Introduction

Let me first state that I am very glad and honoured to contribute to the present volume devoted to the Mahābhārata and its upākhyānas, designed as a tribute to Alf Hiltebeitel’s essential analyses of the Mahābhārata in the last forty years. My aim here is neither to provide a new reading of a specific upākhyāna nor to propose general considerations about upākhyānas but to present Madeleine Biardeau’s (1922–2010) understanding and study of the upākhyānas. This chapter can thus be seen as a reflexive paper on how this important epic textual material was dealt with by one of the most insightful scholars of the Mahābhārata and a crucial source of inspiration for Hiltebeitel, who translated into English what is arguably Biardeau’s most original book, *Histoires de poteaux* (*Stories about Posts*). Considering the massiveness of Biardeau’s work on the Mahābhārata which spanned some four decades, I have tried to distinguish phases in her writing on the upākhyānas and I have tentatively identified four of them, which account for the four-part frame of this contribution:

1. First phase: late 1960s–early 1970s, characterized by a comparison of epic and purāṇic versions of myths in the framework of debates on critical editions of such texts.
2. Second phase: 1970s, mainly teaching and supervising research on upākhyānas, while continuing in parallel the publication of her series of major articles under the title “Études de mythologie hindoue.”
3. Third phase: late 1970s–early 1980s, the period when Biardeau publishes her main case studies on epic upākhyānas.
4. Fourth phase: 1985–2002, a period that sees the completion of the enquiry and the overall presentation of the Mahābhārata to a wider audience.

Before presenting those four phases in their succession, one point must be stressed: once the essential overall coherence of the Mahābhārata as a unitary
work of mythical nature is accepted—and all Mahābhārata students know that this claim was continuously and untiringly advocated, emphasized and strengthened by Biardeau—the upākhyānas do not present a peculiar theoretical or conceptual problem. As was the case with all other portions of the epic text (tales of mythical origins, frame stories and dialogues, main narrative, didactic passages—even the longest ones in parvans 12 and 13), the upākhyānas are looked upon by Biardeau as integral to the Mahābhārata, not as later interpolations or gratuitous digressions, and thus they must be read and studied with the same seriousness and earnest and inquisitive mindset as any other portion and in a constant va-et-vient between the whole and the part. She stated it very clearly in accordance with her structuralist stand at the beginning of her 1978 article “Mythe épique et hindouisme d’aujourd’hui”: “In a structural perspective, it is normal to consider that the interpretation of the MBh as a whole goes hand in hand with the interpretation of partial episodes, and that both of these aspects must throw light on each other in a continuous movement of going back and through.” In this passage as well as other analogous ones, Biardeau has suggested the hermeneutic or exegetic role that can be played by the upākhyānas in helping the reader to understand in a more refined and complete way the overall meaning of the Mahābhārata. The imprint of Biardeau’s deep philosophical formation is unmistakable here in this search for the unity and coherence of the Mahābhārata, her proneness towards synthesis, and a unified reading and global understanding of the epics.

First Phase: Late 1960s–Early 1970s

Biardeau devoted the first fifteen years of her work in the field of classical Indology to an exacting and extensive study in Indian darśanas and philosophy of language, which culminated with the publication in 1964 of her book Théorie de la connaissance et philosophie de la parole dans le brāhmanisme classique. In the mid-1960s, her interest gradually shifted from Brahmanical

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1 Madeleine Biardeau, “Mythe épique et hindouisme d’aujourd’hui,” Indologica Taurinensia 5 (1977): 43. In the original, the text reads: “Dans une perspective structurale, il est normal de considérer que l’interprétation du MBh comme totalité va de pair avec l’interprétation d’épisodes partiels, et que les deux aspects doivent s’éclairer l’un par l’autre dans un mouvement de va-et-vient incessant.”