

Fathers and Sons: Deconstructing Paternity and Engendering Literature

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The Story in the Sacrifice

Early in the narrative, after the introductory materials, in The Descent of the First Generations, the bard Ugraśravas tells Śaunaka:

In the pauses between the rites [of the *sarpasattra*] the brahmins told tales that rested on the *Veda*, but Vyāsa told the wondrous Epic, the grand *Bhārata*... Aye, I shall tell you that sublime grand tale, *The Mahābhārata*, as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana's mind contrived it, from the very beginning. (Mahābhārata 1.53.31, 35)¹

The bard begins his account by praising Vyāsa, but the narrative itself begins once Janamejaya requests Vyāsa to recount the Mahābhārata:

Sir, you have been a witness to the deeds of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas. I want you to tell me about their acts, brahmin. How did that Breach (*bheda*) arise between the men of untroubled deeds, and how did that great War come about, which was to be the destruction of the creatures... (Mahābhārata 1.54.18–19)

Vyāsa turns to his student Vaiśampāyana and instructs him: “tell him in full, as you have heard it from me how of old the Breach occurred between the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas” (Mahābhārata 1.54.22–23). Vaiśampāyana proceeds to narrate the “entire Epic,” which is clearly understood as being the story of the “Breach” (*sarvam itihāsam purātanam... bhedaṃ*; 1.54.23–24).

The Mahābhārata is narrated at a sacrifice, in the intervals of a sacrifice. Telling a story in the pauses of the sacrifice is a part of Vedic ritual praxis. What is important here is not how Vyāsa exploits these pauses to tell his own tale, but the importance of story telling itself. These are not random stories told to fill in the tedium of extended and multi-part rituals: an easy explanation that explains nothing. To give just one example, according to the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, at the *rājasūya* sacrifice, the king must ritually hear the story of Śunaśepa. The snake sacrifice is an unprecedented ritual and the *ākhyāna* is also unprecedented. Yet the careful setting of this narrative does not permit us ignore either the ritual as a mere literary device or the *bheda* narrative as mere history (such as the racial battle posited by Christian Lassen).

The War Narrative

Equally unprecedented is the “sacrifice” of the Kurukṣetra war, the *raṇayajña*. It would, again, be easy to dismiss this compound term as a metaphor. But characters in the epic seem to take the metaphor very seriously:

Duryodhana said:

I and Karna, father, have laid out the sacrifice of war and here we stand consecrated with Yudhiṣṭhira as the victim, bull of the Bharatas. This chariot is

¹ All references to the Mahābhārata are to its critical edition. All translations are van Buitenen's.

the altar, this sword the spoon, this club the ladle, this armor the *sadas*. My steeds are the four sacrificial priests, my arrows the *darbha* grass, my fame the oblation! Having offered up ourselves in war to Vaivasvata, O king, we shall triumphantly return, covered with glory, our enemies slain. (Mahābhārata 5.57.12–14)

Karṇa said:

Vārṣṇeya, the Dhārtarāṣṭra will hold a grand sacrifice of war. Of this sacrifice you shall be the Witness, Janārdana, and you shall be the Ardhvaryu priest at the ritual. The terrifier with the monkey standard stand girt as the Hotar; Gāṇḍīva will be the ladle; the bravery of men the sacrificial butter. The *aindra*, *pāśupata*, *brāhma*, and *sthūṇākarna* missiles will be the spells employed by the Left-handed Archer. Saubhadra, taking after his father, if not overtaking him in prowess, will act perfectly as the Grāvastut priest. Mighty Bhīma will be the Udgātar and Prastotar, that tigerlike man who with his roars on the battlefield finishes off an army of elephants. The eternal king, the law-spirited Yudhiṣṭhira, well versed in recitations and oblations will act as the Brahman. The sounds of conches, the drums, the kettledrums, and the piercing lion roars will be the Subrahmaṇyā invocation. Mādri's two sons Nakula and Sahadeva of great valor will fill the office of the Śamitar priest. The clean chariot spears with their spotted staffs will serve as sacrificial poles at this sacrifice, Janārdana. The eared arrows, hollow reeds, iron shafts and calf-tooth piles, and the javelins will be the Soma jars, and the bows the strainers. Swords will be the potsherds, skulls the Puroḍāśa cakes and blood will be oblation at this sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa. The spears and bright clubs will be the kindling and enclosing sticks; the pupils of Droṇa and Kṛpa Śāradvata the Sadasyas. The arrows shot by the Gāṇḍīva bowman, the great warriors, and Droṇa and his son will be the pillows. Sātyaki shall act as Pratiprasthātar, the Dhārtarāṣṭra as the sacrificer, his great army as the Wife. Mighty Ghaṭotkaca will be the Śamitar when this Overnight Sacrifice is spun out, strong-armed hero. Majestic Dhṛṣṭadyumna shall be the sacrificial fee when the fire rite takes place, he who was born from the fire.

The insults I heaped on the Pāṇḍavas, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the Left-handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the Fire of their sacrifice. When the Pāṇḍava drinks the blood of Duḥśāsana, bellowing his roar, it will be the Soma draught. When the two Pāñcālyas fell Droṇa and Bhīṣma, that will be the Conclusion of the sacrifice, Janārdana. When the mighty Bhīmasena kills Duryodhana, then the great sacrifice of the Dhārtarāṣṭra will end. The weeping of the gathered daughters-in-law and granddaughters-in-law, whose masters, sons, and protectors have been slain, with the mourning of Gāndhārī at the sacrificial site now teeming with dogs, vultures, and ospreys, will be the Final Bath of this sacrifice, Janārdana. May these barons, old in learning and days, O bull among barons, not die a useless death for your sake, Madhusūdana. Let the full circle of the baronage find their death by the sword on the Field of Kurus, holiest in all three worlds, Keśava. Ordain here, lotus-eyed Vārṣṇeya, what you desire, so that the baronage in its totality may ascend to heaven.

As long as the mountains will stand and the rivers flow, Janārdana, so long and forevermore shall last the sound of the flame of this war. Brahmins shall in their gatherings narrate the Great War of the Bhāratas, proclaiming the glory of the barons. Keśava, lead the Kaunteya to the battle, and keep this council of ours, secret, enemy-burner. (Mahābhārata 5.139.19–56)

It is true that the term *yajña* has a range of application in the epic. In the Gītā Kṛṣṇa lists many *yajñas* (Bhagavadgītā 4.24–32), and uses *yajña* to extol knowledge (of *Brahman*). He ends his enumeration with the words, “Thus, the various kinds of sacrifices lie spread at the mouth of the Vedas. Know them all to be born of action (*karmajān*). Knowing thus, you will become liberated” (Bhagavadgītā 4.33; Swami Gambhirananda trans.). But the remarks of Duryodhana and Karṇa display—despite their apparent knowledge of technical details—the dimmed wits of literalists. These characters are completely sold on the efficacy of sacrifice, which is understandable, but which specific sacrifice they refer to is hard to say. Most of the details have us believe that they are referring to a *somayajña* which is usually performed by Brāhmaṇas. There is one *somayajña* which is performed by Kṣatriyas, though. That is the *rājasūya*.

The Rājasūya Sacrifice

Reading the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa closely (esp. AB 34), Kolhatkar points out the tensions unleashed in the *rājasūya* sacrifice:

When a kṣatriya had to perform [a *śrauta*] sacrifice, he had to keep aside his *kṣatriyatva*—the differentiating qualities of a kṣatriya—and accept *brāhmaṇatva* which was necessary to for the performance of the sacrifice. Therefore, offerings like the *iṣṭāpūrtasyāparijyāni* and *ajitapunaravaṇya* offerings were introduced into the ritual of sacrifice. By offering these oblations before the consecration, the kṣatriya sacrificer announced that he thereby became a brāhmaṇa. . . . when a kṣatriya was consecrated for a sacrifice, the faculties of a kṣatriya in him were taken away from him by the deities of those faculties. But this was not all. Since the *brāhmaṇatva* of the kṣatriya sacrificer was only a temporary phase and that he wanted to be a kṣatriya again, it was necessary to reinstall the kṣatriya qualities and faculties in him. Therefore, the after-offerings also were prescribed, after performing which he got back his *kṣatriyatva*.²

Of course, this is the case of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, and other texts do not raise these complications: anyone consecrated for such a sacrifice is automatically considered a Brāhmaṇa without further ado. But the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa is critical to our interpretation because the switch of the Kṣatriya to a Brāhmaṇa (as in the case of Bhīṣma’s “renunciation”) and its contrary (as in the case of Droṇa’s taking up of arms) is absolutely essential to understanding how Vyāsa sets up the “war sacrifice”—a *bheda* which is at a deeper level a *raṇayajña* explicitly structured by the catastrophic consequences of the *rājasūya*.

Let me briefly digress to distance myself from the anti-intellectual banality of the “historical” perspective. It has led some individuals to opine thus:

² Madhavi B. Kolhatkar, *Surā, the Liquor, and the Vedic Sacrifice* (Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1999), 37.

A neat parallel to our scene is offered by the coronation of the kings of Great Britain. There is a martial episode that was inserted in that ancient rite at an early date. After the coronation service in the Westminster Abbey a banquet used to be held in the Westminster Hall. During the first course a champion rode into the hall on horseback and provoked all dissenters, and therefore possible challengers of the king, by throwing down the gauntlet; this he did three times (inspired by the three bans before marriage?). The king thereupon drank from the silver-gilt goblet, which he handed to the other in reward. It was an elaborate and appropriate episode. Its later history is enlightening: it was last done so in 1821; the banquet had fallen into desuetude. Henceforth the quondam champion was reduced to the office of bearing the standard of England. This function is even less revealing of its origin than the Vedic king's attack on a baron "somewhere north or east." Where the Vedic rite according to the manuals has once more been reduced, the epic dramatization has again expanded to an elaboration confrontation of the challenger with the kingmaker, and the threat of disruption of the consecration, and of war.³

Quot homines tot sententiae. Vedic manuals—indeed any deep insights—are not "reduced" or, to put it in other words, "sublated, superseded, fulfilled." The paradigms of development and degeneration are easy asylums for unthinking minds slipping on sophistic tongues. Texts are *interpreted*. Interpretations mean more than speculations about "*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*" This ends the digression into previous scholarship. We are on much firmer textual ground when we simply read what the interpretive tradition says. Janamejaya, in the Bhaviṣyaparvan of the Harivaṃśa asks Vyāsa:

The great Bhārata tale is great in import and great in extent, but it went by in what seemed to me like a moment, so good was it to listen to. With its profuse and magnificent stories, that tale truly confers glory upon everyone. It's as if when you put it together, brahmin, you were pouring milk into a conch shell. But just as one can never have enough nectar or enough of the joys of heaven, in the same way, although I've heard this Bhārata tale, I haven't heard enough of it. So, with the omniscient seer's permission, I have a question to ask, my lord.

In my opinion, the cause of the destruction of the Kurus was Yudhiṣṭhira's rājasūya rite. Since the unstoppable warrior-princes have come to ruin and grief, I suspect that the rājasūya was arranged in order to cause the war. For Soma is said to have performed a rājasūya once upon a time, at the end of which there was that great big war over Tārakā; and Varuṇa also performed one, and at the end of that great and grand rite there was a war of the gods and demons that caused the destruction of all creatures; and the royal seer Hariścandra also performed this rite, which annihilated the kṣatriya class. So as soon the noble Pāṇḍava also performed this formidable rite, the great war of the Bhāratas was stacked up like a bonfire.

³ J. A. B. van Buitenen, "Introduction," in J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2: *Book 2: The Book of Assembly; Book 3: The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 24–25.

But if the war that destroyed the world was rooted in the great rājasūya rite, then why wasn't that rite prevented? For the various aspects of the ritual are hard to accomplish successfully, and so if the rājasūya wasn't going to be prevented then the destruction of the people became inevitable as soon as one ritual aspect was done badly.

You yourself are the grandfather of all our forefathers, you know what's happened and what's yet to happen, you're our creator and our protector. So why did the man who was guiding those sensible people let them fall away from prudence, my lord? For it's when they're unprotected and poorly guided that people make mistakes. (Harivaṃśa 115.11–22; Brodbeck trans.)

The rājasūya then is not something of a prelude to the war narrative. The war narrative itself is an interpretation of the rājasūya, and, as this text demonstrates, it is a *critical* interpretation. As I aim to show, the critique is not just of the rājasūya, but of sacrifice in general. In the war narrative, a battle of sacrifice versus knowledge—that is to say, an *interpretation* of sacrifice—underlies the battle action. Or, to return to what is explicitly stated by the text, the *raṇa* is a *yajña*, and a *mīmāṃsā* of *yajña*.

Sacrifice: The Connection between Heaven and Violence

The purpose of sacrifice is the fulfillment of desires. The maximization of desire in this life is through wealth, power, and progeny, but beyond this life, heaven.⁴ The Vedic sacrificial perspective is extremely precise in its understanding of desire and the framework (*dharma*) within which it can be obtained with a minimum of undesired consequences. The commentator Sāyaṇa says:

Now what is this Veda, what is its definition, what are its subject matter, purpose...? A book which informs about the transcendent (*alaukika*) ways to achieve the *iṣṭa* (that which is desired) and avoid *aniṣṭa* (the unwanted) is called 'Veda.' By the word '*alaukika*,' *pratyakṣa* (direct perception) and *anumāna* (inference) are set aside. An *upāya* (measure) which is not known either by direct perception or by inference is known by this way; this is the sense of 'Veda.'⁵

The Mahābhārata grants the twofold nature of the *dharma* revealed by the Veda: *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. The purpose of the former is to ensure the proper functioning of the worlds by

⁴ Cf. Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 3.5.1: "Then Kahola, the son of Kuṣītaka, asked him. 'Yājñavalkya,' said he, 'explain to me the Brahman that is immediate and direct—the self that is within all.' 'This is your self that is within all.' 'Which is within all, Yājñavalkya?' 'That which transcends hunger and thirst, grief, delusion, decay and death. Knowing this very Self the Brāhmaṇas renounce the desire for sons, for wealth and for the worlds, and lead a mendicant life. That which is the desire for sons is the desire for wealth, and that which is the desire for wealth is the desire for the worlds, for both these are but desires. Therefore the knower of Brahman, having known all about scholarship, should try to live upon that strength which comes of knowledge; having known all about this strength as well as scholarship, he becomes meditative; having known all about born meditateness and its opposite, he becomes a knower of Brahman. How does that knower of Brahman behave? Howsoever he may behave, he is just such. Except this everything is perishable.' Thereupon Kahola, the son of Kuṣītaka, kept silent" (Swami Madhavananda tr

⁵ Sāyaṇa, *Bhāṣya Bhūmikā of the Taittirīya Samhitā of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*, in Saraswati Bali, *Sāyaṇa's Upodghāta to the Taittirīya Samhitā and the Ṛgveda Samhitā: Introduction, English Translation of the Text and Notes* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 1999), 33.

enjoining ethical means for fulfilment of desires, that is, the *upāya* for obtaining wealth, wife, sons, and heaven. This is the ontic, finite, and worldly *dharma*. The latter *dharma* is meant for renunciation and *mokṣa*, which is ontologic and in the form of knowledge of *Brahman*. An obvious confusion arises here: is heaven the goal or is it *mokṣa*? The confusion arises not merely out of our minds being turned outward,⁶ but because of manifest ease of imagining heaven and instinctually wanting it, rather than the difficulty of realizing the subtle Self noetically.

This debate between “heaven” which is achieved through *soma* sacrifices such as the *jyotiṣṭoma*, and *mokṣa* which is achieved through knowledge becomes the crux of commentaries on the Veda. Historians simply note the obvious and unthinkingly believe that there is a real contradiction here and that it can be “resolved” (whatever does that mean?) by positing different periods and textual layers. That may well be. But the Mahābhārata critical edition demonstrates (expansively) and the Gītā states axiomatically that both heaven and *mokṣa* are alternatives—the former achieved through sacrificial works and progeny, the latter through a philosophical pedagogic praxis: listening to the revelation about the unity of *Brahman* and *ātman*, cogitating on it until all doubts are resolved, becoming resolute in that knowledge and finally experiencing it.

All this is common knowledge. But what I wish to demonstrate here is that it is the much-dismissed perspective (“Vedāntic,” “Śāṅkarite,” etc.) that structures the entire epic. Not merely through some external features such as the settings of the frames, etc., but by a minute dissection of sacrificial logic itself. The critique is not that sacrifice is ineffective—to say that would be to falsify not only Hinduism but also Christianity.⁷

⁶ “The self-existent Lord pierced the senses outward. Therefore, one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes inward and then sees the indwelling Self. The unintelligent people (*bālāḥ*) follow external desires. They get entangled in the snares of the widespread death. Therefore, discriminating people (*dhīrāḥ*), having known what true immortality is in the midst of impermanent things, do not pray for anything here” (KaU 2.1.1–2; Swami Gambhirananda trans.; trans. modified).

⁷ I am enamored of “Catholic” interpretations of Christianity such as the Neoplatonism of St. Augustine, the Neo-Aristotelianism of St. Thomas, and the philosophical mysticism of Meister Eckhart. Indology inasmuch as it has lost its connection to philosophy thus becomes an “underhanded Christianity”—a phrase borrowed from Nietzsche. The full quotation from Nietzsche is from *Twilight of the Idols* § 6:

Fourth proposition. Any distinction between a “true” and an “apparent” world—whether in the Christian manner or in the manner of Kant (in the end, an underhanded Christian)—is only a suggestion of *décadence*, a symptom of the decline of life ... That the artist esteems appearance higher than reality is no objection to this proposition. For “appearance” in this case means reality once more, only by way of selection, reinforcement, and correction ... The tragic artist is no pessimist,—he is precisely the one who says Yes to everything questionable and terrible itself, he is Dionysian ...

In this quote lies the origin of my critique of the naïve realism of the Rankean historian. History is an appearance which is taken to be “real,” and real art (for example, the epic) is dismissed as an appearance of text-historical accidents. If the *history* of scholarship is seen as its reality, Mahābhārata studies followed a search for a historical war ever since Lassen pronounced it to be an Aryan race battle. This racial concern would be, in the historians own conception of “reality,” the reality of historicizing scholarship. *Not critiquing the historical method explicitly in every instance is therefore an ethical and epistemic flaw in any scholarly work that claims to be about the epic.* I confess I cannot do it at every instance. Instead, I practice (and it is difficult) reading texts anti-historically, that is, as art, and any “history” they possess is the history of texts in their traditions. Otherwise, it would be a case of lecturing Velasquez on the history of the

Rather, the critique of sacrifice is that it is finite, violent, fraught with danger, and that its results are ultimately undesirable. Thus, while the sacrificial portion of the Veda has a place in connecting ethical means to goals here, it does not answer our ultimate concern. So let us use a term *karmaṭa* for those who are intent solely on satisfying desires here and hereafter, and do not grant anything that transcends satisfaction of desires. For them, ethics is always a means to an end, and the end is always sons (in this life) and heaven (hereafter). For the *karmaṭas*, there is no *nivṛttidharma*; in fact, they see it as a mere eulogy of the sacrifice itself!

The Mahābhārata of course takes sides on this debate. It deconstructs the son-heaven axis of the *karmaṭa*'s interpretation of the Veda, by systematically “killing off” all sons and demonstrating the “instability” of heaven itself. All its denizens must be subject to conflict with the Asuras, even if they do not “fall” from heaven as Vasu, Yayāti, Nahuṣa, and others did. This “descent” from heaven en masse to fight the *devāsura* battle is the divine secret (*devarahasya*) which drives the epic action. The “war” is not at all a war in the literal sense; it is set up literarily as a war of the worlds (heaven included), on the one hand, and a “war” against the *karmaṭa* interpretation of the Veda, on the other. To analyze this, we need to clarify what we mean by immortality or salvation, be it celestial relocation or ontological reorientation.

The Many Forms of Salvation

Immortality (*amṛtatva*) can be spoken of in many ways:

1. *Poetic immortality* usually belongs to the hero who performs great and memorable deeds, whose undying glory is immortalized by the poet. In Greek Epic, it is called κλέος, whereas in Sanskrit is *śravas* or, *kīrti*.⁸ It is—in the literal sense—nominal immortality. This immortality is presented as heaven, a hero may reach it by falling in war, and remain there for as long as he is remembered.⁹
2. *Genealogical immortality* is the immortality one achieves through creating a son. If the genealogical lineage were to die out, then the preceding array of fathers and ancestors would vanish into oblivion.
3. *Gifted immortality*: One attains heaven through the fiat of a god whom one follows full of faith. But upon closer inspection, the “gift” is in fact a transaction, and thus involves sacrifice.
4. *Sacrificial immortality*: One can obtain heaven (*svarga, loka*) through sacrifices, routinely violent and requiring the destruction of a sacrificial victim, the best victim of course being one's own son. We will see this—at least in the Hindu context—in the narrative of Hariścandra, a narrative which forms a key component of the rājasūya. This is transactional immortality.

seventeenth-century Spanish court. Admittedly, historians do not always attempt to lecture Vyāsa on urbanization and “cows” in his time. But to attempt to produce histories contravened by the reception of texts comes a close second.

⁸ See Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 173 and 178.

⁹ See Marcel Detienne, *Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1999). Also see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, “From Poetic Immortality to Salvation: Ruru and Orpheus in Indic and Greek Myth,” *History of Religions* 51, no. 3 (2012): 239–61.

5. *Noetic immortality, mokṣa*, or salvation through knowledge or transcendence. The philosophical life prepares one for this goal.

We only need to read the Kāthopaniṣad to discover that the Upaniṣadic tradition is aware of (and thought through) the various kinds of immortality and the value of each type of salvation. With Naciketas's first wish, "O Death, of the three boons I ask this one as the first, namely that (my father) Gautama may become freed from anxiety, calm of mind, freed from anger towards me, and he may recognize me and talk to me when freed by you" (KaU 1.1.10; Swami Gambhirananda trans.),¹⁰ the text takes care of genealogical immortality. Faith had already entered Naciketas (KaU 1.1.2) and, kindly disposed towards him, the God Yama grants him the means of attaining heaven in which one can rejoice (*modate svargaloke*; KaU 1.12). The means of attaining heaven turns out to be a sacrifice, which Naciketas masters. Thus salvation granted by a god and salvation through sacrifice are addressed. Unmasked, Yama also grants poetic immortality: the sacrifice will henceforth bear the name of the brave Naciketas: "people will speak of this Fire as yours indeed" (*etam agniṃ tavaiva pravakṣyanti janāsas*; KaU 1.1.19). Finally, the fifth form of salvation is contained in Yama's ontological-pedagogical discourse on *Brahman*.

The Rājasūya Ritual

Although externally the rājasūya appears to be a secular political affair concerning kingship and sovereignty, it is not so. Heesterman writes:

In this light the rājasūya can be viewed as an abridged representation of the unending cyclical process of decay and regeneration. Though it seems that the rājasūya as known to us has been moulded into a ceremony performed once and for all, the fact that on some occasions its central feature, the regenerating unction, is spoken of in the brāhmaṇa texts as already performed, points to an original pattern of yearly repeated unction and regeneration ceremonies. Moreover, the regeneration motive is to be resumed once again after the conclusion of the rājasūya by the sautrāmaṇi sacrifice which also amounts to renewal and rebirth.

In the centre of the cyclical regenerations of the universe, set in motion and regulated by the ritual proceedings at the place of sacrifice, stands the king. When, standing with raised arms, he receives the unction, the king manifests himself as the cosmic pillar, the path between heaven and earth along which the fertilizing unction waters take their circular course from sky to earth and back again. The king is, however not only the centre and pivot of the universe, he is the universe itself; he has been seen to encompass, like the cosmic man Prajāpati, the universe in respect both to space and to time. He is not conceived of as a static image of the cosmic structure, he impersonates the cosmic tide of regeneration and decay.¹¹

¹⁰ śāntasaṅkalpaḥ sumanā yathā syād vītamanyur gautamo mābhi mṛtyo |
tvaṭprasṛṣṭam mābhivadet pratīta etat trayāṇām prathamam varam vṛṇe ||

¹¹ J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya Described according to the Yajus Texts and Annotated* ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1957), 223–4.

These remarks should disabuse us of the narrow way in which van Buitenen (cited earlier) interprets the rājasūya ritual. Moreover, it allows us to see the rājasūya as a whole cycle of the universe, a motif that underlies not only the *yuga* concept of circular temporality but also the circular composition of the text itself. It allows us to see the repetition of the rājasūya in the *raṇayajña*, and how the *raṇayajña* coheres with the *pralaya* motif. Heesterman is right in his interpretation of this sacrifice as an “*utsava*” rather than a coronation. Even before Yudhiṣṭhira, King Pāṇḍu also died unable to undertake the rājasūya, which is why he did not attain the heaven of Hariścandra. Even this detail echoes this *soma* sacrifice:

In the first place, there is Soma presiding over Somic festivals. These festivals are in themselves fully expressive of the cosmic kingship as outlined above, as their concern with the death and regeration of “king Soma” shows...On several occasions, especially at his proclamation, the king seems to be identified with King Soma. Also Varuṇa plays an important part...the king is identified as Varuṇa. ...attention is focused on Indra as the royal prototype with whom the king is identified. ...another trace of his pre-eminence can be observed in the equation of the rājasūya with the slaying of Vṛtra, Indra’s characteristic feat.If one could ask which is the deity presiding over the rājasūya, there can be only one answer: the king, who by virtue of the ritual realizes his inherent identity with the cosmos and its processes.¹²

Now that king-deity is Yama himself in the Mahābhārata! True that birth and death occur cyclically, but we emphasize natality foolishly, ignoring mortality. In the textual cosmos of the Mahābhārata, death is the king who undertakes the primordial sacrifice, not the Prajāpati.

Killing off the Son

Let us state the obvious: the hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are killed by the powerful Bhīmasena Pāṇḍava. All the sons of the Pāṇḍavas are killed—some in battle like Ghaṭotkaca and Abhimanyu—and many of the remaining ones in the night-time raid by Droṇa’s son, Aśvatthāman. No son survives. The exception is Parīkṣit, who is resurrected by the power of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. Vyāsa seems intent on keeping the appearance of a genealogy intact, while undermining it systematically. Bhīṣma will take a vow of celibacy; his seven older brothers are dispatched to heaven as soon as they are born. Despite Bhīṣma’s best efforts to keep the line going,¹³ it seems only the author can truly keep the line going through *niyoga*. Between Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana,¹⁴ the Kuru genealogy is “Kuru” in name only. Even if we grant that the death of all the latter day Kurus is a consequence of the war, it does explain the morbidity implied by *niyoga*. We need to ask pointedly: why is Vyāsa systematically deconstructing paternity?

¹² Ibid., 225.

¹³ Bhīṣma fetches the princesses of Kāśī for his stepbrother and when he hears of the super-fecund Gāndhārī he arranges her for his stepson Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

¹⁴ Vyāsa also divides and resurrects Gāndhārī’s aborted mass of flesh.

Let us take up the *karmaṭa* interpretation first by examining its textual basis. The textual tradition on which the Mahābhārata is drawing emphatically identifies the son with immortality: “you are the self called putra” (*ātmā vai putranāmāsi*; Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 14.9.4[26]); “Put is the name of hell full of several hundred sufferings, one who protects (his Father) from that (hell) is a son, that is why son has his so-called name” (*pun nāma narakam anekāśatatāram | tasmāt trātīti putras | tat putrasya putratvam* ||; Gopathabrāhmaṇa 1.1.2; Patyal trans.); “This world of men is to be won through the son alone, and by no other rite” (*so ’yaṃ manuṣyalokaḥ putreṇaiva jayyo nānyena karmaṇā*; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.5.16; Mādhavānanda trans.); “The Self-existent One has called him ‘son’ (*putra*) because he rescues (*trā*) his father from the hell named Put” (*puṣṇāmnō narakād yasmāt trāyate pītaram sutah | tasmāt putra iti proktaḥ svayam eva svayambhuvā* ||; Manusmṛti 9.138; Olivelle trans.). In the Mahābhārata, Draupadī reminds Bhīma: “When you guard your wife, offspring is protected, when the offspring is safe, the self is safe” (4.20.27).

Is Dhṛtarāṣṭra a *karmaṭa*? This is an easier question to answer, compared to whether Yudhiṣṭhira was. To answer it, let us take up the gambling scene. Both Yudhiṣṭhira’s loss at the dicing game and Vidura’s failure to teach Dhṛtarāṣṭra are Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s losses. Unlike Naciketas who had declined progeny and prosperity offered by Yama Dharmarāja, Dhṛtarāṣṭra has misinterpreted Yudhiṣṭhira Dharmarāja. The blind king not only misunderstands Naciketas but also his father Gautama, who “gave” his son to death. His *lokāyata* and *karmaṭa* interpretations of *putro vai ātmā* are shown to be fatally wrong. According to the *lokāyatas*, the son perpetuates progeny and property; but Dhṛtarāṣṭra loses both. According to *karmaṭas*, the son saves the father from hell and provides a higher world, *pitṛloka*, by offering *piṇḍas*. If Dhṛtarāṣṭra attains that goal, it would be through Yuyutsu, and the odds of that are one to a hundred sons. Throughout the epic, Upaniṣadic *mokṣa* is presented as the irrefutable truth at every possible event. Like Naciketas’s father, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s father Vyāsa gives away his Kṣatriya sons with detachment in *niyoga*. But Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not inherit his father’s wisdom, because his mother preferred to keep her eyes closed to the *ṛṣi*’s appearances. He inherited a maternal attachment to his son, unable to be the father who can teach his son *dharma*. Vyāsa himself appears and reprimands Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the topic of filial love and responsibility in Mahābhārata 3.9.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s Sacrifice

The *rājasūya*, a distinguished Vedic ritual, is an excellent opportunity for the Mahābhārata to investigate the limits of sacrifice. It is a *yajña* performed by a Kṣatriya. Without disturbing the claims of authority, or *pramāṇa* of the Veda, Vyāsa seizes upon the “switch” between the Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas to pursue his critique far away from the concerns of *pravṛtidharma*. The critique he launches is also Vedic, of course, but from the perspective of the Forest Books and Upaniṣads. That critique should be understood not as “de-construction.” It should be understood in the strictest sense of the Greek word *krinein*, which means to separate. Separate what? *Pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti dharmas* in their relation to each other. The former is necessary for the latter, but it is an incomplete goal fraught with grief and repeated births. Yudhiṣṭhira *chose* the *lokas*. Pay close attention to Nārada working hand-in-glove with Vyāsa in the Sabhāparvan. Nārada *put* the idea of Hariścandra in Yudhiṣṭhira’s head in response to the king’s desire to listen

to an account of various *sabhās* and *lokas*. Yudhiṣṭhira *chose* to do the rājasūya. Vāsudeva *arranges* for Yudhiṣṭhira to get the result of the *yajña* because he is the *yajña-phala-dāta*. Nārada *returns* to witness the *yajña* to witness Vyāsa’s careful interpretation of the sacrificial order. Let us read that section:

On the day of the Unction the brahmins and the kings made their entrance into the inner sacrificial enclosure. In order to pay their homage, the great seers, led by Nārada, seated themselves at the altar of the great spirited king and shone there with royal seers: like gods and divine seers assembled in the palace of Brahmā they attended one rite after the other, and boundlessly superior, discussed it: “This is right.” “No, not that way!” “So, and in no other way!” Thus they spoke in their multitude and argued with one another. Some made lean matters seem fat, others made fat ones lean with arguments that are definitively set forth in the textbooks. Some sagacious debaters tore apart the conclusions completed by others, as vultures tear apart a piece of raw meat thrown in the air. Others, great in their vows and chief experts in all Vedas, took pleasure in relating tales that were informed by Law and Profit. The sacrificial terrain, crowded by Gods, brahmins and great seers, wise in the Veda appeared like the unclouded sky with its asterisms. No *śūdra* nor anyone without vows was near the inner altar at Yudhiṣṭhira’s habitation. (Mahābhārata 2.33.1–9)

This passage marks the begin of the rājasūya ritual. How strange, then, to describe a solemn occasion as a raucous, sophistic crowd! Experts arguing with each other! Have rituals become obscure because of *dharma*’s decline? Or, is the apparent decline in understanding the rituals an opportunity to go beyond them? The comparison with vultures tearing up meat is a surprising image to draw at the sacrificial ritual. Do not the texts tell us that the violence in a *yajña* is not violence? King Vasu, the inceptor of the Kuru cycle, is Vyāsa’s maternal grandfather. He is given a chariot in the Ādiparvan by Indra, who turns him away from *nivṛtti* to *pravṛtti*.¹⁵ In Book 12, Vyāsa shows Vasu falling from the sky into a crevice in the earth because Vasu had sided with the sacrificial logic as opposed to *nivṛtti* and had spoken in favor of the violence of animal sacrifice in *yajña*. Fully accepting the authority of the Veda, Vyāsa is pointing to the obscurity of the rituals and the sophistry of the interpreters, the violence of sacrifice, and the problem of desire in the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school. Here too, he is only working out the Vedāntic possibility of the teaching of the Upaniṣad. He is asking, “*taṃ tvaupaniṣadaṃ puruṣaṃ pṛcchāmi*” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. 3.9.26). But by revealing that Puruṣa as Bhagavān Vāsudeva, Vyāsa is presenting *smārta karmas* as efficacious in both *dharmas*—*pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. We see how Nārada, Kṛṣṇa, and Vyāsa are working together. The rājasūya is a *yajña* performed by the Kṣatriya Yudhiṣṭhira. The *raṇa* is the continuation of the rājasūya; in no other way can we identify the war with a Vedic *yajña*. And in that *raṇayajña* Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is saying what Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana is saying here:

O son of Pṛtha, those undiscerning people who utter this flowery talk which promises birth as a result of rites and duties, and is full of various special rites

¹⁵ See my “Vasu(s) in the Mahābhārata,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth Dubrovnik International Sanskrit Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas* (forthcoming).

meant for the attainment of enjoyment and affluence, they remain engrossed in the utterances of the Vedas and declare that nothing else exists; their minds are full of desires and they have heaven as the goal.

One-pointed conviction does not become established in the minds of those who delight in enjoyment and affluence, and whose intellects are carried away by that (speech). (Bhagavadgītā 2.42–44; Swami Gambhirananda trans.)¹⁶

This critique of *yajña* from the perspective of *mokṣa* is powerfully presented in the Muṇḍakopaniṣad:

7. The eighteen persons necessary for the performance of sacrifice are transitory and not permanent and *karma* in its nature inferior, has been stated as resting upon these. Those ignorant persons who delight in this, as leading to bliss, again fall into decay and death.

8. Being in the midst of ignorance and thinking in their own minds that they are intelligent and learned, the ignorant wander, afflicted with troubles, like the blind led by the blind.

9. The ignorant following the diverse ways of ignorance, flatter themselves that their objects have been accomplished. As these followers of *karma* do not learn the truth owing to their desire, they grow miserable and after the fruits of their *karma* are consumed, fall from Heaven.

10. These ignorant men regarding sacrificial and charitable acts as most important, do not know any other help to bliss; having enjoyed in the heights of Heaven the abode of pleasures, they enter again into this or even inferior world (*lokān*).

11. But they who perform *tapas* and *śraddha* in the forest, having a control over their senses, learned and living the life of a mendicant, go through the orb of the sun, their good and bad deeds consumed, to where the immortal and undecaying Puruṣa is. (MuU 2.7.7–11; Swami Gambhirananda trans.)

What is “missing” in the Mahābhārata passage cited previously is equally important. Let us read again the line: “Others, great in their vows and chief experts in all Vedas, took pleasure in relating tales that were informed by Law and Profit.” What about *mokṣa*? Recall the ritual injunction that the king performing *rājasūya* should hear the story of Śunaḥśepa, the story about a child who was to be a sacrificial victim, who was saved from that sacrifice. This story is *not* told in the epic’s version of the *rājasūya*.

The Legend of Śunaḥśepa

The legend of Hariścandra and Śunaḥśepa occurs in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa. The R̥gvedic corpus contains two Brāhmaṇas (Aitareya and Kauṣītaki or Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇas), two Āraṇyakas (Aitareya and Kauṣītaki or Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyakas) and two Upaniṣads

¹⁶ yāmimāṃ puṣpitāṃ vācaṃ pravadyantavyapaścitaḥ |
vedavādaratāḥ pārtha nānyadastīti vādinaḥ ||
kāmatmānaḥ svargaparā janmakarmaphalapradāṃ |
kriyāviśeṣabahulāṃ bhogaiśvaryagatiṃ prati ||
bhogaiśvaryaprasaktānāṃ tayāpahrtacetāsāṃ |
vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ samādhau na vidhīyate ||

(Aitareya and Kauṣītaki Upaniṣads). Let us first consider the questions of chronology and history. Keith believes that, “The *Aitareya* will then stand as one of the oldest of the Brāhmaṇas, and doubtless it is older than the *Jaiminīya* and *Śatapatha*.”¹⁷ Chronologies, it must be borne in mind, depend on the date of Buddha’s death, supplemented by text-historical speculations such as the first mention of a significant word or concept. Scholars place these texts “before the period of Buddha and probably not later than 600 B.C.”¹⁸ The presence of the concept of *punarmṛtyu* in the Kauṣītaki (25.1) is explained by holding that this is a “younger” text, and the section might be “later.”¹⁹ For the purposes of this paper, I will neither affirm nor contest these dates. As for the socio-political and cultural backgrounds derived from the texts, let us also accept Keith’s statements.

There is abundant evidence of the milieu which produced the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*: it was that of the Bharatas in the middle country, and a time when the fame of Janamejaya was at its height. The Bharatas, the Kuru-Pañcālas with the Vaśas and the Uśīnaras are the inhabitants of the middle country and we hear of the raids of the Bharatas upon the Satvants and the custom of their cattle, and their practice in ritual matters, as all authoritative. We are told of the consecration of Bharata Dauṣanti (vii.22), but the great king is Janamejaya Pārikṣita and his priest is Tura Kāveśya, who anointed him (viii.21), who proclaimed to him the proper drink at the royal consecration (vii. 34), who talked with him on the nature of pasturage (iv. 27)... Now the period of Janamejaya is doubtless that of the close of the earlier Vedic period if the Samhitās, and thus accords well with the position he holds in the *Aitareya*.²⁰

Now let us turn to the Śunaḥśepa narrative in the *Aitareya*. Along with the rājasūya, it occurs in the seventh Pañcikā. Based on a comparison with Kauṣītaki and on the assumption that “the Soma sacrifice is the real theme of the text, and anything that does not concern that sacrifice and has no parallel in the *Kauṣītaki* is certainly suspect,” Keith draws the following conclusion:

This at once leads us to regard as later such parts of the Pañcikās vii and viii, which deal in the main with anointing of the king at the royal consecration and the drink ascribed to him in the place of the Soma, reserved for the priests. The chapters which deal with the rite commence with the legend of Śunaḥśepa (vii.13–18) which is appropriate because it is recited to the king after his anointing, then it is elaborately proved (vii.19–26) that the royal power is dependent on the priestly power and that the king must not drink the Soma... The whole passage is full of a spirit of Brahmānical self-assertion, which is at any rate not prominent in the rest of *Aitareya*, and it is also marked by the important part played by Janamejaya, who is mentioned in vii.27.34; viii.11.21, and whose pre-eminence in the eyes of the composer is perfectly obvious... The account of the

¹⁷ Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas: The Aitareya and Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas of the Rigveda* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44. Cf. also Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxxvi–xxxvii.

¹⁹ Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas*, 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

consecration, it should be noted, has really nothing parallel in the other texts dealing with the subject, but the ascription of the great consecration of Indra to certain kings is parallel to the description in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* of the Aśvamedha as performed by these kings. The whole rite stands in no relation to the *Brāhmaṇa* as a whole.²¹

But the consistency argument is flawed, there could be alternative interpretations—and I know of at least one—which beautifully explain the rationale for connecting the “king’s drink” and the *soma* drink.²² With these comments on the text, let us turn to the story itself.

The Śunaḥśepa story is as follows. Hariścandra Vaidhasa Aikṣvaka had a hundred wives but no son. He asked Nārada, “Since now men desire a son, both those that have and those that have not knowledge, what does a man gain by a son?” Nārada gives an elaborate reply in ten verses. His argument can be broken down into five points:

1. Having a son repays an ancestral debt, “by means of a son have fathers ever passed over the deep darkness,” or sorrow here and hereafter (because a son offers *piṇḍas*), as Sāyaṇa glosses.
2. The man is reborn as his son, “The father entereth the wife, having become a germ (he entereth) the mother, in her becoming renewed, he is born in the tenth month.”
3. A son is a means to heaven, “a sonless one cannot attain heaven,” and the son is “a light in the highest heaven.”
4. A contrast with renunciatory practices: the son is “(a ship), well-founded, to ferry over. What is the use of dirt, what of goat-skin? What of long hair, and what of fervor?” Nārada qualifies this statement by saying, “seek a son, O Brahmins, this is the world’s unspeakable advice.” The gods, too, participate in this view; about the wife, identified with *mahātejas* or Great Brilliance, they say, “This is your mother again.”
5. This is the knowledge of beasts, too. Nārada ends his response ambiguously pointing to the bestial nature of this path. “All the beasts know this; therefore [among beasts] a son his mother and his sister mounteth. This is the broad and auspicious path along which men with sons fare free from sorrow; on it beasts and herds gaze, for it they unite even with a mother.”

Nārada then advises Hariścandra, “have recourse to Varuṇa, the king, (saying) ‘Let a son be born to me; with him let me sacrifice to thee.’” The comment is puzzling, to say the least. On the face of it, it seems to strike down the ritualist, materialist, and bestial reasons for having a son that Nārada had elaborated in his lengthy *daśaka*. The rest of the story works out the logic of Hariścandra’s sacrificial transaction with Varuṇa. Hariścandra propitiates Varuṇa with the words, “Let a son be born to me; with him let me sacrifice to thee.” Varuṇa is compliant and accepts Hariścandra’s terms. Note that the god himself had not demanded the sacrifice; he merely accepted the terms proposed to him. Hariścandra obtains a son called Rohita. Now Varuṇa demands that the Hariścandra keep

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² See Kolhatkar, *Surā, the Liquor, and the Vedic Sacrifice on the sautrāmaṇi*.

his word. He says to him, “a son hath been born to thee; sacrifice to me with him.” But Hariścandra dithers. He says his son will be fit for sacrifice when he is ten days old, then again when he has teeth, then again when his teeth fall off, then again when he gets his second set of teeth, then again when he has become fit to bear arms. Noticeably, in each case the god Varuṇa patiently complies. Finally, Hariścandra confronts his son with the intention to sacrifice him. Refusing to be a victim, Rohita takes up his bow and wanders in the wild.

Hariścandra, meanwhile, pays the price for not keeping his word. Ironically, he suffers from a swollen belly, an ailment that resembles pregnancy. Varuṇa, it seems, is not without a sense of humor. Rohita hears about his father’s ailment and tries to return “from the wild to the village.” But assuming a human form Indra dissuades him and bids him to wander. Ironically again, the son is beset with a life of wandering in the forest, the very thing the “world’s advice” sought to avert. For five years Rohita wandered; each year Indra prevented him from returning with eulogies to wandering. At the end of the fourth year, for example, Indra says, “Kali he becometh who lieth, Dvāpara when he riseth, Tretā when he standeth erect and Kṛta when he moveth.”²³

Finally, in the sixth year, Rohita finds a Brāhmaṇa called Ajīgarta Sauyavasi, who lived hungry in the wild with three sons. Intending to find a substitute victim for the sacrifice—thus saving his father from his affliction—Rohita offers a hundred (cows) for one of Ajīgarta’s sons. The wretched father said, “not this one,” and kept the eldest, while the mother, similarly, protected the youngest. The middle one, Śunaḥśepa, is ransomed, and bringing him to his father, Rohita said, “O father dear, come, let me redeem myself with his one.” Hariścandra consults Varuṇa about the substitution of the victim. Once again, the ever-compliant Varuṇa says, “be it so.” Varuṇa, who thus far has said nothing more than accept Hariścandra’s contract, now volunteers an opinion by adding: “be it so, a Brahman is higher than a Kṣatriya.” The rite in which Śunaḥśepa is to be the sacrificial victim is the rājasūya.

Four priests officiated at this sacrifice. Viśvāmitra was the *hotṛ*, Jamadagni was the *adhvaryu*, Vasiṣṭha was the *brahman* and the Ayāsyā was the *ugdātr* priest. But no one was willing to bind Śunaḥśepa as the victim. The wretched Ajīgarta, the father, offers to do it for another hundred, and slaughter his ransomed son for another hundred. Śunaḥśepa was bound, and Ajīgarta, whetting his knife, approached him. Śunaḥśepa understood the deadly logic of the bestial ways, but a man is not an animal after all! “Like one that is not a man, they will slaughter me; come, let me have recourse to the deities.” With specific verses from the R̥gveda, he propitiated in order Prajāpati, Agni, Savitr̥, Varuṇa, Agni again, Viśvedevas, Indra, Aśvins, and Uśas. Each verse released a bond binding Śunaḥśepa, each verse caused his father’s belly to become smaller. The

²³ Martin Haug in his translation of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa says: “Sāy. [Sāyaṇa] does not give any explanation of this important passage, where the names of the Yugas are mentioned for the first time. These four names are, as is well known from other sources (see the Sanscrit Dictionary by Boehtlingk and Roth, s.v. *kali*, *dvāpara*, &c..) names of dice, used at gambling. The meaning of this Gāthā is, There is every success to be hoped; for the unluckiest die, the Kali, is lying, two others are slowly moving and half fallen, but the luckiest, the Kṛta, is in full motion, the position of dice given here is indicative of a fair chance of winning the game.” One of the items of text-historical dogmas is the idea that the “yuga theory is very late,” or at least “later.” The Mahābhārata now questions this view: the yuga scheme does not appear a “later interpolation.” Martin Haug, *The Aitareya Brahman of the Rigveda*, vol. 2 (Bombay: Government Central Book Depot; London: Trübner and Co., 1863), 464, n. 8.

priests asked Śunaḥśepa to device the rite for the day. Varuṇa evidently does not insist on a victim and is appeased by Śunaḥśepa's recitations. By knowing how to approach the gods and transact with them, the intelligent boy saved himself, the rite, and a father... only it was not his biological father Ajīgarta but Hariścandra. So where do we stand on the "world's advice" on paternity? Śunaḥśepa votes against biological parentage. Choosing the *hotṛ* priest Viśvāmitra as his father, Śunaḥśepa sits in his lap. Seeing this, Ajīgarta has a change of mind and wants his son back. He calls out to his son, "O seer, thine ancestral line abandon not, return to me." Śunaḥśepa refuses, saying, "Three hundreds of kine didst thou, o Aṅgiras, prefer to me." Ajīgarta expresses remorse, Śunaḥśepa does not relent, Viśvāmitra intervenes and adopts Śunaḥśepa. Twice Śunaḥśepa calls his father a *sūdra* for his wickedness, and addresses Viśvāmitra as "son of a king." Kolhatkar's thesis that what is at stake here is the ambiguity of the royal and sacerdotal functions throws light on these well-structured "confusions."

The narrative returns to the topic of sons. Unlike Hariścandra who had a hundred wives and no son, Viśvāmitra has a hundred and one sons: fifty older than the middle one called Madhucandas, and fifty younger than him. When their father adopts Śunaḥśepa as the oldest son and first in line for the inheritance, the older fifty protest and are cursed by the father. Madhucandas and the other fifty sons accept Viśvāmitra's decision and earn their father's blessings. These blessings seem to laud Kṣatriya qualities: "O my sons, rich in cattle and with heroic offspring, hall ye be, who, accepting my will, have made me possessed of heroic (*vīravantaḥ*) offspring."

Śiśupāla in the Mahābhārata

The Mahābhārata knows the legend of Śunaḥśepa, although as the son of Ṛcīka. Ajīgarta is never mentioned in the epic.

Śunaḥśepa, the son of Ṛcīka and of great austerities, was liberated from the terrible sacrifice where he met the fate of becoming a sacrificial animal. Having pleased the gods in Hariścandra's sacrifice with his brilliance, he became the intelligent Viśvāmitra's son. (Mahābhārata 13.3.6–7)²⁴

Beyond this passing reference, the story of Śunaḥśepa is never told. When the epic tells the story of a father who wishes to sacrifice his son, it is not Hariścandra but King Somaka. As for Hariścandra is mentioned only one other time in passing:

You have heard that the great king Hariścandra, having performed sacrifices earned merit and overcame sorrow. Being a (mere) man, he surpassed Indra with his prosperity. Therefore, everything should be offered in sacrifice. (Mahābhārata 12.20.14)²⁵

²⁴ ṛcīkasyātmajaś caiva śunaḥśepo mahātapāḥ |
vimokṣito mahāsatrāt paśutām abhyupāgataḥ ||
hariścandrakratau devāms toṣayitvātmatejasā |
putratām anusarṁprāpto viśvāmitrasya dhīmataḥ ||

²⁵ hariścandraḥ pārthivendraḥ śrutās te; yajñair iṣṭvā puṇyakṛd vītaśokaḥ |
rddhyā śakraṁ yo 'jayan mānuṣaḥ saṁs; tasmād yajñe sarvam evopayojyam ||

Let us see what story *is* told in Yudhiṣṭhira’s rājasūya, though. It is the story of the death of Śiśupāla. Bhīṣma takes the time to describe in detail the childhood of the Cedī prince. When he was born, he was misshapen and brayed like an ass. His mother and father decided to cast him out. A disembodied voice told his father, “King, he is born your son, illustrious and powerful, therefore be not afraid of him, but guard your child anxiously” (Mahābhārata 2.40.5). The voice further predicted that the one who restores the proper appearance of the child would also be his death. Later, when the queen placed her son in Kṛṣṇa’s lap, his appearance was restored. The anxious mother, Kṛṣṇa’s aunt, knew that Janārdana would kill her son. To assuage her, Kṛṣṇa promised, “I shall forsooth forgive a hundred derelictions of your son, paternal aunt, even though they may be capital offenses. Do not sorrow” (2.40.22). But when the emboldened Śiśupāla overreached his transgressions in the rājasūya, Kṛṣṇa cut his head off with a discus. Curiously—and this is an amazing turn of events—Śiśupāla is liberated. “Thereupon the kings watched a sublime radiance rise forth from the body of the king of Cedī, which, great king, was like the sun rising up from the sky; and that radiance greeted the lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa, honored by the world, and entered him, O king” (2.42.22–23). Śiśupāla inaugurates the famous motif of *vairi-bhakti*, of which the Bhāgavata speaks sufficiently. What concerns us here is the way a Vedic *yajña* is presented, and how that presentation is an interpretation. Indeed, head and shoulders above all the expert squabble, the feat accomplished by the two Kṛṣṇas—*ṛṣi* and God—forms the *bhakti* praxis and *itihāsapurāṇa* narrative that won out in Hinduism.

What if we postulate as a thought experiment: is the Śiśupāla narrative presented in the place of the Śunaḥśepa narrative? What follows is not an interpretation of the Śunaḥśepa in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, but of a specific understanding of it in *this* context of the Mahābhārata. Here, there are echoes. One character was born deformed and brayed like an ass; the other is named after a dog’s tail, which is known for not being straight. Both are betrayed by their parents. Both end up in the place of the *yajñapaśu* or the sacrificial animal. Both inhabit the domain of the rājasūya. Motifs like sitting on the lap of Viśvāmitra to be saved from the sacrifice and sitting in Dāmodara’s lap to attain *mokṣa* are important clues; as are the hundred fetters which become undone and the hundred transgressions which fail to bind. Śunaḥśepa is released in the last moment by *ṛk* mantras and is adopted into a new family line with a hoary ancestry. But Śiśupāla is saved in an entirely different way. He fulfills, on the one hand, his function as the *yajñapaśu* all too well—magnifying and humanizing the sacrificial victim; on the other, he attains something infinite, a state that can never be achieved through any *yajña*. By replacing the Śunaḥśepa narrative with the Śiśupāla narrative, Vyāsa replaces the *pitṛloka* with that which is beyond all *lokas*, *mokṣa*. After all, the “substitution” itself is contained in the Śunaḥśepa narrative: Śunaḥśepa himself is a substitute for Rohita. Yudhiṣṭhira and the other kings see the light of Śiśupāla enter Kṛṣṇa. And yet they do not *see* it. They neither see the peril of the sovereignty granted by the *yajña* nor do they see the *mokṣa* that could have been theirs. That is the blindness of *kāmyakarma*.

The relationship of people to narratives is the opposite of how the historical method thinks. Stories are not made up by unthinking people stitching scraps from here and there. People appear to enact and narrate stories and then people disappear. Stories are neither made nor destroyed: they manifest in the deepest intellect of *ṛṣis*. Humans only remember or forget, interpret and understand or misunderstand them, celebrate or

critique them. Let us return to the Yudhiṣṭhira’s rājasūya. What do we see? We see the *yajña*:

Its disruptions appeased, its undertaking joyous, its properties and grains abounding, rich in food-stuffs, with plentiful eatables, it was well-guarded with Keśava. Janārdana of the strong arms brought the grand sacrifice of the Royal Consecration to its end: the blessed Śauri, who wields bow, discus, and club, stood guard over it. (Mahābhārata 2.42.33–34)

And in the next verse he undergoes the ceremonial *avabhṛta* bath (Mahābhārata 2.42.35). When Kṛṣṇa prepares to leave, Yudhiṣṭhira is most grateful: “It is by your grace, Govinda, that I have attained to the rite. By your grace that the entire royal baronage came under my sway and attended on me, bringing rich tribute” (2.42.47–48). Kṛṣṇa understands very well. Giving this *bharatarṣabha* his *karmaphala*, Kṛṣṇa the protector of the *yajña* departs. He will await the other *bharatarṣabha*; the one who is the best (*pāla*) among students, *śiśus*. At the end of the Ādiparvan, Kṛṣṇa had chosen eternal friendship with Arjuna. And in the Bhagavadgītā, Pārtha reciprocates and chooses Kṛṣṇa as his teacher.

The word Hariścandra stands for Prajāpati,²⁶ and Śunaḥśepa attains the worlds of the gods and *pitṛs*; his is a temporary immortality within *yajña*, whereas Śiśupāla goes beyond the domain of sacrifices to an identification with Puruṣa. This distinction between the two stories I am arguing here is consonant with the Bhāgavatapurāṇa:

31. Śunaḥśepa, being the middle son of his parents, was sold by them to Hariścandra’s son as a sacrificial victim for Hariścandra’s *yajña*. But he was saved by his prayers to Devas and Prajāpatis as directed by Viśvāmitra.
32. This Śunaḥśepa, who was saved from immolation in the *yajña* by the Devas, though belonging by birth to the line of Bhṛgu, became a famous ascetic among the descendants of Gādhi because of his being adopted by Viśvāmitra (the son of Gādhi). He came to be well known under the name of Devarāta. (BP 9.16.31–32; Swami Tapasyananda trans.; trans. modified)²⁷

Yudhiṣṭhira the *karmakāṇḍin* has a lengthy education in the forest awaiting him. For the moment he is a *bāla* (see Śaṅkara’s commentary on Bhagavadgītā 5.4). Verses 42.45–60 describe Kṛṣṇa’s departure. They are ironically long for the departure of the ubiquitous Self, but they are also *meaningfully* long, because the author wishes to show the subsequent events are a function of the fruit of the *yajña*, not of Kṛṣṇa. What needs to be shown is the impermanence of the fruit of sacrifices.

²⁶ The word “Hariścandra” occurs in a Soma-pavamāna of the Rgveda:

pavamānasya jaṅghnato hariścandrā aṣṭṣata |
jīrā ajiraśociṣaḥ ||
Best rider of the chariot, praised with fairest praise mid beauteous ones,
Gold-gleaming with the Marut host (RV 9.66.26; Griffith trans.)

²⁷ I contrast the term Devarāta to Viṣṇurāta, the title given to Parīkṣit (BP 1.19.29) and Brahmarāta, a title given to Śuka.

Those who are versed in the Vedas, who are drinkers of Soma and are purified of sin, pray for the heavenly goal by worshipping Me through sacrifices. Having reached the place (world) of the king of gods, which is the result of righteousness, they enjoy in heaven the divine pleasure of gods.

After having enjoyed that vast heavenly world, they enter into the human world on the exhaustion of their merit. Thus, those who follow the rites and duties prescribed in the three Vedas, and are desirous of pleasures, attain the state of going and returning. (Bhagavadgītā 9.20–21; Swami Gambhirananda trans.)

The Extent of the Rājasūya

The rājasūya theme begins early in the Book 2 of the epic. Four events guide the entire Sabhāparvan:

1. Maya builds a *sabhā* for Yudhiṣṭhira as a favor for Arjuna who had spared his life. Yudhiṣṭhira makes the hall his throne-room for ruling Indraprastha.
2. Nārada arrives, and questions Yudhiṣṭhira on kingly policy. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Nārada to describe all the *lokas* he had visited. Nārada describes them, and mentions that the highest *loka* was not available to Pāṇḍu, Yudhiṣṭhira's father. The reason: he did not perform the rājasūya sacrifice as Hariścandra did.
3. Yudhiṣṭhira is eager to perform the sacrifice for the sake of securing heaven for his father. He takes Kṛṣṇa's counsel, and thereafter also his help to have Jarāsaṃdha killed. When Śiṣupāla attempts to disrupt the rājasūya, he again resorts to Kṛṣṇa to kill the Cedī prince and protect the sacrifice.
4. As a component of the sacrifice, and out of a desire to trick the Pāṇḍavas, Dhṛtarāṣṭra invites them to a dicing game. The Pāṇḍavas lose the game and are forced into twelve years of exile and one year of living incognito. It is during the dicing game that Draupadī is humiliated in court. The Pāṇḍava heroes, especially Bhīma, take his horrific vows to avenge her.

The question of when the rājasūya theme ends is not as clear. One obvious *terminus ad quem* is the exile of the Pāṇḍavas into the forest. After all, it neatly ends the sovereignty and the royal ritual of Yudhiṣṭhira. That would leave the *raṇayajña* as a separate sacrifice, a metaphorical one. The plot of the story, however connects the loss in the first round with the war in the second round. This second round, then, metaphorical though it appears, is a repetition of the rājasūya. Thus, the theme of rājasūya extends upto the (re) consecration of Yudhiṣṭhira after the war, and it includes the war narrative in the form of *raṇayajña*. But even this new *terminus ad quem* does not put the rājasūya theme to rest. The Mahābhārata does not forget to tie up the loose-end in the last *parvan*: In the Svargārohaṇaparvan, when the *dharma* king ascends to heaven, he is led to the highest realm, the one he had craved and sacrificed for on behalf of his father (and himself), namely the heaven won through the rājasūya sacrifice:

rājasūyajitām̐ lokān aśvamedhābhivardhitān |
prāpnuhi tvam mahābāho tapasaś ca phalaṃ mahat ||
upary upari rājñām̐ hi tava lokā yudhiṣṭhira |

hariścandrasamāḥ pārtha yeṣu tvam vihariṣyasi || (Mahābhārata 18.3.23–24)

This attainment of heaven is the fruit of the rājasūya sacrifice when it succeeds (“higher and higher than those of the kings are your worlds, Yudhiṣṭhira”—the fruit won by rājasūya), and when it fails, we have a repetition of the sacrifice as *raṇayajña*. The theme of the rājasūya sacrifice, that is, the *soma* sacrifice meant for attainment of heaven forms a continuous theme in the epic narrative. The Śunaḥśepa story is not forgotten either. The epic transforms the story into a critique and narrates it to Yudhiṣṭhira in the forest as the story of Jantu. Hariścandra is replaced by King Somaka (no surprise there), and the hundred sons of Viśvāmitra in relation to the one Śunaḥśepa is also echoed in Somaka wishing to sacrifice his one son out of a desire for a hundred sons. Except, unlike the Śunaḥśepa of Aitareya, the message has been amplified to fit the critique of performing violent sacrifices for the sake of attaining *lokas*.

The Architecture of Sacrifice

We now see how the rājasūya, a *soma* sacrifice, stands as a model for the dynamics of *pravṛtti*, driven by the desire for sons and heavens. Yudhiṣṭhira undertakes it, and in round one, he fails to grasp the violence, danger, and ultimate futility of sacrifice for heaven. At this level, he fulfils his function on behalf of the gods in the *devāsura* battle. Once Kṛṣṇa leaves the sacrifice, the consequences of the sacrifice follow. The fruit is ephemeral. Yudhiṣṭhira is not supposed to lose at the gambling match, but he does. And the fact that with the heavens, he *also* loses his sons is demonstrated by Draupadī: she begins menstruating, a phenomenon signaling her failure to conceive. The textual fact that she is menstruating when brought to court is significant. To be sure it serves to trigger the reader’s outrage: it sets up the expectations of a *tisis* (vengeance) narrative.

But when we look more closely at the epic, these expectations are frustrated, because, although the Mahābhārata is aware of transactions that are significant for ethics such as gift-giving and guest hospitality, on the one hand, and recklessness, violation, and retribution, on the other, we already see a temporal unevenness even within this. For example, guest hospitality is demonstrated in the narrative “present,” gift-giving immediately after. But retribution in the form of Bhīma’s revenge on the Kauravas for humiliating his wife Draupadī is a long way off, more than thirteen years after the offense. From Bhīma’s perspective, the *tisis* narrative holds. He had vowed to kill the hundred Kauravas, and he does. But in a long intervening period, his anger is barely contained, and erupts occasionally. What is the narrative significance of the delay? It is hardly a matter of “waiting to cool down” before acting, because the “cooling period” of *śānti* only occurs after the war. Narratively, the space of twelve years is filled by the exile in the forest, allowing for education, pilgrimage, and preparation for war with weapons and wisdom. But compared to the pedagogic tract of the Śāntiparvan, which occurs only over a few days, time is highly compressed in the Vanaparvan, and stretched out in the Śāntiparvan, narratively speaking. These temporal distortions allow for the clarification of *dharma*, and the intervention of the protector of *dharma*, Kṛṣṇa. The destruction of the Kauravas satisfies Bhīma’s revenge, but ultimately it is not direct or automatic. Bhīma’s prowess is constrained (but not diminished) by *dharma*. See again, the pause before the battle, a pause that reveals the Gītā. *Dharma* teachings in the epic thus necessitate

modulation in chronicity. They cannot be articulated in historical time.²⁸ The clearest example is the comparison between Paraśurāma’s immediate and violent matricide, and Cirakārin’s delayed pondering.

Bhīma’s vows, Nārada’s prophecy, Maitreya’s curse, and Jayadratha’s abduction of Draupadī thus carry this motive thematically until Bhīma finally concludes it. Beyond this *tisis* dimension, however, there is the sacrificial level as well. From Draupadī’s menstruation to the slaughter of all his sons, Yudhiṣṭhira bears the full brunt of Vyāsa’s critique of sacrificial logic. In the “war narrative,” the *karmaṭa* who keeps his hope in heaven and sons is the loser. Yājñavalkya often engages in such interpretive battles, and if we keep in mind the stakes—heaven opens the door not merely to death but to repeated death—the Kurukṣetra war is not an exaggeration. This argument between *svarga* and *mokṣa* as structuring the entire epic is now clear. Let me recapitulate it diagrammatically:

²⁸ The expression “learning from the lessons of history” is often repeated, nearly never followed, and, philosophically speaking, history is too anemic a foundation for ethics. By history here I mean historiographic reconstructions of the past where, to put it in Ranke’s words, “how it was” is the goal of historical writing, whereas ethics concerned with the “ought.” In Plato’s *Republic*, probably the most rigorous inquiry into the conditions for ethics, Socrates says:

And so, Glaucon, his [Er’s] story wasn’t lost but preserved, and it would save us, if we were persuaded by it, for we would then make a good crossing of the River of Forgetfulness, and our souls wouldn’t be defiled. But if we are persuaded by me, we’ll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good, and we’ll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way. That way we’ll be friends both to ourselves and to the gods while we remain here on earth and afterwards—like victors in the games who go around collecting their prizes—we’ll receive our rewards. Hence, both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we’ve described, we’ll do well and be happy.

The passage is loaded with significant resonances to the Sanskrit epic. The journey described by Socrates is the story of the warrior Er, who falls on the battlefield, though his body does not decay and he later wakes up. Er’s narrative is described by Socrates as not the tale of Alcinous, that is, it is not the story of Books 9–10 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, a story interpreted in antiquity as the journey of the soul (see Proclus, *In Plat. Parm.* 1025a, 29–37: “Many are the wanderings and circlings of the soul: one among imaginings, one in opinions, and one before these in understanding. But only the life according to the nous has stability and this is the mystical harbour of the soul to which, on the one hand, the poem leads Odysseus through the great wandering of his life, and to which we too shall draw ourselves up, if we would reach salvation”).

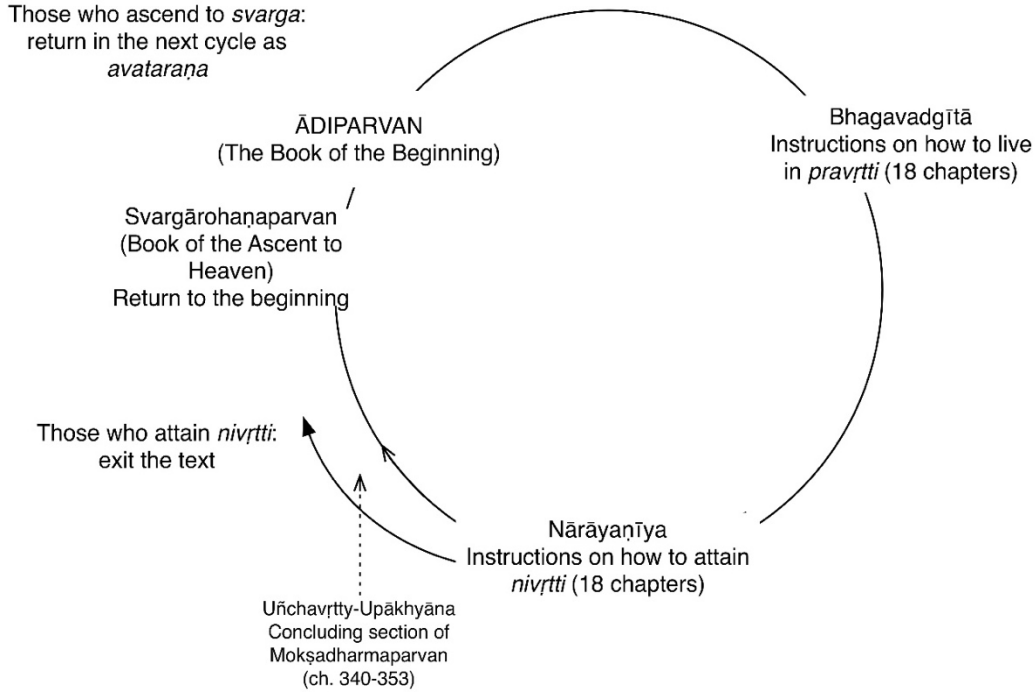


Fig. 1. The Lokas and the Pathways of the Soul

This diagram depicts the cyclical structure of the universe, with beings exiting it in two ways: either to heaven or by attaining *mokṣa*. The composition thus not only follows cyclical temporality but also the *pathways* of the soul after death. In the Mahābhārata, the word “*svarga*” indicates the path of the ancestors. The lexical differences of the *lokas* and *svarga* and Amarāvati, etc. blend in Vyāsa’s literary genius. I have translated the word *svarga*, *pitṛlokas*, *lokas*, and all finite abodes of enjoyment as “heaven.” Note that the epic begins with a fall from this heaven: the very birth of the characters in the Ādivamśāvatarāṇaparvan (Descent of the First Generations) is, in a way, a fall from *pitṛloka* or heaven. The structure of the epic echoes the *pañcāgnividyā* of Chāndogya Upaniṣad (5.3.10). This *vidyā* belongs to the Kṣatriyas and is taught by Pravāhaṇa Jaivali to Śvetaketu and his father Uddālaka Āruṇi. The *vidyā* reveals the transmigration of the souls in a universe conceived of as a sacrifice or *yajña*. It also occurs in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (6.2).

Śuka and the Saved Son

The foregoing discussion of the sacrificial order through *rājasūya* and *raṇayajña* demonstrates that salvation through sacrifice (*pravṛtti*) is—although effective—temporary, violent, fraught with danger, and ultimately pointless. This was the Upaniṣadic critique all along: philosophical salvation (through *nivṛtti*) alone is effective and ultimately beatific. All that remains is to place this “battle” within the overall context of the Mahābhārata. Vyāsa chooses two bird narratives to introduce these two “pathways” available for the soul. One is the leader among fools, Mandapāla, who uses his *tapas* for attainment of heaven. The other is the *dhīra*, Garuḍa. Vyāsa’s own son, Śuka, chooses the latter path. While all his literary progeny perish and go to heaven (only to return in the beginning of the book, again and again), his only begotten son Śuka

attains *mokṣa*. We now have all the elements needed to understand the Droṇaparvan: how does Droṇa interpret the *raṇayajña*? Looking back at Mandapāla’s foolish choices (he goes from *ṛṣi* to a bird, and from female to female, and finally goes from the Khāṇḍava to “another place” with his wife Jaritā and his four sons. One of them, significantly, is called Droṇa.

Interpreting the Droṇaparvan

The Droṇaparvan contains eight *upaparvans*. The first two are significant:

1. Droṇābhiṣekaparvan (1–15): After Bhīṣma falls, Droṇa is anointed as the general of the Kaurava army. This transfer is significant, because, as Biardeau has shown, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, “the renouncing prince and the warlike Brahman”²⁹ (1981: 87), are enantiomorphs of each other. Each violates his *svadharmā*: the *pitāmaha* Bhīṣma renounces kingship and inheritance in favor of Satyavatī’s offspring to please his father, whereas Droṇa gives birth to a son out of cupidity (*lobha*), and then seeks to acquire power and wealth, the attributes of the Kṣatriya.

2. Saṃsaptakavadhaparvan (16–31): Arjuna fights the sworn warriors, while elsewhere on the battlefield Droṇa routs the Pāṇḍava armies. This setup is significant, because earlier in the Bhagavadgītā Arjuna had raised the problem of *guruhatyā*, mentioning Bhīṣma and Droṇa. The *guru* is also a father. In a sense, Bhīṣma already resolved the problem of *guruhatyā* when he fought Rāma Jāmadagnya, the common *guru* of both Bhīṣma and Droṇa, in Book 5 of the Mahābhārata.

In the six remaining *upaparvans* of this book, the action moves by the death of either the father or the son, systematically on both sides, in a series of actions and reactions. I briefly summarize their order and contents:

1. Arjuna’s beloved son Abhimanyu fights along with him but is killed (Abhimanyuvadhaparvan, *adhyāyas* 32–51).
2. Racked by grief, Arjuna is inconsolable. He vows to avenge his son (Pratijñāparvan, *adhyāyas* 52–60).
3. Raging, Arjuna kills the warrior responsible for his son’s death: Jayadratha (Jayadrathavadhaparvan, *adhyāyas* 61–121).
4. But collateral damage continues: Bhīma’s son Ghaṭotkaca is killed (Ghaṭotkacavadhaparvan, *adhyāyas* 122–54).
5. Droṇa is misled by Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma, and Yudhiṣṭhira into thinking his son is dead. Laying down his weapons, Droṇa allows himself to be killed (Droṇavadhaparvan, *adhyāyas* 155–65).
6. Alive and angry, Droṇa’s son Aśvatthāman launches the *nārāyaṇāstra*, which cannot be countered (Nārāyaṇāstramokṣaparvan, *adhyāyas* 166–73).

As this brief summary shows, rather than violent events told for dramatic effect, the *parvan* unfolds as a deconstruction of the father-son motif as it operates in the sacrificial order of *pravṛtti*. No son equals no heaven, and no heaven is perhaps better than heaven (as the story of Mudgala in the Vṛihidrauṇikaparvan clearly articulates). Albeit in highly abstract literary form, this deconstruction of “*putro vai ātmā*” choreographs even the

²⁹ Madeleine Biardeau, “The Salvation of the King in the Mahābhārata,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 15 (1981): 87.

“war narrative.” Indeed, it *is* the meaning of that narrative: historical facts may be true or false, but do not contain meaning, especially salvific meaning. If we recall that the problem of the transfer of immortality backwards from the son to the father was already raised in the Ādiparvan (in the story of Yayāti), which forms part of the “hermeneutic and pedagogic” apparatus of the Mahābhārata, it is clear that a pervasive logic is being worked out in the Droṇaparvan.

Droṇa is consecrated early in the Droṇaparvan (Mahābhārata 7.5.37) and he is reported dead (at 7.7.33) just two chapters later! The blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks for a fuller account, but we learn only later that the cause of Droṇa’s death was the “mistake” he made about his son: he was fooled into thinking his son was dead. Let us consider this: had Droṇa been killed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna (who was born from a sacrifice to be his death), he would have attained heaven. By the same logic set up in the death of the Cedī prince in the rājasūya, Kṛṣṇa arranges for Droṇa to avoid this mishap and attain the world of *Brahman*. Behind Yudhiṣṭhira’s “lie” is concealed a deeper truth: contrary to Droṇa’s conviction, his son is *not* his self; in fact, he is a fatal distraction. In this *parvan* where so many sons die, the path of “renunciation” that Droṇa resorted to is the best possible outcome for Arjuna’s beloved teacher. Is it “love” for his son that caused Droṇa to lay down his weapons? No. As Yājñavalkya teaches in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, *na vā are putrāṇāṃ kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavanty ātmanas tu kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavanti* | (2.4.5). The son is merely the extension of the self, and the means for extending the self, not an end in himself. Droṇa confesses as much:

I hold Dhanamjaya higher than my son Aśvatthāman, king, and there is greater humility in that ape-crested man. If I shall have to fight with Dhanamjaya, who is dearer to me than my own son, in order to maintain the Law of baronage—a curse on a baron’s life! The Terrifier, for whom no archer in the world is a match, is better than any other bowman by my own grace. A betrayer of friends, one evil-natured, heretical, dishonest, or crooked finds no more honor among the strict than an addlebrain at a sacrifice. An evil man, though warned from evil, wants evil; a good man, though tempted by evil, wants good. Though treated treacherously, they still act friendly, while your flaws, chief of the Bharatas, only lead to your downfall. The elder of the Kurus has spoken to you. I have, Vidura has, and so has Vāsudeva, yet you do not see your salvation. “I have got the strength,” you think and hope forcibly to make your crossing, as though crossing the rainy season and flooding the Ganges with its sharks, dolphins, and crocodiles!

You cannot defeat the Pāṇḍava for whose triumph a Draupadī hopes, she true-spoken and of awesome vows and austerities, a Goddess! How can you defeat the Pāṇḍava, best of all bearers of arms, who has Janarārdana as his councilor and Dhanamjaya for his brother? How will you defeat the heroic Pāṇḍava of severe austerities, who has for his companions brahmins of great fortitude, who have mastered their senses?

I shall repeat, as a friend must who wishes to do anything to save the life of a friend who is drowning in an ocean of disaster. Stop this warring, make peace with these heroes, so that the Kurus may rise! Do not, with your sons, councilors, and troops march out to defeat!” (Mahābhārata 5.137.5–20).

To what or whom must we attribute Droṇa's happy fate of being clutched from the fatally deceptive jaws of heaven? To Kṛṣṇa? To Kṛṣṇa's love for Arjuna and Arjuna's love for his old teacher? Or perhaps to Vyāsa, who, musing over the bird Droṇa, composed a better fate for *this* Droṇa who drove his argument for *mokṣa* forward? Whatever these mysteries may be, their "war narrative" is hardly reportage. It is a barely concealed and thrillingly ornate war of competing interpretations of salvation.