An Appreciation of, and Tribute to, Will Johnson on the Occasion of his Retirement
James M. Hegarty and Simon Brodbeck

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There are some well-known, anonymous, lines of appreciation about Sanskrit poetry. These state that drama is the best type of poetry, and that Kālidāsa’s Ṭhākura’s adopted daughter, Śakuntalā, is leaving to be married. Here we are marking a different sort of change: the retirement of a cherished colleague. As scholars and Englishmen, we will not express ourselves by means of tears and lamentations, as Kaṇva does; or at least not here. Nevertheless, ‘he leaves today’, and we wish to take some note of this. We will do it in the time-honoured academic fashion: over the course of this paper we will present the facts of Dr Johnson’s scholarly career and, having done this, we will present work that reflects his profound influence upon us.

Will Johnson: Indologist and Translator

Will Johnson was born on 4 November 1951 and grew up in Warwickshire. After a period of working in the theatre he entered the School of African and Asian Studies at the University of Sussex as a mature student, and he received his BA in Religious Studies with first-class honours in 1984. From there he moved to the University of Oxford, receiving his MPhil in Classical Indian Religion in 1987, and his DPhil in 1990 with a thesis entitled ‘The Problem of Bondage in Selected Early Jaina Texts’, completed under the supervision of Richard Gombrich. From 1991 to 1992 he was the Michael Coulson Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, and in 1992 he was appointed as Lecturer in Religious Studies at what was then the University of Wales College, Cardiff. He was promoted to the rank of Senior Lecturer in 1997, and to the rank of Reader in 2009.

During his academic career he was active as an external examiner for several different universities, as well as being a member of numerous panels, editorial boards, working groups, and professional bodies, and a consultant for several publishers. Within Cardiff University he was an impeccably amiable colleague who served as a member of the Senate for four years, and as acting Head of School (later Department) on four different occasions. A member of the Centre for the History of Religion in Asia since its launch in 2009, he was particularly active as editor of the centre’s online open-access journal, Asian Literature and Translation. He taught across the spectrum of South Asian religions and belles lettres, including language teaching in Sanskrit and Prakrit, and supervised two MPhils and three PhDs.1

The verse takes up the subject of parting and loss. Kaṇva’s adopted daughter, Śakuntalā, is leaving to be married. Here we are marking a different sort of change: the retirement of a cherished colleague. As scholars and Englishmen, we will not express ourselves by means of tears and lamentations, as Kaṇva does; or at least not here. Nevertheless, ‘he leaves today’, and we wish to take some note of this. We will do it in the time-honoured academic fashion: over the course of this paper we will present the facts of Dr Johnson’s scholarly career and, having done this, we will present work that reflects his profound influence upon us.


His research publications include substantial contributions on aspects of Jain religion and philosophy, translations of several Sanskrit classics (with meditations on translation), and reference works (including reviews). These publications influence and facilitate various groups of scholars, and guide students, and entertain and enrich the wider reading public; and they will continue to for many years.

Will Johnson: a Bibliography

The list presented here is not definitive with regard to published work, and omits a good deal of unpublished work. The reviews mentioned in the footnotes are merely indicative.


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\[\text{Reviews: Wade Osburn, Booklist 106.6 (15 November 2009); Ramachandra Guha, 'Older-Time Religion', Times Literary Supplement 5571 (8 January 2010), p. 5; Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, Archives de sciences sociales des religions 156 (2011), p. 184.}\]
Towards a Blank-Verse Mahābhārata

James M. Hegarty

In what follows, I will offer two examples of translations I have undertaken of the Mahābhārata into – not strictly iambic – blank verse. These emerged directly out of wide-ranging discussions with Will about that text, which both of us find irresistible.

Will and I shared, first of all, a sense of the musicality and rhythm of the Sanskrit source text. In particular, we admired the way in which the dominant metre of the text, the four-footed śloka, combined a steady pulse with a capacity for rhythmic variation. This is not unlike the relationship between the rhythm a kit drummer may lay down and the fills that punctuate this basic beat, while still having to conform to it. Will, in moving from syllable-timed Sanskrit to stress-timed English, sometimes chose to imbue his prose with rhythm, as illustrated by his 2005 Clay Sanskrit Library volume. More often, however, he saw the appeal of a more formal – metrical – approach, as illustrated by our introductory quotation from his The Recognition of Śakuntalā, and by his Sauprikaparvan. It was in the spirit of this more formal approach that I approached the Mahābhārata.

As well as metre, Will and I discussed the danger of exoticism in translation; this is to balance oneself on a razor’s edge. The Mahābhārata is an ancient text. Much of its content is opaque to contemporary Indian readers. Much more of it is inscrutable to non-Indian readers. Yet statements like these, sensible as they may sound, move us into dangerous theoretical territory; we might very well ask, ‘inscrutable in whose terms, and why?’ It is perfectly possible to read the Mahābhārata as a ‘modern’, of any type, and to experience it as a unified and compelling text. This is the case even if the reasons for so doing would be incomprehensible to the original authors or early audiences of the text. Shashi Tharoor’s Great Indian Novel is a ‘transcreation’ of the Mahābhārata that makes it into an account of twentieth-century Indian politics. Such a reading is as brilliant as it is anachronistic. It might be described, with little controversy, as interventionist. Artistic translations can also do this; if I wished, I might translate every mention of the in my view somewhat pompous Vidura in the Mahābhārata as Polonius; I could, if I was so minded, replace the one name with the other completely. This would be intertextually exciting, but would push beyond the bounds of what we refer to as scholarly translation. This is because scholarly translations tend to be reconstructive rather than interventionist. Quentin Skinner’s rule of thumb for the intellectual historian serves just as well for the scholarly translator:

For if a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing.10

Amongst other activities, then, scholarly translators reconstruct the text as it might have worked in the minds, and social realities, of readers no longer present to us. They are not limited to a ‘range of descriptions’, as they have a fragment of the original experience before them: the text itself, albeit separated from all contexts of reception bar the present one. This leaves translators with two options. They can tell people what they believe to have been the case by means of explanation based on analysis. The only way they can show them, however, is by means of the translation itself. Translation, more than any other activity, dramatises our engagement not just with the text, but with the hypothetical history of authorship and reception that we advocate (for scientific reasons, hopefully).

Such reconstructive translations are based, however, not just on exploration of the conditions of origin and transmission of our source texts, but also on aesthetic decisions; and this brings us squarely back to interventionism and exoticism. For example, scholarly translations that preserve a wide variety


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of terms in the source language stop readers in their tracks and ask, ‘Do you know what this word means?’ They also shout, ‘This is a foreign word and a foreign text!’ This is a defensible strategy, but a prose translation in hybrid English wears its alterity rather brashly. It might also be seen to cut against the reconstructive endeavour (at least for the reader). Reconstruction need not be experiential in its focus; one can reconstruct something without offering a sense of what it was like to use the thing in question. We can, for example, make stone tools that are perfect replicas of their ancient prototypes, but we cannot, as a consequence, skin an animal with them very efficiently. To approach the experience of using something requires an intervention. Obviously the use of a text is, in some sense, more complicated than the use of a stone tool. My discussions with Will convinced me that intervention was not to be mitigated, but instead enjoyed, as part of a scholarly reconstruction.

I approached my desk, then, with some trepidation. Having reconstructed – to the best of my abilities and the state of our knowledge – the early operating context of the text in question, I wanted to use my translation to communicate, in part, my findings. If this was theoretically inevitable, why not luxuriate in it? If the talismans of hybridism and literalism would not protect me, then my decision was to try to translate the Mahābhārata as it might have been experienced by its early users: as a robustly rhythmic poem without exaggerated diction, undue exoticism or archaisms.

What follows are selections from two different projects, both of which share the same metrical, reconstructive, yet highly interventionist approach to the translation of the Mahābhārata. The first is part of a translation of the Mahābhārata’s fourth book, the Virāṭaparvan. It is a composite reconstruction of the Malayālam-script Sanskrit manuscripts used in compiling the critical edition of the text. These manuscripts represent the most conservative branch of the southern recension, which expands the Mahābhārata at every turn. The goal of this endeavour is to create a readable English version of perhaps the most popular book of the southern recension at a fairly early stage in its development. More broadly, the goal was to begin to use the critical edition to explore the way in which the Mahābhārata changed over time, as it moved around the Indian subcontinent. After all, a stemma codicum, or family tree of manuscripts, once established, can be read both backwards and forwards. The second project is to translate all the passages in the Mahābhārata that relate to the life of Vidura (using, initially, only the critically reconstructed text, but, in time, expanding to include all significant variants).

I will present the opening canto of the Virāṭaparvan as it is found in the Malayālam manuscripts, followed by translations of the birth and death of Vidura in the critically reconstituted Mahābhārata. In both cases, parallel Sanskrit text is provided. These projects would not exist without Will’s influence, but their many faults and infelicities have, of course, nothing to do with him.

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11 Vishnu S. Sukthankar et al., eds, The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–71). More specifically, see vol. 5 of the same: Raghu Vira, ed., The Virāṭaparvan, being the Fourth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India, for the First Time Critically Edited (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1936).
In the Court of King Virāṭa, Canto 1

The Pāṇḍava princes, having lost everything due to the connivances of their cousin Duryodhana, have spent twelve years banished from their homes and families. In order to satisfy the conditions of their exile, they must spend a further year incognito or find themselves banished once more. This is quite a challenge for five, somewhat conspicuous, demigods and the wife that they share. The Virāṭaparvan opens with King Janamejaya, a descendant of the Pāṇḍavas who is hearing their story from the sage Vaiśampāyaṇa, in an inquisitive mood. He asks of the fate of his ancestors on the eve of the thirteenth, and pivotal, year of their exile.

DEDICATION

All hail Hari, the lord of all that is!

Honour Gaṇapati, who clears the way!

12 M₁ and M₂ omit the introductory mantra. Verses 1–4 are lost in M₃. M₄ reads: hariḥ svasti śrīvedavyāśya namah. The above is the dedication of M₅.

13 Italicised text indicates phrases added – in part for the sake of the English metre – that are not in the Sanskrit text. I have taken the decision to integrate in the translation those speech markers that, in the Sanskrit, are not metrically constrained and generally consist simply of the name of the character and the word ‘said’ (or sometimes just the name). I have used these few extra syllables to introduce a little extra information – useful to the English reader – about the speakers (or about the deity to which the text as a whole is being dedicated), which is well known to Indian users of the text. More broadly, italicisation is intended to allow the reader to be in no doubt as to when the translator has added material to the original text, although unfortunately there is no way other than by means of notes to indicate where I have left detail out. This has inevitably occurred in the movement from the 32-syllable Sanskrit couplet to the 20-syllable – mixed and sometimes hypermetric – iambic form I have selected for the English translation. This is an example of an intervention, as I have styled it above.
janamejaya uvāca
kathām virāṭanagare mama pūrvapitāmahāḥ
ajñātavāsam uṣītā duryodhanabhāyārditāḥ
pativrata mahābhāgā satatam satyavādini
draupadā śatmaham ajñātā duṣṭhikhitāvasat
te ca brāhmaṇamukhyāṣ ca sūtā paurogavaiḥ
ajñātavāsam avasaṃ kathām ca parīcārakāḥ

vaiśampāyaṇa uvāca

dharmena te bhyanujñātāḥ pāṇḍavaḥ satyavādināḥ
ajñātavāsaṃ vatsyantaḥ channā varṣaṃ trayodāsāṃ
topaviṣya vidvāṃsaḥ sahitāḥ saṃśītavrataḥ
ye tadbhaktā vasanti sma vanavāse tapasvinaḥ
tān abruvan mahātmānaḥ śiśṭāḥ prāṇjalayas tadāḥ
abhyanujñāpiṣyantasaṃ vīvāṃsaḥ dhīrtavrataḥ
viditaṃ bhavatāṃ sarvam dhārtarāstraḥ yathā vayam
chadmanā hṛtāryāś ca niḥsvāś ca bahuṣaḥ kṛtāḥ
usitāḥ ca vane vāsaṃ yathā dvādaśa vatsaraṇaḥ
bhavabhūr eva sahitā vanyāḥārā dvijottamaḥ

CANTO ONE

King Janamejaya, born to rule, said:
1 ‘How then, in fear, did my forefathers live,
Forced to dwell, disguised, in another’s court?

S And could Draupadī, devoted, sharp of tongue,
Live alone, in grief, unremarked upon?
S Amidst housekeepers and servants, chattels all,
Could such as these remain undiscovered?’

Vaiśampāyaṇa, the savant, replied:
5 ‘Commanded by Dharma, lord of the law,
To spend the thirteenth year hidden from view,
The noble brothers sat with brahmins pure,
Tempered by exile, upon the forest floor.

S Resolved as to their course, cultured and wise,
The king spoke, his hands cupped in supplication:
S “Good sirs, you know the way in which we were
Robbed of all comforts, beggarèd, left to starve.
S Twelve long years in the presence of the blessed,
Our fasts broken only by leaves and fruit.

14 The numbers on the left indicate a verse in the critical edition (CE) of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata. An S indicates that the verse occurs in the southern recension only. For the wording of both the numbered verses and those marked S, I have followed the wording of the Malayālam-script manuscripts (M). Five such manuscripts were used in the preparation of the CE’s Vīrāṭaparvan. The M-group manuscripts are southern in character, but contain a large number of unique readings. The numbers on the right-hand side of the page give the verse numbers of the reconstituted M-group text. These give simply a running total, and are designed to facilitate movement between the translation and the Sanskrit text. The verse numbers do not indicate the lines which introduce a character’s speech and which end in uvāca (‘he or she said’) followed by a daṇḍa. I would like to thank Simon Brodbeck for his comments on and corrections of the present text and translation.

15 The M manuscripts omit this line, but I have included it for the sake of clarity.
ajñātavāsasamayam śeṣam varṣaṁ trayodaśam ǀ

tad vatsyāmo vayaṁ channās tad anuñātum arthaḥ ǀ
suyodhanaś ca duṣṭātmā kārṇaś ca sahasaubaḷaḥ ǀ
jānantā viśamaṁ kuryur asūvām atyantavairiṇaḥ ǀ
yuktācāraś ca yuktāś ca kṣaye svasya janasya ca ǀ
durātmanāṃ hi kas teṣaṁ viśvasāṁ gantum arhati ǀ
api nas tad bhaved bhūyo yad vayaṁ brāhmaṇaṁ saha ǀ
samastāṁ svesu rāṣṭreṇu svarājyaṁ sthāpaye mahāñha ǀ
ity uktvā duḥkhaśokārtṛtaḥ śucir dharmasutas tadā ǀ
saṁmūrčito 'bhavad rājā sāśrūṇaṁ tyuḍhiṣṭhirah ǀ
tam athāśvāsayan sarve brāhmaṇaṁ bhrātṛbhīḥ saha ǀ
atha dhaumyo 'braṇīd vākyam mahāratham nrpatiṁ tadā ǀ
rājaṇ vidvān bhavān dāntāḥ satyasāndho jītendriyaḥ ǀ
naivaṁvidhāḥ pramahyanti naraḥ kasyāṁ cid āpadi ǀ
deivai apy āpadaḥ āprāptaḥ channais ca bahubhis tadā ǀ
tatra tatra sapatnānāṁ nigrāhārtham mahātmabhīh ǀ
indreṇa niṣadhaṁ prāpya girirastāṃśrame tadā ǀ
channenoṣya kṛtaṁ karma dviṣatāṁ balaniṅgaraḥ ǀ
viśuṇāṃgaṁgirīṁ prāpya tadādītyāṁ nivatsyatāḥ ǀ
garbhe vadhārtham dāityānāṁ ajñātrenositaṁ cīrām ǀ
proṣya vāmanarūṣena pracchannam brahmācāriṇāḥ ǀ
baler purā hṛtaṁ rājyaṁ vikramaś ca taṁ śrutam ǀ
ārvṛṇa vaṣataḥ channam ūrau brahmaśriṇāḥ tadā ǀ
yat kṛtaṁ tāta lokeṣu ca sarvam śrutam tvayā ǀ
pracchannam cāpi dharmājinaḥ harinā vṛtraṅgaraḥ ǀ
vajraṁ praviśya śakrasya yat kṛtaṁ tac ca taṁ śrutam ǀ
hutāśanena yac cāpāḥ praviśya channam āsataḥ ǀ
vibuddhānāṁ hitam karma kṛtaṁ tac cāpi te śrutam ǀ
20

S

Now only the thirteenth year remains, wherein,
Bound by our word, we shall hide. So let us go!
S

King Duryodhana with all his allies,
Who are our sworn and forsaken, upon
Finding us, plan to slaughter one and all.
S

For who will trust in those in whom malice
Resides? So we ask you: can that which was ours
Be ours again? Claims now lost be reconfirmed?”
S

His voice breaking, consumed by grief, noble
Yudhiṣṭhira collapsed, insensible.
S

All rushed to his side, making him sit,
And Dhaumya – *their priest* – spoke words of comfort:

“My king, wise lord, ever faithful and firm,
In adversity, men like you do not fail.
The very gods have used disguise in order
To defeat their foes in times of trouble.

S

Indra, *king of the gods*, lived unknown in
A hermitage to confound his enemies.
Viṣṇu, *lord of all*, hid on a mountain
Biding his time before even his birth!

S

You know very well how he descended,
Disguised as a dwarf, to free heaven and earth.
And you have often heard what that great sage
Aurva did, hidden in his mother’s thigh.

S

Even Kṛṣṇa, unbeknownst to all, entered
Indra’s thunderbolt to kill the serpent king.
Moreover, Fire itself sank in the waters,
Lying hidden to aid the gods. This you know!

S

The refulgent sun, dwelling for a time
on earth, consumed all who stood against him.

S

16 M, *has praviṣya chadānasatā* (chadana + āsata – chadana meaning ‘covering’ etc.), with little impact on the meaning of the verse.
viṣṇunā vasatā cāpi grhe daśarathasya ca l

daśagrīvo hataś channaṃ samyuge bhūmakarmanā II S II
evam ete mahātmānaḥ prachannās tatra tatra ha l
ajayaṅ chāṭravān mukhyāṁ tathā tvam api ṣeṣyasya II S II
iti dhaumyena dharmajno vākyaih samprariḥṣitaḥ l
śaṭrabuddhīḥ punar bhūtā vyāṣṭambhāḥ yudhiṣṭhirāḥ II S II
aṭhābrāvīn mahābāhur bhūmaseno mahābalaḥ l
rājāḥnāṃ balināṃ śreṣṭho girā sampariḥṣayaan II S II
avekṣaya mahārāja tava gāṇḍīvadhanvā l
dharmānugatayā buddhyā na kim cīt sāhasam kṛtam II S II
sahadevo mayā nityaṃ nakulaś ca nivāritaḥ l
śaktu vidhvaṃsane teṣāṃ śatrughnaḥ bhūmakrīmaṇau II S II
na vayaṃ vartmaḥ hāsyāmo yasmin yokṣyati no bhavān l
tad vidhattaḥ bhavān sarvam kṣipraṃ ṣeṣyāmahe parān II S II
ity ukte bhūmasenena brāhmanāḥ paramāśiṣāḥ l
prayuṣyāprcchyaḥ bhаратān yathā svān prayayur graṇḥān II S II
sarve vedavido mukhyā yatayo munayas tadā l
aśīr uktyā yathānugam punārdaṇānāṃkṣiṇaḥ II S II
te tu bhṛtyāś ca dūtaś ca śilpināḥ paricārakaḥ l
anujīnāpya yathānugam punārdaṇānāṃkṣiṇaḥ II S II
saha dhaumyena vidvāṃsaḥ tathā te pāṇca pāṃḍavāḥ l
utthāya prayayur viṛāḥ krṣṇāṁ ādāya bhārataḥ II S II
kroṣmatram atikramya tasmād vāśāṃ nimittaḥā l
śvobhūte manuḥavyāghṛś channavāśāṃrtham utoḍāḥ II S II
prthak śaṭravīḍhaḥ sarve sarve manvitrāradāḥ l
saṃdhiḥvibrakāḷaṁ maṇtrāya samupviśan II S II
nivrṛtavanvāśās te satyaśaṃdha yaśasvināḥ l
akurvata punar mantram saha dhaumyena pāṃḍavāḥ II S II
aṭhābrāvīd dharmarājaḥ kuntiputro yudhiṣṭhirāḥ l
bhṛtṛ śriṅām ca samprekșya dhaumyam ca kurunandana II S II

And Viṣṇu, of mighty deeds, incarnate
As Rāma, cut the ten throats of Rāvana.
Indeed, just as these great beings conquered
Their foes by means of subterfuge, so shall you!
Yudhiṣṭhīra, much heartened by the words
Of Dhaumya, once again became resolute.
Then statuesque Bīma gave a short speech
Designed to delight his mighty brother:
“O king, with his dread bow, mighty Arjuna
Has not acted in haste, by your command.
Sahadeva and Nakula, held back
By me, though greatly skilled, destroy no one.
What you ordain, my lord, we always do!
So say the word and we will conquer all!”
The mighty one fell silent; and the brahmins,
Uttering blessings, departed.
Then the renunciants took their leave; each
Offered blessings, promising to return.
The brothers set off with their retinue.
Full of regret, they made heartfelt obeisance.
Their wife and priest beside them, the five sons of
Pāṇḍu stood tall, perfect in all respects.
A league distant, those tigers amongst men,
Intent upon the challenge before them,
Settled down to talk; each had the measure
Of conflict; each their science and their magic.
Surrounded by resplendent forest dwellers,
The brothers, with Dhaumya, started to speak.
Yudhiṣṭhīra, having pondered wisdom,
Had something to say to his family.’
Vaiśampāyana, quick of wit, went on:

2. ‘Well, safe in his forest retreat, that king, Pious Yudhiṣṭhira, emboldened now
By boons given by lord Dharma himself,
3. Having told all to the gathered brahmins,
Gave them ample fuel for their sacred fires.\(^{17}\)
4. Magnanimous yet proud, Dharma's own son,
His brothers before him, addressed them all:\(^{18}\)
5. “A dozen years away from home, and now
the thirteenth; arduous and difficult.
6. Upright Arjuna, son of Kuntī, shine
A light for us; let us live in comfort,
7. our foes fooled, content with our lady wife.”\(^{19}\)

Arjuna, that hero amongst men, said:

7. “My lord, with the protection of lord Dharma,
We shall surely go forth unrecognised.
8. But I will list those kingdoms fit for purpose,
Fine and secure, so that you might choose one.
9. All around us are tribes peaceful and pleasant:
Cedis, Matsyas, Sālvas, and Videhans,
Bālhikas, Sūrasenas, Kalirigans,
Not to mention the mighty Magadhans.\(^{20}\)
And what of King Virāṭa, whose city is,
I have heard, fecund, cosmopolitan,

And full of great wealth, O scourge of your foes?
Where our king leads, there, indeed, we shall follow!
In which place, do you wish to dwell?”

Yudhiṣṭhira, that noble lord, replied:
“As the blessed lord of dharma decreed,
So shall it be, O you of mighty arms.

Having debated the matter, I shall
Select a place well-suited to our needs.
The esteemed King Virāṭa will know of us.
Ever welcoming, he keeps the law of kings.
Renowned as a perfect chief, abiding
In old age; him I choose, my sinless lord.

My decree: twelve months in Virāṭa’s service.
In his city we will find employment,
Passing time according to our talents.
State therefore what you wish to do, Kuru’s son!”

Arjuna, that best of bowmen, replied:
“Divine lord, what work will you undertake
For the Matsyan king? What delights await you?

Upright in thought and deed, ever truthful,
You are neither covetous nor bitter.
Yet service will suit you ill, as will disguise.

Kuru is a noted ancestor of the Pāṇḍava brothers. Verses 13, 14 and 15 differ markedly
in S as compared to the CE. I follow S (which includes M).

Matsya is the name of the kingdom over which Virāṭa rules.
My king, the abode of all virtues, suffers
A penance, the wrong of which is all too clear.26

Lord, you know nothing of the common man;
How will you endure his ceaseless labours?"

Arjuna spoke thus and the king responded.

Yudhiṣṭhīra, first amongst men, replied:

"Learn now of the work I shall undertake
Upon reaching the halls of King Virāṭa:
I am minded to become court-gambler,
Skilled at play and known to all as Kanka;
Throwing down gems and gold and ivory
With those bewitching dice of red and black.27

Luck-filled, mysterious and beautiful,
They are, my dear, the sweetest prize of all!

The delight of the court, yet mastered by few,
Does not the pulse quicken at a single touch?
Scattering those beauties on level ground,
I will play. Such sport suits me well, good sir.29

26 S uses the word tapas to describe the activities of Yudhiṣṭhīra. This seems a knowing usage, evoking images of self-abnegation (perhaps ironically, but equally, perhaps not).
27 I take the references to jewels and gold and ivory to be metonyms referring to game pieces (or to items staked). This is implicit in my translation, but is made explicit in Garbutt’s rendering of the parallel verse of the Nilakaṅṭha text (the Sanskrit of which differs slightly). See Kathleen Garbutt, trans., Mahābhārata Book Four: Virāṭa (New York: New York University Press / JJC Foundation, 2006), p. 29.
28 I took the decision to retain a focus on the tokens of play (as a category that includes both the jewels and the dice – strictly speaking ‘nuts’ – mentioned in the previous śloka). This seems a defensible strategy for a translator faced with an elusive and ill-understood game that is being evoked by an ancient – or at least medieval – society in respect of an even more ancient society (i.e. the one imagined in the poem). It is also possible that vaiḍūryan kāñcanān dāntān refers to the dice rather than the stake, as Paul Thieme suggests; see ‘Chess and Backgammon (Tric-Trac) in Sanskrit Literature’, in his Kleine Schriften (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984), p. 214.

24 The second half of this śloka is different to that of the CE text.
25 I have followed M5 in reading the verb here as nivāpsyāmi.
kaṅka nāmnā parivrājha bhavisyāmi sabhāsadaḥ l
jyotiṣe śakunijñāne nimitte cākṣakauśale ॥ S ॥
brāhmaṃ vedam adhiyānaḥ vedāngāni ca sarvaḥ l
dharmakāmārthamokṣeṣu nitiśāestreṣu pāragaḥ l
prṣto 'haṃ kathayiśyāmi rājñāḥ priyahitaṃ vacaḥ ॥ S ॥
āsaṃ yudhiṣṭhirasyāham purā prānasamaḥ sakhā l
iti vakṣyāmi rājanaṃ yadi mām anuyokṣyate ॥ 22 ॥
virāṭanagare channa evamyuktaḥ sadā vase ॥ S ॥

iti śrīmāhābhārate virāṭaparvanī prathamo 'dhyāyaḥ ॥ 1 ॥

S The sage Kaṅka will be welcome at court;
Astrologer, augur, a player of games;
Master of the Vedas; a brahmin who
Also knows of the goals of life and rule.31
He will provide advice fit for a king. 65
If he is asked, he will tell them he was
Yudhiṣṭhira’s great friend, dear to him as life.32
In thrall to another, thus will I hide.”

THUS ENDS THE FIRST CANTO OF THE BOOK OF VIRAṬA

29 I have transposed a vocative from the previous śloka here.
30 I use the colophon of the CE. I have omitted a line that is present in M, but not universally attested amongst these manuscripts.
31 I abbreviate here the standard enumeration of the goals of life (dharma, kāma, artha and mokṣa) as well as the political treatises (niti-śāstra) and the materials ancillary to the Vedas (vedāṅga).
32 I have adjust the pronominal usage in this sequence of verses for poetic effect and to underline what I take to be the despondency of the final line here, in which I return to the first person.
śūle protaḥ purāṇarśir acoraś coraṇkayā
aṇīmaṇḍavya iti vai vikhyātaḥ sumahāyasāḥ
sa dharmam āhūya purā maharśir idam uktavān
iṣṭkayā mayā bālyād ekā viddhā sakuntikā
tat kilbiṣam smare dharma nānyat pāpam āham smare
tan me sahasrasamitaṁ kasmān nehaṁjyati tapaḥ
garīyān brāhmanavadhāḥ sarvabhūtavadhād yataḥ

tena śāpema dharmo ’pi śudrayonāv ajāyata
vidvān vidurārupena dhārmī tanur akilbiṣi

The Birth and Death of Vidura

In the book of the descent of the primary lineages (ādi-vamśa-avataraṇa-parvan) of the Ādiparvan (‘The Book of Beginnings’) of the Mahābhārata, which tells of the divine origins of many of the characters, we find the following brief account of the birth of Vidura (chapter 57).

Accused of being a thief, Aṇīmaṇḍavya
The sage, old, though potent still, was impaled.
Outraged, he spoke thus to the god of Law:
‘From callow youth, long ago, I stabbed a bird.
This wrong I know, but none other comes to mind.
Why then was my abstinent life ignored?
There is no higher sin than slaying a Brahmin; you shall be born in a Śūdra’s womb!’
Cursed by that sage, subtle Dharma, righteous, faultless and true, took birth as Vidura.

The death of Vidura occurs towards the end of the Mahābhārata, in chapter 33 of the Āśramavāśikaparvan (‘The Book of the Residence in the Hermitage’). At this point in the story, the Pāṇḍavas have already defeated the Kauravas in a horrific war. In the aftermath of the war, the remnants of the Kauravas (chiefly the elderly generation, who were not combatants in the aforementioned war) have to make peace with the Pāṇḍavas. They co-habit, in an uneasy relationship, in the royal capital. Their king is the Pāṇḍava monarch, Yudhiṣṭhira. Vidura has been a trusted adviser of both sides. Dhrtarāṣṭra in his old age, and ever-mindful of the losses he has sustained, retires to the forest with his wife, Gāndhārī, as well as Kuntī (the mother of the Pāṇḍavas) and Vidura. They plan to lead an ascetic life in a forest hermitage. Unbeknownst to the characters, Vidura is the incarnation of the god of religious law, Dharma, on earth. Dharma was cursed to an earthly birth when he was overly severe in his judgement of the life of an ascetic called Māṇḍavya (as we heard above). Complicating matters is the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is the son of Dharma, though he is the also the son of one King Pāṇḍu.
Dhṛtarāṣṭra said: ‘Vidura is well, My dear. He performs strict austerities. Seen here and there, he lives on air, his bones And veins in stark relief. Just then, with matted locks and smeared with filth, Naked but for the pollen of wild flowers, Slave-born Vidura was seen from afar. Turning to look at them, he stopped in his tracks. Yudhiṣṭhira gave chase; alone, he ran Into the woods. Here and there, seen and unseen, He vigorously pursued him, shouting ‘O Vidura! It is I your cherished king!’ Deep in the lonely woods, noble Vidura Ceased to run. He took refuge by a tree; A mere shadow of a man, wasting away, Yet known in an instant by the king. And then, coming into his presence, that king, Within earshot, said, ‘I am Yudhiṣṭhira.’ Vidura, unblinking, fixed his gaze upon His lord, and by it was united with him. Limb on limb and breath on breath, Vidura Merged their senses and their beings entire. Wise Vidura, as if afire, entered The king’s body, with his yogic power. Leaning against a tree, eyes fixed upon, The king saw that life had now fled his frame. Full of vigour, suffused with new powers The Dharma King, Pāṇḍu’s son, remembered all. Full of knowledge, he recalled lives gone by; Just as had been described to him before. Yudhiṣṭhira thought to cremate his friend, But a heavenly voice began to speak:
bho bho rājan na dagdhavyam etad vidurasamjñakam l
kalevaram ihaitat te dharma eṣa sanātanaḥ ll 31 ll
lokāḥ saṃtānakā nāma bhaviṣyanty asya pārthiva l
yatidharmam avāpto 'sau naiva śocyaḥ paraṇṭapa ll 32 ll

'O king, burn not this man; you are him
And he is you; he is the god Dharma!
My prince, heaven awaits him. He goes now to
An ascetic's rest, well-earned. Do not grieve!'
Libretto for Viśvāmitra and Nandini

Simon Brodbeck

The inspiration for this piece is threefold. Firstly, a script that Will let me read, for a dramatisation of the story of Nala, which has not yet been produced, but which I hope will be in due course. That script showed me that translation may be from one medium to another as well as from one language to another. Secondly, Gustav Holst’s choral works from the Sanskrit, particularly his one-act opera Sāvītrī (sic; opus 25, 1908) and his various Hymns from the Rig Veda (opus 24, 1907–08; opus 26, 1908–12). Lastly, Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s book of Ballets Without Music, Without Dancers, Without Anything, which shows the validity of presenting, in one medium, an account of an artwork putatively intended for, but as yet unrealised in, another. Adopting and adapting Céline’s approach allows me to write the libretto for a balletic opera without composing music or choreographing dances. The music and dancing are as supplied by the reader. The reader should also feel free – as any composer surely would – to elongate specific moments by repeating lyrics where desired.

The Story

The heart of this opera is a dramatisation of a story narrated to the Pāṇḍavas and their mother Kunī by the gandharva Citraratha at Mahābhārata 1.165. In a nutshell: King Viśvāmitra, out hunting, visits Vasiṣṭha’s ashram, takes a fancy to his cow Nandini, and attempts to appropriate her; she resists by producing a jungly army which overpowers his troops; and as a result he abandons his royal role and, through fearsome austerities, becomes a brahmin.

Several of the story’s themes – the forest, and conflict between its inhabitants and its visitors – are already alive in the context of Citraratha’s narration: Citraratha has attempted to prohibit the Pāṇḍavas’ access to the River Gāṅgā, but has been overpowered by Arjuna Pāṇḍava. In this story told by Citraratha, in contrast, the visitor fails to get what he wants from the forest.

This is one of several stories in early Sanskrit literature that feature conflict between Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra. It narrates the first meeting of the two men. At Mahābhārata 1.165 it is prompted by Arjuna in light of what Citraratha has said about sage Vasiṣṭha in the immediately preceding chapters.

A longer version of this story is found at Rāmāyaṇa 1.50–55; there it is followed by a string of other stories about what happened to Viśvāmitra while he was attempting to become a brahmin, which he finally manages at Rāmāyaṇa 1.64.10–19. A shorter version is also found, at Mahābhārata 9.39.12–29, in connection with Balarāma’s visit to Rusaṅgu’s ashram, where Viśvāmitra’s transformation into a brahmin is said to have occurred.

Adheesh Sathaye’s discussion of this story in his book on Viśvāmitra focuses upon Viśvāmitra’s rare feat of becoming a brahmin even though he was not born in a brahmin family. This focus is also evident in Sathaye’s two articles on the Mahābhārata’s Viśvāmitra legends, and picks up on a primary

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33 Hear for example the 1965 recordings of Sāvītrī and the third group of Choral Hymns (with the Purcell Singers and the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by the composer’s daughter Imogen Holst; Decca reissue, 2011).
35 For the chapter with full critical apparatus, see Vishnu S. Sukthankar, ed., The Adīparvan, being the First Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India, for the First Time Critically Edited (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), pp. 684–90.
38 That short version does not include the episode of Viśvāmitra coveting and attempting to appropriate Vasiṣṭha’s cow; rather, the cow emits the jungly army at Vasiṣṭha’s behest after the misbehaviour of Viśvāmitra’s soldiers.
39 See Sathaye, Crossing the Lines, pp. 72–76 (on the Rāmāyaṇa version), and pp. 87–88 (comparing the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa versions).
concern of this story and of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, which encourages sticking to the class – and thus the class tasks – one was born into.

Before discussing the libretto and the translation strategies used in its production, I would like to mention that the story of Nandini is tailored not just to its most immediate narrative context, but also to the wider context of the *Mahābhārata*’s plot. When they encounter Citraratha, the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī are travelling towards Kāmpilya, where Arjuna will win the hand of Draupadī, who will then marry all five Pāṇḍava brothers. Arguably the *Mahābhārata*’s most crucial scene is the later dicing scene of *Mahābhārata* 2.53–65, in which Duryodhana Kaurava and his brothers, having apparently won Draupadī from their Pāṇḍava cousins in a throw of dice, proceed to manhandle her, abuse her, and then attempt to strip her naked, while her husbands look on helplessly, for they have already been staked and lost in previous throws and thus they are slaves who cannot initiate their own actions. The indignities visited upon Draupadī in this scene are the major factor driving the *Mahābhārata* narrative towards the war between the two sets of cousins; and the abuse of Nandini in *Mahābhārata* 1.165 seems in some ways to mirror the scene, with Vasiṣṭha in the same position as the Pāṇḍavas – since he is prevented, by the nature of his role (brahmin role in his case, slave role in theirs), from intervening to protect the suffering female. In both stories the female character, thrown back upon her own resources, is effective in resisting her appropriation and ill-treatment. Draupadī does this by the power of argument, and also by the apparent power of her own integrity, whereby when Duḥṣāsana Kaurava attempts to strip her, her clothes are miraculously replenished and her modesty preserved; and Nandini does it by producing obedient armies from her orifices. It is as if Citraratha is giving the Pāṇḍavas a disguised account of the crucial crisis in the marriage they are soon to begin; or it is as if Vaiśampāyana, the narrator of the story of the Pāṇḍavas, is giving Janamejaya, its primary listener, a disguised analogue of a crucial scene yet to come.

### The Libretto

Although the direct speech in the source text transfers easily to an opera libretto, the descriptions of the action often do not. Lorna Hardwick describes this basic narratological problem:

Epic poetry has a narrator through whom other voices are articulated and by whom the listeners’ experience is shaped ... In drama that explicit narrative frame is hidden behind the characters in the play and the action on the stage. A different kind of ‘reality’ is created, that of the immediate world of the stage in which people move and gesture and interact as well as speak and in which they rarely address the audience directly. The audience are spectators, and the range of imaginative responses and ranges of meaning can be directed and limited by what is represented on the stage and how it is represented ... [I]n general a staged performance which operates as visual spectacle rather than aural...

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41 For a study of Yudhisthira Pāṇḍava’s behaviour at this juncture stressing his status as a slave, see Mary Brockington, ‘Husband or Slave? Interpreting the Hero of the *Mahābhārata*’, in John Brockington, ed., *Battle, Bards and Brāhmīns* (Papers of the 13th World Sanskrit Conference, vol. 2; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012).

42 *Mahābhārata* 2.61.41. In the next verse this is called tad adbhutatamān loke, ‘the greatest miracle in the world’. On the details of the manuscript evidence here, see Alf Hiltebeitel,
experience has to develop narrative techniques which can be integrated into the staging.  

I have sometimes translated the text’s descriptions of action as stage directions, sometimes as additional sung lines, and sometimes not at all. Sometimes I have used additional characters – the boy, the chorus – to make details of the action explicit in cases where the description in the source text is inconveniently general or summative.

The following presentation of *Mahābhārata* 1.165 gives the Sanskrit text in the first column, van Buitenen’s English translation in the second, and the libretto in the third; and so even readers who do not know Sanskrit will easily see what I have done in terms of compression and expansion of the source text.

The most obvious expansion is the framing of the story with two additional songs performed by the chorus. These are translations of hymns from the *Ṛgveda*: 10.146 credited to Devamuni Airamā and dedicated to the (female) forest, and 10.127 credited to Rātri Bhāradvājī or Kuṣika Saubhara and dedicated to the (female) night. These hymns have been chosen because their subjects fit well with that of the story they here frame. The three female figures are intended to function as one. The new context given to these hymns by the story of Nandinī allows them to resonate in new ways; consider 10.146.5, for example, and the she-wolf and he-wolf in 10.127.6, and the cows and conqueror

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44 J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *Mahābhārata Volume 2: Book 2. The Book of the Assembly Hall; Book 3. The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 331–33. I have separated van Buitenen’s translation into individual verses in order to present it in parallel with the Sanskrit, and I have added superscript verse numbers. I have also altered the translation slightly: in v. 3 I have corrected ‘Kānyakubja’ to ‘Kanyakubja’ (cf. van Buitenen’s note, p. 463); in v. 15 I have relocated the clause ‘which was named Nandī’, which van Buitenen places earlier (after ‘flawless and lovely cow’); and in v. 38 I have added ‘or seven’ and changed ‘rocks’ to ‘missiles’.

45 Incidentally, Holst adapted both of these hymns for solo voice and piano, although neither were included in the collections he published. See Raymond Head, ‘Holst and India (II)’, *Tempo* (new series) 160 (1987), pp. 29 n., 33, 37.


Viśvāmitra and Nandinī

Cast (in Order of Appearance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td>soprano, alto, tenor, bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest creatures</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viśvāmitra</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunters</td>
<td>tenor, baritone, bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasiṣṭha</td>
<td>baritone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>treble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandinī</td>
<td>mezzo-soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest warriors</td>
<td>bass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indra</td>
<td>bass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rgveda 10.146

arānyāṇy arānyāṇy āsau yā preva naśyāsī l
Kaṭhā grāmaṃ na pīcchasi na tvā bhīr iva vindatīṃ mī l 1 l

vṛṣāravāya vadāte yad upāvāti ciccikaḥ l
Aṅghāṭibhūr iva dhāvayāṃ aranyāṇir māhiyate mī 2 l

uṭa gāvā ivādanty uṭa veśmēva drśyate l
Uṭo aranyāṇīḥ sāyaṃ śaṅkaṭir iva sarjati mī 3 l

gām aṅgaisa ā ṣāvayati dārv aṅgaiso apāvadhit l
Vasām aranyāṇyāṃ sāyaṃ akrūkṣad iti manyate mī 4 l

na vā aranyāṇir hānty anayaś cen nābhigacchāti l
Svādōḥ phalāśya jagdhvāya yathaṅkāṃmāṃ ni pādyate mī 5 l

āṅjānagandhim surabhīṃ bāhvaṃnām akṛṣṭivalām l
Prāham mṛgāṇāṃ maṭtāram aranyāṇim āsaṃsiṣān mī 6 l

Scene 1: the forest.

Chorus:

Forest, goddess forest
You seem to vanish before us
Why don’t you want to come into town?
Aren’t you at all afraid?

When one chirping bird
Is egged on by another
The forest rejoices
As if she’s dancing with cymbals

The forest at evening
Is like cattle feeding
Like a homestead come into view
Like a creaking cart

You think someone’s calling their cow
You think someone’s chopping their wood
Stay in the forest at evening
You’ll think it’s someone screaming

But the forest won’t cause harm
Unless someone else attacks;
You can eat tasty fruit
Then rest at your ease

I praise the goddess forest
The mother of the deer
Fragrant with the smell of balm
Unploughed but full of food

Dance of the forest creatures (incl. jigs, hornpipes, reels, waltzes).
Mahābhārata 1.165

Arjuna sai:
What caused the feud between Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, who both lived in holy hermitages? Tell it to us all.

Gandharva sai:
This story of Vasiṣṭha they call purāṇic Lore in all three worlds, Pārtha. Learn from me how it was.

In Kanyakubja once sat a great king, O bull of the Bhāratas, who was famed in the world as Gādhi, devoted to the Law of Truth.

This Law-spirited king had a son with plentiful troops and mounts, a crusher of enemies, who was known as Viśvāmitra.

He was wont to hunt with his ministers far out in the wilderness, shooting deer and boar in the lovely deserts and wastelands.

Once, when questing for deer, he became wan with fatigue and thirst, and he went to Vasiṣṭha’s hermitage, O best of men.

The great-spirited Vasiṣṭha had a Cow of Plenty, which yielded anything he wished when he told her to yield.

Enter King Viśvāmitra and the hunters.
Dance of the hunters.

Scene 2: Vasiṣṭha’s ashram.
Vasiṣṭha and a boy are there.

Enter Viśvāmitra and the hunters, exhausted.

Vasiṣṭha:
King Viśvāmitra, son of King Gādhi of Kanyakubja
Welcome to you and your friends
What an honour
Here is water – wash the dust from your feet
I’ll see about some forest food

The boy brings food and drink, with announcements.

Nandini dances unseen.
grāmyāraṇyāḥ ca duṣdhūḥ ca | šaḍrasaṁ cāmṛtarasaṁ raśāyanam anuttamam ǁ 10 ǁ

bhōjanīyaṁ peyāṁ bhakṣyāṁ viṇdhi ca | lehyāṁ amṛtakalpāṁ coṣyāṁ ca tathārjuna ǁ 11 ǁ
taiḥ kāmaṁ sarvasampūrṇaṁ pūjitaḥ ca mahāpatiḥ ǀ sāṁtyaṁ sabalaś caiva tutoṣa sa bhrśaṁ nṛpaḥ ǁ 12 ǁ

10. Herbs of village and woods she yielded, and milk, and incomparable elixir with all six tastes, like the Elixir of Immortality itself,

11. and various foodstuffs of the kind that are chewed, or drunk, or licked, or sucked, tasty like elixir, Arjuna.

12. The king was honored with all he desired in great plenty, and he and his minister and his escort became greatly content.

Boy: Root beer
Viśvāmitra and hunters: God bless you
Boy: Pink berry pakora
Viśvāmitra and hunters: God keep you
Boy: Chateau Bhārgava, sparkling
Viśvāmitra and hunters: We are honoured
Boy: Mushroom and wildflower salad with chive croutons and cottage cheese

Viśvāmitra: What a treat
Boy: Côtes du Gomati, aged in oak
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Tasty drop
Boy: Roast peacock with beetroot and pomegranate stuffing
Viśvāmitra and hunters: You spoil us
Boy: Venison samsāra with brahmin potatoes and soothsayer sauce

Viśvāmitra and hunters: Magnificent
Boy: Domaine du Niśāda
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Delightful
Boy: Sprouts-of-the-season soufflé
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Succulent
Boy: Rhinoceros and wild garlic biryani
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Delicious
Boy: Spiced mango kulfi
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Stupendous
Boy: Cream cocktails

Viśvāmitra and hunters: Amazing
Boy: Fruits-of-the-forest fondant fancies
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Delectable
Boy: Almond fudge
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Unbelievable
Boy: Blossom brandy and butter tea
Viśvāmitra and hunters: Butter tea, butter tea

Viśvāmitra: This is the food of the gods
Vasiṣṭha: My cow Nandinī yields whatever is desired
Viśvāmitra: Nandinī, Nandinī
Enter Nandinī. Viśvāmitra sees her.

Viśvāmitra: Oh Vasiṣṭha, your cow Nandinī ...

Viśvāmitra (to himself):

Six feet long, five feet round, three feet wide
Smooth flanks and thighs
Beautiful eyes, handsome figure
Prodigious breasts, she's perfect
Lovely tail, pointy ears, pretty horns
Feast for the mind
Neck and head so long and thick
Pale as a swan, pale as the moon

Viśvāmitra and Nandinī dance together.

Viśvāmitra (to Vasiṣṭha):

I'll give you ten million cows
I'll give you my kingdom
Take the kingdom – enjoy it, sage
But give me Nandinī

Vasiṣṭha:

I need butter to feed the gods
And ancestors and guests
I can't give up rich Nandinī
Not even for your kingdom

Viśvāmitra:

I am the government, you are a scholar
Good with your texts and your toils
Scholars are peaceful and self-composed
It's not their role to be bold
But if you don't give me my beloved
For ten million cows
I won't neglect my role
I'll take your cow by force

Viśvāmitra saluted the beautiful milch cow of Vasiṣṭha, which was named Nandī, and said contentedly to the hermit,

Make Nandinī over to me for a myriad cows or my kingdom! Rule my kingdom, great hermit!

Vasiṣṭha said:

I keep Nandinī for offerings to the Gods, my guests, and my ancestors, and for melted butter oblations. I cannot give her away, even for your kingdom, prince sans blame.

Viśvāmitra said:

I am a baron, you are a brahmin with no more means than asceticism and Vedic study. How can there be resistance in brahmans who are serene and have mastered themselves?

If you do not give me the cow I want for a myriad of mine, I shall not forsake my own Law but take it away from you by force!

With astonishment, he looked at Vasiṣṭha's flawless and lovely cow: she was six measures long, three wide, and five around, with fine flanks and thighs, prominent frog eyes, good carriage, fat udder, beautiful tail, pointed ears, handsome horns, and long, thick neck and head.

With astonishment, he looked at Vasiṣṭha's flawless and lovely cow: she was six measures long, three wide, and five around, with fine flanks and thighs, prominent frog eyes, good carriage, fat udder, beautiful tail, pointed ears, handsome horns, and long, thick neck and head.
Vasiṣṭha said:
You are a king at the head of an army, a baron of mighty arms. Make haste and do what you wish, take no time to reflect!

The Gandharva said:
At these words, O Pārtha, Viśvāmitra took the cow Nandinī, translucent like the moon or a wild goose, forcibly away.

And as she was driven up and beaten with thongs and sticks, Vasiṣṭha's beautiful cow Nandinī began to bellow.

She came back to him and stood before the blessed Lord, lifting up her head to him; and however sorely she was thrashed, she did not stir from the hermitage.

Vasiṣṭha said:
I hear your cry for help, my dear, as you keep lowing again and again. You are being taken from me by force, Nandī, for I am a forgiving brahmin.

The cow said:
I cry out but no one will help me. I'm beaten with sticks and with stones by Viśvāmitra's merciless soldiers. How can you allow it, my lord?

Vasiṣṭha said:
Firepower's the forte of rulers
Patience the forte of scholars
So patience is my lot
If you want you should go
The cow said:
Have you forsaken me, good master, that you speak to me so? If you do not forsake me, brahmin, they will not be able to force me away.

Vasiṣṭha said:
I do not forsake you, my lovely, stay if you can. They have tied your calf with tight fetters and are taking it away by force!

The Gandharva said:
When Vasiṣṭha's cow heard him say 'Stay!' she curved her head and neck upward and her aspect became dreadful.

Her eyes red with anger, and bellowing thunderously, she drove the army of Viśvāmitra about on all sides.

As she was beaten with thongs and sticks and driven hither and thither, her eyes blazed with rage and her rage waxed stronger.

Her body shone with the fires of fury like the sun at noon, and she spouted a huge rain of burning embers from her tail.

From her arse she created the Pahlavas; the Śabarās and Śakas from her dung; from her urine she she created the Yavanas, as she well-nigh swooned with rage.

From her foam she brought forth the Punḍras, Kirātas, Drāmiḍas, Śimhalas, Barbaras, Daradas, and Mlecchas.

Nandinī:
Have you forsaken me, my lord
That you speak to me that way?
If you haven't forsaken me, my lord
No army can drive me away

Vasiṣṭha:
I'm not forsaking you, my dear
If you can you should stay

Nandinī stands tall and fights back noisily and furiously against the hunters.
Chorus: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Nandinī pushes the hunters back, but they advance upon her again with their whips and sticks.
Chorus: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Incandescent with rage, Nandinī emits fireworks.
Chorus: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Nandinī emits an army of forest warriors from her orifices.
The chorus announces each cohort.

Nandinī: I shit on you
Chorus: Black people, brown people
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Nandinī: I piss on you
Chorus: Foreigners, asylum seekers
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Nandinī: I spit on you
Chorus: Fat people, mad people
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Nandinī:
Have you forsaken me, good master, that you speak to me so? If you do not forsake me, brahmin, they will not be able to force me away.
And when she had brought forth these manifold hosts of Barbarians, clad in their manifold armor and brandishing arms, she scattered with her furious troops that large army before Viśvāmitra’s eyes.

Every single soldier was surrounded by five or seven others; before Viśvāmitra’s very eyes his army was routed with a rain of missiles, till it was everywhere broken down and intimidated.

Yet not a soldier of Viśvāmitra’s was separated from his life by Vasiṣṭha’s furious soldiers, O bull of the Bhāratas.

Viśvāmitra’s army was driven off to a distance of three leagues, and as it yelled in panic it found no savior.

Brandishing various weapons, the forest warriors advance and overpower the hunters, while Viśvāmitra looks on helplessly.

The hunters scatter into the forest, wailing in terror, while Viśvāmitra looks on helplessly.
drṣṭvā tan mahad āścaryam brahmatejohavaṁ tadā
dhig balaṁ kṣatriyabalaṁ brahmatejobalaṁ balaṁ
balābalaṁ viṇiścitya tapa eva paraṁ balaṁ

viśvāmitraḥ kṣatrabhāvāṁ nirvinṇo vākyam abravīt 41
viśvāmitra became loath with his baronhood and
said,
‘A curse on the power that is baronial power! Brahminic
power is power. On weighing weakness and strength,
asceticism appears the superior power!’

41 On seeing this great miracle that sprang from brahminic
power, Viśvāmitra became loath with his baronhood and
said,

sa rājyaṁ spīṭam utsṛṣya tāṁ ca dīptaṁ nrpaśṛiyam
bhogāṁ ca prṣṭhataḥ kṛtvā tapasy eva mano dadhe 43

He relinquished his prosperous kingdom and his blazing
kingly fortune, he put all his pleasures behind him and set
his mind on austerities.

43 He became perfected by his austerities; and suffusing
the worlds with his splendid might, he burned all the worlds
with his fiery puissance and attained to brahmminhood. And
the Kauśika drank the pressed-out Soma with Indra.

sa gatvā tapasā siddhiṁ lokān viṣṭabhyā tejāsā
tatāpa sarvāṁ dīptaṁ bhrāhmaṇatvam avāpa ca
apibac ca sutaṁ somam indreṇa saha kauśikaḥ 44

Viśvāmitra stands motionless.

Scene 3: the forest.
Enter Viśvāmitra.
Viśvāmitra: The power of rulers is no kind of power
The power of brilliance and truth is true power
I’ve realised the meaning of weakness and power
Self-control’s the highest power

I’ve given up my thriving realm
My blaze of royal majesty
And all the things I used to love
Self-control’s my sole concern

Viśvāmitra stands motionless.

Dance of the forest creatures.

Lightshow (in the manner of the ‘star gate’ sequence in Stanley
Kubrick’s film ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’).
Chorus: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Enter Indra.

Indra dances the soma-pressing dance.

Indra offers the soma to Viśvāmitra. Viśvāmitra drinks.
Chorus: He drinks the soma

Nandini dances unseen.
Ṛgveda 10.127

Chorus and Indra:

Goddess night is coming
She’s lit up many places with her eyes
She’s put on every jewel
The immortal goddess has filled up space
The valleys and the peaks
She drives away the darkness with her light
The goddess is coming
She’s driven away the twilight, her sister
The darkness is certain to run away too
She’ll soon be upon us
We’ve settled down in her path – your path
Like a bird in its nest in a tree
The people have settled down
The creatures with paws and the creatures with wings
And even the busy birds of prey
Keep the she-wolf and he-wolf to yourself
Billowing night, ward off the thief
Be easy for us to get through
Darkness has shown herself to me
Decorated all over, black and beautiful
Return her, dawn, as you would borrowed things
Night, daughter of the sky
I’ve rounded up this hymn for you
As if I were rounding up cows
Look upon it with favour
As a hymn for a conqueror

rātrī vai akhyad āyatī pūrutrā devy aṣṭabhūḥ
viṣvā adhi śriyō ‘dhita || 1 ||
orv āpṛ amārtā nīvatō devy uḍdvatāḥ ||
jyoṭīśā bādhate tamāḥ || 2 ||

nir u svāśāram askṛṭoṣasanā devy āyatī
aped u hāṣate tamāḥ || 3 ||
sā nō adya yasyā vayāṃ ni te yāmān avikṣmahi
vrkṣe na vāṣatīm vayāḥ || 4 ||

ni grāmās avikṣata ni pāḍvanto ni pākṣīnāḥ
ni śyenāsā cid arthināḥ || 5 ||
yāvayā vṛkyālōm vṛkāṃ yāvayā stēnam āṁrye
athā nāḥ sutarāḥ bhava || 6 ||

upā mā pepīṣat tamāḥ krṣṇaṃ vyāktam asthita
uṣā ṛṇevā yātaya || 7 ||

upā tē gā jvākāram vṛṇśva dūhitar divāḥ
rātrī stomāṇ na jigyusē || 8 ||

(Indra gestures towards different sections of the audience)

(Indra becomes visible)
Notes on the Translation

Ṛv 10.146.1. I have translated vindiṭiṇī as if it were vindiṭi: the lengthening and nasalisation of the vowel are purely performative features.⁴⁹

Ṛv 10.146.2. The identities of the creatures vṛṣārava and cicīka are rather obscure. Where previous translators have provided translations, these have tended to be insects and/or birds, though Basham takes vṛṣārava literally as ‘lowing of cattle’, as do Jamison and Brereton with their potentially misleading ‘bull-roarer’ (they also supply ‘frog?’ as a parenthetical possibility).⁵⁰ In his book on Birds in Sanskrit Literature, Dave discusses this verse and identifies the vṛṣārava as the hawk-cuckoo and the cicīka as the crested swift.⁵¹ I lean towards Dave’s interpretation, but I have left the identities of the birds open so that the image does not depend on the ornithological expertise of the audience.

Ṛv 10.146.6. Many previous translations of akrṣṭivalām – Wilson’s ‘uncultivated’, Griffith’s ‘who tills not’, Basham’s ‘she tills not’, and Jamison and Brereton’s ‘she does no ploughing’ – seem to me to miss part of the point here, which is that the forest bears fruit without a man having ploughed her. The ploughing is not something she hasn’t done, but that hasn’t been done to her (cf. O’Flaherty’s ‘untilled by a plough’); something like parthenogenesis is implied. The sex-as-ploughing metaphor implicit here is also implicit elsewhere in early Sanskrit literature, for example in connection with Sītā’s birth (Rāmāyaṇa 1.65.14; 2.110.27–29); as Olivelle says, using appropriately gender-specific terms, ‘The plough symbolizes man’s dominance over and his manipulation of nature.’⁵²

Mbh 1.165.9–11. I have expanded the description of the feeding of the hunting party, and I hope to have introduced some humour at the same time. I have tried to emphasise the forest habitat as well as the dairy products appropriate to Nandinī’s allegedly bovine form. Sathaye suggests that the feast offered to the visitors is a vegetarian one,⁵³ but this is not entirely evident from the text’s description, and I have devised a menu which takes the word kāma (occurring three times in v. 9 and once in v. 12) seriously in relation to the visitors.⁵⁴ Van Buitenen’s translation of v. 9 pegs the kāmān to Vasiṣṭha, but this is interpretive.

Mbh 1.165.13–14. I have removed the connection between Nandinī’s eyes and a frog’s, so as to conform to common canons of beauty. I have also imported the description hamsacandraṣṭrīkāsām into Viśvāmitra’s speech from v. 21, where it is hard to preserve because it is part of Citraratha’s narration.

Mbh 1.165.18–20, 24, 28. As mentioned above, the necessity of sticking to the tasks appropriate to one’s class is a major concern of the Mahābhārata⁵⁵ and of


⁵⁴ In the account of the hospitality provided to Bharata and his escort at Bharadvāja’s ashram (Rāmāyaṇa 2.85), meat and alcohol are certainly present. See Cinzia Pieruccini, ‘Bharadvāja’s Hermitage and the Paradise of the Warrior (Rāmāyaṇa II 85)’, in Paola M. Rossi and Cinzia Pieruccini, eds, Kings and Ascetics in Indian Classical Literature (Milan: Cisalpino, Instituto Editoriale Universitario, 2009), p. 28.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Bhaiguvaḍāṭī 18.45–48: ‘A man achieves perfection by contenting himself with his own work; hear how such a man, intent upon his own work, finds that perfection. A man attains perfection by reverencing, through his own specific activity,
this story. Viśvāmitra makes it clear that because he is a kṣatriya it is appropriate for him to take Nandinī if he wants, and that because Vasiṣṭha is a brahmin it is not appropriate for him to oppose this. Additionally, although this is not explicitly stated in this chapter, both characters would presumably know that it is the king’s duty to enforce obedience to class-duty within his domains. But when this particular chapter is taken out of its literary context and then also out of its cultural context, it is difficult to bring out the full implications of these references to kṣatriyas and brahmins. Accordingly, I have turned them into rather impressionistic allusions to the roles of the government and the scholar. If these allusions bring to mind the treatment of British academics by recent governments, then so be it. In any case, the narrative point – that Viśvāmitra implicitly threatens Vasiṣṭha with unpleasant repercussions should he attempt to hold on to Nandinī – is hard to lose, even in translation.

Mbh 1.165.30. As per van Buitenen’s translation, Vasiṣṭha tells Nandinī that ‘They have tied your calf with tight fetters and are taking it away by force!’ This is the only verse that mentions Nandinī’s calf; there is nothing in what precedes or follows to suggest that Nandinī has a calf, or that Viśvāmitra would have any interest in it. Vasiṣṭha presumably makes this statement in order to provoke Nandinī into resisting against her assailants. If so, then there may not be any necessity for the statement to be true (there is after all no direct narration to this effect); but if it is true, and the hunters are trying to make Nandinī come along by capturing her more vulnerable calf first, then Vasiṣṭha and the hunters must have contrasting ideas about what Nandinī would do in such circumstances. Vasiṣṭha’s statement about the calf seems to provoke such thoughts in the audience; but in so doing it implies a possible maternal motivation for Nandinī’s violence which Citraratha then seems to nullify, stating as he does – in the next verse – that Nandinī’s transformation was prompted just by Vasiṣṭha asking her to stay (which he did before he mentioned the calf). Thus although the mention of the calf seems to show Vasiṣṭha manipulating Nandinī towards the violence that he as a brahmin has been forced to eschew, it also complicates the question of Nandinī’s motivations. In order to keep things simple, and to maximise the dramatic effect of Vasiṣṭha’s instruction to Nandinī to stay if she can, in my translation I have omitted the second line of this verse. I considered reversing the order of the two lines and having Vasiṣṭha address the line about the calf to himself (thus the calf would be Nandinī herself); but that wouldn’t work because the hunters have not tied Nandinī up.

Mbh 1.165.31. The chorus line – which is repeated as Nandinī’s rage bears fruit, and which also recurs in the following scene as a lead-in for Indra – is intended to complement and enhance the intensity of the episode. Its eight-syllable pattern is taken from Act Two of Philip Glass’s opera Satyagraha.

Mbh 1.165.35–36. In addition to introducing new lines for Nandinī and the chorus in order to make clear what is happening, I have also replaced the eleven types of people listed in the Sanskrit text with very approximate English equivalents. The Sanskrit labels them pahlava, sabaras, sakas, yavanas, pundraś, kirātas, drāmīḍas, simhalaś, barbaras, daradas, and mlecchas, this last word then being used again in v. 37 as a general category subsuming them all. These Sanskrit words for the most part denote distinct ‘outsider’ ethnic groups stereotyped as culturally and linguistically inferior. In the translation I have

15 On these groups, see for example John Brockington, ‘Concepts of Race in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa’, in Peter Robb, ed., The Concept of Race in South Asia (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Aloka Parasher, Sen, ‘“Foreigner” and “Tribe” as Barbarian (Mleccha) in Early North India’, in Parasher, Sen, ed., Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). Both writers discuss this passage. Brockington says of these groups that ‘their role in this context is to defend brahmanical
extended the theme beyond ethnic groups and included also other types of group who have been subject to prejudice, bullying, or marginalisation; and in order to prolong and emphasise this pivotal moment, I have also extended the range of bodily functions and fluids that Nandinī uses to create her army.

Mbh 1.165.41–44. The final episode of Mahābhārata 1.165 presents particular difficulties, partly because of the specific notions of brahmin and kṣatriya mentioned above, and partly because it is narrated so briefly. Viśvāmitra is clearly plunged into existential crisis because his royal power has proved to be impotent – but in competition with what? In the Sanskrit there is a slippage between the power whereby Nandinī was able to repel Viśvāmitra and his men with her motley armies, and the power whereby Vasiṣṭha and his forest ashram were more attractive to Nandinī than Viśvāmitra and his palace. In the Sanskrit this ambiguity is tilted towards the latter pole in the sequel, by the statement in pāda 42b (brahmatejobalam balam) and by Viśvāmitra’s eventual attainment of brahmminhood (this being, presumably, what he wanted instead of the royal status he discarded). But I have tried to retain the ambiguity and keep the appeal of this Viśvāmitra – and the terms of his striving in this scene – as open as possible. He has behaved correctly according to his education and experience, but has then been denied the expected result, and he is consequently coming to new terms with himself and his desires. His victory is thus a yogic one.

Ṛv 10.127.5. The verb avikṣata is in the second person plural. The poet seems to be addressing at least the people (and probably also the various creatures) directly, and were it not for their accents, the nouns and adjectives (grāmāso, padvanto, pakṣināḥ, śyenāsaḥ, arthinaḥ) could be read as vocatives. But maintaining this second person sense in the English translation would sound odd, since both of the neighbouring verses have night, the hymn’s subject, in the second person. Perhaps because of this, all the translations I have consulted translate avikṣata as if it is in the third person plural.59 I have followed suit; but I have also preserved something of the second-person effect by means of a stage direction.

Closing Remarks

James M. Hegarty and Simon Brodbeck

It has been a great pleasure for us to present work that owes its existence to the encouragement and scholarly example of Will Johnson. His contribution to Indology is unquestionable. His contribution to the creation, in English, of something of the playful brilliance of Sanskrit literature is one that numberless individuals, now and in the future, will enjoy and benefit from. As for ourselves, it has been a privilege for us to be his junior colleagues and to receive his mentorship. He is truly a gentleman and a scholar, a sahṛdaya and a brahmārṣi.