INTRODUCTION
AD FONTES, NON ULTRA FONTES!

Many believe stemmata to be accurate depictions of the historical vicissitudes of transmission, but it is the few who believe that this is not the case who are right.

— Paulo Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method

About this Book

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

The Mahābhārata critical edition, which was begun in 1931 and completed in 1966, will be fifty years old next year. This is an appropriate moment to look back at the history of this edition and its reception. It is also an appropriate moment to create the kind of scholarly tools and auxiliary materials required to use this edition, something that was envisaged by the edition’s creators but never done in the past. This book addresses these needs through discussing criticisms and (mis)interpretations of the critical edition and its prospects. It also carries forward the criticism of German Mahābhārata studies undertaken in The Nay Science, whose unscientific and ideologically-tainted theories of the Mahābhārata pose the greatest single obstacle to the correct reception, interpretation, and use of the edition. As will become clear, contemporary objections to the critical edition are fundamentally restatements of theoretical positions staked out by the German critics in the nineteenth century.

---

1 See the testimony of P. L. Vaidya at the end of the introduction to the Śāntiparvan. S. K. Belvalkar intended to add to his partially completed introduction a complete description of the Mokṣadharmaparvan’s contents, but his death prevented him from completing this objective.

2 Nineteenth-century German Indologists placed their trust in an oral Aryan epic, the so-called “Urepos.” They argued that this epic would have been the possession of heroic Kṣatriya warriors, and they blamed the Brahmans for its subsequent transformation into a legalistic document concerning ritual, worship of ancestors, and theology. In spite of the fact that these views were anti-Semitic both in inspiration and intent (for Brahmans read: priestly or Semitic; for heroic read: Aryan and Germanic), they continue to taint contemporary Mahābhārata studies. For a discussion, see The Nay Science, chapters 1–2.

3 Thus, for instance, James L. Fitzgerald, when he writes: “Between 400 and circa 50 BCE: the continued circulation of that old narrative within a new oral Pāṇḍava epic, in which five entirely new, semidivine heroes were injected into the Bharata dynasty (depicted as incapable of sustaining itself now) and then suffered exile from it, and, finally, allied with the old Pañcāla rivals, overthrew the Kuru-Bharatas and established a new Bharata reign.
these objections, therefore, requires us to understand the original reasons for these claims, as well as to grasp the reasons why anyone might wish to resurrect these views.

Why a Critical Edition?

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

To a scribe working in the thirteenth century, the question of which Mahābhārata manuscript to copy would have been an easy one: as a rule, there would not have been more than a few manuscripts available to him, mostly descended from the same source, and so, barring a few variants, there would have been little to choose among them. He might have chosen the one most easily available to him, or the most complete, or the one best preserved and produced a copy, inserting the variants of other manuscripts (if he chose to consult them at all) in the margins or perhaps on separate sheets (the śodhapattra, as they are called). Occasionally, a scribe working in one of the centers of Hindu intellectual life (such as the late sixteenth-century commentator Nilakaṇṭha) might have had access to a larger number of manuscripts, indeed, to an overview of the manuscript tradition from across the subcontinent. In that case, the scribe, being more concerned with preservation of the tradition and regarding himself as a part of a living tradition, entitled to make selections and to emend and rearrange the texts, might have selected the best narratives, creating a composite manuscript that would, in turn, have generated further copies, establishing a new tradition. In time, new verses might have entered the tradition through the inevitable processes of exegesis and commentary or new episodes.

This hypothesis thus agrees, in part, with A. Holtzmann Junior’s thesis about a reversal of the polarity of the heroes and villains (see Holtzmann, 1892),” and “Different versions of the ‘inversion’ theory were debated at length by various authors pointed to in the last note. My historical focus on the epic’s history is quite different from that of these earlier scholars, though clearly I think the ‘inversionists’ were on the right track.” James L. Fitzgerald, “Mahābhārata,” in Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan (Brill Online, 2015); http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-encyclopedia-of-hinduism/mahabharata-BEHCOM_2020040 (accessed September 23, 2015) and James L. Fitzgerald, “No Contest between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the Mahābhārata,” in Epic and History, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010), 119, n. 18. But in less explicit ways as well, contemporary Mahābhārata studies are largely a reprise of nineteenth-century scholarship, as, for instance, when scholars continue to insist that the epic’s origins must lie in a heroic, oral bardic tradition. In spite of the fact that there is no evidence for this view and in spite of the fact that there is no way to combine oral epic theory with textual criticism, which presumes the mechanical transcription of written exemplars, scholars continue to defend the oral origins hypothesis, because of the unparalleled ability it gives them to make claims about the Mahābhārata. In some sense, the entire problem of Mahābhārata studies revolves around this one question: is there a way to show the existence of an oral epic in non-circular, non-self-referential, or non-question-begging ways?
might have been composed for places where there was felt to be a narrative lacunae but this
augmentation would not have been a problem: it was evidence of the vitality of the tradition, of
its ability to renew and translate itself for a new circle of readers each time.

The first printed editions⁴ of the Mahābhārata continued this practice of reprinting the
available manuscripts. The editors of these editions were not concerned with establishing a
critical text. They saw themselves as part of a living tradition and their concern was only to
make available in the new medium what had previously existed only in the manuscript
tradition. Besides employing teams of learned śāstris or paṇḍits to check and possibly emend
the source manuscript, they were not too concerned with the accuracy of the text or with
reconciling variations between their edition and the other printed editions.

A new set of concerns, however, came to the fore in the late nineteenth century, as the
Mahābhārata increasingly became an object of specialist concern: what is “the Mahābhārata”?
What was the oldest form of the text? Between two competing versions, which one must be
judged the more authentic? It was partly in order to resolve these questions and partly in order
to bear out their own theories about an original epic (the so-called Urepa) that calls for a single,
scientifically validated text⁵ began to be heard. As Moriz Winternitz, an Austrian Indologist
and one of the leading advocates for a Mahābhārata critical edition, put it, “what we really need,

⁴ The Mahābhārata, an Epic Poem Written by the Celebrated Veda Vyāsa Rishi, vols. 1–4 (Calcutta: Education
Committee’s Press/Baptist Mission Press, 1834–39); Atmaram Khadilkar, ed., Mahābhārata with Nilakaṇṭha’s
Commentary (Bombay: Ganpat Krishnaji’s Press, 1863); Vasudev Balacharya Ainapore, ed., The Mahābhārata
with the Commentary Bhāvadipa of Nilakaṇṭha, 6 vols. (Bombay: Gopal Narayan & Co., 1901); T. R.
Indian Texts with Footnotes and Readings, 19 vols. (Bombay: Javaji Dadaji’s “Nirnaya-sagar” Press, 1906–14); P. P.
S. Sastri, ed., The Mahābhārata (Southern Recension) Critically Edited by P. P. S. Sastri (Madras: Rasawamy
Sastrulu & Sons, Madras, 1931–33); Ramachandra Kinjawadekar, ed., Mahābhārata with the Commentary of
Sarfojirajapuram edition of 1896, seem not to have survived.

⁵ See Moritz Winternitz, expressing this precise anxiety in the pages of the bulletin of the twelfth International
Congress of Orientalists: “This much, however, is clear even from the few extracts from South-Indian MSS
hitherto published, that the text of the Mahabharata as found in our Bombay and Calcutta editions is an utterly
insufficient basis for critical researches concerning the life of the great Hindu Epic, and that the text on which all
Mahabharata studies have hitherto been founded, is not the text but only one of the texts of the Mahabharata.”
Section of the XIIth International Congress of Orientalists, Held at Rome, in October 1899,” XIIme Congrès
International des Orientalistes, Bulletin no. 3. (1899): 46 (Winternitz’s italics).
and what seems to me to be the *sine quâ non* for historical and critical researches regarding the text of the Mahabharata, is a *critical edition* which should neither satisfy the people of Northern India nor those of the Dekkhan, but which should satisfy the wants of Sanskrit scholarship. I repeat what I said at the last Congress in Paris, that ‘a critical edition of the Mahabharata made by European scholars according to the principles followed in editing any other important text, is wanted as the only sound basis for all Mahabharata studies—nay, for all studies connected with the epic literature of India.’

**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. This section also addresses three misconceptions of the critical edition: (1) That it is eclectic; (2) that it is not a text; and (3) that it can be replaced by any other text with an apparatus of variants.*

A critical edition gets around the problem of multiple versions of a text by subjecting the different readings of the available manuscripts (called *variae lectiones* or variant readings) to a rigorously hierarchical procedure: readings thought more likely to represent the reading of the ancestor of all manuscripts examined for the edition (known as the *archetypus* or archetype) are printed above the line as the critically constituted text (*constitutio textus*), while the remaining variants (which hence are considered “corruptions” of the former) are printed below the line (where they form the *apparatus criticus* or critical apparatus of the edition). In this way, a critical edition is able to create an overview of the entire tradition, assigning the available readings a specific place (i.e., either above or below the line) depending on their relative weight (i.e., on how archaic they can claim to be). Reading the *stemma codicum* (the genealogical tree of manuscripts) from top to bottom, we have an overview of everything that the tradition contains—not only the inferred (i.e., hypothetical) texts that are posited as having existed on the basis of the available manuscript evidence but also the actual, physically extant manuscripts that remain our only source of evidence for the tradition.

---

4 Ibid., 47 (Winternitz’s italics) and see also Moriz Winternitz, “Promemoria über die Nothwendigkeit einer kritischen Ausgabe des Mahābhārata, insbesondere der südindischen Recension,” *Almanach der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 51 (1901): 207: “I therefore already declared at the Paris Congress that a *critical edition of the Mahābhārata organized by Western scholars according to the principles of philological criticism valid in Europe is the conditio sine qua non of all Mahābhārata research*” (Winternitz’s italics).
A critical edition thus, as can be seen, represents the easiest and most elegant way to arrange the available information. As Contini observes, “a critical edition is, like any other scientific act, a mere working hypothesis, the most satisfactory, namely, the most economic one, and one which proves apt to connect a system of data.”\(^7\) This view has replaced the earlier tendency to regard a critical edition as a facsimile of an actually existing text, that is, either the text of the author’s hand, the so-called *autograph*, or a copy of this text, that is, an *apograph* that was the first source of the surviving tradition. This tendency became unsustainable not only because to maintain that the reconstruction corresponds in all its particulars to an actual text requires a leap of faith but also because of the positive evidence that not all the lines of the constituted text are of the same antiquity. As Sukthankar observes, the Mahābhārata critical edition “precisely like every other edition . . . is a mosaic of old and new matter. That is to say, in an average adhyāya of this edition (as of any other edition) we may read a stanza of the second century BC followed by one written in the second century AD. Sometimes the gap will occur in the middle of a line, precisely as in every other edition.”\(^8\)

In fact, every line or every word of the genealogical-reconstructive edition or the reconstructive edition, as we shall refer to it henceforth, occurs at a point on a continuum that we, along with Leonardi, might describe as being anchored between the text and its extant manuscripts that attest or witness to the text (hence called *witnesses*). In each case, a line either “[goes] back to a stage of the transmission as close as possible to the original text” or it “[represents] one or more outcomes of the process of transmission materially attested in the surviving tradition.”\(^9\)

---


8 V. S. Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” in *The Adiparvan for the First Time Critically Edited*, vol. 1 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), ciii.

Figure 1. The two options of a philology oriented toward the text and a philology oriented toward the witness.\textsuperscript{10}

A critical edition is thus the living image of the diachronic history of the text, with each element of it corresponding to a definite stage of the text. This will be either the archetype of the tradition in the cases where we are able to reduce the plurality of readings to one, or one of its descendants in the cases where we are able to unify only some branches of the tradition and encounter a \textit{crux} (i.e., two competing readings, either of which might be the original). In all cases, the critical edition will exhibit greater historical continuity (provided the editor has read the evidence correctly) than any of the competing editions, simply because of its concern with accurately modeling the history of the text. Thus, the text will be continued for the most part at the same level, namely, at the level of the archetype, \textit{except} where the editor has been unable to determine the reading that is the ancestor of all the others, at which point it will descend to the level of one of its \textit{hyparchetypes}.\textsuperscript{11} But even in respect of \textit{these} passages the constituted text is less eclectic than any of its witnesses, because it at least prints the next most proximate reading, rather than permitting the fall to continue uncontrollably through centuries. As Michele Barbi says, “it is not a matter of treating as certain what is only probable, or forcing everyone to accept our conclusions; but when one has illustrated to scholars the state of things and the reasons for and against a given conclusion, has one not done what science allows and demands? [. . .] Why should we give up considering each case for itself, and why should we not be allowed to substitute our cautious and reasoned judgment for that of a transcriber whose judgment [. . .] we do not see the reasons for and cannot measure the extent of?”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Modified from Leonardi, “Il testo come ipotesi (critica del manoscritto-base),” 7.

\textsuperscript{11} Sukthankar’s comment earlier (see n. 45) therefore needs to be relativized. The critical edition is a “mosaic of old and new matter,” but it is so to a \textit{lesser degree} than any of the competing editions, because of the editor’s concern with printing as archaic and as consistent a text as possible. In fact, except for the places where the text is forced to descend to the level of one of its hyparchetypes (i.e, subarchetypes or archetype of only one branch of the tradition)—these are the places indicated in the critical edition by the use of the wavy line—we have no reason for thinking the text is not continuous.

\textsuperscript{12} Michele Barbi, \textit{La nuova filologia e l’edizione dei nostri scrittori. Da Dante al Manzoni} (Florence: Sansoni, 1938), xxii–xxiii.
Understanding a critical edition in this more sophisticated way also permits us to clarify some pervasive misconceptions regarding the Mahābhārata critical edition. The critical edition is not an artificial text, a “Frankenstein’s monster, pieced together from various scraps of different bodies,” as some have suggested. It is, rather, a particular arrangement of textual materials (as, indeed, every edition is) undertaken with the aim of expunging centuries of scribal error and variation, and providing as close an approximation of the original text as possible. It is furthermore a rigorously scientific text, in that it follows a rational logic and that each of its steps is clearly documented. Contrary to the charge that it creates a new text, one that lacks either an organic community or continuity with the tradition, every line of the reconstructive edition is validated by the tradition. Recall that each line of the constituted text occurs at a point on a continuum defined by the two ends of the text and its witnesses. In the case that the editor is able to resolve the different manuscript readings and derive them from the putative original, the text that emerges is that of the author’s hand or one as close to it as possible. It is thus better and more accurate than any of the surviving variants.

13 The language is Doniger’s; see Wendy Doniger, “How to Escape the Curse,” review of The Mahabharata, translated by John Smith, London Review of Books 31, no. 19 (2009): 17–18. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n19/wendy-doniger/how-to-escape-the-curse (accessed October 13, 20015). The complete passage reads: “There are several recensions of the Mahābhārata, each preserved and cherished by a particular community. The critical edition, by contrast, is like Frankenstein’s monster, pieced together from various scraps of different bodies; its only community is that of the Pune scholars, the Frankensteins. Moreover, it left out a great deal of material that the Indian literary and religious traditions have continued to draw on, such as the passage in which Vyāsa dictates the entire text to the elephant-headed god Ganesha.”

14 These materials (one ought to be very clear about this to oneself) are not taken from the various manuscripts in existence. They are intellectually intuited as belonging to the common source of these manuscripts, based on well-understood rules and calculations of probability. For instance, if we have a tripartite stemma consisting of three extant manuscripts A, B, and C deriving from a lost, common source α and two of these manuscripts read m and n and m and n are not insignificant variations, what is the likelihood that two manuscripts simultaneously arrived at m while the third preserved the original reading n? In restoring the reading m to the reconstructed text, therefore, the editor does not “piece together” the edition from m and other such passages: rather, he intuits with his mind’s eye what the common source of the extant manuscripts must have contained, such that it can give rise to the observed variants or such that the observed variation between the witnesses can be satisfactorily explained.

15 See preceding note. “Validated by the tradition” does not mean that the line is taken from the manuscript or manuscripts that contain the line, for the line is included in the reconstructed text because it is logically understood as being a feature of the archetype, and this logical understanding is based on the tradition or undergirded by it though, in a sense, of course going beyond it.

16 These are both aspects Sukthankar is aware of. See his “Prolegomena,” lxxxvi: “Our objective can only be to reconstruct the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach, on the basis of the manuscript material available”; and ibid., ciii: “It only claims to be the most ancient one according to the direct line of transmission, purer than the others in so far as it is free from the obvious errors of copying and spurious additions” (all italics Sukthankar’s).
More likely, it will be attested in several since it represents the consensus of at least one branch of the manuscript tradition. The reading is also better than the alternatives, which the editor after careful evaluation discarded. In both cases, the constituted text represents a better text than that available in any of its witnesses.\textsuperscript{17} A verse found in a Telugu manuscript, for instance, only has that manuscript to attest to it. In contrast, every line of the critical edition of the Mahābhārata is of greater antiquity than any of the surviving witnesses. And while the constituted text of a critical edition is eclectic in the sense that it preserves readings of differing antiquity, it is no more so than any other edition. Indeed, the argument can be made that \textit{it is less so} because, as Timpanaro describes, “to this random and irrational eclecticism [of the tradition],” “[the editor] must oppose [his] choice, which is based on rational judgment and therefore is not eclectic in the pejorative sense.”\textsuperscript{18}

The charge of Frankensteinism is thus misguided. In contrast to the transmitted texts of the tradition, which are composites of the author’s intention and what the copyist understood or chose to write down in the specific case (and this over centuries), the critical edition offers a much more legible and scientific text. In his activity, the editor seeks to eliminate conflated sources (i.e., manuscripts copied from two or more sources, which are truly hybrid editions), he disentangles readings of doubtful or differing antiquity that have been commingled through the scribes’ activity, and he attempts to put in place, as much as is possible, materials of similar

\textsuperscript{17} Note that adopting particular recension of the Mahābhārata such as the Telugu recension, as Doniger suggests, also will not get around the problem. First, the Telugu recension is a composite not only in the sense of being a mixture of good readings with scribal changes, obvious errors, and so on but also because it includes much material from the neighboring Grantha recension. The Telugu recension was found to the most eclectic recension of the Mahābhārata. It contained material not only from the Grantha but also from Devanāgari, Bengali, and other northern sources. Second, which of the available Telugu manuscripts should we use? The Bhandarkar editors collected and examined twenty-eight manuscripts of the Telugu recension, of which three made it into the critical apparatus. Each of them contained a different mixture of readings and episodes. Which of these ought we to take as representative of the “Telugu recension”? The task of reducing the available readings to one cannot be avoided. Third, even if we restricted ourselves to just one exemplar (for example, the manuscript T1), the problem of “[leaving] out a great deal of material that the Indian literary and religious traditions have continued to draw on” will not be solved. For this exemplar, like any other manuscript of the Mahābhārata, represents just a selection of the material found in the complete Mahābhārata tradition. It also will leave out certain narratives. The problem can only be solved if we create an edition containing or representing all Mahābhārata manuscripts, but how else to present this information and evaluate narratives for their authenticity, other than by following a strictly hierarchical procedure, that is, subordinating the more recent readings to the more archaic?

antiquity. He does so, furthermore, using all the knowledge and judgment about the tradition at his disposal. And while his edition is an interpretation of the text, it is no less naïve to imagine that a copyist faced no interpretive choices when transcribing his exemplar than it is to maintain that “we can and must edit [recensere] without interpreting” (Lachmann). The emphasis on eclecticism thus obscures the real question: which is the more scientific and more legible text and which is the truer image of the diachronic reality of the tradition? Turning Doniger’s metaphor on its head, we could rather say that the editors of the Bhandarkar institute are like doctors who took off bandages and laid bare the patient’s sores, bringing to light what had been concealed and restoring what had been incorrectly joined or separated.

A second pervasive misconception that is almost the mirror-image of the first is that the Mahābhārata critical edition is merely an “Arbeitsinstrument” or working tool. This

---

19 Giorgio Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1952), 123, put this beautifully: “The better the judge of [. . . ] a reading knows the language and habits of the ages that transmitted his reading, or that may have coined it, the sounder his judgment will be. The best critic of a Greek text handed down by Byzantine tradition will be the one who, besides being a perfect Hellenist, is also a perfect Byzantinist. The best editor of a Latin author transmitted in Medieval or post-Medieval MSS will be the one who is as knowledgeable about the Middle Ages and Humanism as he is about the author and his language and times. Such a critic is an ideal that no one can perfectly incarnate, but that it is everyone’s duty to strive to come near to.” The translation is Trovato’s.

20 The metaphor is F. A. Wolf’s. The complete passage reads as follows: “A true, continuous, and systematic recension differs greatly from this frivolous and desultory method. In the latter we want only to cure indiscriminately the wounds that are conspicuous or are revealed by some manuscript or other. We pass over more [readings] which are good and passable as regards sense, but no better than the worst as regards authority. But a true recension, attended by the full complement of useful instruments, seeks out the author’s handiwork at every point. It examines in order the witnesses for every reading, not only for those that are suspect. It changes, only for the most serious reasons, readings that all of these approve. It accepts, only when they are supported by witnesses, others that are worthy in themselves of the author and accurate and elegant in their form. Not uncommonly, then, when the witnesses require it, a true recension replaces attractive readings with less attractive ones. It takes off bandages and lays bare the sores. Finally, it cures not only manifest ills, as bad doctors do, but hidden ones too.” F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, trans. with an introduction and notes by A. Grafton, G. W. Most, and J. E. G. Zetzel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 43–44.

21 The term is Oskar von Hinüber’s and the underlying objection is voiced by him so: “Looking back, the moment it [the critical edition] was planned turned out to be exceptionally fortuitous, as the methodological advances that have been achieved in the recent period would have prevented this edition [from being realized] for it is its stated goal to reconstruct the Ur-Mahābhārata, a task of which we know in the meantime that it is completely unattainable. The text that we read in the ‘critical’ edition never existed in this form. What has arisen is not the Ur-text, which could not have arisen at all, but a completely new normalized recension. . . . It is beyond question that they [the editors of the Mahābhārata critical edition] have presented researchers with an extremely useful working tool [Arbeitsinstrument], provided that it is used keeping in view its own methodological and historical conditions.” Oskar von Hinüber, “Der vernachlässigte Wortlaut. Die Problematik der Herausgabe buddhistischer Sanskrit-Texte, Zur Überlieferung, Kritik und Edition alter und neuerer Text,” in *Kleine Schriften*, Teil I, ed. Harry Falk and Walter Slaje (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 436.
misconception, found most often in the work of the German Mahābhārata critics whose Protestant makeup disposes them against the very idea of a text, arises from a misunderstanding regarding the nature of the editor’s activity. To the critic, it may appear as though the primary purpose of textual criticism is merely to provide “rational procedures for advancing the most likely hypothesis about what the original was like and how, in rough outline, it was transmitted down to its preserved witnesses.” But textual criticism also seeks to provide “an edition of an ancient text that is accessible to the modern reader and, at the same time, conforms to the intention of its author.” Without this aspect, the editor’s activity would be diminished. It would be reduced to the proposing of hypotheses, without contributing in any way to the preservation of the text. Indeed, it would lead to the radical separation of the activity of the critic from the readers of the text, a possibility that no one can seriously contemplate. As Leonardi reminds us, “The concept of a critical edition [also] implies a responsibility to propose a text that, while meeting the requirements of science and elucidating the manuscript tradition, is not merely accessible to specialists, but recovers a work of the past for a contemporary public to read; one that does not reproduce a document, but interprets the tradition as a whole as a means to transfer its textual reality into something that is readable today.” What was said earlier about the critical edition offering the most scientific, the most legible, and the most transparent text (in terms of its diachronic history) applies here too: to say that the critical edition offers the best possible text implies a concurrent responsibility to read the constituted text and not merely regard it as the object of specialist investigations. A text that cannot be read is not a text.

---

22 We find it, for instance, also in a letter addressed to one of the authors, warning against the error of reading the constituted text as running text. “The critical edition is no more than a convenient working tool [Arbeitsinstrument], with whose aid one can survey what is (hopefully) a representative selection of (hopefully) important manuscripts.” Michael Hahn, Letter to Vishwa Adluri, 10.2.2010, 4. But the constituted text is, in fact, running text and can be read as such. Indeed, it was Sukthankar’s explicit intent that it should be so: against the German critic Walter Ruben, who recommended an indiscriminate use of the wavy line (indicating uncertainty), Sukthankar opposed: “even a constituted text is after all a text, meant to be read like any other text, and not a chart of the aberrations of careless copyists of the last two millennia.” V. S. Sukthankar, “Epic Studies III: Dr. Ruben on the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata,” Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute 11, no. 3 (1930): 280.


24 Lorenzo Renzi and Alvise Andreose, Manuale di linguistica e filologia romanza (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009), 268.

The third misconception consists in thinking that the Mahābhārata critical edition merely provides a text of the Mahābhārata along with an apparatus of variants. As we have already dealt with the misconception that the critical edition provides just a text, we shall focus here on the second half of this statement. This misconception is evident in Sylvain Lévi’s suggestion to Sukthankar, made in a 1929 review of the first fascicule of the critical edition, that he might just print the text of the vulgate (i.e., the edition of Nilakaṇṭha, called the vulgate, because it is the most widespread) along with a list of the variants in other manuscripts. The problem with Lévi’s proposal, which he apparently advocated as a means to reduce the scope of editorial judgment (i.e., the use of subjective iudicium), is twofold. First, even if the editor is not supposed to select the best manuscript (the bon manuscrit, as it is called) and is supposed to merely reprint the vulgate rather than edit it, the proposal does not get around the problem of choosing between variants. For, which of the versions of the vulgate ought the editor to reprint? The printed editions, as Sukthankar observes, are inferior to the manuscripts of the vulgate. While the editor could, in theory, correct the printed editions using the manuscript sources, such an approach is hardly warranted, as Sukthankar notes. “It would, however, hardly repay, now, the trouble to re-edit, from manuscripts, the version of Nilakaṇṭha, as there are far better versions that could be edited instead, for instance, the Kaśmīri.” Correcting the printed editions would, furthermore, reintroduce the necessity of making editorial choices. Second,

26 See Sylvain Lévi, Review of The Mahābhārata. For the First Time Critically Edited, by Vishnu S. Sukthankar, *Journal Asiatique* 215 (1929): 347: “Si j’osais me permettre une suggestion dans ce domaine, je conseillerais à l’éditeur de renoncer, par pitié par nous, à la part même du travail qui lui tient le plus à coeur et qui apporte à son esprit le plus de satisfaction, la reconstruction de l’Ur-Mahābhārata comme il se plait à dire, d’accepter la Vulgate—autrement dit l’édition de Nilakaṇṭha, par exemple—comme point de départ, et de nous livrer au plus tôt le dépouillement, comme il est fourni par ses notes, des manuscrits décrits et classés selon l’excellente méthode qu’il a adoptée.”

27 Note that Lévi’s proposal goes a step beyond Bédier’s. Whereas Bédier only renounced Lachmannism for editing the bon manuscrit, Lévi requires the editor to renounce any attempt at interpreting the manuscript material, including the identification of the best manuscript. The editor is not supposed to edit at all; he is merely to reprint the vulgate. At most, his editorial activity extends to collating manuscripts and collecting (not even ordering) the variants. Here Lachmann’s dictum, “we can and must edit [recensere] without interpreting,” would truly be fulfilled, but hardly in a way the elder scholar could have desired.

28 “The (printed) editions of Nilakaṇṭha’s version leave much to be desired. They have arbitrarily changed many of the readings and added a certain number of lines which are not found in the Nilakaṇṭha manuscripts hitherto examined.” Sukthankar, *Prolegomena,* lxvii.

29 Ibid., lxviii.

30 Lévi could, of course, argue that the editor ought to select one manuscript of the vulgate and stick rigorously to it. But even here, he could not avoid giving a justification of why this manuscript over another, unless he wishes to be perfectly arbitrary. One sees that there is a threshold of evaluative activity below which an editor may not go. A
and more significant, Lévi seriously underestimates the value of a critical edition. A critical edition, as we have seen, is not just a text along with an apparatus of variants. It is, rather, the living image of the diachronic history of the text. By considering what manuscripts a reading is based upon, the reader is able to intuit not only the attestation for it but also its relative antiquity and authenticity. Inversely, by seeing how far back a variant or an episode can be traced, she can gain some sense of its date or even of its geographic origin. A critical edition represents the editor’s best understanding of the tradition, based upon his years-long digestion of the manuscript evidence. Granted an average reader may never read a critical edition in this nuanced way. She may never, for instance, appreciate that when a reading is attested by both the northern and southern recensions of the Mahābhārata, it is unambiguously the reading of the archetype, and so on. But the edition itself contains much more information than a mere list of variants would: it contains information on the families to which these variants belong, the classification and genealogical relationship of manuscripts, and the codicological weight of individual variants. In contrast, a mere list of variants—without any attempt to organize the information, that is, to classify the manuscripts into families, to group variants and to subordinate some of them to others—contains no other information beyond the mere fact of the existence of variants. It can hardly be considered a substitute for the true critical edition.

Critical edition can be made mechanical and free of subjectivity to a great extent: it cannot be automated completely.

31 We find the same error repeated in Georg von Simson, Mahābhārata: Die Große Erzählung von den Bhāratas (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 688 when the author asserts: “The value of the critical edition consists above all in the fact that it offers a wealth of readings in its critical apparatus and appendix that, in many cases, ease the task of interpretation, and that a not insignificant number of individual verses, groups of verses, or even longer textual passages that appear only in individual manuscripts or only in a few manuscripts have become recognizable beyond reproach as late additions.” Von Simson seriously underestimates the value of a critical edition, when he thinks its primary function is to supply the reader with variant readings “that lighten the task of interpretation.” Actually, the variants reprinted in the apparatus are precisely those the editor has rejected as being of doubtful authenticity. To restore them to the constituted text whenever the reader faces interpretive challenges undoes the point of establishing a critical text. Von Simson’s understanding is closer to Lévi’s here, for whom the apparatus represented more a spectrum of possibilities, from which anyone might choose. The reason von Simson recommends this is because his work consists primarily of identifying elements of the “oral epic,” and hence it is important for him to portray the critical apparatus as no more than a collection of readings, all of which are of equal authority (and some of which are of greater authority) than those of the constituted text.

32 Practically, as well, such a list would be far less useful than Lévi imagines. In a true critical apparatus, if the manuscripts a, b, c, d, and e belong to the family A and for a certain verse all of them feature the identical variant x, the editor does not need to list all of them separately. He can just note A x or A: x; depending on his conventions. This principle holds true even if one or more of them vary. In that case, he might note A (exc. b) x; b y or A (exc. b, c) x; b y e z or A (d as in text) x. This approach, of course, relies on his having completed a preliminary recensio or study of the manuscript materials so that he knows that a, b, c, d, and e are descendants of a common source. In
contrast, Lévi’s proposed list will merely contain the raw data from the initial collations (that is, the comparisons of the manuscripts), without the all-important preliminary digestion that the editor will have done for the reader. Indeed, since Lévi explicitly rejects genealogical analysis, this would be an apparatus without an accompanying stemma and hence almost completely useless. It will inform the reader that there exist variants, but he will not know what the value of those variants is, what the genetic relationship between them (or genetic relationship of the witnesses in which they occur) is, and whether it is legitimate to replace the printed text with a certain variant or not.

The text of the critical edition represents the text of the archetype, as best reconstructed by the editor on the basis of the available manuscript evidence. It is thus running text and is both more continuous and less eclectic than the other editions. Only in places where the editor is uncertain of the reading (indicated by a wavy line under the text) is the text discontinuous, based not on the consensus of the tradition but only a part of it. In the example, verses 20 and 21cd are unambiguously the reading of the archetype; a part of verse 21ab is marked as uncertain and represents, in this case, the reading of only some manuscripts. A look at the critical apparatus suffices for the reader to know exactly which manuscripts the text is based on and thus the stage of the tradition reconstructed or represented in the text before her. Reading a critical edition, then, is a matter of constant triangulation between three elements: the constituted text, the stemma, and the critical apparatus. Additionally, a reader may wish to keep in mind implicitly a diagram such as Leonardi’s line, which allows him to represent in space the successive transformations of the text. If a reader knows how to use these elements, she will never be in any doubt about what
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 sense of the archetype as an especially authoritative or, indeed, unique exemplar, for our stemma is only hypothetical and models only a part of the historical reality (i.e., that part that is either preserved in or can be reconstructed on the basis of our manuscripts).

Having examined three misconceptions of the Mahābhārata critical edition in the preceding section (namely: (1) the critical edition is eclectic; (2) the critical edition is not a text, and (3) the critical edition can be replaced by any other text with an apparatus of variants), let us turn to its interpretation. The correct interpretation of the constituted text is that it is the archetype of the extant tradition, that is to say, the latest common ancestor of the extant manuscripts that can be reconstructed on the basis of their evidence and therefore also the earliest form of the text that can be reconstructed on the basis of these manuscripts.²⁴

The extant witnesses will, of course, have older ancestors in common (for example, the source of the latest common ancestor and its source in turn, and so on), but nothing can be said about these texts because, once we have interpreted all the evidence and drawn the necessary inferences, there is no data left for us to arrange. We have accounted for all of the variant readings in the manuscripts (eliminating, for instance, the errors found only in individual branches of the tradition or in individual manuscripts), and so what we have is the earliest and

²⁴ Reeve and Trovato offer similar formulations:
Reeve: “a. (archetype of specific witnesses) latest common ancestor; b. (archetype of a work, or without qualification) latest common ancestor of the known witnesses; known witness when common ancestor of the rest.”
Trovato: “The archetype (archetype2) [is a text that] can be reconstructed logically—with varying degrees of accuracy—on the basis of the number of conjunctive errors that are common to all its descendants; that is, by subtracting from the total number of errors attested in the tradition all separative errors that are exclusive to each family of witnesses, and those characterizing individual witnesses.” Paolo Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method: A Non-Standard Handbook of Genealogical Textual Criticism in the Age of Post-Structuralism, Cladistics, and Copy-Text (Padua: Libreriauniversitaria, 2014), 64.
most authoritative text it is possible to reconstruct.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, while we might assume that some of the readings in our archetype might themselves be corruptions, we could not show that they were.\textsuperscript{36} There is no reason to interpret the constituted text of the Mahābhārata critical edition as anything other than what Sukthankar declares it to be, “the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach, on the basis of the manuscript material available.”\textsuperscript{37}

This sense of archetype, which we shall call the logical sense, must be distinguished from a second sense, which we shall refer to as the material or historical sense. As Timpanaro has shown, before the term archetype acquired the meaning it has today in textual criticism,\textsuperscript{38} it had an earlier meaning. “Scholars used to think that the Humanists (like the ancients before them; cf. Cicero, Ad Att. 16.3.1) meant by the term archetypum or codex archetypus only the ‘official text’ checked by the author and intended to be published afterward in further copies.”\textsuperscript{39} Trovato discusses how this older sense of archetype, which he calls archetype\textsubscript{1} and glosses as “official text, prepared by its author for publication,” is sometimes crossed with the first sense (archetype\textsubscript{2}) to yield a third sense of the term, that is, the archetype as “an especially authoritative exemplar, or as the result of a sudden and inexplicable bottleneck in the ancient

\textsuperscript{35} Barring divinatio (conjecture), of course. But for reasons that will be come clear, neither is there much scope for divinatio in the Mahābhārata nor are the Mahābhārata critics’ attempts to reconstruct an earlier stage of the transmission based upon divinatio, at least as this term is understood in textual criticism.

\textsuperscript{36} Note that no new arrangement of the data will permit us to reach an earlier stage of the tradition. We might, at most, restore some other variant or variants to the constituted text (moving ones we previously thought were original to the critical apparatus), but this text would once again be, by definition, the archetype, and therefore the earliest form of the text that can be reconstructed on the basis of the available evidence. Note also that from the fact that the scribe committed error z in moving from the archetype to one of its descendants, we cannot assume that he, or another scribe, must have likewise committed error y in moving from the ancestor of the archetype to the archetype. This would be an error of induction. And while testimonia such as fragments or archaeological and other kinds of historical evidence may cause us to revise some of our judgments, they will never justify us in editing our text drastically to fit those testimonia, for testimonia by their very nature are uncertain and they may be referring to a version of this text, an abridgment, or another text altogether, and so forth. This is the error we find committed in Schlingloff (Dieter Schlingloff, “The Oldest Extant Parvan-list of the Mahābhārata,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 89 [1969]: 334–38) and the literature based on his work. See John L. Brockington, “The Spitzer Manuscript and the Mahābhārata,” in From Turfan to Ajanta: Festschrift for Dieter Schlingloff on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday, ed. Eli Franco and Monika Zin (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2010), 75–87.

\textsuperscript{37} Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” lxxvi (Sukthankar’s italics).

\textsuperscript{38} That is, of a manuscript, detected through reconstruction, that stands at the apex of the stemma and from which the branching of the tradition began.

\textsuperscript{39} Timpanaro, The Genesis of Lachmann’s Method, 50.
and medieval tradition whereby only one copy survived.” Even highly experienced critics sometimes make this mistake. Kantorowicz writes that

it is possible, and often necessary, to distinguish from the original an “archetype”, which a “textual history”, often centuries long, separated from the original, and which was saved by chance, or because it carried an erudite version, until it came down, alone or with only a few companions, to a time closer to our own.31

Pasquali also states that

Lachmann founded his method on the assumption that the tradition of every author always and in every case harked back to a single exemplar that was already disfigured by errors and lacunas, which he called the archetype. No one doubts that this is mostly the case [. . . ]. On careful consideration, it must appear unlikely that in every case only one exemplar of each surviving work had been saved in the Middle Ages, whether Western or Byzantine, while all the others had perished with the fall of ancient civilization.42

The error lies, as Trovato observes, in confusing “two conceptual spheres that we need to keep distinct: the history of the tradition, with its unattainable real trees, that is, the often very rich ensemble of MSS that historically existed, including those that disappeared without leaving traces, and textual criticism, with its very tangible although perfectible stemmata codicum, based on the few MSS that have come down to us.”43 The ambiguity in the meaning of archetype, meaning once a hypothetical ancestor of the surviving manuscripts and once an actual

40 Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 64.
42 Pasquali, Storia della tradizione e critica del testo, 15, cited and translated in Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 65 (Trovato’s italics).
43 Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 65.
manuscript that alone survived the reduction in the number of exemplars in the “medieval” period, is responsible for much of the confusion in the interpretation of the critical edition.

This ambiguity is also at the root of a mistaken interpretation of the Mahābhārata critical edition, as we find it in the work of Georg von Simson. Observing that the Mahābhārata “cannot be regarded as the direct transcription of oral poetry,” von Simson asks, “how then is the emergence of our text to be understood?” He suggests that “these people [i.e., the hypothetical redactors of the Mahābhārata], after they had put together a first, rough version of the text [from out of the oral materials in circulation], continued to work on it and inserted additional passages, which we today recognize as interpolations.” Then he adds:

If however, we set out from the assumption the redactions had before them older versions of the Mahābhārata, then we must reckon with the fact that these older versions were already revised in various ways and that interpolations entered into them before they were evaluated for our Mahābhārata. Further, we may assume that even after the completion of the final redaction, for a certain period of time until the final separation of the north and south Indian recensions, interpolations entered into the text, and which hence could not be eliminated using the editorial principles of the Poona edition [i.e., the critical edition].

The history of development of our Mahābhārata text can then be outlined as follows:

---

44 Actually, there is no reason to assume such a thing in all but an infinitesimal percentage of texts. In the majority of cases where critics have assumed such a reduction, it can be shown that they are actually confusing the archetype in the first sense with the second. Even Timpanaro occasionally gives way to this error, as when he writes: “Some years ago, Courtney wrote a curious essay where he postulates a fourth-century archetype for all the Virgilian codices that have come down to us [. . . ]. He appears to be aware of the unlikelihood that a single copy of the Virgilian text was preserved at a certain point in antiquity,” not noticing that the confusion he attributes to Courtney is his own. Sebastiano Timpanaro, Per la storia della filologia virgiliana antica (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 1984), 181, cited and translated in Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 65. Without other evidence (for example, the testimony of ancient scribes or historiographers), we cannot know whether all the copies of a text had been reduced at some point to one. Only in cases where we possess only a single exemplar of a text, could we assume such a thing but to call this witness an archetype of itself would be an unusual use of the term.


46 Ibid., 282.

47 Ibid., 283.
(1) In the beginning there was [...] the short epic transmitted as an oral, improvised composition in the tradition. Here it is meaningless to inquire into the original text and the author: the poem was realized by several epic bards in constantly changing form, bard and author were identical in this stage. Out of this period arise many of the formulaic expressions of our Mahābhārata, the technique of the adhyāya introductions and conclusions, the schematic development of the small battle-scenes, etc.

(2) There followed a period of written fixation of the text [schriftlichen Fixierung des Textes], indeed, we can also assume with certainty that different versions of the poem were written down at different times [zu verschiedenen Zeiten verschiedene Fassungen des Gedichts aufgezeichnet wurden], of which the remains can still be traced in our text.

(3) Finally, an individual diaskeuast or a committee of diaskeuasts, compilers, or redactors took up the task of forging together from the different written versions in circulation [verschiedenen umlaufenden schriftlichen Fassungen] [...] a great epic intended to exceed all previous versions in both extent and comprehensivity. The result was a text that one can characterize as the goal of the Poona edition, a goal that could, of course, only be partially attained due to the inadequacy of the written transmission.

Note that Von Simson commits precisely the error that Trovato cautions against. From the fact that all the lines in our stemma converge at the apex, giving us a codex unicus, he concludes that the constriction in the tradition must have been real, and he uses this to once again open up the tradition above the archetype, giving the tradition the form of an hourglass. He explains the absence of any other descendants from the pre-archetypal tradition in terms of the influence or

---

the dominance of the archetype, which he calls “the final redaction” and attributes to the redactors’ desire to offer “as comprehensive a text as possible.”

Actually, however, the constriction in the tradition is only apparent. As Trovato observes,

> Tracing a tradition back to an archetype dating, say, from the fourth century, does not at all mean that ‘in antiquity’ (or in the Middle Ages, or in the early modern period) a single witness of our text was preserved, or a single copy that was authoritative for one reason or another. What it means is that the witnesses available today do not allow modern philologists to trace their way any further back than a given manuscript (usually lost), often far removed from the original, and sometimes datable with fairly reasonable approximation.

From the apparently unique nature of the archetype, we may not conclude that there was only one exemplar of the text in circulation, nor that this exemplar must have been a “final redaction.” Von Simson is clearly interpreting archetype in the second of our two senses listed earlier, that is, as “an especially authoritative exemplar, or as the result of a sudden and inexplicable bottleneck in the ancient and medieval tradition whereby only one copy survived.” But there is no evidence that such a constriction took place and hence also no evidence of a concerted, final redaction responsible for reducing the number of copies of the text to one. Von Simson’s error consists in not realizing that “the archetype of the stemma has nothing to do with the history of the tradition (official copies, if any; copies commissioned for

---

49 Von Simson, Alttindische epische Schlachtbeschreibung, 282.
50 Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 66.
51 Apparent, that is, only from the perspective of the tradition, for which there would have been many copies, and not from our perspective, from which the archetype is really unique. Perhaps corresponding to the distinction between the several senses of archetype we need to introduce a distinction between something that is a codex unicus for us and something that is a codex unicus simply or without qualification.
52 It does not matter whether this supposed redaction is called a “final redaction” (von Simson), a “normative redaction” (Andreas Bigger), or a “Gupta redaction” (James L. Fitzgerald): the error is the same. All three authors make the mistake of identifying this supposed exemplar with the constituted text reconstructed in the critical edition, Fitzgerald most egregiously in Brill’s Encyclopedia, when he introduces and discusses the Mahābhārata critical edition under the heading: “The Written Sanskrit Mahābhārata: The Gupta-Era Text Reconstructed from the Manuscript Tradition.”
53 Trovato, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method, 64.
circulation by the author himself, etc.), but only with the ensemble of manuscripts that happen to be available today, used by the philologist in the stage of recensio.” This is why Trovato recommends that textual critics “use the word archetype [only] to designate the point in the stemma beyond with the surviving tradition does not allow them to reach.”

Conclusion

The hypothetical ancestor of our manuscripts was probably one of several exemplars in existence at the time. It is only 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, however, is only apparent: it is a consequence of the fact that our stemma only models a part of the history of the text. From the apparently unique nature of the archetype, we may not conclude that there was an actual reduction in the number of exemplars at the time. A forteriori 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) only arises because some scholars do not know how to read the evidence of the stemma correctly.

Von Simson is not simply confused about the meaning of archetype; he also intentionally exploits the ambiguity in its meaning to contest the editor’s choices. From the fact that the number of variants decrease as we approach the archetype, he concludes that the archetypal variants must be the result of careful selection, and thus opts for polygenesis of variants above the archetype. The constituted text is retained as the archetype, although it now no longer refers either to the archetype in the technical sense (i.e., as the latest common ancestor of the extant manuscripts that can be reconstructed on the basis of their evidence) or to the archetype in the historical sense (i.e., as the official text of the author’s hand), but to mean “the late work of relatively untalented compilers.” Bizarrely, he holds on to the aim of a reconstruction of the archetype, even though his suggestion undermines the logical relationships on which the

---

54 Ibid., 66.
55 Von Simson, Altindische epische Schlachtbeschreibung, 285.
56 “All these features [errors in recollection, introduction of synonymous expressions, displacement of verses, etc.], which, together with the effects of the contamination of manuscripts, have made the creation of the critical edition so difficult appear to me, however, to exclude neither the hypothesis of an archetype of the extant manuscripts nor that of an Ur-text, to which these would have to be traced back. One must only be clear about the fact that this Ur-
reconstruction is premised, and proposes to resurrect an earlier stage of the tradition through a subjective evaluation of variants. According to him,

Since the older Bhārata or Mahābhārata versions were not suppressed by the gigantic epic all at once but only bit by bit, some of the regionally attested manuscript versions could go back to their influence. The hypothesis of an Ur-text is not significantly impaired by this assumption; but our attitude towards the readings will quite likely change, since they, in many cases, could easily be older than the Ur-text envisaged by the critical editor.⁵⁷

Scholars will recognize in this passage the source not only of Andreas Bigger’s “normative redaction” hypothesis or his hypothesis of a “parallel transmission”⁵⁸ of the Mahābhārata but also of his idea that some of the readings rejected from the constituted text might actually have a greater claim to antiquity than those of the archetype. This passage is also the source of Reinhold Grünendahl’s thesis that the text “was transcribed directly from the oral tradition in a particular script.”⁵⁹ His claim that “the text could have been fixed in a script from the oral tradition repeatedly and in completely different periods [der Text kann mehrmals und zu ganz verschiedenen Zeiten aus der mündlichen Tradition heraus fiziert worden sein]”⁶⁰ practically repeats verbatim Von Simson’s idea that “different versions of the poem were written down at different times [zu verschiedenen Zeiten verschiedene Fassungen des Gedichts aufgezeichnet wurden].” Finally, we may cite the work of James L. Fitzgerald, who cites, without crediting, Von Simson’s thesis that,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 285–86.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
The Pune text gives us an approximation of what must have been a very prestigious and important written Sanskrit text that eclipsed prior versions of the Mahābhārata both oral and written, though probably it did not eliminate them altogether.\textsuperscript{61}

Fitzgerald adds:

The critically established text is in part a ‘lowest common denominator,’ and while Sukthankar was right to posit that everything in this ‘Gupta archetype’ (not his designation) was faithfully transmitted everywhere (thus everything not found everywhere derives from some source outside the Gupta archetype), that putative fact does not mean that any and all textual elements not deriving from the Gupta archetype are posterior developments. \textit{In all likelihood there were prestigious written redactions of a Sanskrit \textit{Mahābhārata} prior to that of the Gupta era as well as major and minor oral traditions. Many elements of such traditions not included in the ‘official’ Gupta era redaction no doubt found their way into many, or even all, of the particular manuscript traditions through the normal processes of conflation.}\textsuperscript{62}

In spite of the widespread acceptance of von Simson’s thesis, however, it is unambiguously false. The critical edition does not provide any support for the thesis of “older Bhārata or Mahābhārata versions.” There is also no justification for thinking the text reconstructed in it is some especially prominent exemplar, the product of an intentional redaction, compilation of different narratives, replacement of oral versions, and the like.\textsuperscript{63} As we have seen, these

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Ibid. (Italics added.) And see also Fitzgerald, “Mahābhārata,” where Fitzgerald, combining von Simson’s and Bigger’s hypotheses, offers this account of the epic: “The text established by Sukthankar and his colleagues is an approximation of a written redaction of the text that became normative (Bigger 1998; Bigger 2002), which seems to have served as the actual written source of most of the subsequent manuscript tradition, but which evidently did not function as the sole source of the text of every parvan.”
\item[63] Philipp Maas thinks that “the final redaction(s) of the MBh, which would be the archetype(s) of all manuscripts, is/are the result of a single authorial/redactorial intention.” He adds: “In my view, the final redaction(s) of the MBh, which would be the archetype(s) of all manuscripts, is/are the result of a single authorial/redactorial intention. It is, however, improbable, in my view, that the comprehensive literary material was created anew for this occasion. I would rather assume that a lot of material (written and/or oral) was reused, rearranged, and
\end{footnotes}
interpretations are false, occasioned by a misconception regarding the nature of stemmatic reconstruction, namely, that because the archetype occupies an especially prominent position on our stemma, it must also have been an especially prominent exemplar for the tradition. In truth, however, the archetype may have been quite unexceptional from the perspective of the tradition. It is only chance that its descendants, rather than those of the other manuscripts in circulation at the time, survived. Further, in the absence of stemmatic arguments, how does Von Simson know that some readings “could easily be older than the Ur-text envisaged by the

adapted to the intentions that guided the composition of the MBh.” Philipp A. Maas, Communication to Vishwa Adîrî, online session on Academia.edu, October 10, 2015.

64 Note that these claims are also false for a second reason, namely, that von Simson’s arguments for an oral epic are merely suggestive and do not prove the existence of such an epic. As in his article “Die Einschaltung der Bhagavadgîtâ im Bhîṣma-pâvan des Mahabhârata,” Indo-Iranian Journal 11 (1968/69): 159–74, he uses the fact that questions are not answered immediately or in the most obvious way to suggest the work of later “interpolators,” and from this he concludes that the Mahabhârata, purified of these passages, would correspond roughly to the original oral bardic epic. This argument is doubly flawed, because:

1. Digression and the resumption of the original theme following a digression are not evidence for interpolation: the Mahabhârata has a naturally recursive style, and the repetition of groups of words or phrases is not restricted to “interpolators.” Von Simson’s analysis assumes that because the narrator resumes the narration with the same or similar introductory words after a digression, the intervening passage must be an insertion and the repetition evidence of a hasty attempt to smooth over the transition.

2. Even if von Simson could show that these passages are interpolations, this would not prove the existence of an earlier oral epic. Von Simson merely assumes that one of the characteristics of the oral tradition is its brevity, its focus on the main combatants, and its emphasis on warfare. But these could just as well be features of a written composition. Note that von Simson’s arguments also do not succeed in eradicating or altering the basic dimensions of the story: its placement within a mimetic universe, its location within the yuga framework, its representation as another stage of the conflict in the perennial conflict between the gods and the titans, and so on. The following is a typical example of his analysis:

Noting that Saṃjaya does not respond directly to Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s “precise question” (ke ‘raksan dakṣiṇam ca kram ācāryasya mahātmmanah | ke cottaram araksanta nighnataḥ śatravān raṇe) but instead describes how some of the Pāṇḍava heroes attack Droṇa and how the nighttime battle commences in general terms, he suggests that this is evidence for the following passages being an insertion into the original text. He further notes that a few lines later Dhṛtarāṣṭra once again interrupts Saṃjaya to ask about the combatants’ reactions to Droṇa’s appearance on the field and for further details (tasmin praviṣṭe duṛdharme srījayaṁ amitaivasi | amṛtyumṛtyum saṁrabdhe kā va ‘bhūd vai matis tadd). His conclusion is as follows: “verse 130.5 of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s question appears to be connected directly with 129.3[:] Whereas the final pada of this verse corresponds word for word with 129.3d, the diacuseaut attempts in another place to vary: he contrasts kathaṁ mṛtyum upeyivān in 129.4 with a better chosen kathaṁ . . . pāncatvam upajagnivān in 130.7. In the description of battle, death is spoken of often enough. However, when in spite of consulting the Pratika-Index, the word pāncatta is attested at the beginning of a pada only outside of the battle, except for this one case, then we can consider this as a definite sign for the latest origin of our passage.” Von Simson, Altdindische epische Schlachtbeschreibung, 208. Actually, the literal repetition amounts to four words (nighnataḥ śatravān raṇe and kathaṁ), three of which occur five times in the Mahabhârata (nighnataḥ śatravān alone occurs seven times and the singular form nighnataḥ śatrūn another seven) and are common enough words we might expect in a description of battle, and the fourth is one of the most common interrogatives in the Mahabhârata. Incidentally, there is nothing surprising about Saṃjaya initially responding with a general description of the battle: this is a common feature of the Mahabhârata and von Simson exaggerates the extent of discrepancy when he suggests that Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s is forced to restate his question.
critical editor”? The short answer is that he does not. His selection of “older” readings relies on a priori ideas of an older epic (for example, that the war books or scenes rich in words for conflict are older than the other sections). The suggestion that “the older Bhārata or Mahābhārata versions” would have been “suppressed by the gigantic epic [not] all at once but only bit by bit,” to be sure, offers a superficially plausible model of how these allegedly older readings might have survived past the constriction (or, as Andreas Bigger will later call it, the “normalization”) in the tradition. But as there is no evidence that such a redaction took place and the idea of a constriction is itself erroneous, the thesis’s probative value is nil. The idea rests on a misunderstanding concerning the nature of stemmatic reconstruction, coupled with some highly creative theorizing. Likewise, the suggestion that “some of the regionally attested manuscript versions could go back to their influence [i.e., the influence of putative older oral versions of the epic]” is a feint, intended to provide a superficially plausible model of how readings, rejected from the constituted text as being less archaic, might be older than those of the archetype. In reality, of course, the stemmatic arguments for these readings being corruptions is extremely strong, and someone who wishes to contest them would have to do so: either (1) on the basis of a different interpretation of the manuscript evidence, which von Simson has not done; or (2) by rejecting stemmatic arguments altogether, which von Simson has again not done. His thesis is thus a rather transparent attempt to hold on, seemingly, to stemmatic reconstruction, while advancing arguments for the antiquity of certain readings that are actually non-stemmatic in nature, that is to say, his work is critical in name only.

Von Simson’s 1974 Habilitationsschrift is rich in examples of this sort of subjective reconstruction. He argues in the introduction that “if anywhere, then traces of the old, orally improvising heroic poetry are to be found here [in the battle scenes].” He continues, “precisely the wealth of small duel-scenes offered the possibility of distinguishing the prosaic and the typical [elements] from the unique, the essayed original [elements], those leading to the artificial poetry that was conceived of in written form. The origins of the Mbh [Mahābhārata] out of an orally improvising epic poetry manifests itself in a wealth of details that are also demonstrable in the epic poetry of other peoples […]. That the description of battle contains older and more recent sections can be definitively demonstrated in at least some places.” Von Simson, Altindische epische Schlachterebeschreibung, 9. The methods he applies to this end are “statistical examinations of vocabulary and metrical analyses” and “[the identification of] repeated groups of verses” (also, occasionally a more nebulous criterion of “style”) (ibid., 10), and using these criteria he in fact does eliminate a number of verses. Note that the criteria are subjective and the argument circular, and that von Simson’s claim to “continue the text-critical work [already done by Sukthankar] on the basis of the Poona edition [that is, the Mahābhārata critical edition]” (ibid., 7) is a serious confusion of lower criticism with higher.
At this point von Simson might interject that although he was mistaken as regards the constriction the fact that there were several exemplars of the Mahābhārata in existence at the time of the archetype makes it especially likely that the critical edition represents just one version of the work. It could therefore well be the case that the archetype was an authoritative exemplar, specifically redacted by the Brahmans and thereafter copied assiduously so that it replaced all other exemplars. Since our stemma models only a part of the historical reality, we would be hasty to assume that this version is an accurate representative of the broader tradition. It may model just that part the Brahmans cared to preserve, and hence he is not wrong to seek to discern the outlines of a heroic Aryan, Kṣatriya tradition that would have preceded the Brahmanic one and been opposed to it.

The problem with this argument is threefold:

1. Von Simson’s argument only shifts the problem one level further, that is, from above the archetype to either adjacent to it or below it. It does not overcome the central difficulty that, in the absence of manuscripts or positive historical information, we have no reason to assume the existence of a heroic oral epic. If there is no evidence for a reduction of a plural epic tradition above the archetype into it, there is also no evidence for such a reduction alongside or shortly after it.

2. Note also that the fact that we do not possess all exemplars ever produced does not mean that our stemma is not an accurate representation of reality. As Timpanaro observes, “if it were possible to trace out the genealogical tree of all the manuscripts of a given text that really existed (what Fourquet and Castellani call 'the real tree’), then this would almost always turn out to be much richer than the stemma we end up reconstructing on the basis of shared corruptions.” But “for the purposes of recensio this causes no problems: our simplified stemmas function just as well for reconstructing the reading of the archetype as they would if we were able to trace out the 'real stemmas.’”\(^{66}\) Although our hypothetical stemma only models part of the reality, and our reconstruction would be much richer if we had access to more manuscripts (and it would

---

take us back to a much earlier stage of the tradition were we to have access to older manuscripts or manuscripts related to our witnesses through extremely remote ancestors), the text we restore would still be a recognizably a text of this work. It would not, for instance, take us back to a different work altogether. At most we would be able to identify some more latent errors in our archetype or find that features we thought our witnesses owed to it are in fact owed to a still earlier ancestor. But we would not find that our archetype is exceptional in any way. Consider, for example, the following simplified stemma:

Figure 3. The part stands in for the whole.

In the example, \( \omega \) was copied at \( \theta, \delta, \varepsilon, \) and \( \iota. \) \( \theta \) generated further copies at \( \alpha, B, \) and \( \gamma; \) \( \alpha \) generated copies at \( A \) and \( \beta, \varepsilon \) at \( \eta \) and \( \zeta, \) and \( \iota \) at \( x \) and \( \lambda. \) \( \delta \) was destroyed before it produced

---

67 Something similar can be observed in the effort to sequence all of the genes of the human in the Human Genome Project. Even though every human carries a slightly different combination of DNA bases or “letters,” sequencing the genes of just a few sample individuals (in actual fact over 70% of the reference genome came from a single male donor) still provides us with a fairly accurate picture of the human genome. If we added more samples, we would obtain a more fine-grained picture (something that is being done in the project to develop a haplotype map of the human genome), but we would not suddenly, for instance, end up with the chimpanzee genome. We would deepen our understanding of individual variation and the range of our analysis, but because the individuals we are studying are all members of the same family, we would still find that the genome initially sequenced is an accurate representation of the whole.

68 In the diagram above, although we possess only the part \( \theta \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \) (\( \theta \) reconstructed on the basis of \( AB \)), \( \theta \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \) nonetheless stands in for the whole because, as in a hologram, every part contains the whole. \( \theta \) will give us the work \( x, \) which is contained in all of its exemplars without it ever being identical with any of them including \( \omega. \) It may give us that work with variations—as do all of the exemplars: even in \( \omega, \) where \( x \) comes as close to being realized as possible, \( \omega \) is never fully identical with \( x, \) the work in mente, even before we take into account the possibility of scribal errors, authorial revisions and the like—but it gives us that work nonetheless.
further copies, A and B survived, but β, γ, η, ζ, and κ and λ did not. Our stemma would reconstruct only a part of the historical reality (θ–A–B). The fact that we do not have access to α makes no difference to the reconstruction because, as Trovato observes, “the lines of stemmata, like geometrical lines, are composed of infinite points,” that is to say there could have been infinitely many intermediate copies between θ and A (or α and A) without it making any difference to the reconstruction. Access to β would also not help us, since the errors unique to it are of no use in reconstructing the reading of the archetype and those it shares with A could be owed just as well to α as to θ. If we had access to γ we would be more secure of reconstructing θ, but we would still be unable to reconstruct an earlier stage of the tradition.

Access to either δ, ε, or ι (or if ε and ι are destroyed to η, ζ, κ, and λ, since we could restore the reading of ε from η and ζ and of ι from κ and λ) would permit us to reconstruct ω, and in this case we would be reconstructing an earlier stage of the tradition. But note that ω remains the archetype and the text that we obtain, though older, would not be radically different, since θ, δ, ε, and ι are all copies of the same work. Although the versions more likely to survive are those of successful editions (i.e., the so-called vulgatae) or those that produce the most descendants, unless we had a reason for thinking that the text had undergone a drastic change in the time it was copied from ω to δ (or ε or ι) and the time it was copied from ω to θ, there is no reason for thinking that δ, ε, and ι represent Kṣatriya versions of the epic and θ the Brahmanic version of it. As for the suggestion that θ might itself be the “Brahmanic redaction,” what sense does it then make to assert that it is a copy of ω? θ would then be a new work, and far from possessing just the archetype of the surviving manuscripts, we would have the first source of the entire tradition, whether surviving or lost, that is, the original. Unless we can prove that θ is a completely different text (something that requires another exemplar for comparison, i.e., either

---

69 Trovato, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method*, 148.
70 Could von Simson accept that θ is the original, a work in fieri, the apex not only of our hypothetical stemma but also of the historical tree (the arbre réel) and yet insist that one must draw a dotted into θ from some point still higher than it, indicating contamination from an earlier source? He could, but only if he had another manuscript for comparison, that is, either an apograph of this source or a quotation from it or even testimony about it. But the Mahābhārata cannot itself be both the example of a contaminated text and evidence for the source of contamination.
δ, ε, ι or one of their descendants), we are justified in thinking that the part of the tradition we have (AB) stands in for the whole.\footnote{Vincenzo Guidi and Paolo Trovato, “Sugli stemmi bipartiti. Decimazione, assimmetria e calcolo delle probabilità,” \textit{Filologia italiana} 1 (2004): 9–48.} It would be unparsimonious to think otherwise.\footnote{Note that it is also unbelievable to think that $\theta$ represented such a major innovation over $\omega$ yet no one noticed the difference or that the other exemplars, which would now not just be better or worse copies of the same text but completely different texts than that $\theta$, were not conserved. The reasons for extinction of a line are varied and include natural catastrophes, unfavorable economic and social conditions, and so on, but one of them is clearly that successful editions that meet popular demand lessen the incentive to continue copying earlier models. In this case, since $\theta$ is not just an edition of $\omega$ but a completely different work, we have no reason for thinking that $\omega$ would not continue to be preserved from one of its other descendants. Von Simson’s argument assumes just that blend of malevolence and destructiveness that he attributes to the Brahmans, the proof of which is supposed to be that the original has not survived!}

3. More seriously, von Simson has not understood the way manuscripts are created and destroyed at all. He thinks that some exceptional event such as the destruction of the heroic Kṣatriya culture and concerted efforts by Brahmans to assert their own religious ideology must be required in order to reduce the number of copies available to one. But in truth the process is much less spectacular. As Vincenzo Guidi and Paolo Trovato have shown,\footnote{Vincenzo Guidi and Paolo Trovato, “Sugli stemmi bipartiti. Decimazione, assimmetria e calcolo delle probabilità,” \textit{Filologia italiana} 1 (2004): 9–48.} at almost all rates of decimation, the probability of a one-branched tradition is higher than the alternatives. Although their analysis is dependent upon the tradition studied,\footnote{Guidi and Trovato restricted themselves to the traditions of printed editions, which have the advantage that the entire tradition, as well as the exact dates of creation and loss of exemplars, are known.} they conclude that the calculations are also applicable to the study of real trees. Indeed, Trovato notes:
Whatever the decimation rates used in our experiments, it is intuitively evident that, given any real tree, with 2, 3, or exceptionally even 5 or 6 branches, the chances of survival for any of its primary branches (which we can call real families) will be:

a. high if it is a family crowded with witnesses (and therefore in many cases with further branches of its own),
b. low if it is a family with few members,
c. very low, or non-existent, if it is a family composed of a single manuscript.\textsuperscript{75}

Thus all that is required for other, hypothetically existent branches of the Mahābhārata to have died out is that the number of copies in these branches should have been below a certain threshold—\textit{without the necessity to assume that the copies contained significantly different versions of the epic}. For the tradition of Sannazaro’s Arcadia, Guidi and Trovato were able to show that it sufficed “for the decimation rate to be above 51.6\% for there to be a high probability of ending up with a two-branched stemma and the extinction of the archetype.”\textsuperscript{76} Given the vicissitudes of manuscript transmission it is indeed quite plausible that all our surviving manuscripts are descended, directly or indirectly from a single source, without that source, for that reason, having to be the sole manuscript in existence at that time,\textsuperscript{77} and without it having to be a special Brahman-dominated version, “reflect[ive] of the[ir] view […] and […] to a great extent driven by their interests and ideologically prejudiced.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} Trovato, \textit{Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method}, 145.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} To be very clear, we are discussing two different things here: the first is whether the archetype was the sole manuscript in existence at the time of its creation or at the time copies were made from it (it was not); the second is whether it is possible that branches of the tradition deriving from other exemplars in existence might have become extinct over time, leaving this branch as the sole one in existence (it is highly probable, as Guidi and Trovato’s work and the experience of other editors shows). Thus von Simson is wrong on multiple counts: first he thinks that the archetype was the only text in existence at the time; then he imagines that a special event was required to make sure this was the only text in existence at the time; and finally, he also confuses the gradual decimation of exemplars over time below the one exemplar that happened to generate copies that survived, leading to this branch of the tradition becoming the sole branch that we can reconstruct, with the extinction of the Kṣatriya tradition all at once and alongside or just prior to the archetype (barring those “surviving” elements, of course, that he thinks he can detect with higher critical means in the Mahābhārata).
\textsuperscript{78} Von Simson, \textit{Mahābhārata: Die Große Erzählung von den Bhāratas}, 591.
The following example will illustrate the process of transmission of a work, as well as show that the constituted text need not be as late as is widely thought:

Figure 4. The birth and death of manuscripts.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} Reproduced from Trovato, \textit{Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lachmann’s Method}, 139. The original is from Michael P. Weitzman, “Computer Simulation of the Development of Manuscript Traditions,” \textit{Bulletin of the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing} 10, no. 2 (1982): 55–59, but we have been unable to examine this work. Weitzman’s convention is to designate lost exemplars by means of circles; dotted circles represent exemplars about to disappear. This work came to our notice after the completion of chapter 3 of this work, but note the similarity in conventions in figures 58–60, though the small circles used to terminate the lines there represent the dead-ending of the tradition in the sense that that particular manuscript ceases to be copied and a new, expanded tradition is set forth rather than the loss of the exemplar. Nonetheless the resemblance is striking.
At AD 941, three copies (10, 12, and 13) of the work survive and the tradition consists of two branches. At AD 1144, 12 is lost, but not before it has been able to set forth the tradition (of which again copies 15, 16, 18, 23, and 25 are lost; only 22 survives). Copy 13 is about to disappear, but has generated five descendants. At AD 1287, the last surviving manuscript of the left branch (22) is about to disappear; without it, the original cannot be reconstructed any more. Nonetheless the surviving witnesses permit us to reconstruct 13, which as their latest common ancestor is the archetype. If a part of the tradition descended from 13 had been damaged (for example, 90–92), this would not matter, because we would still be able to infer the existence of 21 from 96 and 105 (though not their intermediate archetypes), and so reconstruct 13. If, on the contrary, 96 and 105 were destroyed as well, we would only be able to reconstruct 32, which in this case would be the archetype. Note that we do not need to possess all of the manuscripts that were ever produced to be able to reconstruct the archetype. If 22 or any of its descendants had survived, we would be able to reconstruct the original itself: 22 would have been more valuable to us than any number of descendants of 13 (provided we had at least one).

This example, though adapted from its original context, illustrates the danger of thinking that the Mahābhārata critical edition reconstructs a “Gupta-era text” (Fitzgerald) and the like. Indeed, the truth is that we do not know, because the complete tradition is almost never spread out before our eyes like this. 91 and 101 are very late copies, separated by seven generations from the original, yet their agreement is enough to give us the text of 13, removed just two generations from the original. All that counts is for our manuscripts to model as wide a spectrum of the tradition as possible. One good manuscript deriving from higher in the hierarchy brings us much closer to the original than several lower down in the stemma, and the lateness of our manuscripts should not be used as an argument for the lack of originality of the text reconstructed in the critical edition. In the example above, a late sixteenth or seventeenth-

---

80 See preceding note. Apparently, Weitzman was the first to invent the diagrams to demonstrate the random loss of exemplars and the evolution of the tradition. Weitzman and Trovato both feature the diagrams in order to make a point about the frequency of two-branched stemmata (namely, that given random manuscript “death” a two-branched stemma still turns out to be the likeliest alternative). Our concern here, however, is not with the likelihood of bipartite stemmata but the constantly changing position or the constantly changing identification of the archetype in the stemma.
century copy of 22, presuming it had survived until then, would have been more valuable than fourteenth or fifteenth century copies of 32. And since we do not know which manuscripts our witnesses are copies of, and we have as yet no way of estimating their distance from the original,\textsuperscript{81} we should really place much greater faith in the fact that we have some excellent manuscripts, whose text may go back to second or third century CE sources,\textsuperscript{82} or even earlier, and that we appear not to have lost any significant part of the tradition. If Sukthankar’s testimony, “there is nothing to suggest that our Mahâbhârata manuscripts have suffered any serious loss at any time. There never was any lack of manuscripts, many of which were preserved carefully in temples, and which must have been copied repeatedly, for the enhancement of merits. There is no evidence of any break in the tradition at any time or any place, within the confines of India at least. The probable inference is that our manuscripts contain all that was there originally to hand down, and more,”\textsuperscript{83} is correct then there is reason to think that the Mahâbhârata as reconstructed in the critical edition is essentially the work as it always existed: as we saw in the example above, all that matters is that we should have one exemplar from the left branch of the tradition for us to be able to reconstruct the original. In other words, what is decisive is not the loss of individual manuscripts but the \textit{annihilation of entire branches}. As long

\textsuperscript{81} Spencer and Howe have developed algorithms to measure the distance between manuscripts (see Matthew Spencer and Christopher J. Howe, “Estimating Distance between Manuscripts Based on Copying Errors,” \textit{Literary and Linguistic Computing} 16, no. 4 [2001]: 467–84), but their work relies on treating manuscript transmission as similar to the transmission of genetic information (the text is interpreted by them as a sequence, with individual words corresponding to nucleotides). The problem with this approach is that, in the case of genetic transmission, we can know the approximate rates at which genetic errors crop up; in the case of manuscripts, the rate of corruption cannot be determined independently of historical information. It will also vary depending upon the tradition studied. Spencer and Howe acknowledge these limitations of their work.

\textsuperscript{82} The oldest dated manuscript of the Ādiparvan is the Nepâli manuscript N3 dated 1511 AD. Sukthankar estimates that the Śāradā codex Ś1 is “three or four centuries old.” Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” xvii. That would place it in around the sixteenth century CE. The text of this manuscript appears to be very old: it is free of almost all of the “modern” interpolations that characterize the other manuscripts; it is free of their innovations; the language is decidedly archaic. Assuming that birch-bark manuscripts last 300–400 years before they begin to deteriorate and that an upper limit for the age of palm-leaf manuscripts is 800–1000 years (our source is D. C. Sircar, \textit{Indian Epigraphy} [Delhi: Motılıl Banarsidass, 1965] and see also A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, “An Epigraphical Note on Palm-leaf, Paper and Birch-Bark,” \textit{Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal} LXIX, II [1900]: 93–134; Stefan Baums, “Gandhāran Scrolls: Rediscovering an Ancient Manuscript Type,” in \textit{Manuscript Cultures: Mapping the Field}, ed. Jörg Quenzer, Dmitry Bondarev, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch [Berlin, Munich, and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014], 183–226 describes birch-bark manuscripts dating back to the second century BCE, but these appear to be exceptional cases), and keeping in mind the fact that its text appears very old, the scribe of the Śāradā codex may have had access to an exemplar from the eight or ninth century CE. If that scribe in turn had access to an old exemplar, we would be looking at a text handed down from the second century CE, which puts us perhaps just one or two generations away from the autograph.

\textsuperscript{83} Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” xcv (Sukthankar’s italics).
as even one descendant of the branch survives, its essential information is preserved and that means that, provided none of the higher-level branches have been fully decimated, we can reconstruct a very early stage of the transmission. If, as Sukthankar suggests, there was continuous copying of manuscripts it is entirely plausible that even higher-level branches of the Mahābhārata tradition have been preserved (note that it is not the preservation of lower-level branches that counts). It does not matter that these branches have been preserved through frequent copying because the fact that our witnesses are three or four generations removed from the source matters less than the fact that, when overlaid over each other, so to speak, they give us exceptional resolution of the original.84 There is really no reason for thinking that the text we possess is anything other than the Mahābhārata as it always was: a work of philosophy, law, cosmology, and didactics.

Von Simson’s attempted “text critical [textkritische] investigations” into the Mahābhārata thus mark a turn away from the methodological advances of the nineteenth century (i.e., the introduction of a systematic recensio85 and replacement of the much-dreaded emendatio ope ingenii with emendatio ope codicum86). They actually set the field of textual criticism back two hundred years, to a stage before the discovery that it is possible to reconstruct archetypes following a mathematical and universally replicable procedure. In place of objective rules and calculations of probability for deriving the reading of the ancestor of a set of given manuscripts, von Simson’s work advocates a return to an arbitrary and subjective Textkritik, where readings are selected at random because they conform to some preconceived notion of the original epic. As was demonstrated in The Nay Science, the arguments for defending the greater antiquity of some readings or passages over others are always the same and they are always four: (1) the bardic hypothesis, (2) the Kṣatriya hypothesis, (3) the war narrative hypothesis, and (4) the Brahmanic hypothesis.87 The redefinition of the constituted text of the critical edition as a conscious redaction of earlier oral epic materials thus permits a recourse to a well-established

84 As ever, frequent manuscript copying is the best remedy against loss of the tradition and what frequent copying introduces in terms of errors it more than makes up in terms of preserving the tradition (that is to say, a lower signal to noise ratio, that is, a higher level of noise, is preferable to no signal at all).
85 That is, the systematic review or examination of the available manuscripts (or at least a large selection of them).
86 That is, emendation with the help of native wit and emendation with the help of manuscripts.
87 Adluri and Bagchee, The Nay Science, 79–83.
German tradition of interpreting the Mahābhārata as evidence of enslavement by the Brahmans and the downfall of heroic Aryan Kṣatriyahood.\textsuperscript{88} We cannot even make the argument here that von Simson is advocating a return to the greater use of subjective \textit{iudicium}, that is, the greater use of the editor’s subjective judgment of the authenticity and quality of readings, because that would presuppose a familiarity with criteria such as the \textit{usus scribendi} or the scribe’s habitual style and \textit{lectio difficilior} (i.e., the principle that the more difficult or the more obscure reading is to be preferred), neither of which are applicable here because: (1) von Simson

\textsuperscript{88} See von Simson’s introduction to his abridged translation of the Mahābhārata (\textit{Mahābhārata: Die Große Erzählung von den Bhāratas}). After stating, “Researchers are still divided about the genesis of the Sanskrit version, which dates back possibly to the middle of the first century BC but was probably brought into the form we know today only centuries later” (ibid., 583), he writes, “as with the Trojan War depicted in the Homeric \textit{Iliad}, in the center of the Mahābhārata there is a war, which we are unable to locate politically and historically” (ibid., 585). Then he continues: “The Brahan authors and redactors, to whom we owe the latest revisions of the epic, sought to legitimize by all the rhetorical means [at their disposal] a social structure in which they could claim the dominant role. Already since the late-Vedic period the battle for supremacy between the Kṣatriyas and Brahmans was a constant topic [. . . .] The picture that we encounter here [in the Mahābhārata] is by no means a balanced one, but rather, reflects the view of the Brahmanic revisionists of the epic, and this view is to a great extent driven by their interests and ideologically prejudiced. The interests of the Brahmans, that is, the class-interests of the priests and intellectuals, are clearly expressed above all in Books III, XII, and XIII where there was rich occasion for reminding the Kṣatriyas, that is, the members of the warrior class, of their duties and for warning them by means of situable narrative examples of the punishments that threaten for oversetting bounds. Such reprimands can even be put in the mouths of Kṣatriyas, as is the case, for example, Kṛṣṇa in the ‘Bhagavadgītā’ or Bhīṣma in Books XII and XIII—probably they attained even greater significance in this way” (ibid., 591). See also ibid., 603: “Such textual passages, which retard [the action] and invite one to reflect [on it] and provide a commentary on the main narrative from moral and philosophical perspectives, could hardly have belonged to the oldest poem, which appears to have known only an articulation of the plot into ‘the quarrel,’ ‘the forest-exile,’ and ‘the war,’ as is appropriate to a heroic poem”; ibid., 638: “He [Vyāsa] is a Brahman, priest, seer, and ascetic—his introduction as the author of the Mahābhārata thus robably first occurred in the period when the Brahmans had taken over the poem from the sūtras, the epic bards”; ibid., 639: “The great battle, however, in which we may see the core of the old heroic poem, is narrated by the charioteer (sūtra) Saṁjaya to his master, the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra”; ibid., 640: “the fixation of the text in writing was, in fact, preceded by a phase in which epic materials were passed on by orally improvising epic bards, whom we can thus identify with the sūtras”; ibid., 641: “Although there are indications of early precursors of the Mahābhārata that were possibly transmitted only orally [and were] perhaps closer to ballads than to an epic, [precursors] that may have emerged in the milieu of the sūtras which was closer to the Kṣatriyas, the text we possess places so much emphasis on the superiority of the Brahmans over the Kṣatriyas (founded on their spirituality and ascetic lifestyle) that one can infer an extensive revision by the Brahmans”; “Here [in the fifth book] the talk is still of the glory of the warriors, which may have been the genuine topic of the old bardic poem”; ibid., 643: “The animosity of the Brahmans toward the warrior nobility that is expressed here indicates just how far the Mahābhārata had traveled from its origins in a bardic poem that probably had a much closer connection with the Kṣatriyas. The repeated destruction of the Kṣatriyas occurs as a punishment for their arrogance and their insufficient respect vis-à-vis the Brahmans. It is thus not a glorious victory as was the case in the old heroic poem”; ibid., 644: “certainly, it was this the main objective of the Brahmanic revisionists of the heroic poem that had been transmitted of old, namely, to impel the Kṣatriyas to accept the Brahmanic legal order [. . .] and ibid., 645: “there once existed different forms of the Bhrārata poem in competition with another, be they oral or be they written, which were then at some point combined into a [single] text by the redactional activity of the Brahmans.” And see also 632 and 664 for references to “Indo-Germanic” and “Aryan,” respectively as characterizing the earliest stage of the epic.
does not think there was a single author and cannot be familiar with his style; and (2) he does not know which is the lectio difficilior since he is not comparing two readings, one of which represents the banalization of the other, but two readings, one of which is supposed to represent the “official” choice of the Mahābhārata redactors and the other the “original” content of the bardic narration. In fact, the only criterion that will be applicable here is the critic’s sense of what may or may not have been appropriate to a heroic culture—a criterion that was already applied in the work of Adolf Holtzmann Jr.\(^89\)

As the unacknowledged source of almost all modern Mahābhārata criticism in the period after the completion of the critical edition, von Simson’s work has had a massive influence on the reception of the Mahābhārata. Yet it is completely false. It has given scholars a way to recast or to completely get around the evidence of the critical edition. As the earliest stage of the text that can be reconstructed using scientific means, the latter posed a major challenge to the Mahābhārata critics’ theories of a heroic original epic, with later Brahmanic and \textit{bhakti} interpolations. The critical edition offered no support for the distinction of “epic” from “pseudo-epic” elements. It also did not justify the scholars’ claims that some parts of the constituted text of the Mahābhārata might be earlier than others, or their attempted “layering” of the epic. It did not, for instance, support their contention that the Bhagavadgītā was not originally part of the epic or that some books such as the post-war Śānti- and Anuśāsana-parvans were added after the formation of the original epic. There was also no evidence to support the thesis of three historical versions of the epic, corresponding to its three narrations (i.e., the narration by Ugraśravas to Śaunaka, by Vaiśaṃpāyana to Janamejaya, and by Vyāsa to his disciples). Even though it decisively rejected some of the most popular narratives in the Mahābhārata tradition as later insertions, the text the critical edition produced was much closer

---
\(^89\) See Adluri and Bagchee, \textit{The Nay Science}, chapter 2. The key passage from Holtzmann Jr. is this: “We thus find some similarities in the conditions of the most ancient Indian and the most ancient Germanic periods; here and there we encounter a battle-lusty warrior race with all the seeds of culture alongside a cruel crudeness of passion. Whether here one must suppose [that the epic is] a recollection of a primordial age during which they lived together or a further development that ran parallel under similar existential conditions, I cannot decide here. [But] it is certain that the \textit{Mahābhārata} has preserved traces for us that reach back to a very early period of Indian antiquity; that therein recollections of an Indo-Germanic primordial age have been preserved, is, at least so far, at best plausible.” Adolf Holtzmann Jr., \textit{Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata} (Kiel: C. F. Haessler, 1892), 51 (italics added).
to the traditional reception of the Indian epic, that is, as a body of inspired literature, than to the assertions of the German critics. The Mahābhārata critics had hoped for a critical edition as the best means for undermining the authority of the textual tradition, and the Bhandarkar editors had countered with an edition bearing out the traditional reception of the epic. If the critics were to continue, they would have to redefine the evidence of the critical edition in a way conducive to their speculative views, and this explains the contemporary significance of theories that the Mahābhārata critical edition captures but a late stage—specifically the stage of its first transcription from an older, fluid oral epic tradition—of its transmission. Von Simson’s thesis offered a way to claim that they were cognizant of the Mahābhārata critical edition and took its evidence into account in their work, while continuing the kind of subjective, unscientific, and only allegedly historical reconstructions they had previously undertaken. As the basis of

---

90 The relevant passages are to be found in Winternitz’s article “The Mahabharata,” The Visva-Bharati Quarterly 1 (1924): 343–47. See especially 343: “[I]f I wished to show you the difference between the Indian and the Western attitude of mind in studying things Indian, I could not do better than showing you what the Mahábhárata is to us, why we study it and how we study it”; “Every Indian is justly proud of the Mahábhárata, and every Indian probably knows something of the story and the characters of the great Epic. But I venture to doubt whether many Indians know what the Mahábhárata really is and all that it contains in its hundred thousand slokas. For, as I have said, it is rather a whole literature than a single poem”; “Mahábhárata is an abbreviation of Mahábhárat-ákhyána, and means ‘the great story of the battle of the Bháratas.’ The Bháratas are mentioned already in the Rigveda as a warlike tribe, and in the Bráhmans we first meet with Bharata, the son of Duhsanta and Sakuntalá, who is considered as the ancestor of the royal family of the Bháratas”; 344: “In consequence of some family quarrel in the royal dynasty of the Kauravas, there arose a great and bloody war, in which the old family of the Kauravas or Bháratas was almost entirely annihilated. Although we know of this war only from the Mahábhárata, and not from any other sources, we shall have to look upon it as most probably a historical event. The story of this battle was sung in ballads, and out of these ballads some great poet of name unknown created a great historic epic of the battle of Kurukshetra. This old heroic poem forms the kernel of the Mahábhárata”; 345–46: “To the present day this gigantic work in spite of all the divergent elements which have entered into it, is generally considered in India as one uniform poem, composed by the venerable Rishi, Krishna Dvaipayana, or Vyása, who is also credited with the arrangement of the four Vedas and the authorship of the Puránas. (This is about the same as if one were to believe that the whole of Sanskrit literature from Kalidasa to Jayadeva was composed by one man.)”; 346: “These statements [regarding the epic’s multiple narrations] prove that, even in India, in spite of the pious belief in the authorship of Vyása for the whole poem, some recollection was yet retained of the fact that the Mahábhárata had gradually grown from an originally smaller poem to its present size. Of this fact there can not be the least doubt that our Mahábhárata, as we have it now before us, is a very different work from the original epic poem of the battle of the Bharatas”; and 347: “The critical historian of Indian literature will not join in this praise of the Mahábhárata. He will not see in it as a whole, a work of art at all, but a literary monstrosity. The Mahábhárata, as we have it now, is a vast compilation of the most heterogenous matter, a very jungle of poetry and learning in which the most beautiful flowers of poetry grow side by side with weeds of no beauty at all; and the profoundest wisdom is found by the side of the silliest rubbish.” (Winternitz’s italics throughout).

91 This is illustrated very well by Fitzgerald’s comments in the introduction to his translation of the Śántiparvan. Contrasting himself with Madeleine Biardeau, Fitzgerald writes, “Readers may see, however, that I am, at least in principle, much more concerned than she is with matters of history. Where Biardeau sees in the Mahábhárata some instance of a unified epic-śrutic cosmology and theology, I see it as situated in particular circumstances, as a pragmatic utterance which certain agents used to some advantage. I also see it as having a diachronic history—that
almost all claims about the Mahābhārata tradition in the contemporary period, the redefinition of the critical edition as either a “final redaction” or as a “normative redaction” (hereafter, we shall use Andreas Bigger’s term for it) is thus key to understanding contemporary Mahābhārata scholarship. In the next chapter, we shall therefore take a closer look at it.

is, as containing within it various later developments of some of its own earlier formulations.” James L. Fitzgerald, “Introduction [to the Book of Peace],” in The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women; 12. The Book of Peace, Part One (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 127, n. 198. The problem is that a study of the diachrony of the text must begin with the archetype and what develops from it as the history of the text and not earlier. This history is captured in the critical edition, which thus presents us the only objective basis for its study. The diachronic history of the text is precisely what the stemma and apparatus of variants record. To seek to study it prior to the first recorded emergence of the text (or what can be reconstructed as such) is the study not of diachrony but of pseudochrony. In that it exceeds the domain of what can be said, it is not even pseudochrony but simply a nonsense.