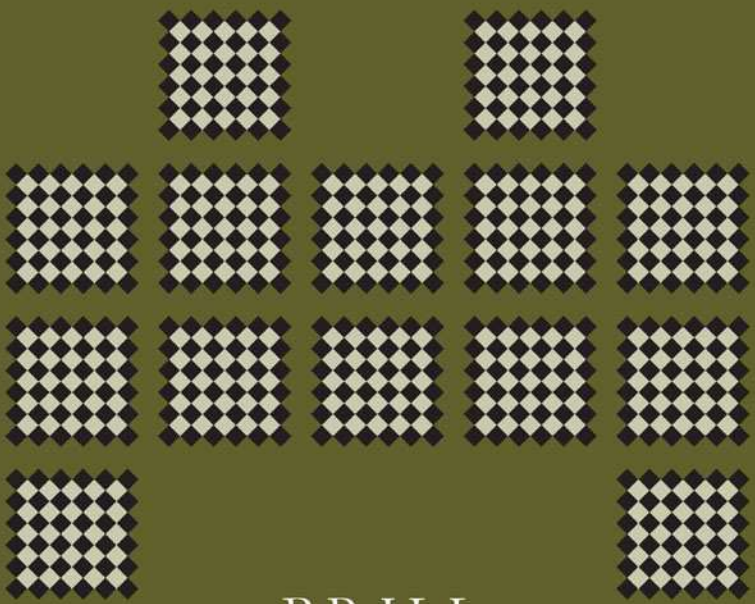
Kevin McGrath

The Sanskrit Hero
Karṇa in Epic Mahābhārata



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THE SANSKRIT HERO

Karṇa in Epic Mahābhārata

BY

KEVIN McGRATH

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dānam ekapadaṃ yaśah

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of Gordon Miln.

Cambridge, 2003

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABORI, Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute.
BEFEO, Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient.
HOS, Harvard Oriental Series.
IIJ, Indo-Iranian Journal.
JAOS, Journal of the American Oriental Society.
JAS, Journal of the Asiatic Society.
JIES, Journal of Indo-European Studies.
JRAS, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
ZDMG, Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the hero as he is manifest in the Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata. It focusses principally upon Karṇa, as he arguably represents an ideal typology for heroic-āryan ideals, both from an archaic and a classical point of view. I shall argue that he is the most important hero of the poem. A preliminary working definition of the epic hero would be — a martially and verbally gifted figure with some degree of divine genealogy who is separated or isolated from his community and is returned to that community only after death, via the medium of praise and lament. As we shall see, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Kuntī, to name a few, perform these 'songs' for Karṇa after his demise or reputed demise. Heroes are also recipients of worship or cult practice, but, for our present purposes, heroes only exist within the medium of epic poetry — which is what this study examines.[1] In this analysis there are two fundamental assumptions, one concerning the nature of preliterate epic poetry, and one assuming a basic Indo-European (IE) heroic substrate. As we proceed through this study I shall expand upon these two foundations, illustrating the unique importance of the Mahābhārata as an IE epic that still functions in modern society, and indicating wherever possible parallel narratives in other epics.

Karṇa is the son of Sūrya, the Sun, and the Pāṇḍava queen, Kuntī.[2] He was conceived and born before Kuntī was married and is thus technically a bastard, *pāraśava*,[3] although he is never actu-

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[1] See Fitzgerald, 1991, on the subject of the Mahābhārata as a "Fifth Veda". On the idea of 'genre', see Nagy, 1999. This study only considers the Indo-European hero; for an elegant overview of a non I-E hero, see Abusch, 2001.

[2] Her father is called, curiously, Śūra, I,104,1.

[3] See I,111,27ff. for the kinds of son. Here, presumably, Karṇa would be called a *kānīna*, one 'born of a young wife, maiden'. Vasu's commentary on Pāṇ. IV,1,116, *kanyāyāḥ kanīna ca*, states, "The word *kanyā* means a virgin, the son of a virgin is produced by immaculate conception ... The son of a virgin viz. Karṇa or Vyāsa."

ally called this. He was born wearing an impenetrable breast-plate and with dazzling ear-rings. We hear the account of how his birth occurred four times in the course of the Mahābhārata. There is something about this tale of origin which is extremely important for the narrative. No other heroic genesis receives such repeated consideration, nor is it that its retelling is being used to frame episodes. After being born he is immediately abandoned and exposed to the river Gaṅgā, to be found and brought up by a *sūta*, that is, a member of the chariot driving and poet caste. Hence Karṇa is often referred to by the patronym, 'son of a *sūta*', when in fact he is the eldest born of Kuntī's sons, and arguably — if not legally first in line for the throne - then certainly in possession of the *cachet* of seniority; Yudhiṣṭhira recognises this in his valedictory speech at the conclusion to the Strī *parvan*.[4]

Being someone of such extreme, if not invincible martial abilities, from the beginning of the poem Karṇa projects a highly charged enmity against his one possible equal, that is Arjuna, the champion of the Pāṇḍavas. In book five, Saṃjaya, officiating as an emissary, tells his king that Arjuna speaks of how he will slay Karṇa *and* the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. For Arjuna the principal opposition is only Karṇa.

Throughout the poem Karṇa's true identity is obscured for the other participants. Throughout the poem however, the audience constantly hears of how great and powerful he is. Yet right from the start of book one we are repeatedly told of how Karṇa is soon to die: in the organisation of the narrative there is never any prospect of his continuing life. This forecast is intrinsic to the history of

[4] Apart from Saṃjaya, the only other character in the poem to receive this title, *sūtaputra*, is Kīcaka, in the Virāṭa *parvan*. Draupadī uses this expression in the vocative as a way of expressing contempt for her would-be seducer (IV,13,13;17;15,15ff.) Kīcaka, like Karṇa, is a commander of the army. It is interesting that the term has such derogatory connotations for her, for throughout the Mahābhārata we see a constant and strong sub-text in which Draupadī always depreciates Karṇa. In controversion of this, however, in popular accounts of the poem, Draupadī sometimes reveals "a secret affection" for Karṇa. See Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.289; Gandhi, 1999, p.4, "Draupadi ... the woman Karna had wanted for himself."

Karṇa. He is someone who is *śaptaḥ ... vañcitaḥ*, 'cursed and betrayed' (XII,5,15). He is also enormously pre-occupied by fame and the expression of this.[5] How the term actually enters into an economy of heroic values, and what it can be rated against, is a major focus of this study. Fame and its exchange is a vital aspect of the Indo-European and Sanskrit hero and it was my fascination with this term which initially led me into making an analysis of Karṇa.

One final quality for which Karṇa is renowned is his boasting and capacity for skilful verbal assault.[6] Also, allied to this, he is famous for his extraordinary generosity or liberality, a phenomenon which he takes to self-destructive extremes. One of his names, *Vasuṣena* may suggest a connection with this liberality, or, 'one whose army consisted of Vasus' — an epithet more fitting to a divinity. Karṇa takes the importance of verbal obligation to absolute levels, far beyond that of mundane speech.

Karṇa, as the eldest scion of both parties contending for control of the throne at Hastināpura, could theoretically lay claim to supremacy, but he chooses to be unaware of this priority and supports the losing side.[7] He is what Dumézil calls "l'aîné méconnu".[8] Unlike other heroes in the poem, for some reason the character of Karṇa does not appear to have been overlaid with later doctrinal considerations, specifically brahminical or *vaiṣṇava*. This is the major reason that he presents an interesting case for study. One could therefore propose that his kind of heroism recalls an unembellished and in this sense 'truer' model of heroic action, that is, 'earlier'. He is the most heroic due to his lineage, his divine and intrinsic armour,

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[5] One of the activities of a kṣatriya is to conquer and to rule land. This spatial aspect receives temporal amplification by the acquisition of fame. That is, something which extends in time, ideally being 'perpetual'.

[6] It is thus fitting that his adoptive father should be a member of the poet caste, *sūta*; that is, a *genetrix* of fame, and one whose work is formulated speech.

[7] He is of course, not a lineal offspring of the family.

[8] Dumézil, 1968, p.153-54.

and his complete devotion to the honour of kṣatriya ideals.[9] It is this *unevolved* quality of Karṇa's heroism that drew me into making this study: he appears to present an unalloyed version of an 'original' epic hero.

Karṇa has power but he lacks status, much like Achilles.[10] He dramatises, metaphorically, the vivid competition that exists in classical Indian society between the brahmin, who has status, and the kṣatriya, who holds power. It is no coincidence that his ultimate destruction comes about through the curses of two brahmins and that when Indra receives the ear-rings from Karṇa — a crucial moment in Karṇa's downfall — he is disguised as a brahmin. The life of Karṇa thus dramatises contention between the two *varṇas*.[11]

We shall thus be looking at passages where the heroic, equated with kṣatriya behaviour, is being described or implored, and we will be using these to build up a general outline of what constitutes heroic action and prescription. Karṇa, as a figure whom one could describe as 'the best of the Kurus', provides the most fruitful instrument for this project; this study focusses on him as a primary exemplar of the Sanskrit hero. *He* is the model that allows us to move from the particular to the general.

In general, this entails a concentration on the parts of the cycle that deal expressly with kṣatriya activities. The assumption here is that epic was originally kṣatriya literature.[12] Thus a great deal of the Mahābhārata lies beyond this research. For instance, much of the genealogies of the Ādi *parvan* and brahminical narrative sections as given in the Āraṇyaka *parvan*, as well as the explicit

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[9] Like Siegfried in the Niebelungenlied, or Fer Diad in the Táin, or Achilles with his Styx-tempered body, Karṇa has a special skin that protects his torso.

[10] See Dumont, 1966, Ch.III.

[11] It is a similar conflict between the priestly and the martial that sets off the Iliad.

[12] Mehendale, 1995, would see the war as a *dharmayuddha*, 'a battle of dharma'. This kind of approach has much to offer and is typical of Indian and many Western Mahābhārata studies during the last twenty or thirty years. Such an approach does not necessarily consider the epic as 'kṣatriya literature'. See Matilal, 1989. The two standard surveys of Mahābhārata scholarship during the last century and a half are by Hiltebeitel, 1979, and de Jong, 1985 and 1986.

teaching of books like the Śānti *parvan* and Anuśāsana *parvan* and certain other interspersed sections that deal with cosmogony or sacred geography, will not be dealt with here.[13] These sections of the poem do not explicitly concern heroic culture, but cover fields that deal, among other things, with edification — either in dharmic terms or in practical terms — such as the conduct of correct kingship and 'polity', *artha*.[14] We shall only be working with those parts of the text that deal with archetypical kṣatriya behaviour: for instance, physical trials and conflict, lineage dispute, cattle raiding, the capture of brides, weapon lore, the validity of speech, generosity upon request, and boasting.[15] This is not a rigid distinction however, as the poem as we have it today manifests a cusp between

[13] These I would choose to refer to as *itihāsa* and even, in some cases, as *śāstra*. Such verses I do not consider to constitute heroic literature. In the Tīrthayātrā *parvan* where pilgrimages are being described at length, for instance, the word 'hero/warrior' is rarely mentioned, and principally as a form of address to the auditor of that section of the poem, Yudhiṣṭhira (III,80-153). I would submit that 'epic' Mahābhārata closes with the end of the Strī *parvan*; see below, Ch.VI. Thapar, 2000, pp.615ff., distinguishes between "the original epic and the pseudo-epic". She makes a distinction between tribal chiefdoms and monarchic systems where lineage patterns and gift exchange are important, and a system of more stratified society, where caste is more significant than lineage, and where agrarian life predominates.

[14] On the subject of right kingship, see book five: when Indra has not brought rain to the kingdom, the 'people', *prajā*, go to Bhīṣma and beg him to take control and rule correctly. *vyādhīn praṇudya vīra tvaṃ prajā dharmeṇa pālaya*, 'Warrior, remove the sickness, rule the subjects with dharma!' (V,145,27). The scene related in these lines reminds one of the practice of sacred kingship, the body of the king being a metaphor of the body politic. Many areas of the epic explicitly deal with the practice of such sacred kingship and the poem as a whole has a trajectory towards the correct kingship of Yudhiṣṭhira, much of whose 'ideal' *formation* is given in the first part of the Śānti *parvan*, which is a teaching of *rājadhama* by Bhīṣma. The old and defeated ruler Dhṛtarāṣṭra gives Yudhiṣṭhira advice as to the practice of good kingship at XV,9-12.

[15] Goldman, 1977, working from an earlier article by Sukthankar, 1944, marked out much of the reasoning behind what we are describing as brahminical, or 'inflated' text. M.C. Smith, 1975, detailed a fairly simple outline for what we are describing as typical kṣatriya poetry. "Before tablets of law existed, the [warrior] code was taught through the stories that demanded special solutions in the application of the code, or Dharma", 1992, p.117. For her, this 'warrior code' reflects bronze age culture where there is a "warrior control over ethical systems", *ibid*. p.110. Hopkins, 1888, also gives a good sketch.

literate and preliterate culture, and some areas of the epic contain both kṣatriya and brahminical material — though usually with a predominance of one side.

By kṣatriya behaviour, I understand those individual and social actions that concern physical power and the possibility of bloodshed: these are activities that relate directly to 'nature' rather than to the 'cultural' world of brahmins. The latter depend principally from a reference to sacred texts, a dependance which becomes subsequently modified by 'literacy'.[16] I have inferred therefore that exhortation to behave according to kṣatriya dharma concerns what it means to behave heroically.[17] If *tapas*, 'austerity', is the key term applicable to brahmins, *tejas*, 'ardour', is the equivalent quality which epic kṣatriyas possess and represent.[18]

1. *Methods of Approach*

There are two basic assumptions primary to this work. One concerns an understanding of preliteracy as first established by Milman Parry and Albert Lord and then developed by Gregory Nagy.[19] Secondly, I assume that the epic hero is a poetic phenomenon derived from various templates or moulds of Indo-European precedent; this is dealt with further below.

The first approach describes an understanding of the creation and performance of epic poetry as a tradition which involves and sustains certain themes. Each time a poet in this tradition sings his

[16] My view of the kṣatriya-brahmin divide comes primarily from readings of Manu and Kauṭilya, as well as from expressions of *varṇa* conduct in Mahābhārata itself. I would subsume such injunctions under the various rubrics of dharma. See Lingat, 1973, Ch.III; Kane, Vol. III, Ch.I-III. Also, my interpretation is much coloured by what I understand the Indo-European hero to be, for which, see below.

[17] III, 33 *et seq*., for instance; also, VI,1,26, *tatas te samayaṃ cakruḥ kurupāṇḍavasomakāḥ / dharmaś ca sthāpayāmāsur yudhānāṃ bharataṛṣabha*, 'Then the Somakas and Pāṇḍavas and Kurus made an agreement, O bull of the Bharatas. They established the dharma of the warriors'. See also VI,131 *et seq*.

[18] In the person of Yudhiṣṭhira, who is ultimately the Kuru king, these two aspects are confounded.

[19] Lord, 1960.

work, he re-composes it, drawing upon a store of narrative themes and verbal formulae. There is no *fixed* text; the poem is reconstituted *in* and *during* its performance. It is only later in the history of the poem that the 'text' becomes stabilised, and only then does the performance become a finite reproduction of that form. Thus, according to this view, there once existed simultaneously many varying types or traditions of the poem.[20]

"The 'tradition' is not a rigid monolith outside the singer but as dynamic as the singers who operate in it", is how Lord expressed this.[21] In his earlier work he had prefigured this by saying, "The singer's natural audience appreciates it [the song] because they are as much part of the tradition as the singer himself".[22] This model of a dual axis of reference — singer and audience, all the prior compositions and performances — is an absolutely vital tool for any comprehension of how epic was formed and existed; for there obtains a crucial reciprocity between the two parties involved in the 'event'.

An understanding of how formulaic expression operates is a key assumption in this kind of analysis, for this supplies the substance of the tradition. Such an instrument was perfected in the eighties by J.D. Smith who extended the range of the formulaic model to include "sub-vocabularies" that illustrate how such formulaic expression was displayed: thus, certain phrases tend to appear in certain books of the Mahābhārata more than in other books.[23] From such a stylistic analysis one can construct an 'archaeology' for the text. That is, certain formulae tend to adhere to certain themes or to certain conventions in the narrative. A variety of different oral tradi-

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[20] The sum of all, or most of, these varying types is what the editors of the Critical Edition at Poona used to determine what they considered to be a complete text.

[21] Lord, 1991, p.78. "A golden thread of family relationships runs through the tradition both vertically and horizontally."

[22] Lord, 1960, p.97.

[23] J.D. Smith, 1987, p.591ff. For instance, *idaṃ vacanam abravīt*, is frequent in the earlier books but rare in the *śāstra* sections of the poem. The occurrence of formulae in the Mahābhārata tends to happen in the second and fourth *pādas* of the *śloka* line.

tions although merged into one 'conclusive' text, still maintain traces of individual colouring — formulae — from those earlier components.

Though the idea of the Greek hero has been extensively explored in the work of Gregory Nagy, beginning with *Best Of The Achaeans*, curiously enough this Iliadic model has never been applied to or tested on the cognate Sanskrit epic.[24] Nagy, especially in a chapter of a later work, *An Evolutionary Model*, which draws upon a paradigm of epic aetiology in contemporary India set up by Blackburn *et al*, has given us a picture of an heroic type.[25] Here, he describes the evolution of an epic as "a progression from *uneven weighting* toward *even weighting*", as it relates to the importance of episodes: certain parts of the poem are subsumed under other more 'popular' parts.[26] These episodes are "sewn" together during performance.[27] This typology could be applied to Karṇa, where 'his epic' is subsumed under the body of 'Arjuna's epic' - the latter receiving more 'weight'. It is a model that illuminates the nature of the problem for us as readers.[28] Arjuna's epic would appear to

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[24] Nagy, principally 1979. From the point of view of method and analysis, the main difference between the Hellenic and Indic material is that the former is reinforced to a great extent by the findings of archaeology, whilst the latter benefits from the fact that the epic tradition continues to sustain itself even after three millennia of vitality and that such data is available to the analyst through the work of ethnographers and folklorists. In subsequent footnotes I shall expand upon this dimension wherever possible; it offers an analyst the possibility for undestanding how epic not only functioned but continues to function within a traditional society. See, Carter and Morris, 1998; Snodgrass, 1998; and Sax, 1991; Blackburn *et al*, 1989. For the progress of Karṇa from the Sanskrit epic into local or 'oral' epics, see Hiltebeitel, 1991, p.102, where he discusses the mediaeval Epic of Pābūjī, "Karṇa is the only *Mahābhārata* character invoked in Parbū's text, and is a powerful presence in *Pābūjī*." Needless to say, the Mahābhārata, especially as it is presented in film and comic books, still plays an enormously vital role in modern Indian culture. See, Mankekar, 1999.

[25] Nagy, 1996b, p.29. Blackburn *et al*, 1989.

[26] Nagy, 1996b, p.77-80.

[27] *Ibid*. p.86. As in *grantha*, 'an artificial arrangement of words ... verse, composition ... book', (Monier-Williams). From the root √*grath*, 'to fasten, tie together, arrange'.

[28] For instance, the Tamil *Karṇa Mokṣam* of Pukalentippulavar is a contemporary drama, nevertheless it does illustrate all the *essential elements* in what could

concern the oral tradition less than Karṇa's epic, and writing — the "durable institution of the sign" — more.[29] Ultimately, in terms of the epic's historicity, there is a shift through three hypothetical stages, from 'transcript to script to scripture.'[30] The movement in 'weighting' that different heroes receive occurs during these shifts.

A vital point in Nagy's earlier 1979 study was that a hero needs to secure his 'entry into epic', for this supplies his immortality. Homeric heroes — like Karṇa — are pre-eminently concerned that their deeds acquire fame: the culture of myth, for Achilles, is of more importance to him than any natural order.[31] "The mortality of Achilles and the immortality conferred by the songs of the Muses" supplies the nature of the relationship between poet and song.[32] Fame is not simply the compensation for a heroic death, but the medium itself that simultaneously maintains the fame, as the hero "is incorporated into epic, which is presented *by epic itself* as an eternal extension of the lamentation sung by the Muses over the

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be termed 'Karṇa's narrative' taken from the complete or larger poem: they are 'given weight'.

[29] Foley, 1991, p.xiii. See Dupont, 1994, p.55, where she comments on the amalgamation of local epics into a larger 'whole': "The tale of the Trojan War was told throughout Greece, but each royal palace expected a different version from the bard, each little king on his own little island would want to hear that one of his own ancestors was the true conqueror of Troy; in northern Greece, they celebrated Achilles' slaying of Hector, around Ithaca ... they would speak mostly of Odysseus ... in Sparta the blonde Menelaus was the hero, in Argos it was Agamemnon, the king of kings. An episode created for one particular place could never be used elswhere." Pargiter, 1908, gives useful geographical background to Kurukṣetra.

[30] Nagy, 1996a, p.110. 'Transcript' concerns a representation of a performance of the epic as *composed* orally; that is, after the event. 'Script' concerns the poem as it is recited from memory, the text having become frozen; that is, before the event. 'Scripture' concerns the poem when it is not only recited but has acquired an authority which itself generates other poetry and when there exists only one authoritative text. This progress maps a movement from the various to the singular. M. Brockington, 1999, p.120, gives a tabular description of the Rāmāyaṇa's five stages of transmission. She favours the concept of an original poet. See also J. Brockington, 1984, whence this model derives.

[31] Nagy, 1979, p.176 *et seq*.

[32] *Ibid*.

hero's death".[33] Such heroism derives primarily from physical and martial prowess as it concerns the hero's *philoi*, that is, his peers. How this process of 'entry' functions is essential to any comprehension of the hero, for it expresses that vehicle in itself.[34] It is via the acquisition of fame through heroic, or good kṣatriya action, that a hero's deeds are sung of, *in epic*. Epic is in this light a song about the death of a hero: mortal as a human being and so subject to death, yet immortal, like a deity, and living forever, *in song*. "Thus the specific institution of lamentation ... leads to the *kléos* of the epic".[35]

The Mahābhārata's four battle books, in this light, present the essential nature of epic: they describe the conditions in which fame is awarded. Appropriately, in these books, the terms for fame are rarely heard, for the reason that these *parvan*s directly constitute that quality and that award.[36]

In this project it is therefore of seminal importance that we look at speeches where our protagonist proclaims how significant fame is. Indic heroes are both generated and sustained in one of the most important vehicles of preliterate culture, that is, epic verse or the poetry of *sūtas*, a caste of charioteers whose task doubles up with that of singing epic poetry.[37] This is probably one of the most fun-

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[33] *Ibid.* p.184.

[34] Vernant, 1991, p.58, comments, concerning the absolute importance of this preliterate medium, "heroic honour and epic poetry are inseparable."

[35] Nagy, *op. cit.*, p.184.

[36] If they are, it is usually in compounded form.

[37] "The original epic performer, ancient sūta, was, as we know, a king's charioteer (at the same time his personal cook, probably also bodyguard and physician when needed). He was well versed in the kṣatriyan legendary lore, warriors' code of honour, customs and rules, royal genealogies and epic tales of the past — in the battle episodes we see sometimes that a royal warrior in the middle of battle asks his sūta for advice, or a sūta himself, when he sees that his chariot fighter fails to fulfill his duty, preaches to him a sermon on kṣatriyan svadharma, referring to famous precedents in legendary past (see, e.g. III.19.15-16, 23.20-25, 190.46; V.8.29-30; VIII.18.52-54, 28.5-8). By the way, it should not be forgotten that Kṛṣṇa, by preaching to Arjuna the sermon of the BhG. on the field of battle, simply fulfills his sūta's duty. A sūta was also a witness to a noble warrior's great deeds (that's why so often a warrior before attacking the enemy addresses his sūta with such words as: "Witness now the might of my arms." etc.) — and he also had

damental assumptions that I make and it is derived from Nagy's work.[38]

Holtzmann was one of the earliest western scholars to study the Mahābhārata and successfully established the epic as a field of study in the West.[39] Typical of his period was a search for 'layer-

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to be ready at any moment to describe these glorious deeds of his patron in an improvised panegyric. This function of the sūta is probably personified in the image of Saṃjaya. It should be stressed that this sūta of the old type could sing anywhere and anytime at his patron's (king's or noble warrior's) orders. Quite different was the situation with the performance of the epic poetry at the later period. The epic songs were now sung on the roads of pilgrimage and the MBh. as a whole was being performed at a particular period of time — during four months of the rainy season (Bomb. ed. I.62.32, XVIII.6.22ff.) ... The symbiotic co-existence of sūtas and Brahmans at the tīrthas led to the gradual change in the social image and status of the epic "singers of tales". There appeared some transitory types of the epic performers: first, besides the early kṣatriya sūta whose reputation in the eyes of the late epic singers was fairly low, there appeared a new type — sūta paurāṇika, whom the late epic calls *munikalpa* 'equal to the ascetics' (I.57.82); the difference between the two is evident, by the way, in the Arthaśāstra 3.60.30-31, where the ancient sūta's origin is traced to a pratiloma marriage of a kṣatriya with a brahmana woman; and such an origin, in spite of a supposed brahman connection, is considered to be low". Yaroslav V. Vassilkov, message posted on Indology@listserv.liv.ac.uk, 27th, September, 1999: yavass@yv1041.spb.edu. For the despond of the hero being expressed to the *sūta* see IV,36,7ff., and VI,23,29ff. Śalya at VIII,28,5-8, describes to Karṇa the tasks of a good charioteer.

[38] As Śiśupāla says in book two, 'no song [epic?] praises the singer, even if he sings a lot', *na gāthā gāthinaṃ śāsti bahu ced api gāyati* (II,38,17). There is a tantalising reference in the Ghoṣayātra *parvan*, where the herdsmen are celebrating after counting the cattle: *sa ca paurajanaḥ sarvaḥ sainikāś ca sahasraśaḥ / yathopajoṣaṃ cikrīḍur vane tasmin yathāmarāḥ*, 'All the town-people and the army, by the thousand, played in that forest for their amusement, like the Immortals' (III,229,7). The question is, does such 'play' indicate some kind of rural drama or festival, celebrating an annual or pastoral event? Would this be a dramatic performance of scenes from epic? See Sax, 1991, on the periodicity of such within a modern context. Gönc Moačanin, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, pp.245-256, analyses a possible relationship between epic and *nāṭya*.

[39] Holtzmann, I, 1892. He, incidentally, considered the Mahābhārata to have been originally a Buddhist poem and Karṇa the greatest hero therein, "den Lieblingshelden des Dichters", vol.I, pp.94-126. For Holtzmann, Duryodhana was originally an ideal Buddhist ruler, "Dass zwischen *Açoka* und *Duryodhana* ein geheimnissvolles Band besteht", pp.104-106. Holtzmann's 'inversion theory', that is, that the 'original' Mahābhārata was a reverse of what we now have in the text, with the Pāṇḍavas being the aggressors, receives a certain validation from

ing' in the text, specifically for prior layers. This term refers to how the poem, hypothetically, gained in size by accretion over time; additions tended to produce different cultural levels in the poem, the 'earlier' parts typified as kṣatriya and the later as brahmin. This present research builds upon such thinking inasmuch as it implicitly pursues that area which Holtzmann and others denote as 'prior': for this would signify the kṣatriya, and heroic, parts of the poem.[40] It is for this reason that, in this study, sections of the Mahābhārata like the Anuśāsana *parvan* or the final *parvan*s, which contain much brahminical material, are dealt with only in passing.

Ludwig worked in an intellectual *milieu* typical of the late nineteenth century, where natural phenomena were considered to be the organising principles for much of literature, especially performative literature.[41] He regarded the epic as representing the dying and rebirth of seasons and within this temporal drama the heroes acted as principal agents. Such a line of inquiry must remain in the realm of speculation however, until further scholarship supplies us with

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Patañjali, who, "while commenting on the Vārttika II on Pāṇini III,2,122 gives in his Mahābhāṣya the example *dharmeṇa ha sma kuravo yudhyante*, 'the Kurus fought according to dharma'" — in Mehendale, 1995, p.58. Certainly the four Kaurava generals are all, in some way or other, compromised by their loyalty to the Pāṇḍavas, and only succumb to their opponents, with the exception of Śalya, through the use of morally dubious tactics. See Blackburn *et al*, 1989, p.148: in this modern and 'vernacular' account, the Kauravas win and the Pāṇḍavas lose the battle. Cavalli-Sforza, 2000, p.157, goes as far as to say, "The effectiveness and the cruelty of the Indo-Europeans' war against earlier settlers of India is told in vivid images of battle described in the *Mahabharata*."

[40] Hopkins, 1901, for example, is one of these others. The problem is how one defines this 'earlier' quality in a preliterate work; is there a possible empirical criterion? Can one assume, like M.C. Smith, that a prosodic form of more ancient provenance denotes such priority or even 'purity'? Or is the criterion more concerned with cultural or thematic practices, averring that activity x holds historical antecedence over activity y? One could propose that the pursuit of fame is a signal phenomenon of preliteracy, and, as it is one of Karṇa's driving passions, we can thus locate him 'earlier', than say, a hero like Arjuna. I am profoundly aware of how the 'earlier-later' argument is easily flawed, given its preliterate setting. M.C. Smith does offer a potentially inductive explanation. See Nagy, 1996b, on the 'Homeric Question' — a similar issue in western Classics.

[41] Ludwig, 1884. This continued for decades: see, Keith, 1925; Hillebrandt, 1929.

more contextual material for the epic's recital.[42] Nevertheless, this is a model which I find notionally compelling but which I am unable to formulate any arguments toward.[43] The poem possibly imitates the seasonal progress of the year, and this is somehow being acted out in a ritual to which we are not privy, possibly the *aśvamedha*.[44]

Sidhanta, in a book written in the first half of this century, placed the Mahābhārata within the conceptual realm of Indo-European

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[42] Weber, 1891, and Hazra, 1955, have intimated a possible course. Hopkins, 1888, p.323, accords with the gist of their view: "the Epic was said to have been repeated at a great sacrifice as a secular diversion, and that to this day the Epic-recitations are given on such occasions." The latter point is still correct, except that the poem is now *read* aloud — personal communication Jogesh Panda and J. Jhala. Basham, 1989, p.72, comments, "In the course of the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*) and certain other lengthy Vedic sacrifices, brāhmaṇs would recite to the populace stories, especially connected with the ancestors of the king who was sponsoring the sacrifice. One can conceive that the story of the great war became particularly popular, and many kings, even though not direct descendants of the Pāṇḍava heroes, would find some remote or fictitious relationship which would give them a claim to connect the theme of the poem with their families ... The brāhmaṇs more and more took it over from the royal bards." Hiltebeitel, 2001, Ch.4, *passim*, proposes a novel view of time and the epic.

[43] See von Simpson, 1984, for a discussion of another view of time in the epic. This is amplified in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, in which, on pages 53-56, he cites twelve "concrete dates or season[s]" mentioned in the course of the poem. Yaroslav Vassilkov, also in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, pp.17-33, discusses *Kālavāda,* the doctrine of Cyclical Time, and the concept of heroic didactics. On p.26, he comments, "since the tenor of *kālavāda* was inherent in the epic tradition beginning from the time of its 'oral existence' … [I] conclude that *kālavāda* and the teaching of the omnipotent Fate (*daiva*) related to it are constitutive for the epic."

[44] Ludwig, *op. cit*., pp.14-16, where Karṇa is said to represent the winter sun. Murdoch, 1904, gives a good overview of the modern ritual calendar, which offers a westerner unfamiliar with the sub-continent some sense of how the seasons proceed. The exile of the long Āraṇyaka *parvan* would fit this 'calendrical' model as would the social reversals and 'misrule' of the Virāṭa *parvan*; and the *katábasis* of the Sauptika *parvan*, and the amazingly strange and beautiful image of Duryodhana lying submerged in a lake and creating ice about himself. There are also the *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* rites within the text itself. This is ultimately a highly speculative approach and is difficult to support. Vassilkov, in Brockington, 2002, p.138, suggests that pilgrimage is the ritual ground for the recitation of the epic – the poem being sung at the *tīrthas*.

poetics, except that he used the word 'heroic' in his title rather than actual IE nomenclature.[45] Sidhanta describes what he considers to be accounts that fall under this heroic rubric. Where he writes about an heroic 'age', however, the argument becomes *a priori*.[46] For epic is really a retrospective phenomenon and heroes are figures of an idealised past, that is their sole temporal dimension; in that sense, there exists an antiquarian quality to epic.[47] It is an aspect that exists only in the relation which obtains between a poet and patron and not in an historical past.[48]

Contemporary studies of IE poetics are led by Calvert Watkins. This discipline is founded upon a common poetic tradition that derives from and is inspired by the songs composed by Indo-European migrant poets during bronze-age times and dispersed across the language groups which range across Europe and southern Asia. Watkins writes that "formulas are the vehicles of themes, and that in the totality of these we find the doctrine, ideology, and culture of the Indo-Europeans ... The *function* of the Indo-European poet was to be the custodian and transmitter of this tradition".[49] Thus to talk about an heroic 'age' as an historical reality

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[45] Sidhanta, 1929. He was a student of Chadwick.

[46] "Yet with all its irrelevancies the *Mahābhārata* is the main source of our information with regard to the Heroic Age of India", p.28. This is sometimes referred to by Indian commentators as the *vīrayuga*.

[47] J. Brockington, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, p.129, comments that "The tendency towards greater frequency of formulaic *pādas* in the later parts of the Rm, as of the MBh, seems indeed to be due more to the demise of the true oral tradition, when such features are consciously reproduced in order to give authenticity — or perhaps more exactly the appropriate quality — to later material." He adds the interesting point that, "Nonetheless, the tendency to greater frequency of formulaic *pādas* in the later parts of both epics does seem to be not an index of orality but rather a sign of the decay of the genuine oral tradition."

[48] See Watkins, 1995, p.70. Similarly, "The same reciprocity relation as between poet and patron existed between poet and the gods".

[49] *Ibid*. p.68. Hopkins, 1901, p.365, describes two elements that go towards this 'functioning' or the organisation of epic: "a slowly repeated circle of tales", and, "impromptu bardic lays". He adds, "the song is here accompanied with the lute ... the *vīṇā*."

rather than as a tradition or habitual fiction is to miss the mark.[50] My underlying comprehension and understanding of IE poetics, and not only as it concerns the hero, is derived from *How To Kill A Dragon*, Watkins' magisterial overview of this fundamental and seminal system of thought.

Vielle, a modern scholar operating in this same field but with more emphasis on comparative method, has described the hero in similar IE terms as Sidhanta although somewhat more fluently.[51] For instance, he likens Karṇa to Memnon — son of the Dawn, from the epic cycle of Proclus — who is killed by Achilles.[52] His basic conceptual model is taken from Dumézil. I shall not be looking at the hero from a solely IE perspective but it is impossible for one to ignore the fact that the Mahābhārata hero stems from a profoundly IE category.[53] Vielle has described heroes of this tradition as typically of two kinds: those who enter into combat with fabulous or monstrous creatures, that is, supra-human beings; and those who pass through their life cycle at the end of an era by participating in a great final battle.[54] Karṇa fits both these types.

Jamison in three of her recent papers has also drawn attention to patterns of Indo-European poetics at work in the Mahābhārata, as

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[50] Hesiod situates his 'heroic age', that of the *hēmítheoi*, between the bronze and iron generations, WD 157-173. If one accepts the idea of four IE 'ages', this would be to place the Mahābhārata heroes between the *dvāpara* and *kali yugas*, which does, in a way, fit with the poem's eschatology. The hero Rāma, is said to have existed at the junction of the *tretā* and *dvāpara yugas*, which would offer one explanation of why the heroic manner of Rāmāyaṇa is so different from what obtains in the Mahābhārata.

[51] Vielle, 1996. Dumézil, 1968, p.61, has described the methodology of this process as being 'comparative': such is the "only admissible procedure."

[52] *Ibid*. p.148, "C'est alors aussi que Karṇa a été sacré roi de sa contrée orientale d'Aṅga par Duryodhana comme Memnon l'était des Ethiopiens".

[53] There are heroic epic songs from East and South Africa, see Mbele, 1986; but I choose not to test my model in this way, preferring to limit the schema. Nor do I wish to enter into discussion of 'universals'; see de Vries, 1963, chapter seven, for a consideration of these.

[54] Vielle, 1996, Ch.I, *passim*. See Watkins, 1995, Ch.38; Ch.49, p.471, on the "terrifying exploit of the hero"; and then, Ch.50, p.484, "It is part of the formulaic definition of the HERO that he is BEST, or vanquishes the BEST."

has Skjaervo.[55] Both compare Homeric or Iranian characteristics with similar manifestations in the Mahābhārata. In fact one of the initial attractions of Karṇa for me was his essential Indo-European outlook, unlike say, some of the other heroes in the poem, who are described much more through what is a generally modifed or specifically *vaiṣṇava* lens.[56]

The work of Georges Dumézil towers over all other twentieth century Mahābhārata scholars with perhaps the exception of Sukthankar.[57] In the first part of *Mythe et Épopée* he thoroughly examined the heroes of the Mahābhārata from two primary perspectives: that of the temporal continuity which certain principal heroes exhibit with Vedic deities; and from the point of view of the theory of the '*trois fonctions*'. He writes of "la transposition de dieux en héros qui est à la base du Mahābhārata."[58] He applies this model to the rivalry that obtains between Karṇa and Arjuna for instance, citing the previous antagonism which exists in the Ṛgveda between Sūrya and Indra.[59] This serial unity between the Vedic pantheon and the heroic world of epic is essential to the plan of *Mythe et Épopée* and to the Dumézilian concept of the Sanskrit hero.

My approach does not follow this Dumézilian scheme which expounds upon the morphological unity of IE epic structures.[60] However, Dumézil's work is an invaluable and fundamental ground for this study because of its genealogical method — the divine origin of heroes is essential to the ambivalence of their mortal-

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[55] Jamison, 1994, 1997, 1999b. Skjaervo, 1998.

[56] One could say, perhaps more accurately, that some of the heroes in the poem are *inscribed* with *vaiṣṇava* ideals.

[57] Dumézil, 1968-73.

[58] Dumézil, *op.cit*., p.218.

[59] *Op. cit*., p.158. Similarly, 1966, p.52, n.7, "Thus Karṇa, the son of the Sun god, duplicates three mythic traits of the Vedic Sun: (1) His hostile relations with the hero Arjuna, the son of Indra, are those of the Sun and Indra. (2) Arjuna overthrows him when a wheel of his chariot sinks into the earth, just as Indra detaches a wheel from the chariot of the Sun. (3) Like the Sun, he has two successive mothers, his natural mother who abandons him on the very night of his birth, and his adoptive mother whom he later acknowledges as his true mother; see ME I: 126-35."

[60] Hiltebeitel, 1976a, applies such methods with great success.

immortal nature. I shall not be employing his tripartite theory of functions nor the corresponding model of the '*trois péchés*' of the hero.[61] It is the structural play within the epic itself that is the focus of this work; that is, the tension existing between various components of heroic activity.

It is noteworthy that Dumézil cites Wikander, when he considers the divine parentage of the Pāṇḍavas as being more Iranian than Vedic, as with Bhīma and Vāyu, for instance, or Yudhiṣṭhira and Mitra-Varuṇa.[62] In the poem, Yudhiṣṭhira's paternal connection is to Dharma, who is neither a typically epic nor Vedic deity. This kind of approach gives the poem, or the analyst, a basis for tremendous historical range.

From the prospective rather than retrospective angle, Madeleine Biardeau has examined the Sanskrit hero from the point of view of his being an *avatāra*.[63] Her approach concentrates on the purāṇic world and thus addresses a later time than the 'epic period' examined here: it is not an epic term in the sense which this study addresses.[64] She is interested in the hero within the context of early Hinduism and as a phenomenon of 'devotion', *bhakti*, and considers heroes as agents of dharma during periods immediately prior to 'cosmic decay', *pralaya*. This approach offers a very different slant to the understanding of the hero pursued in the present inquiry and is not too fruitful for an analysis of Karṇa, who rises out of what is an 'archaic' matrix.[65]

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[61] The functions are what Allen, in Bronkhorst and Despande, 1999, p.21, refers to as an "I-E signature."

[62] Dumézil, 1968, p.75.

[63] Biardeau, 1976 and 1978, *inter alia*.

[64] The Mahābhārata as we have it is traditionally considered by western scholars to be datable to a period from 400 b.c.e. to 400 c.e. Macdonell, 1900, Ch.X, seems to have set this vague and often repeated standard. Karṇa would appear to be more deeply rooted in the Indo-European tradition than this.

[65] Perhaps we could obliquely define archaic as that which is pre-Buddhist and pre-Jain, and the classical as concerning a period when the incarnations of Viṣṇu were flourishing in poetry and sculpture. Having said this however, one may also consider Karṇa as an archaic figure on synchronic grounds alone. Biardeau chooses not to address the text from a developmental point of view, but accepts its unity.

The Mahābhārata readily admits to the view that heroes are *avatāras* of deities, in particular with Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, the latter announcing this in the Gītā.[66] This view does give an extra dimension to the hero and provides possible substance for what became hero worship. Cult is an integral part of the overall picture of a hero; we have the cultic dimension from the Greek model as demonstrated by Nagy, and also through work done by J.D. Smith and Stuart Blackburn and others.[67] The moment in the Gītā where Kṛṣṇa describes how he and his fellow charioteer are karmically related has been described as the first evidence or explicit pronouncement of a divine *avatāra*, and it is pertinent that this occurs within a strictly heroic context, that is, on the battlefield.[68] In many cases in India, cult is directed at these incarnations.

Nagy has typified the Greek hero as one who manifests extremism in his person and behaviour, who is untimely, and who enters into some kind of agonistic relation with a deity, either male or female.[69] How a hero engages in action which provides fertility for a community, generally for an audience or specifically in terms of the *polis*, is an area that he has examined in detail, focussing on the idea of cult. Fertility or 'order' in an Indic sphere is covered on the large scale by considerations of what in earlier times was referred to as *ṛta*, and then by what subsequently came under the multivalent tenets of dharma, 'harmony, equilibrium, decorum or degree'.[70] The ultimate question would be, what does the death of a hero performed in poetry or song mean for an audience — in terms of this *fertility*? The answer to this of course depends on the period which one is focussing on or trying to reconstruct. Certainly, epic has a

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[66] VI,32,20 *et seq*.

[67] J.D. Smith, 1987. Blackburn *et al*, 1989. Cross-cultural studies of cult, especially in antiquity, do however, exhibit problems of nature: the function of such cults is not always similar, although it would seem that the basic ground concerns agriculture or pre-modernist means of production.

[68] Diana Eck, personal communication.

[69] Nagy, 1979, p.289.

[70] I give several translations for this polyvalent term as it is impossible to secure its meaning by one word alone. See Fitzgerald, forthcoming.

context which has great bearing on the message of epic itself.[71] One must eventually ask the question as to what was the purpose of these epic events, what was their efficacy?

2. *The Text*

We should at this point mention the 'tradition' itself, both in its variety and in the secondary material which it generated.[72] The editors of the Critical Edition, overseen for the main part of their work by Sukthankar, relegated certain alternative manuscript variants from the text to the footnotes or the appendices, thereby bringing a western process of textual study to the native system. There exists a primary divide between the Northern and Southern manuscript traditions, the latter being generally the *textus ornatior*, the more pro-

[71] Contemporary analysts of the epic are fortunate in being able to draw evidence not only from the Sanskrit text but from the poem's current varieties of performance throughout the sub-continent. Hiltebeitel, 1999, chapter two, has an excellent theoretical overview of contemporary approaches to the differences between Sanskrit and local epics. In chapter three, he describes the death of Karṇa in a south Indian epic (initially recorded by Beck). The context of these modern-day local or 'oral' epics is well detailed. See also, Pukalentippulavar, 1998. Looking at these contemporary recitals and performances is one way of approaching the 'original' epic.

[72] One of the problems in dealing with epic concerns the phenomenon of *diglossia*. By the middle of the first millenium Sanskrit was no longer the spoken language and various Prakrits were already well established by the time of the Buddha. It was not only the case that songs about heroes were an attempt at the recall of a literary or poetic past but that the language in which these songs were performed was also an 'artificial' phenomenon; although epic, because of its 'errors', betrays a more natural air than say, later 'classical' Sanskrit. This accounts for much of what is called 'epic Sanskrit', that is, usage which is irregular in a strictly grammatical sense; it is *ārṣa* Sanskrit, the language of the *ṛṣis* who lived in another *yuga*. For instance, the use of the absolutive/gerund *ya* suffix when there are no prefixes to the stem, or the lack of augment for the imperfect, etc. See Jamison, in Holst-Warhaft and McCann, 1999, p.38, "What does a classical moment mean in a culture when the classical language has been dead for approximately a thousand years?"

fuse and hence slightly longer.[73] There is not only this deep and original incision in textual arrangement, but, as Sukthankar noted, the text "was probably written down *independently* in different epochs and under different circumstances."[74]

The late eighteenth century *pothī*-form 'Bombay' edition usually has the mediaeval commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha printed along with it at the bottom of each page.[75] His work is in a long line of commentarial practice beginning with Devabodha and carried on by Arjunamiśra. The Bombay edition does not incorporate much of the material that is only to be found in the Southern Recensions.[76] I have made frequent use of Nīlakaṇṭha's commentary especially where the poem deals with technical issues, such as ritual implements, items of armour, *et cetera*. The 'vulgate', *editio princeps*, is the later Calcutta edition, which I have not referred to.[77]

Sukthankar was well aware of the problems in dealing with preliterate poetry. Even in advance of the work of Parry and Lord he understood that there flourished a tradition of what he called "itinerant *raconteurs*", whose purpose in life was the performance of

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[73] "The Southern recension impresses us thus by its *precision, schematization, and thoroughly practical outlook*. Compared with it, the Northern recension is distinctly vague, unsystematic, sometimes even inconsequent, *more like a story rather naïvely narrated*, as we find in actual experience", Sukthankar, 1944, p.48. "The discrepancies between the two recensions, as already observed, are so numerous and so multifarious, that any attempt to enumerate and classify them must remain incomplete and unsatisfactory", *ibid*., p.49.

[74] Sukthankar, *op. cit*., p.100.

[75] The actual text that he edited "is a smooth and *eclectic* but inferior text, of an inclusive rather than exclusive type ... Nīlakaṇṭha's guiding principle, on his own admission, was to make the Mahābhārata a *thesaurus of all excellencies* (culled no matter from what source)." Sukthankar, *op. cit*., p.85.

[76] The Bombay edition, for long the standard edition of the epic until the publication of the CE, was not used by Sukthankar and his fellow editors, as it did not represent a manuscript tradition but was compiled in the nineteenth century by *paṇḍits*. It contains "readings which have no manuscript support", Sukthankar, *op. cit*., p.6.

[77] The 'vulgate' is, as S.K. De, the editor of the Udyoga *parvan*, describes it on p.xviii, "an uncritical conflation". Sukthankar, *op. cit*., p.106, describes it as "a text which was made up, probably, also in great haste but with inadequate and insufficient materials, only in the last quarter of the seventeenth century."

the poem.[78] He realised that, unlike the brahmins, who in their schools preserved a detailed authenticity of inherited Vedic texts, with these poets something quite the converse was in operation and that their 'text' was "multiple and polygenous".[79] Nagy has written of how even when there is a literate tradition at play there is still plenty of room for textual shift and alteration, as exhibited by the phenomenon of "*mouvance*".[80]

The editorial problems in dealing with a poem the size of the Mahābhārata and with such historical, geographical, and social variance, are immense. Kosambi and Schlingloff have written about the nature of textual variation and have brought highly relevant material to bear on the question of how this was so.[81] Kosambi analysed the *parvasaṃgraha* figures, the quantities of verse given in the description of 'contents', and matched these up with the actual quantities. Schlinghoff, also working on the *parvan* list, from the basis of what had been preserved in fragmentary manuscripts from Qizil in Chinese Turkestan, was able to show how certain parts of the epic were not included in that corpus and hence could possibly be described as being 'later' additions to the whole.[82] This assumes that the 'whole' was always the case; in fact, "There are very few MSS. of the entire work."[83]

What we have in the Critical Edition is "a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach", and, which is "the most ancient one according to the direct line of transmission".[84] Sukthankar, great scholar that he was, accepts the fact that it is a "mosaic of old and new matter", and admits that this

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[78] Sukthankar, *op. cit.*, p.1.

[79] *Ibid.* p.2; p.128, "[T]he Mahābhārata is not and never was a fixed rigid text, but is a fluctuating epic tradition, a *thème avec variations*, not unlike a popular Indian melody." Edgerton, in his introduction to the Sabhā *parvan*, 1944, p.xxxvi, also discusses the problem, and comments on the CE, "I believe that it is ... approximately what the Alexandrian text of Homer is to the Homeric tradition."

[80] Nagy, 1996a, p.9 *et seq.*, discussing a term pioneered by Zumthor.

[81] Kosambi, 1946. Schlingloff, 1969.

[82] The Virāṭa *parvan* and the Anuśāsana *parvan*, for instance.

[83] Edgerton, in his Sabhā *parvan* intro, 1944, p.xxxvii.

[84] Sukthankar, *op. cit.*, p.129.

in some instance renders a text that is not always smooth as, say, the vulgate is in places, and which even manifests occasional anacoluthon: but which has been "inferred with a high degree of probability".[85] There has been criticism of the Poona edition, claiming that it is 'artificial' and divorced from any 'actual' and performative tradition.[86] Nonetheless, it does represent a monument to long, extremely dedicated, and assiduously detailed scholarship, and has provided the current researcher with virtually complete coverage of all the relevant manuscript traditions available today.

P.L. Vaidya, in his introduction to the Karṇa *parvan* makes the comment that, "The text of the Karṇa *parvan*, as it has come down to us, seems to have been in a fluid form from very early times. This fluid state is responsible for the great divergence in the texts in the Northern and Southern recensions, particularly at the commencement and towards the end, like a rope automatically unwinding itself when left without the securing knots at the ends".[87] This would seem to indicate, from a modern point of view, a dynamic level of activity in the oral tradition that surrounded or contained this section of the poem, but which did not seriously affect the thematic material of 'Karṇa's epic'.[88]

Needless to say I have made extensive use of the on-line CE text as recently made available by J.D. Smith of Cambridge University. It is a re-ordering of the original electronic text provided by Muneo Tokunaga of Kyoto University.[89] This has been of vital use in the search for words.

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[85] *Ibid.* p.130.

[86] Perhaps this approximates to the *Kalevala* model as compiled by Lönnrot (and then imitated by Longfellow). What one ends up with is a *trompe l'oeil* version of a poem representing the 'whole' of ancient India. Wagner's composition of Der Ring Des Nibelungen, drawn from many epic sources, is also roughly analogous. The editors of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, 1988, remark, in their General Introduction, that their editorial method arguably produces, "a version that never existed in Shakespeare's time."

[87] P.L. Vaidya, fasc. 20, BORI ed., p.xxiv.

[88] 'Oral tradition' incorporates composition, performance, and transmission.

[89] http://bombay.oriental.cam.ac.uk/index.html

Much of the method followed in this work is that of *explication de texte*, 'close reading'. In the next chapter I shall examine the name of Karṇa and attempt to show its relevance to the overall narrative. Then, I shall analyse the term *kathā*, in an effort to come to some understanding of what 'epic' was for kṣatriyas. Thirdly, I shall examine what heroes were 'like', in the organisation of simile that depicts them as well as in the crucial importance of vision as a medium for the original preliterate poets.

In Chapter III we shall look at Karṇa's relationship with three of his peers looking in particular at structural arrangements in both plot and language. In the following chapter certain of his most important speeches will be under scrutiny.

Chapter V inquires into the relationship between heroes and sons or heroes and fathers. In this study I shall indicate varieties of heroism that do not only concern Karṇa.

Finally, I shall briefly touch upon some of the cult aspects of epic heroes in the sub-continent and indicate sources for possible ritual as given in the text and in later material culture.

Given the enormous range of the poem, analysis focussed on individual terms is not always fruitful. Unlike the Homeric corpus, which was 'fixed' quite early, the Mahābhārata continued to flourish and still does continue to flourish in the sub-continent; the poem is recited even today by brahmins in villages on the occasion of certain festivals in the Hindu calendar — such is its ongoing vitality. Thus, to distinguish a meaning for individual words is often less inductively successful than it should be. A study of key words in Mahābhārata heroism, such as *vīra* and *śūra*, or, *yaśas* and *kīrti*, does not often throw light upon the concept under investigation. I spent an enormous amount of time pursuing the instance and context of such terms, but eventually abandoned my inferences for want of resolute conclusion.

Conversely, due to the centripetal organisation of the poem, where various separate traditions were combined to effect a synthetic or 'master' epic, it is possible to speak of the large range of synonyms contained in the poem as a phenomenon in itself. This is an unusual aspect of the Mahābhārata, compounded by the artifici-

ality of the language and the fact that Sanskrit was early on no longer a living tongue. In later classical poetry an extensive use of synonyms came to be considered to be a poetic virtue.[90]

[90] When an non-vernacular and literary language that contains an enormous spectrum of vocabulary loses the distinctions that separate the meaning of different words, its frame of reference becomes closed and internal. This marks a secondary stage in its process of 'artificiality'. It is not just that the language is no longer spoken, but that the nuance of specific words begins to vanish. As signifiers, words can at this point, become quite arbitrary, 'meaningless'. See Staal, 1979. The word for 'water' is a good example: *jala*, *salila*, *āpaḥ*, *vāri*, *toya*, *udaka*; does this degree of synonymy represent a move away from 'local' literatures towards a more pan-Indian form perhaps? This would denote a procession away from individual significance towards greater fungibility of terms. Another good example can be observed in the large variety of words for 'king': *rājā*, *mahārājā*, *nṛpati*, *nṛpa*, *kṣitipa*, *nareśvara*, *narādhipa*, to name a few. Normally one would imagine that a strict ranking occured with such a list of royal titles, but this is not the case within the poem. Again, it seems as if the impetus to uniformity derives from the suppression of what were local or lesser traditions of the poem. Our understanding of 'local' traditions can perhaps be refined down to refer to certain books of the epic or to certain heroes in the epic — but this is not the aim of the present work.

CHAPTER TWO

KARṆA KAUNTEYA

In this chapter I shall give a cursory outline of the major activities and occasions in the narrative or 'epic' of Karṇa. I would then like to focus upon the name of Karṇa as this encodes details of his make-up. Thirdly, I would like to offer an overview of how epic poetry amplifies and supports the world of kṣatriyas and what the term for 'epic' is in this respect. Lastly, the question of metaphor and simile — as crucial tropes within this poetry — needs to be studied, as this will provide us with a poetics as to how epic functions.

1. *A Brief Life*

Karṇa makes his first nominal entry into the Mahābhārata in the Ādi *parvan* where he is described, in *triṣṭubh* verse, via the metaphor of a tree.[1] Ugraśravas, the poet who is the actual speaker of the Mahābhārata as we have it, is describing the poem and its origin.[2]

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[1] For a brief and compressed form of all the lineal history in the Ādi *parvan*, see V,147,1-30. This supplies the background genealogies.

[2] This extended metaphor is repeated by Yudhiṣṭhira at V,29,46ff. It is indicative of the poetics which are at work in the epic, that the same lines can be spoken by different voices at different times. There are four major metaphors, related to the hero, that are at work in the Mahābhārata: those of trees, of water, of fire, and of mountains. These four images generate, via metonymy, many other images that oscillate, as it were, from the initial key icon. Other metaphors that are typical but not so extensively repeated and which do not generate metonyms with such frequency are snakes and astronomical imagery. Another way of looking at how metaphor works in the poem would be to conceive of it as a fabric, with the warp being supplied by metaphor and the weft by metonymy. Thus an extraordinary reticulation can be developed by the poets, amplifying just a single theme. For example, from the metaphor of boat, one can proceed to metonyms of oars, rough seas, tillers, and so on, extending that original first image thoughout the text.

I,1,65: *duryodhano manyumayo mahādrumaḥ skandhaḥ karṇaḥ ...*
Duryodhana is a great tree, filled with resentment, Karṇa is the trunk ... [3]

This metaphor of the hero as a tree recurs again many times in the poem.[4] As usual with the epic hero, the narration commences with a prolepsis, telling of what happened at the end.[5] He is thus mentioned by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who casts him in the company of Duryodhana and Śakuni (I,1,95), the three who rigged the gambling match. Dhṛtarāṣṭra then sings a long monody of his grief in *triṣṭubhs*.[6] Karṇa is spoken of in the course of this lament as having set his mind, along with Duryodhana, on the attempted capture of Kṛṣṇa (I,1,119). He is described as refusing to fight and concomitantly rejecting Bhīṣma, the Kaurava commander. From the very start of the poem, Karṇa is cast in somewhat shadowy light.

From the point of view of an audience, this kind of poetic is able to address areas of particular familiarity with extraordinary range or magnitude. I am grateful to Gregory Nagy for introducing me to this idea of a fabric of meaning. See Jakobson, 1980, p.129ff. on metonymy and metaphor.

[3] All references are to the Critical Edition of BORI, unless otherwise stated: my translations.

[4] It should be noted that representations of the Buddha were at first aniconic — except for the Jātaka scenes — and were often made in the form of a tree, the *bodhidruma*. In fact the image of the 'sacred tree', *caitya vṛkṣa*, goes back to Indus Valley times: see Parpola, 1994, fig.13.8, p.229.

[5] Similarly, the first of the battle books, the Bhīṣma *parvan*, commences, just prior to the opening lines of the Gītā, with Saṃjaya declaring that Bhīṣma had been struck down (VI,14,3). Then, the poet is asked *how* this occurred, and the audience hears about the ten days leading up to the moment. This kind of narrative recapitulation is the norm for the Mahābhārata, with the poet announcing the death of a hero and the interlocutor requesting an account of such — 'how did it happen?'

[6] I use the convention throughout of 'sing' for epic declamation. Certainly, melody is not in question here, but sonority is not to be excluded. See Nagy, 1991, Ch.1. Any modern verbal rendering of Mahābhārata supports this view. Hopkins, 1888, p.323, "The verses are sung by the musician to a musical accompaniment in honor of the king and his ancestors ... We find, not one, but a band (*gaṇa*) of musicians singing the deeds of old heroes, and accompanying themselves on the lyre (*vīṇā*), and called *vīṇāgāthin* (lyre-singer)." Also, there is the obvious reference to what is 'sung', *gītā*, by Kṛṣṇa.

Karṇa is next mentioned in the course of the *Parvasaṃgrahaḥ*, where his ear-rings are taken by Indra (I,2,127). Then, he is described as mounting the chariot of Kṛṣṇa (I,2,148) and being, *anumantritaḥ*, 'consecrated'. He rejects Kṛṣṇa, however. This moment anticipates the Gītā, where Kṛṣṇa speaks to Arjuna: a crucial equivalence between these two heroes is thus established early on in the poem.

The Karṇa *parvan* itself is qualified as, *paramādbhutam,* 'extremely wonderful,' an epithet no other *parvan* receives (I,2,169). A few events from the final battle are given and Karṇa is then said to be killed. In chapter fifty-seven of the Ādi *parvan* we have the second reference to Karṇa's distinguishing characteristics: the ear-rings that cause his face to shine, and the breastplate he is born with that sets him apart from ordinary mortals.

I,57,82: *sahajaṃ kavacaṃ bibhrat kuṇḍaloddyotitānanaḥ.*
The one whose face shone with ear-rings, bearing a cuirass inborn.

Heroes, unlike mortals, are not brought into the world simply: somewhere in their generation a deific presence is at play. This is the source of the ambiguity that distinguishes heroes from mortals and from deities: their lives occupy this space between two zones of the cosmos. The divine birth of Karṇa is first given in I,104,7 where Kuntī served the visiting *ṛṣi* Durvāsas so well that he gave her a favour in recompense, disclosing a mantra by which she could call upon any deity in order to conceive a son.[7] This of course she does, consequently becoming pregnant as well as having her virginity sustained. She does not seem to tell her husband Pāṇḍu about this although she does explain to him the use of the mantras which Durvāsas taught her (I,113,34ff.)

[7] We also hear of this account in I,104,8ff., III,287.ff, V,142, and XV,38. On that last occasion, Kuntī asks, *putro me tvatsamo deva bhavet*, 'O deity, might I have a son, like you! (XV,38,12). de Vries, 1963, p.211ff., gives a good overview of the IE hero in terms of birth and early life.

She bore the *vīra*, the 'warrior', the best of weapon-bearers, who was distinguished by his innate breastplate and glowing ear-rings.[8] He is *amaraprabham*, 'glorious as an immortal' (III,292,4). It is noteworthy that he is called *sūta* even before he is adopted by the actual charioteer from whom he received this title. Here we see the poet assuming that his audience already knows the story; this is not really a case of anticipation.[9]

Kuntī then proceeds to expose the child, *kumāraṃ salakṣaṇam*, 'the marked boy', to the river Gaṅgā. He is retrieved by an *adhiratha*, a charioteer, and his wife Rādhā, and taken as their own. Karṇa receives from the *dvija*, 'twice born', the name Vasuṣena, because of his golden ear-rings and cuirass (III,293,12); the name is connected with his later liberality and with his progenitor the Sun, one of the Vasus. The audience never actually hears from whom he receives the name of Karṇa. He develops into a young man, 'venerating the Sun from noon onwards' (I,104,16),[10] and he is a 'truthful man, heroic, praying', always generous to brahmins.

Gāndhārī, on hearing that Kuntī had produced a son, *bālārka-samatejasam,* 'whose splendour was like the sun that was newly risen', aborted her own pregnancy by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, which led to the

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[8] I propose to translate the word *vīra* by 'warrior', and the word *śūra* by 'hero'. Hopkins, 1888, p.99, comments on a verse in the Rāmāyaṇa (whose placement he cannot recall), "that defines the *çūra*, or knight, as ... *pauruṣeṇa hi yo yuktaḥ sa çūra iti saṃjñitaḥ*. That is, a man of might is the real knight. But *çūra* means more than this, and, associated as it almost always is with *satkulīna* 'well-born', means a noble, technically speaking — a man of the upper class at court and in the field. *Kulaja* (well-born), as epithet of a warrior, is indicative of power ..." It does seem appropriate that when Karṇa's mother submits to the attentions of Sūrya she makes him formally promise that her son would be a *śūra* (III,291,17), for he is going to become the best of the Kurus. A glance at the *pratīka* Index will reveal that *śūra* occurs fifty per-cent plus more times in the second five books of the poem than in the first five books.

[9] The conception and events leading up to it, the birth, and then the encounter with Indra, are all given in compressed form, an account amounting to only twenty-one *ślokas*. Such versatility on the part of the poets is typical of preliterate technique.

[10] Saṃvaraṇa is the only other figure in the poem who actively venerates the Sun. See I,160,12ff. He is an ancestor of Arjuna.

production of Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers and single sister (I,107,25).

This abbreviated account of Karṇa appears in the preliminaries to the poem and highlights the important moments of his story prior to his physical presence in the narrative proper, which only begins with his appearance at the weapons trial in I,125. An audience would thus briefly hear all of his life before the character entered the story, beginning with his death, as sung of in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament.[11]

From the most ancient hero Rāma Jāmadagnya he had received instruction in the martial arts; similarly from the teachers Droṇa and Kṛpa.[12] Then, as a mature young warrior, Karṇa appears at the weapons trial and challenges Arjuna, a contest that will inform the rest of his life. At this point he makes his first association with Duryodhana and becomes an intimate advisor and is consecrated as a king of an eastern province.

When the question of legality arises as to whether Draupadī had been won or not in the rigged gambling session in book two, she herself having raised the 'point of order', *praśna*, Karṇa is vociferous and eloquent as well as insulting in defence of Śakuni's victory

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[11] This is assuming that the audience heard the epic sequentially, but how often was this the case? Thomas Burke pointed this out to me. See also, Sax, 1991, on contemporary performances of the Mahābhārata. One must assume that the epic tradition is by nature diverse and only unified or integrated at a later time in its 'history'. Sukthankar, 1944, p.14, writes, "Moreover the *parvans* are mostly handed down separately, or in groups of a few *parvan*s at a time, at least in the oldest manuscripts now preserved."

[12] III,286,8 and 293,17. There are three heroes mentioned in the course of the Mahābhārata with the name of Rāma. There is Rāma Dāśarathi, who has his own eponymous epic; there is the brother of Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, for whom see Bigger, 1998, and Hiltebeitel, 2001, p.121ff.; and there is the ancient hero Rāma Jāmadagnya, the brahmin son of one of the *saptaṛṣi*, 'seven sages', who, at the command of his father, killed his mother, for whom see Fitzgerald, 2002. It is only really the latter who has any force within the overall narrative, although Balarāma does come and go in an uneventful way. In the *sabhā*, during the Udyoga *parvan*, Duryodhana reports that Karṇa was *anujñātaś ca rāmeṇa matsamo'sīti*, 'Favoured by Rāma — 'you are my equal!' (V,54,51).

(II,62,26).[13] Karṇa speaks well, this is one of his major qualities; he is not simply martially adept and an equal to Arjuna, but he also has the gift of address, including verbal attack. He, as a king should, gives his firm and well illustrated opinion on dharma as it pertains to this situation: what is correct behaviour and what is incorrect. He even goes on to say, indicating a knowledge of *śāstra,* that,

II,61,35: *eko bhartā striyā devair vihitaḥ ...*
A single husband is ordained for a woman by the deities ...

Subsequently he always fits the role of king well, frequently giving his view on policy or correct kṣatriya action.

Newly arrived in the forest, Yudhiṣṭhira, reviewing his enemies, describes Karṇa as,

III,37,16: *amarṣī nityasaṃhṛṣṭas tatra karṇo mahārathaḥ*
sarvāstravid anādhṛṣya abhedyakavacāvṛtaḥ.
Karna is passionate, always bristling, a great chariot-warrior, familiar with all weapons, invincible, covered by an adamant breastplate.

The audience first hears of Karṇa in action during the Ghoṣayātrā *parvan* where he engages with *gandharvas* and is soundly beaten.[14] Then, during the cattle raid against the Matsyas he skirmishes with Arjuna for the first time and is again beaten.[15]

Indra, disguised as a brahmin, approaches him before the battle of Kurukṣetra and requests the ear-rings and cuirass. A true kṣatriya cannot refuse such a request and Karṇa cuts off his divine attrib-

[13] Shulman, 1985, p. 380, (citing Hiltebeitel) writes, "South Indian traditions glorify Karṇa in various ways ... one finds many hints of a clandestine love between Karṇa and Draupadī." In the Ālhā text that projects the Mahābhārata into the Kali *yuga*, Karṇa is cursed by Śiva to be reborn as Tāhar, a brother of Draupadī.

[14] III,230,18ff.

[15] IV,33,2ff.

utes.[16] In return he receives from Indra a missile which is guaranteed to destroy its target, divine or human.

Immediately prior to battle commencing, Karṇa retires, having been insulted by Bhīṣma.[17] He does not enter the fray until book seven. In book eight, the Karṇa *parvan*, he fights with Arjuna and perishes. Just before he dies Karṇa made several claims as to how dharma had failed him and as to how *daiva* or 'destiny' had triumphed. *Jayo daive pratiṣṭhitaḥ*, is what he had said earlier concerning this, which is now repeated several times again: 'victory depends on what comes from the deities' (VII,120,29).[18]

2. *The Name of Karṇa*

One of meanings of the word Karṇa signifies 'eared' or 'the ear-ringed one'.[19] Thus intrinsic even to his nominal being is this possession of ear-rings that denote invulnerability. When Kuntī had conceived her son, in the account given in book three, Sūrya appears as *āmuktakavacaṃ devaṃ kuṇḍalābhyāṃ vibhūṣitam*, 'a deity decorated with ear-rings and possessing a breast-plate' (III,290,5). Karṇa receives these as part of his identity as metonyms of his descent, because Kuntī, before agreeing to make love with Sūrya, makes him promise that the son born of the union would be *ku-*

[16] From √*yāc*, 'ask', "a term of compulsion", Jamison, 1996, p.191. The use of this verb has the force of "compel[ling] someone to give ... the yāc-er puts himself in the power of the one approached and tacitly accepts inferior status ... the verb is in reciprocal relation with the root √*dā*, 'give'." Jamison discusses this moment in the epic on p.192-93, "the marginal and ambiguous figure of Karṇa seems an embodiment of traditional, inherited, Indo-European ideals." Karṇa himself uses this term when, in discussion with Sūrya, he mentions the prospect of Indra's begging: *kuṇḍale me prayācitum*, 'to beg my ear-rings' (III,284,30).

[17] V,165,27.

[18] In compressed form, Karṇa's life is swiftly recapitulated by Yudhiṣṭhira and Nārada during the first five chapters of the Śānti *parvan*.

[19] Karṇá. It is entirely fitting that, for a hero who is intensely pre-occupied with fame, 'that which is heard', that his very name be connected with such 'hearing'. He is also sometimes, although not very often, referred to as *vṛṣan*, 'bull', or 'best', or simply, 'male'. Śiva, Indra, as well as Kṛṣṇa, are also referred to by this name, and it thus takes on something of the quality of an epithet.

ṇḍalī kavacī śūro, 'a hero with ear-rings and breast-plate' (III,291,17).[20] In fact it is the promise of the divine ear-rings and cuirass for her child that really seems to seduce Kuntī. Sūrya admits to her that Aditi herself bestowed the ear-rings upon him and that both they and the cuirass are *amṛtamayam*, 'made up of the immortal' (III,291,18). He promises to give her son these things, *te' sya dāsyāmi*, 'These I will give to him' (III,291,21).[21]

In book five when Indra comes to him and begs to be given the ear-rings so that his son, Arjuna, Karṇa's chosen opponent, may win their imminent duel, Karṇa cuts them off.[22] Without his ear-rings Karṇa is a hero who is 'without himself', that is, dead, or soon to be dead — the ear-rings being an emblem for his identity or life.[23] The epic poets make much of this economy of metaphor

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[20] Note that Karṇa is referred to as *śūra*, and not *vīra*: 'hero'. Skanda, the divine son of Agni and Svāhā, is really the only other significantly ear-ringed hero in the poem who is in any way like Karṇa. *tam varadaṃ śūraṃ yuvānaṃ mṛṣṭakuṇḍalam*, 'That benificent young hero who possessed shining ear-rings' (III,218,3). He is in fact more of a deity than a hero although Indra on meeting him addresses him as *vīra* (III,218,15), just before he is anointed as commander of the divine army that is to attack the *dānavas*. This he does victoriously and Indra acclaims him, *triṣu lokeṣu kīrtiś ca tava akṣayyā bhaviṣyati*, 'And your fame will be imperishable among the three worlds' (III,221,76). Thereafter Skanda plays no important role in the Mahābhārata narrative.

[21] One observes the usual interplay between *dā* and *yāc*, for a few lines later, Kuntī is referred to by the poet as *yācamānā*, 'soliciting' (III,29127). As an aside, the mechanics of this coition are, that 'he, whose form was yogic, touched her navel', *yogātmā nābhyāṃ pasparśa ca eva tām* (III,291,23).

[22] The Maruts, Indra's *gaṇa* in the Rgveda, also wear ear-rings. So Karṇa's ear-rings metonymically, would link him to this group. Indra is *the* deity who is both divine *and* heroic and the icon of epic heroes.

[23] Throughout the course of the poem, the most common occasion for ear-rings to be noted by the poets is when they describe a decapitated head lying on the ground embellished by such ornaments. (VI,66,7; VII,15,37;VIII,19,28; IX,13,15). Thus the most typical instancing of ear-rings in the epic is intimately associated with death. In book six, for example, of the twelve occasions for *kuṇḍala* being mentioned, ten concern decapitated heads. (In book six, the usual formula is *śirobhiś ca sakuṇḍalaiḥ*; in book seven the elements of the typical formula are *śiraḥ kāyāt sakuṇḍalam*.) The final reference to ear-rings in the poem comes when all the dead heroes rise out of the Gaṅgā and meet one last time with the remaining Kurus. All these dead are described as 'possessing radiant ear-rings', *sarve bhrājiṣṇukuṇḍalāḥ* (XV,40,15).

where the ear-rings are exchanged for fame and a spear, and then the spear is given up to a figure who wears ear-rings, in return for further renown.[24]

No other players in the epic possess ear-rings that are so remarkable. Kings and *sūtas* sometimes display ear-rings, but there the quality stops; the poets take no further notice of the fact.[25] One such character who is thus remarked is the *sūta* or poet Saṃjaya who sings much of the central part of the poem and who possesses the divine eyesight allowing him to be aware of what is occurring far away in the distance; he is called, *kuṇḍalī,* 'the one with ear-rings'.[26] Another is Jayadratha, whose decapitated head is de-

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[24] In the account of the Mahābhārata given by Colonel de Polier published in 1809 and republished in 1986 by Gallimard, Karṇa still has, at the end of his life, "une petite plaque d'or et deux petits diamants", which he offers to Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa who have approached him in the disguise of brahmins as he lies dying. As Polier remarks, p.285, the two had come "à voir un homme dont la charité et la générosité sont si universellement renommés." This is curiously akin to what J.D. Smith, 1982, has from a folk tradition in western India, where Karṇa, dying, gives to Kṛṣṇa, his teeth.

[25] The first minor narrative in the poem however (I,3,1), is about Utanka going in search of ear-rings for his guru's wife which a snake subsequently robs. It is this primary 'framing' tale that first introduces the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya. This narrative is repeated in the Āśvamedhika *parvan* where again, the ear-rings are taken by a snake (XIV,57,13). Similarly, in book three when the *dānavas* deceive Duryodhana by telling him that Karṇa will kill Arjuna, they explain that the soul of Naraka had entered the body of Karṇa for this express purpose (III,240,19). Now, in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, X, Naraka is described as one who had stolen the ear-rings of Aditi, the mother of Indra. Kṛṣṇa, in the account, returns these after having slain Naraka. This theme of ear-rings being taken is deeply ingrained within the Mahābhārata narratives and constellates about Karṇa: *his* is the crucial lost ear-ring story with which the other tales resonate. One other notable instance where ear-rings appear, but in a slightly derogative sense, is when Arjuna makes his entry to the court of king Virāṭa (IV,10,5). Here he is described as absurdly feminised and the ear-rings are part of that cosmetic. Draupadī, in IV,18,14, remarks about Arjuna's jewellery in an extremely contemptuous fashion, saying that one who once carried divine missiles now wears ear-rings!

[26] The *sūtas* in IV,65,13 are also *sumṛṣṭamaṇikuṇḍalāḥ*. The *gopāḥ*, 'guardian', at IV,30,4, also receives this epithet. He does have a 'chariot' though, a *ratha*, which possibly links him with *sūtas* — hence the ear-rings. Curiously, in the next line, he speaks with the king who is *śūraiḥ parivṛtam*, 'surrounded by heroes', and they are *kuṇḍalāṅgadadhāribhiḥ*, 'sporting bracelets and ear-rings'. *śūra* is a marked term for hero, and a term that is particularly applicable to Karṇa. So it is

scribed as possessing ear-rings *sakuṇḍalam*, (VII,121,26).[27] Also ear-ringed is Ghaṭotkaca, a demon *rākṣasa* who is instrumental in making Karṇa even more vulnerable than he is. His ear-rings are *bālasūryābhe*, 'like a young sun'. Interestingly, in the next line he is described as also possessing a cuirass, this one being 'broad and very bright and of brass or white metal' (VII,150,10). As we shall see below in Chapter III with Bhīṣma, identities are often played out antagonistically.

In book three, Indra, the progenitor of Arjuna, appears before Karṇa in order to divest him of his signs of invulnerability so that Arjuna will triumph in the forthcoming duel. Immediately prior to this, Karṇa's own father, the Sun, Sūrya, comes to him in order to warn him about what Indra is up to. Karṇa dismisses Sūrya's warning saying that for him to be able to give something to Indra, the chief of the deities, will only bring him fame. For the chief immortal to come and beg from him can only elevate Karṇa in terms of renown. He goes on to talk at length about the importance if not the priority of fame over anything else.

Indra then appears, disguised as a brahmin, and Karṇa hands over his jewels and breastplate, removing them bloodily with a knife. In return he receives a missile, a *śakti* that is unerring in its flight.[28] Thus, although he is no longer invincible, he retains the potential capacity to destroy Arjuna, as well as earning the superla-

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apposite that here we have a connection with ear-ring and *śūra*. See Jakobson, 1980, p.138, "The general meaning of the marked is characterized by the conveyance of more precise, specific, and additional information than the unmarked term provides."

[27] His henchman, Koṭikāśya, with whom he attempts to kidnap Draupadī in the forest, is similarly described as *kuṇḍalī*, 'ear-ringed' (III,248,17). Like Saṃjaya, Koṭikāśya functions as a *sūta*, a 'charioteer'. It would thus seem that *kuṇḍalin* is a signifier for this class of individual; Karṇa of course, belongs to the *sūta* class. In the Virāṭa *parvan* ear-rings appear with a much greater frequency than any other book in the Mahābhārata: for some reason they are far more commonplace in this section of the poem.

[28] The reason he does not use this to destroy his main enemy, Arjuna, is given in VII,157,37, where Kṛṣṇa says, *aham eva tu rādheyaṃ mohayāmi yudhāṃ vara / yato nāvasṛjac chaktiṃ pāṇḍave śvetavāhane*, 'So I delude[d] the son of Rādhā, best of warriors. Hence he did not discharge the weapon at the son of Pāṇḍu, him of the white horses'.

tive honour of having bestowed a gift upon the chief of the celestials. Later on, through a similar act of great liberality, Karṇa also relinquishes the missile.

When Karṇa had cut away his natural breast-plate he received the patronymic, *vaikartana*, from *vikartana*, the Sun, 'divider' or 'distributor', but it can mean 'the one who cuts'.[29] When he does this cutting, all the deities and celestials are present and roar aloud and flowers fall from the sky (III,294,36).[30] This is something that only occurs once again, that is, at the end of his life in book eight (VIII,63,60). Thus, these two instants, where there is a loss of im/mortality, are being emphatically indicated by the poets.

Not long after this Karṇa briefly skirmishes with Bhīma, the father of the *rākṣasa* Ghaṭotkaca. In this engagement he loses an earring to one of Bhīma's arrows. There is a triple polyptotonic play on the noun here, for the kind of arrow that is used is called a broad arrow or *karṇin*.[31]

VII,114,3: *sa karṇaṃ karṇinā karne ... vivyādha.*
He pierced Karṇa on the ear with a broad arrow.

In the next line Bhīma also pierces his chest, which of course is no longer protected by the divine and invulnerable cuirass which Indra had taken. This same phrase where the triple play on ear is made had also occurred sixty lines earlier on in the chapter, when someone else attacks Karṇa.[32] So twice the audience is signalled

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[29] *tato vaikartanaḥ karṇaḥ karmaṇā tena so'bhavat*, 'Then, by this act Karṇa became Vaikartana' (I,104,21). Kṛṣṇa repeats this, *karṇo vai tena vaikartanaḥ smṛtaḥ* (VII,155,19).

[30] When Bhīṣma elects to die at VI,114,33ff., there are identical phenomena. Bhīṣma, as shown below in Ch.III,2, has many traits in common with Karṇa. There is a similar phenomenon when Duryodhana finally dies, an event that Gitomer, 1992, has examined. Karṇa and Duryodhana are of course closely linked figures.

[31] Bhīṣma, in the Śānti *parvan*, describing some of the rules of war, interdicts the use of such arrows (XII,16,11).

[32] This is when Abhimanyu was assaulting Karṇa, *sa karṇaṃ karṇinā karṇe punar vivyādha phālguniḥ*, 'Abhimanyu again pierced Karṇa on the ear with a broad arrow' (VII,46,10 and 47,1). I follow the translation convention of only giving primary proper names where the text supplies an epithet or secondary title.

this new mortality of the hero by the poet's repetition of the symbolic locus of that mortality.

Similarly, just a few lines before the wheel of Karṇa's chariot sticks in the earth in book eight, there is again such a signal (VIII,66,42). The audience has heard prophesied several times that the grounded wheel will be a sign for Karṇa's death. A few lines prior to this, Karṇa, of course, has his ear-rings — presumably a new and 'mortal' set — and his crown, struck off by an arrow of Arjuna. Again, we observe the same pattern appearing: ear-rings or the absence of ear-rings and death.

Bhīma's demon son, the *rākṣasa* Ghaṭotkaca, who wears 'brilliant ear-rings', *dīptakuṇḍalam*, then goes into the attack. This initial duel between Karṇa and the demon continues over many lines (VII,150,4-103). It is because Ghaṭotkaca is destroying the Kuru forces in book seven that they beg Karṇa to save them (VII,154,48ff.) Just as Karṇa generously and impersonally relinquished his ear-rings, so he relinquishes the missile; he does not hesitate to save his companions. He destroys Ghaṭotkaca by using this final supernatural resource, the special spear, the *śakti* which was guaranteed to always find its target and which he had previously reserved for Arjuna.[33]

VII,154,54: *mṛtyoḥ svasāraṃ jvalitām ivolkām.*
A meteor, like the blazing sister of Death.

By the time the final duel with Arjuna happens, Karṇa no longer has either the protection nor the weaponry to triumph: which of course means death.

This stratagem to weaken and defeat Karṇa had been engineered by the super-subtle deity Kṛṣṇa, who danced with delight and be-

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The profusion of nomenclature can be confusing to those unfamilar with the poem.

[33] The spear is *nihitā varṣapūgān vadhāyājau satkṛtā phalgunasya*, 'kept and adored a succession of years for the destruction of Arjuna in battle' (VII,154,53).

came *atiharṣam*, 'overjoyed' (VII,155,11) when Karṇa was no more invincible to Arjuna.[34] He says,

> VII,155,13: *śaktihastaṃ punaḥ karṇaṃ ko loke' sti pumān iha*
> *ya enam abhitiṣṭhet ...*
> *What man is there in the world who could withstand Karṇa*
> *with the spear in hand?*

Complete with ear-rings and spear Karṇa was invincible in the three worlds; neither Indra nor Varuṇa nor Yama himself could defeat him (VII,155,15ff.), even Kṛṣṇa was powerless. Kṛṣṇa adds that Karṇa had now attained 'human status', *so' dya mānuṣatām prāptaḥ* (VII,155,27), that is, he could be killed.[35] It should be mentioned that previously in the poem, in book one in fact, we heard that Ghaṭotkaca was 'created by Indra himself' especially for the destruction of Karṇa, *saa sṛṣṭo maghavatā ... karṇasya ... vināśāya,* (I,143,38).

What is important here therefore, is firstly, how these divine ear-rings are really objects which denote great power and a certain non-mortality and which Karṇa is prepared to exchange in return for extraordinary fame and a spear. Secondly, when he does give up his invincibility even more, by using that special missile to finish off Ghaṭotkaca, he is again behaving in a fashion that will secure him fame and in conditions marked by the presence of these *kuṇḍale*, ear-rings.[36]

In return for this second act of bestowal we hear,

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[34] Twice had Kṛṣṇa instructed Arjuna to desist from attacking Karṇa because the latter still held this missile (VII,148,33ff.) Even Saṃjaya comments on this tactic of Kṛṣṇa's to keep Arjuna away from Karṇa at VII,157,28. Kṛṣṇa then summons Ghaṭotkaca and requests that he venture against Karṇa (VII,148,40ff.)

[35] Although Kṛṣṇa adds, *nānyena kenacit / ṛte tvā*, 'not by anyone else except you!' (VII,155,23). At this moment in the chariot, Kṛṣṇa proceeds to sing a long eulogy of Karṇa, lavishly praising him (VII,155,24-27). He finishes this by telling Arjuna that only one instant will occur when Karṇa will be able to be slain, that is, when his wheel sticks in the ground (VII,155,28). Later, he informs Arjuna that *upadekṣyāmy upāyaṃ te yena taṃ prahaniṣyasi*, 'I shall indicate to you the stratagem with which you will kill him' (VII,156,30).

[36] Ghaṭoṭkaca possesses both ear-rings and a cuirass. Symmetry is also a phenomenon qualifying the Karṇa-Arjuna relation; see below, Ch.III,1.

VII,154,63: *tataḥ karṇah kurubhih pūjyamāno*
yathā śakro vṛtravadhe marudbhiḥ.
Then Karṇa was being honoured by the Kurus,
as Indra by the Maruts after the destruction of Vṛtra.

That is, Karṇa is being praised as if he were the chief of the immortals himself. There is a circulation here of fame, and the two exchanges are marked by the unusual presence of ear-rings. In French one would say that, 'Pompidou a cassé sa pipe', or in English, 'George has kicked the bucket'. It is as if the idiom here is that 'Karṇa has lost his ear-rings'. This is perhaps pushing the model a bit far, but the import is carried through.

As a corollary to the above, when Arjuna eventually slays Karṇa — and we have been hearing this refrain about his imminent death right from the beginning of the poem when the blind old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra mentions him in his lament (I,1,139) — Arjuna is again and again likened to Indra slaying the demon Vṛtra. That is, Karṇa is again and again put in the position of Vṛtra.

VIII,63,16: *indravṛtrāv iva ... samupasthitau ...*
They appeared ... like Indra and Vṛtra.

We hear of this particular myth many times in the Ṛgveda, it could almost be said to be the 'charter myth' of Vedic culture or poetry. It is a myth associated with the primary cosmogonic act whereby the three worlds are made viable for human life. At this point where Vṛtra perishes, the 'waters' of creativity are released.[37] Thus the death of Karṇa is by analogy being signalled to an audience as a moment of extreme fecundity or fruition. The life which has won for him, by his own account, such fame, is in its conclusion seen as a metaphor for that victory whereby the chief of the deities established order and feasibility in the world. The ear-rings are the primary metonym of this death.

[37] See Watkins, 1995, p.300, "That is, the dragon keeps wealth from circulating: the ultimate evil in society in which gift-exchange and the lavish bestowal of riches institutionalized precisely that circulation."

Secondly, as well as signifying 'ear', the word Karṇa also means helm or rudder. The metaphor of steering a boat is a figure of speech that we shall see is also dear to the Mahābhārata poets. It is possible to show that certain metaphors, like this one, do not exist alone, that there is a field or network which they amplify anaphorically.[38]

One such figure of speech that we repeatedly hear of in the epic is that of a 'vessel' or 'raft', *plava*, that is at risk in the sea, or is being submerged. This often refers to the Kaurava cause. Sometimes the metaphor is extended, and battle itself is the referent for sea.[39] Dhṛtarāṣṭra in book seven describes his army as a 'great sea', *mahodadhi*, and says that Karṇa is 'the full and risen moon' to this, *karṇacandrodayoddhitam* (VII,89,14). Heroes are often the *plava* that will cross the dangerous ocean, the threat usually coming from battle. Karṇa receives many such mentions and his name connects him more closely to this metaphor than other heroes.

We should remember at this point that when Karṇa was born he was exposed to the river Gaṅgā: he is *gāṅgeya*, a metronym for one born of the Ganges. Thus implicit in his very person and title is that primary fluid image.

Also we have Duryodhana making the interesting comment in book one that,

I,127,11: *śūrāṇāṃ ca nadīnāṃ ca prabhavā durvidāḥ kila.*

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[38] For instance, at the outset of the Karṇa *parvan*, the formation of the army at the moment of Karṇa's first entry onto the field, is that of a *makara*, 'sea-monster' (VIII,7,14). Perhaps there is an even larger field of reference here, as, for instance: *... lokā hy āpsu pratiṣṭhitāḥ / āpomayāḥ sarvarasāḥ sarvaṃ āpomayaṃ jagat*, ' ... the worlds stand in water, every taste is made of water, all the world is made of water' (I,171,17-18). To take the metaphor even further, *saṃnimajjaj jagad idaṃ gambhīre kālasāgare / jarāmṛtyurmahāgrāhe na kaścid avabudhyate*, 'No one perceives this world sinking in a deep sea of time [where there are] sharks of death and age' (XII,28,43).

[39] A study of the imagery connected with water in the Mahābhārata would produce fascinating results. The sea, rivers, rain, the primal 'waters', and all the associated metaphors and metonyms, fishes &c., supply an enormous range of visual information. Water and its counterpoint, fire, are the two key images of the poem, and the poets constantly make these references with degrees of extraordinary complexity.

> *The origins of heroes and rivers are indeed difficult to understand.* [40]

In fact one of the very constant metaphors of battle in the poem is that of a *nadī*, 'river': with the dead elephants being islands, wrecked chariots being sand-banks, the fallen warriors being like the trunks of trees floating, with vultures and dogs being like predatory sea-creatures. It is the one metaphor of battle that an audience hears more than any other.[41]

Returning to the theme of the ship, in book seven, before Karṇa has been proclaimed commander of the Kaurava forces, Duryodhana refers to his army as being, 'like a boat overwhelmed or submerged in the sea', *majjatīm nāvam ivārṇave* (VII,2,3).

In book five, Karṇa is talking with his mother, Kuntī, who has come to speak with him for the first time ever. She pleads for his mercy so that he will not kill all her other sons, the five Pāṇḍavas, who are in fact his younger brothers. He rejects her plea on the

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[40] Note the term used here, *śūra*, rather than *vīra*, 'hero', as it applies to Karṇa.

[41] VI,99,33ff.; VII,36,29ff.; VIII,55,38ff.; IX,8,33ff., for instance. In the Āśramavāsika *parvan*, the old king advises Yudhiṣṭhira that he should advance this river against an enemy, *sthūṇāśmānaṃ vājirathapradhānāṃ / dhvajadrumaiḥ saṃvṛtakūlodhasam / padātinagāgair bahukardamāṃ nadīṃ / sapatnanāśe nṛpatiḥ prayāyāt*, 'A king should advance — in the destruction of his rivals — a river possessing as its source chariots and horses, that is stony and possessing tree trunks, whose banks and shores are with trees like banners, and possessing much mud with elephants and infantry' (XV,12,14). The *nadī* flows *pitṛlokāya*, 'towards the world of the dead-ancestors'. This is an extremely common and highly elaborate metaphor that is heard repeatedly throughout the battle books. In terms of song, it functions as one of the key refrains that binds a sometimes highly paratactic narrative together. The above admonition by Dhṛtarāṣṭra is an extremely rare instance of a speaker actually commenting on the metaphor itself; it is as if he is quoting a *subhāṣita*-like maxim, which is here in irregular *triṣṭubh* form. Extending this metaphor, it is said by Vyāsa that before the great final battle, *pratiśroto'vahan nadyaḥ*, 'the rivers ran backwards' (VI,3,32). The idea of death being connnected with reversal is also related to the deterioration presented by the sequence of *yugas*. Metonymically, the sea or ocean in popular lore was associated with dis-order or lawlessness, where larger fish eats smaller fish: *matsyanyāya*. I would submit that the ocean metaphor, just like the *nadī*, is literally connected with the flow of blood from wounds. The above reference by Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a rare occasion when the metaphor is being spoken of as a reality.

grounds that he had given his word to king Duryodhana, his patron, and in whose fealty he now stands, and who is the cousin and rival of those brothers. Karṇa says that he can never change anything once he has spoken it. Correct and undeviating speech is vital for both kṣatriyas and brahmins and is something to which Karṇa adheres absolutely. This statement about the irrefrangibility of his words is typical.

He then says to his mother,

V,144,14: *mayā plavena saṃgrāmaṃ titīrṣant duratyayam.*
With me as boat they desire to cross the unfathomable battle.[42]

The boat here is the, *plava*, and 'they' are the Kauravas. This is a metaphor that recurs many times in the poem, either spoken by Karṇa or by someone else and which he is often the referent of. In a similar vein,Yudhiṣṭhira, instructing his herald, Saṃjaya, asks,

V,26,20: *kathaṃ karṇo nābhavad dvīpa eṣām.*
Why was Karṇa not an isle for them?

Equally, the old blind king, says,

VIII,5,23: *taṃ śrutvā nihataṃ karṇaṃ dvairathe savyasācinā*
śokārṇave nimagno'ham aplavaḥ sāgare yathā.
Having heard that Karṇa was slain in a duel by Arjuna
I am plunged in a sea of grief, like one, boatless in an ocean.

The interesting cornerstone to all this however comes after the fatal wounding of the most senior hero, Bhīṣma. King Duryodhana approaches Karṇa and asks him who he considers should be the next commander. Karṇa had refused to participate in the fighting right from the first day, after being insulted by Bhīṣma, the most distin-

[42] Arjuna, uttering *kathā* to Kṛṣṇa, as they ride together in a chariot in the Aśvamedhika *parvan*, says something very similar. *pāṇḍavā ... bhavantaṃ plavaṃ āsādya tīrṇāh sma kurusāgaram*, 'The Pāṇḍavās crossed the Kuru-sea having used you as a boat' (XIV,51,7).

guished of the kṣatriyas. Rather like Achilles, Karṇa had withdrawn from combat.[43]

Duryodhana says to Karṇa,

VII,5,8: *na ṛte nāyakaṃ senā muhūrtam api tiṣṭhati*
āhaveṣu āhavaśreṣṭha netṛhīneva naur jale.
Without a guide, the army does not stand even a moment
in battle, O best in battle! Like a boat in water
without a governor.

He continues in the next line, by making a comparison, using the form of *śleṣa* or 'pun'.

VII,5,9: *yathā hy akarṇadhārā nau rathaś cāsārathir yathā.*
As a boat without a helmsman and a chariot without driver.

This is a very subtle way of saying to Karṇa that the army is *akarṇa*, without a helm, and who does he think should be appointed to be the next marshal?[44] Again, the Mahābhārata poets are giving their audience an ironic message that is not actually taken up within the poem itself but is directed outside of the narrative.

Finally, to take a step back to the beginning of the poem, where Śaunaka is requesting that Ugraśravas recite the great tale of the Bhāratas to him, he refers to this *kathā* as *manaḥsāgarasaṃbhūtām maharṣeḥ*, 'born of the oceanic mind of the *ṛṣi* Vyāsa (I,53,34), which in terms of narrative would denote the primary sea.

As a rider to the above we have in book two of Ṛgveda, in a hymn to Indra, the deity who has a strongly genetic importance for heroes. The poet says,

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[43] Tod, 1929, vol. II, p.637, depicts Karṇa as "the Hindu Apollo", because of his radiance. This is similarly an aspect of Achilles.

[44] Karṇa, of course, despite the fact that the army have been clamoring for him, decorously proposes that Droṇa be appointed as commander. This is not an occasion for boasting and self-promotion, the conditions are not present for such (VII,5,12ff.) Karṇa is always correct in protocol; even the bragging occurs only when it is appropriate that such a performance should take place. Despite the joy of the army that the best hero is now with them and despite Duryodhana's mute offer, Karṇa only does what is fitting.

II,16,7: *prá te nāvaṃ ná sámane vacasyávam ... yāmi.*
I advance towards you in the festival a song [like] a boat.

The metaphor of a hymn being a vehicle is commonplace in the Ṛgveda. The epic poets extend that image to the valour of a hero, which, as we know, only exists *in* the song. Epic poetry and its primary metaphor of marine imagery thus fuse on many levels, and Karṇa, by virtue of his name as 'helmsman', is profoundly part of this order.

3. *Epic & Kṣatriyas*

If epic is to be considered the literature of kṣatriyas, then before making an analysis of how epic was actually referred to in late archaic and early classical times, we should first make a brief examination of the nature of kṣatriyas themselves. The three terms which merge here, kṣatriya, kingship, and hero, are more clearly demarcated in the case of the latter two words.[45] The term *kṣatriya* refers primarily to what is in essence a kin group of IE provenance.

Benveniste writes, "On désigne la classe des guerriers, dans l'Inde, par skr. *kṣattriya*, *rājanya*. Le premier nom est un dérivé de *kṣattra*, 'pouvoir', ... le second, *rājan(i)ya-* 'de souche royale', du nom du 'roi' *rāj(an)*."[46] He continues, "Ces deux noms ne s'appliquent pas à des dignitaires, mais aux membres d'une classe et les désignent par le privilège attaché à leur condition. Ils ne se rapportent pas au métier des armes; l'un et l'autre évoquent la puissance, la royauté. Nous lisons dans ces termes si clairs la manière dont s'est orientée dans l'Inde la désignation des 'guerriers': s'il y a

[45] Hopkins comments, 1888, p.215, on Karṇa's consecration as *senāpati*, 'commander-in-chief', at the beginning of book eight, *abhiṣiṣicuḥ karṇaṃ vidhidṛṣṭena karmaṇā*, 'they consecrated Karṇa with the proper rite'. "We might pause here to ask whether this was not originally a coronation service: whether the similarity between the election to generalship and that to kingship does not lie in the fact that they were at first identical."

[46] Benveniste, 1969, pp.286-287.

liaison entre 'guerriers' et 'puissance', c'est que le pouvoir temporel n'est pas l'attribut nécessaire du *rāj*."

He adds that "On verra en effet en examinant le concept du *rēx*, tel qu'il se définit entre le Rome et l'Inde, que le 'roi' n'était pas doté d'un pouvoir réel." This accords with the important idea that in the Mahābhārata the activity or operation of 'power' was split or polarised between king and hero.[47] This is specifically adumbrated by the relation between Duryodhana and Karṇa.[48] Benveniste further modifies this idea of the *rēx* as "plus prêtre que roi".[49] Duryodhana's various powers of 'illusion', *māyā*, fit nicely with this model, as does Yudhiṣṭhira's reiterated threat to withdraw to a forest life.

Benveniste traces Sanskrit *rāj* back to **rēg*-, relating it to Greek *orégō*, 'to stretch out'.[50] He goes on to define sovereignty in this sense as belonging to "celui qui trace la ligne, la voie à suivre". He refers the word *kṣatra* to an 'indication of royal power', of "be[ing] master of, hav[ing] at one's disposal".[51] As Benveniste points out, *kṣatra* is etymologically connected with the term *satrap*,

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[47] The relation of king and hero is essentially an hierarchical one. Nārada's address to Yudhiṣṭhira in book two provides a good and succinct summation of 'ideal' kingship: II,5,7-100. During this speech Nārada uses the vocative of *vīra*, 'O warrior', when speaking to Yudhiṣṭhira: II,5,16; 22. This distinction of king and hero which we use hermeneutically is thus not always sustained by the text itself. The distinction holds true however if we restrict the term 'hero' to the word *śūra*. This separation of the royal and the heroic is nicely put by Vidura when he enjoins Dhṛtarāṣṭra to tighten up his rule: *kṣatrād dharmād hīyate pāṇḍuputras taṃ tvaṃ rājan rājadharme niyuṅkṣva*, 'The son of Pāṇḍu falls short of kṣatriya dharma. Coerce him, O king, in kingly rule!' (V,40,27). Perhaps what is more deeply problematic though, is the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra has really abdicated power in favour of Duryodhana who is only 'crown prince', *yuvarāja*, but one who has virtually assumed kingship. As Saṃjaya says, *vyajānata yadā tu tvāṃ rājadharmād adhaś cyutam*, 'When he [Kṛṣṇa] observed you fallen down from the station of a king ...' (VII,62,12).

[48] Or Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna.

[49] *Ibid*. Tome II, p.9.

[50] *Ibid*. Tome II, pp.11-14.

[51] *Ibid*. Tome II, pp.18-19, "ētre maître, disposer de".

"qui garde le royaume".[52] Thus, for instance, in book five we hear, *kṣatriyaḥ paripālayet*, 'the kṣatriya should protect' (V,130,28).[53]

In the Ādi *parvan* when Karṇa appears before the assembled heroes and challenges Arjuna to a duel and immediately has his rank questioned by Kṛpa, Duryodhana says there are three classes of king.

I,126,34: *ācārya trividhā yonī rājñāṃ śāstraviniścaye*
tatkulīnaś ca śūras ca senāṃ yaś ca prakarṣati.
Master, in the opinion of sacred teaching, the origin of kings
is threefold: one, of family; a hero; and whoever leads an army.

We thus see displayed the intimate link between heroes and kings, a nexus that epic well expresses and sometimes compounds. Technically, Karṇa is a king, but he functions primarily as a hero.

During their wanderings in the forest, and whilst they are anguishing in conversation, at one point Bhīma says to his elder brother,

III,49,13: *rājyam eva paraṃ dharmaṃ kṣatriyasya vidur budhāḥ.*
The wise know that kingship is the highest dharma of a kṣatriya.

Our initial assumption is that only kṣatriyas are heroes, a typology that fighting brahmins ascribe to, Droṇa, for instance. The manner of speaking and rhetoric of heroism that kṣatriyas engage in within

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[52] For Dumont, 1980, p.153, "Power is thus legitimate force ... power is roughly the Vedic *kṣatra*, the principle of the Kṣatriya varṇa (literally 'the people of the empire'); it is force made legitimate by being subordinated hierarchically to the *brahman* and the Brahmans." For Lingat, 1973, pp.210-211, kingship is that which "belonged to him who possesses *kṣatra* de facto, the *imperium* ... power to command ... the foundation of all royalty." Hopkins, 1888, gives a definitive view of the "ruling caste".

[53] *tathā rājanyo rakṣaṇaṃ vai prajānām* (V,29,22). See Oguibénine, 1985, p.27, where he quotes Horowitz, 1975, where a *kṣatriya* is "one who overcomes all resistance, who is restrained by no will of his own". Oguibénine denies Horowitz's connection of the word *kṣatriya* with the Greek **skhetlón*; for him, "lorsqu'il est question de traduire véd. *Ksatrá-* soit par 'pouvoir-temporel' ou 'principe de la fonction guerrière', peut-on se souvenir que ces notions sont plutōt le résultat d'un développement sémantique dont le point de départ se localisait autour des notions spatiales."

the context of the poem would typically be martial in orientation — the controlled use of violence being of central importance. Death and its limit are the ultimate referents for kṣatriyas, whereas for brahmins ritual purity is the key sign. These prescriptions are often given in speeches where a wife or a mother is exhorting the hero to action, or from a depiction of the deeds that kṣatriyas perform.[54]

Bhīma, when he and his brothers have just arrived in the forest at the beginning of the exile, says,

III,36,34: *kṣatriyasya tu sarvasya nānyo dharmo'stisaṃyugāt.*
For all kṣatriyas there is no other dharma than battle.[55]

Duryodhana, at the outset of the Karna *parvan*, tells his warriors,

VIII,2,9: *jayo vāpi vadho vāpi yudhyamānasya saṃyuge.*
Of one fighting in battle, there is either victory or death.

Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna in the Gītā,

VI,40,43: *śauryaṃ tejo dhṛtir dākṣyaṃ yuddhe cāpy apalāyanam*
dānam iśvarabhāvaś ca kṣatrakarma svabhāvajam.
Heroism, splendour, fortitude, and skill, also — not fleeing in battle,
generosity and authoritative being: are natural kṣatriya action.[56]

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[54] Draupadī, for instance, is described as *dharmārthakuśalā*, 'skilled in policy and dharma' (II,69,9). At IV,20,28 she informs Bhīma, *kṣatriyasya sadā dharmo nānyaḥ śatrunibarhanāt*, 'There is no other dharma of kṣatriyas than the perpetual annihilation of enemies'. It was Draupadī who actually raised the question of dharma in the *sabhā*, after the gambling session, to which Karṇa was the initial respondent (II,61,27-38). On another occasion, she says: *nādaṇḍaḥ kṣatriyo bhāti nādaṇḍo bhūtim aśnute*, 'A kṣatriya without authority does not shine, without authority he does not enjoy land'. Thus Draupadī speaks to Yudhiṣṭhira when he wished to retire from kingship and lead an ascetic's life in the forest (XII,14,14).

[55] Also, *kṣatradharmās te yeṣāṃ yuddhena jīvikā*, 'Those who possess the dharma of kṣatriyas — the livelihood of whom is through war' (XIV,2,16).

[56] King Śalya gives a good outline of the four *varṇas* at VIII,23,32ff. For kṣatriyas, he says, *goptāraḥ saṃgrahītāraḥ dātāraḥ kṣatriyāḥ smṛtāḥ*, 'Kṣatriyas are considered protectors, takers and givers [of wealth]'.

Very often when a speaker is admonishing or describing what a good kṣatriya should do, as this is being expressed *in* the epic, and as epic is the literature of heroes, implicit therefore is the injunction, *for* heroes. Heroes manifest *kṣatradharma* excessively; in this they perish and this activity occurs within a world presented, if not generated and sustained, by epic poetry. The term most applicable to what we are here calling 'epic' is, I would propose, *kathā*. We should thus try and refine the meaning of this word. *Kathā* derives from Vedic *kathā́*, 'how, in what way?' As we shall, a great number of synonyms cluster about this term.

At the beginning of the battle books, at the opening of the Bhīṣma *parvan* — and these books are the focus of the whole poem and constitute the *realia* of the epic — the first word of Janamejaya is *katham*. 'How did the heroes fight?', he asks. It is in response to this, that the poet Vaiśaṃpāyana begins his account, that is, the 'epic' commences. Within this framing narrative, it is fitting that whenever the old king asks his poet to sing the epic — and Saṃjaya, as we shall see later, is *the* epic poet — Dhṛtarāṣṭra always first asks him a question, 'how did that happen?', 'how was it?' The first occasion of this, when the battle books actually begin at chapter fifteen, Dhṛtarāṣṭhra's question, thrice stated, begins with *katham*.[57] Saṃjaya then proceeds to sing *his* epic, the core epic, which immediately processes into the Gītā. Successive chapter openings repeat this form.

In book three, Janemejaya asks his poet, 'what happened?', and Vaiśaṃpāyana replies, *kathayāmi kathām* (III,284,4).[58] It is the term *katham*, bearing this original question-and-answer sense of form, that comes closest to representing for us, as readers, the *occasion* of epic singing: that hypothetical situation which goes to es-

[57] This threefold repetition occurs again at VI,15-17 and again at 63-64; plus, the long speech is interspersed with many individual *katham*. Before Saṃjaya really begins to detail the events of battle in the Droṇa *parvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in chapter 9, devotes thirty-eight *ślokas* to this kind of interrogation.

[58] *Kim*, or even *ke*, is sometimes substituted for *katham*, as the interrogative calling forth the poet's song.

tablish the *genre* of epic. It exists in that verbal relation between patron and poet.

In book one of the poem the Pāṇḍavas are *incognito*. Having won Draupadī at the bride-choice, one evening in the house of a potter they are telling *kathā*.[59]

I,184,11: *te tatra śūrāḥ kathayāṃ babhūvuḥ kathā*
vicitrāḥ pṛtanādhikārāḥ
astrāṇi divyāni rathāṃś ca nāgān khaḍgān gadāś cāpi
paraśvadhāṃś ca.
Those heroes told stories, amazing epics whose topic was battle,
divine weaponry and chariots, elephants, swords and also maces
and axes.[60]

Later, when they are being secretly spied upon, they are described by the son of Drupada as,

I,185,11-12: *te nardamānā iva kālameghāḥ kathā vicitrāḥ*
kathayāṃ babhūvuḥ
na vaiśyaśūdraupayikīḥ kathās tā na ca dvijāteḥ kathayanti vīrāḥ
niḥsaṃśayaṃ kṣatriyapuṃgavās te yathā hi yuddhaṃ
kathayanti rājan.
They, like roaring black clouds, told many various
wonderful epics,
those warriors do not tell of a brahmin nor epics suitable
to śūdras and vaiśyas.
They are doubtless kṣatriya-bulls as they speak about

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[59] *Bhārgava*, is the term used here, denoting 'potter' (I,184,1). See Goldman, 1977, for the resonance of this word. They were a clan whose poets expressed the epic tradition in *vaiṣṇava* terms, supplying literal closure to a performative tradition.

[60] In an effort to convey this specific meaning of the term, I translate this *kathā* by 'epic'. I hope to demonstrate that this is a fruitful rendering. Monier-Williams gives 'tale, talk, feigned story; Apte gives 'fable, conversation, speech'; Böhtlingk & Roth supply 'Unterredung, Rede, Erzählung'. My argument is that, under certain verbal conditions, the connotations of this term would indicate an occurrence of 'epic' being sung. It is apposite that the term used for 'hero' in the above quotation, where the connection is specifically with 'epic', is that of *śūra*. In I,185,12 however, the active term is *vīra*. Here, the word is used in connection with *kathās ... dvijāteḥ*.

battle, O king.

It would seem that in this passage a vivid distinction between sacerdotal and secular/warrior literature is being made, and that there was actually a literary vehicle for kṣatriya dharma, which I infer is epic. At this point in the poem the Pāṇḍavas are disguised as brahmins, and this affinity which they have for kṣatriya culture, which they cannot disguise, is one of the telling instants in their recognition.

Hopkins cites a passage where the term used for what is sung is *gāthā*, an old word that has Iranian parallels.[61]

I,121,13:[62] *apy atra gāthāṃ gāyanti ye purāṇavido janāḥ.*
Men who knew the old tradition now sing a hymn.

In book one where the audience listens to the outer frame of the poem, Ugraśravas, the actual reciter of the text, a poet of the caste of *sūta*, refers to it as *ākhyānam bhāratam mahat*, 'the great Bhārata legend' (I,53,31), but only three lines previously it is *kathāṃ vyāsasaṃpannām*, 'an epic arranged by Vyāsa'. *Kathā* is also the term used to describe what king Janamejaya hears, which is the original singing of the poem (I,2,74).

Again, later on when Janamejaya is speaking to Vaiśaṃpāyana, we hear the same phrasing, *mahābhāratam ākhyānaṃ kurūṇāṃ caritaṃ mahat*, 'the Mahābhārata legend, the great account of the Kurus' (I,56,1). When the time comes for the *parvasaṃgraha*, the listing of the minor narratives, the term used to describe this series is *itihāsa* (I,1,31-33). At this point the poem is no longer 'epic' in the strict sense, that is, a song concerning kṣatriyas, but has acquired many other didactic and genealogical components. I would argue that *ākhyāna* is the expanded version of the poem, which contains non-kṣatriya material, whereas the simply 'epic' poem is

[61] Hopkins, 1901, p.365. Although *gāthā* in Vedic times could possibly be used for any narrative literature.

[62] This is a reference to the Bombay edition. In the CE it appears at I,112,13, and, II,38,39.

the *kathā*. *Itihāsa* is a much more compendious term and is associated with the former word.[63]

Still in book one the audience hears the famous phrase,

I,2,240: *anāśrityaitad ākhyānaṃ kathā bhuvi na vidyate*
No 'epic' is known on earth that does not have recourse to this legend.[64]

The 'legend' in question being the full eighteen books of the Mahābhārata. It is then said that,

I,2,241: *idaṃ sarvair kavivarair ākhyānam upajīvyate.*
This legend is supported by all the best poets.

This is a telling statement, for the truly 'epic' poets are the *sūtās*, and *kavi* is a title that generally applies to later kinds of poets — classical rather than archaic poets.[65] The three kinds of poetry 'makers' are typically the *ṛṣis*, the *sūtas*, and the *kavis*.[66] The former class are the Vedic seers, who envision their hymns. The *sūtas* are the charioteers, figures aligned with the kṣatriyas, especially kings, whilst the third term covers a less specific kind of poetry and is a title that later came to be applied to the classical court-poets, Kālidāsa being their paragon.[67]

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[63] *Ākhyāna*, from *ā√khyā*, to announce, communicate.

[64] Amplified at I,56,33.

[65] Although *kavi* does have earlier Vedic and Iranian use.

[66] Monier-Williams describes the *kavi* kind of poet as being "in this sense without any technical application in the Veda." He, erroneously, attributes its etymology to 1.*√kū*, 'to cry aloud'. There are two other categories of poet which could be termed 'minor' or less important, in terms of the literature: these are the *bandins* and the *māgadhas*. The former 'accompany the army to chant martial songs' (M-W), and the latter are usually termed as 'panegyrists'. When Duryodhana first sets out onto the field at Kurukṣetra he is *saṃstūyamānaḥ*, 'being praised' by these two kinds of poets (VI,20,7).

[67] That is, during the first half of the first millennium of the common era. Having said this however, we should note an atypical instance where Vyāsa, a *brahmaṛṣi*, which is the highest level of 'seer', is also said to be a *kavi* (I,54,5); he is always otherwise described as a *ṛṣi*. Interestingly, as a poet, he is said to possess *puṇyakīrtiḥ* and *mahāyaśāḥ*, 'sacred fame' and 'great glory' (I,54,6). He then proceeds to tell of the *vīrāh*, 'warriors'. This use represents an exception however, but

When Vaiśaṃpāyana, prompted by Vyāsa, first begins to sing the poem to king Janamejaya, he describes his work as a *kathā* (I,55,3).[68] On a later occasion we have another reference to what is possible epic, but again, the terms used are not specific, although the verbal root is √*kath*.[69]

I,214,28: *tatra pūrvavyatītāni vikrāntāni ratāni ca*
bahūni kathayitvā tau remāte pārthamādhavau.
Both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa enjoyed themselves, having told
Many accounts of the past, valiant and pleasing.

When asked by Janamejaya in book three, to tell of how Arjuna ventured into the Himālayas to meet Śiva and obtain weapons, Vaiśampāyana replies,

III,39,8: *kathayiṣyāmi te tāta kathām etāṃ mahātmanaḥ.*
I will tell you, sir, this epic of the great one.

Later, in book three, during the narrative of Sāvitrī when the parents are looking for their son and daughter-in-law, they come across an *āśrama*, 'hermitage', where the brahmins tell them epics of kings.[70]

III,282,7: *āśvāsito vicitrārthaiḥ pūrvarājñāṃ kathāśrayaiḥ.*
He was calmed with the help of various and diverse epics
of previous kings.

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it does illustrate how the epic often fuses meaning into what amounts to synonymy.

[68] Vaiśampāyana begins his work by giving the whole in compressed form, I,55,6-43. He closes this account by saying that the poem has three principal parts, *bhedo rājyavināśaś ca jayaś ca*, 'Partition, loss of kingdom, and victory'. These three elements supply the substance of the *kathā*.

[69] Actually a pseudo-root derived from √*kathaya*.

[70] Brockington, 1998, cites this and the following reference from book fifteen as evidence for the *sūta* tradition.

Ideally it would help if we could connect this sense of *kathā* more specifically with *yaśas* or *kīrti*, the two key terms for the epic hero.[71]

After the marriage of Abhimanyu the Pāṇḍavas celebrate, one of their pleasures being in the telling of epic, *kathā*.

V,1,8: *tataḥ kathās te samavāyayuktāḥ kṛtvā vicitrāḥ puruṣapravīrāḥ.*
Then those champions performed wonderful epics, right for the occasion.[72]

A few chapters later Śalya is telling Yudhiṣṭhira a *kathā* about Indra. As usual, the term fits with what we have generally been hearing. But then, after the recital is concluded, Śalya refers to it using the other term, *ākhyāna*, 'legend' or 'telling'.

V,18,19: *ākhyānam indravijayaṃ ya idaṃ niyataḥ paṭhet…*
Whoever [is] temperate and would recite this legend of the victory of Indra …

Here we have an instance of a tale relating to a deity who is the typical paradigm for heroic expression; Indra merges the separate categories of deity and hero. We see a synonymity between *kathā* and *ākhyāna* on this occasion which occludes our process of definition. To complicate the nomenclature even further, *upākhyāna* is another of these terms and one that appears to be interchangeable with *carita*, 'account'. Both come up frequently in the *Parvasaṃgraha*.[73]

After the war is over and before the *aśvamedha* begins in book fourteen, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are in the *sabhā* at Indraprastha telling stories of war and suffering.

XIV,15,6: *tatra yuddhakathās citrāḥ parikleśāṁś ca pārthiva*

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[71] Earlier Arjuna had *kīrtayām āsa karmāṇi*, 'recounted the deeds' of Kṛṣṇa's previous lives (III,13,8-36). We see this semantic cluster uniting *kīrti* with speeches that relate of heroic accomplishments.

[72] It is appropriate that the term *kathā* is used for a public setting rather than a private, which also fits with our translation of this term as 'epic'.

[73] I,2,109; 115; 116. *carita*, from √*car*, to move, wander, practice, perform.

kathāyuge kathāyuge kathayām āsatus tadā.
There, O prince, they told each other fabulous war-epics and [of] hardship, epic after epic.[74]

The weight of the term *parikleśa*, 'hardship, suffering', is taken up again three lines on where the *kathās* are being told to Arjuna in order to mollify his post-war unhappiness. If our proposition that *kathā* denotes a telling of epic is correct, this would agree with a reading of epic that situates it genealogically under the original heading of lament for a dead hero.[75]

XIV,15,9: *putraśokābhisaṃtaptaṃ jñātīnāṃ ca sahasraśaḥ*
kathābhiḥ śamayām āsa pārthaṃ śaurir janārdanaḥ.
Janārdana consoled Pārtha who was scorched by grief for his son and thousands of kin, with epics.

When, at the outset of the Droṇa *parvan*, the blind old king has been singing a lament for the recently deceased Droṇa, he becomes so distraught that he requests that Saṃjaya desist from any further speech until he recovers himself. The speech is, of course, the second of the four central battle books, the focal component of the epic, and composed of thirteen secondary *parvans*; that is, what is *essentially* epic.

VII,8,39: *muhyate me manas tāta kathā tāvan nivartyatām.*
Sir, my heart is overcome. Therefore withhold your epic.

In book fifteen we again have *ṛṣis* telling epics and soothing the grief of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and again the term is *kathā*.

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[74] One can reasonably presume that these are something like the four battle books. Again, the scene is a public setting, the *sabhā*.

[75] Nagy, 1979, Ch.6. Hopkins, 1888, pp.326-7, discussing the hypothetical origins of epic singing, comments, "A sort of dirge seems to be sung over the fallen heroes in the great 'scene of lamentation': that is to say, in the songs of lamentation there seems to be involved the custom of singing a formal dirge, or song of death *and glory* in honor of the fallen, and *apart* from the later burial rites." My emphasis. He adds, "victory-songs and genealogical recitations are given at a wedding (i. 184. 16)."

XV,26,4: *tatra dharmyāḥ kathās tāta cakrus te paramaṛṣayaḥ.*
There, sir, the great ṛṣis performed virtuous epics.

It is of course possible that these are occasions of pūraṇic recital and are not in any way self-referential occasions for epic. For the major instances of possible epic singing that occur in the poem, the term employed is usually *kathā*. I would propose that this is how kṣatriyas considered their song. Certainly we rarely hear of *itihāsa*, 'thus was it', the usual term for stories, not epic.

When the Pāṇḍavas are in the forest in book fifteen and are lying down for the night, what they do is tell epic, *kathā*.

XV,34,2: *tatra tatra kathāś cāsan teṣāṃ dharmārthalakṣaṇāḥ.*
Their epics were various and marked by practice and prescription.

These epics in the next line are *nānāśrutibhir anvitāḥ*, 'accompanied by various Vedic quotes'. Two lines later the members of the group who are speaking are described as *nṛvīrāḥ*, 'champions'.

Saṃjaya, *cakṣuṣā divyena*, 'with the divine eyesight' provided by Vyāsa, observes the field at Kurukṣetra, and, as Vyāsa says, *kathayiṣyati te yuddham*, 'he will relate to you the battle' (VI,2,9-10); that is, the central part of the poem detailing the great battle itself, books six to nine. When Dhṛtaraṣṭhra asks Saṃjaya to tell him about the death of Karṇa, the verb he uses is the same: *kathayasva*, 'tell!' (VIII,1,41).

As the delighted Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna after the fall of Karṇa,

VIII,69,2: *vadhaṃ vai karṇavṛtrābhyāṃ kathayiṣyanti mānavāḥ.*
People will tell the death of Vṛtra and of Karṇa.

That 'telling' being, of course, the epic songs.

In conclusion, the term *kathā*, is, I would submit, the word used most appropriately and specifically for kṣatriya poetry or epic, and on those occasions should be translated by the word 'epic'. *Itihāsa*, is a term that covers the generally more edifying material of prose stories. *Ākhyāna* certainly is a word that is employed to describe the Mahābhārata as a whole, its legend; but this incorporates all the

'non-epic' or non-kṣatriya elements. The employment of this word is not always specific to kṣatriya narrative. The word *carita* covers 'deeds' or 'accounts'; and in subsequent periods came also to convey a meaning of 'life' in general, as in the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghoṣa, 'Life of the Buddha', or Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, 'Life of king Harṣa'. Both of these works are historically later and overtly attempt to emulate the manner of heroic poetry.

As usual, however, the Mahābhārata manifests an extraordinary degree of synonymy amongst terms, and any definitive ascertainment as to precise usage is not to be found without exception. Certainly, it is not possible to refine the meaning of *kathā* down to any conclusive point, but the above does illustrate the variety of significance that the term 'epic' has when used in the Mahābhārata. It is telling that the strictly 'epic' parts of the poem are sung in response to the query, *katham*, 'how did such occur?' Almost every *adhyāya* begins with this interrogative delivered by the old king to his poet, marking the occasion.

In terms of understanding the verbal form of epic, the two words that we have for hero/warrior, *śūra* and *vīra*, do not tell us too much etymologically.[76] The epic word *śūra* is contextually linked with ancestors; that retrospective connection between ancestor and hero is a frequent one in the Mahābhārata. In book five, for instance, we find that *śūra* and *vighasa*, 'offerings to ancestors' are conjoined, and seven lines later *śūra* is connected with *bāndhava*, 'kin' (V,131,34). Epic, as we know, is a phenomenon of a retrojected past. After long and detailed analysis of the two words, employing the *pratīka* Index and also doing computer searches to check every instance of *vīra* and *śūra*, I had to abandon any thought of conclusion simply because the evidence was insufficient to enable me to argue for a forceful case of difference between

[76] Monier-Williams makes the suspect claim that *śūra* is cognate with the word for 'corpse'. I subsume compounded terms, such as *pravīra*, under that of *vīra*.

these words. Synonymity once again wins out, although I presume this was not always the case.[77]

Finally, just as a note that perhaps illustrates this indistinct terrain between king and hero: it is often typical that heroes are aligned with the periphery and not the central region of a society. Given the lack of historical evidence to our period, however, can one talk about 'the border'? Certainly the Kauravas are fixed whilst the Pāṇḍavas are very often in motion geographically, especially in the undomesticated areas of the *araṇya*, 'wilderness'. Karṇa is certainly king of a region, Aṅga, that is beyond the pale and both unorthodox and not orthoprax. Rāma goes off to Laṅka, just as both Iliad and Odyssey deal with 'outer regions'.[78]

Kṣatriya culture thus embraces both heroic endeavour and kingship, warrior ideals and principles of *artha,* 'sound rule'. In terms of poetry, which is the focus of this work, fame is the point where these two agencies hinge and epic provides the literature where these two functions are represented.

On an historical note, Michael Witzel has written extensively and with meticulous scholarship, tracing the 'Development of the Kuru State' as it first appears in the Ṛgveda.[79] He has covered the movement of the Bhārata people as they moved across the Sindhu into the Panjab and their subsequent battle with the Five Peoples and the Pūrus. King Sudās won at the *Daśarājña*, 'Battle of Ten Kings', mentioned in RV VII,18.[80] This, he would argue, provides a possible historical kernel, "a snapshot of history", for the epic

[77] It is possible that one term rather than the other was favoured at a given stage in the text's growth or by particular poets or redactors, for which there is some inferential evidence.

[78] Thapar, 2000, p.691, makes this observation about heroes as borderers. Vidal-Naquet, 1986, discusses this phenomenon from the point of view of what Wikander would refer to as a Männerbund.

[79] Witzel, 1995, 1997. Lal, 1973, and 1981, has attempted to correlate the Mahābhārata with Painted Grey Ware levels. Parpola, 2002, similarly treats the epic as historical.

[80] Curiously enough, in book one of the Mahābhārata, there is a reference to a battle in the fabulous past between the Pāñcālas and the Bhāratas and this is described as *akṣauhiṇībhir daśabhiḥ*, 'with ten great armies' (I,89,33).

battle of Kurukṣetra. As we have seen in the West with Troy and Mycenae, to posit a physical ground for epic does have a certain validity, although myth does not function in the same way as historiography.[81] Witzel has assembled an impressive array of material from the Ṛgveda however, representing the historical and geographical conditions for this kṣatriya community as given in the literature. His arguments provide an invaluable 'shadow' to the epic poem.

4. *Simile & Vision*

We should now examine not so much what Karṇa, as our standard hero, is or does but what he is 'like', that is, the use of comparison: simile — *upamā*, and *rūpaka* — metaphor.[82] What, for epic poets, was a hero 'like'; how does an audience actually 'see' the hero? This offers an important perspective on the hero simply because the poets rarely give their audience any realistic description of their characters. Physical descriptions are stylised and avoid individual delineation.[83] What we have rather is an extensive use of simile and metaphor to convey the material appearance of the hero. Perhaps

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[81] Nagy, 1990a, p.8 writes that, "epic is a reflection not so much of historical events as of myth." Hopkins viewed the situation, 1888, p.70, as, "In a land without history, legend becomes dangerously ennobled." For 'history' read 'prose', and for 'legend' read 'song' or 'poetry'. This 'danger' would obviously lie in performative technique. He continues on p.323, "a musician of the military caste shall (at this point in a religious ceremony) sing an original song; the song shall have for a subject 'this king fought, this king conquered in such a battle.' As Weber points out [ZDMG xv,136], these lays were assumed to be historical." These lays are, he adds, "the improvised verses of a minstrel".

[82] Gerow, 1971, p.35, describes a metaphor as a simile where the "explicit comparison is suppressed."

[83] Yudhiṣṭhira is given a 'big nose', *pracaṇḍghonaḥ* at XV,32,5, and at V,50,18-20, Bhīma has a 'knotted brow and is pale and tall', but such detail is extremely rare. In the former speech, Saṃjaya describes Draupadī as 'touching middle age', *madhyaṃ vayaḥ ... spṛśantī* (9). There is another rare instance where she is described, this time by Yudhiṣṭhira in the gambling scene, *naiva hrasvā na mahatī nātikṛṣṇā na rohiṇī / sarāgaraktanetrā ca ...* 'Neither short nor tall, nor too dark nor ruddy, and her eyes are inflamed with passion ...' (II,58,32).

this is a way of indirectly emphasising that heroes, like deities, did not really obtain to mortal status; that is, they could not be immediately represented.

Typical of Sanskrit literature, these figures of speech are employed to a vast degree. Comparison is one of the most important arts of the epic poets, a skill which later reached extraordinary levels of finesse in the work of Kālidāsa. "Simile is, indeed, the figure par excellence", writes Gerow; "it is the basic form of poetry — the reasoned use of irrelevancy".[84] The particles operating here are, *iva*, *-vad*, and *yathā*. "Poetry comes into existence as soon as simile ... adds its unique dimension of irrelevance."[85] "The great achievement of Sanskrit poetry lies in its word pictures."[86] Through the use of simile, death and violence in the lives of heroes are made beautiful; that is, the nature of death and violence is reversed from its usual quality. Metaphor, where the particle of comparison is suppressed, is a crucial, if not *the* crucial trope, along with metonymy, that supplies a text with amplified and relevant meaning.[87]

There is the interesting phenomena however of interchangeability here, for the use of metaphor is not consistent. We have observed how many heroes are compared to Indra, for instance. Secondly, metaphor, simile, and metonyms appear in the epic as part of large figurative economies of image: there is a *system* of comparison at play. References are neither peculiar nor individual. We have seen how the poets build up a great range of instances where the sea and rivers and the ocean are called upon, and where vessels range. There is a reticulation of images which extends out from a single metaphor.

It is not just that something is like something else or assumes the representation of something else, but that all those other things are part of a system of their own. As we saw above, heroes are party to a world of tremendous marine and aquatic imagery, especially

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[84] *Ibid.* p.35-36.
[85] *Ibid.* p.37.
[86] *Ibid.* p.73.
[87] See Jakobson, 1980, Ch.7, on this amplification of meaning.

Karṇa with his nautical name. It is as if the poem is bound together by an interior syntax of imagery that connects on a level of metonymy and anaphora. In terms of the pragmatics of song culture, repetition of image, especially when such imagery is extensive — as with the heroic *nadī*, the simile of the 'river' — serves as a refrain or chorus whose continual restatement integrates the disparate elements of narration as well as simply pausing the movement. It is not only the case that these similes are employed by the poets but that their repetition is a constant force in the procession of the epic itself, relieving the *parataxis* of lines. Again and again the audience hears a simile repeated, like a bar of music or a particular instrument; audially there is a different pattern of recurrence. The effect is to bind the poem with much more tension and effect an auxiliary semblance of structure.

Hopkins writes that "stock similes belong to neither epic [MBh. and Rām.], but to the epic store in general, as may be seen by consulting the long list of identical similes in identical phraseology common to both epics".[88] This is in line with what Lord has called formula and theme, that is, a *tradition*,[89] and which we discussed in Chapter I.

The use of similes on a large scale really occurs in sections of the poem where battle supplies the action. This is not only restricted to the four major battle books but to other parts of the epic where physical conflict structures the narrative. Within an oral tradition the display of repeated similes is vital to the mnemonics of that system and it is very often the similes that supply the body of formulae. These similes provide visual messages that, repeated, sustain the movement of the poem. As we have seen above, such signifiers often reticulate, metaphorically and metonymically, to bind the work together as a whole. Also, the repetition of similes can relate the poem to other and larger frames of reference: for instance, the presence of a hero on the battlefield, given in terms of images of fire and heat, links directly to descriptions of the sacrifice.

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[88] Hopkins, 1901, p.205ff.

[89] As a complement to this, in *kāvya* verse, repetition of words is explicitly condemned as manifesting poor style.

One side aspect concerning the use of similes is that certain comparisons are unique to particular passages or sections of the poem. This would lend support to the theory that such passages are not so much *later* additions to the larger text, but that these passages are perhaps indicative of *other* oral traditions that have been incorporated into the major poem. By other, I would here denote geographically other traditions as well as traditions that are simply separate, such as caste. The micro-epic of Rāma, for instance, in book three, is such a case, or the Virāṭa *parvan*, which appears to be a different *kind* of epic that was introduced into the larger corpus. In such sub-narratives there are instances of unusual similes that do not appear in other parts of the text. A stylistic analysis from this point of view would facilitate an identification of different/local traditions that the poets have woven and plaited into the larger and more pan-Indic epic.

Semantically speaking there are two fundamental kinds of reference: the hero is like an aspect of power in the natural world, or the hero is like an aspect of beauty in the natural world. There is also a third and subsidiary figure, where the hero is like an aspect of the mythical world, typically that of Indra. On a level of simple taxonomy, these are the three primary units of epic likeness.

When Karṇa makes his initial entrance into the poem, in person rather than by reference, after a single *śloka* devoted to his glory, his eyes, and his parents, he is immediately described by four *ślokas* of 'likeness'. Such large use of comparison has not been employed by the poets as yet in the poem and it is as if this advent of the foremost hero of the Mahābhārata is being soundly magnified with extensive verbal fanfare and *brio*.

I,126,4: *siṁharṣabhagajendrāṇāṃ tulyavīryaparākramaḥ.*
One whose valour and prowess was equal to lordly elephants, bulls, and lions.

This continues in simile form, *upamā*, there being no physical or individual description of him in any way. It is the *likeness* that is important for the poets.

dīptikāntidyutiguṇaiḥ sūryendujvalanopamaḥ
5: *prāṃśuḥ kanakatālābhaḥ siṅhasaṃhanano yuvā.*
A young man, like the blaze of moon and sun, with qualities of light and loveliness and candescence,
strong, muscular, bright as a golden palm tree.

We have already observed the initial metaphor of the tree from book one, *duryodhano manyumayo mahādrumaḥ skandhaḥ karnaḥ*.[90] The three most usual *comparanda* for the Sanskrit hero are marine and riverine, arboreal, or mountainous in nature. This image of the tree recurs many times throughout the poem as an illustration of what a hero is like.[91]

VIII,42,5: *dadhāraiko raṇe karṇo jalaughān iva parvataḥ.*
Alone in battle, Karṇa withstood: like a mountain a flood of water.[92]

At another point, Kṛṣṇa, as a good charioteer should, is directing Arjuna's gaze, and repeatedly exclaiming as he makes his report, *paśya*, 'look!' (VIII,43). On one of these occasions he compares Karṇa to,

VIII,43,38: *udayaṃ parvataṃ yadvac chobhayan vai divākaraḥ.*
As the sun shining upon an eastern mountain.

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[90] There is an occurrence of *śleṣa* here, 'punning', for Skanda is also the name of a martial deity to whom Karṇa is also likened on other occasions. Curiously, Mankekar, 1999, writing about the televised epics, quotes an informant as saying, p.226, "The *Ramayan* story is straight, like a palm tree. The *Mahabharat* story is like a banyan tree with spreading stems full of rich sub-plots and vivid characters."

[91] The image is typically of a tree in blossom, but in one unusual occasion, Bhīṣma, recently felled and dying, is likened to a *sīmāvṛkṣa*, 'boundary-tree' (VI,115,9). Śikhaṇḍin, wounded with many arrows is described as *śākhāpratānair vimalaiḥ sumahān sa yathā drumaḥ*, 'Like a very great tree with immaculate tendrils and limbs' (VIII,18,69). The heroic *nadī*, a metaphor that the audience constantly hears throughout the course of the battle books, is in the Droṇa *parvan* said to be *sarvataḥ pūrṇāṃ vīravṛkṣāpahāriṇīm*, 'everywhere full — bearing away the trees [like] heroes' (VII,13,9).

[92] At VIII,59,43 he withstands the Pāñcāla arrows with an equivalent simile: *karṇaṃ vavarṣur bāṇaughair yathā meghā mahīdharam*, 'They rained a flood of arrows upon Karṇa, as a cloud does upon a mountain'.

Wounded heroes are also like trees in blossom.

IV,53,51: *śoṇitāktā vyadṛśyanta puṣpiteva kiṃśukāḥ.*
Smeared with blood they appeared like a blooming kiṃśuka tree.

To sustain the arboreal valence of this image there is the metonym of the 'thorn', *kaṇṭaka* or *śalya*, that sticks into a hero due to the activity of a rival.[93]

The Pāñcālas, as they approach Karṇa with the desire of killing him, are described as,

VIII,40,44: *sarvato'bhyadravan karṇaṃ patatriṇa iva drumam.*
Everywhere, they ran at Karṇa, like birds at a tree.[94]

After Karṇa has been anointed as commander of the army — a particularly joyful moment for him, for at last he receives recognition *and* power — he is likened to the war-deity Skanda. *karṇaḥ śuśubhe ... devair ... yathā skandaḥ*, 'Karṇa shone like Skanda with the deities' (VIII,6,46).

The duel between Bhīṣma and Rāma in book five continues during the course of many days and, like the great and final battle of the Mahābhārata itself, takes place at Kurukṣetra. The comparisons given for this combat, taken from the the natural world and its beauties, provide the terrible conflict with qualities of the lyrical and fertile. Through the use of simile, the battle becomes the opposite of what it in fact really is: destruction and death acquire the qualities of beauty and fertility.

V,180,31: *hemantānte'śoka iva raktastabakamaṇḍitaḥ*
babhau rāmas tadā rājan kvacit kiṃśukasaṃnibhaḥ.
Like an aśoka tree at the end of winter adorned with red clusters,
O king, Rāma shone like some kiṃśuka tree.

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[93] For instance, I,130,20, or, *rājyam akaṇṭakam*, 'the thornless kingdom', XIV,15,14.

[94] Arjuna himself describes the Pāñcālas as fleeing from Karna, *gandhād gāvaḥ keśariṇo yathā*, 'like cattle from the scent of a lion' (VIII,47,9).

Karṇa in the course of book eight, his own book, is depicted through an enormous number of likenesses. Close to death, when he is *vatsadantaiḥ ... samācitaḥ*, 'covered with calf-tooth arrows', he shines,

VIII,66,38: *supuṣpitāśokapalāśaśālmalir*
yathācalaḥ spandanacandanāyutaḥ.
Like a mountain with thousands of fluttering sandal trees
and śālmali, palāśa, and aśoka trees in bloom.

Earlier, he had been,

VIII,17,120: *tāpayām āsa tān bāṇaiḥ sūtaputro mahārathaḥ*
madhyaṃdinam anuprāpto bhūtānīva tamonudaḥ.
The son of the sūta, the great charioteer, scorched them
with arrows,
as the dispeller of darkness scorches creatures at noon.

As he is the son of the Sun, this simile is a common but not peculiar likeness of Karṇa. Other heroes can be similarly solar in comparison. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa for instance, are 'like the sun and fire elevated', *udāhitāv agnidivākaropamau* (VIII,68,54).[95]

VIII,56,51: *āditya iva madhyāhne durnirīkṣyaḥ paraṃtapaḥ.*
The scorcher of enemies [Karna] like the sun, difficult to
behold at noon.[96]

Equally, Arjuna is compared to his father.

VIII,68,52: *nihatya karṇam ... arjunaḥ*
vṛtraṃ nihatyeva sahasralocanaḥ.
Arjuna, having slain Karṇa
like Indra having slain Vṛtra.

The heat motif of the sun is extended to fire itself, *agni*, with all the sacrificial connotations which that bears with it.

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[95] As below in Ch.III, we see how identities are often between opponents.

[96] At VIII,57,57, the audience hears of *arjunabhāskaro*, the 'Arjuna-sun', which is *yathā ... sūryaḥ*, 'like Sūrya'.

VIII,40,61: *karṇāgninā raṇe tadvad dagdhā bhārata sṛñjayāḥ.*
The Sṛñjayās were similarly burnt, O king, by the
Karṇa-fire in battle.[97]

Here the force is the same as above but the expression is metaphorical.

VIII,21,28: *tām śastravṛṣṭiṃ bahudhā chitvā karṇaḥ śitaiḥ śaraiḥ*
apovāha sma tān sarvān drumān bhāṅktveva mārutaḥ.
Karṇa repeatedly cut those many rain-clouds of weapons
with sharp arrows,
like the wind having broken the trees, he carried them all off.

Later, chasing the Pāṇḍavas, he is,

VIII,44,24: *tūlarāśiṃ samāsādya yathā vāyur mahājavaḥ.*
Like an impetuous wind having come upon a heap of grass.

On the final morning of Karṇa's life, mounted together with Śalya, the two heroes finally set out for the field and are described in terms of solar imagery again.

VIII,26,11: *... karṇaḥ ... svaratham ...*
adhyatiṣṭhat yathāmbhodaṃ vidyudvantaṃ divākaraḥ.
Karṇa mounted his own chariot ...
as the sun ascends a cloud that is flashing with lightning.

Similarly, driver and hero are,

VIII,26,12: *vyabhrājetāṃ yathā meghaṃ sūryāgnī sahitau divi.*
Like Sūrya and Agni united in the sky, they shone on a cloud.

As they set out, there are many portents. Meteors are observed in the sky, there is thunder, the earth trembles, fire is seen upon the

[97] At VIII,58,18, it is Arjuna who bears the fire metaphor. As always, the symmetry between these two heroes is constantly sustained by the poets, in narrative and in trope.

standards (VIII,26,33ff.) Karṇa 'blazed ... like a flash of fire', *samajvalat ... pāvakābho* (VIII,26,40).[98]

As Arjuna, once noon has passed, slowly approaches closer to Karṇa on the final day, his sight is directed by Kṛṣṇa towards his opponent.

VIII,41,2: *karṇaṃ paśya mahāraṅge jvalantam iva pāvakam.*
Look at Karṇa, like a fire blazing in a great arena!

In chapter twenty-nine of book eight where the audience hears of the protracted and ornate verbal contention between Karṇa and his driver, Śalya, the latter soundly insults Karṇa.[99] Here it is metaphor that is the operant trope and the likeness is absolute — as far as contempt goes.

VIII,27,50: *nityam eva sṛgālas tvaṃ nityaṃ siṃho dhanaṃjayaḥ.*
You are always a jackal, Arjuna is always a lion.

When Karṇa is responding to Śalya's 'derision', *tejovadha*, Karṇa's self-praising contains a long sequence of similes. Unlike what the audience usually hears however, it is not the poet who is making the comparisons but the speaker himself, praising himself in a condensation of poetic practice.[100]

VIII,29,10: *samudrakalpaṃ sudurāpam ugram*
śaraughiṇaṃ pārthivān majjayantam
veleva pārtham iṣubhiḥ saṃsahiṣye.
Like a shore I shall resist Arjuna with arrows.
He is like the sea, terrible, inaccessible,
submerging the earth, possessing waves of arrows.

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[98] Ominously, his horses stumble and fall to the earth and there is an *asthivarṣam*, 'a shower of bones', that falls from the sky (VIII,26,36). The poets thus combine the person of the hero with the being of the whole cosmos — a vital connection — which is necessary in the establishment of hero cult. It is also remarkable that there are *real* portents that approximate to the entities which obtain in simile form. I am grateful to Stephanie Jamison for drawing my attention to this latter point.

[99] See below, Ch.IV,6.

[100] Martin, 1989, p.193, described this phenomenon in the Iliad.

On another occasion he is described by the poet,

VIII,56,44: *mṛgasaṃghāny athā kruddhaḥ siṃho drāvayate vane.*
As an angry lion in the forest starts a herd of deer.

Later he becomes,

VIII,31,4: *vyadhamat pāṇḍavīṃ senām āsurīṃ maghavān ĭva.*
He struck the Pāṇḍava army like Indra struck that of the āsuras.

There are of course, many references to the solar qualities of Karṇa, how bright he is, how shining and fulgent. This is his typical likeness, but, as we have seen, it is a likeness not only specific to him.

VIII,6,43: *abhiṣiktas tu rādheyaḥ prabhayā so'mitaprabhaḥ*
vyatiricyata rūpeṇa divākara ivāparaḥ.
Karṇa, of unlimited splendour, anointed with splendour,
excelled with beauty, like the unrivalled sun.

At the end of his life, the body of Karṇa was like a fire extinguished by a great wind, put out at the end of a sacrifice.

VIII,67,29: *mahānilenāgnim ivāpaviddham*
yajñāvasāne śayane niśānte.
Like a fire removed by a great wind
when the dawn comes at the conclusion of a sacrifice.

His body, even dead, continues to shine and emit light.

VIII,67,30: *śarair ācitasarvāṅgaḥ śoṇitaughapariplutaḥ*
vibhāti dehaḥ karṇasya svaraśmibhir ivāṃśumān.
Its limbs drenched with floods of blood, loaded with arrows
the body of Karṇa shines like the sun with its own rays.

The next line speaks of, *karṇabhāskaraḥ*, 'a Karṇa-sun' which falls 'in the afternoon', *aparāhṇe*.

The head receives three final comparisons from the poet as it tumbles onto the earth. It is like the 'image of one who possessed the thousand deeds of Indra, like a beautiful multifoli-

ate/thousandfold lotos, like a thousand-rayed sun at dusk' (VIII,67,39). Here we have our three types of reference: myth, natural beauty, and natural power, united by metonymy and anaphora of *sahasra*, 'thousand'.[101] Śalya, reporting to Duryodhana says, *karṇaṃ hataṃ kesariṇeva nāgam*, 'Karṇa was slain, like an elephant by a lion' (VIII,68,6).

Karṇa remains lying on the ground as an image of great beauty, *bhāti karṇo hato'pi*, 'even slain Karṇa shines' (VIII,68,37). His solar effulgence receives long descriptions and analogy; he is, *sūrya ivāṃśumālī*, 'like the sun garlanded with rays'.

VIII,68,42: *hato vaikartanaḥ śete pādapo'ṅkuravān iva.*
Karṇa, slain, lies like a tree with many limbs.

The 'rivers do not flow', *sarito na sravanti*, and 'the sun set with turbid light', *jagāma cāstaṃ kaluṣo divākaraḥ*: another confounding of the real and the metaphoric. After his death there were great cosmic upheavals — again, indicative of how the hero is intimately connected with nature (VIII,68,47-50). No other hero in the poem generates such universal reverberations by his demise, and certainly, no other hero receives such lengthy acclaim when he dies. Karṇa's death is the most important death in the Mahābhārata. Kṛṣṇa joyously tells Arjuna,

VIII,69,2: *hato balabhidā vṛtras tvayā karṇo dhanaṃjaya.*
[As] Vṛtra was slain by Indra, Karṇa was by you, Arjuna!

In the Strī *parvan*, the book of laments, he is compared to, 'a glowing fire in battle,' *jvalitānalavat saṅkhye* (XI,21,1), and, sur-

[101] Vernant, 1991, Ch.2, has written of how important the 'beautiful death' is to the hero. "Through a beautiful death, excellence no longer has to be continually measured against someone else or to be tested in combat." Perhaps one could say that *kīrti* has replaced *yaśas*, that poetics have triumphed over contest. The reverse of a beautiful death occurs when the victor despoils or mutilates the body of the defeated. Bhīma does this to the felled Duryodhana, and has to be checked by Yudhiṣṭhira, in book nine. 'He died', *mamāra*, is an extremely unusual verb in the four battle books; death being indicated by more explicitly visual reference.

rounded by his wives he is like Indra in battle surrounded by enemies.

XI,21,8: *anādhṛṣyaḥ parair yuddhe śatrubhir maghavān iva*
yugāntāgnir ivārciṣmān himavān iva ca sthiraḥ.
In battle, invincible to enemies, as Indra was to his enemies:
fixed, like the Himālaya, flaming like an apocalyptic fire.

On the banks of the Gaṅgā Kuntī laments, referring to Karṇa as a *śūra* (XI,27,7). She says he is 'like the sun', *divākara iva*, and 'has no equal in prowess on earth', *nāsti samo vīrye pṛthivyām* (XI,27,10).

As an afterword, it is worth mentioning an unusual *ekphrastic* moment in the Virāṭa *parvan* (IV,38,20ff.), where there is a passage in which the weapons of the Pāṇḍavas are described from the point of view of the emblems which they display.[102] On the sword of Arjuna there are the eyes of a frog, an elephant is the emblem upon the bow of Bhīma, and fireflies are displayed on Yudhiṣṭhira's weapon. For the twins, Nakula's bow exhibits a sun and Sahadeva's is embellished with locusts.

In book six, the referent for an unusual simile is no longer the natural world or an image of the divine, and thus cultural or linguistic world, but a complex picture.

VI,42,25: *kurupāṇḍavasene te hastyaśvarathasaṃkule*
śuśubhāte raṇe' tīva paṭe citragataiva.
The two armies of the Pāṇḍavas and Kurus, filled with chariots, horses and elephants
shone exceedingly in battle: as though a picture on a painted

[102] To a lesser degree, this also occurs when Saṃjaya describes the *dhvajas*, 'standards', at VII,80,2ff. *Ekphrasis* concerns the description of a static and complete object. It is a moment in narrative when what is being described is not part of the narrative's movement, there occurs a 'freezing' of an image, and something akin to a shift in register. An object of artifice is being described as a comparison, and so, critically, a very different axis of reference is engaged; fixity and immobility are the overarching qualities of *ekphrasis*. In a way, the poets are referring to their own technique and its accomplishment, insofar as *ekphrasis* is a 'set piece' describing a finite object.

piece of cloth.

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Again, in book seven,

VII,159,40: *tat tathā nidrayā bhagnaṃ avācam asvapad balam*
kuśalair iva vinyastaṃ paṭe citram ivādbhutam.
So dissolved with sleep, that army slept, speechless,
as if placed by artisans upon a cloth: a beautiful
painting, as it were.

Similarly,

XV,40,20: *dadṛśe balam āyāntaṃ citraṃ paṭagataṃ yathā.*
He saw an approaching force, like a picture on a painted cloth.

This is a very different kind of comparison, and rare for the Mahābhārata, for the referent is a work of artifice, *citra*: a visual image or representation of something *in* the world. It is not a reference to myth or the natural world, but to a *depiction* of that through *speech*; what is described is absolute, beyond the evolution of the narrative, and static. Concerning representation, there is an intermediate stage of removal, between signifier and signified: an artificial object.

Consequent to this, perhaps one should also remember that everything that Saṃjaya 'sees' and reports, is by virtue of divine eyesight granted to him by Vyāsa. He sees, *manasā*, 'with his mind'. This ability forsakes him, when, at the death of Duryodhana, his grief is too great.[103] This capacity of his supplies an essential component to any understanding of heroic poetics. What appears before Saṃjaya's eyes is *the myth*, he actually 'sees' the heroes, unlike the other poets in the song who have 'heard' their vision from

[103] Saṃjaya does inform his old king that he actually participated in the combat at one point and was captured by Sātyaki (IX,2,51), so there remains an ambivalence here, as with so many aspects of the poem. Due to his grief, he ultimately loses his *divyadarśitvam*, 'divine vision' at X,9,58. Vyāsa later saves his 'substitute' from being killed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna at IX,28,37.

prior poets.[104] His speech is actually that of the heroes, directly, without mediation, the *ipsissima verba*.[105] The old king, requesting that Saṃjaya tell him of how something transpired, often says to him *tatvena kuśalo hy asi*, 'you are one conversant with truth' (VII,106,16).

Vyāsa, who possesses the vision to be able to perceive 'everything', in an absolute sense, grants him the inspiration:

VI,2,11: *prakāśaṃ vāprakāśaṃ vā divā vā yadi vā niśi*
manasā cintitam api sarvaṃ vetsyati saṃjayaḥ.
Apparent or not apparent, by day or if at night,
Saṃjaya will observe all, even what is thought by mind.

Vyāsa's comprehension is total, there is no further reference, he is *pratyakṣadarśī ... bhūtabhavyabhaviṣyavit*, 'one who has before his eyes the past, present and the future' (VI,2.2).[106]

The audience also hears, at XI,16,3, that Gāndhārī received a similar gift of divine vision from Vyāsa. In the sixteenth *adhyāya*, Gāndhārī sings of her vision of the field, what is in fact, a mini-epic of its own. The poet says, *dadarśa*, 'she saw', followed by the imagery. At line eighteen, she commences to verbally describe this vision herself. Speaking to her kinsman Kṛṣṇa, she says, *Paśya*, 'look!'[107] By chapter seventeen, this vision has collapsed, when having suddenly seen Duryodhana, she becomes overwhelmed by

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[104] Principally Ugraśravas and Vaiśampāyana. Vyāsa too, one must assume, 'sees' his poem, altough he is more like a Muse who 'contains' or 'knows' the complete repertoire of the work. It is worth noting that the central body of the poem, the battle books, the 'core' of the epic, are related by a Kaurava poet, albeit one critical of Dhṛtarāṣtra's lack of policy.

[105] When the old king is asking him about what happened to Droṇa, Saṃjaya admits that he is *pratyayakṣadarśivān*, 'one who has seen what is before his eyes', and then immediately proceeds to tell of what Droṇa *said*! (VII,11,1).

[106] Repeated at 14,1.

[107] As a corollary to *paśya*, is the expression *śṛṇu me*, 'listen to me!' This latter phrase is typically how the poet replies to the old king's query *katham*, 'how did such and such happen?' The *paśya* occurs when the singer is well 'into' the narrative. It is not just the case that a different sense is being addressed here, but that a different temporality is being engaged: there is an *enactment* occurring, with a consequent intensification of emotion.

grief.[108] Gāndhārī is then transported to be beside him. Next, the poet, Vaiśaṃpāyana/Ugraśravas, resumes the third person *rapportage*: *vilalāpa*, 'she cried' (XI,17,3). The audience immediately hears the substance of these cries. Gāndhārī soon reverts to the *Paśya*, mode of depiction, however, describing her sight and impersonating the voices of the various wives and mothers on the field. She begins each chapter subsequent with, *eṣa*, 'that one.'

That is, in terms of genre, Gāndhārī is putting herself in the place of the *sūta*, charioteer-poet; and Kṛṣṇa, who is her interlocutor, is in the place of the hero. One observes very nicely, how the voices in the poem shift with such facility between spheres. If Saṃjaya is the poet of the battle books, Gāndhārī is the poet who sings the Strī *parvan*, the book of lamentation. One should also recall that when she married Dhṛtarāṣṭra, she bound a cloth over her eyes in order to imitate his blindness and so she does not actually see anything. This vision, I would submit, is a form of IE epic poetry, where the *sūta* speaks to the hero or king, beginning with the imperative *paśya*! Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Śalya and Karṇa, are exemplars of this, and the addressee acts as a metonym for the outer audience.[109]

This, as it were, makes Saṃjaya an *aoidós*, rather than a *rhapsōidós*.[110] He actually recomposes his song, rather than reciting what he had previously learned. Ugraśravas and Vaiśaṃpāyana function in the latter role. Vyāsa, to extend the model, is almost in

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[108] As with Saṃjaya, when he too perceives the deceased king.

[109] Draupadī-Jayadratha could be included in this model, from III,249ff., where, although the imperative is lacking, the substance is the same. An obverse to this form is seen in the Táin Bó Cúailnge, where Fer Diad says to his charioteer, 'How does Cúchulainn look?' (p.179 in Kinsella). One could cite here, Rousseau, who, in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Ch.I, made the pertinent observation, that poetry speaks more effectively to the eyes than to the ears, "Ainsi l'on parle aux yeux bien mieux qu'aux oreilles" (1967, p.503). For him, poetry *was* the original language — by which, he means figurative language — "ses premières expressions furent des tropes" (*ibid*., p.505). In Ch. III, he discusses how poetry was the beginning of speech, "D'abord on ne parla qu'en poésie" (*ibid*., p.506). Rousseau is being empirical, insofar as epic stands in the place of literature's commencement. See also Bakker, 1997, Ch.4 *passim*.

[110] On the distinction between these terms, see Nagy, 1996a.

the place of the Muses, particularly as he is not actually a human being, but one who comes and goes at will; and he is also one who possesses both divine foresight and hindsight.[111] The terms *śruti* and *smṛti* are analogous to the above; with the sense for *śruti*, that it has been inspired, usually visually, and not audially. The Ṛgvedic poets *saw* rather than *heard* what they then composed and sang. Their songs were inspired and not simply remembered-and-recited.

It is as if the process involved for Saṃjaya is *ekphrastic*, insofar as he is describing an image to which he has visual access. He actually 'sees' the battle although physically far removed from its scene; it is something in his mind, there is no object. Thus the four central books of the poem have a very different poetic presence, within the overall frame of the Mahābhārata, compared to the other books. The other poets sing of what they have received and previously listened to during the course of an earlier singing.[112]

Similes perhaps more than metaphors are what come within the view of Saṃjaya's inner eye. Both concern memory for him, not only of the natural world and the world of poetry and myth, but the world of formulae and epic recital itself. He has a store of visual experience as well as a bank of audial experience upon which to draw as he composes, line by line, what it is that he 'sees': he renders his vision by supplying it with likenesses. In terms of the poem's reference, he is actually the generative *source* of formulae or repetition. As we have noted, epic functions as an integrating force for the community in which it is performed and sung; it supplies them with a common myth, a community of reference: this is the ultimate effect of Saṃjaya's vision. Albert Lord observed, "we are ... struck by the conservativeness of the tradition".[113] This conservativeness concerns the nature of verbal likeness and sustains it by constantly drawing on its repeated expressions.[114]

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[111] From *vy*-2.√*ās*, 'to arrange, dispose'.

[112] It is strange however, that Saṃjaya tells the old king that he was actually a participant in the battle (VII,70,41), unless this is an occasion for the poets to nod, or, a magnification-dramatisation of Saṃjaya's powers of imagination.

[113] Lord, 1960, p.133.

[114] de Vries, 1963, p.268, expresses this nicely: " ... a distinction should be made between traditional and popular poetry. The latter always reduces the value

of a song; the former derives its significance from the fact that it arises and assumes its form not at a certain moment but in a series of creative moments, and that it owes its foundation and style to the very fact of communication."

CHAPTER THREE

CONTENTION & IDENTITY

There are three important relationships in the life of Karṇa exhibiting three degrees of subjectivity. One is with the champion of the Pāṇḍava cause, Arjuna; the second is with the ancient, Bhīṣma; and the third is with his patron, king Duryodhana. Epic heroes nearly always have a specific opposite number, another warrior whom they are allotted to fight against: this is their *bhāga*, or 'share', which for Karṇa is Arjuna.[1] Bhīṣma and Karṇa have a relationship that is a balance or congruence of both contention and identity. With Duryodhana however, the relation is one of *sakhitva*, 'friendship', with all the agenda which that carries. Between Arjuna and Karṇa and Bhīṣma and Karṇa, the Mahābhārata poets have established extraordinary degrees of parallelism, a phenomenon which does not appear elsewhere in the poem.[2] I would like to examine these three relationships and to elucidate their component structures.

Claude Lévi-Strauss in his lucid 1977 radio lectures discussed the way in which mythology, like music, organises itself structurally rather than sequentially.[3] "Music and mythology were ... two sisters, begotten by language".[4] For music it is the sound element that predominates whilst for mythology it is the 'meaning' element. It is not simply a question of greater and lesser counterpoint but also of

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[1] Given at V,56,15, *arjunasya tu bhāgena karṇo vaikartano mataḥ*, 'Karṇa, known as Vaikartana, is with the lot of Arjuna'. See also V,161,4-9, where Dhṛṣṭadyumna appoints his forces their individual *bhāga*. In Monier-Williams, *bhāga* also has the subsidiary meaning of 'fortune, lot' or 'destiny'. Nagy, 1979, p.125, remarks on an analogous situation of meaning concerning the word *moira* in epic diction.

[2] Nagy, 1979, p.33 discusses the idea of the *therápōn*, 'ritual substitute'. Heroic symmetry is key to an understanding of this term. Arjuna and Karṇa *do* very similar things, whereas Karṇa and Bhīṣma *are* very similar by nature.

[3] Lévi-Strauss, 1978.

[4] *Ibid*. p.54.

certain thematic repetitions that integrate a pattern. When we look at a particular group of similes we are also observing a larger world of reference which is both inside and outside of the text.[5] "It is impossible to understand myth as a continuous sequence", he writes.[6] Lévi-Strauss went on to analyse certain themes in the myth of Siegfried, from the point of view of contiguity of phrase; he discovered that Hagen, the traitor and opponent to Siegfried, was associated on this level. The method here is similar to what we are pursuing now: conflict is often simply a matter of mirroring or repetition rather than of outright difference. Karṇa's relation with Arjuna is the reverse of his relation with Duryodhana, and Bhīṣma offers a median between these poles. Karṇa's movement between *bhāga* and *sakhi* is almost fugal, converging at death.

1. *Arjuna*

The births of Karṇa and Arjuna occur closely together, the former being the first-born and the latter being the fourth-born of Kuntī's sons: their rivalry is that of maternal half-brothers therefore.[7] This kind of intense rivalry of immediate male kin that leads to the death of one of the parties is not unusual for Indo-European epic.[8] Intrinsic to the course of the Mahābhārata is the fact that Karṇa will be slain by Arjuna: there is nowhere any possibility that this will be otherwise. The story of the conflict between two sides of a clan thus hangs between the polarity which obtains between these two figures.[9]

Of the three relationships examined here, this one is the most typical of heroic antagonism in a strictly martial sense. The rivalry

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[5] See above, Ch.II,4, where similes of Karṇa are examined.

[6] Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p.45.

[7] The Sanskrit term *sapatna*, 'rival, adversary', is a back formation from *sapatnī*, 'co-wife'. The sense being that there are rival sons.

[8] Rostam and Sohrāb offer a typical example, where son is killed by father; Firdowsi, IX,138.

[9] Allen, 1999, p.414, "Arjuna and Karṇa relate to each other in ways that neither relate to anyone else."

takes the form of physical opposition, which for the Sanskrit hero includes the art of verbal assault and derision prior to the actual duel.[10] A formal 'duel', *dvairatha*, is the typical heroic encounter. In terms of metaphor the two are often, but not always, presented in terms of what appertains to Indra and what to Sūrya, their respective progenitors: thunder, the rain-cloud, and heat, as in the dry season. The poets are in no way consistent here however.[11]

Even before the two heroes meet each other it is said that Karṇa's 'rivalry was always with Arjuna', *sadā hi tasya spardhāsīd arjunena* (III,293,19). It is also said, right from the beginning, that because of Karṇa's cuirass and ear-rings, Yudhiṣṭhira was worried by his 'invincibility in battle', *avadhyaṃ samare* (III,293,20).

Karṇa's first word in the poem is *pārtha*, a metronym of Arjuna and a direct challenge to him. This occurs at the 'trial', *vidhāna*, of martial skills. Arjuna has been winning at all the events and Karṇa now makes his splendid entry, both in the poem and at the trial. He is *pādacārīva parvataḥ*, 'like a walking mountain'. He announces that he will perform any feat that Arjuna has accomplished and do it 'better', *viśeṣavat*.[12]

I,126,9: *pārtha yat te kṛtaṃ karma viśeṣavad ahaṃ tataḥ*
kariṣye paśyatāṃ nṝṇāṃ mātmanā vismayaṃ gamaḥ.
Pārtha! Whatever your deed I will do better
while people watch. Do not be amazed!

Thus Karṇa sets himself up as a champion — Arjuna is his only rival. Karṇa wants to be the best and with his intrinsic attributes, the ear-rings and cuirass, he is. The poem turns about this contention.

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[10] Although there is, in so many of the folk tellings or dramas, a steady theme of sexual tension between Karṇa and Draupadī, which supplies a shadowy subtext.

[11] For example, even Bhīma, who does not obviously subscribe to a model of radiance, is likened to Sūrya at VI,73,10.

[12] Sjoestedt, 1949, p.63, comments on a similar IE tradition, "It seems to be the rule for a great hero to enter always by violence, even into his own social group, and that, before becoming a member of society, he must establish himself against it in disregard of its customs and even of the royal authority."

I,122,47: *spardhamānas tu pārthena sūtaputro' tyamarṣanaḥ.*
The extremely belligerent son of a sūta — contentious with Arjuna.

Karṇa becomes so paramount in his inspiration, if not leadership of the Kauravas, that Bhīma, in the forest, refers to their *karṇamukhān parān*, 'enemies led by Karṇa' (III,49,10).

As we have observed above in Chapter II, the sea as a metaphor, with all the economy of imagery which circulates about this trope, is highly pertinent to Karṇa, particularly as his name has marine connotations itself. When Arjuna appears at the weapons trial, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks his closest minister, Vidura, 'What is the noise?' The simile which is enjoined is that of a sea.

I,125,15: *kṣubdhārṇavanibhaḥ ... sumahāsvanaḥ.*
A great sound ... [like] a sea that is agitated.

The poets are thus appropriating an image that they later make much of as it concerns Karṇa and are applying it to his opponent. As we shall see below, antagonism in the epic is often actually played out in terms of equivalence: here, it is on the level of metaphor.

Karṇa accomplishes all that Arjuna had done in the trial.

I,126,12: *yat kṛtaṃ tatra pārthena tat cakāra mahābalaḥ.*
What was done by Arjuna — that the mighty one [Karṇa] has done.

On being asked by King Duryodhana what he wants, his second request, after asking for the 'friendship' of his patron, is for a duel with Arjuna, *dvandvayuddham*. In this single *śloka* of Karṇa's, the format of his whole narrative is established by the twofold request.

I,126,15: *kṛtaṃ sarveṇa me' nyena sakhitvaṃ ca tvayā vṛṇe*
dvandvayuddhaṃ ca pārthena kartum icchāmi bhārata.
All my other business done, I choose friendship with you, and, O Bhārata, I wish to make a duel with Arjuna.

Karṇa then challenges Arjuna, having first made the interesting claim,

I,126,19: *vīryaśreṣṭhāś ca rājanyā balaṃ dharmo'nuvartate.*
Kṣatriyas are the best of warriors, dharma follows after power.

Here *rājanya* is an older word for kṣatriya. It is remarkable that this is one of the first statements that Karṇa makes and that the phrasing is slightly archaic. The sentiments expressed expressed here agree with the model of a hero who is in many ways archaic; it is also interesting that dharma is given as secondary to power.

Arjuna accepts the other's challenge. Immediately Indra and Sūrya are active above the arena in order to observe the combat (I,126,23); the former as lightning and thunder and the latter as the 'light-maker', *bhāskara*. This presence of the paternal figures also occurs in book eight of the epic at the end of their rivalry when Karṇa succumbs to Arjuna, thus framing the contention of the two focal heroes; then the two deities are accompanied by many more celestial beings. These are the fathers of the two heroes who have their own especial conflicts in Vedic myth and this is a fundamental instance of Dumézil's view concerning the extension of mythical structures, principally those of the Ṛgveda and Atharva Veda plus some of the *brāhmaṇas*, into the literature of epic. What could be viewed as the natural polarity of thunder and sunlight manifest in Vedic myth, is now being dramatised by the epic poets.

When asked by Kṛpa to pronounce his lineage however, Karṇa is mortified by shame, *vrīḍāvanatam ānanam*, 'his face [was] bowed down by shame' (I,126,33); he has no lineage to speak of, having been adopted by a 'charioteer', a *sūta*.[13] On one hand, Karṇa is inferior, on the other hand, he is the elder brother. This duality is essential to Karṇa's narrative. The first encounter between the two heroes thus ends inconsequentially, although Karṇa's enmity is

[13] Mehendale, 1995, p.7, discusses the use of the term 'equal' as it is applicable here in terms of *prahartavyam*, 'who is to be attacked'. He cites *yathāyogaṃ yathāvīryaṃ yathotsāhaṃ yathāvayaḥ / samābhāṣya prahartavyam* ... (VI,1,30).

further roused.[14] Duryodhana appoints Karṇa to a kingdom, and the scene closes.

At the 'bride-choice', *svayaṃvara,* of Draupadī, Karṇa is present, accompanying Duryodhana and other sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. It is then said that along with other world-renowned princes Karṇa was unable to string the bow which would have won him the bride (I,179,4).[15] The Pāṇḍavas along with their mother are presumed to have perished in a fire which Duryodhana had planned. Arjuna, dressed as a mendicant, succeeds in stringing the bow and is awarded the garland by Draupadī who becomes his wife.

Karṇa then leads the angry kṣatriyas against the Pāṇḍavas who are disguised as brahmins. Brahmins should not be competing in a *svayaṃvara*, the social order forbids such a mixing up of *varṇa*. The assembled kings exclaim,

I,180,6: *svayaṃvaraḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ itīyaṃ prathitā śrutiḥ.*
The svayaṃvara is for kṣatriyas: this is declared in śruti.

This is the first occasion where Arjuna and Karṇa actually enter into combat, and it is the latter who is the actual assailant.[16] Much of the nature of their antipathy is established during this first duel.

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[14] At this point he is very like Parzifal, another 'unknown' champion.

[15] There is a variant reading to this in which Karṇa does triumph but Draupadī rejects him as he is only of the *sūta* caste, *nāhaṃ varayāmi sūtam*, 'I do not choose a charioteer!' (I,1827*,3). In Hiltebeitel's account of a contemporary south Indian ritual where this moment is part of the drama, "Only Karṇa comes close." Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.199. He is foiled by Kṛṣṇa, who, disguised as a rat, "severs the bowstring". Sukthankar, 1944, pp.77-78, comments on this passage, and quotes from Ramesh Chandra Dutt's, *Epic of the Bharatas*, "Drupad's queenly daughter said: 'Monarch's daughter, born a Kshatra, Suta's son I will not wed'. Karna heard with crimsoned forehead ..." Sukthankar adds, "the brave little Draupadī ... snubs openly ... the semi-divine bastard, the understudy of the Villain ... the unwanted suitor." The manuscripts that contain this component of the scene are "late and inferior or conflated manuscripts." Nevertheless, "this seemingly beautiful little passage ... has won its way into the people's hearts."

[16] At Kurukṣetra this occurs formally on the sixteenth day, and at the *svayaṃvara* of Draupadī they also meet on the 'sixteenth day' of the festival, *ahni ṣoḍaśe*, I,176,27.

Ironically, this time it is Arjuna whose true personage is 'unknown' — a neat reversal.

I,181,7: *tato vaikartanaḥ karṇo jagāmārjunam ojasā*
yuddhārthī vāśitāhetor gajaḥ pratigajaṃ yathā.
Then Karṇa, son of the Sun, went vigorously at Arjuna,
keen for a fight, as an elephant against a rival elephant,
because of a cow.

As they struggle, they comment on each other's skill and upon their own individual expertise, taunting each other.

I,181,12: *iti śūrārthavacanair ābhāṣetāṃ parasparam.*
So in language fitting for heroes, they shouted at each other.

In this, the first brush of the two most important heroes in the poem, it is appropriate that the marked term, *śūra*, is used, and not the looser term, *vīra*. It is telling that the simile attached to this instant concerns the rivalry for a woman, two elephants struggling for mastery of a cow. Nowhere in the poem is it explicitly stated that Karṇa has any affection or longing for Draupadī or that he wants her for himself — although his participation in the *svayaṃvara* would indicate a desire for her hand. Yet at this initial and weighty moment, that, in terms of metaphor, is very definitely the message. Such a perception gives an interesting and more 'human' slant on what is otherwise a highly complex fabric of motivation for Karṇa. In his heart he is full of conflict and tension, whereas a hero like Arjuna does not possess such internal irresolution. It is such inner complication, particularly as it concerns Draupadī, which makes for a hero who has over the centuries captured the popular imagination of audiences.

So they fight and verbally berate each other, Arjuna having the best of the day. Karṇa questions his opponent as to identity: a nice reversal of what occurred in the previous scene when they had first met. He calls him a *vipramukhya*, 'best of brahmins', and says that he is 'pleased', *tuṣyāmi*, with the *bhujavīrya*, 'might of his arms'. He then asks,

I,181,16: *kiṃ tvaṃ sākṣād dhanurvedo rāmo vā viprasattama*
atha sākṣād dharihayaḥ sākṣād vā viṣṇur acyutaḥ.
Are you Archery in person, or Rāma, O best of brahmins?
Or are you Indra-of-bay-horses in person, or Unshakeable Viṣṇu?

Rāma here would be Rāma Jāmadagni. It says a lot about the nature of the poetic tradition at the time, that both Indra and Viṣṇu, representing the Vedic world and the inchoate Hindu world, are linked together with the later Rāma in one sentence — since these three figures conduce to the ultimate destruction of Karṇa.[17] He concludes his speech,

I,181,18: *na hi mām āhave kruddham anyaḥ sākṣāc chacīpateḥ*
pumān yodhayituṃ śaktaḥ pāṇḍavād vā kirīṭinaḥ.
For no man is able to fight angry me in battle,
other than Indra himself or the crowned Pāṇḍava, Arjuna.

Such is the trio that Karṇa proposes as the 'best': he and Arjuna and Indra.

Arjuna denies that he is anyone but a brahmin, *brāhmaṇo'smi*, 'I am a brahmin!' At this, Karṇa, very correctly, strictly adhering to kṣatriya dharma, withdraws, for a kṣatriya should not fight a brahmin, for they are putatively superior and *ajayya*, 'invincible' (I,181,21) — so thinks Karṇa. By virtue of his disguise, Arjuna is the deceiving one during this match; duplicity is not a quality that can ever be applied to Karṇa.[18]

Karṇa withdraws, *śaṅkita*, 'alarmed', a form of action that he will repeat several times in subsequent combats with Arjuna. It is striking that a brahmin should defeat a kṣatriya in a duel, and also

[17] That is, the curse of Rāma, the taking of the ear-rings and cuirass by Indra, and the magic of Kṛṣṇa (an incarnation of Viṣṇu) that saves Arjuna who then shoots the final arrow that decapitates Karṇa. (One should also add to this list the curse of the brahmin that leads to the wheel of Karṇa's chariot sticking in the earth.) No other hero in the poem has such a complex network of agency surrounding his death. It is as if these three (four) forces need to converge before Karṇa dies.

[18] Except on the sole occasion when he pretends to Rāma to be a brahmin. See below.

that Draupadī should be won by a brahmin. The other kṣatriyas remark that none but Rāma, Droṇa, and Kṛpa — all *gurus* in a martial sense, and brahmins — as well as Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, are able to fight Karṇa. The term used is *yodhayitum*, 'to cause to fight' (I,181,28); they do not use the word 'to defeat'.

Thus the first violent encounter of Karṇa and Arjuna closes, unresolved and obscure, real identities being veiled on both sides.

In the gambling match, ostensibly an element in the *rājasūya* or royal consecration ritual,[19] Karṇa is present at the play. When Duḥśāsana brings in the wife of the Pāṇḍavas who had been lost in the rigged match, he calls Draupadī a *dāsī*, 'servant'. Karṇa is the first, in terms of narrative, to commend this insult (II,60,38); he is *hṛṣṭa*, 'joyous'. It is for this excess that Karṇa is always remembered by the Pāṇḍavas, in particular during the final moments of his life when Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna about this abuse (VIII,67).[20] This scene takes the enmity between the two heroes to a much more bitter level, giving an emotional charge to what was only a physical rivalry in origin. It is as if the martial conflict is insufficient, and that for an even higher affective tension to be introduced, Draupadī has to enter between them. She supplies a very human 'ground' to the heroic duel — what is perhaps jealousy or even sexual desire.

Karṇa then calls her a *bandhakī*, a 'harlot', because she has more than one husband, and commands that her clothes and those of her husbands be taken, *vāsāṃsi ... upāhara,* (II,61,38). Later, he refers

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[19] Van Buitenen has argued soundly for this, 1981, p.18 *et seq*. Söhnen-Thieme, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, pp.139-154, offers a study of the Dyūta *parvan*. Examining the prosody, she makes the perceptive comment on p.150, that, "Whereas the triṣṭubh passages primarily provide dialogues and discussions, which are no doubt essential for the action, the anuṣṭubh verses serve various purposes, the most prominent being the narration of action." She adds that "Karṇa ... postulat[es] that the stake was valid [because] the Pāṇḍavas have agreed (silently) to her [Draupadī] being openly named as a stake." In the late twentieth century television version of the epic, it is Karṇa who suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira finally stake his wife.

[20] In Hiltebeitel's account of this moment in a south Indian drama, "Arjuna vows to kill Karṇa, making his fallen body jump from its wounds." 1988, pp.235-37.

to her as a *dāsī*, again, instructing Duḥśāsana to bring her to the house: 'he dragged her off', *tām vicakarṣa*.[21]

When the dharma of Draupadī's situation is again raised and after Bhīṣma has deliberated, Karṇa has no hesitation in giving his finely worded opinion on the matter (II,63,1-5). He continues to insult her, using the word 'servant' four times. Bhīma responds, accepting this 'servile state', *dāsadharma,* but he adds that it is below his dignity to be angry at the mere son of a *sūta*.

After the second gambling session and repeated loss, Bhīma pronounces a curse on Karṇa to the effect that Arjuna shall kill him (II,68,26). Arjuna repeats this threat (II,68,32), saying he will destroy Karṇa and his followers. Thus slowly the polarity between these two is reified. Interestingly it focusses on a woman, and the reiteration of this particular grievance is what sustains their conflict to the very end. This conflict over a woman is not included in the Critical Edition, but exists quite vividly in present-day local versions of the epic events.

When Arjuna, in the Āraṇyaka *parvan*, having been counselled by Vyāsa, goes off in search of weapons, he meets Śiva and fights with him. He then asks the deity for the Pāśupata missile. One of the reasons that he gives for making this request is that he wishes to destroy Karṇa whom he describes as always being *kaṭukabhāṣiṇī*, 'one whose speech is biting' or sarcastic (III,41,11). It is this verbal 'bitterness' that is the real essence of the conflict between the two heroes, founded upon their physical rivalry. Speech is the locus of their mounting antagonism, culminating only later on the battle field.

Soon other deities arrive and Yama, lord of the dead, tells Arjuna that he will slay Karṇa.

III,42,20: *pitur mam āṃśo devasya sarvalokapratāpinaḥ*
karṇaḥ sa sumahāvīryas tvayā vadhyo dhanaṃjaya.

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[21] Yudhiṣṭhira later calls these incitements of Karṇa, *yo bībhatsor hṛdaye prauḍha āsīd asthipracchin marmaghātī sughoraḥ / karṇāc charo vāṅmayas tigmatejasāḥ pratiṣṭhito hṛdaye phalgunasya*, 'It was terrific in the heart of Arjuna, a stab in the vitals, cutting to the bone, arrogant; an arrow, from Karṇa, made of words, sharply caustic, which stuck in the heart of Arjuna' (V,29,37).

Karṇa, a particle of my divine father who illuminates
the entire world,
he, who possesses very great prowess, is to be slain
by you, Arjuna!

Nowhere in the narrative, even long before the battle books begin, is Karṇa ever given any opportunity of survival. Karṇa even admits this himself, when he speaks with Kṛṣṇa in book five. Deities, *ṛṣis*, mortal heroes, all state this fact right from the very beginning of the epic.

V,139,46: *yadā drakṣyasi māṃ kṛṣṇa nihataṃ savyasācinā*
punaścitis tadā cāsya yajñasyātha bhaviṣyati.
When you see me slain by Arjuna, O Kṛṣṇa!
then there will be the piling up again of that sacrifice.

One assumes that this is also part of the audience's appreciation of the hero's performance. Right from the opening of the poem, Karṇa's is *the* most important and necessary death. To put it in metaphorical terms, Karṇa is the animal to be immolated in the ritual of epic narration; he is the victim.[22]

Even Dhṛtarāṣṭra, talking of how he expects the eventual war to go, speaks of Karṇa as *ghṛṇī ... pramādī ca*, 'passionate and careless' (III,46,10), and not able to withstand Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa, when he visits the brothers in the forest (III,48,25), says that he himself will slay Karṇa. Bhīma in the following chapter speaks of their enemies, whose principal is Karṇa, and says that he too will slay him (III,49,16).

Yudhiṣṭhira offers a long elemental description of the counterpoint between Karṇa and Arjuna given in metaphorical terms: in this, fire plays an important part and is to be extinguished by the rain-cloud of Arjuna. Here again, the poet clearly contrasts the qualities of Sūrya and Indra.

III,84,11: *taṃ sa kṛṣṇāniloddhūto divyāstrajalado mahān*

[22] Just as Patroklos, in some black figure vase designs, is depicted as a ram lying on its back with its throat slit, with the name of Patroklos appearing in script above. See Griffiths, 1985.

śvetavājibalākābhṛd gāṇḍīvendrāyudhojjvalaḥ
satataṃ śaradhārābhiḥ pradīptaṃ karṇapāvakam
udīrṇo'rjunamegho'yaṃ śamayiśyati saṃyuge.
A great cloud of divine weapons raised by the wind of Kṛṣṇa
bearing cranes of white horses and beautiful with the
rainbow of Indra,[23]
this proud rain-cloud of Arjuna will extinguish in battle
that constant blazing fire of Karṇa with showers of arrows.

Dumézil has written at great length about the distinctions in such a passage, the opposition of Sūrya and Indra.[24] Such extension only adds further dimension to the equipoise which we observe between these two heroes. The fact is however, that the Mahābhārata poets are not consistent in their deployment of metaphor and simile and these qualities are often reversed or applied to other heroes: many heroes are *likened* to Indra, the most 'heroic' of the deities, and many heroes are likened to Sūrya, for their brightness.[25] Fire is a constant metaphor applied to the Pāṇḍavas as well as to many other heroes.

Just prior to the Ghoṣayātrā episode, Karṇa is made aware of how his opponent had been to the *indraloka*, 'world of Indra', and obtained divine weaponry. 'He then became unhappy and dejected', *ahṛṣto'bhavad alpacetāḥ* (III,225,31); for his superiority is no longer quite so distinguished, as is borne out by the fighting which occurs soon after between the two.

Thereafter, when Kṛtyā, a fire-born demon woman, takes Duryodhana to the 'underworld', *rasātala*, the *dānavas* tell him that Karṇa was in fact the incarnate soul of Naraka (III,239,25). This is the only time that the audience hears of any previous existence of Karṇa, which is not at all the case with the Pāṇḍava heroes. This, I would submit, supports the argument that Karṇa is a more 'archaic' hero than most of the other heroes in the poem. The

[23] This is usually glossed as a name for the Gāṇḍiva bow of Arjuna.
[24] Dumézil, 1968, I,1: chapters one, two, and four.
[25] Even Yudhiṣṭhira, the least 'heroic' of the five brothers is *indrakalpaḥ*, 'equal to Indra' (II,62,26), and this is just after the gambling match!

mention of a previous life for Karṇa is so slight and restricted to a single *śloka*, that it really does not carry much weight.[26]

In response to king Duryodhana's question as to when the Pāṇḍavas would be finally disposed of, Karṇa's next step was to promise 'not to wash his feet' until Arjuna was slain, *padau na dhāvaye* (III,243,15).[27] At this, all the Kauravas present 'cried out', for the rivalry has now shifted to another level, that of an avowal, the contention has been publically and verbally formalised to the death. We are then informed that the king is thereafter always 'going happily', *priye nityaṃ vartamānaḥ*, with Karṇa (III,243,23). This mounting contest between Karṇa and Arjuna is thus, obversely, an increasingly crucial element of the friendship between Karṇa and his patron. There is an equilibrium, with Karṇa as the fulcrum between the two sides. Obversely, on hearing abour Karna's vow, Yudhiṣṭhira, in the forest, becomes 'profoundly agitated' or 'terrified', *samudvigna* (III,243,20), particularly on account of Karna's invincible breastplate.

When Karṇa participates in the cattle raid in book four against the Matsyas he finally comes up against his opponent on the field for the first time.[28] He gives a long boastful and poetically beautiful speech, embellished with images of fireflies, locusts, and snakes, for twenty-one verses, proclaiming his own strengths and denying those of Arjuna (IV,43,1ff.) He mentions, *ṛṇam akṣayyam*, 'the undecaying debt', that had been promised before to Duryodhana, which was to slay Arjuna. The veracity of a kṣatriya's speech is vital to his self possession and is constitutive of an obligation, *ṛṇa*,

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[26] Shulman, 1985, p.386, n.127, would argue to the contrary. "Karṇa is the only figure in the epic identified with both a demon (Narakāsura) and a god (Sūrya). Note the symmetry of Arjuna-Nara's positioning alongside Nārāyana, the god, and opposite Karṇa-Narakāsura, the 'demon'."

[27] This statement never seems to be resolved, perhaps because it, quite literally, is not. Yudhiṣṭhira remembers the vow at VIII,47,38.

[28] See J.D. Smith, 1991, and Romila Thapar, 1981, on the relation between heroes and the stealing of cattle. Sontheimer, 1989, p.71, discusses "hero stones ... erected for heroes who had died in battle defending their herds." He mentions that "cattle robbing has always been a way of declaring war".

incurred verbally. Being true to his word is not just important to Karṇa but is a quality which has absolute value for him.[29] The audience now becomes aware that the rivalry with Arjuna in not simply personal, but has become pendant upon Karṇa's relation with his patron: this is another dimension and is again founded on a spoken commitment.

In a reversal of the simile which we had earlier, Karṇa now becomes *śaradharo mahāmeghaḥ*, 'a great cloud pouring arrows', which will extinguish the *pāṇḍavāgnim*, 'the Pāṇḍava fire' (IV,43,13-14). As we have already observed, this kind of poetic practice presents a problem for analysis insofar as there is no consistency of use in metaphor and simile: at one time Arjuna bears such a likeness and at other times that image is carried by his opponent. The argument that the contention between Sūrya and Indra which exists in Vedic material is sustained by the drama of Mahābhārata does not always hold true, due to such poetic fluency. Continuities between 'myth' and epic are not always constant.

Karṇa refers to Arjuna as a tormenting barb in the heart of Duryodhana, which he will remove. The actual duel of arrows is brief and Karṇa is soon bested, his banner shot away (IV,49,10), and he turns from the field. Arjuna goes on with the attack and soon cuts off the head of Karṇa's brother.[30] This death of an agnate enrages Karṇa and stimulates him to re-attack. Again, he is easily bested, *gajo gajena ... jitaḥ*, 'an elephant by an elephant defeated', and again he flees his opponent (IV,49,23). Five chapters later they return to face each other, and this time there is a long prelude where they only make verbal assaults. Arjuna, who is *kāmayan dvairathe*, 'longing for a duel', reminds the other about what happened in the *sabhā*.

IV,55,2: *avocaḥ paruṣā vāco dharmam utsṛjya kevalam.*
You said bitter words having entirely thrown aside dharma.

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[29] It is surely no coincidence that the lexeme *ṛṇa* is embedded in the very name of Karṇa. Obligations of friendship and feudal honour are crucial to Karṇa's view of life; one could even go so far as to say that they provide the very kernel of his identity. Connected to this is his own extraordinary and renowned liberality.

[30] One assumes that this is an adoptive brother, a son of his foster parents.

Arjuna also reminds Karṇa about what Karṇa had said to Draupadī, and says that now he must 'accept the consequences', *phalam āpnuhi*. It is interesting that in this, their first real martial engagement, Karṇa is addressed as *rādheya*, 'son of Rādhā', a metronym (IV,55,3), just as Karṇa first addressed Arjuna. Usually in conversation, Karṇa is referred to as 'the son of a *sūta*'. Perhaps this is Arjuna's way of emphasising that his rival is really so much inferior to him in terms of caste; or is it that the metronym is the important vocative when summoning an opponent?

Arjuna triumphs, having overwhelmed his opponent to such an extent that before flying from the field, Karṇa becomes momentarily 'knocked out', *sa tamasāviṣṭaḥ ... na ... prajajñivān,* (IV,54,24), and he is *gāḍhavedanaḥ*, 'one whose pain is deep', an unusual epithet. Since Indra secured the removal of Karṇa's divine armour, he is no longer invincible, as we now see.

IV,55,24: *tasya bhittvā tanutrāṇaṃ kāyaṃ abhyapatat śaraḥ.*
Having pierced his armour, the arrow entered his body.

Arjuna continues to insult the other, *upākroṣat*, as he flees. It is worth remarking that Arjuna next proceeds to assault Bhīṣma. As we shall soon see, Karṇa and Bhīṣma are very often, in terms of the narrative, closely associated.

Karṇa again returns to the fray for a third time (IV,58,1) and is heard of once more being defeated by Arjuna. This time he is on the back of an elephant, a somewhat unusual vehicle for him (IV,60,7ff.), from which, when it is killed, Karṇa flees on foot, *aṣṭaśatāni padān*, 'eight hundred paces'.

When Duryodhana is defeated by Arjuna and seeks to flee, Karṇa along with the other principal Kaurava heroes returns to his side (IV,61,3). The sound of Arjuna's conch leaves them all 'senseless' however, *saṃmohitāḥ* (IV,61,11), and Arjuna's charioteer is able to strip them of their clothing, Karṇa's being brilliant

yellow.[31] It is strange that all these great heroes collapse simply from the sound of Devadatta, Arjuna's conch, and were *śānti-parāḥ*, 'intent on peace'. This is an incident which does not quite fit with the usual narrative and makes one wonder if it is not a 'later' Bhārgava addition to the story.[32]

When Kṛṣṇa tries to tempt Karṇa into joining with the Pāṇḍavas in the Udyoga *parvan*, he describes how it would be for Karṇa to be consecrated as the rightful king.[33] In the account Kṛṣṇa says that Arjuna will be the driver of Karṇa's chariot, a nice reversal! (V,138,21). Karṇa then describes the imminent war as a sacrifice, a metaphor that Duryodhana had first used earlier in the book.[34] In Duryodhana's model, *yaśas* is the oblation. For Karṇa, the *vīrya*, 'prowess' of the dead heroes will stand in this place, and Karṇa will then be cut down by Arjuna.

Kṛṣṇa replies in similar form, beginning, like Karṇa, with *yadā drakṣyasi*, 'when you see ...'; saying that, when he and Arjuna appear on the battlefield, that will mark the end of the current 'age', *yuga*. Again, the audience hears of these two champions being deeply linked, even in this mythical and temporal sense. As the eschatology of *yugas* comes historically later than the archaic Indo-European sensibility which we have attempted to ascribe to Karṇa, this explains the uniqueness if not the completely uncharacteristic quality of the statement of Karṇa's about his obvious death. One could argue that Karṇa represents, for the Bhārgava poets, the *kali yuga*, simply because he is the subject of more internal paradox

[31] This is, of course, a colour emblematic of Buddhism, on the significance of which, in relation to Karṇa, see below, Ch.VI. Those of Droṇa and Kṛpa are white and those of Duryodhana and Aśvatthāman are blue.

[32] Goldman, 1977, avers that the Bhārghava *gotra*, 'clan' had much to do with the 'final' organisation of the poem. They were a brahmin, not a kṣatriya clan: hence the fundamental focus of the epic shifted. Shende, 1943, had earlier argued that it was the Āṅgirasa clan that was more influential in the narrative. One can assume that different clans or families favoured different themes or parts of the epic. Making use of the term 'later' when one is dealing with preliterate materials is always complicated; I have great respect for Goldman's observations however.

[33] This scene is discussed more extensively below in Ch.IV,3.

[34] See below, IV,3 for an analysis of this metaphor.

and conflict, and Arjuna represents the *dvāpara yuga*. Rāma was supposed to be a hero of the *tretā yuga*, after all, so such applications are not completely far-fetched.[35]

However, something is not quite right here, in the manner which Karṇa speaks of his own ritual death. This scene could be a later inclusion to the text, giving 'Arjuna's epic' more 'weight' in terms of its balance with 'Karṇa's epic'. It would have been very easy to slip this episode into the poem; it is a closed and unconnected narrative of its own. To explain a passage away as 'late' is not a fruitful explanation, however, and I prefer to consider this passage as it stands, and to see Karṇa as speaking from what can only be called a 'transcendental' voice; the passage has such an uncanny ring about it.

The odd thing is that the final words of Karṇa, before Kṛṣṇa makes his eschatological response, are enjoining secrecy to what has just been spoken.

V,139,57: *samupānaya kaunteyaṃ yuddhāya mama keśava*
mantrasaṃvaraṇaṃ kurvan nityam eva paraṃtapa.
Kṛsṇa, lead Arjuna to my battle,
O scorcher of foes, always making a concealment of this plan.

Is this enjoinment just to support the unique quality of what Karṇa has recently admitted? What would this tell us about him then, if all along, despite his great vaunting and personal aggrandisement, he knew that his chosen rival was to kill him? This is an insoluble problem which nevertheless gives to the hero an extra and enigmatic dimension of paradox. The admission of his own death at the hands of Arjuna, which he now requests that Kṛṣṇa keep secret, is a statement that undercuts everything else that Karṇa ever says. Insofar as a hero's fame originates at death and is bound up with that trajectory, which, as we have seen, is the absolute pre-occupation of Karṇa, then he is now actually deliberating upon this point of exchange. It is as if Karṇa realises that having had Indra himself come begging, he has gained his glory, *yaśas*; and all that is re-

[35] On the *yugas* in the Mahābhārata, see González-Reimann, 2002.

quired now is that he perish on the field at the hands of his greatest opponent — in order to secure the *kīrti* of this.

Karṇa completes this dialogue by describing an apocalytic vision which he had experienced where the Pāṇḍavas were regnant (V,141,27ff.) There is an startling symmetry between the Gītā episode in book six and this brief scene, even to the extent of the vision. Once again, it would appear that for the Mahābhārata poets, antagonism is often derived from, if not dramatised as, certain forms of similarity. The symmetry is slightly obverse though, with Karṇa in the position of the explicator, which is Kṛṣṇa's role in the Gītā. The audience hears Karṇa speaking in a manner which is parallel to how Kṛṣṇa addresses Arjuna. Once again, the poets make a display of congruence, as it occurs between these two primary heroes. Karṇa is enjoining secrecy, on this occasion, whereas, in the Gītā, Arjuna is the one to pose questions and demand responses.

Once the fighting at Kurukṣetra actually begins, it is not until book seven that Karṇa enters the fray. He meets up with Arjuna for a second time but they only skirmish; there is no set duel. Karṇa loses three of his brothers to Arjuna's arrows (VII,31,60).[36] He is then beset by Bhīma and needs to be rescued by Duryodhana and Droṇa (VII,31,67). Later, Karṇa is one of the six warriors who are involved in the death of Abhimanyu, the favourite son of Arjuna, and through whom the line of Bhāratas eventually descends. On the advice of Droṇa (VII,47,28), Karṇa disarms Abhimanyu of his bow, his most important weapon: then Abhimanyu meets his end. There follows a long interlude where Karṇa and Bhīma fight a ferocious and lengthy duel, which Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa merely observe. Arjuna only intervenes at the close, to help his brother.

[36] Presumably in his adoptive family although the term is *sodarya*, 'couterine'. Abhimanyu, nine chapters later, also removes the head of one of Karṇa's brothers with an arrow (VII,40,4). In the following line, this causes distress for Karṇa, *karṇo vyathāṃ yayau*, 'Karṇa became alarmed'.

Karṇa and Arjuna skirmish during the latter's pursuit of Jayadratha, and Karṇa's chariot is destroyed (VII,120,74).[37] Kṛṣṇa had encouraged Arjuna to avoid Karṇa at VII,122,33 because the latter still possessed the crucial *śakti* which he was was holding in reserve to slay Arjuna with. At that point Karṇa skirmishes with Sātyaki and has his vehicle destroyed; his son, Vṛṣasena, comes to his aid. Arjuna, when he next meets up with Karṇa on the field, merely insults him,

VII,123,8: *karṇa karṇa vṛthādṛṣṭe sūtaputrātmasaṃstuta.*
O Karṇa, Karṇa, blind, you praise yourself – a sūta's son!

He vows to slay Karṇa's son because Karṇa had been one of the six to orchestrate Abhimanyu's death and because he insulted Bhīma.[38] As usual, the poet maintains narrative symmetry.[39]

The first day of Karṇa's leadership, the sixteenth day, is desultory, very little happens. On the morning of the seventeenth day of battle and the last morning of Karṇa's life, he is in a sanguine mood and talking with his patron and vows not to return to camp unless he fells Arjuna (VIII,22,30). Karṇa describes his bow, Vijaya, which was originally fabricated for Indra and then given to Rāma before being passed on to him (VIII,22,36ff.) He describes it as being far superior to the bow of Arjuna, Gāṇḍīva, which had been given by the deity Agni.[40] The poets are always matching up these two in one way or another, to the effect that their enmity is further under-

[37] *ākarṇamuktair iṣubhiḥ karṇasya caturo hayān / anayan mṛtyulokāya*, 'With broad arrows released from his ear he led the four horses of Karṇa to the world of the dead'. Note the play on the word *karṇa*.

[38] Vṛṣasena had in fact been allotted to Abhimanyu as his *bhāga* when Dhṛṣṭadyumna appointed the forces at V,161,9.

[39] Curiously both Abhimanyu and Karṇa are grasping a wheel of their respective chariots as they die (VII,47,38 and VIII,66,60).

[40] One occasion when the mirroring between these two heroes is non-symmetrical is with the conch. *devadatta* is an important part of Arjuna's equipment, but there is no such named equivalent for his rival. Karṇa does possess such an item, but it never receives a title, unlike those belonging to many other heroes. See VI,47,23-29 for a description of how vital this part of a warrior's paraphernalia is. See Hornell, 1914, on the conch being borrowed from Dravidian sources.

scored via reflection. Karṇa admits, however, that he does not have the inexhaustible quivers that Arjuna possesses, nor does he have a chariot or horses of the proficiency and mettle of Arjuna's.

Contrary to the normal warrior-charioteer relationship, best characterised by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, what obtains between Karṇa and Śalya is the mirror opposite.[41] Instead of advice and amity we find satire and derogation, the usual derision which exists between opponents prior to a duel (VIII,26,27ff.) Everything that happens in the chariot of Karṇa and Śalya is the reverse of what occurs in the chariot of their opponents.[42] It is as if the poets are displaying an obverse and reverse.[43] The counterpoint between Arjuna and Karṇa is thus not only given in terms of narrative but is also structurally extensive.

Once noon has passed on his last day, the tide slowly turns against Karṇa. During the morning he is triumphant and twice sends Yudhiṣṭhira from the field. Arjuna, thinking that his brother is badly wounded, seeks him out. Yudhiṣṭhira mistakenly concludes that Karṇa is slain, *hatam ādhiratham mene*, and immediately sings a lament for him, in effect praising him (VIII,46,4-9). This is then followed by a long denigration of Karṇa when Yudhiṣṭhira realises his error.[44] When he discovers that Karṇa still lives he rebukes and mocks Arjuna for failing in his duty as a hero and not keeping to his word (VIII,48). He suggests that Arjuna give his bow to Kṛṣṇa

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[41] Śalya is of course the *mātula*, 'maternal uncle' of Yudhiṣṭhira and thus bound by forms of kinship to the side of the Pāṇḍavas. Śalya and Kṛṣṇa are the only two charioteers to survive the battle, see Mehendale, 1995, p.21 and 27-29. Śalya is killed later by Yudhiṣṭhira, but not as a charioteer.

[42] See Kṛṣṇa's speech at VIII,51, for instance, which Arjuna responds to in the following *adhyāya*, with an anaphoric play on the term *adya*, 'today'. There is a similar, but shorter and less formulaic, exchange between Bhīma and his driver, Viśoka, at VIII,54, which includes the usual charioteer's exclamation of *paśya*, 'look!'

[43] Hiltebeitel has surveyed this relationship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in depth, 1982, p.96ff. See also Watkins, 1995, pp.302 and 360ff., on the action of the "HERO ... with COMPANION."

[44] Cúchulainn also sings a long lament for his deceased foster-brother (pp.199-205 in Kinsella's translation of the Táin). The key term in the final stanza is 'fame', *clu* (2730).

and tells him that it would have been better if he had never been born or had been miscarried! (VIII,47,14-15).[45] Arjuna of course is furious that his *vrata*, 'vow', has been put in question and draws his sword to kill his brother and needs to be restrained by Kṛṣṇa. Again, we see the usual expression of how necessary or inevitable it is that Karṇa be slain by his fixed opponent; the section in fact opens with an anticipation of this — the two are locked together by their oaths. For Karṇa, Arjuna signifies death, or fame, just as conversely, for Arjuna, Karṇa signifies 'triumph', *jaya*.

The two begin to skirmish at VIII,57 but this does not immediately resolve into a formal encounter until the death of Karṇa's favourite son. The poet makes much of their resemblance at this point: the duals, *tau* and *ubhau* are repeated again and again in the course of the *adhyāya*, and their mutual resemblance becomes a *cadenza*.

VIII,63,17: *devagarbhau devasamau devatulyau ca rūpataḥ.*
In form, both were sprung from a deity, like a deity, equal to a deity!

They both become as a 'stake', *glaha*, in a game of dice that is to be played (VIII,63,25), a nice recapitulation on the part of the poet. Ultimately, as the duel commences, the two are likened to Indra and Vairocana (VIII,63,5), Karṇa implicitly in the latter, demonic position; further on this polarity is likened to that of Indra and Vṛtra (VIII,63,16).

The sky is anguished for the sake of Karṇa, and the earth for Arjuna. At no other moment in the poem is there such a universal gathering. The whole cosmos divides on the basis of this relationship between the two heroes: no other instant in the epic exhibits such absolute opposition.

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[45] Yudhiṣṭhira says that for thirteen years he never slept properly, thinking of Karṇa (VIII,46,16), and that *paśyāmi tatra tatraiva karṇabhūtam idaṃ jagat*, 'I see the world — everywhere become Karṇa!' (VIII,46,19); and wherever he went, fearful of Karṇa, *paśyāmi karṇam evāgrataḥ sthitam*, 'I see Karṇa stood before me!'

VIII,63,32: *dyaur āsīt karṇato vyagrā sanakṣatrā viśaṃ pate*
bhūmir viśalā pārthasya mātā putrasya bhārata.
O lord of the people, the sky with its lunar mansions
was for Karṇa,
the entire earth for Arjuna: a mother for a son, O Bhārata.

All kinds of celestial beings gather to observe the fight, *gandharvas, dānavas, ṛṣis, rākṣasas*, including Indra and Sūrya, and the deities debate the qualities of the two heroes, expressing their concerns and wishes for the combat. The deities, not wishing that the cosmos become de-stabilised, say to Brahma,

VIII,63,47: *samo'stu deva vijaya etayor narasiṃhayoḥ.*
Lord, let the victory be balanced between these two man-lions![46]

They formally challenge each other, like Indra and Śambara, and the contest begins (VIII,63,63). This is the central moment of the poem, the event that has been sung of by the poets since the very beginning of the epic, and is the closing of polarity. Even the two standards, the monkey and the 'elephant-girth', *nāgakakṣya*, grapple with each other, like Garuḍa and a snake (VIII,63,68).[47] The chariot horses and the two drivers glare at each other.[48] These two are like the east and the west winds, or the sun and the moon (VIII,64,6-7), as the poets make much of the mirroring in this final test, a mood that is reinforced by the steady repetition of dual

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[46] Brahma responds, *karṇo lokān ayaṃ mukhān prāpnotu puruṣarṣabhaḥ / vīro vaikartanaḥ śūro vijayas tv astu kṛṣṇayoḥ*, 'Let Karṇa — the bull of men, the warrior, son of the Sun, hero — let him obtain the divine worlds! Let victory be for Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa!' (VIII,63,55).

[47] In book four where all the Kuru *dhvajas*, 'banners' are described, (much like the shields in the Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus), this standard of Karṇa receives the epithet of *rucira*, 'radiant' (IV,50,15). The *nāgakakṣya*, by simple metonymy, connects Karṇa with Hāstinapura, the 'city of the elephant': the elephant which he is riding and which has become tractable. Duryodhana's banner is simply a *nāga*, 'elephant. It is difficult to imagine how the *nāgakakṣya* would be graphically represented. At VI,17,18ff., the Kuru banners are given again.

[48] Both warriors are now *śvetahayau*, both possessing white steeds: an epithet usually reserved for Arjuna. Once again, we observe the unity of contention and identity.

forms. They are like two elephants fighting for a cow, or two mountains fighting each other, or two huge clouds opposing each other, or two lions, or two bulls, like two deities (VIII,65,2-7). Arjuna is depicted as,

VIII,65,40: *tataḥ prajajvāla kirīṭamālī ...*
Then the garlanded and crowned one [Arjuna] blazed up ...

They both make use of their divine weaponry, the various supermissiles. The *nāgāstra*, 'snake-arrow', which Karṇa had kept well guarded and preserved in his quiver and whose origin went back to the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest when Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa sought to appease Agni in book one, is finally taken out and released. This *raudram śaram*, 'horrific arrow', was *pārthārtham atyarthacirāya guptam*, 'protected for an extremely long time for the sake of Arjuna' (VIII,66,5). Karṇa nocks it, against the advice of Śalya, saying that,

VIII,66,8: *na saṃdhatte dviḥ śaraṃ śalya karṇaḥ*
Śalya, Karṇa does not nock an arrow twice!

This would be beneath his kṣatriya dignity. He charges the arrow with a speech act, which fails. *hato'si vai phalguna*, 'You are dead, Arjuna' (VIII,66,9).[49] The failure of this performative marks the end for Karṇa; he is no longer empowered, but has either forsaken or lost everything or has been outmanoeuvred by Kṛṣṇa's tactics. The arrow fails due to Kṛṣṇa forcing down the chariot of Arjuna and making the horses kneel.[50] Only Arjuna's crown is dislodged and falls to the earth. This was Karṇa's final divine resource.

The two continue to duel, and there is much imagery of snakes as they exchange bloodthirsty arrows, one of which, sustaining the

[49] Yudhiṣṭhira, slaying Śalya, with another special *śakti*, also utters such a speech act, *hato'si* (IX,16,47). Aśvatthāman does the same at X,13,18. One can infer that this is typical kṣatriya practice for an intended *coup de grāce*. See Austin, 1975, p.133, "the performative should be doing something as opposed to just saying something; and, the performative is happy or unhappy as opposed to true or false."

[50] Another instance of the heroic 'code' being ignored by the Pāṇḍava side.

symmetry of events, strikes off the crown of Karṇa (VIII,66,32). Curiously, with that same shot, Arjuna also removes Karṇa's earrings, the sign of which we have already discussed. In the following line, Karṇa is divested of his 'wonderful armour', *varma bhāsvaram*, that had been so carefully wrought 'by the best artists', *śilpivaraiḥ*. At that point Karṇa, *babhau girir gairikadhāturaktaḥ*, 'he shone like a mountain dyed with red chalk' (VIII,66,36).

As previsioned throughout the poem, Karṇa's wheel is to fall into a hole and stick and the *mantras* of Rāma do not come to mind: this happens.[51] In the next line he disclaims against dharma,

VIII,66,43: *manye na nityaṃ paripāti dharmaḥ.*
I think that dharma does not always protect.

He is repeatedly pierced by his opponent's arrows and sinks into desolation. Kṛṣṇa incites Arjuna to strike more, saying that Karṇa 'swallows arrows', *grasate śarān* (VIII,66,52). Then, 'the earth swallowed the wheel', *agrasan mahī cakram.*

Karṇa, who, *kopād aśrūṇy avartayat*, 'wept out of anger', repeatedly asks for respite: *muhūrtaṃ kṣama pāṇḍava*, 'rest a minute, O Pāṇḍava!' Standing on the ground, struggling with his wheel, he reminds Arjuna of when it is incorrect to fire at an opponent, *na śūrāḥ praharanti*, 'heroes do not strike' — and he lists the kinds of mitigation. *tvam ca śūro'si*, 'you are a hero', he says, *tasmāt kṣama*, 'therefore desist!' He adds, *na ... bibhemy aham*, 'I do not fear'.[52]

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[51] Sergent, 1995, has compared this incident with the similar death of Balor in, '*La Seconde Bataille de Mag Tured*'. Lug, who slays Balor, he also likens to Arjuna.

[52] Just as when he first entered the poem, at his exit, Karṇa is talking about the nature of 'heroism'. See above, I,126,19. Also, the imperative *kṣama/kṣamasva* is here used just as Ṛcīka used it to cause Rāma to halt the destruction of kṣatriyas at an earlier time (I,2,6). Perhaps this is a formal kṣatriya term used to conclude a combat. Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.413, relates how, in a south Indian drama, at the death of Karṇa, as he is supposed to be lying on the battlefield, "the appeal for offerings to his widow are staged against the background of the rising sun". It is "a device to coax donations from the audience".

Karṇa's last plaintive words in the poem are addressed to Arjuna, reminding him that what he is doing now is in breach of formal *kṣatradharma*.

VIII,66,65: *smṛtvā dharmopadeśaṃ tvaṃ muhūrtaṃ kṣama pāṇḍava.*
Having remembered the teaching of dharma, forbear a moment,
O Pāṇḍava!

Kṛṣṇa acerbically accuses Karṇa and reminds Arjuna of all that he and his brothers had suffered because of Karṇa, mentioning Draupadī in particular.[53] Arjuna, thus enraged, continues to strike. Karṇa speaks no more and continues to defend himself. His standard is felled by Arjuna, and a great exclamation rises from the assembled troops. The poet says,

VIII,67,16: *yaśaś ca dharmas ca jayaś ca māriṣa*
priyāṇi sarvāṇi ca tena ketunā ... apatan.
Glory and dharma and victory, sir, and all dear things
with that banner ... fell.

'Glory', because no other hero in the poem is as passionate about glory as Karṇa is, and one could reasonably aver that no other hero possesses or obtains such glory as Karṇa held. 'Dear things', because this was a younger brother slaying an elder half-brother.[54] As for dharma, perhaps dharma here collapses because the Pāṇḍavas made use of deceptive stratagems in order to win the battle — much as the Kauravas had behaved illicitly in the gambling match — and their claim to dharma is somewhat counterfeit.[55]

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[53] This moment is reminiscent of the scene where Kṛṣṇa is inciting the reluctant and hesitant Arjuna to strike down Bhīṣma (VI,113,31).

[54] *hataḥ ... bhrātā bhrātrā sahodaraḥ*, 'A uterine brother slain by a brother' (XII,1,35). Fer Diad, in the cognate Irish epic, is also felled by his "own ardent and adored foster-brother" (p.168 in Kinsella). They also fought over the course of several days and Fer Diad was also slain unfairly, with the use of the *gae bolga* (pp.196-97). Gandhi, 1999, p.4, comments, "Karna is the wronged hero, wronged by teachers, brothers and mother, more wronged and more heroic than other wronged heroes."

[55] Matilal, 1989, covers this question from a point of view of moral reasoning. See Vidal-Naquet, 1986, pp.106-122, on the 'trickery' employed by young warri-

Then with a truth act, referring to past ascetic accomplishments, *anena satyena nihantu ayam śaraḥ*, 'by this truth let this arrow slay', (VIII,67,20), Arjuna removes Karṇa's head.[56]

VIII,67,27: *dehāt tu karṇasya nipātitasya*
tejo dīptaṃ khaṃ vigāhyācireṇa.
From the body of the felled Karṇa
splendour, plunging quickly into the sky, blazed.

The body of Karṇa was like a fire extinguished by a great wind put out at the end of a sacrifice (VIII,67,29), and the body, as if pos-

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ors living outside of the social bounds. Also, on the 'forest' theme, Parkhill, 1994. The question is, are the Pāṇḍavas in their life in the *araṇya* functioning as a *vrātya* band, and is such an IE tradition for young men? Such a dimension would give a very different perspective to questions of dharma. See AV XV, the *vrātya* hymn; the journeying to the various directions which occurs in this hymn is something which we also see quite distinctly in the Āraṇyaka *parvan*, especially in the *tīrthayātrā* section. Sjoestedt, 1949, p.82, remarks on an Old Irish equivalent: "The *fiana* are companies of hunting warriors, living as semi-nomads under the authority of their own leaders"; p.90, "The *fiana* constitutes a society independent of tribal society and resting on a basis, not of family or territory, but of initiation."

[56] Brown, 1972, for an exegesis on the 'truth act'. See Hiltebeitel, 1991, p.82, describing a performance given in January 1987 of the present-day south Indian epic, *Elder Brothers*. He describes the death of Karṇa, "When Karṇa had fallen from his chariot, his *puṇṇiyam* (merit) still protects him and turns Arjuna's arrows into flowers." The brahmin source for Colonel de Polier in the eighteenth century informed him that, "Malgré cette supériorité, ce héros [Karen] ne peut éviter sa destinée", *op. cit.* p.285. Nirad Chaudhuri, writing about his village life in the early part of the twentieth century, describes his memory of a drama about Karṇa. "To me personally no scene at these plays gave me greater thrills than the last one of the death of Karna. After a vigorous fight with Arjuna ... Karna found himself helpless through the curse of his teacher, and, face to face with death, gave out the triumphant shout: 'It's only fate.' I have that shout still in my ears as it was uttered by our star performer Kanto Babu", 1999, p.62. Hiltebeitel, 1988, pp.394-398, has some interesting comments on the modern Tamil drama, *Karṇa Mokṣam*. Mankekar, 1999, p.227, remarks on the impact of the twentieth century film version of the poem as depicting, "the struggle between two aspirants to the throne in terms of the conflict between lineage and qualifications (described by scriptwriter Raza as 'the conflict between *janma* and *karma*') [that] became controversial because it seemed to articulate public skepticism about Rajiv Gandhi's ability to succeed his mother, Indira Gandhi, as India's prime minister." The point being that some considered him 'destined' for high office.

sessing rays, shone with arrows (VIII,67,30). The poets make great virtuoso use of their rhetorical skills at this point, embellishing the moment profusely with simile. At this, the symmetry between the two heroes is concluded.

Once the duel ends with the death of Karṇa, the great battle is really finished; the following *parvan* which concerns the final eighteenth day is brief and summary. Thus the great contention of the two heroes, which in a way provided the epic with its major axis, is fulfilled. The partition which exists between the two rival sides of the family is dramatised and focussed by these two figures and the counterpoint is not simply narrative, but structural.

What began with a trial of weapons between young warriors is terminated by a formal duel, prior to which Karṇa is systematically deprived of almost every superiority which he possesses, except for the snake-arrow, and there, his integrity is foiled by Kṛṣṇa's supernatural efforts. It is fitting that his last word is the name of Arjuna, as was his first word on entering the poem.[57]

2. *Bhīṣma*

What happens between Karṇa and Bhīṣma is something very different. What I would like to illustrate now is that the intense animosity which exists between these two is in reality a product of their similarity: the contention is in fact not due to difference but to identity.[58] What is a pure contest with Arjuna and complete amity with

[57] Shulman, 1985, p.398-99, poses the opposition between the two heroes in a slightly different manner. "Arjuna is the 'young king'; Karṇa chooses not to be king ... Karṇa's true rival, who eventually defeats him with the help of the trickster-deity ... is ... the androgynous clown of the Virāṭa episodes ... Karṇa ... accepts the world and the sacrificial process which rules it. Not so Arjuna: his triumph is ... the victory of the clown." The only way that I can follow this argument of the clown-Arjuna, is to consider it in the light of reversal, (*vide* Bakhtin, 1968), where it is not the seasons that are being turned topsy-turvy but the *yugas*.

[58] Georg von Simpson, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, p.64, comments, "Bhīṣma's relation to Karṇa is obviously of a complementary nature ... Karṇa is the son of Sūrya and without doubt represents an aspect of the sun. Thus the fall of the grandfather-like Bhīṣma and his younger rival Karṇa's entry on to the stage

Duryodhana is a balance of both these qualities with Bhīṣma. If Arjuna is the *bhāga* of Karṇa and Duryodhana his *sakhi*, then Bhīṣma lies midway upon a line drawn between those two points. In the *sabhā* at Hāstinapura, Bhīṣma and Karṇa always represent two opposing wings of policy; they are a dove and a hawk, to use a modern metaphor. What is symmetry between Karṇa and Arjuna is, between Karṇa and Bhīṣma, more of a similitude.

Bhīṣma is of an older generation than king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of the Kaurava side in the great battle at Kurukṣetra. Bhīṣma should have succeeded to the throne, but, because of a vow, he never did.[59] Karṇa also, though not of a previous generation to the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, is the eldest-born of them all: he has a claim to being the heir apparent.[60] His priority is not generally known however. Thus both figures are somehow deferred or excluded from their rightful claims in the hierarchy.

Both Bhīṣma and Karṇa are *gāṅgeya*, that is, they are born from the river Gaṅgā.[61] Bhīṣma's mother is literally the goddess Gaṅgā, who only appears to him at the end of his life, whereas Karṇa was exposed to the river at birth and was borne away in a *mañjūṣā*, a 'box'.[62] Genealogically, Karṇa is connected with Sūrya, and Bhīṣma is connected with Dyaus (I,93); thus, figuratively, in terms of Sun and Sky, they both derive from a literally aerial source. At the start of the Gītā, Saṃjaya opens his list of Kauravas with *bhīṣmaś ca karṇaś ca* (VI,23,8); and the first particular shot of the battle comes from Bhīṣma against Arjuna, *gāṅgeyas tu raṇe pārthaṃ viddhvā* (VI,43,10).

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seem to mark the transition from *dakṣiṇāyana* to *uttarāyaṇa*. In this case myth and epic story coincide perfectly ..."

[59] Bhīṣma is what Dumézil, 1966, p.409, calls the "framing hero", one who "lives through as many generations as he wishes." This means, however, that he relinquishes the possibility of procreation. The experience and knowledge of Bhīṣma is so extensive that when he dies, says Kṛṣṇa, *iñānāni alpībhaviṣyanti*, 'knowledge will become less' (XII,46,23).

[60] The eldest son of the senior wife of Pāṇḍu.

[61] There are actually four rivers that bear the infant Karṇa: the Aśvā, Carmaṇvatī, Yamunā, and Gaṅgā (III,292,26).

[62] Karṇa's mother also only comes to him immediately before his death.

Karṇa and Bhīṣma are the only two in the poem who received training in weaponry and martial arts from the ancient brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya. Both are the best of their respective generations, both nominally and in terms of their skill as warriors. Earlier on in the epic however, Bhīṣma defeated his teacher in a duel that lasted for many days;[63] whereas Karṇa was cursed by Rāma for disguising himself as a brahmin in order to learn the mantras required to activate certain missiles. It is this duplicity which Bhīṣma brings up on several occasions when he derides Karṇa, saying, *tadaiva dharmaś ca tapaś ca naṣṭam*, 'then dharma and austerity were lost' (V,61,17).[64]

Like Bhīṣma, who had gone alone with only a bow to Kāśi in order to secure brides for Vicitravīrya, Karṇa had made the journey to the city of Rājapura in order to secure a wife for his king, Duryodhana; and he had ravaged the rulers there (VI,117,15).

When Karṇa and Arjuna meet in either competition or final conflict the deities and celestial beings assemble in the sky. This also

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[63] This duel, which begins at V,180, besides that of Karṇa and Arjuna, is arguably the most important duel of the poem, and lasts for a month. It occurs at Kurukṣetra and, *mise en abyme*, stamps the place for what comes later. This duel is also a conflict of brahmin and kṣatriya. One could argue that if Yudhiṣṭhira represents brahmin ideals more than he does kṣatriya *mores*, then Kurukṣetra becomes a situation of conflict between the two orders. Rāma is a curious figure in the Mahābhārata, coming and going, but never actually engaging in the main narrative. Rāma is of course a scion of the Bhārgava clan, and combines both kṣatriya and brahmin modes of behaviour due to his mother's confusion between two kinds of tree at the time of his conception (III,115,23-25). He is the one who beheaded his mother at the request of his father (III,116,7 supplies the rather unique reason!), who then went on to exterminate the kṣatriyas twenty-one times because a king had killed his father (III,116-117). He is an ancient or ancestral hero who continues to live on and on, 'visiting' present time, as it were. Bhīṣma is also similar to Rāma in that both are celibate.

[64] That manipulation of Rāma's trust by Karṇa is the only moment in his life when Karṇa behaves in an 'improper' manner for kṣatriyas. It is the only time in his life that he lies. As he himself says, *mithyā prajñayā*, 'having promised falsely' (V,61,2). Moments like this in the poem shed light on the nature of epic society, insofar as 'everything' is known by or among the heroes: privacy or secrecy is not part of this literal vision. Similarly, one must assume that an audience was aware of most the details of the Mahābhārata cycle in their totality, even when only certain *parvans* were being sung.

happens when Bhīṣma and Arjuna engage, as in the Virāṭa *parvan* (IV,51, 5ff.) Such an event is restricted to these three heroes.

When Arjuna gazes into Kṛṣṇa's mouth in the eleventh book of the Gītā (VI,33,26), whom does he see, but Bhīṣma and Karṇa (accompanied by Droṇa).

Nevertheless, in their exchanges, these two, despite their many similarities, are constantly opposing each other. Karṇa is always vaunting his own prowess whilst Bhīṣma is constantly diminishing the other's potential. The antipathy is only resolved at the end of book six when Bhīṣma is dying, supine upon a bed of arrows, and is approached by a distraught Karṇa.

Bhīṣma does not want to fight at Kurukṣetra but does so out of allegiance to his king, Duryodhana.[65] Similarly, Karṇa, knowing of his true paternity and fraternity, nevertheless adheres to the Kaurava cause because of the fealty that has developed between him and Duryodhana. Both heroes are thus bound not by organic kinship, but by verbal bonds of admission.

The antagonism between the two first really surfaces in book three, the Āraṇyaka *parvan*. Here Bhīṣma criticises Karṇa for having abandoned his king when beset by *gandharvas* or supernatural aerial beings (III,241,6). He says that Karṇa is only worth 'a fourth', *pādabhāj*, of the Pāṇḍavas. This belittling repeats itself again and again and is not so much a denial of his policies but of the person of Karṇa himself. Throughout the protracted exchanges of the Udyoga *parvan* and the debates at Hāstinapura which ensue, Karṇa repeatedly and zealously favours a war policy and in doing so he always rejects the proposed conciliation of Bhīṣma. Bhīṣma is the first to respond to Dhaumya, the house-priest who is acting as the initial Pāṇḍava herald, and does so gently and mildly. Then,

V,21,18: *bhīṣme bruvati tad vākyaṃ dhṛṣṭam ākṣipya manyumān*
duryodhanaṃ samālakṣya karṇo vacanaṃ abravīt.
Whilst Bhīṣma was uttering that speech, bellicose Karṇa
boldly interposing, looked at Duryodhana and said the words ...

[65] He understands this dilemma at V,153,16-17.

Karṇa rejects all that Dhaumya has proposed. Later, Bhīṣma says that Karṇa is 'of a bad nature', *durjātes* (V,48,28).[66] Karṇa replies that he is acting only according to kṣatriya dharma and that he is 'steadfast in his own personal dharma', *kṣatradharme sthito hy asmin*.

One of the complications of Bhīṣma is that he has made an oath of renunciation, something that is not typical of Mahābhārata kṣatriyas, being more of a brahmin practice.[67] This means that he is not strictly in keeping with kṣatriya culture, whereas Karṇa is. In fact Bhīṣma, after nine days of unsuccessful battle, even went so far as to tell the Pāṇḍavas how they might kill him (VI,103,70); again, a very unwarrior-like act. One should note here that in general, Karṇa manifests serious conflict with brahmins; for two brahmin curses ultimately provide the necessary conditions for his death.

Bhīṣma responds to Karṇa's defence of himself by berating him for unfounded self-promotion.

V,48,33: *yad ayaṃ katthate nityaṃ hantāhaṃ pāṇḍavān iti*
nāyaṃ kalāpi saṃpūrṇā pāṇḍavānāṃ mahātmanām.
When, this man always boasts, 'I shall slay the Pāṇḍavas',
this man is not possessed even of a part of the
great-souled Pāṇḍavas.

He proceeds to blame Karṇa publically in the *sabhā*.

V,48,34: *anayo yo'yam āgantā putrāṇāṃ te durātmanām*
tad asya karma jānīhi sūtaputrasya durmateḥ.
Whatever the adversity that will come to you foolish sons,
know that as coming from the idiot Karṇa!

Next he describes how lacklustre Karṇa was during the action against the Matsyas and how he even failed to protect his brother who fell during the onset. He reminds the assembly of how Karṇa was also unable to protect Duryodhana during the cattle raid and

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[66] Bhīṣma also observes that Duryodhana attends to the 'opinion of Karṇa who was cursed by Rāma', *matam ... rāmeṇa caiva śaptasya karṇasya* (V,48,27).

[67] He undertakes this vow and remains in perpetual *brahmacaryāśrama* and never advances to the status of householder. See V,169,17-18.

how Duryodhana had to be saved by Arjuna and Bhīma.[68] Karṇa speaks *mṛṣoktāni bahūni*, 'many false words', he adds (V,48,41).[69] When Karṇa finally addresses the assembled court in the Yānasaṃdhi *parvan*, and tells how he will defeat the enemy, Bhīṣma savagely belittles him, *kiṃ katthase kālaparītabuddhe*, 'What are you boasting, you whose mind is seized by death!' (V,61,7).

When the war is at last about to begin, Bhīṣma refuses to be consecrated as commander unless Karṇa stands down, as the younger hero always seeks to outdo him. It is as if these two heroes are both so intensely possessive of their *tejas* that they are unable to stand together and should really be enemies.

V,153,24: *spardhate hi sadātyarthaṃ sūtaputro mayā raṇe.*
The son of a sūta always vies with me excessively in battle.

Karṇa reciprocates and refuses to fight until Arjuna has killed Bhīṣma.[70] The ancient is invested with command, but then, nevertheless, it is with Karṇa that Duryodhana proceeds to circumambulate the battle-terrain prior to ordering camp to be made.

V,153,34: *parikramya kurukṣetraṃ karṇena saha kauravaḥ.*
Duryodhana walked about Kurukṣetra with Karṇa.

Similarly the final order for the army to yoke at dawn is given by Karṇa.

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[68] Bhīṣma repeats these two instances of Karṇa's failing at VI,94,7ff., when during the early days of battle at Kurukṣetra, Duryodhana visits him one night with the hope of convincing Bhīṣma to retire from combat so that Karṇa might intervene.

[69] The poet here makes the comment that when king Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not attend to the speech of Bhīṣma, *kuravaḥ sarve nirāśā jīvite'bhavan*, 'all the Kurus became without hope in living'; that is, they were from that point doomed (V,48,47). This is a rare moment in the text when the voice of the poet is heard directly and unmediated and is addressed to the audience.

[70] Both Karṇa (V,153,25) and Arjuna — at the outset of the Gītā, VI,24,9 — make the same statement, *na yotsye*, 'I will not fight!' — another instance of heroic symmetry. Arjuna, of course, is horrified that, among other things, he will have to kill Bhīṣma. It is as if, in terms of the poetry, at least, there exists a closed tripartite circuit between these three heroes.

V,160,28-29: *dūtāḥ ...*
... tūrṇaṃ pariyayuḥ senāṃ kṛtsnāṃ karṇasya śāsanāt
ājñāpayanto rājñas tān yogaḥ prāg udayād iti.
From the command of Karṇa, heralds quickly went about
the entire army ordering the kings: Yoke before dawn!

The next morning, Bhīṣma addresses Karṇa as a 'vile wretch', *katthano nīcaḥ*, and there is a terrific and insolent argument between the two. However, on inspection it is obvious that Bhīṣma is also a great boaster. Rāma had called once him a *raṇaślāghin*, 'one who boasts of battle' (V,177,19), and just before the conflict opened at Kurukṣetra, Bhīṣma was telling Yudhiṣṭhira how even Indra himself could not achieve victory over him.[71]

VI,41,41: *na taṃ paśyāmi kaunteya yo māṃ yudhyantaṃ āhave*
vijayeta pumān kaścid api sākṣāc śatakratuḥ.
Yudhiṣṭhira, I do not see that man man who could conquer
me, fighting in battle: not even Indra in person!

Similarly in book five he had said,

V,178,37: *na tadā jāyate bhīṣmo madvidhaḥ kṣatriyo'pi vā ...*
But then, no kṣatriya is born like me, Bhīṣma ...

It is because of Bhīṣma's continuing insults to him that Karṇa ultimately refuses to fight in the approaching war and withdraws for ten days until Bhīṣma is no longer combatant.[72] 'When Bhīṣma is

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[71] Indra, although a deity, is constantly being cited as the ideal for kṣatriya heroes. Even Kṛṣṇa is likened to him! *kṛṣṇa puraṃdara iva* (II,2,20).

[72] The audience had heard an anticipation of this threatened withdrawal by Karṇa at V,61,13 during the discussions at court about Saṃjaya's embassy. *nyasyāmi śastrāṇi na jātu saṃkhye pitāmaho drakṣyati māṃ sabhāyām*, 'I resign my weapons. Bhīṣma will see me only in the *sabhā*, and not in battle'. However, Bhīṣma is here behaving with the wisdom of experience. When the Kauravas first go into formal battle, that is when they attack the Matsyas, and the Pāṇḍavas suddenly appear in the latter's defence, Bhīṣma obviously accepts all Karṇa's self-proclamation and vaunting and places him in the van, leading the army. *agrataḥ sūtaputras tu karṇas tiṣṭhatu daṅśitaḥ*, 'Let Karṇa, fully armed, stand to the fore' (IV,47,19). It is after this encounter however, when Karṇa utterly fails to live up to his boasts about how he can defeat Arjuna, that Bhīṣma's opinion of him changes.

dead I will fight', *hate tu bhīṣme yoddhāsmi*, (V,165,27). It is as if they are so close or identical that each one's presence precludes that of the other.

In the catalogue of warriors, which Bhīṣma recounts as the army advances, he gives Karṇa a very low rank indeed, that of *ardharatha*, literally, 'half a chariot', the fourth level of valour; when Karṇa is, of course, the best of the Kauravas.[73] Bhīṣma derides Karṇa for giving up his ear-rings and cuirass.

V,165,5: *viyuktaḥ kavacenaiva sahajena vicetanaḥ*
kuṇḍalābhyāṃ ca divyābhyāṃ viyuktaḥ satataṃ ghṛṇī.
Mindlessly deprived of his natural cuirass,
deprived of divine ear-rings: he is always wrathful!

Due to all this, and the following, Bhīṣma declares that Karṇa cannot survive an attack by Arjuna, *na ... jīvan mokṣyate*, 'he will not be released alive'. This is,

V,165,6: *abhiśāpāc ca rāmasya brāhmaṇasya ca bhāṣaṇāt*
karaṇānāṃ viyogāc ca tena me'rdharatho mataḥ.
Because of the curse of Rāma and the declaration of the brahmin,
and because of the loss of his kit: by this I consider him
half a charioteer.[74]

Droṇa seconds the damning opinion of the ancient.

V,165,8: *raṇe raṇe'timānī ca vimukhaś caiva dṛśyate*
ghṛṇī karṇaḥ pramādī ca tena me'rdharatho mataḥ.
He is seen as extremely haughty and retreating in
battle after battle.

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[73] The ranking is: *mahāratha*, *atiratha*, *ratha*, and *ardharatha*, see V,167-169. There is a secondary 'catalogue' in the Droṇa *parvan*, which is devoted to a description of the chariots, and especially the horses, in the Pāṇḍava army. Much of this description focusses on the sons of the principal warriors. The standards are also detailed. The account is sung by Saṃjaya and comes in the middle of several scenes given over to combat; it has the quality of a lyrical *intermezzo* (VII,22). On the signal importance of charioteering for the Indo-European (hero), see Drews, 1988, Ch.VII, pp.154-156 in particular.

[74] Bhīṣma is of course making a play on the phonetics of *ardharatha* and *adhiratha*, Karṇa's patronym.

Wrathful and mad is Karṇa, for this I consider him
half a charioteer.

Karṇa is of course furious, his 'eyes were wide-open from anger', *krodhāt utphullalocanaḥ*. He retorts,

V,165,10: *marṣayāmi ca tat sarvaṃ duryodhanakṛtena vai.*
I suffer all that for the sake of Duryodhana.

He calls Bhīṣma 'half a charioteer' and accuses him of *tejovadham*, 'destroying honour', something which the audience later hears Śalya doing when he drives Karṇa's chariot.[75] Such a kind of speech is the converse of boasting, that is, to diminish someone by insult. He asks Duryodhana to 'abandon this wicked Bhīṣma', *tyajyatām duṣṭabhāvo'yam bhīṣmaḥ* (V,165,17), and calls him *gatavayā mandātmā kālamohitaḥ*, 'lifeless, stupid, deluded by time'.[76]

V,165,25: *aham eko haniṣyāmi pāṇḍavān nātra saṃśayaḥ*
... yaśo bhīṣmaṃ gamiṣyati.
I alone shall destroy the Pāṇḍavas, that is doubtless,
... but the glory will go to Bhīṣma!

Before Duryodhana steps in to end this blazing of abuse between the two, Bhīṣma sends out one more insult.

V,166,8: *tvāṃ prāpya vairapuruṣam kurūṇām anayo mahān upasthito.*
Having acquired you — a man of discord – great misfortune
has come to the Kurus.

Before the display of forces occurs, when Duryodhana asks his generals how long they think it will take them to subdue the Pāṇḍava forces. Bhīṣma replies, saying that a month would be suf-

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[75] I would like to translate *tejovadha* as 'satire' or 'derision'. It is a particular kind of poetic speech that is intended to rebuke or ridicule another's self-esteem or prestige. See below, Ch.IV,6.

[76] Once battle has commenced and the Kauravas are not doing well, Duryodhana reminds Bhīṣma about this scene, and in doing so loyally calls Karṇa a *mahāratha*. *tvatkṛte hy eṣa karṇo'pi nyastaśastro mahārathaḥ*, 'Because of you the great charioteer Karṇa has put down his weapons' (VI,48,36). When Karṇa is duelling with Bhīma at Kurukṣetra the poet calls him an *atiratha* (VII,108,41).

ficient for him to accomplish this (V,194,14); Droṇa reiterates this term, Kṛpa doubles it, and Aśvatthāman considers ten days sufficient. Karṇa however ventures that victory can be achieved in five nights, *pañcarātreṇa* (V,194,20), at which Bhīṣma 'laughs aloud', *jahāsa sasvanaṃ hāsam*.

This steady antipathy between the two finds no release. Because they are both on the same side, there exists no obvious zone or medium for the discharge of what must be called rivalry. Bhīṣma is aligned with the old king, whereas Karṇa is the immediate friend and counsellor of Duryodhana, who could be called the 'young king'. What we observed as an horizontal counterpoint between Arjuna and Karṇa, here, takes on a more vertical, or temporal dimension.

In the book five exchange between Kṛṣṇa and Karṇa on the chariot, the latter made use of the same expression as Duryodhana had used earlier, that of war as a ritual sacrifice, but this time Karṇa referred to the various officials at the sacrifice rather than the objects employed. He says the death of Bhīṣma will mark the termination of the ritual, *yajñāvasānam* (V,139,48). Then, Karṇa refers to himself as the 'piling up again of the sacrifice' once it is concluded, *punaścitis ... yajñasya*.[77] So again, despite their mutual antagonism these two remain closely associated even in metaphor: alliance is sustained. Reconciliation finally occurs when the elder is lying fatally wounded on a bed of arrows and the younger approaches in dejection.

VI,117,7: *pitā iva putraṃ gāṅgeyaḥ pariṣvajya ekabāhunā.*
Bhīṣma with a single arm embraced him, like a father a son.

Suddenly, another aspect is constellated, that of father and son, and the latter's antagonism to the former. The audience observes this as occurring between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana, but here the motif

[77] *punaściti* is a technical term for the repiling of the fire altar if the first piling has failed to achieve its object.

receives further application.[78] Bhīṣma speaks with Karṇa *in camera*, as it were.

VI,117,7: *rahitaṃ dhiṣṇyaṃ ālokya samutsārya ca rakṣiṇaḥ.*
Having observed the place [to be] private and having dismissed the sentinels.

This is curious, and would indicate that whatever was to be said was secret. Bhīṣma praises Karṇa, for his lineage, skills, and integrity and admits that he only spoke sarcastically to Karṇa in order to diminish the other's *tejas* (VI,117,10). Bhīṣma advises him to fight with 'desire of heaven', *svargakāmyayā* , and admits,

VI,117,13: *na tvayā sadṛśaḥ kaścit puruṣeṣvamaropama.*
There is no one like you among men, O you like a deity!

He adds that Karṇa is 'superior to men on earth', *manuṣyair adhiko bhuvi* (VI,117,17), and admits that he had known for a long time that Karṇa was the son of the Sun and that Karṇa would obtain a world conquered by kṣatriya dharma.[79] Perhaps this is the reason for the privacy; for after all, in another discreet conversation, that of Karṇa with Kṛṣṇa, the former also requests the other not to reveal the fact that he is the eldest of all the brothers. Karṇa admits his true genealogy, but says, as he said to Kuntī, that his loyalty is to Duryodhana, for his mother had betrayed him (VI,117,22-23).

Bhīṣma advises him to fight, much as Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to fight, 'without egotism', *nirahaṃkāra*, as there is no other true kṣatriya dharma.

VI,117,31: *ahaṃ tvāṃ anujānāmi yad icchasi tad āpnuhi*
kṣatradharmajitāṅ lokān saṃprāpsyasi na saṃśayaḥ.
I forgive you. Whatever you desire, that obtain!
Doubtless, you will achieve the worlds won by kṣatriya dharma.

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[78] Arjuna's relation with Bhīṣma is agnatic, whereas that of Karṇa is affinal. The former must kill Bhīṣma and does not want to, whereas Karṇa would like to be rid of the ancient, but cannot simply effect this.

[79] Nārada and Vyāsa had informed him, he says.

He finally tells Karṇa to be 'like an ocean for the Kaurava rivers', *samudra iva sindhūnām* (VII,4,2), and that he should be the *gati*, the 'refuge' of his adopted Kaurava kinsmen (VII,4,8).

Karṇa returns to speak with Bhīṣma the following morning, prior to the onset of battle. He sings praises of the ancient and promises to bring victory to the Kauravas (VII,3). Equally, Bhīṣma sings Karṇa's praise (VII,4), describing the victories whereby Karṇa extended Duryodhana's sovereignty.[80] He ends by encouraging Karṇa to triumph and re-affirms the paternal connection.

VII,4,10: *bhavān pautrasamo'smākaṃ yathā duryodhanas tathā.*
Sir, you are like our grandson, just as Duryodhana is!

Karṇa then takes his final leave of Bhīṣma.

Lastly, in the pre-amble to the *aśvamedha* and the *anu-gītā*, we have the line:

XIV,14,15: *bhīṣmakarṇapurogāṇāṃ kurūṇāṃ kurunandana*
sahito dhṛtarāṣṭreṇa pradadau aurdhvadaihikam.
O joy of the Kurus, together with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, he gave
the obsequies of the Kurus led by Karṇa and Bhīṣma.

Thus we see the two joined even in their funeral rites.

The above illuminates the tension between Bhīṣma and Karṇa as well as delineating the nature of Karṇa's individuality. Sanskrit heroes are nearly always paired off in some way, but here there is not only an opposition but also an extreme instance of identity, in contrast to the symmetry observed between Karṇa and Arjuna. It is remarkable that both Bhīṣma and Karṇa aspire to being paragons of kṣatriya action, yet both in some way or another do not quite fit the paradigm: Bhīṣma with his celibacy and Karṇa with his rank of *sūta*.

[80] None of these events have previously been mentioned in the poem (VII,4,4-7).

3. *Duryodhana*

Whereas the kind of relationship which Karṇa shares with Arjuna and Bhīṣma is founded on certain identities and contentions, what Karṇa experiences with his king and patron is possibly much more complex. Patterns of king-hero relations in Indo-European epic poetry take on many forms, generally not of a mutually agreeable nature.[81] What obtains between these two figures is somewhat different from this paradigm. In a way the Kṛṣṇa-Arjuna relation of friendship is reflected by what obtains between Duryodhana and Karṇa; amity is the crucial word.

Karṇa appears from nowhere and almost immediately becomes the intimate friend and counsellor of Duryodhana. This uncanniness that surrounds Karṇa is key to any comprehension as to his identity and is one of the reasons that his character has been kept vividly and variously alive in popular poetry and drama over the centuries.

To begin with, like Karṇa, Duryodhana is of an archaic mould. There are shamanistic qualities about him, insofar as he is able to use his powers of 'illusion', *māyā*, to create impressions (V,60,10ff.) At the end of his life there is the wonderful image of him lying submerged in a lake and creating ice by this ability, and being able to speak, from the depths, to addressees on the bank (IX,29,54ff.)[82]

He is born in unusual circumstances: when his mother Gāndhārī had heard of the birth of Karṇa she became unhappy and aborted her own pregnancy (I,107,10ff.)[83] She produced a *māṃsapeśī*, a

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[81]Davidson, 1994, Ch.5, gives a good overview of the relation between the IE king and hero. See p.99, where she comments on "the theme of a superior hero in the service of an inferior king." Kauṭilya recommends that kings, for their might, make use of *pravīrapuruṣa* (IX,1,7).

[82] Duryodhana also speaks of this strange relationship that he has with water at V,60,14-15.

[83] True to form, he is born on the same day as his *bhāga*, Bhīma (I,114,14). Later, whilst still a youth, Duryodhana attempts, with snares, with snakes, and with poison, to kill his rival (I,119,34-41). The two are paired against each other in a wrestling match at the weapons contest in I,125.

'foetal mass', which the all-wise and all-controlling Vyāsa advised her to place in a hundred water jars out of which Duryodhana and his siblings appeared. Soon after his birth, when his father was discussing the throne and succession, there are a series of inauspicious signs, which Vidura, the chief minister, interprets as indicating problems for the dynasty.

I,107,30: *vyaktaṃ kulāntakaraṇo bhavitaiṣa sutas tava.*
Evidently this son of yours will be the cause of the end of the family.

Vyāsa tells the old king that,

VI,4,5: *kālo'yaṃ putrarūpeṇa tava jāto viśāṃ pate.*
O lord of the people, death has been born with the form of your son.

Also, there is virtually no indication of Duryodhana having any kin by marriage. He only has his parents, maternal uncle, and brothers; that is, what he inherits.[84] This is unlike the Pāṇḍavas who are extremely familial — in terms of their marriage.[85] Like Bhīma, his favoured weapon is the mace, again a phenomenon which has slightly archaic overtones. In his analysis of the Mahābhārata heroes, Dumézil curiously does not pay much attention to

[84] Nārada does relate of how Duryodhana once abducted a girl at a *svayaṃvara* in the city of Rājapura and how Karṇa helped him whilst they were being pursued (XII,4). There is also a cursory mention of the 'son of Duryodhana' at VI,51,7, but this is unusual. At VII,45,9 Duryodhana, flying from the *mêlée*, turns back to save his son Lakṣmaṇa, *pitā putragṛdhī nyavartata*, 'the father, longing for his son, turned back'. The one reference in the poem to a wife of Duryodhana is in the form of a simile, describing how he lies upon the earth, beside his mace, dying. *paśya imāṃ saha vīreṇa ... śayānāṃ śayane dharme bhāryāṃ prītimatīm iva*, 'See it [his mace] beside the warrior, like an affectionate wife lying on a rightful bed' (X,9,13). In general, there is no mention of *kāma* in the life of Duryodhana, *artha* predominates. One could tentatively extend this generalisation to the Kauravas as a whole, with the rider that, in the Strī *parvan*, the women of the Kaurava men sing laments and perform obsequies.

[85] Also, what distresses Arjuna at the beginning of the Gītā is *kulakṣaya*, 'ruin of clan, family' (VI,23,40).

Duryodhana, presumably because Duryodhana, unlike the other major heroes in the poem, has no divine parentage.

Duryodhana is first said to have met Karṇa when the latter's adoptive father sends him to Hāstinapura to learn archery from Droṇa (III,293,16). Some time later, presumably a few years, when Duryodhana witnesses Karṇa's challenge to Arjuna at the weapons trial, he is 'touched by joy', *prītiḥ ... aspṛśat*. Karṇa's first word to Duryodhana, on being asked what he would choose as a favour, is *sakhitvam tvayā* (I,126,15).[86] This occurs just after Karṇa has just made his dramatic and provocative entry. Duryodhana immediately understands that this is a figure whom he could exploit as a means of diminishing the Pāṇḍavas, especially Arjuna.

I,127,23: *bhayam arjunasaṃjātam kṣipram antaradhīyata.*
The fear born of Arjuna quickly vanished.

Duryodhana realises that the profound enmity which he nurtures against his rival cousins for the throne now has an agent equal in prowess to Arjuna. The structural axis which we examined as obtaining between Arjuna and Karṇa is thus intrinsic to the functioning of Duryodhana's friendship with Karṇa.

Before a duel can occur the two parties must proclaim their lineage, the equal rank of the contenders being important.[87] When Karṇa's origins are demanded and he has little to pronounce,

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[86] When Karṇa is first discovered by the *sūta* and his wife, the charioteer is described as *dhṛtarāṣṭrasya vai sakhā*, 'a comrade of Dhṛtarāṣṭra' (III,293,1). For Karṇa, this 'friendship' is almost on the level of what later came to be described as *bhakti*, 'devotion', an affection that aspires to an unworldly and immaterial relation. Hiltebeitel, 1982, examines the importance of 'friendship' in epic culture.

[87] *mātaraṃ pitaraṃ kulam*, 'mother, father, clan', I,126,32. See Mehendale, 1995, p.10, "The third *dharma* ['mutually agreed upon rules'] is concerned with combat between equals." Karṇa says to Nakula, *sadṛśais tāta yudhyasva*, 'sir, fight with those who are worthy!' (VIII,17,94 — quoted in Mehendale). Bhīṣma, speaking to Duryodhana at Kurukṣetra, advises him to only fight with kings and no others, *rājadharmaṃ puraskṛtya rājā rājānam ṛcchati*, 'Having observed royal decorum, a king [only] attacks a king' (VI,91,22). It is for this reason, that a kṣatriya should only contest with an equal, that Bhīṣma, in the course of his own *parvan*, refuses to attack Śikhaṇḍin.

Duryodhana steps in and defines the genealogy of kingship as having three 'sources' or *yonis*. He describes Karṇa as being *arājñā*,[88] 'a non-king,' and offers to appoint him, or technically, anoint him, as ruler of the Aṅgas, a kingdom towards the East near the region of contemporary Bengal.[89] Brahmins immediately proceed with the consecration, and he becomes *śriyā yukto mahābalaḥ*, 'one of great strength joined with fortune' (I,126,36).[90] At this point a very definite reciprocity between the two is inaugurated. The fact that Karṇa has virtually no relationship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra is an aspect of the intense bilateralism that occurs between Duryodhana and his champion.[91] There are none of the identities and symmetries which we have just been analysing.

Once installed as king, Karṇa asks his new patron what he wants of him, in return for the gift of a kingdom. Duryodhana, echoing the other's own words replies, *atyantam sakhyam icchāmi*, 'I want endless friendship' (I,127,38).[92] When Karṇa's humble father appears and Bhīma ridicules his low status, saying that he is like a dog, Duryodhana responds by saying that the greatest power of warriors is to fight with other warriors (I,127,11), citing the origins of some of the greatest kṣatriyas. He describes the presence and appearance of Karṇa and uses the term *śūra*, and adds,

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[88] *yady ayaṃ phalguno yuddhe nārājñā yoddhum icchati*, 'If this Arjuna does not wish to fight in battle with one who is without sovereignty' — 'a non-king' (I,126,35).

[89] The only significant mention of Karṇa as acting king of this region comes when he is defeated by Bhīma on his eastern campaign in book two, *sa karṇaṃ yudhi nirjitya*, 'He, having subdued Karṇa in battle' (II,27,18). The town of Campā, where Karṇa had first been discovered by wife of the *sūta*, is in the region of the Aṅgas (III,292,26).

[90] To this kingdom he later adds more territory. Jarāsaṃdha, king of the Māgadhas, almost killed in a duel with Karṇa, surrenders and in restitution makes over to his opponent the town of Mālinī to rule (XII,5,6).

[91] Although they are cousins, by marriage.

[92] Prefiguring this statement is the request of Kṛṣṇa to Indra after the holocaust in the Khāṇḍava forest. Indra gives missiles to his son, but, *vāsudevo'pi jagrāha prītiṃ pārthena śāśvatīm*, 'Vasudeva took eternal friendship with Arjuna' (I,225,13). This moment in the poem is an occasion where nascent Hinduism touches hands with the old Vedic system, or, where the classical hero and the archaic hero join amicably in favour of Arjuna.

I,127,15: *katham ādityasaṃkāśam mṛgī vyāgraṃ janiṣyati.*
How will a doe give birth to a tiger who is like the sun?

In book eight, just before Karṇa is to die, Duryodhana reiterates this sentiment, saying that because of his great skill in archery which Karṇa received from Paraśurāma, he cannot possibly be of the caste of *sūtas*, and that he considers him a *devaputra*, 'son of a deity' (VIII,24,159).[93]

When they depart the arena, Duryodhana 'takes Karṇa by the hand', *karṇam ālambya kare*, (I,127,19). No one else in the poem appears to recognise Karṇa's intrinsic nobility nor are there such displays of masculine amity anywhere else in the work. Karṇa, for his part, *pareṇa sāmnā abhyavadat suyodhanam*, 'spoke to Duryodhana with great friendliness' (I,127,24).

From now on Karṇa is always at the side of his king and they are rarely apart. Usually Śakuni is along with them , a 'gang of three', and sometimes Duḥśāsana is accompanying, making it 'four'. These are the ones who plan and effect the downfall of the Pāṇḍavas. Karṇa always proposes vigorous action, often to the extent of war. Duryodhana is typically described as a *duṣṭātmā*, a 'wicked soul', and as one 'scorched by envy', *īrṣyayā abhisaṃtaptaḥ*, for his cousins. It is this antipathy which Karṇa attaches himself to and does his utmost to activate: this is his key role in the poem. What drives Duryodhana is envy and usurpation, whereas Karṇa is fuelled by his feelings of complete loyalty.[94] He emulates and aggravates what he perceives to be the position of his king. If Duryodhana could be said to provide the form of the contention

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[93] When his adoptive father had first taken Karṇa from the basket he had said, *devagarbho'yam manye*, 'I think this is a child of a deity' (III,293,8).

[94] What really drives envy home into Duryodhana's heart is to hear the *paurāḥ*, 'people', discussing the superior merits of the Pāṇḍavas and Bhīṣma compared to those of the Dhārtarāṣṭras (I,129,4-10). For a good account of Duryodhana's envy see II,46-49, *tenāham eva kṛśatāṃ gataś ca*, 'By this I am one who has gone to leanness' (II,49,25). He does justify this jealousy however by saying, *asaṁtoṣaḥ śriyo mūlaṃ tasmāt*, 'Dissatisfaction is therefore the root of prosperity' (II,50,18), which is a good kṣatriya maxim.

with the Pāṇḍavas, it is Karṇa who supplies the greater part of its content. Duryodhana's position is really what is stake, but it is Karṇa who is always the one suggesting various belligerent inroads into Pāṇḍava authority.

In council at Hāstinapura, king Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks his son and Karṇa for their opinion as to what should be done in the kingdom now that the Pāṇḍavas had shown themselves not to be dead, as was thought, and now that they had just forged a strong new marriage alliance with the Pāñcālas.[95] In response to Duryodhana, who is favouring a policy of sowing dissension through the use of 'stratagem', *upāya*, among the Pāṇḍavas, it is Karṇa who proposes the alternative policy of war, *praharaṇīyās te*, 'they are to be attacked' (I,194,11). He completely discounts the efficacy of a policy that would be implemented *upāyena*, 'by means of strategem'. He begins by saying,

I,194,1: *duryodhana tava prajñā na samyag iti me matiḥ.*
Duryodana! It is my opinion that your insight is lacking!

Karṇa is putting himself in the place of the hard-line, 'hawkish' advisor, a role he will hereafter consistently take. This is the first time that such a policy has been mooted and Karṇa does this with extreme vigour and passion. He repeats this phrase several times 'with vigour', *vikrameṇa*, adding,

I,194,18: *vikramaṃ ca praśaṃsanti kṣatriyasya viśāṃ pate*
svako hi dharmaḥ śūrāṇāṃ vikramaḥ pārthivarṣabha.
They praise the valour of the kṣatriya, O lord of the earth!
O bull of princes, vigour is the personal dharma of heroes!

This is the first occasion in the poem where such a plan of war is put forward. It is from this moment, a moment inspired solely by

[95] They had been considered immolated in the *jatugṛha*, 'house of lac', at Vāraṇāvata by Purocana, on the instigation of Duryodhana after the trial of weaponry and Arjuna's success (I,137).

Karṇa, that the long process that culminates at Kurukṣetra begins.[96] This speech represents the source of the great Bhārata war, and it could be argued that Karṇa is thereby the instrument of transition from *dvāpara yuga* to *kali yuga*: he is the one to supply motivation. The repeated thrust of the belligerence is *vikrameṇa ... tāñ jahi*, 'strike them with force' (I,194,20). The two elder warriors, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, of course oppose this. They, along with Kṛpa, will always counter the alliance of Karṇa and Duryodhana, but without success; Bhīṣma wants to give the Pāṇḍavas half the kingdom (I,195,8 and 19). Karṇa then accuses both Bhīṣma and Droṇa of being dishonest and avaricious in their counsel. The latter angrily rebuts Karṇa,

I,196,28: *vidma te bhāvadoṣena yad artham idam ucyate*
duṣṭaḥ pāṇḍavahetos tvaṃ doṣaṃ khyāpayase hi naḥ.
We know it is through a flaw in your character this thing is said:
impaired on account of the Pāṇḍavas – you proclaim error to us.

Vidura concludes the council's deliberation by lambasting Duryodhana and Karṇa and Śakuni for favouring such a violent policy.

I,197,28: *duryodhanaś ca karṇaś ca śakuniś cāpi saubalaḥ*
adharmayuktā duṣprajñā bālā mā eṣām vacaḥ kṛthāḥ.
Duryodhana and Karṇa and Śakuni are
unlawful, stupid, puerile! Do not effect this policy of theirs!

The following scene is the opening of the Gograhaṇa *parvan*, the 'raiding of cattle'. Here, it is Karṇa who is proposing the plan of sending out 'spies', *cara*, in order to locate the disguised Pāṇḍavas in this, their final year of exile (IV,25,8).

In the gambling session Karṇa insults Draupadī and does not hesitate in doing his utmost to humiliate her and her husbands. It is this

[96] Kṛṣṇa later tells Vidura *seyam āpan mahāghorā kuruṣu eva samutthitā / karṇaduryodhanakṛtā*, 'This greatly terrible disaster has arisen among the Kurus. It was done by Duryodhana and Karṇa' (V,91,9).

that the Pāṇḍavas always recall as the greatest opprobrium which they experienced and it is this insult of Karṇa's that Draupadī takes to heart most deeply.[97] Immediately before Karṇa's death, Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna of what occurred in the *sabhā* in an attempt to inspire him with the necessary passion to finally destroy Karṇa. It is this moment of excess and the deceit which Karṇa employed in order to obtain Rāma's confidence that mark the two instants in Karṇa's life where he behaved with hubris, exceeding what should have occurred. In book five, when Karṇa and Kṛṣṇa are talking on the chariot, the former admits that he spoke excessively on those occasions.

V,139,45: *yad abruvam ahaṃ kṛṣṇa kaṭukāni sma pāṇḍavān*
priyārthaṃ dhārtāraṣṭrasya tena tapye'dya karmaṇā.
Kṛṣṇa, whatever fierce things I said to the Pāṇḍavas
for the sake of Duryodhana: by this action I suffer now.

Again, he is only acting out of allegiance to his patron. When Duryodhana is later distraught at the possible ascendance of the Pāṇḍavas — even though they have only just gone off to the forest, which he perceives to be at his own expense — Karṇa observes that his king has become *nātihṛṣṭamanāḥ*, 'not very joyous'. He says,

II,8,16: *priyaṃ sarve cikīrṣāmo rājñaḥ kiṁkarapāṇayaḥ*
na cāsya śaknumaḥ sarve priye sthātum atandritāḥ.
We all who have the hands of servants wish to do
the good of the king.
Unwearied, we all cannot stand in his favour.

He proposes the taking of arms and, *gacchāmaḥ sahitā hantuṃ pāṇḍavān*, 'together we go to slay the Pāṇḍavas'. All of them proclaim *bāḍham iti*, 'yes', and 'angrily', *saṃkrudhāḥ*, they set off (III,8,20).

The audience thus hears how Karṇa performs as a catalyst to both the king and his two other 'henchman', *vaśānuga*. This is a

[97] *na hi me śāmyate duḥkhaṃ karṇo yat prāhasat tadā*, 'My pain is not appeased — that Karṇa then mocked me!' (III,13,113). She repeats this *verbatim* before the assembly the next day (V,93,11).

characteristic that Karṇa will rapidly develop until he is the only real intimate of Duryodhana, the 'first' of his companions. If it were not for Karṇa's tremendous wrath against the Pāṇḍavas, Arjuna in particular, one might say that Duryodhana could not have stepped as far as he did. It is Karṇa who acts as the real fuel to the conflict, constantly raising the stakes. Without Karṇa, Duryodhana's enmity would have remained hollow.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra in colloquy with his *sūta,* Saṃjaya, criticises Karṇa as being a 'fool', *manda*, who 'thoughtlessly', *vicetas*, exacerbates the follies of his son (III,46,35).[98] The devotion that Karṇa displays for his patron, particularly through speech, is irate, haughty, and constantly abrasive. Heroes, unlike kings, are only responsible for their reputation, not for any larger dharma that supports the laws of a community. The problem in this relationship is that Duryodhana is a bad king — even his father says this; in a way, Duryodhana behaves more like a hero than a king, his position is ambiguous.

Before the Ghoṣayātrā *parvan* really begins, Karṇa sings a long and eloquent hymn of praise to his king (III,226,1ff.) In this he urges the usual policy of aggression.

III,226,13: *sa prayāhi mahārāja śriyā paramayā yutaḥ*
pratapan pāṇḍuputrāṃs tvaṃ raśmivān iva tejasā.
O great king, provided with superb splendour, march out!
Scorching the sons of Pāṇḍu with heat, like the rayed sun.

It is Karṇa who comes up with the 'ruse', *upāya*, of going to the forest to count the cattle, and so to provoke the Pāṇḍavas.[99] When

[98] Duryodhana, Śakuni, Duḥśāsana and Karṇa are frequently slighted in the collective, as in V,35,66, where they are referred to as *mūḍha*, 'stupid'. In the Droṇa *parvan*, after Bhīma has successfully defeated Karṇa who had finally come onto the field, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, speaking with Saṃjaya, recalls how Duryodhana used to vaunt Karṇa's prowess, *karṇo hi balavāñ śūro dṛḍhadhanvā jitaklamaḥ*, 'Karṇa is a potent hero, a steadfast archer, indefatiguable' (VII,110,6).

[99] When Duryodhana first suggests, in council, that the Pāṇḍavas are to be removed by subterfuge, and I,193,4ff. is the first speech where he has spoken in this manner, Karṇa rejects the policy, saying that *upāya*, 'stratagem', is not the way to act. *na hy upāyena te śakyāḥ pāṇḍavāḥ kurunandana*, O joy of the Kurus, not by stratagem are the Pāṇḍavas to be expelled' (I,194,2). Thus Karṇa's proposal to use *upāya* in book three indicates a real shift in his thinking.

he announces this to Duryodhana he does so 'laughing', *prahasan* (III,227,18).

The plan goes awry however and *gandharvas* attack them. Karṇa fights valiantly (III,230,11ff.) and is described as 'unmoveable like a mountain', *girir ivācalaḥ* (III,230,25). Karṇa performs as the Kaurava champion until his chariot is hacked to pieces; then he retreats, mounting the chariot of another. Having observed Karṇa defeated, the whole force turns. Ominously, Duryodhana's champion failed to protect him in this first trial.

The *gandharvas* then vanquish their opponents and capture Duryodhana and his baggage train. At the instigation of Yudhiṣṭhira, who is prepared to go to any length to save a cousin, one of his own *kula*, 'clan', Arjuna and his brothers join combat and release Duryodhana.[100] In speaking with Arjuna the leader of the *gandharvas* refers to *abhiprāyaḥ ... duryodhanasya pāpasya karṇasya ca*, 'the aim of the wicked Duryodhana and Karṇa' (III,235,3). Even he is aware of how these two are joined in machination.

Freed and thus humiliated by his enemy, *vidīryamāṇo vrīḍena,* 'torn by shame' (III,235,23), Duryodhana determines to fast to death, *prāyam upāsiṣye* (III,238,19).[101] Karṇa naturally convinces him that this is not really the proper course, cleverly saying that the Pāṇḍavas, being his subjects, had no choice but to free their king! He then gives a long and rhetorical account of kingship from this point of view (III,238,38-48). He repeats several times, *uttiṣṭha rājan*, 'rise O king', and concludes this admonishment by saying,

> III,238,48: *prāyopaviṣṭas tu nṛpa rājñāṃ hāsyo bhaviṣyasi.*
> *O king, as one who has fasted to death, of kings*
> *you will become laughable.*

Duryodhana does not relent from his decision until he is given a vision of the underworld by Kṛtyā, a demoness. There, the *dānavas*

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[100] According to Yudhiṣṭhira the 'dharma of kin', *jñātidharma*, does not collapse under any condition, even during internecine feud (III,232,2).

[101] We have already heard Duryodhana utter this wish during earlier speeches (II,43,19ff.; III,8,6). He also repeats it later on the battlefield (VII,125).

inform him that Karṇa will kill Arjuna[102] and will hand over his ear-rings and cuirass to Indra; Duryodhana thus gives up his intention of fasting (III,240,30). This is just a ploy, of course, to deflect Duryodhana from his intended death. Notably, the vital point in the turning of Duryodhana's mind is the prediction that Karṇa will defeat Arjuna. The next morning Karṇa goes to his king and 'having embraced him with both arms', *pariṣvajya ... bhujābhyām*, admonishes him, *uttiṣṭha rājan*, 'rise, O king!' (III,240,37), promising to destroy Arjuna in the coming fight.

Thus we see how totally dependent the patron has become on his *sakhi*, 'friend', and also how even the underworld conspires to delude Duryodhana.[103] One can only conjecture that the *dānavas* and *daityas* do this because they wish to facilitate the destruction of the world and *dvāpara yuga*. They are part of the overall cosmic movement.

Thus the *folie à deux* proceeds. This kind of relationship is unusual for it does not fall within the typical categories of other kṣatriya relations exhibited in the poem. It is more than advisory but less than the friendship as evinced by the Kṛṣṇa-Arjuna model,[104] although there is an intimacy about this relationship which does not exist between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.[105] Back in Hāstinapura Karṇa is again heard praising the potence of his king, saying that he is like Indra himself. Duryodhana responds by saying that with Karṇa as a 'beloved friend' *sahāyaḥ ... anuraktaḥ*, 'nothing is difficult', *na kiṃcid durlabham* (III,241,17-18). The latter encourages Duryodhana to celebrate the *rājasūya* ritual, that is, to be conse-

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[102] Repeated at III,240,32.

[103] The *dānavas* inform Duryodhana that, *hatasya narakasyātmā karṇamūrtim upāśritaḥ*, 'the soul of the slain Naraka has entered the body of Karṇa' (III,240,19). This is the means that they had planned for the destruction of Arjuna *vadhopāyo'rjunasya*. It was Kṛṣṇa who had originally killed Naraka, an *asura*.

[104] Rāma and Lakṣman manifest a similar amity, but without any of the opprobrious qualities that this relation between Duryodhana and Karṇa reveals.

[105] Except perhaps for VI,33,41ff.

crated as king of kings; but this is of course not feasible whilst Yudhiṣṭhira survives.[106]

Karṇa's pre-occupation with fame — and his extraordinary ambition for the achievement of this — perhaps suits the pattern of friendship which exists between king and hero, insofar as the latter requires the offices of the former if his fame is to be accomplished. There is a very real symbiosis between the roles of king and hero. Functionally neither can exist without the other and yet the former's need for continuity or longevity comes into opposition with the latter's ultimate need for death. The hero is to acquire and defend the kingdom and the king is to rule it.[107]

As Duryodhana addresses his commanders before the onset of the fighting in the Virāṭa *parvan*, he begins his speech,

IV,42,2: *ukto'yam artha ācāryaṃ mayā karṇena cāsakṛt.*
This policy was repeatedly stated by Karṇa and me to Droṇa.

Thus we see how authority is now situated not simply with the king but in association with him! This long speech of thirty-one *ślokas* that Duryodhana gives is then followed by an equally long address to the commanders by Karṇa, in which he grandly refers to his own valour and martial distinction.

The 'debt', *ṛṇa*, which Karṇa owes his king, is further reified in book four, where he vows to repay this.[108]

IV,43,10: *adyāham ṛṇam akṣayyaṃ purā vācā pratiśrutam*
dhārtarāṣṭrasya dāsyāmi nihatya samare'rjunam.
Today, the undecaying debt I previously vowed,

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[106] Duryodhana's brahmins therefore convince him to perform what they call the *vaiṣṇava* ritual, which involves a special golden plough.

[107] There is a third cycle in this exchange, whereby the king offers the earth to the brahmins at the conclusion of the horse sacrifice. They accept and then return it, receiving a symbolic tribute in its stead. See XIV,91,7, *yudhiṣṭhiraḥ prādāt ... vyāsāya tu vasuṃdharām.* Also, *pṛthivī dakṣiṇā smṛtā* (XIV,91,11).

[108] This indebtedness is reversed by Duryodhana at the outset of the Śalya *parvan*, when Karṇa and most of the other Kaurava heroes have fallen, *ye madarthe hatāḥ śūrās teṣāṃ kṛtam anusmaran / ṛṇaṃ tat pratimuñcāno ...* 'Recollecting what was done [by] those heroes slain for my sake, that debt restoring ...' (IX,4,42). This debt is mentioned again by Duryodhana at IX,31,18 and 21.

I will give to the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, having slain Arjuna in battle.

Enlarging upon this, he then, a few lines later, referring to Arjuna, says,

IV,43,19: *adya duryodhanasyāhaṃ śalyam hṛdi cirasthitam samūlam uddhariṣyāmi ...*
Today I shall tear out the thorn with its root long placed in the heart of Duryodhana ...

When they are fighting the Matsyas in book four and being bested by Arjuna, it is Karṇa who comes to the right side of Duryodhana to protect him, *duryodhanam dakṣinato' bhyagacchat* (IV,61,3). At the onset of this clash Karṇa had boasted,[109]

IV,37,13: *na cārjunaḥ kalā pūrṇā mama duryodhanasya vā.*
And Arjuna is not [equal to] a full part of Duryodhana or me.

This kind of behaviour, as we shall see, is in line with typical warrior practice.

Yudhiṣṭhira in the Udyoga *parvan* describes Karṇa as a 'clever minister', *amātyaḥ kuśalī*, of Duryodhana, which is a formal relationship (V,23,13).[110] There is thus a hierarchical and emotional complexity in what is going on between Duryodhana and Karṇa; which is to be expected of the latter, for none of his behaviour adheres to ordinary standards. As we saw in his dealings with Arjuna, Karṇa is full of paradox and extremes.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, instructing his *sūta*, Saṃjaya, who is to act as herald in the Udyoga *parvan*, where ambassadors are exchanged to parley over the likelihood of war, describes Duryodhana and Karṇa as:

V,22,6-7: *teṣāṃ dveṣṭā nāsty ...*
anyatra pāpād viṣamān mandabuddher duryodhanāt

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[109] This is the first occasion that we hear Karṇa proclaiming his greatness before a battle. See below, Ch.IV,5 where boasting is analysed.

[110] Nevertheless, he is soon saying to Saṃjaya, *paśya saṃmoham asya*, 'Look at his delusion!' (V,26,17).

kṣudratarāc ca karṇāt.
There is none who dislikes them other than the wicked
hostile, dull-witted Duryodhana and the more despicable Karṇa.

This is what the old king instructs his messenger to inform the Pāṇḍavas!

In subsequent council Duryodhana describes his friend as *tulya*, 'equal' to Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Kṛpa (V,54,51).[111] At one point the blind old king tells his son that it is Karṇa who makes him follow a policy of war.

V,57,9: *na tvaṃ karoṣi kāmena karṇaḥ kārayitā tava.*
You do not act with desire. Karṇa is the instigator of you.

In reply Duryodhana gives his famous speech, where the audience hears of war as a metaphorical sacrifice. Sacrifice is, of course, generally the principal domain of brahmins.[112]

V,57,12: *ahaṃ ca tāta karṇaś ca raṇayajñaṃ vitatya vai.*
I and Karṇa, sir, having instituted a sacrifice of war ...

This is to say an awful lot, for it gives to the *sakhitva* a dimension previously absent; that is, Duryodhana is laying claim to a sacerdotal position.[113] Is this really a metaphor, rhetoric, or is formal battle, with immolation of victims, seen by the culture as a necessary activity for the maintenance of harmony in the *triloka*, the 'cosmos'? If this is so, then the Sanskrit hero really does obtain to levels of divinity, or at least to the *quasi*-sacerdotal. This would also give the singing of epic a truly 'ritual' dimension, where the hero is the 'victim', the *paśu*.

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[111] All three of whom have divine, or 'non-human', *ayonija*, origins: Bhīṣma's mother was the river Gaṅgā, Droṇa was born from a basin, and Kṛpa from a reed (V,54,47-49). Duryodhana then calls them *śūra*, saying, *śakrasyāpi vyathāṃ kuryuḥ saṃyuge*, 'They could make the fear even of Indra in battle' (V,54,50).

[112] Hiltebeitel, 1976a, analyses the force of this metaphor. Bhīma first mentions a *raṇasattra,* 'sacrifice of battle', in III,242,14. Indra at XII,99,12.ff. depicts a *saṃgrāmayajñaḥ*.

[113] Duryodhana is putting himself and Karṇa in the place of the 'sacrifier', not the 'sacrificer', *yajamāna*. That is, they are in the place of the actual officiants.

At this point in the progress of the poem, it is only the 'gang of four' in the *sabhā* who favour a war policy. All the others present, king, herald, ministers, the ancient Bhīṣma, all favour suing for peace. This is where Duryodhana denies his cousins even a pin-prick's area of ground (V,57,18).[114] Duryodhana is really the active king by now and for some reason Karṇa is unusually silent in this second round of ambassadorial exchange.

At the next exchange of messengers, when Kṛṣṇa himself presents the Pāṇḍava cause to the court at Hāstinapura, the audience hears,

> V,89,12: *mṛdupūrvaṃ śaṭhodarkaṃ karṇam ābhaṣya kaurvavaḥ.*
> *Duryodhana spoke tenderly to Karṇa — what was ultimately wicked.*

It is curious, that against the pleas of Kṛṣṇa — which Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his counsellor Vidura, along with the ancient Bhīṣma and the *ācarya* Droṇa, as well as the old queen, Gāndhārī, all publically support — Duryodhana can still hold out for war (V,122-126). Kṛṣṇa closes this interview by advising the old king, *duryodhanam baddhvā tataḥ saṃśāmya pāṇḍavaiḥ*, 'having tied up Duryodhana, conciliate the Pāṇḍavas!' In terms of *Machtpolitik*, Duryodhana is the one with all the cards, no one goes against him; but the substance of this power lies with Karṇa. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, hearing of the plot to kidnap Kṛṣṇa, describes his son as *rājyalubdham*, 'lustful for sovereignty' (V,128,30).[115]

When Karṇa joins Kṛṣṇa in the latter's chariot and they discuss the imminent war, Karṇa replies to Kṛṣṇa's offer of personal kingdom and supremacy, saying, that not for the entire earth nor for piles of gold and not from fear nor from happiness 'is he able to speak untruthfully', *na ... anṛtaṃ vaktum utsahe*. The *anṛtam* refers

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[114] Repeated at V,126,26.

[115] Vidura, to Kuntī, describes how he considers the old king: *mattaḥ putra-madenaiva vidharme pathi vartete*, 'Stupefied by passion for his son he goes on the way of lawlessness' (V,142,5).

to his relationship with Duryodhana.[116] For thirteen years he had possessed a 'thornless kingdom', *rājyam akaṇṭakam*, among the Aṅgas, because of his dependence on the king (V,139,13). Karṇa, having relied on Duryodhana, thus took up arms for him. He repeats that he is unable to perform what Kṛṣṇa adjures because of this relation, which has what in western terms would be called a feudal necessity about it.

V,139,17: *anṛtaṃ notsahe kartuṃ dhārtarāṣṭrasya dhīmataḥ.*
I am not able to perform an untruth of the wise son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

Duryodhana had also selected him as the one to oppose Arjuna in a 'duel', *dvairatham*, he says.

At no point does Karṇa ever bring this relation with his patron into any breach. His verbal commitment and obligation incurred in book one at the *vidhāna*, 'trial of weapons', is never put to question. Disregarding the moral consequences of his loyalty, this strict adherence to his given word supplies one of the conditions qualifying Karṇa as superlatively heroic.

Karṇa then repeats the extensive metaphor used above, about battle being a sacrifice which Duryodhana would conduct. As Duryodhana had focussed more on the utensils of the ritual, Karṇa now pays special attention to the officiants (V,139,29ff.) He then confesses that he knows that both he and his king and all the others will perish in the battle (V,141,35) and admits that they will all enter the fire of Arjuna's arrows (V,141,42).

The night before fighting begins at Kurukṣetra, even though Bhīṣma is the *senāpati*, 'commander-in-chief' of the forces, it is

[116] It is interesting that Karṇa makes use of the word *anṛta* here, whereas one of the pre-occupations of the Pāṇḍavas is *dharma*. See below Ch.IV,4, when he speaks with his mother and employs the same term. Of the two terms, *anṛta* is the more 'archaic', which accords with the view that Karṇa is one of the more 'archaic' heroes in the poem.

with Karṇa that Duryodhana surveys the Kaurava camp.[117] Bhīṣma later refers to him insultingly and says that he is 'counsellor, guide, and relative' to Duryodhana, *mantrī netā bandhuś ca* (V,165,4). When immediately prior to the first moments of battle, Yudhiṣṭhira crosses the lines to speak with the individual heroes of the Kaurava side, Karṇa says to him that his 'life has been given up', *tyak-taprāṇam* (VI,41,87) to the service of Duryodhana, and that he would never be *vipriya*, 'disloyal'. Just before he at last enters the battle, Karṇa approaches the recumbent Bhīṣma, and is advised to make peace. Karṇa responds that he does not wish to be seen as *mithyā*, 'false' to Duryodhana (VI,117,22).

On the morning after Bhīṣma has withdrawn from the leadership of the Kauravas, all the assembled princes acclaim and shout for Karṇa to be re-instated. This is almost an election. They turn to him,

> VII,1,31: *bandhum āpadgatasyeva tam evopāgaman manaḥ.*
> *Like the heart of one misfortunate turns to a relative.*

This public acclamation runs through fourteen *ślokas*, and no other hero in the poem receives such popular support for his leadership. He is *durvārapauruṣam*, 'one whose heroism is irresistible'; *mahāyaśāḥ*, 'possessing great glory'; *yo'graṇīḥ śūrasaṃmataḥ*, 'one who is foremost, renowned among heroes'; and *sodaryavat*, 'like a brother' to Duryodhana. Then addressing the army in a long formal and speech before he enters the fray, Karṇa praises Bhīṣma, causing them to weep.[118] He tells them that once he has slain the enemy, *dāsyāmy ahaṃ dhārtarāṣṭrāya rājyam*, 'I will give the kingdom to Duryodhana' (VII,2,22).

When Duryodhana comes to him on the evening of the fourteenth day and requests that he exert himself to save Jayadratha,

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[117] During the course of the Bhīṣma *parvan*, when Karṇa has withdrawn from combat, he continues to work 'behind the scenes', trying to inspire Duryodhana to in some way discharge Bhīṣma from the fight (VI,93).

[118] This is a long twenty-two verse speech, following the pattern analysed below in Ch.IV,5 and 6. Karṇa boasts as to what he will accomplish, essentially making a speech act.

Karṇa, having just been bested in an immense duel with Bhīma, is sanguine and measured in his response. In unequivocable terms he promises to do his utmost but keeps on repeating the phrase *jayo daive pratiṣṭhitaḥ*, 'victory is based on destiny' (VII,120,28). At this point he no longer vaunts nor praises his patron like he used to.

Duryodhana loses confidence in his friend after Jayadratha is killed. 'Karṇa is beaten', he says to himself several times, *sa karṇo nirjitaḥ* (VII,125,5ff.) He pleads with Droṇa to be allowed to enter the combat and perish, recalling his similar desire to die after being defeated by the *gandharvas* in book three. Later, as events look even worse for the Kauravas, Duryodhana asks Karṇa for further effort.

VII,133,2: *ayaṃ sa kālaḥ saṃprāpto mitrāṇāṃ mitravatsala*
trāyasva samare karṇa sarvān yodhān mahābala.
O you who are devoted to the friends of friends,
the moment of amity has come!
Karṇa, O mighty one, rescue all my warriors in the battle!

Karṇa replies,

VII,133,10: *mayi jīvati kauravya viṣādaṃ mā kṛthāḥ kvacit.*
Whilst I live, O Kuru son, never be despondent!

During the fifteenth night, the 'battle at night', when the two sides illuminate their chariots and elephants with lamps or torches and fight on through the dark, the *niśāyuddha*, Kṛṣṇa contrives that Arjuna avoids his *bhāga* and that Karṇa meets up with Ghaṭotkaca. The continuation of fighting into the dark had been at the command of Duryodhana (VII,138,12), and the description of how this appeared is a uniquely beautiful moment in the poem which is likened to a *naradevayuddha*, 'battle of deities and men' (VII,138,33). This is also the moment when Kṛṣṇa has Ghaṭotkaca attack the Kauravas, causing havoc, and Duryodhana requests that Karṇa resist the demon. Karṇa does this in a long duel in the course of which Ghaṭotkaca makes great use of his powers of illusion, much like Rāvaṇa. Karṇa becomes 'greatly pained', *ārtiṃ parāṃ gatam* (VII,152,8), but succeeds in withstanding the *rākṣasa* and

then killing him. Karṇa and Duryodhana, in a unique triumphal moment, ride together in the latter's chariot back to camp (VII,154,63).

On the dawning of his last day, Karna visits his king and describes his strengths and weaknesses. Gone are the moments of hortatory declamation. He requests that the king of Madras drive for him. Duryodhana then has to convince Śalya that this is not beneath his dignity, for Śalya, a king, considers Karṇa to be lowly (VIII,23,29ff.) *sūtas*, he says, are *paricārakāḥ*, 'servants' (VIII,23,36), even though Karṇa is *yaśasvin*, 'glorious'. Duryodhana has to give a lengthy and flattering account as to why Śalya should do this; it continues for a hundred and sixty-one *ślokas*, in which Śalya is likened to Brahma! (VIII,24). Such is Duryodhana's committment to Karṇa, who, he says, is 'like the Sun', *ādityasadṛśa*.

VIII,24,151: *nāpi sūtakule jātaṃ karṇaṃ manye kathaṃcana.*
Thus, I cannot consider Karṇa one born into a clan of drivers!

Duryodhana carries on praising Śalya and listing Karṇa's achievements at Kurukṣetra, and the Madras king agrees to drive the chariot. Śalya makes the ominous request that whatever he says to Karṇa, as he drives, is to be forgiven (VIII,25,6). As the audience knows, Śalya intends to distort the formal charioteer-hero relationship. At VIII,26,6 the audience hears Karṇa instructing the king as a *sūta*, ordering him to prepare the vehicle, a rare moment of poetic irony.

The next day sees the dawning of Karṇa's *aristeíā*, his *vikramakāla*, his 'moment of valour'. So far, in the battle, the Kaurava forces have been led by two figures whose inclinations were more to the Pāṇḍavas than they should have been, from Duryodhana's point of view, that is; for Bhīṣma and Droṇa bore a paternal regard for their foe and this had been to the detriment of Duryodhana. Once Karṇa was anointed as *senāpati* (VIII,1,11-12), for the first time, the Kauravas were being led by a commander ut-

terly devoted to his king and utterly opposed to the enemy; the tone of the battle changes markedly.[119]

Just prior to Karṇa's death there are 'showers of flowers', *puṣpavarṣāṇi* (VIII,63,60), a phenomenon which also occurs at the death of Duryodhana.[120] When Karṇa is dead, Duryodhana sinks into terrible remorse, is said to be *śokaparītacetāḥ*, 'mindless with grief', and,

VIII,68,32: *hā karṇa hā karṇa iti bruvāṇa ārto visaṃjño*
bhṛśam aśrunetraḥ.
Saying, Alas Karṇa! Alas Karṇa! [He was] greatly distressed,
witless, with eyes full of tears.

Later, he is described,

IX,1,4: *bhṛśaṃ śokārṇave magno nirāśaḥ sarvato'bhavat.*
He was utterly hopeless and wholly submerged in a sea of grief.

Seven lines after this *śloka*, Duryodhana has given up and entered into the depths of a lake.[121]

Karṇa is referred to by Vyāsa, who is speaking to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the Strī *parvan* or book of laments, as the 'greatest friend' of

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[119] This is repeated, with modification, when Duryodhana says *abhiṣecaya senānye svayam ātmānam ātmanā*, 'Anoint yourself in the command, the self by the self' (VIII,6,28). This is an unusual thing to say and indicates Karṇa's priority: the anointing is not usually performed by the anointed. The ritual is described at VIII,6,36-42. After this is accomplished, the king speaks to Karṇa *snigdhaṃ bhrātṛsamam vacaḥ*, 'affectionate and brotherly words' (VII,7,1).

[120] *apatat sumahad varṣaṃ puṣpāṇām*, 'a great rain of flowers fell' (IX,60,51). The poets are signalling this as an exceptionally divine moment.

[121] When Saṃjaya actually meets up with Duryodhana, after all the Kauravas have been killed, the king is *ekaḥ*, 'alone' (IX,28,40). This is prior to his entering the lake. Earlier, after his chariot had been smashed, he was described as *pṛṣṭham āruhya vājinaḥ*, 'having mounted the back of a horse', which is an extremely unusual phrase for the poem, and perhaps denotes something an eminent kṣatriya only does in disgrace or defeat (IX,24,21). Having entered the waters of the lake, Duryodhana *astambhayata toyam ca māyayā*, 'By sorcery he made [froze?] the water solid' (IX,28,52). At II,43 it is because Duryodhana mistakes polished stone for water that he is laughed at by the Pāṇḍavas and servants: this is the crucial circumstance that leads to the dicing challenge. Duryodhana is framed by these bodies of water it seems.

Duryodhana, *paramaḥ sakhā* (XI,8,29).[122] Finally, when all the heroes of Kurukṣetra appear out of the Ganges, Karṇa and Duryodhana are still together, compounded, *karṇaduryodhanau* (XV,40,9).

These three relationships, with Arjuna, with Bhīṣma, and with Duryodhana, manifest three important aspects of Karṇa's persona; these are his dimensions, as it were. We hear little of his putative kingship, which appears to have minor bearing on his status as hero.[123] Similarly, there is little mention of any kinship relations, apart from with his mother and half-brothers, although the audience had been informed that he had wives according to the caste of a *sūta*, and that sons and brothers, presumably adoptive brothers, existed.[124] In the battle books the sons do appear, usually in a cursory manner, except for Vṛṣasena.

In these three portrayals I have tried to reveal three ranges of *persona*, which in the first two instances also indicate a degree of antagonism. One is then driven to ask, what does this structural and sometimes narrative symmetry have to tell us about the epic hero or kṣatriya society? When the whole universe divides in book eight (VIII,66) for the ultimate fight between Karṇa and Arjuna, this duality fills the cosmos and all its beings. It is as if the dualism or binarism of the universe is an important aspect of kṣatriya *weltanschauung* and is displayed in their personal affairs as given via epic.

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[122] In the afterlife however, when Yudhiṣṭhira visits *svarga*, Karṇa is not with Duryodhana in the blissful regions but is found with his brothers in the other tortuous place, *naraka*, (XVIII,2,40-41).

[123] Shulman, 1985, p. 381, writing of the relation between Karṇa and Arjuna comments, "The two stand on opposite sides of the divide between heroism and kingship."

[124] In the drama, *Karṇa Mokṣam*, by Pukalentippulavar, Ponnuruvi, the wife of Karṇa, plays an important role. Conversely, in Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.315, where he describes a modern-day version of the epic that centres about Draupadī, "As the son of the sun god, Sūrya, Karṇa inherits a dangerous solar side that complicates his relations with women ... This brings Kuntī close to Draupadī, who presumably could also 'handle' Karṇa, having been born from fire."

CHAPTER FOUR

SIX SPEECHES

There are six major dialogues in which Karṇa participates, excluding those exchanges that he makes with Duryodhana, Arjuna, and Bhīṣma which were analysed in Chapter III above. They all fall into a general pattern of projecting kṣatriya dharma, with the exception of the conversation which Karṇa has with Kṛṣṇa.[1] This particular dialogue reflects certain unique aspects of Karṇa's persona which we hear of nowhere else. Five of these speeches are private, that is, only the speakers hear what is said. The exchange with Kṛpa is public and although all of the speeches are to some extent 'performative', this particular speech functions as a commentary on the manner in which heroes, and especially Karṇa, address each other.[2]

1. *Sūrya*

Janamejaya opens this section of the poem by inquiring about Yudhiṣṭhira's 'great fear concerning Karṇa, *tat ... karṇaṃ prati mahad bhayam* (III,284,3).[3] Saṃjaya describes how, to pre-empt the arrival of Indra, who is *pāṇḍānāṃ hitakṛt*, 'intent on the good of the Pāṇḍavas', Sūrya comes to visit his son who is sleeping and at 'the end of his dream', *svapnānte*.[4] He has taken on the appear-

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[1] Niles, 1999, p.8, comments on epic as being "a form of ritualized discourse through which powerful people enhanced their prestige and self-esteem and articulated a system of values that was meant to benefit society as a whole."

[2] See Martin, 1989, p.37 *et seq*., on the nature of the 'performative'.

[3] In the *parvānukramaṇī* this section is a 'book' in itself and receives the title of *kuṇḍalāharaṇam*, 'the taking of the ear-rings', in the list of the hundred specified minor narratives (I,2,47).

[4] Miller, 1991, p.60 observes, "... in ancient Vedic myth the sun, called Mārtaṇḍa, is the first born of Aditi and is considered the first mortal. There is an intentional parallelism between the sons of Aditi and the sons of Kuntī. Karṇa, be-

ance of a brahmin and warns Karṇa of the plan. He calls him *satyabhṛtāṃ vara*, 'best of truth-bearers' (III,284,19).

III,284,13: *dadāsi ... prayācitaḥ ...*[5]
vittaṃ yat cānyad apy āhur na pratyākhyāsi karhicit.
Asked, you give, they say: you never deny wealth and whatever else.

This is one of Karṇa's most distinct characteristics: he is always generous.[6] We see this with the spear that he surrenders in order to save the army (VII,133). This is in accord with the principle that kṣatriyas personally give and do not take, they generate rather than receive, and Karṇa is always one to consider himself an exemplary kṣatriya.[7]

Sūrya warns him that his two natural ear-rings allow him to be invincible, *avadhyas tvam raṇe'rīṇām,* 'you are not to be slain in battle by enemies'. Having surrendered them to Indra, he will perish.

III,284,18: *āyuṣaḥ prakṣayaṃ gatvā mṛtyor vaśam upeṣyasi.*
You will become subject to death having attained a diminution of life-span.

These ear-rings, are, as we have seen above, a metonym for Karṇa's life or vitality. In a way the success of the victor at Kurukṣetra is dependent on the possession, or dispossession, of these jewels. With them, Karṇa would have been unbeatable and the Pāṇḍava cause would not have gained its triumph.

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ing the first born son of Kuntī, must also be the first to die, despite his divine birth."

[5] Note the concord between *dā* and *yāc*.

[6] This gift to Indra the brahmin does have something of the air of a formal prestation about it, if Karṇa is acting from a kingly rather than heroic point of view.

[7] This is in the private sense, not in the public sense of conquering. For kṣatriyas and the circulation of wealth see VIII,23,33.

Sūrya addresses Karṇa as *tāta*, a form of address which usually means 'father', but which is also 'a term of affection addressed to a junior.'[8]

III,284,22: *aham tāta sahasrāṁśuḥ sauhṛdāt tvāṃ nidarśaye.*
I, the Thousand-rayed, advise you, son, because of fondness.

Karṇa replies respectfully, *prasādaye tvām*, 'I honour you', and says that he 'speaks from friendship' *praṇayāt*.

III,284,25: *vrataṃ vai mama loko'yaṃ vetti kṛtsno vibhāvaso*
yathāhaṃ dvijamukhyebhyo dadyāṃ prāṇān api dhruvam.
O shining one, the entire world knows my vow,
that I would surely give even my life to prominent brahmins.

Strangely it is because of brahmin curses that he eventually perishes. He also asks Sūrya not to dissuade him from his 'promise', his *vrata*, if he really loves him.

III,284,24: *na nivāryo vratād asmād ahaṃ yady asmi te priyaḥ.*
If I am dear to you, I am not to be hindered from my vow.

He then says that he will give up the two jewels and the cuirass.

III,284,27: *dāsyāmi vibudhaśreṣṭha kuṇḍale varma cottamam*
na me kīrtiḥ praṇaśyeta triṣu lokeṣu viśrutā.
O best of deities, I shall give both ear-rings and fine cuirass.
My fame must not perish, renowned in the three worlds.

This is the first time that Karṇa has discussed his 'fame'. As we saw in Chapter II above, it is a crucial component of heroic culture and something that completely dominates Karṇa's self-possession in the world.

III,284,28: *madvidhasyāyaśasyaṃ hi na yuktaṃ prāṇarakṣaṇam*
yuktam hi yaśasā yuktaṃ maraṇam lokasaṃmatam.
For one like me, the inglorious saving of one's own life
is not right.

[8] Monier-Williams.

Death yoked with glory, esteemed by the world, is right.

That is, death with glory is preferable to life without glory, something Achilles also adheres to absolutely. By 'glory' we understand 'myth', that is, a phenomenon of culture and language, not of nature. Being *in the epic* is more important than being alive *in the world*.

Karṇa then makes an act of illocution in the form of a vow.[9] So far in this dialogue, references to Indra have all been by epithet: *śakra, pākaśāsaṇa, puraṃdara*. Now, using the actual name of Indra, Karṇa says, or in fact, vows, to give Indra what he wants: *so'ham indrāya dāsyāmi*, 'I will give to Indra' (III,284,29). It is not a truth act, for there is no correlative statement, 'as this is true ... then that will happen', *tena satyena*, as when Arjuna finally kills him: *anena satyena nihantv ayam śaraḥ* at VIII,67,20.[10] With this statement Karṇa is engaging another narrative, that is, one which will lead him to death, as he is no longer invulnerable. In the third *pāda* of this same *śloka* (III,284,29), Karṇa reverts to using an epithet for the name of Indra, *balavṛtraghnaḥ*.

III,284,29-30: *yadi māṃ balavṛtraghno bhikṣārtham upayāsyati ...*
... tan me kīrtikaraṃ loke tasyākīrtir bhaviṣyati.
If the Slayer of Vala and Vṛtra approaches me for
the purpose of begging ...
... That will be causing fame for me in the world, infamy for him.

No other hero in the Mahābhārata speaks in such terms, weighing fame by increment. Certainly, Arjuna never speaks in such terms. Bhīṣma, on a few occasions, makes reference in his speeches to fame, but never so absolutely. This is a unique aspect peculiar only to Karṇa. To put this in another way, Karṇa is the only hero in the poem who demonstrates such a pre-occupation with the medium itself, through which his story is being narrated.

Karṇa considers that he will obtain 'perpetual fame' by such an act of liberality and quotes an 'ancient' *śloka* supporting this

[9] See Austin, 1975, pp.108-132.
[10] Brown, 1972.

(III,284,35).[11] It is not simply the act of giving up what in effect signifies life and victory for Karṇa, but the possibility of achieving something even more prestigious than that, which appeals to him.[12] What attracts Karṇa is the fact that one of the greatest of deities is importuning him as a supplicant and that only he is able to satisfy this.[13] This gesture would be an act that would really elevate him in terms of renown. As we know, the vehicle of that renown is epic itself, the poetry of the *sūtas* — what the audience hears now. There is a degree of reflex here, insofar as what Karṇa is speaking of is actually occurring there and then.

Sūrya responds with a statement that kinship is more important than fame: friends, sons, wives, mother and father; these and kings perform the 'human duties of the living', *jīvatām ... kāryam* (III,285,4). He adds that he speaks like this because he realises that Karṇa is a *bhaktaḥ*, one of his devotees.[14] He does say however,

III,285,9: *devaguhyaṃ tvayā jñātuṃ na śakyaṃ puruṣarṣabha.*

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[11] The quoting of proverbs within epic is an interesting phenomenon in itself, providing one with another vector of the oral tradition. J. Brockington, 1979, has examined this appropriation in the Rāmāyaṇa. In Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, p.125, he comments, "More than half [of the proverbs in the Rām.] are shared with the MBh but much smaller proportions are shared with other genres of Sanskrit literature, indicating that the proverbial and related material forms part of the common epic tradition." He continues, referring to "a traditional bardic stock".

[12] Fame for Karṇa is very much a phenomenon of transcendence. See below, Ch.VI.

[13] When Duryodhana and Karṇa are talking in VII,127,5, Duryodhana refers to Arjuna as the 'son of Indra', *śakrātmaja*. Is this a case of the poet nodding, or would Karṇa actually know that Arjuna was the son of Indra? When making a formal speech to the assembled forces before he leads them to battle for the first time, he does refer to Arjuna as *tridaśavarātmajo*, 'son of the best of the deities' (VII,2,16). I would propose that such phenomena are aspects of the synchronic nature of narrative within an oral tradition: it is textuality that disposes narrative towards logical or temporal sequence. Once writing becomes common, the very nature of narrative changes — it is not just the case that the medium has altered.

[14] As an instance of this, we have: *yadā tu karṇo rājendra bhānumantaṃ divākaram / stauti madhyaṃdine prāpte prāñjaliḥ salile sthitaḥ*. 'O king, when in the middle of the day Karṇa praises the brilliant Sun, he stands in water with his hands together' (III,293,21).

O bull of men, you are not able to know what is hidden by the deities.

What that 'mystery' denotes is presumably that Sūrya is his progenitor, which he learns in time. *nākhyāmi te guhyaṃ kāle vetsyati*, 'I do not tell you the secret; it will be found in time'. It does seem that Karṇa is aware of this though; perhaps the sentence is really only an occasion for the poets to play with the drama of the moment, and the statement actually has no consequence, is phatic - bearing more on the relation between poet and audience than on that between Sūrya and Karṇa.

Sūrya admonishes him further not to give up his inborn gifts if he desires to have victory over Arjuna. Karṇa only reiterates his devotion to the Sun, saying that untruth is the only thing that he fears.

III,296,6: *bibhemi na tathā mṛtyor yathā bibhye'nṛtāt aham.*
I fear not death as I fear untruth.[15]

He asks Sūrya to allow him to even give up his life if Indra requests it, because of his vow. Sūrya agrees but with the proviso that Karṇa ask for a missile in return. He then vanishes. Karṇa, at his morning devotion later on in the day, recounts this dream to the rising sun.[16] The Sun uttered, *tatheti*, 'so be it', and Karṇa realised the veracity of his experience (III,286,19-20). 'Desiring the missile', he waited for Indra to arrive.[17]

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[15] Bhīṣma, speaking to Satyavatī, says, *satyāc cyutiḥ kṣatriyasya na dharmeṣu praśasyate*, 'A fall from truth is not declared among the dharmas of a kṣatriya' (I,97,24). That is, kṣatriyas should neither lie nor betray their word.

[16] It is curious that at this instant in the text the poets refer to Karṇa by another name, that of Vṛṣa, a term that also signifies bull, that is, the fertile or fecund one (III,286,18).

[17] From the point of view of poetics, this episode opens with Sūrya's first word, 'Karṇa' (III,284,10), and closes with his final word, *sahasraśaḥ*, 'thousandfold' (III,286,13). One of the epithets of the Sun is *sahasraṃśu*, 'thousand-rayed one', and at the moment of Karṇa's death the poets make a triple play on this term (VIII,67,39).

2. *Indra*

This is a short episode in the poem where Karṇa meets up with the father of the hero who is either to kill him or whom he will kill.[18] When Indra appears to Karṇa disguised as a brahmin it is noon and Karṇa is at his daily devotion to the Sun.[19] He immediately asks Indra if he wants women or villages or cattle (III,294,2). Indra of course replies that he wants Karṇa to cut off his cuirass and ear-rings if he is 'one whose vow is true', *satyavrata*. Karṇa admits that without his special attributes he will become 'accessible', *gamanīya*. He is laughing as he speaks, *prahasan*, an unusual adjective for Karṇa, and this is repeated (III,294,9 and 13). It is telling that such a word is used at the point when he is effectively electing to die.

Karṇa then tells Indra that he is aware of who he really is, *devadeveśa*, 'Lord of gods!' If he gives Indra the gifts, then Indra will become disreputable: it is Indra who should be offering the favour.[20]

III,294,16: *yadi dāsyāmi te deva kuṇḍale kavacaṃ tathā*
vadhyatām upayāsyāmi tvaṃ ca śakrāvahāsyatām.
If I would give you, O deity, both ear-rings and cuirass,
I would obtain a death sentence, and you, Śakra,

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[18] Here we an instance of have what Nagy, 1979, Ch.17, would refer to as classical 'god-hero antagonism', which stresses the sense of *agōn*. Indra is the deity of heroes and Karṇa is the paradigmatic hero. One should assume here that the cuirass and ear-rings do not make him immortal, only invulnerable.

[19] We have heard before about this devotional habit of Karṇa in III,293,21. When Indra appears to Uttaṅka in XIV,57,28 he also appears in the guise of a brahmin. In fact, this is not an unusual disguise for Indra.

[20] Mauss has described how a giver is able to dominate the receiver until the gift is returned or reciprocated. 1990, p.59, "The recipient puts himself in a position of dependence *vis-à-vis* the donor ... The recipient is dependent upon the anger of the donor." Here Mauss quotes from the Anuśāsana *parvan* 75,16 (3638), *krodho hanti yad dānam*, 'anger slays whatever the donation'. Jamison, 1996, p.195, writes, "As we will see, the giver/beggar relationship is one of fundamental inequality. The giver, by virtue of his action, acquires power over the beggar, sometimes power of life or death." On this occasion, it is not 'life or death' which is the point, but *fame*.

would obtain ridicule.

Indra agrees to make an exchange, anything but his *vajra*, and Karṇa selects the *amoghā śakti*, 'the unfailing missile'. The deity restricts its use to one occasion though. This will later be part of the undoing of Karṇa.[21]

Indra warns Karṇa that the 'warrior', *vīra*, whom he wishes to slay with the missile is protected by Śiva and by Kṛṣṇa (III,294,28). Karṇa accepts the terms of the exchange with the rider that Indra repair his flayed body so that he does not appear repugnant once the cuirass is removed. He resolves to discharge the weapon only when he is in complete unresolve, *saṃśayaṃ param prāpya,* 'having reached utter doubt'; then he gladly surrenders his natural protection. As he cuts off the cuirass and ear-rings (III,294,37) he is described as *smayamānaṃ nṛvīram*, 'a smiling champion of a man'.[22] The poets make much of how joyous a moment this is for Karṇa, to be able to offer a unique gift to Indra.[23] Even Indra is *prahasan*, 'laughing'.

The final stanzas of this passage are in irregular *triṣṭubh* form, giving a certain weight and conclusiveness to the narrative. M.C. Smith's remarks on such metrical conditions are pertinent, in an *a*

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[21] See above, Ch.II,2.

[22] Settar, in Settar and Sontheimer, 1982, p.19, instances this as an occasion when Karṇa acts as a *dāna-vīra*. The *yuddha-vīra* is "appropriately identified in ... Arjuna."

[23] Later poets, Bhāsa, in particular, have focussed on this 'tragic' generosity of Karṇa. See, Miller, 1991, p.60, "The play's exposition of the relationship between sacrifice, mortality, and heroism dramatizes the Indian idea that one must heroically confront death in order to enjoy the freedom that comes by transcending the barrier between mortality and immortality." Similarly in the Rajasthani *Epic of Pābūjī*, in J.D. Smith, 1991, 1129, "At the break of day King Karṇa gave us a gift of a maund and a quarter of gold." Shulman, 1985, p.380ff., discusses Karṇa's tragic qualities from a point of view of Aristotelian poetics: concerning horror, "Like the Tamil bandit heroes, he is an outsider, a symbolic embodiment of the remnant — cast off, impure", pp.385-86. Shulman adds the note, qualifying 'impure', that this "Recall[s] his conception at the time of Kuntī's menstrual impurity." After his death, Saṃjaya says of Karṇa, *dadāny ity eva yo'vocan na nāstīty arthito'rthibhiḥ*, 'He was one, a giver asked by the importunate, who said, 'let me give', not, 'there is nothing' (VIII,68,44). He adds, *svam api jīvitam*, 'even his own life'.

priori sense, in that they draw attention to a possible archaic order being engaged; more than that it is difficult to say. It is significant however, that Karṇa does play a large role in the narrative which she presents as a 'core' which is founded on this metrical form.[24]

All the deities and *dānavas* and *siddhas* roar when Karṇa proceeds to cut himself (III,294,36). He gives the cuirass, *ārdra*, 'wet with blood', to Indra. This 'furnished Karṇa with glory in the world', *karṇaṃ loke yaśasā yojayitvā*. He is described as *muṣitam*, 'robbed' (III,294,40), which caused 'distress', *dīna*, for his adopted kinsmen, the Kauravas, and they are, *bhagnadarpa*, 'ones whose pride is sunk'.

The above two encounters are different from what follows, insofar as they concern deities. As figures of ambivalence, neither mortal nor immortal (except in song), heroes, unlike mortals, enjoy an access to the world of divinities: Arjuna converses with Indra and Śiva, Yudhiṣṭhira with Dharma, Karṇa with Indra and Sūrya. Kṛṣṇa is not to be included in this list as he is more of an incarnate deity, is closer to the heroic than to the divine; although he is in no

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[24] M.C. Smith, 1992. This is neatly summarised on pp.479-82, JAOS 95.3 (1975), where Smith describes her basic ideas as she has derived them from Hopkins. "[A] core of old verses seems to devolve on the presence of irregular Vedic-type verses in a cluster ... The *Mahābhārata* needs to be understood as a tradition which still retains traceable growth rings. The classical verses are the elaborations of a bardic tradition stemming from the heroic past." "The following ... indicates the general deposit of a bhārata war epic core ... I,1,102-158: Story framework mechanism in triṣṭubh metre. I,176-190: Pāṇḍava marriage alliance. II,49-68: Gambling match. III,5-6: Vidura visits Pāṇḍavas in exile. III,35: Yudhiṣṭhira's explanation of gambling. III,254: Draupadī's description of her husbands. V,22-40: Attempts at discussion through messengers. V,47: Arjuna's message to the Kurus. V,64: Kṛṣṇa's response. V,65: The messenger's plea for safety. V,90-91: Kṛṣṇa takes on the peace mission. V,160: Arjuna's reply to a taunt. VI,4: List of ill-omens for the Kurus. VI,21-22: Description of the armies. VI,24,5-8: Arjuna hesitates to kill the grandsire. VI,116,47-51: Death of Bhīṣma. VII,2: Karṇa assumes command of the Kuru army. VIII,4,90-105: Saṃjaya reports the death of Karṇa. VIII,26,40-71: Karṇa's lament for Bhīṣma and Droṇa. VIII,27-30: Karṇa takes Śalya as a chariot driver. VIII,45-49: Yudhiṣṭhira goads Arjuna to fight Karṇa. VIII,53-54: Bhīma fights. VIII,57: Arjuna is attacked. VIII,61-67: The death of Karṇa. VIII,68: Śalya assumes command of the Kurus. IX,16: Death of Śalya. IX,19: Death of Śālva. IX,27: Death of Śakuni. IX,58: Death of Duryodhana. XV,21: Dhṛtarāṣṭra leaves for exile in the forest."

way, despite his death at the hands of *Jarā*, mortal. Perhaps he only intensifies this ambivalence. Similarly the figures of Vyāsa and Nārada are ambiguous, neither mortal nor immortal; one could consider them as heroes of speech only.[25] It is part of the paradigm that heroes are able to converse with deities; this is one of their traits which places them beyond the mortal. It is a point that we shall return to below, in Chapter VI,2.

3. *Kṛṣṇa*

This dialogue and the one immediately subsequent, when Karṇa speaks with his mother, are called, in the *parvasaṃgraha*, *vivāda-parvan*, 'the narrative of dispute' (I,2,52).[26]

What occurs in this exchange is unlike anything else in the poem as it relates to Karṇa. In a way this conversation is a reflection of the speeches in the Gītā. Here we see the hero and his driver on a chariot, or the hero and a deity. Kṛṣṇa, as we have already noted, behaves more like a hero in the course of the epic than like a deity, except that, only nine chapters previously, he had revealed his divine nature before the assembled *sabhā*.[27] In this account, what Karṇa says is unlike anything else he ever speaks: it is almost as if he is in the place of the theophanist himself, relating all as it will be, but in divine and atemporal terms.

Kṛṣṇa begins by first complimenting the other on his knowledge of the Vedas and the subtlety of *dharmaśāstra*; Karṇa, he says, is *pariniṣṭhita*, 'accomplished' in these skills (V,138,7). This is

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[25] Typically Vyāsa perceives mentally, not physically, *idaṃ manasā viditam* (I,144,7), which gives him a unique and atemporal role in the narrative.

[26] This narrative is also referred to in its colophon at V,148 as the *upanivāda parvan*, 'book of flattery or secret cajolery'. It is pertinent that this section of the poem is related by Saṃjaya, who makes use of his divine poetic insight in order to describe to Dhṛtarāṣṭra what happened on the chariot between Kṛṣṇa and Karṇa. This kind of narration is usually only specific to the four battle books.

[27] When Kṛṣṇa first makes his entry into the poem he is described as *yadu-pravīraḥ*, 'champion of the Yadus' (I,179,9). Yudhiṣṭhira calls him *no gatiḥ ... nātho ... guruḥ*, 'our path, protector, guru' (V,145,12).

something that the audience has never heard about Karṇa before, for usually one only hears of how great an examplar of kṣatriya virtue he is, in a physical sense, rather than what habitually comes under the rubric of a brahmin. Right from the beginning of this scene then, something very different is being signalled: in this conversation, the audience is to hear what is a unique discourse.

Kṛṣṇa then tells him that by law he should be considered as the eldest born of Pāṇḍu's sons and that, 'you will be king' *rājā bhaviṣyasi* (V,138,9).[28] Also, through his mother, he is related to the Vṛṣṇis, the clan of Kṛṣṇa himself: in fact, Kṛṣṇa is his cousin.[29] He tells Karṇa that all the Pāṇḍava allies, the kings and kṣatriyas and their sons, shall be tributary to him, *pādau tava grahīṣyanti*, 'they will touch your feet' (V,138,12); and that in time he will sleep with Draupadī.

V,138,15: *ṣaṣṭhe tvāṃ tathā kāle draupadī upagamiṣyati.*
In the sixth place, Draupadī will, in time, approach you [sexually].

That is, he will join the five brothers in sharing her as a wife.[30] He will be anointed as king and Yudhiṣṭhira will stand behind him holding the 'fan', *vyajana*, as the 'crown prince', *yuvarāja*. Bhīma will hold his 'great white umbrella', *chatram ... mahac chvetam*. Kṛṣṇa gives a long list of the pageant which will follow in Karṇa's train and the tributes that other kings will bring.

V,138,26-27: *vijayaṃ vasuṣenasya ghoṣayantu ca pāṇḍavāḥ*
sa tvaṃ parivṛtaḥ pārthair nakṣatrair iva candramāḥ.
Let the Pāṇḍavas sound out the triumph of Karṇa!
You, surrounded by the princes, as the moon by its stations.

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[28] He is echoing what Pāṇḍu told Kuntī in I,111,27 concerning the *ṣaṭ purtā*, 'six forms of son', when he, cursed with celibacy by a copulating buck, was encouraging his wife to become pregnant by a brahmin.

[29] Kuntī is the sister of Kṛṣṇa's father, Vasudeva.

[30] In the popular version of the epic related in Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.316, "Draupadī reveals her longings for Karṇa." She has "unrealisable sexual longings" for him.

Finally, he admonishes 'brotherhood', *saubhrātram* with the Pāṇḍavas (V,138,28).

How does Karṇa respond to being offered lordship of the world?[31] This is of course what Duryodhana is struggling for. He replies formally and eloquently, dealing with Kṛṣṇa's points. One thing about Karṇa is that when he is not boasting, he always speaks with dignity and great art: he truly is *vadatām vara*, 'best of speakers'.

He admits to knowing of his divine father and his mother's subsequent exposure of him at birth as if he had been 'inauspicious', *yathā na kuśalam* (V,139,3-4). It was Rādhā who gave him succour though, the wife of a *sūta*. 'From affection', *sauhārdāt*, and not just from scriptural injunction, he knows Adhiratha, the *sūta*, as a father. It was Adhiratha who had rites performed for him, *putra-prītyā*, 'with love for a son', and had him named Vasuṣena by brahmins; who found him wives with whom he got sons, who then gave him grandsons (V,139,9-11).[32] With them, 'bonds of love were born', *kāmabandhanam saṃjātam*.[33]

His next loyalty goes to his patron and king, Duryodhana, with whom he has been in allegiance for thirteen years and whom he cannot betray:

V,139,12: *na ... harṣād bhayād vā govinda anṛtaṃ vaktum utsahe.*
Not from joy nor fear, Kṛṣṇa, am I able to speak untruth.

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[31] Shulman, 1985, p. 399, notes that Karṇa cannot accept this and become king for "he is wholly identified with the ethos of the hero, with the hero's ... path to fame ... His world is closed, relatively static, locked into meaning." Kingship in this instance is more concerned with the shifting and subtle dynamics of dharma, with balances. King and hero here occupy two very different semantic fields.

[32] The only occasion for the audience to hear of a wife of Karṇa occurs during the Strī *parvan*, when Gāndhārī sings of the dead and lamenting after the battle is over. *paśya karṇasya patnīm*, 'Look, there is Karṇa's wife' (XI,21,10). This woman is also, incidentally, the mother of Vṛṣasena and of Suṣeṇa, his favoured sons.

[33] Sjoestedt, 1949, p.61, remarking on the very common tradition of fostering in the cognate Irish epic tradition, comments that, "The bond created by ... fosterage was regarded as more sacred than the natural bond."

During that time, he had performed all the appropriate rites and sacrifices and marriage rituals with *sūtas*, that is, with those appropriate to his station — he had kept to his caste (V,139,14). Duryodhana had 'depended' on him, he says, *samāśritya*, and selected him to fight against Arjuna in battle, *dvairathe*, 'in a duel'. Karṇa cannot breach that trust by not accepting the duel.

V,139,18: *yadi hy adya na gaccheyaṃ dvairathaṃ savyasācinā*
akīrtiḥ syād hṛṣikeśa mama pārthasya cobhayoḥ.
If I would not go to the duel with Arjuna,
O Kṛṣṇa, infamy would belong to both me and Arjuna.

For Karṇa, allegiance is something derived from emotion and verbal commitment. It does not depend on blood ties nor upon any organic relation. Such an approach to kinship would appear contrary to the usual *varṇa* formations, and is certainly contrary to what Kṛṣṇa himself speaks of in the Gītā, where any kind of miscellany is decried.

As with Bhīṣma, when he had given his word and vowed to remain celibate, there is no possible revocation of such verbal commitment. Truth for kṣatriyas, especially the heroes, is something existing within spoken language. For brahmins, truth is much more textual or canonical, it is more 'external'. In book one, Bhīṣma says, *parityajeyaṃ trailokyaṃ rājyaṃ deveṣu vā ... na tu satyaṃ kathaṃcana*, 'I would abandon the three worlds or kingdom among the deities ... I would in no way abandon truth'; his oath is so vital (I,97,15). He gives three *ślokas* of similes detailing the intensity of such commitment, concluding with,

I,97,18: *na tv ahaṃ satyam utsraṣṭuṃ vyavaseyaṃ kathaṃcana.*
So may I in no way resolve to abandon truth.

The situation is like that now facing Karṇa.[34]

Immediately prior to the opening of battle at Kurukṣetra, Kṛṣṇa goes over to Karṇa, admitting that he had heard of Karṇa's announcement not to fight until Bhīṣma falls. Kṛṣṇa again asks Karṇa

[34] Note that Karṇa speaks of *anṛta* whereas Bhīṣma uses the word *satya*.

to forsake the Kauravas, *asmān varaya rādheya*, 'choose us, Karṇa' (VI,41,85), so long as Bhīṣma remains unslain. Karṇa again refuses, *na vipriyam kariṣyāmi dhārtarāṣṭrasya*, 'I shall do nothing offensive to Duryodhana'.

VI,41,87: *tyaktaprāṇaṃ hi māṃ viddhi duryodhanahitaiṣiṇam.*
Know me as one who has abandoned his life wishing
the good of Duryodhana!

To return to the earlier scene, Karṇa then says something slightly ominous or *unheimlich*, strangely out of character.

V,139,20: *mantrasya niyamaṃ kuryās tvam atra puruṣottama.*
O best of men, you should hold back this speech.

Karṇa advises Kṛṣṇa not to tell Yudhiṣṭhira of what is Karṇa's true position, namely, that he is a brother. Yudhiṣṭhira then 'will not uphold the kingdom', *na sa rājyam grahīṣyati*, if he thought that he was not, in terms of dharma, the true heir to it (V,139,21).[35]

V,139,23: *sa eva rājā dharmātmā śāśvato'stu yudhiṣṭhiraḥ.*
Let Yudhiṣṭhira, the dharma-souled one, be perpetual king!

Karṇa says that if he himself 'obtained the great rich kingdom, he would give it to Duryodhana', *prāpya ... mahad rājyam ... sphītaṃ duryodhanāya ... saṃpradadyām* (V,139,22). This is completely contrary to what he and Śakuni and Duḥśāsana have been dubiously propounding for the sake of Duryodhana. All their schemes have been to secure the throne, and now Karṇa is rejecting the offer. The audience suddenly hears of a unique side to Karṇa that never appears again outside of this exchange. His role as a hero thus needs some modification.

He next describes,

V,139,28: *mahān ayaṃ kṛṣṇa kṛtaḥ kṣatrasya samudānayaḥ.*

[35] When Yudhiṣṭhira discovers that Kuntī knew about Karṇa's identity and did not inform any of the Pāṇḍavas, especially himself, he curses her: *śaśāpa ca mahātejāḥ sarvalokeṣu ca striyaḥ*, 'and the austere king cursed women throughout all the worlds' (XII,6,10).

Kṛṣṇa, this great assembly of kṣatriyas has been effected.

Karṇa then relates *in extenso* the metaphor of war as a sacrifice, *śastrayajño* (V,139,29-44), an image first given by Duryodhana above.[36] The sacrifice is to be performed by Duryodhana.

V,139,29: *dhārtarāṣṭrasya vārṣṇeya śastrayajño bhaviṣyati*
asya yajñasya vettā tvaṃ bhaviṣyasi janārdana.
Kṛṣṇa, there will be a sacrifice of weapons of Duryodhana,
you will be the witness of this sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa.

Arjuna is the *hotṛ*, whose bow will be the ladle and Kṛṣṇa will be the officiating *adhvaryu*. Karṇa lists all the roles of the ritual as the Pāṇḍavas will play them.[37]

Karṇa then describes the imminent death of his fellow warriors and himself and Duryodhana and the ritual laments of the women that will follow this.[38] The metaphor for his own death also partici-

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[36] Shulman, 1985, p.386 goes so far as to say that "the true hero, like Karṇa himself, is a sacrificer, an archetypal Vedic *yajamāna*."

[37] Although the metaphor is the same as employed by Duryodhana at V,57,12ff., the import is totally different. In Duryodhana's model, he and Karṇa were participants in the ritual. Here, it is the case that Duryodhana is a *yajamāna*, the one to commission the rite. In the former case, Yudhiṣṭhira was in the place of the 'victim', *paśum*, whereas now, *yudhiṣṭhiraḥ / japair homaiś ca saṃyukto brahmatvaṃ kārayiṣyati*, 'Yudhiṣṭhira will act as a brahman, conjoined with prayers and libations' (V,139,34). Karṇa's death is part of the latter model, whereas in the former instance he was a sacrifier. On the idea of war being associated with the sacrifice, see Oguibénine, 1985, p.97, "le sacrifice comporte une compétition entre poètes et secrète la guerre qu'on fait aux adversaires du sacrifice exclus de l'univers sacrificiel".

[38] Karṇa, in a contemporary Tamil drama, is described by Hiltebeitel as "the most lamented hero of the war", 1988, p.412. The songs of lament in the Strī *parvan* approximate to a kind of lyric expression, where the addressee is deceased and that condition of 'absence', writ large, is the object of the speech. Lament as women's ritual is described by Alexiou, 1974. Foley, in Bakker & Kahane, 1997, p.65, discusses ritual lament as tripartite: "(1) a statement that 'you have fallen', (2) a summary of personal history and the dire consequences for those left behind and (3) a final intimacy." The lament that Subhadrā sings for Abhimanyu is a good set example (VII,55,2ff.) At her entry into the Strī *parvan*, a woman is described as *prakīrya keśān ... bhuṣaṇāny avamucya / ekavastradharā*, 'having strewn her hair and taken off her ornaments, dressed in a single cloth' (XI,1,10). Presumably this is the manner in which women set out on these occasions and

pates in this general metaphor of the sacrificial rite: this is the *punaścitiḥ*, 'repiling' of the fire altar (V,139,46). It is what occurs after the main action of the sacrifice is completely done, and is a preparation for another ritual occasion. Is Karṇa thus saying, metaphorically, that his death will be a preparation for what is to succeed, that is, the subsequent *yuga*?

Karṇa is speaking out of character in describing not only his own death but the total defeat of the Kauravas and death of Duryodhana. Not only is he doing that, but he is perverting his king's own metaphor, that of the *śastrayajña*, 'sacrifice of weapons'; and this is when he has only just been describing how his loyalty to Duryodhana was superior to any other relation in his life! This speech is contrary to every other speech that Karṇa has given or will give in the poem. He has rejected the absolute sovereignty that Kṛṣṇa has offered and instead presents his unique vision of what the consequences of all this conflict will be. If one ignores the question of textual emendation here, such a pronouncement, being so adverse to every other statement of Karṇa's in the epic, puts him in an even more isolated position than Achilles with his desire for *kléos* above all else.[39] It is a strange and haunting moment whose open-endedness and irresolution only makes for an even greater effect, at least in terms of the ominous. It is as if this moment represents Karṇa at his most stable, most truthful, because it is his most unearthly speech; at this point he possesses no pre-occupations nor attachments.

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such apparel is not haphazard. Another indicator of lamentation is where a woman is described as 'crying like an osprey', *kurarīva nanāda* (XIV,60,24). If one could submit an hypothetical genealogy for epic, a lament for the death of a hero would mark its putative origin. Hopkins, 1888, p.171, discussing death rituals, comments, "they [the royal household] sings songs of praise above their slaughtered heroes." Praise compounded with lament is the inherent nature of epic poetry.

[39] If textual emendment was the case, it must have occurred very early. According to the editor of the Udyoga *parvan*, S.K. De, there are no serious textual problems with the manuscripts of this book. Commenting on the Northern and Southern recensions, he writes, "the two recensions do not recede very materially from each other." Even the Javanese text is in general accordance.

He concludes by asking Kṛṣṇa to do what pleases him, *vidhatsva yad abhīpsitam*, 'dispose whatever you wish!'

V,139,53: *śastreṇa nidhanaṃ gacchet samṛddhaṃ kṣatramaṇḍalam kurukṣetre ...*
May the accomplished ring of kṣatriyas go to a destruction by weaponry at Kurukṣetra ...

To this, he adds,

V,139,54: *yathā kārtsnyena vārṣneya kṣatraṃ svargam avāpnuyāt.*
So that, Kṛṣṇa, the kṣatriya order may obtain heaven entirely.

Returning to fame again, he finally says,

V,139,55: *yāvat sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritas ca janārdana*
tāvat kīrtibhavaḥ śabdaḥ śaśvato'yam bhaviṣyati.
Kṛṣṇa, as long as mountains and rivers will stand,
so long will this perpetual sound that arises from fame exist.[40]

Karṇa adds that Kṛṣṇa should keep this exchange private, *mantrasaṃvaram kurvan nityam*, 'always making a concealment of [this] speech', echoing what he had similarly adjured at 139,20, and giving closure to the speech.

What the audience has just heard is in fact a reversal of the norm, where the (divine) charioteer informs his warrior-hero about the future events of a battle: using his supernatural vision the *sūta* usually relates to the hero the course of events and victory. Here the *sūta*, Karṇa, is the one who is telling Kṛṣṇa about what is going to happen, which is the opposite of what occurs in the Gītā, where it is Kṛṣṇa who reveals in his speech the hypostatic nature of what is about to occur. Also, as a second reversal, Karṇa quite joyously describes his and his side's monumental if not cosmic defeat. All that he had spoken about loyalty and integrity is suddenly irrelevant. Karṇa is placing himself, or the poets are placing Karṇa, in a position within the poem that is superior to that of any other character: the usual distinction of life and death has collapsed. Or, Karṇa is

[40] That 'perpetual sound' one assumes, is the epic.

suddenly out of the causal sequence of narration. Even Vyāsa himself never speaks with such visionary forecast. The fact that Karṇa also embraces his own annihilation as part of this only accents his clarity and unearthly view. Certainly, Arjuna is never party to such selfless lucidity.

Kṛṣṇa is pleased and laughs and repeats his offer of the earth as a gift.

V,140,2: *api tvāṃ na tapet karṇa rājyalābhopapādanā*
mayā dattaṃ hi pṛthivīṃ na praśāsitum icchasi.
Would the taking of the kingdom not burn you, Karṇa?
For, you do not wish to rule the earth given by me?

The metre then reverts to *triṣṭubh* form for three stanzas: these are sung by Kṛṣṇa. They are in praise of the 'victorious flag' of Arjuna, *jayadhvaja*, and seem curiously disjunctive — these stanzas seem to having nothing to do with the flow of exchange. He also says that victory is now certain for the Pāṇḍavas, echoing what Karṇa had just said (V,140,3). The audience then hears Kṛṣṇa, referring to himself in the third person (V,140,6), giving a description of how the *dvāpara yuga* will end, although he makes no mention of the *kali yuga*, which seems curious.[41] He finally gives Karṇa specific instructions as to when battle should commence, qualifying this with an account of how appropriate the present moment is. Here, Kṛṣṇa displays astronomical knowledge that is more typical of brahmins than of kṣatriyas. He concludes by saying that the kṣatriyas who die then,

V,140,20: *prāpya śastreṇa nidhanaṃ prāpsyanti gatim uttamām.*

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[41] As there are no long-term survivors of Kurukṣetra, could one then infer that heroes probably only obtain in the former period? Is Parikṣit to be considered heroic therefore, or just a great king? In book one of the text, in the minor narrative of Āstīka, where the story of Parikṣit's death is related at length, he is nowhere described as a hero, but only as a king. In the Āśvamedhika *parvan* however, the fourteenth book of the poem, the descendents of those fallen at Kurukṣetra remain to fight with Arjuna as he follows the horse. It is a curious *coda* to the heroic accounts of what occurred at Kurukṣetra, and reads like a studied imitation.

Having obtained destruction by weapons, they will obtain the highest end.

Karṇa inquires as to why Kṛṣṇa attempted to delude him if he knew that the world was about to come to an end (V,141,1-2). Then he confesses that 'the destruction of the entire earth', *pṛthivyāḥ kārtsnyena vināśaḥ,* was due to the gang of four: Śakuni, himself, Duḥśāsana, and Duryodhana (V,141,2). All who follow Duryodhana 'will proceed to the dwelling of Yama', *prāpsyanti yamasādanam*. He proceeds to give a highly accurate astrological account of why battle would be immediately appropriate and why the Pāṇḍavas will triumph (V,141,5,ff.)[42] Again, such detailed technical knowledge sounds unusual for the character of Karṇa, but so much of this speech is of that nature. This description of signs and portents continues for a long twenty *ślokas*.

The meeting is terminated by Karṇa describing an apocalytic dream of a 'vast white palace', *sahasrapādaṃ prāsādam*, in which he viewed the Pāṇḍavas, dressed in white and triumphant, and the earth full of bones and blood (V,141,27-42).[43] He makes the very *vaiṣṇava* statement that, *yato dharmas tato jayaḥ*, 'wherever there is dharma, *there* is victory' (V,141,33).[44] He closes the vision by

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[42] The battle of Kurukṣetra occurs around the time of the autumnal equinox and Bhīṣma dies after the winter solstice.

[43] Amiya Dev's '*La Guerre de Kurukṣetra n'aura pas Lieu*', in Matilal, 1989, pp.86-88, analogises Karṇa at this moment to Achilles once he has heard of Patroklos' death and realises his own mortality, or Hagen in the Nibelungenlied, who hears of his own imminent death from three water sprites. "His [Achilles'] heroic dharma does not really leave him a choice ... Karṇa does not have Achilles' passion but ... perhaps he is the most heroic figure of the Mahābhārata." Dev quotes from Buddhadeva Bose's verse play, *Pratham Partha*, saying that, "Bose has given Karṇa the final decisive role ... Karṇa alone can stem the bloodshed by coming over to the Pāṇḍava side ... Bose reverses the order of Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī's overtures to Karṇa, and throws in an extra third; an overture from Draupadī (of course, Draupadī does not know that Karna is a Pāṇḍava by birth and so her husband)."

[44] At V,66-68, Saṃjaya, in a private interview with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vyāsa, tells of the cosmic puissance of Kṛṣṇa Janārdana. The phrase *yataḥ kṛṣṇas tato jayaḥ*, is first expressed here (V,66,9), as part of this eschatology. It is a prelude to the theophany of V,129. These three chapters supply a basic and condensed *vaiṣṇava* dogma. Vyāsa himself makes use of this formula when speaking to the old king

saying that he and the other kings will soon enter the dwelling of Death, and,

V,141,42: *ahaṃ cānye ca rājāno yac ca tat kṣatramaṇḍalam*
gāṇḍīvāgniṃ pravekṣāmaḥ ...
I and the other kings and the whole ring of kṣatriyas
will enter the fire of the Gāṇḍiva bow ...

The unique, to Karṇa, statements made in this dialogue lead the reader to wonder if they are not 'later additions' to an earlier form of this part of the poem.[45] The above phrase is particularly associated with *vaiṣṇava* devotion to Kṛṣṇa as a deity, as related in the Gītā:[46]

VI,41,55: *yato dharmas tataḥ kṛṣṇo yataḥ kṛṣṇa tato jayaḥ.*
Where there is dharma there is Kṛṣṇa.
Wherever Kṛṣṇa, there is victory.[47]

How is one to explain why Karṇa speaks so paraleptically and in such an out-of-character manner during the passage? If it is not the case that this passage is a later addition, there is something extraordinarily peculiar about the speech: the prophecy about the sacrifice of war and Karṇa's own death, as well as the vision of the apoca-

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immediately prior to the events occurring at Kurukṣetra, *yato dharmas tato jayaḥ* (VI,2,14).

[45] There would be no way of checking this, except perhaps using J.D. Smith's (1987) technique of stylistic analysis. In the Critical Edition there are no serious manuscript problems with this section of the poem. Goldman, 1977, following on from Sukthankar, 1944, has shown how the 'later additions' or amplification could have occurred. He is specifically concerned with how 'Bhārata legends became woven together with Bhārgava stories'. Hiltebeitel, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, p.162, comments that "the *Mahābhārata* makes the Bhārgavas a kind of last resort of the Brahminical world order, with Kṛṣṇa descending from Bṛghu in his maternal line ..." Brockington, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, pp.121-130, controverts the case that formulaic repetition is an essential feature of an oral tradition, by arguing that the use of formulas in 'later' parts of the epic can indicate an oral tradition that is becoming defunct. Perhaps the use of recognisable formulae supply the poem with an artificial quality of authoritative age; that is, they are deliberately anachronistic.

[46] Personal communication, Edwin Bryant.

[47] Repeated by Bhīṣma at VI,62,34.

lypse. It could be argued that the Bhārgava editors of the poem only touched this one moment in the story of Karṇa and considered that sufficient for their patently ideological purposes; it is a moot point which cannot be resolved. One can only understand how the infinitely innovative flexibility of an oral tradition makes this possible and that the poets were performing in constant adjustment or reciprocity with their audience.[48]

Kṛṣṇa reiterates that the end of the world is imminent. Karṇa's last word to the other is that they might both escape *vīrakṣayavināśanāt*, 'from the annihilation and ruin of warriors', and meet *svarge*, 'in heaven'. Again, both eschatological considerations fit more with the world expounded in the Gītā than with the views expressed in Karṇa's other speeches throughout the poem. It is as if there had been a switch in genre, from the strictly heroic to the more sectarian. They separate, 'having embraced closely', *pariṣvajya pīḍitam.*

It should be recalled that Kṛṣṇa is the one character who later does his utmost to engineer the death of Karṇa by arranging that Ghaṭotkaca enter the fray (VII,148,35), and then by encouraging Arjuna to strike at Karṇa when the latter is pleading for mercy after his chariot wheel sticks in the earth, reminding him of all that Karṇa did and said to Draupadī in the *sabhā* (VIII,67,1ff.)[49]

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[48] One can thus speak of a '*vaiṣṇava* recension' in the light of Nagy's progress from 'transcript to script to scripture', Nagy, 1996a, p.110. The Mahābhārata tradition retained its oral process for centuries, and even, it could be argued, up to the present, unlike, say, the RV tradition, which early on became 'frozen' or 'scripted', abandoning its reliance upon the immediacy of *ad hoc* composition. For a group of poets to respond to their audience's cultural *niveau*, is normal in preliterate society: which is what the Bhārgavas must have done. They are perhaps equatable with the Peisistratid epic poets in early classical Athens – poets, who, patronised by the tyrant Peisistratus, prepared what would appear to be the first formal written recensions of the Homeric corpus. See Nagy, 2002, p.13, "lawgivers … [are] culture heroes who institutionalized Homeric poetry in their own respective city-states".

[49] In the Tamil version of the story by Villiputtūrār, quoted in Shulman, 1985, pp.388ff., Kṛṣṇa, in the guise of a brahmin, approaches Karṇa as he lies dying. Karṇa retains his head in this version, and Kṛṣṇa requests that Karṇa give him all the merit that he obtained in life. The latter of course complies. Shulman explores

4. *Kuntī*

Kuntī, distressed by the failure of the exchange of emissaries in the Udyoga *parvan*, goes down to the river Gaṅgā where Karṇa is performing his daily devotions to the Sun.[50] She stands behind him listening to his recitation until eventually he greets her (V,142,27). This is the first time in his life that he speaks with his mother.[51] The subsequent exchange fits into the genre of the wife or mother of the hero exhorting him to a certain kind of honourable action. There is somewhat of a reversal however, insofar as Karṇa the son, reviles his mother for not treating him as a kṣatriya mother should.

Heroes in the Mahābhārata do not generally perform rituals of devotion for a deity, apart from Arjuna when he is seeking weapons from Śiva (III,39), and then that is a single specific occasion.[52] Certainly no other hero performs 'devotion', *upādhyayana*, for a progenitor as Karṇa does. Yudhiṣṭhira is always talking about dharma, but this is hardly the active deity Dharma himself, and there is certainly no 'devotion' involved.

He greets her by announcing who he is, *rādheyo'ham ādhirathiḥ karṇaḥ*, 'I, Karṇa, son of Rādhā and Adhiratha'. Which, given his knowledge of his true parentage and the person whom he is addressing, is somewhat of an embittered if not provocative statement.

Kuntī first tells him who she really is and describes his conception, admitting that he is *pūrvaja*, 'firstborn', and that, *pārthas tvam asi putraka*, 'You are a Pārtha, son!' (V,143,3). She addresses him as *śastrabhṛtāṃ vara*, 'best of weapon bearers', informing him that he was born,

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this connection between Karṇa and 'compassion', *karuṇā*; again, one observes an interesting play on phonetics.

[50] Tagore, composed a verse play about this incident, *Karṇa-Kuntī-Saṃbād*.

[51] When the Pāṇḍavas were being humiliated in the *sabhā*, Yudhiṣṭhira's anger was steadied by the fact that he noticed that 'the feet of Karṇa were like those of his mother', *kuntyā hi sadṛśau pādau karṇasya* (XII,1,41).

[52] Aśvatthāman, in book ten, does perform an obeisance to Śiva, but this is rather peculiar, and is not really 'devotion' in a technical sense. Scheuer, 1982, covers this scene well.

V,143,5: *kuṇḍalī baddhakavaco devagarbhaḥ śriyā vṛtaḥ.*
Possessing ear-rings, with a cuirass fitted, a divine child surrounded by beauty!

Kuntī tells him that it is not 'right', *yuktam*, that he serve the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and she admonishes him, much in the way that Kṛṣṇa did, to join with Arjuna and so dominate the world.[53]

V,143,10: *asādhyaṃ kiṃ nu loke syād yuvayoḥ sahitātmanoḥ.*
Of you two united together, what could be impossible in the world?

He should ally with his five brothers and be surrounded by them 'like Brahma surrounded by the Vedas', *vedaiḥ parivṛto brahmā yathā* (V,143,11).

V,144,1: *tataḥ sūryād niścaritāṃ karṇaḥ śuśrāva bhāratīm.*
Then Karṇa heard a voice issue from the Sun.

This voice tells him to do as his mother instructs, *karṇa mātṛvacaḥ kuru*, 'Karṇa, perform your mother's word!' *satyam āha pṛthā vākyam*, 'Pṛthā has spoken a true word!' The poet comments, however,

V,144,3: *cacāla naiva karṇasya matiḥ satyadhṛtes tadā.*
The mind of Karṇa did not waiver from its true content.

Karṇa rejects her request on the grounds that although he was born a kṣatriya, he never received the dues thereof, but only those pertaining to a *sūta*.

V,144,5: *akaron mayi yat pāpaṃ bhavatī sumahātyayam.*
The wrong which you did to me was a very great transgression.

He says, *avakīrṇo'smi te*, 'I was discarded by you!'[54] Being abandoned by her as an infant meant for him a 'destruction of fame and

[53] Although Kṛṣṇa advocated kingship with Yudhiṣṭhira, she is pressing for joint action with Arjuna, which would be more on the level of heroism.

glory', *yaśaḥkīrtināśanam* (V,144,5).[55] This is worse, in Karṇa's view, than what an enemy could do to him.

V,144,6: *aham ca kṣatriyo jāto na prāptaḥ kṣatrasatkriyām*
tvatkṛte kiṃ nu pāpīyaḥ śatruḥ kuryā mamāhitam.
I, a kṣatriya born, have not received the kṣatriya
rites on your account! What enemy would do me a more
wicked ill?

She also denied him all the due *saṃskāras* and the *kṣatrasatkriyās*, whatever 'rites should have been appointed for a kṣatriya'. He has no sympathy for his mother because she never acted on his behalf *mātṛvat*, 'like a mother'.[56]

V,144,8: *na vai mama hitaṃ pūrvaṃ mātṛvac ceṣṭitaṃ tvayā.*
Nor indeed was my welfare ever previously striven for
by you, like a mother!

Karṇa asks her, if he deserted the Kauravas, *kim māṃ kṣatram vadiṣyati* (V,144,10), 'will anyone call me a kṣatriya?' He continues in this vein, as to how dastardly it would be if he abandoned them now: it would be 'fruitless', *aphalam*.

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[54] *avakīrṇa* has a literal meaning of 'one whose vow of chastity is violated', or 'one whose semen has been spilt'; so Karṇa is is using strong language here.

[55] In the epic of Pābūjī, as transcribed by J.D. Smith, 1991, it is this casting out of the infant hero into the river that links Dhēbo with Karṇa. This, as well as the latter's great liberality and also his caste ambivalence, leads the Sanskrit hero into the local epic of Rajasthan: an unusual progress. In the Tamil drama described by Hiltebeitel, 1988, p.314, "because so many women have claimed to be his mother, the gods have given him a saree that will incinerate any woman who wears it after making a false maternal claim ... Kuntī dons the combustible saree, becomes radiant as gold, and Karṇa believes her." In this account, Kuntī asks Karṇa to direct the *nāgāstra*, 'snake missile', only once against her other sons. "Karṇa elicits Kuntī's promise that when he lies dying on the battlefield, she will take him on her lap, feed him with milk from her breast, and proclaim him before all as her son."

[56] Karṇa later repeats these statements, detailing the *rationale* behind his resentment, to the moribund Bhīṣma (VI,117,21ff.) He also justifies to Bhīṣma the reasons for his devotion to Duryodhana.

As we have seen on other occasions, Karṇa is always determined that his speech be absolutely correct however this affects his life. As far as he is concerned, his mother failed in her dharma, and he is now *not* going to fail in his duties towards the Kauravas. How can he desert them now, having received so much from them, he asks?

V,144,14: *apāre pārakāmā ye tyajeyaṃ tān ahaṃ katham.*
How may I abandon them at sea who desire a shore?

He absolutely refuses to reject his benefactor and says that only those who are *rājakilbiṣiṇas*, 'offenders against a king', would behave so.

V,144,15: *ayam hi kālaḥ saṃprāpto dhārtarāṣṭropajīvinām*
nirveṣṭavyaṃ mayā tatra prāṇān aparirakṣatā.
Now the time has arrived for those supported by Duryodhana.
This is not to be requited by wanting to defend my own life!

In this very dramatic scene Karṇa propounds a dharma of chosen filiation over that of blood filiation. Kuntī betrayed him and he will not betray Duryodhana. 'I will not speak untruth to you', he says, *na vai tvayi anṛtaṃ vade*, because,

V,144,18: *dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putrāṇām arthe yotsyāmi te sutaiḥ.*
I shall fight with your sons in the cause of the
sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[57]

He adds, *na karomy adya te vacaḥ*, 'I shall not perform your word'; that is, he is turning her profound disloyalty to him around, reversing the order.

Finally he does compromise with Kuntī and promises not to slay his brothers, except for Arjuna. He tells her, in another moment of illocution, that 'five of your sons will not perish', either with Arjuna

[57] Underlying all of this exchange is the play of phonetics in the word for 'charioteer', *sūta*, and 'son', *suta*. Karṇa makes much of this, it seems, with his emphatic repetition of the term.

dead or with himself dead, *na te naśiṣyanti putrāḥ pañca* (V,144,22).[58]

If the latter,

V,144,21: *yaśasā cāpi yujyeyaṃ nihataḥ savyasācinā.*
Killed by Arjuna I would then join with glory!

She agrees to the pact, admitting,

V,144,24: *yathā tvaṃ bhāṣase karṇa daivaṃ tu balavattaram.*
As you say, Karṇa, destiny is stronger.

That is, with speech one can lay down the parameters, but the final conclusion does not lie in the realm of human agency.[59]

So ends Karṇa's only meeting with his mother during his lifetime. Kuntī is *dukhāt pravepatī*, 'trembling from despair' (V,144,23), whereas Karṇa is described as *prītaḥ*, 'pleased'. The next time that she sees him he is dead on the battle-field and she is

[58] In the first chapter of the Śānti *parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira repeats this account of what happened between mother and son and the promise made. He comments, *so ... hato vīro bhrātā bhrātrā sahodaraḥ*, 'That co-uterine heroic brother was slain by a brother' (XII1,36).

[59] Karṇa accomplishes his promise to Kuntī in the course of various duels with his brothers. Having beaten Bhīma for instance, he does not slay him, but merely touches him with the tip of his bow, *vyāyudhaṃ na avadhīt cainaṃ karṇaḥ kuntyā vacaḥ smaran / dhanuṣo'greṇa taṃ karṇas tvabhidrutya parāmṛśat*. 'Karṇa, remembering the speech of Kuntī, did not kill him weaponless. Having attacked, he touched him with the tip of the bow' (VII,114,67-68). Similarly, he does the same, having encountered and bested Sahadeva, one of the twins, *athainam dhanuṣo'greṇa tudan*, 'thus striking him with the tip of his bow' (VII,142,15). Nakula, the other twin, is equally dismissed after being defeated, being touched on the neck by Karṇa's bow-string (VIII,17,91). The same happens with Yudhiṣṭhira, Karṇa 'touching his shoulder with his hand', *skandham saṃspṛśya pāṇinā* (VIII,33,36). All of these actions are of course extremely insulting for the recipient, insofar as they completely go against a rigorous kṣatriya code. Thus although Karṇa keeps to his word, he nevertheless humiliates these four brothers, Bhīma especially is enraged by these symbolic gestures. Thus his mother's exhortations had some success.

lamenting.[60] The closing phrase of the poet in this scene is, *tau jagmatuḥ pṛthak*, 'the two of them went separately'. That separateness is something that is distinct about Karṇa as a hero.

5. *Kṛpa*

The dialogue which occurs between Karṇa and Kṛpa is unlike any of the four speeches above, being rather an extended exchange of insult and rebuttal. Kṛpa, along with Droṇa, is one of the *ācāryas* who instructed Karṇa in martial skills (III,293,16). What is said in this address recalls what has been said many times throughout the epic by Bhīṣma to Karṇa, that is, that the latter is a vain boaster, *ayaṃ katthate nityam*, 'this one always boasts' (V,48,33).[61] Karṇa is never ironic.[62] This particular moment in the poem concentrates all these sentiments of criticism into a highly focussed attack on Karṇa and forces him into defending the position which he has created for himself through self-acclamation.

Martin in his book on the language of heroes writes that such speech-acts as boasting are "poetry meant to persuade, enacted in public, created by authority, in a context where authority is always up for grabs and to be won by the speaker with the best style."[63] That is, heroic manner is not merely an affair of prowess and physical skill, but that language is a crucial, if not *the* crucial element in its practice; bragging has a conative function. Martin qualifies the above sentence by adding that such speech is "inherently

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[60] In book fifteen, at the end of her life, before Kuntī leaves for the forest, she does admit her responsibility for the death of Karṇa: *avakīrṇo hi sa mayā viro duṣprajñayā tadā*, 'So that hero was cast down by my stupidity' (XV,22,11).

[61] Even Saṃjaya publically observes, during the Udyoga *parvan*, that Karṇa is a boaster (V,58,11). The root √*katth*, 'to boast', is probably cognate with the term *kathā*, *vide* Mayrhofer.

[62] Warder, 1989, p.89, ascribes the *rasa*, 'genre', of *ūrjasvin* to Karṇa, as showing "the pride and disdain of a noble hero".

[63] Martin, 1989, p.238. He analyses the importance of boasting and the nature of its efficacy among Iliadic heroes. He distinguishes between *épos*, and *mūthos*: the latter being public and performative where the speaker enacts the statement authoratively.

antagonistic". Arjuna, at one point in the forest, describes the speech of Karṇa as *tīkṣṇāsthabhedinyaḥ*, 'bone-piercing and sharp' (III,295,3).

The scene opens with Duryodhana expressing alarm at how battle is progressing for the Kauravas. To which Karṇa replies,

VII,133,5: *paritrātum iha prāpto yadi pārthaṃ puraṃdaraḥ*
tam apy āśu parājitya tato hantāsmi pāṇḍavam.
If Indra arrived here to save Arjuna,
having quickly beaten him, then I will slay the Pāṇḍava.

He continues, saying that he will slay all the enemy together in battle and, 'I shall give the world to you', *tava dāsyāmi medinīm* (VII,133,11).

Kṛpa, the *ācārya*, retorts cynically,

VII,133,13: *śobhanaṃ śobhanaṃ karṇa sanāthaḥ kurupuṅgavaḥ*
tvayā nāthena rādheya vacasā yadi sidhyati.
Brilliant, brilliant, Karṇa! The bull of the Kurus has a protector!
With YOU *as protector, Karṇa! — If [it is] by speech*
one succeeds!

Kṛpa then says that Karṇa 'boasts a lot', *bahuśaḥ katthase karṇa* (VII,133,14).[64] He cites the occasion when the *gandharvas* routed them in the forest and when Arjuna similarly defeated them outside the city of the Vairāṭas: in both instances Karṇa failed to triumph. In the case of the latter, just before the engagement began, there had been an equivalent exchange between Kṛpa and Karṇa when Karṇa had been, as usual, vaunting his kṣatriya prowess in a lengthy twenty-one *ślokas*. He had said that if Arjuna or Virāṭa arrived,

[64] In V,194,6 the audience had heard Duryodhana describe Karṇa as *samaraślāghī*, 'a boaster in encounters'. Yudhiṣṭhira, speaking with Arjuna, during one of the pauses at Kurukṣetra, says that Karṇa was, *yo'sau nityam śūramadena matto / vikatthate saṃsadi kauravāṇām / priyo'tyartham tasya suyodhanasya*, 'One who, extremely beloved of Duryodhana, always drunk with heroic rapture, boasts in the Kuru assembly' (VIII,46,35).

IV,43,2: *aham āvārayiṣyāmi veleva makarālayam.*
I will impede [him] as the coast impedes the sea.

He concludes this speech with an equally hortatory image:

IV,43,20: *hatāśvaṃ virathaṃ pārthaṃ pauruṣe paryavasthitam*
niḥśvasantaṃ yathā nāgam adya paśyantu kauravāḥ.
Let the Kurus today see Arjuna, established in valour,
with horses dead, unscharioted, hissing like a snake.[65]

Then, Kṛpa rebuts him with an equally lengthy speech of twenty-two *ślokas* which commences with him saying to Karṇa, 'you do not know the nature of things', *nārthānāṃ prakṛtiṃ vettha*, and, 'nor will you perceive the consequences', *nānubandham avekṣase*; and that his 'mind is more cruel in battle', *yuddhe krūratarā matiḥ* (IV,44,1).

IV,44,10: *ekena hi tvayā karṇa kiṃ nāmeha kṛtaṃ purā.*
Indeed! What was done by you alone previously, Karṇa?

Kṛpa lists all of Arjuna's accomplishments and terminates his diatribe against Karṇa's swaggering by advising, 'Karṇa, do not be impetuous!', *karṇa mā sāhasaṃ kṛthāḥ* (IV,44,20).[66] Strangely, for Bhīṣma is usually at odds with Karṇa, the elder defends the latter's bragging, perhaps because no real action has yet occurred and the narrative is not developed and Karṇa has not borne his two defeats. He says, speaking in terms of appeasement,

IV,46,5: *karṇo yad abhyavocan nas tejaḥsaṃjananāya tat.*
That which Karṇa spoke to us is for the cause of splendour.

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[65] A nice instance of what Watkins, 1995, p.301 *et seq.*, writing about the Indo-European tradition, describes as "HERO SLAY SERPENT". The image of the hero's opponent as an infuriated serpent is common throughout the course of the battle books and in other violent meetings during the epic. To this is allied the frequent image of arrows being like snakes — as they hiss through the air.

[66] Aśvatthāman immediately reiterates this tone, remarking that Karṇa boasts before action, before anything is achieved or accomplished: *karṇa vikatthase*, 'Karṇa, you boast!' (IV,45,1). *tvaṃ punaḥ paṇḍito bhūtvā vācaṃ vaktum ihecchasi*, 'You, having become a pandit, you desire to make a speech here!' (IV,45,15).

What the audience hears now in the Droṇa *parvan* is akin to the above but much more forcefully and bitterly expressed. Kṛpa tells Karṇa to 'fight ... without speaking', *abruvan ... yudhyasva* (VII,133,11). He adds, 'you boast a lot', *bahu katthasi*, and that 'you are seen as fruitless', *niṣphalo dṛśyase*.

VII,133,20: *garjitvā sūtaputra tvaṃ śāradābhram ivājalam.*
Son of a charioteer, you growl like an autumn cloud
that is without water!

Kṛpa continues in this tone, essentially accusing Karṇa of cowardice in the face of Arjuna's missiles. He then says,

VII,133,23: *bāhubhiḥ kṣatriyāḥ śūrā vāgbhiḥ śūrā dvijātayaḥ*
dhanuṣā phalgunaḥ śūraḥ karṇaḥ śūro manorathaiḥ.
Kṣatriyas are heroes by arms, brahmins are heroes by speech.
Arjuna is a hero with the bow, Karṇa a hero with
imaginary chariots! [67]

This is an important distinction which Kṛpa is raising here, but he is using the terms in a way that is slightly distorted. For it is usually the case that heroes, the Indo-European hero in general and the Mahābhārata hero in particular, boast before combat and verbally assail their opponent.[68] Kṛpa here is making a false difference between what is appropriate to the two *varṇas*, for speech in the brahmin's case usually only refers to sacrifice and law, that is ritual speech.[69] There is a problem here, inasmuch as Kṛpa is a brahmin: like Droṇa, he is a brahmin who lives as an instructor in weaponry.

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[67] Note that the active term here for hero is *śūra* and not *vīra*.

[68] They also, in many cases, as in Iliad, announce their lineage. *te nāmāny atha gotrāṇi karmāṇi vividhāni ca / kīrtiyantaḥ*, 'They, announcing name, clan, and various accomplishments' (XIV,76,6). It is also kṣatriya practice for the best of the heroes to have 'arrows marked with their name', *ātmanāmāṅkitān bāṇān* VII,134,24; also VII,113,5. Presumably this is an ideogram. Also, as Droṇa goes into battle he is 'proclaiming his name', *droṇo nāma viśrāvayan yudhi* (VII,7,14). At VII,147,34-35, this proclaiming is compared to the similar announcement of names that occurs at a *svayaṃvara*.

[69] Or in debates about *śāstra*.

That is, the usual strong separation between kṣatriya and brahmin is blurred in his person.

Karṇa replies formally and without anger, the poet says, *evaṃ paruṣatas ... karṇaḥ praharatāṃ śreṣṭhaḥ ... abravīt*, 'Thus harshly addressed, Karṇa, the best of strikers ... spoke'.

VII,133,25: *śūrā garjanti satataṃ prāvṛṣīva balāhakaḥ*
phalaṃ cāśu prayacchanti bījam uptam ṛtāv iva.
Heroes always thunder like storm clouds in the monsoon,
and like a seed dropped to the earth in season, they
quickly offer fruit.
26: *doṣam atra na paśyāmi śūrāṇāṃ raṇamūrdhani*
tat tad vikatthamānānāṃ bhāraṃ codvahatāṃ mṛdhe.
I do not see the error here, of heroes bearing the burden in battle,
boasting this and that in the van of battle.

He makes the curious addition that,

VII,133,27: *yaṃ bhāraṃ puruṣo voḍhuṃ manasā hi vyavasyati*
daivam asya dhruvaṃ tatra sāhāyyayopapadyate.
Whatever burden a man with his mind resolves to bear,
certainly, with regard to that, destiny approaches for
his assistance.

Manasā, 'with his mind', is the focal term here, indicating volition or motive. That is, destiny favours the conscious action, and presumably constrains the unconsidered. Karṇa is thus informing Kṛpa that his speech is not simply grandiose and bombastic, but intentional, that it possesses a logic. He adds, turning Kṛpa's previous simile back upon itself, that heroes 'do not roar vainly like clouds full of rain', *vṛthā ... na garjanti sajalā iva toyadāḥ* (VII, 133,28).[70]

VII,133,29: *sāmarthyam ātmano jñātvā tato garjanti pāṇḍitāh.*
Then the wise thunder, having recognised their own strength.

[70] Duryodhana's final speech is glossed by the poet, *evaṃ duryodhane ... garjamāne*, 'When Duryodhana was thus roaring' (IX,32,1).

He concludes by saying, *tato garjāmi*, 'thus I roar!' *paśya tvaṃ garjitasyāsya phalam*, 'See the fruit of this thundering!' His final sentence is such a roar:

VII,133,31: *duryodhanāya dāsyāmi pṛthivīṃ hatakaṇṭakām.*
I shall give to Duryodhana a thornless earth.[71]

The key term in both of these speeches is the verb √*garj*, 'to roar, cry, growl, thunder, vaunt, boast,' as an elephant might do or a rain-cloud — an aspect of Indra. This is a word often used by epic and lyric poets for the description of monsoon storms. We have seen how typical a metaphor are the two agencies of fire and rain-cloud in the poem: a cloud extinguishing the fire is a common analogue for battle. So the roaring is a metonym of this image of rainfall and fertility.

Kṛpa responds with a long list of the various members of the Pāṇḍava forces and their incredible strengths. He concludes at length by telling Karṇa that his words are *apanaya*, 'bad policy (VII,133,43). Karṇa responds, saying how vital the *śakti*, the 'missile', which Indra gave him, is in all his planning (VII,133,47); knowing this, he is able to make such grand declarations, for nothing can withstand that weapon. Karṇa is staking everything on that one irresistible advantage. He repeats his earlier claim, *tato garjāmi gautama*, 'hence I roar, O son of Gautama!' (VII,133,50). He threatens to cut out the tongue of Kṛpa with his sword, and calls him,

VII,133,51: *tvaṃ tu vṛddhaś ca vipraś aśaktaś cāpi saṃyuge.*

[71] Note the arboreal metonym. Arguably, this statement might not be at all boastful, but more of the nature of the formulaic, that is, heroic protocol or manner, where the hero offers the conquered land to a king. It certainly expresses a sentiment and a phrasing that the audience has heard on other occasions. Such a statement could merely represent the division of power between king and hero, that bilateral quality which the kṣatriya function divides at. The martial hero wins the battle and territory and offers it to the king who governs it with his law and authority; this, in turn, is legitimised by the ritual practices of the brahmins and their legal deliberations over what constitutes right dharma. There is thus a circulation or exchange of power among these three elements of rule: an economy in which all three play roles as exchangers.

You, are old, and a brahmin, and also unskilled in the fight![72]

He continues to insult and rail at him, the obverse of boasting, and praises his individual companions as *śūrāḥ ... kṛtāstrāś ca balinaḥ*, 'potent heroes expert with missiles' (VII,133,56) and adds, modifying his previous great claims,

VII,133,58: *daivāyattam ahaṃ manye jaya subalinām api.*
I think that, even for the very powerful, triumph depends on destiny.

He ends by calling Kṛpa *dvijādhama*, 'lowest of brahmins'.

Karṇa is thus totally conscious of the *function* of his boasts; they are not words that he throws about when enthusiastic or irate; he is completely aware of their measurement and frame. It is all part of his *vikrama*, 'energy'. As he says to Nakula on a later occasion on the field of battle,

VIII,17,53: *karma kṛtvā raṇe śūra tataḥ katthitum arhasi.*
Having performed deeds in battle, then, O hero, you can boast!

Aśvatthāman joins in the dissension, drawing his sword in defence of the *ācārya* and vituperously insults Karṇa. He threatens to decapitate him. It should be remembered that Aśvatthāman is also a brahmin and not a kṣatriya. Duryodhana himself restrains his violence (VII,134,3), and they insult each other further: Karṇa vilifying the other's brahminhood and Aśvatthāman calling Karṇa a 'son of a charioteer'. Duryodhana conciliates the parties and advises them to turn to the approaching enemy, who have come to fight with Karṇa. Mollification is reached and war recommences.

As they set out for the field, the poet likens Karṇa to *parivṛtaḥ śakro devagaṇair*, 'Indra, surrounded by his crowd of deities' (VII,134,9). Karṇa is soon skirmishing with Arjuna and is bested. As his own chariot has been again destroyed he has to join Kṛpa on the other's vehicle!

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[72] Note that Karṇa possesses the *śakti*, and Kṛpa is here called *aśaktas*: there is a phonetic resonance at work. We have observed before how Karṇa was good at making this kind of nuance.

Duryodhana, in response to this, utters a long boastful speech himself, about how *he* will now beat Arjuna (VII,134,54ff.) Aśvatthāman, advised by Kṛpa, goes to his king's support, encouraging him to stay away from the van of battle. The audience then hears Aśvatthāman's lengthy boasts as to his own prowess (VII,135,2-14).

The two sides in this dispute speak in a manner which is slightly awry; only rarely do they actually address each other's points. They are bragging or satirising and not arguing. It is noteworthy however that Karṇa defends his habit of bragging and explains, to some extent, its basis. In the Ādi *parvan* when he made his first entry into the poem, he did immediately accomplish all the feats that Arjuna had performed in the weapons trial, thus establishing a certain superiority. Then his cuirass and ear-rings did lend him a certain excellence, which the missile from Indra later restored.

On entering combat with another hero, two conditions must be fulfilled. One is that the genealogy of the assailants must be known, as duels only occur between equals of lineage and *varṇa*.[73] The other condition, or customary preliminary, is that the contestants verbally assault each other before actually engaging in physical contact. It is the latter point which Karṇa has been propounding and defending during this speech.[74]

As a rider to the above, it is fitting that when Karṇa finally rejoins the Kuru forces at the commencement of book seven, he makes a speech to the army (VII,2,4ff.) There is nothing about this

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[73] This is also the case at a *svayaṃvara*, I,178,15ff. See however, I,187,2, where the disguise of the Pāṇḍavas complicates this.

[74] This is the *vāgyuddham* (IX,55,1). Mehendale, 1995, p.6, commenting on VI,1,28, *vācā yuddhe pravṛtte no vācaiva pratiyodhanam*, 'when battle begins by speech, by speech alone is the rebuttal', remarks: "This seems to have meant that one *must* reply in fitting terms to the opponent's verbal tirade, and that one should not shoot arrows at the opponent before he had had his say." See pp.6-9 on boasts. Before their first formal duel after the *svayaṃvara*, Karṇa and Arjuna insult each other, *iti śūrārthavacanair ābhāṣetāṃ parasparam*, 'So they shouted at each other with words having to do with heroes' (I,181,12). Cúchulainn, in the Táin, 2625, before he enters the duel with his foster-brother, also engages in great verbal display (p.181-84 in Kinsella).

address that is inflated or self-acclaiming;[75] he uses words that are tempered and appropriate, assessing the opponents, promising to either defeat them or give up his own life. He berates the *kāpuruṣa,* 'coward'. *dāsyāmy ahaṃ dhārtarāṣṭrāya rājyam*, 'I shall give the kingdom to Duryodhana' (VII,2,22), or he will perish himself, he says. He then, in good IE fashion, calls for all the various items of his paraphernalia, and lavishes praise on each object individually (VII,2,23-29).[76] This is integral to the speech, which concludes on the emphatic note,

VII,2,33: *na tv evāhaṃ na gamiṣyāmi teṣām*
madhye śūrāṇāṃ tat tathāhaṃ bravīmi.
It is not the case at all that I shall not go among those heroes!
That is what I say to you!

6. *Śalya*

As a corollary to the above exchange one should append the dialogue which occurs between Karṇa and king Śalya as they proceed to the field on their chariot. This instance represents a perversion of the model adduced above of hero and charioteer; it is its shadow, as it were.[77] Here, the *bravura* of Karṇa fails as a speech act, and obversely, the charioteer who *should* be praising his hero, decries him satirically.[78] In this case, the speech act of denigration succeeds.

[75] As when he speaks to Duryodhana at VII,21,18-27 — a sanguine and measured assessment of Pāṇḍava forces that is in no way hortatory.

[76] Saṃjaya then caps this with an equally lavish description of Karṇa, at last in command, setting out on his chariot for the field. *sa siddhimantaṃ ratham uttamaṃ dṛḍhaṃ sakūbaraṃ hemapariṣkṛtaṃ śubham*, 'That perfect, superb chariot, beautiful, embellished with gold, with a strong pole' (VII,2,34-37). See RV VI,75, a hymn in praise of the various weapons of a warrior. Descriptions of heroes as they set out for the field, in which their paraphernalia are luxuriously detailed, would similarly come under this genre of poetry.

[77] Appropriately, when Gāndhārī surveys the corpses on the battlefield in the Strī *parvan*, Śalya's tongue is being eaten by birds (XI,23,5).

[78] Śalya, *cukopayiṣur atyarthaṃ karṇam*, 'desired to make Karṇa extremely angry' (VIII,27,30). Śalya had told Yudhiṣṭhira in book five that he would behave like this. Once again, as at every other point, the audience perceives Karṇa as be-

The poet adroitly switches protocol and plays with the model's formality. The dialogue extends for more than three hundred *ślokas*.

Much of the section is in *triṣṭubhs* and opens in an elevated and dignified style, depicting Karṇa, poised in his chariot (VIII,26,40ff.) These, of course, are the final hours of Karṇa's life. The poets make much of the pageantry of how Karṇa circumambulates his chariot before mounting it, having first invited Śalya to ascend the vehicle (VIII,26,8ff.) Priests and eulogists sing their praises. This is unlike any similar moment in the poem; no other hero undergoes quite so admirable a departure. Karṇa then speaks with eloquence, toying with the rhetoric of the occasion. *sa śalyam ābhāṣya jagāda vākyam*, 'having spoken to Śalya he made a speech'.

This begins with Karna detailing how he would even resist Indra. *bravīmi satyaṃ kuravaḥ*, 'I speak the truth, Kurus!' (VIII,26,45). He tells of how only he can resist Arjuna who is, *mṛtyum ivograrūpiṇam*, 'like the horrible form of Death'. He tempers his speech however, and praises the abilities of Droṇa, saying, *neha dhruvaṃ kiṃcid api pracintyam*, 'Nothing is to be deemed certain in the world'. Either he will be victorious or perish, *diṣṭaṃ na śakyaṃ vyativartitum*, 'I cannot overcome what is destined', he adds (VIII,26,54). He sings the praises of his chariot and equipment and informs Śalya that he would even encounter with Death himself were he to come to Arjuna's protection (VIII,26,59).

Śalya cries out, *virama virama karṇa katthanād*, 'Stop, Karṇa! Cease from boasts!' He controverts all that Karṇa had just said (VIII,26,62ff.), and praises Arjuna, reminding Karṇa of how often Arjuna had triumphed over him. The poet says of Śalya, *bahuparuṣaṃ prabhāṣati*, 'he spoke many bitter words' (VIII,26,70).

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ing distracted from his true course. On the potence of satire, see Tod, 1929, vol. I, p.lix, "The *vish*, or poison of the bard, is more dreaded by the Rajput than the steel of the foe." Fer Diad, in the Táin, receives similar denigration when his charioteer praises the opponent, Cúchulainn, at 2581. Fer Diad says, 'It's your help I need now / not this false friendship. / Enough of your praises' (p.180 in Kinsella).

Karṇa's only response is, *bhavatu bhavatu*, 'Let it be', or, more colloquially, 'so what!'

The hyperbole continues in the following *adhyāya* but in a differing form. Karṇa promises to bountifully reward whosoever in the army is the first to indicate to him the whereabouts of Arjuna (VIII,2-13). The speech repeats its promise, *dadyām*, 'I would give', followed by lists of, among other things, jewels, cattle, horses, women, and villages. Śalya responds to this speech by informing Karṇa that his words are *bālyāt*, 'puerile' (VIII,27,19). He proceeds, as usual, to depreciate all that Karṇa has said, saying that he is seeking Arjuna, *mohāt*, 'out of delusion'; *kālakāryaṃ na jānīṣe*, 'you do not comprehend time nor duty' (VIII,27,24). Karṇa replies that Śalya is 'an enemy possessing the face of a friend', *mitramukhaḥ śatruḥ*; which is, of course, correct.

Śalya, then, gives a long speech (VIII,27,31-52), fully declaiming against Karṇa. Here, Karṇa is a *bāla*, 'child', a *mūḍha kṣudramṛga*, 'stupefied small deer', a *sṛgāla*, 'jackal', a *śaśaka*, 'a little rabbit', in a long list of insults. The invective is delivered with the full force of rhetorical repetition and rounded off with a summary of the complementarity between Karna and Arjuna. It is a *virtuoso* speech.

The poet, making a play upon the name of Śalya, 'dart', says that Karṇa became angry with the *vākśalyam*, 'speech-dart' (VIII,27,53). Karṇa then informs him of his last supernatural missile, the *nāgāstra*, 'snake weapon', which he has in reserve that has been kept in sandal and 'worshipped', *pūjito*.[79] This, like the *śakti* which he had marked for Arjuna and which he released at Ghaṭotkaca, is also being held for his *bhāga*. Hence, he informs Śalya, his vaunts are not pretentious, but well-founded. *tau hatvā samare hantā tvām*, 'having killed those two in the fight, I will slay you!' he then says (VIII,27,67). He does add, though, that they, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, could possibly slay him. This statement is a formula that

[79] The arrow is later described as *sadārcitam*, 'always honoured' (VIII,66,6). See the above note on the praise of weapons as a genre of poetry.

kṣatriyas utter before going out to meet their *bhāga*: 'either I shall slay him or he will kill me', *māṃ hantā ... taṃ vā hantāsmi*.[80]

As is common even today in angry exchanges, *éthnos* becomes the issue: Karṇa proceeds to insult the Madraka people in Śalya's kingdom. There are *gāthā*, 'songs', he says, sung by women and children and old people, 'songs previously told by brahmins', *brāhmaṇaiḥ kathitāḥ pūrvam*, about the 'the Madra man [who] is eternally corrupt', *durātmā madrako nityam* (VIII,27,76). Sexual morals, drunkenness, diet, all come in for a lambasting. In particular, there is 'no amity among the Madrakas', *na sauhārdam madrakeṣu*.[81] The women are *nirhrīkāḥ*, 'impudent', *ghasmarāḥ*, 'voracious', and *naṣṭaśaucāḥ*, 'spoiled' (VIII,27,89). In contrast to such *mleccha*, 'barbarian, outcast' practices, Karṇa closes the speech by referring to the dignity of kṣatriyas.

VIII,27,92-4: *yad ājau nihataḥ śete sadbhiḥ samabhipūjitaḥ*
āyudhānāṃ saṃparāye yan mucyeyam aham tataḥ
na me sa prathamaḥ kalpo nidhane svargam icchataḥ
so'ham priyaḥ sakhā cāsmi dhārtarāṣṭrasya dhīmataḥ
tadarthe hi mama prāṇāḥ ...
If slain in combat, one is lying honoured by the good,
or if I would give up life in the battle of warriors -
[that] is not my first wish — desiring heaven in destruction,
I am the dear friend of the wise son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra –
in that is my life ...

On this sober note, Karṇa concludes his rebuttal, retracting his threat to kill Śalya: but if the other speaks so rudely again,

VIII,27,103: *punaś ced īdṛśaṃ vākyaṃ madrarāja vadiṣyasi*

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[80] Yudhiṣṭhira, going out to meet his *bhāga*, says, *māṃ vā śalyo raṇe hantā taṃ vāham*, (IX,15,21). Bhīṣma had expressed the same sentiment at VI,77,9. It is the 'stock sentence', pronounced before departure towards the field and the opponent. Kṣatriyas are very good at declaiming or viewing such binary situations. That is their perspective of the world.

[81] Similarly, *madrake saṃgatam nāsti*, 'there is no friendship among Madrakas' (VIII,27,80 and 83). Karṇa repeatedly stresses this failing of the Madraka people, that they are utterly incapable of friendship, *mitradruṅ madrako nityam*, 'Madrakas are betrayers!' (VIII,27,93).

śiras te pātayiṣyāmi gadayā vajrakalpayā.
O king of the Madras, if you speak like this again,
I shall make your head fly off with my adamantine mace!

Śalya now tells the fable of a crow and goose, an allegory on Karṇa's *hauteur* (VIII,28,3ff.)[82] Next, Karṇa confesses about the two brahmin curses, and how, because of the first, Rāma's, he is exceedingly worried.[83]

VIII,29,3: *saṃtāpayaty abhyadhikaṃ tu rāmāc chāpo'dya.*
Today, the curse from Rāma is extremely distressing [to me].

Then, once again, Karṇa begins to sing of his own prowess and majesty (VIII,29,8ff.); this is given in irregular *triṣṭubhs*. He next insults his driver further and focusses on how disloyal Śalya is, compared to himself.

VIII,29,20: *apriyo yaḥ paruṣo niṣṭhuro hi kṣudraḥ ...*
hanyām ahaṃ tvādṛśānāṃ śatāni kṣamāmi tvām.
[You] who are unfriendly, severe, cruel, indeed vile ....
I could kill hundreds of your sort — I can spare you!

Karṇa accuses him of speaking 'in the service of Arjuna', *pāṇḍavārthe*, which is the complete opposite of what a charioteer should be doing, and is totally *apriya*, 'unfriendly'. *mayy ārjave*, says Karṇa, 'in me is honesty', whereas Śalya is *jihmagatiḥ*, 'crooked, snake-like' (VIII,29,21); he is a 'betrayer of friendship', *mitradrohī*. 'Time is now horrible, fabricated by Death itself',

[82] Ironically, he also gives a neat, precise summation of the duties of a charioteer, including remedies for wounds, augury of signs, familiarity with weapons and animals (VIII,28,6-8).

[83] The two curses are also heard at V,61,2 and XII,2-3. In this story of Rāma's curse, very popular with contemporary Indian traditions, Karṇa, in the company of Rāma, pretended to be a brahmin in order to receive the secrets of certain missiles from the guru (VIII,29,4ff. and XII,3). Bitten by a *kīṭa*, 'worm', whilst Rāma slept with his head on Karṇa's lap, the latter did not move and bore the agony in silence. On wakening, Rāma observed the blood, and realised that a brahmin could never have withstood such pain. Karṇa confesses to being a *sūta*, *sūto'ham asmi* (VIII,29,6). Rāma curses him so that he will forget the necessary mantras when the divine weaponry, which he has revealed to him, is needed.

Karṇa says, *kālas tv ayaṃ mṛtyumayo'tidāruṇo*. Śalya is disloyal to Duryodhana, his king, whilst Duryodhana is one who always favours *mitra*, 'friendship'. Karṇa is only concerned with Duryodhana's benefit (VIII,29,25).

He again confesses to Śalya that there is another curse, coming from when Karṇa accidentally shot a brahmin's cow: this is, that his wheel would fall into a hole during battle (VIII,29,31ff. and recounted at XII,2). *tasmāt bibhemi*, 'I am afraid of that', he admits.

VIII,29,40: *ity etat te mayā proktaṃ kṣiptenāpi suhṛttayā.*
Thus I have declared to you with friendship, even though abused by you.

He adds,

VIII,30,4: *nāhaṃ bhīṣayituṃ śakyo vāṅmātreṇa kathaṃcana.*
I am by no means intimidated by mere words!

Karṇa then resumes his contemnation of the Madraka folk, telling of how an elderly brahmin of Dhṛtarāṣṭra used to tell *purāvṛttāḥ*, 'old happenings' (VIII,30,9), describing these rude and revolting people. Again, he focusses primarily on the nature of the women. This diatribe lasts for almost eighty *ślokas*.

The colloquy ends and combat resumes with the audience hearing Dhṛtarāṣṭra asking Saṃjaya his usual questions about tactics and battle formations, the names of the various manoeuvres. As they drive out onto the field, Śalya describes a long list of unfavourable portents that are occurring (VIII,31,37ff.)[84] Then, as the Pāṇḍavas come into view, he, in typical IE fashion, describes the opposition to Karṇa, *paśya*, 'Look!' (VIII,31,58ff.)[85] Later, as Arjuna approaches them for the last fight, Śalya and Karṇa speak to each other amicably, without recrimination, in the 'usual' manner of charioteer and hero (VIII,57,13ff.)

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[84] This is in symmetrical contrast to the portents when Arjuna ultimately sets off towards the final duel (VIII,50,43ff.)

[85] Saṃjaya, describing the approaching Pāṇḍavas to his old king, speaks in this same form, *paśyata*! (XV,32,5-18). See above, Ch.II,4.

The range of discourse that occurs between Karṇa and Śalya at this time, as they stand in the chariot, is enormous. Insult, confession, vaunting, abuse, threat, forgiveness, the poet compounds many kinds of emotion into this one dialogue, making it, essentially, a *pastiche* of sorts. It is unique in the poem. The standard hero-charioteer model is turned inside out and converted into something very human. As the final major speech in Karṇa's life, and on the penultimate day of Śalya's life, it sums up all Karṇa's contradictions and paradox, the strange imbalance between potence and irresolution that is so part of his make-up. For a poet to sing this would be a great *tour-de-force*, providing an intensely dramatic scene in which a great range of emotions was portrayed before the final end.

One might conclude from this that the *rhodomontade* and performative aspects of heroic discourse are only engaged when the addressee is another hero. For that kind of speech event to occur, the conditions of hyperbole must be balanced, just as in a formal duel with weapons and title.[86]

It is perhaps the ability to speak well, in terms of both persuasion and truth, that is the most determining factor if the term heroism is to be applied to a martially expert or superior kṣatriya. It is for this reason that Arjuna does not fully qualify, except for the fact of his relation with Kṛṣṇa, but even then it is his position as interlocutor that really marks out his excellence: *he* is the one to receive the divine speech of the Gītā, and *he* is the one to be allowed to perceive the divine theophany of his mentor or friend.

Similarly with Yudhiṣṭhira, the *dharmaputra*, whose speech one would expect to be true, particularly as he is also the *dharmarājā*. He is both morally and finally in the position of king, the one who is responsible for generating and sustaining truth in a community

[86] The first proper speech of Karṇa on the battle field at Kurukṣetra is sanguine and reserved. He is talking with Duryodhana who praises the feats of Droṇa, his new commander. Karṇa deliberately modifies his king's enthusiasm, commenting on the individual strengths of the opposition (VII,21,18-27). There is nothing *bravura* about the speech.

through its laws, which of course, emanate from his decisions and pronouncements. Yudhiṣṭhira however, compromises himself spectacularly at the death of Droṇa with his lie about the elephant.[87]

Rāma of epic Rāmāyaṇa is also not merely a great king or great warrior and mighty kṣatriya; he is a hero due to his adherence to true speech and the import of illocution. He places the value of his word above any other human responsibility, even above his own feelings of affection, desire, and love for a wife. For this he too is *vadatām vara*, the best of speakers and hence heroic.

It is my contention that given the nature of formulaic language during the preliterate period that we are considering, the poetic conception of society and its internal conflicts privileges formal poetic speech above all other kinds of authority.[88] This is manifest in a twofold manner. One, is that the speaker must have the integrity and intelligence to be able to form such utterances, and two, that the speaker is able to remain true to the logic or conclusiveness of such pronouncements. That is, 'unto death': either of the person of the speaker or the person of those closely allied with the speaker, his kin; and in disregard of any other obligation.

Thus it is Karṇa's capacity to follow through with the consequences of what he says that really elevates him to the level of hero; even though his admission of what he considers correct ethical behaviour is to the detriment of what is considered the social or conventional ethical code. If we accept that the dialogue between Karṇa and Kṛṣṇa is not a later addition to the poem but is party to the reality of Karṇa's character, then this elevation is truly tran-

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[87] VII,165,116.

[88] In Vedic culture, it is the *ṛṣis* who possess this power of efficaceous speech, but to levels of magical achievement or causality, particularly with curses. It is an interesting question, what can speech actually 'do', given the probity or *tejas*, of the speaker? Vyāsa crosses the margin, or confuses the margin, between epic and hymnic poetry, as does Nārada. See XIV,61,10, where Vyāsa says, *janiṣyati mahātejāḥ putras tava yaśasvini / prabhāvāt vāsudevasya mama vyāharaṇāt api*, 'Your splendid son will live, lady, because of the power of Kṛṣṇa and *also because of my utterance*'. See Staal, in Alpers, 1989, pp.48-95, on the effects of mantric speech.

scendental: Karṇa exceeds anything that Arjuna achieves or even considers.[89] His appreciation of what constitutes necessity and its conditions makes Arjuna's hesitation at Kurukṣetra seem mundane.

When Sūrya, speaking bodilessly from the sky says, *mātṛvacaḥ kuru*, 'do as your mother says', and Karṇa ignores this injunction, he is going against the grain of what he would normally be expected to do. The word of the father, and the mother in this case, as both are present, is normally what amounts to law or dharma, especially when the paternal figure is one of the greatest of deities. At that moment he excels as a hero and becomes the 'best' of the Kurus; insofar as his behaviour stands apart from any other contact, except perhaps for the relation which he enjoys with Duryodhana, which he has personally elected. Access to divine weaponry, the accomplishments of physical prowess, even material wealth: these are not crucial from this point of view. At that moment he is alone, not only in terms of a moral agent who decides what is correct, but alone also because his decision as to ethical rigour leads to his own death. Karṇa raises ethical conduct to a level beyond any other player in the Mahābhārata, and he does this via speech and via his loyalty to such.[90] His haughty *braggadocio* manner is part of this picture, for in a way his responsiblity is unlike any other hero in the poem. As we have seen, his vaunting is not something outraged and enthusiastic, but is given always under controlled circumstances and could almost be considered a formal *genre* of its own: it always *fits* the situation as it should.

It is Karṇa's decision to keep to his own word, that is, his fidelity to Duryodhana, that isolates him and thus qualifies him as truly heroic.[91] *Anṛta*, verbal untruth, as it applies to Duryodhana, is ever-

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[89] See Allen, 1996, for another aspect of Arjuna's behaviour, his adherence to the values of the *āśrama* system.

[90] Bhīṣma, as we have seen, always stands close to Karṇa, in many different ways. His relationship with speech is arguably similar to that of Karṇa, because of the vow of celibacy which he pursues. Apart from this though, there is not the complexity of *persona* as there is with Karṇa.

[91] On the battle-field, Karṇa, in book six, says to Duryodhana, promising to bring down Arjuna, *śape satyena te nṛpa*, 'I swear an oath, to you, O king, truly' (VI,93,9). It is kṣatriya convention that when a hero has vowed to kill someone,

present in Karṇa's mind, as are the conditions of that friendship which he is so often invoking. Only at his death is this separation dissolved and he is mourned as a son by his mother and ultimately 'he' joins his father in the *antarikṣa*.

This capacity for truthful speech is amplified by the fact that Karṇa is inadvertently adopted at birth into a low caste status. His heroism has thus further to go, as it were; it has to travel longer on the way to that point of dignity and intrinsic nobility which supports the ability of a hero to be a speaker of true speech. Speech is what raises Karṇa above every other figure in the poem and is thus totally isolating for him.[92]

The above five speeches, along with the exchanges that Karṇa has with Duryodhana and Bhīṣma, would supply the poets who once sang the hypothetical 'Karṇa Epic' with an extremely diverse spectrum of material. No other hero in the poem ranges through quite so many intense passions as Karṇa; one understands why even up to the present time he remains so popular to the Indian world. It would not be difficult to imagine poets specialising in this dramatic corpus which Karṇa generates and a gifted singer running the *gamut* of all the dialogues or *duos*.

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no other kṣatriya is permitted to slay that person; which explains why Arjuna resists Kṛṣṇa's two attempts to kill Bhīṣma, for he has himself vowed to accomplish that (VI,55, and 102). If this had occurred, the fame of Arjuna would have been diminished. This represents, as it were, the elected *bhāga*, as opposed to the appointed one. Likewise, one of the problems at the death of Abhimanyu is that he is not killed by his appointed *bhāga*. Challenged, however, a kṣatriya should not ignore the summons (VII,16,39). A further extension of this model of kṣatriya *mores* is when a group of warriors band together and swear a complex ritual oath, to the effect that they will either destroy an opposing hero or die themselves; it is a suicide pact, as in VII,16,11-36. These are called *saṃśaptikas*, 'conspirators', and a single group of these runs through the Kurukṣetra narrative — they have sworn to either kill Arjuna or themselves perish in the attempt. The passing of a crowd of *saṃśaptikas* is a common refrain in the battle books and in fact the sixty-sixth minor *parvan* is eponymously theirs.

[92] Sjoestedt, 1949, p.69, comments on the Old Irish hero, "The superiority of the hero is not confined to the spheres of warfare and magic: it extends to what we should call intellectual culture."

To conclude, it is Karṇa's use of speech as a form of assault that sets off the movement of the poem towards Kurukṣetra.[93] As the old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra says to his poet,

III,46,32: *kiṃ kṛtaṃ sūta karṇena vadatā paruṣaṃ vacaḥ.*
O poet, what was done by Karṇa saying bitter speech?[94]

[93] Yudhiṣṭhira, in the forest, lies awake at night recollecting *paruṣā vācaḥ sūtaputrasya*, 'the bitter words of Karṇa' (III,245,5).

[94] After the battle is over, Yudhiṣṭhira speaks of Karṇa as, 'one whose teeth are spears and arrows and whose tongue is a sword', *karṇināLīkadaṃṣṭrasya khaḍga-jihvasya ... karṇasya* (X,10,15-16). In the late twentieth century novel of Tharoor, 1989, p.137, Karna is described as having "a razor-edged tongue".

CHAPTER FIVE

HEROIC COUNTERPOINT

In this chapter I shall do two things. One is to examine the phenomenon of how heroes relate to their sons — and sometimes *vice-versa*. Secondly, I shall to examine three instances where differences are strongly marked between various kinds of heroic endeavour. Here we shall not focus simply on Karṇa but on three other figures and the manner in which they are treated by the poets. This is in order not so much to test the outline of the heroic so far constructed, but rather to give it counterpoint, and consider whether these events fit with the pattern which we have adduced, and examine if they in any way modify our schema.

Arjuna's encounters with three deities — and I have not included Kṛṣṇa here as he is neither explicitly nor completely a deity — provide a good occasion for analysis, as no other hero deals with deities quite on the scale that Arjuna does. Also, the meeting between Yudhiṣṭhira and his progenitor, Dharma, provides an unusual example of the hero in his intellectual or speaking dimension. Thirdly, Bhīma, especially in book one, exhibits heroic behaviour which is very unlike the model we have developed for Karṇa. Bhīma's heroism is extremely familial in orientation as well as crude or primitive.[1] This is primarily so only in the earlier books, for in the later battle narratives he acts in a way that is like the other heroes in the poem and the earlier type of behaviour vanishes.

As a brief rider to the above, I would like to take a look at a strange ritual that occurs in book two. There is the *rājasūya*, the *aśvamedha*, and the *vaiṣṇava*, specifically royal rituals, and there is the *svayaṃvara* and the 'weapons' trial', to name a few of the major kṣatriya rites that appear in the course of the poem. The par-

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[1] At one point Kṛṣṇa remarks to Yudhiṣṭhira that Bhīma is '[more] beloved to you than all your brothers', *bhīmaḥ priyas te sarvebhyo bhrātṛbhyo* (X,12,3).

ticular rite in book two which I shall look is a unique kind of kṣatriya action, and one that Karṇa never performs or participates in.

Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna and Bhīma manifest aspects of the epic hero which are present, though less visibly, in Karṇa.[2] It is pertinent that Yudhiṣṭhira in book two refers to these two other heroes as his 'two eyes', *bhīmārjunāv ubhau netre* (II,15,2). These three brothers, to the exclusion of the twins, are closely united throughout the poem. For this reason, Sahadeva and Nakula do not really enter this part of the discussion.

1. *Heroes & Sons*

The relations between heroes and their sons supply an important condition to the Mahābhārata. They offer a basic patterning for heroes in terms of primary kinship.[3] Rostam and his son, to name the

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[2] Like the three sons of the previous generation, their legal father and uncles, these three are also excessively accomplished in wisdom, the bow, and physical strength. *pāṇḍur dhanuṣi vikrānto ... balavān āsīd dhṛtarāṣṭro ... na kaścid vidura saṃitaḥ dharme* (I,102,19-20). Such provides an interesting repetition of what appears to be a pattern of tripartition.

[3] Concerning kinship in the Mahābhārata, it is remarkable that Kuru kingship descends through Arjuna to his son via the matriline, in that he marries his mother's brother's daughter, his cousin Subhadrā. Also, earlier on, when the lineage is threatened by a lack of sons, there is an instancing of a levirate, when Vyāsa fulfills the conjugal obligations of his deceased brother, Vicitravīrya. Marriage, in the epic, however, is patrilocal. Another such instance of unusual kinship structure occurs when a mother is admonishing her son to the accomplishment of kṣatriya dharma — found in the Āśvamedhika *parvan*, where Ulūpī, encourages her son Babhruvāhana to go and fight: *kuruṣva vacanaṃ putra dharmas te bhavitā paraḥ*, 'Do what I say, son! It will be the highest dharma for you' (XIV,78,11). The scene is informative in terms of kinship, insofar as Ulūpī is a co-wife of Arjuna, and the son is the child of another co-wife, by him. A similar instance of this form, is when Abhimanyu is given the metronym *kārṣṇeya*, 'son of Kṛṣṇā', when he is actually the son of a co-wife, Subhadrā (VI,57,3), or *kārṣniḥ* (VI,58,44). Also, Kuntī, a sister in law to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, refers to him as her 'father in law' at XV,23,20. A similarly related point — three wives of Arjuna, at VII,55,32, join to lament the death of the son of one of the wives.

most famed instance from another IE epic tradition, holds to the same model, but *in extremis*.[4] The deaths of the sons of Karṇa and Arjuna are critical moments in the poem, and the relation between Duryodhana and his father provides a constant refrain. Vyāsa is of course the *Ur-vater* and the epic is concerned with his heroic male lineage all the way down to Parikṣit, for whom the whole Mahābhārata is prologue.[5] The minor narrative in the poem where all the dead appear from out of the river Gaṅgā, receives the title of Putradarśana *parvan*, 'the book of the vision of the sons' (I,2,67). It is telling that this is how the deceased are collectively named. The one over-arching hero of the divided Kuru family is Bhīṣma, and his most common epithet, *pitāmaha*, 'paternal grandfather', formulates this agnatic pattern. He, interestingly, during the meetings of the *sabhā* in the Udyoga *parvan*, says that,

V,145,17-18: *ekaputram aputraṃ vai pravadanti manīṣiṇaḥ*
na cocchedaṃ kulaṃ yāyād vistīryeta kathaṃ yaśaḥ.
The wise pronounce that one son is no son.
How else should one extend glory and the family not go to ruin?

In the Droṇa *parvan* three sons carry the force of the narrative: Abhimanyu, Ghaṭotkaca, and Aśvatthāman. The last is only pur-

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[4] Ferdowsi, IX,138,2167-84. An interesting view of an heroic kinship structure or ascending scale of affection occurs towards the beginning of the Gītā, where Saṃjaya lists the assembled Kurus to Arjuna in terms of male kinship: 'fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, friends, fathers-in-law, and companions' (VI,23,26-27). Arjuna then expresses this view himself, but slightly differently: 'teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, and other 'relatives by marriage', *saṃbandhinas tathā*' (VI,23,34). It is curious how Saṃjaya, the *sūta*, and Arjuna the *vīra*, vary in their accounts. The latter's description gives more emphasis to affinal relations, whilst the former gives more weight to agnatic relations. There is an equation of father and 'teacher', *ācārya*, that is, son and disciple are in the same position (*śiṣyaḥ putrasamaḥ* -VII,66,33). Hence, Yudhiṣṭhira crosses the lines before Kurukṣetra to speak with Bhīṣma and Droṇa and Kṛpa, his *gurus* (VI,41), as does Bhīṣma before his duel with Rāma (V,180,13ff.)

[5] He appears largely in the Purāṇas and has no active role in the Mahābhārata. The patriline that descends through the Kaurava side, through Dhṛtarāṣṭhra's sons, does not extend and is destroyed by the matriline branch.

portedly killed. Jayadratha, whom Arjuna slays in requital for the death of his son, is decapitated by a broad arrow and the head lands in his father's lap. In the next *parvan* Karṇa's son perishes, and in the subsequent book, all the sons of Draupadī are assassinated whilst asleep; the Pāṇḍavas become *hataputrāḥ*, 'having slain sons' (X,9,50). The Āśvamedhika *parvan* concerns the journeys of Arjuna, in pursuit of the sacrifical horse, back and forth across India north of the Deccan, encountering the sons and grandsons of those heroes who perished during the great war.

The first moment in the poem where Karṇa actually appears in person is at the show of weapons. In this scene Adhiratha, Karṇa's adoptive father, also appears, much to his son's embarrassment; for it puts the latter's uncertain status in jeopardy. This shame that Karṇa bears because of his lowly parent is crucial to any comprehension as to his heroic identity and passion, supplying dramatic shadow to the image.

Karṇa's son Vṛṣasena has as his *bhāga*, 'opponent', the son of Arjuna, Abhimanyu.[6] The death of the latter could be construed as a moment of great pathos in the poem and causes profound despair and rage for his father. Later, Arjuna vows to slay Vṛṣasena and does so, causing Karṇa to weep.[7] It appears that the relation between a hero and his son is the strongest of all social bonds, certainly exceeding that between husband and wife and even that of the masculine friendship between heroes. In the case of Karṇa, the death of his son signals the commencement of his own demise: it is the overture to that scene.[8]

As we have already mentioned, the relation of wife to husband or mother to son is typically one of admonition or incitement, in

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[6] Another instance of the poets' use of heroic symmetry. On the final day of Vṛṣasena's life, when Abhimanyu is already dead, Yudhiṣṭhira appoints Nakula as his *bhāga* (VIII,31,33).

[7] He is not simply tearful, as he has been on two other occasions, when brothers of Duryodhana perished after coming to his rescue, but he seriously *weeps*. This is something that Karṇa does nowhere else in the poem. See below.

[8] Even the great *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha chooses to die once his son(s) perish, I,166,39ff.

terms of heroism at least,[9] whereas the relation between father and son encompasses an emotion that borders on the profoundly tragic. The beginning of the poem concerns a sacrifice instituted by a son for a deceased father, that is, the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, who, having heard of what happened to his father, *paryatapyata duḥkhārtaḥ pratyapiṁṣat kare karam*, 'distressed, he grieved, pressed hand upon hand' (I,46,33).

Similarly, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, right at the beginning of the poem, sings a long formal lament in irregular *triṣṭubhs* (I,1,102-58), which is immediately preceded by an admission of grief for his son Duryodhana.[10]

I,1,98: *ahaṃ tv acakṣuḥ kārpaṇyāt putraprītyā sahāmi tat*
muhyantaṃ cānumuhyāmi duryodhanam acetanam.
I, blind, endure that wretchedly, with love for a son.
I am distressed for the distracted mindless Duryodhana.

Even Yudhiṣṭhira remarks at one point about *Putrasnehas tu balavān dhṛtarāṣṭrasya*, 'Dhṛtarāṣṭra's very powerful love for his son' (V,70,75). It is precisely that unconditional love that leads to the collapse of the kingdom.[11]

Throughout the battle books, the vivid and detailed account of the events on the field of Kuruksetra which Saṃjaya sings to the old king, the audience often hears the refrain *putras tu tava*, 'and your son ...'[12] It is as if Duryodhana is a key metonym linking up these scenes, much to the satisfaction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[13] Like the

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[9] Or lamentation, after the hero's demise.

[10] At the commencement of the Strī *parvan*, when the old king laments his slain one hundred sons, he is said to be 'like a tree with severed branches', *chinnaśākham iva drumam* (XI,1,4).

[11] Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself, once everything is over, admits that he was *putrasnehābhibhūta*, 'overcome with love for a son' (XV,5,4).

[12] Sometimes given in the plural as there are in all a hundred sons.

[13] This is important as there is not a lot of narrative transition in these books and some means of continuity must be provided by the poet. The exchanges between Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are a paradigm for what is happening between the poet and audience, and the constant interjections and vocatives vivify and refresh this relation.

vocatives of the poet to the king, these expressions that touch upon the father-son relation, supply a certain continuity to the poem.[14] Indeed, the word *putra* is heard with extraordinary frequency during the course of the battle books; it is very much a primary term therein, particularly in the Droṇa *parvan*.

At the commencement of the Karṇa *parvan*, hearing that Karṇa has been felled, Dhṛtarāṣṭra collapses 'senseless', *naṣṭacetā* (VIII,3,1). He is overcome by grief as if for a son, and such a show of emotion on his part has not occurred before.[15] Recovered, he sings a long eulogy for Karṇa (VIII,5,10-26), listing all his wonderful qualities, just as if Karṇa were his son.[16]

VIII,5,21: *varo mahendro devānāṃ karṇaḥ praharatāṃ varaḥ.*
Great Indra is the best of deities — Karṇa is the best of champions!

The initial battle scenes are so confused and pell-mell that Saṃjaya says,[17]

VI,44,2: *na putraḥ pitaraṃ jajñe na pitā putram aurasam*
na bhrātā bhrātaraṃ tatra svasrīyaṃ na ca mātulaḥ.

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[14] A son of Duryodhana receives passing notice at VI,51,14, but this aspect of Duryodhana is rarely considered by the poets. *tato duryodhano rājā dṛṣṭvā putraṃ mahāratham / pīḍitaṃ tava pautreṇa prāyāt tatra janeśvaraḥ*, 'Then king Duryodhana, the ruler, having seen his son, the great charioteer, pressed by your grandson, went there'. When Lakṣmana, a son of Duryodhana, loses his head to one of Abhimanyu's arrows, the poet comments, *tato duryodhanaḥ kruddhaḥ*, 'then Duryodhana [was] angry' (VII,45,18). At the commencement of the battle, Lakṣmana had been, appropriately, in a duel with Abhimanyu (VI,51,8ff., and 69,30ff.) At VIII,4,13 a son of Duryodhana is also mentioned, felled by Arjuna's son. That is all; it is as if the poets consider Duryodhana as sterile and unproductive, his line has no subsequence.

[15] The women in the palace are likewise *śokārṇave ... nimagnāḥ*, 'immersed in a sea of grief' (VIII,33).

[16] Continued at 29-43, then dropped, and returned to again at 64-110. This speech is one of the finest tributes to Karṇa.

[17] Repeated at VI,44,45; and at VI,89,23, *pitā putraṃ na jānīte putro vā pitaraṃ tathā*. This formula recurs many times throughout the battle books, indicative of the chaos involved. It functions as one of the several refrains.

Son did not know father, nor father his natural son,
nor brother a brother, nor an uncle a nephew.[18]

The disorder is so intense and 'horrible', *ghoram*, that even these three most intimate of relations, with the father-son nexus first, are lost. Again,

VI,55,37: *jaghānātra pitā putraṃ putraś ca pitaraṃ tathā.*
Father struck son, and also, son struck father.

In general, throughout the battle books the audience constantly hears expressions of father-son relationships. 'The son of ...' is a steady refrain. *Putra* is a term constantly reiterated and not, as in the Iliad, simply in a genealogical or patronymic sense.

It is the putative loss of Aśvatthāman that provides the sufficient condition for the death of his father Droṇa in book seven.[19] In book nine, the Śalya *parvan*, the gambler Śakuni loses his son to Sahadeva and is then felled himself a few lines later (IX,27,29; 58). Again we observe the same pattern. It is noteworthy that when Śakuni does fall he is described not by name but as 'son of Subala', *subalasya putraḥ*.

In the Sauptika *parvan*, the information that the *pāṇḍaveyas*, the five sons of Draupadī, have been destroyed whilst they slept, constitutes the final message that Duryodhana receives: immediately he dies.[20]

X,9,55: *ity evam uktvā tūṣṇīṃ sa kururājo mahāmanāḥ*
prāṇān udasṛjad vīraḥ suhṛdāṃ śokam ādadhat.
Having spoken so the great-souled king of the Kurus was silent.
The warrior gave up his breath and accepted his grief of kin.

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[18] Literally, 'mother's brother' and 'sister's son'.

[19] VII,164,108-110. The fact that the *saptarṣis*, 'Seven Sages', had also materialised before him on the battle-field and declared that his time had run out also conduced to Droṇa's ultimate submission (VII,164,86ff.) Conversely, *tatas tat pāṇḍavaṃ sainyam ... nihataṃ droṇaputreṇa pitur vadham amṛṣyatā*, 'Then the Pāṇḍava army was slain by the unforgiving son of Droṇa for the death of his father' (XIV,59,31).

[20] Their births and names are given in I,213,71ff.

Certainly these are enemy sons, but nevertheless one observes the same structure as above, although converse: the death of heroes being linked with the death of sons. Four lines later, it is Dhṛtarāṣṭra who is overcome by grief and *cintāpara*, 'lost in thought', hearing the above lines spoken by Saṃjaya.

In the Mausala *parvan* when the world is turned upside down, and then, with the death of Kṛṣṇa, the transition between ages is completed, the disorder is marked by sons and fathers attacking each other.

XVI,4,40: *avadhīt pitaraṃ putraḥ pitā putraṃ ca bhārata.*
O Bhārata, son attacked father and father son.

Then, when Kṛṣṇa perceived his son Pradyumna and others destroyed in the drunken chaos, he became 'wrathful', *cukrodha*, and was *kopasamanvitaḥ*, 'furious'. It is anger rather than sorrow that fuels him, and of course, it is not long before his own death occurs.

The pattern is different with Arjuna, on two counts. Firstly, when he realises that Abhimanyu no longer lives, he sings a long informal lament, inquiring as to the whereabouts of his son (VII,50,19ff.)[21] This is concluded with Arjuna being described as being like 'a merchant whose ship has been broken', *bhinnapoto vaṇig yathā* (VII,50,44). Frenzy rather than pathos colours his grief, but it is unlike what Karṇa manifests for his son.[22] The death of Abhimanyu does not stand as a sign for Arjuna's own decease.[23]

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[21] Kṛṣṇa seeks to console him by saying 'This is the path of all undeviating heroes, especially of kṣatriyas whose livelihood is battle', *sarveṣām eṣa vai panthāḥ śūrāṇām anivartinām / kṣatriyāṇāṃ viśeṣeṇa yeṣāṃ yuddhena jīvikā* (VII,50,62).

[22] *pāṇiṃ pāṇau viniṣpiṣya śvasamāno'śrunetravān / unmatteva viprekṣan*, 'Pressing hand in hand, sighing, tearful, glancing like a lunatic' (VII,51,19).

[23] Strangely, when Irāvān, the son of Arjuna by Ulūpī, a *nāga*, is struck down at VI,86,70, there is little mention of any distress on the part of Arjuna. The audience hears *ajānann arjunaś cāpi nihataṃ putram aurasam*, 'And then Arjuna did not know that his natural son was slain' (VI,86,75). Then later, when informed by Bhīma, he was, *duḥkhena mahatāviṣṭo niḥśvasan pannago yathā*, 'Filled with great grief, hissing like a snake' (VI,92,1). That is all. He contemns the slaughter of kin and clan, but there is no formal lamenting or extended sorrow. Perhaps this

What it does signify is an intense mourning and despair on the part of this hero, an emotion no other hero endures with such expression. Arjuna vows to commit suicide, he will enter the fire if he does not revenge his son (VII,51,37).[24]

Secondly, during the course of the Āśvamedhika *parvan*, Arjuna is killed by another of his sons, Babhruvāhana, and has to be restored to life by the 'daughter of a snake', *pannagātmajā*, Ulūpī, who rises out of the earth; she is one of his co-wives. Ironically, both father and mother had encouraged the son to take up arms and fight (XIV,78).[25] Thus the pattern between fathers and sons evinced so far is sustained.[26] It is also the case, as noted above, that conflict between father and son is the primary sign of dis-order, of a reversal in social equilibrium; and in this scene it is perhaps indicative of the onset of the *kali yuga* or at least its cusp.

XIV,78,20: *tayoḥ samabhavad yuddhaṃ pituḥ putrasya cātulam.*
The battle of the those two, of father and son, was unequalled.

If, along with martial excellence, one of the the signal qualities of a hero is his isolation and separation from community, and the immediacy of community is marked by the relation between father and son, then the death of the latter is a critical aspect of heroic experience, in terms of poetry. "One of the hero's most important properties is his state of being alone, that is to say, his existence as a

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is due to the child being half-serpent; Bhīma does not really grieve or lament for his half-demon son, Ghaṭotkaca. In fact, the only one to express any rage at Irāvān's death is Ghaṭotkaca — another appropriate occasion of heroic symmetry (VI,87,2).

[24] Usually what a wife does for a deceased husband.

[25] In the scene where Citrāṅgadā berates Ulūpī, (XIV,79), it becomes quite obvious, that for a woman, the husband is far more important than the son. This is unlike what is exhibited by husbands/fathers, where the relationship with the son is the most vital. I am grateful to Thomas Burke for this observation.

[26] Accordingly, Arjuna also brings down his own 'grand-father' Bhīṣma, in book six, continuing this pattern.

heroic one-of-a-kind".[27] Extraordinary grief only amplifies this state.

One can identify four 'levels' in the persona of Karṇa, where loss becomes increasingly important to him. First, when he is talking with Indra in book five; here he lacks nothing. In fact he is the one offering to the most heroic of deities: it is Indra who importunes him. Similarly when Karṇa exchanges banter with Kṛpa in book seven he is full of his own potential: again, he lacks nothing. Secondly, when Karṇa speaks with Kṛṣṇa in book five, things are different, and he is profoundly aware of his imminent demise. This is not the person whom the audience has heard speaking before. Thirdly, also in book seven, when Karṇa gives his declamation to Duryodhana on *daiva*, he is speaking from another point of view. Loss is now much more intrinsic to his narrative; he is no longer complete and irrefutable. Finally, it is only when he weeps at the death of Vṛṣasena in book eight that Karṇa is no more in full possession of himself; mortality is encroaching upon him. The tears he weeps at this point are analogous to the tears which Achilles sheds when he learns of the death of Patroklos.[28]

Just as we saw in Chapter II above with the ear-rings, there is a signalling of mortality *vis-à-vis* immortality: an equivocation or ambiguity which is essential to the nature of a hero. The ambiguity is bridged by the access which the hero has to fame, something that is *śāśvatī*, 'endless'. The death of his son before his eyes signals to Karṇa his own conclusion: something the audience has been told about right from the beginning of the epic. Somehow in the poem, the omnipotence and invincibility of the hero has to be symbolically depreciated; for in order to become a hero one must die. It is only death which provides his access to fame. The loss of Vṛṣasena

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[27] Kahane, in Bakker and Kahane, 1997, p.118.

[28] A similar circumstance is when Indrajit, the son of Rāvaṇa, is slain by Lakṣmana in III,273,24. At that point Rāvaṇa is lost and enters the fray to meet his death at the hands of Rāma (III,274,1). Vṛṣasena is described by the poet as *karṇasya dayitaṃ putram*, 'the cherished son of Karṇa', a title that no other son of his receives (VII,132,17).

supplies Karṇa with a foretaste of this: his great fame has a price — which will be his own death.

It is significant therefore, that in the first scene of Karṇa's story, his adoptive father appears almost at the very beginning, and then in the final scene of the *aristeíā*, Karṇa is lying dead on the ground with *his* son, also fallen, beside him. In both scenes there is this sign of filiation which encloses the Karṇa 'epic'. Equally, the last reference to Karṇa's story in the poem is where he is described as returning to the Sun, his true father.

During the Droṇa *parvan*, just before Karṇa returns to the battle, having been absent for ten days and then publically acclaimed by the assembled princes, he is likened to a father who is desirous of rescuing his children, a very unusual simile for the epic and one which is only applied to Karṇa.

VII,2,3: *piteva putrāṃs tvarito'bhyayāt tataḥ.*
He then approached quickly like a father his sons.

Satyasena and Suṣeṇa, sons of Karṇa, are his 'wheel-guards' *cakra-rakṣau* and Vṛṣasena protects his rear (VIII,32,40-41).[29]

VIII,32,45: *pitaraṃ tu parīpsantaḥ karṇaputrāḥ prahāriṇaḥ.*
Karṇa's sons, champions, desiring to protect their father.

Suṣeṇa is protected from Bhīma by his father (VIII,32,53ff.) but is soon to be slain (VIII,53,11).[30] The death has little effect, it seems,

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[29] At VIII,44,34 he is described as being *pituḥ samīpe*, 'in the presence of his father'.

[30] Although at VIII,56,56, the 'two sons of Karṇa', *karṇaputrau*, appear again. Whether this refers to other sons, or whether this is a moment when the poet nods, is a moot point. Also, in this same line, the audience hears of *bhrātarau*, 'two brothers'. However, the audience hears of Suṣeṇa being felled again at VIII,60,4. On this occasion, Karṇa is *krodhaparītacetāḥ*, 'extremely angry' (VIII,60,7). In the Śalya *parvan*, 'the heroic, invincible sons of Karṇa' are mentioned one more time (IX,7,23). Whether these are other sons or further lapses is also indeterminate. At VIII,9,21, *karṇaputrau*, Suṣeṇa and Satyasena, see their brother Citrasena killed by Nakula. There is something quite odd going on here, perhaps due to an

on his father, who becomes *ārtarūpa*, 'one who is looking grieved'. Only with Vṛṣasena is a crisis effected.

Vṛṣasena makes his appearance in book five in the catalogue of warriors where Yudhiṣṭhira's chief, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, is allotting his forces their 'shares'.

V,161,8-9: *... samādiśat*
vṛṣasenāya saubhadraṃ śeṣāṇāṃ ca mahīkṣitām
samarthaṃ taṃ hi mene vai pārthād abhyadhikaṃ raṇe.
And of the rest of the kings he appointed Abhimanyu to Vṛṣasena.
He thought him suitable [the former], even greater than
Arjuna in battle.

In the Droṇa *parvan* as Saṃjaya lists the banners of the host, Vṛṣasena's standard displays a golden peacock.

VII,80,16: *mayūro vṛṣasenasya kāñcano maṇiratnavān.*
The golden bejewelled peacock of Vṛṣasena.

Because of this, his chariot shines like that of the young war god, Skanda.

Not long after this, as Karṇa is being overwhelmed in his duel with Bhīma, his horses are shot away and he abandons his chariot and mounts that of his son.

VII,103,28: *hatāśvāt tu rathāt karnaḥ samāplutya viśāṃ pate*
syandanaṃ vṛṣasenasya samārohan mahārathaḥ.
Karṇa, O king, having jumped from the chariot whose
horses were slain,
the great charioteer mounted the vehicle of Vṛṣasena.

Later in this book, Arjuna, after Karṇa had skirmished with Satyaki and had his horses and chariot shot away beneath him, approaches Karṇa and rails at him. He accuses him of falsely insulting Bhīma

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inappropriate use of formulas, perhaps due to the fact that the Śalya *parvan* belongs to a separate tradition. At IX,9,47, Suṣeṇa loses his head again. He is, *nadīvegād ivārugṇas tīrajaḥ pādapo mahān*, 'like a great tree on a bank, unbroken by the violence of the river' (IX,9,48).

and also for being a participant at the death of Abhimanyu. He concludes the speech with a promise to destroy Karṇa's son.

VII,123,16: *hantāsmi vṛṣasenaṃ te prekṣamāṇasya saṃyuge.*
I shall slay Vṛṣasena in battle for you as you watch.

This is probably the greatest and most grievous threat that Arjuna can make to his enemy. It was inspired by the fact that Karṇa, encouraged by Droṇa, had been the one to break Abhimanyu's bow immediately prior to the closing of the *cakravyūha*, 'the circular array' which led to Arjuna's son being killed (VII,47,31).

In battle on the penultimate day of Karṇa's life, Yudhiṣṭhira appoints Vṛṣasena the *bhāga* of Nakula. The latter is beaten by Karṇa's son in a formal duel, in which at one point he is likened to Indra himself (VIII,62,18). There is a long account of this duel and it is the only occasion that Vṛṣasena actually receives his fame from the poets: this is his *aristeíā*.[31] Both Kṛṣṇa and the defeated Nakula formally direct Arjuna to go against Vṛṣasena. Arjuna proceeds to the encounter and repeats his threat against Karṇa's son which he then accomplishes with arrows.[32]

VIII,62,61: *sa pārthabāṇābhihataḥ papāta rathād vibāhur*
viśirā dharāyām
supuṣpitaḥ parṇadharo'tikāyo vāteritaḥ śālevādriśṛṅgāt.
He, struck by the arrows of Arjuna, fell from his chariot
to the earth
armless and headless, like a gigantic Śāla tree in bloom and
in leaf, impelled by wind from the peak of a mountain.

Karṇa then weeps exceedingly, the only occasion for this phrase in the poem.[33]

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[31] The audience had heard of his skirmishing in the Droṇa *parvan* (VII,143,13ff.) when he fought against Drupada. At VII,145,42, father and son are briefly fighting side by side.

[32] This moment figures in Act IV of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa's Veṇīsaṁhāra, quoted in Keith, 1924, p.214.

[33] He is merely' tearful' on other occasions. When Karṇa's brother, coming to rescue Karṇa as he is being bested by Abhimanyu, is killed, in book seven, Karṇa

VIII,63,1: *vṛṣasenaṃ hataṃ dṛṣṭvā śokāmarṣasamanvitaḥ*
muktvā śokodbhavaṃ vāri netrābhyāṃ sahasā vṛṣaḥ.
Vṛṣa [Karṇa], full of the passion of grief, having seen
Vṛṣasena felled,
suddenly discharged water, arising from grief, from both eyes.

The two warriors, Karṇa and Arjuna, like the sun and moon, *candrādityau*, then approach each other. This moment marks the beginning of the duel which has been sung about from the commencement of the epic. The poets extend a long list of similes to cover this encounter, the most important duel of the whole battle. Appropriately, when Yudhiṣṭhira comes afterwards to view the body of the champion, Karṇa, also headless, is lying next to Vṛṣasena.[34]

VIII,69,30: *saputraṃ nihataṃ dṛṣṭvā karṇaṃ rājā yudhiṣṭhiraḥ.*
King Yudhiṣṭhira saw Karṇa slain along with his son.

Yudhiṣṭhira then says to Kṛṣṇa, 'I am now king in the world, Govinda', *adya rājāsmi govinda pṛthivyām*.[35]

2. *Arjuna: Indra, Agni, & Śiva*

Arjuna in his various adventures comes into contact with three particular deities from whom he receives weapons and relevant mantras. One of the reasons that heroes exist in poetry is that humans are unable to come into contact with deities, in life; that possibility of contact with deities is accomplished in song. These moments of

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is only distressed. *karṇikāram ivoddhūtam vātena mathitaṃ nagāt / bhrātāraṃ nihataṃ dṛṣṭvā rājan karṇo vyathāṃ yayau*. 'O king, having seen his brother killed, like a karṇikāra tree tossed by the wind and whirled from a mountain, Karṇa became alarmed' (VII,40,5).

[34] Once the funeral pyres start to burn at Kurukṣetra in book eleven, the remains of Karṇa are incinerated 'along with his wrathful son', *sahaputraṃ amarṣaṇam* (XI,26,36).

[35] This is an unexpected statement, as if he knew in some way, contrary to what we heard in book five, that Karṇa had held a practical ascendancy over him.

ambivalence between the mortal and immortal registers represent instances that are by definition truly heroic. Arjuna in particular has close encounters with divine beings.[36] The audience first hears of Arjuna's prowess with weaponry at the trial in book one, where he displays all his various skills, especially those of archery, in highly accomplished and heroic fashion (I,125,18-25). He then, in the course of the poem, goes on to acquire other missiles from various deities.

pāvakaṃ māṃ nibodhatam, says the disguised Agni, 'know me as fire!' (I,214,5), when Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, who has just formally become the other's brother-in-law, meet up with a brahmin who demands food from them.[37] He requests that they aid him in taking the Khāṇḍava forest which he wishes to eat, that is, burn.[38] The forest is protected by Indra, the progenitor of Arjuna, who always saves the forest with his rain. Thus we see a strange conflict emerging.

Arjuna requests *karaṇāni samarthāni*, 'enabling force' from Agni (I,215,19), and in response, Arjuna receives the Gāṇḍīva bow with its two inexhaustible quivers and the chariot with the monkey standard. These are two vital components of Arjuna's heroic paraphernalia. The weapons, in typical IE fashion, receive a long seventeen *śloka* description (I,216,3-20).

To rescue the forest and its creatures, Indra comes and rains. Arjuna prevents him with his new missiles, *vāri pāṇḍavaḥ pratyavārayat śaravarṣeṇa*, 'Arjuna prevented the rain with a shower of arrows' (I,218,1); thus, father and son are contesting. The success of Arjuna, aided by Kṛṣṇa — although it is very clear that the former is the real agent here — leads to all the deities gath-

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[36] Bhīma enjoys two such encounters: with the deity Hanūmān (III,146-150), where the meeting is apposite, as both are figures renowned for their bodily strength and sheer size; and with the deity Kubera (III,152), again, a figure of gross proportions.

[37] Throughout this passage he is never called Agni until the final *śloka*, *agnir na dadāha*, 'Fire did not burn' (I,219,40). He is referred to as Pāvaka, Dhūmaketu, Hutāśana, Mahārciṣas, or Hutabhuj. All in fact are epithets or titles.

[38] *khāṇḍava* also means 'sugar-plum' or 'candy'.

ering in support of the beleaguered Indra (I,218,31ff.) Yama, Kubera, Varuṇa, Śiva, the Aśvins, Tvaṣṭar, Aṃśa, Aryaman, Mitra, Pūṣan, Bhaga, Savitar, the Rudras and Maruts, and many more; all assail the Pāṇḍava, but without success.

After this Indra comes down, saying, *tuṣṭo'smi*, 'I am pleased', and offers a 'favour', *vara*, to his son. In the next line, Arjuna of course chooses weaponry.

I,225,9: *pārthas tu varayām āsa śakrād astrāṇi sarvaśaḥ.*
Arjuna then chose weapons from Śakra, entirely.

Next, when the Pāṇḍavas are in the forest, Yudhiṣṭhira is unable to sleep for thinking about Karṇa (III,37,18). Vyāsa soon appears and advises him to send Arjuna off to find Indra and Śiva in order to obtain special weapons (III,37,30). Arjuna is despatched and soon meets up with a Indra, disguised as a brahmin, who reveals his identity and asks his son to choose a favour. It is not clear, in these encounters between Arjuna and Indra, whether the former is aware of the genetic relation between the two. Arjuna, naturally, asks for a weapon.

III,38,38: *tvatto'dya bhagavann astraṃ kṛtsnam icchāmi veditum.*
Now, from you, lord, I want to know the entire weapon[ry].

Indra agrees to this only on condition that Arjuna first visit Śiva.

Arjuna sets off, and Śiva, in the guise of a *kairāta*, 'mountaineer', soon appears (III,40,1ff.), and the two begin attacking each other. It does not take Arjuna long to realise, because his arrows are harmless, that his opponent is Rudra (III,40,30), and he succumbs, *papāta saṃmūḍhas*, 'he fell, senseless'. Śiva renders the usual phrase, *tuṣṭo'smi*, 'I am pleased'.[39] He adds, *kṣatriyo nāsti te samaḥ*, 'there is no kṣatriya equal to you' (III,40,52).

Śiva offers him a favour, and Arjuna replies, as usual, requesting a weapon or missile, *kāmaye divyam astraṃ tad ghoraṃ pāśupataṃ prabho*, 'Sir, I want that terrible divine weapon Pāśupata'

[39] This is repeated in III,163,44, when Arjuna relates this encounter himself.

(III,41,7), probably the most destructive weapon in the cosmos. One of the reasons that he requests this particular item is so that he might fight with Karṇa, who is *nityaṃ kaṭubhāṣiṇī*, 'always speaking sarcastically' (III,41,11).

Śiva vanishes, having granted the favour. Arjuna exclaims, *mayā sākṣān mahādevo dṛṣṭa iti*, 'the Great God was seen by me, literally, in person!' (III,42,2). Varuṇa then appears, and Kubera, Yama, and then Śakra himself. Yama proclaims,

III,42,20: *karṇaḥ sa sumahāvīryas tvayā vadhyo dhanaṃjaya.*
That Karṇa who possesses very great prowess is to be slain by you, Arjuna!

By this, he adds, *akṣayā tava kīrtiś ca loke sthāsyati phalguna*, 'your fame, Arjuna, will stand undecaying in the world' (III,42,22).

Yama gives him his *daṇḍa*, 'rod'; Varuṇa gives him his *pāśān*, 'nooses', and Kubera gives him a *divyam astram*, 'divine weapon'. Indra then invites him to his *svarga*, 'heaven', in order to receive the weapons which he proffered earlier (III, 42,25-37).

This physical and perceptable contact with deities is a significant aspect of heroic being, especially in the case of Arjuna. With him, the reception of items from the various divine arsenals is integral to these contacts, and his father, Indra, is instrumental in this.

We next see Arjuna even more intimately involved with his progenitor and travelling on Indra's chariot to the otherworld (III,43,27). This is a kind of heroic activity that Karṇa does *not* engage in; he is far more 'mortal' in a way.

At Amarāvatī, Indra's city, the deity treats his son like a child.[40]

III,44,21: *mūrdhni cainam upāghrāya devendraḥ paravīrahā*
aṅkam āropayām āsa praśrayāvanataṃ tadā.
And divine Indra, killer of enemy-warriors, having sniffed him on the head,

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[40] This kind of reception of a child by a parent is prescribed in the *Gṛhya Sūtras*. See Jamison, 1991, pp.116-120, on the 'sniff-kiss'.

then mounted the deferential and modest one to his hip.

Arjuna, like a small child, is the recipient of much affection and many smiles and caresses. He then takes possession of a variety of weapons, *śakrasya hastād*, 'from the hand of Śakra', including the *vajra*, 'thunderbolt' (III,45,4). He is likened to *śakrāsanam avāptavān*, 'one who had attained the seat of Indra' (III,45,12).

Arjuna does not only gain martial benefits from all this but he also becomes,

III,45,32: *nṛttavāditragītānāṃ divyānāṃ pāram eyivān.*
One who has gone to the utmost of divine song, music, and dance.

Again, these are not a qualities that Karṇa acquires or demonstrates; he has no 'courtly' graces.

All this continues for five years (III,47,12) and as a *gurvartha*, 'fee to his guru', Indra requests that Arjuna destroy a group of *āsuras*, his enemies, the *nivātakavacas*, those 'whose armour is impenetrable' (III,165,11).[41] Again, Karṇa participates in nothing like this. He is more 'human', having less to do with immortal worlds, and is thus more subject to death. Arjuna is more supernatural.

Later, when Arjuna is relating all this to his brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, he describes how, as he set out to perform the task, the assembled deities, *manvānā devarājaṃ mām*, 'thought me the king of the deities', that is, Indra himself (III,165,16). This claim is repeated in the next chapter (III,166,8), where it is the *dānavas* who make the observation. Karṇa is never considered in such light, except by the poets in their use of similes.

Mātali, Indra's charioteer, drives for Arjuna, and the battle lasts for seventy-eight *ślokas* (III,167-169). He finally wins by using the *vajra*, Indra's 'thunderbolt'. Mātali laughing, exclaims, after it is all over,

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[41] Here we see the metonymy of the impenetrable breastplate, linking this scene with Karṇa.

III,169,20: *naitad arjuna deveṣu tvayi vīryaṃ yad īkṣyate.*
Arjuna, the prowess which is seen in you, that is not seen among the deities!

He repeats, at the end of his speech,[42]

III,169,32: *na hi śakyāḥ surair hantuṃ ya ete nihatās tvayā.*
For the deities are not able to destroy those who were slain by you.

Then, Arjuna proceeds to destroy the flying city of Hiraṇyapura which belongs to the *daityas* (III,170,16-53).

Karṇa never experiences conflict on such a divine level as this. As a hero he is far more 'earthly' and suffers more from such characteristics and contests, whereas Arjuna reaches towards divine and inhuman limits. Also, apart from Karṇa's brief meeting with Sūrya and then Indra, he has no further contact with divinities, and unlike Arjuna and Bhīma, he has no amorous experiences, either of a human or supernatural kind. It is the mortality of Karṇa that is important, not his super-natural side. It is possibly this aspect of 'humanity' that has allowed Karṇa to become so popular among vernacular poetry and lore. As a hero, Karṇa keeps to the mortal side of that margin which distinguishes the divine and terrestial worlds, whereas Arjuna has crossed that border and functions more in the divine register.

3. *Yudhiṣṭhira & Dharma*

The occasion of this meeting of father and son is a test for Yudhiṣṭhira. It is not one of martial ability but one that concerns his intellectual and verbal skills: he is tested with riddles. In its way this encounter follows after the pattern of a *brahmodya* or poetic duel, 'a rivalry in sacred knowledge, playful discussion of theological

[42] He says this again, more forcibly, at III,170,53.

questions or problems' (Monier-Williams).[43] The one occasion where Yudhiṣṭhira meets with and speaks to his father (III,297,11ff.) follows almost immediately after the single instance where Karṇa encounters and converses with his own progenitor (III,284,21ff.)

Earlier in the poem where Vidura is privately advising Yudhiṣṭhira about the imminent hazards at Vāraṇāvata where it is planned that the Pāṇḍavas should be burned alive, he speaks as one who is *prājñaḥ* 'wise', to one who is *prājñam*.[44] Vidura is qualified as *pralāpajña*, 'one who understood nonsense' (I,133,18). This speech is in the form of riddles.[45] Describing, *sotto voce*, fire, he says,

I,133,19: *alohaṃ niśitaṃ śastraṃ śarīraparikartanam.*
A weapon, not made of metal, sharp, cutting the body ...

He continues in this vein through four more *ślokas*, conveying his veiled message to Yudhiṣṭhira. As we observed above in Chapter IV, abilities associated with speech are crucial in any definition of a Sanskrit hero, and this was something that Karṇa excelled in, particularly in his vaunts. Decoding riddles is not one of Karṇa's skills however, although he is expert in *nuance* and implication.

Yudhiṣṭhira meets Dharma, who is disguised as a *yakṣa* and claims to be a 'crane', *ahaṃ bakaḥ* (III,297,11).[46] The situation is that of a lake in the forest and the other Pāṇḍavas are lying about, ostensibly dead. The *yakṣa* threatens to also kill Yudhiṣṭhira unless

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[43] Aṣṭāvakra and Bandin engage in *bramodya* in III,134,7ff.

[44] Vidura is the brother of Yudhiṣṭhira's mother's husband, and so has a certain paternal air about him.

[45] Later, I,135,6, this is accounted as *mlecchavāc*, 'barbarism'.

[46] Yakṣas are 'a class of semi-divine beings'. See Coomaraswamy, 1928, 1931. Apart from the Indus Valley figures and sealings they provide the first plastic representations of the human body in Indian art. Usually they are considered to be associated with fertility and guardianship. It is from these figures that sculptural representation of the Buddha developed. Given this relation, or continuity, it is appropriate that the deity Dharma disguises himself as a Yakṣa. Curiously, in XIV,93, Dharma takes the form of a 'mongoose', *nakula*, and in XVII,3, the form is that of a dog. Dharma seems to have some affinity with animal representation.

he answers his 'questions', *praśna*. These are a series of eighteen — a canonical number in the poem — riddles. The first is,

III,197,26: *kiṃ svid ādityam unnayati ke ca tasyābhitaś carāḥ*
kaś ca enam astam nayati kasmiṅś ca pratitiṣṭhati.
What raises the sun and what is its surrounding retinue?
What conducts it home and on what is it founded?

Yudhiṣṭhira responds to these four queries with, *brahma, deva, dharma, satya*, 'prayer, the deities, dharma, and truth'. He continues to reply successfully. On being asked about the *devatva*, 'godhead' of kṣatriyas, about their dharma, their human nature, and their *asat*, 'falsehood', Yudhiṣṭhira says,

III,297,33: *iṣvastram eṣāṃ devatvaṃ yajña eṣāṃ satām iva*
bhayaṃ vai mānuṣo bhāvaḥ parityāgo' satām iva.
The bow is their godhead, sacrifice is their [dharma],
as of the good.
Fear is their human nature, abandonment is [their falsehood],
as of the false.

One other interesting point in this rapid and formal exchange, is the question, *kim svid ātmā manuṣyasya*, 'what is a man's self'? To this Yudhṣṭhira answers, *putra ātmā manuṣyasya*, 'a son is the man's self' (III,297,50-51).[47]

The dialogue over and the trial successfully accomplished, the brothers are returned to life and the *yakṣa* proclaims his true person, that of Dharma and the *janakaḥ*, 'progenitor' of Yudhiṣṭhira. In the next line he describes his ten 'persons' or 'bodies', beginning with *yaśas*, 'glory'. He says, *dvārāṇy etāni me viddhi*, 'know these are my gates' (III,298,6-8). The above interrogatory process, he adds, had been because, *jijñāsur tvām ihāgataḥ*, 'I came here with the desire to know you'. According to the manner of these meetings, pleased with the performance of his son, he offers him a favour, *varaṃ vṛṇīṣva*, 'choose a favour!'

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[47] We have heard this before, *ātmā putraḥ*, 'the son is the self' (I,147,11), and also later, *ātmā putraḥ smṛtas* (XIV,82,21).

In book three, when Bhīma is trapped within the toils af a huge snake, he can only be free if Yudhiṣṭhira answers correctly a series of *praśna*, 'questions' (III,177,12ff.) These turn out to be questions concerning *varṇa*, the four 'categories' of proper society. Yudhiṣṭhira, having successfully responded to the snake, then proposes his own questions, to which the snake soundly replies. The latter is so impressed and illuminated by Yudhiṣṭhira's words, that he is freed from the curse that made him inhabit a serpent's body (III,178,44).

As a king, the *dharmarāja*, Yudhiṣṭhira necessarily holds the gifts of speech and insight. As we saw above in Chapter IV, Karṇa behaves heroically not only in the martial field but also in the verbal field. There, however, true to being a hero rather than a king, his excessive ability with speech is somewhat different from what we have just observed with Yudhiṣṭhira. Karṇa's verbal abilities are more concerned with the performative aspects of boasts and verbal threat, whereas with Yudhiṣṭhira, speech is connected with a king's duty and capacity to generate dharma *via* speech.

4. *Bhīma*

During the Pāṇḍava's wandering disguised in the forest,[48] prior to their second and more formal exile after the gambling match, Bhīma is strong, voracious, closely united with his kin, and a killer of the demonic. Perhaps one could talk about 'Bhīma's epic' at this point. This is unlike the Bhīma that the audience hears of in the

[48] Draupadī sings a short *précis* of much of this 'epic' in book three when she is complaining to Kṛṣṇa about how awfully she has been treated, III,13,71-101. The *araṇya*, 'forest', is the terrain beyond settled areas, is beyond the pale. An unusual image obtains at this point, that of a mother roaming in disguise with her five sons. They are without any social organisation, are mere wanderers; see I,159,2, where they are said to be *anagnayo anāhutayāḥ*, 'fireless, without offerings'. See Parkhill, 1994, on the forest theme.

battle books, where he performs like any other of the great kṣatriyas.[49]

Bhīma, who when born, fell off his mother's lap.

I,114,13: *tataḥ sa vajrasaṃghātaḥ kumaro 'bhyapatad girau*
patatā tena śatadhā śilā gātrair vicūrṇitā.
Then the prince, hard as a thunderbolt, fell onto the mountain.
The mountain by him falling, was pounded by his
limbs a hundredfold.[50]

The childhood exploits of Bhīma are those of a massively strong and physically over-developed boy: he is gargantuan.[51] In play, *śatam ekottaram ... kumārāṇām ... eka eva vimṛdnāti*, 'alone he crushes the hundred and one princes' — sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (I,119,17).

When he and his brothers and mother flee from Vāraṇāvataka he carries all the family upon his shoulders. His *vīrya* becomes the protection of the family.[52]

I,136,17: *bhīmasenas tu rājendra bhīmavegaparākramaḥ*
jagāma bhrātṝn ādāya sarvān mātaram eva ca
skandham āropya jananīṃ yamāv aṅkena vīryavān
pārthau gṛhitvā pāṇibhyāṃ bhrātarau sumahābalau.
O king, Bhīmasena, whose valour was impetuous and terrible,
having taking all his brothers and his mother,
the virile one went: having mounted his mother upon a shoulder,
twins on hip,[53]

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[49] At Kurukṣetra, Bhīma's *bhāga* is Duryodhana. They are both adepts with the mace, the weapon with which Bhīma finally defeats his opponent. Bhīma is also the one Pāṇḍava whom Duryodhana tries to assassinate by various expedients, I,119,28-42. VI,50 offers a good and detailed account of how Bhīma typically behaves at Kurukṣetra. Bhīma is active during the early days of the battle and re-enters during the Jayadrathavadha *parvan*. The poet's description of him at this second moment of re-entry is especially beautiful (VII,102,51ff.)

[50] Repeated, I,150,17.

[51] I,119,14-24.

[52] See Yudhiṣṭhira's speech, I,150,5-10.

[53] Notice that the placing of the twins upon his hip is similar to the treatment of a son by a father, Arjuna by Indra, above.

having taken the mighty princely brothers with both hands.

Then he proceeds with such velocity and impetus,

tarasā pādapān bhañjan mahīṃ padbhyāṃ vidārayan
sa jagāmāśu tejasvī vātaraṃhā vṛkodaraḥ.
Shattering trees with impetus, splitting the earth with his feet,
that Bhīma, splendid, fleet as the wind, set off speedily.

As he proceeds with great strides, a wind, *anila*, set up by his pace, is actually generated (I,138,1).[54] This impression of velocity and impetus is repeated in book three when Bhīma ventures off into the mountains to satisfy Draupadī's desire for certain flowers. He is,

III,146,39: *siṅhavyāgraganāṃś caiva mardamāno mahābalaḥ*
unmūlayan mahāvṛkṣān pothayaṃs corasā balī.
The mighty one [went] crushing prides of lions and tigers.
The strong one [went] uprooting great trees and destroying
with his chest.

Later, he falls in love with a *rākṣasī* and brutally kills her brother in order to win her.[55] They then make love on mountains, by rivers, everywhere, producing the demon Ghaṭotkaca as their son (I,139-143).[56]

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[54] In book two, as he goes 'he shakes the earth', *kampayan ... medinīm* (II,26,7). Dumézil, 1968, pp.91-92, discusses Bhīma, son of the wind, Vāyu, as a demonstration of his progenitor's qualities. He is a hero principally of *bala*, 'force', "le plus brutal", p.125. At V,74,8, Bhīma informs Kṛṣṇa that he can hold heaven and earth apart with his two arms, if need be. This is of course, one of the original founding myths of the cosmos, which Indra performed: the separation of sky and ground. *śile ivāham ete nigṛhṇīyāṃ bāhubhyām*, 'I would hold them apart with my arms like two stones'. A similar kind of heroism is exhibited by Hanūmān, another son of Vāyu, in the Rāmāyaṇa.

[55] Here, as when he fights with Jarāsaṃdha (II,21,10ff.), or as when he fights with Sudharman (II,26,5), or as when he fights with Jaṭāsura (III,154,40ff.), and as when he fights with Kīcaka (IV,21,47ff.), Bhīma uses only his bare arms and no weapons: he is *nirāyudha*.

[56] When Ghaṭotkaca makes his active entry into the poem in book three he is referred to as a *vīra* (III,145,7). It seems that a demon, so long as his progenitor is a hero, is qualified to also be considered heroic.

Still disguised as mendicants in the forest, when they have begged for their food, the four brothers and Kuntī eat half the supply and Bhīma with his tremendous voracity takes the rest (I,145,6).[57] Bhīma, on the instructions of his mother, next proceeds to destroy another *rākṣasa*, Baka, by main force, using a tree as weapon in a 'tree-fight', *vṛkṣayuddham* (I,151,16).[58]

After the gambling match has occurred in book two and Draupadī has been forfeited, it is Bhīma who speaks up in her defence and criticises his elder brother's folly (II,61,1-6). Then, when Duryodhana provocatively slaps his thigh before her, Bhīma vows to crack that bone. As he does so,

> II,63,15: *kruddhasya tasya srotobhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāvakārciṣaḥ*
> *vṛkṣasyeva viniśceruḥ koṭarebhyaḥ pradahyataḥ.*
> *From all the bodily apertures of that enraged one,*[59]
> *flames of fire went in all directions: like from the hollows*
> *of a tree being burned.*

Likewise, he is the one chosen to defend her against Kīcaka's advances in the household of king Virāṭa. It is Bhīma whom Draupadī

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[57] This also happens at I,184,6 when they are eating after the bride-choice and their mother says, *ardhaṃ ca bhīmāya dadāhi bhadre*, 'and give half to Bhīma, my dear'.

[58] He also uses a tree as a weapon in the uproar that follows immediately after the conclusion of the *svayaṃvara* (I,180,15), which is what makes Kṛṣṇa realise that he must be Bhīma (I,180,19) This is, as it were, the sign of Bhīma, *vṛkodaro nānyeha*, 'There is no other here but Bhīma'. This pattern is repeated when he fights with the *rākṣasa* Jaṭāsura: it becomes a *vṛkṣayuddham*, 'tree-fight' (III,154,49); and similarly with Kirmīra (III,12,39-50). In the Virāṭa *parvan*, again, it is the employment of a tree as a weapon (IV,32,16) that leads to him being recognised (IV,32,18): it is his *sign*. These trees are *gadārūpeva*, 'like maces', the weapon which Bhīma uses in formal battle. See Watkins, 1995, Ch.38, on the importance of the "WEAPON" for Herakles. Bhīma again uses a tree to fight with when defending Draupadī from more than a hundred *sūtas*, IV,22,18ff.; at this moment he is likened to 'Death [Yama] holding his rod', *daṇḍapāṇir ivāntakaḥ*, (IV,22,19). Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in his long description of the nightmarish qualities of Bhīma's heroism reiterates this expression exactly (V,50,7), and during the course of the battle books Bhīma is again frequently likened to horrific Death.

[59] This is repeated at II,64,14.

approaches in the night and complains to about her lot (IV,16,5). He is the husband whom she chooses to waken and who then has to listen to seventy-seven *ślokas* of angry words. These are words not directed solely at Kīcaka's attempted rape, but at Bhīma's brothers, her four other pusillanimous husbands; which reduces Bhīma to weeping (IV,19,30). Later, Bhīma leaves Kīcaka dead and crudely mangled, limbless, so that he is 'like a tortoise', *kūrmam ... iva* (IV,22,2). It is also to Bhīma that she appeals in order to seek vengeance upon Aśvatthāman when the latter struck down her five sons in the night (X,12,22).

In these three episodes Bhīma is the primary hero and guardian for his family. He appears particularly close to his mother. Voracity and brutality colour his *vīrya*.[60] Such is a pattern of heroism that is primarily physical and kinship oriented; it does not really attain to the title of 'martial' because of the use of crude instruments of conflict — bodily strength and trees. As Bhīma himself says to Yudhiṣṭhira, *kṣatriyasya viśeṣeṇa dharmas tu balam aurasam*, 'The dharma of the kṣatriya is especially his innate strength' (III,34,50).

In these early accounts before Kurukṣetra actually begins, Bhīma is often busy in dealing with *rākṣasas*, that is, the non-human, by employing brute force.[61] The emphasis on appetite also sustains the slightly atavistic sense which hangs about this hero; in a way, a 'pre-kṣatriya' or 'pre-civil' form, unlike what we have observed with Karṇa.[62]

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[60] When Bhīma mocks and kicks the head of the wounded Duryodhana, this is considered very bad form by Yudhiṣṭhira (IX,58,15ff.) He instructs Bhīma to desist.

[61] In III,152,40ff., Bhīma assaults more *rākṣasas*. After another attack, it is Kubera who comes and speaks with Bhīma (III,158,45ff.) According to early sculpture, Kubera or Naravāhana, is a fat, voracious deity, whose manner in some ways is not unlike that of Bhīma. Bhīma's brutality is portrayed when he kills elephants and lions by hand or with the trunks of banana trees in III,146,44-48. In IV,12,28, he fights with tigers, lions, and elephants and at VII,25 he fights and kills an elephant in the course of battle. At VII,114,64 he actually throws an elephant at Karṇa.

[62] Bhīma is also one to receive an especial weapon from the deity Maya. Simultaneously, Arjuna receives his famous conch Devadatta. *gadāṃ ca bhīmasenāya*

During the anxieties of the Udyoga *parvan*, king Dhṛtarāṣṭra sings a long, more than forty *śloka*, horror-filled description of the terrors which Bhīma represents for him. His fear of Bhīma is given the simile of that fear which 'a large antelope', *mahāruru* feels for a tiger (V,50,2). Half way through his account he uses another metaphor for Bhīma's cruelty.

V,50,25: *apāram aplavāgādhaṃ samudraṃ śaraveginam.*
An ocean, unfathomable and boatless, shoreless,
impetuous with arrows.

Karṇa's first formal duel at Kurukṣetra is with Bhīma, whom Karṇa challenges (VII,106,12). In this match Karṇa is *sumahāyaśāḥ*,[63] 'endowed with very great glory', and *ācāryavān*, 'like a guru' (VII,106,24-25). At this point Karṇa really makes his entry into the battle; his earlier presence had been more peripheral — for instance, he was present at the death of Abhimanyu. It is telling that Bhīma is his opponent at this opening point. Karṇa behaves *mṛdupūrvam*, 'gently', whilst Bhīma is *krodhapūrvam*, 'wrathful' (VII,106,38). Karṇa is driven to mount another chariot when his own vehicle is demolished. Bhīma, then recalling the scene in the *sabhā* and the offence to Draupadī, redoubles his efforts.[64] Karṇa,

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pravarāṃ pradadau tadā / devadattaṃ ca pārthāya dadau śaṅkhaṃ anuttamam, 'Then he gave a most excellent mace to Bhīma and to Arjuna he gave the incomparable conch Devadatta' (II,3,18). (Arjuna receives the conch again at III,165,22, this time from an unidentified donor, *pradīyamānaṃ devais tu devadattam*, 'Devadatta, given by the deities'. At III,171,5, Arjuna again receives the gift of Devadatta, this time from Indra.)

[63] This is the only occurrence of this compound in the Droṇa *parvan*. No other hero receives such an epithet; it is an extremely rare word in the epic. The poet is here signalling the onset of Karṇa's *aristeíā* by using such a term. On one other occasion, Prajāpati, the creator of the universe, is called this (V,9,43). Indeed, *mahāyaśās* itself is rare for the battle books.

[64] VII,107,12 especially, where Bhīma recalls Karṇa as saying *narakaṃ patitāḥ pārthāḥ sarve ṣaṇḍhatilopamāḥ*, 'All the sons of Kuntī have fallen into hell — they are barren sesamum'. It is said that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa come to his aid, but nothing more is heard of this until the end of the duel when Arjuna fires at Karṇa in VII,114,86ff. Duryodhana sends one of his brothers, Durjaya, to the relief of Karṇa. The brother is soon killed and Karṇa, *rudann ārtas*, 'unhappy, weeping'

ultimately 'distressed', *vihvala* (VII,108,33), retreats briefly from the encounter.

This immense duel, which continues over the course of almost five hundred *ślokas*, is one of the most complex of the whole poem. It draws to a close when Karṇa recollects his promise to Kuntī (VII,114,67) and desists from the offensive, merely touching Bhīma with the tip of his bow. Karṇa proceeds to insult his opponent, belittling him and abusing his coarseness. He calls him *tūbaraka mūḍha audarika*, 'eunuch, idiot, glutton!' (VII,114,69), and sustains this level of verbal denigration for ten *ślokas*.[65]

VII,114,79: *gṛham vā gaccha kaunteya kiṃ te yuddhena bālaka.*
Or, go home, son of Kuntī! What do you, child, have to do with war, child?

When Bhīma fulfills his promise to Draupadī and drinks the blood of Duḥśāsana at VII,61,6, he reaches his most gory and bestial.[66] This is how he expresses his loyalty to his principal wife: it is cannibalistic and inhuman and sits well with the hellish side of Bhīma that the poets detail so assiduously.

(VII,108,39), circumambulates the body respectfully. After Karṇa has lost two more vehicles, Duryodhana sends in another brother, Durmukha, who is similarly slain. Karṇa is once more afflicted with grief, *aśrupūrṇākṣa* (VII,109,22), and he circumambulates the fallen body. Again, we see Karṇa behaving in a fashion that is atypical of other heroes. When five more brothers join the fight and are subsequently felled, Karṇa becomes *āgaskṛta*, 'guilty' (VII,111,2). His chariot is once more annihilated and he retreats. Duryodhana sends in six more brothers, who are all immediately slain and fall *bhumau vātanunnā iva drumāḥ*, 'like trees thrust by the wind onto the earth' (VII,111,19). In the next line, Karṇa is one 'whose face was full of tears', *aśrupūrṇamukhaḥ*. He mounts a fifth vehicle, another seven brothers are sent in, and they also fall to the arrows of Bhīma (VII,112,30). On the penultimate day of the war, Karna is again beaten by Bhīma, and forced to withdraw, that is, his driver takes him from the field after he has collapsed in the chariot box (VIII,34,40). In response to this, Duryodhana sends in another dozen-plus of his brothers to harry Bhīma (VIII,35,7ff.) It would appear to be a kṣatriya convention to circumambulate the body of a fallen comrade.

[65] The verb is *vi√katth* (VII,114,80).

[66] *nāyaṃ manuṣyaḥ*, 'This one is not a human being', is what the byestanders utter (VIII,61,10.)

One element of the above does not fit nicely with the model which we have developed; that is, when Bhīma's son Ghaṭotkaca is killed by Karṇa (VII,154), his father neither mourns nor laments for him. It is a tearful Yudhiṣṭhira who performs this function in a somewhat desultory way (VII,158,26-47), and who then proceeds to the field in order to seek revenge.[67] The audience hears nothing of Bhīma's grief.[68] The poets do not give Ghaṭotkaca much that is usually due to a dead hero, presumably because he is really a *rakṣasa*, non-human and demonic.

The heroism of Bhīma is thus made up of actions that could be described as 'primitive'. They are rough, brutal, but family-oriented and generally uncomplicated as well as being ghastly and horrific as Death itself.[69] This is very unlike the agonistic narrative of Karṇa, replete with anxieties and visions and absolute devotion to ideals and the value of a spoken word. If Arjuna possesses the more than human qualities of heroism, and Karṇa exemplifies the distinctly human properties of such, then Bhīma could be said to manifest the very 'basic' and fundamental qualities of heroic existence.

To conclude this chapter perhaps let us look at a series of extremely solemn images that portray the five Pāṇḍava brothers and their wife and house-priest, Dhaumya, as they set off towards their outcaste

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[67] It is Vyāsa himself who materialises and restrains Yudhiṣṭhira from going against Karṇa (VII,158,53ff.)

[68] In fact, at VI,60,48ff., when Ghaṭotkaca had perceived that his father had been seriously injured, *he* was the one to effect a rescue. Incidentally, Bhīma is the one to first inform Droṇa that Aśvatthāman is dead (VII,165,30-32).

[69] At VII,102,41 he refuses to leave Yudhiṣṭhira's side until someone else stands in to protect him. Also, strangely enough, he is the one to organise the sacrificial aspects of the *aśvamedha* after the war is over (XIV,86,11ff.); and, *vihitaṃ bhīmena*, 'arranged by Bhīma' (XIV,87,2). In book fifteen, Bhīma is the only Pāṇḍava to still bear resentment to the Kauravas, fifteen years after the war had ended (XV,4,12); he is the only brother to treat Dhṛtarāṣṭra unpleasantly. He criticises Yudhiṣṭhira's pleasure when Dhṛtarāṣṭra wishes to perform a *śrāddha* for his deceased sons; and he accepts that he and his brothers should perform such for Bhīṣma and Droṇa but says, 'Kuntī will give [the service] to Karṇa', *kuntī karṇāya dāsyati* (XV,17,17).

state in the forest. It is Vidura who describes them to king Dhṛtarāṣtra (II,71,3-24).[70] There is something both haunting and threatening about how they go and their particular gestures hint at certain liturgical manners which could perhaps be peculiar to kṣatriyas in defeat but not submission.[71]

The seven set off, as if they are processing, led by Yudhiṣṭhira, *vastreṇa saṃvṛtya mukham*, 'having covered his head with a cloth' (II,71,3). This is because, Vidura says, quoting Yudhiṣṭhira in the first person, *nāhaṃ janaṃ nirdaheyaṃ dṛṣṭvā ghoreṇa cakṣuṣā*, 'Let me not burn completely the people, having looked [at them] with terrible sight' (II,71,11).[72]

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[70] Note again the poetic technique of relating a scene through the sight and speech of a third person who imitates the words of those whom he is reporting; the interlocutor, in this case the old king, standing in the place of the audience.

[71] Another instance of what could be tentatively described as a kṣatriya ritual of the defeated, but this time *for* the defeated, is when Bhīma shaves the head of the vanquished Jayadratha with an arrow (III,256,9), leaving only five 'braids', *saṭās*; presumably to represent the five Pāṇḍavas. Jayadratha is then to proclaim his subservience, *dāso'smi*, whenever he enters a *sabhā*. Gurney, 1990, p.126, cites an instance in a Hittite text where "a ritual of purification following a defeat" is performed. Intrinsic to these very rare and unusual kinds of rite are the acts of lament and cursing. There is also, of course, the individual act of entering *prāya*, the meditative state of fasting to death after having been defeated, emotionally as well as physically, which Mahābhārata heroes sometimes elect. See, Duryodhana (III,238,19); Bhuriśravas (VII,118,36); Droṇa (VII,165,31ff.); Yudhiṣṭhira (XII,27,23). Even Draupadī threatens to enter *prāya* after her sons have been assassinated in the Sauptika *parvan*, unless she is revenged (X,12,15). It seems implicit to the act of entering *prāya* that the hero concerned is to be decapitated. On the other side of the coin, is the *aśvamedha*, where the horse, as a ritual scapegoat or *pharmakós*, is ultimately killed, along with many other animals — XIV,87,7ff., and XIV,90,34, *paśūnāṃ triśatam*, 'three hundred animals' — in order to purify the victors of the pollution of war and bloodshed. *vājimedhaḥ pāveyet pṛthivīm*, 'the horse-sacrifice would cleanse the earth' (XIV,3,11); also, *jñātivadhyākṛtaṃ pāpaṃ prahāsyasi*, 'you will renounce the wrong done by the destruction of kin' (XIV,90,15). Arjuna patrols virtually all of north India in pursuit of the sacrificial animal: this is not so much an extension of Pāṇḍava *imperium*, but a ritual encountering with the progeny of the fallen heroes of Kurukṣetra. Incidentally, this model of *régime* must take its archetype from the Mauryan empire, renewed during Gupta times. See Morris, 1976, for similar rituals in a non-IE tradition.

[72] Kṛpa refers to this ability of Yudhiṣṭhira when he says, *yudhiṣṭhiraś ca pṛthivīṃ nirdahet ghoracakṣuṣā*, 'Yudhiṣṭhira could burn the world with his ter-

Next in the procession comes Bhīma, *bāhū viśālau kṛtvā*, 'having outstretched his arms'. This signifies, Vidura says, again speaking in the first person, *bāhvor bale nāsti samo mama*, 'there is no equal to me in strength of arm' (II,71,12).

Following him comes Arjuna, *sikatā vapan*, 'strewing sand' (II,71,4). These *asaktāḥ sikatās*, 'loosed grains of sand', denote that *śaravarṣāṇi ... mokṣyati śatruṣu*, 'he will release showers of arrows among his enemies'.

Sahadeva comes in the fourth place, *mukham ālipya*, 'having smeared his face'. This is in order that, *na me kaścid vijānīyān mukham adya*, 'lest anyone recognise my face today'.

The very definite way in which Vidura not only reports all this but also re-enacts the direct speech of the Pāṇḍavas, profoundly emphasises the ritual or communicative effect of these symbolic actions. A very real drama is being portrayed with actors making histrionic gestures and with a distinct formal narrative. It is not often in the poem that the audience hears of such ritual sublimation. It is a complex and funereal procession with a mass of precise and highly articulated signs. There is a strict organisation about how the seven proceed and Vidura's imitation of what they proclaim only supplies the scene with more 'threat'.

Nakula follows on, *cittavihvalaḥ*, 'his mind distressed' (II,71,5). He is *pāṃśūpaliptasarvāṅgo*, 'his limbs defiled with mud'. Vidura says that this is, *nāhaṃ manāṃsy ādadeyaṃ mārge strīṇām*, 'Lest I, on the way, take the hearts of women'. It is worth noting that of all the brothers, it is the twins who are cast in the passive or receptive role in this parade.

Draupadī comes in the penultimate position, *keśaiḥ praticchādya mukham*, 'having concealed her face with her hair' (II,71,6). She is *śoṇitāktārdravasanā*, 'wearing a garment wet and anointed with blood'. This indicates, according to Vidura,

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rible glance' (VII,133,42). One should recall that it is Yudhiṣṭhira himself who has his feet scorched by Gāndhārī's dharmically fortified or charged eyesight in XI,15,6, when she momentarily lifts a corner of her blindfold.

II,71,19-20: *hatapatyo hatasutā hatabandhujanapriyāḥ*
bandhuśoṇitadigdhāṅgyo muktakeśyo rajasvalāḥ
evam kṛtodakā nāryaḥ pravekṣyanti gajāhvayam.
Thus the women who have offered funeral water
will enter Hāstinapura:
their husbands dead, dead sons, deceased dear relatives and kin,
menstruating, hair in disarray, limbs smeared with the blood
of family.

In the final place comes the *purohita*, 'chaplain'. He is *yāmyāni sāmāni raudrāṇi ... gāyan*, 'singing the inauspicious Death refrains', and *kuśān ādāya pāṇinā*, 'having brought *kuśa* grass by hand' (II,71,7). This grass, says Vidura, is *nairṛtān darbhān*, 'tufts of *kuśa* grass dedicated to the goddess of death, Nirṛti' (II,71,21); and, he adds, this is what Dhaumya sings:

II,71,22: *hateṣu bhārateṣv ājau kurūṇāṃ guravas tadā*
evaṃ sāmāni gāsyanti ...
When the Bhāratas are slain in battle then the elders of the Kurus
will sing thus ...

There would appear to be some very specific rite being represented here, both in its precise formality and also in its direct speech that describes each player's symbolism. It is one of the most arresting series of images in the Mahābhārata, sinister and yet highly controlled. Its orderliness would seem to argue that this is not something that the poets have made up but that it signifies a very real, and I would argue, kṣatriya ritual; in this case dramatised by the Pāṇḍavas. The long first sequence of the poem ends with this slow exit of the heroes towards the forest. The audience never hears of Karṇa engaging in such strangely liturgical action.[73]

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[73] The only other remotely similar instant in the poem is when Virāṭa strikes Yudhiṣṭhira, and to prevent his blood dripping onto the floor, Draupadī catches it in a saucer (IV,63,47;64,8). At play in that moment is the old ritual, which Jackson, 1999, p.84, talks about in another context, as a "pagan Mongol practice, which did not permit royal blood to be spilled on the ground." The danger here, in the Virāṭa *parvan*, is that the kṣatriya ritual of vengeance could be irrevocably engaged. Draupadī acts to obviate such.

CHAPTER SIX

CLOSURE

In the above chapters, I have attempted to describe the hero Karṇa as *the* paradigmatic hero of the epic Mahābhārata using criteria supplied from studies of other IE epics. I have done this from the point of view of an analysis of Karṇa's own narrative and speeches and also from the perspective of how he relates to other heroes in the poem. Then we examined certain other paradigms of heroism, in order to provide counterpoint to the model. Unique in the world of epic poetry, the Mahābhārata continues to flourish into the twenty-first century and to both influence and inform modern Indian culture. In my footnotes I have tried to depict this secondary or adjunct world of contemporary literature. These provide the scholar of preliteracy with a marvellous and unrivalled view as to how epic not only once functioned but continues to thrive.

There remains a dimension intrinsic to the paradigm of the hero that we have attempted to portray *apud* Nagy, and that concerns his manifestion in cult — the hero as one of the stylised dead. In the world of the sub-continent where climatic conditions have not been conducive to the preservation of artifacts, our modern understanding of ancient material culture is limited. Hence this element in the analysis of the Indic hero is more confined to mediaeval times: to the *kīrti stambhas* for instance, stone monuments which must have been the recipient of certain devotions.[1] Buddhist sculpture with all

[1] Thapar, 1981. Salomon, 1998, p.102: "Memorial inscriptions are very frequently seen on memorial pillars or *pāliyās*, typically recording death in battle ("hero-stones")." Salomon is here writing about Gujurat. Concerning the *kīrti stambhas* or *jaya stambhas*, Thapar, 2000, p.689, writes, "hero-stones commemorated in form what the epic commemorated in words." Rushbrook, 1970, has some photographic illustrations of hero-stones in Kutch. Similarly, Thapar, 2000, in the chapter, "Death and the Hero", pp.680ff.

its human *nāgas* similarly offers many interesting possibilities for research.[2]

Cult involves a worshipper and what, for want of a better term, could be described as the 'ghostly'. Surrounding this template are the actual dead or revenant and also deities, and of course, the presence of nature — specifically agriculture or herding. Additionally, there is sometimes the further aspect of raiding and warring, with the corollary of initiation and kin-groups. In cult, the worshipper seeks to invoke the beneficent influence of variously identified immaterial forces; rites and formulated speech effect this.

Burkert, in his study of *Greek Religion*, describes the first instancing of Greek heroes as being within an epic context. He adds however, "In later usage ... the hero is a deceased person who exerts from his grave a power for good or evil and who demands appropriate honor".[3] This is not simply the worship of a dead ancestor but is much more specific and is related to the influence of epic poetry in ritual performance and to certain mythical genealogies that are said to proceed from epic figures.[4] Burkert goes on to discuss the separation of the realm of the deities and the chthonic realm of the dead, linking this with political change in early iron age Greece. He distinguishes heroes as local phenomena, as opposed to the more extensive or pan-Hellenic presence of the deities.[5]

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[2] There is such a stone in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, from Amarāvatī.

[3] Burkert, 1985, p.203. J.D. Smith produced a film in conjunction with the BBC on this theme, examining the scenario as it appears in contemporary Rajasthan. "*The Epic of Pābūjī*", BBC2, Dec. 2nd, 1992, directed by H.O. Nazareth for 'Penumbra'.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.* p.206, "he acts in the vicinity of his grave for his family, group, or city." A possible reason for explaining why Karṇa retained his putative 'archaic' qualities in the Mahābhārata is that he had, earlier on, received such cult status that the Bhārgava editors felt disinclined to tamper too much with his position in the poem, except for the episode with Kṛṣṇa in book five. This is of course speculation, but it is possible that Karṇa, as the hero of a local — say Eastern — epic, in the process of amalgamation, was down-played or given less weight, than say, a hero like Arjuna, who was earlier on the protagonist of say, a more Western epic. That is, different heroes and different *parvans* 'originally' stem from different regions.

"Sacrifice leads to heaven; this is now extended to the hero killed in battle", is how Filliozat puts it.[6] He continues, "hence the valiant conduct of the king in battle should produce more than material gains [subjugation of land]. The other fruit is heaven." This latter return introduces the element of what he calls the "transcendental". One can infer that from this heaven of Indra, the hero/king continues to dispense benison, if correctly approached, via the ritual.

Filliozat concludes by discussing the mediaeval phenomenon of hero-stones. On a great number of these "the hero is shown surrounded by divine figures as well as carried in the *vimāna*", 'vehicle'.[7] This is exactly how Bhīṣma, through the account given by Indra, describes such *lokāḥ* (XII,99,45 ff.)[8] In Mahārāṣṭra, Sontheimer observed that "there are hero-stones whose lowest relief shows the hero who has been killed and the cattle he has protected or won back"; some are "depicting a struggle over cattle".[9] In the pastoral region of Veḷāpūr, he describes "dozens of stones representing battle scenes". Nearby, he speaks of another area where, "the hero stones from the Yādava period ... depict heroes protecting cattle."[10]

In the final book of the poem, the Svargārohaṇa *parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira goes to both *svarga* and *naraka*, the good and bad places respectively, and sees various kin in both regions. This would appear to be a 'late' book and not to represent the cosmology which the earlier books present, although such a impression is not securely founded.[11] It is interesting to note, though, that at the beginning of the *parvan*, *svarga* is qualified with the epithet,

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[6] *Ibid*. p.7.

[7] *Ibid*. p.8. Referring to these worlds, *lokāḥ*, Bhīṣma says, *hanta paśyata / pūrnā gandhavakanyābhiḥ*, 'Look! [they are] full of gandhavas and maidens!' (XII,100,4).

[8] XII,99,4: *sarvatejomayaṃ divyaṃ vimānavaram āsthitam*, that is, in heaven the hero would be 'seated [in] a divine choice vehicle made of the splendour of everything'.

[9] Sontheimer, 1989, p.152.

[10] *Ibid*. p.178.

[11] It is disturbingly easy in Mahābhārata studies to pass over problems by saying that something is a late addition to the text.

triviṣṭapa, a name for Indra's heaven, probably from the verb *vi√ṣṭambh*, 'to push apart, separate'. Indra was the deity who originally separated the worlds: so this is a metonym. If heroes are an especial sub-category of the *pitṛs*, then this specific heaven would serve as their locale. Whatever derives from such a place has the potential for affecting the course of human affairs, *if invoked and honoured correctly*.

As Bhīṣma says,

XII,100,18: *na hi śauryāt paraṃ kiṃcit triṣu lokeṣu vidyate*
śūraḥ sarvaṃ pālayati sarvaṃ śūre pratiṣṭhitam.
Nothing higher is known in the three worlds than heroism.
The hero protects everything. Everything is based on the hero.

Such a model of cult draws upon this potential which the dead hero possesses and which could be said to be situated in 'heaven', however that place is located or termed.

As archaeology in south Asia is often subject to severe near-tropical conditions, it is difficult for us to reinforce our conceptualisation of the hero with much physical evidence of cult practice. This is something that is broadly manifest for the Greek model, where the ritual role of the hero in society and ideology, was, in a material sense, highly developed. Also, the presumably non-iconic nature of brahminical religious activity and the lack of durable temple architecture further complicates the situation of analysis.[12] Unlike the Greek heroes, Sanskrit heroes appear to excel in neither ritual games nor athletics *per se*, a realm that was essential to the Greek

[12] However, see VI,108,11: *devatāyatanasthāś ca kauravendrasya devatāḥ / kampante ca hasante ca nṛtyanti ca rudanti ca*, 'The statues of the Kuru king stationed in the temple, tremble and laugh and dance and weep'. This is an extremely rare instance of such imagery. At VII,39,16 there is the unique reference to images of deities: *dharmamārutaśakrāṇām aśvinoḥ pratimās tathā / dhārayanto dhvajāgreṣu draupadeyā mahārathāḥ*. 'The sons of Draupadī, great charioteers, bore on their banners images of the Aśvins, Indra, the Māruts, and Dharma'. This must be one of the first references to images of deities in Sanskrit literature.

paradigm in its connection with the *polis*.[13] The only important public role for games would seem to be in the annual chariot race which is part of the *vājapeya* rite.[14]

In the Greek model of the hero, which was our starting point, serpent imagery is an important component in how heroes are depicted, either in terms of simile or in graphic representation upon pottery. Such portrayals are an important component of the display surrounding cult practice. Watkins has shown how profoundly intrinsic the basic formula of "HERO SLAY SERPENT" is to the Indo-European epic tradition.[15] If there is one original statement that sums up the 'original' hero, that is it. We have observed how heroes are beings, who, unlike ordinary mortals, are able to come into contact with deities and not perish.[16] It is as if the relation between heroes and serpents is the reverse of this, or, by metonymy, that the connection between heroes and serpents is a profoundly characteristic quality of their overall identity. Similes of heroes in combat being like snakes are extremely common throughout the poem, particularly in the battle books where such tropes are rife.

Emily Kearns in her work on Attic heroes makes the observation that "snakes have an intimate connection with heroes and

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[13] The weapons trial and the *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* incorporate a certain amount of athletic endeavour, but cannot be described as being primarily such.

[14] Tait. Sam. I,7,7-12 and elsewhere. Chariot-racing imagery is common, beginning with the RV. It was clearly an habitual and culturally important practice. Unfortunately there is no specific evidence of this in the Mahābhārata.

[15] Watkins, 1995, Ch.36 *et seq*. The image of a snake associated with a hero is a constant simile employed throughout the Mahābhārata. Duryodhana, fatally wounded, for instance, is *kruddhasyāsīviṣasyeva cchinnapucchasya*, 'like an angry poisonous snake with its tail cut' (IX,60,25). Feller Jatavallabhula, in Brockington and Schreiner, 1999, pp.206-07, even goes so far as to say that "The hundred Kauravas are a 'brood' just like the snakes, and the manner of their birth accounts for, or symbolically represents, their 'reptilian' evil and vicious nature....Garuḍa eats the snakes, the Pāṇḍavas kill the Kauravas." She associates the *sarpasattra* of Janamejaya with the *raṇayajña* of the battle. This epic theme entered into early historiography, when king Kanishka, in "one of [his] most cogent legends" is recorded as emitting "smoke and flame from his shoulders in order to subdue an evil nāgarāja", Rosenfield, 1967, p.28. Kanishka flourished c.110-33 c.e.

[16] See above, VI,2 and IV,1 and 2.

'chthonic' deities, because of their mysterious appearances and disappearances from the earth; under the earth, it seems, they still retain their power and vitality."[17] Now, some of the earliest sculptures we have from the sub-continent are images of human figures standing within a snake's hood. Also, the Mahābhārata begins with the a tale about Utanka and the snake king Takṣaka, followed by two other snake stories and proceeds with the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya which goes awry.[18] Snake narratives thus establish the ground for the poem right from the start. Utaṅka re-appears again in book fourteen, at the end of the work, giving closure. The association of snakes and heroes sustains itself throughout the epic.[19]

Shulman makes the fascinating observation that, "In effect, there are *three* ophidian heroes on the Kaurava side (whose serpentine characteristics stand out more clearly as the battle draws toward its close): Karṇa, Aśvatthāman, who bears the serpent's forehead jewel; and Duryodhana, whose banner is the serpent, and who is compared to a serpent when he goes into hiding in the pool (9.31.33)." He links Karṇa by reason of his congenital ear-rings.[20]

All of the above, I would propose, are facets of the aura of heroes which partially exists in cult: we see a formal relationship that receives depiction in both myth and plastic relief. There is the chthonic image of Duryodhana, for instance, visiting the 'underworld' in book three, where he is 'renewed'.[21] Pal, describing sculpture from Mathurā, now in the Los Angeles County Museum, writes of the "tribal god-hero" Balarāma, brother of Kṛṣṇa, who is

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[17] Kearns, 1989, p.16. In an Indian setting, snakes are usually opposed to *gandharvas*, the former living within the subterranean world whilst the latter inhabit the aerial zones. Also, Harrison, 1922, p.325ff., on 'The Hero as Snake'. On this connection between snakes and heroes, see, when, in a dream, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa visit Śiva and obtain the Pāśupata weapon, and they first behold that object: it is in the form of two snakes inhabiting a lake (VII,57,70).

[18] Tod, 1929, vol. II, p.626n.1, even goes so far as to write of the 'serpent races'; that is, he is making a dubious connection between Taxila and Takṣaka.

[19] This is to such an extent that Minkowski in his 1989 JAOS article, p.416, commented that "the Mahābhārata becomes the most complete compendium of Indian snake-lore that we have in Sanskrit literature."

[20] Shulman, 1985, p.386, n.126. "Cf. Mbh 1.3 (the story of Utanka)".

[21] III,239-40.

represented with a coiling serpent. "In a third-century relief, the Buddha is [also] protected by a multihooded serpent as is Balarama."[22]

Coomaraswamy speaks of, "a wooden image of Ketu, a human hero: this inscription, dateable about 161 B.C. ... and various epic references to human figures, generally of gold, might be cited as analogues."[23] He also cites, "an inscription from the Morā site speaking of images of the Five Heroes (Pāṇḍavas) and reproduction torsos which may have belonged to the figures in question."[24] Such imagery as this, one can safely assume, received some kind of ritual offering.

Krishnamoorthy makes the observation that in the *Pratimānāṭaka*, 'The Statue Play', by Bhāsa, Bharata, the half-brother of Rāma, returns to court and sees a statue of his father Daśaratha in the *pratimāgṛha*, 'house of images' or 'memorial hall'.[25] This is the sign which makes him realise that his father is deceased. For Krishnamoorthy this is indicative of "the custom of honouring dead heroes by setting up their images in temple-like structures."[26] For him, the icon of Sītā in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* bears a similar resonance, although on this occasion the sculpture is connected with her ritual function — in terms of substitution — rather than as a

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[22] Pal, 1986, p.25. As we have observed, it is appropriate that early plastic representations of the Buddha often show him as heroic, inasmuch as qualities usually associated with the hero are part of this iconography. See S58, p.182. On the connection between the Buddha and heroism, Wayman in his 1997 study of Buddhism prefaces the first chapter with a quote from the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhitantra*, (Chap. 2), "Later, I am the hero gladly pronouncing the words that annul all fear, and am called 'Great Hero'."

[23] Coomaraswamy, 1927, p.43.

[24] *Op. cit.* p.66 n.3. Rosenfield, 1967, describes this sanctuary of Mōrā, close to Mathurā, pp.151-152: "[W]hoever the heroes were, they must not have been immediate historical figures. Whatever their original historical basis, they had become suffused with idealistic overtones."

[25] In Settar and Sontheimer, 1982, p.13. Rosenfield, 1967, pp.149-153 and pp.168-69, regards the 'house of images', *devakula*, as an Iranian-influenced innovation in India.

[26] Tod, 1929, vol. II, p.842, describes "an enclosed court or area ... [in which] are displayed ... the statues of the knights-errant of the desert." These are mediaeval Rājput heroes.

subject of cult itself. Nevertheless, the fusion of statuary and ritual is present. One can infer that the death of the hero must have occurred through the violence of combat.

In book one of the Mahābhārata, Ekalavya, rejected by Droṇa as a student, goes to the forest and constructs an earthen image of the guru and offers it his devotion. This may be pushing the model of hero-cult too far, but certainly the form of such 'cultivation' is there, insofar as worship is being cathected onto an image of an heroic figure.

I,123,12: *araṇyam anusaṃprāptaḥ kṛtvā droṇaṃ mahīmayam*
tasminn ācāryavṛttiṃ ca paramām āsthitas tadā.
He, arrived at the forest, made an earthen Droṇa,
and then undertook respectful behaviour to the teacher.

Before the formal lamentations in the Strī *parvan* actually begin, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, apprised that Bhīma has come into his presence, seeks him out and tries to crush the hero in his arms. However, Kṛṣṇa, the *éminence grise* of the Pāṇḍavas, had substituted a bronze figure for the person of Bhīma, so avoiding the latter's death. This is described by the poets as *bhīmasenam ayasmayam*, 'a brazen Bhīma'; presumably a statue cast in metal (XI,11,15 and 17). There appears to be nothing exceptional or unprecedented about this model, and one can generalise and say that others, of similar nature and form, must have existed.

J.D. Smith in his book on the mediaeval Rājput hero Pābūjī writes of the contemporary situation where a hero's "worship is very widespread ... he has become the centre of a coherent cult which is served by its own priests (the *bhopos* who sing the epic), and which has provided itself with a fully developed mythological account of his position and role in the universe."[27] Earlier he describes a situation from the 1950's, "when a dacoit dies at the hands of the authorities, the general reaction is not to hail the triumph of law and order but to lament the death of a hero." He has observed the typical progression from deceased hero to deified hero.

[27] J.D. Smith, 1991, p.89ff.

Karṇa and Draupadī both receive cult status in contemporary India. Hiltebeitel, in his two volume study, has outlined this practice in the case of the Draupadī.[28] Karṇa nowadays receives cult status in parts of Rajasthan where he is the ideal Rājput hero and his hour of worship occurs appropriately at the moment of dawn.[29]

Perhaps the essence of the Sanskrit hero, as demonstrated and amplified by Karṇa, is that of a figure who, by virtue of the extraordinary *tejas* that he possesses, is able to stand apart from his true or rightful community with impunity.[30] Yet, at the point of death, he can be praised by all the members of that community whom he has in a way betrayed by this separation. At death he is re-integrated back into society by the honour or *kīrti* which he receives and thereby re-integrates the community itself. Even Kṛṣṇa praises Karṇa once he has fallen, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhiṣṭhira both sing laments for him.

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[28] Hiltebeitel, 1998, p.401, "Karṇa's nondemonic nature, particularly with regard to his generosity and concealed Kṣatriya identity, becomes a vehicle for the expression of intensified bhakti. It is the death of Karṇa, rather than that of the other heroes ('Abhimanyu, Jayadratha, Duḥśāsana'), that gives this devotional aspect its 'fullest expression'", p.410.

[29] Jhala, 1991, and in personal communication. Several Rājput Maharājas have received the name of Karṇa, because of its martially glorious associations. A certain Karṇadeva was a thirteenth century Vāghela king in what is now Gujarat. Recurrences of the name Karṇa are extensive in contemporary western India and different lineages will subscribe to having Karṇa as part of their ancestry. He holds iconic value, for reasons of his undeviating heroism, and, almost obversely, for his low caste superiority to higher brahmin castes. Shulman, 1985, p.400, n.152, notes that "Karṇa is claimed as an ancestor by the Veḷāḷas, the landed caste that offers crucial support to kingship and the state, but that is not properly 'royal' in itself." In Indonesia, a shadow puppet theatre stemming from the story of Karṇa is extremely popular: see n.19, p.xix, on the Wajang Wong version, in Pukalentippulavar, 1998. The name *Sukarno* is one of great political prestige today in Indonesia.

[30] Sjoestedt, 1949, p.75, comments on a cognate IE tradition: "The hero is the eternal solitary, he who perseveres when others turn back." "On the one hand we have the hero in the service of the tribe, and on the other the heroes outside the tribe. And this dualism reproduces, in some degree, in the camp of men, the dualism we have observed in the camp of the gods, opposing heroism as a social function to heroism as a natural force", p.94.

The great self-possession or 'valour', *parākrama*, that Karṇa exhibits is not simply a manifestion of the unique fact that he is born invincible, thanks to his cuirass, nor of his unapproachable actions and excelling deeds, but also derives from the integrity and the tenacity by which he maintains ethical decision. It is not for nothing that he is described as *vadatāṃ vara*, 'best of speakers'.

Having said this, perhaps one could add that, paradoxically, ambiguity is another essential component of heroic patterning in the Sanskrit field. Heroes, being neither mortals nor deities, are strange figures who brush up against certain aspects of immortality and yet, as mortals, die. They are liminal figures, exemplified by this ambivalence between the two terms for hero and also for that which heroes stand for, fame. The *śūra* is closer to the world of the dead, that is the divine world, than the *vīra*; and *kīrti*, is more allied with the former than is *yaśas*. Heroes exist on this margin between the divine and the mortal and so partake of this binary existence.

Karṇa's pre-occupation with fame adheres to this mould, for it is through fame that he views himself as victorious over death, a kṣatriya point of view taken to its ultimate conclusion. This is especially the case when he relinquishes his invincible potential only in order to receive the *kīrti* that this act will bring to him.[31] Heroes seem to oscillate between the two registers of divinity and mortality, *through the singing of epic*; yet they do not fully inhabit either region. It is this quality which makes them potential objects of cult once they are dead. Poetry, the language of epic, remains the principal, if not absolute, instrument of their immortality, and mediates across that margin of life and death, the divine and the earthly. As we observed above, the poetics of this particular operation, at its core, offers a unique blend of both seeing and hearing.

This ambiguity can be best illustrated in another dimension, where it becomes almost a condition of duality. That is, as we saw in Chapter III above, heroic identities are always bound up with

[31] Could one say that when Karṇa gives up his ear-rings and breast-plate to Indra he is exchanging *yaśas* for *kīrti*? He thus moves from the register of *vīra* to that of *śūra*. This is a totally *a priori* point of view, but it does bear some significance in terms of the semantic field which we have proposed.

another figure, best demonstrated by the Karṇa-Arjuna symmetry. The identities that underlie what appear to be situations of vigorous contest between opponents are the basis of those contentions. A mutual antagonism with another hero is an intrinsic component of the heroic model, that is, the *bhāga*.

In terms of individual persona, Yudhiṣṭhira magnifies this quality of equivocation well by his constant doubting and desire to retire to the forest.[32] Arjuna is similarly ambiguous, not only because the audience hears repeatedly about his being part of a divine unit with Narāyaṇa, but also, for instance, when he was supposed to go off as a *brahmacārin* in book one. Then, he suddenly engaged in a series of five amorous encounters; beginning with the snake-girl Ulūpī, who seduced him, and ending with Subhadrā whom he formally captures in *rākṣasa* marriage.[33] Bhīṣma and Duryodhana are both profound figures of ambivalence, the former for his sheer complexity and denial, and the latter for his mercurial if not tragic ways — endlessly shifting between remorse and threats of suicide, and dazzling, if not magical, hubris. Both outwardly in the narrative, and inwardly in reflection, these heroes embrace a great deal of duality.

This ambivalence is most deeply manifest in the fact that we have two principal words for warrior/hero, *vīra* and *śūra*. Despite the high degree of similitude between these two terms they are not always synonyms, but demonstrate, on occasion, two different meanings which touch upon a division between the mortal-immortal worlds.

The hero who seeks fame could also possibly be described, within an Indian context, as a prototype for what came to be the 're-

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[32] Matilal, 1989, pp.1-18 has covered this question of dilemma. In terms of contentions, Yudhiṣṭhira's *bhāga* whom he actually kills in book nine, is Śalya, his maternal uncle. That is, somone whom he should normally be extremely close to and who in fact, in the absence of a father, is the figure who would normally perform a paternal function.

[33] Allen, 1996, has examined these five relationships.

nouncer' or renunciant.[34] That pursuit of an ideal, as opposed to a material valuation of the self, can be viewed as a template for what later came to prevail in Buddhist, Jain, and then Hindu teaching: a way of living that gave priority to a sublime valence of life as opposed to the mundane. Such a pursuit in both cases was one that aimed for the a-temporal, whether that of song culture and poetry or that of the soul's residence in an unearthly site. Perhaps one could ascribe such achievement to an absolute desire insofar as it seeks the incorruptible.[35] Karṇa, by his pre-occupation with fame, supports such a view. Yudhiṣṭhira could be said to have crossed the line from being solely a warrior-hero because he attempts to adhere so fixedly to the renunciant tenet of withdrawal into the forest and non-action. He does participate in the battle books however, and kills an opponent. Nevertheless, no Mahābhārata hero is as pre-occupied with a non-material transcendental ideal as Karṇa is.[36]

Epic, as it is not ephemeral, dramatises and mediates between the worlds of an idealised past and a present, as well as between the levels of the divine and mortal. At the intersection of both these spheres is a moment of death. The hero, like the renouncer, aims to surmount that instant through an access to 'undying fame', that is, epic poetry, or in the latter case, through numinous and transcendental vision.

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[34] Bronkhorst, 1993; Madan, 1982; Della Santina, in, Matilal, 1989, pp.96-97, would go so far as to ascribe this strand in culture, what he calls "the Śramaṇical tradition", as being "originally associated with pre-Aryan Indus Valley civilisation." The grounds for making this claim are not clear to me.

[35] The cult status that heroes often received in ancient Greece, that were then overtaken by the cults offered to Orthodox saints, illustrates a similar progress.

[36] Vernant, 1991, p.57: "The real meaning of heroic activity lies elsewhere ... it is in a way metaphysical ... Heroic striving has its roots in the will to escape aging and death ... Real death lies in amnesia, silence, demeaning obscurity, the absence of fame." Sontheimer, 1989, pp.202-3, writing of western India today describes "a *vīr* is thus someone who understands how to provide himself with special yogic abilities." He quotes from "a well-known verse found on hero stones in Karnatak [where] the yogī and the hero are compared: *dvau imau puruṣau loke sūryamaṇḍalabhedinau / parivrāḍ yogabhuktaś ca raṇe cābhimukho hataḥ*. As the yogī breaks through the orb of the sun by means of his yogic abilities, so the hero who dies in battle does the same thing. Battle is therefore a kind of yogic exercise". (V,33,32 apparatus.)

Thus what we see in the epic of Karṇa is a solar hero, with his shining cuirass and ear-rings,[37] who loses his sun-like characteristics and succumbs to the assaults of his younger brothers who wish to secure the throne. The next brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, an 'ideal brahmin king'[38] and son of the paternal aunt of Kṛṣṇa, triumphs in securing power. Determinacy plays two very different roles in the contingent worlds of heroism and kingship.

Let us conclude with a few brief passages depicting Karṇa. Towards the end of the Droṇa *parvan*, as he stands beside Arjuna on their chariot, Kṛṣṇa describes Karṇa as one who was invulnerable to every being in the three worlds until he surrendered his ear-rings and cuirass and until his spear was deployed. Then, he remains invincible, except to Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa adds,

VII,155,24: *brahmaṇyaḥ satyavādī ca tapasvī niyatavrataḥ*
ripuṣv api dayāvāṃś ca tasmāt karṇo vṛṣā smṛtaḥ.
Pious and true to his word, austere, whose regime is restrained,
and compassionate towards enemies – thus the bull
Karṇa is remembered.

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[37] The phenomenon of solar perihelion? See Rosenfield, 1959, pp.205-217, on the Iranian sources of solar motifs in the plastic arts.

[38] Personal communication, James Fitzgerald. See also IV,27,12-24, where Bhīṣma describes the good kingship of Yudhiṣṭhira. There, everything 'is conjoined with its proper qualities', *svaiḥ svair gunaiḥ susaṃyuktās*. To make a connection between Yudhiṣṭhira and Aśoka is to identify a strong resemblance; *dharmarāja*, is, after all, Yudhiṣthira's primary epithet. Also, *Ajātaśatru*, is another of his principal epithets, and is also the name of a Nanda king, fl.491-459, who converted to Buddhism. We have observed above the possible steady Buddhist undercurrent in the poem, a thread which one presumes was later 'edited' out, both literally and also in terms of oral poetics. See Sutton, 1997, p.334, "The *kṣatriya-dharma* taught in the *dharma-śāstras* and in the *Śāntiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* is rejected by the Aśoka of both legend and edict, as it is by Yudhiṣṭhira in the epic." "[T]he final redaction of the narrative was influenced by events in the reign of Aśoka", p.335. Sutton refers specifically to Rock Edict XIII where "the abhorrence of warfare" is given; he compares this with Yudhiṣṭhira's similar abhorrence in the Udyoga *parvan* and elsewhere. Apart from these considerations, the latter parts of the Mahābhārata can definitely be viewed as a celebration of Yudhiṣṭhira's monarchy.

The old king, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, asking about Karṇa not long before he enters his last fight, describes him,

VIII,56,4: *kurūṇām api sarveṣāṃ karṇaḥ śatruniṣūdanaḥ*
śarma varma pratiṣṭhā ca jīvitāśā ca Saṃjaya.
For all the Kurus, Karṇa, the destroyer of the enemies,
is the protection, defence, and firm hope of life, Saṃjaya!

During the course of the Strī *parvan*, when Karṇa's fallen torso is described, there remains little of his body; he is *alpāvaśeṣo*, because he has been eaten by scavengers (XI,21,13). Gāndhārī also informs the audience that he was *draṣṭuṃ na saṃprītikaraḥ*, 'not agreeable to look at', because of this depradation. She says,

XI,21,9: *bhūmau vinihitaḥ śete vātarugṇa iva drumaḥ.*
He lies on the earth like a tree felled by the wind.

The Strī *parvan* closes the narrative that commenced with the gambling in the *sabhā*; in effect, this is the end of epic Mahābhārata.[39] Yudhiṣṭhira is rightfully called the 'king of the Kurus' once again (XI,26,44); by this appellation, the poets signal closure for their work, for the term *kururājo yudhiṣṭhiraḥ* is a term that only appears after he has reclaimed the throne, and has been used only once before — in the previous book (X,13,5).[40] Much of the final *adhyāya* is spoken by Kuntī, in which she sings a long lament for Karṇa. It is fitting that the epic closes on this note, for it is, I hope, obvious, how central this hero is to the Mahābhārata.

She begins,

XI,27,7: *yaḥ sa śūro maheṣvāso rathayūthapayūthapaḥ.*

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[39] The books following the Strī *parvan* — the Śānti *parvan* and the Anuśāsana *parvan* — are virtually given over *in toto* to *śāstra* and are not 'epic' material. The five subsequent books supply a *coda*. The Āśvamedhika *parvan* picks up the narrative from this last moment on the banks of the Gaṅgā. These concluding books do not add to the epic matter except in very small part.

[40] It is also used on two other occasions: in the Parvasaṃgraha, where it refers to an even later occasion than this in the Śānti *parvan*; and in the Virāṭa *parvan*, where Yudhiṣṭhira refers to himself as the *kururāja* (IV,9,11). It is definitely a weighty term which the poets use with exactitude.

A hero who was a great archer, commander of a troop
of chariot commanders.
8: *yo vyarājac camūmadhye divākara iva prabhuḥ.*
The splendid one who shone like the sun among the armies.

10: *yasya nāsti samo vīrye pṛthivyām api kaścana*
satyasaṃdhasya śūrasya saṃgrāmesvapalāyinaḥ.
Heroic, faithful, unfleeing in battles,
to whom no one on earth was equal in prowess.
11: *kurudhvam udakaṃ tasya bhrātur akliṣṭakarmaṇaḥ*
sa hi vaḥ pūrvajo bhrātā bhāskarān mayy ajāyata
kuṇḍalī kavacī śūro divākarasamaprabhaḥ.
Offer funeral water for that brother of tireless actions!
For he was your eldest brother, born to me from the Sun.
A hero, ear-ringed, armoured, splendid like the Sun!

Yudhiṣṭhira responds to her by saying,

XI,27,17: *nidhanena hi karṇasya pīḍitāḥ sabāndhavāḥ.*
By the death of Karṇa, [we] the clan are troubled!

He adds that his grief is an hundredfold worse than what he felt after the death of Abhimanyu or his son/s by Draupadī (XI,27,18-19). Yudhiṣṭhira orders that Karṇa's wives and relatives by marriage be presented. Then, in their company, he performed the last rites beside the Gaṅgā.

When the Pāṇḍavas, along with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī and Kuntī meet up with all the dead heroes in book fifteen, as the latter rise out of the Gaṅgā waters, *prīyamāṇā vai karṇena saha pāṇḍavāḥ sametya*, 'the Pāṇḍavas, having met up with Karṇa, were very happy' (XV,41,5).

When Yudhiṣṭhira finally visits the heroes in *svarga*, usually translated as, 'heaven', he sees Karṇa, along with his other brothers. There, Karṇa is *dvādaśādityasahitam*, 'attended by twelve suns' (XVIII,4,4).[41] The final mention of Karṇa's 'epic' in the Mahābhārata describes how he ultimately entered the sun, *ravim*.

[41] That is, by his father and eleven paternal uncles, which would include Indra.

āviveśa raviṃ karṇaḥ ... [42]

[42] XVIII,5,18. This would seem to imply that *svarga*, where he had been previously, along with his brothers, is only a transitory situation, perhaps until one's *puṇya* is exhausted — although this would be a 'later' understanding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KARṆA TODAY

There exist scores of sites in contemporary western India where mediaeval heroes receive cult observance and dedication.[1] Karṇa is widely regarded as the ideal transcendent hero, particularly among the Rājputs, whom such later heroes would have tried to imitate: he is their prototype.[2] Similarly, those who raised their dead kin to the rank of heroes with cult status were highly aware of his 'original' example. For western kṣatriyas, Karṇa was the icon which heroic action was modelled after, especially where death in battle was inevitable, such as in the siege of Chitor by Akbar in the sixteenth century. Karṇa is also a figure of contemporary song culture, in both popular and 'bardic' genres, in western India.[3]

For groups seeking to become kṣatriyas, that is for those seeking upward social mobility, it was not uncommon for Karṇa to be the model to be emulated because of his disputed caste status, being both a *sūta* and simultaneously of a royal line. Retrieved from a basket, Karṇa could have been the rightful king.[4] Literature, principally the Mahābhārata, was appropriated for its forms of heroism, and fused with the historical events of mediaeval times; the mythologies of Karṇa being especially applicable to this practice.

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[1] See Tod, 1927; Rushbrook, 1970; Settar and Sontheimer, 1982.

[2] Jhala, 1991, and personal communication.

[3] Personal communication, Neelima Shukla-bhatt. In what follows below, I am aware that my spelling of NIA words, especially in the use of diacritical marks, is not always technically accurate. This is because what is written here comes from a verbal transcription of a film.

[4] Chattopadhyaya, 1994, Chapter 3, discusses the origins of the Rājputs. 'Mahārāja Karṇa' is mentioned on p.66. See Hiltebeitel, 1988, Ch.3, and also p.413, "... no matter where one begins in the caste hierarchy, mokṣa is accessible to one and all ... Karṇa dies recognised by one and all as a true Kṣatriya, the model for those in the audience who claim their own suppressed Kṣatriya identities ... This teaching of the universal accessibility of mokṣa through bhakti, [is] with the Kṣatriya as its model ..."

For Rājputs, the marching season, that is, the battle season, was in the latter part of the year when harvests were in, and when harvests could be plundered. Cult sites nowadays often have festivals at this period.[5] One such occasion, *Daśaharā*, is a primary kṣatriya festival in which the re-emergence of the Pāṇḍavas from the forest is celebrated.[6]

Although epic studies in Mahābhārata cannot draw upon such resources as Greek classicists have at their disposalin terms of the productions of archaeologywhat they do have unbounded access to is a continuing tradition, a phenomenon non-extant in the West. The two accounts given below represent popular traditions of the 'Karṇa epic'. One is from a recording of a male poet singing inside a village house before a small audience of men, the second is that of a woman story-teller, repeating her tale in the presence of a few companions within a courtyard of a palace. In both versions, the content of the narrative is filtered by the speaker, to the effect that the values presented are those of the audience themselves. To use a modern term, the account is modified so that 'transference' is maximised. What we see is a tradition that is supple and flexible enough to adjust to any audience whilst still maintaining its primary form.

For classical India, epic Mahābhārata provided a depiction of an archaic world that was not only 'historical' but also 'better'. This is not to say that myth is allegory however. If 'tradition', *smṛti*, was sustained and represented by the epic, there had to be some means for the poets to innovate, that is, to maintain the vitality of their song in the context of changing circumstances or patronage. The Bhārgava poets, or editors, obviously achieved great success in this

[5] Being part of a lunar calendar these festivals are moveable.

[6] Kane, V,1 p.190, "Dasarā or Vijayādaśamī is a great day for people of all castes but it is especially a day for kṣatriyas ... It is ... a day of commencement, a day of undertaking, for marching out."

process during classical times, when they expressed the tradition in terms of *vaiṣṇava* beliefs.[7]

What we have below, with Amrit and Rādhābāī, offers a similar paradigm, in terms of poetics: the adjustment of tradition, where authority and relevance are plaited or woven into a new fabric during performance. These are transcripts[8] that depend from the scripture of epic Mahābhārata; they are local variations of a pan-Indic myth and demonstrate the extremely fluid dialectic that exists between the two systems.[9]

1. *A Song of Karna*

This song was recorded during an interview by Jayasinhji Jhala and filmed by Liluye Jhala in August of 1999 in an outlying village of the town of Dhrangadhra in the region of Saurāṣṭra.[10] It was sung in Gujarati by Amrit Kalu Rudatala, a member of the Tragaḍā[11] Bhavai caste.[12] The household in which the song was taped are members of the Koli caste, who are traditionally a landless and labouring community, who patronise the occasions for such performances as this. This particular household is a subgroup of the

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[7] They enjoyed the advantages of living toward the 'end' of the tradition, or at least, after the tradition had ceased to be a solely performative genre. They, like Virgil or Apollonios, enjoyed the benefit of viewing the tradition *post hoc*. To extend this model to the twentieth century, see Mankekar, 1999, p.376 n.14: "I believe that the television version [of the Mahābhārata] attempted to make available a 'master text' *on a mass scale* ... this hegemonic master narrative was shown on state-controlled television at a historical moment when religious tensions were high and Hindu nationalism was on the rise."

[8] I use this term in the sense that Nagy, 1996a, employs it.

[9] Sukthankar, 1944, p.119, writes, "It may be surmised that celebrated places of pilgrimage like Ujjayinī, Rāmeśvaram, Kāśī, and others, with recitations of the epics held periodically in their famous shrines, have played an important role in the dissemination of the knowledge of local versions ... among bards and the professional reciters of the epics."

[10] I am extremely grateful to the film-makers for allowing me this privileged access to their work.

[11] This is a caste that compounds Hindu and Moslem cultural practices.

[12] The Bhavaya caste are composed of members who perform the folk theatre of Gujarat. They are Moslem.

Koli caste, the Chuvaniyā, that is, they possess or belong to 'forty-four villages'. Usually much of the village would be present, having been selected and invited, and the villagers themselves choose the material to be sung; that is, there is a very strong patron-poet relation.[13] For this performance however only a few friends and associates were present.

Amrit Kalu accompanies himself with the usual small hand-pumped harmonium, a 'squeezebox'. The form of the 'performance', *vārtā*, is twofold. There is the overall pattern of the song, given in a flat *recitative* of typically five beats, *chātī*, to which the harmonium supplies an audial ground not of melody but of sustained notes. Then there is a smaller and later section, when the song is much more formal and in couplets, and the harmonium accompanies the singer with *cadenza*. A drum is also played at this point.

Amrit begins by singing about the three types of hero that exist.[14] There are the *sūras*, the 'warriors', there are the *dātās*, the 'donors', and there are *bhaktas*, 'devotees.'[15] The stories of these three kinds of hero remain forever, he says.

The poet addresses women:

'Make your sons one of these three. If you do not, it is better that you stay barren.'

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[13] Flueckiger, 1996, p.119, gives a description of this process in Orissa. She adds on p.141, n.16, "Many oral epics in India are published in ... bazaar pamphlet forms." In Chapter 7 she examines in detail the local genre of the Nala episode as performed by Chhattisgarhi groups. She discusses the relation between Sanskrit text, the television production of the epic, which lasts over a hundred hours, and the local genre of the poem.

[14] The following is a transcript of a *verbatim* translation given by J. Jhala at a viewing in November of 1999.

[15] I would presume that Rāma or even Arjuna would be exemplars of this latter kind of hero, according to Amrit's typology.

'There are four yugs. Each yug has a hero. Māndhātā was the hero of the first yug.[16] *Hariṣcandra was that of the last. He was famous for his word and for giving. He gave away.'*[17]

'Karan[18] *was in the second yug, the dvāpara. It is Karan who is to be remembered as the dātā, 'great giver.'*

'This is the story of the Mahābhārat when the whole world was finished.'

'In that battle Karan hit Arjun's rath, 'chariot', with an arrow and threw the chariot back ten paces.'

'But when Arjun hit Karan's rath it went back five paces.'

'Arjun felt 'proud', abhiman, that his arrow was throwing back Karan's rath.'[19]

'Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa says, 'Don't be proud Arjun, because Karan is a great dātā. Karan is a great sūra.'

'The reason that he could not throw your rath further is that I am sitting in your rath.'

'He is born of a virgin, Sūrya-putra, 'the son of the Sun god.'

'I was sitting in your rath and so was Hanumān sitting in your rath.'[20]

'So with that weight on your rath he can toss you back this far.'

'If you wish to further test this hero, come with me.'

'Let's find out what Karan is really like.'

'What Karan is like, what kind of dātā he is.'

'In the pause within the battle, Arjun takes the rūp, 'disguise', of a brahmin.'[21]

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[16] Māndhātā is mentioned in RV I,112,13; also in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata — especially in the latter books.

[17] *tapaḥ paraṃ kṛtayuge tretāyāṃ jñānam ucyate / dvāpare yajñam evāhur dānam ekam kalau yuge*. Manu, I,86. 'It is said that austerity is most important in the *kṛta yuga*, knowledge in the *tretā yuga*. They say that the sacrifice is similar for the *dvāpara yuga*, and donation is pre-eminent in the *kali yuga*'. There is a slight discrepancy here with Sanskrit tradition, but no one in the audience seems overtly aware of this.

[18] Karṇa. This is also the name of the oleander flower, a blossom much used in *pūjā*.

[19] It seems that Amrit has nodded two lines previously, giving Karṇa superiority. For the sake of the narrative he now has to reverse the order of the ten paces and five paces. No one in the audience makes any comment about this.

[20] In popular imagery these chariots are usually the four wheel type.

[21] In *Karṇa Mokṣa*, the Tamil drama that Hiltebeitel describes, 1988, p.411ff., Kṛṣṇa "perceives that Karṇa will not die because he is spiritually protected", and approaches him in the disguise of a brahmin. "Kṛṣṇa extols Karṇa's magnanimous gift and grants him access to Vaikuṇṭha, the paradisal equivalent of mokṣa."

'I have come to ask a favour from you, Karan.'
'Karan says, 'In this battle-field what is there for me to give.'
'I don't care. Give what I ask, or say you cannot give.'
'Karan says, 'I have not said no. How can I say no?'
'A dātā can never not keep his word.'

Amrit then interjects his narrative with an address to his principle patron for this performance, Jayasinhji Jhala. This is in the same loose five beat line accompanied by the sustained notes of the harmonium.

'You are our father, you are three brothers. When people here see that Jayabapa comes to the village, you receive many salutations.'[22]
'Why? Whenever we go to Jayabapa we will never leave empty-handed. We will receive water for the thirsty.'[23]
'When you come back people from all over the place come to you because you are a great dātā.'[24]
'In the battle-field Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa goes to test Karan.'[25]
'Kṛṣṇa says, 'If you do not wish to give us a favour, say so.'
'I have never denied giving a dātā.'
'You can go and tell my wife, Prabhāde, if there is anything you need from the treasury.'[26]
'So Arjun says, 'If you are going to take the gift, we want to take the gift from Karan's own hands.'
'If you do not want to give, say so, and we will go away.'
'Karan says, I tell you!'[27]
'Karan asks, 'Bring me that flint-stone.'
'Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa says, 'Bring that stone!'
'That is insulting, we come to ask you! How can you ask us!'
'Karan, wounded that he was, drags himself to the stone.'

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[22] Earlier on in the film we had seen Jayabapa, Jayasinhji Jhala, receiving *pūjā* from the elderly head of the household, who had washed and anointed his feet, much as he would the feet of a stone image of a deity. Jhala, who is presently a member of the Faculty at Temple University in Philadelphia, is a son of the local Mahārājā. He is the second of the three sons mentioned.

[23] This area of Gujarat is desert for much of the year.

[24] Amrit nicely equates patron and hero.

[25] The verb used here is *kasoṭi*, which means to assay gold.

[26] Prabhāde, a name meaning 'goddess of the Dawn'.

[27] This is accompanied by a loud and long *sostenuto* on the harmonium.

'With the stone he cut out a gold disc that was on his tongue.'

'Here, God,[28] *take this gold rekh, 'coin'.'*[29]

'Bhagavān says, 'This is paśu, 'animal' gold, it is polluted.'

'Wash this in Gaṅgā-jala, 'Gaṅgā-water', then give it. That is polluted.'

'Karan asks, 'Where can I find water?'

'Bhagavān says, 'Bring it because of your sat, 'grace'. From the power of your sat bring the water any way that you can.'

'Please, there lie my quiver and bow. Please hand that to me.'

'Bhagavān says, 'That is absurd. Why are you asking us?'

'That makes a mockery of your gift. You do it yourself.'

'If you can bring your bow and arrow through the power of your sat, and can bring Gaṅgā-jala, it is good.'

'Karan drags himself to the bow and arrows and fires the bow.'

'In walks the goddesss Gaṅgā. The goddess appears.'[30]

Amrit digresses a second time, addressing his patron.

'Just as Gaṅgā is present today in Jhālāvāḍ ...'[31]

'Just as Śaktī appears in Jhālāvaḍ — today there is water in Jhālāvāḍ.'[32]

'Why? Because in Akbar's court the emperor asked how many rains do you want?'

'Some said two, some said four, but our king asked for one, two, three, four, five, twenty-five!'[33]

'That many! — the emperor said.'

'Others have asked for two. Others for three.'

'So the king answered the emperor.'

'The soil in my kingdom is very thin, it is weak, emaciated.'

'The ground dries up and my people are poor.'

'That is why I need more rain.'

'The emperor says, 'Let it be!'

'That very land for which there was no buyer ...'

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[28] The brahmin is addressed as a deity.

[29] Indicating that the tongue is pure and possesses pure speech — comment by Jhala.

[30] In much folk imagery, especially paintings and prints, the goddess is usually indicated as a bird hovering above the hero — comment by Jhala.

[31] The name of the kingdom in pre-Independence times.

[32] The poet conflates the goddesses Gaṅgā and Śaktī.

[33] The king is an ancestor of the anthropologist Jayasinhji Jhala and his camera operator.

'For which there was not ten rupees ...'
'Today there is a cry for that land.'
'Everywhere in Gujarat you cannot find water at a thousand feet.'
'We have it at a hundred feet!'
'So Gaṅgājī presents herself, reveals herself!'
'Submersible pumps are running.'
'Water is running in irrigation ditches.'
'Such is the kindness of the goddess.'
'So, similarly, before Karan, Gaṅgājī presented herself.'
'He washed the gold and said, 'Here is the gold.'
'Bhagavān then called out to Arjun.'
'See the face of Dāneśvar!'
'The same man who could throw the weight of the universe back ten paces!'[34]
'Despite being hurt on the battlefield he still is the dātā.'
'So, here is the example of a dātā in the Mahābhārat.'
'There is a saying ...'

The drums enter supporting a cadenza on the harmonium. The next lines are given in a much more formal manner and in couplets and with much greater and various accompaniment.

'In the great lake there is always one haṃsa, 'goose', greater than others.'[35]
'Among the great eagles, all eagles are not the same.'
'Among the lord elephants, they are not all the same.'
'Among women, they are not the same.'
'All the lakes of the world are not the same.'
'All do not have lotos flowers.'
'There are other flowers, but not the lotos.'
'The lotos only appears in certain places.'
'The eagles ...'[36]

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[34] That is, the weight of Kṛṣṇa on the chariot.

[35] This catalogue of superlatives recalls what Bhīṣma, lying on his bed of arrows, says to Arjuna at VI,116,31ff.; or, what Dhṛtarāṣṭra says, describing Karṇa, at VIII,521.

[36] Amrit does not finish this line, merely mentioning the subject. He allows the harmonium to project the import. The drums, *tablas*, are still accompanying emphatically.

'Among elephants, the king of elephants, Airāvat, is only one.'[37]
'You will see elephants everywhere but you will not see Airāvat.'
'So, similarly with women, they say the women of a town are many.'
'Only a few are the satī, the bhaktī, the dātā. There are many.'
'The same thing is true for dātās, the donors. Not all men are donors.'
'Everyone cannot be a donor. Only some can be.'
'Arjun in the satyayug, tretāyug, during yugs ...'
'Arjun ... there are heroes.'[38]
'We have spoken of three yugs, but in this yug, the Kali, there is only one hero.'
'There is only one hero, Vikram!'
'There are kings, the protectors of people.'
'The story of Vikram — how he travelled incognito about the country.'
'A mother has a choice in the Kali yug. There are three types of hero.'
'Or she can remain barren.'

Amrit then goes on to sing about king Vikram.[39]

We see a wonderful compounding here of many elements from the Critical Edition narrative. What in the Sanskrit epic is performed by Indra, the begging of the ear-rings from Karṇa, is here accomplished by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, and the object transposed into a coin upon the tongue.[40] Also, the relationship of Gaṅgā to Bhīṣma appears to have been translated to Karṇa.[41] Similarly, the association of the arrow with supplying water, an act performed by Arjuna to quench the dying Bhīṣma's thirst, is here transposed onto Karṇa. The account recorded by Polier has a similar reference to the gold *rekh*, the coin in Karṇa's mouth: there it is "petits diamants".[42] Amrit has foregone references to Karṇa's struggle with *daiva*, a com-

[37] The mount of Indra.
[38] Due to background noise here, particularly from the drums, this line and the previous are difficult to catch.
[39] Interestingly, for Amrit, the king in the Kali *yug* functions as a hero.
[40] That is, the old Vedic deity is gone, replaced by two figures from the Hindu pantheon.
[41] We observed above, in Ch.III, how close in identity these two were. Similarly, with the arrow, we see how easily Karṇa is substituted for Arjuna.
[42] Republished by Gallimard in 1986.

mon theme in vernacular accounts, and focussed upon the generosity of the hero. There is a great deal of attention given to the formalities of giving.

The way in which Amrit speaks to his patron, quite literally a poet addressing a king, here — the king's son, is fascinating for the way in which, metonymically, he shifts from the hero Karan, to the benificent ruler who has requested this performance. This instancing itself is then enlarged to embrace the Moslem emperor Akbar. The poet plays upon the metonymy of the drama which he has established: for just as Jhala's ancestors brought water to the area, made it fertile and valuable, so was Karan a bringer of water and fertility. The donation of Karan is transposed to that of Akbar and Jhala. The idea of a hero as a figure who brings balance, benison and harmony to a community, is totally present in this performance and is conflated with the patron-king. Through the song, the benevolence of the hero is attached to that of the local ruler. It is noteworthy that the song incorporates the Sanskrit, the Moslem, and the *vaiṣṇava*, into one cultural unit.

2. *A Story of Karṇa*

This story was recounted by an old servant woman, Rādhābāī, in the palace of Dhrangadhra in the summer of 1999, not long after the monsoon had arrived. She is a member of the Khavas caste.[43] In her youth she was a maid to the Mahārājā's fifth wife and used to massage her feet nightly before sleep. During those times she would also tell her mistress stories. Often, those stories would be have been originally learned from professional story-tellers, which she then repeated. This particular tale was recorded and filmed by Jayabapa Jhala.

This is a story of Karṇa which begins with Gāndhārī's marriage to the bull of Śiva, Nandī. Unlike the song of Amrit, above, this

[43] These are a caste traditionally in domestic service. Frequently they are, or were, the progeny of former kings via mistresses who were often Moslem. Their names indicate which princely clan they are descended from.

tale was given inside one of the palace courtyards and only two other women were present.[44] It is in prose. The companions occasionally interjected comments in emphasis of certain points in the narrative. The three women sat, their hands together, in an attitude of religious devotion. There was no musical accompaniment.

'This is a story of Gāndhārī. She had no children. So the king of Gāndhāradeś had no children.'

'So he said, 'I am going to do tapas in the hills. I am going to worship Śiva, so that I receive the favour of a son.'

'After appropriate devotions, god Śiva tells him, 'In your fate there is no son. I will give you a daughter on the condition that you marry that daughter to my bull, Nandī.'

'The king agreed to that. 'What does it matter to me, at least I shall have a child.'

'The queen received a vardān, 'favour', and had a daughter. Fifteen or seventeen years went by. She became marriageable.'

'So the time came. Pārvatī said, 'It is time. My bullock came dressed up in a turban.[45] *Dress it up!' They put jewels and nice clothes on the bull.'*

'Then the king had misgivings. 'I will be the laughing-stock of all royalty. I am giving my daughter to an animal. Other kings would not take my daughter if this was done.'[46]

Jayabapa asks, *'How can a bull marry a woman?'*

Kāmābāī says, *'How odd, a woman marrying an animal!'*

'So they drove Nandī away and he returned crying to his mother and father. 'They drove me away and hit me with sticks', he said.'

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[44] They were, Vasantbāī and Kāmūbāī. All three were widows of men who had worked as some form of personal servant in the palace. Both of these women arrived in Dhrangadhra accompanying the uterine grandmother of J. Jhala who herself came in 1915 from the principality of Koṭadasanghani. Rādhābāī had come with the fifth grandmother of Jhala from the kingdom of Jamnagar. Kāmūbāī had been born in 1928. She has been a nurse to the various Jhala generations all her life.

[45] That is, dressed for a wedding.

[46] This would represent an instance of hypergamy, a male servant marrying *up*, marrying a princess. From the princess' point of view, the marriage would be hypogamous, *pratiloma*, 'against the grain'. As the tale is being given by a servant, there is a certain amount of projection here. It is analogous to western folk-lore stories of a princess and a frog. See Dumont, 1980, pp.116ff.

'Śaṅkarbhagvān was angry and made an earthquake and rocked the palace and land of the king. There was consternation in the whole town. 'The gods are angry, what are we to do?'

'The king called his daughter. 'Go, get ready again. In a room in secret, Nandī can circumambulate the fire — but do not tell anyone.'[47]

'Nandī came and the daughter. The king sent for a brahmin who said svāhā several times and made them go round the fire four times. So having done that Nandī left. Now no one would marry the daughter.'

'The king was worried. 'I will have a kanyā, no one will marry her.'

'He hears about a blind king, Dhṛtarāṣṭra. No one has given him a daughter. 'We should send her there', he says.'

'But Dhṛtarāṣṭra had learned that the bull had already married the girl. 'I know that your daughter has married the bull. I cannot marry her just like that. Let her go and do fifty-nine tīrthās, 'pilgrimages.'

'The king went off with his daughter on these pilgrimages. Wandering, they came to Kuntīdeś. There she went to Kuntīmā; both were unmarried. They became close friends. They ate together, slept together.'

'Kuntī tells Gāndhārī that she has to go to sleep as early next morning she must serve the ṛṣi. 'Because I have been serving the ṛṣi Durvāsā I will be mother of a hundred sons. I will get a mantra when I go to my in-law's place that will make me mother of a hundred sons.'

'So Gāndhārī said, 'Is that so?' 'Yes, sure, it's true.'

'Now in Gāndhārī's stomach there was some pāp, 'evil'. Gāndhārī decided that she would go, having learned about what would happen. She found out from Kuntī where she goes, what she takes, what she does, all the propitiation rituals.'

'Kuntī says, 'I take a bath in the Jamnā river, then I take some wood, then I wash and take implements of pūjā and then make garlands of flowers.'

'So she made ready and went to Durvāsā. He asked, 'Daughter, have you come?' 'Yes, father, I have come'. He gave her, Gāndhārī, the mantra and Gāndhārī was very happy.'

'She came back and laid down next to Kuntījī and went back to sleep. Kuntījī did not know what had happened.'[48]

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[47] That is, that the wedding ceremony about the fire had occurred.

[48] At this point, the story is so compressed and there are so many transpositions, that if one did not know the 'original' or Sanskrit account, the narrative would be difficult to fathom. Rādhābāī presumes this knowledge on the part of her audience. The pleasure of the telling/hearing is thus *performative* rather than *informative*.

'Kuntī rose, saying, 'Ho, ho, I am late today. I must hurry and go.'

'So she went to the river and bathed and made garlands and picked up some wood. When she went there she saw that all the pūjā vessels had been washed and the courtyard was washed, everything was already done!'

'She looked up and saw the ṛṣi Durvāsā was about to leave the āśram and go and do the day's business. Durvāsā ṛṣi said, 'Daughter, you come back again a second time!'

'She said, 'Father, I have not come'. 'Sure you did. You came and took the vardān a little while ago.'[49] *She said, 'I did not know, father, I did not come.'*

'Durvāsā looked, he took samādhī, he learned who actually came. He learned the truth.'

'He asks Kuntī, 'In your house, do you have guests. Is some royal family visiting you?'

'She said, 'Yes, a king and his daughter came and we were talking and we slept together and I told her.'

'Durvāsā says, 'She has received the favour.'

'Kuntī asked, 'Now what?'

'The sage says, 'Let us think. I will give you another favour. I will give you five sons. Your five sons and her hundred sons will be relatives, but your five sons will be victorious over the hundred sons.' Saying that, Durvāsā left and Kuntī came home.'

'In time, Kuntī said, 'Durvāsā has given me this mantra. Will it work or will it not? Is it true or is it fake?'

'She had this thought while bathing. She bowed to Sūryabhagvān and folded her hands and prayed, to test whether the mantra was true or false.'

'Then, on her face and all over her body the rays of the sun hit her and her stomach. A child was made. She was pregnant with the Sun.'

'So Kuntī says to herself, 'This I did wrong. This is a great sorrow. I have done a great wrong.'

'Sūrya reassured her that she will appear to be a virgin and no mark of shame will attach itself to her. 'Nobody will cast doubts on you. Nobody will defame you.'

'The child that is born to her she wraps in fabric and puts it in the water. She says, 'Go, nothing will happen to you.' Wrapping the child in fab-

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[49] In the vernacular, the *vardān* can signify the husband's promise or agreement.

rics and worshipping the river Jāmnā she put the child in the flowing water.'

'Floating, floating, floating on the waves, this bundle reached Hāstināpur. The king's servant came to bathe in the river.[50] *'What is this floating. Let's take a look.'*

'When he opened it, white as milk, there was this boy, the avatar of beauty. 'How blessed I am', he said, 'That without effort I have found a child.' Then he said, 'I must report this to the king. Without reporting it there may be trouble. After all, I am a servant. People may ask, 'How did he get such a beautiful son, a boy?'

'So in the kacharī, the 'court', the servant said, 'This is what happened.'

'So the king said, 'Never mind, that is very good. It is your good fortune. I will send a brahmin to you and let him look at his horoscope and give him a name. You can raise him.'

'The servant was very pleased. In time the paṇḍit came and saw the horoscope and said, 'This boy's name is going to be Karan. He is going to be a great man with great fame and of great śaubha, 'stature', 'visibility.'

'So Karan is now raised by foster parents and he grows.'

'In the meantime Kuntī is married and comes to the in-law's home. There she meets Duryodhan and his brothers and Karan.'

'The Pāṇḍas are born and they grow up. Then Duryodhan and his brothers do great julam, 'injustice,' to the Pāṇḍavas.[51] *Duryodhan tries everything, he tries games, he tries poison in the pudding, to destroy the Pāṇḍavas. He has great khār, 'hatred', against the Pāṇḍas.'*[52]

'But the Pāṇḍas do not die. In any case they had the favour that they would not die. Bhagvān has said, 'If you die I will have to die too.' So Bhagvān would not let them die.'

'Then the princes go to learn the knowledge of archery or weaponry. The Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas to to Droṇācarya. Karan is also there and Droṇa says to him, 'Not you.' Drona says, 'I take Duryodhan and the sons of kings and I am a brahmin. I cannot teach you. You go and learn from Paraśurām.'

'So that is what happens. The Pāṇḍavas learn with Droṇācarya and he goes to Paraśurām.'

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[50] 'Servant' — *naukar*, from the Persian.

[51] From the Arabic *ẓulm*.

[52] *Khār* denotes bitterness, as when salts are leached — comment by Jhala.

'One day Paraśurām is resting with his head on Karan's lap, his thigh, and a big insect, a boring beetle comes.'

Rādhābāī indicates with her hand how large this insect is.

'Blood is flowing and flowing and Paraśurām woke up and said, 'What is this blood?'

'Karan says, 'This animal called a jaṅj bit me. So I am bleeding.'

'The ṛṣi said, 'You are a kṣatriya!' He said, 'No, I am the son of a servant.'

'No', he said, 'Only a kṣatriya can stand the sight of so much blood and suffer so much pain'. The ṛṣi said, 'Speak the truth!' He insisted on Karan telling truth.'

'So Karan says, 'Yes, I am a kṣatriya. I am a kṣatriya, but I am a dāsiputra, 'son of a slave.'

'Paraśurām thought to himself, 'I know what is going to happen to this man but I cannot say.' 'Because you spoke falsehood, in battle all the mantras I gave will fail you.' So he gave him that curse.'

'In time the young men all went back having been educated.'

'So the Mahābhārat yudh begins and fighting goes on and the Pāṇḍas beseech Kuntīmā, saying, 'Karan has all this prowess, can you do something about it?'

'Arjuna asks his mother, saying' You go and find out from him. Sūryanārāyan has told me to ask you to go and talk to Karan.'

'When Kuntī sees Karan she is overcome by affection. After all, he is her son. Tears of joy flow from her eyes.'

'Karan asks her, 'Why have you come, mother? Why are you crying?'[53]

'She says to him, 'I am your mother!'

'Karan says, 'No! I have to call you mother? But my mother and father are those who raised me.'

'Kuntī says, 'Son, you do not know the story.'

'Karan says, 'Tell me, tell me the truth.'

'Kuntī then says, 'On the battlefield only two of us know. Kṛṣṇa knows and I know. No one else knows. You are the son of the Sun and you were born by this mantra. Only Kṛṣṇa and I know this. Come to the Pāṇḍa side,' she says.'

[53] The word she uses is *hārākhā*, meaning tears of great uncontrollable joy.

'So Karan says, 'No. I have eaten their grain. I am beholden. In my veins and blood is the grain of Duryodhan. All the blood in my veins is filled with the grain of Duryodhan. I have to be loyal and stay on that side. I cannot shift sides and come on your side. It doesn't matter what happens, if Arjun kills me. Let him kill me.'

'Kuntī entreated him a lot.'

'That comes to pass. Karan is killed in battle and people are crying and she is crying more than others. The five Pāṇḍavas ask her, 'Mother, why are you crying so much. In the final count he is our enemy. Why are you crying for our enemy?'

'So Kuntī says, 'Son, you do not know.'

'The Pāṇḍas say, 'After all, he is Duryodhan's servant, our enemy. He is his mantrī, chief counsellor.'

'So Kuntī says, 'Kṛṣṇa Bhagvān and I know. The two of us know.' Because Kṛṣṇa is the son of her brother. He is her sagā.'

'The story that Kuntī has said begins the Kaliyug. In that Kaliyug women will never be able to keep a story to themselves. Men can retain confidence but women are incapable of maintaining a secret. I will tell her, she will tell another, then she will tell a third. If I say, 'Don't tell', they will tell. Whereas man has mind control. Women's intelligence is the size of their big toe. A man has it, his intelligence suffuses his body.'

'Now Bapa, I have grown old. I used to know lots of stories, but many I say in bits and pieces now.'

The material related here is valuable for its point of view: that of a servant, an old family nurse. The emphasis on loyalty of service above that of kin is key, as well as the stress placed on the relation between two women and the importance, for them, of reproduction and of sons. It is the Karṇa epic compressed into a prose story given in the feminine dimension, and this is given under the form of service, with the major focus upon the maternal relation to a son.[54] The curious initial episode dealing with the bull Nandī sets up a counterpoint between *śaivism* and *vaiṣṇavism*, in terms of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. It is also noteworthy that the major elements that usually supply Karṇa with his identity and name, the

[54] Mankekar, 1999, pp.224-256, gives an excellent analysis of Draupadī as she is portrayed and viewed in the twentieth century Hindi Mahabharat.

ear-rings and cuirass, are absent. Hence the generosity of Karṇa does not figure in the narrative. Similarly, the role of *daiva* has no import for Rādhābāī.[55]

The fact that the Kauravas are inherently wrong if not organically or genetically so, is, in this tale, a consequence of Gāndārī's deception and also of the 'badness' of her uterus. Rādhābāī's story is utterly feminised in its complexion and she, because she was once a nurse of her audience, J. Jhala, like Amrit, gives an account that transposes that relation of patron-storyteller into the narrative itself. The account is modelled so that it imitates the relation of that between teller and patron, but without the core 'Sanskrit' element being overly distorted.

Similarly, when she says that Karan's response to Kuntī's claiming to be his mother is, 'My mother and father are those who raised me', Rādhābāī, a nurse of the royal children in the palace of Dhrangadhra, in relating this narrative to other nurses of the household, is by metonymy, incorporating them into the 'experience' of the story.

Thus in these two very different tellings of the 'Karṇa epic', we see how the speakers are able to select their own level of discourse and yet sustain the basic narrative form, as well as drawing in their

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[55] An interesting case study would be to collect songs and stories of Karṇa from all over contemporary India and to see how caste, region, gender, even religion, affect the contents and form of the 'basic' narrative — something, rightly or wrongly, one assumes to be the Sanskrit epic. A purely Moslem telling of the Karṇa epic could offer a fascinating point of view, and could be fruitful in revealing how modern poetics work in performance. Mankekar, 1999, p.378 n.32, comments that she "was struck by how many [Moslem interviewees] made it a point to talk about a *sati* that occurred early in the *Mahabharat* and how many mentioned that Krishna had been depicted as something of a philanderer. None of this was *ever* mentioned by Hindu viewers." On p.383 n.73, she writes, "The responses of Sikh women to Draupadi were quite different ... Draupadi's disrobing resonated with their own experiences of sexual vulnerability and humiliation ... Like some of the Muslim women ... many Sikh women interpreted Draupadi's predicament in terms of the vulnerability of *all* women ... [and] emblematic of the 'reality' of Indian Womanhood." The scriptwriter for the television Mahābhārata was, incidentally, "a Muslim and a renowned leftist intellectual", p.235.

audience on a decidely particular tone. Variation and integrity of story meet in the occasion and performance.[56]

Ashis Nandy, describing a letter written by by Jagadis Chandra Bose to the poet Tagore at the end of the nineteenth century, captures the popular ideal of Karṇa, when he summarises Bose as saying, "Karna ... through self-creation, personal achievements, and masculine courage — transcended his caste and family origins ... [He] would not have been killed but for his generosity ... Arjuna flouted the canons of kshatriya warfare by attacking him when Karna was lifting the wheels of his chariot."[57] He adds, the imagery surrounding Karṇa "had a special appeal among the parity-seeking elites of colonised India."[58] He adds, that, for Bose, "Karna [w]as a possible mythic paradigm for the modern Indian."[59]

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[56] Mankekar, 1999, p.237-38, tells of how the director and scriptwriter of the televised Mahābhārata conceived of their version in the light of contemporary Indian politics: "they had conceived of Bheeshma as the hero of their story". In his long death-bed speech he "uses the term *vibhajan*, a Hindi word frequently used for the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan". The war of Kurukṣetra, in their version, was a metaphor about the division of the country.

[57] Unpublished paper, n.d., pp.37ff. See also, Thapar, 1989.

[58] He describes the film of Shyam Benegal, (script by Girish Karnad), *Kalyug*, and "the ambivalent fascination of the Indian middle classes with the character [of Karṇa]", p.22. "It is [an] attempt by Indian middle class culture to reinterpret the core epics of an epic civilisation", p.41. On p.42, Nandy relates how the hero of the film, Karan Singh, "an uprooted north Indian Hindu", lives in Bombay and is caught in a fratricidal business war between two industrial houses — owned by two sides of the same family. Karan is the illegitimate brother of the side whom he is fighting and is ultimately killed "while attending to the wheel of his car." Nandy's reading fits nicely with a Formalist interpretation, where heroes are at the service of social classes and their 'struggles'; see Propp, 1984, p.149ff.

[59] *Ibid*. p.41. On the previous page, he describes Bose's view of Kṛṣṇa as "a possible model for a reinterpreted ... Hindu godhead, capable of legitimising modern state-craft and positivist science." Nandy cites two twentieth century works, a novel and a Bengali verse-play, that also developed this view of Karṇa as propounded by Bose and Tagore: See, Sawant, and B. Bose. In Tharoor, 1989, Karna is a Moslem lawyer in pre-Independance India; his father is a chauffeur. In this account he becomes the model for Jinna, the main instrument of Partition, and Bhishma is the model for Gandhi.

In conclusion, it is a curious fact that prose or 'folk' lore, remains largely in the feminine and private realm of account, whereas the more formalised composition and sung performance of the 'epic' is publically played out by the men. Certain kinds of language have their respective domains although the subject matter is essentially the same but 'adjusted' to accord with an audience. The primary heroic element remains constant with an amazing flexibility and suppleness.[60] One begins to understand that the nature of 'variance' in an oral tradition is in fact the vitality and strength of that tradition. As Sukthankar himself says, "we must never forget that probably from time immemorial there have existed local versions of the Mahābhārata."[61]

From one point of view, epic is a closed system, not referring to anything beyond itself. Heroes only exist within that world of song and poetry: in a sense, that is where they live *and* where they die, and thence, where they are recalled and remembered. The heroes and the deities and other beings with whom they engage only exist within the situation and conditions of epic performance. From another point of view, epic is constantly both labile and innovative, it is always in a state of transition and adjustment, reacting to its field and context: the poet being in an unrelenting state of responsiveness to his audience. We can observe this well in the above two tales from Saurāṣṭhra. Thus, our hypothetical original 'kṣatriya epic' was able to re-temper itself through the artistry of the poets,

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[60] Hiltebeitel, *op. cit.*, p.411, writing of a current Tamil tradition comments, "The drama develops most of these complex matters in ways that depart little from what is essential in the Sanskrit epic ... Let me only mention that the enactment of combat by chariots is as far as I have seen unique in the dramas, and strikingly beautiful: the warriors exchange places standing on the musician's bench brandishing their weapons and fighting the opponents who dance on the stage below them. And while each warrior stands in turn on the chariot-bench, his charioteer sits beneath him, Śalya making gestures of holding the chariot reins ..."

[61] Sukthankar, *op. cit.*, p.41. Flueckiger, *op. cit.*, p.25, makes the comment, "When I asked what the difference was between *paṇḍvānī* and the recently televised serial production of the Mahabharata, one Chhattisgarhi villager answered that the latter was shastric (textual), whereas *paṇḍvānī* is 'sung from our hearts'." *Paṇḍvānī* are local performance genres of the epic.

to incorporate what must have been a rapidly expanding *vaiṣṇava* world.[62]

The impetus to finalise a critical text can, by its very lack of audience or performative conditions, become excessively exclusive unless those variants are appended to the text, along with the understanding that the tradition has not yet become fixed.[63] The ongoing vivid life of the Mahābhārata, apart from its formal Sanskritic textuality, gives the epic a unique place in the Indo-

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[62] Here I would disagree with Goldman, 1976, for I would prefer to think of the Bhārgava 'poets', rather than 'editors'. I would also like to submit, that, just as the old 'kṣatriya epic' was reformed as cultural change demanded an 'adjusted' song, so too, the epic that obtained during those centuries of Buddhist sway, were also swept over by changing conditions and demands. Reciprocity is the intrinsic nature of an oral-epic tradition.

[63] I would like to think, and this is nothing but surmise, that sometime during the reign of Samudragupta, fourth century c.e., there was a formal written recension of the Mahābhārata. This supplied an authoritative 'script'. It is as if there were an historical *chiasmus*, in that prior to this there must have existed many traditions of the poem, and after this, those momentarily consolidated traditions then once again diverged. Plus, there must have been ongoing traditions not incorporated at this moment. Geographical dispersal, caste variation, variation on the basis of clan and kingdom, all these provided aspects, or rather, emphasised aspects of what, in the West, is now spoken of as the 'text'. Blackburn *et al*, 1988; de Bruin and Brakel-Papenhuyzen, 1992; Hiltebeitel, 1988, 1991, 1999; Sax, 1991; J.D. Smith, 1991, to name but a few western authors, have displayed how vividly multifarious Karṇa's contemporary manifestations are today. One should safely assume that this was also the case during the first millenium b.c.e. That meeting between the Sanskrit epic and the many popular versions offers a fruitful area for analysis, particularly where devotional and cult practices are engaged. 'Scripture' has its 'folk' equivalents, representing continuities in the tradition from many points of view; and also, what it, because of its Sanskritic authority, generates. The 1980's film version of the Mahābhārata, in Hindi, only reinforces the vigour of such processes; see Mankekar, 1999, who studied the response to this television screening which lasted for more than two years and was watched by an excess of two hundred million viewers. Mishra, 1985, p.133, goes as far as to say that "Bombay Film legitimates its own existence through a re-inscription of its values into those of the *MBh*/*Rama*." That is, he believes that contemporary Bombay movies partake of "a form which is homologous with the narrative paradigm established over two millennia ago in the Sanskrit epics." Mishra draws upon the theories of Lord in his understanding of Bombay cinema. Perhaps what he is saying here, is that the epics continue to supply a system of *paideía* for India.

European tradition. The last word should go to V.S. Sukthankar, "As a rule, the variant readings, if they are not mere synonyms, convey a slightly different meaning, but almost always a possible meaning."[64]

[64] *Op. cit.*, p.98.

To quote from an entirely different perspective, but which offers us something comparable to the extraordinary range of such an long-lived oral tradition that encompasses the Mahābhārata: "If you slow down *Psycho* so that it lasts 24 hours, as Douglas Gordon did, the viewer can only glimpse a few frames of it, and its massive processes are, for the viewer, sunk into that immense stretch of time which he cannot observe ... [T]he point of it is the vast mass of movement which the viewer can only reconstruct in his imagination." Hensher, 1999, p.54.

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