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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

KARṆA IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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BY

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Dedication

To

my mother

and

my grandparents

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This dissertation examines several aspects of the character of Karṇa in the Mahābhārata. It begins by arguing that Karṇa's choice of which side to fight on in the epic battle reveals a courageous response to a deep ethical dilemma. Through the story of Karṇa's choice, the epic authors both undermine the claim of completeness of any human knowledge-system about dharma and extend the range of what dharma can encompass. The epic does and does not subvert its ethical systems through alternative framing analogies which allow for multiple ethical perspectives on a single narrative thread.

The epic authors use the myths correlated to the Karṇa narrative to explore the twin themes of self-invention and its impossibility. Karṇa reinvents himself in social rank only to return to what he was originally, through instances of unveiling and gift-rituals that go awry through excessive generosity.

With respect to psychological paradigms, Karṇa is an exception to the Rankian cross-cultural heroic paradigm; the Karṇa narrative centers on not an Oedipal complex but a tension between loyalty (to family) and duties prescribed by dharma. Moreover, Karṇa's character develops not by rejecting a previous identity but clinging to it. Instead of following the Freudian model of individual growth through change, the Mahābhārata's Karṇa seems to manifest his psychological growth through heroic steadfastness (dhīratā).

Through crystalline-like parallels and mirrorings, Karṇa's character reflects and is reflected upon by three other characters, Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Bhīṣma.

Several aspects of Yudhiṣṭhira's personality (his blinding hatred, his adherence to his worldview) emerge in the context of his hatred of and grief over Karṇa. The archrivals Karṇa and Arjuna both aggressively cling to their worldviews; while Arjuna is the idealized devotee (bhakta), Karṇa embodies some of the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā, but without devotion (bhakti). In the reconciliation between Karṇa and Bhīṣma, neither character denies the power of destiny (daiva), but Karṇa allows for and believes in human initiative (puruṣakāra).

In interpreting the Karṇa narrative this way, this dissertation hopes to encourage a conversation about Karṇa which will help us appreciate the subtle design and conscious artistry of the Mahābhārata's characters.

Chapter One

Introduction

"If you remember anyone among the heroes, let it be Karṇa!"
Pampabhāratam 12.217[1]

1.1 A Famous Character

The Karṇa narrative in the Mahābhārata is one of the great narratives of world literature, and a monograph on Karṇa's character is long overdue. Karṇa is a well-known and well-loved character, and his multiple literary incarnations throughout South Asian literature have been interpreted and re-interpreted. Karṇa is, paradoxically, famous as the 'unknown Pāṇḍava,' the sixth brother of the five Pāṇḍava brothers at the center of the Mahābhārata narrative.

In that sense, Karṇa needs little introduction. Indeed, readers who are familiar with the Mahābhārata may even be surprised to know that this dissertation is the first monograph-length study of Karṇa in English. Almost everyone who knows and loves the Mahābhārata smiles appreciatively when the subject of Karṇa is brought up. To this group, there is no question that such a study is necessary.

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[1] Quoted in David Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). p. 380.

But before another conversation about Karṇa begins, I shall summarize the Karṇa narrative as we have it in the <u>Mahābhārata</u>. (The next section will also contain a brief introduction to the <u>Mahābhārata</u> for those readers unfamiliar with this epic.)

1.2 Introduction to the <u>Mahābhārata</u> and Summary of the Karṇa Narrative

The <u>Mahābhārata</u> is a Sanskrit epic which had its origins in oral tradition and it was rescended, scholars believe today, sometime between 400 BCE and 400 CE. The text has remained alive both in oral and written forms to this day. The <u>Mahābhārata</u> is a massive text, comprising traditionally some one hundred thousand couplets. The text is divided into eighteen books (<u>parvan</u>-s), each of which is organized by sub-books and chapters.

The epic pervades daily life and consciousness in many parts of South Asia, and there, as A. K. Ramanujan once remarked, "no Hindu ever reads the <u>Mahābhārata</u> for the first time."[2] The <u>Mahābhārata</u> is sometimes embraced as the 'national epic' of India, and it is frequently regarded as a sacred text in Hinduism; it is part of <u>smṛti</u> -- a set of texts which interpreted the Vedas (the most ancient of Hindu texts) and indeed constitute a *tradition* of interpretation. The <u>Mahābhārata</u> explores how to get to heaven, how gods and human beings interact, the nature of sacrifice, mythology, and ritual. It contains the <u>Bhagavadgītā</u>, a text often extracted from the context of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> and sometimes presented as *the* central statement of Hinduism. And the <u>Mahābhārata</u> is a text concerned with <u>dharma</u>.[3]

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[2] A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the Mahabharata," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 419.

[3] Dharma is a notoriously difficult Sanskrit word to translate. We might translate dharma as 'code for conduct.' It has also been translated as 'law' or as 'religion.' This last term has the advantage that dharma might be more than a 'legislative system' or 'code.' Dharma is closer to the generalized, philosophical idea of law as a transcendent meaning, a meaning that both rises above the details of human existence and gives those details purpose. Moreover, dharma is not law or religion which is distinct from

In its most simplified form, the <u>Mahābhārata</u> is the story of a struggle for kingship and the ensuing civil war. On one side are the five Pāṇḍava brothers, led by the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira. Opposing them are the Kauravas and their allies, the Kauravas being a set of one hundred brothers led by their eldest brother Duryodhana. The Kauravas lose the war, but the Pāṇḍavas' victory is Phyrric in the extreme. All but three human beings on the Kaurava side are dead, as is everyone on the Pāṇḍava side, save for the five brothers, their common wife Draupadī, and Arjuna's daughter-in-law Uttarā. Arjuna is the middle brother of the Pāṇḍavas and is the decisive military strength of the Pāṇḍava side. The Pāṇḍava side is also aided by Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu and ostensibly the foremost divine presence in the book. Also surviving the war are three of the parents of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas: Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī, and Kuntī.

This summary only scratches the surface of an elaborate and complex plot and plot structure.[4] Moreover, the narrative element is only one dimension of a text that also includes, among other things, philosophy, ritual theory, and myth. We should note that the <u>Mahābhārata</u> does not always tell its narratives in a straightforward manner; this is never more true than with the Karṇa narrative, which is revealed as a mystery rather than as a biography. Still, as artful as this narrative presentation is, Karṇa's identity is only a surprise once, and (as Ramanujan pointed out) most <u>Mahābhārata</u> audiences already know his story -- which runs as follows.

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nature or divine will: to conceive of dharma is to conceive the entire universe as part of a single unified moral enterprise: humans, gods, animals, plants, stones – any and every existent thing – each entity contributes to the upkeep and the sustenance of the universe when it acts in accordance with dharma. (Much more will be said about dharma in Chapter Two.)

[4] Interested readers can take in Narasimhan's relatively short version of the plot. For the true taste of the *Mahabharata*, though, readers can turn to van Buitenen's translations. See Chakravarthi Narasimhan, *The Mahabharata: An English Version Based on Selected Verses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

Karṇa is born from the union of an unmarried woman named Kuntī (who belongs to the the aristocratic warrior (kṣatriya) class) and Sūrya, the sun god. Karṇa is born with golden earrings and impenetrable golden body armor; his feet are identical to his mother's. To hide the fact that she had a child before marriage, Kuntī abandons the baby in the Aśva river, where he is picked up, adopted, and raised lovingly by Adhiratha and Rādhā, a charioteer (sūta) couple. Growing up, Karṇa prays every day to the sun and vows that any brahmin (a member of the priestly class) that approaches him while he is praying will receive alms from him. One day while Karṇa is praying, Indra in the guise of a brahmin approaches Karṇa and requests, as a gift, Karṇa's body armor and earrings. Despite being warned that this is a trick, Karṇa cuts them off his body and hands them to Indra. In return, Karṇa receives an infallible weapon that, however, can only be used once.

Karṇa's incredible military skills make him the only match for Arjuna, the best warrior of all the princes in the land. The Pāṇḍavas, though, taunt Karṇa for his low birth, and Karṇa develops a life-long hatred for them, especially for Arjuna. The Pāṇḍavas' cousins, the Kauravas, welcome Karṇa to their fold; the eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana, gives Karṇa a kingdom, makes him a de facto kṣatriya[5] class, and claims Karṇa's steadfast friendship.

In the following years, Karṇa also develops a hatred for Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas' common wife, because she does not let him compete in her groom-choice ceremony (svayaṃvara). Karṇa, in turn, taunts Draupadī when she is humiliated at the Kaurava

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[5] Common Sanskrit terms, such as 'dharma,' 'karma,' 'kṣatriya' and 'yuga' will be underlined only the first time they are used. I will also use 'brahmin' to refer to that class (varṇa).

court. Karṇa also encourages Duryodhana to attack the Pāṇḍavas when they are living in exile in the forest.

Karṇa goes to the brahmin warrior Paraśurāma to learn the arts of war; he disguises himself as a brahmin but is eventually found out and cursed by Paraśurāma: he will lose his knowledge of weapons at the time he needs it most. During that same period, Karṇa is also cursed by a brahmin so that, one day, when he is in the midst of a battle, his chariot wheel will be stuck in the mud.

Just before the decisive battle of Kurukṣetra, Karṇa quarrels with Bhīṣma and vows not to fight until Bhīṣma has been killed. Karṇa also refuses two 'temptations' from Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī, both of whom try to persuade him to switch to the Pāṇḍava side. Karṇa, though, does promise Kuntī that he will kill only Arjuna of her five sons, thus leaving her with five sons no matter who -- he or Arjuna -- survives their combat.

After Arjuna kills Bhīṣma, Karṇa enters the battle but has first to endure the mocking of his charioteer Śalya. During the battle, Karṇa fights well and does in fact defeat and spare the lives of three of the Pāṇḍava brothers; Yudhiṣṭhira is particularly humiliated. Karṇa also participates in killing Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. When Ghaṭotkaca, the son of the Pāṇḍava Bhīma, threatens to destroy the Kaurava side, Duryodhana asks Karṇa to use his infallible weapon on Ghaṭotkaca; Karṇa does so, knowing that that weapon was his only sure way to defeat Arjuna.

When Arjuna and Karṇa finally meet, their duel is at first long and inconclusive. At one point, Karṇa fires an arrow which is really a snake that escaped from a forest that Arjuna had burnt down. Kṛṣṇa, acting as Arjuna's charioteer, lowers the ground beneath Arjuna's chariot, and the snake arrow only dislodges Arjuna's diadem. The snake arrow returns to Karṇa and asks to be fired again; but Karṇa, true to the kṣatriya rule never to refire a weapon, declines the offer. Eventually, Karṇa's chariot wheel does get stuck in

the mud, and from that position he asks Arjuna to provide him time to release his chariot

-- again as stipulated by the kṣatriya code. At that point, Karṇa also loses all his

knowledge of weapons and is rendered defenseless. Encouraged by Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna kills

Karṇa.

After the war is over, it is revealed to the Pāṇḍavas that Karṇa was their brother.

Yudhiṣthira in particular is inconsolable; he regrets not having noticed the similarity in

feet between Karṇa and Kuntī. Yudhiṣthira through his life has been haunted by images

of Karṇa; it has always been Karṇa whom he has feared most on the Kaurava side. Now it

is Karṇa for whom he grieves the most.

Given this narrative, this dissertation makes the following interpretive claims.

1.3 My Claims

Like any rich literary character, the character of Karṇa is fascinating in many

different dimensions. My study begins by investigating the choice that Karṇa makes

when both Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī ask him to fight for the Pāṇḍava side. I argue that Karṇa is

indeed facing a deep ethical dilemma and that his response to fighting a losing battle is

neither nihilistic nor fatalistic; Karṇa's courage is existential rather than martial. I also

explain how Karṇa's story does and does not subvert the ethical systems that Karṇa

implicitly criticizes through his choice, concluding with a discussion of the way that other

episodes in the epic provide alternative 'framing analogies' and thus allow for multiple

ethical perspectives on a single narrative thread. Karṇa's choice is startling in the context

of dharma as 'code for conduct' and of the options that dharma provides to an individual.

By examining these options, we will see how, through the story of Karṇa's choice, the

epic's authors both *undermine* the claim of completeness of any human knowledge-system about dharma[6] and *extend* the range of what dharma can encompass.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, explores the myths behind and related to the Karṇa narrative and the authors' use of this mythic background to explore the twin themes of self-invention and its impossibility. In terms of class and social rank, Karṇa, like a snake that sheds its skin only to remain a snake, reinvents himself in myriad ways only to return to what he was in the first place. His narrative contains instances of unveiling and uncovering, both of which destabilize identity and can also produce new identities. Indeed, if a character can be reborn, then the character may be able to be reborn as good rather than evil -- or vice-versa. Karṇa is like that in the course of his life; if we could use the term 'ambiguous' to cover the whole biography, it is only because Karṇa is able, from turn to turn, to shock us with his vituperative hatred and then awe us with his personal courage. Karṇa's ambiguous social class (varṇa), moreover, leads him into gift-rituals that go awry. (The gift is a gift of the self, and if your self is hidden or ambiguous, the gift-ritual falls apart.) And the epic authors seem to *delight* in exploiting the dramatic possibilities of this instability. Thematically, the Karṇa narrative points to a curious correlation between self-invention and generosity: characters who have re-invented themselves tend to be very generous, and often overly, and fatally, so. Again, the epic authors use myths both as inspiration and intertextually to explore this human theme.

In Chapter 4, I explore what the study of Karṇa can say to scholars and students who are interested in literature or the humanities in general; I show how Karṇa forces us to expand our vocabulary of psychological paradigms, as well as points us towards (and

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[6] It is in this spirit that Bhīṣma can say "Great-spirited brahmins on earth fail to encompass [dharma]" (2.62.15).

helps us better understand) the subtleties of the distinctions made by Sanskrit literary aestheticians. In particular, I examine the way in which Karṇa is an exception to the Rankian cross-cultural heroic paradigm. This investigation leads into a discussion of the possibility of an Indian Oedipal complex: I find that at the heart of the Karṇa narrative is not an Oedipal complex but a tension between, on the one hand, loyalty to family, love for family, and filial respect and, on the other hand, dharmic duties, especially kṣatriya duties.

Karṇa deviates from the heroic paradigm at the moment when he chooses not to become the eldest Pāṇḍava and king. By rejecting power and fame, Karṇa provides another angle altogether on development: Karṇa is a character who 'develops' not by rejecting a previous identity but by clinging to it. That is, he does not change but remains fixed. This contrasts with a western notion of individualism which centers on the ability of the self to evolve, to reform itself, that assumes that individuals are truly free only if they are able to 'become' whatever they want to be. I further contextualize Karṇa's heroic steadfastness (dhīratā) in the work of the Sanskrit literary theorist Bhoja. And thus within the Mahābhārata, there emerges a powerful alternative to the Freudian model of individual growth through change. Instead, a character like Karṇa seems to manifest his psychological growth through steadfastness.

In Chapter 5, I explore how our study of Karṇa helps us interpret the rest of the Mahābhārata; I analyze how Karṇa's character reflects and is reflected upon by three other characters, Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Bhīṣma. By examining Yudhiṣṭhira's hatred of Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira's grief at the death of Karṇa, I show that several aspects of Yudhiṣṭhira's personality (his blinding hatred, his ability to cling to his own worldview) emerge when we consider how these two characters reflect on each other. Next, I argue that Karṇa and Arjuna are suited as archrivals because they are both individuals who

cling aggressively to their worldviews. While Arjuna's worldview centers around his own superiority and is corroborated by historical events, Karṇa's worldview centers around his human relationships and must contend with failure and defeat. Karṇa and Arjuna are also differentiated by devotion (bhakti). Arjuna is the idealized devotee (bhakta), while Karṇa rejects Kṛṣṇa's advice but seems to already embody all that Arjuna is taught in the Bhagavadgītā -- except for bhakti. In that Karṇa thus becomes a mirror image of the ideal bhakta, it may be that Karṇa is a seed for later hate-devotion (dveṣa-bhakti). Finally, I examine the reconciliation between Karṇa and Bhīṣma, characters whose positions on the Kaurava side stand in dramatic opposition. Moreover, even if neither would deny the power of destiny (daiva), Karṇa would still emphasize human initiative (puruṣakāra) in the pursuit of dharma, albeit without attachment to the fruits of that initiative. These three examples delineate the way in which the critical method of examining character reveals complex (crystalline) parallels and mirrorings between the characters of the epic. In this way, the examination of character helps us to rediscover and appreciate the subtle design and conscious artistry of the Mahābhārata.

1.4 The Specter of the Kali Yuga that Pervades the Epic

The Mahābhārata is a post-apocalyptic text and is very self-consciously so. In the very first book, for example, when the story of the war could have been told by the Pāṇḍavas as a series of Pāṇḍava victories over the Kauravas, the list is recited, instead, as a woeful chant by the Kaurava Dhṛtarāṣṭra, with the refrain "I lost hope of victory." (1.1.102 ff.) And indeed the first and outermost audience of the epic,[7] asking for more,

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[7] The Bard Ugraśravas recites the epic to the seers at Śaunaka's twelve-year ritual; but this is only the outermost narrative frame. Subsequently, Vaiśampāyana recites the epic at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. And the narrative framing continues; for example, the events of the battle are recited by Saṃjaya to the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

asks about the curious name of the battlefield, Neighborhood of the Five

(Samantapañcaka). They are thus told about the first of many interlocking apocalypses,

about how Paraśurāma killed all the kṣatriyas:

> During the juncture between the Tretā Yuga and the Dvāpara Yuga,
> [Paraśurāma], greatest of swordsmen,[8] urged on by his anger, repeatedly
> destroyed the earth's kṣatriya class. When he, lustrous like the fire, had
> annihilated the entire kṣatriya class with his own might, he made five
> lakes filled with their blood in Samantapañcaka. In those lakes with their
> waves of blood, he, insensate with rage, offered up bloody oblations to his
> ancestors... Thereupon Rcīka and his other ancestors appeared to this bull
> among brahmins, and, saying "Have mercy!" restrained him, so that he
> desisted. The countryside close to those lakes of blood became celebrated
> as the sacred Samantapañcaka... It was at this same Samantapañcaka that,
> at the juncture of the Dvāpara Yuga and the Kali Yuga, the war between
> the armies of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas was fought... (1.2.3-9)

Each of these aspects of this scene -- the apocalypse, the transition between the ages

(yuga-s, explained below) -- pervades the epic and colors the entire Karṇa narrative.

Consequently, they deserve some comment.

Just as the setting of the epic battle is embedded in a horrifying holocaust, so the

main recitation of the epic is as well. This takes place at the snake sacrifice (sarpasattra)

of Janamejaya; in the space between the rituals, the epic is recited. In the epic's cultural

context, this snake sacrifice is an "abomination"[9] and stands as "a dark mirror for the Epic

as a whole, brilliant, sinister, and surreal."[10] Moreover, it just barely avoids killing *all* the

snakes; the last snake Takṣaka is saved at the last moment by Āstīka. Later, in the

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[8] Literally, best among those who bear śastra ('weapons that cut'). Paraśurāma gets his name from the paraśu ('axe') he wields.

[9] *The Beginning*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Van Buitenen's introduction, p. 4.

[10] Wendy Doniger, "Horses and Snakes in the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata," in *Aspects of India: Essays in Honor of Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr*, ed. Margaret Case and N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar Publications (for American Institute of Indian Studies), 1986). p. 16.

Kurukṣetra war, it will be Parīkṣit who will be saved at the last moment by Kṛṣṇa's intervention.[11]

There are many other similarly interlocking apocalyptic massacres in the epic,[12] the most spectacular being the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest at the end of the Adi Parvan. What is crucial for Karṇa's character is the connection between the apocalypse and the ritual. For it is in Karṇa's mouth that the epic authors place this central metaphor of the battle: that it is a large, extended sacrificial ritual. (5.139.29 ff.)[13]

Second, the transition between the yugas is crucial to interpreting the mood that hangs over the epic. In the epic view of chronology, there are four yugas (ages or eons) of human existence, each of which has distinctive moral, social, and economic dimensions. (3.148 has one exposition of the properties of the four yugas.) Each of the four yugas is progressively more decadent; in each, dharma rules less and less over the aspects of human existence. The most decadent, the most fallen age, is the Kali Yuga, the age in which Janamejaya lives, as do we.

Thus the chronological setting of the epic is very important: human existence is about to enter into a completely new relation with dharma. Life, as the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas know it, will be changed radically by the break in yugas. The social and cultural world that the epic characters live in is on the brink of dissolution. We must keep that in mind as we consider their actions and motives; not only must they deal with all the

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[11] See C. Z. Minkowski, "Snakes, Sattras, and the Mahabharata," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 397.

[12] One list is at ibid. p. 400.

[13] See also Hiltebeitel's *Ritual of Battle* and his use of Biardeau's pralaya (cosmic 'dissolution') theory. Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

ethical dilemmas of a civil war, but they must face them in light of an impending

metaphysical and moral catastrophic transformation.

I should alert the reader to the fact that this reading of the Mahābhārata is not

shared by all contemporary critics. For example, Madeleine Biardeau and Julian Woods

both read the war as a sacrifice "of the decadent moral and social order ... for the

rejuvenation of society..."[14] Biardeau and Woods do not minimize the apocalyptic nature

of the war, but see it as salutary from a cosmic perspective:

> ... intervention by the avatār [in this case Krsna] inevitably involves
> destruction on a cosmic scale... This destruction is represented as a
> gigantic funeral pyre in which the old order of the world, Pāndavas and
> Kauravas alike, must perish to give way to a new world order established
> with the assistance of the divine incarnation Krsna from the remnant
> represented by Parīksit, the perfect monarch embodying the qualities of
> both Arjuna and Krsna.[15]

In this way, Krsna, conceived as a beneficent divinity, saves humanity through the

crucible of the Kuruksetra war.

There is something to be said for such a view: it makes the idea of the

Mahābhārata as the setting for the beginnings of bhakti more palatable. But it does so

only if bhakti is conceived of as devotion to a completely beneficent deity, a deity who

has arranged everything for the best. In other words, such a view assumes a Leibnizian

god who has arranged destiny (daiva) so that we live in the best of all possible worlds,

even if this world is not paradisiacal.

But I am not convinced that such a Leibnizian assumption runs through either the

Mahābhārata, or even later bhakti poetry. Take for instance, Dēvara Dāsimayya's poem:

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[14] Julian Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). p. 10. Woods is following Biardeau. There is also a second goal of the sacrifice: "the establishment of a new path to salvation for the warrior caste (in particular the king)." Ibid.

[15] Ibid. p. 12.

Bodied,
one will hunger.

Bodied,
one will lie.

O you, don't you rib
and taunt me
again
for having a body:

body Thyself for once
like me and see
what happens,

O Rāmanātha.[16]

Here the emotions represented are much more complex than straightforward devotion; the voice is angry, bitter, frustrated, even if this is not a poem about rejecting Śiva. Here, human life is difficult, even perhaps impossible; there is little indication that the author is grateful 'in spite of it all' for the way that Śiva has arranged the world; on the contrary, mortal existence is paradoxical, painful, and gruesome. And devotion, then, is in the context of these sorts of terrible binds.

Woods is aware that the approach of the Kali Yuga stands in tension to the theory that the Mahābhārata is the story of a divine incarnation (avatāra) saving mankind; indeed, Woods finds it "surprising" that "the rejuvenation of society ... is dependent on the avatār but this only initiates a new period of decline."[17] Woods ends his text by

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[16] A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). p. 107. Dēvara Dāsimayya was a tenth-century Kannada poet.

[17] Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata*. p. 26.

quoting from the final part of the epic, a passage which in fact can support my

interpretive position: [in my translation]

> Thousands of mothers and fathers,
> hundreds of sons and wives,
> arise in the world and die --
> and so on and on...

> Thousands of joys and
> hundreds of fears
> affect the fool
> day after day --
> but not the wise...

> With uplifted arms I am crying aloud
> but nobody hears me.

> Since wealth and pleasure come from dharma,
> why do we not seek it?
> A man should never abandon dharma --
> not for the sake of pleasure,
> not for fear or greed,
> or even for his life.

> Dharma lasts forever,
> happiness and sorrow do not.
> The soul lasts forever,
> but its body does not.[18]

I agree with Woods that one aspect of this passage is to exhort us to remain bound to

dharma -- a theme that is explored again in Chapter Two. But there is a complementary

emotion present here: when we contemplate the death of even a single beloved parent or

child, it is difficult enough to bear. Now if we multiplied that emotion thousand-fold,

then twist the emotional dagger with a world unperturbed by human calamity, we would

be unlikely to think of this world as 'the best of all possible worlds.' More likely, and

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[18] 18.5.47-50.

indeed this is what the characterization of the Kali Yuga tells us, we would understand

that we live in *the worst of all possible worlds.* (And in just such a catastropic situation, it

is dharma that can help us make sense of this world.)[19]

This is not 'fatalism,' though I would imagine it could easily be interpreted as such

by Orientalists. And it is not 'pessimism' either, for that term conjures up a

consequentialist moral economy that the Kali Yuga does not necessarily imply. Most

importantly, it is not exactly 'tragedy' either, though there are some tragic overtones to the

Kali Yuga. If we were to classify the Kali Yuga as the 'age of tragedy' we would have to

extend and expand the semantic range of the term 'tragedy' as it has been used so far in

the West. I have shown above that the Karna narrative is not quite 'tragic' in the

Aristotelian sense; similarly, the Mahābhārata and the Kali Yuga are not 'tragic' in the

Aristotelian sense either. The Mahābhārata and the Kali Yuga set themselves forward as

reality. This is life, not a play: there is no post-theatrical stroll in which to experience

catharsis. As David Shulman has pointed out,

> ... the Mahābhārata is coterminous with the world... there is no escape
> built into it from its relentless, bleak vision. It presents itself not as a work
> of art, but as reality itself. No boundary marks off this text from the world.
> Even in recitation, it functions not as purveyor of dramatic illusion, nor as
> an imaginative venture in narrative, but as the vehicle of what might
> properly be termed 'realistic' insight.[20]

Shulman has also argued that texts like the Mahābhārata, and the Karna narrative in

particular, show that Sanskrit literature is indeed aware and capable of moods that have a

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[19] There is indeed much more that can be said about this passage. Note, as I have tried to emphasize, how the voice alternates between distraught and philosophical; the swinging from one to the other -- the literary equivalent of the poet trying to compose himself, and then breaking down again -- is precisely why this is such a fitting ending to a text that swings between these registers.

[20] David Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics," *International Folklore Review* 8 (1991). p. 11. Note that Shulman is not arguing that the *Mahabharata* is a realist text, only that its insight corresponds to insights about reality.

similar emotional impact to Western tragedy. But I would also agree with him that it is not necessary to squeeze South Asian literature into a Western definition of tragedy, even if that definition is extended beyond Aristotle's.[21]

As Chapter Two shows, a human being can act, and act both courageously and in accord with dharma, even in a situation in which dharma seems inextricably contradictory. Indeed, the Kali Yuga is *not* an age in which human beings are helpless or merely playthings of the gods.[22] Rather the Kali Yuga is merely what it sets out to be: the worst of all possible world orders. If anything, human action in the Kali Yuga is particularly noble and courageous, for when dharma is subtle, no human beings can ever be sure of the justice or efficacy of their actions -- and still they act.[23]

1.5 Why this Dissertation is Necessary to Mahābhārata Studies

Karṇa has long been a popular character, both in the public and literary imagination of South Asia, inspiring plays and novels in Sanskrit and other languages, and even infiltrating idiomatic speech.[24] Nevertheless, Karṇa has yet to be the subject of an extended monograph, as say Arjuna[25] or Yudhiṣṭhira[26] have been. Nor has much

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[21] See Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry.* pp. 380-1. This is not to say that it would not be profitable to examine and explore the disjuncture between the mood of the *Mahabharata* and Aristotelian tragedy. Such a study might indeed shed light on both sides of the comparison. But that is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[22] For more on the *Mahabharata* as a līla 'play,' see the section on Karma in this chapter.

[23] The Kali Yuga also suggests a different relationship between human beings and gods; a full-fledged exploration of the theology of the Kali Yuga would require a much broader study.

[24] For example, there is the Marathi expression 'generous as Karṇa' (Karṇā sārkhā udār).

[25] Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

[26] See Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Readers' Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Buddhadeva Bose, *The Book of Yudhisthir: A Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas* (Hyderabad and Bombay: Sangam Books (Orient Longman distr.), 1986).

attention been paid to the *complexities* of his character. That a character in the epic

should have any depth psychologically may not surprise readers who have always loved

Karṇa. But some critics have assessed the epic characters as flat; Geroges Dumézil, for

instance, felt that the Mahābhārata's

> personages, entirely defined by their function, present scarcely anything of
> psychological interest. Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Bhīṣma
> are all of one piece, and one can readily predict what each of them will do
> in each new circumstance.[27]

Even J. A. B. van Buitenen, whose translation is clearly a labor of love, wrote "we will

not expect to find in the epic finely chiseled profiles of the heroes, but roughly hewn

personalities who are subject to little change."[28] More contemporary scholars however

have argued against such flatness. For instance, Alf Hiltebeitel has pointed out that the

characters in the epic do indeed possess "as complex a psychology as one could wish."[29]

More generally, Shulman has suggested that the "alleged impersonality, the utter absence

of subjectivity, in nearly all Sanskrit literature" stems from "an anachronistic

romanticism."[30] Early on, V. S. Sukthankar, editor in chief of the team that produced the

monumental Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata, believed that its characters had rich and

deep psychologies, and he wrote: "when we read the poem with attention we discover

that from end to end the interest is held on character."[31]

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[27] Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée I: L'idéologie des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées des Peuples Indo-Européens* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968). p. 633. Quoted in Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata.* p. 41.

[28] *The Beginning.* Introduction to "The Book of the Beginning." p. 13.

[29] Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata.* p. 41.

[30] David Shulman, "Embracing the Subject: Harsa's Play within a Play," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25 (1997). p. 69.

[31] Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). pp. 54-7.

Thus the goal of this dissertation is to focus on, discuss, and amplify one of the characters of the Mahābhārata, namely Karṇa.

Now, because much has been written about Karṇa,[32] and the Mahābhārata itself does a good job of uplifting Karṇa, a reader may wonder why it would be necessary to read a monograph examining Karṇa's character. Indeed, as the literature review below will suggest, there are many chapters, and the occasional article, dedicated to examining Karṇa's character. However, as I hope this dissertation will demonstrate, an extended study of Karṇa's character can teach us much about the philosophy, beauty, structure, and wisdom of the epic.

Moreover in both the west and in India, there is a heritage of transforming the epic's characters into symbols or allegories. As P. L. Vaidya surveys,

> Lassen, for instance, regarded the dramatis personae of the epic not as ordinary human beings but as historical conditions. Ludwig pressed into service the Nature myth for presenting a symbolic interpretation of the epic... Lachmi Dhar brought in the idea of the solar myth, Usas, dragon of darkness, and so on, for explaining the Mahābhārata... Thadani takes the Mahābhārata to be the symbolization of the six systems of Hindu philosophy and their conflict.[33]

Vaidya rejects such schemes in order to read the epic (at least on one level) as a *historical* document. While this dissertation does not address the issue of whether or not these characters are historically actual, I do share Vaidya's perspective that the characters in the epic can be, and should be, read as human beings, each with positions, biographies, and psychologies worthy of exploration.

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[32] See literature review below.

[33] Parasurama Lakshmana Vaidya, "The Mahabharata: Its History and Character," in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1953).

Thus this dissertation is an attempt to make good on recent claims (Shulman, Hiltebeitel, Sukthankar) that call for an interpretation that appreciates the deep rich psychologies of the <u>Mahābhārata</u>'s characters.

A note on the structure of what is to follow. The next section of this Introduction (Section 1.6) gives a detailed and lengthy survey of <u>Mahābhārata</u> criticism, in an attempt to answer the question of why no monograph on Karṇa has yet been written. Section 1.7 surveys important studies on Karṇa, and 1.8 examines works that have used character as an interpretive basis. The next two sections focus on Biblical scholarship by Robert Alter (whose techniques of biblical exegesis may be readily applied to the <u>Mahābhārata</u>) and on David Gitomer's essay on Duryodhana, which planted the seed for this dissertation. Section 1.11 explains why this dissertation does not make use of systems such as <u>karma</u> (explained below) or destiny (<u>daiva</u>) to interpret Karṇa's character. For some readers, the relationship of this study to others in the field of Indology will not be of interest; those readers may wish to turn now to Chapter 2.

Some readers may also be curious to know what edition of the text I am using; I use the Poona Critical Edition. As an exposition of my stance on the merits and pitfalls of the text of the Poona Critical Edition, I have added an appendix to the dissertation.

Finally, some readers will want to know about the theoretical assumptions underlying this project; if they read on through to the Conclusion, they will find a discussion of the hermeneutics of Wendy Doniger and Hans-Georg Gadamer that inform this study.

1.6 Why has there been no monograph on Karṇa? Or, The Varieties of

Mahābhārata Interpretation

A crucial question may already have arisen in readers' minds: if Karṇa is such an important character and has received so much attention in South Asian literature, why has there not been a monograph on Karṇa until now? It would seem that either I have exaggerated the claims to Karṇa's prominence or that Sanskritists seem to have deliberately overlooked Karṇa. Of course neither is the case, but to understand why this dissertation is the first monograph (at least in English in the West) on Karṇa, we have to examine the history of Mahābhārata criticism and survey the current critical scene.

A note before beginning my survey: there are many surveys of Mahābhārata literature a student may peruse; I have based my survey on my own reading and on the following works: Sukthankar's first chapter in On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata (1942, published 1957), Van Buitenen's introduction to his translation of the Poona Critical Edition (1973), Doniger's review of Van Buitenen's translation (1978), Hiltebeitel's two bibliographic surveys in the Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (ABORI) in 1979 and 1993, Ruth Katz's survey in her introduction to Arjuna in the Mahābhārata (1989), and Woods's appendix to Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata (2001). Readers who want to pursue this subject could do worse than to start with these works.

I should also add that all of these surveys, like most Mahābhārata scholarship, take sides; indeed, one can often get a sense of the sides the scholar is taking when he or she discusses the literature. Thus, too, this survey will be a way for me to lay my own cards on the table: as I proceed through this survey, it will become apparent just where I believe Mahābhārata studies should go and in which direction I myself am going.

Finally, it may seem that what follows is a survey of only Western scholarship, a survey that leaves out the contributions of such Sanskrit commentators as Madhva, Arjuna Miśra, or Nīlakaṇṭha. (Nīlakaṇṭha is the most famous, and was the most respected authority on the epic until the studies of Sukthankar and his colleagues at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute appeared.[34]) No one could doubt that these commentators have influenced Sanskrit scholarship today, but they are not, for better or for worse, part of the intellectual history of this dissertation. Katz, whose <u>Arjuna in the Mahābhārata</u> is also a character study, writes:

> As illustrated by the commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha (seventeenth century), which has been consulted on some points, Sanskrit literary commentaries generally gloss line by line, briefly treating difficult passages rather than providing an extended treatment of any single issue. For the present, therefore, it has been judged most practical and illuminating to concentrate directly upon the Sanskrit text of the epic, in its critical version, in order to look precisely at what this text says about Arjuna.[35]

While I agree with, and have partially adopted, Katz's methodological approach, I would add that the Sanskrit commentators are involved in more than merely line glossing. As the work of J. P. Sinha shows us,[36] the Sanskrit critical tradition was deeply committed to bringing out the beauty of the epic in terms of carefully theorized literary devices. Moreover, Sanskrit commentators, starting with Devabodha in the eleventh century, *were* concerned with interpretive issues of meaning in the epic. Ānandavardhana famously

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[34] Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, "Epic Studies V: Notes on Mahabharata Commentators," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 17 (1936). This article surveys the major *Mahabharata* commentators (Devabodha, Vimalabodha, Sarvajña-Nārāyaṇa, Arjunamiśra, and Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara) and is a brief but exciting example of philological detective work.

[35] Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory.* p. 16.

[36] J. P. Sinha, *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Meharchand Lachhmandas, 1977). Sinha works chapter by chapter through Alaṅkāravādin commentary, Vakroktivādin commentary, and Ānandavardhana's famous insights.

suggested that the dominant aesthetic emotion (rasa) of the epic was a peaceful quietude

(śanta); he recognized the Mahābhārata as both a work of instruction and science (śāstra)

as well as poetry (kāvya). Without denying the considerable importance of such insights,

I will follow Katz in looking at what the Mahābhārata itself tells us about Karṇa.[37]

Van Buitenen notes that the "earliest explicit notice"[38] of any piece of the

Mahābhārata came in 1785 from Charles Wilkins, who translated the Bhagavadgītā.

Franz Bopp (1791-1867), whom Sukthankar dubs "the Father of Indo-Germanic

Philology,"[39] suggested in 1829 that all parts of the epic were not the same age -- and

thus set the direction for Western critical research for his century. As Van Buitenen notes,

this was as much a reaction to reading the epic as it was to drawing the Mahābhārata into

the research program of scholars of Greek epic:

> ... it was no wonder that in a philological climate in which the Homeric
> Question[40] flourished the Indian epic too was submitted to drastic study
> intended to recover the *Urgestalt*.[41]

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[37] Pollock believes there is more to be gained from the commentaries (and the article from which the following is taken shows as much): "As anyone can attest who has worked extensively with the commentaries on the *Ramayana* (or, for that matter, with those on any other culturally significant Sanskrit literary text), scholiasts will often show a stubborn, almost perverse predilection for the utterly improbable or impossible exegesis, and can seem thoroughly disingenuous in the process. And yet, with equal frequency they can explain the text in ways that elicit our immediate assent, which we are prepared to grant both for reasons of common sense and because we can recognize that their explanation often accounts for more, and is falsified by less, of the narrative than other interpretations." Sheldon Pollock, "Atmanam Manusam Manye: Dharmakutam on the Divinity of Rama," *Journal of the Oriental Institute* 33, no. 3-4 (1984). p. 232.

[38] *The Beginning*. Introduction, p. xxxi.

[39] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 4.

[40] "Perhaps the most succinct of many possible formulations (of the Homeric Question) is this one: 'The Homeric Question is primarily concerned with the composition, authorship, and date of the Iliad and Odyssey' (J.A. Davison). Not that any one way of formulating the question in the past was ever really sufficient. Who was Homer? When and where did Homer live? Was there a Homer? Is there one author of the Iliad and the Odyssey, or are there different authors for each? Is there a succession of authors or even of redactors for each? Is there, for that matter, a unitary Iliad, a unitary Odyssey?" Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). p.1.

[41] *The Beginning*. Introduction, p. xxxii.

While I would agree, following Sukthankar, that Bopp's insight "is in a way no doubt quite true,"[42] that it should set the only research agenda for the Mahābhārata seems to me misguided. Moreover, as we shall see, this research agenda has neither died, nor has it produced definitive results. (Still, as we shall see, Hiltebeitel would disagree with this last assessment.)

Following on Bopp's ideas, Christian Lassen (1800-1876) began the process of separating the Mahābhārata into strata. Lassen felt that the first recension took place around 460 or 400 BCE, the second about 350 BCE. After that, "the only additions made to the poem were of a 'Krishnite' character."[43] For Sukthankar, like Biardeau later, the 'Krishnite' character of the epic was crucial:

> [Lassen] had failed to realize that eliminating the 'Krishnite' elements from
> our Mahābhārata was a not less serious operation than removing all the
> vital elements from the body of a living organism; and that consequently
> the residue would no more represent the "original" heroic poem than a
> mangled cadaver, lacking the vital elements, would represent the organism
> in its origin or infancy.[44]

Lassen's framework was only the first of many such text-critical stratifications; Hopkins would provide another. Still, this framework was overshadowed by the controversy around the competing views of Adolf Holtzmann, Jr. (the reversal theory) and Joseph Dahlmann (the synthetic view).

Around 1846 Adolf Holtzmann, Jr.'s uncle, Adolf Holtzmann, Sr. (1810-1870), published a systematic study of the Mahābhārata[45] in which he noticed some of the same

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[42] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p.5.

[43] Ibid. p. 5. See also Christian Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Bonn,: H.B. Koenig; etc. etc., 1847).

[44] Ibid. p. 5.

[45] See Adolf Holtzmann, *Indische Sagen* (Stuttgart: A. Krabbe, 1854).

elements that this dissertation will point out -- that the Kauravas and their allies are not unequivocal villains. Whereas this study reasons from that insight that the epic should not be read as a simply Manichean struggle between good and evil, Holtzmann Sr. decided that elements of Kaurava nobility suggested that the original Mahābhārata was composed by Kaurava bards and that it had subsequently been redacted by Pāndava bards. The reversal theory found its most powerful expression in the work of Adolf Holtzmann, Jr. (1838-1914),[46] who added the argument that Vedic material mentions the Bhāratas and the Kauravas, but not the Pāndavas, suggesting that the Pāndavas took over the kingdom and then rewrote history (the epic) to validate their rule.

I want to stress again, and perhaps I cannot stress enough, that this dissertation is **not** advocating the Holtzmann inversion theory. That the character of Karna in the Mahābhārata is interesting and deserves critical study is not an indication, on my part, of the character's role in any historical development of the epic. Moreover, because I find the character of Karna interesting and worthy of investigation, this dissertation is neither an elevation nor a rehabilitation of Karna's character. Rather it is an attempt to rehabilitate the critical tool of using character to read a work (a move that will be discussed in the conclusion) using the character of Karna as an example of the potential results of such a critical approach. As I shall indicate below, this dissertation in fact has very little to contribute to the kind of historical wrangling the Holtzmanns were involved in.

One alternative to the reversal theory was the synthetic view of Joseph Dahlmann (1861-1930). For Dahlmann, the Mahābhārata was a unified whole and every part was organic to the work's unity. Dahlmann also felt that the work centered around a religious

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[46] See Adolf Holtzmann, *Das Mahabharata und seine Theile* (Kiel: C.F. Haeseler, 1895).

and moralistic message; for Dahlmann the Mahābhārata was first and foremost a treatise

or compendium on dharma, a dharmaśāstra. Dahlmann's work has received various views

over the years. Van Buitenen, for example, writes:

> [Dahlmann's] theory was received with utter disbelief; for indeed a
> cursory reading cannot help but reveal that certain portions are far older
> than others, breathe a completely different spirit, have contrasting
> syntactic and stylistic devices, while countless contradictions can be
> pointed out that are incompatible with the notion of a unified work. The
> great Sanskritist Hermann Oldenberg [1854-1920] dismisses the whole
> theory in one sentence: there is no point in reasoning the unreasonable.[47]

But the same "great Sanskritist" is Sukthankar's *bête noire*, and correspondingly

Sukthankar's opinion of Dahlmann differs. Though Sukthankar does have some respect

for Oldenberg, he begins his book with Oldenberg's infamous assessment of the

Mahābhārata as "the most monstrous chaos,"[48] an assessment that Sukthankar strongly

disagrees with. Indeed, as Sukthankar rightly points out, it is an assessment grounded in

the (arbitrary) rule that "the subject of the epic poem must be some *one* great complex

action."[49] Sukthankar writes of Dahlmann:

> The atomistic methods of the advanced critics of the Mahābhārata
> [Hopkins, after the Holtzmanns] having proven barren of any useful or
> intelligent result, some attempt was made to understand the poem as a
> whole. The most notable of these legitimate endeavors was that of Joseph
> Dahlmann, and as such it deserves special recognition. A certain
> underlying unity of aim and plan in this gigantic work was postulated and
> dogmatically emphasized by this great Jesuit scholar, who of all the
> foreign critics of the Mahābhārata may be said to approach nearest to any

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[47] *The Beginning.* Introduction, p. xxxiii. See also Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahabharata: Seine Entstehung, sein Inhalt, seine Form, von Hermann Oldenberg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922).

[48] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata.* p.1.

[49] Quoted in ibid. p. 2. Sukthankar attributes it to Matthew Arnold, but does not give a source. Webster's Dictionary of 1913 has the quote "The epic poem treats of one great, complex action, in a grand style and with fullness of detail." and attributes it to "T. Arnold." It would seem unlikely that Matthew Arnold, who translated part of the *Shahnameh*, would define epic so narrowly.

real understanding of the Great Epic of India... [Dahlmann] suggests that
the Mahābhārata is primarily a synthesis of all the various aspects of Law,
in the widest sense of the term covered by the Indian conception of
Dharma, cast by a master intellect into the alluring shape of a story, of an
epic. In other words, the Mahābhārata is an epic and a law-book
(Rechtsbuch) *in one.*[50]

And James Fitzgerald writes,

[Dahlmann] seriously attempted to engage the Mahābhārata as it presents
itself, and not as he assumed it must once have been on the basis of some
extraneous and irrelevant production of human culture such as the Iliad.
Dahlmann asked what the Mahābhārata strives to accomplish and how it
works to fulfill its purposes. He sought to read with the text, rather than
against it ...[51]

Later, Woods, impressed by the work of Biardeau, feels that

... the work of recent Western scholarship thus seems to confirm, in a
more methodical manner, what generations of Indian readers have
intuitively understood; that despite its enormous bulk and diversity, the
Mahābhārata does indeed constitute a single literary design with unity of
purpose and continuity of meaning.[52]

Indeed, from our perspective today, it would seem that it is Dahlmann, and not

Oldenberg, whose intuitions have withstood the test of time.

Sukthankar, following Auguste Barth (1834-1916) and Hermann Jacobi (1850-

1937), is not blind to Dahlmann's excesses: Dahlmann believed the entire text dated back

to the fifth century BCE; he also believed that no accretion or expansion of the text was

possible. By turning the Mahābhārata into a dharmaśāstra, he placed Yudhiṣthira at the

[50] Ibid. p. 20. See also Joseph Dahlmann, *Das Mahabharata als Epos und Rechtsbuch. Ein Problem aus Altindiens Cultur und Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Dames, 1895).

[51] James L. Fitzgerald, "The Moksa Anthology of the Great Bharata: An Initial Survey of Structural Issues, Themes, and Rhetorical Strategies" (University of Chicago, 1980). p. 39.

[52] Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata.* p. 159.

center of the story and neglected Kṛṣṇa. It is most likely these excesses that have led so many to overlook Dahlmann's intuitions.

The critic who emerged victorious from the opposition between Dahlmann and the Holtzmanns was E. Washburn Hopkins (1857-1932). Hopkins agreed with the Holtzmanns more than he did with Dahlmann; again, the non-historical aspect of Dahlmann's analysis led most people to dismiss his work. For Hopkins, there was a central 'true' epic, and the rest was agglutinated pseudo-epic. Persuaded by Hopkins, Van Buitenen writes, "It is Hopkins's methods and views that have since been largely, if tacitly, accepted by scholarship."[53] Sukthankar, however, is not so easily swayed -- and if Van Buitenen was correct in 1973, then it seems that Sukthankar's wisdom lay ignored for at least thirty years. Not only does Sukthankar dismiss Hopkins's dating schema, but, as a professional textual critic, he objects to the way that Hopkins treats the Mahābhārata as a "text that is no text."[54]

Indeed, Sukthankar lumps Hopkins with all the other critics who wanted to pare away parts of the Mahābhārata in order to find the "epic nucleus." Sukthankar calls this the "Analytical Theory" and retorts that "this theory is obviously the outcome of superficial study."[55] In this he foreshadows the contemporary work of Tamar Reich who shows that addition/agglutination was as much a part of the formation of the text, indeed of the nature of the text itself, as any other textual process.[56]

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[53] *The Beginning*. Introduction, p. xxxiii.

[54] Quoted in Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 8. See Edward Washburn Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901).

[55] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 10.

[56] Tamar Chana Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata" (University of Chicago, 1998).

After Hopkins and the turn of the century, interest in his approach to the

Mahābhārata wanes (save for the efforts of Moriz Winternitz (1863-1937). One can hear

the frustration in Sukthankar's voice at the end of his survey of these critics in 1942,

shortly before Sukthankar's death:

> What is the secret of the book of which India feels after nearly two
> thousand years that she has not yet had enough? It would be a rather
> hazardous conjecture to suppose that such a thing might perchance happen
> also to the works of the critics of the Mahābhārata, for within less than
> half a century the lucubrations of these wiseacres have approached
> perilously near the limbo of oblivion, from which they are periodically
> snatched out by the industrious pedagogue and the curious antiquarian,
> eager to extend his knowledge of the history of literature. The epic
> obviously contains something -- some elusive ideal -- that produces this
> permanent and not transient quality of interest.[57]

We can easily see why, in this period of Mahābhārata scholarship, no tome was

written on any individual character. As I will claim, it is only when the epic becomes

somewhat fixed within a discourse community that the members of the community can

have a discussion about character. When the discourse community has as its object the

reconstitution of the text, there is no stable source from which to discuss, or even

appreciate, the subtle beauty of the created characters. If every part of the epic were

constantly in danger of being labeled as an interpolation, then why would a critic risk

staking any sort of *interpretive* position based on the text?

Katz's approach to Arjuna's character (see more below) might at first seem to be

based on historical strata, since it is a triple-layered theory. Katz, though, specifically

rejects the idea that those layers were products of historical layers of composition; rather,

like Sukthankar and Madhva, she believes those layers are part of the meaning-structure

of the epic text. Katz, like her mentor Daniel H. H. Ingalls, approaches the character of

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[57] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata.* pp. 29-30.

Arjuna ahistorically, even if she is aware of the historical debates. As Ingalls writes in the foreword to her book,

> I do believe that there are older and younger parts of the Mahābhārata and that these parts can eventually be identified by linguistic analysis. One may thus come to discover changes of custom, changes of geographical knowledge, changes in the art of warfare from passages of earlier to those of later composition. *But I see in the text no reason to suppose that any great change occurred, despite the long period of composition, in the main story line or in the characters who act out the story.* I agree with Ruth Katz that the complex character of Arjuna is essential to the poem in any form which we shall be able justly to hypothesize of it.[58] [Italics mine]

We shall discuss this more below, but we should note the politics of this foreword. Katz was in a sense breaking new ground by approaching the Mahābhārata in this way, treating it as an ahistorical whole and capable of withstanding systematic *literary* analysis. If there were doubts that such an analysis was possible, that such a book was worth reading, a foreword from as imposing a figure as Ingalls may have put such doubts to rest.

After Hopkins, interest in the Mahābhārata arose from a new direction: ethnography.[59] Garrett Jan Held (1906-1955) began this line of investigation[60] inspired by Marcel Mauss's provocation in The Gift that

> ... the Mahābhārata is the story of a tremendous potlatch -- there is a game of dice between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, and a military festival,

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[58] In Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory.* p. xv. Please note that this quote is not suggesting that intepretations of the epic characters never changed in the millenia long history of the epic. Rather it is positing that, whatever the process of composition, the epic characters were stable and more or less fully formed througout the period of composition.

[59] The following is culled from Hiltebeitel's survey. See Section C, pp. 83 ff. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Krsna and the Mahabharata (a Bibliographical Essay)," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 60 (1979).

[60] Garret Jan Held, *The Mahabharata: An Ethnological Study* (London: Kegan, Paul, 1935).

while Draupadī, sister and polyandrous wife of the Pāṇḍavas, chooses husbands.[61]

By emphasizing ritual and using comparative anthropological and sociological perspectives, Held attempts to analyze the epic's episodes in terms of ritual and social groups. So, for instance, when Śakuni deceives Yudhiṣṭhira at the gambling match, Held reads the scene in terms of society organized around dual phratries; in this context, deceit is an admission that the other side is invincible. As Hiltebeitel puts it, "The poets are thus not trying to cover anything up (Hopkins), but are rather exploring the subtleties and ambiguities of deceit, sin, honor, and virtue within the archaic dual structure."[62]

Another exemplar of this type of approach is the work of Walter Ruben.[63] Ruben wanted to examine the epic, and in particular the character of Karṇa, through the (comparative) perspective of the religious traditions of the Inner and Southeast Asian world. Though not the first to do so, Ruben's analysis leads to an epic constructed through cycles of redaction, in which Kṛṣṇa is not part of the first cycle. Thus Ruben suggests that there could have been a Mahābhārata without Kṛṣṇa at all: "each of [Kṛṣṇa's] actions," says Ruben, "could be omitted without injury to the poem in terms of content or style."[64] We shall discuss this topic further below: the divinity of epic characters is crucial in thinking through the relationship between the characters and epic composition. If, as Sheldon Pollock and Hiltebeitel have argued, epic characters such as

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[61] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967). p. 54. We will comment more on this topic in the context of gift-giving rituals in Chapter Three.

[62] Hiltebeitel, "Krsna and the Mahabharata (a Bibliographical Essay)." p. 85.

[63] Walter Ruben, *Krishna: Konkordanz und Kommentar der Motive seines Heldenlebens*, vol. 17, *Instanbuler Schriften* (Istanbul: 1944). We shall later take up Ruben's insight that the dialogue between Śalya and Karṇa is a parody of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

[64] Hiltebeitel, "Krsna and the Mahabharata (a Bibliographical Essay)." p. 90.

Rāma and Kṛṣṇa must have been divine from a very early stage of composition, then it

may also be the case that the epic's semi-divine characters (like Karṇa) could have also

been part of the epic from an early stage. In other words, the epic could have been

literary from a very early stage in its development.[65]

After World War II, interest in the Mahābhārata coalesced into two camps: that of

Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) and that of Madeleine Biardeau. And indeed, much

contemporary scholarship still straddles these two camps. Van Buitenen writes in 1978,

> Dumézil and Biardeau stand on two sides of the Great Divide of the
> traditional periodization of Indian civilization into Vedic and post-
> Vedic... In my view Dumézil's treatment of the epic is too early,
> Biardeau's too late.[66]

Hiltebeitel writes in 1976,

> I have tried to suggest here, although [later] I will steer a middle course
> between them, that the Indo-European perspective of Dumézil and the
> Puranic, one might say "Hindu," perspective of Biardeau are both valid,
> and that, to borrow from a Sāṃkhya similitude, they may at some points
> be as necessary to each other, in making a way through the Mahābhārata
> forest, as the blind man and the lame.[67]

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[65] Another approach which incorporates an anthropological dimension views the *Mahabharata* as structured as a ritual. Minkowski and Witzel argue that the *Mahabharata*'s framing devices can be traced to considerations about vedic ritual and its transformation. More famously, Van Buitenen argues that the structure of the Sabhā Parvan is that of the Royal Consecration (rājasūya), an ingenious explanation which accounts for Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling in structural terms. (I would prefer to do it in terms of his character, but I will not address this here.) See the following: C. Z. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattra and Ritual Structure," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 3 (1989). Minkowski, "Snakes, Sattras, and the Mahabharata." Michael Witzel, "On the Origin of the Literary Device of the 'Frame Story' in Old Indian Literature," in *Festschrift Ulrich Schneider*, ed. H. Falk (Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987). *The Book of the Assembly Hall and the Book of the Forest*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). See especially "Introduction," pp. 3-30.

[66] *The Book of the Assembly Hall and the Book of the Forest.* Introduction to "The Book of the Effort." p. 163.

[67] Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle : Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). p. 140.

And Katz writes in 1989 "The approach of the present study lies between Dumézil's and Biardeau's, and takes suggestions from both..."[68]

So let us examine these two camps. Georges Dumézil was a towering figure in Indo-European studies. His breakthrough insight came in 1938 when he recognized the link between the classes in India and the Roman triad Jupiter-Mars-Quirinus. Dumézil was later inspired by a 1947 article by Stig Wikander which showed that it was "a pre-Vedic, indo-iranian Vayu that Bhīma reflects."[69] By the end of the article, Wikander concluded that

> Bhīma and his brothers must represent a group of anthropomorphisms of the center of the pantheon in some mythological system older than the epic... Thus the divine aspects of the Pāṇḍavas could not have been added to historical figures; on the contrary, the Pāṇḍavas reflect a mythology older than the epic itself (at least pre-Vedic).[70]

Furthermore, the problem that had initially motivated Wikander's inquiry (why the Pāṇḍavas did not appear in pre-Mahābhārata literature) was solved: "as much as they are epic remnants of Vedic gods, the Pāṇḍavas could not emerge until after the Vedic gods had lost their central importance in the religion."[71]

These insights led to a flood of analysis from Dumézil. First, they enabled Dumézil to silence those who believed that the Pāṇḍavas were late additions to the epic, specifically the Holtzmanns and their allies. It also allowed a mapping between the Pāṇḍavas and Dumézil's trifunctional hierarchy. Dumézil extended this analysis to the other Pāṇḍavas and concluded,

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[68] Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata : Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). p. 18.

[69] Quoted in Georges Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus, IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). p. 43.

[70] Quoted in ibid. pp. 47-8.

[71] Quoted in ibid. p. 53.

In as much as the mythological elements attached to the Pāṇḍavas and
their wife belong to a state of religion much older than that of the poem,
these mythological elements cannot be ornaments that were added later; in
as much as they permit us both to make sense of the number and hierarchy
of the brothers and to justify their scandalous marriage, it is the
mythological elements that have produced the brothers, it is the
mythological elements which have served as the model for the brothers
and their marriage. In short, the relationships among the Pāṇḍavas and
their union with Draupadī are pieces of mythology transposed into epic
[form].[72]

In this analytical framework, Dumézil is able to make much of the fact that Karṇa is a

hidden brother of the Pāṇḍavas and that Karṇa is descended from Sūrya. In examining the

details of Karṇa's chariot accident, he writes,

This duel is the only one in the immense poem where a chariot wheel has
such a [big] role. That in itself does not make it unique -- there are other
stories of chariot "breakdowns" which lead to the defeat of their warriors.
But here we are dealing with Karṇa and Arjuna, the son of the Sun against
the son of Indra. It is more than probable that what is going on here is
nothing less than terrestrial transposition of the old myth where Indra
triumphs over the Sun by tearing off or stealing or immuring one of the
wheels of his chariot. We should recall that in the Rg Veda Kutsa, the hero
who benefits from Indra's intervention -- as well as Indra himself -- is
frequently called Ārjuneya "son of Arjuna."[73]

Dumézil's emphasis on the gods from which the characters are reborn is important; but,

as I try to demonstrate in Chapter Three, the epic authors were doing more than just

reworking old myths. They used their own mythology to literary ends: the mythology did

not just inspire these authors but helped them structure stories which explored themes

(e.g. identity and rituals gone awry) in which they were interested.

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[72] From the section "La Terre Soulagée" in Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée I: L'idéologie des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées des Peuples Indo-Européens*. p. 46.

[73] Dumézil's footnote: *Rig Veda* and *Shatapatha Brahmana*. Quote from Georges Dumézil, "Karna et les Pandavas," in *Donum Natalicium H.S. Nyberg Oblatum*, ed. Erik Gren (Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1954). p. 65.

Madeleine Biardeau's work, which continues to be fresh and provocative, is emphatically concerned with what the Mahābhārata itself says: she feels that

> Every Hindu knows at least implicitly, that in relying officially on the Veda and keeping it as the supreme reference, the Mahābhārata is in fact the foundation charter of what in India is called the religion of bhakti, of devotion, and that the Vedic texts hardly lend themselves to this new interpretation.[74]

As Julian Woods cautions us, Biardeau's bhakti in the Mahābhārata is not the same as the later medieval bhakti; rather it is a precursor of the later exuberant movement.[75]

While this approach is no doubt important as an interpretation of the epic, it does to some extent obscure some of the human aspects of the epic's characters. The characters are all surrounded by dharma and its myriad complexities, but to say that every character only exists in the epic to further a grand message about bhakti I think reduces the artistry with which the characters have been drawn. Moreover, the devotion to Kṛṣṇa in the epic is ambivalent and always shifting; if dharma is subtle (sūkṣma), then certainly so is bhakti. As we shall explore further in Chapter Two, Kṛṣṇa, as well as other gods, is often *testing* human beings. To take just one example, at one point in the battle (6.103), when the Pāṇḍavas are wondering how to defeat Bhīṣma, Kṛṣṇa simply suggests to Yudhiṣṭhira that he, Kṛṣṇa, will kill Bhīṣma himself, thus (in a way) keeping Arjuna's vow to kill Bhīṣma. Yudhiṣṭhira will not allow Kṛṣṇa to break his own vow (that he will not fight in the battle) and so refuses Kṛṣṇa's offer. To which Kṛṣṇa responds, "What you say is always pleasing to me." (6.103.50) Thus complete devotion to *whatever* Kṛṣṇa might say

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[74] See *Le Mahabharata*, trans. into French by Jean-Michel Péterfalvi and Madeline Biardeau, *Garnier Flammarion (Series) 433 (V. 1) ; 434 (V. 2)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985). Quote from Volume 1, p. 28. Translated as in Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata*. p. 182.

[75] According to Woods, bhakti in the *Mahabharata* represents "a religious system based on a more positive valuation of the world and the activities that keep it in place." Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata*. p. 182.

is certainly not the message of the epic; in some senses, human beings have to both trust the gods and trust in their ability to pass the gods' tests.

Thus while I would agree that Biardeau's insights are important, bhakti need not be the *only* framework for interpreting the epic or the actions of its characters. The great advantage, though, of Biardeau's framework is that it once again treats the epic as a unified, consistent whole -- not a work which has interpolated pieces which the savvy critic must ignore.

In the eighties and nineties, Mahābhārata scholarship has expanded and flourished in dimensions too numerous to encompass here. Hiltebeitel writes in 1993,

> Though it was probably foolish to think so, it seemed possible up to the
> late 1970's to "control" the bibliography on one Indian epic and to keep
> reasonably up to date on the other. The situation has now changed.[76]

Thus in the following I will examine some Mahābhārata scholarship, in order to give the reader a sense of what current Mahābhārata scholarship is concerned with, and a sense of where this dissertation stands vis-à-vis trends in that scholarship.

Even a cursory glance at the table of contents of Arvind Sharma's 1991 volume of Essays on the Mahābhārata would suggest the range of topics that interest scholars today.[77] In many ways, the scholarly community does not have one central question on which it focuses. (Just as in Classics, there is no Homeric question which guides the field any more.) Nevertheless, for the purposes of this dissertation, one can discern some trends in Mahābhārata scholarship. I would like to organize them into two large categories, categories roughly similar to the ones available at the time of Dahlmann: the

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[76] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 74 (1993). p. 1.

[77] Arvind Sharma, ed., *Essays on the Mahabharata* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).

people who approach the <u>Mahābhārata</u> with Hopkins's hypothesis and those that start

with Dahlmann's hypothesis.

Both Van Buitenen and Ingalls believe that Hopkins is correct in his intuitions. "It

is Hopkins's methods and views that have been largely, if tacitly, accepted by

scholarship,"[78] writes Van Buitenen. "Most of us take Hopkins's theory of the historical

layering of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> as a working hypothesis,"[79] writes Ingalls. When Ingalls

praises the Poona Critical Edition, he does so because

> ... our primary task is to determine which portions are oral poetry and
> which are literary... the Critical Text opens the road to that discovery
> because it represents a text written at a time when literary composition had
> recently replaced the traditional oral composition of the past.[80]

Now why would such a methodological claim be important to this study? If the epic is

indeed multi-layered, and if each layer was redacted by a different set of people, then

literary considerations like character become somewhat meaningless. For example, to me,

one of the most interesting aspects of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> is the tension between an

impression that Yudhiṣṭhira is the ideal dharmic man and king and the fact that Kṛṣṇa

gives the divine epiphany to Arjuna. Ingalls, however, regards this as evidence that "the

epic poets were not always consistent"[81] and thus sees it as evidence for multiple

redactions. Nonetheless, Ingalls is fair to those critics who consider the poem as a whole:

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[78] *The Beginning.* Introduction, p. xxxiii.

[79] Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls, "On the Mahabharata," in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahabharata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume,* ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995). p. 6.

[80] Ibid. pp. 6-7.

[81] Ibid. pp. 5.

"the proponents of one approach have often found themselves at loggerheads with the proponents of the other, but I believe that both approaches are equally valuable."[82]

Since the idea that the epic was composed by significant multiple redactions is based on the idea that some parts of the epic are oral, scholars aligned with the first approach (above) are often interested in the oral aspects of the epic. At a conference in Croatia in 1999, John Brockington organized a working seminar on the oral aspects of the epic; his workshop report serves as a good survey of the state of this field as well as evidence that the oral investigations of the epic are alive and well.[83] Brockington fairly acknowledges critics of this line of investigation: Hiltebeitel believes the epic was written down very early in its career; Ramanujan believed it would be more fruitful to study the way in which oral epics have developed all over India and connect them back to the epic. (Ramanujan's approach has yielded at least two very rich anthologies edited by Paula Richman and Stuart Blackburn *et al* respectively.[84])

Perhaps the most provocative investigation of the oral aspects of the epic is that of Mary Carroll Smith. In her 1975 JAOS article, and in her 1992 book, <u>The Warrior Code of India's Sacred Song</u>, Smith uses philology and oral considerations to ask a "primary

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[82] Ibid. p. 3.

[83] John Brockington, "Issues Involved in the Shift from Oral to Written Transmission of the Epics: A Workshop Report," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999). Hock has also investigated the connections between formulaic passages in the epic and its oral nature. Hock and Stephanie Jamison have both investigated the way that syntax and genre are intertwined in the epic. See Hans Hock, "Narrative Linkage in the Mahabharata," in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahabharata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995).

[84] See the anthologies edited by Richman and by Blackburn *et al*. Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Stuart H. Blackburn, ed., *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

theological question."[85] Her book represents an attempt to locate a theme of the epic (warrior contracts), and a genuine effort to interpret it throughout the epic.

The other point of view, as characterized by Ingalls, is, I believe, based on Dahlmann's instinct that the Mahābhārata was, in one way or another, a *synthetic* whole.[86] This is the approach of this dissertation. Moreover, the text that I will use to represent this coherent epic is the Poona Critical Edition (PCE). (My stance on this is elaborated in the Appendix.) The PCE has been carefully edited, and represents a substantial philological accomplishment. If it errs, it errs by leaving too much *out*, that is, in its appendices. Since some of the excluded material (such as Karṇa's presence at Draupadī's svayaṃvara) can enhance our understanding of the epic, I have turned to it on occasion. But by and large, I have assumed that the PCE is a coherent literary and philosophical text.

One indication of interest in this approach is that the Institute for Advanced Research in Simla has convened topical Mahābhārata conferences and published Mahābhārata essays. "Ethical Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata" is a volume that stands as testimony to the assumption of coherence in the epic. The Holtzmanns' solution to any ethical dilemma was to historicize the problem away. But if the text were itself about ethical dilemmas then such historicizing would miss the text's value altogether.

In what follows, I will detail several studies that argue for the unity of the Mahābhārata. Even though I will emphasize this second trend in my survey, I follow Ingalls in not wishing to diminish the importance of either branch in any way; even if the

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[85] Mary Carroll Smith, *The Warrior Code of India's Sacred Song, Harvard Dissertations in Folklore and Oral Tradition* (New York: Garland, 1992). p. 14.

[86] Indeed, if we consider that the epic might have been written down relatively early, we might consider the entire epic as an interpolation. See the Appendix for Tamar Reich's discussion of interpolation's centrality in the epic's composition.

two branches have different research agendas, it is important that they be able to talk to each other. Let us consider an example from the interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā. Historical considerations could check whether or not parts of the Bhagavadgītā were a response to a Buddhist challenge to the Brahminical order, though the difficulty of dating texts during this period makes this a rather speculative process. On the other hand, interpreting the Bhagavadgītā in the context of the Mahābhārata allows us to compare it, more confidently, to the later Anugītā (14.16-50), and to compare Kṛṣṇa's theophany in the Bhagavadgītā to Kṛṣṇa's other theophanies. In the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa discovers that Arjuna has *forgotten* what Kṛṣṇa had taught him on the battlefield; Kṛṣṇa thus proceeds to re-educate Arjuna. Katz notes that the Anugītā is "largely knowledge oriented,"[87] and indeed the Anugītā can help us better understand the relationship between knowledge and devotion in the Bhagavadgītā. With respect to the other theophanies, Hiltebeitel alerts us to the fact that the Bhagavadgītā is Kṛṣṇa's *second* theophany; the first is at Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court, when Duryodhana tries to bind Kṛṣṇa (5.129.1-17).[88] Hiltebeitel suggests that "by examining the two theophanies together, ... the Gītā should be seen as a coherent part of the epic, not simply as one of its 'didactic' portions."[89] Hiltebeitel explores how Kṛṣṇa's destructive aspect (and his role as a failed mediator) inform the theology and mythology of bhakti. I have left out many important details of both Katz's and Hiltebeitel's analyses; still, it is clear that such comparisons show how the Bhagavadgītā might have been doing more than just responding to Buddhist ideas -- that is, how it was participating in and exploring larger epic themes. I hope that even this brief example has suggested how each

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[87] Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory.* p. 237, n. 23.

[88] Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata.* pp. 120 ff.

[89] Ibid. p. 139.

approach can contribute towards a deeper understanding of the text, as well as act as a check and balance on the claims of the other.

Editors like Nīlakaṇṭha and Sukthankar edited the text so that there could be a reliable whole for people to read and scholars to use. Perhaps the first scholars to take advantage of the idea of the Mahābhārata as a whole were Dumézil and Biardeau, whose ideas we have already discussed. Interestingly, Biardeau is a sharp critic of the Critical Edition, and would prefer to use Nīlakaṇṭha's version of the Vulgate. For both Dumézil and Biardeau, issues of which part is interpolated, and which part is original, are immaterial to their study.

Let us now survey relatively recent trends in this field. First, just as Nīlakaṇṭha himself thought of the Mahābhārata as a dharmaśāstra, there is much interest in reading the epic in this manner. (As well, there are attempts to treat the Mahābhārata as a treatise on power, as an arthaśāstra, usually in intertextual dialogue with Kautilya's Arthaśāstra.) For example, several papers collected by K. C. Mishra from a Mahābhārata conference in Orison in 1988 discuss this topic.[90] Fitzgerald's dissertation and later work also address the way in which the Mahābhārata can be interpreted as a dharmaśāstra as well as the possibility of more than one type of dharma in the epic.[91] Others (and this dissertation will follow their lead) feel that the epic is focused on another dimension of dharma, its subtlety (sūkṣmatā). So B. K. Matilal writes, "If the Mahābhārata imparts a moral lesson,

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[90] Kanhu Charan Mishra, ed., *Studies in the Mahabharata*, 1st ed. (Bhubaneswar: Institute of Orissan Culture, 1989).

[91] Fitzgerald, "The Moksa Anthology of the Great Bharata: An Initial Survey of Structural Issues, Themes, and Rhetorical Strategies".

it emphasizes, again and again, the ever-elusive character, the unresolved ambiguity of

the concept of dharma."[92] And Ramanujan unites both points of view:

> It is not dharma or right conduct that the Mahābhārata seems to teach, but
> the sūksma or subtle nature of dharma -- its infinite subtlety, its
> incalculable calculus of consequences, its endless delicacy. Because
> dharma-sūksmatā is one of the central themes that recur in an endless
> number of ways, the many legal discussions are a necessary part of the
> action.

In other words, the epic teaches not by straightforward didacticism, but by teasing and

exploring dharma. (In Chapter Two, we shall discuss how the epic seems to be constantly

testing dharma.)

Most dharmaśāstra approaches to the epic are much more subtle than the fairly

prevalent reading of the epic as a battle between good and evil. V. K. Gokak exemplifies

this dualistic trend when he writes, "Two of the main characters in the epic, Duryodhana

and Dharma, stand forth as champions of evil and good respectively."[93] And Sukthankar

writes:

> ... the war on the mundane place has been deepened into a cosmic war
> between the Devas and the Asuras, symbolical of the idealistic conflict
> between antagonistic principles, the ceaseless opposition between Good
> and Evil, between Justice and Injustice, between Dharma and Adharma.[94]

There is, of course, evidence in the epic itself which points towards this reading, but it

seems (at least to readers like Matilal) outweighed by the rest of the work: "Thus I find it

impossible to agree with those who interpret the battle in the Epic as an allegory of the

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[92] Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Krsna: In Defence of a Devious Divinity," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 404.

[93] V. K. Gokak, "Presidential Address," in *The Mahabharata Revisited*, ed. R. N. Dandekar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990).

[94] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 89. Later on, Sukthankar will say that, on the metaphysical plane of interpretation, "Good and Evil are thus not conceived as irreconcilable opposites, but rather as complementary processes." (p. 93).

battle between good and evil."[95] Even if the Mahābhārata is a didactic work, it may not

be teaching via the simple allegory of good versus evil; rather its lessons may be far

subtler.

The second way of approaching the Mahābhārata as an ahistorical work stems

from a dimension of the Mahābhārata's orality that the orality philologists are generally

not concerned with, namely, the regional oral epics that have been inspired by the

Mahābhārata or are recast Mahābhāratas. Brockington notes that this was the direction

for the study of epics that Ramanujan emphasized.[96] Anthropologists like Kumar Suresh

Singh, John Leavitt, William Sax, John D. Smith, and Gene Roghair have investigated

regional Mahābhārata tellings.[97] More generally, Blackburn *et al* have edited a volume

on oral epics across India.[98] In Mishra's volume, several papers are dedicated to

examining Sarala Das's Orissan retelling of the Mahābhārata. H. M. Nayak's conference

volume is also dedicated to regional literatures inspired by the Mahābhārata.[99]

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[95] Matilal, "Krsna: In Defence of a Devious Divinity."

[96] Brockington, "Issues Involved in the Shift from Oral to Written Transmission of the Epics: A Workshop Report." Brockington notes that "Ramanujan... is more concerned to show how the epic has grown and been transformed in the vernacular versions." p. 133.

[97] Kumar Suresh Singh, *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and the Folk Tradition* (Shimla: Indian Institute for Advanced Study, 1993). John Leavitt, "Himalayan Variations on an Epic Theme," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). William S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pabuji: A Study, Transcription, and Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Gene H. Roghair, *The Epic of Palnadu: A Study and Translation of Palnati Virula Katha, a Telugu Oral Tradition from Andhra Pradesh, India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[98] Blackburn et al, eds., *Oral Epics in India*. Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas* and *Questioning Ramayanas* have emphasized just how varied epic traditions can be in their spread. See Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Paula Richman, ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[99] Harogadde Manappa Nayak, ed., *Epic in Indian Literature* (Mysore: Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, 1985).

In this context, there are several *literary* works that allude to Karṇa.[100] There is

the ancient Sanskrit play <u>Karṇabhāra</u> by Bhāsa.[101] S. B. Joshi has studied how Karṇa has

been portrayed in the work of Pampa (b. 902) and Kumaravyasa (fl. 1419-1446) in

Kannada.[102] Shivaji Savant's modern Indian novel <u>Mṛtunjaya</u>, based on Karṇa's life, has

been translated into many regional languages and been widely read.[103] S. L. Byrappa's

novel <u>Parva</u> gives much more room and development to Karṇa than the original

<u>Mahābhārata</u> does. R. S. Dinkar's <u>Rashmirathi</u>, too, renders in poetic Hindi the poignancy

of Karṇa's life;[104] and A. Datta, S. Rudramurtisastri, and T. N. Sarma have all produced

volumes of poetry devoted to Karṇa in Maithili, Kannada, and Hindi.[105] Rabindranath

Tagore's play <u>Karṇa-Kuntī Samvad</u> explores the emotional drama of the dialogue

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[100] I doubt that a retelling or a reteller could get away without having an interesting Karṇa, just as versions of the *Mahabharata* which do not give due attention to the *Bhagavad Gita* are heavily criticized. For example, Peter Brooks's version of the *Mahabharata* was criticized for reducing the *Bhagavad Gita* to just a few minutes. Brooks's play has spurned a mini-industry of its own: there are at least two volumes of essays on the reception of the play, both in India and in the West. Gary O'Connor, *The Mahabharata: Peter Brook's Epic in the Making* (San Francisco: Mercury House Inc, 1990). David Williams, ed., *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata* (London: Routledge, 1991). See also Iwona Milewska, "Two Modern Film Versions of the Mahabharata: Similarities and Differences between an Indian and a European Approach," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999). And see papers in M. Bessinger and J. Tylus, eds., *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[101] Barbara Stoler Miller, "Karnabhara: The Trial of Karna," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). See also other Bhāsa translations. Bhasa, *The Shattered Thigh and the Other Mahabharata Plays of Bhasa*, trans. A. N. D. Haksar (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993). Bhasa, *Complete Plays of Bhasa*, trans. K. P. A. Menon, 1st ed. (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1996).

[102] See Shankar Baldixit Joshi, *Karnana Muru Citragalu* (Dharavada: Madhava Ballala Bandhugalu, 1947).

[103] Sivaji Savanta, *Mrityunjaya, the Death Conqueror: The Story of Karna*, trans. P. Lal and Nandini Nopany (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1989).

[104] Ramdhari Sinha Dinkar, *Rasmirathi* (Patana: Udayacala, 1965). Translated as Ramdhari Sinha Dinkar, *The Sun Charioteer*, trans. Ramadayala Munda, David Nelson, and Paul Staneslow (Shoreview: Nagari Press, 1981).

[105] Acyutananda Datta, *Karna, Kamsa Vadha: Maithili Khandakavya* (Patana: Maithili Akadami, 1979). Su Rudramurtisastri, *Karna: Khandakavya* (Bengaluru: Hemakuta, 1977). Tribhuvana Natha Sarma, *Vajra-Dana* (Barabanki: Rakesa Prakasana, 1966).

between Karṇa and Kuntī.[106] And this is only the tip of the iceberg: as Umashankar Joshi

writes, "The other two characters [other than Draupadī] to whom creative writers have

turned again and again are Karṇa and Gandhari."[107] Moreover each retelling of the

Mahābhārata no doubt has its own version of Karṇa; for instance, Shulman analyzes "one

of the high points of Villiputtūrār's long poem," Karṇa's death scene.[108] And Srhihari's

slim volume on Karṇa is an example of Indian popularizing literature (in the tradition of

Amar Chitra Katha) in which Karṇa is treated as one of the eight central characters of the

Mahābhārata.[109] Introducing his extended poem, Dinkar writes,

> I started this work on the sixteenth of February, 1950. At that time I knew
> of only one literary figure who was composing an epic on Karṇa: Pandit
> Laksmi Narayan Mishra of Prayag. By the time *The Sun Charioteer* was
> completed, several new and beautiful works had appeared in Hindi.[110]

One interesting trend in this literature is the connection between Karṇa's story and

caste critical themes. Van Buitenen notes that "in intellectual circles, Karṇa has become

the model for the militantly dispossessed."[111] In 1952, Dinkar put it this way:

> The concern for a resurrection of Karṇa's character is proof that the
> recognition of human values is on the rise in society. The pride of good
> family or high caste is disappearing. In the future, a man will rise to the

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[106] Rabindranath Tagore, *Collected Poems and Plays* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965). I have been told of another play, in Kannada, by T. P. Kailasan called Karṇa, but have been unable to locate it.

[107] Umashankar Joshi, "A Creative Writer's View," in *The Mahabharata Revisited*, ed. R. N. Dandekar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990). p. 285. Joshi refers to his own dialogic poem, "Karṇa-Krishna."

[108] Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. pp. 387-400.

[109] Srihari, *Epic Characters of Mahabharatha: Karna* (Bangalore: Bharatha Samskruthi Prakashana, 1999). Srihari notes in his foreword, that even the old in India need to hear the actual story: "We come across a large number of elderly people also who do not have a correct knowledge of the characters of the great epic. We hope that these little life-sketches based on the original *Mahabharata*, will serve very useful to them as well." p. 4.

[110] Dinkar, *Rasmirathi*. p. 26-7.

[111] *The Beginning*. p. xxviii.

position appropriate to his capabilities, and not a position that was
bestowed upon him by family or caste... In some ways, the resurrection of
Karna's character is an effort to establish this new humanity... The present
age is the age of the uplift of the low and neglected.[112]

As Chapter Two will suggest, this is somewhat true of the Mahābhārata's Karna, but the

way his narrative is structured can be construed to allow for both conservative and radical

readings of his talents.

This literary interest is not unmatched by scholarly interest. There have been

several conference devoted to the Mahābhārata which attest to the continuing scholarly

interest in the epic. The Sahitya Akademi organized a conference on the Mahābhārata in

1987;[113] another was organized by the Institute of Orissan Culture in 1988;[114] yet another

was organized in Montreal in 2001.[115] These conferences stand in addition to the

multitude of conferences which include the Mahābhārata in their scope, such as the one

on epics and puranas in 1997 in Croatia.[116]

The Indian Institute for Advanced Study (IIAS) has also, in recent years,

sponsored several volumes of Mahābhārata inquiry that demonstrate the continuing

Indian interest in the epic as a work of literature and philosophy. We have discussed

Matilal's Ethical Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata and we should also mention the studies

by M. A. Mehendale and Rekha Jhanji. Again, even if I do not agree with their claims,

they set the stage for a humanistic, literary discussion of the text.

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[112] Dinkar, *Rasmirathi*. p. 27.

[113] R. N. Dandekar, ed., *The Mahabharata Revisited* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990).

[114] Mishra, ed., *Studies in the Mahabharata*.

[115] Department of Religion, Concordia University, Montreal, May 2001.

[116] Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic, eds., *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships* (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999).

Of course not all Indian authors are concerned with either character or Karṇa or even this type of humanistic discussion. For example Sarkar notices the complexity of Yudhiṣṭhira's character but does not analyze him.[117] Some like Subhash Anand feel that Karṇa should be held responsible for the Kurukṣetra war, and that Karṇa acts against dharma; even this is an interpretation that one can grapple with.[118] And even among critics who read the Mahābhārata as "the triumph of virtue and the defeat of vice,"[119] there is much interesting interpretive work going on. For example Saroj Bharadwaj tries to determine how destiny and human initiative are compatible within the epic, and how the epic can provide a framework for non-resigned fatalism. (And, in fact, he interprets Karṇa in that light.)[120]

I hope that the foregoing discussion has suggested why there has not been as yet a monograph on Karṇa. Academic interest in the Mahābhārata as a literary text has, in a way, only begun in the 80s and 90s. It is inevitable, perhaps, that the first books would concentrate on the Pāṇḍavas; but certainly there is a growing interest in the Mahābhārata as a topic of literary interest and indeed as a book that is wise about human nature.

An interest in a specific character participates, in a way, as well, in a *non-holistic* approach to the epic. Even though, as I have argued, a holistic assumption is necessary to start the debate, focusing on a character does participate in a way in a fracturing of the epic. I have tried to address this in Chapter 5 in which I try to interpret the character of

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[117] Rabindra Nath Sarkar, *An Episodic Interpretation of the Mahabharata* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1989).

[118] Subhash Anand, *Story as Theology: An Interpretative Study of Five Episodes from the Mahabharata* (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1996). As we shall see in Chapter Three, Anand has researched Bali, whom he admires and whom I will compare to Karṇa.

[119] See Saroj Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva" in the Mahabharata*, 1st ed. (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1992).

[120] Ibid. p. 33.

Karṇa in dialogue with the other characters in the epic. Perhaps also the focus on a particular character corresponds to Greg Bailey's suggestion in 1999 that it would be particular parts of the epic that would be the focus of future research.[121] And perhaps it also corresponds to Van Buitenen's sense that the epic has been most influential in its parts rather than as a whole.[122] Nonetheless, I believe that examining the pieces is the first step towards building a sense of the whole; in that way, I hope to be participating in a project that builds *up* to a holistic interpretation.

One way in which the two trends we have sketched above (the interpretive and the philological) come together is through the question of the divinity of the central character in the epic. Hiltebeitel has forcefully argued that the divinity of the characters must have been established at a very early stage.[123] Hiltebeitel was working from a model established by Pollock with respect to the divinity of Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa.[124] Both Pollock and Hiltebeitel feel that the divinity of the characters they examine (Rāma, Kṛṣṇa respectively) must have been always a central part of the story. This leads to several key considerations: first, the redactors even early on would have had a sense of the whole epic; second, the divinized sections of the epic, which have often been considered late, must have been part of the epic from the very beginning.

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[121] "For the future I expect most research on the *Mahabharata* will be centred on particular parts of the text. This is not suprising as the text is tremendously rich on every level..." Greg Bailey, "Introductory Remarks on Future Research on the Sanskrit Epics and Puranas," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999). p. 8.

[122] *The Beginning.* p. xxxiii.

[123] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhrguization," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999).

[124] See Pollock, "Atmanam Manusam Manye: Dharmakutam on the Divinity of Rama." And see his introduction to Valmiki, *Aranyakanda*, trans. Sheldon I. Pollock, vol. 3, *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Thus in general, we might be able to make the following sort of systematic claim: attention has yet to be focused on a character like Karṇa because (a) attention paid to the Mahābhārata has tended to focus on larger issues like composition, structure, organizing myths, central philosophy, rather than on the smaller details and nuances of the narrative; and (b) when the epic has been interpreted as a battle between Good and Evil, attention has tended to focus on the characters of the Pāṇḍava side. Both of these trends, as we have seen, have begun to change. Partially because the field is getting older, scholars are indeed beginning to move beyond only the big questions of the epic, and are looking at its details. And many scholars have rejected the view that the Mahābhārata is an allegory of good and evil.

1.7 Important Studies on Karṇa

Even though Karṇa is seldom the focus of sustained inquiry, he does get a lot of attention; this section is devoted to the few exceptions to the general rule. I should also note that the history of Karṇa's character is one in which criticism is catching up with literature. Let me illustrate this with one example. In Karṇabhara,[125] Bhāsa transformed the verbal duel with Śalya into a self-inspiring monologue. In this way, Bhāsa anticipates my argument below that Kṛṣṇa does not need to give Karṇa a Bhagavadgītā; Karṇa already knows that he has a duty to perform.

(English criticism may also be playing catch up to criticism in regional Indian languages. K. Lorha has studied Rādhā and Karṇa and their reception in modern Hindi poetry.[126] B. V. Giradhari has studied Karṇa in Marathi literature.[127] And Joshi and V. S.

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[125] Miller, "Karṇabhara: The Trial of Karṇa."

[126] Kalyanamala Lorha, *Adhunika Hindi Kavya Ke Kucha Patra* (Agara: Kendriya Hindi Samsthana, 1988).

[127] Bha Vyā Giradhari, *Karna Ani Marathi Pratibha* (Aurangabada: Savita Prakasana, 1993).

Mali have examined Karṇa in Kannada literature, where Karṇa has been treated by both

Pampa (b. 902) and Kumaravyasa (fl. 1419-1446).[128])

Sukthankar's assessment of Karṇa (1942) is interesting, even if it goes against the

grain of this study. To Sukthankar,

> ... when one remembers the circumstances of Karṇa's birth and early life,
> one can readily account for the apparent contradictions in his character
> and understand his behavior as also his fate. It is easy to recognize in his
> features ... the physiognomy of a man with a frustration complex and
> therefore a clear case of abnormal mentality.[129]

But even if I do not agree with Sukthankar's conclusions, I do with his method and

inclination, and am grateful that he started a dialogue, one that this dissertation hope to

revive and continue. "Few characters in ancient literature," Sukthankar writes,

> ... have been painted with such consummate skill and insight into human
> nature as Maharathi Karṇa, a character which in the past has never been
> properly understood -- has in fact been consistently misunderstood --
> though the epic has furnished us with details of his life with remarkable
> fullness, candor, and clarity.[130]

Sukthankar seems to attack *both* the critics who admire Karṇa's personality -- to him, that

smacks of a Holtzmannian agenda -- *and* those critics who dismiss Karṇa as a simple

allegory of evil. To Sukthankar, Karṇa has a deep and developed psychology, albeit an

abnormal one.

K. Marar's sketch of Karṇa (1950) is a mere six pages; but he brings forth some of

the themes we will expand upon later on:

> [Karṇa] did not hesitate to show respect to his charioteer-father who
> entered the scene with as much humility as Karṇa entered with majesty...

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[128] Joshi, *Karnana Muru Citragalu*. Vi Es Mali, *Kannada Sahityadalli Karna* (Harugeri, Ji. Belagavi: Sirigannada Prakasana, 1999).

[129] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 53.

[130] Ibid. p. 49.

If ethical values are more on the side of the Pāndavas, human values are
more on the side of Karna... It is this single sacrifice [killing Ghatotkaca]
that makes Karna a great soul; by this he certainly proved that his loyalty
towards Duryodhana far outweighed his enmity towards Arjuna.[131]

Irawati Karve's Yugānta[132] is perhaps the most famous work on character in the

Mahābhārata.[133] As Norman Brown writes in his foreword, "seen through [Karve's] eyes,

.. the Mahābhārata becomes a record of complex humanity and a mirror to all the faces

which we ourselves wear."[134] Her chapter on Karna (initially published in 1967) was

crucial to the formulation of this dissertation -- again, not because I subscribe to her

interpretation, but because her interpretation is cogent and provocative. As she writes in

her preface,

> These essays are in a way an attempt to make the younger generation
> understand my point of view [that the Mahābhārata is worth reading]. I
> shall consider it a victory if they think that my interpretation is wrong and
> read the Mahābhārata merely to prove it wrong.[135]

To Karve,

> Karna's defeat lay in just this one fact [:] that he did not know who he was
> by birth; and when the answer was given to him, it was too late... Karna
> was caught in the vicious grip of this question. He had no definite position
> in society. He struggled all his life to gain what he thought was his rightful
> status and his bitterness lay in not having got it.[136]

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[131] Kuttikrishna Marar, *A Journey through the Mahabharata*, trans. P. Achuthan (Trichur: Kerala
Sahitya Akademi, 1989). pp. 25-30.

[132] Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1974).

[133] Indeed many people responded to my initial idea to work on a dissertation on character in the
epic, with "Oh that's been done! Read Yuganta."

[134] W. Norman Brown in Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Poona: Deshmukh
Prakashan, 1969). [There is no page numbering for Brown's Foreword.]

[135] Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. p. xi.

[136] Ibid. pp. 138-9.

Karve feels this central "insecurity" leads Karṇa to "extremes both in his evil deeds as well as in his good ones."[137] In the conversations with Kuntī and Kṛṣṇa, Karve feels that "since Karṇa could not play the role befitting his new identity, he rejected it."[138] While I feel that the reasons for Karṇa's rejecting Kṛṣṇa's offer are more complicated, it was Karve who first alerted me to the importance of this scene and its complexities.

Krishna Chaitanya too recognized the fullness of Karṇa's character:

> One of the most unforgettable personalities of the epic, Karṇa is also the character created by Vyāsa for the most penetrating study of relations between man and his circumstance. In the case of no other does circumstance become so consistently hostile to freeze life in its entirety into a perpetual predicament as in the case of Karṇa.[139]

> If he had not had the making of a great soldier in him, Karṇa might have led a reasonably adjusted life in the frame of the vocational caste into which he found himself adopted. But he had superb martial talents and yearned to distinguish himself in this field.[140]

Chaitanya continues in Karve's mold:

> Depressed throughout his life thus far with the low social status that stifled his growth, with an obsessive hunger for adequate identity, Karṇa is awarded that identity -- and in the conceivably most impressionable moment -- when he challenges a Kshatriya and is challenged in turn about his social rank.[141]

And sometimes, he continues in Sukthankar's mold: "Karṇa, no doubt, hungering for an over-compensatory self-image because of his low status, has built up a reputation for generosity; especially to brahmins he will refuse nothing."[142] Eventually, Chaitanya feels

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[137] Ibid. p. 148.

[138] Ibid. p. 151.

[139] Krishna Chaitanya, *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study* (New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1985). p. 118.

[140] Ibid. p. 119.

[141] Ibid. p. 120.

[142] Ibid. p. 124.

Karna's downfall comes from "pleasing Duryodhana in an overreaction of gratitude for giving him a social status."[143]

Chaitanya reads the conversation with Kṛṣṇa as the turning point in Karna's life. "A great contrapuntal movement begins now. Karna's external prospects steadily become more and more somber, but a light within his interiority shines more and more brightly."[144] Chaitanya nicely highlights Karna's meeting with Bhīṣma as well as exploring the nature of Karna's decision to fight the war wholeheartedly despite his knowledge that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are invincible. Most importantly, for our observations in Chapter Two, Chaitanya characterizes Karna's courage as existential. Unfortunately, Chaitanya does not follow this thread further than to observe that he finds meaning ("a place in the scheme of things") through the particularities of his own circumstances, and that Karna accepts his death "with euphoric elation of spirit because he saw in it his own fulfillment."[145] In some ways Chaitanya stops just short of where this study's second chapter begins; there, I will argue for a different type of existential reading of Karna's choice to remain on the Kaurava side.

Shulman concludes his study of kingship in medieval South India with a chapter on Karna. In Shulman's assessment,

> ... there is perhaps no more popular hero in India's classical literature than Karna... there are good reasons for Karna's popularity; he is, indeed, a peculiarly attractive character both in his own right and in comparison with the rogue's gallery that surrounds him -- the deeply flawed epic

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[143] Ibid. p. 127.

[144] Ibid. p. 129.

[145] Ibid. p. 132-3. It is odd indeed that Chaitanya is so brief here; for other character case-studies in his book, his existential analysis runs much deeper.

heroes from *both* sides of the battle, as well as the deceitful and murderous deity who uses them for his designs.[146]

Shulman stresses Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana as "a focal point of [Karna's] attempt to give meaning and nobility to a painful and problematic career."[147] Just as we will in Chapter Two, Shulman stresses Karna's "conscious tragic choice"[148] and feels that Karna chooses "universalistic values (loyalty, truthfulness, love) over the unsatisfactory, entangling claims of family and dharmic propriety."[149] I will explore this insight in Chapter Two (where I explore how Karna chooses loyalty and love) and in Chapter Four (where I explore the tension between loyalty and dharma). My treatment will rearrange the place of 'family' in this equation; indeed the question of what constitutes Karna's family is one of the central questions of his narrative.

If this study differs from Shulman's interpretation, it is in the place where Shulman agrees with Karve: both see Karna as trying to recapture "the noble identity which is his by birth."[150] In my reading, Karna bases his life and his choices not on birth, not on his nature, but rather on his nurture, on the people that raised him; to me, Karna is not chasing after an identity that he lost -- only *we* know that he lost it; he does not. And when Karna is confronted with this "lost" identity, he refuses it, for he already has an identity of his own. Moreover, even if Karna is "the tragic hero of the Mahābhārata,"[151]

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[146] Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. p. 380. This is also the source of the epigraph of this chapter.

[147] Ibid. p. 381.

[148] Ibid. p. 383.

[149] Ibid. p. 383.

[150] Ibid. p. 382.

[151] Ruth Cecily Katz, "The Sauptika Episode in the Structure of the Mahabharata," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 137.

or even "the tragic anti-hero of the <u>Mahābhārata</u>,"[152] Karṇa's tragedy still differs in one

significant way from Aristotelian tragedy.[153] In Aristotelian tragedy, "<u>anagnorisis</u>

[recognition] brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge; it is the moment when

the characters understand their predicament for the first time... it makes the text and the

world intelligible."[154] As I will show in Chapter Two, Karṇa's predicament is that when

his biological identity is revealed, it is his nurtured identity (the identity that comes from

his friends and adopted parents) to which he courageously clings. Thus unlike in

Aristotelian recognition (<u>anagnorisis</u>),[155] it is not the lack of knowledge (of his biological

identity) that is crucial to the Karṇa narrative; rather it is the way that he chooses and acts

in the face of the revelation. Unlike say, Oedipus, Karṇa is not brought down by the

revelation; his fortunes are not reversed; he does not collapse and curse the world.[156]

(Revelation here is not accompanied by the reversal (<u>peripeteia</u>) that Aristotle

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[152] Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata.* p. 45.

[153] This is not to say that Karṇa's story does not have the affective power of tragedy; indeed it does. I only wish to emphasize that the Karṇa narrative need not necessarily be interpreted through an Aristotelian lens. Note that Karṇa is often the prime example for Indologists who recognize the tragic aspects of Indian literature. Ingalls writes "the hero Karṇa of the *Mahabharata* is tragic quite in the Western sense... Thus the bon mot is disproved that India knew no tragedy until the coming of the British." Sreekantaiya expands this to "the *Mahabharata* itself is a gallery of tragic heroes." Vidyakara, *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry; Vidyakara's "Subhasitaratnakosa."* trans. Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls, *Harvard Oriental Series V. 44* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965). p. 17. T. Nanjundaiya Sreekantaiya, *Imagination in Indian Poetics and Other Literary Studies* (Mysore: Geetha Book House, 1980). p. 62. And see Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry.* p. 380.

[154] Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). p. 1.

[155] Ibid. p. 3 explores the connection between anagnorisis and knowledge. See also *Poetics* 11. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics,* trans. James Hutton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).

[156] That moment (when Karṇa curses dharma) is reserved for the very last moment of his life -- a moment indeed when both the god Kṛṣṇa and the human Arjuna refuse to follow the injunction of dharma.

theorized.[157]) As we shall discuss in Chapter Two, the revelation episode can be seen as ennobling Karṇa.[158]

Nevertheless, Shulman's readings have inspired many of mine, such as the pointedness of Karṇa wondering why Kṛṣṇa tried to deceive him and the connections between the serpent Naraka and Karṇa's personality. In many ways, this dissertation is a response to the challenge Shulman laid down at the end of his discussion: "there is much more to be said about Karṇa in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata..."[159]

Finally, Rick Jarow's article on Karṇa was one I discovered very late in my research, but it is a strong ally of this study in several respects. Jarow feels that Karṇa is "perhaps the character in the tale who most deeply understands Kṛṣṇa's purpose and incarnation, [and] embodies the stature and comportment of the Indian epic ideal."[160] Like Shulman, Jarow emphasizes Karṇa's choice, this time Karṇa's choice when Indra approaches him:

> Karṇa's heroism is of his own specifically human choosing; in tearing the very earrings and armor off his own body and offering them to Indra, he knowingly abandons his immortality and invincibility, his certain alignment with the Absolute, if you will. He chooses human over divine values.[161]

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[157] See *Poetics* 11. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*.

[158] A later study will compare the way in which Karṇa deals with the revelation of his "identity" with the way in which Rāma deals with the revelation of his "divinity." The latter topic has been explored by Pollock in several articles such as Sheldon Pollock, "The Divine King in the Indian Epic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 3 (1984). Such a comparison would illuminate not only each of these episodes but could lay the groundwork for a larger exploration of revelation and recognitions in Indian literature.

[159] Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*. p. 387.

[160] E. H. Rick Jarow, "The Letter of the Law and the Discourse of Power: Karna and Controversy in the Mahabharata," *Journal of Vaisnava Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999). p. 61.

[161] Ibid. p. 63.

This study will emphasize that aspect of Karṇa's choice as well, but will not contrast human and divine values. Rather, I feel that Karṇa chooses between natural and nurtured identities, and I explore the interaction between the human and the divine when Kṛṣṇa *tests* Karṇa.

Jarow also draws the fascinating parallel between Karṇa and Ekalavya narratives, which I will explore in Chapter Three, and he mentions the Freudian family romance (with respect to Ekalavya), the starting point for Chapter Four. Jarow uses Goldman's theory of the composite hero to interpret Karṇa's relationship to Arjuna; I see them, perhaps more simply, as character reflections of each other, and explore this in Chapter Five. And I agree with Jarow's claim that

> ... while Karṇa does not have the deep friendship and devotion to Kṛṣṇa
> that Arjuna has, the driver's son seems to have already comprehended
> what Arjuna will only learn on the battlefield: the true nature of Kṛṣṇa's
> position as well as the pre-determined outcome of the Bhārata war.

Again, this dissertation will expand upon and refine many of Jarow's insights into Karṇa's character.

These studies all point to an enormous interest in Karṇa, expressed perhaps erratically over the years, but growing, and frequently passionate. It is the main purpose of this dissertation to harness that interest and provide a monograph that will spark discussions on the subtleties of Karṇa's character. To be sure, a character that has inspired so much interest will not be easily comprehended by a single work. I can only hope, like Karve, that others will take the time to argue with me.

1.8 Character as the Subject of an Extended Study

That a single character should be the focus of this entire project may also strike some readers as unusual. After all, the epic characters seem to be all tied together in a tapestry of interlocking fates. Indeed, this may be the case, but I still believe that we can

study the human dimensions of a single character and then fruitfully use the results of that study to shed light on other characters. (My attempt to do this latter task is Chapter Five.)

With respect to the Greek epics, there have been several ground-breaking studies which focused on a single character. Paul Friedrich's 1973 article on Achilles in the Iliad, published in the same year as Doniger's Śiva (see below), begins with the assumption "that one reasonably coherent system of ideas underlies the text of the Iliad."[162] "A kind of first cousin"[163] followed in 1975: James Redfield's Nature and Culture in the Iliad which focused on Hector. And a 1978 article by Friedrich and Redfield caused controversy when it presented Achilles as a unique individual, rather than as the exemplification of a type.[164] Friedrich dedicated his 1978 study to Aphrodite, a goddess that until then had not been systematically studied. Like Doniger, Friedrich was not content just to survey the extant ancient Greek documents that referred to Aphrodite; rather he wanted to show that "the meaning of Aphrodite has what biologists call a teleonomy or what the linguist and poet, Edward Sapir, would have referred to as 'drift.'"[165]

In the remainder of this section, I will survey how Indology has dealt with the issue of character. The Mahābhārata in this sense suffers in comparison to the Rāmāyana;

[162] Paul Friedrich, "Defilement and Honor in the Iliad," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1, no. 2 (1973). p. 119. Friedrich's interest in character is also reflected in his anthropological work; see, for example, Paul Friedrich, *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

[163] James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, Expanded ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). p. xvii.

[164] See Paul Friedrich and James M. Redfield, "Speech as Personality Symbol: The Case of Achilles," *Language* 54 (1978). Gordon M. Messing, "On Weighing Achilles' Wingèd Words," *Language* 57 (1981). Paul Friedrich and James M. Redfield, "Contra Messing," *Language* 57 (1981).

[165] Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). p. 3.

the latter is specifically a poem about a man named Rāma:[166] "Is there man in the world today who is truly virtuous?" asks Vālmīki; and Nārada responds, "His name is Rāma, and he was born in the House of Ikṣvāku..."[167] (Robert Goldman and Sally Sutherland have also shown that Sītā, too, is developed as a multidimensional "woman of flesh and blood."[168])

Traditionally, there *seems* to have been the prejudice that the Mahābhārata's characters are not individual human beings but merely allegories for character *types*. We have seen Dumézil's quote above, and Biardeau typecasts as well:

> In abandoning indo-European comparisons, we do not necessarily have to abandon what was most rich in Dumézil's method, namely to recognize that the mythic characters were never reduced to just themselves, but represented a whole complex of notions, of values, of types of activity which defined their unique place in a fixed cast.[169]

As Van Buitenen writes,

> For both scholars, then, the roles of the heroes are fixed: for one in an unchanged, though epically transposed, mythical trifunctional order of values; for the other in a changeless Hindu ethos of values... In doing so, they both decline to be distracted by the quirks of their types...[170]

I quote this example to show that traditionally the *actual* trend in approaching character in Indological studies is to say that "everyone else" seems to approach the characters in

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[166] A similar situation exists between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the former begins by invoking the muse to sing of the rage [menes] of Achilles; the latter with an invocation to sing of the man Odysseus.

[167] Valmiki, *Balakanda*, trans. Robert P. Goldman, vol. 1, *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). p. 121.

[168] Valmiki, *Sundarakanda*, trans. Sally J. Sutherland Goldman and Robert P. Goldman, vol. 5, *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). pp. 57-62. Quote on p. 62.

[169] Madeleine Biardeau, "Etudes de Mythologie Hindoue, II," *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise de l'Extreme-Orient* 55 (1969). Quoted in *The Book of Virata and the Book of the Effort*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). p. 164. My translation.

[170] *The Book of Virata and the Book of the Effort*. p. 164.

terms of types. Van Buitenen himself wrote, as we have seen above, that the

Mahābhārata's characters are not very well developed in an earlier introduction; but here

he is clearly aware of the subtlety of the epic's characterizations. And both Dumézil and

Biardeau have a keen eye for character and in fact make many pointed psychological

observations throughout their commentaries on the epic.[171] If anything, there seems to be

a consensus, as Sukthankar felt long ago, that "when we read the poem with attention we

discover that from end to end the interest is held on character."[172]

So what has happened to all this interest in character? We have seen above that is

has led to studies such as Buddhadeva Bose's and Marar's. Better known, though, at least

in the Anglo-American academic world, is Karve's Yugānta, which was a book composed

purely of Mahābhārata character case-studies. Unfortunately, Karve does not specify why

she focuses on characters; she has written the book because she reads the Mahābhārata

and she "read[s] the Mahābhārata because [she] likes it."[173] (This is actually quite a bold

thing to say; the pleasure of the Mahābhārata experience is often forgotten in the efforts

to study it.) The closest Karve comes to explaining why she is fascinated by the epic's

character is the following:

> While reading the Mahābhārata, we see each person going inexorably to a
> definite end. We become acutely aware that each person knows his end,
> and his agony and dread become our own. And through the agony of each,
> we experience the agony of the whole world.[174]

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[171] See Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée I: L'idéologie des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées des Peuples Indo-Européens.* and *Le Mahabharata.*

[172] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata.* pp. 54-7.

[173] Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch.* p. x.

[174] Ibid. pp. 8-9.

The first Anglo-American scholarly work to really focus on a single character was

Doniger's 1973 Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic; like Friedrich's work above, the scope of

Doniger's sources ranges across the entire ancient Sanskrit corpus. Still, Doniger's

concentrated focus on Śiva as embodying the tension between asceticism and eroticism

(and her refusal to accept the mythology of Śiva as contradictory or paradoxical[175])

challenged scholars to do the same for other characters in Sanskrit literature. The first to

do so for a character from the Mahābhārata was Hiltebeitel's 1976 Ritual of Battle: Krsna

in the Mahābhārata. These works, like Katz's 1989 Arjuna in the Mahābhārata: Where

Krishna Is, There Is Victory, paved the way for the current study.[176] Though these two

latter books are emphatically different in scope and methodology, they both prove (by

demonstration) that a character in the epic is indeed deep and complex enough to sustain

a book-length investigation -- a far cry indeed from the attitude that epic characters are

types! Both books, in addition, show how rich a study of character can be, and how many

issues it opens up for the rest of the epic and for the way that we interpret the epic as a

whole.

Moreover, both of these works take the character in the epic as a consistent,

organic creation. Katz, following Sukthankar (following Madhva), interprets the epic on

three planes; correspondingly, there are three planes to Arjuna's character. Importantly,

Katz does not leave her interpretation with three heads, but endeavors to harmonize the

planes. Hiltebeitel does not subscribe to the theory that the epic needs to be interpreted on

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[175] Wendy Doniger, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). p. 5.

[176] Ibid. Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*. Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory*. I should also mention Burt Thorp's 1986 dissertation on Krsna, which I discovered late in my research process. See Burt Michael Thorp, "Krsna Vasudeva and the Art of Ambiguity in the Mahabharata" (University of California Los Angeles, 1986).

planes;[177] rather, Hiltebeitel's Kṛṣṇa study takes its cues from both Dumézil and Biardeau to determine what was involved in the process of "correlating epic with myth:"

> ...a long process seems likely in which an epic story of ancient contours, probably at no point free of mythic elements, was continually compared and integrated with mythic themes -- in fact, with myths and structure of different periods. The process would have to have been conservative to explain certain long-standing para-Vedic, Indo-Iranian, and even Indo-European myths whose influences, as Dumézil has demonstrated, show through. But the way in which they took their footing in the Mahābhārata would seem to have been not so much through a process of "transposition" as through a process of correlation between two levels of continually changing and growing tradition: myth and epic.[178]

Myth, in fact, is the key to the characters' humanity:

> when the themes of myth are viewed in terms of the lives, fates, and deaths of heroes, they can be examined with great psychological depth... some of the Mahābhārata's most intriguing characterizations emerge directly from a juxtaposition of mythic and epic themes.[179]

Thus Hiltebeitel's Kṛṣṇa character is continually the site of holy seers perceiving connections and weaving together, sometimes borrowing, sometimes transposing, sometimes transforming, the traditional myth and epic episodes into their redaction of the epic.[180]

This study will take a different approach: my primary interpretive initiative is Karṇa's character, and his character as a human being. Thus, while I will address Karṇa's intertextual connections to other myths in the tradition, I will not investigate here what

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[177] See Hiltebeitel, "Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana."

[178] Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*. p. 359.

[179] Ibid. p. 42.

[180] Ibid. pp. 359-60. Hiltebeitel's subsequent work on the cult of Draupadī looked at the ways that many rituals (across time and space) connect to, and reflect upon, the Draupadī narrative in the Mahabharata. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi 1: Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukṣetra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi 2: On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

this suggests about processes of composition. And, agreeing with Hiltebeitel, I will

interpret the epic on a single plane; agreeing with Katz, I will also recognize the

multidimensional ways in which Karna is conceived and depicted.

1.9 Alter's Biblical Scholarship

Hiltebeitel's latest work may actually share some of this methodology; his

Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Readers' Guide to the Education of the Dharma King[181]

seems to continue his comment in 1991 "that the largest inadequacy in Mahābhārata

scholarship, including my own up to 1991, is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a

work of literature."[182] Hiltebeitel cites the biblical scholarship of Robert Alter as a beacon

to light the way; independently, Alter's work was recommended to me by Benjamin

Sommer, a biblical scholar, responding to a version of Chapter Two.[183]

Alter's work has many resonances with my approach to the Mahābhārata. For

instance, from the very beginning, Alter's concern is to battle the idea that the Hebrew

Bible is a hodge-podge narrative, full of interpolations and corruptions.[184] Instead, he

begins his "literary approach to the Bible" with the assumption that there is "a unity of the

text" and that we can discern "a real narrative continuum, ... a coherent unfolding story

in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or

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[181] Unfortunately, Hiltebeitel's book is due out August, 2001, the same date as this dissertation; his book will no doubt influence later revisions of this study.

[182] Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhrguization." p. 156.

[183] Thanks to Benjamin Sommer (Department of Religion, Northwestern University) for this insight. Indeed it felt uncanny to read Hiltebeitel's footnote: "I first read Alter's books in September 1997 only to find that the wheel I was designing to approach the Mahabharata was in many respects reinvented." p. 156, n. 9.

[184] "Let me propose for analysis a supposedly interpolated story because it will give us an opportunity to observe both how it works in itself and how it interacts with the surrounding narrative material." Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981). p. 3.

enriched by the addition of subsequent data."[185] Moreover, considering the Bible as a

work of literature does not detract from its religious character, but instead

> ... focuses attention on it in a more nuanced way... To scrutinize Biblical
> personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the
> multifaceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is
> the biblical God's chosen medium for His experiments with Israel and
> history... What we need to understand better is that the religious vision of
> the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through
> the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction.[186]

> [The Bible's] writers are obviously intent on telling us about the origins of
> the world, the history of Israel, God's ethical requirements of mankind...
> But the telling has a shapeliness whose subtleties we are only beginning to
> understand, and it was undertaken by writers with the most brilliant gifts
> for intimating character, defining scenes ...[187]

We can observe similar trends at work in _Rāmāyana_ scholarship, for example, in the

introductions to the most recent English translations. These pieces are part of a trend,

beginning with Pollock,[188] that challenges us to interpret the _Rāmāyana_'s characters as

coherent creations, as well as the epic as a whole:

> Suppose we were to take seriously what generations of performers and
> audiences have felt, not to speak of the composer, that the monumental
> poem is not made up of heterogeneous and uncombinable narratives, but
> forms a meaningful whole? One of our principal critical tasks would then
> be to ponder how the work functions as a unit, how its parts fit together to
> establish a large and coherent pattern of signification. A provisional
> readiness to posit meaningful unity of the work is at the very least a
> hermeneutical necessity. If we begin with the hypothesis of meaningless,
> irrational disunity, we cannot ask meaningful and rational questions. But
> we face more than a necessity. We face also a postulate authorized by the
> tradition itself, which has always regarded the poem as of a piece.[189]

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[185] Ibid. p. 11.

[186] Ibid. p. 12, p. 22.

[187] Robert Alter, _The World of Biblical Literature_ (New York: Basic Books, 1991). pp. 53-54.

[188] Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhrguization." p. 156, n. 5.

[189] Pollock's introduction to Valmiki, _Aranyakanda_. p. 5.

Pollock develops the character of Rāma through two moments that had been previously viewed as interpolated and contradictory: (respectively) the revelation of Rāma's divinity and Rāma's madness. Through his interpretations we see the way character can unite the epic's theological and political meditations: Rāma the avatār must be a man in order to defeat Rāvaṇa; but as a mortal, he is also a king and his madness represents the destructive capacity of royal power.[190] This summary is too brief to do justice to these interpretations, but the method is clear: it is through the assumption of unity and coherence that we are to interpret the text.

Alter's attitude towards the Bible's unity parallels mine towards the Mahābhārata's unity:

> ... the fact that the text is ancient and that its characteristic narrative procedures may differ in many respects from those of modern texts should not lead us to any condescending preconception that the text is therefore bound to be crude or simple. Tzevetan Todorov has shrewdly argued that the whole notion of "primitive narrative" is a kind of mental mirage engendered by modern parochialism, for the more closely you look at a particular ancient narrative, the more you are compelled to recognize the complexity and subtlety with which it is formally organized and with which it renders its subjects, and the more you see how it is conscious of its necessary status as artful discourse.[191]

Alter acutely observes that when crude literary standards such as "noncontradiction" or "nonrepetition" are applied to any literary work -- from the Odyssey to Ulysses -- they too would be found to be full of interpolations and inconsistencies.[192]

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[190] Ibid. See Chapter 4 and 5 of Pollock's introduction. pp. 15 ff.

[191] Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative. p. 21 Alter's footnote points us to Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). pp. 53-65.

[192] Recall the above discussion of Sukthankar and Arnold.

Alter's vision of the unity of the text is not naïve -- "any literary account of the

Bible must recognize [its] quality of extreme heterogeneity"[193] -- but he feels that the

tradition has canonized the text, and thus

> ... has created a unity among the disparate texts that we as later readers
> can scarcely ignore; and this unity in turn reflects, though with a
> pronounced element of exaggeration, an intrinsic feature of the original
> texts -- their powerfully allusive character.[194]

Alter stresses that

> ... the new literary perspective... does not come to restore the seamless
> unitary character of the biblical text cherished by pious tradition, but it
> does argue in a variety of ways that scholarship, from so much
> overfocused concentration on the seams, has drawn attention away from
> the design of the whole.[195]

Alter even allows for critics who believe in a stratified text -- a theory he rejects -- as

long as their "goal is to lead us toward what the biblical authors and author-redactors

surely aimed for a continuous reading of the text instead of nervous hovering over its

various small components."[196] Alter faults "modern biblical criticism" for trying to

fragment and historicize "a body of texts that religious tradition has enshrined in

timelessness, beyond precise historical considerations."[197] Alter believes, and I think this

opens up the Mahābhārata to us in a new way as well, that "even if the text is really

composite in origin, I think we have seen ample evidence of how brilliantly it has been

woven into a complex artistic whole."[198]

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[193] Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*. p. 49.

[194] Ibid. p. 50.

[195] Ibid. p. 70.

[196] Ibid. p. 70.

[197] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. p. 16.

[198] Ibid. p. 20.

Finally, Alter's view of character will also prepare us for the way the <u>Mahābhārata</u> seems to deal with characters like Karṇa.

> We are compelled to get at character and motive, as in Impressionist writers like Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, through a process of inference from fragmentary data, often with crucial pieces of narrative exposition strategically withheld, and this leads to multiple, or sometimes even wavering perspectives on the characters... the underlying biblical conception of character [is] as often unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity...[199]

As we shall see in Chapter Two, this is similar to the way in which Karṇa will slide between conservative and radical readings of his character.

1.10 Reading the Kauravas without Holtzmann: Gitomer and the Epic of Crisis

I should like to devote some space here to David Gitomer's paper on Duryodhana, which interpreted a Kaurava character in a *non*-Holtzmannian manner. Gitomer focuses on Duryodhana's final speech:

> I have studied the Vedas, bestowed gifts according to ordinance, ruled the earth with its oceans and stood at the head of my enemies. Who is more fortunate than me? What kṣatriyas regard as our desired dharma I have won by meeting my destruction in battle. Who is more fortunate than me? I have won human pleasures worthy of god, and hard for kings to come by. I have reached the ultimate wealth and majesty. Who is more fortunate than me? I'm bound for heaven with my friends and kin, unshakable Krṣṇa. You will live on to grieve, all your purposes destroyed. (9.60.47-50)[200]

Gitomer recasts the tension in this speech not as a riddle or a moral dilemma but rather as a crisis, a clash between two world orders, namely Krṣṇa's divinity (and the subsequent bhakti world order) and the kṣatriya world order. Recasting the tension/riddle as a crisis

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[199] Ibid. p. 126, p. 129.

[200] Quoted in David Gitomer, "King Duryodhana: The Mahabharata Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, no. 2 (1992). p. 228.

enables Gitomer to make two crucial points. First, this tension is not accidental or due to some absorptive tendency; it is structured and deliberate. Gitomer points to the repetition of this crisis of Duryodhana's throughout the epic and even in subsequent Sanskrit dramas. ("In fact, the dramas seem to want to intensify the conflict between the two sets of values."[201]) Thus Duryodhana's speech represents more than simply an enigmatic dilemma; it is a dramatization of a philosophical, sociological, and spiritual crisis.

Second, Gitomer goes even further to suggest that "we cannot always even use the term 'conflict' here, since there is often no common arena of discourse. Instead we trace a rupture between two realms of meaning."[202] This seems to magnify the 'crisis' accurately and appropriately: Duryodhana's speech is not a reconciliation in any way between the bhakti and kṣatriya world orders -- Duryodhana refuses to really acknowledge Kṛṣṇa's divinity; even as he acknowledges Kṛṣṇa's strength he clings to his own warrior world order and repeatedly asks "who is more fortunate than me?" This question evokes the pathos of the dying man who must admit the weakness of the world order he has been fighting for, but who simultaneously refuses to give up that world order. ("I am mindful of the power of Kṛṣṇa, whose [power] (tejas) is immeasurable, but he has not shaken me from following the [dharma appropriate to a kṣatriya] (kṣatradharma). I have entirely won him; I am not to be grieved for at all." 9.64.28-9) There is much more than a 'dilemma' between the bhakti and kṣatriya world order; choosing one over the other is a restructuring of the entire moral and sociological universe. In this way, Duryodhana represents the human being caught between the bhakti and kṣatriya systems; what makes him a human or interesting character is not his "evil" but rather the way he struggles

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[201] Ibid. p. 225.

[202] Ibid. p. 225.

with, and becomes victim to, two irreconcilable political systems and embodies the crisis

between them.

This kind of internal struggle is precisely the type of humanistic insight that I

hope to draw from the Karṇa narrative in the following chapter.

1.11 A Note on Karma

The reader of Chapter Two may wonder why I did not use indigenous systems,

such as karma (translated below), to explain Karṇa's actions and situation, or indeed,

more generally, why I did not employ the categories, such as time (kāla) and destiny

(daiva) that actors in the Mahābhārata sometimes use to explain the course of events and

history. One might even ask: since the indigenous tradition has explained it this way -- or

has suggested the following tools for explanation -- what right do I have to impose *my*

interpretation on the text, let alone an interpretation that uses (Western) Tillichian terms?

To answer these important questions, let me first address the topic of the way that

the epic systematically addresses the fundamental human questions: Why are things the

way they are? How did affairs get arranged so that they lead to exactly this situation in

space and time? And why do people then act the way they do in these situations? To

these questions, there is, unfortunately, no single systematic answer in the Mahābhārata;

as Bruce Long writes,

> ... the sages and scholars failed to discover any single principle of
> causation that could account for all the exigencies of human life. Or, to
> state the matter affirmatively, like their Vedic forebears, the epic writers
> were prepared to embrace (or, at least to tolerate) a diverse array of
> doctrines, in the conviction that while reality is one, it can be designated
> by many names.(Rg Veda 1.64.46)[203]

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[203] J. Bruce Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the Mahabharata," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). p. 42.

Long himself admits at the start of his piece that "the passages discussed herein reflect among themselves a remarkable (and to those who hanker after consistency, frustrating) degree of diversity, and even incongruity of thought."[204] Nevertheless, the epic authors were not working amidst intellectual chaos or relativism:

> ... there are several motifs that appear time and time again in passages drawn from every section of the Mahābhārata, a fact that would appear to indicate the various spokesmen on karma drew upon a common store of general notions, and at the same time exercised considerable freedom to recombine and modify those ideas according to individual and sectarian predilections.[205]

Thus it is important for Mahābhārata interpreters to realize that even if karma was an interpretive framework in other spheres of South Asian culture, it was not the only frame of interpretation for events in the epic. (Below, we shall examine an example of an interpretation of a Mahābhārata scene that does use karma.) Both Yuvraj Krishan and Long realize that there are several other competing interpretive schemas for causality; along with karma, Krishan lists human initiative (puruṣakāra), pre-determination (niyati), destiny (daiva), and time (kāla).[206]

Now out of this list, let us examine karma. The karma of a human being refers both to a human being's actions and the way that the consequences of his past actions (including those in previous lives) have resulted in his current state. In rough, the theory

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[204] Ibid. p. 39.

[205] Ibid. p. 40. For a second opinion, we can turn to Krishan, whose section on the *Mahabharata* (in his survey of doctrines about Karma) is a series of quotes, which, taken as a whole, reinforces Long's point. See Yuvraj Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma: Its Origin and Development in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina Traditions* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997). pp. 95 ff.

[206] Krishan, *The Doctrine of Karma: Its Origin and Development in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina Traditions*. p. 102 'Human initiative' is Woods's translation of puruṣakāra. What Doniger wrote of Hindu theodicy is applicable here as well: "These various approaches to the problem, most of which might have been eliminated or at least modified by other religions in order to strike a single theological note, are all retained in Hinduism in a rich chord of unresolved harmony." Wendy Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). p. 13.

of karma may be said to be "a theory of rebirth based on the moral quality of previous lives."[207] Karma is both a forward and backwards looking theory: it looks back to an individual's past actions to explain his current state; and it looks forward in order to judge and assess possible plans of action. Moreover, the standard against which actions are judged is dharma; thus adharmic actions will haunt their performers well into their next lives.[208] More than that: the karma theory also encompasses an *economy* of karma: karma can be transferred from one person to another, another person can take on someone's bad karma, and so forth.

It often happens that karma is confused with destiny. Take an individual who has tried to always be virtuous; if he finds himself in an unfortunate situation, he may be tempted to blame it on destiny. No matter what he did, he was destined to wind up in that place, and he did; his actions were of no consequence. Alternatively, if he explained his situation via karma, he would have to say that there was some action in his previous lives that he was atoning for by enduring his current situation.

The difference between these two perspectives is the way that they inform the future: if the world is controlled by destiny, then human initiative is pointless; if the world is controlled by karma, then human initiative is crucial. Following Long, we can see these positions in the conversation between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira starting in 3.31. Yudhiṣṭhira is bemoaning his state; he has just lost everything in a gambling match and he has brought his wife and brothers into fourteen years of exile in the forest. To

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[207] Wendy Doniger, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). p. xi. Doniger goes on to list several refinements to this formulation.

[208] As Goldman puts it, "the principles of karma and dharma are closely associated for the latter is, generally speaking, the register against which the positive or negative valuation of the former is accounted." Robert P. Goldman, "Karma, Guilt, and Buried Memories: Public Fantasy and Private Reality in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3 (1985). p. 419.

Draupadī, it is not karma or dharma that rules the world but a God who is a capricious

Dhātṛ (literally, 'Arranger'):

> [We] are like wooden puppets that are manipulated [by the Dhātṛ]; he
> makes body and limbs move... Man, restrained like a bird that is tied to a
> string, is not master of himself... Man knows nothing, he does not control
> his own happiness or misery; pushed by the Lord he may either go to
> heaven or to hell... the capricious blessed Lord plays with [us] like a child
> with its toys... I condemn the Dhātṛ who allows such outrages! (3.31.21
> ff.)[209]

Thus for Draupadī here both karma and dharma are useless: karma does not explain

anything and following dharma is pointless.

Yudhiṣthira's responds that he acts in accordance with dharma because he *must*;

without dharma, an individual sets himself up as the standard for meaning and virtue, a

form of solipsism: "he who doubts dharma finds in nothing else a standard and ends up

setting himself as the standard, and insolently he despises his betters." (3.32.15) Just as

Kṛṣṇa will teach Arjuna, Yudhiṣthira realizes that "a man cannot escape the force of

action by abstaining from actions."[210] And so he acts in accord with dharma, "not in quest

of the fruits of dharma," (3.32.2) but because he must act, and dharma is the only

meaningful framework in which he can act.[211] Moreover, by stressing that he must act,

Yudhiṣthira salvages the role of human effort in controlling the events of the world.

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[209] Translated in *The Book of the Assembly Hall and the Book of the Forest*. pp. 280-281. We should distinguish between this conception and play (līla), wherein the world of human lives is Kṛṣṇa's plaything. The līla notion has a compassionate aspect to it, which Draupadī's Dhātṛ does not. (Shulman describes "the divine clown's savage mercies" with respect to South Indian kingship on pp. 399-400 in Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*.) Even if we were to try to interpret the *Mahabharata's* events though the prism of līla, Yudhiṣthira's rejoinder would still apply: human effort and initiative are constantly incumbent upon us.

[210] *Bhagavad Gita* 3.4.

[211] One ironic aspect of this scene is that Draupadī is encouraging Yudhiṣthira to act (to return and reclaim his kingdom) by arguing that human initiative is pointless. Yudhiṣthira defends his decision not to act (to serve out his exile) by arguing that human effort is always necessary.

Certainly Yudhisthira does not argue that human effort is the only determining factor; but even if human effort is indeed one of several factors, the fact that human effort is necessary implies that a theory of karma can both explain the present and help plan the future. As Long writes,

> ...the realization that events are caused solely by human acts (or in concert with other ... factors, such as time, fate, or divine providence) provides a person with the courage to make a firm and enduring commitment to a life of action (karma-yoga) and to behave in the manner commensurate with the injunctions of the sacred texts [to act in accord with dharma].[212]

Thus the interpretive schema that I employ in Chapter Two (that of dharma) is already linked up with the notion of karma. Indeed, as an individual considers which path is most dharmic, the individual does so both out of piety and a desire to accrue good karma, or avoid bad karma, or both.

Karma is, in fact, used to explain a scene from the Mahābhārata -- but the explanation is not in the Mahābhārata. (This is a scene we will return to in Chapter Two.) At one point on the way to heaven, Yudhisthira discovers that his brothers are in a hellish place; he refuses heaven and wishes to stay with his brothers. Soon enough, the scene is revealed as a test, and Yudhisthira and his brothers take their place in heaven. Some centuries later, in the Mārkandeya Purāna, the story of Vipaścit elaborates on this Mahābhārata story by exploiting the possibilities of karma transference.

> During a brief visit to hell, to expiate one brief lapse, the virtuous king Vipaścit noticed the air from his body was relieving the suffering of the sinners there...[213] [To which] Indra said, "These men of evil karma have reached hell because of their karma; and you must go to heaven because of your own good karma..." [To which Vipaścit replied,] "How can other men find delight in associating with me if these men do not become

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[212] Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the Mahabharata." pp. 51-52.

[213] Yudhisthira too cools his brother by means of the cool breeze that comes from his body.

elevated in my presence? Therefore let the sinners who are undergoing punishment be freed from hell by means of whatever good deeds I have done." Indra [replies] "By this you have achieved a higher place and now you may see how these people, despite their evil karma, are released from hell." Then a rain of flowers fell upon [Vipaścit], and Indra placed him in a celestial chariot and led him to heaven.[214]

Such an explanation relies heavily on the theory of karma, reveals "considerable Buddhist influence,"[215] and retells the episode *without mentioning testing*. Indeed the notion that Indra is testing Yudhiṣṭhira might be a particularly unsettling notion to some,[216] but it *is* part of the Mahābhārata story. Thus, my interpretation of this scene, which stresses the testing element, though different from the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa's reading, is closer to the Mahābhārata. In other words, even if one traditional reading decided to interpret this episode in a particular way, that traditional reading does not necessarily close the door on interpreting that episode.

Let us apply this lesson to the narrative of Karṇa, as we examine his narrative in the light of destiny. Woods writes,

> The life and death of Karṇa is one of the best-documented examples of the machinations of "the gods" (that is, of daiva) in the epic. His life as a whole, we are told, had been planned before his birth in order to pave the way for the warrior caste to get to heaven: "How [should the warriors attain to the regions of bliss, once they have been cleansed by weapons?] For this [Karṇa] was conceived..." (12.2.4-5)[217]

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[214] Wendy Doniger, "Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and the Puranas," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). pp 32-33.

[215] Ibid. p. 33.

[216] See, for instance, the Buddhist retelling of the King Śibi story. When Indra suggests to Viśvakarman (who takes the place of Agni) that they test Śibi, Viśvakarman replies, "Why should we aggravate this great bodhisattva with this matter?" Indra replies, " For my part I'm not of evil mind.// Just as with true gold, one ought to test it." Nagarjuna, *Prajnaparamita*, trans. Kalavinka. Translated from the Chinese translation (in the 405 Critical Edition by Kumarajiva) Fascicle 4. A more thorough investigation of responses to the question 'why do the gods test us' will be a future project.

[217] Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahabharata*. p. 43.

Indeed, when we read Karna's speech in Chapter Two, we will see that Karna *himself* senses that he is a being manipulated by destiny, or at least by Krsna. Again, what we must remember is that while the explanation through destiny is important (it shows us Karna's role in the structure of the epic, for instance), it does not close the door on interpreting the Karna narrative.

Proof of this is the epic authors' own work. If indeed the above explanation through destiny explained everything, then why does Krsna approach Karna just before the battle? Karna would have fulfilled his destiny with or without Krsna's temptation. Moreover, just as Yudhisthira emphasizes to Draupadi that human action and effort are necessary, the epic authors too show that Karna is not merely a puppet of destiny; when he chooses to stay on the Kaurava side, his choice is moving and complex.[218]

Thus just as Yudhisthira emphasizes the human along with the transcendent (dharma, destiny), this dissertation's interpretation in Chapter Two will try to do the same: to interpret Karna's choice in terms of human courage in the face of destiny and dharma.

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[218] As I will try to show in Chapter Two, Karna's choice is not a form of 'fated insanity,' but a conscious and courageous decision. And it is a decision that Karna seems to make out of a sense of the integrity of his emotional relationships; it is not a decision that he *must* make. In Chapter Five, I will *contrast* Karna and Bhīsma's position on fighting on the Kaurava side, thus arguing that Karna is not compelled to choose as he does. Karna's decision is not rooted in compulsion (vidhi) -- or if it is based on compulsion, it is a compulsion based on love and personal loyalty, and not a merely contractual compulsion.

Chapter Two

Courage

2.1 Karṇa's Choice

The Sanskrit epic the <u>Mahābhārata</u> is pervaded by moments of grave ethical choices. From Draupadī humiliated at the Kaurava court, to Arjuna on the battlefield, to Yudhiṣṭhira at the gates of heaven, the epic is constantly posing serious ethical dilemmas about the very systems (dharma, <u>bhakti</u>, etc) that it itself seems to propose. This chapter will focus on the choice that Karṇa makes when he is asked by both Kṛṣṇa and Kunti to fight for the Pāṇḍava side. I want to argue that Karṇa is indeed facing a deep ethical dilemma and that his response to fighting a losing battle is neither nihilistic nor fatalistic; Karṇa's courage is existential rather than martial. I will also discuss how Karṇa's story does and does not subvert the ethical systems that Karṇa implicitly criticizes through his choice, and will conclude with a discussion of the way that other episodes in the epic provide alternative "framing analogies" and thus allow for multiple ethical perspectives on a single narrative thread.

Karṇa's decision is, within the epic, one of the few times that any character bases his argument on affection or love (<u>sauhārda</u>, <u>sneha</u>). Karṇa remains *loyal* to those who have loved him and still love him. Their love for him both justifies and demands Karṇa's loyalty. In part because it is based on loyalty, on human choice and on being chosen, Karṇa's choice leaps out of the epic at the reader. His choice is startling in the

context of dharma as 'code for conduct,' and the options that dharma provides to an individual. By examining these options, we will see how, through the story of Karṇa's choice, the epic authors both *undermine* the claim of completeness of any human knowledge-system about dharma, and *extend* the range of what dharma can encompass.

2.2 Karṇa's Perspective on his Narrative

On the eve of the great war over the kingdom of Bhārata, a god in the form of a man approaches a warrior preparing for battle. The god is Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, and ostensibly the foremost divine presence in the book. And the warrior is Karṇa, who will fight – and die – on the losing side of the war. Karṇa is aware that Kṛṣṇa is a god for Kṛṣṇa's mortal disguise is a thin veil. We should keep this in mind as we examine Karṇa's response to Kṛṣṇa's request.

First, though, I will begin by introducing Karṇa through his story as seen from *his* point of view. Karṇa is the son of a charioteer couple, and thus, in the social system of the epic, a sūta, a member of one of the lower castes (jāti-s) of society. Crucially, Karṇa is not a member, by dint of his parents, of the the aristocratic warrior class (kṣatriya varṇa).[1] Moreover, the sūta jāti that Karṇa does belong to is not merely low, it is an 'against the grain' (pratiloma) jāti, that is, it is a jāti 'originating' from the (hypogamous) union of a brahmin woman and a kṣatriya man.[2] A sūta is not just not

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[1] A person's jāti is that person's 'caste.' We should be careful to distinguish jāti from varṇa 'class.' Each varṇa 'class' contains several jātis 'castes;' brahmin, kṣatriya, etc are varṇas. I would also like to strongly emphasize that I am not using 'class' here in a way that, say, a sociologist would use the term; I certainly do not wish to suggest varṇa has any of the connotations of changeability of a modern 'socio-economic class.' Nevertheless, I use the translation 'class' because, following Doniger, the word helps most English readers *think* through these issues. What precisely varṇa means will have to be refined and corrected by further information (and I hope this chapter will demonstrate as much) as indeed would any cross-cultural translation. See Doniger's introduction to Manu, *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). See especially p. lxxxvi.

[2] Manu 10.11, 10.17 in ibid.

low, he is an outcast (apasada) and should, in the words of Manu, "make his living by an activity reviled by the twice-born [the brahmins, the kṣatriyas, and the vaiśyas]."[3] Nevertheless, at the same time, the sūta jāti is also traditionally the jāti of the epic reciters, and Kṛṣṇa himself participates in the epic battle as a charioteer. (Below I will discuss further the implications of Karṇa belonging to the sūta jāti.)

As a young man, Karṇa develops incredible military skills. At one point, he enters a military tournament, a festival intended to celebrate the end of the military training of the Pāṇḍava and Kaurava princes. The tournament has proceeded quite far when Karṇa arrives; in fact, the champion of the tournament, Arjuna, is about to be crowned. Just before the final ceremonies, Karṇa enters the arena and his very presence causes a stir. Karṇa then reduplicates all of Arjuna's feats one by one. There is one thing left then, to challenge and defeat Arjuna in one-on-one combat. But as Arjuna and Karṇa prepare to fight, the plot takes another twist and class enters the picture.

Kṛpa, an instructor of the princes, asks Karṇa, "what is your kṣatriya lineage?" Karṇa can only hang his head. Then, in another surprising turn, Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava brothers, steps forward and *makes* Karṇa a kṣatriya. Citing scripture legalistically, Duryodhana reminds the crowd that class is not always a matter of birth. A man who rules a kingdom becomes *de facto* a kṣatriya. So Duryodhana bestows a small province on Karṇa. Immediately, priests are summoned and Karṇa is anointed. And now that Karṇa is a kṣatriya, no one can object to the battle between Karṇa and Arjuna.

At just that moment, Karṇa's father, the charioteer Adhiratha, enters the arena. (Perhaps someone has run to tell him that his son has become a king.) And Karṇa,

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[3] Manu 10.46.

without hesitation, bows down to his father to show him respect. And this causes a pandemonium both among the contestants and the crowd – there are jeering comments at Karṇa, there are cries of support – but the net result is that the tournament breaks down and the battle between Arjuna and Karṇa is postponed.

Karṇa never forgives the Pāṇḍavas for the taunts, and, in the years that follow, Karṇa's anger and envy at the Pāṇḍavas only deepens and grows. One interesting example is the princess Draupadī's groom-choice ceremony (svayaṃvara). Just as at the tournament, Karṇa is disallowed from even *participating*. The contest involves stringing a bow and when Karṇa steps up to try, Draupadī objects, saying that she should not be married to the son of a sūta. (Draupadī is a kṣatriya princess.) That certainly offends Karṇa, but the insult is compounded when Draupadī allows a *brahmin* attending the svayaṃvara to compete for her hand. The same argument based on class should indeed apply just as well to the brahmin: as Manu says, "a twice-born man should marry a wife who is of the *same* class…"[4] And even though "marrying up" (hypergamy) is not disallowed by the dharmaśāstras[5] (for example by Manu), in theory Draupadī should be choosing among kṣatriya princes. In that sense, Draupadī is not acting wrongly, only unconventionally when she allows the brahmin to compete. To Karṇa, Draupadī's unfairness lies in the way that she emphasizes convention when it comes to prohibiting Karṇa from the tournament, but she stretches convention when she allows the brahmin to attempt to string the bow. The brahmin turns out to be Arjuna in disguise, and so Draupadī does indeed wind up marrying a kṣatriya. To Karṇa, however, the process that led to that outcome was inconsistent and unfair.[6]

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[4] Manu 3.4 (italics mine).

[5] This term will be explained below.

[6] Ironically, Karṇa too is a kṣatriya in disguise, like Arjuna.

As such events harden Karna's anger and envy, it becomes his life's goal to defeat Arjuna. This brings us to the point where Kṛṣṇa approaches Karna just before the war.

Kṛṣṇa – Karṇa Dialogue [summary]

Kṛṣṇa begins by revealing to Karna that he is a brother to the Pāṇḍavas. He has been adopted by the sūta family, but he was born to Kuntī, the same mother the Pāṇḍavas share.[7] (Kṛṣṇa gives Karna this information very subtly, through vocatives. He begins by addressing Karna as "Rādheya" 'son of Rādhā' in 5.138.6 and then later switches to "Kaunteya" 'son of Kuntī' in 5.138.20.) If Karna is indeed their eldest brother, he can, if he claims that position, be immediately crowned king of the entire realm: both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas would serve him, and he would even enjoy the Pāṇḍavas' common wife! [Kṛṣṇa leaves unsaid that the Kauravas would not dare to challenge the Pāṇḍavas without Karna.] Karna's response is that his father Adhiratha took him in out of *love* and that his mother Rādhā suckled him out of *love* as well. "How could [I] deny her the ancestral offering? ... Adhiratha, the sūta, thinks of me as his son, and my *love* demands that I think of him as my father... my heart has bonds of *love* with them, Kṛṣṇa!" (5.139) Moreover, it would be disgraceful, Karna feels, to abandon a king (Duryodhana) who has given him shelter and privilege for thirteen years.

Karna then makes an [amazing] request: Kṛṣṇa should not let anyone know that Karna is Kuntī's son. If word leaked of this fact, Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest Pāṇḍava, would give Karna the kingdom; then Karna, by dint of his loyalty to Duryodhana, would give Duryodhana the kingdom. And Karna hopes instead to "Let the law-spirited Yudhiṣṭhira be king forever."(5.139.23)

Kṛṣṇa responds that he is amazed that Karna is not tempted by the offer of a kingdom. Nevertheless, the war has been fated long ago, and the war will take place to herald in the Kali Yuga 'the (Dark) Fourth Epoch,' the most decadent and decrepit epoch of human existence.

"But," Karna asks "why [...] did you seek to delude me when you already knew?" (5.141.1) Kṛṣṇa responds enigmatically: "Of a certainty, the destruction of the earth is now near, for my words do not

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[7] It is interesting to note here that the youngest two (twin) Pāṇḍavas are themselves 'adopted' by Kuntī; their mother, Mādrī, committed satī when her husband Pandu died. The Pāṇḍavas get their name from Pandu, but he did not father any of them.

reach your heart, Karṇa. When the destruction of all creatures is at hand, bad policy disguised as good does not stir from the heart, my friend." (5.141.43-44)

Karṇa ends the dialogue by hugging Kṛṣṇa and saying that they shall next meet in heaven.

I should add here that this summary does not capture the length and depth of Karṇa's speeches. The decision that Karṇa makes as he speaks is a very conscious and deliberate decision. It is a difficult decision, made, as the involvement of the speeches suggest, with a great deal of care, tact, and self-consciousness. We should not be tempted into believing that because Karṇa rejects Kṛṣṇa's advice there is something naïve about his view of the world, something he simply does not understand. As I will try to argue below, it is precisely because Karṇa understands perfectly and precisely the world before him that his decision becomes so interesting and poignant.

Kṛṣṇa's efforts are only the first attempt to bring Karṇa to the other side. The second, and perhaps more dramatic attempt, is made by Kuntī, Karṇa's biological mother. Kuntī also approaches Karṇa and reveals that she was indeed his mother. The sun god, Sūrya, who is Karṇa's "biological" father, even speaks from the heavens to confirm Kuntī's story and to encourage Karṇa to follow her advice.

Kuntī - Karṇa Dialogue [summary]
Kuntī finds Karṇa praying, as is his ritual, at the banks of the river until the sun scorches his back. When he has finished, Karṇa introduces himself politely but explicitly as the son of Adhiratha and Rādhā. [Note that Karṇa already knows that Kuntī is his mother, since Kṛṣṇa has already told him as much.] Kuntī reveals herself as his mother and asks him to join the Pāṇḍavas. Kuntī then adds another stunning revelation: Karṇa's *father* is Sūrya. Sūrya as well suddenly speaks,[8] verifies Kuntī's

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[8] "a voice ... issued from the sun" (5.144.1).

words, and advises Karṇa to follow her.[9] But "Karṇa's mind did not falter, for he stood fast by the truth." (5.144.3) As he had with Kṛṣṇa, Karṇa reiterates that he must stay his course out of loyalty.

Still, out of a desire to "persevere in the human conduct that becomes a decent man," (5.144.19) Karṇa does promise Kuntī that he will kill only Arjuna, of all her sons, thus leaving her with five sons at the end of the battle.[10]

This dialogue, it should be noted, is one of the best-loved moments in the epic. And it is also explicitly about Karṇa's nobility. Just before Karṇa begins the dialogue he is described as "a proud and splendid man."[11] We shall return to this description, examining the double-edged implications of "proud" as well as analyzing just how splendid a *man* Karṇa is.

2.3 Multiple Choice: the Options that Dharma Provides

At the outset, Karṇa's choice has much emotional impact. As noted, it is one of the few times that any character justifies his actions based on affection or love (sauhārda, sneha).[12] And, as we have mentioned, it is a remarkable moment in that Karṇa's choice is based on loyalty, on human choice, and on being chosen. To understand why Karṇa's choice is so startling, we have to examine first the concept of *dharma* 'code for conduct' in the epic, and second what options dharma leaves open to an individual. This context will reveal to us that, through the story of Karṇa's choice,

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[9] Note that that the offspring of a male god and a mortal woman is explicitly defined as belonging to the kṣatriya class. Thus this revelation makes Karṇa into a kṣatriya and establishes the very kṣatriya lineage, the lack of which had so humiliated Karṇa at the tournament.

[10] Kuntī approaches Karṇa while he is praying, and Karṇa has sworn that any brahmin that approaches him during that time will receive alms from him. It is precisely in this same guise that Indra approaches Karṇa and steals his golden armor and earrings.

[11] 5.143.31.

[12] A project for later development would be to delineate the semantic fields of sneha and sauhārda in the *Mahabharata*, or perhaps, in classical Indian literature. As suggested above, doing so within the *Mahabharata* is difficult because of the limited number of instances of individuals *making an argument* based on these terms.

the epic authors both undermine the claim of completeness of any human knowledge-system about dharma,[13] as well as extend the range of what dharma can encompass.

But even before this introduction to dharma has started, the very title of this chapter section has already subverted some of the spirit of dharma. The world of dharma is a world, essentially, of choicelessness. Dharma is coded into varna and jāti, an in that sense, an individual's dharma stems from 'nature,' not 'nurture.' To know who your parents are is to know the substance of which your body is made up, and hence your jāti and the dharma appropriate to that jāti.[14] That much is the standard view of dharma.

However, in certain situations, dharma is difficult to discern, and the epic contains several such situations. I will discuss below the 'options' that dharma 'makes available,' referring to the sources of dharma, appeal to which takes place only in an extreme situation, but *a situation of the type which the epic authors seem to delight in constructing.* (That is why I feel justified in talking about these options.) Each of these sources engenders a tenable and satisfactory system for leading a human life.

Two caveats: first, these systems are not completely independent of each other, and they do overlap in places. Nonetheless, they represent differing (and potentially conflicting) ideologies. Second, at the same time that the epic is exploring dharma, it is also exploring (and expounding) Bhakti Hinduism, a school of worship which wished to

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[13] It is in this spirit that Bhīṣma can say "Great-sprited brahmins on earth fail to encompass [dharma]" (2.62.15).

[14] This aspect of dharma *seems* to justify Bhīma's sneering at Karna, after having seen him bow to the charioteer Adhiratha: "you [had] better stick to the whip that suits your family" (1.127.5).

get away from a ritualism whose very location and inspiration were the treatises on dharma.[15]

2.4 Introduction to Dharma

Much has been written about dharma, and I do not intend to provide anything like an exhaustive treatment of the topic here. Rather, I will sketch here an outline of the relevant aspects of dharma for this investigation. Following Inden, who follows Kane,[16] we might translate dharma as 'code for conduct.' It has also been translated as 'law' or as 'religion.' This last term has the advantage that dharma might be more than a 'legislative system' or 'code.' Dharma is closer to the generalized, philosophical idea of law as a transcendent meaning, a meaning that both rises above the details of human existence and gives those details purpose. Dharma does carry the connotations of these English translations, but it has another important dimension: dharma is not law or religion which is distinct from nature or divine will. To conceive of dharma is to conceive the entire universe as part of a single unified moral enterprise: humans, gods, animals, plants, stones – any and every existent thing – all contribute to the upkeep, the sustenance, of the universe when it acts in accordance with dharma. (Dharma is derived from the verb root dhṛ 'to bear, sustain.')[17]

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[15] This dissertation cannot investigate the following topic, though a larger study could: James Fitzgerald has suggested that there are two senses of Dharma in the epic, an older Dharma based on meritorious deeds and a new Dharma based on (inner) virtue. James L. Fitzgerald, "The Brahmins' Struggle for Status and Authority in the Mahabharata" (paper presented at the American Association of Religion Annual Meeting, Nashville, 2000).

[16] Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). p. 19. Panduranga Vamana Kane, *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930-62).

[17] "Dharma is not simply a code for conduct; it is the highest of the three goals of man as an embodied being, taking proper precedence over the "enjoyment of desires" (kāma) and the "acquisistion of wealth" (artha). As a goal, dharma is the "proper order" of things that brings about the good of the whole world, a goal that is achieved only by the constant striving of people. Thus, dharma is not only a synchronic state of beings but also a diachronic process of becoming, inherent in the units that make up

The Vedas (the basis for a form of Hinduism that predates the <u>Mahābhārata</u>) made the claim that it was *sacrifice to the gods* that was the human contribution to dharma. Human beings should thus structure their society, activities, and lives in a way that enables proper ritual performance of sacrifices. Crucially, the Vedas were known as <u>śruti</u> (literally 'the heard'); they were not merely the texts at the heart of both the structure and meaning of society; they represented a direct transmission from the gods to human beings. And in some sense they also represented the *only* such communication: to understand <u>śruti</u> was to understand what the gods meant to tell us the single time they communicated with us.

Complementing <u>śruti</u> is <u>smṛti</u> (literally 'the remembered'), a set of texts which interpreted the Vedas and indeed constituted a *tradition* of interpretation. (Lingat, for example, translates <u>smṛti</u> as 'the Tradition.') It is in the <u>smṛti</u> that we find the compendiums of laws, the <u>dharmaśāstra</u>-s, such as those of Manu and Yājñavalkya. And it is in the <u>smṛti</u> that we find the <u>Mahābhārata</u> -- a text which contains a vast compendium of rules for good kingship in the two massive volumes, the Śānti and Anuśāsana Parvans. In addition, as I hope to show here, the epic reflects deeply on the nature of dharma itself and how human beings stand in relation to it as they choose and take action.

Dharma also pervades the human world because dharma is coded into <u>varṇa</u> and <u>jāti</u>, and <u>jāti</u> is coded into every human being's mode of worship, occupation, place, and

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the world." Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal.* p. 19.

bodily substance.[18] (In general, dharma inheres in "its own particular, homologous substance."[19]) As Inden writes,

> ... "bodily substance" and "code for conduct" ... were not conceived of
> dualistically in Hindu culture. They were not considered to be
> irreducibly different and opposed elements drawn from contrasting
> "natural" and "moral" orders having their own distinct rules. Instead,
> they were conceived of as mutually interdependent elements, each of
> which may be shaped by or even reduced to the other because they were
> in fact drawn from the same single "bio-moral" order.[20]

In this sense, an individual's dharma stems from 'nature,' not 'nurture.' To know who your parents are is to know the substance of which your body is made, and thence your jāti and the dharma appropriate to that jāti. It is precisely this aspect of dharma that *seems* to justify Bhīma when he sneers at Karṇa, having seen Karṇa bow to the charioteer Adhiratha, "you [had] better stick to the whip that suits your family." (1.127.5)

2.5 Dharma as an Interpretive Tool

A natural question at this point would be: why discuss Karṇa's choice in terms of dharma? If indeed there are laws for everything, why not simply assert that "Karṇa was wrong?" The reasons to discuss Karṇa's choice in terms of dharma are multiple. First, and most generally, because the Mahābhārata as a whole is about dharma; it is considered a part of the dharma-smrti.[21] Second, more specifically, at the start of their dialogue, Kṛṣṇa praises Karṇa on his knowledge of the Vedas and the dharmaśāstra:

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[18] Following ibid. p. 17

[19] Ibid. p. 19.

[20] Ibid. pp. 11-12.

[21] Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, trans. J. D. M. Derrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). pp. 9-10.

tvam eva Karṇa jānāsi vedavādan sanātanān
tvaṃ hyeva dharmaśāstreṣu sūksmeṣu pariniṣthitaḥ (5.138.7)
Karṇa, you are the one who knows the eternal words of the Vedas;
For when the dharmaśāstras are subtle, you indeed are firm/certain.

Third, Karṇa has a deep connection to Yudhiṣṭhira,[22] who is the Dharma King

(dharma-rāja). (The dharmaśāstra portions of the epic are spoken, not surprisingly, to

Yudhiṣṭhira.) Not only is Karṇa a replacement "eldest" brother (the essence of Kṛṣṇa's

offer), but, Yudhiṣṭhira is obsessed with Karṇa. After being defeated by Karṇa in battle,

he admits, "for thirteen years ... through fear of Karṇa, I did not obtain any sleep by

night or any comfort by day... Wherever I was, the universe appeared to me to be full

of Karṇa!" (8.66) Moreover, the only time Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna argue, it is over

Karṇa (8.66-69), and their argument is so intense that Kṛṣṇa has to prevent Arjuna from

killing Yudhiṣṭhira.[23]

2.6 Options for Action

We are now in a position to examine in some detail the most common options

that a (male) character in the epic has open to him.[24] Most of these options are

exemplified by the Pāṇḍava brothers (along with other heroes), but Karṇa chooses

through an option that is unusual both for him and for the epic.[25]

The list below is arranged roughly according to the sources of dharma (with one

additional option). Moreover, in the Mahābhārata, some of these options interact and

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[22] As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Karṇa has a deep connection to other characters as well, namely Arjuna and Bhīṣma.

[23] See my section 1.11 for why I am not here discussing Karṇa's choice in terms of karma.

[24] Women have other options open to them; exploring such options would be another study altogether.

[25] I should clarify that these "options" are not explicitly laid out as such in the Mahabharata.

coexist with bhakti notions, as will be specified below. Here in brief are the five options:

1. smṛti / svadharma 'individual duty as established by the Tradition'
2. śruti / bhakti 'divine [direct] communication'
3. sad ācāra 'custom of good people'
4. 'Might makes right.'
5. ātma-tuṣṭi 'approval of one's conscience'

Karṇa chooses to act based on the fifth option, but it is also instructive to see how and why Karṇa shies away from the other options. As when examining any moral choices, it is often as interesting to understand what *is not* chosen, in order to fully grasp the dimensions of what *is* chosen

2.6.1 smṛti / svadharma 'individual duty as established by the Tradition'

Exemplified by Sahadeva and Nakula (the youngest Pāṇḍava twin brothers), individuals in this option "sustain" society by acquiescing to the role they have been given by their inherited biology. Living by this option is the most direct application of the jāti system described above and in the dharmaśāstras. In this option, one's own nature (that is, one's origins, identity, etc.) is more important than anything else in determining one's potential. Human beings need to understand the truth about themselves; and when they do, the actions they make on that basis are the most likely to lead towards their own fulfillment as individuals, as actors in 'the field of dharma.'

Karṇa refuses to live by svadharma in two ways, both of them important: first, he chooses to value that aspect of his life that is "Nurture" even if it not "true" in some sense. Karṇa's real mother is his adopted mother, not his biological mother; more precisely, *when considering how to act in the world, Karṇa chooses to consider his adopted mother his real mother.* Second, his mother's identity should not determine

what he can or cannot do. Indeed, his kṣatriya status comes not from any biological material, but from Duryodhana's grant. For Karṇa, what individuals believe they are capable of should be determined neither by their class nor by their biological parents.

At this point, it helps to introduce the Sanskrit term for human 'essence,' svabhāva.[26] Karṇa is taking the position that his svabhāva is determined not by nature, but by nurture; so Karṇa is not denying that he has an "essence" per se. What Karṇa is saying is that "my essence (svabhāva) is determined by my nurture, and [like Yudhiṣṭhira] I cannot be swayed from my essence, by *any* cause, not even by a divine cause!"

Of course, to the reader, and perhaps even to Karṇa, the decision to continue as a kṣatriya -- something that neither Karṇa, Kṛṣṇa, nor Kuntī question -- is an implicit acceptance that his bodily substance really has determined his path of conduct after all. I will return to this fact later on; for now, however, I want to concentrate on the way that Karṇa *justifies* his action, on how Karṇa chooses sides. Even if the net result of Karṇa's choice may be the same whether he acts based on svadharma or ātma-tuṣṭi, I want to concentrate on what it means to Karṇa (and to us as readers) for him to act based on ātma-tuṣṭi.

2.6.2 śruti / bhakti 'divine [direct] communication' Bhakti is devotion to a god, and usually devotion to Kṛṣṇa in particular. In this option, a human being gives up all individual choice and simply follows what the god tells him or her to do. This is, in short form, the message of the Bhagavadgītā, expounded by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna, when

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[26] See 18.8.30 when the god Dharma is praising Yudhiṣṭhira for not abandoning his svabhāva, despite tests.

Arjuna hesitates before engaging in the civil war that will destroy both his world and his family.

> But to those who serve me while thinking only of me and none other,
> who are always yoked, to them I bring felicity... Whatever you do, or
> eat, or offer, or give, or mortify, [Arjuna], make it an offering to me ...
> Even a hardened criminal who loves me and none other is to be deemed
> a saint, for he has the right conviction ... Reduced to this passing world
> of unhappiness, embrace me! (6.31.20-35)

Moreover, human beings should give up on any desire to try to reap the benefits of their actions – or to try to understand what ramifications their actions will have.

> Restrain yourself and renounce the fruit of all your actions... Beloved of
> me is the devotee who neither hates nor rejoices, does not mourn or
> hanker, and relinquishes both good and evil. (6.34.12-17) Listen to one
> more final word of mine that embodies the greatest mystery of all. I shall
> tell it to you for your own good, for you are profoundly dear to me. Keep
> your mind on me, honor me with your devotion and sacrifice, and you
> shall come to me. Abandon all the Laws and instead seek shelter with me
> alone. Be unconcerned, I shall set you free from all evils. (6.40.63-66)

Bhakti Hinduism is a huge school of belief,[27] and much critical exegesis of the Mahābhārata is devoted to how the epic contains the seed for bhakti Hinduism.

In logical structure, bhakti and śruti are similar. In both, the word of a god is taken as the path to follow.[28] In both it is assumed that the gods, like humans, strive towards dharma; thus following the advice, requests, commands, and suggestions of a god -- whether heard directly or recorded as 'heard' -- would be right.[29]

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[27] More precisely, there are many bhakti sects sustained by a common ideology.

[28] They differ in that bhakti may be sometimes readily understandable, while śruti is aphoristic and mysterious.

[29] Like Christian Protestantism much later, bhakti claims that the gods have not merely spoken 'once' in a hoary antiquity, but that they may be constantly in communication with us; Kṛṣṇa is omnipresent -- if we only listen. Thus the 'heard' takes on a completely new connotation.

Note also that in some cases, bhakti and smṛti may coincide; thus in the

Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna to perform his svadharma, to fight as is appropriate

for a prince.

Karṇa simply rejects the śruti/bhakti option as he rejects Kṛṣṇa's advice.

Similarly, in the exchange with Kuntī, Karṇa also rejects Sūrya's advice. In another

episode, Karṇa will reject Sūrya's advice, even though doing so will cost him his life. In

that episode, he refuses to treat a god disguised as a mendicant as a god – insisting,

despite being warned and despite the veil falling rather obviously, on acting as if the

god before him was a human beggar-priest.

In spite of this, we should note that Karṇa's attitude towards the gods is not

dismissive: he does not wave them off as if they were giving him false advice. He

repeatedly acknowledges that the advice they give him is sound. But yet when he acts in

the world, he chooses to act in a manner that sets the god's advice on the same level as

any other.

2.6.3 sad ācāra 'custom of good people' According to most dharmaśāstras, an

individual may appeal to this source of dharma when both smṛti and śruti fail to resolve

a dilemma. The "custom of good people" is based on the consciousness of dharma that

brahmins innately possess. Manu, for example, says

> If (the question) should arise, 'What about the laws that have not been
> mentioned?' (the reply is): 'What educated priests say should be the
> undoubted law.' ... Whatever law is agreed upon by an assembly
> [pariṣad] of ten people or more, or even three people or more, who
> persist in their proper occupations, that law should not be disputed... the
> law that is determined by even a singly priest who knows the Veda
> should be recognized as the supreme law, but not one that is proclaimed
> by millions of ignorant men. (12.108, 110, 113)

According to Lingat,

> Pariṣad "colleges" disappeared in relatively early times, probably prior to
> the development of the literature comprised in the [dharma]śāstras... The
> proper function of pariṣads... have been fulfilled at later periods by the
> Brahmins attached to courts of Indian princes, such as the paṇḍita who
> bears the title vinaya-sthiti-sthāpaka ("he who established the lines of
> good discipline") in Gupta inscriptions.

The epic exemplar of the paṇḍita is Yudhiṣṭhira, the 'Dharma King.' Vidura, who seems

a good candidate for a paṇḍita, is a wise but often ignored counselor at Dhṛtarāṣṭra's

court; ironically, even though he is an incarnation of the god Dharma, Vidura is of a low

caste and so not a perfect fit into this category.

'Custom of good people' is perhaps especially most helpful in understanding

both 'dharma in extremity' (āpad dharma) and everyday situations that, say, Manu does

not cover. By allowing that such cases could be dealt with by a wise, trained brahmin, it

opened the way to a flourishing commentarial tradition on the dharmaśāstras.

Now, as we have seen. Kṛṣṇa himself addresses Karṇa as someone who

understands the subtlety of the dharmaśāstras. But Karṇa, like Vidura, is ostensibly

from the wrong class to have such knowledge or such intuition. If Karṇa does choose a

path that leads to dharma, it is not by the logic of 'custom of good people;' it would

have to be by the logic of ātma-tuṣṭ.

2.6.4 'Might makes right' Exemplars of this option are Duryodhana and Bhīma, one

from each side of the battle; they "walk softly and carry a big stick." Both rely on brute

strength, and both of these characters are driven by the passion that wells up within

them: when Duryodhana challenges the Pāṇḍavas, it is because his breast is full of pride

and envy; when Bhīma rips open Duḥśāsana on the battle field, it is because his breast

is full of revenge and hatred.[30] Both these characters are driven by their instincts and are

endowed with superhuman strength; thus when they do act, things fall their way.

Brian K. Smith sees this as a remnant of a Vedic worldview:

> In the Veda, self-aggrandisement and dominance were unabashedly
> embraced and unshamedly displayed... violence and power *over* another
> were celebrated on their own terms, or rather, were represented as part
> and parcel of the natural order of things... 'The eater of food and food
> are indeed everything here,' [Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, 11.1.6.19] and what
> might appear as a culinary metaphor was really meant as a descriptive
> account of the natural and social world organized into a heirarchically
> ordered food chain.. the higher orders 'live on' the lower... It is an order
> of things seemingly most advantageous to the one with the greatest
> physical strength and military might -- the biggest fish, the top dog. The
> rank order of eaters and food in the natural world is straightforward: the
> physically more powerful eat the physically less powerful.[31]

(For Smith, such a worldview stands in tension with a vegetarian brahminical code, and

Manu's dharmaśāstra, as a text, responds to this tension.) In the epic, this option is

constantly expressed (and undermined) by the means taken to gain victory. For example

in the final mace duel between Bhīma and Duryodhana, Bhīma has to play foul and hit

Duryodhana below the waist in order to win.[32]

Perhaps it is most surprising that Karṇa does not choose according to the logic

of this option. After all, one of the clearest expositions of this option in the epic comes

from Karṇa's lips: "dharma follows/obeys strength" (balam dharma anuvartate).

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[30] Bhīma, though, seems more sympathetic because his instincts seem more noble. For instance, Bhīma defends women in distress while Duryodhana is willing to see even a queen violated in public.

[31] Brian K. Smith in his part of the introduction to Manu, *The Laws of Manu*. pp. xxiii - xxvii.

[32] On Duryodhana's subsequent rage and denunciation of Kṛṣṇa (who suggests the foul move to Bhīma), see David Gitomer, "King Duryodhana: The Mahabharata Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112, no. 2 (1992).

(1.126.19)[33] Without making 'excuses' for this utterance (e.g. Karṇa had just been humiliated by Arjuna, Karṇa was speaking in the context of kṣatra-dharma), it is undeniable that at many points Karṇa chooses to act according to this philosophy. Indeed that is why Karṇa encourages the raids on the Pāṇḍavas while they are in exile – and why Karṇa is judged by some critics to be an immoral character. However, what is important to this discussion is not whether or not Karṇa is a character that *always* follows one of the above options. It is which particular option he chooses in this particular moment. And in this particular instance, Karṇa does not believe in his choice beause it will be justified by military victory. *On the contrary, he knows his side will lose.*

This raises three general points. First, methodologicaly, because the epic is such a text of particulars, writing about it must also be an exercise in particulars -- I discuss here only a particular moment in which Karṇa exhibits a particularly interesting choice, given the peculiar circumstances of that choice. Second, I do not wish to claim that Karṇa is the hero of the epic or that he represents some "fifth way" of dharma. I only hope to establish that, at one peculiar juncture, Karṇa chooses in a particularly striking way.

Third, the Mahabharata is driven by a search for limits (in the form of paradox) and a search for order. Just as Karṇa, as well as Bhīṣma, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Arjuna, both lives by a rule-based dharma and runs up against the limits of that dharma, so the text contains both long stretches of rule-based dharma as well as story after story where

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[33] Interestingly, the closest 'counter-law' to this aphorism comes from Draupadī, and it is interestingly askew: "Greed kills dharma."

dharma is subtle, paradoxical, surprising, and still surprisingly *not* ungraspable or impossible to understand.

2.6.5 ātma-tuṣṭi 'approval of one's conscience' Unlike other dharmaśāstras, Manu and Yājñavalkya allow ātma-tuṣṭi (Yājñavalkya 1.7) svasya priyam ātmanaḥ (Manu 2.12) 'approval of one's conscience'[34] as a source of dharma. Lingat writes:

> ... it is only when all the other sources of dharma are silent that the rule
> of dharma may be sought out in the approval of one's conscience. The
> commentators on Manu add the hypothesis that where one has a choice
> between two ways of acting conscience will show which is to be
> preferred. They believe, moreover, that the approval of conscience, as a
> rule of life, is not to be admitted except in the cases of individuals of
> great virtue.[35]

And this is the option that seems to best fit Karṇa's choice.

Faced with all of these options, Karṇa *chooses to act based upon loyalty to those who have chosen him.* He chooses the fifth option in the sense that he follows his conscience rather than any form of *code*. He chooses to be loyal to those human beings who have, without any coercion, bestowed kindness upon him: since his adopted parents took him in, he will choose to act in loyalty to them, even though he knows they are not his biological parents. Since Duryodhana spared him some humiliation at the tournament, he will fight for Duryodhana – knowing full well both that Duryodhana's side will lose and that Duryodhana is not fit to rule the kingdom.

Let us take up again here the objection that Karṇa may be simply acting out of a certain naïveté, that he is blind to the evil sides of Duryodhana because Karṇa is so

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[34] These phrases literally translate to 'inner contentment,' or contentment of the soul. I've adopted Lingat's stronger version to give the phrase its moral flavor.

[35] Lingat, *The Classical Law of India.* p. 6.

emotionally tied to the social status that Duryodhana gave to him. Again, the epic authors seem to be specifically concerned with this objection when they have Karṇa spell out astutely how important it is for Kṛṣṇa not to mention their dialogue to anyone:

> So you should suppress word of our taking counsel here, best of men;
> that would be best, I think, joy of all the Yādavas. If the law–spirited
> king of strict vows [Yudhiṣṭhira] knows that I am Kuntī's first-born son,
> he will not accept the kingdom... (5.139.20-23)

If that were to happen (as I've described above), Yudhiṣṭhira would hand the kingdom over to Karṇa; Karṇa in turn, being beholden to Duryodhana, would give the kingdom over to Duryodhana. And this is specifically an outcome that Karṇa does not want: he knows that Yudhiṣṭhira is a good king, and in fact praises the Pāṇḍavas in some detail in the passage following this quotation. In this sense, Karṇa is not naïve to the faults of Duryodhana or ignorant of the qualities of the Pāṇḍavas. Nor is he naïve about what the outcome of the war might be: even though he mentions to Kṛṣṇa in parting, "perhaps we shall see you again ... if we escape alive from the great battle" (5.141.45), Karṇa knows full well that he will die in the war, and even that Arjuna will kill him. When Karṇa compares the battle to a sacrifice, he includes, "when you see me cut down by the Left-handed Archer [Arjuna], it will be the Re-piling of the Fire of their sacrifice." (5.139.45) Far from being naïve, Karṇa is thoroughly prescient about both what the future will bring and the relative merit of the warriors on each side of the war.

It might also seem at first pass that Karṇa's actions are simply unethical; one might ask, "aren't Karṇa's actions contrary to *dharma*, the moral Law? Shouldn't Karṇa have prevented the war at all costs? Doesn't the human sacrifice of the war far outweigh any personal concerns he might have?" These would be valid questions if there were any chance that the war would not take place. But Karṇa is sure the war is inevitable,

and Kṛṣṇa assures him that he is correct. And if war is indeed inevitable, what good would changing sides do? Indeed, if there is no way that an individual can prevent the outbreak of war, then there is perhaps nothing to do but to have the courage to live up to one's own personal convictions.

In this light, Karṇa's stand might appear fatalistic: it might seem as if Karṇa were not choosing based on any system but rather not choosing at all -- simply resigning himself to an impending and inexorable destiny. Such an interpretation would be subject to the criticism that it, like so many colonialist studies before it, has found here in the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, as these did in all Eastern texts, a general resignation towards life and thought, a defeatist fatalism that explains, among other things, the supposed lack of progress in the East. In place of such a view, this chapter will show in the following remarks how far from fatalistic Karṇa's stand is – that it is, instead, highly courageous. Karṇa is by no means "resigning" himself to the side that he is on – it is not the case that he has simply given up on human efficacy. Rather, I want to show that Karṇa makes a great choice, a great, conscious, and deliberate choice, by rejecting Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī and acting, instead, on the basis of loyalty.

Note that in a world where one's <u>jāti</u> is coded into one's biological substance, Kṛṣṇa's offer directly appeals to the assumption that one should follow the path of biological identity. So, apart from the rhetoric of the <u>Bhagavadgītā</u> (which is not present here except by echoes[36]), Kṛṣṇa seems to be saying: "By biology, you are the real king. Take the kingship."

Given that a bloody war is about to be fought over this kingdom, it is strange enough within the epic that Karṇa does not accept Kṛṣṇa's offer. Nonetheless, in the

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[36] For example, Karṇa (like Arjuna) is specifically in a chariot when Kṛṣṇa speaks to him.

context of world literature, Karna is even more remarkable. Indeed, Karna's life follows an archetypical biography that Freud called the "Family Romance."[37] In this story, our hero begins his life as a social nobody. As he grows, the hero astonishes his friends and family with astounding feats and is perceived as something of an upstart. At a certain point, the hero is revealed as the son of the king, and to much fanfare is declared the king. At this point, every cultural hero from Moses and Jesus to Cyrus and Oedipus, from Watu Gunung in Java to Nyikang in the Upper Nile, *every* cultural hero acknowledges his right to the kingship and takes responsibility for the kingdom. *Except* for Karna, the only "Family Romance" character who refuses this destiny. In a unique moment in world literature, he says, 'No, I refuse the kingship. I am not the king; I am the son of the parents who loved me.'

2.7 Framing Analogies

This is not the only perspective the epic affords on this scene. In the following, I will consider how another story, by way of analogy, *frames* Karna's story and gives us another ethical perspective on it. I want to use this additional perspective to explore and interpret in the following pages the type of courage that Karna exhibits in making the choice he does, in the decision itself. To understand this courage, then, we will first compare Karna's choice to two choices that Yudhisthira makes at the end of his life.

As we have seen, Karna has a deep connection to Yudhisthira. As the Dharma King (dharma-rāja), Yudhisthira's relationship to dharma is one of the keys to understanding dharma in the epic. Yudhisthira is tested on three occasions, once by a Yaksa 'sprite' and twice on the way to heaven. Let us now turn to this latter pair of tests.

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[37] This topic will be explored in full in Chapter Four.

The first test: Yudhiṣṭhira and the dog [summary]

Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas leave Hastinapura, and a dog joins
Yudhiṣṭhira. As they walk, they each fall dead until only Yudhiṣṭhira and
the dog are left alive. Indra appears and invites Yudhiṣṭhira into his
chariot to take him to heaven. Yudhiṣṭhira responds that he "does not
want to go to heaven without [his] brothers" and Draupadī. Indra assures
Yudhiṣṭhira they are all in heaven. Then Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to ride
Indra's chariot, but only if he can bring his dog along. Yudhiṣṭhira says
he does not want to be cruel to one who has been loyal to him. Indra
replies "Abandon the dog. There is no cruelty in that." (17.3.8[38])
Yudhiṣṭhira refuses, and so Indra reminds Yudhiṣṭhira of how dirty, how
polluted, and how polluting dogs are. Still Yudhiṣṭhira does not budge
from his position. Eventually the dog turns into the god Dharma and
congratulates Yudhiṣṭhira: "Great king, Bharata, you are well born, with
the good conduct and intelligence of your father, and with compassion
for all creatures." (17.3.17) Dharma then reminds Yudhiṣṭhira that it was
he who tested Yudhiṣṭhira before in the Dvaita forest. (17.3)

Curiously, Dharma does not tell Yudhiṣṭhira *why* he tested him. We shall return to this

question later.

The second test: Yudhiṣṭhira and the false heaven [summary]

When Yudhiṣṭhira reaches heaven, he sees Duryodhana seated on a
throne. He does not see the other Pāṇḍavas and, more emphatically, he
doesn't see Karṇa. (The other Pāṇḍavas brothers are surprisingly less
prominent than Karṇa in Yudhiṣṭhira's lament.) And so Yudhiṣṭhira
wants to leave. The Indra "in a speech utterly devoid of cruelty"[39] says
"Great king, dwell in this place, that you have won by your own good
actions. Why do you still drag human affection about, even now?"
(17.3.30-31) The test continues in an even harder form than the two
previous tests. A messenger of the gods leads Yudhiṣṭhira to a dark,
awful, bad-smelling place; he is tired and exhausted. When Yudhiṣṭhira
turns to leave (he is at the limits of his endurance 18.2.30-31), voices call
out imploring him to stay. When he asks their names, they are the

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[38] Translations from Books 16-18 from a rough draft of a translation of these books by Wendy
Doniger, distributed in the course "The *Mahabharata*" at the University of Chicago, Fall 1998.

[39] I highlight this phrase in the context of the question of 'why do the Gods test us?' Such a
question is, however, the seed for another study altogether.

Pāṇḍavas, Karṇa, Draupadī, and the sons of Draupadī. Then he decides
to stay there. Just as he does so, all the Gods appear and it turns out that
there, where Yudhiṣṭhira is standing, is really heaven. (18.1-3)

In both of these tests, Yudhiṣṭhira makes the right choice and upholds dharma, despite

an argument based on dharma to lead him in a different direction -- an argument which

is, moreover, an argument proposed by a god.

By examining the ways in which this pair of tests is similar to the pair of

Karṇa's dialogues (one with Kṛṣṇa, one with Kuntī), I hope to show that the proposal

that Kṛṣṇa makes to Karṇa is not really a negotiation to stop the war. Instead, it is a test,

and a test that Karṇa passes.

Karṇa, like Yudhiṣṭhira, is tested twice. Each pair of tests tries to make the hero

waver in his resolve; in both pairs of tests, the argument for abandoning a loyal person

is based on dharmaśāstra. Moreover, each hero (Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira) is loyal to two

types of people, one elevated, one low. Yudhiṣṭhira is loyal to a dog and his brothers;

Karṇa is loyal to his sūta parents and king Duryodhana. And each hero is rewarded,

after the test, by a god. Just as the god Dharma blesses Yudhiṣṭhira, when Karṇa refuses

Kṛṣṇa's offer, Kṛṣṇa will laugh, hug Karṇa, and inform him that he will go to heaven

and that his comrades will attain "the highest goal."[40] By this analogy, then, it seems

that Kṛṣṇa is testing Karṇa.[41]

(Of course the analogy is imperfect in that Kuntī cannot be said to be *testing*

Karṇa. In that sense, Karṇa's trial contains both a test by a god and genuine human

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[40] Note that there is already an issue of narrative framing here; we know, even though
Yudhiṣṭhira does not, that he is making the right choice. Within the frame of Yudhiṣṭhira's story, it seems
as if he is ignoring dharma. But in a larger narrative frame (for example that of Janamjeya hearing the
story), it is obvious that Yudhiṣṭhira is acting according to dharma.

[41] Van Buitenen calls the entire section 'The Temptation of Karṇa.'

appeal. Yudhiṣṭhira's trial, on the other hand, contains no human appeal, but it contains a physical ordeal that is so draining that he turns around to give up. At that point, his brothers' voices cry out, and Yudhiṣṭhira thenceforth does not waver.)

The fact that Yudhiṣṭhira, 'Dharma King,' is tested raises two interesting points: one about Yudhiṣṭhira's character, and one about the epic's attitude towards dharma. Crucial here is the word that the god Dharma uses for 'test,' namely jijñāsā. (This is a desiderative from the root verb jñā 'to know.') In both of the following points, the desire to *know* dharma is caught up in testing dharma.

Van Buitenen has argued famously that Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling in the Sabhā Parvan represents a step in the Vedic rājasūya, a ceremony and sacrifice for royal consecration. To van Buitenen, "the apparent anomaly of the dicing match" loses its aura of "wanton randomness" in the context of the ritual prescriptions for the rājasūya, which include both a dicing match of twenty turns and a follow-up match.[42] To this interpretation, I would like to add the claim that Yudhiṣṭhira's tendency to gamble is not uncharacteristic or random; instead, his human urge to gamble, to play, is appropriate to his epithet 'Dharma King.' Recall Inden's formula: a particular dharma "was considered to be inherent in its own particular, homologous substance."[43] So why then would dharma inhere in a gambler?

Dharma reminds us that we are more than merely physical, biological beings by inhering itself in our physical, biological being. At the same time, dharma gives some sort of meaning to our activity as such beings. With that in mind, consider how Huizinga characterizes *play*:

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[42] See *The Book of the Assembly Hall* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). pp. 3-30.

[43] Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal.* p. 19.

> Even in its simplest forms, on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is is a *significant* function -- this is to say, there is some sense to it... [44]

It is in this sense that play and gambling are consistent with dharma: rising above the biological, they project meaning onto human activity.

Furthermore, just as Yudhisthira gambles to the extreme, the epic authors also push, through their imaginations, dharma to the extreme. Put simply, in their desire to know dharma, the epic authors test dharma. (Again, this is encapsulated by jijñāsā.) Just as the god Dharma tests Yudhisthira, the authors test Dharma. Just as the god Dharma's test is sometimes answering a list of questions (the Yaksa in the forest), so the epic authors provide lists of 'laws.' But just as the god Dharma sometimes uses a test of resilience, the authors also test dharma in that they show how, even in extreme situations, extraordinary human beings not only recognize dharma, but do so despite its subtlety and despite all other diversions. The resilience of that human aspect of dharma is the true test of its resiliency: dharma would not be dharma if no human being could ever know it.

A. K. Ramanujan compared Manu to Kant;[45] comparing the epic authors to Kant may help clarify their position. They would agree with Kant that *every* moral dilemma has an answer; in that way, dharma is never ambiguous, even if it is subtle (sūksma). But they would disagree with Kant that we know that we are truly ethical when we rise above our natures; the epic authors would say, rather, that we know we are fulfilling our

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[44] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). p. 1.

[45] A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1989).

human potential when our ethical decisions line up with the duties of our biological natures. The epic authors would also not agree with Kant that the answer to every moral dilemma can emerge from a (rationalized) system of dharma (in the sense of 'ethics'). No dharmaśāstra, not even the Mahābhārata itself, has *all* the answers. (Even if the Mahābhārata contains all that human beings need to know, perhaps, like an ironic Socratic ignorance, this fact is also something that human beings need to know.) Finally, even though incomplete, a rationalized, systematic approach can provide almost everything that we do need to resolve ethical dilemmas. So the Mahābhārata as a system of dharma is almost complete, but never radically complete. For want of a better phrase, I'll call this "the quasi-completeness of dharmaśāstra." The project, then, of the epic authors is not to show that there is some "counterexample" to dharma; *instead, it seems the epic authors are stretching the limits of what dharma contains.*

Indeed, if we suspect that both the gods Dharma and Kṛṣṇa knew that Yudhiṣṭhira and Karṇa would 'pass' their respective tests, we might also suspect that the epic authors are not so much truly 'testing' dharma as helping the reader (or listener) believe that dharma is indeed universal and resilient, that it is ever subtle, but also within the human capacity to grasp. In other words, they want to help their readers have *faith* in dharma, to have faith in the idea of dharma even when it seems dharma has collapsed around them. (Remember that the Mahābhārata is a text for the Kali Yuga.) In the following, I want to explore how the epic authors demonstrate Karṇa's courage through his faith in dharma.

2.8 The Anxiety of Meaninglessness

This term of Tillich's can help us see what is at stake in Karṇa's choice. (The horrors of WWII which inspired Tillich's analysis are not, in the end, so different from the horrors of the Kurukṣetra war which fired the moral and literary imaginations of the

epic authors. It is not surprising they ponder similar human dilemmas.) I will try to show that Karna's choice is made in a radically anxious situation, that he acts in the face of *the anxiety of meaninglessness*.[46]

This term (*the anxiety of meaninglessness*) requires explanation. For Tillich, the human condition is characterized by three basic anxieties: the anxiety of death and fate, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, and the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. Note that an anxiety, as Tillich stresses, is not a fear: a fear has a definite object, and it can be met with courage.

> One can act upon [a fear], and in acting upon it participate in it – even if
> in the form of struggle... But this is not so with anxiety, because anxiety
> has no object, or rather in a paradoxical phrase, its object is the negation
> of every object. Therefore participation, struggle, and love with respect
> to it are impossible... Fear is being afraid of something, a pain, the
> rejection by a person or a group, the loss of something or somebody, the
> moment of dying. But in the anticipation of the threat originating in these
> things, it is not the negativity itself which they will bring upon the
> subject that is frightening but the anxiety about the possible implications
> of this negativity. The outstanding example – and more than an example
> – is the fear of dying. Insofar as it is fear its object is the anticipated
> event of being killed by sickness or an accident and thereby suffering
> agony and the loss of everything. Insofar as it is *anxiety* its object is the
> absolutely unknown "after death," the nonbeing which remains nonbeing
> even if it is filled with images of our present experience.[47]

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[46] I do not use this term so as to imply that we *necessarily* need a Tillichian interpretive framework to understand this episode in the *Mahabharata*; it is only that Tillich's term is useful and at hand. When Whitehead said that all western philosophy was footnotes to Plato and Aristotle, he did not mean that we need only read those Greeks. Rather, later philosophy was a way of alerting us to the wisdom already there. Similarly, I am only using Tillich to help explicate an aspect of Karna's courage I believe the *Mahabharata's* authors had in mind as they shaped his character, to remind us of the wonderfully complex situation they created millenia ago.

[47] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be, Terry Lectures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). pp. 36-8.

Tillich's second anxiety, that of emptiness and meaninglessness, is a concern "about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives rise to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by a the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence."

Let me pause for a moment to explain in some detail Tillich's taxonomy of anxiety; it will help us defray some of the objections to the claims I will make below. Crucial to this taxonomy is the fact that all three anxieties are different, even if they might coincide in an individual. For our purposes, we should be careful to distinguish the anxiety of meaninglessness from the anxiety of non-existence (death). The anxiety of non-existence involves at most two terms, existence and non-existence, However, the anxiety of meaninglessness can involve a potentially limitless number of terms: meaninglessness, meaningfulness of type A, meaningfulness of type B, etc. Of course, the presence of more than one type of meaningfulness suggests a relativism of meaningfulness, which in turn precipitates anxiety about what can be meaningful at all.[48]

This is precisely what Karṇa risks when he rejects Kṛṣṇa's offer. For, as Karṇa suspects and Kṛṣṇa repeatedly affirms, there will be no meaning in the Mahābhārata's world which is not controlled in some way by Kṛṣṇa. For example, in the battle, when Karṇa and Arjuna finally do battle, Karṇa at one point fires a snake arrow at Arjuna. This arrow is more than magical, it has a personal vendetta against Arjuna. When the arrow is about to find its mark, Kṛṣṇa lowers the very earth below Arjuna's chariot. The arrow thus only knocks the gem off Arjuna's crown. What is the "meaning" of such an

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[48] As we shall see below, this distinction will enable us to see that Karṇa is indeed not anxious about death, he is specifically anxious only about meaninglessness.

event? What, in the face of such a volatile and unpredictable fate, can an individual do? Or to put it in another way, where can an individual find the courage to act (here, continue fighting) when the net result (here, Arjuna's victory) has already been explicitly predetermined?

Similarly, and more radically, when Kṛṣṇa approaches Karṇa and tells him that Kuntī is his real mother, Karṇa is faced with the possibility that all the "meaning" that he has found in his life so far is lost. Indeed, with the news that Kṛṣṇa has given Karṇa, nothing of what has happened so far makes much sense any more for Karṇa's life: there is an inevitable war with a predestined result; there is the option of becoming a universal monarch simply by claiming the truth; there is no meaning left to war, to peace, to human relations, to his own way of life.

Here you might object that predestination is actually a surfeit of meaning. If there is a divine plan, then "everything" so to speak has a part in that plan, and thus finds "meaning." In Karṇa's story, however, we find a hero who seems to be looking for meaning that can be generated by and from *human choice*. That is to say, meaning that does not come from on high, but a humanistic, existential meaning; a meaning that derives its affective weight from human choices made freely and thus genuinely.

Which brings us to the crux of this argument: the path that Kṛṣṇa offers to Karṇa, then, is not a path "without" meaning; it is instead, a path with a thoroughly different *kind* of meaning. And it is precisely this, the presence of a complete, coherent, totalizing alternative meaning to our existence, that suggests, as we saw above, the unsettling relativism inherent in multiple meaningfulnesses – which in turn precipitates the anxiety of meaninglessness.

We might think of this situation via the following analogy: assuming your life was a book that you were reading, imagine if a god entered the room and told you that

your life-text was written in a language that you do not know. Or imgaine if a god revealed that your life-text is really a coffee-table art book and you should have been "reading" it for the pictures.

Surprisingly, Karṇa refuses to care who or what generated his life-text and keeps on reading as if it made sense nevertheless. To illustrate a much less heroic form of this type of choice, consider the reading of the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Imagine a reader (like myself) who loves his short stories and reads them avidly, thrilled by their depths and labyrinthine intricacies. One day, though, our reader meets an authority who claims that Borges had, in an interview, dismissed all his short stories as jokes. "I wrote them as jokes," the authority reports Borges said. "They don't *mean* anything." How then to keep on reading Borges? And how then to keep on reading them meaningfully, as we hope perhaps that our reader can continue to do, after the "truth" has been revealed?

2.9 Karṇa's Unique Kind of Courage

Karṇa's choice takes a certain degree of courage, and it is a form of heroism that is specifically distinct from the military heroism that is traditionally associated with epic heroes. And it is a form of courage that we perhaps do not encounter everyday. Again, Tillich can help us; his catalog of the types of courage can help us pinpoint exactly what constitutes Karṇa's courage.

First, as we have said, this form of heroism is something more than martial. It is also distinct from a Socratic rational-democratic heroism; there is little rational or democratic to Karṇa's decision. Then, Karṇa's heroism is also distinct from Thomistic "perfect courage", which is a gift from the divine; Karṇa explicitly rejects the advice of the god – his courage is very much a human act. (Contrast this, for example, with Arjuna's courage, which does, in its way, arise as a gift from Kṛṣṇa.) Then again,

perhaps Karṇa is a Stoic – certainly, Seneca's claim that "undisturbed by fears and unspoiled by pleasures, we shall be afraid neither of death nor of the gods"[49] sounds very much like the words of a man who has just chosen to die rather than listen to the advice of a god. But the Stoic courage was firmly rooted in wisdom, and Karṇa makes no such claim. He does not justify his claim by means of any general principle, only by means of the particularities of his life. And he does not, as Socrates did, suggest that his death might in any way benefit the population he lives among. If anything, Karṇa knows that his decision is another step towards the huge misery that the war will bring down upon the whole region. (The same logic can be applied to Spinoza's neo-Stoic courage as well.) The Stoics faced their predestined fate with the armor of wisdom; Karṇa faces his predestined fate without armor,[50] protected only by the love and loyalty he feels within him.

Tillich's analysis of Nietzsche's idea of courage is slightly more challenging and here again we might be tempted to pigeon-hole Karṇa. Tillich brings out Nietzche's existential side, writing of "the courage to look into the abyss of nonbeing in the complete loneliness of him who accepts the message that 'God is dead.'"[51] Again, Karṇa does not quite fit into this category because he does not believe that Kṛṣṇa is "dead" – Karṇa is by no means an atheist. Karṇa believes in heaven and even believes that Kṛṣṇa is a god. This, in fact, is what makes Karṇa's position so interesting: it is precisely because he does believe that Kṛṣṇa is indeed divine that his decision to reject Kṛṣṇa's advice is so surprising.

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[49] Quoted in Tillich, *The Courage to Be.* p. 15.

[50] This metaphor is inspired by a story wherein Indra tricks Karṇa into cutting off the golden armor (and earrings) that Karṇa was born with.

[51] Tillich, *The Courage to Be.* p. 30.

Tillich writes that "Courage is self-affirmation 'in spite of,' and the courage to be as oneself is self-affirmation of the self as itself."[52] Additionally, this "courage to be is an expression of faith, and what 'faith' means must be understood through the courage to be."[53] Thus, I suggest, Karṇa, threatened by radical meaninglessness, may potentially "experience an abyss in which the meaning of life and the truth of ultimate responsibility disappear."[54]

This brings us to Tillich's dilemma, which in a way is the same one that the authors of the epic seem to be raising as well: "Is there a courage which can conquer the anxiety of meaninglessness and doubt? ... Can faith resist meaninglessness? ... How is the courage to be possible if all the ways to create it are barred by the experience of their ultimate insufficiency? If life is as meaningless as death, if guilt is as questionable as perfection, if being is no more meaningful than nonbeing, on what can one base the courage to be?"[55]

The epic authors would nod assent; they might ask, "how can an individual be courageous in the face of a dharma-less world?" After all, dharma is in many ways what seems to give the world, especially the world of human actions, meaning. If dharma is taken away or proven ambiguous, what are humans left with? Or rather, if dharma is merely an individual's conscience, then how can it be universal? How can it sustain all of existence? How can it be transcendent?

Tillich's answer seems to me an interesting solution to the dilemma, and one perhaps that is not present in the epic. Let me sketch it here in any case: the courage to

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[52] Ibid. p. 151.

[53] Ibid. p. 172.

[54] Ibid. p. 174.

[55] Ibid. p. 174-5.

face the anxiety of meaningless stems from what Tillich calls "absolute faith." This is a

faith that "transcends a theistic idea of God."[56] We do not, though, for the purposes of

interpreting the epic, need to follow Tillich into that theology. Instead, let us return to

the idea of loyalty that both Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira espouse.

2.10 Karṇa's Faith in his Loyalty

In the previous section, we saw how unique Karṇa's courage is. In this section, I

want to show how Karṇa's loyalty to his family is not a simple and straightforward

"clinging" but rather a paradoxical "faith" that seems to rise above both mere instinctual

emotions and systematized ethics.

Let us work through an analysis that will lead up to my assertion that Karṇa's

courage is structured analogously to faith. At the outset, these are the crucial facts that

Karṇa has in mind as he responds to Kṛṣṇa's offer:

1. Kṛṣṇa is a god. (And Karṇa, like any human being, has a duty to god.)
2. The war is inevitable and many warriors will die. (Kṛṣṇa reiterates this afterwards: it was all foretold.)
3. The Pāṇḍavas will win the war, since Kṛṣṇa is on their side.[57] (And Arjuna will kill Karṇa.)
4. Bhārata is best ruled by Yudhiṣṭhira (by the Pāṇḍavas).
5. Karṇa can take Arjuna's place among the Pāṇḍavas, and the Pāṇḍavas could rule just as well. (Karṇa and Arjuna are interchangeably strong; the future strength of the kingdom is assured with either warrior among the Pāṇḍavas.)
6. Kuntī is Karṇa's biological mother; Rādhā is his adopted mother. (Karṇa owes a debt of loyalty to Rādhā; he has a duty to her.)
7. Sūrya is his father. (He truly is kṣatriya.[58] Therefore he does not need Aṅga, Duryodhana's gift, to participate in the war.)

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[56] Ibid. p. 182.

[57] "Where Kṛṣṇa is, there is victory" (6.41.55, 9.61.30).

[58] The union of a god and a kṣatriya woman is kṣatriya.

8. If the Pāṇḍavas find out who Karṇa is, Yudhiṣṭhira will give Karṇa the rights to Bhārata, and Karṇa will give them to Duryodhana – who would not rule as well as Yudhiṣṭhira would.

9. Karṇa owes a debt of loyalty to Duryodhana; he has a duty to him.

These facts make Karṇa's decision impossible to approach ethically straightforwardly; on the contrary, he makes a decision in the face of a sharp ethical dilemma. Consider the conflicting duties that Karṇa faces:

duty to himself (self-preservation, self-promotion)	[fight for the Pāṇḍavas]
duty to god (Kṛṣṇa)	[fight for the Pāṇḍavas]
duty to Kuntī	[fight for the Pāṇḍavas]
duty to Duryodhana	[fight for the Kauravas]
duty to Rādhā and Adhiratha	[fight for the Kauravas]

Thus Karṇa's decision is in the face of an ethical dilemma where his *duties* pull him in different directions. Karṇa has a myriad of conflicting duties; whichever side he chooses (Pāṇḍava or Kaurava), Karṇa will betray some duty. Moreover, since some of the duties conflict independent of nature (e.g. his conflicting duties to god and his adopted mother), Karṇa cannot be helped by (Kantian) ethics alone.

How can Karṇa make a choice in this paradoxical situation? Before we turn to an answer, we should consider three "escape" routes from this moral dilemma. The first is some sort of "weighing," utilitarian or otherwise: how many duties would be violated by fighting for the Pāṇḍavas? For the Kauravas? Such strategies are little more than rhetorical justifications for a decision; "weighing" as such cannot generate truly ethical behavior, it can at best attempt to condone it.

The second "escape" route is to run away from the moral dilemma altogether. Karṇa could decide to fight only half-heartedly for the Kauravas[59] – and thus in essence kill himself. Nevertheless, the moral dilemma would not have been overcome – he would have chosen to avoid the choice altogether – a "solution" which still would not resolve the fact that he would have betrayed some of his duties. In the epic, it is precisely this kind of cowardice that is repeatedly discouraged, most notably by Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā. It is also the cowardice that is at the root of the humiliation of the Kaurava court, when they are paralyzed by Draupadī's question – another instance where the failure to act in the face of a paradox of dharma becomes shameful.[60]

But Karṇa enters the battle wholeheartedly.[61] Karṇa fights valiantly, and is truly dedicated to the Kaurava cause – in spite of what he knows: that they will lose and he will be defeated. Again, when the Kauravas are being routed by Ghaṭotkaca, Karṇa uses up the only weapon he has that could defeat Arjuna. The fact that Karṇa does so shows that he is genuinely working towards a Kaurava victory. (If he is only participating in the battle for the opportunity to fight Arjuna, he would have preserved this weapon for that purpose.) And this is the nature of Karṇa's courage: he enters the battle wholeheartedly on the Kaurava side in spite of the pre-ordained Kaurava defeat and his own personal inevitable defeat by Arjuna.

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[59] Not fighting is not an escape route for Karṇa – not fighting for Duryodhana is equivalent to going over to the Pāṇḍava side since Karṇa is Duryodhana's strength.

[60] We should be careful to distinguish the inaction at Draupadī's humiliation from the steadfast loyalty of Karṇa or Yudhiṣṭhira. Bhīṣma and the Kaurava court are paralyzed and condone Duryodhana's actions through their paralysis. Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira are not paralyzed; they are making a conscious choice to stay put.

[61] In fact, he does so with so much enthusiasm that Yudhiṣṭhira engineers some espionage in which Karṇa's charioteer Śalya attempts to demoralize Karṇa. (8.27 ff.)

A third escape route is resigning oneself to glory only in the next life. Crucially, this not what Karṇa does as he makes his choice. In making the choice to stay on the side of the Kauravas, Karṇa is not merely resigning himself to losing the war – although that seems inevitable to him – and achieving glory in heaven. Neither is he merely resigning himself to being killed by Arjuna, although, in a way, that also is inevitable since Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna's protector. Karṇa resigns himself to those facts, but then – in a movement based only on an absurd faith in himself – he believes that he will still defeat Arjuna in battle here on this earth. Karṇa chooses to act with a horizon of possibility that contains, paradoxically, only impossibilities. Karṇa can do so because of the fierce loyalty with which he clings to the *dharmic reality* of his loyal human relationships: Karṇa is steadfast in having faith in a dharma that makes sense (and will reward him) here, in this life.

In the end, though, Karṇa is killed by Arjuna in a decidedly non-dharmic and stingingly ignoble way: after a long and inconclusive duel with Arjuna, Karṇa's chariot wheel becomes stuck in the mud.[62] He alights to pull the wheel free, but to no avail. Karṇa sees Arjuna preparing to fire an arrow at him and argues, based on the kṣatriya code, that Arjuna should desist until Karṇa has freed his wheel. Arjuna pauses momentarily, but then Kṛṣṇa encourages, almost orders, Arjuna to fire. And Arjuna does.[63]

2.11 Conclusion

In the Mahābhārata in general, human beings are placed into their respective social classes according to the class they are born into. Class then determines an

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[62] This has been prefigured by a curse placed on Karṇa long before the battle.

[63] The implications of the relativity between Karṇa's and Arjuna's ethical dilemmas will be discussed in Chapter Five.

individual's nature or character, which in turn determines what kind of social element the human being should be: what profession, whom to marry, what to eat, what to wear. As we have seen, Karṇa takes a stand against all of these determinations: his class is not determined by his birth, and certainly his nature and character are not determined by the class he is born into. Karṇa does not believe that birth or class determines anything, that 'nature' as socially defined does not matter. What does matter to Karṇa is 'nurture,' the way he was brought up, the parents who loved him and the friends who gave him his chance in life.

From our perspective here and now, when Karṇa chooses nurture over nature, he is not taking a stand just for his own identity; he is taking a stand for classes upon classes of people who have been politically and socially disenfranchised by politicians and sociologists who believe that a child's social class determines the nature and character, and thus the potential and future, of that child. As we debate the relative merits of social programs like affirmative action, we return, again and again to this ancient 'nature versus nurture' debate. What determines how much society should invest in an impoverished youth in the inner city? Will he become a criminal no matter how much money and love is showered on him? Or will she shine if only she were given the opportunity?

Despite avalanches of numbers and studies from either side of the political spectrum, such a question can hardly be answered scientifically. Human potential is something we believe in with our souls; proof of this is that we need to vote on it, time and time again in various disguised forms. But political and statistical rhetoric aside, what is it that educates our souls in our beliefs about human potential? Myths do – be they religious, folk, or epic. The Horatio Alger myth is one such myth; as is Karṇa's story: his story gives us the *courage* to believe that no matter the social class they are

born into, and no matter the immense psychological difficulty, human beings have the potential to make, or remake, themselves into heroes.

And yet even this much does not exhaust Karṇa's story. For even if Karṇa becomes heroic through his own choice, there remains the nagging fact that what Karṇa chooses to be is what, in some sense, he already was from his birth – a kṣatriya. In that way, Karṇa's story seems to reinforce, rather than undermine, social determinism. Thus this single story manages at once to appeal to both sides of this political spectrum, simultaneously producing conservative *and* subversive interpretations.[64] And it is precisely this rich, lush polysemy that lies at the heart of the beauty of Karṇa's story, a story whose poignancy will always draw readers into its ethical and psychological intricacies.[65] This chapter has examined in detail how a complex web of ideas is caught up in Karṇa's action; the next chapter will do the same for Karṇa's narrative in its mythological context. And just as in this chapter, where the epic authors' artfully wove together so many strands of thought, so too in the next chapter, they will weave together so many myths to produce, magically again, Karṇa's same story.

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[64] This serves as an example of Doniger's insight that "myths do not merely reflect the eternal, reactionary archetype, or even the present hegemonic Zeitgeist; they can subvert the dominant paradigm... myths may also oppose prevailing prejudice. Storytellers may, like judo wrestlers, use the very weight of archetypes to throw them, and with them to throw the prejudices that have colored them for centuries." Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth, Lectures on the History of Religions New Series, No. 16* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). p. 107.

[65] Similarly, Goldman and Sutherland suggest, in the context of the *Ramayana*, that it is the moment of Sitā's greatest anxiety and greatest ambiguity that lends "her the multidimensionality, uncertainty, and ambivalence that, ironically, elevate her from the level of a static icon of unreasoning devotion to that of a woman of flesh and blood. It is in this character portrait of a woman ... that we see the genius of the poet and, no doubt, the reaon for the incomparably high regard in which this figure continues to be held ..." Valmiki, *Sundarakanda*, trans. Sally J. Sutherland Goldman and Robert P. Goldman, vol. 5, *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). p. 62.

Chapter Three

Exploring Human Issues Through Myth

In the Aśramavāsika 'Sojourn in the Hermitage' Parvan of the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, Vyāsa reveals to the survivors of the Kurukṣetra war that the characters in the war were incarnations of deities. At first, this seems like mere aggrandizement of the characters -- that they were incarnations of deities makes the spectacle of the battle even more magnificent, even more awe-inspiring. But I want to interpret Vyāsa's revelation in another way as well: as an invitation to reflect upon what it means to say that a human character, caught up in a very human drama, is an incarnation of a god. In this chapter, I will try to read the human narratives as correlations of, as corresponding to,[1] the stories that surround their deities. More specifically, I will attempt to fulfill the challenge of that invitation with regard to the Karṇa narrative, in order to understand what it means that Karṇa is connected both to Sūrya, the Sun, and to Naraka the snake, half-cobra, half-divine (<u>nāga</u>), from whom Karṇa is reincarnated.

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[1] I follow Hiltebeitel's approach to epic and myth. He uses the terms "correlation" or "correspondence" to refer to the way in which epic and myth interact. This is laid out in my section 1.8. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). pp. 358-359.

When working with an epic narrative and the myths that hover over it intertextually,[2] we may discover several types of correspondences. Here, I will focus on correspondences that reveal the ways in which the epic authors fashion the *character* of Karṇa. The epic authors seem to start from some kind of mythic correspondence and then explore and ponder its human dimensions. In the case of Karṇa, they might wonder, what would it feel like for the Sun -- visualized as a horse or a charioteer -- to be raised as a charioteer (sūta)? What kind of person would he be? Where would his loyalties lie? In this way the epic authors use mythic correspondences to develop and explore Karṇa's psychology and social relations. Subsequently, they interweave the abstract lines of divine stories with deeply psychological episodes to explore the human issues that intrigue them.

In this vein, I will explore one dimension of the Karṇa narrative that the epic authors fill with human interest -- the twin themes of self-invention and its impossibility. As we shall see, the epic seems to afford both of these perspectives, letting us interpret an episode as a story about self-invention, or letting us interpret it as a story about the impossibility of self-invention. Now self-invention, or re-invention, is a milder form of reincarnation; in both processes, some parts of the human being remain (for instance karma) and some parts completely change. Take, for instance, the story of Śikhaṇḍinī, a

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[2] A. K. Ramanujan emphasized how intertextual Indian literature was. Gangadharan has studied the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas intertextually. And Bailey has studied the Purāṇas intertextually; his article also contains a theoretical discussion of intertextuality. See A. K. Ramanujan, "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections," in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker and Stuart H. Blackburn (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). pp. 7-8 ff. (Reproduced from *History of Religions*, 28.3 (1989): 187-216.) N. Gangadharan, "Puranas and the Mahabharata," in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahabharata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995). Greg Bailey, "Intertextuality in the Puranas: A Neglected Element in the Study of Sanskrit Literature," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques, and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington, Peter Schreiner, and Radoslav Katicic (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999).

woman who hates Bhīṣma. She kills herself in order to be reborn as a man so that she can avenge herself on Bhīṣma in battle. The re-invention theme is also connected to the sun (which is reborn every dawn) and snakes, who, when they shed their skin, are born-again. (Snakes are in the category of twice-born (dvija) just like brahmins.) Karṇa partakes of both of these images: he is both the son of the Sun and a reincarnation of the nāga Naraka.

Since self-invention is a theme in the stories of both strands of Karṇa's mythological heritage, it is not surprising that the authors use the Karṇa narrative to explore the ramifications of self-invention and its impossibility. Indeed, this is the claim that frames this chapter. I will organize aspects of the Karṇa narrative to demonstrate three of these ramifications:

A. Class and Social Rank These are always connected to a notion of self in South Asia because caste (jāti) is coded into one's bodily substance.

B. Unveiling and Uncovering These are processes of identity formation: unveiling can be seen as the invention of a new self by discarding the former self.

C. Gift-rituals Gone Awry The reason many of these rituals go awry is because one party takes advantage of, or tries to exploit, another party's self-invention. This is connected to the larger Mahābhārata theme of sacrifice gone awry.

3.1 Class and Social Rank

Karṇa's biological mother is Kuntī; Karṇa is adopted by a charioteer Adiratha and his wife Rādhā.[3] Here is the story of how Kuntī gives birth to and abandons Karṇa. As an adolescent girl, the princess Kuntī is sent to take care of a wandering sage who arrives at

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[3] Rādhā has been barren until Karṇa arrives; when he does, her milk miraculously begins to flow and she later has children of her own.

the court of her father. The sage, Durvāsas, is so pleased with Kuntī that he gives her a boon: with the incantation, Kuntī may summon any god to descend to earth and to do her will: "Whether willing or unwilling, that God is bound to be in your power and, controlled by your spell, to bow to you like a servant." (3.289.19) Later, as she ponders the power of the spell and sees that she is menstruating, Kuntī evokes Durvāsas's boon and calls down Sūrya. ("By his wizardry he had split himself in two." 3.290.9) Seeing him before her, Kuntī's thoughts turn from sexual curiosity to protecting her honor:

> O Lord of the cows [Sūrya], go back to your own domain. // Your
> behavior would turn my maidenhood into sadness.[4] (3.290.21) Be
> gracious, my lord! I have summoned you out of curiosity! (3.290.11) I
> summoned you childishly to learn the power of spells; pray, forgive me,
> my lord, I am only a child! (3.290.26)

But Sūrya is not so easily dismissed:

> Surely it is not fitting to summon a God and send him away pointlessly!
> Your intention was to have a son by the sun... so give yourself to me, for I
> shall father a son such as you desire. Otherwise, good woman of the lovely
> smile, I shall depart without having lain with you, and I shall be angry and
> curse you, [as well as] the brahmin [Durvāsas] and your father. On your
> account I shall set fire to them all... (3.290.12-15)

Kuntī "kept smiling, while her body was wrapped in confusion." (3.291.6) She decides to make the best of the situation and *negotiates*: Sūrya is to leave her a virgin and she is to give birth to a son who will be a hero and will have earrings[5] and divine (body) armor like the sun's. Sūrya agrees, impregnates her but leaves her a virgin, and departs.

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[4] Literally, "this behavior is the grief of my state of virginity."

[5] Sūrya says "Aditi herself gave me these earrings" (3.291.21).

(According to folktale,[6] Karṇa is born from Kuntī's ear; hence his name and Kuntī's ability to remain virginal despite childbirth.)

This episode has several resonances in solar mythology in the story of Sūrya's wife, Saranyu or Saṃjñā. And here we will begin to see how varṇa (class, color, form) plays a role in the narrative. I will quote this story in some length because I will return to it in later episodes in Karṇa's life.

Sūrya and Saṃjñā[7]

[Sūrya] married Saṃjñā, the daughter of Tvaṣṭṛ [the divine artisan]. She had beauty and youth and virtue, and she was not satisfied by the form of her husband. For Saṃjñā was filled with her own bright ascetic heat, and the form of Sūrya, burnt by his own fiery brilliance in all his limbs, was not very attractive; excessive, it constantly overheated the three worlds. Sūrya produced a daughter and two sons: first came Manu... and then the twins Yama and Yamuna. When Saṃjñā saw that the form of Sūrya had a dark color, she was unable to bear it; transforming her own shadow into a similar, earthly female, a Saṃjñā that was made of magic illusion, she said to her, "I am going to my father's house; you stay here in my house. Treat my three children well, and do not tell this to my husband." The similar female replied, "Even if I am dragged by the hair, even if I am cursed, I will never tell your husband. Go wherever you like, goddess."

Somewhat embarrassed, the wise woman went to her father's house. Her father, however, reviled her and kept telling her, "Go back to your husband," and so she took the form of a mare. Meanwhile, Sūrya, thinking "this is Saṃjñā," produced in the second Saṃjñā a son who was his equal. And because Sūrya thought, "This one looks like the Manu who was born before," the son's name was "Manu the Similar." The earthly shadow Saṃjñā gave extra affection to her own child and did not behave in the same way to the older children. Manu put up with her but Yama could not. In his anger and childishness, and through the force of future destiny, Yama threatened the shadow Saṃjñā with his foot. Then the

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[6] Dr. W. G. Ramarao, personal communication.

[7] Harivaṃśa 8.1-48. Quoted from Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). pp. 44-45.

similar mother, who was very unhappy, cursed him in anger: "Let that foot of yours fall off."

Terrified by the curse and agitated over the shadow Saṃjñā's words, Yama reported this to his father. "Turn back the curse!" he said to his father; "a mother should behave with affection to all her children, but this one rejects us and is good to the younger one. I lifted my foot at her but I did not let it fall on her body. You should forgive what I did out of childishness or delusion." Sūrya said, "You must have had very good cause indeed if anger possesses you who know dharma and speak the truth. But I can't make your mother's words fail to come true. Worms will take flesh [from your foot] and go to the surface of the earth. Thus your mother's words will come true, and you will be protected from the blow of the curse."

But then Sūrya said to the similar Saṃjñā, "Why do you show excessive affection [to one] among your children when they are all created equal?" She avoided this question and said nothing to Sūrya, but when he wanted to curse her to destroy her she told him everything, and he became angry and went to Tvaṣṭṛ. Tvaṣṭṛ mollified Sūrya's anger and trimmed him on his lathe, removing his excessive fiery brilliance. Then Sūrya was much better to look at.

[Sūrya] saw his wife the mare by concentrating his powers in yoga, for no creature could look at her because of her brilliance. Then he took the form of a horse and coupled with her through the mouth, for she was struggling against mating with him in her fear that it might be another male. She vomited out that semen of Sūrya from her nose, and two gods were born in her, the Aśvins, called the Nāsatyas. Then Sūrya showed her his handsome form, and when she saw her husband she was satisfied.

Let us examine the similarities of this story to the episode about the birth of Karṇa. The epic authors have exploited the following correlations:

• Just as Saṃjñā is reluctant to have sex with the brilliant Sūrya, Kuntī too does not want Sūrya to give her a son at first.

• Both eventually conceive a child by Sūrya but it is a strange conception: Saṃjñā is impregnated *through the mouth* and *as a horse*; and the strangeness of Kuntī's impregnation is described as follows:

When King Kunti's daughter had thus been promised
At her bashful soliciting of the Sun,

> She fell on her blessed couch, and confusion
> Set in as she lay there, a broken creeper.
>
> And the Sun, confounding her with his splendor,
> With his wizardry entered her and made her pregnant.
> But the day star did not despoil her at all,
> And the young woman again returned to her senses. (3.291.27-28)

Even several incidental elements have been artfully rearranged from one story to the other:

• Saṃjñā's father's refusal to protect her is mirrored by Kuntī's father's implicit inability to protect Kuntī. If anything, Kuntī winds up protecting her father from Sūrya's anger.

• In both stories, Sūrya threatens a mate/wife with extreme violence; the extremity of Sūrya's threat can be judged by comparison with what the shadow Saṃjñā imagines as the worst possible injury that Sūrya would inflict upon her, namely being dragged by the hair or cursed. (Note that here the male and the female are alike.)

• Both stories contain a magical splitting which allows a character to be in two places at once -- with agency in both places. The authors specifically note that the sun is still shining while Sūrya goes to Kuntī. Saṃjñā's double has even more agency, and an independent will of her own.

• Yama's claim that he should be excused from his action because he is only a child mirrors Kuntī's plea to Sūrya that she only brought him to earth because she was curious. Interestingly, in neither case is this line of argument effective: Sūrya is not dissuaded in one case, and in another, he is incapable of fully preventing the shadow Saṃjñā's curse.

• Both stories contain a mother turning into a horse: after Karṇa is born, Kuntī places him in the Aśva 'horse' River. And Saṃjñā turns into a horse to escape Sūrya's brilliance, leaving in her place a 'shadow' mother, Chāyā, to raise her children.

(Later we will see how the authors have also woven into the Karṇa narrative the themes of foster/surrogate mothering, of the trimming of the sun, and of mutilation of a child of the sun.)

In the Saṃjñā myth, Saṃjñā rejects Sūrya because of his color.[8] Sūrya has burnt himself dark, which, to Saṃjñā and the symbolism of class (varṇa), is lower class.[9] In Sanskrit, the connection between class and color is immediate, for the Sanskrit varṇa can mean either 'class' or 'color.' The epic authors thus continue the solar mythology; but by placing Karṇa in a sūta family, they also complicate it in a way distinctly theirs.

By birth, Karṇa is a kṣatriya, a member of the aristocratic warrior class, in that the son of a god and a kṣatriya woman is a kṣatriya. But growing up, Karṇa does not know he is a kṣatriya and in fact thinks of himself as the son of his adopted parents; thus he thinks of himself as a sūta. Let us now see how the epic authors thoroughly exploit this ambiguous varṇa situation in the Karṇa narrative.

Though not considered a kṣatriya, Karṇa trains in the military arts by worshipping Sūrya. Karṇa's training most directly resonates with that of Ekalavya, another character who acquires kṣatriya skills despite his varṇa.

Ekalavya

Ekalavya is a tribal king but not of the kṣatriya varṇa; he longs to learn archery from Droṇa, who refuses to teach him. Ekalavya goes to the forest, fashions a clay image of Droṇa, and "so great was his faith, and so sublime his discipline, that he acquired a superb deftness at fixing arrow to bowstring, aiming it, and releasing it." One day, when the Pāṇḍava princes are out hunting, one of their dogs wanders into Ekalavya's enclave and begins barking, disturbing Ekalavya. To silence the dog, Ekalavya shoots

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[8] See ibid. pp. 47-8; Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). pp. 292-5.

[9] See Chapter Two where I discuss briefly why I use the term 'class' to translate varṇa; I do not wish to suggest any of the fluidity that a sociologist might associate with a technical use of the term 'class.'

"almost simultaneously seven arrows into its mouth." When the dog
returns to the Pāṇḍavas, they are amazed by this feat of archery and follow
the dog back to Ekalavya's enclave. When they ask him who he is, he
responds that he is a pupil of Droṇa's. Later, Arjuna complains to Droṇa,
"didn't you once embrace me when I was alone and tell me fondly that no
pupil of yours would ever excel me?" In response, Droṇa goes to
Ekalavya, taking Arjuna along. Confronting the ever respectful Ekalavya,
Droṇa demands his guru-dakṣiṇā, his gift as Ekalavya's teacher. Ekalavya
agrees: "there is nothing I shall withhold from my guru!" And Droṇa
demands Ekalavya's archery *thumb*. "Forever devoted to the truth, with a
happy face and unburdened mind, he cut off his thumb without a moment's
hesitation and gave it to Droṇa."(1.123)

The Ekalavya story highlights the danger a character faces when practicing activities that

do not correspond to his varṇa.[10] Similarly, the righteous demon (asura) Bali, whose

extreme generosity we shall consider later, is berated by his father for engaging in non-

asura-like activities.

Having trained in the kṣatriya arts, Karṇa enters a military tournament. When he

is about to challenge Arjuna for the victory, Kṛpa stops the duel. He objects to Arjuna

fighting a stranger, and asks Karṇa for his kṣatriya lineage. Karṇa can only hang his head.

Duryodhana steps in and makes Karṇa king of Aṅga on the spot, and thus a de facto

kṣatriya. Here Karṇa again does not know he is a kṣatriya; Karṇa believes he is a sūta

who has acquired the rank of a kṣatriya.

Then Karṇa's father, Adiratha, enters the arena, and Karṇa, without missing a

beat, bows down to his father. If being elevated to a higher caste is a fantasy for a person

suffering in the lower reaches of the caste system, then being exposed by a relative's caste

is that fantasy's corresponding nightmare. In India's Ex-Untouchables, Harold Isaac is

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[10] Specifically, the danger comes for straying outside of one's svadharma, which is determined by
jāti and varṇa. See Wendy Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1976). pp. 94-99.

told by one informant (who is "passing" for a higher caste), "You can't disappear entirely. There are always relatives and parents, always ceremonies, marriage, and death."[11] When one informant told Isaacs that he would have a Hindu ceremony for his daughter and that no one would be able to tell the difference, another informant responded, "Even if they don't talk, the caste Hindu guests will be able to tell from the speech and dress of the relatives; because if there are relatives, they are surely poorer relatives and you can always tell."[12]

The tournament episode, thus, for Karṇa, has swung from fantasy (equaling the best archer in the land) to nightmare (Kṛpa's question) to fantasy (Duryodhana's gift *and* being able to share it with his father) to nightmare (the jeering at his paying his respects to his father).

(In addition, Karṇa's unhesitating recognition and unselfconscious love and respect for his father is contrasted with Kuntī's decision to *not* recognize Karṇa publicly. Kuntī certainly knows he is her son, and faints when Karṇa and Arjuna are about to fight. But she does not step forward and identify Karṇa as her son and the eldest Pāṇḍava.)

Thus in this episode, Karṇa's kṣatriya nature is revealed while Karṇa remains attached to his identity as "the sūta's son." The scenes are artfully arranged so that, ironically, Karṇa can view the events as kṣatriya nurture being imposed upon his sūta nature; as readers, we can both sympathize with Karṇa and see how Karṇa's kṣatriya *nature* reveals itself in spite of his sūta nurture. Again the epic makes available *both* of these perspectives on varṇa.

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[11] Harold Robert Isaacs, *India's Ex-Untouchables* (New York: John Day Co., 1965). p. 145.

[12] Ibid. p. 159.

We see a similarly intricate play on vaṛṇa in the Paraśurāma episode. When Karṇa trains under Paraśurāma (12.1-6), varṇa-s are layered on varṇa-s. Paraśurāma is a brahmin ascetic whose father had been killed by kṣatriya princes out hunting. Paraśurāma vows revenge on the *entire* kṣatriya class and kills them several times over. In fact, Kurukṣetra, the battle field, is the place where Paraśurāma filled *five lakes* with kṣatriya blood. (1.2.3-6) For Paraśurāma to take on the guise of a kṣatriya is already unusual, but after he stops killing kṣatriyas, he becomes a teacher -- a teacher who will teach the kṣatriya arts to brahmins, and *only* to brahmins. Karṇa, thinking himself a sūta, approaches Paraśurāma disguised as a brahmin in order to learn the secrets of the powerful Brahmāstra 'Brahma weapon.' So we have a student, who is a kṣatriya by birth but believes he is a sūta, pretending to be a brahmin and receiving instruction in the kṣatriya arts -- from a brahmin who hates kṣatriyas! And, as Karṇa himself will remind us, the sūta jāti is believed to be the result of the intermarriage of brahmins and kṣatriyas.

But if this story seems to promote the plasticity of varṇa, it is also a story of how biological identity reveals itself. One day Paraśurāma is taking a nap in Karṇa's lap. An insect[13] alights on, and proceeds to bore into, Karṇa's thigh. Not wanting to disturb his master's rest, Karṇa does not budge to swat away the insect. Eventually Paraśurāma is awakened (by the blood) and sees Karṇa's thigh bored through and covered in blood. Paraśurāma realizes that Karṇa is not a brahmin, and says "Fool! No brahmin could ever endure such agony! Your fortitude (dhairyam[14]) is like that of a kṣatriya!" (12.3.25) Subsequently, Karṇa, admits to being a sūta: "Know me as a sūta, born of the mixture of brahmin and kṣatriya." (12.3.26) Whereupon Paraśurāma curses Karṇa: he may be master

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[13] "a frightful worm ... which ate fat and flesh ... that worm that fed on blood..." (12.3.6-7).

[14] We will return to this important term in Chapter Four.

of the Brahma weapon for a while, but it will one day escape him. (12.3.30-31) (And indeed, when Karṇa needs the Brahma weapon the most (against Arjuna), he cannot remember how to use it.) Thus this episode too brings us back to the varṇa dimensions of the twin perspectives of self-invention and its impossibility.

To conclude this section, let us examine the repeated prejudice that Karṇa encounters because he is (presumed to be) a sūta. This theme is constant across the stories where Karṇa's varṇa is emphatically ambiguous. Time after time, Karṇa is cursed and abused from being from the wrong varṇa -- when in fact he himself does not even know which varṇa he belongs to in biological terms. Thus as we see Karṇa reinvent his varṇa, we see him return, in a way, to the same varṇa that he started from. Like a snake that sheds its skin only to remain a snake, Karṇa reinvents himself in myriad ways only to return to what he was in the first place. Nevertheless, Karṇa's rebellion against the limits of biological varṇa marks his stand as radical; in both stories we see Karṇa knowingly transgressing the limitations of varṇa in order to exercise his own (kṣatriya) talents -- just as Ekalavya had attempted to do.

3.2 Unveiling and Uncovering

As much as it is about varṇa, the Paraśurāma episode also reflects upon the twin possibilities of unveiling and its impossibility; again, the epic offers both perspectives: one which recognizes the possibility of unveiling, and one which denies this possibility. Karṇa is revealed as a kṣatriya even though he himself remains committed to his sūta identity. Before we delve into the significance of this failed unveiling, however, let us look at an unveiling that actually does produce a new identity.

One day, as Karṇa is praying, Indra approaches Karṇa disguised as a brahmin and asks for his armor. (1.104, 3.284-94) Sūrya warns Karṇa that Indra will try to trick him,

but Karṇa still treats Indra as if he were a brahmin and cuts off his armor and earrings.[15]
Karṇa is renamed by this episode; he is henceforth sometimes called Vaikartana, 'the
cutter' -- a name which connotes of 'change, alteration; woeful state, miserable plight;
disgust.' The connotations of this word suggest that the passage is not one of heroic
splendor but rather one to evoke awesome pity.

This shedding of the 'outer layer' of his body links Karṇa to snakes. Recall that
Karṇa is the reincarnation of Naraka, a <u>nāga</u>; his shedding of his body-armor is a
symbolic shedding of skin. Cutting off his earrings is also symbolic of his snake
connection: one word for 'snake' is <u>karṇa-hīna</u> 'earless.'

But despite this 'new' self, Karṇa remains who he was previously -- and is
perceived by everyone in the same way. There is a curious analogue in Bhīṣma's attitude
towards Śikhaṇḍin: Bhīṣma will not fire at Śikhaṇḍin because he was a woman in a
previous life. Thus, despite all outward appearances, a person's essence may lie in the
past, in a previous life.

Karṇa's birthmark from his mother is his feet; they represent another failed
unveiling. His exposed feet 'unveil' his biological identity -- even as his social identity is
layered over his biological identity. And it is indeed the failure to recognize Karṇa's feet
which haunts Yudhiṣṭhira after Karṇa has died. To elaborate: when the war has finally
ended, Yudhiṣṭhira, the victor and the new ruler of the land, is inconsolable. He is upset
over the death of his friends and relatives, but what "is burning [his] limbs like a fire
burning a heap of cotton" (12.1.24) is specifically the loss of his brother Karṇa.
(Yudhiṣṭhira does not know until after the war that Karṇa was his brother.) Compounding

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[15] Sūrya's attempt to warn Karṇa recalls the story of Sūrya and Yama: Sūrya can save Yama from
death, but not from mutilation. [Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and
India.*, p. 46.] Here, though, Sūrya cannot save his son either from death or from mutilation.

his sorrow, Yudhiṣṭhira knows that he *had* noticed that Karṇa's feet resembled Kuntī's,

but could not make the necessary connection. Even at the dice game, when furious at the

Kauravas' taunts, Yudhiṣṭhira declares: "my anger vanished when I saw his feet; and I

thought to myself, 'Karṇa's feet resemble Kuntī's feet!' I longed to know the cause of the

resemblance between him and Kuntī, but the reason would not come to me, no matter

how I considered it." (12.1.41-42) Here again, the epic authors have taken an aspect of

the mythology and given it a human dimension, for the feet of Sūrya and his sons are

mythologically charged body parts. As we saw above in the story of Sūrya and Saṃjñā,

both Yama, Sūrya's son, and Sūrya are lame and have mutilated feet. Moreover,

> the only part of the Sun's body not pared away by Tvaṣṭr, the feet are so
> blindingly radiant that they must be always covered. Mortal artisans,
> therefore, are instructed to make images of the sun without feet, because
> the primeval artisan was unable to trim them and thus to bring them within
> the compass of an artist.[16]

Thus the epic artists make Karṇa's feet 'invisible' even though they are the glaring

("blindingly radiant") marker of Karṇa's biological identity.[17]

To conclude this section, unveilings and uncoverings can destabilize identity, and

can even produce new identities. As a human being, Karṇa here is stripping away layers

of identity. His physical birthmarks are being removed and he becomes further and

further distanced from his biological identity. (More on this in Chapter Two.) Moreover,

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[16] Ibid. p. 183.

[17] Recognition by feet is a common trope in many Indo-European stories, such as Cinderella -- another story in which a person from a lower social class is elevated to a higher social class by virtue of the choice of a prince. Another is the "Return of Martin Guerre" where the "new" Martin Guerre is found suspicious by virtue of the shoemaker not having the right cutout for his feet. And Oedipus's name refers to his (swollen) ankles, disfigured by the manacles put on them when he was a child. These stories, however, do not contain the crucial element of failing to notice identical feet.

the story also emphasizes that it is Karna's actions (more than any characteristics of his body or story) that define him in that he is named for the 'change.'

The ability of snakes to shed their skins and be 'reborn' (their dvija-ness) is a crucial component of their liminality. If a character can be reborn, then the character may be able to be reborn as good, rather than, evil -- or vice-versa. Snakes thus can switch from good to evil and back again as they molt skin after skin. And Karna too is like that in the course of his life. If we could use the term 'ambiguous' to cover the whole biography, it is only because Karna is able, from turn to turn, to shock us with his vituperative hatred and then awe us with his personal courage.

The three examples of unveiling we have examined here (the Paraśurāma episode, Karna's feet, and the stripping of Karna's armor) all point to the paradox that stripping away layers, even when they are layers of identity, does not necessarily reveal a character's true identity -- however one might define that phrase. The onion analogy is perhaps apt here: in peeling away the layers of an onion, one does not find the onion. Moreover, unveiling is able to reveal via two paths: first, unveiling can create a new identity (thus Karna becomes Vaikartana); or, second, unveiling can reveal itself only to particular individuals -- even when everyone has the same experience (thus Paraśurāma and Karna, Kuntī and Yudhiṣṭhira, reach different conclusions about Karna's identity). Karna is repeatedly exposed -- and kept hidden -- simultaneously.

This suggests that in the Mahābhārata's world, ambiguous identity remains stubbornly ambiguous, often with tragic consequences. Nevertheless, we should be careful of reading the Karna narrative merely as a *lesson* about identity. Such a lesson might be best expressed by Bhīma's taunt to "stick to the whip which suits your family." (1.127.5) But *that* is clearly only one aspect of the narrative, and perhaps even a minor one. I would rather we remember that the epic is set against the transition to the Kali

Yuga, and that Yudhiṣṭhira's grief has Karṇa as its nexus. A multi-layered narrative about a multi-layered character, even if it has tragic overtones, is not necessarily a didactic one. It may very well be exploring the limits of the possibilities of human identity in a beautiful, and, to some, inspirational way.

3.3 Gift-rituals Gone Awry

When gift-rituals take place in the context of ambiguous varṇa, they often go awry; the gift, in a way, is a gift of the self, and if your self is hidden or ambiguous, the gift-ritual falls apart. The epic authors seem to *delight* in exploiting the dramatic possibilities of this instability. Moreover, as we shall see below, there is a curious correlation between self-invention and generosity, in that characters who have re-invented themselves tend to be very generous, and often overly (and fatally) generous.

Karṇa himself vows to give gifts to any brahmin who approaches him while he is praying. And Karṇa's generosity has become enshrined in sayings such as "generous as Karṇa" in Marathi.[18] Karṇa, like Ekalavya, is able to cut off his own body parts as an offering to fulfill a gift-duty. (Both also get named by this act: Karṇa / Vaikartana 'the cutter' from cutting off his armor; Ekalavya 'one thumb' from cutting off his thumb.)

The story of Ekalavya continues the themes of both gift-rituals gone awry and the interplay between an entity and its shadow-replacement. Ekalavya's guru-dakṣiṇā, like Uttaṅka's guru-dakṣiṇā (discussed below) and Karṇa's 'gift' to Indra, is grotesque and out of proportion. The cruelty which Droṇa displays is only proportionate to Ekalavya's respect for Droṇa. Moreover, just as Karṇa is raised by his shadow mother (who is transformed into a physical mother), so Ekalavya is trained by a shadow Droṇa. Ekalavya's dedication to Droṇa turns the statue into a real teacher. Again, the shadow is

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[18] The Marathi expression is Karṇā sārkhā udār 'generous as Karṇa.'

just as effective as the original and has an independent agency. And even though

Ekalavya does not distinguish between the shadow Droṇa and the original one, the

poignancy of the story is that the shadow was indeed Ekalavya's real guru. (Similarly, it

will be the adopted mother (with the suggestion of shadow mother) that Karṇa will

choose to determine his identity.)

We have compared Karṇa's fulfillment of his duty to Ekalavya's, but Ekalavya

was not being 'generous' in quite the same way as Karṇa was. The two paradigmatic

examples of generosity in the mythological canon are Bali and Śibi. In the former myth,[19]

Bali (whose name means 'offering') has becomes king of all three worlds. He is

approached by the brahmin dwarf Vāmana, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, who asks him for a

boon, namely the ground he can cover in three strides. Bali agrees. The dwarf

immediately swells in size until his strides cover the three worlds. Just as Indra will do to

Karṇa, here, a gift of generosity to a brahmin is exploited by a god in the form of a

brahmin.

We should also note that in the range of versions of the Bali myth, we find several

details that are pertinent to our discussion. In some versions, for Vāmana's third stride,

Bali offers his own head.[20] In some versions, Bali's grandfather Prahlāda warns Bali that

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[19] This version of the Bali myth essentially comes from the *Vayu Purana*. The *Mahabharata* is clearly aware of the story that the *Vayu Purana* expounds, but in the epic, bits and pieces of the Bali myth are scattered over the text. For example, at the end of the Āranyaka Parvan, Dhaumya says to Yudhiṣthira, "You have heard how [Viṣṇu] assumed the shape of a dwarf and hid, and with his strides took the kingdom from Bali." (3.299.13) For a thorough catalog of the Bali references in the epic, see Subhash Anand, "Bali: Life-Bestowing Offering," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 74 (1993). pp. 65-66. Note that in the *Vayu Purana*'s version, Bali ends up in hell, with the tone of the text suggesting that this is his rightful place. In other tellings, notably in the *Bhagavata Purana*, Bali is more noble. In that version of the story, the storyteller realizes the mathematical fact that two strides would cover the three worlds. Then: what do have I left, Bali asks, to offer you, except my own head. Viṣṇu then places his third step on Bali's head, taking his life; thus the tone of the ending is different.

[20] "The tradition that with his third step Viṣṇu steps on Bali's head [...] does not appear earlier than in the *Bhagavata Purana*." Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*. p. 137, footnote 59. Suggesting a fascinating correspondence that we will not explore here, Hiltebeitel compares

Vāmana is in fact Viṣṇu; nevertheless Bali still offers Vāmana a boon.[21] And in one version,[22] it is not Vāmana but Indra, disguised as a Brahmin mendicant, who kills Bali by asking for Bali's head as a gift.[23]

Moreover, Bali, like Karṇa, is an ambiguous character in that Bali is an <u>asura</u> who embodies "the paradox of the good demon."[24] They are both demonic characters[25] who demonstrate remarkable moral backbone at moments in their lives. And indeed, in both cases, the usual pattern of gods versus demons is subverted. In the standard pattern (for example, the story of Mahiṣa[26]) a clever demon tricks some god out of a boon and amasses power through that boon; the gods then rally around some figure -- usually an offspring of Indra, Viṣṇu, or Śiva -- who kills the demon. In the Karṇa and Bali narratives, the gods do not use force; rather they exploit the rules of dharma, and the demons' own devotion to dharmic action, to defeat the demons. In that way, the moral standing of the demon becomes much more ambivalent, and it becomes much harder to support a reading of the epic centered on "the ceaseless opposition between Good and Evil."[27] Indeed, Karṇa, as a reincarnation of a <u>nāga</u>, is, like all <u>nāgas</u>, a "creature betwixt

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the three stops of Kṛṣṇa during his mission of peace (in the Udyoga Parvan 5.82 ff) with Vāmana's three steps. See pp. 132 ff.

[21] See Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology.* p. 132. Doniger points to Harivaṃśa 71-72 as one such version. (Footnote 179.)

[22] Ibid. p. 132. Skanda Purāṇa 1.1.18.121-129.

[23] Anand also tentatively suggests "that Bali is associated with the sun." But we shall not pursue that suggestion here. See Anand, "Bali: Life-Bestowing Offering." p. 72.

[24] See Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology.*Chapter V. pp. 94 ff.

[25] Recall that Karṇa is reincarnated from the nāga Naraka. As we shall discuss, nāgas are liminal creatures, but their ambiguous status often leaves them classified as demonic.

[26] See Edward Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1915). p. 49.

[27] Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). p. 89.

and between... [a creature of] moral ambiguity."[28] Let us keep this in mind as we look at

the story of generous King Śibi,[29] whose character is not associated with moral

ambiguity, but whose narrative as a whole seems morally unsettling in another way.

Śibi

[This is the story of how Śibi] "Uśīnara, having sacrificed, excelled over
Indra..." (3.130.17) Indra and Agni wanting to test him, and "willing to
grant a boon," (3.130.19) take the forms of a hawk and a dove
respectively. The dove takes refuge in king Śibi's thigh, and the hawk
protests: "why do you [Śibi] want to do a deed that runs counter to
dharma? Do not out of greed for dharma begrudge me who am starving
the food that has been ordained for me..." (3.131.1-2) Śibi refuses to give
up a creature that has sought his protection, and offers the hawk other
food, but the hawk refuses: "I don't feed on boar or bullocks or any kind of
deer, great king, so what use is their meat to me? ... Hawks eat doves!"
(3.131.17-19) Śibi is stubborn and finally the hawk acquiesces as follows.
"If you love this dove, cut off a piece of your flesh and weight it against
the dove. When your flesh balances the dove's, you will give it to me and I
will be satisfied." (3.131.22-23) So the dove was placed in one pan of a
big scale and the king, cutting off some of his flesh, placed it in the other
pan. But that did not appear to be enough so he cut off some more, but still
the dove was the heavier. Eventually, "when there was no more of his
flesh to balance the dove, he himself, all cut up, mounted the scale."
(3.131.27) At this point, Indra and Agni reveal themselves, and Indra says
"We have come to you in your offering grove to test you in dharma. This
shall be your shining glory... that you cut the flesh from your limbs!"
(3.131.30)

As in the Bali story, the giver winds up sacrificing himself as the only way to satisfy the

gift recipient. The ritual here again has consumed too much -- the image of which is,

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[28] Wendy Doniger, "Horses and Snakes in the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata," in *Aspects of India: Essays in Honor of Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr*, ed. Margaret Case and N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar Publications (for American Institute of Indian Studies), 1986). pp 19-20. Examples of nāgas who help the gods are Śeṣa and Ananta.

[29] In the exchange between Aśvapati ('king of the horses') and Narada, Aśvapati asks if Satyavat is generous and Nārada replies, "In generosity, according to his ability, he is the equal of Rantideva Samkrti, he is brahminic and true-spoken like Śibi Ausinara" (3.278.17).

appropriately for this story, Agni (the ritual fire into whose *mouth* oblations are poured) consuming the world rather than just appropriate sacrificial offerings. Just like the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest (1.214 ff), Paraśurāma's massacres of the kṣatriyas (1.2.3-6), Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (1.1-1.53), and the Kurukṣetra war itself, Agni in the Śibi story goes too far.

Curious also is the role of Indra in this story; Indra is not usually associated with that side of Agni's all-consuming nature, but here his pairing with Agni suggests that, at least from one perspective, Indra was a deity that went too far. By asking Karṇa to cut off his armor, Indra overstepped some sort of limit -- the same sort of limit that Bhīṣma overstepped when he took his vow of celibacy and got the name 'terrible.' Indra has stepped over the line of the 'terrible.' Recall that Indra and Agni have worked together before -- in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, another terrible occurrence.

Finally, the idea of testing mortals to the limit in order to establish their worth seems itself to be treated ambivalently in the epic. (More on tests in Chapter Two.) The story demonstrates that Śibi is a great king but not that Indra and Agni are wonderful gods -- just as when Indra tricks Karṇa, we leave the story wondering about how Karṇa could have cut off his own flesh as an offering, *and* how Indra could have asked him to do so. That the gods should test mortals is universally accepted but even in the process of testing, there must be limits -- and those limits seem to have been overstepped. This is perhaps yet another indication that human existence is passing into the Kali Yuga.[30]

Similarly, Karṇa's generosity is here emphasized, both as something noble (the flowers from heaven that fall after Karṇa gives away his armor) as well as something troublesomely extreme. The scene is bloody and disquieting. This extreme of generosity

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[30] See my section 1.4 for more on the Kali Yuga.

is legendary but it is also somehow beyond the pale of what we can expect (or perhaps even desire) human beings to do.

Karṇa's generosity to Duryodhana is also, eventually, fatal. When Duryodhana makes Karṇa king of Aṅga, Karṇa asks him, "What can I give that matches this gift of kingdom?" Duryodhana replies, "I want your eternal friendship!" And Karṇa agrees. (1.126.37-38) Again, gift giving, generosity, and even gratitude seem to harm the actor and perhaps the world. Later on, Karṇa will remain loyal to Duryodhana even though he knows Yudhiṣṭhira is better suited to rule the kingdom. Karṇa's loyalty, like his generosity, is absolute, and again, like Bhīṣma's vow,[31] both awesome and terrible. And Duryodhana's gift becomes, for Karṇa, a fatal curse.

Karṇa's generosity is deliberately exploited, or potentially exploited, on two occasions. The first involves Indra asking for a gift and the second involves Kuntī doing the same. Let us examine each of these episodes in some detail.

The Indra episode has its roots in the line Sūrya spoke regarding his earrings and how they belonged to Aditi "mother of the gods." Aditi's earrings were famously lost, recovered from her son, the nāga *Naraka*, and then given to Sūrya. And recall that Naraka is reborn as Karṇa.[32] This Naraka is called "world conqueror" (2.9.12) and is killed by *Indra* (3.165.19). Thus the cycle of serpentine Naraka stealing and then losing the earrings (fatally) to Indra is replayed again in the Karṇa narrative: Karṇa loses the earrings to Indra and is subsequently killed by Indra's son Arjuna.

The serpentine resonances continue when we consider one of the framing stories of the epic, the snake sacrifice (sarpa-sattra). Janamajeya has been asked to perform this

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[31] More on the way the characters of Karṇa and Bhīṣma reflect each other in Chapter Five.

[32] "The soul of the slain Naraka that has assumed the body of Karṇa" (3.240.19).

sacrifice by the brahmin Uttaṅka, who bitterly hates the snakes; in particular Uttaṅka hates the snake-king Takṣaka -- and his hatred stems again from a *stealing of earrings*. Even though Uttaṅka eventually retrieves the earrings, he tells Janamajeya to kill all the snakes (1.3.80-195); by doing so, Janamajeya will not only please Uttaṅka but also revenge his father Parīkṣit who was killed by Takṣaka.

But the snake sacrifice is gruesome and terrible, and as we have noted above, it parallels the grotesquely all-consuming Kurukṣetra war. Karṇa himself describes the war as a sacrifice, one of the central images of the epic: e.g. "when you see me cut down by the Left Handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the Fire of their sacrifice." (5.139.46) But if Karṇa is to be consumed by the sacrificial fire, so is Takṣaka. The poignancy of this analogy (Karṇa as Takṣaka) comes from the fact that Takṣaka is saved, at the last moment, from being sacrificed by Āstīka (1.53), while Karṇa, like so many other warriors, is to be a tragic victim of the war. Here the corresponding background story serves as a foil to highlight an emotional aspect of the Karṇa narrative.[33]

There is more still: the earrings are, after all, a gift from Sūrya to Karṇa (or Kuntī) and in that sense they represent, like Durvāsas's gift of the boon, a complex gift, one that in some sense goes awry. So just as Durvāsas's gift almost becomes a curse for Kuntī, so Karṇa's earrings are a strange gift. Like a Chekovian pistol waiting to go off, the golden earrings are waiting to be stolen in a later act, as in fact they are.

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[33] Minkowski reads Takṣaka differently: to him, Takṣaka corresponds to Parīkṣit: each is the sole survivor of a holocaust that eliminates their race. And both are saved only by an intervention, by Āstīka and Kṛṣṇa respectively. See C. Z. Minkowski, "Snakes, Sattras, and the Mahabharata," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).

Moreover, the Uttaṅka story itself is also a story about a strange gift. The story begins with Uttaṅka refusing to sleep with his guru's wife while the guru is away. Later on, Uttaṅka begins bothering his teacher for a gift to give to him:

> the teacher replied, "Uttaṅka, my son, so many times do you prod me about what guru's gift to bring! Go then and visit my wife, and ask her what you should bring. Bring whatever she demands." (1.3.97-98)

The guru's wife demands nothing other than the earrings worn by King Pausya's wife. Uttaṅka sets out to obtain the earrings, which takes him on a journey filled with strange rituals and tests of pollution and purity. Here again, the gift-ritual goes awry. (It is on this journey, moreover, that Uttaṅka develops his hatred for the snakes, which eventually leads to Janamejaya's gruesome sacrifice.)

There is a further dimension to the encounter between Karṇa and Indra: Karṇa also "tricks" Indra back. We shall see that Kuntī employs a similar strategy with Sūrya. (I use the verb 'trick' here in the general sense of exploiting ritual or convention for profit.) By not acknowledging the disguise, Karṇa makes Indra feel as if he has outwitted Karṇa, whereas, in fact, this episode should be an embarrassment to Indra: he has been insulted in that he has been treated like a mortal. Karṇa, moreover, gets what *he* wants; Karṇa's unstinting generosity leaves Indra no choice but to offer Karṇa a boon. Karṇa chooses an infallible (but single-use) magic lance (śakti) in order to ensure victory over Arjuna. (Indra, of course, tricks back the back-trick; Indra gives to Bhīma a son, a warrior so powerful that Karṇa will have to use up the śakti he has marked for Arjuna: "Ghaṭotkaca, created by Maghavat [Indra] because of the magic lance (śakti),[34] so that he might destroy the great spirited Karṇa whose prowess was unmatched." 1.43.39)

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[34] Van Buitenen translates "śaktihetor" as "for power's sake." But here śakti refers not to power in general but specifically to the weapon that Karṇa has. Thanks to Lawrence McCrea for pointing this out to

As a mortal, Karṇa is making a conscious decision to treat Indra as a brahmin instead of as a god. (Sūrya has forewarned Karṇa what Indra will do.) Knowing that he is not dealing with a brahmin, Karṇa still treats Indra as a mortal and uses earthly categories to define his interaction with Indra. In other words, he refuses to see Indra as a god. This resonates with another choice Karṇa makes, when, despite knowing full well that Kṛṣṇa is a god, Karṇa treats Kṛṣṇa's advice as if it were equivalent to other forms of mortal advice (rather than as divine command).[35]

Let us now examine the episode in which Kuntī approaches Karṇa to ask him to switch to the Pāṇḍava side. While this episode might seem like a 'temptation' or a 'negotiation,' it is in essence a gift-ritual similar to the encounter with Indra. Both the epic authors and Karṇa treat it as one; that is why Karṇa feels he must not let Kuntī leave empty-handed. Thus he grants her that he will fight only Arjuna, so that she will always have five sons. (5.144.22)[36]

Kuntī herself is raised as a gift. She is given the name Pṛthā at birth; her father, Śūra, gives her to Kuntībhoja, his childless cousin, and she is raised as Kuntībhoja's daughter Kuntī. (1.111, 3.287.20 ff) She is given away not just out of generosity: when Kuntībhoja and Śūra are young, they are told that one of them will have illustrious children; the other will have none. Hearing that, they vow that the one with children will give the other his first-born child. Thus Kuntī, like Karṇa, is raised an adopted child, a fact which adds poignancy to her actions both when she abandons Karṇa to the river (and to a life as an adopted child) as well as when she reveals to Karṇa that *she* is his

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me. It is also mentioned in John Leavitt, "Himalayan Variations on an Epic Theme," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 450.

[35] Chapter Two elaborates upon this point.

[36] The details of this episode are given in Section 2.2.

biological mother. In addition, when Karṇa refuses Kuntī's offer, and claims his loyalties lie with his adopted mother, Kuntī is both moved (since she too knows what it is to love an adopted parent) and heartbroken (for Karṇa has rejected her and she knows Karṇa will fight Arjuna).

This is an example of how the authors use a fact from an earlier story to reinforce the poignancy of a particular scene. The epic does not explicitly remind us that Kuntī is also an adopted child. Rather, the audience is expected to keep that in mind, even if it is only briefly mentioned elsewhere. The stories reinforce and bring out each others' emotional dimensions. Reading Kuntī's temptation of Karṇa by itself thus loses a valuable dimension if we do not read it with the parallel story of Kuntī's own adoption.

Kuntī, who Karṇa *knows* is his biological mother, attempts to prevent Karṇa from fighting for the Kauravas. In the Sūrya and Saṃjñā story, the shadow Saṃjñā prefers her own child over her adopted children; so similarly, Kuntī seems to prefer her own sons (the Pāṇḍavas) over one that had been adopted (Karṇa). The situation, though, is tricky because the Pāṇḍava twins are not Kuntī's children but Mādrī's; in that sense, Kuntī seems to care for her adopted (step-) children more than she does for a biological one. These subtleties suggest that Kuntī's affections and character are *divided*. After all, she does love Karṇa and faints when she sees Karṇa and Arjuna about to fight in the tournament. In other words, the mythology of the dual mothers from solar mythology is played out not only as Kuntī giving up Karṇa for adoption, but also as Kuntī wanting herself to be a mother to a child that is, emotionally, not hers: Kuntī *wants to be* two mothers. Suddenly the mythic background appears as a poignant foil to what Kuntī is actually able to be. It is this poignant human moment that is the product of the artful retelling of the story, of taking the mythic elements and using them to investigate Kuntī's identity as a mother (in a very human context).

Moreover, this choice continues the trickery theme in a different way: if the shadow mother is a 'trick' mother, then Karṇa chooses to live 'tricked' rather than 'untricked.'[37] Damayanti too as a human woman prefers a mortal ('tricked') man over an immortal ('untricked') one.[38] Furthermore, men like Purūravas (who prefer an immortal to a mortal woman, who prefer the trick) are destined to death. And moreover they are destined to die whether or not they choose otherwise. "The human man who is desired by a woman from the other world -- animal goddess or demoness -- is likely to die, whether he rejects her or accepts her: once the goddess fancies him, he is, quite literally, damned if he does and damned if he doesn't."[39] Again, the epic authors continue this mythic structure in that once Karṇa has chosen to remain loyal to his adopted mother, he is destined to die.

Furthermore, we can think of Kuntī invoking Durvāsas's spell (and its consequences) as another ritual gone awry -- and another gift that turns into a curse. Sūrya is supposed to come down to earth and follow Kuntī's will; that much is the letter of Durvāsas's gift. Because he is brought down by a spell, Sūrya is, in some sense, 'tricked' into descending to the earth. Once there, though, Sūrya refuses to accept that her will is for him to leave, that it was 'only' a youngster's curiosity that brought him down. Sūrya takes her initial desire very seriously, and so 'tricks' Kuntī back. But Kuntī retaliates by getting what *she* wants out of Sūrya -- so the tricks have been layered upon tricks. And both Sūrya and Kuntī walk away feeling that they have got the better of the

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[37] Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena prefers to love a tricked rather than untricked Demetrius.

[38] Also compare with Etain, Ahalya, and Purūravas -- who prefer the divine, that is to say, the tricked. For permutations, see Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. p. 186. Also note that, similarly, Odysseus prefers mortal Penelope over immortal Calypso.

[39] See Ibid. p. 188.

other one, that they out-maneuvered and out-negotiated ('out-tricked') the other. This playful structure of tricking and out-tricking is only matched when Indra comes to earth to 'trick' Karṇa into cutting off his body-armor.

In a larger context, these trick-laden episodes play with the usual pattern in the epic, in which the gods trick mortals (and demons). In the birth of Karṇa, as in the births of all the Pāṇḍavas, this pattern is reversed: mortal women 'trick' the gods, in the sense that they cast a spell over the gods to get what they want (children).

Finally, as we see this theme of trickery playing out in the Karṇa narrative, we should note how the theme itself is a foil to Karṇa's character. Of all the characters in the epic, Karṇa is perhaps the least subtle, the least tricky. Even when he 'tricks' Indra back, it is only by refusing to accept Indra's disguise as a trick, by treating the tricky as the real. Karṇa will make crucial decisions in his life along similar lines; for instance, he will live his life as if his adopted mother is his real mother (even when he knows who his biological parents are). Later, in a crucial moment in the final duel with Arjuna, Karṇa's snake arrow misses Arjuna only because Kṛṣṇa lowers the ground beneath Arjuna's chariot and thus tricks the arrow into missing. When the arrow asks to be fired again, Karṇa ignores the trick and plays by the book: he refuses to refire the one weapon that has a chance of destroying Arjuna. Thus the theme of trickery is used by the epic authors not only as a leitmotif in the Karṇa narrative but also to add a contrasting thematic backdrop to the human character within that narrative.

Thus far we have seen gift-rituals that have gone awry and turned, ambivalently, into the opposite of gift-rituals, namely curses. Karṇa's narrative also contains curses, which themselves go awry. And again they take place in the context of self-invention.

While Karṇa is a student at Paraśurāma's -- pretending to be a brahmin -- he mistakenly kills a brahmin's cow. Knowing that it had been inadvertent, he tells the

brahmin about it. But the brahmin is full of anger and lashes out at Karṇa. He curses

Karṇa, declaring that while Karṇa is engaged with his archenemy,

> the earth shall swallow the wheel [of your chariot]! And when your wheel
> has been swallowed by the earth, and you are stupefied, your enemy will
> attack and cut off your head! (12.2.24-25)

Even though Karṇa offers the brahmin ample recompense for his cow, the brahmin

refuses to retract or mollify the curse -- unusual because curses, like weapons, can usually

be altered in some way.[40] But this brahmin is adamant: "even all the worlds would not

take away my words!" (12.2.28)

If previously we encountered gifts that demanded too much, that went awry, here

now is a curse that is overly harsh; Karṇa, after all, confessed his crime to the brahmin.

The lack of retractibility is reminiscent of Aśvatthāmām's inability to retract the Brahma

weapon he throws at the Pāṇḍavas. Aśvatthāmām is not the sort of person who should

have knowledge of that weapon; like Śibi, like Karṇa, like Ekalavya, he has acquired the

weapon (in this case by playing upon his father's love) by some means other than social

varṇa. That story too has a gruesome, terrible ending; to prevent the Brahma weapon

from killing the Pāṇḍavas, Aśvatthāmām redirects it into the *wombs* of the Pāṇḍavas'

wives. (It is only Kṛṣṇa's later intervention that later saves the embryonic Parīkṣit.)

Thus far, we have seen both cursing and gift-giving go awry; let us conclude this

section by examining, as Mauss did,[41] gifts and sacrifices in a similar light, by

considering the gift-ritual-gone-awry as a particular case of the sacrifice-gone-awry. The

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[40] For example, when Karṇa learns the Brahma weapon, he also learns Brahmāstra sanivartanam "the Brahma weapon, along with [the means of] turning it back" (12.3.2).

[41] See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967).

theme of rituals gone awry recurs throughout Karṇa's life and the stories that surround it. For example, Karṇa describes the Kurukṣetra battle as a sacrifice -- and a sacrifice which becomes a genocide, just as the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest and Janamajeya's snake sacrifices are terrible, horrific genocidal rituals. Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration ceremony with its gambling match is another ritual gone awry which leads, in its way, to the genocidal Kurukṣetra battle. Both large and small, these rituals lead to disaster on a cosmic scale.[42]

The theme of sacrifices and rituals going awry is no doubt appropriate for a text heralding the Kali Yuga. And indeed repeatedly, ambiguities (in identity, in morality, in the relationships between humans, demons, and gods) are exploited to show how catastrophically wrong things can go. However, the human characters involved in these rituals are all absolutely resolute: Karṇa will cut off his armor, Śibi will cut off his limbs until he has no flesh left to cut, Uttaṅka will follow the earrings until he can present them to his guru, and Janamejaya is determined to kill all the snakes. This quality of firm resolution[43] seems to point to a response to the Kali Yuga: even when the institutions of the world (such as ritual) have collapsed, human beings can still pursue, sometimes even with heroic dignity, their own goals and morality.

3.4 Conclusion

To conclude, let us examine one episode which combines all three aspects of self-invention we have investigated. When Karṇa cuts off his armor, he is, first of all, continuing the varṇa aspect of the Sūrya-Saṃjñā story. Second, he both re-invents himself as he sloughs his armor (he is renamed) and remains the same (he becomes

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[42] See Doniger, "Horses and Snakes in the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata." pp. 16-18.

[43] The Sanskrit term dhairyam that we will explore further in the next chapter.

mortal 'again'). Third, the gift of his armor to Indra is an example of a gift-ritual gone awry: Indra is clearly exploiting Karṇa's oath of generosity to help his own son Arjuna; Indra is not a real brahmin asking for alms. Nonetheless, Karṇa does treat Indra as if he were a mortal supplicant, which leads to the net of ramifications we have examined above.

I have tried to argue here that the epic authors formed the Karṇa narrative by correlating myths involving nāgas and Sūrya with a human narrative, not just for aesthetic purposes, but for literary and philosophical reasons as well. Specifically, the epic authors are exploring the nature of self-invention in the context of varṇa-dharma. In that light, the Karṇa story reveals how much the ethico-social fabric depends upon social varṇa and ritual, that is, on the stable varṇa and the sincere intentions of the actors involved. And the Karṇa story shows how fragile that fabric becomes when human beings begin to invent class status for themselves. Or conversely, and more radically, it shows how necessary it is for human beings to invent their own selves when that social fabric falls apart.

Chapter Four

Karṇa and Psychological Paradigms

What can the study of a Sanskrit epic character like Karṇa teach us? That is to say, what can a study such as this one have to say to scholars and students who are interested in literature in general or in the humanities in general? In this chapter, I want to highlight the value of studying the Sanskrit epic by showing how Karṇa, as a character, can participate in pre-existing literary discussions from both Western academia and the Sanskrit literary tradition. Karṇa, I want to show, forces us to expand our vocabulary of psychological paradigms (or perhaps to explode a paradigm altogether) and points us towards (and helps us better understand) the subtleties of the distinctions made by Sanskrit literary aestheticians.

This is not say, however, that the Sanskrit paradigms are better than the Western ones. As I will show, our study has a lot to contribute to the Sanskrit discussion as well. Karṇa has been overlooked as a "hero" type for centuries, though well-loved and praised well and often. (See introduction for more on the history of the Karṇa narrative through South Asian literary history.) The character study of Karṇa, I hope to show, has much to contribute to both Sanskrit and Western discussions and will expand all of our visions of human psycho-emotional possibility. To use Gadamer's phrase, Karṇa will broaden our "horizon" of understanding of human psychology.

A study that crosses cultural boundaries, however, may evoke some methodological suspicion, and I want to briefly address this at the outset. Where a theory or a story "shares some meanings"[1] with some element of the Karṇa narrative, I hope to exploit that convergence to discover some subtlety of the narrative. The optimism, though, that such a sharing can be both illuminating and scholarly responsible, I borrow from Wendy Doniger, who writes, "we must search for something essential but not essentialist."[2] Similarly, through the following analyses, I hope to use cross-cultural comparisons without having to make (or imply) universalist claims. Following Doniger, I believe that

> the universalism of most systems of comparison can [...] be avoided. The great universalist theories were constructed from the top down: that is, they assumed certain continuities about broad concepts such as sacrifice, or a High God, and an Oedipal complex; but these continuities necessarily involved cognitive and cultural factors that, it seems to me, are the least likely places in which to look for cross-cultural continuities. The method that I am advocating is, by contrast, constructed from the bottom up. It assumes certain continuities not about overarching human universals but about particular narrative details concerning the body, sexual desire, procreation, parenting, pain, and death, details which though unable to avoid mediation by culture entirely, are at least *less* culturally mediated that the broader conceptual categories of the universalists.[3]

In what follows, I will exploit some cross-cultural continuities to help us appreciate the subtleties of the Karṇa narrative. Psychological paradigms will thus not be used to delimit the myth; rather, it is at the moments when the Karṇa narrative stretches these paradigms

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[1] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*, Lectures on the History of Religions New Series, No. 16 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). p. 54.

[2] Ibid. pp. 66-67.

[3] Ibid. p. 59.

(when it both participates in the conversation and longs to break free of it) that both the narrative and the paradigms will best illuminate each other.

As we have discussed in Section 1.5, Alf Hiltebeitel has pointed out that the characters in the epic do indeed possess "as complex a psychology as one could wish."[4] This chapter attempts to fulfill Hiltebeitel's "wish;" that is, it attempts to fill out one aspect of Karna's psychology. At the outset, I should say that it will not attempt to fill out every aspect of Karna's psychology -- merely one that I have found particularly intriguing. I have chosen to focus on this aspect of Karna's psychology -- his steadfastness and equanimity -- for the following reasons.

I hope this chapter will show that Karna, as a character from the South Asian tradition, has more then just a *different* psychology. That is to say, I do not wish to hold up Karna as an exemplar of some sort of exoticized psychology, an aberrant data point on the chart of psychological paradigms. Rather, I want to show that Karna is (already) part of the (admittedly Western) psychological discourse, and that the Karna narrative stands out from that discourse, as a counter-example with much to contribute to the discourse. In other words, it is not just that the character of Karna is not psychologically naïve; I want to show here that the character of Karna is psychologically instructive, that examining his character can teach us something about (human) psychological theory. In other words, Karna's psychology is *both* different *and* participating in the ongoing psychological intellectual dialogue.

(In this way, I hope to advocate the *strong* form of the call to comparative studies. In its weak form, the call to comparative studies suggests that scholars can look at works

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[4] Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). p. 41.

from the non-western tradition because such works happen to be in dialogue with the western works. This form of the calls lacks necessity; or to put it less derogatively, it does not force comparitivism on all scholars. The stronger form advocates that scholars *should* look always at works of non-western traditions before making claims about the ways a particular issue (e.g. the mind-body problem) has been addressed throughout history.)

4.1 The Karṇa Narrative through a Rankian Lens

This section will examine the Karṇa narrative through the lens of Otto Rank's influential 1909 essay "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." I have chosen to use Rank as my basis for an analysis because he was the first to realize that the Karṇa narrative fits into a more general pattern of hero myths. Moreover, students of "the hero" paid little attention to Karṇa after Rank; for example, Lord Raglan ignores Karṇa in his 1936 study of "The Hero." (Freud himself recognized Karṇa and wrote about him in Moses and Monotheism. Since Moses is much later than Rank's essay, it seems likely that Freud learned of Karṇa from Rank.)

4.1.1 Background to Rankian analysis

Before delving into Rank's analysis itself, we should have some background on Rank's perspective on myth. Rank wished to analyze myths as products of the human imagination, an imagination that was implicitly universal. In this way, Rank hoped to dispel theories that myth formation was based on allegories of natural phenomena or on migration patterns and cultural borrowings.

Rank's motivation to do so was partly Freudian. Since Rank believed that myths were products of a universal imagination, any individual's particular moral disapproval at a myth was evidence of its power, and thus of the myth's authenticity as an uncensored

product of the imagination.[5] Thus, when Max Müller would like to interpret incest or

parricide myths as reflections of (and on) natural phenomena, Rank disagrees and argues

that such interpretations do nothing more than obscure the myths.[6] To Rank, Müller's

attempts to "bestow the myths with dignity" lack the power to do justice to all the

important elements of the story. (We shall see an example of this in the generalized hero

narrative below.)

Rank explicitly contrasts Goldhizer's interpretation of the Oedipus myth with

Freud's. By casting Oedipus "as the solar hero who destroys his progenitor, the

darkness,"[7] Goldhizer creates an interpretation which is more 'soothing' than Freud's

famous interpretation in the Interpretation of Dreams. But Rank, like Freud, is unwilling

to accept the argument that the more censored explanation is the more scientific; to Rank,

the aspects of the myths that strike at the subconscious are the most telling. (We shall

return to this issue below when we assess the controversy over the role of the Oedipus

complex in South Asian psychology.)

Nonetheless, while Rank and Freud do not shy away from the sexual, they both

wish to eliminate the gods from their stories. (Doniger has called Freud the great

euhemerist of our time.) This plays into the variant of the Karna narrative that Rank

chooses to analyze; it comes from Lassen's emphatically euhemeristic 1846 rendition of

the Mahābhārata. For example, in this retelling, Pāndu is not impotent, but conceives

children himself -- the gods impregnating Kuntī and Madrī are simply left out of the tale.

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[5] Otto Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero," in *In Quest of the Hero*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). p. 8. Rank's essay was published in 1909; an English translation appeared in 1914.

[6] Ibid. p. 8.

[7] Ibid. p. 9

Subsequently, when Kuntī tells Karṇa of his biological birth, Karṇa becomes a *rationalist* and rejects Kuntī's story along rationalist lines, for being implausible!

4.1.2 Introduction to Rankian Analysis of the Karṇa Narrative

In the variant of the Karṇa narrative which Rank examines (p. 15), Karṇa is born and raised in the way we have seen earlier. When Karṇa arrives at the tournament and challenges Arjuna, Kuntī recognizes him. Instead of fainting (as the critical edition tells it), the Kuntī of Rank's variant approaches Karṇa and reveals herself as his biological mother. Again, Kuntī acts (at least partially) out of fear that Karṇa may injure Arjuna. Karṇa considers Kuntī's revelation "a fantastic tale" and refuses to stop fighting. Then, in Rank's variant, Karṇa is allowed to fight and indeed dies at the tournament, defeated by Arjuna.

To my mind, such a variant is unlikely to have had wide circulation. Since one of the battle parvans is the Karṇa Parvan, Karṇa must live to be a general of the Kaurava army (after Bhīṣma dies). Nevertheless, even this widely divergent variant still preserves as central the drama of Karṇa's choice when confronted by his biological identity. And thus, even if Rank's variant is very different from the one we have discussed, the mental constitution of a character whose birth is of a certain type, and who poignantly confronts his biological identity, is at the heart of Karṇa's psychological character.

Given this narrative, Rank notices that many of its elements, and its overall structure, fit very well into a general pattern that the birth and life of many heroes follow. Rank formulates the pattern as follows:

> "The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth,

and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. After he has grown up he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors."[8]

The birth of the heroes Paris, Perseus, Oedipus, and Cyrus are all examples of births that fit this pattern.[9] Often there is a prophecy accompanying the birth of the son that the son will destroy the city or kill the father. In general, every hero becomes famous, attains high rank, and, often, becomes king. This is the pattern, for instance, of the lives of Cyrus and Hercules.[10]

As we shall see, the Karṇa narrative does diverge significantly from this pattern. Lord Raglan expanded Rank's pattern into a checklist of 22 items. Lord Raglan's list seems particularly suited to Oedipus, who receives a score of '21.'[11] As we have noted, Lord Raglan skips over Karṇa; by my calculations, Karṇa scores a '9', a low score but not lower than other heroes which Lord Raglan does consider (e.g. Elijah). My point is only that even though the divergences are multiple, the connection to the general pattern is striking. And, as I shall try to demonstrate below, even the divergences are instructive.

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[8] Ibid. p. 57. Rank provides another version of the essential elements of the prototype of the birth of the hero: "Summarizing the essentials of the hero myth, we find the descent from noble parents, the exposure in a river, and in a box, and the raising by lowly parents; followed in the further evolution of the story by the hero's return to his first parents, with or without punishment meted out to them... It is very evident that the two parent-couples of the myth correspond to the real and the imaginary parent-couple of the romantic fantasy." p. 62.

[9] Ibid. p. 15.

[10] Ibid. p. 15.

[11] FitzRoy Richard Somerset Raglan, "The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama," in *In Quest of the Hero*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). p. 139.

Finally, in terms of appreciating the artistry of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> as a literary

creation, it is interesting to see how its authors crafted a story that seems to begin by

playing along with the pattern, and then turns the pattern on its head. A story that follows

a conventional plot satisfies in a particular way (e.g. the boy and the girl live happily ever

after) but unconventional plots also challenge and intrigue us (e.g. <u>Madame Bovary</u>). It

takes a great deal of artistry to turn a conventional plot on its head: the authors have to

create a *new* plot and carefully work out all its ramifications.

Nevertheless, to claim as much, we will first have to examine the claim that the

pattern that Rank proposes is indeed universal, or even cross-cultural. To this end, we

will need to digress into a discussion of Rank's methodology.

4.1.3 Rankian methodology

A student of Freud, Rank formed his key to unlocking the structure of this hero

pattern by "analogizing the ego of the child with the hero of the myth."[12] As in the

Freudian model of early childhood development, the male child[13] is jealous of his father;

he thus constructs a fantasy in which he kills his father, and is justified in doing so. To

this end, the child invents a hostile father, a father that neglects the child, abandons him,

or exposes him to the elements. The father's plan is foiled, however, since the child

survives, and returns to eventually kill and supplant his father. (Freud termed this plot *the*

family romance.) "Thus the fantasy of the family romance is simply realized in the

myth... The hostility of the father, and the resulting exposure, accentuate the motive

which has caused the ego to indulge in the entire fiction."[14]

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[12] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 62.

[13] In this chapter, only male heroes will be discussed, both because Karṇa is male and because analyzing the female child would require a different paradigm entirely.

[14] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 63.

This fantasy can be framed and interpreted in two ways, depending on who the parents the child is currently living with are perceived to be. In the first interpretation, this fantasy is based on a child who perceives he is neglected:

> "The creative influence of this tendency to represent the parents as the first and most powerful opponents of the hero will be appreciated when it is kept in mind that the entire family romance in general owes its origin to the feeling of being neglected -- namely, the assumed hostility of the parents."[15]

In the fantasy, then, he imagines that he is, on the one hand, raised by loving parents, and, on the other hand, justified in killing his biological parent. Moreover, killing the biological parents does not in any way disinherit him: his abilities and his right to social and political power are his by birth, and he assumes them once he *realizes* his true identity.

In the second interpretation, the family romance is the fantasy of the neglected child who wishes his parents were someone else. That is, that the child's fantasy is that his current parents are adopted and that he needs to leave them and their socioeconomic class and return to his rightful place at the pinnacle of society. In this fantasy, the child's parents are unworthy of him and he must leave them since they are inappropriate and inauthentic (in the sense that they are not his biological parents). Thus the child invents a fantasy in which he leaves both the parents that raised him *and* his biological parents in order to take up power for himself. In this second scenario, it is not jealousy per se of the father which is central; it is, rather, embarrassment at the parents which motivates the fantasy.

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[15] Ibid. p. 64.

One might pause at this point to wonder how Rank makes the above analogy (between the child's ego and the hero) plausible. Rank does so via the following insight: "the hero should always be interpreted merely as a collective ego."[16] That is, the hero does not represent the precise infantile experience of any particular author but rather the infantile wishes, fantasies, and desires of the collective ego. That is, it represents a pattern rather than any particularity of individual genius. The genius, for Rank, that *is* revealed is the genius of the (universal) human imagination. As we shall see below, we can modify this to show that the genius that is revealed by the Karṇa narrative is the genius of the epic tradition itself.

A myth is like a dream of the masses of the people; and is thus open to the same interpretation that Freud deployed in the <u>Interpretation of Dreams</u>. As Rank writes,

> "the relevant teachings of Freud... not only help us to help us understand the dreams themselves but also show their symbolism and close relationship with all psychic phenomena in general, especially with daydreams or fantasies, with artistic creativeness, and with certain disturbances of normal psychic function. A common share in all these productions belongs to a single psychic function: the human imagination."[17]

One might also wonder how adults created these stories; if the fantasy was infantile, how did it play a role in adult life and creativity? "Myths are [...] created by adults, by means of retrograde childhood fantasies, the hero being credited with the mythmaker's personal infantile history."[18] Moreover, the myths may also reveal the guilty conscience of the mythmaker: "besides the excuse of the hero for his rebellion, the myth

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[16] Ibid. p. 62.

[17] Ibid. p. 7.

[18] Ibid. p. 71.

therefore contains also the excuse of the individual for his revolt against his father."[19] In this way, the myth reflects the child, as well as reflections on childhood, within the mythmaker.

Thus it seems both the individual and the collective imaginations play a role in the creation of the myth. Rank himself claims that his essay is the first attempt to interpret mankind's imagination in terms of both the individual and the collectivity.[20]

Crucial to our purposes is that idea that heroism can be reformulated -- that is to say, *interpreted* -- as a psychological phenomenon. Thus the elements in the story (such as the violence) can be interpreted in psychological terms (abandonment, betrayal, etc). Moreover, the psychological approach can do more than just explain why the story is told as it is; it can explain the motivation behind certain symbols which cannot be explained by natural phenomena or cultural borrowing. Rank's example is the water imagery in the hero narrative; for example, Karṇa is placed into the Aśva river. This cannot be explained in terms of astral imagery or by migration explanations. Water is a birth symbol in Freud's Interpretation of Dreams,[21] and thus an appropriate symbol for the "second birth" of the child in the family of his adopted parents. Similarly, the basket is a womb and so the baby's trip down the river in a basket is a symbol of rebirth.[22]

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[19] Ibid. p. 71.

[20] Ibid. p. 9. Earlier (p. 7) Rank writes that "it is to the imaginative faculty of humanity at large rather than of the individual – that the modern myth theory is obliged to concede a high rank, perhaps the first, as the ultimate source of all myths." This is not to exclude the individual; rather it is to lessen the priority on explanations based on natural phenomena or migration.

[21] See also the end of Goldman's paper. Robert P. Goldman, "Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 6 (1978).

[22] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 63.

This provides us with a methodological comparison. In the Myth Chapter, we saw

the Aśva River as a remnant of the solar myth of a horse-mother. Here, the other half of

this same symbol can be analyzed (in an equally totalizing way) outside of that

intertextual mythological context. This alerts us to a characteristic of the Mahābhārata:

just as within the epic there are often several complete (and independent) explanations for

one event (e.g. for why Draupadī is married to all five Pāṇḍavas), we will find complete

(and independent) intereprations of the epic as we examine it. Certainly, as I hope this

dissertation as a whole will show, there are complete (and independent) interpretations of

the Karṇa narrative.

4.1.4 Rankian Analysis

Once again following Freud, for Rank the essential moment in the hero narrative

comes when the hero makes a break with his parents. Let us examine the essential point

for Rank, Karṇa's decision with respect to his mother. This break represents a crucial

moment to Freud and his followers. Paraphrasing Freud, Rank writes:

> "The detachment of the growing individual from the authority of the
> parents is one of the most necessary, but also one of the most painful
> achievements of evolution. It is absolutely necessary for this detachment
> to take place, and it may be assumed that all normal grown individuals
> have accomplished it to a certain extent."[23]

For example, as Cyrus moves upwards socially, "he constantly removes, as it were, the

last traces of his ascent."[24] This illustrates Freud's point -- and provides a stark contrast to

Karṇa's psychological trajectory.

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[23] Ibid. p. 59.

[24] Ibid. p. 74.

And lest we think that this point above is a relatively weak claim, Freudian theory goes on to claim that "social progress is essentially based upon this opposition between the two generations." [25] Thus this break with the parents becomes the key to both personal development and social amelioration. Interesting then how Rank does include Karṇa, but how later Karṇa is conveniently forgotten from this discourse!

This emphasis on the break with one's parents is, of course, central to the Karṇa narrative. But it is central in an interesting way, and its difference from the Freudian tradition is not a simple opposition. The Karṇa narrative is after all a Janus-faced story, or in this case, perhaps a Brahma-faced story. Just when one believes one has come to an interpretation, one turns a corner and finds yet another face, yet another aspect of the story.

In this case, Karṇa can be seen as both breaking away and remaining loyal: *by being loyal to his adopted parents, he breaks away from his biological parents*. If, as Rank claims, the pattern of the hero is universal, then the authors of this epic narrative seem almost to be playing with the psychological prototype: they have composed a story which simultaneously confirms and refutes it! It is like a poem that leaves the philosopher alternately delighted and perplexed; it is the poetry of either/or.

However, it may not be that the authors are playing in this way: what if the Freudian/Rankian prototype were *not* universal? In that case, then perhaps the Karṇa narrative represents something deep and personal about the psyche of the authors, about *their* collective imagination -- this could reveal something very interesting about the South Asian psyche and perhaps its relationship to the (western?) Freudian one.[26]

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[25] Ibid. p. 59.

[26] See my section 4.2.

In any case, the poignancy of Karṇa's break with his biological mother is certainly highlighted by Freud's observation. Repeatedly, readers (of all times, for whatever reason) expect Karṇa to abandon his (adopted) parents, and to take the kingdom for himself. In the Sanskrit tradition, a bhakta would say that Karṇa should listen to Kṛṣṇa. A conventional dharmaśāstra reader would say that Karṇa should obey his mother since conventional dharma (which privileges nature as we have seen) would consider Kuntī his mother. And Freud would say that making a break with his perceived (thus adopted) parents would make Karṇa into his own individual and help society -- which is what *would* happen in a conventional reading of the Karṇa narrative as well.[27] If Karṇa were to accept himself as Kuntī's son, Karṇa would, according to the temptations of Kuntī and Kṛṣṇa, *both* become king *and* prevent the war. (We shall see below that such a reading is misguided.)

At this point, however, let us reflect briefly on what exactly Kṛṣṇa's and Kuntī's temptations mean to Karṇa. Both the brutality of Kṛṣṇa's request, and the corresponding horror of Kuntī's attempt, indicate a point of view in which Karṇa as an individual is not of much account. It is partially that which has made him a hero to the socially dispossessed. In the context of a kṣatriya framework, as Karṇa himself says, his world is not simply a world of *power*. It is a world also of social relations -- his love for his parents (who will do their funeral rites?) and his duty to Duryodhana (who helped him

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[27] Here, I am using 'conventional narrative' to refer to V. S. Sukthankar's interpretation. (Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). pp. 49-53) Believing that all divine advice is good advice, Sukthankar feels that Karṇa's refusal to heed such advice is prideful. Karṇa's "inferiority complex" makes him lash out at all the noble characters in the epic. And his generosity is "but a pose, albeit an unconscious pose, a clever artifice to outdo the accredited nobility in their vaunted virtue [and] liberality, and to hear himself lauded... He had no true generosity of heart." Sukthankar concludes that Karṇa is "a man with a frustration complex and therefore a clear case of abnormal mentality." And while I disagree with Sukthankar, I owe much to the clarity with which, and the rhetoric by which, he laid out his interpretation.

when he was a "nobody"?). Being Adhiratha and Rādhā's child is part of his identity and he owes his loyalty to them based on love.

A radically separated individual is not in a desirable state in the Mahābhārata. Indeed, if an individual is all alone, the individual would be left with nothing but power.[28] This is what the characters neither desire nor even consider as an option. It not unrelated (as we shall explore in the next chapter) to Yudhiṣṭhira's sorrow after the war: if he had lost a brother (Karṇa) then what was the war for? It is also connected to Arjuna's query before the war in the Bhagavadgītā:

> I see omens of chaos,
> Kṛṣṇa, I see no good
> in killing my kinsmen
> in battle.
>
> Kṛṣṇa, I seek no victory,
> or kingship or pleasures.
> What us to us are kingship,
> delights, or life itself?
>
> We sought kingship, delights,
> and pleasures for the sake of those
> assembled to abandon their lives
> and fortunes in battle.[29]

The idea of power, of kingship, wealth, and pleasures independent of familial and social relations is indeed horrifying to everyone involved in the war. And it is (as we have seen in the introductory chapter) one of the central motifs of the specter of the Kali Yuga that pervades the epic.

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[28] Thanks to Neil Coffee, personal communication, for this insight.

[29] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam Classics, 1986). 1.31-33.

This reflection on the psychology of Karṇa's choice helps us understand the poignancy of all the other stories that Rank and Freud talk about as well. For instance, Moses (who like Karṇa, moves socially downwards because of his decision at the moment of "recognition") has the same poignant aspect to his story -- Moses believes he is a prince of Egypt, even if he eventually takes his place among the Hebrews. The shift must indeed have been a massive psychological rupture -- one which we shall discuss further here, for Karṇa, like Moses, chooses the lowly but loving relationship.

For Rank (and Freud), the ease with which one can abandon one's perceived parents seems to be based on a fantasy (or is it a reality?) of parental neglect.[30] That is, the child imagines that he has been neglected, and that crime excuses his fantasy of rebellion. And this is what the epic authors go to such a great deal of effort to dispel: they set up a hero who has all the features of the hero narrative but they give him parents who adore him -- ideal parents in emotional terms: loving, caring, sincere. (The presence of such an ideal father will be discussed further in the section below on family relations.)

As we have seen, there is another urge tied into this adoption fantasy: the child's fantasy that he deserves much more than the social situation he finds himself in, that he is really of noble rank, that he is really a king. Rank writes that the "true hero is the ego itself"[31] and that the first (and perhaps only) heroic act is revolt against the father. Similarly, Freud writes, "as a rule, the pivot for his entire system is simply the culmination of the family romance, in the apodictic statement: I am the emperor (or god)."[32] And indeed this pathological dimension of heroes is not lost on Rank and Freud.

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[30] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 60.

[31] Ibid. p. 70-71.

[32] Quoted in ibid. p. 77.

Rank finds anarchists and family romance heroes similar[33] and connects both to delusional paranoiacs. Those who *live out* a hero fantasy wind up in jail.[34]

This particular delusion, however, deserves more comment, for it is a delusion that has received much attention, especially in modern, capitalist societies. Gustave Flaubert wrote <u>Madame Bovary</u> just as capitalism was transforming French society, and created a heroine whose central mental preoccupation is being someone who she is not. Indeed, Emma Bovary's essence is precisely that fantasizing, a fantasizing that eventually leads to her death. For Flaubert, prevalent as it might be, such a fantasy was untenable in reality. Flaubert was skeptical (at best) of where capitalism was leading France. (In that way, <u>Madame Bovary</u> and the <u>Mahābhārata</u> are similar: they both bleakly depict a society in transition, and a society which is, in the authors' opinion, devolving.)

The French philosopher Jules Gaultier[35] popularized the term *bovarysme* and posited that it was at the heart of capitalism, as well as at the heart of what was wrong with capitalism. To Gaultier bovarysme was the faculty that drove individuals to work hard, to compete, to become the people they were not.

> For Gaultier, *bovarysme* was *the faculty of conceiving oneself as other than one is* and as such represented an evolutionarily valuable human possibility. This depends, however, on the stimulation of a *higher* conception of oneself, an aspiration for the better. When the goal aimed at is unobtainable, mere fantasy, *bovarysme* is damaging and ultimately pathological. It is this pejorative sense of the term Gaultier finally stressed and that became current, unsurprisingly given its derivation from Flaubert's novel and the conventional condemnations of Emma.[36]

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[33] Ibid. p. 78.

[34] Ibid. p. 76.

[35] See Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme*, New ed. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921). (Originally published in 1902.)

[36] Stephen Heath, *Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, Landmarks of World Literature.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Thus *bovarysme* could be either a pathological fantasy or the psychological engine of industry, depending on the connection to reality that the "higher conceptions of oneself" maintained.

And indeed when we reflect on the Hindu system of rebirth, even on characters within the epic such as Śikhaṇḍin, we see that it is also driven by such an urge: we act in concord with dharma not just to build a better world but also to be reborn in a better state, or to not be reborn at all. But it is again the same urge: we are perhaps something much more than the state in which we find ourselves at the moment. Whether it is socio-economic or dharmic climbing, a "bovarysme" of sorts pervades both systems.

Again, this is just what is so striking about Karṇa's choice. Here is Karṇa's chance to rise high, to become king, to be the person he was born to be. He does not need to wish in the next life to be a king or better: he can achieve that right now! And yet he refuses. As we saw, he refuses in order to maintain his own sense of dharma, and -- as we shall see below -- to maintain his own sense of family relationships. Moreover, as we shall see in our discussion of dhīratā, Karṇa's heroic act is also an act of steadfastness, of steadfast loyalty to his father and mother. Like Emma, Karṇa can conceive of himself independently of the identity that society has given him; like Emma, Karṇa has the dhīratā to cling to that identity throughout all sorts of external temptations.

4.1.5 Rankian Miscellany

Other parts of the Rankian analysis are worthy of comparative attention. For example, Rank, following Freud, feels that the pattern of the fantasy is usually to ennoble the father and accept the biological mother.[37] The Karṇa narrative again works

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[37] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 61.

differently: Karṇa accepts his father along with his low rank (at the tournament) and rejects his biological mother along with her high rank. Viewing the scenario thus seems to highlight Freud's assumption that the drives involved in this sphere are sexual, and that sexual competition over the mother is what causes the child to idealize the mother (hence not enlarge her in the fantasy) and compound the threat of the father (hence make him more powerful and justify the rebellion).

From Karṇa's perspective, though, his parents are not individuals with whom he is in competition; they are individuals who give his life meaning and reference. His psychological satisfaction comes from pleasing them and by repaying them with his accomplishments. Note that when Karṇa is crowned king, he bows to his father when Adhiratha enters the arena. Similarly, when Kṛṣṇa says that the kingdom will come to him, Karṇa says that he will give it to Duryodhana. It is not the drive to *acquire* power and wealth that drives Karṇa; it the drive to be able to share wealth, riches, and prestige with the people that have cared for him loyally. We might compare this urge to the insight from Mauss[38] (and his followers) that in "potlatch" economies, it is not the accumulation of wealth per se that is important, but rather the ability to give away that wealth in a socially meaningful manner and thereby form social bonds. Moreover, the Mahābhārata provides us with an example of what it would mean to have power but no social relations: at the end of the war, Aśvatthāman has a weapon of incredible power but no relatives. Even though he uses the weapon, it gains him nothing, and he spends the rest of his life as a wandering outcast. Whether or not Aśvatthāman has power, without social relations he is essentially excluded from meaningful activity in the epic.

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[38] See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967).

It is interesting also to note that Karṇa's adopted parents are both *human*. As Rank points out, in a scenario in which the hero abandons his lower-class mother, "the lowering of the mother into an animal is [...] meant to vindicate the ingratitude of the son who denies her."[39] Rādhā is not just human; she is *made* human by the epic authors. After all, as we saw, the "base" myth has a mother who is a horse. The epic authors left a remnant of that story in the name of the river, but *elevated* Rādhā to a human being. This corresponds, as well, to the fact that Karṇa does not reject Rādhā and is not ungrateful towards her. The debasing animalizing has been eliminated since Karṇa simply does not need to hate or debase Rādhā, and indeed refuses to do so.

Another aspect that Rank and Freud emphasize is that of revenge and retaliation at the heart of the child's fantasy's motive.[40] Here they strike a deep chord in the Karṇa narrative: indeed Karṇa *is* full of vengeful hatred, but it is not directed toward his parents. It is certainly not directed towards his adopted parents, and it is also *not* directed towards his biological father Sūrya, whom he worships daily. (More on this below.) Indeed, the character with whom he might be most angry (Kuntī), Karṇa treats rather well. He greets her with honorifics, and he grants her a most lavish gift in response to her most horrifying of demands.

Kuntī's demand is particularly biting to Karṇa because it resonates with the facts that sting him the most: Karṇa is full of vengeful hatred towards those who have humiliated him, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. And those are the very people that Kuntī is trying to protect, and doing so with unabashed bias. Just as Karṇa felt it was unfair that society forgave the Pāṇḍavas for the way that they treated him, now, just when his own

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[39] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 75.

[40] Ibid. p. 61.

biological mother reveals herself to him, her first act is a request blatantly biased towards the Pāṇḍavas. *Even then*, Karṇa does not flare up in anger against her, but only quietly refuses her extravagant request and gives her something else extravagant in its place -- the lives of all of her sons except Arjuna. And indeed in the war, Karṇa will have the chance to kill all the Pāṇḍavas except Bhīma, but will restrain himself and allow the defeated Pāṇḍavas to escape with their lives.

Karṇa's devotion to both his fathers is profound.[41] To Sūrya, he prays every day until the sun scorches his back. To his father Adhiratha, he sacrifices even the kingship. Rank noticed the tendency of the myth to elevate the father into the greatest of men,[42] and Karṇa seems to demonstrate this with respect to Sūrya. Nevertheless Karṇa does not display the urge to compete with or eliminate -- let alone kill -- his fathers.

Indeed Karṇa's worship of Sūrya is one of his defining characteristics: if ever there was an anti-oedipal father-son relationship is that of Karṇa and his fathers. The pattern of tension between father and son[43] is replaced in the Karṇa narrative by a pattern of worship without blind adherence. Karṇa prays every day to Sūrya but does not heed his advice. Karṇa will bow down before Adhiratha even when he has become a king; yet Karṇa will not follow Adhiratha in his caste profession. (Karṇa will not "stick to the whip that suits his family."[44]) Karṇa seems to represent another relationship pattern: reverence without subservience.

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[41] Again, talking about real psychological phenomena when Karṇa's father is a god is perhaps a conflation of discourses, but, as I have said in the introduction, I feel it is a path into the richness of the work. And it prevents, in my opinion, a euhemeristic flattening of the text's psychological dimensions.

[42] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 62.

[43] Ibid. p. 65.

[44] This is Bhīma's taunt at 1.127.5.

Equally importantly for the upcoming discussion, his fathers do not feel any urge to kill Karṇa; both of them love and protect him as best they can. Adiratha's love is attested to by Karṇa's affection for him. And Sūrya warns Karṇa of Indra's trick, and encourages him to take over the kingdom.

4.2 Familial Relations Gone Awry

Indeed Karṇa's relations with his parents seem to raise the question (at least from Rank's or Freud's perspective) of why Karṇa does not have a jealous father.[45] If Rank is accurate in describing the myth as a creation of the authors' or the collective's imagination, then the question arises as to whether or not the authors of the Mahābhārata had the Oedipal impulse in their unconscious. (Certainly, if we follow Freud, they should have this in mind since Freud considers the Oedipal conflict as universal.) This question has been raised and debated by A. K. Ramanujan and Robert Goldman, each of whose arguments we will examine below.

Before turning to Ramanujan's and Goldman's article, I want to clarify the purpose of this discussion: not just to elaborate on the above question but to show that aspects of Karṇa's character (and especially its shadow relationship to Arjuna) can contribute to this debate. Specifically, I want to suggest that Karṇa and Arjuna together represent two sides of the same psychic coin: **on one side is loyalty and adharma; on the other side is disloyalty and dharma.** These two sides are in tension with one another and the heroes seem to flip back and forth between the two sides. I am not addressing here the question of which side of the coin is "better;" rather I want to argue that the psychological motivation for the Karṇa narrative, as well as the stories that

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[45] See e.g. ibid. p. 62.

Ramanujan and Goldman discuss, can all be interpreted as artistic creations inspired by this psychic tension.

Let us first examine Goldman's position. Goldman strongly opposes the suggestion that there is no trace of the Oedipal complex in Indian literature. He admits that it might be difficult to find, but this is only so because father and mothers, for Goldman, have been displaced onto symbolic substitutes, namely gurus, elder brothers, and brahmins for fathers, and cows (usually) for mothers. In Goldman's view, there are three paradigmatic types of Oedipal sons in the Sanskrit epics:

> "The first of these types, and in some ways the one most poorly attested by individual myths in the epics, is that in which a son, almost always a surrogate son, successfully attacks a father figure and through this attack achieves maturity and temporal power... Its most unequivocal and important Indian example is the story of the conflict of Kṛṣṇa and Kamsa... The second major oedipal type of tale is that in which a character launches an oedipal attack on his surrogate father and/or surrogate mother. The 'son' [...] is punished with a castration which may be to a greater or lesser extent symbolic. This is an extremely popular and influential type of story... The last of the three major types of oedipal legend discussed here is that in which a heroic son anticipates and avoids overt oedipal conflict and paternal aggression by freely submitting to the father's will and in effect castrating himself. Heroes of this type are never punished by their fathers but are on the contrary rewarded in various ways...Legends of this third type tend to differ in at least two important respects from those of the other two types. The first distinction is a formal one [:] the negatively oedipal son is sharply contrasted with his older and less subservient brothers... In providing this contrast between the 'good' and 'bad' sons, this type of legend provides a more inclusive presentation of oedipal issues and alternatives... A second important feature that distinguishes legends of the third type from those of the other two is the fact that it is in these episodes alone that the sons are regularly seen in oedipal juxtaposition with their actual fathers... [This confirms] the notion that in traditional India's strictly hierarchical and rigidly repressive family, representation of a son actually attacking his own father or entertaining sexual thoughts about his own mother is subject to the strictest sort of taboo. It is not, of course, as many have argued, that such aggression and

libido is not there. On the contrary, it would appear to virtually obsess the authors and the audience of the epics."[46]

The evidence for Goldman's examples rests upon the sort of substitutions that Freud posited happened in dreams. Thus Goldman, like Rank, would like to read the epic's narratives as dream sequence of a Indian collective mind. One striking (and strikingly suspicious) example of this kind of substitution is the all-giving cow (kāma-dhenu) for mother. Because the kāma-dhenu and a mother are both symbols of fecundity, Goldman feels justified in conflating them. I am not convinced he should: a relationship of fecundity could be fundamentally different from a relationship of sexuality. For example, arguing over a field, is different from arguing over a woman, let alone conflict over a mother. There are specific psycho-developmental relationships that lead to a bond between mother and son (e.g. a breast fixation during the oral stage) which are centrally connected in the Freudian paradigm to the Oedipal complex. Moreover, this is not just any cow, this is a very special cow with very special powers; Vasiṣṭha's relationship to the cow is not necessarily one of marital attachment -- there are myriad other relationships possible. For example, the cow may be part of some conception of a "household" like the Greek *oikos* or the Roman *familia*.[47] The kāma-dhenu could be considered part of Vasiṣṭha's "family," just as in medieval Europe when "scapegoats" were tried and hung for misfortunes that fell upon the family. Thus the economic and social bond between the kāma-dhenu and Vasiṣṭha may be something other than just sexual.

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[46] Goldman, "Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics." pp. 362-364.

[47] Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. p. 48: "The best etymology of the word *familia* is that which aligns it with the Sanskrit *dhāman*, a house." Mauss quotes Walde's *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (p. 70) and writes "Although Walde hesitates over the proposed etymology, there is no need. The principal *res*, the real *mancipium* of the *familia*, is the *mancipium* slave whose other name, *famulus*, has the same etymology as *familia*." p. 119, note 12.

Finally, I would agree with Rank that the replacement of a human figure, especially a female figure, by an animal is an act of misogyny.[48] This sort of misogyny, however, does not seem to me compatible with Vasiṣṭha's utter devotion to and spirited defense of the kāma-dhenu. Thus to simply replace a mother, let alone a *wife*, with a cow is a massive substitution, one that *might* happen in a dream, but certainly not in a text that wanted to give the appearance of reality.[49]

Moreover, as we shall see below, there are other frameworks that can systematically interpret the tensions that Goldman identifies as oedipal -- thus discounting Goldman's central claim that the Oedipal complex is the *only* way to make sense and significance of the stories he has collected. Finally, even if we did accept Goldman's substitutions, what would such an acceptance mean? Why should we *translate* Hindu myths into Greek molds? If Freudian psychoanalytic theory requires a bedrock in the Oedipal conflict, does a psychoanalytic framework of the South Asian psyche(s) require the *same* bedrock? Or wouldn't any bedrock do?

Goldman's 1978 article was a response to a 1972 article by Ramanujan;[50] Ramanujan in turn responded in a reworked 1983 article.[51] Ramanujan begins by alerting us to *point of view* when examining cross-cultural motifs. "Greek and Kannada Oedipal tales provide a very neat example of a pair of tales in which a *structure* is the same, but

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[48] Rank, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 75.

[49] Indeed the *Mahabharata* is so much a text about reality that the question is regularly raised among Indians not as to whether the events happened, only *when*.

[50] A. K. Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus," in *Indian Literature*, ed. A. Potdar (Simla: Indian Institute for Advanced Study, 1972).

[51] A. K. Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus," in *Oedipus, a Folklore Casebook*, ed. Lowell Edmunds and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1983). I note in passing that Ramanujan agrees with Goldman that the triangle Vasiṣṭha-Viśvāmitra-kāma-dhenu should be interpreted as (first) brahman-kṣatriya-fecundity and (then) as father-son-mother.

the narrative point of view is exactly in reverse." [52] Consequently "to structural analysis we need to add *point of view*, before we can interpret a tale."[53] Thus "while intergenerational competition (Kluckhohn's phrase, 1959) seems universal, the direction of aggression and desire, and the outcome seem different in different cultures."[54]

Armed thus, Ramanujan examines variants of a Kannada story in which a mother marries her son, a story that "expresses a mother's desire and real temptation to cling to her son." [55] Ramanujan places this story in the context of "the great importance of sons to mothers in the politics of the Indian family,[56] the prolonged period of breast-feeding, the practice in many families of sons sleeping next to mothers, almost until they are adolescent."[57] Complicating this family dynamic is the Hindu belief that "fathers are reborn as sons. The rivalry between fathers and sons for the mother is because the mother loves her son and the father is left out." [58] Thus Ramanujan delineates a category of Oedipal tales in India that take place from the mother's perspective.[59]

Later, Ramanujan suggests another angle on the topic, one that seems to have much promise for our analysis. In discussing a story in which a son becomes an ascetic

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[52] Ibid. p. 238.

[53] Ibid. p. 243.

[54] Ibid. p. 254.

[55] Ibid. p. 243.

[56] Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978). p. 53.

[57] Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus." p. 243.

[58] Ibid. p. 243.

[59] Whether or not Ramanujan is correct, such an analysis can shed little light on a story wherein a mother's first act is to send her child down the river. The dynamic thus is completely different: Karna is the character doing the clinging, not his parents per se. This suggests too that in addition to *point of view*, we might also consider *agency* in addition to narrative structure.

when he discovers that his mother is his father's daughter, Ramanujan points out that, "here, as in the Oedipus stories, the emphasis is placed on the resulting confusion of normal kin-relations, especially the conflation of generations (grandfather-father-son-brother) resulting from incestuous relations -- and the son's horror at such a discovery."[60] This tale suggests a completely new way to interpret not only this story, but all the Oedipal stories we have seen, as well as shed light on the Karṇa narrative

Ramanujan's folktale also suggests the following general *asexual* causal chain: adharmic sex leads to adharmic familial relations, which lead to adharmic power relationships, which lead to dilemmas in which:

(1) loyalty to family; love for family; filial respect
are pitted against
(2) dharmic duties (for example, and especially, kṣatriya duties)

(Compare this chain and conflict to that in the <u>Bhagavadgītā</u> 1.40. There adharma destroys the family and consequently leads to the dilemma that Arjuna is facing on the battlefield.) Let us see how my modification of the folklore pattern can be applied as an interpretation which runs parallel to Ramanujan's and Goldman's analyses.

Now "Indian conceptions of heroes and heroism are also quite different from the Greek or other European notions... The modern Western quest is individuation, achieved through an overthrow of the father, whereas the Indian hero's quest is to fulfill his father, his family."[61] The father's test of the children takes two forms: sexual assault on the daughter -- "the sexual assault of the young woman by the non-marriageable kin -- here a father, in many tales an elder brother -- and non-kin (e.g. a lecherous ascetic or guru)"[62] --

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[60] Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus." p. 249.

[61] Ibid. p. 254.

[62] Ibid. p. 250.

or castration of the son." Such and other chastity ordeals for the young women parallel the long exile, symbolic castration or heroic ordeals of the young male heir, usually required by the father."[63] Following Goldman, Ramanujan writes: "such figures as Bhīṣma and Rāma [are] ideal sons, [and] 'do constitute the ego ideal for Hindu men.' (Goldman, 1978: 346)"[64]

Ramanujan's and Goldman's insight here is crucial for my argument, for I want to suggest that the hero's dilemma stems from a conflict between "fulfilling the father" and upholding dharma. The terrible[65] Bhīṣma is an illustrative example: when Bhīṣma gives up his right to the throne in order that his lust-lorn father can be satisfied, Bhīṣma creates a power vacuum which leads eventually to a struggle for succession and the Kurukṣetra war.[66]

In other examples, Ramanujan tells of princesses who will not sleep with their father;[67] Goldman tells of Viśvāmitra's sons who refuse to kill themselves. Both the princesses and the sons use arguments from dharma to defend their actions; both are outraged by their father's request. Viśvāmitra's sons reply:

> How is it, [father], that abandoning your own sons you protect the son of another? We see this as being as forbidden an action as, in the matter of food, the taking of a dog's flesh.[68]

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[63] Ibid. p. 251.

[64] Ibid. p. 248.

[65] Goldman translates Bhīṣma's name as "awesome" -- it can also be translated "terrible" and that would be the feeling I prefer.

[66] Similarly, when Karṇa gives up his armor to Indra, he might be unwittingly contributing to the inevitability of the war.

[67] A Tamil tale from Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus." pp. 249-50.

[68] Goldman, "Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics."p. 349.

Unlike Bhīṣma's course, the children in these cases choose dharma over filial loyalty, that is, (2) over (1) above.

Where I would like to differ from Ramanujan and Goldman is in their view of the the above sort of rejection as unmitigatedly bad. While it may be the case that sons like Bhīṣma and Rāma are held up as examples, the actions of the father (either in desiring to assault his daughters or asking for his sons' lives) are by no means unambiguously morally correct. It takes an amazing leap of cultural relativism to agree with Goldman that "Viśvāmitra's sons ... are evidently not good sons."[69] Goldman's cites Viśvāmitra's speech back to his sons, a speech which invokes dharma but seems to do so self-servingly and circularly:

> "Going against my words, this brazen speech is to be condemned from the standpoint of dharma. It is terrible and makes the hairs of the body stand on end."[70]

I fail to see how this could be read straight-forwardly as an expression of the culture unless one reads deliberately literally. Much more interesting here is to see (as Goldman himself says elsewhere) the figure of the castrating, terrifying father-figure, wielding power indiscriminately, as well as, the conflict that such a situation has engendered, a conflict in which dharma itself seems to support both sides.

In an even more extreme form of my position, I would argue that Bhīṣma's act of "filial piety" itself is adharmic, as is Arjuna's act of sharing Draupadī with his brothers because Kuntī tells him to do so.[71] A clear sign of the improper nature of Bhīṣma's act is

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[69] Ibid. p. 349.

[70] Ibid. p. 349.

[71] Surprisingly, neither Ramanujan nor Goldman use this famous example as an Oedipal type. Here is a mother who greets the news of her son's marriage by vitiating his relationship with his bride. By forcing Arjuna to share Draupadī, Kuntī undermines his sexual relationship to his wife. There is a justice to

the fact that it has to be explained "away" by an old curse,[72] this time Vasiṣṭha's curse on

Dyaus (who is reborn as Bhīṣma):

> But this one, Dyaus, the one on whose account I cursed you, because of
> his own actions will dwell in the world of men for a long time. Since I
> address you in anger, I do not wish to utter a falsehood. Nor shall the
> great-minded man father children among men. He shall be a righteous man
> well versed in all the śastras. Intent upon pleasing his father, he shall forgo
> the pleasures of women.[73]

When Bhīṣma's father Śāṃtanu (indirectly) asks of him that Bhīṣma give up the kingdom

so that Śāṃtanu can satisfy his sexual desire for the fisher-girl, this is an outrageous

request by the standards of the epic and of kṣatriya dharma. Putting a sexual dalliance

above the welfare of the kingdom, for example, is the precise opposite of the spirit of

dharma that Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa invokes when he puts the welfare of the kingdom

above his own wife (and thus banishes Sitā). Thus when Bhīṣma actually honors his

father's indirect request, it is indeed a "terrible" thing; it certainly has a kind of nobility

about it, but it is by no means a conventional, or even desirable, course of action. In that

sense, I would disagree that the tradition *unequivocally* holds up Bhīṣma as an ideal

son.[74]

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this scene similar to the one we discuss in the text. Arjuna won Draupadi by a trick -- masquerading as a brahmin; thus he has violated a rule of sexual dharma by winning her. Second, the fact that the epic authors have to go to such lengths to justify this polyandry suggests (as in "the lady doth protest too much!") that there is something here that is improper that needs some explaining away.

[72] Similarly, there are "old curse" explanations for Draupadī's polyandry.

[73] *Mahabharata* 1.93.37-39, Goldman's translation from Goldman, "Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics." p. 340.

[74] Whether or not Rāma is held up as an ideal son is another issue altogether -- here I am concentrating on the characters in the *Mahabharata*.

The pattern that we *do* see is the conflict between familial relations and more general dharmic power-relations. We might express this as the conflict between the domestic and the political, but that I think would be to abstract this too far from the particulars of the stories. Those particularities seem best to be captured by the conflict between (1) and (2) above and the way that such a conflict has been produced by acting on adharmic sexual urges.

The usual response to such a dilemma/conflict is suicide or castration (or symbolic forms thereof). We shall discuss below how important it is that Karṇa does *not* follow either path when confronted with just such a dilemma. In the context of the usual outcomes of these stories, it would seem that for sons, resistance is futile; the usual outcome in these stories is that the son is defeated by the father. A very common pattern is "the aggression of the father towards the son. In all these stories the son willingly gives up (often transfers) his political and sexual potency."[75] (e.g. Bhīṣma.) "Many more instances can be cited of the father-son conflict with the father as victorious aggressor."[76] "In all these cases, we must note that the son never wins, almost never kills the father figure. Where a younger man kills the older, as when Arjuna kills Bhīṣma, it is clear that it is the latter who teaches him a way of doing so. The power of the father-figure is never over-thrown."[77] (The one exception to this rule, which both Goldman and Ramanujan mention but do not discuss at length, is Kṛṣṇa's slaying of his uncle Kamsa. We would do

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[75] Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus." p. 244.

[76] Ibid. p. 245.

[77] Ibid. p. 247 This claim, combined with the Freudian assumption above, would mean that *all* Indian men were dysfunctional (psychosexually fixated). Whether or not psychoanalysts believed this were true, this does not seem like a productive path into the Indian psyche(s).

well, though, to heed Ramanujan's reminder that Kṛṣṇa is a god, and has para-human

powers.)

In Chapter Five, I will discuss at length the ways in which Karṇa's and Arjuna's

characters illuminate each other. The relationship of these two characters is significant

here because Arjuna seems to be a character who embodies the Oedipal conflict.[78] As

Arjuna's arch-enemy, Karṇa is also the character who *refuses* to abandon (symbolically

kill) his father. We can thus see Karṇa as the shadow of an oedipal character, and

moreover, I would argue that Karṇa's presence and his relationship to Arjuna suggest that

both Oedipal and non-Oedipal possibilities are present in the minds of the authors.

Consequently, it seems that the *tension* between Arjuna and Karṇa is at the heart

of "the Indian version of the Oedipal complex," or more precisely, at the heart of stories

which might otherwise be interpreted as Oedipal. In other words, it is not necessarily

only a tension about sexual jealousy. It is a tension of which path to follow in the world:

a path in which one is loyal to one's parents but which is adharmic, or a path which is

dharmic but involves oedipal killing. We return here to the Bhagavadgītā, though via a

circuitous path. We shall see later that the Bhagavadgītā is not a complete and isolable

unit, that it must be read in comparison with other epic tests and characters. Thus the

Bhagavadgītā might represent more of a temporary resolution[79] of a moral dilemma that

captivates the Indian imagination, rather than an absolute doctrine.

In this way Karṇa and Arjuna together represent a pair of heroes; they represent

two sides of the same heroic "coin." Again one side is loyalty and adharma; the other side

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[78] See Goldman's reading of the Babhruvāhana episode.

[79] Amartya Sen, "Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000). p. 482.

is disloyalty and dharma. Moreover, it is not clear, in the end, that Arjuna's choice is the better one. The Kali Yuga is a world in which familial and social relations have gone awry and in which dharma does not guide human beings in a straight-forward manner.

Which is not to say that Arjuna is not firmly convinced that he is in the right, so swayed is he by Kṛṣṇa's message to him in the Bhagavadgītā. Later on, Arjuna, made confident by his victory at Kurukṣetra, encourages his own son to fight against him:

> "My son, why have you not attacked me who have crossed the border of
> your kingdom guarding Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrificial horse? Damn you! You
> fool. You know the rules for warriors yet you greet me peacefully when I
> have come to fight!"[80]

In Arjuna's mind *his* son is loyal to him only if his son fights him, that is, does his duty as a kṣatriya, by being loyal to his svadharma. So once again, Arjuna contrasts personal loyalty to dharma or svadharma.

This contrast is precisely what Karṇa does not do: he conceives of loyalty in terms of human emotions. (These are of course the emotions that Kṛṣṇa dismisses in the Bhagavadgītā 2.11: "You grieve for those beyond grief, / and you speak word of insight; / but learned men do not grieve / for the dead or the living."[81]) Karṇa, like Viśvāmitra's sons, also has dharma on his side (as we saw in Chapter Two), but his dharma is intuitive as well as rule-based: just as Viśvāmitra's sons intuitively and emotionally know that their father's request is absurd, so Karṇa similarly feels that to be asked to betray his adopted father is not just horrifying but wrong.

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[80] Goldman, "Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics." p. 330.

[81] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War.*

Part of the reason that Karṇa feels so strongly about his father -- indeed both his

fathers -- is that his fathers have always supported him. After reading Goldman and

Ramanujan's articles (and perhaps Freud as well), I was tempted to forget that many

fathers do support their sons, and indeed that that in itself is a major theme of the

Mahābhārata. Much of the plot can be said to hinge on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's support of his son

Duryodhana, no matter what Duryodhana chooses to do, and irrespective of whether or

not Dhṛtarāṣṭra approves of Duryodhana's actions. Similarly, Sūrya and Indra both work

to help their sons; and Dharma, like Arjuna, tests his son Yudhiṣṭhira. And so on. There

are, I would venture to say, many *more* examples of fathers supporting sons (in the

Mahābhārata at least) than the reverse. And thus, as my model above shows, we could not

begin to understand the underlying psychological conflict behind these stories without

understanding both sides of 'the coin' -- that is, both the supportive and the aggressive

fathers, both the emotionally attached and the emotionally detached sons, both the calls

of dharma and the calls of love.

4.3 Courageous Constancy

In Moses and Monotheism, Freud analyzes a character who is slightly different

from the Rankian hero prototype, but the paradigm still has great analytical and

interpretive power.[82] In fact, it may be that the usefulness of the prototype is to help us

see precisely what is so interesting about a particular character -- perhaps indeed what we

mean when we say that a particular hero is interesting.

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[82] The fact that the Moses story is inverted (e.g. Moses has a lowly birth) -- the precise reversal of
the pattern -- is the proof of the validity of the prototype. This analysis is similar Freudian dream analysis:
e.g. a dream in which you dream of fighting with somehow is not a dream of hating that person but
interacting with, or loving, them. The wish fulfillment is represented by the opposite of the wish. See Rank,
"The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." p. 70.

Karṇa's moment to deviate from the hero prototype is when he does not choose to become the eldest Pāṇḍava and king. By not choosing power and fame, Karṇa makes a choice different from, say, that of Achilles in the Iliad, who has to choose between a long life and eternal glory. Achilles chooses fame (kleos) over time on earth. Karṇa does not have such a choice; in fact, the choice itself is the temptation. Kṛṣṇa wants to seduce Karṇa into thinking that Karṇa has a choice between a full and long life span (if he were to not fight) and a nihilistic future (death, infamy). But in fact the war is inevitable; the Kauravas are dead set against the Pāṇḍavas -- if the episode of the dice game teaches us anything, it is that Duryodhana will go to any lengths to destroy the Pāṇḍavas. Moreover, even though Duryodhana says he will not fight without Karṇa, the first eight days of the battle are indeed fought without Karṇa -- suggesting that even if Karṇa had decided not to fight, the war would have still taken place. Thus, as Karṇa rightly suspects, the war would go on even if Karṇa were not on the Kaurava side.

Karṇa appears to be acting in a way that is very different from Achilles. Achilles is weighing two options and trading one for the other; Achilles makes an active choice between two paths to follow. In contrast, Karṇa stands his ground. He does not 'trade;' rather he refuses to be seduced by the offer of a new identity. Such a difference is crucial for the question of the applicability of Freudian psychology here. For Freud, the self, like a butterfly, has to evolve through stages. This is true not only for infants, but for full-grown individuals; the journey through the stages is the bedrock of the Freudian paradigm. (Thus a trauma which prevented the transition from one stage to another can manifest itself later in life as a pathology and thus need to be revealed by the psychoanalytic process.)

The ability of the self to evolve, to reform itself, lies at the heart of a western notion of individualism as well; individuals are only truly free if they are able to

"become" whatever they want to be. The great test of this is for them to conquer their upbringing by their own choices. Thus the poor boy becomes a concert piano player; the impoverished girl a senator.

In contrast, Karṇa's story provides another angle altogether on development: Karṇa is a character that "develops" not by rejecting a previous identity but by clinging to it. That is, he does not change but remains fixed. The crucial śloka here is 5.144.3:

> And thus addressed by his mother, and by his father the Sun himself,
> Karṇa's mind did not falter, for he stood fast by the truth. (cacāla naiva
> Karṇasya matiḥ satya-dhṛtes)

The bahu-vṛīhi compound satya-dhṛtiḥ 'he who possesses constancy, steadfastness, resolution with respect to the truth' points to the crucial quality that allows Karṇa to resist the temptation of his biological parents, namely dhṛti. Derived from the verbal root dhṛ, the noun dhṛti has the meanings 'holding, seizing, supporting, firmness, constancy, resolution,' as well as 'satisfaction, contentment, joy.' The godess Dhṛti is the wife of Dharma; she is the godess of Resolution and Satisfaction. This semantic field is closely related to the semantic field of dhīratā, or dhairya, nominal forms which are derived from the verbal root dhṛ -- the root from which the word 'dharma' is derived. The marriage of Dharma and Dhṛti on the divine plane points to interrelatedness of the domains of the two derivaties of the verbal root dhṛ on the semantic plane, and is an example of the way mythology "encodes" moral and psychological cultural values.

Further dhīratā is the noun of the adjective dhīra, which has the meanings of: 'steady, constant, firm, resolute, brave, energetic, courageous, self-possessed, composed, calm, grave.'[83] Dhairya has the added nuance of 'intelligence, forethought .' Thus the

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[83] Monier Monier-Williams, *Dictionary, English and Sanskrit* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1961). I used the electronic version of this dictionary.

semantic field seems to center around both 'satisfied resolution' and 'considered resolution.'[84] I have listed so many translations here and above because I feel that this semantic field (encompassing Dhṛti and Dharma) is essential to understanding both Karṇa's character and the contribution that a study of his character can make towards the exploration of the human psyche. Note, for instance, in our current context, that dhīratā conjoins courage and bravery with firmness, resoluteness, and constancy: Karṇa's bravery and courage derive not from his ability to transform himself (as perhaps Arjuna does in listening to the Bhagavadgītā); rather, Karṇa's bravery derives from his constancy, his steadfastness.

Not surprisingly, this adjective dhīra is used in Sanskrit literary criticism to describe heroic types. It is combined with other qualities, and these combinations also shed light on the semantic field of dhīratā. In the fourteenth century literary treatise SāhityaDarpaṇa composed by the Orissan scholar Viśvanātha Kavirāja, we find:

dhīra-udātta-nayika 'the brave and noble-minded protagonist'
dhīra-uddhata-nayika 'the brave and proud protagonist'
dhīra-praśānta-nayika 'the brave and calm protagonist'
dhīra-lalita-nayika 'the brave protagonist who is also sportive and restless'

Such a typology shows us how this notion of constancy and courage can combine with pride or nobility, or even calmness.

In his early eleventh century literary critical work, the ŚṛṅgāraPrakāśa (Light on Passion), Bhoja (in the assessment of Pollock) argues that "what makes us call a hero a hero is the fact of his possessing 'continuity' or 'stability' of character (dhairyam)..."[85]

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[84] The gender division here is (disappointingly) stereotypical: the feminine noun points towards pleasure and satisfaction while the masculine noun points towards mindful intelligence.

[85] Sheldon Pollock, "The Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29 (2001). p. 25.

Bhoja inherited this category but he went on to expound a theory based on this category

with particular clarity and force. Bhoja defined the four kinds of firmness for the four

different heroic types, and matched each heroic type with one of the four life goals,

dharma, artha, kāma, and moksa:[86]

Heroic Type	Life Goal
udātta	dharma
uddhata	artha
praśānta	kāma
lalita	moksa

Indeed, for Bhoja, "the hero is conceived of as a moral agent, indeed nothing but a moral

agent,"[87] and eventually the literature containing the hero becomes "equipment for

living."[88] In fact, the way that literature led to a certain type of vyutpatti 'education in the

largest sense' was, Bhoja believed, through a conception of literature in which literature

presented a unitary meaning. In this vein,

> Bhoja offers a range of literary works whose plots have been revised in the
> interests of removing faults and so producing a unified aesthetic
> experience... [e.g.] Bhatta Narayana's *Venisamhara* (The Tying of the
> Braid), in which Duḥśāsana's blood is drunk not by Bhīma but by a demon
> who had taken possession of him.[89]

This revisionistic literary spirit, says Pollock,

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[86] Pollock views this matching as Bhoja's "single most original contribution": Passion (Śṛṅgāra) is "what enables people [...] to experience the world richly. It represents their capacity for emotional intensity as such, and hence may be taken as the origin of all other affective states, or rasas (plural). Moreover, it is this intensity that leads them to strive to fulfil the most crucial life-needs." Ibid. p. 24.

[87] Ibid. p. 25.

[88] Ibid. p. 27.

[89] Ibid. p. 23.

fully testifies to a progress, slow but certain, in the elimination of core varieties of conflict, a gradual retreat to an ever more complete disengagement from the world of life's unpleasant realities, in favor of a single moral vision. In literature if not in life, as Bhoja says, 'It must be the good guy [gunavat], not the bad guy [dosavat], who wins.'[90]

Such a progress highlights, ironically, one presupposition throughout this dissertation: that the Mahābhārata is a text of tensions and contrasts, that it is a text that constantly juxtaposes and compares. While it can sometimes be a text that dictates "x, y, and z" (e.g. in the Bhīṣma parvans), it can also act like a text that says "x but y, or maybe even z..."[91] Thus the above progression points, I believe, to a literary conception which represents only part of the epic tradition, and indeed the part which I have not focussed on in this dissertation. The epic of a single moral vision is the epic as dharmaśāstra, a tendency certainly present in the longing for a yuga where dharma would be resolute, a longing expressed at length in the Bhīṣma Parvans. Still, as I have tried to do in this dissertation, we must remember that this is only part of the entire epic -- the epic contains stretches where dharma is straightforward and clear as well as stretches where dharma is evasive and subtle.

The parts of the epic in which we do find characters like Karṇa are thus in a curious relation to later literary traditions. Such parts seem to be either eliminated or incorportated into the unified moral vision, and their contrariness subdued. The dhīratā that Karṇa represents will only later become the hallmark of the hero; thus later this dhīratā seems to be transferred -- perhaps even forced -- onto the "winners" of the

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[90] Ibid. pp. 23-24.

[91] And this itself is an opposition!

Kurukṣetra War. *But in the epic*, Karṇa who represents 'constancy' is, roughly speaking, in tension with Arjuna who represents change.

(That Arjuna represents change will also be taken up in greater length in the next chapter; here I will sketch some of the evidence. We have seen Arjuna participating in tales of Oedipal overthrows, which support Freud's point about abandoning one's parents and transforming oneself. Arjuna is also arguably the most dramatically and markedly changed when the Pāṇḍavas are at the court of Virāṭa. Finally Arjuna represents change in terms of a reading of the <u>Bhagavadgītā</u> not as an "awakening" text, but as a "conversion" one.)

Let us imagine an analysis of the Arjuna-Karṇa conflict along the model that Bhoja lays out for Rāma-Rāvaṇa. However, to imagine this properly, we need to understand the subtle problematic behind such an analysis, the question of whether or not an author, or the work, should (morally) elevate the villain or not. If the <u>pratinayika</u> 'antagonist' that the <u>nayika</u> 'protagonist' destroys is weak, then it is no great achievment or fame that accrues to the protagonist. Conversely, if the anatgonist is is morally strong, then it is a crime to destroy him. Moreover, if the two were equal, then it must have been Fate that was behind the victory, again vitiating the <u>nayika</u>'s *moral* victory.

Bhoja's adjudication on this topic brings this chapter together:

> "In the <u>Rāmāyana</u> and similar works, by the poet's showing the pre-
> eminence of a virtuous man and the destruction of a flawed man, we are
> being taught to act like Rāma and not like Rāvaṇa: As Rāma obeyed his
> father's order and despite being exiled to the forest achieved ultimate
> victory, whereas Rāvaṇa, though he was capable of conquering the three
> worlds, was destroyed because he had lusted after another man's wife, so
> will it turn out for others. Such is the moral instruction of this text, and of

other literary works, courtly epics and the like, composed in the same spirit."[92]

Thus the very virtue that will distinguish Rāma from Rāvana is an Oedipal submission! When Bhoja says, "be like Rāma and not like Rāvana," he brings us back to the discourse space of sons sacrificing for their father, the very space we were discussing above (through the lenses of Goldman and Ramanujan). Moreover the virtue (that will distinguish Rāma from Rāvana) is an Oedipal submission of the most brutal kind; symbolically, as Ramanujan points out, retreating to the forest is a kind of social suicide,[93] thus symbolically relating Rāma to Viśvāmitra's sons. (Recall that the latter, when asked to commit suicide, refuse to do so.) The very submission that we have seen that Karna refuses, and indeed that can be construed in terms of dharma and familial relations, is here held up as Rāma's virtue! And indeed our reflections on the Karna story have shown us that the idealized vision of filial submission can be realized only in a frame of mind in which the reader has to forget not only about reality but about the other characters in the story as well!

Thus a Bhojian analysis might run: "Be like Arjuna, not like Karna," because Arjuna obeys Krsna and Karna does not. Such an analysis shows us precisely how the Karna narrative seems to represent an exception to the general literary critical paradigm. Karna, the ancient pratinayika, embodies the crucial aspect, dhīratā, that will characterize future nayikas.

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[92] Pollock, "The Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory." p. 26.

[93] "Such a renunciation, a withdrawal from all relations, in Indian terms, is a kind of social suicide -- one becomes a *sanyasi* by performing a funeral rite on oneself." Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus." p. 240.

4.4 Development through Dhīratā

Central to Karṇa's character, dhīratā in the Mahābhārata lies on a spectrum of human virtues which ranges from the individual as infinitely fluid, infinitely flexible to the individual as supremely constant. For the epic as a whole, it seems that all of these virtues are part of the human "horizon" of possibilities; there is not merely *one* virtue that will carry the day. As a literary work, the Mahābhārata is interested in playing upon all the different ways in which different aspects of human existence may be both beautiful and heroic -- that is how the different aspects of human existence might give us the courage to live our own lives and make our own decisions.

Moreover, the epic seems also to emphasize the tension between stillness and change and their curious interrelationship. For instance, in the Bhagavadgītā, a person whose insight (prajñā) is firm and sure (sthitha) will eventually become one with Kṛṣṇa. In other words, that person will evolve closer to Kṛṣṇa in successive lives; thus firmness and steadfastness (stillness) lead eventually to (spiritual) development.

The tension between stillness and change takes place in anticipation of the Kali Yuga, the age when dharma is not immediately obvious to an average human being. Thus it becomes especially difficult during such an age to remain sthitha, but the epic authors seem to relish the idea of creating heroic characters who manage (though their dhīratā) to do just that.

This brings us back to one of the question with which we began this chapter: what can studying the character of Karṇa contribute to a psychoanalytical discussion? As we have seen, there is, within the Mahābhārata, a powerful alternative to the Freudian model of individual growth through change. Instead, a character like Karṇa seems to manifest his psychological growth through dhīratā, 'heroic steadfastness.' Whereas Freud would stress in the family romance the importance of breaking with one's past, the Karṇa

narrative and dhīratā would suggest that a person can grow simply by not being swayed by even the most seductive of external factors.

The Karṇa narrative resonates deeply not only with the oft-told tale of the hero but also with the less frequently expressed anxiety of 'being revealed as a fraud,' the anxiety of the Emperor's New Clothes. This story is the converse of Rank's prototypical hero narrative: here the protagonists, at the moment of recognition, are exposed as much lower than they believed themselves to be. In the Karṇa narrative, there is indeed such a shaming scene (at the tournament) but it becomes curiously layered over: though "exposed" as a sūta, Karṇa "becomes" a kṣatriya. It is later, when Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī approach him, that Karṇa is really exposed. And it is at this moment that the Karṇa narrative turns into an account of a different psychological paradigm -- a paradigm in which the individual is not developing though discarding identity after identity, but rather surviving through hanging on to a meaningful identity.

The Karṇa psychology thus suggests a paradigm of psychological well-being based on the loving (not antagonistic) relationship between parents and child; it is an exploration of the psychological strength of a child who has been raised by loving parents and a demonstration of how important that bond is to the child. The importance of the bond seems especially crucial if the child charts social territory unknown to the parents; they send the child into that society armed with nothing but (the memory of) their affection.

Such a scenario might resonate not only with socially upwardly mobile academics today (retracing the steps of Hardy's Jude) but with the epic sūtas themselves. Caught between being the handlers of the whip and chanting the epics, between being excluded from the world of kṣatriya deeds and being the repository of fame and memory of those deeds, the sūtas might constantly find themselves confronted with the anxiety of being

exposed as a fraud. It is interesting then that their character Karṇa, instead of succumbing to the fantasy of abandoning his sūta-ness, clings to it. In that way, the sūtas perhaps send a message about psychology and class: for the upper classes, abandoning one's parents and finding one's own identity may indeed be healthy; for other classes, however, remaining heroically and steadfastly loyal to the love inherent in one's social and familial bonds may give one the strength to survive the hardships of an unpredictable and unpredictably unjust fate.

Chapter Five

Character Reflections

In this chapter, I want to demonstrate that character study will shed light not only on one character but on many characters in the Mahābhārata. I do so not just to emphasize that the impact of this study and its methodology extends to many aspects of the Mahābhārata, but also to indicate just how carefully structured the Mahābhārata is as a literary piece. If we imagine each character as a unique crystal, we might see how each character's brilliance is composed, in part, of brilliance reflected from *other* characters. In this way, the Mahābhārata gives its protagonists a human dimension: they are not only incarnations of devas and asuras (not just transpositions of independent divine entities) but rather individuals caught up in a tightly woven human net, a net which is itself a carefully constructed aesthetic structure.

That a crystalline structure of reflections and meta-reflections is at the heart of the Mahābhārata has been articulated in Ramanujan's essay "Repetition in the Mahābhārata."[1] The essay attempted to flesh out

> the native's sense of its unity, its well-plotted network of relations... a "native intuition" [of] the intricate sense of structure and unity in this ten-mile monster of a work. I use "intuition" not in any occult sense, but as linguists use it -- the sense that every native speaker has of the grammar of

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[1] In Arvind Sharma, ed., *Essays on the Mahabharata* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). pp. 419 ff.

his mother tongue which makes him speak grammatically and judge what is or is not grammatical.[2]

Taking that intuition as a reference point, Ramanujan suggests that the epic is an ordered literary work:

> a second look at the foreshadowings and recapitulations make one think of Flaubert, except on an epic scale. Henry James spoke of how the elements in Flaubert were "...always so related and associated, so properly a part of something else that is in turn part of something other, part of a reference, a tone, a passage, or page, that the simple may enjoy it for the least bearing and the initiated for the greatest."[3]

Thus the stories, events, and characters in the epic work together "in amassing repetitive networks and density."[4] And Ramanujan finds his metaphor for this process in crystallography:

> Crystallographers also speak of crystal growth in steps wherever there is a "dislocation", which makes for both order and growth, an open ended system. When one compares the many Mahābhāratas or other works based on the epics the way new incidents are added only in certain places where there seems to be a need for them, one thinks of such an analogy with crystal growth.[5]

Now just as Ramanujan saw that events and plot motifs were structured through crystalline repetition, I would like to suggest that the characters can be thought of crystalline as well. Each character grows as an independent crystal, and characters relate to each other as, say, two distinct crystals from the same family are seen to be related.

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[2] A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the Mahabharata," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 421.

[3] Ibid. p. 426.

[4] Ibid. p. 427.

[5] Ibid. p. 441.

There are illuminating family resemblances and, brought together, each highlights the other's distinctive features.

5.1 Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira

Let us begin this investigation by revisiting the parallelism between Karṇa's and Yudhiṣṭhira's tests. Recall that part of the evidence for the parallelism between these two is the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is obsessed day and night by Karṇa. Moreover, after the war is over, Yudhiṣṭhira dutifully laments all his other losses, but it is Karṇa that he goes on (*and on*) about. Why should this be? What is it about the discovery that Karṇa is his brother, and the loss of Karṇa, that pricks Yudhiṣṭhira so?

Allow me to first discuss a methodology that I do *not* want to adopt here, namely the methodology of interpretation via psychological decomposition. In this methodology, the five Pāṇḍavas would represent, say, five aspects of the author's imagination. (Or, cleverly enough, if there was no author but just a tradition, the five Pāṇḍavas would represent "the mind of man."[6]) Each Pāṇḍava would represent one component of the author's mind, and Karṇa, being a brother, would then represent a sixth component.

This would correspond conveniently to two facts. First, the Sanskrit mind theory of the five senses plus mind (manas) would correspond nicely to a 'five plus one' theory of a healthy personality (represented by the five Pāṇḍavas plus (one) Karṇa). Second, Yudhiṣṭhira's lamentation over Karṇa's death can be read as a subconscious outpouring of the authorial mind lamenting that it (the authorial mind itself) can never be whole and healthy again, for one of its component parts is lost. Such a reading is, to my tastes, too clever by far. It neglects the crucial fact about the Pāṇḍavas and, indeed, all the other characters in the epic: that they are *carefully developed and individualized human beings.*

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[6] For examples of this sort of analysis, see Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). Quote from p. 67.

When we think of Yudhiṣṭhira as a human being, other aspects of his grief over Karṇa come to the fore; Yudhiṣṭhira's lament is a complex of emotions. We shall examine five components in what follows. First, he is greatly disturbed by the fact that Karṇa is a replacement for himself -- that Karṇa could have become the eldest Pāṇḍava and ruled the kingdom. This is the horror of being *substitutable* in the world: the horror that, despite our humanity, we are not uniquely individualized and special. Even if Yudhiṣṭhira is a great king, he might only be just as good as any other great king. This reminds us simultaneously of the impending scale of the Kali-yuga (mortal actions are but puny in the scale of the new era arriving), and of the story that even the king of the gods was just one in a long line of ants, each of which was an Indra.

Second, Yudhiṣṭhira is lamenting Karṇa's death itself not just as loss but as meaninglessness. In my Chapter Two, Kṛṣṇa's offer to Karṇa puts Karṇa in the face of the anxiety of meaninglessness; here the revelation of Karṇa's identity places Yudhiṣṭhira in the face of the anxiety of meaninglessness. What could it mean that Yudhiṣṭhira has 'won' in any moral terms? If indeed there was a "Pārtha"[7] on the other side that could have ruled the entire kingdom, then what was the point of the war? Most specifically, how could the struggle have been a way of upholding dharma? Indeed, from one point of view, by slaying the "rightful" king, the Pāṇḍavas (led by Yudhiṣṭhira) do not seem to have served dharma well. The war has meaning as a struggle to establish Yudhiṣṭhira as the rightful king (to some part of the kingdom); if Yudhiṣṭhira is *not* the rightful king, the war, the central event of Yudhiṣṭhira's life at that point, loses its primary meaning.

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[7] I say this in the context of Bhīma's taunt to Karṇa at the tournament: "Son of a sūta, you do not have the right to die in a fight with a Pārtha!" See Ramanujan, "Repetition in the Mahabharata." p. 433, footnote 3. Also mentioned in E. H. Rick Jarow, "The Letter of the Law and the Discourse of Power: Karṇa and Controversy in the Mahabharata," *Journal of Vaisnava Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999). p. 65.

Third,[8] and while this is not explicitly stated in the epic, it is an undercurrent of Yudhiṣṭhira's grief: it suddenly becomes apparent to Yudhiṣṭhira what Karṇa's choice meant. In other words, deducing from the facts at hand, Yudhiṣṭhira realizes that Karṇa chose to allow him to be king, that Karṇa must have deliberately requested Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī to keep quiet about his upbringing in order that the Pāṇḍavas rule. Otherwise, as Yudhiṣṭhira can figure out, Karṇa would know that Yudhiṣṭhira would have ceded the kingdom to Karṇa, and Karṇa would have, in turn, ceded it to Duryodhana. Thus the fact that Karṇa stuck to Duryodhana's side (and not did not assume the kingship) makes Yudhiṣṭhira understand how difficult Karṇa's choice must have been. And Yudhiṣṭhira understands, as well, that Karṇa chose not out of bitterness but out of loyalty and that he acted not naively but astutely.

Fourth, these aspects of Karṇa's choice make Yudhiṣṭhira all the more tortured over the way that he has *hated* Karṇa for so long. Indeed, as we shall examine in some detail, Yudhiṣṭhira's fear and hatred of Karṇa almost cause a permanent rift between Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna. Now Yudhiṣṭhira has to face the fact that for all his hatred of Karṇa, Karṇa respected Yudhiṣṭhira and wanted him to be king. Thus suddenly Yudhiṣṭhira understands another aspect of why Karṇa spared his life on the battlefield.

Finally, and this is an aspect of Yudhiṣṭhira's grief that the episode does emphasize, there was indeed a clue that Karṇa was a Pāṇḍava: his feet were identical to Kuntī's. Again, this is difficult for Yudhiṣṭhira to bear because, as the future king and 'King Dharma' (dharma-rāja), it has been his reputation, and will be his task, to *recognize* the correct path of dharma. It is an ability to recognize, to notice the crucially illuminating details that allow one to discern right from wrong, that is at the heart of an

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[8] Thanks to the audience at a talk at Northwestern University's Religion Department for making this point.

individual who *knows* dharma. If Yudhiṣṭhira did not *recognize* Karṇa, it calls into doubt so many other things: did Yudhiṣṭhira recognize that fighting the war was the right path? Did he recognize correctly that he should lead Arjuna to wipe out the Kaurava side?

These aspects of Yudhiṣṭhira's grief and guilt appear *simultaneously* through Yudhiṣṭhira's multiple reflections on Karṇa. Yudhiṣṭhira's grief is complex and multi-layered. This scene is clearly the work of a literary talent, or talents, that worked assiduously to create a climax where so many themes of two stories, kept artfully parallel through much of the epic, are suddenly conjoined in the scene of Yudhiṣṭhira's emotional outpouring.

This sort of literary analysis seems to arise from the text itself; one need assume nothing more than what the text gives the reader.[9] Unlike an interpretation based on psychological decomposition, it is not a theory imposed onto the five brothers. Yudhiṣṭhira is clearly an individual character in the epic;[10] he does not need to be "completed" by Arjuna or Bhīma. Even if they act as a group in public, in private the brothers are clearly distinct human beings, each with their own ideas and personality.[11]

Such a reading also pushes into the background (or onto the backburner) the sort of functional/theological interpretation put forward, by say, Dumézil wherein the five Pāṇḍavas represent five Vedic deities, or portions thereof.[12] If indeed, the Vedic set only

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[9] One could also argue that I have to assume certain aspects of human nature, such as the nature of grief, the nature of literary creativity, and perhaps even the nature of reason. I might even be accused of imposing (my) *subjectivity* onto literary characters. See the introduction and conclusion for a methodological discussion.

[10] For more, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Readers' Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[11] See Ramanujan, "Repetition in the Mahabharata." pp. 440-441. Ramanujan first writes, "In this epic, the Pāṇḍavas act as one person vis-à-vis Kuntī, Draupadī, and the Kaurava cousins." But he later adds, "The five heroes are also individuated by the poet..."

[12] Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée I: L'idéologie des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées des Peuples Indo-Européens* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968).

numbered five, and this set were somehow "complete" and transposed into the epic, then

Yudhisthira's grief at Karna's loss would seem strange and problematic. Why indeed

would Yudhisthira (as a Dumézilian "function") grieve for the "non-functional" Karna?

Since Karna had no function, society would not necessarily be left hanging by Karna's

loss, and indeed Yudhisthira should just go about the business of being king with little to

no hesitation.

Another kind of theological interpretation is also pushed into the background by

our interpretation of this scene: interpreting the scene on Sukthankar's "cosmic"/"ethical"

plane[13]. This kind of interpretation poses the war as a binary struggle between the forces

of dharma and the forces of adharma, between the gods (deva-s) and the demons

(asura-s). As Sukthankar writes:

> the war on the mundane plane has been deepened into a cosmic war
> between the Devas and the Asuras, symbolical of the idealistic conflict
> between antagonistic principles, the ceaseless opposition between Good
> and Evil, between Justice and Injustice, between Dharma and Adharma.[14]

If this were the case, why would a dharma-rāja mourn for a general on the other side?

Why would a deva mourn for an asura? In terms of the binary opposition, Yudhisthira's

victory would be bitter *but absolute*, and Yudhisthira would comprehend that. Indeed, the

fact that Yudhisthira refuses to accept the victory as absolute does not indicate his

cowardice (as Draupadī suggests). Rather, Yudhisthira realizes that *this was not a battle*

between binary opposites. And the fact that it was not makes the huge losses seem utterly

pointless -- so much so that Yudhisthira wishes to retreat to a space wherein the world is

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[13] See Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). Here he discusses his three planes of interpretation.

[14] Ibid. p. 89. We should note that on the "metaphysical" plane, "opposites combine to form a whole... The universe is indeed one... But here is the rub. *Polarity informs the universe.*" p. 93.

simple, contemplative, and the individual is free of the dharmic dilemmas of the world. "I am evil and I am a sinner and a destroyer of the earth. Sitting right here, I will wither my body away... I will abandon this body." (12.27.22,25)

While this opinion is eventually rejected by Yudhiṣṭhira (after hearing the story of Aśma 12.28.2 ff), note how neatly the philosophical and the symbolic align themselves. If, as Ramanujan observed, exile to the forest symbolizes a kind of social suicide in South Asian story and epic,[15] then Yudhiṣṭhira's response to killing a potential substitute for (a symbol of) himself is to symbolically kill himself.[16]

5.2 Yudhiṣṭhira's Hatred: Re-evaluating Karṇa

Yudhiṣṭhira's shame over having hated Karṇa deserves more comment because it reflects not only on Yudhiṣṭhira but back upon our own critical assessment of Karṇa. As I shall argue below, at this moment not only is Yudhiṣṭhira transformed, but the audience is as well. Specifically, if Yudhiṣṭhira feels shame and grief at the way he hated Karṇa, so too then does the audience who also may have felt the same way about Karṇa. It could be that it is moments like this that have led to an enduring fascination with Karṇa's character: the epic itself forces the audience to re-evaluate and thus ponder his character. (Compare this moment to a similar one when Kuntī approaches Karṇa; just as Kuntī leaves feeling ashamed that she never accepted Karṇa, so the audience, too, is touched by Karṇa's generosity, and perhaps conflicted at having previously not "accepted" him.)

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[15] "Such a renunciation, a withdrawal from all relations, in Indian terms, is a kind of social suicide -- one becomes a *sanyasi* by performing a funeral rite on oneself." A. K. Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus," in *Oedipus, a Folklore Casebook*, ed. Lowell Edmunds and Alan Dundes (New York: Garland, 1983). p. 240.

[16] Again, this neat parallel seems so precisely laid out by the epic authors that it appears eerie that it is absent from millennia of criticism. Critical lacuna are evidenced by the works of Bose and Krishna Chaitanya -- works which are serious, scholarly, and not limited in length or scope. See Buddhadeva Bose, *The Book of Yudhisthir: A Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas* (Hyderabad and Bombay: Sangam Books (Orient Longman distr.), 1986). Krishna Chaitanya, *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study* (New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1985).

Yudhiṣṭhira's hatred is best illustrated by his delight and relief at Karṇa's death. After Yudhiṣṭhira learns of Karṇa's death, he marches out to the battlefield to examine the body. (8.69.26 ff.) Previously Yudhiṣṭhira, upon mistakenly thinking that Karṇa has been killed, admitted: "thirteen years have passed through which, terrified, O [Arjuna], I obtained neither sleep at night nor comfort by day..." (8.46.16)[17] Yudhiṣṭhira has to see the dead body with his own eyes, and exults. In the context of what the audience already knows about Karṇa, this is a scene full of a bitter dramatic irony.

Such behavior might appear at first uncharacteristic of the dharma-rāja. For example, such behavior seems precisely the opposite of what Kṛṣṇa preaches to Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā: Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna to fight without an eye to the fruit of his actions. Certainly exulting over the death of an enemy is enjoying, indeed, wallowing in the fruit of the action. This behavior also *seems* uncharacteristic of the Yudhiṣṭhira who accepts so many things in the epic with a grave stoicism; he bravely faces "opponents" (e.g. the yakṣa in 3.297) and the turns of his fate (throughout the Āranyaka Parvan). To see him so happy over the death of Karṇa is perhaps surprising. Certainly, *if* we wished to read the epic as a litany of ideal types, such behavior on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira would have to be expunged or conveniently overlooked.

But this *is* Yudhiṣṭhira, and a beautifully drawn Yudhiṣṭhira. Just because the epic does not provide us with what we expect it to, this points to a fault not with the epic, but only with our own presuppositions about epic literature, its genre, and our reading practices.

The image of Yudhiṣṭhira exulting over Karṇa's body points to the crucial idea that Yudhiṣṭhira hates Karṇa in a deep and lasting way. Indeed, his bitter hatred has been

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[17] Such moments remind us that Yudhiṣṭhira is not ideal but all too human.

seething for thirteen years, thirteen years in which Yudhiṣṭhira has not even been able to sleep. This image, which has not received much critical attention, is, to this study of Karṇa, crucial: Yudhiṣṭhira despises Karṇa to the bottom of his soul. It is an irrational, all-consuming sort of hatred, a hatred that burns in Yudhiṣṭhira and even causes him to say things without thinking. It is this hatred that drives Yudhiṣṭhira to insult Arjuna, a scene (8.48 ff.) to which we now turn.

At the outset, we should be careful to contrast Yudhiṣṭhira's insult of Arjuna to his lie to Droṇa. Yudhiṣṭhira lies to Droṇa in *sotto voce*, deeply humiliated by the falsehood he has to tell. This is an utterance that Yudhiṣṭhira's soul revolts against; Yudhiṣṭhira, we might imagine, cringes inside as he says it. Contrast this with his reaction when Arjuna tells him that Karṇa lives. Yudhiṣṭhira immediately lashes out at Arjuna with the most horribly sharp insult he can muster: if Arjuna cannot kill Karṇa, he is not worthy of the Gandiva bow. When Yudhiṣṭhira insults Arjuna, he is caught up in the passion of his hatred for Karṇa. He does not cringe as he insults Arjuna; indeed his insult's full-bloodedness pierces Arjuna so deeply that Arjuna is literally about to kill Yudhiṣṭhira. (It is only the intercession of Kṛṣṇa which defuses this tension.[18]) This sort of hatred certainly could not be part of calm, considered dharma; this is the hatred that blinds.

This brings us to the point I want to argue here: Yudhiṣṭhira's hatred reflects the same sort of hatred that Karṇa feels throughout his life, but especially the hatred he feels towards the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī after the military tournament and Draupadī's svayaṃvara. Whereas Yudhiṣṭhira is blind to Karṇa's virtues, Karṇa is not blind to Yudhiṣṭhira's. Moreover, though Yudhiṣṭhira's hatred drives him to have Karṇa killed,

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[18] Kṛṣṇa has to transform Arjuna's vow into a lie, into a mirror of just the sort of lie that Yudhiṣṭhira tells to Droṇa. Note also that Arjuna's previous vow is, like the explanations for Draupadī's marriage, a potential rationalization of a situation that later redactors might find difficult to stomach: a true quarrel between Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira.

Karṇa's bitterness is often coupled with either compassion or political acuity. Thus Karṇa spares (and so humiliates Yudhiṣṭhira) both out of his generous vow to Kuntī and his belief that Yudhiṣṭhira is best fit to rule.

(This is again, as I have stressed elsewhere in this dissertation, not an exoneration of Karṇa's actions. Even in the Mahābhārata, two wrongs do not make a right: just because Karṇa is just as hateful as the "great" Yudhiṣṭhira does not mean that Karṇa deserves to be praised, or held up as a model for behavior. And, I should add, the reverse is also true. If certain critical and religious traditions have held up Yudhiṣṭhira as a hero to emulate, that does not mean his status is "voided" by an analysis such as mine. Traditions, history, and individuals all *use* texts in a variety of complex ways; I believe it is pointless to say that such readings of Yudhiṣṭhira are 'wrong.' I do not wish to participate in any such dialogue, but wish merely to point out, that as a literary work, the Mahābhārata has several aspects that have been, to my eye, artfully engineered but have so far escaped critical attention. Bringing these aspects to the surface does not negate anyone's beliefs; belief constitutes another discourse space altogether. In the literary-humanist discourse space in which I position myself and this dissertation, these literary aspects are crucial to a discussion and exploration of the text.)

If Yudhiṣṭhira feels the same sort of hatred that Karṇa does, we sense once again how the authors subtly parallel the two characters. They are brothers in a way that the epic wants to make both startlingly clear and piercingly poignant. The civil war pits brother against brother, loyalty against loyalty, and it is the horror of this that strikes deep into Yudhiṣṭhira at his moment of utmost despair.

And this is a recognition in which, the audience, no matter how many times they see, hear, or read it, can always find something beautiful. Yudhiṣṭhira's recognition of Karṇa as brother is much deeper than a simple recognition of a blood tie, although that

undoubtedly plays a role in his grief. It is also a deep recognition about how he must reinterpret his life's events to make sense of this new fact. It is like a conversion experience, or in psychotherapy, a "breakthrough."

And it falls upon Yudhiṣṭhira without his choice. The facts are there before him and there is nothing that Yudhiṣṭhira can do about them. Which brings us to another curious intersection: if Yudhiṣṭhira has to reinterpret his whole life to make sense of Karṇa's biological identity, that is, as we have seen, exactly what Karṇa refuses to do. Karṇa refuses to reinterpret his life in terms of his biological identity and prefers, instead, to live as if his adopted identity were his real one. Consequently, the final irony, atop this mountain of tragic ironies, is that, to rule, Yudhiṣṭhira too must, in the end, put Karṇa behind him, ignore the fact of Karṇa's biological identity, and treat Karṇa as if he were just another Kaurava who deserved to perish.[19] Like Karṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira must resolve to face the "alternative" totalizing meaning (which Karṇa's biological identity brings to his life's events) with fortitude; in the face of the anxiety of meaningless which such an alternative (totalizing) meaning engenders, Yudhiṣṭhira must resolve to (re-)commit himself to the worldview that he has inhabited his whole life up until this point. That he must cling to this worldview, a worldview defined by his relationships to his brothers and his own sense of dharma, is in fact a *lesson* that this passage in his life teaches him. It is a lesson that (Yudhiṣṭhira now knows) Karṇa also had to learn, and it is a lesson that Yudhiṣṭhira will exploit when, in his two tests on his way to heaven, he will again have to cling to his sense of dharma and his loyalty to his (Pāṇḍava) brothers.

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[19] Yudhiṣṭhira has to treat Karṇa as if he were, say, Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira's attitude to Duryodhana can be gleaned from his vehement taunts to Duryodhana at the edge of the lake in which Duryodhana is hiding.

I would like to end the comparison with one more methodological note. I want to stress here that the interpretation that I am *not* propounding here and that I have tried to avoid is the interpretation that Karṇa is Yudhiṣṭhira's Jungian shadow. In some sense, Jungian shadow interpretation is yet another form of psychological decomposition interpretation, but the Jungian version often gives more autonomy and character to the shadow. Even with that added level of human dimension, I still want to avoid it: there is a determinism between the psyche and its shadow in Jungianism which I feel is not present in the relationship between Yudhiṣṭhira and Karṇa. Their relationship, as I have tried to show above, does share some interesting parallels, but it is not a simple relationship of mirroring. Indeed, in the following, I will try to substantiate this claim by showing how Karṇa has interesting and literarily productive similarities to Arjuna and Bhīṣma. In this way, to reiterate this chapter's introductory metaphor, the crystal that is Karṇa's character reflects and is reflected upon by the other characters, but still retains its own individual place in the epic creation.

Before moving into the discussion of Karṇa and Arjuna, I should note that I have explored here only one set of resonances between Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira. Another set is, for example, as Hiltebeitel has explored, how Yudhiṣṭhira represents a motif of false friendship which contrasts with Karṇa's true friendship and loyalty.[20] Such discussions are complementary to mine, and I will leave them aside for the purposes of this essay.

To summarize the comparisons between Yudhiṣṭhira and Karṇa: by examining Yudhiṣṭhira's hatred of Karṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira's grief at the death of Karṇa, I have tried to show that several aspects of Yudhiṣṭhira's personality (his blinding hatred, his ability to

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[20] See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). pp. 254ff.

cling to his own worldview) emerge when we consider how these two characters reflect on each other.

5.3 Karṇa and Arjuna

In this section, I want to look at the thematic links that the authors have drawn between the characters of Arjuna and Karṇa. After Karṇa's dialogue with Kuntī, the best remembered aspect of Karṇa's character is most likely his battle with Arjuna. Indeed the battle of Karṇa and Arjuna is perhaps the military climax of the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, rivaled only by the battle between Bhīma and Duryodhana.[21] A common motif in Balinese tapestry, for example, is the battle between Arjuna and Karṇa, each mounted on his chariot, with the dark Kṛṣṇa piloting Arjuna's, and each firing arrows that collide in the sky. The image in these large tapestries is that of a frozen standoff, of weapons canceling each other out. This suggests that, of all the warriors in the battlefield, it is precisely and exactly Karṇa who is the best match for Arjuna.

Without elaborating on the obvious, let me quickly overview the well-known evidence that points towards this claim.

1. At the military tournament, Karṇa reduplicates all of Arjuna's feats.

2. Indra specifically acts twice to eliminate Karṇa as a threat to Arjuna: first by robbing Karṇa of his armor, and second by creating Ghaṭotkaca, whose presence will force Karṇa to use the "Never-failing spear."

3. Karṇa promises Kuntī that he will let all of her sons, except for Arjuna live. Thus after the battle, she will be left with five sons, including *either* Karṇa *or* Arjuna.

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[21] There is, of course, the strange encounter between Śalya and Yudhiṣṭhira. Kṛṣṇa declares that Yudhiṣṭhira is a pratiyoddhṛ 'fitting opponent' for Śalya, but what that can mean is mysterious. (See Hiltebeitel p. 268) Why Yudhiṣṭhira would be capable or fit to fight anyone is particularly strange given his performances on the battlefield. I shall not pursue this further here.

A fourth feature is the parallel nature of their charioteer advice scenes. Just as Kṛṣṇa encourages Arjuna to fight the war, Śalya, Karṇa's charioteer, demoralizes Karṇa. (This was first noted by Walter Ruben and then further analyzed by Hiltebeitel.[22]) Thus the Bhagavadgītā finds itself parodied as Śalya insults and tries to sap Karṇa of his will to fight.[23]

And there is a fifth feature, which we shall discuss below: just as Kṛṣṇa "gives advice" to Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa also "gives advice" to Karṇa when he suggests that Karṇa switch sides. And the epic authors specifically place this scene in a chariot (5.138.1); they do so, I believe, to emphasize its relationship to the Bhagavadgītā. (After all, there are *many other* places at which individuals in the epics meet and discuss things.) The fact that Karṇa is seated in his chariot -- presumably without a charioteer (for Śalya will eventually take that place) indicates that we are to read this scene keeping the Bhagavadgītā in mind.[24] As I shall argue below, our analysis of this scene points us towards a rereading of the Bhagavadgītā scene as another test, and, eventually, Karṇa as another form of devotee (bhakta).

But before we proceed to that rereading, I would like to focus first on the question which has strangely received little attention so far: *why is Karṇa set up as the archrival of Arjuna?* Again, as in the previous section, I want to nod towards explanations which base

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[22] See Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata.* pp. 254 ff.

[23] There is another parody of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the Virāṭa Parvan when Arjuna acts as charioteer to and encourages Uttarā. (4.35 ff.) See Ramanujan, "Repetition in the Mahabharata." p. 424, note 2 for a bibliography on this topic. Note too that Yudhiṣṭhira has put Śalya up to discouraging Karṇa, and that Yudhiṣṭhira himself will soon kill Śalya.

[24] I will not address here a discussion about the ordering of events in the epic; the ordering is, I believe, carefully orchestrated. However, the epic was also clearly a piece that was to be read and reread, performed and performed again. Thus, scenes that come before are very much "in dialogue" with scenes that come later on. But to flesh out the full textual implications of this sort of textual world would be another paper altogether.

themselves on divine transpositions and Jungian shadows, but not to advocate them. Krsna himself in the epic provides an explanation of the first type to Arjuna:

> Just as Vrtra was killed by the destroyer of Bala, so Karna [was killed] by you, O [Arjuna]. Men shall talk of just [one] death for Karna and Vrtra. Vrtra was slain in battle by the much splendored bearer of the *vajra*; by you, then, was Karna slain with bow and sharp arrows.[25]

Hiltebeitel notes that the passages he quotes here are mostly from Northern recensions; the last, though, is found in the South. For Hiltebeitel, the Northern redactors seized upon this one verse and expanded upon it -- to make a point, a point that Hiltebeitel believes is a point about friendship, and a point that parallels and contrasts Yudhisthira and Karna, more than it contrasts Karna and Arjuna. While I am convinced by Hiltebeitel's analysis, it does not yet answer my question.

Moreover, despite the fact that it is Krsna who provides this explanation of the events (and thus the rivalry) between Arjuna and Karna, Krsna's explanation does not necessarily "end" the discussion of the nature of their rivalry. It seems like an explanation that covers up some deeper resonance, just as the multiple explanations for Draupadi's polyandry smack of some much more interesting explanation. Such explanations might also suggest redactors who found themselves with a clearly beautiful literary situation but felt compelled (for religious or philosophical reasons) to elaborate with an explanation.

In my interpretation, the opposition between Arjuna and Karna is more human: the two represent, and see themselves as representing, two different worlds of meaning. Moreover, these are worlds of meaning which both Karna and Arjuna recognize, which they understand are in opposition, which they understand as absolutely unequal, and to

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[25] 8.69.2-3 Based on Hiltebeitel's translation. Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata.* p. 263.

which they each align themselves only with a great deal of struggle. These two worlds of meaning are the precise worlds which appear to Karna at the test which Kṛṣṇa gives to him: that is, the world in which reality is determined by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna's victory, and the world in which reality is determined by human intuitions and emotions. (In what follows, I will refer to a character's "world of meaning" as his *worldview*; this social science term indicates how a character chooses, constructs, and engages with meaningful entities. To use an anachronistic metaphor, *worldview* refers to the glasses through which a character views reality.)

Let us first examine Arjuna's worldview. One of the stories crucial to understanding Arjuna's personality is the Ekalavya episode. Arjuna here does not humbly accept the fact that reality has produced another archer equal to him; he calls upon Droṇa to simply eliminate that fact from his reality. Arjuna, as Nara, as the consort of Kṛṣṇa, simply is the best; he has been promised as much and he believes it must be so. His entire identity, in a way, is predicated on his complete and utter superiority over all other human beings.

That is why the opening moment of the Bhagavadgītā is so crucial to Arjuna's character. Up to that point, Arjuna knows he is unequaled, and that the god Kṛṣṇa is on his side. It is only when he suddenly realizes the *consequences* of his superiority that he suddenly pauses. It is an "it's lonely at the top" moment: if indeed Arjuna kills all the warriors on the other side, as he knows he can, he will have then killed many of the relatives he loves dearly. Suddenly, the world that Arjuna has always inhabited, the world of his undoubted superiority, is a world which seems to be deeply flawed. Suddenly,

Arjuna wonders if there is another world of meaning out there, a world not defined by power and victory, but by human relationships.[26]

And it is precisely to dissuade him from pursuing that other sort of world of meaning that Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna what he does in the Bhagavadgītā. From Kṛṣṇa's perspective, Arjuna has been right all along: power and divine power are indeed what give meaning to the world. Arjuna should not worry about his ties to his teachers and elders; what Arjuna should worry about is how best to execute his superior military skills.

For the moment, I am examining the Bhagavadgītā as a drama, as a moment in the development of Arjuna's character. In this context, we should also remember that Arjuna eventually *forgets* the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā.[27] Thus, as important as the philosophical statements in the Bhagavadgītā may be, they neither *define* nor *delimit* Arjuna's character.

Indeed what may be the most crucial part of the Bhagavadgītā for Arjuna is the theophany.[28] And indeed this would be consistent with my reading so far since Arjuna is a character who conceives the world in terms of power, his own or a god's. Through the theophany, Arjuna realizes *just how powerful* Kṛṣṇa is. And Kṛṣṇa flatters his ego by telling him that it is only Arjuna who can see this.[29] Arjuna thus accepts, through the

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[26] Here I take a different tack than do critics such as Madhav Deshpande who feel that "the description of the state of Arjuna's mind in the first chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* makes it clear that Arjuna's decision not to fight is not a conclusion based on well thought out philosophical reasoning. It was the climax of a total breakdown of self-confidence caused by fear, uncertainty, compassion, etc." In Madhav Deshpande, "The Epic Context of the *Bhagavad Gita*," in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). p. 335.

[27] See the start of *Anugita* (14.16-50).

[28] *Bhagavad Gita* 11 (6.33).

[29] Of course, if that were true, then Saṃjaya would not have been able to report it to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and other complications of the narrative would ensue. Nonetheless Arjuna is happy enough to be told that he is unique in Kṛṣṇa's favor.

theophany, that Kṛṣṇa is indeed more powerful than any other force in the universe, and this immense show of force indeed convinces Arjuna that he should fight on.

I am not arguing, as some have, that it is Kṛṣṇa's power itself that convinces Arjuna to fight. In that reading, Arjuna hesitates because (as Kṛṣṇa later implies) he is simply a coward. I want to propose that Arjuna, confident in his power to destroy, questions what would be the consequences of the power he possesses.[30] And I want to suggest that the theophany is the decisive stroke in making Arjuna believe that his original world of meaning (of military power, of kṣatriya-dharma, and of bhakti) is *the* world of meaning for Arjuna. Arjuna is so overwhelmed by the theophany that he once again takes up his arms against his relatives, forgetting all of his previous hesitations and objections, hesitations and objections which, in the world of kṣatriya-dharma and bhakti have little or no relevance.

In contrast, Karṇa is fighting for a world of meaning, a worldview, which is precisely predicated on human relationships and loyalty. And yet, this is a worldview that Karṇa himself knows is doomed. Indeed, as his grand description of the Kurukṣetra war as a sacrifice indicates, Karṇa knows that he will be killed, that he will be fed to the sacrificial fire, and that Arjuna's world of meaning will prevail. In other words, Karṇa has to fight Arjuna to defend a world of meaning that is in fact utterly bound to be defeated.

Karṇa doggedly fights for and defends a point of view which he knows (for himself) represents a real human possibility. But Arjuna fights from a position of complete dominance, a position where he not only knows that he is in the "right" but that the very events of history seem to corroborate his point of view. Arjuna knows that his side will win and will "write history."

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[30] See Amartya Sen, "Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000).

These two worldviews are not compatible; they cannot coexist. As Karṇa realizes, at the end of the war, only one or the other of them will survive. But that is not to say that one is absolutely better than the other. It is only that history has proven one stronger than the other at that moment.

In the battle between Arjuna and Karṇa, the epic authors attempted to represent the battle between two worlds of meaning, one which had the forces of historical reality on its side, and another, which, though possible, was doomed to failure. In this way, the death of Karṇa mourns the death of a particular set of ideas. The authors of the epic have thus tried to make the battle of ideologies into an emotional literary episode.

Nonetheless, if I were to claim at this point that the conflict could be reduced to a conflict of ideology, then I would have become yet another type of euhemerist: I would have replaced human character with ideology. I believe, however, it is not so much the ideology itself that is important to the human dimension of this clash (and hence the human dimension of the characters) but the characters' relationship to the ideologies they stand for. To specify: Arjuna's relationship to his ideas about martial and divine superiority are held with a grim determination; Arjuna deeply believes that the world around him *must* succumb to the force of his superiority and that his victory is both necessary and righteous. In contrast, Karṇa is unable to have such a relationship to his ideas; as we have seen, Karṇa knows that the final arbiter of reality in the epic is Kṛṣṇa. Thus Karṇa fights for a vision of the world that is doomed, but unfortunately, for him, the only meaningful world he has.

An analogy can help here: consider a soldier who has been given death orders when the tide of the war is clearly against his side. Or consider a soldier in a makeshift army who stands to defend his homeland against an imperialist force. A soldier in such a situation knows that he is marching to his death; he knows, or perhaps would know if he

reflected, that the forces of history are certainly not in his favor. He is certain that his side will in the end lose. And yet, assuming he is a thinking man, when he fights, he fights for something -- for his homeland, for his way of life, for something that gives some meaning to his actions. Like this soldier, Karṇa is fighting for his world of meaning despite the fact that he knows that he fights in vain.

5.4 A Lesson from the Bhagavadgītā

Our reading of this rivalry allows us to reread the Bhagavadgītā as a response to Arjuna *failing* precisely the sort of tests that Yudhiṣṭhira and Karṇa pass. Like the Anugītā, the Bhagavadgītā will give Arjuna the discipline (he lacks) to 'stand firm', to remain rooted in the identity he has developed so far. The Bhagavadgītā will do so by transforming Arjuna's friendship for Kṛṣṇa into bhakti.

Let us recall the ethical implications of Kṛṣṇa's offer to Karṇa and compare it with the Bhagavadgītā. Amartya Sen has characterized the Bhagavadgītā as a debate between a consequentialist ethics (championed by Arjuna) and a deontological ethics (championed by Kṛṣṇa's duty argument).[31] But these positions are exactly *reversed* in the scene in which Kṛṣṇa talks to Karṇa: here *Kṛṣṇa* presents a consequentialist ethics ('Karṇa, think of the consequences of becoming a Pāṇḍava...'), while Karṇa stands firm based on a deontological ethics of faith.[32]

In this light, our previous interpretation (that this is a test that Karṇa passes) is given further corroboration. After all, Karṇa essentially takes a deontological position, like the one of which Kṛṣṇa will eventually have to *convince* Arjuna. Moreover, recall Kṛṣṇa's most difficult advice to Arjuna:

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[31] Ibid.

[32] See also Jarow, "The Letter of the Law and the Discourse of Power: Karna and Controversy in the Mahabharata." pp. 71-72.

Be intent on action
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!

Perform actions, firm in discipline,
relinquishing attachment;
be impartial to failure and success --
this equanimity is called discipline. (Bhagavadgītā 2.47-48)[33]

When we observe the battle, it is hard to discern whether or not Arjuna really follows this advice or not; after all, Arjuna always wins. He may lose his son and others dear to him, but as far as his own action is concerned, Arjuna knows that his action is always effective and always produces the 'fruits' toward which his action is directed. In some ways, because Arjuna is so successful, and in fact Kṛṣṇa makes Arjuna universally successful, the injunction to "be impartial to failure and success" is difficult to judge with respect to Arjuna.

However, when we observe Karṇa, we find an individual who specifically acts with respect to the action itself and not the consequences of the action. Karṇa fights because he believes that he must; he does not fight attached to the fruit of his actions -- for he knows that fruits of his actions will all be nil. Karṇa's actions will have no fruit; thus we are able to verify that Karṇa is attached to his actions in and of themselves.

Moreover, Karṇa's dhīratā (which we discussed in the previous chapter) fits well with the Bhagavadgītā's sthitaprajñā ideal. And Karṇa's fixedness through the epic is both the source of others' praise of him (for Karṇa's loyalty) and of their criticism of him (for

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[33] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam Classics, 1986). p. 36.

his stubbornness). At the same time, Arjuna is a *variable* character: he grows through transformations, and indeed his transformations are multiple and spectacular:

- During the Pāṇḍavas' exile Arjuna travels alone on a long journey which takes him to heaven, etc.(3.38 ff.)

- Arjuna's disguise as the eunuch dancing master Bṛhannaḍā is arguably the most radical identity shift among the brothers. (4.2)

- Arjuna is transformed by the Bhagavadgītā, forgets the teachings, and then is transformed again by the Anugītā.

The Bhagavadgītā is a lesson in fixedness, in 'standing firm', in the discipline of a particular belief; it arrives at moments when Arjuna seems to be straying from the identity that he has developed so far. Thus, when Karṇa is tempted by Kṛṣṇa by the offer of a new identity, Karṇa refuses it, thereby epitomizing just the kind of disciplined 'standing firm' that the Bhagavadgītā espouses. Thus Karṇa becomes, ironically, the model for acting in the way that the Bhagavadgītā proposes.[34]

This leaves us with a battle essentially between two warriors, *both* of whom seem to embody the Bhagavadgītā's central precept with respect to action.

The difference, though, between Arjuna and Karṇa is precisely bhakti. Whereas Arjuna will follow whatever Kṛṣṇa says, Karṇa does not. Arjuna's reality is defined by Kṛṣṇa; Karṇa's is not. Arjuna triumphs on the battlefield because he is a bhakta, and Karṇa is not. And it is in this way that this battle on the field points towards the centrality of bhakti in the Bhagavadgītā. (Methodologically, this analysis stands as a caution regarding interpreting the Bhagavadgītā without attending to the larger epic context.)

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[34] Also Jarow: "Karṇa's choice is ultimately the same as Arjuna's." Jarow, "The Letter of the Law and the Discourse of Power: Karṇa and Controversy in the Mahabharata." p. 72.

And yet like every conclusion that the epic seems to offer us, this conclusion seems to suggest another. If Karna refuses Krsna's offer, there is still within Karna great respect for Krsna; if the events of his life had been different, Karna would have been able to worship Krsna, and indeed it is merely his human loyalties that prevent Karna from doing so. If Karna is a <u>bhakta</u> in all ways except in his devotion to Krsna, then perhaps Karna is the prototype for the later idea of the <u>dvesa-bhakta</u> 'the hate-devotee.'

Before moving to a comparison between Karna and Bhisma, I will recapitulate these last two sections. I have tried to argue here that Karna and Arjuna are suited as archrivals because they are both individuals who, when true to their character, cling aggressively to their worldviews. While Arjuna's worldview centers around his own superiority and is corroborated by historical events, Karna's worldview centers around his human relationships and must contend with failure and defeat. Karna and Arjuna are also differentiated by devotion (<u>bhakti</u>). Arjuna is the idealized devotee; Karna rejects Krsna's advice but seems to already embody all that Arjuna is taught in the <u>Bhagavadgita</u> -- except for devotion itself.

5.5 Karna and Bhisma

These two characters are perhaps least often grouped together. Their attitudes, poses, and ways of conducting themselves are entirely antithetical.[35] They appear as two individuals who have nothing but contempt for each other. And indeed this contempt erupts into a real consequence for the Kaurava side. When Duryodhana asks Bhisma to lead his forces, Bhisma stipulates, "there is one condition under which I shall willingly become your general: either Karna must fight first, or I, for this son of a <u>suta</u> always

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[35] Biardeau and Péterfalvi write of "l'inimité -- ou l'incompatibilité -- entre Bhisma et Karna." ('the enimity -- or the incompatibility -- between Bhisma and Karna.') *Le Mahabharata*, trans. Jean-Michel Péterfalvi and Madeleine Biardeau, *Garnier Flammarion (Series) 433 (V. 1); 434 (V. 2)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985). Vol. 2, p. 19.

seeks to rival me in battle." (5.153.24) Before Duryodhana can reply, Karṇa declares, "In no manner whatsoever shall I fight as long as this son of the Ganges is alive! Only when Bhīṣma has been felled shall I fight with [Arjuna]." (5.153.25)[36] And thus when the war begins in 6.17, it is only Karṇa (and his retinue) that do not take up arms: "Lacking only Karṇa, [Dhṛtarāṣṭra's] sons and the kings on [his] side rode out, causing the horizons to resound with their lion roars." (6.17.15) Indeed, the first indication that there is a structured relationship between Karṇa and Bhīṣma is the fact that they become complementary generals; they replace one another structurally at the head of the Kaurava army.[37]

In this context, their reconciliation on Bhīṣma's deathbed sheds light not only on both of their characters, but on the nature of fighting on the Kaurava side. The scene takes place after the tenth day of fighting, and is at the very end of the Bhīṣma Parvan.

Summary of Karṇa-Bhīṣma Dialogue

After all the other warriors had paid their respects to the fallen Bhīṣma, and left, Karṇa approached him and fell at his feet. "I am Rādhā's son, whom you always regarded with hatred (dveṣa)." (6.117.5) The dying Bhisma struggled up, embraced Karṇa as a father would a son (piteva putram), and said: "If you had not come to me, things would certainly have not gone well for you.[38] You are Kuntī's son, not Rādhā's son. I do not hate you, I tell you the truth. I said harsh things to you in order to destroy your energy (tejas)[39] ... I know of your heroism in battle, which is difficult for your enemies to withstand, as well as of your devotion to

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[36] If Bhīṣma insists on calling Karṇa "the son of a sūta" then Karṇa will call Bhīṣma "the son of the Ganges." This recalls Duryodhana's speech when he defends Karṇa from Bhīma's taunts: "The origins of both kṣatriyas and rivers are surely obscure" (1.127.11).

[37] Other generals, such as Śalya, fight in the war before they become generals.

[38] yadi māṃ nābhigacchethā na te śreyo bhaved dhruvam (6.117.8cd) This parallels the generals' response to Yudhiṣṭhira before the war: each of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Śalya begin their response to Yudhisthira with "yadi māṃ nābhigacchethā ..." And all say similarly, "if you had not approached me, I would have sworn an oath to your defeat." (Bhīṣma 6.41.33, Droṇa 6.41.49, Kṛpa 6.41.65, Śalya 6.41.74) This section will be analyzed in further detail below.

[39] Compare this to Śalya's taunts to Karṇa while serving as Karṇa's charioteer.

brahmins, of your courage (śauryam), and of your excellent conduct in the giving of gifts ... In archery, in the use of heavy weapons or light weapons, you are the equal of Arjuna, or of Mahātma Kṛṣṇa ... The anger I once held against you is now gone. Human initiative (puruṣakāra) cannot overcome destiny (daiva). O killer of your enemies, your brothers are the Pāṇḍava heroes, born from the same womb as you. If you wish to do what is dear to me, unite with them!"

Karṇa answered, "I know that I am Kuntī's son, and not born to the sūta. But I was abandoned by Kuntī and I was raised by the sūta. [Moreover,] having enjoyed lordship through Duryodhana, I cannot play him false. Wealth, my body, and that which is best, fame -- I abandon everything for the sake of Duryodhana ... Who could turn back destiny with human initiative? ... I understand completely that the sons of Pandu and Vasudeva are invincible by other mortals. Knowing that, we act with courage [against] them! (26)... O hero, I would [rather] fight with your permission."

Bhīṣma replied, "If indeed you cannot abandon this terrible enmity, then I permit you [to fight] O Karṇa. Fight with the desire of reaching heaven ... For there is no other dharma better for a kṣatriya than fighting. I made a great effort for a great while towards peace, but could not achieve this..." Bhīṣma's last words in the Bhīṣma Parvan are "Where there is dharma, there is victory." (6.117)

Even in this reconciliation, we find deep tensions. Karṇa, now having been told numerous times about his biological identity, introduces himself specifically as the son of Rādhā. Bhīṣma, however, seems incapable of accepting that sort of relationship as meaningful. Bhīṣma assumes that Karṇa is naïve or ignorant, and "informs" him of his biological lineage. Indeed the very relationships Karṇa is most proud of, Bhīṣma dismisses. And thus even as Bhīṣma gives Karṇa his blessings, it is in a spirit at which Karṇa might bristle.

However, Karṇa is kind to the old and dying man. He asks Bhīṣma's permission to fight and more than stressing his devotion to his adopted parents, he gives Bhīṣma an answer that Bhīṣma can understand: having enjoyed Duryodhana's patronage and wealth (artha), Karṇa must now fight for Duryodhana. This differs from the answer that Karṇa has given to Kṛṣṇa: there the part of his answer regarding Duryodhana stressed loyalty

and royal power (rājyam) (5.139.13). And there, Karṇa does not hesitate to stress his devotion to his adopted parents. But Karṇa's answer to Bhīṣma does parallel an answer that Bhīṣma himself has given -- to Yudhiṣṭhira. In fact, each Kaurava chief gives a set of formulaic answers to Yudhiṣṭhira on the eve of the battle, when Yudhiṣṭhira approaches them for blessings. We shall now examine this scene.

In 6.41, just as the battle is about to begin (and just after the Bhagavadgītā has ended), Yudhiṣṭhira crosses the battle lines to obtain blessings from Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Śalya. Each guru says the same thing to Yudhiṣṭhira: if you had not come to ask for my blessings, "I would have sworn an oath to your defeat;" and:

> arthasya puruṣo dāso dāsastvartho na kasyacit / iti satyaṃ
> 'It is the truth that man is the slave of wealth but that wealth is no man's slave." (e.g. 6.41.36)

And all of them compare themselves or their words to sexual deficiency ('klibavat').[40] In addition to their blessings, Yudhiṣṭhira also asks each guru how he can be killed. Bhīṣma and Kṛpa give him no answer; Droṇa and Śalya explain precisely how they will die.

Thus Karṇa's answer is very specifically directed towards Bhīṣma and his fellows. Indeed the group of four gurus that Yudhiṣṭhira asks permission from are all characters that at some point or another attack either Karṇa (or another skillful non-kṣatriya). It is Kṛpa who asks Karṇa's lineage at the military tournament. It will be Śalya who will try to sap Karṇa of his energy -- this very promise is made to Yudhiṣṭhira when Yudhiṣṭhira asks Śalya for his blessings. Similarly, Bhīṣma now admits that he always insulted Karṇa in order to sap him of his energy (and thus keep the Kauravas in check). Only Droṇa has not directly attacked Karṇa; but Droṇa's violence towards Ekalavya

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[40] Glossed by Nilakantha as kataravat 'as if cowardly, faint-hearted, or timid' See Ganguli-Roy, Vol. V, p. 100.

indicates very clearly that Karṇa could not have been trained by Droṇa, and that Droṇa would not have tolerated a student like Karṇa who was not only not a kṣatriya but an equal of Arjuna in archery. Thus by giving this answer to Bhīṣma Karṇa is very clearly speaking conciliatory words, words that he feels will console Bhīṣma, but perhaps not heartfelt words.

This conciliation is surprising because it takes place between two characters who have only spoken the harshest of words to each other. Thematically, though, there are several sets of convergences in their characters; for example, if their conciliation is marked by a generosity of spirit, it may be because they are both markedly generous characters. Bhīṣma remarks on Karṇa's generosity to brahmins, and Karṇa, in turn, calls Bhīṣma by the epithet bhūridakṣiṇa, 'one who bestows rich presents (on brahmins).' Like Karṇa, Bhīṣma grants awesome favors to those that ask him for them.

And they are both men who make terrible sacrifices, and both of their sacrifices are out of love for their parents. Bhīṣma gives up women, marriage, and his right to the throne in order that his father Śāṃtanu can marry Satyavatī. This is a sacrifice so terrible that Bhīṣma is named for it: previously known as Devavrata, he is henceforth called Bhīṣma 'the terrible" after the cries of "terrible! terrible!" that came from the heavens when he uttered his oath. (1.94.86 ff) Even though the gods are not as moved, Karṇa's sacrifice is similar. As we have discussed, when Kṛṣṇa approaches Karṇa with the offer of the kingdom, Karṇa too renounces the kingdom in the name of his parents. (As we have seen, much more is going on there. Still, the structure of his renunciation is strikingly similar to Bhīṣma's.)

The similarity of Karṇa's and Bhīṣma's spirit of self-sacrifice is highlighted by Karṇa's *other* sacrifice, when he cuts off his armor to give to Indra. Here *is* an instance wherein Karṇa is renamed by the sacrifice:

When the Gods and men and Dānavas
And the hosts of the Siddhas witnessed Karṇa
Flaying himself, they all roared forth,
For he moved no muscle in spite of the pain.

To the thundering sound of celestial drums
A divine rain of flowers fell from above
At the sight of Karṇa now flayed by his sword,
While that hero of men smiled time and again.

Having cut his armor loose from his body,
He gave it still wet to Vāsava;
He cut off his earrings and gave those too --
For his feat he is known as Vaikaratana. (3.394.36-38)

The absolute natures of both Bhīṣma and Karṇa constitute a fascinating parallel. The absolute asceticism with which Bhīṣma leads his life is paralleled by Karṇa's daily devotion to Sūrya. The quiet and immediate self-brutality with which Karṇa cuts off his own armor is like that immediate and instantaneous spirit of self-sacrifice with which Bhīṣma gives up the kingdom for his father. In both cases, the heroes will remain true to their vows (Karṇa in achieving his sacrifice; Bhīṣma's vow is the sacrifice itself), and in both cases, their vows will lead, in one way or another, to the Kurukṣetra war (Karṇa is no longer invincible and so Duryodhana is no longer omnipotent; Bhīṣma's vow causes a power vacuum and eventually a struggle for succession.) But no matter the consequences for humanity, neither will stray from their vows. And thus their resulting social position on the Kaurava side is ambiguous: on the one hand they both know Yudhiṣṭhira would be a better ruler; on the other hand, they are both compelled to fight for Duryodhana.

This highlights both Karṇa's and Bhīṣma's curious relationship to the structure of the Pāṇḍava victory. Through his gift to Kuntī, Karṇa determines that he will fight only Arjuna, thus preserving the Pāṇḍava brothers through the war. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira

that he will favor the Pāṇḍavas even if he is fighting for the Kauravas.[41] But both of these

crucial components of the Pāṇḍava victory come about only because they are asked for,

that is, only because of Karṇa and Bhīṣma's generosity.

Moreover, we have seen that not only will Karṇa not join the Pāṇḍavas, he wants

to make sure that Yudhiṣṭhira does not know that he is Kuntī's son; that is why Karṇa

asks Kṛṣṇa to remain silent about their dialogue. But Bhīṣma knows that Kuntī is Karṇa's

biological mother, and says that Nārada and Kṛṣṇa told him as much. (6.117.9) This

allows us to deduce that Bhīṣma, like Karṇa, is fighting the war despite knowing how to

stop it: if Karṇa is revealed as the eldest Pāṇḍava, the fighting would immediately cease.

Now, unlike Karṇa, Bhīṣma tries to stop the war, or claims that he tries. Indeed, Bhīṣma

is torn between saving the warriors he knows will die if the war continues, and letting

Duryodhana reign (the outcome if Bhīṣma reveals Karṇa's identity). And so Bhīṣma does

nothing, and the war continues. Bhīṣma's paralysis is reminiscent of his earlier paralysis

when Draupadī asks whether Yudhiṣṭhira could lose her when he had already lost himself

(2.60 ff.) Bhīṣma's response then is similar to his response to the "riddle" of how to stop

the war: "as dharma is subtle, I fail to resolve [the] riddle the proper way." (2.60.40)[42]

Bhīṣma's response to the war contrasts with Karṇa's response to the war, in

particular, and to the dilemmas he faces in general. As we have seen (in Chapter Two),

Karṇa remains on the Kaurava side as an active and dharmic choice; like Yudhiṣṭhira,

Karṇa does not freeze in the face of the complexities of dharma.

This helps us to differentiate between Karṇa's and Bhīṣma's outlooks as they fight

on the Kaurava side. At the beginning of this section, we saw that their motivations for

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[41] For example, as Biardeau suggests, Bhīṣma insults Karṇa to cleverly keep him out of the war and thus keep Arjuna out danger.

[42] Note too that Bhīṣma's suggestion that Karṇa reveal himself to the Pāṇḍavas does not solve the riddle either.

remaining loyal to an inferior king overlapped; the preceding paragraphs put us in a position to examine the differences in their attitudes towards their efforts and the war's inevitable outcome. The heart of this difference lies in the contrast between their formulations of the relationship between destiny (daiva) and human initiative (purusakāra). Bhīṣma declares flatly, " Human initiative cannot overcome destiny." (6.117.18) Karṇa's rejoinder is not a negation but a question, a loosening of Bhīṣma's absolute statement. Karṇa asks, "Who could turn back destiny with human initiative?" (6.117.24) Karṇa would not deny the power of destiny; indeed he proceeds to explain just how clearly he understands that destiny has ordained the Pāṇḍava victory and the invincibility of Arjuna and Krṣṇa. Nevertheless, Karṇa will still fight with courage and vigor for the side to which he is loyal -- which suggests that even if human initiative is overwhelmed by destiny, effort is still important and necessary.

We find analogous positions in the discussion between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira (that we examined in Section 1.11) starting in 3.31. Recall that Draupadī suggests that everything is arranged by a capricious god; thus karma explains nothing and following dharma is of little use. Yudhiṣṭhira counters that since one must act, one requires a (non-solipsistic) standard by which to act, and that standard must be dharma. Thus not only is dharma important, but we must direct our efforts towards pursuing it. Again, Yudhiṣṭhira does not deny that events might be (or seem to be) arranged by either destiny or caprice. Nor does Yudhiṣṭhira assert that by following dharma, a human being is entitled to success: even though following dharma does bear fruit, the fruition of those acts, like the fruition of all acts, are "the mysteries of the Gods." (3.31.33) As Krṣṇa will tell Arjuna, human beings should pursue dharmic action for its own sake, without aiming towards any fruit of that action:

Be intent on action,
 not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction! (Bhagavadgītā 2.47)

A man cannot escape the force
of action by abstaining from actions... (Bhagavadgītā 3.4)[43]

Finally, Yudhiṣṭhira's argument for exerting human effort towards the pursuit of dharma

is no less cogent no matter how many other explanatory systems -- for instance, nature

(prakṛti) or time (kāla) -- are brought to bear on human affairs: however one accounts for

the world, one inescapably *must* act.

In a similar (though not exactly identical) vein, we may interpret Karṇa's response

to Bhīṣma to suggest that human effort is necessary despite the power of destiny. Indeed,

by allowing events to be determined by destiny, Karṇa (like Yudhiṣṭhira) seems to cut

himself off from the fruits of his action; Karṇa will pursue an action for the sake of the

action itself: he will be loyal merely for the sake of loyalty, he will fight for Duryodhana

merely for the sake of his pledge of allegiance. On the other hand, we may interpret

Bhīṣma as pursuing actions not just for the sake of dharma but for their results. Bhīṣma is

disappointed he could not keep the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas from waging war. Neither

Karṇa nor Bhīṣma renounces action altogether, but what they expect from their personal,

human initiative differs.

Let us take, as illustration, the conciliatory dialogue itself: Karṇa approaches

Bhīṣma merely to reconcile himself with Bhīṣma and to ask for Bhīṣma's blessings.[44]

Bhīṣma, though, tries to exploit this opportunity by asking Karṇa to switch sides and end

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[43] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. pp. 36, 41.

[44] Contrast this with Yudhiṣṭhira who asks (of the chiefs) not only blessings but the means to kill
them as well.

the war. Bhīṣma tries constantly to produce an effect in the world; paradoxically, here, his actions produce none.

In sum, while the mood of the reconciliation between Karṇa and Bhīṣma is affectionate, there is a dramatic tension in their positions on the Kaurava side. Moreover, even if neither would deny the power of destiny, Karṇa would still emphasize human initiative in the pursuit of dharma, albeit without attachment to the fruits of that initiative. Bhīṣma's efforts are more goal-oriented, even if they are oriented towards dharma in the larger sense; thus when he is unable to achieve those goals, Bhīṣma feels that destiny trumps human effort.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has by no means definitively covered this topic. Indeed, the possibilities for comparison between Karṇa and other characters in the epic may be far, far greater than what has been examined here. (For instance, Sukthankar writes, "*Vidura* is in many ways the exact counterpart of Karṇa."[45]) This chapter, however, has as its scope only the delineation of some instances of the way in which the critical method of examining character reveals complex (crystalline) parallels and mirrorings between the characters of the epic. In this way, the examination of character helps us to rediscover and appreciate the subtle design and conscious artistry of the Mahābhārata.

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[45] Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. p. 54. Italics mine.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: A Conversation about Theory, or a Theory of Conversation

"I sit in front of him in silence,
and set up a ladder made of patience,
and if in his presence a language from beyond joy
and beyond grief begins to pour from *my* chest,
I know that his soul is as deep and bright
as the star Canopus rising over Yemen.

And so when I start speaking a powerful right arm
of words sweeping down, I know *him* from what I say,
and how I say it, because there's a window open
between us, mixing the night air of our beings."
Rumi[1]

Each chapter in this dissertation is meant to stand, more or less, on its own; and I have indicated where they speak to each other. I do not intend to make concluding remarks here that pertain to the content of the chapters. Thus, for some readers this conclusion is unnecessary: if the chapters have done their job, they will want to go out and start conversations about Karṇa, either with me or with others who care about the Mahābhārata. As in the Rumi poem above, I would judge this study by the quality of conversation it engenders.

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[1] Jalalaldin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995). pp. 31-2.

Still, there are readers who may be interested in what methodological assumptions underpinned this dissertation. By revealing as much, I hope that my exposed weaknesses may help those readers formulate their own ideas about how to read Karṇa; even in this conclusion, the interpretation of Karṇa is still the focus of the enterprise.

In the following, I will sketch out the main lines of this dissertation's hermeneutical philosophy. First, I will trace the influence of Doniger's ideas, as set forth in The Implied Spider. Second, I will connect these hermeneutics to that of Gadamer, as set forth in Truth and Method. Finally, I will take up Gadamer's idea of conversation and examine why *character* is a particularly apt topic for the kind of interpretive practice that Doniger and Gadamer frame, and, conversely, why their hermeneutics are particularly suitable to investigating the human questions of character analysis.

6.1 Doniger and The Implied Spider

One of the theoretical questions a reader may have is as follows: what justification do I have for making the claims that I do? That is, how do I know that the Mahābhārata says the things that I claim it says? Is this a dissertation about Karṇa in the Mahābhārata or Karṇa in the head of Aditya Adarkar?

One could also frame this objection in terms of historical considerations: how can I claim that our intuitions about notions like love and loyalty are at all compatible with the intuitions about love and loyalty that the epic authors or audience had? If I talk of affection or love (sneha), shouldn't that term be grounded in a project that first establishes from a historian's perspective just what the semantic field of sneha was at the time of the Mahābhārata's composition? (And indeed such a project would first require that I accurately date the Mahābhārata, then explain how I believe it was formed, and so on.) One could cite examples from Greek scholarship which would highlight the importance

of this kind of scholarship; for instance, Detienne and Vernant's work on metis (cunning) radically expanded our vision of that term and of Homeric culture.[2]

The question of historicity is subtle, like dharma, and most of the rest of this conclusion will be dedicated to formulating a response to that question. The first part of my response attempts to distinguish between notions like dharma and metis, which are highly culturally specific, and other terms which refer to more universal (psychological and moral) phenomena, such as the affection between a child and a parent. On the one hand, terms such as dharma do need to be addressed very carefully, as I have tried to do in Chapter Two. On the other hand, the love (sneha), that Karna feels that Adiratha and Rādhā have shown him, is, I feel, a human emotion that is as radiant to us as it was to the epic authors. Which is not to say that this emotion, or Karna's motives are perfectly clear; I spend Chapter 2 exploring them. But I can claim that the poignant emotional tug I feel when reading the scene is similar to the feelings that the epic's *ur-audience would have had.

Doniger has expressed this hermeneutic position as follows:

> The method that I am advocating... assumes certain continuities not about overarching human universals but about particular narrative details concerning the body, sexual desire, procreation, parenting, pain, death, details which though unable to avoid mediation by culture entirely, are at least less culturally mediated than the broader conceptual categories of the universalists.[3]

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[2] See Marcel Detienne and Jean Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[3] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth, Lectures on the History of Religions New Series, No. 16* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). pp. 59-60. If I invoke Doniger's aid here, I may be stretching her claims further than the limits she has established for them; she claims only to be speaking for "the narrow field of comparative mythology within the broader field of the history of religions" (p. 2). But her remarks I think can be applied to a much wider range of academic pursuits.

This experience behind the myths is what Doniger wishes to approach and grapple with; it is the raw material out of which the mind of the mythographer spins the web of culture. Thus "... we must believe in the existence of the spider, the experience behind the myth, though it is indeed true that we can never see this sort of spider at work; we can only find the webs, the myths that human authors weave."[4] Doniger builds an interpretive framework that is "essential but not essentialist." She wishes to be aware of cultural difference, but at the same time attuned to universal similarities. She enlists the aid of Dilthey:

> ...any discussion of difference must begin from an assumption of sameness; Wilhelm Dilthey has said that "Interpretation would be impossible if expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing were strange in them." If we start with the assumption of absolute difference there can be no conversation, and we find ourselves trapped in the self-reflexive garden of a Looking-Glass ghetto, forever meeting ourselves walking back through the cultural door through which we were trying to escape.[5]

To invoke Dilthey is a subtle stratagem; Dilthey is most commonly associated with a 'scientific' approach to establishing 'truth.' Dilthey indeed would try to understand a text by the historical reconstruction of the world of the author, the world behind the text. In this way, Doniger positions herself as "complementary" with, rather than competing against, "projects of historical contextualization." Indeed, what she claims for her comparative method could also be claimed for a humanist hermeneutics:

> There are ways in which to make the comparative [humanist] project responsibly aware of the complementary (I refuse to regard it as competing) project of historical contextualization. It is not my intention to privilege the comparatist [humanist] over either the authors within the

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[4] Ibid. p. 61.

[5] Ibid. p. 67. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961). p. 77. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking Glass*, ed. Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice* (New York: Bramhall House, 1960). Chapter 2.

culture or other scholars who contextualize myth within the culture: the cross-cultural [humanist] view is not an overview that subsumes the contextualized view, but an alternative view that slices the problem in a different way, that sees sideways, horizontally, instead of vertically.[6]

This dissertation is not a project of intellectual history per se, but hopes nonetheless to be complementary and compatible with such projects.

Indeed, we want to know why long dead readers and hearers found the Mahābhārata beautiful, but we also want to know what we find beautiful in it. Both are crucial questions to answer, even if they involve different research agendas.[7] In that sense, part of my response to the historicity question is that I believe that it is a valid hermeneutic approach to discuss the text through its universal dimensions, as long as we choose those universal dimensions carefully. No doubt other studies (such as those about the concept of dharma in the Mahābhārata[8]) will challenge and shape my interpretation of Karṇa; but those studies and mine can, and should, dialectically enrich each other.

The quote from Dilthey also defers another objection to this project; one might argue[9] that the Mahābhārata's characters, like, say, Kafka's characters, are not *human* in the same way that we are human. Rather, the Mahābhārata's characters are human beings in a completely different world -- a world of gods and magic -- just as Kafka's characters

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[6] Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth.* p. 47.

[7] An exemplar of the historical approach is Ingalls' notes on Vidyākara's anthology; by contextualizing the poetry, Ingalls makes the poetry not only accessible but beautiful. See Vidyakara, *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry; Vidyakara's "Subhasitaratnakosa."* trans. Daniel Henry Holmes Ingalls, *Harvard Oriental Series V. 44* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[8] See James Fitzgerald's conference presentations. James L. Fitzgerald, "The Brahmins' Struggle for Status and Authority in the Mahabharata" (paper presented at the American Association of Religion Annual Meeting, Nashville, 2000). James L. Fitzgerald, "Dharmaputra, Kankadharmaraja: The Unknown Yudhisthira of the Mahabharata" (paper presented at the International Conference on the Mahabharata, Concordia University, Montreal, 2001).

[9] Thanks to Katia Mitova for so astutely discussing this objection with me.

live in a world of incomprehensible laws and unexpected transformations. Thus, speaking

about the characters in terms of any sort of realism, including humanism, would be

misguided because their world is not realistic in any form to which we might have access.

To this I would reply that I am, in general, in agreement with the principle that we

should look to every text for strategies as to how to interpret it. Nevertheless human

psychology, human emotions, and human capacities are always part of the internal logic

of a work of art.

> Behind a narrative is an experience, real or imagined: something has
> happened -- not once, like a historical event, but many times, like a
> personal habit. Narrative does not receive raw experience and then impose
> a form upon it. Human experience is inherently narrative; this is our
> primary way of organizing and giving coherence to our lives. But we can
> never give an exact account of an experience, any more than we can
> retrieve a dream without any secondary revisions or elaborations.
> However close we get, we can never reach it, as in Zeno's paradox of
> Achilles and the tortoise -- we get halfway there, and half the remaining
> distance, and so on, but never all the way. There must be an experience for
> the retellings to refract it as they do, but all we have are the refractions
> (some close to the experience, some farther), the tellings, which are
> culturally specific, indeed, specific to each individual within the culture.
> And we can get close (as close as Achilles got) to this ideal raw
> experience by extrapolating from what all myths have in common,
> modified in the light of what we can simply observe about the human
> situation in different cultures.[10]

One could imagine (or try to imagine) a work in which human beings had a completely

different psychology but that would not be very interesting work of art. Who, in the end,

would be able to understand it? At best, it would be a mathematical game, playing with

its own assumptions, speaking only to itself. For a work of art to shed any light, directly

or indirectly on the human condition, for it to speak to human beings, there must be

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[10] Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*. p. 55-6.

something of the human within the work itself. And clearly the Mahābhārata has 'spoken' to human beings for a long time; in that sense, I feel justified in talking about the human aspects of Karna's character. As Jhanji writes, "My interest in the Mahābhārata stems from my desire to look upon it as a human document representing certain persons inhabiting a possible world."[11]

There is an additional historical complexity in the case of texts as old as the Mahābhārata. To apply historical principles to its interpretation is often no more than an exercise in reading the Mahābhārata itself. For the Mahābhārata is *itself* one of our best sources of historical data for constructing the cultural world of its authors. Adding to this difficulty for this dissertation is the fact that Karna seems to be a character that defies norms -- that is both what is most interesting and most carefully crafted about his character. Thus, if one were to ask me, "what does it mean 'to choose based on love' based on evidence in the epic?" I would have to proceed like Homeric scholars trying to define hapax legomena: I would use both the narrative context and my own sense of what was important to the character in this context.

A third complexity making a purely historical interpretive project nearly impossible is the dearth of literary theory contemporaneous with the period(s) of the Mahābhārata's composition. The most famous Sanskrit theorizing on the Mahābhārata is probably Ānandavardhana's remarks in the ninth century, and they have come to be accepted for their wisdom.[12] But Ānandavardhana himself was a radical thinker; he was not merely putting into words a static literary theoretical tradition. For instance, his

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[11] Rekha Jhanji, *Human Condition in the Mahabharata* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995). p. 4.

[12] See J. P. Sinha, *The Mahabharata: A Literary Study*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Meharchand Lachhmandas, 1977). pp. 61 ff.

famous dictum -- that that the dominant aesthetic emotion (rasa) of the Mahābhārata is a

peaceful quietude (śanta) -- is remarkable for his time, for Ānandavardhana was one of

the first critics to consider the rasa of an *entire* work of art the size of the Mahābhārata.[13]

Our situation is similar to the one that Segal has noted for the study of Sophocles:

A Freudian analysis, to be sure, uses an interpretive system extraneous to
Sophocles and his time; but then virtually all interpretive systems applied
to Greek tragedy, from Aristotle's poetics on, are extraneous to the original
author and audience and might well baffle them.[14]

Of course this does not suggest that we can apply any methodology whatsoever to the

text; but it does suggest that the effort to construct *the* literary world view behind the

Mahābhārata may be difficult, and that our efforts to understand the text as it speaks to us

do not necessarily fly in the face of contrary historical evidence.

6.2 Gadamer and Truth and Method

... the discovery of the true meaning of a text or of a work of art is never
finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error
constantly excluded, so that true meaning has filtered out of it all kinds of
things that obscure it, but there emerge constantly new sources of
understanding which reveal unsuspected elements of meaning.[15]

Doniger's hermeneutic system is a rich course in itself; but it is also well

complemented by a healthy serving of Gadamer's Truth and Method. Gadamer's work

replaced the scientific hermeneutics of Dilthey with "horizons" of meaning and

"conversations" between the critic and the text. Instead of stressing the historical gulf

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[13] Thanks to Lawrence McCrea for this insight.

[14] Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). p. 177.

[15] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). p. 265.

between the critic and the text, Gadamer emphasized the continuity of history and how

the past was inscribed in the present.

Gadamer's theory is based on his idea of "horizons."

> A horizon is not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further...[16] The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.[17]

Our present horizons are not static but continually being modified, a process which rests

on testing our assumptions and prejudices. Moreover "an important part of this testing is

the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we

come."[18] In this way, Gadamer emphasizes how intertwined our present horizons are with

the past.

Gadamer makes use of the concept of "horizon" to explore what is at the heart of

historical hermeneutics.

> We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, i.e. place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves. Thus this acknowledgement of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth ...[19]

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[16] Ibid. p. 217.

[17] Ibid. p. 269.

[18] Ibid. p. 273.

[19] Ibid. p. 270.

Gadamer's warning is especially pertinent when interpreting a text like the Mahābhārata, which does not claim to be static but rather all-encompassing and universal.[20] Indeed, the idea that we can enter the horizon of the Mahābhārata's authors might be a fantasy.

> Is the horizon of one's own present time ever closed ... and can a
> historical situation be imagined that has this kind of closed horizon?
>   Or is this a romantic reflection, a kind of Robinson Crusoe dream
> of the historical enlightenment, the fiction of an unattainable island...?
> Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he is always
> involved with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose
> a culture is an abstraction.[21]

Just as our present horizons are unfixed, replete as they are with ever-shifting vantage points and boundaries, so historical horizons too are shifting. "Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion..."[22] We interpret the past in part through our relationship to it, a relationship which necessarily changes as our own present horizons evolve.

In that the past and tradition are always constitutive of our present horizon, Gadamer cautions us against imagining our interaction with the past as an exercise in stepping into an alien world. To understand the past, we cannot disregard ourselves and our own horizons; on the contrary, "we must [] bring ourselves,"[23] even as we imagine the historical situation. Gadamer carefully distinguishes this from "the empathy of one

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[20] As evidence, we have the frequently quoted verse, "whatever there is here regarding dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa may be found elsewhere; but what is not here is nowhere else." (1.56.33; 18.5.38) Dharma, artha, kāma (sensual pleasure), and mokṣa (liberation) are the four goals of human existence. In this way, the *Mahabharata* can claim to be an all-encompassing text.

[21] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. p. 271.

[22] Ibid. pp. 270-1.

[23] Ibid. p. 271.

individual for another,"[24] as well from simply applying our own frameworks, standards, and presuppositions upon someone else. Instead,

> it always involves the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes, not only our own particularity, but also that of the other. The concept of 'horizon' suggests itself because it expresses the wide, superior vision that the person who is seeking to understand must have.[25]... Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation but consciously bringing it out.[26]

Crucial to this hermeneutic task, then, is understanding what happens when we ask questions of a text that comes from the past.

> A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon: for the historical horizon that is outlined in the reconstruction is not a truly comprehensive one. It is, rather, included within the horizon that embraces us as the questioners who have responded to the word that has been handed down.
> Hence it is a hermeneutical necessity always to go beyond mere reconstruction. We cannot avoid thinking about that which was unquestionably accepted, and hence not thought about, by an author, and bringing it into the openness of the question. This is not to open the door to arbitrariness in interpretation, but to reveal what always takes place.[27]

Once Gadamer has theorized how we can pose questions to a text from the past, he can propose his master metaphor, that of a conversation between the text and the critic.

> The guiding idea ... is that the fusion of the horizons that takes place in understanding is the proper achievement of language... If we seek to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon according to the model of the

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[24] Ibid. p. 272.

[25] Ibid. p. 272.

[26] Ibid. p. 273.

[27] Ibid. p. 337.

conversation between two persons, the chief thing that these apparently so
different situations have in common -- the understanding of a text and the
understanding that occurs in conversation -- is that both are concerned
with an object that is placed before them. Just as one person seeks to reach
agreement with his partner concerning an object, so the interpreter
understands the object of which the text speaks. This understanding of the
object must take place in a linguistic form; not that the understanding is
subsequently put into words, but in the way in which the understanding
comes about -- whether in the case of a text or a conversation with another
person who presents us with the object -- lies the coming-into-language of
the thing itself.[28]

The spirit of conversation is, I believe, the appropriate critical spirit in which to
approach a book in which nearly every scene is a conversation. To know the
Mahābhārata is not to read it alone but to share it; the text itself teaches us that. Each of
the original framing stories is a narrative of how the text was shared. Gadamer's
hermeneutics of conversation is thus, for me, not just an approach, but, with respect to the
Mahābhārata, an *imperative*. It is incumbent upon us, as scholars, to ensure that the
Mahābhārata continues to be as vibrant and interesting to future generations as it is today.

The Mahābhārata may indeed be a vast historical databank; but it is also a work of
art. As I have tried to suggest, we neglect either at our peril. We want to look at the
context of the epic, but we do not want to confine the epic to that context. Indeed, the
epic itself seems to want to burst out of its own context: it is a text about transition, a text
that chronicles the last days and inhabitants of a bygone era (yuga), and then ends on an
ellipsis -- an ellipsis that points only to the present. Like Gadamer, the Mahābhārata
reminds us that the past is not 'history.' The past is the beginning of *our* history.

Moreover, we need to keep in mind our present and our audience. If indeed a text
is about kingship, then why would I, who do not live in a monarchy, wish to read it? And

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[28] Ibid. pp. 340-1.

if the text is about something else 'as well,' then what is that secondary subject? And, again, why would I be interested? I think texts like the <u>Mahābhārata</u> *do* elicit good answers to such questions, and answers that range far beyond the filial or the excavative, that is, far beyond the idea that "we should know what ancient South Asians thought" or "we should know what *those* ancient South Asians thought." Thus, even when we are talking about kingship, it cannot be completely divorced from our own concerns (e.g. how power is represented by literary forms). In its claims of universal knowledge, the <u>Mahābhārata</u> claims to be able to speak to us; perhaps we should let it and listen attentively.

6.3 The Interpretation of Characters

> Characters resemble people. Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease.
> Meike Bal[29]

I hope that the preceding has made the following obvious: if interpretation is a conversation, then the most likely candidate for that conversation is a character in the text. Whatever may be the structure of conversation between, say, the critic and the plot, it is hardly difficult to imagine 'talking' to Karṇa. Or, to take a metaphor straight from the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, to talk to someone who knew Karṇa well. Indeed, much of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> is a series of answers (from the sage Vaiśampāyana) to the questions of Janamejaya (a descendant of the Pāṇḍavas) about who his ancestors were. For example,

> Sir, you have been witness to the deeds of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas. I want you tell me about their acts... tell me all... for you are the very person who knows this... (1.54.18-20)

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[29] Meike Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). p. 80.

> I wish to learn who the kings were that became the dynasts in the line of
> Pūru, how many they were and what manner of men, how mighty they
> were and puissant...(1.89.1)

Thus one interpretive challenge the <u>Mahābhārata</u> explicitly offers is to understand the answers that Vaiśampāyana gives to Janamejaya; we must understand how Vaiśampāyana's narratives delineate characters, and subsequently how these characters constitute Janamejaya's psychological inheritance. Thus by studying character, we are participating in exactly the sort of inquiry that motivates (in part) the telling of the epic in the first place.

Moreover, the assumption that Janamejaya operates under -- that he can understand what his ancestors did, that he can understand what sort of human beings they were -- is an assumption of a Gadamerian sort. We should not forget that Janamejaya is separated from his ancestors, in the context of the epic, by a *radical* break in time: they lived in a different <u>yuga</u> altogether. Indeed, if one were to pose the historicist question to me, one would also have to pose it to Janamejaya, and in a much stronger form: 'how can you, Janamejaya, who live in the Kali Yuga ever hope to understand anything of people who lived in the Dvāpara Yuga? That was a completely different world...' This ridiculous question, of course, only illustrates Gadamer's point that to ask historicist questions of a text from the past is always part of a project of imposing our methodology (our prejudices) on an alien object of interpretation.

And the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, like Gadamer, does not believe that the past is separated in a radical way from our interpretive powers. Indeed, if Janamejaya can understand his ancestors, then our ability to understand Karṇa is a much easier task in historicist terms. Whatever else Vaiśampāyana may teach or tell Janamajeya, one thing is clear: the

interpretation of characters from the past, as far as the Mahābhārata is concerned, *is*

possible.

Moreover, by placing its exploration of past characters in the context of a very

human dialogue (Janamejaya's very human inquiry into his own past), Gadamer's

conversational theory of interpretation seems both appropriate and warranted. If there is a

connection between the epic horizon and my own, it is certainly one of humanity; as a

human being I can understand the human dilemmas of the epic characters. And they in

turn can expand my horizon of my possibilities as a human being.

Gadamer does not hide his debt to Plato; indeed, the Platonic dialogue as a genre

is proof by demonstration of how conversation can expand one's horizon of

interpretation. In the Apology, Socrates presents his version of Janamejaya's inquiry;

when Socrates dies, he will be able to talk to *his* intellectual ancestors:

> Or again to get to know Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer -- how
> much would you pay for that? I would be willing to die a lot of times if all
> of that is true. For in my case I think that would be the most wonderful
> way for me to pass my time there. When I would meet Palamedes, or
> Telamonian Ajax, or any of the other people of the old time who died
> through some unjust judgment, I could compare my experience with theirs
> -- that would be pretty enjoyable, in my opinion. Then comes the best part:
> to carry on testing and inquiring into the people there, just like those here -
> - who is wise, and who thinks he is but isn't? What would it be worth to
> you, gentlemen, to be able to examine the commander in the Trojan war,
> that great army, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or ten thousand other men and
> women I could mention? To talk to them there, and pass time with them,
> and examine them -- wouldn't that be an amazing happiness?[30]

Again, what spans time and culture is our ability to converse with other human beings --

as well as (let us not forget) our interest in doing so.

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[30] Plato, "Plato's Apology of Socrates (Translated by James Redfield)," in *Engaging the Humanities*, ed. Philippe Desan (Chicago: Garamond Press, 1997). p. 33. Stephanus 40e ff.

In this dissertation, I have taken Gadamer's conversational hermeneutics one step further: it is not just that I have heard the story of Karṇa, I have interpreted it out of his presence. My model for this has always been Camus's laconic but spectacular injunction, "we must imagine Sisyphus happy."[31] Camus seems to invite us to go further than just learning from Sisyphus. Indeed, the adjective 'Sisyphean,' which his essay introduced to the language, completely misses this crucial point: Sisyphus's repetitive and pointless labor might represent the drudgery and pointlessness of human existence, but beyond that analogy is Sisyphus the human being, the human being who must have human emotions, must have human qualities.[32]

And this corresponds, too, at least to my experience of reading the Mahābhārata. When we look at the characters as human beings, their actions, their victories and their losses become rich and meaningful. The invitation to interpretation has always seemed to me to be immediate. The characters and their narratives practically leap off the page into our imaginations. The stories are vivid and poignant; the characters are fascinating and profound. They not only teach us about humanity; they challenge us to imagine their inner states.

I want to stress that I am *not* apologizing either for discussing character, or for my methodology. In fact, despite the rich interpretive possibilities of approaching character, it is surprising how many of the many scholarly works which contain fine insights into literary characters, apologize in their introductions. Karve writes, "Sanskrit is not my

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[31] Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Revised and expanded ed. (New York: New American Library, 1989). p. 378. See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955).

[32] I will not address here why Camus interprets Sisyphus that way; the interested reader should read not only *The Myth of Sisyphus* but Camus's writings on suicide.

field of study. I read the <u>Mahābhārata</u> because I like it... I have written according to my

own ability and inclination."[33] Similarly, Jhanji writes,

> I had none of these [historical] objectives for undertaking this study.
> Neither am I qualified to study the antiquity from these vantage points, for
> I am neither an Indologist nor a social anthropologist or historian. Then
> why am I studying the <u>Mahābhārata</u>? My interest in the <u>Mahābhārata</u>
> stems from my desire to look upon it as a human document representing
> certain persons inhabiting a possible world... I am interested in them
> because they are an important part of our psychic furniture.[34]

Outside of Indology, in an introduction to a revised edition of his already famous book,

Redfield writes that his book "is in its way a naïve reading of the <u>Iliad</u>, responsive to

those aspects of the poem which most engage the common reader: character and plot."[35]

It is worth noting that such apologies were not occasioned by withering criticism, but by

the imagined tut-tutting of the Deans of the Discipline. Karve was well respected before

<u>Yugānta</u>; Jhanji was lecturing at the prestigious Indian Institute for Advanced Study;

Redfield's book was already a landmark in Homeric studies.

It turns out that Indology and Classics are not alone in their neglect of character.

In 1978, Seymour Chatman wrote, "it is remarkable how little has been said about the

theory of character in literary history and criticism."[36] Seventeen years later, Roger

Schlobin could still write, "it is the rare contemporary study of fiction that even has an

index entry for 'character,' and character theory has been a very rare topic for book-length

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[33] Irawati Karve, *Yugānta: The End of an Epoch* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1974). p. x.

[34] Jhanji, *Human Condition in the Mahabharata.* p. 4.

[35] James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector,* Expanded ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). p. viii.

[36] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978). p. 107.

studies for the last fifteen years."[37] One can account for this trend in several ways. For example, Martin Price suggests that

> so intense is the [internal] coherence [of the symbolist, or modernist,
> novel] that characters tend to dissolve into the elaborate verbal structure of
> the work... The creation of character is a form of art, whatever else, and
> the modernist novel seems at times to have abjured this art for others, as
> cubism shattered the portrait and disposed its elements in new ways.[38]

Chatman remarks that both Aristotle and the Formalists "argue that characters are products of plots, that their status is 'functional' ... [And] the French *narratologistes* have largely followed the Formalist position that 'characters are means rather than ends of the story.'"[39] Or perhaps structuralism is the culprit; Vladimir Propp and the structuralists attempted "to define character through its participation in spheres of action, these spheres being few in number, typical, classable."[40] And Jonathan Culler concedes that

> Character is the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid
> least attention and has been least successful in treating. Although for many
> readers characters serve as the major totalizing force in fiction --
> everything in the novel exists in order to illustrate character and its
> development -- a structuralist approach has tended to explain this as an
> ideological prejudice rather than to study it as a fact of reading.[41]

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[37] Roger Schlobin, *Character, the Fantastic, and the Failure of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1995 [cited]; available from http://wpl.lib.in.us/roger/char95.html]. See Schlobin's helpful bibliography.

[38] Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). pp. 45, 47-8.

[39] Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film.* pp. 111-112.Chatman does not attribute these quotes to any particular author.

[40] Roland Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse Structurale Des Récits," *Communications* 8 (1966). p. 16. Quoted in Alexander Gelley, *Narrative Crossings: Theory and Pragmatics of Prose Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). p. 60.

[41] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). p. 230.

Of course, there have been voices that have noticed this gap, as the epigraph from Bal indicates; structuralists like Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes later developed interests in character;[42] and Price's <u>Forms of Life</u> analyzes "ways in which character has been imagined and presented"[43] in a range of novels. Nevertheless, by and large, characterology remains a lacuna in current literary theory, and character remains an under-utilized literary interpretive tool.

If this last section has stressed the Gadamerian side of my methodology, let me return now to Doniger's "complementary, not competing" position. The general project of this dissertation has been to continue (perhaps revive) the interpretation of the <u>Mahābhārata</u> as a human document. To be sure, it is crucial that we understand the ways in which the epic has been understood historically, and constantly strive towards refining such understandings. But our interpretive project should not stop there. If possible, we need to be both historical and contemporary: to continue the conversation about the epic and thereby keep it *alive*. If every generation has remade the <u>Mahābhārata</u>, we should not be afraid of remaking it for ourselves as well. If it achieves anything at all, I hope this dissertation encourages us to revitalize our discussion and scholarship of the epic, and to treat it as the subject of historical and humanistic literary exploration.

Doniger begins <u>Tales of Sex and Violence</u>, her book on the <u>Jaiminīya Brāhmana</u> with "I have loved the <u>Jaiminīya Brāhmana</u> ever since I stumbled on it some twenty years

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[42] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

[43] Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel.* p. xi.

ago."[44] I want to *end* this dissertation on a similar note.[45] To me, every critical essay is a love letter to the book itself, a letter of unrequited love, sometimes, and often a love that is arduous to bear[46] -- but the essay is a work of passion nonetheless. Like literature, criticism is a human document; behind the words is a soul that has been stirred enough to want to write. I hope that this dissertation has demonstrated that to you, has shown you why I love (in all the complexities of that emotion) the <u>Mahābhārata</u>.

A lover's food is the love of bread,
not the bread.
Rumi [47]

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[44] Wendy Doniger, *Tales of Sex and Violence: Folklore, Sacrifice, and Danger in the Jaiminiya Brahmana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). p. 3.

[45] I do not wish to quarrel with those who wish to *assess* literature, or who wish to approach literature scientifically or dispassionately; there is room enough for both of us in this town.

[46] Books sometimes *do* repay the love. And, like Karṇa, they are free to love those that loved them -- not necessarily those to whom they were 'born.'

[47] Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*. p. 29.

Appendix

Turning a Tradition into a Text: Critical Problems in Editing the Mahābhārata

A critical edition is crucial to the sort of discussion of character that I have been

engaged in over the course of this project -- quite simply because different variants often

produce radically different interpretations of the characters. By changing the placement

of an event here or there, a redactor can alter the way a character is perceived. For the

purposes of this dissertation, I have used the Poona Critical Edition (PCE) as the basis for

my Mahābhārata. Occasionally, I have dipped into variants, but by and large I have kept

to the PCE text.

Still, the PCE is fraught with problems and has been criticized even by its

defenders. Hiltebeitel, for example, writes,

> there is no such thing as 'the extant epic,' although the PCE gives the
> dangerous illusion of having produced one. Rather the PCE is no more
> than a consensus text, produced by modern scholars from their
> examination of variants from numerous 'extant' Sanskrit Mahābhārata-s
> (one must emphasize the plural) in manuscripts assembled from all over
> South Asia, and from dates between the fourteenth and the twentieth
> century.[1]

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[1] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 74 (1993). p. 3.

This appendix will discuss some critical problems in editing the Mahābhārata, problems that arise, it seems, from the attempt to turn a tradition into a text.

First, let us overview the text-critical problems facing an editor of the Mahābhārata. Although we can now specify the main period of the formation of the Mahābhārata, this period only demarcates a central range; the epic continued to evolve, in both its written and oral forms after this period. Indeed, the epic is as much a 'tradition' as it is a 'text.' The editor-in-chief of the PCE, V. S. Sukthankar, wrote that one

> essential fact in Mahābhārata textual criticism [is] that the Mahābhārata is not and never was a fixed rigid text, but is a fluctuating epic tradition, ... not unlike a popular Indian melody. ... *Ours is a problem in textual dynamics, rather than in textual statics.*...the Mahābhārata is the whole Epic tradition, the entire Critical apparatus.[2]

Even at the time that the epic was set down into writing, it was not a rigid, stable form that found a written image. The epic tradition is one of constant change. To quote Sukthankar again, "The view that the epic has reached its present form by a gradual process of addition and alteration receives strong support from the fact that the process is not stopped by scriptural fixation."[3] Wendy Doniger has compared the epic to a banyan tree which grows upwards but also sideways and downwards. Its branches grow down to establish new trunks. Over time some trunks die and new ones form. Coming to the tree after years of growth, how can one tell which was the 'original' trunk? And what would be the point of such an identification?

Also crucial here is the realization that generic assumptions about orality and literacy do not necessarily apply to the Mahābhārata tradition. As both Madeleine

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[2] Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, "Prolegomena," in *The Mahabharata, Vol. 1, Adi Parvan,* ed. Sukthankar et al (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933). p. cii.

[3] Ibid. p. lxxvi.

Biardeau and Doniger have emphasized, oral texts in the South Asian context are often marked by rigidity, not fluidity. The Rg Veda, for example, has been preserved via highly accurate oral transmission since the second millennium BCE. Conversely, *written* texts proliferated in ever changing manuscript form. Nevertheless, it may be wiser to follow Doniger's suggestion that "it makes far more sense to mark the distinction between fluid texts ... and fixed texts ... than to go on making adjustments to our basically misleading distinction between oral and written texts."[4] The South Asian distinction with respect to canonical texts is that of śruti and smṛti, the 'heard' as opposed to the 'remembered.' Any editor must face the fact that the Mahābhārata is part of smṛti; unlike śruti, smṛti is reverenced not for the exact sequence of syllables but rather for its meaning. The Mahābhārata manuscripts thus represent only part of a tradition that is simultaneously dynamically oral and textual.

Moreover, different parts of the epic evolved in different ways, in different scripts, and along different literary lines. For example, Sukthankar found that "[t]he gulf between the Northern and Southern recensions is [...] vast..."[5] Moreover, even after it had been written down, the Mahābhārata was not handed down as a unitary whole -- that is, as all eighteen parvans together: "The parvans are mostly handed down separately, or in groups of a few parvans at a time, at least in the oldest manuscripts now preserved."[6]

The relative independence of parvans produced, in turn, an internal textual heterogeneity. As Tamar Reich has observed,

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[4] Wendy Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). p. 60.

[5] Sukthankar, "Prolegomena." p. cv.

[6] Ibid. p. v.

the shape of *certain* parvans... has been definitely fixed by a single act of committing the text to writing. Some of these, however, have been so much expanded afterwards that the process of expansion must be counted as a later major stage in their formation. *Other* parvans... have not been through such a centralized standardization process at any stage."[7]

The South Asian "culture of the book" also contributed significantly to the current state of manuscripts. "An Indian book consists of a number of loose leaves held together by two loose boards and tied by a piece of string through one or two holes in the leaves and the boards."[8] Paper came to South Asia after 1000 CE; before that the leaves of a book were made of birchbark or palm leaf, neither of which could weather the seasons very well. Moreover, arranging a book as loose leaves made it easy to insert a leaf, if a scribe would so desire. Finally, there would always be such opportunities, since "for a text to survive it was necessary for it to be transcribed regularly."[9]

Thus when it came time to establish a critical edition of the Mahābhārata, the project was much broader than just collecting and organizing all the different manuscripts. The project itself raised the issue of what was meant by the term 'text' as well as what text-critical assumptions could be then applied to the Mahābhārata. How could an editor apply Western philological techniques and text-critical assumptions to the Mahābhārata's dynamic textual tradition?

It is also important to address the subject of the main recensions of the Mahābhārata. First, note that counting manuscripts is difficult because, as we saw, the entire text is not transmitted regularly. Does a manuscript of just one parvan, or a part of

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[7] Tamar Chana Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata" (University of Chicago, 1998). p. 79.

[8] *The Beginning*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Introduction, pp. xxviii-xxix.

[9] Ibid. Introduction, pp. xxix.

a parvan, count? In any case, manuscripts appear plentifully, if one looks for them. For example, for the Ādi Parvan, the editors collected 235 manuscripts; they collated though only 60, the rest being of "late and questionable value." Second, with respect to dating, the oldest manuscript the Critical Edition collated is dated 1511, which is, as we have noted, relatively late.

The editors of the PCE found that the extant recensions fell into Northern and Southern families. The Northern family was represented by the Calcutta edition, the so-called "Vulgate," which became the editio princeps for the Critical Edition. The Northern family had another line, clustering around the Bombay edition, an edition which was supposed to include as well the scholium of the 17th century scholar Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara. Sukthankar, however, felt that the manuscripts of the Bombay recension contained "many readings and lines which are not to be found in Nīlakaṇṭha manuscripts, and are therefore not wholly reliable."[10] The Southern recension is best represented by P. P. S. Shastri's edition. Sukthankar praised this edition, but did not feel that Shastri was presenting a critical edition: even though Shastri wanted "to print the text of the selected manuscript as it is, only correcting clerical errors, ... he constantly flout[ed this principle] in pursuit of some imaginary norm."[11]

Now let us examine Sukthankar's and his team's critical responses to these issues. Sukthankar felt that his duty, as a textual critic, was "to restore the text, as far as possible, to its original form,"[12] and Sukthankar's methodology towards this end was based on stemmatics. The first part of the Critical Edition project was collation, and this proceeded

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[10] Sukthankar, "Prolegomena." p. civ.

[11] Ibid. p. cv.

[12] Ibid. p. cvi.

as follows: each verse (śloka) of the Vulgate was written out on its own sheet of paper, with variants listed below the original, character for character. "Additional" [verses] which came before or after this [verse] in other editions were noted in the margin, or on additional sheets. The collations were checked and then handed to an editor for "the constitution of the text." The methodology of this constitution was encapsulated in two principles:

> 1. "To accept as original a reading or feature which is documented uniformly by all manuscripts."[13]

> 2. To resolve doubts and conflicts (consistently) by following the Northern recension.

These two principles guided Sukthankar to produce what he calls "the constituted text:" which was "a modest attempt to present *a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach* with some semblance of confidence. ... " But Sukthankar also cautioned that

> the constituted text cannot be accurately dated, nor labeled as pertaining to any particular place or personality... It goes without saying that (precisely like every other edition) it is a mosaic of old and new matter... This unevenness and these inequalities are inevitable, conditioned as they are by the very nature of the text and the tradition.[14]

Such disclaimers notwithstanding, the constituted text was eventually published alone and became more and more canonical. The Chicago English translation of the epic uses this constituted text.

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[13] Ibid. p. lxxxvii.

[14] Ibid. p. ciii.

There were -- and are -- at least two veins of criticism of this project. The first

may be termed, Bédierian criticism. Some critics of the PCE such as Sylvain Lévi and

Biardeau argued for a Bédierian approach to the text. Instead of searching for an ur-text,

these critics would have taken one established, widely used text as representative of the

tradition. In that vein, they recommended the recension that the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha

had edited. In that way, the PCE's critics claimed, the project would avoid simply

creating another recension of the text.

Many well-known episodes of the Mahābhārata have been relegated to the

appendix of the PCE and are hence excluded from the constituted text. An example is the

story of how the Mahābhārata was written, a story that might be of particular interest to

philologists. The story runs like this: Vyāsa, the author of the epic, conceived of the poem

> as containing almost everything, but [] confessed that no writer could be
> found on earth for his composition... Vyāsa [then] thought of Gaṇeśa, and
> when the god appeared, asked him to write down [the epic Vyāsa knew
> orally as Vyāsa recited it]. Gaṇeśa agreed to do so, as long as he never had
> to stop writing, a condition to which Vyāsa agreed as long as Gaṇeśa
> would not write anything that he did not understand... Vyāsa, "for the sake
> of diversion, mysteriously wove knots into the compoition..." Because of
> these knotty verses, "even the omniscient Ganesha would ponder for a
> moment, and all the while Vyāsa created many more verses."[15]

Thus the Mahābhārata itself accounts for the "knotty" philological problems that its

editors and translators grapple with!

Other episodes, frequently part of performances of the epic, are also relegated to

the appendix; a famous example is Draupadī's endless sari, a miracle that prevents her

utter humiliation, and a miracle that she is granted through prayer and devotion to the god

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[15] Bruce M. Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Krsna Dvaipayana Vyasa in the Mahabharata*, 1st
Indian. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999). pp. 11-12.

Kṛṣṇa. There are also examples which seem to work in the opposite direction: accretions which have been termed as an integral part of the text. For example, the very first śloka of the constituted text. Interestingly, this śloka was also the śloka that was read at the inauguration of the project of making a critical edition. Sukthankar himself honestly points out that "this [śloka] is foreign to the entire southern recension of the epic."[16]

The second vein of criticism is based on Reich's distinction between omission and insertion. Reacting to the assumption that scribes never omit passages, Tamar Reich questions the first of Sukthankar's principles. To Reich, "we must begin to think of expansion as a practice constitutive to the Mahābhārata, and not as an aberration of the tradition."[17] This text-critical principle, we should note, corresponds well to the content of the epic, where characters often provoke another cycle of stories by posing a quandary or asking about the identity of a certain character; the episodes are motivated, one to the next, by such questions. Reich argues that many passages in the constituted text might have been additions, and that there would be no way for an editor to tell. For example, a popular text like the Bhagavadgītā could well have been a relatively late addition in every tradition. (Again, because most of our extant manuscripts are relatively recent, we would not be able to tell.) But if expansion were the norm, then why should an editor leave out a passage which is attested to in, say, all but one manuscript? Universal attestation, the core of Sukthankar's first principle, then would seem ill-fitted to this sort of textual tradition. Furthermore, as Reich wisely notes, "the question of [scribal] omission and the question of universal insertion are logically intertwined."[18]

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[16] Sukthankar, "Prolegomena." p. iii, footnote 1.

[17] Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata". p. 50.

[18] Ibid. p. 49.

Notwithstanding all the debate surrounding the text, we should also note that some of these issues *are* addressed within the Mahābhārata tradition itself. The text self-consciously asserts its own legitimacy and accuracy through such devices as verse counts and tables of contents. These are emphatically part of the Ādi Parvan, 'the book of the beginning.' The Ādi Parvan also legitimizes itself through stories about its own creation (as previously discussed) as well as the succession of it tellers, tellings, and re-tellings.

The Ādi Parvan seems to give itself authenticity but limits, in a way, its own absoluteness. Vyāsa taught it to five disciples; one of these, Vaiśampāyana, is the singer of our version of the epic. Vyāsa too was present as Vaiśampāyana recited the epic, adding even more legitimacy to this version. But even as our version is legitimated, and even if our version does contain all that human beings need to know,[19] our version is still one of many.

Sanskrit itself does have a sophisticated literary critical tradition, and versions of the Mahābhārata were edited before the 20th century. For example, in the 17th century, Nīlakaṇṭha gathered, in his own words, "many manuscripts from different regions and critically established the best readings."[20] Nīlakaṇṭha aimed at an edition which collected, as completely and as authoritatively as possible, the epic stories his contemporaries knew and recognized, conscious both of religious considerations and of issues of legitimacy.[21]

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[19] As evidence, we have the frequently quoted verse, "whatever there is here regarding dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa may be found elsewhere; but what is not here is nowhere else." (1.56.33; 18.5.38) Dharma, artha, kāma (sensual pleasure), and mokṣa (liberation) are the four goals of human existence. In this way, the *Mahabharata* can claim to be an all-encompassing text.

[20] Nīlakaṇṭha, Introduction, verse 6. Quoted in 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, forthcoming). p. 131.

[21] Madeleine Biardeau, "Some More Considerations About Textual Criticism," *Purana* 10, no. 2 (1968). p. 121.

According to Sheldon Pollock, the Sanskrit critical tradition addressed issues of legitimacy and accuracy through

> a model of textuality at once historicist-intentionalist and purist-aestheticist... texts were held to be intentional productions of authors, whose intentions could be recovered by judicious assessment of manuscript variants. At the same time, literary texts were laksyagrantha or instantiations of rule boundedness (laksana) [...] in terms of grammar, lexicon, prosody, and the poetics of sound and sense, and, when conflicts arose, they had to yield to the superior claims of the rules.[22]

To round out our picture of this critical edition, we will examine in this next section the conceptual universe in which Sukthankar was trained. This is, I want to suggest, the Renaissance Humanistic tradition that can be seen, via the work of Anthony Grafton, to encompass Lachmann and Wolf. In Defenders of the Text, Grafton traces how European Renaissance Humanism far outlasted the time traditionally associated with its demise. He first tells us that

> modern historians ... have treated Renaissance humanism as an influential but transitory effort to renew Western culture by reviving a classical literary education and applying the tools of philology to ancient texts. They have agreed that newer men with newer scientific brooms swept the humanists from the center stage of Western thought after 1600.[23]

Grafton proposes instead that "humanism remained a rich and vital -- though also a varied and embattled tradition -- for at least two centuries after the end of the Renaissance."[24]

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[22] Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture from the Inside Out." p. 132.

[23] Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). p. 3.

[24] Ibid. p. 4.

We must remember that Renaissance humanism was a complete system of education (a complete alternative to Scholasticism), not just a particular way of approaching ancient texts. This accounts, on the one hand, for its lasting power: European rulers recognized how effective the humanistic education was in turning out able historians and diplomats. But it also accounts, on the other hand, for the schism that would mark the history of humanism. Using the exchange of two minor scholars, Massari and Guidetti, Grafton illustrates that in the Renaissance there was a clear split as to what the "task of the interpreter" should be:

> For Massari, [...] the task of the interpreter [...] is to decipher, phrase by phrase, what [the text] meant to its author and its original readers; for Guidetti, the task of the interpreter is to amass around the individual words of the passage general information useful to the modern student.[25]

Guidetti saw scholarship as serving pedagogy: by learning how to write and read Latin, students would then be able to see for themselves the literary and moral value of the classics before them. For Massari, scholarship produced, or strived to produce, a scientifically accurate picture of the past -- all the details of, say, the world that Cicero lived in as well as what Cicero meant when he said what he did. For Guidetti, the classics stood forth as ideal artifacts: they were fully formed and ready to spread their learning. For Massari, the classics were ancient and problematic texts, texts which were difficult (perhaps impossible) ever to know fully, and whose least difficulty could require massive philological apparatus to solve.

When we watch how this tradition passes down to Wolf, we can sympathize with Grafton when he writes, "To watch Wolf applying his general programme to a specific

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[25] Ibid. p. 25.

document is to confirm the view that much of his work was traditional in character."[26]

Grafton suggests that much of the philological theory that Wolf used to start his

Altertumwissenschaft (the study of human nature in antiquity) was borrowed from the

sophisticated methods that had developed at his time for Biblical scholarship.

Specifically, Wolf was influenced by the work of J. G. Eichhorn, another student of

Heyne. Grafton reconstructs the intellectual genealogy that leads from Joseph Scaliger to

Wolf.

Karl Lachmann would take up the idea, which Wolf stressed, that the techniques

for the critical study of the Old and New Testaments were the same techniques that a

philologist could apply to any ancient text. Lachmann, it might seem, went from editing

Lucretius to editing the New Testament, but for Grafton, Lachmann was, like Wolf,

"annex[ing] for classical studies the most sophisticated methods of contemporary biblical

scholarship."[27] Lachmann's goal in his version of the New Testament was to create a

scientific version of *the* text of the fourth century (just after the New Testament had been

compiled). Both Lachmann and Wolf revitalized historicism in classical scholarship.

Their works were major victories for the historicist side of the humanist tradition, the side

represented above by Massari.

Sukthankar's philological approach to the Mahābhārata seems to continue in the

vein of Wolf and Lachmann. Reich characterizes the entire project of the PCE as

Lachmannian, and Sylvain Lévi writes, "Mr. Sukthankar, schooled both by pandits and

by German philology, is torn between the indigenous tradition and Wolf."[28] Assuming

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[26] Ibid. p. 220.

[27] Ibid. p. 241.

[28] Sylvain Lévi, "Review of 'the Mahabharata, for the First Time Critically Edited'," *Journal Asiatique* (1934). Quoted in Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata". p. 16.

that Reich and Lévi's characterizations are fair, and that Grafton's intellectual history is accurate, Sukthankar would seem to have inherited a philological training whose roots lie in Renaissance humanism. Moreover, we can also see that it is the 'Guidetti' tradition in Renaissance humanism with which the philological tradition that includes Wolf, Lachmann, and Sukthankar has always been (and perhaps continues to be) in dialogue.

It is thus not surprising that Sukthankar would sacrifice certain kinds of merits (for example stories that 'everyone' knows) for a version of the text that is as ancient as possible. It is again valuing the Massari humanistic lineage over the Guidetti one. We should not forget that Sukthankar himself wrote of the constituted text: "It is, in all probability, not the best text of the Great Epic, possible or existing, nor necessarily even a good one."[29]

To conclude, Sukthankar was caught between what the public, both scholarly and popular, demanded of him and the realities of the dynamism of the Mahābhārata tradition. His own detailed introduction to the PCE captures this dilemma. At the start, he quotes Maurice Winternitz: a critical edition of the Mahābhārata was "wanted as the only sound basis for all Mahābhārata studies... for all studies connected with the epic literature of India."[30] And he himself envisions the project as producing

> a critical edition of the Mahābhārata in the preparation of which all important versions of the Great Epic shall have been taken into consideration, and all important manuscripts collated, estimated, and turned to account. ... It will be a veritable thesaurus of the Mahābhārata tradition.[31]

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[29] Sukthankar, "Prolegomena." p. ciii.

[30] Quoted in Ibid. p. i. (Sukthankar's reference is: Winternitz, Indol. Prag. 1 (1929), 58 ff.)

[31] Ibid. p. iii-iv.

A hundred pages later, near the end of the same introduction, he cautions the reader that

the constituted text

> is not anything like the autograph copy of the work of its mythical author,
> [Maharshi] Vyāsa. It is not, in any sense, a reconstruction of the Ur-
> Mahābhārata... that ideal but impossible desideratum. [...] It will,
> therefore, be prudent not to claim too much for the first critical edition, or
> to expect too much from it.[32]

Providing a critical edition -- which sadly even he cannot claim as the best edition -- is

perhaps the best that an editor of dynamic textual tradition can do. Trying to capture a

dynamic object in a stable form may never be possible; as Doniger has written, "to

attempt to pin down the Mahābhārata in a critical edition is to attempt to make a strobe

photograph of a chameleon."[33] Still, the myriad advantages of having a critical edition --

and the discussions and scholarship that a stable version of the text opens up -- would

seem in the long run to outweigh the disadvantages.

A stable text does enable readers to read -- and read with some degree of

satisfaction -- the epic in a way that allows them to focus on character, rather than on

textual issues. Again, that is not to say that textual issues are not important, but just that a

discussion of character is difficult if the text upon which we are trying to base an

interpretation is constantly shifting: if a person A made some claim *xyz* about Karṇa

based on passage *abc*, another person B might reject that interpretation not because the

evidence does not support the interpretation, but only because the passage *abc* does not

appear in B's edition. Then, inevitably, the discussion becomes a debate about text-

critical issues, and character interpretation gets left aside.

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[32] Ibid. p. ciii-civ.

[33] Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes.* p. 59.

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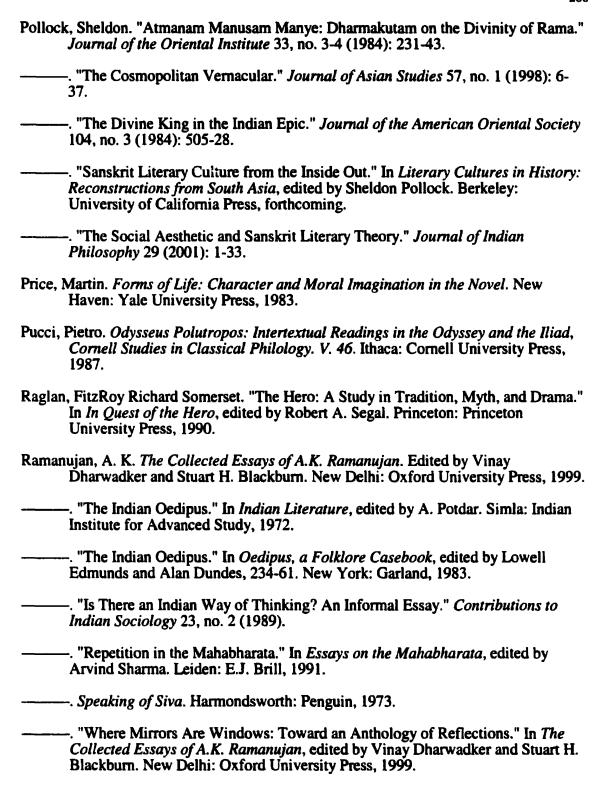
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