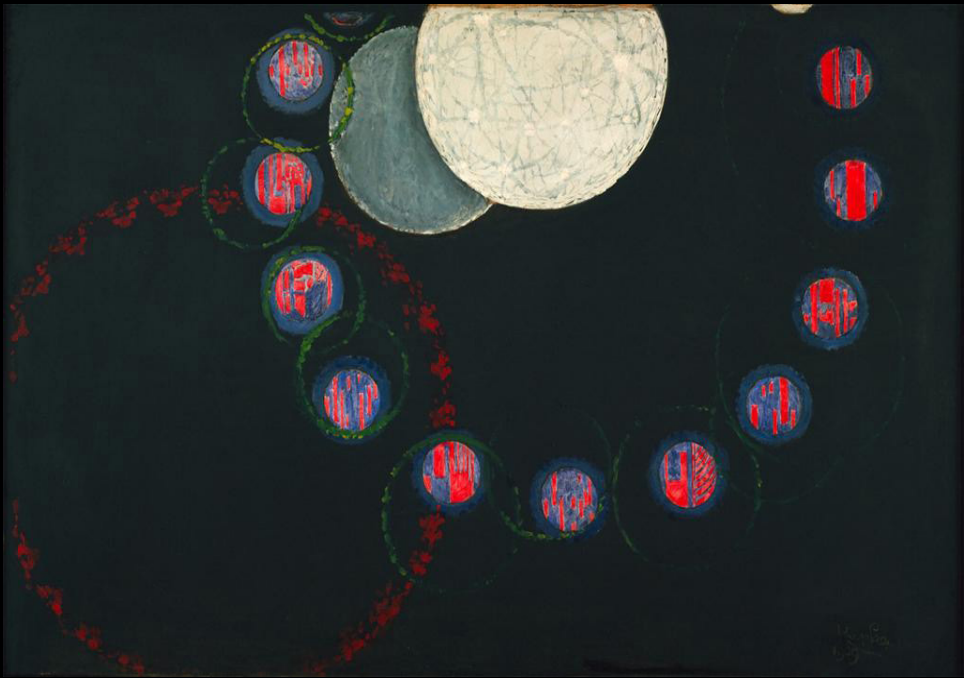


PHILOLOGY AND CRITICISM

A Guide to Mahābhārata
Textual Criticism



Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee



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CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Introduction: Ad Fontes, Non Ultra Fontes!

About This Book

The aim of this book and its connection with our first book; the central problem confronting Mahābhārata studies

Why a Critical Edition?

Why a critical text is required and what problem it attempts to solve

What Is a Critical Edition?

A description of the critical edition: its components, how it reduces the plurality of readings to one and what the status of the resultant text, the constituted text, is. Three misconceptions about the critical edition: (1) it is eclectic, (2) it is not a text and (3) it can be replaced by a text with an apparatus of variants

How to Interpret the Critical Edition

The text reconstructed in the critical edition is the archetype of the tradition, defined as the latest common ancestor of the manuscripts examined for that edition. This sense of *archetype* should not be confused with the archetype as an especially authoritative or unique exemplar, for our stemma is merely hypothetical and models only a part of the historical reality—the part that is either preserved in or can be reconstructed from our manuscripts.

Conclusion

The hypothetical ancestor of our manuscripts was probably one of several exemplars in existence at the time. It is solely by chance that only its descendants, rather than those of other manuscripts, survived, resulting in its apparently unique position in the history of the text. This uniqueness is only apparent: it is a consequence of the fact that our stemma models only a part of the history of the text. From the apparently unique nature of the archetype, we may not conclude there was an actual reduction in the number of exemplars at the time. *A fortiori* all theories that attempt to explain the reduction in terms of the actions of putative “redactors” at the time are false. The idea of a conscious redaction (of oral epic materials) arises only because some scholars do not know how to read the stemma correctly.

Chapter One: Arguments for a Hyperarchetypal Inference

The Normative Redaction Hypothesis

The constituted text is not the archetype of the tradition but merely a “normative redaction,” defined as “a redaction that had a normative effect and overgrew all other versions.” The critical edition reconstructs “a text that was a historical fact at a certain period in time,” but precisely because it is not the archetype, it should not hinder us from exploring “the prehistory of the normative redaction.” Above all, we should consider “passages rejected from the constituted text,” as they could be evidence of a “parallel transmission” of the Mahābhārata.

Normative Redaction, Archetype and Original

Textual criticism allows us to reconstruct the archetype of the tradition, which represents a constriction in the tradition attributable to a “normative redaction.” This reconstructed archetype, however, only gives us access to the official Brahmanic text resulting from the redaction of an earlier oral tradition. It neither accurately models the contents of the tradition nor can it be seen as a copy of the original, since the tradition was plural above the archetype and a single original never existed.

Criticism: Higher and Lower

The redefinition of the constituted text as a normative redaction rather than an archetype permits us to reconstruct earlier stages of the tradition using “higher criticism.” In contrast to textual criticism, which is a rigorous and mechanical procedure that begins with the manuscript evidence and attempts to infer the manuscripts’ likely sources based on shared errors of transcription, higher criticism uses subjective, a priori criteria to identify certain passages as older than others and therefore as part of the “genuine” epic tradition.

The Argument from Spread and the Argument from Resilience

Textual criticism only permits us to reconstruct the source of the first branching. However, this ignores the possibility that the tradition was plural before the apex. The reconstruction of the archetype is thus an error, arising from the fallacious assumption that all readings derive from a unique text (argument from spread). Our reconstructed archetype is based on readings that passed through the constriction between the two cones, whereas readings that fell directly from the upper cone to the lower without passing through the apex could be older (argument from resilience).

Refutation of the argument: The argument from spread fails because it overlooks that the shape of the tradition before the archetype is irrelevant for the reconstruction of the archetype, which remains *ex hypothesi* the oldest ancestor of the extant witnesses that can be reconstructed. In fact, the archetype makes no claims about whether the tradition spread away from the original or all readings fell through one particular manuscript.

It only claims that all our manuscripts are descended, however remotely, from this one source. Likewise, the argument from resilience fails because it erroneously infers the existence of a real constriction in the tradition from the archetype's apparently unique position in the stemma and further argues that some readings at least could have escaped the archetype's constricting effect.

The Argument from Empty Reference

The critical edition contains references to events, whose description no existing passages meet. However, these "empty references" must once have had a referent. If suitable descriptions occur in the apparatus, we may assume that they were the original referents, contained in a version of the Mahābhārata distinct from the normative redaction. The critical edition discards these passages as unique to one branch of the tradition, but this is false because they are actually older than the normative redaction it reconstructs. The normative redaction eliminated the passages, but they later reentered the tradition, thus occurring in some manuscripts only. Restoring the referent to the constituted text restores the text to a state before the normative redaction.

Refutation of the argument: The argument suffers from the fallacy of proof by assertion, because it is tantamount to asserting that a passage A is old because it is considered old. Its fallacious nature is not immediately apparent because, rather than state it simply, Bigger asserts that A is actually R', the referent of passage R, whereas the reading $R \rightarrow R'$ reconstructs an original $R \rightarrow R'$; as the surviving referent of this original reference R' is thus old. The equivocation between R' as a passage in the extant witnesses thought to correspond to a reading R (that is, R'₁) and R' as the referent of an original R (that is, R'₂) permits him to "infer" R's antiquity, even though, actually, he has only asserted it. The empty reference plays no role in demonstrating A's antiquity; it merely conceals the illegitimate shift from R'₁ to R'₂.

The Argument from Loss

The argument from loss entails the claim that certain passages, though contained in the Mahābhārata's hypothetical "normative redaction," were lost from part of the subsequent manuscript tradition. They are therefore not found in the constituted text, although, as typical of Brahmanic concerns, they should have been included in it.

Refutation of the argument: The argument from loss replaces a critical principle—agreement between independent families—with a subjective and prejudicial principle for reconstruction. It uses this dogmatic principle—passages considered "Brahmanic" should be restored to the constituted text, even if they lack manuscript support—to assimilate the constituted text to a hypothetical Brahmanic redaction. It then uses this restored text, in turn, as evidence for the reality of the Brahmanic redaction. Given its circularity, the argument should persuade no one. That it does illustrates the truth of the observation that if "the circle that has been constructed [is] large and confusing, [...] the logical mistake goes unseen."

Chapter Two: Reconstructing the Source of Contamination

Understanding “Contamination”

Mahābhārata critics understand “contamination” not as textual critics do (for whom it refers to the addition of readings from a second source besides the one the scribe copied), but as the interpolation of Brahmanic elements into an original Kṣatriya epic. They thus interpret contamination to mean a kind of pollution (namely, with the Brahmins’ religious ideology).

Contamination: Hyperarchetypal and Extra-stemmatic

This section distinguishes between extra-stemmatic contamination, intra-stemmatic contamination and hyperarchetypal contamination. We examine Bigger’s view that the hypothetical Kṣatriya epic underwent contamination from Brahmanic sources prior to the formation of the archetype (hyperarchetypal contamination) and that the resulting Brahmanic text then itself underwent contamination beneath the archetype with remnants of the Kṣatriya epic that survived either in folk traditions or in the poets’ memory (extra-stemmatic contamination).

Identifying the Source of Contamination

This section contrasts the Mahābhārata critics’ arbitrary and tendentious arguments for Brahmanic “contamination” with objective criteria for identifying the source of contamination. We show that the minimum condition to identify interpolations is a stemma of the form 3+1, where three manuscripts descend from the contaminated source and a fourth descends from an independent source. If any two manuscripts descended from the contaminated source agree against the manuscript descended from an independent source, then their reading is the reading of the source of contamination.

The Argument from Uncertainty

Mahābhārata critics often try to undermine the stemma by positing contamination from a nonextant oral source (extra-stemmatic contamination). They claim that as our stemma does not accurately represent historical reality, we cannot definitively exclude earlier, nonextant sources.

Refutation of the argument: The argument from uncertainty fails because introducing uncertainty into a system affects all outcomes equally. Introducing uncertainty into the stemma does not make it likelier that a Kṣatriya epic existed. It only appears to favor the Kṣatriya epic because the critics assume its existence in advance and that they can know its contents without a stemmatic reconstruction.

The Argument from Oral Source

If the oral tradition survived past the Brahmins’ seizure and destruction of the original epic, elements from it could have trickled back into the manuscript tradition. This could

have occurred if a scribe either recollected an oral version or possessed a transcript of it. In that case, we are justified in thinking that some of the readings in our manuscripts (and *mutatis mutandis* the constituted text) are older than others, and some at least as old as the oral epic.

Refutation of the argument: The argument does not address the question of how we can identify the alleged remnants of the oral epic. Every manuscript contains readings of varying antiquity but, without the stemmatic method, we cannot sift between them. The argument also does not address the problem that the alleged remnants could be later innovations or inaccurate recollections. Indeed, in a long chain of transmitters such as an oral tradition presumes it is especially likely that the readings underwent deterioration. The analytic critics fail to perceive the problem because they focus on passages rather than readings, and do not ask how, even if we grant that the passages were original, their readings could have been transmitted unchanged.

The Argument from (Postulated) Antiquity and the Argument from Ideology

This concluding section examines two related arguments, the argument from (postulated) antiquity and the argument from ideology. The first refers to the Mahābhārata critics' habit of declaring that certain passages are old because they are postulated as old. The second refers to their ideological reasons for doing so, namely, proving the baleful nature of Brahman domination for India.

Refutation of the argument: Neither argument is actually an argument. The argument from (postulated) antiquity merely asserts the antiquity of certain passages without demonstrating it. The argument from ideology elevates the German scholars' anti-Semitic prejudices to a first principle and uses this, in turn, to sustain the kind of circular, counterfactual and logically fallacious arguments we have seen. These prejudices hold the key to understanding the German scholars' work, specifically their insistence on a tendentious Brahmanic redaction of an earlier heroic epic.

Chapter Three: Confusions Regarding Classification

Classification: Typological and Genealogical

Many criticisms of the Mahābhārata critical edition arise from a misunderstanding about how editors classify manuscripts, how they determine filiation and how they reconstruct—via eliminating either the readings of witnesses or entire witnesses—the archetype. Crucially, arguments for different classes of manuscripts (or entirely new “recensions”) are based on the erroneous assumption that because a group of manuscripts lacks certain passages characteristic of other manuscripts, the former constitute a family, even though the dichotomy is merely typological, not genealogical, and as yet no filiation has been established between the manuscripts so separated.

Determining Filiation

Filiation can be established only through shared errors, which permit us to identify two manuscripts as more closely related than others of that family (all of which will contain the same text, but not the same errors, which are unique to this branch of the tradition). It is hence incorrect to establish filiation on the basis of shared readings, as they identify the two manuscripts only as members of the family chosen for study (manuscripts of the Mahābhārata), but do not permit us to define them as a specific branch of that family—manuscripts descended from the first source of the error or errors.

Eliminating Witnesses

A comparison of the constituted text with variant readings or passages rejected from it will not permit us to establish an earlier stage of the transmission. At most, we might establish that a reading rejected by the editor is preferable and restore it in our text, but this text will still be, by definition, the archetype and not a supra-archetype of the kind critics think they can produce by randomly selecting passages from the appendices (on the grounds of their presumed “Kṣatriya” origins).

The Argument from Brevity and the Argument from False Premises

In creating the critical edition, Sukthankar followed the evidence of the shortest witness, the Śāradā codex, and reprinted the readings of this manuscript as his constituted text. However, as the Śāradā codex was not the shortest witness (for the Nepālī manuscript NAK 5/ 356 is shorter by 63 passages), the critical edition must be begun anew.

Refutation of the argument: This conclusion would be justified only if the editor actually reprinted the readings of the Śāradā codex as his constituted text. In point of fact, he compared manuscripts of different classes to reconstruct the reading of the archetype. He showed in several cases that the Śāradā codex itself contained interpolations and additions. This means that what is decisive is not the length of the Śāradā codex over the Nepālī manuscript NAK 5/356, but whether passages in the constituted text exist, which are not attested in the latter, something Grünendahl (who raises the objection) has not shown.

The Argument from a Misapprehension Concerning Classification (Schriftartprämisse)

The Mahābhārata manuscripts were classified into versions on the basis of their script, according to a principle Lüders first articulated in 1908 (the script is characteristic of the version). However, this classification is erroneous, inasmuch as the script proved not characteristic of the version and neither the variant readings nor the additional passages were consistently characteristic of specific versions.

Refutation of the argument: The Mahābhārata manuscripts were classified not by their script, but by their text. The term *version* is a synonym for a manuscript’s text. If the editors nonetheless looked to the script as a first, extrinsic indicator of a manuscript’s

text, this is because, in practice, it was often a reliable guide to the text contained in a manuscript. The editors were not blind to the circumstance that sometimes a manuscript, contrary to their expectation of it, could contain the text of another version. They often reassigned manuscripts assumed to belong to one version on the basis of their scripts to another (whose members were all in a different script). If the editors had merely looked to the script they could neither have drawn up a stemma nor reconstructed the reading of the archetype.

The Argument from Extensive Contamination

The widespread presence of contamination between Mahābhārata manuscripts (evinced by the existence of interpolated passages across recensions) makes a satisfactory classification impossible.

Refutation of the argument: In practice, no editor found contamination such a problem that he could not establish the manuscripts' true filiation. Though present, contamination was restricted largely to the additional passages, which, indeed, were often transmitted horizontally. The manuscripts' true filiation almost always became obvious in terms of the significant errors in the text. Grünendahl errs because he considers only the interpolated passages rather than readings. His understanding of contamination is also peculiar: according to him, the absence of interpolation is also a kind of "contamination" (namely, non-contamination), for how (he reasons) could two manuscripts agree in featuring the same text if not for the fact that one of them "contaminated" the other? The answer is simple: the manuscripts contain the identical text, because the same text was handed down to them and no influence of the one upon the other needs to be presumed to explain the circumstance that they lack the same interpolations. Interpolations, except when interpolated, tend not to be present, so that no special circumstance is required to explain their absence in a manuscript.

The Argument from Independent Recensions

Since widespread contamination between Mahābhārata manuscripts makes it impossible to draw up a stemma, the editors should have concentrated on a regional recension and produced an edition using one manuscript, preferably the shortest, as the base.

Refutation of the argument: The argument overlooks the fact that, even if the editors had chosen to produce a critical edition of one of the regional recensions, they could not have done so without considering its place in the overall tradition. Further, if contamination makes it impossible to produce a critical edition of the Mahābhārata tradition as a whole, this is especially true of a critical edition of a regional recension, since contamination was most pronounced between the manuscripts of a recension. Grünendahl's proposed edition (based on the Nepālī manuscript NAK 5/356) would be not a critical edition but a pseudo-Bédierist edition. He could neither draw up a satisfactory stemma nor proceed in cases of crux or where the Nepālī manuscripts contained inconsistent readings. His edition opens the floodgates for conjectural criticism, which is all he seeks to do.

The Argument from Expertise

The argument from expertise refers to the replacement of argument with expert testimony. The mere fact of citation, without an attempt at paraphrase much less clarification, serves to validate an author's views. Rightly speaking, the argument from expertise is not an argument at all. It merely reflects the institutionalized prejudice in favor of certain authors and positions. It reveals the broken system of preferment at Mahābhārata studies' core. The scholars entrusted with discriminating between correct and incorrect scholarship have proven incapable of distinguishing objective research from ideological views.

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“Philology and Criticism has been much needed in Mahābhārata studies for the past half-century. Adluri and Bagchee describe how the critical edition’s evidence does not support theories of a prior oral epic or ‘layering’ in the text. Brilliant and persuasive!”

—Bruce M. Sullivan, Professor of Comparative Study of Religions,
Northern Arizona University, USA

“In their effort to reject current accounts of the Mahābhārata’s textual history, Adluri and Bagchee introduce several nuanced and updated notions from neo-Lachmannism into the field of Sanskrit textual criticism. I cannot help being delighted at this empirical confirmation of Giorgio Pasquali’s claim that the original of, say, a Chinese or Bantu text cannot be reconstructed unless one follows certain general rules, albeit adapted to the variability and specific requirements of particular texts.”

—Paolo Trovato, Professor of History of the Italian Language,
University of Ferrara, Italy

Philology and Criticism contrasts the Mahābhārata’s preservation and transmission within the Indian scribal and commentarial traditions with Sanskrit philology after 1900, as German Indologists proposed a critical edition of the Mahābhārata to validate their racial and nationalist views. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee show how, in contrast to the Indologists’ unscientific theories, V. S. Sukthankar assimilated the principles of neo-Lachmannian textual criticism to defend the transmitted text and its traditional reception as a work of law, philosophy and salvation. The authors demonstrate why, after the edition’s completion, no justification exists for claiming that an earlier heroic epic existed, that the Brahmans redacted the heroic epic to produce the Mahābhārata or that they interpolated “sectarian” gods such as Viṣṇu and Śiva into the work. By demonstrating how the Indologists committed technical errors, cited flawed and biased scholarship and used circular argumentation to validate their racist and anti-Semitic theories, *Philology and Criticism* frees readers to approach the Mahābhārata as “the principal monument of *bhakti*” (Madeleine Biardeau). The authoritative guide to the critical edition’s correct use and interpretation, *Philology and Criticism* urges South Asianists to view Hinduism as a complex debate about ontology and ethics rather than through the lenses of “Brahmanism” and “sectarianism.” It launches a new world philology—one that is plural and self-reflexive rather than Eurocentric and ahistorical.

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The volumes featured in the **Anthem Cultural, Historical and Textual Studies of South Asian Religions** series are the expression of an international community of scholars committed to the reshaping of the field of textual and historical studies of religions. The volumes in this series examine practice, ritual and other textual religious products, crossing different area studies and time frames. Featuring a vast range of interpretive perspectives, this innovative series aims to enhance the way we look at religious traditions.

Cover image: František Kupka, *The First Step (Le Premier Pas)*, 1910–13? (dated on painting 1909), oil on canvas, 32 3/4 x 51” (83.2 x 129.6 cm). DIGITAL IMAGE © (2018) The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence

