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The Theft of the Pārijāta Tree in Early Sanskrit Sources¹

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Abstract

The Pārijātaharaṇa or theft of the magical Pārijāta tree is a well known episode in the life of the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa. The earliest Sanskrit sources of the incident consist largely of short or passing references to the deed, and mainly understand the seizure of the tree to have involved a fight between Kṛṣṇa and Indra. The actual episode is narrated in the critical text of the *Harivaṃśa*, but there no fight occurs. This piece follows up on and responds to a recent publication in this journal in which the narrative discontinuity surrounding the Pārijātaharaṇa is treated briefly in connection with the problem of textual emendation. After identifying and contextualizing the relevant epic passages, I take up the key sources of the myth in the following centuries, and reflect briefly on the issue of the Sanskrit tradition's own work of narrative emendation, as well as some of the implications thereof for readers and translators.

Introduction

The myth of the Pārijātaharaṇa — the theft of the Pārijāta tree by Kṛṣṇa — is a popular narrative encountered often in Hindu storytelling and art, neatly encapsulated in the static image of a mature Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu mounted upon the back of his eagle Garuḍa, accompanied by his wife Satyabhāmā and carrying the magical and invaluable tree.

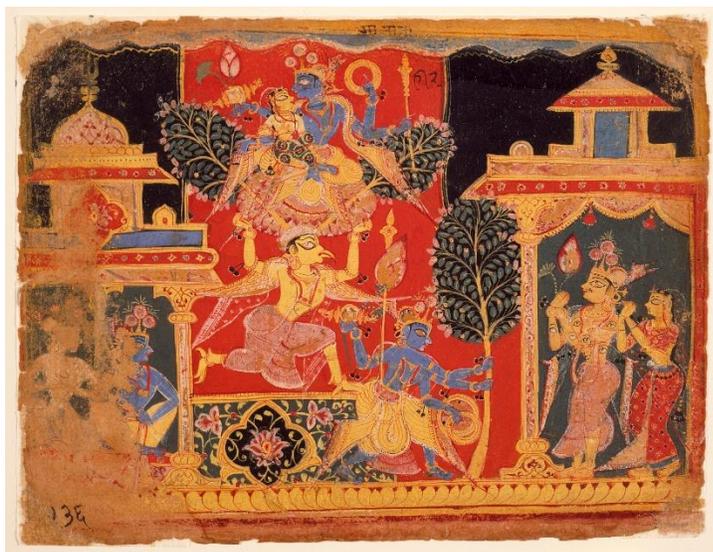


Image 1

Manuscript illustration, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* |
16th century | Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck
Collection | Los Angeles County Museum of
Art | Accession number M.72.1.26 |
<http://collections.lacma.org> | public domain
|

In the briefest terms, this episode sees Kṛṣṇa flying on Garuḍa up to heaven, accompanied by Satyabhāmā who, upon seeing the tree, prompts her husband to uproot it from its place in the garden of Indra, king of gods. This prompts a kerfuffle with Indra, but the conflict is soon resolved in a friendly manner (Kṛṣṇa and Indra often fall out briefly in this way, but never for long — they are divine brothers and ultimately on the same team). Kṛṣṇa returns to earth and plants the tree in his city of Dvārakā where it makes for a distinctly auspicious presence amidst the women's quarters. This tree is said to have originated on the occasion of the churning of the ocean of milk (e.g. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.9.93 [20]) and commonly is identified as a species of jasmine, namely the *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* (see Image 2).



Image 2

Flower of the *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* or Parijat tree |
 Photo by Adityamadhav83 | Creative Commons Attribution-Share
 Alike 3.0 Unported license | Wikimedia Commons |
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:\(Nyctanthes_arbor-tristis\)_flower_at_Madhurawada_01.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:(Nyctanthes_arbor-tristis)_flower_at_Madhurawada_01.JPG)

Elsewhere I have written about the social and religious significance of this tree [1], which is clearly part of a larger culture of tree worship in South Asian tradition.² Here I shall not repeat those earlier arguments but rather take up a question concerning the textual history of the episode and some of the theoretical or methodological implications thereof.

While perhaps most widely known through such sources as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (see Image 1), the myth appears to have its basis in the great epic *Mahābhārata* (MBh [27]) and its *khila* or supplement, the *Harivaṃśa* (HV [28]).³ Together these texts (dating roughly to the 2nd-4th century CE⁴) provide the oldest sources of this episode, and indeed of the entire Kṛṣṇa biography. A much awaited and anticipated English translation by Simon Brodbeck of the critical edition (CE) HV text has now appeared [5], providing unprecedented access to this historically important source of devotional Hinduism. This volume came parceled with a *khila* or supplement of its own, published in this journal [6]. In this piece, Brodbeck raises the question of textual emendations, and among his various problem cases is the episode of the Pārijāta tree. This, he rightly notes, is not handled consistently in the CE text: what exactly the Pārijāta-haraṇa involved — particularly whether or not Kṛṣṇa and Indra came to blows over the tree — is not quite clear in this source [6: 97]. Looking at all the MBh and HV references to the affair, there appear to be two understandings: one in which they fought, one where they did not.⁵ Resisting the urge to emend the text in the face of what appears to be a kind of narrative hiccup, Brodbeck states:

There are many other more minor narrative discrepancies of this kind. Where the text's language is ambiguous I have generally tried to make translation choices that minimise

narrative contradiction or confusion, if possible. But where the text is clear, apparent unemended narrative discrepancies still stand. Across the *Mahābhārata* Vaiśampāyana presents Kṛṣṇa[’s] career in such a way as to imply – within the text’s world, not within the real historical world – multiple versions of different tales.

[6: 97]

Brodbeck is, I believe, quite correct not to attempt any emendation or correction here. The HV’s references to the event of Kṛṣṇa’s theft of the Pārijāta tree do present readers with a kind of narrative equivocation, and in what follows below I would like to examine this case and trace out briefly the evolution of the scene in early Sanskrit sources as a way of illustrating how the episode, and possibly its discontinuities, were received. All of this will lead to some reflections on issues raised by Brodbeck in the quote above and more generally in his *Asian Literature and Translation* piece. But first we must understand exactly what the sources say about the transplanting of the magical tree.

Early Sanskrit Sources of the Pārijātaharaṇa

The earliest references to Kṛṣṇa’s theft of the Pārijāta appear to be two brief comments made in the CE MBh text. The great epic does not relate Kṛṣṇa’s biography as such, but revolves around the five Pāṇḍava brothers and the great war of Kurukṣetra. Kṛṣṇa plays a vital role, but not one that permits a full account of his life story [5: xxii-xxviii]. Thus at times we find in the MBh passing references to events of Kṛṣṇa’s life — events presumably known to the MBh authors but not narrated in detail by them — which are then told in full in the HV, which is appended to the MBh precisely in order to fill in these blanks and provide a full *kṛṣṇacarita* or account of Kṛṣṇa’s life. The theft of the Pārijāta tree is just one example of this pattern. In the CE text of the MBh, the actual story of Kṛṣṇa’s theft of the tree is never related; one finds instead only two short, passing references to the deed. The first of these occurs in the context of book 5, where the Pāṇḍavas’ uncle Vidura warns Duryodhana against acting on a foolish plan to kidnap Kṛṣṇa, and as a warning against the doomed plot, Vidura enumerates a number of Kṛṣṇa’s heroic feats which bespeak his incredible strength. Among these is the Pārijātaharaṇa (MBh 5.128.48):

*varuṇo nirjito rājā pāvakaś cāmitaujasā |
pārijātaṃ ca haratā jitaḥ sākṣāc chacīpatiḥ || 48*

King Varuṇa and Agni, too, were conquered by Kṛṣṇa of limitless energy, and Indra the husband of Śacī was publicly defeated by Kṛṣṇa as he was stealing the Pārijāta.

The second reference to this event is in MBh book 7, where Dhṛtarāṣṭra, grieving over the likelihood of his sons’ destruction at the hands of the mighty Kṛṣṇa, also recounts some of the deeds which bespeak Kṛṣṇa’s invincibility (MBh 7.10.22-23):

*vainateyaṃ samāruhya trāsayitvāmarāvatīm |
mahendrabhavanād vīraḥ pārijātam upānayat || 22*

*tac ca marṣitavāñ śakro jānams tasya parākramam |
rājñāṃ cāpy ajitam kaṃcit kṛṣṇeneha na śuśruma || 23*

22

Kṛṣṇa the hero, having mounted upon Vainateya (Garuḍa) and terrified the city of Amarāvatī, removed the Pārijāta from the home of Mahendra.

23

And Śakra forgave that, knowing Kṛṣṇa's power. Who has heard of anyone unconquered by Kṛṣṇa, even among kings?

These are simply short references made in the context of enumerations of Kṛṣṇa's various heroic feats. In the first case, a conflict is understood (*jitaḥ ... śacīpatih*), while in the second it seems Indra knows better than to confront Kṛṣṇa, and pardons the deed (*tac ... marṣitavāñ śakro*), although Kṛṣṇa is said to cause terror in Amarāvatī, hinting at some kind of hostile behavior. As yet we don't know why Kṛṣṇa stole the tree or on what occasion. Expanding on such details was a chief concern of the HV poets, and so we find the full details of Kṛṣṇa's little garden project told there.

The Pārijāta episode in the CE HV occurs in the context of Kṛṣṇa's adult life as a young adult householder acquiring wives, riches, and establishing a prosperous home. In *adhyāyas* 91-92, Kṛṣṇa goes to war against the demon Naraka (Bhauṃa), who has seized the wealth of the gods, kidnapped 16,100 women, and taken possession of Varuṇa's umbrella and the earrings of Aditi. Kṛṣṇa undertakes this campaign in the company of his wife Satyabhāmā, with the two of them riding upon Garuḍa. He eventually slays Naraka with his *cakra*, takes the hoards of riches, and rescues the 16,100 women. In order to return Aditi's earrings, Kṛṣṇa flies up to heaven on Garuḍa, still accompanied by Satyabhāmā. After Kṛṣṇa has delivered the earrings and received the courteous hospitality and blessings of Indra, Śacī and Aditi, he and Satyabhāmā are left free to wander through Indra's heaven as they please. Here (92.62-70) is where we find the CE HV's Pārijātaharaṇa episode, properly speaking:

*vainateyaṃ samāruhya sahitaḥ satyabhāmayā |
devākrīḍān parikrāman pūjyamānaḥ surarṣibhiḥ || 62*

*sa dadarśa mahābāhur ākrīḍe vāsavasya ha |
divyam abhyarcitaṃ caityaṃ pārijātaṃ mahādramam || 63*

nityapuṣpadharaṃ divyaṃ puṇyagandham anuttamam |

yam āsādyā janaḥ sarvo jātiṃ smarati paurvikīm || 64

*saṃrakṣyamāṇaṃ devais taṃ prasahyāmitavikramaḥ |
utpāṭyāropayāmāsa viṣṇus taṃ vai mahādrumam || 65*

*so 'paśyat satyabhāmāṃ ca divyām apsarasaṃ hariḥ |
tataḥ prāyād dvāravatīm vāyujūṣṭena vai pathā || 66*

*śrutvā tad devarājas tu karma kṛṣṇasya vai tadā |
anumene mahābāhuḥ kṛtaṃ karmeti cābravīt || 67*

*sa pūjyamānas tridaśair maharṣigaṇasaṃstutaḥ |
pratathe dvārakāṃ kṛṣṇo devalokād arimdamah || 68*

*so 'bhipatya mahābāhur dīrgham adhvānam alpavat |
pūjito devarājena dadṛśe yādavīm purīm || 69*

*tathā karma mahat kṛtvā bhagavān vāsavānujaḥ |
upāyād dvārakāṃ viṣṇuḥ śrīmān garuḍavāhanaḥ || 70*

62-63

Having mounted Vainateya (Garuḍa) together with Satyabhāmā, strolling about the pleasure-grounds of the gods and being revered by them, the great-armed one saw the great Pārijāta tree, a divine and celebrated object of worship (*caitya*)⁶, in a pleasure-park of Vāsava.

64

This divine tree was always in bloom and possessed the most wonderful pure perfume. Every person who approached it remembered his former birth.

65

Viṣṇu, whose valor is unbounded, having forcibly uprooted that great tree under protection by the gods, loaded it up (on Garuḍa's back).

66

Hari looked upon Satyabhāmā the divine Apsaras, then went forth to Dvāravatī on a wind-swept path.

67

Indra the great-armed King of Gods, hearing about that deed of Kṛṣṇa, conceded and said "The deed is done."

68

Foe-conquering Kṛṣṇa, being praised by the thirty gods and lauded by the troops of great sages, proceeded to Dvārakā from the world of the *devas*.

69

The great-armed one, having flown along a long path as though it were a small one, honored by the king of gods, saw the city of the Yādavas.

70

The Blessed Lord Viṣṇu, the younger brother to Indra, with Garuḍa as his mount, having done the great deed in this way, came [back] to Dvārakā.

Clearly here, Kṛṣṇa does not fight with Indra over the tree, and in fact Indra's response is concession (*anumene*) and resignation (*kṛtam karma*: "the deed is done", or in Brodbeck's rendering "What was done was done" [5: 279]). This seems to align HV 92.62-70 with MBh 7.10.23 where Indra judiciously yields to Kṛṣṇa's arboreal ambitions, "knowing his power" (*jānaṃs tasya parākramam*). And while Satyabhāmā is present here, she plays almost no role whatsoever, except that Kṛṣṇa somewhat mysteriously looks at her (92.66) when he uproots the tree.⁷ She does not prompt Kṛṣṇa or seem to have anything to do with the Pārijāta seizure. Kṛṣṇa rather appears to desire it as an object of wealth with which to beautify the city of Dvārakā, and he does not worship it or engage in any ritual practices, whatever may be the tree's ritual or sacred significance as a *caitya*. I will return below to examine how these two 'missing' elements — actual conflict with Indra over the tree and the prompting role of Satyabhāmā's jealousy — are taken up in later renderings of the deed.

First, however, there remain a handful of other CE HV references to the Pārijāta tree of the kind found in the MBh, namely short or passing comments where Kṛṣṇa's various deeds are being related. The first of these comes soon after the episode itself, when the beauties of the Western coastal city are described at length. The divine provenance of Dvārakā's various features is defined, including a spectacular peak of Mount Meru which is brought by Viśvakarman on Indra's orders. Meanwhile Kṛṣṇa himself transplants the Pārijāta (93.57ef-58ad):

pārijātas tu tatraiva keśavenāhṛtaḥ svayam || 57
nīyamāne hi tatrāsīd yuddham adbhutakarmanāḥ |
kṛṣṇasya ye 'bhyarakṣaṃs taṃ devāḥ pādapam uttamam | 58a-d

But the Pārijāta tree there in Dvārakā had been carried away by Keśava himself. While it was being brought home, there was a battle between Kṛṣṇa of wondrous deeds and the gods who protected the magnificent tree.

Now, we might be forgiven for becoming confused. Was there a fight over the tree or not? Of the three remaining CE HV references to the event, two state clearly that Kṛṣṇa fought with Indra, and one is noncommittal:

vāsavaṃ ca raṇe jitvā pārijāto hr̥to balāt | 105.10ab

The Pārijāta was taken by force after (Kṛṣṇa) defeated Vāsava in battle.

Similarly, a battle for the tree is clearly cited in chapter 109. When the Vṛṣṇis gather to speculate on who might have kidnapped Kṛṣṇa's grandson Aniruddha, Anādhṛṣṭi makes the following observation:

*idaṃ karma tvayā kṛṣṇa sānubandhaṃ kṛtaṃ raṇe |
pārijātasya haraṇe yat kṛtaṃ karma duṣkaram || 42*

*tatra śakras tvayā kṛṣṇa airāvataśirogataḥ |
nirjito bāhuvīryeṇa svayaṃ yuddhaviśāradaḥ || 43*

*tena vairaṃ tvayā sārdhaṃ kartavyaṃ nātra saṃśayaḥ |
tatrānubandhaś ca mahāṃs tena kāryas tvayā saha || 44*

*tatrāniruddhaharaṇaṃ kṛtaṃ maghavatā svayam |
na hy anyasya bhavec chaktir vairaniryātanaṃ prati || 45*

42

O Kṛṣṇa, this deed done by you in battle — this bad deed of the theft of the Pārijāta — is not without consequences.

43

There, O Kṛṣṇa, was war-wise Śakra, mounted upon the head of (his elephant) Airāvata, himself defeated by the power of your arms.

44

Therefore he must be hostile towards you, there can be no doubt about this. This is the considerable consequence for you enacted by him:

45

Maghavat himself abducted Aniruddha. No one else could have the power to commit such revenge.

The third and final HV verse (97.14) does not point clearly either way:

*mahendrabhavane jāto devair gupto mahātmabhiḥ |
acintayitvā devendraṃ pārijātadrumo hṛtaḥ || 14*

The Pārijāta tree, born in the home of Mahendra and protected by the great-souled gods, was seized with no thought of Devendra.

The most we can say here is that Kṛṣṇa does not trouble himself with how Indra might feel (*acintayitvā*).

The only true narrative rendering of the Pārijāta-haraṇa in the CE texts of the MBh and HV understands the deed to have involved no fighting, with Indra perhaps raising an eyebrow, but yielding or conceding to Kṛṣṇa (*anumene*, HV 92.67); MBh 7.10.23 suggests likewise (*marṣitavān*), although hints at conflict as well. One verse does not lean either way (HV 97.14), while others clearly contradict the principal narrative account (Mbh 5.128.48; HV 93.57-58; HV 105.10; HV 109.42-45). Once again, all of this will prompt some methodological and theoretical reflections below in pursuit of some of the issues raised by Brodbeck. For the moment, I will continue to follow through with the Sanskrit textual tradition which in a sense resolves the discrepancy — if indeed it was perceived as such — by making it abundantly clear that yes, of course, there was a spectacular battle with Indra over the Pārijāta, largely on account of Satyabhāmā.

This emerges in two Sanskrit sources appearing very promptly after the 2nd-4th century CE period when the HV was likely completed. These are the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (ViP) and *Harivijaya* of Sarvasena. The 4th or 5th century CE⁸ ViP [20] frames Kṛṣṇa's biography upon that of the HV, but expresses Kṛṣṇa's life within a more fully rendered Vaiṣṇava universe. This naturally includes the Pārijāta-haraṇa, which is related at ViP 5.30-31 in a slightly more elaborate manner than the HV: Kṛṣṇa and Satyabhāmā are received more formally in heaven with much praise for Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu from Aditi, mother of the gods. Once they spot the tree in Indra's garden, Satyabhāmā suggests the tree be brought to Dvārakā, and she remarks (ViP 5.30.33-36):

*yadi te tad vacaḥ satyaṃ satyātyarthaṃ priyeti me |
madgehaniṣkuṭārthāya tad ayaṃ nīyatāṃ taruḥ || 33*

*na me jāmbavatī tādr̥gabhiṣṭā na ca rukmiṇī |
satye yathā tvam ity uktam tvayā kṛṣṇāsakṛt priyam || 34*

*satyaṃ tad yadi govinda nopacārakṛtaṃ tava |
tad astu pārijāto 'yaṃ mama gehavibhūṣaṇam || 35*

*bibhratī pārijātasya keśapakṣeṇa mañjarīm |
sapatnīnām ahaṃ madhye śobheyam iti kāmaya || 36*

33

If what you say to me is true — that “Satyā is exceedingly dear [to me]” — then let this tree be brought for the grove near my house.

34

Often have you affectionately said, O Kṛṣṇa, that “Neither Jāmbavatī nor Rukmiṇī are so beloved to me as you are, O Satyā!”

35

If that is true, O Govinda, and not [merely] reverent words on your part, then let this Pārijāta be an ornament in my home.

36

I wish to be that resplendent one in the midst of my co-wives, wearing a bouquet of the Pārijāta in my hair.

Satyabhāmā's words prompt Kṛṣṇa into action. His seizure of the tree sparks the guardians of the grove to protest; they insist it is Śacī's tree. Satyabhāmā stokes the conflict, challenging Indra to prove himself against her own husband. The fight erupts but does not last long; Satyabhāmā then confesses she only wanted to see her husband properly recognized as superior to Indra, and the tree is freely given out on loan for the duration of Viṣṇu's human embodiment as Kṛṣṇa. Thus in this rendering of the tale, which likely emerged not long after the CE HV, the Pārijātaharaṇa is already cast as a battle prompted by Satyabhāmā.

Also dating to the 5th century CE [15: v] is the Mahārāṣṭrī Prakrit *Harivijaya* of Sarvasena, likely the first *kāvya* work to take up the Pārijātaharaṇa as the theme of an independent poem. This entire work is no longer extant, but has been substantially reconstructed by Kulkarni [15] on the basis of surviving quotations in *sāhitya* and other theoretical literature. In Kulkarni's reconstruction of the *Harivijaya*, it becomes clear that Sarvasena was taking some liberties with the episode as it was known to him. In his poem, Satyabhāmā is, as in the ViP, thinking of her co-wives, and particularly Rukmiṇī, when prompting Kṛṣṇa for the tree. Sarvasena stresses the theme of co-wife jealousy and exploits this for opportunities to describe the envious and charming Satyabhāmā in high *kāvya* style. As Kulkarni shows [15: 4-7; 98-99], later theorists such as Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta praised Sarvasena for doing this, themselves clearly understanding that co-wife jealousy was a novel contribution to the episode on Sarvasena's part, even if it appears to us to have begun already in the ViP. Thus perhaps Sarvasena began with the ViP, and not HV 92.62-70, while later theorists seeing his jealous wife theme as a new development may themselves have been only familiar with an account along the lines of the CE HV episode. In any case, this formula — the tree is acquired through a battle stemming from Satyabhāmā's jealousy of her co-wives, particularly Rukmiṇī — strikes just the right tone in balancing romance and valor, and becomes the standard and popular configuration in later sources.

The chief of these later sources is the HV itself, which in a sense resolves its own narrative equivocation. This occurs not in the later manuscript variants on the key 92.62-70 passage (these are more cosmetic than substantial), but in an extravagant reshaping of the affair closely following and enriching Sarvasena's formula. This is labeled by Vaidya as App. I 29-29A and forms two chapters of a larger set of materials interposed immediately after *adhyāya* 92 which itself concludes with the short Pārijāta scene. Together this appendix material totals over 2000 verses. Almost all HV manuscripts in India from North to South contain this material, and it is impossible to know precisely from where it may have originated.⁹ We can however say that the App. 29-29F block of material originated no later than the 11th century CE [4: 92]. These seven appendices treat the Pārijātaharaṇa (29), the Puṇyaka vow and other women's *vratas* connected with the tree (29A), the story of the demon Nikumbha (29B), Śiva's Pārijāta grove and the attack made upon it by the demon Andhaka (29C), an account of a seaside picnic enjoyed by Kṛṣṇa and the Vṛṣṇis (29D), the abduction of Kṛṣṇa's granddaughter Bhānumatī (29E), and the substantial tale of Pradyumna and the demon princess Prabhāvatī (29F; see [2: 5-10] and [3: 150-172]). The revisited and expanded Pārijāta scene in 29-29A corresponds to chapters II (*Viṣṇuparvan*) 65-76 of the Vulgate HV [14]. I have elsewhere written about the pair of appendices 29 and 29A, the theological significance of the ritually engaged wife which we find developed in these materials, and the issue of the Pārijātaharaṇa's larger significance in Vaiṣṇava tradition broadly speaking [1], and don't wish to repeat or take up here these much larger question of the tree's religious and social significance. Rather, it will suffice to quickly identify the content of App. 29, so as to understand its function vis-à-vis the CE HV 92.62-70 passage, which in my view is a corrective one.

Although in the CE HV at the conclusion of *adhyāya* 92 Kṛṣṇa has already returned to Dvārakā with the tree, App. 29 retells the entire tale anew, in a sense ignoring the short CE text episode altogether. In brief, this begins with Nārada's appearance in Dvārakā. The sage brings with him a flower of the miraculous Pārijāta tree and describes its many supernatural qualities. At Nārada's prompting, Kṛṣṇa gives the flower to his chief and eldest wife Rukmiṇī who is thereby distinguished as his favorite wife. Satyabhāmā, Kṛṣṇa's younger and somewhat more volatile wife, learns of this and flies into a jealous rage, sulking in her private chambers. Naturally Kṛṣṇa comes to visit and to inquire why she is upset. The source of Satyabhāmā's jealousy — the gift of the single Pārijāta flower to Rukmiṇī — is soon identified, and Satyabhāmā proposes that Kṛṣṇa, to make up for this insult to her, obtain for her the entire Pārijāta tree. The account of the ensuing journey to heaven, negotiations with Indra, and war are substantial. In the course of these goings-on, it becomes clear that the tree is significant not only as a symbol of Satyabhāmā's superiority over Rukmiṇī, but more broadly as a ritual object and bestower of *saubhāgya* or marital felicity, and of other qualities desired by married women. In the end, Aditi tells Indra that he must part temporarily with the Pārijāta tree so that Satyabhāmā can perform a vow with it called the Puṇyaka; thereafter it will be taken back to heaven. Kṛṣṇa returns in triumph to Dvārakā where all are amazed by the miraculous tree, and where Satyabhāmā does indeed carry out the Puṇyaka (29A).

The author or authors of this appendix appear to revise the short and uneventful text of HV 92.62-70 and establish the full narrative of war with Indra which as we have seen was already circulating elsewhere in the CE texts of the MBh and HV, but had not been narrated fully there. Surely so miraculous an object as the Pārijāta tree could not be had without a

vigorous battle, and indeed a recurring rivalry with Indra (in the end, amicable and fraternal rather than truly antagonistic) was already a well-established aspect of Kṛṣṇa's character — one thinks of the lifting of Govardhana mountain (HV 61) or the burning of Khāṇḍava forest (MBh 1.214-225). App. 29 thus rehabilitates the narrative in accordance with the larger patterns that characterize Kṛṣṇa's life and “updates” the short CE account. While there is a hint at the tree's ritual importance in the CE (at HV 92.63 it is called a *caitya* or sacred worship-tree, even “tree-shrine”; see note 6), and association with women due to the presence of Satyabhāmā, it is only in the 29-29A materials that we find a detailed ritual practice for women in connection with the Pārijāta tree. As such the narrative elaboration seeks to amplify both the conflict and the theme of women's auspiciousness [1].

Reflections on a Narrative Equivocation

With a clearer sense now of the reception and development of the episode over time, I can return to the question of the CE HV's narrative equivocation and the methodological problems that arise when reflecting on it. The issue is not simply whether or not there was a fight, or which of the CE MBh and HV passages are “correct.” Rather, the question is what inference we make regarding the HV author or authors' attitude toward what we are calling narratively inconsistent passages. One possible inference is that (a) the text is the product of various voices and authors who were not always aware of what each other were doing (or: the final polishing and integrating editorial hand missed one or two small details within the various sources being brought together that might otherwise have been reconciled). The author of HV 92.62-70 simply did not know of the larger tradition attested by the other passages which celebrate this heroic deed as a battle with Indra. This might be characterized as a diachronic approach, although importantly it does not commit to or require any particular stratification claim (e.g. “the no-fight version of HV 92.62-70 must be earlier, the passages mentioning a fight must be later”). This has the benefit of taking the fewest liberties in terms of inferring what the authors did or did not know: all we can say is that there is no evidence that the person who wrote HV 92.62-70 had any awareness of the Indra-battle passages, or of a larger oral tradition from which that legend arose. Over and against this inference, we might say that (b) the author of HV 92.62-70 did not describe the battle but must have understood one to have taken place and omitted it for some reason or another. As such he himself did not perceive any discrepancy at all, and cannot be charged with creating a narrative wrinkle. This approach is more generous, giving the text the benefit of the doubt and crediting it with greater cohesiveness, as well as the author with greater creative agency and self-awareness. It does however require a certain degree of inside-the-poet's-mind inference and projection on our part.

But apart from these two possibilities, a third emerges in the quote from Brodbeck above [6: 97], perhaps a variant of the (b) option, which I will call (c): the narrative discrepancy exists “within the text's world” but not “within the real historical world”. What I understand Brodbeck to be saying here is that, with cases like the Pārijāta tree, the epic authors were perfectly aware that they were encoding into their poems multiple accounts of an event — they had heard tell of detail X on one occasion, as well as detail Y on another, and

they consciously decided to put in both X and Y. The multiplicity and inconsistency, such as it is, comes from within the oral culture of storytelling surrounding Kṛṣṇa, and the authors of written texts are fully aware of the discrepancies, choosing deliberately to make them part of the "text's world," perhaps in a spirit of inclusivity and accommodation. My understanding of the alternative which Brodbeck rejects is effectively the (a) inference or something similar — namely that the discrepancies originate in the "real historical world," such that multiple versions originate in actual physical manuscripts from different places, written by different people unaware of each other.

I see great merit in the (b) and (c) reading postures, as they constitute strategies for good-faith reading and handling of a text which the Hindu tradition itself certainly understood to be whole and cohesive. Indeed, even if handled in complete isolation from its traditional Hindu context and community, there is no denying the thematic, theological and ideological consistency of the text. In practical terms, the (b) and (c) postures have the advantage of precluding the need for any burden-of-proof philological labour (the fruitfulness of which is by no means guaranteed) that is required if one wishes to make a truly stratified diachronic argument, labeling passage X as earlier and Y as later. But I admit that I find (a) — which is not a stratified diachronic argument and makes no claims about earlier and later layers — to be the most economical, as once again it requires no speculations on the inner workings of the poet's mind, only the (in my view, uncontroversial) premise that more than one person was involved in the creation of the HV. And like (c), it assumes that the HV reflects and takes on board a larger oral culture of Kṛṣṇa storytelling, largely integrating it into a unified whole, with only small occasional hiccups such as the Pārijāta affair.

More importantly, I feel the (a) inference is borne out by the trajectory of development of the story summarized above. My view is that the reception history of the Pārijāta scene strongly suggests that the HV 92.62-70 passage was at least seen by some to be incomplete, possibly even "incorrect." It is worth noting that the HV Appendix 29-29A material sits unintegrated on the tail end of the original theft scene and simply rewrites it from the beginning as though the trip to heaven had not been related in *adhyāya* 92. It does happen often in the MBh and HV that an episode is first told in short form, and then Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana to relate it in full (e.g. MBh 16.1 vs. the *parvan*'s remaining *adhyāya*'s 2-9). We could call this the "kernel and question" technique. This however is not what happens at HV App. I 29 lines 1-4 (= Vulgate II.65.1-2): Janamejaya prompts Vaiśampāyana for more, but he only asks generically for more stories about Kṛṣṇa's married life in Dvārakā (*dvārakāyāṃ nivasataḥ kṛtadārasya ... caritaṃ*). The return to the narrative dialogue here does not function to integrate 92.62-70 with what follows in the usual nutshell-then-full-detail mode. The author of the 29-29A material could have easily construed his materials as an elaboration on the preceding short and no-conflict account by using the "kernel and question" maneuver found everywhere throughout the epics and Purāṇas. But the fact that he does not is, for me, suggestive of a more direct impulse to rewrite and retell the affair from scratch, which of course indicates that the no-conflict CE passage was perceived as lacking or incomplete. In a sense, then, my preference for an (a)-type reading posture for approaching the 92.62-70 passage — whereby I assumed that the author had no awareness of other oral or written versions of a more violent confrontation with Indra — is prompted by the tradition's own handling of the material across the post-CE-text generations.

Thinking through one more step and the larger context of the "kernel and question" technique, it is worth recalling that epic and purāṇic texts are generally framed as dialogues, with a format and structure that self-consciously encodes an active reception model into the content of the work. In other words, the narrator-auditor conversations (Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya, Parāśara to Maitreya, etc.) direct the course of the unfolding textual material, with the narrator responding to prompting questions from the auditor. This provides us with an image of authorship that is highly receptive and responsive to a receiving public — indeed the very last verse of the CE HV text is "What else would you like me to tell you?" (*kim aparam icchasi kiṃ bravīmi te*, HV 118.51). As such epic and purāṇic texts understand themselves as already being shaped by and responsive to a receiving audience, with an authority figure full of stories and wisdom doing his best to satisfy a (generally insatiable) interlocutor. As this question-and-response format is encoded in the very DNA of a work like the HV, it is only natural that what we call the CE text evolved in a continuous dialogic mode, expanding further in response to a larger receiving public over the centuries. My reading, then, is that poets and *bhaktas* within the tradition perceived the 92.62-70 passage as out of step with a better-known rendering of the Pārijāta affair, and I am content to invoke multiplicity of authorship to account for the initial equivocation or narrative hiccup at the level of the CE MBh and HV. At a certain moment, the public receiving this material objected: "But was there not a great battle between Kṛṣṇa and Indra over this tree, because of Satyabhāmā?", and a kind of narrative emendation or correction was created in the form of App. I 29-29A, which itself was informed by existing purāṇic, *kāvya* and no doubt oral traditions.

Having said all of this, I would like to close by admitting how fragile such hypotheses and methodological premises can be, and to acknowledge again the value of what I have called the (b) and (c) postures, as well as the weaknesses of the (a)-type reading which in the end I prefer, even while recognizing its limits. Ultimately, my hypothesis does require an inside-the-poet's-mind inference: not the mind of the author of HV 92.62-70, but that of the 29-29A poet. I can avoid any added assumptions about what the former was "really thinking," but precisely such assumptions must be made in order to articulate the motivations of the latter. I do feel that "the 29-29A poet wanted to correct and expand on the short no-conflict tree theft" is a stronger and more defensible inference than "the 92.62-70 poet really knew that there had been a great battle, but chose not to describe it." Even so, I am still claiming knowledge of the mind of a composer, which is always dangerous and problematic. Can one ever truly avoid such claims and projections when working with this kind of material?

Moreover, when we reflect on the dynamics of narration, composition and reception invoked above, a number of nagging questions emerge which, while unanswerable by the lights of any methodology, admittedly are perhaps more challenging to an (a)-type approach than to (b) or (c): Did anyone in ancient India actually read or hear recited a form of the HV that corresponds to Vaidya's CE text? Did they take in the text as a whole or in isolated pieces? If in pieces, does any of this business about narrative continuity matter at all? If as a whole, did they even perceive, and were they actually troubled by, what I have called narrative discontinuities? How did they understand the relationship between sources like the HV and ViP, which I have set out here in a diachronic sequence? As Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas*, would they not have seen them as all of a synchronous piece, and would this not make for a very different reading or reception posture than my own? Keeping such questions as these on

our working tables and desktops (both real and virtual) is bound to give us pause now and again, but I would like to think that we benefit in the long run from the tempering effect of such pauses.

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this piece for their many helpful suggestions and observations.

² Two titles that provide excellent entry-points to the literature on trees as ritual objects in South Asia are [19] and [10].

³ On the meanings of the term *khila* (“appendix,” “supplement”) and its application to the *Harivamśa*, see [7] and [16].

⁴ The time frame of 400 BCE - 400 CE for the MBh's composition and development, established most famously in [13: 397-398], has certainly become an academic tradition sustained more by habit than by substantial evidence (see [12: 15 note 57] for examples of the popularity of Hopkins' dating down until today; [25: lxvii] provides a more recent instance). However, if we put aside the vexed matter of origins, the notion that the critical editions of the MBh and HV reconstruct for us forms of the poems completed before the Gupta empire was in full swing (roughly early 5th century CE) does indeed seem very probable, while the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, which also relates Kṛṣṇa's life, seems to fall more squarely within the Gupta period itself (for more recent arguments here see [23: 68 and 363-420]; [24: 589–590]). For a review of dating hypotheses on the HV, and argument for its placement between the 1st-3rd centuries CE, see [8: 67-87].

⁵ To date, a few scholars have registered this variability in accounts of the tree's displacement. Mirashi [18] notes the brevity of the CE HV text and the fact that it does not involve a fight with Indra. He pairs this with MBh 7.10.22-23 (discussed above), thereby contrasting what he characterizes as a short non-confrontational version in the CE texts with later and longer versions involving a battle [18: 7-11]. Here Mirashi is of course correct that there is an enormous difference between the CE HV 92.62-70 reading and almost all later versions of the tale. However he is not aware of the MBh 5.128.48, HV 105.10, and HV 109.42-45 passages which clearly show that the CE MBh and HV texts do know of a battle with Indra over the tree. Similarly Charlotte Schmid, although cognizant of the MBh 5.128.48 verse, does not address the matter of confrontational and non-confrontational accounts both occurring in the CE texts [22: 248 notes 4 and 5]. Renate Söhnen-Thieme [26: 360–361] notes the MBh 5.128.48 verse which suggests, against MBh 7.10.22, that a fight took place for the tree, but does not mention the

other relevant passages. Sindhu S. Dange [9] meanwhile does not address this matter in her treatment of the episode.

⁶ The term *caitya* designates the tree as a sacred shrine or site of worship. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue: it is intriguing that this term, which has such a centrality and presence in Buddhist and Jain constructions of sacred space, is used here together with the notion that the tree permits those in its presence to remember their past lives (*yam āsādyā janaḥ sarvo jātiṃ smarati paurvikīm*, HV 92.64cd) — an extraordinary power that is ascribed to Buddhas and Jinas. The worship of trees and the *yakṣa* spirits dwelling in and around them cuts across and is taken into Brahminical, Buddhist and Jain worship systems alike (again, see [19]). As such, it is possible that the author of the HV 92 passage was cognizant of the special significance of the *caitya* in Buddhist contexts, and that there may even be an echo here of larger ongoing sectarian contestations over sacred spaces and the meaning thereof.

⁷ In fact at 92.66a most of Vaidya's manuscripts read *satyabhāmā*, nominative, and not accusative *satyabhāmām*, and make the object of $\sqrt{paś}$ a troop of divine Apsarases or celestial nymphs, seen by both Kṛṣṇa and Satyabhāmā. By contrast, the final CE reading followed here makes Satyabhāmā the Apsaras and object of Kṛṣṇa's glance.

⁸ For a variety of ViP dates see [29: lxxi-lxxiii]; [11: 24]; [21: 249]; [17: 18]. Happily a new English translation of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* by McComas Taylor will be appearing soon.

⁹ See [6: 17-20 and 56-59] on the question of Vaidya's exclusion of near-omnipresent passages from his CE text.