

RURU: ETYMOLOGY FROM HELL

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This paper traces out the non-literal functions of *nirukti* or etymology in the *Mahābhārata*. That the epic poets use grammatically unreliable etymologies requires no proof. But what I wish to demonstrate is that the reason for this is not mere rhetorical fancy. I want to point out the connection between etymology and soteriology in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*.

In the, *Āstīkāparvan*, the fifth minor book of the *Mahābhārata*, Śaunaka asks the bard: “This I wish to hear. Pray tell me the etymology of *jaratkāru*.” The bard resolves the word into *jarā* and *kāru* and interprets the word as “monstrous destruction” (*Mahābhārata*, 1.36.2-3; “*jaratkāru niruktam tvam yathāvad vaktum arhasi // jarā iti kṣayam āhur vai dāruṇam kāru samjñitam*”). This passage is important because it throws light on a previous occurrence of etymology in the text, in which the word *Mahābhārata* is *etymologically* related to salvation: “Once the divine seers foregathered, and on one scale they hung the four *Vedas* in the balance, and on the other scale *The Bhārata*; and both in size and weight it was the heavier. Therefore, because of its size and weight, it is called *The Mahābhārata* - he who knows this etymology is freed from all sins” (*Mahābhārata*, 1.1.208-209; “*catvāra ekato vedā bhāratam ca ekam ekatah / samāgataih surarṣibhis tulām āropitam purā / mahattve ca gurutve ca dhriyamāṇam tato adhikam // mahattvād bhāravattvāc ca mahā bhāratam ucyate / niruktam asya yo veda sarva pāpāih pramucyate //*”).

Likewise, we are given an etymology for “*Āstīka*” (“Since his father before departing for the forest had said of him, “There is,” while he was still in his mother’s womb, his name was known as “*Āstīka*” [*Mahābhārata*, 1.44.21; *asti ity uktvā gato yasmāt pitā garbhastham eva tam / vanam tasmād idam tasya nāma āstīka iti viśrutam //*]) that relates the name to being, hinting at the Upaniṣadic tradition of soteriological ontology. Thus etymology functions not merely accidentally as poetic rhetoric, but as an index for what is of ultimate concern to humans: destruction and salvation.

This claim is born out through a close reading of the myth of Ruru (*Mahābhārata*, 1.8.1-1.12.5). An investigation of the grammatical root of the word *ruru* and of its meanings and occurrences in myth reveals that the poets of the epic took great pains in naming characters. The name *Ruru* derives from \sqrt{ru} meaning “to howl”; Ruru is thus, literally, “the howler”, a fitting name for a character who cries with grief and rage upon losing his beloved. Moreover, Rudra, a name for Śiva, is also interpreted to mean “the howler”. A creation myth from the *Maitrayāṇī Samhitā* describes a scene in which Prajāpati, Lord of Generation, copulates with his daughter, Uṣas, in the guise of an antelope, when interrupted by an arrow shot by Rudra. Ruru, however, is also the name of an antelope, recalling Prajāpati and Uṣa in the myth of creation. Ruru thus appears to combine both aspects of the myth of creation: creation or the desire for creation and its interruption or the desire for cessation. Finally, the *Puranic Encyclopaedia* lists an entry for a hell populated by rurus, “a kind of dreadful serpent.” “This hell is known as “Rauravam” because of the abundance of rurus there.” This evidence casts the Ruru narrative in a completely new light - the sage who persecutes the snakes is himself a kind of serpent! - and forces us to revise our assumptions about persecutor and persecuted in the narrative. Ruru is a violent being who wreaks vengeance on the snakes but he himself appears cast in a “Rauravam”, a hell where it is his lot to suffer injury through the snakes.

These various examples suggest that the idea of a “strictly correct” etymology is misleading: etymology is always made subject to the demands of meaning rather than the other way around. The motivation for this approach can ultimately only be understood from out of a conviction central to Indian philosophical thought, that, in the words of Ādi Śaṅkara, “the rules of grammar will not save... at the time of death” (“... *saṃprāpte sannihite kāle nahi nahi rakṣati ḍukṛñkarāṇe*”).