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Some Words on the Battle at Kurukṣetra (Retardations and Replacements)

Abstract

The paper points out the elements of the eighteen day long battle at Kurukṣetra, in particular the retardation techniques, which delay the duel between the two most valiant warriors, Arjuna and Karna, until the seventeenth day of the battle.

This paper attempts to determine the *principium compositionis*, around which the great, eighteen day long battle of the Bhāratas at Kurukṣetra is organized.

The description of the battle is central to the *Mahā-bhārata*. It fills four books (VI-IX) named after the heroes fighting on the losing side; the victory over them outlines the successive stages of the Pāṇḍavas' path to final triumph.¹ Thus, the poet has devoted a huge amount of space to the description of the battle, which takes place on several levels; it is also a cataclysm which leads to the destruction of all sinful Kṣatriyas at the turn of the Dvāpara-yuga and the Kali-yuga.² The battle seems to have its analogue in the bloody events that occurred in the mythical past, at the turn of the Tretā-yuga and the Dvāpara-yuga³, when Rāma son of Jamadagni wiped out numerous generations of sinful Kṣatriyas. This myth is evoked in the *Mahā-bhārata* ten times.⁴ The battle can also be given a microcosmic dimension and referred to as the transformation an individual goes through on his/her road to perfection, as it seems encouraged by the *Bhagavad-gītā*⁵; the

¹ On the deaths of the four marshals, cf. Hildebeitel 1990: 244-286.

² Biarreau 1989: 103.

³ Hopkins 1915: 217. M. Biarreau (1985: 52), however, places these bloody events in the distant past preceding the very beginnings of the *catur-yuga*-cycle: the Kṛta-age would allegedly be "the renaissance after the massive destruction of the sinful kṣatriyas" (executed by Rāma Jāmadagnya).

⁴ Hopkins 1915: 184; Sukthankar 1936: 65. Cf. Goldman, *passim*.

⁵ Sukthankar 1957: 116ff.

opponents in this battle personify human traits, which the person struggling on this path has to part with.⁶ If we do not reject those hidden, indirect meanings which refer to the processes that happen within an individual, the order in which specific thresholds are overcome, the order which the poet must respect, will clearly play a significant role.

Thus, the multidimensional battle which almost totally destroys the losers and soon afterwards equally eliminates almost entirely the army of the winners requires a description adequate to its significance. By developing the battle scenes, the poet also meets the demand of those listeners who relish the tales of thousands of skirmishes without asking questions about any concealed metaphorical sense. Thus, the battle scenes are effortlessly enriched with ever new duels. The fight between the leading characters is to be seen against the background of the combat of thousands against thousands. This reminds one of the techniques used by Homer, when he depicted the individual triumphs of selected heroes' on the battlefield. In order to ensure the possibility of sketching the battle scene continuously, each time in different configurations, the skirmishes of the leading characters are often left unresolved. It is easy to trace the ways in which fights are interrupted, so as not to allow anyone out of the game prematurely: the omnipresent retardation efforts permit the poet to keep the listener's attention, while at the same time to develop the description of the battle to enormous proportions.

In all this an important if not principal idea is to be seen, an idea underlying the whole construction of the battle, which, in some sense, makes it resemble the battles described in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. The idea is this: do not allow a decisive clash between the two leading warriors of the opposite sides to occur too soon. The warriors are Arjuna and Karna. Their premature meeting should not occur for many reasons. First and foremost, this would have meant such a weakening of the losing side that this would have actually implied the end of the battle, whereas there is still a lot to happen in it. Besides, what a literary defeat would it be for Homer to allow Hector to die from Achilles' hand right at the start of the *Iliad*! What would have happened to the second part of the *Aeneid*, the battle part, should Turnus, Aeneas' opponent, die as soon as the later reached Italy? In a similar manner in the Indian epos the premature death of Karna from the hand of Arjuna would have stripped the battle of a lion's share of its dramatic effect.

While looking at the course of the battle at Kurukṣetra we shall see – despite its hugeness – its particularly meticulous direction. Inevitably, it makes its way towards the confrontation between Arjuna, the most valiant of the Pāṇḍavas, with Karna, the mainstay, the hope and the success warrant of the Kauravas. The confrontation of the two heroes is in preparation by the poet from the very beginning of the epos. The two heroes are strongly contrasted with each other. Karna is actually a mirror reflection of Arjuna. He is his (step-) brother, a fact that the heroes themselves for a long time ignore,⁷ nevertheless he is in a way doomed to lose. Why? The answer lies within the religious stratum of the

⁶ Sukthankar 1957: 94, 100ff.

⁷ The late interpolation, the conversation of Karna with Kṛṣṇa, and later with Kuntī (V 143 and 144), in which Karna learns of his descent, is to remain secret at the request of Karna. In this way the redactor attempts to justify the fact that further in the epos no influence of this information on Karna's attitude may be seen.

poem: it is so, because Karna (and Duryodhana, whom he supports) rejects Kṛṣṇa, who is the warrant of victory. But why does Karna reject Kṛṣṇa, who even immediately before the battle (VI 41,85ff) offers Karna an alliance with himself and with the Pāṇḍavas? As for Karna, he himself gives friendship and indebtedness to Duryodhana as the main reason (V 139,13ff). There is, however, also a more profound cause, the fate of the luckless, haughty Karna. His are grandiose knightly virtues, but they are disorganised and used in an inappropriate manner as he is under the curse of illegitimate descent and consequently he lacks the sacraments becoming to each Kṣatriya. Another reason is that Karna is considered to be the incarnation of Narakāsura (III 240,19), the old enemy of Viṣṇu, whose avatāra is Kṛṣṇa. Such hostility is, as it turns out, hereditary! Actually, the whole conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas can be seen as the “earthly incarnation” of the conflict between Devas and Asuras.

In the eighteen day long battle the ultimate duel between the two protagonists takes place as late as the seventeenth day. For sixteen days the poet has either refused to allow them to meet or has allowed only brief encounters, when it was known that mortal combat would be impossible, since Arjuna would not have time for it. This is the case in the major episode (*Jayadratha-vadha*) in the *Book of Droṇa*, when Arjuna is in a hurry to kill Jayadratha before sunset.

The duel of Arjuna and Karna is definitely the culminating point of the battle as a whole, just as the duel of Achilles and Hector is in the *Iliad*. The duel, which takes place after two “invincible” heroes Bhīṣma and Droṇa are defeated, opens the way to conquer two further adversaries, Śalya and – finally – Duryodhana. Therefore, the duel of Arjuna and Karna is a definite turning point in the battle. We should here immediately add that each battle book has its own climax, which is either the death, or merely the elimination from the combat of the hero after whom the book is named. The position of the death of Karna is visibly central, even though it takes place on the penultimate day of the battle. Karna finds his death from the hand of Arjuna, whose chariot is driven by Kṛṣṇa himself. And just as Karna is a mirror reflection of Arjuna, his charioteer, Śalya, is contrasted to that of Arjuna – Kṛṣṇa. In the epic the following words keep returning as a sort of refrain: “Where Kṛṣṇa is, there is victory”.⁸ An equally frequent reassurance is: “Where dharma is, there is victory”, which clearly demonstrates on whose side the dharma or truth, justice and virtue stand.⁹ Such is the “charioteer” of the war-chariot of Arjuna. And this is the religious dimension of the *Mahā-bhārata*: alliance with God brings victory. The charioteer of the ill-fated Karna is Śalya. He alone, the best of the charioteers (VIII 23,5), is said to be worthy of holding the reigns of Karna’s chariot. A dubious honour. His “quality” is confirmed in the fatal characterization of the Madrakas, of whom he is the king (VIII 27,73ff). Eventually, Śalya’s role with respect to Karna

⁸ This is how R.C. Katz (1990) entitled her book in order to underline the role of Arjuna’s alliance with Kṛṣṇa in Arjuna’s victory.

⁹ In the present paper, the author does not take any stand in the matter of the “treacherous counsels” of Kṛṣṇa. However, in view of the metaphorical nature of the epic, it would not seem appropriate to interpret them literally.

is the same as Kṛṣṇa's for Arjuna; this role, however, turns out to be the reverse of the role of Kṛṣṇa, just as Śalya turns out to be the reverse of Kṛṣṇa, and Karna of Arjuna. The discourse of Śalya with Karna on the war chariot seems to be "the *Bhagavad-gītā* à rebours"¹⁰: instead of reassuring Karna he rather discourages him, disheartens him by his sneering speech, by which, by the way, he keeps his word given to Yudhiṣṭhira (V 8,25ff; VI 41,81f). One might expect that just as Karna is going to die from the hand of Arjuna, Śalya is going to die from the hand of Kṛṣṇa. This is, however, impossible since Kṛṣṇa does not fight. Thus he will be defeated by the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira, who will perfectly serve the purpose and "replace" Kṛṣṇa in this respect; he is the son and the personification of Dharma, the Dharma-rāja. In the final duel of Yudhiṣṭhira with Śalya two attributes compete: fairness against vileness.

Let us, however, return to the confrontation of Arjuna with Karna.

The central position of the duel between Arjuna and Karna is witnessed by the apparent efforts of the poet to prepare it carefully and to display it in as impressive a manner as possible. The harbinger of the particular, negative relationship between the two heroes appears already on the very first pages of the epos, when the king of the Pāṇḍavas and that of the Kauravas are represented in the form of two trees (I 1,65f). In the tree of the Pāṇḍavas its trunk is represented by Arjuna, in that of the Kauravas – by Karna. Karna turns out to be as equally an outstanding archer as Arjuna. During the tournament which crowns the period of his apprenticeship in the craft of war he equals Arjuna in every respect and already then his dream is to challenge Arjuna (I 126,9); as in order to receive the hand of the princess Draupadī the task is to tauten an extremely resistant arch and hit the target, he is ready to fulfil it; his defeat is not due to his failure in any respect but because of his low descent, this is the reason why Draupadī refuses him as a suitor.¹¹ During the only conversation of Karna and Kuntī, when Kuntī asks him to spare her sons in the battle, he agrees with the exception of Arjuna, against whom he will be fighting for life and death (V 144,20ff). Thus Kuntī will have five sons in any case, the question is only who will take the place amongst those five: Arjuna or Karna (V 144,22). Examples of very consistent techniques to contrast Karna with Arjuna are numerous in the *Mahā-bhārata*, but in the present paper we shall not go any further in this direction.

The question now arises: how was it possible for the poet to delay the duel of Arjuna and Karna until so late in the battle, that is, until its penultimate day? This was possible because specific retardation efforts were taken and a system of replacements was used which rendered other knights active. One might say that the retardation of the principal duel of Arjuna with Karna is the cornerstone of the construction of the battle. In many ways this technique reminds us of Homer. In short, this appears as follows:

In the *Book of Bhīṣma*, during the first ten days of the battle, the poet totally removes Karna from the battlefield. An excuse for this is provided by the conflict between Karna

¹⁰ Cf. Brockington 1998: 149f, who quotes W. Ruben, 1941. *Krishna: Konkordanz und Kommentar der Motive seines Heldenlebens*. Wien, p. 221.

¹¹ Mhbh., ed. Calcutta, I 7027. In the critical edition this passage is omitted.

and Bhīṣma. Karna is piqued by the fact that Bhīṣma has not included him among the great warriors (V 165,5), hence his announcement of not joining in the battle so long as Bhīṣma commands the Kauravas (V 165,27). By recourse to this measure the poet gains a lot. In a simple way the threat of a premature clash between Arjuna and Karna is postponed for ten days. Certainly, such an untimely encounter happens nonetheless in the *Book of Droṇa* (VII 120), when the fatal duel – because of justified reasons (Arjuna is in a hurry!) – does not take place,¹² but the poet takes all the precautions not to multiply such situations. There are also other benefits resulting from this removal of Karna for ten days in the *Book of Bhīṣma*. First, this allows the glory of Bhīṣma, who no doubt whatsoever is the most eminent warrior on the side of the Kauravas at this stage of the battle, to shine to the full. And it is he who captures the attention of Arjuna. At this point also the triumphs of Droṇa, the second unquestionable pillar of the Kauravas, are not much emphasized by the poet. Great heroes may not overshadow one another. Moreover, during those first ten days of the battle Arjuna undergoes a great transformation. From the despair he expresses at the very beginning of the battle in the famous *Bhagavad-gītā* (I 34, II 4f), his unreadiness to turn against those whom he loves as his masters, tutors, teachers and closest relatives, to his decision, he progresses to the conclusive fight with his beloved Bhīṣma. In the *Book of Bhīṣma* a certain procrastination of the clash can be seen, a certain dilatoriness or stalling tactic with which both Arjuna and Bhīṣma set about fighting. On the epic level this can be easily justified by family ties and the deep friendship established between the two heroes. But more profound reasons are understandable and even necessary, if we are to transfer the battle onto another level and consider it as an inner conflict within an individual person.¹³ In that case we have to recall the words of the *Bhagavad-gītā* in which it is said that a sage (which Arjuna is to become) rejects not only the evil of the transitory world but also its goodness (II 48,50,57; V 20,22,25). By being reluctant to fight against Bhīṣma, Arjuna gives a proof of his being not ready to part with the good side of the world, or the good aspects of his life so far. Overcoming this difficulty is a necessary condition for further combat. A similar inner conflict can be seen in the next Book, since Droṇa is also the beloved teacher of the whole younger generation. With the defeat of Bhīṣma and of Droṇa, the opponents of the Pāṇḍavas become more unequivocal in their negativity.

The exclusion of Karna from the fight in the *Book of Bhīṣma* has resolved the problem of a premature clash between the protagonists during the first ten days of the battle. However, the battle is eighteen days long. And in the next Book, Karna will have to join the battle on the side of the Kauravas: Bhīṣma has been defeated and no longer commands the army, thus the reason for not fighting is removed. How then is the poet going to prevent Arjuna and Karna from a possible clash, which would be still premature at this stage? Premature, because on the side of the Kauravas there is still their second pillar, the “invincible” tutor and master of both the fighting parties, Droṇa, equally beloved by the Pāṇḍavas; and besides and foremost, Karna is at this moment still too strong;

¹² As a “substitute” duel one might consider the one of Bhīma and Karna (VII 106-114).

¹³ Sukthankar (1957: 107) sees in Bhīṣma the personification of tradition.

he is invincible as he still has an infallible spear, a spear which can be used only once. Before the duel with Arjuna he has to be disarmed. Soon an opportunity to do this will be found. For the moment, however, in order not to risk an untimely encounter of the two principal antagonists, it is Arjuna now who is “removed”, in a way, from the battlefield. Actually, he is occupied by the so called Saṁśaptakas, innumerable troops of Kṣatriyas, who continuously challenge him personally, ready to fight to the death (VII 16,15ff). For Arjuna it would have been an absolute dishonour not to respond. Thus they take him to the outskirts of the battlefield, far from its mainstream, and in doing so they act with deliberation on the plan to deprive Yudhiṣṭhira of Arjuna’s protection and to permit Droṇa to capture Yudhiṣṭhira (as long as Arjuna protects the king nobody can approach). This is at least the official reason for which the Saṁśaptakas challenge Arjuna. There is, however, yet another obvious reason for it: the construction of the battle.

Both retardations, caused first by the removal of Karṇa from the battlefield and secondly by the peculiar removal of Arjuna, bring to mind the *Iliad*. Achilles, offended in his pride and really angry with Agamemnon, spends the lion’s part of the battle described in the *Iliad* in his tent. He is not going to fight. Let the Greeks feel painfully what his absence means. The rage of Achilles, as we know, will eventually turn against himself: because of the triumphs of the Trojans he will lose his beloved friend, Patroclus. This analogy will reveal itself in the absence of Arjuna in the mainstream of the battle at the beginning of the *Book of Droṇa* and in the death of his son Abhimanyu, as a result (VII 48,12ff). Let us have a closer look at these issues.

The absence of Karṇa, and later the partial absence of Arjuna provide the poet with ideal conditions for another move, important for the construction of the battle, that is, the introduction of the system of replacements. The empty place in the ranks of the Kauravas, created in the aftermath of the absence of Karṇa, and later that in the ranks of the Pāṇḍavas caused by the absence of Arjuna is in each case taken by another hero, namely Bhagadatta replacing Karṇa and Abhimanyu standing for Arjuna.

In the second half of the *Book of Bhīma* and right at the beginning of the *Book of Droṇa* the most deadly “second line” warrior amongst the Kauravas is the invincible Bhagadatta. Indeed, he is an undisputable replacement for Karṇa! Some details about him point to his specific “relationship” with the figure of Karṇa. The myth which at this time Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna (VII 28,27-33) relates Bhagadatta to asura Naraka. And it is indeed Karṇa who turns out to be the earthly incarnation of Naraka!¹⁴ Once Bhagadatta received from Naraka a miraculous weapon – the *vaiṣṇava*, which earlier was given to Naraka by Viṣṇu himself, on the demand of the Earth, Naraka’s mother. Presently, armed with this weapon, Bhagadatta ravages the ranks of the Pāṇḍavas at Kurukṣetra, even Bhīma fails to defeat him. At a certain time, struggling against Arjuna, Bhagadatta throws his *vaiṣṇava* and the miraculous missile is received by Kṛṣṇa, the earthly avatar of Viṣṇu. Hitting him in his chest, the missile is transformed into a wreath of flowers (VII 28, 16f). In this way the weapon returns to its legitimate owner. Without his miraculous weapon Bhagadatta

¹⁴ Cf. III 240,19: *hatasya narakasyātmā karṇa-mūrtim upāśritaḥ*. Also the theft of Aditi’s earrings by Naraka and further their loss can be considered as a link between Naraka and Karṇa, cf. Sachse 2006: 246f.

dies from Arjuna's blow. The whole scene of the duel between Arjuna and Bhagadatta carries some presentiments of the postponed, final duel of Arjuna with Karna. Both duels are linked together among others by means of the scenes with Arjuna's diadem. In the duel with Bhagadatta Arjuna's diadem is only touched by Bhagadatta's spear (VII 28,12), whereas in the duel with Karna the diadem is knocked off with yet another particular missile, the arrow into which the snake Aśvasena has changed (VIII 66,11).

Bhagadatta dies at the beginning of the *Book of Droṇa*, on the twelfth day of the battle, or else on the second day on which Karna takes part in it: since Karna has already come back, his replacement may leave. On the other hand Arjuna, who is busy with the Samśaptakas from the beginning of Book Seven, is replaced by the new generation of the Pāṇḍavas, namely by Arjuna's son Abhimanyu (cf. *Abhimanyu-vadha*, VII 32-49), and later by Ghaṭotkaca, the son of Bhīma hence Arjuna's nephew (cf. *Ghaṭotkaca-vadha*, VII 128-158).

The replacement of Arjuna by Abhimanyu resembles, again, the Trojan War: in the work of Homer Patroclus dies in the battlefield, killed by Hector, during the absence of Achilles. In the *Mahā-bhārata*, it is the sixteen year old Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadrā, who dies while replacing Arjuna and breaking through Kauravas' defences. In both cases the death of the young men enrages the heroes. In the *Iliad* Homer promptly leads to the climax: the duel between Achilles and Hector. In the work of Vyāsa in turn, though the issue is more complex, the events form a logical and consistent sequence; in vengeance for the death of Abhimanyu Arjuna kills Jayadratha, whom he blames for his son's death, since he has blocked any possible help to Abhimanyu from the remaining Pāṇḍavas. To dispel any doubts as to the fact that Arjuna has to kill Jayadratha, who at this moment rather suddenly becomes one of the major opponents of the Pāṇḍavas, Arjuna takes an oath to do so: either he does it before twilight, or he jumps into fire (VII 51,37).

We should however remember that before the duel between Arjuna and Karna the poet had to "disarm" Karna by taking away the infallible spear. The triumphs of the second son of the Pāṇḍavas, Ghaṭotkaca, after the death of Jayadratha serve the purpose; Ghaṭotkaca is so menacing that Karna directs his infallible spear against him – the spear originally "reserved" for the clash with Arjuna; and so Ghaṭotkaca dies, replacing Arjuna in his death, whereas Karna is disarmed, which for the future duel is crucial.

Soon after the death of Ghaṭotkaca, at the end of Book Seven, the master Droṇa also dies, bringing revenge from Aśvatthāman. He uses *nārāyaṇāstra* but it is neutralised by the troops of the Pāṇḍavas instructed by Kṛṣṇa. The route to the fight of Arjuna and Karna is eventually free. The long postponed duel can now take place (the *Book of Karna*).

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