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MAHABHARATA

Prologue 3
Introduction to the poem and its main storytellers: Vyasa, Vaishampayana, and Ugrashravas.

I • THE BOOK OF THE BEGINNING

1. The ancestors: 13
The Bharata lineage; the story of Satyavati and the birth of Vyasa; Shantanu marries the goddess Ganga, and Bhishma is born. Shantanu later marries Satyavati and they have two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Chitrangada dies in battle. Bhishma abducts three royal sisters, Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, as brides for Vichitravirya. Amba had already chosen another husband, and leaves the court. Vichitravirya dies childless, and Vyasa fathers two sons on the royal widows—Dhritarashtra (born blind) and Pandu (born pale)—as well as a son, Vidura, by a maid-servant.

2. Dhritarashtra and Pandu: 25
Bhishma, as regent, arranges marriages for the Bharata princes: Dhritarashtra marries Gandhari, who chooses to wear a blindfold lifelong; Pandu marries Kunti and Madri; Vidura, being born of a shudra mother, marries a woman of equivalent parentage. Pandu is cursed by a brahmin to die during the sexual act, so has to remain celibate. Kunti

deploys a boon she has received previously, and gives birth to three sons, fathered by different gods. Madri gives birth to two sons in the same way. These five sons—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—are known as the Pandavas. Gandhari, blessed by Vyasa, gives birth to one hundred sons (the Kauravas), and a daughter. Evil omens attend the birth of the eldest, Duryodhana. Pandu gives way to temptation and dies in the act of love with Madri. Madri climbs on his funeral pyre, and Kunti takes the five boys to Hastinapura, the capital of the Bharata kingdom.

3. Cousins: 38

The five Pandavas and the hundred Kaurava boys get on badly together. Encouraged by his uncle, Shakuni, Duryodhana makes an unsuccessful attempt on Bhima's life. The young princes are trained in the arts of war, first by Kripa and then by Drona—both brahmins. Drona plans vengeance on his former friend, Drupada, king of Panchala.

4. Learning the arts of war: 50

Drona trains the royal princes in his weapons school. Arjuna becomes an outstanding archer, and Drona's favorite. Drona's son, Ashvatthaman, also receives special attention. Karna, foundling son of a suta, joins the weapons school, and is despised. He becomes deeply envious of Arjuna. Ekalavya, a tribal boy, is turned away by Drona, but becomes a great archer through diligent practice.

5. Karna: 60

We learn Karna's real parentage. He seeks out the great weapons teacher, Rama Jamadagnya, and acquires celestial weapons but, finally, is cursed by his teacher for deception.

6. The tournament: 70

Drona organizes a public display to show the young princes' skills. Karna arrives and humiliates Arjuna. Duryodhana befriends Karna.

7. Revenge: 81

Drona mounts an attack on Drupada's city, Kampilya. Drupada is humiliated. Through prayer and austerity, he acquires a son, Dhrishtadyumna, born to avenge his father, and a daughter, Draupadi, who will, he hopes, marry Arjuna.

8. The lacquer house: 88

Duryodhana persuades his father to send the Pandavas and Kunti off on a visit to Varanavata. Duryodhana plots the death of his cousins, but the plot is unsuccessful and they escape into the forest.

9. Flight: 98

In the forest, the Pandavas encounter the ogre Hidimba and his sister, whom Bhima marries. She gives birth to their son, Ghatotkacha. At Vyasa's prompting, the Pandavas move to the city of Ekachakra, where Bhima kills the ogre Baka.

10. Draupadi's bridegroom choice: 111

The Pandavas, disguised as brahmins, go to Kampilya where Arjuna wins the contest for Draupadi's hand. Owing to a misunderstanding, all five brothers become her husbands. They meet their cousins, Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) and Balarama, for the first time.

11. Acquiring a kingdom: 123

Duryodhana is enraged by the Pandavas' good fortune. His father, the king, agrees to divide the kingdom in half. Yudhishthira will be king of the barren Khandava tract. In time, the Pandavas transform it, building the beautiful city of Indraprastha. The brothers make an agreement to avoid jealousy arising between them over Draupadi. Arjuna transgresses, and insists on going into exile.

12. Arjuna's exile: 136

Arjuna visits sacred sites, has liaisons with Ulupi and Chitrangadaa, visits Krishna's city, Dvaraka, and marries Krishna's sister, Subhadra. Back at Indraprastha, Subhadra gives birth to Abhimanyu, and Draupadi to five sons, one by each brother.

13. The burning of the Khandava Forest: 144

Walking in the forest, Arjuna and Krishna encounter the god Agni, who wishes to burn down the forest, but is being thwarted by the god Indra (Arjuna's father). They agree to help him, and are given celestial weapons. Through their efforts, the forest is burned down, only a few creatures escaping.

II • THE BOOK OF THE ASSEMBLY HALL

14. The decision: 153

The divine architect, Maya, builds a beautiful assembly hall for Yudhishthira. The seer Narada suggests that Yudhishthira make an attempt to become king of kings. The king of Magadha, Jarasandha, stands in the way of this ambition, and Krishna and Bhima challenge him and defeat him.

15. King of kings: 164
Yudhishthira's brothers take armies to other kingdoms throughout the land, and secure the fealty of a number of other kings. A great consecration sacrifice takes place, to which the Kauravas are invited. The king of Chedi, Shishupala, challenges Yudhishthira's choice of Krishna as guest of honor, and Krishna kills him. After the ceremony, Duryodhana tours the assembly hall and is consumed by envy and despair.

16. Duryodhana's despair: 176
Back in Hastinapura, Shakuni suggests that Yudhishthira be invited to a gambling match, which he is sure to lose. Dhristarashtra agrees to this. Yudhishthira, despite misgivings, accepts the invitation.

17. The dice game: 186
Due to Shakuni's sleight of hand, Yudhishthira loses everything he owns, including his brothers, himself, and his wife. Draupadi challenges the elders to say whether her husband could have lost her, when he had already lost himself, and therefore had no right to property. Duhshasana, second eldest Kaurava, tries to strip Draupadi, but fails. Duryodhana lewdly insults Draupadi, and Bhima vows to kill both him and his brother. Draupadi's question remains unresolved, but Dhritarashtra cancels Yudhishthira's losses and allows the Pandavas to leave.

18. The dice game resumes: 203
Duryodhana and Shakuni devise a new basis for a dice game, and the Pandavas are brought back. Whoever loses this time will go into exile for thirteen years, while the winner takes possession of their lands. Only if they remain unrecognized during the thirteenth year will their lands be returned. Yudhishthira agrees, plays, and loses. The Pandavas depart for their forest exile.

III • THE BOOK OF THE FOREST

19. Exile begins: 211
The Pandavas, accompanied by devoted brahmins, settle in a pleasant spot in the forest. Back at court, the seer Maitreya curses Duryodhana. He and Dhritarashtra learn that Bhima has killed an ogre in the forest, and fear for the future. Krishna and other allies visit the Pandavas in the forest.

20. Discord: 223
Draupadi and Bhima urge Yudhishthira to ignore the terms of the dice game and attack the Kauravas. Yudhishthira refuses. Vyasa appears and counsels them. He advises that Arjuna should go on a quest to acquire celestial weapons. Arjuna departs.

21. Quest: 235
Arjuna travels to the Himalaya where he is tested by Indra, and embarks on a period of strict austerities. He is tested by the god Shiva, who promises to give him the terrible divine weapon *Pashupata*. He spends five years in Indra's heaven. In the forest, Yudhishthira is disconsolate, and the sage Brihadashva tells him the story of Nala and Damayanti.

22. Pilgrimage: 248
The seer Lomasha, sent by Indra, visits the Pandavas who are restless, missing Arjuna. He proposes that they go with him on a pilgrimage to sacred sites, and as they travel, he tells them enlightening stories—the tales of Rishyashringa, King Shibi and the hawk, and King Yuvanashva. The party journeys into the Himalayan mountains, and Bhima encounters Hanuman, the great ape of the *Ramayana*, and does battle with yakshas. The Pandavas are reunited with Arjuna. Bhima has an encounter with the snake Nahusha. After some years, the Pandavas begin their slow descent to the forest on the plain.

23. Duryodhana's mistake: 267
The exile enters its twelfth year. The Pandavas are visited by the ascetic Markandeya, who tells them marvelous stories, and offers them wise advice. Krishna visits with his chief wife, Satyabhama. She asks Draupadi what is the secret that keeps her husbands devoted to her, and Draupadi says there is no secret; only her own assiduous devotion as a wife. With the period of exile soon coming to an end, the Kauravas become increasingly apprehensive. They undertake a huge expedition into the forest with the aim of intimidating the Pandavas with a show of strength. Their rash encounter with the king of the gandharvas results in Duryodhana being beaten and humiliated. Karna vows that he will grind Arjuna into the dust.

24. The end in sight: 283
The Pandavas are visited by Vyasa. He advises Yudhishthira and tells the story of Mudgala the gleaner. Jayadratha, Duryodhana's brother-in-law, attempts to abduct Draupadi and is punished and humiliated by Bhima. He vows to have revenge. Markandeya visits and tells the story of Savitri and Satyavat. Karna's father, Surya the sun god, warns him that Indra will try to obtain the protective armor he was born with. Karna encounters Indra disguised as a brahmin. He gives him the armor and receives Indra's spear in exchange. The Pandavas begin to prepare for their thirteenth year of exile. The god Dharma, Yudhishthira's father, tests them and promises that they will succeed in remaining unrecognized until their exile expires.

IV • THE BOOK OF VIRATA

25. Virata's court: 299
The Pandavas plan the disguises they will assume during their thirteenth year. They travel to the kingdom of King Virata and obtain employment in the royal court. Bhima protects Draupadi from the lustful advances of Kichaka.

26. The cattle raid: 313
The Kauravas mount a raid on King Virata's cattle. Arjuna, still disguised as a eunuch, defeats them, with Virata's son, Uttara, as his charioteer. The Kauravas recognize him, but the thirteenth year is up. Virata offers Arjuna his daughter, Uttaraa, in marriage, but Arjuna suggests that his son, Abhimanyu, marry her instead.

V • THE BOOK OF PERSEVERANCE

27. Suing for peace, preparing for war: 331
Duryodhana refuses to return Yudhishthira's kingdom and the Pandavas, expecting war, meet with their main allies. In the hope of achieving a resolution, Drupada sends his household priest to Hastinapura. Both Arjuna and Duryodhana seek Krishna's support; Krishna will act as Arjuna's charioteer, and Krishna's army will join the Kaurava side. Shalya, Madri's brother, takes the side of the Kauravas. Dhritarashtra sends Sanjaya to urge the Pandavas not to make war.

28. Diplomacy continues: 345
Dhritarashtra is extremely agitated, and Vidura tries to soothe him with stories and wise words. The council meets to hear a report from Sanjaya. Duryodhana is confident of victory and refuses to make any concessions.

29. Krishna's mission: 360
The Pandavas are pessimistic about the chances of peace. Krishna decides to make one last attempt, and travels to Hastinapura. He addresses Duryodhana in the council, but the Kaurava insists that he is in the right. Krishna reveals his divine power.

30. The temptation of Karna: 375
Before leaving Hastinapura, Krishna reveals to Karna the truth about his origins—he is really the eldest brother of the Pandavas—in the hope of persuading him to change sides and share the kingdom with the Pandavas. Kunti makes the same attempt, but Karna refuses on principle.

31. Marshaling the armies: 384
Huge forces are assembled on the plain of Kurukshetra. Bhishma is appointed commander of the Kauravas, but he and Karna declare that they will not fight alongside each other; and Bhishma will not fight Shikhandin because he was born a woman, Shikhandini, and, in a previous life, was Amba, whose goal was to have revenge on Bhishma for ruining her life.

VI • THE BOOK OF BHISHMA

32. The song of the Lord: 395
Through the gift of divine sight, Sanjaya will report every stage of the war to the blind king. Arjuna suddenly sinks down in his chariot declaring that he will not fight, that he cannot commit the sin of killing his kinsmen. Krishna, through teachings and through revelation, persuades him that his attitude is wrong (the "Bhagavad Gita").

33. The war begins: 421
Yudhishthira approaches the Kaurava elders to ask for their blessing. Battle begins. The first day brings heavy losses for the Pandavas.

34. Bhishma in command: 431
The second day goes better for the Pandavas. On the third

day Arjuna engages in combat with Bhishma, but so half-heartedly that Krishna intervenes. The fourth day favors the Pandavas; several Kaurava princes are killed. Duryodhana starts to worry. Bhishma urges him to make peace but he refuses. On the fifth day, many thousands of troops are killed. Bhima fights heroically and, on day six, wounds Duryodhana severely.

35. Bhishma implacable: 448
Bitter fighting involves many named warriors, including Arjuna's son Iravat. Ghatotkacha inflicts huge damage on the Kauravas. Duryodhana is discouraged and suspects Bhishma of favoring the Pandavas. Next day, Bhishma scorches the allies of the Pandavas. Again, Arjuna is reluctant to fight him.

36. The fall of Bhishma: 461
Bhishma is felled by Arjuna, using Shikhandin as a shield. Bhishma has been given the boon that he can choose the time of his death, and this is not an auspicious time. He will lie on the field of Kurukshetra, pierced by arrows, but alive, until the winter solstice.

VII • THE BOOK OF DRONA

37. Drona leads the Kauravas: 471
Karna and Bhishma are reconciled. Drona fails to capture Yudhishthira. Arjuna is challenged by the Trigartas. Death of Bhagadatta.

38. The death of Abhimanyu: 490
Arjuna is drawn away to fight the Trigartas. Jayadratha's revenge leads to Abhimanyu being trapped by the Kauravas and killed. Arjuna vows to kill Jayadratha the next day.

39. In pursuit of Jayadratha: 505
Arjuna and Krishna make every effort to reach Jayadratha before nightfall, but he is heavily defended. Bhurishravas is killed by Satyaki in dubious circumstances. Thanks to a ruse of Krishna's, Arjuna succeeds in killing Jayadratha, fulfilling his vow.

40. Battle at night: 526
General fighting continues through the night. Karna is an outstanding warrior, but the Pandavas do well. Duryodhana suspects Drona of favoring the Pandavas. Discord among the Kauravas, whose forces are hard pressed by Ghatotkacha. Karna uses the celestial spear he was keeping for Arjuna, and kills Ghatotkacha.

41. Drona and Ashvatthaman: 541
The fighting continues, Drona inflicting great damage on the Pandava forces. Drona is killed through deception encouraged by Krishna. Drona's son Ashvatthaman swears vengeance and uses celestial weapons which Krishna and Arjuna neutralize.

VIII • THE BOOK OF KARNA

42. Karna in command: 557
Karna is consecrated as Kaurava commander, with Shalya as his charioteer. Arjuna fears Yudhishthira has come to harm, and seeks him out. They quarrel and Krishna helps them resolve their differences. Arjuna swears not to return until he has killed Karna.

43. Tragic Karna: 575
Shalya tries to undermine Karna's morale. Bhima kills Duhshasana and drinks his blood, fulfilling his vow. Karna's sons are killed. Arjuna and Karna finally meet in a duel to the death. Karna is killed.

IX • THE BOOK OF SHALYA

44. Defeat for Duryodhana: 589
Shalya is the Kaurava commander. Bhima kills the last of Dhritarashtra's sons, apart from Duryodhana who flees and hides in a lake. The Pandavas track him down and challenge him to come out and fight. He is narrowly defeated by Bhima who smashes his thighs, contrary to the rules of fair fight. The war is over. Krishna takes the news to Hastinapura.

X • THE BOOK OF THE NIGHT ATTACK

45. Massacre by night: 611
Ashvatthaman vows to avenge Duryodhana and his father. With Kripa and Kritavarman, he attacks the Pandava camp and, strengthened by the god Shiva, slaughters the surviving Pandava and Panchala fighters, including all of

Draupadi's sons. The Pandavas pursue Ashvatthaman and defeat him, but at great cost.

XI • THE BOOK OF THE WOMEN

46. Dhritarashtra's grief: 631
Dhritarashtra is heartbroken and is consoled by Vidura and Vyasa. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, and the Pandavas go to the battlefield.

47. Gandhari's lament: 642
The field is crowded with women looking for their dead loved ones. Gandhari is given the gift of divine sight and describes what she sees. She curses Krishna for his part in the war. Kunti reveals that Karna was her son.

XII • THE BOOK OF PEACE

48. Yudhishthira, reluctant ruler: 653
Yudhishthira is grief-stricken by the carnage and by Karna's death. He holds himself responsible and says he will renounce the kingdom. Only in that way can he atone. His brothers and Draupadi try to dissuade him.

49. Yudhishthira listens to the seers: 664
Devasthana, Vyasa, and Krishna all speak to Yudhishthira. Vyasa tells him he should perform the great horse sacrifice. He sets aside his doubts and enters Hastinapura. Krishna tells him to learn from Bhishma.

50. The education of the Dharma King (1): 680
Bhishma, lying on his bed of arrows, instructs Yudhishthira on the duties of a king.

51. The education of the Dharma King (2): 698
Bhishma's teaching continues. He speaks about a person's moral obligations, as well as the need for a king to exercise good judgment. He tells instructive stories.

52. Dharma in difficult times: 709
Through parables, Bhishma talks about right action at times when the kingdom is under threat, or is undergoing famine. Yudhishthira asks his brothers for their views on the relative importance of the three goals of kshatriya dharma—virtue, wealth, and pleasure. He praises a fourth goal—moksha—and asks Bhishma to talk to him about how absolute freedom can be achieved.

53. The path to absolute freedom: 724
Through stories, Bhishma teaches the subtleties of karma, spiritual practice, and the importance of worshiping Vishnu. He discusses the difficulty of achieving absolute freedom while still living in the world.

XIII • THE BOOK OF INSTRUCTION

54. The teaching continues: 745
Bhishma's final stories concern the nature of responsibility for actions; whether Death can be conquered; whether men or women enjoy sex more; whether one can become a brahmin within one lifetime; and the nature of compassion.

55. The death of Bhishma: 756
Yudhishthira continues to learn from Bhishma. With the arrival of the winter solstice, Bhishma composes himself and dies.

XIV • THE BOOK OF THE HORSE SACRIFICE

56. King Yudhishthira turns to the future: 767
Yudhishthira is again despondent but is heartened by the prospect of the horse sacrifice through which he can atone for wrongdoing. Yudhishthira travels to the mountains to retrieve buried treasure which he will need for the sacrifice. Arjuna spends time with Krishna and receives spiritual instruction. Krishna sets off for Dvaraka and encounters Uttanka, an ascetic to whom he reveals his divine nature. Uttaraa gives birth to a son but the baby is born dead as a result of Ashvatthaman's deadly invocation. Krishna brings him to life and he is named Parikshit.

57. The horse sacrifice: 782
Arjuna accompanies the sacrificial horse throughout the land in preparation for the great ceremony. He encounters Chitrangadaa and Ulupi, and his son Babhruvahana. The elaborate sacrifice takes place. A mongoose disparages it, and tells the story of the devout brahmin of Kurukshetra.

XV • THE BOOK OF THE HERMITAGE

58. The retreat of the elders: 797
After fifteen years, Dhritarashtra and the other elders depart for the forest, to lead an ascetic life. The Pandavas visit them. Vidura dies and his spirit enters Yudhishthira. Vyasa arranges an epiphany: for a single night, the heroes killed at Kurukshetra rise up from the Ganga and are reconciled, and reunited with their loved ones.

XVI • THE BOOK OF THE CLUBS

59. Krishna's people: 817
Thirty-six years into Yudhishthira's reign, grim portents are seen. In Dvaraka, Vrishni warriors are cursed by brahmins for disrespect, and are killed by one another, thus fulfilling Gandhari's curse. Krishna's time on earth is over; he and Balarama die. Arjuna escorts the citizens of Dvaraka out of the city before it is engulfed by the sea. His divine weapons fail him. Vyasa advises the Pandavas to leave Hastinapura.

XVII & XVIII • THE BOOKS OF THE FINAL JOURNEY and THE ASCENT TO HEAVEN

60. The final journey: 829
Yudhishthira abdicates in favor of Parikshit. The Pandavas and Draupadi circumambulate the kingdom and make for the Himalaya. One by one, they fall dead and their spirits go to heaven, except for Yudhishthira who enters heaven in his body as a mark of his extraordinary virtue. In heaven his virtue is tested. He sheds his earthly body and is reunited with those he loves.

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Ugrashravas has come to the end of Vyasa's epic poem. He takes his leave from the forest ascetics, and goes on his way.

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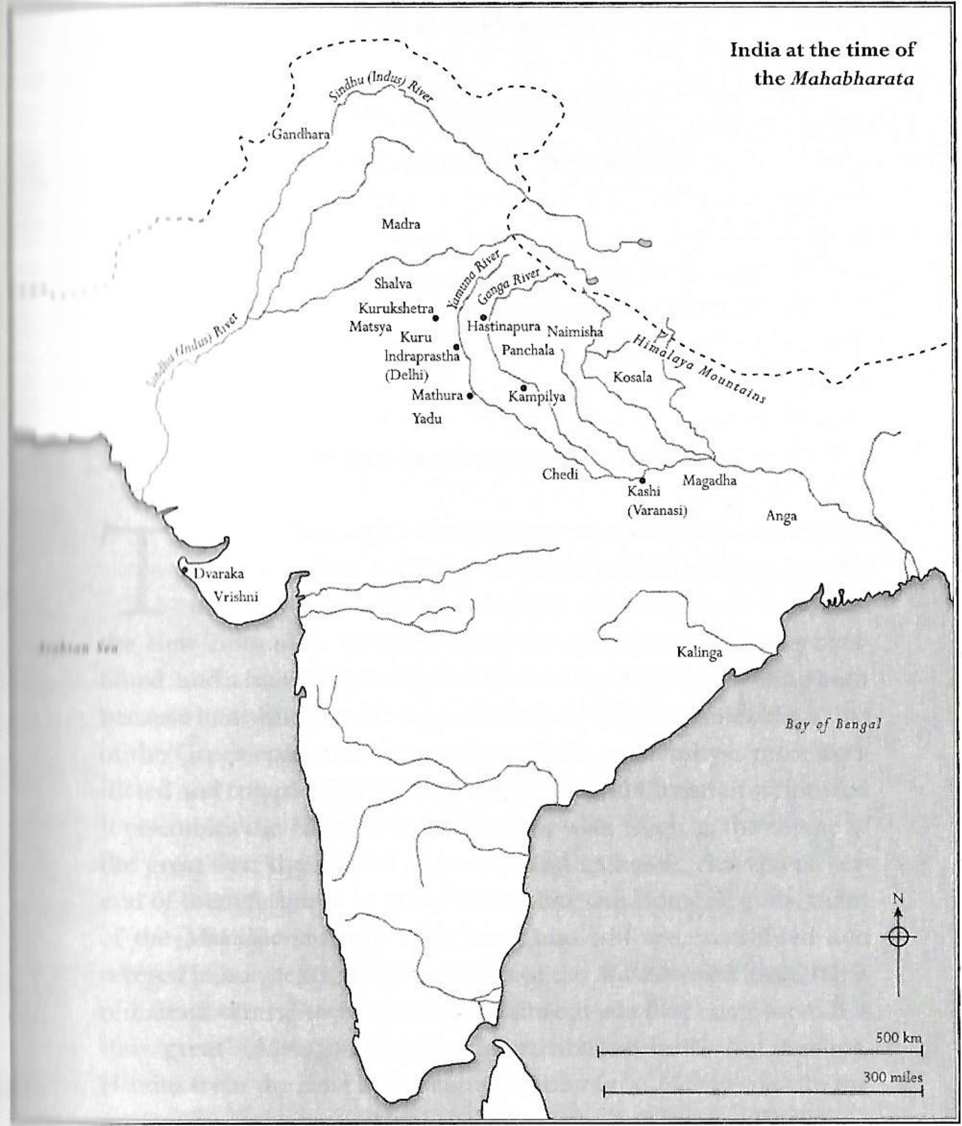

FOREWORD

The *Mahabharata*, a Text for All Seasons[1]

WENDY DONIGER

THE TEXT: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

THE *Mahabharata* is a text of about 75,000 verses—sometimes rounded off to 100,000—or three million words, some fifteen times the combined length of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, or seven times the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, and a hundred times more interesting. More interesting both because its attitude to war is more conflicted and complex than that of the Greek epics and because its attitude to divinity is more conflicted and complex than that of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. It resembles the Homeric epics in many ways (such as the theme of the great war, the style of its poetry, and its heroic characters, several of them fathered by gods), but unlike the Homeric gods, many of the *Mahabharata* gods were then, and still are, worshiped and revered in holy texts, including parts of the *Mahabharata* itself. It has remained central to Hindu culture since it was first composed. It is thus "great" (*Maha*), as its name claims, not only in size but in scope. Hindus from the time of the composition of the *Mahabharata* to the present moment know the characters in the texts just as Christians and Jews and Muslims, even if they are not religious, know Adam

1. Some portions of this essay are reworked from my book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 252–76.

and Eve. To this day, India is called the land of Bharata, and the *Mahabharata* functions much like a national epic.

The story may have been told in some form as early as 900 BCE; its resemblance to Persian, Scandinavian, Greek, and other Indo-European epic traditions suggests that the core of the tale may reach back to the time when these cultures had not yet dispersed, well before 2000 BCE. But the *Mahabharata* did not reach its present form until the period from about 300 BCE to 300 CE—or half a millennium; it takes a long time to compose three million words.

The *Mahabharata* marks the transition from the corpus of Sanskrit texts known as *shruti*, the unalterable Vedic canon of texts (dated to perhaps 1500 BCE) that the seers "heard" from divine sources, to those known as *smriti*, the human tradition, constantly revised, the "remembered texts" of human authorship, texts that could be altered. It calls itself "the fifth Veda" (though so do several other texts) and dresses its story in Vedic trappings (such as ostentatious Vedic sacrifices). It looks back to the Vedic age, and may well preserve many memories of that period, and that place, up in the Punjab. The Painted Gray Ware artifacts discovered at sites identified with locations in the *Mahabharata* may be evidence of the reality of the great *Mahabharata* war, which is usually supposed to have occurred around 950 BCE. But the text is very much the product of its times, the centuries before and after the turn of the first millennium.

The *Mahabharata* was retold very differently by all of its many authors in the long line of literary descent. It is so extremely fluid that there is no single *Mahabharata*; there are hundreds of *Mahabharatas*, hundreds of different manuscripts and innumerable oral versions (one reason why it is impossible to make an accurate calculation of the number of its verses). The *Mahabharata* is not *confined to* a text; the story is there to be picked up and found, salvaged as anonymous treasure from the ocean of story. It has been called "a work in progress,"[2] a literature that "does not belong in a book."[3]

2. Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 14–15.
3. Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 75–76.

The *Mahabharata* (1.1.23)[4] describes itself as unlimited in both time and space—eternal and infinite: "Poets have told it before, and are telling it now, and will tell it again. What is here is also found elsewhere, but what is *not* here is found nowhere else." And in case you missed that, it is repeated elsewhere and then said yet again in slightly different words toward the end of the epic: "Whatever is here about dharma, profit, pleasure, and release [from the cycle of death and rebirth] is also found elsewhere, but what is *not* here is found nowhere else . . ." (18.5.38).

The *Mahabharata* grew and changed in numerous parallel traditions spread over the entire subcontinent of India, constantly retold and rewritten, both in Sanskrit and in vernacular dialects. It grows out of the oral tradition and then grows back into the oral tradition; it flickers back and forth between Sanskrit manuscripts and village storytellers, each adding new gemstones to the old mosaic, constantly reinterpreting it. The loose construction of the text gives it a quasi-novelistic quality, open to new forms as well as new ideas, inviting different ideas to contest one another, to come to blows, in the pages of the text. It seems to me highly unlikely that any single author could have lived long enough to put it all together, but that does not mean that it is a miscellaneous mess with no unified point of view, let alone "the most monstrous chaos," "the huge and motley pile," or "gargantuan hodge-podge" and "literary pile-up" that some scholars have accused it of being. European approaches to the *Mahabharata* often assumed that collators did not know what they were doing and, blindly cutting and pasting, accidentally created a monstrosity.

But the *Mahabharata* is not the head of a brahmin philosophy accidentally stuck onto a body of non-brahmin folklore, like the heads and bodies of people in several Indian myths, or the mythical beast invoked by Woody Allen, which has the body of a lion and the head of a lion, but not the same lion.[5] True, it was somewhat like

4. All of the translations are my own, from the Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata* (Poona, Maharashtra, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–69).
5. Woody Allen, "Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts," in *Without Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1976).

an ancient Wikipedia, to which anyone who knew Sanskrit, or who knew someone who knew Sanskrit, could add a bit here, a bit there. But the powerful intertextuality of Hinduism ensured that anyone who added anything to the *Mahabharata* was well aware of the whole textual tradition behind it and fitted his or her own insight, or story, thoughtfully into the ongoing conversation. However diverse its sources, for several thousand years the tradition has regarded it as a conversation among people who know one another's views and argue with silent partners. It is a contested text, a brilliantly orchestrated hybrid narrative with no single party line on any subject. It was contested not only within the Hindu tradition, where concepts of dharma were much debated, but also by the rising rival traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. These challenges to the brahmin narrators are reflected in the text at such places as Bhishma's teachings in Books 12 and 13. But the text has an integrity that the culture supports (in part by attributing it to a single author) and that it is our duty to acknowledge. The contradictions at its heart are not the mistakes of a sloppy editor but enduring cultural dilemmas that no author could ever have resolved.

The great scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan used to say that no Indian ever hears the *Mahabharata* for the first time. For centuries Indians heard it in the form of public recitations, or performances of dramatized episodes, or in the explanations of scenes depicted in stone or paint on the sides of temples. More recently, they read it in India's version of Classic Comics (the *Amar Chitra Katha* series) or saw it in the hugely successful televised version, based largely on the comic book; the streets of India were empty (or as empty as any street ever is in India) during the broadcast hours on Sunday mornings, from 1988 to 1990. Or they saw various Bollywood versions, or the six-hour film version (1989) of Peter Brook's nine-hour theatrical adaptation (1985).

In 1989, Shashi Tharoor (Indian Minister of State for External Affairs) retold the *Mahabharata* as *The Great Indian Novel*, in which the heroes are recast as thinly veiled forms of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and others. (The hero Karna, who, in the Sanskrit version, slices off the armor that grows on his body and fights against his brothers, appears as Mohammed Ali

Karna, who, when he goes over from the Hindu to the Muslim side, seizes a knife and circumcises himself.) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her 2009 novel *The Palace of Illusions*, retells the *Mahabharata* from the standpoint of the heroine, Draupadi, who is, in this telling, in love with Karna and close to the transsexual heroine Shikhandin/Shikhandini, who is, in the Sanskrit text, too, Draupadi's brother/sister but never meets her. And now there is Chindu Sreedharan's "Epicretold," posted on Twitter, so that we can read the *Mahabharata* one 140-character tweet at a time (www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1917882,00.html). Reintepretations of this sort have been going on from the moment the *Mahabharata* began to be composed. Whenever the *Mahabharata* is told or retold, the ethical and religious questions it raises are given new, contemporary meanings.

And this new verse retelling by Carole Satyamurti takes its place in this honorable lineage. It is not, technically, a new translation, since Satyamurti worked not from the Sanskrit original but from other translations, particularly the Ganguli and van Buitenen/Fitzgerald translations. Nor is it a freely rendered retelling, since she sticks very close to the content, if not the wording, of the translations she used. Her abridgment, too, is different from that of the many other available versions, including that of John Smith; Satyamurti has made her own choices, and has included several episodes that Ganguli, van Buitenen/Fitzgerald, and Smith leave out, popular stories such as the episode in which Vyasa dictates the text to Ganesha. And most significantly, she has told the story not in prose but in blank verse.

THE STORY OF THE HEROES, AND THE STORIES OF WOMEN

The bare bones of the central story (and there are hundreds of peripheral stories, too) could be summarized like this, for our purposes:

The five sons of King Pandu, called the Pandavas, were fathered by gods: Yudhishthira by Dharma (the moral law incarnate), Bhima

by the Wind, Arjuna by Indra (king of the gods), and the twins by the Ashvins. All five of them married Draupadi. When Yudhishthira lost the kingdom to his cousins in a game of dice, the Pandavas and Draupadi went into exile for twelve years, at the end of which—with the help of their cousin, the incarnate god Krishna, who befriended the Pandavas and whose counsel to Arjuna on the battlefield is the *Bhagavad Gita*—they regained their kingdom through a cataclysmic battle in which almost everyone on both sides was killed. They all went to heaven and died happily ever after.

But the story of the Pyrrhic victory of the Pandava princes constitutes just a fifth of the epic, its skeleton. Many episodes, including some about women, are hooked on fairly securely to the fabric of the plot: a question about the ancestors of the Pandavas inspires the narrator to tell the story of the birth of their ancestor Bharata, from Shakuntala, the innocent maiden whom King Dushyanta seduced and abandoned (a story that captivated Goethe); Yudhishthira is consoled, after his own gambling disaster, by the tale of Nala, whose compulsive gambling lost him his kingdom and his wife Damayanti, until she managed to reunite them. Other stories are told as moral lessons to the human heroes and heroines, such as the tale of King Shibi, who chopped off his own flesh to save a dove fleeing from a hawk (both birds turned out to be gods disguised to test him); and Savitri, whose steadfastness persuaded the god of death to spare her doomed husband. Philosophical and legal questions also arise out of the aporias of the plot and are answered in discourses that sometimes go on for hundreds of verses. Hindu tradition attributes the work to a single author, named Vyasa, but Vyasa is also the author (that is, the father) of the two fathers of the warring heroes, Pandu and his brother Dhritarashtra. Thus Vyasa, the author, is himself a character in his own story.

The text depicts women with powers and privileges they would seldom have again in Hindu literature. Women with multiple sexual partners appear with surprising frequency in the *Mahabharata*; the text offers us, in four consecutive generations, positive images of women who had several sexual partners (sometimes premarital) seriatim. Satyavati has two sexual partners (her legitimate husband Shantanu and the sage who fathers Vyasa on the island). Ambika and Ambalika have two legitimate partners (the king who dies and Vyasa, through the Levirate). Kunti has one husband (Pandu, legitimate but unconsummated) and four sexual partners (gods, quasi-legitimate). Madri has three partners (Pandu, legitimate and fatally consummated, and two quasi-legitimate gods). The prize goes to Draupadi, who has five legitimate husbands, simultaneously—the five Pandavas. Her pentad is truly extraordinary, for though men could have several spouses throughout most of Hindu history (and a number of men in the *Mahabharata* do have several wives, most famously the Pandava hero Arjuna and the incarnate god Krishna), women most decidedly could not. It is always possible that the *Mahabharata* was recording a time when polyandry (multiple husbands) was the custom (as it is nowadays in parts of the Himalaya), but there is no evidence to support this contention. Since there is no other evidence that women at this time actually had multiple sexual partners, these stories can only be suggestive, evidence either of women's greater sexual freedom or, perhaps, of men's fears of what might happen were women to have that freedom, of the male redactors' nightmare vision of where all that autonomy might lead. Draupadi's hypersexuality may simply have validated an ideal that was understood to be out of reach for ordinary women—imagined precisely in order to be disqualified as a viable option. King Pandu tells his wife Kunti a story explicitly remarking upon an archaic promiscuity that is no longer in effect, pointedly reminding her, and any women who may have heard (or read) the text, that female promiscuity was an ancient option no longer available to them, even though he tells her this story in order to persuade her to have sex with someone other than himself—admittedly, a god.

The lineage of the heroines is therefore a remarkably positive fantasy of female equality. True, Draupadi doesn't choose to have five husbands, and though she has a sharp tongue at times, she generally exerts her power through subtlety and manipulation—as subservient women always have—not exactly a model of equality. But many of the *Mahabharata* women are a feminist's dream (or a sexist's nightmare): smart, aggressive, steadfast, eloquent, tough as nails, and resilient. Other women in the *Mahabharata* show remarkable courage and intelligence, too, but their courage is often used in subservience to their husbands. The wives of the two patriarchs,

Pandu and the blind Dhritarashtra, are paradigms of such courage. Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra, keeps her eyes entirely blindfolded from the day of her marriage to him, in order to share his blindness. Pandu's two widows vie for the privilege of dying on his pyre.

THE *MAHABHARATA* AS A RELIGIOUS TEXT

But the *Mahabharata* is not just a story. It is a religious text, foundational for Hinduism. At moments scattered through the text, the Pandavas' cousin, the incarnate god Krishna, intervenes, most famously in his counsel to the hero Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, which many Hindus revere as the *Bhagavad Gita*, "the song of god." Krishna straddles the line between a human prince and an incarnation of Vishnu. Other gods, however, appear in unambiguous full divinity throughout the epic. Throughout the *Mahabharata*, we encounter people who say they worship a particular god, the start of sects and therefore of sectarianism. It includes a "Hymn of the Thousand Names of Shiva" and tells a story about the circumstances under which Shiva came to be worshiped. Shiva appears to Arjuna in the form of a naked tribal hunter and occasionally goes in human disguise among mortals. Pilgrimage is described at length, particularly but not only in the "Tour of the Sacred Fords" (3.80–140).

Many chapters are devoted to disquisitions on the nature of spiritual peace (*shanti*) and liberation (*moksha*) from the wheel of transmigration (*samsara*). And the text not only describes several great sacrifices—a triumphal horse sacrifice after the great war near the end of the story, and a grotesque sacrifice of snakes at the beginning—but often describes the battle itself as a great sacrifice, in which the warriors offer themselves as victims. The great battle on the field called Kurukshetra—a name as familiar to Hindus as Armageddon to the Abrahamic religions—is also an eschatological conflict at the moment when the universe is about to self-destruct. For the end of that battle marks the beginning of the Kali age, the fourth of the four degenerating ages, or yugas. Even within this

moment of degeneration, Krishna is said to descend to earth (as an avatar of the god Vishnu) to restore dharma (the moral law) when it has declined in the course of the cycle.

Many passages end with the "fruits of hearing" them ("Anyone who hears this story [about snakes] will never die of snakebite," etc.). And the book as a whole declares, at the very end:

> This auspicious story, called a history, is the supreme purifier. Whatever wise man recites this constantly at every lunar fortnight, his evils are shaken off, he wins heaven, and he goes to the state of brahman. Whatever sin one commits by day in the senses or even in the mind-and-heart, he is set free from that at that evening's twilight by narrating the *Mahabharata*. This history, called "Victory," should be heard by anyone who wants power, and also by a king, and by the king's sons, and by a pregnant woman. A person who desires heaven would get heaven, and one who desires victory would get victory. A pregnant woman gets a son or a well-married daughter. Whoever recites this worthy history that has great meaning and value and is Veda-made, that man becomes free from evil, achieves fame here on earth and will achieve supreme success; I have no doubt about this. If a man of faith studies even a line by means of this worthy study of the Bharatas, he is purified of all his evils, without exception. Whoever recites the story of the *Mahabharata*, with his mind well collected, achieves supreme success; I have no doubt about this. Whoever thoroughly understands, as it is being spoken, the *Bharata* that slipped out of the cup of the lips of Vyasa and is immeasurable, worthy, purifying, auspicious, and removes all evils, what use has he for ablutions with the waters of lake Pushkara? (18.5.31–46, 52–54)

Above all, the *Mahabharata* is an exposition of dharma, the moral and religious law of Hinduism, including the proper conduct of a king, of a warrior, of an individual living in times of calamity, and of a person seeking to attain freedom from rebirth. The text debates the clash between, on the one hand, the growing doctrine of non-violence toward all creatures (*ahimsa*) and, on the other,

both the justice of war and the still dominant tradition of animal sacrifice. It both challenges and justifies the entire class structure.

Many other deep philosophical questions, too, grow out of the human dilemmas that tangle the protagonists in their coils. Dharma continued to denote the sort of human activity that leads to human prosperity, glory, and victory ("Where there is dharma, there is victory," the text famously proclaims), but now it also had much more to do. For now the text was often forced to acknowledge the impossibility of maintaining any sort of dharma at all in a world where every rule seemed to be canceled out by another. The gods, too, were sometimes tripped up by the subtlety of dharma. Time and again when a character finds that every available moral choice is the wrong choice, or when one of the good guys does something obviously very wrong, he will mutter, or be told, "Dharma is subtle" (*sukshma*), thin and slippery as a fine silk sari, elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp, internally inconsistent as well as disguised, hidden, masked. People try again and again to do the right thing, and fail and fail, until they no longer know what the right thing is.

The *Mahabharata* deconstructs dharma, exposing the inevitable chaos of the moral life. The narrators kept painting themselves into a corner with the brush of dharma. Their backs to the wall, they could only reach for another story. And this is the epic tale that Carole Satyamurti now retells in a new form.

Preface

LOVE, LOSS, RAGE, envy, loyalty, heroism, spiritual aspiration, ethical and political dilemmas—the *Mahabharata* brings to life all these timeless human experiences, and more. I had been familiar with the story in outline for many years, but there came a point, in about 2007, when dissatisfaction with the various translations, abridgments, and versions of it in English prose crystallized into a wish to try to retell it myself—in the form of a poem, as the original is a poem. The sheer scale and grandeur of the epic were both daunting and exhilarating—the literary equivalent of the soaring Himalayan peaks which are a reference point for so many of its characters.

In some ways, it is a strange and distant world the *Mahabharata* conjures up, a strangeness that can show us something about the variety and breadth of human experience, about thought and behavior that otherwise we might never have imagined. And yet I am repeatedly struck by parallels, both at individual and at societal levels, between that world and our own. Perhaps most striking is the epic's moral complexity. Although it is clear who is in the right in the violent struggle for possession of the kingdom, each one of the "heroes," and the divine Krishna himself, engages at some point in morally dubious action, while the main "villain," Duryodhana, is true to his principles, and is blessed by heaven on his death.

The question of what constitutes right action (dharma) for a particular actor in particular circumstances is the central preoccupation of the poem—and of human beings in every time and place—as is the question of how to reconcile right action with self-interest. Throughout, the *Mahabharata* wrestles with these problems. Yudhishthira after his victory in the internecine war at the center of the poem is, as it were, the battleground on which incompatible

desires, and seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between desire and dharma, are played out.

The concept of dharma focuses mainly on action. This is Krishna's concern in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 32), but he is also concerned, in that passage, with the state of mind that gives rise to action. If action is undertaken in a spirit of right understanding, and of devotion to the deity, then the consequences of it are not the responsibility of the actor. There are parallels here with the position of the modern soldier, whose duty (dharma) is to obey, whose training prepares him or her to hand over responsibility to the commanding officer, and whose devotion, if not to God, is to country and comrades.

The *Mahabharata* says of itself that it is addressed to women as well as to men, and one of its unusual features, in the context of other ancient epics, is the importance given to women characters. For instance, what Homeric (mortal) women have to say has very little impact on events. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is told by her son, Telemachos, that power, including the power of speech, is the business of men, and she is sent off to her room! In the *Mahabharata*, by contrast, women—notably the Pandavas' wife, Draupadi—often refuse to be silenced. A number of female characters have their own, distinctive points of view and are seen to engage in debate and comment on an equal footing with men, especially, but not only, in matters of war and peace.

The poem is also explicitly addressed to people of all social positions, and although the importance is recurrently asserted of maintaining the distinct identities of the top two ranks in the social order, there are also places where, implicitly or explicitly, we are reminded of the worth, and the suffering, of people at the bottom of the social hierarchy—suffering whose relevance transcends time and place. The story of lowborn Ekalavya (Chapter 4), whose luminous gifts as an archer are destroyed by Arjuna's jealousy, has been adopted by the Dalit movement in India as an iconic instance of the injustice to which their community continues to be subjected. The burning of the Khandava Forest (Chapter 13), in which snakes and other forest dwellers are slaughtered in huge numbers, could be taken as a symbolic representation of the way that, always and everywhere, the powerful can oppress the weak.

Many retellings give rather scant attention to Bhishma's teachings to Yudhishthira, centered on the subject of how to be a good ruler (Books 12 and 13). These constitute over twenty-five percent of the whole, and it is true that there are elements in these books that can be omitted as being tangential to the central narrative, and of little interest to the modern reader. But timeless political concerns, and notably questions of how rulers can retain power, feature strongly in the *Mahabharata*. And like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, to which it bears a striking resemblance, what Bhishma has to say about how the ruler should operate, and what mistakes he should avoid, has direct relevance today and should not be treated in a perfunctory way. Nor, in my view, should Bhishma's teaching on spiritual matters. Although some of the beliefs about life and the afterlife, for example, may seem alien to many readers, when considered with an open mind they may be seen to have parallels with ideas that are commonplace in many religious traditions.

The *Mahabharata* also gives us plenty to think about from an ontological point of view. Its sense of the enormous scale of the cosmos, for instance, is very different from the depiction featured in the Greek and Roman myths, and prefigures modern understandings. And although one should be wary of drawing facile parallels between ancient Indian cosmology and modern physics, the idea that "every coherent thing tends inherently toward dissolution" (Chapter 53) is reminiscent of the concept of entropy.

Central to the epic is the prolonged account of the great war at Kurukshetra (Books 6–10), where we are invited to imagine the theater of war as a series of set-piece duels and battles, as though we were looking at an unfurling tapestry. The descriptions, and the vast numbers of combatants cited, are clearly not meant to be realistic, but rather to conjure up huge scale and grotesque detail in order to imprint the excesses of war on the imagination. At a time when arrows were the most lethal weapons known, the poets imagine celestial weapons which anticipate the mass-murderous capability of modern warfare—weapons which create pure victims, rather than losers in even-handed combat. As the First World War is commemorated a century on, we know how difficult it is to absorb, from facts alone, what war means for those affected by it. We need images; and we need language.

The *Mahabharata* gives us these, by piling detail upon detail, story

upon story, and often by mobilizing formulaic turns of phrase—stock epithets, vocatives, and descriptions—key features of the oral epic poetry which probably was part of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* tradition. One of the aspects of the way the poem is narrated is repetition or recurrence, as if to remind us, across its enormous canvas, of what it is important for us to remember.

Indeed, *within* the epic, the characters do not always remember what they have been told, or what they really know—or else they are unable to take it in and act on it. Dhritarashtra is repeatedly warned that his son will bring catastrophe on the Bharata clan; he believes it and yet he cannot bring himself to take the necessary preventive measures. Yudhishthira knows that gambling can be disastrous, but continues to engage in it anyway. Arjuna appears to have been persuaded by Krishna's great sermon and revelation on the battlefield (the *Bhagavad Gita*) that he has no alternative but to fight and kill his cousins and his teachers (Chapter 32). Yet he repeatedly makes only halfhearted efforts. And in fact, later on (Chapter 56) he declares that he does not remember what Krishna told him. It is as if Krishna's words graze past him and out into the wider world, where generations of Hindus and others have taken them to heart.

Fate, or the gods' design, is often invoked to explain such paradoxical behavior, and the tension between fate and human effort, free will and determinism, is a recurrent theme—and a continuing preoccupation for us today. How freely do we really choose between one course of action and another?

Much more could be said, but I want to mention a final aspect of the *Mahabharata*—its psychological plausibility. As just one example, I am interested in the fact that, for different reasons, neither Duryodhana's parents nor Karna's birth mother *see* them as children. Duryodhana's mother, by choosing to be blindfolded so as to have no advantage over her blind husband, is depriving her son of the affirmation and visible love that a baby would normally find in his/her mother's eyes. She is putting her husband first. Kunti, by abandoning Karna at birth to the vagaries of the river, is choosing to value respectability over the welfare of her baby. Although Duryodhana and Karna are loved and cherished during their

upbringing, as adults they are both characterized by extreme enviousness. It may seem fanciful, but it is as if nothing but the actual experience of the loving maternal gaze can convince them that they possess enough of value, and that the wealth or skill of others is not a diminishment of their own. No wonder they become soul mates!

Despite the availability of various versions of the *Mahabharata*, on page, screen, and in live performance, I am assuming that it will be less familiar to the average American or European reader than the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, for instance. I have seen my task as one of trying to open the reader's eyes—as my own were opened—to the richness of a literary masterpiece they may hardly have heard of until now.

I do not read Sanskrit, and have worked from scholarly translations (not other people's retellings) in order to come as close as possible to the original. Given its size (roughly 5,000 closely packed prose pages in the only complete English translation to date, by K. M. Ganguli,[1] published in the late nineteenth century), any version of the *Mahabharata* intended for the general reader is necessarily an abridgment. When I got to grips with Ganguli's translation, as well as with other (partial) translations,[2] I wanted to try to convey the epic's extraordinary qualities in as vivid and accessible a way as possible. My guiding principle throughout has been faithfulness to the original, as I have become yet another meta-narrator, though I have included some widely loved stories that do not figure in the Poona Critical Edition, or in Ganguli's translation. In my version, as in the original, the register is that of a storyteller addressing an audience.

In constructing my abridgment, I was guided by my sense of the outline and architecture of the epic, informed by my reading. My method was to read Ganguli and other translations, section by section, and then to put them aside, and give myself time to digest what I had read, intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically. Out of this would come a decision about what to include and what could

1. There is a complete translation by M. N. Dutt, also published in the late nineteenth century, but it is said to be heavily dependent on Ganguli.
2. See Suggestions for Further Reading at the back of the book.

be excluded; what must be foregrounded and what could be mentioned briefly. I then wrote my own version, checking what I had written against the original (translated) source, and doing this repeatedly throughout the entire writing process.

The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is mainly composed in *shlokas*, a verse form with specific metrical requirements and stanzaic arrangement, used in ancient India for a wide variety of texts, some imaginative, some religious, some practical. It is the wide applicability of the form that has led some people to the view that it was, for ancient India, what prose is for us, arguing that prose is the best medium in which to render the epic for a modern readership. But the *Mahabharata* is composed in patterned language, designed to be recited, or chanted, and I wanted something of that quality to come across in my version. For this reason, I have chosen a flexible form of blank verse, which arguably occupies a place in the English literary tradition analogous to that of the *shloka* in ancient Sanskrit. It is the meter of Shakespeare's plays, of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Wordsworth's *Prelude*. In saying this, I am not setting myself up as being on a par with the greats of English literature, but rather saying that the meter of blank verse is laid down in the mind's ear of anyone even slightly familiar with English poetry. It is a form particularly well suited to narrative verse, and is still widely used. It is also the basic meter of natural English speech. Listen to anyone speaking English, and you will soon pick up the rhythm of iambic pentameter.

Blank verse is an unrhymed form, with ten or eleven syllables, and five beats, or stresses, to the line. Of course no one would adhere rigidly to this description; that would make for a very mechanical and numbing effect. Rather, the rhythm of a five-beat line is laid down in the mind's ear as a template against which the reader or listener receives the line—which may stretch or contract the number of syllables, and which will not be composed entirely of iambs. For that reason, in this retelling, I would like the reader to imagine the names of at least the main people and places in their approximately correct pronunciation (AR-ju-na, for instance, not Ar-JOO-na). Many of the names may be unfamiliar, and the Glossary at the back of the book provides a guide to pronunciation, showing in each case where the stress or stresses should fall.

In choosing blank verse, I have allowed the number of syllables per line to vary slightly—that is, with very few exceptions, each line has nine, ten, or eleven syllables. Because I have imagined the poem being spoken, I have exercised some license as to what constitutes a syllable. In English speech, there are "half-syllables," as when syncope is used. So "chariot," for instance, does not have the same unequivocal three syllables as "destiny." Although the basic meter is pentameter, this too has been used with a certain latitude. Rather than every line having an audible five beats, I have heard the meter as allotting the same amount of *time* to each line, with syllables and stresses having the freedom to dispose themselves variously within that amount of time. Many lines do, in fact, have five beats, so I trust the reader to have that rhythm in mind as a benchmark, against which he/she receives those lines which seem not to conform metrically, and assigns them their due portion of time.[3] In the end, though, the reader should not be put off by thinking about these technical considerations, but should read as comes naturally to them.

Vinay Dharwadker points out in his Afterword that the *shloka* verse form is meant to be chanted or sung. English blank verse does not inhabit the same tradition, but it is meant to be *heard*, as well as read, and my version is composed for the ear, for reading aloud, as well as for the intelligence and the imagination. I have used internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance—not in a systematic way, but as aural threads that run through the poem.

The diction of the Sanskrit epic is relatively plain. There are many similes, but relatively little use of extended metaphors or heightened language, so in rendering the epic in language that does not draw attention to itself—that is, does not divert attention from the narrative drive—I am not betraying the original. Furthermore, as Coleridge argued,[4] many of the linguistic resources one

3. The difficulty readers may have in accommodating different metrical principles, and the need for them to be open to the musicality of a line, is discussed by Ted Hughes in his essay "Myths, Metres, Rhythms," in *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).

4. A poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry" (Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14).

looks for in a lyric poem are not appropriate in a long narrative one. The intensity of expression that is possible over a fairly short span could probably neither be sustained nor tolerated over 800 pages.

I have thought hard about the issue of gendered language. It has been common in English until relatively recently to refer to a non-specific human being as "he." This is no longer acceptable—and the *Mahabharata* is meant for everyone. I have therefore tried to use gender-neutral language where appropriate, and where it can be done without clumsiness.

As is explained more fully in the Afterword, the *Mahabharata* is structured as a series of narrative frames, one inside another, "authored" by a series of different speakers. Apart from the assumed anonymous meta-narrator, the entire epic consists of one character speaking to one or more others. There is a danger, in trying to reproduce this, of confusing the reader, and I have tried to deal with it partly by explicitly flagging who is speaking, and partly through the device of using prose when characters within the story are themselves telling a story.

At the center of any of the ancient epics is the quest for honor, glory, and fame. The afterlife of heroes depends on their being remembered. For the Pandavas, for tragic Karna, for Bhishma, for the single-minded Duryodhana, the great *Mahabharata* is that commemoration.

CAROLE SATYAMURTI

MAHABHARATA

AFTERWORD

The Poetry of the *Mahabharata*

VINAY DHARWADKER

Dites, qu'avez-vous vu?
Tell us, what have you seen?

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *Le Voyage* (1857)
ROBERT LOWELL, *Imitations* (1961)[1]

ONE OF THE pleasures of Carole Satyamurti's retelling of the *Mahabharata* is that it pursues a variety of goals and accomplishes them with seemingly effortless skill. It is a contemporary poem in English that seeks to stand aesthetically on its own, to be valued for its craft, thematic significance, and imaginative scope and depth. At the same time, however, it is overwhelmingly concerned with representing another poem as transparently as possible, even though the latter is remote in time and place as well as language and culture, and embodies a very different set of shaping principles. On a different plane, Satyamurti's poem sifts through the numerous interwoven stories of the original in order to fashion a cogent storyline, and creates a narrative momentum that will hold our interest continuously. But it also pulls us in other directions, as it flexibly accommodates a mass of material from Sanskrit, and

1. Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (1961; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), p. 68.

absorbs an abundance of unfamiliar terms, concepts, and qualities. Even as it maintains balance and restraint, the book takes some remarkable risks: adapting iambic pentameter and English blank verse to its practical tasks, it achieves a monumental size of almost 27,000 lines and 200,000 words. More than two and a half times the length of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and over three times the length of Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude*, it emerges modestly as the longest successful experiment in English narrative poetry in modern times.

Astonishing as Satyamurti's technical accomplishments are, however, it is her desire to re-narrate an ancient Indian poem that defines her primary purpose in these pages. But what kind of work is the *Mahabharata* itself, and what are its attributes that a modern version ought to represent? How does this English poem actually relate to its largely inaccessible Sanskrit source? And what sort of world do the original *Mahabharata* and this innovative retelling open up for us, as cosmopolitan readers here and now? Wendy Doniger's Foreword and Satyamurti's Preface offer two kinds of answer to these and related questions; in this Afterword, I would like to explore a third angle of vision that complements their perspectives.

TEXTUAL FORMATION[2]

The *Mahabharata* became a subject of international interest beyond the borders of Asia almost two hundred and fifty years ago, when the typographer and philologist Charles Wilkins, working in Calcutta under the patronage of Warren Hastings, then governor-general of the East India Company's Indian territories, started to translate it from Sanskrit into English. Like most other translators who have followed him, Wilkins was unable to complete the project, but he did publish his rendering of one part of

2. Detailed information on the epic's textual history, print publication, and critical edition appears in the general introduction to *The Mahabharata*, vol. 1: *The Book of the Beginning*, translated and edited by J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. xiii–xliv; see especially pp. xxiii–xxxix.

it, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in 1785, which proved to be both popular and influential in Europe.[3]

Ever since then, scholars and commentators have been divided into two main camps about the form and classification of the *Mahabharata*, especially in literary terms: one camp essentially views it as a "library," or a loose-leaf "encyclopedia" at best, whereas the other regards it, first and foremost, as a particular poem in Sanskrit, with a well-defined structure and definite aesthetic properties. It may be difficult to pinpoint the work's authorship, or to fix its date, place, and process of composition the way we can for modern works, but uncertainties of this kind do not deprive it of specificity as a Sanskrit poem. The poem's unifying principle does not lie in a "coherent point of view" or a fixed set of themes on the surface, but lies instead, as A. K. Ramanujan also argued in the 1980s, in a multilayered integration of shape and substance, sources and ends, at a deeper level of organization.[4] The aesthetic and imaginative aspects of the *Mahabharata* are vital factors in its reception in world literature today.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Indian and Euro-American scholars came to generally agree that, given the complexity and importance of the *Mahabharata*, it was essential to establish a definitive text in its original Sanskrit form. After some delay, a team of Indian Sanskritists, led mainly by V. S. Sukthankar, took up the task independently at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Poona (now Pune). They collated and calibrated 1,259 surviving manuscripts, from different parts of the subcontinent, and rigorously evaluated every word and every line in more than 89,000 verses attributed to the poem, before publishing its critical edition in 21 volumes between 1919 and 1969.[5] In the course of the past eight decades, the international community of Sanskrit scholars has arrived at a clear consensus that the Poona critical

3. J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: An Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 58–59 and 85.
4. On classical arguments and his own position, see Ramanujan's "Repetition in the *Mahabharata*," in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 161–83, especially p. 163.
5. V. S. Sukthankar et al., Critical Edition of the *Mahabharata*, 21 vols. (Poona, Maharashtra, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1919–69).

edition gives us the best version of the *Mahabharata* as a poem that possibly can be reconstructed in modern times.

AUTHORSHIP

All the information we can gather and all the inferences and assessments we can make indicate that the poem reconstructed in the critical edition was composed collectively in a preclassical variety of Sanskrit by successive generations of poets between about 400 BCE and 400 CE, on the Gangetic plains in north India, mostly under imperial regimes.[6] However, in view of the astonishing connectedness, consistency, and cogency the poem achieves on such a temporal and textual scale, it is conceivable that, at the end of the compositional cycle, the text may well have been assembled, edited, and integrated by a single group of poets, possibly working under one master editor, on the eve of India's classical age (which runs roughly from 400 to 1200 CE). Given our bias as modern readers—that a poem is "never finished, only abandoned"—it is plausible that the canonical Sanskrit form of the *Mahabharata* that we have today is the form in which that final editor or group of poets "abandoned" it to the future accidents of history some sixteen hundred years ago.

The text itself says that it is the work of a *rishi,* or visionary sage, of brahmin patrilineal descent named Krishna Dvaipayana, whose extraordinary life span stretches across several generations of principal characters in the poem, and who is an eyewitness to its events as well as a seminal participant in them. Krishna Dvaipayana—not to be confused with Lord Krishna, the very different divine-human character—is also addressed as "Vyasa" (literally, redactor or editor), and appears forty-four times in the poem's action. Once he has completed his great poem, Vyasa teaches it to others, including his preeminent pupil, Vaishampayana, who becomes its principal transmitter. Vyasa's text is broadcast for the first time in his

6. The case for multiple authors of the *Mahabharata* is made in van Buitenen, op. cit., "Introduction."

presence and under his supervision, when he authorizes Vaishampayana to recite it in its entirety to King Janamejaya, at a "snake sacrifice," a Vedic ritual of cosmomoral significance, which the latter sponsors in order to set the world in order early in his reign.

Among those attending this public event is a bard named Ugrashravas, whose father, Lomaharshana (literally, "the teller of hair-raising tales"), is the most famous bard of the times. Ugrashravas carries the vast narrative Vaishampayana delivers at King Janamejaya's sacrifice to another notable event, a conference of all the hermits who live in Naimisha Forest—a region that, famously, is as much a spiritual and ecological retreat from worldly human society as a sequestered celestial zone of magic and fabulation. At the invitation of the hospitable hermits, who are eager to hear his "tales of wonder," Ugrashravas recites the text he had heard from Vaishampayana; and, as the *Mahabharata*'s opening chapter informs us, Ugrashravas's renarration in the enchanted forest—at two removes from Vyasa—is the version that reaches the rest of humanity as the canonical form of the poem. Thus, unlike the Homeric epics, which offer barely a glimpse of the supposedly blind poet of Greek antiquity, the Sanskrit poem provides us with a full metanarrative about its origins and transmission.

A BASIC POETICS

What makes the *Mahabharata* a poem, and how is it put together? If we were to answer this question as fully as possible, we would arrive at an account of the Sanskrit work that would serve a purpose similar to that of Aristotle's *Poetics,*[7] which is concerned with poetry in the ancient Greek world, especially in the genre of drama and the subgenre of tragedy. In order to explain—theoretically and practically, descriptively and prescriptively—how tragic drama is composed and how it works in the theater, Aristotle breaks it down into six constituents and their mutual relations and func-

7. Aristotle, *Poetics,* edited and translated by Stephen Halliwell, Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47–55.