

## ✦ *KĀLAVIPHALĀNYĀSTRĀṆI TE SANTU:* STORY-TIME IN KARṆA'S DEFEAT AS DEPICTED IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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The paper focuses on three sets of events relating to Karṇa's defeat in the *Mahābhārata*: the weapons exchange (*MBh.* 3.284–294), the chariot ride (*MBh.* 8.26–69), and the two curses (*MBh.* 12.2–5). From a narratological perspective, it analyzes them in terms of story-time (the narrative timing of the events in the story). With this literary approach to Karṇa's character, its goal is to support the claims of a consciously designed *Mahābhārata*, one of whose authorial techniques would precisely be time management.

### 1. THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* AND KARṆA

The *Mahābhārata* is a work of literature.<sup>1</sup> This assertion, bewildering as it may appear if referring to any other masterpiece of world literature, is still a necessary one when it comes to *Mahābhārata* studies. Historically, arguments against the unity of the text have been based on assumptions about its extension in space (number of original/interpolated verses) and time (number of centuries of development). The critical edition,<sup>2</sup> alongside research on the prejudices behind such assumptions,<sup>3</sup> has now paved the way for a renewed appraisal of what a century ago used to be dismissed as “eine wissenschaftliche Ungeheuerlichkeit” (“a scientific monstrosity”) (Oldenberg 1922: 32).

The so-called “Methode der Synthetischen Kritik” (“method of synthetic criticism”) (Dahlmann 1899: 71–115) has led to a trend of scholarship that views the *Mahābhārata* as a “product of conscious literary design” (Adluri & Bagchee 2011: xiii), whether it be in an ahistorical manner<sup>4</sup>

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1 See Hildebeitel (1999: 156): “the largest inadequacy in *Mahābhārata* scholarship is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature”. See Adluri & Bagchee (2011: xiii–xiv).

2 See Brodbeck (2013: 135): “since the completion of the Poona edition, the analytic approach is less appropriate than it was previously, and the synthetic approach more so”.

3 See Adluri & Bagchee (2014: 151): “Summarizing the scholarly consensus of the epic's genesis to date, Hopkins presented the following chronological summary [the 400 BCE – 400 CE timeline].”

4 See Brodbeck (2016: 10): “I want to set history aside and approach the *Mahābhārata* as fiction.”

or in a historically placeable one.<sup>5</sup> Even though characters in the *Mahābhārata* have been approached more often through “microstudies” than as part of “holistic theories” (Brodbeck & Black 2007: 9), there are certainly a few instances of *literary* approaches to Karna.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Adarkar (2001: 1, underlining in the original) begins his dissertation by asserting, “The Karna narrative in the Mahābhārata is one of the great narratives of world literature, and a monograph on Karna’s character is long overdue.” Moreover, as part of his claims, it is stated,

These three examples [Karna reflecting/being reflected upon by Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Bhīṣma] delineate the way in which the critical method of examining character reveals complex (crystal-line) parallels and mirrorings between the characters of the epic. In this way, the examination of character helps us to rediscover and appreciate the subtle design and conscious artistry of the Mahābhārata. (Adarkar 2001: 9, underlining in the original)

Similarly, in his communicative-model study of Karna, Köhler (2014: 132) admits,

This analysis is based on two suppositions: the MBh will be heuristically considered (1) as a piece of literature, i.e. as an elaborate arrangement of textual parts into a structured unit, and (2) as possessing a structure which has been formed intentionally.

And yet, these two researchers are of the opinion that the *Mahābhārata* underwent a long period of composition,<sup>7</sup> for, as claimed by Fitzgerald (2010: 73), “compositional simultaneity is not required for structural integrity”. Although Hildebeitel (2011: 51), as one of the leading defenders of the “synthetic approach”, has himself acknowledged that his own “epiphany as to the written literary character of the MBh owed a good deal to prior points made by Fitzgerald”, the approach of a *literary* Karna does indeed agree more with that of a *literary Mahābhārata*, which was written from the start and completed in a relatively short period of time. Even more telling than Kṛṣṇa’s relationships with Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Bhīṣma are those that intertwine Kṛṣṇa and Karna: “The passage [concerning Karna’s death] is also illustrative of the textual issues that bear upon strategies of reading and interpreting the Mahabharata” (Hildebeitel 2007: 24).”

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5 See Hildebeitel (2001: 18–20): “I suggest, then, that the *Mahābhārata* was composed between the mid-second century BC and the year zero”; “I propose further that the *Mahābhārata* was written by ‘out of sorts’ Brahmans who may have had some minor king’s or merchant’s patronage, but, probably for personal reasons, show a deep appreciation of, and indeed exalt, Brahmans who practice the ‘way of gleaning’: that is, *uñchavṛtti* Brahmans reduced to poverty who live a married life and feed their guests and family by ‘gleaning’ grain”; and “I would also urge that the *Mahābhārata* must have been written over a much shorter period than is usually advanced [...] and at most through a couple of generations.” See also Wulff Alonso (forthcoming, translation by the author): “Let’s go back to what we know about his [sc. the author’s] chronology. We said that because of his Ovidian inclinations we can place him beginning at the second decade of the first century. There are arguments to support that he also profits from Statius. It is advisable to maintain mistrust because behind his *Thebaid* there are centuries of Hellenic elaborations that are unknown to us and that he may have used. Still, I would state that there are indications of him taking part in the world revealed by those late epics of the 1st century. This would delay the chronology of our author and his work, the *post quem*, let’s say three quarters of a century, but it would not interfere with the context that makes it possible.” (The author of the book has kindly granted us access to *El cazador de historias: Un encuentro con el autor del Mahābhārata* (“The hunter of stories: An encounter with the author of the Mahābhārata”) before its publication.)

6 See McGrath (2004: 1) for the most elaborate monograph on Karna using an “analytic approach”: “In my analysis there are two fundamental assumptions, one concerning the nature of preliterate epic poetry, and one assuming a basic Indo-European (IE) heroic substrate.”

7 See Adarkar (2001: 2, underlining in the original): “The Mahābhārata is a Sanskrit epic which had its origins in oral tradition and it was rescended, scholars believe today, sometime between 400 BCE and 400 CE.” Köhler (2014: 131) adds: “Originally being about a struggle between two related families reaching back into the hoary Vedic past, the MBh presumably has reached its (more or less) final form before the 7th century CE.”

Building upon these ideas and profiting from some theories of narratology (Bal 2017), this paper tackles temporality as a key aspect of story-time in the narrative of Karna's defeat. It also suggests that such uses of time can be added to the set of authorial techniques deployed while consciously designing the *Mahābhārata*.

## 2. NARRATOLOGY AND TIME

Understood as “the ensemble of theories of narratives” (Bal 2017: 3), narratology reveals itself as a useful tool for approaching “a vast narrative” (Hegarty 2012: 2) such as the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>8</sup> From a narratological perspective, a distinction is established between *fabula*, that is, “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 2017: 5), and *story*, that is, the content of a narrative text that “produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a fabula” (Bal 2017: 5). A fabula consists of some basic elements: the events themselves, their actors, their time, and their location. Likewise, a story offers a set of correlated aspects: respectively, the ordering of such events, the characters, the temporality, the space, and the focalization—an aspect without a specific precedent within the elements of the fabula but nonetheless essential for storytelling.

Time is, therefore, one of the pairs of concepts that serve for narratological studies.<sup>9</sup> Following the distinction between fabula and story, one can speak of fabula-time and story-time. The first one designates the chronological timing of events in the fabula; the second one, the narrative timing of the events in the story. From the point of view of fabula-time, there are two types of duration (Bal 2017: 178–180): crisis and development. Crisis-type duration is characterized by the compression of events within a short period of time, whereas development-type duration profits from the expansion of events over long periods of time. These types of duration are not absolute but relative, and they constitute opposite ends of a spectrum rather than opposing poles. For instance, texts with frame and embedded narratives, like the *Mahābhārata*, tend more toward development, but they can also depict moments of crisis, as is the case with Karna.

From the point of view of story-time, there are three forms of temporality (Bal 2017: 67–102): sequential ordering, rhythm, and frequency. The sequential ordering of the story is better understood in terms of chronological deviation from the fabula. The direction, the distance, and the span of such deviations can reveal a lot about a particular narrator's storytelling techniques. When speaking of a temporal deviation, its direction is either forwards (toward the future) or backwards (toward the past), its distance depends on whether it leads to a time that is closer or further away from that of the main events, and its span refers to the amount of time taken by the deviation itself.

When analyzing the direction of a temporal deviation, the terms *anticipation* and *retroversion* are useful for relating it to the future or to the past, respectively (Bal 2017: 71). Furthermore, when appraising the distance of a temporal deviation, the following concepts are suggested (Bal 2017: 76–77): external anticipation (forwards and outside the main events), external retroversion (backwards and outside the main events), internal anticipation (forwards and inside the main events), internal retroversion (backwards and inside the main events), mixed anticipation

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hämeen-Anttila's (2018) and Špicová's (2019; 2022) narratological approaches to the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>9</sup> See de Jong & Nünlist (2007) for an example of a narratological study that is centered on time and carried out within another ancient narrative tradition.

(forwards and both inside and outside the main events), and mixed retroversion (backwards and both outside and inside the main events).

Rhythm, the second form of temporality, can be determined by contrasting the amount of time taken by events in the fabula against the amount of space taken by events in the story. Brief events narrated in a lengthy way signal a slow rhythm, but long-lasting events narrated briefly point to a fast rhythm. Bal (2017: 90) proposes five different *tempī*, ranging from that in which the fabula-time is the longest to that in which the story-time is the longest: ellipsis, summary, scene, slow-down, and pause.

Finally, frequency, the third form of temporality, relates to the number of times that events in the fabula are presented in the story. One event with several presentations comprises a higher frequency, while several events with one presentation are equivalent to a lower frequency. As was the case with rhythm, for frequency Bal (2017: 102) also advances a five-fold typology: singular (one event, one presentation), plurisingular (various events, same number of presentations), varisingular (various events, different number of presentations), repetitive (one event, various presentations), and iterative (various events, one presentation). *Repetition* and *iteration* are particularly helpful for the texts under consideration.

### 3. FABULA-TIME AND STORY-TIME: THE TWO CURSES, THE WEAPONS EXCHANGE, AND THE CHARIOT RIDE

The fabula of Karna has been put back together by Hildebeitel (2007: 26–27) in the following fourteen events:<sup>10</sup> (1) Birth and abandonment (*MBh.* 1.104; 3.297–298), (2) a curse by an unnamed Brahman, motivated by the unintentional killing of a cow and causing the wheel to get swallowed by the earth (*MBh.* 8.29; 12.3), (3) a curse by Rāma Jāmadagnya, motivated by the intentional impersonation of a Brahman and causing him to forget the *brahmāstra* (*MBh.* 8.29; 12.3), (4) ridicule at the tournament and appointment as king (*MBh.* 1.126–127), (5) the cursing of the snake (*MBh.* 1.218), (6) the death threat at the dice match (*MBh.* 2.68.32–36), (7) possession (*MBh.* 3.240.19), (8) the giving of earrings and armor to Indra in exchange for the *śakti* (javelin) (*MBh.* 3.284–294), (9) the announced destruction of his *tejas* by Śalya (*MBh.* 5.8), (10) the remembered curse by Rāma Jāmadagnya and the first refusal to fight (*MBh.* 5.61), (11) temptation (*MBh.* 5.138–144), (12) the remembered curses by Rāma Jāmadagnya and by the anonymous Brahman, and the second refusal to fight (*MBh.* 5.165), (13) the killing of Ghaṭotkaca with the *śakti* (*MBh.* 7.154–158), and (14) getting killed by Arjuna (*MBh.* 8.65–68).

The narrative ordering is contrary to the chronology. Moreover, relying on the presentation of selected highlights from Karna's life, it points toward a crisis-type duration.<sup>11</sup> From the birth and

10 Cf. Mani's (1975: 391–393) six main events (birth, education, curse, kingdom, armor/earrings, and ascent), together with ten interspersed "details" about his life and fifteen "incidents" related to the war, including the temptation, the refusal to fight, the killing of Ghaṭotkaca, and getting killed by Arjuna. In any case, it is worth remembering that there are many more mentions of Karna interspersed throughout the *Mahābhārata*. See also Bowles' (2006: 15–50; 2008: xv–lv) introductions to his translation of the *Karna-parvan*, and Brodbeck's (2009: 166ff.; 2021: 252ff.) analyses in connection with the narrative of Karna's life.

11 See Bal (2017: 179): "A development may present, in historical order, as much material as seems fit [...] The selection of the crisis form implies a restriction: only brief periods from the life of the actor are presented." See also Hildebeitel (2007: 27): "Unlike Yudhishtira and Arjuna, who as winning heroes are the subject of consecutive narrative, Karna is the subject of a fragmented counter-text [...] that the poets leave readers to piece together from segments where he is part of the main story and patches where he is the subject of selective memories—not only others' memories but his own."

the abandonment (1), the narrative fast-forwards to the ridicule at the tournament and the appointment as king (4). The time span is not specified, but it must be several years, because it implies his coming of age. Around that same point, the audience learns about the cursing of the snake (5), which is the last piece of information coming from the *Ādīparvan*. The *Sabhāparvan* anticipates his death with a threat at the dice match (6), while the *Āraṇyakaparvan* relates his possession (7) and his giving of earrings and armor to Indra in exchange for the *śakti* (javelin) (8), and then turns back to the birth and the abandonment (1). After a clear progression (4, 5, 6, 7, 8), the text goes back to the start, representing a circle that instead of moving from birth to death emphasizes the birth and virtually ignores the death, which is only alluded to by the threat.

The slow build-up agrees with a development-type duration, but the significance of the character also fits with the crisis-type.<sup>12</sup> From the *Udyogaparvan* on, when the war is imminent, so too is Karṇa's demise. Furthermore, from this point on, the moving back and forth in time is much more evident. There is anticipation in the announced destruction of his *tejas* by Śalya (9), and there is a mixture of retroversion and anticipation not only in the remembered curse by Rāma Jāmadagnya and the first refusal to fight (10) but also after his temptation (11), in the remembered curses by Rāma Jāmadagnya and by the unnamed Brahman, and in the second refusal to fight (12). The killing of Ghaṭotkaca with the *śakti*, found in the *Droṇaparvan*, is pivotal in that it both recalls the encounter with Indra and announces the one with Arjuna.

The *Karṇaparvan*, being an entire major book named after Karṇa, is also telling in terms of the function of the character within the text. Instead of just building up to the duel, the narrative delays it by a playful use of the story-time.<sup>13</sup> A version of the two curses (2 and 3), distant in the fabula-time but nearby in the story-time, is presented right before his getting killed by Arjuna (14). To put it another way, there is a clear emphasis in the fact that the longest temporal jump within the fabula-time is placed right before the most relevant event within the story-time. Yet, anticipation is not the only procedure used to emphasize an event. The technique is also that of an enclosure of the event, which is placed after an anticipation and before a retroversion. This last retroversion, consisting of another retelling of the two curses (2 and 3), stands apart by signaling the longest temporal jump within the story-time, given the fact that it appears in the *Śāntiparvan*.

Birth, death, and the curses linking them together seem to be the key events. Those are the ones in which the chronology gets inverted to a higher degree: "The interventions in chronology that become manifest can be significant for the vision of the fabula which they imply" (Bal 2017: 182). The list can be further augmented through the addition of the giving of the earrings and armor to Indra in exchange for the *śakti*. This infallible spear features in two episodes, whereas the earrings and the armor are precisely the elements that set this character apart. Following these findings, the rest of the paper focuses on three sets of events, to which a new sequence is now assigned, based on their placement within the fabula-time: (a) the two curses, (b) the weapons exchange, and (c) the chariot ride.

For Karṇa's defeat in the *Mahābhārata*, the fabula-time is as follows: (a) *during his youth*, he learns about the *brahmāstra* from Rāma Jāmadagnya and receives two curses, (b) *during the exile*, he exchanges his earrings and armor for Indra's *śakti*, and (c) *during the war*, he

12 See Bal (2017: 179): "In a development, the global significance is built up slowly from the strings of events. [...] In a crisis, the significance is central and informs what we might call the surrounding elements."

13 Such a narrative technique also exploited in the Homeric epics. See Wulff Alonso (2014) for a cultural-contact explanation of the similarities between the *Mahābhārata* and what would be one of its sources.

rides a chariot alongside Śalya and gets killed by Arjuna. On the other hand, the *Mahābhārata* orders the story-time like this: (b) the weapons exchange *during the thirteenth year of exile* (*MBh.* 3.284–294), (c) the chariot ride *during the seventeenth day of war* (*MBh.* 8.26–69), and (a) the two curses *during the aftermath of the war* (*MBh.* 12.2–5).<sup>14</sup>

The events of the weapons exchange (b) receive a lengthy presentation in the *Kuṇḍalāharaṇaparvan* (*MBh.* 3.284–294). From the opening of this minor book, whose narrator is Vaiśampāyana, an explicit reference to the story-time is provided. The action is set at the beginning of the thirteenth year of the Pāṇḍavas' exile: the forest dwelling is completed, and the incognito undertaking is pending. The first event (b1) is an anticipation: Indra prepares to beg Karna: <sup>15</sup> *dvādaśe samatikrānte varṣe prāpte trayodaśe | pāṇḍūnām hitakṛc chakraḥ karṇam bhikṣitum udyataḥ ||* (*MBh.* 3.284.5; “When the twelfth year had passed and the thirteenth come, Śakra, in order to do the Pāṇḍus a favor, prepared to go begging for Karna.”)

The second event (b2) is also an anticipation: Sūrya warns Karna. Just as Indra is about to intercede in favor of his son Arjuna, so too is Sūrya for his son Karna. Some details here are of particular interest. The warning allows for the character to proceed with the same degree of knowledge that the audiences had already acquired from the narrator. The phrasing, appropriately, is in the future tense. The imagery of the Brahman is intended to tie this scene together with that of the two curses. This connection becomes even clearer when considering that Karna's earrings are tantamount to his immortality—and, consequently, his lack thereof leads to his demise.<sup>16</sup> Karna's future death is thus expected by both the character and audience, but it is also longed for by the character himself:<sup>17</sup> *upāyāsyati śakras tvām pāṇḍavānām hitepsayā | brāhmaṇacchadmanā karṇa kuṇḍalāpajihīṛṣayā ||* (*MBh.* 3.284.11; “Śakra will approach you in the guise of a brahmin, Karna, seeking to rob you of your earrings in order to help the Pāṇḍavas.”)

The third event (b3) points to a mixture of retroversion and anticipation: Karna is born as a Pāṇḍava. On one hand, with the notion of secrecy, it takes the action back to the character's birth. In a sense, the revelation of his true origin is like a rebirth. And on the other hand, by announcing that such a secret will be known by him, it foreshadows his conversations with Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī, which, just like the one he is having at this precise moment with Sūrya, will not convince him to change his mind. The phrasing, once again, is quite telling: he will know (*vetsyati*) at the right time (*kāle*). The audience has known about it since the *Ādiparvan*; the character will too, by the *Udyogaparvan*; and other characters, as is the case with his unaware brothers, will not until the *Śāntiparvan*. In this way, if Karna will not do anything to change the outcome, the Pāṇḍavas cannot.

14 Also anticipated in *MBh.* 5.61 and 5.165.

15 All Sanskrit quotations are from Sukthankar, Belvalkar & Vaidya (1933–1971). The English translations are from van Buitenen (1975) for the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, from the author of this paper for the *Karṇaparvan*, and from Fitzgerald (2004) for the *Śāntiparvan*.

16 See *MBh.* 3.284.18: *yadi dāsyasi karṇa tvam sahaje kuṇḍale śubhe | āyusaḥ prakṣayam gatvā mṛtyor vaśam upesyasi ||* (“Karna, if you give away your beautiful inborn earrings, you will forfeit your life and fall in the power of death”).

17 See *MBh.* 3.284.26–28: *yady āgacchati śakro mām brāhmaṇacchadmanāvṛtaḥ | hitārthaṃ pāṇḍuputrāṇām khecarottama bhikṣitum || dāsyāmi vibudhaśreṣṭha kuṇḍale varma cottamam | na me kīrtiḥ praṇāśyeta triṣu lokeṣu viśrutā || madvidhasyāyaśasyam hi na yuktaṃ prānarakṣaṇam | yuktaṃ hi yaśasā yuktaṃ maraṇam lokasaṃmatam ||* (“If Śakra comes to me in the guise of a brahmin, to beg from me in order to favor the sons of Pāṇḍu, O thou most-high of the Walkers of the Sky, I shall give him my earrings, best of the gods, and my superb armor, lest my fame vanish, which is renowned in the three worlds. For to the likes of me, infamy that saves our lives is not fitting, but fitting is a glorious death that the world approves.”)

*asti cātra paraṃ kiṃ cid adhyātmaṃ devanirmitam |  
 ataś ca tvāṃ bravīmy etat kriyatām aviśaṅkayā ||  
 devaguhyaṃ tvayā jñātum na śakyam puruṣarṣabha |  
 tasmān nākhyāmi te guhyaṃ kāle vetsyati tad bhavan ||*

There is something superior within yourself, which has been created by a god. Hence am I speaking to you: act without hesitation. A secret of the gods you cannot know, bull among men; therefore, I shall not tell you the secret. You shall know it in time. (*MBh.* 3.285.8–9)

If Sūrya moved the story-time back to Karṇa’s birth, Karṇa himself moves it forward to his education, which is still in the past from the point of view of the events surrounding the weapons exchange. Thus, the fourth event (b4) is when Karṇa studies under Rāma Jāmadagnya. However, this allusion to the event emphasizes the procurement of the *brahmāstra* but conveniently ignores the two curses, one of which refers precisely to him forgetting what he had learned: *tavāpi viditaṃ deva mamāpy astrabalaṃ mahat |jāmadagnyād upāttaṃ yat tathā droṇān mahātmanaḥ ||* (*MBh.* 3.286.8; “Thou knowest too, O God, that I have a great power of weapons that I have obtained from Jāmadagnya and the great-spirited Droṇa”.)

What would have been a one-directional transaction of begging now turns into a reciprocal transaction of exchange, thanks to Sūrya’s advice: the earrings (*kuṇḍale*) for the “javelin” (*śaktim*; *MBh.* 3.286.14a). After that, Karṇa wakes up. All that happened between Sūrya and that sound-asleep Karṇa is then retold to Sūrya by this woken-up Karṇa, just to be sure. This retelling is done “in sequence” (*ānupūrvyeṇa*; *MBh.* 3.286.18c). To tell something in sequence is to follow the fabula-time, whereas to have told it out of sequence would have been to produce a separate story-time. The text shows awareness of the duplicity, which would imply that the choices for altering the chronology are conscious ones.

From here on, the text moves backwards, following its own footsteps. The fifth event (b5) is the same as the third: Karṇa is born as a Pāṇḍava. Karṇa’s birth is presented as a story of yore, thus highlighting its distance from the current moment in the story-time.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the narrative, there are several references to a linear chronology: the Brahman comes, he stays for a year with Kuntī,<sup>19</sup> some time passes and Kuntī summons Sūrya,<sup>20</sup> her pregnancy proceeds, and she gives birth to Karṇa.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the birth, the earrings and the armor stand out. They are mentioned in anticipation by Kuntī,<sup>22</sup> and at the actual birth by the narrator.<sup>23</sup> They are also

18 See *MBh.* 3.287.4a–b: *kuntibhojaṃ purā rājan brāhmaṇaḥ samupasthitaḥ* (“Sire, of yore a certain brahmin appeared before Kuntibhoja.”).

19 See *MBh.* 3.289.12a: *tataḥ saṃvatsare pūrṇe* (“when a year had passed”).

20 See *MBh.* 3.290.001a-b: *gate tasmin dvijaśreṣṭhe kasmimś cit kālaparyaye* (“when that best of the twice-born had gone and some time had passed”).

21 See *MBh.* 3.292.4: *tataḥ kālena sā garbhaṃ suṣuve varavarṇinī | kanyaiva tasya devasya prasādād amaraprabham ||* (“And in time the fair, unmarried woman gave birth to a child as lustrous as an immortal by the grace of the god.”)

22 See *MBh.* 3.291.17: *yadi putro mama bhavet tvattaḥ sarvatamopaha | kuṇḍalī kavacī śūro mahābāhur mahābalaḥ ||* (“If I receive a son from you, dispeller of all darkness, let him be ringed and armored, a hero of strong arms and great strength!”)

23 See *MBh.* 3.292.5: *tathaiva baddhakavacaṃ kanakojjvalakuṇḍalam | haryakṣaṃ vṛṣabhaskandhaṃ yathāśya pītaṃ tathā ||* (“He had a coat of mail tied on, and sparkling golden earrings; and he was as orange-eyed and bull-shouldered as his father.”)

mentioned twice by retroversion when Karṇa receives the names Vasuṣeṇa and Vaikartana.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the sixth event (b6) is the same as the fourth: Karṇa studies under Rāma Jāmadagnya. The story-time keeps in line with the fabula-time: Karṇa comes of age,<sup>25</sup> and he studies under Droṇa and Kṛpa but also under Rāma Jāmadagnya.<sup>26</sup>

The climactic moment of the weapons exchange begins with Indra's actual arrival, which was announced at the very beginning of the passage. This happens at noon while Karṇa is praising Sūrya, because "at that point of time" (*tatkāle*; *MBh.* 3.293.22c) he could not refuse what was asked of him. There are two key events by which the ending of the episode recalls its beginning. In the next event (b7), Indra begs Karṇa,<sup>27</sup> (thus recalling b1); and in the following one (b8), Indra warns Karṇa<sup>28</sup> (thus suggesting b2).

If the presentation of the weapons exchange was lengthy, that of the chariot ride (c), with its forty-four *adhyāyas*, is even more so. Once again, sequential ordering plays a key role. Even in the middle of the fight, there is time to look back—by means of yet more instances of retroversion—to the curses that had, long before, determined Karṇa's tragic outcome. Shortly after the ride begins, Karṇa tells Śalya about what he deems to be events from earlier times (*purā*; *MBh.* 8.29.4b). First (c1), Rāma Jāmadagnya curses Karṇa: for impersonating a Brahman, he will forget, during his time of action (*karmakāle*), about the *brahmāstra*: *prṣṭas cāhaṃ tam avocaṃ maharṣiṃ; sūto 'ham asmīti sa mām śasāpa | sūtopadhāv āptam idaṃ tvayāstraṃ; na karmakāle pratibhāsyati tvām ||* (*MBh.* 8.29.6; "After being questioned, I told the great seer that I was a charioteer, and he cursed me: 'You have obtained this weapon while having the status of a charioteer, so during the time for action, it will not present itself to you.'") Thus, the curse that was ignored when mentioning the studies (b4) is now emphasized.

Second (c2), an unnamed Brahman curses Karṇa: for killing a cow, his wheel will get swallowed by the earth while he fights: *śvabhre te patatāṃ cakram iti me brāhmaṇo 'vadat | yudhyamānasya saṃgrāme prāptasyaikāyane bhayam ||* (*MBh.* 8.29.31; "A Brahman told me, 'May your wheel fall into a hole when you are at war fighting, and when this has happened, may fear be your only path.'") In the fabula-time, the curse by the unnamed Brahman predates that by Rāma Jāmadagnya. This makes sense, since the curse by the unnamed Brahman would have occurred *while* Karṇa was Rāma Jāmadagnya's student, and that relationship would not have been tenable after the teacher's curse.

In turn, the story-time presents Rāma Jāmadagnya's curse first, and this placing seems to be motivated by the impact that its outcome has at this point in the narrative. Because of this curse, Karṇa forgets about the *brahmāstra*, which would have sufficed for a rapid triumph from

24 See *MBh.* 3.293.12: *vasuvarmadharam ḍṛṣṭvā taṃ bālaṃ hemakuṇḍalam | nāmāsya vasuṣeṇeti tataś cakrur dvijātayaḥ ||* ("Seeing that the child wore a costly armor and golden earrings, the twice-born gave him the name of Vasuṣeṇa". See also *MBh.* 3.294.38c-d: *tathotkṛtya pradadau kuṇḍale te; | vaikartanaḥ karmaṇā tena karṇaḥ ||* ("He cut off his earrings and gave those too. For his feat he is known as Vaikartana."))

25 See *MBh.* 3.293.14b: *vavṛdhe* ("grew up"); *MBh.* 3.293.15b: *vivṛddhaṃ samaye* ("grown up in time").

26 See *MBh.* 3.293.17: *droṇāt kṛpāc ca rāmāc ca so 'stragrāmaṃ caturvidham | labdhvā loke 'bhavat khyātaḥ parameśvāsātām gataḥ ||* ("He obtained the fourfold weaponry from Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Rāma and became famed in this world as a superb archer.")

27 See *MBh.* 3.294.4: *yad etat sahaṃ varma kuṇḍale ca tavānagha | etad utkṛtya me dehi yadi satyavratō bhavān ||* ("It is your inborn armor and earrings I want, man sans blame. Cut them off and give them to me, if you are a man of your word!")

28 See *MBh.* 3.294.33: *vidyamāneṣu śastreṣu yady amoghām asaṃśaye | pramatto mokṣyase cāpi tvayy evaiṣāḥ patiṣyati ||* ("But if you unleash the Never-failing Spear absentmindedly when other weapons are at hand, it shall fall upon you yourself, without a doubt.")



the distance. This having failed, hand-to-hand fighting turns out to be Plan B. The stuck wheel, resulting from the unnamed Brahman's curse, is *then* far more relevant to the plot. Even a small detail like this one can serve in understandings of the implications of sequential ordering in storytelling.

But the narrator does not leave it there. Through a second change in the order of events, the ordering of the story-time now coincides with that of the fabula-time: the curse of the unnamed Brahman is alluded to before that of Rāma Jāmadagnya. This allows both for the tragedy to be emphasized and for the reversal to come full circle. In the very last mention of these events (c3), Karṇa's wheel gets swallowed by the earth (thus recalling c2) and Karṇa forgets the *brahmāstra* (thus suggesting c1): *tataś cakram apatat tasya bhūmau; sa vihvalaḥ samare sūtaputraḥ | ghūrṇe rathe brāhmaṇasyābhiśāpād; rāmād upātte 'pratibhāti cāstre ||* (MBh. 8.66.42; "Then, his wheel fell into the ground, and the son of the charioteer was agitated in battle when his chariot was whirling because of the Brahman's curse, and when the weapon obtained from Rāma did not present itself.") Here, the frequency is low and almost iterative.

Having been ignored during the weapons exchange, and having been emphasized during the chariot ride, the two curses (a) receive a brief but crucial treatment during the aftermath of the war. Now aware of their bond, Yudhiṣṭhira struggles to make sense of Karṇa's death. Nārada helps him by revealing this "secret of the gods" (*guhyaṃ [...] devānām; MBh. 12.2.3a*), which is precisely what it had been called at MBh. 3.285.8–9. Then, Nārada proceeds to tell Yudhiṣṭhira about these events from earlier times (*purā; MBh. 12.2.3d*), which is also what Karṇa had told to Śalya at MBh. 8.29.4b. In retrospect, all the pieces start falling into place.

First (a1), Karṇa kills a cow. He does so on a certain occasion (*kadā cit*) during his stay at Rāma Jāmadagnya's hermitage: *sa kadā cit samudrānte vicarann āśramāntike | ekaḥ khaḍgadhanuṣpāṇiḥ paricakrāma sūtajah |* (MBh. 12.2.19; "One time that *suta*'s son went off by himself and wandered about the fringes of the hermitage, near the ocean, carrying his sword and bow.") This act brings upon Karṇa the curse of the unnamed Brahman, which is now phrased in a much more specific way: Karṇa's wheel will get swallowed by the earth when he fights against his sworn enemy, who, in turn, will behead him. That enemy is Arjuna.

*yena vispardhase nityaṃ yadarthaṃ ghaṭase 'niśam |  
yudhyatas tena te pāpa bhūmiś cakram grasiṣyati ||  
tataś cakre mahīgraste mūrdhānaṃ te vicetasah |  
pātayiṣyati vikramya śatrur gaccha narādhamā ||*

The earth will swallow up the wheel of your chariot, you wicked man, when you are fighting against the rival with whom you always vie, on account of whom you exert yourself without rest. And when the earth has swallowed your wheel, your enemy will attack you and lop off your stupid head while you are distracted. Go, you vile man. (MBh. 12.2.24–25)

Second, (a2) Karṇa impersonates a Brahman. Even though the impersonation begins before the killing of the cow, it only ends on a certain occasion (*kadā cid*) while at the hermitage, after Rāma Jāmadagnya falls asleep on Karṇa's lap and an insect bites Karṇa's thigh: *tataḥ kadā cid rāmas tu carann āśramam antikāt | karṇena sahito dhīmān upavāsena karśitaḥ ||* (MBh. 12.3.4; "One time Rāma was roaming about with Karṇa in the vicinity of the hermitage when that wise one became weak because of his fasting.") Focused on succeeding as a good disciple, the Kshatriya-born Karṇa fails as a believable Brahman, and Rāma Jāmadagnya curses him. The specificity of the curse is also noteworthy, since this sort of alter ego that he will be fighting when he forgets the *brahmāstra* is none other than Arjuna.

*yasmān mithyopacarito astralobhād iha tvayā |  
tasmād etad dhi te mūḍha brahmāstraṃ pratibhāsyati ||  
anyatra vadhakālāt te sadṛśena sameyuṣaḥ |  
abrāhmaṇe na hi brahma dhruvaṃ tiṣṭhet kadā cana ||*

Since your craving for it led you to behave falsely, you mixed up fool, you will remember this Brahman shot at all times except the moment when you will be killed, having joined battle with one like yourself. For the Brahman never remains fixed in one who is not a Brahman. (*MBh.* 12.3.30–31)

#### 4. KARṆA'S DEFEAT: THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* AND *KARṆABHĀRAM*

A single set of events—that is, the two curses—has, by the end of the second third of the narrative, been presented on three separate occasions: twice during the chariot ride and once during the aftermath of the war. This is what in narratology is called repetition. Each presentation of these events emphasizes their significance, whether it be by means of anticipation or retroversion—or even both techniques. The story of Karṇa's defeat in the *Mahābhārata* is one of emphasized repetition,<sup>29</sup> and this was noticed by the author of the *Karṇabhāram*,<sup>30</sup> which is one of the six *Mahābhārata*-inspired plays attributed to Bhāsa.

The *Karṇabhāram* opens with a prologue intended to praise Viṣṇu. In its only act, it presents an adaptation of Karṇa's dialogue with his newly appointed charioteer Śalya. After the first of three calls to arms (*KBh.* 5.1), Karṇa, who is aware of his relationship with the Pāṇḍavas, tells the story of how, during his time studying under Rāma Jāmadagnya, he came to master the art of war, only for his knowledge to be then nullified by a curse coming from his own teacher. Following the second of the three calls to arms (*KBh.* 14.4), Karṇa meets with Indra, who, in the guise of a Brahman, begs Karṇa for a boon. Since Karṇa's cows, horses, elephants, gold, lands, and sacrifices are not deemed sufficient, and since neither is Karṇa's own life, Indra manages to get what he had in mind all along: Karṇa's armor and earrings.

Even against Śalya's advice, Karṇa proceeds to cut off his armor and earrings, upon which Indra proclaims Arjuna's upcoming victory. Right before the end, another character in the guise of a Brahman brings Indra's *śakti*, with which Karṇa is going to be able to fight Arjuna now that he has been deprived of his greatest strength. The play closes with the third and last call to arms (*KBh.* 24.1). This summarized and reinterpreted version of Karṇa's demise can be helpful as a point of comparison when carrying out narratological analysis, such as the one presented here. If the *Mahābhārata*'s story time is b / c / a (weapons exchange / chariot ride / two curses), that of the *Karṇabhāram* is c / a / b (chariot ride in *KBh.* 3–8 / one curse in *KBh.* 9–11 / weapons exchange in *KBh.* 15–25).

The epic text starts in the middle and moves, through a circle-like sequence, to the end and then to the beginning, whereas the dramatic text begins at the end and progresses, through the same kind of circular sequence, to the beginning and then to the middle.<sup>31</sup> The point of the fabula-time chosen by each genre to wrap up the story-time can reveal a lot about their different

29 As pointed out by McGrath (2004: 2), “We hear the account of how his [Karṇa's] birth occurred four times in the course of the *Mahābhārata*. There is something about this tale of origin which is extremely important for the narrative. No other heroic genesis receives such repeated consideration, nor is it that its retelling is being used to frame episodes.”

30 All Sanskrit quotations are from Bhasa-Projekt Universität Würzburg (2007). The English translations are from Woolner & Sarup (1931).

31 According to Bal (2017: 66), both narrative and theater are “time-based arts”.

features and procedures. The epic story-time is overdetermined,<sup>32</sup> with a couple of extra explanations, while the dramatic story-time is conflated. In other words, the play merges the moment of the chariot ride (which comes later in the epic) with that of the weapons exchange (which comes earlier in the epic).

In the *Karṇabhāram*, not only are the two curses conflated into one, but also this single curse is the rope that binds together the two conflated moments of the fabula: the chariot ride and the weapons exchange. The curse is straightforward, stating, “Useless be thy weapons in the time of need (*kālaviphalāny astrāṇi te santu*)” Although it is not found in the *Mahābhārata*, it seems like a very suitable way of beginning—and ending—the reflections in this paper.

*kr̥tte vajramukhena nāma kṛmiṇā daivān mamorudvaye  
nidrācchedabhayād asahyata guror dhairyāt tadā vedanā |  
utthāya kṣatajokṣitaḥ sa sahasā roṣānaloddīpito  
buddhvā mām ca śasāpa kālaviphalāny astrāṇi te santv iti ||*

By ill chance an insect called “steely teeth” bored through both my thighs. Afraid of disturbing my teacher’s slumber I endured the pain with fortitude. Awaking in a stream of blood, he found me out and straightaway blazed into fiery wrath and cursed me, saying, “Useless be thy weapons in the time of need.” (*KBh.* 10)

As seen, temporality is a key aspect in the narrative of Karṇa’s defeat. A narratological approach, such as the one resulting from an application of Bal’s (2017) theories, has proven useful when analyzing this character from a literary point of view. The distinction between the fabula-time or the chronological timing of events in the fabula, on one hand, and the story-time or the narrative timing of events in the story, on the other, has been particularly helpful for evaluating time as one of the authorial techniques at play in the *Mahābhārata*.

Out of the fourteen events relating to Karṇa’s life—(1) birth and abandonment, (2) the curse by the Brahman, (3) the curse by Rāma Jāmadagnya, (4) ridicule and accession, (5) the cursing of the snake, (6) the death threat, (7) possession, (8) the giving up of earrings and the armor, (9) announced discouragement, (10) the remembered curse by Rāma Jāmadagnya, (11) temptation, (12) the remembered curses by Rāma Jāmadagnya and by the Brahman, (13) the killing of Ghaṭotkaca, and (14) getting killed by Arjuna—there are three whose focus is on Karṇa’s defeat. According to the fabula-time of the *Mahābhārata*, those three are (a) the two curses received *during his youth*, (b) the weapons exchange having taken place *during the exile*, and (c) the chariot ride *during the war*. In the epic’s story-time, the first event is saved for last, *during the aftermath of the war*.

Lastly, a better appreciation of the *Mahābhārata*’s uses of anticipation, retroversion, repetition, and iteration was the result to its contrast, in terms of the depiction of Karṇa’s defeat, with the *Mahābhārata*-inspired *Karṇabhāram*, which deals with the same subject, although in a different manner, that is, by starting with the second event from the epic’s story-time (the chariot ride) and then making its way around the rest of the narrative. After that comes the epic’s last event (the curse) and, after that, the epic’s first event (the weapons exchange). In storytelling, changing the order of the factors clearly does change the product.

32 According to Hildebeitel (2007: 25), “the death of Karna is probably the most overdetermined event in the *Mahabharata* war—indeed, in the entire *Mahabharata*”.

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