Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

The Perfection of Dilemma: Towards a Narrative Poetics of the Mokṣopāya

Aamir Kaderbhai

aamir.kaderbhai@theology.ox.ac.uk

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Research Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: November 20th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11430138/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

The Perfection of Dilemma: Towards a Narrative Poetics of the *Mokṣopāya*

If I am to live well, must I know who I am? And what, in the pursuit of an ideal life, is the role of doubt and confusion about one's identity? Are they obstacles to be overcome, insurmountable barriers in an ultimately tragic quest, or something else, perhaps doorways to liberation? For readers of Sanskrit literature, the two great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, offer rich and contrasting narrative landscapes in which to seek answers to these questions. Both centre on warrior heroes who, after losing their kingdom and enduring a long exile, regain it through victory in a cataclysmic war. Yet where Rāma 'has no qualms or uncertainty' about his mission to defeat Rāvaṇa and his forces of evil, the *Mahābhārata's* internecine conflict involves 'heroes are very human in their doubts and uncertainties' (Brockington 1998: 25). Many readers have accordingly observed a basic duality between the two epics which is typified, amongst other places, in how the narratives treat the state of the world post-war. Where Rāma's epic defeat of Rāvaṇa results in ten thousand years of ideal rule, the battle of Kurukṣetra ends in a devastated kingdom and Yudhiṣṭhira having to reckon with the earth-shattering consequences of his actions. Of particular relevance to thinking about identity and confusion is the way in which David Shulman unfolds this basic contrast between the epics into a discussion of their 'poetics.' In Shulman's reading the two epics portray two complementary 'visions of life' (2001: 23), which are expressed not only in their differing attitudes to war but in the way each text conceptualises self-identity and the struggle to grasp it. Where the *Rāmāyaṇa* expresses a 'poetics of perfection' by depicting 'idealised heroes' struggling in a broken world, the *Mahābhārata* expresses a 'poetics of dilemma' through a world in which brokenness extends into the inner lives of its characters, whose struggle to know themselves and reality often never reaches a final resolution (24). Following this reading, we can understand the two epics as offering distinct yet complementary answers to the question of whether one can ultimately know oneself, and what repercussions this has for a life well lived.

In the present essay, I read the *Mokṣopāya* in the light of this complementary relationship. In some ways it is an unlikely candidate for such a comparison: where the two classic epics were the products of long processes of compilation over the final centuries BC and early centuries AD,[1] the *Mokṣopāya* was composed in 10th-century Kashmir,[2] and seems to be in large part the product of a single hand.[3] Moreover, on no accounts can we straightforwardly place it into the category of 'epic' alongside the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Unlike these two texts, the *Mokṣopāya's* framing narrative is not a 'confrontation… on the plane of physical prowess'

[1] For a discussion of the dating of the two epics, see John Leonard Brockington 1998 as well as the entries on each epic in the *Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Fitzgerald 2012; Goldman and Goldman 2012).

[2] Hanneder places the Mokṣopāya 'ziemlich nahe an 950' by determining a *terminus post quem* in the Kashmiri King Yaśaskara, whom the text mentions, and *termini ante quem* in Rāmakaṇṭha and Kṣemendra, who appear to reference the text (Hanneder 2012: 89). This dating has been more recently corroborated by Slaje (2025: 63). For a discussion of the Kashmiri origins of the text see Slaje 2005.

[3] Walter Slaje (1994) proposed a stratification of the text (diagrammed in Hanneder 2006, 15), though Hanneder questions whether certain layers can be untangled (2006: 18). More recently Roland Steiner points to the recurring references to the frame dialogue and the presence of a 'superordinate narrator' throughout. On that basis he suggests that 'individual authorship may possibly need to be assumed … for the basic conception' of the *Mokṣopāya* (2025: 83). Further evidence points in the same direction: the text's references to its anonymous human author (Slaje 2020: 168), the overarching design implied in its notion of a 'gradation of instruction' (Hanneder 2006: 28), and intra-textual references within the text's narratives (Hanneder 2006: 32–33). Whatever later scribal insertions and reworkings it has undoubtedly undergone, the *Mokṣopāya* thus appears to be a unitary work conceived by a single author.

(Jason 1975, quoted in Shulman 2001: 21) — a feature of the classic works that has been used as justification for their classification as 'epics,' despite their divergent self-classifications.[4] Instead of a heroic drama, the *Mokṣopāya* is framed as an extended dialogue between Rāma and the sage Vasiṣṭha on the nature of reality and liberation. Consequently, any narrative poetics that the text contains is expressed not in its framing narrative but in the tapestry of sub-narratives woven throughout Vasiṣṭha's philosophical teaching.

Despite these divergences, a closer examination of the *Mokṣopāya* reveals not only that the two epics were at the forefront of its author's mind, but that the text can be fruitfully read as synthesising the complementary poetic worldviews of its two epic predecessors in order to narratively complement its explicit concern with *jīvanmukti*, 'living liberation.' In Shulman's terms, the *Mokṣopāya's* narratives offer a poetics of perfection through dilemma, wherein the impossibility of fixing a determinate identity for oneself, rather than being a source of doubt and confusion, becomes the key to a life of liberation. In making this point, this essay seeks to contribute to existing literature on the relationship between narrative and philosophy in the *Mokṣopāya* (Lo Turco 2005; Madaio 2019) by clarifying a dimension of how the text constitutes itself, through narrative, as a *śāstra* whose core message can only be communicated implicitly.

The argument proceeds as follows. I begin by considering the difficulties of classifying the *Mokṣopāya*, and argue that the two epics were large enough influences on the text that reading it in light of these texts offers a productive way into its narrative world. Here I also show that the text understands itself as communicating its central teaching implicitly, through narrative, so that an investigation of its poetics is an investigation of its self-conscious teaching strategy. I then turn to an overview of the story of Līlā, the longest of the *Mokṣopāya's* sub-narratives, which serves as the essay's principal source, supplemented by references to other tales. I then move to examining David Shulman's characterisation of the complementary relationship between the two epics, situating it within the wider scholarship on their pairing. Scholars have approached that relationship from many angles: moral, political, devotional and gendered. Shulman's account is distinctive, both in his essay on the epics' paired poetics and in his studies of particular episodes, for its attention to how each epic conceives of personal identity and the struggle to grasp it. This focus aligns closely with the ontological and existential concerns of the *Mokṣopāya*, and Shulman himself briefly connects the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* to the epic tradition he describes. With this framework in place, I read the *Mokṣopāya* first against the *Rāmāyaṇa's* 'poetics of perfection,' arguing that recontextualises the original epic by offering a window into the liberated mind of Rāma recasted as a *jivanmukta*. I then read the text against the *Mahābhārata's* 'poetics of dilemma,' arguing that it openly embraces the fragmentation of the self that the *Mahābhārata* continually hints at but never openly embraces. Finally, I bring these readings together to show how, in the *Mokṣopāya*, dilemma becomes the very condition of perfection. The conclusion places this narrative poetics in the context of the *Mokṣopāya's* explicit teaching, considering how it might uncover a dimension of the text's philosophy that remains veiled through traditional *śāstric*-style presentation.

Locating the Mokṣopāya

[4] Where the *Rāmāyaṇa* understands itself as the *'ādikāvaya'* or the first work of poetry (Brockington 1998: 1), the category that the *Mahābhārata* most often places itself is '*itihāsa'* or 'chronicle.' For more on the different ways the *Mahābhārata* classes itself see (Hiltebeitel 2005: 465).

The *Mokṣopāya*, the earliest available version of the more widely known *Yogavāsiṣṭha*,[5] is on all accounts a confounding text. Originally composed in 10th-century Kashmir, largely by a single hand, and unabashed about its human authorship (Slaje 2025: 26), it nonetheless frames itself as a 'great Rāmāyaṇa' (*mahārāmāyaṇa*) (MU III,8.8) which is recited by Vālmīki shortly after finishing the classic *Rāmāyaṇa* (MU I,1.4-25). Yet strangely for a *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mokṣopāya* is not an account of Rāma's epic exploits, nor is it a Vaiṣṇava devotional work that foregrounds Rāma's divinity. Indeed, uncharacteristically for a classic depiction of the steadfast hero, Rāma begins the narrative in a state of confusion, unable to fulfil his princely duties, despairing at the suffering and meaninglessness of worldly life. In this respect, he closely resembles the *Mahābhārata's* Arjuna doubting the righteousness of his *kṣatriya-dharma* moments before the battle of Kurukṣetra. And like Arjuna, the Rāma of the *Mokṣopāya* has a teacher to aid him in his despair. In this case it is Vasiṣṭha, a recognisable figure from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who guides Rāma back to confidence through an extended dialogue — constituting a majority of the text's more than 30,000 verses — which results in Rāma embracing his worldly life as a liberated being. Thus, Rāma is a narrative embodiment of the text's primary object of concern: *jīvanmukti,* 'living liberation.'[6]

In order to awaken Rāma, Vasiṣṭha propounds a philosophy, the knowledge of which leads to liberation (MU II,10.21).[7] This philosophy is profoundly illusionistic: not only does the world arise only as a mere accident (*kākatālīyavat*),[8] but it was unreal from the beginning.[9] It is a mere projection of the mind, which is itself an illusion,[10] rendering the world as unreal as a dream within a dream.[11] The only reality is pure consciousness, often described as the 'space of consciousness' (*cid-ākāśa*), in which the world exists like a statue in a pillar, not yet carved out.[12] This pure consciousness is totally beyond the reach of language, including terms such as 'Self,' '*brahman*,' and even 'pure consciousness.'[13] In constructing this philosophy, the *Mokṣopāya* draws from a wide range of philosophical sources, most prominently Advaita Vedānta, Non-dual Śaivism, and Idealistic Buddhism, but is not beholden to any of them.[14] In fact it sees itself as putting forward the 'position of all positions' (*sarvasiddhāntasiddhānta*, cf. Slaje 1992), a position that moves beyond the disputes between the various philosophical schools, for which 10th-century Kashmir was a particular hotbed (cf. Franco and Ratié

---

[5] That a Kashmirian recension of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* transmitted in Śāradā script, which calls itself the *Mokṣopāya*, is an earlier version of the text was first suggested by P. C. Divanji (1938: 33–39) and conclusively demonstrated by Walter Slaje (1994). On the history and transmission of the *Mokṣopāya* in its principal versions, see Slaje 2025.

[6] According to Slaje, 'the *Mokṣopāya* belongs to the oldest texts that know of the concept of, and at the same time make deliberate use of, the technical term "*jīvanmukti*"' (2000: 172).

[7] For discussions of the *Mokṣopāya* as offering a vision of liberation through knowledge (rather than through *yoga*) see Slaje 1998, 2000.

[8] E.g. *akartr eva tadā manye kākatālīyavaj jagat* IV,38.7bc; *kākatālīyayogena sampannāyāṃ jagatsthitau* V,9.49ab.

[9] E.g. *idam ādāv anutpannaṃ* III,4.57a; *ādāv eva hi notpannaṃ yat tasyehāstitā kutaḥ* III,7.40ab.

[10] E.g. *mana eva ca sargādāv anutpannam asadvapuḥ* III,4.76ab*; tasmān nāsty eva duṣṭātma cittaṃ nāma jagattraye* V,13.95ab.

[11] E.g. *mano dṛśyamayaṃ doṣaṃ tanotīmaṃ kṣayātmakam / asad evāsadākāraṃ svapnas svapnāntaraṃ yathā* III,4.77; *sargavṛndaṃ yathā svapne svapnāntarayutaṃ puram* VI,249.57bc

[12] E.g. *anutkīrṇaiva bhātīva trijagatsālabhañjikā / citstambhe na ca sotkīrṇā na cotkartātra vidyate* III,15.2

[13] E.g. *ṛtam ātmā paraṃ brahma satyam ityādikā budhaiḥ / kalpitā vyavahārārthaṃ yasya sañjñā mahātmanaḥ* III,1.12. For the fact that the description of the absolute as 'consciousness' is itself provisional, see III,10.23-24.

[14] 'The unknown author teaches a non-dualist philosophy and combines, it seems, all kinds of influences present in his Kashmirian ambit, but never follows any of these so far that one might say what philosophy he teaches or to which religion he belongs. Scholars have tried to pinpoint the text as being, for instance, mainly Śaiva or strongly Buddhist, often missing that the text is in fact mostly idiosyncratic' (Hanneder 2025b: 102). For more on the philosophical originality of the text, see Author forthcoming.

2016: xii). Indeed, the text sees itself as a kind of encyclopaedia of philosophical systems. Borrowing a line from the *Mahābhārata* (MhBh I,56.33), it says:

> What is here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere else. The wise know that this is the treasury (*kośa*) of all treatises (*śāstra*) on consciousness (*vijñāna*) (MU III,8.12).[15]

In part because of this inclusive attitude, Bruno Lo Turco has suggested that the *Mokṣopāya* might be a product of anti-sectarian *siddha* traditions of early-medieval Kashmir (Lo Turco 2024). Yet despite styling itself here and elsewhere as a kind of cross-sectarian treatise (*śāstra*),[16] and despite putting reason's authority above scripture,[17] the *Mokṣopāya*, unlike a traditional *śāstra*, is sparse on direct philosophical argumentation: it does not systematically refute other philosophical views nor systematise its own. Rather, Vasiṣṭha's method of instruction involves a combination of didactic philosophical pronouncement and teaching story. Littered throughout the text, these sub-narratives are sometimes riffs upon classic tales, sometimes original stories; some are concise, with an obvious moral, and some are extended and ornate jewels of Sanskrit narrative literature: poetically crafted depictions of fantastical worlds replete with narrative twists, fourth wall breaks, and gorgeous poetic descriptions. These stories often depict fantastical worlds that put flesh on the bones of the text's illusionistic philosophy: we encounter hundreds of layers of dreams within dreams, women who meet the imaginations of themselves in their husband's minds, kings who become untouchables, infinite worlds existing within tiny stones, and men who become gods through the power of their imaginations. Although the text refers to these narratives as 'examples' (*dṛṣṭānta*),[18] they are not 'examples' in the Nyāya sense — proofs of a generality — rather they are fictions that are aimed at helping the reader grasp the fictionality of her own world. Thus, they are instrumental in the text's task not simply to describe liberation and the path toward it, but to offer it directly. As we hear:

> In this world, when one sets out to reflect on the *Mokṣopāya*, he is said to partake of liberation (II,13.17).[19]

This liberation is not simply one more view, but a direct experience that transcends all views.[20] Thus the *Mokṣopāya*, with its combination of philosophy and narrative, understands itself ultimately as a means to an end, a *mokṣa-upāya*, a method for liberation that is itself as illusory as the fantastical worlds it depicts.[21]

Owing, amongst other things, to its encyclopaedic ambitions and its originality of style, the *Mokṣopāya* has long been a difficult object of study. While recent scholarship has clarified the priority of the Kashmiri *Mokṣopāya* to the pan-Indian *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, and has thus freed it from the Advaita Vedāntic associations of the latter text,[22] the

---

[15] *yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit / imaṃ samastavijñānaśāstrakośaṃ vidur budhāḥ //*

[16] E.g. *nātyantatajjño nātajjñas so 'smiṅ śāstre 'dhikāravān* I,1.2ab; *śāstram ākarṇayasi cet tattvaṃ prāpnoṣi nānyathā* I,2.4bc.

[17] E.g. *yuktiyuktam upādeyaṃ vacanaṃ bālakād api / anyat tṛṇam iva tyājyam apy uktaṃ padmajanmanā //* II,18.3

[18] E.g. *idaṃ śravyaṃ sukhakaraṃ kathādṛṣṭāntasundaram* II,13.14ab.

[19] *pravṛttiḥ puruṣasyeha mokṣopāyavicāraṇe / yadā bhavaty āśu tadā mokṣabhāgī sa ucyate //*

[20] E.g. *ye kecana samārambhā yāś ca kāścana dṛṣṭayaḥ / te ca tāś ca pade dṛṣṭe niśśeṣaṃ yānti vai śamam* II,12.7; *sarvāsām eva dṛṣṭīnāṃ sarvāsām eva sampadām / parijñāya svam ātmānam upari sthīyate ciram* VI,128.44

[21] E.g. *etac chāstrādy avidyāyāḥ sāttviko bhāga ucyate / tāmasaḥ sāttvikenāsyā bhāgenāyāti saṅkṣayam* VI,356.21.

[22] The associations between the *Mokṣopāya* and Advaita Vedānta take off when Vidyāraṇya/Mādhava uses the so-called *Laghuyogvāsiṣṭha* (an abridged version of the Mokṣopāya taken out of Kashmir sometime before 1258 and which calls itself

Mokṣopāya can still be approached from a number of angles. Like the elephant in the story of the blind men, this multifaceted text has a tendency to mirror its reader's preconceptions. Candidly acknowledging this, Tamara Cohen, at the outset of her study of *yoga* in the MU, states that it "seems to present to the reader whatever they seek to find within it… Therefore, since I have looked for Yoga in the MU, I have found it" (Cohen 2023: 1–2).

Despite this hermeneutic predicament, certain ways of reading the *Mokṣopāya* follow naturally from aspects of its self-characterisation. This includes reading the text as a self-conscious response to the two great epics. As we have seen, the *Mokṣopāya* styles itself as a *mahārāmāyaṇa*, yet contains a narrative framing that is reminiscent of the *Gītā*. On top of this, not only are many characters from both epics referenced in the *Mokṣopāya's* stories,[23] but the text actually contains its own version of the *Bhagavadgītā* (MU VI,56-62) that Vasiṣṭha styles as a prophecy (VI,56.25-33) and in which Kṛṣṇa preaches to Arjuna the MU's own distinctive philosophy (cf. Cohen 2020). Thus, even if the framing narrative events of the text — Rāma's crippling doubt, his conversation with Vasiṣṭha and his subsequent liberation — hardly constitute a narrative of 'conflict and heroism' that is often taken to constitute the 'epic' genre (Smith 2009: lxvi), the two Sanskrit epics were undoubtedly playing a role, both consciously and unconsciously, in the author's design of the text.

More to the point, the *Mokṣopāya*, like the two epics, offers a mirror in which the fundamental questions of human life can be reflected and reflected upon, in a manner that goes beyond the text's explicit philosophical teaching. In book VI of the *Mokṣopāya*, we find the following verses:

> The teaching of the three categories [of human pursuit (*puruṣārtha*)][24] exists within *śāstras* etc., Rāghava, but the attainment of *brahman*, because it is not able to be spoken, does not exist in that kind of instruction (VI,356.15). This [attainment], which is suggested by the meanings of all [of a *śāstra's*] statements, is experienced spontaneously, through one's own experience, like the glory of the seasons (*kālaśrī*) [is suggested] by its own productions [i.e. fruits and flowers etc.][25] (16). The knowledge of *brahman* in a *śāstra* is found to transcend all [of its] meanings, just like the pure grace in a woman goes beyond all [her individual] limbs (17). This ultimate (*para*) understanding, which transcends words, is not attained from a *śāstra*, from the words of a guru, from offerings, nor from worshipping deities (18).[26]

---

simply the Vāsiṣṭha) as an authority in his *Jīvanmuktiviveka*. Walter Slaje has shown that Vidyāraṇya's use of the *Laghuyogvāsiṣṭha* to support his particular blend of Advaita and Yoga involved a significant misreading (Slaje 1998). His reading nonetheless proved powerful, and the text became influential in Advaita Vedānta from this point onward. Of particular note is its use in the work of Prakāśānanda and Madhusūdana, Advaitins from the sixteenth century, who used the *Laghuyogvāsiṣṭha* as a source for their doctrine of *dṛṣṭisṛṣṭivāda* (see Timalsina 2006: chap. 8).

[23] For example Daśaratha's court is described in detail in the first book, along with characters such as Viśvāmitra, Lakṣmaṇa, and Śatrughna. Interestingly, a number of characters from the *Mahābhārata's Śāntiparvan* also make appearances in their own sub narratives, such as Janaka, Bali (given as Baḍi in the Mokṣopāya manuscripts), Prahlāda, and Maṅki.

[24] *vargatrayaṃ dharmakāmārthās tasyopadeśo* TP VIb,197.15

[25] *vasantādikālaśrīḥ prasavena tat tad ārtavaphalapuṣpādi janmaneva dhvanyamānā sūcyamānā* TP VIb,197.16

[26] *vargatrayopadeśo hi śāstrādiṣv asti rāghava / brahmaprāptis tv avācyatvān nāsti tacchāsaneṣv api // kevalaṃ sarvavākyārthair dhvanyamānāvagamyate / kālaśrīḥ prasaveneva svayaṃ svānubhavena sā // sarvārthātigataṃ śāstre vidyate brahmavedanam / sarvāṅgātigaṃ svacchaṃ lāvaṇyam iva yoṣiti // na śāstrān na guror vākyān na dānān neśvarārcanāt / eṣa eva padātīto bodhas saṃprāpyate paraḥ //*

In these verses the *Mokṣopāya* is paraphrasing Ānandavardhana,[27] the 9th-century Kashmiri aesthetic theorist famous for proposing that 'implicit suggestion' (*dhvani*) is the 'soul' (*ātman*) of poetry (DA I.1), and the means by which aesthetic emotion (*rasa*) is communicated.[28] Here the *Mokṣopāya* transposes this idea to 'the attainment of *brahman*', which, like Ānandavardhana's *rasa*, cannot be stated directly. Undoubtedly, much of this implicit communication happens through the *Mokṣopāya's* many narratives, which the text identifies as the primary method of interpretation (*paribhāṣā*) through which it can be reflected upon (II,18.49). While an investigation of the technical workings of Ānandavardhana's conception of suggestion in relation to the *Mokṣopāya* remains a desideratum, here I want to look more broadly at the way the *Mokṣopāya* fashions a complex matrix of narratives in which the reader can investigate her own personal doubts and questions regarding the text's specific object of focus: liberation. We can call this matrix, following David Shulman, the 'poetics' of the text. In the present article, I examine this poetics through a comparison with that of the two Sanskrit epics, showing how the *Mokṣopāya* builds on them to present its own unique vision of life.

The Narrative World of the *Mokṣopāya*: The Story of Līla

Before turning to this comparison, it is worth gaining a sense of the *Mokṣopāya's* narrative world through an overview of the text's longest sub-narrative, and the first of its major ones: the story of Queen Līlā (MU III,15.17–III,59.18).[29] It tells of a woman who, in an effort to remain united with her husband, embarks on an extraordinary journey through multiple parallel worlds. On the way she meets her husband's imagination of her, and she comes to be convinced of the unreality of everything she had previously taken for granted, only to return to her world as a liberated being. Sadly, this jewel of world literature remains understudied — it has never been adequately translated into a European language.[30]

In a flourishing kingdom, Vasiṣṭha tells Rāma, there lives Queen Līlā with the virtuous King Padma, whom she deeply loves. One day the queen is seized by dread at the thought of her husband's inevitable death (III,16.19-20). When Brahmins tell her that no one in this world can be made immortal (25), she devises a plan: if Padma's body cannot escape death, she will ensure that his soul (*jīva*) remains with her in her chamber when he dies (27-29). Through austerities she wins the favour of the goddess Sarasvatī, who grants her wish and promises to return whenever Līlā needs her guidance (39-42).

When Padma eventually dies in battle, Līlā summons the goddess and begs to know where he has gone (III,17.9). Rather than simply telling her, the goddess shows her. With divine assistance (16) Līlā enters *nirvikalpasamādhi* (17) and travels through the space of consciousness to a vast world contained within the

---

[27] This was first observed by Raghavan, who notes that the simile of the grace of a woman 'clinches the reference as one to Ānandavardhana and *Dhvanyāloka*' (1939: 121). The verse that Raghavan is probably referring to is DA I.4. The reference to Ānandavardhana was later confirmed by Hanneder, who also highlights the frequent use of the word *camatkāra/-kṛti* in the Mokṣopāya as proof of Ānanda's influence (Hanneder 2006, 40 n.103). Other passages that show the influence of Ānandavardhana on the *Mokṣopāya* are cited by Bruno Lo Turco (Lo Turco 2002b: 48 n. 22).

[28] For more on Ānandavardhana's aesthetic theories, see Anandawardhana et al. 1990; McCrea 2008; Reich 2021.

[29] For discussions of this story, and translations of select passages, see Hanneder 2006; Lo Turco 2002a, 2015.

[30] The MU has been partly translated into German, not including book III and the latter part of book VI (Steiner 2014a, 2013, 2014b, 2018). Of the English versions, all render the later *Yogavāsiṣṭha* recension rather than the *Mokṣopāya*, and none is a verse-by-verse translation. Vihari Lala Mitra's rendering (1891) has long been faulted as profoundly interpretive and unreliable (Atreya 1932: 12); and Venkatesananda's *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga* (1993), though a serviceable summary of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha's* content and narratives, is likewise not a verse-by-verse translation.

confines of her own bedchamber (19). There Padma is now a young, sixteen-year-old king ruling over a powerful kingdom. Returning eventually to her own world, Līlā is profoundly confused. She summons the goddess again and discuses which of the worlds – her own or the one she has just witnessed – is real and which is merely fabricated (*kṛtrima*) (III,18.15-28). The goddess convinces Līlā that something real cannot arise from something unreal: both worlds must be of the same nature, and so both must be unreal.

In order to impress this truth more deeply on Līlā's mind, Sarasvatī tells her a story. In a mountain village lived a Brahmin, named Vasiṣṭha, who lived with his wife Arundhatī (III,18.38-19.2).[31] Watching, one day, a king pass by with his retinue (19.5-9), he secretly longs to become a king himself (11-14). As the Brahmin nears death, his wife, just like Līlā, approaches Sarasvatī and begs that her husband's soul never leave the little hut they share (17). Sarasvatī obliges, and on his death the Brahmin becomes a great king in a new world that exists within the space of the hut (19-23). When Arundhatī dies shortly afterwards, seemingly of grief, her soul follows her husband's and becomes his queen in this new world (24-27). Then comes a major twist in the Līlā narrative: the goddess' tale, which at first seemed unconnected to Līlā's situation, is revealed to be an account of her own past life. Līlā was Arundhatī, and Padma was the Brahmin who wished to be king (III,20.1). The world Līlā has known until now and taken to be real exists within a small hut in a mountain village, just as Vidūratha's world exists within her own bed chamber.

Līlā cannot believe this (III,20.6-11). In order to convince her, the goddess, after a long philosophical teaching, takes her through the space of consciousness to the Brahmin's world (III,25.38). There Līlā recognises the place where she once lived as Arundhatī and even speaks with her son (III,26.7-39). Now beginning to understand just how deep the rabbit-hole goes, Līla travels with the goddess back through the space of consciousness — glimpsing on the way the infinite parallel universes contained therein (III,30) — before arriving back at Padma's world (III,31.3-4). Many decades have passed since Līlā's last visit, and the King, now called Vidūratha, is at war with a rival kingdom. During a lull in the conflict, Līlā and the goddess visit the King (III,40.8) and awaken him to who they are and how his world is a mere illusion in an illusion (25-30). The two women then meet Vidūratha's consort (III,44.1): a woman also called Līlā, described as a mirror image of Līlā herself (14), produced by the King's memory of Līlā from his previous life (49-50). And just like the original Līlā, this "second Līlā" (*dvitīyalīlā*)[32] asks the goddess to allow her to remain with her husband after death (III,45.3-7).

Eventually Vidūratha rides out to battle with his enemy, King Sindhu. There follows an epic conflict — echoing the great war books of the Sanskrit epics — which narrows into a duel between the two kings that ends with Vidūratha's death (III,50.41-45) and Sindhu taking the throne (III,51.15-21). In the concluding sequence of the story, all three women, the two Līlās and the goddess, travel back to the world in which the story began. Padma's corpse, which has now lain dead for a month, is resurrected when the soul of Vidūratha returns to it (III,58.37-41). The story ends with the goddess vanishing for the last time and Padma ruling again happily over his kingdom, now with not one but two wives named Līlā. All three characters are described as *jīvanmuktas* who delight in telling the fantastical tale of their adventures (III,59.14-19).

The Complimentary Poetics of the Two Epics

[31] We are told explicitly that this Vasiṣṭha and this Arundhatī are similar to the Vasiṣṭha telling the tale and his wife, yet they are not the same, and do not share the same consciousness as their counterparts (III,19.1-3).

[32] Also described in other ways, such as "the Līlā of that place" (*taddeśalīlā*), who is contrasted to "the previous Līlā" (*pūrvalīlā*).

With the story of Līlā in hand, we are now in a place to examine the *Mokṣopāya* in the light of the poetics of the two great epics. We have already touched on the distinction between the 'poetics of perfection' and the 'poetics of dilemma' that David Shulman reads into the two Sanskrit epics, a distinction that ultimately reveals 'a relationship of pairing,' and which 'may help to explain both something of the conspicuous difference between them and the nature of their combined impact on subsequent Indian literature.' (Shulman 2001: 23).

Shulman outlines this distinction as follows:

> 'The *Rāmāyaṇa*... illustrates the tragedy always consequent on perfection or the search for perfection, just as the work as a whole could be characterised by what I would call the "poetics of perfection." It creates a sustained, lyrical universe peopled by idealised heroes whose very perfection involves them — and the audience — in recurrent suffering. The *Mahābhārata's* heroes, by way of contrast, are anything but perfect; they are deeply flawed human beings, torn by terrible inner conflicts, confused by reality, and driven by a combination of forces towards ultimate disaster. The poem that tells their tale is equally ambiguous and unresolved, with an open-ended quality, on many levels, that distinguishes it from the other epic. I shall refer to the *Mahābhārata's* design as the "poetics of dilemma."' (24)

In Shulman's conception, the 'distinct but complimentary visions' (23) of the two epics are reproduced on multiple levels: in the contrast between the formally integrated *Rāmāyaṇa* and the sprawling, 'unbounded character' of the *Mahābhārata* (28). This contrast is mirrored in the inner worlds of their principal characters, as well as their outlooks on the conflicts at the heart of each narrative. Key to the argument in the present paper is Shulman's point that this contrast between the two epics as not simply a contrast between the morally clear-cut *Rāmāyaṇa* and the ambiguous *Mahābhārata*, rather it centres on where the epics locate conflict. As will be discussed further below, conflict in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is largely externalised. It plays out between the protagonists and the forces arrayed against them, above all in the opposition between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, rather than within the protagonists themselves. The *Mahābhārata*, by contrast, lodges conflict and doubt within its characters' inner lives, including the lives of those it appears to hold up as moral exemplars.

Related depictions of the relationship between the epics have been put forward: in relation to attitudes towards war (Brockington 1998: 25), transformations of subjectivity (Doniger 2002: 57), the formal features of both texts (Hiltebeitel 2005: 470), and their political significance across South Asian history (Pollock 1993: 283). We might also think of A. K. Ramanujan, whose essay 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*' locates the *Rāmāyaṇa's* multiplicity outside the text, in the many forms the story takes across the history of its retellings (Ramanujan 1991b). In contrast, 'Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*' finds the *Mahābhārata's* multiplicity within the text, in characters who are 'not quite "fixed," or "finite" as they are open to past lives as well as other lives around them' (Ramanujan 1991a: 440). While some scholars frame the poetic relationship between the two epics differently,[33] this basic dualism, articulated powerfully by Shulman, offers an effective means of casting light on the poetics of the *Mokṣopāya*.

Perfection as Process: The *Mokṣopāya* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*

[33] Sally Sutherland Goldman's study of Sītā and Draupadi (Sutherland 1989) offers an instructive counterpoint to Shulman's reading. She emphasises Sītā's conformity to dharmic social norms and to an ideal of womanhood, in contrast to Draupadī's openly aggressive and non-normative conduct. Yet she also shows that Sītā's aggression does not disappear, it is concealed and turned inward, an example of inner conflict that contrasts with the steadfast figure of Rāma.

What might this light reveal? The obvious starting point for a comparative analysis is to read the *Mokṣopāya*, with its explicit *Rāmāyaṇa* framing, as an embodiment of the 'poetics of perfection.' This is a move that Shulman himself makes. A formal correlate of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* poetics, Shulman explains, is the fact that the epic presents itself as created 'in a totalistic, visionary experience, in a timeless moment of *yogic* contemplation' (Shulman 2001: 33), namely Vālmīki's access – through meditative concentration – to the entire epic described at the poem's outset (R I,3.1-9). Thus, the *Rāmāyaṇa's* contents, with its idealised heroes, mirror its self-understanding as a perfect and bounded composition. By means of this, the text 'achieves a perfection of form in the telling, and which ultimately presents us with a sustained inner world that is ontologically superior (by its own devices) to any other' (Shulman 2001: 39). Central to the *Rāmāyaṇa's* design, Shulman tells us, is its self-presentation as *another* world. To this he adds that 'It is not by chance that a later work such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, a classic of narrative ontology, calls itself a *mahārāmāyaṇa*.' (39). On Shulman's reading, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, and by extension the *Mokṣopāya*, is a text that in its coherence and singularity of vision presents an ontological alternative to the real world. It thus takes the 'poetics of perfection,' which in the *Rāmāyaṇa* concerns primarily Rāma's moral perfection as the 'best of those who uphold *dharma*' (*dharmabhṛtām vara*), in a uniquely metaphysical direction.

This persuasive reading can be extended further. The *Mokṣopāya*, unlike the *Mahābhārata*, is fundamentally optimistic about human perfectibility: apart from Rāma's lament in the first book, and a couple of the more tragic allegorical sub-tales,[34] most of the text seeks to soothe the sting of tragedy. We saw this in the story of Līlā, who was able to turn the death of her beloved husband into an occasion to liberate herself and ultimately to be reunited with him. This optimism is also present in other tales, such as the tale of Indra and Ahalyā (III,89-90), in which an adulterous queen and her libertine lover remain, through their love, happy in the midst of the tortures set upon them by Āhalyā's jealous husband. What is more, all of these sub-tales are contained in a frame story that, as we saw, ends with Rāma attaining the perfected state of liberation that sets the stage for his epic exploits in the classic *Rāmāyaṇa*. These optimistic endings push us to align the *Mokṣopāya* with the epic with which it aligns itself, an epic which, in contrast to the *Mahabhārata*, leaves its reader with a 'living, restored, reintegrated world' after its earth-shattering war (Shulman 1991: 94).

Yet a deeper analysis can emerge when we note that the *Rāmāyaṇa's* 'poetics of perfection' does not entail a simple optimism but rather hinges on the 'tragedy always consequent on perfection.' Thus, Rāma's perfection is the engine behind the sometimes-tragic moments of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* drama. Rāma accepts banishment to preserve his father's truthfulness, and his obedience to Sītā's desire leads to her capture, from which follows the horrors of the great war. Indeed, the last book of the epic, even if it complicates the perfect image of the post war *rāmarājya* by depicting Sītā's tragic banishment, emphasises how this banishment follows from Rāma's unswerving dedication to his royal obligations. In this way, the classic epic and its narrative arc presupposes Rāma's perfection as the pinnacle of *dharmic* action – indeed the poem is instigated by Vālmīki's question to Nārada: 'Is there a man in the world today who is truly virtuous?' (R I.1.2). Even if there are other moral exemplars in the tale, and even if some of Rāma's actions have been deemed as ethically controversial — such as

[34] E.g. the 'story of the mind' (*cittophākhyāna* III,98-99) which narrates a man, a metaphor for the mind, tormented in the wilderness; or the similarly metaphorical 'story of the elephant' (*gajophākhyāna* VI,93.1-31).

the killing of the monkey King Vālin (cf. Matilal 2002) and the execution of Śūrpanakhā — Rāma's status as the supreme embodiment of *dharma* is unquestioned throughout the text.[35]

The *Mokṣopāya*, on the other hand, does not presuppose Rāma's perfection nor his uniqueness; quite the contrary. The text's narrative frame is a journey from a state of imperfect, half awakening – constituted by the 'dispassion' (*vairāgya*) displayed in Rāma's opening lament – to the state of perfect liberation. Moreover, in the context of the *Mokṣopāya's* narrative world, Rāma does not stand out in undertaking this journey, indeed his transformation is predicated upon hearing numerous tales of other characters who undergo similar transformations. Līlā, as we saw, attains liberation through the aid of Sarasvatī and their epic journey across the space of consciousness. Other examples include the sages Uddālaka (MU V,51-55) and Vītahavya (V,82-89) who attain liberation seated in *yogic* postures, and the king Śikhidvaja who is liberated with the aid – and trickery – of his liberated wife Cūdālā (VI,81-114). Sometimes the journey to liberation is travelled by characters who are very distant from the normative ideals embodied by Rāma: the humungous demoness Karkaṭī becomes liberated without having to give up her love for human flesh – after attaining liberation, she restricts herself to eating only criminals condemned to death (III,82.41-44). Thus, rather than being an epic about the actions and tragic experiences of a perfect person in an imperfect world, the *Mokṣopāya* is an epic about the process of perfection itself, about the process whereby a human transforms into a *jīvanmukta* such that he becomes capable of acting in the world with the same equanimity that allows Rāma to be a steadfast adherent of *dharma*. This process of perfection is not restricted to any single individual; indeed the *Mokṣopāya* is explicit in its desire for its reader to undergo this process it describes.

This shift in focus has implications for the reader's comprehension of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is presupposed by the text. The *Rāmāyaṇa's* manichean moral clash between the forces of good and evil, embodied in the figures of Rāma and Rāvaṇa, becomes, in the light of the MU's radical illusionism, as insubstantial as a dream. What seems in the original epic to be an all-important, cosmic drama of destruction and victory is recontextualised as an illusory appearance within the space of consciousness. In the Līlā story we get a vivid sense of this. The war between Vidūratha and Sindhu is described in detailed passages: we are immersed in the stakes of the battle and its horror – the post-war, corpse-covered battlefield is described in detail (III,401-4) – yet we are told in no uncertain terms, both explicitly and through the narrative context, that this battle was a mere illusion that appeared in the space of Līlā's bedroom, itself a mere illusion (III,52.4-5). Indeed, in the final analysis, all things according to the *Mokṣopāya's* philosophy are ontologically indistinguishable from unreality. At one point in book six, when Vasiṣṭha gazes upon the infinite expanse of consciousness with its infinite parallel worlds, we hear the following:

> In some [worlds], the demon Rāvaṇa is killed by another Rāma. In others, the demon Rāvaṇa slays Rāma (VI,243.47).[36]

[35] Pollock uses this, amongst other things, to argue that Rāma's divinity is essential to the core story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (1984; Vālmīki et al. 2021: 20), counter to the long-standing text-critical consensus that the outer books of the epic, which emphasise Rāma's divinity, are late (J. L. Brockington 1984). Yet even Brockington's account of the development of the epic, which follows this consensus, takes Rāma's righteousness to be the central organising principle of the epic.

[36] *kvacid anyena rāmeṇa hatarāvaṇarākṣasam / rakṣasā rāvaṇenaiva kvacin nihatarāghavam //*

The *Mokṣopāya* thus proposes that the epic battle and victory around which the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* orbits, with all of its cosmic stakes, is in fact a mere daydream, no more real than an infinite array of alternative worlds where everything one can imagine – and then some – seems to take place.[37]

We must keep in mind that this is not simply a retelling, but a recontextualization of the classic *Rāmāyaṇa*, which the *Mokṣopāya* claims to be an extension of. Thus if we are to read the *Mokṣopāya* on its own terms, we must take it be revealing that Rāma's perfection of character, the perfection that drives the drama of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, has its origin in Rāma's inner realisation of the illusory nature of reality and his indifference to triumph and failure. Rather like Līlā peering into Padma's consciousness contained within the space of her bedroom, the reader of the *Mokṣopāya* is offered a window into Rāma's mind, which is paradoxically indifferent to the consequences of the drama that Rāma is embroiled in throughout the events of the classic epic. Thus, if we are to read the *Mokṣopāya* as expressing the 'poetics of perfection' we must do so in a way that keeps in mind the text's attempt to go beyond the poetics of its predecessor without contradicting it. As a prequel to the original *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mokṣopāya* recasts the Rāma of the great epic as a *jivanmukta*, a living liberated being, whose steadfast character is a product of realisation of the illusory nature of the world. We are shown a side of the original story that was never visible but was always present: Rāma's liberated mind, which was in fact operating with totally different ontological premises that the text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* presumes.

Perfection through Dilemma: The *Mokṣopāya* and the *Mahābhārata*

The 'poetics of perfection' is thus transformed in the *Mokṣopāya.* Yet how is this perfection related to the 'dilemma' at the heart of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* bigger, more morally ambiguous, more formally unruly cousin? What role, if any, does the 'poetics of dilemma' play in the *Mokṣopāya's* narrative world?

To understand this, let us look at Shulman's reading of the *Mahābhārata* more closely. As we saw, he articulates the epic's 'poetics of dilemma' by highlighting the parallel between the *Mahābhārata's* formal qualities and the various forms of inner conflict that play an important role in the text's narrative. These conflicts take different forms. Often, the conflict is constituted by doubt concerning the correct action to take, as in Arjuna's condition at the outset of the great war, or the royal sages' great inability to act decisively following the lost dice match and the assault of Draupadī. Sometimes conflict is constituted by a deep sense of regret at the path that one has chosen, embodied most forcefully in Yudhiṣṭhira's post-war lament. Sometimes it is constituted by the morally dubious actions that characters are compelled to commit as part of a larger effort to uphold *dharma*, such as Yudhiṣṭhira's lies about Aśvatthāman, which lead to Drona's death. In fact, Emily Hudson has argued that these moments of dilemma and 'disorientation' train the reader of the *Mahābhārata* to distrust the narrative as it is presented. She argues that the epic thus encourages its reader cast doubt upon its own conclusion: Yudiṣṭhira's famous testing by Dharma. Yudhiṣṭhira's final entry into heaven after a series of tests and tricks may not be the happy ending it seems to be but could in fact be a further trick hiding the epic's final message: that "the distinction between heaven and hell is a ruse" (Hudson 2013: 214).

All these conflicts and riddles are essential to the portrayal of 'the subtlety of *dharma*' (*dharma-sukṣmatā*), one of the guiding themes of the *Mahābhārata*. At face value, this seems quite contrary to the flavour of the *Mokṣopāya*, wherein great moments of moral tragedy are not its centre of narrative gravity. Yet Shulman's

[37] For more on the *Mokṣopāya's* radical illusionistic ontology, see Author forthcoming.

analysis of the 'poetics of dilemma' extends beyond these kinds of conflict into a discussion of *Mahābhārata's* vision of self-identity — the unsettling ontology that mirrors the text's moral ambiguity.

This is most obvious from Shulman's analysis of the *Mahābhārata's* story of Nala and Damayantī. A narrative told to Yudhiṣṭhira after the Pāṇḍava's exile, it "illuminates from its own perspective certain of the central themes and events of the main epic narrative" (Shulman 1994: 2). This story recounts how King Nala falls in love with the princess Damayantī and wins her hand at her *svayaṃvara*, despite having to compete with gods disguised as himself. Yet soon after the marriage, Nala becomes the victim of the demon Kali, and under his influence, loses his kingdom in a game of dice and is forced into exile with his wife, whom he soon abandons in despair. Eventually, after his rescue of the snake-King Karkotaka, his transformation into a hunchback expert at dice, his return to the palace, and his restoration to his original form, the story ends with Nala and Damayantī reunited in peace and reigning over their kingdom.

For Shuman, 'Nala's primary experience, enacted in varying manners at different points in his career, is that of watching reality — his reality, inner and outer — splinter and reproduce itself" (1994: 14). This is evidenced by events in the story, such as the gods taking the form of Nala at Damayantī's *svayaṃvara*, or, more obviously, by Nala's possession by Kali. Through these events, 'Nala comes to know himself as other, perhaps as a confusing series of others who influence his actions and help explain their incoherence, their apparent cruelty, their taintedness with evil.' His experiences lead to a face-to-face encounter with the alien elements of his own selfhood, which eventually lead Nala, in Shulman's reading, 'toward an experience of the self as rich in being but ultimately empty of identity.' 'And it is this theme,' Shulman continues, 'especially in relation to the destructive aspect of the process, that Nala epitomised for the Epic as a whole' (26).

This powerful reading of the Nala tale must contend with the fact that it is not the most obvious one. Shulman anticipates the reader's objection that 'this is all, after all, rather speculative,' and that the tale may be a simple account of 'possession and how to avoid it' (1994: 15-16). More to the point, counter to Shulman's reading of Nala's identity as fundamentally fragmented, Damayantī is able to recognise Nala's 'true self' both in the *svayaṃvara* and when he returns to the palace disguised as the hunchback Bahuka. Far from being the paradigmatic tale of a fractured identity, the tale could equally be read as the loss and recovery of Nala's true self.

Yet for Shulman, the fact that the truth of the instability of Nala's self is not obvious — is in some way hidden — is essential to the structure of the epic. Indeed, Shulman's reading of the Nala tale parallels his reading of the concept of 'fate,' or *daiva,* in the *Mahābhārata* in general. This is encapsulated perhaps most effectively in the epic's central moment of the dice match between Yuḍhiṣṭhira and Śakuni, Duryodhana's accomplice, which ends with the Pāṇḍava heroes loosing their kingdom and facing exile. Echoing the Vedic ritual with its drama of loss and rebirth, the dice match for Shulman is a moment wherein the 'surface' of *dharmically* structured social and cosmic order is revealed to be undergirded by a 'depth' of chaos that constitutes time as an inexorable march toward destruction.

> 'Duryodhana is undoubtedly correct in describing dicing as the gate to heaven (as Vidura is right about its opening the gates of hell). Here, as elsewhere, *daiva* entails the rupture of existential planes. Paradoxically, connection to unseen levels of reality is always, in the *Mahābhārata*, won through destruction. As in sacrifice, one gets past the surface only by taking something away. In fact, the problem can be restated more generally as one of relating surface to depth. Yudhiṣṭhira normally sticks

> to the surface, i.e. to images of propriety and order; this is where the universalistic values of *dharma*, which he espouses, are to be found. But the underlying structure is, it seems, anything but proper. Such order as it has must be off balance, riddled with falsehood and illusion. The game of dice, a re-ordering of the cosmic map, creates Time (or Death, *kāla*), with all its terrors. Such is the nature of this type of map: an ordered surface that suggests, encompasses, and activates the unbalanced forces beneath or behind it' (Shulman 1992: 360).

This structure of surface veiling depth is also present in Yudhiṣṭhira's test at the Yakṣa's lake, which, when read in the context of the epic as a whole, reveals a 'contextual irony' that is echoed by the riddling nature of the sequence. Yudhiṣṭhira is an 'ironic figure,' whose explicit answers to the Yakṣa's riddles display his commitment to 'noninjury' (*ānṛśaṃsya*), yet whose inevitable and tragic role in a 'in a violent disaster on a universal scale,' is suggested implicitly by the riddling sequence (Shulman 1996: 158). This repeated pattern of surface veiling depth allows Shulman to say of Yudhiṣṭhira's dice game that, 'this game, which takes the world apart and reconstructs it, is not, properly, a process that happens to reality but rather a characterization — perhaps the major such definition repeatedly offered by the epic — of the inner mechanism of reality itself' (Shulman 1992: 361). Just as in the story of Nala, where on the surface we find a hero who loses and regains himself, hiding yet hinting at the more disturbing reality of the alienation of the self from itself, so the epic's main narrative gives constant hints toward an abyssal depth, the terrifying truth of time's entropy veiled beneath the glamour of its heroes and their victory over the forces of evil.

Understanding the ontological dimension of the *Mahābhārata's* 'poetics of dilemma' in this way, how can we conceptualise its relation to the poetics of the *Mokṣopāya*? The first point to make is that we can read the *Mokṣopāya* as, in one sense, taking the 'poetics of dilemma' to its logical conclusion by depicting radical tales of self-fragmentation through its fantastical narratives. Not only does Līlā find out that what she took to be her real world was nothing but an illusion appearing within a tiny mountain hut, she comes face to face with the imagined version of her spawned by her husband's memory. This kind of identity-splitting narrative is characteristic of the *Mokṣopāya* as a whole. In the story of the hundred Rudras (MU VI,66-73), we meet a Buddhist monk, who not only dreams himself to be someone else, he dreams hundred different alien selves, including the god Rudra, who unites all the dreamers together and forces them to wonder at the mystery of so many selves arising out of a single consciousness (cf. Hanneder 2025a). Compared with the *Mahābhārata's* Nala, the *Mokṣopāya* is much more daring in its narrative experiments with self-fragmentation.

Yet a deeper relation between the two texts can be observed, one that makes contact with the text's focus on liberation. The *Mahābhārata*, In Shulman's analysis, is consistently interested in repairing — albeit to the limited degree that it is able — the wounds in the identities of its characters that reality is continuously inflicting. The *Mahābhārata's* chaotic depth, the 'dilemma' of the self's emptiness at the heart of the text's poetics, is expressed only in the subtext of the epic, hidden behind the ultimate victory of its warrior heroes. Juxtaposing this with the *Mokṣopāya*, we can see that the text is not only comparatively unrepentant about the confusion it wreaks on its reader, it goes further by casting this confusion in a new light. As I see it, the *Mokṣopāya* can be read as suggesting that the very displacement of the self that the Mahābhārata's characters are constantly at war with is itself the path to ultimate liberation.

We encounter this at several points in the text, but one particularly revelatory moment is Līlā's encounter with her strange *döppelgänger*, the second Līlā, which constitutes the narrative apogee of Līlā's self-displacement. Unlike Nala, whose identity is destabilised through possession by Kali and through his transformation into

Bahuka, Līlā's belief that she is a real and stable individual is undone when she confronts a version of herself that exists only as an image within her husband's mind — an image she comes to recognise as no less real than the self she had taken herself to be. The destabilising effects of this doubling are repeatedly emphasised by the poet. Shulman has drawn attention to the structural prominence of doubling in the Nala narrative: "There are two dice-games, two *svayaṃvaras*, two riddles (and two riddling moments), two snakes in the forest, two charioteers, two *sabhās*; Nala and Damayantī naturally have twins" (Shulman 1994, 13). Yet whereas these doublings haunt the background of the Nala tale, in the Līlā narrative the doubling moves decisively to centre stage. The second Līlā is explicitly described as a mirror image of the first (*pratibimbam iva*, III.44.14); at times the two Līlās speak as one (*līlādvayam uvāca*, III.47.1), referring jointly to "our husband" (*no bhartā*, III.47.2); and in many verses they are not distinguished at all, both being referred to simply as Līlā (e.g. III.44.14; III.59.14). Indeed, there are moments in the narrative where it becomes difficult to determine which Līlā is being described.

Crucially, this splitting of identity — though it initially produces confusion — is not treated by the narrative logic of the *Mokṣopāya* as a threat to be concealed or a problem to be remedied, as the *Mahābhārata* treats Nala's possession and disguise. On the contrary, Līlā embraces her *döppelgänger* as a companion, and her encounter with this reflected self becomes a central vehicle for deepening her own (and the reader's) understanding of the illusory nature of reality. Therefore, the collapse of Līlā's former sense of personal identity is not an obstacle to liberation but its very condition. It is precisely through this destabilisation that Līlā attains the goal announced at the outset of the tale: reunion with her husband after death. The Līlā narrative thus ends, like the story of Nala, with the restoration of the kingdom and its rulers. Yet while the Nala episode depicts a restoration that closely mirrors the harmonious state preceding the rupture of Nala's possession, in the Līlā narrative the conclusion both reflects and radically differs from the story's beginning. Now there is not just one Līlā but two, and the king and his two queens are all liberated beings. In the *Mokṣopāya*, depth is not concealed beneath an orderly surface; rather, depth and surface are interwoven. The narrative surface unabashedly contains the fragmentation of self that the *Mahābhārata* repeatedly approaches but – precisely to achieve its own poetics effect – keeps at arm's length.

Similar dynamics could be traced in other *Mokṣopāya* narratives. The tale of the hundred Rudras intensifies this logic further, presenting not a doubled but a massively fragmented self, unified in Śiva yet without privileging any single manifestation — not even Śiva himself — as more real than the others. Other examples include the story of the king Vipaścit, who, like Nala at the *svayaṃvara*, appears in four different versions of himself, but unlike in the *Mahābhārata* story, these four versions each continue to live their lives without the narrative ever deciding which of them is Vipaścit's 'true' self. More examples could be given. Yet the contrast in narrative poetics between the *Mokṣopāya* and the *Mahābhārata* can be underscored by imagining how the Nala story might have appeared if it had been absorbed into the *Mokṣopāya's* distinctive vision. It would involve, perhaps, Nala sharing his marriage to Damayantī with the gods who took on his form at her *svayaṃvara*, after they had all found liberation and realised that the distinction between men and gods was unreal. Or it would involve Nala's whole drama of loss and exile being a mere daydream Nala fell into one day, a daydream that turn out to have been real when he encounters people who remember him as Bahuka. Or it would involve Damayantī, upon the loss of her husband, realising that the notion 'husband' is nothing more than a mental projection, and after attaining liberation, generating a new husband, a mirror image of Nala, using the power of her mind. The *Mokṣopāya*, it seems to me, would take the self-fragmentation that the original Nala story keeps close to its chest and would wear it openly on its sleeve.

From this analysis, we are now in a position to characterise the *Mokṣopāya's* border engagement with the poetics of the two great epics. The *Mokṣopāya* can be seen as combining the *Rāmāyaṇa's* 'poetics of perfection' with the *Mahābhārata's* 'poetics of dilemma,' not by striking a compromise between them, but by exploiting what Shulman has called their 'complementary poetics.' In the *Mokṣopāya*, *the path to 'perfection' lies precisely in recognising the 'dilemma' of an eternally displaced identity* — that one is never the simple, self-identical being one takes oneself to be. This is the poetic parallel, expressed through the Mokṣopāya's narratives, of the truth the text constantly reiterates: to gain liberation, one must recognise the illusory nature of both the world and oneself.

Conclusion

Shulman reflects on the moment in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa — during the testing of Sītā — when Rāma becomes confused about his true identity and cries out to heaven and to Brahmā for an answer. Brahmā replies that he is and always has been the great Lord Viṣṇu: 'He is none other than Nārāyaṇa, who is the imperishable Absolute; he is supreme *dharma*, Krṣṇa, the Puruṣa, Puruṣottama, the world's creator, the sacrifice, and so forth' (Shulman 1991: 93) Thus, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* is 'the portrait of a consciousness hidden from itself; or, one might say, of an identity obscured and only occasionally, in brilliant and poignant flashes, revealed to its owner. The problem is one of forgetting and recovery, of anamnesis: the divine hero who fails to remember that he is god comes to know himself, at least for brief moments, through hearing (always from others) his story' (Shulman 1991: 93). In this moment, the *Rāmāyaṇa's* poetics of perfection gets as close as it ever does to the *Mahābhārata's* poetics of dilemma by depicting Rāma's fundamental ignorance about who he is. Yet even if it gets close, it never touches it: Rāma, even if he is unaware of it, nonetheless has a true identity – the reader of the epic is never in doubt about this.

As we noted toward the beginning of this paper, the *Mokṣopāya* ends with Rāma as a liberated being who has complete knowledge of the Self as pure consciousness. Like the classic *Rāmāyaṇa*, it can thus be read as a tale of Rāma not knowing and then coming to realise his true identity. Yet, as this paper has shown, what this recognition means in the *Mokṣopāya* is very different. Rather than recognising his identity as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, Rāma, awakened by Vasiṣṭha's stories, reaches liberation by realising that he will never be able to find any stable and determinate identity for himself. The characters that Rāma has encountered in his conversation, such as Līlā, face inescapable confusion when attempting to understand who they are, yet find freedom in accepting this and all the radical metaphysical implications that come with it. Like both Līlā and Rāma, the reader of this confounding epic is led on a journey to perfection through dilemma. In attempting to not only describe a path to liberation in life, but to serve as a path in itself, the *Mokṣopāya* depicts destabilising universes in which characters who must face their own lack of ultimate identity head on serve as an opportunity for *Mokṣopāya's* reader to awaken to the same realisation. While the explicit philosophy of the *Mokṣopāya* gives us determinate answers to the question 'who am I': I am 'pure consciousness,' or 'the Self,' or some such transcendent reality, the text's stories offer us a complementary reflective medium which can read as illuminating a dimension of this realisation that these explicit, philosophical formulation obscure. To know oneself as 'pure consciousness' or as 'the Self' is not simply to take on a new identity, but to renounce the project of identity formation altogether. It is to float freely in a world where the question 'who am I' has no final answer.

Bibliography Primary Sources

DA — *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana.

Ānandavardhana. The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta. Translated by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan. Edited with an introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls. Harvard Oriental Series 49. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

MhBh — *Mahābhārata*.

Sukthankar, Vishnu Sitaram, S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, et al., eds. The Mahābhārata: Critical Edition. 19 vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–72. Reprint, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1999.

MU — *Mokṣopāya*.

Slaje, Walter, ed. Mokṣopāya: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011.

R — *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki.

Bhatt, G. H., et al., eds. The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa: Critical Edition. 7 vols. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1958–75.

Bibliography: Secondary Sources

Ānandavardhana. 1990. *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Translated by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan. Harvard Oriental Series 49. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Atreya, B. L. 1932. *The Yogavāsiṣṭha and Its Philosophy*. Moradabad: Darshana Printers.

Brockington, J. L. 1984. *Righteous Rāma: The Evolution of an Epic*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Brockington, J. L. 1998. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Abt. 2, Indien 12. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004492677.

Chapple, Christopher Key, and Arindam Chakrabarti, eds. 2015. *Engaged Emancipation: Mind, Morals, and Make-Believe in the Mokṣopāya (Yogavāsiṣṭha)*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Cohen, Tamara. 2020. "Arjunopākhyāna: An Idealist Non-Dualistic Translation of the Bhagavadgītā." *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History* 2 (2): 122–52. https://doi.org/10.1163/25425552-12340018.

Cohen, Tamara. 2023. "Yoga in the Mokṣopāya." PhD diss., University of Toronto.

Divanji, Prahlad C. 1938. "Further Light on the Date of the Yogavāsiṣṭha." *Poona Orientalist* 3: 29–44.

Doniger, Wendy. 2002. "Transformations of Subjectivity and Memory in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana." In David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, 57–72. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195144505.003.0004.

Fitzgerald, James L. 2012. “Mahābhārata.” In Knut A. Jacobsen et al., eds., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_BEH_COM_2020040.

Franco, Eli, and Isabelle Ratié, eds. 2016. *Around Abhinavagupta: Aspects of the Intellectual History of Kashmir from the Ninth to the Eleventh Century*. Leipziger Studien zu Kultur und Geschichte Süd- und Zentralasiens 6. Berlin: LIT.

Goldman, Robert P., and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman. 2012. “Rāmāyaṇa.” In Knut A. Jacobsen et al., eds., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/2212-5019_BEH_COM_2020060.

Hanneder, Jürgen. 2006. *Studies on the Mokṣopāya*. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 58. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Hanneder, Jürgen. 2012. *Mokṣopāya: Weg zur Erlösung*. Indologica Marpurgensia 4. München: P. Kirchheim.

Hanneder, Jürgen. 2025a. “The Meditating Monk.” In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *25 Years of Mokṣopāya Studies*, 169–90. Veröffentlichungen der Indologischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz 10. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Hanneder, Jürgen. 2025b. “The Way to Liberation according to the Mokṣopāya.” In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *25 Years of Mokṣopāya Studies*, 101–44. Veröffentlichungen der Indologischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz 10. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2005. “Not Without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in the Sanskrit Epics.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (4): 455–511. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-005-7050-9.

Hudson, Emily T. 2013. *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*. AAR Religions in Translation. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199860760.001.0001.

Jason, Heda. 1975. *Ethnopoetics: A Multilingual Terminology*. Israel Ethnographic Society Studies 3. Jerusalem: Israel Ethnographic Society.

Lo Turco, Bruno. 2002a. “The Story of Līlā: A Paradigm of the World of Shared Experience.” In Giuliano Boccali, Cinzia Pieruccini, and Jaroslav Vacek, eds., *Pandanus ’01: Research in Indian Classical Literature*, 27–42. Prague: Signeta.

Lo Turco, Bruno. 2002b. “Towards a Chronology of the Yogavāsiṣṭha/Mokṣopāya.” *Annali dell’Università degli Studi di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’* 62: 41–77.

Lo Turco, Bruno. 2005. “The Metaphorical Logic of the Mokṣopāya.” In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *The Mokṣopāya, Yogavāsiṣṭha and Related Texts*, 131–53. Geisteskultur Indiens: Texte und Studien 7. Aachen: Shaker.

Lo Turco, Bruno. 2015. “Ākāśa and Jīva in the Story of Līlā.” In Christopher Key Chapple and Arindam Chakrabarti, eds., *Engaged Emancipation: Mind, Morals, and Make-Believe in the Mokṣopāya (Yogavāsiṣṭha)*, 23–52. Albany: SUNY Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438458687-004.

Lo Turco, Bruno. 2024. “An Unshakeable Awareness: Siddhas and Jīvanmukti according to the Mokṣopāya.” In Chiara Neri and Francesco Sferra, eds., *Teaching Awareness in the Buddhist Tradition: Essays in Honour of Professor Corrado Pensa*, 58-81. Sheffield: Equinox. https://doi.org/10.1558/isbn.9781800503328.

Madaio, James. 2019. “Transformative Dialogue in the Yogavāsiṣṭha.” In Brian Black and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, eds., *In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions: Encounter, Transformation, and Interpretation*, 107–29. Dialogues in South Asian Traditions. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351011136-7.

Matilal, Bimal Krishna. 2002. “Rāma’s Moral Decisions.” In Jonardon Ganeri, ed., *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, vol. 2, 85–90. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

McCrea, Lawrence J. 2008. *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir*. Harvard Oriental Series 71. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mitra, Vihari-Lala, trans. 1891. *The Yoga-Vasishtha-Maharamayana of Valmiki*. Calcutta: M. L. Patra.

Pollock, Sheldon. 1984. “The Divine King in the Indian Epic.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (3): 505–28. https://doi.org/10.2307/601658.

Pollock, Sheldon. 1993. “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (2): 261–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/2059648.

Raghavan, V. 1939. “The Date of the Yogavāsiṣṭha.” *Journal of Oriental Research* 13: 110–28.

Ramanujan, A. K. 1991a. “Repetition in the Mahābhārata.” In Arvind Sharma, ed., *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, 419–43. Brill’s Indological Library 1. Leiden: Brill.

Ramanujan, A. K. 1991b. “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.” In Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, 22–48. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reich, James D. 2021. *To Savor the Meaning: The Theology of Literary Emotions in Medieval Kashmir*. South Asia Research. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197544839.001.0001.

Shulman, David. 1991. “Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sītā in Kampaṉ’s Irāmāvatāram.” In Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, 89–113. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shulman, David. 1992. “Devana and Daiva.” In A. W. van den Hoek, D. H. A. Kolff, and M. S. Oort, eds., *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*, 350–65. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004643994_022.

Shulman, David. 1994. “On Being Human in the Sanskrit Epic: The Riddle of Nala.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (1): 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01066357.

Shulman, David. 1996. “The Yakṣa’s Questions.” In Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman, eds., *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, 151–67. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195101867.003.0008.

Shulman, David. 2001. “Toward a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics.” In *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit*, 21–38. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Slaje, Walter. 1992. “Sarvasiddhāntasiddhānta: On ‘Tolerance’ and ‘Syncretism’ in the Yogavāsiṣṭha.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 36 (Suppl.): 307–22.

Slaje, Walter. 1994. *Vom Mokṣopāya-Śāstra zum Yogavāsiṣṭha-Mahārāmāyaṇa: Philologische Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungs- und Überlieferungsgeschichte eines indischen Lehrwerks mit Anspruch auf Heilsrelevanz*. Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 609; Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 27. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Slaje, Walter. 1998. “On Changing Others’ Ideas: The Case of Vidyāraṇya and the Yogavāsiṣṭha.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 41 (2): 103–24. https://doi.org/10.1163/000000098124992448.

Slaje, Walter. 2000. “Liberation from Intentionality and Involvement: On the Concept of Jīvanmukti according to the Mokṣopāya.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28 (2): 171–94. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004742001659.

Slaje, Walter. 2005. “Locating the Mokṣopāya.” In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *The Mokṣopāya, Yogavāsiṣṭha and Related Texts*, 21–35. Geisteskultur Indiens: Texte und Studien 7. Aachen: Shaker.

Slaje, Walter. 2020. “Vasiṣṭha the Void: Inquiries into the Authorship of the Mokṣopāya.” *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasienstudien* 37: 168–204.

Slaje, Walter. 2025. “How the Yogavāsiṣṭha Got Its Name, with an Excursus on the Yogabhūmis.” In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *25 Years of Mokṣopāya Studies*, 23–82. Veröffentlichungen der Indologischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz 10. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Slaje, Walter. 2026. “Zur Glaubenskritik im Mokṣopāya: Am Beispiel des Veda und Vergeltungskausalität.” In Walter Slaje, ed., *Aspekte des Schaffens kaschmirischer Dichter und Denker: Erträge eines aus Anlaß des 35. Deutschen Orientalistentags 2025 in Erlangen veranstalteten Fachkolloquiums*, 37–62. Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 145. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Smith, John D., trans. 2009. *The Mahābhārata: An Abridged Translation*. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin.

Steiner, Roland, trans. 2013. *Mokṣopāya, Übersetzung, Teil 3: Der Weg zur Befreiung. Das Vierte Buch: Das Buch über das Dasein*. Veröffentlichungen der Fächergruppenkommission für Außereuropäische Sprachen und Kulturen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Steiner, Roland, trans. 2014a. *Mokṣopāya, Übersetzung, Teil 1: Der Weg zur Befreiung. Das Erste und Zweite Buch: Das Buch über die Leidenschaftslosigkeit; Das Buch über das Verhalten der Befreiungssucher*. Veröffentlichungen der Fächergruppenkommission für Außereuropäische Sprachen und Kulturen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Steiner, Roland, trans. 2014b. *Mokṣopāya, Übersetzung: Das Fünfte Buch: Das Buch über das Zurruhekommen*. Veröffentlichungen der Fächergruppenkommission für Außereuropäische Sprachen und Kulturen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Steiner, Roland, trans. 2018. *Mokṣopāya, Übersetzung, Teil 5: Der Weg zur Befreiung. Das Sechste Buch: Das Buch über das Nirvāṇa, 1. Teil: Kapitel 1–119*. Veröffentlichungen der Fächergruppenkommission für Außereuropäische Sprachen und Kulturen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Steiner, Roland. 2025. "Vasiṣṭha's Prahlāda: Philosophical Reinterpretations in the Mokṣopāya." In Jürgen Hanneder, ed., *25 Years of Mokṣopāya Studies*, 83–100. Veröffentlichungen der Indologischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz 10. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Sutherland, Sally J. 1989. "Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1): 63–79. https://doi.org/10.2307/604337.

Timalsina, Sthaneshwar. 2006. *Seeing and Appearance*. Geisteskultur Indiens: Texte und Studien 10. Aachen: Shaker.

Vālmīki. 2021. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: The Complete English Translation*. Translated by Robert P. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, Rosalind Lefeber, Sheldon I. Pollock, and Barend A. van Nooten. Princeton Library of Asian Translations. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Venkatesananda, Swami, trans. 1993. *Vasiṣṭha's Yoga*. Albany: SUNY Press.