Being a Woman in Ancient Texts: Helen and Draupadi as Rhetorical Pretexts in the World of Men

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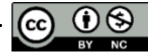
Copyright 2026 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC4.0). 

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative rhetorical analysis of Helen of Troy and Draupadi of the Mahabharata by examining how ancient literary traditions construct women as symbolic sites for negotiating blame, agency, and the legitimacy of war. Through a close reading of Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, Isocrates's *Helen*, Euripides's *Helen*, and key episodes of Draupadi's life from *Mahabharata*, including her polyandrous marriage, abductions, humiliation in the dice game, and subsequent political interventions, I argue that both figures function less as stable mythic women and more as rhetorical pretexts deployed by male authors to articulate their ideological concerns. The analysis reveals that in Greek rhetorical traditions, Helen becomes a medium for exploring persuasion, culpability, and civic pedagogy. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's assertive voice and ethical interventions reveal the tensions within patriarchal dharma and the political logic of epic violence. Despite their cultural and contextual differences, Helen and Draupadi serve analogous purposes: each becomes an instrument through which patriarchal systems negotiate honor, order, and the socio-political justification of violence. The paper highlights their rhetorical functions over mythic ones by exploring how these figures become enduring sites of cultural meaning-making and suggests directions for analyzing their evolving reinterpretations in modern literature and media.

Keywords: Helen, Draupadi, Feminist Rhetorical Analysis, Greek Mythology, Mahabharata, Patriarchy, Rhetoric, Epic Women

Introduction

Ancient myths are filled with intriguing female figures. Shrouded in the mysteries of divinity, power, and sometimes deceit—such as Medusa and Hera in Greek mythology, Eve in Christianity, Dākinīs in Buddhist myths, and Shakti in Hindu tradition—these women are repeatedly positioned as transformative presence at the center of enduring narratives. Helen of Greek mythology, first mentioned by Homer in the 8th century BCE, and Draupadi of Hindu mythology, whose narrative emerges in the *Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE–400 CE), are prime examples of such figures—characters whose stories have inspired writers and critics across centuries and generations.

Helen, popularly known as Helen of Troy after the city to which she was taken or eloped, stands as one of the most iconic figures in Western classical literature. Traditionally depicted as the daughter of Zeus and Leda and married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, her beauty and her subsequent abduction or elopement with Paris of Troy set in motion the Trojan War (considered to have taken place around 12th or 13th century BCE), a conflict that reshaped the epic imagination of the ancient Greek world. Helen, as "the most substantial, nuanced, and compelling female character" (Blondell, 2013, p. 53), has been repeatedly reimagined across literary, artistic, and cultural traditions as a paradigmatic yet enigmatic figure of beauty. She has served as both muse and provocation, generating a shifting series of meanings from Homer's guilt-ridden prized token equivalent to "Spartan gold", and Christopher Marlow's (1616/1997) "Sweet Helen", an apparition capable of making one "immortal with a kiss" (p. 53) to Euripides's (1891) misfortunate woman, who was offered "beauty, if misfortune is beautiful." These layered representations situate Helen as an enduringly intriguing presence within the moral, political, and imaginative landscape of ancient Greece.

Draupadi is one of the most prominent heroines of the *Mahabharata*, the ancient Hindu epic. Born from sacrificial fire as the daughter of Drupad, king of Panchala, she enters marriage with the five Paṇḍava brothers, the Kuru princes, through an arrangement shaped by ritual obligation, destiny, and political necessity. Within the epic, Draupadi emerges as a decisive ethical and political force rather than a passive catalyst of conflict. Her decisive interventions in key episodes of the *Mahabharata* including her abduction by Jayadratha, her resistance to

Kichaka's harassment during exile, and most notably her public humiliation in the dice game at the Kuru court, which precipitates the Kurukshetra war, foreground her voice, moral judgment, and insistence on justice, positioning her as an unusually vocal and influential figure in the ancient Indian epic world.

Drawing on post-Homeric portrayals of Helen by Gorgias, Isocrates, and Euripides—fifth- and fourth-century BCE writers invested in *logos*, persuasion, and narrative—and on Draupadi as represented by the authors/compilers of the *Mahabharata,* this paper brings Helen and Draupadi into a comparative conversation. Rather than treating them merely as characters within epic plots, the study examines how they function as conceptual lenses—figures through whom writers reflect on and actively shape ideological questions of blame, agency, divine causality, and patriarchal order. By situating Helen within the rhetorical projects of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, Isocrates' *Helen*, and Euripides' *Helen*, and Draupadi within the *dharmic* and patriarchal politics of the *Mahabharata*, the paper argues that both figures become instruments of argument—shaping, contesting, and reframing the moral vocabularies of their respective cultures.

Methodologically, this study employs a comparative close reading anchored in rhetorical analysis. Given that both Helen and Draupadi occupy a magnanimous presence in their respective literary and cultural traditions, a comprehensive treatment of each is beyond the scope of this study. I therefore focus on Helen as presented in three Greek texts—Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, Isocrates' *Helen*, and Euripides' *Helen*—and on selected pivotal episodes from Draupadi's life in the *Mahabharata*, including her marriage, abduction by Jayadratha, assault by Kichaka, and the fateful game of dice.

The significance of this comparative approach lies in its ability to shift the discussion from treating Helen and Draupadi as "timeless archetypes" to understanding them as textual effects shaped by specific rhetorical contexts: the epideictic display of classical Athens in Helen's case, and the *dharmic*-ethical narrative framework within the *Mahabharata*'s layered compilation history in Draupadi's case. This perspective offers enriching insights into scholarly traditions that consider Helen and Draupadi as cognate heroines of epic literature, whose respective roles reflect comparable narrative and rhetorical functions.

Helen and Draupadi: A Review of Critical Perspectives

The *Iliad* and *Mahabharata* are often compared as two foundational war epics emerging from two distinct ancient civilizations—Greek and Indic. Both "revolve around the lives and feats of mighty men with extraordinary powers and a strong will to follow strict moral codes" (Das, 2025, p. 28). Though separated by geography and culture, the two texts exhibit a strikingly parallel structure—personal and familial affronts escalate into collective catastrophes, with divine interventions entangling with human agency—making a comparative study of their plots and characters a compelling scholarly endeavor.

At the turbulent vortex of these epics stand two unforgettable women: Helen of Troy and Draupadi of the Kuru court. Both are framed within their traditions as extraordinary figures "divinely ordained to be the cause of a catastrophic war" (Chatterjee, 2018, p. 18). Yet they are far more than narrative pretexts; they are complex characters who expose the fragility of patriarchal honor systems, generating enduring scholarly discussion and revisions across time. Helen of Troy, due to her continued cultural prominence has been described as "the most famous woman in European history after the Virgin Mary" (Austin, 2008, p. 23). However, despite being one of the most celebrated figures, "her agency in her own story remains […] obscured" (Worman, 1997, p. 151). Helen herself seems to anticipate her literary afterlife with compromised subjectivity in the *Iliad*, when she reflects: "On us the gods have set an evil destiny, / That we should be a singer's theme / For generations to come" (Homer, 8th century BCE/1990, Iliad 6.357–58). Her words articulate a striking self-awareness: she recognizes that her life has already been transformed into narrative, into song, into tradition.

In *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom*, Norman Austin (2008) offers a comprehensive examination of Helen's literary afterlives, tracing the ways her identity fractures across competing literary traditions. Austin argues that Helen exists simultaneously as woman and as sign—her beauty operating as a destabilizing force that exceeds the limits of personal agency. In Homeric epic, though she is self-aware and self-critical, and across retellings, whether she is imagined as seduced, abducted, innocent, or complicit, "it is the same story, in which Helen, as a woman who disgraced herself and betrayed her family, remains the major scandal" (Austin, 2008, p. 2). For Norman Austin, the various revisions of Helen's

myths are not simply narrative alternatives but meditations on poetic authority and the capacity of tradition to construct and reconstruct iconic figures. Mihoko Suzuki (1989) similarly notes Helen's shifting portrayal across Homeric and later traditions:

> Homer's juxtaposition of Helen as a mystified emblem and as a fictive character is consistently reenacted in post-Iliadic accounts. From the Odyssey on, Helen is always present in the texts to be studied, but as a myth-either an emblem of doubleness or of duplicity on the one hand, or a trivial cardboard figure on the other-to be scapegoated and repudiated. (p. 17).

Such analyses underscore that Helen's identity is never fixed; rather, it is continually negotiated within the literary tradition, reflecting broader cultural anxieties about gender, agency, and the authority of narrative.

Draupadi, an equally striking figure in Indic tradition, has also drawn attention as one of the few women in Hindu mythic narratives who can speak her mind in the world of men. Outspoken, assertive, resistant, vengeful, and married to five husbands, Draupadi challenges almost every conventional notion of femininity within the patriarchal and patrilineal society of India. Draupadi is "perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic *Mahabharat*" (Spivak, 1981, p. 387), serving as one of the cultural credentials of the so-called Aryan civilization of India (Spivak, 1981, p. 387). As a controversial and bold character, she has frequently been the focus of feminist and post-colonial critics examining the structures of patriarchy and the supposed linearity of history in the Indian subcontinent.

Draupadi's struggle against injustice "reflects one of the first acts of feminism – a fight for one's rights" (Das, 2024, p. 223). She "emerges not merely as a symbolic figure of suffering but as a situated subject whose freedom is constrained yet actively asserted within patriarchal structures" (Verma & Kaur, 2026, p. 5). As a figure navigating freedom within constraint, Draupadi's "resistance does not dissolve patriarchal structures, but it renders them visible and ethically contestable" (Verma & Kaur, 2026, p. 6). Thus, Draupadi, an influential figure, is considered as pivotal and decisive in the *Mahabharata.* Saptorshi Das (2014) states:

> If the *Mahabharata* is an intricately woven saga of intense hatred and passionate love, ruthless bloodshed and noble thoughts, awe-inspiring courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem and the all destroying war it vividly describes. (p. 231)

She is not positioned merely as a participant in the epic conflict but as a defining force whose presence shapes both the emotional texture and the political trajectory of the narrative.

In more recent literary traditions, Draupadi has inspired a range of reinterpretations: some texts shift the focus by making her the first-person narrator, as in *Yajnaseni* (Pratibha Ray, 2000) and *The Palace of Illusions* (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 2008), while others offer metaphorical renditions that transform her into a symbol of defiance against systemic oppression, as in Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* (2001), translated by Gayatri Spivak. Interestingly, although Draupadi has endured across centuries of storytelling and inspired diverse cultural interpretations, the narrative surrounding her largely remains unchanged, unlike that of Helen.

However, as Nilasha Das (2025) notes in *The Role of Women in Epic Narratives*, both heroines are distinguished by their remarkable and divine origins, which lift them beyond ordinary womanhood. "From confronting divine authority to challenging assemblies of men, they demonstrate extraordinary strength in moments of crisis" (Das, 2025, p. 27). Considering the circumstantial contexts of both characters, G. Reshma and A. Vanitha (2025) argue, the events surrounding these female figures suggest that although they appear free from overt patriarchal subjugation, they are nonetheless maneuvered, often subtly, by dominant male powers. Scholars also argue that viewing these figures solely as convenient characters of immediate patriarchal structures oversimplifies their narrative function, since their portrayals engage with more nuanced, historically sedimented socio-cultural formations of gender, power, and authority that extend across time. Ratna Chatterjee (2018) observes, "the ambiguous character of Helen of Sparta reflects the emerging structures of Indo-European society, while the equally complex figure of Krishnā-Draupadī of Pāñcāla embodies lingering pre-Vedic ideological traces within an increasingly patrilineal Vedic order" (p. 260). Their portrayals are therefore

culturally layered and historically suggestive. Thus, Helen and Draupadi are compared not simply because wars unfold in their names, rather, they reveal how epic traditions stage women as sites of ideological tensions—where beauty, honor, cosmic order, and patriarchal control intersect.

This study engages with this complex dynamic of these characters, examining not merely as patriarchal puppets, but how they come to *be* as such. By considering them not simply as “bellis casus” figures within plots, but a rhetorical operation that turns the female hood into a symbolic site on which time-based political and ethical claims are sanctioned, the study aims to offer a more enriching perspective on the roles of Helen and Draupadi in epic traditions. To do so, it brings epideictic rhetoric, that focuses on praise or blame, often used to celebrate values, virtues, or vices in a public or ceremonial context (in case of Gorgias/Isocrates) and exculpating revision (in case of Euripides) into conversation with the *Mahabharata’s dharmic*-ethical narration.

Helen in three Greek texts

Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, Isocrates’ *Helen*, and Euripides’ *Helen* do not radically depart from earlier mythic traditions; rather, they reconfigure what was already established about Helen in the Homeric and post Homeric corpus. Gorgias and Isocrates build upon the Homeric portrayal, and Euripides base upon “phantom Helen” tradition, but they shift the emphasis from Helen as a disgraced or morally suspect woman to Helen as a figure worthy of defense and even admiration.

Gorgias’s Encomium of Helen

In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias offers a rhetorical apologia, arguing that Helen’s departure to Troy resulted from divine necessity, physical force, persuasive speech, or overpowering love—each of which removes moral responsibility from her. Helen becomes less a culpable agent than a subject acted upon by forces beyond human control. Gorgias presents Helen as a mortal woman—extraordinary in beauty yet could be “possessed by love, and seduced by word” (Gorgias, p. 78)—subject, like all human beings, to the external forces that govern all human beings.

Thus, *Encomium of Helen* is not a panegyric as its name bears though Gorgias does not miss to say that she is the one with “godlike beauty” (p. 77). Rather than a praise, it argues instead that reproaches about her are without ground, and it may rightly be called a defense of Helen

(Kim, 2010, p. 74). Gorgias proposes four possible reasons for Helen's act, that can be categorized into 2 divisions: "God's predetermination" (will of fate, wishes of God and vote of necessity), or "human's premediation" (by force, by words and by love). She is clearly exempt from reasons that result from God's predetermination. It is for the Human premediation that Gorgias is attempting to prove her innocence. If she was forced, then she was a sufferer to be pitied "rather than pilloried" (p. 79), if she was persuaded, she was under the powerful influence of speech, "for the speech that persuades the soul constrains that soul which it persuades both to obey its utterances and to approve its doings" (p. 81). If she was enamored by love for Paris, it would count as misfortune rather than sin as "love has the divine power of the gods, and human, a lesser could not reject and refuse it" (p. 83). Considering Greek societies at that time, Gorgias sounds convincing as "pantheism" and "determinism" are two distinct characteristics of Greek societies that believe in divine intervention and circumstantial attributes resulting possibly in a force majeure. But there is an interesting twist at the end in which he says that his purpose was to just to compose a speech as an encomium of Helen and an amusement for himself.

Two things are suggested here. First Gorgias is "giving" justice to a woman, which clearly connotes pan-Greek male-centered power dynamics – it's a duty of a man to exonerate a woman's misdeeds. Another is his parting remark which clearly says that it is a rhetorical exercise. For him, *logos*, appeal to logic and reasoning, is "a powerful lord, who with the finest and most invisible body achieves the most divine works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity" (p. 79). Actually, the text is an epideixis protreptic intended for aspiring students of rhetoric. Because of this, some critics have concerns over the text's possible interpretations which can provoke a dilemma regarding the nature of persuasive power, or even to embroil the audience in a firsthand experience of rhetoric's seductions (Pratt, 2015). Since its subject matter is ultimately speech or *logos* itself, it foregrounds or showcases the central characters at issue here: men as speaking subjects, women as objects, and language as medium of exchange (Crockett, 1994). So, his speech brackets truth to highlight method (Pratt, 2015), a typical sophist approach to exercise his own practice and beliefs. These critics assert that the text is less concerned with establishing truths than with demonstrating method. By means of this, it stages rhetoric as a performative arena, where characters and language function as instruments through which the author teaches aspiring

rhetoricians how persuasion operates, making the audience complicit in the exploration of speech, power, and social dynamics, in which Helen, the very subject of discussion, is ironically overshadowed.

Isocrates's Helen

If silencing "Helen" is an art, Isocrates has mastered the skill. In *Helen*, he talks about her without really talking about her! He does two things common in Greek societies at that time: valorization of Greek heroes, in this case, Theseus and validation of a woman's virtue by males of rank and power, in this case, Zeus, Theseus and Menelaus. After proemium, Isocrates goes in length to describe the valor of Theseus (this transgression covers more than half of the whole text), to eventually say that if Helen is liked by such an epitome of perfection, she definitely should "be praised and honored, and regarded as far superior to all the women who have ever lived" (Isocrates, p. 81). For him, we shall never have a more trustworthy witness or more competent judge of Helen's good attributes than the opinion of Theseus. When Theseus abducted her when she was just 7, he was not enamored by her beauty but blinded with the idea that he should have a divine wife as he himself was the son of God. Isocrates's sycophantic praising of Theseus infers his ideological blind spots that exempt any manipulation of celebrated male figures unquestioned.

Besides Theseus, Helen's beauty is another obsession to Isocrates. Because of her beauty, for Isocrates, it is reasonable for Greeks to go against the Trojans as it was for the beauty which is "the most venerated, the most precious, and the most divine" (p. 89). In this account, Helen functions as an ennobling figure whose presence inspires greatness. Helen's beauty is not a cause for shame but as the catalyst for heroic action and Panhellenic unity, framing the Trojan War as a source of collective Greek glory rather than moral catastrophe. The fetish of beauty is so powerful that he advances the examples of Gods and Goddesses who succumbed to the beauty of both mortals and immortals. "If the Helen is about one thing, it is about the pursuit of beauty. Helen was pursued by mortals and gods alike not because she was knowledgeable, rational, or wise but because she was beautiful" (Poulakos, 1986, p. 8). However, beauty which Helen stands for is also granted by Zeus. Helen is not presented as the possessor of the beauty but an object that contained the beauty bestowed by her father. Rather than Helen who embodies the beauty, Isocrates is more concerned to what she signifies.

Isocrates's compensatory and disproportionate rhetoric (not actually a praise of Helen's virtues but praise of the male chauvinism that sanctions the virtues), towards the end, presents Helen with agency, albeit a questionable one. He opines that Helen should be credited for making lives of many Greeks better by creating the momentum that contributed to the growth and prosperity of Greekdom and made the death of Greek heroes "more to be envied than the life of the rest of mankind" (p. 95). She is also praised for being a savior who saved Greeks from the slavery of the barbarians. "For we shall find that it was because of her that the Greeks became united . . . against the barbarians, and that it was then for the first time that Europe set up a trophy of victory over Asia" (p. 97). Isocrates first shows that political leadership is superior to physical strength, and then subordinates both to beauty. But the politics behind this abrupt shift towards the end is engendered from not what Helen was or did, but what she caused, again leaving her out of the conversation.

Euripides's Helen

Euripides, by contrast, draws on the "phantom Helen" (eidolon) tradition first articulated by Stesichorus in his *Palinode* (6th century BCE). In Euripides' tragedy *Helen*, the real Helen never travels to Troy; instead, a divine phantom accompanies Paris, while the true Helen remains in Egypt. After the war, Menelaus discovers her there, and together they escape, exposing the devastating irony that the Trojan War was fought over an illusion. Although Euripides adopts an alternative mythic strand, his play continues the broader tradition of reexamining Helen's culpability and destabilizing her status as the definitive cause of war. His Helen is portrayed as virtuous and steadfast, embodying the moral integrity expected of a noble wife. She is also intellectually astute, possessing "the most well-bred mind, a quality not to be found in many women" (Euripides, p. 72), a characterization that underscores her discernment, strategic intelligence, and ethical self-awareness.

Like Gorgias and Isocrates, Euripides also has the same fundamental purpose—to exempt Helen from the hatred of people, but, due to his striking departure from Homeric tradition, he evidently contrasts with Gorgias and Isocrates in many ways. Firstly, it's a narrative rather than just the arguments about her. Secondly, the most sought after "beauty" is hardly a matter of concern here, beauty is referred once or twice, not as a thing to glorify but as a matter of condemnation that brings misery. And lastly,

Helen's agency is all central here—she is the one with tact and talent, the only thing that leads to the conclusive happy ending. His innovation of Helen seems to be fashioned after Homeric Penelope, but his Helen "can plan and bring to fruition a plan of action which the Homeric Helen and Penelope never achieve. By presenting a Helen whose plans are successful, Euripides fulfills the possibility of a female subjectivity which is repressed in the Homeric epics" (Holmberg, 1995, p. 19). Helen, usually blamed as the cause of the war, takes the lead in lamenting its destructive consequences. She … place[s] her own troubles on an equal footing with those of Greeks and Trojans, and thus create yet another level on which she can be viewed as victim (Juffras, 1993, p. 46). Helen is "the woman whose lust was said to have sent thousands of souls to Hades had in truth been the slave of her own chastity for seventeen years" (Pippin, 1960, p. 157). Euripides makes "violence frustrated" and "innocence triumphant" (p. 157). But he has still presented her as a virtuous one that fits the time's frame, not as a free-spirited rebel, conforming to the essentialist idea of an ideal woman of the time.

Plurality of Helen

As just observed, all the texts are "Defense of Helen" with many overlapping and departure in the way they deal "beauty" and "context". Greeks' obsession for "beauty" is established by both Gorgias and Isocrates. However, unlike Gorgias who at least acknowledges her as "human" (who could be smitten by love, persuaded by speech etc.), Isocrates totally objectifies her by using the most exploitative referential lens of Greek male authority to validate her beauty. But both agree that the war is justifiable as Helen's divine beauty deserves being fought for. In short, the beauty of Helen for both Gorgias and Isocrates is the testimony of her exemption. Euripides has a different notion of Helen's beauty. She is an epitome of a perfect woman remorseful of the miseries she caused, chaste who values her fidelity above all and guards it as a holy shrine. Unlike the other two texts, Helen has a voice, and a subjectivity. Though, there are instances where she is objectified confirming to the social mores (especially in relation to the circumstances of her being a bride material), her wise and timely act overshadow it. Across these texts, we might discern a broader tradition of divergence in their treatment of her situation as a site of compulsion, divine elevation, or tragic misrecognition. Yet one principle remains consistent: the masterful deployment of *kairos*, the opportune moment, through the pretext of exonerating Helen.

Gorgias, a Sophist, and Isocrates, belonging to a reformist rhetorical–pedagogical tradition, both deploy Helen as a vehicle for instruction. Their Helens are not merely mythic revisions but pedagogical performances designed to demonstrate the power of rhetorical method to aspiring speakers of the time. In their apparent self-reflexiveness, they are unabashed about the power of *logos*, and manipulating the ideas they want to establish. In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias famously declares, “Speech is a powerful lord, who with the finest and most invisible body achieves the most divine works” (Gorgias, p. 79). He states the power of logos as something that “can impress the soul as it wishes” (p. 71). Helen thus becomes a test case for rhetorical compulsion: if she was persuaded, she is not to be blamed. The speech is less about rehabilitating Helen than about exhibiting the sovereign force of discourse itself as he himself states at the end that he composed the speech as an amusement to himself. “Gorgias logos is at best incapable of representing any sort of truth or reality and, at worst, is bound to work in concert with deception” (Valiavitcharska, 2006, p. 147). Isocrates, known for his epideictic prose, self-enclosed linguistic artifact, playful exercise (Poulakos, 1986), exploits this exercise even more but in subtler way. Right from the proemium, he directs his angle to either critiquing his contemporary for their inability to take loftier flights, defending his style or valorizing Greek heroes. Like Gorgias, Isocrates as a teacher of rhetoric “must have been concerned with the rising popularity of eristic; and he must have been interested more in the beauty of language than the beauty of Helen” (Poulakos, 1986, p. 16). In both writers’ case, Helen functions less as a stable mythic figure than as an occasion for showcasing rhetoric’s capacity to shape belief, redistribute blame, and manufacture glory. In this way, both writers’ praise of logos reflects the exigencies of the sophists’ heyday, highlighting their focus on the power of persuasive speech in public and intellectual life, rather than on ideas or truths in themselves.

For Euripides, the use of *logos* is not merely stylistic display but a vehicle for engaging larger historical dialectics. Why did Euripides want to establish a new pattern of experiences about Helen? Why did Euripides think of following the conspiracy theory of “phantom Helen”, advanced by Stesichorus and Herodotus? Euripides manipulates the earlier treatments of Helen, to present her as innocent victim and chaste wife but he apparently reflects “intellectual and cultural issues of the late fifth century” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 19). Weaving the ideas of reality and illusion and shifting the

authorial subjectivity to Helen, Euripides serves seemingly instantaneous, but a serious political motive. The play was written during the time marked by heightened political tensions. It was first performed in Dionysia at 412 BC, during Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), shortly after Athens suffered a devastating defeat against Sparta in Sicilian expedition. His play is considered to have seized the moment of profound crisis to question the premises of war itself: just as the Greeks fought for an image mistaken for reality, Athenians too might be sacrificing themselves for causes founded on misrecognition, pride, or political deception. Euripides' dramaturgy thus transforms myth into timely critique, exploiting the opportune historical moment to interrogate collective delusion.

Isocrates' *Helen*, though different in tone and purpose, also carries a powerful political undertone. It was written around 370 B.C, after Peloponnesian War and before Alexander's annexation. The post war period was fraught with poverty and pessimism. In addition to its internal political instability, Athens was also trying to neutralize the dominance of Sparta through a series of coalition-based war. In this postwar atmosphere, Isocrates' valorization of Helen and the Trojan War functions as a strategic act of cultural restoration. By reframing the war as a source of Panhellenic unity and heroic excellence, he invites his audience to dwell nostalgically on a mythic past of collective glory and shared purpose. The encomium, thus, becomes a morale-boosting rhetorical exercise, urging Greeks to recover a sense of dignity and cohesion through the memory of heroic endeavor.

Thus, in the classical rhetorical and dramatic tradition, Helen becomes an explicit "pretext" for epideictic performance, though each author deploys her toward distinct ends. As a result, Helen emerges as a portable argumentative figure through whom authors debate persuasion, culpability, agency, and the public uses of myth.

Draupadi in *Mahabharata*

Draupadi is portrayed as a woman of extraordinary beauty and virtue, yet she remains a deeply controversial figure because of her outspokenness, fierce sense of justice, and vows of vengeance—qualities that are often seen as propelling her husbands toward the cataclysmic Kurukshetra war, the central conflict of the *Mahabharata*. Unlike Helen, whose myth branches into divergent narrative traditions, Draupadi does not

exist in fundamentally competing versions. Although the *Mahabharata*, attributed to Vyasa, has accumulated regional retellings and localized subplots over centuries of transmission, its core narrative arc concerning Draupadi—a vocal princess, married to five husbands, and publicly humiliated in the Kuru court before becoming a central figure in the epic war—remains largely consistent.

Given the epic's immense scale, a comprehensive treatment of all her episodes lies beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this discussion will concentrate on pivotal and climactic moments that define her ethical positioning within the epic: her miraculous birth from the sacrificial fire, her polyandrous marriage to the five Pandava brothers, her abduction by Jayadratha, her assault by Kichaka during exile, and the fateful dice game in which she is publicly humiliated. These episodes do not only shape the trajectory of the epic but also crystallize Draupadi's agency, voice, and symbolic function within a patriarchal and martial order.

Draupadi's birth is extraordinary and symbolically charged. She is not born of a human womb but emerges fully grown from the *yajna vedi*, the sacrificial fire, already in the bloom of youth. The *Mahabharata* describes her in strikingly sensual and exalted terms:

> Of eyes like lotus-petals and of faultless features, endued with youth and intelligence, she is extremely beautiful. And the slender-waisted Draupadi of every feature perfectly faultless, and whose body emitteth a fragrance like unto that of the blue lotus for two full miles around. (Vyas, p. 419)

From the moment of her appearance, beauty and destiny are intertwined in her figure. Her father, King Drupada, originally desired that she marries Arjuna, the most formidable of the Pandava brothers. However, upon hearing the false news of the Pandavas' death, he organized a *svayamvara*—a public contest featuring an extraordinarily difficult archery challenge—to determine the worthiest suitor. Such competitive trials are common in ancient epic traditions, especially when the bride is portrayed as exceptionally beautiful, functioning as a mechanism to prevent future disputes among rival kings. This structure parallels, in some respects, the competitive dynamics surrounding Helen's marriage, though the conditions under which Menelaus was chosen are less formally dramatized. In both cases, feminine beauty becomes the catalyst for martial testing, political alliance, and the potential for large-scale conflict.

As fate would have it, Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin during the Pandavas' incognito exile, successfully won Draupadi's hand in the archery contest. Upon returning to their forest dwelling, he "represented Yajnaseni [Draupadi] unto their mother as the alms they had obtained that day" (Vyas, p. 432). Without turning to see what had been brought, Kunti replied, "Enjoy ye all what hath been obtained" (Vyas, p. 432). When she realized the gravity of her words, she was horrified; yet, as a maternal and divine authority, her utterance could not be revoked. Consequently, Draupadi became the wife of all five Pandava brothers. The unusual marriage is justified within the epic framework by the explanation that Draupadi had once prayed to Lord Shiva for a husband possessing five distinct virtues; since no single man could embody them all, her wish was fulfilled through polyandry.

The episodes of her abduction by Jayadratha and her assault by Kichaka reveal a recurring pattern in the *Mahabharata*: Draupadi's beauty becomes the catalyst for male transgression, while her resistance precipitates violent retribution. Jayadratha, the king of Sindhu and her brother-in-law, abducted her when he found her alone in the forest during the Pandavas' exile. Similarly, Kichaka, the powerful commander and brother of Queen Sudeshna of the Matsya (Virata) kingdom, became infatuated with her during the Pandavas' incognito year and made persistent sexual advances. In both instances, Draupadi refuses submission and demands justice. Jayadratha is defeated and nearly killed by the Pandavas, spared only because he is married to their cousin; Kichaka, by contrast, meets a brutal end at the hands of Bhima. These episodes underscore a consistent narrative dynamic: Draupadi's beauty incites violation, but her voice and insistence on redress activate the epic's machinery of vengeance and moral reckoning.

The final episode I consider here is the fateful game of dice, culminating in the attempted disrobing of Draupadi by Dushasana, one of the most controversial and dramatically intense scenes in the *Mahabharata*. The dice match was orchestrated between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, their cousins and principal rivals. As the game progressed, Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, lost his wealth, kingdom, brothers, and even himself. Enticed by the Kauravas with the promise that everything would be restored if he wagered Draupadi and won, he staked her as his final bet. The gamble proved disastrous: the Pandavas lost again, and Draupadi was declared won.

What followed was a spectacle of humiliation, rarely seen in myths of the Indic epic tradition. Dushasana dragged Draupadi into the royal court by her hair, at a time when she was menstruating, subjected her to public ridicule, and attempted to disrobe her before the assembled elders and kings. The assault would have been complete had divine intervention not stepped in; through Krishna's grace, her garment became endless, thwarting the attempt to strip her naked. This moment marks a decisive rupture in the epic's moral order. Draupadi's outrage transforms into a vow: she swears she will not bind her hair again until it has been washed in Dushasana's blood, a chilling foreshadowing of the catastrophic Kurukshetra war that would annihilate much of the Kuru dynasty and the warrior elites of the Indian sub-continent. Yet the episode contains a significant reversal. When Dhritarashtra, the blind king and father of the Kauravas, fears the destructive power of Draupadi's curse and the moral consequences of her humiliation, he offers her boons to appease her. In a moment of strategic restraint, Draupadi requests the freedom of Yudhishthira and then of her remaining husbands, thereby restoring both their liberty and their honor. Even at the nadir of degradation, she exercises agency through speech, transforming victimhood into moral leverage.

As can be observed, Draupadi's life is a saga of trials and tribulations, marked by humiliation and disgrace. Despite being the revered wife of some of the mightiest warriors, Draupadi suffers abuse because of her vulnerability as a woman, whether left defenseless or used as a pawn in political schemes. Yet in every instance, she refuses to yield. She resists both physically and verbally, challenging not only her oppressors but also her husbands, who fail to protect her. When war ultimately erupts, it is her relentless questioning, provocation, and insistence on justice that fuel its intensity.

To understand how Draupadi is portrayed by the original author and subsequent editors, it is essential to situate the *Mahabharata* within its diachronic context. The epic is believed to have been compiled between the 4th century BCE and the 4th century CE, while its events are traditionally dated to the 9th–8th century BCE. Vyasa is credited as the author of the text. Although the central storyline—the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas—and its key causes remained largely unchanging, later editors adapted the narrative, shaping details to align with their own socio-cultural contexts. "According to Winternitz, one of the greatest authorities on the epic, the story of the disrobing of Draupadi and [Krishna] supplying her

garments was not in existence till the 4th century A. D" (Dhavalikar, 1991-1992, p. 523), which proves that writer/compiler and subsequent editors must have their own reasons to shape, adapt and approximate the text.

Draupadi's portrayal in the *Mahabharata* seems to underscore two intertwined ideas: the first subtle, the second more explicit. In ancient Hindu ideology, suffering is often understood as a path to the ultimate "Brahman," or divine salvation. Exemplary female characters—from Sabitri to Sita—are rarely spared hardship. While this notion of suffering applies universally, it is often intensified for women, which brings us to the second, more overt proposition: the patriarchal norms and deeply ingrained misogyny of the time. As the heroine of one of Hindu mythology's central texts, Draupadi is depicted as a character whose life must include suffering—not as punishment for nonconformity, but as part of a divine plan. This pattern is evident from the circumstances of her marriage, which results from the unalterable boon of Lord Shiva to the repeated assaults and objectifications she endures. She becomes the target of lustful men such as Jayadratha and Kichaka, and is treated as property or a prize in the hands of her husbands—whether referred to as "alms" in marriage or as a stake in the game of dice.

Helen and Draupadi: Different Stories, Shared Destiny

Though Helen and Draupadi both serve a narrative function as beautiful *casus belli*, "causes of war", whose bodies embody the collective fantasies and anxieties of their respective societies, they differ in personality, attributes, and narrative presence within their respective texts. Helen's sexual allure occupies the center of the Trojan conflict, a war in which she is positioned more as a prized token than as a decisive agent, whereas Draupadi emerges as an overtly political figure who actively shape the ethical and dynastic stakes of the war.

A key point of departure between Helen and Draupadi is voice. In the Greek texts discussed here, Helen is often represented through "defenses of Helen," with writers speaking on her behalf. Helen largely remains passive, except in Homer and Euripides, where she is self-reflective but neither assertive nor decisive. Perhaps it is her enigmatic position—the way Homer initially presents her both as a cause and victim—that invites creative reinterpretation, explaining why Helen appears in multiple versions. By contrast, Draupadi speaks for herself throughout the *Mahabharata*. She is consistently vocal, assertive, and quick to defend

herself challenging male authority, which could be one reason why she is less susceptible to reinterpretation. Her repeated demands for justice, confrontations with elders and kings, and her ability to transform personal violation into collective political action culminate in the Kurukshetra war. She suffers, but also shapes the political landscape around her. Interestingly, the voice plays an important role in the afterlives of these epic figures. Helen's one-dimensional passivity engenders plurality, allowing multiple interpretations, whereas Draupadi's multidimensional, rhetorically assertive presence solidifies her singularity.

Despite these differences, one fact remains unchanged: the creators and writers of both Helen and Draupadi are male, and however the characters are represented, they ultimately serve a single function—to reinforce what Laura Mulvey (1975) calls the "male gaze," framing women as objects of heterosexual male desire. In both cases, they are subjected to patriarchal norms, particularly male desire directed at the female body, especially a beautiful one. Though in Helen's case, beauty is her defining attribute, central to her narrative significance, Draupadi's beauty, by contrast, is not always foregrounded in the same way. Yet her body, described as "an unreally beautiful woman", recurs as a site of male contestation, underscoring how the *Mahabharata* constructs her, at least at times, as a passive object within a male-driven narrative (Adhikari, 2025, p. 5).

In Greek tradition, the divine economy—Zeus's contest, Aphrodite's promise and male honor politics—Menelaus versus Paris—prestructure Helen's "choice." In the *Mahabharata*, male vows, gambling, and dynastic rivalry create the conditions in which Draupadi's humiliation becomes both symptom and catalyst. These dynamics are immediately apparent in the narratives and widely discussed too, but there are also more circuitous and subtle mechanisms at work that are less readily visible. One such notable trope employed in both contexts to secure male dominance is the blaming of women, which functions as a convenient moral shortcut, obscuring the structural violence embedded within patriarchal systems. This dynamic is framed in a strikingly easiest way: the subordination and resulting victimization of both Helen and Draupadi are presented as predestined fate. Appeals to preordination and determinism to justify injustice toward women are characteristic of both ancient Greek and Hindu societies. Helen's abduction by Paris is justified through Aphrodite's promise that he would win the most beautiful woman in the world if he

chose her as the fairest among Hera and Athena. Similarly, Draupadi becomes a victim of her mother-in-law's verbal mishap, even though Kunti is otherwise portrayed as wise and witty. At first glance, it seems that both women are made victims by another woman—Aphrodite and Kunti—but is this truly the case?

If we push both stories back in retrospection, we can see who is at play. It is Zeus who dragged Paris in the contest and it is Shiva who granted Draupadi the boon. So, we can see the victimization of women in two folds – both as victim and perpetrator. Blame shifting or scapegoating Aphrodite (for her vanity and shallowness) and Kunti (for gibberish insensitivity), are the most stereotypical male-centric moves. Another common ground we can detect is the notion of "beauty" as the major cause that lures the respective perpetrators. So, authors of Helen and Draupadi assume that beauty is destructive or at least has internalized the formulaic notion that "great war is fought over a woman's beauty." But we all know who determines what counts as beauty and who sets the parameters that define it.

A subtle move that we can detect, especially in the case of Draupadi, is a self-contradictory note: she is considered as one of the greatest female icons in Indic tradition. However, her fierce assertiveness and polyandrous marriage stand in stark contrast to established ideals of womanhood, highlighting the tension between societal expectations and her exercise of agency. Draupadi's position as one of the revered *kanyas* complicates conventional notions of female virtue, prompting us to question why certain exemplary female characters do not align with contemporary patriarchal norms.

In Indic mythical tradition, there is a long-standing practice of developing complex female characters who challenge established social and moral norms. Consider Shakti, one of the most chimerical embodiments of womanhood, who symbolizes cosmic female energy. She represents both beauty and the grotesque, creation and destruction, existing in a state of non-duality. Given both the existing realities of society and the metaphysical scope of these ideas, it is not straightforward to explain why authors create female characters who defy conventional paradigms. Yet such contested positions can signal another cultural maneuvering, appearing to serve two interrelated functions: prescriptive and strategic. Prescriptively, these narratives present value-based judgments that shape moral frameworks—for instance, illustrating the consequences of lust and

greed to instill caution and ethical restraint on male population. Strategically, they maintain a normative equilibrium between men and women, not by granting equal power, but by establishing a form of manipulation trap that creates a world where female hood is respected and awed, which serve as a fantasy escape that women can cling to compensate her negotiated subjectivity. Draupadi embodies this cultural rhetoric, just as Helen's legendary beauty functions as a compensatory mechanism, exonerating her from full culpability in the discussed Greek narratives. In this sense, Helen and Draupadi represent different manifestations of the same underlying cultural logic: women positioned simultaneously as objects of desire and as instruments through which patriarchal and moral orders are enforced to create the desired homeostasis.

Conclusion

This comparative reading shows that Helen and Draupadi are rhetorical interfaces where ancient cultures negotiate blame, agency, and the legitimacy of war. In Gorgias, Isocrates, and Euripides, Helen becomes a site for experimenting with persuasion, civic pedagogy, and wartime critique; in the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi becomes a site where *dharma* sanctioned by patriarchy is tested. We can thus see that both Helen and Draupadi function as strategic metaphors for reinforcing established patriarchal structures. Female hood, as loci of subordination, reflect the philosophical frameworks of their respective authors, sanctioning the essentialist norms of their time. While their portrayals differ according to their contingent cultural and narrative contexts, both Helen and Draupadi serve the socio-political and moral purposes of their authors, a practice that forms part of a continuum persisting even today. Future analyses adopting a rhetorical orientation could explore how these figures are reinterpreted in later traditions and adaptations, across novels, television, and digital media. Examining these evolving portrayals can illuminate how contemporary authors and audiences negotiate female subjectivity, resistance, and moral authority within patriarchal frameworks.

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