

XIV.—The Dramatic Unity of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

GORDON M. KIRKWOOD

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

The interpretation of Kitto, according to which Heracles is the central figure while Deianeira contributes only an incident in his life, is at fault in its disregard of the prominence of Deianeira's part. It is essential, however, to find a unity rather than to accept the play as two separate tragedies. An examination of the characters of the two principals as they are presented in the play shows a contrast between them both on human grounds and between Deianeira's human weakness and Heracles' super-human certainty; in both elements Deianeira is the central figure. Acceptance of the importance of this double contrast makes possible the explanation of elements in both their characters, and especially that of Heracles, that are not otherwise intelligible, and supplies the unity which the play lacks without it.

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* has recently received, at the hands of H. D. F. Kitto,¹ a new and unusual interpretation. Basing his argument on two of the play's most discussed difficulties, the form of the prologue and the apparent break between the parts of Deianeira and Heracles, Kitto concludes that the play is essentially not a "universal tragedy," but a "dramatic study" embracing "several facets of the situation created by so unusual a character as Heracles." Thus, first, the narrative form of the prologue, unparalleled in Sophocles, is necessary because it introduces past history about Heracles that is not integral with the immediate matter of the play; second, since Deianeira is to be regarded only as an incident in the life of Heracles, when her tragedy is through she is of no further interest, hence she vanishes completely and does not come into consideration in the last, the Heracleian, scene of the drama.

Kitto's interpretation has one serious flaw: it takes too little account of Deianeira. In the first place, Deianeira occupies the dominant position in the action of the play for 946 out of the 1278 verses,² fully as great a proportion as that occupied by Ajax in the *Ajax*. Moreover, Deianeira does not vanish after her death, but is constantly represented by Hyllus in the final scene, just as Ajax is represented by Teucer.³ Nor will Kitto's suggestion as to the

¹ *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1939) 290-300.

² That is, to the end of the Nurse's report of Deianeira's death.

³ This point is noticed by Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1920) 158.

purpose of the prologue bear careful examination. In the quasi-monologue of Deianeira which opens the play and is the narrative part of the prologue, 17 of the 48 verses deal with events in Deianeira's life before she knew Heracles; and even in the ensuing verses, where Heracles is mentioned, the emphasis is not on Heracles' actions, which are only vaguely referred to, but on Deianeira's thoughts, her fears and sorrows following upon Heracles' actions. It is natural, then, to assume that the prologue belongs primarily to Deianeira, not to Heracles.

Kitto is unquestionably right, however, in endeavoring to find a unity in the play, rather than supposing, as many critics have, that it contains two virtually separate tragedies, that of Deianeira followed by that of Heracles.⁴ For the structural unity observed in the *Trachiniae* by Jebb and others,⁵ achieved through Heracles' love for Iole, which is the cause for Deianeira's sending of the poisoned robe and hence for the death of both Deianeira and Heracles, is not sufficient: true dramatic unity demands that the functions of the characters also be integrally related and that they contribute to a single dramatic purpose.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that such a unity does exist, and that it is produced by a contrast between Deianeira and Heracles.

That there are elements of a general sort in which Deianeira and Heracles are contrasted has often been noticed. Weinstock comments on the contrast between the stationary existence of Deianeira and the roving life of Heracles, and between the constancy of Deianeira and the unfaithfulness of Heracles;⁶ Reinhardt speaks of the essential maleness of Heracles as contrasted with the femininity of Deianeira.⁷ The contrast has never, however, been examined fully nor granted its true importance for the play. One thing in particular has prevented this: the constant desire of critics to justify Heracles. Thus Webster argues that it is not unnatural for Heracles to show neither sympathy nor sorrow for Deianeira when Hyllus tells him of the innocence of her intentions and of her suicide,⁸ although the necessity to apologize for Heracles shows

⁴ Cf. Jebb, *Sophocles, Part V, The Trachiniae* xxxviii f.; Karl Reinhardt, *Sophokles* (Frankfurt am Main, 1933) 46.

⁵ Jebb, *op. cit.* (see note 4) xlii; Lewis Campbell, *Sophocles*, vol. 2.237.

⁶ Heinrich Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Leipzig, 1931) 139.

⁷ *Op. cit.* (see note 4) 69.

⁸ T. B. L. Webster, "Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Greek Poetry and Life* (Oxford, 1936) 164-80. Jebb, *op. cit.* (see note 4) xxxvii, expresses the case well: "We do not require him to be tender, but to be human."

clearly that his conduct is not natural. Thus, also, Norwood sees in the handing over of Iole to Hyllus a reparation to Deianeira and a recognition by Heracles that it is to Deianeira, not to Iole, that his true attachment belongs;⁹ yet the context of this incident emphasizes the callous and selfish spirit in which Heracles makes his disposal of Iole. All such apologies seem forced and inadequate, because they do not interpret the text of the play in a natural manner. An interpretation of Heracles' character in the most obvious way, with no attempt to justify him, reveals that critical passages such as the two mentioned above have an emphatic and precise meaning for the contrast.

In the following brief examination of the play, I shall attempt to show that there is a contrast of a double nature between Deianeira and Heracles: first, a contrast on purely human grounds; second, a contrast between the human qualities of Deianeira and the super-human status of Heracles; and that in both aspects of the contrast it is on Deianeira that the interest of the play is chiefly centered. In order to pursue this examination it will be necessary first to review the portions of the play which reveal Deianeira's character, and then to show how the character of Heracles forms a contrast to hers, in the two ways mentioned above.

The long speech of Deianeira which opens the play, although addressed nominally to the Nurse, is for the most part a monologue in effect; this is only one of several virtual monologues of Deianeira that find their dramatic fulfillment only in the contrast provided by the words of Heracles in the closing scene. In this speech Deianeira reveals anxiety, timidity, and a strong sense of foreboding. The worldly practicality of the Nurse's reply, with the suggestion that Hyllus be sent in search of Heracles, emphasizes Deianeira's impracticality, and the gratitude with which Deianeira receives the suggestion shows her graciousness. In her instructions to Hyllus Deianeira incidentally reveals a further important characteristic, when she states as a perfectly obvious fact that upon Heracles' safety her own depends: if he dies, she will die also. This is not merely a statement of physical dependence on Heracles, for it shows that Deianeira has no conception of life without Heracles, and this attitude is revealed by her again, later in the play. The prologue, then, reveals Deianeira as anxious, timid, and impractical

⁹ *Op. cit.* (see note 3) 156-7.

on the one hand, gracious to others and devoted to Heracles on the other.

In the speech following the *parodos*—another virtual monologue—Deianeira again shows anxiety, caused especially by the ominous tone of Heracles' words on setting out on his last expedition: "This time like a man no longer living he spoke" (161). At the end of the speech she gives further proof of her complete love of Heracles, when she speaks of her fear lest she "henceforth be deprived of the best of mortal men" (176f.).

Throughout her conversations with the aged messenger and with Lichas, which now follow, Deianeira exhibits a persistent uneasiness. This is especially marked when, after Lichas has reported that Heracles is alive and well and the Chorus exclaims that there is now "manifest happiness" for Deianeira, she answers somewhat dubiously and at once turns her attention to the unfortunate captives.

In the following incident there occurs the most striking proof in the play of Deianeira's sympathy and graciousness: her attitude to Iole. Her final words, in dismissing Iole, are especially effective in this connection: "Let her then enter the house that she may be as content as possible, and not receive at my hands a further woe to add to her present ills" (329–331). Not only is the dramatic irony of these words striking, but also their revelation of Deianeira's warm and generous nature.

Deianeira's conduct on being informed of Heracles' true reason for destroying Oechalia, and of Iole's identity shows, above all, unchanging loyalty and devotion to Heracles and complete unselfishness. In contrast with the Chorus, who express open anger at Heracles' underhand action, Deianeira utters not a word of blame; instead, she is dismayed and bewildered: "What is to be done, friends? For I am confounded by this present news" (385f.). The same spirit is displayed in her appeal to Lichas to tell the truth, where she declares, "I would be mad to blame my husband, when he is overcome by this disease (i.e. love), or this woman, who has no share in baseness nor in causing harm to me" (445–8). Even after her decision to take steps to recover Heracles' love, Deianeira declares that she is not angry with him: "For it is not, as I have said, right for a modest woman to yield to anger" (552f.).

In her acceptance of Nessus' word, upon which depends the success of her device, she shows again her impracticality; this she

herself recognizes later on, when it is too late to avert the catastrophe. When she begins to suspect that the anointed robe will kill Heracles, she states, as in the prologue, her determination to die if Heracles dies: "This I have resolved: if he shall fall, by that same force I too shall die. For to live in ill repute is not endurable to one who chooses to have lived not ignobly" (719-22). The last sentence recalls Ajax's similar resolve:¹⁰ as Ajax, so Deianeira has a firm concept of the noble life; but while Ajax's concerned matters of personal glory, Deianeira's is concerned entirely with her love for Heracles.

Two passages remain to be noticed: first, Deianeira's final and superlative proof of her lack of thought for herself and her devotion to Heracles, when she goes within, after Hyllus' report, in silence, without thought of justifying herself even to her son; second, the Nurse's description of Deianeira's death, which is a last summing up of her characteristics. The Nurse tells how her mistress wandered about the house, weeping at the touch of household objects and at the sight of servants; thus again Deianeira's tenderness and regard for others is stressed. Finally she entered the bed-chamber and threw herself on the bed; her final words are addressed to things connected with her married life: "O bed and bridal chamber, farewell now forever" (920f.). That her last thoughts turn to these things is a final proof that her whole life is centered in Heracles.

To sum up, Deianeira is devoted to Heracles, gracious toward others and completely unselfish; she is impractical, uncertain of herself and has a strong sense of foreboding. The last of these points has a clear structural value for the play, since it foreshadows the coming tragic events. All the rest of her characteristics, and the feeling of foreboding as well, in so far as it contributes to the impression of her uncertainty, will be seen to have their contrasts in the character of Heracles.

Heracles' character is much less fully portrayed, and will therefore require less comment. Before he appears, he has been called the best of mortals by his wife and son; the Chorus, being less attached to him, shows distinctly less enthusiasm. Only for Deianeira's sake do they seem to be eager for his return, and their words of praise for him are few; on the other hand, they display open hostility when they learn of his unfair treatment of Deianeira

¹⁰ *Aj.* 479-80.

in sending Iole to her. Only once do they speak words of praise, and this is at the end of Heracles' account of the famous labors, where their words are hardly more than a conventional recognition of the greatness of Heracles' achievements. To this somewhat cold attitude of the Chorus, there must be added, for our estimate of Heracles, his unjust treatment of Deianeira, his brutal hurling of Lichas to death and his indifference to Hyllus' well-being. This last appears in Hyllus' own words, when he quotes his father: "My son, come near, flee not my affliction, even if it be necessary for you to die with me" (797f.).

The bitterness and brutality of Heracles' words from his entrance up to the point at which Hyllus tells him of Deianeira's death and innocence may be pardoned for the most part on the grounds that he is in agony, and believes that he has been murdered by his wife. One passage in this speech, however, contains a definite contrast between Heracles' selfishness and Deianeira's love of him. Deianeira's final words, addressed to her bed and bridal chamber, have been quoted above; here there is a deliberate parallel which emphatically recalls this, when Heracles makes a similar apostrophe: "O hands, my hands, O back and breast and arms of mine!"¹¹ Each apostrophizes what is dearest: Deianeira her life with Heracles, Heracles his own physical attributes.

When Hyllus finally succeeds in telling his father of Deianeira's innocence and of the trick of Nessus, Heracles makes no mention of Deianeira. That this is intended by Sophocles to emphasize Heracles' disregard of Deianeira in contrast to her devotion is shown by the nature of the passage. Hyllus recalls the silence of Deianeira's withdrawal when he says here, with reference to her: "The situation is such that it is not right to keep silence" (1126). Heracles greets the news of Deianeira's death merely by regretting that he could not have dispatched her himself; and to Hyllus' explanation that she "intended well" he angrily answers: "Was it well, you wretch, for her to slay your father?" (1137). To him the intention means nothing, for only the act affects him. All this harshness would be forgotten if at the conclusion of Hyllus' explanation, Heracles showed some pity for Deianeira; but after three verses of lamentation he says only: "Come, my son; for your father lives no longer" (1146). The preceding three verses are ambiguo-

¹¹ 1089-90; this contrast is noticed by Reinhardt, *op. cit.* (see note 4) 70.

ous:¹² he may be lamenting for Deianeira's tragedy as well as his own misfortune; and this ambiguity creates an air of suspense, on which the selfishness of the words *πατήρ γὰρ οὐκέτ' ἔστι σοι* breaks with greater emphasis. This silence about Deianeira forms a striking contrast to the silence of Deianeira, so recently recalled to our minds by Hyllus' words. Thus the contrast between devotion and selfishness is particularly stressed a second time.

The following passage, in which Heracles orders Hyllus to burn his body on Mount Oeta, shows Heracles' disregard of Hyllus' feelings and natural instincts, but since it does not involve Deianeira, it need not be examined. Deianeira is next concerned when Heracles gives his second command, that Hyllus marry Iole. Callousness toward both Hyllus and Iole and a completely selfish motivation are revealed by the manner in which he makes the request: "That no other man than you may have her who has lain by my side" (1225f.). It is nothing more, as Kitto observes, than "a tribute to himself."¹³

Hyllus is horrified at the idea, and says that only a madman would take one who was the cause both of Deianeira's death and Heracles' present state. Arguing against his father, he exclaims: "But am I then to learn impiety?" (1245). He feels that to marry Iole would be irreverent toward both his parents. Heracles' answer is significant: "It is no impiety, if you gratify my heart."¹⁴ Again he disregards Deianeira completely, when Hyllus brings her into consideration. This passage is a third special marking of the contrast. Deianeira's attitude toward Iole was remarkable for its evidence of devotion to Heracles and generosity toward Iole; Heracles' is remarkable for its disregard of all that pertains to Deianeira and its callousness toward everything but his own desire.

To sum up the elements of this first part of the contrast, we find an emphatic counterpart to Deianeira's devotion in Heracles' disregard of her; to her gentleness in his brutality, her generosity in his complete selfishness. Three times Sophocles has emphasized the contrast by opposing their words and behavior in special critical points.

The second thread of contrast is much slighter, but it is of vital

¹² The plural *ἔστραμεν* (1145) contributes especially to the ambiguity of these verses.

¹³ *Op. cit.* (see note 1) 294.

¹⁴ 1246. The emphatic position of *τούμὸν* in the phrase *τούμὸν εἰ τέρψεις κέαρ* marks the selfishness of Heracles' words.

importance for the understanding of the tragedy; this is the contrast between Deianeira's very human impracticality and uncertainty and Heracles' super-human effectiveness and certainty in word and action. The passages emphasizing the qualities of Deianeira important for this point have already been examined. Of Heracles' swift effectiveness there is one excellent picture long before he appears: Deianeira describes his killing of the Centaur in the following words (565-8):

ἐκ δ' ἦυσ' ἐγώ,
 χῶ Ζηνὸς εὐθὺς παῖς ἐπιστρέψας χεροῖν
 ἦκεν κομήτην ἰόν· ἐς δὲ πλεύμονας
 στέρνων διερροίζησεν.

Jebb's translation retains something of the swiftness implied by the Greek sentence: "I shrieked; the son of Zeus turned quickly round, and shot a feathered arrow; it whizzed through his breast to the lungs." The compactness of Deianeira's description well reflects the swift effectiveness of the action.

More important is Heracles' behavior when he hears that the Centaur caused his death. He is at once certain of the course of action he must pursue, and drives relentlessly to its completion, in spite of Hyllus' constant wavering. This is especially marked by the unhesitating precision with which he dismisses the first of his commands to Hyllus and launches upon the second: "Then even that will suffice. But grant me now a small favor in addition to the greater ones" (1216f.).

To be associated with this effectiveness is the emphasis on Heracles' status as the son of Zeus. The Chorus makes repeated allusion to this; Heracles' first words are "O Zeus"; that he builds an altar and sacrifices to Zeus after his victory reminds us of it; more than once he calls upon Zeus as father. It is this element of his nature that lends significance to Hyllus' words when he reluctantly consents to marry Iole: "Never could I appear base while I trust in you, father" (1250f.); and it is this that makes the closing words of the play especially forceful: "There is none of these things that is not Zeus." This super-human aspect of Heracles' nature explains his certainty and effectiveness, which are strongly contrasted to Deianeira's uncertainty and helplessness. In a way, it explains his disregard of Deianeira on the mention of Nessus' name, for Heracles' course of action is fated and necessary: he must pro-

ceed as he does. It does not, however, justify his treatment of Deianeira on human grounds; the emphatic contrast between them shows that Sophocles did not intend such a justification. It is rather that in this super-human, necessary aspect, Heracles is a force rather than a character; as such, he is a part of Deianeira's fate. It is this second thread of contrast, between the human uncertainty of Deianeira and the element of fated necessity in Heracles, that raises the theme of the tragedy from the particular, the story of Deianeira's love, Heracles' selfish disregard of her, and the unhappy consequences, to the universal, the portrayal of mankind's struggle with powers beyond its control.

The greater emphasis is upon the purely human contrast, and in this Deianeira is clearly the central and tragic figure. The minor contrast, however, is of vital importance for the tragedy, for upon it the *Trachiniae* depends for its universality; in this too it is upon Deianeira that our attention is chiefly fixed, since she is the representative of humanity.

It is clear that all the major elements of the characters of both Deianeira and Heracles contribute to the double contrast between them; the significance of many of their characteristics cannot be satisfactorily explained apart from it. Moreover, it is only by a recognition of the importance of the contrast that a dramatic unity can be found in the play which does not unduly minimize the part of one of the two chief figures. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that we should interpret the *Trachiniae* in accordance with the contrast; and the above interpretation represents an attempt to follow out its meaning for the play.