

The Clay Sanskrit Library, founded by John and Jennifer Clay, general editor Richard Gombrich, edited by Isabelle Onians and Somadeva Vasudeva. *Mahābhārata Book Two: The Great Hall*, trans. Paul Wilmot, 588 pp., 2005. *Mahābhārata Book Three: The Forest, Volume Four*, trans. W. J. Johnson, 374 pp., 2006. *Mahābhārata Book Four: Virāṭa*, trans. Kathleen Garbutt, 516 pp., 2006. *Mahābhārata Book Seven: Droṇa, Volume One*, trans. Vaughan Pilikian, 473 pp., 2006. *Mahābhārata Book Eight: Karṇa, Volume One*, trans. Adam Bowles, 604 pp., 2005. *Mahābhārata Book Nine: Śalya, Volume One*, trans. Justin Meiland, 371 pp., 2006. Published by New York University Press and the JJC Foundation.

Readers of this journal may be familiar with the Clay Sanskrit Library. The books are small but perfectly formed green hardbacks, with smooth thin supple hard yellowish ('acid-free') paper of rare quality. Each book contains a short document entitled 'CSL conventions' (these are unusual but easily negotiated), an introduction, the text (Sanskrit on the left, English on the right, or sometimes at the bottom or top of the page one way or the other overleaf on the right), endnotes, glossary (here mostly of names), index, and a sandhi grid.

The Clay Sanskrit Library is to be commended for focusing much of its initial energies into translating the *Mahābhārata*: the *Mahābhārata* introduced by these half-dozen volumes, if and when completed, will be the first English/Sanskrit parallel-text edition to be made widely available in Europe and America. However, although this will no doubt succeed in furthering the Clay Sanskrit Library's noble aim 'to introduce Classical Sanskrit literature to a wide international readership' (<http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org/index.php>), the *Mahābhārata* critical edition produced in the last century, to which almost all international scholarship now refers by numbered chapter and verse, is not the text translated here; rather, this is the version also known as the 'vulgate' *Mahābhārata*, put together (by comparing and collating various manuscripts) by the pandit Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara in the seventeenth century and upon which he wrote his famous and innovative commentary *Illuminating the Inner Meaning of the Mahābhārata (Bhāratabhāvadvīpa)*. Like the vulgate, the critical edition was created by comparing various manuscripts, but in its case these were accumulated from the length and breadth of India and beyond; the material common to the extant manuscript traditions was isolated as a 'reconstituted text', with the additional material presented as footnotes and appendices. Although attitudes may differ as to the ancient integrity of this text, scholars have been grateful to take it up as a referential yardstick, and the Clay *Mahābhārata* would be a much more useful research tool if it incorporated a parallel numbering system so that readers looking up a critical edition reference could find it here more easily. Of the first six translators only Pilikian includes a chapter concordance.

The *Mahābhārata* tells of the origins, the conduct and the effects of the great war fought at Kurukṣetra, principally between the five sons of Pāṇḍu and their cousins the one hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The events described in Wilmot's volume are the war's most obvious cause. The ancestral kingdom has been split in two in an attempt to avoid difficulties, but the growing imperial fame of the Pāṇḍavas upsets Duryodhana, whose blind father is prevailed upon to host a dice match between the cousins, at which the Pāṇḍavas' wife Draupadī is assaulted and Yudhiṣṭhira loses the Pāṇḍava share of the kingdom for a fixed term of twelve-plus-one years. Johnson's volume documents the end of the twelve-year period, including two wonderful stories told to the Pāṇḍavas by the visiting sage Mārkaṇḍeya – 'The story of Rāma' and 'The

glorification of the faithful wife' (that is, Sāvitrī) – as well as two episodes in which Karṇa (Duryodhana's best friend, the unknown eldest Pāṇḍava) and Yudhiṣṭhira have important encounters with Indra and Dharma respectively. Garbutt's volume covers the thirteenth year of exile, in which the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī live incognito at a neighbouring royal house with various dramatic and amusing consequences.

These three volumes present narrative material already covered by the Chicago translation, which began in 1970 at the beginning of the text, broke off (due to the death of translator van Buitenen) at the beginning of the Kurukṣetra war, and took up the tale again in 2004 at the war's end, thus for the time being missing out the five books detailing the combat. To this reader, the most exciting of the Clay *Mahābhārata* volumes are thus those of Pilikian, Bowles and Meiland, which fill in some of the intervening martial stretch. These volumes are the first instalments of the books (*parvans*) of Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya, which, like the book of Bhīṣma which precedes them, are named after the successive leaders of Duryodhana's army. Each of these books present the war's events as described in retrospect to Dhṛtarāṣṭra by his attendant Saṃjaya, a combatant who has been given special extra-sensory powers to aid his narrative purpose. In each book Saṃjaya begins by telling Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the fall of the latest leader, and the grief of the blind old monarch – who is partly responsible for the war – serves to frame the detailed events of the conflict. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's horror at the gradual destruction of his sons and their allies causes him to lay blame for the slaughter in various directions, but never succeeds in quelling his curiosity or his thrill at hearing about the hair-raising acts of heroism on Kurukṣetra. The battlefield *mêlée*, although it may be assessed in various ways, is never less than compelling when viewed up close. Pilikian writes in his Introduction: 'There is no question in my mind that the battle books yield the finest poetry of the epic... Cultures across the world, particularly the more civilized, have always enjoyed the spectacle of violence, and in the materialist cosmos of the "Mahābhārata" it is the moment at which life is turned into death that is fetishized and that fascinates' (p. 21).

The Clay Sanskrit Library's piecemeal translation of the *Mahābhārata* is inevitably rather uneven in its English, but each translator manages to make the text their own, and what may seem to be infelicities of word choice at the beginning of a volume may end up being friends by the end. Here and now I think it would be contrary to the spirit and intent of the Clay project to engage in detailed critique of each translation: it goes without saying that translation is an impossible business, and though we might raise eyebrows at passages which might have been treated differently, we need those who try to bring a text alive. Even a terrible translation is better than no translation at all (these *Mahābhārata* translators will be learning from each other), and the parallel presentation of the Sanskrit text means that errors are transparent and corrigible in the reading by those familiar with the language. Translators are urged to volunteer their services to Richard Gombrich for future volumes. Of those presently under consideration, Bowles's volume is remarkable for its constant fidelity to the Sanskrit, and Pilikian's for the plangent and visceral poetry of its English. Indeed, Pilikian has produced passages here which jump off the page (sometimes careering around the room) as few ancient texts can do in translation.

The *Mahābhārata* volumes vary considerably in the extent and nature of their introductions and notes. The genre of 'Clay *Mahābhārata* volume introduction' is delightful and open, particularly given the multi-volume nature of many of the books. In the six volumes under review, introductory overviews are not lacking of the story as a whole

(or at least so far), or of the events and characters to be presented in the volume, but depth of reference to scholarly literature and to connected events in what are or will be other volumes is variable. Wilmot's introduction mentions the tension between *daiva* ('that of the gods') and human effort that runs throughout the *Mahābhārata*, and locates the text's production in terms of post-Aśokan rivalry between Buddhists and brahmins; Johnson's introduction briefly discusses the relation between the *Mahābhārata*'s Rāma story and Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the place of *dharma* in the other three passages he translates; Garbutt's introduction (at only seven pages the shortest of the six) remarks upon the humorous and carnivalesque aspects of the *Virāṭaparvan*; Pilikian's introduction suggests that 'the epic is a highly ironic text' with a 'very modern sense of the absurd' (p. 18), and highlights its cosmological metaphors; Bowles's introduction (at 36 pages the longest of the six) gives a superb survey of Karṇa's story and character and is notable for its use of critical-edition chapter and verse references; Meiland's introduction takes up again the question of epic inevitability and also refers back to the events of the *Karṇaparvan* in assessing Śalya's character.

One cumulative effect of these first six volumes is to highlight the characters of Śalya and Karṇa, both of whom at some level are fighting on the wrong side, and whose *Karṇaparvan* dialogue as charioteer and chariot-warrior is one of the finest passages on show here. Another cumulative effect of these volumes is an accidental concentration upon the charioteer/chariot-warrior dynamic, which is seen also in the *Virāṭaparvan* (when Arjuna-the-transvestite plays the driver for Virāṭa's son) and in disguised form in the ongoing relationship between Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as well as most famously in the *Bhagavadgītā* to which we look forward as part of Alex Cherniak's forthcoming *Bhīṣmaparvan*.

The text's multiple naming of most characters is more or less dealt with by the Clay volumes, sometimes simply by translation, sometimes by an introductory listing of each main character's names, and sometimes by using endnotes. In regard to the latter, which may be frequent and break up the reading, the Chicago method (of one-name footnotes) is preferable but perhaps would waste space in the parallel text. It is to be hoped that future volumes will be proofed more thoroughly than these (the frequency of typographical errors is sometimes unfortunate), and that material essential to each volume (such as Meiland's list of his departures from Kinjawadekar's edition) will be included within it rather than promised on the Clay website.

The *Mahābhārata* is the multi-jewelled crown of Sanskrit literature, and if and when it is completed this parallel-text version will surely be the Clay Sanskrit Library's most memorable product. With regard to the interpretation of the text as a whole, we may broaden a sentiment found in Garbutt's introduction: 'Though many suggestions have been offered, one should not necessarily accept that only one is right, but, rather, that all these varied theories are useful and not mutually exclusive. Much of the Sanskrit literature we still have today is highly complex and functions on many levels, so we should not underestimate how sophisticated 'Virāṭa' was intended to be' (p. 19).

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