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Transitions and transmissions in the *Mahābhārata*: Revisiting the Ugraśravas/ Śaunaka frame dialogue

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Abstract

The focus of this chapter will be on the literary significance of the *Mahābhārata*'s framing of the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka. By taking a literary, rather than historical, approach to the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka, I hope to explore some of the ways in which this opening scene characterises the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, including what

1 I wrote this paper in 2010 for an edited volume that was never published. The working title of that volume was 'Revisiting Transitions in Indian History'. It was due to be edited by Ranabir Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy. In the meantime, this paper has circulated among friends and colleagues and has been cited in two publications of which I am aware: Adluri (2011: 192) and Brodbeck (2009: 245n.40). Although I might have approached this paper differently now, because it has already been circulated among and cited by other scholars, I leave it almost unchanged from the version I submitted for publication more than 10 years ago. I am grateful to Raj Balkaran and McComas Taylor for inviting me to submit this paper to this volume. I would like to thank the following people for their helpful feedback during the Revisiting Transitions seminar in Delhi in March 2007: Naina Dayal, Shonaleeka Kaul, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Kumkum Roy, Shalini Shah, Romila Thapar and Mudit Trivedi. Additionally, I would like to thank Simon Brodbeck, Yulia Egorova, Jim Fitzgerald and Alf Hiltebeitel for reading earlier drafts of this paper and offering useful suggestions. I am also grateful to the British Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the project 'Epic Constructions: Gender, Myth, and Society in the Mahābhārata', under which the research for this paper was carried out.

type of text it aspires to be, what types of audiences it intends to address and what types of authority it attempts to invoke. As we will see, the complexities of the outer-frame dialogue often elicit more questions than they solve, but by investigating these issues, I hope to bring attention to the rich potential in considering the literary dimensions of the *Mahābhārata*, without supposing that all tropes, metaphors and motifs correspond to a historical reality.

Introduction

Historians have tended to regard the *Mahābhārata* as representing important transitions within Indian history. Romila Thapar (2000: 131), for example, has suggested that the epic reflects 'something of a transitional condition between two rather different structures, the societies of the lineage-based system and that of the monarchical state'. Despite such assertions, the *Mahābhārata* remains a troublesome text for historians both because of its composite nature—containing textual material likely to represent several different historical periods—and because of its mythic scope in relating the deeds of gods and demigods alongside those of mortals. As such, it is very difficult to determine the relationship, if any, between the episodes recorded in the text and events that occurred in Indian history.

Despite such limitations in linking the narrative to historical changes, the *Mahābhārata* is correctly regarded as a transitional text, if for no other reason than the fact that transition is a major theme within the literary world of the text. Throughout both the main narrative and its abundance of embedded stories, the *Mahābhārata* portrays several radical temporal, cultural and religious changes, such as the transformation from one *yuga* to another, shifting attitudes about *dharma* and a change from ritualism to devotionalism. Furthermore, the text itself represents a shift from the revealed authority of the Vedas (*śruti*) to a new type of religious literature based on the memory of a lost tradition (*smṛti*).[2]

The focus of this chapter will be on another transition that has long been associated with the *Mahābhārata*: the change in the transmitters of the text from bards to brahmins. As we will see, this portrayal of the epic's origins has been closely tied to the assumption that the outer frame of the story,

2 As Sheldon Pollock (1997) has demonstrated, both *śruti* and *smṛti* claim Vedic status. But whereas *śruti* designates the Vedic texts that have remained intact, traditional accounts present *smṛti* as that which has been remembered from lost Vedic sources.

featuring the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka, can be read as representing the compositional history of the text. Part of the problem with this hypothesis is, as I will suggest, that it naively assumes that this scene depicts a historical process, while it neglects to examine the ways in which the frame story can add to our appreciation of the literary construction of the text. By taking a literary, rather than historical, approach to the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka, I hope to explore some of the ways this opening scene characterises the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, including what type of text it aspires to be, what types of audiences it intends to address and what types of authority it attempts to invoke. As we will see, the complexities of the outer-frame dialogue often elicit more questions than they solve, but by investigating these issues, I hope to bring attention to the rich potential in considering the literary dimensions of the *Mahābhārata*, without supposing that all tropes, metaphors and motifs correspond with a historical reality.

Ugraśravas as bard: Why does a *sūta* narrate the *Mahābhārata*?

For most audiences of the epic in India today, the *Mahābhārata*'s outer-frame story features the episode in which Vyāsa, the author of the text, dictates his tale to Gaṇeśa, who puts the brahmin's words into writing. The impetus for transcribing the epic came from the god Brahmā, who visited Vyāsa when he was concerned about how he should communicate his work to his students. Despite the ubiquity of this episode among modern tellings of the *Mahābhārata*, this is not the story that frames most of the manuscripts that were considered when constructing the Critical Edition.[3] Instead, the critically reconstituted text begins with an episode in which the *sūta* Ugraśravas approaches a group of brahmin *ṛṣi*s and recites the tale that he claims to have heard told by Vaiśampāyaṇa at King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice.

It has always seemed curious to me that a text that declares itself to be as authoritative and exhaustive as does the *Mahābhārata*—at times even claiming for itself Vedic status—would feature a *sūta*[4] as the main narrator

3 See Fitzgerald (1991: 152).

4 One of the problems in understanding Ugraśravas's role as the *Mahābhārata*'s main narrator revolves around the ambiguity of the term *sūta*, which sometimes seems to mean 'bard', on other occasions seems to be a name for a charioteer and on yet other occasions can mean both or neither. Shubha Pathak (2006: 133) attributes this ambiguity to the merging of two different textual traditions.

of its outer frame. This central role attributed to Ugraśravas has tended to be explained in terms of the theory that the *Mahābhārata* originated among professional storytellers and was later appropriated by brahmins. V.S. Sukthankar explicitly connected the theory about the text's transmission to the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka, seeing the frame story as 'an unconscious admission' that the *Mahābhārata* originated among bards and was appropriated by a specific group of brahmins, the Bhṛgu clan:

> The Bhārgava influence is implied in the person of the Kulapati Śaunaka. The *sūta*, who used to recite the poem in the Heroic Age, is kept on, with due regard to traditional usage, to give the new recension a setting appropriate to it and indicating the source at the same time. (Sukthankar 1936: 73)[5]

It is not my intention to argue that the *Mahābhārata* was not originally composed by bards; indeed, there are other grounds besides the frame story that suggest bardic origins.[6] Rather, my aim here is to point out that even if the *Mahābhārata* originated among professional storytellers, it is extremely unlikely that Ugraśravas as a literary character is meant to represent such a bardic background. According to the *Mahābhārata*'s own representation of its compositional history, it did not originate among *sūta*s, but was authored by the brahmin Vyāsa, who taught it as the fifth Veda to his five brahmin students, who, in turn, went in separate directions to recite the *Mahābhārata* in public.[7] As we will see, the text provides conflicting accounts of how the *sūta*s—Ugraśravas and his father, Lomaharṣaṇa—learned the *Mahābhārata*, but all such explanations agree that they learned it from brahmins: either from Vyāsa himself or from his student Vaiśaṃpāyana.[8] Furthermore, the outer-frame narrative reminds us on several occasions that Śaunaka and the

5 More recently, Vassilkov (1995: 251) sums up this view: the *Mahābhārata* is a 'heroic epic of the classical type. On the other hand, it is well known that at a certain stage of its development in the oral tradition the *Mbh* was revised by brahmins who tried to make it into a religious and didactic work, a Dharmaśāstra'. See also Brockington (1998: 20, 155).

6 For theories about the oral history of the text, see de Jong (1975); and Vassilkov (2002). See also Sharma (2000) for possible links between *sūta*s and the *śloka* compositional style. Hiltebeitel (2001b: 4) has challenged such theories of bardic origins, calling the orality of the *Mahābhārata* a literary trope.

7 Vyāsa's five brahmin students are Vaiśaṃpāyana, Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila and his son Śuka (*Mbh*, 1.57.74–75); a different list includes Śuka, Nārada and Asita Devala (1.1.63–64); and, as we have seen, Vyāsa is also said to have taught Lomaharṣaṇa (1.13.7).

8 As we will see, Ugraśravas gives two different explanations for how he knows the *Mahābhārata*: at the very beginning of the text, he claims to have heard Vaiśaṃpāyana's narration at the *sarpasatra* (*Mbh*, 1.1.10), while at the beginning of the Paulomaparvan, he attributes his knowledge to learning from his father (1.5.4–5). Ugraśravas also gives two different explanations for how his father knows the text: on one occasion he says his father learned from Vaiśaṃpāyana (1.5.4–5), while later he says his father was Vyāsa's student (1.13.6–8).

brahmins of the Naimiṣa Forest have already heard everything that Ugraśravas has to tell them.[9] Thus, regardless of the history of the *Mahābhārata*'s transmission, the epic's own account is that it originated among brahmins, not bards.[10]

Rather than look for a historical explanation for Ugraśravas's role as a narrator, we might be better advised to examine what literary purpose he serves. One way to explore his literary role as narrator is to see how he compares with other narrators within the text. With the inclusion of at least 67 *upākhyāna*s (Hiltebeitel 2005: 467), not to mention numerous embedded teachings, dialogues and other stories, there is a long list of *Mahābhārata* characters who assume the role of narrator at one time or another. However, there are four speakers whose narration frames large portions of the narrative: 1) Ugraśravas, the main speaker in the text's outer frame; 2) Vaiśaṃpāyana, the main speaker in the text's inner frame; 3) Saṃjaya, who narrates Books 6–10; and 4) Bhīṣma, the main speaker in Books 12–13.

Among these narrators, Ugraśravas seemingly has the most in common with Saṃjaya, who is also a *sūta*. However, the parallels between Ugraśravas and Saṃjaya as storytellers are limited for two reasons. One is because Saṃjaya repeats events that he witnesses at first hand, while Ugraśravas recounts a text he has learned (more on this distinction below). The other difference is that Saṃjaya has a special power to enhance his narration: the divine eye (*divya cakṣus*) he receives from Vyāsa (*Mbh*, 6.2.9–13, 6.16.5–10).

In fact, the text's two other narrators, Vaiśaṃpāyana and Bhīṣma, receive some form of narratorial assistance as well. Vaiśaṃpāyana is not only a brahmin, but also one of Vyāsa's five students. If that is not enough to authorise him as the *Mahābhārata*'s narrator to King Janamejaya, he recounts the text under the specific instruction of Vyāsa (*Mbh*, 1.54.21–22), who remains present for the text's recital.

Bhīṣma, despite not being a brahmin, is described by his mother, Gaṅgā, as having learned the Vedas from Vasiṣṭha, as knowing all the *śāstra*s known by Uśanas and Bṛhaspati and as knowing all the weapons known by Rāma Jāmadagnya (*Mbh*, 1.94.31–36). As Alf Hiltebeitel (2001a: 276–77) points

9 After the Pauṣyaparvan, for example, the sages make a point of describing what Śaunaka already knows (*Mbh*, 1.4.4–5). As Hiltebeitel (2001b: 103) comments: 'Ugraśravas can hardly feel much esteemed at hearing that Śaunaka already knows "completely" all such stories as Ugraśravas might tell him.'

10 As Hiltebeitel (2001b: 13n.51) observes, this is the case for both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*: '[I]n each Sanskrit epic the transmission goes in the reverse, from Brahmans to bards.'

out, these celestial teachers described in the Ādiparvan account for many of the sources that he cites in the Śānti and Anuśāsanaparvans. Yet, the time spent in Heaven with his mother is not enough to authorise Bhīṣma as Yudhiṣṭhira's postwar instructor on *dharma* and the duties of a king. Like Saṃjaya, Bhīṣma begins his narration only after receiving the divine eye—although Bhīṣma receives it from Kṛṣṇa rather than from Vyāsa (*Mbh*, 12.52.15–22). Bhīṣma makes clear that receiving divine vision is what gives him the traditional knowledge to be Yudhiṣṭhira's teacher: 'I behold all the laws [*dharma*] pronounced by the Vedas and by the final portions of the Vedas [*vedānta*], because of the boon you have granted me' (12.54.19).[11] Even despite such a divine endorsement, Bhīṣma's authority to narrate seems to be a concern throughout both the Śānti and Anuśāsanaparvans, as he continually makes clear who his sources are, often citing Bṛhaspati and Manu in particular. If that is not enough, Vyāsa is present for most of his narration.

In these examples, we see that the other major narrators within the *Mahābhārata* have some special authority to narrate that is additional to their class status or their *paraṃparā*. Vaiśaṃpāyana and Saṃjaya derive their authority directly from Vyāsa, while Bhīṣma receives authority from both Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa. When all the narrators receive direct endorsement in one way or another from Vyāsa, the fact that Ugraśravas does not contributes to the questions about his narratorial authority.

Ugraśravas as narrator: The problem of the double explanation

Equally problematic is how Ugraśravas learns the *Mahābhārata* in the first place. In the very first scene of the *Mahābhārata*, Ugraśravas approaches a group of brahmins who are conducting a 12-year ritual in the Naimiṣa Forest. After a brief exchange, the brahmins ask Ugraśravas to recount the *Mahābhārata*: 'Tell us the story of old [*purāṇam*] that was imparted by the great *ṛṣi* Dvaipāyana' (*Mbh*, 1.1.15). Ugraśravas begins with several preliminaries—providing invocations, a cosmology, a brief history of the composition and transmission of the text, three plot summaries and various *phalaśruti*s—before narrating the epic's first story, the Pauṣyaparvan (1.3).

11 Translations based on those of van Buitenen and Fitzgerald.

Yet, after the Pauṣyaparvan, we again hear of Ugraśravas's arrival in the Naimiṣa Forest. This time, however, before recounting any stories to the brahmins, he must wait for their leader, Śaunaka, to finish performing a ritual. When Śaunaka arrives, he asks Ugraśravas to begin his narration of the *Mahābhārata* with an account of the Bhṛgu clan—Śaunaka's own family. Ugraśravas obliges by reciting the Paulomanparvan, and subsequently relates the Āstīkaparvan, after which the main story of the *Mahābhārata* begins.

Mahesh Mehta (1973: 547) has described the 'double introduction' to the *Mahābhārata* as 'two blocks [that] are put together without any attempt at organic combination—a strange patchwork!' Yet, he has proposed that despite their 'incongruous juxtaposition', there are threads that link them together, suggesting they 'belong to the same redactoral agency' (Mehta 1973: 549).

In addition to the textual problems with the double introduction, both accounts provide different explanations for how Ugraśravas has learned the *Mahābhārata*. In the first introduction (*Mbh*, 1.1.1–26), Ugraśravas informs his brahmin hosts that he recently returned from King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, where he heard Vaiśaṃpāyana recount the great stories that make up the *Mahābhārata* (1.1.10). Then the *sūta* reports that he has also visited numerous sacred fords (*tīrtha*s) and sanctuaries (*āyatana*s), including the location of the war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. Ugraśravas's travels along the pilgrimage circuit demonstrate his bardic credentials, as, according to the *Mahābhārata* itself, such locations were venues for performing oral legends; meanwhile, his presence at the snake sacrifice, where he hears Vyāsa's student Vaiśaṃpāyana recite the *Mahābhārata*, places him in a line of oral transmission that is just one person removed from the epic's composer.

The second introduction begins with the same sentence as the first, but subsequently Ugraśravas's arrival is portrayed quite differently. Rather than wait for the brahmins to be seated and for them to offer him a seat, Ugraśravas folds his hands at his forehead and is the first to speak, asking the brahmins: '[W]hat do you wish to hear, what should I tell you?' (*Mbh*, 1.4.2). They reply that they will ask him to tell stories later, but first they must wait for Śaunaka, who is in the fire hall attending to the ritual. While they are waiting, the brahmins make a point of describing what their leader already knows. When Śaunaka finally arrives, he takes his 'most respected seat' (*āsanaṃ paramārcitam*) and then speaks to Ugraśravas: 'Your father, my boy, formerly learned all the stories of old. Have you learned them all too, son of Lomaharṣaṇa?' (1.5.1).

Crucially, throughout his conversation with Śaunaka, Ugraśravas never mentions that he has been to King Janamejaya's *sarpasatra*,[12] nor does he say he has toured any pilgrimage sites. Rather, the first glimpse of how Ugraśravas has learned the *Mahābhārata* comes from Śaunaka's question. Of course, at this point, Śaunaka is not asking to hear the *Mahābhārata* per se, but rather to hear an account of his own ancestors, the Bhṛgus—an account that becomes part of the *Mahābhārata* through Ugraśravas's narration. Nevertheless, when responding to Śaunaka, Ugraśravas confirms that he has received his learning from his father, who had learned from Vaiśaṃpāyana: 'All that was formerly learned perfectly and was formerly narrated perfectly by the great-spirited Vaiśaṃpāyana and the brahmins, that was learned by my father and has been perfectly learned by me' (*Mbh*, 1.5.4–5).

At the beginning of the Āstīkaparvan, Ugraśravas again presents himself as his father's student:

> This *itihāsa*, known as a *purāṇa*, was recited by Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana to the dwellers of the Naimiṣa Forest. My father, the bard Lomaharṣaṇa, Vyāsa's student [*śiṣyo vyāsasya*], was once asked by the brahmins to tell it. Therefore, I have listened to it. I will now relate it just as I have heard it. (*Mbh*, 1.13.6–8)

Here, apparently in addition to teaching the *Mahābhārata* to his five students, Vyāsa is said to have recited the Āstīkaparvan to brahmins in the Naimiṣa Forest; crucially, Ugraśravas adds that his own father, rather than learning this story from Vaiśaṃpāyana and his successors, had learned it directly from Vyāsa, as his student. Additionally, Ugraśravas claims that his father had once recited the Āstīkaparvan to brahmins.

Śaunaka, seemingly unperturbed by the different presentations of Lomaharṣaṇa's *paraṃparā*, observes that Ugraśravas narrates like his father: 'You speak like your father; we are very pleased. Your father was always ready to please us. Tell us now this story as your father told it' (*Mbh*, 1.14.2–3). Here, Śaunaka verifies Ugraśravas's claim that his father had narrated this tale to brahmins and suggests that he had heard such tales from Lomaharṣaṇa himself. Ugraśravas then confirms that he has learned to narrate like his father: 'I will tell the Āstīka story as I heard it from my father' (1.14.4).

12 I use the form *satra* instead of *sattra* throughout, as this is how the word appears in the *Mahābhārata*. As Simon Brodbeck (2009: 125) suggests, the *Mahābhārata*'s different representation of this term could indicate that it represents its *satra* rituals differently from how *sattra*s are described in Vedic texts.

As we can see from these exchanges, in addition to the 'problem of the double introduction', the *Mahābhārata*'s outer-frame story also presents the problem of two modes of transmission.[13] In the Paulomaparvan, Ugraśravas does not mention attending King Janamejaya's *sarpasatra*, while in the opening scene, when Śaunaka is not yet present, Ugraśravas does not mention learning from his father. The most well-known explanation for the double introduction is the one offered by Sukthankar (1944: 11): that each version was at one point the opening frame for a different version of the *Mahābhārata*, and that both have been included in the final redaction because both were 'too good to lose'.

Yet, when we approach the double introduction as a narratorial question, rather than merely a textual one, another intriguing possibility emerges: rather than two versions of the same scene, these two accounts could represent two different narrations. This is indicated when Ugraśravas, addressing the Naimiṣa brahmins in the first introduction, refers to his narration to Śaunaka in the second introduction: 'I will narrate to you the entire Bhārata tale from the Pauloman tale onwards, as it was told at Śaunaka's *satra*' (*Mbh*, 1.2.30). As the second introduction begins at the Paulomanparvan, this remark suggests that Ugraśravas is telling the Naimiṣa brahmins that he will narrate to them what he had already told Śaunaka on a previous occasion.

Subsequently, after listing the *Mahābhārata*'s 100 books, Ugraśravas tells his audience: 'These one hundred *parvan*s were previously recited by the great-spirited Vyāsa. They were again narrated by Ugraśravas, son of Lomaharṣaṇa, in the Naimiṣa Forest, but in eighteen books' (*Mbh*, 1.2.70–71). Again, this scene indicates a narration by Ugraśravas that has already happened. Of course, such passages could be explained away in terms of sloppy editing, and the fact that Ugraśravas refers to himself in the third person suggests there is some confusion here. However, these two references to the second introduction within the first introduction should also give us pause to consider whether our final redactors had in mind one Naimiṣa frame or two.

It is certainly possible that Ugraśravas has recited the *Mahābhārata* in the Naimiṣa Forest before, and to some of the same brahmins. Ugraśravas tells the Naimiṣa brahmins, for example, that poets have recited the epic before, are reciting it now and will recite it again in the future (*Mbh*, 1.1.24).

13 The end of the *Mahābhārata* seems to recognise the first introduction, with Ugraśravas concluding that he has narrated everything that was told by Vaiśaṃpāyana, rather than everything that had been told by his father (*Mbh*, 18.5).

Furthermore, we know that the Naimiṣa Forest had already been the setting for at least two other narrations: one by Vyāsa and one by Lomaharṣaṇa. Indeed, as Hiltebeitel (2001b: 100–1) points out, when the Naimiṣa brahmins ask Ugraśravas to narrate the *Mahābhārata* in the first introduction, they seem to have a certain familiarity with what the *sūta* is about to recount: '[W]hat the *ṛṣi*s want to hear is something that has clearly passed through the hands of such Brahmans as themselves.' Of course, Hiltebeitel is making a different point: that the outer frame generally presents the *Mahābhārata* as the type of text that would be known by brahmins such as those in the Naimiṣa Forest. Yet, if the episode featuring Śaunaka represents a previous occasion, this would also help explain some of the differences between the two introductions concerning the interactions between Ugraśravas and the Naimiṣa brahmins. The first introduction, for example, describes in more detail the courteous exchanges between the *sūta* and his brahmin hosts, with Ugraśravas waiting for the brahmins to speak before speaking and only taking a seat after his hosts have been seated. By contrast, in the second introduction, Ugraśravas begins speaking immediately on his arrival. Thus, if the first introduction came chronologically after the second, this would help clarify why the Naimiṣa brahmins are more respectful towards him than they were earlier: now they know he can spin a fine tale because they have already experienced his storytelling abilities.

Although the outer frame is open to this reading, I do not want to emphasise this point too strongly; it is not clear that such an interpretation would offer a better explanation for the 'problem of double introduction' than those offered by Sukthankar and Mehta. Additionally, such a scenario presents a major chronological inconsistency: if, in the second introduction, Ugraśravas had not yet been to Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, how is he able to narrate this episode to Śaunaka?

While such a blatant temporal problem might seem to discount the possibility of two different Naimiṣa frames, there are hints of a similarly complex chronology even if we take the two introductions as one continuous scene, with Śaunaka making a late entrance. At the beginning of the first introduction, when the Naimiṣa brahmins ask Ugraśravas to tell them the *Mahābhārata*, they seem to know already some of the details, not only about the epic in a general sense, but also as it has been narrated at the snake sacrifice: 'Tell us the story of old [*purāṇam*] … [W]e wish to hear it just as Vaiśaṃpāyana, at Dvaipāyana's request, repeated it at King Janamejaya's *satra*' (*Mbh*, 1.1.15–18). Of course, Ugraśravas has not come directly from the

snake sacrifice, as he has already told the seers that on the way to the Naimiṣa Forest he has visited many *tīrtha*s and *āyatana*s, as well as making a stop at the holy site of Samantapañcaka; so, it is possible that word of Janamejaya's sacrifice had already reached his brahmin interlocutors before Ugraśravas arrived. But even if we can produce a chronological explanation, it seems clear that the two accounts of how Ugraśravas has learned the *Mahābhārata* do not fit comfortably together.

Unlike Mehta and Sukthankar, I am not interested in speculating about the process and relative sequence by which different sections were incorporated into the text. Rather, my aim here is to draw attention to the fact that—whichever way we try to explain the double introduction: as one continuous scene, as two different frames or as two versions of the same scene—the outer frame contains two explanations for Ugraśravas's education: an overdetermined justification that could suggest that the authority of Ugraśravas as a narrator was a concern for the redactors, and perhaps one for which they struggled to find a satisfactory explanation. But, as we will see, this double explanation also places Ugraśravas equally within two very different types of lineages of transmission.

The second introduction presents a lineage that resembles a Vedic *paraṃparā*, with Ugraśravas learning the tradition from his father, who learned it from Vyāsa and/or his student. Although Ugraśravas and his father are not brahmins themselves, the father to son transmission, combined with a lineage that goes directly back to Vyāsa, gives the appearance of an orthodox mode of transmission. The first introduction, however, is seemingly much more problematic. Although Ugraśravas's claim to have heard the *Mahābhārata* at Janamejaya's *sarpasatra* places him closer to Vyāsa in terms of the history of the text's transmission, this explanation seems to open more complications, as Ugraśravas is the student neither of Vyāsa nor of Vaiśaṃpāyana. In fact, in this account, his only means of knowing the *Mahābhārata* seems to be overhearing the text as it was narrated to someone else.

Eyewitnesses and eavesdroppers

Ugraśravas, of course, is not the only narrator who legitimises his claim to knowledge by means of his presence at a particular place and time. Another example of eavesdropping as the means for narratorial authority appears in Ugraśravas's account of the Āstīkaparvan, as he describes the events leading up to the snake sacrifice. Ugraśravas mentions that King Janamejaya once

asked his ministers to report a conversation between Takṣaka, the king of the snakes, and the brahmin Kaśyapa. However, when Janamejaya asks to hear this exchange, he is concerned about how his ministers could possibly recount a conversation they did not themselves witness—a dialogue that was seemingly not witnessed by anyone at all: 'I first wish to hear the dialogue between the king of snakes and Kaśyapa in the forest, which was without inhabitants. Who witnessed and heard what came to be heard by you?' (*Mbh*, 1.46.26–27). The ministers respond that a man who was collecting branches just happened to have climbed a tree when he overheard the conversation. Later this man recounted the dialogue in the city where the ministers were present. The ministers tell Janamejaya that what they related to him about this encounter was exactly as they had heard it from the eyewitness himself (1.46.31). Crucially, after hearing this explanation, King Janamejaya makes his fateful decision to conduct the snake sacrifice.

Similarly, when Śakuntalā recounts her family origins to Duḥṣanta, she presents her own biography in the words of her father as spoken in a conversation with a *ṛṣi*—a dialogue she claims to have overheard (*Mbh*, 1.65–66). As I have discussed elsewhere (Black 2007b), eavesdropping is often offered as a plausible explanation for how female characters know what they know, particularly when their words could be called into question. Both Draupadī (3.33.56–58) and Sulabhā (12.308.181–84), for example, describe occasions when they overheard brahmins teaching their fathers when they need to explain how they have been educated in traditional knowledge. Perhaps Ugraśravas, as a *sūta* who might not have been accepted formally as Vaiśaṃpāyana's student, is relying on eavesdropping for similar reasons.[14]

Significantly, Vyāsa, who is credited with composing the *Mahābhārata* from his own mind, also resorts to eavesdropping to explain how he knows what he knows—suggesting, of course, that even he was not outside the question of how he derived his authority as composer or narrator. In the Strīparvan (*Mbh*, 11.8.20–44), for example, the divine plan that Vyāsa reveals to Dhṛtarāṣṭra is one he overheard when it was discussed in Indra's assembly hall.

On other occasions, his authorial status derives from being an eyewitness. When Jamanejaya first asks Vyāsa to recite the *Mahābhārata*, he says to him: 'The actions of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, you have seen them with your

14 However, Ugraśravas tells Śaunaka that his father, Lomaharṣaṇa, was the student of Vyāsa (*Mbh*, 1.13.6–8) and Vaiśaṃpāyana (1.5.4–5).

own eyes [*pratyakṣadarṣivān*], Sir. I want you to tell me, twiceborn' (*Mbh*, 1.54.18). Vaiśaṃpāyana will subsequently tell Janamejaya (1.55.2, 1.56.12), as Ugraśravas tells the Naimiṣa brahmins (1.1.23), that the *Mahābhārata* is Vyāsa's 'thought entire' (*mataṃ kṛtsnam*), but here, when Vyāsa is first asked to speak about the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, Janamejaya addresses Vyāsa more as a chronicler than as a textual composer.

Similarly, when Bhīṣma narrates an account of Vyāsa and Śuka in the Śāntiparvan, he spells out how he has come to know about the scene where Śuka achieves *mokṣa*. As Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira, Vyāsa was not present to witness Śuka's final liberation, but this event was observed by several *ṛṣi*s, who reported back to Vyāsa, from whom Bhīṣma learned about it. As Hiltebeitel (2001a: 261) comments: 'Bhīṣma thereby indicates who [beside Śuka] witnessed the wonder of Śuka's liberation, which Vyāsa has just missed, and thus how Bhīṣma could have gotten this missing moment of the tale.' Such scenes indicate the complexity of Vyāsa's double role as both the text's divinely inspired composer and a participant within the narrative. Vyāsa is portrayed as both a Vedic *ṛṣi* who sees the text with his mind's eye and a 'historical' witness who provides a testimony of the events he observes at first hand.

In returning to the question of why Ugraśravas is the main narrator, we have perhaps elicited more questions than provided answers. But if questions remain as to why a *sūta* would be the text's main narrator, it is instructive to observe that the *Mahābhārata* seems to have struggled with this question as well. As is evident with episodes throughout the text, such as Draupadī's polyandrous marriage, the death of Bhīṣma and the death of Kṛṣṇa,[15] the *Mahābhārata* tends to provide multiple explanations for situations that are considered controversial or problematic. Seen in this light, the double explanation is worth noting because it indicates a possible tension within the text itself.

We might also consider reading the Ugraśravas narration within the context of the text's claim to reach an audience that is much larger and more inclusive than that of the Vedas. Although the Critical Edition does not contain the

15 For a discussion of these three episodes, see Black (2021): Draupadī's marriage (pp. 57–81), Bhīṣma's death (pp. 49–52) and Kṛṣṇa's death (pp. 169–71).

well-known description of the epic as a text 'for women and śūdras',[16] the *Mahābhārata* does seem to regard itself as delivering a universal message. In addition to the numerous *phalaśruti*s throughout the text that address audiences beyond those who are male and of the twice-born classes, Vyāsa himself, in the Śāntiparvan, instructs his disciples to teach his story to members of all four *varṇa*s (12.314.45). Given the author's own instruction to his students, what better way to reach a diverse and inclusive audience than to have Brahmanical knowledge communicated by someone of lower birth. Indeed, without making any claims about the 'real' history of the text, this scenario seems to be the one that the *Mahābhārata* tells about its own transmission: originating among brahmins, but learned by *sūta*s such as Ugraśravas, who, implicitly, share such tales and legends with a wide audience, particularly when they frequent popular pilgrimage sites, such as the ones Ugraśravas visited before arriving in the Naimiṣa Forest. If this is indeed the *Mahābhārata*'s own account of its transmission, perhaps the double explanation of Ugraśravas's narratorial credentials is part of depicting him as a transitional character: as both inside and outside the Brahmanical textual tradition. He can trace his educational lineage back to the composer himself, but at the same time he is at the margins of that tradition, eavesdropping on the epic at King Janamejaya's sacrifice.

Śaunaka the Bhārgava

While Sukthankar's theory of the *Mahābhārata*'s compositional history takes Ugraśravas to represent the text's bardic origins, a more recent hypothesis suggests that Śaunaka and the Naimiṣa brahmins are symbolic of a Brahmanical authorial committee. In his provocative book *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Alf Hiltebeitel (2001b) has challenged several widespread assumptions about the compositional history of the epic. In response to the commonly accepted theory that the *Mahābhārata* was composed in distinct stages over up to 1,000 years (500 BCE – 500 CE), Hiltebeitel (2001b: 20) suggests the text was put together in a much shorter period—at most, a 'couple of generations'; instead of positing bardic origins, Hiltebeitel proposes that the

16 This description of the *Mahābhārata* appears in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.4.25), which says that Vyāsa composed his story out of compassion for women, *śūdra*s and uneducated twice-borns. Nonetheless, there are several individual *phalaśruti*s throughout the text that offer rewards for *śūdra*s and women (see, for example, 12.327.104–5; see also Black 2007b: 55–56, for *phalaśruti*s that specifically address a female audience).

Mahābhārata was originally composed by brahmins. Moreover, according to Hiltebeitel (2001b: 19–20), the brahmins who composed the epic were part of a 'committee' or 'team' who had the patronage of a minor king or merchant. As Hiltebeitel speculates, Śaunaka and the brahmins of the Naimiṣa Forest represent part of this authorial committee.

I have considerable appreciation for Hiltebeitel's theory of the text's history and transmission, particularly as he bases most of his speculations on a close reading of the stories the epic tells about itself—'how the text itself portrays those who compose, transmit, and receive it as audiences' (2001b: 29). Nevertheless, while Śaunaka and the Naimiṣa brahmins are depicted as major players in the transmission of the text, at no point does the *Mabhābhārata* suggest they were involved in any compositional activities, such as authorship or editing. Thus, it seems unlikely that the brahmins in the frame story reflect an authorial or editorial team. Rather than assume that Śaunaka and the Naimiṣa brahmins are depictions of the epic's authors, I would like to examine the role that Śaunaka plays within the literary world of the text. Or, following Hiltebeitel's (2001b: 110) own advice, I would like to explore Śaunaka as a literary character.[17]

Although he is usually not considered a central character, Śaunaka has the prominent role of being the *Mahābhārata*'s primary listener. Of the four main framing dialogues that structure the text, three feature a king as the primary audience—namely, Janamejaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhiṣṭhira—and in all three cases, the stories and teachings that the king hears are connected to his ability to rule and his claim to regal power.[18] In the examples of these three royal auditors it is clear that listeners depicted in the *Mahābhārata* are well chosen receivers who often have something to learn from what they hear.

In his role as the text's primary listener, much has been made of Śaunaka being a member of the Bhārgava family of brahmins,[19] particularly in the context of Sukthankar's theory of Bhṛguisation.[20] As we have seen, Sukthankar's

17 See also Patton (2011).

18 Janamejaya hears the *Mahābhārata* at his *sarpasatra*, where he interrupts his massacre of the snakes, hence stopping, or at least pausing, a cycle of violence that has continued for several generations; Dhṛtarāṣṭra not only hears in detail the tragedies of the war, but also is repeatedly instructed by Saṃjaya that his own actions and inactions contributed to the war and, consequently, to the deaths of his sons; Yudhiṣṭhira learns discourses on *nīti* and *dharma* as he prepares to assume the position of king.

19 Members of the Bhārgava family are descendants of the *ṛṣi* Bhṛgu, who is one of the 10 *ṛṣi* composers of hymns in the *Ṛg Veda*. Although the term *Bhṛgu* appears in the *Ṛg Veda*, this word is first associated with a particular sage or as the ancestor of the Bhārgava clan in the Brāhmaṇas (Goldman 1977: 150n.14).

20 See also Goldman (1977); Minkowski (1991); Brockington (1998); and Hiltebeitel (2001b: 105–18).

theory assumes that the *Mahābhārata* was not only composed by bards and appropriated by brahmins, but also appropriated by a specific group of brahmins: the Bhārgavas. Śaunaka plays a pivotal role in this theory, as he, being a descendent of Bhṛgu, represents the Bhārgava appropriation of the text. Recently, scholars such as Minkowski (1991) and Hiltebeitel (2001b) have rejected the suggestion that the Bhṛgus were compilers and/or editors of the text. As Minkowski ponders: 'Why should we assume that in India a distinct group could take hostage the product of an entire culture, an epic, moreover, that itself suggests a history of conforming to the interests of its listeners?' (1991: 400). But, even if it is unlikely that Śaunaka represents an appropriation of the text, his family identity is nonetheless an integral part of his character in the frame story.

Indeed, the two stories that Ugraśravas narrates to Śaunaka in the outer frame feature a Bhārgava brahmin in a prominent role.[21] Ugraśravas's first story to Śaunaka is prompted by the brahmin's request to hear about the history of his own family. After recounting a family genealogy[22] and an episode about Bhṛgu cursing Agni, the story resumes several generations later, with Ruru, whose fiancée Pramadvarā is killed by snakebite. Through an act of truth (*satyakrīya*), Ruru revives his bride-to-be, but only after giving up half his own life. Yet, even after bringing his bride back from the dead, Ruru swears to take revenge by killing all snakes. He then goes around lashing snakes with a stick, but one day strikes a lizard instead. This lizard, as it turns out, is a sage who has been cursed because he had frightened another sage with a snake. The lizard tells him he is acting like a *kṣatriya*: that brahmins should observe *ahiṃsā* and leave the killing to the *kṣatriya*s. He then tells Ruru about Āstīka, who saved the snakes from extermination through his inspiring song of praise to Janamejaya. Rather than narrating this story himself, however, the lizard instructs Ruru to learn it from a brahmin. Subsequently, Ruru returns to his father, Pramata, who tells him the story.

Yet, we never hear Pramata tell the tale, as the beginning of the Āstīkaparvan returns to the dialogue between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka. Ugraśravas's account of the Āstīkaparvan begins with the rivalry between the two wives of Kaśyapa: Kadrū, the mother of the snakes, and Vinatā, the mother of two birds, one of which is Garuḍa. This story weaves together several other

21 The Pauṣyaparvan also features a prominent Bhārgava and addresses the *sarpasatra*, but Śaunaka is not present to hear this tale.

22 The genealogy of Śaunaka's branch of the family is presented as follows: Bhṛgu (+ Pulomā) > Cyavana Bhārgava > Pramati (+ Ghṛtācī) > Ruru (+ Pramadvarā) > Śunaka.

tales, including the churning of the milk ocean, the stealing of *soma* and the battle between the *deva*s and *asura*s, before relating the death of Parikṣit and how Āstīka—who was taught by Cyavana, son of Bhṛgu—interrupted Janamejaya's sacrifice to save the snakes from extermination.

As we can see, the stories of Ruru and Āstīka connect Śaunaka personally with the snake sacrifice, which both stories set up to be the primary lenses through which Śaunaka will view the *Mahābhārata*'s main narrative (Minkowski 1991). Additionally, a number of themes that appear generally in Bhārgava stories link closely with the account of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, particularly the recurring motif of genocidal vendettas, with the Bhārgavas often depicted as the ones who attempt to exterminate entire populations.[23] Rāma Jāmadagnya, who kills off the entire *kṣatriya* population 21 times, is well known, but the theme of near-extermination also appears in other Bhārgava stories, such as the story of Aurva (*Mbh*, 1.169–71), in which, in this case, the Bhārgavas are the victims of genocide, with the *kṣatriya*s not even sparing the unborn Bhārgava children.

Another Bhārgava story with relevance to Śaunaka—although it is not included in the outer frame—is the tale of King Vītahavya, the founder of Śaunaka's branch of the Bhārgava family. As narrated by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira in the Anuśāsanaparvan (*Mbh*, 13.31), King Vītahavya was born a Śāryāta king and is depicted as a 'particularly murderous warrior' (Goldman 1977: 112). In another episode of near-genocide, Vītahavya and his sons kill all the sons and soldiers of King Divodāsa. However, King Divodāsa manages to escape and, subsequently, holds a sacrifice with the aid of his priest Bharadvāja for the sake of having a son. Subsequently, Pratardana is born and, when he reaches maturity, he attempts to avenge his father's family by marching against King Vītahavya and killing all his sons in a single battle. Fearing for his own life, Vītahavya flees to Bhṛgu's ashram. When King Pratardana shows up—keen to complete extermination of the Vītahavya clan—he asks the brahmin to surrender the king, with Bhṛgu replying that there are no *kṣatriya*s in his ashram. Because of Bhṛgu's inherent truthfulness, this declaration transforms Vītahavya into a brahmin, and Vītahavya ends up being the founder of Śaunaka's branch of the family.

23 As Goldman (1977: 5) points out, the Bhārgavas are often portrayed in a rather negative light: 'The central concern of the Bhṛgus appear from the mythology to have included death, violence, sorcery, confusion and violation of class roles [*varṇāśramadharma*], intermarriage with other varṇas [*varṇasaṃkara*] and open hostility to the gods themselves. In addition, several of the Bhārgava sages are shown in the epic to have engaged with impunity in such activities as theft, drinking liquor, and killing a woman, acts that are condemned unequivocally in the law texts as especially improper for brahmins.'

The story of Vītahavya brings up several recurring themes that have relevance to Śaunaka and the tales he hears in the outer frame. For example, it portrays the founder of Śaunaka's side of the family as originally being a king. As such, Śaunaka is reminded that Ruru, who was accused of acting too much like a *kṣatriya*, was not his only ancestor whose status as a brahmin was somewhat ambiguous. This story also reveals that Vītahavya, once he was pronounced a brahmin, did not receive his Vedic education by means of the traditional method, but rather learned the Vedas from the virtue of Bhṛgu's words.

As we can see, one of most significant aspects of Śaunaka's character as depicted in the frame story is as a figure who links themes found in Bhārgava stories with the portrayal of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, as well as with other tales of violence and mass destruction found throughout the *Mahābhārata*. If we begin to reconsider with Minkowski (1991: 400) 'the process that brought the Bhṛgu material into the *Mahābhārata*', a possible clue could be that Śaunaka is not the narrator of the epic, but its foremost listener. In other words, if Minkowski (1991: 400) is correct in assuming that the *Mahābhārata* has 'a history of conforming to the interests of its listeners', rather than supposing that the *Mahābhārata* was appropriated *by* Bhṛgus, we could consider the possibility that, conversely, it was framed or modified *for* them—or, more likely, a community of listeners who were familiar with Bhārgava lore. Without any external evidence, such a suggestion remains highly speculative; and, as I have already suggested, it is not at all clear that the frame story should be read as depicting the historical transmission of the text. However, when considering the *Mahābhārata*'s own portrayal of its transmission, we should keep in mind that Śaunaka is depicted as neither author nor appropriator of the text, but rather, as its main listener.

Śaunaka as listener

Although Śaunaka's role as a Bhārgava is clearly important, there is much more to him than being a member of this famous family. Along with his participation in the outer-frame dialogue,[24] characters with the name Śaunaka appear on four other occasions in the *Mahābhārata*'s main story, three of

24 After the opening section of the text (*Mbh*, 1.1–54), the outer-frame dialogue is referred to directly only on a few other occasions: 2.46.4; 15.42–43 (when Kṛṣṇa brings Parikṣit back to life); and at the very end of the epic (18.5). Additionally, as Hiltebeitel has argued, the narrative returns to the outer-frame dialogue at several points in the Nārāyaṇīya, in passages that either have not been included in the Critical Edition or have been misattributed to other speakers (for further discussion, see Hiltebeitel 2006).

them in the Āraṇyakaparvan. The name Śaunaka is a patronym that can refer to any descendent of Śunaka, so we cannot assume that all appearances of this name necessarily refer to the same person.[25] However, as we will see, there are similar characteristics among these Śaunakas and, in one case in particular, when the text seems to be referring to a different Śaunaka, the narrative playfully connects this personage to the one who is listening to Ugraśravas in the outer frame.

In the Āraṇyakaparvan, which depicts the Pāṇḍavas during their 12-year exile, the heroes encounter numerous *ṛṣi*s, brahmins and storytellers, including Vyāsa, Mārkaṇḍeya, Nārada, Dhaumya, Baka Dālbhya, Bṛhadaśva and Lomaśa. Significantly, Śaunaka appears as the first of these eminent sages to offer the Pāṇḍavas a teaching (*Mbh*, 3.2.14–79). On this occasion, he is described as a knower of *sāṃkhya* and yoga; and his reference to King Janaka suggests he is familiar with upanishadic lore.[26]

Śaunaka also appears as one of several *ṛṣi*s who are in attendance during Baka Dālbhya's instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira (*Mbh*, 3.27.23).[27] Notable names among those present on this occasion are Vyāsa, Nārada and Bṛhadaśva. Although it is not clear what Śaunaka does after Baka Dālbhya's lesson, it is possible he stays around to hear the Nala story, which is suggested by the fact that the story's narrator, Bṛhadaśva, has also seemingly been present among the Pāṇḍavas since listening to Baka Dālbhya. Additionally, Śaunaka appears in a list of *ṛṣi*s who accompany the Pāṇḍavas on part of their tour of *tīrtha*s (3.83.102–4).[28] Among the more familiar names here are Vyāsa and Vālmīki, as well as Vedic *ṛṣi*s such as Kāśyapa, Viśvāmitra, Gautama, Asita Devala, Bharadvāja, Vasiṣṭha and the upaniṣadic teacher Uddālaka.[29]

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25 As Patton (2011: 131) remarks, even if we take these and other instances of the name to be referring to different personages, there are nonetheless several similarities among them: a 'set of literary characteristics that constellate around this name'.

26 For further discussion of the connections between characters with the name Śaunaka in the Upaniṣads and the *Mahābhārata*, see Black (2017). For Śaunaka as contributing to the *Mahābhārata*'s presentation of itself as an Upaniṣad, see Black (2021: 2).

27 The full list is: Dvaipāyana, Nārada, Jāmadagnya, Pṛthuśravas, Indradyumna, Bhāluki, Kṛtacetas, Sahasrapād, Karṇaśravas, Muñja, Lavaṇāśva, Kaśyapa, Hārīta, Sthūnakarṇa, Agniveśya, Śaunaka, Ṛtavāk, Bṛhadaśva, Ṛtavasu, Urdhvaretas, Vṛṣāmitra, Suhotra and Hotravāhana.

28 Here, the list is: Vālmīki, Kāśyapa, Ātreya, Kauṇḍinya, Viśvāmitra, Gautama, Asita Devala, Mārkaṇḍeya, Gālava, Bharadvāja, Vasiṣṭha, Uddālaka, Śaunaka and his son Vyāsa, Durvāsas and Jābāli. It is also notable that, according to this list, Śaunaka has a son.

29 During this journey, they hear the following *upākhyāna*s: *Agastya* (*Mbh*, 3.94–108), *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* (3.110–13), *Kārtavīrya* (3.115–17), *Sukanyā* (3.122–25), *Māndhātar* (3.126), *Jantu* (3.127–28), *Śyena-Kapotīya* (3.130–31), *Aṣṭāvakra* (3.132–34) and *Yavakrīta* (3.135–39). Interestingly, among the places they go with the Pāṇḍavas is the Naimiṣa Forest (3.93.1).

In these two lists, Śaunaka is mentioned along with textual composers such as Vyāsa and Vālmīki; storytellers within the *Mahābhārata*, such as Mārkaṇḍeya and Bṛhadaśva; and Vedic *ṛṣi*s such as Vasiṣṭha and Bharadvāja. Although only his name is mentioned, in these instances, we are offered a glimpse of Śaunaka's character through his association with composers, storytellers and immortal sages: he is confirmed as an authoritative teacher, whose presence contributes to establishing the reliability of other speakers and the orthodoxy of their teachings. Moreover, on these two occasions, he is present as a listener—that is, cast in the same role as the Śaunaka in the outer-frame dialogue. In this way, Śaunaka is presented as a key listener within the text, as well as the primary listener to the text as a whole.[30]

In a fourth occurrence of a character with the same name in the main story, Śaunaka Indrota[31] appears in the Śāntiparvan (*Mbh*, 12.146–8). Although the inclusion of his given name could distinguish Indrota from the other Śaunakas, this episode makes teasing allusions to the text's outer-frame dialogue. In this episode, Śaunaka Indrota features in a dialogue with King Janamejaya, who, we might remember, is the primary listener to Vaiśaṃpāyana's recital of the *Mahābhārata* in the epic's inner-frame dialogue. Thus, the narrative presents its audience with the baffling scenario of Yudhiṣṭhira listening to a story about Janamejaya,[32] who is his brother Arjuna's yet-to-be-born grandson. Considering the temporal complexities of such a situation, it would certainly not strain any further narrative plausibility if this Śaunaka were the same as the one in the text's outer frame. But even if they are not the same person, it is hard to imagine that the epic poets did not at least intend for Śaunaka Indrota to call to mind Śaunaka the Kulapati,[33]

30 It is noteworthy that the portrayal of Śaunaka as a primary listener, or interlocutor, is consistent with the appearances of personages sharing the name Śaunaka in other textual contexts, particularly the Upaniṣads (see Black 2017). For example, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.3.5–7), Śaunaka Kapeya is the audience to whom a *brahmacārin* poses a riddle; while in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.3), a 'great householder' (*mahāśāla*) named Śaunaka learns from Aṅgiras—a scenario that is repeated at the beginning of the *Brahma Upaniṣad* (see Olivelle 1992). The beginning of the *Nāradaparivrājaka Upaniṣad* (c. 1150 CE) appears to be modelled on the outer frame of the *Mahābhārata*, with Narāda arriving in the Naimiṣa Forest to find Śaunaka and a group of *ṛṣi*s performing a 12-year *satra* (see Olivelle 1992).

31 This name also appears in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (8.5.3.5).

32 This story refers to Janamejaya as a descendant of Parikṣit (*Mbh*, 12.146.3), making it clear that this is the same king who performs the *sarpasatra* in the inner-frame story. See Fitzgerald's note (2004: 768).

33 *Kulapati*, which appears on two occasions to designate Śaunaka (*Mbh*, 1.1.2; 1.4.1), probably means something like 'leader' (see Hiltebeitel 2001b: 99, 103). Another designation used to describe Śaunaka is *gṛhapati* (1.4.11).

who appears at the beginning of the text.[34] Assuming that this is the case, this dialogue playfully puts the listeners of the outer and inner dialogues in conversation with each other.

Furthermore, the dialogue between Śaunaka and Janamejaya addresses themes explored in the text's frame stories. In this episode from the Śāntiparvan, Janamejaya retreats to the forest in shame after accidentally killing a brahmin. While in the forest, he seeks the advice of the wise sage Śaunaka, who instructs the king to perform a ritual and to make a promise never to harm brahmins again. Śaunaka then praises the king for his efforts to make up for his past deeds and reinstates him as king. That a character named Śaunaka can assist King Janamejaya in expiating his sins connects this story to two of the tales that Śaunaka the Kulapati hears at the beginning of the *Mahābhārata*: one in which Āstīka, a relative of Śaunaka, interrupts King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice; the second in which Ruru, Śaunaka's 'grandfather',[35] does not go through with his vow to kill all snakes. Taken together, all three stories seem to connect the name Śaunaka with the capacity for making up for past sins and putting an end to horrible cycles of violence.

As we can see from the stories of the outer frame, as well as other tales directly related to him, Śaunaka's identity as a member of the Bhārgava clan is a vital link in connecting several themes that appear in stories of Bhārgavas, with the account of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and several episodes in the *Mahābhārata*'s main story. Additionally, in his role as a brahmin listener, Śaunaka serves to legitimise Ugraśravas's narration. A possible implication is that Ugraśravas's story cannot be the fifth Veda that it aspires to be without being sanctioned by Śaunaka and his colleagues.[36] Fitzgerald makes

34 Adam Bowles (2007: 318) has recently made similar observations: the Śaunaka of the outer frame 'is nowhere called Indrota, suggesting that the two should not, strictly speaking, be identified as the one person. But we should be wary of concluding that the choice of interlocutors is an unknowing coincidence, and we could perhaps regard the authors or redactors as engaging in a bit of playfulness by vaguely suggesting, or leaving it open for the audience to conclude, that the principle audiences of the two tellings of the *Mbh* described in the *Mbh* itself are here engaging in a conversation of their own.'

35 Śaunaka's family tree is ambiguous. The Anuśāsanaparvan depicts him as Śunaka's son, but the Ādiparvan suggests that Ruru is his great-grandfather, thus making Śunaka, referred to as *pūrvapitāmaha* ('forefather'), his grandfather, rather than father. As Hiltebeitel (2001b: 113n.68) comments, the Ādiparvan genealogy is 'short', giving Śaunaka no father to close the descent line. See also Goldman (1977: 165n.66).

36 Indeed, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, Vedic authority is often established more through the text's listeners than through its speakers—a point suggested by Vaiśaṃpāyana at the beginning of his narration to Janamejaya, when he says, twice, that the *Mahābhārata* should be recited to brahmins (*Mbh*, 1.56.28–29). Additionally, when Ugraśravas tells the Naimiṣa brahmins that reciting even a quarter of the *Mahābhārata* to brahmins performing a *śraddha* will bring food and drink to his ancestors, perhaps he is effectively providing the authorising criteria for his own recitation (1.1.203).

a similar point in describing how the presence of brahmins contributes to the *Mahābhārata*'s self-proclaimed Vedic status: the 'enthusiasm for the text by Śaunaka's company is not only a rhetorically important endorsement of the text, legitimising and recommending it as reliable teaching, it implies a necessary feature of the text's being a Veda' (Fitzgerald 1991: 164).

Conclusion

As several scholars have explored (for example, Witzel 1987; Minkowski 1989), framing techniques are an important characteristic of several ancient Indian religious texts.[37] While different texts employ this organisational structure differently, one of the most recurring uses is to lend authority to a particular doctrine within a text or to the whole text. The Upaniṣads and Buddhist Nikāyas are relatively straightforward in this respect, as they link specific teachings to authoritative individuals such as Yājñavalkya or the Buddha. Through the figure of Vyāsa, as well as the inclusion of teachings from famous teachers such as Bṛhaspati, Kṛṣṇa, Nārada and others, the *Mahābhārata* seems to use its dialogical structure in similar ways. Yet, as we have seen, the dubious authority of several of its narrators, combined with the multivocality of its narration, make the epic's use of frame dialogues much more complex and ambiguous.

Perhaps the best way to understand Ugraśravas's narration is as operating in tandem with the other major recitals within the text. While the Ugraśravas narration takes place at an all-brahmin ritual,[38] Vaiśaṃpāyana's telling is during a royal ritual, with a much wider audience. Meanwhile, Saṃjaya's reportage of the war is delivered in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court, with Gāndhārī and the wives of many of the combatants listening as well;[39] Bhīṣma's postwar instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira is set outside, near the battlefield, with Kṛṣṇa, Satyaki, Bhīma, Arjuna, the twins, Kṛpa, Yuyutsu, Saṃjaya and Draupadī in attendance; and the Pāṇḍavas hear a number of tales during their wanderings in the forest, particularly at pilgrimage sites—exactly the sorts of places from where Ugraśravas has just come when he arrives in the Naimiṣa Forest.

37 See also Matchett (2002); Adluri (2011); Appleton (2015); Esposito (2015); and Hiltebeitel (2015).
38 Although Hiltebeitel (2001b: 166) suggests that the wives of the brahmin ritualists could also have been in attendance. See also Black (2007b: 60–62).
39 For a discussion about the role of Gāndhārī as a listener to Saṃjaya's report of the war, see Black (2007b: 62–65).

In other words, the numerous narrators of the *Mahābhārata* connect the telling of the epic to different possible contexts of reception, as well as to the various types of listeners who are present in each location.

Among other things, the many voices, settings and audiences of the *Mahābhārata* can be seen as part of its transitional character from *śruti* to a new type of post-Vedic religious text. It is well known that the *Mahābhārata* links itself to the Vedic tradition through its claim to be a fifth Veda, but, as Sukthankar (1998: 23) (reflecting on Dahlmann) reminds us: '[T]hroughout Indian antiquity, above all things, the *Mahābhārata* was recognised as a "dhamma-saṁhita, as a smṛti".' What has been largely overlooked, however, is the wide range of textual descriptions the *Mahābhārata* uses to refer to itself. As Hiltebeitel observes, the two most frequent designations are *ākhyāna* (on 14 occasions) and *itihāsa* (on eight occasions). Other terms the text uses for self-description are *purāṇa*, *kathā*, *śāstra*, *upaniṣad* and *carita*.[40] Hiltebeitel (2005: 465) suggests that, by means of 'its multiple self-designations', the *Mahābhārata* 'sustains itself as a multigenre work'.

This array of self-descriptions could run parallel with the multiple voices, but it also could be seen as betraying a certain ambiguity, even uncertainty, among the composers and editors as to what type of text the *Mahābhārata* aspires be. In this way, the *Mahābhārata* is very much a text in transition—still in the process of deciding how to define itself in a post-Vedic world. Ugraśravas and Śaunaka emerge as integral participants in representing this transition.

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40 See Hiltebeitel (2005: 465) for the full list of terms and their references.

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