ARTICLE

'The dialogue between a cat and a mouse' in *Mahābhārata* 12.136 and narratives about spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) in Ancient Indian literature

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Abstract

'The dialogue between a cat and a mouse' (*Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*) is an animal fable used in the *Mahābhārata* to provide instruction in statecraft (*nīti*). This article argues that the *Mahābhārata* version of this tale must be based on an earlier soteriological allegory about a brahmin who provides spiritual liberation to a king in exchange for protection. The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* abounds in terms and phrases that, in addition to their everyday meanings, have a technical or typical usage in the ascetic traditions of Ancient India. Moreover, the conversation between the cat and the mouse resembles that between a teacher and a disciple, rather than a discussion of a possible alliance between two kings. The hunter of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* can be identified with the Buddhist Māra. To support the plausibility of this soteriological reading, the article includes a discussion of Buddhist *jātaka*s with a similar plot.

Keywords: Kings and brahmins; *mokṣa*; *jātaka*; Māra; *Mahābhārata*; fable

'The dialogue between a cat[1] and a mouse' (*Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*) is one of the animal fables that is used in the *Āpaddharmaparvan* subsection of the *Śāntiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* to provide instruction in statecraft (*nīti*).[2] This story is used to illustrate a *nīti* teaching about a weak king (the mouse) who should make a temporary alliance with a strong former enemy (the cat) when surrounded by several hostile kings (a mongoose and an owl) and facing certain defeat. A further theme that is explored in the second part of the dialogue is the danger that may arise for the weaker king (the mouse) if his alliance with the stronger king (the cat) continues longer than necessary: the cat may eat the mouse if his survival no longer depends on the mouse. Adam Bowles has already

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[1] James Fitzgerald has pointed out that the animal meant here is most likely a civet rather than a cat. See his note to *Mahābhārata* 12.136.22 in J. L. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata. Book 11: The Book of the Women; Book 12: The Book of Peace, Part One*, translation with introduction (Chicago 2004), p. 762. I find Fitzgerald's suggestion plausible, but I have opted for the more conservative 'cat' for Sanskrit *mārjāra*.

[2] This story has been translated in *ibid*. A shorter version is found in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (6.7.106–129). The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* shows strong parallels to the frame story of the second section (*tantra*) of the *Pañcatantra* (see also H. Falk, *Quellen des Pañcatantra* (Wiesbaden, 1978)), which resembles the story of the mouse Hiraṇyaka in *Hitopadeśa*. The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* has several thematic continuities with other fables in the *Mahābhārata* and the Buddhist *jātaka*s, some of which will be discussed below.

explored these themes and shown how this episode fits in to the broader context of the *Āpaddharmaparvan*.[3]

The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* is the second of three animal fables that are told consecutively in the *Āpaddharmaparvan*. Rudolf Franke has noted that the first[4] and third[5] of these episodes have parallels in the Pali *jātakas*, but he also mentions the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* in relation to some phrases that it shares with other Pali *jātakas*.[6] I believe that the third of these fables, *Mahābhārata* 12.137, shows signs of being adapted from a Buddhist or ascetic source. At any rate, it is clear that it was not composed for the purposes of instruction in *nīti* because it involves a discussion of philosophical and religious matters. A detailed demonstration of this claim requires another article. The placing of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* between these two tales increases the possibility that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* was adapted from Buddhist-influenced or ascetic materials.

In this article I will argue that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, as found in the Critical Edition (henceforth: CE) of the *Mahābhārata*,[7] must be based on a story that had a different allegorical meaning. The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* uses terminology and imagery commonly found in discourses about renunciation and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), and the cat treats the mouse as a teacher (*guru*) rather than as an allied king. These features of the story, as well as some contradictions and repetitions in the narrative, can be explained by positing an earlier version of the story, which was meant to illustrate how a brahmin (mouse) provides spiritual liberation to a king (cat), while the king protects the brahmin from hostile powers or from other classes (*varṇas*) in the society.

After a few more introductory remarks, a short summary of the plot of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* will be provided and an explanation for a contradiction in the plot will be offered (in the second to fourth sections). The fifth section will introduce some of the key arguments that support a soteriological reading of the tale by noting several words and phrases that can be understood in two different ways—secular and soteriological. The sixth section will discuss two passages in which the mouse is depicted as a (possible) minister to the king, and the seventh will provide evidence for understanding the four animals of the story as representing the four classes (*varṇas*) of the society. In the eighth section we will turn to the hunter, the only human character, arguing that he represents both death and spiritual bondage. This will lead to a discussion of stories about escaping death and Buddhist *jātakas* with a comparable plot in the ninth to eleventh sections. In particular, I will emphasise that structurally similar stories about escape, especially from a fowler, are interpreted in a soteriological way as an escape from Māra in the *jātakas* of the *Mahāvastu*, while the Pali tradition avoids such an interpretation of its versions of the same *jātakas*. Some speculations about this difference will be offered. Thus, while the main focus on this article is on the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, it will deal in some detail with *jātaka* material. This is indispensable for evaluating the extent to which the proposed soteriological interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* narrative is plausible. The twelfth and thirteenth sections will discuss some features of the story that are of secondary importance to the narrative, but that can nevertheless be given a soteriological interpretation in order to read the entire[8] *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* as a soteriological allegory.

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[3] A. Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 249–258.

[4] See *Mahābhārata* 12.135 and *Mitacintijātaka* (no. 114).

[5] See *Mahābhārata* 12.137 and *Kuntanijātaka* (no. 343).

[6] R. O. Franke, 'Jātaka-Mahābhārata-Parallelen', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* XX (1906), pp. 317–372.

[7] V. S. Sukthankar et al. (eds), *Mahābhārata*, 19 vols (Poona, 1927–59).

[8] By the entire *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* I mean the first two sections of the story only. These have the appearance of an already complete narrative, as discussed in the third section below.

Narrative and didactic elements of the story

Animal fables in the *Mahābhārata* are unique in that they are written entirely in verse, as opposed to the Pali *jātakas*[9] and fables in the *Hitopadeśa* and later *Pañcatantra*, which are composed of a fixed or didactic versified part and a unique prose version of the story.[10] When one compares, for example, the immediately following *Mahābhārata* story (12.137) with *Kuntanijātaka* (no. 343), it is easy to observe that all four verses of the *jātaka* are found (with minor variations) in *Mahābhārata* 12.137.30–33. This suggests that at least these four verses were transmitted as a more or less fixed group, around which different narratives could be constructed in prose or verse. Likewise, different Buddhist traditions elaborate different narratives around similar *jātaka* verse material, as will be exemplified below. When we come to the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, there is no *a priori* means for knowing which verses, if any, belong to a hypothesised shorter or 'core' version of the story.

It is possible, however, to introduce a different distinction—between narrative and didactic material. Narrative passages are those that are relevant for the story proper, being descriptions of the characters and the events that take place. These can be contrasted with verses or *pādas* (quarters) of verses that are purely didactic in nature and could easily have circulated as general *nīti* knowledge, not tied to the particular narrative. Apart from the narrator Bhīṣma's introduction, in the first part of the narrative (up to verse 117) didactic materials are found in verses 39, 44 (*pādas* c to f), 45 (*pādas* a and b), 57, 58 (*pādas* c and d), 89, and 102–106. I propose that these didactic materials were added when the narrative was adapted for *nīti* purposes. The versified format of the story obscures the fact that at least some of these didactic verses are most likely quotations. Apart from the didactic verses listed above, there are a couple of narrative verses that support the *nīti* interpretation of the story advocated in the *Mahābhārata* itself. Verse 42 mentions *kṣatravidyā* ('royal knowledge', a synonym of *nīti*) and verse 86 refers to the mouse as *amitraghna*, 'slayer of enemies'. For my hypothesis to be viable, these must also belong to the *nīti* reworking of the *mokṣa* narrative. I will work on the assumption that most of the verses that belong to the story proper predate the adaptation of the story for the purpose of instruction in *nīti*. Nevertheless, I will not attempt to reconstruct a definite shorter version of the story.

Despite the evidence being inconclusive, I believe the hypothesis of an earlier *mokṣa* version of the tale is worth exploring due to the cumulative evidence and its inherent plausibility. Moreover, although it does not provide allegorical meaning to every single detail of the story as it now stands, such a *mokṣa* reading gives a much richer meaning to the details of the story than does its *nīti* interpretation in the *Mahābhārata*. By assuming a higher level of sophistication and literary skill than is obvious, it is thus generous to the tradition that produced it.

Plot summary

To make the argument easier to follow, a summary of the story is now provided, which notes some contradictions in the plot. For the purposes of this article, the plot is divided into three parts.

In the first part, a hunter sets a trap into which a cat falls. Then a mouse starts eating the bait attached to the trap. While the mouse is eating, two predators appear. If the mouse climbs down to the ground he will be eaten by a mongoose. If the mouse remains where he is, he may be eaten by an owl who hovers over him. The mouse comes up with a

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[9] V. Fausbøll (ed.), *The Jātaka. Together with Its Commentary: Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*, 6 vols (London, 1877–97; reprint: Oxford, 1991–2006).

[10] See P. Olivelle, 'Talking animals: explorations in an Indian literary genre', *Religions of South Asia* VII (2013), pp. 14–26.

plan to make an alliance with the cat, suggesting to him that he will set the cat free if the cat spares his life and protects him from the other predators. The cat agrees. As soon as the mouse enters the trap, the owl and mongoose leave. (It is conceivable that a shorter version of the story ended here.)

In the second part of the story, the mouse takes his time to release the cat. The reason given for this is that the cat will surely eat the mouse once there is no longer any danger. The mouse only releases the cat when the hunter approaches in the morning so that the cat has no time to eat the mouse. When the hunter arrives, however, the mongoose and the owl are said to leave for a second time, so here a contradiction is introduced. At this point all the characters return to their homes, which looks like an obvious ending.

The story continues, however, with a third part, in which the cat approaches the mouse at his home, asking to continue their friendship. The mouse refuses to come out, observing that the cat could now eat him, and the story ends here.

On the parts of the story

In this article I will propose a *mokṣa* reading of the first two parts of the story only, as I believe that the third part is an addition to a shorter version of the same story. That the third part is an addition to an already complete narrative is obvious from the structure of the story. Furthermore, two different lessons are learned from the first, or first+second, and third parts. While the first two parts in their *nīti* interpretation teach mainly about making an alliance with a former enemy, the third part is concerned with the dangers involved in maintaining an alliance with an inherently dangerous companion. Moreover, in the *Pañcatantra* version, the equivalent of the third part is a separate episode, and the dangerous animal who wants to form a friendship with the mouse is not the same animal that was saved in the first part.

Why do the predators leave twice?

As noted in the summary above, the predators are said to leave twice—first, after the forming of the alliance between the mouse and the cat, and, second, when the hunter arrives. In the first instance, 'the mongoose and the owl went home without hope having seen them two [i.e. the cat and the mouse who had just become allies]' (*tau dṛṣṭvā nakulolūkau nirāśau jagmatur gṛhān*; 12.136.82). This is followed in some northern manuscripts (K4,5 V1 B0-2,5 Da Dn1,n3 D2,3,8) by a further explanation in three verses which are provided as a starred passage in the CE. It clarifies that the predators were 'unable to attack' (*aśaktau … saṃpradharṣayituṃ*; *311, line 4) due to the successful alliance between the mouse and the cat. This explanation of the predators' departure fits the logic of the *nīti* framework well. In the second instance of departure, however, the details are slightly different:

Now the mongoose and the owl immediately lost hope, being very frightened upon seeing that terrible-looking [hunter].

atha cāpi susaṃtrastau taṃ dṛṣṭvā ghoradarśanam
kṣaṇena nakulolūkau nairāśyaṃ jagmatus tadā (12.136.112)

This is followed by two verses (113 and 114) that repeat, verbatim, part of the explanation that was relegated in the first instance to a star passage after verse 82.[11] I cannot see how a later departure of the predators could fit the logic of the *nīti* framework. Moreover, the

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[11] Verses 113–14 are omitted by the manuscripts V1, B0,1,5, Da.

later passage (112–114) appears to be a combination of two distinct ideas. If the cause of the predators' departure is the arrival of the hunter, it is hardly relevant that they are unable to attack the mouse because of its excellent alliance with the cat.

Thus, the manuscript transmission of this detail of the story is problematic. It is possible to offer a speculative explanation of how this might have come about. In the *mokṣa* version of the story, the predators left when the hunter arrived. When the *nīti* version was made, their departure was moved to an earlier point in the story in order to illustrate the potency of the alliance. For some reason, the manuscript tradition retained traces from the earlier version so that all the manuscripts used for the CE retain the contradiction of the predators leaving twice. Confusion arose as to the proper place of the verses 113–114, which were introduced when creating the *nīti* version, and were kept by some manuscripts in their proper place after 82, but ended up in the CE text in the wrong place, where they form, at least, a possible logical contradiction with verse 112.

The alliance between the cat and the mouse: ordinary and soteriological language

In this section I will list a number of features of the conversation between the cat and the mouse which lend support to a *mokṣa* interpretation of the story. The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* uses a number of words and expressions that could be interpreted in a secular as well as a soteriological way. To begin with, *mokṣa*, which in the context of the story most readily means 'release from the trap', is one of the most frequently used terms for 'release from *saṃsāra*'. In the next sections we will discuss a number of further instances of ambiguous language.

On being nirvṛta

In verse 107 the mouse Palita addresses the cat Lomaśa using another term with two meanings, namely, *nirvṛta*:

> The majority of threads have been cut. Just a single thread remains. I will quickly cut that one also. Become calm (*nirvṛta*) Lomaśa.
>
> *chinnaṃ tu tantubāhulyaṃ tantur eko 'vaśeṣitaḥ*
> *chetsyāmy ahaṃ tad apy āśu nirvṛto bhava lomaśa* (12.136.107)

To become *nirvṛta*, however, also means to become spiritually liberated or to reach *nirvāṇa*, the latter term being derived from the same verbal base *nir+vṛ*. Thus, a second meaning emerges—the mouse is promising the cat that his liberation is imminent. The corresponding Pali word *nibbuta* is commonly used to describe a spiritually liberated person. *Nirvṛta* characterises a sage at least once in the *Śāntiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (12.171.59), but that passage has been demonstrated to show 'remarkable influence from Buddhist and Jain sources'.[12]

Crossing over

When Palita proposed the alliance to the cat, he uses a simile of crossing a river:

> Whoever uses a piece of log to cross a very deep and great river, he makes that log cross over and he is carried over by the log. Such shall be our alliance of good escape (*sunistara*). I will make you cross over and you will make me cross over.

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[12] M. Tokunaga, 'An annotated translation of MBh 12.168–171', 京都大學文學部研究紀要 = *Memoirs of the Faculty of Letters, Kyoto University* XL (2001), p. 2.

kaś cit tarati kāṣṭhena sugambhīrāṃ mahānadīm
sa tārayati tat kāṣṭhaṃ sa ca kāṣṭhena tāryate
īdṛśo nau samāyogo bhaviṣyati sunistaraḥ[13]
ahaṃ tvāṃ tārayiṣyāmi tvaṃ ca māṃ tārayiṣyasi (12.136.60–61)

The parable of crossing a river is well known, especially in Buddhist sources, where it stands for spiritual liberation. For example, in the *Nāvāsutta* (*Suttanipāta* 316–323[14]) a teacher provides knowledge for others as a means to cross over; he is the compassionate boatman. Very similar language is used in *Mahābhārata* 12.313.22–23. Crossing to the other shore, with or without mention of a teacher, appears in a number of other *Mahābhārata* passages (for example, 12.227.17; 12.228.2; 12.309.17), including *Bhagavadgītā* 4.36.

Of course, similar language about getting to the other side could also be used with regard to overcoming more mundane kinds of hardship. For example, *Mahābhārata* 12.128.49 says that '[the king] who possesses a treasury overcomes (*tarati*) everything (*sarvaṃ tarati kośavān*)'. Nevertheless, I find that the particular way the mouse expresses himself must be intended to evoke the soteriological usages of 'crossing over'.

In contrast to other usages of this simile, such as in the Buddhist *Nāvāsutta* and *Mahābhārata's Janakaśukasaṃvāda*, the present version claims that the teacher gets himself over. This might have been intended to be satirical, portraying the mouse as acting in his own best interests rather than helping the cat out of compassion.[15]

Student and teacher

The dialogue between the cat and the mouse, if didactic *nīti* verses are removed, does not read like a conversation between two kings. Rather, the relationship between the cat and the mouse is that between a master and a student or devotee.

As they make an alliance, the cat calls himself a student (*śiṣya*) and a devotee (*bhakta*) of the mouse (12.136.69), and the cat says that he has sought refuge (*śaraṇaṃ gataḥ*) from the mouse. Words related to *bhakta* are commonly used in the Buddhist literature to signify the relationship one should have to a *kalyāṇamitra*—a 'good friend'[16] who provides assistance on the spiritual path, or simply to a wise person (*paṇḍita*).[17] I believe that such usages of the term also inform the present passage.

Of equal significance is the phrase *śaraṇaṃ gataḥ*, 'gone for refuge', which is found in the same verse (69). While it can mean simply 'to seek protection', it is also a standard phrase in Buddhism, where 'going for refuge' to the Buddha effectively means conversion to Buddhism.

I find it difficult to see why such statements would be made by the cat if this was meant to be no more than an alliance between two kings who are in equal danger.

A possible further parallel with the Buddhist usage of *bhakti* is related to *Theragāthā* 370, which says that one who is 'devoted' (*bhaktimān*) to wise people becomes wise (*paṇḍita*) himself. This recalls the mouse's question: 'Will this enemy now become wise

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[13] I am not aware of any other uses of *nistara* in Sanskrit. The expected form would be *nistāra*.

[14] D. Andersen and H. Smith (eds), *Sutta-Nipāta* (London, 1913).

[15] A further and rather risky interpretation can be added in support of a possible satire. The prefix *nis* can also be used as a negative prefix, in which case *sunistara* would mean 'without any crossing at all'. Perhaps the text here implies that some brahmins do not really liberate kings, but instead play them for fools in order to bring them under Brahminical influence. The cat is described as 'stupid' (*mūḍha*; verse 43), 'not wise' (*akṛtaprajña*), and 'to be controlled' (*vaśya*; verse 87).

[16] For example, *Theragāthā* 249 uses *bhaj* with *kalyānamitta*. H. Oldenberg and R. Pischel (eds), *The Thera- and Therî-gâthâ (Stanzas Ascribed to Elders of the Buddhist Order of Recluses)* (London, 1966).

[17] For instance, *Theragāthā* 993: *paṇḍitaṃ bhaje*.

(*paṇḍita*) through [our] alliance/association (*saṃgatyā*)?' (*apīdānīm ayaṃ śatruḥ saṃgatyā paṇḍito bhavet*; 12.136.46). This further supports the mouse's position as a possible teacher, and not simply a weak king who draws on his *nīti* wisdom to survive.

On prasāda

At one point the cat says that he will obtain life by the 'favour' (*prasāda*) of the wise (*prājña*) mouse (12.136.76). *Prasāda* is another term that has a technical meaning in the soteriological traditions of Ancient India, apart from its secular meaning of 'favour' or 'help'. Moreover, this technical usage is often related to the teacher-student relationship, which has already been discussed. In a soteriological context, the word *prasāda* refers more specifically to the liberation-granting favour that the *guru*, or sometimes a deity, grants to his (or her) disciple. Although such a path to spiritual liberation is not common in the *Mahābhārata*, it is found in its *Janakaśukasaṃvāda* (12.313), which claims that the *prasāda* of his *guru* Vyāsa has given divine knowledge (*jñānaṃ divyam*) to King Janaka and has contributed to or caused the perfection of Vyāsa's son Śuka (12.313.42–43).[18] Incidentally, this verse occurs in a conversation that has already been referenced above because it employs a simile of crossing over with the help of a teacher. This suggests that the author of the *mokṣa* version of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* may have been familiar with the religious developments recorded in the *Janakaśukasaṃvāda*.

Becoming a minister?

The alliance between the cat and the mouse is described using a phrase that is difficult to interpret in its given *nīti* context. When the mouse convinces the cat to accept his proposal, the mouse 'being very confident entered [the trap where the cat was] and properly undertook *arthas*' (*praviveśa suvisrabdhaḥ samyag arthāṃś cacāra ha*; 12.136.80). I will explore two possible understandings of the statement, but, unfortunately, neither of them can account for the usage of the plural of *artha*.[19] One way of translating *artha* with a motion verb would be to say that the mouse undertook his 'work' (*artha*), as specified in their deal. A problem with this interpretation is that the mouse by no means plays his part properly (*samyak*), at least from the cat's point of view, because he postpones the cat's release. (The postponement will be discussed below.) An alternative interpretation would be that the mouse undertook *artha* in the sense of *arthaśāstra*, namely, became a minister for the king. A verb derived from the same root *car* appears with the *puruṣārthas dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma* in *Mahābhārata* 12.72.3. Again, a satirical interpretation may be suggested. While the verse says that the mouse properly undertook its duty,

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[18] Additionally, there are a number of passages in the *Mahābhārata* in which the same King Janaka, or a king with the same name, has an interaction with a teacher that results in his attaining spiritual liberation, although the word *prasāda* itself is not used in such passages. The most famous of such episodes is the *Janakasulabhāsaṃvāda* (12.308), in which Janaka is visited by the wandering mendicant Pañcaśikha for just a few months. Another *mokṣa*-inducing encounter between King Janaka and Pañcaśikha is recorded in 211–212. Such passages indicate the emergence of an emphasis on the agency of the spiritual master who can help the king to attain spiritual liberation in a short period of time without recourse to renunciation. The promise of such an easy path to spiritual liberation comes under severe attack in *Janakasulabhāsaṃvāda* (see J. Fitzgerald, 'Nun befuddles king, shows karmayoga does not work: Sulabhā's refutation of King Janaka at MBh 12.308', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* XXX (2002), pp. 641–677), and it is possible that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* also mocks this trend.

[19] This reading must have seemed problematic to people transmitting the text since the majority of manuscripts disagree with it. Nevertheless, the reading adopted in the CE is the only one that finds support in both Northern and Southern recensions.

which was to release the king, it did nothing of the kind, instead becoming a minister of the king.

A very certain statement about the mouse becoming the cat's minister is found later in the story, when the hunter has departed and the mouse is safely back home:

> Please become a lord of my body and of my house. Become my teacher regarding all matters. Become my minister, oh wise one, teach me like a father. You have no danger from me, I swear by my life. In wisdom you are like Uśanas himself, whereas I have the strength. Joined with the power of your counsel (or spells: *mantra*) one would find only triumph.

> *īśvaro me bhavān astu śarīrasya gṛhasya ca*
> *arthānāṃ caiva sarveṣām anuśāstā ca me bhava*
> *amātyo me bhava prājña piteva hi praśādhi mām*
> *na te 'sti bhayam asmatto jīvitenātmanaḥ śape*
> *buddhyā tvam uśanāḥ sākṣād bale tv adhikṛtā vayam*
> *tvanmantrabalayukto hi vindeta jayam eva ha* (12.136.125–127)

Nowhere are the *varṇa* identities of the cat and the mouse as *kṣatriya* and brahmin made as clear as in this statement. The cat claims to have physical strength and ambitions of military conquest, while he compares the mouse to the legendary brahmin sage Uśanas as he invites the mouse to become his minister (*amātya*). Uśanas, however, was not an *amātya* but the *purohita* (chief adviser or chaplain) of the *asuras* (demons), a position normally reserved for brahmins. The reverential attitude of the cat towards the mouse, both in this passage and in verse 36, discussed above, is reminiscent of how a king should treat his *purohita* according to *Arthaśāstra* 1.9.10: '[The king] should regard [the *purohita*] like a student regards his master, like a son regards his father, like a servant regards his master (*tam ācāryaṃ śiṣyaḥ pitaraṃ putro bhṛtyaḥ svāminam iva cānuvarteta*).'[20]

As noted above, there are reasons to believe that the final part of the narrative was originally separate. Regardless of whether I am right about the original independence of the first part, the cat's speech discussed above shows that at some point in the redaction or transmission of this story, the cat and mouse were perceived as a king and a brahmin.

The four animals

There are four animal characters in the story—a mouse, a cat, a mongoose, and an owl. All four animals represent kings in the *nīti* version presented in the *Mahābhārata*. There are several indications that the four animals were originally intended to represent the four classes (*varṇas*) of the society.[21] The strongest evidence for identifying the mouse as a brahmin and the cat as a *kṣatriya* comes from the narrative itself and from their conversation, as discussed in the previous section. In this section I will discuss the names and the adjectives that describe the four animals in relation to the association of specific colours

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[20] R. P. Kangle (ed.), *The Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra*, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Bombay, 1969).

[21] Cf: 'Animals, divided as they are into distinct species, provide a wonderful canvas to paint the picture of a society divided into distinct groups. We see already in the Puruṣa Hymn of the *Ṛg Veda* (10.90) that the four social classes (*varṇa*) of ancient Indian society were viewed as originating from different bodily parts of the primordial person, much like the sun and the moon, and animals and birds. Such social classes are not contingent social formations but essentially different species': Olivelle, 'Talking animals', pp. 19–20. Despite writing this, Olivelle does not proceed to claim that the animals represent the *varṇas* in any given fable and moves on to discuss the nature-nurture debate as explored in some fables.

(*varṇas*) and traits with the four classes (*varṇas*) of the society. Some of the adjectives that describe the animals, however, seem to be purely physical descriptions of the species (for example, *tīkṣṇatuṇḍa*, 'having a sharp beak', for the owl in verse 32). If an allegorical or double (*śleṣa*) reading of such adjectives is possible, it escapes me, and I will therefore not discuss them.

The colours of the four classes are identified in *Mahābhārata* 12.181.5, which states:

The colour of brahmins is white, but the colour of *kṣatriyas* is red. The colour of *vaiśyas* is yellow, but the colour of *śūdras* is black.

brāhmaṇānāṃ sito varṇaḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ tu lohitaḥ
vaiśyānāṃ pītako varṇaḥ śūdrāṇām asitas tathā (12.181.5)

Animal fables in Indian literature (and beyond) normally illustrate a universal virtue or truth. The animals who act in such fables are associated with certain character traits, and the fables about such animals tell a universal truth about all people who have such characteristics. It is well known that '[f]requently it is the names of the participants in fables which carry the moral of the fable'.[22] This is true, for example, of the story that directly precedes the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* which tells how Procrastinator (*Dīrghasūtra*) perished, while Far-Sighted (*Dīrghadarśin*) escaped from danger (*Mahābhārata* 12.135). Generally, it appears that when fables need to talk about kings or brahmins in particular they introduce such human characters in the story itself, where they often act alongside animals. Alternatively, a character may be designated as the king of a certain species.

In this case, however, the names of the four animals do not denote virtues, vices, or other characteristics. This convention of the fable genre is probably broken because the story, in its *mokṣa* version, is more of an allegory than a regular fable. In the *mokṣa* reading the four animals do not represent character traits, but rather the four classes of the society.

The mouse

The name of the mouse is Palita. This would usually be translated as 'grey', but *palita* can also mean 'old'. Fitzgerald combines both meanings, here translating Palita as 'Old Gray'.[23] According to the colour scheme cited above, a brahmin would have to be white rather than grey. If we understand, however, that Palita refers to the hair colour of an old person, it no longer necessarily needs to mean 'grey'. Some people's hair turns white rather than grey when they become old. Thus, the Pali-English Dictionary (henceforth, PED[24]) suggests that the compound *palitakesa* ('one whose hair is *palita*') means 'with grey (that is, white) hair' (s.v. *palita*).[25]

Palita is first introduced as 'very wise' (*mahāprājña*) in verse 21. The Pali equivalent *mahāpañña* is usually applied to the Buddha himself or to his chief disciples, and, moreover, in repetitive passages it is often repeated after *paṇḍita* (learned), an adjective normally reserved for brahmins or *śramaṇa* teachers. Palita is later qualified by several similar adjectives that testify to his learning and wisdom, such as 'knowing the highest meaning' (*paramārthajña*) in verse 128 or 'knowing the essence of *dharma*'

[22] Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India*, p. 245.

[23] Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*.

[24] T. W. Rhys Davids et al., *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, reprint (Bristol, 2015).

[25] Perhaps an opposition between *palita* (as white) hair and black hair is suggested by juxtaposing these in *Gāndhārī Dharmapada* verses 182 and 184.

(*dharmatattvajña*) in verse 181. These would certainly be appropriate characteristics for a brahmin, although an objection could be made that such epithets are not exclusive to brahmins in the *Mahābhārata*.

The cat

I suggest that the cat represents a *kṣatriya* in the *mokṣa* reading of the story. He is the strongest of the four animals. Although this point is made explicit only in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* version,[26] it is presupposed by the *Mahābhārata* version as well since the owl and mongoose do not even contemplate an approach once the mouse is under the protection of the cat. The cat's name in the critically constituted text is Lomaśa ('Hairy'), which has no *kṣatriya* connotations that are obvious to me. When the cat is introduced in verse 22, manuscript T2 reads his name as Lohita ('Red'), which is the colour of the *kṣatriya*, as seen above. It must be noted, though, that a change from Lomaśa to Lohita seems unlikely, making the latter the *lectio difficillior*. Admittedly, the support of a single manuscript is very weak evidence for claiming that this must have been cat's original name. Yet it should be noted that a relatively small number of manuscripts were used to create the CE of any section of the *Mahābhārata*, and there is not enough data to dismiss this as an isolated scribal mistake or some other corruption. Unfortunately, only two Telugu (T) manuscripts were used by the editors, and it is therefore impossible to determine how frequent the reading 'Lomaśa' appears in the Telugu recension. Furthermore, T2 transmits many readings that it does not share with any of the other manuscripts used for the edition, so that one may wish to consider T2 as a witness to a separate recension altogether.[27]

The cat is further introduced as *pakṣisattvāvasādaka*, 'destroyer of winged creatures', in verse 22. Fitzgerald understands the word *sattva* in this compound differently and translates it as 'a nemesis of the birds'.[28] The entire Southern recension and D7, however, read *sarva* ('all') for *pakṣi* ('bird'). The resulting compound *sarvasattva* is commonly used in the sense of 'all beings'. I believe that *sarvasattva* is more likely to be the original reading and that the compound *sarvasattvāvasādaka*, 'he who lets down (or hurts) all beings', might have been used to mark the cat's identity as a *kṣatriya*.[29] A criticism of *kṣatriyas* as violent and unreliable is one of a variety of views on kings expressed in the *Mahābhārata* as well as early Buddhist literature. Notably, such a view is especially prevalent in fables and other narrative literature when describing interactions between a king and an ascetic or another wise person. One needs to look no further than the immediately following *Mahābhārata* episode, where it is observed that 'one should not trust *kṣatriyas* who hurt

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[26] 'Among them the mouse was prey to the three of them, but the other three were prey to the cat' (*mūṣako 'tra tribhirvadhyo mārjāreṇa trayo 'pare*; *Kathāsaritsāgara* 6.7.109; P. Durgāprasād and K. P. Parab (eds), *The Kathāsaritsāgara of Somadevabhatta*, 4th edn (Bombay, 1930)). This supports Fitzgerald's identification of *mārjāra* as a civet, because our *mārjāra* has to be an animal that can prey on a mongoose.

[27] The transmission of the names of the animals is messy. Palita is sometimes spelled as Phalita, and Lomaśa is sometimes spelled as Romaśa, and, surprisingly, these variations are often found within the same manuscript. It may be significant that T2 is one of the few manuscripts that sometimes calls the mouse Phalita and transmits the owl's name as Caṇḍaka, the latter to be discussed below. It is possible, but far from certain, that the tale might have been adapted from or influenced by a Middle Indic version, which read Phalita, usually Sanskritised as Palita, and Caṇḍaka, Sanskritised by most manuscripts as Candraka. If this is true, T2 is a very useful witness indeed.

[28] Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, p. 513.

[29] There is no a priori reason why the Northern reading should be preferred to the Southern reading. It is not difficult to imagine that *sarvasattva* would have seemed strange to the people transmitting the *Mahābhārata*. Without the (possible) allegorical context, a mere civet is hardly a threat to all beings (*sarvasattva*), and this could have been 'corrected' to the factually more appropriate *pakṣisattva*.

everyone' (*kṣatriyeṣu na viśvāsaḥ kāryaḥ sarvopaghātiṣu*; 12.137.14) and who 'are friendly (*saṃbhajanti*) as long as they need something but neglect [their friends] when their purpose has been accomplished' (*kāraṇe saṃbhajantīha kṛtārthāḥ saṃtyajanti ca*; 12.137.13). Another notable example from narrative literature is the speech of an ascetic to a king in *Mahābhārata* 12.83.23–36, which explains that it would be too dangerous for the ascetic to serve the king. For an example of a claim about the fundamentally violent and unreliable nature of the *kṣatriya* from the Buddhist literature, see *Cullahaṃsajātaka*, p. 345. Thus, there appears to be a convention in some fables and narratives in the *Mahābhārata* and Buddhist literature that kings are dangerous and not trustworthy. Therefore, *sarvasattvāvasādaka* would fit in well with a pattern of describing *kṣatriyas*.

In the context of this trend it may be significant that the compound *pakṣisattvāvasādaka*, (or the, in my opinion, preferable *sarvasattvāvasādaka*) ends in a causative of *ava+sad*. This is the opposite of *ud-hṛ*.[30] Forms based on *ud-hṛ* are commonly used to talk about help and saving in fable literature, including the *Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa*, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and the *jātakas*. Thus Palita also says to Lohita: 'I will save you' (*ahaṃ tvām uddhariṣyāmi*; 12.136.49). Probably here *avasādaka* is intended more specifically to indicate the ungrateful and unpredictable nature of the cat, which in turn could suggest that the cat is a *kṣatriya* in line with the stereotypes discussed in the previous paragraph.

The mongoose

The name of the mongoose is Harita ('Yellow'), which suggests a *vaiśya* identity, according to the colour scheme given above.

The owl

If the four animals indeed represent the four *varṇas*, the owl must stand for a *śūdra*. His name in the CE text, however, looks more noble than that. He is called Candraka, 'Moon'. This would be an appropriate name for a flying nocturnal predator. Several manuscripts from both Southern and Northern recensions read his name as 'Caṇḍaka' in verse 32 where it first appears (K1,2,4 D1 T2 G1). Moreover, Caṇḍaka, rather than Candraka, seems to be behind the unique reading Daṇḍaka found in Ś1. It may be noted that almost always such agreement between the main Kashmirian/Śāradā manuscripts and even a few Southern manuscripts are taken as sufficient for accepting the reading in the reconstituted text. Moreover, Caṇḍaka is a *lectio difficilior*. This word is not recorded in the major Sanskrit dictionaries (those of Monier Williams[31] and Böhtlingk and Roth[32]), but is recorded by PED as having the same meaning as *caṇḍa* which in turn means 'violent, fierce, angry' in both Sanskrit and Pali.

In verse 73 the owl is described as *kṣudra* ('vile, lowly'). This sounds somewhat like *śūdra*,[33] but I am not the only one to make a connection between the two words. The

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[30] See, for example, *Bhagavadgītā* 6.5: *uddhared ātmanātmānaṃ nātmānam avasādayet...*

[31] M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Oxford, 1899).

[32] O. Böhtlingk and R. Roth, *Sanskrit Wörterbuch*, 7 vols (St Petersburg, 1855–1875).

[33] I am not the first to suggest that the names of the characters of some fables might indicate their *varṇa* identity. When analysing the eleventh story of the first *tantra* of the *Pañcatantra*, which talks about the jackal Caṇḍarava, McComas Taylor observes: 'In my mind, at least, *caṇḍa* conjures up another word to which it may be related, *caṇḍāla*' (McComas Taylor, *The Fall of the Indigo Jackal: The Discourse of Division in Pūrṇabhadra's Pañcatantra* (Albany, 2007)). Taylor's social interpretation of this and other episodes of the *Pañcatantra* has been criticised in a review article by Philip Maas, 'On discourses of dharma and the Pañcatantra', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* LV (2014), pp. 5–31, but, as far I can see, none of Maas's critical points would

nirukta ('folk etymology') analysis of the Pali word *sudda* (= Sanskrit *śūdra*) in the *Aggaññasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* states: 'Their conduct is fierce/greedy (*ludda* = Sanskrit *rudra/raudra/lubdha*), their conduct is vile (*khudda* = Sanskrit *kṣudra*), [therefore], oh Vāseṭṭha, they came to be called *suddas*' ('*Luddācārā khuddācārā ti' kho Vāseṭṭha Suddā, Suddā tv eva akkharaṃ upanibbattaṃ*; *Dīghanikāya* 27.26[34]). Moreover, the other purported characteristic of the original *śūdras*, namely being 'fierce' (*rudra/raudra*), is a synonym of Caṇḍaka, which I believe to be the original name of the owl. Most likely both *lubdha* and *rudra/raudra* were intended to be covered by the Pali word *ludda*.

Perhaps such word play between *kṣudra* and *śūdra* requires a Middle Indic antecedent of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* to really work. A similar antecedent is suggested by the variations of the owl's name. It would be most elegant if the owl's name was originally Prakrit Caṃdaka, which corresponds at the same time to Sanskrit Candraka and Caṇḍaka. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, the variants of the mouse's name, Palita/Phalita, could also be explained as a remnant of a Middle Indic spelling, Phalita. Finally, the story contains what appears to be an accusative absolute construction *prabhātāṃ śarvarīm* in verse 24: 'Having gone home [the hunter] sleeps happily and goes [back to the trap] when the night becomes light [that is, in the morning]' (*gṛhaṃ gatvā sukhaṃ śete prabhātām eti śarvarīm*). Such a construction has been attested in some forms of Middle Indic, including Pali,[35] but it is not even mentioned in the grammars of Sanskrit[36] or epic Sanskrit.[37] All of this suggests that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* might ultimately be derived from a Middle Indic version, although the evidence is far from conclusive.

While the *Śāntiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* usually emphasises the servile nature of the *śūdras* rather than suggesting that they are inherently wicked, one also finds verses that link *śūdras* with bad qualities that are generally in line with those attributed to them in the *Aggaññasutta*:

> Those brahmins who delight in violence and falsehood, who are greedy (*lubdha*), who subsist by any trade, who are black and who have fallen from purity, have become *śūdras*.

> *hiṃsānṛtapriyā lubdhāḥ sarvakarmopajīvinaḥ*
> *kṛṣṇāḥ śaucaparibhraṣṭās te dvijāḥ śūdratāṃ gatāḥ* (12.181.13)

Another epithet applied to the owl is 'moving at night' (*kṣapācara*; 12.136.32). This further suggests a low class identity; perhaps the night is expected to evoke the black colour, which is the colour of *śūdras* in the colour scheme quoted above.

While some of the arguments advanced in this section are problematic, especially in so far as they rely on variant readings of the manuscript from different recensions, taken together they provide a strong case for identifying the four animals of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* with the four classes of society. A soteriological reading of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* does not necessarily require that this identification is correct. Perhaps only the mouse (teacher) and

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be relevant for the present analysis of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. Of course, the name Caṇḍaka also 'conjures up' the word *caṇḍāla*, and it is possible that the owl represents the lowest strata of the society more broadly, covering both *śūdra* and *caṇḍāla*.

[34] T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (eds), *The Dīgha-Nikāya* (London, 1890–1911).

[35] See, for example, K. R. Norman, 'Aśoka and capital punishment: notes on a portion of Aśoka's fourth pillar edict, with an appendix on the accusative absolute construction', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 107.1 (1975), pp. 16–24.

[36] For example, W. D. Whitney, *A Sanskrit Grammar: Including both the Classical Language, and the Older Dialects, of Veda and Brahmana*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1889).

[37] T. Oberlies, *A Grammar of Epic Sanskrit* (Berlin, 2003).

the cat (student) are significant for the allegory, although it would be more elegant if the other two animals also had a meaningful role to play.

The hunter

The description of the hunter

After discussing the identities of the four animals and some features of the story that invite a soteriological interpretation, we now return to the last remaining character of the story—the hunter.

The hunter appears at the beginning of the story to set a trap, into which the cat falls, and returns to it in the morning to find that the cat has just escaped. The hunter has no obvious allegorical meaning in the *nīti* version of the story. His possible identity for the *mokṣa* version is indicated by his name, description, and activity. I will suggest that the hunter represents death and spiritual bondage.

This is how the hunter is described:

> In the morning the hunter (*caṇḍāla*) called 'Obstacle' (Parigha) appeared with a weapon in hand. He was ugly, blackish yellow (or black and yellow: *kṛṣṇapiṅgala*), *bald*,[38] *grey*, filthy, and of terrible sight. He had large buttocks, pointy ears, a large mouth, and he was surrounded by a group of dogs.

> *tataḥ prabhātasamaye vikṛtaḥ kṛṣṇapiṅgalaḥ*
> *sthūlasphig vikaco rūkṣaḥ śvacakraparivāritaḥ*
> *śaṅkukarṇo mahāvaktraḥ palito ghoradarśanaḥ*
> *parigho nāma caṇḍālaḥ śastrapāṇir adṛśyata* (12.136.9–10)

The following verse further specifies that the hunter 'looked like a messenger of the [death god] Yama' (*yamadūtābha*; 12.136.11).

This description is not of an ordinary hunter but of a supernatural being, such as a *yakṣa* or *rākṣasa* ('demon'), and many of his visual features are reminiscent of the descriptions of other frightening characters. Several of his epithets bring to mind the descriptions of Ghaṭotkaca, the son of the hero Bhīma, and the *rākṣasa* ('demon') woman Hiḍimbā. Ghaṭotkaca is also described as *mahāvaktra*, 'having a large mouth', and *śaṅkukarṇa*, 'with pointy ears', in *Mahābhārata* 1.143.28 and as *vikaca* later in the same passage in 1.143.33.

Some of his epithets are elsewhere applied to more terrible characters. The Rod of Punishment (*daṇḍa*), also personified, is described as *śaṅkukarṇa* in 12.121.14. The colour 'dark-yellow' or colour combination 'black and yellow' (*kṛṣṇapiṅgala*) is also associated

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[38] Describing the hunter as both *vikaca* and *palita* may be problematic. Fitzgerald takes *palita* to refer to the hunter's beard, thus avoiding the contradiction of saying that he is both bald and grey-haired (Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*). Alternatively, *vikaca* could be translated differently as it also means 'blossoming', as noted by Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* and indicated by *Amarakośa* 2.4.7 which lists *vikaca* among other words meaning 'blossoming': *praphullotphullasamphullavyākośavikacasphuṭāḥ* (C. S. Thatte (ed.), *Amarakośa with the Commentary of Maheśvara* (Bombay, 1882)). *Sphuṭita*, a causative version of the last member of this list, appears in the description of the hunter in the *Pañcatantra* parallel to this episode. There the hunter is described as *sphuṭitakaracaraṇa* ('whose legs and arms are *sphuṭita*'), which gives one some reason to believe that *vikaca* here also might be intended to describe the limbs of the hunter. While *sphuṭita*/*sphuṭa* and their synonyms usually have a positive connotation, here the compound *sphuṭitakaracaraṇa* must contribute to the description of the hunter as ugly and terrible, and *sphuṭita* thus probably means something like 'swollen' or 'out of proportion'. It should be noted that very few manuscripts read *vikaca* in the first place; the entire Southern recension reads *vinata*, 'bent'. Similarly, very few manuscripts read *palita*; many Northern manuscripts read *malina*, 'dirty, soiled', whereas the Southern recension reads *khanitrī*, 'carrying a spade or hoe'.

with a number of inauspicious or terrible personifications of cosmic forces. It appears in the description of the goddess Brahmahā ('brahmin-slayer') in *Mahābhārata* 12.273.11 and characterises the eyes of Rudra in 12.160.47. The same *kṛṣṇapiṅgala*, alongside *vikaca*, describes Time (*kāla*), personified in *Mahābhārata* 16.3.2. Colours are important in descriptions of Yama as well. In 3.281.8–9 he is said to be 'pure black' (*śyāmāvadāta*), 'wear yellow clothing' (*pītavāsasa*), and 'have red eyes' (*raktākṣa*). In later literature Yama's messengers are also said to be *kṛṣṇapiṅgala* (e.g. *Garuda Purāṇa* 2.18.22[39]).

Although the story itself says that the hunter looks like a messenger of Yama, some of his features can be associated with Yama himself. These are the weapon (*śastra*) he carries, the dogs that accompany him, and the already mentioned 'noose' (*pāśa*). The highly ominous figure of Kali, who represents an unlucky throw of the dice, and *Kaliyuga*, the most miserable of the world ages, is also described as surrounded by dogs (*śvabhiḥ parivṛtaḥ*) in the additional passage number 9, found in some manuscripts after *Mahābhārata* 3.55.1.

Thus, the hunter shares epithets with minor demons (*yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*) as well as some of the most ominous forces mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, such as Brahmahā, Kali, Daṇḍa, Rudra, and Yama himself. There is little doubt that he represents such forces, especially the force of death, and the story explicitly links him with Yama.[40] This aspect of the hunter's personality is not employed in the *nīti* version of the story in any way, and I propose that it is a remnant of the *mokṣa* version of the same story.

There is one more odd detail of the story which further supports the identification of the hunter with death. It is said that 'the cat was bound in the trap although he was careful' (*mārjāras tv apramatto 'py abadhyata*; 12.136.25). A typical feature of the *pāśa* of Yama and Māra is precisely that it cannot be escaped under normal circumstances.[41]

Death is personified in Ancient Indian literature not only as Yama, but also as the Buddhist Māra. Several studies have discussed the continuity between these figures as well as their differences.[42] A common feature of relevance here is that both Māra and Yama bind people with a noose (*pāśa*[43]), which is the term used throughout the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* to refer to the device in which the cat is caught (verses 37; 55; 73; 83; 84; 86; 91).

While both Yama and Māra bind their 'victims' with a noose (*pāśa*), only Māra's noose is usually equated with desire and spiritual bondage. Given that a number of features of

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[39] Bombay: Venkatesvara Steam Press edition as provided on http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/3_purana/garup1_u.htm (accessed 20 December 2022).

[40] Such ominous connotations are elucidated most clearly in Pūrṇabhadra's version of the *Pañcatantra*, which also describes a terrible hunter followed by dogs in the frame story of the second *tantra*. This has already been noted as being related to the present tale and reads: *dvitīyam iva kālam, pāśahastam, hṛdayam ivādharmasya, avatāram iva pāpasya, upadeṣṭāram iva sarvapātakānām, suhṛdam iva mṛtyor, vṛkṣābhyāśam āgataṃ vyādham ekam apaśyat*—'He saw a hunter come near the tree. The hunter was like a second Kāla ("Time"), noose in hand, like the essence of *adharma*, like evil incarnate, like the teacher of all sins, like a friend of death' (Sanskrit text as given in the critical apparatus of F. Edgerton, *The Panchatantra Reconstructed: An Attempt to Establish the Lost Original Sanskrit Text of the Most Famous of Indian Story-collections on the Basis of the Principal Extant Versions*, 2 vols (New Haven, 1924), p. 182). Despite such an impressive introduction, the hunter plays a very small part in the *Pañcatantra* story, which does not lend itself to the kind of soteriological reading that is proposed here for the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*.

[41] This phrase should be compared with verse 23 of *Cullahaṃsajātaka*: 'When a man is overcome and his life is about to end, he notices neither nets nor snares when he approaches them' (*yadā parābhavo hoti poso jīvitasaṃkhaye/ atha jālañ ca pāsañ ca āsajjāpi na bujjhati//*). In this *jātaka* the king of geese is caught in a trap laid by a fowler compared with death. The snare (*pāsa*), which is so difficult to notice, is clearly that of death.

[42] For example, J. W. Boyd, *Satan and Māra: Christian and Buddhist Symbols of Evil* (Leiden, 1975); M. Nichols, 'Dialogues with death: Māra, Yama, and coming to terms with mortality in classical Hindu and Indian Buddhist traditions', *Religions of South Asia* VI (2012), pp. 13–32.

[43] *Pāśa* is also an attribute of other destructive deities with a similar function, as noted in L. Thomas, 'The identity of the destroyer in the Mahābhārata', *Numen* XLI (1994), pp. 255–272.

the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* invite a soteriological interpretation, I believe it would be more appropriate to understand the hunter as representative of Māra rather than Yama. Perhaps the hunter fuses aspects of both figures, as will be discussed below. Māra's noose is often used in Buddhist ascetic poetry, where it is usually equated with desire, which is at the root of spiritual bondage. Attributing the functions usually associated with the Buddhist Māra to the hunter, it becomes possible to meaningfully account for the bait and the trap he sets as well as for the subsequent escape from that trap.

On āmiṣa

The hunter of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* uses bait (*āmiṣa*) to attract animals to the trap. As noted by Boyd, it is typical of Māra to use *āmiṣa* as bait.[44] Indeed, the word *āmiṣa*, besides meaning 'bait', has strong connotations of the ascetic traditions of Ancient India, and I suggest that this word should be understood in both its ordinary and ascetic senses here.

Āmiṣa, which also means 'flesh' or any object of enjoyment, is often mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, Buddhist, and Jaina texts as a fundamental driving force behind *saṃsāra*. In this usage, the term *āmiṣa* plays a similar role to terms like *kāma, tṛṣṇā, sneha,* and so on, and should perhaps be translated as 'desire'. In the same textual sources, the adjective *nirāmiṣa* (without *āmiṣa*) is used to describe sages or the mental states of sages who have overcome worldly enjoyments. The PED meaning for *nirāmiṣa* is 'having no meat or prey; free from sensual desires, disinterested, not material'.

Hunter's name

The hunter's name Parigha, 'Obstacle', would be fitting for Māra, since one of Māra's key activities is 'to set up obstacles (*āvaraṇa*) and bring about interruption (*antarāyam upasaṃharati*)'.[45] Fitzgerald translates the hunter's name as 'Cross-bar',[46] which is the standard meaning of the word *parigha* in the *Mahābhārata*. The figurative meaning of the Pali equivalent *paligha* as 'obstacle', however, is only recorded by the PED, whereas the Sanskrit dictionary of Monier-Williams notes the figurative meaning for *parigha* as 'obstacle', beginning with the *Raghuvaṃśa* (*circa* fifth century CE).

Escaping death

Both Brahmanical and Buddhist literatures present narratives about escape from Yama and Māra respectively. Nichols has helpfully discussed such stories from the Brahmanical tradition, comparing them with Buddhist understandings of Māra.[47]

There are a number of stories in Indian literature that depict escape from death personified. The most famous of these stories is the Sāvitrī story in the *Mahābhārata*. A similar motive is also explored in the Buddhist *jātakas*—the *Cullahaṃsajātaka* of the Pali tradition (no. 533) and the *Mṛgarājajātaka*[48] of the *Mahāvastu*.[49] It is not possible to provide a detailed comparison of the stories, interesting as that may be. In each of them a character caught with the noose of Yama (in the *Mahābhārata*) or a hunter (in the *jātaka* versions) is saved when another character displays exceptional love or devotion, as well as mastery of

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[44] Boyd, *Satan and Māra*, p. 95.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[46] Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*.

[47] Nichols, 'Dialogues with death'.

[48] To be more precise, it is called '*śiriprabhasya mṛgarājasya jātakaṃ*'.

[49] E. Senart, *Le Mahāvastu, texte sanscrit publié pour la première fois et accompagné d'introductions et d'un commentaire*, 3 vols (Paris, 1882–1897).

dharma, greatly impressing Yama or the hunter, which results in the character being released. The primary message of these stories does not appear to be soteriological, not even in the Buddhist versions. The obvious virtue illustrated by the Sāvitrī story is her being *pativratā*, 'devoted to her husband'. The same applies to the *Mahāvastu* version, whereas in the *Cullahaṃsajātaka* version *bhakti*, 'devotion', is displayed by a general towards his king. Additionally, the focus of the stories is on the remarkable understanding of *dharma* on the part of the saviour characters.

In addition to these, there are stories in which escape from Yama is attained through the grace of Viṣṇu or Śiva. Nichols notes two such episodes in *Purāṇic* literature.[50] I would add that there is also one episode in the *Mahābhārata* in which a dead son is brought back to life through the grace (*prasāda*) of Śiva (12.149.114). It is doubtful whether escape from death in the *Purāṇic* accounts related by Nichols should be understood as escape from *saṃsāra*—almost certainly it should not be so understood in the *Mahābhārata* episode. The characters of these stories return to life but not as spiritually liberated sages. The dead son in *Mahābhārata* 12.149 does not obtain a permanent state of immortality, but a full lifespan of a hundred years (12.149.109). Such stories illustrate the power of *bhakti*, devotion to a deity, and the miraculous power of Viṣṇu or Śiva.

Although neither of the stories so far mentioned in this section seems to imply that escape from death means escape from *saṃsāra*, it would be natural to identify the two. One of the epithets of the highest reality (*brahman*) in the *Mahābhārata* is 'the immortal' (*amṛta*) or the immortal state/place (*amṛta pada*) (for example, 12.199.32, 12.208.26; 12.209.19). The same epithet, *amṛta pada*, is also found in the Buddhist tradition, which uses the term *amṛta* to refer to the state in which there is no longer birth and death, namely, *nirvāṇa*.

There is, however, one well-known passage in Brahmanical literature which links Yama to aspirations for immortality, understood as spiritual liberation. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* a brahmin youth Naciketas entertains a dialogue with Yama, during which Yama tells Naciketas how to reach complete peace (*śāntim atyantam eti*), crossing over both birth and death (*tarati janmamṛtyū*; 1.17[51]). As noted by Nichols, elements of this *Upaniṣad* can be interpreted as 'reinforcing orthodox sacrificial practices, while incorporating philosophical notions about transmigration advanced by renouncer groups',[52] and the portrayal of Yama in this text incorporates standard Brahmanical tropes with features of the Buddhist Māra. Of particular interest is Nichols' observation that in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* Yama undertakes a typical activity of Māra when he attempts to tempt Naciketas with worldly goods such as wealth, power, and beautiful girls.[53]

The example of *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* demonstrates that the opposition between Brahmanical Yama and Buddhist Māra is not always clear-cut in Ancient Indian literature. I believe that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* offers a similar fusion of typical aspects of the two deities.[54]

Māra and saviour animals in Buddhist *jātakas*

The earlier '*mokṣa*' version of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, which is proposed in this article, requires, among other things, that the hunter represents the agency of Māra and that an

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[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

[51] P. Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford, 1998).

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[54] That such a combination of elements of Brahmanical and Buddhist literatures can be found in the works of a single author is perhaps most vividly exemplified by the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghoṣa, which, despite being a 'Buddhist text', makes many references to Brahmanical narratives, primarily from the *Mahābhārata*, and is partly addressed to Brahmanical debates about *dharma*, as noted in A. Hiltebeitel, 'Aśvaghoṣa's Buddhacarita: the first known close and critical reading of the Brahmanical Sanskrit epics', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* XXXIV (2006), pp 229–286 and in P. Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha* (New York, 2008).

escape from his *pāśa* represents spiritual liberation. Some evidence in support of such an interpretation of the story has already been provided. The likelihood of the existence of such a *mokṣa* version of the story is increased by the existence of similar Buddhist narratives that depict an escape from a hunter or a fowler who is traditionally identified as Māra.

If one looks at the Pali *jātakas*, there is little evidence to support a hypothesis that the early Buddhist communities would have understood the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* or similar narratives as soteriological allegories. I have already mentioned, for example, the *Cullahaṃsajātaka* which, despite resembling the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* in several ways, is not given a soteriological interpretation by the tradition.

This section will provide an overview of the Buddhist *jātakas* that involve animals and escape. While not all of these *jātakas* merit a soteriological interpretation or are given such a reading by the tradition, I will note that some *jātakas* found in the *Mahāvastu* reinforce my reading of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*.

The Buddhist *jātaka* collections include a number of stories where one animal saves another animal or human. When encountering such a motive in a Buddhist text, the possibility of interpreting it in a soteriological way naturally presents itself, especially if a character is saved from something that is frequently likened to *saṃsāra* in ascetic literature, such as a trap made from *pāśa*, as in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, or, for example, a violent river, as in the *Rurujātaka* (no. 482). On the other hand, helping others is basic to human life, and stories about helping or saving others provide a good basis for talking about virtues and vices generally.

The role of animals in early Buddhist literature has been explored in a monograph by Reiko Ohnuma.[55] Helpfully, this book also includes a chapter on 'Animal Saviours', which deals with stories that are comparable to the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*.

One of the key trends discovered by Ohnuma is that in a number of *jātaka* stories a human or an animal saved by another animal displays ingratitude towards its saviour.[56] The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* is an interesting answer to this trend, since in the second part of the story the mouse is suspicious of the cat and refuses to become his minister after the cat is saved and the predators are gone. The final part of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* reflects the same discourse, using some key vocabulary that often appears in these stories, such as *kṛtajña* 'recognising a favour, grateful' and *ud-hṛ* 'to save'. It contrasts with the Buddhist *jātakas*, since the cat is not even given a chance to display his ingratitude to the cautious mouse.

Another key finding of Ohnuma is that several

> *jātakas* also [in addition to the *Nigrodhamigajātaka*] involve a saviour animal who converts the king through his exaggerated virtue and then uses this leverage to win the safety of all other animals—including the deer of the *Nandiyamiga Jātaka* (No. 385), the deer of the *Ruru Jātaka* (No. 482), the crow of the *Supatta Jātaka* (No. 292), the crow of the *Kāka Jātaka* (No. 140), and the dog of the *Kukkara Jātaka* (No. 22).[57]

The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* appears to be in conversation with this trend as well, as long as it is accepted that the cat is identified with a potentially dangerous king. In the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, however, there is no 'conversion' of the king, or winning the

[55] R. Ohnuma, *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* (Oxford, 2017).

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

safety of others. The mouse manages to keep him in check by making cat's release dependent on the mouse's help.

It seems quite clear that both types of 'animal saviour' *jātaka* identified by Ohnuma are primarily concerned with topics other than spiritual liberation. There are, nevertheless, some *jātaka* stories that involve a saviour animal, but do not present any aftermath to the escape and therefore do not conform to either of the narrative themes identified by Ohnuma. It would be worth exploring whether such stories can be interpreted in a soteriological way and whether they have been given such an interpretation by Buddhist tradition(s). Within the Pali *jātaka* collection, such a story is, for example, the *Mitacintijātaka* (no. 114) and the *Kakkarajātaka* (no. 209), which finds a counterpart in the *Śakuntakajātaka* number 2 of the *Mahāvastu*. The Pali tradition offers no soteriological interpretation to such *jātakas*. Moreover, Māra plays virtually no role in the entire Pali *jātaka* collection, being identified with a character in just one among 547 stories. When a mean or harmful character appears in a Pali *jātaka*, he is usually identified as a previous incarnation of Buddha's unfaithful disciple Devadatta.[58] In other words, the Pali *jātaka* collection offers little support for the interpretation of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* that I am proposing.

The situation is reversed, however, in the *Mahāvastu*. There Devadatta appears in just one story, while Māra is identified with the villain in all the others. The *Mahāvastu* contains a sequence of *jātakas* which illustrate how Māra unsuccessfully tried to overcome the *bodhisattva* in his previous lives when the latter was born in animal form. These are the *Śakuntaka jātakas* number 1 and 2, *Kacchapajātaka*, and *Markaṭajātaka*.[59] There are three other stories in the *Mahāvastu* that relate how the bodhisattva overcame Māra as an animal in a previous life. These are the *Vṛṣabhajātaka*, and *Vānara jātakas* numbers 1 and 2. Some of these *jātakas* are also found in the Pali tradition, where they are usually linked with Devadatta rather than Māra.

While all of these *jātakas* depict an escape from danger presented by Māra, both *Śakuntaka jātakas* in particular should be compared to the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* because in these two *jātakas* Māra is a fowler who catches his victims with a *pāśa*.

The villain of the *Śakuntakajātaka* 1 is a fowler (*śākuntika*) who catches birds with snares (*jāla*) and traps (*pāśa*), feeds them until they are fat, and then sells them for slaughter. The Buddha, who narrates the story, identifies the fowler with Māra. The bodhisattva himself is a bird called Paṇḍitajātiko who is caught by the fowler but observes what becomes of other birds and begins fasting. This makes him undesirable to potential buyers and eventually he is allowed to escape back to the forest.

This story employs the double meaning of the word *mokṣa*, just as the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* does. In the introduction the Buddha makes a statement about *mokṣa* as spiritual liberation in relation to the time he spent in the 'forest of austerities' (*tapovana*), practising physical asceticism before discovering the uniquely Buddhist *dharma*:[60] 'It was not just at that time that I practiced austerities for the sake of liberation

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[58] Devadatta's appearances as an animal in Pali *jātakas* have been analysed in N. Appleton, 'What does it mean to be a badly behaved animal? An answer from the Devadatta stories of the Pāli Jātakas', *Religions* X (2019), pp. 288ff.

[59] Notably, the same sequence of stories also includes the *Mṛgarājajātaka*, which I have already mentioned because of its similarity to the *Sāvitrī* story. In the *Mṛgarājajātaka* a hunter, although described as a terrible human-hunter, is not identified with Māra, but with Buddha's disciple Ānanda. Ultimately, the hunter appears in a positive light since he is impressed and 'converted' by the deer queen's display of *dharma*.

[60] This episode of the bodhisattva's career is commonly included in canonical and post-canonical biographies of the Buddha. A notable detail about *Mahāvastu's* version is that life in the *tapovana* itself is given soteriological significance. The Buddha is said to have practised such 'difficulties' (*duṣkaracaryā*) in his desire for *mokṣa*. While Pali sources deny the value of such mortification, the *Mahāvastu* claims that physical asceticism is instrumental

(*mokṣa*)' (*na bhikṣavo etarhi eva maye mokṣābhiprāyeṇa duṣkaraṃ cīrṇaṃ*; 2.241). In the conclusion he says: 'At that time also I carried out austerities for the sake of escape (*mokṣa*) from the cage of that same Māra, who was the fowler' (*tadāpi mayā etasya mārasya śākuntikasya paṃjarāto mokṣābhiprāyeṇa duṣkaraṃ cīrṇaṃ*; 2.243).

In the second *Śakuntakajātaka* of the *Mahāvastu* Māra is again a fowler and the bodhisattva is again a bird, but this time he is a leader of a pack of birds. The bodhisattva escapes the fowler and saves his flight of birds by recognising the fowler's disguise as a tree.

Thus, there are two episodes in the *Mahāvastu* in which escaping from a *pāśa* set by a fowler is identified with overcoming Māra, and in the second of them, other beings are saved from *pāśa* as well. This demonstrates that at least some Buddhist communities employed the possible allegorical meaning of stories about escape from hunters. Such stories employ vocabulary that is used in Buddhist ascetic poetry to talk about the activity of Māra, bondage, and escape from *saṃsāra*. The presence of such stories in a Buddhist tradition increases the likelihood that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, too, was originally understood in a soteriological context.

I do not believe that these stories about escape were necessarily composed with a soteriological meaning in mind, although some might have been. Most of the stories mentioned above, including the *Śakuntaka* stories, extol wisdom or cleverness, termed variously as *cintā*, *buddhi*, *kuśalatā*, or *prajñā*. The name of the bodhisattva in the *Śakuntaka* stories is Paṇḍitajātiko, 'Wise by Nature'. It seems quite certain that some, if not all, of these stories were composed to illustrate the virtue of wisdom, most probably in a secular context. Different Buddhist communities used these stories for their own purposes. While the Pali tradition prefers to dwell on the Devadatta as the villain (where one appears), the *Mahāvastu*, associated with the Mahāsāṃghikas, prefers to identify the villain with Māra, giving such stories a soteriological edge.

It is difficult to say how such stories were understood when they first became a part of Buddhist literature and whether there was even a single main interpretation. The emphasis on Devadatta in the Pali tradition strikes me as odd, while the identification of at least the fowlers with Māra seems more natural. We have already seen that identifying hunters with death is a trend in Indian narrative literature, and their use of bait and snares (*pāśa*) further suggests a link with Māra.

The *Kakkarajātaka* of the Pali canon and the *Śakuntakajātaka* no. 2 of the *Mahāvastu*

It may be worth briefly looking at the *Kakkarajātaka* (no. 209) which is the Pali counterpart of the second *Śakuntakajātaka* of the *Mahāvastu*. The verse element of both *jātakas* is related, although it is not identical, while the surrounding narrative is somewhat different. Both stories describe how a bird recognises a fowler disguised as a tree and thereby escapes from him.

Although a soteriological interpretation of this story is possible and given to the *Mahāvastu* version, as discussed above, no such explanation is offered by the Pali tradition. While in the *Mahāvastu* the context for relating the group of Māra stories was Māra's attempts to tempt the ascetic bodhisattva, in the Pali canon the *Kakkarajātaka* is told in relation to a monk who knows what food is good for him.

Following the trend noted above, the fowler (*sakuṇaluddaka*) is identified as Devadatta. Surprisingly, the bodhisattva is not identified as the bird who escapes the fowler, but as a

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in enhancing meditative practices or mental transformation: 'As the flesh decreases, the mind gains further tranquillity. Mindfulness, effort and concentration also become more stable' (*mānsehi kṣīyamāṇehi bhūyo cittaṃ prasīdati / bhūyo smṛti ca vīryaṃ ca samādhi cāvatiṣṭhati //* (2.239).

tree-dwelling spirit (*yakṣa*) who does nothing whatsoever but simply observes the scene. Such inactivity on the part of the bodhisattva does not allow the reader to learn about the virtues of the bodhisattva himself and, moreover, it disturbs the characteristic Devadatta-bodhisattva antagonism.

   The *jātaka* only has two verses. The second verse makes it clear that the story was originally primarily about the bird and the hunter, and its imagery invites a soteriological interpretation. That the verse does not exactly match the narrative is something that cannot be explained at the moment.

   This old skilful partridge has come having broken the net of horse-tail snares (*vālapāsa*). He departs and speaks.

   purāṇakakkaro ayaṃ bhetvā pañjaram āgato,
   kusalo vālapāsānaṃ apakkamati bhāsatīti

It hardly needs stating that breaking the net or cage (*pañjara*) suggests spiritual liberation, but just to be sure, we note that the same phrase appears in *Buddhavamsa* 23.2:

   Having stopped all existence, having reached the perfection of practice, like a lion having broken a cage, he obtained unsurpassed awakening.

   ugghāṭetvā sabbabhavaṃ cariyāpāramiṅ gato
   sīho va pañjaraṃ bhetvā patto sambodhim uttamaṃ[61]

The second verse of the *Kakkarajātaka* is also worth quoting, because it contains possible parallels with the description of the hunter in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. Here is what the bird says, apparently addressing the fowler disguised as a tree:

   I have seen assakanna and vibhitaka trees in the forest, but they are not capable to do as you, tree, are.

   diṭṭhā mayā vane rukkhā assakaṇṇavibhīṭakā,
   na tāni evaṃ sakkanti yathā tvaṃ rukkha sakkasīti

What I have just provided is a conventional translation of the verse. After reading the description of the hunter in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, a different reading of the verse can be made, according to which the bird recognises the fowler to be a demonic character, not unlike the Parigha of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. The word *rukkha* could correspond not only to Sanskrit *vṛkṣa* ('tree'), but also to Sanskrit *rūkṣa* ('dirty, unpleasant'), which is one of the adjectives describing the hunter in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. Moreover, the choice of the species of trees that are named does not seem arbitrary. The first part of *assakaṇṇa* (Sanskrit *aśvakarṇa*, 'horse-ears') could also be related to Sanskrit *aśri*, 'sharp'. In that case *assakaṇṇa* would be a synonym of *śaṅkukarṇa* ('pointy-eared'), which also describes Parigha. The name of the second tree, *vibhīṭaka* (Sanskrit *vibhītaka*), means 'frightening', which is also in line with the description of Parigha.[62]

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[61] I have departed slightly from the way this verse is printed in the Pali Text Society's edition: *Ugghāṭetvā sabbabhavaṃ cariyā-pāramigato/ sīho va pañjaraṃ bhetvā patto sambodhim-uttamaṃ//*. N. A. Jayawickrama (ed.), *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpiṭaka* (London, 1974).

[62] These puns are lost in the *Mahāvastu* version of the same verse, which simply reads *vṛkṣa* ('tree'), and lists other species of trees.

If both *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* and *Kakkarajātaka* refer to a stereotypical description of a supernatural hunter/fowler, in the context of escaping from the *pāśa* of the hunter, there is some reason to suppose that both episodes might be related, albeit distantly. Moreover, both of them delight in puns and playful language.

One gets the impression that the Pali tradition deliberately avoids a soteriological interpretation of these *jātaka* verses. It is not difficult to imagine the reasons for this. The *jātakas* tell us about the lives of the Buddha before he became a *buddha*, and therefore it would be inappropriate for a *jātaka* story to illustrate how the Buddha escaped Māra in the past. This appears not to have been a problem for the communities that transmitted the *Mahāvastu*. There are reasons to believe that the shared ancestor of the Pali *Kakkarajātaka* and the second *Śakuntakajātaka* of the *Mahāvastu* did address the topic of spiritual liberation. Such an interpretation is invited by the verse material and remains explicit in the *Mahāvastu* version.

This hypothesis is supported by the observation that there is no hesitation in identifying a hunter with Māra in the *Makkaṭasutta* of the *Saṃyuttanikāya*,[63] which relates a tale about a hunter who sets bait and manages to catch some monkeys, while others escape. The monkeys who manage to escape Māra's bait are identified with monks who practise mindfulness and do not engage with the sensual realm, thus not giving Māra an opportunity. Furthermore, the example of the *Makkaṭasutta* demonstrates that the possibility of identifying a hunter in an escape story with Māra seemed natural to the Pali tradition as well, as long as the story is not labelled as a *jātaka*.

A survey of Buddhist narratives about escaping hunters or fowlers reveals that there is a tendency to identify them with Māra in the *jātakas* of the *Mahāvastu* as well as in the *Makkaṭasutta* of the Pali canon. Nevertheless, this possibility of interpretation is always avoided in the *jātakas* of the Pali canon.

I now return to the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* to comment on two aspects of the story that can be interpreted as belonging to the soteriological allegory. The discussion of these points is secondary to the main argument of the article. In other words, I believe that the identification of the mouse, cat, and hunter with a teacher, student, and death/Māra, respectively, holds, regardless of whether the proposed interpretation of these additional details is correct or not.

A delay in liberation

A peculiar feature of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* is the hesitation on the part of the mouse when it comes to releasing the cat from the trap. In the *nīti* version of the story, it is explained that the mouse hesitates in order to wait for the hunter, so that the cat is released just before he arrives, leaving no time for the cat to eat the mouse.

It is possible that this episode of the story was added at a later stage and has no bearing on the *mokṣa* version of the story. It should be noted, however, that the postponement of the cat's *mokṣa* could be read in light of the doctrine that a king's primary duty is to protect his subjects, especially brahmins, and he is only allowed to pursue *mokṣa* in old age, as it were, in retirement. This idea is put forward, for example, in *Mahābhārata* 12.63.18–22. The approach of the hunter would signify that the cat is becoming old.

Buddhist narratives of Brahmanical decline

A number of reasons have been put forward to argue that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* is based on an earlier tale about a brahmin who liberates a king in exchange for protection

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[63] L. Feer (ed.), *Saṃyutta-nikāya. Part V: Mahā-vagga* (London, 1976).

and patronage. Supposing that this hypothesis is found convincing, further questions arise regarding the authorship of the story, the intention of the authors, their possible religious affiliation, if any, and so forth. It is not possible to treat all of these questions here, but there is one, possibly significant, element of the story that has not yet been touched upon and which can provide a basis for speculating on some of these issues.

The mouse only gets into trouble in special circumstances. When the cat falls in a trap, the mouse comes out fearlessly:

> While looking for food he soon saw the bait (*āmiṣa*), ascended the trap and started eating the bait, inwardly laughing at his bound enemy [i.e., the cat], while himself staying at the top of that [trap]. While intent on the bait he happened to look down and saw another terrible enemy.

> *bhakṣaṃ vicaramāṇena nacirād dṛṣṭam āmiṣam*
> *sa tam unmātham āruhya tad āmiṣam abhakṣayat*
> *tasyopari sapatnasya baddhasya manasā hasan*
> *āmiṣe tu prasaktaḥ sa kadā cid avalokayan*
> *apaśyad aparaṃ ghoram ātmanaḥ śatrum āgatam* (12.136.27cd–29)

The phrase *bhakṣaṃ vicaramāṇena* (from vi+car) in this passage immediately reminds one of the usage of word *bhaikṣa*, sometimes spelled *bhaikṣya*,[64] with the root *car* to designate the practice of wandering mendicancy or going on a begging round. Similar meaning is carried by the compound *bhaikṣacaryā*, sometimes spelled *bhaikṣyacaryā*, and by the corresponding Pali (*bhikkhāya car*, *bhikkhācariyā*, and so on) and Prakrit constructions and compounds. Perhaps the allegorical meaning of this is that the mouse starts off as a wandering ascetic (*śramaṇa*), and becomes tempted by wealth (*āmiṣa*). The connotations of *āmiṣa* in ascetic discourses have been discussed above. As long as the mouse has nothing, he has nothing to fear, but as soon as he acquires wealth, he finds himself in danger, because that wealth can be forcefully taken away by others. The mouse solves the problem by transforming from a *śramaṇa* into a powerful king-advising brahmin. Reading such a transformation into the present story concurs with a claim found in several Buddhist texts that the 'original' brahmins were similar to *śramaṇas* in lifestyle, while contemporary materialistic brahmins have failed to live up to this ideal. Such a 'history' of brahmins is told in the *Aggaññasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* as well as in the *Brāhmaṇadhammikasutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta*. The latter is especially useful for our present purpose as it describes how the originally modest and virtuous brahmins started coveting the luxuries of a royal life and came up with Vedic hymns and sacrifices to obtain wealth from kings.

The interpretation of Palita's life along similar lines is also supported by the usage of the phrase '*āmiṣe tu prasaktaḥ*' to describe the mouse. This can also mean 'attached to material things'. The opposite of this—'he has no attachment to material things' (*nāmiṣeṣu prasaṅgo 'sti*; 12.152.21)—is used elsewhere in the *Āpaddharmaparvan* to describe a virtuous person.

These observations would further support the possibility that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* was adapted from a *mokṣa*-themed tale that was satirical—or at least critical of the situation that it alludes to. It appears to describe the 'fall' of an imagined ancient ideal brahmin from his natural state of *śramaṇahood* as he becomes interested in the material world (*āmiṣa*). Perhaps, through a rich donation, he is transformed from the state of a *bhikṣu* to the state of a rich landowner or the like. He now needs protection and finds the strongest ally possible—the king. The brahmin promises to provide spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) to

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[64] See, for example, *Mahābhārata* 12.8.8. and 12.9.12.

the king, but first he makes the king live out a lifetime in the material sphere, protecting the brahmin. Meanwhile, the brahmin lives safely under the king's protection: 'He calmly slept in the bosom of the cat like in the bosom of his parents' (*mārjārorasi visrabdhaḥ suṣvāpa pitṛmātṛvat*; 12.136.81).

In contrast to the Buddha, who teaches the *dharma* out of compassion so as to help others cross the ocean of *saṃsāra*, the mouse does it for his own benefit, so that he himself also 'crosses over'. There seems to be no real conversion of the king from his original violent stance to a more peaceful state.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a new interpretation of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* in the *Mahābhārata* and discussed stories about escape from death in the *Mahābhārata* and early Buddhist literature, some of which bear a thematic resemblance to the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*.

The *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* of the *Mahābhārata* abounds in terms and phrases that, in addition to their everyday meanings, have a technical or typical usage in the ascetic traditions of Ancient India. Moreover, the conversation between the cat and the mouse resembles that of a teacher and a disciple rather than a discussion of a possible alliance between two kings. All of this suggests that the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* is based on an earlier version of the same tale which was composed as an allegory about an alliance between a brahmin and a king, in which the brahmin liberates the king in exchange for protection. The details of such an alliance corresponds to religious developments recorded elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*. There are some reasons to believe that the other two animals in the story were intended to represent the other two *varṇas* of the society, namely, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*. The hunter of the story can be identified with the Buddhist Māra, who represents both death and desire, which is at the root of spiritual bondage. Some of the arguments made in this article, especially those related to the *varṇa* identities of the animals, rely on linguistic probability and should be taken with a grain of salt. It is the cumulative evidence of such arguments that makes them compelling to explore.

The *nīti* interpretation of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*, which is advanced in the *Mahābhārata* itself, does not account for some of the story's key details as there are a few contradictions in the plot and descriptions of the characters. The proposed *mokṣa* interpretation of the same story finds meaning in most of the details of the story and explains how the contradictions might have arisen. It is charitable towards the author (s) of the story as it assumes that the story was carefully crafted to relish in double meanings, word plays, and to have an allegorical meaning as a whole. This would make the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* a unique piece of literature that breaks the conventions of the fable genre to provide a socio-religious commentary by the means of an allegory.

Some features of the story suggest that it was intended to be satirical. While the Buddha is the compassionate boatman who helps others cross over, the mouse gets himself over as well. Dangerous kings are converted to non-violence in the Buddhist *jātakas*, but no such transformation happens to the cat in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. While the Buddha overcomes the temptation (*āmiṣa*) set by Māra, the mouse is attached (*prasakta*) to the bait (*āmiṣa*) set by the hunter and manipulates the cat for protection. It is this calculated self-interest on the part of the mouse, as he manipulates the cat, that provides a link between the *mokṣa* reading of the story offered in this article and the *nīti* reading provided in the *Mahābhārata*.

The findings of the present study hint at a complex text history for the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* which cannot be fully disentangled at present. It assumes at least two versions of the story—an earlier *mokṣa* layer and a later *nīti* reworking—but there may have been more editorial steps before its present state was reached. There

are some grounds to believe that the tale was translated from a Middle Indic original or influenced by a Middle Indic version, although the evidence is inconclusive. In a number of instances I have emphasised terminological and thematic continuity with the Buddhist literature. Most of these elements, however, such as the metaphor of crossing over, can also be found in ascetic discourses in the *Mahābhārata* itself. Moreover, the alliance between a king and a liberation-granting teacher seems to be a religious development described primarily in Brahmanical literature.

To assess the plausibility of a soteriological interpretation of the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* I have discussed structurally similar stories about escape. The ascetic poetry of Ancient India employs figurative language to talk about spiritual liberation, using such examples as 'escape from a net', 'cage', or the like. Sometimes, it mentions the noose (*pāśa*) of Māra as something to be escaped from. It would seem natural to attribute a soteriological interpretation to other Ancient Indian narratives about an escape from the *pāśa* of a hunter or from death.

In general, two types of stories about escape from death can be identified in Ancient Indian literature. The first tells how a faithful character saves their friend from the noose of Death or a hunter who represents death. Nevertheless, this escape is only temporary and does not appear to have soteriological significance in such stories. To this group belongs, for example, the famous Sāvitrī story of the *Mahābhārata* as well as the Pali *Cullahaṃsajātaka* and the *Mṛgarājajātaka* of the *Mahāvastu*.

The second type of story extols the virtue of cleverness which allows the main character to escape death and sometimes to help others escape as well. Only some of these *jātakas* involve a character who lays out a *pāśa*. Of this group I have discussed the *Śakuntaka jātakas* 1 and 2 from the *Mahāvastu* and the Pali *Kakkarajātaka* which is related to *Śakuntakajātaka* 2. All of these *jātakas* talk about a bird who escapes the *pāśa* of a fowler, and the description of the fowler in the *Kakkarajātaka* resembles the description of the hunter in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda*. The fowler is identified with Māra in both of the *Śakuntaka jātakas*, but not in the *Kakkarajātaka*.

This brief survey reveals that not every story about escape from death, or even from the *pāśa* of a hunter or a fowler, has been traditionally understood in a soteriological way. Nevertheless, both the *Mahāvastu* and the Pali canon include stories in which the escape from a trap set by a hunter or a fowler is understood as a representation of spiritual liberation and an escape from Māra. This increases the likelihood that the cat's escape from the *pāśa* of a hunter in the *Mārjāramūṣakasaṃvāda* was also originally understood to represent spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*).

While Māra often figures as a character in the *jātakas* of the *Mahāvastu*, the Pali tradition identifies *jātaka* villains as the previous births of the Buddha's unfaithful disciple Devadatta. I have suggested that this must be a peculiarity of the Pali *jātaka* tradition, especially since the Pali tradition does not hesitate to identify a hunter with Māra in the *Makkaṭasutta*, which is not classified as a *jātaka* tale.