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For Esty and Judy

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BRUCE HEIDEN

Columbus, Ohio
February 1989

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INTRODUCTION

Reading as a Sophist

After years of comparative neglect and even scorn, Sophocles' *Trachiniae* has begun to exert on modern readers some of the fascination it must have held for the ancients. Ours indeed is a age that allows no inhibitions to obstruct its appreciation of a drama that features "love charms, magic, primitive battles between fantastic creatures, sexual violence and desire, bull-shaped river gods, centaurs, the invisible poison of the Hydra's blood."[1] Yet this most lurid of Sophoclean texts has also stimulated serious meditation on such matters of contemporary intellectual concern as the threshold of civilization and savagery, the conditions of knowledge, and the coherence of existence. *Trachiniae* has been rediscovered as a classic, a work of as much interest to our time as it was to Sophocles'.

In the growing body of recent commentary surrounding *Trachiniae*,[2] this study differs from others most obviously in its scope. An exercise in what has been called "the art of reading slowly,"[3] it patiently interprets the text in great, though not exhaustive, detail, and it respects, though not slavishly, the text's dramatic sequence. This choice was not intended to effect a methodological advance over other studies that define the object of interpretation differently, for decisions to limit or expand the scope of research are always somewhat arbitrary. It was motivated by nothing more compelling than delight in the practice of close reading, and suspicion that a text that concerns itself with an unruly secret, the charm of Nessus, might hold some unruly secrets of its own that only close reading could uncover.

This is not the first study of *Trachiniae* to pursue secrets in the text; the late Cedric Whitman proposed a program for reading all of Sophocles that assumed hidden elements in every play.[4] But Whitman's program did not call for microscopic reading, and the secrets it found in *Trachiniae* were not those discovered by my own study. Therefore it will be helpful to examine briefly certain aspects of Whitman's project, both to acknowledge his brilliant

insights and clarify our differences. Whitman sounds the keynote of his study in the following words:[5]

> Sophocles was an artist who hid his meanings under a glossy and almost impenetrable surface of simplicity . . . he could veil his human intensity in formal grace and refined brilliance . . . he has often seemed stiff and remote. Yet the most discriminating readers have always felt his inner fire, and since the fifth century B.C., scholars and men of letters have used all their philology and intuition to pierce his baffling exterior.

This statement was and, to a great extent, remains, a powerful, courageous iconoclasm. It tacitly opposes the commonly held view that Greek drama was an entirely public, sensual art form, one immediately, almost naturally comprehensible to the fairly coherent community in whose united physical presence it was performed.[6] Whitman instead posits a divided, baffling text, and an audience divided between the most discriminating and the less, an audience moreover of *readers*. All this suggests to classical scholars the much-ridiculed Euripidean studies of A. W. Verrall, an association that still can produce a violent reflex. And in taking respectful notice of Sophocles' critical *Nachleben*, Whitman uproots the tragedian's audience from the Theater of Dionysus altogether.

In short, Whitman seems almost to have recognized the conditions of a text that is open to creative interpretation. But he was in fact not prepared to acknowledge the place of creativity in reading, even in his own. In the paragraph following that quoted above he hastens to assure his professional colleagues that his work will not challenge the positivistic canons of philology. "I have tried diligently to relate my interpretation to what little historical evidence there is and to allow Sophocles to speak for himself as far as possible."[7] But, we ask, how baffling or cryptic can a text be if it speaks for itself? Whitman's reading of Sophocles now appears to be much more conventional than at first promised. And indeed at many points Whitman will insist that, in crucial matters of meaning, Sophocles' text leaves no room for doubt. Of Ajax he declares, "no one can disbelieve in the hero's greatness."[8] Those who have doubted Deianeira's moral spotlessness Whitman derides as "fault hunters."[9] Faced with an undeniably baffling passage, Antigone's strange self-justification, in which she says she would not have disobeyed a decree prohibiting burial of a father or son, Whitman swiftly deletes it from the text. "Once this passage has been removed, the scene is intelligible and not in the least out of character."[10]

Yet Whitman's chapters on the plays do contain some fine perceptions of Sophocles' obscurity. These are probably attributable to his integrity as a reader, for the clear, hard simplicity of heroes interested him much more than the elusiveness of the text. Whitman longed to hear a univocal hymn of praise for the heroism he admired, but he had to admit, and did admit, that Sophocles did not provide it. Through his theory of cryptic writing Whitman attempted to master this fundamentally unsatisfactory circumstance. By distinguishing between Sophocles' explicit surface and his hidden depth, Whitman was able to extract the true heroism he sought in Sophocles from the alien environment in which it tragically lay. Doing this, he suggested, might require nothing more than looking in the right place: "The only possibility of an advance . . . lies in a totally new point of view. Attention must be focused not on the chorus, which embodies the framework, but on the hero himself."[11] In this passage he seems to say that the heterogeneity of the Sophoclean text can be escaped simply by reading only part of it, and that he knows which part to read. In speaking of "the inconsistency between what the hero does and what the chorus says"[12] Whitman does not mention that hero and chorus sometimes agree, and more important, that they may contradict themselves as well as one another. How to detach the framework then?

Fortunately Whitman's actual readings do not strictly follow the (somewhat inconsistent) guidelines set for them in his Preface and Introduction. Even after he has relegated the Sophoclean chorus to the margin of his interpretation, his study of the heroes finds itself confronted by contradictions that he cannot completely rationalize. In the following insightful sentences he expounds the leading theme of his interpretation of *Trachiniae*, "late learning."[13]

> Man must act, if he acts at all, from likelihood. This fact the Sophists of the time developed not only in theory, but especially in the practical procedures of legal argument; and once more, it is possible to see how Sophocles was affected by the Sophistic, but in his own peculiar way. He makes his characters act on the basis of likelihood, while the fatal dice are loaded hopelessly and irrationally in favor of the most unlikely event. Thus, in the split between the hoped-for likelihood and the unknown, unlooked-for facts, the plot of *Trachiniae* becomes a long and painful search for truth, whose final discovery brings overwhelming despair. Hence Deianeira's great scene is not that in which she sends the robe, or where she kills herself, but that in

> which she finds out from Lichas who the captive princess is and why Heracles has brought her home with him. Later she finds out what the results of the robe were: and after her death Heracles and Hyllus find out the answers to the remaining mysteries. 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. The famous irony of Sophocles here takes a new form: the characters constantly struggle to do what they constantly say cannot be done. Deianeira herself sets the tone for the whole piece in her opening lines, where she says first that life cannot be judged until it is over; but then, contradicting herself immediately, she says that she knows her life at least is miserable. Likelihood tells her that she is safe in saying that; but she has yet to learn how miserable she can be.

Within these sentences a powerful intuition is at work. Whitman undoubtedly has his finger on something. Deianeira does contradict herself. Knowledge does obsess the characters of *Trachiniae*, who often claim to possess it, less often despair of it. Their expectations are indeed sometimes frustrated, and these expectations are sometimes explicitly based upon a calculation of likelihood. Yet Whitman's influential conclusion about the play, that it teaches the futility of expectation and the certainty of retrospection, does not do justice to the complexity of the text. For example, Whitman does not set forth exactly where in the text conclusions based on likelihood are drawn. Not all the passages deal with predictions of the future, and those that do predict the future have implications that seriously threaten Whitman's interpretation. The idea that Iole will remain in Deianeira's home as Heracles' favored concubine is introduced by the Messenger as a matter of likelihood: Heracles has not sent Iole to the house like a slave; Deianeira should not expect that; it isn't probable, if Heracles is consumed by desire:

> οὐδ' εἰκός, εἴπερ ἐντεθέρμανται πόθῳ. (368)

If the argument from εἰκός is clearly specious, as Whitman proclaims,[14] then Iole's future in the house should remain a matter of doubt. For Whitman, as for most readers, it is a matter of certainty; but it concerns the future, not the past, even after Lichas confirms the Messenger's report. Again, the idea that Deianeira's robe might kill Heracles is first mentioned when Deianeira infers

that Heracles *ought* to die as a result of the poison on the arrow that killed Nessus:

> πῶς οὐκ ὀλεῖ καὶ τόνδε; δόξῃ γοῦν ἐμῇ. (718)
>
> How will [the arrow] not kill him as well? At least so it seems to me.

At this point Heracles' death is clearly in the realm of expectation. We seem to have an exception to Whitman's rule of the unlikely event. Or do we? Heracles has not yet died when Deianeira kills herself; he is still alive, of course, when he proclaims the fulfilment of the oracles about his death; he is still alive when the play ends. The text does not assert unequivocally that without the pyre, Heracles could not have survived the robe.[15]

Whitman sees that the characters of *Trachiniae* sometimes make claims of knowledge that prove incorrect, and he sees that this somehow poses knowledge as a problem in the play; yet he ultimately accepts some of the claims of knowledge as true. His interpretation, therefore, operates fundamentally by selecting statements deemed true, isolating them from their context, and letting them "speak for themselves": the "late learning" formulation, for example, is lifted straight from the words of Deianeira:

> ὧν ἐγὼ μεθύστερον,
> ὅτ' οὐκέτ' ἀρκεῖ, τὴν μάθησιν ἄρνυμαι. (710-711)
>
> Knowledge of which (i.e., the centaur's plan) I am acquiring too late, when it is no longer of any use.

Despite the textual self-contradictions of which he is well aware, Whitman still expects the text somehow to speak the truth. Indeed his entire reading of Sophocles is based upon a passionate belief in the possibility and desirability of truth, for it proclaims the Sophoclean hero's fidelity to an inner law:

> Those who say that [Sophocles'] plays teach sophrosyne have generally failed to recognize how refined and true may be the understanding which the Sophoclean hero has of himself, and how the man who is, in the eyes of all the world, a law unto himself may yet be acting in obedience to a true law which is beyond the vision of those who observe him.[16]

The complementarity between the method of Whitman's reading and its moral program is obvious. Yet a reading of *Trachiniae* that steadily faces the text's contradictions instead of resolving them must cast doubt upon both the integrity of the heroic will and the truthfulness of the text. This, in fact, is the reading undertaken in the present study. Like Whitman's, it seeks to uncover something deemed hidden in the text; but instead of revealing an allegedly true truth of a hero, allegedly concealed by a false truth of a chorus, it uncovers the contradictions and uncertainties that all the characters' claims of knowledge conceal.

Some critics of Sophocles might protest that the focus of this reading on textual inconsistency does nothing more than anachronistically, or even tastelessly, resist dramatic conventions accepted by all of Sophocles' contemporaries, and that in so doing it reduces *Trachiniae* to meaninglessness. Actually this interpretation shifts attention away from Sophocles' meaning and the meanings of his characters to a facet of the text that has been neglected for too long: its probable, possible, or intended effects, that is, its rhetoric in the broadest sense.[17] To be sure when critics of Sophocles have dealt with inconsistencies in his plays they have usually attributed them to the poet's dramatic technique, his desire to surprise his audience or arouse it to pity.[18] But this recognition of Sophoclean rhetoric, though welcome, has been inadequate for two chief reasons. First, it tends to assume that Sophocles' rhetoric is opaque to his audience and thus does not stimulate any doubts as to his texts' meanings or their truthfulness. A.J.A. Waldock, for example, states, "There is a principle of criticism that may sound trivial, but that has very great usefulness as a check and a guide: it is this: an audience has very little time to look backwards; it is too busy keeping up with events of the moment. (This is an inability that dramatists count on . . .) This question about [Deianeira's intention] would have no reality for an audience . . ."[19] In other words, audiences never critically examine the impression a play produces. Second, it rarely, and only in very obvious cases, recognizes that Sophocles' characters, as well as Sophocles the dramatist, speak and act in the hope of producing effects. Indeed, the characters' speeches are riddled with gaps and contradictions much like those attributed to Sophocles' dramatic technique, and one might conclude that the characters of Sophocles, not just apparent sophists like the Odysseus of *Philoctetes*, but all of them, have dramatic or rhetorical techniques of their own. It cannot, therefore, be safely assumed, as even critics of dramatic technique have done, that the characters in Sophoclean tragedy ever mean what they say, or that Sophocles himself was fully committed to any impression of meaning his plays may

seem to produce. The meanings of the plays and their speeches are among the effects of their rhetoric, and may be studied as such.

It is strange that the guild of classical scholars, usually so historical in approach, should have failed to take seriously the rhetorical aspect of Greek tragedy; even Whitman, who goes much further than most scholars in considering the influence of the sophists upon Sophocles, insists staunchly upon the truthfulness of the Sophoclean heroes.[20] Of course a critic bent on demonstrating Sophocles' devotion to truth might adduce the fact that the plays contain numerous speeches proclaiming or demanding truth and deprecating lies; yet it should not require any extraordinary suspiciousness to recognize that the claim of truth may itself have a powerful effect, and that it may be made precisely in order to produce this effect. Many ordinary Athenians of the fifth century will have been aware of the possible rhetorical motives of the statements they heard in private life, in the courts and assemblies, and in the theater; of course so would sophists, politicians, and poets. Especially dramatic poets, who aroused powerful emotions through illusionistic presentation of stories to which they had made considerable inventive contributions. For such Athenians, and for many poets as far back as Homer, rhetoric was not an alien intrusion upon a pure language of truth but a part of life, and the theater was the last place where they would have wanted to forget this.

Modern critics, on the other hand, have been so charmed by the rhetoric of either Sophocles' choruses or his heroes (since Whitman especially the latter) that they have scarcely noticed it as rhetoric at all: it is truth, just as the speeches claim. "The great speech in which Heracles lists his achievements (1089 ff.) has a grandeur and a pathos which convince us of the necessity of his strength and the value of his services."[21] In other words, Heracles is noble because he speaks nobly. Not even the sophisticated structuralist/imagery studies of Charles Segal have opened a rhetorical perspective on Sophocles; indeed, despite their extraordinary contributions, they may be said to have carried the obliteration of rhetoric to a new extreme. Segal's studies of *Trachiniae* elicit from the text transpersonal patterns of imagery that, it is claimed, directly manifest meaning. "It would be an oversimplification to say that the *thelxis* of the poisoned robe is merely a symbol of lust. Rather to the mythopoeic imagination, the robe and the poison *are* the lust, and the plasticity of the symbol allows the poet to conjoin and interweave the psychological and cosmic orders."[22] "These metaphorical and symbolical links between present and past are not an artificial superposition, but the expression of a terrible vision conveyed through the plastic power of myth and symbol . . . Sophocles has allowed the mythical material to speak in its

own terms with a direct factuality which is characteristically his own."[23] In gathering references to "time" or "knowledge" from all over the text with little or no regard to their speakers or the circumstances of their utterance, Segal's studies almost completely obscure the rhetorical poses of the characters and the problems they raise. Only this allows Segal to present the patterns of imagery he discovers as a more or less completely unified text.[24] When he does deal with the difficulties posed by a particular scene, the exodos of *Trachiniae*, which leaves doubts about Heracles' future, Segal must struggle to keep the text coherent. Rather than admit that the text does not close off the network of imagery he has traced, Segal supplies the apotheosis his pattern requires.[25] Sophocles' "vision" appears to have been less complete, or less explicit, or both, than Segal would suppose. Yet a rhetorical approach to the text would allow us to study the same quasi-patterns that Segal has displayed, without demanding a unity that cannot be found in them. We can observe that the text creates an effect of unity without attributing the unity to the text itself. We can recognize that, rather than proceeding from a doubtful poetic vision, the text's effect of unity actually requires the interpretive, affective contribution of the spectator or reader.

While traditional philology always insists upon its objectivity, disavowing itself as a creative subject and claiming simply to present a text that speaks for itself, rhetorically self-conscious reading acknowledges from the start the subject without whom the text can have no meaning or effect whatsoever. It acknowledges as well that the audience of a text comprises a plurality of persons who in all probability will respond differently to the same text, and that even the same person may respond in different ways to the same text, at different times or even at one time. Conventions of discourse may render some reactions more likely than others, and rhetorical reading may attempt to trace these conventions with special care. Nevertheless it avoids reducing the effect of a text to a closed set of conventional responses, because conventions exist only as abstractions from particular acts of discourse, which are always unique and thus free and creative even when they contribute to a dominant mode of response. Conventions themselves, moreover, may intersect to elicit plural responses to a given utterance, as in any common pun; and plurality of response may itself be accepted as a convention of discourse, as it is, for the most part, in the modern Western academy. Rhetorically self-conscious reading therefore deliberately exhibits the text's openness to a variety of responses.

This is just to say that rhetorically self-conscious reading not only studies the rhetoric of the text, but that it also recognizes the ineluctably rhetorical nature of reading itself. It posits an epistemological gap between the text and its audiences, which prevents the audiences from ever definitively knowing either what the text is or what it means. Audiences will attempt to bridge this gap by creating an impression of the text and (if they are not vigilantly self-conscious, perhaps even if they are) substituting this impression for the text itself, treating it *as* the text and responding accordingly. This activity can be recognized as rhetorical equally well whether it is regarded as a kind of trope, as the effect of persuasion, or as both. It can be observed not only in a reading of any whole text, but just as importantly in the responses the characters in a play or novel make to one another. Thus in focusing upon the probable, possible, or intended effects of a text, rhetorical reading focuses upon the act of interpretation as such.

Dramatic texts obviously lend themselves to interpretation as representations of action, but the spectator of a drama may also pay attention to the actual performance itself, the acting, scenery, and costumes; and he may reflect upon what effects the author hopes to achieve by the entire performance. The rhetorically self-conscious spectator therefore suspends disbelief in the play's representation, but he also suspends belief: he simultaneously watches the author, the characters and the actors. And when, in watching the characters, he observes them making representations in *their* speeches and gestures, he similarly suspends both disbelief and belief, contemplating *what* the characters represent, the *effects* such representations may have on the characters portrayed in the play, and the material elements of the characters' representational performances. In short, he sees the represented world as a stage, the characters as players, the drama as an illusion of an illusion.

The reader who looks for representations effected by the characters in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* will find them without difficulty, for the play seldom represents its characters as doing anything other than representing. The play's action consists almost entirely of narrative speeches in which the characters represent events occurring either outside the scene represented in the orchestra, inside the speakers' bodies where they cannot be seen, or in the future. The play begins as Deianeira summarizes the difficulty of her life since Achelous courted her; Hyllus arrives with a report of reports of Heracles' whereabouts, and Deianeira tells him about the oracle predicting Heracles' future. In the parodos the Chorus describes the cosmic order that guarantees Heracles' safety. Deianeira describes the state of marriage for the Chorus, then narrates Heracles' departure, including narration of the oracle predicting Heracles' future, an oracle reported to Heracles by the priestesses of Dodona, who got it from the sacred oak. A messenger arrives to report the arrival of Lichas, who has reported the imminent arrival of Heracles; Lichas arrives and narrates what Heracles did in his absence.

Later the Messenger reports a different report which Lichas had given. In her attempt to extract the truth from Lichas Deianeira represents her own temperament. In the first stasimon the Chorus narrates the battle of Heracles and Achelous. Deianeira emerges from the palace and describes for the Chorus the situation that will exist when she, Heracles, and Iole live together. Then she narrates her acquisition of Nessus' charm, a narration that includes Nessus' representation of the charm's effects. After sending Lichas away with the robe and returning to the palace, she emerges again to narrate the destruction of the wool used to apply the charm. Hyllus arrives and narrates the agony of Heracles at Cape Cenaeum. In the third stasimon the Chorus narrates the chain of events leading to the fulfilment of the oracle received by Heracles. The Nurse narrates Deianeira's suicide. Heracles is brought to the palace, where he describes the effect of the poison on him, recounts his past conquests, reports the oracles and their fulfilment, and describes the form his death must take.

Most of the above representations are couched in a rhetoric of knowledge and truth; that is, they claim to impart knowledge of actual events. But throughout *Trachiniae* one also finds references to the effects of these representations, their power to elicit or ease anxiety, to arouse joy or pity, to earn compensation, and to induce belief. These references justify paying close attention to all the motives for speech in *Trachiniae* other than the transmission of knowledge, and to the rhetorical means by which the speeches achieve or attempt to achieve their effects. But there are also indications that the speeches do not transmit knowledge at all, but rather produce a deceptive impression of knowledge and truth. Scholars have long been aware of numerous contradictions both within and between representations in *Trachiniae*. For example, exactly how long has Heracles been away from Trachis, fifteen months (44-5, 164-5) or twelve (648)? Did the oracle that Heracles left with Deianeira say that his crisis would occur at a specified place (74-77) or at a specified time (164-7, 824-5, 1169)? Can Nessus be regarded as the cause of Heracles' death (1160-2) if the hero only dies when burned on the pyre? These contradictions disturb the illusion of representation and expose it precisely as illusion. They suggest that the characters do not know what they claim to know and even believe they know. One might say that, through the gaps in his characters' representations, Sophocles represents an epistemological gap that separates the characters from the reality they wish to know and communicate. He represents them, therefore, as interpreters not only of one another's texts, but of experience, which also functions as a text precisely insofar as it requires interpretation.

For *Trachiniae* there is no knowledge, only interpretation. For the characters in *Trachiniae*, however, it is quite the opposite; even when their interpretive activity should be most evident, as when Heracles expounds the meaning of his oracles, they speak in terms of knowledge. A wide gulf therefore separates the rhetoric of the characters from the impression that the whole play can produce when read with close attention to its rhetoric. Again and again the characters appeal to stable correspondences in their world: correspondence between language and what is the case, patterns in events that permit deductive predictions of the future, fulfilment of divine intentions. The characters lack a fully rhetorical understanding of language, thought and experience, and even when Lichas and Deianeira deliberately use language to deceive they expect to be able to control its effects. But seen from a rhetorically self-conscious point of view, the play as a whole seems to represent an unstable world of accident, uncertainty, and illusion, a world in which tragedy arises precisely in the ignorance or denial of rhetoric, in the self-deceptive treatment of interpretation as knowledge and the effort to master an elusive reality through the equally elusive devices of language.

This possibility of reading *Trachiniae* against the representations of its characters may suggest in turn that old friend of Sophoclean critics, tragic irony; but this is not Sophoclean irony as traditionally conceived. The usual view of Sophoclean irony supposes that the words of the characters (or the dramatic situations) possess a true and a false meaning, the former of which is understood by the audience but not by the characters.[26] Thus while the characters stumble about in a world of illusion, the audience has knowledge that, in the context of the play, could only be possessed by the gods. The exodos of *Trachiniae* has in fact been read this way by those who believe their familiarity with mythic continuations of the story (Heracles' apotheosis, Hyllus' generation of the Dorian race) afford them a perspective on events superior to that of Hyllus and the Chorus.[27] Sophocles may indeed have expected his text to be read this way, at least by some interpreters. But such a reading simply repeats the tragic error of the characters in *Trachiniae* by regarding its interpretation of the text as knowledge, overlooking the fact that if Heracles' apotheosis or Hyllus' descendants are relevant to *Trachiniae*, it can only be because readers interpretively deem them so, not because anything in the text determines that they must be relevant. This sort of irony, far from teaching that "if even *these* people destroyed themselves . . . we should not be surprised if life is full of illusion and deception for us, too",[28] allows the spectators to feel pity for the characters and forget their own troubles.[29] But the irony posited by rhetorically self-conscious reading is much more humbling for the spectator who can appreciate it. This irony at most allows

the spectators to realize that the characters, despite their rhetorical claims of knowledge, are interpreters like himself, and like all humanity. The only knowledge that separates this spectator from the characters is knowledge of their common ignorance.[30]

Among the illusions of the characters in *Trachiniae* certainly the one that receives the greatest dramatic emphasis is the illusion that the gods at least have knowledge, that their oracles have meaning and predict events to come. Belief in the absolute knowledge of the gods and the validity of their oracles has even been seen as a special characteristic of Sophoclean tragedy and of Sophoclean piety.[31] Now even if we were to grant that *Trachiniae* does as a whole represent a demonstration of divine knowledge, we would still be entitled to ask how such a demonstration, effected through the illusion of drama, could ever be anything other than an illusion. But as our interpretation shall show, the text of *Trachiniae* itself places obstacles to acceptance of the claim that the oracles have been fulfilled, the most obvious being the fact that Heracles doesn't die in the play. The mortal predicament shared by the characters and spectators of *Trachiniae* is tersely expressed in a famous fragment of Xenophanes (DK B34):

> καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὔτις ἀνὴρ ἴδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται
> εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων·
> εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών,
> αὐτὸς ὅμως οὐκ οἶδε· δόκος δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται.
>
> No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the gods and about everything I speak of: for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, yet oneself knows it not; but seeming is wrought over all things. (Kirk trans.)

Unlike Xenophanes, however, Sophocles does not in *Trachiniae* indulge in open speculation about the gods. Instead he stages characters who make claims about them. By representing the universe as controlled by gods, the characters of *Trachiniae* are able to overlook the forces within themselves that lead them to tragedy: their own lust, jealousy, pride, anger, anxiety and delusion. They also neglect the instability and unpredictability of their environment. For in *Trachiniae* all things are constantly in motion, changing from one form to another, always at a threshold between what they have been and what they will be. And because as human beings the characters cannot perceive this threshold condition, their impressions inevitably delude them.

This delusion, this threshold, could have been considered a god itself. One name for it might have been Logos, the powerful lord of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*. Another might have been Hermes, god of thresholds, exchange, heralds, accident and fertility. A third name might have been Dionysos, himself a god of many names and forms. Yet another name might have been Zeus. But unlike the Olympians, this divinity is not a force outside of man; rather it constitutes man.[32]

In this respect our interpretation of *Trachiniae* has especially benefited from that of Charles Segal, whose view of tragedy in general and *Trachiniae* in particular has stressed the dissolution of differences and the tragic hero's confrontation with divisions within himself.[33] For Segal, however, tragedy represents a temporary, abnormal state; it collapses the boundaries only to reestablish them,[34] its characters behold the savagery within themselves only to cast it out and create a safe interior once again. Thus apropos of *Trachiniae* Segal can state,

> Nessus lives in buried, remote strata of our being but can still return . . . with unexpected virulence. Heracles has subdued this archaic world of bestial powers, but he has not entirely subdued the archaic bestiality within himself. The Centaur's poison . . . brings it to life again. By confronting this more primitive self with a more developed human self, by suffering and then overcoming the 'ancient gift of the beast of old' . . . Heracles wins again his old victories over the beasts and can become the truly civilizing hero . . . .We witness Heracles' loss and then recovery of his humanity . . . .[35]
>
> As Heracles performs the ritual functions of the scapegoat, his own end . . . absorbs the violence which he has let loose.[36]
>
> The end of the play can also be read as a reflection on the civilizing power of tragedy itself. It represents the cathartic process by which unleashed violence is once again absorbed into an ordered structure shown elastic enough to contain it. The tragedy lets loose chaos in a fearful destruction of the boundaries between man and beast, but at the same time its aesthetic form asserts the framework which can contain and neutralize that violence.[37]

We must acknowledge that in these passages as in others, Segal's account of *Trachiniae* does capture an important aspect of its rhetoric, but that it does so without recognizing this aspect *as* rhetoric. Heracles does indeed claim to be a purifier and to possess self-control; some spectators may well have felt reassured when the play ended without its violence transgressing the boundary between orchestra and audience. But according to our reading, this purification, this self-control, this boundary, are all illusions. The tragedy does not represent a temporary dissolution of boundaries, but rather temporarily makes it possible for its spectators and readers to glimpse the liminal state of all existence at all times. And part of this recognition, if and when it occurs, may be the recognition that the play does not remain enclosed within the orchestra, that it is open to interpretation, and that its effects cannot be predicted or controlled.

It would not be inaccurate to describe the reading of *Trachiniae* here outlined as deconstructive; its emphasis upon gaps separating speech from its putative origin and its recipients, the consequent interpretability of texts, the practice of reading the same text in incompatible ways, and the claim that the text itself represents the problem of reading and writing, all recall the themes of deconstructive criticism.[38] Nevertheless it should be clear that no anachronism is involved in reading a Greek tragedy in this way, because all of the above themes had already been sounded in fifth century Athens. Gorgias articulated the gap between reality, thought, and speech in his treatise *On Not-Being*, where he argued that (1) nothing exists, (2) if something does exist, it cannot be known to human beings, and (3) even if something does exist and is knowable, it cannot be communicated to another person (DK B 3). According to Gorgias it was man's ignorance of reality and dependence upon seeming that made him susceptible to the deceptive power of *logos* (DK B 11.10-11). Protagoras claimed that reality had contradictory attributes and thus might appear different to different people (DK A 14.217-219). The same thing could be described in opposing ways, even by the same people; thus Protagoras taught his students to praise and blame the same things (DK A 20, 21). Sophistic relativism was specifically applied to the interpretation of poetry, where it was understood that one poem might elicit a variety of interpretations and might be self-contradictory. This is clearly displayed in Plato's *Protagoras*, where Protagoras argues that one of Simonides' poems is self-contradictory (339B-D); after Socrates propounds a different interpretation, Hippias offers yet a third reading, even while praising Socrates' (347A-B). Socrates himself less tolerantly decries the plurality of interpretations that inevitably arose whenever poetry was discussed (347E). And we know from many sources that the sophists sometimes claimed that there was

nothing secure in either reality or speech, and in debate sought to demonstrate that every argument implied its opposite.[39] Most importantly, Gorgias' comment that tragedy is a deception (DK B 23), and Plato's denunciation of tragedy as an art of imitation (*Rep.* 595B, 598D-602B) both suggest that, at least in certain quarters, tragedy was understood specifically as a form of sophistic illusion. In the fifth century, therefore, it was altogether possible to interpret Greek tragedy along the lines followed by this reading.

Thus we return again to Cedric Whitman, who so rightly stressed the kinship of Sophocles with the most advanced thought of his time. "Once he is given even a slight historical foothold," wrote Whitman, "Sophocles himself should provide the best possible key to the intellectual history of the middle fifth century."[40] Given the uncertainties of interpretation, that foothold could never be secure, that key could only open up more questions. In this rhetorical interpretation of *Trachiniae* I have tried to give Sophocles an historical foothold in the only way I deem possible, by reading his tragedy as an enigma, the enigma it has always been.

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