

Chapter Two



Nivṛtti Dharma The Search for the Highest

In the previous chapter, we sketched in broad strokes the general framework of religion in the *Mahābhārata*. We proposed that the *Mahābhārata* is jointly inspired by two separate traditions of religious practice, one ascetic and one domestic, and argued that the text consciously tries to synthesize the values of the two. We noted that while for the most part this synthesis is quite successful, the differences between the two traditions appear irreconcilable at two nodal points: the issues of sex and violence. We argued then that much of *Mahābhārata* religion is engrossed with discovering a median path between extremes of violence and sex. Finally, we suggested that the *Mahābhārata* is able to integrate the values of the two traditions in two thoughtful ways, one through rigorous management, and the other through a philosophical adjustment in our methods of thinking about them.

In this chapter, I would like to initiate the analysis of sexuality by bringing into convergence two streams of dialogue—the *Mahābhārata*'s ideas and assumptions about women, and the *Mahābhārata*'s thinking on religion. We will begin with the soteriological orientation of *nivṛtti dharma*. As we will see, the analysis of the gender ideology of *nivṛtti dharma* is by no means simple; it is intertwined with the discourses of *yoga*, asceticism, and renunciation and it is within these discourses that we must locate our discussion of female sexuality. For while the place of women in *nivṛtti* ideology may appear straightforward, to get some sense of the practical and material aspects of women's engagement in *nivṛtti* practices it is necessary to detour through a typology of the varieties of ascetic and renunciatory traditions. It then becomes possible to investigate the place of sexuality in each stream, and to examine the ways in which women participated in ascetic and/or world-renouncing endeavors, both as objects of the male gaze and as practicing subjects in their own right.

Nivṛtti Dharma: The Soteriological Orientation

Hinduism is typically thought to teach a theology of liberation accessible through various “paths” (*jñāna*, *bhakti*, and *karmayogas*), and the *Gītā* overall supports this analysis, outlining *karmayoga* (chapters three and four), *bhaktiyoga* (chapters nine through eighteen, particularly eleven), and *jñānayoga* (dispersed through the entire discourse) and weighing them against each other. In the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, however, these paths are not so discretely defined. For the most part, the *nivṛtta*, or soteriological strand of the tradition is characterized by a technique that is an amorphous composite of several types of religious practice. This technique is most commonly called *yoga*. The late Vedic period saw the emergence of numerous religious groups, both Brahminical and heterodox, and a shift in focus from the community to the individual. These trends generated something of a “discourse of *yoga*”¹ and “*yoga*” may be said to be the quintessential religious practice associated with the *nivṛtta* form of *Mahābhārata* religion.

Yoga

The exact use of the term *yoga*, however, is notoriously difficult to pin down. As van Buitenen notes, the word and its cognates occur almost 150 times in the *Gītā* alone (1981, 17). Its basic root is *yuj*, meaning “to yoke” “harness,” or “attach,” but this refers to such a complex of ideas that the term has a broad semantic range. At the least, *yoga* “always refers to a strenuous effort to which a person has committed himself” (17).

In the epic, the word *yoga* is associated with identifiable beliefs and practices. First, it assumes a *weltanschauung* in which the world is an eternally preexistent place of inevitable and endless suffering.² Worldly engagements are futile and transient and hence (ritual) action is of no efficacy. The only worthwhile goal is to seek something constant within oneself, beyond the interminable vacillations of the world. In *yoga* therefore one is urged to cultivate a liberating knowledge (*vidyā*, *jñāna*) “that would lift one permanently and absolutely beyond the vicious circle of action, death, rebirth, and action again.”³ This *jñāna* implies the intuition of a permanent, unchanging reality at the core of the person, and the *Mahābhārata* seems to use the language of dualism and nondualism somewhat idiosyncratically, referring one moment to the resplendent *puruṣa* that inheres in the body but remains

unbesmirched by the wranglings of the world; and another moment to the blissful, pervasive vitality of *Brahman* (XII.262.45). *Yoga* may also be adapted to a *bhakti* worldview, in that the *parampuruṣa* of Sāṃkhya may be viewed as the *īśvara*, or the *yogeśvara*, the “lord of *yoga*.”⁴ Thus philosophically *yoga* employs both theistic and nontheistic language,⁵ dualist and non-dualist frames.⁶ The exact formulation of ontology seems to be secondary to its primary interest: that of proposing a way of conducting oneself in the world, through the transcendence of attachment, hatred, and desire (*rāgad-veṣamoha*, III.2.34, V.42.8–12).

In addition to the above, *yoga* is also associated with certain mental attitudes. The most frequently mentioned quality is that of equanimity, of being unruffled in the face of both pleasant and unpleasant experience. *Yoga* involves a hardy mental stoicism, a sternness with oneself to remain resolutely balanced regardless of what one encounters. The ascetic Gautamī, for example, remains stalwart even through the death of her son (XIII.1). *Yoga* also involves an ethical care and concern for others. Thus, Pāṇḍu in undertaking *yoga*, declares his intention to live “never ridiculing anyone, never frowning at anything, always gently-spoken, delighting in the welfare of all creatures . . . always equal-minded to all breathing creatures, as though they were my children”⁷ (I.110.10–11). Finally, *yoga* involves meditation (XII.232), a withdrawal of the senses, inhalation, and exhalation combined with concentration (XII.192), and the recitation of *mantras* (XII.189).⁸

How does one locate women in the practice of this *yoga*, which is the inseparable companion to the pursuit of *mokṣa*? This is not an easy question to answer, given that the *Mahābhārata* is a patriarchal work not entirely cooperative with feminist projects. One must therefore look for other avenues into a discussion of this material, and the most obvious one is that of asceticism.

The most ubiquitous adjunct of *yogic* practice is asceticism.⁹ Asceticism is the stock solution to a life of worldly misery; whenever people are distraught with grief, fear, or anxiety, they are counseled in ascetic values, ascetic perspectives. Thus, when in *Ādiparva*, Pāṇḍu learns of his inability to father children, it is to asceticism that he turns (I.110). When an insomniac Dhṛtarāṣṭra frets on the eve of the great war, the *nivṛtta* sage Sanatsujāta instructs him on ascetic values (V.42–45). The renouncer Medhavin repeatedly harangues his father on the futility and transience of worldly life, and enumerates to him the consciousness-altering, liberative virtues of the ascetic life (XII.169). Ascetic repudiation of the world is the primary technique

for achieving *nivṛtti* goals in the *Mahābhārata*. This element of physical trial is stressed in numerous passages describing *yoga* (XII.188, XII.289, XII.294, XII.304).

As with much else in the *Mahābhārata*, however, asceticism is an inchoate jumble of practices, a complicated and heterogeneous affair not easily summarized. That it is a major preoccupation is obvious even from a casual perusal of the text. Ascetics peer out of every other page of the epic and are highly idealized figures, exalted, esteemed, feared for their paranormal powers, and generally held in awe. In spite of the occasional stabs against it, asceticism is roundly revered, encouraged, and valorized throughout the text.

It is not necessary here to enter into the lengthy debate over the origins of Indian asceticism, with its highly vexed question of whether later Hindu ascetic and yogic practices evolved from the Vedic tradition itself, or whether there were other influences that shaped Hindu practices. It is certainly clear from the earliest strands of Vedic literature that some form of asceticism was practiced in Vedic times,¹⁰ but whether this was the precursor of the varieties of asceticism we see in later literature is the subject of tremendous disagreement.¹¹ For our purposes, these questions should sensitize us to the fact that there is likely to be a multiplicity of ascetic forms and styles practiced in the *Mahābhārata*.

Varieties of Asceticism in the *Mahābhārata*

It would seem that the most obvious principle for distinguishing between varieties of ascetic practice is by way of identifying the goals of ascetic practice. This, however, presents another complication, because, as an overview of the material reveals, goals are not always obvious. While sometimes austerities are very clearly directed toward one goal or another, others are more difficult to read. It is clear that ancient India held a high nostalgic value for a life of simplicity, frugality, and mental and physical stoicism, a life that admitted the conquest and stern disciplining of the body—hence asceticism is widely practiced. However, even though asceticism is the most common instrument of the *nivṛtti* orientation, not all ascetics in the *Mahābhārata* are soteriologically motivated. Some practice asceticism as an extension of a broader eremitic lifestyle framed by adherence to Vedic tradition. Others practice asceticism for the purpose of attaining very worldly objectives. In what follows, we will look, briefly, at the varieties of ascetics mentioned in the text and summarize the goals to which they seem to be devoted. Follow-

ing that, we will search another route into a discussion of women's participation in ascetic practice.

There are eleven major terms employed for ascetics in the text; together, they encompass the range of ascetic activity we encounter. Prima facie, it would seem that five are descriptive of a renunciant orientation: *yati*, *bhikṣu*, *yogin*, *parivrajaka*, and *samnyasin*; and six are descriptive of a Vedic one: *ṛṣi* (and various grades of *ṛṣi*—*brahmārṣi*, *jarārṣi*, *mahārṣi*, *devārṣi*, *viprārṣi*, *paramārṣi*); *muni*, *valakhilya*, *vaikhānasa*, *siddha*. The term *tapasvin* appears to be used adjectivally, to refer to all varieties of ascetics. We also find reference to ascetic activities associated with the terms *brahmacarya*, *vānaprasthya*, and *saṃnyāsa*. This categorization, however, is by no means absolute; indeed, it can only be provisional and heuristic because many of the terms share commonalities. Some terms are used interchangeably with others—but not consistently; some appear to be committed to soteriological pursuits, while others seem to engage in austerities idiosyncratically. The challenge, then, is to disentangle *nivṛtti* varieties of asceticism from the *pravṛtta*, or “worldly.”

Let us look at brief descriptions of these figures.

Ṛṣi	Numerous characters are called <i>ṛṣis</i> in the text—e.g., Vyāsa, Nārada, Agastya, Dadhīci, Lomaśa, Cyavana, Atri, Bharadvaja, Bhṛgu, Utaṅka, Kaśyapa, Kaṇva, Vasiṣṭha and others; at other times, several of these are also known as <i>munis</i> . As a rule, <i>ṛṣis</i> are <i>brāhmaṇas</i> , and seem committed to upholding the Vedic tradition. They study the Vedas. They are also said to propound philosophical theories. Thus, in the Anuśāsana-parva, the doctrine of <i>karma</i> is said to be expounded by them. There are two groups of <i>ṛṣis</i> : The first type takes a vow of perpetual celibacy (<i>urdhvaretas</i>): for example, Kaṇva. The second group is married but at least for periods practices celibacy. They have children of their own or sometimes they adopt children exposed to the elements, for example, Kaṇva, Sthūlakeśa. They observe rigid vows. They perform rituals and <i>saṃskāras</i> . They attend sacrifices. <i>Ṛṣis</i> are usually described as merciful, high-souled, truthful, illustrious, self-restrained, and contemplative. The relations between <i>devas</i> and <i>ṛṣis</i> are marked with tension. Indra, the chief of the <i>devas</i> lives in constant fear that the <i>ṛṣis</i> might usurp his position by virtue of their ascetic power. Hence he sends <i>apsarās</i> down to earth to disrupt their penance.
------------	--

Vaikhānasa	<i>Vaikhānasas</i> are forest dwellers. Like the <i>Vālakhilyas</i> and other ascetics, they are said to be in control of their senses (<i>jitendriya</i>), always engaged in <i>dharma</i> (<i>dharmapara</i>). They avoid sensual pleasures, enjoy the fruits of their penance immediately, and finally ascend to heaven (XII. 236.20). They subsist on roots, fruits, and flowers and observe stern vows (XII. 236.15). They are followers of the Vedic <i>dharma</i> as are the <i>Vanaprasthins</i> , and the <i>Vālakhilyas</i> (XII. 160.24). The hermitage of <i>Vaikhānasas</i> is situated in the Himalayas in the northern region (V.109.9). The <i>Vaikhānasas</i> are described as devotees of Nārāyaṇa (XII. 360.14).
Siddha	<i>Siddhas</i> are heavenly/semidivine beings (XII 284.17). Usually they are paired with other semidivine beings: Caraṇa (I.92.25, IV.26.10; [in this case, the word appears to be used to describe both renunciators and forest-dwellers] V.179.4, V.187.23, XII.175.23, XII.193.12), <i>Gandharva</i> , <i>Yakṣa</i> (I.111.1, [in this instance again, the word is used for both renunciators and forest-dwellers] V.62.22, XII.145.13), <i>devas</i> (IV.51.13) and also with sages (<i>r̥ṣis</i>) (I.111.9, I.117.33, IV.51.13, XII.54.4, XII.260.35). <i>Siddhas</i> are said to be sons of Br̥haspati and well-versed in the Vedas (I.60.6). They are very successful ascetics (III.2.71, I.4.10, XII.155.3, XII.160.23, XII.274.12). They observe celibacy (I.57.57, XII.290.71). They are also engaged in <i>japa</i> and <i>homa</i> (I.64.38). They have a <i>yoga śarīra</i> (II.8.26). They live in the woods (3.25.20).
Munis	<i>Munis</i> are of cleansed souls (<i>bhavitātmānam</i>), and residents of forests (<i>vane nivasatam</i>) who subsist on bulbs, fruits and roots (<i>kanda mūla phalāśinām</i> XIII.14.82)—cannot obtain food prepared with milk XIII.17.04 Upamanyu says that the names of Mahādeva were given by <i>munis</i> who were seers (<i>tattva darśibhiḥ</i>). XIII.17.26 Mahādeva is said to be the best among <i>munis</i> . (<i>munīnām api yo muniḥ</i>) (XV.15.17) Vyāsa is referred to as <i>muni</i> by Vaiśampāyana. XV.35.10 Vyāsa tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he should not feel pity that one has taken up residence in the forest (<i>vanavāsa</i>), that he eats wild rice (<i>svadate vanyam annam</i>) and wears the dress of <i>muni</i> (<i>munivāsāmsi</i>). XVI.5.22 Kṛṣṇa ascends heaven and is received by <i>munis</i> (<i>pratyudyayuh munayah</i>) XV.45.12 After the Pāṇḍavas returned, Dhṛtarāṣṭra with Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Saṃjaya retires to Gaṅgādvāram. He performed severe penance (<i>atathe tapastīvram</i>), subsisted on air, and is referred to as <i>muni</i> in this verse.

The above varieties of ascetics appear to engage in austerities in conjunction with an eremitic lifestyle, and would seem to represent the ideal of Vedic tradition: men of self-restraint and contemplative practice, who nevertheless remain committed to the norm of Vedic practice, participate in Vedic ritual, learning, and teaching, and expect to achieve the goal of heaven. The following, however, would appear to be varieties of ascetics who, to a greater or lesser extent, shun Vedic sacrifice, and are committed to goals beyond heaven, to the deathlessness of *mokṣa*.

Parivrajaka	This word occurs only in the Śāntiparva, and functions as a synonym for <i>saṃnyāsin</i> (a renouncer) (XII.184.10, XII.185.3, XII.269.16). Carvaka, a demon and a friend of Duryodhana, visits Yudhiṣṭhira in the guise of <i>parivrajaka</i> , with a <i>tridaṇḍī</i> in his hand and a tuft of hair on his head. The words <i>bhikṣu</i> and <i>parivrajaka</i> are used interchangeably in these verses (XII.39.23, XII.39.33).
Yati	<i>Yati</i> also practices renunciation, but not as a stage of life. Unlike a <i>ṛṣi</i> he is opposed to the Vedic tradition of sacrifices. The Śāntiparva speaks of <i>yatidharma</i> in several places (XII.38.13, XII.226.5, XII.294.36, XII.306.94, XII.336.5, XV.33.32). The aim of <i>yatidharma</i> is to attain freedom (<i>mokṣa</i>) (XII.262.29). He fears birth and death (XIII.16.15). He is engaged in <i>dhyānayoga</i> . He is able to see the <i>ātman</i> through the power of meditation and penance (<i>tapas</i>) as one sees his own image reflected in the mirror. Since he possesses a knowledge of the Self—is an <i>ātmavedī</i> —(XII.335.85), he can attain <i>brahmanirvāṇam</i> (VI.27.26) (I.1.197). He is in control of his senses, free of passions and patient (III.145.30) (I.38.9). Anger destroys his penance (I.38.8). He practices celibacy (<i>urdhvaretas</i>) (II.11.34), (II.48.40), (III.222.42). He does not have a permanent abode, wanders throughout the country (III.28.16), and leads a secluded existence (XII.308.168). He has his head shaven and carries a <i>kamaṇḍala</i> and <i>tridaṇḍa</i> . (III.262.16). He is close to Nārāyaṇa (V.69.5). The Āśramavāsikaparva contains a discussion between a sacrificial priest and a <i>yati</i> concerning animal sacrifice. The <i>yati</i> does not approve of animal sacrifice and practices <i>ahiṃsā</i> . The <i>yati</i> says that abstinence from cruelty to all creatures is justified simply on the basis of what is perceptible to the five senses and that any means beyond sensory perception is not necessary (XIV.28.18).

Yogin	Humans as well as gods are referred to as <i>yogis</i> . Vidura is a <i>mahāyogin</i> (XV.35.12). Vyāsa and Sanatkumāra are also referred to as <i>yogins</i> . (XIII.18.1, XIII.14.159). Śiva and Viṣṇu are called <i>yogins</i> (XIII.14.155, XIII.135.104). Śiva is the best among <i>yogins</i> (XIII.14. 155). He is also known as <i>kālayogin</i> (XIII.17.48). The Pāṇḍavas are said to be observers of <i>yoga dharma</i> (XVII.1.44, XVII.2.1). <i>Yogins</i> have access to esoteric knowledge (XII.225.15); <i>yogins</i> who practice <i>dhyāna</i> achieve <i>nirvānam</i> XII.188.22. The one who has no fixed abode (<i>aniketa</i>), who takes shelter under the foot of a tree (<i>vrkṣa mūla āśraya</i>), who does not cook for himself (<i>apacaka</i>) (in other words leads a life of mendicancy) is a <i>muni</i> , an eternal <i>yogin</i> (<i>sadā yogi</i>), a renouncer (<i>tyāgi</i>), and a mendicant (<i>bhikṣuka</i> , or <i>samnyāsin</i>) XII.12.09; Vyāsa says all beings go back to the <i>Brahman</i> and this knowledge is only accessible to <i>yogins</i> (<i>yogibhiḥ paramātmabhiḥ dr̥stvā</i>) (XII.225.15).
Bhikṣuka	The <i>bhikṣuka</i> (<i>samnyasin</i>) renounces all action. He is a refuge (<i>abhayam</i>) to all creatures. He is friendly and benevolent to all creatures. He controls his senses. He is free of all attachments and passions. He subsists on food obtained without asking. He eats as much as needed to keep him alive. He must obtain only as much as he requires. He has to go begging when the smoke in the houses ceases, and the fire in the hearths are put out and people in the houses take their food. He neither rejoices when he gets something nor feels sad if he could not get anything. He seeks food just enough to keep him alive. In this process he should not deprive anybody of his or her food. He has to go begging alone, not in groups. He treats a clod of earth and a lump of gold equally. He does not save anything for his own use. He has neither friends nor foes. He does not care if anyone praises or blames him. He should not be ostentatious in his acts of piety. He must lead a solitary life. In the rainy season he lives in one place but in the summer he spends only one night at an inhabitable place. He takes shelter in an empty house, a forest, a cave, a river or at the root of a tree (XII.9.22 ff., XII.237.36 ff, XIV.45.17 ff). He should practice the following eight virtues: non-violence (<i>ahimsā</i>); celibacy (<i>brahmacaryam</i>); truthfulness (<i>satyam</i>); honesty (<i>arjavam</i>); freedom from anger (<i>akrodha</i>); jealousy (<i>anasūya</i>); and slander (<i>apaisunam</i>); and self-restraint (<i>dama</i>) (XIV.46.35).

Returning now to the question of gender, where does one locate women among this variety of ascetics? Can we speak of female *yatis* and *munis*, *brahmārṣis*, *yogins*, and *parivrajakas*? Searching the material, one finds that there are no overt references to female *ṛṣis* or *munis* or *yatis*, but we have the occasional reference to *siddhās*, *bhikṣukīs*, and *parivrajakās*. To conclude from this that some forms of asceticism were ideologically supported for women and others barred would, however, be a hasty and unwarranted extrapolation. Our data are simply too sparse to support generalizations that are tenable.

I propose, therefore, another avenue of entry into the topic, to speak not of types of *ascetics*, but types of *asceticisms*. In what follows, I identify four broad types of *asceticisms*, distinguished from each other by their goals as well as by their methods and forms. In analyzing these, we can clear some of the hedges to see where sexuality figures in ascetic practice, and in the pursuit of *mokṣa* in particular.

Broadly speaking, some measure of ascetic practice is required of four *ways of being in the world*: *brahmacarya*, *vanaprasthya*, *parivrajya* (or *saṃnyāsa*), and being in observance of a *vrata* (vow). The first three terms, *brahmacarya*, *vanaprasthya*, *parivrajya* (or *saṃnyāsa*), are inherently ambiguous and it is often unclear what precisely each signifies outside of its immediate context. Patrick Olivelle makes this point in his 1993 work, *The Āśrama System*. As he notes, there are both ancient and classical understandings of concepts such as *brahmacarya*, *vanaprasthya*, and *saṃnyāsa*. In the older formulation, these three categories, which along with that of *garhasthya* are collectively known as the *āśramas*, signify *vocations* or *choices of lifestyle* that a twice-born man may pursue on completion of his basic theological education. In the classical formulation, however, and in subsequent Hinduism, the *āśramas* are taken to be not vocational alternatives, but *successive stages of life*, signifying the ideal life span of a twice-born man. This distinction is important for interpreting sexuality because the older sense of these terms evokes *nivṛtti* resonances while the classical evokes *pravṛtti* ones, and the ideology of sex in *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti* is decidedly at variance. Whereas *nivṛtti* involves an absolute *negation* of sexuality (a negation that paradoxically generates greater sexual power, as Doniger has pointed out¹²), *pravṛtti* involves the close *regulation* and management of sex. Hence, the term *brahmacarya* in *nivṛtti* has significantly different connotations from what it carries in *pravṛtti*. An overview of the ways in which these terms are used in each tradition will clarify the issue.

We have noted that asceticism is a characteristic of both, world renunciation, and worldly engagement. Thus the *pitṛyana* (the “path of the ancestors”) of *pravṛtti* dharma also accommodates and valorizes asceticism without, however, giving it highest priority. In much the same way as we observed *pravṛtti dharma* rationalize sex and violence, acknowledging their necessity but limiting their power, it takes the radical, antinomian tendencies of asceticism and domesticates them. Through the theological innovation of the *āśrama* system, a modified form of asceticism is accommodated in every phase of this life cycle. In the student stage, the youth guards his chastity carefully, lives simply, serves his guru with selfless regard, and studies. His life is defined by its austerity, its sternness and rigor—qualities that are typical of ascetic life in general. Following the student stage of life, he abandons all overt ascetic engagements and immerses himself in domestic existence. The symbolic rite of passage into this stage is marriage. Domesticity is not to be a hedonist adventure, however, for even in marriage and worldly life, some memory of his collegian orientation toward asceticism is retained in the elaborate rules governing his sexual life. As Jamison notes, the purpose of these rules is to imbue sexual and procreative life with the solemn spirit of celibacy: “Thus, sexual abstinence can be regularly reaffirmed as a goal in the midst of a busy procreative life.”¹³ In following the rules for sexual engagement in *pravṛtti dharma*, the householder lives an attenuated kind of sexual life, not only recalling the abstemious self-discipline of his student days, but also anticipating the pursuits of his future life, when he will devote himself to higher spiritual pursuits.

With *vanaprasthya*, the individual comes closer to that goal. He leaves behind sexual life again and adopts a moderate course of ascetic activity, living in the forest on roots and fruit, still engaged in the *pravṛtti* exercise of maintaining the householder fires, but increasingly distancing himself from the concerns of that world. Finally, in *saṃnyāsa*, he is permitted to shed all ties to society and the world, and to pick up again with seriousness the thread of ascetic practice that he had held in his student days (though never entirely dropped). The consciousness of a future soteriological purpose thus grounds the structural course of a man’s entire life in *pravṛtti dharma*. But whereas the *nivṛtti* practitioner undertakes the pursuit of *mokṣa* immediately, seeing no value in the world outside of it, the *pravṛtti* practitioner pursues it modestly and moderately. He gets a foretaste of the methods to the achievement of *mokṣa* in his student days,¹⁴ but he postpones the focused search for most of his life, until he has fulfilled the demands of the social world in which he is implicated.

Through the device of the *āśrama* system, *pravṛtti dharma* takes the radical asceticism of the *nivṛtti dharma* and distributes it into stages of an otherwise domestic and socially productive life. The antistructural, world-negating edge of *nivṛtti dharma* is blunted, and the individual's spiritual aspirations are accommodated through the absorption of *nivṛtti* practices in moderate and manageable doses. The ideology of renunciation is thus appropriated in such a way that it presents no serious threat to worldly life. Only those who have fulfilled their obligations by the world are suited to engage in it. The social world can in this way continue to function with all its preoccupations, and individuals are still promised *mokṣa* within one lifetime.

The point of the above overview is to alert us to the hazards of interpreting terms such as *brahmacarya*, *vanaprasthya*, and *saṁnyāsa*. This is because in any instance, ascetic activity may be supporting either a *pravṛtti* orientation or a *nivṛtti* one, and one needs to be awake to the different goals, methods, and assumptions of both traditions in order to avoid generalizing the traits of one to the other. The *Mahābhārata*, which typically defers to the ancient vocabulary even while anticipating its classical semantic reformulations, evokes both understandings of these terms at different times, and one is left to infer entirely from context what each term signifies in each instance. While some varieties of *brahmacarya* or *vanaprasthya* are directed at the *devāyana* of *mokṣa*, liberation, desiring release from the cycles of *saṁsāra*, a large part is very clearly inspired by more pedestrian worldly goals, the highest of which is heaven (*svarga*, *devalokam*, *brahmalokam*, or *somalokam* (XIII.130.18)).¹⁵

Brahmacarya

It is now time to take account of these differences in more detail. *Brahmacarya*, according to the classical formulations of the *āśrama* system, refers to the period of celibate discipleship that constitutes the twice-born boy's first ritual stage of life. *Brahmacarya*, however, is also undertaken as a vocational lifestyle and where this is the case, it seems to serve both the old Vedic ideology geared at heaven and the new ascetic ideology geared at liberation. Celibacy is the most distinctive trait of *brahmacarya* pursued as a lifestyle. Where it is geared toward the goal of heaven, it is accompanied by the performance of strenuous austerities. In the *nivṛtti* soteriological orientation, it would seem that the entire meaning complex of the term *brahmacarya* is evoked: *brahmacarya* is the path that leads to *Brahman* (hence *mokṣa*). The

individual thus shuns marriage and domesticity on *ideological* grounds, as inimical to the goals of a focused religious life. In both of the latter cases, the word *brahmacārin* connotes lifelong celibacy rather than discipleship¹⁶ and in this sense is in *direct opposition* to what *brahmacarya* signifies in the *pravṛtti* stream: a *preparation* for conjugal householder life. The celibacy of the *nivṛtti brahmacārin* in particular represents a conscious rejection of the world-sustaining values of the *pravṛtti* path, of marriage and the domesticity that sex inevitably prefigures, with the understanding that *nivṛtti brahmacārins* are focused on a higher path of self-realization.

We have examples of all of these forms in the *Mahābhārata*. *Brahmacarya* as a stage of life, indicative of a *pravṛtti* orientation, is followed, for example, by four of Vyāsa's students who, on completion of their studies, disperse to marry and take up their ritual duties as *brāhmaṇas* (XII.315.9). Others, such as the itinerant sage Nārada are reputed to be *brahmacārins* by vocation, though not explicitly directed to the goal of liberation.¹⁷ In addition, we find many references to individuals who continue as *brahmacārins*, avowing themselves to lives of celibate self-denial in a *nivṛtti* mode. Vyāsa's son and disciple Śuka is one example of this. One hears also of Jaigīśavya, the mendicant guest of Asita Devala, who achieves *mokṣa* through silence (IX.49.5 ff.). Asita Devala, inspired by his example, vacillates between *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* paths, and finally determining on *nivṛtti*, follows suit (IX.49.59–61). In these cases, *brahmacarya* serves *nivṛtti* ideals. The term *brahmacarya* thus can refer to different things in different contexts; in all cases it connotes celibacy, but celibacy is in the service of differing ideals in each case. In *nivṛtti*, celibacy supports the ideal of world renunciation, in *pravṛtti* it supports discipleship, and in the liminal case of characters such as Nārada, who pursue it neither as a stage of life nor in the interests of *mokṣa*, celibacy forms part of the repertoire of asceticism that is geared at achieving higher worldly goals, such as heaven and the proximity of the gods.

Vanaprasthya

The second type of asceticism evident in the text is that of the *vanaprasthin* ascetic, and the *vanaprasthin* is perhaps the most contested figure in discussions of asceticism in the ancient Indic world. As the name suggests, *vanaprasthins* reside in forest hermitages, and live reclusive lives of unadorned simplicity. The critical question, however, is: to what end? Is the *vanaprasthin* the model of the *pravṛtti* actor, who is conscious of his dues to

society and its ritual world, but is mentally and spiritually attuned to soteriological goals? There's vast disagreement on these points, but as we have seen, there are several varieties of *vanaprasthins* operating within the text, exhibiting a range of motives. The *Āpastamba* Dharmasūtra describes two basic types of *vanaprasthins*, one who retires alone to the forest and successively reduces his dependence on food and nourishment, and the other who lives a simple domestic life with wife and children on the margins of society (II.9.22.1–9). In the *Mahābhārata*, one description of life as a *vanaprasthin* is found in XII.236.

The *vanaprasthin* is one who gradually abandons the stage of being a householder and enters the next stage of life as a forest recluse. He undertakes this after much deliberation, after the birth of grandchildren, the appearance of wrinkles on his body, and the greying of his hair. In the forest he continues to perform the fire sacrifice and worship the deities he revered while being a householder. For the purpose of sacrifice he tends some cows. The offerings to the fire constitute clarified butter. He observes vows and eats only once. He subsists on rice and wild grain. He worships his guests. He eats what is left after feeding his guests. In order to perform the fire sacrifice and worship his guests, he is allowed to store grain and other items for a day or a month or twelve years. Throughout the year he exposes himself to the elements. In the rainy season he gets drenched and in summer he sits in the sun surrounded by fires on all sides. No luxuries are permitted. He sleeps on the bare earth and may use small mats of grass for sitting. He is supposed to stand on his toes. He bathes three times a day before he performs the sacrifice. He is forbidden to use any implements. He uses his teeth or stones to clean grains. If his vows are rigid, he will subsist on roots, fruits and flowers like the Vaikhānasas. Sometimes he will survive on a liquid diet, taking gruel either in the bright fortnight or dark fortnight. His wife or wives also observe similar austerities. (XII.236)

Is the *vanaprasthin* geared toward *nivṛtti* goals, or *pravṛtti* ones? From the above description, it would seem that *vanaprasthins* should be understood as supporting *pravṛtti* ideals, as is apparent from their maintenance of the minimal accoutrements of the Vedic tradition—the household fire, veneration of *devas* and *pitṛs*, and some household rituals. This conclusion is not without ambiguity, however, for in spite of their ritual practices, *vanaprasthins* often espouse radical *nivṛtti* ideals. A good case in point is Vyāsa. A forest-dwelling

sage and *guru*, who, though unorthodox in not possessing a wife, lives in an *āśrama* with his attenuated family of one son, maintains the household fire and performs the Vedic rituals of the *agnihotra* and so forth. Even sans femme, Vyāsa may rightly be taken to epitomize the *pravṛtti* tradition. He offers priestly services to people (for instance, at Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* and later, at his *aśvamedha*), and later, admonishes Yudhiṣṭhira sternly on his worldly duties. As Bruce Sullivan has pointed out in his work on Vyāsa,¹⁸ the sage replicates the priestly role of Brahmā in the world, where Brahmā is archetypally a Vedic deity, epitomizing *pravṛtti* functions.

The story cannot end there, however, because on the other hand, the philosophies espoused by Vyāsa address soteriological aspirations, and thus contain quintessentially *nivṛtti* content. Thus when, on the eve of the war, Dhṛtarāṣṭra pleads for spiritual counsel to allay his anxieties, Vyāsa refers him to the sage Sanatsujāta. Sanatsujāta is one of the seven sages recognized in the origin myth of the *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* traditions, and is acknowledged as one of the progenitors of the *nivṛtti* tradition. The discourse that Sanatsujāta offers directly enunciates the high objectives of the *nivṛtti* tradition. Similarly, in training his own son, Śuka, Vyāsa discloses only *nivṛtti* ambitions. It is his advice that "Family, children, wife, the body itself, one's exertions, and all one's possessions acquired with difficulty are insubstantial and useless in the next world. Your interest does not lie in excessive attachment to them"¹⁹ (XII.316.32–33). One should, therefore, detach oneself from them and be resolutely alone, for "the desire for living in a village is like a binding cord"²⁰ (XII.316.37). He exhorts Śuka to "abandon both virtue and vice, truth and falsehood. Having abandoned truth and falsehood, abandon that by which these are cast off"²¹ (XII.316.40). Śuka will achieve wisdom and peace by setting aside all partiality for friends and intimates, and conducting himself with humility before all (XII.317.29). It is only in taking his father's advice seriously that Śuka embraces the *nivṛtti* path, holding himself resolutely aloof of worldly involvements (XII.320.19).

Vyāsa may thus be regarded as one archetype of the forest sages to be found in the *Mahābhārata*. Although they themselves do participate in certain Vedic functions, and thus cannot be considered antistructural in the same way as the ideals of *nivṛtti* hold, at the level of ideas, they espouse the philosophies and ethics of *nivṛtti*, explicitly denouncing the ritual and social preoccupations of *pravṛtti* and advocating the radical ethics and teleology of *nivṛtti*. This kind of *vanaprasthin* represents the inherent religious ambivalence of the text as a whole, intensely inspired by renunciatory ideals yet also dialectically committed to maintaining order in the world. One way to read

them may be as figures rehearsing toward liberation and counseling others on *nivṛtti* ideals, but not yet accomplished enough to achieve it themselves. This would seem to be the case with Vyāsa, who coaches his son Śuka on *nivṛtti* ideals but later, lamenting his loss and seeking to follow his itinerary through the high heavens, discovers to his embarrassment that he is not advanced enough to replicate Śuka's success (XII.320.29–30).²²

A second archetypal *vanaprasthin* is the *brāhmaṇa* who marries and then sets up a home away from the presses of the village. He is thus both householder and *vanaprasthin* simultaneously. This is the most common variety of *vanaprasthin* encountered in the MBh. The famous seven sages of Vedic lore might be said to represent this type: all the Bhārgavas, Agastya, Vasiṣṭha, Viśvamitra, and others make their homes in the forest, living a simple eremitic existence while engaging in their duties as priests and Vedic teachers. Intimately involved in the intrigues of the gods and the *asuras*, they often operate as advisers or counselors to one or the other side in the battle for universal sovereignty. These figures are most obviously modeled on the *ṛṣis* of ancient Vedic lore. Most often, they reinforce Vedic paradigms rather than *śramāṇika* ones²³ and are cited as the progenitors of the *pravṛtti* tradition, exemplifying Vedic values. They are idealized as forest-dwelling creatures, eking subsistence out of the simple fare of the forest, often suffering pecuniary hardship.

A third archetype of the *vanaprasthin* is the one who retires to the forest in the third stage of life, after having lived a rich life in society. This *vanaprasthin* is almost always aged, and almost always *kṣatriya*; Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Bṛhadaśva, Yayāti, Śibi, and various other kings all retire to the forest in the twilight of their royal careers. *Brāhmaṇas* in the *Mahābhārata* are most often *originally* forest-dwellers and do not undertake *vanaprasthya* as a stage of life. Exceptions are those who serve as ministers and advisers to kings, figures such as Kṛpa or Dhaumya, who accompany their lieges wherever they go.

There are thus at least three distinct types of *vanaprasthins* operating in the forest, if we do not include all the figures whose presence is clearly anomalous—such as kings deprived of their kingdoms, exiled heirs, and disenchanted others: figures such as Nala, Satyavat, and the Pāṇḍavas themselves are almost always *kṣatriya*. Only one of these types, the third, undertakes *vanaprasthya* as a stage of life, and this appears to be a *kṣatriya* pursuit. Otherwise, the forests are clearly the turf of *brāhmaṇas* who reside there permanently. Among these, some raise families and are actively engaged in ritual activities. Others, in the first category, engage in ritual but

are mentally and spiritually inclined toward *nivṛtti* goals. Hence they occupy a liminal and uneasy space between Vedic and *śramaṇa* worlds.

All of these types, however, engage in asceticism to varying degrees, and asceticism always involves a negotiation of sexuality. More on this below.

Samnyāsa

The third form of asceticism is that of the *parivrajaka*, also known as the *saṃnyāsin*.²⁴ He is the one who renounces familial ties and social values and undertakes a radical pursuit of individual soteriological goals.²⁵ The defining features of the world renouncer in ancient and medieval Indian asceticism may be summarized as follows: (1) cutting social and kinship ties; (2) living an itinerant life without a fixed home; (3) mendicancy associated with the abandonment of socially recognized economic activities and the ownership of property, especially of food; (4) abandoning ritual activities customary within society; and (5) celibacy.²⁶

Pāṇḍu provides us with a good description of *saṃnyāsa*, before he, at the persuasion of his wives, forsakes it as an option.

I shall unflinchingly yoke myself to harsh austerities. Ever alone, each single day under a different tree, I shall beg my food. A shaven mendicant, covered with dirt, sheltering in empty spaces, or sleeping at the foot of a tree, I shall traverse this earth. I shall renounce all that is dear and hateful, I shall neither grieve nor rejoice, I shall remain balanced before praise and abuse, without blessings, without greetings, without choices, without possessions. I shall make fun of no one, frown at nothing, always sweet-spoken, delighting in the welfare of all creatures. I shall never offend any of the four orders of moving and unmoving beings, remaining always equal-minded to all breathing creatures, as though they were my children.

I shall beg my food one time a day of seven families. If there are no alms to be had when they themselves go hungry, I shall take whatever food they offer, a little every time, whatever I receive first. When the seven are done, I shall never beg more, whether I received anything or not. If a man hacks off my arm with a hatchet, and another anoints the other arm with sandalpaste, I shall neither think well of one, or ill of

the other. I shall do nothing out of a will to live, or a will to die; I shall neither welcome life, nor turn away death. All the rites for prosperity that the living can perform, I shall pass them all by, when I come to their instants and dates. At all times, I shall forsake all that makes the senses work, give up duties and cleanse all the grime of my soul. (I.110.7–18, van Buitenen's translation)

The Śāntiparva describes further the life of the *saṃnyāsin*. His life of renunciation is based on the Upaniṣads. He undertakes renunciation when, as a *vanaprasthin*, he is weak from old age and physical ailments. He enters the next stage of life by removing his hair and nails and purifying himself with various acts. Being detached from every object of the senses he meditates on the *ātman* and performs the *ātmayajña*. He takes five or six morsels of food, after offering them to the vital breaths (*prāṇas*) while reciting the *mantras* from the Yajurveda. He lives alone. He does not have a permanent residence. He enters the villages only for begging food. The *saṃnyāsin* is a refuge to all creatures. He is of virtuous conduct. He has realized the *ātman*. He is freed from all sins, and feelings of anger and delusion. He is not interested in action for the sake of this world or the next world. He has neither friends nor enemies. He has subdued his senses. He lives in this world unconcerned about anything. Eventually he attains eternity (XII.236).

In *saṃnyāsa*, individuals formally renounce the world and practice *nivṛtti* ethics in a focused and serious way. In the *pravṛtti* tradition, where *saṃnyāsa* is conceived as the fourth and final stage of life, *saṃnyāsa* is limited to males of the upper three castes, and has a sacrament that marks its beginning. In the *nivṛtti* tradition, where *saṃnyāsa* is undertaken as a vocation, the rules are hazy. It is unclear, for example, what qualifies one for *saṃnyāsa* (*adhikāra*), or what rituals, if any, mark the entry into the life of a *saṃnyāsin*. Some narratives would suggest that *saṃnyāsa* may be undertaken without formal ritual—as, for example, in the case of Vyāsa's son, Śuka, whose progress toward *mokṣa* is described in several chapters of the Śāntiparva.²⁷ Others, however, show *saṃnyāsins* with the formal appurtenances of renunciators, such as begging bowl, robes, and staff. This is the case with Sulabhā (see below).

Samnyāsa also is treated both as a stage of life and as a vocation. The Kaurava minister Vidura undertakes *saṃnyāsa* toward the end of his life. When the Pāṇḍavas visit their elders in the forest, they are informed that Vidura has wandered off into radical homelessness. He is also described as

being naked (*digvāsā*) and covered with dirt (XV:33.15–29). Since wandering without clothing, the last vestige of civilizational life, was a practice of certain sects, Brahminical and Jain, it is possible to suppose that Vidura had become initiated into a particular sect during his last years of life. In other contexts, *saṃnyāsa* appears to have been undertaken as a vocation. The perpetually wrathful Durvāsas appears to be some variety of unclad *saṃnyāsin*. Śeśa, “the eldest and best of snakes,” is said to have devoted himself to *nivṛtti* practices from the very beginning (I.32.2ff); and Devāpi, Śaṃtanu’s elder brother, “while still a child, entered the forest” (I.90.48). In the *nivṛtti* interpretation of *saṃnyāsa*, the word *saṃnyāsin* implies not an elderly person who abandoned householder life after having raised children and ensconced them into their own families; it denotes simply somebody who has renounced the world, and yields no information about age, children, family, and so forth.

Mahāvratā

The fourth form of asceticism is more squarely teleological, aimed at the achievement of particular ends, such as children, power, and sovereignty. This type of asceticism is apparently preceded by the declaration of a vow (*vratā*) that binds the individual to certain rules, necessitating certain conduct while barring others. We might therefore refer to it as the asceticism of a *mahāvratin*, one who is formally undertaking a course of action for a limited period of time. This is by far the most extreme form of asceticism practiced in the *Mahābhārata*. These ascetics appeal to the deity, and then perform superhuman feats of asceticism, involving hyperbolic acts of self-mortification, such as standing on one toe with one’s hands raised high amid five blazing fires in the roaring heat of summer. Through these acts of self-mortification, ascetics hope to impress the deity and win his or her favor. The deity will then grant them their desired boons. Perhaps surprisingly, this type of asceticism is very common in the *Mahābhārata* and is practiced by every variety of being: *rākṣasas*, *dānavas*, *asuras* of all kinds; human beings, animals, birds. Kṛṣṇa is seen to practice it, for the birth of a son (XIII.15.4–6); Arjuna practices it for the acquisition of weapons (III.39.10ff.); Viśvāmitra practices it to become a *brahmārṣi* (I.165.40ff.), and Maṭaṅga practices it to become a *brāhmaṇa* (XIII.129.1–16). Different sages routinely practice it, as do the *asuras*. This kind of *mahāvratā*-based asceticism is therefore extremely common.

Such asceticism is most often a *pravṛtti* pursuit, involving an initiation and a period of practice that ends on acquisition of the desired goal.²⁸ It may also be a *nivṛtti* activity, however, depending on the goals that one aims to achieve. For example, while this kind of asceticism is generally practiced for the attainment of worldly goals, it may also be practiced in the spirit of *bhakti*, seeking not a temporal end but a spiritual one. This is suggested, for example, in the lengthy *Śāntiparva* hymn offered to the god Śiva.

Differences Between *Pravṛtti* and *Nivṛtti* Uses of Asceticism

One significant difference between the asceticism of *pravṛtti dharma* and the asceticism of *nivṛtti dharma* is that in addition to the other ways in which ascetic activity is routinized, regulated, and moderated in *pravṛtti dharma*, there are numerous rules pertaining to qualification, or *adhikāra*, for ascetic activity. In *pravṛtti dharma*, asceticism, and the *āśrama* scheme into which it is interjected, are both explicitly limited to males of the three upper castes. Women and *śūdras* do not qualify for ascetic activity, particularly in its more pristine forms during the *brahmacharya* stage of life and the *saṃnyāsa* stage of life. Women are sacramentally inducted into the system through marriage, but their role is supportive rather than primary. They assist their husbands in the fulfillment of their domestic duties, and may be permitted to accompany their husbands in the *vanaprasthya* stage, at the latter's prerogative.²⁹ They are not acknowledged in any independent way within the *āśrama* scheme.³⁰ *Śūdras* do not participate in the *āśrama* system at all, since they do not receive any of the sacraments. Their claim to the system is summarily dismissed, as illustrated in a story of the *Anuśāsanaparva*. A *śūdra*, seeking learning, approaches one guru after another for instruction, but is rejected by all. Finally, one *brāhmaṇa* accepts him as a disciple. The *śūdra* thus acquires an education in the sacred texts, and as a result is reborn into more promising circumstances in his next life. The *brāhmaṇa* who instructed him, however, suffers negative *karmic* consequences in his next life, and is significantly demoted in status (XIII.10.3ff.). A more brutal story is recounted in the Uttarakāṇḍa of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *śūdra* youth *Śāmbūka* offends against the natural order by practicing austerities. Through his transgressive activities, he is alleged to have caused the premature death of a *brāhmaṇa*'s son. For his temerity, he is summarily executed by Rāma, and the world is thus said to be restored to order (*Rām.*, VII.76, MBh.XII.149.62). The moral of the story is

the same in both instances: *sūdras* (and women) do not have the *adhikāra* to pursue traditional ascetic activities. These are the exclusive privilege of twice-born manhood. The renunciant orders of later Hinduism instituted similar restrictions. The majority of the lineages of the Daśanāmis, for example, to this day observe sex and caste restrictions.³¹

In the relatively unregulated asceticism found in the *nivṛtti* tradition of the *Mahābhārata*, however, no such restrictions are apparent. Both women and *sūdras* are found among *nivṛtti* renunciators in the text. Some of these characters are discussed below.

Male Ascetics and Sexual Transgression

One final note about male asceticism in the *Mahābhārata*. From the context, we can determine that much of the advice alerting men to the hazards of dealing with women is directed at novice *saṃnyāsins* such as Śuka, renunciators who are about to undertake the goal of *mokṣa* with earnestness. In the text, however, it is not *saṃnyāsins* who are most in need of this advice. Accounts of *saṃnyāsins*, in fact, are highly idealized. At the point that Śuka departs the world, for example, he has no interest in women. He is not at all tempted, even though he is surrounded by a veritable bevy of beauties in Janaka's court (XII.312.35 ff.). Similarly, there is no question of Mudgala becoming tempted by the charms of women. He has a clear sense of what is permanent and what is impermanent, and does not hesitate to dismiss even the pleasures of heaven as being unworthy of his exertions (III:247.1–44).³² Accounts of *saṃnyāsins*, therefore, are more idealistic than realistic and do not give us a good sense of what the real challenges may have been for male ascetics. The only subgroup of ascetics we see seriously challenged by sexual desires is that of the *vanaprasthins*. Moreover, it is not that of the *ḥṣatriya vanaprasthins* who adopt forest life as a stage after concluding *garhasthya* responsibilities. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Śibi, and others, for example, are never seen in sexual encounters after their retirement to the forest; they are depicted as being elderly, and beyond such concerns at their time of life. The ascetics who find themselves in sexual situations, and often, are the *brāhmaṇa vanaprasthins* of the first and second categories, who reside in the forest as a vocational lifestyle. There are many, many occasions of male *vanaprasthin* ascetics, traveling through the forest, being stimulated by the sight of a woman sporting in the water, or an *apsarā* passing by, with her skirt blown aside by the wind. Vyāsa is very obviously excited (*kāmamohita*) by the

image of the *apsarā* Ghṛtācī while he was performing the offices of a *hotṛ*, and he suffers some embarrassment for this (XII.311.1–8). Droṇa is the result of his father Bharadvāja’s excitement over the *apsarā* Ghṛtācī; he ejaculated on a reed (I.121.3–4). Kṛpa and Kṛpī were born by the same means. Their father, Gautama, became aroused at the sight of the *apsarā* Jalapādi, who had been sent to distract him (I.120.7–14). The *vanaprasthin* sage Parāśara became stimulated at the sight of Satyavatī rowing across the river (I.57.56–64). Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was born when his father, Vibhandaka Kaśyapa, was titillated by the sight of the *apsarā* Urvaśī (III.110.14). Śrūvavatī was born when ṛṣi Bharadvāja’s passions were stirred at seeing Ghṛtācī (IX.47.57); Sarasvat was born when ṛṣi Daḍhīci ejaculated into the Sarasvatī, after becoming excited on seeing Alambuṣā (IX.50.5–9). In the heavens, even the priestly god Brahmā, who represents the idealized form of *vanaprasthin* sages, is said to have been aroused by the sight of Dīkṣā and her sisters, to the extent that he discharged his semen into the fire³³ (XIII.85.8). The group, therefore, that appears to be most susceptible to sexual interludes are the *vanaprasthins* who have lived in the forest for generations.

Sexuality in Nivṛtti Dharma

One element common to all varieties of asceticism is the control of sexuality; as noted in the previous chapter, this is the single most fundamental credential of the ascetic life. In this context, women represent a special challenge. This is either stated outright, or implied in many of the passages of the text. One such passage states, “Women lead [men], ignorant or wise, again and again down the wrong path, in the control of lust and anger. The nature of women is such that it is harmful to men. Therefore, the wise do not delight in women”³⁴ (XIII.48.36–37). In another passage, we hear that “they are demons who go about with wondrously beautiful forms. They are incomparably beautiful and very cruel, and always connive to destroy austerities”³⁵ (III.113.1). Yet another advises that for a man who practices *brahmacharya*, “the stories of women are not to be heard. Nor are they to be seen naked. At any time, from the very sight of them,” it is explained, “the weak are afflicted with passion”³⁶ (XII.207.12). The negative link between women and asceticism thus seems firmly established. Women are “terrifying magical illusions,” the text tells us. “They confound the ignorant”³⁷ (XII.206.9).

These statements are relatively common in the text, and capture well the sense of caution that teachers hope to instill in male ascetics toward

women. It is further evident that the problem with women hinges exclusively on sexual provenance. It is not simply that women are a disturbance; it is that women exercise enough sexual appeal to derange men and fill them with passion. This is why men are advised specifically not to look at undressed, sexually exposed women. The fear is of their power to attract men to them sexually. It is female sexual attractiveness that is threatening, that represents peril to male ascetics.

Male Perceptions of Female Sexuality in *Nivṛtti Dharma*

Female sexuality is a menace to male ascetics for a variety of reasons, and these are pondered at various points in the text. The most obvious reason is that desire for a woman may distract a man from his ascetic engagements. Celibacy is crucial to ascetic practice, and *brahmacarya* of either variety is “difficult to practice” (*suduṣkaram brahmacaryam* XII.207.11). Enticed by desire for a woman, a man may become diverted from his ascetic purpose, and yield to his bodily wants. While the occasional lapse may not appear to be a serious problem, there is the danger that a man’s attraction for a woman may pull him into a full-scale reimmersion into worldly life. That would be a much bigger calamity. A man may become seduced again into the pleasures of worldly life, and without being cognizant of it, slide into the rhythms of domesticity. Trapped again in the sinewy snares of children and dependents, a man may find himself out of the running for *nirvāṇam* for yet another lifetime. One passage in the text analyzes this process. It says: “Because of the keen desire men have for women, children are born from them.” Children are a special danger, because once one becomes entwined in their affections, one may lose conviction in the self-denial necessary for the *nivṛtti* path. A wise man is advised, therefore, to “Cast off those vermin born of one’s body, made as if of one’s limbs and one’s consciousness. Cast off those leeches whom one regards as one’s children, born of oneself and one’s mind” (XII.206.9–10). “Sons, family, community life all lead one to the realm of rebirth”³⁸ (XII.290.67). One should steer studiously clear of them. It is a commonplace assurance that, “When one is freed of the many strong nooses created by children and [worship of] gods, one abandons happiness and sorrow and is free, having attained the highest end”³⁹ (XII.212.45). One of the reasons to avoid sexual contact with woman, therefore, is to avoid a relapse into domesticity.

Sexual intimacy with a woman also has more subtle and adverse consequences for a male ascetic. This is because of the theory of *tapas*. In the

Mahābhārata, as in most Indian texts, the fundamental logic of ascetic pursuit is that by performing stern austerities, beginning with the rigid restraint of one's sexual urges, one generates a heat, or energy, called *tapas*, which can be harnessed and manipulated. This internal heat is a by-product of one's ascetic practice, and grows steadily with the consistency and severity of one's austerities. Although it is only a by-product, it is nevertheless quite crucial, for it is this energy that then can scorch the seeds of *karma* so that they no longer sprout into life. With this energy, visualized as an intense and potent blast of heat, one can burn through the *karma* that keeps one captive in *samsāra*, and catapult oneself to the other side, the side of *mokṣa*, where there is no more rebirth. *Tapas*, therefore, is a precious and coveted bank of energy. When not being employed for burning up one's *karmic* bonds, it translates into a power to perform outstanding feats—incinerate offenders to ashes, transform them into reptiles, raise people from the dead, and so forth. This is why the curse of ṛṣis and long-time ascetics is so dreaded, because through the course of many years of rigorous observance, ascetics have such an accumulation of *tapas* that they can radically alter people's lives.

It is important to note that the practice of *nivṛtti dharma* demands restraint of *all* of one's raw emotional impulses. This is a fact that often goes unappreciated; *any* form of intense self-discipline generates *tapas*, and conversely, any departure from self-discipline results in a depletion of *tapas*. The *Gītā*, for example, identifies three key areas where self-control is imperative, in the combination *rāgadveśakrodha* (BG III.34, 37). In this formula are found the three most persistent sources of *karmic* bondage: *rāga*, “love/attachment/passion/lust”; *dveśa*, “hatred/animosity/resentment/vengefulness”; and *krodha*, “anger.” Mastery over *rāga* seems to get the most emphasis in the epic, perhaps because it makes for colorful stories, and because it is the most obvious source of challenge to ascetics. It is easy therefore to forget that *dveśa* and *krodha* are just as pernicious, both from the point-of-view of personal self-cultivation and from that of accumulating the *tapas* necessary to “scorch the seeds of bondage.” Wrath is as futile as lust; both deplete *tapas* and implicate one in the world. The mastery of all of these is vital for the *nivṛtti* path. All of them, if controlled, harnessed, disciplined, yield energy and vigour (*tapas*). Conversely, all of them—lust, hatred, anger—if indulged, sap one's vitality and strength, diminishing both one's power of clear discernment and one's ability to perform extraordinary feats (such as that of leaping from *samsāra* to *mokṣa*). By yielding to the seductive temptations of anger or hatred, one destroys one's *tapas* just as quickly as by yielding to sexual desire.⁴⁰

That said, however, the most ready technique for accumulating *tapas* is through the control of one's sexual desires. The more formidable one's mastery over sexual urges, the more spectacular one's power. Conversely, the simplest means for sabotaging *tapas* is indulgence in sexual activity. This is why the gods spend so much time engineering sexual situations for ascetics. They lure the ascetics into sexual involvement with women, in the hope of expending the sages' cache of *tapas*. When the sages' energy is thus depleted through sexual activity, the sages no longer represent a threat to the gods, having lost their power.

For a male ascetic, sex is a particular hazard, because the physical loss of fluid experienced by a man in ejaculation most tangibly represents his diminution of ascetic energy. One statement in the *Śāntiparva* voices this concern: "Even in dreams, passion so churns the mind and thoughts [of men] that even without contact [with women], their sperm spills out of them"⁴¹ (XII.207.22). The squandering of semen is a senseless dissipation of the man's vital energy. This is why one of the explanations for the former prosperity of the Dānavas is that "they never took pleasure in the emission of their semen into empty space, into animals, into inappropriate wombs, or on sacred days"⁴² (XII.221.44). When they forsook these good habits, their sovereignty came to an end. Since women are invariably represented as the source of male sexual fantasy, they are easily targeted as culprits in causing this expenditure of semen; hence, in many narratives, women come to be condemned. In these ascetic narratives, women are simply sexual objects, and sex implies bondage to the world. "One who regards repeated births to be only due to sexual union with women is free"⁴³ (XII.277.28).

Female Personality in Male Ascetic Discourse

The above, then, is one angle on the relation of female sexuality to *nivṛtti dharma*. It represents male apprehensions of women's sexual power, and points to the fact that the female body is a rich source of sexual fantasy and stimulation for male ascetics. This is a sexuality that is externally ascribed to women. Women in this stream of dialogue are objectified as sexual beings, and male fears of female sexuality coalesce into a characterization of women that is primarily sexual.

The fact that female bodies are sexually objectified in male ascetic discourse is hardly surprising; feminist research on all ascetic traditions should lead us to anticipate precisely this development. Ascetics in all traditions

must overcome their sexual urges and learn to restrain their desire. The difficulties are two. One is that these statements assume a heterosexual male audience, leading one to conclude that all ascetics in the *Mahābhārata* are heterosexual men. This assumption is not borne out by the evidence of the text (see below). The other is that, typically, the problem is located not in male desire, but in woman herself. “According to *śruti*, women are frail and infirm. They are without rites and unrighteous”⁴⁴ (XIII.40.11); women are “intrinsically full of passion”; they are, in fact, “the eternal embodiment of the senses”⁴⁵(XII.206.9). Male ascetic antipathy for women is projected without reflection on women, so that it becomes not male desire for women that is the source of consternation, but women themselves. Women come to be viewed as being willfully seductive, willfully deceitful, bent on foiling the penances of men.⁴⁶

These male biases obtain a special boost from the Sāṃkhya presuppositions of the text. The *Mahābhārata* borrows much of its religious vocabulary from Sāṃkhya philosophy. This philosophy, as encountered in the *Mahābhārata*, proposes a set of dichotomies in which the masculine is identified with *puruṣa*, the indwelling eternal self of an individual. This *puruṣa* is envisaged as being submerged in the playfully enticing, mutating femininity of *prakṛti*. Woman symbolizes *kṣetra*, the world, the field of multiplicity and action, while man symbolizes *kṣetrajña*, the knower of the field, whose intrinsic wisdom penetrates through the diverse charms of *prakṛti* (XII.206.8). Being *kṣetra*, hence worldly and material, woman represents all that *samsāra* represents: pleasure, enjoyment, amusement, attraction; sense-addiction, passion, indiscipline, lust. She is naturally identified with the senses and the seductive lure of the world. The male ascetic, therefore, in order to achieve freedom from the world, must replicate in his own acts the clarity of the ancient *puruṣa*; he must disengage himself from the sinuous coils of womanhood, just as *puruṣa* must disengage from *prakṛti*. Just as the *puruṣa* shines through the—willfully?—obscuring fogs of *prakṛti* and emerges serene and distinct from her, the male ascetic must resist being overcome by womanhood, and divine himself to be the *kṣetrajña* that he intrinsically is. This constitutes his *śānti*, his final liberation.

The link between woman and the world in Sāṃkhya is so tenacious as to seem organic. As one ecstatic soul, newly enlightened, joyously exclaims of *prakṛti*, “I will no longer live in the company of that which has for so long deceived me. Deceived by it, I, who am without transformation, considered myself to be constantly changing”⁴⁷ (XII.295.32). In the same manner, the male ascetic aspires to no longer be duped by womankind. In order to achieve

the cosmic aloofness of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*, he must cultivate a worldly aloofness from the daughter of *prakṛti*, namely woman. Since the primary dichotomy of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* is expressed within Sāṃkhya itself in gendered language, it is readily exploited to legitimate the prejudices of male ascetics. Thus, women are easily identified with the attractions of the phenomenal world, from the absorbing enclosures of which men must escape. “For this reason,” the poet concludes, “wise men should especially avoid [women]” (XII.206.8). This characterization of womanhood is taken for granted in the *nivṛtti*-inspired portions of the text.

It would be easy to assume from these reflections that asceticism in the *Mahābhārata* is a male-dominated business. A cursory reading of the text could certainly give this impression, because at first glance, the names of male ascetics far outnumber those of female. On closer examination, however, one finds that this is not the case. Both male and female ascetics inhabit the text. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to recall our detour through the nature of asceticism in the *Mahābhārata*. The point that we are now ready to make is that every one of these forms of asceticism is practiced by women as well as by men.

Women and Asceticism

That a tradition of female asceticism existed in ancient India has been noted by scholars. “There is overwhelming evidence . . . for the existence even within the Brahmanical tradition of independent female ascetics”; “Early Sanskrit grammatical literature records several names for female ascetics.”⁴⁸ Similarly, “We have ample evidence that there were female ascetics in India in the past, and anyone acquainted with this country knows that there are still such persons today.”⁴⁹ These contentions are borne out by a methodical survey of women’s participation in the varieties of asceticism identified above.

Women as Brahmachāriṇīs

Beginning with *brahmacharya*, *brahmacharya* as an *āśrama* was by definition only open to boys of the upper three castes, and while there apparently were parallel rituals for girls in the past, they are not mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*.⁵⁰ The daughters of gurus may, however, have received some education, and may have been allowed to participate in the same activities as the

boys.⁵¹ In *Ādiparva*, for example, Devayānī seems to spend all her time with Kaca, a student and an ascetic (*sa brahmacārī ca tapodhanaśca* I.71.38). Śakuntalā, who grew up in her adoptive father Kaṇva's *āśrama* similarly appears in Duṣanta's court in the garb of an ascetic, and is termed an "evil ascetic" (*duṣtatāpasī*) by Duṣanta. Later, she is said to have "controlled the heat that she had accumulated with her austerities" (I.68.18, 22). In the *Ādiparva*, we are told that "Bṛhaspati's sister, the best of women, was a *brahmacāriṇī*, an adept in *yoga*, who, unattached, roamed the entire world"⁵² (I.60.26). She eventually married Prabhāṣa, the eighth *vasu*, and became the mother of Viśvakarman (I.60.26). Uddālaka's daughter Sujātā, similarly, grew up in the *āśrama* of her father, and married his pupil Kāhoḍa (III.132.7–20). These women grew up in forest hermitages, and may well have fallen into the life-patterns of male students, although they cannot be said to have practiced *brahmacarya* as a formal *āśrama*.

We do however, find unambiguous references to women who practiced *brahmacarya* as a vocation right from childhood. This includes Diśā, the aged ascetic whom Aṣṭāvakra encounters in the *Anuśāsanaparva*. She calls herself a *brahmacāriṇī* (*kaumāraṃ brahmacaryaṃ me* XIII.21.20), and is described as "an old and highly blessed ascetic, who lives in observance of a *dīkṣā*";⁵³ Aṣṭāvakra is advised to pay his respects to her on seeing her (XIII.19.24). Balarāma, on his pilgrimage, comes across a hermitage where lived a *brāhmaṇa* woman, "an adept, who had from youth led the life of *brahmacarya*. That ascetic, disciplined with *yoga* and perfect in austerities, went to heaven"⁵⁴ (IX.53.6). The same passage alludes to another woman, the daughter of Śāṇḍilya. "There was once a lady, a renouncer, the daughter of the great-spirited Śāṇḍilya. She was a self-restrained *brahmacāriṇī* of formidable vows. Having earned in her *āśrama* fruits equivalent to those of an *aśvamedha*, the radiant and blessed woman, possessed of the fruit of her efforts, went to heaven and was worshipped by the self-restrained high-souled ones"⁵⁵ (IX.53.8). There is also the daughter of the celebrated ascetic Kuṇigarga. "There was one auspicious and beautiful woman renouncer. Through the practice of tremendous and difficult austerities, she lived in her *āśrama* without fear. She, without father, disciplined, did not wish for a husband, but was unconcerned, never having seen a husband worthy of herself. So she continued with her strenuous ascetic activities, which caused pain to her body. She worshiped the gods and the *pitṛs*, and lived in the unpeopled forest"⁵⁶ (IX.51.5, IX.51.7–8). Śāṇḍilī, whom Gālava meets in the *Udyogaparva*, was apparently a *vanaprasthīn* ascetic living by herself and practicing austerities on Mt. Rṣabha (V.111.1ff). One may conclude, therefore, that while some privileged

young women may have enjoyed some of the benefits of *brahmacarya āśrama* as a stage of life, a period of discipleship directed at their fathers, most of the *brahmacāriṇīs* found in the text practiced sexual abstinence as a lifestyle, in conjunction in some cases with *nivṛtti* goals (see Sulabhā below).

Women as Vanaprasthinīs

In *vanaprasthya*-style asceticism, although the formal injunction to male householders is that they may proceed to the forest either with or without their wives (*sadāro vāpyadāro* XII.61.4), it seems that in most cases women *did* accompany their husbands, and sometimes, so did other women. While most texts on *vanaprasthya* suggest that in this stage a man abandons his wife, as in the *Upaniṣadic* paradigm of Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī, where the former gives his wives the choice of whether or not to accompany him, the MBh. says of *vanaprasthya* that “It is the mode in which wives emaciate themselves” (XII.236.2). Gāndhārī and Kuntī, for example, both accompany Dhṛtarāṣṭra in his retreat to the forest. In some cases, it appears that elderly widowed women retreated into the forest even on their own, without spouses. This is the case with the generation of Kaurava women preceding Kuntī and Gāndhārī. Satyavatī, Ambikā, and Ambālikā all set out together to retire to the forest. “They performed extraordinary austerities, and at last the ladies gave up their bodies, and went the chosen path”⁵⁷ (I.119.12). This appears to be a commonplace occurrence, because they are advised to do this by the sage Vyāsa himself: “Go now; leave everything. Yoke yourself and live in the forest of austerities . . .”⁵⁸ (I.119.7). Earlier, Kuntī and Mādrī had persuaded Pāṇḍu not to undertake *saṃnyāsa*, so that they might accompany him in *vanaprasthya*-style eremitism, which they did (I.110.25–28). In other cases, widowed women appear to have lived as ascetics in the forest, with their children. Kuntī, for example, after the Vāranāvata episode, assumes the guise of an ascetic (I.144.3). She could only have done this if there were enough of a tradition of female asceticism already established to make her disguise plausible. Similarly, the widow Gautamī appears to have lived with her young son in the forest (XIII.1.9ff.). Vasiṣṭha’s daughter-in-law Adṛṣyantī, left widowed and alone when Vasiṣṭha ventured off to kill himself in grief, continues by herself in the forest, and gives birth to her son, Parāśara (I.167.10ff.). In the same way, Mādhavī, the daughter of Yayāti, is said to “choose the forest as her husband” (V.118.5), and ventures forth into the forest completely by her-

self. Moreover, nobody attempts to dissuade her from her choice. After Kṛṣṇa's death, his wives depart to the forest (16.8.72). Four of Vasudeva's wives Devakī, Bhadrā, Rohinī, and Madirā prepare to mount his pyre and die with him (16.8.18.24), but Akrūra's wives go forth as wanderers (16.8.70). Rukminī and other named wives enter fire, but Satyabhāmā and others enter the forest (16.8.71–72).

It is in *vanaprasthya* practiced as a vocation, however, that we see the largest numbers of women. Their presence is not always obvious, but may be inferred from the fact that practically all of the sages and gurus were married. Viśvamitra alludes to his wife in the *Śāntiparva* (XII.139.27). Vasiṣṭha, in the *Ādiparva*, is seen with his wife and family (I.166–67). Various Gautamas are seen with their wives. The epic itself opens with the student Utaṅka striving to obtain earrings for his guru's wife, the Gautamī Ahalyā. All of the Bhārgavas are seen with their wives: Bhṛgu with Pulomā, Cyavana with Sukanyā, Ṛcīka with Satyavatī, Jamadagni with Renukā. These wives live and work with the men in the forest, and in some cases, engage in the same kind of ascetic activities. Arundhatī is praised by Mahādeva with the words: "The supreme perfection that has been acquired by the pure-minded Arundhatī, what this auspicious and committed one has achieved is greater than what has been achieved by you great ones, who also have bound yourselves to vows for my sake, over here"⁵⁹ (IX.47.47–49). Without food or water, she cooked food for Śiva, listening to his discourses, for twelve years, unperturbed even when the fire consumed her toes. Lopamudrā is similarly praised as an exemplary *vanaprasthya* wife, living in unembellished simplicity. The wives of the seven sages are depicted in various activities in the text. The princess Śāntā is said to have married Ṛśyaśṛṅga and lived with him in spartan modesty.

Not only wives, but entire families are seen with the male ascetics. Vasiṣṭha is shown in a *vanaprasthin* domestic scenario, with his widowed daughter-in-law and her child (I.166–67ff.). Uddālaka is seen in another scenario with his infant son and grandson (III.132.6–20). Kaṇva lives in the forest with his adopted daughter, Śakuntalā (I.65.1ff.). Śukra is a devoted and indulgent *vanaprasthin* father to his daughter, Devayānī (I.71.21ff.). Sthūlakeśa shares his hermitage with his adopted daughter, Pramadvarā (I.8.5ff.). Thus, the forest in the *Mahābhārata* is peopled with comparable numbers of men and women, practicing *vanaprasthya*-style modest asceticism as a vocation. The existence of women is not especially acknowledged, but is evident to anyone who takes a closer look.

Women in Saṃnyāsa

In the case of *saṃnyāsa* asceticism, it is worth making the point with some emphasis that women did renounce the world, and were apparently permitted and recognized as doing so.⁶⁰ This is evident in statements such as the following, which stipulates the kind of women who are not suitable for marriage. Among the types listed are women who have renounced the world (*pravrajitā* (XIII.107.124). Women clearly did involve themselves in *nivṛtti* practices. In these engagements, they are acknowledged as achieving success and perfection.

We have several examples of such women. The most obvious one is the *bhikṣuṇī* Sulabhā, found in the *Śāntiparva*. She is seen in the garb of an ascetic, and is said to be an itinerant *yoga*-practicing mendicant. Several other *saṃnyāsiniṣ* are mentioned in the *Śalyaparva*, along the *tīrthas* (pilgrimage sites) visited by Balarāma. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we encounter the *tapasvinī* Svayamprabhā (IV.52–53). (In the *Rāmopākhyāna* of the MBh., she is called Prabhāvatī III.266.41–42). In the *Uttarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, moreover, the sage Vālmīki informs Sītā that “Not far from my hermitage, there are many female ascetics established in pious practices” (VII.49). Mādhavī, in the *Udyogaparva* of the MBh. appears to have wandered into homelessness (V.118.5). Although we have fewer details here, Piṅgalā, the fallen woman who gains true realization upon the death of her lover, appears to have wandered off into homelessness.

Women as Occasional Ascetics

Finally, there are many examples of women undertaking *mahāvratas* or extreme ascetic practices directed toward finite goals. Umā undergoes exacting rigors to obtain Śiva for her husband. Ambā displays dogged determination in her austerities, undertaken to accomplish the death of Bhīṣma (V:170–97). Draupadī, in a previous birth, emaciates herself in *tapas* to acquire a good husband (I:157.6–10), Śrīvavatī lives as a *brahmacāriṇī* and conducts penances to obtain Indra for her husband (IX.47.1–55).

Women thus dot the pages of asceticism as much as do men. They are given less importance, and this may be for various reasons. Men traveled more, providing ritual services for patrons, and had more prominent roles to play even in ascetic life, as gurus and teachers and priests. Women tended the

household, and supported their husbands in the simplicity in which they lived, when they were not independently practicing austerities themselves.

The fact of female asceticism should not in fact surprise us, because there is a well-established tradition of female asceticism recalled in classical Hindu mythology. The goddess Pārvatī is the mythic paradigm of the woman ascetic whose austerities were so fierce as to terrify the gods. The reverence inspired by her formidable powers seems to reverberate in the text in the accounts of *tapasvinīs*. Not only is women's capacity for asceticism, and their ability to unpack the lofty subtleties of the most rarefied truths valorized at the conceptual level, but asceticism is treated as the fair domain of women. Women who do enter into ascetic activities, even though they may be vastly outnumbered by men, are admitted and inducted into ascetic practice, and trained by male gurus. Moreover, their prerogative to engage in these activities, their *adhikāra*, is supported by their male colleagues, at least as far as we can gather from the narratives. The ferocious ambitions of Ambā, for example, are supported by the sages of the forest, even though they are explicitly geared toward the negative end of wreaking revenge on Bhīṣma. Ambā is mentored by the forest sages, said to formally renounce the world (*pravraja*), and is instructed in the methods of renunciation (V:176–88).

The point of the above demonstration is to illustrate that, at least in the imagination of the author(s) of the *Mahābhārata*, the forests were populated by both men and women. Both men and women were engaged in practicing moderate and extreme degrees of ascetic life. Yet, it is only women who are held up as hindrances to ascetic practice, reflecting the male perspective that characterizes the text. The sexual challenges facing women ascetics are neither seriously imagined nor treated. But what of women's sexual desires? Did women ascetics not face the challenges of sexual temptation? Do male bodies play a parallel part in the endeavors of women ascetics, as female bodies play for men?

Women Ascetics and Sexual Desire

There is no shortage of didactic injunctions to women, exhorting them to protect their chastity. These are commonplace in the text. For the most part, however, these statements are directed at maintaining the sanctity of *pravṛtti dharma*. There are very few directions addressing women occupied with *nivṛtti* contemplations. As Lynn Teskey Denton remarks about contemporary

female ascetics, “If we know little about the spirituality of the average householder woman, we know even less about women who are not householders but whose lives are fully religious.”⁶¹ What information we can glean about the lives of women ascetics, therefore, we must infer from the general ascetic norms that seem to be in existence, and from particular events. A preliminary overview of the accounts of female ascetics and sexuality suggests that women replicated the patterns of male ascetics. The accounts of *saṃnyāsiniḥ* and what I have dubbed *mahāvratā* women ascetics, like those of men, tend to be highly idealistic. Therefore, we rarely find a *saṃnyāsini* or occasional *tapasvini* deterred from her focus by sexual desires. It is only among *vanaprasthin* women, and young *brahmacāriṇiḥ* that we find sexual challenges and slips. Even there, it is only *vanaprasthins* who live out their lives in the forest, rather than *vanaprasthins* by *āśrama* who experience sexual temptation.

From what we can gather about *saṃnyāsini* women ascetics from the few who are mentioned by name, we can surmise that women only embarked on ascetic practice once they had achieved a level of conviction about their domestic or sexual lives. We can look at four short vignettes to understand this better. The first is that of Piṅgalā.

Piṅgalā

Piṅgalā is said to be a courtesan whose lover dies tragically in an accident. “At that time of great anguish, she achieved wisdom and tranquility” (XII.168.47). Realizing in those moments of grief that the only enduring love is that of the Self within her, she resolved to hone her insight with further knowledge.

I am free of desire. [Human lovers], who are really embodied forms of hell, destroy one with their desirable appearances. They will never again deceive me! I am awake, restored to consciousness. I am endowed with true wisdom, I am without purpose, I am unmoved by worldly objects. Happiness and sadness have gone; being without hopes is the highest happiness. Having driven off hope and discouragement, Piṅgalā sleeps in tranquility.⁶² (XII.168.50–52)

In this song, Piṅgalā recounts her encounter with the divine. She experiences the liberating insight of what is true reality, and as a consequence, all of her earthly desires naturally fall away from her. Thus, where she had been

caught in the trap of sexual and emotional attachments before, they no longer affect her, for she has moved beyond them. Now she sees human lovers as “hell personified,” and refuses to be “deceived” by them any longer.

Piṅgalā’s language describing male lovers wholly parallels the statements about women lovers in the discourses of male ascetics. Just as women lovers are represented as being deceitful and lustful in male discourses, male lovers are here represented as hellish beings, deceitful and lascivious, diversions from the true reality. Desire for them must be overcome in order for a woman to become free.

Interestingly, in Piṅgalā’s song, the supreme soul is described in masculine terms, as a lover, a woman’s “dear lord” (*kāntam*), by the side of whom a woman has always lain. He is the one lord worthy of love, whom most women do not, unfortunately, recognize: “What woman is there who holds this [the Supreme Soul] as her lover and loves it, even when it comes near?”⁶³ (XII.168.49). Piṅgalā regrets that she, too, had been in that state of error: “I have for a long time lived, agitated, beside this dear love, in whom there is nothing but calm tranquility, but unable to reach him”⁶⁴ (XII.168.48). Now she has awoken, and identified her true love. The sexual motifs of her *pravṛtti* life are carried over into *nivṛtti* to characterize her relationship with the divine. The Supreme Soul is thus visualized as her male lover. The obverse is not true in the confessionals of male ascetics. There, the Supreme Self continues to be described as masculine, but the imagery is nonsexual. This is congruent with the gendered language of Sāṃkhya, in which *puruṣa* is always associated with the masculine.

Kuṇigārgyā

The story of Kuṇigārgyā is related in the *Śalyaparva*. After the death of her father, this young woman remained in the forest, undergoing strenuous acts of *tapas*. She never married, because she could never find a man who was worthy of her. Yet, we are told, she was happy! (IX.51.9). She practiced austerities for a long time, until she was so old that she could no longer get about on her own. When she prepared to cast off her body, however, she was asked by the sage Nārada “how can a girl who has never cultured herself [through marriage] enter heaven?” (IX.51.11).⁶⁵ Not to be deterred, Kuṇigārgyā offered half her austerities to any man who would marry her. One man, Śṛṅgavān, agreed, on the condition that she only live with him for one night. Much to his consternation, however, on their wedding night, she transformed

herself through her *tapas* into a beautiful young woman, making him instantly regret the condition that he had placed on their marriage. The next morning, she shed her body and proceeded to heaven, leaving her husband so distraught that he, in an extraordinary reversal of the *satī* paradigm, cast off his own body and followed her to heaven (IX.51.3–23).

In this anecdote, we see the woman ascetic in a position of spiritual power. She yields to the worldly prejudices of both Nārada and her husband, but in such a way as to illustrate their hollowness. She agrees without argument to marry, but marries only to observe the formal letter of the rule. Then, she overturns her husband's prejudices about her age by appearing as a beautiful young woman on their wedding night. She is so beautiful, in fact, that Śṛṅgavān is led to abandoning his own life, to join her in heaven. Both men in this narrative are depicted as being held captive to *samsārika* values. Kuṇigārgyā foils the biases of both, and emerges as the most enlightened of the three.

Śāṅḍilī

Śāṅḍilī is a character who makes a brief appearance in the *Udyogaparva*. She is cast as a *brāhmaṇa* woman who lives alone on a peak of Mount Rṣabha, doing solitary acts of *tapas*. One day, when the *brāhmaṇa* Gālava and his friend, the mighty bird Garuḍa, stop there for the night, she greets them hospitably, and offers them food. Before falling asleep, Garuḍa considers the idea of abducting the “sorceress” (*siddhā*) for her magic powers. On awaking, he finds that his wings have fallen off. Reflecting that this is the result of the injurious thought harbored the night before, he apologizes to Śāṅḍilī, and she forgives him. “Innocent of any blemishes and blameless in my ways, I have embraced strict conduct, and thus achieved the highest perfection,”⁶⁶ she tells him (V.111.14). She restores the bird's wings to even greater grandeur, and sends the two off with the parting words: “Never despise a woman, even if she is despicable”⁶⁷ (V.111.16). This is a very minor episode in the larger body of the text, but it is an interesting one. Śāṅḍilī is depicted as a hermit recluse, engaged in acts of self-mortification. She is said to be an accomplished and enlightened sage. But when men attempt to trifle with her, assuming her to be a woman and therefore quaint and not to be taken seriously, she reveals her powers to them. Garuḍa is grounded from flight, and must beg forgiveness before he can continue his journey. The question of sexual desire simply does not arise. Śāṅḍilī, like others of her stripe, has moved beyond the sway of sexual temptation, and is instead at the point of observing that the

sex of the *nivṛtti* striver is of no consequence. In these narratives, the women demonstrate that sex is no criterion of ascetic worth. Far from being befuddled in sensual preoccupations, as the stereotypes of women in the *Mahābhārata* would have it, these women illustrate that prejudices of gender are markers of spiritual naïveté in the *nivṛtti* path. A truly enlightened being will have transcended them.

Sulabhā

Possibly, the most relevant female figure to this discussion is the *tapasvinī* Sulabhā. Sulabhā is explicitly described as a *bhikṣuṇī*, a renouncer: “In the age of *dharma*, there was a mendicant woman named Sulabhā, who wandered over the whole earth practicing *yogadharma*”⁶⁸ (XII.308.7). Having heard much in her travels about the sagacity of the king of Mithilā, she decides to test him. “Doubting whether [Janaka] had been freed into *dharma*, Sulabhā, endowed with *yoga*-power, entered his mind with her own”⁶⁹ (XII.308.16). Through her *yogic* powers, she enters into his body. The king senses her presence, and objects. Amid much high-flung discourse, he berates her for the impropriety of her conduct as an ascetic: “The triple stick is not for one who is attached to desire; it is for one who is devoted to *mokṣa*. It is not protected by you. Fair one, you are not liberated”⁷⁰ (XII.308.56). He goes on to advise her that, “You are a *brāhmaṇa* woman, belonging to the highest caste. I am a *kṣatriya*. There can be no union for us. One should not cause an intermixture of classes”⁷¹ (XII.308.59). He calls her actions sinful. Sulabhā responds with discourse on the metaphysical truths of the universe. Gārgī-like, she asks him a series of pointed questions. If, she says, as the religion holds, all beings are essentially one, their souls being of the same stuff, how is it possible for him to distinguish himself from her? What is his body, and what is hers? “If you see your body in your own body, and your soul in your own soul, why is it that you do not see your own body and your own soul in the bodies and souls of others?”⁷² (XII.308.126). How, therefore, can he ask the question: Who is she? What, after all, is the difference between him and her? His prejudices about gender and sexual conduct reveal that he is yet a novice, and far from wise in *nivṛtti dharma*. “What mark of freedom is there in one who fails to cast an equal eye on the agreeable and the disagreeable, on the weak, and the strong?”⁷³ (XII.308.130).

In this passage, Sulabhā is already an adept. She has excelled beyond the stage of sexual temptation, and is unconfounded by the riddles of sexual

ethics. In her lengthy discourse with the king, moreover, she pronounces what may be the last word on sexuality in the ideals of the *nivṛtti* tradition: that the differences between genders exist only at the level of lower, worldly knowledge. A truly enlightened person knows that there is no essential basis for prejudice between male and female, for both are of the same stuff. Only one uninitiated in the higher truths would be confused by it. In this kind of resolute self-confidence and deep insightfulness, Sulabhā is typical of *Mahābhārata samnyāsini* ascetics. By the time that we meet them, issues of sexual temptation have long been resolved.

In these episodes, we see women ascetics speaking not to issues of sexual temptation, but to those of sexual prejudice and stereotyping. They themselves personally are beyond being lured into sexual involvement. What we do see them doing, however, is tackling the sexual chauvinism of men. In these vignettes, women are positioned as the instructors of the men. They reveal to the men their sexual preconceptions, which are incompatible with the practice of *nivṛtti dharma*, and which represent lower levels of knowledge. At the highest level of knowledge, differences of gender are inconsequential. In all of these situations, the women emerge as the more enlightened and adept of the two.

So much for *samnyāsini* ascetics; where we do see women struggling with their sexual desires is in the accounts of *vanaprasthins*. In this, they parallel the trend for male ascetics. The majority of both men and women who succumb to sexual temptation are *vanaprasthins*. Moreover, they are *vanaprasthins* by vocation, not by life stage. Thus, while older men who retire to the forest at the end of a long career are not shown to be sexually stimulated, neither are women. There is no question of Kuntī, Gāndhārī, Satyavatī, and others of their ilk being tempted to engage in sexual activity. There is a clear understanding that for both men and women, their sexual lives are over, and that they are now in the forest in pursuit only of their personal salvation. For both, it is only among ascetics who live *vanaprasthin* lifestyles as a vocation that we encounter occasions of sexual temptation.

It is in this light, I believe, that we should read the narratives of forest women who err sexually. We have the infamous story of Ahalyā, who willfully or innocently committed adultery with Indra (XII.258). We have Renukā, who became aroused at the sight of the king Citraratha sporting in the water with his wives, and thus committed adultery in thought (III.116.5–10). We have Ruci, the wife of Gautama, who apparently was tempted by the offers of Indra, but was restrained from acting on them. Among supernatural beings, we have Svāhā, who fornicated with Agni, after

impersonating the wives of seven seers. The primary difference between the indiscretions of male and female *vanaprasthin* ascetics is that whereas male sexual indiscretions are taken in stride, being at most the subject of amusement, female indiscretions amount to actual crimes. Thus, even though we know that the majority of the *vanaprasthin* sages are married, their sexual misadventures with other women are looked on with indulgence. Parāśara, Vyāsa, Gautama, and others suffer no disapprobrium for yielding to their sexual temptations, even to the point of fathering children. Women *vanaprasthin* ascetics, on the other hand, are sometimes treated quite harshly. Ahalyā earns herself unending notoriety in Hindu tradition, and is ordered by her husband to be killed (XII.258). In the *Rāmāyaṇa* account, she is turned into a stone. Renukā, for becoming momentarily aroused by the sight of the king Citraratha, is actually punished with death. She is killed by her own son, Rāma Jāmadagni, at the behest of his father. (She is later restored to life at the plea of the same son III.116.10–19.) Svāhā in her sexual escapades is accorded an uncommon indulgence for her impersonation of the sages' wives, but the wives are summarily abandoned by their husbands. Even when they are cleared of all suspicion, the sages refuse to reconcile with them (III.215.13).

Children?

While sexual desire is thus not a particular impediment for *tapasvinīs*, one is tempted to hypothesize that the pull of children may have been more compelling. Do children inhibit the ascetic labors of women, as enduring stereotypes would prompt? The narratives of women in the forests do not support this conclusion. In the *Āśramavāsikaparva*, Yudhiṣṭhira pleads with his mother Kuntī not to embark into the forest with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī. He, along with his brothers, begs her to stay, even threatening to use his royal privilege to forbid her from going. Kuntī, however, is undeterred. She had, she says, done her motherly duty by seeing them through to their final victory in the war. Now it was her time to devote herself to her own spiritual work: to prepare herself for death. She insists on entering the forest (XV.24). In another vignette, the loss of her only child could have distracted the elderly Gautamī from her ascetic practices. When her beloved son succumbs to death after being bitten by a snake, the hunter Arjunaka, anticipating the grief of Gautamī, offers to kill the murderous snake. With steely self-control, however, Gautamī resists. Insisting that the death of the snake will not bring her

son back, she urges the hunter to refrain from harming the snake, saying she will not act out of anger or revenge (XIII.1.9ff.). In these tellings, women display a moral and spiritual resolve that is characteristic of accomplished sages. They function here as exemplary figures, imparting instruction to others through their personal fortitude.

Conclusions

In concluding, it is necessary to entertain the question of what such data ultimately mean. If we have references to characters and narratives about women, to what extent can we take them as literary hyperbole, and to what extent should we assume they reflect historical reality? Isn't the very fact that we can enumerate them at all a testament that even if they reflect historical truth, they were exceptions among exceptions, served literary purposes rather than real, and no historical mileage should be drawn from literature, which by its very nature artfully bends reality and weaves fiction with fact? Olivelle seems to respond to this question: "These literary references do not necessarily demonstrate the historical reality of such female ascetics. What they do demonstrate is that in at least some segments of the Brahmanical tradition female asceticism was recognized as both legitimate and praiseworthy and that such women could choose to become ascetics on their own and not at the behest of their husbands."⁷⁴ As Khandelwal points out in another context, moreover, the conceptual importance of such images "far exceeds their statistical presence because of the way they problematize standard representations of both religious renunciation and gender in Hindu India."⁷⁵ Images have symbolic power. If nothing else, tales of women ascetics and renouncers represent paradigms of the independent religious practice of women, paradigms that generations of real women may draw on as resources to forge their own religious paths.

Thus what the above survey reveals is that in the imagined world of the *Mahābhārata*, there were numerous women active in *nivṛtti* preoccupations, if not always as radical renouncers, as ascetics of varying grades of ambition. If one were to draw some generalizations about women in the *nivṛtti* stream, one might say that in male ascetic discourse, women are sometimes cast in the role of temptresses, immersed in the sensual enjoyments of the material world. These discourses furnish us with some harsh statements belittling women's intelligence, their aptitudes, and their moral sense. There is, however, another trajectory of thought that may be recovered from the text, and it

evaluates women's aptitudes in a positive and balanced way. The text states unambiguously, for example, that "*Brahman* has no sex—it is not male, female, or neuter"⁷⁶ (XII.242.22). Women's aptitude for freedom is recognized in other statements, such as: "Whatever one's sex, male or female, the person who gains knowledge of *Brahman* has never to undergo rebirth"⁷⁷ (XII.242.23). In the chronicles of Sulabhā, Kuṇigārgyā, and others, women's full competence for assimilating the highest truths is affirmed. What's more, in these accounts, women are treated with a liberality and deference that is at marked odds with the condescension that characterizes attitudes to women in other parts of the text. Their moral direction is valued. In various instances, for example, women's guidance is actively sought. Gāndhārī is famously sought out by her husband and others in the Kaurava court for her quiet sagacity. The *brāhmaṇa* Satya's wife Puṣkaradhārīnī disapproves of her husband being addicted to cruel sacrifices, and admonishes him on the true meaning of *dharmic* ordinances. She is described as "pure-minded" (*śuciḥ*) and emaciated from *tapas* (*vratakr̥ṣā*) (XII.264.6). These assertions reinforce the conclusions that may be reached from pondering some of the parables of *tapasvinīs*. The exchange between Sulabhā and Janaka, for example, is transparently a narrative device to emphasize the point that as long as one still discriminates between self and other, and responds with prejudice to superficial attributes such as sex, one exhibits one's paucity of knowledge. True liberating knowledge is distinguished by its ability to transcend such differences. "By wisdom alone are the high and low among beings distinguished. By wisdom . . . was the creation of the universe. Wisdom alone is the highest end"⁷⁸ (XII.229.10). Wisdom is the only recognized determinant of accomplishment, and the narratives of women on the *nivṛtti* path attest that wisdom is not the preserve of one sex. Women's qualification and aptitude for liberation is affirmed in the ascetic strains of *nivṛtti* discourse.

This perspective is reinforced by the other methods of *nivṛtti* practice. The *karma yoga* path, for example, reiterates the point that liberation is available equally to men and women. "Whether a person belongs to a low caste, or is a woman who desires to follow *dharmā*, by following the path [of *yogic* equanimity], they will certainly achieve the final goal"⁷⁹ (XII.232.32). Similarly, we have the *bhakti yoga* endorsement from the *Gītā* where Kṛṣṇa declares, "Even people of low origins, women, *vaiśyas*, nay *śūdras*, go the highest course if they rely on me"⁸⁰ (BG.IX.32). In all varieties of *nivṛtti dharmā*, issues of sex, caste, and other markers of social consequence are of no account. Beings qualify for *mokṣa* in all of these methods by the earnestness of their efforts, not by birth.

This page intentionally left blank.