The Tale of an Old Monkey and a Fragrant Flower: What the Mahābhārata’s Rāmāyaṇa May Tell Us about the Mahābhārata

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I want to focus attention on an episode in the Mahābhārata in which Bhīma seeks saugandhika flowers to please Draupādi (Mahābhārata 3.146–53), resulting in his meeting Hanūmat.1 Included in this encounter is a brief rendition of Hanūmat’s heroic actions with and devotion to Rāma, a story that this episode calls “the Rāmāyaṇa.” This is a fascinating story with many possible implications for our understanding of the Mahābhārata’s history. Although it is not one of the Mahābhārata’s sixty-seven subtales (upākhyāna),2 it resembles them in a variety of ways and is linked to many passages of the Mahābhārata, as will be indicated below. My interest is in raising questions about what this surprise appearance in the Mahābhārata of a figure from the Rāmāyaṇa may tell us about the Mahābhārata.

Alf Hiltebeitel has stated: “I date Manu and the Rāmāyaṇa a little later than or possibly even overlapping with the completion of the Mahābhārata ...” and has argued that the Sanskrit text of the Mahābhārata was written by brahmans

1 I would like to thank those who attended the session at which I presented this paper during the 41st Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in October, 2012. Particular thanks go to Vishwa Adluri, Greg Bailey, Simon Brodbeck, Robert Goldman, James Laine, and Philip Lutgendorf for comments after the presentation, to Vishwa Adluri for organizing the event, and to Alf Hiltebeitel both for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and for inspiring me to approach the Mahābhārata in a new way. All citations of the Mahābhārata are to the Critical Edition: Sukthankar, V.S., et al. (eds.). The Mahābhārata: For the First Time Critically Edited, 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–59). It is conventional to use as his name either Hanūmān or Hanumān, and as noted by John Brockington (p. 134, note 1), the spelling with long u is more frequent in the Mahābhārata: see John Brockington, “Hanumān in the Mahābhārata,” Journal of Vaishnava Studies 12, no. 2 (2004): 129–35. However, for the sake of consistency with other names cited in the stem form, I will use Hanūmat in this article.

working as a committee over a generation or two between 150 BCE and the year 1. He adds that, “To speak of the temporal priority of the Mahābhārata over the Rāmāyaṇa and Manus is thus not to rule out the possibility that the last two might have been started before the Mahābhārata was finished.” Hiltebeitel has also maintained that the Mahābhārata provided the pattern for the Rāmāyaṇa, and I quote: “... the Rāmāyaṇa poet is familiar with the Mahābhārata’s archetypal design and intent upon refining it.” Hiltebeitel’s view is that Vālmīki composed the Rāmāyaṇa by refining the Mahābhārata’s (already existing) mode of expression into kāvya, refining also its structure and style by reducing and incorporating into the main story the subtales for which the Mahābhārata is famous.

Some have assumed or argued that the size of the Mahābhārata, the sheer number of words, is evidence of a long compositional history—it would take a long time to write so much, perhaps 400 or 800 years. Some have assumed or argued that the diversity of literary styles and religious ideas would require hundreds of years to be composed. These, however, are assumptions rather than persuasive arguments. As a counter-example, I can cite Isaac Asimov, who wrote some 500 books—on popular science, history, chess, and science fiction—while also serving as professor of biochemistry at Boston University. I mention him not only because of the number of his many works, but also their diversity: he published in all ten major categories of the Dewey Decimal System, so he was not simply producing quickly written romance novels. Indeed, as another example, Alf Hiltebeitel has written perhaps as much about

4 Hiltebeitel, Dharma, 200.
5 Ibid., 413.
6 See, for example, E. Washburn Hopkins, The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), especially 396–400, in which he imagines a work prior to the Mahābhārata that did not feature the Pāṇḍavas, with growth and “intrusions of didactic matter” (398) in stages from 400 BCE to 400 CE, without much evidence to support such a chronology. An even more elaborate pattern of development in stages is proposed by James L. Fitzgerald in “Mahābhārata,” in Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism, vol. 2, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010). A similar but less elaborated view of its development over time can be seen in J.A.B. van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), xxiii–xxv; see also his comment (ibid., xvi): “Whatever historical realities may also have been woven into the epic, it is not an accident of dynastic history; however fortuitous its career of expansion, the epic is not an accident of literary history. The grand framework was a design.”