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# The Story of Sāvitrī in the Mahābhārata:

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## a Lineal Interpretation

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SIMON BRODBECK

### Abstract

*This paper presents a new interpretation of the story of Sāvitrī as presented in the Mahābhārata. Sāvitrī is viewed as an intended putrikā, or lineal daughter, for her father, and the death of her husband and the misfortunes of her father-in-law are explained as corollaries of this circumstance; but at the last minute Sāvitrī switches her allegiance to her husband and his line, becoming a pativrātā rather than a putrikā. Following a prompt in the Mahābhārata text, the paper concludes with an exploration, on the Sāvitrī model, of Draupadī's relationship to the Pāṇḍava line. The death of the Draupadeyas and the resuscitation of Parikṣit are viewed in terms of a symbolic switch from the putrikā to the pativrātā mode of operation.*

### Introduction

In the *Mahābhārata*, the story of Sāvitrī is told by the ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya, in seven chapters (3.277–283), in response to the following question voiced by Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava:

*asti sīmantinī kācid dṛṣṭapūrvātha vā śrutā |  
pativrātā mahābhāgā yatheyam drupadātmajā ||*

Has anyone before ever seen or heard of such a woman as this daughter of Drupada [that is, Draupadī], so noble and so intent on serving her husbands?

*Mahābhārata* 3.277:3, tr. Smith 2009, p. 215

Accordingly, in Indian history and elsewhere, the story of Sāvitrī – which is illustrated on a sculptural panel from a now ruined temple to Śiva near the village of Bāgh<sup>1</sup> – has served as a paradigmatic story of devoted wifedom. It functions in this way when it is mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and narrated in various Purāṇas;<sup>2</sup> and in his eighteenth-century *Strīdharmapaddhati*, Tryambakayajvan presents Sāvitrī as a model *pativrātā* – a woman avowed to her husband.

<sup>1</sup>See Majumdar 1956. There are also temples dedicated to the goddess Sāvitrī, for example at Pushkar in Rajasthan and at Bhubaneswar in Orissa.

<sup>2</sup>Sītā says to Rāma: “Do you not know, my mighty husband, that I bow to your will, that I am as faithful to you as Sāvitrī was to Satyavat, Dyumatsena’s son?” (*dyumatsenasutaṃ vīra satyavantam anuvratām | sāvitrīm iva mām viddhi tvam ātmavaśavartinīm || Rāmāyaṇa* 2.27:6, tr. Pollock 1986, p. 140). *Rāmāyaṇa* 5.\*548, interpolated after 5.22:7, gives a list of faithful wives and their husbands, including Sāvitrī and Satyavat. For a list of Purāṇa versions of the Sāvitrī story, see Anand 1988, p. 2 n.5.

In her study of the *Strīdharmapaddhati*, Julia Leslie summarises the *Mahābhārata*'s Sāvitrī story:

Sāvitrī is born to King Aśvapati of the Madra people, by the grace of the goddess Sāvitrī, after he has offered oblations with the *sāvitrī* formula regularly for eighteen years. When she grows up, since no man asks to marry her, Aśvapati sends her on a pilgrimage to find a husband. She chooses Satyavat, who lives with his mother and blind father in exile in the forest. Although Sāvitrī learns that he is doomed to die within a year, she marries him anyway and joins the exiled family. As the day of his death approaches, Sāvitrī undertakes the severe *tapas* of standing day and night for three days. On the fourth day, she accompanies her husband into the forest. When Satyavat collapses and Yama comes to take his soul away, Sāvitrī follows, answering Yama with such meek wisdom that he gives her three [separate] wishes (always excluding Satyavat's life). She asks first, that her father-in-law will regain his sight; secondly, that he will regain his kingdom; and thirdly, that her own father will have a hundred sons. Given a fourth wish, she asks that she and Satyavat will also have a hundred sons. The fifth wish is given without qualification: Satyavat is freed.

Leslie 1989, pp. 313–314

It is wonderful the way Sāvitrī gets the better of Yama. She impresses him with verses, and he offers her any boon other than her husband's life and tells her to turn back. She names her boon; but she keeps on with the verses, always forcing another boon. She keeps up the pressure, and eventually Yama cracks.

The story of Sāvitrī was one of the first Sanskrit stories to make an impact in Europe; in the nineteenth century it was translated into several Germanic languages. It has been translated as part of the *Mahābhārata* several times since Kisari Mohan Ganguli (in the late-nineteenth-century Roy edition): by Johannes van Buitenen (in the Chicago edition, translating the Poona version), and most recently by Will Johnson (in the Clay Sanskrit Library edition, translating Nīlakaṇṭha's 'vulgate' version) and John Smith (in the Penguin edition, translating the Poona version).<sup>3</sup>

The story has been discussed and/or interpreted in translators' introductions,<sup>4</sup> as well as by numerous other commentators and/or retellers, including – in addition to the aforementioned Tryambakayajvan – Gustav Holst, who was responsible for the words and music of a one-act opera *Savitri* (premiered in London in 1916; see Trend 1921); Johann Jakob Meyer, who called Sāvitrī “the pearl of all Indian women” (Meyer 1930, p. 427); Aurobindo Ghose, whose long allegorical poem ‘Savitri: a Legend and a Symbol’ was left unfinished at his death in 1950 (Aurobindo 1995); Herman Lommel, who connected the story of Sāvitrī with the Vedic story of the marriage of Soma and Sūryā (Lommel 1955–1958); John Alphonso-Karkala, who compared it with the story of Lemminkäinen's resurrection in *Kalevala* 15 (Alphonso-Karkala 1973); Brad Weiss, who advanced a structuralist approach (Weiss 1985); Narendranath Patil and Subhash Anand, whose symbolic interpretations focused on the role of education as a second birth (Patil 1983, pp. 80–85; Anand 1988); Vidyut Aklujkar, who compared the *Mahābhārata* version with two modern versions (Aklujkar 1991); Konrad

<sup>3</sup>For these translations, see Ganguli 1970 (reprint), pp. 570–585 ('Vana Parva' Chapters CCLXLI–CCLXLVII); van Buitenen 1975, pp. 760–778; Johnson 2005, pp. 154–217; Smith 2009, pp. 214–233. Van Buitenen's translation is prefaced by a chapter-by-chapter summary of the story, which is reproduced, for reference, as Appendix I.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, van Buitenen 1975, pp. 214–215; Johnson 2005, pp. 18–19; Smith 2009, p. lii.

Meisig, who saw in the Sāvitrī story an example of successful human revolt against cruel fate (Meisig 1994); Gouri Lad and Stephanie Jamison, who both focused on Sāvitrī's marital self-determination (Lad 1993, pp. 232–233; Jamison 1996, pp. 245–247); Chris Chapple, who focused on the efficacy of Sāvitrī's *tapas* (Chapple 2006); Kevin McGrath, who sees her as a “woman hero” (McGrath 2009, pp. 106–109); Anita Ray, who discusses the story in terms of the narrative representation of the feminine (Ray 1998 and 2006); and Michael Nichols, who discusses its representation of Death (Nichols 2012, pp. 23–25). In various Purāṇic versions (but not in the *Mahābhārata* version) the story is connected with the worship of the banyan tree, as discussed by Sadashiv Dange (Dange 1963) and Asko Parpola (Parpola 1998 and 2000).

In this paper I concentrate on the version of the Sāvitrī story in the Poona reconstituted *Mahābhārata* (3.277–283, = Sukthankar 1942, pp. 960–990). I argue that the story can profitably be seen in terms of lineal conflict between the families of Sāvitrī and Satyavat, and that in those terms it provides an interpretive window into the *Mahābhārata* in general, and the character of Draupadī in particular. Although I am convinced by this lineal interpretation and hope the reader will be, nonetheless “we do well to resist all impulse to secure the single correct reading, since no such thing really exists” (Pollock 1985, p. 53).

### Yama's boons

Yama's five boon-offering speeches are as follows:

*nivarta tuṣṭo 'smi tavānaya girā svarākṣaravyañjanahetuyuktayā |  
varam vṛṇīṣveha vināśya jīvitam dadāni te sarvam anindite varam ||*

Turn back! But I am pleased with these words you have spoken, every consonant and vowel, every point of your argument. Choose any boon, other than the life of this man! I shall give you what you want in full, blameless lady.

3.281:25, tr. Smith 2009, p. 224

*manonukūlam budhabuddhivardhanam tvayāham ukto vacanam hitāśrayam |  
vinā punaḥ satyavato 'sya jīvitam varam dvitīyam varayasva bhāmini ||*

This most salutary speech that you have spoken to me pleases my heart and enhances the wisdom of the wise. Lovely girl, choose further a second boon, other than the life of this Satyavat!

3.281:30, tr. Smith 2009, p. 225

*pīpāsitasyeva yathā bhavet payas tathā tvayā vākyam idam samīritam |  
vinā punaḥ satyavato 'sya jīvitam varam vṛṇīṣveha śubhe yad ichasi ||*

These words you have spoken are like water to a thirsty man. Choose further whatever boon you wish, fair lady, other than the life of this Satyavat!

3.281:36, tr. Smith 2009, p. 225

*udāhṛtam te vacanam yad aṅgane śubhe na tādṛk tvad ṛte mayā śrutam |  
anena tuṣṭo 'smi vināśya jīvitam varam caturtham varayasva gaccha ca ||*

Fair lady, never before have I heard such words as you have spoken, and I am pleased with them. Choose a fourth boon, other than the life of this man; then go!

3.281:43, tr. Smith 2009, p. 226

*yathā yathā bhāṣasi dharmasaṅghitaṃ manonukūlaṃ supadaṃ mahārthavat |  
tathā tathā me tvayi bhaktir uttamā varaṃ vṛṇīṣvāpratimaṃ yatavrate ||*

The more you speak of *dharma* so pleasingly and eloquently, and with such great significance, the more I feel the highest affection for you. Lady, you are a keeper of your word; now choose an incomparable boon!

3.281:50, tr. Smith 2009, p. 226

The prohibitive words, absent from the final boon-offering speech, are *vinā* (*satyavato*) *asya jīvitaṃ*: “except for his (Satyavat’s) life”. (The word *punaḥ* in the second and third speeches just means “again”.)

Why does Yama eventually offer a boon without stipulating that the return of Satyavat’s life is prohibited? That is the dramatic question. From one angle the joke is on Yama, for being careless.

Once Yama has granted Sāvitrī and Satyavat the boon of a hundred sons, it may seem that when granting further boons he cannot reasonably prohibit Satyavat’s revival.<sup>5</sup> But the boon of a hundred sons for Sāvitrī, made as it is while Satyavat is still dead, evokes a situation mentioned by Kuntī at 1.112, when she tells Pāṇḍu the story of Vyūṣitāśva and Bhadrā. Vyūṣitāśva died, but Bhadrā mourned most effectively over her husband’s corpse, thus winning the boon – in this instance, from the dead husband himself – of bearing sons by him even though he was dead. So she had three Śālva sons and four Madra sons (*trīṇ śālvaṇś caturo madrān sutān*, 1.112:33). Though Kuntī’s story adverts to the necrophilia of the *aśvamedha* rite (Hiltebeitel 2011, pp. 275–277), it also links to Sāvitrī – whose father is a Madra and whose husband is a Śālva – and implies that it could be possible for Sāvitrī to have Satyavat’s sons without Satyavat being revived.

If Yama really wants Satyavat to stay dead, he is careless in omitting, fifth time around, the prohibition of Satyavat’s revival. But what else can he do? Sāvitrī has discovered how to make Yama offer her any boon except Satyavat’s life, and she has made it clear that she is not willing to let him leave with Satyavat’s soul without doing whatever she can to stop him.<sup>6</sup> The only way Yama might get away with Satyavat’s soul is to change his policy on boon-granting, ignore Sāvitrī’s next salvo of verses, and just keep heading south. But it seems that his divine integrity will not allow him suddenly to remain unmoved by Sāvitrī’s statements and demonstrations of *dharma*. And if that is so, then his giving in to her primary wish is just a matter of time, the outer limit to which would be set, in storytelling terms, by the number of other unfortunate things in Sāvitrī’s life that have been mentioned in the story so far and might be remedied through other boons chosen in the meanwhile.

<sup>5</sup>For this interpretation, which Sāvitrī hints at (3.281:53), see, for example, Majmudar 1956, p. 76; Patil 1983, p. 82; Weiss 1985, p. 260; Anand 1988, p. 4; Aklujkar 1991, p. 325; Meisig 1994, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup>Compare James Cameron’s film *The Abyss*, in which a man eventually brings the woman he loves back from death – though there his speeches are to no third party but simply to her inert form.

From this perspective, the narrative necessity for Satyavat's father to be blind, for example, or for him to have recently lost his kingdom, could potentially be explained simply by the storyteller's desire to give Sāvitrī some more things to ask for before Yama eventually gives in. But this would be a misjudgement, because, as I will show, Satyavat's father's blindness and loss of kingdom are significant details within the stereotyped lineal situation that the story showcases: the situation whereby two patrilineal families each need a son, but there is only one son to go round. Nonetheless, it is worth keeping in mind that the story is told in broad strokes such that, in its pivotal scene, a number of emblematic problems can be remedied all at once.

### Sāvitrī the *putrikā*

Consider Sāvitrī's relationship with her father's patriline. According to the norm presented in the Sanskrit Dharmaśāstras, a daughter is to be given away in marriage, at a young age, to another suitable family. Her natal family's duties with respect to her are principally to make sure that this happens; thereafter she is the primary responsibility of the family into which she has married, and for whom she will have sons. Once she has been married off, her natal family will concentrate on their own sons (through imported brides).

But Sāvitrī's father, King Aśvapati, had no sons; and before Sāvitrī was born he undertook an eighteen-year vow in the hope of having some. This vow included recitation of the famous *sāvitrī* formula (*Rgveda* 3.62:10, also known as the *gāyatrī*), and so it was the goddess Sāvitrī who came to grant him a boon. Aśvapati asked for many sons.

*sāvitrī uvāca |*  
*pūrvam eva mayā rājann abhiprāyaṃ imaṃ tava |*  
*jñātvā putrārtham ukto vai tava hetoḥ pitāmahaḥ ||*  
*prasādāt caiva tasmāt te svayaṃbhuvihitād bhuvi |*  
*kanyā tejasvinī saumya kṣipram eva bhaviṣyati ||*  
*uttaraṃ ca na te kiñcid vyāhartavyaṃ kathaṃcana |*  
*pitāmahanisargeṇa tuṣṭā hy etad bravāmi te ||*

"I already knew this purpose of yours, O king," said Sāvitrī, "and had requested Brahmā for sons on your behalf; and from the favour that the self-born lord bears towards you here on earth, you will very soon have a resplendent daughter, good sir. Do not make any kind of answer, for I am pleased with you, and I tell you this through Brahmā's generosity."

3.277:16–18, tr. Smith 2009, pp. 215–216

The goddess Sāvitrī insists that the terms of the boon have been set by her superior, and there is no point in Aśvapati complaining to her about it. Aśvapati might presumably want to argue for a son instead, but he does as he is told, asking only – redundantly and rather amusingly – that the child appear soon.

The girl is born, and named after the goddess and the recited verse. But since she has no brothers, one wonders who will take on the responsibility – normally taken by the eldest son – of regularly feeding the patrilineal ancestors via the *śrāddha* ritual, and of having sons to do the same in turn. I quote from Ganguli's commentarial footnote in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (at what is verse 13.44:14 in the critical edition):

When a father happens to have an only daughter, he frequently bestows her in marriage upon some eligible youth on the understanding that the son born of her shall be the son, for purposes of both *Śraddha* rites and inheritance, *not* of the husband begetting him but of the girl's father.<sup>7</sup> Such a contract would be valid whether expressed or not at the time of marriage. The mere wish of the girl's father, unexpressed at the time of marriage,<sup>8</sup> would convert the son into a son not of the father who begets him but of the father of the girl herself. A daughter reserved for such a purpose is said to be a *putrikadharmīni* or "invested with the character of a son". To wed such a girl was not honourable. It was in effect an abandonment of the fruits of marriage.

Ganguli 1970, p. 18 n.2, in 'Anusasana Parva' Chapter XLIV

The brotherless maiden is something of a legend in old Sanskrit literature:<sup>9</sup> keen for a partner, but to be shunned by good men. No wonder, then, that despite Sāvitrī's loveliness (she looks like a goddess, like Śrī in human form, with a slender waist, broad hips, and eyes like lotus petals, 3.277:23–31), there are no suitors for her hand.

The reason given for the lack of male interest in Sāvitrī is that potential partners were "warded off by [her] brilliance" (*tejasā prativāritāḥ*, 3.277:27). Despite Jamison's parenthetical comment that "many modern women will recognize this plight" (Jamison 1996, p. 245), it seems to me rather unlikely that Sāvitrī was too glorious to be wooed. I take this explanation as something of a joke, with a nice pun to boot (the verb *vr̥* meaning 'ward off' as well as 'choose in marriage'), and instead I follow Jamison's endnoted suggestion that: "As she is also the *only* child of Aśvapati, her potential status of 'appointed daughter' may have put people off as well, though this obstacle is not mentioned in the story" (Jamison 1996, p. 305 n.96). I imagine the text's audience would infer the 'no-brothers explanation' without it being made explicit: no one wanted to marry her because, despite her abundant attractions, she would have seemed very unlikely to make a good patrilineal *pativratā* wife.<sup>10</sup>

### Satyavat's lineal death

As discussed by Jamison and others, if a man fails to find his daughter a husband, according to ancient Indian marital theory she is entitled to find one for herself (Jamison 1996, pp. 236–250; Schmidt 1987, pp. 76–83; Chatterjee 1961, pp. 606–608). In Sāvitrī's case, her father sends her out to do just that, with ministers to accompany her. Being away from her family (and meeting people who do not already know her) might seem to be an advantage. In any case, she conducts what Meyer calls "the fairest Svayaṃvara in the Epic . . . a proceeding

<sup>7</sup>See *Manusmṛti* 9:127–140; *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 28:18–20; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.3:15–16; *Vāsiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 17:15–17. The *Manusmṛti* passage says that a sonless man may ensure his *śrāddha* supply by appointing his daughter as a *putrikā* (9:127); then her son will be his heir (9:131); and thus a daughter's son is operationally identical to a son's son (9:139). In the standard *śrāddha* ritual, *piṇḍas* (rice-balls) are regularly offered in turn for the offerer's father, paternal grandfather, and paternal great-grandfather (see *Mahābhārata* 13.92). But when a *putrikā* has been appointed, *mātulḥ prathamataḥ piṇḍaṃ nirvapet putrikāsutah | dvitīyaṃ tu pitus tasyās tṛtīyaṃ tu pitulḥ pitulḥ ||* "The son of the *putrikā* offers a *piṇḍa* firstly for his mother, secondly for her father, and thirdly for her father's father" (*Manusmṛti* 9:140). For variant understandings, see Appendix II.

<sup>8</sup>Here Ganguli generalises an opinion mentioned at *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 28:19: that the daughter might be made a *putrikā* by mere intention. Compare *Manusmṛti* 9:136, which suggests that property and *śrāddha*-duties might be inherited by a daughter's son even if that daughter was not appointed as a *putrikā* by her father.

<sup>9</sup>In addition to *Mahābhārata* 13.44:14, on the brotherless maiden see *Manusmṛti* 3:11; Kane 1968–1977, vol. 1, p. 7; vol. 2, pp. 435–436; Schmidt 1987, pp. 30–75; Jamison 1996, p. 234; Chakravarty 2000, pp. 184–186.

<sup>10</sup>McGrath mentions this possibility, quoting Jamison; but he does not pursue it (McGrath 2009, p. 206).

that by no means fits into the framework of the usual or court tales of the Svayaṃvara” (Meyer 1930, p. 78 n.3); and she comes back with the news that she has made her choice.<sup>11</sup>

Nārada is visiting Aśvapati at this point, and when he hears that Sāvitrī has chosen Satyavat, the only son of the blind and realmless King Dyumatsena, he reveals that although Satyavat is virtuous and from a virtuous family, he will die in exactly one year’s time. Sāvitrī is accordingly advised to choose another man. But she refuses; and so Nārada tells Aśvapati to give her away as she wishes, and then he leaves.

Perhaps Nārada knows what lies in store for the chosen groom because he habitually frequents all manner of different *lokas* and keeps all kinds of exalted company. Nonetheless, it may seem that his comment makes explicit something that was already implicit within the narrative. Under propitious circumstances, one might expect one year hence to mark the birth of Sāvitrī’s first son. (As the story goes, Yama comes for Satyavat when Satyavat and Sāvitrī are out on a fruit-gathering expedition.) So, since Sāvitrī’s brotherlessness has already alerted us to her father’s probable lineal interest in her son, we can also interpret Satyavat’s impending death in lineal terms. If Satyavat and Sāvitrī’s son is commandeered by Aśvapati,<sup>12</sup> then Satyavat will not receive the *śrāddha* offerings that his genital son (and his son, and his, and so on) would ordinarily offer him, to keep him alive in lineal heaven; so he will starve and die, and his death will be because his wife’s son is his and yet not his. As a lineal death, Satyavat’s death can then represent the lineal death that might occur whenever any daughter is used as a *putrikādharmiṇī*.<sup>13</sup>

In some scenarios it would only be Satyavat who would die in this way; but in the present situation the matter is more serious, because King Dyumatsena has no sons other than Satyavat, and he would thus be as dependent as Satyavat is upon the future *śrāddha* offerings of Sāvitrī’s sons. This is made explicit when Satyavat repeats to Sāvitrī what his parents have told him previously:

*tvayā hīnau na jīvāva muhūrtam api putraka |*  
*jāvad dhariṣyase putra tāvan nau jīvitaṃ dhruvam ||*  
*vṛddhāyor andhāyor yaṣṭis tvayi vaṃśaḥ pratiṣṭhitaḥ |*  
*tvayi piṇḍas ca kīrtis ca saṃtānaṃ cāvayor iti ||*

<sup>11</sup>Sāvitrī’s autonomy is at odds with the view that a woman must never be independent (see, for example, *Manusmṛiti* 9:3), and elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* Bhīṣma mentions a diversity of views on the propriety of Sāvitrī’s and/or her father’s behaviour here. Bhīṣma himself would like to rule against it (he interrupted a *svayaṃvara* to perform an abduction instead, 1.96; see Chakravarti 2009, pp. 33–49; compare Kṛṣṇa’s tips to Arjuna at *Mahābhārata* 1.211:21), but he admits that “nonetheless, the conduct of good people is the most important marker of *dharma*” (*svayaṃ vṛteti sāvitrī pitrā vai pratyapadyata | tat tasyānye praśaṃsanti dharmajñā netare janāḥ || etat tu nāpare caknur na pare jātu sādhaḥ | sādhiṇām punar ācāro gaṛīyo dharmalakṣaṇam ||* 13.45:5–6, implying that Sāvitrī and her father are *sādhus*). Behind Meyer’s quoted comment, the *svayaṃvara* as a marriage form seems to appear in two variants: one where the woman chooses, the other where she is passively won. John Brockington has collected textual data on the *svayaṃvara* and proposes that the variant in which the woman chooses is the later one (Brockington 2006); but several scholars have proposed the opposite (for example Przyłuski, Sergeant, and Katz Arabagian; see the discussion in Schmidt 1987, pp. 92–105), and Heramba Chatterjee deems the free-choice *svayaṃvara* to be both earlier and later (Chatterjee 1961, pp. 608, 611). Perhaps one might eschew all of these historical views, at least as far as the *Mahābhārata*’s *svayaṃvaras* are concerned. See further footnote 23 below.

<sup>12</sup>At *Mahābhārata* 13.45:16 Bhīṣma says that if the bride is *sold* to the groom’s family, her natal family cannot legitimately claim the sons resulting from the marriage. But in the instance under discussion here, Satyavat and his family are penniless.

<sup>13</sup>Interpreting a death in this way fits situations elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*. For the example of the latterly snakebitten Parikṣit, see Brodbeck 2009a, pp. 221–238; Brodbeck 2009b.



Son, if we lose you, we shall not live a moment; our lives are assured just as long as you survive. We are old and blind, and you are our support; the family line depends on you, and so do our ancestral oblation,<sup>14</sup> our fame and our descendants.

3.281:86–87, tr. Smith 2009, pp. 228–229, adapted

### Dyumatsena's blindness

Given how precious Satyavat is for King Dyumatsena's line, why would Dyumatsena allow him to marry an only daughter? From one perspective the answer would be: because otherwise the situation would not be so dramatic and paradigmatic. But in terms of narrative content, there is no suggestion that Dyumatsena and his wife appreciate the danger they are in. Aśvapati takes Sāvitrī with him and goes to visit Dyumatsena to give Sāvitrī away, and Dyumatsena receives them with every courtesy, agrees to the match, and even says, at the end of the dialogue, that he had always hoped to establish a marriage alliance with Aśvapati's family. But he expresses concern that Sāvitrī might not like the rigours of forest life, and that since his family has fallen on hard times, they are perhaps not the most desirable in-laws.

During this brief exchange (3.279:8–14) Dyumatsena expresses reservations concerning the match, but these fail to dissuade Aśvapati from his intention. It is hard to tell whether Dyumatsena is just being modest and polite, or whether he actually wants to avoid this marriage; but in any case, the question of whose lineage the offspring will support is not raised, so if Aśvapati has Sāvitrī in mind as his *putrikā*, he is keeping his cards close to his chest, and if Dyumatsena has any fears on that score, he keeps quiet about them. Dyumatsena is already acquainted with Aśvapati's family to some extent, so perhaps he would know that Sāvitrī is an only child; or perhaps he does not know this.

If it seems as though Dyumatsena is rather precipitous in agreeing to the marriage, he is blind! Sāvitrī has already told Nārada and Aśvapati that while Dyumatsena was ruling his Śālva realm he became blind, and in his hour of weakness he was deposed and exiled by “a neighbour who was an old enemy” (*śāmīpyena . . . pūrvavairiṇā*, 3.278:8, tr. Smith 2009, p. 217). He is in a bad spot; and it seems that in his situation he is glad of any noble marriage his son might make. Perhaps Sāvitrī's choice of this man is connected with her family's search for a family vulnerable and needy enough to accept their daughter. As well as serving as an explanation for his loss of kingdom, Dyumatsena's blindness can be interpreted, regardless of his alleged old wish to establish marriage links with Aśvapati's family, in light of his apparently blithe acceptance of his crucial son's marriage to a brotherless daughter.

Here we can compare the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra – the uncle and uncle-in-law of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, who are listening to the story. As is clear from the various remonstrations of Vidura, Saṃjaya and several others, as well as being physically blind, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is blind to the likely consequences of his decisions and actions (see Hudson 2007); and in this he resembles Dyumatsena. In both cases the blindness bears upon the business of the character's son. But although Dhṛtarāṣṭra in his blindness will suffer enormously and lose his sons,

<sup>14</sup>Here I replace Smith's “funeral rites” – a rather minimal translation of *piṇḍa* – with van Buitenen's “ancestral oblation” (van Buitenen 1975, p. 774). What is invoked is the regular and ongoing ritual that feeds and thus maintains the ancestors in the ancestral heaven. For related examples, see 1.147:8 (a young woman anticipates that the deaths of her father and brother will leave the ancestors without *piṇḍa*); 14.65:20 (Kuntī says that the *piṇḍa* of the long-dead Pāṇḍu depends on the revival of the infant Parikṣit – on which more anon).



Dyumatsena in contrast will keep his son, and will have his sight restored by Yama's boon, thanks to Sāvitrī. The comparison might thus lead one to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's extra, concubinal son Yuyutsu, who, as Yudhiṣṭhira points out (6.41:93), will carry the *piṇḍa* line for Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the Kurukṣetra war, but who is not a legitimate *kṣatriya* heir as Satyavat's son will turn out to be for Dyumatsena.

### Dyumatsena's loss of kingdom

Like the lineal drama between Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons and Pāṇḍu's, the lineal drama between Dyumatsena's line and Aśvapati's is enhanced by the fact that both families are royal. The necessity for any king to arrange his son as the next king, and thus to arrange his family's (and his realm's) lineal succession, makes stories of royal families particularly well suited to the playing out of lineal problematics in more or less stereotyped forms; and this is what we see in those works of Sanskrit literature – and perhaps of all literature – that deal longitudinally with royal families. In the Aśvapati/Dyumatsena story, because Dyumatsena has already lost his kingdom, the stage seems set for the takeover of his land to be followed – or overlaid – by the takeover of his line through Satyavat's marriage to a *putrikā* from a different royal family. As the functional representative of his patriline, Dyumatsena's tenuous grasp of lineal heaven is almost exactly superimposed upon his tenuous grasp of the land that he would wish to be handed down from father to son within his patriline in the following generations. And this fits, because a royal patriline can only keep its kingdom if it succeeds in having a good heir in every generation.

In this respect, one might interpret the chronology of the narrative as deliberately warped, and superimpose elements that are presented as successive – Dyumatsena's loss of his kingdom, and Dyumatsena's agreement to his son's marriage to Sāvitrī.<sup>15</sup> One might even interpret the unnamed 'old enemy', who has deposed Dyumatsena and appropriated his kingdom, to be Aśvapati himself. Either way, interpretively adjusting the chronology would allow Dyumatsena to lose his kingdom as a consequence of accepting the poisoned gift that is Sāvitrī. The magical manner in which Sāvitrī solves Dyumatsena's and Satyavat's problems glosses over but does not obscure the suggestion that she is (she embodies) their cause; that would be why solving them is her brief.

In thinking about this issue, one wonders whether religious studies commentators might perhaps have been rather slow to think through properly the effects of such magical episodes upon the ancient audience. The reason why the story of Yama magically granting specific boons looks tall to us is because it is, in those details, a very tall story; it surely anticipates being seen as such, and it thus anticipates interpretive speculation.

### Sāvitrī the *pativrātā*, and Yama's boons revisited

Once Sāvitrī is married, the narrative shows her behaving like a model patrilineal wife to an extraordinary degree; a romantic ideal of sorts. But Ray suggests that "the first authors to typecast Sāvitrī in a romantic light were the colonialists, nationalists and European

<sup>15</sup>Such superimpositive interpretation is illuminating in several other *Mahābhārata* instances, as I have suggested elsewhere (see Brodbeck 2009a, p. 325).

romanticists” (Ray, 2006, p. 23); and Weiss, reviewing scholarship on Sāvitrī, says that: “In western ideology, the ideal of female fidelity and subservience is well defined, and its correspondence to the Hindu ideal seems to obviate the necessity for in-depth analysis” (Weiss 1985, p. 261). Nonetheless, it is right and proper for Sāvitrī to be seen as a model *pativrātā*, because to become this from her situation as an intended *putrikā* is rare and special, and because although she no doubt does it in response to her new family, she does it effectively alone, or in partnership with death. Confronting Satyavat’s imminent lineal demise, she does three days of supreme *tapas*, and then she makes everything proper in response to Yama’s boons.<sup>16</sup>

If we follow the suggested interpretation of Dyumatsena’s loss of sight and kingdom, the first two boons – Dyumatsena’s regaining his sight and kingdom – imply that Sāvitrī will have her children for Satyavat and for Dyumatsena’s line after all, as per Dharmaśāstra norm. The third boon – a hundred sons for Aśvapati – relates to her father’s line; the first two boons will presumably cause a problem for that line, and the third boon promises a solution. The fourth boon says that Sāvitrī and Satyavat will have many children, and at this point we might think that these could be distributed between the two lines, as suggested by Kuntī’s story of Bhadrā – who has three Śālvas and four Madras – and, for example, by the *Mahābhārata*’s story of R̥ṣyaśṛṅga and Śāntā.<sup>17</sup> The fifth boon is Satyavat’s life, which consolidates the first two boons.

When Sāvitrī has named the fifth boon and Yama has granted it, Yama gives a summary of what he is granting her all told, including the following detail:

*pituś ca te putraśataṃ bhavitā tava mātari |*  
*mālavayāṃ mālavā nāma śāśvatāḥ putrapautriṇaḥ |*  
*bhrātaraś te bhaviṣyanti kṣatriyāś tridaśopamāḥ ||*

Your father too shall have a hundred sons by your mother Mālavī, and they and their sons and grandsons will be forever called Mālavas. Your brothers will be godlike Kṣatriyas.

3.281:58, tr. Smith 2009, p. 227

So the solution for Aśvapati, about which we were naturally curious, will be for him to have sons from a woman other than Sāvitrī, and thus for Sāvitrī to have a hundred little brothers without having to give birth to them herself.

### Sāvitrī and Satyavat go home

After Yama has granted all the boons and Satyavat is alive again, it is getting late in the day, and it seems that the couple will have to camp out for the night. Satyavat is not happy at the prospect. He is upset at the thought of his parents worrying that he, upon whom they depend, might have come to grief; and because of this, Sāvitrī and Satyavat travel through the night to get home. The image of Satyavat coming to grief matches the interpreted situation earlier in the day, before Sāvitrī made her deal with death; and it is presented here as if out

<sup>16</sup>In some *Mahābhārata* examples of this stereotyped lineal conflict, the choice (between his father’s line and his maternal grandfather’s) is apparently made by the son (see Brodbeck 2009b). But in the Sāvitrī story we have a different type of example, where the focus is on the *woman* as the pivot between one lineal mode and the other.

<sup>17</sup>For this latter story, see *Mahābhārata* 3.110–113; Brodbeck 2009a, pp. 82–83.

of sequence, since by this later point everything has, in principle, been solved. But in this delayed moment, Dyumatsena and his wife Śaibyā are indeed worrying; they have become convinced of Satyavat's possible death, and they are trawling the *āśramas* looking for news.

Dyumatsena – who can now see – cries in anguish: “Ah, my son, ah, my good daughter-in-law, where are you, where are you?” (*hā putra hā sādhi vadhi kvāsi kvāsi*, 3.282:9, tr. Smith 2009, p. 230). The sentiment matches the scene very well, but the scene – and the whole sequence between the granting of the boons and the young couple's arrival home – might seem rather narratively gratuitous, or even a bit perverse; it is a new tack to the story, and is omitted in Leslie's summary presented earlier. Nonetheless, the parents-in-law's son-hunting *āśrama*-tour parallels Sāvitrī's husband-hunting *tīrtha*-tour near the beginning of the story. Also, it fits very well in allowing a displaced and delayed presentation of the existential moment before Sāvitrī reinvents herself – with Dyumatsena, Śaibyā and Satyavat all suffering, separately and together.

Many new characters also appear in this extra section of the story: Suvarcas, Gautama, his pupil, the *ṛṣis*, Bhāradvāja, Dālbhya, Māṇḍavya and Dhaumya. The association of these characters with Sāvitrī's switch from the *putrikā* to the *pativrata* mode is underlined at this juncture by their telling the worried old couple in no uncertain terms, in sequence one after another in various ways, that Satyavat is still alive (3.282:10–19); and only then do Satyavat and Sāvitrī turn up and prove it, and explain why they are so late back. We might infer that these *ṛṣis* supported Sāvitrī's revolution against the *putrikā* method; and it is here that we see “a socio-political message of vast proportions, seeking to invalidate all other versions of femininity” (Ray 2006, p. 23). The *ṛṣis* certainly congratulate Sāvitrī on her deeds: “The line of the king was sinking in a lake of darkness, overcome by disasters, when it was saved by you” (*nimajjamānaṃ vyasanair abhidrutaṃ kulaṃ narendrasya tamomaye hrade | tvayā . . . samuddhṛtaṃ*, 3.282:43, tr. Smith 2009, p. 232).

We now hear how Dyumatsena's kingdom is regained according to the surface story: the neighbour who had taken it is killed by his own minister, his gang are also killed, his army flees, and a party comes to find Dyumatsena and invite him back to his old realm. Then Sāvitrī has a hundred sons, and so does her mother Mālavī.

And so Aśvapati has a hundred sons. The solution to Aśvapati's lineal crisis, after his daughter Sāvitrī switches sides, seems simple and elegant – so much so that we wonder again what it was that prevented it earlier, and meant Sāvitrī had to be a *putrikā* in the first place. Aśvapati had no sons, and now, because of Yama's third boon, he has a hundred. But there may be a sting in the tale for Aśvapati, because the hundred latter-day sons of Mālavī – Mālavī who we learned earlier (at 3.277:22, when Sāvitrī was born) is the daughter of a king – are called Mālavas, apparently following in the line of their maternal grandfather. So it seems that the sonlessness that afflicted Aśvapati at the start, and which led to the appointment of Sāvitrī as a *putrikā*, could have been caused by his own wife's being a *putrikā* herself. And it is not clear that the third boon has really solved this problem.

If we review our earlier speculation that the takeover of the kingdom by Dyumatsena's neighbour might have represented Aśvapati and his *putrikā* trick, we can extend our speculations to the identity of the neighbour's murderous minister (*amātya*, 3.283:3). One possibility might be to identify this minister as a representation of Sāvitrī. A better option might be to identify him as Aśvapati's father-in-law, the Mālava king.

Regardless of this detail, the consequence of Aśvapati's lineal sonlessness has been averted within Dyumatsena's line. The main point of the story is that a woman's father should not take her sons for his own line; but also shown quite clearly now, in retrospect, is that one of the reasons why he might want to do so is because his own son is not lineally his own. This consequence means that despite the fact that no daughter of Dyumatsena is mentioned, we can imagine *putrikā* usage spreading in a rippling chain through a wide community of possible intermarriage, unless it is checked at some point.

In this story, the consequence of *putrikā* usage is checked by the disciplined resolve of Sāvitrī. And this female fulcrum can suggest a third, even more preferable representational identity for Dyumatsena's neighbour's murderous minister – to wit: Aśvapati's wife Mālāvī. In any case, if we have been given a glimpse of the infectious nature of *putrikā* usage, we are also encouraged to imagine the similar counter-infectious consequence of women being lineally *pativratā*, through their sons, to their husbands. By being *pativratā* in this way, such women would ensure that their fathers keep trying for sons of their own; and thus the story of one woman's reformation can stand for a reformation in lineal custom across a community of intermarriage – a reformation that can then become constitutive of what it means to be 'high class'.

### Draupadī's mirror

Mārkaṇḍeya concludes the Sāvitrī story as follows:

*evam ātmā pitā mātā śvaśrūḥ śvaśura eva ca |*  
*bhartuḥ kulaṃ ca sāvitrī sarvaṃ kṛcchrāt samuddhṛtam ||*  
*tathaivaiśāpi kalyāṇī draupadī śīlasammatā |*  
*tārayiṣyati vaḥ sarvān sāvitrīva kulāṅganā ||*

Thus it happened that Sāvitrī rescued from calamity herself, her father and mother, her parents-in-law, and her husband's whole line; and in just the same way fair Draupadī here, who like Sāvitrī is a high-born woman renowned for her good character, will save you all.

3.283:14–15, tr. Smith 2009, p. 233

Draupadī has already saved the Pāṇḍavas at the dice match by intervening (thanks to Yudhiṣṭhira's having staked her) and winning the rescue of her husbands, in a manner comparable to Sāvitrī, through successive boons (given by Dhṛtarāṣṭra), as a result of her knowledge of *dharma* (2.58–65). She has also done her bit, while living in the forest, to ensure Yudhiṣṭhira's resolve to regain his kingdom and pay Duryodhana back for the insulting way in which she was treated on that occasion (see 3.28–33). But Mārkaṇḍeya uses the future tense here: she *will* save the Pāṇḍavas.

How precisely are we to take the *tathaiva* ('in just the same way')? Perhaps the reference is to the getting back of the kingdom – an ongoing project as yet unfulfilled. Brian Black, pondering the reference of Mārkaṇḍeya's prediction, draws attention to an important future move:

In the *Virāṭaparvan* Draupadī overhears the arrogant Uttara boast about his martial skills, yet make the excuse that there is no charioteer fit to drive him to the battlefield (4.34.1–9). Draupadī

suggests that Uttara send for Arjuna, disguised as Bṛhannaḍā. . . . Her intervention saves her husbands because Arjuna is called to the battlefield and is able to stave off the Kauravas until the Pāṇḍavas' year in hiding ends.

Black 2007, pp. 68–69

Black's comments here are suggestive, and we will return to this passage. But first let us think of the *tathaiva* in terms of our specific discussions of Sāvitrī. Could Draupadī be a sleeping *putrikā*, who stands in need of converting herself into a *pativratā*? On the face of it she is already firmly pledged to the *pativratā* way; this is implied by Yudhiṣṭhira's initial question (3.277:3, quoted earlier), and it has been made clear when she spoke on the subject to Kṛṣṇa's wife Satyabhāmā, explaining how devoted she is to the Pāṇḍavas (3.222–223). She also has several brothers. Sāvitrī herself was only ever a *putrikā* in between the lines; but if Yudhiṣṭhira were to have heard that subtext and become subject to fears of his own, then Mārkaṇḍeya's comment would seem to be reassuring him that Draupadī's sons will be dedicated to the Pāṇḍava line, not to Drupada's line.

But things go differently for Draupadī. Her five sons, the Draupadeyas, though they fight nobly for their fathers at Kurukṣetra, never prosper them as Sāvitrī's sons do theirs; they are all killed by Aśvatthāman in the night massacre (10.8:44–58). The Pāṇḍava heir comes through Arjuna and Subhadra's son Abhimanyu, who is killed in the battle but whose widow Uttarā is already pregnant; her son, after being stillborn and revived by Kṛṣṇa, is Parikṣit, the next king after Yudhiṣṭhira. So we never know whether the Draupadeyas, had they survived, would have carried their fathers' line, or their maternal grandfather's. The latter possibility certainly is there, though, in that while they live they are collectively named after Drupada.<sup>18</sup>

Given Mārkaṇḍeya's statement, the fate of Draupadī's sons warrants further consideration. As a first step, we can think in terms of Draupadī's disgrace before and following her earlier treatment at the dicing match. After Yudhiṣṭhira has staked her and lost the throw, the Kauravas bring her into the hall while she is menstruating, grab her by the hair, insult her verbally, attempt to strip her naked, and make lewd gestures (2.59–63). Karṇa, responding to Vikarṇa's claim that Draupadī was not lawfully won, concludes that this type of treatment is appropriate in any case, because of her unconventional marital arrangements:

*eko bhartā striyā devair vihitāḥ kurunandana |*  
*iyaṃ tv anekavaśagā bandhakṛtī viniścitā ||*  
*asyāḥ sabhām ānayanam na citram iti me matiḥ |*  
*ekāmbaṛadharatvaṃ vāpy atha vāpi vivastratā ||*

The gods ordain one husband for a woman, heir of Kuru, yet she submits to several: thus she is clearly a whore, and in my judgement it is not remarkable that she should be brought to the hall, or that she should be wearing a single garment, or, indeed, none at all!

2.61:35–36, tr. Smith 2009, p. 147

<sup>18</sup>There also seems to be a precedent for *putrikā* usage within Drupada's household. The mother of Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna is called Pṛṣatī (1.155:34, 47), which is a patronym derived from the name of Drupada's father Pṛṣata; so this woman would be Drupada's sister, daughter, or niece, not his 'wife' in our usual sense of the word. On the Pāñcālas in the *Mahābhārata* see also Katz 1991, pp. 132–136.

Whether or not Draupadī is disreputable before the dicing match, she certainly is after it. Bhīma says to Arjuna:

*trīṇi jyotīṃṣi puruṣa iti vai devalo 'bravīt |  
 apatyam karma vidyā ca yataḥ sṛṣṭāḥ prajāś tataḥ ||  
 amedhye vai gataprāṇe śūnye jñātibhir ujjhite |  
 dehe tritayam evaitat puruṣasyopajāyate ||  
 tan no jyotir abhihatam dārāṇām abhimarśanāt |  
 dhananjaya katham svit syād apatyam abhimṛṣṭajam ||*

According to Devala there are three lights in a man: offspring, deeds and learning. Through these, creatures attain being, for when the body, impure, lifeless and empty, is cast away by one's kin, it is these three that still exist of a man. But one of our lights has been put out, because our wife has been tainted: how, wealth-winner Arjuna, can offspring be born from a tainted woman?

2.64:5–7, tr. Smith 2009, p. 154

So eventually, some time after hearing about Sāvitrī, the Pāṇḍavas fight the war at Kurukṣetra as much to try to restore Draupadī's honour as to regain their lost realm. But when all is said and done, although the kingdom can be won back, there is no remedy for Draupadī's disgrace. How can the next king after Yudhiṣṭhira Dharmarāja be born from a tainted woman? Accordingly, as the tale would have it, he isn't.

Compare the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where the doubts over what Rāvaṇa might have done to the captive Sītā can never be removed. Regardless of whether or not the reader or listener is convinced of Sītā's purity, Rāma's subjects are not, and her misadventures, when coupled to Rāma's failure to take another wife after abandoning his first one, spell disaster for the royal Aikṣvāka line in Ayodhyā.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Sāvitrī's reputation is unimpeached. When she goes out on tour to find herself a husband, her chaperones are mentioned three times in the space of four verses. She travels accompanied by a specially appointed retinue including venerable and trustworthy ministers.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Putrikā and the night massacre***

If Sāvitrī's story is the story of the *putrikā* option being suppressed in favour of *pativrata* wifehood, then the comparison with Draupadī has led us to the deaths of the Draupadeyas in the night massacre. This massacre is explicitly designed to annihilate Drupada's line (10.3:28). It is the last act in a longstanding feud between Droṇa's family and Drupada's (see Brodbeck 2006 and 2009c); but in terms of the *Mahābhārata* as a tale of the Bhārata patriline, its effect is to efface any Pāṇcāla influence or ancestry within that patriline. If in Mārkaṇḍeya's narrative the *putrikā* possibility is suppressed by Sāvitrī's reformation, in Vaiṣaṃpāyana's it is suppressed by this massacre, as perpetrated by Śiva in the guise of Aśvatthāman. As Ruth

<sup>19</sup>When Hanūmat first locates Sītā in Laṅkā, she refuses his offer of a lift back to Rāma on his back, and one of her reasons is because she fears that the ride would compromise the purity of her devotion to Rāma. Hanūmat accepts her decision and commends her reasoning. But as Sītā herself seems at some level to realise, it is already too late (*Rāmāyaṇa* 5.35:20–36:10).

<sup>20</sup>*vṛddhāṃś ca mantrināḥ | vyādiśeśānuyātrām ca*, 3.277:37; *sthaviraiḥ sacivair vṛtā*, 3.277:39; *mānyānām tatra vṛddhānām kṛtvā pādābhivandanam*, 3.277:40.

Katz says, “all named victims of the night raid are Pāñcālas”; “someone is getting rid of the Pāñcālas to make way for another Pāñḍava heir” (Katz 1991, pp. 133, 135).

Following the suggestive leads of several other scholars, I have elsewhere argued that the suppression of the *putrikā* possibility is dramatised in Vedic literature by the story of Śiva’s killing the Prajāpati who mated with his own daughter, and that the *Mahābhārata*’s repeated story of Śiva’s wrecking Dakṣa’s sacrifice is a transformation of that Vedic story and a dramatisation of the same suppression (Brodbeck 2009a, pp. 52–55, 90–95; Brodbeck 2012, pp. 152–153).<sup>21</sup> In light of these results and the fact that the Sāvitrī story has led us to focus on the night massacre in this regard, it is notable that there are extensive structural parallels between the night massacre and the story of the wrecking of Dakṣa’s sacrifice, as set out by Alf Hiltebeitel in the 1970s (Hiltebeitel 1972, pp. 105–122; Hiltebeitel 1976, pp. 312–335). Hiltebeitel details these parallels under 14 headings; some are more convincing than others, but overall the point is very well made. The argument mounted by Hiltebeitel on the basis of these parallels is peripheral to our present concerns, but the connection he establishes between the two stories is vital. In symbolic terms – and this fits with Draupadī’s disgrace as discussed above – we thus see a firm connection between Dakṣa and Drupada, even though there is no explicit suggestion that Draupadī was intended to be a *putrikā*.

If the Draupadī narrative turns upon the violent destruction of her father’s line, this turning point is presented in the Sāvitrī story in terms of Sāvitrī’s loyal dedication to her husband and his line. Also, and relatedly, whereas in Draupadī’s case the destruction is initiated by Aśvatthāman (who has his own motives), Sāvitrī mounts the heroic stand herself. This last difference can be closed up if we consider Kṛṣṇa Draupadī not as a single autonomous character, but as a functional aspect of a dark force that operates through her as well as through Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa.<sup>22</sup> If Draupadī eschews the *putrikā* possibility by suffering the destruction of her father’s line as effected by Śiva, she facilitates the furthering of her husbands’ line, in Uttara’s delivery room, in the guise of her namesake Kṛṣṇa.<sup>23</sup> Parikṣit’s stillbirth (14.65) can be seen as a representation of the death-by-*putrikā* that the Pāñḍava line could have suffered (and it is linked back to the massacre of the Pāñcālas through Aśvatthāman’s curse); but Kṛṣṇa intervenes, as he said he would (at 10.16:15). Like Sāvitrī, Kṛṣṇa gets the better of death, reviving the endangered line through the power of his discipline and *dharma*. He uses an ‘act of truth’, a miracle technique employed in the *Mahābhārata* usually by women.<sup>24</sup>

*noktapūrvaṃ mayā mithyā svaiṣṇv api kadācana |*  
*na ca yuddhe parāvṛttas tathā saṃjīvātām ayam ||*

<sup>21</sup> At *Manusmṛti* 9:128 *putrikā* usage is paradigmatically associated with Dakṣa; and this is borne out in the Bhārata ancestry at *Mahābhārata* 1.70:7–9 and 1.90:7, where the line runs from Dakṣa, through his daughter Aditi Dākṣāyaṇī, to Vivasvat.

<sup>22</sup> For Hiltebeitel’s indispensable theory of the many Kṛṣṇas, see, for example, Hiltebeitel 1976, pp. 60–76; Hiltebeitel 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Sāvitrī and Draupadī both have *svayaṃvaras*, but in each case the choice of husband is later overlaid and overshadowed by the choice of which line will survive, the line of the husband or the line of the father. In Sāvitrī’s case both choices are her own; in Draupadī’s case both choices are made for her. This pattern throws up the possibility of a link between the *svayaṃvara* and the *putrikā* option, particularly as the *putrikā* is in many ways the incestuous wife of her own father. Further discussion of the *svayaṃvara* will not be found in the present paper, but would necessarily involve Damayantī and Kuntī.

<sup>24</sup> On the *satyakriyā*, see Burlingame 1917; Brown 1972; Söhnen-Thieme 1995; Thompson 1998.



*yathā me dayito dharmo brāhmaṇāś ca viśeṣataḥ |*  
*abhimanyoh suto jāto mṛto jīvatu ayaṃ tathā ||*  
*yathāhaṃ nābhijānāmi vijayena kadācana |*  
*virodhaṃ tena satyena mṛto jīvatu ayaṃ śīśuḥ ||*  
*yathā satyaṃ ca dharmas ca mayi nityaṃ pratiṣṭhitau |*  
*tathā mṛtaḥ śīśur ayaṃ jīvātām abhimanyujaḥ ||*  
*yathā kaṃsaś ca keśi ca dharmeṇa nihatau mayā |*  
*tena satyena bālo 'yaṃ punar ujīvātām iha ||*

As I have never uttered falsehood, even in a trivial matter, as I have never turned away in battle, so let this one live! As I love *dharmā*, as I greatly love Brahmins, so let this son of Abhimanyu, born dead, now live! As I have never known discord between myself and Arjuna, by this truth let this dead child live! As truth and *dharmā* always have their basis in me, so let this dead child of Abhimanyu live! As I slew Kaṃsa and Keśin according to *dharmā*, by this truth let this child here live once more!

14.68:19–23, tr. Smith 2009, pp. 712–713

The parallel thus formed between the Sāvitrī story and the story of the Pāṇḍava line is underlined by Sāvitrī's performance of an 'act of truth' after Satyawat has come back to life and has expressed concern that his parents will be worried. We know, as Sāvitrī does, that all danger is already past, provided no one accidentally dies of worry; but the sentiment is encapsulatory.

*yadi me 'sti tapas taptam yadi dattam hutam yadi |*  
*śvaśrūśvaśurabhartṛṇām mama puṇyāstu śarvarī ||*  
*na smarāmy uktapūrvam vai svairesv apy anṛtām giram |*  
*tena satyena tāv adya dhriyetām śvaśurau mama ||*

If I have performed austerities, if I have given gifts, if I have made offerings, then let this night be auspicious for my parents-in-law and my husband! I do not remember having ever spoken an untrue word, even in a trivial matter; by this truth let my parents-in-law survive this day!

3.281:96–97, tr. Smith 2009, p. 229

In this way, the comparison between Sāvitrī and Kṛṣṇā Draupadī comes down to Kṛṣṇa in Uttarā's delivery room.<sup>25</sup>

Lest this nominal shift be thought tangential, we return to Black's suggestion that Draupadī, in her disguise as Sairandhrī, saves the Pāṇḍavas at 4.34. I believe this is so, but not quite in the way that Black intended. When King Virāṭa and his army are away dealing with the Trigartas, and there is no one to defend the nearby Matsya herds from the Kauravas' parallel attack, Draupadī speaks out to ensure that Arjuna goes to do the job with the feckless Prince Uttara. Viewed through the Sāvitrī lens, the result of this intervention is that Virāṭa, pleased with Arjuna's heroic deeds and discovering Bṛhannaḍā's true identity, offers him his daughter Uttarā, and Arjuna says can Abhimanyu have her instead, and Virāṭa gives her to Abhimanyu; and so after the war Parikṣit, the Pāṇḍavas' heir, is born from Uttarā, a maiden

<sup>25</sup>Kṛṣṇa had already intervened to prompt and facilitate the marriage between Arjuna and Subhadrā that produced Parikṣit's father Abhimanyu in the first place (1.211–213).

untainted by multiple husbands, public insults, or implied *putrikā* suspicions.<sup>26</sup> It is Draupadī who arranges this, as if at Bhīma's suggestion (see again 2.64:5–7, quoted earlier). Speaking to Uttara, she extols Bṛhannaḍā's driving skills and says:

*yeyam kumārī suśroṇī bhaginī te yavīyasī |*  
*asyāḥ sa vacanamī vīra kariṣyati na saṁśayaḥ ||*

Your younger virgin sister with the shapely hips, he will certainly carry out her orders, hero!

4.34:16, tr. van Buitenen 1978, p. 80

And so Uttara sends Uttarā to send him Bṛhannaḍā, her dancing tutor, to drive him into battle. Draupadī's contribution towards the marriage of Abhimanyu and Uttarā is also confirmed a few scenes later, when she intervenes to ensure that a brief disagreement between Yudhiṣṭhira and Virāṭa does not spoil the relationship between the two families (4.63:46–47; 4.64:8).

### Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a lineal interpretation of the *Mahābhārata*'s Sāvitrī story, whereby Sāvitrī was intended to be a *putrikā* dedicated to her father's line. Satyavat's death as well as Dyumatsena's blindness and loss of kingdom have been explained in these terms, and Sāvitrī's victory over Yama has been deemed to represent her switch from being a *putrikā* to being a *pativrātā*, with unfortunate results for her father. Many details of the story have been well explained by this interpretation, and other details unmentioned here could perhaps be similarly explained. I have offered a reading of the final phase of the story consonant with this theme, and I have shown how the theme and some important structural features of the story transfer, via Draupadī with whom Sāvitrī is compared, to the wider story of the Pāṇḍavas, thus providing a new perspective on Draupadī's chequered reputation, on the night massacre, and on Parikṣit's revival.

In terms of *Mahābhārata* studies, one effect of these discussions has been to show that denying the *putrikā* possibility is a central theme within the text, even if this is not evident at first glance. Another effect has been to consolidate Hiltebeitel's work on the integrity of the *Mahābhārata*'s *upākhyānas* ('subtales'; see Hiltebeitel 2005), by showing that the Sāvitrī story is thematically and structurally of a piece with the wider text of which it forms – perchance always formed – part. I thus hope that this paper will make a small contribution to the collaborative scholarly exploration of the *Mahābhārata*'s literary merits.

### Appendix I: van Buitenen's summary of the Sāvitrī story (van Buitenen 1975, pp. 760–761)<sup>27</sup>

277 (41 verses). Yudhiṣṭhira asks Mārkaṇḍeya whether any woman has ever been such a devoted wife as Draupadī. King Aśvapati of the Madras, being childless, offers with the

<sup>26</sup>For the replacement of Draupadī by Uttarā, see also Hiltebeitel 1980, pp. 105–107. Following Gehrts, Hiltebeitel calls attention to the garments that Arjuna presents to Uttarā at 4.64:34–35: "The bestowal of the garments on Uttarā represents that their [the Pāṇḍavas'] rebirth will be through her, rather than through Draupadī" (Hiltebeitel 1980, p. 106; compare Gehrts 1975, pp. 206–207, 224–225).

<sup>27</sup>I have removed the block italics the parenthetical inserts that give approximate verse ranges for the various episodes, and I have added the total verse ranges for each chapter.

*sāvitṛī* formula. After eighteen years the Goddess *Sāvitṛī* appears and predicts he shall have a splendid daughter. She is born and named *Sāvitṛī*; when she grows up, no man chooses her for his wife. Her father tells her to find a man on her own, and she departs on a pilgrimage.

278 (32 verses). *Nārada* is visiting *Aśvapati* when *Sāvitṛī* returns: she has found her man in *Satyavat*, a *Śālva* prince, whose father *Dyumatsena* had gone blind and was then dethroned. *Nārada* exclaims that her choice is bad: though otherwise a paragon, *Satyavat* is flawed by imminent death. When her father demands that she find another husband, she insists on her choice; *Nārada* agrees, and the king acquiesces.

279 (23 verses). *Aśvapati* visits . . . *Dyumatsena* and marries *Sāvitṛī* to *Satyavat*. *Sāvitṛī* doffs her finery and wears hermit's garb; she satisfies everyone.

280 (33 verses). When the day of death nears, *Sāvitṛī* undertakes a three-day vow, standing up day and night, though her father-in-law remonstrates with her; upon its conclusion the brahmins bless her. *Satyavat* is about to go to the forest, and she insists on accompanying him; her father-in-law gives his permission. They go out together.

281 (108 verses). While *Satyavat* is splitting wood, he weakens; *Sāvitṛī* rests his head in her lap. *Yama*, the God of death, appears and draws out *Satyavat*'s thumb-sized soul; when he leaves, *Sāvitṛī* follows him. She pronounces formulas of wisdom, for which *Yama* grants her boons: eyesight and restoration for her father-in-law, sons for her father, sons for herself and *Satyavat*, and finally *Satyavat*'s life. *Yama* sends *Satyavat* back with *Sāvitṛī*, and she returns to the corpse. *Satyavat* wakes up, and *Sāvitṛī* postpones explanations, for night has fallen and his parents must be worrying. *Satyavat* agrees: he is the sole support of his parents. They set out, she carrying his ax.

282 (44 verses). *Dyumatsena* regains his eyesight. Worried, he and his wife look for *Satyavat*. The ascetics console him. The couple returns, and they, the parents, and the brahmins sit by the fire. *Satyavat* explains that he was taken ill and slept. *Sāvitṛī* relates how she knew of *Satyavat*'s imminent death and won over *Yama*, who gave her many boons. She is praised.

283 (16 verses). Erstwhile ministers of *Dyumatsena* arrive and relate the death of his kingdom's usurper. Joyously he returns to his land with his family. All the boons come to pass. *Draupadī*, too, shall save her husband.

## Appendix II: on *śrāddha* and inheritance at *Manusmṛiti* 9:140 and 9:132<sup>28</sup>

The *Manusmṛiti* specifies that when a *putrikā* has been appointed,

*mātuḥ prathamataḥ piṇḍaṃ nirvāpet putrikāsutaḥ |*  
*dviṭīyaṃ tu pītus tasyās tṛtīyaṃ tu pītuh pītuh ||*

The son of the *putrikā* offers a *piṇḍa* firstly for his mother, secondly for her father, and thirdly for her father's father.

*Manusmṛiti* 9:140

According to some manuscripts and some commentators, this verse (as also the parallel at *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.3:16) stipulates that the second and/or third *piṇḍas* are for the

<sup>28</sup>On these matters I have profited from conversation with Hans Bakker.

offerer's paternal line (see Olivelle 2006, pp. 328, 772); but such readings seem forced. The whole point of appointing a *putrikā* is that one's line be fed just as if one had had a dedicated son. When Arjuna Pāṇḍava marries the royal *putrikā* Citrāṅgadā (at *Mahābhārata* 1.207:16–23) there is no suggestion that Arjuna or Pāṇḍu will receive *piṇḍas* from Babhruvāhana, the resulting son.

The matter is complicated by *Manusmṛti* 9:131–132 (compare *Mahābhārata* 13.45:13–14):

*mātus tu yautakaṃ yat syāt kumārībhāga eva saḥ |*  
*dauhitra eva ca hared aputrasyākhilam dhanam ||*  
*dauhitro hy akhilam riktham aputrasya pitur haret |*  
*sa eva dadyād dvau piṇḍau pitre mātāmahāya ca ||*

Olivelle's translation reads as follows:

Anything that is part of a mother's separate property becomes the share of her unmarried daughters; and the daughter's son shall take the entire property of a man without a son. The daughter's son shall indeed take the entire estate of the father who is without a son, and he shall offer two rice-balls, one to his father and one to his maternal grandfather.

*Manusmṛti* 9:131–132, tr. Olivelle 2006, pp. 196–197

According to this reading, the son of a *putrikā* feeds both sides of his family, whereas at 9:140 only the mother's side is fed. But Olivelle's translation (as also that of Doniger and Smith 1991, p. 213) is odd, since it apparently presents the same information in two successive lines (9:131cd and 9:132ab). In contrast Bühler's translation, following the interpretation of Medhātithi, reads the second of these lines differently, with *aputrasya pituḥ* referring not to the sonless father of the *putrikā* but to the sonless genitor of the *putrikā*'s son:

The son of an (appointed) daughter, indeed, shall (also) take the estate of his (own) father, who leaves no (other) son . . .

*Manusmṛti* 9:132ab, tr. Bühler 1979, p. 353; compare Jha 1992, vol. 2, p. 280

In other words, although the son of a *putrikā* might sometimes be replaced by his brother as far as his own patriline's *śrāddha* rites are concerned (and then two brothers would, rather awkwardly, serve different lines), if his father has no other sons to do this, then the sole son must feed both lines. I think Bühler's reading is to be preferred, but in both readings there is a man who must sustain both of his parental lines; the only difference is over the circumstances.

If inheritance and *śrāddha*-duties are always linked (see Rocher 1992, p. 645), then a man offering *śrāddha* to both sides of his family would also inherit from both sides; and this would mean that a crown prince wishing to enlarge his realm in the next generation would do well, according to *Manusmṛti* 9:132, to marry a *putrikā* (and, in Bühler's reading, have only one son). One wonders, though, what would actually transpire in such cases. Sustaining two sets of ancestors would be rather impractical, especially for kings, where the line is traced for many generations (as seen in the *vaṃśas* at *Mahābhārata* 1.70–90, *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.69 and 2.102, and so on); and if the situation specified at *Manusmṛti* 9:132 were to obtain repeatedly, then a man might find himself theoretically responsible for a multiply branching network of ancestral *śrāddha* lines, which would surely be unworkable. What would happen in such cases,

I suggest, would be that all lines but one would soon be dropped, depending on which of the many ancestral identities was felt to be most salient; yet this would risk exactly what the *putrikā* regulation is supposedly designed to avoid. So it seems to me that although *Manusmṛti* 9:132 is intended to solve what is perceived as a serious problem, it cannot succeed in doing so; rather, its effect is to highlight that problem. Possible solutions<sup>29</sup> would be to remove the *putrikā* option altogether (but we do not see this), or to warn men against marrying *putrikās* (we see this time and again), thus effectively passing the problem on to some other family.

A final point here: when *Manusmṛti* 9:132 says that the father and the mother's father are both to be sustained, it is perhaps possible to interpret these as one and the same person, because the father of a *putrikā* is also, in a significant sense, the father of her son. Ganguli says that "the son born of her shall be the son . . . of the girl's father" (Ganguli 1970, p. 18 n.2, in 'Anusasana Parva' Chapter XLIV). That is to say, from one perspective the *putrikā* plays not the role of a son to her father, but the role of a wife: she has his son for him.

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<sup>29</sup>In his discussion of the multidimensional category of *sapiṇḍa*, Louis Dumont mentions a tradition of routinely making offerings to the mother's immediate patrilineal ascendants in addition to the father's (Dumont 1983, p. 3; compare Kane 1968–1977, vol. 4, pp. 472–474). Dumont concludes that the introduction of the maternal relatives was an innovation, "an example of the process of aggregation"; that it was "always secondary"; and that in the first place the category of *sapiṇḍa* was "essentially agnatic" (Dumont 1983, pp. 17–18). The development of a bilineal tradition would go some way towards mitigating the problem discussed in this paper; but as Dumont shows, it results in a certain degree of incoherence.

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SIMON BRODBECK  
*University of Cardiff*