Masquerading Mothers and False Fathers in Ancient Indian Mythology

BY WENDY DONIGER

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Professor Jan Gonda, in whose honor this lecture is given, was a scholar of extraordinary productivity and extraordinary scope: his expertise ranged from the most ancient period, the Vedas, through all the texts of the classical Sanskrit period. In attempting to produce a lecture worthy of his legacy, I have decided to trace a central but little studied Indian myth through this same broad span of Indian civilization. It is also, I think, fitting that this lecture be devoted to the Indian treatment of a myth that is told throughout the world, for it allows us to see the particularly Indian qualities of the myth in question.

If a myth is a story transformed by time, Indian stories are the most transformed, and hence the most mythical. Moreover, Hindu myths differ from those of monotheistic cultures in allowing, or spelling out, the maximum number of paradoxes, in exploiting the possibility of paradoxes, maximising the number of problems (unlike Biblical myths which tend to solve problems). They do this in part by incorporating the commentary, and in part by translating the story back and forth between different languages and different story-telling contexts. It is this, as well as the particular cultural details, that makes the Hindu stories different from other versions of the story told in other cultures.

The history of the myth of the masquerading parent in ancient Indian mythology begins with the most ancient text of all, the Rg Veda, composed in North West India in around 1,000 B.C. This text tells us that the wife of the sun god left him and left in her place a substitute, her shadow; between them, these two females gave birth to the ancestors of the human race. A variant of this story of masquerading mothers was retold in the great Epic, the Mahabharata, which went on to weave the ancient tale into another story, not of masquerading mothers but of false fathers, substitute fathers from whom all of the Epic heroes were descended, a circumstance that led to the tragic battle in which all were killed – a holocaust that is the inverse of the creation in the first myth. In my conclusion, I will discuss the implications of this body of myth in terms of theology (the creation and destruction of the human race) and psychology (the deceptive step-parent and the rejected child).
Let us begin at the beginning, with the Rg Veda. Since this text purposely conceals the story, it is helpful to have a brief summary of the plot before we try to decipher the riddling text:

Tvāśtr was the artisan of the gods. His daughter, Sarānyū, married Vivasvant, the Sun, and gave birth to twins, Yama and Yami. Then she put in her place a female of-the-same-kind, took on the form of a mare, and fled. The Sun took the form of a stallion, followed her, and coupled with her. From that were born the twin equine gods called the Aśvins.

Now, this is how the Rg Veda plays with the story:

'Tvāśtr is giving a wedding for his daughter': people come together at this news. The mother of Yama, the wedded wife of the great Vivasvant, disappeared. They concealed the immortal woman from mortals. Making a female of-the-same-kind (savarnā), they gave her to Vivasvant. What she became bore the twin equine gods, the Aśvins, and then she abandoned the two sets of twins - - Sarānyū.¹

No explanations are given for the hiding away of Sarānyū, or who it was that bore the Aśvins; instead, a series of hints are given and, at the end, her name, the answer to the riddle. As the later Indian tradition attempts to unlock the riddle of Sarānyū, it draws upon many deep-seated, often conflicting, ideas about human and divine sexuality and masquerade.

In this first text, the female is explicitly an immortal, and her husband is a mortal (one of those from whom 'they' hid her). Sarānyū’s double is said to be of-the-same-kind (savarnā), of the same sort, or type, or appearance, or of the same color or class (varna²). The double may be 'a like one, double entendre: one like Sarānyū in appearance, and like Vivasvant (the Sun) in character or caste ... like Sarānyū in appearance, i.e., her double, and also one who is suitable in her char-

¹ Rg Veda, with the commentary of Sāyaṇa (6 vols. London, 1890–92), 10.17.1–2.
acter to the mortal Vivasvant - - more suitable than the divine Saranyū, we may perhaps understand. The implication here is that the double woman is mortal, like the Sun, whereas Saranyū is immortal.

The double produces no children, but Saranyū in her own person produces a single, mortal child whose name (Yama) means 'twin' and who is immediately referred to as one of a set of twins, while, as the mare, she produces the twin Aśvins, half horse and half anthropomorphic, like the Greek Dioscuroi or the Roman Gemini. That Saranyū's husband and child are mortal is as clear as anything in this riddle. Yama is in many texts said to be the first mortal. The Sun is explicitly said to be a mortal, in contrast with his seven immortal brothers, in other, closely related texts, where he is also said to have been rejected by his own mother, Aditi. Thus the theme of rejection by the mother can be traced back from Yama, rejected by his mother, to Vivasvant, Yama's father, who is rejected by his mother. Though someone other than Saranyū herself makes the female of-the-same-kind, she herself abandons both The Twin (Yama) and the equine twins; there are no other children. But Yāska, glossing the Rg Vedic verses in his Nirukta (12.10) a few centuries later, adds another significant child:

Tvaṣṭr's daughter Saranyū gave birth to twins from Vivasvant. Putting in her place another female, a female of-the-same-kind (javarna), taking on the form of a mare, she fled. Vivasvant, taking the corresponding form of a horse, followed her and coupled with her. From that were born the two Aśvins. Of the female of-the-same-kind Manu was born.

In the earlier text, 'they' (the gods, we assume) substituted someone else for Saranyū, with or without her consent. Here she explicitly produces the substi-

2 Rg Veda 10.14.2; Atharva Veda (with the commentary of Sāyaṇa, Bombay, 1895) 18.3.13.
3 Such as Rg Veda 10.72.8–9 and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (Benares, 1964) 3.1.3.3.
tute herself. And the female of-the-same-kind has another child, Manu.\textsuperscript{6} ‘Manu’ means ‘the wise one,’ and Manu is the Indian Adam. Thus mānava (‘descended from Manu’) is a common word for ‘human’ (which, in terms of the lexical meaning of Manu as ‘wise,’ might also be the Sanskrit equivalent of ‘Homo Sapiens’). The mortality of Yama is closely related to the nature of his brother Manu, the ancestor of the human race.

That Saranyū and her double are regarded as the mothers of the two ancestors of the human race is even more significant a fact than might at first appear. For Saranyū marks the dividing line between abstract goddesses who have children, and anthropomorphic goddesses who do not. Before her, Aditi (the mother of Vivasvant, and of Indra) and Tvasṭṛ (her own father, and later said also to be the father of Indra) produce immortal children, as do Sky and Earth and a few other deities. But Saranyū is the only goddess who gives birth to mortal children as a result of an anthropomorphic sexual union with a mortal. After her, many Hindu gods and goddesses (or nymphs) produce children with mortal women and men, or by themselves, through a kind of parthenogenesis (thus Śiva gives birth to Skanda, and Pārvati to Gaṇeśa), but never with one another. There are stories in later texts explaining why the goddesses are all barren, sometimes as the result of a curse.\textsuperscript{7} But this is an afterthought to explain what was already long taken for granted, namely, that immortals do not have children simply because they are immortal; if you don’t die, there is no need to reproduce yourself. Or, to put it the other way around, as the myth often does, if you have sex, you must have death: this is the message of the loss of Eden. And, contrariwise, if you are immortal, you can’t have sex (or, at least, procreative sex). This explains why it is that, although gods and goddesses often marry — the hieros gamos is after all a great theme in world mythology — they do not usually procreate with their spouses. Instead, gods seduce mortal women, and goddesses seduce mortal men. This is the pattern set by the Saranyū myth; though in this case her mortal husband is a god, rather than a human mortal,

\textsuperscript{6} For the proliferation of twins, see Bruce Lincoln, \textit{Myth, Cosmos, and Society} (Harvard, 1986).

the result is the same as the result of the mating of a god or goddess with a human mortal: the foundation of a human race.

3. SAMJÑÄ IN THE HARIVAMŚÅ

The story of Sarat;tyu is retold some 1,500 years after the Rg Veda, not in the Mahabharata itself but in the supplement to the Mahabharata, called the Harivamśa. Now the goddess is named not Sarat;tyu but Samjñä, which means, significantly, 'Sign' or 'Image'. At the same time, Samjñä's surrogate is no longer merely said to be of the same class or type, but is also her chaya, her mirror image or shadow — a creature who is not like her but is her opposite either in inversion (the mirror image) or in color (the shadow). This is the Harivamśa version:

Vivasvant married Samjñä the daughter of Tvaśṭr. She had beauty and youth and virtue, and she was not satisfied by the form of her husband. For the Sun was burnt by his own fiery glory in all his limbs, and so became unlovely. The Sun's fiery glory was constantly excessive, and with it he over-heated the three worlds. The Sun produced a daughter and two sons: Manu and the twins Yama and Yamuna. But Samjñä, seeing that the form of the Sun had a dark color (jyā-mavarna), unable to bear it, transformed her own shadow of-the-same-kind (or color, savarna). Her own shadow became a Samjñä that was made of magic illusion. Samjñä said to the female of-the-same-kind, 'I am going to my father's house; you stay here in my house. Treat my three children well, and do not tell this to my husband.' The female of-the-same-kind replied, 'Even if I am dragged by the hair, even if I am cursed, I will never tell your husband. Go wherever you like, goddess.' Somewhat embarrassed, the wise woman went to her father's house. But her father reviled her and kept telling her, 'Go back to your husband.'

And so she took the form of a mare, concealing her form, and grazed in the land of the Northern Kurus. But the Sun, thinking, 'This is Samjñä,' produced, in the second Samjñä, a son who was his equal. And because the Sun thought, 'This one is similar (sadrīya) to the former Manu,' his name was 'Manu

8 In one line in the Harivamśa (Poona, 1969), 8.1, she is called not Saranyū but Sureṇu.
of-the-Same-Kind' (savarna). But the earthly (parthvi) Saṁjñā gave extra affection to her own child and did not behave in the same way to the older children. Manu put up with her, but Yama could not put up with her. In his anger and childishness, and through the force of future destiny, Yama threatened Saṁjñā with his foot. Then the mother of-the-same-kind, who was very unhappy, cursed him in anger: ‘Let that foot of yours fall off.’

But Yama, terrified by the curse and agitated by Saṁjñā’s words, reported this to his father. ‘Turn back the curse!’ he said to his father. ‘A mother should behave with affection (sneha) to all her children, but this one rejects us and is good to the younger one. I lifted my foot at her but I did not let it fall on her body. If I acted out of childishness or delusion, you should forgive that.’ The Sun said, ‘You must have had very good cause indeed if anger possessed you who know dharma and speak the truth. But I can’t make your mother’s words in vain. Worms will take flesh and go to the surface of the earth. Thus your mother’s words will come true, and you will be protected from the blow of the curse.’

‘Then the Sun said to Saṁjñā, ‘Why do you show excessive affection (to one) among your children who are all equal?’ She avoided this and said nothing to the Sun, and he wanted to curse her to destroy her. Therefore she told everything to the Sun, and when the Sun heard this he became angry and went to Tvaṣṭṛ. Tvaṣṭṛ assuaged the Sun’s anger and trimmed him on his lathe, removing his excessive fiery energy. Then he was much handsomer.

He saw his wife the mare, and, taking the form of a horse, he had intercourse with her by joining with her in her mouth, for she was struggling since she feared it might be another male. She vomited out that semen of the Sun from her nose, and two gods were born in her, the Aśvins, the healers. Then the Sun showed her his lovely form, and when she saw her husband she was satisfied.

But Yama was very much tormented in his mind by his karma, and as the overlord of the ancestors, the king of dharma, he ruled over these creatures with dharma. And Manu of-the-Same-Kind will rule in the future during the Period of Manu of-the-Same-Kind. His brother, Vivasvant’s second son, be-
came the inauspicious planet, Saturn. Yami, the younger of the two (twins), became the famous river, the Yamuna.

There are several significant developments in this expanded text. Over the centuries, the word *varṇa* took on new meanings that reflected the hardening of the lines between the social classes, the *varṇas*, and the more overt racial overtones of ‘color’. This may be why the *Savārṇa* (‘same kind’) of the Veda and Yāska becomes a *Sadrīṣa* (‘similar’) or a *chāyā* (‘shadow’) in the *Harivamśa*. The *Harivamśa* refers to the ‘dark color’ of the Sun and the ‘same color’ of the double woman, implying that Śaṁjña rejected the Sun for his blackness and created an appropriately black mate for him. The counter-intuitive idea that the sun is black seems to have occurred to several ancient Indo-Europeans, perhaps an expression of the black spots we see when we stare directly at the sun. The *Harivamśa* implies that the sun gave himself a sun-tan: ‘he was burnt by his own fiery glory in all his limbs.’ In later texts, Yama is often described as a black man (with red eyes); in the contemporary Indian comic book version of the story of Śaṁjña, Yama is depicted as dark brown with thick red lips. There may be undertones of racism even in these early texts. But the more important meaning of *varṇa* in the story of Śaṁjña is ‘kind’ in the sense of mortal versus immortal.

Where Yāska explicitly stated that Manu was the son not of the first wife, the true wife, but of the shadow, the *Harivamśa* says that the first wife bore someone named Manu, as well as the twins. But now it is said that the second wife, the double (no longer called Savārṇa), bore another Manu, a double of Manu, called Manu Śāvarṇi; the subsequent development of the text indicates that we are the descendants of the second Manu, not the first. Thus we are descended not only from a shadow mother but from a shadow Manu, as well. As for Yama, he is caught between the two parents: his stepmother curses him, and his father blesses him. He is the first mortal immortal.

Indeed, by changing the name of the mother from Saranyū to Śaṁjña, this text makes both of the mothers of the human race unreal, for the name of the first wife means ‘the sign’ or ‘the image’ or ‘the name’, and the name of the second wife means ‘the shadow’. Śaṁjña is The Signifier. (Her name contains the verbal root *jña*, cognate with the Greek *gnosis*, and *sam*, cognate with the Greek

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sun, Latin con; she is thus the *co-gnoscente* or connoisseur). Since the word or name is the double of the thing or person, Saṃjñā is her own double from the start. And perhaps it is relevant to note here that *chāyā* in Sanskrit also means a commentary on a text. Thus if Saṃjñā is the text, Chāyā is the commentary; if Saṃjñā is the dream, Chāyā is the secondary elaboration. Yet it should be recalled that names and images in India are regarded as in many ways isomorphic with reality or even able to create reality.10 This consideration distinguishes the force of the Sanskrit term from its Greek and Latin cognates, and gives greater force and meaning to the female who is 'just' an image.

But to the extent that the female images are regarded by the texts as secondary, Saṃjñā ('the sign') and Chāyā ('the shadow') might be regarded as mere reflections of the energy of their husband, the Sun. One manuscript of the *Harivamśa* inserts a short passage describing Saṃjñā's thoughts while she contemplates becoming a mare, thoughts about the nature of women's subordination to men:

She became very worried, and thought, 'To hell with this behavior of women.' She kept blaming herself and her own womanhood: 'No one should remain a woman, ever; to hell with this life with no independence. In her childhood, youth, and old age she is in danger from her father, husband, and sons, respectively.'11 It was stupid of me to abandon my husband’s house; I did the wrong thing. Even though I have not been recognized, I have suffered now in my father’s house, and there she is, the female of-the-same-kind, with all her desires fulfilled. I have lost my husband’s house because of my naive stupidity, and it is no better here in my father’s house.'12

And with that, she decides to become a mare. Yet the Sun is a most pathetic husband, and the real energy (perhaps even the real power) in all versions of the

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10 See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago, 1984).
11 This is a satire on the famous verse in *Manu* (5.148): 'In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence.' See *The Laws of Manu*, translated by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992).
myth seems focussed on the tricky females. If this myth is about victimization, then it is certainly equally, if not more, about subversion.

On the metaphysical level, the myth of Saranyū/Samjñā seems to be saying that we, the descendants of Manu, are the children of the image, children of māyā, not the children of the real thing. It embodies the Vedantic view that we are born into illusion, live in illusion, and can only know illusion. Clearly this is a deeply religious story, not merely (or not even primarily) a story about men and women, or parents and children, or racial color. For, in addition to human questions about incest, stepmothers, rejected children, and unwanted husbands, the Saranyū story raises theological questions about the origin of the human race and human death, about appearance and reality, about the relationship between male and female divine powers, and about the nature of the relationship between humans and the divine. The metaphysical question of the origin of the human race is posed in the fate of Saranyū’s second son, Manu. And the metaphysical question of death is posed in the mythology of Saranyū’s first son, Yama.

4. SARAÑYŪ:KUNTĪ = YAMA:KARNA

It is surely significant that, in so many myths of this type, the children, usually twins, are abandoned by the mother. This theme of the abandoning mother, the wife of the sun, resurfaces in a transformation in a myth that is central to the Mahābhārata:

The princess Kunti was given the boon of invoking a god to give her a child, and she tried out her boon on the sun god, merely out of curiosity. The sun god split himself into two by his power of yoga, so that he came to her but still went on shining in the sky. As soon as Kunti saw him, she begged him to go back, pointing out that she was still a child, but he insisting on lying with her. Karṇa was born, and to conceal her own misdeeds, she threw the boy into the

Horse River (*āśvanadvām*), lamenting, 'Fortunate is the woman from whose breast you will drink. What dream will she have?' Then she returned to the palace, sick with sorrow and in fear of awakening her father. Kanḍa was retrieved by a charioteer whose wife, Rādhā, adopted him.

Now, Kanḍa was born with golden armor and earrings grafted right onto his body. He always competed with Arjuna, who feared Kanḍa's invincible armor. In order to help Arjuna, one day Indra (the father of Arjuna) came to Kanḍa in disguise as a Brahmin and begged the armor from him. Kanḍa said, 'I will strip off the earrings and the armor and give them to you, but let me not look disgusting with my body flayed.' Indra replied, 'You will not look disgusting, and there will be no visible scar on your body. You will be similar (*tadrśā*) to your father in glory (*tejas*) and in color (*varṇa*).'

Kanḍa sliced the armor from his body, streaming with blood, as well as the earrings, and gave them to Indra.

The surrogate mother is first imagined by Kunti, with envy, and then described; the equine mother survives only the form of the 'Horse River' which receives the child, a body of water not mentioned elsewhere in the Epic, to my knowledge. Kanḍa's mutilation is an echo of Yama's mutilation: in the Epic, which abounds in multiple fathers rather than multiple mothers, Kanḍa and Arjuna have the same mother (Kunti) but different fathers (the Sun and Indra), and one father (Indra) mutilates the son of the other father. Moreover, Kanḍa is restored to the condition of being similar to his father in two respects essential to the myth of Saranyū: glory (or semen, *tejas*) and color (*varṇa*), precisely the qualities for which Saranyū rejected Kanḍa's father.

Particularly suggestive of the psychological meaning of the Saṃjñā myth is the heart-rending scene in which, on the eve of the great battle, Kanḍa bitterly berates his mother for abandoning him. Kunti insists that Kanḍa is her son, not Rādhā's, but Kanḍa insists: 'You have done me irreparable harm by casting me out. What enemy could have done me greater harm than you have? When you should have done something, you did not have the compassion you show...

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me now. You have never acted in my interests like a mother." Manu and Yama might have said the very same thing.

5. SUBSTITUTE FATHERS IN THE EPIC

Kunti, the illegitimate mother of Karṇa, goes on to become the legitimate mother of the heroes of the Epic. To do this, she marries King Pāṇḍu - but Pāṇḍu is not the father of the Pāṇḍavas:

Pāṇḍu was cursed to die if he ever made love to his beloved queen, and so he invoked substitute fathers for his sons. His wife, Kunti, had been given the boon of invoking gods for this purpose, and so Pāṇḍu’s sons were fathered by gods."

Pāṇḍu does not know that Kunti has already used this power and produced Karṇa. With his approval, she now invokes five other gods (including Indra and the two Aśvins) to produce the Pāṇḍavas, ‘the sons of Pāṇḍu.’ Why are they called the sons of Pāṇḍu when Pāṇḍu does not beget them? To answer this question we must examine the Hindu concept of the Levirate, the nīyoga.

The need for a substitute father arises when the intended father of a child has died or become impotent before begetting a child. The usual male sexual substitute in ancient India was the dead man’s brother, whose right (indeed whose duty) to beget a child upon his brother’s widow was legitimized and institutionalized in the custom of the Levirate marriage. The myths of Levirate marriage are, like so many myths (as Lévi-Strauss teaches us), about an insoluble contradiction: On the one hand, a man must never have sex with his brother’s wife. On the other hand, he must have sex with his brother’s wife if the brother is dead. On the one hand, the person you most want to have sex with your wife, when you are dead, is your brother, because he has your genes. On the other hand, the last person you want to have sex with your wife, even when you are dead, is your brother, because of sibling rivalry. This basic paradox is buttressed by two corollary paradoxes: the child that results is your child, because the law

16 *Mahābhārata* 5.144.5–9.
17 *Mahābhārata* 1.90 and 1.109.
says he is, but he isn’t your child, because he does not spring from your loins. And your widow wants to have sex with your brother, because she wants to bear a child, but she may very well not want to have sex with your brother, because he is not the man she chose to marry. (This paradox interacts with and further complicates your fear that your wife does want to sleep with your brother). The tension gives rise to the myth. Whether or not the brother is doing his dead brother a favor or an injury is a much debated question, the source of considerable tension within the mythology.

The great Levirate in the Epic arises when king Vicitravirya has died childless, and his mother, Satyavati, summons his halfbrother (by another father), the aged sage Vyasa, to have intercourse with the first of Vicitravirya’s two widows, Ambikā:

‘You must make the queen pregnant right away,’ said Satyavati to Vyāsa. ‘Then,’ said Vyāsa, ‘she must endure my ugliness. If she can bear my smell, my appearance, my clothes, and my body, then she will conceive a most extraordinary embryo on this very day. He will have a hundred sons, who will protect the dynasty and dispel its sorrows; this is certain.’

Then the sage vanished, awaiting the union. With some difficulty, Satyavati won over her daughter-in-law, Ambikā. Then, in the dead of night, when most people were asleep, and the lamps were still shining, the seer entered Ambikā’s bed. When the queen saw Vyāsa’s tawny matted hair, and his blazing eyes, and his red beard, she closed her eyes. Indeed, the sage with his matted hair was ugly, a skinny man of a most peculiar calor, and his odor was the very opposite of sweetsmelling; he was in all ways hard to take. He united with her that night, because he wanted to please his mother, but Ambikā was so frightened that she could not look at him. Afterwards, his mother met him as he came out, and she said to her son: ‘My son, will a king’s son with good qualities be born in her?’ When Vyāsa heard these words from his mother, he said, ‘He will have the vital energy of a million elephants; he will be a wise royal seer, with great fortune, great heroism, and great intelligence; and he will have a hundred powerful sons. However, because of his mother’s deficiency in the quality (of sight), he will be blind.’ ‘But a blind man is not qualified to be king of the Kurus, you treasure of asceticism,’ his mother said, when she heard her son’s words. ‘You must beget a younger son to be king. Beget a child in your broth-
er's other wife, a second king to protect the line of relatives and to nourish the line of fathers.' 'All right,' the great ascetic promised, and he went away. After a while, the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra was born.

The queen persuaded her (other) daughter-in-law, (Ambalika), and, as before, the blameless Satyavati had the sage brought to her. Engaging Ambalika's cooperation, Satyavati once more caused her son to unite with her, to continue the family line. Ambalika, who was a good woman, sat down on the splendid bed, deeply depressed. When she saw him, she too was so upset that she turned pale. Vyāsa saw that she was frightened and upset and pale, and so he said, 'Since you with your lovely face turned pale when you saw how ugly I am, therefore this son of yours will be pale, and his name will be Pale (Pāṇḍu).’ And as the great seer said this, he went out. Ambalika brought forth a boy, pale but full of good signs, seeming to shine forth with good fortune; and from him were born five sons, the Pāṇḍavas, who were great archers.

Then the queen made her eldest daughter, Ambikā, unite with Vyāsa (again) during her fertile season. But when Ambikā, who was like the daughter of a god, merely thought of the appearance and the smell of the great sage, she was frightened, and she did not do what the queen told her to do. She adorned in her own ornaments a slave girl as beautiful as a celestial nymph, and sent her to Vyāsa. The slave girl rose to meet the sage when he arrived, and bowed to him. When he invited her, she had intercourse with him, and did good things to serve him. The sage was completely satisfied by all the enjoyments of lust that he had in her; he spent the whole night with her, taking his pleasure in her. When he got up, he said to her, 'You will no longer be a slave girl. Lovely woman, your womb has received a glorious embryo who will be the very soul of dharma, the most intelligent man in the world.' This son was named Vidura, the brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu. And that is how Vyāsa begot in the field of Vicitravirya sons who were like children of the gods, to extend the dynasty of the Kūrus.18

The widows of Vicitravirya rejected Vyāsa (who appears in the Epic as a kind of walking semen bank) because he was old and ugly and smelled fishy. They also, significantly, reject him because he is the wrong color (too dark? too

18 Mahābhārata 1.99–100, with some verses left out.
light?), and this results in the birth of a child who is the wrong color, Paṇḍu the Pale. Is this another echo of the racial aspect of varṇa that haunts the tale of Saranỹyu?

Moreover, Vyāsa’s relationship to Vicitravirya is clouded, being primarily maternal rather than paternal, making him far from the perfect Levirate surrogate. The Levirate surrogation inspires a female counterpart of trickery, the substitution of the maid for the princess; the Levirate is in itself a social fiction, which leads in turn to the anti-social fiction, the masquerade of women. Vyāsa, who is also said to be the ‘author’ of the text, the Mahābhārata, is the ‘author’ (the grand-father) of the heroes, but a most problematic grand-father, an unsatisfactory substitute for the true parent, and so he produces unsatisfactory offspring (one pale, one blind, one a servant). And Karṇa, the son rejected by his mother and father, is one of the great tragic figures of the Mahābhārata. Beneath these impotent fathers lie angry women, and behind the whole Epic myth lies the earlier, Vedic story of Saranỹyu.

More immediately, behind the Levirate of Vyāsa lies another Vedic paradigm: the Levirate of Dirghatamas, a blind sage (his name means ‘Long Darkness’) known from the Rg Veda as the son of the sage Ucathya and a woman named Mamatā. The story of Dirghatamas is narrated to Satyavati in the Epic in order to persuade her to invoke the Levirate on behalf of her dead son Vicitravirya. This is the story she hears:

Bṛhaspati, who had great virility, lusted after Mamatā, the wife of his older brother, Utathya, though she did not desire him and protested that she was pregnant and he would spill his seed in vain. Unable to control himself, he raped her, whereupon the child in the womb protested, ‘Hey, little uncle, there is no room here for two. You have wasted your seed, and I was here first.’ Bṛhaspati cursed him to enter a long darkness.

Dirghatamas fathered many sons, but they threw him in the Ganges on a raft, not wishing to support him since he was blind and old. He came downstream to a king who recognized him and said, ‘Please father sons on my wives, to continue my line.’ The virile seer agreed, and the king sent him his wife. Regarding him as blind and old, the queen did not go, but sent the old man her nurse, on

19 Rg Veda 1.158.1 and 6.
whom he fathered Kāśivat and ten other sons. When the king saw them, he said, ‘They are mine,’ but the great sage said, ‘No, they are mine, fathered on a slave woman, since your queen rejected me and foolishly gave me her nurse.’ The king pacified the seer and sent the queen to him again. This time, Dirghatamas felt all her limbs and said, ‘You will have a great son.’ And so the sage Aṅga was born from the queen.\(^{20}\)

Dirghatamas feels her limbs, we might presume, to determine that he is in bed with the real queen this time, since, being blind, he must rely on touch rather than on sight. Now, this is a strange story to tell Satyavatī to persuade her, since it incorporates as many anti-paradigmatic as paradigmatic elements, as many implicit arguments against the Levirate as for it: it begins with Brhaspati’s rape of Mamatas, a nightmare distortion of the Levirate, continues through Dirghatamas’s failure to sleep with the queen, and ends, finally, with a successful Levirate. It is therefore a closer parallel to the events that the telling intends to set in motion – the Levirate of Vyāsa with the widows of Vicitravirya – than the teller supposedly realizes: it is the parallel to a disastrous Levirate, not a successful Levirate. Dirghatamas’s failure to sleep with the queen, and the substitution of a maid, is to become the substitution of a servant for Ambalikā (the second time) and the birth of Vidura (the parallel to Kāśivat). Dirghatamas’s own birth in blindness will become Dhrṭarāṣṭra’s birth in blindness. And the quasi-successful final encounter of Dirghatamas with Kāśivat’s mother is the quasi-successful begetting of Pāṇḍu.

The tension for and against the Levirate persists in the myths in the form of unresolved paradoxes within each myth. Thus the wives of Vicitravirya both do and do not want to sleep with Vyāsa, and their ambivalence is the direct source of the tragedy of the Mahābhārata, a tragedy that stems from a problem in the paternity and birth of Pāṇḍu and Dhrṭarāṣṭra, the fathers of the warring cousins in the great Epic. This episode seems to function primarily on the level of folktale, the magic element inhering in the curse of blindness (which is often a punishment for a sexual sin). But the next episode in this series involves deities and is generally regarded as part of the mythical level of the Epic; this is the episode with which we began, Kunti’s invocation of gods to beget the Pāṇḍavas

\(^{20}\) Mahābhārata 1.98.7–33.
- and, secretly, Karna. The final solution in this steadily escalating hierarchy of male surrogates is the invocation of the gods - traditional fathers of so many special sons of virgin mothers. Only on this highest, mythical level is the substitute satisfactory to the woman, freeing her at last from having to supply her own female surrogates to accommodate the unsatisfactory male surrogates provided for her bed.

6. THEOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGS OF THE MYTHS

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern any chronological development in the theme from the mythical to the realistic, from the sacred to the profane, or, indeed, in the opposite direction, from the realistic to the mythological. Mythological versions of the story of the substitute parent appear both in the so-called 'great tradition' texts of Sanskrit and in the vernacular folk materials, or the 'little tradition'; so do the realistic versions of the story.

These stories appear both as myths, involving deities in magical situations, and as tales that function on a more banal and human level, where servants or sisters often assume the role played by magical doubles in the myths. Thus, for the myth of the woman who creates a magical double of herself to avoid an unwanted liaison - Saranyu - , we have the tale of the woman who sends her servant girl in her place - Ambika.

But it is not possible to distinguish legends from myths in any useful way. That is, many of the stories in which gods are the characters turn out to be largely about human problems. And, on the other hand, many of the stories about human beings raise truly theological questions. After all, humans often ask theological questions, and gods are often all too human, as Nietzsche would have said. Both psychological and theological questions may be asked of the same myth. It is not the case that one can ask psychological questions only of 'realistic' myths and theological questions only of 'fantastic' myths.

If we view the human concerns as the logical and psychological base from which the theological versions were derived, we are following in the footsteps of the ancient school of interpretation that we call Euhemerism, which argued that all myths developed in this way: from a 'rational' core of legend about human heroes there developed an 'irrational' overlay about gods. And by attempt-
ing to unravel this unfortunate process, the Euhemerists rationalized the myths: that is, they took stories ostensibly about the gods and made them (back) into stories about humans. Freud may be regarded as a latter-day Euhemerist when he argues that stories that appear to be about god are really about your father.

The interpretive process of rationalization (regarding the supernatural as derived from the natural) argues that the myth itself has *irrationalized*, turning what is rational (observable human behavior) into what is irrational (unobservable divine behavior).

But we can also see the opposite process at work in our stories. That is, theological questions are posed, and in order to answer these questions, human images, human concerns, are projected into the divine world. The meanings of the myths, however, must be sought not merely in the superficial anthropomorphic forms and quasi-human events but in the darker questions that are posed. While irrationalization may indeed occur in mythology (ideas about men and women being transformed into myths about gods and goddesses), the opposite process (what I would call rationalization) is equally common and important.

Psychological interpretations of these myths see them as addressing real human problems, particularly sexual problems. Theological interpretations of the myths see them as addressing cosmological problems: What is god like? How did the human race begin? How did death enter the world? What is the meaning of human sexuality? For a psychologist, the human concerns of the myths of surrogate parents provide a logical and psychological warp on which the theological versions are woven, but for a theologian, the philosophical problem is the warp, the psychosexual problem the weft woven onto it. Thus sex may be a metaphor for god, but god may also be a metaphor for sex. The psychological and theological concerns of the myth stand as metaphors for one another, like the Escher drawing of the hand drawing the hand drawing the hand. In this corpus of stories they intersect at the point of abandonment: the terror of being abandoned by the human agents, first by the mother, then by the wife (sexual jealousy, but also, at a deeper level, the fear of sexual inadequacy, and rejection); and, finally, by god. The human experience of the abandoning mother or

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wife and the theological hypothesis of an abandoning god (otiose, absconditus, or Deist) reinforce one another. Two lovers make one, just as the child with the mother makes one, and the loss of the lover and the loss of the mother pre-shadow the loss of the deity who abandons humankind.

For the god or goddess in these myths is otiose or absconditus, hidden, vanished. And the abandoning mother behaves like God in the Deist argument: God made the world and then left it here for us, without him (or her) to run it - - and, the myth adds, leaving us to the mercies of the substitute. In India, the otiosity of god is also expressed through the erotic metaphor of viraha: the longing for a lover from whom one is separated - - Vivasvant’s longing for Saranyu. The lesson that the abandoning deity teaches the worshipper is two-fold: God cannot belong to any one person, and true love (whether of God of a human lover) respects no boundaries, particularly possessive boundaries. The worshipper may be ‘possessed’ by God in a trance, but God is never possessed.

Thus stories about human women and men become inextricably entangled in the toils of human sexual tragedy and take flight in the illusion provided by myth. And insoluble theological problems take on flesh and seek their solutions, always in vain, on the human stage. The banal and the magical are by no means mutually exclusive, for the royal road that connects myth and fantasy is a two-way stretch. The myth is a bridge between the actual human sexual experience and the fantasy that grows out of that experience and in turn transfigures it. But it is also a bridge between the terrifying abyss of cosmological ignorance and our comfortable familiarity with our recurrent, if tragic, human problems. Some variants narrow the gap by rendering the fantasy in almost realistic terms; but the gap, however small, remains nevertheless. The tension gives rise to the myth.

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