The Story of Sāavitri in the Mahābhārata: a Lineal Interpretation

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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 pativratā 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 pativratā 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 śūmantinī kācid dṛṣṭapārvitha vā śutā |
pativratā mahābhāgā yatheyant 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?


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 Bāgh1 – has served as a paradigmatic story of devoted wifehood. It functions in this way when it is mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa and narrated in various Purāṇas,2 and in his eighteenth-century Strīdharmapaddhati, Tryambakayajvan presents Sāvitrī as a model pativratā – a woman avowed to her husband.

1See Majnudar 1956. There are also temples dedicated to the goddess Sāvitrī, for example at Pushkar in Rajasthan and at Bhubaneswar in Orissa.

2Sītā 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 Satyavant, Dyumatsena’s son?” (dyumatsenaṇaṁ viṇa satyavantaṁ anuvatāṁ | sāvitrīṁ iṣv nāṇaṁ vidihi tvam ātmavasāvanāṁ || Rāmāyaṇa 2.27:6, tr. Pollock 1986, p. 140). Rāmāyaṇa 5.5.548, 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 Nīlakanṭha’s ‘vulgate’ version) and John Smith (in the Penguin edition, translating the Poona version).³

The story has been discussed and/or interpreted in translators’ introductions,⁴ 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 Sūrya (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); Narendra Nath 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

³For 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.

⁴See, for example, van Buitenen 1975, pp. 214–215; Johnson 2005, pp. 18–19; Smith 2009, p. lii.
Meisig, who saw in the Sāvitri story an example of successful human revolt against cruel fate (Meisig 1994); Gouri Lad and Stephanie Jamison, who both focused on Sāvitri’s marital self-determination (Lad 1993, pp. 232–233; Jamison 1996, pp. 245–247); Chris Chapple, who focused on the efficacy of Sāvitri’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 Purānic 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 Sāvitri 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 Sāvitri and Satyavat, and that in those terms it provides an interpretive window into the Mahābhārata in general, and the character of Draupadi 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:

\[
\text{nivarta tuṣṭo śmi tavaṇāya gīrā svarākṣaravyaṣṭiṣṭafutayati Śvam vinīṣveha vināśya jīvitaṃ daṇi te sarvam anindite varam ∥}
\]

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

\[
\text{manonakūlaṃ budhabuddhivardhanam tvayāham ukto vacanam hitāśayam Śvam punah satyavato śya jīvitaṃ varam dvitiyaṃ varayasa bhāmini ∥}
\]

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

\[
\text{pīpāsitasyeva yathā bhavet payas tathā tvayā vākyām idam samīritam Śvam punah satyavato śya jīvitaṃ varam vinīṣveha śube yaḥ icchasi ∥}
\]

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

\[
\text{udāhṛtaṃ te vacanam yaḥ aṅgane śube na tādṛk tvad ṛte mayā śrutam Śvam tuṣṭo śmi vināśya jīvitaṃ varam caturthaṃ varayasa gaccha ca ∥}
\]
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!


\[ \text{yathā yathā bhāsasi dharmasanhitāni manonukūlanī supadaṇa mahārthanv \|} \\
\text{tathā tathā me tvayī bhaktir uttamā varaṇaṃ vṛtiṣvapramanaṃ yatvare \|} \]

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!


The prohibitive words, absent from the final boon-offering speech, are \text{vinā (satyavato) asya jīvatam: “except for his (Satyavat’s) life”}. (The word \text{punah} 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. 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 Vyūṣṭāśva and
Bhadrā. Vyūṣṭāśva 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 (\text{triṣū śālvāṃś caturo madrāṃ sutāṁ, 1.112:33}). Though Kuntī’s story adverts to the necrophilia of
the āsāmedha 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. 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.

5For this interpretation, which Sāvitrī hints at (3.281:53), see, for example, Majmudar 1956, p. 76; Patil 1983,

6Compare James Cameron’s film \text{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 patrilines 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 Dharmāśāstras, 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 Āsvapati, 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. Āsvapati asked for many sons.

sāvitrī uvāca |
pūrvaṃ eva mayā rājanu abhiprayam imaṃ tava |
jiṣṭau putrārtham ukto vai tava hetoh pitāmahah ||
prasādāc caiva tasmāt te suyaṃbhuvhitād bhūri |
kanyā tejasvinī saumya kṣipram eva bhavisyați ||
utaranaṃ ca na te kīṃcid vyāhartavyaṃ kathaṃcana |
pitāmahanisargaṇa tuṣṭāḥ hy etat bravīmi 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.”


The goddess Sāvitrī insists that the terms of the boon have been set by her superior, and there is no point in Āsvapati complaining to her about it. Āsvapati 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 Sraddha rites and inheritance, not of the husband begetting him but of the girl’s father. 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, 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 putrikadharmini 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: 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 prativīrītāḥ, 3.277:27). Despite Jamison’s parenthetical comment that “many modern women will recognize this plight” (Jamison 1996, p. 243), 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 vṛ. 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.10

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 Svayamvara in the Epic . . . a proceeding

7See Manusmrti 9.127–140; Gautama Dharmasūtra 28:18–20; Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra 2.3:15–16; Viśistha Dharmasūtra 17:15–17. The Manusmrti passage says that a sonless man may ensure his śādha 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 śādha 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, māndū prathamātah piṇḍam siraupet putrikānubhaḥ | dvītyam tu pitus tavāyā tṛtyam tu pitah pitab || “The son of the putrikā offers a piṇḍa firstly for his mother, secondly for her father, and thirdly for her father’s father” (Manusmrti 9.140). For variant understandings, see Appendix II.

8Here Ganguli generalises an opinion mentioned at Gautama Dharmasūtra 28:19: that the daughter might be made a putrikā by mere intention. Compare Manusmrti 6.136, which suggests that property and śādha-duties might be inherited by a daughter’s son even if that daughter was not appointed as a putrikā by her father.


10McGrath mentions this possibility, quoting Jamison; but he does not pursue it (McGrath 2009, p. 206).
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that by no means fits into the framework of the usual or court tales of the Svayamvara” (Meyer 1930, p. 78 n.3); and she comes back with the news that she has made her choice.11

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 commanded by Aśvapati,12 then Satyavat will not receive the śraddha 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 putrikādharmini.13

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 śraddha offerings of Sāvitrī’s sons. This is made explicit when Satyavat repeats to Sāvitrī what his parents have told him previously:

tvayā hiṇau na jīvā muḥūrtam api putraka |
yāvad dhariṣyaṣe putra tāvan nau jīvitaṁ dhruvaṁ ||
vyṛddhaḥ pratiṣṭhitah |
tvayi piṇḍaś ca kiritiṣ ca saṃtānaṁ cāvayor iti ||

11Sāvitrī’s autonomy is at odds with the view that a woman must never be independent (see, for example, Manusmṛti 9.3), and elsewhere in the Mahābhārata Bṛhaspa mentions a diversity of views on the propriety of Sāvitrī’s and/or her father’s behaviour here. Bhṛṣma himself would like to rule against it (he interrupted a svayamvara 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” (svayam vṛttir sāvitrī pīnā vai pratyaṣpatyaḥ | tat tasyāṁre prāṇamantā dharmajñā netare jānāḥ | etat tu nāpache ca kare na pare jānāḥ sādhavaḥ | sādhānāṁ punai āśe gareṣye dharmalaksanam || 13.45.3–6, implying that Sāvitrī and her father are sādhus). Behind Meyer’s quoted comment, the svayamvara 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 svayamvara 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 Przyłęski, Sergent, and Katz Arabagian; see the discussion in Schmidt 1987, pp. 92–105), and Heramba Chatterjee deems the free-choice svayamvara 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 svayamvaras are concerned. See further footnote 23 below.

12At Mahābhārata 13.45.16 Bṛhaspa 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.

13Interpreting 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, our fame and our descendants.

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” (sāmipyena . . . pūrvavairinā, 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 Dhrātarāstra – the uncle and uncle-in-law of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupādi, who are listening to the story. As is clear from the various remonstrations of Vidura, Saṁjaya and several others, as well as being physically blind, Dhrātarāstra 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 Dhrātarāstra in his blindness will suffer enormously and lose his sons,

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14 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 (Kunti 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 Yudhīṣṭhīra points out (6.41.93), will carry the pīṇḍa line for Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the Kurukṣetra war, but who is not a legitimate ksatriya 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. 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 pativrata, 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

\[15\text{Such superimpositive interpretation is illuminating in several other Mahābhārata instances, as I have suggested elsewhere (see Brodbeck 2009a, p. 325).}\]
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 *pativrata*, 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.\footnote{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.}

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 Āsvapati — 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 Śalvas and four Madras — and, for example, by the *Mahābhārata*’s story of Rśyaśrága and Śántā.\footnote{For this latter story, see *Mahābhārata* 3.110–113; Brodbeck 2009a, pp. 82–83.} 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:

\begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
pituṣ ca te putraśataṁ bhavitā tava mātirī & | \\
mālavīṁ mālavā nāma śāśvatāḥ putrapaurināḥ & | \\
bhrātāras te bhavisyanti kṣatriyāṁ tridaśopamāḥ & ||
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

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.

So the solution for Āsvapati, 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
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 āśamas 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?” (ḥā putra ḍhā ṣādhvi vadhūḥ kvāśi kvāśīṛty, 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 āśama-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 ṛṣi, Bhāradvāja, Dālbhya, Māṇḍavya and Dhaumya. The association of these characters with Sāvitrī’s switch from the putrikā to the pativratā 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” (nimajjamānaṁ vyasanair abhidrutam kulaṁ narendasya tamomaye hrade | tvayā . . . samuddhītam, 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 (āmatya, 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 Āśvapati’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: Āśvapati’s wife Mālavī. 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 pativrata, through their sons, to their husbands. By being pativrata 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:

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evam ātmā pītā mātā śivaśrīḥ śivaśura eva ca  
bhartuḥ kulam ca sāvitryā sarvam kṛçhṛat samuddhṛtam ||
tathaivaśaśi kalyāṇi draupadī śīlaśanmatā  
tāryisyatī 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.


Draupadī has already saved the Pāṇḍavas at the dice match by intervening (thanks to Yudhīṣṭhira’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 Yudhīṣṭhira’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 Viśālāparvan 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 Bṛhannāda. . . . 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 tathāiva in terms of our specific discussions of Śāvitri. Could Draupāḍī be a sleeping putrikā, who stands in need of converting herself into a pativrata? On the face of it she is already firmly pledged to the pativrata way; this is implied by Yudhīśṭhīra’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. Śāvitri herself was only ever a putrikā in between the lines; but if Yudhīśṭhīra were to have heard that subtext and become subject to fears of his own, then Mārkandaṇeya’s comment would seem to be reassuring him that Draupāḍi’s sons will be dedicated to the Pāṇḍava line, not to Drupada’s line.

But things go differently for Draupāḍī. Her five sons, the Draupadeyas, though they fight nobly for their fathers at Kurukṣetra, never prosper them as Śāvitri’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 Yudhīśṭhīra. 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 Pāṇḍava.

Given Mārkandaṇeya’s statement, the fate of Draupāḍī’s sons warrants further consideration. As a first step, we can think in terms of Draupāḍī’s disgrace before and following her earlier treatment at the dicing match. After Yudhīśṭhīra 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). Karna, responding to Vikarna’s claim that Draupāḍī was not lawfully won, concludes that this type of treatment is appropriate in any case, because of her unconventional marital arrangements:

\[
\text{ekō bhartā striyā devair vihitāḥ kurunandanaṁ} \\
\text{iyaṁ tu anekavaśaṅgā bandhakāti viniścitā} \\
\text{asyāḥ sabhāṁ anayanatā na citrāṁ itī me matīḥ} \\
\text{ekāmbaradhanatavaṁ vāpy atha vāpi vivastratā} \\
\]

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

There also seems to be a precedent for putrikā usage within Drupada’s household. The mother of Draupāḍī and her brother Drtrṣadāyuma is called Pṛṣaṭī (1.15:34, 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 Pāṇčālas 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:

trīṇī jyoṭiṣṇī purusa iti vai devalo 'brahavīt |
apatyaṁ karma viḍyā ca yatāḥ sṛṣṭāḥ prajātataḥ ||
amedhye vai gataṃvāṇe śūnye jñātibhir ujjhite |
dehe tritayam evaītat puruṣasyopajāyaite ||
tan no jyotir abhirhaṇam dārāṇān abhimāraṇānät |
dhananāya kathan svīt syād apatayam abhimāṣṭajam ||

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 Sāvitri, 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 Rāmāyanā, where the doubts over what Rāvana 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 Aikṣvākava line in Ayodhya. In contrast, Sāvitri'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.

**Putrikā and the night massacre**

If Sāvitri'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 Pāṇḍāla influence or ancestry within that patriline. If in Mārkandeya's narrative the putrikā possibility is suppressed by Sāvitri's reformation, in Vaiśampāyana's it is suppressed by this massacre, as perpetrated by Śiva in the guise of Aśvatthāman. As Ruth

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19. When Hanūmat first locates Sītā in Lankā, 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 (Rāmāyanā 5.35:20–36:10).

Katz says, “all named victims of the night raid are Pāṇcālas”; “someone is getting rid of the Pāṇcālas to make way for another Pāṇḍava 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 Daśa’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). In light of these results and the fact that the Sāvitri 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 Daśa’s sacrifice, as set out by Alfrèd 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 Daśa 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 Sāvitri story in terms of Sāvitri’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), Sāvitri 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. 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 Uttarā’s delivery room, in the guise of her namesake Kṛṣṇa. Parikṣit’s stillbirth (14.65) can be seen as a representation of the death-by-putrikā that the Pāṇḍava line could have suffered (and it is linked back to the massacre of the Pāṇcālas through Aśvatthāman’s curse); but Kṛṣṇa intervenes, as he said he would (at 10.16:15). Like Sāvitri, 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:

\[
\text{noktāpūrṇam mayā mitthā svairēṣv api kadācana} \\
\text{na ca yuddhe parāvṛttas tathā samjñavatām ayam} \| 
\]

21At Manusmṛti 9.128 putrikā usage is paradigmatically associated with Daśa; and this is borne out in the Bhrata ancestry at Mahābhārata 1.70.7–9 and 1.90.7, where the line runs from Daśa, through his daughter Aditi Dākaśyāṇī, to Vivavat.

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

23Sāvitri and Draupadī both have svayamvaram, 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 Sāvitri’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 line between the svayamvara and the putrikā option, particularly as the putrikā is in many ways the incestuous wife of her own father. Further discussion of the svayamvara will not be found in the present paper, but would necessarily involve Damayantī and Kunūṇī.

24On the satyakriyā, see Burlingame 1917; Brown 1972; Söhnen-Thieme 1995; Thompson 1998.
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 dharmas, 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 dharmas always have their basis in me, so let this dead child of Abhimanyu live! As I slew Kāṃsa and Keśi according to dharmas, by this truth let this child here live once more!

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 Satyavat 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.

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!

In this way, the comparison between Sāvitrī and Kṛṣṇa Draupadī comes down to Kṛṣṇa in Uttarā’s delivery room.25

Lest this nominal shift be thought tangential, we return to Black’s suggestion that Draupadī, in her disguise as Sairandhri, saves the Pāṇḍavas at 4.34. I believe this is so, but not quite in the way that Black intended. When King Viraṭa 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 Viraṭa, pleased with Arjuna’s heroic deeds and discovering Brhadnāḍī’s true identity, offers him his daughter Uttarā, and Arjuna says can Abhimanyu have her instead, and Viraṭa gives her to Abhimanyu; and so after the war Parikṣit, the Pāṇḍavas’ heir, is born from Uttarā, a maiden

25Kṛṣṇa had already intervened to prompt and facilitate the marriage between Arjuna and Subhadra that produced Parikṣit’s father Abhimanyu in the first place (1.211–213).
untainted by multiple husbands, public insults, or implied putrikā suspicions. It is Draupadī who arranges this, as if at Bhūma’s suggestion (see again 2.64:5–7, quoted earlier). Speaking to Uttara, she extols Brhannadā’s driving skills and says:

|yeṣam kumārī susuṇāi bhaginī te yavīyasī |  
|asyāḥ sa vacanaṃ vīra kariṣyati na saṃśayeḥ ||

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 Uttara to send him Brhannadā, 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 pativratā, 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)*

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

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26For 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).

27I 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.
śāvitrī formula. After eighteen years the Goddess Sāvitrī appears and predicts he shall have a splendid daughter. She is born and named Sāvitrī; 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 Āsvapati when Sāvitrī 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). Āsvapati visits ... Dyumatsena and marries Sāvitrī to Satyavat. Sāvitrī doffs her finery and wears hermit’s garb; she satisfies everyone.

280 (33 verses). When the day of death nears, Sāvitrī undertakes a three-day vow, standing up day and night, though her father-in-law remonstrates with her; upon its conclusion the brahmmins 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; Sāvitrī rests his head in her lap. Yama, the God of death, appears and draws out Satyavat’s thumb-sized soul; when he leaves, Sāvitrī 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 Sāvitrī, and she returns to the corpse. Satyavat wakes up, and Sāvitrī 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 brahmmins sit by the fire. Satyavat explains that he was taken ill and slept. Sāvitrī 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. Draupadi, too, shall save her husband.

Appendix II: on śrāddha and inheritance at Manusmṛti 9:140 and 9:132

The Manusmṛti specifies that when a putrikā has been appointed,

\[ \text{mātuh prathamataḥ piṇḍam nirvapet putrikāsūtaḥ |} \\
\text{dvitiyāḥ tu pitus tasyās tṛtiyāḥ tu pituh pituh ||} \]

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

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

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28 On these matters I have profited from conversation with Hans Bakker.
The 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 pīṇḍas from Babhruvāhana, the resulting son.

The matter is complicated by Manusmṛti 9.131–132 (compare Mahābhārata 13.45:13–14):

\[\text{mātus tu yautakam yat syāt kumārībhāga eva saḥ} |\]
\[\text{dauhitro eva ca hared aputrasyākhiḍam dhanam} ||\]
\[\text{dauhitro hy akhiḍam riktham aputrasya pituḥ haret} |\]
\[\text{sa eva dadyād dvau pīṇḍau pitre mātāmahāya ca} ||\]

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.

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 Medhāti, reads the second of these lines differently, with aputrasya pituh 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 . . .

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 vāṃśas 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 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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29 In his discussion of the multidimensional category of sapinda, 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 sapinda 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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