

NALA AS *NARA*, *RĀJA*, & YUDHIṢṬHIRA:
MASCULINITY, KINGSHIP, & DHARMIC SUFFERING IN THE *NALOPĀKHYĀNA*

BY

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the character of King Nala in Book 3 of the *Mahābhārata* by analyzing how his characterizations fit into the epic's overall sociopolitical context. Specifically, I argue that Nala's depictions as a supremely idealized man and king place him squarely within the political strategies of the *Mahābhārata's* composers, drawing heavily upon earlier, Vedic texts, to reassert a system of gendered social ethics in response to the rise and popularity of contemporary, heterodox ascetic movements such as Buddhism. I further argue that Nala provides valuable insights into how such strategies were used to invert and redeploy ascetic ideals of suffering and salvation, most notably in the character of Yudhiṣṭhira. To support such arguments, I draw from translations (my own, unless otherwise cited) and scholarly analysis of the *Mahābhārata* itself, as well as scholarly examinations of gendered ideologies in ancient India, roughly covering a period from 1500 BCE to the turn of the Common Era.

Introduction

The story of Nala and Damayantī, or *Nalopākhyāna* (“episode of Nala”), is a love story appearing in Book 3 (the *Āraṇyakaparvan* or “Forest/Wilderness Book”) of India’s great epic text, the *Mahābhārata*, appearing as an aside from the epic’s overall narrative. As a whole, the *Mahābhārata* tells the story of the five half-god sons of Pāṇḍu (collectively, the Pāṇḍavas): Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Guided by Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation or avatar (Skt. *avatāra*) of the god Viṣṇu, the five brothers wage an apocalyptic war against their one hundred demonic cousins, the sons of their blind uncle Dhṛtarāṣṭra (collectively, the Kauravas or Dhārtarāṣṭras), who are led by the eldest cousin, Duryodhana. The Kauravas are further joined by Karṇa, a great warrior who is unknowingly the Pāṇḍavas’ older brother. The incredibly violent and fratricidal war that the Pāṇḍavas are destined to wage is presented as a necessary restoration of just rulership with cosmic implications; as such, the relative merits and ethical justifications of such violence vis-à-vis ideals of *dharma* (“law, duty,” etc.) are debated and expounded upon throughout the text, especially insofar as they apply to the necessarily violent duties of warriors and kings. Two of the Pāṇḍavas in particular are central to this overall discourse: Yudhiṣṭhira, son of the god Dharma (the divine personification of the philosophical or socio-legal concept of *dharma*), characterized as the ultimate just, peaceful king, and Arjuna, son of the Vedic war god Indra, depicted as a nigh-invincible, manly warrior.

Within this framework, the tale of Nala is premised as an analogy for that of Yudhiṣṭhira. When Yudhiṣṭhira is cheated out of his kingdom by the Kauravas and forced into a temporary exile in the years leading up to the eventual war, Nala is presented as the tale of a king in a similar situation, only worse. Thus, scholars such as Alf Hiltebeitel

(largely following earlier works by Madeleine Biardeau and David Shulman) have attempted to examine Nala's resonance with the epic's narrative as a whole: how is Nala symbolic of Yudhiṣṭhira? To what extent does his story "frame" or "mirror" the *Mahābhārata* writ large? The goal of this paper is to build upon these arguments and explore how Nala fits into the *Mahābhārata*'s larger sociopolitical context, discourse, and strategy. As we will see, the epic can be read as an ideological successor to the cultural and ritual traditions arising in the mid-to-late second millennium BCE, originating in ancient India's four Vedic texts – the *Rgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*. More specifically, the *Mahābhārata* was crafted as a politicized response to the challenges these traditions faced from burgeoning ascetic movements such as Buddhism and Jainism, starting around the fifth century BCE. Most notable among these challengers was Aśoka, a ruler of the Mauryan Empire during the third century BCE whose new ideologies on *dharma* (Pali *dhmma*) and non-violence (Skt. *ahiṃsā*) formed a direct opposition to earlier Vedic ideals, and in particular, to the political patronage and socioeconomic dominance of brahmins, the elite class of specialized priests and ritual officiants.

As such, the text presents a normative and highly gendered social ethic. The *Mahābhārata*'s presentation of the proper behaviors and responsibilities of men, and most especially those of warriors and kings, draws heavily upon imagery and language found in its Vedic precursors. The character of Nala is a prime example of the strategies by which the epic's composers redeployed a distinctly Vedic blend of masculine ideologies in crafting their discourse. Additionally, Nala helps illustrate how the composers redeployed the logic of exchange and reciprocal reward inherent in ritual sacrifice to invert and recast ascetic ideologies of salvation, austerity, and suffering. In short, the *Mahābhārata*'s

authors put forth a new ideal by which adherence to *dharma*, even to the point of suffering, leads to great rewards in both life and death. Thus, this thesis will explore the ways in which Nala, in his role as an idealized man and king, reflects and embodies the *Mahābhārata*'s overall brahmanical strategies and ideologies. Furthermore, it will use Nala as an interpretive lens for understanding how the logic of "suffering for *dharma*" is expressed in the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, and thus contribute to the larger arguments surrounding the motivations for the epic's composition.

This examination will be divided into four parts. In the first chapter, I will provide a brief summary of the *Nalopākhyāna*, detailing Nala's establishment as an ideal man and king. The second chapter explores the historical progression of masculine ideologies from the *R̥gveda* to the *Mahābhārata*, using the categories of martial and political dominance, generous ritual participation, and sexuality/masculine virility as three analytical or comparative threads that can be traced through the different historical layers. Chapter three will examine the character of Nala thematically, demonstrating how he fits into the *Mahābhārata*'s deployment of the masculine ideologies seen in chapter two. It will also use Nala's characterization as a "truth-speaker" or "upholder of vows" as an illustrative example for how such ideologies are reimagined in the logic of righteous suffering. Finally, chapter four will examine Nala narratively, exploring the symbolic and structural parallels between his story and that of both Yudhiṣṭhira and, to a lesser extent, his brother Arjuna. Thus, Nala will be used as a demonstrative example for understanding dharmic suffering as one of the *Mahābhārata*'s central arguments, embodied by Yudhiṣṭhira himself.

Chapter 1: A Brief Summary of the *Nalopākhyāna*

The story of Nala takes place in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, during the Pāṇḍavas' twelve-year exile in the forest. Yudhiṣṭhira, chastised by Bhīma for acquiescing to the exile rather than immediately taking revenge on the Dhārtarāṣṭras, laments his situation to the brahmin seer Bṛhadaśva, asking "Now is there a king on earth more unlucky than I, barring one you may have seen or heard of? There is no man, I think, unhappier than I am" (van Buitenen 1975: 318). Bṛhadaśva replies that there is such a man, and begins telling Yudhiṣṭhira the story of King Nala. From his first introduction, Nala is immediately established as a man possessing many good qualities of a king:

MBh 3.50.1-4: *āsīd rājā nalo nāma vīrasenasuto balī | upapanno
gunairiṣṭai rūpavān aśvakovidah | atiṣṭhan manujendrāṇām mūrdhni
devapatir yathā | upary upari sarveṣām āditya iva tejasā | brahmaṇyo
vedavic chūro niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ | akṣapriyaḥ satyavādī mahān
akṣauhiṇīpatiḥ | īpsito varanārīṇām udāraḥ saṃyatendriyaḥ | rakṣitā
dhanvinām śreṣṭhaḥ sākṣād iva manuḥ svayam*

"There was a king named Nala, the strong son of Vīrasena, endowed with all good virtues, handsome, and skilled with horses, standing like the lord of the gods at the head of the kings of men, rising far above all of them like the sun in splendor. (He was) a friend of brahmins and a knower of the Vedas, a champion¹ and lord of the Niṣadhans, fond of gambling, a truth-speaker, and a great commander of armies, beloved by the best of women, generous, in control of his senses, a protector and the best of archers, like Manu himself in appearance."

The story also introduces King Bhīma of Vidarbha, who has been unable to bear children. After being visited by the seer Damana and paying him the appropriate honors and hospitality, Damana grants Bhīma and his wife a boon, giving them three sons named Dama, Dānta, and Damana, and a daughter named Damayantī. These names, which are obvious patronymics of Damana, might suggest that the seer himself fathered these

¹ As will be discussed later, I primarily follow Whitaker's (2011) translations of *vīra* as "fit, strong male" and *śūra* as "champion"

children, drawing an interesting parallel to Vyāsa as the father of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Similar to Nala, Damayantī is endowed with all good qualities (*gunaiḥ sarvaiḥ*-) and her beauty is likened to that of the goddess Śrī, Viṣṇu's consort and the divine epitome of feminine beauty. This not only establishes Damayantī as a female paragon to complement Nala's masculinity, but also links her to Draupadī, who is described as Śrī incarnate. Nala and Damayantī hear about one another and begin to fall in love from afar. Nala employs a flock of golden geese as his messengers, who proclaim his good virtues to Damayantī and suggest that the two should marry. Damayantī becomes lovesick for Nala, and her father, judging that she has reached a marriageable age, arranges for her to have a *svayamvara* (lit. "self-choice") marriage ritual.

Meanwhile, Indra learns from the seers Parvata and Nārada that all the kings of the earth have become preoccupied with winning Damayantī's hand at the ceremony. The World Guardians (*lokapālāḥ*) Indra, Agni, Yama, and Varuṇa decide to attend the *svayamvara* as well. En route, they encounter Nala, whom they enlist as their messenger to Damayantī. Nala protests, but ultimately delivers their message, informing Damayantī of the gods' arrival and instructing her to choose one of them as her husband. Damayantī is grief-stricken by the situation, and begins plotting how to choose Nala without forcing him to commit a fault (*doṣa*) by violating his *dharma* as the gods' messenger. She instructs Nala to return to the World Guardians and inform them that she intends to choose Nala in their presence during the ceremony. However, the four gods all arrive at the ceremony having disguised themselves as Nala; furthermore, whereas gods are supposed to appear with unblinking eyes, with their garlands in perfect condition, unsullied by any dust or sweat, without casting a shadow, and slightly hovering so that their feet never touch the

ground, in this case the four World Guardians have hidden these marks of divinity such that they look exactly like the Niṣadha king. Damayantī then makes an invocation of truth (*tena satyena*, “by this truth”) to reveal the gods, saying:

“If it be true that I chose the Niṣadha to be my husband, when I heard the words of the wild geese, then by this truth the Gods must point him out to me! If it be true that I have never strayed in speech and thought, then by this truth the Gods must point him out to me! If it be true that the Gods themselves have ordained for the king of Niṣadha to be my husband, then by this truth the Gods must point him out to me! The World Guardians and the Lord must display their own forms, so that I may recognize King Puṇyaśloka [Nala]!”
(van Buitenen 1975: 328)

Hearing this, the four gods resume their divine forms, Damayantī chooses Nala as her husband, and the World Guardians praise and reward the newlyweds. Most importantly, they bestow eight boons upon Nala:

From Indra:

1. The privilege of seeing the gods in person at his rituals
2. Unimpeded travel wherever he walks

From Agni:

3. The ability to summon fire wherever he wishes
4. The ability to pass through fire unharmed

From Yama:

5. A subtle taste for food²
6. Utter firmness in *dharma*

From Varuṇa:

7. The ability to summon water wherever he wishes
8. An excellent-smelling garland

Together, the World Guardians also give Nala and Damayantī a pair of twin children, a son named Indrasena and a daughter named Indrasenā, before returning to their own realm. This first act of the story ends with Nala performing the *aśvamedha* and many other sacrifices in which his ritual priests are richly rewarded.

² *annarasam* (lit. “the essence of food”), which for the purposes of this story makes Nala an excellent cook

However, as they depart, the World Guardians encounter Dvāpara and Kali – manifestations of the worst two eras of the world (*yuga*) and also the worst two throws in a dicing game – who are on their way to Damayantī’s *svayaṃvara*, not realizing that it has already concluded. Upon learning of Damayantī’s choice of a mortal in the presence of gods, Kali becomes enraged and determines to possess Nala and make him lose both his kingdom and Damayantī. After twelve years of waiting, Kali witnesses Nala performing his twilight rituals without properly purifying himself after urinating. He possesses the king and convinces Nala’s brother Puṣkara to challenge the former to dice, assuring Puṣkara that he can win control of the kingdom in the game. The two brothers begin to gamble and, due to Kali’s possession of Nala and Dvāpara’s possession of the dice themselves, Nala begins to lose all his possessions and his governance falls into disarray. Before Nala has lost everything, Damayantī summons his charioteer Vārṣṇeya, and asks him to take Indrasena and Indrasenā to safety in her father’s kingdom of Vidarbha, after which he may consider himself released from Nala’s service. Vārṣṇeya does as ordered, taking up service with King R̥tuparṇa of Ayodhyā while Nala continues to gamble. Nala stops just short of wagering Damayantī, but having lost all his wealth and his kingdom to Puṣkara, husband and wife are both exiled from Niṣadha and enter the forest with only a single garment each; in the case of Nala, his one garment is quickly stolen by the dice in the form of a flock of birds.

Damayantī suggests that they seek refuge in Vidarbha, but Nala refuses to shame her by arriving at her father’s city in such a pitiful condition. After much hesitation, Nala tears off half of Damayantī’s clothing for himself and abandons her in the night. Damayantī finally loses her composure and places a curse on whomever caused Nala to lose his mind,

so that that being would endure even greater suffering than Nala himself. Afterwards, she begins wandering the forest in search of her husband. She is first saved from a snake by a hunter, who then attempts to rape her; Damayantī makes another invocation, killing the hunter on the spot. She then encounters a hermitage of ascetics, who foretell that she will soon be reunited with Nala before disappearing. Damayantī then encounters and begins traveling with a trade caravan, which is later destroyed by a stampeding herd of elephants in the night. Finally, she arrives at the city of Cedi, where she is taken in as a chambermaid by the city’s royal family.

Nala, on the other hand, comes across a forest fire in his wanderings, and hears a voice from the fire calling out to him by name and asking for help. The voice turns out to be the snake Karkoṭaka, who is unable to escape the fire on his own due to a brahmin’s curse. Karkoṭaka promises to reward Nala in return for saving him from the fire, and shrinks himself to the size of Nala’s thumb in order to be carried to safety. Once free of the fire, Karkoṭaka tells Nala to continue walking while counting his steps out loud, and then bites and poisons Nala on the tenth step. There is an interesting bit of Sanskrit wordplay at work here: *daśa* can mean both “ten” and the second person singular imperative “bite!” (from $\sqrt{damś}$, “to bite”), suggesting that to some extent, Nala inadvertently gave the snake permission to bite him. Nala is immediately deformed and made unrecognizable, but Karkoṭaka reassures him, saying that the poison will only cause pain to the one who possessed him. Karkoṭaka advises Nala to seek out King R̥tuparṇa of Ayodhyā and enter his service as a charioteer so that he may trade his knowledge of horses for R̥tuparṇa’s knowledge of dice, and thereby regain his kingdom. Finally, Karkoṭaka gives Nala a special garment with the ability to return him to his original form. Nala,

adopting the alias Bāhuka, enters Ṛtuparṇa's employ and is reunited with Vārṣṇeya, who now works for him as a subordinate.

Meanwhile, Bhīma is distraught after hearing of Nala and Damayantī's situation, and dispatches a number of brahmins in all directions to find them. The brahmin Sudeva locates Damayantī in Cedi, and it is revealed that the king's mother who took her in is actually Damayantī's aunt. Damayantī returns to Vidarbha and continues the search for Nala, directing the brahmins to recite a particular poem in every city they visit in the hopes that Nala will respond. The brahmin Parṇāda travels to Ayodhyā and encounters Bāhuka, who responds with a poem of his own; Parṇāda reports his findings to Damayantī. Suspecting Bāhuka of being Nala in disguise, she devises a plot to draw him out: Sudeva is sent to inform Ṛtuparṇa that because it is not known whether or not Nala still lives, Damayantī is holding a second *svayamvara*, and that he must travel to Vidarbha in a single day before she chooses a new husband. Knowing that Bāhuka is the only charioteer skilled enough to make the journey in time, Ṛtuparṇa departs with both Bāhuka and Vārṣṇeya. During a brief stop on the road, Ṛtuparṇa boasts that he is able to count the leaves and nuts of a *vibhītaka* tree simply by looking at them. Bāhuka insists on counting for himself, and after concluding that the king's count was correct, asks Ṛtuparṇa how he could have known such a thing. Ṛtuparṇa explains that he knows the secrets of dice and is an expert at counting, and Bāhuka asks the king to teach him this knowledge, offering to give Ṛtuparṇa his knowledge of horses in return. Fearing further delays, Ṛtuparṇa agrees to the exchange and teaches Bāhuka the knowledge of dice and counting. As soon as this is done, Kali is expelled from Nala, who finally regains all of his composure and sanity. Nala is understandably enraged at his former possessor, but he shows Kali mercy on the condition

that Kali will never harm any mortal who glorifies Nala. Greatly weakened from Karkoṭaka's poison and Damayantī's curse, Kali takes refuge in the *vibhītaka* tree, while Ṛtuparṇa and company continue on to Vidarbha.

When they arrive, Bhīma greets Ṛtuparṇa with the greatest honor and hospitality, but not knowing of his daughter's scheme, wonders why he has come. Ṛtuparṇa, noticing that there are no other suitors there and no preparations are being made for a *svayamvara*, merely replies that he has come to give Bhīma his greetings. Damayantī, not seeing Nala arrive in the chariot, sends one of her servants, Keśinī, to investigate Bāhuka. Keśinī is first sent out to ask Bāhuka about Ṛtuparṇa's reasons for coming to Vidarbha and recite Damayantī's poem once more; Bāhuka is brought to tears and once again responds with his own poetry. Damayantī sends Keśinī to spy on him a second time, and her observations reveal that Nala is still in possession of his eight boons: when passing through a low door, the lintel rises to allow him unimpeded travel, and when cleaning meat for cooking, he fills a tub with water simply by looking at it and lights the cooking fire in a similar manner. When he accidentally touches the fire, he is not burned, and when he grinds flowers together between his fingers, they become fresher and more fragrant. Keśinī steals a piece of meat that Bāhuka had prepared, and Damayantī recognizes the taste as Nala's cooking. Keśinī is sent out a final time to visit Bāhuka with Indrasena and Indrasenā, whom he treats as if they were his own children. Finally, Damayantī confronts Bāhuka directly; he explains that it was Kali's possession which caused him to lose his kingdom and abandon her in the forest, while she explains that she has never been unfaithful in their time apart and that the announcement of a second *svayamvara* was merely a ruse to draw him out of hiding. Bāhuka puts on the clothes he received from Karkoṭaka and returns to his true form.

Reunited with his wife, Nala gives Ȕtupaṛṇa the knowledge of horses as previously agreed, and the latter returns to Ayodhyā.

After remaining in Vidarbha for a month, Nala returns to Niṣadha with a retinue of troops and a small amount of wealth from Bhīma. Nala arrives outside the city and challenges Puṣkara to another dice game, declaring his new army, newfound wealth, Damayantī, and his own life as his stake; furthermore, Nala declares that if he refuses, then Puṣkara must face him in a chariot duel. Puṣkara agrees to the dice game, bragging that he has wanted to win Damayantī from Nala all along. In a single throw of the dice, Nala defeats his brother and regains his kingdom and wealth, winning Puṣkara and all of his entourage as slaves. However, Nala shows mercy on Puṣkara, returning his brother's freedom to him and giving Puṣkara a city of his own to rule. Afterwards, Nala enters the city, resumes his kingship, and reassures his people. Hearing the news of Nala's victory, Bhīma sends Damayantī and her children to Niṣadha in company of a large army, and Nala is said to live out his days like the king of the gods, performing many munificent sacrifices.

Bṛhadaśva finishes his account by stating that because Nala was all alone in exile and deprived of his wife, he was in fact much more miserable than Yudhiṣṭhira, who is spending his exile in the company of his brothers and their co-wife Draupadī. Bṛhadaśva explains that one who listens to the story of Nala will enjoy great wealth and prosperity, free from misfortune. He then teaches Yudhiṣṭhira the secret of the dice to alleviate the king's fear that he will once more be cheated out of his kingdom through gambling.

Chapter 2: Masculine Ideologies from the Vedas to the Epics

Before attempting to compare Nala's story to the *Mahābhārata's* "ideologies of masculinity and kingship," it is first necessary to define and explore what, exactly, those ideologies might be. The *Mahābhārata* as a whole cannot be separated from the Indian political and philosophical milieu in the centuries immediately surrounding the turn of the Common Era. In particular, scholars such as James Fitzgerald and Alf Hiltebeitel have argued that the text was compiled by groups of brahmins – an elite class of professional priests and ritual officiants – as a politicized response against the emergence of heterodox, ascetic movements such as Buddhism and Jainism and the rulers, most notably the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (ruled 269-232 BCE (Whitaker forthc.: 8)), who gave such movements political patronage and legitimation. In crafting this response, the brahmin composers draw heavily on their traditions' oldest corpus of mythological and ritual texts: the *R̥gveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, as well as the secondary literature built around these four texts. These texts describe and espouse a set of highly gendered and androcentric social norms and responsibilities. The *Mahābhārata's* anti-Aśokan discourse draws heavily from such Vedic imagery and terminology, but ultimately molds these symbolic assets into its own blend of gendered ideology. As we shall see in Chapter 3, many of the ways in which Nala is established as an idealized man and king are indicative of the brahmanical strategies employed within the *Mahābhārata* writ large; therefore, to understand how Nala fits into these ideological maneuvers, it is necessary to examine the history of these ideologies and the socio-political contexts from which they emerged, beginning with the *R̥gveda*. For simplicity's sake, I have chosen to analyze these theories of masculinity, from the *R̥gveda* to the *Mahābhārata*, using three broad but useful

categories: martial and political dominance, generous ritual participation, and sexual prowess/virility. The first describes a man's responsibility to exhibit physical strength, participate skillfully in battle, and exert protection over his household, community, or in the case of kings, his sovereign realm. The second entails his duty to generously spread wealth, including the spoils of battle, among the larger community via a complex economy of ritual performances. Finally, the third requires him to demonstrate the potency of his masculinity by fathering strong sons who will continue his lineage and embody these three categories in their own right. To see how such ideologies were developed and deployed, let us begin with the *Rgveda*.

The *Rgveda* can be roughly dated to between 1500-1000 BCE and was originally composed and transmitted as a completely oral text. The text and its associated traditions were propagated by tribes of Vedic Āryans (Skt. *ārya*-,³ meaning “civilized, honorable,” etc.) that migrated from Central Asia into the Indus River Valley during the second millennium BCE. These tribes were pastoralist peoples who engaged in cattle-raiding and open warfare against both indigenous peoples and other Āryan tribes, particularly during the summer months. While the *Rgveda* contains references to a pantheon of Āryan deities, three in particular are especially important: the first is Indra, the war god and masculine paragon par excellence, who serves as an idealized image of the duties and responsibilities expected of Āryan warriors. The second is Agni, or fire personified (most notably, the sacrificial fires that are omnipresent in Vedic ritual practice), who serves as the officiating priest and deliverer of sacrifices to the gods, and finally there is Soma, the personified ritual

³ I will use accented Sanskrit terms to indicate a specifically Rgvedic usage or appearance of a particular word. Sanskrit words in texts such as the *Mahābhārata* typically appear unaccented; thus, for example, *śūra* and *śūra* are the same word, but the former refers to its appearances in the *Rgveda*.

beverage which is used to empower both Indra and his Āryan warriors for battle. In exploring Ṛgvedic ideologies of masculinity, Jarrod Whitaker describes a violent, warrior ethic centered around an interconnected economy of warfare and ritual practice. These peoples were initially unconcerned with maintaining landed kingdoms or territorial ownership. As such, their ideologies are replete with symbolism of expansion and free movement, in keeping with the constant need to ride out into battle, win riches, and seize control of grazing grounds and waterways for the purpose of cattle-herding. Whitaker notes that the cosmic serpent Vṛtra, in his role as the mythological archenemy of the Vedic peoples who traps the world's primordial waters, is characterized in direct opposition to such expansionistic imagery, as is the mountain cave (*valá*) where the sun and cattle are similarly trapped. As Whitaker writes, “the nouns *vṛtrá* and *valá* both come from the same root $\sqrt{vr}$, which means ‘to block, obstruct, cover, enclose, encircle.’ Vṛtra is thus the personification of resistance – the Obstacle par excellence – and both the serpent and the *valá* cave are primordial manifestations of an enervating cosmic force that imprisons sunlight, water, life, and prosperity, especially in the form of livestock” (2011: 7). It is not surprising, then, that slaying Vṛtra in battle and smashing open the *valá* cave are two of Indra's defining moments in Ṛgvedic mythology.

Similarly, this imagery of relentless expansion in the face of obstacles in many ways characterizes the roles and responsibilities incumbent upon Āryan men, and helps shed light on the first of our three categories, “martial and political dominance,” in the earliest Vedic context. Whitaker notes that the *Ṛgveda* employs many related Sanskrit terms to define men and masculinity, including *nár* and *vīrá* (both “man” – *nár* in particular is connected to *nara*, also “man,” a term we will come across later), *paúṃsya*

(“masculinity”), *nṛmṇá* (“manhood”), and finally *vīryà* (“virility, manliness, manly power”) (2011: 35, 60). In particular, he focuses on three words to illustrate the roles of the Ṛgvedic warrior: first is the *vīrá*, or “fit strong male who routinely fights in battle,” representing a basic expectation for Āryan men. Second is the *suṽīra*, or “possessing or controlling fit males (or warriors),” meaning either a commander of other *vīrá*- or a father of strong sons who can carry on his lineage; Whitaker further notes Ṛgvedic examples where Indra, Agni, and Soma are all referred to as *suṽīra*-. Third is the *śūra*, which Whitaker translates as “champion,” deriving from $\sqrt{sū}$ “to swell, enlarge; become massive, strong” and thus recalling the expansionistic imagery seen elsewhere (Whitaker 2011: 60, 78-79, 109). Unsurprisingly, Indra is cast as the paradigmatic *śūra*, and he succeeds in this role due to his incredible physical power, or *ójas*, which Whitaker notes is closely connected to depictions of Indra’s big, strong arms. Most notably, several Ṛgvedic hymns depict Indra’s body in ways that take the image of expansion to its extremes, as Indra is said to swell up until he dwarfs the cosmos itself. As Whitaker writes, “*ójas* here appears in a spatial context as Indra physically resists the definitive markers of cosmic space from encompassing ($\sqrt{vyac}$) him ... the poet makes Indra’s strength the earth’s ‘counterpart’ or ‘match’ (*pratimāna*). The term *pratimāna* does not mean that the earth is Indra’s equal, but rather that it is the realm he ‘measures himself against’ (*prāti* $\sqrt{mā}$ ‘to measure against; to copy, imitate’)” (2011: 138). Conversely, RV 4.18.9 describes Vṛtra as “the shoulderless one” (Doniger 1981: 142), which both reminds us that, as a snake, he has no arms, but also suggests that without arms, Vṛtra can never compete on even footing with Indra’s *ójas*. In a similar vein, Whitaker notes that human *śūra* derive their power from a similar term, *śavas*, also deriving from $\sqrt{sū}$ “to swell” and carrying a meaning of “might, strength, power”

(2011: 109). Hence, the Ṛgvedic *śūra* appears as the champion warrior, but is also, as Whitaker notes, explicitly tied to ideals of tribal authority. Of one example in particular, Whitaker writes that, “For this poet, men defined as *śūra*- compete for political and territorial dominance and the loyalty of men, yet they are subject to their war god’s authoritative example ... the extended metaphor highlights the position of a *śūra* as an ‘army leader’ (*senānī*) at the head of other charioteers in cattle raids” (2011: 111). Yet another example focuses on the adjective *ánāmin* (“unbending”), which appears only twice in the *Ṛgveda*, in one case describing Indra’s *ójas* and in the other describing his *kṣatrā* (“dominion, rulership”); Whitaker argues that this connection between unbending strength and dominion suggests “that political power and physical strength overlap because the latter brings about the former” (2011: 141). From these examples, it becomes clear that the term *śūra* refers not only to an Āryan warrior with exceptional martial prowess, but also a chieftain or king in command of other *vīrā*-, who is therefore able to expand his military reach over a wide area. In short, Ṛgvedic ideals of masculinity, martial prowess, and rulership are largely inseparable from one another.

Theodore Proferes expands upon these ideals of masculinity qua martial prowess and political dominance, illustrating that this expansionistic, violent, and politicized imagery extends not only to the individual *śūra*, but to entire Āryan communities as well, particularly as it pertains to their shared participation in the economy of Vedic ritual practice. For example, he draws upon Vedic hymns in which the *daīvodāsa* fire, related to the Bharata leader Divodāsa, can be seen as representing the sovereign claims of a clan. In particular, he translates RV 8.103.1-2 as follows: “The best path-finder has appeared, in whom they have placed their commitments. May our songs reach the (newly) born fire,

increaser of the *ārya*. Fire, scion of Divodāsa, (went) to the gods through his greatness; he expanded throughout mother earth; he set foot upon the peak of the firmament” (Proferes 2007: 38-39). Proferes uses this passage, particularly the phrase “increaser of the *ārya*,” to note that Agni’s role here is to augment and improve the collective power and good Āryan qualities of the groups that deploy Vedic hymns and fire rituals. Thus, Proferes argues that, “As the emblem of the common ancestry of the various groups, the fire is both the focal point of communal identity as well as the symbol of territorial expansionism, spreading horizontally across the earth and rising vertically to the highest point in the firmament. This imagery reflects a projection of power in space by the unified group, which entails overcoming the peoples previously occupying this space and receiving from them the praise and spoils due to conquerors” (2007: 38). This not only applies to individual Āryan tribes, but rather such imagery can be expanded to encompass a particular alliance or confederation of tribes, or even further, it might encompass the community of Vedic peoples as a whole. As Proferes notes, “While each fire constituted the heart of the social unit to which it belonged, it served at the same time to connect that unit to the others sharing the allegiance to the central fire. In this way, fire could serve as the ultimate symbol of social unity, binding a multitude of small groups into a larger polity. Since all fires derived from the same source, the essence of each was the same” (2007: 34). Thus, these fires and the ritual traditions built around them are the central unifying features by which Āryan communities define themselves as such, ally themselves with other Āryan communities, and legitimize their sovereignty and territorial expansions.

The unifying thread between Whitaker’s and Proferes’s accounts of Vedic ideology is the collection of ritual practices used to construct both, which brings us to our second

category of Vedic masculine ideologies: “generous ritual participation.” As was briefly mentioned earlier, it is the ritualized production and consumption of *sóma* which empowers Indra and his warriors for battle, and it is fire’s role as the central element of Vedic ritual that makes it such a defining aspect of Āryan communities. Specifically pertaining to masculine ideologies, Whitaker notes that “the representation of Indra’s body not only reflects a deep-seated ideology pertaining to masculinity and violence; it also constructs it. This is especially evident when men receive ritual praise and partake of *sóma*. A man’s identity cannot be fully realized unless he has access to *sóma* and ultimately participates in the R̥gvedic ritual tradition” (2011: 151). The point here is twofold: firstly, that these concepts of physical/political expansion and martial power, whether expressed through an individual chieftain or a larger Vedic community, constitute a series of idealized and carefully crafted discursive formulations designed to promote a set of normative behaviors that Āryan men are expected to enact and embody; and secondly, that these behaviors are in turn used to reinforce political and economic systems that are beneficial to those who craft them. The circular or reciprocal nature of this system is clearly seen in depictions of Indra’s generosity. As Whitaker writes, “poet-priests repeatedly praise Indra for his generosity while instructing him to distribute wealth among ritual participants and presumably the community at large. In addition, many of the examples presented so far indicate that one of the dominant ways in which wealth is acquired in early Vedic culture is through cattle raiding and warfare. R̥gvedic poets thus embed the concept of masculinity within a violent ritualized economy” (2011: 54). In short, Āryan warriors are ritually-empowered to wage war and win wealth, which they subsequently share amongst their communities, allowing themselves to be further empowered to wage war and win more

wealth, and so on. Winning cattle in warfare is not its own reward, but rather, a means for a man to simultaneously enrich his community and demonstrate his manliness, thus improving his own social standing.

The examples thus far have helped illuminate Ṛgvedic masculine ideologies in regards to the two closely related categories of martial prowess and ritual participation. However, the third category, “sexual prowess/virility,” also requires proper examination. A key concept in this regard is *vīryā*, an abstract noun derived from *vīrā*; Whitaker defines the former as “virility, manliness, manly power” and notes that both terms are explicitly linked with English cognates such as virile, virility, virtue, were(wolf), et cetera (2011: 60, 178 n.1). While *vīryā* is clearly a central theme in the violent, martial responsibilities of Āryan men, its sexual connotations are equally important here, and are once again manifested in the character of Indra. Indra is often likened to a bull and is said to possess “one thousand testicles” and “potent manhood” (*sahasramuṣka tuvinṛmṇa*) (Whitaker 2011: 30), while conversely, Vṛtra’s virility is regularly ridiculed. In particular, RV 1.32.7 reads “Without feet or hands [Vṛtra] fought against Indra, who struck him on the nape of the neck with his [mace]. The steer who wished to become the equal of the bull bursting with seed, Vṛtra lay broken in many places” (Doniger 1981: 150). The implication is clear: Vṛtra is likened to a castrated steer, whereas Indra is a bull of such virility that his semen is overflowing. Examples such as this obviously play into the *Ṛgveda*’s larger masculine ideology, and also help us understand the text’s corresponding roles and expectations for women. As Whitaker writes regarding Vedic femininity, “Females are defined by a patriarchal and misogynistic tradition that characterizes them as fickle or even dangerous and values them for their subservience, sexuality, and reproductivity. Ritual participants

reinforce such values as men can fulfill their ritual and social responsibilities only by being married and having sons” (2011: 30). This relates back to Whitaker’s description of the *suvīra* role, as this term can imply either a leader in command of other *vīra*-, or a man who has fathered strong sons. If a *suvīra* is judged according to how many men he can control, then both his obedient sons and the fighters under his command would seem to represent a sort of symbolic capital to improve his standing in the community. These examples further reinforce our three broad and interconnected categories of Vedic masculinity; martial and political skill, ritual participation, and sexual prowess.

Moving forward in time, Michael Witzel notes that several key shifts in the Vedic socio-political milieu seem to have occurred during a “gap” between the end of the composition of the *R̥gveda* and the compilation of the *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, as well as the proliferation of secondary literature such as the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, et cetera. Witzel dates the *Atharvaveda* in particular to between 1200-800 BCE, arguing that the early portions of the text speak to a period of increased exegesis and codification of *R̥gvedic* ritualism, which went hand-in-hand with the advent of iron-forging technology in India and the rise of settled, landed kingdoms under the Kuru tribal hegemony (1997: 275-284). Ritual practice was split into public (*śrauta*) and domestic/household (*grhya*) rites, which brought with them a highly specialized division of labor amongst ritual priests, all of which seems to have been largely absent in *R̥gveda*. Following Witzel, Proferes (2007: 12) notes that this shift arose from the Kuru’s centralization of political power and brought about a seminal shift in the Vedic ritual economy:

“Witzel links this period with the rise of the Kuru tribe and its extension of hegemony over the central areas of Vedic cultural influence, the region known to later generation as *Kurukṣetra* ‘Land of the Kurus.’ Further, he proposes that the aforementioned reformation

of *Ṛgvedic*-period social and ritual institutions was promoted by the newly ascendant kings of the Kuru dynasty. As part of their program to consolidate power, the Kuru kings sought to overcome the divisive tendencies inherent in the clan-based organization of their priestly elite by encouraging the development of an ecumenical ritual system, one that did not rely upon or perpetuate the clan divisions characteristic of the *Ṛgvedic* period.”

Under such an “ecumenical” system, a new idealized class system (*varṇa*, lit. “color”) emerged that divided Āryans into four groups: brahmins, or the priests, ritualists, and sages; kṣatriyas, the “baronage” of nobles, warriors, and rulers; vaiśyas, the commoners and merchants; and śūdras, the servants and slaves who, unlike the upper three classes, are singled out as being excluded from ritual participation. This ideology is made explicit in the myth of the Puruṣasūkta or “hymn of the cosmic man,” wherein the eponymous Puruṣa sacrifices his own body such that the four classes are formed from its various parts. While this myth does appear in the *Ṛgveda*, the language used indicates that the Puruṣasūkta was a late addition, perhaps added on to further legitimate this newer ideology by grounding it in the oldest Veda. Consider Whitaker’s translation of RV 10.90.12: “The priest was his mouth. The nobleman was made his two arms. As to his thighs, that is what the commoner was. From his two feet the servant was born” (2011: 136). Whitaker notes that its use of words is somewhat suspicious, writing that “The term ‘nobleman’ (*rājanya*) in the second line is a neologism to *Ṛgvedic* diction, and as a hapax legomenon its appearance here points to the lateness of this hymn, as the term is more common in the other *Samhitā* and classical *Brāhmaṇa* texts. It most likely refers to the burgeoning class of martial and political nobility, who will take the more common title *kṣatriya*” (2011: 136). Whereas Whitaker argues that in the earliest Vedic layers, individual men could simultaneously act as warriors, political leaders, and sacrificial poet-priests (2011: 26), under this new ideology, the distinct roles of the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) and the specialized priests in his employ began to emerge. As Stephanie Jamison notes, the term “sacrificer” is somewhat misleading; the

yajamāna is merely the Āryan man who sponsors a ritual performance. He gives “gifts” (*dakṣina*-)/fees to a number of brahmins who perform the sacrifices on his behalf, and he thereby reaps the benefit (or detriment, in the case of mishaps) that the ritual might accrue. While the *yajamāna* is present on the ritual grounds, his participation is carefully circumscribed and directed by the brahmin officiants (Jamison 1996: 30). While patronage of brahmins in this redesigned ritual economy is expected of the upper three *dvija*, or “twice-born” classes, special attention seems to be paid to the economic cooperation between kings and brahmins, and with good reason. The political patronage of rulers would have been essential to the continued success of the system as a whole, and furthermore, competition for social prestige would no doubt be waged by rival *kṣatriyas* trying to employ the best (and consequently, most expensive) brahmins to perform their rituals. For these two groups in particular the *śrauta* economy provided for particularly symbiotic and profitable relationships. From this perspective, it becomes clear why, a few centuries later, Aśoka would have presented such a threat to these brahmins. In undermining the political dominance of brahmanical ritualism, Aśoka was threatening to destroy the lucrative symbiosis that had kept brahmins wealthy and protected as the elites of the *varṇa* system.

However, even before Aśoka, it would seem that our three broad categories of masculinity – martial and political dominance, ritual participation, and virility – have shifted somewhat. While the ideal of the married householder who fathers strong sons and generously spreads his wealth via ritual practice seems largely intact, the focus of this ideal seems altered to a degree. Whereas a R̥gvedic householder would spread his wealth amongst the ritual economy of his larger tribal community, it seems that the concerns of

these later *yajamāna*- are more limited to their family and individual lineage of male heirs. The exception to this rule might be the king. Brodbeck and Black note that while all householders are expected to exert *rakṣaṇa* (“protection”) over their wives and families, the king is metonymically asserted to be the “householder” of his entire realm, thus giving him both the legitimation and expectation to defend his subjects (2007: 17), who are referred to as his *prajā* (“children, progeny”). Returning to Proferes’ examination of Witzel and the rise of the Kuru kings, the reasons behind this shift seem clear. The consolidation of power under the Kuru hegemony would have been made much easier if, instead of the traditional Ṛgvedic ideal whereby tribal chieftains held the loyalties of Āryan men, allegiances were instead shifted to the centralized ruler and the clan-based ritual economy was superseded by the class-based ritual economy. Similarly, while the imagery of violence inherent to these rituals would have remained, the expenses involved in paying a team of brahmins to perform a *soma* sacrifice would have restricted such performances to wealthy and powerful kings. Thus, it would seem that the only one of our three categories of masculinity to remain unchanged is virility, particularly insofar as it pertains to fathering sons and perpetuating a male lineage. Patrick Olivelle cites a particularly clear enunciation of this ideology, drawing from a conversation between the brahmin Nārada and King Hariścandra in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*. When Hariścandra asks what benefit is gained by fathering a son, Nārada replies: “A debt he pays in him, and immortality he gains, the father who sees the face of his son born and alive ... By means of sons have fathers ever crossed over the mighty darkness; for one is born from oneself, a ferry laden with food” (Olivelle 1995: 535). The assertion here is that sons are not merely a means to improve a father’s social standing, but in a very real sense they are both the repayment of

a man's debt to his ancestors and the continuation of the father who is immortalized, living on through his son even after death. However, as Olivelle notes and as we shall see shortly, even this aspect of Vedic masculinity would later be undermined by the rise of newer ideologies.

A new brand of philosophical speculation contained within the Upaniṣadic literature brought with it further changes, beginning sometime between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE (Black 2007: 4). One of the most notable changes was the rise of wisdom-seeking and debate as accompaniments or possibly alternatives to traditional ritual practice. As Laurie Patton puts it, "The Upaniṣads departed from the basic elaboration of these ritual themes. Rather, they used sacrifice as a reference point, a metaphor, for the focus upon and realization of the self (*ātman*) and the identity of the self with the all-important force that animates the world (*brahman*). Some scholars have called this process 'the internalization of the sacrifice'" (Patton 2004: 46). This internalization process centered around the notion that different bodily parts and functions could be likened to the various elements of sacrifice; therefore, with the proper knowledge, one can understand how the sacrifice might take place within their own body. One of the key changes that arises from this philosophical milieu was the shift from kings as munificent patrons of ritual sacrifice to kings as munificent patrons of brahmanical discourse and formal debates (*brahmodya*). Thus, this philosophical shift did not immediately cause a crisis amidst traditional brahmanical ritualism, as brahmins were still the primary teachers of this internalized sacrificial knowledge, and they were still being patronized and paid handsomely by kings. Two pertinent examples of this come from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad*: in the former, the brahmin Yājñavalkya discusses the twice-daily *agnihotra*

ritual with King Janaka and receives one hundred cows as payment for his teachings, even though there is nothing in this lesson that provides a specific benefit for Janaka, and in the latter, five brahmins approach King Janaka and ask for *his* teaching on the *agnihotra*; despite the fact that it is the king who does the teaching, the brahmins in this case are rewarded with one thousand cows and five hundred horses each (Black 2007: 106-107). For Black (2007: 107), these examples highlight a key concept regarding the Upaniṣadic shift in the ritual economy. As he writes:

“Significantly, even when he is the one doing the teaching, Janaka gives excessively, a crucial detail that is shared throughout the dialogues between brahmins and kings; whether the brahmins are teachers or students, the brahmins get paid. By showing that the brahmins receive copious rewards even when they lose arguments and assume the role of the student, these dialogues emphasize that it is the presence of the eminent brahmins that is considered vital, and that in order to attract brahmins to their court kings had to pay extravagantly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, when brahmins participate in philosophical tournaments, they compete fiercely against each other for the patronage of kings. However, when brahmins discuss ideas with *kṣatriyas* there is not the same competitiveness.”

Thus, while our category of generosity (as well as the competitiveness in finding and employing the best brahmins) has remained intact, the role of traditional Vedic ritual itself seems to be slowly losing its centrality as new philosophies and ideologies arise. Furthermore, Black cites examples which suggest that the ideals of winning wealth and begetting sons are also losing pride of place during this era. One particular example involves Yājñavalkya’s teaching of the knowledge of immortality to his wife Maitreyī, after which he planned to retire and live as an ascetic. This example is illuminating for several reasons. Firstly, while Black takes pains to note that structurally, philosophical dialogue between women and brahmins in the Upaniṣads does not seem to constitute formal Vedic instruction, it is still somewhat jarring that women act as interlocutors of the philosophical elite here. Furthermore, when offered her pick of inheritance from Yājñavalkya’s considerable wealth, Maitreyī chooses instead to ask for his knowledge,

given that his wealth will not grant her immortality. Finally, Yājñavalkya's assertion here that one does not require sons for immortality seems to undermine the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* passage cited by Olivelle above (Black 2007: 163-165). This demonstrates that competing views of a man's social duties and expectations are beginning to emerge as philosophical categories such as *ātman*, *brahman*, and immortality start to trump traditional ritual concerns in certain circles.

Eventually, this shift would lead to the rise of heterodox ascetic traditions; these included both *śramaṇa* ("toiling, laboring, austerity; ascetic practice") movements from within the sphere of Vedic or brahmanical traditions, as well as nascent traditions from without, most notably Buddhism and Jainism, all arising sometime around the fifth century BCE. These ascetic movements largely centered around the philosophical concepts of *saṃsāra*, the never-ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth in which all humans are said to be trapped, and *mokṣa*, the liberation therefrom; in turn, these concepts can be seen as outgrowths of the Upaniṣadic focus on the nature of the self and the quest for immortality. Buddhism is of particular relevance to our analysis here, as it presents one of the most successful challenges to both brahmanical orthodoxy and also to the masculine ideologies that we have traced through the Vedic and Upaniṣadic eras. Despite being born a kṣatriya and not a brahmin, the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, is a philosophical and spiritual teacher, challenging the brahmin class's singular dominance in that role. Furthermore, one of the central teachings to emerge from early Buddhism is that of the "Middle Way," whereby both extreme asceticism and brahmanical ritualism are both rejected in favor of ridding oneself of worldly attachments and desires, without necessarily ceasing all action or escaping the world altogether. Most notable for our purposes, however,

is John Powers' depiction of Gautama Buddha's embodied, physical traits, which in many ways depict him as a paradigmatic, hyper-masculine kṣatriya. Specifically, Powers notes that the Buddha is commonly assigned epithets that would seem more appropriate for Indra, namely "bull of a man," "fearless lion," "lion-hearted man," "savage elephant," "stallion," et cetera (2009: 26). Furthermore, the Buddha is shown to have grown up as a highly sheltered and pampered kṣatriya prince, with an extensive harem that he is fully capable of satisfying. As Powers (2009: 32-33) writes:

"The aim of these accounts appears to be to counteract suspicions that when he later decided to leave the palace he might have done so because he was not a real man. It is important that when a future buddha rejects sensuality he does so after fully experiencing all its purported pleasures. His renunciation is undertaken with the full knowledge of what he has given up. Moreover, he should not leave home life as a result of a painful relationship breakup or a personal trauma or because his sexuality is in any way impaired; rather, the bodhisattva must be a 'stallion,' a supremely virile superman able to pleasure huge numbers of women."

This point is further driven home by the Thirty-Two Major and Eighty Minor Physical Characteristics of a Great Man, which are the physiological marks that are said to identify the Buddha. The tenth Major Characteristic is a "penis covered by a sheath," while Minor Characteristics twenty-four and twenty five are "perfect male sex organ" and "body with broad and graceful limbs" (Powers 2009: 235-239); to use a rather crass metaphor from modernity, according to these descriptions the Buddha is quite literally "hung like a horse," while the references to his limbs recall Whitaker's description of big strong arms as markers of masculine *śakti* in the Vedas. Further examples listed by Powers involve Buddhist monks who have renounced their wives and families to enter the monastery, only to have their wives attempt to seduce them into returning. One notable example involves a monk named Vīra, recalling the sense of "virility" inherent in the Vedic *vīra* role, who not only resisted his wife's advances, but impressed her so much with his austerity that she later became a Buddhist nun (Powers 2009: 101). The implication from all of these

examples is clear: Buddhist texts strongly assert that their adherents are not feeble, emaciated, or emasculated ascetics, but rather strong, virile young men in prime physical condition; their *vīrya* or “manly power” is demonstrably potent, yet kept under absolute control by their austerity.

Thus, rather than simply undermining or proposing alternatives to our three categories of masculine ideology (i.e. martial and political dominance, generous ritual performance, virility), in this regard Buddhism dared to invert and lay claim to such categories. As seen above, the ideal Buddhist monk is full of sexual potency, but does not use that virility to bear sons and thus create more attachments to the world. While the Buddha does father a son (according to Powers, to further prevent accusations of non-masculinity (2009: 38)), this inversion of Āryan householder ideals is emphasized by his son’s name: Rāhula, meaning “chain” or “fetter.” Similarly, although the Buddha was an able-bodied kṣatriya, martial prowess is replaced with the ideal of practicing *ahiṃsā*, or “non-violence, harmlessness,” towards all living beings. Third and finally, ritual participation can be dismissed on two separate grounds: first, that trading wealth to brahmins for ritual benefits relies on both desire and attachment, and second, that any merit gained through ritual practice does not really move one any closer towards the cessation of their *duḥkha*, or “suffering.” In short, Buddhism not only undercut the brahmanical traditions’ systems of ritual economy and political patronage, but its new ideologies were also well-situated to refute and undermine a gendered, social ethic dating back to the *Ṛgveda*. Faced with a fundamentally altered political reality and philosophical milieu, the brahmins were forced to respond; that response took the form of the *Mahābhārata*.

Fitzgerald's dating of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition puts the initial development of the central Pāṇḍava narrative sometime between 300 BCE, or just after the Mauryan Empire's rise to power, and 100 BCE, or just following their defeat at the hands of the brahmin-supporting Śuṅga Dynasty. Furthermore, Fitzgerald notes that the text seems to have been redacted after the fact to account for new developments following this period, until a more or less fixed version was produced sometime between 300 and 450 CE (2004: 54). While Hiltebeitel seems to be more or less in agreement with this dating, he pushes back slightly against labeling the *Mahābhārata* as specifically or singularly anti-Buddhist, anti-Mauryan, et cetera, reminding his readers that both the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* refer to all "heretical" traditions as simply *nāstika*, or "those who teach what is not." Hiltebeitel writes that this strategy is "probably to deny significance to any one true rival, and to generalize opposing movements into this deontologized category" (2001: 16). Hiltebeitel's point is well taken here; while Buddhism and Aśoka's Mauryan Empire may have been the biggest or most successful threats the brahmanical traditions faced, they were not the only challengers. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this was not simply a pushback against a pacifist, *ahiṃsā*-practicing society by a group of violent, hyper-masculinized kṣatriyas. Fitzgerald notes that while Aśoka did espouse Buddhist conceptions of *dharma* and *ahiṃsā* in a number of his engraved edicts, and ostensibly expressed regret for the violence of his military campaigns, Aśoka never renounced his regime's ability to commit such violence, and this apparent hypocrisy was keenly noticed by his brahmanical detractors. As Fitzgerald (2001: 67) writes:

"After his neglect of brahmin primacy and the entailed abandonment of *varṇadharma* [i.e. law/duty according to class], the fundamental problem with Aśoka's rule (from the point of view of brahmins unhappy with it, and to judge from the force with which the MBh insists upon and propounds the necessity of socially sanctioned violence) must have been either his blithe-seeming embrace of, propagandizing for, and enforcement of a relatively

thorough-going observance of *ahiṃsā* [“non-violence”] (including the proscription of brahmin animal sacrifices) while neither relinquishing nor grounding his own use of judicial and military violence.” (square brackets mine)

Thus, the issue here is not simply the reaffirmation of justifiable violence by these brahmins, but rather the reassertion of brahmanical authority to authorize and oversee such violence, including animal sacrifices as part of the symbiotic ritual economy between the brahmin priests and their munificent patrons.

Perhaps the best illustrations of this brahmanical strategy appear in the *Śāntiparvan*, wherein Bhīṣma responds directly to many of Yudhiṣṭhira’s questions regarding the dilemma of kṣatriya rulership in a world where *ahiṃsā* is idealized. A particularly illustrative example occurs when Bhīṣma recounts the story of Ambarīṣa, who, after living a life defined by proper *dharma* and generous sacrifices, dying, and ascending to Indra’s heaven, noticed that his general Sudeva had attained an even greater heaven. When asked how this can be, since Sudeva was not as generous of a *yajamāna* as Ambarīṣa, the war god responds with the following:

MBh 12.99.12: *etasya vitatas tāta sudevasya babhūva ha | saṃgrāmayajñāḥ
sumahān yaś cānyo yudhyate naraḥ*

“Surely, my child, the great sacrifice of battle was spread out by Sudeva, and any other man who fights in battle.”

At Ambarīṣa’s request, Indra provides an incredibly detailed, and often macabre account of this “sacrifice of battle,” demonstrating that a bloody battle can and does follow the structure of a *śrauta* ritual and can result in the highest rewards for the sacrificer. Two other stanzas are particularly evocative of the Vedic influence here. Consider the following statement made by Indra:

MBh 12.99.27: *bhartuḥ arthe tu yaḥ śūraḥ vikramet vāhinīmukhe | bhayāt
na ca nivarteta tasya lokāḥ yathā mama*

“And the champion who sets out to the front of the army for the sake of his lord, and does not turn back from fear, his worlds are the same as mine.”

The assertion here is that a champion (*śūraḥ*) who fearlessly fights and dies at the vanguard will rule over a similar number and type of worlds in the afterlife as Indra himself does. This recalls Whitaker’s examination of the Vedic *śūra*, most notably his translation of RV 5.59.5b, which reads, “Like champions in the front of battle, they fought out in front” (2011: 110). However, in this case, the implication seems to be that it is not a ruler, *kṣatriya*, or other specially marked hero who can claim the title of *śūra*, but rather any warrior who fights without fear at the vanguard. Elsewhere, Indra asserts that:

MBh 12.99.26: *brahmasve hriyamāṇe yaḥ priyāṃ yuddhe tanuṃ tyajet | ātmānaṃ yūpaṃ ucchritya sa yajñāḥ ananta dakṣiṇāḥ*

“When the property of brahmins is being seized, he who gives up his dear life in battle, having established himself as the sacrificial post, that sacrifice (becomes) an unending, priestly gift.”

This passage not only reasserts the priority of brahmanical concerns, but also draws an interesting link to Vedic ritual practice. Proferes notes many examples from the *Brahmāṇa* and *Sūtra* literature where the sacrificial post (*yūpa*, to which animal victims were tied) symbolizes the *yajamāna* himself, and in many cases either the post itself or a chip from the post was cast into the sacrificial fire at the end of a ritual; certain examples even assert that doing so grants the *yajamāna* access to heaven and a golden body upon his death (Proferes 2003: 345-348). Within this retooled imagery of the “ritual of battle,” it seems that similar *yūpa* imagery is being employed by the *Śāntiparvan*’s brahmin composers. Specifically, if a man is both the *yajamāna* and an object of sacrifice in battle, specifically a battle waged in defense of brahmanical concerns, then that man becomes the *yūpa* of the ritual of battle and receives heavenly benefits as a result. This is supported by the assertion

that his ritual is one of “unending priestly gifts” (*ananta dakṣiṇaḥ*), perhaps implying that his rewards are also unending. Similarly, the fate of Sudeva, who surpassed his lord in heaven simply by participating in the ritual of battle makes the strategy of these composers even clearer: reassert a violent, masculine ideology, heavily invoking Ṛgvedic terms like *vīrá* and *śūra*, while at the same time blending this ideology with imagery from the later *śrauta* traditions. In the case of Sudeva’s “ritual of battle,” this is made particularly explicit, as engaging in sanctioned violence for the sake of brahmanical interests is not only an acceptable proxy for ritual participation, but rather it may be the ultimate expression of ritual participation.

In summation, we have seen that both the *Ṛgveda* and the literature that followed espoused gendered, androcentric ideologies whereby strong men and their proper behaviors were idealized and commoditized as part and parcel of larger ritual economies. While the focus of these ideologies shifted over the centuries, these differing historical layers can be compared using the three categories of martial and political dominance, generous ritual participation, and sexual potency/masculine virility. The rise of heterodox movements such as Buddhism constituted a direct attack and, in many ways, a philosophical inversion of these ideals. Combined with Buddhism’s increased political clout during under Mauryan rule, it becomes clear that the brahmanical traditions were faced with a crisis. In responding to this dilemma, the composers of the *Mahābhārata* drew upon distinctly Vedic language and imagery, using terms like *vīrá* and *śūra* to reassert the necessity of brahmanically authorized violence. However, this imagery was also tempered by the ideals of generosity and sacrifice as expressed in the later *śrauta* traditions. Finally, examples such as Indra’s depiction of the “ritual of battle” and the rewards gained

by valiant death in defense of brahmanical interests touches upon the logic of reciprocal rewards for self-sacrifice as seen in the figure of the *yajamāna*. As we will see in the following chapters, these notions of sacrifice and reward are critically important to understanding the characters of Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira.

Chapter 3: Nala as *nara* & *rāja* – The Character as Idealized Male

Having traced this history of masculine ideologies from the Vedas to the Epics, let us now consider how the character of Nala fits into these ideologies thematically. By virtue of his original good qualities and his boons from the four World Guardians, Nala is in many ways established as an ideal man and a dharmic king, tying him into the larger brahmanical strategies of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. In this regard, his masculinity can be examined vis-à-vis the three broad categories established in the previous chapter: martial and political dominance, generous ritual participation, and sexuality/virility. To illustrate this point, I will begin by reviewing the list of Nala's qualities, which, by comprising the *Nalopāhyāna*'s first stanzas, serves to focus the narrative around these values from the outset:

1. Strong son of Vīrasena (*vīrasenasuto balī*)
2. Endowed with all good qualities (*upapanno gunair iṣṭaiḥ*-)
3. Handsome (*rūpavān*)
4. Skilled with horses (*aśvakovidah*)
5. Standing like the lord of the gods at the head of the kings of men, rising above them like the sun in splendor (*atiṣṭhan manujendrāṇām mūrdhni devapatir yathā | upary upari sarveṣām āditya iva tejasā*)
6. Friend of brahmins (*brahmaṇyo*)
7. Knower of the Vedas (*vedavic*)
8. Champion (*-śūro*)
9. Lord of the Niṣadhans (*niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ*)
10. Fond of gambling (*akṣapriyaḥ*)
11. Truth-speaker (*satyavādī*)
12. Great commander of armies (*mahān akṣauhiṇīpatiḥ*)
13. Beloved by the best of women (*īpsito varanārīṇām*)
14. Generous (*udāraḥ*)
15. In control of his senses (*saṃyatendriyaḥ*)
16. Protector (*rakṣitā*)
17. Best of archers (*dhanvinām śreṣṭhaḥ*)
18. Like Manu himself in appearance (*sākṣād iva manuḥ svayam*)

Several conclusions can be drawn from this account, beginning with quality #1.

The name given for Nala's father, Vīrasena, means "he whose army are *vīra*-" linking him

to both senses of the Vedic *śūra* (“possessing or controlling fit males (or warriors)”) role: a commander of strong fighters and a father of strong sons. In terms of martial prowess, qualities 4, 8, and 17 establish Nala as a skilled individual combatant; #8 specifically uses the term *śūra*, further establishing Nala as an expert, champion warrior. The expansionistic imagery of “swelling” or “growing big and strong” inherent in the term *śūra* (recalling its root in $\sqrt{sū}$, “to swell”) is further elaborated by the second boon that Nala receives from Indra, “unimpeded travel wherever he walks” (*gatiṃ -anuttamāṃ śubhām*⁴). As Keśinī observes, this boon causes a low doorframe to expand and allow Nala to pass through without lowering his head, which seems very reminiscent of Whitaker’s analysis of expansionistic imagery in the *Ṛgveda*. One particular example is Whitaker’s assertion that, by virtue of his *ójas*, “Indra physically resists the definitive markers of cosmic space from encompassing ($\sqrt{vyac}$) him” (2011: 138). While Nala does not swell up to the point of dwarfing the cosmos as Indra does, in receiving this boon from the war god himself, Nala is further linked to distinctly *Ṛgvedic* imagery of martial prowess, couched in the metaphors of physical expansion and free movement. One final example highlighting Nala’s presumed skill as a combatant occurs towards the end of the story, where he declares that if Puškara refuses a second dicing game, then he must face Nala in a chariot duel. While Nala has never explicitly been shown to fight throughout the story, his great skill with both horses and archery, as well as his identification as a *śūra*, suggest that he would have been favored to defeat and kill his brother in such a duel.

⁴ The literal translation of this line is something like “a most excellent, splendid gait/movement.” Here I follow van Buitenen’s (1975: 329) translation of “an unimpeded course wherever he walked,” which better captures this boon’s meaning and importance within the story’s second act.

In addition to his apparent skills as an individual combatant, qualities 12 and 16 (*mahān akṣauhiṇīpatiḥ* “great commander of armies” and *rakṣitā* “protector,” respectively) suggest that Nala also exhibits martial prowess in his role as a sovereign: 12 does so by placing Nala in the role of a commander/*suvīra*, whereas the term *rakṣitā* links Nala to the expectation of *rakṣaṇa* (“protection”) incumbent upon Āryan householders and, in particular, upon the king as protector of the realm. Furthermore, following his marriage to Damayantī, Nala is said to perform the *aśvamedha*, or horse sacrifice, typically performed by a king following successful military campaigns.⁵ While no such martial exploits are explicitly attributed to Nala, the mere performance of an *aśvamedha* might suggest that Nala did, in fact, achieve conquests that are left undescribed by the text. Thus, through these examples, Nala is shown to exemplify the martial prowess espoused and exalted by the *Mahābhārata*’s masculine ideology.

Outside of a strictly martial sense, Nala’s qualifications as a sovereign are further expanded upon here. Qualities 5 and 9, “standing at the head of the kings of men...” (*atiṣṭhan manujendrāṇām mūrdhni...*) and “Lord of the Niṣadhans” (*niṣadheṣu mahīpatiḥ*), are obvious and explicit assertions of Nala’s kingship; however, Hiltebeitel notes that attribute #2, “endowed with all good qualities” (*upapanno gunairiṣṭaiḥ*-), further links Nala to a central formulation for legitimizing sovereignty found elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*. As Hiltebeitel (1990: 198) writes,

“one of the key formulas connected with royal virtues is the one that describes a person as ‘endowed with all the virtues’ (such as *sarvagūṇopeta*, *sarvagūṇasaṃpanna*, *sarvadharmopapanna*). It is a phrase frequently used with reference to Yudhiṣṭhira, especially in contexts which have to do with his fitness to be king. Thus we have seen it when Dharma, having shed his Yakṣa disguise, promises Yudhiṣṭhira he shall have more than just the specific qualities he requests. And most important, it occurs when Krishna, invited to Indraprastha to advise Yudhiṣṭhira on whether to perform the Rājasūya, declares

⁵ A more detailed discussion of the *aśvamedha* and its place in both Nala’s story and the larger Pāṇḍava narrative will follow in Chapter 4.

his support of Yudhiṣṭhira for the title of *saṃrāj*, ‘universal monarch,’ because he is endowed with ‘every virtue’ (*sarvairguṇair*; 2:13,1 ; cf. 30,23).”

Applying Hiltebeitel’s argument to Nala, it seems that this shared figure of speech serves two functions. First and most obviously, by using one of Yudhiṣṭhira’s own attributes to describe Nala, it relates back to Bṛhadaśva’s initial premise that the subject of his story is a king just like Yudhiṣṭhira, but in a worse situation. Second, ascription of “all good qualities” to Nala can be interpreted in the same vein as his establishment at the head of the kings of men, rising above them in splendor, in that both assert that Nala is not merely a king, but a sovereign ruler. If Nala is to be lauded with the same language as Yudhiṣṭhira, then following Hiltebeitel’s reasoning, perhaps Nala may lay claim to the title of *saṃrāj* as well.

One final point regarding Nala’s qualifications as a sovereign centers around the second boon that he receives from Yama, an “utter firmness in *dharma*” (*dharme paramāṃ sthitim*) which would obviously establish him as a righteous and dharmic king. However, this can be taken one step further by exploring the character of Yama in the epic. Hiltebeitel argues that Yama, the Vedic god of death, and Dharma, the divine personification of the ideological concept of *dharma*, are inexorably linked as one character in the *Mahābhārata*. Specifically, Hiltebeitel notes that Yudhiṣṭhira is “consecrated” (*dīkṣita*) to perform a “sacrifice of battle” in the Pāṇḍavas’ apocalyptic war at Kurukṣetra and thus renew the world, restoring proper dharmic rule. This *dīkṣita* status seems to originate in a myth describing Yama’s sixty-one day *sattra* sacrifice in the Naimiṣa Forest; first, Yama undergoes consecration, followed by five Indras who have been cursed to suffer rebirth as humans. The *Mahābhārata* clearly establishes that the Pāṇḍava brothers as these five Indras reborn, and furthermore that they are sons and “portions” (*aṃśa*) of various gods as

well, but Hiltebeitel notes that only in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, Dharma's son, is the *dīkṣita* status said to be doubled. This could only be the case if he inherited the *dīkṣita* status of the Naimiṣa *sattra* ritual from both Yama and one of the five Indras; thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Yama and Dharma are one and the same in this context (Hiltebeitel 2001: 131-139). Insofar as Nala is concerned, this Yama-Dharma characterization has an interesting implication: in a manner similar to Yudhiṣṭhira, who derives his status as the paradigmatic dharmic king (*dharmarāja*) from Yama/Dharma, his father, Nala gains his “utter firmness in *dharma*” from Yama/Dharma directly in the form of a boon. This provides an interesting parallel with the *Mahābhārata*'s ideology of the dharmic king who is willing and able to perform the necessary, but sometimes violent duties of a kṣatriya, which are in turn grounded in highly gendered, masculine ideals and norms.

From these examples, Nala seems to properly embody the first of three categories – martial and political dominance – both as an individual man and as a ruler; furthermore, the language used to establish these qualities in many cases draws upon distinctly Vedic imagery and language. With that in mind, let us now turn towards his qualifications vis-à-vis the category of sexuality and virility. Recalling the list of Nala's original good qualities, it seems that #3, 13, and 18 (“handsome,” “beloved by the best of women,” and “like Manu in appearance,” respectively) seem particularly relevant here. Establishing that Nala has good looks and is attractive to the “best” or “choicest” of women (*īpsito varanārīṇām*⁶) serve as obvious, external markers of Nala's sexual appeal and potency. Declaring Nala

⁶ Outside of the Poona Critical Edition, some publications of the *Nalopāhyāna*, including that of Charles Rockwell Lanman's *A Sanskrit Reader*, render this passage as *īpsito naranārīṇām*, “beloved by men and women.” The Critical Edition's apparatus indicates that this substitution occurs several places in the Kaśmīrī, Malayālam, and Devanāgarī Composite recensions of the text. In the interest of using the Critical Edition consistently, and because “beloved by the best of women” seems to be a better fit for Nala's attributes here, I prefer to use the Critical Edition's *varanārīṇām*.

to have an appearance like Manu (lit. “thinking,” “wise,” etc. but can also mean simply “man” or “mankind”), the primordial man par excellence, would seem to function in a similar sense – Nala has the looks of a god – but the implications do not end there. Michael Witzel describes Manu as the brother of Yama and the mythological “father of all of the Vedic people” (2009: 768), linking the figure of Manu to the paternal aspect of the Vedic *suṁvīra* role. In other words, Manu is the ultimate father of strong sons because he is literally the common ancestor from which all Āryan *vīra*- are descended. This may be the clearest and most succinct parallel between the character of Nala and these concepts of idealized masculinity: not only does Nala possess the visage of a god and the sexual potency to bear strong sons, but in comparing him to Manu, the composers of this text are effectively likening him to a figure who, like Indra, is the divine embodiment and epitome of Āryan masculinity in its broadest and most comprehensive sense. He is further linked to divine beauty via references to Kandarpa and Manmatha, which are epithets of Kāma, the god of love or, as Hiltebeitel puts it, “the Indian Cupid” (2001: 221). Consider the following:

MBh 3.50.14: *nalaśca naraśārdūlo rūpeṇāpratimo bhuvi | kandarpa iva rūpeṇa mūrtimān abhavat svayam*

“And Nala (was) a tiger of a man, with a form unequalled in the world, as if he was the god of love [Kandarpa] incarnate.”

This incredible beauty is seen again during the World Guardians’ recruitment of Nala as their messenger. Descending from heaven and beginning their journey to Damayantī’s *svayaṁvara*, the four gods happen to see Nala on the road and are immediately dumbstruck:

MBh 3.51.27: *taṁ dṛṣtvā lokapālās te bhrājamānaṁ yathā ravim | tasthur vigatasamkalpā vismitā rūpasampadā*

“And the World Guardians, having seen him shining like the sun, stood with forgotten purpose, astonished by (Nala’s) beauty of form.”

Composing themselves quickly, the gods immediately solicit Nala's promise to serve as their messenger. Given this recruitment episode and the gods' later impersonation of Nala at the *svayaṃvara* itself, a cynical reader might conclude that the World Guardians view Nala as a threat to their attempts to win Damayantī and are actively scheming against him here. Perhaps, to some extent, the World Guardians are tacitly admitting that Nala's beauty is so great that a woman could be right in choosing him as a husband, even in the midst of gods.

Nala's sexual potency is further established by quality 15, "in control of his senses" (*saṃyatendriyaḥ*, from *saṃ-√yam* "to restrain, suppress, control" and *indriyaḥ* "fit for/belonging to Indra, the power of the senses, virile power," etc.). In examining several Upaniṣadic examples, Brian Black specifically translates *indriyaḥ* as "virility," which is always to be kept under proper control. Black notes that sexual activity performed without proper knowledge and discipline can be dangerous and emasculating for the man involved; in several cases, brahmins engaging in improper sex are said to leave the world "impotent" (*nirindriya*) and "without merit" (*visukṛta*) (2007: 142-143). This is reminiscent of Powers' depiction of virility in Buddhist literature; in both cases, the ideal man is endowed with great sexual potency, but such potency is constantly suppressed and controlled. To this point, Black argues that "Upanishadic teachings are explicitly connected to a particular construction of a man, which defines masculinity in terms of sexual potency, thereby linking these instructions to virility and sexual power. Taken together, they show that male sexual activity needs to be controlled for the sake of procreation. As semen is directly linked to immortality, there is a fear of spilling one's seed outside the discursively sanctioned activity of heterosexual intercourse" (2007: 143). Thus, *saṃyatendriyaḥ* does

not imply control simply for control's sake, but rather echoes the points made by Whitaker and Olivelle that controlling and conserving one's virility for the purpose of begetting sons is not only a social imperative, but also the key to the father's immortality via those sons.

The importance of this "control of senses/virility" to Nala's character is further expanded upon later in the story. As soon as Nala, now possessed, begins gambling with Puṣkara, he is described as being "completely intoxicated by the passion for dice" (*akṣamadasaṃmattam*), and his continued rolls of the dice are described as "thoughtless" or "senseless" (*acetasam*). In contrast, when Nala (as Bāhuka) arrives in Vidarbha with R̥tuparna and Vārṣṇeya, Damayantī begins to reminisce about her lost husband, describing his attributes as follows:

MBh 3.71.14: *prabhuḥ kṣamāvān vīraś ca mṛdur dānto jitendriyaḥ | raho
'nīcānuvartī ca klībavan mama naiṣadhaḥ*⁷

"(My) lord is patient, manly, gentle, and controlled, the master of his senses;
a faithful husband, my Niṣadha has been like a eunuch to me."

Just as Nala was described as *saṃyatendriyaḥ* previously, here Damayantī uses the similar term *jitendriyaḥ* ("he whose senses are conquered/suppressed") in describing Nala's qualities from "the good old days." Additionally, the usage of *klībavan*, "like a eunuch," is particularly strange here, especially given that Nala is referred to as a *vīra* in the same stanza. The term *klība* is typically a highly pejorative term carrying emasculating connotations (e.g. "eunuch, impotent, unmanly, cowardly," etc.); in defining this term, Andrea Custodi cites Wendy Doniger's argument that a *klība* is "a defective male, a male

⁷ The exact meaning of *raho* –*nīcānuvartī* escapes me here. Monier-Williams provides "not keeping low company" and "a faithful lover or husband" for *nīcānuvartin* (which is, to the best of my knowledge, a hapax legomenon in the *Mahābhārata*), while *rahaḥ* would seem to imply a sense of "secret" or "private." A possible interpretation might be "one whose low behavior is kept secret" or "one who does not keep secret, low behavior." Van Buitenen somewhat loosely translates this as "My Niṣadha has no vices." For simplicity's sake, I have deferred to Monier-Williams with "faithful lover or husband."

suffering from failure, distortion, and lack,” encompassing a wide range of qualities and behaviors that are the anathema of masculinity (2007: 209). However, the implication in this instance seems to be that Nala is austere in his sexuality, and furthermore, that Damayantī appreciates this quality in her husband. Ironically, by calling Nala a “eunuch,” she reinforces his virility, as it further demonstrates that Nala is fully in control of this manly power.

Having examined Nala’s martial/political dominance and sexual potency, let us now turn to our third category of masculinity: generous ritual participation. Once again, Nala’s original attributes provide a useful starting point. Quality 6, “friend of brahmins” (*brahmaṇyaḥ*-), links Nala to the symbiotic relationship between brahmins and kṣatriyas seen in the *śrauta* ritual economy, while quality 7, knower of the Vedas (*vedavit*-) is evocative of the focus on philosophical speculation and ritual exegesis seen in Black’s depiction of Janaka and other wise kings in the Upaniṣads (especially since *veda* literally means “sacred knowledge”). Quality 14, “generous” (*udāraḥ*) further establishes Nala as model ritual participant, as generosity vis-à-vis the ritualized sharing of wealth was one of the key Ṛgvedic attributes assigned to Indra, and obviously can be further seen in the emphasis on paying munificent gifts to ritual priests in the later *śrauta* traditions. Thus, from the outset, Nala is already characterized as wise and generous participant in the brahmanical ritual economy.

However, it is in several of Nala’s boons that his qualifications as a *yajamāna* are taken to an extreme. Nala’s first boon from Indra (and first boon overall) is “the ability to see the gods at his rituals” (*pratyakṣadarśanam yajñe*, lit. “viewing before the eyes in sacrifice”), which connects him to a key aspect of brahmanical ritualism, dating back to

the *Ṛgveda*: the summoning of gods to the ritual ground itself. Stephanie Jamison (1991: 18-19) aptly summarizes this point when describing the *vedi*, the portion of the ritual ground to the west of the sacrificial fire, strewn with grass as a seat for the gods:

“The strew as comfortable seat for visiting gods, as well as the central act of offering consumable substances in the fire, should make clear on what model the ritual is conceived, that of a formal meal given to a visiting dignitary. The gods are invited to attend. They travel to the place of worship and sit in the place of honor. They are entertained by praise and song and offered food in the form of oblations: each offering in the fire is made to a particular god or set of gods, and they are urged to partake of it.”

With this aspect of the ritual in mind, Nala’s boon seems to take on greater significance; not only can he call the gods down through ritual, but he can actually see them on the *vedi*. In a very real sense, he has been given power over a core element of ritual practice, beyond that of other *yajamāna*-. Nala is given similar powers by Agni’s two boons: “the ability to summon fire wherever he wishes” (*agnir ātmabhavaṃ prādād yatra vāñchati naiṣadhaḥ*) and “the ability to pass through fire unharmed” (*lokān ātmaprabhān*⁸), both of which serve to give Nala control over fire itself, the central element of Āryan ritual practice. Varuṇa, who is described by the epithet “Lord of Waters” (*patirapām*), similarly gives Nala “the ability to summon water wherever he wishes” using virtually identical language (*apām ... bhāvaṃ yatra vāñchati naiṣadhaḥ*). Like Agni’s boons, this ability also links Nala to the central or primordial elements of the ritual, originating in Ṛgvedic mythology. To this point, Michael Witzel notes that fire and water are conceptually linked to one another in the Vedas, as Agni is said to be *apām nāpat*, or “Grandson of the Waters,” born out of the primordial waters that Indra liberated from Vṛtra (2009: 770). In addition to his pre-

⁸ Both of these boon require a bit of over-reading – the first might be read as “Agni gave self-existence where the Niṣadha wishes” or “Agni gave (his) manifestation where the Niṣadha wishes.” As to the second, a literal translation of the full line: *lokān ātmaprabhāṃścaiva dadau tasmai hutāśanaḥ* would be something like “Hutāśana [i.e. Agni] also gave him [Nala] places radiant with himself,” or as van Buitenen puts it, “...entrance to places that were luminous with fire itself.” The obvious narrative impacts of this boon are Nala’s ability to enter the forest fire and rescue Karkoṭaka without fear of injury, as well as Keśinī’s observation that Bāhuka does not burn himself, even when he accidentally touches fire while cooking.

existing good qualities as a ritual participant, through these four boons Nala is effectively being empowered beyond a normal *yajamāna*, in the sense that he has access to and control over several of the most basic elements of the sacrifice. In short, he is not only a wise or generous ritual participant, but a supremely empowered participant as well.

The two remaining boons, Yama's "subtle taste for food" (*annarasam*, lit. "essence of food") and Varuṇa's "excellent-smelling garland" (*srajaṃ -uttamagandhāḍhyām*, lit. "a garland of most excellent scents"), seem strange at first glance, but both may be analyzed along much the same lines of ritual and masculine empowerment. Both have obvious narrative importance as some of the clues used to identify Bāhuka as Nala, but the former in particular can also serve to further link Nala to elements of Vedic sacrifice. Recalling Jamison's depiction of such rituals as "a formal meal given to a visiting dignitary," the types of food oblations cooked in the sacrificial fires are also of great importance here, and as such sacrifices can be broadly divided into categories of *iṣṭi*, or vegetable sacrifice, and *paśubandha*, or animal sacrifice (the latter typically being a much more complex and expensive affair). Furthermore, Michael Witzel notes that the oblation is not apportioned equally between the human participants and their divine guests. Specifically, he notes that Agni both cooks and transubstantiates the ritual offerings, delivering the best portions to the gods and saving the "table scraps" for the mortals. Accordingly, "'food' travels towards the gods in the form of smoke and aroma (*medha*) and is consumed by them. The remains here on earth are a return gift of the gods who have tasted the food while sitting at the sacred fire, soiled it by their spittle and rendered it consumable only by their socially inferior relations, the human beings: this is the remnant (*ucchiṣṭa*), greatly extolled (AV 11.6) as having enormous potential" (Witzel 2003: 78). With this in mind, an interesting

possibility presents itself in regard to Nala's "subtle taste for food." Given that the *rasa* in *annarasam* means "essence" or "the best/finest part of something," one interpretation might be that, to some extent, Nala has been allowed to partake in the gods' share of the food, beyond simply the *ucchiṣṭa* table scraps usually reserved for the human sacrificers. This interpretation seems somewhat tenuous, but may be reinforced by Nala's final boon, "an excellent-smelling garland." An obvious interpretation of this boon is that it enhances Nala's masculine beauty (returning to our "virility" category), since he may now keep himself constantly well-adorned with a fresh, fragrant garland. However, we should recall that having a perfect, unwithered garland is one of the marks of divinity that Damayantī uses to distinguish Nala from the World Guardians. Immediately after her invocation of truth at the *svayamvara*, the four gods are described as *hṛṣitasragrajuhīnān*, "having unwithered garlands and free from dust," whereas in the very next stanza Nala is put in direct contrast, described as *mlānasrak- rajaḥsvedasamanvitaḥ*, "having a withered garland and covered in dust and sweat." Thus, by virtue of Varuṇa's boon, Nala is effectively being permitted to wear at least one of the gods' marks of divinity, further empowering him beyond the norm of a regular *yajamāna* or, more broadly, of a regular man.

Having explored these three broad categories of masculine ideals – martial and political dominance, virility, and generous ritual participation – it has become readily apparent that, through his listed good qualities and eight boons, Nala exemplifies all three. However, there is another point that can be made here, following the argument that Nala is being elevated above the level of mere humanity. This point can be illustrated by examining the World Guardians' encounter with Kali and Dvāpara on their return trip to

heaven following Damayantī's *svayaṃvara*. When Kali declares that Damayantī deserves punishment for choosing a man amidst gods, the World Guardians respond with the following:

MBh 3.55.7-9: *evamukte tu kaliaṃ pratyūcuste divaukasaḥ | asmābhiḥ samanujñato damayantī nalo vṛtaḥ | kaś ca sarvaḡuṇopetaḡ nāśrayeta nalaḡ nṛpaḡ | yo veda dharmānakhilāṃ yathāvac caritavṛtaḥ | yasmin satyaḡ dhṛtir dānaḡ tapaḡ śaucaḡ damaḥ śamaḥ | dhruvāṇi puruṣavyaghre lokapālasame nṛpe*

“Thus addressed by Kali, the gods replied: ‘Nala was permitted by us to be chosen by Damayantī. And who would not depend on King Nala, who has all good qualities, who knows *dharma* completely, who has observed a vow? Truth, resolve, generosity, austerity, purity, self-control, and serenity are firmly established in that tiger of a man, that king who is the World Guardians’ equal!’”

Several observations can be made of this passage. Referring to Nala as “the World Guardians’ equal” (*lokapālasame*) would seem to reinforce the argument that Nala is, in some respects, being elevated to the level of the gods. Other elements of the gods’ praise, most notably “all good qualities” (*sarvaḡuṇopetaḡ*), are highly reminiscent of the virtues and attributes ascribed to Nala elsewhere. However, two items from this list seem anomalous, relative to our examination thus far: here, Nala is described as “one who has observed a vow” (*caritavṛtaḥ*) and is endowed with *tapaḥ* or *tapas*, which can mean “warmth, heat, fire,” “austerity,” or even “pain, suffering,” referring to the self-mortifying practices of various contemporary ascetic traditions. As we will see, these two items link Nala to another masculine, and specifically kṣatriya ideology, which is both an outgrowth of the Ṛgvedic ideal surrounding Indra-like generosity and a brahmanical pushback against competing ascetic paradigms.

Before exploring this point further, it is necessary to pause and examine one particular interpretation of Nala. In his introduction to the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, van Buitenen

(1975: 184) argues that two defining characteristics of the *Nalopākhyāna* are its domesticity and femininity. As he writes:

“In spite of its traditional name it is much more the story of Damayantī than of Nala. The entire concatenation of events is treated strictly from a woman’s point of view. From the beginning Damayantī is the center of attention. Her birth is interesting – the result of a boon – her four brothers are mentioned in passing, then *she* is eulogized encomiastically. He and she fall in love, but we hear more of Nala’s pining than of hers. There is the romantic message of the wild geese, Nala’s discomfiture at having to act as the Gods’ go-between, Damayantī’s composure when Nala appears in the *śerail* [i.e. her living quarters]. Her bridegroom choice is the only free one we have so far encountered. The others were by parental agreement, tournament, and abduction. There are no less than five, identically appearing suitors. Her trueness prevails upon the Gods to reveal themselves. He and she are happily married and have both a boy and a girl. As an additional womanly feature, Nala is given a talent to cook.”

The argument here is that while Nala is the eponymous character and apparent protagonist, it is Damayantī who takes a much more active role in the narrative: she brainstorms the plan to escape the gods’ trickery faultlessly, she performs the invocation of truth that reveals the true Nala, and she later schemes again to draw Nala/Bāhuka out of hiding. On the other hand, a cynical reader might conclude that Nala’s only explicit achievements leading up to their marriage are blind obedience to the gods and being successfully picked out of a lineup. However, a few questions arise from this interpretation. If this is truly Damayantī’s story, then why does the narrative open with an extensive list of Nala’s manly qualities, and why do both the first and second acts conclude with depictions of Nala living “happily ever after” as an exalted, dharmic king performing great sacrifices? Similarly, if Damayantī is the more active character in the *svayamvara* episode, then why does Nala receive the gods’ boons, whereas Damayantī’s rewards (gaining a strong, wealthy husband and bearing children) seem to fit more into an androcentric ideology of the married householder? More simply, we might ask: what did Nala do at the *svayamvara* to deserve the gods’ boons?

In answering these questions, I will suggest a slightly different reading of the Nala's apparent passivity during the *svayaṃvara* episode, drawing upon both the World Guardians' praise, cited above, and one of the few qualities of Nala that we have yet to discuss: #11, "truth-speaker" (*satyavādī*). This attribute conveys more than simply honesty on the part of Nala, but rather is an assertion that the words he speaks are or will be made "true" or "real" (*satya*). The effect of this attribute becomes apparent during Nala's recruitment as a messenger by the World Guardians. Nala initially protests his assignment on the grounds that he was seeking the same thing as the gods (i.e. Damayantī's hand in marriage), and thus he could not possibly be expected to deliver such a message on behalf of another man, even a god. However, the logic used to refute this argument is that Nala promised to complete the gods' task before learning the details, and thus was bound to fulfill that promise. Consider the following passages from their exchange:

MBh 3.52.1: *tebhyaḥ pratijñāya nalaḥ kariṣya iti bhārata*

"Nala, having promised them [i.e. the World Guardians] 'I will do it,' O Bhārata..."

MBh 3.52.8: *devā ūcuḥ | kariṣya iti saṃśrutya pūrvam asmāsu naiṣadha | na kariṣyasi kasmāt tvaṃ vraja māciram*

"The gods said: 'It has been previously heard by us, "I will do it," O Niṣadha. So why would you not do it? Go, Niṣadha, right now!'"

In short, it is the truthfulness of Nala's statement to the gods, "I will do (it)" (*kariṣya*), that is then used as leverage against him. Thus, when Nala approaches Damayantī with the gods' message, she begs him to act on his own behalf and ask her to choose him as he had originally intended. Nala refuses, fearing divine retribution should he break his vow to the gods. However, there is an expanded version of this encounter, printed in Charles Lanman's *A Sanskrit Reader* and also included in Appendix I, §8 of the Critical Edition's

Āraṇyakaparvan, which is useful in understanding another point here. Consider the following statement by Nala:

MBh 3, Appendix I.8: *tāmuṽāca tato rājā vepamānām kṛtāñjalim |
dautyenāgatya kalyāṇi tathā bhadre vidhīyatām | katham hyaham
pratiśrutya devatānām viśeṣataḥ | parārthe yatnamārabhya katham
svārthamihotsahe | eṣa dharmo yadi svārtho mamāpi bhavitā tataḥ | evam
svārtham kariṣyāmi tathā bhadre vidhīyatām*

“Then the king then said to [Damayantī], as she was trembling with her hands together, ‘Having come with a message, O fair one, then let it be done, my lady. Having made a promise, especially to the gods, having undertaken an effort for others’ sake, how can I act for my own ends? This is *dharma*. If my own purpose can be (*dharma*) as well, then I will surely act for my own ends. Let it be done, my lady.”

Nala explicitly links fulfillment of his promise to his sense of *dharma*, and furthermore, only agrees to Damayantī’s plan when she demonstrates that it will not cause him to commit a fault (*doṣa*) in regards to this duty. The fact that the gods choose to append “one who has upheld a vow” (*caritavrataḥ*) to Nala’s good qualities following this episode suggests that it is the fulfillment of this *dharma* through upholding his vow to the gods, which entitles him to both win Damayantī as his bride and receive the gods’ eight boons.

This point is further reinforced by several other characters in the *Mahābhārata*, most notably Bhīṣma. One of Bhīṣma’s defining moments occurs in the *Mahābhārata*’s first book, the *Ādiparvan*, wherein he makes two vows on behalf of his father, Śaṁtanu. Śaṁtanu, the great-grandfather of both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, wishes to marry a girl named Satyawatī, but her father will only consent if her children will inherit Śaṁtanu’s kingdom. As Śaṁtanu’s firstborn son, Bhīṣma resolves this dilemma, first by renouncing his claim to his father’s throne, then by making a vow of lifelong celibacy. Consider Bhīṣma’s first vow:

MBh 1.94.77-79: *evam uktas tu gāṅgeyas tadyuktaṃ pratyabhāṣata | śṛṇvatāṃ bhūmipālānāṃ pitur arthāya bhārata | idaṃ me matam ādatsva satyaṃ satyavatāṃ vara | naiva jāto na vājāta īdṛśaṃ vaktum utsahet | evam etat kariṣyāmi yathā tvam anubhāṣase | yo 'syāṃ janīṣyate putraḥ sa no rājā bhaviṣyati*

“Thus spoken to, the son of Gaṅgā [i.e. Bhīṣma] replied fittingly on his father’s behalf in the hearing of the earth-guardians, O Bhārata: ‘Accept my words as truth, O truest (of men); surely neither the born nor the unborn could bear to speak such words. I will do as you say; the son born to this girl shall be our king.’”

A few interesting parallels between Nala and Bhīṣma can be seen here. Similar language of “truth” (*satya*) is employed, both men make their vows on another’s behalf, and in both cases, the notion of witnesses hearing the vow seems to have some importance; in Nala’s case, the gods remind him that they heard him say *kariṣya* (*kariṣya iti saṃśrutyā pūrvam asmāsu*, “it has previously been heard by us, ‘I will do it’”), and Bhīṣma makes his vow within the earshot of “earth-guardians” (*bhūmipālānāṃ*, i.e. kṣatriya kings) who are said to be “the most truthful (of men)” (*satyavatāṃ vara*). Furthermore, just as Bhīṣma receives an incredibly powerful boon for his vows – the ability to choose the time of his own death – Nala gains Damayantī as his wife (recall the World Guardian’s statement *asmābhiḥ samanujñato damayantyā nalo vṛtaḥ* “Nala was permitted by us to be chosen by Damayantī”) and eight boons from the gods in return for keeping his vow.

The internal logic of vows being presented here can be further related back to one of our three analytical categories: generous ritual participation, with emphasis on the word “generous.” Stephanie Jamison notes that, analogous to the R̥gvedic emphasis on the generosity of Indra and his warriors in ritually sharing their spoils, a similar motif is often seen in regards to kṣatriyas, especially in their role as *yajamāna*-. As she writes, “Kṣatriyas often proudly boast that they are *givers*, not *beggars*” (Jamison 1996: 195). Similarly, she

cites “a little cat fight” in the *Mahābhārata* between the daughter of a brahmin and the daughter of a kṣatriya, where the latter asserts: “You are the daughter of one who *begs*, praises, and receives (presents). I am the offspring of one who is praised, who *gives*, and does not receive” (Jamison 1996: 196). The point here is that kṣatriyas, and especially kings, are not dependent upon others, but rather others are dependent upon them. Ideally, kṣatriyas give generously and are exalted as such, but only receive reciprocal rewards for the deeds they accomplish and the gifts or sacrifices they give up. This is clearly seen in the differing language used for brahmins and kṣatriyas. Whereas the fees (*dakṣina*-) paid to ritual priests for their services are described using the language of “gifts” or “donations,” kṣatriyas receive “boons” (*vara*, lit. “the best” or “choice”⁹) instead. This logic underlying the image of the *yajamāna* who receives a reciprocal benefit based on his sacrifice can thus be applied to vows as well. Bhīṣma “sacrifices” two central aspects of his kṣatriya masculinity – the inheritance of his father’s kingdom and his ability to bear sons – but is richly rewarded in return. Nala gives up his right to act for himself in seeking to marry Damayantī, but in the end, not only does he marry her anyway, but also receives his boons for fulfilling his vow.

One final point can be made in regard these vows, returning to the World Guardians’ praise of Nala when rebutting Kali. In particular, the four gods declare that Nala is firmly endowed with *tapas* (“austerity” but also “warmth, heat,” or “pain, suffering,” etc.), which as mentioned previously, can refer to the energy or power cultivated by austere and often self-mortifying ascetic practice. The fact that this term is only used to describe Nala after he upholds his vow and marries Damayantī suggests that Nala gained such *tapas* by

⁹ While it is not the case with Nala, in many instances it is made explicit that the recipient gets to choose the rewards they receive.

fulfilling his vow, which leads to an interesting observation. Whereas heterodox ascetic traditions such as Jainism and certain *śramaṇa* movements use *tapas* as a means to escape from social obligations and the karmic consequences of their actions, the *Mahābhārata* seems to be asserting a new definition of *tapas* as a way to gain power or other rewards, using a logic of reciprocal exchange similar to that seen in *śrauta* rituals. This can obviously be seen in Bhīṣma's vows, as well as Arjuna's ascetic quest during the Pāṇḍavas' exile, whereby he performs austerities to earn divine weapons from Śiva and Indra. John Brockington further explores this redeployment of *tapas*, citing the arguments of Monika Shee and Minoru Hara that *saṃnyāsin-* ("renouncers, ascetics") are left largely absent from the *Mahābhārata*, at least in the traditional sense of retired men spending the final years of their lives outside of society, living in poverty as wandering mendicants. Instead, ascetic hermitages (*āśrama-*) are depicted as idyllic locations, and *tapas* does not lead to liberation from the world, but rather "is basically a means to achieve various powers" (Brockington 1998: 239-240). This demonstrates yet another aspect of the *Mahābhārata*'s brahmanical response to these ascetic traditions. The epic's brahmin composers are attempting to redefine *tapas* using logic similar to that of the *yajamāna* who gives something up or, in this case, suffers in the fulfillment of his *dharma*, and thus receives some sort of benefit or reward for his efforts. Furthermore, it seems that this logic of self-sacrifice and reciprocal reward is expanded beyond the scope of sacrifice to include vows (be they explicit or accidental/implicit), austerities, and righteous suffering. This is reminiscent of the assertion in the *Śāntiparvan* (translated above in Chapter 2, above) that "When the property of brahmins is being seized, he who gives up his dear life in battle, having established himself as the sacrificial post, that sacrifice (becomes) an unending, priestly gift." In that

example, the champion (*śūra*) who suffers death in the course of brahmanically justified warfare received incomparable rewards in the afterlife. The message is clear: he who gives something of himself and/or suffers for the sake of brahmanical interests – whether through sacrifice, upholding vows, or fighting in brahmanical violence – is richly rewarded, both in this life and the next. In a sense, this seems very similar to the inversion of Āryan masculine ideals seen in early Buddhism; just as early Buddhist texts inverted masculinized, kṣatriya ideologies to undermine the importance of ritual performance and social duty, here the brahmin composers recast *tapas* and self-sacrificing asceticism to strategically reassert their interests. Finally, as we will see in the next chapter, these themes of self-sacrifice and dharmic suffering are of critical importance to the character of Yudhiṣṭhira.

As we have seen, the character of Nala exemplifies and embodies the three categories of Āryan masculinity that we have followed from the Vedas to the epics. Although he never actually fights, the composers still expend a lot of effort emphasizing his martial prowess and ability to protect his realm according to proper, dharmic rule, often drawing from distinctly Vedic imagery and language. His virility and generous ritual participation are similarly well-established, and in a few instances it almost seems as if Nala is being elevated to the level of a god. Additionally, despite never fighting, Nala endures tremendous suffering again and again throughout his story, but each time he becomes even more empowered as a result. Thus, through his adherence to vows and the boons and *tapas* that he gains, Nala is linked to a strategic redefinition of suffering and ascetic practice being carried out by the *Mahābhārata*'s brahmin composers. Lastly, as we will see in the final chapter, this concept of “suffering for *dharma*” is one of Yudhiṣṭhira's

defining character traits, and therefore a key component of the brahmanical discourse at work here.

Chapter 4: Nala as Yudhishthira – Suffering for *dharma*

Having examined in the previous chapter how the character of Nala fits thematically with the *Mahābhārata*'s strategic redeployments of masculine ideologies, one major point remains: examining how Nala's character and story form narrative parallels with those of the Pāṇḍava heroes. The story of a dharmic king who loses everything in a dicing game against a close kinsman, is forced into exile, inhabits a disguise for a time, and later returns to triumphantly reclaim his kingdom is the obvious narrative framework shared by Nala and the Pāṇḍavas. However, the similarities here extend deeper than surface appearances, and a careful examination of the two in parallel can lead to some interesting observations regarding Yudhiṣṭhira's role as the ultimate *dharma*-knowing, brahmin-supporting, and ritual-performing king. In short, the argument that Nala is in many ways emblematic of the epic's larger strategy is further reinforced by the shared imagery and language that connects him to the Pāṇḍavas, and most notably to Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira.

Let us begin with Arjuna on the one hand, and Nala's charioteer Vārṣṇeya on the other. Vārṣṇeya's name means "descendant of the Vṛṣṇis," linking him to the same tribe of which Kṛṣṇa is a member (by virtue of being incarnated as the son of the Vṛṣṇi king Vasudeva). Furthermore, the word *vṛṣṇi* can be taken to mean "bull, bullish, manly, powerful," et cetera, relating back to masculine imagery seen previously, perhaps most notably in Vedic language describing Indra as a virile bull. The fact that Vārṣṇeya serves as Nala's charioteer prior to his first dicing match with Puṣkara draws an obvious parallel to Kṛṣṇa serving as Arjuna's charioteer during the battle at Kurukṣetra. Hiltebeitel expands upon this point, exploring the episode where Ṛtuparṇa, Bāhuka, and Vārṣṇeya travel to

Vidarbha after hearing of Damayantī's second *svayaṃvara*. Specifically, he notes that there is no apparent reason why Vārṣṇeya tags along for the journey, given that Bāhuka can easily drive the chariot by himself. As Hiltebeitel writes, "Then something superfluous happens: 'The that best of men, illustrious king Nala, O king, eased the spirited, powerful horses, controlling them with his reins, and lifting the charioteer Vārṣṇeya (*sūtamāropya vārṣṇeyam*), set out with great speed' (69.19-20). There is no reason for Vārṣṇeya to be on this chariot unless it be to remind us of Kṛṣṇa" (2001: 232). Furthermore, the explicit emphasis on Vārṣṇeya mounting the chariot is mirrored later, during the stop on the road when Ṛtuparṇa imparts his knowledge of dice and counting to Nala. The original point of the stop was to allow Vārṣṇeya to retrieve Ṛtuparṇa's shawl, which had fallen off some distance back up the road. Hiltebeitel notes that the phrase used to describe Vārṣṇeya exiting the chariot, *avatīrya vārṣṇeyo*, carries a double meaning: it both refers to the act of "descending" from the chariot (from *ava-√tr*, "to descend"), and also reminds us of Kṛṣṇa's role as an *avatāra* (lit. "descent") of Viṣṇu. Hiltebeitel thus refers to the charioteer as "the superfluously mounting and descending Vārṣṇeya," whose presence on Nala's chariot serves to remind the audience of Arjuna's relationship with Kṛṣṇa Vārṣṇeya (2001: 232). One final analogy can be made between Damayantī's interactions with Vārṣṇeya and those of Draupadī with Kṛṣṇa during their husbands' respective dicing games. When Damayantī calls upon Vārṣṇeya to take her children to safety in Vidarbha, she entreats him with the words: "I have come to you for refuge, O charioteer, please do as I say" (*śaraṇaṃ tvāṃ prapaṇnāsmi sārathe kuru madvacāḥ*). Hiltebeitel notes that this exchange mirrors Draupadī's pleas to Kṛṣṇa when the Kauravas, having won her from Yudhiṣṭhira in the dice game, drag her into the assembly hall and (among other indignities) attempt to disrobe her.

Draupadī calls out to Kṛṣṇa who, despite being hundreds of miles away at the time, hears her plea and prevents her disrobing as if by magic, causing a new garment to appear on her body instantly every time her clothes are torn off (Hiltebeitel 2001: 225-226).¹⁰ Thus, while Vārṣṇeya does not seem to fulfill Kṛṣṇa’s entire role as an *avatāra*, counselor, and ally to the Pāṇḍavas, the two Vārṣṇeyas are linked to each other by name, by their role as charioteers, and by the “refuge” they provide to Draupadī and Damayantī at a critical juncture in the dicing games.

A second parallel can be established based on Arjuna’s disguise during the thirteenth year of the Pāṇḍavas’ exile. Cursed to spend a year of his choosing living as a eunuch, Arjuna turns this curse to his advantage: assuming the alias Bṛhannalā (also spelled Bṛhannaḍā) he spends the thirteenth year with his brothers in King Virāṭa’s employ, teaching the king’s daughter Uttarā song and dance and dressing as a woman. In examining Arjuna’s alias, Hiltebeitel follows Madeleine Biardeau’s lead in arguing that Nalā and *nara* (“man,” related to the Vedic *nár* seen in Chapter 2) are obvious homonyms, which not only connect Nalā to obviously masculine language and imagery, but also link him to Arjuna’s past life as the sage Nara. Thus, Hiltebeitel suggests a definition of Bṛhannalā as “the great Nalā,” using the feminine ending *-ā* to signify “the Great Man, as Woman” (2001: 218). Obviously, this serves as an apt description of Arjuna, the epic’s manly warrior par excellence, spending a year emasculated and living as a woman, and furthermore, does so in a manner that reminds the reader of Nalā. From this perspective, the homonym of

¹⁰ Hiltebeitel devotes an entire section (2001: 246-259) to examining this episode, noting that various recensions of the text seem to differ as to whether it is Kṛṣṇa’s explicit intervention, *dharma*/Dharma’s protection, or some combination of the two that preserves Draupadī’s dignity here. Hiltebeitel notes one northern recension in particular where Kṛṣṇa, having heard Draupadī’s pleas, awakens and travels by foot from Dvārakā to Hāstinapura (~800 miles) on a moment’s notice to prevent her disrobing. For our purposes here, the key point is not the specific mechanic at work behind Draupadī’s “infinite clothing,” but rather the similar motif of Damayantī and Draupadī seeking refuge in Vārṣṇeya and Kṛṣṇa, respectively.

Nala/*nara*/Nara links the Niṣadhaṇ and the Pāṇḍava, not by lauding the latter's masculinity, but rather by ironically emphasizing its deprivation in his assumed persona of Bṛhannaḷā.

A few other interpretations of the name Bṛhannaḷā/-naḍā require examination here. In particular, Hiltebeitel writes that "A straightforward etymology of the name Bṛhannaḍā is 'large reed' or 'having a large reed' (*naḍa*, *naḷa*: 'reed')" (1980: 160). While this would seem to detract from the Nala/*nara* homonym cited above, Hiltebeitel argues that this is not the case, as this reed imagery can be likened to an episode in which Nara and Nārāyaṇa are challenged to battle by the tyrant Dambhodbhava. While Nārāyaṇa remains inactive in the battle, Nara defeats Dambhodbhava with a "terrible reed weapon [*ghoram-aiṣīkam*]" (Hiltebeitel 1980: 160). This not only further links Arjuna and Nara through the reed imagery, but also foreshadows the battle at Kurukṣetra, where Arjuna will fight with terrible, divine weaponry while Kṛṣṇa, as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa, will participate as a charioteer but not a fighter. Apparently drawing from the phallic connotations of Arjuna's "large reed" here, J.D. Smith argues for yet another definition of Bṛhannaḷā: "she of the big prick," explicitly and adamantly pushing back against the arguments of Biarreau and others built upon the Nala/*nara* homonym (1992: 14-15). Hiltebeitel responds to Smith directly, arguing that he "invokes this meaning only to inveigh, rather contradictorily, against "'symbolic' interpretation' ... with the effect of denying ambiguity" (2001: 219 n.9). In other words, Hiltebeitel does not seem to reject Smith's definition, but rather argues that Smith unfairly discounts the possibility of ambiguity or double meanings here. To this point, Andrea Custodi argues that the depictions of Arjuna's disguise are replete with such layers of ambiguity. In particular, Custodi notes that it is never made explicit whether Arjuna has actually been transformed for this period or is simply cross-dressing,

citing passages where Arjuna's masculinity (or lack thereof) is described using vague language lending itself to multiple interpretations. As she writes, "The one potential moment of truth – in which Virāṭa orders that Arjuna be inspected to ensure that he is safe to put in the princess's quarters – is dealt with ambiguously and even playfully, for the answer comes back that Arjuna's 'non-masculinity was firm (*apumstvam ... sthiram*)'" (Custodi 2007: 211). Given how the text deploys these playful double entendres, it seems likely that Bṛhannalā can also carry multiple meanings here. On the one hand, it can refer to both the "Great Man," reduced to woman as per Hiltebeitel, or the woman "of the big prick" (perhaps similarly suggesting a well-endowed male, reduced to female) as per Smith. On the other hand, Bṛhannalā seems to invoke Nala by name, and might link Nala and Arjuna, not only on the basis of their shared Nara/*nara* connections, but also in the sense that both inhabited emasculating disguises for a time: Nala as the deformed (and as Hiltebeitel argues, "dwarfish" (2001: 230)) Bāhuka, and Arjuna as the effeminate eunuch Bṛhannalā. Custodi provides one final link between the two disguises by noting that, just as Nala was called *klībavan* ("like a eunuch") by Damayantī, Arjuna is described with similar language. One particular example occurs when Arjuna, still wearing his disguise, rushes into battle during the Kauravas' cattle raid on the Matsyas. As Custodi writes, "But on seeing him run nimbly the Kurus said: 'Who is that behind his disguise, as fire below its ashes? He has something of a man and something of a woman. He is built like Arjuna and wears the form of a eunuch [*klībarūpa*]" (2007: 212). While this instance of *klība* does not seem to carry the oddly positive connotations of sexual austerity seen in Damayantī's statement, the similar descriptors provide an interesting comparative lens for the two men. In short, the alias Bṛhannalā provides a point of linkage between Arjuna and Nala based on

their shared connection with the idealized masculine imagery via the homonyms Nala/*nara*/Nara and, in contrast, their similarly emasculating disguises while in exile.

As we will see, the parallels between Yudhiṣṭhira and Nala are more numerous and in many ways more pivotal than those between Arjuna and Nala. Obviously these can be seen as the logical extension of Bṛhadaśva's original premise that Nala was a king in a situation just like Yudhiṣṭhira's, only worse. In examining these similarities, let us begin with the only item on Nala's list of good qualities yet to be discussed: #10, *akṣapriyaḥ*, or "fond of gambling"/"beloved of the dice." While this has the obvious narrative impact of connecting Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira by virtue of sharing an "Achilles Heel," it seems anomalous that this vice would be placed in an otherwise spotless list of virtues. To this point, Smith suggests that this might imply that Nala, unlike Yudhiṣṭhira, did have some skill as a gambler prior to his possession by Kali (1992: 22). However, while this may be the case, Kṛṣṇa explicitly connects Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala, and the dangers of gambling in MBh 3.14, where the *avatāra* explains how he would have intervened, had he been present at the dice game. As van Buitenen translates (1975: 252):

MBh 3.14.4-8: *vaicitryavīryaṃ rājānalaṃ dyūtena kaurava | putrāṇāṃ tava rājendra tvannimittam iti prabho | tatra vakṣyāmy ahaṃ doṣān yair bhavān avaropitaḥ | vīrasenasuto yaiś ca rājyāt prabhaṃśitaḥ purā | abhakṣitavināśaṃ ca devanena viśāṃ pate | sātatyāṃ ca prasaṅgasya varṇayeyaṃ yathātatham | striyo 'kṣā mṛgayā pānam etat kāmāsamutthitam | vyasanaṃ catuṣṭayaṃ proktaṃ yai rājan bhraśyate śriyaḥ | tatra sarvatra vaktavyaṃ manyante śāstrakovidāḥ | viśeṣataś ca vaktavyaṃ dyūte paśyanti tadvidaḥ*

"I would have told King Vaicitravīrya [i.e. Dhṛtarāṣṭra] on your behalf, 'Be done with the dicing of your sons, Kaurava, lord among kings!' and pointed out the deceptions by which you have now become unseated and by which at one time Vīrasena's son [i.e. Nala] was deprived of his kingdom. I would have truthfully described how by gambling a man loses what has not yet been eaten up, and how the addiction to gambling lasts forever. Women, dice, hunting, and drinking are the four vices that spring from desire and make a man lose his fortune. Those who know the texts believe that this

can be said of any one of these vices, but the experts find that this can be said of gambling in particular.”

This not only foreshadows Bṛhadaśva’s telling of Nala later in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* and further links their respective downfalls, but also refers to gambling specifically as a “vice” or “addiction” (*vyasana*). Further parallels between the two dicing games can be seen in the character of Duryodhana and Śakuni, the latter of whom gambles against Yudhiṣṭhira as a proxy for the former. Hildebeitel notes that just as the Pāṇḍavas are incarnations or “portions” (*aṁśa*) of various gods, Duryodhana and Śakuni are “portions” of Kali and Dvāpara, respectively. While on the one hand this draws an interesting parallel between Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira, given that Kali/Duryodhana serves as the arch-nemesis for both, it also raises an interesting question which serves to highlight the differences between the two accounts: does Duryodhana ever “possess” Yudhiṣṭhira, as Kali possesses Nala? This does not seem to be the case, and thus seems to introduce a few contrasts in the two narratives.

Another key difference between Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira is in their respective resolutions: Yudhiṣṭhira loses his second dicing game, sending the Pāṇḍavas into their twelve-year exile, while on the other hand, Nala wins his rematch, giving him his final victory over Puṣkara. Additionally, whereas Nala regains his kingdom bloodlessly, through a single throw of the dice, Yudhiṣṭhira’s restoration comes out of the apocalyptically violent war at Kurukṣetra. To resolve these dilemmas, Simon Brodbeck (2007: 155-156) suggests a different reading of the two narratives, arguing that the two rematches are not the structural parallels that they seem to be:

“Dhṛtarāṣṭra intervenes and restores to Yudhiṣṭhira whatever was lost; then, when called back for the re-match (his stated reasons for accepting are the same as for the first match), Yudhiṣṭhira stakes neither himself nor his family members. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are exiled in rags, but though down they are not out. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s role is played in Nala’s

story by the snake Karkoṭaka, who, rescued by Nala from a forest fire, bites him, turning him temporarily into a hunchback but also poisoning Kali within him, thus initiating his gradual restoration. By returning for the second dice match Yudhiṣṭhira rescues Dhṛtarāṣṭra from the Duryodhana-fire; by losing it he is bitten, and temporarily transformed, distorted, and diminished. Yudhiṣṭhira's Kali to conquer is Duryodhana (who incarnates him), and the urge to abandon self and wife ... Structurally, the Kurukṣetra war matches Nala's second, triumphant dice game, at which, after reuniting with his wife, he wins back his kingdom."

Thus, Karkoṭaka's bite of Nala and the rematch arranged by Dhṛtarāṣṭra can be equated here: while both seem to push Nala and the Pāṇḍavas ever deeper into an already bad situation, at the same time they constitute the "blessings in disguise" which give our heroes the time and freedom needed to make preparations for their comeback. Similarly, although the discrepancy of bloodless versus bloody victory is not so easily resolved, Nala's rematch and Yudhiṣṭhira's victory at Kurukṣetra may be equated with one another as well.

To fully compare and contrast the two dicing games of each hero, it is necessary to first examine two key royal rituals which, as we will see, provide significant clues as to the underlying logic at work here. The first, the *rājasūya*, is a sort of "coronation" rite, but as J.C. Heesterman notes, this does not imply a once-and-for-all installment of the king. Rather, as he writes, "The *rājasūya* seems to have been originally a yearly repeated rite of cosmic regeneration and rebirth, not unlike the Hindu seasonal festivals, the *utsavas*" (Heesterman 1957: 7). Thus, a central theme in the ritual is that of the king as the propagator and upholder of good cosmic order. Specifically, Heesterman points to elements of the ritual performance whereby the king stands at the throne with his arms raised, mirroring the vertical iron post planted in the ritual ground. As Heesterman writes, "so we see the king, when receiving the unction, standing erect with raised arms on the throne, as the personification of the cosmic pillar resting on the navel of the earth (the throne) and reaching up to the sky" (1957: 101). This builds upon Proferes's description (see Chapter 2, above) of the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) being symbolically linked to the

yajamāna himself. In this case, with the king exalted as a supreme *yajamāna*, the act of standing with arms raised on the throne links both him and the post to imagery of the cosmic axis mundi. Similarly, a key moment in the *rājasūya* entails a dicing game between the king and opponents representing the three non-kṣatriya classes; obviously, the king is always supposed to win this game, after which he returns his winnings to the two *dvija* classes (brahmins and vaiśyas), representing his establishment and maintenance of proper dharmic rule according to *varṇa*.

Within the context of the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira is advised to perform the *rājasūya* on the grounds that it will give him a legitimate claim to the title of *saṃrāj* (“universal monarch, emperor”). However, it is important to note that no dice game is performed at this *rājasūya*. Thus, van Buitenen argues that the match against Śakuni is, in a sense, pre-ordained as the completion of his unfinished coronation. As he writes, “[Yudhiṣṭhira] submits, though grudgingly: ‘Once challenged I cannot refuse.’ He speaks in the same frame of mind as Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who allows the dicing because it is *diṣṭa*, ‘ordained.’ And by what but the very structure of the Vedic *rājasūya* itself?” (van Buitenen 1975: 28). Obviously, the game does not follow the script of the *rājasūya*; Yudhiṣṭhira is completely outmatched by Śakuni, leading to the eventual loss of his brothers, himself, and his wife. Christopher Minkowski (2001: 175) likens this to a theme of “interrupted ritual” within the epic, and further argues that it is this incomplete or failed *rājasūya* which leaves Yudhiṣṭhira’s claim to universal kingship unresolved, necessitating the later war at Kurukṣetra. As he writes, “the game goes terribly wrong. Yudhiṣṭhira gambles away everything. The dice game could be said to constitute a sort of unregulated ritual fragment which has been extruded from the disrupted Rājasūya so that the damaged rite can be

completed. It is a vestige of ritual that does not enjoy Kṛṣṇa's protection, and at which, as outrage follows outrage, the full extent of the disaster that lies ahead for all of the heroes is revealed." One last point about Yudhiṣṭhira's first gambling match involves the apparent structure and rules of the *rājasūya* game itself. While van Buitenen notes that many details of the Vedic dicing game have been lost to time, what is clear is that the *rājasūya* game involves twenty throws of the dice, divided into two groups of ten. Yudhiṣṭhira loses himself on the nineteenth throw and Draupadī on the twentieth, leading to controversy in the assembly hall when Draupadī asks whether Yudhiṣṭhira had any right to bet her at all, given that he had already lost himself. This controversy on the final throw ultimately causes the game to be nullified, but as mentioned previously, Yudhiṣṭhira is called back for a rematch to be decided by a single throw. Van Buitenen argues that this further follows the *rājasūya* pattern; because it was the twentieth throw which caused the controversy, it is only the twentieth throw which must be replayed (1975: 29-30). Both of Yudhiṣṭhira's dicing games can therefore be placed under the umbrella of his unfinished *rājasūya*, and thus, his gambling can be interpreted not as a sudden, fatal flaw, but rather as an extension of his role as a dharmic king and *yajamāna*. Just as Nala was bound by *dharma* to uphold a vow against his interests, so too is Yudhiṣṭhira bound to gamble with Śakuni by virtue of his *rājasūya*.

On the other hand, while Nala is repeatedly said to perform a great many munificent sacrifices, no *rājasūya* is ever attributed to him by the text. Furthermore, unlike Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala is well-established as a king for years before Kali finds an opportunity to possess him. Accordingly, the first match between Nala and Puṣkara does not follow any sort of pre-ordained limit on the number of throws, and Nala simply continues to

gamble until he has lost almost everything. When Puṣkara suggests that Nala wager Damayantī, Nala simply throws down all of the jewels and ornaments from his body (*utṣrjya sarvagātrebhyo bhūṣaṇāni mahāyaśāḥ*, “having cast off the ornaments of great glory from all of his limbs”), concedes defeat, and walks out; this is presumably a luxury that Yudhiṣṭhira did not have by virtue of the *rājasūya* structure of his match. There is one interesting point of comparison, to be discussed later, pertaining to this notion of wagering or abandoning one’s wife. However, for now it seems apparent that Nala’s first dicing game and Yudhiṣṭhira’s two games follow markedly different structural and conceptual patterns.

So what about Nala’s second game and Yudhiṣṭhira’s victory at Kurukṣetra? Let us begin with the latter case. Following his victory over the Kauravas, a mournful and guilt-stricken Yudhiṣṭhira must be persuaded, most notably by Bhīṣma’s teachings on *dharma*, to take his place as rightful king rather than retire as an ascetic in penance for his violent and even underhanded actions during the war. Finally convinced, he performs the *aśvamedha*, or “horse sacrifice,” a royal ritual on a similar level as the *rājasūya* which, as mentioned previously, is typically performed at the conclusion of successful military campaigns. The preparation for the ritual involves allowing the sacrificial victim, a warhorse, to roam freely through neighboring territories for an entire year, accompanied by the king’s army. According to Proferes, “The original import of the rite is obvious: should local leaders fail to challenge the horse’s progress, they would affirm their acceptance of submission to the rite’s sponsor. Should they seek to check the trespass upon their domain, the horse’s guard would engage them in battle” (2007: 70). Whitaker reinforces this notion of political submission by writing that “It seems that defeated nobles

and petty kings were expected to attend the conclusion of this year long sacrifice to affirm their subjugated position, while demonstrating loyalty to their new overlord” (forthc.: 8). This ritualized strategy of reinforcing the subjugation of defeated rivals recalls Jamison’s examination of the kṣatriya ideologies of giving and receiving. By accepting the hospitality of their conqueror at his *aśvamedha*, the defeated kṣatriyas are essentially conceding that they are subordinate to and dependent upon his rule. While this seems in many ways similar to the king’s redistribution of the winnings in the *rājasūya* dice game, there is one key difference here: in the *rājasūya*, the king is reinforcing a sense of proper law and order amongst his subjects. On the other hand, in the *aśvamedha*, the king’s strategic generosity is directed at his former rivals, who are presumably fellow kṣatriyas and kings in their own right, and thus might otherwise be seen, to some extent, as peers and equals of the new ruler. In the *Mahābhārata*, this ideology plays out in the characters of Kṛṣṇa and Śalya. Hiltebeitel notes that, while Kṛṣṇa is en route to Hāstinapura as a last-minute diplomatic envoy for the Pāṇḍavas prior to the war, Duryodhana constructs lavish pavilions or halls (*sabhā-*) to entrap the *avatāra* with hospitality. Whereas Kṛṣṇa does not even deign to look at the pavilions, Śalya (king of Madra and uncle of the Pāṇḍavas via Pāṇḍu’s wife Mādrī) later falls prey to the same trap, praising the builder of the *sabhā-* and saying that he deserves to be rewarded (another case of accidentally making a binding vow); Duryodhana thus claims Śalya’s service in battle at Kurukṣetra as his reward, and Śalya is bound to oblige (Hiltebeitel 1990: 132-133, 241). Although Śalya later aids the Pāṇḍavas by undermining Karṇa’s morale while serving as his charioteer, he never explicitly defects; in fact, Śalya serves as the fourth general of the Kaurava army following Karṇa’s death and is killed by Yudhiṣṭhira on the final day of the war.

In the case of Nala's final victory over Puṣkara, similar imagery of loaded hospitality and generosity can be seen. Like Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala's second game is decided in a single throw, but in this case Nala wins back his kingdom and all his wealth, reducing Puṣkara and his entourage to slaves. However, Nala immediately returns Puṣkara's freedom to him and gives his brother a city to rule. While this is not described as an *aśvamedha* (Nala's horse sacrifice comes immediately after his marriage to Damayantī), it seems to follow the same pattern described above. Nala acts generously to his defeated rival, thus subjugating Puṣkara beneath his rule. This would seem to suggest a link between Nala's victory here and Yudhiṣṭhira's victory at Kurukṣetra, and draws an interesting parallel to the two exile narratives as well. Given that Puṣkara and Duryodhana sent Nala and the Pāṇḍavas into exile with nothing, following this logic of generosity and hospitality they may have actually afforded their rivals the symbolic freedom to return as challengers once again. One wonders: if Duryodhana and Puṣkara had offered to return some of Yudhiṣṭhira's or Nala's wealth following the dicing games, could the heroes have accepted and still staked a legitimate claim to their respective thrones?

One final point of comparison between Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira can be seen in the shared imagery of wife abandonment seen in both stories. Simon Brodbeck notes that in the view of Indian cosmology underlying the rise of ascetic traditions in the mid-first millennium BCE, the materiality of the cosmos is expressed using distinctly female terminology. Therefore, abandoning one's wife, as Yājñavalkya, the Buddha, and Mahāvīra (Jainism's founder) all did is metonymically associated with abandoning the world or worldly attachments as a whole, and thus is the key to ascetic salvation (e.g. *mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*). In the case of the *Mahābhārata*'s kṣatriya heroes, this is further associated with

the total abandonment of social and royal duties (Brodbeck 2007: 148-150). In many ways, this ideal of ascetic liberation directly invokes, but completely inverts our three categories of masculine ideologies: by abandoning his wife, a man removes himself from the duties of a married householder in a ritual economy (generous ritual participation), including his obligation to “protection” or *rakṣaṇa* over his family and/or realm (martial and political dominance), and finally relinquishes his ability to bear sons and perpetuate his lineage (sexuality/virility). In a sense, this is the problem presented by the Buddha as a kṣatriya ascetic (and Yudhiṣṭhira as a would-be ascetic): ascetics cannot fulfill any of the brahmanically-defined criteria for the social duties of a man or the proper rulership of a king. Thus, Brodbeck argues that a central theme in the *Mahābhārata*’s response to these ascetic ideologies, particularly as it is expressed by Kṛṣṇa’s teachings of *karmayoga* (referring to “dispassionate, detached, selfless action”) in the *Bhagavadgītā*, is the redefinition of this soteriology by internalizing the act of renunciation while externally reasserting the importance of *varṇadharma* and remaining in society as married householders. As Brodbeck (2007: 145) notes, this response is often couched in the language of abandoning wives:

“Yudhiṣṭhira and many others lose or relinquish or attempt to relinquish or nearly relinquish or nearly lose their wives, but do not actually do so, or at the very least only do so temporarily; and the text’s more didactic sections – most famously the *Bhagavadgītā* – contain the message that soteriological success is attained not through physical renunciation, but through an inner renunciation which neutralizes *karmabandha* (the bondage generated by good and bad action) at source, allowing continued performance of social *dharma*s in a spirit of *karmayoga*”

Thus, the ascetic ideal is strategically inverted and internalized such that, by mentally renouncing and avoiding the passion or egocentrism underlying worldly actions, social *dharma*, including the violent behavior of warriors and kings, can coexist with ideals of salvation.

To see how this works, let us begin by examining the wife abandonment episodes of both Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira. Brodbeck suggests that, in both cases, the act of abandonment only occurs after the heroes have lost themselves, figuratively and/or literally. He writes, “Kali makes Nala abandon Damayantī: he is not himself (hence, perhaps, the question of staking himself never arises). Yudhiṣṭhira, *sans* demon, must lose himself to get to this point. The renunciative urge, marked by wife-abandonment, requires loss of self. Thus the text can reverse events by having the character regain himself” (Brodbeck 2007: 155). Of particular note to this argument is a passage from the *svayamvara* episode in Nala which, while omitted from the body of the Critical text, is printed both in Lanman and as a footnote in the critical apparatus.¹¹ Immediately after being chosen by Damayantī (before the gods bestow their boons), Nala addresses his bride with the following:

MBh 3.224*: *yattvam bhajasi kalyāṇi pumāṃsaṃ daivasamnidhau |
tasmānmām viddhi bhartārmam evaṃ te vacane ratam | yāvacca me
dhariṣyanti prāṇā dehe śucismite | tāvat tvayi bhaviṣyāmi satyam
etadbravīmi te*

“You who chooses a man in the presence of gods, O fair one, know me as your husband, who is surely delighted in your words. And as long as breath remains in my body, O bright-smiling girl, I will be for you. I speak this truth to you.”

Given the importance of vows and of Nala’s role as a “truth-speaker” (*satyavādī*), this passage leads to an interesting conclusion: Nala breaks this vow in abandoning Damayantī, and thus, he has clearly lost a part of himself, one of his best dharmic virtues, during his possession by Kali. In the cases of both Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira, losing the wife is the final stroke in a long and painful process of losing their very identities as men. In many ways, such episodes serve to reassert the ideal described previously by Olivelle in which fathering

¹¹ The apparatus indicates that this passage occurs in several of the Kaśmīrī, Bengali, and Devanāgarī Composite recensions.

sons is the key to a man's immortality. Obviously, this also requires women as the mothers of those sons; to this point, Olivelle writes that "Mother and wife exchange roles and become fused together in their role of begetting male children to continue the male line unbroken, thus assuring male immortality" (1997: 432). In short, while wives are largely seen as inferior and subordinate to their husbands in such a paradigm, they are also the means by which male Āryans continue his lineage, and by extension, fulfill their social obligations as men. Thus, the epic's composers depict the abandonment of a wife not as a virtuous ascetic ideal of salvation, but rather as a complete breakdown of normative masculinity, to be avoided at all costs.

The alternative presented by the *Mahābhārata* has already been seen, at least in part, in the examination of Nala observing vows, even when they require him to give something of himself. Nala becomes endowed with "austerity" or "suffering" (*tapas*) for his actions, but ultimately is greatly rewarded and lauded by the gods. In examining how this same logic applies to the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, Fitzgerald begins simply by examining the meaning of his name. As a compound formed from *yudhi* (loc. "in battle") and *sthiraḥ* ("strong, unwavering," etc.), Yudhiṣṭhira literally means "steady, steadfast, firm, unwavering in war, or battle" (Fitzgerald 2001: 65). Fitzgerald argues that this name cannot be taken literally, as Yudhiṣṭhira demonstrates more ambivalence, guilt, and regret for the Kurukṣetra war than any of his brothers. As mentioned previously, he requires proper education in *dharma* (most notably from Bhīṣma) before properly living up to his name. Thus, Fitzgerald suggests that the name implies that Yudhiṣṭhira ultimately does take responsibility for the war and his actions therein; he still feels guilt, but he has been made to understand why Kurukṣetra was dharmically justifiable (Fitzgerald 2001: 65-66).

Brodbeck (2007: 160) further expands upon this image of Yudhiṣṭhira as the reluctantly dharmic king:

“...after Bhīṣma’s *mokṣadharmā* and death, Yudhiṣṭhira again wants to renounce (14.2.11-13). Kṛṣṇa repeats the gist of the *Bhagavadgītā* (minus the *bhakti*, which has served its purpose), recommending that Yudhiṣṭhira conquer his inner enemy (14.11-13); but although Yudhiṣṭhira performs the *aśvamedha* and rules, he is unhappy, burdened by his grisly past and denied his preferred tonic. Yudhiṣṭhira’s rule is something of a biographical gap. He did not like being king, but we hardly see him being king; his reign’s salient feature is his distaste for it ... He joins the ancient dharmic kings who were beloved of Śrī, sponsored rituals, overcame difficulties, made donations, fought glorious battles, and went to heaven. But reading Yudhiṣṭhira’s story we suspect they might not have liked it; after the dicing, Yudhiṣṭhira never believes the hype. Those kings are in stories, we now suspect, to encourage others – otherwise (the story goes) the world degenerates, women are molested, and brahmins go hungry.”

This passage makes it plainly obvious that Yudhiṣṭhira suffers for his *dharma*. Ultimately, he does serve as the righteous, dharmic king that he was born to be, he performs sacrifices, and supports brahmanical interests, but in so doing he is forced to irreversibly give up his highest dharmic ideal of *ahiṃsā* (“non-violence”). Fitzgerald (2001: 66) aptly summarizes how this suffering and the tension between *dharma* and *ahiṃsā* play out in Yudhiṣṭhira’s character, and furthermore draws our attention back to Aśoka as the target of this brahmanical discourse:

“I think it fair to conjecture that the authors of this episode were implicitly charging that Aśoka had bought his *aśokatva* (his ‘being free from grief’) cheaply, in the currency of ‘heathen’ (*nāstika*) *dharma*, without having taken any real responsibility for it, without any genuine shriving or penance (no *śānti* [“calmness, peace”], no *prāyaścitta* [“atonement”]). Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, is shown facing and fully accepting the horrific consequences of his war-making, undergoing the *praśamana* [“tranquilizing, pacifying, healing”] and *anuśāsana* [“instruction”] of his betters, and being precluded from saying that he is an *ahiṃsra* man (someone who is devoted to *ahiṃsā*). Consistent with the fundamental duality written into Yudhiṣṭhira’s basic character, Yudhiṣṭhira, of course, would really like to have it both ways: to be the All-king of the world (his ambition in undertaking the Rājāsūya in the first place) like Aśoka, and a kindly father of all creatures promoting peace and universal harmlessness as Aśoka described himself. The *Śānti Parvan* narrative, however, and the instructions of *Rājadharmaparvan* that follow, demonstrate to Yudhiṣṭhira that he cannot have it both ways, that he must accept the doing of violence, leave *ahiṃsā* to brahmins, and be content with the intermediate, qualified *śīla* (‘virtue’) of the newer *dharma*.” (square brackets mine)

In this regard, Kṛṣṇa’s *karmayoga* does not actually provide a reconciliation of *dharma* and *ahiṃsā*, but rather provides the means for warriors and kings to disregard *ahiṃsā*

without necessarily depriving themselves of salvation. As noted by Fitzgerald's likening of Aśoka to *aśokatva*, the brahmanical composers are pointing out a certain irony in Aśoka's name, which means "not suffering, not feeling sorrow," et cetera. The peace-loving Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, does suffer in life as a result of his *dharma*, abandoning his highest ideal, but like the examples seen with Nala and Bhīṣma, he is ultimately rewarded for this *tapas*. This becomes most apparent when, upon Yudhiṣṭhira's death, Indra and Dharma trick him into thinking that his brothers and Draupadī are in hell, while the Kauravas are in heaven. Yudhiṣṭhira curses Dharma and chooses to live in hell with his brothers, passing the final test, and it is revealed that the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī were really in heaven all along. According to Brodbeck, "now hell becomes heaven, Indra says Yudhiṣṭhira may cease fretting. Dharma says he has passed another test by choosing hell for love, and Yudhiṣṭhira bathes in the celestial Gaṅgā, obtains a celestial body, and sheds all grief and enmity" (2007: 161). This is one last instance of sacrifice, suffering, and reward for Yudhiṣṭhira. In a sense, he sacrifices his heavenly salvation, as the illusion presented to him by Dharma offends his sense of *dharma* and fairness, and in return Yudhiṣṭhira gets the same heavenly salvation back as his reward, thereby freeing him of unhappiness, guilt, and grief.

To conclude, let us draw this analysis back to the larger themes considered thus far. King Nala is, by virtue of his narrator Bṛhadaśva's original premise, a character who in many ways mirrors Yudhiṣṭhira and, to a lesser extent, Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*. While the narrative parallels between their dicing games, their loss of wealth and kingdom, their exiles, and their eventual restorations are interesting in their own right, it is in the examination of brahmanical responses to ascetic ideals, seen in the instances of wife

abandonment and dharmic suffering which provides the biggest payoff here, linking both men to the soteriological reassertion of social *dharma* as seen in the ideal of the married householder. When Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira lose their wives, it goes hand-in-hand with a loss of self, and represents the ultimate failures of their manly obligations. Furthermore, just as Nala suffers in his adherence to his vow as the gods' messenger, his possession by Kali, and the loss of Damayantī, so too does Yudhiṣṭhira suffer as the supreme upholder of social duties with which he does not always agree. The logic of generous giving, self-sacrifice, and reciprocal rewards is at work here; as unhappy as he was in life, when Yudhiṣṭhira passes his final test, he receives incomparable recompense. In this regard, the *Mahābhārata* presents a normative, gendered social ethic and ideology in which upholding the proper *dharma* of warriors and kings can be unpleasant, violent, and perhaps even immoral at times, but by enduring such suffering, dharmic men will be richly rewarded. Finally, this ideology can be related back to our three categories of masculinity: by remaining in society as a strong, virile father of sons, by exerting martial prowess and political dominance in brahmanically authorized warfare, and most importantly, by generously sacrificing and otherwise supporting the ritual economy, the *Mahābhārata* asserts that Āryan men can still attain the highest of heavens, without having to worry about ascetic ideals like *ahiṃsā*.

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Scholastic Vita

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