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# Bhīṣma, an (Un)reliable Narrator

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the concept of (un)reliable narrator and evaluates Bhīṣma's narration in the *Ambopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* with this category in mind. The *Ambopākhyāna* is divided into six narratives and three different types of narration using the categories of narrator, focalizer, and narrative agent/central figure. Bhīṣma is labeled a highly personalized narrator with a limited authority and reliability in the *Ambopākhyāna*, as opposed to his much more reliable and authoritative status in his other narrations, namely in the *Viśvopākhyāna* and the Doctrinal Books. Signs of unreliability (instances misreporting and underreporting) are shown in the first narrative, which is comparable to Vaiśampāyana's narration in the *Ādiparvan*, and it is suggested that because of it, reliability of other parts the *Ambopākhyāna* is also open to doubt.

**Keywords:** *Mahābhārata*, *Ambopākhyāna*, Bhīṣma, narrator, reliability.

## Narrators in the *Mahābhārata*

When reading and analyzing stories from the *Mahābhārata*, we very scarcely pay close attention to the narrators, interlocutors, and circumstances: who is narrating, to whom, when, why, and how. In other words, we seldom consider the status of the narrators, their levels of subjectivity, authority, and reliability, and ask the question of tellability: what is worth talking about, what is worth telling to whom? How does a text negotiate the point of a story? (Polanyi 1979: 207-8). There usually seems to be no reason to do so, since most of the narrators are supposed to have absolute authority and reliability due to their venerable status, position, or divine boon, and the vast majority of them narrate chiefly in the neutral third person about events they were not involved in directly as a protagonist. The events described were either witnessed by them, or more often heard and/or learned from other reliable source(s). There are, however, parts of the *Mahābhārata* where the narrator's personality seems to gain greater importance, predominantly when a character is narrating a story of which he himself is a protagonist or a central figure. The most intriguing events are those which are

narrated multiple times by different narrators, e. g. the account of the Vasus' curse and subsequent descent to Earth (Mbh 1.91.9-22; 1.93.1-46).<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to apply modern categories of narrators to the *Mahābhārata*, because every narrator (except for the impersonal narrator/editor) is at least mentioned as a character of his own narration or of the higher level of narration, be it in a few short framing third-person verses of the preceding narrator (Ugrasravas Sauti in the very beginning of the *Mahābhārata*, Vaiśampāyana introduced by Sauti), or in a brief first-person autodiegetic narration (Sauti's framing account of him attending Janamejaya's sacrifice). There are many possible ways to categorize the *Mahābhārata*'s narrators and their narrations, such as the difference between repeaters, arrangers, and creators, autodiegetic, homodiegetic, and heterodiegetic narrators (following Genette 1980), or narrators with different levels of subjectivity, authority, and reliability. One of the most useful divisions of the narrators in the *Mahābhārata* is into three categories: 1. "objective" narrator; 2. partly subjective narrator/focalizer; and 3. subjective narrator/focalizer/narrative agent.<sup>2</sup> Because of the fluidity of the *Mahābhārata* and reasons stated above, these categories do not have sharp borders.

(1) A narrator of the first type, i.e., an objective narrator, non-personalized or with an insignificant level of subjectivity, can be defined as a narrator whose primary role in the text is "saying," who does not overtly bring his own perspective ("seeing") and who is narrating events he is not a protagonist or an important character of ("doing"). "Objective" narrators are usually reliable and mostly

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<sup>1</sup> There are some papers dealing with different narrations of the same events, but without attempting to explain the differences as an intentional feature of the text. For instance, in his paper, "Akṛtavraṇa vs. Śrīkṛṣṇa as Narrators of the Legend of the Bhārgava Rāma", Robert Goldman deals with two versions of the story of Rāma Jāmadagnya and Arjuna Kārtavīrya, one in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, as narrated by Rāma's friend Akṛtavraṇa, and one in the *Śāntiparvan*, as narrated by Kṛṣṇa. He notices various differences in both style and content and ascribes them to different redactors of the respective books, rather than to different personalities and personal scripts of the narrators. Even though I agree with the brilliant observations about the differences, I do not think it is necessary to look for explanations of different versions of the story outside the storyworld because the changes can be interpreted as results of the narrators' subjectivity, including their personal scripts, circumstances, and goals, and thus also their possible unreliability.

<sup>2</sup> In dealing with the roles of saying, seeing and doing and their corresponding roles of narrator, focalizer and narrative agent or *actor*, I follow especially Bal 1981: 44-45 and Margolin 2009: 352-353.

interchangeable. Prominent examples of narrators with a very low level of personalization include Vaiśampāyana and Ugraśravas Sauti (after his few introductory verses), who are both mostly repeating the words of Vyāsa. On the other hand, given the dialogical nature of the *Mahābhārata*, even narrators of the first type are dependent on their interlocutors who implicitly and explicitly influence the narration by their position, personality and circumstances in general, and interest in expanding or omitting certain expandable points of the narration in particular.

(2) A partly personalized narrator/focalizer is a narrator (“saying”) who is also an important character of the storyworld (but not necessarily of the narrated events) and whose narration may include personal comments and perspective (“seeing”).<sup>3</sup> A narrator/focalizer narrates events he himself witnessed or moulds the story through his own perspective. Saṃjaya can be seen as a narrator/focalizer due to his dramatic dialogues with the king Dhṛtarāṣṭra. He also takes action in the battle, even though very scarcely (e.g., Mbh 6.90.43-44), and therefore briefly changes into the third type of narrator. Reliability of a narrator/focalizer, if he narrates a larger portion of the text, is usually established through a divine boon or stems from his venerable status.

(3) A personalized narrator/focalizer/narrative agent is primarily a character of the main events who is distinctively marked by the usage of the first-person narration, uses his own perspective while narrating (“seeing”), and is a protagonist or a central figure of his narration (“doing”). Personalized narrators in the *Mahābhārata* usually narrate only a single short explanatory event before the plot moves on, such as Gaṅgā’s account of the birth of the Vasus. The reliability of a personalized narrator can and should be questioned, since he can be deemed unreliable when there are textual signs which emphasize the narrator’s subjectivity and perspective, i.e., a high level of his personalization, and other signs of unreliability as introduced by Booth (1983: 158-159) and elaborated by Phelan and

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<sup>3</sup> The role of “seeing” in the *Mahābhārata* does not have to be actual witnessing of the events. To quote Vidura, *gandhena gāvaḥ paśyanti vedaiḥ paśyanti brāhmaṇāḥ | cāraiḥ paśyanti rājānaś cakṣurbhyām itare janāḥ ||* [“Cows see by means of smell, brahmins see by the Vedas, kings see by the means of their spies, and other people see with their eyes”] (Mbh 5.34.32).

Martin (1999: 94-95),<sup>4</sup> such as misreporting, misreading, and misregarding, underreporting, underreading, and underregarding. Misreporting and underreporting concern the axis of facts/events, misregarding and underregarding the axis of ethics/evaluation, and misreading and underreading the axis of knowledge/perception.

### Bhīṣma as a narrator

In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma is crucial both as a narrator and as a character, although he is primarily a well-depicted and important character of the story-world. We know very little – at least from the text itself – about Sauti and Vaiśampāyana (“objective” narrators), and only slightly more about Saṃjaya (narrator/focalizer), but Bhīṣma’s personality is depicted in great detail. We know about his former life as one of the Vasus, about his birth, youth, his terrible oaths, his entire life up to his defeat, death and last rites, and he remains forgotten even in heaven (Mbh 18.4.17). Bhīṣma as a character changes through time and it is sensible to assume that his levels of subjectivity, authority, and reliability as a narrator also change in different times and circumstances.

When Bhīṣma is mentioned as a narrator, the first narrations that come to mind are those of the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Anuśāsanaparvan*, where he is endowed with a boon of divine vision by Kṛṣṇa (Mbh 12.52.14-21). The text does not allow any doubts about his reliability here, since he is sharing his vast knowledge about dharma (not his life), his narration is approved and enabled by Kṛṣṇa, witnessed by various venerable characters including Vyāsa and Nārada, and swarms with “footnotes” – references to his authoritative sources, who are often the very same ṛṣis who witness his current narration. The level of his subjectivity is low,<sup>5</sup> but his authority and reliability are established quite firmly. The narrated events are mostly ancient stories, philosophical discourses, parables, myths, and leg-

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<sup>4</sup> I also accept Phelan and Martin’s definition of an unreliable narrator. They claim that “a homodiegetic narrator is ‘unreliable’ when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer” (Phelan and Martin 1999: 94).

<sup>5</sup> The level of subjectivity is low, but not non-existent. There are allusions on his personality and experience, e.g., during his speech about the right and wrong types of marriage in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (Mbh 13.44.37-54), he mentions his abducting of the princesses of Kāśī and continues with an advice which was given to him then by his uncle, Bāhlikā.

ends, so he can be deemed a partly personalized narrator/focalizer with a high degree of authority and reliability.

Apart from the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (after the battle), there are another two major narrations by Bhīṣma, which chronologically precede it: the *Ambopākhyāna* (Mbh 5.170-193) in the *Udyogaparvan* (before the battle), and the *Viśvopākhyāna* (Mbh 6.61.30-64.18) in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* (during the battle), both narrated to Duryodhana. Even though they are in different books, these two narrations are closely connected through their common interlocutor and through the fact that they explain in detail Bhīṣma's two reasons for not wanting to fight against the Pāṇḍavas, namely Śikhaṇḍin's female nature (*Ambopākhyāna*) and the unslayability of the Pāṇḍavas (*Viśvopākhyāna*).<sup>6</sup>

The *Viśvopākhyāna*, an ancient story about the gods glorifying Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, is narrated in the neutral third person, except for the framing which is more highly personalized and consists mostly of Bhīṣma's complaining over Duryodhana's constant unwillingness to listen to him (showing a lower degree of Bhīṣma's authority at this point), and an occasional metaleptic information about Bhīṣma's sources which include very much the same sages he always quotes, such as Rāma Jāmadagnya, Vyāsa, or Nārada. Again, Bhīṣma can be deemed a partly personalized narrator/focalizer here with a high degree of reliability, given the distance between the frame narration and the narrated events, which are a part of the "canon" of knowledge.

On the other hand, the *Ambopākhyāna* is narrated mostly in the first person and is highly personalized, abounds with subjective interpretations and very personal events, such as Bhīṣma's dream. Bhīṣma narrates partly the events he experienced himself, partly portions previously narrated to him by more or less reliable sources, including ṛṣis and spies (e.g., Mbh 5.189.18; 5.193.58), and partly incidents with no named sources at all. Bhīṣma is certainly a personalized and even autobiographical narrator here since he narrates an important story from his life which is also the prediction and interpretation of his death.

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<sup>6</sup> Bhīṣma mentions the two reasons when he decides it is the right time to die for him: *kāraṇadvayam āsthāya nāhaṃ yotsyāmi pāṇḍavaiḥ | avadhyatvāc ca pāṇḍūnāṃ strībhāvāc ca śikhaṇḍīnaḥ ||* ["For two reasons I will not fight against the Pāṇḍavas: for the unslayability of the Pāṇḍavas and for the female nature of Śikhaṇḍin."] (Mbh 6.114.32).

## The story of Ambā

The story of Ambā, the princess of Kāśī, is prominently narrated in the *Ādiparvan* (Mbh 1.96) and in the *Ambopākhyāna* of the *Udyogaparvan*,<sup>7</sup> with events from the *Ādiparvan* narration and the *Ambopākhyāna* partly overlapping. In the *Ādiparvan*, i.e., in the reconstructed text of the Critical Edition, the events concerning Ambā and her sisters' abduction are narrated as a part of the main story and end with Ambā's departure from Hāstinapura, it is the story of the birth of the Vaicitravīryas rather than the story of Ambā. The narrator is the "low-personalized" repeater Vaiśampāyana and the protagonist/narrative agent is Bhīṣma. The role of the focalizer is, rather extraordinarily, split between the composer/arranger Vyāsa (who is the primary, yet absent and hidden, focalizer), the narrator Vaiśampāyana, and the interlocutor Janamejaya.

In the *Ambopākhyāna*, we can distinguish between two parts, with the first one focused on Ambā, and the second one on Śikhaṇḍin. The two parts contain six main narratives:<sup>8</sup> the part focused on Ambā has four, which can be called A1 "Vicitravīrya's Wedding," A2 "Ambā's Quest," A3 "Rāma Jāmadagnya," A4 "Ambā's Metamorphoses," and the part focused on Śikhaṇḍin has two, namely Ś1 "Drupada's Child," and Ś2 "The Yakṣa" (with an embedded narrative Ś2e "Kubera"). The *Ambopākhyāna* is situated near the end of the *Udyogaparvan*, and is narrated by Bhīṣma to Duryodhana. Bhīṣma enumerates the heroes on Yudhiṣṭhira's side and then claims that he will not slay Śikhaṇḍin. Duryodhana asks why and Bhīṣma thus commences his narration. This narration, which foreshadows and effectively enables Bhīṣma's death, is autobiographical and extremely Bhīṣma-centric, unlike the main events, where Bhīṣma is technically a secondary character.

### Narrative A1: "Vicitravīrya's Wedding"

The first narrative, "Vicitravīrya's Wedding" (5.170-171), covers the events between Bhīṣma's decision to find wives for his brother and Ambā's departure from

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<sup>7</sup> There are, however, various smaller mentions about this character and the events throughout the text, e.g., in Mbh 5.49.31-34, 5.145.15-40, 13.44.37-54.

<sup>8</sup> The narratives are distinguished from one another by a combination of textual signs, including the nature of the narrator (focalizer, narrative agent), spatio-temporal criteria, and the possibility of recognizing them as a distinct story with a beginning, middle, and end.

Hāstinapura. At least some of narrated events<sup>9</sup> are known to the listener, Duryodhana, probably from several preceding narrations, and to the reader/interlocutors of the higher levels of narration especially from the neutral narration in the *Ādiparvan*, although there are several distinctions between the two versions. Apart from the change of perspective, there are several smaller differences between the two versions, namely that the fight against Śālva is omitted in the *Ambopākhyāna* (“underreporting”), or the fact that Ambā’s father is said to have agreed to her union with Śālva in the *Ādiparvan*, while in the *Ambopākhyāna*, Ambā claims that her father did not know about it (“misreporting”). This narrative is the only comparable one with Vaiśampāyana’s narration, and as such can be taken as the key to analyzing the other narratives. Since there are at least two instances of unreliability on the axis of facts/events here, it can be supposed that these signs might occur in the rest of Bhīṣma’s narration as well.

The autobiographical summary of previous events is rather short. Bhīṣma is both the narrator and the protagonist here, the events are narrated through Bhīṣma’s point of view, so he can be labeled a personalized narrator/focalizer/narrative agent. First-person personal and possessive pronouns are plentiful in this narrative, as they appear in nearly every śloka. From the very beginning, there is no doubt that it is Bhīṣma’s story and not the story of the birth of the Vaicitravīryas. Bhīṣma emphasizes that Śaṃtanu was his father, mentions his vows and stresses that it was Bhīṣma himself who had anointed his brothers to be kings. Thus, Bhīṣma establishes his position as the actual head and grandfather of the Kaurava clan, a position of great (presupposed) relational authority.<sup>10</sup> The narrative contains multiple dialogues and direct speeches, and there is no striking difference between the utterances of Bhīṣma as the narrator and Bhīṣma as the protagonist.

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the events are mentioned on various occasions. Most importantly, there is a narration in Mbh 5.145 where Bhīṣma talks to Duryodhana and mentions his vows, obtaining wives for Vicitravīrya, and fighting against Rāma Jāmadagnya, and claims that “*api te bahuśaḥ śrutam*” (5.145.22), suggesting that at least the story about the abduction of the princesses of Kāśī was an oft-repeated one amongst the Kauravas. The fight against Rāma Jāmadagnya is also frequently mentioned by Bhīṣma and other characters alike. Taking into account that Ambā is an important character in both of these events, it is safe to suppose that Duryodhana and the Kauravas in general were at least aware of her existence.

<sup>10</sup> It should be however noted, that Bhīṣma’s authority over Duryodhana is virtually non-existent at this point of the story.

## Narrative A2: “Ambā’s Quest”

The second narrative, “Ambā’s Quest” (Mbh 5.172-177), covers the dialogue between Ambā and Śālva, Ambā’s stay in the āśrama, and Rāma Jāmadagnya’s departure to Kurukṣetra. It is much less personalized, because the events described here are not directly witnessed by Bhīṣma, he is not the protagonist, the narration is not autodiegetic but homodiegetic. The story is, nevertheless, extremely Bhīṣma-centric, as he is the main topic of everyone’s conversations and his perspective is obvious. There are many witnesses of the narrated events and the narrative is quite long and consists mostly of dialogues, with only a minimum of narration. The prevalence of dialogues creates an illusion of “direct reporting,” and thus also of reliability of the narration, but because of the case of misreporting in a direct speech in the narrative A1, even the direct speeches can be suspected of unreliability.

A summary of all the previous events is given twice here, by Ambā and by her maternal grandfather, the *rājaraṣi* Hotravāhana, and the narrative is quite repetitive in general. Most of the depicted events are public, but the narrative also contains Ambā’s thoughts without stating any source, which is traditionally a typical sign of an omniscient narrator. The illusion of a third-person non-personalized narration is disrupted at the end of the narrative through personal pronouns during a summary of the opinions of the ṛṣis, which remind the reader/listener who the narrator is and that the narration is, in fact, highly personalized.

## Narrative A3: “Rāma Jāmadagnya”

The third narrative, “Rāma Jāmadagnya” (Mbh 5.178-186[187.10]), is again more personalized and delivered from Bhīṣma’s point of view entirely. This narrative, which is autodiegetic and presents a lot of otherwise unknown (and therefore uncomparable) material, depicts the battle between Rāma Jāmadagnya and Bhīṣma, and contains highly personal parts, such as Bhīṣma’s dream (5.184). Personal pronouns are plentiful and present in nearly every śloka. This narrative, which makes up the longest part of the *Ambopākhyāna*, contains two ślokas narrated by Saṃjaya (5.179.30-31, with a change of the first-person to the third-person narrator)<sup>11</sup> and a surprising amount of triṣṭubh verses, especially in chapter

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<sup>11</sup> The change of narrators here is quite puzzling. It can be read as a simple metaleptic reminder of Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s discourse, or a sign of either an omission of a formerly longer narration by Bhīṣma and its summary by Saṃjaya, or of an explanatory addition of something that have been omitted in Bhīṣma’s narration.

5.182 which consists mostly of *triṣṭubh* (the ratio of *triṣṭubh* to *anuṣṭubh* is 3:1) and often quite poetic and reminiscent of Vedic imagery.

This narrative is by far the most personalized one, and interesting usages of perspective (“seeing”) can be found in it. For instance, Bhīṣma as the narrator does not explicitly say that the eight *brāhmaṇas* who appear to help Bhīṣma as the protagonist are in fact the *Vasus*, since he probably did not know<sup>12</sup> and they did not explicitly introduce themselves, but when they appear again in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* and the *Śāntiparvan*, they are infallibly identified by Saṃjaya and Kṛṣṇa respectively, in Kṛṣṇa’s case again in *triṣṭubh*. Many gods and *ṛṣis* are present in this narrative, not only to witness the battle (and enhance the reliability of the narration), but to take part in it as well.

### Narrative A4: “Ambā’s Metamorphoses”

In the fourth narrative, “Ambā’s Metamorphoses” (Mbh 5.187-188), Ambā’s long-lasting austerities, Gaṅgā’s curse leading to Ambā’s transformation into a crooked rivulet, Śiva’s boon and Ambā’s self-immolation are depicted. Bhīṣma is not the protagonist here, he is the narrator, the focalizer, and also the central figure. Since Bhīṣma-the-protagonist did not witness Ambā’s deeds, Bhīṣma-the-narrator explains that he put spies on her in order to know her every move and took council with Nārada and Vyāsa, thus enhancing his reliability as the narrator. It is worth noticing that the events which are depicted in greater detail were witnessed either by Bhīṣma’s mother Gaṅgā, or by numerous *ṛṣis* in Vatsabhūmi. Other events, especially the summaries of the austerities that she underwent for years, are narrated quite briefly and mostly using *perfects* or *periphrastic perfects* instead the more prevalent *imperfects* found in the rest of the narrative. The narrative also contains personal comments about how Ambā’s actions affect Bhīṣma as a then-protagonist (5.187.14) and will affect him as a now-narrator/character. An important fact from the narrated events is that Śiva promises Ambā that she will remember everything in her new birth (5.188.5) a

<sup>12</sup> This fact really shows Bhīṣma’s subjectivity and his high level of personalization. The fact that he did not identify the *Vasus* could be seen as an instance of misreading – i.e., failing to completely grasp a situation. It is a very strong textual signal which shows the reader that Bhīṣma is not endowed with any supernatural boon of divine vision here and that his claims are open to doubt. Also, it is quite possible that in his childhood, Bhīṣma heard the second account of his previous birth, in which he is only identified with one of the *Vasus*, *Dyaus*, because this is the account narrated by his mother Gaṅgā to his father Śaṃtanu. The appearance of the eight *brāhmaṇas* who claim that he is their own body would be naturally quite confusing for him as a character.

fact that is nowhere to be confirmed and might be therefore seen as an instance of misregarding, i.e., falsely evaluating the events.

### Narrative Ś1: “Drupada’s Child”

After Ambā’s death, the scene changes dramatically. The change is apparent from the very first verse, when Duryodhana asks a question for the first time since the beginning of the *Ambopākhyāna*. The fifth narrative, “Drupada’s Child” (Mbh 5.189-192.16), covers Drupada’s childlessness, the birth of his daughter who is promised to become a man eventually, Śikhaṇḍinī’s wedding, and the looming war against her father-in-law. Bhīṣma is not even a central figure here, he is mentioned only when Drupada claims to need a son in order to take his revenge on Bhīṣma.<sup>13</sup> Bhīṣma’s knowledge of the narrated events, which are supposed to be mostly private or even secret, seems to be very detailed. His sources here are spies and Nārada (5.189.10) and he claims that he was the only one, apart from Drupada himself, who knew the truth (5.189.15; 5.189.18).

### Narrative Ś2: “The Yakṣa”

The sixth and the last narrative, “The Yakṣa” (Mbh 5.192.17-193), has a different structure and style than the previous ones. The narrator does not name any of his sources and freely introduces inner monologues, thoughts (e.g., 5.192.17-18), and stories which resemble myths and ancient tales more than his autobiography. Only by the end of the narrative, almost as an afterthought, Bhīṣma mentions spies (5.193.58). The spies might have overheard Śikhaṇḍinī’s own account of the events told to his father Drupada (5.193.9), and also the speeches of various envoys. The events from the palace (multiple witnesses) are narrated in great detail, and the forest events (relatively few witnesses) are rendered much more briefly. The narrative contains an embedded narrative about Kubera’s visit to the *yakṣa* Sthūṇākaraṇa (Narrative Ś2e: “Kubera”). The actual sex-change is narrated in only two śloka, the reason for which – taking into account the structure of the previous narratives – might be the absence of witnesses.

Bhīṣma is a narrator/focalizer here, but his reliability is not established as firmly as in previous narratives: there are no venerable witnesses such as Nārada

<sup>13</sup> It is not difficult to observe the similarity between this and Drupada’s need for a son in the *Ādiparvan* when he wants to take revenge on Droṇa (Mbh 1.155). Even though the narration of the *Ambopākhyāna* comes later in the plot, the events seem to have preceded those narrated in the *Ādiparvan*. Both of the narrations are personalized, one was narrated by a *brāhmaṇa*, and the second one by Bhīṣma.

or Vyāsa, and for most of the accounts there are no sources at all. There are personal comments at the beginning of the chapter 193 and also at the end of it. The end of the *Ambopākhyāna* is very similar to its beginning: it contains a wider Kaurava context – Śikhaṇḍin is mentioned to have studied under Droṇa with the Kauravas (“with you”), the Pāṇḍavas, and his brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna (Mbh 5.193.56-57), and Bhīṣma mentions his vow of not killing a woman (5.193.62-63). An interesting point is also that in his last *śloka*, Bhīṣma speaks in third person about himself, and states, *yadi bhīṣmaḥ striyaṃ hanyād dhanyād ātmānam apy uta* || [“If Bhīṣma kills a woman, he will indeed kill himself.”] (5.193.65). Again, this change is rather peculiar but can be interpreted through the importance of the name “Bhīṣma,” a name that the character acquired after his vow of celibacy. Were Bhīṣma to kill a woman, he would cease to be Bhīṣma. In the last *śloka* of the narrative, the narration returns to Saṃjaya.

## Summary

To summarize, there are two parts, six narratives, and three different narrative approaches in the *Ambopākhyāna*. There are:

(1) Narratives in which Bhīṣma is the narrator, the focalizer, and the protagonist, with a marked first-person narration (i.e., A1 “Vicitravīrya’s Wedding” and A3 “Rāma Jāmadagnya”). These narratives are autodiegetic and highly subjective, Bhīṣma is a personalized narrator/focalizer/narrative agent. Both autodiegetic narratives can be deemed a heroic adventure, as they mostly deal with battles. They cover less time and the time of the narrated events is close to the time of the narration, the prevalent past tense used is the *imperfect*.

(2) Narratives where Bhīṣma is the narrator, the focalizer, and the central figure rather than the protagonist, with less marked first-person narration turning to third-person narration (i.e., A2 “Ambā’s Quest” and A4 “Ambā’s Metamorphoses”). Bhīṣma is a narrator/focalizer with a high degree of reliability based on his reliable sources, on the public character of most of the narrated events, and on the fact that these narratives belong to the same part as the autodiegetic

ones. A2 is a repetitive narrative, and A4 is a summarizing one. Typically, *perfects* are mostly used for summarizing the events, and *imperfects* for other narration.<sup>14</sup>

(3) Narratives where Bhīṣma is the narrator only and even his importance as a central figure of the narration is significantly suppressed (i.e., Ś1 “Drupada’s Child” and Ś2 “The Yakṣa”). Bhīṣma is a narrator/focalizer with a disputable degree of reliability due to the private character of some of the narrated events and general lack of named sources. The part focused on Śikhaṇḍin has a different style. It is significantly less pompous and heroic, and is much more playful and humorous, even ironic at times, and could be read as a separate unit. In these two narratives, *perfects* are the prevalent past tense, and there is a surprising amount of *aorists* in the embedded narrative Ś2e: “Kubera” which make this narrative different both in terms of grammar and in terms of narrative style and reliability.

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<sup>14</sup> Even though it is often deemed that in the epic Sanskrit, the past tenses (i.e., imperfect, perfect, and aorist) are completely interchangeable (Whitney 2003: 296, §821, Oberlies 2003: 153–154), a distinction between them can be easily observed in the *Ambopākhyāna*. In his *Sanskrit Grammar*, Whitney (2003: 295–296, §821) writes that “[a]ccording to Hindu grammarians, the perfect is used in the narration of facts not witnessed by the narrator” but he immediately continues with a claim that “there is no evidence of its being either exclusively or distinctively so employed at any period.” Similarly, Speijer (1886: 247, §330) summarizes Pāṇini’s teachings and claims that “the perfect is restricted to such facts as have not been witnessed by the speaker, and the practice of good authors is generally in accordance with this statement.” In the *Ambopākhyāna*, the perfects are used mostly for summaries and/or events not directly witnessed by the narrator (*parokṣa*), i.e., in accordance with the original meaning of the tense. Imperfects are used for normal narration and/or for events directly witnessed by the narrator/protagonist (*aparokṣa*), and aorists are mostly used in direct speeches of the yakṣas visiting Sthūṇākarna when they discuss the sex change which is, for them, a matter of recent past with consequences in the present. As noted by Speijer (1886: 253, §334) when writing about the usage of aorist in the sense of the actual past, “[t]he most instructive passages are such, as mention the same fact twice, first when told by the author, afterwards when put into the mouth of one of the actors. Then we invariably find the imperfect or the perfect in the historical account, the aorist in the oratio directa.” This rather careful usage of past tenses by Bhīṣma/the author(s) of the episode shows that the different types of narration and levels of possible (un)reliability can also be discerned with the help of the grammatical features: when perfects are used, different process of perceiving the information was employed than when imperfects are. Using the combination of linguistic and narratological analyses can yield fruitful results in the *Mahābhārata* studies, as it is clear that its structure and style are often very elaborate.

## Conclusion: Bhīṣma as a personalized and (un)reliable narrator

There are several situational indicators in the *Ambopākhyāna*, including first- and second-person pronouns, the use of past, present and future tenses (what happened then, what is happening now and what is going to happen later), as well as personalized and subjective style of narration. The usage of personal pronouns can be found in all the narratives, predominantly in the autodiegetic A1 and A3, and occasionally in the others, chiefly at the beginning and the end of them. The autobiographical nature of the *Ambopākhyāna* is very prominent in the context of the *Udyogaparvan*; for instance, there is a particularly frequent usage of “*tato 'ham*” [then I]: of the 30 occurrences in the *Udyogaparvan*, 27 belong to Bhīṣma. The last narrative, which is the least personalized one and also the least marked with personal pronouns, abounds with other signs of narration (e.g., the frequent use of “*bhīṣma uvāca*,” which is a metanarrative sign, i.e., a sign of a completely different type).

Bhīṣma’s perspective can be seen everywhere: as a narrator, he omits certain events (his fight against Śālva, i.e., “underreporting”), he enhances others (his battle with Rāma Jāmadagnya), and he expresses his personal opinions on Śālva and Drupada (both are depicted as cowards). Bhīṣma as the narrator also often gives commentaries about himself as the protagonist, and even shares his emotions. Bhīṣma’s self-presentation and subjective evaluation of other characters of the storyworld do not contradict with the rest of the text and are very much in line with Bhīṣma’s perspective, as presented at other points of the text.

Bhīṣma’s knowledge is mostly limited to his own memories, news from Nārada, Vyāsa, other ṛṣis – the very same sources he cites in the *Viśvopākhyāna*, the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Anuśāsanaparvan* – and probably his mother, the goddess Gaṅgā, and reports from his spies trailing Ambā and later Drupada’s family. He is occasionally able to render someone’s thoughts, but these are implied to be either verbalized (Ambā’s departure from Śālva’s capital), or later narrated to someone else (Śikhaṇḍin’s thoughts in the forest).

It has been established that Bhīṣma is a very highly personalized narrator in the *Ambopākhyāna*. As Margolin has pointed out, “[p]ersonalized narrators, and *only* personalized ones, may on occasion be deemed by the reader as unreliable” (Margolin 2009: 359). Concerning the fictional facts and events of the narrated domain, there are only a few things that can be proved wrong (misreported) by other parts of the text because of the limited comparability to the “objective” narration, but thanks to the instances of misreporting and underreporting in the only comparable narrative, A1, other events and facts can be deemed open

to doubt as well. Also, there are plenty of information that cannot be confirmed. The most obvious is the fact that Śikhaṇḍin does not seem to remember his former life and almost nobody except Bhīṣma comments on Śikhaṇḍin having been born as a woman, even though Bhīṣma mentions that it is a fact known to them, e.g., when talking to Yudhiṣṭhira (Mbh 6.103.75-76). Yudhiṣṭhira does not confirm the fact, but he does not refute it either.

To conclude, Bhīṣma is certainly a personalized and highly subjective narrator in the *Ambopākhyāna*, and pays a lot of attention to establishing the reliability of his narration through his sources and reliable witnesses in the first part, “Ambā,” but not so much in the second one, “Śikhaṇḍin.” Bhīṣma as the narrator definitely wishes to be seen as reliable and the narrative to be deemed a factual narrative, but there are signs of unreliability in the parts of the episode which are comparable to the “neutral” or “objective” narration of Vaiśampāyana. Taking into account the presentation of several kinds of sources (ṛṣis, spies, Gaṅgā), different past tenses used for summaries and general narration, it seems that the author of the *Ambopākhyāna* deliberately used Bhīṣma’s perspective not only on the surface level, but in the very structure of the *upākhyāna*, that the changes in narratorial involvement and knowledge are intentional there to invite the reader/listener to question the reliability of the narration without actually providing any satisfying answer to it. Different accounts of a single event in the *Mahābhārata* should therefore not be discarded outright as a logical inconsistency of the text, but analyzed with regard to the categories of narrator, focalizer, and narrative agent – i.e., the roles of saying, seeing, and doing, and the possible unreliability of any personalized narrator should be evaluated. After all, Bhīṣma himself advised to Yudhiṣṭhira that sometimes it is better to lie than to tell the truth: *bhabet satyaṃ na vaktavyaṃ vaktavyaṃ anṛtaṃ bhavet | yatrānṛtaṃ bhabet satyaṃ satyaṃ vāpy anṛtaṃ bhavet ||* [“It can be that one should not say the truth and should say the lie when the lie shall become the truth and the truth shall become the lie.”] (Mbh 12.110.5).

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