

Review

World of Wonders: The Work of Adbhutarasa in the Mahābhārata and the Harivaṃśa, by Alf Hiltebeitel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xxii + 343 pp., £64 (hb). ISBN 9780197538227 (hb).

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Alf Hiltebeitel, an inimitable, prolific, provocative, and highly influential scholar of the *Mahābhārata*, died in March 2023. This is the last of his books published during his lifetime. It purports to argue that the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa*, viewed as one text, have as their dominant *rasa* the *adbhuta-rasa*, the ‘flavour of wonder’. Hiltebeitel thus diverges from previous attempts to identify the *Mahābhārata*’s dominant *rasa* as *vīra-rasa*, the ‘flavour of heroism’, or *śānta-rasa*, the ‘flavour of serenity’. To substantiate his hypothesis, Hiltebeitel presents a 30-page chart of selected textual usages of certain keywords associated with the *adbhuta-rasa* (principally *adbhuta* itself, its near-synonym *āścarya*, and its concomitants *vismaya* and *vismita*, ‘surprise/d’). He then works through the chart, discussing the clustering of these words and the incidents and ideas thus highlighted. The first two chapters introduce the project and present the chart, and the remaining five focus on: events up to Yudhiṣṭhira’s coronation (Chapter 3); Bhīṣma’s teachings (Chapter 4); books fourteen and fifteen, which the *Mahābhārata*’s lists of contents describe as *mahādbhutam* and *sumahādbhutam*, respectively (1.2.210, 218; Chapter 5); books sixteen to eighteen (Chapter 6); and the *Harivaṃśa* (Chapter 7).

The idea that a literary work would have one *rasa* as its ‘presiding flavour’ (*aṅgī-rasa*) was not proposed until long after the *Mahābhārata* was composed. Hiltebeitel’s basic contention is thus somewhat anachronistic, as he admits (pp. 27–28). Hiltebeitel does not argue that the *Mahābhārata* has a single presiding flavour; this idea exists already, in a hypothetical, retrojected space, since in medieval Kashmir the *śānta-rasa* was added as a ninth *rasa* to the standard list of eight, and the literary theorists Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta thought that the *Mahābhārata* exemplified it in particular. Thus, in suggesting that the *Mahābhārata*’s presiding flavour is in fact the *adbhuta-rasa*, Hiltebeitel might have pursued a strategy of arguing against

those two scholars and their followers. But aesthetic judgments are not like academic ones, and so logical argumentation has a rather subdued role in this book's project. Hildebeitel does not attempt an analysis of every *rasa* in the *Mahābhārata*, or the development of a method that might somehow weigh such analyses in relation to each other and determine which *rasa* predominates. Instead, as its subtitle and the above chapter-summary suggest, this book is best read not as an argument for the dominance of *adbhuta-rasa*, but as a generous exploration of its play within the text.

Hildebeitel's survey takes in a variety of neglected passages and discusses them in unusual and interesting ways, and the effect is very thought-provoking. His analysis highlights the miracles performed by the three Kṛṣṇas (Vāsudeva, Draupadī and Vyāsa, whom the text repeatedly calls 'Vyāsa of miraculous deeds'), including the miracle of Draupadī's non-disrobing at the dicing match, which was 'the greatest wonder in the world' (2.61.42); the revival of the stillborn Parikṣit in book fourteen; and the brief revival of the fallen warriors in book fifteen. Hildebeitel explores the wondrous dimensions of the *Mahābhārata*'s stories with close attention to their effects upon the characters who hear about them. The stress upon internal reception is particularly salutary because the religious-studies scholars who will make up the book's main readership are liable to be somewhat blasé about the depiction of miracles within religious texts, and perhaps also affected by the history of European reception of Hindu stories, in which such aspects were sometimes dismissed as brahmin nonsense. The attention to the dialogical nature of the *Mahābhārata* is a corollary of the literary approach which Hildebeitel has fiercely championed in recent decades, and which now involves viewing the *Harivaṃśa* as the final part of the *Mahābhārata*, a development which is crucial to *World of Wonders*—climaxing as it does with a discussion of the *Āścarya-Upākhyāna* ('Subtale of the Wonder') at *Harivaṃśa* 100 (pp. 260–65)—and can be expected to result in further interpretive advances in future.

Hildebeitel's critics will find plenty of grist for their mill in this book, because although its impressionistic method and elliptical and autobiographical style are appropriate to its aesthetic project, they are also persistent aspects of Hildebeitel's recent work, and they may leave the reader at a loss to evaluate it. Hildebeitel proceeds on the basis of his own vastly informed response to the text, drawing freely from his back catalogue in sometimes lengthy or tenuous tangents that bring it to bear on the book's topic in ways that can frustrate and fascinate in equal measure. The book is dedicated to Hildebeitel's grandchildren, and some parts of it have the feel of a valedictory compilation. Hildebeitel forges connections between the *vīra-rasa* interpretation and his previous work on the South Indian 'Cult of Draupadī', the *Mahābhārata*'s Southern Recension, and the role of *ahimsā* in the text. He also forges connections between the *adbhuta-rasa* and his previous work on the divine plan, the three Kṛṣṇas, and *bhakti* (though he is at pains to point out that the latter is now being seen primarily in aesthetic

rather than theological terms). Readers will inevitably differ in how they weigh the sometimes rather circumstantial evidence that Hildebeitel presents; and although the chart of keyword occurrences in Chapter 2 provides an effective frame for the book, it is not representative—there are many usages of the keywords in Saṃjaya's narration of the war that are not in the chart and are hardly discussed (pp. 114–15)—and it is also departed from in Chapter 6, which depends upon 'unstated wonders and surprises' (p. 233) where the keywords are absent.

In other ways, too, the book does not make it easy for the reader. The chart in Chapter 2 will be referred to frequently, but it is not presented upright, and so the book has to be rotated through 90° repeatedly. Within the chapters, many subsections have titles such as 'Pause 2' or 'Addendum 4', without much indication of what they contain or why it would be so labelled. The book also suffers from a surfeit of typographical errors. I suspect this indicates that the author was in poor health when the proofs needed checking. Particularly astonishing are the misprints circa p. 289, where 'Viṣṇu' appears also as 'Viṣṇu', and then as 'Virad', 'Vior', 'Vi a', 'Vita', 'Vi Mo', 'Viy h', 'Vieap' and 'Vi h'. Truly a god of many forms!

This book cannot be recommended for undergraduate students or for Indologists relatively unfamiliar with the *Mahābhārata*, but it is stimulating throughout, and opens up new ways of thinking about the text. Perhaps surprisingly, it often does so simply by pointing out what the text says. Since the text is enormous, often known by hearsay alone, and easily misrepresented, this is an important strategy. With this book Hildebeitel has taken advantage of the artistic licence that his stature permits; but in so doing he has produced a last testament that reflects his intrepid character to a high degree, and that will be treasured by those whose interest in the *Mahābhārata* he has done so much to encourage and facilitate.