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### Honor and Shame in Greek and Sanskrit Epics

Luther Obrock

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HONOR, SHAME AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HEROISM IN GREEK AND  
SANSKRIT EPICS

Luther Obrock



In Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, the main characters, Estha and Rahel, watch a Kathakali dance performance of parts of the *Mahābhārata*. They watch a re-enactment of the encounter between Kuntī and her son, Karṇa. Karṇa was Kuntī's son, and had lived for many years not knowing that his mother was also the mother of his enemies, the five Pāṇḍava brothers. The viewing of this scene is a beautiful metaphor for conflicting loyalties in a family separated by secrets. Roy uses this motif from the *Mahābhārata* to explore Estha and Rahel's desire to understand their mother, and also to underscore the tragic dimensions of their story. This episode in Roy's novel is especially poignant when it discusses what Roy terms the "Love Laws." In it she explores the system of connections that bind one family member to another.<sup>1</sup>

While exploring the uses of themes from the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*) in *The God of Small Things* would be a useful and fascinating topic, here I choose to focus on same episode that fascinated Roy—the meeting of Karṇa and Kuntī. This meeting takes place in the fifth book of the *MBh*, in an episode in which Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī attempt to persuade

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<sup>1</sup> See Arundhati Roy, *God of Small Things*, (HarperCollins Books: New York, 1997), especially pages 218-225.

Karṇa to fight for the Pāṇḍavas rather than his friend and benefactor Duryodhana. This meeting has some interesting similarities with the return of Hector to Troy and his subsequent meeting with his wife, Andromache, in book 6 of the *Iliad*. Here, I intend to look at the uses of comparative epic in looking at salient cultural patterns and see what insight, if any, can be gained from the juxtaposition of the two works. In these two episodes common thematic and structural features as well as certain more detailed congruencies can be more easily demonstrated. At the broadest level, both episodes concern the failure of a woman to persuade an ultimately doomed warrior. The warrior then explains his reasons for continuing on his chosen course of battle. Both the Karṇa and Kuntī episode in the *MBh* and the Hector and Andromache episode in the *Iliad* (*Il*) provide deep insights into the psyche of the epic tragic hero.

However, when I speak of “comparative” epic, I do not simply wish to show and describe what the two epics share. I am equally interested in the contrasting elements in these stories—how each plays a variation on a theme, to use a musical metaphor. I think it is necessary also to contrast the two epics in order to see how salient features of similar episodes diverge and how that affects the characterization of the tragic hero.

The provenances of the *Il*. And the *MBh* are separated by mountain ranges, centuries,

language, and cultural norms, yet both hold up a doomed warrior as the epitome of tragic nobility. Both epics portray the hero sympathetically, rather than demonizing him as an abstraction of “the enemy.” That both Greek and Sanskrit traditions have this comparable character in their literatures is fascinating, but what is in many ways more interesting is how this character is molded and shaped in each circumstance to become a compelling figure in a compelling work.

I intend to look first at each character in turn and to describe at some length the specific passages that will be compared. Noting congruencies, I hope then to identify and explain an epic “type” based on the characterizations and functions of Karna and Hector. For this, I intend to concentrate on the similar constructions of shame and honor apparent in these passages. Finally I will point out some of the diversions and the way each epic highlights and develops different parts of these common characteristics.

But before a detailed comparison can be launched, some parameters must be set down and some terms defined. Firstly, what does one mean when one speaks of “epic”? Much time has been spent and much ink has been spilled in attempting to define the “epic” as a genre. Since Hector and Karna are in many ways paradigms of “epic” heroism, a discussion of the term is useful to delineate the boundaries of this inquiry and

also to make plain the lens through which I am examining the works. Simply put, epics are martial in nature<sup>2</sup>—a war or battle provides the impetus and stands as the defining event of the narrative. The characters are mostly men caught up in the bloody business of war. The term “epic” in the West is derived from the model provided by the *Iliad*—most other epics are seen as either derivative of the *Iliad*’s form or are compared to the *Iliad* in terms of plot, form, and thematic content. However, the holding of the *Iliad* as the paradigmatic example of pure epic often colors the perception of other epics, especially non-Western works such as the *MBh*.<sup>4</sup>

Epic continues to be a source of enjoyment and study because epics have enormous imaginative power. David Quint asserts in *Epic and Empire* that “...for many readers this power resides in epic’s grandeur and energy of language, its descriptive scope, its dramas of human and divine heroism.”<sup>5</sup> The *MBh* and the *Iliad* both display these traits of thought and language in abundance. However, in attempting to craft a

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<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout I distinguish the martial epic such as the *Iliad* from romance such as the *Odyssey*, following Frye (see below).

<sup>3</sup> See David Quint’s Introduction to *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993)

<sup>4</sup> According to Indian tradition, the *MBh* is placed in the genre of *itihāsa*, which is a compound of the words *iti-ha- āsa* meaning “so indeed it was.” According to Monier Monier-Williams *itihāsa* can mean “talk, legend, history, traditional accounts of former events, [or] heroic history.” See Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003) p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Quint, p. 16



working definition of epic, I am chiefly concerned with overarching structural and formal considerations, while taking their inherent aesthetic value for granted.

Although *Epic and Empire* speaks most directly of the dialogue between Roman epics and romances, I think Quint's discussion is useful because he recognizes that the designation "epic" carries with it connotations derived from a particular tradition, one that grew organically out of a particular train of cultural, social and political factors. Quint expounds on the link between "epic text" and "epic tradition." Quint rightly argues that the conception of "epic" in the West has been largely colored by the constant reasserting and subverting of cultural forms based on past literary ideologies. Quint aims "...to link the text with its literary and cultural memory."<sup>6</sup> He argues that to speak of "epic" automatically draws one into conversation with epic tradition. Here I realize that to speak of "epic" I am describing a formal genre that is exemplified by western works, such as the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, but, in admitting these biases, I think a good working definition of epic can be obtained by applying Western conversations about genre to the *MBh* tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Quint, p. 15.

Northrop Frye offers a useful discussion of the definition of epic in his book *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. He argues that the *Iliad* exemplifies the epic genre; because it is a tale of wrath (*mênis*).<sup>7</sup> Frye contrasts this with tales of cunning (*dolos*) like the *Odyssey*. To further elucidate the distinction between these two genres, Frye borrows two terms from Dante, *forza* (force) and *froda* (deceit), to exemplify the two methods literary characters in each employ to achieve their ends. It is also important to remember, Frye contends, that, “*Forza* and *froda* being the two essential elements of sin, it follows that they must be the two cardinal virtues of life as such.”<sup>8</sup> These terms lay out the two ways of acting in the world.

It is easy to place the *Iliad* firmly into the category of *forza*, since it is almost entirely concerned with war and battle, and the taking of honor, glory, and prizes through martial means. The first word of the poem identifies the topic—rage. The *Iliad* begins with the Greek word *mênin* (rage) and finishes the first line specifying of whose rage is being spoken (*Pêlêiadeô Akhilêos*, “of Achilles, son of Peleus”). The rage of Achilles is further described as “murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, /

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<sup>7</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976) p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Frye, p. 65.

hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls.”<sup>9</sup> The rage of Achilles is thus described as the cause and instrument of death. The Achaeans suffer great losses because of the withdrawal of Achilles in book one. After the death of Patroclus, Achilles unleashes his full fury, slaughtering many Trojan warriors. He even sacrifices nine Trojan youths on the grave of Patroclus. Book twenty-four portrays the recovery of Hector’s body by his father Priam. The entire *Iliad* ends with the burial of Hector. The entire poem is steeped in rage, and the characters react to it through martial force.

The *MBh* is much harder to classify because of the diversity of its episodes and its sheer size; however even the most “romantic” of its episodes can be seen in the larger frame of a story of *forza*<sup>10</sup>. Like the *Iliad*, the *MBh* as a whole is an epic of *forza*. It is very easy to agree on this very broad and very general point: at its most basic level the *MBh* is about a fratricidal war over an hereditary kingdom.

However, Frye goes on to say, “As *forza* is open violence, tragedy seldom conceals anything essential from the audience or the reader.”<sup>11</sup> The // fits very well in Frye’s conception of “open violence.” The characters move forward on a clearly

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<sup>9</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Books, New York: 1991) l. 1.2-3, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of “romantic” episodes in the *MBh*, see Luther J. Obrock, “Force and Cunning: *Nala* as Argument and Romance,” (Unpublished, 2004)

<sup>11</sup> Frye, p. 66.

delineated trajectory and reach their destined end. However, the characterization of the *MBh* as epic based on Frye's "open violence" rings false. Although it is true that the reader or the audience is aware of all the facts in the *MBh*, the characters themselves (especially the eventually victorious Pāṇḍava brothers in regard to their half-brother Karṇa) are at many times unaware of the total picture told in the story. The true tragic force of the story of Karṇa is that the violence is not "open"—that is to say the true ramifications of Karṇa's slaying are not understood until his true identity is revealed. Of course the audience knows this, but the eventual revealing of his hidden identity is essential to the understanding of Karṇa's character.

In epic narratives there are losers and there are winners. From this simple and obvious dichotomy arise many interesting problems—especially when the losers are not abstract demonizations but rather sympathetic humans. The portrayal of the losers in the epics provides a rich source for material about how the authors and the audience perceived fate, honor and duty. To both the authors of the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata* and the listeners, the story was known. Anyone in an ancient Greek or Indian audience would know that Hector or Karṇa was fated to die. What was interesting to the audience was how the characters were portrayed in light of their doomed status. How they explain

themselves, why they fight for a lost cause. In both the *Iliad* and the *Mahabharata*, the soon-to-be-defeated explain themselves, in a vocabulary that tells much about the construction of honor and duty as it was viewed and idealized in their society.

David Quint, discussing a dichotomy that is very similar to Frye's *froda* versus *forza* schema, speaks to the problem of winners and losers in the context. He states, "To the victors belong epic with its linear teleology; to the losers belong romance, with its random or circular wandering. Put another way, the victors experience history as a coherent, end-directed story told by their own power; the losers experience a contingency that they are powerless to shape to their own ends."<sup>12</sup> In this context Quint argues that epics are narratives of winners, and romances are narratives of losers.<sup>13</sup>

However, how can we apply this distinction to characters like Karna and Hector, who are confined to act (at least formally) within the epic parameters, but are fated eventually to loose.

I argue that Frye is correct in asserting that epics are characterized by force and violence. But in order to take into account both the winners and the losers of epic narrative, the ideologies of epic force must be explored. I suggest that in epic, the

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<sup>12</sup> Quint, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> His book is divided into two sections: "Epic and the Winners" and "Romance and the Losers."

winners (Achilles or Arjuna) are directly opposed to the losers (Hector and Karṇa) not only in sides of the battle, but in ideologies of battle. I intend to concentrate on the losing side. As I will go into in greater detail later, both Hector and Karṇa are heroes of *nomos*—of social norms, familial obligations, and class duty. In order to do this, I intend to look briefly at the actions and characteristics of the heroes, and then explore Hector and Karṇa's notions of honor and duty.

In both the *//* and the *MBh*, the hero who is fated to lose explains himself to a non-combatant woman character. In the *MBh*, the mother tries to persuade the hero to switch sides, while in the *//* the wife tries to persuade the hero not to return to battle. The confrontation occurs outside of the scope of the battle or the battlefield. In the *Iliad*, Hector returns to the city of Troy, and talks to Hecabe, Helen, and Andromache. In the *MBh*, the confrontation occurs before the battle begins between Karṇa and his birth-mother Kuntī. The feminine offer of safety and family is firmly rejected in favor of duty and honor. Before exploring the parallels that emerge, each episode in each epic must be examined in turn. Here I will explore two short and congruent episodes: the Temptation of Karṇa in the *Udyogaparvan* and Hector's return to Troy in Book 6.

In one of the most moving scenes in the *MBh*, Kuntī confronts Karṇa to try to convince him not to fight for the Kauravas. War is now inevitable between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, and Karṇa is famed for his prowess in battle and his fierce devotion to the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and his equally fierce hatred of the Pāṇḍava brothers, especially Arjuna. As the audience of the *MBh* is told in the *Ādiparvan*, Karṇa is Kuntī's child from a youthful encounter with the sun god, Sūrya. As she was then a young unwed girl, Kuntī placed the infant Karṇa in a basket and sent him floating down a river. He was found and raised by a childless couple as their own son, while his mother Kuntī eventually married Pāṇḍu and gave birth to the three eldest sons of Pāṇḍu (the "Pāṇḍava" brothers), Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna. (Kuntī's co-wife Madrī was the mother of the other two Pāṇḍavas, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva.)

Kuntī has had no contact with her first-born son since setting him afloat, and Karṇa, although aware of his true parentage, is alienated from his brothers and mother. Then, during the preparations for war, she visits Karṇa at the bidding of Vidura to inform him that she is his real mother, and that the Pāṇḍavas he will soon face in battle are actually his brothers. Kuntī's other sons, the Pāṇḍavas, do not know that Karṇa is their eldest brother. Kuntī tries to persuade Karṇa to fight with his brothers, but he refuses,

citing the kindness shown to him by the Dhārtarāṣṭras<sup>14</sup> and also the insults thrown at him by Arjuna and the other Pāṇḍavas. He then promises that Kuntī will always have five sons—either he will kill Arjuna or Arjuna will slay him.

Barbara Stoller Miller says that Karṇa is “the epic hero who epitomizes the paradox of Indian epic heroism, which is expressed as extraordinary personal integrity and effort limited by the inevitability of destiny, duty, karma, curses, and divine intervention.”<sup>15</sup> This particular scene explores particularly the relationship of destiny and duty in the character of the tragic hero Karṇa. The failed persuasion of Karṇa gives the audience a glimpse into the mind of a man who will ultimately fail, and also allow the author to place a certain ideology in the form of an argument in the mouth of the hero. Karṇa is a well respected man, both in the epic itself and the later tradition. There is in fact a whole body of contemporary literature that celebrates and glorifies Karṇa, especially in the land of his finding, Bengal. In this scene, the doomed hero speaks, explaining his reason for not choosing reunion with his new found brothers, but rather casting his lot with the Kauravas.

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<sup>14</sup> Dhārtarāṣṭra is a patronymic of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the name of the fathers of Duryodhana, Duḥśasana, and the other one hundred evil sons who oppose the Pāṇḍavas. They are often called the Kauravas, which as another patronymic meaning simply “descendants of Kuru,” a name which also refers to the Pāṇḍavas.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Stoller Miller, “*Karṇabharā: The Trial of Karṇa*,” in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (E. J. Brill, Leiden: 1991) p.60.



Kṛṣṇa says to Kuntī that Karṇa “still wishes only for Law out of love for his kinsmen, like a weak man although he is strong.”<sup>16</sup> Vidura, another person allied with the Pāṇḍavas, then tells Kuntī to go to Karṇa and try to win him over to the Pāṇḍavas’ side in the now inevitable war by telling him of his true parentage and family ties to the Pāṇḍava brothers. Kuntī agrees and sets out, and soon, “[o]n the banks of the Ganges Pṛtha<sup>17</sup> heard the sound of her compassionate and fruitful son’s recitations.”<sup>18</sup> The author of the episode goes out of his way to emphasize the piety and general goodness of Karṇa, going on to describe him as “strict in his vows”<sup>19</sup> and a “proud and splendid man, first of the upholders of the Law.”<sup>20</sup>

Kuntī proceeds to tell Karṇa that he is her son from before her marriage. She reveals his divine parentage (which a voice from the heavens corroborates), and pleads with him to join his true brothers. She implores, “Let the Kurus today witness the meeting of Karṇa and Arjuna in a spirit of brotherhood.”<sup>21</sup> She appeals to Karṇa’s sense of duty towards family by informing him of where his true familial loyalty lies. She also

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<sup>16</sup> *The Mahabharata: The Book of the Effort* in *The Mahabharata: Vol. 4*, trans. and ed. J. A. B. van Buitenen. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1978) 5(55)142.5, p. 451.

<sup>17</sup> Pṛtha=Kuntī

<sup>18</sup> 5(5)142.27, p. 452.

<sup>19</sup> 5(5)142.30, p. 452.

<sup>20</sup> 5(5)142.32, p. 452.

<sup>21</sup> 5(5)143.10, p. 452.

appeals to the honor inherent in the *varṇa* system. Kuntī tells Karṇa that, by accepting the Pāṇḍavas as his brothers, he will automatically attain the rank of *kṣatriya*<sup>22</sup> (which he only attained when Duryodhana granted him the kingdom of Aṅgā in the *Ādiparvan*). Kuntī says "...your title will no longer be that of the son of a *sūtā*, you shall be a heroic *Pārtha*!"<sup>23</sup> Kuntī thus attempts to undermine Karṇa's loyalty to Duryodhana by saying his nobility is innate rather than something granted. She argues that since Duryodhana did not grant anything that Karṇa did not already have, he does not owe him allegiance.

Karṇa's response to Kuntī is very blunt. He says, "It is not that I do not believe the words that you have spoken, *kṣatriya* lady, or deny that the gateway to Law is to carry out your behest. But the irreparable wrong you have done by casting me out has destroyed the name and fame that I could have had. Born a *kṣatriya* I have not received the respect due to a baron."<sup>24</sup> Karṇa's counterargument is simple. It revolves around the fame and honor that Karṇa has acquired within the warrior *kṣatriya* class. He says "who would not call me a coward, if I now joined the Pārthas?"<sup>25</sup> He is concerned with

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<sup>22</sup> *Kṣatriya* is the warrior class in classical India's four *varṇa* ("color"=caste) system.

<sup>23</sup> Pārtha is a matronymic from one of Kuntī's names, Prthā. *MBh*, 5(55)143.13, p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> 5(5)144.4-6, p. 153, in van Buitenen's translation, baron= *kṣatriya*,

<sup>25</sup> 5(5)144.10, p. 153.

his reputation among his fellow *kṣatriyas*. “What will the baronage call me?”<sup>26</sup> he asks Kuntī. He is bound by honor to Duryodhana and his Kaurava fighters. Karṇa argues that, “I must discharge my duty heedless of my own life.”<sup>27</sup> Karṇa’s duty is bound to the kindness shown to him in the past by Duryodhana and the abuse shown to him by Arjuna. But more importantly than that, his duty is bound by the perceptions of the people of his own class.

To borrow a Greek term, Karṇa is a hero of *nomos*.<sup>28</sup> Karṇa fights because his social position demands it. He fights for Duryodhana because Duryodhana gave him his social position through his friendship and support. Therefore, the honor he receives from his *kṣatriya* status is owed to Duryodhana. Karṇa’s allegiance to Duryodhana is corollary to receiving *kṣatriya* honor that he desires so very much. In this way, Karṇa must chose to follow *nomos*—the law or social conventions that his social position

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<sup>26</sup> 5(5)144.12, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> 5(5)144.16, p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> *Nomos* is defined as “anything assigned, a usage, custom, law, [or] ordinance.” H. G. Liddell and Scott, (LS) *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003), p. 535. Jenny Strauss-Clay first introduced me to the characterization of heroes of *nomos* (versus heroes of *phusis*). Jenny Strauss-Clay, “How to Be a Hero: The Case of Sarpedon.” Lecture. Feb 25, 2005. I think this distinction carries very well from the Greek examples of Sarpedon and Hector to the Indian Karṇa

demands that he follow. Like Hector, he is bound by honor to serve and fight for the community which in turn has honored him.<sup>29</sup>

The failed persuasion of Karṇa is in many ways congruent to the episode in book 6 of the *Iliad*. In both episodes, a woman with family ties tries to persuade the main hero to reconsider his loyalties in the time of war, loyalties that are in conflict with familial duty. Of course, the episodes are not entirely parallel. Hector is not an orphan son, nor is he offered the chance to “switch sides.” However, it is interesting in each of these episodes that the male warrior has the hope of a family life dangled in front of him, a hope that he must reject because of his duty to his social position. In the case of Karṇa, he is bound to the Dhārtarāṣṭras who elevated his social position to that of being the powerful king of Aṅgā. He is also bound by friendship to the Dhārtarāṣṭras, especially Duryodhana, to fight for the Kauravas. For Hector, he is bound to the duty that comes

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<sup>29</sup> Compare to Sarpedon's speech in book 12 of the *Iliad*:

[the warriors will say,] 'Not without fame, the men who rule in Lycia,  
These kings of ours who eat fat cuts of lamb  
And drink sweet wine, the finest stock we have.  
But they owe it all to their own fighting strength—  
Our great men of war, they lead our way in battle!'

—12.369-73, p. 335

Sarpedon's argument is largely parallel and clarifies the idea of *nomos* succinctly. Heroes are given honor by others. They enjoy honor by virtue of their esteem in the eyes of others. It is therefore the warrior's duty to fight for those who hold them in such high regard. Karṇa's desire for “the respect due to a baron” was satisfied by Duryodhana and his allies, thus he owes them his prowess in battle.

with the position of respect in which the people of Troy have placed him. But before looking at further similarities, let us look at the episode in Book 6 more closely.

Hector returns from the battlefield to Troy at the behest of Aeneas, who tells Hector to make the wives and mothers of the Trojan soldiers gather to propitiate Athena, in order to hold off the fierce attack of Diomedes. So Hector comes into the citadel of Troy. Crowds of women gather around him:

The wives and daughters of Troy came rushing up around him,  
Asking about their sons, brothers, friends, and husbands.  
But Hector told them only, "Pray to the gods"<sup>30</sup>

He then comes to the palace and meets his mother, who offers him a cup of wine. Hector turns her offer down, saying the wine would take away his strength, and also commenting that "...I'd be ashamed to pour a glistening cup to Zeus / with unwashed hands."<sup>31</sup> Here, as with *Karṇa*, Hector's piety is stressed. After telling his mother to go to the temple of Athena, he hurries on to find his brother and to prompt him into action. The meeting of Paris and Hector inverts in many ways the arguments which will occur in Hector's upcoming meeting with Andromache. Paris sits, as he puts it, "plunging myself

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<sup>30</sup> *Iliad*, 6.284-6, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> *Iliad*, 6.315-6, p. 204.

in grief,"<sup>32</sup> while his wife urges him back to battle. Whereas Helen must urge her husband to enter battle, Andromache fails to persuade her husband to stay from battle. Hector sits as a kind of anti-Paris. In the words of Helen, "I wish I had been the wife of a better man, someone / alive to outrage, the withering scorn of men."<sup>33</sup> Hector then refuses Helen's offer to sit with her and hurries on to visit his wife and his son.

Hector finds his wife Andromache on a tower above the Scaean Gates. She comes running to meet him and scolds him with these words:

Reckless one,  
My Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!  
Have you no pity for *him*, our helpless son? Or me,  
And that destiny that weighs me down, your widow,  
Now so soon? Yes, soon they will kill you off...<sup>34</sup>

This scene is charged with emotion. She appeals to him not to return to battle, arguing that in returning to war, Hector chooses an ultimately fatal war over his obligations to his family. She goes on to narrate her family's history and their untimely deaths at the hands of Achilles.<sup>35</sup> She ends her plea with the assertion that in the absence of her birth family, Hector is all that she has left. "You, Hector—you are my father now, my noble

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<sup>32</sup> *Iliad*, 6.398, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> *Iliad*, 6.416-7, p. 207.

<sup>34</sup> *Iliad*, 6.482-6, p. 209.

<sup>35</sup> *Iliad*, 6.491-508, p. 209.

mother, / a brother too, and you are my husband, young warm and strong! / Pity me

please!”<sup>36</sup> As was the Temptation of Karna, this episode is overshadowed by the

promise of family. Andromache’s plea is strengthened by saying that for her, Hector

acts in all familial roles. G. S. Kirk notes that “...there is passionate affection here,<sup>37</sup> as

well as the formal point about the duty that Hector now owes her.”<sup>38</sup> Hector answers

Andromache by saying:

All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman,  
But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy  
And the Trojan women trailing their long robes  
If I would shrink from battle now, a coward.  
Nor does the spirit urge me on that way.  
I’ve learned it all too well. To stand up bravely,  
Always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers,  
Winning my father great glory, glory for myself.<sup>39</sup>

Hector begins by conceding the argument offered by Andromache is valid. Yet after

nodding briefly towards this, Hector steers the conversation away from the narrow

confines of the concerns of his immediate family and onto the heroic honor code (“...I

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<sup>36</sup> *Iliad*, 6.509-511, p. 210. Kirk also notes that “It is tempting but wrong to read modern psychological insights into this, of the wife as mother and sister as well as mother.” Kirk, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup> Passionate affections runs through both of these scenes; in the *MBh*, Kuntī displays a love for Karna, as Karna shows intense affection for Duryodhana

<sup>38</sup> Kirk, p. 216-7.

<sup>39</sup> *Iliad*, 6.522-9, p. 210.

would die of shame<sup>40</sup>..." etc.). He must live up to the expectations of the people that hold him in such high esteem.<sup>41</sup> His spirit (*thumos*<sup>42</sup>) pushes him on this way since he was always taught to be the best (*epei mathon emmenai esthlos*). Here Hector names the two factors which force him to fight—his very nature and his upbringing. He is also very concerned with winning glory (*kleos*), both for himself and for his father.<sup>43</sup> Hector briefly outlines the heroic code that forces him to return to battle.<sup>44</sup>

Seth Schein says that "Hektor, like all men, feels a primary loyalty to the community at large that he preserves by his heroic prowess."<sup>45</sup> Hector, by virtue of his social position (which is both innate and a product of his upbringing), must always "fight in the front ranks of the Trojan soldiers," (*aiei kai te prôtoisi meta Trôessi makhesthai*).<sup>46</sup> Hector must be in the front ranks (*prôtois*) of the Trojan soldiers because he is the first

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<sup>40</sup> Fagles translates the Greek verb *aideomai* as "die of shame." This verb is connected to the Greek noun *aidos*. This line occurs again at 22.125-6. These words and the concepts surrounding them will be discussed at much greater length later in the paper.

<sup>41</sup> Compare to the speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus at 12.363-6:

Why make us lords of estates along the Xanthus' banks  
Rich in vineyards and plowland rolling wheat?  
So that now the duty is ours—...

And also to // 12.369-73, p. 335. See N. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Here and throughout, Greek words and phrases cited from Book 6 are drawn from *Homeri Ilias*, (HI) *Volumen Prius*. Recensuit Arthurus Ludwich. (In Aedibus B. G. Teubneri: Stutgardiae et Lipsiae, MCMXCV)

<sup>43</sup> *arnumenos patros te kai mega kleos êd' emon autou*. HI, 6.446, p. 276.

<sup>44</sup> See Kirk. 18-9

<sup>45</sup> Schein, 173-4

<sup>46</sup> HI, 6.445, p. 276.



among Trojans. This argument is echoed in both language and content in Book 12 by Sarpedon; he declares that “*We* are the ones to head our Lycian front...”<sup>47</sup> (*tô nun khrê Lukioisi meta prôtoisin eontes*<sup>48</sup>). Both Hector and Sarpedon accept valor in battle as the necessary corollary of the esteem in which the people hold them. If they are to be first among citizens, they must be first among warriors.

After stating his heroic code, Hector goes on to say the he knows that Troy is destined to fall, and that it is inevitable that his father and brothers will be killed.

For in my heart and soul I also know this well:  
The day will come when sacred Troy must die,  
Priam must die and all his people with him  
Priam who hurls the strong ash spear...<sup>49</sup>

Hector then goes on to state that the impending death of his father, mother, and siblings is not the most distressing. Rather, he grieves most over Andromache’s impending day of slavery. This anticipation is Hector’s ultimate grief because it symbolizes his ultimate failure: It would mean that as a man—a family man—he was unable to protect his wife.

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<sup>47</sup> Il. 12.366, p. 335. Emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> Hl, 12.315, p. 503.

<sup>49</sup> //, 6.530-3, p. 210.

Hector then reaches down to his son, and the baby recoils in fear. Hector realizes that he is frightened of his horsehair helmet, laughs and puts it aside. He then tosses the child playfully about and says this prayer:

“Zeus, all you immortals! Grant this boy, my son  
 May be like me, first in glory among the Trojans,  
 Strong and brave like me, and rule all Troy in power  
 And one day let them say, “He is a better man by far than his father”--<sup>50</sup>

E. T. Owen says of this episode, “It is the father’s helmet that the baby is frightened of; once it is laid aside he recognizes him and goes to him willingly; Hector the *warrior* he has never seen, but Hector he knows well.”<sup>51</sup> This episode perfectly exemplifies Hector’s conflicting familial and social (i.e. warrior and champion) obligations<sup>52</sup>

Hector’s return to Troy and his meeting with Andromache has been admired by listeners, readers and commentators since it was composed. G. S. Kirk comments on Hector’s continuing ability to arouse admiration and pity: “Clearly his dilemma is a tragic

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<sup>50</sup> //, 6.568-71, p. 211.

<sup>51</sup> E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad*, (Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd.: London, 1989) p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Schein argues that this “contradiction is perfectly expressed a few lines later by the description of Andromache as ‘laughing through her tears.’” p. 175.

one: he sees what he must do, with all its terrible consequences, but is caught between overwhelming pride and a sense of public duty and his love and pity for wife and child.”<sup>53</sup>

Hector is often described in terms like these, a tragic hero who knows the consequences but must act anyway. If one places him against Karṇa, there is an affinity between the characters. At the broadest level, they are both sympathetic characters fated to die. They will both fight a war that they know will prove to be their death. Also like Karṇa, Hector is a hero of *nomos*. As such, like Karṇa, he is bound by the expectations of the people who hold him in high esteem—like Karṇa he owes his very position to them.

Both Hector and Karṇa are forced to make a difficult choice. They are asked to choose between war (and ultimately death) and family. G. S. Kirk sums it up quite nicely speaking of Hector, but I believe that this statement could be just as easily written of Karṇa. He says, “It is a dilemma many soldiers face, yet worse; for Hektor’s whole way of being makes him believe in war, even when there is no comforting cause that it is just.”<sup>54</sup> Both Hector and Karṇa’s speeches are deeply steeped in the conceptions of

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<sup>53</sup> Kirk, p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Kirk, p. 20.

duty and honor. To explore and broaden this theme, I will first briefly discuss the theory behind the psychology and anthropology of duty and honor, seeing it especially through the lens provided by the discussions concerning the concept of shame. Then I will attempt to apply it to Hector and Karṇa in turn.

As I have said before, Karṇa and Hector are both heroes of *nomos*. As such they are bound to the conventions, norms and expectations of the society that has thus honored them. Thus, the goal of *nomos* is *timē*, or honor. I think understanding the relationship between *nomos* and *timē*<sup>55</sup> is essential to understanding the social relationships which bind Hector and Karṇa to fighting a war with which they do not necessarily agree. Here again it will prove useful to understand the meanings of these Greek terms more exactly in order to realize their appropriateness to the characterizations of Karṇa and Hector.

In Greek, the word *nomos* carries with it the meanings of custom, law, or societal norm. This term is essential to understanding the characterization of Karṇa and Hector because *nomos* presumes the existence of a community. This community binds the action of the hero by honoring him. He is then prevented by feelings of shame from

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<sup>55</sup> Again, I am indebted to Jenny Strauss-Clyfor pointing out the relationship between *nomos* and *timē*

acting outside of the conventions and expectations of the community. Both Hector and Karṇa take their communities and the obligations to their communities very seriously, so seriously in fact, that familial duties are pushed aside. This is very clearly seen with regard to Hector in the //. He clearly states that nothing, not even the slaying of his brothers or parents can compare to the agony he will feel when Andromache is dragged away into slavery.

That [the suffering of his kinsman and the downfall of Troy] is nothing,  
nothing beside your agony

When some brazen Argive hales you off in tears

Wrenching away your day of light and freedom!<sup>56</sup>

Yet the concern for his wife, however great it may be, is trumped by his adherence to *nomos*—his duty to the city and his people.

This same concern serves as a major motivation for Karṇa. Before his meeting with Kuntī, Karṇa speaks to Kṛṣṇa. He says:

For thirteen years I have enjoyed unrivalled royal power in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lineage  
by relying on Duryodhana [...]. Duryodhana has raised arms because he relies

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<sup>56</sup> //, 6.539-41, p. 210.

on me, Kṛṣṇa of the Vṛṣṇis. Therefore he has confidently chosen me to be the opponent of the Left-handed Archer in a chariot duel in the war, Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa]. Neither death nor capture, neither fear nor greed can make me break my promise to the sagacious Dhārtarāṣṭra [Duryodhana], Janārdana [Kṛṣṇa].<sup>57</sup>

Karṇa is loyal to the Dhārtarāṣṭras for the simple and forceful reason that he owes them, not only for his power, but on a more basic level for their friendship. They give him honor, he owes them his loyalty. Both heroes of both epics share a common warrior psychology driven by respect their benefactors and fear of the shame that they would incur if they were not to follow through with their obligations.

Each of the heroes is clearly aware of his social status in the bounds of his community. This awareness is coupled with an emotional reaction against the very thought of disloyalty to those who have honored the heroes in the past. Both Karṇa and Hector use a vocabulary which is full of their sense of obligation. Both of their speeches are full of emotional references to the respect they have for their communities and the shame that they would feel if they did not live up to their expectations. Hector says this explicitly in book 6. He states that if we were not to go out and fight the Trojan cause

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<sup>57</sup> *MBh*, 5(55)139.13, 15-19, pp. 445-6.

bravely, he "...would die of shame."<sup>58</sup> Here he uses the Greek verb *aideomai*, which along with its nominal form *aidōs*. This term, having a range of meanings from "shame" to "respect" is an essential—although difficult to translate—word in understanding the Greek concept of heroism and Hector's character. I will spend some time discussing the word and its meanings because I think it drives to the heart of both Hector and Karna's heroic motivation in the epics.

*Aidōs* is a word connected to feelings of shame and feelings of respect, and is a very difficult to translate into English. It is rooted in emotional reactions to complex social factors. Douglas I. Cairns provides a good working definition of the term in his book *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*. He states: "...let *aidōs* be an inhibitory emotion based on sensitivity to and protectiveness of one's self-image, and let the verb *aideomai* convey a recognition that one's self-image is vulnerable in some way, a reaction which one focuses on the conspicuousness of the self."<sup>59</sup> Using this understanding of *aidōs* and the verb *aideomai*, let us look again at the passage in which Robert Fagles translates *aideomai* as "I would die of shame."

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<sup>58</sup> Il. 6.523, p. 210.

<sup>59</sup>Douglas I. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993) p. 2

The passage in Greek reads:

*Alla mal' ainōs*

*Aideomai Trōas kai Trōiadas helkespeplous,*

*Ai ke kakos hōs nosphin alkukazō polemoio...*<sup>60</sup>

But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy

And the Trojan women trailing their long robes

If I would shrink from battle now, a coward.<sup>61</sup>

I take this very short segment to be indicative of the construction of shame in Hector's character in the *Il*. In it the verb *aideomai* is used in a very common way, the verb followed by two accusatives ( *Trōas* and *Trōiadas*) referring to people. Cairns argues that the *aideomai* plus person(s) in the accusative construction is used in two distinct ways, either to feel inhibition before the specified people, or, more positively, to recognize the high status of the people specified by the accusative. The two easy to render this in English would be either "I feel shame before" or "I respect."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *HI*, 6.441-3, p. 275.

<sup>61</sup> *Il*, 6.523-5, p. 210.

<sup>62</sup> Cairns, p. 2.



It is *aidōs* that drives Hector to fight. He clearly cannot bear the shame he would feel before the Trojans whom he respects, to use the ideas contained in both the positive and negative aspects of *aideomai*. To give in to Andromache's demands would turn him into a coward (*kakos*) in the eyes of the Trojans, a thought he clearly cannot bear. The judgment of others gives rise to *aidōs*, this feeling of respect and shame is an outgrowth of his adherence to the *nomos* of the community that honors him. It is clear that "...the notion of honour, indeed, is never far away from the evaluation that is constitutive of *aidōs*."<sup>63</sup>

Although *aidōs* is a Greek word, and in Greek refers very specifically to a set of social constructions, I think the discussions of this term and its importance in the construction of the ancient Greek notion of heroism can be extended to our discussion of the Indian epic and its characters. *Aidōs* is a culturally specific concept, the emotion and its social contexts are not. To broaden the scope of our discussion of *aidōs* and shame, let us broaden the definition to a less culturally specific one. Johanna Stiebert states that, "Shame thus derives from either or both subjective attitudes and sensitivity to 'propriety or decency', which is... at least to some extent culturally and socially

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<sup>63</sup> Cairns, p. 13

constructed. Shame, then, is an emotion focused on the vulnerability and conspicuousness of one's self image (subjective, internalized) in terms of a perceived ideal (objective, external)."<sup>64</sup> In Karṇa's discussions with Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī, the mechanisms of shame are visible beneath the surface of the dialogues. It is especially striking to consider the interplay between the internal (or private) and the external (or public) aspects of this episode and how it can relate to the definition of heroic shame.

As we have seen, Karṇa, like Hector, is bound by *nomos*. However, Karṇa's own place in the social framework is more clearly delineated by the epic in his preoccupations with his caste and this loyalty to those whom he respects who lifted him to a higher station. Karṇa is preoccupied in this passage with his identity as "the son of a *sūta*." As a lower caste, Karṇa naturally feels inferior to the higher caste *kṣatriyas* by whom he is surrounded. Duryodhana elevated Karṇa to semi-*kṣatriya* status by giving him the kingdom of Anṅā. When Kṛṣṇa suggests switching sides, Karṇa is appalled. He says "For thirteen years I have enjoyed unrivalled royal power in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lineage by

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<sup>64</sup> Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution*, JSOT Suppl. 346, (Sheffield Academic Press; Sheffield, 2002), p. 3. Compare Stiebert's formulation to Cairns's assertion that, "One essential unity across the range of usage of *aidōs* and its verb *aideomai* thus lies in their focus on the balance which exists between honor of the self and honor of others." Cairns, p. 13-14.

relying on Duryodhana. I have offered up much and often, but always with the *sūtas*.”<sup>65</sup>

This passage is interesting because it offers two visions of Karṇa, one enjoying the benefits of power and position and one acting as a *sūta*.

However, it is also interesting in the *MBh* how the formulations of shame work both ways. In the *I*, Hector’s anticipated shame is the only sense of shame at play in the episode. Yet in the *MBh*, Karṇa is not only ruled by feelings of prospective shame. Fundamental to this encounter is his bitterness toward his mother. Those ironies are the fundamental pivot of the episode. Duryodhana befriended him, treated him well, and accorded him honor while his own mother did the opposite. She was filled with shame at his birth, but now she abandons the shame she should feel before him, out of desperation for her legitimate children. He has nothing to feel shame about now, and he takes full advantage of his mother, even being bitterly and ironically “generous,” telling her,

Karṇa fits into the *aidōs* model of shame as well. Almost speaking the same words as Hector, Karṇa says to Kuntī, “Who would not call me a coward, if I now joined

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<sup>65</sup> *MBh*, 5(55)139.13-4, p. 445.

the Pārthas?”<sup>66</sup> Much of Karṇa’s retort to Kuntī is filled with expressions such as these, stating that he would be ashamed to change sides when the Dhārtarāṣṭras have honored him so highly. For example, he says “...how could I, /, betray them now.... How could I shatter their hopes now, if they think that with my prowess they can engage their enemies?”<sup>67</sup> How can Karṇa who has enjoyed the esteem and friendship of the Dhārtarāṣṭras switch to the probably winning side at the hour of their greatest need? There are similar restrictions upon Karṇa as on Hector. Since the Dhārtarāṣṭras honored him, he would feel shame before those whom he respects. As with Hector, honor and shame are linked within the confines of the social order to which the hero is bound. As Stiebert has noted, “...shame and guilt have both been identified as self-conscious emotions that may be exacerbated by the disapproval of significant others.”<sup>68</sup>

Karṇa and Hector, although they come from backgrounds separated by geography, landscape, and centuries seem to speak from the similar situations in a similar manner informed by similar psychologies. Both argue that they must fight in a war which they are not convinced is just, and that they are certain that they will lose.

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<sup>66</sup> *MBh*, 5(5)144.10, p. 453.

<sup>67</sup> *MBh*, 5(5)144.12, 15, p. 453. Italics in original.

<sup>68</sup> Stiebert, p. 1.

They chose to fight because they owe allegiance to those who honored them. They are bound by the social norms to fight for a doomed cause. In the end, both hope for a renown that will outlast their lives.

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