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Monsters and the Family: the Exodos of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

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SOPHOCLES' *Trachiniae* is a troublesome play. One source of difficulty is its dramatic richness, for it offers two fully developed major characters, Heracles and Deianeira, a separate dramatic presentation of the story of each, and any number of themes ranging from simple romance to divine injustice. Even the conclusion of the play appears to raise more questions than it answers. One critic, in fact, regards it as an afterpiece added only to satisfy that taskmaster "the demands of the myth."¹ Yet in any drama it is the end that shapes the audience's final understanding, and *Trachiniae* is no exception: the final three hundred lines establish the significance and unity of the entire play. To understand this resolution, two interwoven themes that dominate the end must be examined in light of the previous story. These themes are the monsters and the family.

When Heracles finally appears on stage (983), he comes as a contestant in mortal combat, struggling against an invisible opponent, the disease caused by the poison of the Hydra combined with the blood of Nessos. Throughout the play this disease is characterized as a living creature, a beast.² Deianeira first attributes animal qualities to Nessos' philtre, reporting that it 'devoured' and 'consumed' (δέβρορον 676; ἐδέστρον 677) the tuft of wool with which she anointed the robe for Heracles and describing it as a 'black venom of blood' (ἰὸς αἰματός μέλας 717) that has boiled up in 'foamy clots' (βρομβώδεισ ἀφροί 702)—clots that recall the clotted blood of Nessos (572). The wool itself is

¹ I. M. Linforth, "The Pyre on Mount Oeta in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *CPCP* 14 (1952) 266. An abbreviated version of this paper was read 16 April 1976 at the meeting of CAMWS in Knoxville, Tenn. For further discussion of the bibliography on the diverse problems presented by the play, see Christina Elliott Sorum, "Monsters and the Family: A Study of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *Diss. Brown U.* 1974; on the complex issue of the date of the play, see especially App. II (139-73). For the purposes of this paper the date is assumed to be between 442 and 429. Charles Segal, "Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: Myth, Poetry, and Heroic Values," *YCS* 25 (1977) 103-04, includes the most recent discussion of the dating [hereafter, *Segal*]. My text is *Sophocles Fabulae*, ed. A. C. Pearson (Oxford 1924, rpt. 1964).

² Penelope Biggs, "The Disease Theme in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and *Trachiniae*," *CP* 61 (1966) 223-35, discusses this metaphor at length. See also Segal 114.

personified as the victim of the monstrous poison; it lies 'near to annihilation' (προπετέε 701), a word that will later refer to Heracles, a victim of the same beast (976), and is 'laid out' (προύκειτ' 702) as if for burial.³ Hyllos sustains this image when he describes the poison's effect on Heracles (770-71), as do the chorus, who sing that it is a creature whom death begat and the Hydra bore (834).⁴ The metaphor culminates with Heracles' arrival on stage. The old man accompanying Heracles creates the image of an animal asleep in its lair that becomes a raging, pacing beast when aroused (ἐξεγείρω, ἐκκινέω, ἀνίστημι, ἀγρίαν and φοιτάδα 974-81). When Heracles awakes, the beast attacks and devours him (βρύκει 987; βέβρωκε 1054; ρόφεῖ 1055; πέπωκεν 1056; διάβορος 1084; δαίνυται 1088, and ἤπται 1010; ἔπει 1010; θρώκει 1026; ἐξόρηκεν 1089). Heracles himself regards this battle against the disease as the last of his many labors against monstrous creatures, differing in outcome but not in type (1101-02).

Heracles' references to his labors and the sustained bestial metaphor recall the other monstrous creatures mentioned in the play: Achelous, Nessos, the Hydra, the Giants, the Nemean lion, the Erymanthian boar, Cerberus and the dragon of the Hesperides. These creatures have been ignored or treated simply as the mythological background of the Heracles legend in the many critical studies of *Trachiniae*.⁵ Yet

³ See Soph. *Aj.* 427, 1059 and *Ant.* 1101.

⁴ On the bestial implications of *κατ'ψηκται* (698) and *δάσγμός* (770), see J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles II, Trachiniae* (Leiden 1959) 157, 168 [hereafter, KAMERBEEK].

⁵ These critics include C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944) [hereafter, BOWRA]; C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1966); Gilberte Ronnet, *Sophocle, poète tragique* (Paris 1969); T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (London 1969); Gordon M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Cornell Studies 31, Ithaca 1958) [hereafter, KIRKWOOD]; S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (*Phoenix* Suppl. 3, Toronto 1957) [hereafter, ADAMS]; Marsh McCall, "The *Trachiniae*: Structure, Focus and Heracles," *AJP* 93 (1972) 142-63 [hereafter, McCALL]; Thomas F. Hoey, "The *Trachiniae* and Unity of Hero," *Aethusa* 3 (1970) 1-22. Those critics who discuss the monsters fall into three groups. The first disapproves of the inclusion of the legendary element: F. Allgère, *Sophocle: Étude sur les ressorts dramatiques de son théâtre et la composition de ses tragédies* (Lyon 1905) 10-12; Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Frankfurt/M. 1947) 45 [hereafter, REINHARDT]. The second considers the monsters as a background for the story of Deianeira and Heracles and allows for little or no dramatic interaction between monsters and men: F. J. H. Letters, *The Life and Work of Sophocles* (London 1953) 200 [hereafter, LETTERS]; Kirkwood 22; Herbert Musurillo, "Fortune's Wheel: The Symbolism of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*," *TAPA* 92 (1961) 379. The third group considers that the play presents a complex interweaving of men, gods and beasts—although they—with the exception of Segal (*supra* n. 1)—have done little in the way of explaining why the monsters are important: A. J. A. Waldo,

because their presences are pervasive and because they influence the immediate dramatic action, their rôles and characteristics must be taken into account. All the creatures listed above have an unnatural element in their form: a changing shape, an animal-human combination, three heads, hugeness, invulnerable skin. All are beyond man's control because of their exceptional strength or their extraordinary habitat. When they come in contact with man, all pose a threat to him and his society.

Heracles' list of his labors defines the nature of the threat that the monsters pose for man and society by insisting on both their violence and their separation from man. The Nemean lion is the 'plague of cowherds' (βουκόλων ἀλάττορα 1092); the army of centaurs is 'violent', 'excelling in strength', 'lawless' and 'not mingling' (ὀβριετήν, υπέρροχον βία, ἀνομιον, ἀμεκτον 1095-96).⁶ Cerberus, whose strength is 'irresistible' (ἀπρόμαχον 1098), guards a world that is the negation of living man and the inverse of human society. The serpent who guards the golden apples of the Hesperides is at the 'farthest ends of the earth' (ἐπ' ἐχέτοιο τόποι 1100) in a realm ordinary man cannot reach even by death.

This pattern of the separation and violence of the monsters is described at length twice in the play. Achelous, the first example, appears in a rôle that represents society's sanctioned expression of the quest for a mate, the suitor. His grotesque and fluctuating appearance and the violence of his lust, however, belie this rôle; he arouses in Deianeira not a desire for productive union but for death (15-17). The distance between the monster and the woman is further emphasized by the repeated description of the struggle between Heracles and Achelous in which Deianeira sits far apart unable even to watch the battle (20-25, 497-530). Nessos, the second example, negates his rôle of ferryman with his animal lust and intrudes his violence into another sanctioned institution when he attempts to rape Deianeira, a bride on her wedding journey (562-63). Deianeira, as before, is

Sophocles, the Dramatist (Cambridge 1951) 102; Georges Méautis, *Sophocles: Essai sur le héros tragique* (Paris 1957) 254; Albrecht von Blumenthal, "Sophokles (aus Athen)," *RE* 3A (1929) 1087.

⁶ See Charles Segal, "Mariage et sacrifice dans les *Trachiniennes*," *AntCl* 44 (1975) 45, on the centaurs as an absolute negation of civilized life.

helpless and fearful at the entrance of the monstrous into her world (565).⁷

The disease that destroys Heracles exhibits characteristics similar to those of the monsters described above. This offspring of death and the Hydra, referred to by Deianeira as 'nothing within the house' (*πρὸς οὐδενὸς τῶν ἐνδόν* 676-77) and 'impossible to describe, impossible for man to understand' (*ἀφρακτον, ἀξίμβλητον ἀνθρώπων μαθεῖν* 694), represents a nonhuman and unnatural force. It is 'unapproachable' (*ἀπρόβητος* 1030), beyond man's control, and can only be escaped through death (1010-17).⁸ It poses a threat not only to Heracles but to human society; it destroys both an unimportant part of Deianeira's household, the tuft of wool from the household flock, and an essential part of it, her husband.

Not only does the monster disease recall other monsters, but its attack upon Heracles also brings to mind his previous relationship to the beasts. Heracles appears in *Trachiniae* as a monster-killer who purges the world of its unnatural dangers, making it safe for man (1012, 1058-61, 1089-1100). He is able to do this because he is the son of Zeus, a relationship that endows him both with divine protection (26, 119-21, 140) and with superhuman strength.⁹ Yet there is an ambiguity in Heracles' power that becomes explicit in any consideration of his actions within man's society.

Heracles comes to rescue Deianeira from Achelous, but the rescue does not provide peace or safety for her. Instead, her marriage brings fear and loneliness (28, 108, 150, 176). She cannot rear her family in a stable and familiar situation but must live in exile visited only infrequently by her husband (39-40).¹⁰ Even the oracles, which indicate to Heracles a divine concern with his fate and enable him to be aware that he is acting at the critical moment in his life, create for

⁷ On Achelous' sexuality, see P. E. Easterling, "Sophocles, *Trachiniae*," *BICS* 15 (1968) 65 [hereafter, EASTERLING]; Gilbert Murray, "Heracles, the Best of Men," *Greek Studies* (Oxford 1946) 116; and Segal 105-06 and *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 43.

⁸ Biggs, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 227, concludes "The whole catalogue of the list of labor juxtaposes isolation and animal savagery in the same way as the 'ferre unapproachable disease'."

⁹ See also Letters 193; Kirkwood 67 and "The Dramatic Unity of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," *TAPA* 72 (1941) 210; Bowra 132; Segal 115. Heracles' strength is emphasized not only in the frequent references to his toils and struggles (20, 21, 36, 70, 80, 118, 159, 170, 356, 506, 751, 829, 1101, 1170, 1173) but also in his immense journeys (94-102, 1012, 1060, 1098, 1100) and efficacious decisions (269-73, 359-65, 565-68, 772-83).

¹⁰ See Easterling 59; Segal 108.

Deianeira only fearful uncertainties and helpless waiting (48, 79, 85, 176-77).

Heracles' effect on Deianeira is made most explicit in her expressions of sympathy for the captive women. She pities them because they have lost all that she herself has lost or feels endangered: native land, home and family (40, 141-50; 299-306). Deianeira's identification with Iole is even closer, for she recognizes that the captive's life has been destroyed by her beauty, a fate Deianeira has lamented as her own (465: 25), and that, like herself, Iole understands her plight (313).

The chorus further emphasize the parallels between the two women when, immediately after Lichas has revealed the true motive for the capture of Oechalia, Heracles' passion for Iole, they recount the battle between Achelous and Heracles (497-530). This second account of the struggle differs from Deianeira's report in the prologue, in which she says that Heracles came to 'rescue her' (*ἐκλύεται με* 21). Rather the chorus indicate that, just like Achelous, Heracles is fighting this battle refereed by Aphrodite because he is 'desirous of her bed' (*ἰέμενοι λαχέων* 514).¹¹ Deianeira becomes a 'deserted heifer' (*πόρριε ἐρήμα* 530) suddenly bereft of its mother. This image of Deianeira waiting to be led away as the prize of contest poignantly parallels the scene just on stage, Iole grieving for her lost family as she is led in a captive (325-27). The language of the chorus further enhances the equation of Achelous and Heracles in the anastrophe by presenting the attributes of the two as parallel. Achelous is the strength of a river, Heracles the son of Zeus; each possesses an aspect of nonhuman power. Achelous has his strength as a bull, his four hooves and his horns; Heracles, his bow, his spears and his club. Achelous is from Oiniadae, Heracles from Thebes. They meet as equals. In the epode the stress is on the confusion of the struggle. The weapons and bodies entwined and mingle, and their crashes and moans are indistinguishable. In the heat of battle the two become one.

It becomes evident that Heracles, the monster-killer, is himself a monster.¹² Like Achelous, Heracles comes into contact with the human

¹¹ See also Murray, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 116-18.

¹² G. Karl Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa [N.J.] 1972) 37, also sees this as a battle between two monstrous creatures mad with lust. Compare Easterling 63, who suggests that the chorus sang to contrast Heracles the benefactor and rescuer of Deianeira to the violent Heracles who seizes Iole. The monstrous aspects of Heracles have long been appreciated; the implications for this play, however, have not been thoroughly examined.

world, as represented by Deianeira, because of his sexual desire. Like Achelous, he is able to force his will upon men because of his great strength. The equation of the two by the chorus gains emphasis because it is sung immediately after the true story about Iole has been revealed (351-490); Heracles' destructive actions in Oechalia further undercut his rôle as Deianeira's savior.

Not only does Heracles exhibit bestial violence and lust, but also, like the monsters, he acts in a realm that is separate from the human world of Deianeira. This separation is dramatically obvious in the double structure of the play; the two are never on stage together. The themes associated with Deianeira are the opposite of those associated with Heracles: home and family, knowledge and virtue, and anxiety and passivity, versus travel and absences from home, physical prowess and force, and constant efficacious action.¹³ Deianeira's attempt to change Heracles' love for Iole confirms his inaccessibility to man's control; she not only fails of her desired end but merely becomes a tool for the desires of another monstrous creature, Nessos. The lack of contact is again apparent in Heracles' cessation of reference to Deianeira as soon as he learns the true source of his agony (1141-42). Her actions, intentions and death are meaningless, for he is involved with elements of his own world.

Heracles is, moreover, a threat to man's world, endangering not just the victims of his lust, Deianeira and Iole, but the whole fabric of man's society. His threat is similar to that posed by the monsters of the play: the Nemean lion destroys the cowherds and their animals; the centaurs' violence and lawlessness are a negation of society; Cerberus portends the inevitable failure of man's attempts at continuity; Achelous and Nessos violate the concept of marriage. Heracles has a destructive impact both on the moral standards of society, as embodied by Deianeira, and on the basic unit of society, the family. Because Deianeira, in trying to change Heracles' passion, attempts to control a power that is beyond her, she must have recourse to similar force, a force that she does not understand. By utilizing the magic potion, she destroys the moral fabric of her world, for her reliance on secrecy and falsehood (533, 596-97, 689) negates her own standards of

¹³ The many contrasts between Deianeira and Heracles are discussed by McCall; Kamerbeek 26; Segal 119-23. On the contrast in the imagery surrounding the characters see Thomas F. Hoey, "Sun Symbolism in the Parados of the *Trachiniae*," *Arethusa* 5 (1974) 142, and Robert M. Torrance, "Sophocles: Some Bearings," *HSCP* 69 (1965) 301.

virtue (436-69). Heracles' negative impact is even more direct in his destruction of the family, specifically his own family and the family of Eurytos. He kills Eurytos' son Iphitos (37, 269-73), then seized with a passion for Eurytos' daughter razes Eurytos' city Oechalia, kills Eurytos and carries away Iole. These actions provide a lurid paradigm of his own family's fate. The repercussions of Heracles' passion for Iole are Deianeira's shame, her disastrous attempt to regain Heracles' love, her suicide, Heracles' own agony and death, and a 'home child-lessness in the future' (*καὶ τὰς ἀπαιδαὶ ἐν τὸ λοιπὸν οἰκίαν* 911).¹⁴

The identification between Heracles and the monsters is well established before his appearance on stage. The significance of the final scene lies not in the parallels it presents to previous situations but in the contrasts. Heracles, now a victim of the bestial forces that he has often destroyed in other creatures and exhibited in himself, loses his superhuman power and becomes a dependent invalid. The monster-killer is killed by a monster; the conqueror of women is conquered by a woman.

The initial ironic reversal of the exodos is visual. Heracles, who has controlled both his own movements and those of others, in particular of Deianeira and Iole, is carried onto the stage. Not only is he held in a deathlike sleep (969-70), but he can move only with assistance from other men. This tableau becomes a verbal theme with Heracles' first words, "O Zeus, where in the world am I? Among what men do I lie?" (*ὦ Ζεῦ, ποῖ γὰρ ἤκω; πᾶρὰ τοῖσι βρωτῶν κείμεαι; 983-85*). He whose movements were so often a mystery to Deianeira is now ignorant of his own location. A second reversal is apparent in Heracles' suffering. Once he labored (70); now he is belabored (*πεπονημένον* 985). His life was one of action; now he is acted upon (*ἐκπεπόρημαι* 1104). He boasts that he has 'tasted' (*ἐγευράμην* 1101) myriad labors; now he is being eaten by a devouring disease (987, 1054, 1055, 1084). A third reversal appears in the male and female themes of the play. Deianeira and the chorus lamented the sleepless nights that her marriage to Heracles had brought her (106, 149-50, 175-77). Now it is Heracles who, once roused from his comatose slumber, cannot find a longed-for respite in sleep (1005). Heracles' lust for Iole caused Deianeira and Iole to bewail their fates (*ὠδίνουσα* 325-26; *βρυχάτο* 904; *κλαίει* 905).

¹⁴ For a different treatment of the theme of family, see Segal 123-30, 135.

Now the hero is crying like a weeping maiden (*ὄστε ἄστε παρθένα βέβρυχα κλαίων* 1071–72); in fact, he who has caused Deianeira and the captive women to discover much suffering is now found out to be a woman (*ἐξέυροι* 25; *εὐρούσαι* 284; *θῆλυς γῆρημαι* 1075).

The ultimate reversal, of course, is that which all these changes indicate: Heracles' complete loss of his superhuman strength. Without this special quality he loses his ability to control even his own life and death. His demand that the men of Greece kill him is ignored (1013–14); his son will not heed his pleading (1031–33); even his cry for relief to Hades and Zeus is useless (1040–42, 1085–88). Once the chorus could say that one of the gods always protected Heracles from death (119–21). Now this protection has become a torture.

Heracles, unaware of the true explanation of his situation and of the profound change that his loss of strength implies, desires a violent revenge upon Deianeira. In a perversion of the family situation, he demands that Hyllos join in the murder of his mother (1066). Only by doing this will he prove to be the true son of his father (1064). Heracles continues to try to assert his will upon his enemies by force. The monster-killer has lost his glory, his body. He is still dominated, however, by the passions that led to his present situation—but they are now meaningless. To remain the heroic son of Zeus, Heracles must find another means to achieve honor and another idea to order his world.

Heracles concludes his tirade against his wife by claiming that he wants to punish her in order to teach the world that, alive and dead, he punishes evil doers (*ἦ ἐκδιδοχθῆ πάειν ἀγγέλλειν ὅτι καὶ ζῶν κακοὺς γε καὶ θανῶν ἐτεύαμην* 1110–11). In the ensuing dialogue with his son, however, it is Hyllos who teaches Heracles. His attempts to explain the true source of the poison contrast with an earlier scene: the messenger's explanation to Deianeira of the significance of Iole's arrival (335–90). When Deianeira is told that she is poorly informed, she is eager to learn the truth and listens carefully to the tale. Heracles is hostile and resistant to Hyllos' explanation, interrupting repeatedly with reproaches (1112–42). Yet when all is revealed, Deianeira can only utter uncertainly a plaintive question, "Alas wretched me, wherever am I in this misfortune?" (*οἴμοι τάλαρα, ποῦ ποτ' εἴμι πράγματος*; 375). Heracles, on the other hand, exclaims, "Alas, I understand where I stand in this misfortune" (*οἴμοι, φρονῶ δὲ συμφορὰς ἦν' ἔσταμεν* 1145). Unlike Deianeira, he not only hears the

truth but immediately recognizes its full significance and is able to act in light of this knowledge.¹⁵

The name of Nessos the centaur is the key. This double-natured creature, half man and half horse, half alive and half dead, is a meaningful element in Heracles' realm, the ambiguous world of the hero who is man and son of Zeus, monster and monster-killer. The poison of the Hydra, the blood of Nessos are appropriate enemies. Deianeira, whose human love and desire for security were manipulated by Nessos, is not. Heracles supplied Nessos with a motive and a means. He himself provoked Deianeira to act by sending Iole home. Deianeira's fundamental irrelevance to Heracles' destiny is demonstrated by his complete disregard of her and her death after he hears Nessos' name.¹⁶

By the revenge of the monsters Heracles is released from his labors. This release is contingent upon the destruction of the monstrous element in his nature, his strength. From this destruction emerges a transformed hero who immediately ceases to lament his devastated body.¹⁷ Physical prowess is now irrelevant, for Hercules has found another basis for his authority: his comprehension of and submission to his father's will. Each of his subsequent actions reaffirms this interpretation.¹⁸

The first command of the transformed Heracles is that Hyllos collect his scattered family, a family fragmented by Heracles' own deeds, in order that he may explain to them the oracles concerning his fate (1146–50). Heracles' previous orders to his son have all involved an element of brutal threat and physical violence for his son or his family (797–98, 1031–40, 1064–70). Now he makes a positive and

¹⁵ Galinsky, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 49, also compares the two recognition scenes. He stresses, however, that Deianeira, after she has learned, focuses her sympathy on Iole, while Heracles thinks only of himself. Segal (132) considers both Heracles and Deianeira to be late learners.

¹⁶ Heracles' failure to refer again to Deianeira has been considered by some as proof of callous behavior; see Kirkwood, *art.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 208–09; Linforth, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 264. For views more similar to those expressed here, see Reinhardt 69; Waldo, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 88; McCall 160; Segal 131.

¹⁷ See Kamerbeek 23 and Easterling 67 on the cessation of lamentation.

¹⁸ This transformation is interpreted variously by the critics who note it. Linforth, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 259, finds that from the moment Heracles hears Nessos' name the motivation of the play becomes obscure. Adams (103) considers the change to be a shedding of mortality and an assumption of divinity. Reinhardt (65) and Segal (133–34, 140) elaborate views similar to those expressed here. Heinrich Weinstock, *Sophokles* (Berlin 1937) 33, is almost alone in seeing no change.

peaceful request. Heracles' desire to see his family is itself an indication of change. In the past he visited them only occasionally (31–33) and by his absences caused great anxiety for them. Now he affirms not only the importance of the family unit but also, in his plea that Hyllos call Heracles' own mother Alkmene, the importance of the continuity of the generations. Hyllos, however, is unable to comply with the request, for the family is too scattered and remote (1151–56). Heracles' peaceful acceptance of his son's inability contrasts with his hostile resistance to Hyllos' attempts to thwart him in seeking his revenge on Deianeira (1114–42). It contrasts even more with his violent reaction when Eurytos refused to grant him Iole as concubine (359–65).

Heracles' explanation of the two oracles sustains the familial theme. In reporting the oracles—the first concerning the means by which he will die and the second concerning the time—Heracles refers both to the authority of his father (ἐκ πατρὸς 1159; *πρὸς τῆς πατρώας καὶ πολυγάτου δρυός* 1168). He accepts this fate decreed by his father without anger or grief. Furthermore, Heracles emphasizes his own rôle as a father to Hyllos, who has come to a critical moment in his own life—a moment dependent upon and parallel to his father's crisis—where he must display those attributes befitting the son of Heracles (1157–58). Heracles demanded earlier that Hyllos assist in the murder of his mother to prove he was a true son. Now he asks that Hyllos be his ally (1175, 1177) in a common endeavor not to destroy but rather to fulfill Heracles' destiny and reconstruct the family.

Heracles needs this alliance, in the first place, in order to carry out his own death on the pyre, the 'release' (λύειν 1171) from his labor prophesied by his own father. The previous occurrences of the theme of 'release' lend irony to its culmination in the idea of positive cooperation. Deianeira reports in the prologue that Heracles came to 'release' (ἐκλύεται 21) her from her painful fate as the bride of Achelous. But this was no true release, for her marriage brought her more serious problems. When the messenger arrives with news of Heracles, he comes to 'release' (λύειν 181) Deianeira from her doubt—again with unfortunate results. Compounding the ambiguities, Deianeira announces to the chorus that she has a 'releasing relief' (λυτήριον λώπημα 554) from her troubles: the love philtre given to her by Nessos. The chorus, commenting on Deianeira's directions to Lichas concerning the use of this potion, say that Ares now 'releases'

(ἔλελευεν 654) Deianeira's troubled day. The only true release for Deianeira comes in death when she 'releases' (λύει 924) her gown in order to stab herself. This woman who has had to be rescued twice by Heracles must in the end provide her own escape. Heracles, however, to find his release must turn not only to a human but to his son, a member of the family upon which he has wreaked such havoc.¹⁹

The authority upon which Heracles bases his final requests is a fundamental principle of the society whose rules he has so wantonly violated, a principle vital to the duration of the family, the "most beautiful law, obedience to one's father" (*νόμον κάλλιστον ἐξευρόντα, πειθαρχεῖν πατρί* 1177–78). This affirmation is made by a hero who, because of his enormous strength, has been able to lead an essentially lawless life. Now that his strength is gone, however, Heracles perceives and provides a new basis for his relationship to the world, for he does not merely demand this 'most beautiful law' of filial obedience from his son; he himself provides an example by accepting without rancor or resistance the fate prescribed for him by his own father.

Hyllos agrees to obey his father but only with hesitation (1179–80). To ensure his son's compliance, Heracles again returns to a family theme. He asks his son to swear by the "head of my own father Zeus who begot me" (*ἴμην Διός υἱν τοῦ με φέξαντος κάρα* 1185). This insistence proves necessary when Heracles makes the second of his three commands: that Hyllos burn him on a pyre atop Mount Oeta (1193–1202). Hyllos responds with shocked disbelief, and Heracles must return for the third time to the fact that Hyllos, to be the son of Heracles, must do what is commanded (1204–05). Hyllos must act for his father; he must become, to some degree, a replacement for his father; he must be silent (*ἀτένακτος* 1200) when he lights his father's pyre just as Heracles himself was silent (*ἀτένακτος* 1074) before the attack of the disease and will become so again (1260–62). Demanding that Hyllos fill his rôle as his true son, Heracles recognizes the future of his family and thereby assumes his own rôle as perpetrator. To Hyllos' objections to murdering his father (1207), Heracles responds that his son will be a healer and doctor of his troubles (1208–09). Accepting his destiny as it is revealed by his own father, Heracles is able to understand two seeming contradictions: first, that the dead can kill the living as the oracles prophesied, and second, that death

¹⁹ Compare Segal 116–17, 134.

can become a cure for life. Cognizant of his life as a part of a greater pattern, of life and death as interchanging processes, he acts in accordance with this understanding. Heracles' transformation is evidenced again in his response to Hyllos' protestations to lighting the pyre: he yields.²⁰ He is acting according to a plan of great importance; since it is the fulfillment of the plan and not the domination of his will that concerns him, it is insignificant who actually lights the pyre. There can be no replacement for Hyllos, however, in Heracles' next project.

Heracles' request that Hyllos marry Iole is his last act; as such, and by its position in the play, it has great emphasis.²¹ Viewed in light of the theme of the destruction of the human family by Heracles' bestial power, its significance is clear. Heracles, by uniting Hyllos with Iole, recognizes his responsibility for the continuing pattern of the family and reestablishes the two families he has destroyed, his own and that of Eurytos.²² The cycle of death occasioned by bestial lust is stopped by his request that no one except his son lie with the woman who has lain by his own side (*τοῖς ἑμοῖς πλευροῖς* 1225). Throughout the play the 'ribs' have been the site of injury and death: for Nessos (681), for Heracles (768, 833, 1083), for Deianeira (926, 931). In the nurse's description of Hyllos at his mother's deathbed, the son lies 'side by side' her (*πλευρόθεν πλευρᾶν* 938-39), mourning the destruction of both

²⁰ For further comment on Heracles' yielding to Hyllos on this one point, see Bowra 143; McCall 160; Adams 131; and Segal 135.

²¹ It has been debated whether this request implies that Hyllos marry Iole or take her as concubine. J. Kenneth MacKinnon, "Heracles' Intention in his Second Request of Hyllos," *Trach.* 1216-51," *CQ* n.s. 21 (1971) 33-41, points out that *δάμναρα* (1224) does not necessarily mean 'wife' nor does *κῆρυκεων λέχος* (1227) necessarily mean 'marriage'. He concludes that Heracles intends Iole to be Hyllos' concubine. Segal, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 49-50 n.30, argues that the tradition speaks of the marriage of Hyllos and Iole (Apollod. 2.7.7 and 2.8.2) and that the ambiguity of *δάμναρ* in *Trachiniaiæ* itself is so great that it cannot exclude the marriage: *δάμναρα* is used at 406 to refer to Deianeira herself, and it may mean 'wife' in 429. Segal's view is reinforced by Deianeira's insistence throughout the play that there can be no separation of the wifely and the sexual rôle.

²² There is great controversy over this request. The majority of critics regard it negatively as a sign of Heracles' continued cruelty, disregard of others, or assertion of his ego in tribute to himself: H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (Sather Lectures 36, Berkeley 1966) 170-72; Kirkwood, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 209; Kamerbeek 25; T. B. L. Webster, "Sophocles' *Trachiniaiæ*," in *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays Presented to Gilbert Murray* (London 1937) 178-79; Victor Ehrenberg, *Aspects of the Ancient World* (Oxford 1946) 155; Ronnet, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 98; Weinstock, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.18) 33. The opposite view is represented most strikingly by Bowra 142-43, who sees in the request an expression of Heracles' tenderness, justice and great love and concern for Iole. Elements more similar to the ideas expressed here appear at Musurillo 380; Hoey, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 14; Adams 131; Letters 198; Segal 126, 152-51.

his parents.²³ Now the survivors—Hyllos, who has been compelled to fill his father's rôle, and Iole, in whom Deianeira found so many similarities—must reestablish what is gone; they must lie together to restore life to the family.

Heracles contends that this is a pious act (*εὐεβέειν* 1222). Hyllos objects that to marry her whom he regards as the cause of his mother's death and his father's suffering could only be the act of someone maddened by the avenging Furies (*ᾄστις μὴ*) 'ξ ἀλατῶρων νοσοῖ 1225); marriage is the antithesis of the revenge that he ought to seek. It was Hyllos himself who previously introduced the Furies into the play when he cried out that 'avenging Justice' and the 'Fury' (*ποίνιμος Δίκη*, *Ἐρινύς* 808-09) would punish Deianeira for the murder of her husband. He, however, soon learned that he had wrongly assessed his mother. The chorus affirmed that the Furies entered this family not through Deianeira's actions but rather through Heracles' relationship to Iole, which had borne a 'great Fury' (*μεγάλαν Ἐρινύν* 893-95) for the house. Heracles, in turn, saw the work of the Furies in his own tragedy, claiming that the cloak sent by Deianeira was the net of the 'Furies' (*Ἐρινύων* 1051). The cloak was, in fact, a gift of revenge, for its poison was the venom of the Hydra and the blood of Nessos whom Heracles had killed, but the aptness of the reference to the Furies has a source other than Deianeira. It was Heracles' actions that began the cycle of destruction for the family. The Furies do revenge themselves upon Heracles and destroy in him that element that led to his crime. After this cathartic loss, Heracles can meet his son's charges of impiety and assure him that the Furies have been laid to rest. With an authority that recalls Oedipus at the end of *Oedipus of Colonus*, Heracles asserts that what is pleasing to him is not impious (*οὐ δυσεβεία, τοῦμόν ἐστ' ἥραται κ'έαρ* 1246). Confident that he has fulfilled his mission, he can go to his final rest from toil.

But Hyllos does not rejoice in his father's accomplishment. Indeed, he responds with a bitter condemnation of the gods and their treatment of men (1264-74). If Heracles' last commands indicate that he accepts his terrible death as a meaningful end and that the families he

²³ Easterling (66) notes that Nessos, Heracles and Deianeira are all wounded in the ribs. Of Hyllos' lying side by side with his mother, Easterling says, "This detail perhaps helps to bring out the interconnection between the deeds and sufferings of all the people involved in the disaster, as well as stressing the great lovability of Deianeira as a mother."

has destroyed are reestablished, how can his son's extreme bitterness be explained?

In Hyllos' first appearance in the play, his specific function is to act as go-between for his mother and father, but more basically he serves to emphasize by his presence as a son Deianeira's rôle as a mother and the existence of a household. In spite of his eagerness to find his father, Hyllos in no way appears to be inspired to act because of a desire to exhibit noble and manly qualities or a desire to identify with his heroic father. Like Telemachos at the beginning of the *Odyssey* (1.280-305), he requires the urgings of another to undertake the journey for information about his father and to recognize that this is the manly course (65-66, 92-93). When Hyllos returns to the stage, he is again in the rôle of the son and the messenger, but this time he is a messenger from Heracles. Horrified by the familial aspects of the crime he has witnessed (739-40), he denounces his mother for the murder of Heracles (734-36). Yet throughout his speech it is apparent—through his emphasis on the fact that Deianeira is his mother and that it is his mother who did the awful thing—that his relationship to her pervades his thoughts.

Hyllos learns too late of his mistake in accusing Deianeira of willful murder; she has died. His belated understanding (*ὄψ' ἐκδιδοχθέει* 934) of the true situation echoes a theme first presented through Deianeira; she learned too late of the true effects of the philtre. Encouraging forces outside their usual world both mother and son fail to understand. It is only Heracles who, when he learns of the rôle of Nessos in his death, can respond with creative action. The nurse's report of Hyllos lying side by side with his dead mother concludes Deianeira's rôle in the drama. Together on the bed the mother and the son who is so closely identified with her symbolize the death of the family.

The alliance of Hyllos and Deianeira becomes explicit in the exodos. Here Hyllos accomplishes his first significant individual act by telling his father Deianeira's story. The strength that he exhibits in standing up to his father's wrath is the first sign of his manhood—but it is done for the sake of his mother and is an indication of his continuing love and regard for her. Soon, however, Heracles demands that his son become his father's substitute in the perpetuation of the family. Hyllos never accepts this rôle willingly because he does not understand the true nature of his father's demands. He believes that he will be

the murderer of his father. He is unconvinced by his father's assertions of the piety of his marriage to Iole and acquiesces only because he feels that he has protected himself from the danger of 'appearing evil' (*κακὸς φανεῖσθαι* 1251), a concern similar to that expressed by his mother (666-67, 721).

It is Hyllos' failure to understand his father's last request that is the final indication of the irreconcilable separation between Deianeira and Hyllos, representatives of conventional human society, and Heracles. Whether Heracles is separated by his monstrous strength or by his incarnation of a divine fate, he remains apart from man.²⁴ In both cases he is a force that can act upon man—but these actions always remain incomprehensible to man. Deianeira and Hyllos are united in their lack of comprehension, their lack of power and their grief. Heracles himself does not bemoan the necessity of his death after he learns that it is in accord with the oracles; he does not berate the gods. But Hyllos, returning to the familial theme, condemns the gods "who begot man and are called his fathers" (*οἱ φύσαντες καὶ κληζόμενοι πατέρες* 1268-69). He understands neither his own father nor his father's father. Heracles, in obedience to the will of Zeus, has reconstructed the family from the ruins that he created, but Hyllos sees only the devastation.

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²⁴ For additional and often differing discussion of the contrast between Hyllos and Heracles at the end of the play, see Segal 153, who speaks of "The contrast between human understanding and divine purpose in the clash between Hyllos and Heracles."