CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

INTRODUCTION

1. THE PLAY

The reputation of *Trachiniae*, like the fortunes of Heracles (112–19), has had its ups and downs. The play was evidently admired in antiquity, or it would not have survived; but it was not as widely studied as the other plays during the middle ages and later, and it made little appeal to nineteenth-century taste.[1] Recent criticism has been more sympathetic.[2] *Trachiniae*, after all, is a subtle and highly sophisticated play about primitive emotions, and modern readers can more easily take in their stride features that their predecessors found puzzling or offensive: the quite unromantic treatment of sexual passion, the presentation of Heracles as a most untypical Sophoclean hero, the neglect of Deianira in the final scenes after she has been so intimately studied for the first three-quarters of the play. But there is no denying that problems remain: not so much of structure and moral tone as of background, the religious and cultural assumptions on which the play is based.

It will be as well to start with a brief consideration of the shape and leading themes of the play. For the first 970 of the play's 1278 lines we are confronted with the household of Heracles waiting for his return. As Taplin has pointed out, this is a *nostos* play, like *Persae*, *Agamemnon*, *Heracles*, and the logic of its structure is that the scene we are waiting for is 'the focus and conclusion of the tragedy'.[3] We can accept this analysis without any need to decide who is the play's 'real hero': Deianira, or Heracles, or both of them, or even Hyllus. There is no reason to suppose that for Sophocles, the author of *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, this would have been an important or particularly meaningful question, though it is one that has been endlessly debated by critics. (In terms of performance there is no difficulty in determining which is the 'star part', since

[1] See C. Segal, *Y.C.S.* 25 (1977) 101 for examples.

[2] Segal (n. 1 above) cites many recent studies; cf. also Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles* ch. 4; U. Albini, *Interpretazioni teatrali* (Florence 1972) 55–65 (= *P.P.* 121 (1968) 262–70); C. Fuqua, *Traditio* 36 (1980) 1–81; P. E. Easterling, *I.C.S.* 6 (1981) 56–74.

[3] O. Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977) 84.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

the leading actor would have taken first the role of Deianira, then that of Heracles.)[4]

The play is so constructed that husband and wife never meet: Deianira is dead before Heracles arrives. This has often been seen as a dramatic flaw, and indeed it could be if there were no organic connexion between the Heracles scene and the rest of the play, but Sophocles repeatedly brings on stage people and things that link Deianira and Heracles. *Iole* has shared Heracles' bed and now she is taken into Deianira's house; *Lichas* goes between husband and wife as messenger and bearer of gifts; *the robe*[5] itself is seen on stage in its casket with Deianira's seal (614, 622), and later it reappears when Heracles throws back the coverings and displays its ravages on his body (1078–80). *Hyllus* is physically close to both parents and will lie with Iole: his father calls to him for help at the sacrifice (797–802), he touches and raises Heracles in the litter (1020–5), he embraces Deianira's corpse with the ardour of a lover (936–9). All these links between husband and wife surely reinforce the dramatic effect of their failure to meet, so that this is given a special tension and significance.

Moreover, the whole play is concerned with the exploration of a number of interrelated themes, all of which find their completion not with the death of Deianira, though that is one of the most intense moments, but in the final scene. Everything that happens is seen against a background of mutability, the eternal cycle of joy and sorrow which is vividly captured in the imagery of the Parodos: the 'wheeling paths of the Bear' (130–1), the ceaseless alternation of night and day (94–5, 132–3), the constant movement of winds and waves (111–19). The story of Deianira is framed by two emphatic *gnomai* which stress the instability of human fortunes (1–3, 943–6), a theme recalled whenever reference is made to the change from one state to another – unmarried girl to wife (e.g. 142–52), free person to slave (e.g. 296–306). The pattern is by no means complete when Deianira commits suicide: the language of mutability applies with equal relevance to Heracles, and for all the Chorus' hopes that as son of Zeus he is a special case, protected in some way from the full implications of being human, the Exodos is an

[4] The other parts divide as follows: Hyllus and Lichas (deuteragonist?); Nurse, Messenger, Old Man (tritagonist?).

[5] Cf. C. Segal, *A.C.* 44 (1975) 615 and *C.W.* 74 (1980–81) 129–31.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

elaborate study in the reversals that he too has to suffer (cf. pp. 5–6 below).

Then there is the pattern of finding out: one by one the characters learn, too late, the real truth of their situation. Deianira discovers that the supposed love charm is a poison which will kill Heracles, Hyllus that he has wrongly accused his mother, Heracles that Nessus is the originator of his suffering and that the oracles about his end are truly being fulfilled. Even Lichas finds out – fleetingly – that what he has carried to Heracles is not a gift but a deadly poison: 775–6 emphasizes his ignorance (ὁ δ' οὐδὲν εἰδὼς δύσμορος τὸ σὸν μόνης | δώρημ' ἔλεξεν). This movement of progressive revelation is strongly marked in the language of the play: ἐκμανθάνειν and ἐκδιδάσκειν and words of 'showing' and 'seeing' are insistently repeated.[6]

Closely related to this theme is the motif of writing: Deianira describes the 'old tablet' with its inscribed message that Heracles gave her when he last left home (157–8), and later she compares her careful remembrance of the Centaur's instructions to the preservation of a written text on a bronze tablet (682–3); at 1165–8 Heracles recalls how he wrote down what the oracular oak told him at Dodona. In each case the implication is that the knowledge exists – the message is there, available and unchanging – but it only becomes intelligible in the light of events. It is not by accident that two of these messages are oracular texts, for this, of course, is the special characteristic of oracles, that they represent a glimpse of the truth which can only be properly understood when the events they foretell take place: only then does the cryptic, even nonsensical, text take on a coherent meaning. Only when Heracles hears the name 'Nessus' (1141) can he understand how he can be killed by somebody who is already dead (just as Macbeth understands the meaning of the prediction that his life 'must not yield / To one of woman born' when he is confronted by Macduff 'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd' (Act v. sc. 7)). Only when Heracles is gripped in the torment of the robe can the Chorus see that 'release from toils' meant death (821–30).

So knowledge is intimately related to time, as the play makes clear, partly through the imagery of the written text and the use of oracles, with repeated emphasis on the periods of time – fifteen months, one

[6] Cf. 143, 222–4, 225–6, 849–50, 860–1 nn.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

year, twelve years[7] – that are significant in Heracles' career, partly through the dramatically compelling idea of the poison that has lain inactive all these years being brought to life when it is exposed to the sunlight. There is also great insistence in this play on the past, on the stories of the duel between Achelous and Heracles, of Nessus' attempted rape of Deianira, of Heracles' visit to Dodona. The language used of these events stresses that they happened long ago: Deianira has an 'old' tablet from Heracles (157), and an 'old' gift presented by the Centaur long ago (ἦν μοι παλαιὸν δῶρον ἀρχαίου ποτὲ | θηρός 555–6), Heracles remembers an 'old' oracle of Zeus that he wrote down at Dodona (1165–7). But all these things – and the encounters with Achelous and Nessus – happened within the adult lifetime of the characters, and we should hesitate before we conclude that Sophocles was trying to create a specially remote or archaic atmosphere in *Trachiniae*. These reminders of the past seem rather to be closely bound up with the themes of knowledge and time, and in their emphasis on the way the past can threaten and influence the present they recall other plays by Sophocles, particularly *Electra* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*.[8]

For a number of critics[9] this emphasis on the past, coupled with the use of what they see as 'fairytale' myths, particularly the tale of Achelous, has suggested a clue to the interpretation of the play. The fullest development of these ideas has been made by Segal, who traces the opposition of two sets of values: on the one hand those of the *oikos*, represented by Deianira, the 'quiet' virtues admired in the fifth century, on the other the wilds of nature (Cenaeum, Oeta), archaic heroism, the violence of the beast, all represented by Heracles, who 'never emerges entirely from the remote mythology and from the ancient powers of nature which he vanquishes'.[10] The play tells of a 'violent, primitive past encroaching upon and destroying a civilized house with which we identify and sympathize'.[11] But its movement culminates in a new kind

[7] Cf. 77, 164–8, 647–50, 824–5nn.

[8] Cf. *El.* 1417–21; *O.T.* 1213, 1451–4; H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and meaning in drama*[2] (London 1964) 193.

[9] K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles*[3] (Frankfurt 1947) 45–6 (= 37–8 in the English translation by A. and D. Harvey, Oxford 1979); F. J. H. Letters, *The life and work of Sophocles* (London 1953) 176–7, 192–3; C. Segal, *Y.C.S.* 25 (1977) 99–158.

[10] Segal, art. cit. (n. 9 above) 100.

[11] Ibid. 106.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

of heroism; Deianira's death is just an ending, but that of Heracles holds a sense of the future: he 'traverses the path from an archaic, epic heroism to a heroism which is fully tragic'.[12] No one could deny that the myths of Achelous, Nessus and the Hydra are used to powerful effect to suggest the beast-like strength and violence of *eros* at work in human beings – in Deianira as well as in Heracles – and the extreme fragility of order and civilization. But one may be less confident that Heracles was perceived as an archaic figure by Sophocles and his audience and should be so read by us. This is certainly not how the vase painters saw him, and it may be misleading to suggest that the myths of Heracles are more like 'fairytale' than, say, the legends of Medea or Theseus. Moreover, although there are many obvious respects in which Heracles and Deianira can be seen as polar opposites, all the main themes of the play link them closely together: knowledge, time and also passion.

Eros, treated in this play with an insight that rivals that of Euripides in *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, is a dominant motif throughout. It is memorably expressed in the First Stasimon in the image of Cypris as both contestant and umpire in the games (497–8, 515–16) and at the end of the Third Stasimon as the silent ministering power responsible for all that has happened (860–1). Deianira's decision to send the robe was prompted by her passion for Heracles, while he sacked Oechalia because he wanted Iole, and the robe was only poisoned because Nessus had been frustrated in his lust for Deianira. As the play unfolds, a very close connexion develops between *eros*, madness, the sickness of Heracles, the poison, and the violence of the beasts. In the Exodos, where the sickness of Heracles is presented on stage, we are shown the physical realization of an idea first presented as a metaphor: at 445–6 Deianira describes the passion for Iole as 'this *nosos*'. And when Heracles repeatedly speaks of the *nosos* as a wild beast (974–5, 979–81, 987, 1026–30) we are reminded both of his encounters with Achelous and Nessus (9–21, 507–21, 565–8) and of his own violence (779–82).

Throughout the play these themes are presented with Sophocles' characteristic irony. The return of Heracles was to have been like the coming of a bridegroom to the bride (205–7), but he brings a new bride whose child is an Erinys (893–5), and although the play ends with a marriage – the marriage of Hyllus and Iole – this is seen by Hyllus in

[12] Ibid. 157.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

terms of the utmost horror. The return was also to be celebrated by Heracles with a splendid sacrifice, but it turns out to be a sacrifice in which the sacrificer himself becomes the victim: Heracles is going to be burned on the pyre on Mt Oeta instead of conducting the hecatomb at Cape Cenaeum. And the great hero who is the 'best of men' for his wife, his son, the Chorus (177, 811–12, 1112–13), becomes no stronger than a girl: he weeps like a παρθένος (1071–2; cf. 1075), and we are ironically reminded of the helpless girls earlier in the play: Deianira waiting in terror as he fought Achelous (21–5, 522–5), Iole and the train of captives (298–302). The son of Zeus, who might be expected to receive special protection from his father, seems at the end to be as much a victim of his dispensations as any other human being; and the irony is pointed by the insistence on the relationship of father and son in the scene where Heracles makes his dying demands of Hyllus (cf. 1177–8, 1203nn.).

In formal and thematic terms *Trachiniae* is thus an intricately unified play; why does it still present serious problems of interpretation? There are two main issues: the treatment of Heracles and the meaning of the final scenes. It has often been noted that there is a striking difference in the way Deianira and Heracles are handled. She has the advantage of being on stage much longer than he is, and she is given a high proportion of the poetry, which contributes to the impression of a deeply sympathetic character – noble, compassionate, modest – involved, moreover, in a morally interesting situation: she takes a fatal decision and is seen facing its consequences. As Hyllus says of her, 'She made a disastrous error, with the best of intentions' (1136), a perfect formula for a tragic heroine. But she is dismissed from the end of the play, and although the presence of Hyllus keeps her in the audience's minds she is not 'vindicated': Heracles does not take back his wish to punish her when he hears the truth about Nessus. He, by contrast, occupies the stage for only 300 lines, and although he is given some superb rhetoric he has nothing like Deianira's poetic range, nothing to put him in the same class as Ajax or Philoctetes. He is shown to be egocentric, brutally callous, violent to an extreme degree – all this is stressed through the reactions of the sympathetic Hyllus. Finally, he is in no position to take morally interesting decisions, and there is nothing here to compare with the new depth of insight achieved by the Heracles of Euripides' play. But after all he *is* the 'best of men', the monster-slayer, the son of Zeus:

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

his special status has to be taken into account, and even if he is morally quite unlike the typical Sophoclean hero he is surely meant to command the audience's deep interest and at the end even their respect, when he speaks with a new kind of authority about the oracles and prepares to endure unflinchingly the extremes of pain (1159–73, 1259–63).

Clearly, then, the presentation of Heracles is ambiguous, and no interpretation which sees the play in unambiguous terms will do justice to it: neither as a simple moral parable in which the arrogant Heracles is brought low[13] nor for that matter as a glorious vindication of the resplendent hero.[14] It is not enough, either, to see the essence of the play in the contrast and opposition between male and female, which is the basis of many interpretations, particularly those which see *Trachiniae* as domestic or social tragedy.[15] Of course the contrast is dramatically important, but we have already noted that even more important is the stress on what Deianira and Heracles have in common: both are victims of *eros*, both act in ignorance for their own destruction. What is needed is an interpretation that will take full account of the structure and themes of the play without losing sight of the peculiar role allotted to Heracles.

Iliad 18.117–19 offers a comment on Heracles which can perhaps be taken as a clue to the understanding of *Trachiniae*. 'No, not even mighty Heracles escaped death, who was dearest to Lord Zeus son of Cronos, but fate and the dire wrath of Hera subdued him.' So Achilles schools himself to accept his own fate, using the traditional argument *a fortiori*: if even Heracles, the greatest of men, had to die, why should I escape? Man facing his mortality is already a great theme for tragedy, but *Trachiniae* does not focus on this issue in isolation. The complicating factors are both characteristically human: ignorance (man never knows enough to make right judgements and avoid harming himself) and passion (he does things that will harm himself and his *philoi* under the influence of irrational forces like *eros*). The more remarkable his strength and bravery, the more violent the effects of these irrational forces are likely to be. But the play does not confine itself to the extreme case. We may not all have the capacity for greatness, but we can be good, or try to

[13] Cf. e.g. H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis* (Berkeley 1966) ch. 4.

[14] An extreme version of this view is put forward by A. M. Etman, Τὸ πρόβλημα τῆς ἀποθεώσεως τοῦ Ἡρακλέους, Diss. Athens 1974.

[15] E.g. C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean tragedy* (Oxford 1944) 144; D. Wender, *Ramus* 3 (1974) 2–4.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

be. Set against Heracles is the figure of Deianira, trying to be *sophron*, always mindful of human weakness and vulnerability. But her lack of knowledge, complicated by *eros*, is enough to make her fail disastrously and suffer like Heracles. This is the pattern of a *consolatio* (of a very unsentimental kind). If even *these* people destroyed themselves and one another we should not be surprised to find that life is full of illusion and deception for us, too. And the tragedy is deepened if the 'greatest' in human endeavour is also disturbingly near the beast – a reminder of the precarious nature of all civilization. (The same pattern can be seen in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, with the 'cleverest' substituted for the 'greatest' and a more exclusive concentration on knowledge and ignorance.)

Does the story of *Trachiniae* have any significance beyond its power to convey a sense of human dignity in endurance and of pity for human limitations? Is the mysterious will of Zeus in this play essentially different from the caprices of, say, Aphrodite and Artemis in *Hippolytus*? We are given few definite clues. But the action of the play answers at least in part the question asked by the Chorus in the Parodos: 'Whoever saw Zeus so unmindful of his children?' (139–40). The causation of everything that happens is clearly traced: Heracles' suffering in the robe is shown to be the product of his *eros* for Iole and Deianira's *eros* for him. Deianira had the means (unwittingly) to destroy him because of the Centaur's trick, which relied on the fact that in shooting him Heracles had used an arrow dipped in the venom of the Hydra, another of his monstrous victims. Actions have their consequences. Hyllus' closing denunciation of the gods' *agnomosyne* (1266) is thus set in an ironic context: we know more than Hyllus about what has happened. Moreover there is the end; the pyre and the marriage with Iole, motifs whose meaning we need to study more closely.

The Exodos begins and ends with a procession, of which the focal point is Heracles carried in a litter. This is very different from the kind of procession we were encouraged to expect earlier in the play (e.g. 181–6, 640–6). The triumphal homecoming is replaced by a silent and solemn entry (965–7); Heracles must be either dead already or asleep, exhausted by the agonies of torture he has been suffering in the poisoned robe. At the end of the play the procession is echoed; but this time Heracles is awake, in control, going to his death in a special place and in a specially prescribed ceremony, and displaying heroic endurance. There is both a parallel and a contrast: something has happened in the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

Exodos to alter the pattern. What happens is a series of revelations. First the *nosos* of Heracles is manifested to the audience through his cries of agony (983–1017) and the display of his ravaged body (1076–80); then what Hyllus tells him about Deianira and the philtre precipitates Heracles' revelation of the second oracle, which he can at last interpret, in conjunction with the one so often mentioned earlier in the play (1158–73; cf. 76–81, 157–70, 821–30). From this point onwards the action leads to a new end, which has not been foreshadowed in the preceding events except in glancing ways (cf. 1191n.). As Linforth[16] saw, the play's logic need not extend beyond the *nosos* and presumed subsequent death of Heracles; the pyre on Oeta and the marriage of Hyllus and Iole are not necessary for the conclusion of this story. We can only suppose that they have some importance in their own right for the light they throw on what is happening to Heracles.

At 1174ff. Heracles solemnly binds Hyllus on oath to do as he asks. Hyllus and his helpers are to carry Heracles up to Mt Oeta, cut wood for a pyre and set it alight with pine torches. There is to be no ritual of mourning – no lamentation or tears. This is a very strange prescription, which Hyllus finds horrifying, particularly as it threatens to involve him in pollution. At 1211–16 Heracles modifies his instructions so that Hyllus may remain ritually pure: someone else may actually light the pyre. No explanation is offered for these directions, but Heracles speaks with confident authority, and it is natural to assume that he is recalling the commands of Zeus (cf. 1149–50n.).

Now it could be argued that the point of this episode is purely to suggest the capricious perversity of Heracles; but it is hard to escape the conclusion that for an Athenian audience there was more significance in his commands. Sophocles did not invent the story of the pyre on Mt Oeta: the myth that Heracles met his end there must have already been current as the aetiological explanation of a cult established long before Sophocles' time, in which bonfires were lighted on the top of the mountain and offerings made to Heracles. Excavations have yielded figurines and inscriptions which confirm the literary tradition.[17] It is therefore

[16] 'The pyre on Mount Oeta in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*', *Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Class. Phil.* 14.7 (1952) 255–67.

[17] Cf. M. P. Nilsson, *A.R.W.* 21 (1922) 310–16, reprinted in *Opuscula selecta* I (Lund 1951) 348–54; M. Mühl, *Rh.M.* 101 (1958) 106–34. For Heracles and hero cult cf. Fuqua (n. 2 above) 3–13.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521287766 - Sophocles: Trachiniae
Edited by P. E. Easterling
Excerpt
More information

very likely indeed that the direction to build and light the pyre on Oeta would relate for a contemporary audience to an institution and a story which were perfectly familiar to them, just as the cults at Trozen and Corinth mentioned by Euripides at the end of *Hippolytus* and *Medea* respectively belonged to real contemporary life and formed a link between the world of the drama and the world of the audience.

What we cannot tell from our extant evidence is whether by the date of the first production of *Trachiniae* (whenever that may have been; see pp. 19–23 below) the story of Heracles' death on the pyre was already associated in people's minds with the well-known story of his apotheosis (for the evidence see p. 17 below). Fortunately this is not the most important question to be answered. If we allow ourselves to be guided by the text itself we note that it is not 'about' the apotheosis: the play closes before the death of Heracles, and the emphasis of the action is on suffering and mortality, in the spirit of the passage in *Iliad* 18 quoted above. The silence of the play about what was going to happen on Mt Oeta no doubt left room for different responses on the part of the original audience, depending on the flavour of their piety or their view of life, just as it has left modern critics in a state of perpetual disagreement. There can be *no* authoritative version of 'what happened next', because the play's design does not allow it. But if it is right to see in the story of the pyre on Oeta an ironic allusion to something familiar in contemporary cult and belief outside the frame of reference of the play then there is a suggestion, however mysterious and obscure, that *some* significance should be attached to the manner of Heracles' death, and that it fits into a larger scheme of things in which Zeus's will is mysteriously fulfilled. Whether this is leading to a good or a bad end is not made clear, and Heracles himself shows no sign of understanding it. But his behaviour after he has interpreted the oracle suggests that he has at last grasped something – the paradox, perhaps, that the most a human being can achieve (even the 'greatest', the son of Zeus himself) is an acceptance of the great gulf between human and divine knowledge. And this itself is arrived at only through extremes of suffering.

At 1216ff. Heracles makes his second, 'minor' request of Hyllus: that he should marry Iole. Once more Hyllus is horrified, and once again his religious scruples are offended, this time at the thought of associating with the person he believes to be the agent of both his parents' deaths. Of course this scene adds further to our sense of Heracles' passionate self-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org