Turning a Tradition into a Text:
Critical Problems in Editing the Mahābhārata
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This paper will discuss some critical problems in editing the Mahābhārata, problems that arise, it seems, from the attempt to turn a tradition into a text. The first part of this paper will contextualize the Mahābhārata tradition in two ways: as part of the academic discussion about orality and literacy, and then in terms of the types of South Asian canonical literature. Given the aims of the conference where this paper was presented, the second part of the paper will look at one attempt to create a fixed version of the Mahābhārata, the Poona critical edition.

The Mahābhārata is a Sanskrit epic which has had its origins in oral tradition and was formed, scholars believe today, sometime between 400 BCE and 400 CE. The text has remained alive both in oral and written forms to this day. The Mahābhārata is massive text, comprising traditionally some one hundred thousand couplets, ten times longer than the Iliad and Odyssey combined. The text is divided into eighteen ‘parvans,’ books, each of which is organized by sub-books and chapters.

The epic pervades daily life and consciousness in many parts of South Asia, and there, as A. K. Ramanujan once remarked, "no one hears the Mahābhārata for the first time." The Mahābhārata is sometimes embraced as the national epic of India, and it is frequently regarded as a sacred text in Hinduism; it is part of smṛti – a set of texts which interpreted the Vedas (the most ancient of Hindu texts) and indeed constitute a tradition of interpretation. The Mahābhārata explores how to get to heaven, how gods and human beings interact, and the nature of sacrifice, mythology, and ritual. It contains the Bhagavad Gītā, a text often extracted from the context of the Mahābhārata and sometimes presented as the central statement of Hinduism.

Common assumptions about oral vs. written texts

Now one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of studying a text like the Mahābhārata is how different it is from most other ‘texts.’ In a profound way, the Mahābhārata, and the South Asian literary tradition in general, stands as a glaring counterexample to many prevalent beliefs about orality, literacy, and their consequences. As Madeleine Biardeau puts it,

In the West, oral tradition refers essentially to the manner that popular beliefs, myths, and legends, which were in olden days narrated by more or less skilled people, are transmitted. The narrators were not necessarily specially authorized for this activity;
rather they were appreciated on the basis of their ability to tell stories... Oral tradition in this sense is considered to be authorless, or rather, anonymous and collective. As such it is in opposition to written literature, which is comprised exclusively of works composed by individual authors, whether known or unknown, and which are maintained unaltered, as far as possible, through the manuscript traditions... Since the written literature in the West is valued more highly than the oral tradition, the specific features of the latter were ignored for a long time. The rules of textual criticism were evolved for only the written literature and their main purpose was to reconstruct, out of the variations of manuscripts, the original work of an author.1

And even though it is widely recognized that the "current modern identification of literacy with civilization as such was [only] crystallized during the eighteenth century,"2 "at some time or the other almost every feature of the modern Western world has been linked closely to literacy."3 One prominent example of this tendency is the work of Jack Goody and Ian Watt, who "argue that it was writing which in [ancient] Greece had produced democracy, rational thought, philosophy, and historiography... [Even though] Goody and Watt warned against seeing literacy as the sole cause of [these ideas], any original reservations were forgotten by their followers."4 And there is a related tendency as well to think of the arrival of literacy as a quantum break in history, a moment when minds and society evolve. As Walter Ong famously formulated it, writing is "a technology that restructures thought."5

To these theories, the South Asian tradition looms as a large and unassailable counterexample.6 Here is a tradition which has not been radically transformed by the arrival of writing, in which rationality is alive and well, and in which the oral word has been central, and often dominant, throughout the last three millennia.7

One primary locus of orality in the South Asian tradition is in the canonical texts classed as śruti and smṛti. Literally, the Sanskrit term śruti means 'the heard' and smṛti means 'the remembered'; śruti texts were the Vedas, the most ancient of Hindu texts, and texts at the heart of both the structure and meaning of society. There are four bodies or 'schools' of Vedic texts, of which the most famous is headed by the Rig Veda. The Vedas represent a direct transmission from the gods to human beings. And in some sense they also represent the only such

communication: to understand śruti is to understand what the gods meant to tell us the single time they communicated with us.

Complementing śruti is smṛti, a set of texts which interpreted the Vedas and indeed constituted a tradition of interpretation. It is in smṛti that we find the abhinavagupta's 'the compendia of laws,' such as those of Manu and Vaiṣṇavaṇya. And it is in smṛti that we find the Mahabharata. Interestingly, sometimes the Mahabharata is referred to as "the fifth Veda" a phrase which indicates both euphemistically a text which one knows affectionately or intimately as well as, literally, a text which one holds in reverent awe.

One marker of the difference between śruti and smṛti is the social relations of the text. As Madeleine Biaudeau writes,

"For each school of each Veda there is a group of brahmans who should recite only the particular recension of the school; the text of each recension is thus related to a permanent social group and made inseparable from it. If the text disappeared there would no longer be a basis for the distinction of the group... On the other hand, the smṛti texts, which also probably in one or other date back to a very early period, embody the entire popular lore, with occasional marked difference in the degree of brahmamic orthodoxy. They were probably never exclusively in the hands of the brahmans, and for centuries they have conveyed in a striking manner the beliefs and ideals of the people.8"

In order to see the textual culture in which the Mahabharata exists, in what follows, I'll examine in detail first śruti and then smṛti; I'll use the Rig Veda as the main example of śruti.

"An eighteenth century pundit is said to have given [the following answer] to a European Christian who enquired about 'the Vedic books:' 'Veda is that which pertains to religion; books are not Veda.'9 And according to J. L. Mehta, the "paradigmatic mode of being [of the Rig Veda] is to exist in the hearts and minds of men... and to be recited and chanted by them."10 As the highest form of literature, śruti reveals the truth to the individual through the individual hearing the immutable words or sentences. "The emphasis here is placed on the hearing rather than on the reciting of what has been heard,"11 And because hearing it is so important, it is in the recited or chanted form that the Rig Veda is revered. This oral form is the only fully acceptable and authoritative form of the Rig Veda, and has remained so "for two, possibly over two and a half, millennia after the implementation of writing."12

How do we know the Veda was transmitted orally? As Louis Renou writes, not only is there a negative argument, absence of all ancient reference to writing, but there are positive arguments: the insistence with which they deal with questions of

3 Ibid., p. 19.
4 Ibid., pp. 16-17.
5 Ibid., p. 18.
6 Another counter-example may be Ancient Greece itself, but that is a topic for a separate exposition.
8 Biaudeau, "Some More Considerations About Textual Criticism," p. 120.
10 Ibid., pp. 72-3.
12 Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, p. 68.
accent, of euphony, the cutting up of texts into mechanical sections super-imposed on the cutting up resulting from the internal logic, finally the presence of vikriti 'modified types' of recitation, whose sole object is the guaranteeing of an oral text sheltered from all alteration.\textsuperscript{13}

The Veda was memorized through wonderfully complex modes of recitation known as pāṭha. For example, the jataḥ-pāṭha repeats each pair of word three times in the order ab, ba; ab; bc, cb; bc; etc; on the other hand, ghana-pāṭha is: ab, ba, abc, cba, abc; bc, bcd, dcb, bcd; etc. “In these ways, together with strict traditions of accentuation and melodic rendering, the base text is mastered literally backward and forward in fully acoustic fashion as a hedge against faulty transmission of any word or syllable.”\textsuperscript{14}

Accompanying the oral transmission of the Veda was an active resistance to allowing the Veda to become a written artifact. One reason for the resolve to preserve it in writing was that “it was a magic text, whose power must not fail into the wrong hands... If the sacred chants were spoken by [the wrong] people, it was believed, the words would be polluted like milk contained in the skin of a dog.”\textsuperscript{15} The following list illustrates this principle vividly: “the Aitrey Aranyakya, a late Vedic text, speaks explicitly of writing as a ritually polluting activity... [the student] should not learn when he has eaten flesh, or seen blood, or a dead body, or done what is unlawful... or had intercourse, or written, or obliterated writing.”\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, learning from books was treated with suspicion. One Sanskrit proverb runs: “As for the knowledge that is in books, it is like money placed in another’s hand: when the time comes to use it, there is no knowledge, there is no money.” And Renou notes that “knowledge drawn from the Veda is without fruit if the Veda has not been understood or rather if it has been learnt in writing.”\textsuperscript{17} Ananda Coomaraswamy writes, “From earliest times, Indians have thought of the learned man, not as one who has read much, but as one who has been profoundly taught. It is much rather from a master than from any book that wisdom can be learned.”\textsuperscript{18}

Despite the emphasis on a formalistic memorization of the syllables of the Rig Veda, the tradition did not lose sight of interpretation. Though the emphasis on meaning is greater in the interpretation of smṛiti text, the interpretation of śrutī was still important. Yājñavalkya says that “understanding the meaning of the Veda renders a man fit to obtain [moksa 'liberation'].”\textsuperscript{19} The stages of traditional study are also illuminating: appropriation/memorization; then discussion; then studying it, or reciting it aloud to oneself; and finally reciting it publicly, presumably in a ritual context.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore even if, for śrutī, “the meaning, in relation to the form, had only a minor importance,”\textsuperscript{21} the traditional model of transmission and teaching did not exclude meaning altogether.

The oral form of the Veda not only prevented the Veda from being polluted, it also kept the human beings who used it safe. As Wendy Doniger writes, “you couldn’t take the Rig Veda down off the shelf in a library, for you had to read it in the company of a wise teacher or guru, who would make sure that you were not injured by its power as the sorcerer’s apprentice was injured when he meddled with magic he did not understand.”\textsuperscript{22} Such safety also preserved the text intact. Perhaps the most famous story of the Rig Veda’s oral transmission is the myth of its transition into written form. When Max Müller decided to edit a critical edition of the Rig Veda, he had it recited by brahmins from all over India; each of them had different mother tongues, but each of them said every syllable of the Rig Veda as the others had. Of course, like most European indologists, Müller produced his edition from manuscripts, not from oral recitation, but the story does remind us of how amazing it is that the Rig Veda was preserved orally for over two millennia.

When we examine smṛiti texts like the Mahābhārata, the fixity of the text dissolves. As a ‘remembered text,’ a smṛiti text is acknowledged to have been reconstructed by human authors; smṛiti texts too are canonical and have authority, but they are often written down. Instead of fixing the text, writing it down has had the opposite effect: there are widely disparate variants of the text among even the manuscripts that have survived for us to see.\textsuperscript{24}

Although we can now specify the main period of the formation of the Mahābhārata, this period only demarcates a central range; the epic continued to evolve, in both its written and oral forms after this period. Indeed, the epic is as much a ‘text’ as it is a ‘tradition.’ The editor-in-chief of the critical edition, V. S. Sukthankar, wrote: one ‘essential fact in Mahābhārata textual criticism [is] that the Mahābhārata is not and never was a fixed rigid text, but is a fluctuating epic tradition ... not unlike a popular Indian melody.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{13} Louis Renou, Destiny of the Veda in India (Delhi 1965), p. 26.
\textsuperscript{14} Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{15} Wendy Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes (Chicago 1995), p. 57.
\textsuperscript{16} Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{17} Renou, Destiny of the Veda in India, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{18} Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{19} Renou, Destiny of the Veda in India, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{22} Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes, pp. 578.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 48.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 58-9.
And even at the time that the epic was set down into writing, it was not a rigid, stable form that found a written image. The epic tradition is one of constant change. To quote Sukhankar again, "The view that the epic has reached its present form by a gradual process of addition and alteration receives strong support from the fact that the process is not stopped by scriptural fixation." Doniger has compared the epic to a Banyan tree: the banyan tree grows upwards but also sideways and downwards. Its branches grow down to establish new trunks. Over time some trunks die and new ones form. Coming to the tree after years of growth, how can one tell which was the 'original' trunk? And what would be the point of such an identification?

As a living tradition, the Mahābhārata comprehends much more than any fixed set of knowledge. As David Shulman writes, "It presents itself not as a work of art but as reality itself. No boundary marks off this text from the rest of the world." As the epic itself says, "Whatever is here ... that is found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else." Thus the Mahābhārata becomes a repository for all kinds of wisdom, from the esoteric theological kind to political to folk.

One might expect that once the epic was written down, the oral component of the tradition weakened. In fact, just the opposite was the case. Oral performance of sung texts such as the epics was only stimulated by printing. Moreover, in areas with high literacy, oral performances remain popular for they remain the path of access to the cultural tradition. We must remember that the oral is authoritative, and people even quarrel over which oral variant is correct. For example, William Sax noted the Garhwali argument about which version is the correct one because the Pandavula (their dramatic enactment of the Mahābhārata) is important to them.

Let me emphasize again the idea that the Mahābhārata is a tradition: Alf Hiltebeitel calls it "a work in progress" and the epic says of itself: "Poets have told it before and are telling it now, and will tell it again." Thus even the extant written manuscripts of the Mahābhārata represent only part of a tradition that is simultaneously dynamically oral and textual.

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26 Ibid., p. lxxvi.
27 Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes, pp. 59–60.
30 Graham, Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, p. 76. Also Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes, p. 61.
31 Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes, p. 67.
33 Doniger, Other Peoples’ Myths: The Case of Echoes, p. 59.
34 The Beginning, p. 21 (Mahābhārata 1.1.23).

Concretizing an Oral Tradition

I want to turn now to examine one attempt to bring fixedness to this fluid oral and textual Mahābhārata tradition, to examine the difficulties in turning a tradition like this one into a text. Trying to capture a dynamic object in a stable form may never be possible; as Doniger has written, "to attempt to pin down the Mahābhārata in a critical edition is to attempt to make a stroboscope photograph of a chameleon." Nevertheless, the Poona critical edition is a considerable, perhaps even spectacular, scholarly achievement, and a source of some nationalist pride. After a European attempt to create a critical edition had stalled (due in part to World War One), the new Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute began the project afresh in 1918. The last volume of the critical edition undertaken at the Institute was published in 1970. The time it took to complete this project I hope suggests both its difficulty and its magnitude.

In addition to complexities we've discussed above, there were several other text-critical Problems facing the editors of the Mahābhārata.

Different parts of the epic evolved in different ways, in different scripts, and along different literary lines. For example, Sukhankar found that "[t]he gulf between the Northern and Southern recensions is [...] vast." Moreover, even after it had been written down, the Mahābhārata was not handed down as a unitary whole—that is, as all eighteen parvans together: "The parvans are mostly handed down separately, or in groups of few parvans at a time, at least in the oldest manuscripts now preserved." The relative independence of parvans produced, in turn, an internal textual heterogeneity. As Tamar Reich has observed, "the shape of certain parvans has been definitely fixed by a single act of committing the text to writing. Some of these, however, have been so much expanded afterwards that the process of expansion must be counted as a later major stage in their formation. Other parvans have not been through such a centralized standardization process at any stage."

The South Asian 'culture of the book' also contributed significantly to the current state of manuscripts. "An Indian book consists of a number of loose leaves held together by two loose boards and tied by a piece of string through one or two holes in the leaves and the boards." Paper came to South Asia after 1000 CE; before that the leaves of a book were made of birch bark or palm leaf,
neither of which could weather the seasons very well. Moreover, arranging a book as loose leaves made it easy to insert a leaf, if a scribe would so desire. Finally, there would always be such opportunities, since "for a text to survive it was necessary for it to be transcribed regularly."

Thus when it came time to establish a Critical Edition of the Mahabharata, the project was much broader than just collecting and organizing all the different manuscripts. The project itself raised the issue of what was meant by the term ‘text’ as well as what text-critical assumptions could be then applied to the Mahabharata. How could an editor apply Western philological techniques and textual assumptions to the Mahabharata’s dynamic textual tradition?

This issue of the recensions of the epic make even seemingly straightforward questions like “how many manuscripts exist? And how old are they?” difficult to answer. First, counting manuscripts is difficult because, as we saw, the entire text is not transmitted regularly. Does a manuscript of just one parvan, or a part of a parvan, count? In any case, manuscripts appear plentifully, if one looks for them. For example, for the Adiparvan, the editors collected 235 manuscripts; they collated only 60, though, the rest being of “late and questionable value.” Second, with respect to dating, the oldest manuscript the critical edition collated is dated 1511, which is, as we have noted, relatively late.

The editors of the critical edition found that the extant recensions fell into Northern and Southern families. The Northern family was represented by the Calcutta edition, the so-called “Vulgate,” which became the edictus princeps for the critical edition. The Northern family had another line, clustering around the Bombay edition, an edition which was supposed to include as well the scholium of the 17th century scholar Nilakantha Caturdhara. Sukthankar, however, felt that the manuscripts of the Bombay recension contain “many readings and lines which are not to be found in Nilakantha manuscripts, and are therefore not wholly reliable.” The Southern recension is best represented by P.P.S. Shastri’s edition. Sukthankar praised this edition, but did not feel that Shastri was presenting a critical edition: even though Shastri wanted “to print the text of the selected manuscript as it is, only correcting clerical errors, ... he constantly flout[ed this principle] in pursuit of some imaginary norm.”

Given these myriad difficulties, what did Sukthankar and his team do? Sukthankar felt his duty, as a textual critic, was “to restore the text, as far as possible, to its original form,” and Sukthankar’s methodology towards this end was based on stemmatics. The first part of the critical edition project was collation, and this proceeded as follows: each loka (stanza) of the Vulgate was written out on its own sheet of paper, with variants listed below the original, character for character. “Additional” stanzas which came before or after this stanza in other editions were noted in the margin, or on additional sheets. The collations were checked and then handed to an editor for “the constitution of the text.” And the methodology of this constitution was encapsulated in two principles:

1. “To accept as original a reading or feature which is documented uniformly by all manuscripts.”
2. Doubts and conflicts should be resolved (consistently) by following the Northern recension.

These two principles guided Sukthankar to produce what he calls “the constituted text.” which was “a modest attempt to present a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach with some semblance of confidence. ...” But Sukthankar also cautioned that “the constituted text cannot be accurately dated, nor labeled as pertaining to any particular place or personality... It goes without saying that (precisely like every other edition) it is a mosaic of old and new matter... This unevenness and these inequalities are inevitable, conditioned as they are by the very nature of the text and the tradition.” Such disclaimers notwithstanding, the constituted text was eventually published alone and became more and more canonical. The English translation of the epic uses this constituted text.

There were – and are – at least two veins of criticism of this project. The first may be termed ‘Biedermeier criticism’ and include such critics of the Critical Edition as Sylvain Levi and Madeleine Biaudeau. Instead of searching for an ur-text, these critics would have taken one established, widely used text as representative of the tradition. In that vein, they recommended the recension that the commentator Nilakantha had edited. In that way, the Critical Edition’s critics claimed, the project would avoid simply creating a second recension of the text.

Many well-known episodes of the Mahabharata have been relegated to the appendix of the critical edition and are hence excluded from the constituted text.

For example, the story of how the Mahabharata was written, a story that might be of particular interest to philologists is among them. The story runs like this:

Vyas, the author of the epic, conceived of the poem as containing almost everything, but confessed that no scribe could be found on earth for his composition... Vyas then thought of Ganeśa, and when the god appeared, asked him to write down the epic. Vyas knew easily as Vyasa recited it. Ganeśa agreed to do so, as long as he never had to stop writing, a condition to which Vyasa agreed as long as Ganeśa would not write anything that he did not understand... Vyasa perhaps for the sake of diversion, perhaps because

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39 Ibid., Translator’s introduction, p. xxix.
40 A ‘recension’ here will refer to a relatively stable state of a particular literary work. It can refer thus to stages in an oral evolution, or, as we’ll use it here, to families of manuscripts which can be naturally grouped together.
41 Sukthankar, "Prelogomena," p. cv.
42 Ibid., p. cv.
43 Ibid., p. cvi.
44 Ibid., p. hexvi.
he was worried about keeping up with Ganesa, wove knots into his recitation... [Because
of these knotty verses,] even the omniscient Ganesa would ponder for a moment, and
all the while Vyasa created many more verses.\textsuperscript{46}

Thus the Mahabharata itself accounts for the "knotty" philological problems that
its editors and translators grapple with!

Other episodes, frequently part of performances of the epic, are also relegated
to the appendix; a famous example is Draupadi’s ‘endless sari’, a miracle that
prevents her utter humiliation, and a miracle that she is granted through prayer and
devotion to the god Krishna.

Note that there are also examples which seem to work in the opposite direc-
tion: accretions which have been termed as an integral part of the text. For
example, the very first iloka ‘stanza’ of the constituted text. Interestingly, this
iloka was also the iloka that was read at the inauguration of the project of making
a critical edition. Sukthankar himself honestly points out that “this stanza is for-
eign to the entire southern recension of the epic.”\textsuperscript{47}

The second vein of criticism is based on Tamar Reich’s distinction between
omission and insertion. Reacting to the assumption that scribes never omit pas-
sages, Reich questions the first of Sukthankar’s principles. To Reich, “we must
begin to think of expansion as a practice constitutive to the Mahabharata, and
not as an aberration of the tradition.”\textsuperscript{48} This text-critical principle, we should
note, corresponds well to the content of the epic, where characters often provoke
another cycle of stories by posing a quandary or asking about the identity of a
certain character; the episodes are motivated, one to the next, by such questions.
Reich argues that many passages in the constituted text might have been addi-
tions, and that there would be no way for an editor to tell. For example, a popu-
lar text like the Bhragvata Gita, could well have been a relatively late addition in
every tradition. (Again, because most of our extant manuscripts are relatively re-
cent, we would not be able to tell.) But if expansion were the norm, then why
should an editor leave out a passage which is attested to in, say, all but one
manuscript? Universal attestation, the core of Sukthankar’s first principle, then
would seem ill-fitted to this sort of textual tradition. Furthermore, as Reich
wisely notes, “the question of [scribal] omission and the question of universal
insertion are logically intertwined.”\textsuperscript{49}

Notwithstanding all the debate surrounding the text, we should also note that
some of these issues are addressed within the Mahabharata tradition itself, the text
self-consciously asserts its own legitimacy and accuracy through such devices as

\textsuperscript{46} Bruce M. Sullivan, \textit{Sear of the Fifth Veda: Krma Dvaipayana Vyasa in the Mahabharata}, 1st In-
dian. ed. (Delhi 1999), pp. 11-12.

\textsuperscript{47} Sukthankar, “Preligomena,” p. iii, footnote 1.


\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 49.

verse counts and tables of contents. These are emphatically part of the Adiparvan,
‘the book of the beginning.’ The Adiparvan also legitimizes itself through stories
about its own creation (as we’ve discussed) as well as the succession of its tellers,
tellings, and re-tellings.

Interestingly, the Adiparvan seems to give itself authenticity but limits, in a
way, its own absoluteness. Vyasa taught it to five disciples; one of these, Vaasam-
payana, is the singer of our version of the epic. Vyasa too was present as Vaasampayana recited the epic, adding even more legitimacy to this version. But even as
our version is legitimated, and even if our version does contain all that human
beings need to know, our version is still one of many.

Sanskrit itself does have a sophisticated literary critical tradition, and versions
of the Mahabharata have been edited before the 20th century. For example, in
the 17th century, Nilakantha gathered, in his own words, “many manuscripts from
different regions and critically established the best readings.”\textsuperscript{50} Nilakantha
aimed at an edition which collected, as completely and as authoritatively as pos-
sible, the epic stories his contemporaries knew and recognized, conscious both
of religious considerations and of issues of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{51}

To round out our picture of this critical edition, we will examine in this next
section the conceptual universe in which Sukthankar was trained. This is, I want
to suggest, the Renaissance Humanistic tradition that can be seen, via the work
of Anthony Grafton, to encompass Lachmann and Wolf. In \textit{Defenders of the Text},
Grafton traces how European Renaissance Humanism far outlasted the time tra-
ditionally associated with its demise. He first tells us that “modern historians ...
have treated Renaissance humanism as an influential but transitory effort to
rew. New West culture by reviving a classical literary education and applying the
tools of philology to ancient texts. They have agreed that newer men with newer
scientific brooms swept the humanists from the center stage of Western thought
after 1600.”\textsuperscript{52} Grafton proposes instead that “humanism remained a rich and vi-
tal – though also a varied and embattled tradition – for at least two centuries af-
after the end of the Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{53}

We must remember that Renaissance humanism was a complete system of
education (a complete alternative to Scholasticism), not just a particular way of
approaching ancient texts. This accounts, on the one hand, for its lasting power:
European rulers recognized how effective the humanistic education was in turn-
ning out able historians and diplomats. But it also accounts, on the other hand,

\textsuperscript{50} Nilakantha, \textit{The Mahabharatam with the Bhurata Bhadraupacaryam Commentary of Nilakantha}, ed.
Paridit Rambhandravasti Kinjawdekar, 6 vols., vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oriental Books Re-

\textsuperscript{51} Biardeau, “Some More Considerations About Textual Criticism,” p. 121.

\textsuperscript{52} Anthony Grafton, \textit{Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science}, 1450-
1800 (Cambridge 1994).

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 4.
for the schism that would mark the history of humanism. Using the exchange of two minor scholars, Massari and Guidetti, Grafton illustrates that in the Renaissance there was a clear split as to what the “task of the interpreter” should be: “For Massari, [...] the task of the interpreter is to decipher, phrase by phrase, what it means to its author and its original readers; for Guidetti, the task of the interpreter is to amass around the individual words of the passage general information useful to the modern student.”55 Guidetti saw scholarship as serving pedagogy: by teaching the students how to write and read Latin, students would then be able to see for themselves the literary and moral value of the classics before them. For Massari, scholarship produced, or strived to produce, a scientifically accurate picture of the past – all the details of, say, the world that Cicero lived in as well as what Cicero meant when he said what he did. For Guidetti, the classics stood forth as ideal artifacts: they were fully formed and ready to spread their learning. For Massari, the classics were ancient and problematic texts, texts which were difficult (perhaps impossible) to ever fully know, and whose least difficulty could require massive philological apparatus to solve.

When we watch how this tradition passes down to Wolf, we can sympathize with Grafton when he writes, “To watch Wolf applying his general programme to a specific document is to confirm the view that much of his work was traditional in character.”56 Grafton suggests that much of the philological theory that Wolf used to write his “revolutionary” Altertanumwissenschaft “knowledge of human nature in antiquity” was borrowed from the sophisticated methods that had developed at his time for Biblical scholarship. Specifically, Wolf was influenced by the work of J. G. Eichhorn, another student of Heyne. Grafton reconstructs the intellectual genealogy that leads from Joseph Scaliger to Wolf.

Karl Lachmann would take up the idea, which Wolf stressed, that the techniques for the critical study of the Old and New Testaments were the same techniques that a philologist could apply to any ancient text. Lachmann, it might seem, went from editing Lucretius to editing the New Testament, but for Grafton, Lachmann was, like Wolf, “annex[ing] for classical studies the most sophisticated methods of contemporary biblical scholarship.”57 Lachmann’s goal in his version of the New Testament was to create a scientific version of the text of the fourth century (just after the New Testament had been compiled). Both Lachmann and Wolf revitalized historicism in classical scholarship. Their works were major victories for the historicist side of the humanist tradition, the side represented above by Massari.

Sukthankar’s philological approach to the Mahabharata seems to continue in the vein of Wolf and Lachmann. Reich characterizes the entire project of the critical edition as Lachmannian and Sylvain Levi writes, “Mr. Sukthankar, schooled both by pandits and by German philology, is torn between the indigenous tradition and Wolf.”58 Assuming that Reich and Levi’s characterizations are fair, and that Grafton’s intellectual history is accurate, Sukthankar would have seemed to inherit a philological training whose roots lie in Renaissance humanism. Moreover, we can also see that it is the ‘Guidetti’ tradition in Renaissance humanism with which the philological tradition that includes Wolf, Lachmann, and Sukthankar has always been (and perhaps continues to be) in dialogue.

It is thus not surprising that Sukthankar would sacrifice certain kinds of merits (for example stories that “everyone” knows) for a version of the text that is as ancient as possible. It is again valuing the Massari humanistic lineage over the Guidetti one. We should not forget that Sukthankar himself wrote of the constituted text: “It is, in all probability, not the best text of the Great Epic, possible or existing, nor necessarily even a good one.”59

In that sense, Sukthankar was caught between what the public, both scholarly and popular, demanded of him and the realities of the dynamism of the Mahabharata tradition. His own detailed introduction to the critical edition captures this dilemma. At the start, he quotes Maurice Winternitz: a critical edition of the Mahabharata was “wanted as the only sound basis for all Mahabharata studies... for all studies connected with the epic literature of India.”60 And he himself envisions the project as producing “a critical edition of the Mahabharata in the preparation of which all important versions of the Great Epic shall have been taken into consideration, and all important manuscripts collated, estimated, and turned to account. ... It will be a veritable thesaurus of the Mahabharata tradition.”61 A hundred pages later, near the end of the same introduction, he caution the reader that the constituted text “is not anything like the autograph copy of the work of its mythical author, [Maharshi] Vyasa. It is not, in any sense, a reconstruction of the In-Mahabharata... that ideal but impossible desideratum. [...] If will, therefore, be prudent not to claim too much for the first critical edition, or to expect too much from it.”62 Providing a critical edition – which sadly even he cannot claim as the best edition – is perhaps the best that an editor of dynamic textual tradition can do. Still, the myriad advantages of having a critical edition – and the discussions and scholarship that a stable version of the text opens up – would seem in the long run to outweigh the disadvantages.

55 Ibid., p. 23.
56 Ibid., p. 220.
57 Ibid., p. 241.
61 Ibid., pp. iii-iv.
62 Ibid., pp. cii-cvii.
Ahmad Yasavi and the Dog-Men: Narratives of Hero and Saint at the Frontier of Orality and Textuality

Devin DeWeese

Most of our principles and assumptions about editing Islamic manuscripts have been worked out in the context of a relatively limited range of literary genres, encompassing works that little affected, and were little affected by, the more 'public' oral venues for the transmission and circulation of knowledge and rhetoric (or, works for which possible oral 'variants' could be, arguably, ignored); these include chronicles and geographical works, produced in the environment of court chanceries and often for royal presentation, whose contents were typically not part of ongoing popular transmission or elaboration as a living tradition, as well as juridical and credal works, produced in environments that maintained, by their very nature, a highly controlled relationship between the written text and oral modes of instruction and transmission. With many hagiographical sources, however, and with other genres filled with what we might classify as 'folkloric' material (such as popular local histories, historical diastem or heroic and romantic epics), we are typically faced with textual recordings and adaptations of 'content' that continued to develop in oral venues, separately from the written tradition — sometimes parallel to it, sometimes divergent from it, and sometimes, it would seem, repeatedly intersecting with it. With such material, we risk not only significant errors in the editorial interpretation of manuscript versions of a given narrative, but often serious misunderstandings of the essential meaning, purpose, and 'reading' of a narrative, if we approach the text solely on the basis of a manuscript tradition.

The transmission of the narrative corpus surrounding a popular Sufi saint indeed raises a host of special issues important for religious and social history, as well as for our understanding of the interaction of oral and textual traditions and their role in yielding the extant manuscript recordings of the narrative corpus in question. These issues include the multiple venues in which a saint's legacy may be cultivated (and, hence, in which narratives may be transmitted, both orally and textually); the relations between these venues and modes of transmission; the character of the hagiographical and/or doctrinal material also circulated

1 This applies especially to hagiographical works created as part of the rhetorical self-justification of specific Sufi communities (i.e., those linked with the saint or lineage that is the subject of a given work by bonds of natural descent or initiatic transmission), and less so to the better-known 'literary' hagiographies such as 'Atīya's Taḥdīkat al-awilīyyāt or Jāni's Nafshāt al-umūr.