One of the *Mahābhārata’s* most famous scenes is the multiplication of the sarees at Draupadi’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 Draupadi (Tirupati-amman), found mainly in Tamilnadu, in which Draupadi is regarded as a form of Devī or Śakti and the *Mahābhārata* is celebrated as her cult myth. One premise must thus be stated at the outset. The notion that Draupadi 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 Draupadi cult cannot be traced back farther than about 500 years. Nonetheless, study of the cult will frequently enliven and expand our knowledge of the epic, particularly its symbolism. Garments figure very prominently in Draupadi’s cult. As in the epic, they are used ritually to mark transitions or dramatic intervals in the story. This is true in particular of the disrobing scene.

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.” 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 Karna. Whatever the significance of the two names, Karna’s position here is of the greatest significance.

Vikarna takes the compassionate view, arguing that the throw is nul for three reasons: (1) Draupadi was staked after Yudhishthira bet himself; (2) it was only due to the prodding of Śakuni that Yudhishthira bet her; and (3) the ‘blameless’ or ‘faultless’ (aninditā) Draupadi is “common to all the Pāṇḍavas” (śādhārani ca sarveśaṁ pāṇḍavanāṁ; 2:61.23–24; on citations, see n. 4). Karna outraged at such assertions by a mere youth, offers a point for point rebuttal: (1) it is irrelevant when she was wagered: Yudhisthira could bet her because Draupadi is “included within his total property” (abhyantara ca sarvasve draupadi; 61.31); (2) Śakuni may have prodded Yudhishthira, but he did it audibly and her wager was allowed by the Pāṇḍavas (kiritā draupadi vāca anuṣītā ca pāṇḍavaah; 61.33). But everything turns on the twist he puts on Vikarna’s third point: Draupadi’s blamelessness and her polyandry. Karna begins by introducing a point concerning Draupadi’s condition that Vikarna had not mentioned: “Or if you think it was through adharma that she was led into the sabhā in a single garment, hear my final word. One husband per wife is ordained by the gods, O scion of Kuru; but she, whose submission is to many, is for certain a whore. For her to be led into the sabhā is not strange to my thinking, whether clad in one garment or even unclad” (61.34–36). Karna’s mention of Draupadi’s garments is thus gratuitous in the context of the argument with Vikarna. But his speech does relate the garments to the subject of Draupadi’s chastity, or fidelity to a single husband as ordained by dharma.

He thus dispels Vikarna’s third point that, being “common to all the Pāṇḍavas”, the ‘blameless Draupadi’ could not be bet by any single one of them. Hardly ‘blameless’, she is a ‘whore’ (bandhañī), common to all and protected by none. It is thus on this pretext, having overturned Vikarna’s assertions about Draupadi’s ‘blameless’ polyandry, that Karna calls out: “O Duḥṣåsana . . . . Strip the Pāṇḍavas’ and Draupadi’s clothes” (61.38).

A. TEXTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Among the many passages excised from the Mahābhārata story in the reconstituted text of the Poona Critical Edition, none is so popular as Draupadi’s prayer to Kṛṣṇa in this moment of distress. But an examination of the Northern and Southern variants of this story fully justifies Franklin Edgerton’s judgment: “the evidence of the manuscripts is entirely conclusive” that the gesture is interpolated. Edgerton’s comments focus mainly on questions of style and continuity, but he also cannot avoid some of the theological implications of the alteration. “No prayer by Draupadi; no explanation of the miraculous replacement of one garment by another;