the story of Abhimanyu's death in the *Mahābhārata*. Initially it may seem that the *Pañcarātra* is completely inverting one of the epic's most tragic storylines, but ultimately we find something much more complex: a portrayal of life intertwined with death, rescue intertwined with killing, and reunion intertwined with separation. The *Pañcarātra* therefore offers an absorbing and intricate method of retelling that complicates the very idea of what it means to retell a story in the first place.

In the previous chapter I presented a detailed account of veiled narration as it works within the *Virāṭaparvan*; I included a note about how and why I use the word “narration” to describe what happens not just in a seemingly linear format, such as is connoted by the term

“epic,” but also in a drama. In the chapter that lies ahead I will explore how veiled narration works in the *Pañcarātra*. Three rather different instances of unveiling appear in its account of Abhimanyu’s survival. The first instance involves Abhimanyu’s capture during the cattle raid—an event that adds an entirely new development to the epic’s cattle raid story. In the epic Abhimanyu takes no part in this raid, but in the play he joins the Kauravas when they move in on Virāṭa’s land. During the skirmish he is captured by Bhīma, who is disguised as Virāṭa’s chef and wrestler, and taken back to Virāṭa’s court. This emerges as a moment of unveiling, because the play purposefully and almost systematically recalls the circumstances of Abhimanyu’s death in the epic precisely as it massages these motifs in such a way that they produce a very different conclusion.

The second instance of veiling and unveiling happens in the scene that follows, when Abhimanyu finds himself among his father (Arjuna, dressed as Bṛhannalā) and uncles (Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira, also in disguise) and struggles to perceive who they really are. This scene pointedly takes up a major theme in the epic’s account of the death of Abhimanyu, namely, the tension between the ability and inability to see—and, for a figure who is seen, to be recognized as a distinctive, individual self. By evoking this theme so powerfully, the *Pañcarātra* once again colors its new version of events—the apex of which is the happy reunion of Arjuna and Abhimanyu—with shades of separation and sorrow drawn from the *Mahābhārata*. The presence of the veil is thus made manifest.

The third instance of veiling and unveiling occurs at the beginning of Act 3, when the drama turns away from the Pāṇḍavas and centers on the Kauravas once more. Here Duryodhana’s guilt over Abhimanyu’s capture—an event that he believes will lead to the young warrior’s death—profoundly reflects Yudhiṣṭhira’s guilt over the role that Yudhiṣṭhira had

played in causing Abhimanyu to be killed in the epic. At the end of Abhimanyu's trajectory in the *Pañcarātra*, then, we land in much the same place that we do in the *Mahābhārata*: a state of lament, even if its depth is veiled by the identity of the character doing the lamenting.

In each of these three cases, it is clear that we have to understand various aspects of Abhimanyu's death as it appears in the *Mahābhārata* in order to understand the reversals that appear in the *Pañcarātra*. Thus we are necessarily thrust back into the epic before we can meaningfully advance into the play. This is especially crucial since the *Mahābhārata* narrates the story of Abhimanyu's death in such a way as to make it seem unprecedented in tragedy, the worst of the epic's many worst-case scenarios. It does this in two ways. First, it presents Abhimanyu's death as unforeseen and therefore without cause; this is a rarity in an epic where nearly every event is predicted, vowed, cursed, or in some way foretold. Then second, in the chapters and books that follow the death itself, the epic returns to that death in the form of various characters' laments for Abhimanyu. These laments are united by the motif of counterfactual possibility—the possibility of what Abhimanyu's life might have been if he hadn't died. For the audience, one effect of this “what if?” motif is that instead of coming to know Abhimanyu when he is alive, we come to know him only after he has died—indeed, he appears very little in the epic before he dies. Narratively speaking, therefore, Abhimanyu's death precedes his life, the life envisioned for him by his lamenters. This life is self-consciously unreal—it floats eerily above the reality of Abhimanyu's death—and it is the tension between these two narrative levels that makes the death of Abhimanyu uniquely poignant in an epic otherwise crowded with killing.

The *Pañcarātra* picks up on this signal aspect of the *Mahābhārata*'s depiction of Abhimanyu. Just as the epic does through its laments, the play offers its audience a powerful but

porous and indeed temporary impression of what a life for Abhimanyu might have looked like. This it does through veiled narration. It superimposes one overarching vision—Abhimanyu’s rescue and survival—over its opposite, his death, and in the process of doing so reveals the full duality of what the play projects. Veiled narration then becomes a way for the *Pañcarātra* to embed the distinctive narrative style of the *Virāṭaparvan* in its own particular literary and performative milieu, and to apply that style to a new canvas: the story of Abhimanyu. Yet we cannot help wondering whether the *Pañcarātra*’s narration of Abhimanyu’s life—as against his death—shows it too to be a lament: a lament for Abhimanyu, to begin with, but also a lament for the war as a whole and for the overwhelming diversity of human suffering that it seems to represent. If so, we have here a lament in disguise, and a great deal of the drama’s power, in this respect, derives from the fact that the circumstances of human life, as it presents them, shut off the possibility of reconstructive grieving. What lament could be more poignant, more conclusive, than this seemingly comic face-lift? The epic’s own approach to veiled narration hardly suggests its possibility, and yet it prepares the way for what the *Pañcarātra* achieves. Just as the *Pañcarātra* directs us back to the *Mahābhārata*, we too must begin with the earlier narrative—and the unrealized alternatives it suggests.

Imagination and disbelief: The death of Abhimanyu in the *Mahābhārata*

What makes Abhimanyu’s death stand out from the epic’s many fraught killings? Let me begin by speaking anecdotally. If one were to ask a reader or listener of the *Mahābhārata*—whether the Sanskrit epic itself or one of its retellings—what makes Abhimanyu’s death such a cruel, sad, and striking scene, one would surely be directed to the features of the plot itself.

Abhimanyu goes into battle young, alone, and unprotected; he is killed fighting huge numbers of

warriors by himself; and his enemies kill him before Arjuna or any of the Pāṇḍavas can attempt a rescue. Most memorably, most poignantly insofar as his opponents are concerned, Abhimanyu knows how to break into the *cakravyūha*, the complex battle formation in which the Kauravas enclose him, but when it comes to extricating himself from the formation, he is powerless. It is as if the nature of the vise itself has changed. That is how he dies. These features are essential to Abhimanyu's death; they appear in every retelling of the plot. And yet they are not the full story. The architecture of the *cakravyūha* and the terrible drama of its deployment cannot account for the full emotional resonance that attends the story of Abhimanyu's death.

We can begin to appreciate what is involved by imagining that we are watching all of this happen in front of us in real life. Clearly any one of the aspects of Abhimanyu's death would evoke an emotional response. And yet the *Mahābhārata*'s impact is different: it is literary, it plays by its own rules, and the rules it generates are deeply complex. The way Abhimanyu dies seeps uncannily into the intricately tragic rhythms of the epic as a whole. In the epic's own terms, what makes Abhimanyu's death so emotionally and ethically challenging—indeed, uniquely so?

The answer, I would propose, is that the story of Abhimanyu's death distorts two of the major narrative principles that otherwise hold the epic together. One is the principle of abundant foretelling: nearly every major event in the epic is predicted, foreseen, or anticipated in some way. The other is that the articulation of possibility almost always results in its actualization: nearly anything that can happen *does* happen; the epic's scope is ample enough to permit and even require such a thing. In regard to the first principle, we must observe that while the death of Abhimanyu does not quite come as a surprise, it is certainly not foretold. His death therefore seems to have no narrative cause; it takes on an air of drastic implausibility. That sense of near

impossibility is countermanded by the epic's particular way of manipulating the trope of the lament. In the laments that follow Abhimanyu's death, we are not presented with memories, which is what we might expect, given the genre. Rather, we are presented with powerful visions of events that could or might have taken place, but that we know are imaginary. Impossibility is therefore answered by possibility of a certain sort. There is a pointedly complementary relationship between these ideas—the lack of foretelling and the imagination of a counterfactual survival. That Abhimanyu's death should be unforeseen speaks to a kind of blindness, and that blindness becomes an anchoring theme in the language of the story itself, which returns frequently to the motif of not seeing. The four major laments that follow his death—voiced by Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, Subhadrā, and Uttarā—respond to this sense of blindness by laying out extraordinary moments of vision as to what Abhimanyu's survival might have looked like.

These laments convey a forceful desire—both within the epic frame and on the part of its audience—for Abhimanyu to have lived. To me, this evokes Anne Carson's understanding of the nature of desire, in which “the difference between what is and what could be is visible.”¹ The laments for Abhimanyu operate in a manner that is, as Carson says, stereoscopic, where “the ideal” (for him to have lived) “is projected on a screen of the actual” (the fact of his death). The creators of the *Pañcarātra* know this landscape. Through veiled narration, the retelling is suspended above its narrative base in such a way that the audience maintains an awareness of both. The laments for Abhimanyu in the *Mahābhārata* offer the playwrights a general rubric with which to work, but they seize the moment—the hazy projection—and make it speak in specific dramatic terms.

¹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (McLean, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 16–17.

An unfortold event

In the epic, the story takes place on the eleventh day of the great battle at Kurukṣetra. As is standard for the epic's battle books, the narrative is framed by the Kauravas' experiences, a structure that the *Pañcarātra* notably borrows. We open onto a conversation between Duryodhana and Droṇa, who is leading the Kaurava army.² The army's progress has stalled, so Duryodhana implores Droṇa to take more drastic action. The problem is Arjuna's prowess: if he is present on the field, he will defeat every challenger. Droṇa therefore decides to distract Arjuna—to pull him away from the main battle. He sends a designated group of warriors to challenge him and pull him away to the south. So Arjuna (and, by extension, Kṛṣṇa) are now out of the picture. Back on the main field of battle, Droṇa arranges the Kaurava army in an array called the *cakravyūha*, the “wheel formation,” often depicted as a magisterial pattern in which multiple layers of warriors are arrayed in concentric circles. Note that none of the Kauravas' strategies are directed at capturing or killing Abhimanyu specifically; this lack of intention contributes to the sense of narrative causelessness around Abhimanyu's death. It is not that an elaborate trap has been set for him and him alone, but rather that he simply and literally walks into it.

At this point the story switches to the Pāṇḍāvas' perspective. Standing beside Abhimanyu, Yudhiṣṭhira looks out at the *cakravyūha* and worries aloud about how Arjuna would respond if they failed to break through it. It is only here that the story turns toward Abhimanyu specifically, and that we intuit precisely how he will be killed:

Yudhiṣṭhira saw Droṇa raging and considered different ways to hold him back. But thinking that Droṇa couldn't be defeated by anyone else, Yudhiṣṭhira placed that heavy, unbearable burden on Abhimanyu. Abhimanyu was hardly inferior to

² *Mahābhārata* 7.16.

Kṛṣṇa or Arjuna; his power was immeasurable, and he had killed enemy warriors. Yudhiṣṭhira turned to him and said:

“Arjuna may find fault with us when he gets back, so you must act accordingly, my dear one. I know no way of breaking the *cakravyūha*. Only Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, his strong-armed son Pradyumna, or *you* could break it. There is no one else, no fifth. Abhimanyu, dear Abhimanyu, please grant this favor to us who ask it of you—your fathers, your uncles, every soldier in this army. Hurry, you must take up your bow and take down Droṇa’s array, lest Arjuna find fault with us when he returns from battle.”

“I want my fathers³ to win,” said Abhimanyu. “I will go deep into Droṇa’s perfect battle array, staunch and steady as it may be, and I will break it, since my father taught me the trick of how to break into that formation. But I won’t be able to get out of it if something bad should happen.”

“Split it apart,” said Yudhiṣṭhira. “Forge an opening for us. Whatever way you go, my dear one, we will follow after you. You are just like Arjuna in battle. We will place you before us in the fight and we will follow after you, my child, protecting you on all sides.”⁴

³ The word is the plural of *pitṛ* (father), which in this case would include uncles and other elder male relatives. It often refers to one’s male ancestors broadly. When Abhimanyu uses the word in the singular elsewhere, he means to single out Arjuna, his only biological father. Instead of translating the plural *pitṛ* as “fathers and uncles” (or something similar) here, I chose to use the more opaque “fathers” in order to show that the relationships between a young man and his elder male relatives would have a heightened intimacy in this context.

⁴ *Mahābhārata* 7.34.11–21: *tam āyāntam abhikruddham droṇam drṣtvā yudhiṣṭhirah | bahudhā cintayāmāsa droṇasya prativāraṇam || aśakyam tu tam anyena droṇam matvā yudhiṣṭhirah | aviśahyaṁ gurum bhāraṁ saubhadre samavāsrjat || vāsudevād anavaram phalgunāc cāmitaujasam | abravīt paravīraghnam abhimanyum idam vacaḥ || etya no nārjuno garhed yathā tāta tathā kuru | cakravyūhasya na vyaṁ vidma bhedaṁ kathaṁcana || tvaṁ vārjuno vā kṛṣṇo vā bhindyāt pradyumna eva vā | cakravyūhaṁ mahābāho pañcamo ’nyo na vidyate || abhimanyo varam tāta yācatāṁ dātum arhasi | pitṛṇāṁ mātulānāṁ ca sainyaṇāṁ caiva sarvaśaḥ || dhanamjayo hi nas tāta garhayed etya saṁyugāt | kṣipram astraṁ samādāya droṇāṅkaṁ viśātaya || droṇasya dṛḍham avyagram anīkapravaram yudhi | pitṛṇāṁ jayam ākāṅkṣann avagāhe bhinadmi ca || upadiṣṭo hi me pitṛā yogo ’nikasya bhedane | notsahe tu vinirgantum ahaṁ kasyāṁcid āpadi || bhindhy anīkaṁ yudhāṁ śreṣṭha dvāraṁ saṁjanayasva naḥ | vyaṁ tvānugamiṣyāmaḥ yena tvaṁ tāta yāsyasi || dhanamjayasamaṁ yuddhe tvāṁ vyaṁ tāta saṁyuge | praṇidhāyānuyāsyāmo rakṣantaḥ sarvatomukhāḥ ||* Note, also, the ironic inversion of “protecting you on all sides” in the final *pāda* with what actually happens to Abhimanyu: being surrounded on all sides, but without protection.

Before discussing what is present in this passage, we ought to notice what is missing from it. Many moral turning points in the epic—places where the characters move the plot dramatically in one direction or another as expressions of what they say to be ethical action—are marked by the language of fate or the logic of revenge. Characters rely heavily on fate (*daiva*: a power that is impossible to combat—technically “what comes from the gods (*deva*),” though the gods are often powerless before it) and revenge as familiar idioms intended to persuade others to behave in a certain way or to justify a particular course of action. They do so, I would contend, because arguments that rest on fate or revenge incorporate narratives about causation that extend beyond an individual character’s internal sensibilities. When an epic character decides to act based on her or his personal understanding of dharma or on whatever may have been absorbed from a teacher or adviser, the most straightforward “cause” of the action in question is apt to be what comes into view because of one’s own personal ideology. Arguments based on fate and revenge, by contrast, extend causation beyond oneself and one’s own particular frame of interpretation. Whether a character does this implicitly (“the gods want this,” “something divine is causing me to do this”) or explicitly (“he started it,” “this is an appropriate response to someone else’s action”), rhetorical turns toward fate and revenge place one’s actions within larger causal networks involving the actions and desires of other figures.

One of the extraordinary features of the passage just quoted, however, is that it evokes an interpersonal causal network without employing the logic of fate or revenge. Causation, here, is relational and emotional. Yudhiṣṭhira acts out of fear of his brother’s judgment (“Arjuna may find fault with us” and Abhimanyu acts out of love for his father and uncles (“I want my fathers to win”). As a result, the causal network is small and circumscribed. Rather than bring in divine intention or distant enemies, the passage revolves around a limited and intimately connected set

of individuals: Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, Abhimanyu, and obliquely the other Pāṇḍava brothers. The intimate nature of the causal circle has a profound effect on how one understands Abhimanyu’s death. One fails to have any sense that large forces—gods, enemies, ideologies—are at work. Rather, the large force in question is of a directly emotional and personal nature: Yudhiṣṭhira’s and Abhimanyu’s relational lives—their loves for, fears of, and commitments to their closest family members. In this way the epic makes Abhimanyu’s death seem to emerge from deeply interpersonal, affective causes—an uncanny, almost opposite counterpoint to the elaborate set of impersonal feints that are involved (for instance, the operation of the *cakravyūha* as a battle strategy reserved for rare and, in that way, impersonal usage). Yudhiṣṭhira simply experiences an emotion—a mix of fear and love for Arjuna—and Abhimanyu responds sympathetically. Hearing this, we have an immediate apprehension of how Abhimanyu will die. We understand that his death may be inevitable, not because it is fated in some general way but on account of his own position in the epic fabric. Indeed, his own words set the template: “I won’t be able to get out of it. . . .”

Abhimanyu’s charioteer warns him not to do it, heightening the sense of foreboding that has already begun to arise. By offering an alternative perspective in this way—the traditional wisdom of a charioteer—the epic deepens the sense that Yudhiṣṭhira and Abhimanyu’s decision to proceed in this manner is truly a personal, emotional decision and not a natural expression of fate, vengeance, or ethics. The charioteer says:

This is too much of a burden the Pāṇḍavas have placed on you, sir. Consider the matter seriously; only then should you fight. For Droṇa is your teacher, and truly skilled; he has taken great pains to learn the highest weapons.⁵

⁵ *Mahābhārata* 7.35.3–4ab: *atibhāro ’yam āyusmann āhitas tvayi pāṇḍavaiḥ | saṃpradhārya kṣamaṃ buddhyā tatas tvam yoddhum arhasi || ācāryo hi kṛtī droṇaḥ paramāstre kṛāśramah | atyantasukha-saṃvṛddhas tvam ca yuddhaviśāradaḥ ||*

Many chapters pass. Abhimanyu breaks into the *cakravyūha* and slays hundreds of Kaurava soldiers. Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Nakula, and Sahadeva try to follow behind him, but are stopped in their tracks by Jayadratha, an ally of the Kauravas, who uses a boon from Śiva to overcome them. Abhimanyu is now left on his own, and that is how he is killed. It is important to recognize that it is only once Jayadratha steps into the story that ideas of fate and revenge begin to swirl around Abhimanyu's death. Śiva is now involved in the story, if only tangentially, meaning that we might read into the narrative of Abhimanyu's death some sense that it is divinity-driven. And although he plays a rather oblique role in Abhimanyu's death, Jayadratha becomes the sole focus of Arjuna's revenge thereafter; Arjuna ultimately blames Jayadratha alone for the fact that his son has been killed. One might ask why Arjuna singles out Jayadratha when there are so many other figures who contribute to the slaying of Abhimanyu, many of them much more directly. An obvious target, for example, would be Duḥśāsana's son, since he is the one who actually kills him. But such questions are precisely the point. From one perspective, a death that is not predicted—much less prearranged—prompts a response that seems equally arbitrary. From another, the choice of Jayadratha as the target of Arjuna's revenge takes some of the sting of disorder out of Abhimanyu's death. For Arjuna it is a crucial exercise in meaning-making to link Śiva, Jayadratha, and Abhimanyu in this way. In Arjuna's reading, Jayadratha's divine boon reflects back on Abhimanyu's death in such a way as to render it less random and more logical.

The anonymity of death

After Abhimanyu is left on his own, many more chapters go by and many more hundreds of Kaurava warriors die at his hands. At last Droṇa and Karṇa break his sword and shield. Abhimanyu picks up a chariot wheel—again the *cakra* as *vyūha*—and runs at Droṇa. When the wheel is taken from him, he picks up a mace and faces off with the son of Duṣṣāsana, who quickly brings his own mace down upon Abhimanyu’s head, killing him. That is his death: after dozens of chapters leading up to it, the event itself takes no more than a verse; it is all brought about by a warrior who is essentially nameless. The quick work of it, the lack of momentum leading up to it, and the anonymity of the killer make Abhimanyu’s death eerily realistic. It is certainly a dramatic departure from the lengthy yogic deaths (Droṇa, Bhīṣma) and dharma-debate deaths (Karṇa, Duryodhana) that mark the ends of major figures in the epic—deaths that are marked by grand pronouncements of virtue. Abhimanyu’s death, by contrast, is narrated in such a way that it seems to come from the world we actually live in. How many of us have known individuals whose full, brilliant lives were ended with alarming brevity by anonymous Death? The *Mahābhārata* captures this feeling in the pace of the narration and the haphazard circumstances surrounding Abhimanyu’s last moments alive.

That death should be anonymous—an event that is caused by an anonymous (fundamentally unknown, impossible-to-name) force and also an event that makes a person anonymous insofar as that it robs the victim of individual existence—is something the *Mahābhārata* explores in its story of Mṛtyu (Death).⁶ There Death says, memorably, that she fears people will hate her when they discover she has killed their loved ones. This is perhaps a way of saying that she fears being known, being recognized, or even being seen at all. Her

⁶ Told in the vulgate edition, *Mahābhārata* 7.52.20–7.54.50. See Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar, ed., *Shrīman-Mahābhāratam with the Commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha* (Poona [Pune]: Chitrashala Press, 1929).

anonymity becomes essential to her work. It is not coincidental, I think, that this tale about Death and her reluctance to be known is told to Yudhiṣṭhira in an attempt to console him in his grief over Abhimanyu. It is a story that responds to a death that seems to have more anonymity than most.⁷ This is where the lament comes into play. Especially when death is a painfully anonymous event, lament harnesses the imaginative power of language to restore individuality to the person who has died. Laments, for all their famously generic weight, reinstate the sense of individual personhood that is lost in death. In this they offer a kind of rebirth: death comes first; then we are born into specificity—either in body or in the minds of others.

A death beyond possibility or logic

It is important to keep in mind that in the context of the *Mahābhārata*, none of the pieces of this story are particularly unique. Yes, Abhimanyu is young: various narrators in the epic return to this point, calling him a child (*bāla*) or constructing imagery around his youth (he “plays with” the enemy as a child plays with toys, for example)—but he is far from the only warrior to die young. By the time Abhimanyu dies, two of the other Pāṇḍavas’ children have already been killed in the battle; the other five will die in the night massacre of book 10. Now consider the fact that Abhimanyu knows how to break the *cakravyūha* but not how to escape from it if anything goes wrong. Abhimanyu is not alone here, either, since other characters’ innocent failings catch up with them in similar ways. Think of Karṇa, whose death is

⁷ This anonymity is beautifully explored in the “Padati” / “Pawn Talk” sections of Karthika Nair’s *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (New York: Archipelago, 2019). See, for example, the closing lines: “For we cannot clamour till we are claimed the names remain / our sole archives burn our spears our lances our shields but swear / you will chant the names of the faceless dead like a prayer Father / And await the day when you no more need righteous warfare nor heroes / No deadly belief no divine stairs no hereafter no Kurukshetra either” (270).

overdetermined by honest mistakes—the inborn armor he gives to Indra, the celestial weapon he uses too early, and the powerful mantra he is cursed to forget.

Then there is the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira in particular—the “Dharma King” (*dharmarāja*) whose understanding of moral behavior is often praised by narrators and other characters—is the one who essentially sends Abhimanyu to his death. This might strike a listener as disconcerting or mystifying, and it is certainly a point to which Yudhiṣṭhira himself frequently returns in his grief over Abhimanyu. At the same time, however, we ought to recognize that in some way the entire point of the *Mahābhārata*’s war is that relatives send relatives to their deaths. Nor is this the first time Yudhiṣṭhira’s decisions have caused a member of his immediate family to suffer, as we saw in chapter 4.

Finally we have the discomfiting idea that Abhimanyu is killed not by one warrior in a duel, but rather by the many different warriors who contribute to his downfall—Droṇa, Karṇa, Duḥśāsana’s son, and so on. Such a situation answers to the customs of war in a general way, but it also underscores Abhimanyu’s aloneness. Our narrator highlights this point when he describes the moment of Abhimanyu’s death:

Sheer exhaustion and the great force of the mace stupefied him. Abhimanyu was knocked out. That slayer of enemy warriors fell to the earth. And so in our war, my king, a single man was killed by many. . . He was all by himself when he was killed by six Kaurava warriors—warriors who were led by Droṇa and Karṇa. I don’t think that was dharma.⁸

⁸ *Mahābhārata* 7.48.13, 21: *gadāvegena mahatā vyāyāmena ca mohitaḥ | vicetā nyapatad bhūmau saubhadraḥ paravīrahā | evaṃ vinihato rājann eko bahubhir āhave || droṇakarṇamukhaiḥ ṣaḍbhir dhārtarāṣṭrair mahārathaiḥ | eko ’yaṃ nihataḥ śete naiṣa dharmo mano hi naḥ ||*

In this last regard Abhimanyu is hardly unique. He joins a long list of major characters who die under circumstances that other characters deem contrary to dharma: the killings of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Duryodhana are all labeled “against dharma” (*adharma*) at one point or another. Yet Abhimanyu’s death creates a specific problem, one that transmits itself through subsequent books of the epic in lament after lament and in Yudhiṣṭhira’s many moments of regret. Why does the text refuse to let it go? I would propose that the explanation lies in the sense of disbelief that undergirds a simple question that many characters ask about Abhimanyu’s death: *How did this happen?* Given the *Mahābhārata*’s much quoted claim to encompass “everything that exists,” it is worth asking where such profound feelings of disbelief would come from. If we are already swimming in a mega-story that accounts for all imaginable things, how can this narrative still make so many characters—and, importantly, audiences—feel that Abhimanyu’s death is surd-like, unimaginable?

This is where one of the *Mahābhārata*’s own special veiling mechanisms comes in. Nothing allows us to see clearly beneath this veil. It is contextless—or its context is so specific that it cannot be inferred from other aspects of the epic’s general fabric. Nothing in the texture of the veil prepares us for the sight of what lies behind it. Neither the other characters nor we, as listeners, are prepared to imagine Abhimanyu’s death. The silence is deafening: no one in the epic foretells this particular death—something that is quite astounding given how often we hear various figures speak of the deaths that will come in the great war. At the beginning of the *Bhagavadgītā*, for example, Arjuna sees inauspicious signs that make him believe no good will come of the battle, but there is no accounting for the specific loss that he will soon endure—the death of his own son. Nor do we hear any forewarning of Abhimanyu’s death from Kṛṣṇa,

Arjuna’s all-knowing interlocutor.⁹ Earlier, at the end of book 2, we hear a chorus of dire predictions. The sage Nārada says that in fourteen years all of the Kauravas will be destroyed.¹⁰ Droṇa warns Duryodhana that he and his brothers will be slaughtered.¹¹ Bitterly Saṃjaya tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra: “This is what you have accomplished, my king. A great war will come to pass. Everyone will be annihilated, and everyone who comes after them, too.”¹² Whose ruin is forecast in these two instances, the beginning of the *Gītā* and the end of book 2? It is either the destruction of everybody in general, or it is the demise of the Kauravas and their allies, but never the Pāṇḍava clan. If anything, predictions of the Pāṇḍavas’ future tend to take on a rosy hue. Thus we are utterly unprepared for Abhimanyu’s death. It doesn’t belong, it is unforeshadowed, it goes deeply against the grain. It is, in its own way, darkly veiled: this arsenal of feints and foreshortenings is the epic’s way of making it be so.

The contrast between the opposing sides’ futures crystallizes on the night before the great war begins, and Karṇa, the Pāṇḍavas’ eldest brother, is key to revealing this contrast. He tells Kṛṣṇa about a dream he has had. In the dream he envisions the miserable end of his chosen allies, the Kauravas, and these images he contrasts with a detailed picture of the Pāṇḍavas’ triumph:

The destruction of the entire earth looms over us, and it was I who caused it—I, and Śakuni, and Duḥśāsana, and even Duryodhana. Soon there will be a great war between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas—a ghastly war, bloody and dirty. Burned by the fire of weapons, kings and princes will die following Duryodhana’s lead. Many nights I have dreamed frightful dreams, seeing harrowing omens and monstrous portents. They whisper that for Duryodhana there will be defeat, and for Yudhiṣṭhira there will be victory. There are so many of them it makes me shudder.¹³

⁹ *Mahābhārata* 6.23.31.

¹⁰ *Mahābhārata* 2.71.29–30.

¹¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.71.44.

¹² *Mahābhārata* 2.72.5.

¹³ *Mahābhārata* 5.141.2–6: *yo 'yam pṛthivyāḥ kārtsnyena vināśaḥ samupasthitaḥ | nimittaṃ tatra śakunir ahaṃ duḥśāsanas tathā | duryodhanaś ca nrpatir dhṛtarāṣṭrasuto 'bhavat || asaṃśayam idaṃ kṛṣṇa*

. . . In a dream I watched Yudhiṣṭhira ascend to a palace perched on a thousand steps. He was with his brothers. They wore white turbans and pure white robes. I saw that all of them had bright white thrones. And you, Kṛṣṇa—in the dream I watched you fling human intestines across the earth, staining it blood-red. Yudhiṣṭhira, his power limitless, had climbed to the top of a heap of bones. There he devoured ghee and milk-rice in a golden bowl. He relished it!¹⁴ . . . Arjuna had mounted a white elephant. He held Gāṇḍīva, he was blazing with extraordinary *śrī*, and you were by his side. In the war, all of you will slay the kings who follow Duryodhana—I do not doubt it.¹⁵

The breathtaking detail of Karṇa’s vision—it lasts for a whole chapter—leads the audience to expect the deaths of Duryodhana and all the kings who are his allies; indeed it prepares us to watch Karṇa himself die. For the Pāṇḍavas, by contrast, Karṇa’s imagery of whiteness portends only auspiciousness.¹⁶ This is especially true of the image of being mounted on something huge and white—a throne, a heap of bones, an elephant. For Karṇa, the Pāṇḍavas’ victory is uncomplicated and assured. Indeed, that part of the dream about the Pāṇḍavas’ victory “comes true” in a very different sense from what happens in the case of the Kauravas, or when

mahad yuddham upasthitam | pāṇḍavānāṃ kurūṇāṃ ca ghoram rudhirakardamam || rājāno rājaputrās ca duryodhanavaśānugāḥ | raṇe śāstrāgninā dagdhāḥ prāpsyanti yamasādanam || svapnā hi bahavo ghorā drśyante madhusūdana | nimittāni ca ghorāṇi tathotpātāḥ sudāruṇāḥ || parājayam dhārtarāṣṭre vijayam ca yudhiṣṭhīre | śamsanta iva vārṣṇeya vividhā lomahaṣṇāṇāḥ ||

¹⁴ *Mahābhārata* 5.141.27–30: *sahasrapādam prāsādam svapnānte sma yudhiṣṭhīrah | adhirohan mayā drśṭaḥ saha bhrāṭṛbhir acyuta || śvetosṇīśās ca drśyante sarve te śuklavāsasaḥ | āsanāni ca śubhrāni sarveṣāṃ upalakṣaye || tava cāpi mayā kṛṣṇa svapnānte rudhirāvilā | āntreṇa pṛthivī drśṭā parikṣiptā janārdana || asthisamcayam ārūḍhas cāmitaujā yudhiṣṭhīrah | suvarṇapātryāṃ saṃhr̥ṣṭo bhuktavān ghṛtapāyasam || MBh*

¹⁵ *Mahābhārata* 5.141.34–35: *pāṇḍuram gajam ārūḍho gāṇḍīvī sa dhanamjayaḥ | tvayā sārḍham hr̥ṣikeśa śrīyā paramayā jvalan || yūyam sarvān vadhiṣyadhvaṃ tatra me nāsti saṃśayaḥ | pāṛthivān samare kṛṣṇa duryodhanapurogamān ||*

¹⁶ On Karṇa’s dream, see Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 32–33. Note, also, that “it is the dreamer’s awareness of the dream that brings about its results. The dream is the beginning of a chain of causes, not the result of such a chain or a mere reflection of an event that was always fated to happen and has simply been revealed to the dreamer through his dream (as other Indian texts imply). These two ideas—that dreams reflect reality and that they bring about reality—remain closely intertwined in Indian texts on the interpretation of dreams” (19).

the general horrors of war are to the fore. In regard to the Pāṇḍavas, Karna's visions of "the ghastly war" map onto actual events that unfold later in the story. When he interprets the dream to mean that "all of you [Pāṇḍavas] will slay the kings who follow Duryodhana," he foresees something that really does happen later on. There is a direct correspondence between the dream (or Karna's recollection of it) and narrative reality.

Crucially, though, Karna's dream-predictions lack characterological depth. He dreams in signs and symbols, offering no trace of the pyrrhic victory that in fact awaits the five brothers—including the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira will prove reluctant to rule. The Yudhiṣṭhira of Karna's dream, perched on a pile of human bones and feasting on *pāyasam*, could not stand at a greater distance from the guilt-ridden Yudhiṣṭhira who actually emerges in the epic post-war. To Yudhiṣṭhira, speaking from within the Pāṇḍavas' felt reality, victory feels like loss. In chapter after chapter he muses on how the deaths of his kinsmen have brought him only grief and ultimately could have been avoided.

There is indeed something out of sync here. And yet many readers, over the generations, have been seduced into adopting a similar view of what happens as the epic unfolds. They have wanted to see the Pāṇḍavas' victory as resolute, persuasive, unproblematic, and indeed symbolic. According to this view, the violent and inauspicious aspects of the Pāṇḍavas' victory are ultimately the work of Kṛṣṇa ("I watched you fling human intestines across the earth, staining it blood-red"), and therefore have their places, after all. Karna's dream creates the conditions for us to ask, two books and twelve days of battle later: Does Abhimanyu's death also have its place? Can Kṛṣṇa's tricky divinity explain this, too? Where is Abhimanyu amid all those bones and *pāyasam*?

But dreams and visions are not everything. There are also vows and curses. With respect to Abhimanyu, these amass another subtle form of veiling: an illusion of certainty, if not contentment. Words initially spoken in the form of vows or curses often serve to describe events that will surely happen later on, and some of the epic’s most grisly visions of the future are uttered in the form of revenge vows. At the end of the dice game, for example, Bhīma promises that he will break Duryodhana’s thigh¹⁷ and grind his head into the earth with his foot,¹⁸ and that he will rip open Duḥśāsana’s chest and drink his blood.¹⁹ Arjuna, for his part, swears that he will kill Karṇa and any other kings who cross him.²⁰ After the dice game Draupadī offers her own grim prediction:

Dressed in a single cloth
and crying out, her hair loose,
all while she was menstruating,
her clothing wet and smeared with blood,
Draupadī spoke.

“The men who put me in this position—
Imagine their wives in fourteen years:
Their husbands slain,
their children murdered,
all their beloved relatives killed.

They’ll be menstruating, their hair loose.
Their limbs will be smeared
with the blood of their kinsmen.

That’s what it will be like for them
when they watch us enter Hāstinapura

¹⁷ *Mahābhārata* 2.63.14.

¹⁸ *Mahābhārata* 2.68.28.

¹⁹ *Mahābhārata* 2.68.21.

²⁰ *Mahābhārata* 2.68.33–34.

as they perform rituals for the dead.”²¹

Every single detail of these bitter predictions takes shape later in the narrative. Draupadī’s in particular is made all the more powerful by the fact that her present reality (wearing a single garment, her hair loose, menstruating, covered in blood) is exactly what she promises will befall the wives and mothers of her enemies. We imagine it so vividly because we can see it right there in front of us—in the form of Draupadī herself.

Just as there is no room for Abhimanyu’s special position in Karṇa’s dreams and canticles, here too Abhimanyu has no place. Eerily, no one vows to kill Abhimanyu, and from this perspective too—this lack of foretelling—Abhimanyu’s death seems to emerge out of nowhere. Let us remember that not even the *cakravyūha* was intended to kill Abhimanyu specifically. No vow, curse, dream, or gruesome vision guides it toward his death. In setting Abhimanyu’s death apart from the standard narrative logic of vow-keeping, the epic refuses to give it a reason for happening—or the same reason, at least, as so many other deaths. In this way, the death of Abhimanyu has a singularity to it. By deliberately avoiding the customary narrative logic of the epic—the vows, the curses, the predictions, the dreams, the foretelling—the *Mahābhārata* makes Abhimanyu’s death something chaotic, unexplainable, disorderly, even random. It lacks any wider narrative structure. With respect to him, the epic’s certainties are but veils.

²¹ *Mahābhārata* 2.71.18–20: *ekavastrā tu rudatī mukta-keśī rajasvalā | śoṇitāktārdravasanā draupadī vākyam abravīt || yatkrte ’ham imām prāptā teṣāṃ varṣe caturdaśe | hatapatyo hatasutā hatabandhu-janapriyāḥ || bandhu-śoṇitadigdhāṅgyo muktakeśyo rajasvalāḥ | evaṃ kṛtodakā nāryaḥ pravekṣyanti gajāhvayam ||* Note that Draupadī’s single garment (*ekavastrā*) also finds a mirror in the Kuru women’s future: When they leave Hāstinapura and go to mourn their dead relatives on the battlefield, they wear single garments (*Mahābhārata* 11.9.10).

There is a line in Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* (2004) where one character, a high school student, says of the Holocaust that “To put something in context is a step towards saying it can be understood and that it can be explained. And if it can be explained then it can be explained away.”²² When it comes to Abhimanyu’s death, the *Mahābhārata* deliberately avoids context. This has a powerful effect on the other characters and, I would argue, on the audience as well. Without the familiar foretelling of a vision or dream (such as Karna’s) or vow or curse (that of the epic as a whole), Abhimanyu’s death becomes immensely difficult for anyone to tell a coherent story about. Our disbelief that he could die in this way stems from our necessary failure to understand how his death fits into some broader narrative context. If we could make sense of it, if we could tell a satisfying story about it, we might believe it. Recall that in chapter 4 we discovered how the *Virāṭaparvan*—and the *Pañcarātra* in turn—enact the principle of suspension of disbelief, giving us the context of a performance by means of which we are able to make an agreement with ourselves to suppress our awareness of the artificiality of what we see before us: actors, stages, costumes, sets, and so on. The death of Abhimanyu too calls for a suspension of disbelief, one that is perhaps even more difficult to put into practice. Here we are invited to suspend a set of expectations about how the *Mahābhārata* reveals the contours of its own plot. We are pushed to grapple with an event that ruptures our understanding of “how things happen” in the epic—and that presents itself as an integral part of the narrative just the same. As we will see, the epic then uses our suspended disbelief to indulge in its own fantasy-drama of what Abhimanyu’s future might have been. This it does through a series of laments.

²² Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 74.

Lament and the return of possibility

Setting Abhimanyu's death apart from the epic's familiar narrative and characterological logic means setting Abhimanyu's death apart from narrative time. Not only does this event emerge out of nowhere but it also *goes* nowhere. It cannot be explained, which means it cannot be explained away, and that is why few can put it behind them. This comes through powerfully in the imagery that Arjuna uses to describe his reaction to Abhimanyu's death, even before he learns exactly what has happened. He describes feelings that stick or cling to him, that refuse to leave his presence: "Words stick in my throat. . . Something awful grips me, and it won't slip away from my heart."²³

When certain characters do try to explain Abhimanyu's death, their explanations tend to fall flat. Yudhiṣṭhira is the first to try. After Abhimanyu dies, the whole army rushes over to his body. They see it lying burst apart on the earth. Yudhiṣṭhira must say something to encourage them, so he offers the standard consolation for a warrior's death:

Heaven-bound is this hero who would be slain
Before turning away from his foes.
Stay strong. Do not fear.
We will defeat our enemies in battle.²⁴

But these words do not console Yudhiṣṭhira himself. A short time later, guilt overcomes him:

Then King Yudhiṣṭhira lamented, suffering terribly.

²³ *Mahābhārata* 7.50.4–5: *kiṃ nu me hṛdayaṃ trastaṃ vākyaṃ sajjati Keśava | syandanti cāpi aniṣṭāni gātraṃ sīdati cāpy uta || aniṣṭaṃ caiva me śliṣṭaṃ hṛdayān nāpasarpaṭi | bhuvī ye dikṣu cātyugrā utpātās trāsayanti mām ||*

²⁴ *Mahābhārata* 7.48.34: *svargam eṣa gataḥ śūro yo hato napaṛāṇmukhaḥ | samstambhyata mā bheṣṭa vijeṣyāmo raṇe ripūn ||*

“The hero Abhimanyu is dead.
My brother’s son—a great warrior.
He broke through Droṇa’s giant array
And entered their ranks—a lion among cattle—
All to win my favor.

. . . Now that Abhimanyu is dead,
How will I look at Arjuna?
How will I look at Subhadrā
When she cannot see her beloved son?
She was a lucky woman once.

How will I answer Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna?
With hollow words?
With slippery speech?
With lies?

I wanted what Subhadrā wanted,
What Kṛṣṇa wanted, and Arjuna too—
I wanted victory.
But I alone did this awful thing.

A greedy man is blind to his mistakes.
In delusion, desire is all that matters.
Chasing after honey, I didn’t see
The steep fall that would wait.

What should have been placed before him?
The pleasures of life. Adventures.
Soft beds. Jewelry.
This is the boy I placed before *me* in battle.

. . . Should I not lie alongside him on that earth?
For one agonizing glance from Arjuna
Ablaze with anger
Would burn me and put me there.”²⁵

²⁵ *Mahābhārata* 7.49.3–4, 8–12, 14: *tato yudhiṣṭhiro rājā vilalāpa suduḥkhiṭaḥ | abhimanyau hate vīre bhrātuḥ putre mahārathe || droṇānīkam asaṃbādhaṃ mama priyacikīrṣayā | bhittvā vyūhaṃ praviṣṭo 'sau gomadhyam iva kesarī || kathaṃ drakṣyāmi kaunteyaṃ saubhadre nihate 'rjunam | subhadrāṃ vā mahābhāgāṃ priyaṃ putram apaśyatīm || kiṃ svid vayam apētārtham aśliṣṭam asamañjasam | tāv ubhau prativakṣyāmo hr̥ṣikeśadhanamjayau || aham eva subhadrāyāḥ keśavārjunayor api | priyakāmo*

Yudhiṣṭhira’s speech directly addresses the idea that there is no truly satisfying explanation for Abhimanyu’s death. Granted, Yudhiṣṭhira can explain Abhimanyu’s death in a basic way. If anything he does it all too well, since he blames himself for it: “I wanted victory / But I alone did this awful thing.” Yet this explanation falls apart as soon as Yudhiṣṭhira tries to imagine saying it to anyone else: “How will I answer Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna? / With hollow words? / With slippery speech? / With lies?” It is a story that cannot carry, that will not last—not because it isn’t true, but because, for Yudhiṣṭhira, it is too painful to tell.

This passage also introduces the theme of vision (or lack thereof) into the epic’s construction of the story of Abhimanyu’s death; the lack of vision that Yudhiṣṭhira describes here will be answered by the powerful visions set forth in other characters’ laments down the line. First there is Yudhiṣṭhira’s own lack of foresight (“Chasing after honey, I didn’t see / The steep fall that would await”)—which only underscores the idea that Abhimanyu’s death comes out of nowhere. This lack of vision arises again when Yudhiṣṭhira describes Subhadrā’s grief: “How will I look at Subhadrā / When she cannot see her beloved son?” The image of Subhadrā being unable to see Abhimanyu participates in the *Mahābhārata*’s broader topoi of sorrow: for Subhadrā, Yudhiṣṭhira, and everyone who laments Abhimanyu thereafter, the experience of grief is defined by *wanting* to see and yet being *unable* to see. This extends well beyond the circumstances of Abhimanyu’s death: for example, the epic draws a powerful connection between Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s deep, long-lasting grief and the fact that he is blind.²⁶ Finally, there is the fact that guilt has a distinctly visual pathway. For Yudhiṣṭhira himself, it is not grief but guilt that

jayākāṅkṣī kṛtavān idam apriyam || na lubdho budhyate doṣān mohāl lobhaḥ pravartate | madhu lipsur hi nāpaśyam prapātam idam īdrśam || yo hi bhojye puraskāryo yāneṣu śayaneṣu ca | bhūṣaṇeṣu ca so ’smābhir bālo yudhi puraskṛtaḥ || no ced dhi vayam apy enaṁ mahīm anuśayīmahi | bībhatsaḥ kopadīptasya dagdhāḥ kṛpaṇacakṣuṣā ||

²⁶ On Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s blindness, see Emily Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 106–145.

is defined by an inability to see: “How will I look at Arjuna? / How will I look at Subhadra?” In this verse, Yudhiṣṭhira’s lack of foresight becomes a failure to look his brother in the eye. His inability to do so is then set against Arjuna’s burning gaze. The look of anger that burns its object is a classic *Mahābhārata* trope, but it is all the more striking here because of its contrast with Yudhiṣṭhira’s various kinds of inability to see. Veils, we know, obscure sight—or do they create the possibility of our believing we can see, see beneath?

In Yudhiṣṭhira’s lament we find, also, the seeds of counterfactual vision that will arise so prominently in the other laments for Abhimanyu. This counterfactual vision is really a vision of possibility—an exercise in imagining what Abhimanyu’s life could or should have been: “What should have been placed before him? / The pleasures of life. Adventures. / Soft beds. Jewelry.” In the first three *pādas* (quarters) of this verse Yudhiṣṭhira cracks open a window onto the hypothetical—what might have been but wasn’t—and lets it linger for a moment before allowing reality to slam it down in the final *pāda*: “This is the boy I put before *me* in battle.” Yudhiṣṭhira is employing the rhetoric of possibility: the idea that that everything could have been different, and here—in poetic form—is what things would have looked like if they *had* been different. Yudhiṣṭhira’s lament inaugurates that perspective and hints at the kind of imagery that could be realized in the *Pañcarātra*.

Arjuna’s lament is animated by a similar tension between what he should be seeing (or what he wants to see) and what is actually before him. The space between factual and counterfactual makes the beginning of his lament particularly haunting. At sunset on the day after Abhimanyu has been killed, Arjuna returns to the Pāṇḍavas’ camp and describes everything that should be happening but isn’t. There are no drums beating, he says, no horns blowing, no victory songs being sung:

“There is no joyful Abhimanyu laughing with his brothers and rushing to me as I return from battle,” said Arjuna to Kṛṣṇa as they entered their camp. The two of them saw the Pāṇḍavas looking disturbed, distraught. Downhearted, Arjuna saw brothers and sons, but did not see Abhimanyu.

“You all have such unsettled looks on your faces,” said Arjuna, “and you aren’t greeting me happily. I don’t see Abhimanyu. I heard Droṇa put his soldiers in the *cakravyūha*, and I know none of you could break it. Only Abhimanyu could. But I didn’t teach him how to get out of the *vyūha*. Surely you didn’t send my child into the enemy’s ranks. Surely Abhimanyu didn’t break into our enemies’ array—good with a bow as he is. Surely he isn’t lying dead there.”²⁷

At first the narration revolves around everything Arjuna is failing to see and everything he is failing to experience: he finds no Abhimanyu coming out to greet him and no warm welcome from the soldiers. It is a description of everything that isn’t—but should be—happening. Then Arjuna shifts into the inverse mode: he imagines perfectly everything that *does* happen earlier in the story—Abhimanyu being sent into battle and being left to die there—but describes it in such a way as to make it seem beyond the realm of possibility (“Surely you didn’t . . . Surely he isn’t . . .”). Negative constructions do crucial work in this passage. In the first part of the passage they overtly and accurately account for what is *not* happening (Abhimanyu really does *not* run out to greet Arjuna, and so on) while also allowing Arjuna to express a counterfactual desired reality. If we took out the small negative particle in the first phrase, we

²⁷ *Mahābhārata* 7.50.16–22: *na ca mām adya saubhadraḥ prahr̥ṣṭo bhrātr̥bhiḥ saha | raṇād āyāntam ucitam pratyudyāti hasanniva || evaṃ saṃkathayantau tau praviṣṭau śibiram svakam | dadṛśāte bṛśāsvassthān pāṇḍavān naṣṭacetasaḥ || dṛṣṭvā bhrātr̥mś ca putrāmś ca vimanā vānaradhvajah | apaśyaṃś caiva saubhadram idam vacanam abravīt || mukhavarṇo ’prasanno vaḥ sarveṣāṃ eva lakṣyate | na cābhimanyuṃ paśyāmi na ca mām pratinandatha || mayā śrutaś ca droṇena cakravyūho vinirmitaḥ | na ca vas tasya bhettāsti ṛte saubhadram āhave || na copadiṣṭas tasyāsīn mayānīkavinirgamah | kaccin na bālo yuṣmābhiḥ parānīkaṃ praveśitaḥ || bhittvānīkaṃ maheṣvāsaḥ pareṣāṃ bahuśo yudhi | kaccin na nihataḥ śete saubhadraḥ paravīrahā ||*

would have “There is joyful Abhimanyu laughing with his brothers and rushing to me as I return from battle.” In the second part of the passage, meanwhile, the levels of real and imagined are switched. There the negative constructions overtly describe the desired counterfactual (“you didn’t send my child into the enemy’s ranks”) while covertly expressing the truth (again by removing the negative particle: “you sent my child into the enemy’s ranks”). The effect is disorienting and, I believe, intentional. What is real and what is not? What is possible and what is not?

In allowing us to be pulled along by the current of such possibilities, the epic evokes a sense of choice on the part of the narrator and indeed on the part of the listener. A story could be told or heard in any number of ways; a plot could drift in any number of directions. Things never “have” to be the way they are; there are always alternatives to the way an event is narrated, even in an epic that seems to have exhausted them all. The epic’s many roads not taken find a conversation partner in the contemporary literary theory of sideshadowing, an idea crafted by Gary Saul Morson. Morson writes that sideshadowing happens when “along with an event, we see its alternatives”—such as in the novels of Dostoevsky, which Morson describes as “thick with events that might have happened.” There, as in the *Mahābhārata*, sideshadowing “disrupts our notions about determining causality” and encourages the reader to embrace the “prosaics” of “imperfection, flaws, inefficiency, entropy.”²⁸ I would argue that this is precisely what is happening with Abhimanyu’s death. Along with the event, so inimitably and utterly conclusive, we are psychologically able to see its alternatives. In the passage above Arjuna expresses those alternatives through negative constructions that obfuscate the difference between what is real and what is imagined or desired. The laments for Abhimanyu take things a step further. They prompt

²⁸ Morson, Gary Saul. “Sideshadowing and Tempics.” *New Literary History* 29 (1998): 599–624.

us to visualize those desired alternatives in such detail that they seem to be entirely real themselves.

“As if you had no protectors at all”

Long descriptions of the dead are a standard feature of laments, but Arjuna’s description of Abhimanyu hinges on something special: the refrain that “I will die if I do not see my son.” This line transforms Arjuna’s entire lament into an attempt to see Abhimanyu again. In the context of the *Mahābhārata* the desire to see the dead again—particularly sons who have died in battle—is a widely shared wish. Thus we have the revelations of the dead sons, Abhimanyu included, in book 15.²⁹ But Arjuna’s lament cements this wish as a poetic frame:

I will die if I do not see my son,
The boy Subhadrā and Draupadī
And Kṛṣṇa always loved,
With the eyes of a fawn,
Tufts of hair curling softly.
Mighty as an elephant,
He grew like a young tree!
But he was steady. He smiled as he spoke.
He always did what his teachers told him to.
He was a child but he didn’t act like one—
He spoke beautifully, he was never envious.
He was so energetic, so heroic—
His eyes swept out long, like blue lotuses.
He was patient. He loved the loyal and ignored the lowly.
He was grateful, and wise,
And he knew how to use his weapons—he wouldn’t back down.
He always loved war. Pain sprouted in his enemies!
He was devoted to the welfare of his kinsmen
And tried so hard to win victory for his fathers.
He never struck first.

²⁹ *Mahābhārata* 15.36–44.

In battle, he didn't make mistakes.
I will die if I do not see my son.³⁰

Arjuna tries to conjure Abhimanyu through description—to keep him present by imagining him—and in a sense it works. The lament makes it possible for Arjuna to “see” Abhimanyu again, and because of this Arjuna doesn't die; he lives on. Here again it is a lack of vision—Arjuna's inability to see Abhimanyu—that spawns a powerful vision: his detailed depiction of that very person. And because of Arjuna's careful portrait, we in the audience are able fully to picture Abhimanyu's life after his death has already happened—indeed *only* after his death has already happened. Usually in the epic we come first to know a character and then he or she dies; here, instead, the character dies and *then* we come to know him. It is a striking reversal of the standard narrative order of things, and a formal signal that Abhimanyu's is a death unlike any other.

The lament of Subhadrā, Abhimanyu's mother, similarly paints grief as the state of wanting to see while being unable to see:

Now I look out over the earth,
It might as well be empty,
What made it gorgeous is gone.
I do not see Abhimanyu.
My eyes cloud with grief.³¹

³⁰ *Mahābhārata* 7.50.27–32: *subhadrāyāḥ priyaṃ nityaṃ draupadyāḥ keśavasya ca | yadi putraṃ na paśyāmi yāsyāmi yamasādanam || mṛdukuñcitakeśāntaṃ bālaṃ bālamṛgekṣaṇam | mattadviradavikrāntaṃ śālapotaṃ ivodgatam || smitābhībhāṣiṇaṃ dāntaṃ guruvākyakaraṃ sadā | bālye 'py abālakarmāṇaṃ priyavākyam amatsaram || mahotsāhaṃ mahābāhuṃ dīrgharājīvalocanam | bhaktānukampinaṃ dāntaṃ na ca nīcānusāriṇam || kṛtajñaṃ jñānasampannaṃ kṛtāstram anivartinam | yuddhābhinandanaṃ nityaṃ dviṣatām aghavardhanam || sveṣāṃ priyahite yuktaṃ pitṛṇāṃ jayagrddhinam | na ca pūrvaprahartāraṃ saṃgrāme naṣṭasambhramam | yadi putraṃ na paśyāmi yāsyāmi yamasādanam ||*

³¹ *Mahābhārata* 7.55.14: *adya paśyāmi pṛthivīm śūnyām iva hatatviṣam | abhimanyum apaśyantī śokavyākulalocanā ||*

But her lament is more remarkable for the way in which it presents Subhadrā wrestling with the bounds of possibility that seem to have expanded around Abhimanyu’s death. In particular she struggles to understand how Abhimanyu could have been killed when he was supposed to have been protected by Arjuna, by Kṛṣṇa, by all of the Pāṇḍavas, and indeed by all of their allies:

When your protectors were Pāṇḍavas,
Vṛṣṇi warriors, Pāñcāla heroes,
Who could kill you
As if you had no protector at all?³²

The way of fate—even wise men
Must struggle with it,
Since Kṛṣṇa was your protector
And still you were killed in battle
As if you had no protector at all.³³

Kṛṣṇa is right beside Subhadrā as she says this. “Do not grieve,” he had told her, for Abhimanyu “died a warrior’s death.” Is her response, in the passage above, a veiled accusation? Is this her way of saying to Kṛṣṇa: “Having you as a protector is as good as not having a protector at all”? It is notable that Subhadrā brings up the concept of fate here. And yet, as by now you will suspect, I do not believe she is genuinely appealing to the logic of fate to explain Abhimanyu’s death. No, there is no *daiva* realm here. She is invoking it rhetorically—as a technique to amplify (and simultaneously mask) her criticism of Kṛṣṇa.

³² *Mahābhārata* 7.55.9: *pāṇḍaveṣu ca nātheṣu vṛṣṇivīreṣu cābhibho | pāñcāleṣu ca vīreṣu hataḥ kenāsy anāthavat ||*

³³ *Mahābhārata* 7.55.19: *nūnaṃ gatiḥ kṛtāntasya prājñair api sudurvidā | yatra tvam keśave nāthe saṃgrāme ’nāthavad dhataḥ ||*

In leveling that critique, Subhadrā taps into another way in which Abhimanyu’s death splinters a certain kind of logic in the epic. She calls into question the idea that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa exert an all-powerful hold on events—that things must always go their way. It is not only Subhadrā saying this but the epic’s narrators themselves. Early on the epic sets us up to believe that Abhimanyu’s bonds to Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa will render him invincible. This idea is most clearly voiced by Droṇa, who, in his position at the head of the Kaurava army, orchestrates a diversion that will draw Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa away from the main battle. His decision rests on the logic that “No man—had he gods, *asuras*, or *gandharvas* with him, or *yakṣas*, snakes, and *rākṣasas*—could kill a person while he is being protected by Arjuna.”³⁴ Kṛṣṇa plays a crucial role in this supposedly infallible protection, since Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna come as a pair—a pair so tightly bonded that they are known as “the two Kṛṣṇas.” Their closeness informs Droṇa’s thinking: “Where the all-creating Kṛṣṇa goes, so too does Arjuna the warrior. And when they get there, who but Śiva would be strong enough to cross them?”³⁵

In the lead-up to Abhimanyu’s death, the epic stretches the ties between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa so that they include Abhimanyu. This ensures that the audience will see Abhimanyu as an integral part of the Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa relationship at the moment he is killed in battle. When Abhimanyu confronts the warriors in Droṇa’s *cakravyūha*, he specifically uses the weapons that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa gave him. In doing so, he resembles them perfectly: “He showed off the weapons he learned from Kṛṣṇa and those he learned from Arjuna. That descendant of Kṛṣṇa could not be told apart from the other two Kṛṣṇas.” It is important that at this point the epic marks Abhimanyu as *kārṣṇi*, “the descendant of Kṛṣṇa.” *Kārṣṇi* positions Abhimanyu as a third

³⁴ *Mahābhārata* 7.32.10: *sasurāsuragandharvāḥ sayakṣoragarākṣasāḥ | nālaṃ lokā raṇe jetuṃ pālyamānaṃ kirīṭinā ||*

³⁵ *Mahābhārata* 7.32.11: *viśvasṛg yatra govindah pṛtanānīs tathārjunah | tatra kasya balaṃ krāmed anyatra tryambakāt prabho ||*

Kṛṣṇa to add to the familiar two (Kṛṣṇa himself, that is, and Arjuna).³⁶ The pointedness of this epithet becomes all the more clear when we consider that the preceding verse describes Abhimanyu as *ārjuni*, “the descendant of Arjuna.” In a text as drenched with epithets as the *Mahābhārata* is, such designations rarely matter, but in these two verses, I believe, they do. They push us to remember that Abhimanyu is as much a product of Kṛṣṇa as he is of Arjuna. The elegant correspondence of the two epithets—*ārjuni* is to Arjuna as *kārṣṇi* is to Kṛṣṇa—ties a morphological bow around the whole idea.

How could a Kṛṣṇa die? How could an Arjuna? Much as we are set up to believe that Abhimanyu’s bonds to Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas will render him invincible, what we find instead is the cruel literalism of their separation. The common saying is that “where there is Kṛṣṇa, there is victory”—but where—here—is Kṛṣṇa? Subhadrā’s lament prompts us to imagine that because Kṛṣṇa was not literally and physically present with Abhimanyu, there was never any possibility of his surviving in the first place.

The construction that Subhadrā uses in both verses—“when so-and-so was your protector, you were killed as if you had no protector at all”—sets up an important inversion of reality and possibility. The reality, in Subhadrā’s language, is that Abhimanyu had many protectors. The possibility (the “as if” statement) is that he could be killed in battle as if he had no protectors at all. But we know that this is no possibility, but pure narrative reality. Instead, the deeper possibility that Subhadrā’s lament raises is: What if Abhimanyu had actually *had* protectors? What if his protectors had lived up to their names and protected him? Would he have survived?

³⁶ On the multiple Kṛṣṇas of the *Mahābhārata*, see Alf Hiltebeitel, “Two Kṛṣṇas, Three Kṛṣṇas, More Kṛṣṇas: Dark Interactions in the Mahābhārata,” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 20 (1985): 71–77.

These conflicting visions and the uncomfortable possibilities they raise—did Abhimanyu have protectors or not?—carry over into the lament of Uttarā, Abhimanyu’s widow. We hear it in book 11:

How, my hero, could you meet your death
As if you had no protectors at all?
You *had* protectors—
Pāṇḍavas and Pāñcālas who looked on
As you, a boy alone, were surrounded
By those who yearned to kill you
So that I would suffer.

Yudhiṣṭhira—that “Pāṇḍava,” that “hero,” that “man-tiger”
How did he go on living
When he saw you die in battle
As if you had no one to protect you?³⁷

In dismantling the concept of *nātha* (lord, protector), Uttarā completes the work that Subhadrā began. One aspect of their shared accusation is that Abhimanyu’s death renders *nātha* a meaningless term. (The context makes it clear that for Uttarā the terms “Pāṇḍava” and “hero” and “man-tiger” are similarly empty, which is why I translate them using scare quotes.) Again we find a reversal of reality and possibility. Just as Subhadrā does, Uttarā says “*as if* you had no one to protect you” (*anāthavat*) when she actually means “you had no one to protect you” (*anātha*). The hypothetical language of “as if” is, ironically, what ultimately conveys the full reality of the situation. The hypothetical “as if” is itself hypothetical. Abhimanyu in fact had no one to protect him at the moment of his death, but the fact that Uttarā imagines it as a

³⁷ *Mahābhārata* 11.20.18–19: *bālaṃ tvāṃ parivāryaikaṃ mama duḥkhāya jaghnuṣāṃ | katham nu pāṇḍavanāṃ ca pāñcālānāṃ ca paśyatām | svaṃ vīra nidhanaṃ prāpto nāthavān sann anthāthavat || drṣṭvā bahubhir ākrande nihataṃ tvāṃ anāthavat | vīraḥ puruṣaśārdūlaḥ katham jīvati pāṇḍavaḥ ||*

possibility—“you could have been protected, but you weren’t”—gives it the serious emotional weight that emerges in the gap between the real and the possible.

Uttarā’s lament goes on to offer the most elaborate vision yet. She pictures Abhimanyu in heaven:

What other woman will you meet in heaven
And beckon with soft, flirting words
As you once did me?

You’ll stir the hearts of the *apsarases* there
With your perfect beauty and your smiling speech.

Once you’ve made it to those well-deserved realms
And mingled with the *apsarases*
And enjoyed yourself a time,

You might remember, Abhimanyu,
All the fun you had with me.³⁸

Here we have for the first time a vision of Abhimanyu’s future. It is a vision of the future that accepts his death, but it is still driven by the idea of possibility. This is why Uttarā first portrays this future as a question (“What other woman will you meet?”) and then in the optative (“you might remember”). Her lament is striking because by putting Abhimanyu in the realm of the possible—all the things he might be doing in heaven—and projecting him into this future, she also puts herself in an imagined past: “Will you beckon to her as you once did me?” “Remember all the fun you had with me.” Uttarā shows us that it is not that the dead are in our past but rather

³⁸ *Mahābhārata* 11.20.23–25: *kām idānīm naravyāghra ślakṣṇayā smitayā girā | pitṛloke sametyānyām mām ivāmantrayīṣyasi || nūnam apsarasām svarge manāmsi pramathīṣyasi | parameṇa ca rūpeṇa girā ca smitapūrvayā || prāpya puṇyakṛtāṃllokān apsarobhiḥ sameyivān | saubhadra viharan kāle smarethāḥ sukṛtāni me ||*

that, for the dead, we are the past. They exist in some unknown future. In ways like this a life cut short leaves so much to be imagined.

This, I think, is the real force of Abhimanyu's youth in the epic—that only a figure who died so young could be imagined (and reimagined) so fiercely, and could have his whole life and afterlife projected out in front of him. Everything about Abhimanyu tears at the veils of “reality.” His every lament is a dream of purest sight—narrative beyond the walls of compromise.

Veiled narration and the life of Abhimanyu in the *Pañcarātra*

The *Mahābhārata* is the key to understanding why the *Pañcarātra* chooses to retell the story of Abhimanyu with such particular force. As we have observed, Abhimanyu plays only a minor role in the part of the epic that the *Pañcarātra* portrays most directly, the *Virāṭaparvan*, and yet the play chooses to drop him in the center of exactly that story, making him a pivotal figure in the action. Why? It is because Abhimanyu's death does something within the fabric of the *Mahābhārata* that the *Pañcarātra* seeks to do beyond its bounds. In the epic the story of Abhimanyu's death signifies unprecedented, unexpected, and unimaginable action, and for that reason it triggers a cascade of explorations of what it would be like to step outside the logics that govern the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. Here the *Pañcarātra* takes its cue. In its vision Abhimanyu lives. Thus however playful this play may seem at first blush, it actually projects a very serious truth. It allows the visions of the epic's various laments for Abhimanyu to exist as more than fantasies. Veiled narration makes this possible.

In chapter 4 we saw how the *Mahābhārata*'s *Virāṭaparvan* tells the story of Draupadī and Kīcaka in such a way as to accomplish a distinctive retelling of a story while recalling, on a less palpable level, the original story itself. At key moments the overt layer of the narration—the

retelling—moves aside and gives way to the more familiar “base” version. All this has been necessary background for the *Pañcarātra*, where once again we see techniques of veiled narration at play, but in a strikingly different set of ways. The *Pañcarātra*’s presentation of Abhimanyu reveals this narrative style in clear and powerful terms. In scenes involving Abhimanyu at the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3 the *Pañcarātra* consolidates a portrait of Abhimanyu that feels like a dream sequence—a fleeting vision of what might be or could have been. Like a dream, the *Pañcarātra*’s vision of Abhimanyu’s death, known to every member of the *Mahābhārata*’s audience, stands at a definite distance from familiar experiences of Abhimanyu that the audience shares from the epic. Once again we have two levels of narrative reality, but this time it is the familiar story of Abhimanyu’s epic death and the newly dramatic story of his survival and reunion with Arjuna. The one floats upon one the other—once again—as a veil spreads across a face, but the sense of the contrast feels entirely different this time, at least in the initial encounter. For in the end, as we shall see, we once again have to ask which level is real—or indeed whether there actually is a real and a not-real.

Capture as embrace

The *Pañcarātra* offers us three encounters with veiled narration, extending from the middle of Act 2 through the beginning of Act 3. In each of these we are presented with dramatic enactments that bring us face to face with Abhimanyu’s simultaneous death and his survival, with the latter taking narrative precedence over the former, which it veils. This dramatic feat is accomplished, however, in different ways. Let us begin with the first, which we find at the core of Act 2. Here are the basic contours of the scene.

Having arrived at Duryodhana’s court so that he might honor Duryodhana on the occasion of his *vaiṣṇava yajña*, a moment we recounted in chapter 2. Abhimanyu joins the Kauravas as they decide to raid Virāṭa’s cattle. During the conflict Bhīma, still in disguise as a cook in Virāṭa’s kitchens, lifts Abhimanyu from his chariot and brings him back to Virāṭa’s court. Abhimanyu does not recognize Bhīma and believes he is being captured. Arjuna, busy defending the cattle elsewhere, is able to see Abhimanyu fighting from afar (2.38), but does not witness Bhīma carrying him off. Instead, Arjuna realizes that Abhimanyu is in Bhīma’s grasp only once he has returned to Virāṭa’s court. To Virāṭa and his generals, the event is announced as a great victory—a famous warrior has been captured—though there is a moment of surprise when Virāṭa learns that the person who accomplished this awe-inspiring deed was not a warrior but a cook. Later, the Kauravas, who express responsibility for Abhimanyu, take the “capture” as a difficult loss. Failing to recognize Bhīma, Arjuna, or Yudhiṣṭhira in their disguises, even Abhimanyu himself believes that he has been captured. Although the audience quickly learns that the one who lifted him from his chariot is Bhīma—and therefore that Abhimanyu’s life is far from endangered—many characters in the play continue to see the event as an abduction and think of it as Abhimanyu’s downfall. Their reflections on the event invite the audience to continue to see it from this perspective as well.

Thus the *Pañcarātra* prompts the audience to take a binocular view of things. On one side, we join Virāṭa, the Kauravas, and Abhimanyu himself in believing the young warrior has been captured. On the other, we join Bhīma, Arjuna, and Yudhiṣṭhira in seeing the capture as an embrace—a rescue from the battlefield (or the pasture, as the case may be) and an expression of love. As long as Abhimanyu is on stage or being discussed by others, the audience oscillates between these viewpoints. Although the two perspectives seem to join together at the end of Act

2—the Pāṇḍavas’ true identities are revealed, and Virāṭa and Abhimanyu come to understand what’s going on—it is important to note that the play does not present a resolution at this point. Instead, at the beginning of Act 3, we swing back to a vision of Abhimanyu’s capture. There the Kauravas share a deep regret that they allowed Abhimanyu to have been seized by someone they believe to be one of Virāṭa’s soldiers. While the audience may know better at this point, the *Pañcarātra* uses the Kauravas’ voices to sustain the emotional tension: Has Abhimanyu been rescued from battle, or has he been captured in the middle of it?

In the final section of this chapter we will bring into full view the Kauravas’ responses to Abhimanyu’s capture, but at this point let us examine the first shift in the audience’s perception of what is happening with Abhimanyu—the first moment we realize we are not seeing the whole picture. Halfway through the second act, our gaze follows that of Arjuna, whom we see as Bṛhannalā and who stands at Virāṭa’s side when (s)he hears the news. Initially Arjuna-Bṛhannalā joins Virāṭa in believing Abhimanyu has been captured:

A soldier enters.

King Virāṭa: I’ve never seen you this happy. Tell me: Why are you so amazed?

Soldier: It is unbelievably good news: Abhimanyu has been captured.

Bṛhannalā: He’s been captured?

(To herself)

Today I believed our armies were equal in strength,

And today I saw him.

None of Virāṭa’s men could match him.

Now that the Kīcakas are slain, who would be his equal?

Yudhiṣṭhira: What is it, Bṛhannalā?

Bṛhannalā: Who would defeat him, I do not know,

But he is strong and well trained.
If he has been attacked, it must be some fault
In the fortune of his fathers.³⁹

Arjuna’s two reactions to the news of the capture—disbelief, then blame—deliberately mimic his reaction to Abhimanyu’s death in the *Mahābhārata*, where, we recall, disbelief meets blame: “Surely you didn’t send my child into the enemy’s ranks.”⁴⁰ Indeed the whole vignette opens with a feeling of disbelief—that is, the “unbelievably good news” (*asraddheyam priyam*) that the soldier brings. This sense of disbelief then crystallizes in Arjuna (“Who would be his equal?”) before shifting in the direction of blame (“It must be some fault in the fortune of his fathers”). One reason that this short exchange is so effective as a moment of unveiling—a place where the play’s retelling of Abhimanyu’s story gives way to the epic’s far more sobering account—is that the audience does not know any more than Arjuna at this point: We *all* believe Abhimanyu’s life may be in danger. But then the tone of the scene shifts. We see things from a different perspective: Abhimanyu has not experienced a capture (a grasp: $\sqrt{\text{grah}}$) but, rather, an embrace (another kind of grasp):

King Virāṭa: Now tell me: How was he captured (*grhīta*)?

Soldier: Two arms reached up into the chariot and brought him down without any hesitation.

King Virāṭa: Who did this?

³⁹ *Pañcarātra* 2.34–36: Virāṭa: *apūrva iva te harṣo brūhi kenāpi vismitaḥ* | Bhaṭa: *asraddheyam priyam prāptam saubhadro grahaṇam gataḥ* | Bṛhannalā: *kathaṃ grhītaḥ* | (*ātmagatam*) *tulitabalam idam mayādya sainyam parigaṇitam ca raṇe ’dya me sa dṛṣṭaḥ* | *sadrśa iha tu tena nāsti kaścit ka iha bhaven nihateṣu kīcakeṣu* || Bhagavān (Yudhiṣṭhira): *bṛhannale kim etat* | Bṛhannalā: *bhagavan* | *na jāne tasya jetāram balavāñ chikṣitas tu saḥ* | *pitṛṇām bhāgyadoṣeṇa prāpnuyād api dharṣaṇam* ||

⁴⁰ *Mahābhārata* 7.50.21.

Soldier: The man they say you hired in the kitchen.

Brhannalā: (*Behind their backs*) So he was embraced (*pariṣvakta*), not captured (*grhīta*), by my elder brother.

I stood at a distance
Satisfied just to see him.
But Bhīma, acting openly,
Showed his love for my son.⁴¹

In this exchange we transition from the mournful resonances of Arjuna’s lament in book 7 of the epic to the familiar themes of the *Virāṭaparvan* story: broad comedy, masquerade, and the idea of keeping one’s secrets out in the open. It is a return to the standard mode of retelling that we find in Abhimanyu’s trajectory throughout the play—an uplifting survival story that inverts the epic’s account of his death. The image of capture-as-embrace makes that inversion palpable: an embrace is capture inside out. Thus our perspective shifts upward.

Yet the play maintains a sense of depth as this happens. No sooner does Arjuna as Brhannalā realize what has actually occurred—that Bhīma has not “captured” Abhimanyu in battle so much as rescued him from the fray—than (s)he offers the verse above, which maintains a strong undercurrent of the epic plot: “I stood at a distance, satisfied just to see him.” Even in the play, then, Arjuna finds himself at a distance from Abhimanyu—a transposition of their separation in the epic. Here, however, Arjuna is actually able to see Abhimanyu at that distance. Vision, the crucial element to which he returns in his epic lament (“I will die if I do not see my son”), has been returned, even if the physical space between the two characters remains. The

⁴¹ *Pañcarātra* 2.37–38: Virāṭa: *katham idānīm grhītaḥ* | Bhaṭa: *ratham āsādya niḥśaṅkaṃ bāhubhyām avatāritaḥ* | Virāṭa: *kena* | Bhaṭa: *yaḥ kilaiṣa narendreṇa viniyukto mahānase* | Brhannalā: (*apavārya*) *evam āryabhīmena pariṣvaktaḥ na grhītaḥ* | *dūrasthā darśanād eva vyaṃ santoṣam āgatāḥ* | *putrasnehas tu nirviṣṭo yena suvyaktakāriṇā* ||

result is once again stereoscopic: through the veneer of the *Pañcarātra*'s dramatic retelling we have some sense of the *Mahābhārata* beneath.

Moreover, it is in these few lines that the play plants the seeds of the recognition comedy that will follow Abhimanyu from the moment he arrives in Virāṭa's court through the end of Act 2. No one in Virāṭa's entourage, not even Abhimanyu himself, is aware that the "captor" in question is Bhīma. While Abhimanyu experiences a glimmer of recognition when he sizes up Arjuna (Bṛhannalā), Bhīma (the cook), and Yudhiṣṭhira (Virāṭa's dicing master), he cannot quite place these persons. And Bhīma, Arjuna, and Yudhiṣṭhira, for their parts, have to pretend not to know Abhimanyu at all—though Bhīma, always one to "act openly," almost gives them away. Blindness is on the other side of a recognition comedy, and while Abhimanyu's father and uncles make much of their ability to see him, Abhimanyu remains blind to them all. In a way, he is still their dupe—the one who is deceived and helplessly acted upon, not knowing what is happening to him. The difference is that in the play, he is not killed as a result.

Blindness, anonymity, and recognition

This brings us to the second scene in which we have an encounter with veiled narration. As we recall, Abhimanyu escapes Arjuna's vision in the *Mahābhārata*. He dies alone, separated from Arjuna, and the idea that Arjuna is unable to see Abhimanyu becomes a staple of Arjuna's grief. In the *Pañcarātra*, however, the situation is reversed. Here it is Abhimanyu who cannot see Arjuna, since Arjuna is dressed as Bṛhannalā. And where the duo's emotional peak in the epic is their separation, in the play it is their reunion. In this, the *Pañcarātra* reverses the direction of the blindness that characterizes Abhimanyu's death in the epic. It also does something quite different with it aesthetically. In the play the inability to see—here,

Abhimanyu's inability to recognize Arjuna—becomes fuel for a certain sort of comedy. If the twin themes of blindness and anonymity define the narration of Abhimanyu's death in the *Mahābhārata*, then the *Pañcarātra* takes those themes and remolds them in the shape of a recognition comedy. No longer drifting toward chaos, blindness and anonymity find their ends in the sense of harmony that such a comedy eventually brings. The genre of recognition comedy seems to provide a natural avenue through which to redirect those motifs.

Yet the crucial thing to remember is that even in this comedic mode the key elements of blindness and anonymity are still present. Not only do they drive the whole scene but they allow the play to make a series of pointed callbacks to the story of Abhimanyu's death in the epic. On one level, then, the *Pañcarātra*'s recognition comedy provides an uplifting redirection for the chaotic anonymity of Abhimanyu's death in the epic. On another, however, it opens up space for the audience to recall precisely how Abhimanyu's story unfolds *outside* the world of the play—in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and every other *Mahābhārata* that includes Abhimanyu. In the following section of the recognition scene itself we find several such recollections. Bhīma ushers Abhimanyu into Virāṭa's court:

Bhīmasena: While the house of lac burned,
I carried away my mother and brothers.
They clung to my arms.
But when I took Subhadrā's son down from his chariot
There was only one of him, a boy,
Yet the first effort, I think,
Was the same as today's.

Come here, my prince.

Abhimanyu: Who is this man?

His chest is wide,
His stomach carved out by slenderness,

His thighs broad,
His shoulders high, firm,
His hips lean.
He brought me here
And restrained me with one thing,
His arm.
He was the stronger man
But he didn't crush me.

Bṛhannalā: Come here, my prince!

Abhimanyu: Oh my—who is this other one?

With your women's ornaments that don't quite fit,
You're like an elephant bull painted like an elephant cow!
Light in clothes, hefty in muscle,
You're resplendent. Like Śiva—dressed as Pārvatī!

Bṛhannalā: (*To Bhīma, behind the others' backs*) What was my elder brother doing when he brought him here?

Conquered in his first battle
He was sullied, to begin with,
And we can only feel for Subhadrā
Separated from her beloved son.
Kṛṣṇa will take offense with him, too,
To know he was defeated.
What else is there to say? That's how it is.
Bhīma has ruined the strength of his arms.

Bhīmasena: Arjuna—

Bṛhannalā: Yes, yes! He is Arjuna's son.

Bhīmasena: (*To Bṛhannalā, behind the others' backs*)

Because I took him
We'll face problems, I know,
But who could put up with his son
In the hands of the enemy?

I brought him here
So Draupadī might see him,
For she is deep in her suffering,
Longing for something good to happen.

Bṛhannalā: Abhimanyu!

Abhimanyu: What's this—I am Abhimanyu to you?

Commoners address *kṣatriya* men by name,
And insult my capture.
Is this the practice here?

Bṛhannalā: Is your mother well, Abhimanyu?

Abhimanyu: What's going on here? You speak of my mother—

Are you my Dharmarāja?
Bhīmasena? Dhanañjaya?
You come to me boldly, after all,
As if you were my father
And ask how the women are doing.

Bṛhannalā: Is Devakī's son Keśava in good health?

Abhimanyu: Do you speak of even *that* honored man by name?

Bṛhannalā: Yes, I do.

Abhimanyu: If he has the honor of being on intimate terms with you, then yes, he is well.

The two of them exchange looks.

Are you laughing at me as if you're teasing me right now?

Bṛhannalā: Nothing of the sort.⁴²

⁴² *Pañcarātra* 2.42–48: Bhīmasena: *ādīpīte jatugrhe svabhujāvasaktā madbhrātaraś ca janānī ca mayopanītāḥ | saubhadram ekam avatārya rathāt tu bālaṃ taṃ ca śramaṃ prathamam adya samaṃ hi manye || itaḥ itaḥ kumāraḥ |* Abhimanyu: *bhoḥ ko nu khalv eṣaḥ | viśālavakṣās tanimārjitodaraḥ sthironnatāmsorumahān kaṭīkṛśaḥ | ihāhrto yena bhujāikayantrito balādhikenāpi na cāsmi pīḍitaḥ ||*

At key intervals in this section the audience is prompted to recall the story of Abhimanyu’s death in the *Mahābhārata*, while simultaneously it partakes of the play’s quite different construction of events. Certain instances of narrative unveiling have a real boldness, and one such moment unfolds when Arjuna-Bṛhannalā speaks of Abhimanyu’s capture almost as if it were happening in the context of the epic’s great war. We hear the following declamation: “Conquered in his first battle / He was sullied, to begin with, / And we can only feel for Subhadrā / Separated from her beloved son.” Strikingly, if we were to spotlight this half-verse alone we might think it came from somewhere in the *Mahābhārata* itself. And what is all the more remarkable about Arjuna-Bṛhannalā’s statement is the fact that (s)he has a full awareness of what has happened. In the logic of the play there is no question that Abhimanyu has been taken to safety, yet Arjuna-Bṛhannalā still cannot seem to see it that way, and her (or his) perspective draws the audience back to the sense of precarity that imbues the story of Abhimanyu’s life in the epic. We saw in chapter 3 that Arjuna-Bṛhannalā’s character in the play is particularly “sticky”—a figure who struggles with transitions. Earlier, however, it seemed those transitions had to do with gender, broadly speaking. Here they seem to take on a

Bṛhannalā: *ita itaḥ kumāraḥ* | Abhimanyu: *aye ayam aparaḥ kaḥ* | *ayujyamānaih pramadāvibhūṣanaiḥ kareṇuśobhābhir ivārpito gajaḥ* | *laghuś ca veṣeṇa mahān ivaujasā vibhāty umāveṣam ivāśrito haraḥ* || Bṛhannalā: *(apavārya) imam ihānayatā kim idānīm āryeṇa kṛtam* | *avajita iti tāvad dūṣitaḥ pūrvayuddhe dayitasutaviyuktā śocanīyā subhadrā* | *jita iti punar enaṃ ruṣyate vāsubhadro bhavatu bahu kim uktvā dūṣito hastasāraḥ* || Bhīmasena: *arjuna* | Bṛhannalā: *atha kim atha kim arjunaputro ’yam* | Bhīmasena: *(apavārya) jānāmy etān nigrāhād asya doṣān ko vā putraṃ marṣayec chatruhaste* | *iṣṭāpattiyā kintu duḥkhe hi magnā paśyatv enaṃ draupadīty āhrto ’yam* || Bṛhannalā: *Abhimanyo* | Abhimanyu: *katham katham* | *abhimanyur nāmāham* | *nīcair api abhibhāṣyante nāmabhiḥ kṣatriyānvayāḥ* | *ihāyam samudācāro grahaṇaṃ paribhūyate* || Bṛhannalā: *abhimanyo sukhā āste te janānī* | Abhimanyu: *katham katham* | *janānī nāma* | *kiṃ bhavān dharmarājo me bhīmaseno dhanañjayaḥ* | *yan māṃ piṭṛvad ākramya strīgatām pṛchase katham* || Bṛhannalā: *abhimanyo api kuśālī devakī-putraḥ keśavaḥ* | Abhimanyu: *katham tatrābhavantam api nāmnā* | Bṛhannalā: *atha kim atha kim* | Abhimanyu: *kuśālī bhavatā saṃsṛṣṭaḥ* | *(ubhau parasparam avalokayataḥ)* Abhimanyu: *katham idānīm sāvajñam iva māṃ hasyate* | Bṛhannalā: *na khalu kiñcit* |

specifically literary quality, with Brhannalā struggling to shift between an epic perspective and a purely dramatic or comedic one.

Bhīma’s response pulls the audience in a similar direction, though he injects a more critical aspect. “But who could put up with his son / In the hands of the enemy?” he asks. “I brought him here / So Draupadī might see him, / For she is deep in her suffering, / Longing for something good to happen.” The initial question—*Who could put up with his son in the hands of the enemy?*—reads almost as if it were a direct critique of his and his brothers’ behavior in the epic: How could they have tolerated Abhimanyu’s killing there? It deliberately echoes the many expressions of blame that follow his death in book 7 and beyond. The second sentiment—“I brought him here / So Draupadī might see him”—embodies the focused attention on vision and the power of actually *seeing* Abhimanyu that we find throughout the story of his death in the epic. Again the angle is critical, as if it were responding directly to a problem that is posed by the epic. As their laments in the *Mahābhārata* express so forcefully, none of the women have the chance to lay eyes on Abhimanyu after his death on the battlefield, and this becomes a staple of their suffering. Here, however, Bhīma’s intervention is specifically designed to allow these women—or rather Draupadī, their representative—to right that wrong.

Why Draupadī specifically? As we recall from chapter 4, Bhīma and Draupadī have an especially strong connection in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, in the *Virāṭaparvan* particularly, in the *Pañcarātra*’s account of the *Mahābhārata*, and in many other *Mahābhāratas* beyond that. This particular line certainly makes that connection evident. But it does something else as well. It transports the audience from its involvement in the plot of the *Pañcarātra* to its background in the epic *Virāṭaparvan*, where, as we have seen, Draupadī’s suffering is explored in some of the

greatest depth. In several respects, then, Bhīma’s comment peels back the *Pañcarātra*’s comic veil.

A more underhanded—but in many ways more pointed—gesture of unveiling arrives when Abhimanyu says the following to Arjuna-Bṛhannalā: “You come to me boldly, after all, / As if you were my father / And ask how the women are doing.” The important point here is not that Abhimanyu has essentially recognized Bṛhannalā as his father, though we will examine that shortly, but rather that he frames his understanding of things in the way he does. “*As if* you were my father,” he says: *pitṛvat*. As I read it, this is a specific recollection of the fact that the *Mahābhārata* narrates the story of Abhimanyu’s death around a series of hypotheticals. There is, for example, the descriptor *anāthavat*—“as if he had no protectors”—that appears so frequently in recollections of Abhimanyu’s death. We see the same construction (*-vat*, “as if”) here, now applied to Arjuna-Bṛhannalā. The construction is a common one, to be sure, but in these two places it is used for the same narrative purpose: not to describe a general hypothetical truth at all, but to focus on reality itself—a painful reality, in particular. At the moment of his death in the *Mahābhārata*, Abhimanyu really is *anātha*, someone who lacks protectors. The *-vat* is an emotional and rhetorical enhancer, but at the same time a particle that makes the specific general. Here too, Arjuna is in fact Abhimanyu’s father (*pitṛ*); he is not merely *like* a father (*pitṛvat*). Thus in the context of the play the statement is bittersweet. There is humor to it, yes, but spoken by a young character whose backstory unfolds largely in separation from his father, I imagine the phrase would take on a trace of wistfulness as well. In this moment, for all these reasons, the *Pañcarātra* brings to the surface a distinctly epic way of speaking difficult truths. It is a place where the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative voice comes through with particular clarity.

Then there is the fact that Abhimanyu’s failure to “see”—that is, to recognize—his father and uncles is itself a kind of hypothetical. Part of the comedy here is the ease of recognition. Abhimanyu sees and describes Bhīma and Arjuna-Bṛhannalā with such accuracy that he eventually asks Bṛhannalā “Are you my Dharmarāja? / Bhīmasena? Dhanañjaya?” In chapter 4 we drew attention to the fact that the Pāṇḍavas are largely recognizable as themselves when they arrive at Virāṭa’s court—the result of the *yakṣa*’s boon that, as Wendy Doniger argues, makes it possible for there to be a suspension of disbelief when it comes to the Pāṇḍavas’ rather ineffective disguises.⁴³ All this lends a profoundly theatrical structure to the events of the *Virāṭaparvan*, which the *Pañcarātra* has carefully preserved. It keeps alive the tension between effortless recognition and insistence on unfamiliarity that characterizes the suspension of disbelief we observe in the parent text, the *Virāṭaparvan*.

Recognition comedy as a genre would seem to be a natural way to take the motifs of blindness and anonymity that characterize the story of Abhimanyu’s death in the *Mahābhārata* and redirect them toward the linked goals of restoring characters’ individual identities and bringing harmony to the relationships between them, as seems to happen in the *Pañcarātra*. Recognition—the ability not only to see someone but also to understand who (s)he truly is—eases the pain of anonymity, restoring individual features to a figure who may have lost them, owing either to death, as in the case of Abhimanyu, or disguise, as with Arjuna and Bhīma. Furthermore, the “comedy” part of the recognition comedy creates a structure for reuniting those who have been separated—Abhimanyu and Arjuna. Yet what the *Pañcarātra* does with this comedy of recognition is more nuanced, and it shows how close a close reading its playwright has made of the infinitely complex *Mahābhārata*. We might think, for example, that the act of

⁴³ Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth*, 313–14.

recognition would belong solely to Abhimanyu here, since he is the character who—at some base level, at least—does not understand that the two figures in front of him are his own father and uncle. Yet in the scene quoted above, all three main characters—Abhimanyu, Arjuna-Bṛhannalā, and Bhīma—float between states of being recognized and being hidden.

Take Abhimanyu’s partial recognition of Bhīma and Arjuna. His descriptions of them (“His chest is wide . . . His thighs broad, / His shoulders high, firm,” and “Light in clothes, hefty in muscle, / You’re resplendent. Like Śiva—dressed as Pārvatī!”) serve to separate the Pāṇḍavas’ highly specific qualities—Bhīma’s physique and Arjuna’s capacity for bivalence—from the Pāṇḍavas themselves. They stand as some of the only lines in the play that present the Pāṇḍavas from outside themselves; they bestow both individuality and anonymity on their subjects. Abhimanyu, too, is suspended somewhere between those poles. Bhīma and Arjuna see him and know him, to be sure, but the scene also subtly peels away from him a telling layer of recognizability. The key line comes when Abhimanyu says:

What’s this—I am Abhimanyu to you?

Commoners address *kṣatriya* men by name,
And insult my capture.
Is this the practice here?

In this verse he expresses the fact that one of the core facets of his social identity—his *kṣatriya*-ness—is being called into question as the scene proceeds. He believes that he is no longer seen as the *kṣatriya* he is. By linking that feeling of erasure with the way in which Arjuna-Bṛhannalā calls him by his name (“I am Abhimanyu to you?”), he deepens the sense in which he is not quite “Abhimanyu” here. But at the same time he is calling into question *their* social status, stating that

they must be “commoners” to commit the social gaff of calling him “Abhimanyu” when they do not know him and are not of his class.

At this point it is important to recall how, in the *Mahābhārata*, Abhimanyu’s individuality is in a certain sense erased in the period before he dies. It is similarly called into question in the period immediately following his death. We remember that Droṇa does not even intend to kill him in particular. And how could a boy who is the son of Arjuna and the nephew of Kṛṣṇa be slain in battle? The fact that he has been killed seems to present a direct contradiction to his status as the inheritor of everything powerful about the Pāṇḍava and Vṛṣṇi lineages. In relation to all this Abhimanyu makes the following proclamation: “If I fail to slay any creature who confronts me today, then I would not be born of Arjuna and I would not be born of Subhadrā.”⁴⁴ It is crucial to the narration of Abhimanyu’s death that he in fact fails to fulfill the promise that he has articulated in precisely this way. If death in the epic represents the threat of anonymity—the idea that one’s individual personhood, the specific features and heritage that are so often expressed in the currency of Sanskrit epithets, will be lost—then Abhimanyu, by being slain, in some sense really does cease to be the son of Arjuna and Subhadrā.

This anonymity makes his death universal; it makes it seem as if he is simply one of the many young warriors who die on the battlefield. So in the story of Abhimanyu’s death in the *Mahābhārata* we have, on one hand, a piercing singularity—he is the only major figure killed with no foretelling, a death that breaks the epic’s rules of narrative sequence and time—and, on the other hand, a powerful impression of universality. When Abhimanyu stops being the son of Arjuna and Subhadrā and the inheritor of everything that the Pāṇḍava and Vṛṣṇi lineages

⁴⁴ Popular variant on *Mahābhārata* 7.34.26: *nāhaṃ pārithena jātaḥ syān na ca jātaḥ subhadrayā | yadi me saṃyuge kaścij jīvito nādyā mucyate* || See S. K. De, ed., *Droṇaparvan*, vol. 8 of *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona [Pune]: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1958), 203. This verse appears as 7.35.27 in the vulgate.

represent, he becomes every other soldier who dies too young. The coincidence of these opposites is stunning. And it prompts a question: If Abhimanyu’s death stands in for the deaths of so many others, do the laments for him stand in for the laments over those other unnamed soldiers as well?

In the scene above, the *Pañcarātra* takes Abhimanyu’s vow seriously. Abhimanyu fails to slay the creature who confronts him in battle—namely, Bhīma—and, over the course of the drama of recognition that follows, experiences a significant destabilization of his identity as a *kṣatriya* and as Abhimanyu specifically. The recognition comedy that we have in the *Pañcarātra*’s second act is thus no simple inversion of the story of Abhimanyu’s death as told in the epic. Rather, in specific moments it simultaneously recalls the contours of his death with great precision. Remarkably, these instances of unveiling are discrete moments that unfold very much as part of what is going on in the rest of the play. The *Pañcarātra* is not only interested in recalling the “real” *Mahābhārata* but seems equally compelled to ease the tensions that those recollections present. For example, we find at the end of Act 2 a strong pull toward the restoration of the individual selfhood that Abhimanyu has come to question as the comedy of recognition unfolds. He muses, “I am Abhimanyu to you?” The revelation that Bṛhannalā is Arjuna and the reunion between father and son represent the formal conclusion of the plot. But there is another way in which the play brings Abhimanyu into harmony with Arjuna, and with his broader family network as well, as if far more is at stake here than comedy. At the end of Act 2 Virāṭa offers Abhimanyu a poignant blessing:

You must realize
The steadfastness of Yudhiṣṭhira,
The strength of Bhīma,
The dexterity of Arjuna,
The loveliness and beauty of Mādri’s sons,

And the glory of Kṛṣṇa,
Beloved of the world.⁴⁵

It is a blessing for the restoration of Abhimanyu’s individual identity, which, as we have come to see, is as much social—composite, even—as it is individual. To be Abhimanyu in the truest sense is to embody the qualities of all who surround him.

The guilt of Duryodhana and the fantasy of resolution

If the entire play were to conclude at the end of Act 2, we might be left with a profound sense of resolution, at least when it comes to Abhimanyu specifically. The contours of the story of his death in the epic have been recalled, inverted, and answered: Abhimanyu goes into battle, yes, and his life is threatened, yes—these are plot elements that strongly parallel his death in the epic—but this time it all goes differently.⁴⁶ There is no war, he does not die, and Arjuna does not lose him and suffer. If we left things there, we might be able to accept them as some sort of narrative reality: a sincerely-minded revisionist history of a turning point in Abhimanyu’s life.

Yet in fact we cannot stop there. The *Pañcarātra* consciously and intentionally presents its version of events as fantasy, not reality. The audience is supposed to have an awareness that all we see before us is, in some way, a thought experiment. The *Pañcarātra* offers a self-

⁴⁵ *Pañcarātra* 2.70: *yaudhiṣṭhiraṃ dhairyam avāpnuhi tvam bhaimaṃ balaṃ naipuṇam arjunasya | mādrīsutāt kāntim athābhirūpyaṃ kīrtim ca kṛṣṇasya jagatpriyasya ||*

⁴⁶ Karin Steiner writes that this speaks to the *Pañcarātra*’s desire to encapsulate the entire epic: “A novelty compared to the epic is that Arjuna’s son Abhimanyu takes part in the fight on the side of Duryodhana and is captured by Bhīma. This innovation is related to the fact that the playwright represents the entire plot structure of the *Mahābhārata*. The fight for the cows in the drama thus stands for the great battle in the MBh. The heroic deeds and the resulting dramatic death of Abhimanyu, deeply mourned by both warring parties, are among the most famous episodes of the epic and are, as it were, compensated for in a more harmless way by the capture.” See Karin Juliana Steiner, “Ritual(e) im Drama: Spurensuche im Sanskrit-Schauspiel Pañcarātra,” in *Indisches Theater: Text, Theorie, Praxis, Drama und Theater in Südasien* vol. 8 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 158.

conscious fantasy of resolution—a powerful exercise in imagining how things “might have gone” that undercuts but never replaces the familiar epic story. The comedy of recognition that we follow in Act 2 stands as a compelling vision of an alternate reality, a fantasy of what might have been. And now we must ask, how does the play cultivate in the audience an awareness that what we are looking at is not an expression of some kind of narrative reality but, rather, a performance of fantasy?

The simple answer is that we have an Act 3. There the play deploys a series of events and images that convey the guilt of Abhimanyu’s primary guardian—Duryodhana—and his feelings of responsibility for the fact that Abhimanyu has been captured. At this stage it is as if the *Pañcarātra* lets its own version of the Abhimanyu story fade into the background so that it can portray the story of his death as it appears in the epic—except this time it is not Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas who express their guilt and sorrow over the event, but Duryodhana and the Kauravas. At the beginning of Act 3 we find ourselves among them once more. (Recall that Acts 1 and 3 are located among the Kauravas whereas Act 2 is the only act that focuses on the Pāṇḍavas in disguise.) Duryodhana, who brought Abhimanyu along during the raid on Virāṭa’s cattle, learns that Abhimanyu has been captured in action. What is his response? In defiance of the greediness and defensiveness with which he is so often depicted in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and in many *Mahābhāratas* beyond it, Duryodhana becomes wracked with guilt, saying to his messenger:

Tell me, charioteer: Who took Abhimanyu away from us? I will go free him myself, since

It was my business with his fathers,
The split in our family—
And anyone who speaks honestly

Will say the blame must fall on me.
He is my son now, but
He'll be the Pāṇḍavas' long after,
And when a family has a falling-out
It's not the children who've done wrong.⁴⁷

To me there is no question but that this verse is intended to evoke the aftermath of Abhimanyu's death in the epic, where Yudhiṣṭhira expresses profound guilt over the role he specifically has played in endangering Abhimanyu's life. There it is Yudhiṣṭhira who draws Abhimanyu into battle, and Yudhiṣṭhira who suffers the sharpest sense of guilt after his death. We encountered part of Yudhiṣṭhira's lament to this effect earlier in the *Pañcarātra*, a speech that included these verses:

I wanted what Subhadrā wanted,
What Kṛṣṇa wanted, and Arjuna too—
I wanted victory.
But I alone did this awful thing.

A greedy man is blind to his mistakes.
In delusion, desire is all that matters.
Chasing after honey, I didn't see
The steep fall that awaited.

What should have been placed before him?
The pleasures of life. Adventures.
Soft beds. Jewelry.
This is the boy I placed before *me* in battle.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Pañcarātra* 3.4: *sūta | kathaya kathaya | kenāpanīto 'bhimanyuḥ | aham evainaṃ mokṣayiṣyāmi | kutaḥ | mama hi pitṛbhir asya prastuto jñātibhedas tad iha mama ca doṣo vaktṛbhiḥ pātānīyaḥ | atha ca mama sa putraḥ pāṇḍavānāṃ tu paścāt sati ca kulavirodhe nāparādhyanti bālāḥ ||*

⁴⁸ *Mahābhārata* 7.49.10–12.

Yet the *Pañcarātra* takes a further step. It condenses Yudhiṣṭhira's lament for Abhimanyu and transposes it onto an exceptionally contrite Duryodhana. The parallels are striking. Both Yudhiṣṭhira (in the epic) and Duryodhana (in the play) find themselves in the position of caring for Abhimanyu in the absence of Arjuna. Both draw him into battle, and both profoundly regret that choice. It is a gentle but pointed reminder of the emotional dynamics of the epic, and this shakes the ground that lies beneath the happy reunion of Arjuna and Abhimanyu in the play.

What's more, the sense of guilt that we find in Duryodhana's speech cited above spreads through other characters who belong to the world of the Kauravas. The soldier who brings the message of Abhimanyu's capture describes the event in terms of the Kauravas' failure to live up to their warrior ideals. This is presented in contrast with Abhimanyu's devotion to battle, which the soldier describes as being so robust that he does not hesitate to come into conflict even with members of his immediate family:

He cast off any fear of Kṛṣṇa's discus
And trounced his long-lost relatives,
But the Kurus with their beloved arrows
Failed to protect him.
Abhimanyu was captured,
And we should be ashamed.⁴⁹

Kaṛṇa, too, expresses deep guilt over the Kauravas' failure to act when Abhimanyu is taken from them:

It is not merely the thought
Of him being our family, but

⁴⁹ *Pañcarātra* 3.1: *apāsya nārāyaṇacakrajaṃ bhayaṃ cirapraṇaṣṭān paribhūya bādhavān | dhanuḥsahāyaiḥ kurubhir na rakṣito hṛto 'bhimanyuḥ kriyatām vyapatrapā ||*

Because he was a child that
Abhimanyu met with disaster
While fighting on the front lines
As a favor to you
And we failed to protect him.
Let us throw down our bows
And take up the bark robes of ascetics.⁵⁰

Here too, the parallels between Yudhiṣṭhira’s position in the epic and Duryodhana’s position in the play come to the fore. Karṇa’s “Abhimanyu met with disaster / While fighting on the front lines / As a favor to you (*priyārtham*)” echoes Yudhiṣṭhira’s initial lament:

The hero Abhimanyu is dead.
My brother’s son—a great warrior.
He broke through Droṇa’s giant array
And entered their ranks—a lion among cattle—
All to win my favor (*priyacikīrṣayā*).⁵¹

The idea that favor—or perhaps affection: it is *priya* in both speeches—would be a primary cause of Abhimanyu’s death (or, in the case of the *Pañcarātra*, what many believe to be Abhimanyu’s death) plays a crucial role in various characters’ understandings of what has occurred. For them the sequence of events is grounded in love, and specifically the kind of love that makes a person want what he or she believes to be best for someone else. In the world of the epic this is the kind of love that leads to disaster. It becomes a special refrain in the story of the game of dice in book 2, where Dhṛtarāṣṭra permits Duryodhana to arrange the game “because he loved his son.” It is in fact the final word there, for the book ends with Dhṛtarāṣṭra looking back

⁵⁰ *Pañcarātra* 3.5: *mā tāvat svajanadhiyā tu bālabhāvād vyāpannaḥ samaramukhe tava priyārtham | asmābhir na ca parirakṣito 'bhimanyur gr̥hantām dhanur apanīya valkalāni ||*

⁵¹ *Mahābhārata* 7.49.3–4.

on things and admitting that Vidura, his half-brother and advisor, had been right all along in his admonitions to Dhṛtarāṣṭra not to indulge Duryodhana:

He gave me advice, my attendant did,
That bore *dharma* and *artha*—
Good conduct and prosperity.
But I did not take it
Because I wanted what was best
For my son.⁵²

Thus it is not only the parallel between Yudhiṣṭhira (in the epic) and Duryodhana (in the play) that grounds the *Pañcarātra*'s portrayal of Abhimanyu in the emotional world of the epic. Their joint guilt—both in the epic and in the play—is framed as a response to a disaster that attends love itself: the potential tragedy of love's selflessness. I would suggest that this may be the most powerful unveiling moment in the play as a whole—a scene that takes us back not only to Yudhiṣṭhira's remorseful elegy for his nephew, and not only to the extensive laments for Abhimanyu that reappear throughout the *Droṇaparvan*, but as far back as the original love-driven disaster that drives the game of dice. A comedy of recognition? At some very deep level, there's nothing funny here. Perhaps it takes the comic mode to see it fully.

After the *Pañcarātra*

Abhimanyu lives happily ever after in the play, but the crucial thing to remember is that this conclusion, however uplifting it may seem, is set against explicit recollections of Abhimanyu's death in the *Mahābhārata*. It represents only part of what the play is ultimately

⁵² *Mahābhārata* 2.72.36: *evaṃ gāvalgaṇe kṣattā dharmārthasahitaṃ vacaḥ | uktavān na grhītaṃ ca mayā putrahitepsayā ||*

conveying. Shadows of the *Mahābhārata* supply the rest. We have seen that this is particularly evident in Act 3, when we relive the loss of Abhimanyu from the point of view of the Kauravas. So if we take the *Pañcarātra*'s plot at face value, it is true that Abhimanyu lives. Yet if we appreciate the play's layered presentation of Abhimanyu, we also see that his death is there simultaneously—not just in the *Mahābhārata* but in the play itself.

Even when the *Pañcarātra* reaches its denouement—lest we forget, this is when Duryodhana agrees to share the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas—any sense of emotional integration is temporary. This is true in a quite literal sense. The *Pañcarātra* does not stand on its own. Rather, as we saw in chapter 2, it is one of six short *Mahābhārata* dramas that were likely staged in a performance cycle. The following play in the cycle, *Dūtaghaṭokaca* (*Ghaṭokaca the Messenger*), takes the Kauravas' guilt in *Pañcarātra* Act 3 as its starting point. Yet *Dūtaghaṭokaca* takes that guilt one step further. In the *Pañcarātra*, as we know, Abhimanyu turns out to be alive and the play concludes with the whole family, Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas alike, preparing for his wedding to Uttarā, Virāṭa's daughter. Yet at the beginning of *Dūtaghaṭokaca* it is as if the *Pañcarātra*'s felicitous conclusion never took place. In *Dūtaghaṭokaca* we discover that Abhimanyu has died after all. Moreover, he has been killed in the battle of Kurukṣetra, a fact that the Kauravas mourn bitterly as the play begins. This means that from the vantage point of the whole cycle of *Mahābhārata* plays, the war really does happen. *Dūtaghaṭokaca*, then, would seem to offer the most straightforward evidence in support of understanding the *Pañcarātra*'s happy ending as a fantasy that is both deliberate and self-aware.

Actually, however, the internal evidence is far more convincing. The *Pañcarātra* makes the poignantly provisional character of its own happy ending obvious to the sensitive observer. The deliberate alternations of “base” and “retelling” that belong to the technique of veiled

narration—with the narrative reality of the *Mahābhārata* undergirding and at times perfectly visible through the fabricated dramatic world that is imagined solely in the *Pañcarātra*—facilitate an awareness of the ephemerality of the play’s happy ending at many points. In fact, not only the story of Abhimanyu but the entire story of the *Mahābhārata* is subject to veiled narration in the *Pañcarātra*. For sure, the *Pañcarātra* develops a concentrated and contrapuntal if decidedly “lite” form of what we observe in the epic itself, but comedy is not always innocent. The steep shift in tone between the end of Act 2, where everyone’s identities are restored and Abhimanyu and Arjuna are reunited, and the beginning of Act 3, where the Kauravas mourn the loss of their ward, trains the audience to develop a certain suspicion in regard to whatever may seem a harmonious resolution.

What are we to think, then, when at the end of the play Duryodhana returns to the Pāṇḍavas their share of the kingdom? Is this a happy ending after all? May we savor it as such? Savor we may, but at the same time, if we have been paying attention, we realize that we may not be standing on stable literary ground. A step forward into the *Dūtaghaṭokaca* will seem to confirm that we are not. But the important thing is that the story of Abhimanyu’s life—or was it his death?—has been warning us all along.

Conclusion

The Fantasy Life of the *Mahābhārata*

What does it mean for the *Mahābhārata* to have a fantasy life? Contemporary popular culture, both in India and internationally, offers one answer. If we set aside the ubiquity of the *Bhagavadgītā* and its iterations, we can observe that today's tellings of the *Mahābhārata* unfold largely within the genre of fantasy—that is, novels, comic books, television shows, movies, and video games that make the most of the epic's magical landscape, superhuman characters, and extraordinary weaponry. But it's not only that the *Mahābhārata*'s plots, settings, and characters arrive fantasy-ready, primed to take new shape in graphic novels and streaming series.

Necessarily, fantasy-genre retellings of the *Mahābhārata* elegantly capture many of the formal qualities of the epic as well: its intricate, framed setting; its wells of backstories and sidestories to explore; its collective authorship; its “canonical” elements; and its reader-participants—its fandom, we might say.

Take, for example, the complex web of framing narratives that is woven throughout the epic. Comics by definition frame their stories, only they do it visually. The popular Amar Chitra Katha comic book *Mahābhāratas* explicitly link those visual framing devices with the epic's literary ones—frame stories frame the images within the comic—and so do graphic novels like Amruta Patil's *Mahābhārata*-inspired duology, *Adi Parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016). Art Spiegelman once spoke of comics' frames as jail cells—jail cells that exist so that the characters inside might break them open: hence the thrill of any images that spill outside the frame. This is a reason that so many early comics told stories of imprisonment and escape.¹ Seen through the lens of comics, could the *Mahābhārata*'s many frame stories be a way of containing, putting

¹ Art Spiegelman, “Wordless!,” with music composed by Phillip Johnston, performed 2014–18.

restraints on, a story that would otherwise spill over—into some unending future, or into real life? Or consider the *Mahābhārata*'s proliferation of backstories and sidestories, narratives that diverge from the main course of action. As a genre, fantasy tends to seek out expansion—the wider and more detailed the alternative world it presents, the more plausible it becomes—and the epic offers countless opportunities to do precisely that, as happened, for instance, in the 1988–90 *Mahabharat* TV serial. As a fantasy world inflates and crystallizes, it stretches beyond the creative control of any one author; readers, then, become authors, and fantasy becomes fan fiction.

What stays fixed in the ever-expanding universe of the text—now so much more than a single text? What counts as sacred? What can or should be transformed? These kinds of quandaries drive the broader cultures of fantasy and fan fiction, just as they have inspired the literature of the *Mahābhārata* for the last two thousand years. Importantly and by design, there is no end to such negotiations: fantasy has its happy endings, to be sure, but the genre itself is constantly pushing beyond narrative boundaries such as these.

In the introduction I wrote that in reading fantasy, one experiences a fully developed alternate world that is internally consistent and, crucially, aware of the fact that it is being offered as an alternative to whatever the reader might find familiar, close to personal experience, or realistic. This self-consciousness is often enshrined in the work itself in the form of a portal crossing: a moment early in the narrative when the protagonist crosses over from everyday life into the world of the fantasy.² The portal-crossing event moves the reader along with the protagonist from a standard world to the second, alternative world of the fantasy—one that is just as broad and consistent as the first, and one that will eventually become just as familiar to the

² On the portal-quest fantasy, see Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 1–58.

reader. Yet the two realms remain separate, and so the reader experiences the gap between them. In this way realism becomes a deeply felt but invisible part of fantasy. We have seen that the *Mahābhārata* has a fantasy life in this sense, too. It cultivates two alternative worlds within a single text: the brutal realism of the greater *Mahābhārata* is answered by the self-aware fantasy of the *Virāṭaparvan*. So too does the greater *Mahābhārata* linger beneath the similarly self-aware fantasy of the *Pañcarātra*. Largely speaking, rather than incorporate deliberate portal-crossing moments, the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* keep the borders open. The technique of veiled narration allows the reader to return to the “reality” of the broader *Mahābhārata* at key moments, ensuring that she maintains a sharp awareness of fantasy’s artifice. Yet sometimes, as we have seen, this portal-seeking instinct does actually result in a transplanting of the *Virāṭaparvan* to an earlier place in the performance (or composition) of the epic than one might expect. In practice, the *Mahābhārata* can even start there!

Why construct a fantasy—an entire alternative narrative path—in response to and alongside the reality of the *Mahābhārata*? For the *Pañcarātra*, one straightforward answer is that the drama is simply echoing the *Virāṭaparvan*—which does the same thing to the greater *Mahābhārata*, if on a more limited scale. But I believe that something more outward-facing may be involved here—something that serves readers more intimately. One way to understand this part of the fantasy life of the *Mahābhārata* is to look quite far afield: at Afrofuturism, a literary project that might be more narrowly understood as a subgenre of fantasy or science fiction, but that is more broadly construed as “an aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.”³ Afrofuturist literature intentionally looks to

³ Lisa Yaszek, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 42.

the past and present as it shapes the future, “reorienting,” as Kodwo Eshun writes, “the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective”—that is, intentionally using the vicious and ongoing reality of oppression, rather than ignoring it, as a way to imagine, through fiction, a future that looks very different.⁴ The results can be deeply introspective as well as constructive. “Imagining new futures can serve as a strategy to understand the nature of cruelty,” Lonny J. Avi Brooks writes, “and how we negotiate with cruel acts as constitutive of our greatest aspirations.”⁵ Walidah Imarisha describes the Afrofuturist link between literary and social reality as a powerful exercise in constructing possibilities:

Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds. . . We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories.

. . . “Visionary fiction” is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.⁶

⁴ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 289.

⁵ Lonny J. Avi Brooks, “Cruelty and Afrofuturism,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 101.

⁶ Walidah Imarisha, introduction to *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 3–4.

Without wanting to extrapolate too much from, and thereby exploit, the field of Afrofuturism in the service of a project that lives at a great distance from it, I do believe that the insights of Eshun, Brooks, Imarisha, and other Afrofuturist critics can help pave the way forward in our understanding of the *Pañcarātra*'s and the *Virāṭaparvan*'s relationships with the wider *Mahābhārata*. Here, after all, are two texts—the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*—that are truly visionary. To use Imarisha's language, they “envision a world”—that is, a *Mahābhārata*, which is in so many ways our world, past and present—“without war, without violence.” They “claim the vast space of possibility.” They do this in a way that incorporates and reflects on reality, and even the nature of cruelty itself (Brooks' idea), for that is what veiled narration allows: a constant groundedness in reality while boldly imagining possibility after possibility. We accept the darkness and brutality of the *Mahābhārata*'s world as our own, but perhaps the *Virāṭaparvan* and then more loudly the *Pañcarātra* are asking us to construct an alternative path, not only in literary terms but in human terms as well.

Throughout this dissertation we have seen the fantasy life of the *Mahābhārata* behave in a way that is explicitly time-bound. In the introduction and in chapter 1 we observed how much of the imaginative power of retelling the epic involves constructing its conclusion anew, or rather, devising a satisfying conclusion for it in the first place so as to make it come to an end at all. In chapter 2 (and in the introduction, too) we learned how the extraordinary possibilities that the *Virāṭaparvan* devises are often oriented toward the *beginnings* of things, signaling the onset of a creative space-time that can be imagined as living separately from everyday life. In chapter 3 we explored the extent to which performance is considered temporary in the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*: when does Bṛhannalā enter into Arjuna, and when, if at all, does she leave? In chapters 4 and 5 we saw how the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra*, respectively, use veiled

narration to construct powerful but temporary alternative *Mahābhāratas* in which suffering is eased and violence is averted. Because veiled narration transfers the audience's attention back and forth between the reality of the greater *Mahābhārata* and the fantasy of the retelling—whether it is the *Virāṭaparvan*'s or the *Pañcarātra*'s—members of the audience never find firm ground in the world of possibility, however enthusiastically it may be laid out for them.

But now I wonder: What if the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* were not made to be temporary exercises in fantasy so much as genuine projections of a desire for a more satisfying future than the *Mahābhārata* would predict? Perhaps the fantasy worlds of the *Virāṭaparvan* and the *Pañcarātra* were not meant to be time-bound themselves, but rather were intended to make us realize that the *Mahābhārata*'s cruel realities could come to an end—if only we committed ourselves to that aim. In this reading it is the *Mahābhārata*, and the world of suffering that it mirrors, that is temporary—a performance that we could bring to a close, if we wanted—and the powerful visions created by the *Virāṭaparvan* and *Pañcarātra* that project us into something endless.

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