

The Tale of the Eagle: An Entertainment

JOEL P. BRERETON

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

The *Suparṇādhyaḥya* or “The Tale of the Eagle” is a Sanskrit poem dating approximately to the latter part of the first millennium BCE. While the text itself does not become a significant part of the Sanskrit literary tradition, the story it tells does, though in forms preserved in other literature. This paper attempts to understand the purpose of the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* and the context for which it was composed. It argues that the text was originally created as an entertainment for young brahmin males who were memorizing the Veda under the direction of a teacher in a Vedic school. It concludes that the text was recited during days off from Veda study not only as an entertainment, but also as an encouragement to continue that study and as an education in the power and importance of the texts the students were memorizing.

This talk has its genesis in John Huehnergard’s Presidential address last year (March 2018, published as Huehnergard 2018). Those who heard it will remember it. For those who did not—and have not yet read it in the *Journal*—John presented and discussed ancient letters: a school boy’s frustration with his mother because of his inadequate wardrobe allowance, a wife annoyed with her merchant husband for criticizing the goods she sends him, a brother worried about angering his sister. After the talk and amid many appreciative comments, my colleague Patrick Olivelle sighed, “We can’t do that.” “Do what?” I asked, and he said that because we—meaning we who work on premodern South Asia—don’t have personal documents, we can’t get the same feel for the lives of the people we study that John’s letters provide. He was right, of course, but others, including Patrick himself, have tried to find the people behind the texts we do have. What I will attempt this evening is also an experiment in hunting through an ancient text for the human lives it shadows.

My textual hunting ground is the *Suparṇādhyaḥya*, “The Tale of the Eagle,” a Sanskrit poem probably of the late Vedic and pre-Epic period, which is to say, dating to some uncertain time around or before the beginning of the Common Era.¹ It is not a lengthy text—it counts around 160 verses—nor a terribly significant one in the history of Sanskrit literature. There are only eight manuscripts of it so far reported, including a single late commentary (Tripathi 2016: 26, 29–31). But the story it told had more success than the text itself, since the great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata* (at 1.14–30), embeds a version of the tale based on our text and thereby transmitted the story to the later tradition.

Author’s note: Presidential address delivered March 17, 2019, at the 229th meeting of the American Oriental Society in Chicago. While the address has been slightly revised, its informal style has been retained. I wish to thank Stephanie Jamison, John Huehnergard, and Patrick Olivelle for their inspiration and support and to dedicate the address to the memory of Stanley Insler.

1. I follow the text of the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* as edited in Charpentier 1920. The manuscripts of the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* are irregularly accented, and therefore I follow Charpentier in omitting accents in quoting the text. For an accented text, see Grube 1876 and Tripathi 2016. I cite the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* according to the *varga* and verse numbering in Charpentier and Grube.

The *Suparṇādhyaḥya* tells how the eagle Garuḍa² rescued his mother by stealing the soma, the drink of immortality. Garuḍa's story begins with his birth. Once upon a time, the god Indra offended a group of sages, the Vālakhilya sages, who gave a portion of their ascetic power to the eagle Tārḥṣya, asking him to use it to produce a son who would avenge Indra's insult. As a result Tārḥṣya's wife Vinatā lays three eggs. In her impatience to see her children, she cracks open two of them too soon, giving birth to two incomplete sons (*Sup* 3.2–4). From the third is born Garuḍa, the magnificent and vastly powerful eagle (4.1). Later Vinatā, who had already established herself as not the sharpest tool in the shed, loses a wager to Kadrū, mother of snakes, and as a result she becomes Kadrū's slave (7.1). Good son that he is, Garuḍa assumes part of his mother's servitude. But he makes a bargain with the snakes that if he brings them the drink of immortality, they will release his mother from slavery. That is the set-up; I will return to the main action in a moment.

Now, one key to the audience of this text is a short prose passage appended to the beginning (*Sup* 1.5). It gives approximately correct information on the meter and length of the text and the occasion at which it is to be recited. It's that occasion that interests me: the text says that *parvaṇy adhyayane brāhmaṇābhiśrāvāṇe ca viniyogaḥ* "its employment is at half-month during Vedic study and during the recitation of Vedic explanatory texts." By "Vedic study" (*adhyayana-*) the passage refers to students' memorization of the core texts of the Veda and by "recitation of explanatory texts" (*brāhmaṇābhiśrāvāṇa-*), it means their learning of Vedic exegetical works.³ This context thus places "The Tale of the Eagle" among brahmin boys and young men who were learning to recite and to interpret the Veda. Moreover, the story addresses particularly those who were learning the oldest and most illustrious part of the Veda, the *Ṛgveda*. The story of Garuḍa has its origins in two *Ṛgvedic* hymns that tell how Manu, the first sacrificer, sent a trained falcon to steal the soma and bring it back to earth. Manu could then ritually offer the soma to the gods, thereby sustaining them and winning their support. The text connects itself to these two hymns by claiming that their poet, Vāmadeva, was also the composer of the "Tale of the Eagle."

Locating this story in the midst of Vedic study also explains why "The Tale of the Eagle" was recited at the half-month. In a tradition that still continues, Vedic students have time off from their study each new-moon and each full-moon day. The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, which is of a similar age as "The Tale of the Eagle," quotes an earlier Vedic text that even increases the number of days off: *BDhS* 1.21.22 *hantya aṣṭamī hy upādhyāyam, hanti śiṣyaṃ caturdaśī | hanti pañcadaśī vidyām, tasmāt parvaṇi varjayet* "The eighth day [that is, the day of the half-moon] slays the teacher, the fourteenth day slays the pupil, and the fifteenth day slays the knowledge; therefore, he should refrain from recitations during the days of the moon's change" (Olivelle, tr.). Or again, according to one contemporary informant, trying to learn the Veda on a new-moon day "is like fetching water in a sieve" (Knipe 2015: 144).

So what did and what do students do on days when they aren't learning Vedic recitations? The ancient texts don't tell us. In contemporary Maharashtra, some Vedic schools perform

2. In the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* Garuḍa is called the *suparṇa-*, literally the one 'with fine wing-feathers', but meaning an eagle or other raptor. As noted below, he owes his origins to *Ṛgveda* R 4.26 and 27, according to which Manu sent a *śyena-*, also a raptor, perhaps a 'falcon' (Schneider 1971: 31), to retrieve the soma from on high.

3. I understand the *abhiśrāvāṇa-* in the compound *brāhmaṇābhiśrāvāṇa-* to refer to the recitation or learning of brāhmaṇa texts or a brāhmaṇa text. On the basis of its derivation, *abhiśrāvāṇa-* should mean 'the act of making heard' or 'that which is learned by hearing' or the like, and this analysis governs my translation. The commentary on the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* attributed to Jayasvāmin, probably dating to the seventeenth century (Tripathi 2016: 30), attributes to the word the technical sense of a recitation for brahmins participating in a *śrāddha* rite. But I see no other indication that this text is related to a *śrāddha* rite and little reason to ascribe to the word such a technical meaning.

traditional Vedic rites, or adaptations of these rites, or other domestic rituals. Or students might study other non-Vedic works. Or in schools that do not require as much high-mindedness, students might watch movies or television or play cricket (Larios 2017: 134). That is to say, these days off can include things that are fun. And here is where I leap into the unknown but I believe the not unlikely. Can we read “The Tale of the Eagle” as a text composed for the entertainment and edification of students on their days off from memorization of Vedic texts? I think so, and to do so helps us understand both the text and the audience it addresses.

With some exceptions, the *Suparṇādhyaḥya* takes the form of verse conversations between pairs of characters. Often characters will introduce themselves, but there are instances in which who is speaking is not clear. Because “The Tale of the Eagle” consists of dialogues, one early and again recently revived theory is that it is a proto-drama or even the earliest Sanskrit play (Tripathi 2016: 10, 16–19). If it is a play, however, it is a singularly hectic one, since the text would have more than thirty “scenes,” with a change of “scene” occurring every five verses or so. That would suggest a great deal of running on and off stage. But the text may have been performed by one or two reciters, who could signal changes of location and speaker by gesture, voice, or just explanation. However it was presented, it surely was an entertainment.

Much of the poem, especially its first half, is comic. I realize that there are problems with this claim. Tragedy we can recognize, but detecting what a distant and ancient culture thought was funny can be a trickier proposition. Nonetheless, there are universal theories of humor, the most famous of which is “incongruity theory,” which holds that laughter arises from a mismatch between expectation and realization or between abstract concept and real object (Glasgow 1995: 85). And this text shows a variety of just such incongruities.

Among them are exaggerated sizes and abilities. For starters, consider the Vāḷakhilya sages, who empowered Garuḍa’s birth. These sages are smaller than a thumb.⁴ Their story begins when two of them, who are carrying home the stem of a leaf for firewood, fall into the muddy footprint of a cow and get stuck (*Sup* 2.3). The god Indra sees this, finds it hilarious, and laughs at the sages (2.4). The insulted sages then engineer the birth of Garuḍa to take revenge on Indra. But lilliputian sages with great powers and sages stuck in the mud—and, with particular irony, stuck in the mud of a cow track—are incongruities. They’re funny—funny to us, to the Tale’s early audience, and, unfortunately for him, to Indra.

In contrast to the improbably tiny sages, the appetite of Garuḍa after he is born is improbably gargantuan. Because he is born hungry, his mother advises him to eat a gigantic elephant and a great sea creature, who are living near and in a lake at the top of a mountain (13.1). The peculiarity of the location—a lake on top of a mountain—reflects the absurdity of the sizes of the elephant and the sea creature. In its version of the story, the *Mahābhārata* (1.25.24) describes the elephant as “six leagues (*yojana*-) tall” and “twice as long,” and makes the sea creature to be a tortoise “three leagues high and ten around.” But in the “Tale of the Eagle,” the sea creature is called the comrade of the elephant (13.2) and even looks and acts like an elephant (14.1). As Stephanie Jamison (e.g., 1991–92: 137) has reminded us, the ancient texts observe and describe animals carefully, even when as here they outsize them like balloons in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. If the text says that the sea creature is elephant-like, it shouldn’t be a tortoise, whose resemblance to an elephant is minimal. But there is an elephant-like and, as it happens, an elephant-related sea creature called a *jalahastin* ‘sea elephant’ (cf. Charpentier 1920: 234 n. 1). This is the dugong, a relative of the manatee. The

4. *Mbh* 1.27.8ab *athāpaśyad ṛṣiṅ hrasvān, aṅguṣṭhodaraparvaṇaḥ* “Then he saw the sages, no larger than the segment of the thick part a thumb.”

point of the “Tale of the Eagle” is that Garuḍa eats the largest land creature, the elephant, and then a corresponding sea creature, showing that he is master not only of the sky but also of land and water.

Having captured the two animals, Garuḍa needs a place to eat them, and since he’s a bird, he looks for a tree. His mother guides him to a tree named Rauhiṇa, who sees Garuḍa coming and becomes frightened, saying: *Sup* 14.2 *mahāvīryaṃ hastinam merumātraṃ, sahaḡrāhaṃ dhārayann antarikṣe | javena vāyum balavantam īrayann, upaity asau kampāyan mā suparṇaḡ* “Holding in midair an elephant of great heroic might and the measure of Mt. Meru, together with a sea monster, that eagle there approaches, raising a strong wind with his speed and making me tremble.” Indian literature has many talking animals like the ones in this story (Olivelle 2013b), but few talking plants. There are stories of trees that speak, both in India and elsewhere, but these trees are normally oracular, not anxiety-ridden.⁵ Here, the nervously talking tree is sufficiently incongruous to be inherently comic. We might compare an episode in Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, in which two missiles fired at a space ship improbably transform into a whale and a bowl of petunias. As it falls toward the ground, the bowl of petunias thinks, “Oh no, not again” (Adams 2001: 138–41). While the outcome is sad for them, these despondent petunias climax a comic scene.

Also in good comic fashion, the tree Rauhiṇa’s situation is complicated by the fact that in an extravagant act of ascetic practice, the Vāḡakhilya sages, together with the Vaikhānasa sages, are now hanging upside down from one of the tree’s branches (*Sup* 14.4). The tree invites Garuḍa to land either on that same branch or on a bent branch on the opposite side of the tree. Garuḍa chooses the branch with the sages, which, of course, immediately breaks. The tree right away blames Garuḍa, even though it was the tree who had offered that branch. Because Garuḍa has broken the branch, the tree warns Garuḍa that he is about to commit the “twisted” deed of injuring the sages (14.5). But overcoming this crisis, Garuḍa holds onto the elephant, the sea monster, and now the sage-laden branch, and unlike the bowl of petunias, the sages are saved from a disastrous fall (15.1). The whole scene has the chaos and happy ending of farce. And through these episodes and their exaggerations, I see a laughing, youngish audience, enjoying the absurdity of it all, even or especially the absurdity of the sages, whom otherwise they are taught to respect.

After eating the elephant and the sea monster—the dugong, if you will—Garuḍa is still hungry. Therefore his mother says that he can feed on Niṣādas (16.2), who are usually described in early sources as fishermen and hunters of the hills and forests and who were the culturally and socially other. In the third century BCE, the Vedic exegete Yāska (*Nirukta* 3.8), probably understanding Niṣādas to include all tribal peoples, listed them as a separate, fifth community, alongside the four brahminically defined classes of brahmins, rulers, merchants, and laborers. Attitudes toward forest peoples were ambivalent, although the tilt was distinctly negative. For example, dating around the first century, the *Arthaśāstra* says that forest tribes (*aḡavī-*) can prove useful as a military force (7.14.27) or can be manipulated

5. See, for example, a story about Alexander the Great from Leo, Archipresbyter, in Pritchard 1992: 104. Alexander comes to the trees of the Sun and the Moon. An old man tells him, “Look upwards and in your heart think of whatever you wish to ask, but do not declare it openly.” Alexander then asks in what language the trees will speak, and the old man says, “The tree of the Sun begins to speak in the Indian language and finishes in Greek, whereas the tree of the Moon begins to speak in Greek and finishes in the Indian language.” Alexander wonders whether he will return home in triumph. The tree of the Sun tells him in an Indian language, “As you have consulted my name, so, you will be master of the world, but in no way will you see Macedonia, for your fates have so ordained.” Then the tree of the Moon says, “Alexander, your life is already at its very end, and the one whom you least expect is fated to deceive you.”

against an enemy (13.3.51–53 [see Olivelle 2013a: 693]). But the *Arthaśāstra* (6.1.8) also links forest tribes to wild animals. The ideal countryside (*janapada*-), it says, is . . . *kaṅṭhakaśrenīvyālamṛgāṭavīhinaḥ* “free of criminals, gangs, vicious animals, wild animals, and forest tribes” (Olivelle, tr.). In the “Tale of the Eagle,” not only are the Niṣādas comparable to wild animals, but they also become animal prey hunted by Garuḍa.

I’m not entirely sure how to understand this episode, in which Garuḍa gobbles up the forest people. Is it gleeful bloodlust, the happy decimation of a poorly known and possibly feared group? There is nothing in the poem to tell us the location of those hearing the story, but since study of the Veda was likely in a rural area, perhaps students and teachers were potentially in dangerous contact with such people. Or is it just a Quentin Tarrantino-like violence, so overblown and unrealistic that it becomes comic? Or again, is it simply the comic reversal of a bird hunting humans rather than humans hunting birds? Surrounding this episode is also the humor of a literalized metaphor. In Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, Euripides and Aeschylus contest who is the better poet. To decide whose verses are more weighty, the plan is literally to weigh each poet’s words by putting them on a scale “like butcher’s meat” (Glasgow 1995: 89). This episode in the Tale is not so overtly ridiculous, but it may also be a realization of a common Vedic metaphor that equates the social order and the food chain. Those of higher social standing are the “eaters”; those of lower, the “eaten” (Rau 1957: 34–35). Or it may refer to the metaphor that enemies are “eaten” by victorious warriors, as for example in the *Mahābhārata*, which derides cowards (*kātara*-) as “the food of a hero” (*annaṃ śūrasya*, *Mbh* 12.100.15). Here the low-status and perhaps hostile Niṣādas actually become food.

Even if we find the episode grim, there is a lighter side to it. When Vinatā, Garuḍa’s mother, tells him to eat Niṣādas, she also warns him not to eat brahmins, who might be living among the Niṣādas. But to a bird, all humans look alike—how can you tell which is which, he asks, when they all have *ekaśiṛṣā dvipādā dvihastāḥ* “one head, two feet, and two hands” (*Sup* 16.4). Vinatā tells him that he can distinguish a brahmin because a brahmin is *rajasvalo jaṭīlaḥ paṅkadanta, unnītaśikhāḥ* “covered in dust, with matted hair (or) with raised topknot, having dirt between his teeth,” and because *vadati satyam eva* “he speaks only the truth” (16.5ab). Eating a brahmin, she says, will burn Garuḍa’s throat and make him sick to his stomach, literally “heavy-bellied” (*gurūdara*- 17.2). It is a sit-com staple, well-illustrated by most episodes of “I Love Lucy,” that when character A tells character B not to do act C, you can be sure that B will do C, and therefore it is no surprise that as he eats Niṣādas, Garuḍa soon swallows a brahmin and the brahmin’s family. His throat burns, and remembering what Vinatā told him, he cries out, 18.3cd *aho vīryaṃ dvijātinām, jātimātropajivinām* “Alas, the heroism of the twice-born, who earn a living merely by their birth!” He then tells the brahmin to get out of his mouth (18.4), which the brahmin agrees to do if Garuḍa will also cough up his Niṣāda wife and sons (18.5), which he does (18.6).

There are several peculiarities here beyond Garuḍa’s negotiation with the food in his crop and beyond a brahmin with a tribal wife and a home among the Niṣādas. The unappetizing description of the brahmin approximates that of Vedic students. The texts on dharma, on law and duty, prescribe that Vedic students should wear their hair long and matted or have just a topknot (*ĀpDhS* 1.2.31–32, *VaDhS* 7.11). The *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, again quoting an earlier text, instructs a Vedic student that “he should be covered in dust, have stained teeth, and speak the truth” (*ĀpDhS* 1.7.11 *rajasvalo raktadan satyavādī syād*), and thus it almost exactly duplicates Vinatā’s description of a brahmin. So Vedic students hearing this story might well recognize themselves in this brahmin, although with obvious differences. Most especially they are not those “who earn a living merely by their birth.” They are studying the

Veda with the possibility that they could make a living by their Vedic knowledge or at least could earn their brahminical status. Dharma texts criticize those brahmins who don't learn the Veda and yet claim the donations and honor due to brahmins. Using the same phrase as does the "Tale of the Eagle," the *Laws of Manu* (12.114) declare that *jātimātropajivin-brahmins*, those "who earn a living merely by their birth," cannot constitute a legal assembly; only learned brahmins can do so. So at the end, it isn't clear how we are to regard this brahmin. For what I take to be the Tale's audience, he has the appearance of a kind of brahmin, even their kind of brahmin, but he is a Vedic school drop-out or never-went, who does not have a brahmin's learning. And Garuḍa appears to make unconscious fun of him. He refers to the brahmin as "twice-born," which should describe a brahmin who has been born once from his parents and again from his teacher by initiation into the study of the Veda. Yet Garuḍa somehow knows that that brahmin hasn't learned the Veda.⁶ Nonetheless, to be sure, this episode affirms the inviolability of brahmins, learned or not. This brahmin amid the forest people probably also carries a lesson for Vedic students: perhaps, stay in school and don't become someone who lives off unearned brahminical status. But whatever lesson he may offer, as a minimal brahmin without Vedic learning, who is living among the Niṣādas and who is eaten and coughed up by a bird, he is surely comic.

The humor of the story is carried not only narratively but also linguistically. Especially in its first half, the Tale has a number of playful puns or near puns. I'll give two examples, prefaced by two admissions. First, the only thing less engaging than an explained joke is an explained pun. Second, identifying word-play in a text involves a fine-grained analysis. As I mentioned, there are not many manuscripts of the Tale, and worse yet, those that exist rest on a flawed common archetype. This has provided many pleasurable hours for philologists, who have suggested ways of correcting the text's more uncertain moments, but it also means that some of what I see as subtle and clever word-play might be transmissional glitches.⁷ Nonetheless, despite reasons not to do so, let me describe examples of the half-dozen or so puns I believe to be embedded in the text.

In order to spare his mother, Garuḍa had taken over the task of carrying the snakes, but, unlike his mother, he carries the snakes very high. He thereby brings them too near the sun and elicits this urgent complaint from the snakes: 8.3ab *tīkṣṇāḥ suparṇā bahudhā marīcyaḥ, sūryasya tā naḥ pradrahanti bhogān* "Sharp eagles—the rays of the sun—from many directions! These are burning us coils [= snakes, or: burn our coils]!" That is, the rays of the sun have become *suparṇas*, eagles swooping down upon the snakes. The image of the sun's rays as eagles may also be completed by the postponed *bhogān* at the end of the hemistich. The *bhogāḥ* are primarily the 'coils' of the snakes or the snakes themselves, but the use of this unexpected word may also have been motivated by the homophonous word *bhoga-* meaning 'food'.⁸ That is, the line may carry the suggested meaning, "the eagle-like rays of the sun burn us as their food." The second *bhoga-* meaning 'food' strengthens the comparison

6. Also, Garuḍa's lamenting the brahmin's "heroism" or "manliness" (*vīrya-*) is either intentionally or unintentionally satiric, since the brahmin hasn't done anything particularly heroic. Nor is "heroic" the kind of attribute we expect of brahmins. See, for example, the brahmin vidūṣaka in Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*, who fights off a flower with his staff and whom the king humorously praises for his valor (6.8+).

7. This kind of thing can happen. Ann Hulbert in *The New Republic* (November 14, 1988: 46) reported that James Joyce was once sent a dissertation based on the first edition of *Ulysses*. "A diligent scholar," she said, "had devoted his entire thesis to a line that went something like, 'He took out his cock and looked at the time,' plumb-ing it for reverberations on the themes of mortality, sex, etc. Marvelous, said Joyce—but it was a misprint, . . . the correct spelling was 'clock'."

8. The word-play is slightly more complicated because these two otherwise homophonous words are accented differently: 'coil' is *bhogā-* and 'food' is *bhōga-*. As we would expect, the accented text of the *Suparṇādhyāya* given

between the sun's rays and eagles, because eagles feed on snakes. The passage also anticipates the poem's end, in which Garuḍa receives a boon from Indra and asks that snakes become his food: 30.5a *nāgān vṛṇe bhakṣam ahaṃ śacīpate* "I choose snakes as my meal, o Lord of Śacī [=Indra]." Another example of word-play is in 17.4, in which the narrator—if that is who is speaking—describes Garuḍa as *sūraṃ suparṇam abhiyatpratīkam*⁹ "the hero, the eagle with an aggressive visage." The word for 'visage', *pratīka-*, also means 'incipit', the beginning of a verse or passage used to indicate the whole passage. The pun recalls that Garuḍa embodies the Vedic sacrifice and its recitations (see *Sup* 1.2, below) and therefore that his face is also the "face" of Vedic mantras.

In its second half, the story shifts from narrative comedy and linguistic play to adventure, although adventure not without humor. Once Garuḍa is finally fed, he flies to heaven in order to steal the soma, but to do so he has to overcome a variety of enemies and obstacles, who are, ironically but predictably, mostly snakes. Some of these snakes are partly borrowed from the *Ṛgveda*: the serpent Bhauvana, whose name means the 'earth-bound', is a footless, sharp-eared archer (22.1, 4, 23.1–2), who appears under a different name and form in the *Ṛgvedic* story of Manu's falcon (*ṚV* 4.27.3). Arbuda and Nahuṣa (23.3), enemies of the god Indra in the *Ṛgveda*, show up here as snakes as they do elsewhere. Most of Garuḍa's other snake enemies have no such pedigree, but some have onomatopoeic speaking names, such as Ulūka 'Hooter', Balbūla 'Babbler', and Śvasana 'Hisser' (23.3). Garuḍa defeats also Cakratuṇḍa 'Wheel-nosed', Aśvamukha 'Horse-faced', Kuṇḍakarna 'Pot-eared', Kharakaṇṭha 'Ass-throated' (23.4), Aśvakranda 'Horse-whinnying' (23.5), and Śaśākṣa 'Rabbit-eyed' (23.6) among others. Again, Garuḍa scatters two lightning bolts, named Bhayā 'Fear' and Abhayā 'Fearless' (24.2–3). The lightning bolts carry forward the snake imagery, since lightning flashing across the sky repeats the form of snakes, as it does, for example, in eighteenth and nineteenth century paintings of the *abhisārikā nāyikā*, the woman going at night to a lovers' tryst. She is often depicted with lightning twisting above her and with snakes entwining her feet below her.

All these snakes are not the soma's only protectors: Indra's attributes—his *māyā* 'wiles', his discus, and his lightning bolts (25.1–5)—and the gods themselves challenge Garuḍa. But the attributes fail and even the gods quickly flee before him (26.1–2), all except Agni, the god of the ritual fire. Not wishing to engage Agni, Garuḍa bribes him by offering "rivers of ghee," the ritual fire's desired food, and satisfied by this, Agni lets Garuḍa pass (26.4). At the end, Indra himself confronts Garuḍa. But what might have been the climactic battle quickly fizzles, because Indra's weapon, which, he says, has never failed to smash his enemies (27.4ab), turns out to be useless against Garuḍa. Indra protests that it is disrespectful for Garuḍa to emasculate his weapon in this way (27.4cd), so Garuḍa allows Indra to cut one of his feathers. The three pieces of the feather turn into peacocks, cobras, and mongooses, that is, into one snake and two enemies of snakes (28.1).

At last, Garuḍa overcomes all obstacles, steals the soma, and carries it back to the snakes (29.1). But his promise was to bring the soma, not to let the snakes actually have it. So at the end Garuḍa shows the snakes the soma, thereby fulfilling his part of the bargain and winning freedom for his mother. But he then takes the soma away again (29.3) and returns it to Indra (29.4). So after all the storm and stress, all the rousing adventure, everything returns to the

by Grube reads *bhogān* with the primary meaning 'coils'. But shifting the accent does not block the suggestion of *bhogá-*.

9. Charpentier writes *abhi yat pratīkam*, but Rau (1967: 359)—here following Caland 1927—rightly takes this phrase as a single compound.

way it was before Vinatā's enslavement to the snake mother, and a happy outcome is won by a clever trick in a surprise ending.

This story was an entertainment, and an entertainment whose humor and adventure, I believe, were meant to appeal especially to a youngish male audience. But entertainments of this sort need not lack for greater purpose. Consider the superheroes of comics and movies. Their stories entertain, but these superheroes also express ethical principles, confront social issues, and embody cultural ideals.¹⁰ From 1938 when he first appeared, for example, Superman battled for the goals of the New Deal. In the 1950's George Reeves's Superman fought "a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way." And in one contemporary reboot, Superman brings the reassuring message that even he has identity issues. In fact, in what I see as a continuation of his ancient literary role, Garuḍa has several times become just such a movie or comic book superhero. In 2014, for example, Deepak Chopra published a Garuḍa comic, which follows the story in a general way but makes significant changes. Now Garuḍa must steal the soma in order to fulfill his dharma, his duty, to rescue his mother from the snakes. Chopra abandons the elephant, the sea monster, and the Niṣādas, and goes right for adventure, for the battle to win the drink of immortality. Garuḍa's many serpent enemies become concentrated in one monstrous "Nagantak," "Serpent-Death," whom he defeats after a ferocious fight. As Chopra presents it, Garuḍa's story thus becomes the adventure of a superhero, who upholds the ideal of dharma. Therefore, the story stirringly concludes, "The journey of the warrior often takes him onto the narrowest of paths, but if in his *heart*, one holds true to the principles of dharma, the *righteous* shall *always* prevail."

In a similar way, "The Tale of the Eagle" also interweaves edifying ideals, although unlike Chopra's retelling, not the ideals of dharma. True, Garuḍa does rescue his mother, and so not unlike the Garuḍa comic, his actions show the obligation to protect one's mother, but this is not the principal lesson. Central to the Tale is that the superhero Garuḍa is an embodiment of the Vedic sacrifice. The Tale begins with a benedictory verse praising Garuḍa, who is formed of Vedic chants, recitations, and rites: 1.2 *sauvarṇaparṇam amitadyutim aprameyam, chandomayam vividhayajñatanuṃ vareṇyam | pakṣau br̥hac ca bhavato rathavac ca yasya, taṃ vainateyam ajaram pra ṇamāmi nityam* "The golden-feathered one of unmeasured brilliance, immeasurable, composed of meters, whose body is of various sacrifices, desirable, whose wings are the Br̥hat and Rathavant [=sāman-melodies]—him, the unaging son of Vinatā, do I ever revere."¹¹ This verse is in classical meter and certainly a late addition to the text. But it draws on Vedic traditions that represented Vedic meters as birds and on early versions of the story of Garuḍa, in which the Gāyatrī meter in the form of a falcon or eagle (*śyena-*) flies to heaven to retrieve the soma often to rescue his mother (Mehta 1971: 42–45).

10. When Stan Lee, creator or co-creator of many of Marvel Comics best-known superheroes, died in November, 2018, he was mourned by many. These many were then lambasted by Bill Maher, who argued in his blog that comic books should be only for children and that the fuss over Lee was misplaced (<http://www.real-time-with-bill-maher-blog.com/index/2018/11/16/adulting>, accessed June 13, 2019). The responses to Maher's posting defended Lee's comics by pointing out the problems they addressed and the principles they advocated. Stan Lee, said one, promoted "intelligence over . . . force. He spoke for kindness over abuse," and another, "at their best, like all art they [=comic books] are . . . a reflection of society. [T]he X-Men comics have . . . had themes exploring the Civil Rights. . . . Watchmen delved into what it would take . . . to end the Cold War. . . . Daredevil and the Punisher . . . have look[ed] into . . . street violence . . . and the consequences of revenge." Such concern with issues and ideals has been part of the superhero genre from its beginning.

11. See also *Sup* 4.6, which climaxes the description of wonders accompanying the birth of Garuḍa: *maghānakṣatrajātānām, sarvavedaśarīrīnām | sahasravarṣaḡarbhānām, agnīstambhaḡ sma jāyate* "For those born under the constellation Maghā, for those whose bodies are all the Vedas, for those who are embryos for a thousand years, the power to still fire has ever arisen."

In the Agnicayana rite, the middle Vedic tradition even developed a form of the soma ritual in which a brick altar, representing the sacrifice, is built in the form of an eagle or falcon. Therefore Garuḍa's heroics reflect the power of rituals and recitations. A story about that power would be a lesson and an inspiration for Vedic students, who would one day participate in the rites. In contrast to early Vedic rituals, which propitiate the gods, here Garuḍa is more powerful than the gods, more powerful even than their greatest warrior, Indra. Garuḍa grants Indra a certain dignity by permitting Indra's weapon to cut one of his feathers rather than fail completely, and ultimately he gives the drink of immortality back to the gods. But he is unquestionably superior to Indra. The only god to whom Garuḍa defers is Agni, the ritual fire and therefore also an embodiment of the sacrifice. Garuḍa's superiority to the gods is a narrative realization of the theology of the sacrifice already established in the middle Vedic period, according to which the gods attain and maintain their position through the rites. Recall that the Tale also says that Vedic students memorize not only texts that provide the verbal liturgy for the rites but also texts that interpret the ritual. That is to say, the story of Garuḍa reinforces for its audience what they were being taught in exegetical texts about the Vedic ritual. But I don't doubt that for students the *Suparṇādhya* was a much more appealing way of learning the significance of the sacrifice than was on offer in such works.

The "Tale of the Eagle," therefore, is best viewed as a work of popular fiction, not so far removed from today's superhero comics. It was an entertainment for Vedic students. It appealed to them through humor and through adventure. It was an entertainment, but as popular literature often does, it also conveyed very traditional values and perspectives: Learn the Veda, for it has power. Keep to your studies, for that is how to become a real brahmin, a learned brahmin. Be aware that Vedic ritual supercedes even the gods. It might seem to us a little unfair to make vacation time into a teaching moment, but the plot is not overburdened by its educational value. I wish we South Asianists did have letters from such ancient Vedic students, letters like Iddin-Sîn's to his mother or Aḥaḥa's brother's about his terrifying sister. But we don't. But one thing we can do is to imagine the humanity and the human lives through what has been handed down to us.

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