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DEIANEIRA AND HER GUILT

Abstract: The paper addresses the issue of Deianeira's guilt, which is of central importance to the tragedy of *Trachiniae* as a whole. Her character is illuminated through a comparison with the characters of Iocasta and Eurydice. Of the recent studies dealing with this theme, those by V. Di Benedetto, H. Gasti, and M. Ryzman are examined in detail. The paper concludes that Deianeira does not break "unwritten laws", her actions being a consequence of the tragic ambivalence of the human nature, which is determined precisely by these laws.

The tragedy *Trachiniae* differs from all other preserved Sophoclean plays in a number of characteristics, most notably in its title, erotic theme,¹ and the ambiguity of its general meaning.² The title is the least significant of the three. Although *Trachiniae* represents the single extant tragedy by Sophocles to be named after the chorus, this choice of title is hardly supported by the content, the role of the chorus being no more prominent than in any of the author's

¹ Cf. e. g. P. E. Easterling, Introduction, in: Sophocles, *Trachiniae* (ed. P. E. Easterling), Cambridge 1982, p. 5: "*Eros*, treated in this play with an insight that rivals that of Euripides in *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, is a dominant motif throughout."; or R. W. B. Burton, The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies, Oxford 1980, p. 42: "<...> the power of 'Ἔρως, a theme which runs throughout and gives an underlying unity to the whole tragedy."

² Another aspect which could be numbered among the peculiar features of this play is the history of its reception, particularly in the modern era, in which it has been subject to drastically different judgments. Cf. Schiller's enthusiastic judgment of the Deianeira character (Schmid-Staehlin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur I* 2, p. 378, n. 2), and A. W. Schlegel's rejection of *Trachiniae*, in which he goes so far as to wish for a valid proof that the play is not an authentic work by Sophocles (Schmid-Staehlin, *op. cit.*, p. 374, n. 3); P. E. Easterling, Introduction, in: Sophocles, *Trachiniae* (ed. P. E. Easterling), Cambridge 1982, p. 1; W. Kranz, *Aufbau und Gehalt der Trachinierinnen des Sophocles*, in: *Studien zur antiken Literatur und ihrem Fortwirken*, Heidelberg 1967, p. 283; M. Davies, Introduction, in: Sophocles, *Trachiniae* (ed. M. Davies), Oxford 1991, p. xvii.

other works, and, indeed, dramaturgically a relatively minor one.³ Moreover, it is unclear whether the titles of Attic tragedies stem from the playwrights themselves or were imposed at the official registration of the works.⁴ Accordingly the relevance of the title to any given tragedy needs to be interpreted with caution.

The other two characteristics, on the other hand, are of the utmost importance: the emphasis on the erotic theme helps to endow *Trachiniae* with a peculiar character,⁵ while at the same time – as this paper argues – harmonising their basic meaning with the fundamental maxim of the Sophoclean world. Thus *Trachiniae* represents a successful variation on the leitmotif of the playwright's corpus, both enriching and confirming his tragic view of human nature, which reveals the inseparable duality of man's greatness and insignificance.⁶

³ G. Perrotta (Sofocle, Roma 1963², p. 472) calls attention to the lost tragedies named after the chorus, adding that ancient scholars have preserved double titles for some of Sophocles' tragedies, with one title derived from the chorus and the other from the protagonist. According to Perrotta, it is the former which is usually regarded as genuine by critics. With regard to this, however, P. Riemer, *Chor und Handlung in den Tragödien des Sophokles*, in: *Der Chor in antiken und modernen Drama* (ed. P. Riemer, B. Zimmermann). Drama, Bd. 7, Stuttgart, Weimar 1999, p. 97, n. 16, rightly observes that, even among fragments and tragedies known to us only from other authors' references, relatively few are named after the chorus. Cf. also the judgment by R. W. B. Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 41, emphasising what is essential for the contemporary critic: "there is insufficient evidence from the fragments of tragedies so named [sc. after the chorus] for any judgment to be formed about the role sustained in them by the chorus."

⁴ Cf. O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford 1977, p. 164, n. 1; *idem*: JHS 95 (1975), p. 185.

⁵ The hymn to Eros sung by the chorus in *Antigone* (781–800) has a different dramaturgical function, a double one: by siding with Creon in his conflict with Haemon, because the latter is supposedly driven to irrational behaviour by erotic impulses, the chorus essentially distracts attention from the *real* theme of the play, i. e. the justice or injustice of Creon's prohibition of Polynices' burial. In the light of the chorus' attitude, it is a tragic irony that Eros will indeed show his irresistible power over Haemon yet, driving him to suicide. This disaster (which precipitates Eurydice's death as well) eventually turns against Creon, becoming another terrible proof of the supremacy of the "higher powers" over man's autonomist ὕβρις. However, although Haemon's dialogue with his father indeed shows traces of the influence of Eros, this does not detract in the least from the legitimacy of his attitude to the central ethical issue of the play and to political issues. For the most subtle commentary on this problem, see Winnigton-Ingram, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–98, although I consider his statement that "the power of Eros is one of the central themes of the play" too extreme. A very similar interpretation is offered in Müller, *Sophokles Antigone*, Heidelberg 1967, pp. 171f., based on that by K. von Fritz (*Haimons Liebe zu Antigone*, *Philologus* 89 (1934), pp. 19–33 = *Antike und moderne Tragödie*, Berlin 1962, pp. 227–240).

⁶ Cf. W. Schadewaldt, *Sophokles und das Leid*, in: *Hellas und Hesperien*, I. Bd., Zürich-Stuttgart, 1970, p. 241.

As a force both natural and divine, Eros ineluctably works his dominion over man by trickery and violence. This theme is crucial for both the understanding of the specific character of *Trachiniae* and the recognition of its typically Sophoclean features. The development and dénouement of the erotic theme, with their epistemological and ethical consequences, are so vitally integrated into the dramaturgical structure of the play that they cannot be avoided in any interpretation (the latter may be based on a traditional psychological understanding of the characters;⁷ perceive character contrasts as symbolising the opposition between two incompatible civilisation principles;⁸ favour an explanation of the cosmic background;⁹ or have recourse to psychoanalysis¹⁰). This applies even to studies dealing with minor problems or characters.¹¹

The erotic action is centred by the character of Deianeira: it is she who performs the only important act in the play; her words and attitude strongly determine the perspective in which Heracles, the other protagonist, is perceived (but not vice versa), as well as our view of the events in general; finally, the issue of her guilt is crucial for any discussion of the ethical dimensions of the play.¹² Deianeira thus represents the more important of the two protagonists.¹³ Moreover,

⁷ Major works of this kind include e. g. C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*. Oxford 1944, pp. 116–161, who even sees the two protagonists, Deianeira and Heracles, as the embodiment of the typical female and male character respectively; C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles. A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951, pp. 101–121; G. Perrotta, *op. cit.* (see n. 2), pp. 472–525; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama*, Ithaca, New York 1958, 110–117, as well as the entire chapter 99–180; A. Maddalena, *Sofocle*, Torino 1963², pp. 99–146; G. Ronnet, *Sophocle poète tragique*, Paris 1969, cf. especially pp. 94–105.

⁸ That is to say, between the “civilised”, “modern” life, centred round the home (οἶκος), and the well-nigh bestial activism of the archaic heroic world, cf. C. P. Segal, *Sophocles’ Trachiniae*: myth, poetry, and heroic values, YCS 25, 1977, pp. 99–158.

⁹ Cf. e. g. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, London 1961; J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, 1962.

¹⁰ Cf. e. g. U. Albin, *Dubbi sulle Trachinie*, La parola del passato, fasc. CXXI, Napoli 1968, pp. 262–270; M. Scott, *The character of Deianeira in Sophocles’ Trachiniae*, Acta Classica, vol. XXXVIII (1995), Pretoria, pp. 17–28.

¹¹ Cf. B. Heiden, *Lichas’ Rhetoric of Justice in Sophocles’ Trachiniae*, Hermes 116 (1988), pp. 13–23.

¹² These aspects establish her central role even more convincingly than the purely formal predominance of her text does: she is onstage for practically two thirds of the play (up to v. 812, out of the total of 1275), and even after that she is frequently present through the words of others (cf. vv. 821–945; 1122–1139).

¹³ There is no consensus among the major interpreters of *Trachiniae* on the identity of the true protagonist. The approaches may be divided into three groups.

the complex structure of her character is the key to the Sophoclean understanding of Eros and to the tragedy of *Trachiniae* in general.

The paper uses two approaches towards outlining Deianeira's character. First she is compared to those Sophoclean characters whose social (including sexual) determination and ultimate fate come closest to her own. The next part assesses the major recent interpretations of the complex issue of Deianeira's guilt (a key factor in our reading of her character), considering them in the light of her hitherto neglected character traits.

Three Queens, Three Suicides: Iocasta, Deianeira, Eurydice

Viewed socially (in the broadest sense of the word), Deianeira's closest Sophoclean parallels are Iocasta and Eurydice. All three women are queens and mothers of grown-up children; all three share the manner of their death in committing suicide.¹⁴ Like Eurydice in

According to the first, there are two protagonists, Deianeira and Heracles; to this group belong e. g. C. M. Bowra (*loc. cit.*, see n. 7); J. C. Kamerbeek, Introduction, in: *The Plays of Sophocles, Commentaries, part II: The Trachiniae*, pp. 24–27; G. Perrotta (*loc. cit.*, see n. 7). The second group considers Deianeira the only true protagonist: this view is supported, moderately, by Kirkwood, *loc. cit.* (see n. 7), but more forcefully by Whitman (*op. cit.*, p. 112, see n. 7) and particularly by Ronnet, *op. cit.*, p. 45 (see n. 7). The third group concedes the status of the protagonist and tragic hero to Heracles alone, despite all formal and psychological arguments to the contrary. This view is propounded on the basis of detailed theoretical criteria by H. Diller (Über das Selbstbewusstsein der sophokleischen Personen, in: H. Diller, *Kleine Schriften zur antiken Literatur*, München 1971, pp. 272–85; *idem*: *Menschen-darstellung und Handlungsführung bei Sophokles*, in: *Kleine Schriften* (see above), pp. 286–303). A highly qualified assent is given by L. Bergson, *Herakles, Deianeira und Iole*, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, Bd. 136, Heft 2, 1993, pp. 102–15. An extreme variant, on the other hand, is advanced by S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright*, Toronto 1957, pp. 108–109: "This drama is about Heracles. <...> he is undoubtedly the 'tragic hero'. <...> Deianeira is great <...>, but is a secondary figure. Life has cast her in a minor role for which she is almost incredibly well fitted; it is essentially a minor role that she plays in the *Trachiniae*." Interestingly, a radical form of this view (according to which Deianeira's role is but that of a mediator in attaining the true *telos* of the play, the representation of Heracles' fate) is supported also by F. I. Zeitlin, but for reasons of her own, associated with her *credo* in the elusively feminine nature of the theatre, cf. her paper *Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama*, *Representations* 11 (1985), pp. 63–94. For an authoritative commentary on this long and pressing debate, cf. P. E. Easterling, *loc. cit.* (see n. 1).

¹⁴ Winnington-Ingram (*Sophocles. An Interpretation*, Cambridge 1980, pp. 80–81) calls attention to the different manner of Deianeira's suicide: rather than hang herself, she stabs herself with a sword on her marriage bed. The three lines of her final monologue, as conveyed by the Nurse (vv. 920–922), contain as many as four

Antigone (following line 1244), like Iocasta in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (following 1072), Deianeira (following 812) silently withdraws from the stage, retreating into the palace to perform the last act of her life.¹⁵ Nevertheless, her character significantly diverges from the other two in a number of respects.

As is evident from the preceding context of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Iocasta has reigned as queen for a number of years (with two different husbands), which appears to have some bearing both on her character traits and her fate in the play.¹⁶ Eurydice, by contrast, is the consort of a ruler who has come to power only recently by an extraordinary turn of events, immediately after war. The dramatic reality of *Antigone* escalates and resolves itself too quickly for her new social role to exert any influence on her character. Nevertheless, both women may be described as consorts to the rulers of the states in which they live. It is here that the position of Deianeira differs from theirs: she

words implying that her suicide is motivated by her loss of an erotic, or sexual, relationship (λέχη, νυμφεῖα, κοίταισι, εὐνάτριάν). The same critic warns against the Freudian simplification and exaggeration with which Deianeira's suicide is interpreted by G. Devereux, *Tragédie et poésie grecques*, Paris 1975, ch. 5. It may be added that, regardless of the motives, this suicide is, in *ultima analysis*, yet another expression of human powerlessness in the face of fate.

¹⁵ Suicide is remarkably common in Sophocles, occurring as it does in all plays except *Electra*. It is committed by two male characters: Ajax as the hero and Haemon as a minor character, while Philoctetes attempts it twice or threatens it (1001–1002). Heracles and Oedipus at Colonus cannot be said to die in the true sense of the word or, therefore, to commit suicide, but both willingly accept the fact that they must transcend their earthly existence (which is the same as dying, although a “higher”, metaphysical perspective doubtlessly presents this act as a transition into another form of existence, one shrouded in impenetrable mystery). Heracles' act at the close of *Trachiniae* has the features of a suicide, setting his son Hyllus wondering whether he is in fact being asked by his father to slay him.

¹⁶ Iocasta's belief in chance, as well as her conviction that things had better be left as they are (cf. vv. 977–983), endure only as long as chance and circumstances are favourable to her; that is to say, her conservatism is based on her social status. The judgment by Winnigton–Ingram (Sophocles and Women, in: Sophocle, *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique*, XXIX, p. 239), according to which Iocasta's scepticism is not founded on intellectual arguments and her behaviour is purely feminine, is in a way corroborated by what Oedipus says about her, albeit with a strongly negative connotation: αὐτὴ δ' ἴσως, φρονεῖ γὰρ ὡς γυνὴ μέγα, / τὴν δυσγένειαν τὴν ἐμὴν ἀσχύνεται (OR 1078–1079). Kamerbeek, *op. cit. ad loc.* (see n. 13), interprets these words as: “in the way that women are proud” (implying not the pride in personal achievement, but in noble descent, status and the like). These “chauvinistic” words do not refer to a feature peculiar to Iocasta but to a typical feminine trait (the pride of women). This trait, however, can only manifest itself in the right circumstances, which is what happens in Iocasta's case.

is a queen in exile, as we learn in her very opening monologue.¹⁷ The reference to this fact is doubtlessly intended to underline the difficulty of her position and the unhappiness of her entire adult life.¹⁸

However, judging by certain other events in the play, exile has not represented a great drawback for Heracles' family.¹⁹ The Messenger, for example, hurries to bring Deianeira the news of Heracles' safe return in the hopes of a reward (189–190), which could hardly be possible if she were socially underprivileged. Moreover, Lichas calls her "royal"²⁰ in his verbal conflict with the Messenger, and his overall conduct suggests that she is not without social power: he withholds from her Heracles' true motives for attacking Oechalia so as to avoid wounding her,²¹ revealing them only²² after she promises not to oppose Eros or victimise Iole,²³ and after being prompted by the chorus as well.²⁴ The chorus, consisting of native women or maidens

¹⁷ Cf. 38–40: ἐξ οὐ γὰρ ἔκτα κείνος Ἰφίτου βίαν, / ἡμεῖς μὲν ἐν Τραχίνι τῇδ' ἀνάστατοι / ξένῳ παρ' ἀνδρὶ ναίομεν.

¹⁸ Deianeira herself often contrasts her unhappy married life (that is, her adult life, determined by eroticism) with the happiness of her youth, when her life was still untouched by the consequences of Eros. The latter represents a strong foil for the dark "now" of the play: Eros had frightened her even as a girl, in the form of the river-god Acheloius (cf. 6–17); even the battle between Heracles and Acheloius filled her with terror, despite a feeling of joy (cf. 18–19; 507–530), lest beauty as an erotic element of her nature might bring her sorrow (cf. 24–25). (This indeed happens, but as an unforeseen tragic irony.) The marriage brought about by the "happy" outcome of the struggle fulfils her dark presentiments, her married life being nothing but an all-pervasive fear (v. 28: αἰὲν τιν' ἐκ φόβου φόβον τρέφω). She paints this contrast particularly clearly in the words addressed to the chorus of Trachinian maidens, who are evidently still unwed and untouched by the power of Eros (cf. 141–152).

¹⁹ Cf. the entirely different situation in *Hercules Furens* by Euripides, where the family of Heracles is overthrown by a putsch in Thebes, and in danger of death at the hands of the usurper Lycus.

²⁰ Cf. 405: πρὸς τὴν κρατοῦσαν Δηάνειραν.

²¹ Cf. 481–483.

²² Cf. 472–474. Of course it is impossible to state with any finality just why Lichas should hide the truth from her at first and be afraid of wounding her. He is quite unlikely to be motivated by a premonition of the actual outcome; but why should he be so concerned about the welfare of both Heracles and Deianeira (κείνου τε καὶ σὴν ἐξ ἴσου κοινὴν χάριν)? He is swayed by the argument that Deianeira is aware of her humanity and is neither foolish nor unfeeling, that is to say, she does not set herself against the gods and understands the plight of other mortals (Kamerbeek, *op. cit.* (see n. 13) *ad. loc.*). An emphasis on the sensitivity to the plight of others, however, is only relevant when there are good reasons for believing that this feature might be lacking, and this reason is usually – in Attic tragedy at least – one's social status.

²³ Cf. 436–469.

²⁴ 471–472.

of Trachis,²⁵ likewise respectfully addresses Deianeira as “queen” (ἄνασσα)²⁶ and once, in a burst of joy at the (seemingly) happy outcome, even with the warmer ὦ φίλα γύναι.²⁷ Even the Nurse’s account of her touching farewell to the household things implies a strong attachment to them,²⁸ which is inconsistent with the feeling of alienation suggested by her opening verses (38–40). Moreover, the play tells nothing of the king of Trachis, Ceyx,²⁹ or of his attitude to his guests, Heracles and Deianeira; indeed, he is not even referred to by name. Thus exile plays next to no role whatsoever, except for the very beginning of the tragedy.³⁰ These marginal inconsistencies, however, have no consequences for the dramatic effect of the whole.

Deianeira’s most important difference from the other two queens is, of course, that she unquestionably represents the main character – one far more exhaustive, detailed, complex, and enriched with psychological nuances. Eurydice’s existence, by contrast, is “squeezed” into a total of nine lines (1183–1191). Her character is thus entirely episodic in nature and – understandably – presents a far more restricted interpretative potential than that of either Deianeira or Iocasta, who is allotted 120 lines. In addition to the simplicity of her character, ensuing from her restricted dramatic existence, Eurydice is also morally the purest figure in the play. The recipient is not told anything about her that might suggest any guilt on her part. The only reason for her death is her despair at Haemon’s suicide, which aggravates her sorrow at the death of Megareus.³¹ The dramatic atmo-

²⁵ For an authoritative consideration of the identity and roles of the chorus, see C. P. Gardiner, *The Sophoclean Chorus*, Iowa City 1987, pp. 120; 133–135.

²⁶ 137; 291.

²⁷ 222. The note taken by C. P. Gardiner “of absence of intimacy between Deianeira and the chorus” holds true to some extent, this distance resulting from the disparity in years and social status (Deianeira is an experienced and therefore pessimistic married woman living in exile, while the chorus consists of young, unmarried, and correspondingly optimistic native women), as well as the lack of any closer association between the Trachinian women’s and Deianeira’s fate. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the women feel a certain sympathy for her, which they verbalise through admonitions (137–140), expressions of joy (205–224; 291–292), support of her wishes (633–662), and encouragement to hope (723–724; 727–728) and self-defence (813–814).

²⁸ Cf. 900–906.

²⁹ Cf. Hes. *Scut.* 538; Diod. IV 36, 5; Apollod. II 150.

³⁰ Cf. Kamerbeek, *op. cit.* (see n. 13), *ad* v. 40.

³¹ Cf. 1302–1303.

sphere³² is again a very important factor: Eurydice's words (1191) – κακῶν γὰρ οὐκ ἄπειρος οὖς' ἀκούσομαι – plainly state that the news of Haemon's death will not fall into an emotional vacuum, but into a soul already seared by pain. This opens up another aspect of the already intense tragic irony: Eurydice evidently means that she is used to ill luck, perhaps even inured to it, and that a new revelation, no matter how dire, cannot depress her further. What actually happens, of course, is the opposite – the news of the latest misfortune drives her to death. Despite the shortness and vagueness of her words about being prepared for and hardened against ills, their stark contrast to the imminent future cannot be disregarded. Her stance in this respect is close to Deianeira's: the latter is convinced as well that she has touched the depths of human suffering,³³ that new revelation can bring her nothing new or more terrible than what she has already undergone,³⁴ and she is supported by the chorus in her belief that, considering her current miserable condition, the future can be nothing but better (121–140).

The consequences are equally fatal in both cases: the human mind is revealed to be powerless, while true cognition is born of entirely unpredictable experience, which represents the only authentic and valid contact with the transcendental nature of reality. This radical cognitive powerlessness has overwhelming psychological consequences, with neither Deianeira nor Eurydice being capable of bearing the pain of reality.

Deianeira is undoubtedly more "guilty" than Eurydice, whose single dramatic act is suicide (an act directed at herself but prompted solely by the fate of others, her φίλτατοι), rooted, together with its causes, deep in the core of the plot (her episodic and superficially

³² I use this term to describe a network, varying in size and structure, consisting of factors which exert an *indirect* influence on the characters' beliefs about themselves and others, as well as on their decisions and actions. Thus it indicates the state of mind prevailing in a given section of the quasi-realistic society represented onstage, which affects the psychological and ethical predispositions of the individual characters. The dramatic atmosphere in Greek tragedy is always crucially linked to the preceding mythological context. In Sophocles, it almost regularly exerts a considerable influence not only on the major and minor characters' actions, but, above all, on the changes in their attitude to the central problem of the play – indeed, even to life and the world in general. To mention a few of the most typical examples: the process is certainly most conspicuous in Creon in *Antigone*, but is evident also in Ismene, and – in a very specific sense – in Odysseus in *Ajax*. The last example primarily presents a contrast between the Odysseus in the play and his state in the pre-dramatic reality; this reality, however, is of the utmost importance to the plot.

³³ Cf. Tr. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 459–460.

merely decorative part is certainly an important factor in escalating the dramatic reversal and the catastrophe which befalls Creon). Deianeira is thus closer to Iocasta, not only in the amount of text representing her dramatic existence, but above all in terms of the story, in her guiltiness, although the two women belong to different character categories. It must be noted, however, that Deianeira's part (368 lines) is more than three times as long as Iocasta's (120), which has important implications for the vividness and detailed representation of the two characters. Deianeira can be observed from various perspectives: in dialogues with a number of dramatic characters, in long turns which are practically monologues, and through the words of others.³⁵ Iocasta, on the other hand, delivers her 120 lines almost exclusively in dialogues with Oedipus (between vv. 634–862 and 951–1072) and very rarely in interaction with Creon (637–638), the chorus (680 and 685; 911–923), or the messenger from Corinth (929–944).

The words spoken by Deianeira *before* the true nature of her act is revealed (596 – 597) express what Iocasta attempts to implement through her efforts *after* realising that she and Oedipus are partners in a terrible sin.³⁶ I am not referring here to her “programmatically” mistrust of sages (857–858) and even of divine oracles (946–949), or to her belief in chance (977–983) and her attempts to stop Oedipus from delving into his own past (e. g. 986), but to her reaction in lines 1056–1057; 1060–1061; 1064; 1066; 1068: a peculiar situation where she alone has realised so far what is going on. Her previous occasional outbursts of fear (746, 749) may have been prompted by foreboding, but they are even better explained as a response to Oedipus' horrified words and – if one may speculate – to the physical expression of his horror.³⁷ Iocasta certainly cannot be said to have

³⁵ Her inner life is thus revealed to the audience “by introspection” in the prologue (1–48), as well as in her long reply in 141–177, but also indirectly: 531–587, 672–722. Her character is outlined through the statements of: the Nurse: 49–51; 899–931; Lichas: 472–474; the chorus: 104–111; 526–530; 846–848; Hyllus: 734–737; 815–820; in his turns, or rather, attempts to interrupt his father, from 1120 to 1142; and Heracles: 1050; 1062; 1108–1111; 1125; 1137 (indirectly).

³⁶ Despite the fact that Apollo's oracle only calls for revenge on the murderer of Laius, cf. OT 101–102; 106–107.

³⁷ The masks worn by the actors in the Greek theatre make it difficult to speculate about a possible accompaniment of the lines by facial grimaces or gestures. Thus the text itself must have performed at least some of the functions belonging to body language in a more realistically conceived theatre. Cf. Zielinski, *Philologus* 64 (1905), pp. 6–14; Taplin, 1977, pp. 28–30; D. Seale, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*, London 1982, p. 19, and especially V. Di Benedetto, E. Medda, *La tragedia sulla scena (La tragedia greca in quanto spettacolo teatrale)*, Torino 1997, pp. 176–177.

lived in sin knowingly; she had no inkling of it, and was sincere in her endeavours to find relief for the plague-stricken Thebes (cf. 911–923). When she realises the truth, however, she cannot bear it. In this she differs from Oedipus, whose realisation comes later.

The relationship between Iocasta and Oedipus (before the past begins to emerge) is evidently a very good and “personal” one.³⁸ It certainly appears to be very different from the typical Attic marriage of Sophocles’ time as outlined by contemporary anthropologists.³⁹ For all that, however, Iocasta’s suicide cannot be attributed to her realisation that she is about to lose a beloved husband, that is, to love. Her attitude to love and to her husband is necessarily radically different from Deianeira’s: the duality of her relationship to her husband-son is an expression of human ignorance and insignificance, and thus one of the sources of tragedy in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* story. The question arises what psychological – or, for that matter, social – attitude to this man she could possibly assume after the past has been revealed, particularly as she absolutely refuses to confront the truth and thus seek for an answer to this problem. It must be noted, however, that such inquiries are irrelevant, reaching as they do beyond the reality of the play and the problems which the play is intended to suggest.⁴⁰

The exposition of *Oedipus* is entirely unlike that of *Trachiniae*, the issue of personal innocence in Deianeira’s case being different from that of Iocasta or Oedipus. In *Trachiniae*, Deianeira’s innocence is recognised by almost all the characters, while in *Oedipus Tyrannus* the city is plunged into the palpably objective consequences of his sin. Oedipus, stunned by the sudden disclosure, is unable to inquire into the true measure of his and Iocasta’s guilt (he is to do so at a metatextual level much later, in *Oedipus Coloneus*). Nevertheless, Deianeira is driven to her death by the loss of an unfaithful, unfeeling, but still unconditionally beloved husband, the loss of a relation-

³⁸ What is meant is particularly Oedipus’ profound respect for and faith in Iocasta (cf. 700; 771–773).

³⁹ For an exhaustive anthropological survey of women’s position in fifth-century Athens (with a subchapter on marriage), outlined from the contemporary “orthodox” perspective, see S. Des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy*, Oslo 1990, pp. 35–59.

⁴⁰ This methodological error has been described in detail and labelled the “documentary fallacy” by A. J. A. Waldock (*Sophocles the Dramatist*, Cambridge 1966, pp. 11–24). For the relation of real people to dramatic characters, cf. also J. Gould, *Dramatic Character and ‘Human Intelligibility’ in Greek Tragedy*, *Proceedings of Cambridge Philological Society*, 24, 1978, pp. 43–67.

ship which has given meaning to her whole existence and all the objects within it. At the realisation that it is over, even the moral vindication which *is* within her reach appears worthless to her (for a detailed treatment of this issue, see the following section). Iocasta, on the other hand, could – like Oedipus – make an attempt at expiation, but does not do so. In her case, the loss of reputation, honour, and social status *does* represent the decisive factor, although even here the factors of dramatic atmosphere – the cosmic catastrophe partly caused by her sin – must be taken into account. Disregarding the subjective factor of sensitivity, her situation is even more unbearable than the events to which Deianeira is subjected. Seen purely in terms of subjective, moral guilt, however, her situation is more blameless than that of Heracles' wife. Where, then, does the guilt of Deianeira lie, and how substantial is it?

The Guilt of Deianeira

The question of Deianeira's responsibility for the death of Heracles is, of course, among the issues most crucial to the interpretation of *Trachiniae*, being linked to what is practically the only important action in the play (at least in the framework of the time and space represented onstage), which triggers the subsequent chain of events. An explanation of this act is at the same time an explanation of Deianeira's (moral) character. Interpreters have explored the (il)legality of using love-philtres,⁴¹ the intentionality of her action,⁴² and the causes for the sudden change in her character.⁴³

Broadly speaking, earlier interpretations tend to represent Deianeira as an innocent, devoted wife, who causes her husband's death unintentionally. This event endows her with a tragic quality, at the same creating an all-pervasive impression of the tragic human lot.⁴⁴ Recent criticism, on the other hand, tends to be more qualified

⁴¹ Cf. e.g. C. M. Bowra, *loc. cit.* (see n. 7); Waldoock, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴² Cf. D. A. Hester, Deianeira's "Deception Speech", *Antichthon* 14 (1980), pp. 1–3; C. M. Bowra, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), p. 124; G. Ronnet, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), pp. 100–104; G. Perrotta, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), pp. 500–502; A. Maddalena, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), pp. 133–134.

⁴³ M. McCall, *The Trachiniae: Structure, Focus and Heracles*, *A. J. Ph.* 93 (1972), esp. pp. 144–147; G. M. Kirkwood, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), pp. 113–115; K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles*, Frankfurt am Main 1976⁴, pp. 52–64, and also 42–43.

⁴⁴ This view is to be found in well-nigh all the major monographies on Sophocles cited in n. 7, as well as in many others, such as M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*, Göttingen, 1954, pp. 200–202. However, even some of the earlier authors

in its sympathies,⁴⁵ while the focus of the interpretations has moved from personal psychology into several directions: to psychoanalysis,⁴⁶ to the anthropological background,⁴⁷ or to linking her actions with epistemological and ethical principles. Three outstanding recent studies from the last-mentioned group, all characterised by highly diverse approaches, are those by Vincenzo Di Benedetto,⁴⁸ Helene Gasti,⁴⁹ and Marlene Ryzman.⁵⁰

Di Benedetto discovers new dimensions of Deianeira's character by exploring the epistemological processes discernible in *Trachiniae* and used by Deianeira in particular.⁵¹ This analysis of her cognitive characteristics requires a detailed study of the cognitive lexis in her text, as well as its application to the development of the dramatic action. Another important strategy is a comparison between *Trachiniae* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in terms of both composition and content, which reveals a number of self-evident yet hitherto overlooked similarities and contrasts. To cite an example: in terms of the content, or ideas, *Trachiniae* begins where *Oedipus Tyrannus* ends. Deianeira says at the very beginning that her lot is an unhappy one, whereas Oedipus meets with disaster only when the dramatic action

evaluate her character differently and suggest intentional deception on her part, cf. e. g. T. Zielinski, *Philologus*, 1986, pp. 525ff.; E. Abbot, *The Theology and Ethics of Sophocles*, *Hellenica*, London 1880, pp. 33–66. Mention should be made also of the thesis by K. Reinhardt, *loc. cit.* (see n. 43), according to which demoniac forces possess Deianeira at the fatal moment and transform her personality. Thus she performs the deed intentionally, but is nevertheless not morally responsible for it in the true sense of the word.

⁴⁵ Cf. the talk on this topic between O. Taplin and M. Winnigton-Ingram, in the discussion following the latter's contribution entitled *Sophocles and Women* (see n. 16), p. 254.

⁴⁶ Cf. e. g. U. Albin, *art. cit.* (see n. 10); M. Scott, *art. cit.* (see n. 10).

⁴⁷ E. g. C. P. Segal, *art. cit.*; *idem: Tragedy and Civilization*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1981, pp. 60–108; *idem: Sophocles' Tragic World. Divinity, Nature, Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1995, pp. 26–68. Segal could hardly be described as less sympathetic to Deianeira: his anthropological interpretation is an important elaboration of the traditional views on her character.

⁴⁸ Sofocle, Firenze, 1988, pp. 141–160.

⁴⁹ Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: A Social or Externalized Aspect of Deianeira's Morality, in: *Antike und Abendland* XXXIX (1993), pp. 20–28.

⁵⁰ Deianeira's Moral Behaviour in the Context of the Natural Laws in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, *Hermes* 119 (1991), pp. 386–398.

⁵¹ He names as his chief encouragement to apply research in this direction an article by S. E. Lawrence, *The Dramatic Epistemology of Sophocles' "Trachiniae"*, *Phoenix* 32 (1978), pp. 288–304, albeit stressing at the same time that Lawrence achieves no deeper understanding of the structure of Deianeira's character, mostly preserving a cliché-ridden image, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–142.

is well under way. If Oedipus' fear takes a definite shape only when the tragic dénouement of his story begins to materialise, it is present in Deianeira from the very beginning as an integral part of her personality, becoming "un dato dominante" of her psyche in the third *epeisodion*. For the male protagonist of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, fear is the driving force which prompts him to uncover the truth; for the female protagonist of *Trachiniae*, the cause and effect are reversed: it is the intellectual processes for truth discovery which strike fear into her again and again.

Di Benedetto's most important contribution, however, lies in his perception of a parallel between the portrayal of Deianeira and the process developed in *Oedipus Tyrannus*: the introduction of elements belonging to a new, rationalist culture, which are then negated in the course of the play.⁵² He concludes that the character of Deianeira displays two levels. The level of traditional characteristics – her attachment to the home (οἶκος) and devotion to her husband – is complemented "estremamente audace" by an intellectual, modern personality component, which reveals the characteristics of the new, rationalist culture and its inability to check the truth. This reflects the crisis of contemporary culture, which is typical of Sophocles' plays in general.

Di Benedetto provides no direct answer to the question of Deianeira's guilt; however, he uncovers a new aspect which must be taken into account in any attempt to arrive at a solution. Thus he certainly succeeds in deepening our understanding of Deianeira's character. What he fails to do, however, is to attain his primary goal⁵³ – to disprove the common, "cliché-ridden" notion that *Trachiniae* is a play about the limitations of human awareness and an expression of the poet's resignation induced by these limitations. Indeed, he cannot avoid noting that the rationalist elements introduced by Deianeira's strivings towards the truth are plainly subjected to devaluation. Paradoxically, what his contribution actually does is enrich the "traditional" view on the tragedy's meaning, thus confirming and corroborating it.

The issue of guilt, however, remains. The solution offered by H. Gasti is based on the thesis that Deianeira is ruined because she allows herself to be led by external morality. Her observance of it is expressed through her craving for a good reputation (εὐκλεία). Gasti develops an important argument in support of her thesis by analysing

⁵² *Op. cit.* (see n. 48), p. 145.

⁵³ *Op. cit.* (see n. 48), p. 142.

Deianeira's lexis in the statements concerning moral issues, as these evidently reflect her "social-oriented style of conduct": λέγεσθαι χρηστός, ὀφθήσῃ κακός (452), ψευδεὶ καλεῖσθαι (454), κακῶς κλύουσιν (721). The crucial support for the thesis, however, is provided in lines 596–597, with Deianeira asking the chorus not to betray her for using a love charm, for even a wrongdoer does not fall into disgrace if he accomplishes his deeds under the cover of darkness. Her morality thus relies entirely on public opinion; she equates being good with having a good reputation, as is confirmed by her words:

ζῆν γὰρ κακῶς κλύουσιν οὐκ ἀνασχετόν,
 ἥτις προτιμᾷ μὴ κακὴ πεφυκέναι.
 (721–722)

For Gasti, this problem is an obvious echo of Antiphon's thesis, according to which men base their morality on two foundations, φύσις and νόμος, with only the former being truly reliable.⁵⁴ This parallel is elaborated in great detail,⁵⁵ and Deianeira's conduct is perceived as almost a dramatic embodiment of a νόμος-based moral theory.

Deianeira has sacrificed to the conventional claims of society the deeper claim of her own integrity. Her inner sense of "shame", however, would have been preserved, if she had not given in to her passion, if she had not practised deeds μὴ πρέπονθ' αὐτῇ. Only this principle, as it is formulated in the expression μὴ πρέπονθ' αὐτῷ, of finding a moral restraint within the individual self, would enable men to reconcile the conflict between their inner self and their concern for society and finally it would prevent disaster.⁵⁶

Interesting as this thesis undoubtedly is, it is questionable for two reasons. Firstly: Deianeira's views on cognition and, indirectly, on moral principles are not sufficiently firm, unchangeable, or consistent to suggest a unified and clear philosophical thesis.⁵⁷ On the

⁵⁴ Antiphon, Περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, frg. 44 A, col. 1, 12–23.

⁵⁵ The comparison already appears in M. Ryzman (*art. cit.* (see n. 50), pp. 393–394), but is not considered to be of such significance.

⁵⁶ Gasti, *art. cit.* (see n. 49), pp. 26–27.

⁵⁷ This has been noticed by several critics, who have propounded sundry explanations: T. von Wilamowitz, *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles*, Berlin 1917, pp. 151–154, perceives it as a dramatist's flaw, K. Reinhardt, *loc. cit.* (see n. 43), as an illustration of the intrusion by demoniac forces, and G. M. Kirkwood, *op. cit.* (see n. 7), pp. 113–115, as a particular excellence of the psychological characterisation.

contrary, they are heavily influenced by the moment, by the micro-structure of the dramatic situation. In her first dialogue with the chorus, for example, she tells the Trachinian maidens that they cannot understand her love troubles because they lack experience (142–143; 151–152); later, however, she turns to them for advice in love (584–587), receiving in reply her own previous explanation:

ἀλλ' εἰδέναι χρὴ δρῶσαν· ὥς οὐδ' εἰ δοκεῖς
ἔχειν, ἔχοις ἄν γνῶμα, μὴ πειρωμένη.
(592–593)

Soon afterwards, it is again Deianeira who “instructs” the chorus that only experience, personal misfortune (which is caused by love), can bring true knowledge (729–730). A similar inconsistency can be noted between her statement (459–469) that learning the truth cannot change her attitude to her husband (or Iole), and her words of about fifty lines later (536–554). The ominous rhetorical question τὸ δ' εἰδέναι τί δεινόν; (459) of course receives its final answer in her silence and in the realisation which drives her to suicide. In this light, the words spoken by her at the beginning of the tragedy – namely that she, in contrast to the ancient saying, is aware even before her death that her life is hard and ill-fortuned –⁵⁸ acquire the undertones of ὕβρις. Her opinion (before her realisation) of the Trachinian maidens' position (141–143) can be applied to her own views *before* and *after* her recognition of the consequences of her fatal act: she knows (πεπνσμένη μὲν), but this knowledge is not founded on experience (ἄπειρος δέ). In contrast to the maidens, Deianeira does have some experience before her realisation, but it is insufficient and therefore misleading. It is this insufficiency of human knowledge that is typical of the tragic irony of fate, where man is always doomed to discover a rift between his own interpretation and the true significance of words and events. There are no rhetorical questions in life. Man's decisions – as Sophocles shows through Deianeira's fate – always lag behind reality.⁵⁹

The second objection to Gasti's thesis is the following. If Deianeira really wanted to save her reputation, she would have all possible means at her disposal, yet she does not take advantage of

⁵⁸ Tr. 4–5: ἐγὼ δὲ τὸν ἐμόν, καὶ πρὶν εἰς Ἄδου μολεῖν, / ἔξοιδ' ἔχουσα δυστυχὴ τε καὶ βαρύν.

⁵⁹ This is corroborated also by Heracles' late decipherment of Zeus' prophecies, cf. 1159–1173.

them. She is first alerted to this possibility by the chorus (727–728) when the final outcome is still but a presentiment. Moreover, the chorus indirectly prompts her to defend herself after Hyllus describes the effects of the poisoned chiton and makes a savage attack on her (813–814). Her innocence in the eyes of others is confirmed also by Hyllus' reaction as recounted by the Nurse (932–942), by his replies in his dialogue with Heracles (in 1120–1142), and – indirectly at least – by the fact that Heracles stops abusing her after hearing the name of Nessus (1141–1142). Finally, there is the opinion of the house servants (not defined more precisely) from whom Hyllus learns that his mother had been deceived by the Centaur's advice (935).

Why, then, does she not attempt to save her reputation? Her tragedy can even be said to lie in the fact that she *could* win the understanding and forgiveness of society, but fails to perceive it (while there is still time). I, however, believe that this is not the crucial factor and that this explanation fails to reach the true sources of the human tragedy revealed by her fate. Where are these sources?

The study by H. Ryzman is the most subtle of the three, taking into account the broadest range of Deianeira's personal characteristics and motives. It analyses her psychological profile, as well as the philosophical and anthropological background of her tragedy. The conclusions are summarised as follows: (1) Deianeira believes she is obedient to the unwritten laws; (2) she believes, not without good reason, that she will be thought of as evil since she lives in a community in which actions, rather than intentions, are regarded as the criteria for judging one's behaviour; (3) she is morally innocent, it seems that she has transgressed the unwritten laws unwittingly.

There is something essential, however, which is overlooked even in Ryzman's argumentation. What is problematic is her third and last conclusion, or, more precisely, her understanding of the unwritten laws. This problem is analogous to the one posed by H. Gasti's reading. According to the latter, Sophocles suggests in this play that the true springs of conduct lie deeper, in the inner self, which can be identified with *physis*;⁶⁰ on the other hand, however, Gasti also uses the term "physis" or "nature" to denote the pattern of behaviour determined by human nature⁶¹ (e. g. passions, like love, that can figure as sources of disruption, disturbing the agent's rational planning⁶²).

⁶⁰ Gasti, *art. cit.* (see n. 49), p. 28.

⁶¹ Gasti, *art. cit.* (see n. 49), p. 23.

⁶² Cf. M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge 1986, p. 7.

She does not link the two observations and thus fails to explain how man, acting as he does in accordance with his φύσις, could choose not to follow his passions and thus avoid disaster. The Sophoclean φύσις cannot be straightforwardly and entirely equated with the “inner self”, on which it is possible to found a morality that “should be the only deterrent from evil”. Φύσις is the realm under the mighty and cruel sway of Eros; it is ἄμαχος Ἀφροδίτα who sits “enthroned in power beside the mighty laws”, as the chorus in *Antigone* sings.⁶³ Man’s tragic quality, his guilt without guilt, stems from the very essence of his φύσις. When Deianeira says that she will not oppose Eros who rules even over the gods (441–444), she is presumably still unaware of what her statement implies. Not opposing Eros when he seizes another, one’s beloved (Heracles), is not the same as not opposing him when one is seized oneself. In the first case this means tolerance, understanding, and forgiveness (446–448; 459–467); in the second it means fighting for the beloved (545–546), whom the loving one wants to possess, even against one’s own will, because one is possessed by Eros oneself. The truth is revealed only when your own turn comes – τῷ αὐτοῦ πρῶξιν σκοποῦντι.

Thus Deianeira does not transgress by her act the unwritten laws of nature; on the contrary, she commits it precisely because she follows these laws. She could only avoid the tragic outcome by going against her own human nature. Here lies the true source of her guilt and innocence: the source of her tragic beauty. Issues such as intention, the legality of love-philtres, or the standards of society merely skim over the surface of her tragedy.

⁶³ Cf. *Ant.*, 797–800: τῶν μεγάλων πάρεδρος ἐν ἀρχαίς θεσμῶν· ἄμαχος γὰρ ἐμπαίζει θεὸς Ἀφροδίτα. But the dramatic situation in which these words are sung differs radically from that of *Trachiniae*, cf. n. 5.