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Bhīma: The shadow king

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Abstract

Bhīma is the second eldest of the five Pāṇḍavas in the *Mahābhārata*, known for his cartoonish characterisation as a huge man with large appetites, a formidable warrior lauded for his brute strength and a passionate partner to Draupadī. Together with his younger brother Arjuna, he is recognised as a pivotal warrior on the Pāṇḍava side. What is less appreciated is Bhīma's embodiment of a successful *kṣatriya* king counselling a pragmatic *rājadharma* (the rules or laws relating to kings) in pursuit of the throne. In contrast with Yudhiṣṭhira, who performs the ceremonial and leadership functions, and Arjuna, who embodies the ideal king, Bhīma performs the military and administrative functions of kingship in the shadow of the ideal kingly depictions of his more luminary brothers. This view of Bhīma as the shadow king is at odds with his conventional image, which does not credit him in this regard.

Introduction

The analysis of Bhīma's character in the *Mahābhārata* as one of the three senior Pāṇḍavas has been explored by significant past scholarship, establishing that Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna embody different but complementary qualities that are markers of kingship in the *Mahābhārata*. Yudhiṣṭhira is the heir to the throne of his father, Pāṇḍu, embodies *dharma* and always has his

eye on *mokṣa* but lacks the will and strength required to rule independently and must rely on Kṛṣṇa and his brothers to fill the gap. It is evident that although Yudhiṣṭhira is the apparent king, Arjuna, who possesses skill, strength and discrimination, is often held up as the ideal king. Bhīma is recognised largely for his martial success arising from his innate strength, massive appetite and size, loyalty to the Pāṇḍava cause and to his family, his terrible deeds, which are rākṣasic in nature, and his devotion, bordering on slavishness, to Draupadī, the common wife of the Pāṇḍavas. Contrary to this commonly held characterisation of Bhīma, this chapter will argue that he represents the figure of a pragmatic, successful *kṣatriya* king whose pursuit of rule is fuelled by *kāma* directed at the communal achievements of his family rather than his own interests. Together with Kṛṣṇa, Draupadī and Arjuna, he is constant in counselling a pragmatic *rājadharma*, the pursuit of which is necessary if the kingdom is to be regained. This is not to deny the predominant understanding of his character but rather to appreciate that his character displays a facet of kingship that is in counterpoint to the apparent king (Yudhiṣṭhira) and the ideal king (Arjuna) of the *Mahābhārata*.

This chapter presents a view of Bhīma over the span of the *Mahābhārata*, employing a synchronous literary analysis that is necessary to obtain an overarching view of his character. There could be occasions when adopting a non-synchronous approach is fruitful (Austin 2011: 130)[1] or having a rigorous methodology for synchronous readings with a view to narrative frames such as that proposed by Balkaran (2021) is useful, but neither of these seems appropriate for the scope and focus of this chapter because the character of Bhīma is mostly contained within the main narrative frame. Accordingly, the picture of Bhīma as the shadow king presented in this chapter is that garnered by analysing his actions and relationships over the course of the *Mahābhārata*—a picture that has been hiding in plain sight for centuries.

1 Analysing two mirroring passages that more or less bookend the *Mahābhārata*, Austin has suggested that although he would normally adopt a synchronous approach, a non-synchronous approach can sometimes provide greater insight into the text.

Mythic symbolism of Bhīma and his brothers

The line of scholarship to which this chapter is indebted and incremental was initiated by the groundbreaking work of Wikander, Dumézil and Biardeau, as incorporated by Hiltebeitel. Hiltebeitel summarises the principal findings of Wikander and Dumézil as follows, with respect to the functions represented by the Pāṇḍavas and their common wife, Draupadī: '[t]he eldest Pāṇḍava, king Yudhiṣṭhira, has both sacerdotal and juridical traits; the next two brothers, Arjuna and Bhīma, have pronounced warrior characteristics; and the twins and Draupadī have associations, respectively, with pastoralism and the earth's fecundity' (Hiltebeitel 2011a: 597).[2]

Biardeau (1981: 91) takes this understanding further, associating the sannyāsic Yudhiṣṭhira with the sāttvic quality of *mokṣa* ('liberation') and making him the ideal king at a moment of world crisis who leads the warriors to salvation at the end: 'He rules as Dharma-Yama rules, by destroying and making room for a new world in order to save *dharma* and the three worlds.' She sees the energetic and violent Bhīma as the opposite of Yudhiṣṭhira, devoted to *kāma* ('desire'), as he is the one who is 'born as an answer to this embodied threat to the existence of earth ... at the lowest point of the world crisis' and as such

> upholds the interests of life in this world, and is the strong and bloody warrior who treats his victims on the battlefield [Duḥśāsana, Duryodhana, etc.] as well as outside [Jarāsandha, Kīcaka, many *rākṣasa*s] without any consideration for the warrior's code of honour. (Biardeau 1981: 91)

She argues that this is because 'desire for life requires violence [*hiṃsā*] because every living being is threatened in its very existence by a stronger one' (Biardeau 1981: 91).

Yudhiṣṭhira's passivity, propensity for renunciation, indecisiveness, weakness, inability to refuse dice (van Buitenen 1975: 232; *Mbh*, 3.6.9),[3] vacillation and lack of prowess in battle all highlight the fact that he does not have

2 As the twins do not feature prominently and are not relevant to the argument, they will not be explored in any detail.

3 It is remarkable that even after the kingdom has been lost in the rigged dice game and the Pāṇḍavas are in exile, Yudhiṣṭhira muses to Bhīma about the reason for Vidura's visit to them in the forest and whether it means another invitation to play dice. Shockingly, he acknowledges that if he were to be invited again, he would be unable to refuse yet again.

the wherewithal to prevail against the challenges of rule and exile without assistance, principally from Bhīma and Arjuna. Arjuna—the Nara to Kṛṣṇa's Nārāyaṇa, favoured by the gods and adept in the arts—is lauded as the warrior par excellence, capable of heroic deeds and yogic austerities, whose achievements in obtaining divine weapons and mastery on the battlefield are instrumental to the eventual transcendence of the Pāṇḍavas. Pointing out the various facets of Arjuna's special relationship with Kṛṣṇa, Biardeau (1981: 88) regards Arjuna as 'the figure of the ideal king, in spite of Yudhiṣṭhira's being the apparent king of the story'.

Whether Yudhiṣṭhira or Arjuna is the ideal king, it is obvious that Bhīma is never overtly depicted as the ideal king, although his role in crushing enemies—arguably a kingly function—is well recognised, as for example, in Draupadī's description of him in the following words to her abductor Jayadratha:

> *mahābhujaṁ śālam iva pravṛddham ... etasya karmāṇy atimānuṣāṇi |*
> *bhīmeti śabdo 'sya gataḥ pṛthivyām ||*
> *nāsyāparāddhāḥ śeṣam ihāpnuvanti |*
> *nāpy asya vairaṁ vismarate kadā cit ||*
> *vairasyāntaṁ saṁvidhāyopayāti |*
> *paścāc chāntiṁ na ca gacchaty atīva ||*
>
> [Strong-armed, like a full-grown śāla tree ... The feats he has done are more than human. And the cry of him on this earth is: He's Bhima! No quarter from him will the guilty receive, Nor will his enmity be forgotten; Having put an end to the feud he will come To serenity afterward but not too quickly.] (van Buitenen 1975: 718–19; *Mbh*, 3.254.9–11)

The first part of the picture of Bhīma painted by Draupadī is the typical one describing his appearance and praising his strength and his feats. The second part, however, is more interesting. She describes him as the dreadful hand of justice whose actions are praised by the Earth. We will see later in this chapter the correlation between Draupadī as Śrī and the Earth. By referring to the Earth's cry greeting Bhīma, Draupadī is highlighting her own reliance on him. From the person who perhaps knows him best, he is described as serene after he has acted to enforce *dharma*, implying that the extremity of his actions is paired with a degree of self-mastery and control that enables him to return to equilibrium after the actions have been successfully completed. This description shows Bhīma embodying the necessary functions of an effective

king wielding the rod of punishment (*daṇḍa*): to be aware of *dharma*, acting selflessly and strongly in meting out justice to those who violate *dharma* and returning to a sense of serenity after the deed is done. Bhīma's characterisation is usually of the bombastic, passionate, unruly *kṣatriya*, which is so vividly painted that his role as the law-abiding, dharmic enforcer does not usually come to the fore. Yet, his self-restraint is also recognised by his mother, Kuntī, when after a long absence from her sons, she prefaces her query about Bhīma's welfare to Kṛṣṇa as follows:

> *parākrame śakrasamo vāyuvegasamo jave |*
> *maheśvarasamaḥ krodhe bhīmaḥ praharatāṁ varaḥ ||*
> *krodhaṁ balam amarṣaṁ ca yo nidhāya paraṁtapaḥ |*
> *jitātmā pāṇḍavo 'marṣī bhrātus tiṣṭhati śāsane ||*
> *tejorāśiṁ mahātmānaṁ balaughaṁ amitaujasam |*
> *bhīmaṁ pradarśanenāpi bhīmasenaṁ Janārdana |*
> *taṁ mamācakṣva vārṣṇeya katham adya vṛkodaraḥ ||*
>
> [And Wolf-Belly ... in speed the equal of a wind gust, in anger the match of the great God ... the enemy burner who controlled his anger, strength and impatience ... master of himself in spite of his fury, who obeys his brother's behest, that mass of splendor, storm flood of power, boundlessly august, great-spirited Bhīmasena who strikes terror with his appearance.] (van Buitenen 1975: 368–69; *Mbh*, 5.88.25)

What's in a name?[4]

A common epithet for Bhīma is Wolf-Belly (Vṛkodara),[5] signifying his rapacious appetite (van Buitenen 1971: 360; *Mbh*, 1.12.185.5).[6] This is obviously a reference to his physical appetite, but the term also describes Bhīma's appetite for life (or, in Biardeau's words, *kāma*) and his bottomless capacity for action. Whether evading assassination as a child, carrying the

4 I am deeply grateful to Renate Söhnen-Thieme as a senior scholar of the *Mahābhārata* for her exactitude and generous guidance in providing comments that improved this chapter generally and this section in particular.

5 One of the meanings of this term listed in Monier-Williams (1899: 1008) is a class of demons attendant on Śiva. This is yet another marker of Bhīma's association with Rudra-Śiva.

6 When instructing Draupadī as a new bride in domestic matters, her mother-in-law, Kuntī, asks her to divide all the food collected in two: one half for Bhīma and the other half to be shared among the rest of the family.

entire family to safety from the House of Lac (3.13.75), vanquishing *rākṣasa*s or obtaining victory against enemies in battle, particularly when they are outside the towns in the forest or in the mountains—Bhīma is responsible for saving the family from danger time and again.

Bhīma's parentage, like that of his brothers, is half-human, half-divine. His nominal human father, Pāṇḍu, yearning for sons but unable to father them because of a curse that would result in his death if he touched his wives, learns of the mantra that his first wife, Kuntī, received from the sage Durvāsas in her youth. This magical mantra empowered her to conceive a child from whichever god on whom she meditated and called. At Pāṇḍu's direction and behest, seeking first a son who would be 'law-minded', she obtains the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira, from the god Dharma; then, seeking a son whose strength would grant dominion (*prāhuḥ kṣatraṁ balajyeṣṭhaṁ balajyeṣṭhaṁ sutaṁ vṛṇu*) (van Buitenen 1973: 255; *Mbh*, 1.7.114.5), she obtains Bhīma from the wind god Vāyu; and then, seeking a 'superior son who will be supreme in the world' (*putro lokaśreṣṭho*), she obtains Arjuna from the god Indra, king of the gods. She shares the mantra with Pāṇḍu's childless second wife, Mādrī, who obtains the twin sons, Nakula and Sahadeva, by calling on the Aśvins, the two divine charioteers considered to be the physicians of Heaven.

At Bhīma's birth, a disembodied voice proclaims: 'O Bhārata: He is born to be strong over all that is strong! [*sarveṣāṁ balināṁ śreṣṭho jāto 'yam iti bhārata*].' He displays his strength immediately, shattering a mountain by falling on it with his diamond-hard body, when his mother, Kuntī, startled by a tiger, inadvertently drops him from her lap (van Buitenen 1973: 255; *Mbh*, 1.114.11–13). While the birth of each of the Pāṇḍavas is heralded by a disembodied voice—indeed, Arjuna's birth receives star billing with an extended paean of praise—it is only Bhīma who immediately provides proof of his innate prowess. The baby Yudhiṣṭhira can hardly extol the law and the baby Arjuna will have to be schooled to develop his gifts, but baby Bhīma's essential nature is already on display. While he will also be tutored, his innate nature is radiant from his birth to his end.

The narrative refers to him at this point as Bhīma, however, he is named later with the rest of his brothers by mountain-dwelling seers who call him Bhīmasena (van Buitenen 1973: 259; *Mbh*, 1.115.20), which is translated by Monier-Williams (1899: 758) as 'having a formidable army'—a quintessentially *kṣatriya* name.

The name of Bhīṣma, the Kuru elder who is the caretaker of the kingdom while the nominal rulers are minors, is translated as 'terrible' or 'dreadful' (Monier-Williams 1899: 758)—the name given to him by a disembodied heavenly voice in response to his oath of celibacy. As suggested by the similarities of their names, there is also a resonance in the stories of Bhīma and Bhīṣma. Each has the capacity to be king, but each forgoes the realisation of his innate capacity in favour of others. Bhīṣma does so voluntarily, vowing to abandon his birthright in favour of the son of his father's second wife and eschewing matrimony to satisfy her that neither he nor his descendants will ever challenge her son as king. Bhīma is automatically excluded from rule by the law of male primogeniture, which dictates that he will always be subservient to Yudhiṣṭhira and must curtail his activities and ambitions accordingly. This consequence is accepted and never challenged by Bhīma, who subsumes any personal ambitions to the communal welfare of the family. The sacrifice of Bhīṣma and Bhīma relates to rule of the kingdom; each relinquishes his personal ambitions to rule for the sake of others who assume rule in his stead.

There is a further inference to be drawn from their similar names: a feature that is clearly detailed in the Bhīṣma story is that, like him, Bhīma, based on his abilities and nature, is the one who ought to have been king. This aspect is alluded to by Karve (1969: 56) when she imagines the dying Draupadī saying to Bhīma with her last breath: 'In our next birth be the eldest, Bhima; under your shelter we can all live in safety and joy.' I believe Karve's *naroti* ('dry coconut shell'), deliberately straying from the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, speaks not only to her reading of Draupadī's estimation of Bhīma as her husband and principal protector but also to the many endured vicissitudes that could have been avoided had Bhīma been king.

An association with the god Śiva is embedded in Bhīma's name as it is associated with Rudra-Śiva and the name Bhīṣma is also a name of Śiva. As Kevin McGrath (2017: 52–53) has remarked, Bhīma 'is repeatedly likened to the deity Rudra, being *raudrātmā*, and he is said to be: *atiṣṭhat tumule bhīmaḥ śmaśāna iva śūlabhṛt* (6.58.61) "Bhīma stood in the tumult like the Trident Bearer in a burning ground"'. Śiva is the god known for being out of the ordered norms of the Vedic fire rituals transacted by brahmins between humans and the gods making offerings in return for blessings. Being outside these norms means that Śiva is unpredictable, unregulated and unbiddable. These characteristics combined with his power and propensity to anger make him awesome, terrible, dreadful and so on—characteristics that could

be described as those of *rākṣasa*s. Bhīma's power and tendency to violence and wrath are well-defined characteristics, as indeed is his affinity to *rākṣasa*s seen particularly in his deeds, which are so outside *dharma* as to be rākṣasic in nature.

Bhīma and *rākṣasas*

There are two sets of encounters between Bhīma and *rākṣasa*s given prominence in the text, mainly involving their killing by Bhīma.[7] The first set involves the killing of Hiḍimba, Baka and Baka's brother Kirmīra—all in extended encounters in single combat. The first set follows a pattern of Bhīma clearing the area of the threat posed by the *rākṣasa* in question to either the surrounding population or even to the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī. These killings symbolise Bhīma's defeat of these *rākṣasa*s, fulfilling the *kṣatriya* ruler's role of eradicating threats to the populace and thereby bringing about peace. The first set of killings also cements his connection with *rākṣasa*s through his encounter with the rākṣasic Hiḍimbā, sister of Hiḍimba, whom she betrays in favour of Bhīma. With Kuntī's blessing, accompanied by strange strictures about how they can spend time together, Bhīma and Hiḍimbā enjoy a brief but pleasure-filled marriage, eventually resulting in the birth of their son, Ghaṭotkaca (*Mbh*, 1.143.35).

The second set of killings of unnamed *rākṣasa*s, Maṇimat and other, unnamed *yakṣa*s who bar his entry into territories reserved for the gods and higher beings is harder to fathom and occurs when Bhīma barges his way into these realms in search of the fragrant flowers demanded by Draupadī in the *Saugandhikaparvan* (3.146 ff.).

The first-named *rākṣasa* episode given prominence in the narrative is the killing of Hiḍimba. After Bhīma carries the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī to safety from the House of Lac, they take shelter in a forest while Bhīma stands watch. He encounters the rākṣasic Hiḍimbā, sent by her carnivorous brother Hiḍimba to capture all of them so that he can make a meal of them to share with her. As the others are asleep, she sees Bhīma standing guard and is captivated by his appearance. She assumes a charming human body and approaches him, offering to fly with all of them away from the danger posed by Hiḍimba. Witnessing his sister's appearance and sensing her lust for Bhīma,

7 See Gitomer (2007) for a revealing comparison of Bhīma as depicted in the *Mahābhārata* and Bhaṭṭa's *Veṇisaṃhāra*, illustrating Bhīma's rākṣasic nature.

the enraged Hiḍimba arrives and a battle between him and Bhīma ensues, at the end of which Bhīma kills Hiḍimba. There are no weapons mentioned and the fight sounds like hand-to-hand combat. Hiḍimbā asks Kuntī to be allowed to marry Bhīma, and their union produces Ghaṭotkaca, who will be useful to the Pāṇḍavas, initially in carrying them to the remote Mount Kailāsa (van Buitenen 1975: 497; *Mbh*, 3.145.15) when their own strength fails (3.145 ff.). Later he is summoned to fight on the Pāṇḍava side, and he does so courageously, using his magical powers and tremendous strength in fighting the Kaurava army.

In the company of Hiḍimbā, Bhīma enjoys suprahuman experiences, flying and visiting magical realms not normally available to humans. Hiḍimbā flies him up into these environs where they disport themselves. Via Hiḍimbā, Bhīma is invited into the world of *rākṣasa*s and fathers a son with suprahuman characteristics—a son who will be sacrificed as cannon fodder when Karṇa uses a divine weapon to kill Ghaṭotkaca instead of saving it to kill Arjuna as he had planned (*Mbh*, 7.154.48–50). This episode marks Bhīma's entry into the world of *rākṣasa*s by invitation, because he is loved by a *rākṣasī*, and here, too, the force that propels him into this world is that of *kāma*—this time, not initiated by him but nevertheless enjoyed by him. In any event, ever conscious and true to his *rājadharma*, he remarks that after he has killed Hiḍimba, those who walk in the forest will be able to do so without oppression (1.141.10).

In the Baka story, the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī are living in disguise as brahmins in the house of a brahmin. Their host is in sorrow because it is now his turn to send a person from his family as a sacrifice, together with food to the *rākṣasa* Baka. Offering to alleviate this problem, Kuntī offers Bhīma instead of the host's family as the sacrificial offering, as she is confident that Bhīma will overpower Baka (*Mbh*, 1.145 ff.). The brahmin host complains to Kuntī that the local king is incompetent and has not taken care of this menace because of which the people suffer (1.148.10). Bhīma takes the food demanded by Baka to him but ignores the enraged Baka and eats it all himself before engaging with him in battle. When Baka is felled, Bhīma leaves his body by the town gate and the townsfolk, believing that a brahmin has rid them of Baka, rejoice, instituting a brahmin festival. It is notable that Kuntī arranges Bhīma's confrontation with Baka for two reasons: first, as a mark of gratitude for their brahmin host and, second, to follow *kṣatriyadharma* and *rājadharma* as she asserts that the rewards for doing so are many (1.150.20). As in the

previous killing of *rākṣasa*s, the agent for relieving the populace from the misery of Baka is Bhīma, as he fulfills the *rājadharma* and *kṣatriyadharma* of providing safety and security, which the local king has failed to do.

The pattern is repeated in the killing of Kirmīra, Baka's brother and a friend of Hiḍimba, who seeks revenge for their killings. Instead, he is killed by Bhīma, thereby rendering the forest safe and pest-free (*Mbh*, 3.12.50).

The wanton destruction, killing and rampage on Gandhamādana Mountain and in Kubera's domain by Bhīma do not follow the earlier pattern of killing *rākṣasa*s to eradicate threats to safety. It is also puzzling that Bhīma is chastised by Yudhiṣṭhira, but only mildly by Kubera (*Mbh*, 3.158.35–45), whose friend, the *yakṣa* Maṇimat, was killed by Bhīma while mounting a defence of Kubera's realm. Sent on a mission to collect flowers by Draupadī, Bhīma takes his time, frolics, kills, plunders flowers and so on. This is also the setting, in a mythical landscape away from society, where Bhīma's heroic initiation takes place (Laine 1989: 42–43) and where he is humbled by his elder half-brother Hanumān (3.146.14 ff.). Feller (2005) has analysed these passages in detail, so I will make only some incremental comments here. In these instances, Bhīma is completely unrestrained, outside society and unburdened by the concerns of *dharma* and the opinions of others. He is free to express his elemental nature without societal consequences and when he does so, he overpowers various suprahuman classes of beings in their own domain. Perhaps this is why Kubera does not protest too loudly: he and his followers are no match for the mighty Bhīmasena. As to why Bhīma chooses to indulge in these acts, one can only posit that it is the expression of his elemental nature as the destructive force of the wind. Biardeau (1981: 91) explains the significance of Bhima's descent from Vāyu, who represents *prāṇa*, which is 'the first and last manifestation of life and movement', and 'Prabhañjana, the breaker, one of the symbols of physical strength in its most violent form'.

When Bhīma is restrained and bested, it is by his elder brother Hanumān, who demonstrates a way of being where his formidable strength is yoked to *bhakti*. Both are the sons of the god Vāyu, but Hanumān's realm is accompanied by a gentle, perfumed breeze, whereas Bhīma moves like a windstorm. In these passages, high in the mountains, concerns about kingship and *rājadharma* fade and the unfettered Bhīma is free to express his elemental nature. When he does so, there is no-one, including Kubera and his *rākṣasa*s, except Hanumān, who embodies the same nature as Bhīma, who can stop him.

Bhīma and Duryodhana: One another's *bhāga*

Each of the five Pāṇḍavas is born a year apart from his senior sibling and the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira, is born a year after Gāndhārī became pregnant (van Buitenen 1973: 255; *Mbh*, 1.7.114). Gāndhārī is married to Pāṇḍu's blind brother, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who is acting as regent under the supervision of Bhīṣma, while Pāṇḍu, Kuntī and Mādrī live as ascetics in the forest. Gāndhārī's pregnancy is long and tortured and she gives birth to a mass of flesh that is divided into a hundred pots, each portion gestating at different times and each culminating in the birth of a son (1.107.19–27). The eldest of Gāndhārī's 100 sons is Duryodhana, who is born after his cousin Yudhiṣṭhira, but at the same time as Kuntī gives birth to her second son, Bhīma (van Buitenen 1973: 255; *Mbh*, 1.114.14).

Yudhiṣṭhira is the eldest Pāṇḍava and heir to the throne and should be paired with Duryodhana, who is the eldest Kaurava and seeks to usurp him. However, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, the keenest rivalry is not between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana but rather between Bhīma and Duryodhana. The symmetry between Bhīma and Duryodhana is evident from the outset and is established by their birth on the same day. That symmetry matures into rivalry during childhood games among the cousins when, without malintent, Bhīma's brute strength plagues his Kaurava cousins and continually humiliates them. These experiences inform Duryodhana's desire to bring Bhīma down by trickery, believing that once it is accomplished, he will overpower both Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna (van Buitenen 1973: 265; *Mbh*, 1.119.25):

> The Bhāga, or 'appointed opponent', of Yudhiṣṭhira, the heir apparent is Śalya ... Yudhiṣṭhira's maternal uncle ... There is no symmetry between these two chiefs in the poem apart from the fact of their equal and opposing kinship status. This is despite the fact that individual combat should, by *kṣatriya* custom, only occur between warriors of like rank. (McGrath 2017: 90–91)

The pairing of Yudhiṣṭhira with Śalya highlights the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is merely the titular king who did not have the capacity to rule independently. While noting that 'Duryodhana's Bhāga is Bhīma', McGrath (2017: 90–91) states: 'There is a condition of asymmetry here whose reasoning is not explicit.' However, I argue that if we appreciate Bhīma's ability, strength and will to rule, the reasoning behind this pairing becomes obvious: both Bhīma

and Duryodhana are 'the man who would be king' and each is the mirror of the other. Bhīma's actions, un-dharmic though they may be, are performed on the side of *dharma*, whereas Duryodhana's conformity to *kṣatriyadharma* in battle is performed for an un-dharmic reason, which is the usurpation of the throne against the recognised societal norm of male primogeniture.

At least in childhood, the main Pāṇḍava is Bhīma, and vanquishing him by any means becomes Duryodhana's obsession. At this point, neither Yudhiṣṭhira nor Arjuna is seen as a threat and it is Bhīma who is the thorn in the side of Duryodhana. The twins Nakula and Sahadeva are not even contenders because 'their only aim is to serve their brothers' purposes' (Biardeau 1981: 89). When poisoning Bhīma, tying him in chains and drowning him all fail, Duryodhana conceives of killing all the Pāṇḍavas and Kuntī in the House of Lac. When Kuntī is alerted to this danger by Vidura, of all her sons, Bhīma is the one to whom she turns for assistance and protection. He assures her and ensures their escape by carrying his mother and siblings away to safety. He guards them while they sleep in the forest and is their main protector from the dangers of the forest in the *Ādiparvan* (*Mbh*, 1.143).

While Bhīma takes the lead and shoulders the burden, there is neither assistance nor protest from either Yudhiṣṭhira or Arjuna until they encounter the *rākṣasa* Baka, who bars their entry to the forest. While Bhīma battles Baka with trees used as clubs, Arjuna taunts him and offers to kill Baka if Bhīma is unable to do it himself. This interchange marks Arjuna's emerging presence and skill in arms, which will lead to his eventual transcendence as the *kṣatriya* par excellence in the narrative. Gradually but inexorably, the sole reliance on Bhīma as the mighty protector of the Pāṇḍavas transitions to a tripartite force of Kṛṣṇa for policy and counsel and Bhīma and Arjuna for victory in battle. This reliance is reflected in Yudhiṣṭhira's words while vacillating about whether to send the trio against the Magadhan king Jarāsaṃdha, who is killed in single combat by Bhīma:

> *bhīmārjunāv ubhau netre mano manye janārdanam* |
> *manaścakṣurvihīnasya kīdṛśaṁ jīvitaṁ bhavet* ||
>
> [Bhīma and Arjuna are my eyes, Janardana I deem my mind: what kind of life shall be left for me when I have lost my eyes and my mind?] (van Buitenen 1975: 61; *Mbh*, 2.15.1)

It is this trio that eventually brings about the defeat of the Kauravas and, in particular, the death of Duryodhana by Bhīma. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that Bhīma will be unable to vanquish Duryodhana except by deceit. In turn, Arjuna points to his thigh and Bhīma, understanding the gesture, attacks Duryodhana below the waist, against *kṣatriyadharma*, shattering his thighs, and thus fulfilling his vow of vengeance. When Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's brother and teacher to both Duryodhana and Bhīma, is shocked by this act, Kṛṣṇa defends Bhīma, but Balarāma remains repulsed and Kṛṣṇa must restrain him from attacking Bhīma (Matilal 2002: 117; *Mbh*, 9.59.17–19). Adding a further action beyond the pale, Bhīma places his foot on the head of the dying Duryodhana, attracting censure from everyone around. He responds with characteristic boldness to Yudhiṣṭhira: '*tavādya pṛthivī … tāṃ praśādhi mahārāja* [now the Earth is yours, rule it, Mahārāja!]' (*Mbh*, 9.59.39; McGrath 2017: 108). Yet, even while chiding him, Yudhiṣṭhira reminds Bhīma that this action is at odds with his reputation as 'righteous Bhīma' (*dhārmiko bhīmaseno*) (Meiland 2007: 329–31; *Mbh*, 9.58.17). Bhīma's deeds and attitude at this moment underline his recognition that the mere defeat of the Kauravas is insufficient. A complete annihilation of the world order represented by Duryodhana is necessary. The humiliation of Duryodhana, marked by the smashing of his beautiful thighs (*ūrū babhañja*; the perfected form of the verb √*bhañj*, 'to break'), harks back to the crumbling of the mountain at Bhīma's birth (*śilāṁ gātrair acūrṇayat*). The smashing of the mountain immediately after his birth is Bhīma's potential, which is self-restrained and only partially realised in his smashing of Duryodhana's thighs. This is because his innate ability is restrained by *dharma*; whether we see this as Bhīma's own self-mastery or as Yudhiṣṭhira's leadership of the Pāṇḍavas' cause, the result—that Bhīma never achieves his full potential—is the same. If he were to have been given free rein, as the son of the god Vāyu and like the god Śiva, he could have instigated *pralaya*[8]—a complete destruction of the world—however, this would have prevented Yudhiṣṭhira's rule. Accordingly, in devotion to the Pāṇḍavas' cause and the *rājadharma* that is necessary to allow it to be established, he pulls back, but not without his foot on Duryodhana's head signifying the crushing of the enemy of *dharma*.

8 See Biardeau (1981: 91) for the significance of Bhīma's descent from Vāyu, who represents *prāṇa* ('breath, breathing', pl. 'life'), both at 'the first and last manifestation of life and movement' and at its annihilation.

Protector, partner and servant of Draupadī/Śrī

Bhīma's other key pairing is with Draupadī, the common wife of the Pāṇḍavas. While in exile with Kuntī, the Pāṇḍavas attend the *svayaṃvara* of Draupadī disguised as brahmins. For extended periods after Draupadī is 'won' at her *svayaṃvara*, Arjuna is absent—with Kṛṣṇa, on military campaigns, conducting austerities to win divine weapons or with the gods in Indraloka. Although all the Pāṇḍavas have secondary wives, the narrative displays Arjuna's greater emotional involvement with Subhadrā—whom he abducts with her brother Kṛṣṇa's knowledge and consent—than he displays with Draupadī. In contrast, Bhīma is ever-present with Draupadī and their relationship is portrayed as compatible, warm and full-blooded. When Draupadī is lost in the dice match, it is only Bhīma among all her husbands who is enraged at her plight and protests to Yudhiṣṭhira against the injustice (*Mbh*, 2.61.1–6, 10). He castigates Yudhiṣṭhira, threatens to burn his arms and is barely restrained from proceeding by Arjuna (2.61.7–9).

Bhīma and Draupadī are often on the same side of the argument urging Yudhiṣṭhira to commence war and their extended exhortations to Yudhiṣṭhira on *rājadharma* are significant and passionate. Bhīma urges Yudhiṣṭhira to action against Magadha by highlighting the need for both strength and policy in an effective king:

> *anārambhaparo rājā valmīka iva sīdati* |
> *durbalaś cānupāyena balinaṁ yo 'dhitiṣṭhati* ||
> *atandritas tu prāyeṇa durbalo balinaṁ ripum* |
> *jayet samyaṅ nayo rājan nītyārthān ātmano* ||
>
> [A king without enterprise collapses like an anthill, and weak is the king who governs a strong one without policy. But a weak king who is enterprising can often defeat a strong enemy, if his policy is right, and win the goals that are of benefit to oneself!] (van Buitenen 1975: 60–61; *Mbh*, 2.14.7)

Draupadī continues her extended berating of Yudhiṣṭhira by urging action, asking why their treatment by the Kauravas and their pitiable condition in the forest do not enrage or motivate Yudhiṣṭhira to action (*Mbh*, 3.28.1 ff.). Of Bhīma, she says: 'The powerful man could have killed all the Kurus,

but the Wolf-Belly suffered it, waiting for your grace [*kurūn api hi yaḥ sarvān hantum utsahate prabhuḥ | tvatprasādaṁ pratīkṣaṁs tu sahate 'yaṁ vṛkodaraḥ* ||]' (van Buitenen 1975: 285).

Bhīma goes so far as to question Yudhiṣṭhira's manliness. As he is the closest in age to Yudhiṣṭhira—his almost constant companion, counsellor, advocate, strongman and executor—one has the sense that, among all the brothers, it is only Bhīma who can stretch the bounds of decorum so far:

> *bhavān dharmo dharma iti satataṁ vratakarśitaḥ |*
> *kaccid rājan na nirvedād āpannaḥ klībajīvikām ||*
>
> [You are Law, and crying Law! you emaciate yourself always with your vows; but is it possible, king, that despair has prompted you to the life of a eunuch?] (van Buitenen 1975: 287; *Mbh*, 3.34.11)

After the bitter end of the war, when Yudhiṣṭhira wants to renunciate and Arjuna, on behalf of Draupadī and the twins, speaks harshly, counselling against it, it is Bhīma who intervenes—'it seems, to try to soften Arjuna's harshness' (Hiltebeitel 2011b: 349). In contrast to his spirited exhortations to Yudhiṣṭhira, he is also the regulator of his younger brothers, who follow his lead either in restraining themselves in deference to Yudhiṣṭhira or in urging action: 'Out of deference you, great king, and in a spirit obedient to the Law, the Gandiva bowman has not burst into violence yet [*na kiṁ cit sāhasaṁ kṛtam*]. I constantly keep [*mayā nityaṁ*] Sahadeva and Nakula in check [*nivāritau*]' (van Buitenen 1975: 809; *Mbh*, 3.299.22–23).

The symbolism of Draupadī as Śrī (the goddess of prosperity or beauty and the Earth's fecundity) has been well established, and Laine (1989: 46) remarks that '[s]everal stories in the Bhārata's twelfth book tell of Indra's realisation that sovereignty is given to those whom Śrī chooses; on the epic level, Draupadī's choice of a husband [*svayaṃvara*] is a symbolic gift of sovereignty'. Of all the brothers, Bhīma is the one on whom Draupadī calls time and again to revenge dishonour, to protect her or even to indulge her fancies, and Bhīma is ever ready to comply. He seems pliable to her demands and this relationship is most obviously demonstrated in the *Saugandhikaparvan* (*Mbh*, 3.146–53, 3.157–59), when she twice calls on him to fetch her fragrant flowers. These seemingly fanciful requests nevertheless initiate adventures for Bhīma, which result in heroic initiations that are consistent with his personality (Laine 1989: 40–41). In Feller's insightful study of these passages, she argues that the flowers represent immortality and that, despite having requested the fragrant lotuses twice, Yudhiṣṭhira rather than Draupadī is the recipient, because

Bhīma's rampage to obtain them in realms forbidden to humans symbolises stealing immortality from Heaven, and that Yudhisthira, as Dharma's son, could 'never condone such a revolutionary and dissident act' (2012: 94).[9]

If we regard Draupadī as the Earth/Śrī, I suggest that we can see her in this role looking for a powerful protector at a time of world crisis and she chooses only Bhīma from the five Pāṇḍavas to fulfill this function. I posit that, seen in this context, the golden lotuses and Aśvatthāman's divine armour (which is the subject of another of Draupadī's vengeful and unreasonable requests to Bhīma) can all be interpreted as symbols of kingship, in addition to the lotuses being symbols of immortality, as Feller suggests. In each case, Draupadī taunts Bhīma with the achievements of others, exhorts him to action and, after he returns to Draupadī with the desired prizes, she turns the prizes—that is, the lotuses and the armour—over to Yudhiṣṭhira, the rightful king and the embodiment of Dharma. I regard this repeated motif as the symbolic anointing (*abhiṣeka*) of Yudhiṣṭhira by Draupadī as Śrī, bestowing on him the symbols of kingship. Bhīma's un-dharmic actions are necessary for the establishment of dharmic rule, which is for the benefit of society and thereby also the Earth/Śrī, whose agency transmutes Bhīma's un-dharmic acts into the necessary components of *rājadharma* and the practice of *kṣatriyadharma* that is required for its execution.

Bhīma is commanded by Draupadī because her presence as Śrī connotes kingship, which is what he desires, and his terrible strength and deeds that stand outside society are required to appease her demands.[10] His devotion to her personal protection can also be seen as his devotion to the kingdom. As the agents of the un-dharmic actions required to establish *dharma*, Bhīma and Draupadī are essentially rajasic in nature, whereas the ideal dharmic king (that is, Yudhiṣṭhira) is sāttvic in nature. In contrast, Arjuna—ever the 'middle Pandava'—combines both sāttvic qualities (seen in his austerities and devotion to Krsna) and rajasic qualities (as the supreme warrior). In this way, I argue that we can understand *rājadharma* as being a composite of both sāttvic and rajasic elements represented by the two extremes of Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, with Draupadī as the Earth/Śrī choosing the appropriate agent for the appropriate action.

9 I am indebted to Danielle Feller for her comments on my original thinking about this chapter and, in the true spirit of scholarly collaboration and generosity, for her assistance in sourcing and sharing materials I was unable to access.

10 'And it is important to remember that Draupadī and Bhīma's collaboration against Yudhiṣṭhira constitutes a very real and literal opposition to Dharma—they desire the justice of a revenge that cannot be contained within the notion of dharma' (Gitomer 2007: 302).

Conclusion

The *Mahābhārata* seduces us with stories of *dharma*, heroism, *yoga*, renunciation and *bhakti*. All these ideals intertwine in a majestic symphony of such beauty and detail that our gaze is forever drawn up towards them. As a result, we fail to appreciate the depiction of the real, which runs parallel with those ideals and provides the necessary counterpoint bass note to the melodic symphony. If Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna represent the embellished ideals of the dharmic king held up to the light in the melody of the narrative, Bhīma is forever striking the bass notes, embodying the pragmatic *kṣatriya* king in their shadow, illustrating the dark underbelly of *rājadharma*, which is the grunt-work required for the establishment and maintenance of rule. Bhīma neither prevaricates nor shirks from the necessary grit and gore required to win and maintain the kingdom. While he may rail against Yudhiṣṭhira, his unswerving loyalty is never in doubt. Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna work to regain sovereignty, however, it is Bhīma who has the true and abiding lust for the kingdom. This is recognised by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, whose lamenting words display his foreboding, primarily of Bhīma, as the looming threat to the life of his sons:

> *na pāpakaṁ dhyāsyati Dharmaputro dhanaṁjayaś cāpy anuvartate tam* |
> *araṇyavāsena vivardhate tu bhīmasya kopo 'gnir ivānilena*
> *sa tena kopena vidīryamāṇaḥ karaṁ kareṇābhinipīḍya vīraḥ* |
> *viniḥśvasaty uṣṇam atīva ghoraṁ dahann ivemān mama putrapautrān* ||
>
> [The son of Dharma won't think of misdeeds, And Dhanaṃjaya surely follows his course; But in his forest-exile there is growing In Bhima a wrath as fire in the wind. That hero driven by that great fury And beating his fist in the palm of his hand Does heave a most gruesome, searing sigh And he puts my sons and grandsons on fire.] (van Buitenen 1975: 673; *Mbh*, 3.225.18–19)

Bhīma's eye is firmly on the goals of this world appropriate to *rājadharma*—first, on the *kāma* to the throne as his family's birthright and, second, on *artha*, but only as a means to the practice of *rājadharma*. He leaves *dharma*, unrelated to *rājadharma*, and *mokṣa* to his brothers Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna. The ambit of his activities may be more restrained than that of Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna, but within that limited space that he has self-defined as the scope of his action, he has a depth of knowledge and fierceness of commitment that are unchallenged.

We are given a glimpse of what rule by Bhīma might have looked like in the story of Nala and Damayantī that follows closely Bhīma's discourse on *rājadharma* directed at Yudhiṣṭhira (*Mbh*, 3.49.5–24). The story is contained within the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, where Damayantī's father is also named Bhīma and is the king of Vidarbha.[11] Damayantī's description of her father is a picture of the sort of king the Pāṇḍava Bhīma might have been had he been allowed to rule:[12]

> *rājā vidarbhādhipatiḥ pitā mama mahārathaḥ |*
> *bhīmo nāma kṣitipatiś cāturvarṇyasya rakṣitā ||*
> *vsūyāśvamedhānāṁ kratūnāṁ dakṣiṇāvatām |*
> *āhartā pārthivaśreṣṭhaḥ pṛthucārvañcitekṣaṇaḥ ||*
> *brahmaṇyaḥ sādhuvṛttaś ca satyavāg anasūyakaḥ |*
> *śīlavān susamācāraḥ pṛthuśrīr Dharmavic chuciḥ ||*
> *samyag goptā vidarbhāṇāṁ nirjitārigaṇaḥ prabhuḥ |*
>
> [The sovereign king of Vidarbha is my warlike father, he the lord of the land Bhīma, protector of the society of the four classes. He has offered up great sacrifices of rich stipends, the Royal Consecration and Horse Sacrifice, that eminent prince, with eyes that are wide, handsome, and curved. He is brahminic, virtuous in his conduct, truthful in his speech, unprotesting, decorous, and strict, widely famed, Law-wise, and pure. A perfect herdsman is he of the Vidarbhas, a lord who has vanquished the band of his enemies, and sir, know that I, his daughter, seek help from thee!] (*Mbh*, 3.49.5–24)

Bhīma the king practices what Bhīma the hero is known to espouse: support for the traditional order, strength to protect his populace and conduct the sacrifices enjoined on his station. He is at the apex of his society, able to follow the eternal *dharma* that kings do not request: '*na hi yācanti rājāna eṣa Dharmaḥ sanātanaḥ* [kings do not request, this is the eternal *dharma*]' (*Mbh*, 3.152.9; McGrath 2017: 54).

11 A mapping of the two Bhīmas is beyond the scope of this chapter but as an indicator of the reflection of the hero in the king, the king Bhīma is twice referred to as *bhīmaparākramaḥ* (*Mbh*, 3.66.1, 3.78.3), which is a common term for the hero Bhīma both before (3.48.8, 3.50.5) and after (3.146.13, 72; 3.195.8; 3.276.6) this in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*.

12 See Hiltebeitel (2001: 215–39) for an analysis of the 'mirror effect' of this story to the larger epic narrative; however, to the best of my knowledge, Hiltebeitel does not highlight the resonance between the hero Bhīma and the king Bhīma.

Arjuna is the much-vaunted audience of the *Bhagavadgītā* and espouses the doctrine of *karma* and non-attachment; however, it is Bhīma who continually acts energetically and purposefully in the interests of others rather than his individual self. Like Bhīṣma, Bhīma's sublimation of his immense potential to rule in favour of Yudhiṣṭhira can be regarded as the ultimate sacrifice. Duryodhana represents what Bhīma could have chosen to become: a usurper and a 'man who would be king'. Instead, Bhīma accepts a secondary role in the service of the traditional order despite possessing the advantages of inherent gifts from his father, Vāyu, and the benefits of his *rākṣasa* affiliation. He demonstrates his *rājadharma* by protecting his family, vanquishing *rākṣasa*s, successfully conducting military campaigns and counselling the pursuit of action to regain the throne. His partnering with and devotion to Draupadī further augment the pursuit of a dharmic world order for the benefit of the Earth. There is an honesty in his brutality that reflects the necessary actions to establish suzerainty.

He is far from the unthinking, buffoonish glutton he is generally assumed to be. Rather, together with Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna and Draupadī, Bhīma is a key engine for the achievement of the Pāṇḍavas, whose success is indebted to his devotion to the traditional order and to the family and to which his actions and energies are directed. In the *Mahābhārata*, a text devoted to *dharma*, he is a secondary actor, albeit still the necessary shadow king. In a text extolling *realpolitik* such as Machiavelli's *Prince* or the *Arthaśāstra*, he would take centre-stage. It is therefore only fitting that the poets place him at the head of the chariots when Yudhiṣṭhira enters Hastināpura as king (*dharmarājapurogās tu bhīmasenamukhā rathāḥ*; *Mbh*, 9.12.45) and that he is the one whom Yudhiṣṭhira nominates as the crown prince:

> *paurajānapadān sarvān visṛjya kurunandanaḥ*
> *yauvarājyena kauravyo bhīmasenam ayojayat* (*Mbh*, 12.41.8)

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