



Repetition and Irony at Sophocles Trachiniae 574-81

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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

REPETITION AND IRONY AT SOPHOCLES *TRACHINIAE* 574–81

In Sophocles' *Trachiniae* Deianira, after first responding tolerantly to the news that the young captive Iole is to be Heracles' concubine (436–48, 457–67, 490–92), takes action to ensure her husband's love. In a rhesis (531–87) she explains her action to the chorus: to share her husband with another, younger woman is intolerable; she has therefore taken advantage of the love-philter that she received as a gift from the dying centaur Nessus after he had been shot with one of Heracles' arrows as punishment for molesting her. Nessus, reports Deianira, addressed his dying words to her (569–77):¹

“παῖ γέροντος Οἰνέως,
 τοσόνδ’ ὀνήσῃ τῶν ἐμῶν, ἐὰν πίθῃ, 570
 πορθμῶν, ὀθοῦνεχ’ ὑστάτην σ’ ἔπεμψ’ ἐγώ·
 ἐὰν γάρ ἀμφίθρεπτον αἶμα τῶν ἐμῶν
 σφαγῶν ἐνέγκῃ χερσὶν ἢ μελαγχόλους
 ἔβαψεν ἰοῦς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας,
575
 ἔσται φρενός σοι τοῦτο κλητήριον
 τῆς Ἑρακλείας, ὥστε μήτιν’ εἰσιδὼν
 στέρξει γυναῖκα κείνος ἀντὶ σοῦ πλέον.”

Ἦι μελαγχόλους / ἔβαψεν ἰοῦς θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας is a difficult and arresting phrase. Following A. A. Long's persuasive arguments,² I understand θρέμμα Λερναίας ὕδρας as referring to the hydra's poison, not to the hydra itself; and with M. L. West,³ I take these words to be in apposition to the χολήν implicit in μελαγχόλους and understand Heracles as the subject of the verb. (West's arguments are compelling: there is no instance of βάπτω with a double accusative meaning “dip x into y”; and there is no parallel for the construction that would have θρέμμα, meaning “poison,” serve as the subject of ἔβαψεν.) The verb ἔβαψεν then must bear the metaphoric sense, “wound” (by weapons), that it has several times in tragedy (cf. *Aj.* 95, *Aesch. Cho.* 1011, [*Aesch.*] *PV* 863, and *Eur. Phoen.* 1578):⁴ the phrase is to be translated “where he [Heracles] caused a wound with his gall-dark arrows, [gall-dark] with the hydra's poison.” In this context, however, the verb also suggests something of its literal meaning,

1. The text cited is that of P. E. Easterling, ed., *Sophocles: “Trachiniae”* (Cambridge, 1982).

2. “Poisonous ‘Growths’ in *Trachiniae*,” *GRBS* 8 (1967): 275–77.

3. “Tragica III,” *BICS* 26 (1979): 110–11.

4. The use in 574 admittedly is somewhat different from that in the parallels cited, since βάπτω is used here of striking from afar, not at close range. But one should note that even the distinction between βάλλω (“hit with a missile”) and οὐτά(ζ)ω (“wound by thrusting”) is not always maintained; see, e.g., *Eur. Hipp.* 684 and *HF* 199, where οὐτάζω is used of striking from afar.

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“dip”—here, the dipping of the arrows in the poison. Sophocles’ use of βάπτειν thus gives Heracles’ action a double sense.⁵

The verb βάπτειν is not at all common in tragedy.⁶ It is therefore striking that Deianira should repeat this verb six lines later in describing how she applied the philter to the robe she is sending to Heracles (578–81):

τοῦτ’ ἐννοήσασ’, ὦ φίλοι, δόμοις γὰρ ἦν
 κείνου θανόντος ἐγκεκλημένον καλῶς,
 χιτῶνα τόνδ’ ἔβαψα, προσβαλοῦσ’ ὄσα
 ζῶν κείνος εἶπε· καὶ πεπεύρανται τάδε.

In line 580 ἔβαψα with χιτῶνα τόνδ’ forms a bold expression.⁷ The verb βάπτω can be used to describe the dyeing of wool (e.g., Pl. *Resp.* 429D–E, Ar. *Eccl.* 215–16) or a gown (e.g., Ar. *Lys.* 51), but there was no vat of the love-philter into which Deianira could dip the robe. (Later, at 674–75 and 689–90, she describes in detail how she applied the lotion with a tuft of wool.) Thus the verb’s sense here is peculiar, and its repetition, so soon after its earlier use, is surely meant to recall the earlier occurrence.⁸ Deianira’s action therefore seems ominous: since the first “dipping” was deadly in its results, the second also portends a fatal outcome. One can no longer dismiss such a repetition out of hand as “careless” or “unconscious.”⁹ Easterling has demonstrated that Sophocles’ repetition even of relatively common words (e.g., φέρω at *Aj.* 799 and 802, or ἀκούω at *OC* 551 and 554) is generally significant as part of the rhetorical structure of a given passage.¹⁰ If even such words can be significant in their repetition, we should be all the more alert to the possible importance of the repetition of the uncommon βάπτω, especially when the occurrences are bold in their expression. (In fact, the difficulties of 573–74 and the peculiar phrasing of 580 may well be due to Sophocles’ decision to produce the verbal echo.)

I am not advocating a psychological interpretation according to which Deianira unconsciously reveals with this repetition her deadly intentions. Rather, the repetition adds to the larger ambiguity and irony that are appreciated by the

5. Although most editors construe θρέμμα as the subject of the verb, they recognize, at least implicitly, the double significance of ἔβαψεν here. See Easterling, “*Trachiniae*,” pp. 144–45 (ad 572–75) for a summary of the other chief interpretations of 573–74.

6. Beyond its two occurrences in *Trachiniae* and the four parallels cited above, βάπτω appears nowhere else in Sophocles or Aeschylus (although *POxy.* 2256 15. 2 = Aesch. frag. 451s 15. 2 Radt preserves βαψα as an annotation in the right-hand margin) and only three times in Euripides: twice, prosaically, of the dipping into water of a pitcher and a torch (*Hec.* 610 and *HF* 929, respectively), and once of a foundering ship (*Or.* 707). Of course other forms of the root βαψ- are found in tragedy; most notable in this connection is Aesch. *Ag.* 612, where Clytemnestra’s χαλχοῦ βαφᾶς may well have the type of double meaning that I suggest below for ἔβαψα at 580.

7. The text gives us no cause to adopt the notion, entertained by J. C. Kamerbeek, ed., *Sophocles: “Trachiniae”* (Leiden, 1959), pp. 133–34 (ad 580), that βάπτειν here refers to diluting the poison with water or oil. The bare phrase χιτῶνα τόνδ’ ἔβαψα is amplified in the following participial clause: with R. C. Jebb, ed., *Sophocles: “Trachiniae”* (Cambridge, 1892), p. 91 (ad 580), and others, I take the participial clause to mean “with application of everything that he directed.”

8. Most commentators and critics have been silent on this point; only Kamerbeek, “*Trachiniae*,” p. 133 (ad 580) remarks, noncommittally and without elaboration, that “the use of the verb [at 580] may also refer to 574.”

9. For this common opinion, see W. Schmid and O. Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, vol. 1.2 (Munich, 1934), p. 489; cf. also the survey of such views in P. E. Easterling, “Repetition in Sophocles,” *Hermes* 101 (1973): 14–21.

10. “Repetition,” pp. 14–34.

play's audience. Both Deianira and Heracles perform actions that lead to their ruin, a ruin unimagined and unintended by them. Here the poet joins their actions together by the repeated use of βάπτω: each one "dips" (arrows, appropriately, for the man, a cloak for the woman) with fatal consequences. Deianira, moreover, hesitates over her action: no sooner does she explain her use of the philter than she expresses her uncertainty and diffidence (584–87). In the exchange between Deianira and the chorus that follows (588–97), Sophocles shows her rejecting the chorus' advice of caution.¹¹ Late learning, it has often been observed, is fundamental to this drama.¹² Many elements in the play and the tradition (cf. Hes. frag. 25. 17–22 M.-W.) lead the audience to expect dire consequences from Deianira's sending the robe, consequences that Deianira, although hesitant about her action, cannot foresee. In this context the striking repetition of βάπτω adds to the irony and is a further, and hitherto unnoticed, example of Sophocles' verbal artistry.¹³

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11. As F. Solmsen has recently argued; see "ἀλλ' εἰδέναι χρῆ δρῶσαν: The Meaning of Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 588–93," *AJP* 106 (1985): 490–96.

12. On this topic see, e.g., C. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 103–21, and S. Lawrence, "The Dramatic Epistemology of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Phoenix* 32 (1978): 288–304.

13. For instructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper I am grateful to the Editor, the anonymous referee, and my colleagues James J. Clauss and Mary Whitlock Blundell.

A NOTE ON THE FIRST THREE VICTIMS OF OSTRACISM (Ἀθηναίων Πολιτεία 22. 4)

καὶ πρῶτος ὠστρακίσθη τῶν ἐκείνου συγγενῶν Ἴππαρχος Χάρμου Κολλυτεύς,
 δι' ὃν καὶ μάλιστα τὸν νόμον ἔθηκεν ὁ Κλεισθένης, ἐξελάσαι βουλόμενος
 αὐτόν.

The clause καὶ πρῶτος ὠστρακίσθη τῶν ἐκείνου Ἴππαρχος Χάρμου Κολλυτεύς is generally understood to mean "The first man to be ostracized was one of his [sc. Pisistratus'] relatives, Hipparchus son of Charmus, of Collytus."¹ Those who interpret the clause in this way evidently take it to be both a paraphrase of Androtion on ostracism (*FGrH* 324 F 6 περι δὲ τούτου [sc. Hipparchus]

1. P. J. Rhodes, trans., *The "Athenian Constitution"* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 65; Rhodes' translation accords with his apparent reluctance to conceive of the Alcmaeonids as relatives of the tyrants; cf. P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian "Athenaion Politeia"* (Oxford, 1981), p. 186. See also F. G. Kenyon, trans., *Aristotle on the Athenian Constitution* (London, 1895), p. 40; K. von Fritz and E. Kapp, trans., *Aristotle's "Constitution of Athens" and Related Texts* (New York, 1950), p. 91; H. Rackham, trans., *The "Athenian Constitution"* (London, 1952), p. 67; J. Warrington, trans., *Aristotle's "Politics" and "Athenian Constitution"* (London, 1959), p. 264, n. 4; cf. also D. J. Phillips, "Athenian Ostracism," in *Hellenika: Essays on Greek Politics and History*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley (North Ryde, New South Wales, 1982), p. 29. The translation of G. Mathieu and B. Hausoul-lier, *Aristote: "Constitution d'Athènes"* (Paris, 1922), p. 24 ("Le premier qui fut frappé de l'ostracisme parmi ses parents fut Hipparchos, fils de Charmos, du deme Collytos") has apparently been lost on most English translators and commentators.