Kings without authority: The obligation of the ruler to gamble in the *Mahābhārata*[1]

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Kingship is a puzzle in the Hindu religious tradition. From a literary point of view the *Mahābhārata*[2] portrays kings in a very negative way. The best emperors claim to embody *dharma*[3] and to rule according to it[4] but they do so surrounded by the threat of an inadequate knowledge about their role and how to govern. Yudiṣṭhira and King Nala, for example, lose in the ritual gambling match, part of the imperial consecration rite (*rājasūya*), because they do not possess the knowledge of the dice; neither king can govern chance. Each accepts exile from his throne as a result of a flaw for which they seem at best marginally responsible. Their empires in turn are left in the hands of men even less qualified to rule according to *dharma*; and worse, these replacements are men whose character portraits in the epic suggest that they will plunder the empire for all that they can gain. Kingship, as Heesterman points out, is "roundly abominated"[5] even in the

1 This paper in an earlier draft entitled "Precarious Authority: The Obligation of the Ruler to Gamble in the Mahābhārata" was presented at the 1985 conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion in Montréal.

2 J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), Vol. 2, p. 319-64. All future references will be to the van Buitenen translation and will be indicated both by location in the *Mahābhārata (Mbh.)* with volume, section, line, and then volume and page references to the van Buitenen translation.

3 Yudhisthira is repeatedly called "King of Dharma" throughout the *Mahābhārata*.

4 J. C. Heesterman, "The Conundrum of the King's Authority," in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 108-27. Heesterman states the problem of *dharma* for kings as follows: "In Indian terms, the crux of the authority problem is the king's standing in the matter of dharma. Notwithstanding the tall claims made in behalf of the king's being dharma incarnate, it is made perfectly clear that in matters of dharma—that is, in practically every aspect of his activity—he has no autonomy whatsoever and, instead of leading, must follow" (p. 115).

5 Heesterman, "The Conundrum of the King's Authority," p. 109. Heesterman states:

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portrait of the best kings because they are fundamentally crippled in their capacity to rule.

This scepticism about political life is rooted, according to Heesterman, in a ritual enigma about kings and priests visible in the vedic liturgical texts. There are two aspects to the enigma. On the one hand, Heesterman shows that rulers originally held together the roles of priest and king.[6] On the other hand the liturgical texts display the collapse of that unity. Our interest in this paper is with the epic inheritance of kingship without liturgical authority. By the time of the *Mahābhārata* kings have clearly emerged from the division of labour between priests (*brahmin*) and warriors (*kṣatriya*) without the authority to conduct the rituals and consequently without a basis for their authority to rule. In the epic, kings live within a division of labour in which power is invested in the *kṣatriya* rulers while authority is rooted in *Veda*, the knowledge and rituals possessed by the brahmins. Yet even when the two castes effectively co-operate, the tradition understands that the only authentic ritual is conducted in the forest by the *sannyāsin*, the renouncer, whose interior liturgies can only be effective with the abandonment of the world. The effect is to affirm a profound political disillusionment in the name of the transcendent vision of *Veda*. Political life—that is the rule according to *dharma*—is precarious if not impossible and its alternative is a conception of political life defined by the law of the fishes.[7] In the world of human and social relations, the best that one can hope for politically is that the big fish do not eat too many of the little fish.

Political disillusionment is not the sole effect of the king's limited knowledge. The dilemma posed in the dice match about a *kṣatriya's dharma* is the conceptual framework for Arujuna's breakdown at the outset of the battle in the *Bhagavadgītā*.[8] For the war between the Pāṇḍavas and their cousins, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as we shall see below, is the completion of the liturgical dice match for Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers. In the face of the battle Arjuna must either discover a part of the *kṣatriya*'s knowledge that permits him to understand his actions in terms of a *dharma* which

". . . instead of being exalted as the benign protector of his people he is simply the 'eater' of the people who devours everything he can lay hands on." This is already a cliché in the Vedic prose texts. Later texts enlarge upon this point by stating, for instance, that ten slaughterhouses equal one oil press, ten oil presses one tavern, ten taverns one brothel, finally giving the ultimate price for wickedness to the king, who is as evil as ten brothels; or the king is put on par with a butcher who keeps a hundred thousand slaughterhouses (cf. *Manu* 4.85-86; *Mbh.* 13.126.67).

6 Heesterman, "The Conundrum of the King's Authority," p. 109 and 125-26.

7 John W. Spellmann, *Political Theory of Ancient India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 4-8; 216-19.

8 I have made the argument for the centrality of ritual in the *Bhagavadgītā* in Paul Bowlby, "Tradition in the *Bhagavadgītā*," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 17, 2 (1988).

governs chance, or face the death and destruction of battle understood in terms of the passionate desire for wealth and power elicited by the game of chance that is war.

My purpose in what follows is to build upon Heesterman's thesis about the king's obligation to gamble in the *rājasūya* in order to delineate the character of the political-religious crisis in the *Mahābhārata* represented by the king's failure to possess the knowledge essential to rule.

1

At the basis of the vedic conception of kingship is the conviction that the most powerful means by which society can be preserved from the law of the fishes is to shape a public discipline, *dharma*, within the framework of a complex ritual structure. The king is obliged to participate continuously in a variety of private and public rituals. For the king to conduct the sacred rites is to harmonize the kingdom with the power of the gods in order to reinvigorate life. Fruitfulness, with all of its diverse possibilities of meaning, is the sign of authentic rule. The means to establish that fruitfulness is primarily the king's ritual.

To hold that the primary role of the vedic ruler is liturgical is to assert that there is at work in the Hindu conception of kingship an imperial model. Like the Confucian emperor who mediates the order of Heaven into the world, the Hindu ruler's task is to mediate *brahman* to the world. Rituals such as the *rājasūya*, the royal consecration, are structured not only to install an emperor, but to renew the world and bring it again into a harmony with the known order of the cosmos. These conceptions of kingship are most clearly evident in the *rājasūya* rituals in general and, in particular, the gambling match so compellingly documented by Heesterman.

Heesterman points out that the throne on which the king sits for his installation is conceived as the "navel and womb of kingship."[9] It is located at the center of the world. Its elevation identifies it with the "central mountain so prominent in Hindu cosmology."[10] The king's installation on the throne proceeds in the following manner:

> Sitting on the throne the king is proclaimed brahman in a dialogue with each of the four priests who sit around him at the four quarters. In this ceremony the king is manifested as the power that pervades and connects the discontinuous universe. He alternately disperses this brahman power to the four quarters when addressing each of the priests with "O brahman," and reabsorbs, reintegrates this power and thereby the whole universe (exemplified by the quarters and the gods connected with them) when the priests answer the king "thou art brahman."[11]

9 J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration* ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1957), p. 149; cf. p. 140.

10 Ibid., p. 149.

11 Ibid., p. 150.

The installation ritual shows that the purpose of rulers is to mediate *brahman* to the four quarters of his domain. Such a role defines the imperial conception of kingship in the ancient vedic world.

In the wake of such a conception it is at first puzzling to discover that following the installation of the king there is a dice match in which the stake is both the king and his empire.[12] According to Heesterman, however, ritual gambling serves to restate the king's mediating role.[13] In the game the five dice—called *kṛta, tretā, dvāpara, āskanda* and *kali*—are moved in a circular fashion through the four cardinal points of the universe. Each of the dice is identified with one of the cardinal points. The fifth, *kali*, is located at the integrating apex as in a pyramid. Heesterman describes it: "In another connection TS. 4, 3, 3 classifying the points of the compass with the seasons, the deities, the stomas, the ayas, etc., puts kṛta in relation with the eastern quarter, tretā with the southern quarter, dvāpara with the western quarter, āskanda with the northern quarter and abhibhū (or kali) with the zenith."[14] This identification of the dice with the cardinal directions is then applied in the rotary movement of the dice in the game to recreate ritually the cosmos: "The rotary movement, with which the dice are segregated to the points of the compass, brings them in consonance with the cosmic order, if the number of dice coincides with the points of the compass. In this way the dice exemplify the creation of order among the dispersed and discontinuous elements of the universe."[15] Heesterman concludes that the purpose of the game is as follows:

> ... it is tempting to compare the game of dice to the brahmodya; in both the brahmodya and the game the purpose can be defined as seizing the principle that connects and encompasses the discontinuous. In the game this principle is made palpable by the right number of dice, the number five, the *abhibhū-*, for this is the number connecting the quarters, the world ages, the gods connected with the quarters, the varṇas represented by the players together with the kings.[16]

The integrative purpose of the dice match consummates in the overcoming of death with the birth of the king.[17] The birth of the king is coincident with the renewal of the earth at the New Year. In playing the dice game, then, the stake for which the participants play is simultaneously the cosmos and the king. The king is symbolically coeval with the fifth die, *abhibhū* or *kali. Kali* is the conquering die and conquest places the king at the apex of the cosmos where he links the four cardinal

12 For bibliography on the dice match cf. ibid., p. 143, footnote 16.

13 Heesterman states: "... the game of dice in the hall may be considered a cosmogonical rite intended to bring about the creation of the universe and the birth of the king. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that the game of dice is often connected with the passing of the old into the new year" (ibid., p. 153).

14 Ibid., p. 145.

15 Ibid., p. 151.

16 Ibid., p. 151-52.

17 Ibid., p. 153.

points, the four quarters and the four *varṇas*. From there, sitting on his throne the king becomes the sole mediator between the cosmos and earth. "It is the king himself who is to be 'won,' produced by the gambling; he is the regulating and connecting principle of the quinquepartite universe, the embodiment of the cosmic order that 'bursts forth' from the dice."[18]

The ruler's purpose in the match is to win the earth and literally take possession of it. He then imposes upon it the order he derives from *brahman*. In his victory he returns possession of the earth to those who live within his *dharma*. The citizens, along with their emperor, occupy a defined geography in harmony with *brahman*. Both the emperor and his citizens, then, can anticipate that their lives will bear fruit. The earth can bear its crops; the sun, the moon and the stars will follow their course; the rains will come in season; sons and daughters will be born; men and women can live both protected and harmonious lives. As Heesterman puts it:

> Thus the winner of kṛta unites and integrates the totality of the universe. The king, as the pivotal agency absorbing and releasing the universe, can also be recognized in the dicing game as prescribed in Kaus's account of the unction. In the game he wins all the property from his subjects. Then ensues a dialogue with a vaiśya asking for the restitution of the subjects' property. In his answer the king grants the restitution successively to the brahmins, the kṣatriyas and the vaiśyas, adding: "May the law rule in my country." This addition seems the keynote of the ceremony: the king as the pivot of universal flux and reflux emits the cosmic order.[19]

In this instance it is clear that the gambling match is a liturgical obligation in which the substance of kingship is its capacity to mediate *brahman* to the world and hence govern even chance. The puzzle of the obligation to gamble emerges only on the assumption that the match can be lost. In the *Mahābhārata* this startling possibility is faced and narratively reflected upon in relation to the liturgies of kingship.

2

Van Buitenen has convincingly argued that the entire second book of the *Mahābhārata* is a narrative built around the structure of the royal consecration ritual. He states: "I wish to submit that The Assembly Hall is structurally an epic dramatization of the Vedic ritual."[20] In this book of the *Mahābhārata* Yudhiṣṭhira is not simply acting out his passionate desire for conquest and *samrāj*, imperial rule, he is submitting to an obligation imposed by the requirements of the sacred rite in which he is a participant. Neither the opulent hall, Indraprastha, which Yudhiṣṭhira has had

18 Ibid., p. 156.
19 Ibid., p. 155.
20 Van Buitenen, *Mahābhārata*, Vol. 2, p. 6.

built in the midst of the Khāṇḍava forest, nor the violent power politics by which he has claimed the right to *samrāj* are sufficient to establish his imperial claim. Only the *rājasūya* can achieve that end. It is his liturgical means to an imperial end.

The *rājasūya*, however, is fraught with danger. As its structure unfolds he must demonstrate the validity of his claim as emperor in a variety of ways. He clears the Khāṇḍava forest with a fire. One of the survivors is a deity, an *asura*, Maya by name, who builds the microcosmic palace, Indraprastha. Once built the *sabhā* can house the actual rite. As it unfolds Yudhiṣṭhira is educated in the art of ruling, demonstrates his power by eliminating opponents and conquers the four quarters; finally there is the consecration itself. It is in the wake of the bestowal of the unction waters and the declaration of Kṛṣṇa as his successor that there follows the gambling match. Once he is challenged within the context of this liturgical framework, Yudhiṣṭhira the *samrāj* cannot refuse:

> In the hall... Once challenged I will not refuse,
> For so I have sworn for eternity.[21]

Success in the gambling match will verify liturgically Yudhiṣṭhira's imperial claim in the context of the royal consecration rite.

While primarily imposed by the ritual itself Yudhiṣṭhira's obligation to gamble recognizes political reality as well. For example, the match has been authorized by Yudhiṣṭhira's uncle,[22] the imperial regent Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Should Yudhiṣṭhira win, this authorization has the potential to acknowledge his legitimate succession to the imperial throne against the claim of his cousin and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son, Duryodana. Therefore Dhṛtarāṣṭra's acknowledgement of legitimacy and imperial right offers the hope that the Pāṇḍava family can once more govern a unified empire. It is therefore basic with regard to Yudhiṣṭhira's ambitions.

What transpires in the gambling stage of the liturgy, however, sets the narrative understanding of the emperor apart from the vedic imperial conception. Yudhiṣṭhira loses. His loss is tied to a fundamental and crippling defect: he does not know the secret of the dice. This lack of knowledge is of course specific to the art of gambling but, in its context within the epic, it is manifestly tied to a ritual defect. Yudhiṣṭhira cannot complete the *rājasūya* liturgical cycle for lack of the knowledge of gambling. Yudhiṣṭhira may claim to be the embodiment of divine *dharma* in the world, but that seems no guarantee that he knows unequivocally how to function within the requirements of his royal *dharma*. Despite all his successes in the royal consecration, his imperial ambition is flawed by a fundamental defect of knowledge.

21 *Mbh.* 2(27)52.14-16, p. 126.
22 *Mbh.* 2(27)52.15, p. 126.

The reasons for Yudhiṣṭhira's failure are explained to him once he is in exile. The seer, Bṛhadasva, tells him the story of Nala and Damayantī.[23] This popular story portrays a king in very similar circumstance to that of Yudhiṣṭhira. Nala is "god-like" while Yudhiṣṭhira personifies *dharma*. Yet both lose in their respective gambling matches and must go into exile. The principle explanation of Nala's failure is ritual pollution causing his lack of knowledge about how to conduct ritual. The lack of knowledge opens both rulers to dire consequences.

In the story, Nala goes to the evening sunset ritual, the *sandhyā*, without having washed his feet after urinating and touching water.[24] The liturgical defect opens him to possession by the god, Kali. While this defect may seem trivial, it points at the unthinkable. The mediator of *brahman* to the world cannot even conduct the *sandhyā* ritual without defect. How then could such a king conduct the *rājasūya*?

Consequently both Nala and presumably Yudhiṣṭhira participate in the ritual gambling sufficiently flawed that they transform the rite into an act of passion characteristic of a common gambling match. It is not necessary to imagine that there are two different games that the rulers play, though that may be the case. Rather, the important distinction is between the gambling in the ritual by a consecrated ruler and gambling which makes chance central. The imperial conception, by mediating the power of *brahman* through the ruler to the earth, presumes that the emperor ritually governs chance. For others who play at the game, chance is everything.

There is a long acquaintance in the tradition with gambling as a game of chance. *Ṛgveda* x.34[25] elaborates on the disasters that follow from gambling and provides a basis from which to assess gambling and its relation to a king's *dharma*. Thus in the *Law of Manu* gambling is explicitly prohibited because of its destructive effects on the kingdom:

> 221. Gambling and betting let the king exclude from his realm; those two vices cause the destruction of the kingdoms of princes.
> 222. Gambling and betting amount to open theft; the king shall always exert himself in suppressing both [of them].[26]

The reference to theft is important for it unlocks the key to the distinction between the two types of gambling. Both Yudhiṣṭhira and Nala feel that they have been cheated in the gambling match and hence have had their

23 *Mbh.* 3(32)50-78, p. 319-64; cf. Thomas Parkhill, "From Trifle to Story: A Study of Nala and Damayantī," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 52, 2 (1984): 325-41.

24 *Mbh.* 3(32)56.1-4, p. 330.

25 Ralph T. H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 35 (Varanasi: The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971), Vol. 2, p. 429-31.

26 G. Buhler, trans., *The Laws of Manu* in *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Müller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), Vol. 25, IX.221-222, p. 380; cf. IX.223-28, p. 380-81.

empires stolen. A thief is defined in the *Bhagavadgītā* as a person who eats the ritual offering but does not offer it to the gods in the appropriate ritual contexts.[27] The effect of such "theft" and the ritual ignorance that it displays is to transform the fruits of human action from a gift of the gods into an act driven by the passions. In the epic, then, the ritual defect of the kings transforms the gambling match into an act of passion, a vice, something which is scandalous. Thus, the epic narrator reports of Nala: "He was crazed by the thrill of the dice, and none of his friends were able to restrain him, when he was mindlessly gambling."[28] Even a cursory reading of the gambling match between Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭa which culminates in the wagering of the Pāṇḍava brothers' wife, Draupadī, is equally suggestive of the passion that overcomes Yudhiṣṭhira as he loses everything.[29]

Ritually flawed and now subject to their passions, the rulers are incapable of governing. There is a graphic portrait in the Nala story of the consequence for the kingdom when the ruler is shown to be without knowledge and hence given over to his passions. There is no administration of justice; the citizens can only wait at the gate yearning for a ruler:

> All the townspeople came with the councillors to see the king, O Bhārata, in order to stop the sick man. The bard came and said to Damayantī, "All the townspeople are waiting at the gate with business: the Niṣadhan should be told that all his subjects are waiting for him and are impatient with the vice of their king, who understands Law and Profit." In a tearful voice and wan with anxiety, Damayantī said to the Niṣadhan, her mind ravaged with anguish, "King, the townspeople are waiting at the gate to see you, accompanied by all the councillors, and they pledge their loyalty to their king. Pray see them!" she said over and over again. But the king, possessed by Kali, gave no reply whatsoever to his plaintive, slim-waisted wife of the shining eyes. Thereupon all the councillors and city dwellers thought, "The man is lost!" and unhappily and humbled returned home. In this fashion the dicing of Puṣkara and Nala went on for many months, Yudhiṣṭhira. And Puṇyaśloka kept losing.[30]

In the vedic conception of kingship the ruler possesses the entire empire. If he cannot govern his passions and chance, then he cannot mediate the "world" to his people. In turn the citizens cannot possess their world in

27 J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 83. Van Buitenen translates the *Bhagavadgītā* 3.10-13 as follows: "Prajāpati, after creating creatures and sacrifice together, said in the beginning: 'Ye shall multiply by it, it shall be the cow that yields your desires. Give ye the Gods being with it, and the Gods shall give ye being. And thus giving each other being ye shall attain to the highest good. Themselves enhanced in their being with sacrifice, the Gods shall give ye the pleasures ye desire: he who enjoys their gifts without return to them is but a thief.'"

28 *Mbh.* 3(32)56.5f., Vol. 2, p. 330.

29 *Mbh.* 2(27)43.1-2(28)72; Vol. 2, p. 106-69.

30 *Mbh.* 3(32)56.5f., Vol. 2, p. 330.

confidence any longer. In such circumstances what remains for the citizens is a rule primarily dependent upon arms. Rule by might, in the absence of any knowledge of *dharma* and the liturgies of kings, is to hand the empire over to the biggest fish whose might permits him to consume the lesser fish. The citizens know they are to be ruled by a "thief" and hence will be without protection and deprived of their possessions.

Nala's brother Puṣkara and, more certainly, Yudhiṣṭhira's cousin, Duryodana, will rule during the exile. These victors in the epic's gambling matches are not men who themselves know the secret of the dice. If they did, they would have a powerful liturgical claim upon the imperial throne. Rather Duryodana's ally, Śakuni, possesses the secret of the dice and offers his services for the gambling match. In the Nala story, Puṣkara, Nala's brother, wins with Dvāpara, a deity, controlling the dice and their movement on the gambling floor. At the same time, of course, Nala is possessed by the jealous god Kali who is set on revenge for Damayantī's rejection of the gods at the bridegroom choice. These men with their allies, both divine and human, will rule in Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira's places by force of arms as the big fish, because that is all they know.

Nala and Yudhiṣṭhira are obliged by virtue of their loss in the gambling match to leave their imperial capital and, exiled, live the life of the homeless wanderer in the forest. For Nala, exile is divided into two stages. The first part is the forest, the second stage is in disguise as Bāhuka, the horse master in the household if King Ṛtuparṇa. Not coincidentally, this two-stage movement is the one required of Yudhiṣṭhira, though the time span is different. Yudhiṣṭhira must spend twelve years in the forest and one year in disguise, while three years will pass before Nala can obtain the secret knowledge of the dice. Armed with the knowledge of the dice, Nala will recover his kingdom, his wife and family at one throw of the dice.

For Yudhiṣṭhira exile interrupts the royal consecration ritual at the point of the gambling match. Its completion must await the duration of the exile when the gambling hall will be replaced by the battlefield and the dice by weapons of war. The epic understands that for kings, both battle and the dice match are rituals dependent upon the king's liturgical capacity to overcome chance. The correspondence between the gambling match and battle is expressed in the *Mahābhārata*'s *Book ofthe Bhagavadgītā* in the following way: "That dangerous and inhospitable gambling den on the battlefield, where the carpet for the dicing has been spread out with the bodies of men, elephants, and horses, and the dice rolled with the arrows, spears, clubs, swords, and javelins—what slow-witted warrior gamblers entered that den to gamble for the fearful stakes of their lives?"[31]

Yudhiṣṭhira will conquer in battle and win his empire, demonstrating his possession of an essential component of a king's knowledge. His

31 Van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, p. 45; *Mbh*. 6(63)15.66-71.

victory will depend on his brother, Arjuna, and his capacity to know how to overcome his disillusionment with battle in which he sees his actions as the expression of the passionate desire for wealth and knowledge.[32] Within such an understanding Arjuna sees the battlefield as the embodiment of the passions, elicited by ungoverned chance, which have brought down his brother Yudhiṣṭhira and King Nala. It is of the essence of Kṛṣṇa's response, then, to show how battle is not conceptually different from the dice match. It is a ritual[33] which—properly enacted as a *karmayoga*—permits human beings to rule their passions in a knowledge powerfully envisioned in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*. There Kṛṣṇa displays in his eternal form how he encompasses in his divine *karmayoga* the overcoming of chance in the life and death conflict on the battlefield. There it is Kṛṣṇa who is both the recipient of the ritual action of the warriors and the giver of life and death, success and failure on the battlefield.[34] The ritual of the warrior breaks the connection of means and ends in human affairs.

Kṛṣṇa's teaching, then, is no less an essential component of the king's knowledge than that of the dice. Indeed it may be argued that Kṛṣṇa's teaching goes to the very heart of the tension that arises for warriors and kings haunted by the spectre of their partial knowledge. With knowledge comes victory for both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira. As *samraj* Yudhiṣṭhira will then offer the horse sacrifice as the authentic sign of his imperial claim and as expiation for his losses. For all *kṣatriaya*'s—Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira and Nala—the forest equips them with the knowledge they require to recover their respective empires.

What is crucial, however, is the effect of ritual ignorance on the ideal of kingship. The pictures of kings overwhelmed by their passions and thereby, ritually inept; or driven into prolonged exile; or leaving their empires in the hands of rapacious substitutes are all diagnostic of what Heesterman calls the intractable "conundrum" of kingship. The ruler must participate in a continuous round of liturgies without the proper knowledge essential to conduct them. The epic tradition is heir to this conception of kings as liturgical mediators of the cosmic order. As we have seen, however, the kings cannot measure up to the ritual ideal. They lose the gambling match in the *rājasūya*.

3

Submission to exile, however, does make a fundamental distinction between the winners and losers in these epic gambling matches. Nala and

32 Ibid., p. 71-75; *Mbh*. 6(63)23 1.25-2.10. In the conventional chapter and verse notation of the *Bhagavadgītā* alone, Arjuna's crisis is found in chapters one and two (1.10-2.10).

33 Cf. ibid., p. 83; *Mbh*. 6(63)25 3.10-15.

34 Ibid., p. 115-17; *Mbh*. 6(63)33 11.25-31.

Yudhiṣṭhira accept the liturgical and dharmic consequences of their loss. That is to say, they continue to live within the faith and assumptions that underlie the ritual obligations of a king and warrior. The exile becomes, then, an occasion on which they are able to engage in the quest for the secret of the dice. Acquisition of such knowledge permits them to imagine that the world can again be possessed and ruled by an emperor, now more fully cognizant of *dharma* and hence of how the rituals must be conducted. The problem, however, is that the hope, while present, is tied to a quest which is endless and ultimately elusive—at least for the king's capacity to rule and mediate *brahman* to his empire.

In the epic the forest is an enigma. It does not reside outside the domain of the emperor, as Nancy Falk points out: "It appears that a king had to have some kind of transaction with the wilderness and the beings that inhabited it to acquire or hold his kingship. Many varieties of transaction can be found: kings conquer the wilderness, appropriate its powers, tend its shrines and symbols and beings."[35] Thus, for example, the ritual of a horse sacrifice by which the boundaries of the imperial governance are set clearly imagined that the forest was incorporated into the empire. Nonetheless the forest and its occupants are consistently portrayed as intractable to rule. Thus the forest is portrayed in the *Mahābhārata* as a place fraught with danger. Nala's wife, Damayantī, quickly discovers that in the forest the laws and conventions defined by *dharma* disappear. Her husband Nala abandons her in the night; snakes threaten and hunters rape; elephants range and trample caravans. Nala in turn discovers that the forest is a place in which snake kings attack brahmins who consequently must endure a cursed existence until they too find the secret that unbinds the curse.

The forest has another face, however. Nala and Damayantī also discover hope for their separate quests. Once Nala liberates the snake king from his curse, he receives the first indication that he will indeed succeed in his quest for the secret of the dice.[36] Similarly Damayantī is assured by the ascetics resident there that ultimately she will be reunited with Nala as king.[37] The forest, then, is a place where *dharma* cannot be enforced, yet paradoxically it provides a home for brahmins, renouncers and ascetics, the very persons who know Veda and the knowledge essential for kings to rule. These homeless ones have separated themselves from the world of the city and the life of the householders. They are dead to the world, yet they live and have taken up a life which is subject to Veda alone. The conviction is that the forest alone is the place in which knowledge can be taught and learned and that alone is the hope which sustains both Nala

35 Nancy Falk, "Wilderness and Kingship in Ancient South Asia," *History of Religions*, 13 (1973): 1.

36 *Mbh*. 3(32)63; Vol. 2, p. 344-45.

37 *Mbh*. 3(32)61.86; Vol. 2, p. 340.

and Yudhiṣṭhira in their quest for liturgical knowledge that will enable them to regain their respective empires.

Nala, for example, learns the knowledge of the dice in the forest. Nala is driving King Ṛtuparṇa to Damayantī's purported second bridegroom choice. As Nala, disguised as Bāhuka the horsemaster, guides the chariot across the forest, King Ṛtuparṇa says to him:

> Now you too watch my great talent at counting! No one knows everything, nobody is omniscient—knowledge is nowhere lodged with any single person. In this tree, Bāhuka, the difference between the leaves and the nuts still on the tree and those fallen on the ground is a hundred and one: one more leaf and one hundred more nuts, Bāhuka. Both those branches have five crores of leaves. Take off the branches and their twigs and you get from them two thousand one hundred and ninety-five nuts.[38]

The skill illustrated here by which Ṛtuparṇa instantly sees correlations and is able to calculate the groupings represents the talent Heesterman finds to be essential in the *rājasūya* gambling match. He speculates on the rules:

> In general, however, we may conclude that the point of the game consisted in making certain numerical combinations, based on the numbers four and five, with unmarked dice.... Thus the purpose of the game seems to lie in separating a number of dice and in establishing in visible form the concordance of this number with the regions of the universe. All seems to depend on the skill of the player in computing at a glance the number of the dice to be separated, taking at the same time into account the number of dice to be left for his adversaries.[39]

That king Ṛtuparṇa's skill is directly connected to the dice match is made clear in the text. He tells Nala after watching him count the leaves and nuts individually: "Know that I know the secret of the dice and am expert at counting."[40] Compounding the link to ritual gambling, it is no coincidence that the *vibhītaka* tree around which this incident takes place produces the nuts which are used to fashion the dice used in the gambling match.

The conviction that is here displayed is also an essential part of the vedic imperial faith. It is possible by virtue of the ruler's mediation of *brahman* to calculate the correct number of dice and to correlate that calculation with the four quarters. The ruler's task is to show in the ritual context that he possesses the knowledge to mediate order into the world by virtue of his possession of the counting and correlating skill. His demonstration indicates his mastery of chance. By contrast the epic's image of Nala groveling beneath the *vibhītaka* tree, counting the leaves and the nuts individually, graphically displays his ignorance and lack of skill when

38 *Mbh.* 3(32)70.7; Vol. 2, p. 353.
39 Heesterman, *Consecration*, p. 145-46.
40 *Mbh.* 3(32)70.20-25; Vol. 2, p. 353.

compared to his ruler companion who possesses the secret knowledge of the dice.

It is striking how the narrative at this point makes Ṛtuparṇa the mirror image of Nala with regard to the knowledge necessary to rule. While he possesses the knowledge of the dice, his knowledge remains defective in another respect. In the story he yearns to possess Nala's wife, Damayantī, at a bridegroom choice to be held only a day later and many miles away. Only someone who possesses the royal knowledge of horses is able to cover the miles in time. Ṛtuparṇa shows all the impatience and ignorance with regard to the selection and driving of horses that Nala shows in counting the nuts and leaves.[41] Thus either the skill with horses or the skill in gambling may be understood as one of the many types of royal knowledge which it is proper for a king to show. That Ṛtuparṇa and Nala exchange their respective skills—the art of gambling for the art of horsemanship—amounts to a partial, but by no means complete acquisition of the whole body of knowledge proper to kings. The perennially partial character of the knowledge of kings is understood clearly by Ṛtuparṇa:

> No one knows everything, nobody is omniscient—
> knowledge is nowhere lodged with any single person.[42]

The partiality of this exchange of knowledge is illustrated many times in the *Mahābhārata*. Kṛṣṇa, for example, will teach another aspect of *rājavidyā* or "royal knowledge" in the fourth and ninth chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā*.[43] Similarly in the *Śāntiparvan* section of the *Mahābhārata* Bhiṣma, the family patriarch, will discourse from his bed of arrows on the art of kingship. Both of the latter teachings will take place on the battlefield which, as we have seen, is another version of the *sabha* or gambling den which is located in the forest.

The ritual vulnerability of kings because they lack essential knowledge is repeatedly documented in the epic as a whole. The effect is stunning. Both kings and their kingdoms are abandoned. The world is incapable of mirroring the transcendent vision of Veda in the *kaliyuga*, the last of the four ages of the cosmos. At best there are fragments, glimpses of the brahmanic order envisioned by the ancients. The marginal place of the forest/Veda in the world comes to be the central symbol of the disillusionment with the world.

The ambiguity of the forest may be stated as follows. The forest exists within the empire. However it is a place which the king cannot effectively or consistently rule. At least part of the explanation for the ineffectiveness

41 *Mbh*. 3(32)69.1.10-30; Vol. 2, p. 351-52.
42 *Mbh*. 3(32)70.7; Vol. 2, p. 353.
43 Van Buitenen, *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, p. 85-107.

of kings in the forest is that they discover there that they are subject to it. They need knowledge only located in the forest. To put the matter another way, the king is dependent on the forest. Rulers must submit their imperial claim to a test adjudicated not by the capacity to command armies in battle, but to a ritually defined contest, the essential skills for which can only be learned in the forest. In doing so the king must submit to an authority which resides at the margins of his empire. Submission requires abandoning his position within the empire to others less qualified to rule while he pursues a secret which will permit him to display a portion of the knowledge required to rule.

4

Heesterman has studied the ancient Indian royal consecration rite in order to understand the "conundrum" of kingship. He has done so because "the ritual, however mindlessly performed, is based on penetrating thought. Ritual cannot escape the fundamental problem but must somehow express it in well-defined acts. Ritual, in other words, should make the insoluble at least acceptable without glossing it over. Putting it plainly, the ritual cannot simply put the king on his throne and leave the matter there."[44] The "penetrating thought" of the ritual texts about kings and kingship was taken up again in a narrative form in the *Mahābhārata* epic. It is possible to speculate that the rationale of the epic, at least in part, lies in its public portrait of the end of imperial kingship—a conclusion already drawn in the liturgical arena and now conveyed in epic narrative. Drawing on the ritual gambling of the king in the *rājasūya* in which the king's task is already fraught with danger and risk, the *Mahābhārata* elevates that peril in order to display anew the vulnerability of the imperial institution. Rulers can still govern, but they do so dependent upon a knowledge which exists in the forest, at the margins of the empire. To obtain this knowledge they must abandon their empire and await the pleasure of the forest to give up its secret.

The Hindu tradition makes much of this dependence on knowledge at the periphery of the ruler's domain. The brahmin, not the king, has highest status in the caste or *varṇa* hierarchy because it is the brahmin whose task it is to know the sacred rites and the secret knowledge of the forest. The ruler is left explicitly dependent upon the brahmin with whom he shares the imperial task. Success is possible in a limited way. Kings can succeed in the liturgical gambling match or at war by discovering the secret that can transform their action into a ritual called *karmayoga*, as Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna. Such a yoga in company with the specific ritual knowledge of the dice, with the weapons of war or with horses permits a

44 Heesterman, "Conundrum," p. 117.

king to rule at least temporarily. Transforming skilled ritual actions into a yoga, argues Kṛṣṇa, separates means and ends in human action, and places in Kṛṣṇa's hands the governance of chance and the task of sustaining *dharma* in the cosmos.

As King Ṛtuparṇa points out, however, even the most skilled of kings cannot possess all knowledge. There remains, therefore, simultaneously hidden and explicit in the epic's portrait of imperial kingship a profound scepticism about the extent to which the world can be understood as a cosmos, and its mundane image, an empire. While in general the brahmin becomes the liturgical mediator of *dharma* to the world, it is finally the case that his true home, along with that of the ruler, is in solitude in the forest. The ordering of the human world, of human relations according to *dharma*, is finally intractable even to the brahmin allied with the arms of the ruler. Finally both must leave the world and take up a life in forest devoid of human relations. In solitude they must interiorize the sacred rite mediating the identity of *brahman* and *ātman*. Only in the forest and in solitude as the renouncer, the *sannyāsin*, can the unity envisioned in the ancient rituals be recreated.

The tragic component of this picture of kings constantly threatened by the obligation to seek another facet of *dharma* in the forest, is that their rule must always collapse, if only temporarily. The forest will draw the king away to conquer the only kingdom which can be ruled, the self, and that only for the solitary renouncer. The crippling of kingship is the abandonment of hope that the world can be ruled; that a collective well-being can exist, if only in balance with the solitary yearning for transcendence.