

McGrath, Kevin, *Strī: Women in Epic Mahābhārata* (Boston: Ilex Foundation / Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2009), 232 pp., \$ 24.95, ISBN 978 0 674 03198 2 (paperback).

This book, as the title suggests, is a study of women in the *Mahābhārata*. Chapter 1 is introductory; Chapter 2, “Kinship and marriage”, continues the introduction by detailing, with examples, the various types of marriage evident in the text (*svayamvara*, *rākṣasa*, etc.); Chapter 3, “Women heroes”, has sections on Kuntī, Gāndhārī, Damayantī, Sāvitrī, and Ambā; Chapter 4 focuses on Draupadī; Chapter 5, “Speaking of truth”, analyses the generic content of women’s speeches in the text; and Chapter 6 concludes the study with sections on “Landscape and rivers”, “Sexuality”, and “Women heroes today”.

In terms of its structure, whereby the main body of the book focuses on individual characters one by one, McGrath’s book somewhat resembles Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta: the end of an epoch* (1969) and Pradip Bhat-tacharya’s *Pancha-kanya: the five virgins of Indian epics* (2005), although it is more gender-specific than the former and more text-specific than the latter. But it also seeks to offer a general theory of women in the *Mahābhārata*.

The subject is fascinating, and readers will be engrossed, moved, and inspired by the stories of these women, which McGrath sets out with liberal use of short quotations presented in Sanskrit and in close English translation. It makes for an interesting and thought-provoking (perhaps even provocative) book, and if I present here a selection of the thoughts provoked in this particular reader, I do so in a spirit of gratitude to the author for his contribution to this field of *dharma*, and of encouragement for that field’s further development.

Those familiar with McGrath’s earlier book *The Sanskrit Hero: Karṇa in epic Mahābhārata* (2004) will not be surprised to find that he approaches the text as a repository of ancient Indo-European culture. He says that the *Mahābhārata* as we know it developed over a long period of time. This latter view has been repeatedly challenged in recent years, most particularly by Alf Hiltebeitel, and one expects that soon it will either be responsively rehabilitated, or discarded. McGrath doesn’t perform such a rehabilitation; he states his assumptions at the start, and he doesn’t ask us to let his results justify them. But as the book proceeds, the way those assumptions are used makes it difficult for him smoothly to accomplish the kind of project he has set himself—that is, a text-interpretive one. McGrath removes the

boundary of the text, so there is a lack of definition in the results. And this is particularly unfortunate because in theory, textual studies are well placed to avoid this problem.

The issue of whether or not the *Mahābhārata* grew up over a very long period of time is, in itself, quite simple. Perhaps it did, perhaps it didn't; no one can tell. But thinking it did involves imagining what it might once have been, long before it became what it is now; yet there is no way satisfactorily to ascertain which portions of the present text would have been part of which past incarnations, or when. In this book, the reader is often left in some doubt as to what is being studied: on the one hand McGrath claims to study the *Mahābhārata* as critically reconstituted in Poona ("I accept the critically edited text as a given unity and try to avoid the problem of distinguishing between what is archaic and what is classical", p. 21); yet on the other hand, what he wants and tries to study is something that would be much older than the retrojected Poona text. Accordingly, he sets up a loose definition of "epic Mahābhārata" which "would denote those parts of the poem which principally concern *ḷṣatriya* life: with emphasis on the *bhārata* itself, without the *upākhyānas*" (p. 15), and he has recourse to the theories of Sukthankar (of a Bhārgava brahmanical overhaul), M.C. Smith (of an ancient *triṣṭubh* core), and Gregory Nagy (of prehistoric bards) to support the idea that there once would have been such a thing. (This basic approach has been critiqued before in these pages; see Hildebeitel's review of *The Sanskrit Epics* by John Brockington, in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 43, 2000.) But then much of the material that McGrath draws upon in order to present his view of "women in epic Mahābhārata" is drawn from the very *upākhyānas* and didactic longeurs that he should deem not to be part of it. And it is difficult to see how one would get around this kind of problem, unless one were to be much more specific and consistent about which parts of the Poona *Mahābhārata* one were studying and which parts one were not. After all, the bar for a "working definition" of what is under consideration is already set very high by the precision with which the Poona editors managed to discriminate between what was to go into the critically reconstituted text and what was not.

McGrath's hypothetical "epic Mahābhārata" is too vague to ground his study. It excludes, amongst other things, "parts of the poem which deal with genealogy" (p. 15); "By *bhārata* I understand those elements of the poem which directly concern the narratives of the Pāṇḍavas and of the Kauravas" (p. 15n46). But *bhārata* is a genealogical term that connects to the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas via the Śakuntalā *upākhyāna*; so it seems odd that it should

be used to denote what McGrath intends. The term *bhārata* invokes the genealogy presented to Janamejaya as his own; but it is not clear whether or not Janamejaya would exist within McGrath's hypothetical text.

If McGrath's self-inflicted problems of textual definition seem rather perverse, one might be tempted to speculate more broadly in search of an explanation. The reason projects such as McGrath's can proceed—even after the production of the Poona critical edition—has to do, I suspect, with a kind of socio-existential desire that formed a context for the early heyday of European Indology and has been fossilised within the discipline ever since. So although McGrath is careful to say that “The social world of epic is simulated and ... can in no way be said to signify any actual society. ... [T]he epic world is a poetic view that is retrojected into a hypothetical past” (p. 18; cf. p. 196n14), and although this would presumably also be true of any scholarly pronouncements about pre-monetary Bronze Age “Indo-European” or “Aryan” *ksatriya* culture, nonetheless one is aware that such scholarly pronouncements have been made. I am wary of using the word “Indo-European” with respect to the ancient past in anything other than a strictly linguistic-taxonomical sense. When attempts are made to use it in a wider cultural sense, I think about what transpired between India and Europe in recent centuries, in which we are still implicated: this would be the immediate Indo-European context of our received ideas. The use of the word “Aryan” in this connection is also particularly fraught with difficulties, because its primary meaning is now more or less “non-Jewish”, and it meshes nicely with the term “Indo-European” when one considers the patrilineal biblical ethnology of Noah and sons. McGrath uses the word “Aryan” without explanation (e.g. on pp. 3, 7, 31, 190), and when he perhaps inadvertently approaches a definition of “Indo-European” (on p. 158, referring to Benveniste's observations—in *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes*, 1969—on the asymmetry of male and female roles) the term would appear to function, in this context at least, more or less as a synonym of “patrilineal”.

Thus related issues of political-historical self-awareness recur regarding the gender question. McGrath is male, and his opening acknowledgements refer to his wife as “the best of women” and Stephanie Jamison as *ācāryasattamā*. Can he be trusted to analyse the *Mahābhārata's* view of women? This is a bold project to have taken on, for it is not clear that anyone would be able to seek and re-present the *Mahābhārata's* myth of womanhood without mixing in their own. *Strī* does not consider such issues, which is a shame; but if it had, it would have been a very different kind of book.

In terms of the book's structure, readers may wish that much of the substance of Chapter 5 had been distributed within Chapters 3 and 4, since some of the most pivotal speeches made by Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Draupadī are glossed over quite swiftly within those earlier chapters. This means those chapters don't do what they might have in summing the women up individually. Towards the end the book becomes more than a survey; but because of the aforementioned problems of approach (how the book frames itself as a "reading of"), when McGrath says what he thinks *ṣatriya* women are like, it is hard to know how one might use the generalisations he produces. So much of what might naturally help one to understand what anything in the *Mahābhārata* is like—that is, so much of the *Mahābhārata* itself, at least—has been obscured by the "epic"/"not epic" dichotomy which his title demands, but which is extraneous to the material.

For example, when one sees *ṣatriya* women who tell men to kill or not kill but do not do the killing themselves, and who are heroic through speech, one doesn't know what to make of this in specifically *gendered* terms if all the men one is allowed to think with are the kind who kill—that is, *ṣatriya* ones—because the many brahmin men who (like *ṣatriya* women, in fact) do not kill, but do tell other men to kill or not to kill, have been elided from the interpretive project.

Quite apart from its distortive effect in matters of gender, the elision of what does not "principally concern *ṣatriya* life" obstructs the text's presentation of itself. McGrath says that "Presumably the performance of the epic occurred before a male audience of *ṣatriyas*" (p. 18; cf. p. 138n42); yet the *Mahābhārata* presents itself as an account of what an audience of *ṛṣis* heard from a *sūta* at a *satra*, which in that account consists mostly of what a predominantly brahmin audience heard from a brahmin at a *satra*, where that brahmin, Vaiśampāyana, was allegedly repeating what he had previously heard, together with a handful of other brahmins, from their teacher Vyāsa, another brahmin. *Ṣatriyas* in these audiences (with the crucial exception of King Janamejaya, who, unlike Duryodhana, was persuaded to stop killing) are not much in evidence; and although Vyāsa initially teaches the tale of the Bhāratas in an apparently all-male and all-brahmin context, there is no reason within the text to doubt the presence of many women at both *satras*, or that Vyāsa's opus was composed in anticipation of an audience of all *varṇas* (see *Mahābhārata* 12.314:45).

McGrath presents a very different origin myth for his category of "epic": he suggests that when, in the *Strīparvan*, the *ṣatriya* women "sing of the

greatness and the exploits of the deceased .... singing of their grief and of their simultaneous anger”, “this moment invokes the origin of epic” (p. 184). This suggestion evokes the events described at *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.2, where the cry of a female bird upon the untimely death of her mate triggers Vālmīki to utter the first *śloka* and thereafter—presumably after hearing details about Rāma from Sitā while she lives at his *āśrama* with her two young sons—to compose, in *ślokas*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the first *kāvya*. But there is no generic overlap between the female cry and Vālmīki’s text; even when it depicts females crying, Vālmīki’s text does not *contain* the female cry that allegedly triggered it. And although one might suggest that if it did, then it would contain epic, this would be to render epic, in textual terms, an empty set.

To return to the book’s interpretive generalisations, several key descriptors that McGrath applies to the *Mahābhārata*’s women, as if these were elements of their textually constructed gender, are not obviously less applicable to the *Mahābhārata*’s *kṣatriya* men. For example: that they are very much concerned with the business of marriage and kin; that they suffer in a recurring, ongoing, even systematic fashion; and that they speak heroically from within their suffering. The *Mahābhārata* contains, in its first chapter, its primary example of the genre of threnody: the extended lament of (male) Dhṛtarāṣṭra on account of the death of his sons. Yudhiṣṭhira steps onto the road to Kurukṣetra by undertaking a *rājasūya* at the relayed behest of his dead father (*Mahābhārata* 2.11:66). And he suffers enormously thereafter, and speaks heroically on that account. McGrath does mention men to an extent, but the overwhelmingly single-gendered focus hampers his ability to make sound gendered conclusions.

To make such conclusions in a truly satisfying way would require not just a broadening of the single-gender focus, but a much more ambitious kind of study altogether—one that would necessarily be interdisciplinary. The bibliography of *Strī* gestures towards a cross-cultural focus, but in doing so it evokes hypothetical pseudo-historical contexts; from an Indological point of view, one might say that here such cross-cultural gestures serve to justify a dubious method. But as far as the immediate subject of women in the *Mahābhārata* is concerned, *Strī*’s bibliography is scanty, and much of what it does contain is under-utilised within the book. This is particularly true of studies discussing the symbolic aspects of the text’s female characters. Hildebeitel’s theory of the “many Krishnas”, for example, has enormously advanced our understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole and of the character of Kṛṣṇā Draupadī; yet although McGrath mentions it (on p. 132),

he does not pursue it. It is also unfortunate that prior to his completion of *Strī* McGrath had apparently not seen the volume *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, edited by myself and Brian Black (2007); many of the speeches and episodes he discusses have been given fuller treatment there.

*Strī* contains frequent errors of fact and presentation, but it also contains a great deal of wonderful material. Illuminating insights are evident throughout, and the way in which contemporary *Mahābhārata* traditions are brought to bear on the Sanskrit textual material (by way of footnotes) works well. In my view—and I suppose this is McGrath's view of the *Mahābhārata*—the framing seriously compromises the book, but the primary source is so rich that it cannot be ruined.

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