

## Consistency and character in the *Mahābhārata*

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### Abstract

It is well known that the *Mahābhārata* sometimes contains narrative inconsistencies. In this article I consider a number of these, particularly certain cases in which one or more characters appear to be presented in an inconsistent manner. After considering possible explanations for the existence of such seeming discrepancies, I put forward the possibility that they are more apparent than real, and that the *Mahābhārata* was never intended to be read as a smooth-flowing temporal sequence.

*vyāmisreṇaiva vākyena buddhiṃ mohayasīva me – 6.25.2*

It is part of the day-to-day experience of any Sanskritist who reads the *Mahābhārata* to run into puzzling inconsistencies. For example, in chapter 3 of the *Sabhāparvan* the Asura Maya presents Arjuna with the wonderful conch Devadatta; the same conch is presented to him a second time by the gods in chapter 165 of the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, and a third time six chapters later by Indra. At 2.42.43 Śakuni travels home from Yudhiṣṭhira's Royal Consecration; eighteen *ślokas* later he and Duryodhana are the only guests remaining with Yudhiṣṭhira. In chapter 164 of the *Droṇaparvan* various heroes do battle with each other, and the narrator specifies that, as noble warriors, they eschewed the use of proscribed weapons; yet two of the weapons listed, the barbed *karṇin* and the possibly hollow *nālīka*, are used repeatedly throughout the war. In the course of that war the Rākṣasa Alambusa and Karṇa's son Suṣeṇa are both killed twice, and various other warriors also reappear after their deaths.

None of this matters very much – if Homer can nod, so too, surely, can Vyāsa. Sometimes, however, the great epic presents us with inconsistencies that are more troubling: they may confuse the flow of the narrative, or they may introduce contradictions into a character's words or deeds. It is this second class of inconsistencies that interests me here, since uncertain characterization has the potential to lead to quite major differences of interpretation.

On the morning of the third day of the great *Mahābhārata* war (6.53), neither side initially has the advantage; for example, it is said of the Kauravas that “with focused minds they repeatedly broke the army of the Pāṇḍavas, O king, and then were themselves broken in battle”.<sup>1</sup> The description that follows is very

1 *ekāgramanaso bhūtīvā pāṇḍavānām varūthinīm / babhañjur bahuśo rājaṃs te cābhajanta saṃyuge: 6.53.3.*

generalized: chariot-fighter slays chariot-fighter, elephant-warrior slays elephant-warrior, and so forth; then comes some further even-handed description, typified by the following:

Then Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Jayadratha king of Sindhu, Purumitra and Śakuni son of Subala, heroes unconquerable in battle, valiant as lions, broke the forces of the Pāṇḍavas again and again. But in just the same way Bhīma, his Rākṣasa son Ghaṭotkaca, Sātyaki, Cekitāna and the sons of Draupadī put your sons to flight on the battlefield together with the kings allied to them, O descendant of Bharata, as the gods put the demons to flight.<sup>2</sup>

However, as the day progresses (6.54), the Pāṇḍavas begin to have the better of the fighting. Duryodhana in person succeeds in rallying his fleeing troops, then rounds on his commander, Bhīṣma, and accuses him of treachery: “Grandfather, it is clear that you must be favouring Pāṇḍu’s sons, since you permit this army of mine to be slaughtered, O hero!”<sup>3</sup> Bhīṣma’s response is to burst out laughing at this accusation, as well he might: the description of the actual fighting has provided not even a hint that Duryodhana’s claim might be justified. Then, eyes rolling in anger, he promises to do his best:

“Many times, O king, I have told you this truth to benefit you: the Pāṇḍavas cannot be defeated in battle, not even by the gods under Indra. However, today I shall do to the best of my ability whatever I can do, old though I am, greatest of kings. Watch with your kinsmen! Today, before the very eyes of all the world, I shall stop all Pāṇḍu’s sons with their troops and their kin!”<sup>4</sup>

That afternoon (6.55), Bhīṣma fights so fiercely that the Pāṇḍava army is routed. Kṛṣṇa halts Arjuna’s chariot and says:

“Son of Prthā, now that time has come that you have longed for! Tiger-like hero, smite him, if you have not lost your senses! The words you spoke before in the assembly of kings, O hero – ‘I shall slay all Duryodhana’s warriors headed by Bhīṣma and Droṇa, along with his kinsmen, if they will fight me in battle’ – make those words true, Kuru enemy-tamer!”<sup>5</sup>

2 *tato droṇas ca bhīṣmas ca saindhavaś ca jayadrathaḥ / purumitro vikarṇas ca śakuniś cāpi saubalaḥ / ete samaradurdharṣāḥ śimhatulyaparākramāḥ / pāṇḍavānām anikāni babhañjuḥ sma punaḥ punaḥ / tathaiva bhīmaseno 'pi rākṣasaś ca ghaṭotkacaḥ / sātyakiś cekitānaś ca draupadeyāś ca bhārata / tāvakāms tava putrāms ca sahitān sarvarājabhiḥ / drāvayām āsur ājau te tridaśā dānavān iva: 6.53.25–8.*

3 *anugrāhyāḥ pāṇḍusutā nūnam tava pitāmaha / yathemām kṣamase vīra vadhyamānām varūthinīm: 6.54.35.*

4 *bahuśo hi mayā rājaṃs tathyam uktaṃ hitaṃ vacaḥ / ajeyāḥ pāṇḍavā yuddhe devair api savāsavaih / yat tu śakyaṃ mayā kartuṃ vṛddhenādya nṛpottama / kariṣyāmi yathāśakti prakṣedānīm sabāndhavaḥ / adya pāṇḍusutān sarvān sasainyān saha bandhubhiḥ / miśato vārayiṣyāmi sarvalokasya paśyataḥ: 6.54.40–42.*

5 *ayaṃ sa kālāḥ samprāptaḥ pārtha yaḥ kāṅkṣitas tvayā / praharāsmāi naravyāghra na cen mohād vimuhyase / yat tvayā kathitaṃ vīra purā rājñām samāgame /*

Arjuna now battles against Bhīṣma so effectively that the latter congratulates him. “Śaṃtanu’s son praised his fleetness: ‘Bravo, son of Pṛthā! Bravo, sir, strong-armed son of Pāṇḍu! This great feat truly becomes you, wealth-winner Arjuna, and I am thoroughly pleased with you, my son. Fight with me!’”<sup>6</sup> But his delight in Arjuna’s performance does not deter Bhīṣma from fighting back, and by a mere seven *ślokas* later Kṛṣṇa has lost patience:

Then strong-armed Kṛṣṇa saw Bhīṣma’s valour in battle, and observed that Pṛthā’s son was fighting with restraint. Seeing Bhīṣma ceaselessly showering arrows in battle, blazing like the sun between the two armies, striking down Yudhiṣṭhira’s finest warriors, as if he were bringing doomsday destruction to his army, the blessed Keśava, slayer of enemy heroes, could not endure it. Kṛṣṇa of immeasurable greatness thought that Yudhiṣṭhira’s army was lost . . . and that Arjuna, even though he was being struck by sharp arrows in battle, did not realize what he had to do on the battlefield, because of his reverence for Bhīṣma.<sup>7</sup>

At this point there occurs a typical *Mahābhārata* backtrack. The metre switches from *anuṣṭubh* to *triṣṭubh*, Bhīṣma redoubles his attack, Sātyaki tries to encourage the failing Pāṇḍava troops, and then at 6.55.80–81 Kṛṣṇa loses patience all over again, this time in *upajāti* verses. He leaps down from the chariot to launch a personal attack on Bhīṣma, who welcomes him warmly:

“Come, come, lord of the gods, abode of the world! Honour to you, you who hold bow and discus in your hand! Violently strike me down from my splendid chariot in combat, lord of the worlds, refuge of all beings! Kṛṣṇa, if I am slain here and now by you I shall gain felicity in this world and the next. The three worlds do me honour, heroic lord of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas, in that you are attacking me!”<sup>8</sup>

But Arjuna now leaps down after Kṛṣṇa and, with some difficulty, restrains him, promising that he will do the job himself: “The deed that I vowed will not fail,

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*bhīṣmadroṇamukhān sarvān dhārtarāṣṭrasya sainikān / sānubandhān haniṣyāmi ye māṃ yotsyanti saṃyuge / iti tat kuru kaunteya satyaṃ vākyam arimḍama: 6.55.41–3.*

6 *tasya tat pūjayām āsa lāghavam śamtanoḥ sutaḥ / sādhu pārtha mahābāho sādhu bho pāṇḍunandana / tvayy evaitad yuktarūpaṃ mahat karma dhanamjaya / prīto ‘smi sudṛḍhaṃ putra kuru yuddhaṃ mayā saha: 6.55.55–6.*

7 *tataḥ kṛṣṇas tu samare dṛṣṭvā bhīṣmaparākramam / saṃprekṣya ca mahābāhuḥ pārthasya mṛduyuddhatām / bhīṣmaṃ ca śaravarṣāṇi ṣṛjantam anīśaṃ yudhi / pratapan-tam ivādītyaṃ madhyam āsādyā senayoḥ / varān varān vinighnantam pāṇḍuputrasya sainikān / yugāntam iva kurvāṇaṃ bhīṣmaṃ yaudhiṣṭhire bale / amṛṣyamāṇo bhagavān keśavaḥ paravīrahā / acintayad ameyātmā nāsti yaudhiṣṭhiraṃ balam / . . . arjuno ‘pi śarais tīkṣṇair vadhyamāno hi saṃyuge / kartavyaṃ nābhijānāti raṇe bhīṣmasya gauravāt: 6.55.63–6, 70.*

8 *ehy ehi deveśa jagannivāsa / namo ‘stu te sārṅgarathāṅgapāṇe / prasahya māṃ pātaya lokanātha / rathottamād bhūtaśaraṇya saṃkhye / tvayā hatasyeha mamādya kṛṣṇa / śreyāḥ parasminn iha caiva loka / sambhāvito ‘smy andhakavṛṣṇinātha / lokais tribhir vīra tavābhīyānāt: 6.55.94–5.*

Keśava; I swear by my sons and brothers that at your urging I shall make an end of the Kurus, O younger brother of Indra!”<sup>9</sup>

Thus in two consecutive chapters of the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, 6.54 and 6.55, Bhīṣma and Arjuna are, in immediate succession, accused of fighting poorly out of regard for each other, though in both cases the actual description of the fighting contains no suggestion of any such thing.

Six days later, on the ninth day of fighting, Kṛṣṇa repeats his vow-breaking attempt to become a combatant. In 6.102 Bhīṣma is once again routing the Pāṇḍava forces; Arjuna again attacks him and is again congratulated.

Śaṃtanu’s son praised his fleetness: “Bravo, son of Pṛthā! Bravo, strong-armed son of Kuntī!”<sup>10</sup>

Again, four *ślokas* later, Kṛṣṇa loses patience:

Seeing Pṛthā’s son fighting with restraint, and Bhīṣma ceaselessly showering arrows in battle, blazing like the sun between the two armies, striking down Yudhiṣṭhira’s finest warriors, as if he were bringing doomsday destruction to his army, Vāsudeva, descendant of Madhu, slayer of enemy heroes, could not endure it.<sup>11</sup>

Again Kṛṣṇa mounts a personal attack on Bhīṣma, and again Bhīṣma welcomes him:

“Come, come, lotus-eyed lord of the gods!

Honour to you! Best of the Sātvatas, strike me down today in this great battle, for if I am slain by you in combat, sinless lord Kṛṣṇa, I shall gain the highest felicity in this world and the next. The three worlds do me honour today in this battle, Govinda!”<sup>12</sup>

Once again Arjuna has to stop Kṛṣṇa; we shall see shortly what he says to him.

- 9 *na hāsyate karma yathāpratijñam / putraiḥ śape keśava sodaraiś ca / antam kariṣyāmi yathā kurūṇām / tvayāham indrānuja samprayuktaḥ*: 6.55.100. The epithet “younger brother of Indra” is occasionally used for Kṛṣṇa; Viṣṇu is the youngest of the Ādityas, of whom Indra is chief.
- 10 *tasya tat pūjayām āsa lāghavam śaṃtanoḥ sutaḥ / sādhu pārtha mahābāho sādhu kuntīsuteti ca*: 6.102.46.
- 11 *vāsudevas tu samprekṣya pārthasya mṛduyuddhatām / bhīṣmam ca śaravarṣāṇi sṛjantam aniśam yudhi / pratapantam ivādityam madhyam āsādyā senayoḥ / varān varān vinighnantam paṇḍuputrasya sainikān / yugāntam iva kurvāṇam bhīṣmam yaudhiṣṭhire bale / nāmṛṣyata mahābāhur mādhaveḥ paravīrahā*: 6.102.50–52.
- 12 *ehy ehi puṇḍarīkākṣa devadeva namo ‘stu te / mām adya sātvataśreṣṭha pātayasva mahāhave / tvayā hi deva samgrāme hatasyāpi mamānagha / śreya eva paraṃ kṛṣṇa loke ‘muṣminn ihaiva ca / sambhāvito ‘smi govinda trailokyenādya samyuge*: 6.102.60–61. Compare the *triṣṭubh* passage 6.55.94–5 cited above. This is a beautifully clear case of the adaptation of a formulaic passage from one metre to another: a single set of “given essential ideas” is expressed in much the same words but not “under the same metrical conditions”.

In both these passages, the text's inconsistency is troubling. In the description of the fighting, neither Bhīṣma nor Arjuna is said to have pulled any punches – indeed, Arjuna fights well enough to earn his enemy's praise – yet both are accused of precisely this; in Arjuna's case, the accusation comes mere seconds after the praise.

Indologists have generally reacted in one of two ways to such inconsistencies: they have either viewed them as evidence of textual change over time, typically the not wholly successful insertion of a later section into an earlier piece of text, or they have interpreted them as showing subtleties of character in the heroes of the epic.

In the present case the approach adopted by Irawati Karve in her book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*<sup>13</sup> is a particularly interesting one to consider, since she does both. Of the events of 6.55 she first simply says: "The incident on the third day is an obvious later interpolation" (p. 23). Later this is fleshed out somewhat: "Krishna's leaping from the chariot, discus in hand, on the third day . . . does not fit. The whole incident is described in a very poetic and exaggerated fashion, with a lengthy description of Krishna's divinity.<sup>14</sup> Krishna with the discus in his hand is the traditional picture of the divine Krishna. It is queer that this divine manifestation of Krishna had no effect on Arjuna" (p. 27).

The parallel passage in 6.102, by contrast, is accepted by Karve as genuine: "the incident of the ninth day, in which Krishna leaped down with a whip in his hand, has all the stamp of authenticity. Krishna was driving the chariot of Arjuna. That he should leap with his whip in his hand seems natural. The whole description of the incident is in the usual style of the Mahabharata, concise and unexaggerated.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it fits in the chain of events which leads to the climax of the tenth day" (p. 27).<sup>16</sup>

Having accepted that the second account of Kṛṣṇa's attempted intervention in the battle is authentic, Karve now uses it to draw conclusions about the characters' feelings and motives, and in particular their relationship with one another. She writes: "As the general of a great army, and reputedly a great warrior,<sup>17</sup> Bhishma wanted the glory of being killed by the greatest warrior of his day, namely Arjuna. And this was exactly what Arjuna did not want" (p. 24). The reason why Arjuna did not want it is also made clear: "The *Bhagavadgita* opens with Arjuna's 'How can I in battle send arrows against Bhishma, against Drona, at whose feet I must ever bow in respect?' That was the anguish of

13 I cite from the edition published by Disha Books (New Delhi, 1991).

14 In Karve's view, this implies that the passage is a late addition: "The Krishna in the Mahabharata is definitely not a god, as depicted in later literature" (pp. 167–8).

15 One might question whether these two adjectives do indeed characterize the "usual style" of the epic, or indeed whether it has a single "usual style".

16 The close parallelism between the two incidents, which, as we have seen, extends to repeated verbal echoes, may indeed suggest that one has been modelled on the other. If this is in fact the case, one could argue that 6.55 is more likely to represent the earlier passage, since its account of Kṛṣṇa admonishing Arjuna for fighting weakly against Bhīṣma immediately follows Duryodhana's admonition of Bhīṣma for fighting weakly against Arjuna.

17 Elsewhere Karve argues that this reputation is not entirely deserved.

Arjuna's heart . . . The whole of the Gita in which Krishna tried to persuade Arjuna to stand up and fight proved fruitless as far as the killing of Bhishma was concerned" (pp. 22–3).

Now much of this is open to doubt on fairly simple textual grounds. If Bhīṣma wanted to be killed by Arjuna, why did he twice so clearly welcome death at Kṛṣṇa's hands in the passages considered here? If Arjuna did not want to kill Bhīṣma, why did he fight him fiercely enough to win Bhīṣma's praise, and why did Kṛṣṇa tell him (6.55.41) that the time he had longed for had arrived, the time to smite Bhīṣma? In Karve's version of the story, Arjuna again shows his reluctance to kill the "grandfather" when he stops Kṛṣṇa's intervention in 6.102: "Arjuna ran after Krishna, held him tightly by the feet, and beseeched him to come back to the chariot. Arjuna still refused to kill Bhishma, but at last, with extreme reluctance, he promised to knock him out of his chariot" (pp. 23–4). But this too runs counter to the text of the Critical Edition, on which Karve explicitly states that she bases her work (p. ix).<sup>18</sup> What Arjuna actually says is: "This whole burden is mine: I shall kill Bhīṣma, keeper of his word. Descendant of Madhu, I swear by our friendship and by my own truth and merit that I shall make an end of our enemies, O tormentor of enemies!"<sup>19</sup>

More important than the specific details of the narrative of 6.102, however, is a general point: Karve's picture of the *Mahābhārata* is of a text in which the heroes' words and deeds reveal subtle, nuanced characters. Bhīṣma's reputation as a warrior is ill-deserved; Arjuna's acceptance of Kṛṣṇa's teaching in the *Bhagavadgītā* is not total; Bhīṣma longs for Arjuna to kill him; Arjuna is reluctant to do so. The other characters whom Karve deals with in her fascinating essays<sup>20</sup> likewise turn out to be complex, multi-faceted individuals.

I remain unconvinced. In my perception the characters who inhabit the *Mahābhārata* are – for the most part – depicted with strongly but simply drawn personalities, without the delicate shading that Karve sees in them. In a short article I do not have the scope to argue my view; I can merely state it. But if I am right in even a small number of cases, the problem returns: if we cannot account for inconsistencies in the text as elements of a subtle characterization, how are we to account for them?

One possibility, as already mentioned, is to attribute them to processes of textual change. It is widely considered that the *Mahābhārata* evolved into the text we know over a period of many centuries; the metrical and stylistic differences between different parts of the work would seem to bear this out. In such a view of the epic, inconsistencies may be thought to have arisen when a redactor attempted to insert a "new" passage into an existing narrative, or to assemble

18 This is by no means the only case where Karve's account of events in the *Mahābhārata* differs from that found in the Poona Edition.

19 *mamaīṣa bhāraḥ sarvo hi haniṣyāmi yatavratam / śape mādhava sakhyena satyena sukṛtena ca / antaṁ yathā gamiṣyāmi śatrūṇāṁ śatrukarṣana*: 6.102.67–8. In the final line I have translated the variant reading *kariṣyāmi* rather than *gamiṣyāmi*: cf. 6.55.10 cited above.

20 This is meant sincerely. I disagree with much that Karve has to say, but her approach is refreshingly innovative and stimulating.

a narrative from more than one source. The “backtrack” referred to above as occurring in 6.55 is a typical example. The *anuṣṭubh* narrative reaches the point where Kṛṣṇa accuses Arjuna of not fighting properly, as a prelude to mounting his own attack on Bhīṣma; then suddenly comes a sequence of nine *triṣṭubhs* describing Bhīṣma’s valour and Sātyaki’s resistance; this leads to a second, *triṣṭubh*, description of Kṛṣṇa’s exasperation and, finally, his leap from the chariot. It certainly looks as if a redactor had attempted to make use of both *anuṣṭubh* and *triṣṭubh* versions of the tale, and had been unwilling to discard material from either version, resulting in a sort of narrative dittography.

Analytical approaches to the *Mahābhārata* from Hopkins on have, of course, frequently appealed to this kind of process. Recently M. A. Mehendale has done so in an examination of a number of problematic passages,<sup>21</sup> and though I would hesitate to use the word “interpolation”, as he does, to refer to apparent insertions that awkwardly overlap or contradict their context, I am certainly inclined to see them as resulting from processes that occurred over time. Any non-historical explanation would have to account not merely for this or that individual case, but also for the fact that there are a large number of similar cases.

If such textual processes can reasonably be invoked to explain inconsistencies in the flow of the narrative, might they also account for the character-centred inconsistencies that I have focused on here – cases where contradictions appear in the epic account of a person’s words or deeds? I know of no reason to say that this is impossible: the contradiction of Arjuna’s being almost simultaneously praised for fighting well and blamed for fighting badly could have come about as a redactor attempted to combine two differing narrative strands. But while problems in redaction might well be a mechanism allowing contradictions to come into being, that mechanism can account only for the How in such cases; it cannot account for the Why. And it may not in fact be necessary to look for any mechanism at all, because the contradiction may not be real: it may exist in our perception, rather than in the narrator’s words.

It is important to note that character-centred inconsistencies in the *Mahābhārata* do not present us with a contradiction between two different characterizations of a person; what we see is merely a discrepancy between two different aspects of that person’s known character. The epic heroes do occasionally speak or act out of character – a well-known example is the normally bellicose Bhīma’s advocacy of peaceful diplomacy at 5.72, for which he is immediately taunted by Kṛṣṇa. But I am not aware of any case where the text presents an inconsistency between an expected and an unexpected view of a character’s personality. In the example I have been considering, there is nothing to surprise us if Arjuna fights hard against Bhīṣma, since he is the finest warrior of his age; but there is also nothing to surprise us if he holds back, since Bhīṣma is his revered “grandfather”. Similarly, it would seem wholly in character for a grieving Gāndhārī to blame fate for the catastrophe at Kurukṣetra, but it would seem no less in character for her to blame

21 M. A. Mehendale, “Interpolations in the *Mahābhārata*”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* LXXXII, 2001, pp. 193–212.

herself. What is mildly disconcerting is to find her doing both in the space of four *ślokas* (11.15.17–20).

It is easy to imagine in such cases that a redactor may have attempted to combine two slightly divergent accounts into a single version, and that the result contains a telltale internal inconsistency. But there is another possible explanation. In an earlier article<sup>22</sup> I drew attention to Paul Feyerabend's comparison between the "archaic style" in ancient Greek art and the formulaic diction of Homer,<sup>23</sup> and suggested that his observations could be applied also to the *Mahābhārata*. He describes both the visual and verbal depictions he deals with as *paratactic aggregates*, and comments: "the elements of such an aggregate are all given equal importance, the only relation between them is sequential, there is no hierarchy, no part is presented as being subordinate to and determined by others" (pp. 233–4). A visual example is "the picture of a kid half swallowed by a lion. The lion looks ferocious, the kid looks peaceful, and the act of swallowing is simply *tacked on* to the presentation of what a lion *is* and what a kid *is*" (p. 233). In verbal narration, the "paratactic" approach explains "why Aphrodite is called 'sweetly laughing' when in fact she complains tearfully (*Iliad*, 5.375), or why Achilles is called 'swift footed' when he is sitting talking to Priam (*Iliad*, 24.559)" (p. 241). In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, I drew attention to the similar use of "inappropriate" formulaic epithets, such as the description of Duḥśāsana as "best of Bharata's descendants" (*bharataśreṣṭha*) at 2.66.3, just after his attempt to strip Draupadī naked, or the reference to Duryodhana as Suyodhana (a contemptuous antonym of his name, meaning "easy to fight") as he rides in majesty into his city at 3.240.45.

It seems to me possible that the character-centred inconsistencies in the *Mahābhārata* may result from the same paratactic approach, and that the contradiction arises in our own minds because we are no longer used to reading narratives in this way. From this point of view, Arjuna is a great warrior, and Arjuna is in awe of Bhīṣma, and the one fact has merely been "tacked on" to the other; similarly, Gāndhārī's self-accusation has been tacked on to her accusation of fate. To look for some sort of logical link between the two facts is a mistake: they are both simply present as elements in the narrative sequence.

Though I certainly would not rule out a historical explanation of some inconsistencies of this type, the paratactic explanation is attractive, in that, by eliminating the apparent contradictions, it eliminates the entire problem; all we have to do is accept that mutually inconsistent accounts of a character can co-exist within the narrative. In the cases we have been considering, the gain thus achieved is relatively small: the inconsistencies are neither numerous nor great. But sometimes it happens that inconsistency is piled upon inconsistency, resulting in a texture so complex that it would be very difficult to postulate any credible way of arriving at it by means of historical processes of change. In such a case, viewing the sequence as a Feyerabendian "paratactic aggregate" (though

22 "Winged words revisited: diction and meaning in Indian epic", *BSOAS* 62/2, 1999, pp. 267–305.

23 In *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1978, pp. 230–49.



on a somewhat larger scale than Feyerabend himself conceived) seems the only useful explanation.

I conclude this paper by considering one such case: the events following Bhīma's killing of Duryodhana. The main characters here are Yudhiṣṭhira, Kṛṣṇa and Duryodhana himself (he will not actually die until after Aśvatthāman's night raid on the Pāṇḍava camp), and while it is true that nothing is said or done that is out of character, two at least of these characters are extraordinarily complex. Duryodhana is a great king, an arrogant villain, an incarnate demon, and an obsessive fool, while Kṛṣṇa is a Kṣatriya ruler, an expounder of *dharma*, a deceitful trickster, and the supreme lord of the universe. Even Yudhiṣṭhira is both quiescent figurehead and lord of *dharma* (*dharmarāja*). It seems that the crossing of these three figures' paths at this final, fatal epic crux encourages the narrator to give simultaneous expression to many different aspects of their characters and their relationships with one another, and this results in a stream of apparent inconsistencies. In the following résumé I have indicated such points with a bracketed comment. The narration starts at *Śalyaparvan* 56, as the two combatants attack each other with their clubs.

**9.56.** Duryodhana attacks Bhīma, and the two warriors fight with their clubs for some time, then rest, then fight again, fiercely and with great skill. They strike each other terrible blows, and both men are covered in blood, but each recovers from his enemy's attacks. A blow from Duryodhana's club lays Bhīma low and also rends open his armour, but he gets back to his feet.

**9.57.** Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa which of the two warriors is superior. Kṛṣṇa replies that the instruction they received was equal, that Bhīma is the stronger, but that Duryodhana is the more practised. If Bhīma fights according to *dharma* he will lose: he should therefore fight unfairly. Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna of Bhīma's vow to break Duryodhana's thigh; now is the time to carry it out. Yudhiṣṭhira committed an act of great folly to gamble on the outcome of a single combat, especially with an opponent as desperate as Duryodhana. Unless Bhīma resorts to unfair fighting, Dhṛtarāṣṭra will remain king. Hearing Kṛṣṇa's advice, Arjuna strikes his own thigh where Bhīma can see him; Bhīma understands the signal. Again he and Duryodhana fight; again they rest, then resume their combat. Bhīma rushes at Duryodhana. Duryodhana leaps up in an effort to deceive Bhīma, but Bhīma understands his intention and smashes his thighs with his club. Duryodhana falls to the earth with a great crash; terrible portents appear, to the dismay of the Pāṇḍavas and Pāñcālas. Celestial beings discuss the battle.

**9.58.** The Pāṇḍavas rejoice at the downfall of Duryodhana. Bhīma tramples his head with his left foot and gloatingly reminds him of all the insults the Pāṇḍavas had to endure from him and his followers. Yudhiṣṭhira remonstrates with Bhīma: "He is a king and a kinsman, and he lies fallen; sinless Bhīma, it is not right for you to behave thus. He is destroyed; his ministers and brothers and sons are all slain; no one survives to perform his funeral offerings; he is our brother. It is not right for you to behave thus. People used to call you 'Righteous Bhīma' [*dhārmiko bhīmaseno*] – so why, Bhīma, are you trampling the king?" Then he addresses the fallen man: "This must have been ordained by the all-powerful,

noble creator, that we should seek to kill you, and you us, truest of Kurus. For this great calamity that you have suffered results from your own wrongdoing [so it is apparently not the creator's fault after all], thanks to your greed and arrogance and childish folly. You have caused the deaths of friends and brothers, fathers, sons, grandsons and teachers, and so now you have reached your own death. Because of your wrongdoing we have slain those mighty chariot-fighters your brothers, and many other kinsmen; I am sure this was due to insurmountable fate [and thus apparently not, after all, to Duryodhana's own wrongdoing]".

**9.59.** Balarāma cries out in dismay at Bhīma's unprecedented violation of the rules in striking below the navel. He is about to attack Bhīma when he is restrained by Kṛṣṇa, who argues that the Pāṇḍavas, their allies, have suffered greatly and that Bhīma had to fulfil the vow he had made. "Consider that the Age of Kali is upon us;<sup>24</sup> remember too the oath that Pāṇḍu's son had sworn. Allow him to free himself from both feud and oath!" But Balarāma, unmoved by Kṛṣṇa's sophistry,<sup>25</sup> announces that Bhīma will always be known as an unfair fighter, whereas righteous Duryodhana [*duryodhano 'pi dharmātmā*] has completed the sacrifice of battle and will go the way of the just warrior. He then mounts his chariot and leaves for Dvārakā. Kṛṣṇa asks the grieving Yudhiṣṭhira how he can allow Bhīma to trample his fallen enemy: "Lord of *dharmā*, why do you give your approval to an act of *adharmā*?" [This from the man who originally urged that Bhīma should abandon *dharmā* and kill Duryodhana by means of *anyāya*, and who has just been justifying the deed to his brother; and anyway Yudhiṣṭhira has already remonstrated with Bhīma for trampling Duryodhana.] Yudhiṣṭhira answers that he does not like what Bhīma has done, but that after all the Pāṇḍavas have suffered his actions should be tolerated [though he himself had previously condemned them]. Kṛṣṇa reluctantly accepts this. Now Bhīma joyfully announces to Yudhiṣṭhira the successful conclusion of the hostilities, and Yudhiṣṭhira congratulates him.

**9.60.** The Pāṇḍavas too applaud Bhīma's deeds and congratulate him on humbling Duryodhana, but Kṛṣṇa silences them: "Lords of men, it is not right for an enemy who lies slain to be slain a second time with repeated cruel comments. For this fool is slain [Kṛṣṇa instantly disregards his own advice and re-slays Duryodhana with a torrent of abuse]; this shameless, wicked man was slain from the moment he refused in his greed to grant the Pāṇḍavas their rightful share in the kingdom, preferring his wicked companions to the advice of his true friends, and ignoring the many protestations of Vidura, Droṇa, Kṛpa, Bhīṣma and Saṃjaya.<sup>26</sup> This basest of men is no longer fit to be an enemy or a friend; why waste words on one who is no more animate than a log of wood? Mount your chariots swiftly, lords of the earth, and let us leave! It is a blessing that this wicked man lies slain, with all his ministers, his kinsmen and his friends." At this the dying Duryodhana props himself up with his arms and bitterly accuses Kṛṣṇa of responsibility for the unfair deaths of himself

24 Kṛṣṇa is arguing that in the new age of barbarism breaches of *dharmā* are to be expected.

25 *dharmacchalam api śrutvā keśavāt*: 9.59.22.

26 Reading *viduradroṇakṛpagaṅgeyasamjayaiḥ* at 20b.

and many others, including Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Bhūriśravas and Karṇa: he has secured victory and the death of his enemies only by resorting to *adharmā* and trickery. Kṛṣṇa retorts that Duryodhana and his followers have died as a consequence of his own wickedness. But Duryodhana says that he has achieved the highest in human felicity, and will now attain heaven with his friends and kin; he bids his enemies live on in frustration and grief. His words are greeted by a rain of flowers and cries of celestial approbation, and this, together with thoughts of the unfair deaths of their enemies, causes the Pāṇḍavas shame and grief. But Kṛṣṇa addresses them: “Duryodhana here with his swift weapons, and those other valiant chariot-fighters, could not have been slain by you on the battlefield in fair fight. That is why I devised these stratagems, lords of men – otherwise the victory of the Pāṇḍavas could never have happened [so apparently Duryodhana’s accusations were valid, and Kṛṣṇa’s claim that he has perished because of his own wrongdoing was specious]. For not even the world-guardian gods themselves could have killed by fair means those four noble warriors, famed throughout the world. As for Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son here, not even staff-wielding Death could kill him fairly if he stood club in hand and free from weariness. You should not take it to heart that this king has been slain, for, when enemies become too numerous, they should be slain by deceit and stratagems. This is the path formerly trodden by the gods to kill the demons; and a path trodden by the virtuous may be trodden by all. We have achieved success. Now it is evening, and we should enjoy sleep. Lords of men, let us rest, with our horses and elephants and chariots.” His words restore the Pāṇḍavas’ spirits, and they rejoice to see Duryodhana lying slain.

Let us list the salient points of this passage in sequence. (1) Bhīma, who apparently has a reputation for adhering to *dharma*, is prompted by Kṛṣṇa to violate *dharma* in order to kill Duryodhana. (2) Yudhiṣṭhira is silent about the foul blow of the club but upbraids Bhīma for breaching *dharma* by trampling his fallen foe. (3) Addressing Duryodhana himself, Yudhiṣṭhira attributes his downfall to fate, then to Duryodhana’s own wickedness, then again to fate. (4) Balarāma refers twice to Duryodhana as righteous (*dharmātmā*), whilst his brother Kṛṣṇa calls him wicked, shameless, the basest of men (*pāpo . . . nirapa-trapaḥ . . . puruṣādhamah*). (5) Kṛṣṇa, who had instigated Bhīma’s major breach of *dharma* in killing Duryodhana, and had attempted to justify it to Balarāma, asks Yudhiṣṭhira why he condones Bhīma’s minor breach of *dharma* in trampling the fallen man; in fact Yudhiṣṭhira has already condemned this as an act of *adharmā*. (6) Yudhiṣṭhira, apparently forgetting his earlier condemnation of Bhīma’s act, offers excuses for it, which Kṛṣṇa reluctantly accepts. (7) Kṛṣṇa now scolds the Pāṇḍava warriors for insulting a fallen foe, and then proceeds to insult him at length himself. (8) Duryodhana accuses Kṛṣṇa of winning the war by means of *adharmā*, but Kṛṣṇa retorts that Duryodhana lost it through his own wickedness. (9) Then Kṛṣṇa explains to the Pāṇḍavas that the war could only be won by means of *adharmā*, and that this is acceptable because even the gods act in such ways.

It might be possible to account for some of this tissue of inconsistency by appealing to historical processes of textual change, but I think that even the most ardent of analytical critics would be hard-pressed to explain all of it

away. To me it seems more likely that this is how the passage was always meant to read. Nothing is said or done that seems inappropriate in itself; any one speech or action of a character is consonant with what we know about that character. The problem is that the characters are complex, so that, like Arjuna fighting both well and badly, these speeches and actions contradict one another when assembled in one place. The solution, I believe, is to view such passages as paratactic aggregates, as wholes that are made up of individual parts by a simple process of adding, with no idea that the parts might be thought to stand in some kind of relationship to each other – “ferocious lion, peaceful kid, swallowing of kid by lion”, as Feyerabend puts it (p. 234). As the kid is simultaneously peaceful and half swallowed, so our Yudhiṣṭhira is simultaneously righteous (so that he remonstrates with Bhīma) and soft-hearted (so that he excuses Bhīma). To read the passage aright we have to understand that there is no contradiction between the two.