



# Queer Types in Ancient Indian Medicine Texts. The Case of *Vārtā* and *Ṛṇaputrika* Individuals

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**Abstract** Brahmanical culture, which elaborated the idea of *dharma* (or socio-cosmic order) and at the same time claimed to be founded on it, intended to base on this conception the construction of taxonomies through which to classify all reality. As far as human beings are concerned, they respond to dharmic norms to the extent that they can form pairs (*mithunas*) capable of generating. In this article, I will explore the case of certain queer individuals, who, as non-heteronormative, escape the possibility of fertile pairings, and are therefore judged as a sterile presence. In order to do so, I will make use of some interpretative devices formulated by Deleuze and Guattari and by Foucault, to highlight how Brahmanical ideology in ancient India intended to classify, represent, control, and discipline people's bodies from conception. I will preliminarily focus on the analysis of some passages of texts by ancient Indian grammarians related to the notion of gender, to clarify how grammatical classifications come up against cases in which the grammatical gender does not correspond to the sexual gender exhibited by some individuals. Therefore, I will devote an extensive investigation to excerpts from classical works of Indian medicine, specifically delving into the analysis of two types of individuals, the *vārtās* and the *ṛṇaputrikas*, to shed light on how the identity of these individuals was ideologically framed as the result of pathological anomalies that deviate from the perimeter of the notion of *dharma*.

**Keywords** Hindu studies · Queer studies · History of religions · Philosophy and religions

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## Abbreviations

<i>BŚS</i>	<i>Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Caraka Saṃhitā</i>
<i>EWAia</i>	Mayrhofer 1986–1993 <i>Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindiarischen</i>
<i>JB</i>	<i>Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>KU</i>	<i>KenaUpaniṣad</i>
<i>KEWA</i>	Mayrhofer, 1956, <i>Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen</i>
<i>MDhŚ</i>	<i>Mānava Dharmasāstra</i>
<i>PB</i>	<i>Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>SED</i>	Monier-Williams 1899, <i>Sanskrit English Dictionary</i>
<i>SuS</i>	<i>Suśruta Saṃhitā</i>
<i>YS</i>	<i>Yājñavalkyasmṛti</i>

## Foreword

Brahmanical culture has judged the creation of erotic bonds between people on the basis of whether or not these unions could be fruitful, that is, whether or not the uniting individuals are capable of producing offspring. The motif of the fertile coupling (*mithuna*) runs throughout the Brahmanical hermeneutics of Vedic rites: the search for *bandhus* (connections, links, bonds) between the elements of ritual and reality is specified, from the perspective of sacrificial ideology, as the identification of couplings in which the two members of the couple—although not necessarily belonging, from a grammatical point of view, to the male and female gender—are conceived as male and female: in this way, they constitute a true couple (*mithuna*) and therefore their union will be fruitful. For example, during the performance of the *mahāvratā* rite, one of the moments of the ritual performance requires the *hoṭṛ* officiant (inviter or oblato) to swing on a swing, which with its oscillatory motion alludes to the rhythm and movements of copulation. During the performance of the *mahāvratā*, Vedic ritualists name a series of symbolic identifications of the swing (*preṅkha*, masculine gender noun) on which the *hoṭṛ* sits and the stool (*āsandī*, feminine gender noun) on which the *udgāṭṛ* officiant (chanter) sits, so that between these two ritual objects and the different valences associated with them a *mithuna* (sexual union) is created, based on which a *bandhu* can be established (cf. Spanò, 2022a: 169 ff.). Illustrative of this ideology may be a passage from the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (I, 300)<sup>1</sup>, which is set in the context of the discussion on the manner of intoning chants (*sāmans*) and the consequences of not following the prescribed ritual rules. Indeed, no repetition, uniformity, or tautologies (the technical meanings the term *jāmi-* takes on in ritualistic vocabulary) must occur during the performance of rites. Indeed, uniform or tautological repetition would lead to hyperritualism: it is necessary to ensure the non-repetition or variation (*ajāmi*) of rites (cf. *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* VII, 4, 10, 2 and Spanò, 2022b:

<sup>1</sup> For the text see Vira and Candra (1954). For the translation I also take into account Bodewitz (1990, p. 170). All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the Author.

426–427). In the passage in question from the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, the term *jāmi-* (commonly: 'relationship', such as that between sister and brother) also takes on a specific semantic valence related to non-heterosexual sexual unions. The text states:

*amithunaṃ tad aprajananaṃ yaj jāmi | yathā pumāṃso<sup>2</sup> vā saha śayātām<sup>3</sup>  
striyau vā | kiṃ pumāṃsau saha śayānau prajanayetām kiṃ striyau tau cen  
mithunīkartāraṃ na labheyātām | atho yad evājāmi tan mithunaṃ tat  
prajananam ||*

“What is without sexual union and offspring is similarity, as if two men or two women lay together. What generates two men lying together? What two women? These two [men and women] would not conceive without a [partner] who determines the union of the two sexes. Then, just what is without resemblance is sexual union and procreation” (*JB* I, 300).

Thus, according to the passage, it is fundamental, to speak appropriately of sexual union, that the latter should allow procreation: this is ensured by heterosexual intercourse, by diversity—*ajāmi(tva)* -, whereas homosexual intercourse is sterile, and therefore not permitted by the dharmic norm, because it is ultimately a threat to the very possibility of creating connections or *bhandhus*, that is, a threat to the *dharma* itself (cf. Spanò, 2022c: 87 ff). These assertions are amplified on the ritual level because similarity produces repetition, whereas the ritual or recitation of ritual formulas, to be effective, must themselves be diverse. For this reason, in the *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (VII, 2, 5)<sup>4</sup> it is stated that when chants of *ājya* praise are intoned, since they are the same (*taj jāmi*, “this is uniformity”), to avoid repetition (*ajāmitāyai*, “for non-uniformity”), and to prevent a succession of identical rites from being produced, which would produce no result, they must be addressed to different deities.

Brahmanical culture, pandering to the demands of scientific classification, deepened the study of non-heteronormative individuals in the texts of the 'science of life' or *āyurveda*, i.e., medicine. The two most authoritative texts of *āyurveda* are the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (compiled in the centuries straddling the end of the ancient age and the beginning of the Common Era) and the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (compiled over a long period, probably from the 6th century before the Common Era for the oldest parts to the 3rd-4th century of the Common Era for the most recent parts)<sup>5</sup>. The authors, or rather the compendium makers (cf. Wujastyk, 2003), Caraka and Suśruta, list various types of queer individuals, i.e., individuals whose behaviour falls outside the heterosexual norm, often referred to as *kṛības* or *ṣaṇḍhas*<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, in medical texts, the intention is to explain the causes that led to the birth of an individual belonging to the *trītyaprakṛti* (“third nature” or “third

<sup>2</sup> *pumāṃsau* (cf. Hoffman, 1960, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup> *śayīyātām* (cf. *ibidem*).

<sup>4</sup> For the texts see Vedantavāgīśa (1869-1874).

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the works and problems concerning attribution and dating, see Meulenbeld (1999: 7 ff).

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of these terms and the individuals and behaviour corresponding to them, particularly in Vedic literature, see Spanò (2022c).

gender”), which is not recognised within heteronormative genders and sexualities<sup>7</sup>. The classical Indian medical works represent an example of the classifying practice (and of the power connected to it) proper to the Brahmanical conception of the world<sup>8</sup>, of that *Listswissenschaft* that Indian authors have built around any branch of knowledge. It denounces the restlessness in the presence of what does not fit into precise categories, making it somehow, if not knowable, at least controllable, thus removing it from chaos. In this context, it cannot but be noted that a list, a taxonomy, or a classification plays a fundamental role on the level of representation and thus of the power that each list implicitly or explicitly possesses: through scientific classification, it expresses the need to bring order to nature, but at the same time it becomes an instrument of political control over human communities, over the individuals who do or do not fit on the list<sup>9</sup>. The concept of gender itself is a result of the criteria imposed by classification. Furthermore, classifications, in the context of medical treatises, emphasise a desire for medicalisation (cf. Sweet & Zwilling, 1993), which is then the result of the ideological aspects highlighted earlier. In the medical texts of the Indian tradition, as I will attempt to explain in the course of the article, although we are not faced with the morbid necessity of drawing up a manual of sexual psychopathy, there emerges a consideration of individuals who do not fit into the (dharmic) heterosexual norm that, beyond the scientific classification, refers to their framing within the socio-cosmic order imagined by the Brahmans. I will also attempt to show how the terms used to designate these individuals aim precisely to stigmatise them as deviants from the biological and behavioural norm (*dharma*). Beginning my analysis from the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, I will cross-reference its data with those that emerge from the text of the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, using a key of interpretation that draws on the notion of the “body without organs” (*corps sans organes*) elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, taking it from Artaud and developing it in the broader context of schizoanalysis. The “body without organs” is the body liberated from the functions assigned by ideological devices and, specifically, from a medical interpretation of it (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 1980: 185 ff.) It is significant that the body without organs, defined by the two authors as “le champ d’immanence du désir, le plan de consistance propre au désir” (*ib.*, p. 191), is identified by the metaphor of the egg, which in potency can give rise to all the different organs: “oeuf tantrique” (tantric egg). In this image, it does not seem to me at all coincidental that Deleuze and Guattari refer to a religious and cultural current in the broad sense such as Tantrism, which has always placed itself

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the passages see Zwilling and Sweet (2000). Regarding Buddhist culture, on the construction of masculinity and the characteristics attributed to males see for a general overview Powers (2009). Even in Early Buddhist cultural contexts, anxieties emerge concerning the classification of queer individuals. In this regard cf. Gyatso (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Brian K. Smith has highlighted this aspect well in connection with the desire to classify everything in the universe (human society through the notion of *varna* and on the model of it the deities, space and time, flora, and fauna), whereby “a social hierarchy was integrated into - and therefore ratified and legitimated by - a categorical system with universal scope and persuasive power” (1994, p. 3). Thus, the *dharma* conception (one of whose pivots is the concept of *varna*) elaborated by the Brahmans represents “a totalistic classificatory system” (*ibid.*: 8).

<sup>9</sup> On the risks connected with classifications and taxonomies in the field of the history of religions, see Smith (1996).

in antithesis to the hegemonic ideology founded on the notion of purity<sup>10</sup>: for Tantrism, the body not only does not constitute an obstacle towards liberation, but on the contrary represents an indispensable instrument of it.

## Grammarians' Reflections on Gender Belonging

It was said at the outset that in order to realise a *mithuna*, the two members of the couple must be conceived of as male, and the other as female, regardless of whether they grammatically belong to the male or female gender. For example, in some cases, *mithuna*, and thus *bandhu*, is realised in the union of concepts, ritual objects, or oblativ matters in which one of the two members of the couple can grammatically belong to the neuter gender (e.g. cf. *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* I, 2, 4, 16). Concerning grammatical gender or *liṅga*—specified as *pum̐sliṅga* (male gender), *strīliṅga* (female gender), and *napum̐sakaliṅga* (neuter gender)—the way Pāṇini deals with the topic is sometimes ambiguous, as gender (*liṅga*) is considered both “as a feature of a nominal or as a property of what a nominal signifies” (Cardona, 1988, p. 214), whereby *liṅga* would also constitute a semantic feature. Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*<sup>11</sup> ad Pāṇini IV, 1, 3 (II, 195, 25-198, 19) tries to give a definition of the three genders, in which it seems that the attribution of grammatical gender depends on biological sex. Starting with the question: *strīyām ity ucyate kā strī nāma* (“it is stated [in Pāṇini *sūtra* IV, 1, 3]: ‘of female gender’. What is a feminine name?”), Patañjali addresses the problem of the three genders (which at this point can be understood both logically-linguistically as grammatical categories, but also as ontological categories):

*lokata ete śabdāḥ prasiddhāḥ strī pum̐n napum̐sakam iti | yal loke dṛṣṭvaitat  
avasīyata iyaṃ strīyayaṃ pum̐n idaṃ napum̐sakam iti sā strī sa pum̐s tan  
napum̐sakam iti ||*

“The words *strī* (female), *pum̐s* (male), and *napum̐saka* (non-male, neuter) are known to human beings. Having looked at the world [i.e., the reality one experiences with the senses], one can determine: ‘this is female, this is male, this is neuter’, [saying]: ‘she is female, he is male, it is neuter’ ”.

What do we notice in the world that leads us to recognise the feminine, masculine, and neuter genders? It is the *liṅga*, i.e. the physical characteristics (or rather, the secondary sexual characteristics, which are immediately visible or ascertainable with the senses) that define gender (again, *liṅga*) belonging. Indeed, concerning the

<sup>10</sup> Raffaele Torella (2023, p. 94 but see also Id., 2015) has emphasised in this regard how the Brahmanical élites “not having power directly, they surrogated it by alternatively imposing an opposition between purity and impurity, which marked every aspect of Indian civilisation: purity of spirit, purity of philosophy, purity of ritual, purity of language, purity of social and religious behaviour, etc. In the impure side is tacitly placed every power (excluding one’s own), every reality that tends to escape control and normalisation by its intrinsic nature”.

<sup>11</sup> For the text see Kielhorn (1883).

question *kiṃ punastat* (“again, what is [*liṅga*]?”), Patañjali’s reasoning immediately leads to this definition of the three genders<sup>12</sup>

*stanakeśavatī strī syāl lomaśaḥ puruṣaḥ smṛtaḥ |  
ubhayaḥ antaraṃ yac ca tadabhāve napuṃsakam ||*

”Let the female be designated who has breasts and [long] hair, let the male be designated who is hairy, [let be designated] as belonging to the neuter gender what is close to both or in whom there is an absence [of both]”.

However, to the totalising claim of logical-grammatical and ontological categories, something always seems to escape. Patañjali realises this, measuring himself with a problematic case, which significantly relates to “queerness” and the issues analysed in this paper:

*liṅgāt strīpuṃsayor jñāne bhrūkumse tāp prasajyate |  
liṅgāt strīpuṃsayor jñāne sati bhrūkumse tāp prāpnoti | yaddhi loke dṛṣṭvaitad  
avasīyata iyaṃ strīty asti tad bhrūkumse ||*

“If knowledge of the male and female genders could be derived from the *liṅga*, the feminine suffix *ā* would have to be applied to the term *bhrūkumṣa* [the male actor playing female roles]. If knowledge of the male and female genders could be derived from the *liṅga*, the feminine suffix *ā* would be added to the term *bhrūkumṣa*. Therefore, having looked at the world [i.e., the reality one experiences with the senses], one determines: ‘she is female’ regarding the [male] term *bhrūkumṣa*!”.

The gestures and behaviour acted out on stage by an actor who, in make-up and dressed up as a woman (*stanakeśavatī strī syāt!*)<sup>13</sup>, plays a female character, does not correspond to the sex of the actor himself, nor to the masculine grammatical gender of the term used to designate him, i.e. *bhrūkumṣa*: the gender (*liṅga*) exhibited does not correspond to physical or sexual characteristics (*liṅga*)!

According to Indian cultural tradition, the profession of an actress was equated with that of a prostitute, so in various forms of Indian theatre, female roles were played by men disguised as women (cf. Artola, 1975). The term *bhrūkumṣa* (and the variants *bhr̥kumṣa*, *bhr̥tkumṣa*, and *bhr̥tkumṣa*) etymologically denotes ‘one who arches his eyebrows’, from *bhrū-* (‘brow, eyebrow’). Thus, the *bhrūkumṣa* is the actor in women’s clothing<sup>14</sup>. Beyond etymology, it is significant that, in the Brahmanical ideological framework, *bhrūkumṣas* were conceived individuals, the origin of which must be traced back to unions of the *anuloma* type (i.e., in which the woman is of lower social rank than the man with whom the offspring were conceived). For this reason, within the commentary glosses to the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* (IV, 95), Bālabhaṭṭa specifies that:

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps some parts of the reported *śloka* stanzas are not to be attributed to Patañjali (nor to other known commentators). Cf. Strauss (1927, p. 85, n. 1).

<sup>13</sup> See in this regard Kaiyata’s comment in Strauss (1927, pp. 85–86, n. 3).

<sup>14</sup> See *KEWA*, s.v. and *EWAia*, s.v. *bhrū*. However, a different interpretation of the term comes from Kuiper (1997, p. 143), linking it to an Austronesian and *muṇḍa* etymology.

“An Āyogava (son of a Vaiśya father by a Śūdra mother) begets on a Māgadhika (daughter of a Kṣatriya mother by a Vaiśya father) a son called ‘Bhrukūṃsa’ whose occupation is to train women in singing and dancing. He is an Anuloma”<sup>15</sup>.

From Bālabhaṭṭa’s definition, aimed at legally framing the *bhrūkūṃsas* concerning their ancestry and their *dharma*, it seems to me that further considerations can be drawn concerning the ‘queerness’ of the *bhrūkūṃsas*. If their *dharma* consists of teaching women to sing and dance, these tasks cannot but recall the functions performed in ancient India by the *klības* (men impotent to generate because they are not attracted to the female sex). In particular, the main reference is to the character of Arjuna. In the *Mahābhārata*, Arjuna, the champion warrior of virility, along with his brothers, spends a year incognito at the court of King Virāṭa, disguised as a *klība*, choosing as his name Bṛhannalā (or Bṛhannaḍā), ‘Great Reed’. Arjuna’s task disguised as a woman is precisely to teach the women of the court how to dance and sing<sup>16</sup>. We are not dealing here exclusively with men who disguise themselves as women in order to play male roles, but with men who habitually adopt female clothing and behaviour and who are therefore best suited to play female characters on stage. The question we started with, the correspondence between *liṅga* (grammatical gender) and *liṅga* (sexual characters)<sup>17</sup>, becomes enormously complicated, because the unspoken in Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* concerns the fact that a masculine term denotes individuals that common experience would lead one to include in the feminine gender, and that Sanskrit grammar should rubricate under the neuter gender! In this sense, the whole difficulty of placing individuals who escape the classifications imposed by Brahmanical culture into rigid categories emerges.

Having analysed the case of the term *bhrūkūṃsa*, Patañjali goes on with other examples: the term *khaṭvā*, ‘bed’, is of feminine grammatical gender, and the term *vṛkṣa*, ‘tree’, is of masculine grammatical gender, but neither a bed nor a tree exhibits feminine or masculine physical characteristics respectively. As Edmund Scharf (1995, p. 75) has noted, in order to break out of the circularity of a reasoning<sup>18</sup> that links gender belonging to the suffix and the suffix to physical or sexual characteristics, Patañjali states that:

“a speaker’s use of language must follow ordinary usage in order to convey meaning. And to convey meaning - Patanjali often states - is the purpose of

<sup>15</sup> I quote the translation from Vidyārṇava, 1918, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> On the irony inherent in the name Bṛhannalā see Doniger (1999, pp. 280–281), Pelissero (2002, p. 135) and Custodi (2007, pp. 208–229). On the role of hair in this episode cf. Hildebeitel (1998, pp. 143–176).

<sup>17</sup> The term *liṅga* undergoes an interesting resemantisation in Jaina reflection: as Zwilling and Sweet (2006, p. 374 ss.) have posited out, the Jaina texts distinguish between biological gender (*dravyaliṅga*: material sex mark, i.e. primary and secondary sexual characters) and psychological gender (*bhavalīṅga*: mental sex mark, which concerns the essence).

<sup>18</sup> *anyonyasaṃśraya* denotes the relationship in which cause and effect mutually imply each other, for reasoning incurs the logical fallacy of the vicious circle.

language. Therefore according to Patañjali, to allow language to fulfill its very purpose, linguistic convention limits a speaker's intention”

or, in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*”<sup>19</sup>. In the end, it is evident how Patañjali is forced to take note of the fact that, as Kunjunni Raja (1990, p. 118) wrote,

“this concept of gender (*liṅga*) does not apply to Sanskrit grammar. So Patañjali tries to explain grammatical gender in terms of the constituents (*guṇas*). He states clearly that the grammarians cannot take the grammatical gender to be the same as the gender of normal worldly usage (referring to the sex). Every object is characterised by different states of constituent element (*guṇa*), and these states constitute the gender of the thing”.

Regarding the implications of the *mithunas* that take place in ritual contexts, Charles Malamoud (2005, p. 24) has noted, concerning the passage in question by Patañjali, how the neuter gender is often perceived and considered as actually masculine:

“Il s'en faut de beaucoup que tous les objets dont le locuteur considère, en vertu de son expérience du monde, qu'ils sont inanimés soient désignés par des noms de genre neutre. Et pour ce qui est des êtres animés, et, possiblement, sexués, le genre des noms qui les désignent n'est pas un indice certain de leur sexe. [...] Le rapport entre genre et sexe relève donc de l'usage”.

## Non-heterosexual Individuals in Classical Indian Medical Texts

Within the IV section devoted to the study of the conditions of the body (*Śārīrasthāna*), the compiler of the *Caraka Saṃhitā*<sup>20</sup>, in chapter 2, aimed at analysing the nature of the semen, distinguishes various types of *klība* beginning with a question:

*kasmādviretāḥ pavanendriyo vā saṃskāravāhī naranāriṣaṇḍau | vakrī  
tatheryābhiratiḥ katham vā saṃjāyate vātikaṣaṇḍako vā ||*

“From what is born a hermaphroditic individual<sup>21</sup>, one whose sperm [is dispersed] by the wind<sup>22</sup>, an individual who ejaculates intermittently<sup>23</sup>, a male or female homosexual person [or a hermaphrodite?], an ambiguous individual [from the point of view of sexual behaviour], and also one who becomes

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein (1922, p. 149) (proposition 5.6).

<sup>20</sup> For the text see Sharma (1981).

<sup>21</sup> The term *dviretas*, lit. “double seminal fluid”, also indicates, in the *Brāhmaṇas*, the mare that has been impregnated by both a stallion and a donkey (cf. *EWAta*, s.v. *retas* and *SED*, s.v. *dviretas*).

<sup>22</sup> That is, someone who fails to ejaculate (cf. Cabezón, 2017, p. 394).

<sup>23</sup> That is, according to commentators, an individual who suffers from anaphrodesis and therefore needs to be stimulated using aphrodisiacs for his sperm to flow without difficulty (cf. *ibid.*).

aroused by watching others having sexual intercourse, as well as a castrated eunuch afflicted by the wind?" (CS IV, 2, 17).

With regard to the passage, a first consideration concerns the fact that Caraka asks the reasons for conditions whose causes belong to very different planes. In the first case (*dviretas*), biology (and embryology) comes into play, the answer being found in the fact that male and female semen mix in equal parts or in the fact that the sperm is diseased, resulting in an individual possessing both male and female sexual characteristics (*strīpūṃsalingī*, CS IV, 2, 18). As for the second case (the condition known as *pavanendriyatva*), the cause is related to a hypothetical influence of humidity, and rheumatism caused by it, on the production of sperm, or perhaps better on the ability to attain erection and thus to ejaculate: the wind (or air) affected the sperm receptacle (the testicles) of the one lying in the womb, that is, the foetus (*śukrāśayaṃ garbhagatasya*, CS IV, 2, 18)<sup>24</sup>. In the third case we are faced with sexual dysfunction that could have physical or psychological causes; however, the inability to cope with and efficiently conclude the sexual act, which is realised in ejaculating intermittently (*saṃskāravāha*), is once again traced in the text to the influence of the wind, which causes the door of the sperm receptacle to open (*śukrāśayadvāravighaṭṭanena*, CS IV, 2, 19). In the fourth case, note, first of all, how the most obvious and attested translation of the term *śaṇḍa*, which appears at the end of the first hemistich, with "castrated eunuch" is problematic. In fact, in context, the noun *śaṇḍa* can take on multiple meanings and a first translation could render the term with "homosexual" (in which case the noun could indicate the homosexual condition, male or female), whereby Caraka would be noting, through the question posed initially, that there are male homosexuals and not male homosexuals (i.e., women). Another translation could render the noun *śaṇḍa* as equivalent to "hermaphrodite" (whereby there are intersexual individuals with more masculine and/or less masculine characteristics); finally, a further possible translation could render *śaṇḍa* as "sterile individual (male or female)"<sup>25</sup>. The term *vakrī*, in the fifth case, is extremely significant and poses some problems regarding translation choices. By resorting to etymology to explain the use of this word, we find that *vakrī* refers to the verbal roots *vañk-* with the meaning of "to be bent or crooked" and *vañc-*, "to proceed bent" (cf. *KEWA*, s.v. *vañcati*) in the older language, to which the semantic nuance of "to deceive" is later added. The adjective *vakra-* thus designates an individual "bent, crooked or curved" (cf. *KEWA*, s.v.), but also "equivocal or ambiguous" and in the technical language of astronomy designates the "retrograde" movement of a celestial body. Furthermore, it should be noted that in the Sanskrit language, the term *vakrī-* is found as the first member in

<sup>24</sup> The *doṣas* are the three components of *prāṇa* (life energy) and they are called *vāta*, *pitta* and *kapha* (wind, bile, and phlegm). They have their natural seat in the middle part of the human body (*vāta* in the intestines, *pitta* in the navel and *kapha* in the chest). When the *doṣas* leave their natural seat, extending to other parts of the body, then diseases arise. On the doctrine of the *tridoṣa* see Filliozat (1964: 196 ff.) and White (1996: 21 ff.). On the influence of the wind as a cause of imbalances and thus of pathologies, for a reconstruction of the origins of the doctrine and for some illustrative passages from the classical works of *āyurveda*, see Wujastyk (1998: 115 ff.).

<sup>25</sup> This is the choice of Sharma (1981, p. 414). According to Meulenbeld (1999, p. 40), the *Caraka Saṃhitā* refers to the two types of *kliba* (male and female).

compounds, while the feminine of the adjective *vakra-* is *vakrā-*. Several problems emerge from this analysis and these observations. The *Caraka Saṃhitā* uses the term *vakrī*, which according to grammatical rules should belong to the feminine gender. Could such usage reflect the idea of associating a “bent or crooked” individual (in character and sexual behaviour) with effeminacy, lack of virility, or passivity, so that a female term would designate a passive homosexual male? Such an explanation seems unlikely to me, because in Sanskrit terms for male homosexual behaviour always belong to the male (or at most neutral) gender. Or does the term indicate an individual of the female gender whose behaviour does not meet heterosexual norms?<sup>26</sup> My translation of *vakrī* with “ambiguous” individual from the point of view of sexual behaviour tries to include both male and female individuals whose sexual behaviour constituted a “deviation” from the dominant norms and who were “equivocal” or “ambiguous” for the dharmic norms. Once again, the scientific analysis of an individual is based on a cultural construction, and this is confirmed by the fact that scientific classifications of non-heteronormative individuals prefigure a close relationship with Brahmanical ideology. Concerning voyeuristic paraphilia (sixth case), psychological explanations come into play (the origin lies in the jealousy of the parents or their being themselves affected by voyeurism, cf. *CS IV*, 2, 20). Finally, concerning the last case, designated by the term *ṣaṇḍaka*, once again it is the damp wind that affects performance, vigour, and virility. The term *ṣaṇḍaka*, emphasising the close connection between dharmic conception and medicine, is used in the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, in a context that deals with the subject of ritual impurity. The text (*MDhŚ IV*, 211), concerned with the categories of individuals from whom it is forbidden for the ritually pure individual to accept food, points to the *ṣaṇḍaka* as one of these categories. Moreover, it is significant that in the text the *ṣaṇḍakas* are named immediately after the *abhiśastas*, persons accused of some fault or crime that resulted in their demotion to the rank of outcastes—as if to suggest in the *ṣaṇḍakas* the presence of a fault that renders them impure—and immediately before prostitutes or *pumscalīs*, perhaps suggesting a possible common activity to survive.

The text compiled by Suśruta makes it possible to continue the analysis and complete the answers to these questions. Within the second chapter of section III, also dedicated to the study of the conditions of the body (*Śārīrasthāna*), the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*<sup>27</sup> questions the purification methods of semen and menstrual flow, identifying six categories of *klības*, which allow us to complete the queer lexical framework we are analysing. The text distinguishes:

1. the *āsekya* type (weak in ejaculation), who, having difficulty achieving an erection, attains it by ingesting another man’s sperm (*śukraṃ prāśya*, *SuS III*, 2, 38);

<sup>26</sup> In this case there might be some correspondence with the sixth type of *klība* identified in the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (see below).

<sup>27</sup> For the text of the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* see Nārāyaṇ Rām Āchārya ‘Kāvyaṅīrth’, 1945. Compare also the translations by Sharma (1999a, 1999b) and Bishagratna (1911).

2. The *saugandhika* type<sup>28</sup>, born from a purulent or foul-smelling vagina (*pūtiyonau jāyeta*, 39), achieves erection by smelling the genitals of a couple (*yoniśephasorgandhamāghraya*, 39);
3. The *kumbhika* (passive homosexual or receptive partner) type<sup>29</sup> undergoes anal penetration by another man (“does not keep the vow of chastity in his anus”, *gude ’brahmacaryādyah*, 40).
4. The *īrṣyaka* type is the impotent man whose sexual desire is stimulated by feelings of jealousy provoked by witnessing the sexual intercourse of others (*dṛṣṭvā vyavāyamanyeśām*, 41).
5. The fifth type, called *śaṇḍaka* (or *śaṇḍa*), exhibits womanly gestures (*strīceṣṭitākāro jāyete*, 42) and is spermless (*aśukrah*, 44), whereas the first four are nevertheless capable of producing sperm (*saretas*, 44). In this sense, Suśruta seems to identify, in a more certain and definite manner than Caraka did, the *śaṇḍa* with the castrated eunuch.
6. The last type of *klība* identified by Suśruta is the woman who exhibits manly gestures (or masculine behaviour, *naraceṣṭitā*, 43), the result of a woman who, when having sexual intercourse, moves like a mare on a man (*puruṣavadvā*, 43).

About lesbian relationships, analysis of some passages from the *dharmā* literature suggests that Brahmanical ideology feared sexual relations between women, and between girls, more than those between men, which is why dharmic norms deal unusually harshly with punishments for women who have sex with other women<sup>30</sup>. The Sanskrit vocabulary itself is much richer in terms designed to distinguish the different types of men who are not attracted to women than it is in terms (and concepts) capable of adequately describing female homoerotic desire. What has been mentioned so far, and the patriarchal fears for women’s relationships, are confirmed in a passage from the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, in which once again medical theories take the form of an ideological device, undergoing Brahmanical cultural influence. The consequences of a lesbian relationship, in fact, for Suśruta are terrible:

*yadā nāryāv upeyātām vṛṣasyantyaū kathamcana | muñcataḥ śukram  
anyonyam anasthis tatra jāyate ||*

“If two women have sexual intercourse, somehow both becoming aroused like bulls, both discharge semen into each other: in that case, a boneless being is born” (*SuS* III, 2, 47)<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> That is, effeminate, as “perfumed, fragrant” like a woman.

<sup>29</sup> *Kumbha* means “jar, pot”, hence *kumbhika* denotes a ‘small jar’. On the symbolic identification between the jar and the female womb in Indian culture and religious history, see Spanò (2023, p. 189).

<sup>30</sup> See *MDhS* VIII, 369-370 and Spanò (2022c, p. 82) for translation and bibliographical references.

<sup>31</sup> Bones, in fact, derive from the contribution of male semen (cf. Doniger O’Flaherty, 1980, p. 38). The mythical motif of the birth of beings “without bones” or “with cartilaginous bones”, or, conversely, of fleshless beings, refers, in the Brahmanical tradition, to the realisation of inappropriate *mithunas* and thus *bandhus*, or the failure to realise them. Thus in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* the failure to couple the recitation of a *ṛc* (verse of praise) with the *sāman* (chant), or vice versa, results in the production of only the bones or only the flesh, not the complete individual: *yad ṛcam asānmīm gāyed asthy eva jāyeta na māṃsam | yat sāmāṅcam gāyen māṃsam eva jāyeta nāsthi* (“If he intones the *ṛc* without the *sāman*, then bone is born but not flesh, if he intones the *sāman* without the *ṛc*, then flesh is born but not bone”, *JB* I, 259; cf. *Śaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* II, 1, 1). For the translation compare also Caland, 1919, p. 101.

In the *Nibandhasaṃgraha*<sup>32</sup>, Ḍalhaṇa's commentary on the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* dating between the 11th and 13th centuries, it is significant how a value judgment on the transgressive and unnatural nature of the sexual union between two women emerges in this passage. Indeed, the fruit of this sexual act, i.e. an individual with "small, cartilaginous bones" (*alpakomalāsthīh*) is defined by Ḍalhaṇa as a monster:

*atiśayetaiva pāpena śaṅdhād api nikṛṣṭānām vikṛtāpatyānām utpattihetum nirdiśannāha yadetyādi*

"It would indeed exceed in guilt as well [that] from a castrated eunuch, the cause of the birth of a repulsive and deformed offspring [as the fruit of an unnatural relationship<sup>33</sup>], which is said to indicate the sentence 'yadā etc.'" (Ḍalhaṇa *ad SuS* III,2, 47).

Not only has Brahmanical ideology assigned precise functions and roles to the three genders, but the patriarchal worldview that dominates it is reflected in the characteristics that even in medical works are associated with the female gender, in a sense that is not purely psychological, but physiological, whereby they have precise consequences for the sexuality of the unborn child. Thus,

*klaibyam bhīrutvam avaiśāradyam moho 'navasthānam adhogurutvam asahanaṃ śaithilyam mārḍavaṃ garbhāśayabībhāgas tathā yuktāni cāparāṇi strīkarāṇi ato viparītāni puruṣakarāṇi ubhayabhāgāvayavā napuṃsakakarāṇi bhavanti ||*

"weakness, timidity, lack of confidence, confusion, unsteadiness, heaviness in the lower parts, impatience, softness, yielding, the seed part of the uterus [= feminine], and also the uterine characteristics determine the feminine gender, while [characteristics] inverted determine the masculine gender; the components of both parts [present in equal measure] determine the neuter gender" (CS IV, 4, 14).

These statements are part of an embryological treatment aimed at establishing the gender and the affections or pathologies of the unborn. The compendium maker of the *Caraka Saṃhitā* specifies even more precisely what has been asserted so far, claiming that the observation of a woman's behaviour during pregnancy makes it possible to identify certain signs through which to establish the gender to which the conceived being will belong.

He asks:

*kukṣau strīpunnapuṃsām udarasthitānām | kiṃ lakṣaṇam*

"What is the sign in the womb of a foetus [lit. "residing in the womb"] female, male, or an individual of the neuter gender?" (CS IV, 2, 22).

<sup>32</sup> For the text see Vaidya Jādavaji Trikāmji Āchārya, Nārāyaṇ Rām Āchārya "Kāvyaṭīrya" (1938).

<sup>33</sup> The term *vikṛta*, in the course of linguistic history and different contexts, denotes a wide semantic field relating to incompleteness (cf. ṚV II, 38, 6c), deformity and mutilation (cf. *MDhŚ* IX, 247 and 291).

The answer to the question is significant on two levels. On the one hand, it reveals, once again, a collection of gender stereotypes on which the Brahmanical conception of characteristics attributable to the male and female was based. Furthermore, it seems significant that it is the (culturally attributed) connotations of female nature that are the object of classification. It is the woman's body that is under scrutiny in the field of embryology, and it is on her that the birth of a son, daughter, or *napuṃsaka* individual will depend. This explains how the pregnant woman has been the object of exaltation and constant attention by Brahmanical ideology. Pregnancy constitutes an important moment for the woman, but all attention is focused on the meticulous analysis and classificatory need whereby the organisation of the pregnant female body and all that is connected to it (actions aimed at satisfying needs and desires, gestures and movements, external forms) becomes the object of classification. In this way, classifications forge genders and reproduce them in 'scientific' terms to authorise, sanction, or tolerate certain behaviours. Thus, the stages of the entire course of pregnancy up to birth could be controlled, ultimately reinforcing the control devices over bodies so that unwanted births could be avoided. The female bodies that bear new offspring constitute in the Brahmanical vision, and regarding dharmic norms, the paradigm of the 'body-within-bodies': these bodies are to be organized, to be controlled in a reproductive function, and it is clear that medical theories, while not containing any prescriptions concerning the behaviour to be adopted by pregnant women, are nevertheless the product of a culture that has inscribed childbirth and gender differences in an ideological framework in which the birth of a son is certainly desirable, while that of a daughter or an individual of the third gender is much less so<sup>34</sup>.

*savyāṅgaceṣṭā puruṣārthinī strī strīsvapnapānāśanaśilaceṣṭā | savyāttagarbhā na ca vṛttagarbhā savyapradugdhā striyameva sūte || punnam tvato liṅgaviparyayeṇa vyāmiśraliṅgā prakṛtiṃ tṛtīyām |*

"The woman who moves the limbs of the left side [of the body], who shows that she seeks typically masculine forms of accomplishment<sup>35</sup>, whose sleeping, drinking, feeding, conduct, and movements are feminine, whose

<sup>34</sup> The birth of a male child is the event that is most desired in the texts of the Brahmanical tradition: "By far the most important and most desirable is the natural son (*aurasa*), the legitimate biological son of a man and his lawful wife. It is hard to overstate the praise and importance given to a natural son, especially the firstborn, in Hindu texts from the earliest Vedas right through to the modern period" (Davis, 2018, p. 156).

<sup>35</sup> Śarma's translation (1981, p. 415) "desire for man" takes more account of sexual conduct (desiring men is a sure sign of the birth of a female) but seems to erase the many layers of meanings attached to the expression *puruṣārtha* in Indian cultural history. More interesting appears to be the Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society's (1949, p. 377) "desire for man's society", which insists more on the sociopolitical aspects of the conception of *puruṣārtha*, i.e. the idea, defined around the first centuries of the Common Era (cf. Olivelle, 1993: 216 ff. and Flood, 1997: 13 ff.), which identifies four specific ends that male individuals belonging to the first three classes of the traditional social hierarchy must strive to realise (see also Sharma, 1999a, 1999b). These ends are *kāma*, *artha*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. It seems to me that in the folds of the text of the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, there are also ideological undertones that go beyond the purely medical sphere. What emerges is a criticism of women who claim to participate in the institutions of male society and the fear that women will replace men in the roles that have traditionally been assigned to them. This fear is expressed by the outcome of childbirth: if the woman shows a desire to invade male space, a daughter will be born.

embryo is placed on the left side<sup>36</sup>, and who does not have a round belly, whose left side [i.e., the left breast] produces milk, indeed begets a female; on the other hand, with the signs reversed then [begets] a male; [a woman showing] the signs mixed [begets] an individual of the third gender<sup>37</sup>” (CS IV, 2, 24-25ab).

*Caraka Saṃhitā*’s reflections, therefore, shift to the investigation of certain factors that, while not resulting in the death of the foetus, cause it to develop abnormalities or deformities (*vikṛtis*). These abnormalities are congenital in that they are caused by an imbalance, during gestation, of the *doṣas*, altered by aggravating factors such as diet or motor activity. These abnormalities affect both the future female and the future male, and some of them are on a more biological level: for example, the outcome could be the birth of an infertile female (*vandhya*), if it is the female semen component that causes the *vikṛti*, or the birth of a *pūtipraja* (a ‘rotten creature’, i.e., a miscarriage) if these abnormalities affect the female or male component.

### The Case of the *Vārtās*

However, *vikṛtis* may also concern the birth of individuals whose characters make assignment to one gender rather than another problematic. This too is expressed, in a medicalising perspective that also borrows from Brahmanical cultural coordinates, in terms of physiological dysfunctions; however, it is interesting how in this passage Caraka seems to identify two further genders or two subcategories within the third gender. It states:

*yadā tvasyāḥ śoṇite*<sup>38</sup> *garbhāsayabījabhāgāvayavaḥ strikarāṇām ca śarīrabī-jabhāgānām ekadeśaḥ pradoṣam āpadyate tadā stry ākṛti bhūyiṣṭhām astriyaṃ*<sup>39</sup> *vārtām nāma janayati*

<sup>36</sup> On the associations between the right and the male gender and the left and the female gender, see for the Indian context, from the earliest period, Gonda (1972: 4 ff). In general, see Hertz (1909).

<sup>37</sup> The use of the expression *prakṛtiṃ tṛtīyām* in response to a question in which the term *napuṃs* (non-male, neutral) was used suggests its synonymy in usage, at least in a medical context. In general, the birth of a male depends on the predominance of *śukra* (sperm) at the moment of conception, the birth of a female on a predominance of *rakta*, i.e., “blood”, intended as the female element connected with the menstrual flow. *Rakta* is thus to be understood as “female procreative fluid” (cf. Meulenbeld (1999, vol. IB: 78)). On the symbolism of sperm and blood in Indian religious culture see Doniger O’Flaherty (1980: 20 ff.), Smith (1991: 32 ff.) and Spanò (2019: 74 ff.).

<sup>38</sup> Meulenbeld (1999, p. 42) understands the term *śoṇita* as “female procreative fluid”, a translation I accept, while pointing out that most translations render the term *śoṇita* as “ovum”. In support of my translation choice, it should be noted, with Meulenbeld, that Caraka certainly did not possess sufficient anatomical knowledge to have identified the female ovum. In āyurvedic theories, the noun *śoṇita* identifies, in women (together with *artava*, the “menstrual flow”), the seventh *dhātus*, i.e., the seventh bodily constituent. The first six *dhātus* are common to both sexes: *rasa* (the “secretion of digestion” or “chyle”), *rakta* (“blood”), *māṃsa* (“meat”), *medas* (“fat”), *asthi* (“bone”), *majja* (“marrow”). The seventh corresponds in men to semen or sperm (*śukra* or *retas*), in women to *śoṇita* (or *artava*).

<sup>39</sup> According to the commentator Cakrapāṇidatta (*ad CS IV, 4, 30*): *astriyam iti asaṃpūrṇastrīlakṣaṇām* (“*astriyam* means with characteristics that are not completely feminine”). For the text cf. Vaidya Jādavaji Trikamji Ācārya, 1941.

“But if in her procreative fluid suffers a defect the part of the [female] semen components of the womb and a part of the semen components that produce the female body<sup>40</sup>, then [the woman] generates an individual of non-female gender, but with a primarily female body form, called *vārtā*” (CS IV, 4, 30).

The feminine term and thus its meaning are somewhat obscure. Already Cakrapāṇidatta, author in the 11th century of the Common Era of an *Āyurvedadīpikā* (“Lamp of Āyurveda”), a commentary on the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, stated that the term *vārtā* must certainly indicate some specific pathological condition in the scientific language of the *Caraka Saṃhitā*. Still, he does not provide any further information:

*vārtāṃ nāmeti vārtāsaṃjñā śāstrasamayakṛtā*

“[The expression] ‘called *vārtā*’ refers, according to scientific conventions<sup>41</sup>, to the technical term called *vārtā*” (Cakrapāṇidatta *ad* CS IV, 4, 30).

Who, then, are the *vārtās*? It would seem to be possible to answer that they are individuals whose outward appearance, i.e., secondary sexual characters, appear predominantly female, but whose gender assignment at birth is not female, because they have male primary sexual characters. Today we would likely call them intersexual individuals, i.e., persons in whom both male and female sexual characters are present. What is the cause of the birth of such individuals? If, as we have seen, the abnormalities are determined by defects or imbalances in the humours, the humour connected with air or wind may be involved in this case. Already in the case of the birth of individuals with problems related to the inability to ejaculate, the *Caraka Saṃhitā* had called into question the wind that disperses the sperm by hitting the testicles. Let us remember that in the āyurvedic system, *vātadoṣa* concerns all the processes of the body, especially the movements of the lower part of the body, but also circulation (both blood and lymph), digestion, and of course breathing. As far as the topic at hand is concerned, it is the *vāta* that determines conception by setting in motion the process of the union of the sperm with the ovum. Now, the term *vārtā* could represent a *varia lectio* of *vāta*<sup>42</sup>, constructed from the masculine noun *vāta*, “wind”: in this sense, it could designate a “female individual with a pathological affection of the wind humour”. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the negative meanings of the adjective *vārtta* include “useless, unworthy”. On the other hand, the feminine noun *vārt(t)ā* refers to the semantic sphere of economy and designates, for example in the *Arthaśāstra*, certain activities by which one earns one’s living, in particular agriculture, cattle breeding, and trade. A final meaning of the noun *vārt(t)ā* worth reflecting on is that of “gossip, rumour”. All these meanings refer back to the verbal root *vṛt-* which means “to turn, to turn around”, from which, in composition, *āvṛt-*, “to invert”, and *apāvṛtta*, “inverted, turned inside out”. Having examined these meanings, let us return to the initial question: who were these people and why are they referred to as *vārtā* in the

<sup>40</sup> The noun *bījā* (“seed”) often denotes those parts of the embryo from which organs will develop (Meulenbeld, 1999, Vol. IB: 79).

<sup>41</sup> That is, those in use at the time of the treatise.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *SED*, s.v. Significantly, Monier-Williams’ definition of the term for *vārt(t)ā* is “a female monster”!

*Caraka Saṃhitā*? From the meanings brought to light, one could venture some observations: the *vārtās* are people whose sexuality is problematic for the physicians and Brahmanical cultural categories. They are not simply individuals belonging to the *ṛtīyapraṅkti*, because in them the primary sexual characters do not correspond with the secondary ones. They are “useless” individuals from the point of view of the possibility of generation, as they are probably sterile<sup>43</sup>, but perhaps moral and social stigmatisation should also be read into the term: they are also “unworthy”. In the *vārtās* everything appears the opposite of how it should be—a female appearance but male sexual organs—and certainly, these *monstra* must have made people talk a lot, igniting gossip. And we wonder what activities they could have turned to for a living. Then as now, in a society profoundly underpinned by a heteronormative view of gender roles, these people were perhaps left only to trade in that very exceptionality, the anomaly inscribed in their bodies from birth<sup>44</sup>. In this sense, the bodies of the *vārtās* appear to us as authentic “bodies without organs”: disengaged from the reproductive function, they show no organisation, i.e., they are not organised in accordance with and in function of the norms—of society, biology, jurisprudence, religion. Generally escaping framing within the hegemonic Brahmanical ideology based on the notion of *dharma*, these bodies represent a dangerous anomaly.

### The Case of the *Ṛṇaputrikas*

The problem of gender-related anomalies also concerns the male component involved in the formation of the embryo. Thus, the *Caraka Saṃhitā* continues its examination:

*yaḍā tvasya bīje bījabhāgāvayavaḥ puruṣakarāṇām ca śarīrabījabhāgānām ekadeśaḥ pradoṣam āpadyate tadā puruṣākṛti bhūyiṣṭham apuruṣam ṛṇaputrikam nāma janayati*

“But if in his semen the part of the sperm components that produce the male body suffers a defect, then [the woman] generates an individual of non-male gender called *ṛṇaputrika* [straw doll], but with a primarily male body form” (CS IV, 4, 31).

The compound *ṛṇaputrika* belongs to the masculine (or neuter!) gender, but in Sanskrit literature it is found in the feminine as *ṛṇaputrikā*. The term *putrikā*

<sup>43</sup> The uselessness of those who do not bring children into the world, their residual condition concerning a social model that prescribes the need for men and women to procreate, had already been stigmatised in Vedic times. For instance, in a strophe of the *Atharvaveda* in the Śaunaka recension (XIV, 2, 33b), in the context of one of the most famous compositions used during the wedding ceremony and dedicated to the marriage of Sūryā, the daughter of the Sun (Sūrya), the woman who still lives with her father is designated with the verbal adjective *nyaktā* (“residual, superfluous”, i.e. “spinster”). Cf. for the interpretation of this term the convincing remarks of Jan Gonda (1964, p. 12).

<sup>44</sup> The exercise of prostitution appears as an activity historically connected to communities of non-heteronormative individuals, albeit in different and often complex forms on the contemporary horizon and particularly in urban contexts. About traditional *hijra* communities, see Spanò (2021; 2023), with bibliography; regarding the 19th century, Hinchy, 2019, *passim*.

denotes a “doll” or a “puppet”, but it also means “daughter” in a specific meaning that refers to dharmic legal usages. The most common Sanskrit term for denoting a “daughter” is *duhitṛ*, whereas *putrikā* is a feminine noun constructed based on the masculine *putra*, “son”. The anomaly reverberates on the meaning: *putrikā* denotes a “daughter who is at the same time a son”, i.e., a woman (biologically such) who is nevertheless regarded as a son, i.e., as a male individual. This “daughter who is at the same time a son” is chosen to play the role of a male child by a childless man (*aputra*) to give continuity to his lineage and for hereditary succession. The *putrikā* then, should she in turn have a son (*putrikāputra*)<sup>45</sup>, will have the task of bringing up the son for the father who had no sons. Thus, in the *Mānava Dharmasāstra*, among the various dharmically legitimate ways of ensuring a male offspring for a man, it is prescribed that:

*aputro 'nena vidhinā sutām kurvīta putrikām*

“a childless man can make his daughter a 'daughter who is at the same time a son' through this rule” (*MDhŚ IX, 127ab*)<sup>46</sup>.

We are moving into the field of those customs concerning the passage of inheritance and the need to ensure offspring for men who, for various reasons, had not fathered a male child. Such legal rules included, for instance, the practice, akin to levirate, of *niyoga*, i.e., the formalisation of sexual union between a woman and her husband's brother in the event of the latter being impotent, suffering from a disabling disease or deceased<sup>47</sup>.

However, the term *putrikā* (feminine) also finds further technical use in the medical field in another sense, denoting in general “something small” and specifically, in the plural, the small ear bones called *tragus* and *antitragus*. Thus, in the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, within the section on the operations of piercing and bandaging earlobes, the case is dealt with where the earlobes, as a result of piercing,

<sup>45</sup> In the social hierarchy, the son of a *putrikā* (*putrikāputra*) maintained a less prestigious status than that of a son begotten in the more customary and dharmically better manner. His birth remains indelibly not completely pure and therefore the texts prescribe that a *putrikāputra* cannot be chosen as a Brahman to officiate at Vedic sacrifices. He is equated with an individual who was adopted, or conceived before marriage, or born of an unmarried daughter, or born after the father's death, or has two *pravaras* (i.e. two lines of ancestors) in his lineage. See, *i.a.*, *BŚS II, 3, 3*.

<sup>46</sup> The exceptionality of the norm (cf. Davis, 2018, p. 156; Jamison, 2018, pp. 148–149) seems to prompt the Manu legislator to resort to a mythical foundation. Thus, the text immediately specifies that one of humanity's progenitors, Dakṣa, availed himself of this norm, designating certain *putrikās* to ensure the continuity of his lineage (cf. *MdhŚ IX, 128*). Although the term does not occur in the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, the author of this authoritative code of laws nevertheless specifies that, when the groom chooses a bride, it is necessary to ascertain that the woman, in addition to not being affected by incurable diseases (as the gloss of Bālabhaṭṭa specifies), has a brother (*bhrātṛmatīm*, *YS I, 3, 53a*). The clarification is contextualised by later commentators. For example, Vijñāneśvara's *Mitākṣarā* specifies that for a girl to have a brother meant that she was protected from the risk that she might be commissioned to take on the role of *putrikā*, and thus be forced to return to the paternal home. This task was the father's decision and the daughter who would play the role of *putrikā* evidently had no say in the decision (cf. Vidyārṇava, 1918, p. 104). For the text of the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, I refer to Nārāyaṇ Rām Āchārya, 1949.

<sup>47</sup> On the practice of *niyoga*, forbidden in the medieval age as “an interdicted use in the *kali* age” (*kalivarjya*), see Pellegrini (2001), Davis (2018, pp. 156–157) and Jamison (2018, p. 136).

have become completely detached, so that it is necessary to resort to an operation called *nirvedhima*. The text states:

*kṣīṇaputrikāśrito nirvedhimaḥ*

“The *nirvedhima* is resorted to if the *putrikās* [tragus and antitragus] are ruined” (*SuS* I, 16, 10).

If the first meaning of the feminine noun *putrikā* is projected onto the semantic sphere of sterility or impotence, in which we are moving with the passages of the *Caraka Saṃhitā* that are the subject of this study, and if the second is configured as a technical term of medical vocabulary, on the other hand, it seems to me that the meaning to be taken more into account is the one related to dolls or puppets, which, although they show female or male features on the outside, do not properly have sexual organs nor strictly speaking belong to a gender. A *putrika* is neither male nor female, thanks also to the gender shift from feminine (*putrikā*) to masculine (or neuter) performed within the text. The gender shift seems to emphasise precisely the impossibility of classifying the anomalous body of the *tṛṇaputrika*, which is not male but shows external male characteristics: it is nothing more than a straw doll, a body, once again, useless, because it lacks the possibility of generating. This further semantic extension to the sphere of uselessness derives from the first member of the compound: *tṛṇa*. The gender-neutral term generically means “grass” or “straw”. Regarding the etymology of the term, Jan Gonda (1985, p. 28) already urged caution. Mayrhofer (*KEWA*, s.v. *tṛṇa*) accounts for some attempts to etymologise the term, among which the most accepted one traces the noun *tṛṇa*- to an ie. root (*s*) *ter-* with the meaning of “to be rigid”, and which refers to word families (both in Greek and other Indo-European languages) denoting the rigid sheaths or thorns of plants (the comparison with the English “thorn” is worthwhile). While in Vedic rituality and Brahmanical culture in general, herbs have a function related to magical healing, purification, and the promotion of fertility, nevertheless, among the semantic connotations inherent to our theme, the term *tṛṇa*- denotes in some expressions something useless or an object of contempt, a meaning that emerges in various contexts, mostly related to the observance of dharmic norms. Thus, during the celebration of a *śrāddha*—i.e., a funeral ceremony in honour of the dead that includes offerings with water and fire to the gods and ancestors, and gifts and food to the relatives present and the Brahmins attending the celebration -, the *Viṣṇu Smṛti* (LXXIII, 25) states that the food offered to the officiants that they have not consumed and the used and worthless grass are scattered next to the leftovers<sup>48</sup>. Such semantic nuance is delineated in other dharma texts, such as the *Viṣṇu Dharmasāstra*, V, 58, where the punishment inflicted for those who cut grass is the lowest (cf. Gonda, 1982, p. 14), or, in Kullūka’s gloss to *MDhŚ* IV, 70, where the prohibition for the *snātaka* (i.e., the young man who, having completed the stage of *brahmacārin* as a student of the Vedas at the house of a *guru*, has performed an ablution or *snāna* before returning to his father’s house) to cut the grass without

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Julius Jolly’s translation (1860, p. 236): “The Brahmanas having eaten and being satisfied, let him sprinkle the food (as much as has been left by them) and the grass with the Mantra, ‘Mayest thou not fail me,’ and strew the food near the leavings”.

reason is understood as a prohibition against performing useless or fruitless actions (cf. *ibid.*: 15). Perhaps the most interesting reference within the *dharma* literature is found in *Baudhāyana Gṛhya Śeṣasūtra* (I, 5, 2 ff.), where sand used for ritual purposes becomes useless when mixed with various substances, including grass (*tṛṇa*): the effect on ritual is that it would lead to nothing, its effectiveness would be annihilated. Gonda (1982, p. 27) notes: “Here *tṛṇa* probably is mainly useless, used, worthless (rests of) grasses”.

In the *Kena Upaniṣad*<sup>49</sup>, too, the grass is used as a metaphor for something insignificant, insubstantial. It is said that the ancient Vedic gods, not recognising the *brahman* as the foundation on which their victory, glory, and power rested, deceived themselves, believing that these depended on them alone. The *brahman* then presented himself to each one of them, but none of the gods recognised him, rather they mistook him for a ghost (*yakṣa*). Agni, the Fire, approached him, and the ghost, in order to be recognised, “placed a blade of grass in front of him and [said]: ‘Burn him’” (*tasmai tṛṇam nidadhāv etaddaheti*, *KU* IV, 6): the god tried with his devouring power, but he did not succeed in burning the lowest of beings<sup>50</sup>. Moving within the epic literature, the grass, in the classification of living beings contained in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*<sup>51</sup>, occupies the lowest place, because, after beings endowed with the ability to move, come vegetables, which are immobile, and the grass represents the last category:

*udbhijjāḥ sthāvarāḥ proktās teṣāṃ pañcaiva jātayah | vṛkṣagulma latāvallyas  
tvaksārās tṛṇajātayah* 1171

“Vegetables are said to be immobile, so of them, there are five species: trees, shrubs, creepers, the reeds [whose essence is the bark], and the grass species” (*MBh* VI, 1, 5, 17).

Even in later literature, this sense of the noun *tṛṇa* persists. For instance, in the second *parihāsa* of the *Narmamālā* (“Garland of Amusements”) by Kṣemendra (11th century Common Era)<sup>52</sup>, the author pillories the figure of a *śramaṇikā*, an ascetic or Buddhist nun who behaves questionably by pimping to arrange meetings between lovers<sup>53</sup>. To denote the disdain the *śramaṇikā* holds for the most sacred things, Kṣemendra states that she even mocks Arundhatī, the paragon of virtue and

<sup>49</sup> For the text cf. Olivelle, 1998.

<sup>50</sup> The expression is repeated (*KU* IV, 10) regarding Vāyu, the Wind.

<sup>51</sup> For the text see Sukthankar *et al.*, 1933-1971.

<sup>52</sup> For the text see, Kaul Śāstrī (1923). Compare also Baldissera (2005, p. 78).

<sup>53</sup> In the Buddhist context, as Edgerton (1953, s.v. *śramaṇaka*) points out, the term *śramaṇaka* (fem. *śramaṇikā*) is connoted “clearly with pejorative force”, meaning: “wretched, contemptible, or objectionable (Buddhist) monk”.

wife of the sage Vasiṣṭha, and treats the goddess Gaṅgā carelessly, as useless, using the term *ṛṇa*:

*arundhatīmapi kṣipraṃ pratārayati līlayā |  
purāṇapuṃścalī sā hi jāhnavīm<sup>54</sup> manyate ṛṇaṃ |311*

“She immediately deceives by play Arundhatī as well; old whore, she indeed regards the Ganges as straw” (*Narmamālā* II, 31).

The body of the *ṛṇaputrika*, therefore, appears wilted, withered like straw, it is also, like the body of a *vārtā*, a body without organs, because it has no organisation intended for reproduction; rather, like a puppet, it has been emptied of its organs and filled with straw: as such, it is useless from the point of view of the gender ideology advocated by the Brahmanical *dharma*.

## Conclusions

Smith (1982, p. 44), reflecting on the concept of canon as a subtype of the genre list, wrote that: “The list is, perhaps, the most archaic and pervasive of genres”. The analysis of some passages from ancient Indian grammarians on the notion of gender has highlighted how grammatical classifications come up against cases where the grammatical gender does not correspond to the sexual gender exhibited by some individuals. These issues find a reformulation, from a different perspective, in the classical works of Indian medicine; they reveal, concerning non-heteronormative individuals in general, and specifically for the two cases of the *vārtās* and the *ṛṇaputrikas*, a conception that reflects, in many ways, the Brahmanical anxiety for the compilation of lists or taxonomies and the ideology that over the centuries has framed these phenomena within the perimeter of the notion of *dharma*, that is, of socio-cosmic order. In the Brahmanical *Weltanschauung*, which has elaborated the idea of *dharma* and at the same time claimed to be based on it, what escapes the possibility of realising the *mithuna*, i.e., fertile couplings, to construct the *bandhus* that design the relationships within the cosmos, is discarded as useless. Such are the individuals belonging to the *ṛṇīyapraṅkti*, the third gender: they, though recognised as being part of reality, that is itself a reflection of *dharma*, are nevertheless relegated to sterile presence. In the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* and the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, the birth of individuals is presented as an abnormality, the result of defects or deviations from the norm (*dharma*), so their birth falls within the realm of pathology. The Deleuzian metaphor of the “body without organs” turns out to be a useful key to understanding the ideological foundations on which classical medicine has built its analysis of these individuals, particularly in reference to the *vārtās* and *ṛṇaputrikas*, whose exceptionality in the medical texts is recorded, analysed in its causes, but

<sup>54</sup> “Daughter of Jahnu”. According to the myth, of which we find references in both the *Matsya Purāṇa* (104. 13; 110. 7; 183. 73) and the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (91. 58), when the Gaṅgā descended from heaven to flow onto the earth, it flooded the hermitage of the sovereign-ascetic Jahnu, who, in order to curb his pride, drank it. Having subsequently appeased his anger, Jahnu pushed the Gaṅgā out of his right ear: for this reason, the Gaṅgā is considered the “daughter of Jahnu”.

also interpreted and placed within the framework of the dharmic norm, precisely from the names assigned to designate them. In the light of the analyses conducted, it seems to be possible to reread in the classificatory practices of Brahmanical medical texts what Michel Foucault noted regarding the classificatory practices of 19th-century Western psychiatry: the need to give a name to

“une nature qui s’oubliait assez pour échapper à la loi, mais se souviendrait assez d’elle-même pour continuer à produire encore des espèces, même là où il n’y a plus d’ordre” (Foucault, 1976, p. 60).

In Brahmanical India, the law imposed on bodies is that notion of *dharma* recalled several times. Foucault continues:

“La mécanique du pouvoir qui pourchasse tout ce disparate ne prétend le supprimer [...]: elle l’enfonce dans les corps, elle le glisse sous les conduites, elle en fait un principe de classement et d’intelligibilité” (*ibidem*).

Female and male bodies, maternal bodies, bodies suitable for reproduction, useless bodies as they are incapable of reproduction: each body is classified, represented, controlled, and disciplined, starting from conception, according to its adherence to the notion of *dharma*. The body, to paraphrase Michel Foucault again, is the space in which the construction of power relations, hierarchies, and the taxonomies that support them is concentrated. The discourses constructed by Brahmins on bodies, in the different perspectives that the texts considered in this article take on, provide, as Barbara Holdrege (1998, p. 370) has written,

“a well documented example of the complex hierarchical taxonomies that religious traditions construct to distinguish, rank, and interconnect different types of bodies”.

The critical analysis of the texts and the examination of the semantic stratifications of which the single terms are bearers thus make it possible to highlight the relations and reciprocal implications between knowledge and power, between medical science and Brahmanical ideology in ancient India.

#### **Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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