CHAPTER TWO

DRAUPĀDI'S GARMENTS

One of the Mahābhārata's most famous scenes is the multiplication of the sarees at Draupādi's disrobing. But the passage has never been closely examined either textually or symbolically. Recent developments now make such an examination singularly inviting. For one thing, the Poona Critical Edition provides an excellent guide to the transformations of the text. Secondly, recent scholarship into Mahābhārata symbolism has reached a point where certain insights are beginning to converge and distinctions between interpretations are becoming clear. A discussion of the miracle of the sarees provides an occasion both to reap the benefit of others' insights and to clarify the lines of difference between scholarly views. The approach here is stimulated by fieldwork in the cult of Draupādi (Tiraupatiyamman), found mainly in Tamilnadu, in which Draupādi is regarded as a form of Devi or Śakti and the Mahābhārata is celebrated as her cult myth.¹ One premise must thus be stated at the outset. The notion that Draupādi is a form of the Goddess is not alien to the Sanskrit Mahābhārata. Indeed, her relation to early concepts of the Hindu Goddess requires careful and detailed study. A second premise will not bear so directly on this study of the epic text, but is worth stating to avoid misunderstanding. The Draupādi cult cannot be traced back farther than about 500 years.² Nonetheless, study of the cult will frequently enliven and expand our knowledge of the epic, particularly its symbolism. Garments figure very prominently in Draupādi's cult. As in the epic, they are used ritually to mark transitions

¹ Fieldwork was carried out in 1975 under an American Institute of Indian Studies grant, and in 1977 on a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend. For an initial statement, see Hiltebeitel 1982; see also Hiltebeitel 1981.
² The oldest reference I know of is to a Draupādi temple built and dedicated at the north of Gingee town by Tubaki Krishnappa, founder of the Nāyak line of Gingee kings (rule ca. 1490–1520); see C. S. Srinivasachari, A History of Gingee and its Rulers, Annamalai University Historical Series, No. 2 (Annamalainagar: The University, 1943), p. 88, n.
or dramatic intervals in the story. This is true in particular of the disrobing scene.³

Draupadi’s reluctant entrance into the Kaurava assembly-and-gambling hall (sabhā) is preceded by a question which she insists be asked before she will appear: did Yudhiṣṭhira bet her before or after he wagered himself? The question remains moot through the entire episode. To the wisest counsellors it is irresolvable, and it drives Yudhiṣṭhira to silence. For, as J.A.B. van Buitenen says: “Yudhiṣṭhira cannot very well confirm that she was either won or not, for in either case he would have to confirm a lie: if she was won, he lied about his own stake, for he would still have been free to stake her; if she was not won, because he was no longer free, his staking her was a lie.”⁴ Duryodhana, delighting in the chance to catch Yudhiṣṭhira in this predicament, orders Draupadi dragged into the sabhā. Here she raises her moot question on her own, and provokes the only responses pro and con that the epic offers. They are found as a carefully constructed pair in the form of a debate between two figures whose names, in this context, have the look of a contrived opposition: Vikarna (Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s youngest and noblest son) and Karṇa. Whatever the significance of the two names, Karṇa’s position here is of the greatest significance. Vikarna takes the compassionate view, arguing that the throw is null for three reasons: (1) Draupadi was staked after Yudhiṣṭhira bet himself; (2) it was only due to the prodding of Śakuni that Yudhiṣṭhira bet her;⁵ and (3) the ‘blameless’ or ‘faultless’ (aninditā) Draupadi is “common to all the Pāṇḍavas” (sādhāranī ca sarvesāṃ pāṇḍavānām; 2.61.23–24; on citations, see n. 4). Karṇa outraged at such assertions by a mere youth, offers a point for point rebuttal: (1) it is irrelevant when she was wagered: Yudhiṣṭhira could bet her because Draupadi is “included within his total property” (abhyantarā ca sarvasve draupadī; 61.31); (2) Śakuni may have prodded Yudhiṣṭhira, but he did it audibly and her wager was allowed by the Pāṇḍavas (kirtitā draupadī vācā anujñātā


⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira makes all his bets voluntarily except for the last, his wager of Draupadi; in this instance Śakuni prods him out of his uneasy silence.