

# An Overview of *Mahābhārata* Scholarship: A Perspective on the State of the Field

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## Abstract

*Mahābhārata* (Mbh) studies are a vibrant field of academic study in which many scholars contribute to our understanding of one of the world's most fascinating literary achievements. Works here discussed include monographs and articles in English that represent the most significant efforts in our understanding of this text in recent years, as well as examples of fiction based on the h that demonstrate its ongoing appeal.

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There has never been greater interest in the *Mahābhārata* than in recent years, and this is reflected in the quantity of fine scholarly work being done on the text and its traditions. In an effort to describe and analyze some of the most important work being done, this essay will focus on the Sanskrit text and the translations and studies of it in English in recent years. Not all good work done even in the past decade can be referenced in a review of this length, but in an effort to be inclusive, as many as possible will at least be mentioned. This is a very active field of scholarship where scholars hold very passionate and diverse perspectives. This article offers an overview of the state of the field, but other perspectives and ways of understanding this literature are also possible. Of course, an enterprise such as this is inherently time-bound, sure to be made obsolete by important work done soon after it appears, but the effort is worthwhile as an attempt to measure progress in our ongoing interpretive endeavors.

A decade ago, publication of the translation of the Mbh critical edition was resumed by the University of Chicago Press with the release of volume 7, edited and translated by James Fitzgerald (2004a). The translation and his extensive notes (over 100 pages) on the text of *parvan* 11 and the first half of *parvan* 12, and the introductions to the two text segments (about 100 pages), advance our knowledge in many ways. The series will continue, as the remainder of the text is contracted for publication. The next volume to appear is likely to be *parvan*-s 14 to 18, translated by Fred Smith. The plan is for other segments of the text to be translated by a group including David Gitomer, Gary Tubb, Christopher Minkowski, and Jim Fitzgerald.

Sadly, Clay Sanskrit Library ceased publication of its translation series in 2009. Fifteen of a projected 27 Mbh volumes were published, translated by fine scholars including Adam Bowles, W. J. Johnson, Vaughn Pilikian, and others. The volumes are based on the Chitrashala Press edition (with commentary by Nīlakaṇṭha) and include segments of the text not yet available in the Chicago translation.

A unique work by Peter Scharf, *Rāmopākhyāna – the Story of Rāma in the Mahābhārata: An Independent-study Reader in Sanskrit* (Scharf 2003) provides a translation and word-by-word analysis of the text (Mbh 3.257–276). The work also includes a 70-page introduction on how to use this volume and the author's analysis 'Divine, Historical, and Spiritual Dimensions of the Story of Rāma, and its Place in the *Mahābhārata*'. In addition, a translation and study of the *Harivaṃśa* are being prepared by Simon Brodbeck and W. J. Johnson, and a translation and study

of the *Nārāyaṇīya* segment of *Śānti Parvan* are being prepared by Vishwa Adluri, so we have these to anticipate eagerly.

In addition to these translations, the text has inspired a very useful work for teaching a course on the Mbh, John D. Smith's *The Mahābhārata: An Abridged Translation* (Smith 2009). Its 835 pages, plus 65-page introduction, provide segments of the text translated in full and other segments presented in summary. One might argue with his choices of which segments to abbreviate (for example, most of the 18 chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are summarized), but as a guide to the narrative as a whole, it is very valuable. Carole Satyamurti's *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling* (2015) is a poetic rendering of the narrative in blank verse, based on translations by Ganguli in the 19th century, the Clay Sanskrit Library's volumes, and the Chicago series by van Buitenen and Fitzgerald. The 843-page work successfully represents the Mbh, though readers may be taken aback occasionally by a turn of phrase, such as the repeated description of excited warriors being 'fired up' (453, 481, 527), or Draupadī's comment that, thanks to her protective husbands, 'Any man who looks at me with lustful disrespect is dead meat...' (306). Strikingly, another poetic retelling of the text has appeared in the same year (Slavitt 2015). Based on Ganguli's translation and adhering to it rather closely, this work has a focus on Bhīṣma, beginning with his birth and ending with his death. Thus, the final *parvan*-s of the text are entirely omitted. Two other works that are potentially useful in introductory teaching about the Mbh are *The Penguin Companion to the Mahabharata* (Chakravarty 2007) and *The Mahābhārata: An Inquiry in the Human Condition* (Chaturvedi 2006). The most useful work for introducing students to Mbh study is *Beginning the Mahābhārata: A reader's guide to the frame stories* (Earl 2011) by James Earl. In a review of works potentially of use to introduce the Mbh, Hildebeitel (2015) considers Earl's work along with those of Hegarty (2012), Hudson (2012), and McGrath (2011, 2013), regarding each as wanting in various ways, but finding Earl's 'detailed reading of the intricacies of the *Mahābhārata*'s front matter' one that does not 'narrow the epic text' (Hildebeitel 2015: 167).

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (BhG) remains of great interest to scholars and translators, and the recent study by Richard Davis (2015) brilliantly shows why that might be so. This 'biography' of the famous work highlights its history over two millennia and indicates that a 1982 study enumerated some 273 published translations into English at that time (p. 155). Many more have been published in the decades since, of course. Some noteworthy recent translations include Fosse (2007), Schweig (2007), Patton (2008), Thompson (2008), and Theodor (2010). Most recently, a Norton Critical Edition translated by Flood (2015) includes 40 pages of selections from *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, commentaries on Chapter 13 by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, and by Tilak and Aurobindo as contexts for this translation, plus 70 pages of scholarly criticism selected from studies by John Brockington, Arvind Sharma, Rudolf Otto, Eric Sharpe, and C. A. Bayly, published between 1934 and 2010. In addition to these works on the BhG, a study by Angelika Malinar (2007) has elicited mixed reviews in major journals, including a very positive one by Thompson (2009) and a very negative one by Adluri (2010). That these many translation and interpretation projects continue to find publishers testifies to ongoing interest in the Mbh.

One way of seeing the current state of the field of Mbh studies is articulated by Simon Brodbeck in a pair of articles (Brodbeck 2011; Brodbeck 2013) as the 'analytic' and 'synthetic' approaches to the text (see also Bowles 2007, below). As he observes, these are not to be understood as 'mutually incompatible views of how the text was composed, but as attempts to offer two distinct types of commentary, the one historical, the other literary...' (Brodbeck 2013: 135). Brodbeck argues that completion of the critical edition of the Mbh means that 'the analytic approach is less appropriate than it was previously, and the synthetic approach more so' (Brodbeck 2013: 135), or as he indicates elsewhere (Brodbeck 2011: 238), the synthetic

approach is appropriate for the critically constituted text ('above the line') while the analytic approach is appropriate for the apparatus of variant readings ('below the line'). Often, these approaches, in fact, reflect divergent perspectives on the Mbh, either as a composite text that grew over centuries with contributions by diverse authors of differing views, producing a text with little unity (the analytic approach), *vs.* as a unified text with a coherent meaning due to composition according to a plan (the synthetic approach). These two approaches are often seen in the history of Mbh studies.

This vital point has been in dispute for over a century: Was the Mbh composed over centuries by numerous contributors or in a short period with an agreed-upon design? As I had occasion to observe at a recent conference (Madison, Wisconsin, October 2012), neither the great length nor the dazzling diversity of discourse style and content is an indication that the Mbh must necessarily have been composed by many authors working separately over centuries. As a recent example of similar quantity and variety of literary output, I cite the *oeuvre* of Isaac Asimov, who wrote some 500 books—on popular science, history, chess, and science fiction—while also serving as professor of biochemistry at Boston University. I mention him not only because of the number of his many works, but also their diversity: he published in all ten major categories of the Dewey Decimal System' (Adluri & Bagchee 2016a, 188). This volume *Argument and Design* is a collection of studies of individual Mbh 'subtales' (*upākhyāna*) and theoretical issues about these narratives that reflect on the Pāṇḍavas' story, and the only volume devoted to that topic. If a single author in modern times is capable of producing such an array of publications on an impressive range of topics totaling some 100,000 pages, we cannot rule out the possibility that a single author or small committee produced the Mbh. In any case, in the field of Mbh studies, received wisdom and assumptions about how this text was created are ripe for reconsideration.

Many excellent monographs have been published in recent years that further our understanding of the Mbh. One of the most influential works on Mbh studies since its publication in 2001 is Alf Hiltebeitel's *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Readers' Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. The most important review of this volume, by Jim Fitzgerald, opens with an acknowledgement of Hiltebeitel's role in the field as follows: 'Alf Hiltebeitel has consistently been the single most open-minded and fearlessly imaginative Western reader the authors and editors of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (Mbh) have ever had for their masterpiece. He renews his claim to that distinction with this book' (Fitzgerald 2003: 803). Fitzgerald then describes his disagreements with the work reviewed (see below). Hiltebeitel's vital volume approaches the Mbh as a literary work 'written over a much shorter period than is usually advanced... by a "committee" ... or "team" ... and at most through a couple of generations' (Hiltebeitel 2001: 20) between about 150 BCE and 1 BCE (18). This provocative idea has encouraged 'synthetic' readings and interpretations of the Mbh, providing new impetus for thinking about the text's unity and coherence, and the role of its reputed author Vyāsa. Indeed, his final chapter, 'Vyāsa and Śūka: An Allegory of Writing', returns to this theme by reading an episode near the end of the Mbh as 'an important text for the epic's interpretation' and 'a metatext on the poetics' of the Mbh (279). This work includes a fascinating study of the Mbh's views on the virtues of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) *vs.* noncruelty (*ānṛṣamsaya*) in his chapter 'Don't Be Cruel'. Chapter 7 is dedicated to analysis of 'Draupadī's Question', finding in her unanswered query about *dharma* an echo at the end of the epic when Yudhiṣṭhira wants to ask her something but the Mbh ends before he does so (276–277).

Complementary to this important work of textual interpretation, Hiltebeitel also wrote a monumental study, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative* (2011) that is largely concerned with the Mbh; 9 of its 13 chapters discuss the Mbh extensively. Examination of the discourse on *dharma* in the edicts of Aśoka (Chapter 2), Buddhism's Pāli Canon (Chapter 4), and 'Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*: A Buddhist Reading of the Sanskrit Epics and Their Treatments of

*Dharma* (chapter 13) provides Hiltebeitel an opportunity for comparative study of these religious traditions. Chapters devoted to ‘Women’s Dharma’ (8), comparison of Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira as dharma biographies (9), and Draupadī and Sītā (10), ‘*Dharma* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*’ (11), and ‘*Dharma* and *Bhakti*’ (12) all draw on the Mbh for insights about *dharma*. In what may be unique in publishing history, this very detailed study from Oxford University Press was written in conjunction (and published almost simultaneously) with a much shorter volume in a series from the University of Hawaii Press intended for undergraduate students; *Dharma* (Hiltebeitel 2010) is entirely free of footnotes and is an engaging introduction.

In addition to Hiltebeitel’s excellent monographs, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India* by Adam Bowles (2007) is another important work on the Mbh’s presentation of *dharma*. The work includes a 50-page chapter on the textual history of the term *dharma* prior to and contemporaneous with the Mbh, as context for the Mbh’s presentation of the term, particularly in regard to Yudhiṣṭhira as king. Bowles critiques a ‘skewed focus’ in Mbh scholarship that until recently has relegated ‘didactic corpora to ancillary status at best, or to completely exclude them at worst’ (405). His work includes an important section of the introduction entitled ‘*Mahābhārata* scholarship and the didactic corpora: What is *Mahābhārata*?’ (16–35) in which he surveys approaches to the text with attention to analytic *vs.* synthetic methods and attitudes toward the didactic portions. He highlights a widespread theme in Mbh scholarship that emphasizes the putative existence of an epic largely devoid of didactic material, an approach in which the term ‘epic’ is often used to refer to this ‘heroic’ narrative of allegedly ‘bardic’ origin, a ‘Bhārata cycle’ (‘the epic proper’ according to Brockington), while the Mbh’s didactic material has variously been described as ‘pseudo-epic’ (Hopkins), or ‘brahminic stories’ added to ‘the original epic’ (van Buitenen 1973: xxii–xxiii). Bowles comments, ‘In my view, there is much evidence to suggest that the ‘*Mahābhārata*’ ... has always included and, therefore, been designed with, both narrative and didactic material’ (34–35). His important contribution examines a section of the *Śānti Parvan* on *dharma* in times of distress, showing how this didactic material coheres with the themes of the Mbh regarding kingship, and that it has been carefully composed and integrated into the Mbh.

*Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata* by Arti Dhand (2008) is a brilliant study of the Mbh’s representation of women and sexuality. One of its great strengths is that its discussion is set in the context of the distinction between the religious paths of *pravṛtti* (active engagement with worldly life) *vs.* *nivṛtti* (renunciation of worldly life; liberation-oriented) as variant versions of *dharma*. With its last chapter on *dharma* in times of distress (*āpaddharma*), this work complements Bowles (2007) and observes that the primary area in which women figure in the theorizing of *āpaddharma* is in the context of childlessness but ‘it is clear that male ritual priorities dominate the concern’ (197–198). Dhand demonstrates that ‘sexuality in the text is a far from haphazard, arbitrary, idiosyncratic affair; rather, it is a deeply religious concern...’ (203); see also Dhand (2004). Another key work for understanding gender issues and royal succession is *The Mahābhārata Patriline: Gender, Culture and the Royal Hereditary* by Simon Brodbeck (2010). He observes that ‘... every generation, one son takes responsibility for feeding and remembering the patrilineal ancestors (thus keeping them in heaven) and having a son to do so in future’ (p. 85). One method often seen in the Mbh for producing such an heir is through the *putrikā* daughter, whose son becomes her father’s heir, not her husband’s—a theme explored in relation to the *pativratā* (husband-avowed) wife whose son becomes her husband’s heir. Genealogical accounts of ancestors are of such interest to the Pāṇḍavas and their descendants in part because of the dynasty’s long history of difficulties producing heirs and multiple instances of a younger brother displacing an elder brother in the lineage. Both these volumes contribute greatly to our appreciation of the importance of gender and the roles of women in the Mbh.

A worthwhile and interesting study of the form and function of the Mbh is *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia: Past and Place in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata* by James Hegarty (2012). Situating the origin of the Mbh in the second and first centuries BCE as a response to religious and political challenges (32–36), this work explores the question why the text ‘always presents its narrative content as stories within stories’ (48). Not only does this structure allow the text to comment on itself, it also ‘seeks to effect change in its audience members’ and their world by its repeated and varied *phalaśruti*, or promises of the fruits of hearing the text (87). This work discusses how the Mbh ‘marked the transferal to narrative form of Vedic ritual structures that were a locus of cultural power’ (87), its reworkings of the Vedic heritage termed ‘Vedish’ (112–118). The role of Śaunaka as audience member and interlocutor is significant in that he ‘is associated with the application of Vedic knowledge to the everyday’, which ‘tells us about the goals and ambition of the text’ (36). A chapter on ‘Constructing significant places’ treats the *sabhā* as a politically significant place (with divine paradigms) and religiously significant places from the past (and places from its own narrative) as transformative in the present by means of pilgrimage. He argues that the Mbh successfully intervened in the public imagination through the text’s ‘Brahminical triumphalism; the integration of new religious ideologies and practices; and the darker, more existentially driven, focus on the complexities of being human’ (37). Hegarty’s monograph is a valuable exploration of key themes in the Mbh.

*The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (Adluri & Bagchee 2014), by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, is an important work of hermeneutic analysis focused on the Mbh and BhG. The authors of this work ‘focus on these two texts as paradigmatic of the struggle of the German Indologist against philosophical, ethical, and normative concerns’ (p. xvi). Examining the methods and findings of 19th and early 20th century German scholarship, Adluri and Bagchee demonstrate that what was, purportedly, a philological method of textual criticism disguised and facilitated theologically based critiques. Thus, the interpretation of the Mbh as an heroic epic ‘corrupted’ by the insertion of alien didactic material as a result of ‘Brahmin priestcraft’ became the accepted perspective (despite a lack of textual or historical evidence for it), and was also a (Protestant) way of criticizing Catholicism (see especially 331–338). An interpretation of the Mbh text as corrupted by Brahmins also reflects a search for an Āryan identity by Germans, an effort thwarted by Brahmins through their interpolations into the Mbh. A similar point is made more briefly in Adluri’s important introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* (Adluri 2011b). This volume and an important article (Adluri & Bagchee 2016b) critique *Bhagavad Gītā* scholarship that sees another ‘layer’ in the text for each new topic broached, with little agreement on the number or dividing-lines between such layers, arguing instead for the unity and coherence of the BhG and the meaningful place it occupies by design in the Mbh. Their new book *Philology and Criticism* (Adluri & Bagchee 2016c) is both a guide to textual analysis of the Mbh and an argument for the method used to produce the Critical Edition.

The works here considered help to make the field of Mbh studies a vibrant area of academic inquiry. A monograph that has brought attention to the field is *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, by Emily Hudson (2012), having received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Textual Studies from the American Academy of Religion in 2013. This work has merit: it is a study of the theme of suffering in the Mbh and aims to take seriously Indic literary theory. Space constraints do not allow the detailed review this work deserves, but several significant points can be made concerning its shortcomings. As the title indicates, *dharma* is central to the book’s argument, but the discussion of *dharma* is peculiar. While noting the complexity of the term (36–40), this work does not identify any particular meanings that it mentions as being more relevant than others. Noting (38–39) a distinction Fitzgerald makes between two senses of *dharma*, namely, ritual duties leading to

heaven *vs.* virtues and renunciation leading to liberation, Hudson mistakenly cites the source as 2003: 100, but this should be the introduction to the translation by Fitzgerald (2004a: 105–28). Sadly, Hudson's work virtually omits further discussion of liberation to focus exclusively on *dharma* in the first sense. Its assertion that the Mbh 'brings its audiences to the brink of meaninglessness and then, instead of receding from it, it toys with pushing them over the precipice' (26) leads to a conclusion that 'a fundamental feature of human existence is that suffering exists on a monumental scale and that is it' (215). Moreover, '...nothing, not even *dharma*, can protect us from this fact' (220). The work approaches the theme of suffering in the Mbh through the figure of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king whose blindness symbolizes his inability to perceive *dharma*, referring to the depiction of him as 'the pure arc of a tragic life' (106). This book devotes a chapter to him as one of the 'negative exemplars' (142) who fails to heed good advice, thereby showing the audience the consequences of such behavior, but his life is not so much tragic as karmic; his behavior embodying *adharma* causes his suffering. Of course, the Mbh does offer an alternative, which this work almost entirely elides, namely, the path of *nivṛtti-dharma* leading to liberation from worldly life and its suffering. By treating *dharma* as a monolithic concept, without discussion of its application based on *varṇa*, gender, *pravṛtti vs. nivṛtti*, etc., this work hinders its goal to 'locate meaning in the *Mahābhārata*' (7). The previously discussed books by Bowles (2007) and Dhand (2008), each dismissed in a sentence (5–6) and never again mentioned, are much more successful in examining the Mbh's treatment of *dharma* than this work, which would have been improved by close attention to them, as well as to Fitzgerald's crucial article '*Dharma* and its Translation in the *Mahābhārata*' (Fitzgerald 2004c).

Four volumes by Kevin McGrath (2004, 2009, 2011, 2013) are frustrating in a different way. They demonstrate close reading of the Mbh and offer fine translations of segments of the text, with each volume devoted to an important feature of the Mbh. As McGrath writes in his most recent volume (McGrath 2013: 10), 'In this book I examine what I envision to be an earlier and thoroughly heroic status of the poem when it still existed in a preliterate form, examining the narrative as it concerns Kṛṣṇa as he exists in that hypothetically 'earlier' telling'. In fact, we do not have such a text, so McGrath is examining the text we have while omitting portions he chooses to ignore, namely, parts he regards as didactic, concerning 'edification' (McGrath 2004: 5). Obviously, one must be selective in studying a vast text, but this method conceals important features of the text in a misleading way. McGrath's book on Karna is certainly his most valuable due to the fact that the didactic features of the text are minimal in regard to this character. His approach is based on the assumption that an oral epic predates the Sanskrit text as established in the critical edition, an assumption that cannot be proven, about a 'preliterate form' of the Mbh to which we have no access. The text we have incorporates didactic material in its narrative, and a study should take into account the text as we have it rather than imagine a different text.

Two monographs by philosophers dealing in part with the Mbh merit mention. *Hinduism and Environmental Ethics* by Christopher G. Framarin (2014) includes two interesting chapters on the 'moral standing of animals and plants' in the Mbh. In a chapter entitled 'A Cloak of Clever Words: The Deconstruction of Deceit in the *Mahābhārata*', Jonardon Ganeri (2007) explores ethical issues in the narrative of the Mbh, including Yudhiṣṭhira's lie that aids victory by the Pāṇḍavas.

Recent comparative works expand our knowledge of the Mbh and the context for our interpretations of it. Shubha Pathak's *Divine Yet Human Epics* (Pathak 2014) treats comparatively the epics of India and Greece, arguing that the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Iliad* are 'affirmative epics' in which Rāma and Achilles model the respective religious ideals of their cultures. She argues that the Mbh and *Odyssey* are 'interrogative epics' in which Yudhiṣṭhira and Odysseus struggle with these ideals and question how to embody them. Comparisons between these four epics shed

light on them all. *Tragic Views of the Human Condition: Cross-Cultural Comparisons between Views of Human Nature in Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy and the Mahābhārata and Bhāgavadgītā* by Lourens Minnema (2013) is a brilliant study addressing the following question: ‘In what respects can the *Mahābhārata* epic’s and the *Bhāgavadgītā*’s views of the human condition be called ‘tragic’ in the Greek and Shakespearean senses of the word?’ (1). This capacious work merits intensive study. Adluri and Bagchee (2012) compare narratives in Greek and Sanskrit in an effort to clarify aspects of the MBh. Comparative in a very different but equally provocative way is *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* by Gurcharan Das (2010). He draws on the Mbh for character studies of prominent figures in the narrative, comparing the ethical dilemmas they face with recent and current situations faced in India and the West. In so doing, he aids us not only by providing a contextualized study of *dharma* but also by emphasizing ways in which the Mbh remains relevant to our ethical and existential realities.

The field of Mbh studies is rich in shorter studies as well, and these are much too numerous to be treated here. Many of the most important have been authored by Jim Fitzgerald, who has been the main voice for the analytic approach to Mbh studies over the past couple of decades. As observed earlier, he voiced criticisms of Hildebeitel’s approach to the text and findings in a review essay (Fitzgerald 2003) and in subsequent works as well. In that review, he expresses his perspective as follows: ‘I do not find Hildebeitel’s view of the *MBh*’s composition persuasive, but his laying out of his views on the matter is a valuable contribution to advancing our general discussion of the text’ (Fitzgerald 2003: 804). While stating, ‘I am in general agreement with Hildebeitel concerning the general time frame of the creation of “the main Mahābhārata,”’ he adds that he excludes as later the *Bhāgavad Gītā* and ‘all episodes that elaborate some theme of devotion to Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Kṛṣṇa’, and others (811 and note 32). Fitzgerald’s position is that

The amount and kind of variation in the MBh could be the result of the sort of symposium Hildebeitel imagines, but seeing it that way requires postulating a highly unusual and otherwise unknown event to account for variations that may be explained more economically by imagining the authorial agents responsible for the ‘epic’ to be separated in time and interest and location. (Fitzgerald 2003: 811)

He goes on to argue that analytical or ‘excavationist’ approaches to the text persist ‘because there is no synchronous explanation or reading of the text that allays the suspicions many of us have about apparent heterogeneities on the surface of the text and apparent breaches of meaning ...’ (812); see also Hildebeitel (2004) for a response. Fitzgerald’s vision of the Mbh as a text that grew over centuries is well articulated in later works (Fitzgerald 2004b; Fitzgerald 2004c; Fitzgerald 2006; Fitzgerald 2009; Fitzgerald 2010; Fitzgerald 2014). While he has described Hildebeitel’s work as similar to but more sophisticated and interesting than that of Dahlmann over a century ago (Fitzgerald 2003: 803–04), Fitzgerald has recently revived an old 19th century theory advanced by two scholars named Adolph Holtzmann. According to this theory, the Mbh as we know it is the result of a process of inversion in which the Kauravas were originally the heroes of the work, overthrown by the intrusion of the Pāṇḍavas who replaced them as heroes and relegated the Kauravas to the status of defeated villains. In recent works (particularly Fitzgerald 2009; Fitzgerald 2010) Fitzgerald has expounded this theory of the text’s evolution. As he states, postulating an oral ‘Bhārata’ epic that had existed for centuries, ‘I believe that the germ of the radical transformation of the putative *Bhārata* into what became the *Mahābhārata* ... was the recasting of the old *Bhārata* with the new Pāṇḍava heroes, a ‘war-party’ of the gods...’ (Fitzgerald 2009: 108).

Perhaps the single most striking fact about the *MBh* when viewed against the historical bits and pieces about it that we can glean from Vedic literature is the complete absence from that long record of any

mention of the central protagonists of our *Mbh*, the five Pāṇḍava, and the three critical “*kṛṣṇa*” figures attendant upon them... (110)

Fitzgerald’s effort to shed light on the text by means of historical research drawing from other texts is welcome, and the field would be enhanced by additional work along these lines. It must be said, however, that imagining the shape of an oral composition we do not have is a tenuous basis for interpretation. Even more significantly, the historicity of the Pāṇḍavas need not be seen as the definitive feature of the *Mbh*’s meaning.

One of Fitzgerald’s primary reasons for discounting Hildebeitel’s theory of the *Mbh*’s origin is that he regards it as ‘postulating a highly unusual and otherwise unknown event to account for variations that may be explained more economically by imagining the authorial agents responsible for the ‘epic’ to be separated in time and interest and location’ (Fitzgerald 2003: 811). This is a very interesting and important idea, but the Buddhists convened a congress of monks who jointly compiled the large scripture collection orally within a short time, also a highly unusual and otherwise unknown event, and the text was later written. We have a small sample size when considering the composition of large literary works in ancient India, but the Buddhist example is relevant for comparison. Unique texts may be produced in unique ways.

Excellent collections such as those edited by Rukmani (2005); Brodbeck and Black (2006, 2007); Sullivan (2011b), and Adluri (2011; 2013a) are recent publications that enhance discussion in the field. Adluri’s introductions to the edited volume (Adluri 2013b) and the journal issue (Adluri 2011b) are important statements on *Mbh* studies today. The ongoing series of conferences (now seven) in Dubrovnik on the Sanskrit epics and Purāṇas has resulted in multiple volumes of fine essays; Koskikallio (2009) is a good example of the resulting publications. The World Sanskrit Conference always has sessions dedicated to *Mbh* studies; Brockington (2012) has 14 essays exploring aspects of the *Mbh*, including contributions by well-known scholars in the field (Hildebeitel, Fitzgerald, Brodbeck, Malinar, Hegarty, and others). Simon Brodbeck’s studies (Brodbeck 2004; Brodbeck 2006; Brodbeck 2014, and others) reflect expertise on the text, skill in translation, and a concern for under-theorized issues. Two fine articles by Tieken (2004, 2009) show links between earlier and later portions of the *Mbh*, which ‘testify to a grand design underlying the story as a whole’ (Tieken 2004: 6). Adluri’s rapidly expanding list of publications (including Adluri 2011a; Adluri 2011b; Adluri 2011c; Adluri 2013b) reflects a deep knowledge of the text and a keen ability to articulate meaning in its narratives. The recently published collections of articles by Alf Hildebeitel (2011a, 2011b) plus an article in a volume on drama (Hildebeitel 2011d) emphasize his remarkable industry and influence on the field. Jim Fitzgerald’s studies (including 2004; Fitzgerald 2006; Fitzgerald 2009; Fitzgerald 2010) make valuable contributions to our efforts to understand the *Mbh*.

One way in which the *Mbh* is studied is through performance. Sax (2002) is an ethnographic study of a tradition of *Mbh* performance in the Himālayas by Rājput Hindus. Salomon (2010) is a study of an ancient one-act drama in Sanskrit featuring Bhīma and his son Ghaṭotkaca that reimagines part of the *Mbh* narrative. Sullivan (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011a) is a series of studies of Kerala’s Kūṭiyāṭṭam Sanskrit dramas that are based on the *Mbh*. Such dramatic retellings of the narrative highlight certain features and modify others familiar to us from the Sanskrit text.

Finally, it is noteworthy that recently published fiction has drawn on the *Mbh* as its source. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008) is a narrative with Draupadī as its central figure, and imagines her as secretly harboring a strong attraction for Karna. *Leela’s Book* by Alice Albinia (2011) is a delightful work about writing, in which the *Mbh*’s author Vyāsa and scribe Gaṇeśa are imagined as rivals. Vyāsa’s impregnation of two princesses of the Bhārata

dynasty links him with them in multiple reincarnations as he continues to pursue them, and Gaṇeśa involves himself with their story repeatedly. That the ancient Sanskrit text continues to inspire fictional reimaginations as well as these many scholarly studies are signs of its ongoing relevance and power.

### Short Biography

Bruce M. Sullivan's research interests include the *Mahābhārata* and dramas based on its episodes, as well as religion in the arts and literature more generally. In addition to these earlier studies, his most recent book is an edited volume entitled *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). He has taught at Northern Arizona University (in Flagstaff, Arizona) since 1986 in the areas of Asian Studies and Comparative Study of Religions.

### Note

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