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## **The Ambopākhyāna reconsidered: Reading Ambā's story as part of the Rāma Jāmadagnya myth cycle**

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### **Abstract**

In the Ambā episode of the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma abducts the princess Ambā as a bride for his brother, then releases her when she asks to be returned to the man to whom she was already betrothed. When her betrothed refuses her, Ambā returns to Bhīṣma and asks him to marry her. Bhīṣma, sworn to celibacy, also refuses. Twice rejected and rightly blaming Bhīṣma for her predicament, Ambā seeks revenge—first, by asking for aid from Bhīṣma's former guru, Rāma Jāmadagnya, and then, when Rāma is unable to defeat him and goes into permanent exile, by committing suicide to be eventually reborn as the warrior Śikhaṇḍin to defeat Bhīṣma herself. In this chapter, I will reframe this narrative by reading it as part of the myth cycle of the mostly peripheral figure of Rāma Jāmadagnya, arguing that it serves as his 'exit myth' from the epic while also reinforcing important elements of his wider mythology, especially his relationship with his mother, Reṇukā, and his status in South Indian village cults as a servant of Devī.

## Introduction

In the third volume of his never-to-be-completed translation of the *Mahābhārata* for the University of Chicago Press, J.A.B. van Buitenen suggests the Ambā episode of the Udyogaparvan (5.170–97) is evidence of the epic’s mytho-genetic properties. He argues that the long and complicated story, which is unique to the epic, sprang from an epic author’s lack of an explanation for Śikhaṇḍin’s invulnerability to Bhīṣma. Demonstrating that all the individual elements in the story are found elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, he conjectures that storytellers cobbled together a lot of unrelated elements to provide an explanation:

The point I am trying to make ... is that within a half a millennium of the composition of the text, a minor element ... could create a new legend, an instant tradition, which is acceptable not only because it is entirely epigonic in character, drawing on materials already there, but also because it is so utterly appropriate: the great Bhīṣma, fearfully famed for his abjuration of women, in the end finds his undoing at the hand of one of them, whom he had cheated out of her rightful marriage. It has no precursors, and to my knowledge no successor. This last battle of Rāma is not part of his later biography as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. (van Buitenen 1978: 178)

Van Buitenen’s analysis of the myth is plausible, if dismissive (he finds it ‘ridiculous’ and has quite a bit of fun imagining how the mythmakers came up with such an outlandish story). But it is not exhaustive, as shown in subsequent studies by Vishwa Adluri, Wendy Doniger, Alf Hiltebeitel, Veena R. Howard and Stephanie W. Jamison. These studies have focused on issues of *dharma*, gender, Vedic ritual, the larger *Mahābhārata* narrative and the elements of Śaivism and Śaktism in the story.

There are valuable insights to be gained from all these approaches, but in this chapter, I will do something different and attempt to reframe the Ambā episode as part of the myth cycle of Rāma Jāmadagnya, the warrior sage to whom Ambā appeals for help and who duels with his former pupil Bhīṣma on her behalf. Rāma Jāmadagnya, like Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin, is a creature of the epic, with no narratives preceding his appearance in the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>1</sup> But,

1 Making an argument about him that resembles van Buitenen’s analysis of Ambā, Robert Goldman describes all the epic myths of Bhārgava Brahmins (of which Rāma Jāmadagnya is the most famous) as ‘metamyths’. He concludes that the Rāma Jāmadagnya cycle, which he calls ‘a pastiche of Bhārgava motifs and themes’, is ‘a deliberate creation of the epic bards intended to incorporate, in one complex, almost every highly charged feature of the [Bhārgava] cycle’ (Goldman 1977: 135–36).

unlike Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin, Rāma Jāmadagnya is subsequently elevated to the status of an *avatāra* and starts to appear in many purāṇas and temple legends beginning in the ninth century CE. With varying degrees of emphasis, narratives of his two most notable mythic exploits—decapitating his mother, Reṇukā, and annihilating ‘thrice-seven’ generations of *kṣatriyas*—are repeated throughout this literature, in which he is frequently known as Paraśurāma (‘Rāma with the Axe’)—a name that does not appear in the *Mahābhārata*.

But his defeat in a duel with Bhīṣma in the Ambopākhyāna is one of the two episodes that rarely travels beyond the boundaries of the epic (the other is his training and subsequent cursing of Karṇa). In light of this fact, I decided to leave both these episodes out of my overall analysis of the myth cycle as I worked on turning my dissertation on Rāma Jāmadagnya into a book (Collins 2020a). Having reconsidered that decision, I will argue two things in this chapter: first, that we should read the Ambā story as an ‘exit myth’ of Rāma Jāmadagnya, about which I will say more below; and second, that Ambā’s relationship with Rāma Jāmadagnya sets up a connection to Devī that develops further in his later mythology. But first, we need a brief telling of Ambā’s story.

## The Ambā story

At the end of the Udyogaparvan, as the great battle between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas draws near, the warrior guru Bhīṣma tells the eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana, that he will not take up arms against Śikhaṇḍin, a prince fighting on the side of the Pāṇḍavas. Alarmed, Duryodhana asks him why. Bhīṣma responds by retelling a story that has already been recounted in *Mbh* 1.96 by Vaiśampāyana. It begins with Bhīṣma having renounced the throne and taken a vow of celibacy so that his father, Śaṃtanu, can marry the much younger Satyawatī with the promise that her sons will inherit his kingdom. After siring two sons named Citrāṅgada and Vicitravīrya with Satyawatī, Śaṃtanu dies and Citrāṅgada takes the throne. But when Citrāṅgada is killed in a duel with a *gandharva* (also named Citrāṅgada), his brother, Vicitravīrya, is still too young to rule, so Bhīṣma becomes the regent.

When Vicitravīrya comes of age, Bhīṣma decides to attend the *svayamvara* of the three princesses Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā and kidnap them as brides for his brother. Ambikā and Ambālikā happily agree to the marriage, but their older sister, Ambā, tells Bhīṣma that she has already chosen a husband

and asks to be allowed to return to him. Bhīṣma agrees and lets her go back to her intended husband, King Śālva, who happens to be the same man whom Bhīṣma humiliated by killing his charioteer and defeating him in battle in front of a huge crowd at the sisters' *svayamvara*. This is where the narrative in 1.96 ends, so now Bhīṣma tells Duryodhana the rest of the story.

Unsurprisingly, Ambā's intended husband refuses to take her back after she has been in the house of the man who shamed him so publicly and spectacularly, so he orders her to return to Bhīṣma. Ambā correctly sees the futility of this course of action and, after blaming Śālva, her father and herself for her misfortune, she settles on Bhīṣma as the root cause of her situation and goes to a hermitage to practise asceticism in hopes of finding a way to avenge herself on him. Her maternal uncle Hotravāhana then suggests that she visit Rāma Jāmadagnya.

She first meets his disciple Akṛtavraṇa, who sees that she is troubled and asks her why. She tells him her story and, making reference to the paradigmatic Vedic cattle raid, expresses her wish to see Rāma Jāmadagnya 'kill Bhīṣma as Indra killed Vṛtra' (*Mbh*, 5.176.42). Soon, Rāma Jāmadagnya arrives on the scene and, on hearing her story, he regretfully informs her that he cannot fight Bhīṣma, recalling a promise he made after the annihilation of the *kṣatriyas* that he can only take up arms again at the request of brahmin women. At this point, Akṛtavraṇa reminds Rāma Jāmadagnya of another pledge he made after he wiped out the *kṣatriyas*:

After you defeated all the *kṣatriyas* you promised the brahmins: 'Whenever a brahmin, a *kṣatriya*, a *vaiśya*, or a *śūdra* becomes a brahmin-hater, I will kill him in battle. As a shelter for frightened ones coming for refuge, afraid for their lives, I can never abandon them as long as I live. If an arrogant man defeats the entire *kṣatriya* class in battle, I will kill him.' (*Mbh*, 5.177.14–15)

The pledge to kill the 'arrogant man' who does what he himself has done and wipes out the *kṣatriyas* is certainly a strange promise and it does not occur in either of the epic's versions of Rāma Jāmadagnya's 21-fold annihilation of the *kṣatriyas*. The meaning of the phrase could be that even the man strong enough to wipe out all the *kṣatriyas* would not be strong enough to defeat him. Whatever the case, Rāma Jāmadagnya remembers making the promise even if we do not and agrees to try to persuade Bhīṣma to do the honourable thing and, failing that, to kill him.

The next day, Rāma Jāmadagnya goes to see Bhīṣma and, speaking as his guru, orders him to take Ambā back. When that fails, the two agree to meet on the field of battle. After he duels with Bhīṣma for several days, Rāma Jāmadagnya's ancestors appear and convince him to abandon the fight and return, defeated, to his hermitage on Mount Mahendra. After the duel ends with no relief for Ambā, she takes matters into her own hands and starts to practise austerities in hopes of being granted a boon by the gods. Finally, Śiva appears and grants Ambā the boon of being born a man in her next life, at which point she immolates herself in the sacrificial fire.

But in her next life, she is born as a princess named Śikhaṇḍinī, although her parents dress and raise her as a boy. After Śikhaṇḍinī's wedding, the princess whom she marries learns the truth and word is sent back to her father, Hiranyavarman. Furious, Hiranyavarman threatens to dethrone Śikhaṇḍinī's father if this rumour is proved true. To save her father's kingdom, Śikhaṇḍinī finds a *yakṣa* and convinces him to temporarily trade genital organs with her, so that when the brahmin sent by Hiranyavarman comes to inspect his 'son-in-law', he finds a man, 'Śikhaṇḍin'.

Meanwhile, Kubera, king of the *yakṣas*, finds out what the *yakṣa* has done and curses him to remain a woman (and Śikhaṇḍin to remain a man) until Śikhaṇḍin's death. Therefore, Bhīṣma explains to Duryodhana, even though the Pāṇḍava warrior Śikhaṇḍin has the body of a man, Bhīṣma still considers him a woman whom *dharma* forbids him to attack. Ultimately, this will doom Bhīṣma when the Pāṇḍavas, using Śikhaṇḍin as a human shield, line up behind him and fill Bhīṣma with arrows until he can fight no more.

## The Rāma Jāmadagnya–Bhīṣma connection

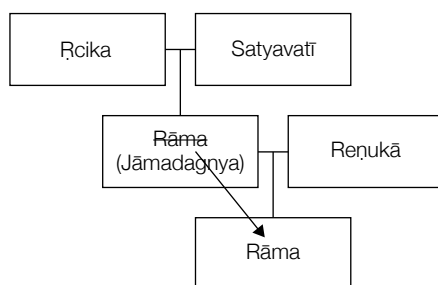
Elsewhere, I have written about the thematic connection of Rāma Jāmadagnya, Droṇa and Aśvatthāman (Collins 2021b). Based on Alexis Sanderson's (2009) epigraphical findings that Indian kings who had converted to Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism between the fifth and the eighth centuries commonly proclaimed their commitment to upholding the *varṇa* system and Johannes Bronkhorst's (2016) argument that Sanskrit mythology provided a model for a new post-Vedic *kṣatriya*–brahmin relationship, I argued that brahmins who felt threatened by the spread of Buddhism and the decline of Vedic ritual and who wanted to protect their privilege and distinctive identity could have done so by embracing narratives of such powerful and dangerous brahmin warriors.

These myths of enraged brahmins, usually connected to Śiva, who unleash terrible destruction before being severely punished for it, would have served as warnings to kings not to forget the potentially destructive power of brahmins' command over the sacrifice. And, through the element of exile or punishment, they would have also reassured the brahmins themselves that they still regarded violence as inherently impure. The connection between Rāma Jāmadagnya and Aśvatthāman specifically is especially clear on this last point since both figures are later recognised as *cirañjīvins* whose immortality is sometimes imagined to be a punishment for their violent actions.

There are reasons to argue for a similarly clear connection between Rāma Jāmadagnya and Bhīṣma (apart from the fact that both figures were portrayed by the Burkinabé actor and *griot* Sotigui Kouyaté in the Peter Brook production). First, both have a 'mother' who is not a mother and in both stories this figure is named Satyavatī. In Rāma Jāmadagnya's story, Satyavatī is a princess married to the Bhārgava sage Ṛcika. After the marriage, she asks his clan patriarch, Bhṛgu, to help her give birth to an ideal brahmin son and to help her mother give birth to an ideal *ṣatriya* son. Bhṛgu agrees and infuses a rice pudding with *brahman* for Satyavatī to consume and infuses another with *ṣatva* for her mother.

But the women accidentally mix up the ritual and Bhṛgu predicts that Satyavatī will give birth to a brahmin who will act like a *ṣatriya* and her mother will give birth to a *ṣatriya* who will act like a brahmin. Horrified, Satyavatī convinces Bhṛgu to defer the prediction for one generation, effectively rejecting the child she is now carrying. As a result, she gives birth to the pure brahmin Jamadagni. Jamadagni in turn sires the *ṣatriya*-natured brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya, who *should* have been Satyavatī's son.

In Bhīṣma's story, Satyavatī is the younger woman who agreed to marry his father if Bhīṣma would renounce the throne and promise never to marry or have children. Bhīṣma's mother is the goddess Gangā, but it is on Satyavatī's behalf that he kidnaps Ambā, Ambikā and Ambalīkā as brides for his half-brother. Later, balking at Satyavatī's request that he break the vow he made for her and do it himself, he has Vyāsa impregnate his widowed sisters-in-law Ambikā and Ambalīkā. Perhaps significantly, Bhīṣma justifies his plan of having a brahmin ascetic sire sons with *ṣatriya* widows by telling Satyavatī the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya having done the same thing after he killed 21 generations of *ṣatriya* men.



**Figure 5.1 The descent of Rāma Jāmadagnya**

Source: Author's depiction.

Another connection is the fact that both Rāma Jāmadagnya and Bhīṣma are notably unmarried and childless—although this is explained only in Bhīṣma's case—and each has some power over death. In later traditions, Rāma Jāmadagnya is a *cirañjīvin*. He is not described this way within the *Mahābhārata*, but he is at the very least a figure from a distant former age who appears to still be alive at the end of the epic. For his part, Bhīṣma has the boon of choosing the moment of his death, which he received from his father after making his terrible vow.

## The duel with Bhīṣma as an 'exit myth'

As I have argued elsewhere, in the post-epic tradition, Rāma Jāmadagnya is unique in his dual identification as both *avatāra* and *cirañjīvin*. He was probably first recognised as an *avatāra* by the Pāñcarātrins not long after the composition of the *Sanatkumāra Saṃhitā* around 800 CE (see Collins 2020b: 169–77). His identification as a *cirañjīvin* is harder to trace, but I would argue that his inclusion in the group (probably around the same time, but independently) is a result of his thematic connection to Aśvatthāman, the epic's other brahmin warrior who perpetrates terrible and disproportionate acts of violence to avenge his father's death. But in the epic where he originates, Rāma Jāmadagnya is best understood as a proto-*cirañjīvin* whose presence links the sacrificial battle at Kurukṣetra to another mythical annihilation of *kṣatriyas*—namely, the one he himself perpetrated in a previous age when he killed 21 generations of them in a rapidly escalating feud that began with a cattle raid.

			<b>Matsya</b>				
			<b>Kurma</b>				
			<b>Varāha</b>				
			<b>Vāmana</b>				
			<b>Narasimha</b>				
<i>Aśvatthāman</i>	<i>Bali</i>	<i>Hanumān</i>	<b><i>Rāma</i></b> <b><i>Jāmadagnya</i></b>	<i>Kṛpa</i>	<i>Vibhiṣaṇa</i>	<i>Vyāsa</i>	<i>Mārkaṇḍeya</i>
			<b>Rāma</b>				
			<b>Kṛṣṇa</b>				
			<b>Buddha</b>				
			<b>Kalki</b>				

**Figure 5.2 Rāma Jāmadagnya at the intersection of *cirañjīvins* (horizontal in italics) and *avatāras* (vertical in bold)**

Source: Author's depiction.

Other than his annihilation of the *kṣatriyas*, which takes place well outside the time frame of the main events of the epic, Rāma Jāmadagnya is involved in only one battle in the *Mahābhārata*: the spectacular duel with his former pupil Bhīṣma that ends with the brahmin warrior withdrawing after days of pitched combat. The duel with Bhīṣma is what I would call one of the ‘exit myths’ of Rāma Jāmadagnya—an episode in which he enters the main narrative just long enough to be written out of it so that his absence requires no further explanation.

In the regional purāṇas, dramas and temple legends focused on Rāma Dāśarathi, where most of Rāma Jāmadagnya’s exit myths are found, the necessity of his exit is clear: there cannot be two *avatāras* at the same time, much less two *avatāras* named ‘Rāma’. The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, composed by Pāñcarātrins in Kashmir between 600 and 1000 CE, is one of the first major purāṇic accounts of the myth to appear after the redaction of the *Mahābhārata*. In it, Śiva tells Rāma Jāmadagnya twice that he will have to give up his *tejas* and lay down his arms (except to protect women and brahmins) when he meets Rāma Dāśarathi (see Collins 2020b: 174–75). The oft-told story of Rāma Dāśarathi establishing his superiority over Rāma Jāmadagnya and forcing him into permanent exile appears in a wide array of textual traditions, including both Vālmiki’s and Kṛttivāsa’s *Rāmāyaṇas*, the Oriya *Jagamohana Rāmāyaṇ*, the Marāṭhī *Śrī Rāmavijaya*, the *Madhava*



*Kandali Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Brāhmāṇḍa Purāṇa* and Bhavabhūti's eighth-century drama the *Mahāvīracarita* (see Nagar 2006: 40–100); Choudhary 2010: 142–48).

For evidence that we should read Bhīṣma's defeat of Rāma Jāmadagnya as a similar denigration of the latter, let us look at how Bhīṣma responds to his guru's command to take back Ambā. After initially greeting Rāma Jāmadagnya with joy and reverence, Bhīṣma insults him, saying that since he does not act like a guru, he will not obey him as a guru. Finally, Bhīṣma challenges Rāma Jāmadagnya with a spiteful and boastful rant that throws his violent past back in his face:

Go and return to Kurukṣetra, War-lover! I will meet you in battle there, strong-armed ascetic. There where you purified your father long ago, Rāma, I will kill and then purify you. Go quickly, war-crazed Rāma! I will dispel your legendary pride, you who call yourself a brahmin. You always boast in crowds, 'I single-handedly wiped out all the kṣatriyas in the world.' Listen to this: Back then, Bhīṣma was not yet born. A kṣatriya that is my equal would have dispelled your pride and lust for battle. But now I, strong-armed Bhīṣma, the destroyer of enemies, *have* been born. And I will take away your pride, Rāma, do not doubt it. (*Mbh*, 5.178.33–38)

Lynn Thomas also sees the duel between Bhīṣma and Rāma Jāmadagnya as an analogue of Rāma Jāmadagnya's duel with Rāma Dāśarathī in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In both stories, she notes, 'the battle is witnessed by representatives of most of the world's inhabitants (gods, *ṛṣis*, etc.), and the cosmic significance of this not uncommon phenomenon is emphasised by phrases which suggest the fate of the world is in the balance' (Thomas 1996: 69).<sup>2</sup>

The results of Rāma Jāmadagnya's battles with Rāma and Bhīṣma are not defeat so much as an acknowledgement that his time has passed. Explaining why he was unable to defeat Bhīṣma as promised, Rāma Jāmadagnya regretfully explains to Ambā: 'This is the limit of my power. This is the limit of my strength' (*Mbh*, 5.187.3). In the later literature, beginning with the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, this same idea of limitation is transformed into a sense—reflective of his dual identity as an *avatāra* and a *cirañjīvin*—that his power and relevance on Earth are less long-lived than is he.

2 See also Choudhary (2010: 110).

While the *Mahābhārata* does not mention him transferring his mantle to the next *avatāra*, as he does with Rāma Dāśarathī, Rāma Jāmadagnya's excoriation and humiliating defeat at the hands of his former pupil serve to convey the same message. There are also obvious references throughout the text to see this battle as the end of his career. For his duel with Bhīṣma, Rāma Jāmadagnya returns to the site where he made five lakes of *kṣatriya* blood in a prior age. And, after two days of battle, his ancestors approach Rāma Jāmadagnya and tell him to lay down his bow (presumably forever) and practise austerities. They also address him twice as *vatsa* ('calf')—a term I will have more to say about later (*Mbh*, 5.186.10–15).

After Rāma Jāmadagnya's ineffectual efforts to intervene in what I will argue below is a transformation of a traditional cattle-raiding story—which is especially humiliating given that an earlier cattle theft had occasioned his total annihilation of the *kṣatriyas*—the story resumes and Ambā, now reborn as Śikhaṇḍin, does what Rāma Jāmadagnya (of all people) could not do, and exacts her bloody revenge. What the Amba-Upakhyāna gives us is a cattle-theft story that serves as an ignominious exit for the brahmin warrior just as the theft of his father's calf serves as his violent but grand entrance—first, as tragedy, then as farce.

## Ambā's abduction and the theft of Jamadagni's calf

In the cases in which his exit myth centres on a battle of the two Rāmas, the winner is elevated and the loser is displaced. But the story of his duel with Bhīṣma does something other than just displace Rāma Jāmadagnya. It plays with one of the elements of his main myth: the cattle raid. The Ambā story in the Udyogaparvan, I argue, can best be understood as a transformation of the same Indo-European cattle-raid mytheme employed to such dramatic effect at the close of the previous book, the Virāṭaparvan, when the Pāṇḍavas end their period of exile and accompany the first raising of Arjuna's standard in 13 years with a show of force to repel an attempted raid by the Kauravas on the cattle of Matsya.

Ruth Katz Arabagian has observed that the 'predominant subject of Indo-European heroic literature is successful warfare for the winning of wealth and kingdom' and that it is 'most often realized in one of two guises: as a theme of cattle raiding, or a theme of bride stealing' (1984: 107). The Ambā

story presents a superimposition of these two themes that is rooted in Vedic ritual while also serving as an inversion of the cattle raid that began Rāma Jāmadagnya's true entrance into the epic (the attempted theft of his family's wishing cow by King Kārtavīrya, which sets his annihilation of the *kṣatriyas* into motion), creating two bookends that contain his epic career.

Returning to Bhīṣma's abduction of Ambā and her sisters, an obvious question arises: why does Bhīṣma kidnap three brides for his younger brother? The easiest way to explain this is to take the story of the bride-napping in 1.96 as an earlier narrative than the longer and more elaborate Ambā story in the Udyogaparvan. If we ignore for a moment Citrāngada's strange and senseless death in 1.95 at the hands of a *gandharva* who coincidentally bears his name (and who promptly ascends to Heaven and disappears from the narrative after the deed is done), we have three brides for three brothers.

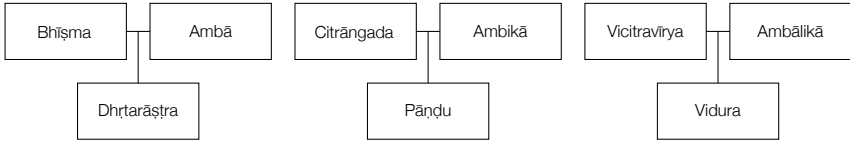
From there, we can imagine a version of this story in which Bhīṣma, Citrāngada and Vicitravīrya are the oldest, middle and youngest sons of Śamtanu, respectively—all three in need of wives to carry on their line. Quite literally, the names Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā are progressively diminutive forms of the word for 'mother' (helpfully equated by Hiltebeitel [2011a: 374] to the Spanish, 'Mama, Mamita, Mamacita'). Their names (which also have Vedic ritual significance, as Jamison and Hiltebeitel have pointed out) suggest that Ambā is meant to 'mother' children for the oldest brother (Bhīṣma), Ambikā for the middle brother (Citrāngada) and Ambālikā for the youngest brother (Vicitravīrya). But of course, Bhīṣma cannot marry, so Ambā is left out.

There are two details in the text that go along with the 'three brides for three brothers' model. First, the next generation of Kurus consists also of three brothers: Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu and Vidura. But since Ambā is missing, the text introduces an unnamed slave girl who has sex with Vyāsa when he comes to impregnate Ambikā a second time—something he does not attempt with Ambālikā for reasons that are never explained. Second, it is noteworthy that the only suitor we hear about Bhīṣma defeating is Śālva, the intended husband of Ambā, implying that he specifically challenged and defeated him to win her.

To be clear, I am not arguing that some lost earlier recension of the *Mahābhārata* story had Bhīṣma kidnapping three brides for himself and his two brothers. I am suggesting, rather, that the epic narrative intentionally departs from the expectations set up by the numerical structure of its mythic episodes. This creation of tension by playing against structure is analogous

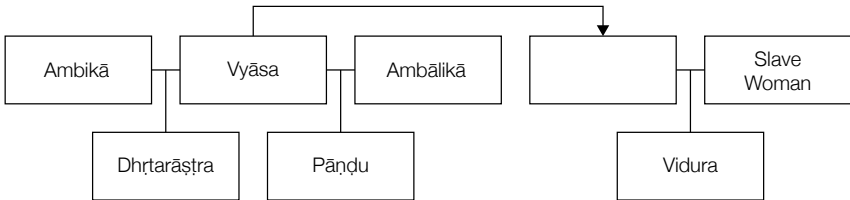
to the way that a film might deliberately play against the expectations set up by its genre, as in Disney's *Frozen* (2013)—a fairytale in which the princess does not need the prince to save her, which plays against expectations set up in virtually every Disney princess movie since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Hiltebeitel has made a convincing case that Vyāsa's impregnation of the two queens and the slave woman is a mythic representation of the Vedic Aśvamedha (2011b: 269–75). I, too, see a ritual context in this myth, but there is also a 'puzzle' (to use Hiltebeitel's term) that operates at the level of the narrative itself. If I were to say, 'I am now going to tell you a story about three princes, three princesses, and their three sons', you would expect to hear something more like the story represented in Figure 5.3 than the confusing patriline in Figure 5.4. In the Ambā episode, the text sets up an expected narrative of three brides for three brothers from which it then departs using a series of unexpected plot twists—some of them (like the death of Citrāngada) a bit unconvincing.



**Figure 5.3 The expected union of the three sons of Śaṃtanu and the three Kāśi princesses with their expected offspring**

Source: Author's depiction.



**Figure 5.4 The epic's account of the descents of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu and Vidura**

Source: Author's depiction.

All this is to say that the epic establishes a deep connection between Ambā and Bhīṣma at the level of structure—a structure that is made more intelligible to the reader the more the narrative plays against it. This structural connection is reinforced at the (much more complex) narrative level: after carefully analysing and recapitulating the story thus far for the audience, Ambā

places the ultimate responsibility for her predicament on Bhīṣma in an inner monologue in 5.173.1–10. She then undertakes a sacred vow to become the only being in the world who can defeat him in battle, in 5.188.18, explicitly saying ‘For the death of Bhīṣma!’ before stepping into the fire.

Now, let us turn to the cattle-raid element in the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya, the most detailed versions of which are found in 3.115–17 and 12.49. One day a king of the Haihaya clan named Arjuna Kārtavīrya, who has received 1,000 arms as a boon from the gods, comes to Jamadagni’s hermitage while on a hunting trip and either he steals (in the Aranyakaparvan) or his wicked sons steal (in the Śāntiparvan) the calf of the milking cow from the hermitage. Rāma Jāmadagnya, who has been away on a journey, returns to find the calf missing and goes after Kārtavīrya to avenge the theft, cutting off Kārtavīrya’s thousand arms with his arrows before finally killing him. But while he is still away and the hermitage is unprotected, the slain king’s sons sneak in and kill Jamadagni in retaliation. When Rāma Jāmadagnya returns to find his father dead, he swears revenge on all *kṣatriyas*, vowing to wipe them out 21 times over. In fulfillment of his vow, he kills 21 generations of *kṣatriyas* and fills five lakes with their blood at the site that will later become Kurukṣetra, before he makes a sacrifice in which he gives away the earth that he has conquered and goes into exile to spend the rest of his days in meditation.

Significantly, in both epic versions of Rāma Jāmadagnya’s extermination of the *kṣatriyas*, the event that starts the conflict is the theft of a calf (*vatsa*) from his father’s hermitage. Also in both versions, the slaying of his father happens when Rāma Jāmadagnya is out retrieving that calf. While there are differences concerning who is responsible for the theft in the two versions of the story, both agree that the calf was the stolen animal and that Jamadagni’s death happened while Rāma Jāmadagnya was out retrieving that calf. In the Ambā story, I argue, the stolen calf reappears in the form of Ambā, and she is once again calling for the help of Rāma Jāmadagnya.

Evidence of this identification appears throughout the text. First, Hotravāhana, the sage who sends Ambā to Rāma Jāmadagnya for help in defeating Bhīṣma, addresses her twice as *vatsa* (‘calf’) in 5.175, as does Akṛtravṛaṇa, once in 5.176. Second, when Śālva sends Ambā away in 5.172.22, he does so by telling her that he fears Bhīṣma and she is ‘*bhīṣmaparigrahaḥ*’. Van Buitenen translates this compound as ‘Bhīṣma’s chattel’, taking it (correctly, I think) to mean that Śālva sees Ambā as Bhīṣma’s spoils of war in the form of livestock, rather than simply as ‘dependent on Bhīṣma’, which the compound could also plausibly mean (1978: 498). Finally, as the result of a curse from Bhīṣma’s

mother during her austerities, Ambā is somehow spiritually bifurcated, with one part of her transformed into an ugly, twisted and crocodile-infested creek in Vatsabhūmi ('Calf-Land') before what is left of her is reborn as Śikhaṇḍin. The final splitting off of part of Ambā at Vatsabhūmi before she is reborn seems to suggest that there is nothing left of the stolen, wandering calf from the first part of the story in the warrior Śikhaṇḍin.

There is also an echo of Rāma Jāmadagnya's main myth in his failure to protect or avenge Ambā. When Kārtavīrya or his sons abduct the calf from Jamadagni's hermitage and Rāma Jāmadagnya takes her back, he is appropriating for himself the paradigmatic *kṣatriya* duty of protecting and raiding livestock. From then on, and especially in his massacre of the warrior class, he is himself more *kṣatriya* than brahmin. But when he fails to bring back the 'vatsa'—that is, Ambā—he not only fails to uphold his *kṣatriya*-like vows to protect all who come to him for help. He also fails in a task that the text has prompted us to regard as a variant form of cattle-raiding: the paradigmatic activity of the Indo-European warrior class.

## The destructive goddess, the rejected Dakṣiṇā and the demonic Kṛtyā

Noting that the only two hymns addressed to Durgā in the *Mahābhārata* are found on either side of Ambā's story in the Udyogaparvan, Veena Howard argues that the text goes to some lengths to identify Ambā (which is another name for Durgā) with the terrifying Mother Goddess:

Even though the traditional conventions of battle prohibit women from participating in battle, I focus on the resemblance of Ambā's acts with those of Mother Durgā, who symbolises the feminist value of defying patriarchal structure. No one's consort, Durgā depends on no male figure. She singly embodies raw power and does not hesitate to decapitate demons ... Ambā's rage, intense austerities, her autonomy, and single-minded focus to kill Bhīṣma evoke Goddess Durgā, who defeats demons impossible even for gods. (Howard 2019: 240)

Asko Parpola has argued against the consensus based on archaeology and art history that Durgā's presence in India does not pre-date the arrival of the Kuṣāṇas from Afghanistan around the middle of the first millennium CE. He concludes instead that the Indus Valley civilisation worshipped a Durgā-

like goddess connected to a lion or tiger who presided over fertility, death and war and underwent a sacred marriage at the New Year festival that involved the death and rebirth of the bridegroom in the form of a bull or a human male sacrificial victim. He also argues for the continuity of this practice in the Vrātya rituals associated with Indo-European-language speakers coming into South Asia from southern Central Asia between 2000 and 1700 BCE (Parpola 2015: 255).

The Vrātyas were a martial band of priests who supposedly conducted their violent sacrifices in the middle of the forest and the dead of winter and who kept the sacrificial gift for themselves. Before Jan Heesterman's important and influential re-evaluation of the Vrātyas in 1962, the prevailing scholarly opinion was that they were a non-Vedic group of antinomian ascetics and that their central ritual, the Vrātyastoma, was a conversion rite that allowed them to purify themselves and enter the brahmin fold (see Collins 2010: 63). But Heesterman argued convincingly that the rites of the Vrātyas were in fact a central part of the ancient Vedic sacrifice that was gradually marginalised as the Vrātyas themselves were demonised by brahmin priests. Their exclusion, according to Heesterman (1962: 19), was a result of 'a shift of ritual thinking in which the ritual universe and its brahmin guardians came to be viewed as pure as against the impure profane world'.

In other words, certain elements of the purāṇic Durgā myth could have been brought to South Asia by the Kuṣāṇas, but they were absorbed into a world view that already had traces of an older version of Durgā in the deep layers of its ritual system.<sup>3</sup> I propose two places in the Vedic literature where we might look for signs of this proto-Durgā, both of which are thematically connected to the figure of the rejected wife, which Ambā surely is.

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3 The way that an imported Durgā might be reshaped through association with the traces of her predecessor is a process that must be thought out. One imperfect analogue can be found in language, in which common word stocks undergo transformation and differentiation through the process of linguistic change before being reunited with their distant cognates by the movement of speakers. I will take two examples from children's literature as that is where one is apt to find alliteration and punning. The first example is the 'Ghost Host' in the Haunted Mansion ride at the Disneyland theme park. The idea behind the name 'Ghost Host' is to play on the resemblance of the two words and the differences in meaning to create a new and evocative phrase. The second example is *The Hostile Hospital*, the title of a children's book by Daniel Handler, who writes under the pen-name Lemony Snicket. In both cases, the alliterative or punning phrases are intended as juxtapositions of meaning, bringing two semantic fields into a state of overlap. In reality, we could also say that all this language play is contained within the single semantic field (greatly expanded through generations of language change) of the \*PIE word *ghosti-s*, which gives us the words *host*, *hostile*, *hospital* and (debatably) *ghost*.

The first is the Kṛtyā, a demoness described in *Rg Veda* 10.85, ‘The Marriage of Sūryā’, which is still commonly recited at weddings (see Collins 2014: 221–23; 2020a: 42). Verses 28–30 describe the Kṛtyā’s origin in the blood that stains the bride’s gown on the night of her defloration:

28. The purple and red appears, a Kṛtyā; the stain is imprinted [on the gown]. The wife’s family prospers and her husband is bound in the bonds.

29. Throw away the gown, and distribute money to the priests. [The stained gown] becomes a Kṛtyā walking on two feet and, like the wife, it draws close to the husband.

30. The [husband’s] body becomes ugly and pale if the husband covers his penis with his wife’s robe out of his evil desire.<sup>4</sup>

The Kṛtyā, born of blood and sex, is the double of the wife created when she loses her virginity and, one might add, her autonomy. It is the power of the feminine, bringing misery to the husband’s family and prosperity to the wife’s household. The hymn tells us that the woman can be absorbed safely into her new family only if the bloody gown/Kṛtyā is disposed of and the officiating priests are paid off. If not dealt with properly, it will become a kind of succubus.

Verse 28 uses the word *bandha*, which is the same word used for the fetters that bind the victim to the sacrificial post, when describing the husband being placed in bonds. And verse 30 tells us that if the husband should reciprocate and succumb to evil desires by penetrating the gown sexually, the Kṛtyā will possess him and make him deformed and pale. A few verses later, the hymn returns to the bloody gown:

34. [The gown] burns, it bites, and it has claws, as dangerous as poison to eat. Only the priest who knows the Sūrya hymn can receive the bridal gown.

35. Butchering, carving, and dividing it into pieces, behold the forms of Sūryā, which only the priest can purify.<sup>5</sup>

4 Based on a translation in Jamison and Brereton (2014: 1524).

5 Based on a translation in *ibid*.



In verse 34, the Kṛtyā takes a demonic and dangerous form that only a priest who knows this verse can handle. The final verse has the priest cutting up the Kṛtyā, using the words *āśasana*, *viśasana* and *adhivikartana*—the last term usually applied especially to an animal carcass.

We have in this story a rough outline of the paradigmatic Devī myth of India in which the male gods temporarily cede their power to a domesticated goddess like Pārvatī so that she can kill a powerful demon. In the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, where, as Raj Balkaran (2018, 2020) has noted, there is a deep connection between Devī and Sūrya, the demon she slays and whose blood she drinks is Raktabīja ('Blood-Seed'). This Devī-Sūrya connection could explain why the Kṛtyā passage is about the transformation of Sūrya's feminine counterpart, Sūryā, 'the archetypal bride' of the *Ṛg Veda* (Jamison and Brereton 2014: 52). One other provocative piece of evidence is the use of '*kṛtya*' to denote a fierce goddess who receives blood sacrifices, but the usage is only attested in Sanskrit lexicons (Monier-Williams 2009: 303).

In this argument (which I have made before, but with less confidence), I am taking a cue from the recent work of David Gordon White, examining a range of Sanskrit, Celtic and Arthurian myths sometimes identified as forms of an Indo-European mytheme in which a hero must win and possess the goddess of sovereignty (Śrī in Sanskrit, Flaith in Old Irish) if he wants to rule the land. But White identifies the core of the story behind them all as something much older: an encounter between a hero and a demon at the grove or pond for which it serves as a *genius loci* (2020: 159–61). More generally, White argues that behind the rites, gods and goddesses of nearly all official religions (Vedic religion included) is something better understood as 'daemonology'—the term he gives to the various approaches ordinary people have taken to deal with the problems of everyday life and the spirit beings who cause them, cure them, or both (see Collins 2021a).

The second possible proto-Durgā appears in the Vedic Rājasūya sacrifice: a wife of a certain kind is explicitly connected to the ceremonial cattle raid that is part of the ritual. The figure of the Parivṛktī, or 'avoided wife', represented by Indra's consort Indrāṇī, is considered essential to the cattle raid's success and is 'homologized to the rejected Dakṣiṇā [or gifted cow]' (Jamison 1996: 107). To interpret this part of the rite, Jamison turns to the *Kāṭhika Saṃhitā*, in which the gods reject the demons' gift of a cow and send her back to the demons, where she becomes a hyena and annihilates them:

In this set of stories ... a Dakṣiṇā [that is, a cow given as a priestly gift] is rejected by the intended recipients. Refusing a gift without cause is a terrible insult and leads to hostile relations ... and the rejected cow is transformed into a fierce, wild female beast—lioness, tigress, or female hyena depending on the text—who ravages the herd. (Jamison 1996: 106; see also Jamison 1991: 93–96)

The violent and uncontrollable nature of the rejected cow or wife and the danger she presents have a flipside in that she can also be used as a weapon against others, guaranteeing the cattle raid's success. Likewise, when she is rejected both by her intended husband and by the celibate Bhīṣma who had sent her to him, Ambā functions much like the dangerous figure of the Parivṛktī. The authors of the epic appear to be making a triple identification of the rejected wife who is also a cow and the rejected cow that becomes the demon-destroying hyena when they have Ambā transform herself into the warrior Śikhaṇḍin—a human weapon that decisively turns the tide of battle against the Kauravas. It is only because of Śikhaṇḍin, literally leading the Pāṇḍava company as a human shield, that Arjuna can successfully defeat the practically invincible Bhīṣma on the field of battle.

I contend that the rejected Dakṣiṇā also plays a role in the post-epic stories of Rāma Jāmadagnya in the form of the Kāmadhenu (or 'Wishing Cow'), who takes the place of Jamadagni's calf in the purāṇic literature. This transposition is likely a result of influence from the myth of Viśvāmitra, who in *Mbh* 13.56.12 is explicitly named as the *kṣatriya* with a brahmin nature born to Satyavati's mother (that is, Rāma Jāmadagnya's uncle and mirror image). His rivalry with the pure brahmin Vasiṣṭha is at the centre of the Viśvāmitra mythos and at the centre of this rivalry is the Kāmadhenu.

It begins when the king Viśvāmitra visits Vasiṣṭha's hermitage on a hunting trip and is amazed to find that a forest-dwelling ascetic can feed his entire royal retinue with a magic cow—here, referred to with the proper name Nandinī. In this story, narrated by a *gandharva*, Viśvāmitra tries to buy the cow but the brahmin Vasiṣṭha refuses to give her up:

Vasiṣṭha replied, 'This cow is used for the gods, for guests, and for the ancestors, and also to make ghee for the sacrifice; this Nandinī of mine cannot be given away, not even for your kingdom, good sir.' Viśvāmitra said, 'I am a kṣatriya, and you are but a mendicant, engaged in ascetic practice and contemplation. How could brahmins have any valor with their placid and subdued nature? If you don't give me the cow that I want for a hundred million [coins], then I will not be deviating from my personal moral code as I take away your cow by force.'

‘You are a powerful king,’ said Vasiṣṭha. ‘A kṣatriya of great valor. Just do whatever you want, but do it quickly—don’t deliberate on it.’

The gandharva said: When he received this reply, Pārtha, Viśvāmitra forcefully seized the cow Nandinī, who had the appearance of a swan or the moon. Struck by whips and goads, being pushed around here and there, Vasiṣṭha’s blessed Nandinī began to bellow. She came before him and stood there looking up expectantly. And even though she was being repeatedly beaten, she did not move away from his hermitage. ‘I hear you crying, my dear,’ said Vasiṣṭha, ‘as you scream out again and again. But, my Nandī, you are being stolen away by force, and I am just a passive brahmin.’ (*Mbh*, 1.165.17–24)<sup>6</sup>

Following this exchange, Viśvāmitra’s men try to take the cow’s calf, which proves to be the last straw for her. The cow grows enraged and produces enormous foreign armies from her dung, urine and spittle. Viśvāmitra surrenders to the overwhelming forces arrayed against him and is convinced by what he has seen to renounce his *kṣatriya* status to become a brahmin (*Mbh*, 1.165.35–45).

A divine magical cow named Surabhī or Kapilā with the power to grant wishes takes the place of the calf stolen from Jamadagni’s hermitage in both the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* and the *Padma Purāṇa*, where she is a boon granted by Indra to Jamadagni. The *Brahmavaivarta* describes armies emerging from the cow in the same way as in the Viśvāmitra story and the *Padma* has the cow fight back herself, attacking Kārtavīrya’s men before disappearing back to Indraloka. The cow does much the same thing in the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, but in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—the only place where she is called Kāmadhenu—Kārtavīrya’s men are able to steal her and hold her until Rāma Jāmadagnya gets her back (Choudhary 2010: 59–60).

The behaviour of cows resisting their abductors recalls elements of the myth of Durgā’s dangerous transformation as well as the figures of the Dakṣiṇā and the Parivṛktī. As I have argued above, the epic connects Ambā to Bhīṣma at the structural as well as the narrative levels. It seems plausible, then, that the Ambā story is a transformation of the earlier Dakṣiṇā story told in the *Kāṭhika Samhitā*—one in which she is the cow-turned-lioness, the Pāṇḍavas are the *devas* and the Kauravas are the *asuras*.

6 Translated by Adheesh Sathaye, available from: [global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/companion.websites/9780199341115/chapter\\_2.pdf](http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/companion.websites/9780199341115/chapter_2.pdf).

But why does the epic have Rāma Jāmadagnya, whom Ambā chooses as her champion, intervene in a way that does not even affect the outcome before she transforms into Śikhaṇḍin and destroys Bhīṣma herself? My answer, which I will explain in the conclusion, is that the epic is introducing an element of his character that will be further developed in South Indian myth and ritual: Rāma Jāmadagnya's role as servant of the goddess.

## Conclusion: Ambā, Reṇukā and the goddess

Arabagian argues that the earliest strata of Indo-European bride-napping and cattle-raiding stories reflect the struggle between the Indo-European settlers and indigenous peoples. Later epic stories of this type, on the other hand, come out of a subsequent period of internal struggle in which the Indo-Europeans have absorbed the indigenous culture and its goddess tradition, which they attempt to 'domesticate' (Arabagian 1984: 118). Arabagian sees the promiscuously sexual and violent female warrior Queen Medb from the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as an Irish analogue to Ambā and identifies both as examples of a 'humanized reflection of the goddess of Sovereignty' arising out of the contact between Indo-Europeans and indigenous goddess-worshippers (1984: 116).

As Parpola has demonstrated, there are good reasons to believe that a proto-Durgā goddess came from West Asia into the Indus Valley long before the Vedic people, and that her main ritual was preserved by the Vṛātyas before they were written out of the Vedic tradition themselves. We can see shadows and traces of this proto-Durgā in the Parivṛktī, the rejected Dakṣiṇā and the Krtyā—the last identification supported by White's contention that the earliest forms of gods and goddesses could be preserved as the 'daemons' associated with sickness, childbirth and fecundity.

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, my purpose here is to reread the Ambopakhyaṇa as part of the Rāma Jāmadagnya myth cycle. I have already argued that his duel with Bhīṣma is an 'exit myth' analogous to the many myths of Rāma Dāśarathī defeating and replacing him in post-epic literature. Now, for the final part of my rereading, I will argue that the connection to Devī introduced by the Ambā story represents a theme that is picked up on in later myths glorifying his mother, Reṇukā, as a form of Devī.

First, I want to point out an important connection between Ambā and Reṇukā: both die and are resurrected in some form as part of their myth cycle. Ambā, in a popular motif, commits suicide by walking into a sacrificial fire so she can be reborn as Bhīṣma's destroyer. Reṇukā is decapitated by Rāma Jāmadagnya himself at Jamadagni's command after she wets her clothes when she sees a *gandharva* prince bathing in a stream and is then resurrected by Jamadagni at Rāma Jāmadagnya's request. In the epic, Reṇukā's re-capitulation goes smoothly, but this is not so in myths from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu that focus on Reṇukā as a goddess in her own right and identify her post-matricide form with the headless goddesses Chinnamastā and Lajjāgauri or the 'transformed' goddess Māriyamman.

In South Indian myths and rituals recorded and examined by Biardeau and Hildebeitel (1988: 77), Rāma Jāmadagnya is identified with the 'Buffalo King' Pōttu Rāja or Pōrmannan, who is also the Buffalo Demon slain by Devī and converted into one of her devotees (see Collins 2020b: 138). He is typically shown holding a demon's head, which is usually the last head of the hundred-headed demon slain by Devī that would kill her were he to allow it to hit the ground (Hildebeitel 1988: 76–82). Biardeau's analysis of a 17-day Tamil festival dedicated to Māriyamman shows Pōttu Rāja having become the sacrificial post and Reṇukā having been assimilated to Durgā:

The goddess who decapitates the buffalo-demon has by implication offered herself for decapitation. Her warrior's sacrifice is what saves the world. Reṇukā is first sacrificed by her son in an act that would be more monstrous than self-sacrifice. She is then replaced with substitute victims: the *kṣatriyas*, who proved to be dangerous to the wellbeing of the cosmic order, *dharma*. (Biardeau 1993: 83–84)

Ambā's story does not play a major part in the Paraśurāma myth cycle that develops after the composition of the epic. But her role as the fierce resurrected battlefield goddess who is alone capable of defeating the seemingly invincible enemy standing in the way of re-establishing *dharma* is clearly passed on to Reṇukā in the forms of Chinnamastā, Lajjāgauri and Māriyamman. I will conclude with one last interesting bit of folklore: the silk-weaving Khatri caste, who claim descent from Rāma Jāmadagnya's archenemy Kārtavīrya Arjuna, offer monthly goat sacrifices to his mother, whom they recognise as their caste goddess 'Reṇukāmba' (Choudhary 2010: 298–99).

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