

# The Rejection of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*

## Dynastic Considerations

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### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, when Kāṇva's pregnant daughter Śakuntalā comes to the royal court, King Duśyanta rejects her because she has been cursed to be unremembered, and has lost her ring of recollection; he cannot recall meeting or marrying her. Durvāsas cursed her, at the start of Act IV, because in the distraction of her love she was slow in extending suitable greetings to him:<sup>2</sup>

That man whose brilliance  
 Robs your thought of everything, including me,  
 A great ascetic fired by penance—  
 That man, though prompted,  
 Shall not remember you at all,

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Saswati Sengupta and Deepika Tandon and their associates, for organising the Miranda House seminar, for inviting me to participate, and for their warm hospitality. In revising this paper I have been grateful for the comments of Mandakranta Bose, David Gitomer, Alf Hiltebeitel, and Will Johnson. All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> In the summary of the plot of the *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* sent by William Jones to Earl Spencer in 1787, it is Duśyanta who is cursed for ignoring the visiting Durvāsas (see Garland H. Cannon Jr., 'Sir William Jones and the *Śakuntalā*', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1953, p. 200). But in Jones's English translation, first published in 1789, it is Śakuntalā (William Jones, *The Collected Works of Sir William Jones*, 13 vols, ed. Garland Cannon, first published 1807, vol. 9, London: Curzon, 1993, p. 441).

Like a drunken sot, who cannot recall  
What he said in his cups the night before.  
(*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act IV, verse 1)<sup>3</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata* version (*Mahābhārata* 1.62–69) there is no curse. The curse is 'The crucial difference between the *Mahābhārata* version and the play',<sup>4</sup> thus Kālidāsa has 'saved his hero from being a calculating hypocrite, a deliberate liar'.<sup>5</sup> For in the *Mahābhārata*, when King Duṣṣanta<sup>6</sup> claims he has never met Śakuntalā before, he knows he has. He admits this later, after being forced to accept her.

<sup>3</sup> William. J. Johnson (trans.), *Kālidāsa, The Recognition of Śakuntalā: a Play in Seven Acts: Śakuntalā in the Mahābhārata* (*Mahābhārata* 1.62–9), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 44. I omit the Sanskrit (and Prakrit) throughout this paper. See, as appropriate, M. R. Kale, *The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa, with the Commentary of Raghunāthācārya, Various Readings, Introduction, Literal Translation, Exhaustive Notes and Appendices*, first published 1898, Bombay: Booksellers' Publishing Co., 1957; Govindlal Hargovind Bhat, Umakant Premchand Shah et al. (eds.), *The Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Critically Edited for the First Time*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1958–1975; Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, Sripad Krishna Belvalkar, Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya et al. (eds.), *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1966; and Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya (ed.), *The Harivaṃśa, being the Kṛitā or Supplement to the Mahābhārata, for the First Time Critically Edited*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969–1971.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. xii; cf. xxiv.

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Bhat, 'The Reputation of Śakuntalā and Duṣṣanta's Dilemma', *Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1960, p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> In Kālidāsa the king is Duṣyanta; in the reconstructed *Mahābhārata* he is Duṣṣanta. I use both names, depending on the version; but Duṣṣanta is very poorly attested in the *Mahābhārata* manuscripts. Most of them have Duṣyanta, some Duṣkanta or Duṣyanta. For the distribution of variants, see the critical apparatus (in Sukthankar (ed.), *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, vol. 1) to 1.62:3b, 1.63:14c, 1.63:15c, and 1.65:4b; thereafter for many instances of the name no variants are given (we imagine the ones listed earlier); the name recurs at 1.89:14d with variants listed again, and a note saying 'The variations of दुःशंत will be ignored hereafter'. Malayālam palm-leaf manuscript no. 158 in the Whish Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society has Duṣṣanta; 'Dushshanta would be the regular representative of the old Vedic forms Duṣṣanta and Dausshanti, as found in the *Alturya* and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇas* (Moriz Winemitz, 'On the South-Indian Recension of the Mahābhārata', *The Indian Antiquary*, vol. 27, 1898, p. 136). Sukthankar refers to Winemitz, seemingly choosing Duṣṣanta because of its Vedic attestations, despite the manuscript evidence. For the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*'s Bharata Daṣṣanti as 'a source of inspiration for the epic authors' (my translation, as elsewhere), see Madeleine Bardeau, 'Śakuntalā dans l'épopée', *Indologica Taurinensia*, vol. 7, 1979, p. 118.

Might Duṣṣanta have forgotten his encounter with Śakuntalā even without Duryāsa's inference (and so be blathering later to cover his tracks)? I presume not. Both texts present Śakuntalā as memorable.

Winemitz said that in the *Mahābhārata* version 'We are scarcely told why Śakuntalā is at first not recognised by the King'; 'the story itself seems fragmentary and incomplete'.<sup>7</sup> Not so. This chapter discusses three reasons for Duṣṣanta's knowing rejection of Śakuntalā in the reconstructed *Mahābhārata*,<sup>8</sup> the first explicit, the second and third implicit. In doing so, it explores some interlinked aspects of royal parliancy in old Indian texts. The reasons are: because of what people would think; because Duṣṣanta already has an heir; and because Duṣṣanta doesn't trust Śakuntalā's father.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Mahābhārata* there is a pre-existing agreement between Duṣṣanta and Śakuntalā, that their son will inherit Duṣṣanta's role as king.

[Śakuntalā said:] '... O best of the Pauravas, hear the condition of my bestowal, my lord. Promise me truly what I am about to say to you in confidence. The son born to me must be your successor—the *yuvatījā*, O great king. Tell me this for certain! If it is so, Duṣṣanta, then I will have sex with you.'

Without deliberating, the king replied: 'It shall be so!' (*Mahābhārata* 1.67:15c–18b)

In the *Mahābhārata*, the child-who-is-to-be-Bharata is born before Śakuntalā comes to court. She mentions the pre-nup:

This son is yours, O king. He is to be anointed as the *yuvatījā*, for he was sired by you, O king; when I delivered him, he looked like a god. You must do this, O best of men, according to the agreement—according to the agreement you made back then, when we had sex at Kanva's hermitage. You must remember it, O momentous one! (*Mahābhārata* 1.68:15c–17)

So if Duṣṣanta accepts the son, he must accept him as heir. I discount the unmentioned possibility of Duṣṣanta accepting Śakuntalā as his wife, and her son as his, but yet denying the pre-nuptial agreement.

<sup>7</sup> Winemitz, 'On the South-Indian Recension of the Mahābhārata', p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Sukthankar et al. (eds.), *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*.

<sup>9</sup> For the two implicit reasons see also Simon P. Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Paritine: Gender, Culture, and the Royal Hierarchy*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 56–63, 133–39.

# DUṢSANTA'S EXPLANATION, AND RĀMA'S REJECTION OF Sītā

In the *Mahābhārata*, Śakuntalā is rejected, protests at length, and starts to leave. Then a heavenly voice is heard, corroborating her account. She told the truth: the son is the king's, and must be accepted.

Duṣṣanta, delighted to hear the heavenly voice (*samprahṛito*, 1.69:34), explains why he was denouncing Śakuntalā as a liar just now. To his ministers and *purohita* he says:

Heed what the messenger of the gods has said! I, also, knew for sure that this one was my son; but if I had accepted him as my son just on the basis of a verbal claim, the people would have been distrustful, and he would never have been free of suspicion. (*Mahābhārata* 1.69:35–36)

To Śakuntalā he says:

The intimacy I had with you was private, queen; so I voiced doubt in order to free you from suspicion. The people would have considered my association with you, and the choosing of this son for the kingship, to be due to your feminine wiles—that's why I voiced doubt. (*Mahābhārata* 1.69:40–41)

He then tells Śakuntalā he forgives her harsh words to him.

The crucial factor in these two speeches is the attitude of the people (*loka*). For the royal family to maintain its reputation and authority, Duṣṣanta deems it imperative that the people do not doubt his biological paternity of this son. The text records no reply to either of these speeches, so the king's explanation seems to be sustained. And because of the public heavenly voice, there are no further doubts over Śakuntalā. Also, there is no suggestion that the king's reputation is tarnished by his having lied in public about his earlier encounter with her.

Duṣṣanta's rejection of Śakuntalā resembles Rāma's rejection of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Bhardeau connects Śakuntalā and Sītā in the context of a woman's apparent inability to be believed on her own account (Śakuntalā told the truth ... a woman's speech could not be self-authenticating ... One thinks of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa*).<sup>10</sup> and both cases involve the people's attitude towards the queen's sexual purity.

<sup>10</sup> Bhardeau, 'Śakuntalā dans l'épopée', p. 118.

Rāma's concern for his family's reputation is basic. Rāma doesn't want to make his father Daśaratha a liar; so when Daśaratha decrees Rāma's exile he goes into exile, even though brother Bharata, on whose unwitting behalf the decree was extracted, begs him to stay and rule Ayodhyā. Rāma explains himself to Lakṣmaṇa:

Let my father—a truthful man, true to his word, ever striving for truth—let him be freed from the fears he has of what other people might say.

(*Rāmāyaṇa* 2.19:7)<sup>11</sup>

Rāma says to Bharata:

[Y]ou must likewise ensure, by your immediate consecration, that the truth of the lord of kings, our father, be preserved. (*Rāmāyaṇa* 2.99:9)<sup>12</sup>

When Jābālī tries to turn him, Rāma justifies his filial fidelity in terms of the esteem that will consequently accrue to himself (and, by implication, his family), and in terms of the effect upon the entire realm (*Rāmāyaṇa* 2.101:3–10).

During Rāma's exile, Rāvaṇa kidnaps Sītā, so Rāma finds Rāvaṇa and kills him, but then he rejects Sītā.<sup>13</sup>

Bless you, but let it be understood that it was not on your account that I undertook the effort of this war, now brought to completion through the valor of my allies. Instead, I did all this in order to protect my reputation and in every way to wipe clean the insult and disgrace to my illustrious lineage. Since, however, your virtue is now in doubt, your presence has become as profoundly disagreeable to me as is a bright lamp to a man afflicted with a disease of the eye.<sup>14</sup> Go, therefore, as you please, daughter of Janaka. You have my permission. Here are the ten directions. I have no further use for you, my good woman. For what powerful man born in a respectable family—his heart tinged with affection—would take

<sup>11</sup> Sheldon Pollock (trans.), *Rāmāyaṇa, Book Two: Ayodhyā*, by Vālmīki, translation first published 1986, New York: New York University Press / John and Jennifer Clay Foundation, 2008, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

<sup>13</sup> See *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.102–107 (the whole scene). Compare this scene (*Mahābhārata* 3.275:6–38) in Mātkaṇḍeya's *Mahābhārata Rāmācārīa* (*Mahābhārata* 3.258–75).

<sup>14</sup> Rāma's simile is intriguing: the audience can wonder whether Rāma might indeed be metaphorically afflicted by a (presumably inherited) disease of the eye.

back a woman who had lived in the house of another man? How could I who boast of my noble lineage possibly take you back—just risen from Ravana's lap and gazed upon by his lustful eye? I have recovered my reputation, and that is the purpose for which I won you back. I do not love you anymore. Go hence wherever you like. I have made up my mind in saying this, good woman. Turn your thoughts toward Lakṣmana or Bharata as you please.<sup>15</sup> (*Rāmāyana* 6.103:15–22)<sup>16</sup>

Rāma accepts Sītā back only after she has proved her purity through an ordeal by fire.<sup>17</sup> Then he says, to Fire:

Unquestionably Sītā needed to be proven innocent before the three worlds, since this auspicious woman had long dwelt in Ravana's inner apartments. For surely had I not put Janakī to the test, the virtuous would have said of me, 'Daśaratha's son Rāma is a lustful fool.' I know full well that Janakā's daughter Maitihilī could give her heart to no other, since she is devoted to me and obeys my every thought. But in order that the three worlds, too, should have faith in her, I, whose ultimate recourse is truth, simply stood by as Vaidehī entered the fire, eater of oblations.<sup>18</sup>

(*Rāmāyana* 6.106:11–14)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sītā's accidental demerit is demerit because she is the first wife of the eldest son and heir (and thus the expected mother of his next-generation replica). Neither of Rāma's brothers Lakṣmana and Bharata will be king, and nor will their sons; implicitly, the people would thus not object to their taking wives of doubtful purity.

<sup>16</sup> Robert P. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, and Barend A. van Nooten (trans.), *The Rāmāyana of Vālmīki, an Epic of Ancient India, Volume VI: Yuddhakaṇḍa*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 455.

<sup>17</sup> In the *Mahābhārata* version there is no ordeal by fire; Rāma takes Sītā back at the bidding (and with the assurances) of Vāyu, Agni, Varuṇa, Brahmā, and—posthumously—Daśaratha (*Mahābhārata* 3.275:17–38). On 'restorative ordeals' in pre-modern India, see David Brick, 'The Court of Public Opinion and the Practice of Restorative Ordeals in Pre-modern India', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2010, pp. 25–38.

<sup>18</sup> Sen writes that 'the concluding verses of [*Rāmāyana* 6.106] strikingly resemble the speech of [Duṣanta] in the Śakuntalopākhyāna of the Mbh. in which the king first refuses to accept Śakuntalā and then gladly accepts her on hearing a divine voice with a further explanation that people would have spoken ill of him had he accepted Śakuntalā in the absence of any "divine evidence"'. Probably the author of the Fire-Ordeal Scene was influenced to some extent by the Śakuntalopākhyāna of the *Mahābhārata*. See Nilmadhav Sen, 'The Fire-Ordeal of Sītā: a later interpolation in the Rāmāyana?', *Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1952, p. 206.

<sup>19</sup> Goldman, Goldman, and van Nooten (trans.), *Yuddhakaṇḍa*, p. 462.

Having served the exile as Daśaratha decreed, Rāma returns to Ayodhyā and becomes king.<sup>20</sup> But the thing he feared when he tried to reject Sītā comes to pass: the people question his propriety in taking her back. As reported, they say:

... Having slain Ravana in the fight and recovered Sītā, Raghava, having mastered his anger, has taken his spouse into his house again. What pleasure can his heart experience in possessing Sītā, whom Ravana formerly held in his lap, having borne her away by force? How is it that Rāma was not filled with aversion for her after she had been taken to Lanka and conducted to the Ashoka Grove, where she was left to the mercy of the titans? We shall now have to countenance the same state of affairs regarding our own wives, since what the king does, his subjects follow! (*Rāmāyana* 7.42:16–19)<sup>21</sup>

So, to safeguard his and his family's royal reputation, Rāma banishes the pregnant Sītā (*Rāmāyana* 7.43–44); she is 'like a sacrificial victim on the altar of public opinion.'<sup>22</sup> Rāma says to his brothers:

Whoever it may be, if his ill fame be current in the world, he falls to a lower state, so long as the defamatory rumours exist. Dishonour is condemned by the gods; honour is revered in the world, and it is on account of fair repute that great souls act. As for me, so greatly do I fear dishonour that I would renounce my life and you yourselves on its account, O Bulls among Men, how much more therefore is it incumbent on me to separate myself from the daughter of Janakā. (*Rāmāyana* 7.44:11–13)<sup>23</sup>

Later Rāma is reunited with Sītā's (and his) sons; they tell him the story. But rather than proving her purity in front of the people, Sītā enters the earth (*Rāmāyana* 7.84–88). Rāma sorrows, eventually drowning himself

<sup>20</sup> The *Mahābhārata*'s Rāma story ends here. It has to; Mārkaṇḍeya is trying to encourage Yudhisṭhira, so he cannot tell him what happened next. See Robert P. Goldman, 'To Wake a Sleeping Giant: Vālmīki's Account(s) of the Life and Death of Kumdhakarmā', in *Epic Undertakings*, ed. Robert P. Goldman and Munee Tokunaga, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009, p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> Hari Prasad Shastri (trans.), *The Ramayana of Vālmīki, Vol. III: Yuddha Kaṇḍa; Uttara Kāṇḍa*, first published 1959, London: Shanvi Sadan, 1976, p. 522.

<sup>22</sup> S. N. Mista, 'The Desertion of Sītā in the *Rāmāyana* and *Uttararāmacarita*: a Socio-Political Analysis', *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, vol. 11 (for 1977–1978), 1979, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Shastri (trans.), *The Ramayana*, Vol. III, p. 524.

in the River Sarayū, with all of Ayodhyā's inhabitants. His descendants settle elsewhere (*Rāmāyaṇa* 7.97–100).

Who speaks for 'the people'? Rāma's governmental ideology and regal self-mythology are seemingly based upon them, and yet within this elite discourse they figure only as imaginative constructions.<sup>24</sup> And in the *Mahābhārata*, King Duṣanta's speeches evoke 'the people' in a similarly oblique fashion.

A recurring theme here is the idea that 'what the king does, his subjects follow' (*Rāmāyaṇa* 7.42:19, quoted above). This is stated in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

Whatever the superior man does, other people simply follow suit. He sets the standard to which the people conform. (*Bhagavadgītā* 3:21, = *Mahābhārata* 6.25:21)<sup>25</sup>

In defence of his rejection of Ambā, Śālva says:<sup>26</sup>

How can a king like me, who has learned his lessons and demonstrates the Law for others, allow into his house a woman who has been another man's? (*Mahābhārata* 5.172:7a–d)<sup>27</sup>

Compare *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.103:19, quoted above. Śālva feels bound to be as impeccably behaved as possible, because of an alleged behavioural trickle-down effect.

That kings would feel constrained in this way seems credible. We might suspect that such a feeling would be, in some measure, a kind of speculative royal vanity; but in Rāma's story the people's suspicion of Śitā, coupled with Rāma's failure to remarry, means there is no next king. And because Ayodhyā's decline results from the people's overweening scruples and mimetic instinct, it is fitting that they follow their king to death.

Duṣanta is concerned about royal public relations in the matter of Śakuntalā and her son, however much we might hope that the people's

<sup>24</sup> Compare 'representative democracy', where government is oriented towards 'public opinion', but the public choose someone to opine in their stead.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Cherniak (trans.), *Mahābhārata, Book Six: Bhīṣma, Volume One*, New York: New York University Press/John and Jennifer Clay Foundation, 2008, p. 197 (adapted).

<sup>26</sup> Compare also *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.101:9–10; 3.48:8–9; *Mahābhārata* 12.59:10.

<sup>27</sup> J. A. B. van Buitenen (trans.), *The Mahābhārata, Volume Three: 4. The Book of Virātā: 5. The Book of the Effort*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 498 (adapted).

regard for Bharata would be dependent upon Bharata's character and abilities (rather than their imaginings about his unknowable paternity). But Śakuntalā and her son are validated by the heavenly voice; it does for Śakuntalā what is never done for Śitā.

We now turn to the implicit reasons for the rejection of Śakuntalā.

### EXISTING THEIR DISINHERTED

If, when Śakuntalā came to the court, Duṣanta already had, and was known at court to have, a son and heir from another wife, this would explain his rejection of Śakuntalā.

The reconstituted *Mahābhārata* mentions no other wife or son, but Kālidāsa's version names two other wives, Hamsapadikā and Vasumatī (beginning of Act V).<sup>28</sup> In Kālidāsa, when Kaṇva Kaśyapa sends Śakuntalā to the court, he also sends a message telling the king to 'take her as an equal to your other wives', and he tells Śakuntalā to be 'friendly to his other wives' (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act IV, verses 17 and 18).<sup>29</sup>

Kālidāsa's version seems to be the more realistic here; every king needs at least one queen.<sup>30</sup> If the *Mahābhārata* suggests that Śakuntalā has no rival as Duṣanta's queen, and her son no rival as Duṣanta's heir, we will wonder why Duṣanta is not keener to get an heir, since this is a basic royal duty. The paradigm at *Mānsmṛiti* 6:2, whereby a man retires only after seeing his son have a son, would particularly suit royal families; it might seem unwise for Duṣanta's father Ilina to have allowed Duṣanta's full consecration as king unless Duṣanta's fertility was already proven.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 53–54.

<sup>30</sup> On king-and-queen as a single representational unit, see Angelika Malinar, 'Arguments of a Queen: Draupadi's Views on Kingship', in *Center and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 80: '[T]he upper strata of a hierarchically organized society represent the values and powers that guarantee the functioning of society. ... [T]he king ... should represent the orderliness, appropriateness and legitimacy of this social order by living up to its values, in brief by incorporating them as the king. However, this incorporation is only complete with a queen at his side.' On the king's incorporation of the social order's values, see above. With regard to the queen Malinar's point is well made, even if *Mahābhārata* kings sometimes seem to operate alone (compare Śantanu after Gaṅgā's departure, *Mahābhārata* 1.94).

<sup>31</sup> See *Mānsmṛiti* 9:137 (the importance of continuity beyond the son): 9:201 (the disqualification of the impotent or unmanly son).

In Kālidāsa's version, although there are other wives, Śakuntalā's son is Duṣyanta's first and apparently only son.<sup>32</sup> But even so, there is the ghost of an elder son when Śakuntalā is compared to Śarmiṣṭhā. Kaṇva says:

To your lord, may you be  
As Śarmiṣṭhā to Yayāti—  
As she bore him Puru, may you bear  
Your king a worthy heir. (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act IV, verse 7)<sup>33</sup>

Were Śakuntalā's son just like Pūru, he would become heir by overtaking an elder half-brother, as Pūru overtook Detyānī's son Yādu (*Mahābhārata* 1.73–80).

The suggestion of a prior son is supported by analogy with the *Rāmāyana*, linking through the name 'Bharata'. In the *Rāmāyana*, Bharata is Rāma's younger half-brother, but Bharata's mother Kaikeyī forces Rāma's banishment and Bharata's promotion (*Rāmāyana* 2.1–16). If Śakuntalā's Bharata shares more than a name with Kaikeyī's, he too would have an elder half-brother who is disinherited on his behalf.

Exploring details elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, we can pursue the possibility that Śakuntalā's son had an elder half-brother. He explicitly does in the southern recension version of the verse genealogy.<sup>34</sup> Instead of 1.89:16ab—'Wise Bharata, the protector of the people, was born to Duṣanta from Śakuntalā'—all Sukthankar's southern manuscripts (T1–3 in Telugu script, G1–7 in Grantha, and M1–8 in Malayalam) read as follows:

<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act V, between verses 29 and 30, in the discussion of what to do with Śakuntalā, who here has arrived at court pregnant, Duṣyanta's *purohita* says: 'Let the lady stay in my house until she gives birth. There's a good reason for that: holy men have already predicted that your first son will bear the bodily signs of a Universal Emperor. If that turns out to be true of the sage's grandson, then congratulate his mother and receive her into your royal apartments. But then, 'Close to the nymph's shrine, a curtain of light, shaped like a woman, whisked her away' (Johnson, trans., *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, pp. 68, 69). In Act VI, between verses 23 and 24, after Śakuntalā's banishment, Duṣyanta muses that 'the wealth of families passes to strangers when the last male heir dies without issue. And such will be the fate of the Purus' wealth when I am gone' (Johnson, trans., *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. 85).

<sup>33</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> As noted by Winternitz, 'On the South-Indian Recension of the Mahabharata', p. 136; see also Moritz Winternitz, 'On the Mahabharata MSS. in the Whist Collection of the Royal Asiatic Society', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1898, p. 148.

Janamejaya, indeed, was born to Duṣanta, from Lakṣmanā, and the son Bharata Daupṣanti was from Śakuntalā. (*Mahābhārata* 1.\*877)<sup>35</sup>

In the reconstituted text it is not so explicit, but something similar seems to be implied. In the *Āraṇyaka-parvan*, Markaṇḍeya gives a genealogy of fires, and the Bharadvāja fire is apparently the elder brother of the Bharata fire:

The fire Bharadvāja, which is honoured first with a portion of ghee at the sacrifice, is said to be his [i.e. Śamyu's] first son. At all the lunar rites the ghee oblation is offered by ladle, that fire is called Bharata, and is a second son derived from Śamyu. (*Mahābhārata* 3.209:5–6)

In the verse genealogy of kings, Vaiśampāyana tells Janamejaya the following:

King Bharata had three wives and produced nine sons, but he didn't think much of them; he said, 'They're nothing like me.' So Bharata sacrificed with great rites, O Bharata, and from Bharadvāja he obtained a son called Bhumanyu. Then [Bharata] the delight of the Pauravas thought of himself as a man with a son; and he anointed Bhumanyu as *putrāñjā*, O supreme Bharata. Then [Bharata] the Indra of the earth had a futile [*pitāha*] son; and that son, who was called Vīattha, became Bhumanyu's son. But there were Subotra, Subhot, Suhavis, and Suyajus, Bhumanyu's sons by Rikṣa's [daughter] Puṣkarinī; and Subotra, the eldest of the princes, became the king. He performed many *soma* rites: *rājasiṃya*, *āśvamedha*, and so on. (*Mahābhārata* 1.89:17–22)<sup>36</sup>

If we combine the foregoing quotations, we can equate the two Bharadvājas with each other, and with the southern recension's 'Janamejaya'; and we can equate Śamyu and Duṣanta, as the father of the two brothers. This yields the speculative genealogy illustrated in the diagram.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Manuscripts M6–8 name Janamejaya's mother Lakṣanā, not Lakṣmanā.

<sup>36</sup> In the prose genealogy Bharata married Sarvasena's daughter Sunandā Kāśeyī and had Bhumanyu, and Bhumanyu married Jayā Dāsārhi and had Subotra (*Mahābhārata* 1.90:34–35). For Bharadvāja as 'Vidathin', see *Bṛhaddevatā* 5:102.

<sup>37</sup> I take the ablative relation between Bharadvāja and Bhumanyu (*lebhe putram bhavadbījāt*, 1.89:18) to indicate that Bhumanyu is effectively adopted from Bharadvāja by Bharata. But the ablative could indicate, for example, that Bharadvāja was a *nityoga-*





It is dangerous to marry a woman who has no brothers. She may be a *putrikā*, and if so she will give her son to her father's line, not her husband's.<sup>43</sup> And Śakuntalā seems to be Kaṇva's only child. Kaṇva has disciples in the *Mahābhārata* and in the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, but no sons.<sup>44</sup> So Śakuntalā might be an unsuitable bride, especially given her pre-nuptial contract. If Duṣanta gives the kingdom to her son, his dynasty could be ruined.

This is obliquely suggested at the end of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act II. Duṣanta has met Śakuntalā and is about to return to the hermitage to see her, when a message arrives from his mother asking him to come home immediately, to take part in the 'ritual fast to safeguard the son's succession'. Duṣanta sends instead the *vidūṣaka*, who says of himself, 'make way for the heir-apparent!'<sup>45</sup> Here Duṣanta's preoccupation with Śakuntalā possibly results in the heir becoming a joker, against the family's best interests.

In view of the *putrikā* possibility, compare Śakuntalā's birth-story, which she tells to Duṣanta as she heard it from Kaṇva (*Mahābhārata* 1.65.20–66.15). Kaṇva adopted her; her biological father was Viśvāmītra, who was born a *ṛṣḍṛīya*. In his letters of 1787 to Earl Spencer, William Jones begins his summary of the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* with Viśvāmītra:

... I must tell you the subject of a Drama in Sanscrit by Calidāsa. ... The dramatick piece, which is neither Tragedy nor Comedy, but like many

<sup>43</sup> See *Mahābhārata* 13.44:14; *Manusmṛiti* 3.11; Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. 1, p. 7; vol. 2, pp. 435–36; Hanns-Peter Schmidt, *Some Women's Rites and Rights in the Veda*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1987, pp. 30–75; Uma Chakravarti, 'Vedic Daughter', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 81, 2000, pp. 184–86. If this seems rather melodramatic, it might perhaps be seen as a paradigmatic limit case, encoding any possibility of a marriage being turned against the husband's family in such a way as to inhibit their famous cultural distinctiveness.

<sup>44</sup> The *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* names Kaṇva's disciples Viśvambhaka (Act IV), Nārada (Act IV), Śārngarava (Acts IV and V), and Śāradvāta (Act V). We cannot identify this Kaṇva Kāṣṭhapa with any of the Kaṇvas mentioned in Vedic texts, none of whom share his patronym. For the Vedic Kaṇvas, who are credited with *Ṛgveda* 8 and part of *Ṛgveda* 1, see Arthur Anthony Macdonell and Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, First published 1912, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007, vol. 1, p. 134. Macdonell and Keith note that in *Atharvaveda Samhitā* 2.25 the Kaṇvas 'seem to be definitely regarded with hostility'; in verse 3 of that hymn, Kaṇva is called 'the devourer of our offspring' (*ganbhāta*; see Maurice Bloomfield, trans., *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda, together with Extracts from the Ritual Books and the Commentaries*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. XLII, First published 1897, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, pp. 30–31.

of Shakespeare's fairy-pieces, is called *Sacontalā*, and the story is this. A pious man, whose name was Viśvāmītra, or Universal Friend, had by his devotion attained such power over all nature, that Indra, the God of the Firmament, began to fear, lest his own dominion might be in danger, and to check the ambitions of the Saint, commanded an *Apsara*, or Celestial Nymph, to descend from heaven and seduce the hermit from his vows of Chastity.<sup>46</sup> ... She (for the Saint had the weakness of other mortals) overpowered his austerity, and was delivered of a lovely daughter ...<sup>47</sup>

Śakuntalā was abandoned, fostered by birds, then adopted and named by Kaṇva.

In Śakuntalā's birth story, Viśvāmītra, succumbing to desire, is ruined by seduction; and if Śakuntalā were later a *putrikā*, Duṣanta's downfall might resemble Viśvāmītra's.<sup>48</sup> Although there seems to be a contrast in that Viśvāmītra is seduced but Duṣanta is the seducer, Bharaṭa's conception might be the result of a perfect seduction performed by Śakuntalā, whereby the seduced has no awareness of being so, thinking himself the seducer!

Śakuntalā's birth story makes her a suitable bride for Duṣanta in *urṇa* terms: in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act I Duṣanta is relieved to discover, from her friends, that Śakuntalā's biological father was a *ṛṣḍṛīya* ('My desires have a foothold at last!').<sup>49</sup> But in the *Mahābhārata*, when combined with Śakuntalā's brotherlessness the birth story also provides, by analogy, a possible explanation for Duṣanta's failure to send the promised royal escort to bring her to Hāstinapura (1.67.20), and for his later rejection of her.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> On Indra's jealousy, see Minoru Hara, 'Indra and *Tapas*', *Adyar Library Bulletin*, vol. 39, 1975, pp. 129–60; on disempowerment by seduction, see Minoru Hara, 'The Losing of *Tapas*', in *India and Beyond: Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought. Essays in Honour of Erits Stahl*, ed. Dick van der Meij, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997, pp. 226–48.

<sup>47</sup> Cannon, 'Sir William Jones and the *Sakuntalā*', p. 200.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Biardeau, 'Śakuntalā dans l'épopée', p. 117: Duṣanta 'in turn falls immediately in love' (my italics).

<sup>49</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. 17.  
<sup>50</sup> It might be a contributing factor in Duṣanta's fear of Kaṇva's curse (1.67.21–22). The most obvious explanation for this fear is that Kaṇva might be enraged—which he isn't—by Duṣanta's having married Śakuntalā without his permission. In Insler's analysis, 'Śakuntalā's seduction by Duṣanta resembles rape, since the maiden is completely innocent until the arrival of the king and therefore highly susceptible to the king's advances' (Stanley Insler, 'The Shattered Head Split and the Epic Tale of Śakuntalā', *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes*, vols. 7–8, 1989–1990, p. 125; cf. 128).



This possibility can combine with the possibility that Duṣanta had a previous wife and son. As discussed, the next generations suggest rivalry between Bharadvāja's descendants and Bharata's; and now we can also see this as rivalry—for oblations and inclusion in this line—between Duṣanta's ancestors and Kaṇva's.<sup>51</sup> Bharata is king after Duṣanta, but the line passes back to Bharadvāja's descendants, who are not related to Kaṇva; so even if Śakuntalā is a *putrikā*, the danger to the Pauravas is overcome, and Duṣanta keeps his pre-nuptial promise to Śakuntalā without starving his ancestors. And in retrospect, the fact that the danger was overcome means Śakuntalā can be presented as one of the *Mahābhārata*'s *putirātā* wives. Stressing the figure of the *putirātā* is a central *Mahābhārata* concern, and Śakuntalā's speech on the subject (1.68:36–52) is one reason why her story is presented where it is, before the genealogies are narrated. *Putirātā* theory is often stressed most particularly with regard to wives whom we might suspect of having been intended as *putrikās* (Sāvitrī is another example, as is Draupadī).

Perhaps in some cultures the appointment of a *putrikā* was not always dependent on there being no sons. Or perhaps there was a perception or rumour to this effect. Thus fear of the other gender—the woman who is needed to produce the son—would be overlaid with fear of the other culture. In this regard it fits that Kaṇva Kāśyapa lives in the wilds, and that Śakuntalā is named after the wild birds who fostered her.

In the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, as in the *Mahābhārata*, the *putrikā* possibility is never directly addressed; but it is nonetheless implied in the first verse of the play proper, spoken to King Duṣanta by his driver (*sūta*):

Glancing from that black-buck to you, bow drawn,

I see Śiva himself, in human form,

Pursuing the chase. (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* Act I, verse 1)<sup>52</sup>

This refers to Śiva's hunting myth, in which he killed the incestuous Prajāpati-in-the-form-of-a-deer, or destroyed Dakṣa's ritual-in-the-form-of-a-deer. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>53</sup> in both cases Śiva's deed curbs

<sup>51</sup> Here I take Śakuntalā as Kaṇva's possible *putrikā*, but some explanation is pending, because, like several other significant *Mahābhārata* women (Gaṅgā, Sāvitrī, Kuntī, and Pramadvārā whose mother is also Menakā) Śakuntalā has two fathers. See discussion below.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Patriline*, pp. 52–55, 90–95.

the *putrikā* custom, which is paradigmatically associated with Dakṣa at *Mānuṣmṛti* 9:128.

#### IF ŚAKUNTALĀ WERE A *PUTRIKĀ*, WHOSE *PUTRIKĀ* WOULD SHE BE?

This question is addressed briefly by way of a hypothetical internal appendix. For our main purpose the answer is immaterial: if Duṣanta doubts Śakuntalā's (and thus her son's) loyalty to the Paurava line, his rejection of Śakuntalā is explained no matter whose *putrikā* she might have been. Her having two fathers would seem to make this doubt more plausible irrespective of the other facts of the matter, and as we will see, the combination of these two particular fathers may be unnerving indeed.

Viśvāmitra's paternal interest in his offspring from *apsaras* Menakā would be an unexpected development, his involvement seemingly ended at Śakuntalā's conception (*Mahābhārata* 1.66:9). And the main signs are that Viśvāmitra had plenty of children. In the *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* he has 100 sons, then another (Śunaṣṣepa; *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* 7.16–18). The *Rāmāyaṇa* has four named sons of Viśvāmitra (*Rāmāyaṇa* 1.56:3; 1.61:7–16), and an elder son, king in Gādhī's Kauśika line, born while Viśvāmitra was yet a *ksatriya* (*Rāmāyaṇa* 1.54:7–11). In the *Harivaṃśa* Viśvāmitra's sons are mentioned at 9:97–100 and 10:15, and eleven are listed at 23:86–94. So in these sources Viśvāmitra does not seem to need a son.

In the *Mahābhārata* Yudhiṣṭhira mentions Viśvāmitra's many sons, and his adopted son, and says that Viśvāmitra established 'Kauśika's great line' (13.3:5–8). But this line seems not to be royal; Yudhiṣṭhira says it is learned, contains hundreds of *brahmarṣis*, and is lauded by *brahmins*. Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* Viśvāmitra produces Aṣṭaka from Mādhavi, and says he wishes he could have had more sons from her; and Aṣṭaka goes off to be king somewhere (5.117:14–19). Mādhavi is Yayāti's daughter, from whom Yayāti seeks daughter's-sons (5.113:5, 14); and Aṣṭaka helps to keep Yayāti in heaven (1.81–88; 5.119).

A new study of Viśvāmitra in the *Mahābhārata*<sup>54</sup> could allow exploration of Śakuntalā as his possible *putrikā*; after all, the prose

<sup>54</sup> Adheesh A. Sathaye, *Viśvāmitra: Intertextuality and Performance of Classical Narratives about Caste*, PhD thesis, University of California (Berkeley), 2004; this, like most previous studies, is quite diffuse.

genealogy names Viśvāmītra as Śakuntalā's only father (1.90:30). Viśvāmītra's affair with Menakā seems to occur after he has quarrelled with Vasiṣṭha and become a *brahmin* (1.65:29); but when Vasiṣṭha's victory over Viśvāmītra is presented as the holding off of Viśvāmītra's efforts to possess Vasiṣṭha's 'cow' Nandinī, this can be read as a victory-by-*putrikā* (1.165).<sup>55</sup> We can thus see three stories as exemplars of a common pattern: Vasiṣṭha/Indra/Yayāti unseat Viśvāmītra through Nandinī/Menakā/Madhavi. And if Viśvāmītra suffered royal lineal failure, he might yet want a *putrikā* of his own.

Turning to Śakuntalā's other father, it might seem that Kaṇva would not be interested in sustaining his ancestors, or in becoming one himself, since he is a celibate renouncer (*undhuvareṇā*, *Mahābhārata* 1.65:16). But elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, renouncers Jaratkāru and Agastya are both begged by their ancestors to have a son, to ensure the survival of those ancestors (1.13:10–23; 1.41; 3.94:11–15); and both then have a son, even though they seem to be indifferent to their own survival as ancestors. When Asita Deva resolves upon renunciation his horrified ancestors exclaim, 'Who will give us our share?' (9.49:55); Asita renounces nonetheless, but the problem is clear.

Various sources say that one who renounces automatically saves many generations of his ancestors.<sup>56</sup> This would obviate the situation in which Jaratkāru, Agastya, and Asita find themselves: but there is no such ruling in the *Mahābhārata*. Thus Kaṇva would only be exempted from ancestral duty if he had an elder brother who was performing that duty in this generation, leaving Kaṇva free to please himself. But no elder brother is evident, and we can easily imagine that Kaṇva bears this responsibility alone. In this regard, adoption might present an ideal solution for renunciative types who nonetheless bear an ancestral responsibility; it would enable the line to continue through the adopted child, whilst also allowing the adoptive father to remain single, celibate, and untouched by *kāma*.

## CONCLUSION

In the *Mahābhārata*, Duṣṇanta's explanation for his rejection of Śakuntalā is that without the heavenly voice, the people would not accept his

paternity of her son. This explanation can serve for the court situation, where a woman has come with her son, and has announced that he is the king's son, and that following an earlier promise he must be made heir. However, we have discussed textual details that allow us to view this pivotal dramatic moment in a wider perspective, making it even more dramatic.

It is a testament to the *Mahābhārata*'s literary brilliance that this moment in its story of Śakuntalā simultaneously admits interpretation on different levels and in different ways. And if we think Kālidāsa knew the *Mahābhārata* when he composed his play,<sup>57</sup> we must view his adaptation in light of the full brilliance of the original. It helps us to understand his introducing the curse of Duryāsa.

<sup>57</sup> This is a common perception. See Murray Bannson Emeneau, 'Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā and the Mahābhārata', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 82, no. 1, 1962 (Emeneau argues to that effect, but perhaps begs the question slightly); Monier Monier-Williams (trans.), *Śakuntalā, or The Lost Ring: an Indian Drama Translated into English Prose and Verse from the Sanskrit of Kālidāsa*, revised eighth edition, London: Routledge, no date, p. xxxviii ('... Mahā-bhārata, a poem with parts of which the [i.e. Kālidāsa's] audience would be familiar, and in which they would feel the greatest pride. Indeed the whole story of Śakuntalā is told in the Mahā-bhārata'); Arthur W. Ryder (trans.), *Kālidāsa: Shakuntala and Other Writings*, New York: Dutton and Co., 1959, pp. 97, 101 ('In the first book of the vast epic poem Mahābhārata, Kālidāsa found the story of Shakuntalā'; 'Kālidāsa has changed the old story'); Michael Coulson (trans.), *Three Sanskrit Plays: Shakuntala by Kālidāsa; Raktasas's Ring by Viśākhadatta; Malatī and Madhava by Bhavabhūti*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p. 18 (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is 'based ... on a threadbare minor legend recounted in the *Mahābhārata*'); Romila Thapar, *Śakuntalā: Texts, Readings, Histories*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999, pp. 5–6 ('the play ... borrows the story from the epic'; 'The theme was selected by Kālidāsa from an earlier source, the *Mahābhārata*'); Johnson (trans.), *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, p. x (Kālidāsa's play 'follows an episode in the great Sanskrit epic'), xxiv, xxvii–xxviii (it 'seems to me likely' that that episode is the 'major source' for the play). The most salient alternative suggestion is that Kālidāsa's main source was the *Padmapurāṇa* version of the story (Winternitz, 'On the South-Indian Recension of the Mahābhārata', p. 136).

<sup>55</sup> Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Partridge*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>56</sup> See for example *Bṛhatsamhitā Upaniṣad* 251; *Śaṅkṛāntya Upaniṣad* 331; Patrick Olivelle (trans.), *Sannyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 72–73.