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The Goddess Takes the Reins: Diomedes' *Aristeia* and Ganga and Bhishma in the *Mahabharata*

The driving of Diomedes' chariot by the goddess Athena during that hero's *aristeia* has always been treated as yet another of *Iliad* V's many unique occurrences (as discussed at Fenik 1968:39, 61-2). But comparison with a corresponding incident narrated in the fifth book of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, in which the goddess Ganga drives the chariot of her son, Bhishma, suggests that the scene may have Indo-European roots. Furthermore, the comparison suggests that Athena's interactions with Diomedes may resonate with familial, as well as heroic, dynamics.

The comparison of these two divine female charioteers fits in to the growing body of recent work identifying Indo-European elements shared between the Homeric and Sanskrit epics. Given the frequency with which gods enter the war at Troy, the mere existence of two such scenes does not automatically suggest that they descend from a common ancestor. A goddess driving a chariot is a striking image, and it is not unreasonable to imagine that the idea could have occurred independently to the poets of both traditions. But examination of the surrounding events in the narratives reveals that the goddesses' chariot-driving is in each case framed by a near-identical set of incidents whose profiles, though less picturesque, are equally exceptional. Because oral epics are subject to constant change, their poets rely on thematic groupings as a framework to maintain narrative continuity, and this gives these groupings a certain durability (as discussed in Lord 1960, Ong 1982:140-41). Therefore, while the goddess at the reins attracts attention and raises the suspicion of a connection, it is the narrative framework surrounding her intervention which substantiates the case that the two scenes are genetically related to one another.

Running through the two scenes are parallel strings of 11 narrative building blocks, occurring in roughly the same order. As the scene opens, (1) The Hero's Contact With the Helpful Goddess Precedes the Combat, followed by the arrival of (2) The War-crazed, Deathless Opponent, after which (3) The Goddess Attempts to Prevent the Conflict by Dissuading the Opponent. After the battle is commenced, eventually (4) The Hero is Roused to Greater Glory by a Shoulder Wound, and (5) The Opponent Boasts Prematurely, while (6) The Charioteer Pulls (an) Arrow(s) from the Hero. The hero encounters (7) The Opponent Who Lacks a Chariot, and later (8) The Opponent Who Faints, but Recovers. At the battle's climax, (9) The Goddess Drives the Hero's Chariot, and (10) A Taboo on Fighting with Immortals is Invoked. The episodes end with (11) The Defeated Opponent Chastised by His Father.

Most of the above themes are military in nature, but there is also an unmistakable thread of parental involvement running throughout both scenes. In the *Mahabharata's* version, the helpful goddess, Ganga, is Bhishma's mother. His opponent is an immortal brahmin warrior whose decapitation of his own mother with an axe (described previously in the epic, and performed at his father's orders) is never directly referred to in the scene, but is an ever-present association with his character. While the *Iliad's* Athena is not Diomedes's

mother but a virgin goddess, she has a number of mortal favorites to whom she gives assistance, and is twice compared to a mother as she does so (*Il.* 4.127-33; 23.783). When these and other references to motherhood are coupled with the scolding of the immortal opponents by their own fathers, an interesting subtext begins to emerge to what on the surface appears to be merely a pair of otherwise typical battle scenes.