

Chapter One

An Introduction to the Literature of the Mahābhārata

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Those who hear *Mahābhārata* in many languages,
in many styles,
from many tellers,
always wanting these stories,
all the rewards of many offerings will forever
be theirs.

—Nannaya, *Mahābhāratamu*

Always Wanting These Stories

As soon as you begin to ask questions about what the Mahābhārata is, does, and says, you find yourself staring at some of the most daunting and irresistible challenges in the study of South Asian literature and religion. The earliest and largest Mahābhārata, a Sanskrit epic¹ poem of some 100,000

1. Finding the right genre description for the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* has been as tricky for readers in the modern West as it was for those in early South Asia. As Alf Hiltebeitel points out, the *Mahābhārata* refers to itself using several different

verses² that was composed and compiled early in the Common Era, narrates the events of a catastrophic fratricidal war and, along with it, nearly everything else in Hindu mythology, philosophy, and story literature. Since a certain darkness haunts the events of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*'s core narrative—the protagonists' family splinters; the characters hurl accusations of moral failing at one another in infinite regress; the main figures die vividly and poignantly; everything is subject to deconstruction, dilemma, and decay—it is sometimes, in India, considered inauspicious to read the entire text or to keep it inside one's house.³ Yet even its own sinister power

genre designations: *itihāsa* (history), *ākhyāna* (narrative), *purāṇa* (an extended myth narrative), *kathā* (story), *carita* (biography), *śāstra* (treatise), *samhitā* (collection), *upākhyāna* (tale), Upaniṣad, and Veda. See "Not without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in the Sanskrit Epics," in *Argument and Design: The Unity of the Mahābhārata*, eds. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (Boston: Brill, 2016), 20. We find "epic" to be a useful descriptor because it signals that we are talking about a very long verse narrative. Some scholars have embraced the "epic" genre designation for the *Mahābhārata*. For example, Shubha Pathak convincingly argues that we can group together "the *Iliad* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as affirmative epics that depict the ready realization of *kléos* [heroic glory] and *dharma*, respectively, and the *Odyssey* and the *Mahābhārata* as interrogative epics that portray the difficulties in achieving these religious ideals," in *Divine Yet Human Epics: Reflections of Poetic Rulers from Ancient Greece and India*, Hellenic Studies Series 62 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University, 2014), 174. But we also realize that "epic" means different things for different thinkers, and one can easily contest its applicability to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Sheldon Pollock discusses several important ways in which the *Mahābhārata* diverges from major Western notions of epic literature in *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 554–55. For more on the relationship between epic poetry and political ideology in the West, see David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

2. This figure is the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*'s own estimate. The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute puts the verse count of its critical edition at around 75,000. See *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar et al. 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66). The fourteenth-century commentary of Vidyāsāgara, known as the *Jayakaumudī*, arrives at a total verse count of 102,555. See Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharya, "Vidyāsāgara's Commentary on the Mahābhārata," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 25, no. 1/3 (1944): 102.

3. Translating the *Mahābhārata* has also been considered a cursed enterprise. The eleventh-century Telugu poet Nannaya is said to have passed away after translating

cannot contain it. Triumphalist readings of the *Mahābhārata* have made it India's "national epic."⁴ The *Bhagavadgītā* ("The Song of the Blessed Lord"), a series of chapters in the Sanskrit epic's sixth book, now constitutes a sacrosanct strand of many Hindu worldviews.⁵ But the clearest indicator of the epic's allure is the fact that for the last two thousand years, the most common response to the *Mahābhārata* has been to recreate it. From medieval Telugu poetry to transnational Twitter, Mahābhāratas flood the languages, localities, and literary genres of South Asia and beyond. How is it that a story so disquieting has also proven so attractive?⁶

Each of the eighteen chapters in this book presents its own answer to that question.⁷ Here is ours. The Mahābhārata story inherently invites more Mahābhāratas. Because of the relentless complexity of its worldview and the ensuing magnitude of its scope, the Mahābhārata persists in leaving

only the first two and a half books of the Sanskrit poem. More recently, in 1978, J. A. B. van Buitenen died after completing less than one third of his English translation of the *Mahābhārata*. See Velcheru Narayana Rao, "Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public," in *Text and Tradition in South India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), 86 n18; and Wendy Doniger, "How to Escape the Curse: The *Mahabharata* translated by John Smith," *London Review of Books* 31, no. 19 (2009): 18.

4. See Pamela Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5. On the diversity and popularity of the Bhagavadgītā tradition, see Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Winand M. Callewaert and Shilanand Hemraj, *Bhagavadgītānūvāda: A Study in Transcultural Translation* (Ranchi: Satya Bharati Publications, 1983).

6. One possible answer is that violent and fantastical narratives often prove popular. In this respect, we cannot help but notice the striking resemblance the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* bears to the hit television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's series of fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Both the *Mahābhārata* and *Game of Thrones* feature endless numbers of characters, major family drama, royal succession disputes, queens who literally emerge from fire, and gruesome depictions of violence including but not limited to rape, beheading, maiming, and cannibalism. And both have inspired voluminous second-order literature, including commentarial and theoretical works, produced by professionals as well as amateurs.

7. In the Mahābhārata tradition, the number eighteen itself holds a certain weight: the battle of Kurukṣetra lasts eighteen days; the *Bhagavadgītā* has eighteen chapters; and the critical edition and vulgate recension of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* each consist of eighteen *parvans*, or books.

its interpreters more to tease out, more to experience, more to complicate or to resolve.⁸ After all, as belief has it, there is something dangerous about a complete Mahābhārata. And so there are many of them; one is never enough. There are Mahābhāratas in Apabhramsha, Arabic, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Persian, Prakrit, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and countless other South Asian languages. They testify to the fact that when it comes to this story, there will always be more to say. And there will always be more ways to say it. The many Mahābhāratas that emerge from the Indian subcontinent include poems, plays, sculptures, paintings, novels, folk tales, short stories, comic books, essays, television shows, and films.

This desire for more—“always wanting these stories,” in the words of passage from Nannaya’s eleventh-century Telugu *Mahābhāratamu* quoted above⁹—is baked into the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*’s own creation myth. There Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed deity and the text’s divine scribe, demands that the sage Vyāsa, the text’s mythical author (and the grandfather of the story’s main figures), dictate the *Mahābhārata* to him without interruption so that Gaṇeśa will not have to stop writing, even for a moment. Gaṇeśa, “always wanting these stories,” becomes not only the *Mahābhārata*’s original hungry audience but also its original reteller, its transmitter from one medium to another. Already the myth links the desire for more of the *Mahābhārata* with the act of retelling it. And Gaṇeśa never finds satisfaction. Vyāsa makes a counteroffer (in the world of this *Mahābhārata*, everything is up for negotiation) and demands that Gaṇeśa comprehend each passage before writing it down. When Gaṇeśa seems to be getting ahead of the dictation, Vyāsa interrupts the flow of the narration with an especially complicated

8. As others have pointed out, the fact that the Mahābhārata evokes unending layers of dilemma, crisis, and struggle has contributed to the narrative’s perpetual and universal relevance. If the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was, as David Gitomer argues, “the repository of crisis in classical India,” then the work’s robust survival in South Asia resulted (as both Gitomer and Sheldon Pollock suggest) from the perpetual relevance of its “war fought at home [in which] both sides must lose.” See “King Duryodhana: The *Mahābhārata* Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992): 222; and Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 225.

9. This is Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman’s translation in *Classical Telugu Poetry: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 59.

passage.¹⁰ This call for perpetual interpretation—that Gaṇeśa make meaning out of each verse—would seem to be disruptive enough. But there is also the literary strategy of rupture per se—what Emily Hudson calls a “gap of meaning” in the narrative, a moment in the Mahābhārata story when a palpable “presence of absence” disorients the listener from her emotional and intellectual expectations.¹¹ The two outermost frame stories of the Sanskrit epic employ this idea of rupture in a more literal way.¹² In both frames, the narration of the *Mahābhārata* takes place during the pauses in an ongoing ritual: the *Mahābhārata* interrupts the ritual, and the ritual interrupts the *Mahābhārata*. All of these meta-narratives teach us that an essential part of reading (or hearing) the Mahābhārata is never getting quite enough of it, at least not as soon as one wants it—the story remains interrupted, incomplete, and maybe a little incomprehensible. That the epic claims to include “whatever exists”¹³ and at the same time runs on the fuel of unfinished, unstable, unsatisfied things—stories, rituals, lineages, truths, audiences—is one of the tantalizing incongruities that propels the *Mahābhārata* forward into endless tellings.

What’s more, the chapters in this book demonstrate that any Mahābhārata represents many Mahābhāratas. We have retellings inside retellings: four chapters explore Mahābhāratas that reconstruct the events of the *Virāṭaparvan*

10. Paul B. Courtright, *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 151–53. Courtright notes that this creation myth most likely postdates (by many centuries) the compilation of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.

11. Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetic of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22–23, 100–04.

12. On the frame stories of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, see C. Z. Minkowski, “Janamejaya’s *Sattra* and Ritual Structure,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 3 (1989): 401–20; and James W. Earl, *Beginning the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Frame Stories* (Woodland Hills, CA: South Asian Studies Association, 2011).

13. *dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha |*

yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit || MBh 1.56.33, 18.5.38 ||

“When it comes to dharma, *artha* (wealth or power), *kāma* (desire), and *mokṣa* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth), what is here is elsewhere—but what is not here is not anywhere else.” All references to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*) in this chapter are to the critical edition. Unless noted otherwise, all translations of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and other primary texts cited in this chapter are our own.

(“The Book of Virāṭa’s Court”), a book of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* that self-consciously mirrors the epic as a whole. Other authors find it impossible to stop at one Mahābhārata, even though they know that the volume addresses over a dozen more. The process of organizing this book has taught us that when it comes to understanding the Mahābhārata, comparison—which drives every chapter in one way or another—becomes a particularly fruitful tool for interpretation. Clearly a comparative approach complements the multivocality that many Mahābhāratas embody.¹⁴ Mahābhāratas often unfold through multiple narrative voices that diverge from and question one another. This intrinsic multivocality allows Mahābhāratas to mirror, on a formal level, the various conflicts that they depict. Even Mahābhāratas that present the narrative in an ethically and aesthetically straightforward manner, as some of the works in this volume do, are in some sense responding to this multivocal, “interrogative” mode of storytelling.¹⁵

14. The multivocality of the Mahābhārata tradition is beautifully illustrated in Balaji Srinivasan’s painting *Draupadi* (2015), which is featured on the cover of this volume. *Draupadi* is painted in the style of the *Citrakathī* picture storytelling tradition that was once practiced in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Srinivasan’s painting displays five different forms of the Mahābhārata heroine Draupadī. The first two forms of Draupadī would be familiar to a pan-South Asian audience. First she appears as the fire-born princess of Pañcāla during her *svayamvara* (bridegroom-choice ceremony). Then, in what the artist has called “the oath,” Draupadī appears as the queen of Indraprastha—surrounded by yards of miraculously replenished clothing, hair flowing freely—vowing not to rebind her hair until she can comb into it the blood of Duḥśāsana (and/or, in certain tellings, Duryodhana). This second Draupadī would be recognized particularly in South India, where the oath has long been a feature of Draupadī’s storyline. See Alf Hiltebeitel, “Draupadī’s Hair,” in *Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*, vol. 2, *When the Goddess was a Woman: Mahābhārata Ethnographies*, eds. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3–7. The other three forms in the painting are inspired by unique representations of Draupadī from the *Terukkūttu* performances of the Draupadī goddess cult in Tamil Nadu. At the center of the painting, Srinivasan presents Draupadī as a *kuyavañci* (fortune teller) preparing to tell the Kaurava women their fortunes. (Sahadeva is disguised as a baby on her hip.) Then we see Draupadī as the fearsome goddess Kālī, who sucks blood from the battleground of Kurukṣetra at night. On the far right, we arrive at Draupadī Amman, a beautiful local deity with a parrot on her hand who is worshiped in northern Tamil Nadu. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol. 1, *Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 303, 291, and 263.

15. “Interrogative” is Shubha Pathak’s term. See *Divine Yet Human Epics*, 174.

There are no categorical boundaries that the Mahābhārata does not overstep. The chapters in this book show that the Mahābhārata has been both elite and popular, Hindu and non-Hindu, classical and vernacular, orthodox and heterodox, constructive and destructive, textual and performative, fragmented and whole, normative and subversive, and affirmative and surprising. For some of the interpretive communities featured in this book, the Mahābhārata defines these categories. For others, the Mahābhārata dismantles these terms of analysis entirely. To anyone who insists that the Mahābhārata is one thing or another, we present the astounding magnitude and heterogeneity of this literary cosmos. If there is “a” Mahābhārata, it is transhistorical, translinguistic, transmedial; it is a Mahābhārata that insists on engendering more Mahābhāratas.

The Story

We first conceived of this book as one answer (among many, of course) to the enduring questions of just what the Mahābhārata is, does, and says. There will be many answers to this mega-question, and many of them will presume many Mahābhāratas. Even the title, “Mahābhārata,” suggesting a unified body of text, hides a plural behind its ever-so-gossamer veil. “Mahābhārata,” after all, means “the Great Bhāratas.” Still one might ask: Is there not a single core story of these great Bhāratas? Let’s begin by expounding the story most people assume.¹⁶

The nuclear tale of most well-known Mahābhāratas goes something like this. After the death of Pāṇḍu, the former ruler of the Bhārata empire, a fierce rivalry is born between two sets of royal cousins, all in the Kuru family: the five Pāṇḍavas (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva) and the one hundred Kauravas, who are led by the formidable Duryodhana and the obsequious Duḥśāsana.¹⁷ While “Pāṇḍava” literally means “son of Pāṇḍu,” the five princes are actually the offspring of Pāṇḍu’s

16. For detailed summaries of the story of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, we recommend: *The Mahābhārata: An Abridged Translation*, trans. John D. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 2009), xv–xviii; and Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 10–20.

17. For a hilarious song that lists the names of all one hundred Kauravas, see SnG Comedy, “SnG: The Kaurava Song,” YouTube video, 2:52, June 24, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1whAeFHW_s.

two wives, Kuntī and Mādri, as impregnated by five Vedic deities. (Pāṇḍu himself is unable to father children—the result of a curse.)¹⁸ The Kauravas are the sons of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu's blind elder brother, and his wife, Gāndhārī.¹⁹

After the Pāṇḍavas survive a fiery assassination attempt in a lac palace and jointly marry an equally fiery princess named Draupadī,²⁰ Dhṛtarāṣṭra divides the kingdom among his sons and nephews. The Pāṇḍavas build a magnificent city called Indraprastha, where Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of the god Dharma (Righteousness), asserts his universal kingship through an elaborate consecration ritual. The prosperous rule of the Pāṇḍavas comes tumbling down, however, when Yudhiṣṭhira gambles and loses to the Kauravas. In a game of dice played against Duryodhana and Duryodhana's maternal uncle Śakuni, Yudhiṣṭhira forfeits his wealth, his brothers, himself, and Draupadī. In most Mahābhāratas, Draupadī emotionally anchors the dicing scene. Some have argued that she is really the center of the story, its linchpin. Let's be agnostic about that as a general statement, but because this aspect of the overall story sits at the core of several Mahābhāratas discussed in this book, we must pause to review it in some detail.

Duryodhana and Duṣṣāsana force Draupadī to appear before the kings, elders, and family members who have gathered in the assembly hall to observe the dicing. There, the most prominent Kaurava warriors attack Draupadī verbally and harm her physically; Duṣṣāsana drags her by the hair,

18. In most Mahābhāratas, Nakula and Sahadeva are the twin sons of the Aśvins (the twin Vedic deities of medicine) and Mādri. In the *Pāṇḍavilīlā* performance tradition in Uttarakhand, however, Nakula is regarded as the biological son of Pāṇḍu and Mādri. Similarly, in Sabalsingh Cauhān's Hindi *Mahābhārat*, Sahadeva is the actual son of Pāṇḍu and Mādri. See William S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63; and Sabalsingh Cauhān, *Sabalsingh Cauhān-Viracit Mahābhārat* (Lucknow: Tej Kumar Book Depot, 2015), 23.

19. While the term “Kaurava” means “descendent of Kuru” and can therefore technically refer to the Pāṇḍavas, who also belong to the Kuru clan, the name “Kaurava” usually refers to the one hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

20. As Jonathan Geen has shown, Mahābhāratas from the Digambara Jain religious tradition “insist that Draupadī married Arjuna alone, and that the rumour of her marriage to five men must be considered absurd, scandalous, and unequivocally false.” See “The Marriage of Draupadī in the Hindu and Jaina Mahābhārata,” (PhD diss., McMaster University, 2001), 173.

and Duryodhana shows her his thigh (a sexual advance). Draupadī protests not only the insults that the Kaurava warriors hurl at her, but also everyone else's failure to intervene.²¹ The most iconic part of the story unfolds when Duḥśāsana attempts to remove the garment that Draupadī is wearing. He tries to strip it away, but another one always appears in its place. Over and over he tries, but a new garment appears every time. Many Mahābhāratas attribute this wonder to the intervention of Kṛṣṇa (an incarnation of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu, who is also the Pāṇḍavas' maternal cousin and closest advisor); the critical edition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* does not. In any case, after this ordeal, Dhṛtarāṣṭra restores to the Pāṇḍavas all that was lost. But this reinstatement of an earlier balance is short-lived. Yudhiṣṭhira loses in a second game of dice. According to the terms of *this* game, the five brothers and Draupadī are forced to live in exile in the forest for twelve years followed by another year of living incognito, which they elect to do at the court of King Virāṭa.

After several failed peace negotiations, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas prepare for war. But before the battle commences, Arjuna, the most skilled warrior in the Pāṇḍava army, holds back. In response, his charioteer Kṛṣṇa tells him a great deal about philosophy and social theory and persuades him to fight. This is the famous *Bhagavadgītā*. In the course of a brutal eighteen-day war, which takes place at Kurukṣetra (literally “the field of the Kurus”), Bhīma, the strongest of the Pāṇḍava brothers, kills all one hundred Kauravas. Under the guidance of Kṛṣṇa, the Pāṇḍavas and their allies also defeat the four generals of the Kaurava army: Bhīṣma (the patriarch of the Kuru clan), Droṇa (the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas' teacher), Karṇa (Duryodhana's closest friend, who, unbeknownst to the Pāṇḍavas, is the eldest son of their mother, Kuntī), and Śalya (the Pāṇḍavas' maternal uncle through their other mother, Mādri).

By the end of this apocalyptic war, nearly all of its participants—including Bhīma's son, Ghaṭotkaca, and Arjuna's sons, Irāvān and Abhimanyu—are dead. Yet the carnage does not stop. In the night, Droṇa's son Aśvatthāman sneaks into the Pāṇḍava camp and slaughters the remaining survivors, including Draupadī's brothers Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Śikhaṇḍin and all of her five sons, each one begotten with one of the Pāṇḍavas. In

21. “The old, eternal dharma of the Kurus has been destroyed,” she says in *MBh* 2.62.9.

order to wipe out the lineage completely, Aśvatthāman releases a celestial weapon into the womb of Abhimanyu's pregnant widow, Uttarā. Kṛṣṇa later intervenes in this disaster. He revives Uttarā's stillborn son and the Pāṇḍavas' heir, Parikṣit.

Several Mahābhāratas—from Kumāravayāsa's fifteenth-century Kannada poem *Karṇātabhāratākathāmañjarī* ("The Essence of the Bhārata Story in Kannada") to the 2013 animated Bollywood film *Mahābhārat*—end with the conclusion of the battle at Kurukṣetra. The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and many other tellings, however, explore the aftermath of this bloody war. After the Kuru women mourn the dead, Kṛṣṇa brings Yudhiṣṭhira to the dying Bhīṣma, who gives Yudhiṣṭhira an extensive lecture on kingship, dharma, and *mokṣa* (freedom from the cycle of rebirth). After Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers, together with Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa, exhort him to reassert his political power, Yudhiṣṭhira performs a horse sacrifice to atone for his wrongdoing in battle and establish rulership once again.

Many years later, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī, and Kuntī retire to a hermitage in the forest, where they eventually die in a fire. All the members of Kṛṣṇa's clan, the Vṛṣṇis, murder one another in a drunken brawl; Kṛṣṇa himself is accidentally killed by a hunter. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī embark on a final journey during which all but Yudhiṣṭhira perish. Yudhiṣṭhira reaches heaven, where he finds Duryodhana—the most meager of happy endings. But when he learns that the other Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are suffering in hell, he insists on joining his loved ones there. It is then revealed that hell is an illusion, and Yudhiṣṭhira is reunited with his family in heaven.²² Thus a sense of ambiguity reigns over the story to the end: What is real, and what is not?

The Mahābhārata Genre

Does a composition need to tell this story in order to be considered a Mahābhārata, and does it need to tell *only* this story? Consider, for example, the Jain narratives that integrate the story of the Pāṇḍavas into their

22. On the endings of the Sanskrit epic and other Sanskrit Mahābhārata tellings, see Naama Shalom, *Re-ending the Mahābhārata: The Rejection of Dharma in the Sanskrit Epic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

more sweeping accounts of the lives of Kṛṣṇa and his cousin, Neminātha, the twenty-second *tīrthānkara* (Jain teacher). In the earliest of these texts, Jinasena Punnāṭa's Sanskrit *Harivamśapurāṇa* ("The Legend of Hari's Lineage," ca. 783), after the Kauravas are defeated (but not killed) by the Pāṇḍavas in the great war, the hundred brothers renounce their earthly possessions and become ascetics.²³ Two remarkably similar poems, Bhīm Kavi's Hindi *Daṅgvaikathā* ("The Story of Ḍaṅgvai," ca. 1493) and Carigoṇḍa Dharmanna's Telugu *Citrabhāratamu* ("The Peculiar Bhārata," ca. 1500), depict the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas joining forces to wage battle with Kṛṣṇa in order to save the life of a local king.²⁴ The Sanskrit drama *Pañcarātra* ("The Five Nights," ca. 200–800) is still more radical in its departure from the central story line. There the feuding cousins avoid the war at Kurukṣetra entirely. Still other works ignore all but one or two characters—Karna, for example, or Aśvatthāman, Kuntī, or Ghaṭotkaca—and others engage shorter, more self-contained installments from the Mahābhārata narrative corpus, such as the stories of Śakuntalā, Sāvitrī, or Nala and Damayantī.²⁵

23. Eva De Clercq, "The Jaina *Harivamśa* and *Mahābhārata* Tradition: A Preliminary Survey," in *Parallels and Comparisons in the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas*, ed. P. Koskikallio (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2008), 404.

24. See Francesca Orsini, "Texts and Tellings: *Kathas* in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, eds. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 337–46; and E. Vasumati, *Telugu Literature in the Qutub Shahi Period* (Hyderabad: Abul Kalam Azad Oriental Research Institute, n.d., ca. 1960), 19–53. We find similar stories in Haḷēmakki Rāma's seventeenth-century *Yakṣagāna* play *Gaya Carite*, the Tamil ballad poems *Pañcapāṇṭavar Vaṇavācam* and *Kurukṣēttira Mālai*, and the 1963 Telugu film *Śrīkṛṣṇārjuna Yuddhamu*. See K. Shivarama Karantha, *Yakṣagāna* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1997), 245–46; and M. Arunachalam, *Ballad Poetry* (Thanjavur: Saraswati Mahal Library, 1976), 108.

25. For some examples of this, see Ahona Panda, "What Karna and Kunti Talked about the Night before the Battle of Kurukshetra," *Scroll.in*, November 8, 2015, <https://scroll.in/article/767802>; Amruta Patil, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2016); Romila Thapar, *Śakuntalā: Texts, Readings, Histories* (London: Anthem Press, 1999); Amanda Louise Culp, "Searching for Shakuntala: Sanskrit Drama and Theatrical Modernity in Europe and India, 1789–Present," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018); and Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 1995).

Are these compositions, so many of which refrain from calling themselves anything resembling “Mahābhārata,” in fact Mahābhāratas?

Sometimes being a Mahābhārata means that a work shares certain motifs (characters, structures, relationships, themes) with the story we have outlined here—a story with which all of the audiences we consider in this book would have been (or are) intimately familiar. Perhaps we can be content with the idea that sometimes being a Mahābhārata means being a work that relates to the central “core” story, or to other Mahābhāratas that embody it. But there are many different ways in which this can be done. To follow in A. K. Ramanujan’s deeply imprinted footsteps, we might delineate these relationships as responsive, reflexive, or self-reflexive;²⁶ or again, following Ramanujan, we might call them iconic, indexical, or symbolic.²⁷ In the end, we would propose, the novels, plays, poems, essays, chronicles, and short stories studied in this book become most meaningful when we leave aside these formal constraints and experience them first and foremost as *Mahābhāratas*, that is, when we embed them in the ever-growing ecosystem of Mahābhārata-related works. The important thing isn’t whether a composition “is” a Mahābhārata or calls itself one, but whether the value of interpreting that work increases as a result of putting it into conversation with other Mahābhāratas. We would argue that it almost always does, and often with a sense of discovery that feels like crystallization.

We are not the first to propose that this is so. This is precisely the move that the Sanskrit literary theorist Ānandavardhana (ca. 850 CE) made in relation to the *Harivaṃśa*—“Hari’s Lineage,” a 16,000-verse Sanskrit account of the lives of Kṛṣṇa and his descendants, along with related cosmological myths. Ānandavardhana described the interpretive advantage of reading in close relation to the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* by taking the *Harivaṃśa*’s own claim that it continues the epic and going a step further.²⁸ “It is true,” he writes, that

26. A. K. Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections,” *History of Religions* 28, no. 3 (1989): 189.

27. A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,” in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 44–45.

28. The *Harivaṃśa* (probably composed over the early centuries CE) takes on the same two outermost frame stories of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa* falls into a number of genre categories. Explorations

the principal role of serenity in the *Mahābhārata* and the importance of *mokṣa* over all human aims are not displayed in the *Mahābhārata*'s initial listing of its subject matter, at least not in so many words. But they are displayed through suggestion . . . And this very meaning that was beautiful and hidden is made perfectly clear (when it was not before) by the creator of the poem, Vyāsa, when he himself creates a resolution at the end of the *Mahābhārata* by offering us the *Harivaṃśa*.²⁹

For Ānandavardhana, the *Harivaṃśa* brings out the *Mahābhārata*'s subtextual Kṛṣṇa-centricity, which allows the audience to appreciate the most "beautiful and hidden" meanings of the epic: its ethos of serenity³⁰ and its lessons about release from the cycle of existence.³¹ It is not the individ-

of its participation in the major contenders—*mahākāvya*, *purāṇa*, and *khila* (an appendix)—along with critical essays on its poetic style, structural features, narrative contents, and history can be found in Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "The *Harivaṃśa* as a *Mahākāvya*," in *Mélanges d'Indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 1968), 381–94; and André Couture, *Kṛṣṇa in the Harivaṃśa*, 2 vols. (Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2015–17). For a recent translation, see *Krishna's Lineage: The Harivaṃśa of Vyāsa's Mahābhārata*, trans. Simon Brodbeck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

29. *satyaṃ śāntasyaiva rasayāṅgitvaṃ mahābhārate mokṣasya ca sarvapuruṣārthebhyah prādhānyam ity etan na svasabdābhidheyatvenānukramanyāṃ darśitaṃ, darśitaṃ tu vyaṅgyatvena . . . ayaṃ ca nigūḍharamaṇīyo 'rtho mahābhāratāvasāne harivaṃśavarṇanena samāptiṃ vidadhatā tenaiva kavivedhasā kṛṣṇadvaipāyanena samyak sphuṭikṛtaḥ* | *Dhvanyāloka*, 276 (*vṛtti* on 4.5). All references to the *Dhvanyāloka* in this chapter are to Ānandavardhana, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana*, ed. K. Krishnamoorthy (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1974).

30. A working translation of *śānta-rasa* in this context. See Gary A. Tubb, "Śāntarasa in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 171–203. Lawrence McCrea writes that *śānta-rasa* "has as its emotional basis the cessation of all desires" and, later on, clarifies that indifference is still an emotional response. See *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 132 and 243. For more on the paradox of feeling non-feeling, see Edwin Gerow, "Abhinavagupta's Aesthetics as a Speculative Paradigm," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114, no. 2 (1994): 186–208.

31. See *Dhvanyāloka*, 272–82 (*vṛtti* on 4.5). For a full translation of this section, see Ānandavardhana, *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V.

ual works but the conversation between them that speaks to this deeper understanding. Over a millennium later, Wendy Doniger used the concept of conversation to describe the value of reading intertextually. Whether it involves “conscious quotation” or a more unconscious kind of representation, she writes, the idea of intertextuality enables us to “eavesdrop on the conversations between storytellers centuries and continents apart.”³²

How we listen to this conversation matters, too. Ramanujan speaks of genre as a special way of listening, one that requires hearing “radially” so as to take in other works even when listening to one in particular. Here is how he describes classical Tamil poems:

Every poem resonates with the absent presence of others that sound with it, like the unstruck strings of a sitar. So we respond to a system of presences and absences; our reading then is not linear but what has been called “radial.” Every poem is part of a large self-reflexive paradigm; it relates to all others in absentia, gathers ironies, allusions; one text becomes the context of others. Each is precisely foregrounded against a background of all the others.³³

In the spirit of Ramanujan’s model, above, we propose to read the Mahābhārata tradition as if it constituted a genre of its own. (Ramanujan himself said something similar of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition: it is “not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances.”³⁴) Mahābhāratas shape “a system of presences and absences” based on recurring characters, relationships, stories, themes, and aesthetics; when we experience a Mahābhārata, we respond—whether we are aware of it or not—to the presence, absence, inversion, subversion, or reformation of these shared features that frame our expectations. Engaging with the

Patwardhan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 690–96.

32. Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

33. Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors are Windows,” 197. On the term “radial,” Ramanujan cites Jerome J. McGann, “Theory of Texts,” *London Review of Books* 10, no. 4 (1988): 21.

34. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas,” 45.

Mahābhārata as a genre would prompt us to listen for such resonances across languages, regions, religions, cultures, and all kinds of historical contexts. The broader goal of *Many Mahābhāratas*, then, is to facilitate this kind of listening. By representing the Mahābhārata as a transmedial, transhistorical, translinguistic, and transdisciplinary mode of expression in South Asia, this book will, we hope, enable the reader to listen closely to a given interpretation of the Mahābhārata while hearing a polyphony of absent tellings in the background.

A Contextual Introduction to the Essays

The sections of this volume reflect a roughly chronological progression of Mahābhārata representations that appear across a range of South Asian literary, religious, historical, social, and political contexts. Of course, we cannot include reflections on *every* Mahābhārata; such a book would end up being longer than the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* itself. In order to keep the length of the book in check—and to escape the long-standing curse that is said to befall those who take on the epic as a whole—we explore but a tiny fraction of extant Mahābhāratas. For one thing, we restrict the scope of our primary sources to Mahābhāratas of South Asian origin. Also, we tend to prioritize less “accessible” Mahābhāratas—works that a reader might seek help understanding or appreciating if she happened to come across them on her own, or simply to hear of their existence. For this reason, the volume contains a significant number of essays on premodern Mahābhāratas in less commonly known languages—Apabhramsha, Old Kannada, Sanskrit, and so on—many of them as yet untranslated into English. Within those bounds, we have endeavored to make our collection of sources representative of different languages, historical periods, media, and genres. We have also been eager to exhibit a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to the material—reflective, we believe, of the Mahābhārata’s remarkable reach across the field of South Asian studies.

PART I: THE MANYNESS OF THE SANSKRIT MAHĀBHĀRATA

Taken together, the chapters in the first part of the volume argue that themes of multiplicity and retelling emerge from, and indeed define, the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* itself. It is important to point out that while we

speak of “the” Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*—something that we say not only for convenience but also to honor the aesthetic cohesion of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* corpus—there are, in fact, many Sanskrit *Mahābhāratas*. First we have the epic’s northern and southern recensions, which themselves represent multi-branch manuscript traditions rather than single texts.³⁵ Then we find that the text we nowadays call the “vulgate” *Mahābhārata*, produced by the seventeenth-century scholar Nīlakaṇṭha, is not just that, but also an exhaustive commentary that he composed to accompany it.³⁶ Nīlakaṇṭha’s was not the earliest commentary on the epic, but it is the only complete commentary to which we have access. Then comes the twentieth-century critical edition of the epic, constructed at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute under the direction of V. S. Sukthankar.³⁷ And there are many more “thens” we could add to the list. The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* thus presents us with multiples beyond measure. The hundreds of written and oral accounts of the Sanskrit epic demonstrate that it “flickers back and forth between Sanskrit manuscripts and village storytellers, each adding new gemstones to the old mosaic, constantly reinterpreting it,” Doniger writes.³⁸ In the volume’s third chapter, David Gitomer leads us through a spectacular exam-

35. See Thennilapuram P. Mahadevan, “On the Southern Recension of the *Mahābhārata*, Brahman Migrations, and the Brāhmī Paleography,” *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2008): 43–147; and Wendy J. Phillips-Rodriguez, “Unrooted Trees: A Way around the Dilemma of Recension,” in *Papers of the 13th World Sanskrit Conference*, vol. 2, *Battle, Bards and Brāhmins*, ed. John Brockington (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012), 217–29.

36. See Christopher Minkowski, “What Makes a Work ‘Traditional’? On the Success of Nīlakaṇṭha’s *Mahābhārata* Commentary” in *Boundaries, Dynamics, and Construction of Traditions*, ed. Federico Squarcini (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2005), 225–44; and C. Minkowski, “Nīlakaṇṭha’s *Mahābhārata*,” *Seminar* 608 (2010): 32–38.

37. For some different perspectives on the critical edition of the epic, see M. A. Mehendale, “The Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*: Its Constitution, Achievements, and Limitations,” in *Texts and Variations of the Mahābhārata: Contextual, Regional, and Performative Traditions*, ed. Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty (Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts, 2009), 3–23; Simon Brodbeck, “Analytic and Synthetic Approaches in Light of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa*,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 223–50; and Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* (New York: Anthem Press, 2018).

38. Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 263–64.

ple of how one such “gemstone”—the story of Irāvān, Arjuna’s half-serpent son—both reflects the stories connected with a better-known figure in the epic, Bhīma’s half-*rākṣasa* or “demon” son, Ghaṭotkaca, and also develops the narrative structure of the epic’s sixth book, the *Bhīṣmaparvan* (“The Book of Bhīṣma”).

Whether mammoth or miniature, the many versions of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* reflect a profound awareness of one another. “Anyone who added anything to the *Mahabharata* was well aware of the whole textual tradition behind it,” Doniger explains, “and fitted his or her own insight, or story, or long philosophical disquisition, thoughtfully into the ongoing conversation.”³⁹ Sheldon Pollock highlights the epic’s remarkable uniformity throughout the first millennium when he observes that “the unmistakable impression given by hundreds of medieval manuscripts copied time and again for centuries on end is that the *Mahābhārata*, just like Sanskrit itself, existed in a quasi-universal trans-regional space and spoke across this space in an entirely homogenous voice.”⁴⁰ In this sense, one might speak of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as embodying a single authorial voice, as Sally J. Sutherland Goldman does in the fourth chapter, when she draws upon multiple sources of the Sanskrit epic—the critical edition, the vulgate, Nilakaṇṭha’s commentary, and two English translations—to analyze the relationship between gender and character narration in “Vyāsa’s” *Mahābhārata*.

Yet we must always keep the manyness in view, as Robert Goldman does in the book’s second chapter. Taking seriously Ramanujan’s assertion that narrative reflexivity forms the aesthetic architecture of the epic,⁴¹ he explores a mode of repetition in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* that has so far escaped the commentator’s eye. Goldman analyzes two of the most prominent motifs in the epic’s narrative framework—revenge and attempted genocide—and shows how they are replicated through the Sanskrit epic. Later in the book we will see that many Mahābhāratas beyond the Sanskrit orbit confront these centrally positioned themes, evoking a world helplessly caught up in the momentum of its own self-destruction.⁴² Some try to rescue that world from its downward spiral—a seemingly monumental task.

39. Doniger, 264.

40. Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 229.

41. A. K. Ramanujan, “Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 421–26.

42. We thank Robert Goldman for the language and the idea in the second part of this sentence.

PART II: SANSKRIT MAHĀBHĀRATAS IN POETRY AND PERFORMANCE

The chapters that form the second part of this volume expand our definition of “Sanskrit Mahābhārata” far beyond the early epic poem. This is a necessary task, for the characters and stories of the Mahābhārata virtually saturate the fabric of Sanskrit literature. Some of the best-known works of classical Sanskrit *kāvya*, comprising the arena of poetry and drama, focus their attention on some of the relatively self-contained stories that emerge from the Mahābhārata corpus. Kālidāsa’s drama *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (“The Recognition of Śakuntalā,” ca. 400 CE) is one particularly famous example, but three celebrated *mahākāvya*s (ornate, multi-chapter poems that follow narrative arcs) do the same. We have Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* (“Arjuna and the Hunter,” sixth century), Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadha* (“The Slaying of Śiśupāla,” seventh century), and Śrīharṣa’s *Naiṣadhīyacarita* (“The Adventures of the Naiṣadha King,” twelfth century).⁴³ Meanwhile, many Mahābhāratas were voiced in Sanskrit literary genres with which readers are ordinarily less familiar: epitomes, bitextual poems (many of which narrate the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa simultaneously), and mixed prose-poems (*campū*s).⁴⁴

43. See Bhāravi, *Arjuna and the Hunter*, ed. and trans. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Murty Classical Library of India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic: The Kirātārjunīya of Bhāravi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Māgha, *The Killing of Shishupala*, ed. and trans. Paul Dundas, Murty Classical Library of India (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Deven Patel, *Text to Tradition: The Naiṣadhīyacarita and Literary Community in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

44. A few examples in roughly chronological order: Vāsudeva’s *Nalodaya* and *Yudhiṣṭhiravijaya* and Dhanañjaya’s *Dvisandhānakāvya* (ninth century); Trivikrama Bhaṭṭa Bāṇa’s *Nalacampū*, Nilakaṇṭha’s *Kalyāṇasaugandhika*, and Rājaśekhara’s *Bālabbhārata* (tenth century); Kṣemendra’s *Bhāratamañjarī* and Anantabhaṭṭa’s *Bhāratacampū* (eleventh century); Kavirāja’s *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya*, Śrutakīrti Traividya’s *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya*, and Hemacandra’s *Saptasandhānakāvya* (twelfth century); Rāmacandra’s *Nalavilāsa* and *Yādavābhyudaya*, Amaracandrasūri’s *Bālabbhārata*, and Agastya Paṇḍita’s *Bālabbhārata* (thirteenth century); Viśvanātha’s *Saugandhikāharṇa* (fourteenth century); and Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa’s *Bhārataprabandha* (seventeenth century). For more on these works, see Yigal Bronner, *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 91–152; and Shalom, *Re-ending the Mahābhārata*, 70–80.

Other compositions take on the Mahābhārata's central narrative and engage with its themes of dilemma and decay. In one influential study, Yigal Bronner shows how Nīivarman's *Kīcakavadha* ("The Slaying of Kīcaka," ca. 600) transposes the epic's evocation of fragmented identities into the "disguised language" of *śleṣa* (simultaneous narration) in poetry.⁴⁵ The same fragmentation casts its shadow across Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa's *Veṇīsaṃhāra* ("The Binding of the Braid," ca. 700), a play that depicts events from the epic in alternating perspectives. One act unfolds from the perspective of the Kauravas, the next from that of the Pāṇḍavas, back and forth. David Gitomer has argued that this play really consists of two plays: one in which the Pāṇḍavas are victorious heroes, and one in which the Kauravas are tragic heroes. This is *śleṣa* again, but in a markedly different way. The fact that the *Veṇīsaṃhāra* presents not a single dramatic path but something more like a dramatic discourse, or conversation between plots, allows the drama to import (in Gitomer's words) "at least something of that epic's eschatology which, on its more original socio-political level, is [an eschatology] of disintegration and human failure."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Lawrence McCrea has shown that a similar ethos governs the twelfth-century Kashmiri poet Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranṅinī* ("The River of Kings"). While Kalhaṇa does not use the figures and stories of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* in the *Rājataranṅinī* directly, he consciously applies the *Mahābhārata*'s illustrations of immorality and decline to the kings whose reigns he describes.⁴⁷

These studies bring us to the threshold of the fifth chapter in our volume. There, Nell Shapiro Hawley directs our attention to one of the six anonymous Mahābhārata plays that were recovered in Kerala in 1910 and initially attributed to Bhāsa (ca. 200), the *Pañcarātra*.⁴⁸ These Bhāsa

45. Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*, 58–81.

46. David L. Gitomer, "The 'Veṇīsaṃhāra' of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa: The Great Epic as Drama," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1988), 495.

47. Lawrence McCrea, "Śāntarasa in the *Rājataranṅinī*: History, Epic, and Moral Decay," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50 (2013): 179–99.

48. On the date and authorship of these six Mahābhārata-inspired dramas, see Heidrun Brückner, "Manuscripts and Performance Traditions of the so-called Trivandrum Plays ascribed to Bhāsa—A Report on Work in Progress," *Bulletin d'études indiennes* 17–18 (1999–2000): 501–50; and Herman Tiekens, "The So-Called Trivandrum Plays Attributed to Bhāsa," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für Indische Philosophie* 37 (1993): 5–44. A counterpoint

dramas, like others we have described, demonstrate a strong commitment to representing both the ethos of disintegration and the aesthetics of mirroring and repetition that characterize the Sanskrit epic itself. Of the six plays, five give life to the Kaurava experience of the events surrounding the war at Kurukṣetra. The *Karṇabhāra* (“Karna’s Burden”) dramatizes the story in which Karṇa severs from his body his inborn armor and earrings and gives them to Indra (the king of the gods and Arjuna’s father), who disguises himself as a *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmin) begging for alms.⁴⁹ In the *Dūtavākya* (“The Messenger’s Words”), Duryodhana and Kṛṣṇa rehearse the events that have led their respective sides of the family to the brink of war. Kṛṣṇa ultimately reveals his cosmic powers to Duryodhana, but the revelation only leads them closer to war. The second messenger play in the corpus, the *Dūtaghaṭokaca* (“Ghaṭokaca the Messenger”), brings Ghaṭokaca to the Kaurava camp near the end of the war. In the *Dūtaghaṭokaca*, the anger of the *Dūtavākya* morphs into a series of laments over the war’s many deaths. Ghaṭokaca then takes center stage in the *Madhyamavyāyoga* (“The Middle Brother”), the only one of the dramas to follow only the Pāṇḍavas. It is set during the Pāṇḍavas’ period of exile and sets in motion a recognition drama between Ghaṭokaca and Bhīma.⁵⁰ Bhīma (or at least the idea of him, since he does not stand among the play’s *dramatis personae*) reappears in the *Ūrubhaṅga* (“The Breaking of the Thighs”), which takes the theme of brokenness as its starting point and its endpoint. The first half of the drama unfolds through the eyes of three soldiers who witness Bhīma breaking Duryodhana’s thighs (and, figuratively, breaking dharma). The second half features a series of emotional separations between Duryo-

to the positions of Brückner and Ticken, if one that predates their research, can be found in V. S. Sukthankar, “Studies in Bhāsa” in *V. S. Sukthankar Memorial Edition*, vol. 2, *Analecta*, ed. P. K. Gode (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1945), 82–184.

49. See *Karṇabhāra: The Trial of Karṇa*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 57–67.

50. See Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, “The Monstrous Feminine: Rākṣasī and Other Others—The Archaic Mother of Bhāsa’s *Madhyamavyāyoga*,” in *On Meaning and Mantras: Essays in Honor of Frits Staal*, eds. George Thompson and Richard K. Payne (Moraga, CA: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, Inc., 2016), 247–74.