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Carried Meaning in the Mahābhārata

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Carried Meaning in the Mahābhārata

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Carried Meaning in the Mahābhārata

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The *Mahābhārata* describes itself as both a comprehensive and exhaustive text, incorporating a range of genres while presenting diverse perspectives through a matrix of interacting narratives. Its main story and subtales are the subject of productive contemporary studies that underscore the significance of the Sanskrit epic, though this scholarship is also famously criticized for overlooking literary inquiry. The following dissertation enacts a close reading of four subtales, Nala's Tale, Rāma's Tale, Sāvitrī's Tale, and The Yakṣa's Questions, in context with the larger work to uncover the implications of a literary study of the *Mahābhārata*. By conducting translations of passages from the epic, this dissertation builds sites of alliance among frame and subtale, literary and translation theory, critical analysis and contemporary scholarship, as well as the *Mahābhārata* and other works of literature in order to consider the ways in which meaning is generated throughout the text. Language, constituent parts, and operative principles are found to reverberate in the epic, eschewing didacticism and stasis for literary vitality. Themes of loss, love, disguise, and discovery veer throughout the

subtales as sideshadows that at once collaborate and contradict to continuously redefine one another. The *Mahābhārata*'s self-conscious and reiterative reinterpretation of its own constructs presents critical insights on translation as dialogical correspondence, occurring within utterances as well as between languages. The act of translation, utilized by the poem itself to develop and proliferate significance, reveals difference and bears legibility within the epic.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

> I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms. (Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher")

WHAT IS HERE IS FOUND ELSEWHERE

Aftershocks from Alf Hiltebeitel's 1999 claim that "the largest inadequacy of *Mahābhārata* scholarship is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature" continue to be felt in the academic community to this day.[1] The statement calls on scholars to reexamine those foundations upon which many contemporary inquiries reside. How, then, were these verses considered? What success might scholarship achieve in adopting a new perspective? If we are to occupy a more fitting space, each tectonic

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[1] For evidence of the anxiety that follows Hiltebeitel's proclamation, see its frequent citation in Hudson 2013, Fraizer 2011, Brodbeck and Black 2007, Fitzgerald 2003.

movement that comes to bear upon our present understanding of the epic must be reexamined so that scholarship might veer toward an ethic that has come to characterize other literary scholars working in the humanities.

And if our ground shakes, let it all fall apart. A study of the *Mahābhārata* as literature should cause us to interrogate the process of scholarship in this particular mode. What does it mean to study something as "literature?" Surely the *Mahābhārata* as presented in the critical edition is ink and page and plot and character. Should this allow us to presume that it is literature – and thereby deem any type of analysis sufficient? The study of literature should not only shed light on the *Mahābhārata*, but, inversely, the epic itself might be a productive voice in larger conversations on the state of the discipline.

In light of Hiltebeitel's work, some scholars of ancient South Asia are beginning to ask questions that hold paramount the literary nature of the text. Primacy is important here. We must take great care in what we choose to elevate in our study. I will argue throughout these pages that to consider a work as literature first demands that the scholar back away from a monolithic reading. Literature allows space for contradiction, change, multitudes, among other qualities. It veers and entangles itself, it speaks to ghosts. To develop our study of the *Mahābhārata* as literature first, and not dependent on historical theorization, is to place Sheldon Pollock's horse back before the proverbial cart.[2] Concurring with Pollock's argument, we should utilize and build upon theory while conducting literary analysis, the literature itself cannot be shoehorned to fit a particular

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[2] See Pollock 2006, 33.

mode. We do not, then, hope to find a particular theory, or even type of theory, as panacea in grasping the whole of this literature.

Instead, literary theories will serve as tools that open the text at the point at which a specific implement is needed most. My hope at the outset of this dissertation is to gain additional, and critical, entryways into the epic and better discern its design.[3] To be clear, I agree with Hiltebeitel's assertion that the *Mahābhārata* as we have it in the critical edition represents a whole and intentionally constructed narrative.[4] Reasons for adopting this position will become more clear throughout this study, but for now it should suffice to say that I believe this perspective is necessary in attempting to gain any foothold in the *Mahābhārata* as it forces us as readers to take nothing in the text for granted. A slippery slope occurs in scholarship that cites sections of the text as incongruent with some overall theoretical structure, therefore inconsequential and summarily a tacked-on addition to some elusive epic core.

In this introduction, I will proceed by moving backwards and considering those academic inquiries that have led to our current moment. I should admit here that I find Hiltebeitel's statement at the start of this section productively provocative, but in need of some qualification. My inspection will show that many early scholars laid important groundwork for the literary study of the *Mahābhārata*. Nevertheless, discord between literary scholars and those who study the *Mahābhārata* exists, and we mean to understand why.

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[3] See Bowles 2009 for Mbh and design.
[4] See Hiltebeitel 2001, 2005.

A Brief History of Recent Mahābhārata Scholarship

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the *Mahābhārata* becomes a consistent object of inquiry for academics interested in South Asia. We can discern four distinct turns in the development of modern *Mahābhārata* studies, specifically in regard to scholars' attitudes toward the literary nature of the epic: historical, rhetorical, literary, and contextual. The historical approach draws upon constituent parts of the text in order to place it within a periodized mapping of Sanskrit composition. Rhetorical analyses consider linguistic and stylistic choices in developing a reading of the text. The literary approach works to uncover the interplay between generic and rhetorical qualities of a whole text in relation to the larger landscape of literary analysis. And finally, a contextual methodology returns to constituents in order to conduct close inspection in light of literary analysis. To set the ground for the initial historical phase, I will commence by considering the work of Winternitz and Hopkins. In the mid-twentieth century, a second period of scholarship, placing precedence on rhetorical elements, emerges through the work of van Buitenen, Ramanujan, and Brockington. The third stage, while building upon previous studies, illustrates a literary perspective in studies by Biardeau and Hiltebeitel around the turn of the millennium. A final phase will consider those more recent scholars who work in the aftermath of Hiltebeitel's *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, utilizing contextual forms of analysis. This is not, of course, an exhaustive list of scholars who made significant contributions to the academic study of the epic. Additional scholars will be mentioned below. These figures, however, represent shifting attitudes and perspectives

on the work over time and usher in the historical, rhetorical, literary, and contextual. Furthermore, by responding to and anticipating those attitudes and perspectives of adjacent phases, these four perspective trends should not be considered monolithic, but necessarily hybrid.

The earliest period of contemporary *Mahābhārata* scholarship is characterized by analyses that operate from an understanding of the epic as exhibiting a distinct lack of design. Thinkers here regarded the epic as a "literary monster" (Winternitz 1908, 326), "monstrous chaos" (Oldenberg 1922, 1), and "a text that is not a text" (Hopkins 1901, 1). Such statements underpin a prevailing perspective that held the epic as an amalgam of thrown-together narratives. We must recognize and promptly interrogate the desire of those scholars in constructing an elaborate framework in which the text is often bent and broken apart in order to fit. This, once again, is the type of mistake recognized by Sheldon Pollock in 2006 that allows a theory of literature to reign over what might be present in the work itself. More specifically, I will show that these scholars placed two concerns over all else: issues of periodization and genre. That is to say, the establishment of a consistent timeline in some historical context along with a name to categorize the style of the narrative in comparison to other Sanskrit works appears paramount within these studies. Though generative in its own right, we find that blind spots occur in ignoring the *Mahābhārata* as primarily an act of literature.

Through the historical approach, periodization and genre become congruent concerns with interdependent fates in Winternitz's 1908 *History of Indian Literature*. A mapping of the development of an epic genre allows the scholar to make certain claims as

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to the overall historical context of the *Mahābhārata*. He identifies *gāthā nārāśaṃsī* or "songs in praise of men" as a precursor category of text, alongside *Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas*, that would eventually evolve into epic.

> These "songs in praise of men" probably soon developed into epic poems of considerable length, *i.e. heroic songs*, and into entire *cycles* of epic songs, centring around *one* hero or *one* great event; for the only two national epics which have come down to us, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, represent but the last remnants of a long past period of epic poetry. Long before these two epics existed as such, songs must have been sung of the great combat of nations around which the Mahābhārata centres, and of the deeds of Rāma, the hero of the Rāmāyaṇa. Neither is it conceivable that the battles of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas and the adventures of Rāma should have been the only subjects of poetry. Many other heroes and great events in other royal houses also must have been sung. These old heroic songs, whose existence we must take for granted, have not all vanished without trace; in remnants and fragments some of them have been preserved in our two epics. (Winternitz 1908, 314)

In a single move, Winternitz demonstrates that an understanding of the text's genre, and thereby its antecedents, permits a theoretical narrative to flourish around the text's historical development. His timeline, in which "songs in praise of men" become "heroic songs," then "cycles of epic song," and finally epic "remnants" as we have them in the *Mahābhārata*, presents a type of chronicle in which we can view an evolutionary model in the creation of the text. From there, Winternitz is able to posit further details as to the way in which these works were transmitted and altered over time. Even the space

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inhabited by the text, facilitated by court singers aligned with the warrior class can be divined from the particular progression of generic textual qualities.[5]

What renders the *Mahābhārata* as a "remnant" of this literary development for Winternitz is the incorporation of additional genres in a seemingly haphazard fashion. The fortitude of that original genealogy is compromised by the introduction of other types of poetry – to such a degree that it leads the scholar to question the poem's congruence with an "epic" genre designation.

> But what we know as the popular epics of the Indians, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, are not the old heroic songs as those court-singers and travelling minstrels of ancient India sang them, compiled into unified poems by great poets or at least by clever collectors with some talent for poetry, but accumulations of very diverse poems of unequal value, which have arisen in the course of centuries owing to continual interpolations and alterations. Though ancient heroic songs do indeed form the nucleus of both these works, the more devotional Itihāsa literature was included in them to a great extent, and such long poems of a religious-didactic nature were inserted, that the Mahābhārata, in particular, has almost completely lost the character of an epic. (Winternitz 1908, 316)

The type of nucleus theory advanced here is important, and will play a major part in the work of subsequent scholars. What emerges is a desire to find some source or name a true *Mahābhārata* over its unnecessary parts. For Winternitz, the core *Mahābhārata* is discernible through a comprehensive understanding of the genre formations in Sanskrit poetry. The corruption of courtly epic, which seems to refer to the epic cycle stage above and is the height of the genre, leads to a new type of text altogether, which Winternitz designates as its own "*whole literature*" (Winternitz 1908, 316) and a "*repertory of the*

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[5] Winternitz 1908, 315.

whole of old bard poetry" (Winternitz 1908, 318). Indeed, Winternitz seems to create a category superstructure for the *Mahābhārata* in which a host of genres might simultaneously subsist. Despite categorizing the epic as an amalgam, the scholar still identifies certain pieces as part of some singular true core. Winternitz goes on to map out particular regions of the text as aligned with his conceptions of the original genre and therefore an older core, elevating the narratives focused on the Pāṇḍavas while setting aside "everything that has no reference to the principal narrative" (Winternitz 1908, 328), including subtales. Winternitz surmises that lost within the "wild undergrowth" (Winternitz 1908, 321) we might find "epics within the epic" (Winternitz 1908, 381), suggesting that generic designations might permit the reader to reaffirm an epic quality within, but not encompassing, the text.

E. Washburn Hopkins more explicitly maps out his historical approach to the *Mahābhārata*. It is worth noting that Hopkins looks to make room for the text itself to speak first in attempting to devise a theoretical construct, at least in name here.

> The best way, of course, to take up the historical investigation of a literary product the origin of which is well known is to begin with the source and afterwards to study the character of the completed whole. But if the origin be unknown, and we wish to discover it, we must invert the process, and begin our examination of the character of the work. When the results of our analysis become plain, we may group together those elements which appear to have existed from the first, and thus, on the basis of analysis, reconstruct the past. (Hopkins 1901, vii)

Hopkins' analysis proceeds as planned. He begins his study by outlining those Sanskrit works and philosophical schools of thought that may have been known to authors of the

Mahābhārata. This contextual foregrounding allows the scholar to identify strands of thought and literary qualities that might be factors in the epic's construction. Concurrently, Hopkins inspects the style of poetry found in the epic in order to identify types of verse that might precede it. More accurately, multiple styles of writing are categorized within the epic in order to suggest discordant conglomeration of different modes of writing.[6] Something that might more fittingly inhabit the designated genre is then found hidden within the text, as Hopkins explains that "[t]races of epic poetry within the early poem cannot be disregarded" (367). Unearthed "traces" of a core epic allow Hopkins to construct a periodization schema in which tribal (here Kuru) communities gave way to later additions, interpolations, and poetic corruptions. Through Hopkins' theory, the above mentioned "monstrous" designation of the *Mahābhārata* is the result of an evolving genealogy of writing and thought that is stuck together with poor patchwork.[7]

Advancing now to our second phase, van Buitenen's 1972 essay, "On the Structure of the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata," breaks down the events of the epic's second book in order to better derive the structural intention of the text, particularly those puzzling final moments of the dicing game. Through this rhetorical approach, van Buitenen struggles with apparent feelings of discord in the book's closing event when compared to the rest of the text's description of Yudhiṣthira's ascent to the throne. More specifically, he asks why the dice game would occur at this particular juncture. To uncover this final problem, however, van Buitenen begins at the start of the book.

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[6] Hopkins 1901, 232-233.

[7] See Hopkins 1901, 368-370. Particularly, "we may expect to find that the tale, as a tale, is full of the grossest incongruities; for to fulfill its encyclopedic character all is fish that comes to the net, and scarcely an attempt is made to smooth away any save the most glaring inconsistencies. Tale is added to tale, doctrine to doctrine, without much regard to the effect produced by the juxtaposition."

Beyond observations, he breaks down key plot elements in order to display their logical development.[8] This mode lays groundwork for a deeper inspection of structure within the epic.

We might note from the start here van Buitenen's reluctance to disregard points of potential misfit in order to produce a productive and comprehensive reading. Allowing all evidence within the text to weigh equally, van Buitenen then develops a structural model that might help elucidate the second book.[9] Once able to discard the notion that labels events in the text as "meandering improvisation" (van Buitenen 1972, 82), the scholar goes on to make some pronouncements upon that final dicing game. He surmises that the dicing appears as a Vedic remnant, a lost part of the ritual that is contentiously revived. Once enacted, van Buitnenen states that the game's historical precedent dictates that the challenge must be accepted. Furthermore, the game's structure, consisting of two distinct rounds at ten throws apiece, alerts the audience to the stakes faced by the protagonist. Of course this raises further questions: Is this another indication that the dice game was a relic and even unknown to the epic's audience? Does the *Mahābhārata* have to educate the audience on the game? The point to make here is that van Buitenen's more expansive argument regarding the design of the second book clears space once again for closer inspection of its constituent parts. To be productive in this manner, then, we move from

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[8] For instance, on page 69, van Buitenen argues that Nārada's description of the Great Halls serves as the necessary impetus for Yudhiṣṭhira's desire to perform *rājasūya*, which sets the fateful chain of events in motion.

[9] For van Buitenen, the second book is a narrative representation of ritual: "the circumstances of the *rājasūya* have lent their design to the *parvan* as a whole that the *parvan* is epic dramatization of the events of the *rājasūya*." (van Buitenen 1972, 70)

text to theory and back again to text. Van Buitenen shows us that we can take little for granted in an analysis of the text.

Though first written a few years preceding van Buitenen's article, A. K. Ramanujan's "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*" was published over twenty years later, in 1991. He argues that patterning and order pervade the text in everything from phrasing and events to character relationships.[10] Ramanujan sheds light on motifs throughout the epic to show that "[s]uch repetitive elements foreshadow later events and recapitulate earlier ones" (Ramanujan 1991, 424). In this way, repetition becomes an aesthetic device. Internal allusions punctuate and give weight to the events and figures of the epic.

Ramanujan interrogates van Buitenen's notion that discernible design necessitates original intention by citing a later folk story that recasts the *Mahābhārata*'s dice game. According to the story, Śakuni, Yudhiṣṭhira's opponent in the dice game, was imprisoned and starved, along with his brothers by an ancestor of the Pāṇḍavas. Śakuni fashioned dice out of his brothers' bones and vowed revenge, leading to the later events of the *Sabhāparvan*. Ramanujan here argues that later-composed events can be made to fit just as effectively as those within the critical Sanskrit text.[11]

We should also note here that Ramanujan's focus on repetition gives us cause to consider the *upākhyānas*, or subtales, told throughout and distinct from the central narrative. For instance, the story of Nala is shown to repeat several of the occurrences experienced by Yudhiṣṭhira. Ramanujan points out that Nala's tale first serves to summarize Yudhiṣṭhira's concurrent state as both lose their kingdom and are sent to the

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[10] Ramanujan 1991, 421-422.
[11] See Ramanujan 1991, 442.

forest. Yudhiṣṭhira is then made to hear the conclusion of Nala's, and thereby his own, story: the kingdom regained.

> Thus, these scores of tales that seem to interrupt the main action have a narrative function. They are performative, i.e. they too are acts, not merely explanations. They add the vector of past and precedent to present and future. (Ramanujan 1991, 427)

Ramanujan argues that repetition is not only necessary for the epic's audience, but also to propel events within the narrative. Discrete parts of the text are recast through Ramanujan's work as integral rather than poorly stitched.

J. L. Brockington's extensive study of *The Sanskrit Epics* might provide further insight on the congruencies and disagreements found in this second phase of scholarship. His task is more Herculean, tackling both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* in total. Such scope seems to prohibit the scholar from more finely-grained analysis, working with larger concepts in regard to both epics. While concurring with Ramanujan's assertions on structural unity within the epic through recurring patterns, he nonetheless relegates repetition to a function of oral recitation.[12] Brockington organizes his study through more general observations of major themes, for instance providing a list of fauna found in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*,[13] useful more for reference than for developing further understanding of the text. Nonetheless, there are moments in which the influence of preceding studies shine through. Brockington takes the notion of repetition and structure a step beyond earlier scholars by illustrating instances of "bracketing" (Brockington 1998, 115) as an aesthetic device within the text. The study plots out verses that contain a

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[12] Brockington 1997, 115.
[13] Brockington 1997, 192-195.

fixed first and fourth *pāda*, while the second and third display variation. Though bracketing is explained as a later addition to the text, we should note that the basis through which Brockington determines the younger and older layers of the epic is unclear at times.[14]

Additionally, Brockington's study discounts the relevance of the *upākhyānas* within the epic. Nala's tale is only referred to insofar as it provides some insight into the nature of marriage as imagined by the text,[15] though we should note that Brockington finds agreement between Nala's presentation of matrimony and that of the central narrative. If we already have suspicion to categorize this work as a swerve away from the more literary-minded analysis found earlier in this second phase, evidence solidifying this designation might be found in Brockington's theory on the development of the epic. According to him, the *Mahābhārata* underwent four stages of development: the basic story, the introduction of mythology, brāhmanization, and, finally, commitment to writing.[16] Through this historical construction, which Brockington deploys early on to color the rest of his study, the perspective on the epic is more aligned with those earlier encyclopedic notions found in the first phase of scholarship rather than a literary production.

Madeleine Biardeau's *Le Mahābhārata* might represent the start of our third phase, often considered foundational for an expressly literary understanding of the text, though Biardeau largely sided with notions around a primarily oral epic. Biardeau's

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[14] Brockington concludes his discussion of bracketing by stating: "The lateness of these passages is unmistakable and points toward written composition as well as transmission" (1998, 116). This conclusion appears based on comparison with other later Sanskrit texts, but it is not substantiated.
[15] Brockington 1997, 219.
[16] Brockington 1997, 20.

undertaking in this text is enormous, first exploring the epic's context in preceding Vedic works through Aśoka before addressing, book by book, major incidents of the epic. Each section is given summary retelling, followed by substantial commentary on its import and design. Through this method, Biardeau creates more extensively and accessibly a literary analysis of the epic. Clearly influencing Hiltebeitel here, the subtale and main story relationship in *Nala* becomes a "récit-miroir" (Biardeau 2002, 482), in which characters and values are given further dimension. The latter, for Biardeau, is the crux of the tale as she argues that complexity in the term *dharma* underscores its importance for the hero to grasp in order to succeed in the climax of the epic. Looking ahead to the Great War as predicated upon a multifaceted *dharma*, such conflict could only be expressed by intermingling the subtale with the main story. Biardeau reads *Nala* as integral to the epic in a purposefully cryptic way.[17] We can see the relationships between Hiltebeitel and Biardeau's work here as both find the text's vitality within seemingly disparate sections. But they differ, too, in that Biardeau looks to grand structure as an end in itself while Hiltebeitel is more occupied with those details that are cast in new light, as are Ramanujan and van Buitenen.

The linchpin study in our brief history of scholarship that comes to define our third phase, Alf Hiltebitel's *Rethinking the Mahābhārata* adopts as its banner the literary analysis of the epic. His inquiry proceeds with deliberate and deep readings of events in the text – thereby placing that horse first in order to arrive at issues that might encircle the narrative. For example, Hiltebeitel explores the introductory frame as aesthetically

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[17] Biardeau 2002, 502.

pertinent and ideologically relevant for the whole text. Through the story's reduplicated primary presentation, told at the Naimiṣa forest and Janamejaya's court, Hiltebeitel uncovers a pattern that supports the epic's self-identification as the whole of thought[18] and "déjà écouté" (Hiltebeitel 2001, 104).

Hiltebeitel expands upon the perspective of literary analysis by employing context as intertextual factor rather than guiding theory, with Alexander and Aśoka as directly preceding elements.[19] By advancing a date of conception between the mid-second century BCE and the year zero, however, Hiltebeitel does not argue for a hidden-core or evolutionary text, but rather the invention of an entirely unique epic genre.[20] Furthermore, he identifies those contested key concepts, most notably *dharma* but also *karma* and *kāla*, that pervade and surround the *Mahābhārata*.[21] But Hiltebeitel finds their unity in difference here, stating that a singular truth would negate the epic's own literary nature.

> The palpable tension between contingency and determinism opens the field of narrative possibilities. At every point we are given the possibility of many stories. No story is ever the whole story. Every version has another version. Every outcome has multiple fatalities behind it. The stories that heroes and heroines hear are sideshadows of their own. (Hiltebeitel 2001, 38)

Where others cite incongruity, Hiltebeitel argues integrity. Echoes of van Buitenen and Ramanujan can be felt here as little is taken for granted and space is cleared for a deeper analysis of the text.

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[18] Mbh 1.56.33
[19] Hiltebeitel 2001, 16.
[20] Hiltebeitel 2001, 19.
[21] Hiltebeitel 2001, 39.

Most notable, then, is Hiltebeitel's treatment of Nala's Tale. We are led by the hand through the subtale here, with those major pronouncements of the text in the background, free to make closer observations. At the outset, parallels in character traits alert us to consider the correspondence between tale and main story. Nala is portrayed in connection to both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira, while Damayantī displays parallels to Draupadī. Thereby, Hiltebeitel brings new dimension to the dice match by noting that Yudhiṣṭhira's act in staking his wife goes unmatched in Nala's version of events. This dissonance, rather, places the text in greater harmony as Hiltebeitel argues that the sideshadow subtale serves to extend an ideological theme of the epic by once again confronting Yudhiṣṭhira with Draupadī's question.[22] The events of the subtale are then contrasted as a romantic recasting of the main story, created by the authors of the epic specifically to provide incongruous fit. Hiltebeitel presents Nala's tale as a deeply embedded portion of a single narrative.

Hiltebeitel's chief interlocutor following the publication of *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, James L. Fitzgerald, is generally unconvinced by the study's arguments toward the epic's deliberateness and design. For Fitzgerald, the Sanskrit work contains far too many discordant tones to come together fully. But the counterpoints seem to require some finessing. For example, Fitzgerald subtly repositions Hiltebeitel's perspective on the *Mahābhārata* as literature to "The *Mahābhārata* as Fiction" (Fitzgerald 2003, 806) as a straw man to debase the breadth of the original argument.

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[22] Hiltebeitel 2001, 219 and 226. At the end of the Sabhāparvan, Draupadī asks her husband whether he staked himself or her first in the dicing match, to which Yudhiṣṭhira provides no reply. The question, argued here (240) and elsewhere (Hiltebeitel 2000) becomes a major catalyzing moment for the epic.

It could be fruitful to approach every aspect of the text as being, possibly, a contingent invention designed for some specific artistic purpose, but not all elements of the *MBh* were designed with the same degree of artistic purpose and freedom; and at the other end of the spectrum, some portions of the text (such as the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*) seem clearly to have been used as convenient containers for the preservation and transmission of text and passages deemed important independently of and prior to their introduction into the *MBh*. Some parts of the text Hiltebeitel examines closely in this book (e.g. *Nala*, Dharma's tests of Yudhiṣṭhira, the Śuka story at 12.310-20) are good examples of passages that do exhibit an inventive freedom suggestive of "fiction." (Fitzgerald 2003, 807)

Categorically reducing the discursive possibilities of the text's genre here, Fitzgerald believes that the type of inventiveness required for this mode of writing can only extend so far. A theory of an encyclopedic text is advanced through the basis of oral narration. The differentiation of "main" *Mahābhārata*, which might concur with earlier periodization, from later interpolated pieces of text, is advanced mostly out of the scholar's disbelief at the possibility of coordinated and complex construction.[23] Instead, Fitzgerald advocates for an "excavationist" approach that seeks to organize, sort, and name divergent parts of the whole text in order to arrive at its evolutionary process of development.

In its most recent contextual phase, *Mahābhārata* scholarship might be defined by an outgrowth of productive dialogue based on the contention of the preceding phase. For example, Georg von Simson's 2005 essay, "The Nalopākhyāna as a Calendar Myth," more explicitly considers the aesthetic connections between subtale and main story than

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[23] Fitzgerald 2003, 812: "-but I have difficulty in imagining a committee of poets jointly inventing such a complex and ingenious connected narrative and at the same time allowing itself such 'loose joins.'"

earlier studies. Von Simson uncovers botanical and astrological significances throughout the *upākhyāna*, without advancing a drastic new conception of the text. Instead, these connections appear mainly to enhance the narrative and illustrate the poetic skill of the authors. Von Simson's major contention is that the year myth uncovers further "parallelism" (von Simson 2005, 113) between *Nala* and the main narrative. He surmises that these threads might account for some pre-*Mahābhārata* trope that pervade both subtale and main story. Starting from, but ultimately disagreeing with, Biardeau's notions of the *Nalopākhyāna* as a mirror story, von Simson contends that focus on keystone concepts such as *dharma* and kingship distorts the subtale, which has more of "a fairy-tale atmosphere" (von Simson 2005, 132). By illustrating etymological connections between character names and specific plant life, von Simson shows that the authors evoke the particular time period that such a plant might flourish. For example, Puṣkara, Nala's opponent in the dice match, is related to the lotus, which grows in autumn. As the reed,[24] Nala loses his kingdom to the lotus, which indicates the transference from rainy season to fall. Yudhiṣthira's tour of the sacred fords, which follows the telling of Nala's tale, similarly indicates the passing of the monsoons into autumn as the area is associated with Brahmā as Puṣkara.[25] Notable for our purposes, von Simson does not claim this reading as foundational to an understanding of the text. Rather, we can intimate poetic flourishes and moments of skill in writing that pervade

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[24] von Simson disagrees with Biardeau and Hiltebeitel's assertation that Nala is meant to signify Nara (man) and instead illustrates an interpretation of Nala as nala (reed). Nevertheless, von Simson agrees with Nala's correspondence to Yuḍiṣthira and Arjuna.
[25] von Simson 2005, 115.

main story and tale.[26] The poetic undertones, therefore, suggest further methods of entry into the narrative.

In a fundamental attempt to revive the first phase of scholarship,[27] Michael Witzel produced a comparative study on epic and Vedic literature, which takes as its starting point the idea that the epic provides narrative flourishes to the skeletal stories presented in the Vedas.[28] By surveying the differences between these texts, Witzel uncovers some contemporary politics. For example, the division of an epic lunar and solar dynasty from a more unified Vedic genealogy signals a changing landscape, which is made to include heretofore unknown peoples.[29] Witzel surmises that the historical moment for these changes likely occurred around the year 100 CE, diverging slightly from the models put forth in the third phase. By viewing the *Mahābhārata* as a sponge of a text, growing out of the Vedas by incorporating the shifting social conditions of its context, and agreeing here with Fitzgerald, Witzel calls for the narrative to be "mined and utilized" (Witzel 2005, 70) in order to better understand the surrounding world during the epic's creation and development.

Adam Bowles' 2009 study, *Framing Bhīṣma's Royal Instruction*, tackles the often easily differentiated didactic portion of the text. For our purposes, the subject of whether Bowles provides reason to perceive the interconnection of the post-War material is not the point – although he does, particularly through a deep reading of character traits and

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[26] von Simson 2005, 133.
[27] See below and Hiltebeitel 2012.
[28] Witzel 2005, 21.
[29] Witzel 2005, 43-54.

their positions in the didactic sections which recall previous dialogues.[30] Instead, most fruitful for our purposes is the way in which Bowles frames the debate. By calling for an inspection of "design," Bowles incorporates earlier concerns with repetition, structure, difference, and function into a more unified perspective. Noting that even Hiltebeitel and his critics can agree when conceiving of the epic as a work of intentional design, Bowles states that "the days of the 'pseudo-epic' are fast being left behind" (Bowles 2009, 124).

THE MONSTER AND THE CRITICS

Adam Bowles might be onto something here. But we can nevertheless observe that distinct phases of scholarship on the epic co-mingle with, resuscitate, and build upon previous work. More recently, Hiltebeitel notes that remnants of Hopkins' method of mining the text have found new life through studies by Witzel and Fitzgerald.[31] My hope here, then, is to provide some perspective on the landscape of theories that surround the *Mahābhārata* – and perhaps, in some sense, loosen ourselves from their grip. While there is much to revere in the scholarship above, these views can also shackle future readings. In establishing what it entails to principally consider the epic as literature, we must move away from readings that treat historical considerations as the only end game in a study of the text. Fleshing out a world around this document is compelling, but not my aim here. Furthermore, as a piece of literature, we will hold the epic as a unitary work with an

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[30] Bowles 2009, 129.
[31] see Hiltebeitel 2012 and forthcoming.

intentional design, not because it has been well argued in the past, though I believe it has, but because it is the only way to achieve any comprehensive reading of this work. To delineate some core or more true sections of the text is simply to limit our own ability to view what might be present in the poem. A critical approach that primarily considers a text as a work of literature develops productive reading of its material without relying chiefly on periodization or a well-understood process of authorial creation. But that is not to say that we have arrived at exactly what this approach to the text does or how it might achieve its goals.

We might find precedent for our struggle in a 1936 lecture by J. R. R. Tolkien titled *The Monsters and the Critics*, in which the scholar argues for literary treatment in the study of *Beowulf*. Eerily familiar, Tolkien writes against "a mass of discussion and theory, which has in the main been directed to the origin of the story of Beowulf, or of the allusions to Beowulf, rather than the understanding or valuation of Beowulf as it is, and was made" (Tolkien 2011, 32). He aims to move away from the historical considerations that have occupied scholarship toward "the actual judgements on Beowulf as a thing itself, as a poem, as a work of art, showing structure and motive" (Tolkien 2011, 32). For Tolkien, and my own considerations, scholarship that employs the text for means outside itself is based on far too much speculation, threatening to relegate the material to curio.

> For the moment my point is this, and it is my main point, and the one on which I hope to convince you: nearly all censure, and a great deal of praise, of Beowulf, has been due either to believing it to be something that it is not (e.g. primitive, rude, or Teutonic) or to disappointment because it was not itself like something

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else the critic would have preferred (e.g. an ancient heroic lay of slaughter and divided allegiances). And this, even where the intention has been 'pure' criticism (as in the case of Ker or Chambers), and the acumen and originality displayed has been great, is due to a mental background due to 'research' - to too much 'research' of the kind that is not so much criticism of the poem as mining in it. (Tolkien 2011, 32)

Mining is a key term here, as we have seen it before throughout the inspection of studies on the *Mahābhārata*.[32] Just as we began our discussion of the epic through geologic imagery, there is clearly something to be gained through a conception of the lithic text. Jeffrey Cohen reminds us of the correspondence between story and nature, particularly in regard to its durability within time.

If narrative is a future-saturated device for artful connection-forging (that is, an apparatus of composition, of production), then humans are among the world's most finely attuned story machines. Only stone has fulfilled this charge with stauncher historical determination. (Cohen 2013)

At the very least, we might say that the epic was carved out with stone in mind, particularly in the shadow of Aśoka's preceding edicts. Furthermore, I believe that Tolkien's conception of pre-literary studies of the epic is spot on. Extracting what might be deemed valuable rather than holding the pieces together disfigures the literature. Tolkien additionally points to scholarly expectation of the text, indicating that difficulty in generically aligning *Beowulf* with other pieces of literature adversely affects its reading. When scholars experience similar difficulties within the *Mahābhārata*, the trend is to once again extract portions of the story under the heading of a particular genre. By

[32] "The epic has been mined for Indo-European myth, Indo-European epic, Indo-European goddesses, non-Indo-European goddesses, oral epic, a prior epic cycle, a pre-Brahmanic Kṣatriya tradition, an historical kernel; a textual kernel; the 'old' narrative beneath the final written 'surface'; etc." (Hiltebeitel 2001, 2). Per our correspondence, Hiltebeitel was unaware of Tolkein's use of the term in his literary study.

positing some alignment between a segment of the text and another type of Sanskrit writing, the study often debases the writing surrounding such extractions. Tolkien might serve as a kind of *neti neti* model through which we can begin to home in on, at least, what a literary reading is not. Furthermore, for all the epic might be mined for, Tolkien reminds us that "Also it is by an author, and is a thing itself" (Tolkien 2011, 37).

While aware of pitfalls in studies of the epic that do not attend more fully to the literary character of the text, we have yet to describe how to conduct proper procedure in this discipline. The chapters below will work to demonstrate the process of literary analysis in regard to understanding the *Mahābhārata*. I will proceed by conducting my own literary analysis of the epic in order to define more accurately the perspective that Hiltebeitel calls for in the opening of this chapter. While a strict definition might do more to restrict than carry my inspection at the outset, there are, nonetheless, particular questions to ask at the outset that might true our bearing. In an effort to better define our limits, how can we partition historical considerations? Tolkien might be instructive here:

> I am not trying to trace in full its history. The eye is fixed primarily on the poem itself, and such criticism as I notice is principally that which is still current, potent, and influential, and even interesting; and insofar as I allude to its history at all it is to point to what I think is the explanation of certain critical commonplaces which I attack. (Tolkien 2011, 31)

There are two key points to comment on here. First, it is crucial that this study be accessible and engaging to others who concurrently study literature. Concordant with my reading of Tolkein here, I argue that the literary approach *opens* the text, rendering it generative for an array of approaches and disciplines, such as religion and history. This means, secondly, that we need to employ means of critical theory available and

paramount to such individuals today. Hiltebeitel demonstrates this well by engaging with

thinkers such as Foucault and Bakhtin in his studies, but the field has grown in recent

decades with additional modes of criticism that we should also consider in relation to this

text.

It is also important to note at the outset that issues of genre will play a major role

in the proceeding literary inspection. We will not only consider the mire of consequences

and possibilities that accompany the designation of "epic," but the possibility of viewing

interior genres within the work itself. This is not to extract, but to understand design. Is

epic, as Richard Martin recently argued, and corresponding to earlier notions by

Winternitz, a type of super-genre that contains other categories of writing within its

binding?[33] As Hiltebeitel notes, the epic itself seems to contend with multiple genres as a

thematically consistent rhetorical device.

> The *Mahābhārata* differs. It has unversified inset phrases to indicate speaker
> shifts. It has multiple "chief listeners" and no one character within the main story
> who listens to the whole. And it sets off its ancillary tales both in its frontmatter
> and its framing with specific generic terms. (Hiltebeitel 2011, 424)

Throughout this study we will ask what might be gained by a consideration of *upākhyāna*

as genre or sub-genre. On the issue of epic, Tolkien finds fault in the way that the term

has been conceived. Perhaps we will have to re-imagine it.

> But why class 'Beowulf' as "epic" however conducted; and who has legislated for
> what should be the main stuff of any poem. Only, I hear, the antiquarian historian,
> who prefers semi-historical legend to folk-tale (whatever that may be) which he
> calls "wild." (Tolkien 2011, 40)

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[33] see Martin 2005.

The contention here alerts us to kernel theories on the *Mahābhārata* in which scholars express difficulty in allowing well-written materials to exist as literary creations. For Tolkien, the high-brow designation of "epic" renders the text as beyond an author's control. I am not certain that I agree on this point, as the term "epic" might work toward the goal of making the text more accessible. The meshwork of correspondences that arise in imagining an epic might give us more points of entry than available otherwise when studying the *Mahābhārata*. Of course, we should not overlook the epic's self-designations, deftly plotted out here by Hiltebeitel:

> Most frequently, the *Mahābhārata* characterizes itself fourteen times as a ''narrative'' (*ākhyāna*: 1.1.16a; 1.2.29b, 235c, 238a, 239b, 240b, and 241b; 1.53.31d and 32a; 1.56.1c, 30c, 32c; 12.337.10a, 18.45.53a) and eight times as a ''history'' (*itihāsa*: 1.1.17a, 24d, 52c; 1.2.237a, 1.51.16c, 1.56.18c and 19a, 1.93.46c). But it also calls itself a work of ''ancient lore'' (*purāṇa*: 1.1.15b, 1.56.15d), a ''story'' (*kathā*: 1.56.2a), a ''collection'' (*saṃhitā*: 1.1.19.1c and 61b), a ''fifth Veda'' (1.57.74ab, 12.327.18ab), the ''Veda that pertains to Kṛṣṇa'' (*Kārṣṇa Veda*, probably referring primarily to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa – 1.1.205a, 1.56.17c), a ''great knowledge'' (*mahaj-jñāna*: 1.1.25b and 49a), a ''treatise'' (*śāstra*: 1.56.21: indeed, in this verse a *dharmaśāstra*, *arthaśāstra*, and *mokṣaśāstra*; and probably 12.238.13c), an *upaniṣad* (1.1.191a), a "biography" or "adventure" (*carita*: 1.56.1d), a "victory" (*jaya*: 1.56.19a), and, surprisingly a "subtale" (*upākhyāna*: 1.2.236a)! (Hiltebeitel 2005, 456)

A fluid and hybrid self-identity within the epic might alert us to the challenges in attempting to name a genre for the work. But I believe it also demonstrates that questions of association and discernment in category are reflectively important to the text itself. By demonstrating difference through genres, constructed as a reciprocal dialectic, I will argue that the text generates meaning and conditions readings.

This literary study of the *Mahābhārata* will focus on the historically contentious relationship between *upākhyāna* and main narrative in order to understand how these distinct pieces might be conceived as symbiotic. Taking a cue here from K. R. Norman, we will attempt to move beyond simply what is being said in order to query how the text creates meaning.[34] Though ours is not philological in nature, this study will similarly consider those nuts and bolts of language that might shed light on questions of design. The subtales, which interrupt the main story on roughly 67 separate occasions, provide opportunity to closely inspect portions of the text *in medias res*. Looking from the middle outward will be instructive as a divergent perspective from previous studies on the epic.[35] Furthermore, as a text that self-identifies as preexistent and without limit — "What is found here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere else" (Mbh 1.56.33) — I argue that the middle is a critical point of entry for the *Mahābhārata* and its literary study. To be succinct, this dissertation argues that the Sanskrit epic demonstratively and reflectively operates from an intermediary position and subsequently works to establish an approach to the epic's scholarship that opens up to that potentiality in generating meaning. My reading will be informed by Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizomatic literature.

> A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and. . . and.. . and. . ." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going? Where are you coming

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[34] Norman 1997, 6.

[35] See Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 25. "It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes."

from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation—all imply a false conception of voyage and movement. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 25)

The subtales of the poem serve as productive sites for understanding alliance by connecting, recasting, and veering among ideas, structures, and language throughout the surrounding narrative. My intervention into the text, which I detail more explicitly below, similarly builds a multi-modal alliance between the study of literature and the epic. Furthering Hiltebeitel's pronouncement at the opening of this chapter, my work is as much to carry the *Mahābhārata* into the study of literature as it is to carry the study of literature to the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, I argue that a rhizomatic approach to the history of scholarship on the epic outlined above informs an understanding of the text as literature. My contribution to the state of the field comes about by enacting the claims made upon a reading of the text by that scholarship rather than leaving such work inert. To derive meaning as an ends rather than a means, I argue, is the act of 'handing down sentences,' Foucault's warning that I have invoked at the outset of this dissertation. The alliance I find in the epic, which is similarly reflected in this study, eschews linear progression and instead requires a veering gesture to generate meaning throughout seemingly divergent contact zones.

Our middle within the text is the middle of the *Mahābhārata*'s third book, in which the central protagonists, the five Pāṇḍava brothers and wife Draupadī, have spent several years banished in the forest following a losing dice wager by the eldest brother, Yudhiṣṭhira. The protagonists hear many *upākhyānas* during their time in the wild, but

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we will focus on four significant instances: Nala's Tale, Rāma's Tale, Sāvitrī's Tale, and the Yakṣa's Questions. Hiltebeitel's survey and categorization of the subtales will be instructive here.

> First come ten in Book I that Yudhiṣthira has not heard. Second are the twenty-one, all but one of them recounted in Book 3, that he hears by the time he meets his father Dharma disguised as a Yakṣa. Eight subtales are then told between Books 5 and 9 that relate mainly to the themes of war. Of these, Yudhiṣthira hears only the first, which recounts a set of stories about Indra through which the narrator predicts Yudhiṣthira's victory (*Mbh* 5.9–18). Finally, there are twenty-seven postwar subtales, of which Yudhiṣthira hears twenty-six, all but one of them in Books 12 and 13. (Hiltebeitel 2011, 426)

We see here that the events surrounding the subtale are of chief interest in its classification, including its manner of transmission. This study focuses on that second category of subtales that come at crucial points leading up to and during Yudhiṣthira's encounter with Dharma, which Hiltebeitel further delineates as bent on "the Pāṇḍava's entertainment and edification" (Hiltebeitel 2011, 428). I will also argue, and it has been discussed elsewhere,[36] that the Yakṣa's Questions subtale serves as a type of climax and culmination to those preceding *upākhyānas* in the epic's third book.

This study is predicated upon a close reading of these four subtales because they explicitly denote a middle point within the text and reflect a critical movement that will guide my work. These narratives bridge disparate milieus in the text through non-linear and rhizomatic means, carrying the main story through intermediary zones on several concurring planes. I will demonstrate that Nala's Tale marks a grappling with the

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[36] see Hiltebeitel 2011, 435–438.

wilderness that necessarily works to render re-legible earlier and subsequent occurrences in the epic in order to carry meaning across and through that unstable landscape. The subsequent subtales re-deploy, compound, and continue to complicate those threads that are visible between Nala's Tale and the main story to continuously elucidate one another. The four subtales are selected as a unit to underscore the immediate dialogue that veers in a multi-direction manner, which is subsequently enacted by a study that proceeds in a reflective fashion.

The opening quotations to this chapter by Michel Foucault and Alf Hiltebeitel not only propel me to look for ways of understanding the text that primarily consider its nature as literature, but also to rethink and more explicitly define the act of literary analysis as I work with the Sanskrit poem. As such, this dissertation is necessarily performative, an *apologia pro vita mea*, to present my own process of reading the *Mahābhārata*. As a student of literature, I have long held the belief that a text teaches us how it wants to be read. My work proceeds as a pedagogy, not only to provide my own reading of the text but more so to better understand how the epic itself creates meaning.

The title of my dissertation, *Carried Meaning in the Mahābhārata,* points to what I see as a keystone for reading and understanding the epic, the act of translation, which I align with the latin *translatus*, carried across. Through my work, I build a conception of this action as it moves through many borders by way of language, milieu, discipline, and genre. Translation is located at the center of a critical exchange that I find to be necessarily multidirectional and generative. In line with that movement, my own process of analysis works from the middle of the *Mahābhārata*'s third book, inspired by Deleuze

and Guattari's notion that literature is rhizomatic, building alliance within and throughout the text. I will read four *upākhyānas* while moving comparatively between subtales and the main story of the epic, as well as building points of contact with other works more commonly studied as literature. I also develop alliance with literary theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes and scholars in South Asia such as Pollack, Shulman, Hiltebeitel, and van Buitenen. In concert, these critical lenses work to render the Sanskrit epic more vulnerable, open to readings and new points of entry. By explicitly conducting my own translations at distinct sites, I attempt to lay out those points of contact that come to bare on my own reading of the *Mahābhārata*.

For example, we will consider how the operative principles of separation and obfuscation weave through the epic. The conditions manifest uniquely in each of these subtales. On separation in Nala's Tale, the eponymous character abandons his wife, Damayantī, to serve out his period of banishment to the wilderness. In Rāma's Tale, Rāma's wife Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa and made prisoner in his kingdom. For Sāvitrī's Tale, her husband Satyavān is taken by Yama, and during the Yakṣa's Questions, Yudhiṣthira works to bring about the return of his four felled brothers. As a thematic point of entry, separation allows me to query the language and moments of unique verse structure in Nala's Tale, finding the emotional resonance indicative of a romance genre further informed by, for example, Fredric Jameson's notions of structural analysis and linguistic alliance with *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. These elements, however, are noticeably absent from the depiction of separation between Rāma and Sītā, and thereby underscore the displays of power and violence that propel their distinct separation, a

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difference that comes to a head at the contentious reunion of the couple. For Rāma's Tale, contact points in Peter Scharf's reading and translation of the narrative and the Old Testament serve to inform my understanding of their framework and trajectory. Veering back toward the heart in Sāvitrī's Tale, the language and atypical verse structure that was earlier employed to denote the emotion of Nala and Damayantī's separation is recast with a corporeal focus in the context of a female protagonist at the impending departure of her husband. The emotional resonance from the earlier subtale alerts us to the form of this separation while cacophonous trajectories provide space to unearth variation between the stories. The Yakṣa's Questions presents a separation between Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers to set into motion a conversation that reverberates with Sāvitrī's discourse. The recurrent loss of each of the four brothers is dialogically bound to other moments of loss and separation, allowing my reading to perceive the patterning as the re-vitalization of dissonance and difference. The corporeal language of separation that we see in Nala and Sāvitrī's Tales is given distinct bent as cognitive reflection within this distinct setting. My study illustrates how models and their alterations guide moments in the text.

My dissertation will subsequently argue that obfuscation is necessarily enmeshed with separation in the *Mahābhārata*. Building our rhizomatic alliance, Nala's Tale illustrates the contingency of these two operative principles. First, gods disguise themselves as Nala at the outset of the subtale to disrupt Damayantī's selection in marriage and the initial union. Later, the dice that initially bring about the exile of Nala and his wife return to the fore in the form of golden birds to further render Nala bereft. Damayantī is similarly described as embodying a disparate state when separated from

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Nala. Nearly stripped naked in the forest, Nala is bitten by a fork-tongued snake and unrecognizably transformed ahead of the reunion with his wife. Sītā is left vulnerable to attack in Rāma's Tale following his interaction with Rāvaṇa's sage disguised as a deer who takes up Rāma's voice. Obfuscation later takes the form of invisible warriors and all-obliterating deaths. Finally, failed vision is embodied in Rāma's reading of Sītā's distressed state at the point of their reunion. For Sāvitrī, concealment allows her hide knowledge of Satyavān's death that threatens to delegitimize her marriage and subsequently lexically outmaneuver her interlocutor, Yama, in order to save her husband. And The Yakṣa's Questions are actually deployed by the figure under several guises, Yama, a voice in the sky, a crane, a Yakṣa, and ultimately Dharma, altering the resonance of each utterance.

Through these readings, I argue that disguise functions here as the impermanent separation of the self and identity. As entry points, these two operative principles allow me to conceive of the epic's project in creating meaning around conceptions of belonging, possession, agency, and ultimately the self. As the latter subtales structurally denote, I argue that a frame question looms large over the *Mahābhārata,* Draupadī's prompt to Yudhiṣṭhira, which I translate as "Did you first lose yourself? Or me, Bhārata" (Mbh 2.60.7). The self is an important site of meaning within the *Mahābhārata*. And we might expect a world building text like this Sanskrit epic to present a pointed conception. Instead, each figure veers in the epic, discordant but contingent. It is perhaps our most glaring example that this work thrives on difference. There are no complete heroes, there are participants, of which we are necessarily complicit in reading and thereby translating

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the work. By self-consciously and reiteratively recasting its own constructs, the *Mahābhārata* proliferates significance within the poem. The poem carries meaning through and across realms, indeed ensuring that, "What is found here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere else" (Mbh 1.56.33).

Returning then to Foucault's opening charge and our desire to better conceptualize literary analysis, I find four key markers. First, to bring something to life, George Steiner provides a theoretical framework to conceive of the process of translation as the continuous haunting of one text to another. Additionally, Steiner states that "Literature…has no chance of life outside of constant translation" (Steiner 1998, 31). Reflectively, we find that the dialogical association between realms enacts critical vitality. Second, we must multiply signs of existence. I demonstrate through my dissertation that a reading stemming from rhizomatic alliance is necessarily generative, discursively finding affiliation and difference that is simultaneously rendering difference coherent. Third, criticism must take leaps of the imagination. As Rancière will demonstrate within my dissertation, "Thus the exegesis of stories belongs to the same activity as their invention" (Rancière 2004, 83). I argue that it is a participatory and creative scholarly act that presents a close reading by the translator. As we are tasked with teaching a text, rendering it more accessible to others, so too is the translator. Finally, criticism must bear the lightening of possible storms. My work attempts a gesture toward the future by providing an ethic for reading this work of literature, bringing into conversation divergent points of contact that better inform my understanding of the way

in which meaning is carried across the epic, creating space for difference as an action that mirrors the *Mahābhārata*.

Recently, I discussed yakṣas as a particular category of monster in the *Mahābhārata*.[37] And we should pay close attention to such figures in how they inhabit boundaries and interact with other characters, but we should not forget that the term "monster" also comes down to us as an early designation for this text in modern scholarship. Jeffrey Cohen's work on the monster might allow us to redeploy such a designation in a more productive light. There is key significance in this object, the text, as monster, though earlier designators might be incorrect in their usage of the term. If the *Mahābhārata* is interpreted as a monster, then it is one that reflectively queries our own notions of itself as we inspect it. A reading of the epic, therefore, is not solely pertinent to the stuff of history.

> The monster commands, "Remember me": restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal return. The monster *haunts*; it does not simply bring past and present together, but destroys the boundary that demanded their twinned foreclosure. (Cohen 1996, ix–x)

We will work to repair previously damaged joints of the poem, gulfs between rhizomatic nodes brought about by mining, in order to recognize its literary heritage. Furthermore, as monster, the text challenges our markers of identification by embracing hybridity and fluid association.

> I argue that the monster is best understood as the embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis. (Cohen 1996, x)

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[37] Rudmann 2014.

The monster, or the *Mahābhārata*, is able to contain contradicting fragments in one whole work. However, those parts are not best revealed through a process of mining. Instead, I believe that we can follow Foucault's aspirations in the epigraph to this essay by employing literary analysis for the sake of opening and understanding the text. We might shed some of those negative monstrous connotations by rendering the work more welcoming to readers and scholars alike. This can be done best, I believe, with the type of engagement that risks deep inspection and new perspective. We will commence by conducting a close reading of the four subtales with panoramic perspective on their correspondences and deploy critical theory when appropriate to undergird our new ground.

ON TRANSLATION

This dissertation is contingent upon an understanding of translation as a critical mode of engagement with the text. Translation is not only the means by which we can begin to make the Sanskrit verse legible to an audience that is unfamiliar with the workings of this Indo-European language, I argue that it is a participatory scholarly act that presents a close reading by the translator in a fashion consistent with literary studies that do not necessarily contend with disparate forms of communication. In other words, as the academic is tasked with teaching a text, rendering it more accessible to others, so too is the translator. Translation, after all, is not simply a linguistic process, but pertains to the carrying over of ideas and materiality in a multi-directional and necessarily

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symbiotic process of exchange.[38] Therefore, translation involves both a teaching and learning of the text. The translator necessarily becomes a new kind of author, though not an authorial one. Instead, the translator intercedes on behalf of the text to understand how the work itself reciprocally conditions its own reception and thereby acts as intermediary through attempting to re-present those rhizomatic connections.

Consider George Steiner's four-step process of translation in *After Babel* (1998), in which the "hermeneutic motion" proceeds as academic inquiry. The translator's initial step requires expectation in the source material for elements that might possess potential for re-rendering into the target idiom.

> There is initial trust, an investment of belief, underwritten by previous experience but epistemologically exposed and psychologically hazardous, in the meaningfulness, in the 'seriousness' of the facing or, strictly speaking, adverse text. We must venture a leap: we grant *ab initio* that there is 'something there' to be understood, that the transfer will not be void. All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust. (Steiner 1998, 312)

Initial trust sets the groundwork for academic inquiry in order for the translator to develop a vision of what might be present within the pages. Steiner calls for the scholar/translator to primarily develop an "understanding" of the source text, which is subsequently demonstrated through translation. We might go further to say that any reading, regardless of language, calls upon the reader to rethink and redeploy the source's words into new space in order to make that material legible in a new bent. The proceeding second step calls for deliberate scrutiny of the text through "aggressive"

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38 See Mehdizadeh 2013, 7.

(Steiner 1998, 313) close reading. This phase emphasizes the particularity of translation as tied to the person engaged in the act of carrying over the work. Sheldon Pollock reminds us that "translation is as philosophically problematic, stylistically individual, and practically hard as life, and as we keep on living we keep on translating, with the inevitable singular imperfections that define being human" (Pollock 1996, 112). Just as a study of literature must necessarily contain the distinct mark of an individual scholar, so too must a translation — that mark, I would further argue, as a recognition of incompleteness, is what gives a translation or study its vitality.

Steiner's third step reveals further tenuous elements in the production of translation. The source material must be rendered to fit the milieu of the target space, necessitating the incorporation of elements specific to a particular time and place, not only a language. This process additionally highlights the dynamic and multi-directional relationship between source and target worlds.

> But whatever the degree of 'naturalization', the act of importation can potentially dislocate or relocate the whole of the native structure. The Heideggerian 'we are what we understand to be' entails that our own being is modified by each occurrence of comprehensive appropriation. No language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed. (Steiner 1998, 315)

By working critically within the confines of both source and target spaces, the translator's ability to carry over the text into the latter is as crucial here as the acquired knowledge of the former – just as the scholar's ability to represent a reading is as critical to the work as the ability to perceive that reading. A translation, according to Steiner's final phase, must therefore leave space for the original work to persist between the lines of the new form.

The source must continuously haunt the target so that the audience is aware of the translation's imperfections and can maintain a skeptical or critical eye toward the reworking. But Steiner maintains that this final step is not to delegitimize or destabilize the translation, but rather recognize the incompleteness of any exchange, linguistic or otherwise.

> But we know that in practice this perfect fit is possible neither at the stage of interpretation nor at that of linguistic transfer and restatement. The limiting conditions on hermeneutic totality, moreover, are not restricted to translation. We saw at the start of the discussion that there are no perfections and final stabilities of understanding in any act of discourse above the most rudimentary (even there ambiguity might interfere). Understanding is always partial, always subject to emendation. Natural language is not only polysemic and in process of diachronic change. It is imprecise, and has to be imprecise, to serve human locution. And although the existence of a 'perfect translation' or 'perfect exchange of the totality of intended meaning' between two speakers is theoretically conceivable, there could be no way of verifying the actual fact. (Steiner 1998, 428)

Jean Paris wrote that the translator's role is to "retrace the original intuition, the root of the work" (Paris 1961, 63) – a dreadful thought. This sentiment places a kind of authority – and burden – upon the translator that one can never hope to achieve. Instead, Steiner provides us with the tools to approach translation as participation in scholarly inquiry. Furthermore, Steiner's assertion that the challenges in carrying over meaning are not particular to the translator underscores translation's function as a critical exercise. Meaning and understanding are caught in a complex meshwork of contingencies and determinations that allow for their continuous redeployment and our own perpetual interest in their inexhaustibility.

Translation is enacted in two different ways in the following chapters. First, I will provide my own English reworking of select Sanskrit phrases and verses in order to explicate and understand the text. Taking Steiner's four-step process as a guide, in addition to A. L. Becker's notion of fluidity of communication contained in the coined term "languaging."[39] I work to develop a mimetic rendering that must at times move beyond lexicographical holdings in order to present a close reading. My aim is to convey the pulse and economy of *kāvya* – the metrical verse style that makes up a majority of the *Mahābhārata* – while presenting something akin to what Seamus Heaney called "directness of utterance" (Heaney 2000, xxix) in his translation of *Beowulf* – a feature similarly present in this epic. Enacting Steiner's process of translation calls on me to ask why the text might present a particular phrasing at a particular moment, similarly recalling K. R. Norman's earlier charge to ask *how* the text develops meaning, and subsequently employ translation to reflect my own conclusions. In this case, the translation is closely woven within an exegetical inquest of the work, which will make more explicit my own choices in carrying over meaning. Second, I will consider translations of the Sanskrit by M. M. Williams, K. M. Ganguli, J. A. B. van Buitenen, Alf Hiltebeitel, and John D. Smith in order to place these renderings in concert and provide further perspective for my own understanding of the text and further reveal the particularity in each act of translation. We should consider these translations as a network of events that continuously has a hand in bringing the original work into being.

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[39] See Becker 2003, 7.

I will work to present translation as a means of critical analysis in examining the *Mahābhārata*, building upon rhetorical, literary, and contextual approaches discussed above in the history of scholarship. The act of translation calls for close reading of the text in order to derive meaning that supports the dialogical resonances that exist between and across particular terminology, verse, tale, book, and epic. A liminal space between source and target language serves as the site in which a close reading is conveyed by the scholar to the audience. The act of the translator — particularly in light of Steiner's final step, gesturing toward the original form in order to recognize the target's inability to totalize — is inevitably the work of scholarship, carrying meaning over into different realms in order to proliferate understanding. Moreover, an inspection of the relationship between subtale and main story within the epic will reveal a text that is chiefly concerned with its own ability to carry meaning between contexts. By extending its narrative conditions, character types, and constituent parts through distinct portions of the work, the *Mahābhārata* provides a type of road map for its own transmission, anticipating the act of translation, either across or within language. I will argue that the epic teaches its readers how it should be read, disclosing the procedures through which it creates and carries meaning throughout its own disparate contexts in order to propagate its vitality.

My analysis on the *Mahābhārata* moves through four successive subtales of the epic over four successive chapters: Nala's Tale, Rāma's Tale, Sāvitrī's Tale, and The Yakṣa's Questions. The structure of this dissertation, however, does not presume to suggest unidirectional progress. Instead, we will journey through the narrative while identifying critical points to establish rhizomatic contact. In translating those verses, we

will veer toward other contact zones that inform my reading in order to consider the ways in which meaning is carried and generated through those pages. For this dissertation, these sites include other moments in the Sanskrit epic, past scholarship on the *Mahābhārata*, critical theory, and a larger canon of works studied under the discipline of literature. By identifying these alliances, I work to "multiply… signs of existence" by opening the text to the type of potentiality that I will argue is present within its own project. This dissertation will demonstrate that by incorporating difference, the *Mahābhārata* perpetually reconsiders its own utterances in order to maintain dialectic vigor. Furthermore, each subtale will identify unique and interdependent contact zones. Nala's Tale introduces motifs of love, loss, veiling, discovery, and repetition. Rāma's Tale recasts sideshadows of those themes by presenting repetition as sound while offering seemingly inconsistent depictions of love and separation. Sāvitrī's Tale similarly expounds upon the discursive possibilities of the text by re-centering its focus upon a female character that at once breaks from and is consistent with notions advanced in the other subtales. Finally, the Yakṣa's Questions structurally redeploy tropes of the text through the more explicit gesture toward the reverberative relationship between subtale and main story. As a nonlinear process that carries meaning through these moments, each point of contact contributes to an understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as a generative work of literature.

In Derrida's essay on translation, "Ulysses Gramophone," he wonders how to transpose laughter. He argues that it would be an impossibility given the "singularity of the event, and therefore uniqueness of signature, or rather of an irreplaceable mark that

cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of copyright, legible across the patronym, after circumcision" (Derrida 1992, 295). So what is necessary, and inevitable, is a secondary event that would hermeneutically transpose the original event, which in turn is the only way that the original event can ever be confirmed.[40] This process of exchange, Steiner shows us, is not limited to translation but accompanies any exercise of understanding. However, translation does provide unique opportunity to present an understanding of a source object in both a rigorous and imaginative manner. This dissertation will demonstrate that translation of the *Mahābhārata* proceeds generatively through a rhizomatic motion between scholarship on the Sanskrit epic and critical thought on literature. By treating translation as a critical act in the middle of these perspectives we might fulfill Foucault's charge in the epigraph by not 'handing down sentences' but instead by multiplying those "signs of existence" (Foucault 1997, 323).

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[40] see Derrida 1992, 309.

Chapter 2 - Nala's Tale

A LOVE STORY

By the time Bṛhadaśva, sage and storyteller, reaches the Pāṇḍavas during their exile in the third book of the *Mahābhārata*, the brothers have already traveled deep into a wilderness teeming with gods and monsters. After a series of conflicts and recurring debates over whether Yudhiṣṭhira should accept the fate handed to them by the dice, the eldest brother's emotions boil over as he laments their misfortune. Upon asking if anyone could be in an unhappier state, Bṛhadaśva intervenes to relay the *upākhyāna* of Nala. We should note that this is the sage's sole appearance in the *Mahābhārata*, peculiar even for the text's cacophony of interjecting storytellers. Furthermore, Yudhiṣṭhira seems to anticipate, or even request, Nala's Tale, pointedly compelling Bṛhadaśva to tell him about a more unfortunate (*alpabhāgyatara*) king that the sage might have seen or heard of before — *bhavatā dṛṣṭapūrvo vā śrutapūrvo 'pi vā bhavet* (Mbh 3.49.34).

From the initial verse of Nala's Tale, both readers and listener, here Yudhiṣṭhira, are given information on the title character that will prove essential in propelling the subtale.

> *āsīd rājā nalo nāma vīrasenasuto balī |*
>
> There was a king named Nala, the mighty son of Vīrasena,
>
> *upapanno guṇair iṣṭai rūpavān aśvakovidaḥ ||*

imbued with desired virtues, handsome, and skilled with horses.

(Mbh 3.50.1)

It is of the latter and more specific attributes that we should take note. Beauty, *rūpavat,* is frequently deployed alongside various protagonists throughout the text. The term is repeated in just a few verses when introducing Damayantī,[41] and similarly describes Draupadī to underscore her prestige at the end of the *Mahābhārata*'s second book.[42] The placement of this adjective at the outset, however, should alert us to its importance as the story progresses. The final term, *aśvakovida* or skilled in horses, is far less common as an initial modifier – in fact it is not associated with another character in the epic. And it should stick out to the reader: this quality will serve a crucial function for Nala as we proceed. Of course, it seems all too fitting that a sage called Bṛhadaśva, whose name means "Great Horse" or "One Who Has Great Horses," describes a hero whose narrative hinges on his ability to handle such animals. Finally, Monier Monier-Williams' translation of *aśvakovida* renders the term "skilled in taming steeds" (Monier-Williams 1965, 4), which gets at something of the spirit here – Nala's renown might stem from a certain mastery over the natural world. We should be sensitive to the relationship between Nala and his environment. Beyond the utilitarian function of setting, the imposition of the wild will crop up repeatedly for our protagonists, both within the *upākhyāna* and the surrounding main narrative.

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[41] Mbh 3.50.13
[42] Mbh 2.72.13

Subsequent verses continue to extol Nala through information that will come into play throughout the narrative. We learn that the king is *akṣapriya*,[43] lover of dice, which squarely aligns Nala with the subtale's listener, Yudhiṣṭhira, who fell victim to gambling in the previous book of the *Mahābhārata*. However, the term might simultaneously work to contrast Nala from Yudhiṣṭhira as the *akṣapriya* compound can similarly signify one who is favored *by* the dice. In either interpretation, the term acts as a point of contact between *upākhyāna* and the main narrative. Nala is also one who speaks the truth, *satyavādin*,[44] a frequently employed qualifier for characters throughout the epic. Most recently in the adjacent main story, Draupadī, the wife of the Pāṇḍavas, asks Yudhiṣṭhira how he might have allowed the dice to "swoop down" (van Buitenen 1974, 280)[45] upon him despite the fact that he himself is a person who spoke the truth.[46] That contradiction, then, between constancy and chance further unites both listener and hero in the subtale.

These praises subsequently turn inward from the audience as the text relates such information to Nala and Damayantī, alternatively. While the initial spark for each other is lit, it is the intervention of a *haṃsa*[47] – a type of goose, *anser indicus* – that appears to ratify the immediacy of their affection. Not just any animal, of course, this fowl is "*jātarūpaparicchada*," (Mbh 3.50.18) covered in gold. Nala captures the bird, who then speaks to the king, begging for his life. The animal offers to fly to Damayantī and speak of his beauty. This act, apart from the news already sent back and forth between the two, causes Damayantī to develop such ardor for Nala that she loses herself, *na svasthā…*

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[43] Mbh 3.50.3
[44] Mbh 3.50.3
[45] here van Buitenen's translation of *āpatitā* (Mbh 3.31.18).
[46] Mbh 3.31.18
[47] Mbh 3.50.18

babhūva,[48] setting into motion her *svayaṃvara* marriage. Both princes and gods travel to Damayantī in order to participate in the selection of her husband. The invitation, however, meant for those princes, and specifically Nala, was only haphazardly overheard by the deities.[49] In the midst of their travel, then, the gods approach Nala to represent them in announcing their intention to Damayantī.

> *bho bho naiṣadha rājendra nala satyavrato bhavān |*
>
> Oh, great Nala of Naiṣadha, Indra of kings, you are bound by truth.
>
> *asmākaṃ kuru sāhāyyaṃ dūto bhava narottama ||*
>
> Help us, become a messenger, best of men.
>
> (Mbh 3.51.29)

Unaware of Nala and Damayantī's romance, the gods select Nala, they explain, because he is *satyavrata*, which I translate as "bound by truth" to emphasize the sense of obligation present in the second word of the compound, to which Nala has no choice but to acquiesce. However, it is worth noting that Nala pledges his fidelity to the gods before knowing their identity or intention.[50] Though appearing to be a roadblock in Nala's quest for Damayantī, the gods' intervention facilitates Nala and Damayantī's first meeting as they sanction a taboo introduction before the *svayaṃvara*.[51] With help from the gods, Nala is able to bypass the kingdom guards and enter Damayantī's chamber.[52]

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[48] Mbh 3.51.1

[49] Mbh 3.51.23

[50] Mbh 3.52.2

[51] Monier-Williams biblically translates Indra's *pravekṣyasi* (Mbh 3.52.10) as "Thou shalt enter" (1965, 17).

[52] *niveśana*, Mbh 3.52.10.

The unique circumstances of Nala and Damayantī's initial encounter alert us to pay close attention to their contact here. First, through Nala's perspective, Damayantī's beauty is once again confirmed. That observation serves to underscore the hardship of the hero's subsequent actions as he "*dhārayām āsa hr̥cchayam*" (Mbh 3.52.13), which Ganguli translates as "suppressed his passion," (2000, 118) van Buitenen renders as "mastered his love," (1975, 326) and Monier-Williams presents as "all his passion he suppressed" (1965, 17). These somewhat disparate interpretations illustrate ways of understanding the verbal root *dhr̥*. "Held" might be the most literal corollary, while "mastered" perhaps harkens back to Nala's strength in control as described in regard to horses. However, it is Ganguli and Monier-Williams' translation as "suppressed" that more clearly conveys a necessary connotation to remind us that the hero is keeping a secret. We should note, then, the position of this verb in regard to what Nala might be holding in the verse, "*satyaṃ*" (Mbh 3.52.13), which we earlier identified as "truth." It is the quality of truthfulness, what the gods had uniquely identified in Nala, that conversely causes him to be something false. This motif, hiding in plain sight, weaves throughout the subtales and central narrative of the epic.

The text proceeds to illustrate the attraction between Nala and Damayantī by repeating different forms of the verbal root *smi*, to smile, when the pair lock their gaze upon each other.[53] This simple image of the two figures smiling at each other, before a word is spoken between them, gets at the core of their romance. What seems crucial here is perhaps the reciprocal nature of the act by both figures in contrast to those slanted

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[53] Mbh 3.52.18

smiles in the previous book by the antagonistic Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana during the assault upon Draupadī.[54] A moment later, however, Damayantī is more forthcoming, declaring her adoration for the man before knowing his identity. By firmly rooting their story as a romance here, an aspect of the subtale often overlooked,[55] this part of the *Mahābhārata* evades reduction as echo or mirror of the main narrative, standing out as something uniquely its own, but at the same time inseparable from the larger work.

Though suppressing his true feelings, Nala maintains his vow to the gods by imploring Damayantī to select one of the deities at the *svayaṃvara*. The princess, now aware of Nala's identity, professes that she will only choose Nala. Nala remains perplexingly true by relaying the subversion plan back to the gods themselves. In response, the gods each disguise themselves as Nala during the ceremony so that they might be accidentally selected. Damayantī cuts through the deception by pleading with the crowd, stating "*haṃsānāṃ vacanaṃ śrutvā yathā me naiṣadho vṛtaḥ*" (Mbh 3.54.17) — that she chose Nala when she heard the words of the geese — reminding us of the animal's intercession while pointing to something of the veracity of their romance. It is through her own quality of *satya*, evoked in each of the three subsequent verses, that Damayantī makes her appeal. Moved by her argument,[56] the gods reveal themselves through a series of marks, such as their inability to sweat, cast a shadow, blink, or place

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[54] Mbh 2.62.23 and 2.63.10, respectively. Duryodhana's smile occurs during the infamous exposure of his left thigh.

[55] see Hiltebeitel 2001, 218

[56] More accurately, the process follows a type of recurrent ritual in Vedic, Prakrit, and Sanskrit literature identified by Eugene Watson Burlingame as an "act of truth" (*satyakriya*) in which "a formal declaration of fact [is] accompanied by a command or resolution or prayer that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished" (1917, 429).

feet firmly on the ground.[57] To further convey their approval in the wedding, the gods bestow eight boons on the happy couple, notably Nala's ability to withstand fire and skill in preparing food.[58]

Madeline Biardeau has argued that the gods possessed no real design to marry the princess after all, but instead acted to sanctify the match.[59] The claim hinges upon an understanding of the compound "*vigatasaṃkalpāḥ*" (Mbh 3.51.27) and its surrounding context, employed to describe the gods during their primary encounter with Nala on the road to the *svayaṃvara*.

> *taṃ dṛṣṭvā lokapālās te bhrājamānaṃ yathā ravim* |
>
> Seeing him shine like the sun, those world guardians,
>
> *tasthur vigatasaṃkalpā vismitā rūpasaṃpadā* ||
>
> with departed intention, astonished by his perfect form, were still.
>
> (Mbh 3.51.27)

This is a brief moment in the text, and we know that it immediately precedes the gods' request of Nala to intercede in the marriage ceremony so that Damayantī might choose one of the world guardians. Nonetheless, there is evidence in the verse to indicate a sudden change of course here by the gods. As Biardeau points out, the phrase *vigatasaṃkalpāḥ*, which I translate as "with departed intention," suggests that their earlier notion to woo the princess was abandoned in the intensity of that moment. This might not be gleaned from Monier-Williams' translation, glossing over the ramifications

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[57] Mbh 3.54.24
[58] Mbh 3.54.30-31
[59] see Biardeau 1984, 249.

of the gods' reaction to Nala by simply stating, "Each arrested stood and silent" (1965, 13). Monier-Williams seizes upon the shock as an end unto itself without complicating its consequences. Therefore, he overlooks *vigatasaṃkalpāḥ* to support the earlier word *tasthuḥ*, stopped.

To further support Biardeau's reading, I argue that we should be more concerned with the term *vismitāḥ*, which directly follows *vigatasaṃkalpāḥ*. While this past passive participle of the verbal root *smi* with prefix *vi-* is often translated as 'surprised' or 'amazed,' in this context a more appropriate translation might be "astonished."[60] The OED points out that astonish is derived from the Old French *estonnir*, which would later evolve into *tonner*, a boom or thunder. Particularly, as we see here in the reaction of the gods, to be astonished is to experience a sudden thunder-clap that stuns. Looking closer at the text in translation, the affect might correlate with Chaucer's Troilus upon first laying eyes on Criseyde, "And sodeynly he wax therwith astoned" (I.274). Elaine Tuttle Hansen identifies this moment as a type of "paralysis" (1992, 145) that alters the character's way of thinking. This shock upon sight of a beautiful physical form renders the appropriate resonance to utilize "astonished" in my translation of the Sanskrit. Furthermore, we will see that instances of stunned debilitation will recur at significant moments in the *Mahābhārata*, calling us to pay special attention to this verse. "Astonished," therefore, gives appropriate weight to the translation, allowing the reader to identify a possible turning point in the narrative.

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[60] This interpretation is not without precedent. Ganguli more literally renders the construction "filled with astonishment" (2000, 117).

We should also note here that the root of *vismitā* closely aligns this section to the subsequent scene in which Nala and Damayantī first lay eyes on each other. This careful crafting of pathos at the outset of the subtale contrasts with the emotion from a wailing Yudhiṣṭhira at the start of the episode and allows for the unique distinction of Nala's Tale as a love story. Agreeing with Biardeau's suggestion that the gods worked toward Nala and Damayantī's union, we might read their actions in transforming into Nala's likeness during the ceremony, a ruse that they only keep up for a few moments, as a recognition of the veracity of their match. In the introduction to his translation of the epic, van Buitenen points out that this is the only free bridegroom choice thus far in the *Mahābhārata*.[61] The agency exerted by Damayantī here, allowing no room for chance as was the case with Draupadī's union with the Pāṇḍavas, finds support by those 'astonished' gods. Moving along with the narrative, we will see that it is not the similarities between this subtale and main story that make it a significant episode for the epic. Instead, the subtale's ability to turn conventions from the main story on their head adds vitality to the entire text.

Furthermore, those "astonished" gods stand in contrast to Kali, who was neither present at the sighting of Nala nor the *svayaṃvara* ceremony and therefore harbors desire to have Damayantī for himself. When Kali protests the princess' selection of a human over one of the world guardians, the other gods attempt to allay his concerns by reassuring Kali that the match was *"samanujñātaḥ"* (Mbh 3.55.7) by the gods. Ganguli renders the term "consented" (2000, 123), while Monier-Williams utilizes the force of the prefixes as "full and liberal sanction" (1965, 33). Both understandings might support

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[61] see van Buitenen 1975, 184.

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Biardeau's claim regarding the intentionality of the gods' actions. In the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, the term is employed when the river Ganges "allows" Śaṃtanu to take the child Bhīṣma,[62] and again when Agni "allows" the Pāṇḍavas to leave the Khāṇḍava forest.[63] The connotation for the word here seems to be one of divine permission rather than a hand at orchestration, which I suggest is based on the gods' placement of Nala in the chamber of Damayantī before the ceremony. Nonetheless, we can discern something approximating authorization by a significant party in this context, leaning a translation more toward Monier-Williams' "sanction." Despite the admonition, an unsatisfied Kali sets Nala's ruin in motion.

DICE PLURAL

We should remember here that the events at the end of the *Mahābhārata*'s second book are still a fresh wound for the Pāṇḍavas — namely, the dice match and subsequent disrobing of Draupadī. Therefore, the emotional impact of Bṛhadaśva's subtale, particularly in the events enacted by Kali, must be acutely felt by the listening Yudhiṣṭhira. The main narrative's prince hears how Kali waited patiently for twelve years, and once "having possessed" Nala[64] immediately initiates a dice match. Like Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala's opponent is a family member intent on winning his kingdom.

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[62] Mbh 1.94.37
[63] Mbh 1.225.18
[64] *samāviśya* (Mbh 3.56.4)

However, Nala has little agency in the matter as the text repeatedly reminds us that he is unable to resist gambling due to the possession.

> *tam akṣamadasaṃmattaṃ suhṛdāṃ na tu kaś cana |*
>
> Maddened by the dice, none of his friends
>
> *nivāraṇe 'bhavac chakto dīvyamānam acetasam ||*
>
> could stop him, who was mindlessly gambling.
>
> (Mbh 3.56.10)

The force of possession here is unstoppable by the possessed and his surrounding retinue. Even Nala's gambling ability escapes blame here as the dice themselves were likewise possessed by Kali's companion, Dvāpara.[65] This emphasis on distancing the hero from his actions stands in contrast to Yudhiṣṭhira, who consciously debates the merits of his dice match and acts on his own accord.

What echoes here, I argue, is Draupadī's question after she was gambled away in the *sabhā* by her husband in Book Two: "*kiṃ nu pūrvaṃ parājaiṣīr ātmānaṃ māṃ nu bhārata*" (Mbh 2.60.7) — "Did you first lose yourself? Or me, Bhārata?" Perhaps out of shame, Yudhiṣṭhira is at a loss to respond. How do we assign blame to these parallel calamities? Yudhiṣṭhira implicates himself by his silence, but in Nala's case the gambler is seemingly guiltless. By holding that distorted mirror up to Yudhiṣṭhira here, Bṛhadaśva forces the prince to confront his role in the dicing. Nala is a figure who has lost himself in the same set of circumstances, in stark juxtaposition with Yudhiṣṭhira. Of course the subtale is told in the presence of Draupadī as well, adding support to her question. To

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[65] Mbh 3.55.13. Both names can also refer to different types of dice throws.

further augment the dicing scene, Bṛhadaśva says that Nala's gambling goes on for months while the citizens of his kingdom languish at the palace gates.[66]

The crucial intra-textual point of contact occurs when Nala's losses in the dicing leave him with little left to wager. Aware of the larger story, both reader and listener can anticipate the next narrative stroke as Puṣkara, Nala's dicing opponent, beckons him to stake his wife. If Nala proceeded in the prescribed way, he might still be easily forgiven, taking into consideration the influence of Kali. But without explanation here, Nala seems to throw off his possession and react in surprising fashion.

> *puṣkareṇaivam uktasya puṇyaślokasya manyunā |*
>
> With Puṣkara's words, Nala's heart
>
> *vyadīryateva hṛdayaṃ na cainaṃ kiṃ cid abravīt ||*
>
> was as if split with rage, and he said nothing.
>
> *tataḥ puṣkaram ālokya nalaḥ paramamanyumān |*
>
> Fixed on Puṣkara, Nala, with rage,
>
> *utsṛjya sarvagātrebhyo bhūṣaṇāni mahāyaśāḥ ||*
>
> the glorious one stripped the ornaments from his body.
>
> *ekavāsā asaṃvītaḥ suhṛcchokavivardhanaḥ |*
>
> Bare but for a single cloth, to friends' dismay,
>
> *niścakrāma tadā rājā tyaktvā suvipulāṃ śriyam ||*
>
> the king walked out, abandoning his substantial fortune.
>
> (Mbh 3.58.4-58.6)

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[66] Mbh 3.56.18

As he requests her to be staked, perhaps it is in Puṣkara's speaking of Damayantī's name, which is related to the verbal root *dam*, meaning 'control,' that allows Nala to begin to exert himself again. Nala's silence opposes Yudhiṣṭhira's loss of speech at Draupadī's question. Here it is an act in rejection of rather than submission to the wager. Is this section of the subtale perhaps reproach for how Yudhiṣṭhira should have acted in his dice match? Similarly "*ekavastrā*" (Mbh 3.58.7), in a single cloth, Damayantī follows her husband out into the wilderness. The repeated mention of clothing here evokes another detail for the end of the second book, Draupadī's disrobing. Draupadī is similarly described as "*ekavastrā*" (Mbh 2.60.15) when she is brought out into the hall as a result of the dicing. Draupadī's aggressors attempt to remove the garment, but an identical covering repeatedly appears in its place. The retention of that one cloth, then, signals the depth of loss for both main story and *upākhyāna* while simultaneously functioning to hold those characters somewhat intact.

In exile, Nala comes across a flock of birds — a historically good omen for the prince. These birds are not *haṃsa* as before, but instead described as a species called *śakuna*. It must not be coincidence here that Yudhiṣṭhira's opponent in his dice match was called Śakuni. The plumage of the *śakuna* also warrants distinguishing language as "*hiraṇyasadṛśacchada*" — "feathers that seemed made of gold" (Mbh 3.58.11; trans. van Buitenen 1974, 332). That their precious plumage might only be a matter of perception here foreshadows the results of their interaction with Nala, who removes his single cloth to utilize in the capture of the birds. Nala acts on the speculation that the birds might

provide sustenance and fortune for himself and his wife. Once the robe is deployed, the *śakuna* take off with cloth in tow. Like the earlier *haṃsa*, they speak to Nala:

vayam akṣāḥ sudurbuddhe tava vāso jihīrṣavaḥ |

We are the dice, fool, here to take your robe.

āgatā na hi naḥ prītiḥ savāsasi gate tvayi ||

No satisfaction has come to us while you went clothed.

(Mbh 3.58.15)

The cloth and the dice, nearly bumping up against each other in both main story and subtale, finally become intertwined, but perhaps we have several sets of dice in this text. In concert, these scenes build that object from manipulated instrument to active aggressor. This dice, becoming animal, one that speaks, one that holds a grudge, calls the reader to rethink the constraints or conditions faced by a particular hero. We should also remember the above-mentioned exchange on gambling misfortune between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira, in which she described his loss as the dice "swoop[ing] down" — that image becomes more literal here.

And why should birds bookend this initial phase of Nala's Tale? Considering our earlier discussion of the text as a love story here, Susan Crane identifies generic conditions that allow birds to come in close contact with humans.

> Closer to a romance's sensibilities than official science and theology were pervasive cultural convictions about animals' similarities to humans. Birds were broadly conceived (and, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, were still conceived in modern France) as making up a society with metamorphic relation to human society, in which birdsong fills the function of human language. (Crane 2013, 121)

For Crane, this particular genre lends to the anthropomorphizing of animals, and birds in particular, by expanding the boundaries of acceptable speech and action. Nala is pained, but not astonished. Their spectrum of behaviors testifies to the complexity of all characters in the text. The animals are both enemy and ally, with lives of their own. As Karl Steel posits, birds, often employed in storytelling for purposes of scale, remind the reader of the "many, many worlds" that intersect and miss each other through birds' indifference to human production.[67] No story is ever the whole story. Here both *haṃsa* and *śakuna* play a crucial role in progressing the plot of the subtale, but they also take the hero down a peg by de-centering his agency.

With this ultimate ruin, Nala's downfall is complete. He returns, naked, to his wife to proclaim to her that he is "*gatacetana*" (Mbh 3.58.19). This term receives a variety of interpretations: "frantic" (Monier-Williams 1965, 45), "deprived of my senses" (Ganguli 2000, 126), "my mind is failing me" (van Buitenen 1975, 332). I would suggest, however, that Nala is referring to something more severe and totalizing that might speak to his subsequent abandonment of Damayantī. Taking *cetana* then to include the whole of a person rather than just the mind, keeping in mind its definition by Monier-Williams as both "man," "soul," and "sense" (Monier-Williams 1984, 397), or perhaps conceptually more akin to 'consciousness,' Nala might be saying, in plain terms, that he has 'lost himself.' This is not the same phrasing as Draupadī's question, but the contact between these two instances — the reversal of the disrobing and perceived separation between husbands and wives — seems to call the reader to make that dialogical connection. But

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[67] see Steel 2013.

there is pull and push here. Nala will leave, he will not leave. The prince is inconsistent in words and actions to his wife, and we should remember that his possession by Kali persists. Of course the text itself reminds us here: *ākṛṣyamāṇaḥ kalinā sauhṛdenāpakṛṣyate* (Mbh 3.59.22), which van Buitenen beautifully renders as "drawn forth by Kali, drawn back by his love" (van Buitenen 1975, 334). When they reach a *sabhā* in the forest, and Damayantī sleeps, Nala splits the remaining cloth in two and departs, though with repeated hesitation, and the text again describes him as *gatacetana*.[68]

Nala's Tale demonstrates incessant reduplications. Birds, once messengers to unite Nala and Damayantī, return to bring about their separation. The gambling scene is repeated between main story and subtale to mirroring effect, but with re-imagined detail. Perhaps most clearly illustrating how extreme the text is willing to concede to this trope, the dice themselves take flight so that they might return to the fore once their application has seemingly run its course. We should keep in mind Hiltebeitel's explication of the epic, "No story is ever the whole story" (Hiltebeitel 2001, 38), but extend that understanding to the objects that resonate within the text. Just as the stories act as "sideshadows" (Hiltebeitel 2001, 38) unto themselves — altered versions to complicate understandings of the text and questions of its design — constituent parts are broken apart and refitted within and around those narrative elements. As David Shulman notes, the interplay between parts and wholes within the *upākhyāna* is reflective of the text's drive, which is dictated both by genre on an abstract scale and objects in particular focus.

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[68] Mbh 3.59.17

Almost nothing that the text mentions manages to remain intact, unsplit, or singular, although thematically there is also a countervailing drive toward unity — this is, after all, in the most general sense, a love story about two people uniting as one. Perhaps the most trenchant symbolic expression of this problem is the almost obsessive focus on the single garment (*ekavastra*) — the garment used to clothe both Nala and Damayantī after the geese make off with Nala's own single cloth, and which Nala cuts in two as he abandons Damayantī in the forest. (Shulman 1994, 13)

One cloth is never just one cloth, both in the case of Draupadī's disrobing and Nala's severance. The implication here, I would argue, is that for anything to be whole in the text — that is, fully realized — it must be understood as fractured, as hybrid. Nala himself is not just Nala at this point, but embodies both himself and Kali. That contradiction is evident in the push and pull of his departure from Damayantī in the *sabhā*. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen provides cause to consider the cohabitation of opposing forces intrinsic to the generic identification.

Trapped in a dialectic of disidentification against the monster, the chivalric subject places himself in constant proximity to the abjected remainder: the monster's (continued) existence, even if in the "zone of inhabitability," is the condition without which the romance hero cannot come into being, and in whose absence cannot know himself. Boundaries that are reified through abjection are inevitably weak because they exist only as materialized through their *constant reiteration*. (Cohen 1999, 134)

Kali as monster, the otherworldly force that enacts conflict for the hero of the genre, serves to build the other's identity. The main story's dice match could never be fully considered without the adjacent subtale scene. The birds that enjoin Nala with Damayantī are incomplete unless we examine their theft of the cloth. That dimension of the dice

which acts on its own is crucial to the dice themselves. Imbued with hybridity, containing difference, each element in the text enacts its process of formation. The vitality of the work, I argue, rests in its hybrid contents.

Furthermore, these constituent parts and operative principles are brought through the Sanskrit epic in a long-form and non-linear process of reification. Meaning is carried between these points of contact in a mutually complicating and legitimizing fashion. If these are in fact mirroring practices, it is never explicit which side holds the glass. And I argue that we should never give precedent to the main story for its own sake. If translation is an undertaking to elucidate by altering signs and signifiers into a different context, then each reduplication is not only a transformation, but a continual *translation* of that element in order to develop understanding in both contexts. Finally, it is worth noting here that in his discussion of hybridity, Cohen refers specifically to the Medieval romance *Sir Gowther* — the story of a man who "never fights a traditional giant, because his monstrous body already contains that enemy" (Cohen 1999, 121). Such correspondences between far-flung tales allows us to view each story with new points of entry. By moving between the specific and abstract, expedited through the framework of genre, this study is enhanced by the inclusion of seemingly disparate worlds of literature. Just as the *Mahābhārata* works intra-textually to magnify crucial components, we must work in tandem intertextually, to carry meaning in between literary realms in order to augment our grasp of the work. The comparative ethic develops a mimetic comprehension between literatures through *translatus* — which I argue functions in line with the discursive force of the epic itself. Both sideshadow within the verse and

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comparisons outside engage in a perpetual practice of meaning development that eschews monovalence and stasis.

ON SEPARATION

The text shifts focus to describe Damayantī's distress upon waking to find herself without Nala. Though abandoned, the language is disparate from Nala's "loss of self." These verses describe the fervor of Damayantī's pain, "*tataḥ sā tīvraśokārtā pradīpteva ca manyunā*" (Mbh 3.60.12) — "then she, agonized by sharp grief and in rage as if having burst into flame…" The invocation of fire speaks to the panic illustrated by Damayantī's aimless darting about the wilderness. But she retains herself, and therefore control. Damayantī is attacked by a boa in the forest — fear for her safety while alone was voiced by Nala in his hesitation to leave — but is subsequently rescued by a nearby hunter. When the hunter subsequently attempts to attack Damayantī, she is able to stop him by virtue of her agency, once again employing the truth-act template described above by Burlingame.

> *yathāhaṃ naiṣadhād anyaṃ manasāpi na cintaye |*
>
> If I there is no other in my mind than Nala
>
> *tathāyaṃ patatāṃ kṣudraḥ parāsur mr̥gajīvanaḥ ||*
>
> then let this vile hunter fall dead.
>
> (Mbh 3.60.37)

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Though it is rare for a woman to commit the act of killing in the *Mahābhārata*, the incident receives little reflection as Damayantī moves on through the wilderness. Likewise, Draupadī's assailant is condemned to death, but it is at the hand of her husband and not the princess herself. Perhaps there is some internal change in Damayantī, who now traverses an increasingly perilous forest "*nābhibhyat… kasya cit*" (Mbh 3.61.10) — "without any fear."

Also surprising here is the text's abstinence from anthropomorphizing the snake. Later on in their own wilderness, the Pāṇḍavas will also be attacked by a boa, but saved through dialogue between the serpent and Yudhiṣṭhira.[69] The attempted consumption of Damayantī stands as the first interaction in the *upākhyāna* between the human and the natural world that does not involve reciprocated speech. As Damayantī continues to search for her husband, however, she comes across a tiger and attempts to engage the animal in conversation.[70] But the tiger makes no reply when Damayantī asks for Nala's whereabouts. She receives the same lack of response in querying a mountain and later, an *aśoka* tree. Though fully ensconced in it, the natural world appears lost to Damayantī. Only an illusory group of ascetics provide her momentary comfort with assurances that the couple will reunite in the future.

These scenes of lamentation regarding love in separation distinguish *upākhyāna* from main narrative counterpart and further align the genre designation of Nala's Tale with romance. Here we look at genre through a set of properties that might run through or, equally important, delineate pieces of writing. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the

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[69] Mbh 3.177.12
[70] Mbh 3.61.30

identification of a "principle operative in a number of texts" (Todorov 1970, 3) provides argument for genre analysis through a structural lens. However, the perceived genre is not a crystalline formation that a particular work must mirror. Such a study will ultimately redefine genre designations as "*every* work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species" (Todorov 1970, 6). We are called, then, to compare literatures in order to perceive a dialectic of genre through peculiarities and abstractions. The *Mahābhārata* allows us space to work intra-textually, though comparisons outside will prove fruitful, as well. Marie de France's lay "Chevrefoil," for example, highlights the moment in which an exiled Tristan is pained over his detachment from Isolt.[71] Likewise, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, regarded as a central component of the romance genre from the medieval period, give us reason to consider lamentation as a cornerstone of this writing form. Heloise's description of her suffering in the absence of love might easily be confused for that of Damayantī.

> You know, beloved, as the whole world knows, how much I have lost in you, how at one wretched stroke of fortune that supreme act of flagrant treachery robbed me of my very self in robbing me of you; and how my sorrow for my loss is nothing compared with what I feel for the manner in which I lost you. (trans. Radice 1974, 113)

By recognizing these structural similarities through the lens of genre, we can look further at the apposition of language between these texts; the resonance in entwining the self with the beloved and scorn toward the circumstances of the disunion. This operative principle, spanning literary traditions, enhances our perspective on salient features of the epic.

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[71] see Hanning and Ferrante 1978, 190

Furthermore, an understanding of structural points of contact through genre allows us to query the shift in the characters' relation to the natural world at this point in the subtale. Fredric Jameson provides a conceptual model within romance for such dissonant experiences of nature.

> Structural analysis now gives us the critical instruments for implementing our proposal to replace the older category of "character," as it dominates such psychology-oriented forms as the *Bildungsroman*, with that, more appropriate to romance, of "states" or world configurations: characters would then be understood as so many "actants" and their deeds as so many properties in the complex mechanism which effectuate the transition from one state to the next; while romance as a whole would be seen as a sequence of what, following Wagnerian opera, we may call "transformational scenes," in which, in some ultimate and unimaginably rapid pass between higher and lower realms, all the valences are suddenly changed, negative and positive poles reversed, and new complex or inverted or neutralized conditions make an unexpected appearance. (Jameson 1975, 148-149)

Nala and Damayantī's shift from ordered landscape to wilderness alone aligns it with the main narrative. But by adding the subtale's depiction of a suddenly inaccessible natural world, we are presented with an unexpected shift in realms as facets of the romance genre. The fantastical world, in which gods and animals intermingle in the affairs of men, suddenly gives way to both literal and figurative chaotic darting. Damayantī's aimlessness illustrates an inability to follow the ordered existence of her previous life. Even when given momentary reprieve — the monks' assurances that her former glory would be restored — Damayantī casts doubt on their forecasting in a way that she would not previously have questioned the appearance of the fantastic.

kiṃ nu svapno mayā dṛṣṭaḥ ko 'yaṃ vidhir ihābhavat |

Did I see a dream? What happened here?

kva nu te tāpasāḥ sarve kva tad āśramamaṇḍalam ||

Where are those ascetics? Where is the group of ashrams?

kva sā puṇyajalā ramyā nānādvijaniṣevitā |

Where is the lovely river with its pure waters, frequented by all kinds of birds,

nadī te ca nagā hṛdyāḥ phalapuṣpopaśobhitāḥ ||

and the charming trees adorned with fruits and flowers?

(Mbh 3.61.93-94)

In considering the episode an illusion, the text provides stark juxtaposition of these two modes of being. That earlier magical world, described in tandem with an idealized landscape, underscores the despair in Damayantī's current state. According to Jameson, the structure of a romance is contingent upon the identification, inversion, and eventual resolution of these "higher and lower realms" (Jameson 1975, 158). While the genre guarantees a particular thrust for the story, much like those dreamed well-wishers do with Damayantī, the tension of the work remains in the possibility of variation in relation to genre. As we continue to interrogate the epic, we are not searching for exact fit, but genre as guidance in accessing elements of the text. Todorov gives cause for understanding genre as instructive rather than dogmatic as "[i]mperfection is, paradoxically, a guarantee of survival" (Todorov 1970, 23).

When Damayantī finally comes across a means to exit the forest, we get a sense of how deeply entwined she has become with this untamed world. We should remember

the subtale's emphasis on the beauty of the princess at the start of the story. At this point, however, the occupants of a passing caravan fear the sight of her.

> *unmattarūpā śokārtā tathā vastrārdhasaṃvṛtā |*
>
> She appeared mad and afflicted with grief, covered with half a cloth,
>
> *kṛśā vivarṇā malinā pāṃsudhvastaśiroruhā ||*
>
> emaciated, pale, filthy, her hair soiled with dust.
>
> (Mbh 3.61.110)

Nearing the end of her time in the wilderness, Damayantī has come to embody that state of being. I should admit here that I prefer Monier-Williams' translation of *pāda* A in this verse, "Manic-like in form and feature" (1965, 79), to my own for both its economy and pliability. We get the sense that Damayantī has undergone transformation through and through in Monier-William's rendering. She has become so separated from her previous form, in fact, that she is no longer recognizable. The people in the caravan wonder if she is *devatā* (goddess), *yakṣī*, *rākṣasī* (two types of supernatural monster in the epic), or *varāṅganā* (beautiful woman).[72] Joining the pilgrims, then, it appears that Damayantī has discovered a clear path out of the forest. That night, however, a stampede of elephants decimates the retinue. Damayantī views the horrific event as the result of her inclusion into the group — the natural world remains unkind to her.

The event is grave enough to warrant a stylistic change in the poetry, from the eight-syllable-per-*pāda* *anuṣṭubh,* to the eleven-syllable-per-*pāda* *triṣṭubh*. The *upākhyāna* scantly employed the alternative *triṣṭubh* prior to this point; first in the

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[72] Mbh 3.61.114-115

subtale's opening of chapter 50, verses twelve and thirteen, to describe the unparalleled beauty of Damayantī, and once again in chapter 54, verse eleven, to illustrate Damayantī's anxiety in attempting to correctly choose Nala in spite of the mimicking gods at the *svayaṃvara*. When we get to chapter 61, however, which narrates Damayantī's lone trek through the forest, the *triṣṭubh* form is employed more frequently, yet sporadically, in verses 6, 7, 25, 32, 38, 51, 66, 78, 117, 118, and 123. The first two instances in this chapter list the creatures Damayantī encounters in the forest. Verse 25 is a lament for Nala, while 32, 38, and 51 ask for his whereabouts from the silent tiger and mountain. Damayantī is questioned by the illusory ascetics in verse 66 and responds in 78. Finally in verses 117 and 118 Damayantī introduces herself to the caravan and at 123 its leader describes their traveling animals. Note then that a list of animals bookends the *triṣṭubh* telling of Damayantī's journey. The subsequent chapter, relating the trampling of the caravan, presents a nearly uninterrupted use of the *triṣṭubh* from verses 6 through 18. Being the sole instance of more than two consecutive *triṣṭubh* verses heretofore, the start of the chapter warrants our attention. These verses describe, with some grisly detail, the slaughter by *danta, kara,* and *pada*— that is tusk, trunk, and foot.[73] The culmination of these events appears when Damayantī reflects on, and attempts to reconcile, the events of the past two chapters.

> *manye svayaṃvarakṛte lokapālāḥ samāgatāḥ |*
>
> I think the world guardians gathered at the *svayamvara,*
>
> *pratyākhyātā mayā tatra nalasyārthāya devatāḥ |*

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[73] Mbh 3.62.8. Strange that the text would have "*padbhyāṃ*" (broken by foot ~ trampled) in the dual here, suggesting bipedal elephants or focusing on just the front legs. Especially odd considering the apposition of the list, the other two modes of the caravan's demise are written in the instrumental plural.

those gods I refused there in favor of Nala,

nūnaṃ teṣāṃ prabhāvena viyogaṃ prāptavaty aham ||

surely it is by their power that I am separated from him.

(Mbh 3.62.16)

Damayantī, displaying difficulty in making sense of the events that have come to pass, finally considers her sin the act of choosing Nala as a husband over the gods. Outside the subtale, we know this is a half-truth: those gods present at the *svayaṃvara* have no hand in the matter. Instead, it is a vengeful Kali, having failed to arrive at the ceremony on time, missing the plot as it were, who constructs the partition between the two lovers. The end of this block of *triṣṭubh* verse marks the conclusion of Damayantī's time in the wilderness as she immediately leaves the tragic caravan to arrive at the Cedi kingdom. We see that throughout the *upākhyāna*, this verse form is attached to the actions and experiences of Damayantī. This association is pronounced as the verse grows more frequent during her separation from Nala. Building connections among character, affect, and form, the text alerts the reader to the emotional resonances of these points in the narrative just as a minor-key adagio might signal a particular tone within a film — the elongated verse focusing in on those difficulties that Damayantī endures. By coinciding with the forest journey, this form underscores the emotion of Damayantī's despair and resignation in ultimately finding herself the cause of such misadventure.

Separation, then, is a driving force in the subtale, which I argue is reflected in three distinct but interwoven ways. First, the narrative plot depicts, on the most apparent level, the physical disjunction of its heroes. Second, the text reflects a concurrent

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severance by means of structure, which we can view through the lens of genre. And third, a stylistic distinction is revealed in the building up of an alternative verse form. Paradoxically, the act of separation is a coordinated and carefully choreographed movement in the subtale, which gives it weight and a critical materiality. As Roland Barthes explains, the literary nature of this work finds essential quality in the ability to maintain both difference and sameness.

> There is supposed to be a mystique of the Text. —On the contrary, the whole effort consists in materializing the pleasure of the text, in making the text *an object of pleasure like the others*... The pleasure of the text is just that: claim lodged against the separation of the text; for what the text says, through the particularity of its name, is the ubiquity of pleasure, the atopia of bliss. (Barthes 1975, 58-59)

By repeatedly reflecting and enforcing the notion of separation, the story gives us something distinct to grasp. This monster has scales. Meaning is brought through narrative, structure, and style to reflect literature which Derrida calls "the institution which allows one to *say everything* in *every way*" (Derrida 1992, 36), to which he adds:

> To say everything is no doubt to gather, by translating, all figures into one another, to totalize by formalizing, but to say everything is also to break out of prohibitions. To *affranchise onself*—in every field where law can lay down the law. The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law in the experience of this "everything to say." It is an institution which tends to overflow the institution. (Derrida 1992, 36)

Not only does this particular literature, as object in institution, express its functions through a range of utterances, it also translates and represents the preceding materiality. Yudhiṣṭhira's lament occurs at the height of his own disjuncture and results in the telling

of Nala's Tale, which translates the main story experiences into something unique on separation and suffering. This in turn renders the subtale separate from and intrinsic to the text as a whole. By distorting its echo of the main story, the subtale's hybrid voicing provides essential ways for understanding the literature.

Furthermore, by focusing on Damayantī as the hero distraught by separation, the subtale subverts its surrounding narrative. Recall that Yudhiṣṭhira asked for the story of a *king* unhappier than himself.[74] Instead, Bṛhadaśva describes the sorrow of a king's wife, asking Yudhiṣṭhira to look outside himself. While Nala will return to the fore, the text does not simply follow him out of the *sabhā* with newly ripped cloth. Instead, the subtale remains with Damayantī as she wakes to find herself abandoned and continues through her endurance of the forest. The narrative, then, is fixed on Damayantī as active protagonist, as hero. Of course we have seen this agency in her self-choice marriage, too. Draupadī's question, posed at the moment of her disjunction from the Pāṇḍavas, continues to reverberate.

ON DISGUISE

Once in Cedi, Damayantī is spotted by the king's mother who asks her identity — *śaṃsa me kāsi kasya vā* (Mbh 3.62.23) "Tell me who are you or whose?" The dialogue advanced by Draupadī on ownership again comes into play. Can Damayantī only be

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[74] Mbh 3.49.34. Note that this verse, which is essentially Yudhiṣṭhira's expression of 'woe is me,' is also in *triṣṭubh*.

understood in terms of property? The response is intentionally vague and misleading. Damayantī responds that she is noble, *jātisaṃpanna*, devoted to her husband, *bhartṛ-samanuvrata*, and, to throw off the scent, a hairdresser, *sairandhrī*.[75] Why Damayantī chooses to conceal herself is unclear. Unlike the Pāṇḍavas, who live in hiding in the subsequent book of the *Mahābhārata*, Nala and Damayantī's expulsion had no condition of a veiled existence. Madeline Biardeau displays similar difficulty with this point in the narrative.

> *Le but pour elle n'est pas de se faire reconnaître comme princess par des égaux mais de retrouver Nala dont elle est sans nouvelles. Et Nala est poursuivi par une ennemi invisible mais puissant. Quand on connait la suite des événements, on a malgré tout de la peine à justifier ainsi l'incognito de Damayantī: plutôt que d'être reconnue par un envoyé de son père, elle aurait pu immédiatement révéler qui elle était, quitte à en faire la preuve. Est-ce l'intérêt dramatique du récit qui à besoin de ce piment supplémentaire? Ou faut-il chercher ailleurs la raison profonde de ce détour?* (Biardeau 1984, 261)

> Her goal is not to be recognized as a princess by others, but to find Nala without notice. And Nala is pursued by a powerful but invisible enemy. Even when one knows the sequence of events, it is still difficult to justify Damayantī's thus disguising herself: rather than being recognized by her father's envoy, she would have been able to reveal who she was immediately, even to prove it. Is it dramatic interest of the story that needs this supplement? Or should we look elsewhere for the real reason for this detour?

While it might be plausible to speculate that a revelation of Damayantī's identity would foil her hope for reunion, the text provides no reason to make this assumption. Regardless of motivation, the act certainly forecasts events for the listening Pāṇḍavas. Draupadī will

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[75] Mbh 3.62.25-26. And see Hiltebeitel 2001, 229.

pretend to be a hairdresser as well,[76] returning the reflection of the mirror story. This is a crucial function of the subtale-main story dynamic: the *upākhyāna* not only re-imagines concurrent events but serves to instruct and guide the main story, as well. Yudhiṣṭhira's request for the tale was to be both consoled for his past and advised on how to proceed.

The text shifts focus to Nala at this point. The prince remains in the wilderness but, unlike Damayantī, retains his ability to speak with animals. Inverting the earlier scene in which Damayantī was attacked by a large boa, Nala responds to a snake's call for help. In exchange for his life, threatened by a surrounding fire, the snake promises to assist Nala — *upadekṣyāmi te śreyas trātum arhati māṃ bhavān* (Mbh 3.63.6). Disparate translations of the line show us that the wording of the promise is as perilous as its outcome. Archaizing language notwithstanding, Monier-Williams' translation renders a soteriological bent into the subtale: "I the way of bliss will show thee, if thou sav'st me from this fate" (Monier-Williams 1965, 95). Ganguli finds the declaration to have more personal application to Nala: "I will instruct thee in respect of thy welfare. It behoveth thee to deliver me" (Ganguli 2000, 141). J. A. B. van Buitenen presents the text as more plainspoken and direct: "If you save me, I shall teach you what will profit you" (van Buitenen 1975, 344). Considering these translations in concert, then, the snake's words seem intentionally abstract to invite confusion for both the reader and Nala. While the offer might be understood as assistance particular to Nala's predicament, the possibility of a broader interpretation either in mundane or spiritual terms persists, along with a sense of suspense through this concealment. Of course we should remember here the

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[76] Mbh 4.3.16

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boon given to Nala upon his marriage to Damayantī, he can pass through the fire unharmed. As the prince moves in to assist, a second proposal by the snake is equally puzzling.

> *padāni gaṇayan gaccha svāni naiṣadha kāni cit |*
>
> Go, counting your own steps, Nala.
>
> *tatra te 'haṃ mahārāja śreyo dhāsyāmi yat param ||*
>
> Then, king, I will give you a great gift.
>
> (Mbh 3.63.10)

So when the snake, who reduced his size so that he might be carried out of the fire, repays Nala by biting him on the tenth step,[77] the reader hesitates to wonder whether Nala's poor fortune persists. The bite instantly transforms Nala's appearance and leaves him *vismita,* astonished.[78] Once again this key phrase is associated with a type of paralysis as Nala is described as arrested, *tasthau* (Mbh 3.63.12), in order to take stock of his new self.

That moment of astonished hesitation is a crucial component to what Todorov calls the fantastic. By discerning the fantastic and its role within a particular work, Todorov argues that we might gain insight into the genre function in literature.

> The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time

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[77] John D. Smith notes the similarity in the Sanskrit between the word bite, here in the imperfect form *adaśat*, and the number ten, in this verse a locative *daśame*. (2009, 173 n. 1)

[78] Mbh 3.63.12

the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work — in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (Todorov 1975, 33)

By employing the fantastic in this particular fashion, inviting and at once reflecting hesitation through reader response and character, the work resists reductive understandings. The shrinking, talking animal and Nala's physical transformation do not require exegetical explanation, but are accepted in the literature through the moment of reflection. Astonishment occurs with the incorporation of the fantastic event through hesitation. In regard to the *Mahābhārata*, the moment is meant to occur on three planes: subtale, main story, and reader. This interaction reaches beyond shared experience to intertwined participation. As literature, rather than as a form of allegory, the poem incorporates and sustains difference. The fantastic allows shifting identity for Nala, Yudhiṣṭhira, and reader.

Following this moment, the snake goes on to explain his obscured actions. The transformation will allow Nala to enter the city of Ayodhyā undetected: "*mayā te 'ntarhitaṃ rūpaṃ na tvā vidyur janā iti*" (Mbh 3.63.13) — "I concealed your form so that people may not know you." In addition, the venom now coursing through Nala's body will harm the possessing Kali. The exclamation by the snake serves as the first direct mention to Nala of Kali's action. Up to this point, the humans in the subtale speculated upon some madness or possession as the only possible explanation for the virtuous Nala's poor deeds, but remained unable to verify this hunch. The double action, freeing the hero from himself in both form and blame, propels Nala away from his

hopeless state of being. Furthermore, the snake reveals that Nala's particular quality mentioned in the opening verse, his skill with horses, will soon gain him control over the dice, which will in turn lead to his reunion with Damayantī.[79] In his final instruction, the snake supplements Nala's cloth with "*divyaṃ vāsoyugaṃ*" (Mbh 3.63.23), which van Buitenen takes to mean "a pair of celestial clothes" (van Buitenen 1975, 345), but might also qualify the outfit as beautiful rather than divine. To return to his original form, Nala is told to put the clothes on and think of the snake.

By the time he arrives at the kingdom of Ṛtuparṇa, Nala has developed a backstory for his new identity. Unlike Damayantī, who largely conceals herself by remaining vague, Nala fully commits to his disguise.

> *sa rājānam upātiṣṭhad bāhuko 'ham iti bruvan |*
>
> He approached the king, saying, "I am Bāhuka.
>
> *aśvānāṃ vāhane yuktaḥ pṛthivyāṃ nāsti matsamaḥ ||*
>
> No one in the world is equal to me in guiding horses.
>
> *arthakṛcchreṣu caivāhaṃ praṣṭavyo naipuṇeṣu ca |*
>
> And I am consulted in difficult and specialized matters.
>
> *annasaṃskāram api ca jānāmy anyair viśeṣataḥ ||*
>
> Also, I know how to prepare food better than others."
>
> (Mbh 3.64.2-3)

As with Damayantī, the disguise functions almost counterintuitively by further revealing the hero to the reader. Not only are those originally attested aspects reaffirmed, but we

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[79] Mbh 3.63.20-21

are also reminded of Nala's cooking ability. This information, though seemingly dispensable, will play a larger role later on in the story. The ruse convinces the king of Ṛtuparṇa to take on Nala, now Bāhuka, as his *aśvādhyakṣa* — supervisor of horses.[80] The way in which the subtale sets the stage for subsequent events, initially describing a figure whose characteristics will be demonstrated when his or her identity is obscured, highlights disguise, the embodiment of difference, as a sustaining component of the self. Nala's words and actions as Bāhuka refine and focus a depiction of the hero.

The classical Tamil epic *Maṇimekhalai* obscures its titular hero in two distinct instances. Given the power to transform her appearance at will, Maṇimekhalai, who works throughout the text to fulfill Buddhist *dharma*, changes her identity while being stalked by a king so that she might freely roam the streets of her city. In this state, she transforms a prison into a temple and housing for monks, honoring the Buddha and *saṅgha*. Toward the end of the book, Maṇimekhalai disguises herself as a male student so that she might learn about the various religious traditions as the final stepping stone along her path to the Buddha. Disguise, therefore, both for the Tamil and Sanskrit epics, functions as a necessary component to relieve restriction rather than a means to hide. Perhaps, though inexplicit, Biardeau's understanding of Damayantī's concealment enacts an operative principle inherent in the genre without requiring pointed motivation. To transform in the epic, to become hybrid, is to fulfill the role of hero. Nala and Damayantī separately alter themselves so they might free themselves up to act as their character

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[80] Mbh 3.64.6

requires. The moment in which Nala's possession is dismantled and he might again act under his own agency is simultaneously when he must proceed incognito, as other.

Ensconced in this new setting, Nala breaks character once every night to sing a lament to Damayantī. Nala displays his guilt over the abandonment and concern for the welfare of his wife.

> *kva nu sā kṣutpipāsārtā śrāntā śete tapasvinī |*
>
> Where does that poor woman lie, afflicted by hunger and thirst, wearied,
>
> and miserable?
>
> *smarantī tasya mandasya kaṃ vā sādyopatiṣṭhati ||*
>
> Thinking of that fool, whom does she wait upon today?
>
> (Mbh 3.64.10)

In van Buitenen's translation of the verse, the third-person subject is shifted to the second person, thereby rendering Nala's call more direct and personal. While the alteration might more clearly present that crack in his mask, the use of the third person, however, aligns with Nala's subsequent explanation of the verse to an overhearing party. Nala as Bāhuka recounts his own story in the third person, expounding upon a 'nitwit'[81] who separated from his venerable wife and now sings out to her in sorrow. Bāhuka states that the man does not deserve to live and doubts whether the wife survives.[82] By stepping into that third-person role, Bāhuka's reflection appears more damning and severe than Nala himself. The efficacy of the scene rests in what it hides from view.

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[81] van Buitenen's translation of *mandaprajña* from Mbh 3.64.12 and following (1975, 345). Nitwit might be a little lighthearted considering the gravity of the scene.

[82] "*vasaty anarhas*" (Mbh 3.64.15); "*yadi jīvati*" (Mbh 3.64.16 and 17)

Damayantī's disguise gives way almost immediately. Her father's searching envoy is able to definitively identify Damayantī through both her unmatched beauty and deep sadness. Despite the feeble mask, Damayantī is changed. Her lengthy description by the envoy reminds us of the subtale's opening verses. But here the praise is amended by descriptions of despair.

rūpaudāryaguṇopetāṃ maṇḍanārhām amaṇḍitām |

Beautiful, noble, and virtuous, she is worthy of ornament though unadorned,

candralekhām iva navāṃ vyomni nīlābhrasaṃvṛtām ||

like a sliver of a new moon covered by dark clouds in the sky.

(Mbh 3.65.16)

More than her identity, the disguise hid Damayantī's trauma from view. When finally confronted with herself by the envoy, therefore, the princess is stripped of pretense "and wept powerfully"— "*ruroda ca bhṛśaṃ*" (Mbh 3.65.30). That display of emotions ultimately betrays Damayantī by causing her harborer, the Cedi king's mother, to query the envoy for Damayantī's identity. But the woman is glad to hear the truth, revealing herself to be the sister of Damayantī's mother.[83] In a fitting bit of symbolism, a lotus-shaped mole, *piplu*, on the forehead of Damayantī, obscured at first by dust, confirms the story. The king's mother permits the princess to return to her parents without hesitation.

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[83] Mbh 3.66.11

Once safe in Vidarbha, Damayantī beseeches her parents to resume the search for Nala. Envoys are once again dispatched to outside kingdoms, but with specific instructions from the princess. Damayantī gives the envoys a scripted request to appeal to her husband.

kva nu tvaṃ kitava chittvā vastrārdhaṃ prasthito mama |

Where have you gone, gambler, having cut part of my cloth?

utsṛjya vipine suptām anuraktāṃ priyāṃ priya ||

Having abandoned your beloved, dear one asleep in the forest, dear?

sā vai yathā samādiṣṭā tatrāste tvatpratīkṣiṇī |

Indeed, she waits for you there, as directed,

dahyamānā bhṛśaṃ bālā vastrārdhenābhisaṃvṛtā ||

the girl covered with half a cloth is wholly consumed.

tasyā rudantyāḥ satataṃ tena śokena pārthiva |

To her, constantly weeping because of this sorrow,

prasādaṃ kuru vai vīra prativākyaṃ dadasva ca ||

o king, show kindness and give her an answer.

(Mbh 3.67.9-11)

David Shulman identifies this passage as "a kind of riddle" (Shulman 1994, 8) that corresponds with the earlier verse sung by Nala each night in Ṛtuparṇa's kingdom. This designation of 'riddle' is advanced by Shulman because an answer might be more complex than a surface reading of the question suggests.

She is taunting him with a question that only has one answer, although enfolded within this answer is the other, perhaps unanswerable question: "why?" Only Nala

would act as he has acted — on the level the identification is utterly secure — but, she wonders, does the fatal moment of his abandonment have any meaning? (Shulman 1996, 9)

Agreeing with Shulman's recognition of the multivalent interpretations of the question along with its specificity directed at Nala, I would add that this 'riddle,' conjoined with Nala's corresponding verses, connect back to the main story by sharing that accessible but ultimately unanswerable quality present in Draupadī's query. Taking these three utterances in concert, then, the riddles present a moment of pause, a hesitation, to consider the significance of the preceding actions. Moreover, this style of questioning, as riddle, connects to the larger motifs of journey and disguise resounding in the main story and subtale.

> In this sense the riddling-speech of the period of searching and disguise is the proper paradigm for their communication. The riddle also embodies just such an open space, a "nowhere" that should somehow be bridged by the answer, even if the answer has the paradoxical effect of veiling or disguising again even as it brings the hidden solution to the fore. Couched in code, the riddle rings true: Damayantī's question is the right one for Nala, not merely in the literal way in which it is conceived but in the much more pervasive sense that the story as a whole seems to suggest. It is the answer that is the locus of difficulty, for everyone — riddler, respondent, the eavesdropping audience outside. (Shulman 1994, 11)

Those three riddles remain unanswered by their intended recipients, Yudhiṣṭhira, Damayantī, and Nala, because their implied answer would be unsatisfactory to the demands of the narrative. The 'riddles' are more declaration than interrogative, as the second and third verses of Damayantī's script more directly demonstrate. Her appeal to her husband is in describing her circumstance in order to reunite, just as Draupadī threw

the legitimacy of her situation in doubt so that Yudhiṣṭhira might disrupt their separation. The verse given to the envoys, then, is meant to appeal to both the prince inside the subtale and the one who occupies the main story.

In fact, Damayantī is explicit on this intention in her instruction to the messengers.

etad anyac ca vaktavyaṃ kṛpāṃ kuryād yathā mayi |

And speak this and more so that he might take pity on me.

vāyunā dhūyamāno hi vanaṃ dahati pāvakaḥ ||

When rattled by wind, the fire burns the forest.

(Mbh 3.67.12)

She hopes to "rattle" Nala in order to break down those elements that brought about their separation — here an oblique speculation on his possession, which is heretofore only confirmed to Nala himself by the snake. Rather than elicit the riddle's implied answer, Damayantī advances the question for alternate effect. Her direct address to Nala, which clashes with the prince's address to his wife in the third person, serves as a more undeviated emotional appeal. Furthermore, the need to read between the lines of the question might account for Damayantī's contradictory detail, describing herself as remaining in the forest while she in fact stays in her parents' kingdom. What Shulman does not address, however, is that the above verses are only the beginning of Damayantī's plea.

bhartavyā rakṣaṇīyā ca patnī hi patinā sadā |

A husband always supports and protects a wife.

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tan naṣṭam ubhayaṃ kasmād dharmajñasya satas tava ||

Although you are one who knows *dharma*, both these have perished — why?

khyātaḥ prājñaḥ kulīnaś ca sānukrośaś ca tvaṃ sadā |

You are ever acclaimed as wise and noble and compassionate,

saṃvṛtto niranukrośaḥ śaṅke madbhāgyasaṃkṣayāt ||

grown cruel, I fear from my own bad luck.

sa kuruṣva maheṣvāsa dayāṃ mayi nararṣabha |

Great warrior! Have pity on me, bull among men!

ānṛśaṃsyaṃ paro dharmas tvatta eva hi me śrutam ||

I often heard you say, compassion is the highest dharma.

(Mbh 3.67.13-15)

The most striking aspect of this final portion of the appeal is the double invocation of *dharma*. The reasons for my own choice in leaving the word untranslated will be made clear below. But for now we should point out that van Buitenen chooses to render the word as "Law" (1975, 349) while Monier-Williams translates *dharma* as "duty" (1965, 115). Ganguli employs two terms: in its primary instance here, *dharma* is deciphered as "duty" while at the end of the plea it becomes "virtue" (2000, 146-147). As a result, we should inspect those two distinct contexts in which the term is applied. Initially, *dharma* is framed particularly around marital responsibilities. The *dharma* of a husband requires acting as guardian for the wife. In the final verse, however, *dharma* is aligned with a more general substrate of the population as benevolent action. Elsewhere in the subtale, *dharma* appears in association with ceremonial practice, referring to the manner in which

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Damayantī carried out her selection of Nala in the *svayaṃvara*.[84] *Dharma* is also correlated with the duties of a king,[85] a skill set that can be imparted by the gods as a marriage gift,[86] a range of knowledge,[87] and a method of hospitality.[88] Through Damayantī's explicit intention to "rattle" Nala with her plea, we should understand the employment of this pliable and loaded term as reflexively echoing its previous invocations.

As Hiltebeitel argues in his 2011 text on the topic, *dharma* holds unique footing in the epic precisely because of its unusual pliability in providing structure to a particular narrative.[89] More specifically, the text's diffuse cast of characters, both, and often simultaneously, actors and listeners, along with disparate contexts, in divergent levels of narrative render the pivotal term impossible to associate with a singular stance.[90] *Dharma* defies lexicographical interpretation in the *Mahābhārata* also in dialogical response to surrounding writings, such as Aśoka's edicts and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which offer narrower portrayal, often personified in a flawless singular figure. Despite the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is frequently referred to as the *dharmarāja*, and is born directly from a deity named Dharma, we have seen that the text takes deliberate steps to disassociate the prince with idealized conduct and thereby a one-to-one correlation between the character and term. Instead, Hiltebeitel grounds the *Mahābhārata*'s *dharma* in legal precedent, as applied to

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[84] Mbh 3.54.25
[85] Mbh 3.54.35
[86] Mbh 3.54.31
[87] Mbh 3.55.8
[88] Mbh 3.61.66
[89] See Hiltebeitel 2011, 27: Hiltebeitel uncovers *dharma* in the Mbh to include common sense, allowing the weight of this governing principle to apply to mundane and murky circumstances, thereby acquiring a range of meanings.
[90] See Hiltebeitel 2011, 424.

both formal and informal understandings of law, and proceeds to demonstrate its malleability. The *upākhyānas* are tied to concerns in understanding *dharma* as Hiltebeitel identifies the subtales as largely imparting non-homogenous lessons in the law.

> In effect, these lessons in legal precedent present just the opposite of what we have seen in the foregrounding that Rāma's ever so law-abiding ancestors provide for him. It is not that lunar dynasty kings are less law-abiding. It is just that they bring the law into play because they like to mess around, which results in legal tangles that carry forward into the main story. (Hiltebeitel 2011, 427)

As we will also find in my later discussion of the Yakṣa's Questions, *dharma* itself becomes a type of riddle in Shulman's terms. Its initial answer, the singular definition, only opens the gates to a host of unanswerable questions. To consider *dharma* in this epic is impossible without asking for whom or when or where it might be applied.

I argue, therefore, that in its multivalence, *dharma* does not obscure, but rather, like Damayantī's birthmark, reveals its subject. Its usage in Nala's Tale underscores both a range in application and its qualifiable importance in association. If we are to take *dharma* expressed in Damayantī's plea as ultimately compassion for a moment, its earlier iterations demonstrate the challenge in applying a single understanding to multiple instances. Agreeing with Hiltebeitel in its grounding in either formal or informal law, I add to that understanding *dharma* as a marker of distinction in the *Mahābhārata*. *Dharma* is itself what comes toward defining the entity at hand, the actions distinct for a husband, wife, king, *et cetera*. Whether rooted in convention, law, or some notion of essentiality, this term is utilized by the epic in its struggles to arrive at a distinctly complex worldview. Damayantī, in appealing to her husband *as* her husband, attempts to uncover the crucial aspect of Nala's position. But as Shulman's notion of riddle suggests, a simple

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understanding only opens toward further unanswerable questions. *Dharma* at once reveals a crux quality and its challenges in being fulfilled. When Damayantī invokes *dharma* in the second instance — attempting to suss out some essential and general meaning of the word — we should read the text as indicating that this plea will have obscured results. Not because she is incorrect, but because, like the structure of epic itself reveals, this is never the whole story. The *Mahābhārata* displays a syncopation in the processes of obfuscation and revelation that defies direct, measured, and directed correspondence.

When the message reaches the disguised Nala, his response is at once revealing and presents further complications to Damayantī's desired result. While he is indeed "rattled," Nala's reaction does not appear sufficient to bring about the couple's reunion.

vaiṣamyam api saṃprāptā gopāyanti kulastriyaḥ |

Even having encountered difficulty, noble women guard themselves,

ātmānam ātmanā satyo jitasvargā na saṃśayaḥ |

by themselves, being those by whom heaven is won: there is no doubt.

rahitā bhartṛbhiś caiva na krudhyanti kadā cana ||

And so when forsaken by their husbands, they never become angry.

viṣamasthena mūḍhena paribhraṣṭasukhena ca |

Him being in difficulty, confused, and fallen from happiness,

yat sā tena parityaktā tatra na kroddhum arhati ||

when she has been abandoned by him she ought not be angry then.

prāṇayātrāṃ pariprepsoḥ śakunair hṛtavāsasaḥ |

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Trying to obtain the necessities of life, his clothing was taken by birds,

ādhibhir dahyamānasya śyāmā na kroddhum arhati ||

consumed by misfortunes, the beautiful one ought not be angry with him.

satkṛtāsatkṛtā vāpi patiṁ dṛṣṭvā tathāgatam |

Whether treated well or not, having seen the husband in that condition,

bhraṣṭarājyaṁ śriyā hīnaṁ śyāmā na kroddhum arhati ||

bereft of kingdom and fortune, she who is beautiful ought not be angry.

(Mbh 3.68.8-11)

Perhaps indicative of Nala's shaken state, there appears to be desperation in his speech. The incessant repetition, both within lines and through corresponding *padas*, carries a manic tone. Nala is clearly riddled with guilt and regret for his past actions, but also mounts something of a self-defense by citing those birds as locus of the couple's separation. It is interesting to note that van Buitenen's translation leaves out any mention of the birds, rendering the verse to explain that Nala himself took the cloth "to find a living" (1975, 350). But those golden-feathered fowl, as we have observed through close reading of the text, are not minor detail but rather crucial to the plot, both in their actions and their states of being. The most significant aspect of Nala's speech, apparently, is the persistent "*na kroddhum arhati,*" evoked at each final *pada* of the latter three verses. The phrase contains a negative particle, the infinitive form of the verbal root *krudh*, to be angry, and the verbal root *arh,* deserve, conjugated in the third person present tense. Despite the simple construction, the phrase is rendered in three different forms in van

Buitenen's translation alone.[91] The repetition, however, seems crucial to reflecting Nala's state of being. I argue, then, that Nala's repetitive speech reflects Deleuze's notion of a "stutter," a deficiency in utterance that is intended to evoke meaning through silence — a pointed hesitation.

> When language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer…then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent. (Deleuze 1998, 113)

The simple construction, therefore, demands to be translated plainly and repeatedly in order to reflect the deficiency of language in reflecting Nala's regret and desperate self-justification. By finding other forms, the translator seeks out more coherent meaning within the speech, which I would argue is purposefully absent here.

> For when an author is content with an external marker that leaves the *form of expression* intact ("he stuttered…"), its efficacy will be poorly understood unless there is a corresponding *form of content*—an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated affect reverberate through the words. (Deleuze 1998, 108)

At first glance, the more literal translation might appear as though my early stance on lexicographical weight is turned on its ear. Instead, this instance reminds us that meaning built in the text through surrounding space, within and in between lines, deserves significant consideration. The prince fails to express any compassion or pity, at least in a manner that might indicate a desire to reunite with Damayantī — and this is certainly a

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[91] "there should be no cause for a grudge," "no beautiful woman would anger," "what beautiful woman would anger?" (van Buitenen 1975, 350). Note that the final two translations also include the nominative *śyāmā*.

significant omission. Instead, Nala is only able to stammer out his desire that the princess "does not deserve to be angry." This intentional silence captures the hindrance of Nala's agency at this juncture. Still possessed and in service to another, he cannot respond satisfactorily. As we have previously found that disguise can often facilitate new discovery, revelation might similarly point to constraint. When Damayantī subsequently hatches a plot to reunite with her husband, she remarks that her intentions must be hidden away from her father.[92]

REDUPLICATIONS

As we have just broached the topic of repetition above, we should turn to the subsequent resurgence of the subtale's opening act. The text calls for a second *svayaṃvara*. Again the marriage ceremony is enacted by Damayantī following the word of a messenger, and again it is a ruse with the explicit intention of facilitating the union of Nala and the princess. Deleuze's paradigm provides insight into the divergent "*form of content*" that allows reprised elements to subsume new meaning. The reader can recognize both the stutter and change as this second *svayaṃvara* is enacted with altered urgency. Damayantī dispatches an envoy to Ṛtuparṇa's kingdom with news of her desire to select a husband again. Nala journeys to Damayantī once more in service to another — this time as Ṛtuparṇa's disguised servant, Bāhuka, rather than a representative of the gods — and along the way faces another unexpected alteration. But first we should note that

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[92] Mbh 3.68.15

her plan is disguised well enough that Nala is unsure whether Damayantī is exhibiting "strategy," *upāyaś cintito mahān* (Mbh 3.69.4), "madness from grief," *duḥkhena mohitā* (Mbh 3.69.4), or the desire to commit "a scornful act" against her husband, *nṛśaṁsaṁ* (Mbh 3.69.5). The uncertainty of this hero in an altered milieu draws a striking contrast to Nala at the start of the subtale.

But the text does purposefully wish to call the reader's attention to those opening movements in the story. Nala's primary act as Bāhuka is in selecting horses to make the expedition to Damayantī. Here that initial *aśvakovida* descriptor comes into action, bolstered by Ṛtuparṇa's skepticism of those animals based on superficial assessment.[93] Nala's skill in horses is so tuned that it allows him to perceive elements that others might overlook. In transit, those horses validate Nala's ability as their speed appears to render the chariot capable of flight.[94] Furthermore, this image recalls the airborne chariot of the gods as they journeyed to the subtale's first marriage ceremony. And just like those gods in the chariot, Ṛtuparṇa's second charioteer looks upon Nala and is *"vismayaṃ paramaṃ"* (Mbh 3.69.22) — completely astonished. Following the observed pattern here, the second charioteer experiences a moment of hesitation in his astonishment where he begins to question whether his co-charioteer is actually Nala in disguise. In fact, van Buitenen more explicitly translates the text's description of Ṛtuparṇa's other charioteer at this moment, *"evam vicārya bahuśo… hṛdayena"* (Mbh 3.69.32), as "with many hesitations in his heart" (van Buitenen 1975, 352). Monier-Williams renders the verse "sate debating in his mind" (Monier-Williams 1965, 129), while Ganguli illustrates that

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[93] Mbh 3.69.14

[94] *"samutpetur ivākāśaṃ"* (Mbh 3.69.21) —they flew up together in the sky.

second driver as "Having thus reasoned in his mind" (Ganguli 2000, 150). While *vicārya* might be defined as 'questioned,' 'debated,' or 'pondered,' the term utilized by van Buitenen, 'hesitation,' more accurately supports my larger reading of the epic.

Moreover, I argue that van Buitenen's translation of the charioteer's state of being demonstrates a careful consideration of the critical word at play. The verbal root *car* denotes movement, to walk or to stir or to wander,[95] while the verbal prefix *vi-* adds words like away, apart, or out[96] to our understanding of the term. Though present to observe Nala's prowess, Ṛtuparṇa's charioteer wanders away repeatedly in his heart. The dichotomy might remind us of Nala's own more literal repeated departure and return, his hesitation at the abandonment of his wife. But more concretely, this moment reflects those gods, seeing Nala on the road to Damayantī's first marriage ceremony, each experiencing "departed intention." I argue that this moment further supports Biardeau's argument as both instances in concert support a particular trope in which that viewer of Nala steps outside of himself and abandons selfish goals through astonishment and hesitation. Agreeing with Hiltebeitel, it is certainly unusual for the scene to depict a duo of charioteers on such a journey.[97] But understanding the second actor as fulfilling the function of recognizing Bāhuka as Nala, while reflecting a larger story in the act of beholding Nala, the character becomes a necessary keystone in spanning these core moments of the text.

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[95] Whitney 2006, 45.
[96] Whitney 2005, 1077.
[97] See Hiltebeitel 2001, 233. Hiltebeitel argues that the second charioteer, Vārṣṛṇeya, also serves as a double to Kṛṣṇa.

The text snaps back from reflection and hesitation to the chariot's intense speed, which now blows the upper garment[98] off the body of Ṛtuparṇa. The king orders his car reversed so that the clothing might be retrieved, but Nala refuses and the matter is immediately dropped. It is a brief and strange moment in the text, perhaps to remind Nala of his own lost cloth. Nala's harsh rebuke of Ṛtuparṇa — on one level the insubordination of a servant to a king, which Thomas Parkhill cites as "displaying staggering chutzpah" (Parkhill 1984, 339) — might reflect some internal anguish. Furthermore, the scene illustrates a transitional return to Nala's own self-agency. In the next instant, Nala is halting the chariot on his own accord so that he can exchange his understanding of the heart of horses — *aśvahṛdaya* — with Ṛtuparṇa's knowledge of the heart of the dice — *akṣahṛdayajña*.[99]

As knowledge of the heart of the dice is imparted to Nala, Kali is finally pushed out of his body,[100] coughing up the snake's poison. The possession ends with a double regurgitation, both from possessed and possessor, and Kali goes on to explain that he was in fact victimized inside Nala's body by additional curses. An enraged Nala restrains himself from imposing further punishment upon the deity, and the two fully break away from each other. The placement of this scene deserves additional consideration. As we have observed, the subtale takes care to juxtapose its two scenes on the road to Damayantī's *svayaṃvara*. It is significant that Kali arrives at the corresponding moment that he missed in the first instance. Having never seen Nala on that road before, Kali

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[98] "*uttarīyam*" (Mbh 3.70.2).
[99] Mbh 3.70.26
[100] "*tasyākṣahṛdayajñasya śarīrān niḥsṛtaḥ kaliḥ*" (Mbh 3.70.27).

could not act in line with those other gods in sanctioning the wedding. Finally present on that road, Kali's actions, though hardly of his own accord, clear the final hurdle in Nala and Damayantī's union. Nala is finally dispossessed, fully himself once again. Though the *Mahābhārata* would never allow anything that simple: Nala is still another, he is still Bāhuka. As the charioteer, Nala rejoins his fellow travelers and rushes in the direction of Damayantī. The horses are so well controlled here that they fly like birds.[101]

The sound of those galloping horses first causes Damayantī to suspect that Nala has arrived at the kingdom. In expressing her longing for Nala, the subtale works once again to underscore the intensity of their romance.

yadi vai tasya vīrasya bāhvor nādyāham antaram |

If I am not in the space within the arms of that man today,

praviśāmi sukhasparśaṃ vinaśiṣyāmy asaṃśayam ||

which is a joy to touch, then I will no doubt die.

(Mbh 3.71.10)

Certainly we can observe that Damayantī holds no grudge over her previous abandonment. Her forgiveness is more explicit in subsequent verses, stating that she has no recollection of past wrongs.[102] Nala, however, is less merciful of himself. When Damayantī's messenger questions Bāhuka on Nala's whereabouts, repeating Damayantī's riddle, he replies that the deserter's actions are evil — *"aśubhakarmaṇaḥ"* (Mbh 3.72.15) — forsaking wife and children. In the first book of the *Mahābhārata,* the same phrase is utilized in the Śakuntalā *upākhyāna* to describe a king who similarly neglects his duty to

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[101] *"utpatato dvijān iva"* (Mbh 3.70.37).
[102] The repeated phrase here is *"na smarāmi"* (Mbh 3.71.13).

his son[103] and in categorizing the fire set to the lacquer house,[104] underscoring the weight of such a pronouncement.

The messenger facilitates a second test to determine the identity of Nala for Damayantī by bringing the princess some food prepared by Bāhuka. Where first Nala was recognized by sound, here he is also known through taste. Recall that Nala was gifted skill in cooking by the gods at his original marriage to Damayantī. Also mirroring that first ceremony, the sense of sight proves insufficient to suss out the true Nala — first because his form appeared in multitude and now because the prince resides within a disfigured disguise. The subtale repeatedly draws the reader back to the peculiarities of that initial marriage. Finally, echoing Nala's unusual first meeting with Damayantī, in which he was granted exclusive audience with his future bride by acting as envoy to the gods, Damayantī calls Bāhuka into her chamber for a private meeting. In some respects, the scene being rehashed at this point in the subtale, that first encounter between the lovers, was the site of the actual *svayaṃvara*. This is the point in which Damayantī makes her intention clear to Nala: "*varayiṣye naravyāghra*" (Mbh 3.53.11) — I will choose you, tiger among men! As Shulman points out, Damayantī also introduces us to her "gift for recognition" (Shulman 1994, 24), which comes to full fruition at this latter point of the story. The correspondences between these two parts of the text allow the reader of the tale to view the process through which the narrative establishes and carries its own conditions. Given its climactic weight, the reader can expect this reflected scene

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[103] Mbh 1.68.70
[104] Mbh 1.135.14

to be the moment when all pretense melts away. Nala fully confesses his identity to Damayantī.

mama rājyaṁ pranaṣṭaṁ yan nāhaṁ tat kṛtavān svayam |

My kingdom was lost not by my own doing.

kalinā tat kṛtaṁ bhīru yac ca tvām aham atyajam ||

That was done by Kali, timid one, and also that I abandoned you.

(Mbh 3.74.16)

J. A. B. van Buitenen renders Nala's message in a more succinct fashion: "It was not my own fault." (1975, 359). Considering the way in which Nala framed those events up to this point, resting the blame squarely on his own shoulders, the acceptance of Nala's lack of agency is remarkable. Both Shulman and Hiltebeitel observe Nala as finally capable of recognizing the self, the completion of an internal struggle.[105] But in observing the way in which Nala's Tale veers back and forth onto itself, the final accomplishment is more circular than linear. Each action toward the conclusion can be anticipated, or at least given full dimension, through the template that is laid out before the reader in the corresponding scene.

Agreeing, then, with Hiltebeitel's work to align Nala's disguise and revelation to those masks subsequently worn by the Pāṇḍavas further afield,[106] both audiences of the subtale are effectively *taught how to read the epic*. As template, the subtale reveals issues to underline in conducting a close reading of the epic, *i.e.* a consideration of concealment as a point of disclosure as well as agency of the self. For the main story heroes and their

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[105] See Hiltebeitel 2001, 236 and Shulman 1994, 27.
[106] See Hiltebeitel 2001, 239.

wife, their approach to the fourth book is informed by this subtale, which matches the process of understanding undertaken by the reader. By committing to these sideshadows and reduplications that occur within subtales, between subtales and main story, and, as we shall see, through dialogical interactions among disparate subtales, my study will continue to demonstrate that as literature, the *Mahābhārata* commits the double action of relaying a narrative while simultaneously teaching the audience how it should be read.

Unlike the rest of us, Nala does not appear to be clued in on the plot as he asks Damayantī how she could commence a search for a second husband.[107] Damayantī's response more explicitly presents the work of the preceding chapters, she invokes the first wedding scene.

> *na mām arhasi kalyāṇa pāpena pariśaṅkitum |*
>
> You should not suspect me of evil, blessed one.
>
> *mayā hi devān utsṛjya vṛtas tvaṁ niṣadhādhipa ||*
>
> Having sent away the gods, I chose you, ruler of Niṣadha.
>
> (Mbh 3.75.1)

By blurring the line between the two events, Damayantī's speech reveals the larger design of the subtale. From the sky, the god Vāyu confirms the princess' alibi while raining flowers down upon the reunited couple.[108] While on one hand, it appears almost contradictory that Damayantī would require ratification, Shulman reminds us that the vitality of the story rests in that interplay between different storytellers.

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[107] Mbh 3.74.21
[108] Mbh 3.75.11-15

You need an audience to recognize the story just as Nala needs Damayanti to recognize him. Without her, he has no identity of his own. Without the audience, the Nala narratives do not exist as such. The story, that is, constitutes something of a riddle. It needs to be answered or deciphered or identified as such. (Shulman 2011, 7)

Vāyu, existing outside of the main action, but also complicit in it, fulfills the function of a mediating audience for the story told between the two lovers, which is after all within a story that is within a story. As Shulman explains, "prior knowledge of the answer is required to resolve the riddle" (2011, 7). Since Nala's stance prohibits his own larger awareness, the deity is in unique position to exhibit the supporting perspective. And as the gods sanctioned their initial union, it is only appropriate that a mirroring intercession occur. Shulman works to uncover that critical correspondence among actors, listeners, and readers of the subtale.

Identification is a matter of knowing. Nala may know the answer to the riddle he constitutes, but he cannot use or become the answer without Damayanti. The interactive exchange is necessary and creative, laying down a field of force within which an identity can emerge… The Nala narrative cannot emerge unless someone tells it to someone else. (Shulman 2011, 8)

The activity Shulman describes here, of telling and retelling in order to bring into existence, is akin to what Derrida pronounces as a process of carried meaning between events in a hermeneutic process of confirmation.[109] A moment that is "haunted" (Derrida 1992, 294) by another transposes the fundamental instance by carrying over meaning between different points while achieving mutual substantiation. Derrida's discussion of the operation of translation, which we can align with the act of storytelling, reveals its

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[109] Derrida 1992, 309.

critical function within and around the development of narrative. Shulman and Derrida both inform this reading of the *Mahābhārata* by underscoring the notion that "interactive exchange is necessary and creative" (Shulman 2011, 8).

Their reunion now at a climactic point, Nala, following the snake's instruction, puts on the dustless robe — *"tatas tad vastram arajaḥ prāvṛṇod vasudhādhipaḥ"* (Mbh 3.75.17) — to shed the disguise. Having lost himself through the removal of an *ekavastra*,[110] Nala's return must be accompanied by a corresponding act. With a stamp of finality, the ultimate verse in the scene breaks meter in presenting the resolution through Damayantī.

> *saivaṁ sametya vyapanītatandrī śāntajvarā harṣavivṛddhasattvā |*
>
> Then joined together, she was free from weariness, alleviated of grief, and her being felt increased joy.
>
> *rarāja bhaimī samavāptakāmā śītāṁśunā rātrir ivoditena ||*
>
> Her desire fulfilled, King Bhīma's daughter shone like the night by the risen cool-rayed moon.
>
> (Mbh 3.75.27)

Physical transformation is not relegated to Nala alone. When Damayantī first called Bāhuka to her room, she is described as *"malapaṅkinī"* (Mbh 3.74.8) — covered in mud. This appearance might be at odds with her current housing within the kingdom, but the image is necessary to juxtapose the shift that occurs within and outside both figures upon the joint revelation. Nala and Damayantī are presented as altered through language of loss

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[110] Mbh 3.58.19.

and recovery. They shed grief, weariness, and disguise, while gaining joy and their original forms. Ganguli's translation of the verse above presents slightly different resonance, rendering the term *kāma* as wish rather than desire, which must in turn be "obtained" rather than fulfilled, as I have advanced above.[111] We can observe the subsequent effects of a seemingly interchangeable word choice in dictating subsequent acts of translation, noting that *samavāpta* derives from the verbal root *āp*, obtain.[112] However, and agreeing with van Buitenen,[113] I argue that my translation as "fulfilled desire" is more contextually expressive of the depth displayed in Damayantī's longing.

With Damayantī's resolution at an end, Nala must return to one final piece of the tale in order to complete the story: the dicing. After a month in his father-in-law's kingdom, Nala travels back to Niṣadha for one final wager. We should note that Damayantī and their children do not accompany him at this point. The dicing, both here and in the outer main story, appears to be a segregated affair. Confronting his previous opponent, Nala resumes their dialogue by agreeing to Puṣkara's request to wager Damayantī.[114] Anticipating the events of the *Mahābhārata*'s fifth book, Nala states that the kingdom will be staked either through the gamble with dice or in the gamble of battle — "*na ced vāñchasi tad dyūtaṁ yuddhadyūtaṁ pravartatām*" (Mbh 3.77.8). Puṣkara is happy to commence, revealing that his true intention was always to win Damayantī.[115] Incensed but restrained, Nala begins the game and ousts his opponent within a single

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[111] Ganguli 2000, 159.
[112] Whitney 2006, 6.
[113] van Buitenen 1975, 361.
[114] Mbh 3.77.5.
[115] "*sā hi me nityaśo hṛdi*" (Mbh 3.77.15) — She has always been in my heart.

verse.[116] The returned king then explains to his opponent that Puṣkara did not best him in the first place, asserting that the defeat came at the hand of Kali. By identifying the true villain, then, the two reaffirm their friendship and Puṣkara returns to his own kingdom. Their resolution points to the narrative possibilities within the main story. As there is no external actor in that outer narrative's dicing, severe conflict is inevitable. Within the *upākhyāna*, Nala's kingdom is now safe to welcome home Damayantī and their children. The subtale closes by assuring its audiences that Nala and Damayantī live out their days contented.

Subsequently returning to the narrator, then, Bṛhadaśva more explicitly tells Yudhiṣthira that he need not worry about his current predicament as the two narratives follow complementary trajectories.[117] In a final act of correspondence, Bṛhadaśva gives the Pāṇḍava prince the same knowledge of dice that Ṛtuparṇa bestowed upon Nala. Further satisfying Yudhiṣthira's original request, the sage goes on to outline the ways in which Nala's story contained greater calamity than the Pāṇḍava narrative. Having just witnessed the operation of reduplication within the text, however, we as readers should not be content to hold the story as simply appeasement or rationalization. Derrida and Shulman both compel us to consider interweaving strands of correspondence as fundamentally generative, simultaneously expanding and bringing into focus the artistic possibilities of the entire work. Our narrator, whom we share with the heroes of the main story, propels the epic, providing at once an infrastructure and countless means for its

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[116] Mbh 3.77.19.

[117] "*tathā tvam api rājendra sasuhṛd vakṣyase 'cirāt*" Mbh 3.78.5. — So you also, great king, shall live this out with your kin for a short time.

subversion. The literary tension rests in reflectively viewing those latent sideshadows within each story. Rather than subsisting as derivative reflections, points of contact propagate the *Mahābhārata* itself. By multiplying the narrative possibilities through subtale and main story, the epic declares, like the poet William Blake, "I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (Blake 1904, 8).

Chapter 3 - Rāma's Tale

THE TRANSLATED STORYTELLER

Considering our discussion on the narrative possibilities that are born from interacting layers of storytelling, it should come as no surprise that Yudhiṣṭhira requests additional tales not long after his meeting with Bṛhadaśva. Though they have met before, the Pāṇḍavas engage the *ṛṣi* Mārkaṇḍeya in a pattern consistent with their introduction to Bṛhadaśva. Rather than ask after his own well being, however, Yudhiṣṭhira here requests a tale more explicitly directed at his recently kidnapped wife.

> *asti sīmantinī kā cid dṛṣṭapūrvātha vā śrutā |*
>
> Is there a woman, or has one been seen or heard before,
>
> *pativratā mahābhāgā yatheyaṁ drupadātmajā |*
>
> as loyal to her husband and virtuous as that daughter of Drupada?
>
> (Mbh 3.277.3)

This is not to say that Nala's Tale satiates the prince's request for tales more squarely directed at himself. Rāma's Tale, immediately preceding Sāvitrī's Tale, and also relayed by Mārkaṇḍeya, is in fact the result of a query that mirrors the one posed to Bṛhadaśva.[118] The shared pattern of questioning through which these subtales are initiated suggests their utility to the listeners and the story as a whole. The crucial point to be made here is not

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[118] Mbh. 3.257.10

that Nala's Tale is, as it appears, insufficient in alleviating the prince's grief, but that one story for a listener is never enough.

Unlike Bṛhadaśva, Mārkaṇḍeya is a more consistent presence in the third book of the *Mahābhārata*. First appearing upon the Pāṇḍavas' arrival into the forest, the sage intervenes as the brothers debate whether to accept their thirteen-year sentence in the wilderness. Mārkaṇḍeya advises the brothers to "Live out this hardship term in the forest / As you have promised" (trans. van Buitenen 1975, 272) — *yathāpratijñaṁ ca mahānubhāva; kṛcchraṁ vane vāsam imaṁ niruṣya* (Mbh 3.26.17) — under the terms of their loss in the dicing. The sage's wording here deserves a moment of consideration as the act he recommends, *niruṣya*, containing the prefix *nis* and verbal root *vas*, more literally translates as 'dwell.' According to the *ṛṣi*, the time in the forest must be experienced rather than suffered before the desired result, the Pāṇḍavas' return to exalted status, can come about — pointing to the education of the Dharma king. It should be of little surprise, then, that Mārkaṇḍeya returns to the Pāṇḍavas in the latter half of their exile in the forest to recount a series of tales surrounding the passage of time.

Luis Gonzalez-Reimann refers to the extended session with Mārkaṇḍeya as "the most important section on the *yugas* in the whole poem" (Gonzalez-Reimann 2002, 92). The *yugas*, or eras of time, are delineated by the sage at the outset of his dialogue with Yudhiṣṭhira into two stages, utopian and polluted.[119] Mārkaṇḍeya proceeds with a series of subtales depicting a process of exhausting, and consequently deteriorating, eras through these two distinct categories. The sage illustrates the utopian period through four

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[119] Mbh 3.181.10-20

brief subtales, each depicting a conflict that is resolved to universal satisfaction. First, a *brahmin* is accidentally shot during a hunt, but revives himself and alleviates the anguish of the prince who shot the arrow.[120] Second, a debate between a king and *brahmin* on their relative status ends harmoniously as the two groups are aligned both with gods and sages.[121] Mārkaṇḍeya goes on to relay conditions for a perfect world as described in a dialogue between a sage and the goddess Sarasvatī.[122] The final narrative in this succession depicts Manu as witness to a great flood, able to save himself and all creatures through the aid of the creator deity Brahmā in the form of a fish.[123] Manu's survival is depicted as the reciprocal result of his own good deed in initially rescuing the fish from harm. These vignettes are apparently linked by the time period they depict. This pure period, in which people act with elevated integrity, remains ultimately unscarred by trial.

Following an interlude account in the first person by Mārkaṇḍeya, which will be discussed below, the brothers pose a more speculative question in regard to the forthcoming *kaliyuga*, which they designate as a period of agitated or confused *dharma* — *samākuleṣu dharmeṣu* (Mbh 3.188.5). The imminent nature of this period is indicated in the shift to the future tense through which the sage describes the gradual discord in regard to *dharma*, signaled through relational and celestial disarray.[124] A subsequent set of subtales narrated by Mārkaṇḍeya redeploys the sage's established tropes with further

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[120] Mbh 3.182. This trope occurs earlier in the epic's main story (Mbh 1.109) with more disastrous results.
[121] Mbh 3.183
[122] Mbh 3.184. The purified world, as made explicit here, is based on acts, *karman*.
[123] Mbh 3.185.
[124] See Mbh 3.188.52-84. Mārkaṇḍeya describes a world full of *mlecchas* who devour everything (*sarvabhakṣa*) and are naturally cruel (*svabhāvāt krūrakarmān*). Nature is described as correspondingly harsh with maligned stars (*jyotīṁṣi pratikūlāni*) and six destructively burning suns (*ṣaḍbhir anyaiś ca sahito bhāskaraḥ pratapiṣyati*). The final stroke of downfall appears to be the ruination of the family structure, hospitality, and friendship, the later of which Hiltebeitel argues makes up the basis for this epic's discourse of civilizational order (Hiltebeitel 2011, 604).

complicated conflicts. Within these six subtales, a king's brutal and selfish acts wrong a *brahmin*, resulting in the bludgeoning death of the king by *rākṣasas*; another king has difficulty finding regard; Viṣṇu is under threat; *brahmins* intentionally kill animals; and *dharma* receives complicated dimension, illustrating its 'subtleties' — *sūkṣmaṁ dharmaṁ* (Mbh 3.196.2) —as applied to both women and base, wicked men — *nṛśaṁsena durātmanā* (Mbh 1.196.12). After focusing exclusively on *brahmins*, kings, and deities in the first block of subtales, concluding with the veneration of a hunter's duties provides a stark marker of the distance traveled by the storyteller here. Transitioning between these sets of tales, the world described by the sage moves from ideal to entangled, Mārkaṇḍeya's lesson from dogmatic to anecdotal.

Here we should recall that the storytelling is interposed before the *kaliyuga* subtales as Yudhiṣthira requests Mārkaṇḍeya's first-person account on the passage of the ages. The sage, illustrated here as inexhaustible, subsisting through countless epochs, provides his own testimony on the degeneration of a world increasingly filled with false speech[125] and neglect,[126] as well as its eventual dissolution. Mārkaṇḍeya describes his fearful experience walking across the ruins of Earth only to come across a lone child who presents the sage with a lush and populated universe, demonstrating the return from destruction that underpins the cosmological structure of the sage's account. The child conveys the renewed world by bringing Mārkaṇḍeya into and out of his own body, an act described respectively as *praveśitaḥ*[127] and *niḥsāritaḥ*.[128] The first term is accurately

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[125] Mbh 3.186.24 — *anṛtavādinaḥ*
[126] Mbh 3.186.27 — *vivarjitāḥ*
[127] Mbh 3.186.91
[128] Mbh 3.187.44

understood as 'caused to enter,' the causative form of the verbal root *viś*. Monier-Williams describesthe latter term, *niḥsārita*, as a derivative of the verbal root *sṛ* particular to the *Mahābhārata* meaning 'expelled.'[129] In concert, the movement in and out serves as a type of education for Mārkaṇḍeya, a revelation that allows him to address the Pāṇḍavas with unique authority on both physical and temporal movement.

Moreover, van Buitenen renders both *praveśita* and *niḥsārita* as 'translated into' and 'translated from' in his English edition of the text.[130] Through this reading, Mārkaṇḍeya becomes the translated object, carried into and out of a different milieu while in turn carrying over his newfound perspective through both contexts. The choice by van Buitenen appears intentionally considered, linking the act to utterance, "On a sudden the child opens its mouth wide, and powerlessly I am translated into it by an act of fate" (van Buitenen 1975, 589), and cognition, "You entered inside my body, and, seeing all the world together there, you were amazing and did not understand; hence I translated you quickly from my mouth, *brahmin* seer, and declared myself to you" (592). It is worth noting that in the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, *praveśita* is translated by van Buitenen as 'admitted,'[131] here *vis à vis* gaining entrance to a palace, and 'stuck,'[132] describing the act of piercing an insect. Through the session with Mārkaṇḍeya, van Buitenen takes intentional steps to combine words meaning enter and exit into the single term 'translated' — rendering it into something of a contronym in suggesting its

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[129] Monier-Williams 1984, 544.
[130] van Buitenen 1975, 589 and 592.
[131] van Buitenen 1973, 166.
[132] van Buitenen 1973, 238.

simultaneous and opposing trajectory. Of course, it is equally crucial here that the passage of time and translation are portrayed as interlinked.

> The process of diachronic translation inside one's own native tongue is so constant, we perform it so unawares, that we rarely pause either to note its formal intricacy or the decisive part it plays in the very existence of civilization. By far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it is a verbal construct. History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense. (Steiner 1998, 29-30)

As the title of Steiner's chapter here makes clear, any attempt in developing an understanding between realms requires the act of translation. Steiner argues that language is contingent upon temporal arrangement, meaning alters rapidly from sign as soon as the latter receives placement. A work in perpetual redeployment must undergo a process of translation, whether within or between languages, in order to bring about its own apprehension. Particularly relevant then, a section of the text that takes as its framework all of time, the cycle of the *yugas*, demonstrates the tension of renegotiation in meaning. Tasked with describing *dharma*, Mārkaṇḍeya portrays its variegation and 'subtleties' through an ever changing timeline. The sage himself becomes translator *par excellence*, existing throughout each of these periods and thereby undergoing his own process of translation which is made more literal when moved into and out of the body of the deity. Much like Umberto Eco's assertion in *Experiences in Translation*, that the best translators have themselves been translated,[133] the sage is able to reflectively reconfigure both himself and the evolutionary significance of *dharma* to his audience and portray unique authority to divulge his subtales due to his extended lifetime.

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[133] see Eco 2001, 5.

By participating in the process of translation, Mārkaṇḍeya, the immortal storyteller, is acutely aware of the perpetual alteration of language just as the text is itself aware that its foundations will require pliability to subsist throughout generations. When presenting a dialogue on an ideologically foundational term such as *dharma*, therefore, the epic leaves space to permit a multitude of understandings.

> Polysemy, the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis, characterizes the language of ideology. Machiavelli noted that meaning could be dislocated in common speech so as to produce political confusion. Competing ideologies rarely create new terminology. (Steiner 1998, 35)

Perhaps less nefarious in its intent, the sage, and thereby the *Mahābhārata*, works to develop a perspective that can endure the inevitable march of time. Sheldon Pollock argues that efforts to centralize power in the epic focus more specifically on a question of geographic rather than temporal dominance.

> The spatial interests of the *Mahābhārata* exert the same kind of structuring force on the narrative as do its political interests, and this is so because the two are mutually constitutive: the political exists in space, and what exists in space, and what exists in space is unavoidably related to the domain of power, whether as something inviting or something resisting incorporation. Thus the plotting of an epic geosphere, far from representing just another among the *Mahābhārata*'s myriad concerns, forms one of its central subjects. Power here is figured, in essence, as the command of space, however we are to understand the idea of command (and the difficulties of a satisfactory understanding should not be minimized), and the space to be controlled is the fundamental concern of power. (Pollock 2006, 226)

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Pollock's description of mapping within the narrative is not tied to consolidation or the carving out of specific applicable locales. Rather, Pollock claims that the text is rendering coherent disparate regions. The dissemination of the *Mahābhārata* conspires with the overall mapping of a larger 'cosmopolis.'

> The *Mahābhārata*'s narrative construction of a supraregional domain was complemented, or perhaps better, enacted, by a range of material-cultural practices relating to the text, including the spread and distribution of manuscripts, the creation of editions, and the various modes of popular dissemination. These practices accomplished two things at once. First, they reproduced narrated space by their location in and circulation through actual space, thereby investigating the narrative with a new degree of actuality and cognizability. Second, they reasserted the symmetry of the political and cultural spheres, endowing the transregional cultural formation that found expression in Sanskrit with a political imagination of transregional scope. (Pollock 2006, 228)

I would amend this argument to note that time and space are contingent in regards to understanding and power within the epic. Mārkaṇḍeya is similarly depicted as a far-reaching traveler, endowed with an abundance of time[134] to embark on world-spanning journeys. The text is aware that it should be made legible to disparate zones both temporally and geographically. The session with Mārkaṇḍeya and Steiner's discussion of meaning demonstrate that language is deployed to reify notions of the past, to which Pollock adds conceptions of the foreign, in order to render a worldview more immediate. Depicting the sage as both translator and translated while providing a spectrum of perspectives on a crucial term in the text's lexicon, I would argue that the *Mahābhārata* anticipates and welcomes its own translation and, further, that van Buitnenen, here

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[134] Mbh 3.186.80.

translator of the translator, is keenly aware that he is carrying over meaning that relies on the act of a translator in order to continue its efficacy, whether across languages, locales, periods, or all three simultaneously.

After recounting his experience throughout the cycle of the ages, Mārkaṇḍeya is again prompted to provide a more direct definition of *dharma*.[135] While at first glance the sage's answer might be read as evading the question, never directly addressing his inquiry, the sage more explicitly vocalizes the inevitable contingency of perpetual translation in developing understanding.

> *na te 'sty aviditaṁ kiṁ cid atītānāgataṁ bhuvi |*
>
> Nothing that has gone before or after on earth is unknown to you.
>
> *tasmād imaṁ parikleśaṁ tvaṁ tāta hṛdi mā kṛthāḥ ||*
>
> Therefore, do not have trouble in your heart, son.
>
> *eṣa kālo mahābāho api sarvadivaukasām |*
>
> This time belongs to all the dwellers in heaven, o great-armed one.
>
> *muhyanti hi prajās tāta kālenābhipracoditāḥ ||*
>
> Surely beings born are bewildered, propelled by time, my son.
>
> (Mbh 3.189.24-25)

Comparing the above translation with that of van Buitnenen will reveal the subtleties of the language.

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[135] Mbh 3.186.20. Yudhiṣṭhira twice asks in which *dharma* he should be stationed — *kasmin dharme mayā stheyaṁ* — and what is the place of his own *dharma* — *kathaṁ ca vartamāno vai na cyaveyaṁ svadharmataḥ* — linking Steiner and Pollock's focus on power in both time and place. Acting in accordance with *dharma* here is what bestows authority upon the prince.

You know all that is past and future on earth, so, my son, do not worry so much in your heart. This time is Time for all the celestials too — the creatures are confused, my son, they are being urged on by Time. (van Buitenen 1975, 598)

An initial discrepancy can be observed in the translation of the compound *atītānāgataṁ* which van Buitenen correctly identifies as 'past and future,' now revealed to Yudhiṣṭhira by the immortal sage. This rendering supports the overarching identification of Mārkaṇḍeya as existing outside of the constraints of time. Given our discussion of Steiner and Pollock, however, and the depiction of the sage's travel, my own translation of the term, attending to the verbal roots as 'come and go,' attempts to leave greater space for the interplay between temporal and geographic domains. Similarly, van Buitenen seems to render *kāla* twice as both time and Time, interchangeably. Capitalized, Time indicates a type of personification or principle, which is certainly present in a section that we have seen identified as one of the most important on the subject of *yugas*. However, I would argue that the notion of 'time' does not receive a spectrum of ideological definitions in the way that *dharma* does throughout the sage's subtales. Instead, time is that actant upon which *dharma* rests, and while time experiences fluidity in the transfer between ages, as an overarching structure it is markedly more fixed — which arguably makes this session more dependent upon and interested in conveying a conception of time rather than *dharma*. In its instrumental form, *kāla* or time is *abhipracud*, which van Buitenen takes to mean 'urged.' In the causative and with the prefix *pra,* the verbal root *cud* is identified by Monier-Williams to also mean 'driven,'[136] which I argue corresponds more directly to the passive stance of those affected by *kāla* as well as the notion of time as carrier. Those

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[136] Monier-Williams 1984, 607.

actions attendant to time become the hinge of these verses, allowing transition and the sage's translation to come to the fore. As a narrator experienced in translation, we will find Mārkaṇḍeya guiding and disseminating attentive readings through his later subtale on Sāvitrī.

REVERBERATIONS

Following the session with Mārkaṇḍeya, the sage remains in the retinue of the Pāṇḍavas as they undergo a series of trials that culminates in the attempted abduction of Draupadī by a king named Jayadratha. Now acquainted with the suffering that befell Nala upon separation with his wife, Yudhiṣṭhira asks if such an evil act is only made possible through the machinations of time[137] before lamenting his station in the forest. The sage replies with an *upākhyāna* on the life of Rāma, whose wife, Sītā, is abducted by the *rākṣasa* Rāvaṇa. The loss of a loved one veers from subtale to main story to subtale again, recast from bewildered abandonment to attempted kidnapping to successful kidnapping. Increasing in intensity through each echo, the notion of separated lovers is enacted within the subtale to appease Yudhiṣṭhira, again requesting a story depicting someone in a similar position to his own. Similar to Nala's Tale, Mārkaṇḍeya relays the story expressly to assure the prince that analogous hardships and trials find favorable resolve within the world of the *Mahābhārata* despite *dharma*'s dependency on time.[138]

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[137] Mbh 3.257.4.
[138] Mbh 3.276.12.

It is worth noting that Yudhiṣṭhira's prompt of the sage includes additional questions on the lineage of Rāma and his adversary, Rāvaṇa.

kasmin rāmaḥ kule jātaḥ kiṁvīryaḥ kiṁparākramaḥ |

Into which family was Rāma born? How heroic was he? How brave?

rāvaṇaḥ kasya vā putraḥ kiṁ vairaṁ tasya tena ha ||

Whose son was Rāvaṇa? What was his fight with him?

(Mbh 3.258.4)

While Nala was introduced by name first, and subsequently described as the "mighty son of Vīrasena" along with a host of other admirable qualities, Rāma's Tale begins by introducing and describing his grandfather, Aja, and father, Daśaratha.[139] Rāma is listed among his brothers as Daśaratha's sons, but not singled out or illustrated with adjectives promoting his virtues. Instead, the narrator moves on to similarly describe Rāma's wife, Sītā, by means of her parentage.[140] In contrast to Yudhiṣṭhira, Rāma's introduction marks him as fully mundane. For van Buitenen, this status extends to Sītā as well, while their union is one which "the Maker himself had destined" (van Buitenen 1975, 728). For Peter Scharf, however, divine intervention arrives by means of Sītā's birth, rendering her more akin to the subtale's listeners. Scharf translates the line in question, *"yāṁ cakāra svayaṁ tvaṣṭā rāmasya mahiṣīṁ priyām"* (Mbh 3.258.9), as "Rāma's dear queen, whom the Creator himself made" (Scharf 203, 98) — with the action of the creator, *tvaṣṭṛ*, referring to either Sītā herself or her marriage. The quick introduction of Sītā, however, also omits any detail of her union with Rāma, which is unusual given the rhythm of subtales

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[139] Mbh 3.258.6.
[140] Mbh 3.258.9.

surrounding the *Rāmopākhyāna*. The marriage, as evidenced in both the tales of Nala and, as we will see below, Sāvitrī, serves as crucial exposition in understanding the force that compels both heroes to reunite with their partners. Given the importance of this element in *Mahābhārata* stories that seek to portray the loss and recovery of a loved one, it seems more crucial for the text to comment upon the marriage's divine provenance rather than that of Sītā. There is less discrepancy over the supernatural heritage of Rāvaṇa, however, who is initially designated as the grandson of the god Prajāpati[141] and illustrated as *daśagrīva* — ten-necked/headed — and "*balenāpratimau bhuvi*" (Mbh 3.259.7) — unmatched in strength on earth along with his brother. Rāvaṇa's backstory receives much greater attention than that of Rāma, at the outset, chronicling Rāvaṇa's asceticism, the resulting accrual of a boon to be free from danger by all beings except humans, and his violent accession to the throne of Laṅkā. The subtale presents the gods concerned over Rāvaṇa's status, leading Brahmā to proclaim that Viṣṇu had taken human form to subdue the *rākṣasa* king, though Viṣṇu is not explicitly linked with Rāma at this point.[142]

Both Hiltebeitel and Scharf cite this vague initial description of Rāma and Sītā as a point of departure between the *Rāmopākhyāna* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[143] The *Rāmāyaṇa* links Viṣṇu to Rāma and his brothers at the outset, and recounts Sītā as plowed from the earth. Scharf finds the *Mahābhārata* iteration capable of introducing the notion of incarnate deities slowly because "the expectation that Rāma is divine hasn't been thoroughly imposed on the text." (Scharf 2003, 1). Without such precedents, both

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[141] Mbh 3.258.11.
[142] Mbh 3.260.5.
143 See Hiltebeitel 2011a, 487 and Scharf 2003, 1.

scholars surmise that the composition of the *upākhyāna* predates the stand-alone epic, leaving us to consider more explicitly the relation between subtale and main story rather than the subtale as a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.[144] Any attempt to locate primacy between these two stories must rely on speculation. Therefore, the more useful framing for these texts can be summarized by the statement, "We are clearly not dealing with linear cumulative development" (Hiltebeitel 2009, 198).

His questions satisfied, Yudhiṣṭhira responds by asking why Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā were exiled to the forest.[145] Mārkaṇḍeya replies with the story of Rāma's own consecration as king, chosen by his father and a counsel for his virtues, only to be undone by Daśaratha's wife Kaikeyī, who forces the appointment of her own son, Bharata, as ruler. The moment that cements exile reverberates with both Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira's loss of their kingdoms.

> *sa tad rājā vacaḥ śrutvā vipriyaṁ dāruṇodayam |*
>
> The king, having heard that unpleasant speech of dreadful consequence,
>
> *duḥkhārto bharataśreṣṭha na kiṁ cid vyājahāra ha ||*
>
> fell into sorrow and said nothing at all, best of the Bharatas (Yudhiṣṭhira).
>
> (Mbh 3.261.26)

This silence, reaching across the main story and subtale, evokes the moment in which Nala refuses to bet his wife and exits the kingdom along with Yudhiṣṭhira's sullen state as Draupadī is dragged into the hall of the dice match. With the conditions established, Rāma immediately departs to the forest before another word can be uttered, along with

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144 For an extensive history on studies that compare the *Rāmopākhyāna* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, see van Buitenen 1975, 207-214.
145 Mbh 3.261.1.

his brother, Lakṣmaṇa, and wife, Sītā. Despite attempts by Bharata to reverse their father's vow, Rāma remains steadfast. The moment recalls Yudhiṣṭhira's dilemma in being followed by brahmins into the forest, as well as discussion at the outset of the third book on whether the Pāṇḍavas should accept the terms of their exile. We should recall that Mārkaṇḍeya, the narrator of the *Rāmopākhyāna*, arrived as the decisive voice early on to encourage the Pāṇḍavas to remain in the forest, alluding to Rāma.[146] By enacting the subtale in the latter half of the *Mahābhārata*'s third book, the sage adds further dimension to the notion of Rāma's Tale as a type of guide for Yudhiṣṭhira throughout the period in the wilderness.

Proceeding into the forest, Rāma battles with *rākṣasas* to keep his attendants safe, eventually maiming the sister of Rāvaṇa. Offended in this brutal fashion, Rāvaṇa's reaction portrays equally violent imagery.

svān amātyān visṛjyātha vivikte tām uvāca saḥ |

Dismissing his councilors then, he said to her alone,

kenāsy evaṁ kṛtā bhadre mām acintyāvamanya ca ||

Who, forgetting and despising me, has done this, woman?

kaḥ śūlaṁ tīkṣṇam āsādya sarvagātrair niṣevate |

Who, holding a sharp spear, uses it on all his body?

kaḥ śirasy agnim ādāya viśvastaḥ svapate sukham ||

Who, having built a fire by his head, relaxes and sleeps happily?

āśīviṣaṁ ghorataraṁ pādena spṛśatīha kaḥ |

[146] Mbh 3.26.7-17.

Who is touching this terrible venomous snake with his foot?

siṁhaṁ kesariṇaṁ kaś ca daṁṣṭrāsu spṛśya tiṣṭhati ǁ

And who stands touching a maned lion's teeth?

(Mbh 3.261.47-49)

Contrasting with the quiet acceptance of ill occurrences as we have observed through both Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira, Rāvaṇa's anger evokes the threatening pronouncements made by Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers following the loss of their kingdom.[147] Rāvaṇa brings his plan for revenge to a sage, who warns that a fight with Rāma will end in defeat, but the Laṅkā king remains obstinate.[148] By juxtaposing these two types of reactions, reverberations between silence and noise, the epic approaches methods of communicating power. Foucault's mapping of the interdependence between the two forms of expression illustrate their shared movements.

> Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide relatively obscure areas of tolerance. (Foucault 1978, 101)

In both instances, the utterance denotes a failure, and accordingly attempts to consolidate and respond in order to counter its damage. By presenting both forms of expression throughout the main story and subtales, the *Mahābhārata* complicates the association between silence and sound, like Foucault, portraying power and its fragility as disseminated among multiple, seemingly opposing, actors. Neither Rāma nor Rāvaṇa

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[147] Mbh 2.68.20-47.
[148] Mbh 3.262.5-9.

represent some ideal form of governance, depicting instead an enmeshed means of incorporating the text's layered listeners. By moving apart from strict moral adherence or codified action, the interplay between the main story and subtale explores means of expressing power within a set of conditions and their effect in producing knowledge — which Foucault designates as "strategical integration" and "tactical productivity" (Foucault 1978, 102).

To fulfill his desire for revenge, Rāvaṇa's sage takes the form of a deer, described as possessing both jeweled antlers and hide — *ratnaśṛṅga*, *ratnacitratanūruha*[149] — which Sītā sends her husband after to hunt. Rāma pierces the creature with his arrow, causing it to release a sound — *svara*[150] — that mimics Rāma's voice but transposes its tone to one indicating pain. The ruse generates a compelling and harsh speech by the now distressed Sītā, threatening suicide if her husband is harmed.[151] The grating sounds send Lakṣmaṇa, who is now described as 'covering his ears,'[152] after his brother, isolating Sītā and allowing Rāvaṇa to enact the abduction. Here sound is utilized to denote power through its ability to inform action, notably through deception and anger, and in recognizing the conditions of its response, a moment in which Sītā might be rendered vulnerable. Carrying over the recurring trope of the ill-fated deer hunt, the instance is dependent upon the translation of Rāma's voice into another body and tone. Intersecting transpositions render themselves complicit in a structure that is at once discordant and measured. The scene of Sītā's abduction can only be relayed to Rāma by means of

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[149] Mbh 3.262.11.
[150] Occuring twice in Mbh 3.262.22.
[151] Mbh 3.262.27.
[152] *"pidhāya karṇau"* (Mbh 3.262.29)

testimony from another party, here the vulture king Jaṭāyu, who in the same motion urges the brothers in the direction of Sītā's rescue in his last breath.[153] This cacophony of voices surrounding Sītā's abduction decentralizes and weakens Rāma's agency, fulfilling the loss of power initiated by his exile.

LISTENING

The helplessness experienced by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is soon alleviated as they work together to defeat an attacking rākṣasa and rescue a *gandharva*. Emboldened and provided with information on how to rescue Sītā by the *gandharva*, Rāma and his brother seek out the monkey king Sugrīva and his associate Hanumān. The two parties agree on a mutual accord. Rāma will assist in the killing of Sugrīva's adversary and brother Vālin, while Sugrīva will help rescue Sītā.[154] Scharf notes the dubious nature of the agreement, throwing Rāma's ethical status into question.[155] Like the jewel-encrusted deer, Sugrīva lets out a powerful sound — once again, *svara* — to call his brother to battle.[156] In contrast to Sītā, however, Vālin's wife urges her husband not to react to the noise.[157] But with the sequence established, Vālin leaves to confront the terrible sound to his own peril. While the monkey brothers are occupied in their fight, Rāma strikes Vālin with an arrow

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[153] Mbh 3.263.21.
[154] Mbh 3.264.14.
[155] See Scharf 2003, 9.
[156] Mbh 3.264.16.
[157] *na tvaṃ nirgantum arhasi* — you should not go out. (Mbh 3.264.17)

to the heart.[158] In recasting the epic's trope of ill-fated hunt, Rāma's distinction from Rāvaṇa is obscured. I argue that in keeping the hero from divine or unblemished associations, the text anchors Rāma's actions within the realm of reproach in order to iteratively depict the character's growth through the subtale. Following the episode, Rāma is depicted as remaining stationary on top of a mountain for four months, while tended to by the monkey king.[159]

The epic shifts focus to Sītā, who is now imprisoned by Rāvaṇa on Laṅkā, though remaining obstinate and austere, and guarded by a troop of weapon-yielding *rākṣasīs* who desire to consume the woman.

> *khādāma pāṭayāmaināṁ tilaśaḥ pravibhajya tām |*
>
> Let's eat her! Let's tear her into sesame-sized pieces,
>
> *yeyaṁ bhartāram asmākam avamanyeha jīvati ||*
>
> this one who lives here despising our lord.
>
> (Mbh 3.264.47)

The excitement conveyed by those demons through the use of the imperative form underscores the intensity of their threat. Nevertheless, Sītā welcomes the gruesome fate over submission to her captor. When Rāvaṇa attempts to convince her to let down her guard, Sītā challenges his adherence to *dharma* in attempting to violate her marriage vow.[160] Rāvaṇa resigns himself to Sītā's constancy, but closes the conversation by reminding her that Rāma is also his 'food.'[161]

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[158] Mbh 3.264.36.
[159] Mbh 3.264.40.
[160] Mbh 3.265.22.
[161] *āhārabhūta* (Mbh 3.265.28)

Meanwhile, Rāma grows impatient within Sugrīva's kingdom. The monkey king assures Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa that any time spent there is necessary for a favorable outcome, as he has dispatched agents to pinpoint the location of Sītā — redeploying Mārkaṇḍeya's appeal for patience. Returning from the south, Hanūmān brings his account of Sītā's whereabouts. He explains that the dejected retinue reached the shoreline to no avail, and sought to remain there until their death. Instead, they encounter Jaṭāyu's brother, who testifies to the whereabouts of Rāvaṇa's kingdom. Emboldened, Hanumān jumps across the ocean and encounters Sītā, who gives Hanumān both a jewel and story to verify the account. With new resolve, an army rises up around Rāma and his mission.

> *śirīṣakusumābhānāṁ siṁhānām iva nardatām |*
>
> The tumultuous sound of those appearing like Śirīṣa flowers,
>
> *śrūyate tumulaḥ śabdas tatra tatra pradhāvatām ||*
>
> roaring like lions, was heard by them running here and there.
>
> (Mbh 3.267.10)

We find sound to be the recurring operative element in denoting materiality within the *Rāmopākhyāna*. The clamor within the subtale recalls the significance of the aural element to the epic. Within its own constraints, the *Mahābhārata* is at once heard and written. For John Miles Foley, orality makes way for diversity, encouraging a text to be understood without monolithic reading.[162] By invoking sound throughout the subtale, the epic marks pathways to a multiplicity of voices. Whether in concert or at odds, by means of speech acts or in metaphor, sonic expression serves a crucial function in depicting a

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[162] See Foley 2002, 95.

multifaceted narrative. By upholding variation, I argue that sound as multiplicity serves to expound upon the incorporation of difference that we have found present in the preceding chapter's discussion of repetition.

Attended by those monkeys, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa make their way to the shoreline. Rāma convenes with the ocean in order to discover the means of its traversal. The god of the water instructs a monkey named Nala to construct a bridge.[163] As the army enters Laṅkā, they are greeted by Rāvaṇa's brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, who serves as an advisor to Lakṣmaṇa.[164] As Rāma and his army build their encampment outside the city walls, he sends an envoy to Rāvaṇa to deliver the terms of the battle.

> *hantāsmi tvāṁ sahāmātyaṁ yudhyasva puruṣo bhava |*
>
> I will kill you with your ministers. Fight! Be a man!
>
> *paśya me dhanuṣo vīryaṁ mānuṣasya niśācara ||*
>
> See the strength of this human's bow, demon!
>
> *mucyatāṁ jānakī sītā na me mokṣyasi karhi cit |*
>
> Free Sītā, the daughter of Janaka. If you will not free her for me,
>
> *arākṣasam imaṁ lokaṁ kartāsmi niśitaiḥ śaraiḥ ||*
>
> then I will rid the world of *rākṣasas* with my sharp arrows.
>
> (Mbh 3.268.15-16)

Recalling the conditions of Rāvaṇa's boon, Rāma highlights his strength as a function of his humanity. Additionally, Rāma's threat verges on the genocidal, evoking

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[163] Mbh 3.267.42.
[164] Mbh 3.267.49.

Jamamejaya's snake sacrifice within the epic's first book.[165] The statement nearly proves disastrous for the messenger, who is immediately attacked by an enraged Rāvaṇa. In retaliation, Rāma commences his attack, breaking the wall of Laṅkā — "*bhedayām āsa laṅkāyāḥ prākāram*" (Mbh 3.268.23) and crushing the difficult-to-attack southern gate — "*dakṣiṇaṁ nagaradvāram avāmṛdnād durāsadam*" (Mbh 3.268.24). The verbal root *bhid* is notably employed by Kṛṣṇa at the start of the third book, denoting the type of violence that he wishes he could have imposed upon the Kauravas during the dicing.[166] Similarly, in the fourth book, Bhīma is described as ready to crush — *avāmṛd* — Kīcaka for harming Draupadī. By establishing these links between subtale and main story, the degree of intensity cast upon the scene is girded by a dialectic of violence. The text acts to establish its lexicon in order to draw significance between realms. In each instance, the type of violence enacted is a response to a transgression toward a woman. Here the destruction of Laṅkā is depicted in language that invokes the obliteration of the body.

Over the subsequent fourteen verses, the battle is described as increasing in scale with countless participants and no clear victor. The text declares provisional victory when Rāma's arrows are deployed upon the city. In a scene that anticipates the main story's Great War, Rāvaṇa's troops attack a group of monkeys during a period of rest.[167] The escalation caused by this form of fighting ultimately brings Rāma and Rāvaṇa face-to-face. The severity of the battle is similarly illustrated by means of sound.

> *tataḥ śabdo mahān āsīt tumulo lomaharṣaṇaḥ* |

Then there was a great, tumultuous, and hair-raising sound.

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[165] Mbh 1.51.11.
[166] Mbh 3.14.13.
[167] Mbh 3.269.1.

rāmarāvaṇasainyānām anyonyam abhidhāvatām ||

The sound of the armies of Rāma and Rāvaṇa as they attacked one another.

(Mbh 3.270.9)

The intensifiers denote a volume that continues to increase through the course of the battle. As Rāvaṇa realizes the extent of the threat, he plays his final cards by sending a *rākṣasa* named Kumbhakarṇa into battle, whom he awakens with various loud-sounding instruments — "*vividhair vāditraiḥ sumahāsvanaiḥ*" (Mbh 3.270.20). As the demon enters the battle, his roaring and laughter — *vindaya, prahasan*[168] — both accompany and signal Kumbhakarṇa's capture of Sugrīva. Lakṣmaṇa is able to respond quickly, killing the demon and rescuing the monkey king. The text repeatedly conveys the critical component of listening through these stories.

In his final pronouncement, Rāvaṇa calls his son Indrajit to kill Rāma and his allies. Correspondingly marking the occasion, Indrajit "clearly shouted his name and challenged the luck-marked Lakṣmaṇa to a fight" (van Buitenen 1975, 752). Showing preference for van Buitenen's translation of *viśrāvya* as 'shouted,' and its connection with the call to Lakṣmaṇa, the immediate resonance retains less efficacy in Johnson's rendering, "Then, boldly announcing his name, the bullish demon challenged Lakṣmaṇa, marked by good fortune, to a fight" (Johnson 2005, 288), or Scharf's, "Announcing his name loudly, the bull-like Rākṣasa challenged the lucky Lakṣmaṇ in battle" (Scharf 2003, 703). In each of the latter iterations, the depiction of sound is pushed back from the action, though we have found evidence within the chapter to more explicitly align the two

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[168] Mbh 3.271.9.

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strands. Nonetheless, Indrajit is not distinguished by his sound, but rather his sight. Upon rendering himself invisible, the demon severely wounds both Rāma and his brother.

Though seemingly lost to Indrajit, Sugrīva and his retinue are able to revive Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa while Vibhīṣaṇa provides an *ambhas*[169] — water, which contains Vedic resonances to power, from *ambu*, and is also aligned with the verbal root *ambh,* 'to sound'[170] — to assist in the fight.

anena spṛṣṭanayano bhūtāny antarhitāny uta |

He whose eyes have been touched by this, then, those invisible beings,

bhavān drakṣyati yasmai ca bhavān etat pradāsyati ||

he will see them, and whomever he will give this.

(Mbh 3.273.11)

The epic presents both sight and sound as ways of knowing. What is heard and what is seen serve as co-disciplinary methods of dissemination. As Damayantī could perceive the hidden Nala to bring about their union, Rāma and his attendants gain the faculty to overcome their obstacles. Through converging sense-objects, we find the incorporation of multiple perspectives. "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (Barthes 1975, 17). By reorienting and reinvigorating the body, Lakṣmaṇa is able to overcome their interlocutor, removing Indrajit's weapon-bearing arms and head from his body.[171] The epic juxtaposes the grasping and removal of the senses with astonishing repercussions.

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[169] Mbh 3.273.10.
[170] Monier-Williams 1984, 84.
[171] Mbh 3.273.22-23.

In response to the death of Indrajit, Rāvaṇa considers killing Sītā, but is advised to direct his ire toward Rāma — not, however, to spare the woman of injury, but rather reasoning that the murder of her husband might prove the more effective wound.[172] First, Rāvaṇa summons a new wave of *rākṣasa* fighters, which van Buitenen describes as a type of undead army: "The hundreds of thousands of Rākṣasas who had departed from their bodies were seen to return…" (van Buitenen 1975, 755). Scharf and Johnson, however, retain the term body, *deha*, in its ablative singular form, portraying the army as likely emerging from Rāvaṇa's own body: "Then Rākṣasas were seen after emerging from his body…" (Scharf 2003, 761).[173] In van Buitenen's translation, the term is rendered plural indicating a return to corporeal form from death. Once the demons are defeated, Indra's charioteer, Mātali, assists Rāma in dealing the final blow. This decisive point in the battle is again verified by its sound production.

> *hāhākr̥tāni bhūtāni rāvaṇe samabhidrute* |
>
> When Rāvaṇa was attacked, the beings made the sound 'hāhā.'
>
> *siṁhanādāḥ sapaṭahā divi divyāś ca nānadan* ||
>
> And the roar of a divine lion along with kettle drums filled the sky.
>
> (Mbh 3.274.18)

While Rāvaṇa deploys the extent of his weaponry, Rāma fires a single sanctified arrow.[174] The shot, depicted deliberately over five verses, consumes Rāvaṇa by fire.[175] The victory

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[172] Mbh 3.273.30.
[173] Mbh 3.274.6.
[174] *taṁ bāṇavaryaṁ rāmeṇa brahmāstreṇābhimantritam* (Mbh 3.274.25).
[175] *prajajvāla mahājvālenāgninābhipariṣkr̥taḥ* (Mbh 3.274.28).

is decisive to such an extent that no trace of Rāvaṇa's body remains: *na ca basmāpyadṛśyata* — 'not even his ashes were seen.'[176]

The crescendo of Rāma's Tale coincides with our observed emphasis on the potency of sound in denoting efficacy in regard to the text's action. The conditions are analogous to a moment in the Old Testament, in which Joshua is commanded to lay siege upon a seemingly impenetrable wall around Jericho through sonic force.

> The Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. When they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat. (Joshua 6.2-5; ed. Attridge 2006, 317)

In both instances, the attacking party's power correlates with their denoted volume. We find that sound plays a role in manifestation — here, particularly, the act of destruction — in line with de Saussure's equation between the sound-object and sign.

> The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it "material," it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract. (de Saussure 1986, 66)

The impact, or efficacy, of these scenes are tied to representations of sound production. We are reminded here that when revealed in a text, sound does not denote itself, but

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[176] Mbh 3.273.31.

rather the surrounding web of significance that bears upon its determinations. Through de Saussure, we can query the relationship between materiality and sound as, "Whoever says that a certain letter must be pronounced a certain way is mistaking the written image of a sound for the sound itself" (de Saussure 1986, 30). While the type of sound discussed here specifically refers to speech in representing language, we can nevertheless associate that causal relationship between the emphasis of sound and clamor.

> Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three. (Derrida 1974, 36)

I argue, then, that the tumult is generative and crucial for the text. Through the incorporation of diversity in an organized way that eschews uniformity, sound is strategically deployed to highlight an oral and aural component to the text that incorporates difference and rejects didacticism. That astonishing thunder-clap we identified in Nala's Tale returns to simultaneously rattle our understanding of the world described within the text and incorporate an array of perspectives under a complex heading, rather than collapsing variation. Reverberation extends our understanding of

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repetition as a rhizomatic incorporation of difference. Without origin or singular meaning, the epic signals toward a unifying framework.

Now reunited with Sītā, the text occupies Rāma's gaze. Their reunion displays conditions that counter tropes established by Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira.

tāṁ dṛṣṭvā cārusarvāṅgīṁ yānasthāṁ śokakarśitām |

Having seen that woman of whose every limb was beautiful, standing on the vehicle, emaciated by grief,

malopacitasarvāṅgīṁ jaṭilāṁ kṛṣṇavāsasam ||

every limb covered in dirt, her hair matted, wearing a black cloth,

uvāca rāmo vaidehīṁ parāmarśaviśaṅkitaḥ |

Rāma said to the princess, suspecting her violated,

gaccha vaidehi muktā tvaṁ yat kāryaṁ tan mayā kṛtam ||

"Go, princess of Videha, you are freed. I have done what I had to do."

(Mbh 3.275.9-10)

Here we find an example of vision as failure within the text. Through his sight, Rāma reads Sītā's distressed state as a marker of infidelity, obfuscated in his understanding of his wife's appearance. Unlike Damayantī, who recognizes and accepts Nala in his drastically altered forms, from bare to disguised and diminished, the focus on Sītā's visual condition and subsequent rejection suggests a causal link. Rāma's visual perception is quickly associated with his grasp of *dharma*,[177] rendering the judgement

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[177] Mbh 3.275.12.

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more severe. In a final blow, Rāma likens his wife to an 'offering licked by a dog.'[178] The stunning turn of events is underscored by the universal shock portrayed by figures in the text, ushering in a silence through which we might inspect the conditions of the subtale. For Peter Scharf, the episode recounts a cosmological construct.

> The scene of Rāma's rejection of and reunification with Sītā serves as a metaphor of stages in the growth to enlightenment as well for the process of transcending. In the stage of enlightenment known as cosmic consciousness (*kaivalya*), the self, identified with pure consciousness, recognizing its own purity, views the body and other evolutes of nature as belonging to the field of change from which it disassociates itself. However, in the ultimate stage of development of consciousness (*brahman*), the self recognizes the transcendent original pure state of nature in all the active states of nature and embraces all levels of nature as one with itself. (Scharf 2003, 25)

By associating the process of the couple's reunion with a larger philosophical structure, Scharf enacts a particular interpretive layer on top of the epic. Through this construct, the rejection acts as a step in perfecting the self. But if Rāma's initial rejection of Sītā can be read as enacting a universal process why does it remain so distinct from its surrounding narratives?

In contrast to Nala's Tale, the *Rāmopākhyāna* omits any moments of lamentation or scenes depicting the emotion of love in separation during the disunion between husband and wife. We find Rāma driven to fight without justifying his actions through love. Reaching further back into the subtale, the lack of precursory marriage narrative stands in stark contrast to the depiction of the relationship between Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī, Nala and Damayantī, and, as we will find below, Sāvitrī and Satyavān.

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[178] *śvāvalīḍhaṁ havir yathā* (Mbh 3.275.13).

Therefore, we have no evidence of a stark change of heart within Rāma at the conclusion of the battle, only the side-shadowed conception of his devotion through the surrounding tales. As both sight and their own accord fall short of enacting their reunion, Rāma and Sītā must instead listen to divine interlocutors. A host of gods descend upon the scene to endorse Sītā and verify her adherence to the marriage. Following a chorus of testimony, culminating in permission to return to his kingdom by Rāma's departed father Daśaratha, Rāma accepts Sītā and returns to their kingdom. Closing out the narrative, Mārkaṇḍeya expressly frames the subtale as evidence of Yudhiṣṭhira's inevitable victory over his enemies, particularly through the assistance of his brothers.[179] The sage concludes by imploring Yudhiṣṭhira to see — *paśya*[180] — Draupadī differently through the telling of the *Rāmopākhyāna*. By conveying the *upakhyāna*, however, Mārkaṇḍeya does not provide directives on the makeup of this new perspective. Instead, the inclusion of the text allows multiple viewpoints to coexist and challenge one another.

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[179] Mbh 3.276.5.
[180] Mbh 3.276.8.

Chapter 4 - Sāvitrī's Tale

THE GOOD WIFE

Having just heard the story of Rāma's misfortune and the abduction of Sītā, Yudhiṣṭhira prompts the sage to recount a tale of a woman as virtuous as Draupadī.[181] Mārkaṇḍeya replies with the story of Sāvitrī, a woman born from a *dharma* king,[182] who had acquired a boon by a deity of the same name to engender a child — of course, the relationship between the main story and the subtales would be compromised with a character born from mundane circumstances. Once matured, Sāvitrī's beauty intimidates all potential suitors, leading her father to request that Sāvitrī find her own partner. Reflecting the current location of her main story counterpart, Sāvitrī departs for the forest, populated by sages,[183] in order to commence the search.

Upon returning to her father's kingdom, Sāvitrī reports to the king and an attendant sage, Nārada, that she has made her choice — the son of exiled king Dyumatsena.

tasya putraḥ pure jātaḥ saṃvṛddhaś ca tapovane |

His son, born in the palace and grown up in the austere forest,

satyavān anurūpo me bharteti manasā vṛtaḥ ||

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[181] Mbh 3.277.3.
[182] *dharmātmā* (Mbh 3.277.5) — For van Buitenen, the phrase renders the king "Law-spirited" (van Buitenen 1975, 762) while for Johnson he is "the epitome of law" (Johnson 2005, 155) and Smith depicts him as a "righteous man" (Smith 2009, 215).
[183] Mbh 3.277.39.

Satyavān, is the right husband for me. I have chosen with my mind.

(Mbh 3.278.10)

While the third book bears the title *Āraṇyakaparvan*, translated as Book of the Forest, the text seems to use two terms for forest somewhat interchangeably: *araṇya* and *vana*. Dictionary references remain mostly consistent, but Monier-Williams reserves the word 'wilderness' to entries on *araṇya*, thereby allowing for further untamed resonances.[184] But considering the appearance of both terms in the verse prior, we might read the text to consider the words on equal footing.[185] With the qualifier *tapas*, however, *tapovana* appears distinct from the dangerous regions of the forest. In Nala's Tale, the *tapovana* is the region of the forest inhabited by ascetics, in which Damayantī asks after her separated husband.[186] Elsewhere, it is described as a type of refuge[187] and sacred place[188] — thereby distinct from *araṇya* as a sanctified region. More immediate for our purposes, the *tapovana* is described as a region of the forest in which the Pāṇḍavas are currently stationed with Draupadī and Mārkaṇḍeya in the outer narrative.[189] Bypassing the more treacherous aspects of the forest, the subtale reflects the progress of the main story. Sāvitrī's swift movement into and out of the forest similarly signals the impending close of the Pāṇḍavas' time in the forest.

Furthermore, we should note the motion through which the bride selects her husband. The expected *svayaṃvara* model, enacted by both Draupadī and Damayantī,

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[184] Monier-Williams 1984, 80 and 883.
[185] Mbh 2.278.9.
[186] Mbh 3.61.82.
[187] Mbh 3.82.98 and 83.83.
[188] Mbh 3.88.26.
[189] Mbh 3.241.4

veers slightly in both terminology and demonstrative steps. That is to say, no contest was held to determine a suitor and the correlated phrase employed here is *manasā vṛtaḥ*.[190] Despite the fact that *svayaṃvara* can be translated to mean 'self-choice,' Sāvitrī's selection method illustrates a greater degree of agency and autonomy, and also unique monologue, as implied by the inclusion of *manasā*. Despite Brodbeck's alignment of Sāvitrī and Draupadī's marriages,[191] the phrase used to describe both the unions of Draupadī and Damayantī appears only within this altered form within the *upākhyāna*. While we are aware at the outset that the subtale works to align with the main story, this discrepancy seems necessary to maintain. I believe that the difference here speaks to the weight of Sāvitrī's subsequent choices. Utilizing the term *manasā* as the means for selection, a number of translation possibilities arise. 'Heart' appears to be the most apparent choice, utilized by van Buitenen, Johnson, and Smith[192] and invoking our earlier discussion of genre through romance and Nala's Tale. While less resonant with love in our own milieu, the word *manas* is also connected with reflection, cognition, and understanding. Those externalized actions of the contest veer sharply into internal considerations. This alteration is necessary because the external action, namely Satyavān's foretold and impending death, could not stand up to the rigors of the *svayaṃvara* structure — with logic dictating that a condemned man makes a poor choice for partner. Moreover, we should note that the overarching difference between these three narratives lies in the focus on the female protagonist. Damayantī remains a crucial but supporting figure in Nala's Tale, Draupadī's narrative primarily serves her husbands,

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[190] Mbh 3.278.10.
[191] Brodbeck 2013, 451 n. 23.
[192] van Buitenen 1975, 764. Johnson 2005, 294. Smith 2009, 218.

while Sītā is all but objectified into plot propelling device. Fixed on Sāvitrī, then, the text must augment the power of her choice and thereby align it with those other characters as a kind of *apologia* depicting all three unions within a more egalitarian institution. Lauren Berlant allows us to consider the imagined upheaval of established structures around marriage as a necessary component of its efficacy.

> This desire for love to reach beyond the known world of law and language enables us to consider the idea that romantic love might sometimes serve as a placeholder for a less eloquent or institutionally proper longing. A love plot would, then, represent a desire for a life of unconflictedness, where the aggression inherent in intimacy is not lived as violence and submission to the discipline of institutional propriety or the disavowals of true love, but as something less congealed into an identity or a promise, perhaps a mix of curiosity, attachment, and passion. But as long as the normative narrative and institutionalized forms of sexual life organize identity for people, these longings mainly get lived as a desire for love to obliterate the wildness of the unconscious, confirm the futurity of a known self, and dissolve the enigmas that marks one's lovers. (Berlant 2012, 95)

The four narratives in dialogue here, the main story and subtales of Nala, Sītā, and Sāvitrī, offer a series of alternative perspectives on love and simultaneously their means of subversion — choices that query their own definitions. The term *manas* as the instrument of choice here allows previously established language to fall away while conveying effect. It is worth noting that the construction, *manasā vṛtaḥ*, does not appear elsewhere in the context of marriage or any other choice. The sage Nārada responds in protest, calling Sāvitrī's choice *ajānantyā… vṛtaḥ*[193] — made in ignorance — clearly in

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[193] Mbh 3.278.11.

apposition with Sāvitrī's self-description and furthering the need to associate *manas* with the mind in this section of the text.

Finally, as outlined by Berlant, the sage reveals the ultimate mystery of Satyavān: the time of his death. Once revealed, the king gives Sāvitrī an imperative to select another suitor,[194] stating that the information supersedes Satyavān's virtues — *tasya doṣo mahān eko guṇān ākramya tiṣṭhati* (Mbh 3.278.24). Note the imagery associated with shadow here. The term *doṣa* contains the double meaning 'flaw' and 'darkness' while *ākram* can refer both to the flaw's immanence or an eclipse.[195] Both Johnson and Smith translate the term as "outweighs" (Johnson 2005, 218 and Smith 2009, 294) while van Buitenen preserves the resonance: "he has one great flaw that overshadows his virtues" (van Buitnenen 1975, 764). I argue that the preservation of this imagery is significant to the poetics of the verse and permits dialogue within the literary tradition of the target language, which contains similar associations, here exhibited by Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1830 poem, *Love And Death*: "Life eminent creates the shade of death; / The shadow passeth when the tree shall fall" (Tennyson 1911,17). Tennyson's writing on the triumph of love over death can enter fruitfully into conversation here when granted the full scope of their intercessions as works of literature. We continue to find that the Sanskrit epic must move toward the study of literature as deliberately as the study of literature must approach the *Mahābhārata*.

Returning to Sāvitrī's proclamation, the woman rebukes her father and Nārada by expounding upon the nature of her choice.

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[194] *ehi sāvitri gaccha tvam anyaṁ varaya śobhane* (Mbh 3.278.24)
[195] Monier-Williams 1984, 128.

manasā niścayaṁ kṛtvā tato vācābhidhīyate |

Having made the decision with the mind, the thought is then speech.

kriyate karmaṇā paścāt pramāṇaṁ me manas tataḥ ||

Then, it is made with action. So, my mind is the authority.

(Mbh 3.278.27)

Through this construction in which thought leads to speech and then action, it becomes difficult to continue to translate *manas* as 'heart.' None of our three above translators maintain the earlier rendering, here utilizing the word 'mind' for *manas* in both instances of its occurrence within the verse. Furthermore, by bookending the translated section above with *manas*, the *kāvya* is arranged to promote a full understanding of the term. The question then becomes, why maintain the translation of 'heart' less that twenty verses prior? In concert, the two verses underscore both the agency of the female protagonist in this subtale and her means of power. Sāvitrī distinguishes herself from other women through the means of her marriage choice, which we will find to resonate through the proceeding subtale. By emphasizing the cognitive turn, rather than emotion, the text presents the decision with severity and resoluteness. The mind here is not only 'authority' but also something of the primogenitor, the source of both speech and action. I argue that the distinction emerges here in the structure of the narrative, here squarely and uniquely focused upon the female protagonist. While the epic narrates from the third person throughout, the subtales are expressly told to allow the audience, often first a main story character, the opportunity to inhabit the perspective, or even the mind, of the subject. Transitively, the marriages of Damayantī and Draupadī are given additional dimension in

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respect to this tale as self-selected affairs because this story allows the opportunity for insight into the mind of a woman committed to an exiled king. Here the subtale renders legible the actions of a woman within the epic's restraints.

> To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (Butler 1990, 23)

Judith Butler allows us to reframe the portrayals of demonstrative gender and cultural roles[196] toward open-ended dialogue on the cogent identity. As literature, the epic demands an inclusive and, as mentioned earlier, a type of *apologia* in regards to the role of a wife in convening a marriage within the subtale in order to incorporate difference rather than prescribe frameworks. Returning to the story, then, Sāvitrī's words satisfy both the king and sage, the latter of which promptly departs, having fulfilled his narrative duty as messenger of Satyavān's death.[197]

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[196] See McGrath 2009 and Brodbeck 2009 and 2013.

[197] I have argued elsewhere (2008) that Mārkaṇḍeya and Nārada are corresponding characters, often standing in for each other. This appears the case within the subtale as well, as Nārada presents himself as something of an expert on time.

Nārada's departure does not alleviate all concerns over Satyavān. Now married

and within three days of his foretold death, Sāvitrī vows to remain standing for the

duration in a display of constancy.[198] The term repeated to describe Sāvitrī's state is

vyavasāya[199] — purposeful, determined, or intent. Her conviction is so firm, in fact, that

Sāvitrī is likened to wood, *kāṣṭhabhūteva.*[200] The means of decision-making here differ in

language from the selection of a husband. Here, Sāvitrī's choice resides more

unambiguously in her heart, employing the locative form of the noun rather than the

instrumental — *eṣa me hṛdi saṁkalpaḥ* (Mbh 3.280.17). When Satyavān sets off for the

forest,[201] his wife's insistence on joining repeats the term *utsāha,*[202] which van Buitenen

similarly translates to 'set one's heart' while for Johnson the term reflects the 'mind' and

'determination.'[203] Smith, conversely, renders the phrase 'longing,'[204] adhering both to the

dual usage and feeling as object. Inspecting the text's usage of these three terms, then,

manas, hṛd, and *utsāha,* we can observe that the work is more intentionally utilizing

repetition and distinguishing types of desire. Their correlation within the target language,

therefore, might relay further nuance in the three individual instances by reflecting the

distinctive word usage. Having convinced her husband to acquiesce, Sāvitrī requests

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[198] *vrataṁ trirātram uddiśya divārātraṁ sthitābhavat* (Mbh 3.280.3)

[199] Mbh 3.280.6.

[200] Mbh 3.280.8.

[201] *satyavān prasthito vanam* (Mbh 3.280.18). An interesting distinction given their current location within the *tapovana,* again, suggesting degrees of wilderness within the forest. Furthermore, Satyavān states that Sāvitrī had never before entered the *vana — vanaṁ na gatapūrvaṁ* (Mbh 3.280.20) — strongly suggesting division between these spaces.

[202] Mbh 3.280.21 and 22.

[203] van Buitenen 1975, 767; Johnson 2005, 296.

[204] Smith 2009, 222.

leave from her in-laws, stating that her desire is to see the forest in bloom[205] and thereby revealing to the audience that the knowledge of her husband's death remained proprietary. Following her husband, then, the text proceeds by describing Sāvitrī with both burning and bifurcated heart.[206] Paired now with the section's earlier reference to the organ, the prominence of emotion is highlighted above cognition. Sāvitrī displays greater feeling in connection to knowing, heightening the importance of remaining alongside her husband though she does not have a clear vision on how to save him from the foretold fate. Furthermore, increased attention upon cognitive and corporeal faculties seems to underscore the impending loss of life.

Once out in the forest, Satyavān experiences a pain in his head as well as, like Sāvitrī, a burning heart.[207] Placing her collapsing husband's head in her lap,[208] Sāvitrī confronts the noose-wielding[209] deity Yama, who approaches to retrieve the man. In her resistance, Yama forcefully removes Satyavān's soul, described here as 'thumb-sized,' via the noose. A corresponding description of a being reduced down to the size of a thumb occurs in the *Nalopākhyānam* — the snake-king Karkoṭaka, whom Nala rescues from fire. In both instances, the carried party is described as *aṅguṣṭhamātra*.[210] The term reflecting Yama's exertion here, *vaśa*, might also indicate the deity's authority or dominion, pointing toward his destination with Satyavān.

yamas tu taṁ tathā baddhvā prayāto dakṣiṇāmukhaḥ |

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205 *vanaṁ kusumitaṁ* (Mbh 3.280.26)
206 *hṛdayena vidūyatā* (Mbh 3.280.29) and *dvidheva hṛdayaṁ* (Mbh 3.280.33)
207 *śirasi vedanā* (Mbh 3.281.2 and 3) and *hṛdayaṁ dūyatīva* (Mbh 3.281.4)
208 *utsaṅge 'sya śiraḥ kṛtvā* (Mbh 3.281.6)
209 *pāśahastaṁ* (Mbh 3.281.9)
210 Mbh 3.63.8. and 3.281.16.

Yama, having then tied him, set out facing south.

sāvitrī cāpi duḥkhārtā yamam evānvagacchata |

And so Sāvitrī followed Yama with distress,

niyamavratasaṁsiddhā mahābhāgā pativratā ||

most virtuous, devoted to her husband, perfected in her vow of constancy.

(Mbh 3.281.18)

As we have observed within Nala's Tale, the atypical verse structure signals increased emotional weight. Here the narrator underscores his original prompt by illustrating the depths of Sāvitrī's devotion. We should also recall that *dakṣiṇa* is where Nala directs Damayantī, toward a city called Dakṣiṇāpatha, when he compels his wife to save herself following the debacle with the birds.[211] Johnson points out that the south retains particular meaning when associated with Yama, who is also referred to as *dakṣiṇapati*, lord of the south.[212] In our own milieu, therefore, the domain of death might be more accurately referred to as the underworld. Despite their divergent connotations, in both instances the direction is traveled by the wife following tragedy within the forest.

Though Yama repeatedly compels Sāvitrī to turn back, the wife refuses, calling her pursuit *sanātana dharma*,[213] the 'eternal' or 'ancient' *dharma*. This phrase occurs sparingly but consistently throughout the *Mahābhārata*. The primary invocation occurs in conversation between the Pāṇḍavas' parents regarding a woman's actions. Here *sanātana dharma* is depicted as freedom for women, even from marriage bonds.[214] Later in the first

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[211] Mbh 3.58.22.
[212] Johnson 2005, 339.
[213] Mbh 3.281.20.
[214] Mbh 1.113.1-21. The phrase *sanātana dharma* occurs twice at verses 7 and 13.

book, that liberty translates to the unrestricted Ganges, which is personified as an ideal woman.[215] In the second book, Draupadī cites the phrase to protest her forceful appropriation into the hall during the dice match.[216] In the third book, the construction occurs on eight different occasions. First, the term describes the requirements of punitive punishment, then, seemingly conversely, the need for restraint. The dispute involves Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī's conversation on whether or not to wait out their time in the forest before exacting revenge upon the Kauravas, to which Bhīma also finds exception.[217] Later, the phrase is used to describe Kṛṣṇa, the first *yuga*, and the conduct of a king, states of perfected being.[218] The construction will turn up again through Sāvitrī only a few verses later in an attempt that might squarely explain the term. Finally, occurring once in the fourth book and twice in the fifth, *sanātana dharma* is used to denote means of honoring a teacher, here Droṇa, and a deity, Kṛṣṇa.[219] While there is indication to link *sanātana dharma* with women's independence, which surely positions Sāvitrī as its exemplar, additional variation renders the phrase difficult to contain. Perhaps rather than attempting to pin down the type of *dharma*, we can instead observe its turn in incorporating female independence into a discussion of *dharma* as a whole. By employing language and structure that allows conceptions of independence to co-mingle with larger theoretical underpinnings, the epic works toward establishing greater standing for women in relation to men. As Hiltebeitel points out, the *Mahābhārata* is

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[215] Mbh 1.158.20.
[216] Mbh 2.62.9.
[217] Mbh 3.13.6; Mbh 3.30.50 and 34.53.
[218] Mbh 3.86.21, 148.10, and 152.9.
[219] Mbh 4.50.7; Mbh 5.83.7 and 86.17.

unprecedented in its depiction of female agency, which is in turn crucial to the development of the text as a whole.

> Each of these women plays her part in this textualization of *dharma*, bringing home its nuances — whether in questioning it, interpreting it, raising questions by her silences, or even by a slip of the tongue. (Hiltbeitel 2011, 410)

In establishing a multivalent and incorporating literature, voices of complication and dissent prove crucial to the efficacy of the text. Sāvitrī's consistent framing or reframing of *dharma*, developing both intertwined with and parallel to egalitarian depictions of gender that arise from her narrative, but also a host of corollary societal functions, is complicit in the project of literature as denoting possibility.[220] Returning, then, to Sāvitrī's second pronunciation of *sanātana dharma*, it is interpreted by the devoted wife in association with non-injury by thought, deed, or word, kindness, and giving.[221] The phrase is intentionally broadened to dilute particular meaning. Throughout this subtale and the subsequent Yakṣa's Questions, we will see a text preoccupied with understanding *dharma*. As literature, however, I argue that the narrative works more toward expanding rather than homing in on a definition.

Though wanting to rid himself of the pursuing woman, Yama admits to experiencing pleasure in her extemporaneous speech.[222] Akin to Draupadī's acquisition of her husband when he had lost himself during the dicing,[223] Sāvitrī is granted boons by Yama for her deft pronouncements. The only restriction, Yama repeatedly reminds, is a

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[220] See Peder Jothen's discussion of Kierkegaard on artistic possibility opposed to the didacticism of religiously organized society (Jothen 2014, 209).
[221] Mbh 3.281.34.
[222] Mbh 3.281.25. Pleasure as *tuṣṭa*.
[223] Mbh 2.63.27-35.

request for her husband's life.[224] Instead, Sāvitrī selflessly requests the reinstatement of her father-in-law's sight and kingdom.[225] In addition to expounding upon *dharma*, Sāvitrī seems concerned with explicating *sat*, repeating the word seven times in the genitive plural *satām*[226] and eleven times in the nominative plural *santaḥ*[227] throughout the dialogue with Yama. Recurring 18 times within a span of 27 verses, *sat* calls for close inspection here. The word is translated consistently as 'the strict' by van Buitenen, 'the self-controlled' and 'the good' by Johnson, and 'the virtuous' by Smith. Of greater interest, perhaps, is Sāvitrī's own translation of the term, persons who hold *dharma* as paramount and enact the *sanātana dharma* as described above, as well as selfless and undeterred adherents to *dharma*. In her final explication, *sat* appears crucial to the landscape of time recently described by Mārkaṇḍeya.

> *santo hi satyena nayanti sūryaṁ*
>
> *santo bhūmiṁ tapasā dhārayanti |*
>
> So with truth the good lead to the sun.
>
> With austerity the good uphold the earth.
>
> *santo gatir bhūtabhavyasya rājan*
>
> *satāṁ madhye nāvasīdanti santaḥ ||*
>
> The good are the course of what has been and what will be, king.[228]
>
> In the midst of the good, the good do not fall apart.
>
> (Mbh 3.281.47)

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[224] *vinā punaḥ satyavato 'sya jīvitaṁ*, or a slight variation therein. (Mbh 3.281.25, 30, 36 43)
[225] Mbh 3.281.26 and 281.31.
[226] Mbh 3.281.24, 29 (twice), 34, 46 (twice), and 47.
[227] Mbh 3.281.23, 24, 35, 46 (twice), 47 (four times), 48, and 49
[228] Here, a vocative address to Yama.

For Sāvitrī's Tale, those persons described as *sat* — which I have elected to render above as "the good" because it seems to more inclusively capture the spirit of the verse, that is, denote beings in a pure and simple state — are crucial cosmological actors. Like her narrator, then, Sāvitrī portrays knowledge of the inner workings of the universe. As observed through the earlier depiction of Mārkaṇḍeya, time and space, here a type of interplanetary balance along with the traversal of past and future, portray conditional linkage through shared maintenance. In consideration with Sāvitrī's definition of *sanātana dharma*, those pronounced virtues that maintain the movement of time and space seem to adhere into a type of lexicon: kindness, giving, truth, austerity, and so on. The fundamental quality of these terms calls into the question the particularity of Sāvitrī's knowledge. Though clearly distinct in her actions, that is marrying a doomed man of her choosing and following Yama to the underworld to retrieve his soul, we should wonder why her worlds appear so universally applicable.

Echoes of an objective relativism support the narrator's earlier pronouncements leading up to the subtale. If we are to wonder why Sāvitrī's words please Yama to such an extreme degree, I would argue that they serve to support the epic's current preoccupation with encompassing worldviews. While we have at other times observed explicitly nuanced and contradictory modes of being, the story reaches a precipice through the culmination of Yudhiṣṭhira's education in the forest and must thereby stake a more definitive claim. The epic undertakes the increased responsibility by leaving additional work for its audience, namely the development of a more granular perspective from a foundational basis. For a text that we have uncovered as cluttered with

sideshadows and foil figures that subvert and expand one another, we find the lack of singular hero intrinsic to the generation of meaning within the epic. Sāvitrī is, perhaps, as idealized of a figure as the *Mahābhārata* permits, and runs the risk of strict pronouncement in her proclamations. By keeping her words in the realm of abstraction, the epic might proceed unabated. For Rancière, the issue revolves around questions of genre, transitioning between religious work and literature.

> The sacred writer has turned into a poet, the symbol into a symbolic play of language. But this disappearance is itself possible only because the "promise of body" of the figure has been incorporated into the matter of imagination to identify it with a promise of meaning: a promise included in the natural and material language that announces in its imagistic profusion a language of the mind. (Rancière 2004, 83)

The epic's disinterest in static figures, instead favoring imaginative possibility, finds shape in the life of its actions rather than didacticism. The specific content of her speech exhibits a type of metalanguage while Sāvitrī enacts her efficacy by embarking repeatedly upon the dialogue with the deity. The repetition of particular concepts such as *sanātana dharma* and *sat* in such a way that their definitions are constantly redeployed in varying shades of light permits space for their wider interpretation. "Thus the exegesis of stories belongs to the same activity as their invention, to the same activity too as the art that brings them to life" (Rancière 2004, 83). It is the persistence of this primary act that in fact allows her to win back her betrothed. Those abstract concepts linger particularly within the singularity of Sāvitrī. Each speech reasserts the language of her uniquely bold pursuit of Death.

Repeatedly winning over Yama, Sāvitrī asks for two final boons. First, she appeals for one hundred sons from Satyavān,[229] a seemingly impossible request given her husband's current mortality. However, we should recall the story of Bhadrā Kākṣīvatī, endowed with the ability to bear sons with her husband's corpse.[230] Nonetheless, the boon appears to set up a final argument. Following her pronouncement translated in part above, Sāvitrī makes her ultimate goal known.

> *varātisargaḥ śataputratā mama*
>
> *tvayaiva datto hriyate ca me patiḥ |*
>
> You have granted me the boon of one hundred sons.
>
> And though given you take my husband.
>
> *varaṁ vṛṇe jīvatu satyavān ayaṁ*
>
> *tavaiva satyaṁ vacanaṁ bhaviṣyati ||*
>
> I choose the boon that Satyavān live.
>
> Your word will then be true.
>
> (Mbh 3.281.53)

We should note that Yama's gift of a boon for the first time does not contain the qualifying exception of her husband's life noted above. The omission here suggests that Yama anticipates the request and is prepared earlier on to grant the boon. Brodbeck names the inciting incident and ultimate resolution the requirement for sons in two patrilines.[231] He claims that each boon is successively granted to alleviate the restricting elements toward a strong male lineage, Sāvitrī's father-in-law's blindness, loss of

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[229] Mbh 3.281.45.
[230] Mbh 1.112.19-34.
[231] Brodbeck 2013, 531.

kingdom, her father's lack of sons, and her own sons by her living husband. While a resulting surplus of sons is explicitly celebrated at the conclusion of Yama's granting of boons,[232] such analysis might threaten to reduce Sāvitrī to an agent of childbearing. Instead, evidence within this subtale and its resonances with figures from both the main story and Nala's Tale suggest the female figure more accurately works to incorporate difference and possibility into the imagined milieu through multifaceted and powerful female depictions.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

Yama, having loosened the ropes,[233] returns home.[234] Sāvitrī departs to the spot in the forest where Satyavān's body was left and with an embrace, *upagūh*,[235] brings him back to life. Lingering for a moment over this construction, which bookends the death as the action similarly taken by Sāvitrī when Satyavān collapses,[236] the verbal root *guh* more accurately denotes a type of hiding or concealment.[237] Embrace as concealment follows Sāvitrī's initial act in shielding her husband from Yama. However, repeated at the end of their time in the forest, *upagūh* appears associated with the unique affection between the characters — a contact so enveloping that it obscures the individual. In his return, Satyavān appears disoriented, asking his wife why he had slept, *supta*, for an extended

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[232] Mbh 3.281.58.
[233] *pāśān muktvā* (Mbh 3.281.54).
[234] *eva bhavanaṁ yayau* (Mbh 3.281.59).
[235] Mbh 3.281.61.
[236] *samāsādyātha sāvitrī bhartāram upagūhya ca* (Mbh 3.281.6).
[237] Whitney 2006, 38.

period and the identity of the dark colored person, *puruṣa śyāma*.[238] Likely at a loss for words at present, Sāvitrī declines to provide full details of the ordeal. Furthermore, the story must be recounted with the entire cast present. She instead expresses fear for the oncoming night and its jackals — *kampayantyo mano mama* (Mbh 3.281.74) 'causing my mind to tremble.' This is a peculiar position for one who has just faced down death himself. Moreover, Satyavān's reanimation allows the resumed reassertion of corporeal language. The repeated focus on faculties and sensations within the body appear to underscore the dire threat of loss. Sāvitrī's physicality reflects her potency within the subtale.

Satyavān, however, is otherwise motivated to return home. Supporting Brodbeck's focus on lineage, the prince fears worrying his parents over his prolonged absence. In his longest speech within the subtale, Satyavān expounds upon his importance to his father and mother, here quoting them:

> *tvayā hīnau na jīvāva muhūrtam api putraka |*
>
> Abandoned by you, we would not continue living, little son.
>
> *yāvad dhariṣyase putra tāvan nau jīvitaṁ dhruvam ||*
>
> As you are maintained, son, so our life is firm.
>
> *vṛddhayor andhayor yaṣṭis tvayi vaṁśaḥ pratiṣṭhitaḥ |*
>
> You are the support of two blind old people. The lineage relies on you.
>
> *tvayi piṇḍaś ca kīrtiś ca saṁtānaṁ cāvayor iti ||*
>
> And so goes our livelihood, fame, and succession.

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[238] Mbh 3.281.63.

(Mbh 3.281.86-87)

This is an interesting monologue from the embattled husband insofar as it corresponds and diverges from the selflessness and devotion of his wife. Sāvitrī's ordeal is unreciprocated here, and furthermore any concern for her wellbeing is offset toward her in-laws. It is difficult not to read sympathy for the wife here, who has already gone to great lengths to alleviate every concern expressed by her husband, but is not credited or given respite. Her husband is clearly unaware of the distance Sāvitrī has already traveled on this day. Instead, Satyavān insists on trudging through the dark forest to return home, displaying pronounced emotion[239] while urging on his wife to partake in another treacherous journey.[240] Once again, however, Sāvitrī bears the brunt of the task.

> *kṛtvā kaṭhinabhāraṁ sā vṛkṣaśākhāvalambinam |*
>
> Having hung the heavy vessel from the tree branch,
>
> *gṛhītvā paraśuṁ bhartuḥ sakāśaṁ punar āgamat ||*
>
> having grabbed the ax, she again approached her husband.
>
> *vāme skandhe tu vāmorūr bhartur bāhuṁ niveśya sā |*
>
> Then that strong-thighed one put her husband's arm over her left shoulder.
>
> *dakṣiṇena pariṣvajya jagāma mṛdugāminī ||*
>
> Clutching him with her right arm, she set off gently.
>
> (Mbh 3.281.103-104)

The image of a burdened Sāvitrī, in one arm her husband and in the other an ax, serves to underscore the extended plight that culminates in the forest. Again, the text draws the

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[239] *ucchritya bāhū duḥkhārtaḥ sasvaraṁ praruroda ha* (Mbh 3.281.94). — "having raised his arms in sorrow, he began to weep aloud."

[240] *sāvitri māciram* (Mbh 3.281.98) — "Quickly, Sāvitri!"

reader's gaze toward the body, providing close detail of Sāvitrī's physical support of Satyavān while illustrating further her own corporeality. As opposed to abstract dialogue, the wife's support for the husband is now made flesh and thereby given additional dimension in the schema of the subtale. I argue that Sāvitrī's act is an extension of her time with Yama, carrying her husband over from death and back out of the forest. As a type of translator, then, responsible for transporting her subject through different realms, it is perhaps appropriate that her own desires are sublimated against the concerns of that subject, namely, the family's lineage. Moreover, this gulf between perspectives is pronounced in the image of the woman departing the forest, holding both ax and husband. In contrast, Satyavān was unable to conceive of his wife's self-sufficiency at the outset of their journey when he asks her, "yāvad gamyaṁ gataṁ tvayā" (Mbh 3.281.19) — "how will you manage on foot?" (tr. van Buitenen 1975, 767).

Satyavān's parents are as concerned as predicted, requiring a retinue of attendants and sages to provide reassurance of their son's safe return. Justification ranges from knowledge in sacred texts, Sāvitrī's prowess, signs from animals, and Satyavān's virtues.[241] The anxiety of their absence supersedes interest in the king's newly returned eyesight. Instead, the parents reminisce over stories of their son as a child, only increasing their worry.[242] When they finally return, Satyavān is interrogated by his parents and the sages on their time in the forest but can only account for the moments in which his consciousness and body lay intact. The sages, however, appear more aware of Sāvitrī's role in the ordeal and its connection to the king's reinstated vision — "you know

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[241] Mbh 3.282.10-19.
[242] Mbh 3.282.8.

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the cause of this, so the truth should be told" (*tvam atra hetuṁ jānīṣe tasmāt satyaṁ nirucyatām*) (Mbh 3.282.35). At their prompting, Sāvitrī relays the series of events, from Nārada's intervention to Yama's boons. Those sages, then, become the first to recognize and offer gratitude toward Sāvitrī. But the appreciation remains framed around the family line.

> *nimajjamānaṁ vyasanair abhidrutaṁ*
>
> *kulaṁ narendrasya tamomaye hrade |*
>
> Beset with calamity, sinking
>
> the king's family was in a lake made of darkness.
>
> *tvayā suśīle dhṛtadharmapuṇyayā*
>
> *samuddhṛtaṁ sādhvi punaḥ kulīnayā ||*
>
> By you, good woman, auspicious supporter of *dharma*,
>
> the family was rescued again, virtuous one.
>
> (Mbh 3.282.43)

The commendation, along with Satyavān's earlier speech, supports Brodbeck's reading of patrilineal concerns as propulsion for the narrative. But I would argue that its frequent redeployment by secondary voices serves more to underscore its absence from Sāvitrī's thought and speech. While indeed she executes the reinstatement of the conditions to permit the continuation of the family line, by design within the structure of those granted boons, it is not her own ultimate goal.   Reconfirming this order, then, we might find additional understanding in her paradoxical request to have one hundred sons as her second to last request. Instead, considering her lack of concordance with the ultimate

concerns of her husband, father, and those sages and culminating request from Yama, we might find Sāvitrī genuinely preoccupied with maintaining her proximity to her beloved. Lending more credence to amorous motivations in the plot, we might observe productive affinity with Marie de France's "Les Deus Amanz." In the French work, a king is unable to part with his daughter, devising an arduous test for her hand in marriage, here carrying the woman across a difficult landscape. In the young man's mirrored collapse by means of the trial, the young woman attempts in vain to revive him and thereby perishes herself.[243] Both narratives portray love as the grounds for their divergent outcomes. In the *Mahābhārata*, Sāvitrī's love informs her preparedness in the face of division by death. For the *Lais*, ardor brings about brash action that leaves its lovers dead together.

Finally, though the text has established the prowess of her speech, the story of Sāvitrī's interaction with Yama is not told directly to her parents or husband. Instead, the tale is repeatedly filtered through those sages the following day.[244] We are aware that the sages' interpretation of events lead them to extol the family line, making their narration perhaps more appropriate for those parents who share those lineage concerns. In fact, Sāvitrī's voice is absent from the remainder of the subtale, instead concerning itself with the king's return from exile and re-coronation. Sāvitrī is mentioned again twice, as an attendant to the king and to quickly convey that she gave birth to one hundred sons.[245] I read her eclipse as somewhat tragic — having unique agency to fulfill her desires that initially clash with the will of a male sage and deity, only to be sublimated by the object of her strength. Unlike Damayantī, Sāvitrī does not undergo a transformation through her

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[243] See Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante's translation (1978, 126-133).
[244] Mbh 3.283.2.
[245] Mbh 3.283.10 and 12.

narrative or express particular elation at the resolution of her concerns. This distinction is further pronounced in an *upākhyāna* that squarely names the devoted wife as its subject. Though in returning to the main story, the narrator Mārkaṇḍeya continues to orient the resolution toward concerns of the production of healthy sons, stating that "by Sāvitrī, her husband's family was rescued from calamity" — *bhartuḥ kulaṁ ca sāvitryā sarvaṁ kṛcchrāt samuddhṛtam* (Mbh 3.283.14). And furthermore, the sage adds, Draupadī will act in kind.[246] The term employed to connect the subtale and main story here is *tārayiṣyati*, a causative future from the verbal root *tṛ*. For Smith, the phrase amounts to "she will save (you all)" (Smith 2009, 233), while Johnson and van Buitenen's translations vary slightly in the meaning as "she shall rescue (you all)" (Johnson 2005, 215 and van Buitenen 1975, 778). Brodbeck and Black have both questioned the tense here and attempted to connect that future aid to an incident within the impending Great War.[247] Instead, we might find Mārkaṇḍeya's allusion more immediate through a closer inspection of the etymological clues. I argue that Mārkaṇḍeya is not, in fact, discussing a type of rescue in its broader connotations. 'Rescue,' as divulged by the sages we have already observed, is aligned with the verbal root *sam + ud + √hṛ*,[248] evoking an image of saving another from drowning in a lake. The verbal root *tṛ* is instead employed earlier in the epic's main story as the Pāṇḍavas move through the forest. Bhīma offers to assist Draupadī and his brothers through the particularly treacherous landscape — "*durge saṁtārayiṣyāmi yady aśaktau bhaviṣyataḥ*" (Mbh 3.141.17). The type of help described here is precise, resonating with the actions of Sāvitrī. "I will carry them over difficult

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[246] Mbh 3.283.15.
[247] See Brodbeck 2009, 538-540 and Black 2007, 69.
[248] Mbh 3.282.43

places, if they will be unable to do so themselves."[249] The phrase in question, *saṁtārayiṣyāmi,* renders the verbal root and act of 'transporting' or 'carrying' from one location to another, particularly over hardship. Therefore, I argue that Mārkaṇḍeya does not share a preoccupation with lineage but instead concerns himself more with the opening prompt in describing the actions of a noble woman and their application to the main story's preeminent female protagonist. Sāvitrī's act in 'carrying' Satyavān is reduplicated in the subtale, first in ferrying his soul back from Yama to his body, and, more explicitly, in strapping herself to her husband and towing him out of the forest. Mārkaṇḍeya's construction in the future tense points to the impending close of their time in the forest. He advises that the brothers will be figuratively carried over their hardships in that landscape by their faithful wife. That crucial measure of Sāvitrī in ushering her husband away from death and the forest is thereby her defining characteristic rather than an ability to uphold a family. Furthermore, her ability to carry over does place Sāvitrī in league with the translated narrator — an appropriate final tale by the sage. A translator provides the interwoven skein of possibility in deconstructing and rebuilding language. "Therefore translating is not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence" (Eco 2001, 13). Confronting the language that surrounds Sāvitrī's Tale reveals an epic intent on providing the tools for its own continuous redeployment.

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[249] We should note that, unexpectedly, Bhīma does not fulfill his promise. In the subsequent chapters, when Draupadī collapses, Bhīma summons his son Ghaṭotkaca to carry her. Other Rākṣasas carry then carry the Pāṇḍava brothers and their attendant brahmins as they cross over difficult terrain.

Chapter 5 - The Yakṣa's Questions

APPROACH

The Yakṣa's Questions serve to close out the Book of the Forest as simultaneous denouement and recapitulation, rendering the section in part through the parlance of *upākhyāna*. As is immediately apparent, the episode does not contain the same basic generic features as other subtales — that is, a story told to characters in the main narrative with distinct actors disconnected from the immediate action of the epic, though thematically relatable. Instead, Hiltebeitel provides a foundation for considering the section exceptional in its relation to the main story and subtale structure of the epic.

> To call it a subtale looks incongruous, for not only is it part of the epic's main story, it is in fact unique because its listener hears *questions* rather than a sub-*story*. In effect, Yudhiṣthira *lives* a substory, and draws, I will argue, on information learned from hearing other substories in his answers. I will thus interpret the episode as a "substory clearing house": one in which Yudhiṣthira is tested on what he has learned so far in life, for which the subtales he has heard in the forest provide a fair index. (Hiltebeitel 2011, 425-426)

Proceeding then by considering The Yakṣa's Questions a type of final exam in Yudhiṣthira's education in the forest, one in which he must cross into the milieu of those subtale lessons, my exploration will consider the language deployed through the chapter and its resonances within other subtales and the main story. How might a series of

eighteen prompts convey the transition from the forest, between frames, and effectively close the book?

Initiating the episode, the Pāṇḍavas are called to recover *"araṇīsahitaṁ"* (Mbh 3.295.8) — more accurately perhaps a bundle of kindling, though I prefer the expediency of van Buitenen's translation as "drilling woods" (van Buitenen 1975, 796) or Smith's "firesticks" (Smith 2009, 241). The thief, an ostensibly unassuming deer whose antlers tangled with the heap, escapes the brothers' grasp. The astute audience, however, has the contextual evidence to associate the pursuit of the deer with impending tribulation.[250] Marooned in the forest, Nakula wonders why the brothers continue to encounter a succession of crises. The dire tone of the question is reflected in the atypical eleven-syllable meter.

> *nāsmin kule jātu mamajja dharmo*
>
> *na cālasyād arthalopo babhūva |*
>
> Dharma never declines in our family.
>
> Nor do we fail for lack of effort.
>
> *anuttarāḥ sarvabhūteṣu bhūyaḥ*
>
> *saṁprāptāḥ smaḥ saṁśayaṁ kena rājan ||*
>
> Being best among all beings,
>
> why have we arrived at danger, king?
>
> (Mbh 3.295.17)

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[250] See van Buitenen 1973, 447 n. 35: "the motif of 'the mishap of the deer hunt'"

Confounded by their persistently poor luck, Nakula expresses a query on character, action, and reward. Immediately, Yudhiṣṭhira moves to negate the basis of the question, stating that such a system does not exist.

> *nāpadām asti maryādā na nimittaṁ na kāraṇam |*
>
> Misfortune does not have limit, reason, or cause.
>
> *dharmas tu vibhajaty atra ubhayoḥ puṇyapāpayoḥ ||*
>
> *Dharma* distributes it to both the good and evil.
>
> (Mbh 3.296.1)

Demonstrating perhaps his understanding of Mārkaṇḍeya's lesson here, and thereby retroactively answering his own prompts toward various sages for companion tales to his own misfortune, Yudhiṣṭhira appears to more firmly grasp their predicament as unassociated with their innate and active virtues and, more importantly, their ever expanding grasp of *dharma*. His brothers, however, resurrect a conversation that opened the third book urging immediate revenge on their condemners.[251] Bhīma, Arjuna, and Sahadeva each name a figure they should have struck down in the dice match, repeatedly deploying the term *hata*,[252] which van Buitenen and Johnson both render as "kill" (van Buitenen 1975, 797 and Johnson 2005, 283). While the dialogue does not reflect a major shift in positions, Yudhiṣṭhira always advocated for constancy as his brothers' argument for more forthright action appears to have tempered little in their twelve years of exile.

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[251] Mbh 3.25-36.
[252] Mbh 3.296.2 and 4.

Strengthening the link between those bookending scenes, both occur at a location designated Dvaitavana.[253]

Finally, I want to suggest lexical discordance between Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers. In the question posed by Nakula, the prince laments their predicament as "*saṃprāptāḥ smaḥ saṃśayaṁ*," which I translate above as "arrived at danger," employing Monier-Williams' definition of *saṃśaya* as it appears in the *Mahābhārata*[254] and agreeing with van Buitenen.[255] Nakula's phrase, "*prāptāḥ sam saṃśayam*" is subsequently redeployed by the three remaining younger brothers in providing their more revenge-prone response.[256] Yudhiṣṭhira's answer, conversely, offers a break in the repetition, replacing *saṃśaya* with *āpadā*, which Monier-Williams defines as misfortune or calamity.[257] Danger as the threat of injury might cleave more closely to their state of hunger and thirst.[258] Misfortune, I argue, aligns more with diverting trials and the overarching predicament of The Book of the Forest. Such calamity is embodied in the boa that arrests Bhīma just prior to the session with Mārkaṇḍeya — a natural or supernatural force that renders action outside of the Pāṇḍava's control. Yudhiṣṭhira describes the snake as *āpad*,[259] which he ultimately appeases through the type of lesson we see reverberate throughout these frames.[260] We should also recall Yudhiṣṭhira's request of Bṛhadaśva to better understand his situation through the subtale of a king as

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[253] Mbh 3.295.5 and 3.25.10.
[254] Monier-Williams 1984, 1117.
[255] van Buitenen 1975, 797.
[256] Mbh 3.296.2-4.
[257] Monier-Williams 1984, 142.
[258] *kṣutpipāsāparītāṅgāḥ* (Mbh 3.295.15)
[259] Mbh 3.177.2.
[260] "What must be fetched for you or taught to you that will satisfy you, snake?" (tr. van Buitenen 1975, 563).

unlucky as himself.[261] The term utilized at that earlier juncture, *alpabhāgyatara*, is absent from the discussion between the brothers, though Yudhiṣṭhira's veer from their established terminology, coupled with the resonant translations does give cause to suspect affinity between the misfortune Yudhiṣṭhira expresses here before Nala's Tale. That alignment, then, serves to further demonstrate the type of knowledge acquired by Yudhiṣṭhira through his time in the forest. Furthermore, the order of declarations is highly suggestive. After Nakula poses the question, Yudhiṣṭhira is the first to provide his response, which does not dissuade the rest of the brothers or curb their use of the repeated phrase. As Hiltebeitel frequently points out, the act of listening is a crucial motif through the narrative layers of the epic.[262]

Rather than offer a rejoinder, Yudhiṣṭhira implores his brother to find sustenance to remedy their despondent state. Nakula finds evidence for a body of water in spotting a large growth of trees and hearing the sound of cranes — *"sārasānāṁ ca nirhrādam"* (Mbh 3.296.8). Approaching the lake surrounded by cranes, Nakula receives a command.

> *mā tāta sāhasaṁ kārṣīr mama pūrvaparigrahaḥ |*
>
> Do not be hasty, friend. This is claimed first by me.
>
> *praśnān uktvā tu mādreya tataḥ piba harasva ca ||*
>
> Having replied to my questions, son of Mādrī, then take and drink.
>
> (Mbh 3.296.12)

My translation favors Johnson's rendering of *sāhasa* as "hastily" (Johnson 2005, 285), rather than van Buitenen's rendering as "violence" (van Buitenen 1975, 797). Surely it

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[261] Mbh 3.49.34.
[262] See Hiltebeitel 2001, 215 and following.

seems a stretch to categorize drinking water as a type of violence, though perhaps forcible action is an appropriate connotation. Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, the term *sāhasa* is associated with sudden and even unconscious movement.[263] We should also recognize the unique structure put in place through that initial warning. Unlike Sāvitrī, who spoke in reflection of her knowledge unprompted, the scene here is more explicitly an inquest. The other major occurrence of a question, *praśna*, acting as a major driving force in the narrative occurs in the second book through Draupadī's protestations in the hall,[264] which, I have argued earlier, reverberate through the third book particularly in Nala's Tale. Nakula does not take notice of the warning, drinks from the lake, and falls — again, the act of listening looms large.

The consequence, *pītvā ca nipapāta ha* (Mbh 3.296.13), thereby deserves a closer inspection. The reduplicated root *pat* with prefix *ni-* might suggest a fall downward. Johnson interprets the construction to its logical conclusion, stating that Nakula "dropped down dead" (Johnson 2005, 285). Through van Buitenen, the term is rendered more pliable: "he collapsed" (van Buitenen 1975, 979). I have pointed out elsewhere that the presence of cranes suggests paralysis as the punishment endured by Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers.[265] Once again, we see a recycling of language as the scene repeats through Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhīma's approach on the lake. Each receive the same warning and result, with some small alteration for Arjuna as he goes on the offensive with a flurry of arrows and thereby draws an additional question after the act. I argue that persistent repetition at the outset of the subtale serves to set the stakes for subsequent events in the

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[263] See Mbh 3.73.26 and 27, Nala is emotional in his sudden reunion with his children.
[264] See especially Mbh 2.61 in which the efficacy and repercussions of Draupadī's questions are discussed.
[265] See Hiltebeitel 2011, 446.

text while providing dialogical access to further afield points in the text. In displaying a pattern within and through the particular episode and epic, additional points of entry and connections elucidate the work.

> Hence the hypothesis: what if patterns showing affinity, instead of being considered in succession, were to be treated as one complex pattern and ready globally? By getting at what we call *harmony*, they would then find out that an orchestra score, in order to become meaningful, has to be read diachronically along one axis — that is, page after page, from left to right — and also synchronically along the other axis, all the notes which are written vertically making up one gross constituent unit, i.e. one bundle of relations. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 432)

Concurring with the larger thrust of this study, the identification of patterns, mirrored elements, or repetition within the text forms an interwoven network of significance that can reshape pathways into the epic. More specifically in regard to the type of linguistic repetition evident in this section, not only do methods of construction and proliferation become apparent, but the epic works to connect the immediacy of the moment with foregrounding substrates.

> First, the question has often been raised why myths, and more generally oral literature, are so much addicted to duplication, triplication or quadruplication of the same sequence. If our hypotheses are accepted, the answer is obvious: repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent. For we have seen that the synchro-diachronical structure of the myth permits us to organize it into diachronical sequences (the rows in our tables) which should be read synchronically (the columns). Thus, a myth exhibits a "slated" structure which seeps to the surface, if one may say so, through the repetition process. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 443)

In mapping premodern narrative, Lévi-Strauss allows us to conceive of repetition as a crucial function of structural integrity. By redeploying those Pāṇḍavas, with the exception of Yudhiṣṭhira, in their thirst for vengeance both within the scene and at the outset of their time in the forest, which then informs their repeated hasty actions at the lake and subsequent ruin, the reader or listener of the epic can witness the machinations in which the conditions and actions of these characters are intentionally guided over the course of the text.

By allowing its audience to approach from multiple angles and scrutinize those interconnected threads, I argue that the text is also setting its own conditions for redeployment and translation. The epic is constantly aware that it will not be told or heard once. Thereby, it establishes a lexicon that might proliferate the means of its transmission. According to Lévi-Strauss' notions of myth translation as quoted below, the metalanguage remains so pungent that the work rejects mistranslation.

> [T]he mythical value of myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. It is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at "taking off" from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 430)

Amending that, however, I argue that the language of the text is so well grounded, through exactly the type of repetition and patterning that Lèvi-Strauss identifies above, that translation can more effectively and expediently derive from the language of the work. Through redeploying its own conditions, the text itself carries over meaning into

multiple contexts. Returning to agreement with Lèvi-Strauss, then, the more prudent inspection in the study of the epic is not its original form, but rather the way in which its rudiments set the stage for constant representation and re-presentation.

> Thus, our method eliminates a problem which has been so far one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the *true* version, or the *earlier* one. On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 435)

Certainly, we can identify degrees of successful translation and consider the possibilities that open and close with each iteration. What our discussion of Lévi-Strauss allows us to conceptualize, then, is the collaboration that occurs in developing meaning in a mirrored way both within different strata of a text and between speaker and audience, again and again.

THE DHARMA KING

As the sole remaining Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira approaches the lake in search of his brothers only to find their inanimate bodies.[266] The established model of approach allows us to read the variations as pronounced through Yudhiṣṭhira. First, an emotional outpouring[267] and protracted reflection accompanies the king's introduction to the scene.

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[266] *nirviceṣṭān* (Mbh 3.297.2), which might be rendered 'motionless,' perhaps supporting my theory of paralysis.

[267] *sa dīrgham uṣṇaṁ niḥśvasya śokabāṣpapariplutaḥ* — He signed long and passionately, overwhelmed by tears of grief. (Mbh 3.297.3)

He inspects his brothers for the cause of their demise, and, finding no wound,[268] suspects a ghost spirit or his enemy Duryodhana.[269] Hiltebeitel does well to uncover the reiterative focus on the king's mental faculties here, arguing a point of distinction between Yudhiṣṭhira and his hasty brothers. Hiltebeitel points out that the section contains repeated use of the verbal root *cint*, which he translates to mean 'ponder,' and *buddhi*, therein 'wits' or 'intellect.'[270] This usage is immediately distinct from the recurrent focus on *manas*, *utsāha*, and *hṛdaya* that accompanied Sāvitrī, though in both cases, those recurrent phrases will set up and guide the subsequent course of the narrative. Amplifying that link, Yudhiṣṭhira proceeds to wonder if his adversary at this juncture is in fact also Yama.[271] Instead, that interlocutor is first identified as a voice from the sky — "*vācam antarikṣāt*" (Mbh 3.296.25) — and is subsequently referred to as a Yakṣa through the narration of the tale.[272]

Having inspected the scene, Yudhiṣṭhira does not venture a drink like his brothers before him, but instead immerses himself in the water, repeated within the verse through the terms *avagāḍhavant* and *gāhamāna*[273] — the former veers closely toward envelopment while the latter suggests the depth of Yudhiṣṭhira's plunge.[274] The act appears to be a protective measure in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's conclusion that his brothers were felled by the power of a flood.[275] Though I could find no instance of the terms for immersion denoting protection otherwise in the epic, they do nonetheless signal

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[268] *śastraprahāra* (Mbh 3.297.4)
[269] *bhūtaṁ mahad idaṁ manye* (Mbh 3.297.4) and verse 5.
[270] See Hiltebeitel 2011, 444-445.
[271] Mbh 3.297.9.
[272] Mbh 3.296.30.
[273] Mbh 3.297.10.
[274] See Monier-Williams 1985, 97.
[275] *aughabalā* 3.297.9.

a sort of reversal from the course of the brothers before Yudhiṣṭhira. The reversal also denotes a self-control in contrast to his brothers, here able to to immerse himself in water without taking a drink. This alternate path prompts the disembodied voice to reveal a form, identifying as a *baka*,[276] or crane, before providing the rote disclaimer.

A quick point of distinction here: while Sāvitrī's Tale certainly appears to anticipate the conditions of this episode replete with collapsed men in the wilderness, a powerful interlocutor, and a unique protagonist bent on their return, Hiltebeitel states that "Yudhiṣṭhira has just heard how Yama released Satyavān because of Sāvitrī's extraordinary fidelity, and also because she answered Yama's question" (Hiltebeitel 2011, 446). Our study has shown, conversely, that Sāvitrī does not speak at the beckoning of *praśna*, but rather on her own accord. In fact, Yama pleads with her to stop and turn back, uninterested in testing the dedicated woman. The interrogation that awaits Yudhiṣṭhira, then, is a reframing of the model established by the previous subtale. This variation, I argue, prevents the mirrors from reflecting too closely to one another while allowing resonance with Draupadī's question, as discussed above, and thereby the propelling action of The Book of The Forest.

Before acquiescing, Yudhiṣṭhira sets forth his own line of questioning per the identity of the voice. By means of deduction, he opines that the defeat of his brothers could not have come about by means of a bird or divine being. Moreover, through the course of his questions, the object of his speech is visually revealed and thus names itself a Yakṣa.[277] Now seen, the Yakṣa again credits himself with striking down the brothers

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[276] Mbh 3.297.11.
[277] Mbh 3.297.18.

and repeats his warning. Yudhiṣṭhira replies that the good do not act impulsively, echoing Sāvitrī's meditation on *sat*,[278] and invites the Yakṣa's questions.

> *yadātmanā svam ātmānaṁ praśaṁset puruṣaḥ prabho |*
>
> Although, o master, a person should not praise the self by means of self,
>
> *yathāprajñaṁ tu te praśnān prativakṣyāmi pṛccha mām ||*
>
> but according to my understanding, I will answer your questions. Ask me!
>
> (Mbh 3.297.25)

In his circular speech, Yudhiṣṭhira again enacts the relativist outlook with which he took up Nakula's earlier query on punishment and reward. Yudhiṣṭhira has heard that time alters any absolute knowledge, even so far as it applies to seminal concepts like *dharma*. Stating that he can only provide his own limited perspective, Yudhiṣṭhira steadies himself for the examination, deploying the imperative *pṛccha* to his examiner.

Moving into the eighteen sets of questions posed by the Yakṣa and their ensuing replies by Yudhiṣṭhira, this study does not attempt an exegetical understanding, but rather finds strands of resonance through other points of the *Mahābhārata*. Shulman states that "only the first question manages to elicit straightforward reference" (Shulman 1996, 153).

> *kiṁ svid ādityam unnayati ke ca tasyābhitaś carāḥ |*
>
> What raises the sun? And what then ushers it near?
>
> *kaś cainam astaṁ nayati kasmiṁś ca pratitiṣṭhati ||*
>
> And so what leads it down? And where is its foundation?

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[278] *santo hi puruṣāḥ sadā* (Mbh 3.297.24).

brahmādityam unnayati devās tasyābhitaś carāḥ |

Brahman raises the sun. The gods usher it near.

dharmaś cāstaṁ nayati ca satye ca pratitiṣṭhati ||

Dharma leads it down. And truth is its foundation.

(Mbh 3.297.26)

Immediately, we can view the intricate construction of the verse as the interrogatives and conjunctions in the initiating query give way to crucial terminology within the subtale. In so doing, the answer links the four terms in question, *brahma*, *deva*, *dharma*, and *satya*, as co-dependent concepts. Equally, the schema of the verse itself, illustrating the process of solar movement, renders the terminology contingent. For Shulman, the initiating verse is 'straightforward' by beginning with 'Brahman' as in effect the ultimate answer to all questions that will follow as the overarching concept at play. Our recent discussion of *dharma* as it interacts with time through Mārkaṇḍeya along with its deployment through the speech of Sāvitrī should already give us opportunity to understand the term as seminal here. Furthermore, we should recall the frequent associations among Nala, Damayantī, and truth, both as central quality but also guiding force within their subtale. Herein lies the crux of my reading of the section as a subtale "clearing house." Yudhiṣṭhira exemplifies his education in the forest as the accrual of a vocabulary permitting participation in the narrative. The king's failure to rescue Draupadī at the close of the second book stems from his inability to answer her question. Recall here that Yudhiṣṭhira pointedly sat silent in the midst of the question, which I speculated above might reflect his shame within the situation. Instead, we have cause now to suggest that the language

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was not available to him at that juncture. Now Yudhiṣṭhira is provided a second opportunity to rescue by means of language. We are not provided with the same query, or type of query, however, as a reflection of the conditions of the interview. Exploring these questions further, we can consider how the Dharma King's period in the forest informs the dialogue.

Proceeding, then, through the questions:

kena svic chrotriyo bhavati kena svid vindate mahat |

With what does one become knowledgable in the Veda? With what does one find the great?

kena dvitīyavān bhavati rājan kena ca buddhimān ‖

With what is one who has a companion, King? And with what is one learned?

śrutena śrotriyo bhavati tapasā vindate mahat |

With listening, one becomes knowledgable in the Veda. With austerity, one finds the great.

dhṛtyā dvitīyavān bhavati buddhimān vṛddhasevayā ‖

With constancy, one becomes companions. With attention to what is older, one is learned.

(Mbh 3.297.28)

A few points of contention in my translation. First, both van Buitenen and Johnson render the verbal root *śru* as knowledge, learning, or instruction,[279] for which there is certainly precedent. While *śrotriya* is a technical term referring to Vedic knowledge, the verse's

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[279] See van Buitenen 1975, 800 and Johnson 2005, 299.

utilization of "*śrutena*" as its rejoinder does call upon the reader to unpack the term toward its verbal root. Considering the possibility of the verse's gesture toward notions of listening is certainly consistent with our own understanding of *śru* as a crucial act throughout the third book. To be clear, this is not to provide one layer of reading over another, but simply to argue that these multiple layers might be simultaneously present and productive in conversation with the rest of the text. We should recall the moment of Nala's return to the kingdom of Damayantī's father in which he is known because his wife hears the sound of Nala's chariot.[280] Likewise, Nala hears the speech of his wife beckoning him home and is altered as a result.[281] Somewhat like *dharma*, the frequent appearance of *tapas* in the epic renders the term difficult to discern, deriving its own lexicon of meaning given the context, though I side with van Buitenen's employment of 'austerities' over Johnson's understanding as 'asceticism,' the latter containing more pointed connotation. Finally, both the translations of van Buitenen and Johnson illustrate slight variation on the final answer:

> one gains insight by attending on one's elders. (van Buitenen 1975, 800)

> By serving the elders, one acquired judgement. (Johnson 2005, 299)

By veering away from van Buitenen and Johnson's understanding of *śru* as learning, I have the opportunity to utilize the term here as a translation for *buddhimat*, which I argue contains necessary resonance here through the lens of Yudhiṣṭhira's ongoing education in the forest, pivoting further from 'acquiring judgement' than to 'gaining insight.' Distancing further from van Buitenen and Johnson's understanding of *vṛddhasevā* as

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[280] See Mbh 3.71 and note the frequent repetition of *śru* as the act of listening.
[281] See Mbh 3.72.21 and 22.

strictly filial piety, the translation might leave space for the resonances of the Pāṇḍavas'
recent cosmological history lesson by Mārkaṇḍeya. The compound is also found in the
description of Rama's virtues within his recently heard subtale.[282] Not discounting the
attention on care for elders within the text, the pivot instead attempts to more literally
break down the compound in order to incorporate that sentiment with the other forms of
knowledge gained from the past.

The next two questions relegate themselves to the particular groups of people,
namely brahmins and kṣatriyas, in order to bring about a contrastingly informed
illustration of those factions. The verses are posed exactly the same, save for the name of
the object, asking Yudhiṣṭhira to identify the *devatva*, *dharma*, *mānuṣa*, and *asa* of both
parties,[283] that is, their divinity, *dharma*, humanity, and vice. Through the structure of the
verse, we can see that the first and third questions are designed to correspond, as are the
second and fourth, here both concerned once again with *sat*, which we have identified as
a classification of persons deemed the good or, elsewhere, the strict. The correspondences
between the lines and verses serve to underscore the difference. Divinity is identified for
brahmins as the recitation of Vedas, *svādhyāya*, while for kṣatriyas is it the bow, *iṣvastra*.
Skipping to the third *pāda*, their humanity, by contrast, is identified as death, *maraṇa*, for
the brahmins and fear, *bhaya*, for the kṣatriyas. The *dharmas* of brahmins and kṣatriyas
are cited as austerity, *tapas*, and sacrifice, *yajña*, respectively, and their vice slander,
parivāda, perhaps more suitably false speech, and desertion, *parityāga*. In concert, we
can view these answers veering between affinity and dissonance between the persons

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[282] Mbh 3.261.3.
[283] Mbh 3.297.30-33.

described. The text goes as far as rendering the final answer of each set of questions near in sound to one another (*parivāda / parityāga*). The final answer is especially resonant as Yudhiṣṭhira, a kṣatriya who has over the past twelve years heard the stories of abandoned wives and kingdoms, displays awareness of his own participation in that schema.

In these initial questions from the Yakṣa, we can observe the reliance on form in the creation of meaning. The verses gain layers of significance through their complex interaction. This interplay, I believe, is what leads Shulman and Hiltebeitel to designate those questions as riddles. Furthermore, Bakhtin provides causes to conceive of meaning as contingent upon form.

> In poetic genres, artistic consciousness — understood as a unity of all the author's semantic and expressive intentions — fully realizes itself within its own language; in them alone is such consciousness fully immanent, expressing itself in it directly and without mediation, without conditions and without distance. (Bakhtin 2010, 285)

Bakhtin is crucial here in distinguishing the study of the epic as one of literature: the form enacts its content. By inspecting the ways in which those constituent parts build and carry signification through language and its form, we can begin to view that self-reflective layer of the subtale, at once incorporating and setting the ground for its own reading. Through this framework, I argue that we can begin to view and translate the dialogue that persists between verses both in this episode and in its correspondences with the larger text. While such a reading might render the epic more intentionally crafted than some are prepared to argue, instead this model might provide further evidence to support the notion that the *Mahābhārata* anticipates and welcomes its own dissemination and proliferation.

Following a series of questions that consider sacrificial practice, cultivation, and what Shulman cites as querying the boundaries between the human and inanimate,[284] the Yakṣa moves more explicitly to an interrogation of language.

kiṁ svid ekapadaṁ dharmyaṁ kiṁ svid ekapadaṁ yaśaḥ |

What one word is dharmic? What one word is fame?

kiṁ svid ekapadaṁ svargyaṁ kiṁ svid ekapadaṁ sukham ||

What one word occupies heaven? What one word is happiness?

dākṣyam ekapadaṁ dharmyaṁ dānam ekapadaṁ yaśaḥ |

Skill is one word that is dharmic. Giving is one word that is fame.

satyam ekapadaṁ svargyaṁ śīlam ekapadaṁ sukham ||

Truth is one word that occupies heaven. Character is one word that is happiness.

(Mbh 3.297.48-49)

Both van Buitenen and Johnson render the reiterative phrase *ekapada* into the more conventional parlance "in a word" (van Buitnenen 1975, 802; Johnson 2005, 313). Such a construction seems redundant as most of Yudhiṣṭhira's responses thus far have satisfied such a condition, as we have witnessed the structural conditions in redeploying the question with only the alteration of a single word in place of those interrogatives. Considering also the shared form as neuter nominatives with the object of each query, my translation argues that the two terms are in apposition. Therein, the verse veers toward linguistic presuppositions, asking for further definitional access to the concepts. Considering van Buitenen and Johnson's somewhat divergent take on the final one word

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[284] See Shulman 1996, 155-156. Particularly of interest is that Shulman begins to consider verses 59 and 61 as the only "true riddle-like examples in this passage."

in the reply, *śīla*, as "character" and "good conduct" respectively, we can observe the vitality of context in carrying meaning. Monier-Williams cites *śīla* as signifying "habit, custom, usage, natural or acquired way of living or acting, practice, conduct, disposition, tendency, character, nature" (Monier-Williams 1985, 1079) and on first inspection of the verse there appears little cause to favor or strike out any of these possibilities. We do immediately know that the term is meant to be associated with *sukha*, happiness, though the definition of this term appears so elusive in our own language that divining its connection here might not seem feasible. Listening more closely to the structure of the subtale, then, we have already uncovered an ethic through which the terminology in the answers can interact. Considering, then, *śīla* in relation to skill, giving, and truth, we can observe a pattern of active elements in contrast to their more innate counterparts in the question, namely *dharma*, fame, heaven, and happiness. By means of this method giving credence to Bakhtin above, we can surmise that the translation might tend more toward the active 'conduct' rather than the more passive connotations of 'character' or 'nature.' Furthermore, we can recast *śīla* back through the third book. Toward the close of Nala's Tale, Damayantī, the abandoned wife, confirms her constancy and dedication toward their reunion. Verified by the deity Vāyu, Damayantī is described as employing both *satya* and *śīla* to bring the two back together.[285] Through this lens, the emotion of the scene in the *Nalopākhyānam* is brought to the fore.

Agreeing with Shulman's consideration of larger structural workings within the Yakṣa's Questions, we might observe a progression in which each successive query sets

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[285] Mbh 3.75.11-12.

the stage for the approximate verse. Closing above with a meditation on happiness, the interrogator follows by invoking larger motifs expressed throughout the subtales leading to their meeting.

> *kiṁ svid ātmā manuṣyasya kiṁ svid daivakṛtaḥ sakhā |*
>
> What is the self of a man? What is a friend made by fate?
>
> *upajīvanaṁ kiṁ svid asya kiṁ svid asya parāyaṇam ||*
>
> What supports his life? What is his highest goal?
>
> *putra ātmā manuṣyasya bhāryā daivakṛtaḥ sakhā |*
>
> A son is the self of a man. A wife is a friend made by fate.
>
> *upajīvanaṁ ca parjanyo dānam asya parāyaṇam ||*
>
> Rain supports life. Giving is his highest goal.
>
> (Mbh 3.297.50-51)

As observed within Sāvitrī's Tale, the male descendant occupies a particular anxiety for actors in the text. Redeploying those speeches by Satyavān's parents, which occur both as speculation and action in the text, the son bears the charge of maintaining the self that has existed across generations. But, and I argue as particularly telling here, the stories that we have inspected through the *Mahābhārata* are not focused on the relationship between fathers and sons, but instead, husbands and wives. Furthermore, a figure's happiness is at stake in both subtales and the main story at moments when that particular union is in duress. As a friend made by fate, we can understand the wife by means of the inevitable return of lovers, as often extolled by subtale narrators as evidence of the main story's eventual happy conclusion. Furthermore, both Damayantī and Sāvitrī's subtales allow us

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to perceive the wife as a friend who makes fate, that is, bend supernatural powers to their desired conclusions. Repeatedly, we observe Damayantī subverting the will of gods in order to be with Nala, just as Sāvitrī exhibits the ability to contend with Death to be near her own husband. As Mārkaṇḍeya illustrates, the wife's ability to carry her beloved in the face of fate is critical to the narrative. Within the questions here, we should note that this is the second time the wife is an answer given by Yudhiṣṭhira. The wife is also described as "the companion of the one at home"[286] in a preceding response verse. Here we can obverse the two states of marriage as portrayed in the subtale, together at home and in trial outside, brought about by fate.

Furthermore, the third answer in this verse appears at first incongruous with the other four. In one regard, there is no stretch in understanding the construction that rain supports life, but such an image stands out in the midst of a discussion of wives and sons. However, we should recall a masterful address by Yudhiṣṭhira's wife, Draupadī, at the outset of the third book during their tête-à-tête on how to proceed in the face of their recent exile. The thesis of her argument to her husband is the need for industrious action.

> *paśyāmi svaṁ samutthānam upajīvanti jantavaḥ |*
>
> As I see it, creatures live off their own effort,
>
> *api dhātā vidhātā ca yathāyam udake bakaḥ ||*
>
> as does the Placer and the Disposer, as well as that crane in the water.
>
> (Mbh 3.33.7)

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[286] *bhāryā mitraṁ gṛhe sataḥ* (Mbh 3.297.45)

To demonstrate her point, Draupadī deploys a metaphor in field cultivation, stating that the farmer can only take so many steps before the fate of the land is in the hands of another.

> *pṛthivīṁ lāṅgalenaiva bhittvā bījaṁ vapaty uta |*
>
> *āste 'tha karṣakas tūṣṇīṁ parjanyas tatra kāraṇam ||*
>
> The peasant cleaves the earth with his plow, then sows the seed, then he sits by silently and the rain does the work. (Mbh 3.33.44; tr. van Buitenen 1975, 285)

By invoking the operative term *parjanya* within a mesh of significance that involves both fate and the wife, I argue that Yudhiṣṭhira is demonstrating his attention to that earlier moment in the book. Rain here is presented as companion to fate, which in turn is brought by the wife through her effort. This active principle is further underscored and linked with the immediately preceding question verse as 'giving,' *dāna* recurs within Yudhiṣṭhira's answer.

> Nearing the close of those eighteen questions, the Yakṣa returns to the concept of *dharma*.

> *kaś ca dharmaḥ paro loke kaś ca dharmaḥ sadāphalaḥ |*
>
> Which is the highest *dharma* in the world?
>
> Which *dharma* is always fruitful?
>
> *kiṁ niyamya na śocanti kaiś ca saṁdhir na jīryate ||*
>
> Controlling what do they not grieve?
>
> With whom does the bond not waste away?
>
> *ānṛśaṁsyaṁ paro dharmas trayīdharmaḥ sadāphalaḥ |*

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Noncruelty is the highest *dharma*.

Vedic *dharma* is always fruitful.

mano yamya na śocanti sadbhiḥ saṁdhir na jīryate ||

Controlling the mind, they do not grieve.

With the good the bond does not waste away.

(Mbh 3.297.54-55)

Hiltebeitel cites this as a "climactic question" (Hiltebeitel 2011, 450) in accordance with Shulman's assertion that here "Yudhiṣṭhira is summing up his life's wisdom" (Shulman 1996, 156). Hiltebeitel finds resonances of this section in Nala's Tale. Keeping with our clearing house inspection, Hiltebeitel finds resonances in Nala's Tale where 'noncruelty,' his translation of *ānṛśaṁsya*, is similarly designated the highest *dharma*.[287] Within the earlier subtale, the context for the phrase involves Damayantī's message disseminated in order to locate her lost husband. Pleading for his return, she invokes *ānṛśaṁsya* as *paro dharma* in regard to the treatment of the husband to his wife. We continue, then, to observe the importance of listening to the wife through the main story and subtales. Likewise, *trayīdharma* is divulged earlier in the form of the third book to Bhīma by Hanumān. Once again blurring the line between subtale and main story, Hanumān introduces himself with the explanation that he was granted a boon to subsist as long as the story of Rāma,[288] though that *upākhyāna* is yet to be told at this point in the book. Hanumān proceeds with a lesson on *dharma* identifying *trayīdharma*, or Vedic *dharma*,

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[287] Mbh 3.67.15; Hiltebeitel 2011, 450.
[288] Mbh 3.147.37.

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as one of three conditions necessary for the upkeep of the world.[289] Hanumān, like Mārkaṇḍeya, appears to derive authority from his long life, portraying his understanding through a grasp of time.[290] It is important to note, however, that Yudhiṣṭhira does not hear the lesson from Hanumān. Bhīma separates from his brothers following birds to a lake.[291]

In his final question of the eighteen, the Yakṣa eschews the established structure to deliver a flurry of definitional examinations.

> *kā dik kim udakaṁ proktaṁ kim annaṁ pārtha kiṁ viṣam* |
>
> What is direction? What is called water?
>
> What is food, prince? What is poison?
>
> *śrāddhasya kālam ākhyāhi tataḥ piba harasva ca* ||
>
> Tell me the time of *śrāddha*. And then take and drink.
>
> *santo dig jalam ākāśaṁ gaur annaṁ prārthanā viṣam* |
>
> The good are direction. The sky is water. Cow is food. Request is poison.
>
> *śrāddhasya brāhmaṇaḥ kālaḥ kathaṁ vā yakṣa manyase* ||
>
> A brahmin is the time of *śrāddha*. Or what do you think, Yakṣa?
>
> (Mbh 3.297.60-61)

The inquiry closes with a return. Yudhiṣṭhira is given the opportunity again to expound upon *sat*, an act that initiated the episode in response to Nakula, and within Yudhiṣṭhira reasoning for complying with the Yakṣa's ban on drinking from the lake. Furthermore, its repetition recalls the recurrent invocations of *sat* within the boon-gaining speeches by Sāvitrī. The second section requests a consideration of water, aligned with *ākāśa* here,

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[289] Mbh 2.149.32.
[290] Mbh 3.148.6.
[291] Mbh 3.146.52.

translated by both van Buitenen and Johnson as "space" (van Buitenen 1975, 803; Johnson 2005, 311). My own rendering of the term as 'sky' is informed by a description Nala's charioteer work, depicted as achieving speeds that allowed his car to travel through the sky.[292] This is the second mention of cows within Yudhiṣṭhira's answers, earlier described as "*pratiṣṭhamānānāṁ*" (Mbh 3.297.37) — which van Buitenen interprets as "the best of the standing" and Johnson "the best for those dwelling" (van Buitenen 1975, 801; Johnson 2005, 301). The term *prārthanā* occurs at one other point in the Book of the Forest, during that above-mentioned dialogue between Bhīma and Hanumān as the latter describes his understanding of time. Here, Hanumān describes what I have translated here as 'requests' or elsewhere considered "prayers" (Monier-Williams 1985, 708), as a degenerate iteration of *dharma*.[293] These questions allow us to consider the way in which the entire third book develops meaning through an interconnected mesh of speakers and listeners through concomitant language.

> To take responsibility for the language of the work as a whole at all of its points as *its* language, to assume a full solidarity with each of the work's aspects, tones, nuances — such is the fundamental prerequisite for poetic style; style so conceived is fully adequate to a single language and a single linguistic consciousness. (Bakhtin 2010, 286)

By arguing that Yudhiṣṭhira's education is in fact the development of a vocabulary, we are also privy to the way in which the text guides its reader through the establishment of a lexicon through each successive layer. The significance of its own language builds through the development of the *Mahābhārata* to such an extent that the text must provide

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[292] *samutpetur ivākāśaṁ rathinaṁ mohayann iva* (Mbh 3.69.21)
[293] *yugakṣayakṛtā dharmāḥ prārthanāni vikurvate* (Mbh 3.148.36)

more or less explicit pathways between moments and frames in order to excavate complex reverberations. Considering its literary resilience, which Bakhtin allows us to arrive at through an understanding of the dialogical correspondences of language, we can view the epic as engaged in the practice of teaching its audience, along with its subjects, how the work might be read.

Upon arriving at this final answer, Yudhiṣṭhira once again reflects the questions back to his interlocutor. The opportunity for additional commentary on his responses is left open as the Yakṣa only replies with satisfaction and a final, bonus question on the subject of a man. Yudhiṣṭhira's response is interesting, equating a man to sound, *śabda*, and stating that he exists as long as the sound is heard,[294] not unlike Hanumān who lives as long as his story. The act of listening continues to hold crucial importance within the *Mahābhārata*. Finally, Yudhiṣṭhira expands his explanation in stating that a man will be prosperous through losing distinction between happiness and sadness, past and future.[295] The answer spurs the Yakṣa to offer to revive one of the brothers — an interesting reversal from Sāvitrī's Tale, in which Yama attempted to avoid rejuvenation at all costs. Here the prince has the opportunity to enact his equanimity by selecting Nakula, who is explicitly and rather harshly described as the least beneficial choice for Yudhiṣṭhira.[296] The king replies by exemplifying his understanding of the word *ānṛśaṁsya* as the highest *dharma*[297] — his choice allows each of his father's wives to retain a living son. His demonstration, then, further impresses the Yakṣa into reanimating all four fallen

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[294] *yāvat sa śabdo bhavati tāvat puruṣa ucyate* (Mbh 3.297.63)
[295] Mbh 3.297.64.
[296] See Mbh 3.297.67-70 in which the Yakṣa is perplexed, describing Arjuna as *parāyaṇa* and comparing Bhīma's strength to an elephant.
[297] 3.297.71.

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Pāṇḍavas before revealing himself to be Yudhiṣṭhira's divine father, Dharma. Before his departure, the god grants three more boons. First, Dharma admits to donning the guise of a deer and returns those firesticks that the Pāṇḍavas set out after.[298] Second, an ability to hide in plain sight,[299] refracting the theme of Nala's Tale[300] and effectively transitioning the brothers out of their time in the forest. Finally, the Dharma king asks Dharma for a slew of virtues, a list of abstract vocabulary which we have found redeployed through the course of the book, their meaning given dimension and context over the interacting layers of narrative presented within the epic. Dharma replies that such things are already within Yudhiṣṭhira's possession.[301]

The subtale concludes with a benediction of sorts, stating that whoever hears the story shall live one hundred years, never act in *adharmic* fashion, nor be poor in deed. Most intriguing for our purposes, that the episode self-identifies here in three instances. The Yakṣa's Questions are thereby a report, *kīrti*, more accurately in compound, one that contains power, *vardhana*. Additionally, the text is readings or recitations, *"paṭhan,"* as well as clever men's true story, *"nṛṇāṁ sadākhyānam idaṁ vijānatām"* (Mbh 3.298.27-28). This unique ending, I argue, sets the section apart from the main story in content, allowing its containment as a particular section under distinctive genre designations. Stylistically, the section mimetically adapts a hallmark of the subtale, namely the summation address provided directly by the narrator to the listening party. Recall that

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[298] Mbh 3.298.13.
[299] *yady api svena rūpeṇa cariṣyatha mahīm imām* | *na vo vijñāsyate kaś cit triṣu lokeṣu bhārata* || — Even though you will move with your own outward appearance, no one in the three worlds will distinguish you, Bharata. (Mbh 3.289.17)
[300] The brothers will choose disguises that reveal something innate of themselves, as we have seen occur in Nala's Tale.
[301] Mbh 3.298.25.

both Bṛhadaśva and Mārkaṇḍeya conclude their subtales by explaining the ways in which their story applies to and benefits the predicament concurrently confronted by Yudhiṣṭhira. That narrator's voice shifts outward and, through the tale's focus on abstract concepts, casts a wider net in order to underscore the story's application. As a subtype of *ākhyāna*, and through its cumulative relationship with those preceding subtales, the Yakṣa's Questions might more firmly occupy Hiltebeitel's designation as a "substory clearing house."

Conclusion

HOW FAR IS FAR

As understood through the above reading of the *Mahābhārata*, the epic is engaged in a self-conscious and reiterative process of reinterpreting its own constructs. Sets of conditions, themes, and even idioms are recast in order to develop and proliferate their significance throughout the poem. I argue that this process is particularly effective, or perceivable, through the *Mahābhārata*'s playful utilization of genre. Explicitly cagey with its designations, interrogating the boundaries of each episode, the epic upends convention through the use of interacting genres, turning Todorov's definition on its head.

> Genres are therefore units that one can describe from two different points of view, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by codification. A genre, literary or otherwise, is nothing by this codification of discursive properties. (Todorov 1976, 162)

That double scrutiny remains crucial, allowing resonances to co-mingle within the unit while at the same time complicating and rendering suspect codification. Agreeing with Todorov, conversely, "we must understand that a text is not only the product of a pre-existing combinatorial system (constituted by all that is literature *in posse*); it is also a transformation of that system" (Todorov 1970, 7). My inspection of the *Mahābhārata*,

reading along with the subtales and their collaborative relation to the epic at large, reveals that the process of transformation can intercede in a work of literature.

Recently, Emily T. Hudson took up the question of literature in relation to the *Mahābhārata*, determining that literary-ness is defined by a process of meaning development rather than overt pronouncements. Specific to this epic, what is shown rather than told, to paraphrase, is what Hudson describes as an "aesthetic of suffering."

> The aesthetics of suffering, which is my articulation of the specific way the *Mahābhārata* works as a literary text, is made up of five components that work together to produce meaning in the text. These five components are (1) the concept of suffering, both as a central theme and an aesthetic principle, (2) narrative strategies, (3) the sensitive reader/receiver (*sahṛdaya*), (4) characters, and (5) conceptual categories. (Hudson 2013, 27)

Furthermore, Hudson states that these five components conspire together to advance a singular worldview, "which centers on confronting the pervasive presence of suffering in the world" (Hudson 2013, 27). Agreeing that literature guides readers through a process of meaning development rather than straightforward instruction, my own reading of the epic might not be compatible with an "aesthetic of suffering." This is not to say that suffering is not pervasive within the epic, but our analysis serves as directly opposed to the notion that such force of conflict extends through the epic for pointed ends. To be sure, Nala, Rāma, Sāvitrī, and the Pāṇḍavas all suffer a great deal, whether by means of exile, concealment, or longing for separated love, but conflict as a way to propel the plot serves as a means to multiple ends, underscoring the artistic possibility rather than a

single viewpoint. Literature, as it should be clear at this point, is first and foremost a form of art, not pedagogy. Hudson's discussion of the "sensitive reader" — one who can be guided by the text to the conclusions of a specific worldview — recalls Jean Paris' conception of translation, advocating a core instruction to carry from original to target.[302] By identifying conceptual categories that work to "manipulate the sensitive reader/spectator's hopes, desires, and expectations regarding central concepts in the epic" (Hudson 2013, 31), I would argue that Hudson's perspective positions the *Mahābhārata* as a pointed religious work, rather than literature. Hudson's discussion of *dharma*, to that end, finds its complicated depiction as points of transgression from a singular mode of being, and not, as I have argued above, a multivalent concept.

Concurring with Hudson again, points of rupture serve as crucial ground for meaning production in the epic,[303] though we have found cause to give equal weight to moments of correspondence, as well as moments that veer between the two endpoints. This close reading of the *Mahābhārata*, guided by an interrogation through the process of translation in order to consider the epic's rhetorical, literary, and contextual components, uncovers the multivalent relationship between subtale and the frame story. As Alastair Fowler explains in his discussion of genre, to the association between these two types of stories within the epic allow for critical reflection on the literary aspects of the text as "genre operates in at least three ways, corresponding to the logical phases of criticism—

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[302] See, for example, Hudson 2013, 72: "The fourth feature [of the text's implicit literary theory] is the inextricable link that the epic's aesthetics of suffering makes between the aesthetic goals of literature and the themes of suffering, loss, separation, death, and impermanence, which as mentioned earlier, constitutes, to a large degree, the dominant worldview of the three major religious traditions of premodern India. Implicit in the *Mahābhārata*'s aesthetics is an argument for why narrative is a distinctively successful genre for exposing this truth."

[303] See Hudson 2013, 220.

construction, interpretation, and evaluation" (Fowler 1982, 256). That is to say that in apposition, this study has sought out attributes that distinguish and underscore main and subtale narratives through a process that carries meaning between genres, or contexts. The character developments of Nala, Rāma, Sāvitrī, and Yudhiṣṭhira, while progressing along a similar trope of loss and renewal, are given unique bent and understanding through their distinct conditions, which serves as much to sustain and propagate as it does to distinguish their individual meaning. By applying theory to these readings, not only has my analysis revealed possibilities in interpretation, but also provided further insight into the operative principles that demand a text to be considered a work of literature.[304] We have additionally sought out pathways to other milieus of literature, disparate in language and periodization, in order to illustrate the fruitful act of comparative analysis in literature, advocating in a sense for an analytical process in conversation with other literary traditions.

Translation is both critical and omnipresent within the *Mahābhārata*, whether monolingual or distanced by time and space. The epic is aware of the immediacy of its utterance and the means to reverberate the narrative and idiom in order to maintain its vitality. Concurring with Steiner:

> This metaphysic of an instant, this slamming of the door on the long galleries of historical consciousness, is understandable. It has a fierce innocence. It embodies yet another surge towards Eden, towards that pastoral before time… But it is an innocence as destructive of literate speech. Without the true fiction of history, without the unbroken animation of a chosen past, we become flat shadows.

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[304] "the literary together with the critical genre can be seen as a group composition, through which understanding collectively deepens" (Fowler 1982, 271).

Literature, whose genius stems from what Éluard called *le dur désir de durer*, has no chance of life outside constant translation within its own language. Art dies when we lose or ignore the conventions by which it can be read, by which its semantic statement can be carried over into our own idiom. (Steiner 1998, 31)

That strong desire to exist renders its verses welcoming to translation, whether the act of carrying original to target language or through the process of reading. As van Buitenen comments on his own translation of the text, his desire as translator is to "open up the vast literature of *The Mahābhārata*" and "make the text as accessible as I can make it" (van Buitnenen 1973, xxxvii, xxxviii). That simply stated ethic corroborates with the way in which the epic itself renders meaning legible across its varied units of narrative.

My own translation above hovers around the realm of metalanguage, attempting to elucidate linguistic possibilities and points of interrogation, while providing a reading that recognizes the limitations of its own contingent utterance. As such, the translation is focused on retaining the pathways through which Sanskrit was transposed into English, i.e. attempting to remain strict to line and *pāda* breaks so that those steps might be traced backwards. Underpinning this pursuit is Derrida's description of the recurring act in *Ulysses Gramophone*, the translation of laughter, which can only be retransmitted insofar as it can point to the singular act. Furthermore, Foucault's relational approach to language alleviates the burden of inherent meaning for morphology and contextual germination.

Language is not what it is because it has a meaning; its representative content, which was to have such importance for grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it provided them with the guiding thread of their analyses, has no role to play here. Words group syllables together, and syllables

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letters, because there are virtues placed in individual letters that draw them towards each other or keep them apart, exactly as the marks found in nature also repel or attract one another. (Foucault 2002, 39).

I believe that an approximate step might concur more accurately with Steiner's methodology for translation and provide a more realized English iteration, here rendering the verses into a form that might mimetically reflect the pacing and emotion of the Sanskrit. Furthermore, an alteration of form, pronouncing difference, allows meaning carried between the two milieux to eschew reduction.

> The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system. But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity, or without the risk of erasing difference in the self-identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or, amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself. For there are two heterogenous ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified: one, the classic way, consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in *submitting*, the sign to thought; the other, the one we are using here against the first one, consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned: first and foremost, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. (Derrida 1978, 281)

Foucault and Derrida find cause to interrogate the structural underpinnings in order to encourage the development of meaning — an act that I have argued is anticipated by the unique style of the Sanskrit epic. By enhancing the narrative possibility through form, a translation might provide more explicit means of gesturing toward the original through the overt signaling of discord between iterations. When Sāvitrī, to utilize Hudson's

phrase, disorients her audience through the distinctive nature of her marital relationship as it reflected back to Draupadī, the reciprocal act of comparison and inquiry by the audience renders the character intelligible, rather than compliant. Translation, therefore, must find pathways between languages while also veering sharply to each other. My close reading of four subtales within the third book of the *Mahābhārata* underscores the vitality of the literature through its corresponding and divergent recasting, causing the perpetual reaffirmation of dialogical narrative elements.

This study of the *Mahābhārata* aspires to support the epic's own ambitious pronouncement, "*yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kva cit*" (Mbh 1.56.33) — what is found here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere else. By interrogating the relationship between main story and subtale, we have uncovered a system through which the epic generates meaning. The text deconstructs and rebuilds its own narratives in order to present the possibilities inherent within its own difference on a wholly comprehensive scale.

> The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer to only itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. (Derrida 1982, 11)

Not just large, but also exacting, the *Mahābhārata* extends this process of deconstruction to its language, inviting translation as a co-conspirator in its totalizing project. Reveling in its incompleteness, in its imperfection, the narrative renders clamor legible — the epic bears the lightning of possible storms.

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How might we develop a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between main story and subtale within the *Mahābhārata*? Perhaps the text provides an approach in its opening stages. Within the *Ādiparvan*, following the recent marriage of the Pāṇḍavas with Draupadī and the establishment of their kingdom at Indraprastha, the sage Nārada relays the subtale of Sunda and Upasunda.

The identical asura siblings set out to overtake the universe together. They enact a series of arduous austerities in order to accrue powers, threatening the gods. Attempting to placate the monstrous brothers, the gods offer a boon. The asuras ask for immortality, are rejected, and in compromise request that they can only be harmed by each other. The gods acquiesce and in turn the asuras relinquish their austere practices and engage in more worldly pleasures. In short order, the brothers amass an army and begin conquering different realms, including heaven and the abode of brahmins and sages. The decimated world is described equal to the destruction that marks the close of the *kaliyuga*, as divulged by *Mārkaṇḍeya* later on in the third book. To carry out their decimation, Sunda and Upasunda alter their forms, becoming elephants, lions, and tigers. The sages conspire with the gods to intervene by creating a beautiful divine woman, named Tilottamā,[305] whom they send to entrap the brothers. Sunda and Upasunda, having conquered the

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[305] Detail, as translated by van Buitenen, on the process of the woman's creation is worth noting: "First he gathered from everywhere with great care whatever is beautiful in all three worlds, whether standing or moving, and placed these gems, which numbered in the millions, into her body. He created her out of the gatherings of gems with celestial loveliness" (van Buitenen 1973, 396).

world, encounter Tilottamā in a forest, wearing a single piece of red cloth.[306] Being of same mind, Sunda grabbed the woman's right hand while Upasunda grabbed her left, and both immediately claimed Tilottamā as his own. The brothers' impasse turned immediately to violence, and the two beat each other to death over the woman.

The most frequent descriptor of Sunda and Upasunda within the subtale is *ekaniścaya*, which introduces the brothers and serves to illustrate them in the recapitulation.[307] The construction is translated by van Buitenen as 'identical resolution,' 'identical decision,' and 'of the same mind' (van Buitenen 1973, 393 and 398). Attempting to encapsulate the slight variations of van Buitenen while invoking Adam Bowles, my own understanding of the compound suggests the rendering 'one design,' e*ka* as single and *niścaya* meaning intention, purpose, or construction. The sameness in Sunda and Upasunda, then, reflects both their development and internal machinations. Likewise, Adam Bowles' consideration of design as a lens through which we might understand the relation between parts of the epic and methods of significance building, brings to the fore issues of sameness and difference within the *Mahābhārata*. Listening to the text, then, a single design brings destruction and self-negation. Mono-focused effort would narrow scope to a degree that the narrative would lose its efficacy.

> The stereotype is the word repeated without any magic, any enthusiasm, as though it were natural, as though by some miracle this recurring word were adequate on each occasion for different reasons, as though to imitate could no longer be sensed as an imitation: an unconstrained word that claims consistency and is unaware of its own insistence. (Barthes 1975, 42)

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[306] "*raktenaikena vāsasā*" (Mbh 1.204.9). A single clothed woman in the forest under much different circumstances in the forest than Draupadī, though equally dire.
[307] Mbh 1.201.5 (twice) and 204.25.

Roland Barthes allows us to consider sameness an unworthy interlocutor, flattening language. Difference, by contrast, is the propelling fuel of the epic, imbuing each utterance with continuously reconsidered significance. The *ākhyāna* and *upākhyāna* do not attempt to deploy matters equally, but instead recast tropes with different trajectories, creating those sideshadows, as described by Hiltebeitel, that, like Nala himself, serve as a mark of vitality. Through my consideration of the interplay between subtale and main story, I argue that the text exhibits veering, to employ a phrase defined here by Nicholas Royle.

> 'Veering' is a present participle and also a noun. As a present participle it means 'Changing course or direction; turning round, revolving', or (in a figurative sense) 'Vacillating, variable, changeful'; as a noun 'veering' refers to the 'The action or fact of changing course or direction'… the figure and concept of veering are linked to the emergence of what I call the literary turn. (Royle 2011, 2)

As a potential marker for the methodology utilized in the above study of the epic, an inspection of its veering design, possible chiefly through close reading, proliferates points of entry into the work.

> 'Veering', in fact, impels us to think afresh and otherwise about the borders or oppositions between interior/exterior or inner/outer. Its appearance in literature and other kinds of discourse… consistently seems to prompt larger questions of interior and exterior worlds, meaning and intention, rhythm and movement, chance and desire, purpose and end. (Royle 2011, 7)

My efforts above are threaded by the interrogation of boundaries, working to illuminate points of correspondence, indefinite lexical borders, and discern the process of carried meaning between milieux. In so doing, we have found cause to allow further correspondence in highlighting briefly other works of literature, disparate in space and

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time, that can mutually benefit from collaborative theorization. Invoking Pollock again, the application of theory renders prismatic view on particulars rather than structure literature or literatures *ab initio*.[308] My pursuit should not be confused with an attempt to compare in order to find sameness, but rather propagate the dialogical possibilities inherent within the study of literature.

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[308] Pollock 2006, 32.

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