Article

‘Ka asi kasya asi, kalyāṇi?’ The Ambiguity of the yakṣas in the Arāñya Parva of the Mahābhārata

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Abstract: Supernatural entities are often described as ambiguous, but ambiguity is underdetermined and undefined. This article has a twofold goal: first of all, it constructs an ideal-type model for identifying and specifying ambiguity in supernatural beings; secondly, it examines the ambiguity of yakṣas in the Arāñya Parva of the Mahābhārata. This model for determining supernatural ambiguity utilizes five markers, which appear in either a positive or negative aspect: fulfilling or denying needs and desires; protecting or attacking humans; belonging to the same order as humans or rejecting this order; beautiful or hideous appearance; and living close by or far away from human communities. Four narratives are examined: the story of Nala and Damayanti, the First and Second War of the Yakṣas, and the story of the Drilling Woods. In all stories, each of the five markers are utilized to describe the yakṣas’ ambiguity. However, one should distinguish between ambiguity proper (when conflicting markers are present at the same time) versus ambiguity caused by the shifting of markers during a narrative.

Keywords: Hinduism; Mahābhārata; mythology; folklore; yakṣas; ambiguity; Monster Theory

1. Introduction

The supernatural is the realm of the marvelous; the extraordinary. It can fill us with awe and a sense of wonder. Yakṣas, a species of supernatural beings found predominantly on the Indian subcontinent are sometimes regarded in that same light. As an example, in Mahābhārata 3.61:113–116 Damayanti, the human wife of King Nala, wanders alone in the forest, lost and forlorn. A caravan picks her up, and people start asking her questions:

‘Who are you, whose are you, good woman? What are you seeking in the woods? The sight of you disturbs us, for are you human? Tell the truth, are you the devatā of this forest, or mountain, or region, good woman? We seek mercy from you! Are you a rāksas, a rāksasī, a noble woman? In any case, bring us luck, blameless woman, and protect us. Ordain, good woman, that this caravan safely depart from here, we seek your mercy!’

While her sight disturbs the people from the caravan, Damayanti is also identified as a goddess (devatā), a noble woman (vīrānganā), a rāksasī (another type of supernatural beings), and a yakṣ or yakṣīṃt, a female yakṣa. So, even though she is found to be disturbing, she is still positively evaluated as a good and therefore luck-providing (kalyāṇī) and blameless woman (anindite); or perhaps it is wished that she is such a woman. This falls into a trend in which beautiful people, and especially women, are considered to be yakṣas or yakṣīṃt (Misra 1981, pp. 31, 149); this is also found in narratives about Yayāti, Nala, Kirāta, Hanumān, Gangā, and Sītā (Misra 1981, p. 28). When identified with these benevolent human characters, those supernatural beings are also not that scary.

At other times, however, the supernatural is dreadful and terrifying. A little bit later in this narrative (a later interpolation in 3.62), after the caravan has gone through much misfortune, some people start to blame Damayanti and her potential supernatural nature as a yakṣīṃt.
'That insane woman who joined this mighty caravan in a misshapen and scarcely human appearance, she is the one who caused this dreadful illusion. Most certainly, she is a terrible råksåst̄i or a yaks̄ı or a pïśñc̄. All this evil is her work, why would we doubt it? If we see that wicked destroyer of merchants again, that causer of immense suffering, we shall certainly slay her who harms us, with stones, and dust, and grass, and wood, and cuffs.'

Here, Damayant̄i is terrible or causes fear (bhayam. kar̄i); she is a maniac-like woman, insane or intoxicated (n̄arı hi-unmatta). She is misshapen or distorted in form (vikr̄t̄ak̄ar̄a), as if she is scarcely human (r̄upama-am̄anus.âm). Indeed, the merchants of the caravan begin to question whether she is either a råksåst̄i, a yaks̄ı, or a pïśñc̄ (a flesh-eating ghoul). This time, the yaks̄ı (and Damayant̄i) is not wonderful, but is instead terrifying.

I do not intend to suggest that Damayant̄i is a yaks.î. It is quite clear by the end of the narrative that she is an exceptional human specimen. What is relevant here, is that she is potentially identified as a yaks.î (or devat̄a, råksåst̄i, or pïśñc̄) by characters in the narrative. It tells us something about Damayant̄i’s appearance in those specific instances, but also about the yaks̄as, who can likewise appear as potentially blissful or potentially harmful. It seems, therefore, that there is no clear-cut image of these yaks̄as. They are wonderful and dreadful at different times, and in that sense exemplify the mysterium tremendum et fascinans that Rudolf Otto attributed to supernatural beings.3

These yaks̄as are, in a word, ambiguous. Ambiguity seems to be one of the key characteristics of the supernatural.4 Supernatural entities are powerful, and possess skills not found among the human population (like providing good fortune or fertility to land, cattle, and people). It is often unclear, however, how willing they are to help mere humans. Sometimes they can be more inclined to tease humans, or downright scare or exploit them. This makes the supernatural tricky to deal with: you never know what any given encounter will yield. Gods are often conceived as portraying the best of humanity, while monsters represent the worst of us; but oftentimes beings that are considered gods could easily be monsters and vice versa (Laycock and Mikles 2021, pp. 3–4, 7). As Laycock and Mikles write, “sometimes all that separates a god from a monster is a dedicated PR team” (p. 4).

While Hiltebeitel (2003, p. 117) and Katz (1989, pp. 112–13) have noted that especially the human actors in the Mahâbhârata are morally ambiguous, the same can be said of the supernatural actors, as the citations above indicate. Similar observations about the ambiguity of the yaks̄as have been noted by Sutherland (1991, pp. 1, 51–52), Coomaraswamy (1971b, p. 1), Gonda (1960, pp. 323–24), and Misra (1981, p. 160). In this article, this sameness ambiguity is examined with regard to narratives featuring the yaks̄as in the third book (Vana or Aranyā Parva) of the Mahâbhârata.

2. Theoretical Frame, Definitions, and Methods

2.1. Ambiguity

As stated above, supernatural entities are ambiguous. Ambiguity is a state of indeterminacy and ambivalence. That which is ambiguous cannot be precisely defined. Giesen refers to it as inbetweenness and fuzziness which defies categorization, meaning that it threatens social order (Giesen 2018, pp. 788–89; see also Kristeva 1982, p. 4). At the same time, this ambiguity is also constitutive of the social order, since strict categorization often does not fit reality (Giesen 2018, p. 792). Ambiguity is mainly the terrain of monsters in Monster Theory (also known as teratology) (As noted by Campbell 1996, p. 218; Cohen 1996, p. 6; Compagna and Steinhart 2019, p. ix; MacCormack 2013, p. 293; and Uebel 1996, p. 266), since they are beings which enable us to reflect on norms as anomalies by means of their appearance and given meanings (As noted by Cohen 1996, pp. 12–13; Friedman 2013, pp. xxviii, xxxv; Mittman and Hensel 2018, p. x; Myhre 2013, p. 197; and Torrano 2019, pp. 132, 134). This can be extended to the monsters of religions as well, which are often dubbed as supernatural beings. For the purposes of this article the supernatural, while a tricky and Western-centric category, will be used for non- or formerly human beings with human-like intelligence, and often greater-than-human powers. Rather than
merely providing a meaningful and ordered cosmos, religious narratives actively generate ambiguity (Feldt 2012, pp. 1–3, 63), and supernatural entities play major roles in those religious universes by inhabiting ambiguous spaces, thus marking these spaces as special. These spaces are not safe by default; they could either harbour great rewards or great evil.

Ambiguity, next to indeterminacy, also denotes ambivalence. Ambiguous beings such as supernatural entities are not predetermined in their allegiances. They might help humans, or might harm them. Especially the fantastic elements in folklore and mythology play with these ambivalent and ambiguous tendencies by merging different dichotomies, like that between benign and malign, natural and supernatural, and self and other (Feldt 2012, p. 6). Such hybridity is seen as rather dangerous (Uebel 1996, p. 276); for it might uncover uncertainties about our conception of what is human (Friedman 1981, p. 3). Additionally, it seems clear that monsters, both literary and anthropological, are understood to reflect power relations, crises, inequalities, anxieties, and traumas (Musharbash 2014, p. 2). While this makes it seem as though monsters and the supernatural are predominantly malicious and troublesome, they actually seem to point to flaws within the cultures in which they appear, enabling us to resolve these issues (Cohen 1996, p. 20).

Ambiguity has never been properly conceptualized. Many articles and books assume ambiguity in supernatural beings, and demonstrate this by showcasing some tendency within the specific supernatural being in question. In order to demonstrate ambiguity in supernatural beings, I will propose a conceptual frame of when supernatural beings are positively evaluated and when they are negatively evaluated. I use the term ‘evaluation’ here to denote how the nature and behaviour of supernatural species are seen by humans. With this I do not intend to make a case for the existence of supernatural entities. At the same time, if one takes the highly valued methodological agnosticism of the scholarship of religion seriously, then I cannot make any statements on the matter of the ontological status of supernatural entities. I can only examine their phenomenological reality: people claim to have experienced their presence or influence, or at least tell stories about them (Laycock and Mikles 2021, pp. 10–12). That is why the human evaluation of their behaviour and presence is relevant.

My proposition is that when markers of these evaluations mingle within one supernatural species, then we are dealing with ambiguity. In this analysis, I will be relying on Max Weber’s conceptual technique of the ideal type. The ideal type is an idealizing abstraction from reality based on many diffuse but concrete individual cases. Such an ideal type is not something found in actuality, but provides us with clear concepts which can be used to examine reality (Grønning 2017, p. 1; Weber 1904, pp. 64–65). In an ideal type, certain features of a phenomenon are made more visible and intelligible in order to demonstrate the unique qualities of the phenomenon in relation to other phenomena (Cahnman 1965, pp. 269, 271; Swedberg 2018, p. 184), while simultaneously providing it with a generic structure useful in comparative work (Cahnman 1965, p. 271). In doing this, an ideal type can demarcate separate features of a phenomenon which in otherwise are mixed up and indistinguishable (Hill 1973, pp. 150–61). Ideal types should not be seen as averages of reality or models of how reality should be, but can only be used in comparison with reality (Swedberg 2018, p. 184; Weber 1904, pp. 72, 76; Weber 1922, p. 10). The ideal types are also not hypotheses, but can be used in constructing hypotheses; this being the case, they serve as tools with which to do research, and are not the result of research (Segady 2014, p. 358; Weber 1904, pp. 64, 67). In comparison with reality, the ideal type helps to establish divergences or similarities, describe them with unambiguous concepts, and understand empirical reality rationally (Weber 1949, p. 43).

In essence, one will never find a purely positively evaluated supernatural being in reality, nor a solely negatively evaluated one, as they are Weberian ideal types. These ideal types have been constructed by referring to many empirical case studies of supernatural beings and their evaluation (see below). Since these case studies reflect a wide span of different cultures, we could establish these two ideal types of the positively and negatively evaluated supernatural entities as a heuristic means for exploring supernatural ambiguity.
worldwide. In order to do this, one needs to append the ideal type model with concepts from the culture pertaining to each case study. In doing this, I am constructing a more sociological kind of ideal type (based on many examples) than a historical one (based on one historical period or society) (Hekman 1983, pp. 124–25). One of the main criticisms on ideal types is that they do not conform to reality (see Eliaeson 2000; Hekman 1983), which is actually a feature of the technique as stressed by Weber (1922, p. 10) Because of their heuristic nature, moreover, ideal types are not in constant need of empirical verification (Cahnman 1965, pp. 270–71). The reductive nature of ideal types is a problem with all kinds of modelling, since reality cannot be reproduced in a scientific model (Eliaeson 2000, p. 255). Segady and Svedberg rightfully state that ideal types are a necessary tool for the social sciences, while they also warn against ever seeing the ideal type as an actuality, especially after its utilization in research (Segady 2014, p. 358; Swedberg 2018, p. 184).

We can determine the ambiguity of supernatural entities, however, by how they score in different markers. The ideal type model provided here is a heuristic tool for exploring concrete case studies dealing with supernatural entities. Regarding the small data set, it is impossible to evaluate the usefulness of this model. Other research has contributed to demonstrating the heuristic value of the model (Sterken forthcoming), and future research within my PhD project at the Radboud University Nijmegen will establish its applicability more thoroughly through three different case studies. For now, the model is merely introduced and utilized. Scouring through the literature, five markers of positively evaluated supernatural entities can be found throughout the literature:

- It aids humans in fulfilling needs or desires, or helps them develop a means to them (Constructed from Bhutia 2019, p. 203; Bowyer 1981, p. 186; Cohen 1996, p. 16; Drewal 2013, pp. 78–79; Feldt 2012, p. 58; Jones 1944, pp. 246, 250; Kelley-Romano 2006, p. 397; Kieckhefer 1998, p. 15; Klaassen 2013, pp. 147, 151; Klaassen 2019, p. 21; Looper 2013, p. 211; Page 2011, p. 133; Parish 2015, p. 159; Petersen 2009, pp. 2, 13; Rockwell 1981, p. 43; Rose 1995, p. 150; Roth 2006, p. 46; Sontheimer 1989, p. 308; Starkey 2017, pp. 33, 38–39, 47–49; Waskul 2016, p. 10; and White 2003, p. 64);
- The experience of encountering the supernatural being (its appearance, smell, the emotional response to it, etc.) is culturally seen as pleasant or acceptable (Constructed from Borsje 2002, p. 75; Classen et al. 1994, pp. 42, 45, 47, 52–53, 104, 117, 130, 146; McHugh 2012, p. 79; Morton 2014, p. 79; Myhre 2013, p. 230; Sayers 1996, pp. 251–52; and Strickland 2013, p. 380);

Similarly, the inverse markers denote negatively evaluated supernatural entities:

- It prevents humans from fulfilling needs, desires, or tasks (Constructed from Bullard 1989, p. 157; and Lancaster 1991, p. 278);


• The experience of encountering the supernatural being (its appearance, smell, the emotional response to it, etc.) is culturally seen as disturbing or disgusting (Constructed from Alimardanian 2014, p. 94; Borsje 2002, p. 75; Carroll 1990, pp. 44–45; Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2011, p. 48; Classen et al. 1994, pp. 37–38, 54, 104, 117–19, 130, 149, 164; Cohen 1996, p. 6; Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 65; Feldt 2012, pp. 56, 60; Felton 2013, p. 104; Friedman 1981, p. 1; Giesen 2018, p. 795; Gilmore 2003, p. 41; Kieckhefer 1998, pp. 159–60; Lenfant 1999, p. 207; Li 2013, pp. 180, 182; Ling 1962, pp. 16, 45; Looper 2013, pp. 197–215; McHugh 2012, pp. 76, 79; Mittman et al. 2013, pp. 333, 335; Morton 2014, p. 79; Mukherji 2018, p. 113; Musharbash 2014, pp. 3, 8; Myhre 2013, pp. 222, 229–230; Riley 2005, p. 287; Pollock 1986, pp. 268–269; Sayers 1996, pp. 251–52; Starkey 2017, p. 35; Stasch 2014, p. 199; Strickland 2013, pp. 370, 380–84, 386; Watanabe 2020, p. 209; and White 2021, p. 138);


As stated above, the definitions of the above markers would be dependent upon specific cultural ideas and norms based on the data being analysed. In order to do that for the material considered here (the yaksas in the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata), we will examine ambiguity in Hindu traditions below.

2.2. Ambiguity in Hindu Traditions

Determining what ambiguity is within the Hindu context is challenging, since there are many contradictory ideas about evil in India, even within some of the selfsame texts (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 19). Sutherland has similarly noted how most deities in India are surrounded by ambiguity (Sutherland 1991, p. 103). Often, however, one finds an extremely simplified and clear-cut delineation between good entities like the devas (gods) and asuras (demons), but this does not hold true in the myriad Indian mythological traditions. Devas and asuras are not delineated by tendencies to help or harm humans (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 63; Held 1935, p. 169). Devas are not representatives of the
good, nor are *asuras* invoked as explanations for evil in India; they are far too ambiguous to cause that. Rather, *devas* cause misfortune more often than *asuras* do (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 58, 141). While the Rg Veda presents *asuras* and *devas* in opposition to one another, it is unclear on what this actually entails (p. 57). Their opposition is certainly not moral (p. 58), but they do battle over world hegemony (Held 1935, p. 170). Held sees the conflict or contrast between the *devas* and *asuras* as the contrast between two moieties of a tribe (p. 171). Both of them are physically indistinguishable, and can assume various forms at will (kāmārupin) through the power of *māyā* or illusion (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 62). Next to that, both species are related to each other as half-siblings. Both share Prajāpati as their father, while having different mothers (Held 1935, p. 169).

There are some differences between *devas* and *asuras*. While *devas* are active during the day, *asuras* and other beings like *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas* are active at night (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 60; Held 1935, p. 169). Another distinction is power, and when *asuras* become too powerful, they must be destroyed so the *devas* can keep their hegemony (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 63). Only in later times did *asuras* become hideous and immoral (p. 65). *Asuras* also tend to take on false doctrines (from Brahmin perspectives), while *devas* stick to the frameworks of Brahmin orthodoxy (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 74; Sutherland 1991, pp. 185–88, 286–87). Lastly, the *devas* always win in the end (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 59; Katz 1989, p. 32; Van der Velde 2007, p. 165), and the war between the *devas* and *asuras* will always continue (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 59).

Ambiguity is a factor determined by humans, and its application to supernatural entities is necessarily influenced by the relations that humans have to the supernatural entities in question. Throughout different constellations of Hinduism, the dynamics between humans, *devas*, and *asuras* have shifted. In Vedic sacrificial religion, humans were allied with the *devas* against the *asuras* (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 79, 86). Especially Brahmin priests side with the *devas*, since the *devas* always win (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 64). In post-Vedic asceticism, however, humans were sided with the *asuras* and other ‘demonic’ beings like *yakṣas* (all inhabiting the āranya or wilderness) in conflict against the *devas*, since ascetics evoke the wrath of the *devas* owing to their acquired power (*tapas*) (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 79–82, 86). This shift has to do with the competition between Brahmins and ascetics, who both claimed privileged access to the *devas*. According to the Brahmins, the power of the ascetics needed to be diminished (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 74, 80–82). In the bhakti-constellation, however, good men and good *asuras* were protected by the *devas* (especially Śiva and Viṣṇu), and the evil men and *asuras* were naturally at war with the *devas* (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 82). At this point, men and *devas* become united in striving for mokṣa (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 83).

Ambiguity also arises because certain questionable acts of the Brahmin priests and *devas* are justified in certain texts, because they allow those priests and *devas* to maintain their hegemony. As an example, a bad priest of the *devas* is acceptable, since anything is allowed that will tip the balance in the battle against the *asuras*. In the post-Vedic Hindu constellation, a good priest can shift alliance in order to rob good *asuras* of their powers. In the bhaktic constellation, priests will bring *asuras* to the *devas* as devotees (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 138). Brahmins and *devas* deal with *asuras* by waging war against them in the Vedas up to the Purāṇas, and from the Brāhmanaśas to the Purāṇas, by means of barring their access to sacrifices (pp. 174–75).

The relationship between *devas*, *asuras*, and Brahmins does not immediately translate to other human populations. Wendy Doniger-O’Flaherty, in studying the Yogasaṣṭi śīla, notes the various ways in which śūdras, women, and demons are depicted as both valuable and dangerous; or, ambiguous. While these three are often rejected by Brahmin orthodoxy, they can be highly valued in ascetic Hinduism. In addition to this, women represented seduction and illusion (*māyā*), while simultaneously being able to instruct how best to eradicate illusion—and demonic women brave even more of this ambiguity. Demons eat human flesh, but also seek superhuman knowledge, and in that sense became analogous
with ascetics. While a positive evaluation is possible here, it is not always so: the association of demons and śūdras is always negative (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1984, pp. 160–65).

Considering these points, it is easy to see how ambiguity easily becomes a part of Hindu mythology, since we are dealing with several different Hindu traditions, each with their own values and points of interest. When we look at the five markers (in both its positive and negative instantiation), and also when taking the yaksas into account, they appear in the following guises:

2.2.1. Aiding in Fulfilling or Denying Fulfilling Desires, Needs, or Tasks

Both the conventional positively evaluated supernatural beings (the devas) and the negatively evaluated (asuras but also beings like yaksas, nāgas and the like) are able to aid in the fulfillment of wishes or needs. Such boons can be attained through offering sacrifices or acquiring tapas. Especially the devas are known for trying to circumvent the rewards of tapas, since it threatens their hegemony. Instead, they try to offer other boons to the practicing ascetic, or make them lose their ascetic focus by tempting them with supernatural beauty like apsarases.

Yaksas are known for granting certain benefits. They can be useful in agricultural contexts by providing rainfall and thunderstorms, but also more generally in that they can conjure up food, create baths, provide good fortune, impart knowledge, award wealth, immortality, and offspring (Gonda 1960, pp. 323–24; Misra 1981, pp. 3, 101, 150–51, 156–59, 163; Sutherland 1991, p. 54; White 2021, p. 105). At the same time, yaksas are also known for stealing jewels instead of just providing riches (Misra 1981, p. 29), and especially yaksints are known for eating children instead of providing them (p. 157). Also, greed and lust are seen as bad, since they appear after the krta yuga, meaning after the first age of a mahayuga during which everything is perfect (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 29). Eating to resolve hunger is not necessarily evil, but it is when one eats improperly (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 32, 58).

Gaining things from yaksas can be achieved through sacrifice or through Tantric practices. In terms of sacrifice, the pacified (so acting positively yakra enjoys the fragrance of jasmine and lotus and other fragrant things, the appearance of garlands of red and white flowers, cooked cereals, fruit, water, fish, flour cakes, and honey, and the performance of dance, song, and music (Agrawala 1970, p. 185; Misra 1981, pp. 98, 100). At the same time, especially in their negatively evaluated form, they can also enjoy liquor, flesh, and blood, items which are often tabooed for consumption (Misra 1981, p. 35; Nugteren 2005, p. 173).

Yaksas and especially yaksints are also heavily sexually connotated. Yaksints often tempt human men sexually, which will have disastrous results if consummated. At the same time, while yaksints are skilled seducers of men, yaksas are not successful in seducing women, instead upholding chaste women and punishing promiscuous ones (Misra 1981, pp. 149, 157–58; White 2003, p. 64). Through Tantric rituals, yaksints can be manipulated into becoming wives (Misra 1981, p. 56). Female sexuality is generally negatively evaluated, however. Lust is seen as evil, since it starts appearing at the end of the krta yuga (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 29), and especially women can be seen as treacherous (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 27; 2009, p. 233). Many cultures warn about female sexuality in the form of feminine monsters (Drewal 2013, p. 97; Li 2013, p. 180; Miller 2013). Sutherland reads the yaksint as a projection of Indian men onto women, who fear them because of the menace in case they are sexually unrestrained. Especially the lone wandering woman in the āraṇya (like Damayanti) will be accused of being evil or demonic; for good women are with their husband when outdoors (Sutherland 1991, p. 138).

Additionally, Sutherland describes that obstacles which prevent access to the devas are evil. Such obstacles can happen temporarily during initiatory or liminal situations, which for Sutherland are demonstrated in the function of the yaksas as gate guardians (dvārapālas) of temples (Sutherland 1991, pp. 158–59). While here one can perceive them as protectors of the right order, they are also known to disturb rituals, especially the śraddha offerings to the pitar (Misra 1981, p. 32; Sutherland 1991, p. 165).
Lastly, rebirth as a yakṣa is sometimes glorified. The rebirth as yakṣa can be achieved by virtuous people and animals (Gonda 1960, p. 323; Misra 1981, p. 147), as well as by fallen soldiers (Misra 1981, p. 28). However, rebirth as a yakṣa can also be attained as a punishment for breaking one’s vows, wishing spiteful things, through an untimely death, or through evil acts (pp. 147, 159). Rebirth of human women as yakṣiṇīs is often regarded in this light. Sutherland states that Indian folk belief holds that women have reproductive needs. If those needs are not fulfilled, then a woman turns into a demonic yakṣiṇī, nāgīṇī (female nāga), or rākṣastā (female rākṣasa). This also happens when the passions and jealousies of women interfere with their social duties. Spirit cults can be established, or certain rituals performed, in order to prevent or pacify the hauntings of these demonic women (Sutherland 1991, pp. 145–47). A similar theme is found in Indian movies. In movies, lower-caste women or minority-caste women often turn into yakṣiṇīs. They are blood-thirsty ghosts who are wronged by high-caste men before their death, and therefore hunt men and drink their blood. Next to that, they are also sexually attractive (Chitra 2020, pp. 52–53). At the same time, it is considered a curse when yakṣas become human, since they lose their immortality (Misra 1981, p. 54).

2.2.2. Protecting or Attacking Humans

Suffering experienced in life or death is considered evil in manifold Hindu traditions, as is abusing one’s own power (Sutherland 1991, p. 158). Yakṣas can enhance this suffering. Hopkins denotes their ambiguity in their double function of guarding and injuring (Hopkins 1915, p. 38). Agrawala and Misra furthermore state that yakṣas are demonic in the Upaniṣads, Sūtras, and Purāṇas, while they are protectors in the Atharva Veda, Tantric sources, and Jainism (Agrawala 1970, pp. 167, 188; Misra 1981, pp. 19, 26, 32). It is also uncertain whether they will help or harm humans (Misra 1981, p. 152). They are known to abduct people, murder them, rape them, eat them, steal from them, kill their offspring (Misra 1981, pp. 3–4; Sutherland 1991, p. 54), and cause diseases (Coomaraswamy 1971a, p. 5; Misra 1981, pp. 75–76, 150–55). However, they are also known to cure diseases (Gonda 1960, pp. 323–24; Misra 1981, p. 163; Sutherland 1991, pp. 166–67), and are also known as guardians of places and people (Agrawala 1970, pp. 167, 188; Bloss 1973, p. 38; Gonda 1960, p. 323; Misra 1981, p. 156; Sutherland 1991, pp. 120–21). Depicted on temple gates, they can serve as guardian deities (door guardians or dvārāpālas; Misra 1981, p. 42; Sutherland 1991, p. 121), like at Bhārhut (Sutherland 1991, p. 106). They are also known as guardians of sacred fields (kṣetrapālas), sacred pools (pp. 121–22), and cities (Misra 1981, p. 159; Sutherland 1991, p. 146). Next to serving as guardians, yakṣas can aid humans in battles, often ensuring the victory of their side (Misra 1981, pp. 159–60). With this, destruction is not always evil (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 58), since adhering to good behaviour also often leads to the destruction of the āsuras (p. 130).

2.2.3. Conforming to or Destroying Human Order

Structural opposition to dharma is seen as evil in many Hindu traditions, and following dharma as good (Chitra 2020, p. 55; Sutherland 1991, pp. 2, 158). Dharma is both normative and descriptive: it describes how the world is, and tells how it ought to be (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 46, 94). This structural opposition would often be against dharmasastra, or the organization of society as envisioned by Brahmins (Nugteren 2005, p. 19). Within such a system, especially Brahmanicide is seen as the most heinous crime (Chalier-Visuvalingam 1989, p. 157). The yakṣas represent opposition to dharma by being opponents of the Pāṇḍavas in the Mahābhārata (Sutherland 1991, p. 158). Normally, when dharma is supported, the order of the natural world is maintained (Katz 1989, p. 31), meaning that opposition to dharma disrupts the natural order. From this point of view, it is evil to oppose svadharm (bound by varna and āśrama (stage of life) in favour of sanātana or eternal dharma (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 95); but such evaluation is reversed in post-Vedic asceticism. For Katz, the conflict between devas and āsuras in the Mahābhārata is a conflict between dharma and adharma, where the devas and Pāṇḍavas fight to maintain dharma against the Kauravas, who are
asuras incarnate (Katz 1989, pp. 32, 48n17, 112–13). Asuras, do not disturb their svadharma by being evil in this framework, since their svadharma entails opposing the devas and killing humans (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 98, 130). Sutherland states that in the Purāṇas, both the yaksas and the rākṣasas are ambiguous devices used to explore the opposition between santatama dharma (eternal or universal dharma) and svadharma (dharma belonging to an individual’s caste) (Sutherland 1991, p. 55).

Next to that, it is also evil to prevent the correct performance of rituals (Shulman 1989, p. 48; Sutherland 1991, p. 158). In Vedic Hinduism, this mainly consisted in the prevention of sacrifices from reaching the gods, while in Purānic sources it is especially the impediment of worship and access to temples (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 183). Yaksas do this by polluting physical elements during a ritual; by claiming the rewards of the sacrifice for themselves; and by falsely receiving gifts and worship (Sutherland 1991, p. 158). From the Brahmin point of view, ascetic practices also disturb the ritual order, and in Purānic Hinduism the devas are afraid of their own decline owing to the ascetic rise of humans. In order to stop this, the devas seek to morally corrupt ascetics, often by stressing the tediousness of dharma (pp. 24, 82).

The disturbance of social hierarchies and relationships is also considered evil (Shulman 1989, p. 48; Sutherland 1991, pp. 136, 158). Yaksas do this by the transgression of sexual (seducing humans) and dietary (eating human flesh) restrictions (Sutherland 1991, p. 159). Abandoning of svadharma, which also entails abandoning social hierarchies, is considered to be an immensely evil act by Brahmin orthodoxy (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 81). At the same time, post-Vedic asceticism often broke with the ideal of svadharma, and stressed the absence of distinctions in order to promote the goal of mokṣa. Asceticism in this context erases the distinction between humans, devas, asuras, yaksas and others, and their implicit hierarchy (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 82, 90; Nugteren 2005, pp. 20, 91–92). Post-Vedic solutions were to destroy the ascetic power (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 82, 90), or the godly attributes of both ascetics and ‘demonic’ beings (p. 137), while bhaktic solutions turned the human or ‘demonic’ being into a deva (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, pp. 82, 90; Sutherland 1991, p. 158).

As elsewhere, here the yaksas are prone to be both positively and negatively evaluated. They are active during the night, the time during which the devas of the proper order are asleep (Misra 1981, p. 150). While they counter proper order in that way, they can also be used to reiterate the proper order by their participation in the juridical process. According to Misra, criminals could be sent to the trees in which yaksas live. There they would either defend their innocence or when their verdict is pronounced. If lying during their defense or when proven guilty, they would be crushed between the yaksas’ thighs (Misra 1981, p. 155).

Here, the yaksas, while being part of legal proceedings, is still seen primarily as the punitive aspect of the legal system, instead of its acquitting and regulatory aspect.

2.2.4. Appearance

Obscuring true appearances through māyā is considered a great evil (Sutherland 1991, pp. 2, 158). Māyā can make us do evil things without our knowledge or consent (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 7). Yaksas are well-known as shapeshifters who can also create illusions (Agrawala 1970, p. 170; Coomaraswamy 1971a, p. 7; Misra 1981, pp. 146–47, 150–51; Sutherland 1991, p. 138). Because of this, we find them described as both beautiful and fierce-looking (Sutherland 1991, p. 54), and therefore ambiguous according to my model. Especially yaksinīs are praised for their beauty (Misra 1981, pp. 3, 54; Sutherland 1991, p. 54). Beautiful yaksas are said to give off light (Misra 1981, pp. 1481–49) but are otherwise not described elaborately. Horrifying yaksas, on the contrary, have many markers. They have red eyes which are squinted or do not blink, dark hairy bodies with coarse skin, pointy ears, a dwarfish stature with a hunched back, frightening faces, huge mouths, feet that are turned the wrong way, other features which resemble those of elephants, bears, and birds, and no shadow (Misra 1981, pp. 3, 32, 147–49, 158–59; Sutherland 1991, pp. 54, 59). In literary texts, there is no solid model for the appearance of yaksas and yaksinīs, and
one often finds diverging descriptions of them. They lose their illusory shape during sex, calamity, sleep, anger, fear, or ecstasy (Misra 1981, p. 147). In addition to shapeshifting, they can also turn invisible, which highlights their indeterminacy (Misra 1981, pp. 9, 147).

2.2.5. Location

Total Otherness or the unknown is often attributed to an enemy or threat (Sutherland 1991, p. 158). This can be Otherness in the term of human Others, but also in terms of geographical distance. To begin with the former, yakṣas together with creatures like nāgas and rākṣasas often resemble the tribal, the foreign, and the uninhabited—in short, everything that falls outside of the known order of villages and Brahmins (Doniger-O'Flaherty 2009, pp. 245–47; Sutherland 1991, p. 159). The image of the yakṣa can also be projected upon that of the Untouchable (or dalit), who often represent the savage and uncultivated in opposition to kṣatriyas (Doniger-O'Flaherty 1984, pp. 162–65; Sutherland 1991, p. 120). This does not mean, however, that yakṣas are always dalit: each individual supernatural being can belong to a different caste, and supernatural species are never uniformly placed within one caste (Sutherland 1991, p. 164).

Regarding the latter, yakṣas can also indicate the geographically distant. The Epics mark a tension between village life (grama) and the forest (āranya) (Thapar 2003, pp. 103–104). According to Nugteren, the Brahmin division of the local area is threefold. There is a division between the dharmic village (grama) where the Brahmins rule, and the adharmic forest (Nugteren 2005, pp. 11, 16, 85). The forest, however, is split up in two different areas. There are the woodlands surrounding the village which the village uses (vana), the so-called safe forest. Then there is the āranya, which is the forest that is beyond human and Brahmin control. This is the place where harmful beings reside, such as indigenous tribes, wild animals, outlaws, monsters, and yakṣas. At the same time, it is also the place where soma is found, where tejas- or tapas-filled vratyas and sādhus wander who can bless and heal or curse and harm. While it is away from the village, the āranya is also an escape from samāsra (Nugteren 2005, pp. 12–14; Van Buitenen 1973, p. xxii). The āranya, next to being dangerous, also provides liberation from Brahmin order and their cycles of rebirth. The āranya is also the place of the āśrama, which especially in the Epic context is the place of exile or idyllic holiday (Nugteren 2005, p. 14). In addition to all this, especially in the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata, the āranya is the place where the Pāṇḍavas, through austere practices, encounter the devas who provide them with secret weapons (Berry 2022, pp. 75, 77). The āranya, in short, is ambiguous; a place of purity and monsters (Parkhill 1995, p. 8).

So yakṣas are often located within the āranya, often residing within a caitya or ayatana (Bloss 1973, p. 37; Misra 1981, p. 50), which is an open-air shrine typically found outside the city in a grove or on a mountain, or on the edges of settlements (Agrawala 1970, p. 189; Misra 1981, pp. 42, 89–90, 97). They can also live in forests, lakes, trees, deserted halls, or on mountains (Misra 1981, pp. 42, 89–90). Here they have most power, and are able to devour anyone who trespasses on their terrain (Misra 1981, pp. 150, 154). Caityas are not merely sinister spaces, but are also considered to be good resting spots for travelers and mendicants, especially in Jain and Buddhist sources (Coomaraswamy 1971a, p. 23), and are likewise signposts on the pilgrimage road itself (Sutherland 1991, p. 121), or even a pilgrimage destination (Misra 1981, p. 52). Sometimes yakṣas are found a bit closer to home, inhabiting the borders of towns and villages (Misra 1981, pp. 42, 89–90, 97; Sutherland 1991, p. 159). When worshipped, yakṣas will also guard the gates of shrines or cities (Coomaraswamy 1971b, p. 8; Misra 1981, pp. 89, 93). Next to that, yakṣas are also found as the tutelary deities of houses (Misra 1981, pp. 20, 93). Thus, White’s statement that devatā inhabit grove caityas and yakṣas those in urban centres does not seem to be strongly substantiated (White 2021, p. 102).

2.3. Method

For this article, the Vana or Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata is analysed. The Mahābhārata is described as one of the two great Epics of India, together with the Rāmāyaṇa.
A tentative dating between 400 BCE and 400 CE is often accepted (Katz 1989, p. 2; Van Buiten 1973, p. xxv). However, one has to take into account that the critical edition of the most ancient variants of the story contain substantial interpolations, meaning that there is no unifying artistic design behind them that was completed at a discrete point in time (Van Buiten 1973, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Different instances of disunity have arisen throughout the years. Holtzmann identified different layers with different interests, like heroic ksatriya epic, brāhmaṇic didactic passages, or devotional bhakti hymns (Holtzmann 1892, p. 8); this was already criticized while he was active (Hopkins 1892, pp. 500–501) while also partly reproduced in later scholarship (Katz 1989, p. 4). In addition to that, the text’s main narrative is incorporated within multiple narrative frames (Shulman 2001, p. 29). While the Mahābhārata is often described as an epic, Hiltebeitel would argue for a multi-generic approach to the critical text (Hiltebeitel 2003, pp. 122, 132), containing multiple genres, voices, and even narratives. Katz and Shulman even consider whether the Mahābhārata is more appropriately considered an encyclopedia (Katz 1989, p. 9; Shulman 2001, pp. 26–28).

The Sanskrit edition which is utilized is known as the Pāṇa or BORI edition. According to Fitzgerald, it reflects the grand Mahābhārata synthesis of the 300–400 CE when the Gupta empire rose to power (Fitzgerald 2020, p. 4). McGrath states that the Mahābhārata became a source of political legitimacy starting with this dynasty, and is nowadays seen as the foundational myth of India itself (McGrath 2019, pp. 41, 83). The Mahābhārata itself is more than that text, however. Next to many regional variations, there are also all manners of plays, depictions, television shows (Hawley and Pillai 2021, pp. 29–30), and more found throughout the ages. As for translations, I use Van Buiten’s 1975 translation, and Ganguli’s 1884 translation. The Sanskrit edition is used to check the translations and to suggest amendments (rare in Van Buiten, more common in Ganguli). This serves to examine different attestations in different manuscript traditions, and to translate certain sections that have been neglected by Ganguli’s otherwise complete translation of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata tradition. The Sanskrit passages will be provided in the footnotes, but only when the yakṣas actually appear in them. Other passages have been omitted. The different manuscript attestations have been referred to by the same system which is utilized in the BORI edition. A description of those manuscripts can be found in Sukthankar (1942, pp. i–x).

I will exclusively examine the yakṣas in the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata, and how they are portrayed. 98 textual places have been located, which have been inductively coded through open coding with the program Atlas.TI. Some of these textual places will, however, not be analysed for this article. In order to maintain a proper length I will focus on four narratives within the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata: the story of Nala and Damayanti (Section 3.1; 3.50–3.78); the First War of the Yakṣas (Section 3.2; 3.146–3.153); the Second War of the Yakṣas (Section 3.3; 3.157–159); and the story of the drilling woods (Section 3.4; 3.295–3.299).

3. The Yakṣas in Narratives in the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata

In the Vana or Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata, the Pāṇḍavas are moved into the aranya, the wilderness, which is the terrain of the yakṣas. The Aranya Parva is also that part of the Mahābhārata infested with the highest concentration of yakṣas. The Pāṇḍavas, having lost the pivotal game of dice against the Kauravas, are exiled into the aranya. The Parva includes a mixture of narrative action which prepares the Pāṇḍavas for the upcoming battle with their rivals by providing them with weapons and many homiletic and philosophical teachings, sometimes meant to prepare them for the upcoming war, but sometimes with quite different goals in mind (Bailey 2022, p. 42).

Previous analyses of the yakṣas in Epic sources have led to some overgeneralised statements. Misra states that yakṣas in Epic literature are mainly benevolent but sometimes uncanny, while they are malevolent in Pāli literature (Misra 1981, p. 28). Such a statement is not warranted for the myriad roles yakṣas play in the Mahābhārata, however. According
to Sutherland, the *yakṣas* are portrayed in Hindu mythology as opposition to kings or *ksatriyas*. The *yakṣas* are savages and uncivilized, while kings represent the highest values and order of society (Sutherland 1991, p. 120). In Epic mythology, *ksatriyas* are the ones who should establish control over displaced demons, rather than the *devas* (p. 53). In a sense, the encounters with *yakṣas* are used in the Epics and Purāṇas as a means to reestablish the sovereignty of the *ksatriyas* in addition to their power (Sutherland 1991, pp. 121–22). While this statement might work for certain narratives (especially the First and Second War of the *Yakṣas* seen below), it is not a sufficient explanation for other passages. Below we will examine the *yakṣas* in more detail.

### 3.1. The Yakṣas in the Story of Nala and Damayantī

The story of Nala and Damayantī (3.50–3.78) is well-known to students of Sanskrit: the practice of translating this story as one’s first real practice with Sanskrit was initiated by Caland. In the narrative, Nala, prince of the Nisādas, and Damayantī, daughter of king Bhīma (not the Pāṇḍavas), fall in love with each other by merely learning of each other’s existence. Through a *svayamvara*, Damayantī is able to pick him as her husband. While happily living together, Nala ruins the kingdom by losing it in a game of dice, after which both of them enter into exile in the forest. At a certain point, Nala gets separated from Damayantī through demonic tricks, and Damayantī starts searching for him. After many adventures she manages to locate him, and Nala is able to win back the kingdom after another dice game, and becomes the king of the Nisādas. This short and undetailed synopsis showcases the similarity to the Pāṇḍavas’ situation at that point in their narrative, as they are freshly banished and need to live in the *āranyaka*.

This story has already been discussed at the beginning of this article. There are some extra textual places which warrant discussion in order to yield a complete picture. In total, there are six textual places in which the *yakṣas* appear in this narrative, of which we have already seen two. The other four are relatively brief and easier to characterize. In two cases, the *yakṣa* is a marker of beauty. First, in 3.50:13, Nala praises Damayantī’s beauty, stating that no one among the *devas*, *yakṣas*, people, and others have heard about or seen such beauty.7 This verse insinuates that these beings (especially the *devas* and *yakṣas*) are normally beautiful, but that even they themselves have not seen a beauty like Damayantī. Likewise, in 3.52.16, Nala’s beauty makes Damayantī question whether he is a *deva*, *yakṣa*, or *gandharva*, inculating that these beings are known for their beauty.

In the two other cases, the *yakṣa* Manibhadra is invoked. Manibhadra is one of the few *yakṣas* which receives a name in Indian texts. In the first textual place (3.61:123), Damayantī joins up with a merchant caravan during her search for Nala. Śuci, the leader of that caravan, calls upon the *yakṣa* Manibhadra to aid them in their search.9 Manibhadra is indeed known by other sources to preside over caravan merchants (Agrawala 1970, p. 184). In the second textual place (lines 60 and 61 of a substitution by certain manuscripts of 3.62:1–17), the mood has shifted. Bad events have befallen the caravan, and its members believe that they are to blame: they failed to worship Manibhadra and Kubera (also called Vaiśravaṇa).10 This latter figure is considered in many passages to be the king of the *yakṣas*.11

When we examine these six textual places which mention the *yakṣas*, we note some ambiguous usages of this figure. Let us therefore now examine it through the model of five markers as developed earlier. Concerning, the first marker describing the fulfilling of needs or preventing them, we see on the one hand that *yakṣas* can help humans (3.61:123) or bring luck (3.61:115). While this is a positive evaluation, we see a more ambiguous portrayal when examining the second marker, describing protection or attack. When first encountered, Damayantī, the potential *yaksinī*, is asked to protect the merchant caravan (3.61:116). Later, however, she turns into a wicked destroyer of merchants and causer of immense suffering (line 63 of appendix 11 of the critical edition, a substitution for 3.62:6–10). In addition to this, Manibhadra and Kubera allow the caravan to be attacked because they have not been worshipped sufficiently (lines 60 and 61 of appendix 10 of the critical edition, a substitution of 3.62:1–17).
At the third marker which is concerned with the proper social order, we find that Damayanti is first approached as a proper woman: someone who is married and brings luck (kalyāṇī, 3.61:113; varṇīganaṇā; and anindite, both verse 115). However, quickly it is determined that she is instead a figure which only brings pāpa, a moral and natural kind of evil (lines 62–63 of appendix 11; Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 6). Additionally, Damayanti wanders alone, which is the mark of a wild woman, not tied to a husband, who could therefore be treacherous, monstrous, or both (Sutherland 1991, p. 138). Lastly, the caravan believes their misfortune is caused by breaking with order, by neglecting worship of Manibhadra and Kubera (lines 60–61 of appendix 10).

As for the fourth marker regarding appearance, we encounter ambiguity as well. The beautiful side of being supernatural or a yaksā/yaksini is stressed three times (3.50:13; 3.52:16; and 3.61:115). However, this image is turned upside down in lines 58–60 of appendix 11, where the yaksī is associated with other sinister supernatural beings like rākṣasas and piśācas, but where Damayanti, potentially identified as a yaksini, is called insane (nārīva unnattā), misshapen (vīkṛtakāra), and scarcely appearing human (ṛitamāṇṇusam); her earlier, beautiful appearance was merely an illusion (māya).

As for the final marker concerning location, one has to remember that the Aranyā Parva of the Mahābhārata mainly plays out in the āranya or wilderness, a place associated with danger in Brahmin orthodoxy. This is clearly seen in the ambivalence with which Damayanti is treated both in 3.61:113–116 and appendix 11. Even though in 3.61:113–116 the response to her is mainly positive or hopeful towards a positive resolution, the members of the caravan are disturbed by her sight (vyathitā, verse 113), for she is a lone wandering woman in the āranya. First, they try to pacify her and ask her to help them and bring them fortune, but after misfortune has befallen the caravan, they turn their backs on Damayanti.

In short: while the location seems to be primarily marked as negative (since it is the far-off āranya) and the first encounter of Damayanti with the caravan is potentially positively evaluated by means of possible wish-fulfilment, all other markers show mixed characteristics, essentially demonstrating that the narrative of Nala and Damayanti utilize the figure of the yaksā as an ambiguous figure (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help/Hindrance</td>
<td>Asked for help (3.61:123) or bring luck (3.61:115)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectors/Attackers</td>
<td>Asked to protect (3.61:116)</td>
<td>Destroyer and causes suffering (line 63 of appendix 11); allow the caravan to be attacked (lines 60–61 of appendix 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order</td>
<td>Good woman (Kalyāṇī (3.61:113), varṇīganaṇā, aninditā (115))</td>
<td>Pāpa (lines 62–63 of appendix 11); Damayanti wanders alone; no worship (lines 60–61 of appendix 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful/Gruesome</td>
<td>Beauty (3.50:13; 3.52:16; and 3.61:115)</td>
<td>Misshapen, illusion (lines 59–60 of appendix 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central/Peripheral</td>
<td></td>
<td>Āranya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. The Yakṣas in the First War of the Yakṣas

The Mahābhārata, in the conglomerate shape available to us in the critical edition, abounds with repetitions. One of these duplicated stories is known as the yaksā-yuddha or war of the yaksas, found twice in 3.146–153 and 3.157–159. In short, both stories tell of how the Pāṇḍavas stay on a specific mountain during their exile. Draupadi, at a certain point, smells fragrant flowers (saugandhika), and sends out Bhima to fetch her some. This will
bring Bhīma within the bounds of Kubera’s territory, which is guarded by his ṣaṅgas and rakṣasas. A battle ensues, and, while both sides fight valiantly, Bhīma eventually wins.

In total, the ṣaṅgas are found in nine textual places in the first narrative, and in seventeen textual places in the second narrative. One finds less ṣaṅgas in the first narrative because the name ṣaṅga-yuddha is a misnomer for this first conflict: the guardians of Kubera’s domain are predominantly rakṣasas in this encounter. This is not surprising, since it has been previously noted that the ṣaṅgas and rakṣasas are often mutually interchangeable (Misra 1981, p. 27; Sutherland 1991, p. 49). Similarly, Kubera is considered to be the king of ṣaṅgas, rakṣasas, gandharvas, guhyakas, nairātmas, and piśācas (Gonda 1960, p. 324; Misra 1981, pp. 5, 60). Van Buitenen believes the second story to be a correction of the first one by adding the ṣaṅgas (Van Buitenen 1975, pp. 201–2).

Bhīma is the protagonist of both stories, and is generally known in the Mahābhārata as the slayer of ṣaṅgas and rakṣasas (Misra 1981, p. 28; Sutherland 1991, p. 52). In the First War, Bhīma departs for Mount Gandhamādana. This mountain, whose name means ‘intoxicated by perfume’ (McHugh 2012, p. 94), is generally described as a lovely and beautiful place (3.146:20–33). Bhīma disturbs the peace of the area, killing many animals (3.146:38–48). Berry stresses that the beauty of the place signifies a kind of mythic environment, which can only be enjoyed upon paying the price of austerity or boldness (Berry 2022, p. 86). The beauty of the mountain is illustrated by some of its inhabitants like ṣaṅgas, gandharvas, devas, and brahma-rūpas (3.146:23). Some manuscripts replace these generally positively evaluated beings with more troublesome ones. B1 changes the devas (or suras) into asuras, while the Dc-manuscript group remove the ṣaṅgas for the rakṣasas or rakṣasas. The beauty of Mount Gandhamādana is further described in 3.146:32–33 where the wives of ṣaṅgas and gandharvas stare at Bhīma. Manuscript D2 replaces the gandharvas for rakṣasas, perhaps again stressing more dangerous aspects rather than the beauteous ones. Manuscript K4 adds that the ṣaṅga, rakṣasa, gandharva, and nāga maidens (kanyā) quickly hide (pañājire) from Bhīma.

After this, Bhīma meets Hanumān, and they engage in battle with each other (3.146:49–3.150:28). While Bhīma nominally loses, he is praised by Hanumān for his valiance, and Hanumān agrees to help him on his quest. Initially he tries to deter Bhīma from joining in his quest. In 3.147:40 and its most relevant addition by manuscript group S, Hanumān states that the path Bhīma wants to take is divine and cherished by the devas, and Bhīma might get crushed or cursed by a ṣaṅga or rakṣasa if he treads it. In a more off-topic discussion, Hanumān tells Bhīma that there were no devas, dānava, gandharvas, ṣaṅgas, rakṣasas, or nāgas (which manuscript T1 replaces with kinnaras) during the yuga yuga or Golden Age (3.148:12). When Bhīma is ultimately unpersuaded to quitting his quest, Hanumān tells Bhīma about the gardens of Kubera which are guarded by ṣaṅgas and rakṣasas, and where one can only pick flowers after giving proper honour to the devas (3.149:22).

After this, Bhīma goes on the move again and arrives at a lake near Mount Gandhamādana and the Saugandhika forest, which is the sporting region of Kubera. Again, this place is described as beautiful, often frequented by gandharvas, apsarases, devas, rūpis, ṣaṅgas, kimpuruṣas, rakṣasas, and kinnaras, where the water tastes like amṛta (3.151:7–8). Later, when Bhīma wants to pick flowers and drink from the lake, he is stopped by Krodhavaśa rakṣasas, who state that deva-rūpis, ṣaṅgas, devas, gandharvas, and apsarases have to ask permission from Kubera to drink from or play there (3.152:5). A battle with the rakṣasas ensues in which the ṣaṅgas are not mentioned, and which Bhīma wins (3.152–12-25). Later, it is stated that Bhīma defeated wide-eyed ṣaṅgas by smashing their bodies, eyes, arms, thighs, and heads (3.153:24). This does not fit in with the description of the actual battle, in which ṣaṅgas are absent, which is perhaps why manuscript GI and manuscript group Dc corrects rakṣasān for ṣaṅsaṁ su-.

When examining this second narrative, four markers are employed. The second marker is purely negative, since the ṣaṅgas are guardians for Kubera’s abode and enemies of Bhīma. This actually makes them supernatural entities who belong to the proper order, since they are underlings of the deva Kubera and also uphold proper rituals. Similarly, they
are entities associated with the beauty of Mount Gandhamādana, and referred to as means to indicate its beauty. However, both these last markers also read as negative in a couple of manuscripts where the yaksas are more closely associated with dangerous supernatural entities, like rākṣasas and piśācas. In short, ambiguity is also found here because of the mixing of different markers (see Table 2).

Table 2. Evaluation of the yaksas in the First War of the Yaksas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help/Hindrance</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectors/Attackers</td>
<td>Yakṣas among proper supernatural entities (3.146:23, 32–33); yakṣas uphold proper rituals (3.149:22; 3.152:5)</td>
<td>Guardians (3.147:40; 3.149:22); enemies (3.153:24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order</td>
<td>Yakṣas among improper supernatural entities (3.146:23, 32–33)</td>
<td>Yakṣas among improper supernatural entities (3.146:23, 32–33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful/Gruesome</td>
<td>Beautiful mount Gandhamādana (3.146:23, 32–33; 3.151:7–8)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central/Peripheral</td>
<td>Beautiful mount Gandhamādana (3.146:23, 32–33; 3.151:7–8)</td>
<td>Dangerous mount Gandhamādana (3.146:23, 32–33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. The Yaksas in the Second War of the Yaksas

The Second War has seventeen textual places mentioning the yaksas. The story begins with Janamejaya (a Kuru king to which the story of the Pāṇḍavas is told—one of the narrative frames building up the Mahābhārata) asking Vaiśampāyana (the narrator of this story) to continue the narrative of Bhīma, whether he fought the yaksas at the Himalaya mountains (where Mount Gandhamādana is located), and whether he met Kubera (3.157:3). Vaiśampāyana then continues the story. After being praised for his strength by Draupadī, Bhīma goes to chase the supernatural enemies from the mountain (3.157:18–24). When arriving at Mount Gandhamādana, its beauty is again described (3.157:35–40). After that, the yaksas, rākṣasas, and gandharvas, with all of their hairs raised, start attacking Bhīma with various weapons. Bhīma cuts off their limbs, hands, and heads, after which the yaksas utter sounds of fear and flee to the south, leaving their weapons behind (3.157:41–51). The rākṣasa Maṇimāt insults the fleeing armies, and attacks Bhīma himself. Only in manuscript K4 do we have yaksarāt instead of rākṣasah, meaning that Maṇimāt is a king or commander of the yaksas (3.157:52). Attacking Bhīma with multiple weapons, he is eventually struck down, and falls down like a witch (kṛiti eva), after which he flees (3.157:68). In all other places, however, Maṇimāt is known as a rākṣasa, even within manuscript K4 (which changes his title in the earlier verse 52), showing again how fluid the border between yaksas and rākṣasas can be.

After this, Bhīma returns to the other Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira condemns Bhīma’s actions. It is contrary to the wishes of the king (Yudhiṣṭhira, that is), and hateful to the thirty devas, and therefore contrary to dharma (3.158:9–15). At the same time, rākṣasas report to Kubera that the foremost of yaksas and rākṣasas have been slain by Bhīma. Everywhere, except in manuscripts D5, M1, Ś1, D1, D2, D3, and manuscript groups Dc and K, Kubera is named the overlord of yaksas (rājanyaksadhipatim) (3.158:16–19), as well as in a later verse (21–22).

This naturally angers Kubera, and he sets out after him. He is followed by many yaksas, who are described elaborately. They have reddened or bloodshot eyes (raktaḥ), a golden hue (hemasamkāśa), huge bodies (mahakṣaya), and accompanying strength (mahabhala). Seven manuscripts replace this last point with mahātaiva or great speed. Manuscript group
S replaces this all with the statement that the yakṣas have a terrifying appearance (ghora-
radarśanam) and follow Kubera.29 The yakṣas are praised here for their abilities and are called
great heroes (javena mahatā vipraḥ) with swords30 (3.158:25–29).31 Next we learn that yakṣas
are capable of flight and are nimble like birds (3.158:31).32

Then Kubera arrives before the Pāṇḍavas, who bow before him. This pleases Ku-
bera immensely, and the yakṣas and gandharvas who accompanied him become pacified
(3.158:32).33 This is a surprising turn in the narrative, which will soon be explained. First,
Kubera sits down on his seat Puṣpaka, and is surrounded by thousands of huge-bodied and
pointy-eared yakṣas and rākṣasas, while there are also hundreds of gandharvas and apsarases
present. The yakṣas and rākṣasas are also described as very swift (mahājavat), while four
manuscripts (K1, K2, M1, and Ś1) replace this with very strong (mahābalahā) (3.158:35–37).34
Kubera first addresses the Pāṇḍavas to stay on Mount Gand-
hamadāna. They should not regret the slaying of yakṣas and rākṣasas, for their deaths had
been foreseen by the devas (drṣṭāscapi suraiḥ pūrva vināśo; 3.158:43).35 Then Kubera turns to
Bhīma, and essentially repeats this message. He states that Bhīma only did what he did
to please Draupadi, and additionally, with the battle he managed to freed Kubera from a
curse (3.158:46).36

This curse is described as follows. The devas are to gather for a conclave at Kuśavatīyā.
Kubera goes there, surrounded by an extremely large number (mahāpādaṃśataistribhīḥ) of
yakṣas (and according to manuscript M1 also rākṣasas). These yakṣas have terrifying appear-
ceances and carry all kinds of weapons. Manuscript B4 omits their terrifying appearance
(ghorarrūpāṇam), exchanging it for an ability to change their shape at will (kāmarūpa
tam); this is the only place within the Aranya Parva explicitly mentioning this ability (3.158:51).37
While there, Maṇimāt (who was identified as a king of yakṣas in 3.157:52, but only according
to manuscript K4) spits on mahaṛṣi Agastya from the sky. Kubera is cursed for not stepping
in: Maṇimāt and his army will be destroyed by a human, and Kubera will suffer from
failing to prevent this. The curse, however, will be lifted once Kubera lays his eyes upon
the slayer of his troops (3.158:52–59), which happened shortly before he sees Bhīma.

Kubera, being grateful, allows the Pāṇḍavas to live at the dāśrama of rājāśri Arśṭiśeṇa
on Mount Gandhamadāna. The mountain is also inhabited by gandharvas, yakṣas, rākṣasas,
and alakās (inhabitants of Kubera’s residence Alakā; Monier-Williams 1899, p. 94), who will
now protect the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira has to keep Bhīma in check, however, because of
his reputation for killing yakṣas and rākṣasas (3.159:11).38 Later it is stated that Kubera’s
servants (matpresyāḥ) will provide the Pāṇḍavas with food (anna) and alcohol (pāṇi), but it is
not completely certain whether these matpresyāḥ are yakṣas (3.159:14).39 While this is an
uncertain affiliation, later it becomes clear that the yakṣas should accommodate all the
Pāṇḍavas’ desires (3.159:27).40 After these statements, Kubera leaves, and his yakṣas and
rākṣasas follow him on beautiful vehicles covered with checkered cushions and decorated
with various jewels (3.159:29–31).41 Now the Pāṇḍavas can safely spend the night on Mount
Gandhamadāna while being honored by all rākṣasas (and yakṣas according to manuscripts
K4, M1, and T1) (3.159:35).42

In this narrative, the role of the yakṣas is more complex than in the First War of the
Yakṣas. The yakṣas inhabit all markers, and are only unambiguous as fulfillers of wishes
(positive evaluation) for the first marker. For the second marker, we find shifting indications
throughout the narrative. First, the yakṣas are enemies of the Pāṇḍavas, but later they are
pacified and even become protectors. This is therefore not so much ambiguity as story
progression. They are more concretely ambiguous in the other markers. For the third
marker, we see more diversity. First of all, yakṣas belong to some kind of proper order by
belonging to Kubera, while they also maintain the proper order by bringing honour to the
Pāṇḍavas. In addition to that, dharma is disturbed by their slaughter. On the other
side of the coin, however, the yakṣas can also be found grouped together with dangerous
supernatural entities like piścas, and may even insult rṣis by spitting on them.
In terms of appearance, they are mainly described as terrifying. They are sometimes associated with beauty, like their vehicles or when they enhance the beauty of Mount Gandhamādana. Additionally, they also have a golden hue (hemaśamkāśā), but it is uncertain how this colour hema should be interpreted. For horses, it refers to a dark or brown colour (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 1304), but as a noun can refer to gold (p. 1305). This descriptor could be neutral instead of a descriptor like suvarṇa, another denomer for the golden colour (p. 1236). Next to the beauty of Mount Gandhamādana, it can also be a gravely dangerous place. With markers 2, 3, and 5 as definitely ambiguous, marker 1 being positively evaluated, and marker 4 being more undetermined, we can conclude that the yaksās’ appearance in the Second War of the Yakṣas is also ambiguous (see Table 3).

Table 3. Evaluation of the yaksās in the Second War of the Yakṣas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help/Hindrance</td>
<td>Perhaps provide food and drink (3.159:14); yaksās gratify wishes (3.159:27)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectors/Attackers</td>
<td>Yaksās pacified (3.158:32); yaksās as protectors (3.159:11)</td>
<td>Yaksās as enemies (3.157:3, 41–51, 52, 3.158:16–19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central/Peripheral</td>
<td>Beautiful Mount Gandhamādana (3.157:35–40)</td>
<td>Dangerous Mount Gandhamādana (3.157:3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4. The Yakṣas in the Story of the Drilling Wood

One of the more famous literary yakṣas is the one found in the story of the Drilling Wood. Most interestingly, this renowned yaksā turns out to not be a yaksā at all, as will be clarified below. In this story, the Pāṇḍavas are chasing a deer that stole fire drilling wood from a Brahmin who had been performing an agnihoṭra. The deer is quite elusive, and at the end the Pāṇḍavas lose track of it. They rest underneath a tree, which Nakula eventually climbs a tree in order to scout for water for his tired, thirsty brothers. He sees some trees near water and hears many cranes, a sure indicator of fresh, drinkable water. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Nakula to fetch some for them, so Nakula departs. Upon entering the lake’s vicinity Nakula hears a voice from antarikṣāṭsa, the intermediate space between heaven and earth. This voice asks him to answer some questions before he drinks, since this is the voice’s old territory. Nakula ignores this, drinks from the lake, and drops down as though dead. Then his twin brother Sahadeva goes there, likewise ignores the voice and collapses (3.295:7–296:19).

There is something rather paradoxical about this part of the Mahābhārata narrative, as noted by Shulman. This episode happens just before the Pāṇḍavas have to hide in exile at the court of Virāṭa, and at this point it becomes apparent that the normal order of things is lopsided. Earlier in the story, the Pāṇḍavas complain about their fate, and that such horrible things have happened to them despite being good people. This contradiction is doubled by the thirst-quenching water which apparently killed the Pāṇḍavas (Shulman 2001, p. 42).

Yudhiṣṭhira, becoming alarmed, sends over Arjuna next. He is struck by grief after seeing his brothers. He lifts his bow, but sees no creature, so he goes to drink. Again, a voice from antarikṣāṭsa states that he cannot take water, and needs to answer some questions
first. Arjuna states his intent to shoot the voice so it will not speak that way again, and shoots many arrows (3.296:20–29). The next line finally identifies the invisible voice:

The yakṣa said: ‘What does this shooting profit you, Pārtha [another name for Arjuna]? Answer my questions and drink. If you do not answer, you shall cease to be as soon as you drink!’ (3.296:30)\(^{43}\)

The yakṣa’s warning does not matter, however. Arjuna still drinks from the water while ignoring the yakṣa, and he too collapses (3.296:31).

With the situation becoming more and more dire, Yudhiṣṭhira sends out Bhima. Upon arriving at the lake, Bhima does not immediately panic like the others. He believes his fallen brothers to be an illusion by some yakṣa or rāksaṣa, whom he needs to fight (3.296:35).\(^{44}\) Bhima is told by the yakṣa to not drink from the water, but Bhima ignores this, drinks, and falls down as though dead. This yakṣa is described as yaksenamitātejasā (or yakṣenaṭdhubhatejasā in manuscript D2 and manuscript group Dc), meaning of great beauty, brightness, or vital power (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 454) (3.296:37–38).\(^{45}\)

With Bhima gone, it is Yudhiṣṭhira’s turn. He heads towards the lake, and the trip is described as beautiful. All kinds of beautiful flora abound, and the lake is piled with gold (3.296:39–43). Once he arrives at the lake, he suspects foul play by Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava brother and sworn enemy of the Pāṇḍavas. However, he discovers that the water does not seem to be poisoned. Yudhiṣṭhira, unlike the other brothers, decides to maintain proper form, and first performs ablutions in the pool (3.297:1–10). This pleases the yakṣa, who identifies itself as a crane (baka) living on the fish of the lake. The baka-yakṣa admits to having put a spell on the other Pāṇḍava brothers, who are therefore not dead but merely asleep. Yudhiṣṭhira must answer questions before he can collect any water (3.297:11–12).\(^{46}\)

That the yakṣa in this text identifies itself as a baka is quite significant. Such a bird is often regarded as a hypocrite, cheat, and rogue, known for its cunning and deceit. Next to that, there have been other unpleasant supernatural beings who have disguised themselves as a baka, like an asura and a rāksaṣa (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 719). Finally, it is also a bird that is closely associated with death (Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976, p. 116).

Even in this ominous disguise, Yudhiṣṭhira is not deterred. Even more so, Yudhiṣṭhira is not convinced of the yakṣa’s self-identification as a crane (which he calls sākuni). Rather, he asks whether the yakṣa is the chief of the rudras, vasus, or maruts (3.297:13).\(^{47}\) Yudhiṣṭhira states that his brothers are immensely strong and could not be felled by devas, gandharvas, asuras, rāksasas, nor yakṣas (this last one only added by manuscript B3; 3.297:15).\(^{48}\) Then there follows a very curious verse. Yudhiṣṭhira states that great curiosity, interest, even desire, has been aroused (kaṭṭāhaḥmahājāttam), but at the same time terror or panic (sādhvāsaḥ) has come over him—a perfect combination for mysterium tremendum et fascinans. Yudhiṣṭhira is trembling within his heart (yena-asmi–udvij–hr.ṣyaḥ), and has a headache, is with fever (sirojvarah) or without (siyorujah) in manuscripts B3 and M1 (3.297:16–17).\(^{49}\)

The yakṣa then identifies itself as a yakṣa, not a bird. He speaks with rough or uneven syllables (purusakṣaratām) and with an ominous tone (tamaśvātām). After that, the yakṣa reveals its appearance to Yudhiṣṭhira. It has unusual or deformed eyes (vīrāpāksaḥ), and a huge body as tall as a palmyra palm, unassailable like a mountain (adhiroṣaḥ parcatapamān), and blazing like the sun (jvalanārkapratīkāṣaṃ). The yakṣa’s voice roars deep like the clouds (mahāgambhīrayā voca) in a threatening manner (tariṣṭatam mahābalaṃ), which Van Buitenen translates as a thunderclap. Next to all this, we find the yakṣa to be standing in an interesting location. There are three different manuscript traditions denoting where the yakṣa takes refuge (dāsritaḥ). Manuscript D2 and manuscript group Dc have sara, which could mean liquid or cord. So, either the yakṣa is standing on a cord or in water. Manuscripts D4, D5, G3, and manuscript groups B and Dn have the yakṣa perching in a tree (vrksam). Most manuscripts, however, locate the yakṣa on a setu, which is a dam or ridge that separates one plot of cultivated land from another. Here, again, just like with the antarikṣatasra or intermediate area between heaven and earth, we find the yakṣa associated with a liminal and therefore truly ambiguous position (3.297:18–21).\(^{50}\)
The yaksā claims that he killed the Pāṇḍava brothers because they drank from the pool when he explicitly forbade them from doing so. Yudhiṣṭhira, likewise, is only allowed to drink after answering questions (3.297:22–23). Yudhiṣṭhira, surprisingly, responds to this stipulation by praising the yaksā as a lord (prabho) or as a bull among male beings (purusārṣabhā in manuscripts D2, D4, D6, G3, and manuscript groups B and Dn). Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to being questioned (3.297:24–25). These questions are traditionally known as praśnavyākaranāya or brahmodya (especially as they appear in Yajur Veda 23), but most commonly as praśnottara-mālīka or garland of questions (Misra 1981, p. 19). According to Agrawala, such questions are an integral part of yaksā worship and mimic the type of questions asked by someone who is possessed by a yaksā (yaksā-graha) (Agrawala 1970, p. 195). While White sees the content of the questions as mere yaksā-abhidharma or yaksā scholasticism (White 2021, p. 143), Shulman treats them with more attention. He places this within the Upaniṣadic riddling tradition (as did Nīlakantha, one of the primary commentators on the Mahābhārata, did before him; Shulman 2001, p. 43), where the riddlee (the one answering questions) is under direct peril, since a wrong answer may lead to a swift death. In such a riddling game, there is a concealed answer which does not directly come to light. Such an answer can be deduced through the questions being asked, which relate to each other by means of cognitive mapping: the different categories and cosmological levels are meant to run parallel to each other (pp. 45–46). Shulman claims that the core of the questions are about ultimate reality (brahman), which is subsumed under the first answer (p. 44):

The yaksā said: ‘What causes the sun to rise, and what are its companions? What makes it set, and on what is it founded? Yudhiṣṭhira said: Brahman makes the sun rise, and the devas are its companions. Dharma makes it set, and on truth it is founded’ (3.297:26–27)

In the story, Yudhiṣṭhira’s answers must be taken as truthful and demonstrating his wisdom. In reality, however, it is quite likely that these lists of questions and answers were memorized (Shulman 2001, p. 45), as happens more often in riddling traditions (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001, p. 56).

After answering these questions (3.297:26–64), the yaksā allows Yudhiṣṭhira to awaken one of his brothers. Yudhiṣṭhira picks Nakula, for he argues that his own mother (Kunti) still has a living son (Yudhiṣṭhira himself), while Madri is bereft of both Nakula and Sahadeva. The yaksā is impressed with this choice, since he would have expected Yudhiṣṭhira to pick one of his full brothers. Because of this, he lifts the spell on the other Pāṇḍava brothers (3.297:65–74). Yudhiṣṭhira, however, is still not convinced of the yaksā’s identity, and asks again who he is: a deva, one of the vasus or rudras, the chief of the maruts, Indra, their friend, or their father (3.298:2–5). Now, finally, the yaksā reveals its true identity: it is the deva Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira’s divine father. In the Mahābhārata, Yudhiṣṭhira is tested three times by Dharma in order to demonstrate sanatāna dharma. This was the first instance. The second test concerns a dog who cannot enter heaven, for Indra does not allow this. Yudhiṣṭhira therefore chooses to stay with the dog (17.1–3). The third test is found in 18.1–2. Here, the Kauravas celebrate in heaven, while the Pāṇḍavas suffer in hell. Yudhiṣṭhira decides to stay in hell with his kinsmen (Fitzgerald 2020, pp. 33–36). Because of Yudhiṣṭhira’s valour, Dharma gives them more boons: the Brahmin will be able to worship Agni without interruption, the Pāṇḍavas will be able to remain in exile without being recognized, and Yudhiṣṭhira will be freed from greed, folly, and anger, and his mind will always be inclined towards charity, austerity, and truth (3.298:11–25).

In this last narrative, we again see a lot of ambiguity. In terms of net balance, it seems that the yaksā is more negatively evaluated here because of its initial threat to the Pāṇḍavas. With regard to the first marker, the yaksā prevents the thirst of the Pāṇḍavas from being quenched on several occasions. Near the end of the narrative, however, the yaksā restores the Pāṇḍavas to life and provides them with boons. While the ambiguity here is of a linear fashion (meaning that it gets resolved through the progression of the story), we are left...
with mainly a negative portrayal of the second marker. Once resolved, the yakṣa turns out to be the deva Dharma, but as a yakṣa his focal behaviour lies in its attacks on the Pāṇḍavas by cursing the lake, playing tricks, and putting the Pāṇḍavas under a spell.

A similar but slightly more complex linear progression is also found with regard to the third marker. The yakṣa starts out as a baka or sakuni, which is an extremely treacherous bird who essentially curses four of the Pāṇḍava brothers. After this, it is associated with proper supernatural entities by Yudhīśṭhīra. After being identified as a yakṣa, the yakṣa asks questions about ultimate reality. Finally, after the trial, as the deva Dharma, there is the restoration of the ritual order: the Brahmin can perform his ritual again.

The fourth marker, then, shows true ambiguity. The yakṣa has tejas, which could be seen as a positive marker, but he also has a terrifying and fascinating appearance as betrayed by Yudhīśṭhīra’s reaction. Similarly, for the final marker, the lake is a beautiful place but is simultaneously highly dangerous. When we also take into account the other two locative moments of liminality (the yakṣa speaking from antarikṣa (multiple occurrences) and standing on the setu in 3.297:18–21), we can see some definite signs of ambiguity in this narrative (see Table 4).

Table 4. Evaluation of the yakṣa in the story of the Drilling Woods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help/Hindrance</td>
<td>Yakṣa cures all Pāṇḍavas (3.297:65–74); Dharma provides boons to Pāṇḍavas (3.298:11–25)</td>
<td>Yakṣa prevents thirst being quenched (3.296:30, 37–38; 3.297:12, 22–23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting/Attacking</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Yakṣa cursed lake (3.296:30); yakṣas play tricks (3.296:35); yakṣa kills Pāṇḍavas (3.297:22–23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order</td>
<td>Yakṣa associated with proper supernatural entities (3.297:13); yakṣa asking questions about ultimate reality (3.297:26–64); yakṣa is Dharma (3.298:6–25); restoration of ritual order (3.298:6–25)</td>
<td>Yakṣa as baka (3.296:11–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful/Gruesome</td>
<td>Yakṣa has tejas (3.296:37–38)</td>
<td>Terrifying but fascinating appearance (3.297:16–21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central/Peripheral</td>
<td>Beautiful lake (3.296:39–43)</td>
<td>Cursed lake (3.296:30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Conclusions

The goal of this article is twofold. First of all, scouring through the literature, an ideal type model has been devised with which one can examine ambiguity in supernatural entities. Five markers have been found for positive and negative evaluations of supernatural species. The first marker considers whether the supernatural being aids humans in fulfilling desires and needs, or prevents such fulfilment. The second marker examines whether the supernatural beings protect or attack humans. The third marker determines whether the supernatural beings fall under the same order as humans, or if they seek to destroy that order. The fourth marker zooms in on the appearance of the supernatural entity, and whether they conform to cultural ideas of beauty and decency, or if they break with these. Finally, the last marker examines the location (either close by or far away) of the supernatural being.

This model has been used to analyse four narratives within the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata: the story of Nala and Damayantī (3.50–3.78), the First War of the Yakṣas (3.146–3.153), the Second War of the Yakṣas (3.157–159), and the story of the Drilling Woods.
In all four of these narratives, the *yakṣas* are found to be ambiguous; that is, the *yakṣas* in these narratives have a combination of positive and negative markers. All of the markers have been employed to determine the *yakṣas*’ ambiguity. One can therefore conclude that *yakṣas* are utilized in their ambiguity in the Aranya Parva of the Mahābhārata. In addition to that, we can now more precisely determine what this ambiguity looks like.

At the same time, we should note the difference between true ambiguity (meaning that both positive and negative markers are present and active at the same narrative moment) as well as ambiguity caused by narrative development. We have seen a couple of examples this last group. First of all, in the story of Nala and Damayantī, there is a shift from the positively evaluated *yakṣa*-Damayantī who can potentially fulfill wishes and protect the merchant caravan, to one who destroys and causes suffering. Secondly, in the Second War of the *yakṣas*, we start with *yakṣas* as antagonists who eventually become pacified and even protectors of the Pāṇḍavas. Finally, in the story of the Drilling Woods, there is a shift from the *yakṣa* as an entity that prevents the fulfilment of desires (quenching thirst) to one who grants boons (reviving the Pāṇḍavas); one can also see a gradual pacifying shift from *baka* to *yakṣa* and finally to the deva Dharma. While there is now a model which serves to determine and analyse ambiguity, we should correspondingly not lose sight of the ambiguous nature of supernatural entities and their tendency to confound any clear-cut analysis of them.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available in this article, and is specified in the footnotes.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1. Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 341); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 204):
   
   kāśi kāśyāśi kālayāni | kim vā mrāgayase vane
tvāṃ dṛṣṭvā vyathitāḥ smeha | kāsācattvasami mānuṣi |113
vada satyāṃ vanasāya | parvatasyātha vā dīśaḥ
devatā tvam hi kālayāni | tvāṃ vayaṃ śāraṃam gataḥ |114
yakṣi vā rākṣasi vā tvam | utaḥśi varāṇgānā
sarvātthā kuru nah svasti | rākṣavāmānānindite |115
yathāyam sarvātthā sārthāḥ | kṣemī śīḍhramito vrajet
tathā vidhatśva kālayāni | tvāṃ vayaṃ śāraṃam gataḥ |116

2. Translation based on Ganguli (1884, p. 141); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1057):
   
   yāsāvadya mahāsārthe | nārivōnmattadarśanā |158
praviṣṭā vikṛtākārā | krtvā rūpamānusam |159
tayeyam vihitā pūrvam | māyā paramadārūṇā |160
rākṣasi vā piśāci vā | yakṣi vātibhayaṃkari |161
tasyāḥ sarvamidaṃ pāpaṃ | nātra kārya vicāraṇā |162
yadi paśyām tām pāpam | sārthadhīgīṃ naukadaṇḍhādam |163
loṣṭakaḥ pāsūbhiściva | tṛṇaiḥ kāṣṭhaisca muṣṭibhiḥ |164
avaśyameva hantavyā | śa sārthasya tu kṛṣchradā |165

3. This phrase is not coined by Otto himself, but it is commonly used as a shorthand paraphrase for Otto’s main idea; see Otto (1917).


5. Doniger-O’Flaherty 1976 is one of the main sources in this section. However, her book is quite unclear in delineating who the ‘gods’ and ‘demons’ are. It becomes apparent that the ‘gods’ are *devas*, but it is by no means always clear whether the ‘demons’ are solely the *asuras*, or could also include beings like *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, *nāgas* and others.

6. Manuscript K3 has *rājenḍra*, which changes ‘people’ into ‘emperor’.

   
   na deveṣu na yakṣēṣu | tadṛgṛ rūpavati kva cit
mānuṣeṣv api cānyeṣu | drṣṭalpūrvā na ca śrutā |113
aho r¯upam aho k¯antir | aho dhairya ˙m mah¯atmanah.

kuñjaradv¯ipimahis.a | ´ s¯ard¯ularks.amr.rg¯an api
pa´ sy¯amy asmin vane kaôte | amanus.yanisevite
tath¯a no yaks¯ar¯ad adya | manibhadrah praśidatu 123


Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 507); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 500):

es.a panth¯ah. kuru´ sres.t.ha | saugandhikavan¯aya te
draks.yase dhanadody¯ana ˙m | raks.ita ˙m yaks.ar¯aks.aih. 12

devars.ayas tath¯a yaks. ¯a | dev¯a´ s c¯atra vr.kodara
¯amantrya yaks.apravara ˙m | pibanti viharanti ca
gandharv¯apsarasa´ s caiva | viharanty atra p¯an. d. ava 5

Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 513); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 524):
tati ca bh¯ımam mah¯atm¯anaḥ | tasy¯as t¯ıre vyavasthitam
daddr.´ sur nihat¯a ˙m´ s caiva | yaks. ¯an suvipuleks.an. ¯an 24

tatah. pravavrr.te yuddha ˙m | tes. ¯a ˙m tasya ca bh¯arata
taih. prayukt¯an mah¯ak¯ayaih. | ´ sakti´ s¯ulapara´ svadh¯an
bhallair bh¯ımah. praciccheda | bh¯ımavegatarais tatah. |43

antariks.acar¯an. ¯a ˙m ca | bh ¯umis.t.h¯an¯a ˙m ca garjat¯am
śarair vivyāda gātrāṇi | rākṣasānāṁ mahābalaḥ 144
sā lohitamahāvṛṣṭir | abhyavaraṇa mahābalaṁ
cāyebhyaḥ pracyutā dhārā | rākṣasānāṁ samantataḥ 145
bhīmābhuhubalotsṛṣṭir | bahudhā yakṣarākṣasāṁ
vinīkkṛttyā adṛśyaṁa | śarirāṁ śirāṁ ca 146
pracchādyāmānaṁ rākṣobhiḥ | pāṇḍavaṁ priyadarśanam
drāṣṭṛḥ sarvahṛtiṁa | sūryam abhraṇāṁ iva 147
sa rāṃśhūr ivādityaḥ | śarir āriniḥāṭāṁ bhūṁ
sarvān ārchan mahābhūḥ | balavān sāyaṇikramāḥ 148
abhūtarjayanāṁ sa ca | ruvanās ca mahāraṝṇ
na mohāṁ bhīmasenaḥya | drāṣṭṛḥ sarvarākṣasāḥ 149
te sarāṁ śaṭastarvāṅgā | bhīmasenaḥ bhayārditāṁ
bhīmam ārtasvarāṁ cakrur | viprakīṁcamaḥyudhāḥ 150
utsṛjjya te gadaśūlāṁ | asākṣipta pardvādān
daksināṁ diśam ājāmu | trāśītā dhṛdhaḥpanā 151
22 Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 527); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 532):
tatra śulagadapāṇi | vyūḍhaḥ hūrasko mahābhujah.
saṁkha vaśraṇaṁvasin | maṇḍīmaṁ nāma rākṣasāḥ 152
23 Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 528); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 533):
sendrāśanir ivendren | visṛṣṭa vātaramahasā
hattva rākṣaṁ kṣitiṁ prāpya | kṛtyeva nipapāta ha 168
nyastasastraṇyudhāḥ śrāntāḥ | ṣoṇitākapaḥcirchadāḥ
prakīrnamūrhdhajā rājan | yaksādhipatim abruvan 16
gadāparighanistriṁśa | tomaraprāsavyodhinaḥ
rākṣasāḥ nihataḥ sarve | tava deva puraḥsaraḥ 17
pramrdya taraśa śailaṁ | mānusena dhaneśvara
ekena sahitāḥ samkhye | hatāḥ krodhavasā ganāḥ 18
pravarā rākṣasendrāṇāṁ | yaksānāṁ ca dhanaḥhipa
śerate nihata deva | gatasattvāḥ pārāsavaḥ 19
sa tac chrutvā tu śaṁkruddhah | sarvayaksagānāḍhipaḥ
kopasa śrāktanayanah | katham ity abraṇīd vacah. 21
dvitiyām aparādhyanta | bhīmaḥ śrutvā dhaneśvaraḥ
cukrodha yaksāḥ ṣadhipatir | yujyataṁ iti cābravṛt 22
26 Different manuscript traditions provide different formulations for the huge numbers in 3.158:28. Manuscripts D3, D5, K1, K3, and K4 have śaṭaśaśāḥ. K2 has satasatāḥ; D1, D2, D4, D6, and manuscript groups B, Dc, and Dn have daśaśaśāḥ, which is closer to the term found in all remaining manuscripts (daśaśaśāḥ).
27 Manuscript T1 replaces this with rākṣaśā, which is the only manuscript to add the rākṣasā in this passage.
28 D1, D2, D3, K1, K2, and S1.
29 Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 536);
anuṣajnurmahāṭmānam | dhanadāṁ ghoradarśāṇāḥ
20 budhanistriṁśā (and in K1 and K2 ghrtaṁstriṁśā), the last element needs to be corrected to niḥtrimśā.
30 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 529); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 536):
śobhamāṁ rathe yuktāṁ | tariṣyanta ivāśuṁghaṁ
harṣyaṁ āśur anonyam | inītaitaṁ vijayāvahāṁ 25
sa taṁ āsthyāṁ bhagavāṁ | rājarājo mahāraṁṣa
prayayau devagandharvaiḥ | stūyamāṁ mahādyutim 26
taṁ prayāntaṁ mahāṁtamaṁ | sarvayaksagānāḍhipaṁ
raktāśaḥ hesamāṁkāśā mahākāyā mahābalaḥ 27
sāyudhā budhanistriṁśā | yākṣa daśaśaśātutuṁ
javena mahatā vīrāḥ | parivāryopatsthāre 28
taṁ mahāntamaṁ upāyantam | dhaneśvaram upāṇ
tkedadṛṣṭur hṛṣṭaromānaḥ | pāṇḍavāḥ priyadarśanam 29
31 Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 529); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 536):
te pakṣina iṣvopattyā | gireḥ śringāṁ mahājaṁvah
asthūṁ teśāṁ samabhīṣyāsā | dhaneśvarapurahṣāraḥ 31
33 Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 529); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 536):

tatas taṁ hrśamanasaṁ | pāṇḍavāṁ prati bhārata

samikṣya yākṣagandharvā | nirvikārā vyavasthitāṁ 132

34 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 529); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, pp. 536–37):

śāyāsaṇavaram śrīmat | puspakaṁ viśvakaṁnaṁ

vihitaṁ citraparyantam | ātiṣṭhata dhanādhipaṁ 135

tam āśinaṁ mahākāyāṁ | śankuṁkarnā mahājāvāṁ

upopaviśūr yaksā | rākṣasaṁ ca sahasraśaṁ 136

śataśaṁ cāpi gandharvāṁ | tathāvīpāradsaṁ gaṇaṁ

parivāryopatīṣṭhanta | yathā devaṁ saṣṭakratum 137

35 Translation: Van Buitenen (1975, p. 530); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 537):

vrūḍā cātra na kartavyā | sāhasaṁ yay idam kṛtaṁ

dṛṣṭaṁ cāpi suraṁ pūrvaṁ | vināśo yāksaraśaṁ 143

36 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 530); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 537):

mām anāḍrtya devaṁ ca | vināśaṁ yāksaraśaṁ

svabhāvalam āśritya | tenaṁ pritīmāṁ tvaya 146

37 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 530); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 538):

devatānāṁ abhūṁ mantrāḥ | kuśavyāṁm nareśvara

vṛttaṁ tāṭhāṁ agamanāḥ | mahāpadaśaṁtais tribhūṁ

yaksanāṁ ghorarūpaṁāṁ | vивidhāyudhadhārīṁāṁ 151

38 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 531); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 540):

alakhaḥ saha gandharvair | yaksati ca saha rākṣasaḥ

manṇiyuktā manusyendra | sarve ca girīvāsināṁ

rākṣantu tvā mahābhāho | sahitāṁ dvījasattamaṁ 11

39 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 531); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 540):

tathāvai cañnapaṁāṁ | svādūṁ ca bhūṁ ca

upasṭhāyanti vo grhyā | matpreśayaḥ puruśaṛṣaṁba 14

40 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 532); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 540):

svesu veśmasu ramyeṣu | vasaṭāṃ sitrāṭapanāṁ

kāmān upahārisyanti | yaksā vo bharaṭaṛṣaṁbaḥ 127

41 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 532); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 540):

evam uttamaṃkarmānām | anuśīya yudhīṣṭharam

astam girīvaraśreṣṭhaṁ | prayaṇaṁ guhyakādihaṁ 129

tam paristomasāṁkīrṇair | nānāratmaviḥbhūṣaitaṁ

yānair anuyayur yaksā | rākṣasas ca sahasraśaṁ
daṃniyuktā manusyendra | sarve ca girīvāsināṁ

rākṣantu tvā mahābhāho | sahitāṅ dvījasattamaṁ 131

42 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 532); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 542):

tāṁ paristomasāṁkīrṇair | prayaṇaṁ guhyakādihaṁ 129

tam paristomasāṁkīrṇair | nānāratmaviḥbhūṣaitaṁ

yānair anuyayur yaksā | rākṣasas ca sahasraśaṁ

dākṣeraḥ prajñāpāramāṇāṁ | kuberaḥ paramāṇāṁ

bhāvinaḥ paramāṇānāṁ | aiśvāvatapathे yatāṁ 131

43 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 532); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 542):

pāṇḍavāpi mahātmānas | teṣu veśmasu tāṁ kṣapāṁ

sukham uṣur gātt Kovagrahyā | pūjitaḥ yāksaraśaṁsāḥ 135 according to manuscripts K4, M1, and T1

44 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 798); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1023):

yaksā uvāca |

kim vighātāna te pārtha | prāṣāṇā uktvā tathāḥ pibā

anuvātu tvā tathāḥ prāśāṇā | pīṭhāva na bhavīṣyasi 130

45 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 798); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1024):

tāṁ druṣṭvā duḥkhito bhāmas | ṭrayā ca prapiṇḍītaṁ

amanyaṁ mahābhāhuḥ | karma tād yāksaraśaṁsāṁ

sa cintāyāṁ āsa tadā | yoddhāvayaṁ dhruvām adya me 135

46 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 798); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1024):

yaksā uvāca |

mā tāta sāhasaṁ kārsṛ | mama pūrvariparigrahaḥ

prāśāṇā uktvā tu kaunleya | tathāḥ pibā harasva ca 137

vaśāṇāpyaṇa uvāca |
evam uktas tato bhīmo | yāksaṁnāmitatejasā

avijñāyaṁ tvā prāśāṇā | pīṭhāva nāpāṁ ha 138

47 Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 799); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1026):

yaksā uvāca |
ahaṁ bakaḥ śaivalamatsyabhakṣo | mayā niśāḥ pretavaśaṁ tavaṁuṇāḥ
tvaṁ pañcamaṁ bhavitā rājaṁputra | na cet praśnāṁ prchato vyākaroṣi |11
mā tāta śahasaraṁ kārṣir | mama pūrvaparigrahaḥ
praśnāṁ uktvā tu kauntey | tataḥ pība harassva ca |12

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 799); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1027):
yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
ruḍrāṇāṁ vā vaśuṇāṁ vā | marutāṁ vā pradhānabhāk
prchāmi ko bhavān devo | naitac chakuninā kṛtām |13
viśaḥeram mahāyuddhe | kṛtāṁ te tan mahādbhutam | 15 according to manuscript B3.

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, pp. 799–800); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1027):
ativa te mahat karma | kṛtāṁ ca balanāṁ vara
yan na devā na gandharvā | nāsurā yaksarākṣasāḥ

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 800); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1027):
na te jānāmi yat kāryam | nābhijānāmi kānḳṣitam
kautukālaṁ mahā jātaṁ | sādhvasam cāgataṁ mama |16
yenaṁ syu dvignahṛdayaḥ | samutpattinaśirvajraḥ
prchāmi bhagavānīnānuṣmāt | ko bhavān iha tiṣṭhāti |17

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 800); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1027–28):
yakṣa uvāca |
yakṣo 'ham asmi bhadrāṇi te | nāsmi paści jalecaraḥ
mayaite nihatāḥ sarve | bhṛtrāras te mahaujasāḥ |18
vaśaṁpāyana uvāca |
tataṁ tām asivāṁ śrutvā | vācaṁ sa paṇaśkaśarāṁ
yakṣasya bruvaṇa rājan | upakrayaṁ tādā sītataḥ |19
vīruṇaśaṁ mahākāyaṁ | yakṣaṁ tālasamucchrayam
jvalanārkapratiκāsāṁ | adhrṣyaiṇ parvatopamaṁ |20
setum āśīrya tiṣṭhantair | dadarsaḥ bhuratarasabhaḥ
mehgabhumīrayā vācā | tarjayantam mahabalām |21

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 800); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1028–29):
yakṣa uvāca |
ime te bhṛtrāro rājan | vāyaṁaṁ mayāsakṛ
balāṁ ṭoṣam jihṛsantaṁ | tato vai śuditaṁ mayā |22
na peyam udakam rājan | prāṇāṁ iha paripaśta
pārtha ma śahasam kārṣir | mama pūrvaparigrahaḥ
praśnāṁ uktvā tu kauntey | tataḥ pība harassva ca |23

Translation based on Van Buitenen (1975, p. 800); Sanskrit: Sukthankar (1942, p. 1028):
yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
naivāṁkām kāmye yakṣa | tava pūrvaparigrahaṁ
kāmāṁ naitat praśamsanti | santo hi puruṣaṁ sadā |24
yadāṁ ma śahasam kārṣir | mama pūrvaparigrahaḥ
prāṇāṁ yāt kauṭyāte | tataḥ pība harassva ca |25

yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
sarasya ekena pādena | tiṣṭhantam aparājitam
prchāmi ko bhavān devo | na me yakṣo mato bhavan |26
kas caiṁaṁ astāṁ nayati | kaṁsminīṣ ca pratitiṣṭhati |27
yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
brhmādityam unnavayati | devās tasyābhitaṁ ca rāh
dharmaṁ caṣtaṁ nayati ca | satyo ca pratitiṣṭhati |28

yakṣa uvāca |
imīti ṣvīdādyāṁ unnayati | ke ca tasyābhitaṁ ca rāh
kaṣ caiṁaṁ astāṁ nayati | kaṁsminīṣ ca pratitiṣṭhati |29
yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
brhmādityam unnavayati | devās tasyābhitaṁ ca rāh
dharmaṁ caṣtaṁ nayati ca | satyo ca pratitiṣṭhati |30

yuddhiṣṭhira uvāca |
sarasya ekena pādena | tiṣṭhantam aparājitam
prchāmi ko bhavān devo | na me yakṣo mato bhavan |31
vasūnāṁ vā bhavān eko | rudrāṇāṁ atha vā bhavān
atha vā marutāṁ śreṣṭho | vairi vā tridaseśvāraḥ |32
mama hi bhṛtrāra ime | sahaṣraśayodhinaḥ
na tāṁ yogāṁ pariṣṭhitam | yena syuḥ vinipātī |33
sukhaṁ pratibuddhānāṁ | indriyāṁ upalakṣaye
sa bhavān suḥṛd āsmaṁ | atha vā naḥ pitā bhavan |34
It was actually Dharma disguised as a deer who stole the fire drilling sticks, showcasing that even the devas can be ambiguous figures.

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