Introduction

Narrative and Method

Yājñavalkya is perhaps the most important literary-historical figure in ancient India prior to the Buddha.[1] He is attested to throughout the late Vedic ritual, philosophical, Epic, and Purāṇic literature (8th century BCE and well into the common era)—specifically, in the *Śatapaṭha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB), the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU), the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), and various Purāṇas. The Hindu tradition views him as the founder of the White Yajurveda (YV) school of ritual practice, which he is said to have received from the Sun (*āditya*).[2] Further, he is credited with writing a legal treatise, the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (YS), and is considered one of India's earliest and best known thinkers. In secondary scholarship he is also associated with a number of firsts in Indian religious literary history: the first person to discuss *brahman* and *ātman* thoroughly; the first to put forth an (albeit limited) theory of *karma* and reincarnation; the first to renounce his household life; the first to dispute with women in religious debate (*brahmodya*); and the first to discuss religious and philosophical matters with his wife. Throughout early Indian history, then, Yājñavalkya was seen as a priestly bearer of ritual authority, a sage of mystical knowledge, and an innovative propagator of philosophical ideas and religious law. In modern times, for many in the tradition he personifies the hoary past of the Veda, Vedic orthodoxy, and the beginnings of Vedāntic philosophical discourse.

In spite of Yājñavalkya's significance in ancient Indian literary history, he has only been approached in limited studies through philosophical and positivist-historical lenses—that is, the early narratives of Yājñavalkya have been viewed as the beginnings of formal

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

philosophy and/or the emphasis has been placed on isolating the "real" Yājñavalkya and his teachings.[3] The later narratives concerning Yājñavalkya have been treated perfunctorily, if at all, and are generally taken as "mythic" fabrications. Yājñavalkya has never been taken seriously as a literary figure through the variety of texts in which he appears and has not been given the treatment he deserves. This is all the more ironic given that Yājñavalkya, because of his importance, is mentioned in nearly every introductory text on Hinduism or work on ancient Indian philosophy.[4]

The principal goal of this book is to analyze the early literary and historical construction of Yājñavalkya as a cultural icon in late Vedic, Epic, and Purāṇic literature[5] and to discuss how Yājñavalkya is composed and recomposed in religious texts in different historical contexts with different (literary, doctrinal, and sociological) intentions. Thus, I will critically analyze the early Yājñavalkya texts in regard to both their literary *and* social components—that is, how literary and lived worlds intersect in the construction of a social identity and literary memory across time.

Literary Background

Who is Yājñavalkya and what is his literary portrayal? These questions are central to this book and are dealt with at length in the following chapters. It is, however, prudent to give a brief summary to frame the narrative that is to follow.

Yājñavalkya first appears in the Brāhmaṇa literature (especially the ŚB, ca. 8th century BCE), an ancient genre of hieratic commentary devoted to ritual minutiae, stories, and myths—all of which have the overall purpose of explaining the various sacrificial acts and their relation to the gods, the phenomenal world, and humankind. He is portrayed as a ritual specialist giving his opinion on a variety of ritual actions and interpretations. Most of the passages are succinct and do not provide any detailed information about this individual (such as lineage, associations, etc.) nor do they provide much of a context. They do, however, give a sense of Yājñavalkya's character—a ritual specialist with a tendency towards sarcasm or wit. The majority of the passages are short, consisting of little more than a paragraph when translated into English. The form these passages often take is a series of opinions

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

on a particular sacrificial point, although Yājñavalkya does appear in a few passages where his statement or opinion is the only one given.

In the later books of ŚB we encounter longer narratives in which Yājñavalkya is one of the principal characters, though shorter passages do occur as well. It has been argued by some that these longer narratives are more philosophical, indicating a shift from the earlier portrayal of Yājñavalkya and are themselves perhaps "mythical." It should be pointed out, however, that while one may see a shift in the character of Yājñavalkya, I show how the topics discussed are still intimately tied to his previous portrayal (albeit perhaps more abstractly in some cases) showing a clear attempt at consistency. Such longer narratives also give us a context to Yājñavalkya's appearance, something quite obscure in the single passages which simply list various ritualists' opinions on some particular point.

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* chapters 3 and 4 (ca. 6th century BCE), Yājñavalkya is the central character in a rather lively public debate and then in a private discussion, both set in the court of Janaka, the famed king and sponsor.[6] In the public debate of BĀU 3, other well-known ritual specialists have also gathered as well to participate. This debate spans such topics as sacrifice, life, death, and immortality, and climaxes with the rather dramatic defeat of the famous ritualist Śākalya, thus establishing Yājñavalkya as the most learned in the Vedas. Chapter 4 of BĀU shifts to a private religious discussion between Yājñavalkya and Janaka and continues by elaborating several of the themes presented in chapter 3. Chapter 4 then concludes with an even more private discussion, presumably in the domestic context, between Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyī. In the sixth and final chapter of BĀU, we are told that Yājñavalkya is viewed as the founder of the White Yajurvedic school of ritual interpretation and that he received the sacrificial formulae of the White Yajurveda Saṃhitā from the Sun (*āditya*).

Yājñavalkya again appears in the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), the Epic poem dated roughly between the 4th century BCE and 2nd century CE.[7] While he is mentioned only briefly in a few passages, we do have one longer passage in the Śāntiparvan where Yājñavalkya is the central figure. Here he is seen teaching Janaka the doctrine of Yoga-Sāṅkhya, quite appropriate for this didactic book. Interestingly, after Yājñavalkya teaches his version of this doctrine, we step out of this dialogue proper and are told a story about how Yājñavalkya received

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

the White Yajurveda *and* composed or compiled the ŚB, a new detail in his biography.

Finally, Yājñavalkya appears in a number of Purāṇic texts, often in the context of explaining the origin of the Vedas. In these various texts we encounter what I show to be recompositions of earlier material. We also have different stories about how and why Yājñavalkya split with his teacher to form his own ritual school, how he had to purify himself to receive the White Yajurveda from the Sun, and how he is seen as the founder of the White Yajurvedic tradition. Details of these tellings are premised on the earlier stories, stories which must have come to constitute a more widely held literary world surrounding the figure of Yājñavalkya. The composers of these texts interpret the figure more freely than those before them, and the literary life of this figure greatly expands.

Throughout the expanse of the literature under question here, there are a number of topics and themes that will be revisited throughout the chapters of this book. First, Yājñavalkya's wit or sarcasm is quite particular to this literary figure and makes him unique in ancient Indian literature, particularly amongst philosophers. Even in the earliest material, such as the ŚB, we find Yājñavalkya associated with many instances of clever wordplays, short and witty retorts, and derisive statements towards other Brahmins or opinions. While such comments may not be solely limited to the figure of Yājñavalkya, their overwhelming prevalence here and in the later literature that exploits such a characterization, I argue, clearly defines him as a distinct literary figure. In this sense, by looking at the use of sarcasm attributed to this figure, we see the foundation of his personality developing in the earliest literature.

In tracing the use (and nonuse) of this character trait diachronically, an intriguing pattern starts to emerge. For example, in the early material the sarcasm associated with Yājñavalkya *only* appears in situations where he is taken as authoritative by the tradition and not in situations where his opinion is an option or even disputed. I argue that this character trait of the figure of Yājñavalkya was viewed positively by the White Yajurvedic tradition and that his sarcasm was seen as justified by his correct (to their minds) interpretation of the matter at hand. This use of sarcasm develops and expands in the later books of ŚB and throughout the BĀU, culminating in Yājñavalkya's authority becoming absolute, when he begins to be portrayed as *always* correct

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

in his opinion whether on ritual procedure, in public debate, or in private discussion. As sarcasm can be variously understood—such as humorous or rude—in this early context it might be best understood as "pride in correct knowledge," as it was apparently a positive trait (he was, after all, correct in those interpretations) and the sarcasm adds rhetorical force to his authority. In fact, the sarcasm associated with Yājñavalkya positions him as an ideal spokesperson for a newly emerging tradition—authoritative in his own right, but particularly in deriding the establishment with which he was competing.

When we approach Yājñavalkya's appearance in the MBh, his characterization changes; his character is still based on the same model of Yājñavalkya that was established in the early literature, but it is understood and deployed differently. Yājñavalkya's characteristic wit appears relatively absent in the MBh tellings, but his authority has risen greatly. This may be because the White Yajurvedic tradition is no longer a new contender in the Vedic sacrificial world and derisive competition was less necessary, though its position may not yet be as secure as others as it is often portrayed as a historically "younger" Veda. Here, Yājñavalkya is portrayed as a *r̥ṣi* (sage) of the ancient past and is said to have been present in Indra's heaven to perform the *rājasūya* (royal consecration ceremony). This mythical association authorizes him to perform the same rite for Yudhiṣṭhira on earth. It is clear that Yājñavalkya's status has grown in the Brahminical world and this figure plays an integral role in various parts of the text. In a longer passage associated with Yājñavalkya, I suggest that a lack of his characteristic sarcasm from earlier material may have prompted hagiographical elaboration about how Yājñavalkya came to have knowledge of the White Yajurveda and what his relationship to the Sun god was. In this sense, even though the characteristic sarcasm is absent, the composers, in elaborating a story of Yājñavalkya's past, are reminding us that we are still dealing with the same figure from the older literature.

In the Purāṇic material, this sarcastic trait is variously understood, sometimes negatively and sometimes positively. Given the depth of time between the Purānic compositions and those of the Vedic period, the composers had more liberty to explore his personality for their own ends. Here we encounter different stories that attempt to explain how Yājñavalkya could receive a "new" Veda (and what "new" means in the context of simultaneously being "ancient") and how his person-

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

ality played a role in that reception. In one text, it is suggested that Yājñavalkya's teacher misunderstood a statement by Yājñavalkya and was insulted. Yājñavalkya then appealed to the Sun god for a new Veda since he had been compelled to return the Black Yajurveda to his teacher. In another text, we are told that Yājñavalkya did, apparently intentionally, insult his teacher and had to undergo penance. His penance pleased the Sun to such a degree that the Sun god chose to grant him a new Veda. In another story, which is a retelling of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* story, Yājñavalkya is not sarcastic or arrogant at all, but all of the other Brahmins present in a public debate are said to have this trait. In this case, what could be understood as a negative trait associated with a particular *ṛṣi* is placed onto the other Brahmins in the debate and thus the character of Yājñavalkya is "sanitized" while inverting the moral message of the story.

The rather unique trait of sarcasm attributed to Yājñavalkya, as I argue throughout this book, is a defining trait that positioned him as particularly appropriate to be taken as the founder of the White Yajurvedic tradition. A close reading of the texts suggests that it is this characteristic that ideally situates him as the spokesperson for the tradition: he is a leader who can justify his own tradition's practices in contrast to an already established orthodoxy, even—or especially—if that means denigrating others in the process. It is, however, also a trait that the tradition had to reconcile itself with once the tradition and its founder became established. In the later literary traditions (the Purāṇas), the composers are concerned with this unique trait, in part because they lacked the same agonistic need of the earlier tradition. In these cases, we find that their interest lies in explaining his sarcasm or arrogance, especially how such an ambivalent trait can be associated with such a renowned sage.[8] Some of these texts try to explain this characteristic away ("it was based on a misunderstanding") or elaborate how, if viewed as a character flaw, it can be overcome (such as through penance).

A second related theme that we find throughout the literature on Yājñavalkya is his association with other, newer religious traditions or practices. For example, from the MBh onward Yājñavalkya is associated with apparently different traditions of *yoga*. While the earliest material does not discuss Yājñavalkya in relation to *yoga*—it is likely that a distinct mainstream tradition as such did not exist at the time—it appears that Yājñavalkya's authority is being put to a different use

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

in later material. Here we find that his philosophical discussions on the nature of the self (*ātman*) and the universal principle (*brahman*) from the earlier material are reinterpreted in the context of mental and physical conditioning that are supposed to aid in the realization of certain larger truths.

As Yājñavalkya is associated with a new Yajurveda, he paradoxically becomes viewed as an ancient *ṛṣi*. Here I argue that Yājñavalkya becomes emblematic of "the new within the ancient" and his association with *yoga* and other traditions is a means of claiming ancient authority for newly developing traditions. This becomes particularly clear in the Purāṇas where there is the dual concern of explaining the origin of Yājñavalkya (as a "new" sage among ancient ones) with newly emerging (or newly "Sanskritizing") traditions devoted to Śiva or Rāma or valorizing apparently new rites or pilgrimages. As such, the character of Yājñavalkya becomes a means to put the present into the past to make a claim to authority for a tradition. To put this another way: a "new" sage is made "old," but then his new "oldness" is utilized to claim "oldness" for other newly developing traditions, thus creating a mutually reinforcing temporal circle. In this way, the ancient may newly appear in the world, but its newness becomes an ironic feature in the creation of authority, rather than a bug.

Another central theme in the literature is how Yājñavalkya becomes seen as an idealized priest in relation to kings. In the ŚB we see the beginning of this association with King Janaka, himself an idealized king who sponsors Brahmins and, at least on one occasion, is said to know more than Brahmins about a particular rite and its significance. In the BĀU, Yājñavalkya is closely associated with Janaka, and he proves himself to be the wisest Brahmin at a debate held at Janaka's court. Later in the same text it is said that Yājñavalkya teaches Janaka about the nature of life, death, and the cosmos in a private discussion. In later literature, Yājñavalkya appears often with Janaka, but he also is associated with other kings as well. His kingly associations parallel his ritual associations with the *aśvamedha* (royal horse sacrifice) and the *rājasūya* (royal consecration), emphasizing the dependent relationship of kings and Brahmins.

From these precedents, there are suggestive reasons why Yājñavalkya becomes associated with the legal tradition (*dharmaśāstra*) where his name is attributed to a particular legal text (the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*). Based on a comparison with the figure of Manu and

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

the famous legal text attributed to him, I argue that Yājñavalkya fulfills a similar ideological function as Manu, albeit from the other side of the dominant *varṇa* coin. While Manu is an idealized king, Yājñavalkya has become an idealized Brahmin, specifically through his relationships with kings, and both represent class-based claims to a tradition of *dharma*.

Finally, the major concern of this book is how we can trace the life of a literary figure across time and texts and how we can query these recompositions for what they tell us, not only about how a larger tradition developed out of a smaller one, but also about how various people understood this figure in recomposing him. By viewing the recomposition of Yājñavalkya as a literary figure in different literature, we are granted a window into the concerns and motivations of those later compositions. If we view these recompositions as a form of commentary on earlier literary productions, we can analyze these later traditions in a new manner. We can look at what aspects of an earlier narrative were known and/or were important to different composers by looking at hagiographical expansion (such as later narratives focused on Yājñavalkya's wives or on the origins of the Vedas), hagiographical inversion (such as the narrative of Yājñavalkya's sarcasm being transposed onto others), and hagiographical contraction (such as removing certain details altogether or collapsing a story to focus on one particular part).

It is in the historically later narratives that the figure of Yājñavalkya becomes an increasingly well-known figure—both because the audience progressively widens in the transition between genres in the oral literature and also due to a broadening creative license on the part of the authors to explore or expand on those literary precedents. This does not mean that later composers were not bound to collectively held notions of who this figure was, but that certain genres and contexts allowed for a certain freedom in how those authors might compose or recompose. I suggest that we think of this process as the "literary memory" that these composers had of Yājñavalkya—a ritualist, a debater with a strong wit, and a philosopher with two wives—where the authors were not necessarily rigidly bound to a specific textual tradition, but were apparently well aware of it and found different means to work within its larger contours for their own ends.

By talking about the "life" of a literary figure, we are also talking about the lives of various individuals who found this literary figure interesting, useful, or religiously compelling for any number of different

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

reasons. This diachronic and narratological approach to the figure of Yājñavalkya is, as far as I am aware, the first of its kind. Generally speaking, portrayals of Yājñavalkya beyond the early material have been simply dismissed by scholars or rather perfunctorily treated. In fact, I would argue that exploring how a figure attains such a status, and more so, what such a status means, grants a unique view into how particular ancient Indians understood their tradition. Further, to dismiss the narratives as myth or the like ignores the fact that there are many different stories about Yājñavalkya coming from many different traditions which grants a view into how *different* people used the figure in their compositions for *different* ends.

"Literary Lives"

I have argued elsewhere as a devil's advocate against scholarship that attempts to find a "real" Yājñavalkya within the literary presentation of this figure in an effort to illuminate the problems with such approaches.[9] This book begins with the assumption that, given the current state of scholarship, the search for a historical individual in this case will only produce very limited results. While I do not think that such studies should be abandoned altogether, more sophisticated theoretical models need to be developed if one wishes to pursue this route. What is necessary in such attempts is an analysis of how narrative and history are interrelated as well as an explicit discussion about the criteria used to determine if something can be considered "legend," "myth," or "fact." As I have shown (Lindquist 2011b), no attempt so far has been adequately able to demarcate a "real" Yājñavalkya—more often than not, the logic employed to do so can simply be turned on itself or equally compelling alternatives can be given. Further, a more sophisticated view of literature must be adopted by those concerned with the early material as regards the notion of narrative or narrativeness, that is formal characteristics that make certain speech into narratives. As is well accepted, if not always analyzed, all speech is motivated to some end, whether that end is rather banal or more insidious (from pleasantries, to sharing of information, to an attempt to convince or deceive). Any narrative, whether told for the first time or repeated for generations, takes on formal literary structures and employs narrative devices which do not necessarily say anything

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

about its historicity, but do speak to the motivations of composers. These devices do not mean that what is being told is historically true or not, but it does mean that the speech is motivated towards various ends and narrative structures and devices are employed to support those ends. As Roland Barthes (1972), among others, has shown, we are always surrounded by narrativity whether it be in our speech acts, our advertising, our view of our own individual lives, or in our other cultural productions. Unlike others concerned with Yājñavalkya, I take the nature of these narratives as the starting point of analysis, rather than as the conclusion.

The early textual evidence as we have it does not appear to lend itself, as far as I can determine, to the drawing of a firm line between who is the "real" historical Yājñavalkya and who is not. While there most likely was a real historical individual at some point in early Indian history, where to determine the beginning and the end of a "person" in the early literature remains analytically unclear.

For my purposes, I take the portrayal of Yājñavalkya in the literature as a *literary* figure. Within the confines of literature, we can compare and evaluate the various portrayals to analyze who this figure was as part of the literary imagination of ancient Indians and how that literary imagination creates a literary memory over time. Rather than proposing any grander theory to explain legend, myth, or mythic development, the following chapters look at the various ways that a series of narratives (i.e., those surrounding Yājñavalkya) and history (the contexts, whether material or ideological) intersect. Dominick LaCapra (1994) has made the useful heuristic distinction between the "documentary" and the "work-like" aspects of a text, where the former is the object of sociological and historical scrutiny and the latter the object of literary criticism. Following this bifurcation, I will analyze certain historical developments in early Indian history and their relationship to textual production. Thus, by avoiding entirely the question of a "real Yājñavalkya," the focus of this monograph is *what Yājñavalkya represents, to whom,* and *why*. Such a focus allows us to view the development of Yājñavalkya as a literary figure across time and contexts. We can, by approaching Yājñavalkya as a literary figure, analyze the pronouncements and stories attributed to him as well as the motivations of the communities who preserved these texts as indicative of various (historical) concerns, ideas, and beliefs. Thus, by not searching for the "authentic" person or teaching, this book looks at what people believed and why across time.

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

In this fashion, a literary view of Yājñavalkya focuses on aspects of the texts which have been largely overlooked.[10] For example: we can analyze plot, character, literary structures and devices, themes and thematic change, and note the use of hyperbole, sarcasm, and narrative tension. More importantly, we can analyze what all this tells us not only about the rise to authority of a particular figure, but also about those communities that created and maintained these stories in a variety of genres.

Chapter 1 is concerned with Yājñavalkya in the earliest literature, the ŚB. In this chapter, I deal with Yājñavalkya in two sections: his portrayal in ŚBM (Mādhyandina) books 1–5 and then in books 11–13 (both along with the correlate passages in the other recension of the same text, ŚBK [Kāṇva]). After briefly discussing the name "Yājñavalkya" itself and the literary history of the ŚB, I analyze the form and meaning of the different passages in which Yājñavalkya appears, focusing on the form and function of what many have called his "sarcastic" nature. It is here that I elaborate the contours of what constitutes "sarcasm" in the context of this figure. Moreover, I will propose a topography of the statements attributed to Yājñavalkya, which shows that not only was Yājñavalkya *not always* authoritative in his pronouncements, but that the authoritativeness and sarcasm attributed to him increases in parallel fashion across the texts. I also discuss the historical reasons for this development: as the tradition of the White Yajurveda was establishing itself in the frontier northeastern region, it needed a spokesman for what must have been seen as a fringe tradition. In this fashion, Yājñavalkya's sarcastic portrayal serves as an ideal soapbox for this tradition—one which not only establishes the White Yajurveda as a legitimate sacrificial school, but also one which criticizes, even mocks, the then current western (Kuru-Pañcāla) establishment. In the later books of ŚB, I will also suggest that a template of Yājñavalkya has begun to be established—that is, the character and narrative basis that will influence most, though not necessarily all, of his other literary portrayals. Chapter 1 is furnished with more philological rigor than the following chapters, but as I explain below, this is unavoidable.

Chapter 2 analyzes the most important text associated with Yājñavalkya, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. It is in this text that Yājñavalkya is found in an elaborate narrative about the nature of the sacrifice (*yajña*), life, death, the self, and rebirth. This text, similar to narratives found in later ŚB books, comprises a lively debate, but

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

with rather deadly consequences. Not only will I discuss the various passages and their meaning, but I will also focus on how the text coheres as a whole. I will investigate the thematic links between the sections and how the various sections develop a single coherent plot and climax (BĀU 3), followed by a distinct but interrelated continuation of these themes (BĀU 4). I propose that the entire Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa, while not a single narrative, is a series of narratives that thematically coheres as a larger "teaching narrative." This teaching narrative progresses through BĀU 3 and 4 coinciding with an increasing privacy in the contexts of these teachings (from the public to the private court, concluding with a private dialogue between a husband and wife).

In this chapter, I will also discuss the various literary devices which serve to hold this narrative together. Particular attention will be paid to how the BĀU account is consistent with the portrayal of Yājñavalkya in the ŚB, not necessarily suggesting a real individual, but certainly suggesting an attempt at consistency on the part of the literary tradition. It is here too that the topography of sarcasm and authority from chapter 1 will be discussed anew: I show that the authority attributed to Yājñavalkya, coupled with his characteristic sarcasm, is a firmly established pairing. While this trait begins in the ŚB, the notion of "pride in correct knowledge" is entrenched by BĀU—that is, all sarcastic expressions are justified in context based on the fact that Yājñavalkya is *always* correct in his interpretations of the sacrifice, life, death, and rebirth. Further, I show that this "philosophical" text is ultimately polemical—it is inherently an *argument against* western forms of ritual understanding and an *argument for* the newly establishing/established eastern hegemony.

A subsection in chapter 2 is devoted to women in the BĀU, as this is the first literary occurrence of women involved in abstract, philosophical debate. This section focuses on how gender is constructed in this text and how the role of women is related to the portrayal of Yājñavalkya and the larger narrative. Another section in this chapter concerns the interpretation of BĀU 3.9.28, a riddle-poem which has caused problems for scholars and the indigenous tradition alike. As this riddle-poem is the conclusion of the debate of BĀU 3, it is necessary to take a fresh look at what it may mean, particularly regarding the nature of rebirth. This is particularly important, because contrary to common opinion (e.g., Horsch 1966), a close reading shows that Yājñavalkya is clearly associated with a newly emerging idea of rebirth.

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

The first two chapters, particularly chapter 1, are the most philologically detailed chapters in the book. Though I am sympathetic to the nonspecialist reader, I hope he or she will understand that this was unavoidable for two main reasons. First, at the heart of this book is the methodological principle that stories need to be taken seriously in their appropriate linguistic and historical context. As such, close linguistic and textual scrutiny is the hallmark of all that follows. Because of this, primary text and translation is employed throughout the body of the text (and separately as an appendix for the whole of chapters 3 and 4 of the BĀU), not only to justify my own interpretations, but also to give the reader an appreciation for the interpretive complexity that is involved. This linguistic and textual scrutiny, though, is most intense where the language or larger context is obscure. This is particularly true of the *brāhmaṇa* material in chapter 1. Since *brāhmaṇas* are ritual technical manuals for the early Vedic practitioner, they assume a knowing audience—an audience intimately familiar with a vast array of religious texts and practices which are obscure not only to the nonspecialist, but often also to the specialist separated by thousands of years and miles. I spend a significant part of chapter 1 teasing out the plausible context and meaning of these passages, which often requires teasing out the meaning of individual phrases or words.

A second reason that this level of detail is unavoidable in these chapters, in this case especially in the textual analysis of chapter 2, is that the literary background of Yājñavalkya becomes established here, and later composers explicitly and implicitly refer to it in their compositions. Chapter 2 discusses the literarily and historically most important narratives about Yājñavalkya found in the BĀU. My close literary analysis of this text not only *lays out* the groundwork of my own chapters that follow, but also *is* the groundwork for the composers of the later portrayals of this figure. I argue that this text codifies a template of this figure, and it is this template that later authors draw upon, even when challenging or circumventing it. This template, then, must be understood in detail in order to understand those later literary developments. Since my interpretations are tied intimately to my understanding of the primary text, the text and translation (including notes) of BĀU 3–4 are included in a separate appendix. This is done not only to give access to the larger narrative to the nonspecialist reader, but to lay bare my interpretative moves to specialists.

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

The reader who is not familiar with Sanskrit or early India is advised to not become bogged down in the philological details of these chapters. In order to assist in this, each chapter has several thematic sections which are intended to both focus on some of the most interesting details in these sections (such as the use of sarcasm attributed to Yājñavalkya or the historical anomaly of females participating in what were normally all-male arenas) and also provide brief summaries to create a broader picture of this literary figure. If a larger picture is the goal, the details create and justify that picture. The reader should be rewarded in the chapters that follow, not because that material is uncomplicated or less interesting, but because those passages are predicated on the earlier material and are also less complicated philologically, at least for my purposes.

In chapter 3, I consider the role of Yājñavalkya in the MBh. I analyze and discuss the brief references throughout certain books of this text. Particularly, I focus on the one long narrative concerning Yājñavalkya and how, at least on an initial reading, his appearance seems anomalous—he is teaching the metaphysics of Yoga and Sāṃkhya, doctrines he has never been associated with before. However, I show how Yājñavalkya's appearance is not so anomalous after all. Yājñavalkya's main appearance is principally in the Śāntiparvan, a later didactic text which focuses especially on Yoga and Sāṃkhya, but it is also a text concerned with justifying new teachings under older, more established garb. Thus, by the time of the MBh, Yājñavalkya was established as a sage of the past and new doctrines are being attributed to his authority, making a claim to ancient precedence.

It is also in the MBh where the first discernible hagiographical tendencies concerning Yājñavalkya begin. The MBh contains a story about how Yājñavalkya broke away from his teacher of the Black Yajurveda, how he purified himself for his transgression against his *guru*, how he received the White Yajurveda from the Sun for his penance, and how and why he compiled or composed the ŚB. This story itself also seems, at first glance, anomalous with respect to Yājñavalkya's larger teaching on Yoga-Sāṃkhya as it is not thematically related and appears simply attached to the end. While it may be that this passage is a later addition, I suggest that it is an intentional, necessary part of the longer passage. The reason for this, I argue, is that this passage in the MBh has fundamentally altered the template of Yājñavalkya established in the ŚB and the BĀU. As I show in chapters 1 and 2,

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

a foundational characteristic of Yājñavalkya that is developed is his sarcasm. In the MBh, Yājñavalkya's sarcastic wit is nowhere to be found—in fact, Yājñavalkya appears almost without a personality, a perhaps reverential portrayal of a venerated sage. This longer passage is a dry listing of the fundamental tenets of a particular view of Yoga-Sāṃkhya, which is purely didactic and Yājñavalkya might appear to be little more than a mouth to put that teaching into. It is here that I suggest that there was a perceived need for the inclusion of a brief hagiography, as well as the ascription of the White Yajurveda and the ŚB to Yājñavalkya, *because of* the lack of sarcasm or apparent connection to his earlier portrayal and association with ritual. This is to say that there is a lack of connection to the template that had previously defined Yājñavalkya as a literary character so a connection had to be forged through hagiography. Not only does this passage serve as an entertaining conclusion to the discussion of Yoga-Sāṃkhya (perhaps one of its intents, given its dry nature), but it also makes clear that we are dealing with *the same literary figure* found in the ŚB and the BĀU, something otherwise not necessarily obvious.

While chapter 3 discusses what appears to be the first clear hagiographical trend in any Yājñavalkya narrative, the narrative shows that by this period Yājñavalkya was an established figure, even an ancient *ṛṣi*. In chapter 4, I will discuss how this hagiographical trend is greatly expanded in the Purāṇic ("legendary/historical") accounts. As I will demonstrate, the Purāṇic narratives about Yājñavalkya center on five major themes: (1) retellings of the BĀU/ŚB; (2) a concern with names and origins (specifically, the division of the Vedas and the perceived split between the White and Black Yajurveda); (3) Yājñavalkya in relation to *yoga*; (4) the relationship of kings and Brahmins; and (5) Yājñavalkya in relation to the *dharmaśāstra* tradition.

Analyzing these five themes, I argue, allows us not only an insight into what stories, narrative structures, and character portrayals these authors were familiar with from the earlier sources, but they also grant us a view into how later composers understood the previous narratives in the composing of their own. Reading these later stories as explicitly or implicitly based on earlier ones allows us to view these later compositions as a form of commentary, granting us insight into how this figure was interpreted and reinterpreted across time.

Chapter 4 concludes with the all-too-brief ascription of the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* to Yājñavalkya. As the evidence is extremely meager, I

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany

only tentatively suggest possible reasons why this text was ascribed to him based on a comparison with the figure of Manu and a composite view of Yājñavalkya across time.

This book then concludes with "Yājñavalkya and Ancient Indian Literary Memory." Recently, it has been shown that it can be fruitful to view Indian images as having "lives."[11] This is to say that images are reinvented and reinscribed with meaning over time—depending on their context, both physical (such as how and where they are installed) and more abstract (such as how they are offered to, and venerated by, particular communities). Like images, religious-literary figures also have "lives," here the lives within a particular story or cluster of stories, but also lives across time and space which are reinvented and reinscribed with meaning depending on the needs and motivations of the particular communities that maintain, venerate, and elaborate the narratives surrounding such figures.[12] This book is, at its base, about how these two "lives" intersect.

© 2023 State University of New York Press, Albany