«You Are the Same Śikhaṇḍinī»: Narrative Constructions of Śikhaṇḍin's (Gender) Identity in the *Mahābhārata.*

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Abstract

In the *Mahābhārata,* Bhīṣma creates the narrative of his own death: he connects his not fighting against Śikhaṇḍin, an alleged (former) woman, to his famous vow of celibacy, thus also to his boon of *svacchandamaraṇa,* and claims that killing a woman would mean killing himself (MBh 5. 193. 65). Bhīṣma is the primary source of information about Śikhaṇḍin, as well as the person most affected by it. The problem of Śikhaṇḍin's gender is discussed on several occasions in the *Udyogaparvan,* especially in the *Ambopākhyāna* (MBh 5. 170-193), and the *Bhīṣmaparvan,* and its importance is limited to Bhīṣma's death. The truthfulness of Śikhaṇḍin's (former) womanhood is almost exclusively dependent on Bhīṣma's reliability as a narrator, and his entire character is authoritatively defined by Bhīṣma as well. Bhīṣma presents the issue slightly differently to the Kauravas (the emphasis is on Śikhaṇḍin's "current" womanhood in the *Ambopākhyāna* and in MBh 6. 94. 16), to the Pāṇḍavas ("former" womanhood [MBh 6. 103. 70-82]), and to Śikhaṇḍin himself ("current" womanhood [MBh 6. 104. 41]), and also creates presumably deliberate ambiguity between referring to Śikhaṇḍin's birth gender and previous life as Ambā. Other characters merely quote him and are obviously puzzled by the news of Śikhaṇḍin's status as a *strī* 'woman' (*e.g.* MBh 6. 160. 15), *strīpuṃs* 'woman-man', or *strīpūrvaka* 'former woman' (*e.g.* MBh 5. 169. 19-20). They simply use the fact without either refusing or confirming it, thus taking part in the narrative presented by Bhīṣma, which authoritatively defined Śikhaṇḍin's character and created a powerful self-myth.

Keywords: *Mahābhārata, Ambopākhyāna,* Bhīṣma, Ambā, Śikhaṇḍin, narrator, narratology, gender, liminality, polyphony, identity.

1. *Introduction*

The *Mahābhārata* is, as it claims, an *itihāsa* 'history'[1]. The term *itihāsa* itself can be compared to the notion of factual narration as used in modern narratology, as opposed to a narration that is overtly fictional[2]. Events, facts and characters presented in a typical factual narration are supposed to exist outside of the text, outside the particular storyworld, ideally in the "real world". What is different from a typical factual narration is the fact that the *Mahābhārata* is not narrated in the neutral extradiegetic third person[3] but much of the narration is intradiegetic: it is composed, at least partly, as a polyphonic[4] interpretation of a factual discourse. To put it bluntly, even though there is a presupposed set of events and facts as they "really happened", the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* decides not to present them to the recipient in such an easy monophonic "history book" type of way. Rather, on the contrary, the *Mahābhārata*'s uniqueness lies precisely in these different voices and general lack of unequivocal answers: it is too close to the everyday experience of its audiences, even that of the audience of the real world, where assumptions, gaps and insufficient understanding of events are a rule rather than an exception.

When dealing with the depicted events but also with characters, the subjectivity of the respective voices is crucial: there are issues of external or contextual subjectivity (what is narrated, by whom, to whom, under what circumstances) and

1. *Itihāsa* is not the only word used in the *Mahābhārata* to describe itself, but one of the most common (after *ākhyāna*) and certainly one of the most important. For more about the self-presentation of the *Mahābhārata,* see Hiltebeitel 2016, 20-21.

2. The distinction between a fictional and factual narration is, however, rarely a sharp one. Peter Hühn (2014, 156) writes that «[t]he commonsense understanding is that this opposition concerns the question of referentiality, in other words, the ontic status of the signified, of the represented entities and happenings (characters, situations, places, points in time, changes of state as well as attitudes, emotions, experiences), namely, whether the representation refers to something that exists independently of the act of representation or whether the represented is (wholly or predominantly) invented, fictive, and projected by the semiotic representation in the first place. This opposition is, however, less clear-cut and less discriminating with respect to texts than it purports to be». The *Mahābhārata*'s self-presentation as an *itihāsa* certainly claims referentiality to the real world, even though the references cannot be confirmed. For a more detailed analysis of the distinction between a factual and fictional narrative, see Schaeffer 2009.

3. The terminology of extradiegetic (heterodiegetic) and intradiegetic (homodiegetic and autodiegetic) narrators follows Genette 1980.

4. For the importance of polyphony and dialogue in the *Mahābhārata,* see Hiltebeitel 2011, Fitzgerald 2003, Black 2007 who speaks about the *Mahābhārata*'s «complexly interwoven dialogical structure» (*ibid.,* 57), and the importance of various primary and secondary (eavesdropping) audiences, or Reich 1998, who interprets the *Mahābhārata* quite aptly as a «battlefield of a text».

of internal subjectivity. As a result of the aspectual storyworld[5], every character has an individual narrative or "personal script" of the events presented in the *Mahābhārata*: he or she can never know everything that is going on, nor are they able to see all the implications of an event, and they organise and interpret the events according to their own knowledge, personality, and memory. There are at least two things that have to be taken into account when dealing with narrators / characters and their narrations: that there is a certain way they perceive the events and characters, and a certain way they present them, and that these two things are closely interconnected but not necessarily the same: one can for example perceive a character as brave, and yet present him or her as a coward when it suits one's purpose. Or, as I argue in this paper, the characters can perceive and / or present someone, in this case Śikhaṇḍin, on different occasions as a man, a woman, a *rākṣasa* incarnate or Ambā reborn. In addition to its many voices, there are various types of audience in the *Mahābhārata*, and it has to be emphasised that the characters' versions of the events are not the same as the reader's, and that any character, narrator, or member of the narrative, authorial, or flesh-and-blood audience[6] has a different way of perceiving them.

As a consequence of the subjective presentation of the events, the facts are in a state of a continuous negotiation and truth is often elusive. Bhīṣma's death and the nature of his slayer(s)[7] is one of these extremely elusive facts. In the *Ambopākhyāna* (MBh 5. 170-193), which is a subjective autobiographical narrative[8], Bhīṣma presents several facts that can neither be confirmed, nor refuted by other portions of the text, but it does not mean that they are not discussed or pondered

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5. As Palmer (2014, 146) mentioned «readers read novels by seeing the storyworld as aspectual: different characters experience the storyworld differently».

6. For the different audiences, I follow Phelan (2017, 92) who distinguishes «three audiences in nonfictional narrative and four audiences in fictional narrative, namely 1. flesh-and-blood readers, 2. the authorial audience, 3. the narratee, and 4. narrative audience, the observer position». Even though the *Mahābhārata* presents itself as a factual discourse, there is a considerable body of readers who do not accept the depicted events as the historical truth and read it as fiction and we do not have information about the authorial audience's views, hence I have retained the narrative audience as well.

7. The blame for (or glory of) killing Bhīṣma is ascribed variantly in the text to Śikhaṇḍin (*e.g.* Saṃjaya in MBh 6. 14. 5-9; Janamejaya in MBh 7. 1. 1; Dhṛtarāṣṭra MBh 8. 1. 36; Gaṅgā in MBh 13. 154. 21-25), to Arjuna (*e.g.* Ugraśravas Sauti in MBh 1. 21. 57; Dhṛtarāṣṭra in MBh 1. 11. 26; Kṛṣṇa in MBh 13. 154. 28-29). Probably the best solution to this problem is to acknowledge that the matter is undecided and as puzzling as Śikhaṇḍin's gender (*e.g.* Custodi 2007, 218).

8. I have argued elsewhere that Bhīṣma's narration is subjective and can even be seen as unreliable. See Špicová 2019.

by the other characters and various audiences inside and outside the storyworld. Rather, on the contrary, the facts presented by Bhīṣma in the *Ambopākhyāna* and elsewhere are of crucial importance not only for his death, but also for its interpretation.

2. *Śikhaṇḍin as a Liminal[9] and a Composite* Palimpsest *Character*

When dealing with Bhīṣma's death, Ambā seems to be the traditional starting point. In this paper, I will start from Śikhaṇḍin as not every character is aware of Śikhaṇḍin's former life as Ambā, and indeed most of the characters who do know, show no interest in this piece of information. When summarising the story of Bhīṣma's (second) death, it is usually said that Bhīṣma was killed by the team of Śikhaṇḍin and Arjuna (and Kṛṣṇa): Arjuna put Śikhaṇḍin before himself because Bhīṣma would not fight against a (former) woman that is Śikhaṇḍin. We may also add, in our summary[10], that Śikhaṇḍin was born a woman and later obtained manhood from the *yakṣa* Sthūṇākarṇa and that he had been Ambā in his former life, the very same Ambā who had been kidnapped by Bhīṣma, an event that had effectively ruined her life, so she had practiced austerities in order to be reborn as a man and finally kill Bhīṣma. The problem is that most of these facts come from Bhīṣma's own narration[11], a narration that is very subjective, quite often unreliable, narrated purposely with his death in mind, and, furthermore, not available to all the audiences of the *Mahābhārata,* especially not to all the characters, including Śikhaṇḍin himself.

The character of Śikhaṇḍin is one of the elusive facts co-created through many voices. For the narrative / authorial audience and the flesh-and-blood readers, Śikhaṇḍin is, like most of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters, a *palimpsest* character:

9. For liminal characters, I follow Doniger's (1980, 284) list of liminal figures which «include the eunuch, the transvestite (or sexual masquerader), the figure who undergoes a sex change or exchanges his sex with that of a person of the opposite sex, the pregnant male, the alternating androgyne (male for a period of time, female for a period of time), and twins».

10. The summary conflates the events narrated by Vaiśaṃpāyana in MBh 1. 96, by Bhīṣma in MBh 5. 170-193, and parts narrated by Saṃjaya, especially in MBh 6. 114.

11. Even though scholars do usually at least mention that Bhīṣma is the narrator of the *Ambopākhyāna* (*e.g.* Howard 2019, 220; Adluri 2016, 275), they do not seem to consider it a thoroughly narrative-changing feature. The narrative aptness of Bhīṣma as the narrator is also sometimes commented upon (van Buitenen 1978, 178; Howard 2019, 222) but generally Vaiśaṃpāyana's narration in the *Ādiparvan* and Bhīṣma's autodiegetic narration in the *Udyogaparvan* are treated in the same way.

behind the human Śikhaṇḍin, another character can be seen. Śikhaṇḍin might even be what I call a composite *palimpsest* character, that is, a human character with more than one previous life, divine and mortal. Composite *palimpsest* characters are more an exception than a rule in the storyworld, the chief examples being the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī, and Śikhaṇḍin. At first sight, Śikhaṇḍin can be seen as someone who is a man / a woman, is / is not Bhīṣma's killer, and is a positive / negative figure. In different places in the *Mahābhārata*, Śikhaṇḍin is said to be: 1. a (male) *rākṣasa* incarnate; 2. Ambā reborn; and 3. someone who was born a girl and later changed into a man. These identities are presented by different narrators to different audiences. All of the characters have a certain way of perceiving other characters, in this case Śikhaṇḍin, as well as of presenting them to others, and, by extension, to the various narratees, and to the narrative, authorial, and flesh-and-blood audiences. Śikhaṇḍin is a character who is almost exclusively defined by the other characters and narrators, as opposed to Bhīṣma who is one of the most self-defined characters of the text (with the exception of the two characters with a special metarelation to the storyworld, namely Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa).

3. *Śikhaṇḍin is a* Rākṣasa

There are two important lists in which Śikhaṇḍin is mentioned as a *rākṣasa* incarnate: one of them appears in the *Ādiparvan* and is narrated by Vaiśaṃpāyana to Janamejaya[12], and the other is told to Gāndhārī and others by Vyāsa in the *Āśramavāsikaparvan*[13]. The first list serves as an interpretative key to the characters for the audiences from Janamejaya upwards, which includes the narrative / authorial audience and the flesh-and-blood audience, but excludes the characters themselves. On the other hand, the second list is available to the characters as well, or at least to the characters who have survived up to that point and is meant (theoretically) to help them deal with their grief after the war. Even though these two lists are not the same, they both mention Śikhaṇḍin and agree on his *rākṣasa* nature – it is double-confirmed by the two most reliable voices of the *Mahābhārata*.

For the interpretation of Śikhaṇḍin's character, the instances where Śikhaṇḍin is *not* mentioned as a *rākṣasa* incarnate are equally as important as those where he is. Bhīṣma never alludes to Śikhaṇḍin's *rākṣasahood,* even though it would be an amazing opportunity to enhance his wickedness: it is quite clear that

12. MBh 1. 61. 87c.
13. MBh 15. 39. 14c.

Bhīṣma is not aware of this fact. Similarly, Droṇa calls Śikhaṇḍin a person conversant with deceit (MBh 6. 108. 17), yet does not even allude to the *rākṣasahood*. Śikhaṇḍin's former life as a *rākṣasa* is known only to the narrative audience before the battle, and to the survivors after the battle, so the authorial / narrative audience can – and should – frame Śikhaṇḍin's personality and actions as *rākṣasa*-like right from the beginning. However, the characters only get the possibility to do so after the battle is over, and it can be presumed that this information could be a true discourse-shifting "plot twist" for some of them, as it would enhance the guilt of killing Bhīṣma by *adharmic* means. The authorial / narrative audience is supposed to perceive the transgender character of Śikhaṇḍin as a malevolent being.

4. *Ambā Reborn*

Most of the papers that deal with the characters of Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin and / or with Bhīṣma's death take the fact that Śikhaṇḍin is Ambā reborn absolutely for granted but it is not as self-evident as it might seem. This is because the fact itself is not narrated by the "objective" Vaiśaṃpāyana, the conveyor of the voice of the implied author, but by Bhīṣma who has proved himself to be a subjective and occasionally unreliable narrator on this occasion. Furthermore, the fact that Śikhaṇḍin is actually Ambā reborn was "deduced" by Bhīṣma rather than witnessed – it is impossible to claim with complete certainty that a character was reborn as someone else if there is no specific metarelation or a boon of divine vision. What is most intriguing about this fact is that it is unequivocally presented as the truth by the two characters who prominently receive a boon of divine vision, but "before" they get the boon. It would have been easy for the authors of the *Mahābhārata* to let these characters claim or at least confirm this fact during their respective authoritative discourses, but they did not do so, nor did they have the author himself, Vyāsa, present this fact, as is the case of Draupadī's former lives.

In the *Ambopākhyāna,* Bhīṣma establishes or confirms the fact that Śikhaṇḍin is a former woman (to the Kauravas and for the narrative audience), both in this life and in the former one, and that both the girl's austerities and her sex change were performed in order to bring about his own death. The story of Ambā constitutes by far the largest part of Bhīṣma's narration in the *Ambopākhyāna.* Apart from that, there is only one other character who explicitly mentions the unity of Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin. In his short summary of Śikhaṇḍin's

life in the *Udyogaparvan*[14], Saṃjaya mentions a terrible *tapas* of the girl from Kāśī who wished for Bhīṣma's death even at the cost of her life, was born as a daughter of Pāñcāla and became a man by fate. Saṃjaya also hints at the story of Ambā very quickly after Bhīṣma falls on the bed of arrows in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*. He does not really connect Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin as a single person but mentions that Bhīṣma lies on the bed of arrows, he who defeated all the assembled kings in a great battle in the city of Kāśī on a single chariot[15] and he who was not killed by Rāma Jāmadagnya and has his origin in a Vasu (*vasusaṃbhava*), was killed by Śikhaṇḍin. Taking into account that Saṃjaya already provided Dhṛtarāṣṭra with the information that Śikhaṇḍin is, in fact, the reborn Kāśī princess (*i.e.* Ambā, [MBh 5. 49. 31]), this might be a knowing allusion to Śikhaṇḍin's former life as Ambā. On the other hand, Saṃjaya's first narration was before he received a boon of divine vision, and the second one after that. The fact that Ambā is not mentioned here might also be seen as a "correction" of his previous beliefs: Śikhaṇḍin might not be Ambā reborn after all. In any case, the story of Ambā is given prominence only in Bhīṣma's narration to Duryodhana and seems to be a rather "private" reason ("private" in the sense that it is meant for the Kauravas, even though many assembled kings are mentioned) for his refusal to fight against Śikhaṇḍin. Whenever Bhīṣma is asked elsewhere about the reason behind this, he simply points out Śikhaṇḍin's (birth) sex which then becomes the 'official' reason for most of the characters. Thus, Bhīṣma actively creates two narratives in the *Ambopākhyāna*: Śikhaṇḍin is Ambā reborn and Śikhaṇḍin was born a woman, but in any further communication he only confirms the latter. His lengthy narrative about Ambā and her austerities may seem like his acknowledgement of guilt towards the girl whose life he had ruined and his acceptance that she was the cause of his death[16]. However, in any later speeches including the famous advice to the Pāṇḍavas, he never mentions her again, and after his fall, he almost aggressively refuses that Śikhaṇḍin had anything do with it, beginning in MBh 6. 114. 55-61 where he claims that the arrows which are killing him belong to Arjuna and repeats the phrase 'these are not Śikhaṇḍin's arrows' (*neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ*) six times.

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14. MBh 5. 49. 31-34.
15. MBh 6. 140. 6.
16. Such is the argument of *e.g.* Howard (2019, 222) who says that «Bhīṣma accepts in advance his defeat by Śikhaṇḍin as the just consequence of his own deed of *adharma* toward Ambā». Similarly, *ibid.*, 227; 237. He might accept her privately as the cause of his death, but he is certainly trying to exclude her from any further discussion about his demise.

5. *The Sex Change*

The problem of Śikhaṇḍin's gender is discussed almost exclusively in the *Udyogaparvan* and the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, and its importance is limited to Bhīṣma's "death" after which this attribute of Śikhaṇḍin and indeed Śikhaṇḍin himself – are all but forgotten. Śikhaṇḍin's gender identity is puzzling, and certainly not every character perceives him in the same manner, but it is crucial for Bhīṣma and his death.

The sex change is only briefly mentioned by other narrators apart from Bhīṣma, usually when they are summing up the events of the *Mahābhārata* or introducing the heroes of the battle. There are a couple of mentions by Vaiśaṃpāyana at the beginning of the text in which he summarises the events of the *Mahābhārata* and presents genealogies. Śikhaṇḍin is listed as being born a girl, daughter of Drupada, and afterwards as receiving manhood from the *yakṣa* Sthūṇa[17]. The second reference in the list of partial incarnation presents Śikhaṇḍin as a *strīpuṃsa*, a woman-man, who used to be a *rākṣasa* in his previous life[18]. From the very beginning the outer audiences are aware of Śikhaṇḍin's birth as a female and his liminal nature. Both these pieces of information are present in the summaries of the text by the narrator who already knows everything that has happened and who is the voice of the implied author, and therefore someone to be taken seriously.

Apart from Vaiśaṃpāyana, there is also Saṃjaya's account in the *Udyogaparvan* where he names the heroes which the Pāṇḍavas mustered. Śikhaṇḍin is mentioned as someone who was born as Drupada's daughter and gained manhood from the *yakṣa*[19]. In the *Droṇaparvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra uses very similar words to ask about Śikhaṇḍin as Saṃjaya in the *Udyogaparvan* with only a minor alteration, using the word *strīpūrva* here instead of *strīpuṃsa*[20]. Saṃjaya's evaluation of Śikhaṇḍin's sex is successfully transmitted to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and to all the audiences upwards. It is however still nothing the parties involved in the Bhīṣma / Śikhaṇḍin struggle would necessarily be aware of.

Bhīṣma's claims are quite straightforward and his narration of the *Ambopākhyāna* is the central source of information about Śikhaṇḍin's birth gender,

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17. MBh 1. 57. 104.
18. MBh 1. 61. 87. We can also read it as simply being a "demonic" woman-man. It is, however, a list of partial incarnations, so a divine or demonic lifetime is to be expected.
19. MBh 5. 49. 32.
20. MBh 7. 9. 41.

his life and former life, especially for the characters involved in the battle. It is Bhīṣma himself who brings this assertion into the spotlight for the other characters of his level of narration in the *Udyogaparvan* where he enumerates the heroes on the Pāṇḍava side to Duryodhana which is exactly how Śikhaṇḍin was introduced by both Vaiśaṃpāyana and also Saṃjaya. Almost immediately after this, he claims that he will fight against anyone except Śikhaṇḍin, and uses the *pāda* 'I will not slay Śikhaṇḍin' (*nāhaṃ hanyāṃ śikhaṇḍinam*)[21], which he will repeat several times throughout the rest of the *Udyogaparvan*, and which is also quoted by other characters four times in the *Bhīṣmaparvan*.

As a reason for not fighting against Śikhaṇḍin, he claims that Śikhaṇḍin is a *strīpūrvaka*, a former woman[22]. When Duryodhana does not seem to understand the reason behind Bhīṣma's statement, Bhīṣma begins a long narrative to explain it in detail. As a reaction to *strīpūrvaka* Duryodhana poses his first question ('Why will you not slay Śikhaṇḍin?')[23], to which Bhīṣma replies with the story of Ambā. Duryodhana's second question ('How did Śikhaṇḍin, having been a woman, become a man?')[24] is answered with the story of Śikhaṇḍin(ī). The problem of Śikhaṇḍin's gender is therefore presented in the second part of the *Ambopākhyāna*, and Bhīṣma's narration retains a certain fuzziness between Śikhaṇḍin's former womanhood as Ambā and as Śikhaṇḍinī. However, the account apparently gives more prominence (certainly in terms of length, sources and details) to the former while retaining the latter as the "official" version: even though the answer to the question 'Why will you not kill Śikhaṇḍin?' which here is 'Because of Ambā', is never repeated again.

6. *Deliberate Deadnaming: Śikhaṇḍin(ī)*

The problems of misgendering and deadnaming, so much discussed in the current discourse, are not something modern society has invented. The English terms might be relatively new but examples of the concepts can also be found in the *Mahābhārata*: Bhīṣma's identification of Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin, and his notion that Śikhaṇḍin is a woman includes instances of what we would now call misgendering (calling Śikhaṇḍin a woman, even though he is male both socially and biologically)

21. MBh 5. 169. 16.
22. MBh 5. 169. 120.
23. MBh 5. 170. 1a.
24. MBh 5. 189. 1.

and deadnaming (calling Śikhaṇḍin with his former female name, Śikhaṇḍinī). The very existence of a transgender person in the storyworld[25] inspires a wide range of reactions from various audiences. For the characters, the reactions include strong opposition (Bhīṣma), silence (Śikhaṇḍin) and general puzzlement (everyone else).

There are two versions of the name: Śikhaṇḍin (lit. 'peacock') and Śikhaṇḍinī (lit. 'peahen'). Apart from Bhīṣma and the characters in Bhīṣma's narration (Drupada and his wife), nobody uses the feminine version of the name which seems to suggest that for everyone else, Śikhaṇḍin is simply a man. No other characters ever use the name Śikhaṇḍinī or even Ambā when talking about the Pāñcāla prince. Nevertheless, the usage of the two versions of the name Śikhaṇḍin(ī) does not seem to be quite as important as the usage of masculine or feminine grammatical forms. "Śikhaṇḍin" can be seen as a neutral form which may be used with both the masculine and feminine grammatical forms, "Śikhaṇḍinī" is a highly marked form used only to highlight the hero's femininity. This is how it is used by Bhīṣma in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* to enhance the usage of feminine grammatical forms and make sure that his message is absolutely clear[26].

7. (Mis)Gendering: (S)He

Grammatical forms used to describe Śikhaṇḍin are quite coherent in the narrations of Vaiśaṃpāyana and Saṃjaya: in the reconstructed text of the Critical Edition, feminine grammatical forms are used before the sex change, and masculine forms after it. However, in various manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata*, masculine grammatical forms can be found in places where the reconstructed text has feminine

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25. There are other instances of a sex change and transvestitism in the *Mahābhārata,* most notably Arjuna in the *Virāṭaparvan*, also Ila / Ilā who is mentioned both in the *Mahābhārata* (as the mother and father of Purūravas, 1. 70. 16) and in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (7. 78-81), and the king Bhaṅgāśvana (narrated by Bhīṣma in 13. 12). The god who is most involved in Śikhaṇḍin's life, Śiva, is also famously an *ardhanārīśvara.* The transgender topic is discussed by various scholars, including Brown (1927), Goldman (1993), Doniger (1997, 1980), Custodi (2007), Adluri (2016) and others. They all see Śikhaṇḍin as a special case, mostly due to the unusual female-to-male transition, the relative stability of the change and its crucial consequences. For instance, Goldman (1993, 380) calls this episode «the most complex and elaborate single instance of a case of sexual transformation in the literature and one of the few significant accounts of female to male transsexualism».

26. *E.g.* in MBh 6. 104. 41: *yaiva hi tvaṃ kṛtā dhātrā saiva hi tvaṃ śikhaṇḍinī* ∥ 'you are the same Śikhaṇḍinī the Creator made you'.

forms and *vice versa*[27], which shows that the problem of Śikhaṇḍin's gender was by no means a solved one and that the scribes and various audiences of the *Mahābhārata* shared the characters' puzzlement. What I find extremely interesting is that some of the papers concerning Ambā often talk about Śikhaṇḍin using female pronouns, thus agreeing with Bhīṣma's interpretation of events, even though they might not be sympathetic to Bhīṣma himself and his deeds[28]. Śikhaṇḍin's gender still seems to be an open question.

The *Ambopākhyāna* is narrated by Bhīṣma as an autobiographical narration, a highly subjective one, and the usage of masculine or feminine grammatical forms for Śikhaṇḍin depends on Bhīṣma's own personal script, including his views and beliefs. Before the sex change, the usage of masculine / feminine forms seems to be slightly chaotic, but a distinction between "her" private life and "his" public life can be traced: a girl is born but presented and raised as a boy[29]. Bhīṣma's usage of gender-related pronouns seems to show the distinction between Śikhaṇḍin's biological sex (female) and social, publicly displayed gender (male). Privately, the royal couple talk about the child as a girl, and Drupada even addresses his publicly male child as «Śikhaṇḍinī»[30]. Feminine forms are also used by Bhīṣma as the narrator of this episode when Śikhaṇḍinī reaches youth and is recognised as a woman by her wife[31]. In connection to the marriage and Śikhaṇḍin's public life and family, masculine forms are used[32]. The situation changes when Śikhaṇḍin's sex begins to be the subject of rumours, and feminine grammatical forms are used again, even in public[33]. When Śikhaṇḍin's mother publicly takes blame for the deceit, she talks about her child as a girl, Śikhaṇḍinī[34], but Bhīṣma as a narrator uses the male name when describing Śikhaṇḍin's mother[35].

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27. *E.g.* in MBh 5. 49. 34, the Critical Edition has *yāṃ yakṣaḥ puruṣaṃ cakre bhīṣmasya nidhane kila*, but Sukthankar (1940, 247) notes *yaṃ* in manuscripts K4, B, Dn, D1. 3-6. 10, T, and G1. 2. 4.

28. *E.g.* Adluri on various occasions prefers Ambā over Śikhaṇḍin: «Ambā / Śikhaṇḍin's problematic sexuality, and her ability to transform, [...]» (2016, 277), and even when only Śikhaṇḍin is in question feminine pronouns are used: «These are the last words he utters to her, [...]» (*ibid.*, 293). There are other options, *e.g.* Goldman (1993, 381) chose to use s/he. Most papers which deal with Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin – including this one – somehow retain the characters' puzzlement.

29. MBh 5. 189. 12-17.

30. MBh 5. 191. 18.

31. MBh 5. 190. 12-14.

32. MBh 5. 190. 9.-10; 13; 17.

33. MBh 5. 190. 22; 5. 191. 3, 17.

34. MBh 5. 192. 1-4.

35. MBh 5. 191. 12; 5. 192. 1.

Feminine grammatical forms are used when Śikhaṇḍin enters the forest, along with both versions of the name. The *yakṣa* continually addresses Śikhaṇḍin as a woman – it would be strange to address her as a man when she is about to change sex with the *yakṣa's* help. After the sex change, Śikhaṇḍin's sex and gender are in line, and Bhīṣma as the narrator of the *Ambopākyāna* invariably talks about Śikhaṇḍin as a male: the male version of the name, masculine pronouns and grammatical forms are used, except for a single notion that after her father-in-law's departure, Śikhaṇḍinī was exceedingly happy[36]. After Kubera's arrival at Sthūṇākarṇa's abode (in the embedded narrative), the *yakṣas* refer to Śikhaṇḍin as a woman: for them, she is Drupada's daughter Śikhaṇḍinī, a woman who, for a limited amount of time, acquired the 'sign of a man'[37]. They do not talk about any event that occurred after the sex change, thus their usage of the feminine grammatical forms is unsurprising. On the other hand, Kubera refers to Śikhaṇḍin with a masculine pronoun when he curses Sthūṇa to remain a woman[38], thus confirming the transition.

After Kubera's departure, Śikhaṇḍin is invariably referred to in masculine grammatical forms in the narration but Śikhaṇḍin's womanhood is by no means forgotten by Bhīṣma and he constantly places it in the foreground, while stressing his own inability (one would even be tempted to say "impotence") and unwilling-ness to kill a woman. Contrary to the narrator's and the characters' treatment of Śikhaṇḍin's gender, only masculine grammatical forms are used for Sthūṇākarṇa, even after the sex change. The closest the description comes to a feminine form is *strīsvarūpa, i.e.* 'in "his" feminine form'[39]. It is never even hinted that Sthūṇa should be described as a real female. The reasons behind this can be partly the im-permanence of the change and the fact that he was a *kāmarūpin*: the *yakṣa* will live much longer than Śikhaṇḍin and has always been able to change his appearance at will no matter what. This connects him more to Arjuna / Bṛhannaḍā[40] than to Śikhaṇḍin's newly gained masculinity, because for Sthūṇākarṇa and Arjuna, the sex change is nothing but a short episode, but for Śikhaṇḍin, it changes his entire life.

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36. MBh 5. 193. 29.
37. MBh 5. 193. 36.
38. MBh 5. 193. 43.
39. MBh 5. 193. 40.
40. During Arjuna's disguise, his female name Bṛhannaḍā is used along with Arjuna's usual names, and there are both masculine and feminine grammatical forms. Masculine forms are predom-inantly used by the narrator and feminine forms during dialogues with other characters which is log-ical and does not disturb the audiences.

In the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, Bhīṣma mentions Śikhaṇḍin's birth sex to Duryodhana, Yudhiṣṭhira and even to Śikhaṇḍin himself, explaining to all of them why he will not fight against Śikhaṇḍin. In the *Bhīṣmaparvan*, it is easy to observe that Bhīṣma's presentation of this particular fact is subjective, not only because of his personality and personal script, but it also depends on his audiences and circumstances: he presents a slightly different set of facts to different audiences.

He repeats his former claim to Duryodhana, that he will not fight against Śikhaṇḍin because he used to be a woman[41]. Bhīṣma here really highlights Śikhaṇḍin's (even current) womanhood: she is the same woman Śikhaṇḍinī the Creator made her, and in this *śloka*, Bhīṣma uses exclusively feminine grammatical forms[42]. This *pāda* is near-repeated by him once more in his dialogue with Śikhaṇḍin[43]. To summarise, when he talks to the Kauravas or to Śikhaṇḍin, Bhīṣma's claim is very straightforward: Śikhaṇḍinī is simply a woman for him. There is no ambivalence in his claims here, as he is talking to someone who has to understand and accept his position in order to make his plan of self-destruction – which is neither shared with the Kauravas nor with Śikhaṇḍin at that point – successful: Śikhaṇḍin is a woman and Bhīṣma cannot fight against a woman.

On the other hand, when presenting the plan he himself created in order to enable his own death to Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma talks about Śikhaṇḍin purely in masculine grammatical forms, about someone who used to be a woman and then gained manhood, not mentioning his "current womanhood"[44]. Unlike when he talked to Duryodhana, he also claims that the fact of Śikhaṇḍin's former female sex is known to all of the Pāṇḍavas[45]. Even though he calls Śikhaṇḍin inauspicious (*amaṅgalyadhvaja*)[46], he goes no further in claiming that the chief ally and relative of the Pāṇḍavas is, in fact, a female.

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41. MBh 6. 94. 14.

42. MBh 6. 94. 16-17.

43. MBh 6. 104. 41. Śikhaṇḍin replies to Bhīṣma's speech with an alteration of the first verse of this *śloka*.

44. MBh 6. 103. 70-82.

45. MBh 6. 103. 76.

46. MBh 6. 103. 74c. The word *dhvaja* can mean a flag, a banner, but also a sign in general, and an organ of generation (*strī, puṃs*). Here, it is probably most logical to assume that it means 'an inauspicious sex organ'. Another sound interpretation would be that Śikhaṇḍin as such is an inauspicious sign for Bhīṣma. The term *amaṅgalyadhvaja* might also refer to the Śikhaṇḍinī / Śikhaṇḍin sex change and the fact that his newly acquainted sex organ does not belong to a human, but to a *yakṣa*. It has to be noted that the *yakṣa*s are mostly seen as inauspicious, only a step away from the *rākṣasa*s.

Apart from Bhīṣma's own words, there are also Saṃjaya's reports regarding the moments when Śikhaṇḍin approached Bhīṣma, Bhīṣma refused to fight against him, "remembering / keeping in mind his / Śikhaṇḍin's womanhood". Saṃjaya always uses male pronouns for Śikhaṇḍin, even when he reports Bhīṣma's opinions[47]. Every other character merely quotes Bhīṣma on this matter. There is no character who adds any information about this fact from another source, even though characters with divine vision, great ascetic merit, and even presumed witnesses of the events are present, such as Saṃjaya, Vyāsa, or Kṛṣṇa. There is also nothing new from Śikhaṇḍin himself or his family. Śikhaṇḍin's birth sex is alluded to twice by Duryodhana when he explains his strategy to his brother Duḥśāsana and asks him to protect Bhīṣma from Śikhaṇḍin. In both versions, he starts by quoting Bhīṣma's famous *pāda* 'I will not slay Śikhaṇḍin' (*nāhaṃ hanyāṃ śikhaṇḍinam*). In the first version, the quotation only spans one *śloka* and, interestingly, the word *śrūyate* 'it is heard' is used, so it is much less authoritative than Bhīṣma's own former narration[48]. The second quotation is more elaborate: the first verse is the same one used by Duryodhana previously and the second verse is quite similar, the only difference being the use of *strīpūrvako hy asau jātas* ('he was born as a woman before')[49] instead of *śrūyate strī*.

Similarly, Arjuna also quotes Bhīṣma, his famous *pāda* and the fact that Śikhaṇḍin was born as a girl and became a man[50] as a conclusion of his emotional dialogue with Kṛṣṇa which takes place after the Pāṇḍavas' visit to Bhīṣma's tent where they discovered that the only way to slay him is to position Śikhaṇḍin before Arjuna. Interestingly, the *pāda nāhaṃ hanyāṃ śikhaṇḍinam* was not used by Bhīṣma then, and in this quotation, Arjuna uses the word *jātā* for Śikhaṇḍin's birth and not for becoming a man as it was used when Bhīṣma talked to Duryodhana. Even though this quote may be read as also alluding to Ambā – if we read the word *purā* as meaning 'in the previous birth' – the Pāṇḍavas never show any explicit knowledge of Ambā but are said to know about Śikhaṇḍinī, so it seems that the Pāṇḍavas' understanding of the situation is that the problem is Śikhaṇḍin's birth sex and not his former life as Ambā.

Droṇa also quotes the same *pāda* and repeats the assertion that Śikhaṇḍin is the same woman the Creator made her, and also describes Śikhaṇḍin as 'being conversant with deceit' (*nikṛtiprajña*) and having an 'evil mind' (*pāpacetas*). Droṇa

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47. MBh 6. 65. 28; 6. 82. 26; 6. 99. 7; 6. 112. 80; 6. 113. 46.
48. MBh 6. 16. 15.
49. MBh 6. 95. 8.
50. MBh 6. 103. 100.

also repeats that Śikhaṇḍin is *amaṅgalyadhvaja, i.e.* one with an inauspicious banner or sex organ or an inauspicious sign in itself and claims that Bhīṣma does not fight him for this very reason[51]. Droṇa is supposed to know Śikhaṇḍin very well, as he was, according to Bhīṣma, Śikhaṇḍin's *guru.* At the same time, Droṇa and Śikhaṇḍin's father Drupada have a very complicated relationship which might also be the reason for Droṇa's unflattering description of Śikhaṇḍin. As negative as the description of Śikhaṇḍin may be, it only makes use of masculine grammatical forms and names, with the exception of a direct quotation of Bhīṣma's words.

8. *Who Is Śikhaṇḍin?*

To summarise, Śikhaṇḍin's identity as a composite and liminal character is quite puzzling. There are six basic readings of this character that can be applied for the outermost audiences, including the flesh-and-blood reader. If we suppose some of the portions of the *Mahābhārata* are "late", we can say that Vaiśaṃpāyana's and Vyāsa's lists of partial incarnations are both later *addenda* to the text and Śikhaṇḍin is simply Ambā reborn[52]. On the other hand, seeing that Bhīṣma is a subjective and occasionally unreliable narrator, we may conclude that Bhīṣma's claim that Śikhaṇḍin is Ambā reborn is unreliable, and he is therefore simply a *rākṣasa* as claimed by Vaiśaṃpāyana and Vyāsa. This reading is problematic because Saṃjaya, who is generally a very reliable, albeit necessarily partly subjective narrator, also says that Śikhaṇḍin is Ambā reborn. A very suspicious reader might even assume that both Bhīṣma's and Vyāsa's / Vaiśaṃpāyana's claims are false (unreliable and / or later *addenda*), and Śikhaṇḍin is simply Śikhaṇḍin, without any reliably narrated former life.

Śikhaṇḍin's former life as Ambā is the one with the greatest narratological potential: the celibate Bhīṣma was killed by a woman whom he had kidnapped in her previous life. The rebirth gives Śikhaṇḍin – who in this reading is still perceived as a woman – the right to do this and the audience would therefore see it as rightful

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51. MBh 6. 108. 17-18.

52. Any reader can of course simply "opt out" from the authorial audience which is led, or even forced to see Śikhaṇḍin as a malevolent being because of his former life as a *rākṣasa*. As Phelan (2017, 100) put it, «[a]ny member of the actual audience is of course free to decide that any narration is deficient, especially along the axis of ethics, because any reader can resist or reject the ethical values that undergird an author's narrative».

vengeance, allowing them to experience some kind of 'poetic justice'[53]. Without the *rākṣasa* former life, the story of Ambā and Bhīṣma would resemble the story of Vedavatī and Rāvaṇa (Rm 7. 17): the harassed woman returns to become the reason for the kidnapper's / rapist's demise in her next life while the kidnapper's only vulnerable spot is the woman's (Śikhaṇḍinī / Sītā) male counterpart (Śikhaṇḍin / Rāma). This would align Bhīṣma with the "villains" far more than the narrative audience is supposed to perceive him, and it is his narration of the *Ambopākhyāna* and Śikhaṇḍin's other life as a *rākṣasa* which saves him from this fate.

There are three other options which take into account both claims: Ambā is a (male) *rākṣasa* incarnate, who was then reborn as Śikhaṇḍin; the human female Ambā was reborn as a male *rākṣasa* before becoming a female (Śikhaṇḍinī) again; and Śikhaṇḍin is comprised of a part of the female Ambā, and a part of the male *rākṣasa* which seems to be the most probable conclusion with no additional unexplained sex changes necessary. The "reliable" narrators present him as a *rākṣasa* incarnate and as someone who was born as a woman and subsequently became a man. The identification of Śikhaṇḍin with a *rākṣasa,* which instantly makes him an antagonist, is only available to the audiences from Janamejaya upwards, and not available to any of the characters, probably not even to Śikhaṇḍin himself or his family. It is only authoritatively presented as a fact later by Vyāsa who, by presenting this former life and keeping silent about Ambā, almost absolves Bhīṣma of any guilt and shows Śikhaṇḍin as the villain of the *Bhīṣmaparvan,* at least for the authorial audience. The modern flesh-and-blood reader might quite often be more sympathetic towards Ambā and Śikhaṇḍin than towards Bhīṣma.

On the other hand, Śikhaṇḍin's former womanhood is ascertained by Vaiśaṃpāyana, just as it is known to Saṃjaya and Bhīṣma, so it can be taken for a reliable fact shared by all types of audiences. However, it is not certain what "womanhood" is alluded to by the different characters. Śikhaṇḍin's identification with Ambā never successfully crosses the boundary between the characters and the reliable framing narrators. The Ambā / Śikhaṇḍin identification only exists in the background, apparently with no importance for anyone except for Bhīṣma who gives this very identification as the reason for his death to Duryodhana, if not to the Pāṇḍavas. Yet the outermost audiences, including today's flesh-and-blood

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53. However, the fact that Ambā's revenge is somewhat disappointing has frequently been commented upon. Custodi (2007, 217) says that Ambā «doesn't even really ever accomplish what she set out to do»; Doniger (1997, 141) notes that «[t]here is therefore something anticlimactic about the killing of Bhīṣma by Śikhaṇḍin»; Howard (2019, 239), however, sees such an interpretation as a misconstruction of Ambā's life.

readers and scholars take Ambā's revenge – seemingly almost against Bhīṣma's later expressed wishes – to be the reason for his death.

Bhīṣma is a character who self-defines himself continuously and almost aggressively: by his vow, by creating his own self-myth; other characters may not agree with his self-identification (like Śiśupāla), but they can do little to change it. On the other hand, Śikhaṇḍin is a character defined almost exclusively by other characters, mostly by Bhīṣma. There is nothing particularly noteworthy about Śikhaṇḍin without the voices of other characters, and he never gets the chance to define himself. There are various liminal Śikhaṇḍins for various audiences. To the Kauravas, Bhīṣma presents Śikhaṇḍin explicitly as a woman, and to the Pāṇḍavas, more carefully as a man who used to be a woman, showing the difference between perception and presentation. The outer audiences can accept either of these two versions according to their own personal scripts. In the *Ambopākhyāna,* Bhīṣma presents Śikhaṇḍin as Ambā reborn but other characters do not comment on it and the outer audiences can make their own choices to believe or not to believe Bhīṣma's words. The only reliable framing information about Śikhaṇḍin is his former life as a *rākṣasa* and his liminal nature. The character of Śikhaṇḍin is a quintessential liminal character of the *Mahābhārata* that changes with different points of view: a malevolent woman for the Kauravas, a heroic man for the Pāṇḍavas, a tragic hero(ine) and / or a *rākṣasa* incarnate for the narrative, authorial and flesh-and-blood audiences. What, however, cannot be answered, is who is Śikhaṇḍin for Śikhaṇḍin himself as there are also no signs of his self-presentation or even a friendly presentation seeing that his character is almost fully defined by his enemy Bhīṣma who creates a new Śikhaṇḍin for every audience.

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