Ancient Epic

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Literary and Linguistic Essays

Edited by

Mercedes Díaz de Cerio Díez,
Concepción Cabrillana and Cecilia Criado

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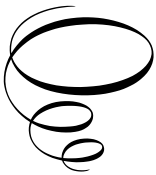

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Preface

This book presents work by the members of the Classical Philology Research Group at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Ancient epic, widely recognised as "the master-genre of the ancient world", as J.M. Foley (*A companion to Ancient epic*, 2005, introduction) points out, provides the common ground for a variety of contributions which together draw on the full scope and range of methodologies characteristic of literary and linguistic approaches to this topic.

In terms of the organisation of the essays, those of a directly literary nature have been placed first in the volume. Of these, studies with a more general orientation precede those with more specific focus, with the latter arranged chronologically.

Thus, José Virgilio García Trabazo's "Revolt vs. *Dharma*: Western and Indian Heroes" opens the volume, given its general, contrastive approach to the figure of the epic hero. Applying a comparative perspective, García Trabazo analyses the contrast between the "political" characterisation of Western epic characters—including both Classical epic and European medieval epic—and Indian epic heroes. In Western "non-constructed" epic traditions, the King and the Hero are rivals, and more often than not are involved in open confrontation: it is this rivalry that configures a space of "political tension", which can even lead to the impugnment of the legitimacy of the monarchy. Clearly, this Western impugnment contrasts with Indian epic, where, despite also being rooted in the Indo-European tradition, no such thing exists. García Trabazo holds that Indian epic ideology was forged at the time of "strategic alliances" between priests and warriors. The main axis of this ideology of supremacy, which guaranteed the dominion of the two superior castes, was the *dharma*, a concept that unified the "established order" and "justice". This ideological unification prevented the dissociation of the "king" and the "hero" in India, two characters that at least in certain Western contexts came to symbolise the tension between "established power" and "justice".

Narrowing down the focus on Greek literature, María José Martín Velasco's "What is Expedient (τὸ Συμφέρον) in the *Iliad*" is an analysis of several discourses in the Homeric poem. Through these Martín Velasco explores the working of rhetorical principles prior to Aristotle's

systematization in a society where negotiation and persuasion are more important than authority. The aristocratic desire to support and participate in the common cause fades when the honour code is broken, and a rhetorical mechanism must be implemented in order to re-establish it. The values comprising the honour code then act as a source of persuasion and as a referent for deliberation. This dynamic could even be said to configure the whole poem, which opens with the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon and ends with the reconciliation of Achilles and Priam.

The influence of Homeric epics on ancient literature in general is a pervasive phenomenon, and one which is dealt with—from quite different approaches—in several contributions in this volume. Thus, Mercedes Díaz de Cerio explores the process of intertextuality underlying the Platonic re-elaboration of the Homeric passage of Odysseus' *catabasis* in "Socrates' *Descensus ad Inferos*: the *Nekuia* in the Works of Plato". The Athenian thinker evokes the same Homeric passage (the catalogue of heroes of the past in *Od.* 11.568-635) in two distinct dialogues (*Prt.* 315-316a and *Grg.* 523a-527). This unique situation allows for a thoughtful analysis, focusing on the contrast between both the Homeric source and the Platonic texts, as well as on the subtle differences between both processes of rewriting by Plato, including the variety of formal procedures involved, the selection of literary motifs, and the extent and scope of Homeric quotation and its conceptual use in each dialogue. Such an inquiry, which aims to show the intricacies of Platonic manipulation, implies a survey of other Platonic passages (from *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and *Republic*) where the evocation of the *Nekuia* is involved.

The Homeric poems are discussed from a very different perspective in Yolanda García's "The Subordination of Epic to Mystic Poetics: the Example of Polyphemus in Love". The Homeric text here undergoes a specific kind of literary interpretation, that of the Ancient Mystic reading of epics, and in this way a close relation between such a Mystic exegesis and the origins of the literary character of "Polyphemus in love" is claimed. A mechanism central to the rewriting of a legend through this kind of exegesis is that which recreates a myth by developing the Dionysiac symbols recognised in the legend itself, often with the incorporation of philosophical and literary interpretations of such symbols. García analyses the central framework and motifs of Polyphemus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as the intertextual relationship with Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, plus the link between both of these to Empedocles.

A somewhat similar process of intertextuality, rooted in Greek tragedy but departing from here and reaching its climax in Roman literature, is introduced by Cecilia Criado. Her study, "The Theban Fratricidal Wars. The Mythic-Historical Approach of Ovid, Seneca and Lucan", considers the ways in which the Theban civil wars were dealt with by these three poets. Following the suggestions of the Greek tragedians, they exploited the admonitory political function of Thebes through establishing the parallel between a predilection for fratricide and civil war in both mythological Thebes and historical Rome. Yet, surprisingly, Oedipus and his sons are absent from the "Theban section" of the *Metamorphoses* (2.836–4.603), and it is also striking that Lucan makes few references to them. Criado shows how post-Augustan literature privileged, by contrast, the other Theban civil war, that is, the confrontation between the *Terrigenae* at the moment of their birth. She suggests that Ovid established the synonymy of this myth with that of the Colchian *Spartoi* as being more apt as a means of reflecting the civil struggles of contemporary Rome. The success of this Ovidian innovation is seen in the fact that Lucan, and later the Flavian poets, would sanction and expand it.

Finally, the essay "*Vates in Fabula*: Chiron and Orpheus in Valerius Flaccus" by Antonio Río Torres-Murciano closes the section of literary contributions looking at intertextual processes. The author examines the character of the *aoidos* (the bard) in Valerius' poem in metapoetic terms, as a literary reflection of the confrontation of two types of epic chant. Thus Rio claims that Chiron and Orpheus' presence in Valerius Flaccus' book 1—unprecedented in Apollonius Rhodius but with an interesting parallel in the Orphic *Argonautica*—is used by the Roman poet to compare the different types of epic bard. Chiron's voice cannot be heard in the poem, but he embodies the Homeric rhapsode, the ideal teacher of heroes such as Achilles. Still, the epyllion that Orpheus sings for his crewmen, which focuses on Phrixus and Helle's escape on the ram with the golden fleece, has a markedly Alexandrian tone. The antagonism thus established between the two bards brings about a contrast between Orpheus' soft epic and the Centaur's strong, Homer-style epic. In this way, Valerius stresses the tensions behind his own task as author of an *epos* which is, necessarily, a matter of rewriting a complex literary tradition.

The section of the volume dealing with linguistic issues opens with "Direct Speech and Lexical Presence of *Esse* in Virgilian Epic" by Concepción Cabrillana. Her corpus-based analysis of the omission of *esse* in the *Aeneid* goes deeper than was possible in traditional stylistics and, as

such, is an example of how state-of-the-art linguistic analyses can cast new light on literary works, considerably enhancing our comprehension of these. The study of *sum* in the *Aeneid* provides some interesting and unexpected data, such as the greater presence of verbal forms in direct speech—a discursive type which is, on the face of it, more suitable for elliptical phenomena—than in narration. An initial statistical analysis shows that these occurrences are inversely proportional: the longer the narrative text, the fewer verbal forms of sum are found. Using a multi-layered linguistic analysis, Cabrillana claims that several factors might account for this behaviour of *sum*: the use of grammatically marked verbal forms (for the tense, mood, person and number) in direct speech makes the lexical presence of such forms indispensable, while co-causal factors can also occur, such as pragmatic focalization of the verbal form and the presence of impressive illocutionary force, as well as lexical-semantic factors (quasi-formulaic constructions or the expression of a specific semantic notion through *esse*).

A very different linguistic approach is employed by Juan José Moralejo in "*Homerus Callaicus*". He analyses those Galician toponyms which, as an element of cultural reassessment, purport to have some link to Homeric characters, and the paper embodies a rich and surprising blend of Homeric themes with the study of Galician culture, a field which, reasonably enough, has a sound tradition at the University of Santiago. Widely-known Greek and Latin texts are considered in their relation to myths about the presence of Homeric heroes in *Gallaecia*; it is taken for granted that such a presence is a fabrication, based on previous models and traditions, and through borrowing the practice which, in the Hellenistic period, extended to the Atlantic area both the use and the formal and semantic manipulation of indigenous onomastic forms in consonance with Hellenic ones. Greek and Latin texts serve as a basis here to expose the arbitrariness and ingenuity with which this process took place, both in medieval times and during the Humanist period from the 16th to the 19th centuries, as a means of lending antiquity and distinction to certain Galician cities. Moralejo also shows how long the manipulation of onomastic forms continued, leading to the imagined Hellenic origins of other cities.

Some practical notes for readers

The abbreviations used for authors and Greek works follow Liddell-Scott & Jones (*Greek-English Lexicon with Supplement*, 1968, Oxford); those for Latin authors follow the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (1904–, Leipzig); the books of ancient works are quoted in Roman numerals and chapters in Arabic numerals. For all issues of Latinization we have followed the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth (1966 [1968], Oxford). Editions and translations are acknowledged in the respective bibliographies (where necessary, due mainly to references to several editions of translations of the same text, the original editor or translator is specified).

Revolt vs. *Dharma*: Western and Indian Heroes[1]

José Virgilio García Trabazo[2]

1. Characterisations of Epic and of the Epic Hero

Definitions of the epic hero abound in the literature, reflecting many different points of view. This essay will consider the ideological bases that serve to grant epic heroes their particular character, looking at two cultural groups which, despite sharing the same Indo-European origins, are relatively well differentiated: the Indian and Western traditions.[3] With regard to the Western tradition, I have used this vague, generic label to avoid excluding epic traditions other than the classical Graeco-Latin one—the oldest in Europe—such as the Germanic, Celtic and Slavonic traditions. The question of how far the different European medieval epic traditions also merit consideration in such a study will also be addressed, despite the chronological and cultural distance between these and their ancient predecessors.

1.1. Shamanist Epic, Mythic-Historical Epic and Historical Epic

The classification of the different epic types according to the features of their protagonists[4], proposed several decades ago, could also be of potential use to us here.

In **shamanist epic**[5] the hero (or heroes) has superhuman or "magical" powers which are seen especially in their capacity to change their physical form at will, as well as in their inexhaustible vitality or superhuman speed. We find an example of this type of epic in the *Mahābhārata*—although the other two types are not excluded from this Indian poem, as

will be shown below—and in the "constructed" Finnish-Karelian epic, the *Kalevala*.

As for the second category, the **mythic-historical epic**, Homer's poems are the foremost examples. His heroes, particularly in the *Iliad*, are both literally and formulaically related to the gods (διογενής "a descendant of Zeus") yet their destiny is framed in a human space and in human dimensions. Homeric epic is full of resemblances as a "test site" for the relationships between gods and men. Irish epic, especially the Ulster series, also introduced divine agents, who are almost always the parents of the hero. This is the case with the brilliant warrior Cú Chulainn: just as in the case of the Greek and Latin heroes, a god protects him while another opposes him implacably.

The third type, **historical epic**, refers to those in which real, historically-based models are used to build the account. The label "historical" does not, of course, imply the transmission of "real" events, but rather is intended to reflect a strong contrast with the mythical categories. The ancient French *chansons de geste*, such as the *Chanson de Roland*, is a good example of this kind of "historical" epic, as are a number of other medieval epic poems, such as the Spanish *Poema del Mío Cid*. The present study, of course, is not intended to address the long-standing problem of the historicity of epic, but it seems useful, nonetheless, to consider this triple categorisation of the form as a means of approaching the problem of the political dimension of heroes; otherwise, the analysis of this alleged dimension would become a mere theoretical exercise, rather than a means of expanding our knowledge of the cultures which lay behind epic poems.

1.2. "Traditional" and "Constructed" Epic

The process of formation of these epic types involves another well-known classification of epic: the division between "traditional" and "constructed" epic. The latter is sometimes called "literary" or "author" epic, reflecting more or less the interference of a personal authorship in contrast to the supposedly "normal" growth and development of the "traditional" epic. Two of the most evident examples of "constructed" epic are Virgil's *Aeneid*[6] and the *Kalevala*.[7] In what follows I will try to explore the extent to which differentiating between these two types of epic is crucial in tracing the possible connections between social or political values and their literary expression.

2. The Political Dimension of Western Heroes[8]

2.1. The "Non-Politics" of the Hero

The narrative genre known as epic—both Eastern and Western—does not afford listeners/readers any perspective outside that of the warrior-hero. To quote Dean A. Miller (2000: 177), the system of values it reflects seems to ignore completely and deliberately the *Realpolitik* of the corresponding culture. This involves a conscious rejection of some of the most basic aspects of rationality, and as a consequence the hero superciliously and obstinately persists in behaving in a "non practical" or "non pragmatic" way. Yet, this does not hinder a detached analysis of epic as a valuable set of "political" documents, in the sense that they reflect a certain vision of power, authority, or both, however indirect this vision may be; hence, these documents also embody a certain vision or reflection of the construction, the orientation and the control of a society.

If we try to consider them as political documents, the heroic texts will reveal a particularly restricted vision of the setting of the action. The protagonists usually occupy the central space and society as a whole, and the anonymous crowd which is the background against which epic actions are depicted is deprived of meaning, and can even seem to be invisible in this heroic context. The action, the political tension and the rivalry in the epic context usually focus on the **confrontation between the hero and the king**.[9] In Dumézilian terms, the First Function ("Sovereignty") and the Second Function (the Warrior Function) are in constant battle for domination, determined to occupy the top of the social pyramid. The Third Function (the productive Function) is always relegated to a minor or even non-existent political role, that is to say, it remains "outside politics". Hence, the epic context is always inhabited by "another" powerful *persona* who interacts with the hero, and it is this interaction that moulds the hero's political dimension.

2.2. "Monarchs" and "Antimonarchical" Characters

The king and the hero are characterised from the point of view of the very class of "the powerful", of those who stand out, who excel or are beyond the rules that apply to society in general. Sometimes, the king also assumes the heroic function, just as when a ϝάναξ in the *Iliad* acts as a war leader, creating a space in which the main rivalries of the Homeric

poem are settled: those concerning heroic prestige and honour. It is in this context that the famous quarrel about the slaves taken as booty takes place between Agamemnon and Achilles, in chant 1 of the *Iliad*. Achilles' words reflect the damaged honour of the hero, and he is even willing to raise his sword against the monarch (and would have done so were it not for the personal intervention of Athena), in that the king is accused of being unjust and also a coward, two transgressions unfitting of someone who should be a "good monarch" and a "good warrior":

(1) Hom. *Il.* 1.148–51, 161–8, 225–30

> Τὸν δ' ἄρ' ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
> "ὤ μοι, ἀναιδείην ἐπιειμένε, κερδαλεόφρον,
> πῶς τίς τοι πρόφρων ἔπεσιν πείθηται Ἀχαιῶν (…)
> καὶ δή μοι γέρας αὐτὸς ἀφαιρήσεσθαι ἀπειλεῖς,
> ᾧ ἔπι πολλὰ μόγησα, δόσαν δέ μοι υἷες Ἀχαιῶν.
> οὐ μὲν σοί ποτε ἶσον ἔχω γέρας, ὁππότ' Ἀχαιοὶ
> Τρώων ἐκπέρσωσ' εὖ ναιόμενον πτολίεθρον·
> ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν πλεῖον πολυάϊκος πολέμοιο
> χεῖρες ἐμαὶ διέπουσ'· ἀτὰρ ἤν ποτε δασμὸς ἵκηται,
> σοὶ τὸ γέρας πολὺ μεῖζον, ἐγὼ δ' ὀλίγον τε φίλον τε
> ἔρχομ' ἔχων ἐπὶ νῆας, ἐπεί κε κάμω πολεμίζων. (…)
> "οἰνοβαρές, κυνὸς ὄμματ' ἔχων, κραδίην δ' ἐλάφοιο,
> οὔτε ποτ' ἐς πόλεμον ἅμα λαῷ θωρηχθῆναι
> οὔτε λόχονδ' ἰέναι σὺν ἀριστήεσσιν Ἀχαιῶν
> τέτληκας θυμῷ· τὸ δέ τοι κὴρ εἴδεται εἶναι.
> ἦ πολὺ λώϊόν ἐστι κατὰ στρατὸν εὐρὺν Ἀχαιῶν
> δῶρ' ἀποαιρεῖσθαι ὅς τις σέθεν ἀντίον εἴπῃ·

Achilles scowled at him and answered, "You are steeped in insolence and lust of gain. With what heart can any of the Achaeans do your bidding, either on foray or in open fighting? (…)

You (…) threaten to rob me of the prize for which I have toiled, and which the sons of the Achaeans have given me. Never when the Achaeans sack any rich city of the Trojans do I receive so good a prize as you do, though it is my hands that do the better part of the fighting. When the sharing comes, your share is far the largest, and I, forsooth, must go back to my ships, take what I can get and be thankful, when my labour of fighting is done." (…)

"Wine-bibber", he cried, "with the face of a dog and the heart of a hind, you never dare to go out with the host in fight, nor yet with our chosen men in ambuscade. You shun this as you do death itself. You had rather go round and rob his prizes from any man who contradicts you".

Therefore, it is not uncommon to see the hero and the king competing against each other or even to see their "Functions" overlap, as also happens in the Persian context, if we consider, for example, the *Shāh-nāma*, although in this case they are also presented as opponents or rivals.[10]

At this point, before returning to medieval epic, it might be useful to include a reflection on Latin "constructed" epic (see § 1.2), in particular Virgil's *Aeneid*. We will discover nothing new by alluding to its Homeric models, yet in the context of our present study it becomes clear that the treatment of the hero is very different from that in Homeric epic, at least from the point of view of its comparison with (or differentiation from) the treatment of the king. The broadly accepted interpretation of Virgil's works as presenting a propagandistic element in favour of the new Augustan monarchs makes it easy for us to understand why a confrontation such as the one between Achilles and Agamemnon is not possible in Virgil's *epos*: given the propagandistic purposes of the *Aeneid*, there is simply no place for a confrontation between heroic principles and morals and the principles and morals of the monarchs, represented by the hero-leader Aeneas. At least in this sense, it would be necessary to conclude that its character as a "constructed" epic marks the difference between the *Aeneid* and the "political" vision of traditional inherited epic.

As to medieval European epic, *The song of the Nibelungs* shows a thematic variation with regard to the confrontation or rivalry between the hero and the monarch: Siegfried's initial "heroic" boastfulness, reflected in his intention to take over the lands and castles of King Gunther, gives way to a less controversial position, and later on he goes as far as to assume the role of Gunther's champion in the fight against the Saxon invaders, becoming "a powerful man who acts in a responsible way defending the legitimate authority".[11] The *chansons de geste* have been classified into two types or cycles:[12] the first of these includes the "noble king"—mainly Charlemagne, of course—an icon of victorious Christianity, although he ends up being blamed for the death of Roland and Olivier. The latter can also be considered a victim of two opposed imperatives: his personal friendship with Roland and his political or monarchic sense of "the good of the common cause".[13] The second cycle is characterised by a seriously diluted or blurred sovereignty: the king has become "weak, even sly", as in the old French *Cycle des Narbonnais*. The archetype of this second group is Charlemagne's son, Louis, a sort of "anti-king", the negative of his illustrious father. This image of the king is specific to the medieval West; in Spanish epic, for

example, we have the episode of the Cid's oath in Santa Gadea, which reflects, roughly, the fear and mistrust felt towards the monarch, whose behaviour towards his knights and vassals is not as it should be.

In northern Europe at the time a more severe judgement is brought against the monarchy. The Icelanders sagas had begun to be written in Iceland by the beginning of the 13th century, although they narrate events that go back to the 9th century, a time of the progressive colonisation of Iceland from Norway. There is no consensus as to the real reasons for this migration to Iceland, but the earlier Icelandic sagas provide abundant material concerning the strongly antimonarchical feelings of the colonists. One of the central Icelandic texts, the *Landnámabók* ("The Book of Settlement"), mentions the Norwegian King Haraldr Halfdansson fifteen times as being the direct cause of the emigration of individuals and families to Iceland, which is frequently expressed by means of the phrase "due to the oppression (*ofríki*) exerted by King Haraldr". The family that proves a more overt involvement with or tendency towards the antimonarchical cause is the Kveld-Ulfrs family, mentioned in the *Saga of Egil Skallagrímsson*. In this saga, which was undoubtedly written by Snorri Sturluson (1178/1179–1241), an account of Egil's adventures is provided; he is the most important Icelandic Skald of old, and also a famous Viking and confirmed enemy of the Kings of Norway. In his saga the crimes of these kings are enumerated: they are either unjust, tyrannical traitors (like King Haraldr), or weak, rather ungenerous and also traitors (like Haraldr's successor, Eiríkr "Blood-Axe"). Towards the end of chapter 78 of the saga, the poem composed by Egil in honour of one of the leaders of the revolt against King Hákon of Norway, Arinbjörn, appears:

(2) *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar* 78

Emk hraþkvæþr	For generous prince
hilme at mæra,	Swift praise I find,
en glapmáll	But stint my words
of gløggvinga,	To stingy churl.
openspjallr	Openly sing I
of jofors dóþom,	Of king's true deeds,
en þagmælskr	But silence keep
of þjóþlyge.	On slander's lies.

According to Miller (1989; 2000: 181),[14] this negative image of the "bad king" found in Icelandic literature could be traced back to the

Indo-European tradition, something which is virtually impossible to prove. I think that the literary image of the bad king attested in European epic poems is an archetype forged by the very opposite image, that of the "good king" or of the "good monarch"; by forged I mean that the presence of one, in this case the "good king", a constant both in history and literature, might promote or encourage the opposite image, rather than exclude it *a priori* from the discourse on power.

Once more, according to Miller, it is possible to see the following structure, in which the king is despised by the hero in three ways: 1) The monarch rules over a social order from which the hero has excluded himself, or rather, to which he adheres only according to his own conditions. 2) The king pretends to be clearly above any lay or profane code, ignoring the social and legal order or subverting it as he imposes it on others. 3) He can take advantage of his authority due either to his incompetence or to the absence of clearly set limits, and he can even interfere with the role of the hero. To quote Miller (2000: 181ff., my emphasis):

> In schematic terms **the heroic mode makes a strong political objection to the monarch** because the latter establishes a vertical and metonymical structure, set in terms and forms of a hierarchy and the intensive control of this hierarchy, and yet **the monarch may evade or violate that structure**, pushing himself into the horizontal and the metaphorical patterns shaping and dominating the heart of the heroic idea. The confusion of the two types brings less gain to the hero than to the king.

Thus, the king can allude to the very structure or hierarchy on which his own authority is based, invading the hero's natural territory, in contrast to the hero's opposition to the king's authority. The difference between these two characters might reflect a latent dissociation between power and fairness, an idea that—as we shall see—is radically opposed to the prevailing situation in classical India.

2.3. The Champion and the "Bad King"

The main task of a hero, as a *champion*, is to substitute the king; a *champion* is a sort of hero integrated into the monarchy, shielding the king from outer threats. In both a real and a symbolic way, the king instrumentalizes the heroic power of the *champion*, who therefore becomes vulnerable. This vulnerability becomes the main issue of several epic archetypes, as we can see, for instance, in the tragic destiny of the

hero-champion Roland, or in Danish epic champions such as Þórólfr, who dies during a battle while fighting for the cause of the king.[15] The main conclusion we can draw from this structure is the inherent danger—on many occasions, a fatal danger—of the function of the "king's champion". This danger can also be provoked or sought by the antagonist of the king himself; some sources in old French even involve the so-called antimonarchical *démesuré*, typical of the knight who reacts violently and irrationally against the king.[16]

In old Welsh accounts of King Arthur (such as the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* or *Triads*) the image of the British monarch is very different from subsequent ones, with complex interactions between the king and the hero-champion (in this case, Cei, i.e., Sir Kay). Arthur is presented as a bellicose, violent, jealous and sexually voracious monarch. In later continental sources, this immoral, even evil king has become a model of moral redemption; as we know, his champion is now Sir Lancelot (unknown in the Welsh sources) and the long-standing tension between the monarch and the warrior becomes the well-known and somewhat banal triangle formed by the old king, the young queen and the young warrior, though with a sexual and generational focus. However, as trivial as this new romantic story may seem when compared to the ancient structures, it is still possible to trace in it the personal, individual and competitive essence of the hero; the typical dimension of opposition to the system, and to the collective rules that govern the social structure and the established hierarchy, lies now in the attraction he feels for the "forbidden" woman. This hero is still drawn to risk and danger; he not only breaches the rules that govern the articulation of loyalty and faithfulness among the characters that embody the first two Functions (the "sovereign" and the "warrior"), but also the rules that govern and constitute the basis of family solidarity.

The negative image of the king also appears in Russian folk epic (*былины byliny*); thus, in "The Prince of Tver", the *khan* appoints one of his deputies as governor of a city because he has stabbed his own son and drunk his blood,[17] following the king's orders.

2.4. Western Heroes as "Political" Heroes

In spite of the inherent limitations of the "non-political" perspective, noted in § 2.1, the epic sources make it possible to establish a politically significant implication: that the heroic individual is straightforwardly

described as the most significant actor regardless of his "political" standing or lack of it. Epic is the imaginary projection of a very real sense of position in the political hierarchy; yet, the hero symbolises an individualistic position, the political analysis of which is very difficult. The hero *is what he is*, and his predominant position is founded on a permanent defence of his essence. Such an individualism prevents and even reacts against the systematic social logic according to which a given group is formed and operates.[18]

According to Jackson (1982: 15), the main epic conflict between the "established" king and the "intruding" hero is verified through the adamant selfishness of the epic hero, rather than through the operations of the monarchs. This "weakness" of the king detected by Jackson in epic would be underlined in the narrative, yet it is not intended to prove a transition towards a stronger, more efficient king—although this change does occasionally take place—, but rather to raise doubts as to the legitimacy of the very monarchy, doubts that are shared and encouraged both by the creators of epic and by their audience. The *totalitarianism* proposed by Dumézil as a consubstantial element of his *fonction guerrière*, which is essentially bellicose, demands a partial portrait of the bad king, and if there is none, it creates it. This would have been the process underlying the construction of the mythical story of the last tyrant, the lusty King Tarquin the Proud, during the Roman Republic under the rule of the ranking nobility or *patricians*, thus justifying the condemnation and final ousting of Tarquin.[19]

The political order that leads to heroic epic is always unstable. The destructive potential of the hero—his negative component in his character, the uncontrolled activity of his armed, deadly ego—runs parallel to prototypical scenarios that muddle attempts at social stability and at imposing obedience to the rules and the established order. From the perspective of Western heroes, those imposing such attempts must be questioned, challenged and even defeated.

3. Epic Heroes in India

Indian epic provides an opposing picture to the Western one, since it does not depict a conflict between the hero and the king.[20] This difference might be seen as merely fortuitous, a result of some kind of distortion due to the partial transmission of the texts. Yet such a supposition quickly becomes untenable as soon as we consider the immense textual corpus

of Indian epic and begin to explore the ideological essence of the epic context in classical Indian literature.

3.1. The Social Context of Indian Epic Literature

3.1.1. The Establishment of the Caste System

The "epic" period of Indian literature follows the so-called late Vedic period, with no abrupt pause between the two. The former of these historical and literary periods coincides with the spread of a marked social stratification resulting from the long process of settlement of the semi-nomad Indo-Aryan tribes that inhabited the Ganges valley between 2000 and 1400 BC[21] During the early Vedic period the free, ordinary members of the tribe (*viś-*) and the warrior noblemen (*kṣatriya-*)—from which the tribal leader (*rājan-*) would be chosen—were clearly differentiable. Of course, the Brahmins (*brāhmaṇa-*), the caste of the priests, are also mentioned in early texts as a distinct social group. As those ancient semi-nomad groups began to settle, they started to build closer relationships with the native peoples of the Indian subcontinent, who worked for them as farmers and artisans. The external sign distinguishing the dominant free Aryans and the native peoples was "colour" (*varṇa-*), a term that soon became a synonym for "caste" and started to be applied to the different social classes, including the three *Aryan* castes (priests, warriors, free farmers) and the dominated peoples. A late hymn of the *Ṛgveda* reflects the new system for the first time. It is the *Puruṣa-sukta* or "Hymn of the Man", the primordial being is sacrificed, torn apart by the gods in order to create the universe. There is no dissociation between the "cosmogonic" and the "sociogonic" dimensions, since by tearing the primordial being apart both the world and the four castes are created:

(3) *Ṛgveda* 10.90.11–3[22]

yát púruṣaṃ ví ádadhuḥ / katidhā́ ví akalpayan?
11 múkhaṃ kim asya? káu bāhū́? / kā́ ūrū́ pā́dā ucyete
brāhmaṇò "sya múkham āsīd, / bāhū́ **rājanyàḥ** kṛtáḥ;
12 ūrū́ tád asya yád **váiśyaḥ**; / padbhyā́ṃ **śū́dró** ajāyata
candrámā mánaso jātáś; / cákṣoḥ sū́ryo ajāyata
13 múkhād índraś ca agníś ca, / prāṇā́d vāyúr ajāyata

> When they divided up Puruṣa, / how many pieces did they make him into? / What was his mouth, what were his arms, / what his thighs, his feet called? (12) His face was the **priestly caste**, / his arms became the **princely caste**, / his thighs (became) the **third caste**, / from his feet the **fourth caste** was born. (13) The moon was born from his mind, / the sun was born from his eyes; / from his face Indra and the Fire, / from his breath the Wind was born.

In time, this system became fossilised and acquired greater relevance. The social classes during the late Vedic period were characterised by the emergence of a class-based hierarchical order that reflected the distribution of duties among the different social classes. The classes at the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins and the warrior noblemen, the second level consisted of free farmers and traders, and the third was formed by slaves and native workers and artisans. These natives ruled over by the Indo-Aryan were skilled artisans; one of the reasons for the establishment of the caste system might have been the Vedic Aryans" need for the kind of handicrafts that they initially lacked. Hence, the system was conceived of in order to preserve the social and political supremacy of the Aryans, yet to draw the necessary artisan class into the broader social structure.

The political and commercial development that characterised the late Vedic period had its correlate in the upsurge of new social structures. It was in the Gangetic Plains that a new type of monarchy appeared, these organised into small territories. The *kings* mentioned in early Vedic texts were essentially nothing more than tribal leaders who were held accountable before the assembly formed by the men of the tribe (*viś-*, *jana-*) or before an aristocratic tribal council (*sabhā-*, *samiti-*). Some tribes even lacked a king and were governed by these assemblies or councils; recent[23] Indian historians have noted this ancient "democratic tradition" with pride.

But the early Vedic tradition of aristocratic tribal republics disappeared during the late period. With the transition from nomadism to sedentary agriculture, a new type of monarchy appeared. The new kings were not necessarily more powerful, but their position was based on a new ideology. The previous kings derived legitimacy through elections of the members of the tribe; in the new period the king would be the result of a confrontation between the noblemen, and his legitimacy would be based on a ritual investiture by the Brahmins. The common people were mere spectators in this ceremony. This was the time of the magnificent Royal Consecration sacrifices (*rājasūya-*) and of the "sacrifice

of the horse" (*aśvamedha-*), conceived of as shattering propagandistic proof of the authority of the king, who could face any challenge and thus dissuade enemies from defying him. The cosmic, magical meaning of these royal rites became essential over the course of the following millennium and exerted a decisive influence on the ideology of the monarchy in classical India.

The royal apotheosis had a number of explanations. On the one hand, the old association between the monarch and the land[24] was still in force, and the king was responsible for maintaining the cosmic order and fertility. But the most crucial dimension in this new ideology was that of the social context. The apotheosis of the king had become a necessity due to the growing stratification of Vedic society, which gave way to mutual interest among the monarchs and the Brahmins to guarantee their respective positions. The late Vedic texts written by Brahmins stated clearly that they were the most determined defenders of this new idea of sacred sovereignty, because they expected the king, in exchange for their support, to buttress the preeminent position of the Brahmins in the caste system.

The territorialisation process of the ancient tribal society was very slow, lasting more than five hundred years. Since there were many different tribes, many new small states appeared. In contrast to the case of the political situation in Western Asia, in India the Aryans did not have to confront powerful enemies or great empires who were trying to annex them by force, and thus could establish a more efficient political organisation.

3.1.2. The World of the Mahābhārata[25]

It was during this period of progressive territorialisation and tribal confrontation that the great epic Indian poem began to be written; "the great [epic Indian] poem of the Bhārata", with its 106,000 stanzas or "double verses" (*śloka*), is probably the longest piece of world literature. It offers an account of the dispute between the Pāṇḍavas lineage and their cousins, the Kauravas, for the control of the high Ganges and Yamuna river basin during the late Vedic period. The Kauravas had settled in Hastinapura, by the Ganges river bank, some 92 km to the north east of Delhi; the Pāṇḍavas and their family had settled in Indraprastha, by the Yamuna, where the capital of India is located at present. The one hundred members of the Kauravas devise a plan to take over the kingdom of the Pāṇḍavas: they invite the latter to play dice, who lose everything;

the Pāṇḍavas must then go into exile in the forest for twelve years and into hiding for a further year. When they return their cousins refuse to give them the kingdom back—as expected—and thus the Pāṇḍavas begin a cruel battle against the Kauravas which lasts eighteen days. The Pāṇḍavas finally win, with the help of Kṛṣṇa.

Despite the fact that this poem became more complex over time through the addition of many secondary stories and different elements issuing from the poetic imagination of its authors, there is currently general consensus as to the historical accuracy of the nucleus of the account. Archaeologists have identified quite precisely different material elements mentioned, such as the type of dice used in the fatal game that triggered the battle between the families. It seems that the victory of the Pāṇḍavas over the Kauravas could reflect an effective alliance with the native tribes.[26] If we now consider the classification of the epic types in § 1.1—shaman epic, mythic-historical epic and historical epic—, we can conclude that the *Mahābhārata* is a combination of abundant material from the three types.

3.1.3. Epic Ideology

The veteran local hero, Kṛṣṇa, ends up joining the Hindu pantheon as an *avatāra* or incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. But his integration is the final result of a long process. This ally of the Pāṇḍavas is depicted rather unfavourably in quite a few passages of the poem, even as the instiller of evil plots. Such contradictions led several scholars—Holtzmann (1892–1895), Lassen (1847–1861 I: 774) and von Schroeder (1914–1916)—to think that the poem initially took the side of the Kauravas, changing later on and siding with the Pāṇḍavas. But Oldenberg (1922) has argued firmly against this hypothesis: the great gambling scene is one of the oldest and its description shows a clear fondness for the Pāṇḍavas. The question must remain open, then, at least for now. According to Mylius (2003 [1983]: 74), the divergences as far as these differing inclinations are concerned could be due to the diversity of the situations in which bards had to perform at the royal courts: they depended on the affability of their royal protectors, and, hence, it is unclear whether or not they might have adapted their points of view to favour the preferences of the monarchs in question.

The most important narrative interpolations from an ideological point of view were those backed by Brahmins. We have already commented on

the alliance between priests and warriors (§ 3.1.1) as a means of guaranteeing their social pre-eminence in the markedly hierarchical Indian caste system. The priests' influence can be noted in the *Atharvaveda*, and indeed their ideological imprint is evident throughout the different instances of Indian classical literature, even though they did this through later additions to the texts. Obviously enough, they also did so in the case of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the two great epic poems. This is probably one of the reasons why Indian epic cannot easily be compared to Western epic: the ideology behind it—in spite of initial appearances, and even more so if we consider the generic parallelism with Western epic—is not the expected one of the warrior class (*kṣatriya*) but one resulting from the "strategic alliance" between *kṣatriya*—and *brāhmaṇa*—, in which it is the priests who finally exert the ideological leadership, as might be expected. There are many accounts in which the supremacy of the Brahmins over other castes—and in particular over the *kṣatriya*—is stressed. Let us consider, for instance:

> The story of *ṛṣi* (the Brahmanic ascetic wise man) Vasiṣṭha and prince Viśvāmitra goes back to the *Ṛgveda*. In *Mahābhārata* (1.165) Viśvāmitra is the son of the King of Kanyākubja; during a hunting course he visits Vasiṣṭha hermitage and it is there that he sees the Nandinī cow, a "wish-granting cow" (*kāmadhug dhenu-*) that can grant any wish to his master immediately. The *kṣatriya* wants to have that cow and offers the ascetic ten thousand "normal" cows in exchange. He even offers Vasiṣṭha his whole kingdom, but he refuses to hand the cow over. When Viśvāmitra is about to take it by force, with the help of his army, the cow farrows a numerous battalion of barbarians who defeat the army of the *kṣatriya*. Hence, the latter admits his inferiority with regards to the Brahmins and decides to leave his worldly possessions and turn to asceticism, and he ends up becoming a Brahmin (Mylius 2003: 85).

There are also hundreds of didactic digressions in the poem, such as the lesson taught by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira, the hero, in books 12 and 13, when he is about to die. These didactic digressions nearly always contain a philosophical and ideological element, in which the **basic concepts of *karman* and *dharma*** play an essential role. The former is usually translated as "work, action, deed; (personified) deed, resulting from the previous acts, either worthy or unworthy; subjection to the actions and their consequences". The "tale of the Snake, Death, Time and the Karman" can exemplify the essence of this concept:

> The son of a devout Brahmin woman, Gautamī, is bit by a poisonous snake and dies. Arjunaka, the hunter, catches the reptile; he takes it to the mother and asks for her permission to kill it. But Gautamī opposes because she thinks that the death of a creature can only bring about further misfortune; furthermore, that will not bring her son back to life. The hunter insists: enemies must be killed; and he even mentions Indra's deed as an example, for he finally killed Vṛtra, the dragon. Back in the Vedic times everyone knew this deed of the most important god in their pantheon. Yet, in the "epic" period, Indra and the myths having to do with him had already blurred away and, thus, this "Vedic" argument is no longer powerful. Thus, the very snake joins the conversation: she pledges her innocence, because she is nothing but a mere instrument of Mṛtyu, Death. Right then, Death appears and says that neither she nor the snake are to blame, for existence itself is based upon Kāla's actions (Time or Fate). The hunter keeps blaming both the snake and Death for the terrible fate of the boy. Then, Kāla, in person, appears and declares that he, the snake and Death are innocent: their actions are fully justified by the *karman.* Each one has the fate he deserves or the one he has sought for through his own actions. These words bring some consolation to Gautamī on the death of her son, because now she can take it as the consequence of their *karman* (Mylius 2003: 86).

The concept of *karman* forms part of the ideological structure developed during the time when the caste system was becoming consolidated. If we consider this concept from outside the referential culture, that is to say, if we consider it from an *etic* approach—using the nomenclature created by Pike (1954, 1955, 1960 [1967])—, it is not difficult to note that its operation is a key element in an improved system of social immobilism: the *karman* blames the victim of the mishap (or of the injustice) for that mishap (or injustice). Its psychological grounds are the doctrine of transmigration or reincarnation (*saṃsāra-*), and its normative or legal expression—but with an *emic* cosmic or natural basis—is the *dharma*, a concept that I will propose as being the main ideological-political factor in the literary contrast here between Western and Indian epic.

3.2. The Ideology of the Dharma

The term *dharma* is very old: indeed, it appears in the *Ṛgveda*, although its meaning in the first Vedic texts is highly imprecise[27] ("assistance", "support", "stable order, law") and even in the texts of the middle and late Vedic period (*Brāhmaṇa*s and *Upaniṣad*s) its use is still rather

infrequent.[28] This is particularly interesting in that it is the main concept of Indian civilisation. P. Olivelle's hypothesis, which I fully share, is that its development and theological definition take place in the very context of the competition between Hinduism and Buddhism. The Buddhist religion adopted the *dharma* as its main moral concept, and in turn was adopted as the state ideology by the Maurya dynasty; it was then divulged, mainly by the most important monarch of the time, Aśoka, in the first half of the 3rd century BC. The political ideology during the Maurya period removed Brahmins from their privileged social position and put them on a level with other priestly and monastic classes, principally the Buddhist *śramaṇa*. During the period following the Maurya dynasty, the Brahmins recovered their unique position and their special relationship with the king and the political authorities. The symbiotic relationship between *brahma* and *kṣatra*—which had yielded such beneficial results for both castes since the Vedic era—was thus beginning to be restored.

3.2.1. The Dharma of the King

The two most outstanding written works that exemplify the ideology of the *dharma* during the "epic" period—both of them deliberately and closely related to the *Mahābhārata*—are the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* or *The Laws of Manu*[29] and the *Bhagavadgītā*[30] which forms part of book six of the *Mahābhārata* as a long piece of religious-philosophical speech. I will not attempt an in-depth analysis of the *Bhagavadgītā* here, since this would require its own study. The *Mānavadharmaśāstra* is more directly related to the problem which the current essay addresses, because it is undisputedly the most important and influential treaty concerning the *dharma*; it was written during the first two centuries of the Christian era, and it is almost contemporary with the moment in which the *Mahābhārata* was written; its compilation is largely a consequence of the same social-political circumstances as the epic poem:

1) **Reaction against the marginalisation of the Brahmins,** removed from their privileged position in the social hierarchy;

2) **Reaction against the usurpation of the royal privileges of the *kṣatriya*** by the *śūdra* (the forth caste, the "non-Aryans"), since the Maurya and their predecessors, the Nanda, were considered as such;

3) **Opposition to the foreign dynasties,** such as that of the Kuṣāṇa, which ruled over most of northern India and who also favoured Buddhism by that time.