

Narrative Plurality in the *Mahābhārata*: Three Versions of a Dialogue between Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra

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Abstract

This paper will examine and compare three versions of a dialogue between Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, all of which appear in both the Critical Edition and the Vulgate. These dialogues take place in the immediate aftermath of Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*, exploring Duryodhana's emotional response to his cousin's royal ritual and offering different accounts of the lead-up to the dicing match. The appearance of different versions of the same episode is a recurring characteristic of the *Mahābhārata*. As Hiltebeitel has observed, the *Mahābhārata*'s heterogeneity is its 'trademark', indicating that 'the first *Mahābhārata* poets felt no need to harmonize or eliminate what critics call contradictions and doubled passages' (2015: 155). While Edgerton sees 'inconsistencies' and van Buitenen sees the different versions of this particular dialogue as essentially the same account, I will approach each version as a different attempt to use the same episode to explore the causes of the dicing match. In keeping with the *Mahābhārata*'s tendency to include several explanations for the same outcome, on this occasion we see several depictions of the same event, with each one providing a different lens through which to reflect on what has led to this encounter and how this encounter will affect subsequent events in the narrative. In approaching the dialogues in this way, I will demonstrate that we get a more complex understanding of how Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra – as well as Śakuni and Vidura – contribute to the dicing match by examining the tensions between these different accounts. Rather than treating any of these versions as more original or authoritative than the others, their inclusion within the same text suggests that this was considered to be a particularly important episode, and one that was used repeatedly to rehearse unresolved tensions about the events leading up to the dicing match. More generally, I will suggest that the multiple versions of this conversation indicates that the *Mahābhārata* itself represents a dialogue among different traditions of addressing the moral problems in the story of the Kurus.