On the Growth and Composition of the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas

Relationship to Kāvya. Social and Economic Context

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The Strange Story of Princess Mādhavī

1) Introduction: the story of Mādhavī

In this paper,[1] I propose to examine the strange story of princess Mādhavī, which is narrated in the Gālavacarita (MBh 5,104–121),[2] on the occasion of Kṛṣṇa's embassy at Duryodhana's court. Kṛṣṇa tries to convince Duryodhana that he should share his kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas, and the ṛṣi Nārada tells him the story of Mādhavī to warn him against the dangers of excessive obstinacy and pride. I call this story strange, because, as we shall see, the way in which Mādhavī is treated and/or behaves violates practically all the rules concerning the correct treatment and behaviour of women. Yet neither Mādhavī herself, nor those who inflict that treatment on her, are ever blamed or said to act in a way that is contrary to *dharma*. The story, which is rather intricate and contains other sub-stories, is as follows:

Desiring to test the *rājarṣi* Viśvāmitra, the god Dharma, disguised as the *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha,[3] visits Viśvāmitra's hermitage, and asks for food. Viśvāmitra takes a long time to prepare for him a special rice-mess (*caru*), but when it is at last ready, Dharma has already eaten someone else's food and tells him to stay there for a while (*tiṣṭha tāvat tvam*) (5,104.12). So, keeping the *caru* hot on his head, Viśvāmitra remains for a hundred years standing like a pillar and feeding on wind (5,104.13), waiting for his guest to return. When he finally comes back, Dharma is pleased with Viśvāmitra's obedience, and he makes him a brahmin by simply saying: "I am pleased, brahmin seer!" (*prīto 'smi viprarṣe*) (5,104.17).[4]

2   The references to the MBh are always to the Critical Edition, and the translations are by van Buitenen (1975 & 1978).
3   This disguise on the part of Dharma is certainly calculated to increase the difficulty of the test, for the deadly feud between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, even though the theme is not mentioned here, is well known elsewhere in the epics.
4   Rm 1,64 has a different version of the story: there, Viśvāmitra becomes a brahmin through a boon from the god Brahman, after practising fierce *tapas* in the east.

Overjoyed, Viśvāmitra turns to his student Gālava,[5] who has been serving him with unfailing devotion during all those years, and tells him that he is now free to leave. But Gālava insists on first giving him his teacher's fee (*gurudakṣiṇā*), till finally, somewhat vexed with Gālava's obstinacy, Viśvāmitra tells him to bring him "eight hundred horses, white like the moon, with ears that are black on one side" (*ekataḥ śyāmakarṇānāṃ śatāny aṣṭau dadasva me | hayānāṃ candraśubhrāṇām…*) (5,104.26). **5,104.** Hearing this, poor Gālava is plunged into the deepest depression. After lamenting for a while and contemplating suicide, he takes refuge with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. At once, Garuḍa appears to him, declaring that he is at his service, and asking him where he wants to go.[6] **5,105**. To help him decide, Garuḍa describes the four directions to Gālava, starting with the east and ending with the north. **5,106–109**.

Gālava decides to go east first. He climbs on Garuḍa's back, but soon he cannot stand the bird's speed any longer and begs him to stop,[7] lamenting about the horses he has to find. Garuḍa, laughing, asks him why he did not tell him all this before,

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5   Gālava mainly appears in the MBh in lists of *ṛsis*. He also expounds on certain topics in 12,276 and 13,18, and he appears in the story of the lotus eaters in 13,96, in the company of other *ṛsis*, as well as Arundhatī, Yayāti, Śibi and Aṣṭaka. In the *Devībhāgavata* and *Harivaṃśa*, Viśvamitra is not Gālava's *guru*, but his father: Viśvāmitra goes away for a long period of time to do *tapas*, leaving his family to fend for themselves. Gālava, his middle son (compare with the story of Śunaḥśepa!) is nearly sold by his mother to save her other children from starvation. She takes him to the market bound by a rope around his neck, but king Satyavrata (subsequently named Hariścandra) saves them, promising to look after their sustenance as long as Viśvāmitra is away. That is how Gālava got his name, concludes the passage, because he had been tied by a *gala*—a rope made of the *gala*-reed: *so 'bhavad gālavo nāma galabandhān mahātapāḥ* (*Harivaṃśa* 1,9.100). In the MBh passage, it seems rather unusual that a brahmin should be the *śiṣya* of a *kṣatriya*! it seems in fact taken for granted that Viśvāmitra is already a brahmin.

6   Gālava and Garuḍa's adventures in MBh 5,110–111 form a sort of mini-story within the sub-story. In fact, Gālava and Garuḍa are linked in several ways: the name Gālava can be derived from the root √GAL (to liquefy or to devour), and similarly, Garuḍa, according to traditional etymologies, is derived from the root √GṜ and can mean the "devourer". Thus both names denote a certain grasping quality. Besides, immediately before the present story, another story is told to Duryodhana in order to warn him against excessive pride, in which it is Garuḍa who is shown to be endowed with excessive pride. In the present story, Duryodhana is warned against stubbornness, and Gālava has excessive stubbornness. Both Gālava and Garuḍa are excessive in one of their defects, and they are both used as negative examples.

7   Commenting on this passage, Dumézil (1971: 318) remarks rather amusingly: "Alors commence une chevauchée où le comique se mêle au mystique et qu'on dirait contée par quelque Lucien respectueux du sacré. Le vertige de la vitesse et de l'altitude inspire à Gālava de ces cris qu'on entend dans les foires, devant les manèges de chars volants, et Garuḍa, avec ses facilités aérodynamiques, se moque de lui." But indeed, as Dumézil rightly notes, the situation is not merely comical, because Gālava, due to Garuḍa's stupendous speed, is deprived of hearing and eye-sight and plunged in end-of-the-world chaos and confusion, where air, earth and ocean, along with the creatures they contain, get mixed up in a whirl. This is not the only place where Garuḍa is shown as the master of confusion. See Feller (2004: 199).

because he knows a way to solve his problems.[8] But first, he proposes to stop for a while on mount Ṛṣabha in order to rest. **5,110**. Accordingly, they land on mount Ṛṣabha, where they are hospitably received by a female brahmin ascetic named Śāṇḍilī. After eating, they fall into a kind of swoon, and when Garuḍa wakes up, he finds to his horror that he has lost his wings and has become similar to a ball of flesh endowed with a face and feet (5,111.4–5). It turns out that this was a punishment inflicted on him by the woman ascetic, because he had harboured the secret design of carrying her off to heaven (5,111.8–9). He begs her to release him from this curse, and she graciously agrees, after warning him never to despise women. Released, Garuḍa and Gālava continue their quest, but cannot find the desired horses. They meet Viśvāmitra, who reminds Gālava of his promise. **5,111**.

Then Garuḍa has an idea. Gālava should beg a king for riches. He takes him to his friend Yayāti, the king of the Matsyas and Kāśis, in Pratiṣṭhāna. Sadly, king Yayāti's fortune has dwindled, and he does not have anything left to give. Instead, he puts at Gālava's disposal his beautiful daughter Mādhavī whom he will be able to exchange against the desired horses. **5,112–113**. Agreeing to this plan, Gālava first takes Mādhavī to king Haryaśva in Ayodhyā. Gālava offers Mādhavī to the king in exchange for a *śulka* (bride-price) consisting of the eight hundred above-described horses. The king is sorely tempted, desiring progeny and seeing Mādhavī's beauty. But he owns only two hundred horses corresponding to this description. Then Mādhavī speaks for the first time. She says that she has received the boon to become a virgin again after each birth. She suggests that Gālava should in turn give her to four kings, collect two hundred horses from each, in exchange for which each king would get a son from her. Gālava is only too happy to follow her advice, and king Haryaśva agrees to give her back to him after the birth of a son. In time, Vasumanas, a king richer than the Vasus, is born. Gālava then picks up Mādhavī, who has become a virgin again, and goes with her to king Divodāsa, king of the Kāśis. Again, this king owns only two hundred black and white horses, and the same bargain is struck. Mādhavī gives the king a heroic son named Pratardana. **5,114–115**.

Then Gālava offers her to king Auśīnara of the Bhojas on the same conditions. Mādhavī gives the king a son named Śibi, renowned for his truthfulness and dharmic conduct,[9] then follows Gālava again. On the way, they meet Garuḍa. **5,116**. Laugh-

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8 On a narrative level, this remark rather comes as a surprise to the reader, because so far we have naturally assumed that Garuḍa knew about Gālava's mission (having presumable been told by Viṣṇu), and that the reason why he wanted to take him on a world tour was precisely to find the horses. According to Brockington (1998: 203), this passage is probably a later adjunction to an already late passage: "The *Digvarṇana* in the *Udyogaparvan* (5,107–109) occurs in the context of the late *Gālavacarita*, where Garuḍa appears in order to help Gālava and describes to him the eastern, southern, western and northern quarters in successive *adhyāyas*. In reality it is entirely concerned with a mythical geography, a mark perhaps of the general lateness of the passage."

9 See the story of Śibi with the pigeon and the falcon in MBh 1,130. ff.

ing, Garuḍa advises Gālava to give up his search for the two hundred remaining horses. Indeed, there used to be one thousand such horses, he says, but four hundred of them were lost forever in the river Vitastā.[10] So instead of wasting his time, he should offer Viśvāmitra the six hundred horses he has already obtained, and Mādhavī in lieu of the two hundred remaining ones, and let the sage also produce a son in her. Gālava obeys at once, and proposes the deal to his former *guru*. Viśvāmitra accepts, and Mādhavī bears him a son named Aṣṭaka, a great sacrificer.[11] Then Gālava takes her back to her father Yayāti. **5,117**. Yayāti organises a *svayaṃvara* for his daughter, at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. But instead of choosing one of the suitors, Mādhavī chooses the forest (*vanaṃ vṛtavatī varam*) (5,118.5) and goes off to live in the woods like a deer, observing chastity as a *mṛgacāriṇī* (5,118.7).[12]

Yayāti reigns for thousands of years, then goes to heaven. After spending thousands of years there, he loses his mind and starts to despise everyone. Accordingly, he is thrown out of heaven. Wishing to fall among good people, he falls into the Naimiṣa forest, where his four grandsons by Mādhavī are offering a *vājapeya* sacrifice. Mādhavī also turns up, and offers her father half of the merit she has accumulated living as a *mṛgacāriṇī*. Then Gālava too arrives on the scene and offers him one eighth of his merit. **5,118–119**. Then each of his grandsons offers him a share of their merit, by means of which Yayāti floats up to heaven again. There the god Brahman enlightens him as to the evils of self-pride, the cause of his downfall. Likewise, Nārada concludes his tale by warning Duryodhana against self-pride (Yayāti's fault) and obstinacy (Gālava's fault), and advises him to make peace with his cousins. **5,120–121**.

To my knowledge, the only detailed analysis of Mādhavī's story was made by Georges Dumézil in his *Mythe et Epopée II*.[13] Dumézil shows that the story is the Indian version of an ancient Indo-European myth, which finds an equivalent in

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10   Here only (5,117.4–8) we learn of the origin of these horses. As Garuḍa explains to Gālava, Ṛcīka (a brahmin, the future father of Jamadagni and grandfather of Rāma Jāmadagnya) approached king Gādhi (Viśvāmitra's own father) and asked for the permission to marry his daughter Satyavatī. Gādhi asked in exchange for a thousand horses white like the moon and having ears that are black on one side. Accordingly, Ṛcīka obtained such horses from the god Varuṇa himself, at the Ford of the horses (*aśvatīrtha*), and then gave them to king Gādhi. Gādhi subsequently gave them away to brahmins at a *puṇḍarīka* sacrifice, and these brahmins in turn sold them to kings, in lots of two hundred each. But four hundred were lost while crossing the river Vitastā (modern Jhelum). Thus, given that Gādhi is Viśvāmitra's father, it is not ruled out that Viśvāmitra knew all along that he was setting his pupil a—partly—impossible task, for there were only six hundred horses left.

11   Aṣṭaka is said to be the author of RS 10,104. Aṣṭaka means "consisting of eight parts". He probably receives this name because he stands for the last portion of eight (hundred) horses, and he indeed inherits the first six hundred horses from his father Viśvāmitra. So he represents the totality of eight hundred.

12   On the motif of the *mṛgī*, see Dumézil (1971: 363).

13   See Dumézil 1971, part 3 : "Entre les dieux et les hommes: un roi", esp. pp. 331–353.

Celtic mythology with the cycle concentrating on queen Medb. The name Medb is etymologically connected with that of Mādhavī, deriving from *medhuā*, "intoxi-cation" or "the intoxicating one".[14] Like Mādhavī, queen Medb is the daughter of a famous father, Eochaid Feidlech, the supreme king of Ireland, who represents the type of the Universal King, who stabilises and enlarges his kingdom by means of his daughter's sons. Like Mādhavī, queen Medb has in turn four, sometimes, depend-ing on the texts, five husbands—all kings. According to Dumézil's analysis, Medb and Mādhavī are representatives of the royal sovereignty—Flaith in Ireland and Śrī-Lakṣmī in India—who, it is well-known, tends to be fickle and goes from one king to the other.[15] Thus, in Dumézil's view, the story is "an early speculation on royalty".[16]

While Dumézil's analysis of Mādhavī's tale and his Indo-European compari-son remain perfectly valid in my eyes, there are some points regarding the story of Mādhavī that I would like to add or develop in this paper:

1) Dumézil (1971: 324–325; also 341) tends to downplay some of the more shocking traits of the Indian narrative, attributing them solely to the misin-terpretation of the western reader and implying that in the context of ancient India Mādhavī's adventures do not deviate from the social norm, or *dharma*. A closer examination of Dharmaśāstra texts, however, reveals that this is far from true. In the second section, we shall review what is prescribed in those texts concerning the behaviour and treatment of women.

2) On the other hand, Dumézil (1971: 325, 344) is undoubtedly right when he says that the brahmanical mythmakers have done all they could to clothe the ancient myth in garments of respectability. In the third section we shall exam-ine how they achieved this, namely, by ensnaring the protagonists of the tale in the rigid bounds of social conventions, and keeping them in situations of duress (*āpad-dharma*) from which their only way out is to resort to means that would otherwise be frowned upon in more normal conditions. This theme was already touched upon by Jamison in her 1996 publication, *Sacrificed Wife/ Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*.

3) In the fourth section, I will develop a new way of interpreting this tale, name-ly, as a horse-sacrifice tended by Mādhavī's father Yayāti, the Universal King, as a means to install his power durably. This *aśvamedha*, in which Mādhavī plays the role of the sacrificial victim, is a typically Indian twist in the tale. In my opinion, the sacrificial analogy is one more way of excusing the unac-ceptable: just as in a sacrifice "killing is not killing" (cf. ManuSm 5,39), so too, we may assume, committing improprieties is excused by the sacrificial contingencies.

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14   See Dumézil (1971: 330).
15   See Dumézil (1971: 335–342).
16   See Dumézil (1971: 330).

2) The proper treatment and behaviour of women according to the legal texts[17]

What strikes us most about the character of Mādhavī is her elusiveness, and her lack of attachment and ties to anyone. Her family background is mysterious: Yayāti, of course, is said to be her father, but her mother's identity is not disclosed.[18] She leaves in turn her father, then her successive husbands and the four sons she has had with them, and ultimately the whole of society, without demur, without protest, without looking back, with what appears like monstrous indifference. Her lack of feeling seems inhuman. And indeed, Mādhavī is not treated as a human being at all, but as a chattel, that can be given away, exchanged, bartered. Her father donates her in lieu of riches, and Gālava acts as a sort of pimp, selling Mādhavī to certain kings, making her breed with them, and getting a fee in exchange. Even the kings do not really take her for herself, although she is beautiful, but value her mainly for the sons she will give them. No wonder that she finally chooses the forest at her *svayaṃvara*. As Jamison puts it: "She had surely had enough of men!" (1996: 210).[19] Perhaps the most shocking thing is that Mādhavī herself suggests the terms on which she can be exchanged, revealing to Gālava the boon she has received to become a virgin again after giving birth. What kind of brain-washing, we wonder, can induce a person to think of herself in these terms?

But is this first impression just that of the modern reader or does anything in the Indian legal texts in fact warrant such dealings? In the following section, I propose to review what the legal texts have to say on the topic of women, in order to check whether or not anything in that type of literature justifies the treatment which is meted out to Mādhavī. Of course, we know that the ancient legal texts are at least

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17   The *Manusmṛti*, or *Mānavadharmaśāstra*, will be cited in Doniger and Smith's translation (1991), and the other *Dharma-Sūtras* according to Olivelle (2000).

18   Yayāti has two famous wives, Devayānī and Śarmiṣṭhā, whose quarrels are narrated in the first book of the MBh, and who each have sons, but Mādhavī is not said to be the daughter of either of them. Yayāti is said to have two sons by Devayānī and three by Śarmiṣṭhā (MBh 1,78.9–10). In the story which concerns us here (as also in the Rm), only two of Yayāti's sons are mentioned: Yadu and Pūru (MBh 5,118.2). Yadu is Devayānī's son (MBh 1,78.9). He gets exiled to the periphery of the kingdom because he refuses to give his youth to his father (MBh 1,79.7). Pūru (who takes over Yayāti's old age in MBh 1,79) is Śarmiṣṭhā's son (MBh 1,78.10). Mādhavī is not mentioned in book 1, even though her sons play the same role as in book 5 in rescuing Yayāti. She only figures in a passage kept in Appendix I 52 of the Critical Edition. There, interestingly, she reappears to save her father during an *aśvamedha* tended by the god Brahman, at which her four sons are also present, just after the horse's limbs have been offered into the fire.

19   We see that as long as the union is understood to be temporary, Mādhavī makes no resistance. On the contrary, she is the one who indicates her willingness and her ability to become a virgin again after each birth. But as soon as a permanent and definite union is planned for her by her father, she escapes to the forest.

equally prescriptive as they are descriptive, or perhaps even more so. Therefore we should not expect them to give us a faithful picture of the social reality in ancient India. Yet, they may give us at least some general indication.

Very quickly, while reading the precepts of the Dharmaśāstras, we realize that Mādhavī's story violates practically every rule of ancient Indian law regulating marriage and the proper behaviour and treatment of women, and must therefore have seemed as shocking in those days as it is nowadays. One of the rare rules that is respected is that she is/becomes a virgin before each marriage.[20] For according to ManuSm 3,5: "A woman […] who is a virgin is recommended for marriage to twice-born men." Becoming a virgin again—which Mādhavī manages thanks to the boon she has received—seems to be a prerequisite before contracting a new union. This trait was certainly introduced into the ancient tale by the Indian myth-makers, in order to conform at least to some degree to the legal and religious standards. Otherwise, in strict contravention to all legal rules or beliefs are the following facts:

– **Her father sells her**, or at least gives her away to a man who in turn will sell her. According to *Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2,13.10: "The custom of donating or selling one's children is not recognized as legitimate."

– **She has four husbands** in turn instead of only one. Even though the MBh knows of course an illustrious precedent in the person of Draupadī, nevertheless, on this point, the legal texts are unanimous. Thus *Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2,13.3: "It is a sin to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman who has been married before." *Gautamadharmasūtra* 4,1: "A householder should marry a wife […] who has not been married before…". ManuSm 9,71: "An intelligent man who has given his daughter to someone should not give her again, for a man who gives and then gives again is lying to someone." Ibid. 5,162: "… nor is a second husband ever prescribed for virtuous women."

– **She is given against a *śulka*** (bride-price). Usually, this type of union is called *āsura* or demonic,[21] and is condemned by most legal texts, though with varying degrees of severity. One of the most hostile to this form of marriage is *Baudhāyan-adharmasūtra* 1,21.1–2: "Now they also quote: "It is laid down that a woman who is purchased for money [(or goods, wealth) (*krītā dravyeṇa*)] is not a wife. She cannot take part in rites for gods or ancestors, and Kaśyapa has declared her to be a slave (*dāsī*)." ManuSm 3,31 defines this type of union as follows: "It is called the demonic (*āsura*) law when a man takes the girl because he wants her himself, when he has

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20   Likewise, Satyavatī regains her virginity after giving birth to Vyāsa (MBh 1,57), Kuntī after giving birth to Karṇa (MBh 1,104.12), Draupadī becomes a virgin again after marrying each of the Pāṇḍavas (MBh 1,190.14), etc.

21   E.g. *Gautamadharmasūtra* 4,11; *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* 1,20.6; *Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2,12.1. But the same type of marriage is called a "human marriage" in *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra* 1,35: "When a man negotiates a price and purchases a girl for money, it is the "human" marriage." (*paṇitvā dhanakrītī sa mānuṣaḥ*).

given as much wealth as he can to her relatives and to the girl herself." This text is somewhat contradictory in its evaluation of such a type of union. In 3,23, it says that this type of marriage is right for a ruler, but then goes on to quote some other authorities who say that " … the demon marriage is recommended for a commoner and a servant. And two—those of the ghouls and the demons—are traditionally regarded as wrong and are never to be performed." (3,24–25). Later we find: "No learned father should take a bride-price for his daughter, no matter how small, for a man who, out of greed, exacts a bride-price would be selling his child like a pimp." (3,51)[22]

– **Mādhavī's four sons are described as models of virtue**. According to most law makers, the sons born from a demonic marriage, or from a wife who has previously been married to another man, turn out to be men of vile and worthless character. Thus ManuSm 3,36–40 first enumerates the noble qualities of the sons born of the first four types of unions, adding in 3,41: "But from those (four) other remaining bad marriages (including the demonic) are born cruel sons, liars who hate the Veda and religion." *Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2,13.3: "it is a sin to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman who has been married before […] 2,13.4: and a son born from their union undoubtedly participates in their sin." *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* 1,21.1: "The excellence of the marriage, it is stated, determines the excellence of the children that issue from it." Again, this is not corroborated by our story, which on the contrary depicts Mādhavī's four sons as absolute paragons of virtue, each excelling in a particular domain of "dharmic" or pious behaviour: Vasumanas in *dāna*, Pratardana in *vīrya*, Śibi in *satya* and Aṣṭaka in *yajña*.

– **She becomes an ascetic**, living as a *mṛgacāriṇī*. When Mādhavī comes home to her father after having given birth to four sons, Yayāti organises a *svayaṃvara* for her, desiring to get her married, this time for good. This obviously already goes against the precept laid down by ManuSm 9,71 (quoted above), that a father should not give his daughter twice—let alone five times! At the time of her *svayaṃvara*, Mādhavī chooses the forest and goes away to live like a deer. Strangely, this raises no protest whatsoever amongst the multitude attending the *svayaṃvara*. No one tries to prevent her from leaving, not even all the assembled kings and princes who were

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22   However, Jamison (1996: 215) comes to the following conclusion concerning the practice of *śulka*: "Despite the continually expressed disapproval of the bride-price, […], it is hard to escape the conclusion that it was a common custom, if slightly distasteful to the delicate-minded." And she also remarks (1996: 214): "nor is bridal sale in the epic restricted to the mythic past. Mādrī, the second wife of Pāṇḍu and mother of the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, was such a purchase". (See MBh 1,105.45: *mādrī... parikrītā dhanena*). In this regard, Simon Brodbeck (personal communication) also notes: "As against Baudhāyana, it may be worth pointing out here that, in Bhīṣma's opinion as stated at MBh 13,45.16, the best way to ensure that a wife is not going to be a *putrikā* for her father [i.e., that her sons will not become the heirs of *her* father instead of their father] would be to pay money for her at the time of the wedding." This may explain to a great extent why this type of marriage enjoyed the favour of certain milieus.

certainly hoping to get her as their wife. Her choice seems to be perfectly acceptable to all.

Although women ascetics are frequently represented in epic literature,[23] and even in the Upaniṣads,[24] according to the legal texts, the legitimacy of this mode of life appears very problematic for a woman. (See also Jyväsjärvi [2007: 74]). Even if it is true that the Dharma-Sūtras do not usually condemn women ascetics,[25] most of the texts do not have any provisions for women ascetics at all, even when they mention the rules concerning ascetic men. Manu, for example, has not a word to say on women ascetics; on the contrary, he regularly emphasizes the women's lack of independence, as in the well-known verses found in ManuSm 5,147–148: "A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. 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." (The same is repeated in 9,3). Or again in 5,154–155: "A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities. Apart (from their husbands), women cannot sacrifice or undertake a vow or fast; it is because a wife obeys her husband that she is exalted in heaven." As Leslie (1989: 139) remarks: "The concept 'female ascetic' is in itself an anomaly. For women are so identified with both family life and sexual pleasure that the idea of a woman renouncing these things is (from the orthodox male point of view) a contradiction in terms." In fact, the only time when a few texts say something about women renouncing the world is after they have been widowed, which is obviously not Mādhavī's case.[26] The above statements seem to radically preclude a woman from simply leaving society and going into the forest. And yet, as Denton notes (2004: 23): "Nonetheless, not only do female ascetics exist today, but there are enough descriptions of and indirect references to them in both classical texts and popular lore to suggest that women leading

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23   Indeed, the same story contains the depiction of another woman ascetic, the brahmin Śāṇḍilī (MBh 5,110–111). For this narrative, see Brodbeck (2009).

24   Denton (2004: 5): "And, indeed, Vedic literature does provide irrefutable evidence for the existence of both female celibate students and female renouncers in ancient India." Denton (2004: 7): "The Upaniṣads […] are honoured because they contain graphic descriptions of individuals who appear to be the precursors of many types of contemporary practitioners: celibate ascetics, both male and female…"

25   Thus also Denton (2004: 23): "Traditional textual sources that specifically forbid asceticism to women are few."

26   For instance *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra* 19,32–34 (concerning the dead king's wives): "His women folk and other wives also should receive food and clothing. Or, if they are unwilling, they may become wandering ascetics" (*anicchantyo vā pravrajeran*, 34). Even today, many ascetic women seem to be widows. As Denton (2004: 11) remarks: "On my first visit to Benares in 1973 I had noticed that many of the beggars were widows, and the few references to the topic in the literature suggested a relationship between female asceticism and widowhood." But contra the assumption that all ascetic women were widows, see Jyväsjärvi (2007: 81).

a wide variety of ascetic lifestyles have always been part of the Indian scene." The problem of women ascetics in ancient India is thus a singularly complex one.

What kind of ascetic does Mādhavī become? If we have imagined that Mādhavī leaves society on a whim, having had enough of it and with the desire to become a *sannyāsinī* to gain *mokṣa*, we have to think again. In fact, if we read carefully the brief passage that describes her penance (5,118.6–11), we see that nothing in what she undertakes points to the mode of life of a *sannyāsin*, or to a desire to obtain liberation from the cycle of rebirths. Also, she does not go begging for food amongst people and dwellings, but retires to the forest. How exactly does she live there? She practises penance (*tapas tepe*) (5,118.6), she resorts to fasts, observances and restraints, and thus becomes emaciated, and lives like a deer (*upavāsaiś ca vividhair dīkṣābhir niyamais tathā | ātmano laghutāṃ kṛtvā babhūva mṛgacāriṇī ||*) (5,118.7); she lives on grass and water (5,118.8–9), in the deep and empty forest, in the sole company of deer[27] (5,118.10), wrapped in chastity (*brahmacaryeṇa saṃvṛtā*) (5,118.11). These are the precise points that emerge from the description of her *tapas*. Now, if we read the legal texts to find out what type of ascetic this corresponds to, it turns out that it is not easy to find one that answers exactly this description. As far as I could ascertain, the closest approximation would be what the *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* calls *vaikhānasa*, a subtype of the *vānaprastha*, who is classified under "hermits who do not cook".[28] This text describes the *vaikhānasa*'s mode of life as follows (3,3.19–22):

3,3.19: Let him not hurt even gnats or mosquitoes. Let him suffer cold and undertake ascetic practices. Residing in the forest, let him be content and find delight in bark garments, skins, and water.

3,3.20: When guests arrive during a meal time, he should first receive them hospitably. Let him be intent on honouring gods, and Brahmins, offering daily fire sacrifices, and performing ascetic practices.

3,3.21: This is a difficult mode of life—it cannot be given up; it is similar to that of animals and birds; it involves collecting what one needs for that day and eating acrid and bitter food. Having embarked on this splendid path far away from wicked men and undertaken the forest life, a Brahmin never comes to ruin.

3,3.22: To move around with animals, to dwell with them alone, and to sustain oneself just like them—that is the visible token of heaven (*pratyakṣaṃ svargalakṣaṇam*).

The *vaikhānasa*'s ascetic life-style bears obvious similarities to Mādhavī's: living on water and "acrid and bitter food" (*kāṣāyakaṭuka*; in the MBh we have *tikta*),

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27 On the subject of living with deer, and imitating the behaviour of these animals, see Thite (1972: 202–206).

28 According to MW dictionary, this word derives either from Vikhanas, a name of the god Brahman, or *vi-khanasa* (digging up [roots]) (anchorites).

in the forest "far away from wicked men" but in the sole company of animals "sustaining oneself just like them", yet also performing sacrifices and observances.[29] Thus, the *vaikhānasa* lives away from society (except, we must assume, for the occasional guest) and his wish is to obtain heaven. This is a mainly Vedic type of asceticism.[30] Mādhavī's desires concerning the after-life are, it is true, never made clear, but the fact is that she offers half of the merit she has accumulated by her lifestyle to her father, to allow him to go back to heaven. We can thus safely assume that her penance would lead her to the same destination after death. Thus, by her mode of life, Mādhavī does not take herself out of the pale of Vedic ideology with its constraints of debts, giving and asking, but remains within it, though on a special track. But it remains nevertheless clear that this path is nowhere recommended for women. Baudhāyana prescribes it for men and brahmins, and Mādhavī is neither.

As we can see from the above references, Mādhavī's story blatantly transgresses a number of rules laid down in legal texts, and yet neither Mādhavī herself, nor those who are responsible for her behaviour, are ever blamed, or depicted in a negative light. As we mentioned above, there is no doubt that the legal texts are largely prescriptive and that their sections on women often clash with the roles and attitudes of women as they are depicted in the epics.[31] Yet Mādhavī's case is undoubtedly extreme in its deviation from the prescribed norm. Such being the situation, how was it possible to make the character of Mādhavī nevertheless appear in a positive light, clothed in the apparel of respectability? The next section will attempt to answer this question.

29　We are here leaving aside the tricky problem of how to combine these two activities, namely, living in the wilderness like an animal and offering sacrifices…

30　See Bronkhorst (1993) for the distinction between Vedic and non-Vedic ascetics. Concerning the Vaikhānasas, however, Bronkhorst remarks (1993: 31): "We might here be tempted to identify this *vaikhānasa* with the "Vedic" *vānaprastha* of the ĀpDhS. There is however a major difference. For the *vaikhānasa* is not necessarily married! In normal circumstances he would therefore not be entitled to kindle the Vedic fire. […] So the *vaikhānasa* […] appears to combine elements of the "Vedic" and "non-Vedic" *vānaprasthas* in the ĀpDhS: he is no longer required to marry, and is yet allowed to kindle the Vedic fire, so as to become a sacrificing ascetic." As for Mādhavī, marriage would perhaps not be a problem, since she is officially married to the forest.

31　And some of these legal texts are found in the MBh itself, they need not be different texts. According to Sutton (2000: 429): "([MBh 13,]44–47) contain the epic's principal *dharma-śāstra* concerning women." He further remarks: "There is no doubt that the women described in the narrative passages behave in a manner that is notably different from that prescribed by the teachings of the *Anuśāsana*, but the question remains as to how far this portrayal represents a radically alternative view of the social status that women may aspire towards. [….] Attempting to establish doctrine from narrative portrayals is inevitably problematic, for one can never be absolutely certain of the author's attitude to individual characters. It appears, however, that all three of these women [Draupadī, Kuntī and Gāndhārī] are to be viewed in a positive light…" Sutton (2000: 431).

3) The rules of exchange

Jamison (1996: 208–210) analyses the story of Mādhavī in terms of the "give and take" or rather "ask and give" regulating the traditional hospitable behaviour in Vedic society. Indeed, the whole narrative is replete with incidents depicting the tensions resulting from the obligations of correct social interaction, which explain to a certain extent the extraordinary particulars of the tale. Dealing as they were with the ancient mythical material, which contained certain traits (especially Mādhavī's four marriages) which were unacceptable in the Indian context, the epic myth-makers chose to make up an entire frame-story which would help to legitimise the "unorthodox" aspects of Mādhavī's tale: kept in situations of duress, the protagonists, in order to keep up their honour, have no other option but to resort to means that would otherwise clearly be deemed disreputable.

The first incident concerning the rules of exchange and hospitality occurs between Viśvāmitra and the god Dharma, who comes in the disguise of the ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra's arch rival. As Jamison (1996: 189) notes, "the theme of the visiting god-in-disguise is as old as the earliest Indian literature." She classifies this type of story under the general heading of "the Exploited Host stories", namely, the "motif of the greedy guest who reveals himself as Dharma (vel sim.) and rewards his long-suffering hosts". Such stories represent "the hope offered to a real-life host that hospitality will ultimately be its own reward, an incentive to good hostly behavior." Of course, a guest, and what is more a brahmin, has to be received with all the proper rites and care. In the present case, Viśvāmitra receives his guest impeccably, and his reward is practically unequalled in all the literature on record: from a *kṣatriya*, he becomes a brahmin.

The second incident takes place between Viśvāmitra and Gālava, i.e., teacher and pupil, or *guru* and *śiṣya*. Viśvāmitra does not want to receive a *gurudakṣiṇā* from his student Gālava, because he thinks that Gālava has more than repaid him by serving him obediently for a hundred years. But Gālava does not understand it in this way. Though repeatedly told to go (*gaccha*), he refuses and insists on giving his master a fee, for, he says: "Only that human rite succeeds which is recompensed with stipends (*dakṣiṇā*); for when the stipends have been paid, the strict man enjoys the acquittal of his debt. The stipend is the rite's reward in heaven, and it is said to be one's peace." (MBh 5,104.21–22). Clearly, Gālava's debt will not be repaid unless he gives a formal *dakṣiṇā*, and unless that is paid, he cannot hope to reach heaven.[32] The issue is very serious. Nevertheless, Gālava's insistence angers Viśvāmitra and

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32 Gālava further elaborates on this topic in 5,105, especially in verses 6 and 7: *ṛṇaṃ dhārayamāṇasya kutaḥ sukham*; *pratikartum aśaktasya jīvitān maraṇaṃ varam*. Similarly in 5,112.16, while speaking to Yayāti. Dumézil (1971: 317) opines that Gālava is right to insist and acts according to the Law. Yet, it is precisely this attitude that makes him an example of obstinacy, which Duryodhana is not encouraged to follow because it may lead to disaster.

prompts him to ask for an extravagant fee,[33] which he probably knows his pupil will not be able to give, thus plunging him into yet deeper debt and despair. Thus far from being good-hearted and well-intentioned, as we might first think, a *guru* who does not name his fee indeed burdens his luckless student with a debt that might ruin his prospects of a happy after-life.[34]

The third incident involving asking and giving occurs when Gālava asks king Yayāti for riches.[35] King Yayāti is obliged to fulfil Gālava's wishes, for Gālava is a guest, who has to be received hospitably, and a brahmin—and as the legal texts never tire of repeating, the *kṣatriya*'s duty is to give to the brahmin, and the brahmin's is to receive from the *kṣatriya*. Besides, Garuḍa's sponsorship—he intercedes on Gāla-va's behalf and explains his case to king Yayāti—certainly adds weight to Gālava's request. But king Yayāti, for reasons which are not mentioned, has no riches left.[36] Thus he has no other choice but to give away his daughter, who is apparently his only remaining possession.

Yayāti's gift of his daughter first seems a disinterested one, or at least one that he is forced to make without expecting anything in return. But it soon turns out that he will, in fact, get something. Garuḍa promises Yayāti that Gālava will give him a part of his merit gained by austerities: "He shall apportion a share of his austerities to you. To the brim he shall fill you who are already full of a royal seer's austerities." (*tapasaḥ saṃvibhāgena bhavantam api yokṣyate | svena rājarṣitapasā pūrṇaṃ tvāṃ pūrayiṣyati ||*) (MBh 5,112.18). And Yayāti himself mentions another reward he will get from the transaction, namely, grandsons. "It is my desire, my lord, that I shall have daughter's sons (*dauhitra*)." (5,113.14).[37] Thus even here, where all the *smṛti*

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33 This story is not the only instance of a *śiṣya* being asked for a disproportionate fee after pestering his *guru* to name one. Compare for instance with MBh 1,3.83–115, the story of Uttaṅka, Veda's student.

34 We are here leaving aside another exchange involving rules of hospitality, which takes place between the ascetic woman Śāṇḍilī and Garuḍa. (See MBh 5,110–111). Garuḍa misbehaves by entertaining some forbidden thoughts about Śāṇḍilī—he wants to take her with him to heaven—and she punishes him in a rather striking way, by reducing him to a sacrificial offering of sorts: deprived of his wings, he becomes "similar to a ball of flesh" (*māṃsapiṇḍopama*) (MBh 5,111.5). According to Dumézil (1971: 318), Garuḍa was not entertaining lascivious thoughts. Yet we must note that Bhīma gives exactly the same treatment, expressed in identical terms, to Kīcaka when the latter tries to seduce Draupadī in MBh 4,21.60. The difference is that Kīcaka is killed in the process!

35 Gālava asks for alms (*bhikṣā*) (5,112.17) and the root √YĀC "ask for, beg" (5,112.5) is used for his action. On the use of this term, Jamison (1996: 195) remarks that "by the act of yāc-ing one can *compel* someone to give" and "the price of refusing a Brahman's yāc is disaster." (1996: 191). But "though begging is a characteristic activity of Brahmans and clearly a lucrative one, it can also be somewhat shameful or embarrassing."

36 Sometimes, righteous kings have no riches left because they have given them all away at sacrifices, but this is not explicitly stated here.

37 Here Jamison (1996: 296, note 8) analyses the term *dauhitra* as "grandsons born to a daughter, to serve as male heirs of a sonless man." Strictly speaking, as *Āpastambadharmasūtra*

texts would seem to warrant unilateral giving and taking, it is actually an exchange that is taking place: Yayāti is trading his daughter as an investment against the promise of future *puṇya* and grandsons.

The next and perhaps most important exchange takes place between Gālava and the various kings to whom he in turn "sells" Mādhavī. Here the exchange runs on a purely commercial basis: one son against two hundred horses. In fact, the term *śulka* (bride-price) is used repeatedly during the whole exchange (5,113.13, 17, 21 [twice]; 5,114.4, 15; 5,115.17; 5,116.5). It is clear from the reaction of the first king (Haryaśva of Ayodhyā, in 5,114) that it is not Mādhavī alone who is worth the horses, but she is worth them only inasmuch as she can give him a son.

With Viśvāmitra, however, Gālava does not use the term *śulka* when he proposes the girl to him. For indeed, she, or rather the son she will give him, along with the six hundred horses, is part of Gālava's *gurudakṣiṇā* and Viśvāmitra has nothing to give in exchange. He is getting paid for his previous services. Here Mādhavī is not exchanged against riches, she herself is the riches.

The last exchange takes place at the end of our story, when King Yayāti falls from heaven. He is enabled to go back to heaven thanks to a "cocktail" consisting of half of his daughter's hoarded *dharma*: *upacito dharmas tato 'rdham* (5,119.24); one eighth of Gālava's *tapas*: *tapaso me 'ṣṭabhāgena* (5,119.28); the fruit of Vasumanas' giving (*dāna*) (5,120.5), of Pratardana's title of hero (*vīra-śabda*) (5,120.7), of Śibi's truthfulness (*satya*) (5,120.9–10), and of Aṣṭaka's sacrifices (*yajña*) (5,120.12).[38] First Yayāti refuses to be helped when his grandsons offer him the merit they have gained by various dharmic activities, on the ground that "I am not a brahmin, whose wealth comes from accepting (presents). I am a *kṣatriya*!" (*nāhaṃ pratigrahadhano brāhmaṇaḥ kṣatriyo hy aham*) (5,119.19). But then Mādhavī persuades him to let his grandsons help him "cross over", saying that it is an ancient practice (*ime tvāṃ tārayiṣyanti diṣṭam etat purātanam*) (5,119.23), "presumably referring once again to the idea of descendants preserving the position of their ancestors in the afterlife." (Sutton 2000: 89). We probably have here an indirect allusion to *śrāddha* ceremonies. The fact that Mādhavī herself helps her father in the same way surely comes under the same heading. What is more unusual is that Yayāti accepts one eighth of Gālava's (a brahmin's) merit. A king accepting from his grandsons may be in the

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remarks, a grandson by an appointed daughter is called a *putrikāputra*, whereas a grandson by a non-appointed daughter is a *dauhitra*: "A male child born to a man's daughter following an agreement, should be recognized as his son by an appointed daughter. Any other child is his grandson by his daughter." (*abhyupagamya duhitari jātaṃ putrikāputram anyaṃ dauhitram*). (*Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2,3.15). Mādhavī is not explicitly said to be an "appointed" daughter, and Yayāti already has sons who inherit his kingdom. But of course, Mādhavī's sons rescue him when he falls from heaven. Brodbeck (2009, chapter 8), taking into account earlier events told in book 1 of the MBh, also argues that Mādhavī is in fact a *putrikā*.

38   We may note by the way that heaven is reached by means of *dharma*, penance, giving, heroism, truthfulness and sacrifices. Cf. also Sutton (2000: 84–85).

order of things, but a king accepting from a brahmin certainly not! The fact that he takes the allotted portion of Gālava's merit can of course be explained by the fact that Gālava is here repaying his previously contracted debt. Yayāti, who had received his guest hospitably, with *śraddhā* or "hospitable reception", is now getting *śrāddha* (that which comes from *śraddhā*) in exchange.[39]

We now understand why the story had to continue so far, and did not stop at the point where Mādhavī leaves for the forest, which would have been a possible ending: the narrative could not be concluded before all the debts contracted by Gālava were paid back. He first contracts one towards Viśvāmitra, which he manages to pay back, at the cost of great effort, in the form of six hundred special horses, plus one son by Mādhavī.[40] And he contracts one towards king Yayāti, which he repays in the form of merit gained by his penance. Thus poor Gālava, far from leading a carefree life in the forest dedicating himself to penance and concentrating on his after-life, is in fact as harassed as any businessman, leading a heavily debt-ridden existence! The merit he accumulates by means of *tapas* precisely serves to pay back these debts. *Tapas* appears to have a real monetary value in brahmanical economy: like a treasure, it can be hoarded, given away, even counted and divided, since Gālava gives one eighth of it to Yayāti. Thus *tapas* may be a way of paying one's religious or social debts in the complicated legal system of ancient Indian religion. We now realise that the *bahuvrīhi* compound *tapodhana*, "whose riches consist of *tapas*", is not just a figure of speech, but should be taken quite literally.[41]

Thus, as we have seen in this section, some of the more outrageous treatments meted out to Mādhavī are explained away by the stringent social obligations (especially the rules governing hospitality) that are incumbent on the various protagonists of the tale. To excuse their eccentric behaviour, the myth-makers improvise several scenarios of *āpad-dharma* that explain why they are forced to behave in a way that would otherwise clearly be out of the question.

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39   See Jamison's remarks on the meaning of these terms: "*śrāddha* may refer to the host's obligation to provide for his guests' needs and desire." And : "The name of this [*śrāddha*] ceremony is usually explained as somehow connected with the offerer's *faith* in the Brahmans or in the ritual's efficacy, but this seems a convoluted way to derive this term, especially when one reads the descriptions of the rite. For by far the greater part of the treatments of this ceremony, particularly in dharma and epic texts, concerns *not* the actual offerings to the Pitṛs, but rather the meal offered to the attending Brahmans. The śrāddha ceremony consists in essence of inviting a group of Brahmans to dinner, of offering them hospitality ; […] So a direct derivation of the term as meaning "related to hospitality" seems a better path than connecting it with some putative 'faith'." (1996: 176–184).

40   Indeed, in 5,117.13, Gālava declares that he has become debt-free: *anṛṇa*.

41   See also Hara (1970).

4) The horse-sacrifice

Dumézil analyses the character of Yayāti as the type of the "first king", a sort of universal king who distributes all the territories on the periphery of his kingdom to his elder sons (in Yayāti's case, as a punishment because they have refused to take over his old age), while he himself, and his main heir Pūru (the only son who has accepted to bear the burden of his old age), remain "in the middle", in his capital Pratiṣṭhāna (1971: 258–271).[42] Furthermore, as Dumézil (1971: 272–282) shows, Yayāti in a sense also "conquers" or distributes himself evenly over the scale of the "three functions" by means of the grandsons he has by his daughter Mādhavī. Each of them represents one of the three Dumézilian functions: Vasumanas, the richest, stands for the third function, that of fertility and riches; the heroic Pratardana for the second function, that of warfare; and the truthful Śibi, along with the sacrificer Aṣṭaka, share between them two facets of the first function, the realm of the sacred.[43]

While studying Mādhavī's story, I was struck by its possible analogies with an *aśvamedha* or horse-sacrifice. This impression is created by the accumulation of a number of details that figure in the story, such as place-names, proper names, numbers, etymologies, colours, travels, or the fruits of certain actions. Taken in isolation, none of them would amount to much, but kept together, they come to form a rather coherent picture. Now, Dumézil (1971), in his analysis of the story of Yayāti and Mādhavī, makes no reference to an *aśvamedha*, and indeed, he has next to nothing to say about the eight hundred horses which figure so prominently in the story. But in my opinion, reading the story as an *aśvamedha* organised and tended by king Yayāti impersonating the *yajamāna*, would suit very well his type of the all-conquering universal monarch, since, as the comparison with the *aśvamedha* described in the MBh's *Āśvamedhikaparvan* shows, one of the thinly veiled aims of such sacrifices was precisely the conquest of the world.[44]

The *aśvamedha* is one of the most spectacular rites of ancient India, it is described in a number of ritual texts,[45] as well as in both epics, and has been the object of numerous articles and monographs.[46] Since this sacrifice is well-known, I will not describe it in detail here. Rather, what I propose to do in this section is to note the various resemblances or points of comparison which can be drawn between the story of Mādhavī and a horse-sacrifice. Let us first note that there are a number of

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[42]   This is seen in the version of the story found in the first book of the *Mahābhārata* (1,79).

[43]   The first king to whom Mādhavī is offered, Haryaśva, says that she could even give birth to a universal king, a *cakravartin* (MBh 5,114.4). Instead of one *cakravartin*, she gives birth to four kings, whose combined qualities could make a *cakravartin*. See also Dumézil (1971: 326).

[44]   It is true that the epic depictions of *aśvamedhas* highlight this trait more than the ritual texts.

[45]   Especially in *kāṇḍa* 13 of the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa*.

[46]   See Dumont (1927), Jamison (1996), Kak (2002), etc.

displacements in Mādhavī's story, especially displacements concerning the *dramatis personae* of the ritual performance. In my opinion, Mādhavī stands for the sacrificial victim, the horse; the four kings[47] with whom she mates therefore represent the four queens; her father Yayāti acts as the *yajamāna* who organises the whole sacrifice;[48] and Gālava, who leads her from one kingdom to the other, stands for the guardian of the horse during its journey preceding the sacrifice.[49]

The first point which alerts us to this possible comparison with a horse sacrifice is of course the presence of the horses. The primary point of the whole enterprise is to obtain eight hundred[50] very special horses: white like the moon, with ears that are black on one side. Now, the ritual texts vary as per the exact colours or patterns of colours which are desirable in a sacrificial horse, but they often mention black and white (see Dumont 1927: 22–23).[51] Similarly, in the horse-sacrifice described in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, the sacrificial horse is said to be a *kṛṣṇa-sāra* (*kṛṣṇasāram… aśvam*) (MBh 14,72.7). The term *kṛṣṇa-sāra*, according to the Monier-Williams dictionary, means "chiefly black, black and white, spotted black". In the—it is true much later—*Gārgasaṃhitā* and *Ānandarāmāyaṇa*, the horse that is

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47   We may object to Viśvāmitra being called a king, for he has just become a brahmin. Yet, his fundamentally ambiguous *kṣatriya-cum-brahmin* nature is regularly brought to the fore and is ingrained in his myth. Moreover, in MBh 5,117.22, Gālava tells Mādhavī that by her intervention she has saved six people: her father Yayāti; *four* kings (Viśvāmitra counts as a king even though he has already become a brahmin!); and himself. Besides, Viśvāmitra enjoys Mādhavī and engenders a son in her like the other three kings.

48   Though again, Viśvāmitra might be said to vie with Yayāti for this title, for after all, he is the one who starts the whole thing by asking for the horses.

49   Gālava can also be compared to the *neṣṭar* of *soma*-sacrifices (and the *aśvamedha* is of course a *soma*-sacrifice). In Jamison's words (1996: 137): "The Neṣṭar […] is [the wife's] standard escort and caretaker during the Soma Sacrifice." His duty is to see to it that the sacrificer's wife mates symbolically with the gods during the sacrifice. In effect, she becomes a sexual offering. The term *neṣṭar*, which is probably derived from the root √NĪ "to lead", seems particularly appropriate for Gālava, since it is stated a few times that Gālava walks in front of Mādhavī, and that she follows him during their peregrinations from one kingdom to the other (see MBh 5,115.21 and 5,116.1).

50   Let us note that the number four and its multiple eight seem to be omnipresent in the performance of the *aśvamedha*. Thus, a four-eyed dog is killed before the horse; the king has four wives, who have a total of four-hundred attendants, the horse is protected by four hundred soldiers; the sacrificial victims are tied to eight-cornered stakes, etc… In our story, likewise, there is a description of the four directions; Mādhavī marries four kings and has four sons; there are eight hundred horses, in four lots of two hundred each; the horses have ears that are black on one side: we thus obtain four black and white stripes on their heads; Mādhavī's last son with Viśvamitra is called Aṣṭaka (consisting of eight parts); Gālava gives Yayāti one eighth of his *tapas*, etc…

51   Dumont (1927: xii) makes the following comment on these two colours. "D'après Sātyayajñi, le cheval doit être noir et blanc, avec une tache sur le front: le noir représente le noir de l'oeil de Prajāpati, le blanc, le blanc de l'oeil, et la tache représente la pupille."

chosen for the horse-sacrifice is moon-white with black ears (*śyāmakarṇa*).[52] Thus the eight hundred horses desired by Viśvāmitra are in fact the perfect horses for an *aśvamedha*, even though they are twice officially required for wedding transactions.[53] Yet in Mādhavī's story, these horses are not sacrificed. They are simply made over to Viśvāmitra, who gives them to his son, and nothing more is said of them. We must look elsewhere to find the real "victim" of this horse-sacrifice.

In an *aśvamedha*, it is well-known that the sacrificial horse is a stallion, with whom the chief queen (*mahiṣī*) unites after he has been put to death. In Mādhavī's story, the inversion in the sex of the sacrificial victim, namely, the fact that a woman stands for the sacrificial horse, may first appear problematic. But in certain Indo-European variants of the horse sacrifice, it is precisely a female horse that is sacrificed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1980/1981) made an exhaustive study of this rite. She shows that, mainly in the Celtic[54] ritual, the horse sacrifice was the sacrifice of a white mare, considered to be of divine origin, with whom the king first united sexually, and who was subsequently killed and eaten by him, thus restoring his waning powers.[55] In some epic narratives, which seem to reproduce the pattern of the horse-sacrifice, traces of the female-horse (whom O'Flaherty [1981: 156] calls "the vestigial mare") uniting with the human king still appear. In my opinion, this is the case in the story of Mādhavī. This point may help to explain the inversion in the sexes as compared to a real horse-sacrifice in the Indian context: instead of one stallion and four queens, we have here one female "mare" (Mādhavī) and four kings.

In a horse sacrifice, before the actual sacrifice takes place, the horse is let loose for one year, protected by an army. In the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, this takes the obviously exaggerated form of a *dig-vijaya*, or conquest of the cardinal points, the horse conveniently performing a *pradakṣiṇā* of India, starting with the north-east (*uttarataḥ pūrvam*) (MBh 14,72.21).[56] In our story, the horses do not perform any such travel: they are only taken from their previous owners' courts to Viśvāmitra's hermitage. But someone else undertakes a tour of northern India, namely, Mādhavī in the company of Gālava.[57] First Gālava collects Mādhavī from her father's capital,

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52   See *Gargasaṃhitā* 10,8.10 and 15; *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* 3,1.3 and 44. On the *aśvamedha* described in these texts, see Koskikallio (2002).

53   First for Satyavatī's wedding, then for Mādhavī's (several) marriages. See Defourny (1978: 141, note 4; and 149).

54   And if the comparison seems remote, let us remember that the name and the story of Mādhavī are precisely connected with those of the Celtic Queen Medb.

55   See Doniger O'Flaherty (1981: 150–153).

56   As Dumont (1927: iii) notes, the sacrificial horse is made to start in the direction of the northeast, in the company of one hundred other horses and escorted by four hundred horsemen.

57   In this respect, Dumézil (1971: 344) notices an important difference between Medb and Mādhavī: Queen Medb operates in and from one place, her father's capital, whereas princess Mādhavī's husbands are geographically spread out. Mādhavī's tour to meet her husbands is thus an innovation of the Indian epic.

Pratiṣṭhāna (5,112.10), a town at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā (on the left bank of the Ganges opposite modern Allahabad). The name of this city is significant. It means: "firm standing-place, foundation". It is thus the ideal basis and starting point for a sacrifice, the place from which the sacrificial victim starts out. Then Gālava leads Mādhavī in turn to:

1) king Haryaśva Ikṣvāku of Ayodhyā (north).
2) king Divodāsa of the Kaśis, in Kāśī or Benares (east).
3) King Auśīnara / Uśīnara of the Bhojas. The Bhojas are located near the Vindhya mountains (cf. Monier-Williams), hence in the south.
4) Viśvāmitra (king turned brahmin). The location of his *āśrama* is not specified, but it might be in the west since he is traditionally represented as son of the king of Kanyākubja (modern Kanauj), which is west of *prayāga*.

Even though the last location is rather putative, we seem to obtain a course first north, then east, then south, then west. Thus the way in which Mādhavī is promenaded clockwise in the four directions over the terrain of northern India by Gālava reminds us of the horse's journey before it is sacrificed.[58]

Comparing Mādhavī to a sacrificial horse may seem far-fetched, but she is indeed treated like chattel (more precisely like a prize mare), valued only for her possible offspring by most kings, especially by the first, Haryaśva (bay horse!) This was already commented upon by Jamison (1996: 209): "The first king he offers the girl to, Haryaśva, looks her over as if she were a horse herself (MBh 5,114.2–4), noting her good points and her breeding potential…".[59] And let us remember that the term *kṛṣṇasāra*, used to designate the "mostly black" sacrificial horse, also means a type of antelope, and that Mādhavī will precisely live like an antelope (*mṛgī*) after choosing the forest. Thus we obtain the equation: horse = antelope = Mādhavī. The tale reveals the following inversion: the real sacrificial horse has to remain chaste *during* its journey, only copulating with the chief queen (*mahiṣī*) *after* it has been put to death, the three other queens looking on, whereas Mādhavī is made to breed with four kings *during* the journey, and chooses chastity (*brahmacarya*) *after* fulfilling her procreative duties. We may note that for most protagonists of this tale (except

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58   Before this tour of northern India, another description of the world already figures in the story which concerns us here: Garuḍa describes the four directions to Gālava, starting with the east, and proposes to take him wherever he wants.

59   MBh 5,114.2–4. The king's exact words are: "She is high in the six high points, slim in the seven slim points, deep in the three deep points and red in the five red spots. […] she is endowed with many signs of good augury and capable of bearing many children. She is capable of giving birth to a Turner of the Wheel !" Dumézil (1971: 320, note 1) comments as follows: the six high points are the breasts, the hips and the eyes; the seven slim points are the skin, the hair, the teeth, the fingers, the toes, the waist and the neck; the three deep points are the navel, the voice, the intelligence; the five red points are the palms, the outer corners of the eyes, the tongue, the lips and the palate (with variants).

Gālava), the positive outcome of the whole affair is that they obtain a descendant: this holds of course for Mādhavī herself, who has four sons, for her father Yayāti, who gets grandsons, for the three kings with whom she mates and for Viśvāmitra, who get a son each. Ostensibly, Viśvāmitra started the whole thing to obtain eight hundred horses. But when he receives six hundred of them, with Mādhavī and their future son representing the missing two hundred, he grumbles, saying that Gālava should have given him Mādhavī straight away, so that he could have produced four sons in her, instead of only one! Judging by his reaction, it seems that Viśvāmitra after all values sons more than horses. This insistence on progeny is in harmony with the aim of horse-sacrifices elsewhere. In the first book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, king Daśaratha performs an *aśvamedha* in order to obtain sons, and generally, the rite is considered to promote fecundity and prosperity, for the king who performs it, as well as for his kingdom and the earth in general (see Dumont 1927: xii). The mating of the dead horse with the chief queen, especially, is considered as a rite promoting the fertility of the land.

Now, if we consider Gālava's leading Mādhavī around various kingdoms of northern India as the horse's preliminary journey before the actual sacrifice takes place, then it follows that we must consider the *svayaṃvara* that king Yayāti organises for his daughter after her return as the sacrifice properly speaking. Comparing this particular *svayaṃvara* with the final ceremonies of a horse sacrifice actually leads to interesting results. The place where Mādhavī's *svayaṃvara* is held and from which she goes off into the forest, is not her father's court, as we would expect, and where *svayaṃvaras* are usually held, but at "an *āśrama* at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā" (*āśramapadaṃ gaṅgāyamunasaṃgame*) (5,118.1). This confluence is often named *prayāga*,[60] "the place of sacrifices", which makes it an ideal place for a horse-sacrifice. If we refer to MBh 3,83.72 (a verse found in the context of a description of *tīrthas*) which lists "Prayāga along with Pratiṣṭhāna" (*prayāgaṃ sapratiṣṭhānam*), this place is not too far from Yayāti's capital Pratiṣṭhāna.[61]

If the setting is unusual for a *svayaṃvara*,[62] what to say of the participants! For all sorts of beings attend the ceremony: not only kings and princes, the usual suitors, but also snakes, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, birds and wild animals, seers, and the denizens of the mountains, trees and woods (MBh 5,118.3–4).[63] Thus *prayāga* is not only at the confluence of two rivers (three actually, if we include the invisible subterranean

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60   Modern Allahabad.

61   This reference was kindly pointed out to me by Simon Brodbeck in a private communication.

62   Though not, indeed, for a horse-sacrifice, which must always take place outside the settlements.

63   If we are to believe MBh 3,83.65–68, Prayāga is these creatures' permanent place of residence, they do not come there just for the purpose of the *svayaṃvara*. As Petteri Koskikallio (personal communication) remarks: this diversity of the guests at the ceremony in a sense mirrors the diversity of the victims in a horse-sacrifice.

Sarasvatī), it is also between civilisation and wilderness, and it unites the earth, the heavens (*gandharvas*) and the underworld (*nāgas*).[64] This is obviously a place where many choices are open to Mādhavī. MBh 3,83.71, which describes *prayāga*, is also significant in this respect: "The land between the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā is known as the vagina of the earth; and Prayāga […], thus the seers know, forms the end of the vagina, the vulva." (*gaṅgāyamunayor madhyaṃ pṛthivyā jaghanaṃ smṛtam | prayāgaṃ jaghanasyāntam upasthaṃ ṛṣayo viduḥ ||*). This verse in effect says that the confluence is the sex of the earth. As such, it is not only a very apt place to organise a *svayaṃvara*, but also the ideal place from which one can be reborn elsewhere into a new life or a different realm—which is in a sense what Mādhavī's chooses to do.

At a real *aśvamedha*, both wild and domestic animals are tied to the sacrificial posts. This is explained as follows in ŚBr 13,2.4:

"Prajāpati desired, "Would that I might gain both worlds, the world of the gods, and the world of men." He saw those beasts, the tame and the wild ones; he seized them, and by means of them took possession of these two worlds: by means of the tame beasts he took possession of this (terrestrial) world, and by means of the wild beasts of yonder (world); for this world is the world of men, and yonder world is the world of the gods." (Transl. Eggeling 1885/1963).

The wild animals are then released, the domestic ones are sacrificed. There is a total of twenty-one stakes (cf. ŚBr 13,4.4), and the horse is tied to the central (eleventh) stake. It thus occupies a middle position between wild and domesticated, and could potentially join the wild animals. Of course, the normal sacrificial horse has no choice but to get sacrificed. It is only after being sacrificed that it fulfils its procreative, or fertilising, functions. But since Mādhavī has already fulfilled hers, she has a choice. At her *svayaṃvara*, she does not choose a normal human marriage and a tame domestic life, but she chooses the forest (*vanaṃ vṛtavatī varam*) (5,118.5), and becomes an unsacrificeable wild animal—a *mṛgī*.

Furthermore, the horse holds an intermediary position between earth and heaven, it is thus *par excellence* a liminal animal. ŚBr 6,4.4.2, quoting RS 10,1.2 and *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* 21,43, says of the horse: "Thus born, art thou the child of the two worlds;—the two worlds, doubtless, are these two, heaven and earth;" (Transl. Eggeling 1885/1963). This explains that Mādhavī elects a life of penance that will (so *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* 3,3.22, quoted above) directly lead her to heaven. Nor does she choose just any forest to practise penance. We next meet her in the elusive Naimiṣa forest (5,119.9), a constantly shifting sort of place, unlike the very clearly

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64   An episode described in Rm 2,85 also reveals that this spot can potentially combine features of heaven and earth. The sage Bharadvāja, whose hermitage is situated on the exact same place at the confluence of the two rivers, receives hospitably prince Bharata and his retinue. The sage transforms his hermitage into heaven, entertaining his guests with succulent food and dancing heavenly nymphs. For one night, heaven comes down to earth.

pinned-down *saṅgama*. As Hiltebeitel (2001: 158) has shown, the Naimiṣa forest, this "twinkling forest" of many sacrifices, seems to be in the sky, it is not really on this earth.[65] And the Naimiṣa is in turn connected with the "upper story", heaven itself, for when Yayāti falls from heaven, floating down the trail of the smoky Gaṅgā emitted by his grandsons' sacrificial fire, he falls into the Naimiṣa forest (MBh 5,119.12). Thus Mādhavī escapes from her *svayaṃvara*/sacrifice and resorts to the celestial wilderness to practise her penance. We see that this choice is made possible by her horse-nature, which places her at the junction between wild and tame, and earthly and celestial, and offers her the choice between the two options.[66] And indeed, nobody tries to hold her back, her decision seems a perfectly legitimate one. External decorum is maintained, and neither *svayaṃvara* nor sacrifice are failures, for after all, Mādhavī "marries" the forest and Yayāti reaches heaven—the *yajamāna*'s reward.

Thus, in my view, stories such as that of Mādhavī should not be analysed in terms of what they may reveal as to the position of women in ancient India, but should be viewed as enactments or actualisations of sacrificial rituals and hospitable performances, their narrative encoding being part of the overall plan of the Epic to promote the Vedic sacrificial world-view. At the same time, the story also offers an alternative to sacrifice in the form of the *tapas* that Mādhavī undertakes in order to avoid being sacrificed herself. As we have seen, she only manages to escape from the *svayaṃvara* because she resorts to the forest and opts for a life of asceticism. In a sense, this narrative, like many others in the MBh, opens up the choice between the path of *pravṛtti* and that of *nivṛtti*, between living in the world to sacrifice, and retiring from the world to practise austerities. And clearly, for women, the only viable option to married life was a life of penance.

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65   The idyllic description of the forest where Mādhavī practises her penance (cf. MBh 5,118.8–10) would also seem to point to the same conclusion, even though it is of course a topos in Sanskrit literature.

66   This ties Mādhavī to another mythical figure, that of Saraṇyū/Saṃjñā, who leaves her husband and children and goes off to the wilderness of the (heavenly) Uttarakuru region to practise penance in the form of a mare. See e.g. HV 1,8.

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