ON THE STRUCTURE OF SOPHOCLES' *TRACHINIAE*

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**ABSTRACT**

Contrary to the conventional diptych interpretation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, I maintain that the play can be structurally divided into four sections, each with two conflicting versions of the truth. These sections feature a transition from ignorance to knowledge, from passivity to activity and from emotion to reason. The whole movement advances towards Heracles' deification.

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* ends as it starts, with a phrase that is rather proverbial. Hyllus, indignant at his father's suffering and his mother's death, considers Zeus as the sole agent responsible for the events represented on stage. 'And none of these things is not Zeus'\(^1\) (1278), he cries desperately, as the procession is ready to convey Heracles to mount Oeta so that he may be cremated. Deianeira, at the very beginning of the tragedy, stated that 'there is an ancient saying among men, once revealed to them, that you cannot understand a man's life before he is dead, so as to know whether he has a good or a bad one' (1-3).\(^2\) The drama ends with Heracles still alive. Only the audience is aware that his transportation to Oeta prefigures his apotheosis, which, however, is never explicitly mentioned during the play. I believe that M. Davies' opinion that 'the central theme of the *Trachiniae* may be seen as the working out (largely through the agency of Deianeira) of Zeus' plan for his son Heracles\(^3\) is correct. The basic aim of this paper, then, will be to demonstrate how the structure of the play is directed at the fulfilment of Heracles' apotheosis. In some sense this article is a response to Kane's article on the structure of the play.\(^4\) The author maintains that in the second half of the exodus Heracles accomplishes the revival of marriage and sacrifice; in this way he re-enacts each of two parallel segments into which his wife's tragedy is equally divided. My purpose here will be to propose a different structure.

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4 R.L. Kane 'The structure of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. Diptych or trilogy?' *Phoenix* 42 (1988) 198-211.
It is commonly held that the *Trachiniæ* falls into two distinct parts (1-946 and 947-1278), in each of which Deianeira and Heracles respectively occupy the role of the protagonist. This is the conventional *dipych* interpretation. However, the play, as I see it, can be structurally divided into four sections, each with two different versions of the truth. In each instance the person primarily involved is initially deluded by appearance; later on he or she discovers the truth by accident. Apart from this transition from ignorance to knowledge, these four main sections also feature a transition from passivity to activity. Moreover, reason each time replaces an emotional response to the facts. This whole movement, in the final analysis, advances towards Heracles’ deification.

Before any of the four main sections begins, Deianeira’s decision to send her son Hyllus in search of Heracles is of cardinal importance for the functioning of the plot, because, as we shall see, Hyllus’ wavering between his mother and his father is very important for the final outcome of the play.5

The first section containing two conflicting versions of the truth (141-530) involves the cause of the sack of Oechalia. Two messengers appear successively before Deianeira to inform her about Heracles’ return to his house. According to Lichas, the official envoy of Heracles, the city of Oechalia was sacked because of its king’s offensive behaviour towards the hero and Heracles’ subsequent enslavement to Omphale. But the other messenger informs Deianeira that the true cause for the conquest of this city was Heracles’ desire for Iole, the daughter of king Eurytus. The king denied Heracles’ demand that his daughter be given to him, to have as his secret bed-fellow, and because of this Heracles destroyed her city and captured her. And while in Lichas’ narrative Zeus is the sole divine agent, in the narrative of the second messenger Heracles appears as *Eros*’ pawn. The two narratives are not mutually exclusive; the one complements the other. It becomes clear that Eurytus insulted Heracles because the hero asked him to give him his daughter as his concubine. Heracles’ slavery under Omphale, imposed on him by Zeus, prefigures his slavery under the passion of love for Iole. Zeus works through the power of *Eros*. In all probability, Heracles’ enslavement by Omphale intensifies not only his wish to take revenge on Eurytus, but also his determination to acquire Iole by any means. Later on, Lichas is forced to admit that ‘he who in all other matters has excelled in might has been altogether vanquished by his passion for this girl’ (488-89). Lichas has concealed the truth on his own initiative, in order not to hurt Deianeira’s

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5 T.F. Hoey, ‘The *Trachiniæ* and the unity of the hero’, *Aretusa* 3 (1970) 14 notes that on the level of being, Hyllus is a fusion of both of his parents, so that by his existence he serves to unite them.
feelings (479-83), whereas the first messenger had preferred the truth, despite the fact that he took no pleasure in saying disagreeable things (373-74). Moreover, Lichas is encouraged to reveal the truth to Deianeira because he realized that ‘being a mortal, she thinks like a mortal and not unreasonably’ (473). Deianeira was previously careful to attribute Heracles’ passion to the universal power of eros and to stress that she had no intention of fighting against the god. Reason seems to prevail over feeling. Nevertheless, in the next episode Deianeira resolves to act. Whereas she previously seemed passive and fearful, she now appears unwilling to share her husband with a much younger rival and decides to resort to what she believes to be a magic charm.

The second section characterized by two conflicting versions of the truth (531-730) concerns Deianeira’s two accounts of the nature of the love charm which she wants to apply to Heracles in order to win him back. Before, she felt pity for Iole; now she calls her ‘an outrage to my feelings’ (538). Before, she maintained that she had never reproached Heracles for his numerous infidelities (459-63); now she complains of the reward from her so-called ‘faithful and noble’ husband (540-42). What is notable is that Deianeira does not get as angry with Heracles, because she has learnt to tolerate his extramarital love-affairs, which she considers as a disease. What causes her indignation and urges her to act is that this time her husband has imposed on her to live with another, much younger woman in the same house (κοινωκεῦν, 545). This constitutes a serious threat to her position as the mistress of Heracles’ oikos. Deianeira risks losing the most vital part of her identity, the one that gives meaning to her whole existence. And it is precisely this threat which causes her to remember an incident of the past and to resort to what she believes to be a charm. This is also the reason why her narrative (555-81) sticks to the mere facts without expressing any sort of doubt about the trustworthiness of the source of the supposed charm, his intentions or its efficacy. She longs to oust Iole. Besides this she can think of practically nothing else. Nevertheless, she does ask the chorus whether her deed may be regarded as μαβταν (587). She previously used the same adjective to describe the lustful hands of the centaur Nessus, who tried to rape her (μαβτανος χερων, 565). Deianeira adopts the logic of the dying beast and believes his promise that his blood mixed with the venom of the Hydra will be a charm for the mind of Heracles, so that he shall never love another woman instead of her. She thinks that by dyeing a tunic with the

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6 On Deianeira’s fear see R.P. Winnington-Ingram, Sophocles. An Interpretation (Cambridge 1980) 75-76.
7 In fact, Iole is called a δύταρ (wife) by Lichas in line 428.
'charm' and by sending it to Heracles the task has been accomplished (πεπίσταμα στάδε, 581). However, Deianeira's denial to take into serious consideration the chorus' warnings that she must first put it to the test (περιπατήσατε, 593) before acting8 points to the fact that in her anxiety to maintain her role as the mistress of Heracles' house she is willing to jeopardize her innate sophrosyne as a wife and to become one of those women who dare to commit rash crimes and whom she herself hates (cf. 582-83 to 596-97). That is, in trying to maintain her identity Deianeira finally loses it. And as in the first section, featuring the accidental encounter and confrontation of the two messengers, Deianeira accidentally finds out that the tuft of wool with which she had anointed the robe is consumed by itself. Only now is she able to use her logic and express doubts about the intentions of the centaur and the real efficacy of the 'charm' (707-18). She realizes that the 'charm' which was carefully hidden inside her house, instead of ensuring her ἀκαίρετος cohesion, will bring about its dissolution with Heracles' death. And while Deianeira was previously waiting passively for Heracles to express his longing for her before saying how she longs for him (630-32), she now decides to act by committing suicide in case Heracles dies; for she will not bear to enjoy evil repute (719-22).

The third section (731-970) involves Hyllus' enlightenment regarding the guilt of his mother. Hyllus has witnessed Heracles' suffering caused by the robe and now he turns and reports the incident to Deianeira. His first words before his narrative are an indictment of his mother: 'Mother, I would choose one of three things, that you should no longer be alive, or that you should survive and be called someone else's mother, or that you should somehow acquire a better mind than the one you have!' (734-37). At the end of his speech he curses Deianeira to be punished by avenging Justice and the Erinys (807-09) and later on wishes that she may have for her own the joy that she gave to his father (819-20). The portrait of Heracles in Hyllus' narrative is not sketched in a favourable light: in his agonizing pain he hurls the innocent Lichas against the rocks and kills him (777-82), and he orders Hyllus to come closer even if this costs him his life (797-98). Nevertheless, Hyllus seems to admire his father. He calls him πάντων ἀριστόν ἄνδρα τῶν ἐπὶ χοίρι / ἀπό τῶν ἄλλων γιὰ ὅψη ποτέ (811-12). This is the reason why he considers his mother guilty and curses her. He does not hear her side of the story, not only because he does not have the opportunity (Deianeira departs immediately after the end of his speech), but also because his

8 E. Carawan, 'Deianeira's guilt', TAPA 130 (2000) 209-11 believes that the heroine's negligence to take into serious account this suggestion is her most crucial mistake.
admiration for his father prejudices him against her. His refusal to take into account the words of the leader of the chorus (813-14), which point to a different version than the one he has in mind, testifies to the above interpretation. It takes the people of the house to inform him that she acted in ignorance, beguiled by the centaur (934-35). But it is too late; Deianeira is already dead and Hyllus passively laments and weeps over her. However, when the time comes, he will actively defend her before his father.

The fourth and final section of the *Trachiniae* (971-1278) concerns Heracles’ recognition of the cause of his death. When he is brought on stage, Heracles does nothing but ask pity for himself. He laments his condition and wishes for death. Convinced by Lichas’ report, he believes that Deianeira is responsible for his imminent death and so asks Hyllus to deliver her into his hands so that he can punish her. It is true that Deianeira’s wish to avoid ‘living together’ (ξυνοικεῖν, 545) with Heracles’ concubine has set ‘a woven covering of the Erinyes’ upon her husband, which literally ‘lives with him’ (ξυνοικεῖν, 1055). But Hyllus informs his father that, despite her error, his mother’s intent was good (1136). When he mentions the love charm, Heracles happens to ask about the source of the potion. In response, the name ‘Nessus’ is mentioned and Deianeira is forgotten altogether for the rest of the play. Having previously suffered passively, Heracles now forgets his agony and proceeds to action. Before the reference to the name of the centaur, Heracles was suffering and was asking for death as redemption, but he was not certain that he was going to die. Now he is sure of his imminent death. His order to Hyllus to summon his whole family underlines the importance he attaches to the oracles he knows. Both of the oracles he received came from Zeus (1159 and 1168). Although Heracles’ interpretation of Zeus’ prophecies points to death, his subsequent request to Hyllus to transfer him to mount Oeta and burn him alive reveals a different conception of the future his divine father has in store for him. Indifferent to his son’s feelings, Heracles also asks Hyllus to marry Iole. Despite his initial revulsion, Hyllus is compelled to yield. The two requests seem interconnected because they are both introduced by the second person imperative of the verb οἶδα (cf. 1191 to 1219). We are aware that the first instruction concerns Heracles’ forthcoming deification, otherwise its mention would seem totally meaningless in such a context. Iole is one of the decisive factors in this apotheosis. Her introduction to the house of Heracles has caused its

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disaster. But (perhaps in an expression of gratitude) she must be kept in the family by the institution of a new house. This is one way of explaining the link between Heracles’ two requests.

Having heard the name ‘Nessus’ and having correlated the two oracles, Heracles seems to possess a secret knowledge. Despite the fact that he mentions death as the outcome of the prophecies (1172-73), he may be subconsciously aware of his imminent apotheosis; otherwise his first request seems inexplicable. He may well have died in his house; there would be no need for his transfer to mount Oeta or for the ritual of sacrificing himself on a pyre. This secret knowledge is reflected in his avoidance of answering Hyllus’ question of how he could heal his body by setting light to it (1210). Heracles previously called Hyllus ἀμαντον ἵδια τῶν ἐμῶν κακῶν (1209). The same noun is used in connection with Zeus: τὸς δ’ ἱεροτέχνας / ἱερόταγος, ὃς τάνο ἀπατ’ / ἱερὸς Ζήνης κατακαλήφης; (1000-02). Hyllus is one of the agents for the fulfilment of Zeus’ plan, the deification of Heracles.

This role is appropriate for Hyllus, because he was the one who turned Heracles’ attention from Deianeira to Nessus and permitted him to connect the oracles. Hyllus was also the one who reported Heracles’ suffering on the robe to Deianeira and thus hastened her death. Heracles and Deianeira must never meet, if Zeus’ plan is to work. If the two were to meet, the centre of attention would have become Heracles’ revenge on her, as the text makes clear, and the subsequent lamentation over her death. Nessus’ name would never have been mentioned and Heracles would never have correlated the two oracles that gave him the secret knowledge of his forthcoming apotheosis.

The structure of all four sections I have examined leads with almost mathematical accuracy to Heracles’ deification. The characters proceed from ignorance to knowledge, from feeling to reason, from passivity to activity. All four sections concern Heracles, whether he is on stage or not. In the first movement it is Heracles’ grandeur and plethoric personality that cause the encounter of the two messengers. The people of Malis stop Lichas in order to hear about the hero’s news. Lichas informs them about Heracles’ passion

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10 Cf. S.M. Adams, Sophocles the Playwright (Toronto 1957) 132: ‘We know that in these two commands Heracles is acting from knowledge unperceived by mortals, though we, the audience, have that knowledge’, and cf. also C. Segal, Tragedy and Civilization. An Interpretation of Sophocles (Harvard 1981) 99.

11 Cf. T.F. Hoey, ‘Ambiguity in the exodus of Sophocles’ Trachiniat’, Arcturus 10 (1977) 285: ‘Live cremation was part of the given legend and it therefore has vertical meaning for the audience. But it makes no sense to Hyllus, and only if Heracles consciously expected immortality could it have made sense to him.’
for Iole and so the first messenger can later on contradict Lichas’ false report to Deianeira. In the second part Deianeira is willing to neglect certain important aspects of the charm’s effect because of her overwhelming desire to regain Heracles, while in the third Hyllus is bent on condemning his mother because of Heracles’ greatness. In the fourth, of course, Heracles himself is the central focus. The themes of the four sections (Iole, Nessus’ charm, Deianeira’s innocence and the cause of Heracles’ death) are relatively connected by cause and effect, and gradually tend to fulfill Zeus’ plan.

The human tragedy lies in the fact that Hyllus cannot possibly comprehend this plan and so attributes γνωστούντα (1266) and αἴσχροτητα (1272) to the gods. He has seen his mother dying and his father suffering on the same day. It is only natural for him to feel indignation towards the gods and especially Zeus.

In all four sections examined, the bed or sexuality is the common denominator. Deianeira dies on her bed in Heracles’ house, while the suffering Heracles on the litter manifests the symptoms of what he repeatedly calls a disease, the word that Deianeira had previously used to refer to his infidelities. Indeed, Zeus’ will is accomplished mainly through the sexuality of which the power ruins his son’s earthly house. After all, Heracles was notorious for his promiscuity and it was fated that this particular vice of his would ultimately be the means of his glorification. His hamartia, the wish to accommodate two women in one house, proves his salvation. It has been observed that one of the most important motifs of the play is ‘late learning’. The examination of the tragedy’s structure shows that the late learning of Deianeira and Hyllus leads to Heracles’ timely knowledge to fulfill his destiny.

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