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**A SELECTION OF THE PAPERS PRESENTED AT
THE MEETING OF THE ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA
DI STUDI SANSCRITI**

(Rome Sapienza 26th-28th October 2017)

edited by

Raffaele Torella, Marco Franceschini, Tiziana Pontillo,
Cinzia Pieruccini, Antonio Rigopoulos,
Francesco Sferra

Editorial

The *Associazione Italiana di Studi Sanscriti* (AISS) was established in the mid-1970s, founded by Oscar Botto, as the national counterpart of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies (IASS) founded in Paris in 1973. The first conference of the AISS was held in Turin on October 17, 1980, and from then onwards its meetings have been held fairly regularly every two years, each time at a different University where Sanskrit and South Asian studies are taught. The AISS has painstakingly published the proceedings of the conferences as well as summaries of the activities and research projects carried on in the main Italian Universities, thus documenting the developments of Sanskrit and South Asian studies in the last forty years. Recently, an official website of the AISS has been created which offers information on the activities of the *Associazione* and the principal Indological events taking place in Italy as well as abroad:

<http://www.associazioneitalianadistudisanscriti.org>.

The most recent conference of the AISS was held at the University of Rome Sapienza on October 26th-28th, and saw the participation of numerous Italian scholars working at Italian and foreign Universities, along with the participation of a few invited scholars from the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. The first day and part of the second were devoted to the presentation and brief discussion of thirteen papers freely investigating a wide variety of Indological topics. In the final seminar, titled “India and its encounter with the other” fourteen papers were presented and discussed. The articles comprised in this volume were selected by the AISS Board: R. Torella (President), M. Franceschini, T. Pontillo, C. Pieruccini, A. Rigopoulos, F. Sferra, and submitted to the standard process of double-blind peer review.

Raffaele Torella

PAOLA PISANO

VĪRYAŚULKĀḤ KANYĀḤ:
ASPECTS OF WOMEN'S DEPENDENCE
IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* AND IN OLD GREEK SOURCES

1. Premise*

1.1. As is well known, the *Manusmṛti* and the *Mahābhārata* mostly exhibit a strict attitude towards women's dependence. According to Manu's statement,

pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane |
rakṣanti sthavire putrā na strī svātantryam arhati ||
(MDhŚ 9.3)

“Her father guards her in her childhood; her husband guards her in her youth and her sons guard her in her old age; a woman does not deserve independence”.

This belief corresponds to the Brahmanical point of view and is often found in other ancient Indo-European societies, such as the Iranian and Greek ones.

Men have to prevent women from acting on their own initiative (MDhŚ 9.2: *asvatantrāḥ striyaḥ kāryāḥ*; MBh 1.161.16: *na svatantrā [...] yoṣitaḥ*). Women are given (the

* I should like to express my deep gratitude to the friends who have supported me: Daniela Boi, Antonio Carlini, Livia Fasola, Bonaria Lai, Donatella Lissia, Edelweis Sacconi. Special thanks to Sally Davies for revising the English of this paper and to Tiziana Pontillo for her suggestions and encouragement and for the inspiring conversations we have had about my work. Of course, the responsibility for any mistakes lies solely with me.

verb is *dā*) by the father to the husband when they are of child-bearing age (MDhŚ 9.4: *kāle 'dātā pitā yācyaḥ*).

However, opposite evidence does exist, especially referring to an earlier time, as testified by the character of Urvaśī who in RV X.95 is depicted as ‘a resolute and hard-hearted female anxious to return to her carefree life with her fellow Apsarases and happy enough to abandon her child in order to get free’, and also by what Pāṇḍu has to say in MBh 1.113 about the boundless freedom of women in the olden days.

Moreover, in the *Mahābhārata* (e.g. in MBh 1.67.26; 5.173.3-5), referring to the same period, one also comes across elements of an epoch when doubts on women’s dignity and autonomy were being raised.¹ This probably came about within the awkward attempt by the Brahmanical reformers to regulate and/or discredit the different matrimonial practices which were at odds with their orthodoxy, but deep-rooted in the *kṣatriya* milieu, such as the *svayaṃvara* and the *gāndharva vivāha*.

1.2. Referring mostly to these last institutions, my paper focuses on some contradictory instances of the ancient Indian concept of women attempting to detect and explain them by analysing comparable Greek texts. In this regard, I should like to begin by focusing on the topic of *vīryaśulkaḥ kanyāḥ*, i.e. of girls whose *śulka*² in the Sanskrit epic is an act of bravery.

I shall mainly consider how the marriages of Sītā (R 1.65-68; R 2.110.36-52), Draupadī (MBh 1.174-85), and of Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā, the princesses of the Kāśis (MBh 5.170-73) were arranged.

¹ Cf. A. Hildebeitel, *Dharma*, Honolulu 2010, pp. 89-108.

² *śulka*, the Sanskrit word for bride-price, does not originally involve a marriage by purchase, but rather a wedding gift that elicits a complementary counter-gift. A *śulka* may be wealth, service, even sacrifice, as in the case of Bhīṣma who in MBh 1.97.13-14 uses the word *śulka* to indicate his own renouncement regarding offspring: *tvam apatyam prati ca me pratijñāṃ vettha vai parām || jānāsi ca yathāvṛttaṃ śulkaheṭo tvad antare* |, “Yet you know the sovereign vow I have sworn concerning offspring, and you know what befell when your bride price was to be paid” (transl. van Buitenen).

The Homeric wedding gifts (ἔδνα) given to the bride’s father by the future son-in-law seem to be equivalent to *śulka*. See M. I. Finley, “Marriage, Sale and Gift in the Homeric World”, *Revue Internationale des Droits de l’Antiquité*, iii, vol.2.1955, pp. 167-94: pp.178ff.

2. Sītā as vīryaśulkā kanyā

2.1. Sītā was raised by King Janaka of the Videhas as his favourite daughter. Her name means furrow, since she sprang up behind his plough as he was tilling the earth. Although every ruler on earth desired her hand, Janaka was unwilling to give the girl in marriage without previously testing each suitor's strength, since he was convinced that this selfsame strength should be her only bride-price because of her extraordinary origins:

*bhūtalād utthitā sā tu vyavardhata mamātmajā |
vīryaśulketi me kanyā sthāpīteyam ayonijā ||* (R 1.65.15)³
“Sprung from the earth, she has been raised as my daughter, and since she was not born from the womb, my daughter has been set apart as one for whom the only bride price is great strength” (transl. Goldman).

When Sītā's wooers meet in Mithilā, Janaka asks them to string Śiva's bow which was extremely heavy and hard to pull. The kings test themselves with little success, since they were unable to hold the bow, let alone lift it.

2.2 Later on, young Rāma, coming from Ayodhyā, asks and is allowed to see the bow: he succeeds in holding it and manages to draw it without any difficulty, even breaking it. (R 1.66.17). Janaka rejoices at having requested this trial of worth (*vīryaśulka*), since this has given him the chance to find his ideal son-in-law. Rāma is not only remarkably strong, but also Daśaratha's son and by marrying him Sītā will bring prestige to the Janaka lineage.⁴

³ Cf. R 1.65.17; 1.66.23; 1.66.25; 1.67.7; 1.70.20-22. Janaka continuously underlines in the Bālakāṇḍa that a *vīryaśulkā kanyā* is an asset of extraordinary value, which must not be wasted.

⁴ R 1.66.22-23: *janakānām kule kīrtim āhariṣyati me sutā | sītā bhartāram āsādyā rāmaṃ daśarathātmajam || mama satyā pratijñā ca vīryaśulketi kauśika | sītā prāṇair bahumatā deyā rāmāya me sutā ||*, “With Rāma, Daśaratha's son, for her husband, my daughter Sītā will bring glory to the House of the Janakas. And so, Kauśika, my vow that

2.3. The marriage agreement is drawn up between the two fathers-in-law (R 1.68.12-14). Moreover, Sītā's younger sister Ūrmilā, (R 1.70.20-23; R 2.51) and two female cousins (R 1.71.5-6) are also bestowed on Daśaratha's three other sons. This highlights the importance of the wedding alliance between royal families and the character of marriage as an exchange relationship.⁵ In particular, Sītā is an asset to be wisely invested, in order to bring benefits to her father and his clan, but she is not considered as being an independent person. Even when she mentions her *svayaṃvara*⁶ in the Ayodhyākāṇḍa, she stresses her dutiful acceptance of her father's will⁷ without referring to any personal choice:

*evaṃ dattāsmi rāmāya tadā tasmin svayaṃvare |
anuraktā ca dharmeṇa patiṃ vīryavatāṃ varam ||*
(R 2.110.52)

“And that is how I was bestowed on Rāma, there at the self-choice ceremony, and as is right I love my husband, the mightiest of men” (transl. Pollock).

3. Evidence of *vīryaśulka* in the Greek tradition

In the oldest Greek tradition there are analogous instances of *vīryaśulka*⁸ with similar implications for the role of the brides

great strength should be her only bride-price has been proved true. For my daughter Sītā, as dear to me as life itself, shall be given in marriage to Rāma” (transl. Goldman).

⁵ Cf. N. K. Sidhanta, *The Heroic Age of India, A Comparative Study*, New Delhi 1975, p. 147; p. 154; S. W. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, New York and Oxford 1996, pp. 207ff.

⁶ In the Ayodhyākāṇḍa Sītā mentions her *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* three times (R 2. 110. 23, 37, 52). On the contrary, in the Bālakāṇḍa Janaka does not say whether the trial takes place during a *svayaṃvara*; nor is it stated whether Sītā is present during the test and she also plays no part in her father's actions.

⁷ At the end of the Bālakāṇḍa (R 1.76.15) it is also said that Sītā was naturally dear to Rāma, for she was the wife his father gave him:

⁸ This is not surprising in an ancient society. Several Greek and other Indo-European parallels to the *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* disprove the hypothesis of a non-Aryan origin of the *svayaṃvara*. Cf. H-P. Schmidt, *Some women's rites and rights in the Veda*, Poona 1987, pp. 94ff.; R. Barlow, “The Will to Marry: Did Indo-European Brides Choose Their Husbands?”,

who are generally the daughters of kings and chieftains. Some examples deserve due consideration.

3.1. Othruoneus from Kabesos,⁹ in asking for Kassandre's hand, offers no gifts (ἔδνα) to her father, but promises him that he will perform an extraordinary deed (μέγα ἔργον), *i.e.* *vīrya*, withdrawing the Achaean army from Troy. Old Priam agrees to give him his most beautiful daughter.

3.2. The soothsayer Melampous was the only one of her many suitors who was able to win for his own brother (*Od.* 15.237) the hand of Pero, Neleus' daughter. By bringing back Iphikles' cattle, he managed to accomplish an extremely difficult task, allowing him to recover substantial wealth for Pero's father.¹⁰

3.3. Alexidamos¹¹ won his bride in a foot race¹² arranged by Antaios, a Libyan king, among his daughter's suitors. He involved a great number of his noblest kinsmen and just as many foreigners so that he could accomplish (φύτεύω "to plant" v.111) the most glorious marriage for his famous fair-haired daughter. She dressed up in her finest attire and sat at the finish line. As the grand prize, whosoever first leapt forward and touched her dress could take her away with him. Alexidamos won the race, took the cherished maiden by the hand and then led her through the throng of Nomad horsemen.

3.4. A 'historical' marriage contest is described by Herodotus (6.126-31). Around 570 BCE, Kleisthenes, the despot of Sicyon (Peloponnesus), arranged a complex

in *Der antike Mensch im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ritual und Magie*, hg. v. C. Zinko-M. Zinko, Graz 2015, pp.1-18: p.13.

⁹ A place in the Hellespontine area. Cf. *Il.*13.363-69.

¹⁰ *Od.*11.287-297; 15.226-42. Cf. Arjuna's regaining of cattle at Virāṭa's court (MBh 4.33-67).

¹¹ Pindar (*Pyth.*9.103-125) reestablishes the ancient glory of Alexidamos, an ancestor of Telesikrates, the victor in the Pythian games of 474 BCE.

¹² According to Pausanias (3.12.1), Penelope's father promised her to the victor in the race won by Odysseus.

competition since he wanted to marry his daughter Agariste to the best man he could find in Hellas. He publicly invited all the Greek citizens who deemed themselves worthy of becoming his kinsman, to come to Sicyon within an appointed date. He kept the suitors with him for a year, testing their capabilities not only in running and wrestling, but also their skills in music and conversation, observing them during common meals, in order to assess their manly worth (ἀνδραγαθίη).¹³ When the appointed day came for the celebration of the marriage feast, Kleisthenes announced that he had chosen the Athenian Megacles.¹⁴ Albeit in a different context,¹⁵ many significant features, such as the aims of the competition, the public summoning of the suitors, the detailed list of the contenders, the hospitality offered by the despot, some of the requested trials and also the elimination of a suitor,¹⁶ are very reminiscent of an Indo-Aryan *vīryaśulka*.¹⁷ The main similarity specifically concerns the condition of women. Along with Sītā, Agariste, whose marriage bolsters the standing and the political interests of her father and husband's family, can be considered a *vīryaśulkā kanyā*: she is not present while her marriage feast is being held (Hdt.6.129.1); she is only mentioned after her betrothal to the man her father has chosen and, as a matter of fact, we never actually see her (Hdt.6.130.2).

¹³ Hdt.6.128.1. In so doing, Kleisthenes combines the Greek heroic tradition with his own political interests. See S. West in A. Heubeck, S. West, and J.B. Hainsworth, *Omero, Odissea, Introduzione, Testo e Commento*, Milano 1981, p. LXXIX n.1.

¹⁴ Megacles, the great-grandfather of Pericles, belonged to the family of the Alcmeonidae. Herodotus, (6.131) points out that this was how the fame of this family spread abroad in Hellas.

¹⁵ The abilities of the suitors are not evaluated in a formal competition. Moreover, Kleisthenes does not want to offend the pride of any excluded suitors, so he rewards them by giving them a talent as compensation.

¹⁶ The Athenian Hippocleides was disqualified because of his bad behaviour in performing an indecent dance (Hdt.6.128.2-129).

¹⁷ This is not a *svayamvara* since Agariste is not even given a nominal right to choose her own husband.

4. Draupadī's marriage contest

4.1. On the contrary, in *Mahābhārata* 1.176-179, Draupadī, the daughter of Drupada, the mighty king of the Pāñcālas, seems to hold a prominent position in her marriage contest, the most spectacular *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* of the Sanskrit epic. She shows herself to the suitors descending into the arena, freshly bathed, splendidly attired and adorned with all manner of ornaments.¹⁸

After various wooers have failed to win her hand, Arjuna, Pāṇḍu's son and a great warrior, tries and succeeds.

Draupadī announces the result by giving him the winner's garland and following him.¹⁹

4.2. Even though this behaviour is formally presented as Draupadī's self-choice, she is explicitly instructed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna to observe the ritual:²⁰

ete cānye ca bahavo nānājanapadeśvarāḥ |
tvadartham āgatā bhadre kṣatriyāḥ prathitā bhuvi ||
ete vetsyanti vikrāntās tvadarmaṃ lakṣyam uttamam |
vidhyeta ya imaṃ lakṣyaṃ varayethāḥ śubhe 'dya tam ||
 (MBh 1.177.21-22)

“These and many other princes of many country-sides, all these barons renowned on earth have come to sue you, my dear. These brave men shall shoot at the great target to win you. The one who hits it, he is the one you should choose today, beautiful princess” (transl. van Buitenen slightly modified).

¹⁸ MBh 1.176.29-30. S. W. Jamison (“Penelope and the Pigs, Indic Perspectives on the Odyssey”, *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 18, No 2/Oct., 1999, pp. 227-272: pp. 249ff.) highlights the ritual character of the scene.

¹⁹ MBh 1.179.22-23. The custom of placing a garland on the man who is chosen in a *svayaṃvara* ceremony is common to many Indo-European societies. Cf. M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 2007, pp. 434ff.

²⁰ Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Drupada's son, officially explains the details of the trial to her suitors. As well as Sītā and the other Greek maidens mentioned above, Draupadī's father also fixes a bride price for her: in MBh 1.185.23 she is explicitly said to be *pradiṣṭaśulkā drupadena rājñā*.

Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna probably wants to prevent his sister from acting on her own initiative and going against Drupada's wishes. In actual fact, Draupadī had previously rejected Karna, who first performed the test successfully, because he was thought to be the son of a charioteer.²¹

4.3. As a matter of fact, Drupada had always secretly hoped that the hero Arjuna would marry his daughter since king Pāṇḍu was his great friend.²² This specific aim led him to organize a contest based on strength and skill, which could only be won by Arjuna:²³

*yajñasenasya kāmas tu pāṇḍavāya kirīṭine |
kṛṣṇāṃ dadyām iti sadā na caitad vivṛṇoti saḥ ||
so 'nveṣamāṇaḥ kaunteyān pāñcālyo janamejaya |
dr̥ḍhaṃ dhanur anāyamyam kārayām āsa bhārata ||
yantram vaihāyasaṃ cāpi kārayām āsa kṛtrimam |
tena yantraṇa sahitaṃ rājā lakṣyam ca kāñcanam ||*
(MBh 1.176.8-10)

“It had always been Yajñasena's wish to give Kṛṣṇā to the diademed Arjuna, but he did not divulge it. Since he hoped to search out the Pāṇḍavas, the Pāñcālya had a very hard bow made, well-nigh impossible to bend, O Janamejaya Bhārata. He had a contraption built in the sky, and onto the contraption he had a golden target fixed” (transl. van Buitenen).

In this way, the suitors who were eliminated only had their own weaknesses to blame.

²¹ Cf. MBh 1.178.17 footnote [1827*3]: *nāhaṃ varayāmi sūtam*, “I will not choose a charioteer”. Drupada agreed with her daughter's judgement and arranged for the contest to be repeated. This passage is omitted in the Crit. Ed., but seems to be well supported in the MS tradition. See Jamison, “Penelope”, p. 246 n. 48.

²² MBh 1.185.18-19. On Drupada and Pāṇḍavas' wedding politics cf. Sidhanta, *The Heroic Age*, pp. 156; 187f. Drupada's army might have backed the Pāṇḍavas' push to reclaim the throne, which happened to coincide with Drupada's own vengeful plot against Droṇa. See F. W. Alonso, *The Mahābhārata and Greek Mythology*, Delhi 2014, p. 312.

²³ See G. Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssee: Le fantastique et le sacré*, Paris 1954, p. 16.

5. A Greek *vīryaśulka* woman: Penelope

As many scholars have observed, the story of the archery contest to choose Draupadī's bridegroom finds its parallel in the competition for Penelope's hand depicted at the end of the *Odyssey*. The details often coincide in a striking manner and both also display a very similar narrative framework.²⁴ In particular, Odysseus' wife, the queen whose husband's fate is unknown, proposes herself, *i.e.* the realm of Ithaca, as the prize for the contest (ἄεθλον) and asks her suitors to demonstrate their strength and skills.²⁵ Significantly, Penelope comes to this important decision by herself.²⁶ She always plans and acts on her own initiative; she herself takes the bow and the quiver to the room where the competition is to be held (*Od.* 21.56-79), and she is also apparently the one to hand the axes to Eumaeus the swineherd.²⁷ Even though Telemachus, her son, having come of age is considered as her guardian,²⁸ he only later officially announces her proposal to the wooers (*Od.* 21.103ff.). Odysseus himself, who has returned to Ithaca disguised as a beggar has yet to reveal himself to his wife. He is in favour of Penelope's plan (*Od.* 19.582ff.), but not the one who suggested it. Penelope is free to choose a new husband,²⁹ but does not really want to find one: she is only trying to postpone this happening (*Od.* 2.87-106) and has thus organized a test that she thinks only her

²⁴ See N. Allen, "Pénélope et Draupadī: la validité de la comparaison", in *La Mythology et l'Odyssee. Hommage à Gabriel Germain, Actes du colloque international de Grenoble 20-22 mai 1999*, Genève 2002, pp. 305-12; Alonso, *The Mahābhārata*, pp. 319ff. The motif of the archery contest is supposed to belong to Bronze Age Egypt. See M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon*, Oxford 1997, p. 432.

²⁵ The trial involves the stringing of the king's bow (*Od.* 21.56) which Odysseus had left for safekeeping, and the shooting of an arrow through the rings of twelve aligned axes (*Od.* 19.572ff.; 21.73ff.).

²⁶ According to a Homeric idea, men's decisions are motivated by an impulse from a god. See B. Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, Göttingen 1975, Vierte neubearbeitete Auflage, pp. 35ff.

²⁷ *Od.* 21.80-82. See V. Di Benedetto, *Omero: Odissea*, Milano 2010, p. 1089.

²⁸ In actual fact, there is some uncertainty in the *Odyssey* about who has control over Penelope.

²⁹ *Od.* 4.770f.; 18.285-9; 19.524-9; 20.341f.

husband can win.³⁰ From an Indo-Aryan perspective, she has arranged a *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara*, a fixed one just like Drupada. But Penelope's specificity is that she is a woman who has assumed the duties of a father or an elder son. She is both giver and given, both subject and object: she is a *vīryaśulka* woman whose bride-price has been fixed and, at the same time, she is the one who cleverly establishes her own price.

6. *vīryaśulka* and *gāndharva vivāha*: the choice of Ambā

6.1. According to MBh 5.170-173, the *svayaṃvara* arranged by the king of the Kāśis for his daughters Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā, is a *svayaṃvara* of the *vīryaśulka* type that Bhīṣma turns into an abduction. Bhīṣma, whose aim is to find a wife for his brother Vicitravīrya, arrives in the city of Benares during the ceremony. He sees the assembled kings, as well as the three adorned maidens, and knows that their bride price is a manly deed, even though the exact nature of the contest is never stated.³¹ Lifting the girls onto his chariot, Bhīṣma challenges the kings, compelling them to fight against him and defeating them. According to the values of the *ṛṣatriya* tradition, he regards his fighting and his victory over the suitors as a real act of bravery

³⁰ Cf. Germain, *Genèse*, p. 16; Alonso, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 325.

³¹ MBh 5.170.13: *vīryaśulkās ca tā jñātvā samāropya ratham tadā | avocaṃ pārthivān sarvān ahaṃ tatra samāgatān | bhīṣmaḥ śāntanavaḥ kanyā haratīti punaḥ punaḥ ||*, "Knowing that their bride price was an act of bravery, I lifted them on to my chariot and told all the kings gathered there: 'Bhīṣma, son of Śāntanu, is taking these girls!'" (transl. van Buitenen).

The story of MBh 1.96 is quite different: the three princesses have to choose their bridegrooms from a host of assembled suitors without a formally set contest. Moreover, Bhīṣma, who abducts the maidens while their *svayaṃvara* is taking place, justifies himself by referring to a legitimate procedure: the *rākṣasa* type is the best form of marriage and the most customary one for warriors. M.R. Yardi, *The Mahābhārata: Its Genesis and Growth. A Statistical Study*, Poona 1986, p.157, considers MBh 1.96 as belonging to the so-called Sauti layer, which is more recent than MBh 5.170-173 classified as a part of the Suta layer.

(*vīrya*).³² As a consequence, the maidens are now his by right. On his return to Hāstinapura, he says:

*imāḥ kāśipateḥ kanyā mayā nirjitya pārthivān |
vicitravīryasya kṛte vīryaśulkā upārjitāḥ ||*
(MBh 5.171.2)

“I have won these daughters of the Kāśi king for Vicitravīrya at the bride price of bravery by defeating the kings” (transl. van Buitenen).

6.2. Surprisingly, while Bhīṣma is preparing for his brother's wedding, Ambā, the eldest princess, asks him to release her from the marriage abduction in accordance with the Law, since she had already chosen Śālva, the king of Saubha, as her bridegroom: she had fallen in love with him and, unbeknown to her father, he too had chosen her secretly.³³ Bhīṣma reveals this fact to Satyavatī and to the councillors, Brahmins and priests and then allows Ambā to leave.³⁴ She goes up to Śālva but he rejects her because she had previously belonged to another man and also because he was afraid of Bhīṣma (MBh 5.172.22). Ambā's reaction to her beloved's refusal is not just an emotional one. She is aware of her condition and refuses to be a passive victim.³⁵ As she leaves Śālva, she utters a monologue expressing her thoughts (*cintayām āsa*): she regrets the fact that she had not jumped off Bhīṣma's chariot at the right moment to

³² As Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife*, p. 225, points out, “in this way the fighting was brought within the orthodox system of gift and counter-gift and the maidens' abduction was made equivalent to other types of marriages (e.g. Ārṣa and Āsura) where such gifts change hands.”

³³ Theoretically, the *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara* does not seem compatible with Ambā making a personal choice: it is not clear how she would have managed if the king of Śālva had not won the competition. In actual fact, Ambā is opposed to the *vīryaśulka* and to her father.

³⁴ Interestingly, in MBh 1.96.47-50 Ambā, who speaks for herself at the assembly of the Brahmins, is presented as a virtuous maiden (*satī*), who had chosen her bridegroom according to her father's wishes. This account seems more consistent with Brahmanical orthodoxy.

³⁵ Bhīṣma has become the main actor in her situation interfering in her *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara*. In the end, she devises the plans for her vengeance which will tragically affect both her own and Bhīṣma's destiny.

run towards Śālva, and then curses Bhīṣma, Śālva and her foolish father:

*dhig bhīṣmaṃ dhik ca me mandaṃ pitaraṃ
mūḍhacetasaṃ |
yenāhaṃ vīryaśulkena paṇyastrīvat praveritā ||* (MBh
5.173.5)

“A curse on Bhīṣma, a curse on my dull-witted mindless father, who thrust me forth like a harlot for the bride price of some derring-do” (transl. van Buitenen slightly modified).

She does not accept Bhīṣma’s *kṣatriya* values and mostly censures her father who, in her opinion, has offered her like a woman for sale as a prize to the highest bidder, because of the *vīryaśulka*. This striking criticism might also refer to a custom that is known in the non-Kṣatriya strata of society. According to Arrianus (*Ind.*17.4), to avoid either giving or taking dowries, the fathers of Indian maidens publicly offered them (προάγοντες ἐς τὸ ἐμφανὲς καθιστᾶσι ἐκλέξασθαι) to the victors of boxing matches, running contests or other manly exercises.³⁶

6.3. In the story which precedes her denunciation of the *vīryaśulka*, Ambā is described as an intellectually independent person, who is strong-willed and learned in the Law. When Śālva refuses to accept her as his wife, she tells him that the abandonment of lovers is not praised in the Law (*Dharma*).³⁷ Moreover, she stresses her own fidelity, chastity and love, asking Śālva to love her (*bhajasva mām*) since she has never dreamed of anyone but him: she is not another man’s woman, but a virgin (*kanyā*) who has come to him of her own free will (*svayam*).³⁸

In uttering these words Ambā does not endorse the fact that someone who is in love must also be loved in return, but rather,

³⁶ This report, attributed to Nearchos, Alexander the Great’s admiral, is also mentioned in Strabo 15.1.66.

³⁷ MBh 5.172.10.

³⁸ MBh 5.172.14-16.

she demands that Śālva legally acknowledges her right to become his wife by referring to her previous choice and to their mutual agreement:

mayā śālvapatih pūrvaṃ manasābhivṛto varaḥ |
tēna cāsmi vṛtā pūrvaṃ rahasy avidite pituh ||
kathaṃ mām anyakāmām tvaṃ rājañ śāstram adhītya
vai |
vāsayethā gr̥he bhīṣma kauravaḥ san viśeṣataḥ ||
 (MBh 5.171.6-7)

“In my heart I had chosen the king of Śālva as my bridegroom, and he too had chosen me secretly, unbeknownst to my father. How can you, who have learned the scriptures, force me to dwell in this house, when I am in love with someone else, Prince Bhīṣma, you being a Kaurava to boot?” (transl. van Buitenen).

6.4. As Jamison points out,³⁹ Ambā’s formulation is very close to the legal definition of the *gāndharva vivāha*, the union of a lust-driven couple, kept secret from their parents.⁴⁰

As a matter of fact, she also refers to the *gāndharva vivāha*, when she says that she comes to her beloved of her own free will (6.3) and also when she finally expresses her regret about her decision not to jump off Bhīṣma’s chariot and run to him (6.2). Ambā seems to consider that *gāndharva vivāha* is a legal alternative to *vīryaśulka* and to the dependence of women entailed therein.

Her bond with her betrothed and her right to rejoin him were unanimously recognized by Bhīṣma, Brahmins and by society in

³⁹ Cf. Jamison, “Penelope”, p. 247 n. 51.

⁴⁰ ViSmṛ 24.23: *dvayoḥ sakāmayor mātāpitr̥rahito yogo gāndharvaḥ*. Cf. MDhŚ 3.32: *icchayānyonyasaṃyogāḥ kanyāyās ca varasya ca | gāndharvaḥ sa tu vijñeyo maithunyaḥ kāmasāmbhavaḥ ||*, “When the girl and the groom have sex with each other voluntarily, that is the ‘Gāndharva’ marriage based on sexual union and originating from love” (tr. Olivelle 2005). According to Jamison (“A Gāndharva Marriage in the Odyssey: Nausicaa and her Imaginary Husband”, in J. Greppin and E.C. Polomé, eds., *Fs. J. Puhvel*, Washington 1997, pp.151-60: pp. 158ff.), a trace of Gāndharva marriage is implied in some passages in the Odyssey. Cf. also M. Alberro, “Formas de matrimonio entre los antiguos celtas y otros pueblos indo-europeos”, *Zephyrus*, 57, 2004, pp. 249-61: p 251ff.

general (6.2). This may suggest that Ambā, who opposed her father and obtained her freedom from Bhīṣma, possesses the legal standing to give herself away and, therefore, that she can become a legal wife (*bhāryā*).⁴¹

Theoretically, it is an extraordinary acknowledgement of women's autonomy and self-choice, which seems to be guaranteed by the Gāndharva marriage. It is also extremely significant that the recognition of her independence occurs in the same context as Ambā's (and possibly Bhīṣma's) fierce denunciation of the *vīryaśulka*.

What could be paradoxical and inconsistent with such an extraordinary acknowledgement is the fact that once Ambā has been rejected by Śālva, she has no way out and nobody on whom she can rely (MBh 5.173.1), whereas her sisters can happily go on with their lives, adoring the handsome Vicitravīrya (MBh 1.96.55). However, the precariousness of an action, recognized on the one hand and refused on the other, is characteristic of *gāndharva vivāha*, as is demonstrated by the Śakuntalā episode, and probably connected to its origin.⁴²

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the above-examined instances of *vīryaśulkāḥ kanyāḥ* in the Sanskrit epic are not at all consistent. In fact, they provide a variety of approaches, which are also found in parallel examples in ancient Greek. Striking similarities to elements in

⁴¹ The Śakuntalā episode clearly shows the legal standing of a maiden to give herself away in the 'Gāndharva' marriage (MBh 1.67.15; 1.67.25ff.). See G. Dumézil, *Mariages indo-européens*, Paris 1979, pp. 43f.; Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife*, p. 212; p. 250. This part, which according to Yardi (*The Mahābhārata*, p. 157) belongs to the so-called Sauti layer, seems to be more recent than the Ambā episode described in MBh 5.170-173.

⁴² Cf. Ya.V. Vasilkov, "Draupadī in the Assembly-Hall, Gandharva-Husbands and the Origin of the Gaṇikās", *Indologica Taurinensia*, XV-XVI 1989-90, pp. 388-398; pp. 395f. Both Strabo (15.1.30) and Diodorus (19.33.2-4) who associate the origin of *sahagamana* with an old marriage custom, probably a previous form of the Gāndharva-marriage, remark that it led to infidelity and crime. Cf. P. Pisano, "A Virtuous Woman Must Follow Her Husband", in *Cross-cutting South Asian Studies, An Interdisciplinary Approach* ed. by S. Bindi, E. Mucciarelli and T. Pontillo, New Delhi 2016, pp. 224-62; pp. 247ff.

ancient Greek literature, such as the politics of marriage, the procedure of the *vīryaśulka svayaṃvara*, the way of obtaining a wife by returning a stolen herd to her father, and the habit of trying to find a wife for one's brother, possibly also bespeak a common Indo-European inheritance.

Some parallel examples in both the Indian and Greek contexts may also help to throw light on aspects that are somewhat puzzling if taken alone, for example, Agariste's marriage or Penelope's freedom to choose her own husband or the archery contest.

As the episodes of Penelope and Ambā show, there is an ambivalence in the range of action which is either recognized or denied to women and which warns against any standard one-sided ideas of their position.

Abbreviations

HDT	Herodotus
IL	<i>Iliad</i>
IND	Indica
MBh	Mahābhārata
MDhŚ	Mānava Dharmasāstra
OD	<i>Odyssey</i>
PYTH	Pythian Odes
R	Rāmāyaṇa
ṚV	Ṛg Veda
ViSmṛ	Viṣṇu Smṛti

