How to become a Brahman: The construction of *varṇa* as social place in the *Mahābhārata*'s legends of Viśvāmitra

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This article investigates varṇa *as an embodied and spatialized social practice in the Sanskrit* Mahābhārata*, with a focus on the epic subnarratives of Viśvāmitra, the legendary king who became a Brahman. Adopting a post-Dumontian position that the articulation of social status is always a political act, the* Mahābhārata*'s treatment of Viśvāmitra is analyzed as a literary attempt to secure the social place of Brahmanhood in post-Mauryan India. Two specific narratives are taken up for comparative study: first the* kāmadhenu *legend—the squabble with Vasiṣṭha that led to Viśvāmitra's Brahmanhood—and then an altogether different story in which a mixup by Viśvāmitra's sister Satyavatī meant that he had always been a Brahman by birth. Two distinct interpretive voices are heard in the same epic—one extolling Viśvāmitra's extraordinary ascetic power, and another, louder one minimizing his realworld impact by insisting that his* varṇa *change never actually happened. Developing the concept of 'textual performance' to explain how fluid legendary material was embedded into the fixed epic corpus, this article argues that the* Mahābhārata *utilized counter-normative figures like Viśvāmitra to articulate alternative voices and possibilities, but within a carefully regulated epic storyworld that naturalized* varṇa *as an everyday social practice.*

Though little is certain about how it took place, the composition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was clearly of monumental significance in the social history of early India.[1] Its grand vision has been linked closely to the consolidation of imperial polity (see Thapar 1984; Sutton 1997; Brockington 1998, 162–7), the emergence of *bhakti* religiosity (see Hiltebeitel 2004; Biardeau 1982; Laine 1989; Fitzgerald 1983; Sutton 2000), and the development of a newly cosmopolitan Sanskrit literary culture around

[1] All references to the two Sanskrit epics in this essay are to their respective Critical Editions, henceforth abbreviated as *Mbh* and *Rām*. Their use has been greatly facilitated by the electronic texts of the Sanskrit epics produced by Muneo Tokunaga, as revised and corrected by John Smith, and are accessible electronically on Smith's Home Page [online] (accessed March 24, 2007). Available from: <http://bombay.indology.info/index.html>.

the beginning of the Common Era (Pollock 2006, 224–6). Equally significant is the epic's role in the development of *varṇa* as a normative discourse in post-Vedic social life. What emerges in Vedic culture as a 'totalistic classificatory system' (see Smith 1994, 8),[2] and what functions as an all-encompassing social ideology within *śāstraic* texts[3] appears in the *Mahābhārata* as everyday social practice, as a natural determinant of moral life (*dharma*). Particularly striking here is the idea that an individual's social place is immutably fixed by his physical birth. Throughout the *Mahābhārata*—and especially in its 'ancillary' portions—it is birth that carves social barriers and limits, birth that fixes one's life trajectory. I do not wish to argue that the principle of inherited social status is unique to this epic, nor do I suggest it to be the earliest formulation of a discourse lucidly articulated in the *śāstras*.[4] What sets the epic project apart from other early Indian texts is its imbrication of *varṇa* discourse within the complex mass of myths, legends, and anecdotes—in short, within a narrative tradition.[5] In an effort to take this seemingly extraneous material seriously, this essay argues that the *Mahābhārata*'s discursive use of legendary subnarratives constitutes an important source of its cultural power and textual authority in early India. The *Mahābhārata*, I suggest, utilizes this traditional storyworld to naturalize *varṇa* as an embodied and spatialized social practice,[6] and this essay will investigate this social productivity of the epic through its treatment of Viśvāmitra, the legendary king who became a Brahman.

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[2] Classic Indological approaches to the origin of caste include: Dutt 1931; Ghurye 1932; Ketkar 1909; Kosambi 1946. The origins of the system may indeed be pre-Vedic; Georges Dumézil, for example, regards *varṇa* to be a survival of archaic Indo-European thought (Dumézil 1968–1973).

[3] On the *śāstras*' use of 'pliable' and 'strict' norms to articulate this all-encompassing ideology, see Rocher 1975. A seminal discussion of caste in the *dharma* texts is found in Muir 1868; see also Olivelle 1998. In another publication, Olivelle helpfully points out that '*Dharmaśāstra* … represents an expert tradition and, therefore, presents not a simple record of customs but a jurisprudential *reflection* on custom' (Olivelle 2004, xxxix).

[4] The tangled intertextuality of the epics and *śāstras* lies outside the purview of this essay. Brockington argues that 'in general terms, the parallels found in the didactic parts of the *Mahābhārata* are closer to the extant texts of the *Manusmṛti* than those found elsewhere and it seems likely that they are derived from it …' (Brockington 1998, 486).

[5] This phenomenon was perhaps first noted by Joseph Dahlmann, who regarded the epic as a mode of popular instruction of the *dharmaśāstra*—see Dahlmann 1895.

[6] I use the term 'storyworld' following David Herman's remarkable analytic shift from story to storyworld in the study of narrative literature (Herman 2002). Through the term 'storyworld', Herman evokes 'the world-creating power of narrative, its ability to transport interpreters from the here and now of face-to-face interaction, or the space-time coordinates of an encounter with a printed text or a cinematic narrative, to the here and now that constitute the deictic center of the world being told about' (ibid., 14). The concept of storyworld therefore signals the performativity of fictional narrative in imagining possible places inhabited by possible bodies. In the case of the *Mahābhārata* and most mythological narratives in South Asia, this storyworld is not purely fictive, but represented as historical fact. As Herman points out, nonfictional narratives involve 'relocating not to an alternative possible world but to a possible world that is an earlier—and perhaps competing—vision of the world deemed actual' (ibid., 15).

Viśvāmitra and *varṇa* in the *Mahābhārata*

In a section of the Anuśāsana Parvan (*Mbh* 13.3–4) entitled the 'Viśvāmitropākhyāna [The Viśvāmitra Subnarrative]', Yudhiṣṭhira, newly victorious in the Bhārata War, poses a question to the dying Kuru patriarch Bhīṣma about Viśvāmitra, a Vedic personality quite clearly situated at the margins of epic narrative tradition. 'Mighty King, Lord of Men', he asks,

> If Brahmanhood is impossible to attain by members of the other three *varṇas*, then how did the mighty Kṣatriya Viśvāmitra attain Brahmanhood? This is what I wish to hear, righteous King of men—please tell it to me in detail, Grandfather (*Mbh* 13.3.1–2).

Before Bhīṣma may respond, Yudhiṣṭhira first summarizes what he already knows of the sage. This laundry list of legends alludes to the existence of a Viśvāmitra narrative tradition, stories that were not invented by the epic but presumably were transmitted orally prior to its textualization in the epic. Yudhiṣṭhira's query participates in what Sheldon Pollock has called the 'faux orality of textual performance' within the epic, through which, 'faux' or not, we are able to hear the voice of the epic's target audience at the time of its written composition (Pollock 2006, 79, note 9). 'Grandfather', he says,

> Please tell me how that man of immeasurable valor slew the hundred sons of Vasiṣṭha, entirely through his *tapas* [ascetic power]; how, appearing like the end of Time, he created violent *yātudhānas* and *rākṣasas* [demons], his body enveloped in hostility.[7]
>
> Tell me how, lauded as a Brahman, the wise one went on to establish the great Kuśika lineage in this world, packed with hundreds of *brahmarṣis* [Brahman-sages].
>
> Tell me how Ṛcīka's son, the great ascetic Śunaḥśepa, was released from the great sacrificial rite in which he had been placed as a victim,
>
> And how, during Hariścandra's sacrifice, by gratifying the gods with his majesty, he became the son of great Viśvāmitra;
>
> How, when they did not assent to Devarāta being the eldest, your Majesty, his five hundred sons were summarily cursed to be Śvapacas [dog-cooker outcastes].[8]

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[7] This is an allusion to the *Mahābhārata*'s Kalmāṣapāda legend (*Mbh* 1.165–168), in which Viśvāmitra encourages the king Kalmāṣapāda, who is already possessed by a *rākṣasa*, to eat up the hundred sons of Vasiṣṭha. This is resonant perhaps with the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s account of the struggle between the two sages, in which Viśvāmitra does not kill Vasiṣṭha's sons, but instead curses them to become low-caste Śvapacas, dog-cookers, after they refuse to attend his sacrifice for the similarly cursed Ikṣvāku king Triśaṅku (*Rām* 1.58.16–20).

[8] The Śunaḥśepa legend is told at length in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where the king is named Ambarīṣa (*Rām* 1.60.5–1.61.27); the reference here corresponds more closely to the earlier Vedic version found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (*AB* 7.13–18) and the *Śāṅkhyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (*ŚŚS* 15.20–21).

> Tell me how Triśaṅku, the Ikṣvāku, though shunned by his peers, was led gladly into heaven, upside-down, and placed in the southern direction.[9]
>
> Tell me how Viśvāmitra's broad river, the Kauśikī, is frequented by *rājarṣis* [royal sages], blessed and auspicious, and served by throngs of *brahmarṣis* [Brahman-sages].[10]
>
> Tell me how the esteemed nymph named Rambhā, possessing five jewels, acted as an obstacle to his *tapas*, and due to his curse was turned to stone.[11]
>
> Tell me also how long ago, overcome with fear of him, Vasiṣṭha tied himself up and drowned himself in the waters, but was raised back out, unbound—how, from that time on, the great river Vipāśā became holy, made illustrious by the deeds of that great Vasiṣṭha.[12]
>
> Tell me how he praised the lord Skanda, the leader of the gods' armies, and how, gratified, [Skanda] released him from a curse.
>
> Tell me about him, he who shines eternally amongst the "Brahman-sage" [*brahmarṣi*] constellation as it revolves around the pole star Dhruva, fixed in the northern sky.
>
> Kaurava, I am highly intrigued by all of these and other exploits of this Kṣatriya—please tell me in detail how this came to be, powerful Bhārata: how did he become a Brahman without taking on another body? (*Mbh* 13.3.3–17)

A few of these allusions, such as the story of Śunaḥśepa Devarāta, have deep continuities with Vedic literature; others, like his praise of Skanda, are entirely fragmentary, with no traceable antecedents. These wispy threads of narrative come together to produce a fascinating snapshot in the literary history of this mythological character, emphasizing the extraordinary ascetic power that enables Viśvāmitra to challenge the gods' will and to invoke terrifying curses. At the same time, Yudhiṣṭhira's query leaves no doubt that the most striking aspect of Viśvāmitra for the *Mahābhārata*'s audience is sociological: this is a man who successfully changed his own *varṇa*.

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[9] The story of Triśaṅku is told very briefly in the Ādi Parvan (*Mbh* 1.65.31–35), but in great detail in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Rām* 1.56.11–1.59.33). The mention of Triśaṅku being placed upside-down in the South suggests that this reference is closely allied with the *Rāmāyaṇa* version, in which 'the gods agreed to allow Triśaṅku to remain in those constellations, hanging upside down, appearing as if immortal' (*Rām* 1.59.33).

[10] Similar associations are made between the Kauśikī and Viśvāmitra throughout the *Mahābhārata* (e.g., *Mbh* 1.65.30–32; 3.82.124; 3.85.9). In the *Rāmāyaṇa* the river Kauśikī is said to be his sister, Satyavatī (*Rām* 1.33.7–8), but in the *Mahābhārata*, that connection seems not to be made, as Robert P. Goldman and Sally Sutherland note (Goldman, Sutherland 1984, 349, note 8). Conversely, as we shall discover, the *Mahābhārata* holds Satyavatī's actions before Viśvāmitra's birth directly responsible for his *varṇa* change, while the *Rāmāyaṇa* leaves the entire episode unmentioned.

[11] Yudhiṣṭhira here refers to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s account of the curse of Rambhā (*Rām* 1.62.25cd–26, 1.63.1–15). It is true that Viśvāmitra is often tempted by the *apsaras* Menakā throughout purāṇic and classical Sanskrit literary tradition, including the Ādi Parvan within the story of Śakuntalā (*Mbh* 1.65.20–66.12), but the Rambhā narrative, in which Viśvāmitra is able to resist the temptations of *kāma*, appears uniquely in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

[12] Yudhiṣṭhira appears to be begging Bhīṣma for the story of Viśvāmitra's conflict with Vasiṣṭha in the Ādi Parvan, where Vasiṣṭha becomes suicidal after Kalmāṣapāda eats his sons (*Mbh* 1.166.39–167.10).

The concept of *varṇa*, suggests Brian Smith, was 'perhaps the most pervasive taxonomical scheme in vedic texts' (Smith 1989, 242), and was classifying everything from the world of the gods and the divisions of space and time to natural flora and fauna (Smith 1994, 8). Smith's argument that *varṇa* has been a watertight and all-encompassing concept throughout its history challenges the more common theory, held since at least the writings of John Muir, that social boundaries were fluid and negotiable in early Vedic culture.[13] Jan Heesterman, for example, explains that *varṇa* ideology crystallized during the late Vedic period, when an 'axial breakthrough' within archaic Vedic sacrificial culture resulted in a cleavage between the 'transcendent ritualism' and 'mundane reality', and as a consequence, required 'absolute dividing lines' between the *varṇas*.[14] In either case, with the advent of the *dharmaśāstras*, *varṇa* and its attendant concepts of purity and purification were institutionalized within the normative Brahmanic worldview.[15] Early heterodox texts, along with Aśokan inscriptional evidence, disputing the social status of Brahmans but not the validity of *varṇa*, further support the hypothesis that even when contested, *varṇa* remained the dominant mode of social discourse in the late Vedic period (Chakravarti 1987; Jha 1991, 30–1; Thapar 1997, 56–7). In other words, within the time of the epic's textual production, to be an intellectual meant to think using the sociological *episteme* of *varṇa*.[16]

More difficult to assess, however, is whether *varṇa* was an actual social practice in early India, or whether it was pure social discourse, the world as seen through particularly Brahman-tinted lenses. Louis Dumont's landmark structural analysis of caste has suggested both to be true, theorizing *varṇa* to be a timeless, cognitive grammar of 'encompassment' governing the observed reality of *jātis* [castes] in South Asia. This assessment is not without its critics, and in the 40 years since its first publication, Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* has been subjected to a significant dismantling.[17]

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[13] For example, the earliest pronunciation of a four-tiered social ideology, the oft-quoted *puruṣa* hymn within the *Ṛgveda-saṃhitā* (*RV* 10.90), fails to mention the word '*varṇa*' and contains the only occurrence of 'Vaiśya' and 'Śūdra' in the entire *Ṛgveda-saṃhitā*—see Sharma 1978, 295; Kane 1961. Key historical studies making this argument include: Muir 1868; Heesterman 1985, 29–30; Mazumdar 1965, 387–91; Jha 1991, 25; Thapar 2002, 124–5.

[14] See 'Brahmin, Ritual, and Renouncer' and 'Ritual, Revelation, and the Axial Age' in Heesterman 1985.

[15] One could argue, for example, that 2000 years before Dumont, Manu was making the same Saussurean argument that the *langue* of *varṇa* governs the observable *parole* of social strata differentiated by degrees of purity and pollution—see Olivelle 1998, 214.

[16] Giving support to this assertion is Pollock's analysis of *śāstraic* discourse as a naturalization of cultural practices—see Pollock 1985.

[17] For a thorough overview of post-Dumontian scholarship, see Raheja 1988. For important critiques and reassessments of *Homo Hierarchicus*, see Dirks 1989; Inden 1986; Marriott 1969; Madan 1971; Mencher 1974.

Pauline Kolenda and others have explored the complexities of South Asian social formations muted within Dumont's work (Kolenda 1976; Barnett, Fruzetti, and Östor 1976), while Arjun Appadurai has taken particular aim at Dumont's opposition of the individualistic West to holistic India (Appadurai 1986; see also Berreman 1971). McKim Marriott, Richard Burghart, and Gloria Raheja have argued that caste coexists with other modes of hierarchy in traditional Indian social environments (Marriott 1976; Burghart 1978; Raheja 1989), and Declan Quigley has suggested that Dumont's reading of purity uncritically privileges Brahmanic texts and therefore Brahman perspectives (Quigley 1993). Perhaps the most frontal assault to Dumont's theory has been Nicholas Dirks's critique that 'caste' as an institution, as a natural property of Indian society, was an Orientalist construction—a cultural technology of British rule (Dirks 2001, 9; see also Inden 2000).[18] Though they focus almost exclusively on contemporary inflections of caste, Dumont's critics have provided one important observation for the textual study of early India: the articulation of social status has always been a political act.

Following Dirks's suggestion that 'Indian society, indeed caste itself, was shaped by political struggles and processes' (Dirks 2001, 11, quoting Dirks 1987, 5), this essay regards the *Mahābhārata*'s treatment of Viśvāmitra as an attempt to secure, through literary representation, the social place of the Brahman class within a changing political world.[19] A sage with an impressive Vedic reputation, Viśvāmitra is located at the margins of the *Mahābhārata*'s storyworld—within the mass of myths, legends, and tales embedded within its primary narrative of fratricide, *guru*-murder, and the general collapse of Kṣatriya *ethos*.[20] Though this subnarrative material is often regarded as extraneous and secondary, it forms the majority of the epic's textual mass and plays a critical role in the epic's thematic development.[21] Barbara Gombach argues that this 'ancillary' material was 'the principal means by which the Bhārata story was explained in traditional terms' (Gombach 2000, 349). Likewise, Danielle Feller has noted the epic's deep continuities with Vedic mythological tradition, adapting old myths within 'changed social and religious conditions' (Feller 2004, 312). Set within a past that is far removed from the epic's apocalyptic disturbances, and certainly from our unfortunate age of Kali, legends told in the *Mahābhārata*

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[18] Dirks and Inden are, of course, heavily indebted to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979).

[19] This observation accords with Fitzgerald's argument that the epic is primarily concerned 'to provide ideological and narrative grounding for a brahminical conception of kingly rule and hierarchical society in the wake of the Mauryan empire' (Fitzgerald 2003, 811).

[20] For definitive studies of Viśvāmitra in Vedic literature, see Hariyappa 1953; Rahurkar 1964; Sharma 1975; Chaubey 1987; Sathaye 2004.

[21] Hiltebeitel, building on the work of Biardeau, has made a similar argument; see Hiltebeitel 2005; Biardeau 1984.

thus help paint an idealized moral backdrop to the turbulent events of the primary narrative, a storyworld populated with bodies clearly marked as Brahman, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, or Śūdra.[22]

At the same time, these embedded stories often feature characters whose actions pose striking challenges to Brahmanic social norms.[23] Viśvāmitra, for example, is the only major figure in ancient Indian literature to have become a Brahman by his own free will.[24] Yudhiṣṭhira's question itself, 'How did he become a Brahman without taking on another body?' evokes a close association of *varṇa* with the physical body, and it is precisely Viśvāmitra's extraordinary circumvention of everyday social physics that is celebrated through his legends. On the other hand, even though Viśvāmitra's actions seem consistently to challenge the system, the epic uses these stories to reaffirm social norms and boundaries. As we will see, the story of Viśvāmitra's conflict with the Brahman Vasiṣṭha over a wish-giving cow, is customarily used to explain how Viśvāmitra changes his *varṇa*, and forms the centerpiece of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*'s lengthy treatment of Viśvāmitra. In the Anuśāsana Parvan, however, Bhīṣma ignores this narrative and tells a different story—Viśvāmitra, he claims, was actually born with a Brahmanic essence but raised in a Kṣatriya home. Within this textual juxtaposition, the 'Viśvāmitropākhyāna' is making use of traditional narratives first to raise a social question and then to regulate its interpretation.

I will refer to this technique of framing epic subnarratives as *textual performance*—the strategic entextualization of legendary narrative matter within the larger literary frame of the epic.[25] In doing so, I follow a performance-centered turn within folklore studies, that investigates how 'verbal art' emerges through a negotiation between performer and audience (Bauman 1975).[26] Traditional narratives embedded within

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[22] Or, indeed, the 'Other'. The Cāṇḍāla and other outcaste groups form a significant part of the *Mahābhārata*'s physical and spatial definitions of social identity, and Viśvāmitra also plays a key role in constructing this social boundary in the *Mahābhārata*, but that cannot be explored in detail here; for a thorough discussion of Viśvāmitra and outcastes, see White 1992.

[23] For the definitive study of counter-normative figures in the *Mahābhārata*, see Goldman 1977.

[24] The *Mahābhārata*, to be sure, mentions a handful of other figures who became Brahmans, but the transformation is in most cases accidental, providential, or temporary. The Śalya Parvan's narration of Viśvāmitra's transformation gives the names of two others who are turned into Brahmans by the power of a *tirtha*—Sindhudvīpa and Devāpi (*Mbh* 9.39.10). Goldman notes 'the only other case of such a transformation in the epic literature is that of the king Vītahavya who is transformed into a Bhārgava brahman through the infallible power of the potent father figure Bhṛgu (*MBh* XIII.31)'. For more on Vītahavya, see Goldman 1978, 387, note 200.

[25] Perhaps the most well-known theory of epic entextualization is the 'Bhṛguization' theory first proposed by S.V. Sukthankar (1936) and later extended by Goldman (1977). For reassessments of the Sukthankar-Goldman theory, see Hiltebeitel 1999; Minkowski 1991; Reich 2001; Fitzgerald 2002.

[26] For further analysis of 'textual performance' and Viśvāmitra, see Sathaye forthcoming, 142–3.

the text of the *Mahābhārata*, I suggest, may be more productively regarded as 'performances' within the confines of textual space. Such a reading enables the historical analysis of the epic without becoming mired in the interminable and largely unanswerable questions of its textual development.[27] If, as the prevailing, 'analytic' opinion holds, the epic text evolved over a period of at least 500 years and as many as 1,000, it is futile to search for any single master blueprint to what is ultimately a composite text, a kind of premodern *pastiche*. As John Brockington's meticulous studies of epic development warn, any analysis of the epic's meaning is susceptible to anachronistic results without first isolating stages of development within the epic corpus (Brockington 1998, 20–1).[28] Conversely, building upon Joseph Dahlmann's 'synthetic' theory and the holistic work of Madeleine Biardeau, Alf Hiltebeitel provocatively argues the *Mahābhārata* to be authored by a committee of composers and in a relatively brief span of time at the end of the 1st millennium, BCE—perhaps as little as two generations (Hiltebeitel 1999b, 20). Arguing against reading the epic as an encyclopedic amalgam, Hiltebeitel suggests that the *Mahābhārata*'s role in early India may be understood only when the epic is theorized as a coherent work of written literature (Hiltebeitel 1999b, 21).[29] But this is a literary work for which we have basically no external historical data, and so any investigation of the epic's role in social history, therefore, arrives at a seemingly unavoidable leap of faith.

The concept of textual performance, I believe, offers a unique means of mediating between the arguments of the analysts and synthesists. Regardless if one posits that the epic developed over centuries of ever-expanding oral tradition, or if one imagines it to be a literary creation of a committee of authors, the epic text, at some point in its production, has clearly incorporated pre-existing narrative material. Both conservative and creative forces are therefore at play in its composition, suggesting that we may think of the *Mahābhārata* as being at once a fluid and fixed text.[30] On the one hand, since legends like those of Viśvāmitra are found in both epics and in the early *purāṇas*, but in vastly different contexts, with great variation, and without overt *verbatim* reproduction, they must have belonged to a fluid oral narrative tradition prior to their presence within the epic. These legends would have been familiar to broad segments of

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[27] This is precisely the predicament that has befallen the theory of Bhṛguization—see especially Hiltebeitel 2001, 105–18.

[28] The classic statement of the analytic approach is E. Washburn Hopkins (1993), especially Chapter Five, 'Origin and Development of the Epic' (pp. 363–85).

[29] For further discussion on the *Mahābhārata*'s encyclopedic nature, see Hiltebeitel 2001, 14–5, 161–3; Proudfoot 1979.

[30] I borrow this terminology from Wendy Doniger's brief but thought-provoking essay 'Fluid and Fixed Texts in India' (Doniger 1991).

society and would have diffused widely across the subcontinent, but also would have exhibited the variation expected within an oral tradition.[31] On the other hand, there is a remarkable coherence in how these stories are embedded in the *Mahābhārata*, displaying little significant textual variation across the extant manuscripts.[32] At some point in time, therefore, it appears that there arose an intellectual need to situate these epic narrative traditions within the bounds of a fixed, written text, within a *bona fide* Vedic religious context, and within the moral boundaries of Brahman-oriented social order.[33] Furthermore, as Pollock has argued, epic textual production involved a 'plotting of an epic geosphere' of political power, serving as an early stage in the development of the Sanskrit 'cosmopolis' (Pollock 2006, 226). An important aspect of what Fitzgerald has called the 'Gupta archetype' appears a scholastic effort to 'fix' the epic's narrative tradition (Fitzgerald 2004, 70), by giving it textual authenticity, temporal and spatial boundedness, and most importantly, by placing it within the *Mahābhārata*'s religious, social, and political authority. The fixed, literary production of the *Mahābhārata* contained, in this sense, a *textual performance* of otherwise fluid narrative traditions in early India.

Unlike the binary opposition of oral and written literature, the concept of textual performance—the fixed utterance, either oral or written, of a fluid narrative tradition—enables the recovery of multiple interpretive possibilities alongside an otherwise monolithic Sanskrit text, and reveals the presence of distinct voices in the construction of early Indian social discourse.[34] Rather than as simply a documentary archive of early Indian cultural life, the *Mahābhārata* may be read as a constructed cultural space in which popular understandings of history, religion, and social order are being regulated through the strategic use of narrative literature.[35] In the case of

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[31] This half of the picture specifically takes inspiration from the work of A.K. Ramanujan, but also espouses the standard folkloristic model of epic composition as oral-formulaic poetry—see Ramanujan 1986. For a definitive discussion on international scholarship on the Oral-Formulaic Theory, see Foley 1988.

[32] Fitzgerald notes that despite the vast amounts of variation between manuscripts, 'there was a remarkable degree of close agreement in readings line after line, in the order of verses, and in the contents of the Parvans, agreement that can be explained only by postulating the existence of a normative written text at some point in the past and in some significant measure' (Fitzgerald 2004, 69).

[33] Some evidence for this Brahmanic regulation of the epic narrative tradition may be recovered through the structural analysis of its opening frame narratives, involving oral performance during a 12-year *sattra* ritual in the Naimiṣa Forest—see Minkowski 1989; Witzel 1987; Hiltebeitel 2001, 93–104.

[34] In other words, we may perceive, within the bounded Sanskrit text, what Ramanujan has insightfully described as a 'presence of reflexive worlds' within folk narratives (Ramanujan 1991, 51).

[35] James Hegarty (2004) provides an in-depth analysis of the importance of narrative in the *Mahābhārata's* construction of the 'significant past', and many of the ideas in this essay take direct inspiration from Hegarty's work on the cultural connections between the past and 'place' in the Sanskrit epics.

Viśvāmitra, this essay will recover two distinct interpretive voices in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata:* one that spotlights the extraordinary ascetic power behind his social rupture, and another, louder one that minimizes the social impact of this counter-normative figure by insisting that his *varṇa* change never actually happened. Bhīṣma's reply to Yudhiṣṭhira will illustrate this second, normalizing voice of the *Mahābhārata*, but the social question he is trying to efface is raised through another, more provocative account of how Viśvāmitra actually became a Brahman. This fascinating narrative, to which we now turn, is the legend of Vasiṣṭha's *kāmadhenu*.

The *kāmadhenu* legend

At the heart of the *kāmadhenu* legend, there is a social rupture: a Kṣatriya body violates Brahman domestic space. Though neglected in the 'Viśvāmitropākhyāna', this story is told three times in the Sanskrit epics: once in the first book of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* once in the Ādi Parvan of the *Mahābhārata*, and then briefly again in its Śalya Parvan.[36] Though the *Rāmāyaṇa* version is lengthier and more detailed than the Ādi Parvan version, it remains difficult to determine conclusively which version was composed first. Despite the ambiguity of textual history, it remains relatively clear that both epics share a common narrative tradition. As Goldman notes, 'despite differences in size and in detail, the versions are fundamentally the same', and Biardeau has similarly observed that all versions of this story contain a common underlying ideological message (Goldman 1978, 351; Biardeau 1999). This shared plot proceeds as follows: Viśvāmitra, the Kṣatriya ruler, arrives in the hermitage of the Brahman sage Vasiṣṭha, where the king and his troops are served a delicious feast through the services of the sage's *kāmadhenu*.[37] Impressed, Viśvāmitra tries first to purchase the *kāmadhenu* from the sage, and then tries to take her by force, but is defeated by hordes of barbarian armies emitted from every orifice of the magic cow.[38] Vanquished

[36] *Rām* 1.50.20–1.55; *Mbh* 1.164–5; 9.39. Though it has fascinating ramifications for understanding the relative chronology of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, the Śalya Parvan version seems largely derivative from the Ādi Parvan, and for sake of simplicity, we will not take it up in great detail.

[37] There is, however, some superficial variation in the presentation of these motifs. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra the king arrives at Vasiṣṭha's hermitage during a tour of his dominions (*Rām* 1.50.20–1); the *Mahābhārata* specifies that he is 'hunting deer and boar in the charming woods' (*Mbh* 1.165.5). The *Rāmāyaṇa* names the cow 'Śabalā' while the *Mahābhārata* calls her 'Nandinī'. The *kāmadhenu* is unnamed in the Śalya Parvan version, which in fact lacks the cow-theft motif altogether. Instead, Vasiṣṭha simply asks his cow to attack Viśvāmitra and his armies after they desecrate his hermitage.

[38] There are certain key differences in the details of Viśvāmitra's defeat. First, while the *Rāmāyaṇa* has Vasiṣṭha actively order his cow to produce the barbarian armies (*Rām* 1.53.17), in the *Mahābhārata*, the *kāmadhenu* acts on her own (*Mbh* 1.165.31). In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *kāmadhenu*'s barbarian armies slay Viśvāmitra's hundred sons (*Rām* 1.53.18–1.54.7), while in the *Mahābhārata*,

by the Brahman, Viśvāmitra becomes disenchanted with his Kṣatriya status and decides to become a Brahman himself. Divine forces urge him to stop, declaring that such a feat is impossible, but nonetheless, Viśvāmitra eventually succeeds in gaining Brahmanhood through a great amount of *tapas*.[39]

The cultural power of the *kāmadhenu* legend lies in how it configures narrative spaces as *varṇa*-encoded social 'places' and then tightly regulates how physical bodies may move within them. If a narrative may be thought of as a *mimesis*, as a verbal reproduction of a sequence of realworld events, it is important to note that such a sequence always takes place within a set of storyworld spaces, regardless of the fictionality of the narrative or the historicity of those spaces.[40] Of particular interest is the role of narratives in the construction of 'domestic spaces'—interiorized social spaces that are demarcated from a public exterior, on account of their being coded by particular qualities and practices.[41] By inscribing certain cultural practices as naturally belonging to specific social spaces, narrative literature has a significant but underestimated role in the cultural construction of social 'place'.[42] In the *kāmadhenu* legend, and arguably in epic literature as a whole, domestic space is intrinsically inscribed with the ideology of *varṇa*, as are the physical bodies that move in and out of this space. That is to say, it is fundamentally the story of a Kṣatriya who penetrates a Brahman's home and tries to steal his Brahmanic cow. These *varṇa*-encoded narrative movements create a rupture, a structural 'ungrammaticality' that turns a story about cow theft into a profound statement on the natural boundaries of

only his armies are defeated. Furthermore, the latter specifies that 'none of Viśvāmitra's soldiers was deprived of life by the angered sons of Vasiṣṭha' (*Mbh* 1.165.39). The loss of his sons in the *Rāmāyaṇa* instigates a mini-quest within the story, as Viśvāmitra leaves the hermitage in dejection, and travels to the Himalayas to procure the divine *astras* from Śiva (*Rām* 1.54.8–20). His final defeat comes through one-on-one battle with Vasiṣṭha (*Rām* 1.54.21–1.55.21).

[39] In the *Mahābhārata*, this transformation is described in one and a half verses (*Mbh* 1.165.44), while the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s telling will extend this narration to nearly nine chapters (*Rām* 1.56–64), incorporating his encounters with Triśaṅku (*Rām* 1.56–59), Śunaḥśepa (*Rām* 1.60-61), Menakā (*Rām* 1.62), and Rambhā (*Rām* 1.63), until Vasiṣṭha eventually is forced to acknowledge him to be 'the greatest knower of the Kṣatriya Veda as well as the Brahman Veda' (*Rām* 1.64.15).

[40] Narratologists thus speak of a 'deictic shift' relocating a reader from the here and now into the 'alternative space-time coordinates of the storyworld' (Herman 2002, 270).

[41] The classic study of the 'intimate values of inside space' is Bachelard 1994. The humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has also written eloquently about domestic 'places' as intimate spaces (Tuan 1984, 136–48). Notable among anthropological studies of domesticity in South Asia is Daniel 1984. In the context of early India, Patrick Olivelle has noted the robust contrast between the cultural categories of 'village'—settled, cultivated, moral—and 'wilderness'—wild, powerful, and dangerous; see Olivelle 1990.

[42] Particularly illuminating in this regard is Michel de Certeau's analysis of the significance of cultural practice in the negotiation of place and the relations of power embedded within place—see Certeau 1984.

society.[43] The legend induces a social rupture—the inescapable radicality of a human body out of place.

Though we are not given extensive detail about the bodies of Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra in either epic version of the story, a manifest opposition between their Brahman and Kṣatriya bodies is created through formulaic epithets and dialogues in the narrative. The following tabulation of epithets describing Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, taken from all three epic versions of the *kāmadhenu* legend, for example, clearly indicates the close connection between *varṇa* and the body.

Viśvāmitra:

Epithet	Number of Occurrences	Citations
'having great splendor [*mahātejas*]'	5	*Rām* 1.50.19.c, 1.50.20a, 1.50.21a, 1.51.5a, 1.51.10c
'having great strength [*mahābala*]'	4	*Rām* 1.50.28d, 1.51.1.b, 1.54.19b, 1.55.1b
'intelligent [*dhīmant*]'	3	*Rām* 1.51.3a, 1.52.21b, 1.54.22b
'good king [*rājasattama*]'	2	*Rām* 1.51.4b, 1.51.5d
'having great ascetic power [*mahātapas*]'	2	*Rām* 1.54.15b, 1.55.21b
'vehicle of massive strength [*saṃṛddha-bala-vāhana*]'	1	*Mbh* 1.165.4b
'enemy-slayer [*ripu-mardana*]'	1	*Mbh* 1.165.4d
'the greatest of conquerors [*jayatām śreṣṭha*]'	1	*Rām* 1.50.28c
'glorious [*pratāpavant*]'	1	*Mbh* 9.39.12d
'having great fame [*sumahāyaśas*]'	1	*Rām* 1.54.8b
'great-minded [*mahāmati*]'	1	*Rām* 1.51.15b
'great-souled [*mahātman*]'	1	*Rām* 1.53.2b
'great sage [*mahāmuni*]'	1	*Rām* 1.54.13d

Vasiṣṭha:

Epithet	Number of Occurrences	Citations
'the most eminent of reciters [*japatām vara, śreṣṭha*]'	7	*Rām* 1.51.1d, 1.51.6c, 1.51.20b, 1.54.6b, 1.54.26b, 1.55.13a, 1.55.20b

[43] By ungrammaticality, I am using the terminology of the French poetician Michael Riffaterre. In remarking on the use of ungrammatical linguistic forms in the late medieval works of Rimbaud, Riffaterre describes ungrammaticalities as 'special signs, bearers of the poem's literariness, because they connect it with a generic or thematic intertext and at the same time define a poem's originality by opposing it to this intertext' (Riffaterre 1981, 232–3).

Epithet	Number of Occurrences	Citations
'blessed [*bhagavant*]'	6	*Mbh* 9.39.19, *Rām* 1.51.2d, 1.51.12a, 1.52.10a, 1.52.21a, 1.55.2a
'having great splendor [*mahātejas*]'	3	*Rām* 1.51.20a, 1.54.26a, 1.55.22a
'excellent sage [*munivara, munisattama*]'	3	*Mbh* 9.39.20b *Rām* 1.51.3c, 1.52.10b
'having great ascetic power [*mahātapas*]'	2	*Rām* 1.51.6b, 1.55.22b
'having great fame [*sumahāyaśas*]'	1	*Rām* 1.53.17b
'righteous-souled [*dharmātman*]'	1	*Rām* 1.52.10c
'of immeasurable radiance [*amitaprabha*]'	1	*Rām* 1.53.13d
'of extreme potency [*paramaujas*]'	1	*Rām* 1.53.5d

The *Mahābhārata* versions make little use of epithets—taken together, the Ādi and Śalya Parvan versions employ only three for Viśvāmitra and three for Vasiṣṭha. On the other hand, formulaic descriptions abound in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s telling, and these align themselves in the following striking pattern: while Vasiṣṭha is regularly called 'great-souled [*mahātman*]' or 'blessed [*bhagavant*]', Viśvāmitra is considered to be 'having great splendor [*mahātejas*]' or 'having great strength [*mahābala*]'. Furthermore, while both are deemed to be 'having great ascetic power [*mahātapas*]', Viśvāmitra is called this only when engaging in *tapas* to acquire Śiva's *astras* ('magic weapons') in an effort to defeat Vasiṣṭha, a motif not found in either *Mahābhārata* version. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Brahman Vasiṣṭha is also lauded three times as 'having great splendor [*mahātejas*]', an epithet ordinarily expected of Kṣatriyas. However, each one comes after a Kṣatriya-like act: after Vasiṣṭha generously offers a feast to the king and his troops (*Rām* 1.51.20a), after he angrily swears to destroy Viśvāmitra (*Rām* 1.54.26a), and after their feud escalates to the point of universal destruction (*Rām* 1.55.22a). Aside from these exceptions, the evidence suggests that Vasiṣṭha's Brahman body is distinguished by the blessedness and greatness of the inner self, its *ātman*, while the Kṣatriya body of Viśvāmitra—aside from a period in which he accrues ascetic power—is marked by external qualities of splendor (*tejas*) and strength (*bala*).

This mapping of *varṇa* onto physical bodies also takes place through dialogues within the *kāmadhenu* legend. The Ādi Parvan constructs an opposition between the aggressive Kṣatriya and the placid Brahman when, in his attempt to seize the magic cow, Viśvāmitra declares to Vasiṣṭha, 'I am a Kṣatriya, and you are a sage, engaged in ascetic practice and contemplation—and where is valor among Brahmans, those placid and restrained souls?' (*Mbh* 1.165.18). As the cow is being dragged

away, Vasiṣṭha informs her that as a 'merciful Brahman [*kṣamāvān brāhmaṇa*]', he is powerless to stop the king's use of force (*Mbh* 1.165.24d). 'The strength [*bala*] of Kṣatriyas is splendor [*tejas*]', explains the sage, 'while the strength of Brahmans is mercy [*kṣamā*]; mercy has possessed me, so you should go with him if you like' (*Mbh* 1.165.28). The opposition of Kṣatriya *tejas* and Brahmanic *kṣamā* here places a *varṇa*-encoding upon physical power (*bala*). The use of the verb *bhaj* (possess, enjoy) also indicates that Brahmanic compassion is imagined as a physical trait of Vasiṣṭha. The physicality of Kṣatriya valor is made explicit in a declaration by Viśvāmitra that has been omitted from the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*: 'I am a Kṣatriya, not a Brahman, and according to my ethics, I possess physical valor [*bāhuvīrya*]; and so here, I will steal her from you, as you look on, with the strength of my arms [*bhujabalena*]' (*Mbh* 1.1758*). The Kṣatriya characteristics of Viśvāmitra's body, his 'physical valor [*bāhuvīrya*]' and 'strength of arms [*bhujabala*]', are what sanction him to behave as a Kṣatriya and take the cow by force, reinforcing the embodied nature of *varṇa*. 'You are a king who is firm in strength [*balastha*]', retorts Vasiṣṭha, 'a Kṣatriya possessing physical valor [*bāhuvīrya*]. Just do whatever you want, but do it quickly—don't deliberate over it' (*Mbh* 1.165.20).

Through epithet and dialogue, then, Brahman and Kṣatriya *varṇas* are mapped onto the bodies of the two principal characters of the *kāmadhenu* legend. At the same time, *varṇa* is mapped onto more static features of the narrative landscape—the hermitage of Vasiṣṭha, its background inhabitants and most importantly, within the *kāmadhenu* herself. First, the epic's depiction of the hermitage as a Brahman domestic space—in which the Kṣatriya is welcomed as a guest—constructs a world in which Brahman religious practice is centralized, but placed outside of the realm of Kṣatriya political authority. The clearest examples of the mapping of the Brahman *varṇa* onto Vasiṣṭha's hermitage appear in its aesthetic description, the elaborate greeting ritual with which Viśvāmitra and his troops are welcomed and the wondrous feast that they are offered as part of the sage's hospitality to his guest. The *Mahābhārata*'s account of Viśvāmitra's entry into the hermitage is brief and unadorned—Viśvāmitra and his fatigued troops are welcomed with 'water to wash his feet, to use as oblation, and to cleanse his mouth, and with salutations and forest offerings' (*Mbh* 1.165.8). The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s description of the hermitage is more detailed and elaborate, and worth presenting here in detail:

> He came upon Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, bearing many kinds of flowers, fruits and trees, full of herds of different kinds of fauna, and frequented by perfected beings. It was adorned with gods, *dānavas*, *gandharvas*, and *kinnaras*, filled with placid deer and frequented by groups of twice-born. It was full of groups of Brahman sages [*brahmarṣis*] and divine sages [*devarṣis*], and it was everywhere packed with great men who looked like Agni through the performance of austerities, and with great men who were like Lord Brahmā, who lived on

> water alone, or air, or eating only dried leaves; [it was filled] with others who ate only fruits and roots, those who had conquered their passions and subdued their senses, and with sages [*ṛṣis*] and divine ascetics, who were devoted to prayer and sacrifice. Thus did the mighty Viśvāmitra, greatest of warriors, behold Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, resembling Brahmā's heaven itself (*Rām* 1.50.23–28).

Packed with divine beings, ascetics, natural bounty, and peaceful religious activity, Vasiṣṭha's home is given the very same Brahmanic characteristics that belong to his body: sacredness, placidity, and a general aura of ascetic power. The *Rāmāyaṇa* version further emphasizes the Brahmanic nature of the hermitage. Vasiṣṭha bids the king welcome, gives him a seat, and serves him fruits and roots, 'according to custom' (*Rām* 1.52.3c). The pair then ask each other about their welfare, in a discussion that similarly normalizes the characteristics of Brahman and Kṣatriya *varṇas*: While Vasiṣṭha asks the king about his subjects, his military exploits, his treasury and his progeny, Viśvāmitra inquires about the state of the sage's austerities, his penances, his sacrifices, and the fauna in his hermitage (*Rām* 1.52.4cd–5ab). Vasiṣṭha then offers Viśvāmitra and his troops a feast. The Ādi Parvan version describes the *kāmadhenu*'s meal in two verses: 'She emitted cultivated and wild rice, herbs and milk, and unequalled elixirs containing all six flavors and the flavor of ambrosia; also, foods, beverages, and other consumables of great variety, as well as heated sauces all made out of ambrosia' (*Mbh* 1.165.10–11). The exquisite—and noticeably vegetarian—nature of this meal is evident from the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s more detailed description:

> There were sugarcane and sweets, grains and wines, excellent liquors, expensive drinks and eatables of many sorts; mountainous heaps of steaming rice, savory dishes and soups, and rivers of yogurt; curries of all sorts of flavors, and thousands of silver platters piled up with delicious things (*Rām* 1.52.2–4).[44]

Just how vegetarian would a Brahman's feast have been in early India? D. N. Jha has demonstrated the existence of 'latitudinarian' attitudes towards vegetarianism in the *śāstras*, and argues that Brahmans may have continued to keep a non-vegetarian diet even during the medieval period (Jha 2002, 91–3, 118). Brockington notes an ambivalence towards meat in the *Mahābhārata*, and a 'tendency to condemn it' within the didactic portions.[45] In our case, like other narratives involving the protection

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[44] Further evidence for the vegetarian nature of this meal comes from imagery found in the Ś manuscript of the *Mahābhārata*, but excised from the Critical Edition text (*Mbh* 1.1753*): 'There were steaming hot piles of rice that appeared like mountains; there were condiments and soups, as well as lakes of yogurt; there were wells filled with *ghee*, alongside piles of other edibles. There were thousands of edibles of the highest quality, all over the place; there were wines of several different kinds, and thousands of clothes and blankets of great quality'.

[45] Jha and Brockington both consider an incident within the Kalmāṣapāda narrative, where a Brahman asks the accursed king Kalmāṣapāda for a meal of meat, only to receive a meal of human flesh (*Mbh* 1.166.20–32), as indicating that 'meat was clearly a normal part of a brāhmaṇa's diet' (Jha 2002, 95; see also Brockington 1998, 225).

of cows (Proudfoot 1987), the *kāmadhenu* legend appears clearly impacted by the *ahiṃsā* doctrine—which Jha believes to have 'made its first appearance in the Upaniṣadic thought and literature' (Jha 2002, 140; see also Chapple 1996). If it is indeed vegetarian, the Brahman feast is perhaps meant to contrast with the violence of the Kṣatriya hunt, but in any case, its copiousness and the ensuing delight of Viśvāmitra's satiated troops is above all a testimonial to the concealed magnificence of the Brahman's divine power.[46]

The central conflict of the narrative occurs precisely because the Kṣatriya tries to usurp the embodied symbol of this limitless Brahman power, the *kāmadhenu*.[47] This is made clear through the cow's own speech to Vasiṣṭha as she is dragged away:

> They say that a Kṣatriya has no real strength [*bala*], and that the Brahman is really stronger [*balavattara*]. O Brahman, the strength of Brahmans [*brahmabala*] is divine [*divya*] and stronger than that of the Kṣatriya [*kṣattra*]. You have immeasurable strength [*aprameyabala*], there is no one stronger than you—Viśvāmitra may possess great valor [*mahāvīrya*], but your splendor [*tejas*] is unassailable. O man of great valor [*mahāvīrya*], I am filled with Brahman strength [*brahmabala-saṃbhṛta*]—give me the orders and I will destroy that wicked man's pride along with his army (*Mbh* 1.53.14–16).

Vasiṣṭha hesitates to order the release of this power in the Ādi Parvan, but in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he urges the *kāmadhenu* to 'Let loose an army to destroy my enemy's army' (*Rām* 1.53.17cd).[48] The two epics will thus arrive at distinct moral positions on whether a Brahman ought to make active use of Brahman power, but they are united in the opinion that this power is the natural property of a Brahman, a symbolic *kāmadhenu* whose extraction from the Brahman's home leads to disastrous results. In the Śalya Parvan version, Viśvāmitra's armies are 'scattered in all directions' (*Mbh* 9.39.21d), while the Ādi Parvan claims that though the king was defeated, 'none of Visvamitra's soldiers was deprived of his life by the angered sons of Vasiṣṭha' (*Mbh* 1.165.38d–39). We may again note the Ādi Parvan's emphasis on Vasiṣṭha's forbearance, even in the violent midst of the 'great marvel that had arisen from Brahman power' (*Mbh* 1.165.41ab).

The *Mahābhārata*'s depiction of Brahmanic passivity is in sharp contrast to the active portrayal of Vasiṣṭha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* version, which features a one-on-one

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[46] Resonant here is a theme running throughout the *Mahābhārata* of concealed divine power, to be released through a kind of explosive, apocalyptic display of force; see Goldman 1995; Hiltebeitel 1980.

[47] In his psychoanalytic study of Sanskrit epic literature, Goldman argues that the *kāmadhenu* legend acts as a sublimated representation of the oedipal struggle between father and son, displaced onto the social hierarchy of Brahman and Kṣatriya. The feminized *kāmadhenu* represents the mother at the center of the oedipal struggle; see Goldman 1978, 351.

[48] Vasiṣṭha is presented as a pro-active Brahman in the Śalya Parvan, as well, ordering his cow to 'Let loose the ferocious Śabaras!' (*Mbh* 9.39.20c).

duel between the sage and the king. Viśvāmitra's utter defeat—including the death of his hundred sons incinerated by Vasiṣṭha himself—prompts the king to travel to the Himālaya Mountains, perform *tapas*, and procure magic weapons from Śiva (*Rām* 1.54.12–18). *Astras* in hand, the king vengefully returns to Vasiṣṭha's hermitage. In contrast to his earlier visit, when the intervening formalities of hospitality, food, and conversation had nullified the dangerous implications of a Kṣatriya entering a Brahman's home, Viśvāmitra's entry is now violent and terrifying:

> The king arrived at the hermitage and let loose his magic weapons, which, because of their splendor [*tejas*], engulfed the ascetic grove in flames. Seeing the mighty Viśvāmitra releasing his magic weapons, the sages trembled and ran in fear in hundreds of directions. Vasiṣṭha's frightened disciples, and the animals and birds, all scattered in a thousand different directions. In just a second, great Vasiṣṭha's hermitage became empty; it was as silent as a wasteland (*Rām* 1.54.21–24).

Despite the weapons of mass destruction that he possesses, Viśvāmitra's assault fails, as Vasiṣṭha confronts him and swallows up [*gras*] each of the Kṣatriya's *astras* using his powerful Brahman staff [*brahmadaṇḍa*]. This final defeat leads Viśvāmitra to declare his famous *dictum*:

> Damn this Kṣatriya force! The force of Brahmanic power is truly the greater force. With merely one Brahman's staff, all my magic weapons have been vanquished.[49]

Resolving to procure what is clearly Vasiṣṭha's superior martial power, Viśvāmitra then determines to seek Brahman status through a rigorous program of *tapas*. In the end, he is said to have acquired Brahmanhood by accumulating such tremendous *tapas* that it threatens the stability of the cosmos itself. This astonishing, extraordinary feat is precisely the source for the great sociological question that haunts Viśvāmitra, reappearing time and again in Hindu mythological literature ever since Yudhiṣṭhira first asked it: how could a Kṣatriya become a Brahman without changing his body?

As it imprints the ideological discourse of *varṇa* onto the physical bodies and domestic spaces of its storyworld, the *kāmadhenu* legend comes to possess a certain narrative force within the Sanskrit epics. On the one hand, *varṇa* is being naturalized as a social discourse, since the *kāmadhenu*—the symbol of Brahman power—naturally belongs in the Brahman's domestic space. At the same time, the simultaneous rupture of narrative and social space produces an inevitable 'ungrammaticality', a discursive question that demands interpretation. Both epics explain Viśvāmitra's *varṇa* change

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[49] *dhig balaṃ kṣatriyabalaṃ brahmatejobalaṃ balam | ekena brahmadaṇḍena sarvāstrāṇi hatāni me* (*Rām* 1.55.23). The first half of the verse is found *verbatim* in the Ādi Parvan's version, but—importantly—with a different second half: 'I have understood which is more powerful and which is less, and clearly, *tapas* is the highest force [*balābalaṃ viniścitya tapa eva paraṃ balam*]' (*Mbh* 1.165.42). For a theorization of the role of this half-verse in the textual performance of the *kāmadhenu* legend, see Sathaye forthcoming, 144–7.

as resulting from *tapas*, but the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* further regulates this *tapas* through a lengthy expansion of the narrative. In between his conflict with Vasiṣṭha and his triumphant self-transformation, the *Rāmāyaṇa* embeds a sequence of the other familiar Viśvāmitra-centered legends: the stories of Triśaṅku, Śunaḥśepa, Menakā, and Rambhā. These are all tests of Viśvāmitra's will, as his accumulated ascetic power is repeatedly lost through moments of desire and anger (*kāma* and *krodha*). In the end, Viśvāmitra's quest is successful only after he eliminates *kāma* and *krodha* in their entirety through 1,000 years of uninterrupted *tapas*. In other words, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is arguing that under ordinary human conditions, *varṇa* change is practically impossible.[50]

Satyavatī and the mixed-up birth of Viśvāmitra

Though Viśvāmitra's achievements might be difficult to emulate, the story of his success continues to leave open the possibility of anyone becoming a Brahman, and this is indeed the thrust of Yudhiṣṭhira's question with which we began our inquiry. We are now in a better position to assess the performative power of the 'Viśvāmitropākhyāna' in the Anuśāsana Parvan, and how it directly takes up the physicality and spatiality of the sage's *varṇa* change. Surprisingly, while Yudhiṣṭhira's questions include a number of allusions to other Viśvāmitra-centered epic legends (e.g., Triśaṅku, Kalmāṣapāda, Śunaḥśepa), there is no reference—at all—to the *kāmadhenu* legend in Yudhiṣṭhira's query or in Bhīṣma's response.[51] Instead, Bhīṣma explains that Viśvāmitra's body was already infused at birth with Brahmanhood through the fateful mistake of his sister Satyavatī. Exerting strict control on how its audiences interpret Viśvāmitra, Bhīṣma's response may be read as an effort to regulate the social ungrammaticality of a Kṣatriya seizing Brahman power. The story proceeds as follows:

Gādhi, son of Kuśika and a descendant of the famous king Jahnu, is the king of Kānyakubja. Unable to produce a male heir, Gādhi decides to retire in the forest. While living in the forest, he comes to have a daughter named Satyavatī, who catches the eye of the Bhārgava sage Ṛcīka. Smitten by her unparalleled beauty, the Brahman

[50] Within the *Mahābhārata*, the Śalya Parvan version similarly reaffirms the rigidity of *varṇa* even as it celebrates Viśvāmitra's achievement, since he attains Brahmanhood after many austerities at a *tirtha* on the banks of the Sarasvatī, a place made sacred in the Kṛta age by a Brahman named Ārṣṭiṣena (*Mbh* 9.39.3–11). According to the Śalya Parvan, two others attained Brahmanhood at this same site, Sindhudvīpa and Devāpi, but we are not given any details about their lives. With respect to the Ādi Parvan's telling, I have argued elsewhere that the juxtaposition of the Kalmāṣapāda narrative after the *kāmadhenu* narrative leads to two distinct modes or 'flavors' of *tapas*—Viśvāmitra's Kṣatriya *tapas* and Vasiṣṭha's Brahman *tapas* (Sathaye forthcoming, 150).

[51] This absence is all the more striking since Yudhiṣṭhira's query includes a clear reference to Vasiṣṭha's suicide attempts within the *Mahābhārata*'s Kalmāṣapāda narrative that is juxtaposed immediately after the Ādi Parvan version of the *kāmadhenu* legend (*Mbh* 13.3.14).

asks Gādhi for his daughter's hand in marriage. Gādhi, deeming the destitute ascetic to be an unworthy groom for his daughter, demands a seemingly unattainable bride price [*śulka*]: 'one thousand horses, the color of the moon's rays, fast as the wind, but each having one black ear' (*Mbh* 13.4.12abc). To the king's surprise, however, Ṛcīka propitiates the god Varuṇa and easily accomplishes the task. Fearing the sage's curse, the king agrees to the marriage. After the wedding, in order to ensure the fertility of both his wife Satyavatī and his mother-in-law, Ṛcīka tells Satyavatī that she should first embrace a ficus tree [*udumbara*], and her mother a fig tree [*aśvattha*],[52] before eating two special *carus* (*mantra*-infused concoctions of rice) that he has prepared especially for them. When Satyavatī excitedly tells her mother, however, her mother urges her to switch the trees and *carus*, since Ṛcīka must have given his wife the more powerful *caru*. 'Just think', she argues, 'how else might your brother become distinguished? (*Mbh* 13.4.33cd). Mother and daughter switch the trees and the *carus*, and both become pregnant. Ṛcīka soon realizes what has happened and angrily rebukes his wife:

> I had placed the complete *brahman* in your *caru*, and I had placed pure *kṣatra* valor in her *caru*. You would have given birth to a sage whose virtues would be praised in all three worlds, and she to a distinguished Kṣatriya—this is what I had done. But since you and your mother have reversed it, she will become the mother to a great Brahman and you, my dear, will produce a Kṣatriya of ferocious deeds. My wife, this is not a good thing you have done, out of fondness for your mother (*Mbh* 13.4.37–40).

Heartbroken, Satyavatī pleads to Ṛcīka for forgiveness, asking for a boon so that her son—and his son—may not behave like a Kṣatriya. Ṛcika agrees that fate be made to skip one generation, and it is their grandson, Rāma Jāmadagnya, who eventually becomes the terrifying slayer of the entire race of Kṣatriyas. Satyavatī's mother, meanwhile, the wife of Gādhi, gives birth to Viśvāmitra, who becomes a Brahman sage 'due to the power of that sage (Ṛcīka)' (*Mbh* 13.4.46cd).

The Satyavatī legend makes use of a genealogical argument to reconfigure Viśvāmitra's body in two distinct ways. Not only does the narrative bind Viśvāmitra by blood to the Bhārgavas, the most infamously counter-normative family in epic mythology, it reduces Viśvāmitra's life-story to the circumstances of his birth, thereby nullifying the discursive threat to the immutability of *varṇa* raised through the *kāmadhenu* narrative. Viśvāmitra did not change his body, but had always had a Brahman body inhabiting Kṣatriya domestic space. With this remapping of Brahman *varṇa* onto Viśvāmitra's body, his movement into Brahman social space is no longer a radical event, no longer a forcible seizure of Brahman power, but rather can only

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[52] 'During the menstrual period, she should embrace a fig tree [*aśvattha*] and you a ficus tree [*udumbara*]' (*Mbh* 13.4.27).

be viewed as a return home. As Bhīṣma himself explains, 'So, King Yudhiṣṭhira, the great ascetic Viśvāmitra was *not* in fact a Kṣatriya, since Ṛcīka had infused the highest *brahman* within him' (*Mbh* 13.4.59). Through this strategic use of a genealogical narrative, the *Mahābhārata* produces the strongest possible affirmation of normative social discourse: an individual's social place is inviolably fixed by *varṇa* at birth.

Just as it reconfigures the *varṇa*-encoding of Viśvāmitra's body, the *Mahābhārata*'s textual performance of the Satyavatī legend also inverts the *kāmadhenu* legend's mapping of *varṇa* onto domestic space. Whereas the *kāmadhenu* legend had valorized Brahman domestic space as placid, sacred, and welcoming, the Satyavatī legend represents Kṣatriya domestic space as alien and patently inhospitable to Brahmans. We can get a better sense of how the Anuśāsana Parvan does this by comparing its telling to another epic version of the story. Interestingly, Yudhiṣṭhira has heard this story before—and in fact a very short time before—in the preceding Śānti Parvan, where Kṛṣṇa had told him of Rāma Jāmadagnya's birth (*Mbh* 12.49). Kṛṣṇa tells more or less the same story as Bhīṣma, but through a different focalization: the Śānti Parvan version is centered on Rāma Jāmadagnya, while the Anuśāsana Parvan centers its narration on Viśvāmitra.[53] These distinct focalizations are connected to two important textual variations between the two versions. First, the bride price motif is not present in the Śānti Parvan's Rāma-centered version. Through the inclusion of this customary royal marriage practice, the Viśvāmitra-centered Anuśāsana Parvan version produces a markedly Kṣatriya domestic space, one that is further tied to economic status, since Gādhi rejects the Brahman sage as a suitor because he is 'destitute [*daridra*]' (*Mbh* 13.4.9c). Here, since the Brahman penetrates Kṣatriya domestic space and forcibly seizes the beautiful Kṣatriya princess, the bride-price motif clearly inverts the Brahman-centered narrative kinetics of the *kāmadhenu* legend. Second, while the Śānti Parvan suggests that the *caru*-switch happened because Satyavatī had been unwittingly 'tricked' (*vyaṁsitā*) by her mother, the Anuśāsana Parvan makes her equally culpable in the crime. Her mother's voice dramatically pleads the Kṣatriya case for switching the *carus*: 'Just think—how else might your brother become distinguished?' Both of these motifs appear on the surface to articulate Kṣatriya points of view on *varṇa* as a social practice, through the strong and willfully resistant voices of Viśvāmitra's mother and father. On the other hand, since both are, in the end, easily silenced by Ṛcīka's Brahman power, these Kṣatriya voices—like Viśvāmitra's efforts—may hardly be considered true articulations of any counter-Brahmanic ideology within the epic, but

[53] Seven other versions exist in purāṇic literature—with a notable absence within the *Rāmāyaṇa*—and each follows either the Viśvāmitra-centered or Rāma Jāmādagnya-centered focalization. For a more extensive comparative study of these variants of the Satyavatī legend in the epics and *purāṇas*, see Sathaye 2004, 53–67.

at best what Ramanujan has termed 'a presence of reflexive worlds'—a brief, fleeting glimpse of Kṣatriya-centered possibilities within the discourse of *varṇa* (Ramanujan 1991, 54). Along with Viśvāmitra's self-transformation, the resistant voices of his parents are rapidly foreclosed by the textual performance of the Satyavatī legend in the Anuśāsana Parvan, turning Viśvāmitra into yet another dreaded example of *varṇa-saṅkara* (intermixture of *varṇa*) in the *Mahābhārata*.

Conclusions: Textual performance and v*arṇa* in Early India

Our analysis of the *Mahābhārata*'s representation of the legendary sage Viśvāmitra permits some conclusions about the cultural work of epic subnarratives. Firstly, and most importantly, we are able to see how epic subnarratives about Viśvāmitra naturalize the very social boundary that he successfully crosses. This takes place first through a mapping of *varṇa*-based social discourse onto bodies and domestic spaces within the narrative, and then representing Viśvāmitra's *varṇa* change as either a violent penetration of Brahmanhood through the religious force of *tapas* (as in the *kāmadhenu* legend), or as a return to an original condition (as in the Satyavatī legend). Despite differences in content, both narratives reaffirm a fundamental difference between Brahman and Kṣatriya domesticity—both act, therefore, as naturalizations of *varṇa* as social place. As a consequence, *varṇa* is constructed as a static and immutable relationship between physical bodies and domestic spaces. To express this in simple terms, the *Mahābhārata* depicts a world in which Brahman bodies naturally belong in Brahman homes, and Kṣatriya bodies belong in Kṣatriya homes.

Secondly, our approach to epic subnarratives as 'textual performances' clarifies our understanding of the textual production of the *Mahābhārata*. Since the *Mahābhārata* follows a clear discursive strategy in embedding the Viśvāmitra legends within its larger literary corpus, and since these narratives exhibit robust intertextualities with the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other purāṇic texts, it seems evident that the epic is neither a haphazard, cancerous growth, nor a standalone work of pure literary imagination. The query-response structure of the 'Viśvāmitropākhyāna' in the Anuśāsana Parvan allows the epic to regulate the counter-normative implications of this legendary king who became a Brahman—and not just any Brahman but one of the principal Vedic seers. By providing an authoritative answer to the question of how this could happen, the Satyavatī narrative regulates our interpretation of Viśvāmitra, and in this sense 'fixes' an otherwise fluid narrative tradition. It must be said, however, that epic textual performance is always a supplementary act, trumping but not entirely effacing the variant readings and alternative voices that it seeks to address. As a result, competing sources of social power remain enticingly within the realm of possibility in the figure

of Viśvāmitra, to be taken up time and again by literary and popular cultural traditions in South Asia.

Finally, the analysis of textual performance in the epic addresses the important question of why the *Mahābhārata* gained broad cultural power in early Indian society. The *Mahābhārata* is an expansive, all-encompassing text that famously claims 'that which exists here, exists elsewhere—and that which does not exist here, exists nowhere' (*Mbh* 1.56.33, 18.5.38). The analysis of epic Viśvāmitra legends suggests that 'that which exists here' sought, around the beginning of the Common Era, to be the definitive consolidation of 'that which exists elsewhere'. As a fixed cultural stage upon which authoritative 'performances' of traditional narratives about marginal figures like Viśvāmitra take place, the *Mahābhārata* permitted the expression of counter-normative voices and possibilities, but which were carefully and safely couched within a naturalized, Brahman-centered social order. The mechanics of this naturalization, as we have observed, is the encryption of *varṇa* ideology onto narrative bodies and spaces. To the extent that it situated actual human bodies within realworld social spaces, and to the extent that it tried to solidify the boundaries between these spaces, even as it told of figures who broke those boundaries, the *Mahābhārata* may be read as a literary text that employed traditional narratives to construct social place in early India.

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