

The Transformations of Kaine/Kaineus and Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin

In her analysis of transformations of women into men, Wendy Dongier neglects to cite the Kaine/Kaineus myth. I analyze this myth in relation to the myth of Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin in India. I believe this is the first comparison of these two myths. I will analyze the myths on the following themes: (1) the reasons for the transformations; (2) invulnerability of the hero; (3) whether the protagonists recall their former state as women; (4) the consequences of the transformations.

First, brief summaries are given. For the Greek myth, the two major sources are Acusilaos (*FGrH* 2 F22) and Ovid, *Met.* 12.189-209 and 459-535. In both accounts, Kaine is raped by Poseidon. He then grants her a wish and she asks to be transformed into a man; in Acusilaos, the reason is obscure: "it was not holy (ἱερόν) for her to bear children", in Ovid, she wishes not to endure rape again. Poseidon thus makes her invulnerable. Acusilaos then relates that Kaineus sets his spear up to be worshipped and Zeus sends the centaurs to pound him into the ground. In Ovid, the context is the battle of the Lapiths and centaurs in which the centaurs bury Kaineus under logs.

The story of Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin is found in the epic poem, the *Mahabharata* 1.96, 5.170-93, 10.8, 13.154. Ambā and her two sisters hold a *svayamvara* (literally, self-choice). This usually involves a contest and a suitor winning the bride(s). Ambā hopes that Śālva will win, but Bhīṣma abducts the sisters for his brother Vicitravīrya. Ambā asks Bhīṣma to let her go as she is in love with another and Bhīṣma complies. But Śālva rejects her. Then, Ambā decides to perform austerities and the gods allow her to become a man in her next incarnation to avenge herself on Bhīṣma.

The reincarnated Śikhaṇḍin is first born as a girl but is magically transformed into a male. At this point, he only wishes to kill Bhīṣma. Bhīṣma is a formidable warrior, since he has received the boon of dying when he wishes from his father. But he refuses to fight with anyone who was born a woman. So, when Arjuna fights with Bhīṣma, Śikhaṇḍin serves as Arjuna's "shield," as Bhīṣma will not shoot at him. Arjuna shoots Bhīṣma full of arrows and the arrows form a "bed" when he falls. He lies in this way waiting for a more auspicious time to die.

On the reasons for transformation, Ovid is clear that Kaine does not want to be violated again. Whatever Acusilaos means by "it was not holy for her to bear children," Forbes Irving 159 rightly observes that this transformation is "a form of compensation for being deprived of her natural fulfilment as a woman." Ambā is in a similar situation, not marrying Vicitravīrya and rejected by Śālva. In her case, the natural fulfilment is marriage.

The Greek term for invulnerability, ἀτρωτος, also conveys a sense of being "inviolable in a sexual sense." (Forbes Irving 157) This fits well with Ovid's reasoning above; she does not wish to be "wounded" again. In his invulnerability, Kaineus seems to overcompensate in his masculinity. Kaineus derives from κείνω, "to kill," as Eust. *II.I.* 264 proposes. He also sets his spear up to be worshipped. While the term "invulnerable" is not used of Śikhaṇḍin, nevertheless, his acting as a "shield" to protect Arjuna provides a sort of invulnerability. But it is Bhīṣma who seems invulnerable and Śikhaṇḍin and Arjuna must find ways to counteract this. While Śikhaṇḍin like Kaineus seems only to think about killing Bhīṣma, he is not the supermale that Kaineus is. Bhīṣma regards him as a woman recalling that Śikhaṇḍin was formally Ambā and was first reborn as a girl. (Doniger 285)

Their masculinity seems to overwhelm the heroes such that they do not recall their former state as women. It is usually someone else who remembers that they were once women. (Doniger

284) The centaurs in Ovid state that Kaineus was a woman in encouraging themselves to overcome him. And it is Bhīṣma who remembers that Shikhandin was once Ambā.

In the transformation from female to male in the Greek story, an excess of masculinity is created, which must be counteracted by the aggressively masculine centaurs. Where perhaps order is restored in Acusilaos, there is the uneasy sense that invulnerability was not the solution that Kaine intended. For Śikhaṇḍin, the situation is reversed: Bhīṣma is “invulnerable” and Śikhaṇḍin, whom Bhīṣma regards as female, with Arjuna must find ways to kill him. The “death” of Bhīṣma, as Doniger 284 notes, is not immediate and anticlimactic. Both transformations are unsatisfactory.

Bibliography

Doniger, Wendy, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, U. of Chicago Press 1999.

Forbes Irving, P.M.C., *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*, Oxford UP 1990.