

**“You Have to Read the Whole Thing”:
Some Reflection’s on Madeleine Biardeau’s *Mahābhārata***

By Alf Hildebeitel

My correspondence with Madeleine Biardeau goes back to 1971. Early that year, Jean Varenne was commenting on the chapters of a translation he had encouraged me to make of Sylvain Lévi’s *Le doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmaṇas*, which I eventually decided not to publish. I had gotten to know Varenne when he had come to the University of Chicago as J. A. B. van Buitenen’s replacement in 1967-68, and he had urged me to read the first two parts of Madeleine’s “Études de mythologie hindoue” on “Cosmogonies purāṇiques,” which appeared in the *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* in 1968 and 1969. Varenne now told me that Part 3 was in press, which he said would be about *pralayas* and *avatāras*, and urged me to write to Madeleine to ask about its availability. Madeleine wrote back on June 4, 1971, enclosing her mimeographed copy of this lengthy and invaluable article. Varenne was right, she said, that it was still “sous presse,” but cautioned that he had expanded its contents: “Il traite seulement du pralaya comme vous pourrez voir dans le manuscrit ci-joint. . . . C’est seulement dans le prochain article—encore à écrire—que je vais aborder la question des avatāra, et votre lettre est venue fort opportunément me rappeler une note que j’avais oubliée, mais qui reste valable. Je crois encore que l’avatāra, qui intervient à la jonction des deux yuga, provoque et résout en même temps une crise cosmique qui est l’analogie symbolique d’un pralaya, et c’est sans doute cette crise qui, dans la théorie des unités de temps, devient la sandhyā.” I did not keep a copy of my cover letter, so I do not know what might have jolted Madeleine’s memory. But as a PhD student, I would have been pleased to read that I could offer something to her work in progress. Her letter went on to indicate that she believed “la perspective comparatiste de Dumézil n’apporte pas grande lumière pour la compréhension de la crise du MhBh,” and went on to summarize her own treatment of the subject that had appeared in the comptes-rendus résumés of her courses at the EPHE in 1968-69 and 1969-70, which she also included offprints of in this package. She concluded, “Je ne sais si ces quelques réflexions

s'intégreront dans les vôtres ou si au contraire elles vous paraîtront parfaitement étrangères à vos préoccupations. En tous cas, je serais heureuse d'être informée de votre travail sur ce sujet.”

Two years later, when I had finished the dissertation, I had the temerity to let her see for herself by sending a copy of it to her—all 600+ pages. On November 20, 1973, she replied, probably after a prior exchange that I did not keep. In typed single-space pages, there was, first, a cover page, and then five pages of detailed notes of criticism. The cover page began, “Je vous envoie le reste des notes que j'ai prises sur votre thèse. Vous allez encore les trouver trop critiques . . . mais quel serait l'intérêt de notes qui se contenteraient d'approuver” (Biardeau's ellipsis). It ended, “Encore merci de m'avoir donné la possibilité de lire votre thèse. Cela m'a vivement intéressée et j'en ai retiré beaucoup de remarques utiles pour mon propre travail. Puisque vous avez pris toute liberté par rapport à vos aînés, j'espère que vous accepterez aussi mes remarques les plus critiques sans en être découragé. Il est normal que nous ayons des optiques assez largement différentes et ce n'est qu'en continuant à travailler que nous pourrions réduire certaines différences.” Madeleine's extensive notes were the only scholarly feedback based on close reading that I received on my dissertation before it was revised into my first book, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*.¹ I am glad we went on to have over thirty years both to narrow and sharpen our differences, and equally to appreciate what her cover letter called our “préoccupations communes, en particulier sur les relations entre Viṣṇu et Śiva.” More on these matters shortly.

Now insofar as my title for this talk includes the phrase “Madeleine Biardeau's *Mahābhārata*,” I mean first to honor the interdisciplinary range of Madeleine's work that is a theme of this Journée in her memory. The epic was initially, and always remained for her, primarily the *Mahābhārata* of Sanskrit texts, including its intertexts: notably the *Harivaṃśa*, on which her student André Couture has continued to do important work in showing the interplay between the *Mahābhārata* and this “appendix.” But Biardeau's *Mahābhārata* quickly enough became also an object of her anthropological inquiry. Madeleine was undoubtedly the first *Mahābhārata* scholar to begin to trace the epic's routes across the culture and terrain of South Asia, and she

¹ This, even though van Buitenen was on my dissertation committee.

influenced my choice to do the same—in fact, beginning in these early exchanges of letters, she was determinative in directing me to study the Tamil Draupadī cult. Moreover, as her work on the epic continued to tack back and forth between the text and the terrain, she was eventually to offer the first and still the only *thorough* examination of the text from the standpoint that it was composed as a riposte to Buddhism, thereby developing an historical hypothesis that nullified the favorite charge of so many of her critics that her “structuralist” or “symbolic” approach to the epic was ahistorical. What I mean by the phrase “Madeleine’s *Mahābhārata*” thus takes in these three disciplinary approaches, and a few others could be mentioned as well.

But my title also refers to her last book on the epic, *Le Mahābhārata: Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*, which I suspect I am not the only one to have heard her describe as “my *Mahābhārata*”—the 2,017 page two volume text that she could speak of in this fashion as our current-day Vyāsa.

My correspondence with Madeleine soon led to meeting her in Pune in 1974, and in 1975 I started visiting her in Paris almost every year until my last meeting with her in Fall 2008. I also hosted her twice in Washington, in 1979 and 1986, during speaking tours I helped to arrange for her. She was lovely with my kids and with significant others in my life. I will mention three conversations I had with her that are especially memorable, only the last of which is pertinent to my topic. In Fall 1974, sitting outside at a club in Pune, Madeleine was telling me about the Buffalo Demon Mahiṣāsura when I revealed what an utter novice I was in aspiring to undertake the ethnographic work I was preparing for, by exclaiming, “Oh, you mean the *water buffalo*”—having up to that point thought she was talking about the bison-“buffalo” on the American nickel. Second, while we were talking late into the evening over her kitchen table in Paris on a summer night in 1998, loud cheers in the street interrupted us and brought a smile to her face, and the comment, “I think it is time we had better see how the World Cup is going.” The third occurred in her living room, probably in summer 2001. When she was finishing her *Mahābhārata*, Madeleine told me she had decided to conclude it with some thoughts on what she had learned. When I asked her, “What have you learned, Madeleine?” she paused for a long smile and at last replied, “You have to read the whole thing.” Upon which we shared a good hearty laugh.

Well, I took her to be referring to the *Mahābhārata*, though I've since thought it more likely that she was referring to her book itself. Either way, the lesson should stand, and one would expect the two results to overlap: that reading Madeleine's whole book would tell us how she reads the whole *Mahābhārata*. And of course it does. But I will be speaking to that expectation and some questions that it raises.

I did, of course, read Madeleine's *Mahābhārata* as soon as I could, with great excitement, admiration, and gratitude for her many new insights and discoveries. I have referred to it often in most things I have written since. In particular, I remember her discussing the pleasure she took in, as she put it, "finding the word 'écart'," which she translated for me as "swerve," and used to describe the way the *Mahābhārata* marks a "bhakti swerve" in the Brahmanical tradition's handling of the Vedic revelation, while *Manu*, she says, "'budges' as little as possible" in its allegiance to the Veda (2002, I, 85, 87, 96, 140). I have built on her understanding of the *Mahābhārata*'s "bhakti swerve" as a pivotal insight around which to shape the penultimate chapter, and for me one of the most satisfying, titled "Dharma and Bhakti," in my forthcoming book *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*. I will first speak very telegraphically about what I hold to be some of the most productive and enduring lessons of Madeleine's *Mahābhārata*, and then equally briefly about some things we saw differently. That will lead me to the main topic I wish to address, which is Madeleine's way of reading the *Mahābhārata* itself whole—"the whole thing," that is. And with that, I will conclude with some discussion of what I would now say is the main difference between us, which waited until the 1990's to emerge: the decade during which she was writing her *Mahābhārata* and I my *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of Yudhiṣṭhira* (2001). In making this little tour, I will also cite from two other studies that Madeleine published in the 1990's that reflect the ideas she was developing in her *Mahābhārata*: the 1991 chapter "The Two Sanskrit Epics Reconsidered" in Gerhard Oberhammer's *Studies in Hinduism: Vedism and Hinduism*, and her very important and provocative 1997 article titled "Nara et Nārāyaṇa."²

In brief, then, I regard Madeleine's *Mahābhārata* as having successfully shown that the epic, in making its "bhakti swerve," is what she called "le monument principal,

² Some of which is condensed in Biardeau 2002, 1: 140-45.

et sans doute le plus ancien de la *bhakti*,³ and that it can be profitably interpreted in toto as being the first text to situate itself in what she called the universe of *bhakti*,⁴ and to have done so under a distinctly non-sectarian impulse featuring not only Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa but frequently Śiva as well, and often reminding us not to forget the emerging of the Goddess.⁵ I would also say that the book's attempt to "decipher" a symbolic code in the *Mahābhārata* is broadly successful on two main registers: what I would call a thematic register, taking in discussions of sacrifice around the sacrifice of battle, the goddess, the avatāra, apocalyptic, and allusions to Buddhism; and an etymological register tracing where, when, and why certain names or epithets—e.g., Pāñcālī for Draupadī, Bībhatsu for Arjuna, Janārdana or Devakīputra for Kṛṣṇa—take precedence at distinctive points in the narrative.⁶ More than this, the book provides a way to read the *Mahābhārata* by bringing out how the interplay between these themes and epithets pace the narrative,⁷ and shows the poet's (or poets') great care for design.⁸ Indeed, allowing for an idea that I was to promote in my *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, Madeleine was willing to consider the possibility that the *Mahābhārata* could be the work of a small team of Brahman poets attached to a royal court (or some allied royal courts) working in close collaboration, but she preferred the hypothesis of a single author because of the very power of the conception of the ensemble.⁹ And I would agree with her that, as an hypothesis, a single author of genius has this advantage.

³ Biardeau 1981, 78 n. 1. Cf. 1997, 81, on the central place that the *Mbh* holds in the emergence of *bhakti*.

⁴ See explicitly Biardeau 2002 1: 640 n. 13.

⁵ See Biardeau 2002, 2: 26-28 (goddess and *avatāra*); 109 (Bhīṣma's *śakti*); 169 (goddess, Viṣṇu, and Śiva); 215, 220, 225, 461, 466-67, 674 (Ambikā, Kālī/Kālarātri, night raid and apocalypse). Cf. 1994, 1-4 on the non-sectarian character of the *Mahābhārata*. The point needs to be reinforced with regard to Grünendahl's view of the *Nārāyaṇīya*, discussed below, for which he has to coin a name for the supposed sect that would have "stamped" its "*Nārāyaṇīya* theology" over much of the epic: the "epic Pāñcarātrins." The *Nārāyaṇīya* contains ample references to Rudra-Śiva, including a statement that he and Nārāyaṇa may be co-worshipped, and an explanation of why even Nārāyaṇa worships him (*Mbh* 12.328.16-27).

⁶ See Biardeau 2002, 1: 317: "On peut même remarquer ... que le poète est plus à l'aise dans le maniement des noms métaphoriques et qu'il donne toute leur valeur sémantique dans le contexte"—here à propos the name Govinda.

⁷ Biardeau 2002, 1: 367: the epic introduces Śiva at its own pace, as could be said of many other characters, notably Kuntī, Karṇa, and Kṛṣṇa, on whom see Hildebeitel 2007.

⁸ 2002, 2: 417, with regard to Vyāsa's rescue of Saṃjaya on the battlefield; 639-45, with regard to sacrificial elements.

⁹ See 2002, 1: 145-46, "rien jusqu'à maintenant ne vient se mettre en travers de notre hypothèse d'une œuvre unique d'un poète ou d'une petite équipe de poètes brâhmanes, attachés à une ou des cours royales alliées, mais travaillant en étroite collaboration. L'hypothèse de l'auteur unique reste préférable toutefois à cause de la puissance même de la conception de l'ensemble comme tel."

In sometimes differing from Madeleine, however, I would begin by observing that she confines her method of “décryptage” always to “le récit,” “la trame narrative,” that is, to the epic’s narrative(s): the main story, and some clearly prominent substories or *upākhyānas*, most notably “Śakuntalā” and “Yayāti,” the two highlighted in the early genealogy of the Kuru royal line in Book 1, and those she calls the three “mirror stories” of Book 3—“Nala,” “Rāma,” and “Sāvitrī.” In two cases, however, this method allows her to read the epic’s main story symbolically in ways that run contrary to what the epic itself says. Her interpretation of the epic’s crisis, first through the schema of the *pralaya* (1994, 47-63), and then as apocalyptic, does not, I think, demonstrate that the *Mahābhārata* war would usher in a *Kṛta* yuga as an apocalypse of the future¹⁰ rather than the *Kali* yuga, which she might, I think more fittingly, have called an apocalypse of the past. Likewise, at least to one who suffers from Arjuna fatigue (as I do), she makes too much of passages that allow her to portray Arjuna as the central hero and “ideal king,”¹¹ and too little of the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is the *real* king, and the hero who remains at the center of the narrative down to the very end.¹² This problem is compounded where she provides a rationale for overlooking hefty didactic segments in which Yudhiṣṭhira is the chief auditor. In her *Mahābhārata*, she writes, “Dès le début de cette étude du récit épique, il était clair de mon point de vue qu’il faudrait sacrifier les Livres XII et XIII” (2002, 2: 521).” Book 12 “est . . . un livre essentiellement didactique . . . qui rompt la trame narrative du récit épique.” Saying the same of Book 13, she adds, “la soif de connaître de Yudhiṣṭhira est inextinguible et la patience de Bhīṣma sans limites, ce qui alourdit beaucoup le poème” (*ibid.*).¹³ Sooner or later everyone makes a joke

¹⁰ Biardeau 2002, 1: 393, 396, 596, 609-10 (Kṛṣṇa as a double for Kalki, and taking the *Mbh* to have been a model for the *Aggañña Sutta*), 635 (taking it “Systematization absurde” that Kṛṣṇa should as *avatāra* introduce the *Kaliyuga*), 1002, 1006-8; 2: 255, 407, 342, 346, 407, 439. This difference, like the next one, goes back to Biardeau’s November 1973 annotations on my dissertation: “il est impossible de lier la restauration du dharma accompli par Kṛṣṇa avec le ‘black age to come.’”

¹¹ Biardeau 2002, I: 144-46. As I previewed in the previous note, Biardeau would write in 1973: “il faudrait au moins suggérer que l’hypothèse inverse est tout aussi, sinon plus, vraisemblable: à savoir renforcer l’idée que la souveraineté universelle réside en Arjuna, idée que vous refusez plus loin. Tant pis : je crois qu’il faut déchiffrer un mythe à travers ce qu’il semble dire en clair.”

¹² See, to the contrary, Biardeau 2002, 1: 155-58; 1997, 90: “The probable relation between Yudhiṣṭhira and death and the predictions regarding his *rājasūya* no doubt take account why this king scarcely acts as a king. The entire intrigue goes on around his sovereignty, but he is not one of the principle actors. At each step he speaks of abandoning the kingship for the forest. For him deliverance is the supreme value, even if he does not conclude for inactivity. He must rely on Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa” (my translation).

¹³ A graphic representation of “the parallelism between the two epic plots” in Biardeau’s “The Two

about Bhīṣma's interminable bedside sermon, but reading it, and one would think interpreting it, should, one would think, be part of—and indeed part of the *challenge* of—“reading the whole thing.”

The differences mentioned so far might be called episodic, or seen as matters of emphasis or even taste. But I am now approaching the more overriding difference that emerged in the nineties and became evident in our two books of 2001 and 2002: Madeleine's and my contrasting evaluations of the Pune Critical Edition. Let me introduce this topic by looking at a discussion of the Critical Edition in Madeleine's 2002 book. Launching her discussion of the *Mahābhārata's Āśvamedhika Parvan* (Book 14), she comes to the *Anugītā*, one of its early units, with the comment, “Ici se passe quelque chose d'incompréhensible” (2002, 2: 566). She then “permits herself recourse to observations on the Critical Edition”¹⁴ regarding this unit's inclusion there. The *Anugītā* introduces Arjuna as a sort of dunce: having forgotten the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he asks Kṛṣṇa for a rerun, and Kṛṣṇa, claiming not to remember it himself, recounts instead a dialogue in which a Brahmin delivers “une dissertation pâteuse et peu claire sur la délivrance, *mokṣa* . . .” (ibid). Madeleine now alludes to what two Critical Edition editors—the editor-in-chief V. S. Sukthankar and the 14th Book's editor R. D. Karmarkar—have to say about the epic's *Parvasaṃgraha* (i.e., chapter two of *MBh* Book 1), and points out how the *Anugītā* is listed anomalously in it.¹⁵ “With the *Anugītā*,” she says, “one has the impression of finding oneself in a passage of the *MBh* just as incongruous as the group of Viṣṇuite chapters titled *Nārāyaṇīya-parvan* at the end of Book 12, which, likewise, does not figure in the *Parvasaṃgraha*. The state of the manuscript tradition (which, one knows, is very recent in relation to the creation of the *MBh*, since the sole most ancient manuscript goes back to the 12th century) has, however, made the authors of the critical edition judge that these passages must be incorporated despite their strangeness and intrinsic difficulty (malgré leur étrangeté et

Sanskrit Epics Reconsidered” tips her hand on this point. Every one of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* seven books is shown to have a plot parallel in the *Mahābhārata's* eighteen books except for *Mbh* Books 12 and 13, next to which appears the notation “= 0” (1991, 89).

¹⁴ “Je me permets ici d'avoir recours aux observations de l'Édition critique....”

¹⁵ At 1.2.66 and 1.2.206-11: the second passage gives only four subjects treated by Book 14, in which the *Anugītā* doesn't figure, while the first associates it with the *Āśvamedhika-Parvan* but not as integrated into it, and without mentioning anything else (Biarreau 2002, 2: 565).

leur difficulté intrinsèque)” (Biardeau 2002, 2: 566). Earlier, Madeleine says the *Nārāyaṇīya*'s *avatāra* list must date from the 3rd century A.C. [CE], while she considers the *Mahābhārata* she is otherwise discussing to be from the 3rd century BCE (2002, 1: 139-40). My point is this: it is one thing to pass over didactic material because it is different; it is another to use the Critical Edition to argue against its editorial choices to say that something incongruous would be late. I believe Madeleine here is underestimating the choices of the Critical Edition Editors and, for once, underestimating the *Mahābhārata* poet, or poets.

I have not got any good ideas of my own for regarding the *Anugītā* as intrinsic to or congruent with a meaningful reading of the whole *Mahābhārata* thing, but I know there is a good idea about this out there from a young Australian scholar named Adam Bowles, a student of one of Madeleine's occasional “auditeurs assidus” in her courses on the *Mahābhārata* at the EPHE, Greg Bailey. I have, however, developed some ideas for regarding the *Nārāyaṇīya* as intrinsic and congruent to such a reading of the whole, and they are currently being enriched in major ways in a dissertation by a young scholar named Vishwa Adluri, who has worked informally with me. Moreover, although I cannot develop the point here, in drawing on some recent studies by T. P. Mahadevan, I have taken the *Nārāyaṇīya* as a text by which to demonstrate—based on its variations in the Southern Recension—that the Critical Edition actually succeeded, despite Sukthankar's many disavowals, in reconstituting a fair approximation of the *Mahābhārata*'s first written archetype. To me, one of the most regrettable costs of Madeleine's perception of the *Nārāyaṇīya* as late, is that she seems to have avoided even mentioning it in her brilliant 1997 article “Nara et Nārāyaṇa.” Citing there, as is her customary practice, both the Critical Edition and Nīlakaṇṭha's “Vulgate,” she reinforces many points by citing interpolations where she could equally strengthen them by referring to the *Nārāyaṇīya*. Let me, however, be clear. There can be no objection to citing interpolations as reinforcing a point about the *Mahābhārata*. That is, indeed, one way, and a good one, to read the whole *Mahābhārata* thing! But I do have an objection to ostracizing the *Nārāyaṇīya*. Let me just note that Reinhold Grünendahl has taken the alleged lateness of the *Nārāyaṇīya*'s so-called “Part B” to have generated a “*Nārāyaṇīya* theology” from which late redactors stamped a “profile of ideas” onto the *Mahābhārata*

such that one of its near-final last “layers” or “strata” can be identified anywhere one finds the pair Nara and Nārāyaṇa, Nārada, Mount Gandhamādana, the Badarī āśrama, the notion of Vyāsa as author, and so on. Madeleine’s reading already stands as an effective rebuttal to Grünendahl’s, but she had the wherewithal to make it more effective had she not dismissed the *Nārāyaṇīya*.

In any case, by now it is possible to say that two types of reactions to the *Mahābhārata*’s Critical Edition have emerged. On the one hand, most scholars prone to stratifying the epic into early, late, and later levels, whose camp we have just seen Madeleine fleetingly, and quite uncharacteristically,¹⁶ join regarding the *Anuṣṭi* and the *Nārāyaṇīya*, can see, behind the work of its Pune editors, Sukthankar’s training in German philology. This camp is, in general, favorable to the Critical Edition, and takes issue only with specific editorial choices made or allegedly missed—as Grünendahl does with the Critical Edition’s dubious decisions on the *Nārāyaṇīya*. Two scholars in this camp, Andreas Bigger and James Fitzgerald, have coined the term “normative redaction” for what they say the Pune text reconstructs. Their “normative redaction” would have erased prior versions after some indeterminate, but necessarily long, period. Such scholars thus see the Critical Edition as having sharpened the tools by which they can continue—like their pre-Critical Edition predecessors—to excavate the text for interpolations, newer and older layers, and its ever-elusive “core.” On the other hand, some scholars prone to more serious engagement with the *Mahābhārata* as a whole and living text, have taken generous views of more “tradition”-oriented Northern and Southern editions. Wendy Doniger has thus written repeatedly and disparagingly of the Pune CE, and David Shulman has also had some slighting things to say about it.

Madeleine Biardeau, however, was the first major scholar to build a case against the Pune Critical edition when it was newly completed, taking the view, as Doniger would do, that “such a text never existed” (Biardeau 1968, 123). Yet it was a case for

¹⁶ See 1997, 85 n. 14: “Evidently it is no longer a question of cutting up the epic tissue into separated historical layers, where Kr̥ṣṇa would be sometimes a ks̥atriya indeed human, sometimes the supreme god, the last step of a supposed evolution. Still less must one suppress from the narrative framework the allusions in Book 2 to the pastoral childhood of Kr̥ṣṇa. Perhaps it is good to repeat that this is not for facility’s sake that all the text is taken into consideration, but because it is the totality that makes sense” (my translation).

which she drew on precedents in French Indology. In her debate over the Critical Edition's merits with V. M. Bedekar, she brought up Georges Dumézil's preference for the Calcutta Edition over the Critical Edition (Dumézil 1968, 34) to argue that the current western study of texts is more scientific than the "outdated" one implemented in the Critical Edition and defended by Bedekar (Biardeau 1970a, 180). She also takes umbrage at Sukthankar's dismissal of "my *paramaguru*" Sylvain Lévi's notion that, rather than continue reconstructing a critically edited text, Sukthankar would have done better to reprint the Vulgate of *Nīlakaṇṭha* and show all the newly found variants along with it to let readers decide their preferred readings (Lévi 1929, 347; Sukthankar 1933, lxxxiii-lxxxiv; Biardeau 1968, 115-16).¹⁷ Biardeau says that as a "result of the impact of . . . the dominant trend of Western Indian studies, that is, historical philology," "modern pandits . . . in the name of science . . . have introduced the historical dimension into the realm of myth, where it cannot exist"¹⁸ (1968, 122). One hardly needs to read between these lines to see that Madeleine's debate was not so much with Bedekar and the mostly Indian editors of the Pune Critical Edition, whom she depicts as straddling an impossible allegiance to traditional Indian panditry and an "outdated" German philology, but with German philology itself. Yet Bedekar had the appropriate answer: "Even myths are studied scientifically by anthropologists. But here the matter is quite otherwise. Are mss of different recensions and versions myths?" (1969, 223). The point is not whether one scientific method is right for all texts, but which methods are best for which texts. Several times, Madeleine refers to the pair "epics and purāṇas" to make the point that, as oral texts, they would call for one and the same type of open textual study. But the problem is not that the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas have oral traditions behind them, but what impact those oral precursors would have had once those texts were written.¹⁹ The problem with this frame of reference was

¹⁷ I agree with Bedekar's defense of Sukthankar as to the shortsightedness and really the impossibility of such an approach, and van Buitenen's critique of Biardeau for renewing it (see Bedekar 1969, 212-13; van Buitenen 1978, 152; Biardeau 1968, 119, 122-23). On Lévi's outspoken dislike of German philology, see Rocher 2009, 636-39 and the recent books she reviews on those pages. Lévi was appointed to teach on Indian religions at the founding of the new 5th Section of Sciences Religieuses at the Sorbonne in 1886 (Rocher 2009, 639), where Biardeau was one of his eventual successors.

¹⁸ Biardeau 1968, 32. I reverse the order of the quotes.

¹⁹ Although Bedekar does not question a single approach to both "epics and purāṇas," he does point out Sukthankar's view that the "problem" of the *Mahābhārata* was "sui generis" in comparison with Western

twofold. First, an epic is not a *purāṇa*. As Ludo Rocher demonstrates, there are excellent reasons to be dubious about critical editions of cross-purāṇic textual pieces like the *Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa*, and likewise of most *purāṇas* themselves.²⁰ But none of these reasons necessarily hold for the *Mahābhārata*. Second, as J. A. B. van Buitenen showed—even though I do not agree with much else he said there in saying it, Biardeau's exemplum to show the superiority of the Vulgate over the Critical Edition by comparing two variants of the story of Kārtavīrya Arjuna draws on quasi-purāṇic interpolations of the Vulgate to support her structuralist interpretation.²¹

Madeleine's closing arguments also became rather catch-as-catch-can. She chided Sukthankar for using the Bombay Edition rather than the Critical Edition for his 1942 lectures, missing the point that he could not have cited the latter at points where it was not yet complete. Having declared a preference for “more developed versions,” she brought up the possibility of versions being “shortened (possibly according to the fees to be expected).” And in suggesting that “rather than reconstruct a single authentic text we had better published all regional versions” (1970, 302-3), she raised the red herring of “inauthenticity.” These arguments continued into her “The Two Sanskrit Epics Reconsidered” in 1991, where she writes:

It is true, we nowadays have manuscripts at our disposal falling into several groups, all of them relatively late, each group having of course a number of variant readings: there are added verses or absent ones, episodes that are lacking or fully developed. But these families of manuscripts have been spread on a vast geographical area and the different versions may have differed as much in space as in time. For all that matters, these manuscript families are distinguished by their scripts, usually regional scripts that are used to transcribe the Sanskrit texts. But if we go from one version to the other, say from the shortest version written in Śārada script on birch

texts (1969, 219-20).

²⁰ Rocher 1986, 97-99 objects, with reference to Kirfel's work (1927) on the *Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa* or “Five Features of a Puraṇa,” to the intent to “reconstruct an ideal Ur-text of any purāṇic passage” (97), and the assumption that “mini-purāṇas are more basic than their conglomerations into large purāṇas in the traditional sense” (98). “It goes without saying that, once one looks at purāṇas as purely oral tradition, as a tradition carried forward by individual story-tellers, and which is, therefore, authorless and anonymous, as a tradition only parts of which have accidentally been committed to writing,—it goes without saying that in that case critical editions based on the standard rules of textual criticism make little sense” (99).

²¹ Van Buitenen 1978, 145-52.

bark from Kashmir to the “conflated” southern version called Kumbakonam version, we are struck much more by the identity of the narrative than its variant readings: we could give a summary of both of them without any difficulty. Moreover, there is no reason to hold that one version is more authentic than the other because its manuscript is shorter and earlier. That is why I do not give much heuristic value to the reconstituted text of the critical edition of Poona. The importance of the critical edition comes only from the fact that it gives us almost all of the known versions in the critical apparatus and the appendices (1991, 85-86).

Biardeau, however, did refine her views over the years on what she regarded to be the *Mahābhārata*'s primary orality. Whereas in 1968, she consigned the oral *Mahābhārata* to “the bards (usually non-brahmins)” (1968, 116), in 2002, acknowledging that “Today, certain specialists²² think that it is materially impossible to regard [the Mbh] as an oral composition because of its dimensions,” she weighs in for orality in the name of Brahmins' memories, the possibility that they could conceive a work on this scale,²³ and their habitation of a Vedic “universe of sounds.”²⁴ From bards to Brahmins is a considerable advance; in fact she had already made it at least as early as 1991.²⁵ The bardic hypothesis has long posited that there was originally a bardic core to the *Mahābhārata* before it fell into the hands of Brahmins and was thereby “Brahminized” into the composite form—weighed down by didactic and devotional-theological components and irrelevant substories—that we find it in today even in the Critical Edition. The bardic hypothesis could thereby be further tied to a tribal view of the early *Mahābhārata*:²⁶ one that the Pune Critical Edition should help us to put to rest. Since

²² See Malamoud 2002: 127-146 (‘Noirceur de l'écriture’), especially 132 and 166-167, nn. 21-22. Biardeau (2002, I: 748, n. 2) cites an earlier 1997 article version of this chapter, leaving it uncertain whether she perceives Malamoud to disagree with her views mentioned below.

²³ ‘... concevoir une oeuvre à cette échelle’ (Biardeau 2002, II: 748).

²⁴ Biardeau 2002, 2: 747-749; my translation, Hildebeitel 2005b, 85.

²⁵ Biardeau 1991, 87-88: “What is more important is to grant—even just as an hypothesis—that there is one author for each epic and that the author in both cases must have been a *brahman*. We could add: a living in dependence on a royal court, that is, in a normal situation, a dharmic one for a *brahman*. Only this unity of authorship can account for the unity of the narratives, even if the dimensions of both poems, the MBh being foremost in that, are beyond our own memorizing capacities. Even though their first diffusion occurred inside royal courts, it must have spread very fast to Viṣṇu temples, wherever they existed, and addressed a vast audience.” Cf. 2002, 1: 145-46, as cited above in n. 9.

²⁶ My formulation of a tribal *Mahābhārata* draws on a forthcoming book by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, which exposes how an “Āryan” Indo-Germanic blood-lusting tribal Kṣatriya knighthood was conjured up by the two Adolf Holtzmanns (uncle and nephew) to define the oldest stratum of the

about 1947, so-called oral theory has sought to come to the rescue of this bardic hypothesis. But much as oral theory has enriched our awareness of oral performative aspects of *Mahābhārata* verse, it cannot take us back to a pre-Brahmanical “bardic” “Kuru” epic sung in praise of tribal Kṣatriya heroes that, moreover, “belonged” to those Kṣatriya tribes and their bards before Brahmins took it over. It is instructive to note how Sylvain Lévi reconfigured this view of the epic in his article explaining the epic’s recurrent formulas that link Kṛṣṇa and dharma with victory (*jaya*). Lévi endorsed the notion that the *Mahābhārata* first belonged to Kṣatriyas, and even to “bards and rhapsodes” who would have sung for “the rajas of those days, like the Rajputs of to-day, with a view to recreation between two warlike expeditions” (1918-20, 17). But Lévi was silent on any tribal element, never once mentioning the word. Instead, he argued that the *Mahābhārata* “is, like all the creations of the Hindu genius, a work of a caste and a sect” (15)—by which he meant the Kṣatriya caste and the Bhāgavata sect. Biardeau kept to Lévy’s understanding of the centrality of caste,²⁷ regarding the epic’s treatment of varṇa, and more specifically the interplay between Brahmin and Kṣatriya, as a key to deciphering its ideology. But just as Lévi had gotten beyond the “tribal” hypothesis, we can appreciate Biardeau’s advance in getting beyond her “paramaguru’s” bardic hypothesis, as indeed also his sectarian one. As I have noted, Biardeau is to be credited with underscoring the nonsectarian character of the *Mahābhārata*—most notably in the ways it plays out complementarities between Viṣṇu and Śiva, as her student Jacques Scheuer, and, as she noted in her early letter to me, I, would continue to do as well.

In concluding, let me thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to look back at the forty years during which I got to know Madeleine Biardeau first as an avid reader of her first writings on the *Mahābhārata* and the purāṇas, then as something of a disciple, and to have been accepted by her sooner than I could have expected as a colleague and a longtime friend. As she wrote shortly before I first met her, we could anticipate that in continuing our work we could look forward to

Mahābhārata prior to the decadent “Brahmanical” takeover of the epic, and thus to anchor their so-called inversion hypothesis; and the musings of Hermann Oldenberg in communing with such heroic ancestors in his musty study.

²⁷ It might make for an interesting contrast to check my implied observation here that French scholarly interest in Indian caste (with little interest in Indian tribes) could be contrasted, over a long time, with German scholarly interest in Indian tribes (with relatively little interest in Indian castes).

reducing some of our differences. Certain differences to be sure were reduced, as we so often traversed the same text and the same terrain. And for me at least, my work on both the *Mahābhārata* and the Draupadī cult is unimaginable without Madeleine's having blazed so many paths ahead of me. As to the sharpening of longstanding differences and the emergence of new ones, it was never her goal or mine to eliminate any of them. Let me imagine that Madeleine would be listening with a smile as she hears me once again taking "toute liberté par rapport à mes aînés." Madeleine Biardeau's *Mahābhārata* is still a young text that will have a long future as more and more bold and thoughtful young scholars like Adam Bowles and Vishwa Adluri realize what is to be gained by reading the whole thing.

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