

# THE DRAMATIC EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOPHOCLES' *TRACHINIAE*

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THE MEANING OF THE *Trachiniae* is revealed to us superficially through the obvious implications of the causation and the contrasted presentation of the two protagonists,<sup>1</sup> but more subtly through the theme of knowledge, explored throughout the play as events and situations are translated into epistemological terms. Cognitive and perceptual expressions occur with unusual frequency and with a reflective concentration that compels the auditor to ponder the sources of information and their reliability, and the inevitably personal and subjective responses often accorded this information by characters of the drama.

The fundamental truths of the play are conventional enough. The two key passages are the opening lines with the famous λόγος that a man's happiness can only be known when he is dead, that is when the full course of his life is known, and the parodos with its notion of the vicissitudes of fortune cast upon mortals by the son of Cronus. These vicissitudes of joy and sorrow and of knowledge and ignorance are conveyed here through the beautiful light-and-dark imagery of the sun and star-spangled night, and of waves in succession. Spangled Night (αἰόλα νύξ [94]) from its own destruction (ἐναριζομένα [94]) gives birth to and lays to rest the sun which is itself naturally associated with brightness (99) and with sight (δμυα [102]), and in particular here with sight or knowledge of Heracles, for this is the knowledge to which the whole dramatic action tends. In the concluding epode the same spangled night is more explicitly related to the ebb and flow of human life: of wealth, joy, and deprivation. Suffering and night are brought together almost to the point of identification in the prologos by Deianeira in an explicit way which is echoed by the more purely "poetic" association merely implicit in this imagery (29-30). But Deianeira is aware only of the succession of nights of suffering, not of the days which come between, as she lies awake anxiously awaiting news of Heracles. This implied pessimism is at odds with the more balanced and certainly more conventional view of the chorus.

But the practical utility of the chorus's view that suffering will in time give place to joy is impaired by human ignorance. Deianeira's sufferings at the hands of Achelous were apparently followed by the joy of release bestowed by Heracles under the auspices of Zeus (26-27). But in the perspective of time Heracles' release of Deianeira has been shown merely

<sup>1</sup>See my discussion of critical views in the final section, 302.

to have brought new sufferings (27–35). So a problem arises: having accepted the basic principle of fortune's ebb and flow, how do we identify genuine occasions for joy or sorrow amid this ambiguous flux of events?

Let us take one example. With the messenger's apparently favourable report of Heracles' imminent return Deianeira declares that Zeus has finally brought joy (201). She speaks, in words which resist translation, of enjoying the fruit of the "unexpected eye of the report risen:"

ὥς ἄελπτον ὄμμα' ἐμοὶ  
φήμης ἀνασχὼν τῇσδε νῦν καρπούμεθα (203–204)

The "risen eye" suggests that the report resembles the sun, itself a symbol of knowledge as we have seen;<sup>2</sup> but we shall see too that the terms *φήμη* and the earlier *λόγος* (184) imply, in the context of the play, the uncertainty of information. This uncertainty implicit in the terms undermines for us the impression of certain knowledge suggested by Deianeira's confidence and by the covert suggestion of a sun image in *ἀνασχὼν*. The effect is underscored, of course, by the auditor's realisation that ultimately Deianeira will have no cause to rejoice. This further association of what is deemed to be knowledge with the sun, as darkness was associated with ignorance, will encourage us further to explicate the master image of the *parodos*. Is it too far-fetched to argue that Sophocles' evocative image of darkness both giving birth to the sun and laying it to rest (94–96) implies the virtual primacy of ignorance in the world of men, while the spangled quality of night suggests the shimmering instability of mere information which too often passes for genuine knowledge?<sup>3</sup> In support of this interpretation I would draw the reader's attention to the use of *αἰώλος* in the *prologos* (11) as the epithet of the serpent, the form adopted by Achelous in his courtship of Deianeira after he had taken the shape of a distinct bull (*ἐναργῆς ταῦρος* [11]). I would suggest that the sequence of metamorphoses paraded before Deianeira by Achelous foreshadows symbolically the bewildering parade of information, some clear, some deceptive and obscure, which Deianeira will confront during the play's action, and which mirrors the epistemological texture of the world which it is the lot of all mortals to weave and within which they are inevitably interwoven.

The very first word of the *Trachiniae* denotes a source of information, a *λόγος*, that is, an ancient maxim "manifest" (*φανεῖς* [1]) for human apprehension. Full knowledge (*ἐκμάθους*, 2), it declares, of a man's happiness

<sup>2</sup>See Kamerbeek's note *ad* 203–204 (J. C. Kamerbeek, *Trach.*, Leiden 1959).

<sup>3</sup>"For a time, night itself becomes the motif of uncertainty, delicately at first, but significantly in connection with words that suggest wifehood and motherhood; then, to round off the chorus, night appears as a full-fledged symbol of evil" (C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* [Cambridge, Mass. 1951] 111).

or sorrow is unobtainable until he is dead. Deianeira, however, feels that she has knowledge of her own sorrow already before she has died (*ἔξοιδ'*, 5). This supposed knowledge is based on a review of her life up to the present. It falls into two periods: the courtship of Achelous and the marriage with Heracles. At first Deianeira had interpreted this "diptych" as the succession of good fortune upon ill but in the event Zeus' *τέλος* (26) only *appeared* fair (*καλῶς*, / *εἰ δὴ καλῶς*, 26–27), as Heracles' "release" of Deianeira (*ἐκλύεται*, 21) led only to further sufferings in the form of her anxiety for him during his absence. Consequently the essential notion of good fortune succeeding ill becomes problematical when it encounters our frequent mortal inability to distinguish good fortune from ill.

Closely associated with knowledge here and throughout are emotional reactions, especially those of Deianeira, which are essentially passive.<sup>4</sup> In response to Achelous' horrifying variety and ambiguity she can only pray for death (16). Similarly, amid the terror of Heracles' struggle with the river-god, she is so smitten with fear (*ἐκπεπληγμένη φόβῳ*, 24) that knowledge is impossible (*οὐ γὰρ οἶδ'*, 22).

As to the present, no one has knowledge of Heracles' whereabouts (*οὐδεὶς οἶδε* 41), in spite of which Deianeira claims to "understand" (*ἐπίσταμαι*, 43) that he has suffered some injury. In the circumstances she can only be referring to an intuition born of fear. Far from being an epistemological basis for remedial action, this intuition only contributes to her fearful passivity.

But even if Deianeira is temperamentally disposed to paralysed inaction through fear and anxiety, information will make itself known and a response will eventually be forced. The nurse gently rebukes her mistress for failing to seek information about Heracles (55) and advocates sending Hyllus (who has just arrived) to obtain it. Deianeira welcomes these *λόγοι* (60, 63) or *μῦθοι* (62) and her communication of them to her son elicits his "knowledge" (*οἶδα*, 67) of Heracles. The "knowledge," however, consists of stories (*μύθοις*, 67) about Heracles, the reliability of which has not been established (*εἰ τι πιστεύειν χρεών*, 67) because in the first place their being stories implies that Hyllus has merely heard about his father (*κλίνειν*; 68, 71, 72) and is dependent upon what people say or announce (*φασί*, 70; *ἀγγέλλεται*, 73; *φασίν*, 74); and secondly their content is itself uncertain: Heracles is moving his army against Eurytus' city *or* he is about to do so (74–75).

Such difficulties may be further compounded. Even if accurate information is available, mortals may simply be unaware of its existence, and now Deianeira commends to Hyllus knowledge in the form of a *λόγος*

<sup>4</sup>Deianeira's passivity is well-established in criticism of the play, and is most ably discussed by Marsh McCall, "The *Trachiniae*: Structure, Focus, and Heracles," *AJP* 93 (1972) 142–163).

hitherto unknown to him (78): the reliable (πιστά, 77) prophecies connecting Heracles with Euboea. Now while Sophoclean oracles are wont to convey accurate knowledge from an unimpeachable source and thus to afford absolute certainty, nevertheless as a practical source of knowledge they fall far short of immediate experience because their expression is very often obscure or misleading. In this case Deianeira relates a version of the oracle<sup>5</sup> which provides for two alternatives: either Heracles will "accomplish"<sup>6</sup> the end of his life *or* his future life will be happy, if (or when) he carries out (ἄρας, 80) the labour in which he is presently engaged (79–81). Now if the oracle had merely predicted happiness for the rest of Heracles' life, it would not be too difficult to recognise this as a euphemism for an early death, as Heracles later does when he remembers this aspect of the prophecy (1143–1150). But the present expression of the oracle at least *suggests* mutually exclusive alternatives, death *or* happiness; and therefore implies that happiness here is not a euphemism for death. Strictly, one supposes, the "either-or" could comprise an alternative expression of the same fact, that Heracles will die. If so, it is grossly deceptive. In any case now that Hyllus has this information about the oracle he will initiate action to find the whole truth (90–91), an undertaking in pointed contrast to his mother's characteristic inactivity.

Following the entrance of the chorus Deianeira conjectures (ὡς ἀπεικάσαι, 141) that the Trachinian women are present having ascertained (πεπυσμένη, 141) her suffering. But πίστις is set below ἐκμάθησις in the epistemological hierarchy, as Deianeira gives them to understand that thorough knowledge of her suffering could be obtained only through their undergoing personal experience of a nature similar to her own:

ὡς δ' ἐγὼ θυμοφθορῶ  
μήτ' ἐκμάθοις παθοῦσα, νῦν δ' ἀπειρος εἶ. (142–143)

Associated with ἐκμάθησις is "insight" (εἰσίδοιτο, 151) obtained from scrutiny (σκοπῶν, 151) of one's own situation.

Deianeira now refers again to the oracle but with a slight change of emphasis. Heracles will die when the appointed time has elapsed or live the rest of his life without sorrow (166–168). The same alternatives apply as before with their fateful ambiguity, but the oracle is conditioned now by time rather than place. The effect of the differing versions is epis-

<sup>5</sup>"The wealth of oracular material only emphasizes the impossibility of knowing the future .... The supposed clarity and helpfulness of these oracles are deliberately confusing. They represent what hindsight, or knowledge free from time, might know, but which no one in the moment of action could conceivably know" (Whitman [above, n. 3] 108). For a different emphasis see G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958) 74, 78–79.

<sup>6</sup>For the key term τέλος and its compounds and cognates see 26, 79, 155, 167, 170, 174, 742, 824, 825, 948, 1149, 1171, 1187, 1257, 1263.

temologically disconcerting, and anxiety increases as time and place seem, as it were, to converge upon Heracles in the way that Ajax' character and Athena's wrath seem to converge upon that hero. The oracle hitherto accepted as reliable (πιστά, 77) is now mildly questioned (ναμέρτεια, 173), but if the prophecies are true they must be fulfilled now (173–174). Deianeira's reaction to this uncertain but critical information is violent, but essentially passive, terror (ἐκπηδᾶν ἐμέ/φόβῳ, 175–176).

At this point, however, Deianeira's anxiety is due for release as the chorus see a messenger approaching πρὸς χάριν λόγων (178–179). The release which he brings (λύσω, 181) parallels in a minor way the release from Achelous earlier bestowed on Deianeira by Heracles, itself a release from anxiety and paralysis in the face of horrifying uncertainty (ἐκλύεται, 21). Now the deliverance from Achelous was in a sense illusory, for the marriage which followed brought a renewal of anxiety and uncertainty; but the messenger here with the confidence of the Creon or Corinthian of the *OT* brings what appears to be good news. Deianeira is to know or understand (ἐπίστω, 182) that Heracles is alive. Her response even to this seemingly certain information (λόγος, 184) is at first indecisive surprise, so that the messenger is obliged to reiterate that Heracles will indeed be manifest (ἤξειν, φανέντα, 186). But with the future tense uncertainty has returned, and furthermore what is manifest may be deceptive, as Deianeira will discover.

Of course the messenger's positive λόγος may reflect only his own confidence, so Deianeira will know whence he has learned it (μαθὼν, 187). He has heard it (189), he says, from Lichas, who is undergoing examination (κρίνει, 195) by the people who wish to learn fully (ἐκμαθεῖν, 196). The information, however, will be the more certain, it is implied, as Deianeira will soon see Lichas clearly (ὄψῃ ... ἐμφανῇ, 199). Now Deianeira is prepared to declare that Zeus has brought her joy (200–201), but the audience will remember that Zeus had once before brought deliverance which in the event proved deceptive (26–27). So Deianeira's joy is a hasty reaction on the basis of inadequate information, a reaction echoed in the subsequent ode, in which the chorus also accept the evidence of sight (although they have not actually seen Heracles) and regard the hero's return as "clearly present to see face to face" (223–224). Deianeira agrees with the chorus; she has before her the visible evidence of Heracles' retinue (ὄρῳ, ὄμματος, 225; λεύσσειν, 226), and the messenger is indeed manifest (φανέντα, 228).

Now the information conveyed by the messenger derived from Lichas, and Deianeira will examine this remoter human source. She bids him "teach" her (δίδαξον, 233) if Heracles is still alive, whereupon Lichas offers her the evidence of his own eyesight. Lichas is speaking, however, not of the present but of the past. When he was actually leaving Heracles

(ἐλειπον, 234) he was not merely alive, but "powerful and flourishing" (234–235). In this way clear information is rendered less so by the emphasis upon the past time, and the validity of any consequent misgivings on the part of the audience is confirmed by the obvious irony of *κού νόσφ βαρύν* (235). We are reminded that what is clear in the immediate past may be totally false in a catastrophic instant.

If information is sometimes deceptive or unreliable, it is also on occasion unpalatable, as might seem to be the *λόγος* of Heracles' enslavement (250–251). But since this was brought about at the behest of Zeus, Lichas declares, it should not be seen as a cause for shame. Be that as it may, this story depends on subjective experience, and it is double-edged, for it is Heracles himself who tells of his thralldom (*ὥς φησ' αὐτός*, 249; *ὥς αὐτὸς λέγει*, 253). The subjective element may be taken either as tending to render the account authoritative, in this case all the more because it comes from Heracles himself, or as drawing our attention to the human source and his motivation. The audience is thus alerted to possible irony: the messenger thinks that Heracles is an unimpeachable witness; the audience realise that the great hero may have motives for deception.

The account of Heracles' exploits with Eurytus and Iphitus reveals his decisiveness by contrast with Deianeira, a quality bought perhaps at the cost of epistemological sophistication and moral sensitivity, as he regards Eurytus as "solely responsible of mortals" (*μεταίτιον / μόνον βροτῶν*, 260–61) for his enslavement. The murder of Iphitus is *ὑβρις* in the sight of Zeus because stealth was employed (275–280).<sup>7</sup> Secrecy or stealth is a principal theme of the play for the obvious reason that Deianeira employs it against Heracles with fatal consequences, and in respect of the theme of knowledge it implies a deliberate attempt to exploit man's already tragic ignorance. Iphitus was preoccupied when Heracles slew him, his eye (*ὄμμα*) in one place, his mind (*νοῦν*) in another (272). The eye, we have seen, is a symbol of knowledge in the play; here Iphitus has no knowledge of his hidden adversary, being absorbed in tracking down his cattle.

Deianeira is now aware of the *λόγος* of Heracles' return, the messenger's account having undergone elaboration by Lichas. Apart from the factual content there is, more significantly, a moral lesson for Deianeira, a warning against the *ὑβρις* of secret action. Such a *λόγος* is more akin to the first of the play, the ancient maxim, in that it provides a guide for conduct for those who are sufficiently aware to profit by it. But while this vital lesson is lost on Deianeira, what seems more clearly knowledge now impinges fatefully on her consciousness: the visible evidence of the female captives, and among them Iole. The importance of this is clear from Lichas' explicit mention of the women whom Deianeira sees before her

<sup>7</sup>On the importance of *hybris* in the play and Kitto's view see below, 303.

eyes (*ὧν ὁρᾷς ἐν ὄμμασιν*, 241; *τάσδε δ' ἄσπερ εἰσορᾷς*, 283) and from her immediate compassion for them (242–243). The twofold nature of her information, what she has ascertained and the women who are before her, should occasion her clear delight:

*ἄνασσα, νῦν σοι τέρψις ἐμφανῆς κυρεῖ,  
τῶν μὲν παρόντων, τὰ δὲ πεπυσμένη λόγῳ.* (291–292)

She would seem, in the chorus's view, to have adequate knowledge of Heracles' return. The matter is not so clear to Deianeira, who certainly rejoices, but reminds us (with or without conscious emphasis) that she has merely "heard" (*κλύουσα*, 294) this information and draws from it the inference that it is appropriate to rejoice. Still, the knowledge is not so clear in its implications for action that careful consideration (*εὐσκοπούμενοις*, 296) is precluded. But here it is less the truth of the information which is in doubt than the moral implications of an apparently happy event. A reflection to this effect occurs to Deianeira through the medium of sight (*ὁρώσῃ*, 299; cf. *τάσδ' ὁρωμένη*, 306): the fate of the captives reminds her of the ebb and flow of fortune which afflicts the whole of mankind, not least herself.

At this critical point in the play Deianeira turns again to Zeus (303–306), who, the chorus have told us, brings succession of weal and woe (126–131) and who, according to Deianeira, brought a happy ending to Achelous' courtship (26–27). That outcome, of course, was ambiguous. Later in the play the messenger's report moved Deianeira to apostrophize Zeus for the joy he had brought (200–201). It was Zeus of Oeta she invoked, with clearly ironical implications for the audience.<sup>8</sup> And ironically her present appeal to Zeus Tropaeus (303) immediately precedes her compassionate attention to Iole and the beginning of an obvious concatenation of events leading to the employment of the Hydra's deadly blood. In the *OT* (911–923) Jocasta's prayer to Apollo for deliverance is followed at once by the apparent deliverance of the Corinthian; here, similarly, it is as if Zeus answers Deianeira's prayer, and precisely on her condition that if he turns against her family he will do so after her death. The god, it seems, works through the unwitting Deianeira to destroy her and her family.

The sight of Iole moves Deianeira to pity (*ῥκτισα / βλέπουσ'*, 312–313), a response which reflects her individual nature. But here a new epistemological element enters. We have been made aware of the difficulty of attaining knowledge against the background of a general assumption that its attainment is desirable. Lichas, however, represents the view that knowledge may be dangerous, that sometimes it is better not to know since there is a risk that one will react unwisely. His almost sullen reti-

<sup>8</sup>See McCall (above n. 4) 145–146.

cence recalls the Theban of the *OT*. But for Deianeira not to know is accounted "misfortune" (*ξυμφορά*, 321). Oedipus sought knowledge of self; here Deianeira's sympathy for others must be afforded ample scope. Iole, however, like Lichas, apparently believes in silence (and ignorance) (*σιγῇ*, 319; 322–324). And this salutary, if timorous, attitude would have prevailed had the messenger not felt that thorough understanding was required and might be gained from listening to his account of the matter of which he claims to have knowledge:

αὐτοῦ γὰρ πρῶτον βαιὼν ἀμύνειν, ὅπως  
μάθῃς, ἄνευ τῶνδ', οὐστινάς τ' ἄγεις ἔσω  
ὦν τ' οὐδὲν εἰσήκουσας ἐκμάθῃς ἃ δεῖ  
τοῦτων ἔχω γὰρ πάντ' ἐπιστήμην ἐγώ. (335–338)

He bids her stand and listen (*σταθεῖσ' ἄκουσον*, 340), whereupon she bids in turn that the account be given (*χὼ λόγος σημαινέτω*, 345). The messenger distinguishes between words as such and the truth (346–348) and later between what is agreeable (*φίλα*, 373) and the truth. Deianeira requests a clear statement of what he knows, for of what he has said she is ignorant (349–350). So by this preliminary exchange the audience are once again clearly oriented towards the epistemological issues of the play. The messenger's present account is corroborated in that it accords with Lichas' earlier speech uttered before witnesses including the messenger himself (351–352). With the revelation of the substance and genuine motivation of Heracles' exploits the theme of obscurity through deceit is again thrust before us. The messenger, like Lichas before him, points to the visible evidence of Iole (*ὡς ὄρᾳς*, 365) whom Deianeira sees in the new light of her real significance. Thus she discovers that what is apparently clear and visible may be in reality secret (*λαθραῖον*, 377).

Deianeira's response to this new information is characteristic: she is overwhelmed (*ἐκπεπληγμένη*, 386). The false account earlier conveyed by the messenger originated from Lichas who is now impeached as a witness. (cp. 49–60) Again Deianeira must be advised to seek information, to ascertain (*πεύθου*), to examine forcibly (*πρὸς βίαν κρίνειν*) in order to obtain accurate speech (*σαφῇ λέξειεν*) (387–388). Once again the source of information comes to her of its own accord (391–392; cp. 58–60). With the now familiar orientation of the spectator through epistemological words (393–397) Deianeira is assured of the reliability (*τὸ πιστὸν τῆς ἀληθείας*, 398) of Lichas' testimony.

We shall soon discover, however, that Lichas' motives for this falsehood are by no means evil and in fact reveal the naivety of the notion that the truth is always for the best. An epistemological battle ensues. When the messenger confronts Lichas with the discrepancy between his two accounts, Lichas challenges him to name witnesses of his first, allegedly true



account (421–422). When these witnesses have been cited (423–424) Lichas takes refuge in the distinction between saying what one fancies one has heard and making an exact statement of the real happenings (425–426).<sup>9</sup> The distinction is epistemologically important but irrelevant in this instance, as Lichas has sworn (*ἐπὶ ὥμοτος λέγων*, 427) that he brings Iole as Heracles' "wife."

At this critical juncture Deianeira makes further reference to Zeus of Oeta, begging Lichas to reveal the *λόγος* (436–437), and again we are free to imagine Zeus working through Lichas to effect the fateful revelation.

Yet another epistemological problem is raised. Lichas has taken the view that Deianeira will react badly to the truth and has therefore concealed it in her interest (481–483). Of course he had no actual *knowledge* of her reaction. Her speech of reassurance recalls Medea's reassurance to Creon of her reasonable attitude to him and his daughter.<sup>10</sup> Medea's speech involved only deception; Deianeira's involves also self-deception. Medea was fully and tragically aware of the cleft between mind and heart and could use the former to further the desires of the latter, but Deianeira's consciously and deliberately tolerant and altruistic nature cannot wholly withstand the undertow of her more spontaneous conjugal jealousy. Lichas is deceived, as Deianeira, like the Sophoclean Ajax in his "recantation" speech, shows a sensitive awareness of the human condition and an ability to apply this awareness to her own situation. Notable is her denial of all responsibility on Iole's part (447–448). To understand is to forgive, and Iole's part must be understood in the context of the vicissitudes of human fortune (439–440) and the invincibility of Eros (441–449), and in the light of Deianeira's own experience. This is consistent with her earlier assertions. The word for responsibility here (*μεταίτια*, 447) recalls Heracles' uncharitable and unsympathetic apportionment of total blame to Eurytus (*μεταίτιον* / *μόνον*, 260–261) and looks forward to Hyllus' agonised sense that in Iole he is marrying the woman "solely responsible" for his mother's death (*μόνη* / *μεταίτιος*, 1233–1234). Such a view is, of course, an oversimplification and signally ignores Deianeira's own responsibility, but it is emotionally excusable and highlights the seeming enormity of Heracles' demands of his son. Knowledge for Deianeira involves admitting as much as possible to the play of her sensibilities and compassion, in this case through the medium of sight (*ᾠκυρα ... προσβλέψας*, 464). This is why ignorance is painful (458; cf. 321). The tragic implications of this admirable attitude are clear in the sequel.

With her secret confiding in the chorus (*λάβρα*, 533) Deianeira resorts to the very secrecy which is condemned in her husband by Zeus and by

<sup>9</sup>See Kamerbeek *ad loc.*

<sup>10</sup>Eur. *Medea* 292–315.

the chorus. Clearly there is a discrepancy between Deianeira's earlier acceptance of Heracles' involvement with Iole and her uncharacteristically bitter language here (536–542). Although Deianeira reasserts her reasonable response in epistemological language—she does not “understand” (οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι, 543) how to be angry with Heracles—the discrepancy reflects her inability to bring her feelings of erotic possessiveness and pardonable jealousy into line with her characteristic sympathy. This is a more subtle phenomenon than the polarised disunity of the Euripidean Phaedra and is less obtrusively presented. Her reiteration of the attitude required of a reasonable woman (552–553) perhaps confirms our awareness of her inability to attain this attitude.

The secrecy to which Deianeira now resorts applies appropriately to the blood of the Hydra, itself hidden (κεκρυμμένον, 556) in a bronze urn.

We have now reached the epistemological crisis of the play: Deianeira's decision to use the gift of Nessus. The language, as we should expect, reflects the theme of knowledge. The chorus require *πίστις*, the guarantee or reliability earlier ascribed to the prophecies (77). In this they are uttering merely their own opinion (δοκεῖς, 589), what *seems* to them to be so; *πίστις*, however, is only to be obtained through direct, immediate experience. In this case the aural evidence consists of Nessus' dying words to Deianeira. The dramatic action has already made us acutely aware that such evidence may be corrupted by unconscious error or deliberate deceit. Even sight is unreliable, if it is of an event in the past. Heracles' return was visible to the messenger, all but visible to Deianeira. The most comprehensive visual evidence was Deianeira's of Iole, and here vision combined with inherent sensitivity and compassion. Nevertheless, the knowledge so gained could not deter Deianeira from attempting to secure Heracles' love. Had she tested the gift before sending it to her husband she might have witnessed the visual evidence of its corrosive effect. But the crowning difficulty stems from the tragic truth that only knowledge of what is present or past can properly be said to be within the domain of mortal knowledge at all, leaving aside the obscure prophecies of deity. This is clear from the chorus's reference to the *πίστις* obtained from actually doing something (δρωμένοις, 588). Short of this there is only the *πίστις* of what seems, before one has “associated oneself with the attempt:”

οὕτως ἔχει γ' ἡ πίστις, ὡς τὸ μὲν δοκεῖν  
 ἔνεστι, πείρα δ' οὐ προσωμίλησά πω. (590–591)

Here *προσωμίλησά* seems to suggest the intimate knowledge which comes only with experience.<sup>11</sup>

Deianeira has thus arrived at an *impasse* which demands a decision.

<sup>11</sup>See Kamerbeek *ad loc.*

Will she or will she not act on insufficient evidence? Again she relies on the advice of others as the chorus advocate knowing by doing it:

ἀλλ' εἰδέναι χρηὶ δρῶσαν' ὥς οὐδ' εἰ δοκεῖς  
ἔχειν, ἔχουσ' ἂν γνῶμα, μὴ πειρωμένη. (592-593)

While accurate knowledge is impossible before the event—this is the burden of the opening *λόγος* of the play—it is clear that Deianeira proceeds on grossly insufficient evidence and without the epistemological circumspection which the preceding action has encouraged the alert auditor to value.

First of all Deianeira requires secrecy of the chorus, admitting that her undertaking may appear shameful (596-597). The instructions given to Lichas direct that the robe be kept out of the light of the sun (606). The sun is a symbol of knowledge in the play and especially knowledge of Heracles; Deianeira is thus choosing the ways of darkness and ignorance. When Heracles finally reveals himself all too clearly (*φανερὸς ἐμφανῶς*) (608-609), it will be too late. Meanwhile in the abeyance of genuine knowledge Heracles is to be deceived with false (*φράζ'*, 604; *σῆμ'*, 614; *εὐμαθὲς*, 614; *μαθήσεται*, 615) and is to be given the false assurance of Deianeira's instructions (*λόγων ... πίστιν*, 623) by Lichas who is himself the victim of deceit and misunderstanding (*ἐπίσταμαί*, 626; *οἶσθα*, 627) and (like Deianeira) of violent emotional reaction to apparent knowledge (*ἐκπλαγῆναι ... ἠδονῇ*, 629).

Deianeira's realisation of the baneful properties of Nessus' gift (663 ff.) prompts her observation that one should not conceive enthusiasm for a deed whose outcome is obscure (669-670). Her reaction is vague fear rather than rational inference (*δέδοικα*, 663; *οὐκ οἶδ'*, 666). The events described are "an unexpected marvel to learn of" (*θαῦμα' ἀνέλπιστον μαθεῖν*, 673). The fate of the wool is an intimation of Heracles' fate. Deianeira has worked in the obscurity of deceit with a reagent whose properties are obscure and which must remain in the obscurity of physical darkness in order to retain its potency. When exposed to light its properties become clear while, paradoxically, the substance with which it has come into contact disappears, not merely spatially but as it were essentially from within (*ἔδηλον*, 698; cf. 676 ff.). The already obviously sinister implications of the wool's disappearance—that Heracles will suffer likewise—are thus greatly augmented in the light of the theme of knowledge, as a physical obscurity which normally betokens ignorance is clearly a prelude to the supremely tragic knowledge of the play.

Deianeira is the victim of late learning (710-711). In this case her anticipation of the worst is fully justified and soon corroborated by Hyllus. The chorus, on the other hand, criticise an unjustifiably gloomy *ἐλπίς* not founded on experience (723-724), but Deianeira naturally re-

joins that one may well be pessimistic when one has planned badly (725–726). The chorus would mitigate her responsibility; Deianeira's acceptance of full responsibility reveals her greatness of soul. We remember that she was inclined to excuse Heracles and Iole and to see the latter as in no wise responsible (444–448). Such a view was achieved through compassionate understanding based on personal experience. But Deianeira refuses to extend a like tolerance to herself, and with this ruthlessness in respect of self she proceeds to manifest a Heracleian directness in action.

But it is Deianeira's turn to be silent (731) and listen to her son's dreadful report. The knowledge comes with a brutal specificity and directness:

τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν σὸν ἴσθι, τὸν δ' ἐμὸν λέγω  
πατέρα, κατακτείνασα τῇδ' ἐν ἡμέρᾳ. (739–740)

Here are the full implications. The knowledge is thrust upon her in the imperative; the definition of Heracles as her husband and Hyllus' father stresses the dreadful situation of Deianeira as a wife and mother. Her reaction is, characteristically, paralysed surprise and disbelief (741), but what is revealed (*φανθέν*) as done cannot be undone (743). She inquires as to the source of this knowledge: from what man did Hyllus learn it (*μαθὼν*, 744)? Unfortunately, the knowledge is all too well corroborated. He did not *hear* it (*κού κατὰ γλῶσσαν κλύων*, 747) but *saw* it with his own eyes (*αὐτὸς ... ἐν ὄμμασιν / ... δεδορκώς*, 746–747). But his mother wants further evidence: *where* was Hyllus when he witnessed his father's doom (748)?<sup>12</sup> Deianeira will now be told everything and “learn” it (749).

Heracles, we learn, in his sufferings, like Deianeira shortly, wishes to avoid being seen (*δψεται*, 800; cp. 903) to be outside the knowledge of men. Deianeira, on the other hand, will soon see him (*ἐσόψεσθ'*, 806) alive or dead, and will never see another like him (812).

Deianeira's silent departure, quite apart from its grim implications, recalls the silence motif earlier in the play. Lichas and Iole chose silence as an appropriate response to unpalatable knowledge; Deianeira now chooses it apparently in the knowledge (*κάτοισθ'*, 813) that she is thereby acquiescing in Hyllus' accusations. Hyllus, however, wishes to lose sight (and knowledge) of her (815–816) as she is a mother only in name (817–820). Hyllus is, of course, deceived by his ignorance of Deianeira's motives, and in this instance the appearance and the reality of mother do in fact coincide. The distinction between appearance, or nominal role, and reality is further explored in Heracles' relationship with Hyllus who in order to prove himself a true son is obliged to murder his own father (1199–1207; cf. 1064).

<sup>12</sup>See below, n. 13.

When the nurse brings the news of her mistress' death the chorus inquire into the basis of it. Did she see the deed of violence (*ἐπείδης*, 888)? Indeed, she was standing by (*πλησία παραστάτις*, 889)<sup>13</sup>, a circumstance facilitating compassion (cf. 896–897).

Deianeira in the final actions of her life again resorts to secrecy, this time to remove herself from sight and knowledge (903). The nurse, too, must have recourse to concealment in order to learn of her mistress' actions (*λαθραῖον ὄμμι*, 914). Deianeira's mode of suicide is made by verbal echo to reflect her characteristic emotional behaviour. Throughout the play Sophocles has described her as "smitten" (24, 386); now with gruesome literalness she is smitten in the midriff (*φρένας πεπληγμένην*, 931). A similar irony applies in inverse fashion to Heracles who, once the literal sacker of cities, is now himself metaphorically "sacked" (*ἐκπεπόρθημαι*, 1104).

With the spectacle of his mother's doom late learning comes to Hyllus (*ὄψ' ἐκδιδαχθεῖς*, 934). The terms are important (932–935). He sees and takes pity. Only immediate, present vision seems to confer accurate knowledge (*ἔγνω*, 932). And with the reference to Deianeira's unwitting slaughter of Heracles (*ἄκουσα*, 935) the issue of responsibility is again thrust before the audience. Deianeira saw Iole as *οὐχ ἐκούσα* (466), but Heracles will soon ignore such distinctions (1122–1125, 1137) in his appalling and awesome inhumanity. The piece of popular wisdom (943–946) with which the nurse concludes her account reminds us of Deianeira's opening *λόγος*, the implications of which she ignored to her own destruction, and thus effectively rounds off Deianeira's tragedy.

Through the theme of knowledge the Deianeira and Heracles tragedies are made to form a unified whole. Hyllus, too, is drawn into this theme. For example the folly of jumping to conclusions is illustrated through the term *μάταιος*. According to the nurse he who acts on inadequate information is *μάταιος* (945). Similarly Hyllus blamed his mother *ματαιῶς* (940) and earlier Deianeira shrank before the perils of an action which was *μάταιον* (587).

The Heracles section of the play is interwoven with epistemological terms. Surely Hyllus (and the chorus), says the old man, is fully aware (*ἐξήδησθ'*, 988) of the need for silence in order that Heracles may sleep (*σιγῇ*, 989). The point is that Heracles, like his Euripidean counterpart or the Sophoclean Ajax, is better off without consciousness of his agony. Knowledge, we have seen before, is sometimes better avoided. Hyllus, for his part, cannot endure the sight (991–992) and on waking Heracles is agonised that he should be seen thus (997–999).

We have seen Hyllus' earlier concern with the apparent discrepancy in Deianeira's case between a nominal and a true mother (817–818);

<sup>13</sup>Cf. 748, 896, 1076.

Heracles is likewise concerned that Hyllus prove himself a true son, which in the circumstances means one who brings his own mother to suffer death at the hands of his father. There is again the play on words, appearance and reality and upon sight and accurate knowledge:

ὦ παῖ, γενοῦ μοι παῖς ἐτήτυμος γεγώς,  
καὶ μὴ τὸ μητρὸς ὄνομα πρεσβεύσης πλέον.  
δός μοι χεροῖν σαῖν αὐτὸς ἐξ οἴκου λαβὼν  
ἐς χεῖρα τὴν τεκοῦσαν, ὥς εἰδῶ σάφα  
εἰ τοῦμόν ἀλγείς μᾶλλον ἢ κείνης ὁρῶν  
λωβητὸν εἶδος ἐν δίκῃ κακούμενον.

(1064–1069)

Here Hyllus is instructed to choose between the name of mother without the reality and the emotional knowledge consisting of the pity he should feel for his father. In profound self-pity Heracles bids his son stand near (στῆθι πλησίον, 1076; cf. 748, 896) and consider (σκέψαι, 1077), view (θεᾶσθε, 1079), see (ὁρᾶτε, 1080) his lamentable condition.

Even if Heracles is “nothing”<sup>14</sup> (τὸ μηδὲν ὦ, 1107), nevertheless he will destroy Deianeira. There is an obvious irony in that he is destroyed by a “nobody” (= Nessus) while Deianeira has eluded his vengeance, although he believes that she must learn (ἐκδιδαχθῆ, 1110) that even in death Heracles can destroy her.

But Heracles' whole attitude is based on a misconception about Deianeira, so Hyllus bids him be silent and listen (1115) for he does not know (οὐ γὰρ ἂν γνούς, 1118). There is an unpleasant literal-mindedness about Heracles by contrast with Deianeira. This is made especially apparent through the theme of knowledge. For Deianeira knowledge is a problem to be given careful thought before action, and personal responsibility (except her own) is mitigated, she feels, by the complexity of causation. Heracles, understandably, is impatient with Hyllus' obscurity (ποικίλλεις, 1121; cf. 412). He is not concerned with refinements such as whether Deianeira acted with conscious intention (ἐκουσία, 1123). For him she is simply his murderer, and any concern for her on Hyllus' part is a sign of his degenerate nature (1129). Again when Hyllus informs him of Deianeira's suicide he fails to think of the implications of it for her intentions in using the Hydra's blood (1132–1133).<sup>15</sup> But Heracles must learn (μάθοις, 1134) what Hyllus knows (νοεῖς, 1135) about Deianeira and how she erred on seeing Heracles' “marriage” with Iole (προσείδε, 1139) and was persuaded by Nessus (1141–1142). When at last Heracles has knowledge (φρονῶ, 1145), he combines it with the oracles he calls to mind, and now in his turn will confer knowledge on Hyllus (πίθησθε, 1150).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Ajax* (767, 1094, 1257, 1275) where the expression, partly through its ironical implications, directs us to an appraisal of Ajax' heroic standards.

<sup>15</sup>See McCall (above, n. 4) 159–160.

From this point on and in the light of the most profound insight of the play Heracles takes control of the action. He refers to the oracle that at this time he will find release from his sufferings (λύσιν, 1171; cf. 21, 181). Now he knows that this signifies his death (1171–1173), for it is now clear (λαμπρά, 1174).<sup>16</sup>

We have been introduced to the problem of emotional response to knowledge, be it adequate or not. Deianeira was persuaded by Nessus (570, 661–662; ἔθελγε, 710; 1141). Now Hyllus will obey his father before he hears what is required of him. Not only must he kill his own father, but he is not even permitted to express the emotions which Heracles contemns as weak, but to which he himself gave vent in his self-pity, the emotions Deianeira has taught us to prize (1200–1201). The discrepancy between word and reality is again exploited. Nominally Hyllus will be his father's *φονεύς*; in reality "the sole healer of his ills" (1206–1209). Deianeira strove to be the true wife but killed her husband; Hyllus will consciously strive to kill his father, but will achieve a salutary result.<sup>17</sup> Finally there is Hyllus' marriage with Iole. The command to take her to wife is set in the context of obedience to a father and therefore of proving oneself a true son. He is told to obey (or be persuaded; *πιθοῦ*, 1228). Hyllus fears that by doing his father's will he may be learning impiety (*ἐκδιδαχθῶ*, 1245), but Heracles calls upon the gods as unimpeachable witnesses (*μάρτυρας*, 1248) of the rectitude of his instruction.<sup>18</sup> In the play's closing moments, Heracles has accurate knowledge.

The epistemological terminology of the play makes possible an exploration in properly dramatic terms of the sources of human knowledge and sufficient criteria for action, but it also serves to define the principal tensions of the drama. Accordingly it is appropriate to conclude by relating the epistemological theme to other critical views.

Whitman takes the view that the "whole structure of the play is a quest to uncover certain truths, a quest which unravels against a constantly sounded contradictory motif of the uncertainty of knowledge and the impossibility of knowing anything but what is past."<sup>19</sup> Whitman insists on the unmitigated pessimism of Sophocles' outlook and plays down the element of individual human responsibility. He takes Deianeira rather than Heracles to be the hero, in part at least because "of all the broken figures at the end, Deianeira alone is tragic, for her will is the only

<sup>16</sup>The epithet of the sun's light (99).

<sup>17</sup>This is one of the many parallelisms of the play. Another of the less obtrusive ones is the "rounding off" effect of Heracles' two *πορθμοί* that of Nessus (571) and now a second which he requests in his Nessus-imposed suffering (802).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. 352, 422, 899.

<sup>19</sup>Whitman (above n. 3) 110–111.

one involved" (112). Heracles is depicted as "fantastically gross" so that Deianeira may remain "alone" and "unloved" to the end (119). While some critics attribute to Deianeira the "intellectualistic" *hamartia* of having acted ill-advisedly, Whitman sees her mistake not as an individual *hamartia* but as "inherent in life" (114). Kitto's position with regard to Deianeira is similar. He argues that the chorus's "cautious approval" of her action "makes her mistake more than an individual one, something more like a typical one ... typical of the blindness which is the inescapable lot of humanity."<sup>20</sup> Kirkwood also associates Deianeira chiefly with tragic human ignorance while allowing for an individual failing. For him the implications of Deianeira's "pathetic fate are made clear only in Heracles' scene." She suffered so cruelly "because in trying to interfere with the actions of Heracles she was grappling with forces too great for her. Only for Heracles can the baffling and misleading oracles and the truthful lie of Nessus give meaning and pattern."<sup>21</sup> And for Kirkwood there is "something more than human" (118) in Heracles' personality.

Kitto places the chief emphasis on Heracles, as does McCall who compares him to other Sophoclean heroes.<sup>22</sup> For McCall it is Deianeira who illuminates Heracles, largely through the contrast recognised by Kirkwood and others between the irresolute Deianeira and the decisive and effective Heracles.<sup>23</sup> While critics generally find Heracles' character monstrous and grotesque, McCall draws our attention to the sympathetic response Heracles evokes in the other characters. Kitto, on the other hand, convicts the hero of *hybris* in sacking Oechalia<sup>24</sup> and is thus able to conclude that human affairs are not "bound to go wrong, as if on some malignant principle" (294), and that Deianeira suffers from the "disproportionate effects" of Heracles' *hybris*.<sup>25</sup>

The epistemological theme certainly reinforces the overriding notion of human ignorance, since the perils and difficulties of knowing and acting are experienced by everyone in the play, including the almost superhuman Heracles. Nevertheless we should not ignore a serious element of personal responsibility on Deianeira's part; this aspect of the play is also illuminated by careful attention to Sophocles' epistemological language. When Deianeira comes to decide upon her fateful course the audience are well aware that she proceeds on insufficient evidence and with a characteristic indecisiveness well established in the prior action. Moreover, she fails to profit by the object-lesson of Heracles' punishment for the *hybris* of

<sup>20</sup>H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*<sup>3</sup> (London 1961) 295.

<sup>21</sup>Kirkwood (above n. 5) 50.

<sup>22</sup>McCall (above n. 4) 155-162.

<sup>23</sup>See Kirkwood (above n. 5) 49-51.

<sup>24</sup>Kitto (above n. 20) 292-294.

<sup>25</sup>This would seem to be the implication of Kitto's remarks on page 298.



stealth or by the traditional wisdom of the play's opening maxim. The contrast between her and Heracles is presented partly through their differing notions of knowledge: Heracles' simplistic ascription of responsibility to individuals, Deianeira's sensitive awareness of the manifold implications of an action which blur the responsibility of the individuals caught up in it.

As for the poet's view of the human condition, the complex exploration of the theme of knowledge reinforces an awareness of the extent of our mortal limitations. However, there does not seem to me to be anything explicit or implicit in the imagery which suggests anything other than resignation in the face of these limitations.

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