

BHĪṢMA'S SOURCES

Alf Hiltebeitel
Washington, DC

Nearing the end of the *Mahābhārata*'s *Śāntiparvan* and its closing *Mokṣadharmā* sub-parvan, Bhīṣma is lying on his bed of arrows. Immersed in instructing Yudhiṣṭhira about virtually anything that might make this grieving king a reluctantly willing one after the terrible war, he comes to the story of Vyāsa and his son Śuka, and how the latter fulfilled his penchant for mokṣa, liberation. Toward the beginning of this tale, relating how Vyāsa looked when he performed his arduous tapas to beget Śuka, Bhīṣma pulls in a surprise witness:

And by the splendor of his matted locks like the crest of a fire, he [Vyāsa] was seen to be blazing, possessed of immeasurable splendor. Lord Mārkaṇḍeya said this to me. He always told me the deeds of the gods here (Mbh 12.310.23–24).

Again, toward the end of the story, with Vyāsa understanding that his son has set forth on the 'supreme way' (*uttamāṃ gatim*), "filled with affection, the father followed along behind" (320.18). Vyāsa himself, "having risen to that supreme way of great yoga" (320.20ab), now trails by only the 'bare moment' (*nimeṣāntarāmātreṇa*; 320.20c) that Śuka's mokṣa has taken. But when he comes to the mountain his son has sundered, Śuka has "gone to the other side".¹ At this point, Bhīṣma once again clarifies his sources and the position of Vyāsa as author relative to them: "The Ṛṣis then repeated to [Vyāsa] that act of his son" (320.21cd). Bhīṣma thereby indicates who (beside Śuka) witnessed the wonder of Śuka's liberation, which Vyāsa had just missed, and thus how Bhīṣma could have gotten this missing moment of the tale. Vyāsa heard it from the witnessing Ṛṣis, who could have again included Mārkaṇḍeya, who, in turn, could have been among those who could have told this to Vyāsa, as well as the whole story to Bhīṣma. Finally, when Bhīṣma concludes the story, he reassures Yudhiṣṭhira with a double citation: "The Ṛṣi

¹ I leave the metaphor to speak for itself here. For more extended discussion, see Hiltebeitel, forthcoming, Chapter 8, § D.

Nārada formerly told it to me, O king, and so did the great yogin Vyāsa, line by line amid conversations” (*saṃjalpeṣu pade pade*; 320.40). Thus Nārada too could have been among the witnessing Ṛṣis who told Vyāsa about his son’s departure. Unlike Mārkaṇḍeya and the generic Ṛṣis, however, Nārada and Vyāsa are both actors within the Śuka story. Bhīṣma is thus careful to show that his sources include not only such insider testimony as theirs, but, where necessary, that of outside observers like Mārkaṇḍeya and the Ṛṣis – celestial Ṛṣis, that is: a category that would, however, also include not only Nārada but, from time to time, Vyāsa. We thus get the impression that while Vyāsa is one of Bhīṣma’s sources,² Bhīṣma pulls the story together from varied sources particularly where it is necessary to “supplement” the author.

Bhīṣma’s citation apparatus is certainly not typical of a Parry-Lordian oral epic, for which Albert Lord posits authorly anonymity and “the Tradition” itself as author (1960). Indeed, neither does the phrase “line by line” suggest improvisational oral formulaic verse. But of course we are not in the “main story”, to which certain scholars, drawing on oral theory, have looked for their evidence of the *Mahābhārata*’s earliest oral strata. We are in the *Mokṣadharmā* section of the *Śāntiparvan*, which is among those “didactic” tracts that such scholars deem to be literary and late.³ There, as James L. Fitzgerald has argued, Bhīṣma seems to draw on some kind of library – whether oral or written⁴ – that a “redactor” has “edited” into Bhīṣma’s mouth as the bulk of a “Mokṣadharmā anthology”⁵ – leaving room also for eighteen segments “here and there” that Bhīṣma

asserts on his own authority, that is without attributing the substance of the text to some sage or other like Bhṛgu or Manu, either by formulaic introduction or by some statement within the text (Fitzgerald 1980: 320).

² Bhīṣma repeats Vyāsa’s teachings to Śuka (12.224–247; Bedekar 1966: ccxiii–ccxv), narrates their father-son story (12.310–320), and cites him at several other points: 12.200.3: as an authoritative source on Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, along with Nārada, Asita Devala, Vālmīki, and Mārkaṇḍeya; 247.1; 327–338 (*Nārāyaṇīya* citations); 13.18.1–3 (he recited Śiva’s thousand and eight names on Mount Meru to obtain a son: i.e., Śuka); 13.25.5–12 (on Brahmanicide); 13.118–120 (story of the worm who became a Kṣatriya); 13.121–123 (conversation with Maitreya); 13.146.23 (composed the *Śatarudrīya*).

³ For an overview, see Brockington 1998: 3, 18–28, 120–127.

⁴ Fitzgerald admits that it is “necessary to bear in mind the uncertainty that exists about the nature of these ‘texts’ prior to their existence in a fixed text of the *Mahābhārata*. If the texts anthologized in the MDh come from an improvisational oral tradition, then the whole concept of the ‘history’ of these ‘texts’ is highly problematic, if not completely inappropriate” (Fitzgerald 1980: 331, n. 1). As I have indicated, however, oral theorists are not interested in Bhīṣma’s orations.

⁵ See Fitzgerald 1980: 279–280, positing “that there existed in the Brahman tradition a number of texts concerned with aspects of the mokṣa perspective that were neither Veda ... nor sūtra”, “unquestionably by different authors”, and that someone “collated [them] into an anthology”.

Fitzgerald (1980: 320–321) suggests that these eighteen units may be “original contributions of the redactorial agent”. Although I believe Fitzgerald exaggerates the likelihood of a high percentage of preexisting texts, and underestimates the creativity of the “redactorial agent”, which was probably a group or committee, the line of inquiry remains promising for the *Śāntiparvan*⁶ and other portions of the *Mahābhārata*. Here, however, I am interested not so much in Bhīṣma's anthology as his methods of citation; not so much in his bibliography as his footnotes. It must suffice for this essay to note that, as elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, the two together describe an intertextual situation that probably evokes the composition of written texts that would have been known and used orally (see Narayana Rao 1993: 95).

Until recently (see now Brockington 2000), Fitzgerald and Annette Mangels seem to be the only scholars to have given attention to Bhīṣma's sources: Fitzgerald while focusing on the above-mentioned anthology thesis; Mangels on the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative technique. In his dissertation on the *Mokṣadharmā*, Fitzgerald notes that Bhīṣma often cites “old accounts” through an oft-repeated formulaic line: *atrāpy udāharantīmam itihāsam purātanam*; ‘On this they recite/cite/quote this old account.’⁷ One can learn a good deal from these passages. Counting slight variants,⁸ in his *Śānti*- and *Anuśāsanaparvan* oration Bhīṣma uses (or quotes others using) the full-line formula eighty-eight of the one hundred and six times it is used in the entire epic.⁹ He also sometimes precedes his references to *itihāsam purātanam* with other tag phrases, most typically *atra te vartayiṣye 'ham itihāsam purātanam*, ‘On this I will tell you an old account.’¹⁰ Looking only so far as through the *Śāntiparvan*, sometimes the “old account” goes unattributed, as if it were something Bhīṣma knows first hand (e.g., 12.189.6; 263.2). But most often (sixty-three times), it is a “dialogue” (*saṃvāda*). Yet it can also be a story (*kathā*, 202.6; *ākhyānam*, 248.11), speech (*vacaḥ*; 168.8), discourse (*vādam*; 194.2), or “words” (*vākyaṇi*; 253.1).¹¹ And it can be something that was first “proclaimed”

⁶ As Fitzgerald (1980: 76) observes, the *Rājadharmā* subparvan of the *Śāntiparvan* is more “strongly motivated” than the *Mokṣadharmā* in terms of narrative momentum.

⁷ The translators (Ganguli 1884–96; van Buitenen 1973; Fitzgerald 1980, etc.) have taken *udāharanti* variously as “they cite”, “they quote”, “they narrate”, “they recite”, and *itihāsam purātanam* as “old or ancient history, story, tale, legend, or account”. It appears to be best to keep a sense of ambiguity to the verb, which may deliberately write orality into the text. For *itihāsam*, “account” seems the best single term for its neutrality.

⁸ Replacing *api* eleven times with *eva*.

⁹ There are eleven usages prior to the *Śāntiparvan*, seven in the *Śāntiparvan* before Bhīṣma gets going, and none after he has finished in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*. These and other such figures come from using Muneo Tokunaga's machine-readable *Mahābhārata* text (1994).

¹⁰ Mbh 12.168.28; 224.6; 288.2; 291.7; 298.3; and with variants: 146.2; 277.2; 13.40.2.

¹¹ Covering such ground in discussing the *Mahābhārata*'s terms for stories and their anti-quoting appeal to Vedic authority, see Gombach 2000: 109–122.

(*proktam*),¹² or more often “sung” (*gītam*).¹³ Without calling it an “old account”, Bhīṣma also quotes *gāthā* verses that were “sung” (*gītāḥ*) by Brahmā about royal treasuries (12.134.1), and an *upaniṣad* that was uttered by king Yayāti (12.94.38). Most interesting are cases where the account is further sourced. Bhīṣma quotes Dhṛtarāṣṭra quoting Nārada (12.124.18). He recalls an “old account” sung by Mañkin, who quotes Śuka and in turn cites another “old account” sung by king Janaka of Videha,¹⁴ leading to the recollection of a quatrain-collection (*padasam-cayam*) of a certain Bodhya (12.171.4–57). He also tells the “old account” of what Vyāsa told Śuka when asked about creation and the divisions of time (12.224.6). The chronology of the citations is obscure but plausible in these cases,¹⁵ but it is baffling how Bhīṣma could have heard an “old account” that the Brahman Indrota, a descendent of Śaunaka, told to the Pāṇḍavas’ descendant Janamejaya, which includes verses sung by Yayāti (12.148.9) and Satyavat (148.14–15) and a quotation of Manu (148.26).¹⁶ Places can also be surprising. Bhīṣma heard the “old account” of the Muni and the dog whose heart had gone human¹⁷ in Rāma Jāmadagnya’s ascetic grove (*tapovane*), where it was told by some of the most excellent Ṛṣis (*yad uktaṃ ṛṣisattamaiḥ*; 12.117.1–2). And he heard the story (*kathā*) of Kṛṣṇa’s power, and why he took animal forms, from Kaśyapa in the hermitage of Mārkaṇḍeya (reached by Bhīṣma during a hunt), amid “hosts of Munis seated by thousands” (12.202.4–6). The epic does not tell us when Bhīṣma visited Rāma Jāmadagnya’s ascetic grove¹⁸ or Mārkaṇḍeya’s hermitage. Most expansively, when Yudhiṣṭhira asks to hear about the infallible Puṇḍarikākṣa,¹⁹ Bhīṣma replies that he heard about this topic (*artha*) when Rāma Jāmadagnya was speaking,²⁰ and from Nārada, Vyāsa, Asita Devala, Vālmīki, and Mārkaṇḍeya (12.200.3–5)! Let us make four observations: 1) as referenced, time and space are expansive; 2) Bhīṣma’s citations, sources, and authorities have a certain Vedic ring to them²¹; 3) his sources tend to

¹² Mbh 12.124.18, by Nārada; 227.2, by Ariṣṭanemi to Sagara. See Minkowski 1989: 402, 411–412 on *pra + vac/proktaḥ*, with its Vedic overtones, in “the sense of an original utterance”.

¹³ Mbh 12.78.6 (the only case I can see with a refrain); 12.93.2; 170.2; 171.4; 171.55; 251.1; 268.3; 270.13.

¹⁴ His aphoristic saying, “Unlimited is my wealth, of which nothing is mine. If Mithilā burns, nothing of mine burns” (12.171.56) – also quoted at 12.17.18 and 268.4.

¹⁵ I take up the case of Śuka in Hildebeitel, forthcoming.

¹⁶ See Belvalkar 1954: 939: there must be two Janamejayas.

¹⁷ Mbh 12.117.10: *manuṣyavad gato bhāvaḥ*. On this wicked tale, see Hildebeitel, forthcoming, Chapter 5.

¹⁸ Bhīṣma did not visit Rāma Jāmadagnya’s hermitage when he fought him over Ambā; they met at Kurukṣetra (5.177–178), and in any case did not pause over stories.

¹⁹ “The one with the eyes of the Puṇḍarīka Lotus”, a name of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa.

²⁰ Or muttering, *jalpataḥ* (12.200.3).

proliferate when he is expatiating on themes of bhakti, notably to include not only Mārkaṇḍeya and Nārada but Vālmīki; and 4) one need not accept the commonly held view that bhakti passages are “late”.²²

Fitzgerald also suggests that whenever Bhīṣma answers Yudhiṣṭhira's questions by citing his “old accounts” and numerous authorities, the combination “stand[s] out ... as an overall frame” (Fitzgerald 1980: 281–282). Yet he limits his notion of a “frame” here to the “garland of Yudhiṣṭhira's questions” and Bhīṣma's often-oblique responses. Fitzgerald finds this frame too uncoordinated (p. 295), patternless (p. 322), and “thin and weak to be a text of any importance in its own right” (p. 293). But he does not explore its relation to the epic's encompassing frames:²³ Vaiśampāyana's first public narration of the *Mahābhārata* at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (the inner frame); Ugrasravas's retelling of the epic to the Ṛṣis of the Naimiṣa Forest (the outer frame); and Vyāsa's original teaching of the *Mahābhārata* to Śuka and his four other “disciples” (the outermost, or authorial, frame) – this third frame being indispensable to understanding all of the epic's other frames.²⁴

Mangels, however, takes interest in Bhīṣma's citations against just this background. She diagrams these encompassing frames as a “box-structure” (*Schachtelstruktur*; Mangels 1994: 42–44) that has been affected, as will be noted, by late purāṇic “corrections” (p. 144). What interests her is these frames' relation to two long interior frame segments that she places within the same “box”: the bard (*sūta*) Saṃjaya's war narrative, and Bhīṣma's post-war oration. As Mangels notes, in both cases the interior frame narration or oration is made possible by imparting the “divine eye” or *divya cakṣus* to the speaker: to Saṃjaya, by Vyāsa himself;²⁵ to Bhīṣma, by Kṛṣṇa with Vyāsa authoritatively present.²⁶ Noting that it is possible to

21 See notes 11 and 12 above, and note 26 below.

22 Cf. note 2 above. Vālmīki is also mentioned among the coming-and-going celestial and sometimes Viṣṇu-attending Ṛṣis at 2.7.14, 3.83.102, 5.81.27, 99.11, and 13.18.7. One need not accept the commonly held view that bhakti passages are “late”.

23 Though he seems to be aware of the possibility: “A few of the framing passages do express an awareness of the rest of the collection ...” and “coordination among the introductory frames” (Fitzgerald 1980: 294).

24 A point I make in Hildebeitel, forthcoming. On the *Mahābhārata* frame stories, see also Witzel 1986; Minkowski 1989; Mangels 1994 (as cited below); Oberlies 1998; Reich 1998: 56–75; Hildebeitel 1998.

25 See Mbh 6.2.9–13; 16.5–10.

26 Mbh 12.52.15–22; see Mangels 1994: 99–100, 126, 148. Before Vyāsa's presence is mentioned, Kṛṣṇa has already told Yudhiṣṭhira that Bhīṣma knows past, present, and future (12.46.19); then, once we know that Vyāsa is there, Kṛṣṇa adds that he has bestowed on Bhīṣma from afar the “divine knowledge of seeing the triple-time” (*traikālyadarśanam jñānam divyam*) by means of their mutual meditation on each other (47.65). Moreover, Vyāsa hears from Kṛṣṇa that whatever Bhīṣma says “will stand on earth as if it were a declaration of the Veda” (*vedapravāda*), and that it will have “validity” (*pramāṇa*; 54.29–30).

obtain the divine eye on one's own by means of yoga, as Yudhiṣṭhira claims to have done,²⁷ Mangels takes Saṃjaya's and Bhīṣma's cases to show, contrastively, that, in not letting either of them get the divine eye on his own, the redactor (*Epiker*) indicates that he is not ready to risk leaving these characters answerable for vast stretches of text to the odium of fiction.²⁸ Indeed, when Bhīṣma obtains the divine eye, Nārada attests to all the ancient and celestial authorities Bhīṣma knows and can cite: he has seen the gods, gratified the divine Ṛṣis led by Bṛhaspati, learned variously from the Asuras' preceptor Uśanas, from such other Ṛṣis as Vasiṣṭha, Cyavana, Sanat Kumāra, Rāma Jāmadagnya, and Mārkaṇḍeya, and from Indra.²⁹

Mangels's main interest, however, is in further contrasting Saṃjaya and Bhīṣma. There are places where Saṃjaya seems to have the "divine eye" before Vyāsa gives it to him for the war narration.³⁰ He samples it briefly when Kṛṣṇa lets him see his theophany in the Kuru court.³¹ He previews at least one of its powers when he discloses, with Vyāsa's blessing, Vāsudeva and Arjuna's "thought entire".³² And most importantly for Mangels, he enters a trance to gauge for Dhṛtarāṣṭra the strength of the Pāṇḍava army.³³ For Mangels, the first two passages result from a bhakti overlay that subsumes Saṃjaya's older self-sufficient bardic powers under themes of the later purāṇic bardic tradition exemplified by Vyāsa and Vaiśampāyana. In these two instances the "little Sūta Saṃjaya" is pushed into the background³⁴ and subordinated through the "divine eye" itself – a "literary sediment of practical yoga technique" (Mangels 1994: 130), "a Buddhist pendant" (p. 137, n. 324), and a belated addition to make Saṃjaya's narration credible (pp. 117, 125, 131). But the third passage leads Mangels to "speculate" – in the name of a

²⁷ Mangels 1994: 137: by "the yoga of knowledge" (*jñānayogena*; 11.26.20). Actually, the point could be challenged: it is presumably still Vyāsa who tells us that Yudhiṣṭhira obtained the divine eye by yoga.

²⁸ Mangels 1994: 148. Cf. pp. 99–101 and 111 on Vyāsa's function as "Ordner", "einen ordnenden Geist" imparting his duties as author to authorize others' (Bhīṣma's, Saṃjaya's, Kṛṣṇa's ...) fictions.

²⁹ Mbh 12.38.7–13. The case of Indra's instruction is interesting. Whether it is at the same point in Bhīṣma's life or another, Bhīṣma not only learned from Indra but "formerly", when the gods were fighting the Asuras (6.21.9–11), he advised him, saying, "Those who seek victory conquer not so much by strength and heroism as by truth and non-cruelty (*satyānṛśamsyābhyām*), as also by dharma and enterprise." See similarly 6.15.38.

³⁰ See Belvalkar 1947: 329–331; Mangels 1994: 97–98, 107, 113, 142–144.

³¹ Mbh 5.129.13; see Mangels 1994: 137.

³² Mbh 5.65.7d. Mangels (1994: 142–143) takes Saṃjaya as adapting to a hierarchy here, generally viewing bhakti passages as overlay (pp. 36–38, 44–48, 52, 83–88, 99–100, 144, 148).

³³ Mbh 5.49.9–14: Saṃjaya heaves long sighs, faints, falls, and loses consciousness before replying. See Mangels 1994: 143.

³⁴ Mangels (1994: 143–144), for whom the "little Sūta" (pp. 107, 143) is Vyāsa's "protege" (*Schützling*; pp. 110, 123, 126); see further Mangels 1994: 26, 69–71, 97–129, 140–145.

recovery of the original bard – on a thoroughgoing “correction” of the war books (p. 144). Meanwhile, in contrast to this recuperable bard overlain by bhakti stands Bhīṣma.³⁵ His provision with the divine eye, says Mangels, is doubtless done to achieve a connection with the dharma-texts (p. 99–100), and as a sign of the presence of “abstract authors” appearing in the narrated figures (p. 45) – a notion she relates to a Brahmanical overlay concerned with dharma (pp. 44–45, 52). Mangels thus regards the divine eye to be a late literary effect in both cases, but only in Saṃjaya’s does she argue that it is superfluous. Yet Bhīṣma also anticipates one of *his* uses of the divine eye before he gets it from Kṛṣṇa. Noting how *Mahābhārata* narrators cite other narrators (pp. 61–62, 65), Mangels recalls that midway through the war, Karṇa learns that Bhīṣma knows from Vyāsa, Nārada, and Keśava (6.117.9) that Karṇa is the son of Kuntī. Let us note that the two interior frames intersect here: it is Saṃjaya reporting.

While the contrast between Saṃjaya and Bhīṣma is certainly valuable, I do not think that either takes us back to a pre-*Mahābhārata* textual situation: a prior oral bardic war-narrative in the case of Saṃjaya, or a prior library in the case of Bhīṣma. But leaving these oral and literary excavations aside, it is possible to find in the *Mahābhārata* itself the source of Bhīṣma’s main sources. They come from his time with his mother. Let us look at some key moments in the birth and early life of Bhīṣma, paying attention especially to the ways his story configures space and time and fashions the “chronotope” (Bakhtin 1981; Hildebeitel & Kloetzli, forthcoming) through which cosmological time descends into dynastic time (see Chart). A methodological point here: A. K. Ramanujan has a good impulse when he criticizes me for overemphasizing divine-human connections at the expense of “the architectonic complexity of the *human* action of the epic” (Ramanujan 1991: 434, n. 4) – so long as we are willing to explore where that complexity takes us *in its own terms*. The human action has *cosmological* complexity.

There was once a king born of the Ikṣvāku lineage, a lord of the earth known as Mahābhiṣa, true-spoken and of true prowess. With a thousand Aśvamedhas and a hundred Vājapeyas, he satisfied Devendra; and then that lord obtained heaven. Then at some time the gods did homage to Brahmā. The royal Ṛṣis were there and king Mahābhiṣa (among them). Then Gaṅgā, best of rivers, approached the Grandfather. Her garment, radiant as the moon, was raised by the wind. (Mbh 1.91.1–4.)

That is the setting. An Ikṣvāku or Solar dynasty king, Mahābhiṣa, has left earth for heaven to join the royal Ṛṣis there, and in the typically vast time of that place, measurable for now only by one of the epic’s cunning narrative conventions,

³⁵ Saṃjaya’s being a messenger (*dūta*) gives him a “home advantage” over Bhīṣma and other narrators (Mangels 1994: 117).

Bhīṣma's Sources: Flow Chart / Star (*) Chart

Solar Line

Mahābhiṣa to heaven *
Sees celestial Gaṅgā's *
lifted skirt * * *

Brahmā's curse: mortal
birth, before Mahābhiṣa
can return

Mahābhiṣa chooses to be
son of >

Lunar Line

Pratīpa

Pratīpa sires Santanu with
his aged wife

Gaṅgā* * *

Muses about Mahābhiṣa

Sees the bedimmed (*)Vasus >

Agrees to be Śantanu's wife
as it was "on her mind"

Stipulates Śantanu will
retain one son, >

Appears to Pratīpa, sits on his
right thigh, prompting him to
make her his daughter-in-law
for his as-yet-unborn son

Vasus

Cursed by Vasiṣṭha (*) for
coming too close to him at
dawn, to be born in a womb

Ask Gaṅgā to provide them
an auspicious womb

Choose Pratīpa's son Śantanu
(not yet born) to sire them

Insist Gaṅgā throw her sons
in water so their restoration
won't be "so long"

Bhīṣma, for whom the Vasus
each will supply 1/8 of their *vīrya*,
yet cursing him to be sonless

Vasiṣṭha*

Curses Vasus to be womb-born

Pratīpa tells Śantanu to expect a beautiful woman whom he must not question

Śantanu drinks Gaṅgā with his eyes (** *), and marries her

Gaṅgā drowns Śantanu's first seven baby sons

Śantanu questions Gaṅgā and baby Bhīṣma lives

Śantanu hears from Gaṅgā about Vasus' descent, and asks for particulars about Bhīṣma: why he must dwell among humans

Gaṅgā stays with Śantanu for a *paryāya*

Drowns her first seven sons, but not Bhīṣma

Gaṅgā tells why Bhīṣma has a special destiny on earth ...

Gaṅgā takes Bhīṣma and disappears

Śantanu meets Bhīṣma ... >

Bhīṣma checks the waters of the Gaṅgā with his arrows

Gaṅgā reveals that Bhīṣma has studied the Vedas, etc., with Vasiṣṭha (*), Uśanas, Aṅgiras, and Rāma Jāmadagnya

With Śantanu's boon, Bhīṣma picks time of death, and returns to Heaven/Sky at winter solstice ...

First seven Vasus restored to heaven

The Vasu Dyaus stole Vasiṣṭha's youth-extending cow for his wife to give to a human princess

Cursed Dyaus in particular to a long time among humans with no offspring or pleasure with women

... on solar time

“at some time” (*tataḥ kadācit*),³⁶ while Brahmā was receiving homage from the gods with Gaṅgā among them, her garment, as radiant as the moon, was raised by the wind (or by the wind god Vāyu) (*tasyā vāsaḥ samudbhūtam māruteṇa śaśi-prabham*). The poets have introduced us to the luminous celestial Gaṅgā, her robe the Milky Way, and their metaphoric range is the night sky where there are not only rivers of stars but mighty winds,³⁷ and where Ṛṣis, royal and otherwise, are stars as well.³⁸ Now, as Gaṅgā’s garment lifts,

The host of gods then lowered their faces. But the royal Ṛṣi Mahābhiṣa looked at the river fearlessly. Mahābhiṣa was disdained (*apadhyāta*) by lord Brahmā,³⁹ who said, “Born among mortals, you shall again gain the worlds.” (Mbh 1.91.5–6.)

In a fairly widespread interpolation (1.111*), Brahmā also curses Gaṅgā to join Mahābhiṣa in this double destiny. But the Poona Critical Edition does well to show that this is superfluous: as we shall see, Gaṅgā’s descent will be voluntary and amorous, and is not to be accounted for by the insecurities of Brahmā. Mahābhiṣa is able to choose the king, Pratīpa of the Lunar dynasty, who will be his father, and it is curious that his karmic crossing from the Solar to the Lunar line comes not only after seeing Gaṅgā’s lunar radiance, but with a curse that follows his unabashed glance up her skirt. Coming from the Solar line, with its more regularly luminous courses, Mahābhiṣa chooses his second royal destiny in the line that will be marked henceforth, through his descent, by its different kind of rhythmic waxing and waning time, and by the outcomes of his own desire.⁴⁰ Meanwhile,

The river, best of streams, having seen the king fallen from his firmness, went away musing about him in her heart. Going on her path (*pathi*), she then saw the celestial Vasu gods, their energy (*ojas*) smitten with dejection, their figures bedimmed (*vidhvastavapuṣaḥ*). Having seen those forms (*rūpān*), then, the best of streams asked, “Why are your forms lost (*naṣṭarūpāḥ*)? Is there tranquility among celestials?” The Vasu gods said to her, “O great river, we were vehemently cursed by the great-souled Vasiṣṭha for a small fault. Foolishly indeed, we all formerly came too close (*atyabhiṣṭāḥ purā*) to Vasiṣṭha, that best of Ṛṣis, when he was seated concealed (*prachannam*) at twilight (*saṃdhyām vasiṣṭham āsīnaṃ*) ...” (Mbh 1.91.8–12.)

³⁶ Of the *Mahābhārata*’s twenty-seven usages of this line-opener, eight occur within Bhīṣma’s narration, none in Saṃjaya’s.

³⁷ As Vyāsa instructs Śuka, the celestial Gaṅgā is associated with the Parivaha wind, the sixth of seven winds. When it is “agitated”, heavenly waters carry through the sky; it abides, having diffused the propitious water of the celestial Gaṅgā” (315.46). This would seem to imply the diffusion of the celestial Gaṅgā or Milky Way by this wind, which has also to do with the obscuring of the sun and the rising of the moon (315.47–48).

³⁸ Mitchiner 1982; Hildebeitel 1977; 1998; forthcoming, Chapter 4.

³⁹ If we look back from a purāṇic perspective, there is an emerging irony here, since in purāṇic myth, Brahmā is often the prurient one disdained or punished for his gaze (see e.g., Dimmitt & van Buitenen 1978: 34–35, 171; Hildebeitel 1999b: 68–76).

⁴⁰ Perhaps he even senses that a lunar line prince would have a better chance with Gaṅgā than a solar line one. On the solar and lunar dynasties, see Thapar 1991.

Samdhyām (accusative) with the root *ās-* implies “seated at twilight prayers”, but refers also just to “twilight” itself: *maybe* Vasiṣṭha was praying, but this can also be translated, “... when Vasiṣṭha was seated concealed at twilight”. Since it has up to now been night, of the two “twilights”, we must be talking about the dawn. Having started this story “at some time”, we have moved on a little bit. The poets have made *vapus* (‘figure’) and *rūpa* (‘form’) interchangeable. Both could be translated ‘(beautiful) appearance’. What is happening at dawn, while Gaṅgā goes along on her celestial path, is that the Vasus not only lose energy due to a curse of Vasiṣṭha, but that their appearance has been “bedimmed”: an astronomical meaning that Monier-Williams (1899: 969) gives for *vidhvasta*. This could be suggestive as applied to the “darkened” form/appearance of the chief Vasu of the story, Dyaus, the old Vedic “Father Sky”, who will supply the primary divine substance of Bhīṣma in the story’s resumption, which, as others have noted, is on some points rather different.⁴¹ But first, why has Vasiṣṭha cursed the Vasus? The resumption will give us another answer, but this first one’s is most intriguing. Vasiṣṭha is interrupted while perhaps praying or at least doing something at dawn, of course; but more than this, he is “concealed”, “hidden” (*prachannam*). This would mean that the Vasiṣṭha star, one of the seven in the constellation of the Seven Ṛṣis or Ursa Major, has become invisible at twilight.⁴² Moreover, the Vasus “all formerly came too close”⁴³ to him at this twilight. It sounds like they nearly bumped into him. The resumption will tell us that when these things happen, Vasiṣṭha is at his hermitage on a side of Mt. Meru (1.93.6). Meru is the cosmic mountain by which celestial movements of the night sky are measured against alternately emerging earthly orientations (Kloetzli 1983; Hildebeitel 1999a: 293; forthcoming, Chapter 8).

The Vasus now add that Vasiṣṭha cursed them to be born in a womb, and that his curse cannot be thwarted. Unwilling to “enter an inauspicious human-female womb” (*mānuṣīṅāṃ jaṭharam ... aśubham*), they ask Gaṅgā to become a human woman (*mānuṣī*) whose womb, we must assume, will for obvious reasons not be inauspicious. Gaṅgā agrees, and asks them who among mortals they choose as their begetter. The Vasus pick Pratīpa’s son Śaṃtanu. Gaṅgā says, “Such is even my mind, sinless gods, as you say. I will do his pleasure; that is your desire” (1.91.17) – as Dumézil puts it, “La providence, on le voit, a bien fait les choses, puisqu’elle aura pour partenaire sur terre celui qui a quelque peu troublé son cœur” (Dumézil 1968: 179). The Vasus insist that Gaṅgā “must throw his [Śaṃtanu’s] (new)born

⁴¹ Smith 1955: 91–96; Dumézil 1968: 178–180; van Buitenen 1973: 455, n. to 1.91.10.

⁴² See Witzel 1999: 13–14 and 17, n. 14, clarifying that “when we actually look at the Big Dipper when it appears in the early evening even today; it moves towards the north pole, surpasses it and sets in the west” (Witzel 1999: 14). Cf. Parpola 1994: 222, 241–243.

⁴³ *Atyabhiṣṭa*: “having approached too much; having come too close” (Monier-Williams 1899: 17, citing Mbh 1.3854, the present verse). See van Buitenen 1973: 216: “we ... passed by”; but “passed by” does not explain why Vasiṣṭha would get angry.

sons into the water so that our restoration will not take so long a time, O triple-world-goer” (*yathā nacirakālaṃ no niṣkṛtiḥ syāt trilokage*) (91.18). What is not so long a time for the Vasus will now begin to be measurable in human years, with Gaṅgā linking the three worlds through which divine time is now channelled into human time. Again she agrees, but with the proviso that Śaṃtanu will retain one son. Each of the Vasus then imparts an eighth of his *vīrya* (energy/manliness/sperm), and Bhīṣma will thus be born from this collective energy⁴⁴ as “the son you and he desire” (91.20d). But, add the Vasus, Bhīṣma “shall not reproduce his lineage among mortals. Thus your son will be sonless, despite his possessing *vīrya*”. With Gaṅgā’s agreement on this further point, the “delighted” Vasus “went straight on as they intended” (91.21–22).

Gaṅgā then appears to Pratiṭpa out of the waters of the Ganges. Sitting on his right thigh, she invites him to make love to her. He has some scruples, but she has his attention. And because she chose his right thigh, suitable for children and daughters-in-law, rather than his left, where a wife would sit, he invites her to become his daughter-in-law instead. Agreeing, and thereby virtually assuring this apparently shrewd old king a son they *both* desire, Gaṅgā says,

So by devotion to you will I love (*bhajiṣyāmi*)⁴⁵ the famous Bhārata lineage (*kulam*). Whoever are the kings of the earth, you⁴⁶ are their refuge. I am unable to speak the qualities that are renowned of your lineage in even a hundred years; its straightness is peerless (*guṇā na hi mayā śakyā vaktum varṣa śatair api | kulasya ye vaḥ prathitās tat sādhutvam anuttamam*). (Mbh 1.92.12c–13.)

Fusing her descent with the destiny of the Lunar dynasty, she declares that her love for its kings and their lineage will extend over measurable human years.

Telling Pratiṭpa the conditions he must impart to his son – who must never question anything Gaṅgā does (92.14) – Gaṅgā disappears (92.16). Even though Pratiṭpa and his wife are old, he “burns tapas” and “at a certain time” (*etasminn eva kāle*)⁴⁷ Mahābhiṣa is born as their son, coming to be called Śaṃtanu (92.17–18). Although his prior Solar dynasty identity is not specifically mentioned, his karmic carryover is now made explicit: “And remembering the imperishable worlds he had conquered by his own karma, Śaṃtanu was indeed a doer of meritorious karma” (*saṃsmaramś cākṣayāṃl lokān vijitān svena karmaṇā | puṇyakarmakṛd evāsīt Śaṃtanuḥ kurusattama*; 92.19). We do not know, however, whether he remembers his moment of audacity in gazing up Gaṅgā’s skirt.

44 The Vasus have put it “en cagnotte”, “in a kitty”, according to Dumézil 1968: 179.

45 Share in/enjoy ...

46 Plural: your dynasty.

47 This line-opener is used 48 times in the *Mahābhārata*, and by both Saṃjaya and Bhīṣma.

Śaṃtanu becomes a young man, and Pratīpa, before parting for the forest, describes the beautiful woman who may approach his son and heir to the throne, and the conditions under which she will stay with him:

“She is not to be questioned by you as to who she is or whose she is. And whatever she does, she is not for you to question, sinless one. At my command, she is to be loved as she loves you.” (Mbh 1.92.22–23b.)

And so once while he was hunting “along the Siddha- and Caraṇa-frequented Gaṅgā” (92.25cd),⁴⁸ young king Śaṃtanu

saw a superb woman whose figure had an intensive glowing (*jājvalyamānām vapuṣā*) that was like the splendor of a lotus, faultless everywhere, with nice teeth, adorned with divine ornaments, wearing a subtle cloth (*sūkṣmāmbaṛadharām*), alone, and radiant as the calyx of a lotus ... As if drinking her with his eyes, the king was not satisfied (*pibann iva ca netrābhyām nāṭpyata narādhipaḥ*). (Mbh 1.92.25d–28.)

Śaṃtanu is still fixed by the gaze that got him into trouble as Mahābhiṣa. But more than this, what is it to drink this woman with one's eyes and not be satisfied if not a reminder that she is a river of the stars? Their words of courtship include her Melusine-like requirements; and, as their joys unfold,

... by attachment to pleasure (*raṭisaktatvād*), the king, seized by the qualities of this foremost woman (*uttamastrīguṇair hṛtaḥ*), was not aware of the many years, seasons, and months that passed (*saṃvatsarān ṛtūn māsān na bubodha bahūn gatān*) (Mbh 1.92.41).

Meanwhile, in what is “not so long a time” for the eight Vasus, Śaṃtanu sires them in Gaṅgā's womb, and she throws the first seven into the water, saying “I fulfill your wish” (92.43–44). Finally, with the eighth, Śaṃtanu protests and Gaṅgā lets the boy live. This child will come to be known as Bhīṣma. But, she says, “This stay (*vāsa*) of mine is now exhausted in accord with the agreement we made” (92.48cd) – a “stay of a round (*paryāya-vāsa*) [that] was done in the presence of the Vasus” (92.55ab). She has thus been with Śaṃtanu for a *paryāya*: a going or turning around; a revolving, revolution; a course, lapse, or expiration of time (Monier-Williams 1899: 605). She tells Śaṃtanu who she is, and briefly about Vasiṣṭha's curse of the Vasus, but Śaṃtanu wants to know more about all this, including a new question: what did Gaṅgadatta-Bhīṣma do to have to “dwell among humans” (93.2)? To answer this, Gaṅgā resumes the story of the Vasus' curse by Vasiṣṭha. Of these two narratives, I believe it is best to begin with the simple recognition that the two versions are meant to be read together, from which it will unfold that the second amplifies the first, but does not erase its meanings or allusions.

⁴⁸ Soon she will say similarly, “I am Gaṅgā, the daughter of Jahnu, frequented by the hosts of great Ṛṣis” (1.92.49ab). Together, the two passages would thus describe both her earthly and heavenly courses.

As already noted, we now learn that Vasiṣṭha's hermitage is on a side of Mount Meru (93.6). Gaṅgā also fills out what it might mean that the Vasus "all formerly came too close" to Vasiṣṭha: they stole his cow, a "choice milch-cow of every desire" (*sarvakāmadughāṃ varām*) who was born of Dakṣa's daughter Surabhī and the celestial Ṛṣi Kaśyapa, and who roved freely through that forest of ascetics, Munis, gods, and divine Ṛṣis. "At a certain time" (*kadācit*), the Vasus and their wives came to that forest and "roamed everywhere", taking their delights. The wife of the Vasu Dyaus saw the beautiful cow and showed her to Dyaus, who knew that she belonged to Vasiṣṭha, and that a mortal who drank her milk would have firm youth for ten thousand years (93.18–19). Dyaus' wife⁴⁹ knew a deserving princess on earth⁵⁰ for whom this cow and her calf would be just the right gift, and asked Dyaus to bring them quickly (93.21–25). So together with his brothers, Dyaus seized the cow. Gaṅgā also fills out what it might mean that Vasiṣṭha "was seated concealed at twilight". Charged by his wife to steal the cow, Dyaus "was unable to see the intense tapas of the Ṛṣi" (*ṛṣes tasya tapas tīvraṃ na śaśāka nir-ikṣitum*; 93.27cd). Perhaps that relates to Vasiṣṭha's invisibility. But he was not seated, at least when the cow was stolen. He was out gathering fruits (93.28b). It is possible that Gaṅgā's resumption unpacks and narrativizes Vedic allusions in the first account: Twilight-Dawn (Uṣas) is a cow and has cows that are identified with her rays, with Agni, and with the Sun⁵¹; "the Vasiṣṭhas claim to have first awakened her with their hymns" (Macdonell 1898: 47); perhaps Dyaus, the Day-Sky,⁵² makes off with Vasiṣṭha's ruddy-rayed bovine. In any case, back at the hermitage and missing the cow, Vasiṣṭha soon knew what had happened by his divine sight, and cursed the Vasus to take on human births (93.30c–35). But when the Vasus, knowing they were cursed, sought mitigation, he stipulated that the seven Vasu accomplices would "obtain release after a year", but that the chief perpetrator Dyaus would "dwell in the human world for a long time by his own karma" (... *vatsyati | dyaus tadā mānuṣe loke dīrghakālaṃ svakarmanā*; 93.37cd) and have no human offspring, ... [and] forsake the enjoyment of women" (93.36–39d). Gaṅgā then recounts her promise to the Vasus, and concludes that only Dyaus "will dwell a long time in the human world" (*dyau ... mānuṣe loke ciraṃ vatsyati*; 93.42cd). While Vasiṣṭha sets the terms of time in the story from above, Gaṅgā repeats them as they now bear on earthly matters. Bhīṣma, the son of a king who switched from

49 She does not seem to have any trait that would identify her as the Pṛthivī – Earth, Dyaus' Vedic wife.

50 This is Jinavatī, daughter of king Uśīnara.

51 See O'Flaherty 1981: 112–115, 179, 211 (ṚV 4.5.8–10; 1.92.4; 5.85.2).

52 Vedic Dyaus means both 'heaven/sky' and 'day'. Uṣas is frequently identified as his daughter (Macdonell 1898: 21). I do not find persuasive Dumézil's attempt to link Bhīṣma with the Scandinavian god Haimdallr (Dumézil 1968: 182–190).

the solar to the lunar dynasty, will live childless in the latter, and use the boon of being able to choose the time of his own death (*svacchandamarāṇam*; 1.94.94c), given to him by his father, to postpone his death to the winter solstice, thereby getting back on solar time.

Meanwhile, however, Gaṅgā has one more surprise for Śaṃtanu. This king who had finally spoken out to keep his eighth son even though he knew it would meant losing his wife is suddenly without them both:

Having told this, the goddess disappeared right there (*tatraivāntaradhīyata*), and, having taken that boy, she thereupon went as she wished (*jaḡāmātha yathepsitam*) ... And Śaṃtanu, afflicted with grief, went then to his own city. (Mbh 1.93.43, 45ab)

For Gaṅgā to disappear (*antar-adhīyata*) – literally, “to turn her mind to what is inner”, “to vanish into herself” – in this manner conventional to the epic’s gods and Ṛṣis, including the author, is of course to return to her own element, the waters of the Ganges. In going with her, Bhīṣma’s disappearance is almost like the drowning of his brothers. But of course it is different too: he is alive, she has brought him with her, and he will return to Śaṃtanu to begin his long life on earth.

Vaiśampāyana lauds Śaṃtanu’s pious rule, and resumes the story with the conventional re-start mechanism, which brings the flow of time back to the river: “At a certain time” (*kadācit*), hunting while “following the river Gaṅgā,⁵³ Śaṃtanu saw that the Bhāḡīrathī had little water” (94.21). Let us note how this name Bhāḡīrathī evokes a connection between Śaṃtanu and the Solar-line king Bhagīratha, who brings the heavenly Gaṅgā down to earth: Śaṃtanu will meet Bhīṣma in a context that implies the Gaṅgā’s descent. Wondering why “this best of streams does not flow swiftly as before, he saw the occasion” (*nimittam*; 94.23):

... a shapely large good-looking boy employing a divine weapon like the god Sacker of Cities was engaged with sharp arrows, having fully stopped the entire Gaṅgā (*kr̥tsnām gaṅgām samāvṛtya śarais tikṣṇair avasthitam*)! Having seen the river Gaṅgā obstructed with arrows in that one’s vicinity, the king became amazed, having seen this superhuman feat (*karma dṛṣṭvātīmānuṣam*). Śaṃtanu ... did not recognize that son whom he had formerly seen only at birth. But he, having seen his father, bewildered him by illusion (*mohayāmāsa māyayā*), and then quickly, having totally confused him, disappeared right there (*tatraivāntaradhīyata*). Having seen that wonder, king Śaṃtanu, suspecting it was his son, said to Gaṅgā, “Show (him)!” Gaṅgā then, assuming a beautiful form, taking that well-adorned boy by the right hand, caused him to appear. (Mbh 1.94.21–29b)

The wonder of stopping the river with arrows is indeed amazing. One finds the recurrent epic image of “showers of arrows”, with its implication of an equivalence between raindrops and arrows. But a river is not separate drops. Bhīṣma is, of

⁵³ To follow the river probably means, as van Buitenen (1973: 223) has it, “downstream”, along its course.

course, shooting arrows into his mother, but it seems unlikely that we should connect this with the many tensions with women that run throughout his and his father's story. Rather, I think Randy Kloetzli has a keen insight: "The arrows of course are time (conceived as moments destroying motion/fluidity) and the Ganges is eternity ... or motion which brings eternity down into time"; Gaṅgā descends as "the unifying fluid motion of time as motion which dynastically results in progeny, lineages, etc." (Kloetzli 2000). Bhīṣma's strange intervention marks the boundary over which celestial time and human time can cross in different ways, but in which dynastic time will henceforth play itself along with Gaṅgā's loving devotion, but without her or her son's lineal descent. For she will not rejoin her husband, and he will bear no offspring. Indeed, like mother like son: Bhīṣma has learned to "disappear then and there" exactly as Gaṅgā did a few verses earlier, and as other gods and sages do. And like her, he can be brought forth, presumably from her waters, holding her hand.

Where then has Gaṅgā taken Bhīṣma for his upbringing? We may now return to our opening question of Bhīṣma's sources. Gaṅgā said to Śaṃtanu,

"This is the eighth son, O king, whom you formerly sired in me. He is yours, tiger among men; take him to your home. The energetic one studied the Vedas and their limbs from Vasiṣṭha (*vedān adhijage sāṅgān vasiṣṭhād eva vīryavān*) ... And whatever scripture (*śāstram*) Uśanas knows, that he knows entirely. And so too the son of Aṅgiras [= Brhaspati], revered by gods and demons – whatever scripture he knows, that too is wholly established in this one ... together with its limbs and appendages. That Ṛṣi, unassailable by others, the scorching son of Jamadagni – whatever weapon Rāma [Jāmadagnya] knows, that too is established in him. This great archer, O king, skilled in artha and royal dharma (*rājadharmārthakovidam*), is your own⁵⁴ son, a hero given by me – take him home." (Mbh 1.94.31–36.)

The poets do not overstate the matter. But clearly, Bhīṣma has been brought up by the celestial Gaṅgā. She has taken him up to the stars, near Mount Meru where he would have learned his Veda from Vasiṣṭha.⁵⁵ Similarly, it would be through the same access given by his mother that Bhīṣma would have been able to learn the śāstras, their limbs and appendages, divine weapons, and *artha* and *rājadharmā* from Uśanas, Brhaspati, and Rāma Jāmadagnya. It will be recalled that Nārada attests to a similar list of Bhīṣma's sources – Brhaspati, Uśanas, Vasiṣṭha, Cyavana, Sanatkumāra, Rāma Jāmadagnya, and Mārkaṇḍeya – at 12.38.7–13, when Bhīṣma gets the divine eye. Bhīṣma's time with his mother need not account for all the sources he cites in the *Śānti*- and *Anuśāsanaparvans*. When he cites Dhṛtarāṣṭra,

⁵⁴ *Nijam* could also be 'my own'.

⁵⁵ Perhaps Vasiṣṭha's involvement in Bhīṣma's Vedic instruction implies a follow-up from his having cursed Dyaus to become incarnate in Bhīṣma, who has in effect recycled himself from heaven to earth to heaven, and now back to earth, courtesy of his triple-world-going mother Gaṅgā.

for instance, it would be an earthly recollection from later in his life. But this youthful education accounts for the time and place of many of Bhīṣma's sources. And it shows a certain consistency between the didactic frame of the *Śānti-* and *Anuśāsanaparvans* and an important foundational narrative of the *Ādiparvan*.

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