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Kṛpa A Neglected Brahmin Warrior*

ABSTRACT: In a recent study (Pontillo 2016) it has been argued that the *Mahābhārata* contains traces of a heterodox culture, the Vrātya-culture, and these emerge most clearly in connection with Bhīṣma and Droṇa. In this article it will be strongly suggested that any analysis of these two epic characters should take Kṛpa into account as well, since he has many features in common with them, especially with Droṇa. Furthermore, after a briefly outlined proposal to explain these commonalities, the function of the narrative character of Kṛpa will be examined.

KEYWORDS: Kṛpa, Droṇa, *Mahābhārata*, violence

Introduction

Since the beginning of Indology, the *Mahābhārata* (= MBh),¹ one of the two great Indian epics, has attracted the attention of scholars and has become the subject of study from the most diverse perspectives. This

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¹ All references are to the Critical Edition of the MBh (Sukthankar 1933–1972).

will certainly not change in view of its importance, the variety of motifs it contains, its complex history of origin and transmission, and its sheer size. Since this work is situated between Vedic culture and the world of Classical Hinduism of the Purāṇas, it is also a worthwhile object of research for studies on the continued influence of the former and on the origin of ideas prevailing in the latter. The complex history of ideas in this work can be seen in many points that are very often connected with the idea of *dharma*, and this also applies to the link between *varṇa* and violence. Thus, a number of characters that appear in the MBh belong to the *varṇa* of the Brahmins on the one hand, but are dedicated to the craft of war, on the other. This contradicts the norms of *dharma* and therefore requires an explanation, especially with regard to the extent of violence in the epic, where in many places it appears excessive.²

Tiziana Pontillo has made a suggestion for dealing with one aspect of this complex phenomenon; in a recent article, she has argued that the MBh contains traces of an Indo-Āryan but non-Brāhmaṇic culture termed Vrātya-culture which emerged from the first wave of Indo-Aryan immigrants and is distinct from that of communities adhering to Vedic beliefs and practices (Pontillo 2016). She has tried to establish the connection between this culture and the MBh by interpreting certain elements of the epic as traces of two features of the Vrātya-culture: “a) competitive access to social status; b) a sort of heroic asceticism aimed at god-like status” (Pontillo 2016: 210). In particular, Pontillo regards episodes and motifs connected to two of the most important heroes of the older generation, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, as unexplainable within the frame of a *dharma*-oriented society based on the *varṇāśrama*-system, but as rather easily comprehensible if taken as being part of an older competitive society.

It goes to Pontillo’s credit that she has directed the attention to some noteworthy features of the MBh, feature which are without doubt in need of further attention, even if one may not be inclined

² Goldman has given an apt characterization of the MBh (Goldman 2021: 51): “There are probably few, if any, major works of world literature that even remotely approach the level of the Mahābhārata’s obsession with this theme [= genocide, F. K.]”

to accept all conclusions she has drawn from them. As I have argued elsewhere, for example, a focus exclusively directed at Bhīṣma and Droṇa may tend to leave out other important aspects, as there is at least one more epic character, Kṛpa, who has a number of features in common with them and needs therefore to be taken into account as well (Köhler 2021: 106). A comparison with Kṛpa will be undertaken here, accordingly, and I proceed as follows: 1. It will be argued that the character of Kṛpa needs to be compared with that of Bhīṣma and Droṇa, and the similarities and differences between them will be listed and discussed. 2. In the second step, an attempt will be made to understand the character of Kṛpa within the frame of a narrative model according to Mangels (1994). The article will end with some concluding deliberations about his narrative role in the MBh.

An extraordinary career

Biography

*aśvatthāmā balir vyāso hanūmāś ca vibhīṣaṇaḥ |
kṛpaḥ paraśurāmaś ca saptaita cirajīvinaḥ ||*

Aśvatthāman, Bali, Vyāsa, Hanumān and Vibhīṣaṇa, Kṛpa and Paraśurāma: These are the seven long-lived ones.

Among the seven “long-lived” beings enumerated in this anonymous stanza is Kṛpa, a character from the MBh. It is said there that he holds a prominent position in the court of the Kauravas and is involved in one of the most important episodes (the night massacre), but nevertheless, he has usually received little attention in the West. Not only has he been more or less completely neglected in research;³ he does not even figure in Peter Brook’s 1989 adaption of the epic for the theatre. And it is easy to see why: No *parvan* is named after him, no unfair means is used to kill him (indeed, he is not killed at all, but rather

³ The only exception known to me is Smith 1991.

belongs to the few survivors of the battle), there is no episode within the epic that is focused exclusively on his actions, and the story of his supernatural birth resembles that of Droṇa (which, however, is told in much more detail) so closely, that it is indeed difficult to make sense of his appearance in the text at all, be it from religious, text-historical, or narrative perspective. However, the statements made by and about him in the epic are not easily reconciled with this status. As the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas, the Kauravas and later on even of Parikṣit, he is treated with respect throughout; furthermore, he sees himself as an invincible fighter.⁴ To come to terms with this somewhat confusing state of affairs, it may be helpful to start with the most decisive parts of his biography. Its earlier stage, until the start of his time as a teacher, is recounted by Vaiśampāyana to Janamejaya in MBh 1.120 in 21 *ślokas*. Previously, it was reported that the Rudras have incarnated in Kṛpa (MBh 1.61.71). He is a Brahmin, son of Śaradvat and grandson of the Rishi Gautama.⁵ He was born, together with his twin sister Kṛpī, by way of the spilling of seed on a bundle of reeds by his father at the sight of an *apsaras*. The twins were brought to the court by the king Śaṃtanu and raised there. After their father had tracked them down, he instructed Kṛpa in martial arts. Afterwards Kṛpa himself became the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas instructing them in the use of arms.

Apart from this chapter, he is prominently featured in two episodes:⁶ the first one is situated immediately before the beginning of the battle, where Yudhiṣṭhira approaches the elders on the enemy's side (Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa and Śalya) to receive their permission to fight them (MBh 6.41). The second time Kṛpa appears is in the

⁴ *avadhya*, MBh 6.41.69, cf. footnote 22.

⁵ Which Gautama? MacDonnell and Keith have listed several persons of this name from Vedic texts, but not in connection with Kṛpa or his father Śaradvat (MacDonnell and Keith 1958: 240–241). The name “Kṛpa” itself appears two times only in the R̥gveda (RV 8.3.12 and 8.4.2), where it denotes a protegée of Indra (*ibid.*: 179). Therefore, unlike Droṇa, a clear Vedic genealogy cannot be easily reconstructed for Kṛpa.

⁶ The descriptions of Kṛpa's fights with various enemies in the battle of Kurukṣetra will not be considered here.

night massacre after the battle which forms the subject matter of the 11th book, the *Sauptika Parvan*, and is certainly one of the most gruesome episodes in the entire epic. Aśvatthāman seeks revenge on Dhṛṣṭadyumna, at any cost, for the death of his father Droṇa, even in violation of dharma rules (attacking the sleeping and defenceless, intemperance in killing). Kṛpa, together with Kṛtavarma agrees to help him in his bloody revenge, in spite of objections he has raised against it earlier (MBh 10.1–5; 8) and takes his leave of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his companions (MBh 11.10.18–23). For the last time, the MBh reports about Kṛpa in connection with the departure of the Pāṇḍavas; he is made the teacher of Parikṣit, the last surviving Pāṇḍava (MBh 17.1.13, as prophesized by Kṛṣṇa, MBh 10.16.13).

Comparison with Droṇa and Bhīṣma

In order to test the viability of assigning Bhīṣma and Droṇa to a presumed non-orthodox Vṛātya culture on the basis of the figure of Kṛpa, it will be first investigated whether there are sufficient similarities between these three characters. The criteria used for this comparison can be understood as that subset of kinds of attributes that constitute the characters within the epic. They are listed in the following table:

	Kṛpa	Droṇa	Bhīṣma
Birth	supernatural	supernatural	usual ⁷
Varṇa	Brahmin	Brahmin	kṣatriya
Aṃśa	Rudras	Bṛhaspati	Dyaus
Special characteristic	Master of martial arts	Master of martial arts	Master of martial arts
Motive for fighting for Duryodhana	wealth	wealth	wealth
After the battle	survived	dead	dying

⁷ Compared to the births of Kṛpa and Droṇa, that of Bhīṣma certainly appears to have happened in a much more common way, since he was at least born of a woman, the goddess Gaṅgā.

Even a superficial comparison shows they are similar; all three belong to the older generation, are masters of martial arts and are considered by Vaiṣampāyana as partial incarnations (*aṁśa*) of divine beings (this in itself is nothing uncommon in the epic scheme of things), and, against their better judgment, all three fight for wealth on Duryodhana's side. The similarities between Kṛpa and Droṇa, in particular, are striking: Both of them are sons of Brahmins, both of them are the offspring born of semen spilled involuntarily at the sight of an *apsaras*,⁸ and both engage in an activity that deviates from the norms of their caste. Furthermore, since Droṇa marries Kṛpī, the twin sister of Kṛpa, they are related to each other. In view of these commonalities, it makes sense not to limit the investigation of "conspicuous" characters from the fathers' generation to Droṇa and Bhīṣma, but also to extend it to Kṛpa. What significance do the results of this comparison have? Is it possible to understand the traits of Kṛpa's biography as remnants of an archaic culture based on competition and aiming at reaching a god-like status? The answer is likely to be rather negative. This becomes particularly clear when a closer look is taken at the differences between Kṛpa and Droṇa in particular. No aspects of competition or rivalry are mentioned in connection with Kṛpa, nor can any ambitions for divine status be ascribed to him. On the contrary, unlike Droṇa, who is reprimanded for his violation of class rules immediately before his death at the hands of Bhīma (MBh 7.165.28–31) and in the disputes among the Pāṇḍavas and their allies after his killing by Dhṛṣṭadyumna (MBh 7.168.22–39),⁹

⁸ In Kṛpa's case, the seed fell on reed (*śara*); in Droṇa's, it was put by his father Bharadvāja into a bucket (*droṇa*), cf. MBh 1.120.12 and 1.121.4. Smith has already noted the parallels in the stories of their births and compares them to the story of the birth of Skanda, which is told in MBh 9.43, and who has been born without a mother as well (Smith 1991). According to Smith, these three stories are variations of the myth of a male hero or savior (Smith 1991: 98). But even if the motif of parthenogenetic (perhaps better "unisexual"?) birth may have a mythical background, the stories where it has been used are located in different narrative frames; the story of Skanda is told by Vaiṣampāyana to Janamejaya without a connection to the main plot.

⁹ Cf. especially MBh 7.165.31 *ekasyārthe bahūn hatvā putrasyādharmavid yathā | svakarmasthān vikarmastho na vyapatrapase katham* "You kill many for a single

to my knowledge, no such accusation is ever made against Kṛpa. Not only that, he is even appointed Parikṣit's teacher although he was involved in the night massacre.¹⁰ Kṛpa is thus firmly anchored in the society ruled by the norms of *varṇa* despite belonging to the older generation, and he is recognised as such.

Genesis and narrative function of Kṛpa in the MBh

Genesis of the character of Kṛpa

It has thus been shown that despite many similarities with the other two main representatives of the older generation, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, especially with the latter, Kṛpa represents an independent and at the same time strangely contradictory character. This naturally raises the question: How can this character, together with its peculiarities, be explained? How is it possible that someone who was involved in some of the worst violations of the Dharma norms, namely the killing of Abhimanyu and especially the nocturnal massacre, is not only not punished by the victors, but in the end is even entrusted with a most important task, the education of Parikṣit? I do not want to pretend to already have a ready answer to these questions, but instead outline a possible approach to a solution in the following. Until now, it has been tacitly assumed in this article that the MBh in the form of the Critical Edition must be understood as literature, and thus as a work of art in its own right, and that questions of textual transmission can be neglected in comparison. But with regard to the peculiar character of Kṛpa a closer look at the Critical Edition may offer an

son, like one who does not know the Dharma, leaving your own activities [you kill] those who follow their activities—are you not ashamed?"

¹⁰ And Kṛpa has certainly not anticipated this development, rather, he is, like Kṛtavarman and Aśvatthāman, aware of the extent of their crime and fears its consequences, as he confesses to Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra: *pāṇḍūnām kilbiṣaṃ kṛtvā saṃsthātuṃ notsahāmahe*—"After committing such an evil to the Pāṇḍus we cannot stay" (MBh 11.10.16ab).

explanation for its genesis. The chapter which contains the story of Kṛpa's miraculous birth starts with a question poised by Janamejaya (Buitenen 1973: 266): "Pray tell, great brahmin, what was the origin of Kṛpa and how did he come to be born from a reed stalk and obtain his weapons?"¹¹ But this question appears without any connection to the content of the preceding chapter 119 and is also not foreseeable in the immediately preceding chapters either.¹² Chapter 119 is mainly about the rivalry between the young Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas and especially about Duryodhana's assaults on Bhīma. There the last stanza reads (*ibid.*: 265):

The sons of Pāṇḍu, tamers of their foes, divined it all, but following Vidura's advice, did not bring it into the open.¹³

There is an obvious narrative break between these chapters, and for this reason van Buitenen has inserted in brackets the translation of one stanza that has been excluded by Sukthankar from the text of the Critical Edition (*ibid.*: 265):¹⁴

(Then, seeing that the boys at play were getting too malicious, the king entrusted them to Gautama, so that they would be taught by a guru—Gautama Kṛpa, master of the precepts of the Veda, who had been born from a reed stalk).¹⁵

¹¹ MBh 1.120.1: *kṛpasyāpi mahābrahman saṃbhavaṃ vaktum arhasi śarastambhāt kathaṃ jajñe kathaṃ cāstrāṇy avāptavān.*

¹² Although Kṛpa's birth was already mentioned in MBh 1.57.90, as was pointed out by one of the reviewers, where it appears as one of the elements of the long list of the epic's main characters, the details of his biography are only narrated in MBh 1.120.

¹³ MBh 1.119.43: *pāṇḍavāś cāpi tat sarvaṃ pratyajānann arimdamāḥ udbhāvanam akurvanto vidurasya mate sthitāḥ.*

¹⁴ As he aptly notes (*ibid.*: 459), without this stanza chapter 120 would not be needed.

¹⁵ *kumārān krīḍamānāms tān dṛṣṭvā rājātidurmadān guruṃ śikṣārtham anviṣya gautamaṃ tān nyavedayat śarastambe samudbhūtaṃ vedaśāstrārthapāragam* (Sukthankar 1933: 534). This stanza is contained in manuscripts K4, Dn and D2,4; all of them belong to the northern recension and have been considered by

In addition, there are other conspicuous features: The description of Kṛpa's biography ends with a stanza of 6 times 8 syllables (MBh 1.120.21):

*tato 'dhijagmuḥ sarve te dhanurvedaṃ mahārathāḥ
dhṛtarāṣṭrātmajāś caiva pāṇḍavāś ca mahābalāḥ
vṛṣṇayaś ca nṛpāś cānye nānādeśasamāgatāḥ*

[...] and from him all the warlike sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the powerful Pāṇḍavas learned archery; and so did the Vṛṣṇis and other barons who came from different countries. (transl. Buitenen 1973: 266)

Almost at the end of the (much longer) biographical account of Droṇa, there is a stanza that is quite similar both in content and metre (MBh 1.122.46):

*rājaputrās tathaivānye sametya bharatarṣabha
abhijagmus tato droṇam astrārthe dvijasattamam
vṛṣṇayaś cāndhakāś caiva nānādeśyāś ca pārthivāḥ*

Other princes also gathered there, bull of the Bhāratas, and came to the eminent brahmin Droṇa to learn about weapons, such as the Vṛṣṇis and the Andhakas, and also barons who hailed from other countries. (transl. Buitenen 1973: 270)

The introduction to Droṇa's biography also seems strange in view of the fact, that Kṛpa, an excellent archer, had already worked as a teacher. The stanza reads as follows (MBh 1.121.1):

*vaiśampāyana uvāca
viśeṣārthī tato bhīṣmaḥ pautrāṇāṃ vinayepsayā
iṣvastrajñān paryapṛcchad ācāryān vīryasammatān*

Sukthankar as being of inferior quality (*ibid.*: LI, LXVI and LXXI). Some manuscripts also add *adhijagmuśca kuravo dhanurvedaṃ kṛpāt te (ibid.)*.

Vaiśampāyana said: Looking for excellence and demanding discipline for his grandsons, Bhīṣma asked about for teachers of recognized prowess who knew archery [...]. (transl. Buitenen 1973: 267)

So, on the one hand, some features of Kṛpa's character have been elaborated in a slightly more pronounced manner in only a few manuscript traditions, but on the other hand, he appears in all of them; it seems therefore most likely that its conception must go back in time beyond the first common archetype. The easiest way to account for this state of affairs is the assumption that Kṛpa, a character similar to Droṇa, was attached to one or even some multiple versions of the MBh story and has been integrated into the written forms of this epic. But it goes without saying that this assumption is in need of further research.

The narrative function of Kṛpa

For the understanding of Kṛpa's character in the MBh it is not sufficient, of course, to seek explanations for its origin; these must rather be supplemented by considerations of its function within the epic. Such an approach, however, requires consideration of the textual form, and this question is notoriously difficult due to the MBh's complicated history of transmission. On the one hand, it is widely recognized in research that the MBh in its present form is the product of additions and revisions; on the other hand, it has been received as a unit, i.e. a discrete literary work. And if this is the case, the following two assumptions will be presupposed: the MBh (1) displays an elaborate arrangement of textual parts into a structured unit, and (2) this structure can be heuristically considered as intentionally formed. In order to do justice to them, the communication model taken from literary theory will be presented below and applied to Kṛpa's narrative function.¹⁶

¹⁶ The following explanation is a summary of Köhler 2015: 133–136 and is essentially based on Mangels 1994: 29–35 and 44–59.

Excursus: The communicative model of literature

The starting point is the assumption that literary works can be understood as acts of communication for which sender, addressee, and message are necessary. This model becomes complicated by the postulate that there are several communicative levels within a text. One has therefore to distinguish between the concrete author, the implied author and the fictitious narrator, who all have their receptive counterpart (the concrete, the implied and the fictitious reader). Furthermore, there are also the protagonists whose stories are told; they are the narrated characters. The concrete author is the person who is responsible for bringing the literary work into existence, and the concrete reader is the one who perceives it. The implied author is the imaginary authorial presence discerned throughout the text; such an authorial presence may be detected especially in the way the story is depicted; this author is recognizable in the MBh, for example, by the *bhakti* elements as well as the final stanzas at the end (MBh 18.31–54). His counterpart, the implied reader, is in a way a hybrid entity: on the one hand he constitutes the ideal audience the author wants to address, on the other he figures as an ideal which the concrete readers should resemble in their interpretative acts. The fictitious narrator and his audience, finally, are inhabitants of the imaginary work created by the (concrete) author. In the case of the MBh, Ugraśravas and Vaiśampāyana, as well as Saṃjaya, are the fictitious narrators.

With the help of this model, we will now take a closer look at the narrated character of Kṛpa, especially its resemblance to that of Droṇa. At a certain point in time, the MBh included both of them, and since it is an epic, consequently a work of literature, the question of the literary function of this character necessarily arises. This question can be further clarified, since epics belong to narrative literature: what is the narrative function of Kṛpa in the MBh? As we have seen, there are only a few passages where he is prominently featured, and one of them is embedded in descriptions of Yudhiṣṭhira's visits to his gurus in the midst of the hostile army immediately before the battle to receive their permission to fight them (MBh 6.41.32–83). In the following,

we will argue that the reason for Kṛpa's ambivalent position can be found in this scene. Yudhiṣṭhira visits Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Kṛpa in turn, and it is very revealing what he wishes to learn from his teachers; a means to defeat them in battle.¹⁷ First Yudhiṣṭhira questions Bhīṣma (MBh 6.41.40–43):

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “How will I be able to defeat you, the invincible, in battle; recommend a benefit to me, if you see [my] welfare!”

Bhīṣma said: “Kaunteya, I do not see any man who could defeat me in battle as long as I am fighting, even if it were Śatakṛtu [Indra] in person.”

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “Well, therefore I ask you, Grandfather, praise be to you! Pray tell [me] the means for victory over you in the battle with the enemies!”

Bhīṣma said: “Son, I do not see an enemy who could defeat me in battle. The time of my death is not yet there; come back [again]!”¹⁸

Bhīṣma's replies are not particularly helpful, as he puts him off until a later date.¹⁹ Next in turn is Droṇa (MBh 6.41.56–61):

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “I ask you, best of the twice-born, listen to what I wish to be told. How will I be able to defeat you, the invincible, in battle.”

¹⁷ In what follows Yudhiṣṭhira's meeting with Śalya will be omitted, since the subject of their talk is slightly different from that of the other ones.

¹⁸ MBh 6.41.40–43: *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca kathaṃ jayeyaṃ saṃgrāme bhavantaṃ aparājitam | etan me mantraya hitaṃ yadi śreyah prapaśyasi || bhīṣma uvāca na taṃ paśyāmi kaunteya yo māṃ yudhyantaṃ āhave | vijayeta pumān kaś cid api sākṣāc chatakṛtuḥ || yudhiṣṭhira uvāca hanta pṛcchāmi tasmāt tvāṃ pitā-maha namo 'stu te | jayopāyaṃ bravīhi tvam ātmanaḥ samare paraiḥ || bhīṣma uvāca na śatruṃ tāta paśyāmi samare yo jayeta māṃ | na tāvan mrtyukālo me punarāgamaṇaṃ kuru ||*

¹⁹ At MBh 6.103.70–82 Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira about the possibility of employing Śikhaṇḍin for his killing; for Bhīṣma's role in the epic and especially his moral authority based on his embodiment of the virtues which Kṛṣṇa proclaims to Arjuna, cf. McGrath 2018.

Droṇa said: “Your victory does not happen as long as I fight in the battle. Strive swiftly for my death together with your brothers, king!”

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “Well, therefore tell [me] the means for your death, big-armed one: Bowing reverently here I ask you, teacher, praise to you.”

Droṇa said: “I see no enemy, son, who could kill me while I stand fighting on the battlefield, unceasingly showering floods of arrows full of fury,

King, one can kill me in the fight of the warriors, if I, approaching death, have laid down my weapons and am unaware. This I tell you truly.

I will abandon the weapon after I have heard something exceedingly terrible from a man whose speech is trustworthy. This I tell you truly.”²⁰

Here, too, the *guru*’s replies are not exactly uplifting: While Droṇa hints at how he might be defeated, it is becoming apparent that this will involve a violation of *dharma*, since killing a man who has laid down his weapons violates the rules of war, and this can only be disastrous in Yudhiṣṭhira’s eyes. With this certainly disappointing (to say the least) information Yudhiṣṭhira finally approaches Kṛpa (MBh 6.41.68–70):

Yudhiṣṭhira said: “Well, therefore I ask you teacher, listen to my speech!”

But at this point, the dialogue stops and Samjaya continues, as Yudhiṣṭhira is unable to continue:

²⁰ MBh 6.41.56–61: *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca prechāmi tvāṃ dvijaśreṣṭha śṛṇu me yad vivakṣitam | kathaṃ jayeyam saṃgrāme bhavantam aparājitam || droṇa uvāca na te ‘sti vijayas tāvad yāvad yudhyāmy ahaṃ raṇe | mamāśu nidhane rājan yatasva saha sodaraiḥ || yudhiṣṭhira uvāca hanta tasmān mahābāho vadhopāyam vadātmanah | ācārya praṇipatyaiṣa prechāmi tvāṃ namo ‘stu te || droṇa uvāca na śatruṃ tāta paśyāmi yo mām hanyād raṇe sthitam | yudhyamānaṃ susaṃrabdhaṃ śaravarṣaughavarṣiṇam || rte prāyagataṃ rājan nyastaśāstram acetanam | hanyān mām yudhi yodhānām satyam etad bravīmi te || śāstraṃ cāhaṃ raṇe jah-yām śrutvā sumahad apriyam | śraddheyavākyaṭ puruṣād etat satyaṃ bravīmi te ||*

Samjaya said: “After this speech the king staggered, lost his wit and did not speak. Gautama, knowing what he wished to say, replied to him: “King, I am invincible; fight, obtain the victory! I am pleased with your coming, I will always rise and pray for your victory, king. This I tell you truly.”²¹

At first glance, Yudhiṣṭhira’s collapse seems quite understandable; after all, he must assume that the imminent battle is already lost. From a dharmic perspective, however, the situation is somewhat different: On the one hand, as a Kṣatriya, he is obliged to join the battle in order to assert his interests and to gain fame and glory; on the other hand, Yudhiṣṭhira sees the horror of war in all its clarity and for this reason has tried to avoid it to the best of his ability.²² Under these circumstances, when he learns that the whole battle and all its consequences are futile from his point of view (which goes beyond the *kṣatriyadharmā*), his reaction cannot be surprising.²³ Less comprehensible from the point of view of narrative logic is Kṛpa’s statement. After all, the two greatest heroes of the Kauravas, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, have not completely excluded that they could be defeated under certain circumstances, but this possibility is ruled out by Kṛpa.²⁴

²¹ MBh 6.41.68–70: *yudhiṣṭhira uvāca hanta prcchāmi te tasmād ācārya śṛṇu me vacaḥ | samjaya uvāca ity uktvā vyathito rājā novāca gatacetanah | tam gautamaḥ pratyuvāca vijñāyāsyā vivakṣitam | avadhyo ‘haṃ mahīpāla yudhyasva jayam āpnuhi || prītas tv abhigamenāhaṃ jayaṃ tava narādhipa | āśāsiṣye sadotthāya satyam etad bravīmi te ||*

²² One may think of his offer to Samjaya immediately before the war (MBh 5.31) to be content with five villages!

²³ It has been proposed in a recent study (Marcinkowska-Rosół and Sellmer 2023: 423) that Yudhiṣṭhira’s collapse results from the compulsion to fight his teachers (this would be quite comparable to Arjuna’s scruples immediately before the battle, as described at the beginning of the *Bhagavadgītā*). This cannot be ruled out, but in this interpretation the content and context of the scene lose their relevance; Yudhiṣṭhira has known for some time that he has to fight his teachers, so he should have already grieved over it; but that his fight is hopeless according to human judgement may have only just become clear to him through the encounter with his teachers.

²⁴ Both von Simson (1969: 173) and subsequently Viethsen (2008: 34–36) saw in the above-mentioned chapter MBh 6.41 as the product of a “second interpolation,”

However, this does not fit in with the (narratively speaking) rather subordinate position he occupies compared to them. However, this statement seems to make more sense if the model of narrative levels presented above is used. At the outermost narrative level, that of the implied author, Kṛpa's statement gains a special significance. Researchers are almost unanimous in assuming a brahmanic authorship of the written versions of the MBh on which the Critical Edition is based (Bronkhorst 2007: 94), which, despite all uncertainties, is probably to be located in the centuries after the Maurya dynasty (> 180 BC, cf. Brockington 1998: 130–158, Simson 2011: 646–649). The Brahmin writers or editors saw their culture exposed to a variety of threats and wanted to counter these primarily with the model of cooperation between Kṣatriyas and Brahmins.²⁵ These ideas are most evident at the level of the implied author, as it is here that the authors' norms and values manifest themselves. In the picture sketched at this level, Kṛpa functions as a representative of Brahmanic culture and as such must be adopted into the world of the victorious Pāṇḍavas. Although Yudhiṣṭhira in particular is seen as the embodiment of the *dharma* associated with the Brahmanic worldview, *dharma* includes the esteem of its keepers, the Brahmins, and this esteem is shown at the narrative level of the main plot in the constellation of characters; Kṛpa as Brahmin remains without blame and even becomes Parikṣit's weapons instructor.²⁶

with which the insincere behaviour of the Pāṇḍavas is justified by the fact that the superior opponents themselves had given hints on how to overcome them. Kṛpa's character is, so to speak, left out of this interpretation, but it is shown below how he also finds his place in it.

²⁵ Of course, this cooperation does not run smoothly, and for this reason the Brahmin authors have not missed to introduce the considerable number of Brahmin warriors into the MBh to remind the *kṣatriyas* of it (cf. Feller 2015).

²⁶ Why are the other two Brahmins, Droṇa and Aśvatthāman, not "spared" and been given a place in the post-war society as well? These questions certainly require their own investigation, but one might suspect that Droṇa's death was too firmly anchored in the MBh's story from a certain point in time onwards, and that Aśvatthāman, who does not die but is cursed, deviates too much from Brahmanical norms (as he himself admits, cf. MBh 10.5.18–22).

Kṛpa's behaviour during the nocturnal massacre can perhaps also be rationalised by his function as a representative of Brahmanic culture and the special importance dharmic behaviour plays in it. At Duryodhana's request, Kṛpa anoints Aśvatthāman as leader (MBh 9.64.38–40). But in doing so, he subordinates himself to his instructions, so that despite all the reservations he expresses, he feels compelled to participate in Aśvatthāman's amoral actions.

In addition to confirming Brahmanical values and norms, the figure of Kṛpa also serves to emphasise Kṛṣṇa's divinity. Kṛpa not only survives the battle of Kurukṣetra, his position as Parikṣit's teacher in the art of weapons is predicted by Kṛṣṇa *vis-à-vis* Aśvatthāman (MBh 10.16.13):

[Kṛṣṇa] “But Parikṣit, the hero, after attaining youth and undergoing the study of the Vedas, will obtain all weapons from Kṛpa Śāradvata.”²⁷

Aśvatthāman had assumed that the redirection of the Brahma weapon would result in the downfall of the Pāṇḍava lineage, but Kṛṣṇa not only averts this doom, by predicting that Kṛpa, Aśvatthāman's erstwhile comrade in arms, would be on the side of his mortal enemies, he even humiliates his adversary, for Kṛṣṇa's divine nature implies that his predictions will come true.

Conclusions

The analysis of Kṛpa's character presented here has started from Pontillo's considerations of two further epic actors, Bhīṣma and Droṇa, as embodiments of the continuation or afterlife of a heterodox culture, the “Vrātya” culture, in which social status is not assumed according to dharmically fixed norms for *varṇa*, but is acquired through competition and warriorship. Starting with the criticism that an examina-

²⁷ MBh 10.16.13: *vayaḥ prāpya parikṣit tu vedavratam avāpya ca | kṛpāc chāradvatād vīraḥ sarvāstrāṇy upalapsyate ||*

tion of the “teacher generation,” to which Bhīṣma and Droṇa belong, is likely to be incomplete without a similar analysis of Kṛpa, who likewise belongs to it, the parallels between these three characters have been brought to the fore. Droṇa and Kṛpa in particular show a striking similarity in their essential characteristics, but without the elements of the heterodox “Vrātya” culture emerging in any significant way in the latter.

The conspicuous coincidence of these characteristics not only has consequences for the assignment of individual characters to heterodox forms of society, but also from a literary point of view, as such a doubling requires explanation from a narratological perspective. The problematic nature of Kṛpa’s character is further exacerbated by the contradiction between two particularities: his involvement in the night massacre and his continued position of respect as Parikṣit’s teacher. The solution suggested here is to consider the history of transmission: the MBh is known to have undergone various revisions, and it is against this background that Kṛpa’s contradictory role can be understood: As a *dharma*-conscious Brahmin and warrior, he had to obey the instructions of the commander Aśvatthāman, and at the same time Kṛṣṇa’s greatness is shown by the fact that he predicts the latter’s future fate. Thus, both the importance of *dharma* and the glorification of Kṛṣṇa could be expressed.

It goes without saying that this proposal as well will not yield fully convincing answers. First of all, Kṛpa’s narrative origin remains unclear. Although his function in the epic context can be made plausible, the obvious parallel to Droṇa cannot. And in view of the nocturnal massacre, the question arises as to whether Kṛpa is really the appropriate “vehicle” for *dharma* and Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*. Perhaps not only the figure of Kṛpa, but also his survival after a nefarious deed was an integral part of the epic tradition, so that they had to be retained even in revisions?

And finally, given the nature of Kṛpa, the question of the relationship between violence and *dharma* also arises. Although the authors of the MBh did not fail to problematise the use of violence (e.g. by emphasising benevolence, *ānṛśaṃsya* cf. Hildebeitel 2002: 202–209),

Brahmins often remain unaffected by this, including Kṛpa. Or do they? A cursing of Kṛpa is not mentioned in the MBh, but to live as a teacher of Parikṣit in the worst age, the *kaliyuga*, is perhaps punishment enough according to the authors.

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