

## Sophocles' *Trachiniai* and the Polis

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What can be said about the *polis* and democracy in Sophocles' *Trachiniai*? For as Winnington-Ingram characterizes the play: "this is a tragedy of sex."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, Jasper Griffin observes *Trachiniai*'s absence from the burgeoning scholarship on tragedy and politics: "It is noticeable that recent writers on the political nature of Attic tragedy seldom mention *Trachiniae*."<sup>2</sup> What is more, Bernard Knox, who unlike Griffin more willingly explores how Sophocles considers the *polis* in his plays, excludes *Trachiniai* from engaging in this political inquiry: Sophocles, "like Aeschylus, poses the heroic figures of the ancient saga against the background of a half-mythical, half-contemporary *polis*, or, in the case of the Trojan War plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, of the *polis* in arms, the στρατός. There is only one exception: *Trachiniae*."<sup>3</sup> Despite the dismissal of *Trachiniai* as an apolitical play, I am going to try to show briefly that while the play is about sex – more precisely about *eros* – its presentation of the power and problem of *eros* goes beyond the love triangle of its main protagonists – Herakles, his wife Deianeira, and his new beloved Iole – to extend *eros* to the political. It connects *eros* to the *polis* by showing the way *eros* can destroy the *polis*, and the proto-democratic people's feeling of *eros* for the polis-destroyer, Herakles. *Trachiniai*, it turns out, can be seen as a play deeply concerned with the *polis* and democracy – specifically the *erotics* of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

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### The power and problem of *eros*

*Trachiniai* deeply considers the power of *eros*. The Chorus gradually articulate more and more clearly Aphrodite's central role. In the first *stasimon*, they recognize Aphrodite's invincibility:

μέγα τι σθένος ἅ Κύπρις ἐκφέρεται νίκας αἰεί. (497)  
Kypri always carries out a great strength of victory.

Towards the end of the play, they see Aphrodite as the play's divine agent. Whereas Herakles' messenger Lichas earlier names Zeus as the agent of the action: Ζεὺς ὄτου πράκτωρ φανῆ (251); the Chorus revise his statement to name Aphrodite as such:

ἅ δ' ἀμφίπολος Κύπρις ἄναυδος φανερά  
τῶνδ' ἐφάνη πράκτωρ. (860-861)  
The handmaid Kypri silent, manifest appears the agent of these things.

As the Chorus articulate, the whole play consists of a manifestation of the erotic power of Aphrodite.

The power of *eros* includes the problem of *eros*. As Lichas diagnoses, *eros* alone defeats Herakles:

ὡς τᾶλλ' ἐκεῖνος πάντ' ἀριστεύων χεροῖν  
τοῦ τῆσδ' ἔρωτος εἰς ἅπανθ' ἤσσων ἔφυ. (488-489)  
He [Herakles] whose might is best in all other things  
has been utterly defeated by his *eros* for this girl.

Indeed Deianeira refers to Herakles' erotic weakness as a disease (cf. 544):

ὥστ' εἴ τι τῶμῳ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῆδε τῆ νόσῳ  
ληφθέντι μεμπτός εἰμι, κάρτα μαίνομαι (445-446)  
If I am throwing blame upon my husband because he has been  
seized by this sickness,  
I am extremely mad

Once Deianeira states this correlation between *eros* and *nosos*, the play's later use of *nosos* to describes Herakles' dying pains suggests that he dies of nothing other than *eros*:

ἔρρωγεν παγὰ δακρύων· κέχυται νόσος, ὃ πόποι, οἷον ἀναρσίω  
οὔπω Ἡρακλέους ἀγκαλειπὸν ἐπέμολε πάθος οἰκτίσαι (854-855)

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Our fountain of tears broke forth; the sickness has spread  
throughout, alas,  
such pitiable suffering never yet came upon glorious Herakles from  
enemies.

*Trachiniai* presents the problem of *eros* most overtly in a love triangle. Deianeira and Herakles both feel longing but not for each other: while Deianeira desires Herakles, Herakles desires Iole.<sup>5</sup> So the Chorus early in the play describe Deianeira's longing for Herakles:

ποθουμένα γὰρ φρενὶ πυνθάνομαι  
τῶν ἀμφινεικῆ Δηϊάνειραν αἰεὶ,  
οἷά τιν' ἄθλιον ὄρνιν,  
οὔ ποτ' εὐνάξειν ἀδακρύτων βλεφάρων πόθον  
(103-106; cf. 630-632)

I perceive that quarreled about Deianeira always with longing heart,  
just like some wretched bird,  
never puts to rest her longing, nor stays her tears.

The Messenger soon after describes Herakles as in a similar state of longing, but for Iole:

ὡς τοῦσδε πέμπων οὐκ ἀφροντίστως, γύναι,  
οὔδ' ὥστε δούλην· μηδὲ προσδόκα τόδε·  
οὔδ' εἰκόσ, εἴπερ ἐντεθήρμανται πόθω. (366-368)  
He is sending her [Iole] here not carelessly, woman,  
not as a slave; do not expect this;  
it is not likely, if he is heated by longing.

Thus *Trachiniai* has been understood in the way sketched out so far: as a play about the problem of *eros* as private, affecting the principal actors. Yet within its presentation of *eros*, the play presents also, though less obviously and so without scholarly notice, its political dimension.

### *Eros and Polis*

Thucydides reminds us that in Classical Athens, the objects of *eros* extend beyond the private to the public – to the *polis* specifically.<sup>6</sup> So Pericles encourages the male citizens to become lovers, *erastai*, of the city (Thucydides 2.43.1):

τοὺς δὲ λοιποὺς χρὴ ἀσφαλεστέραν μὲν εὐχέσθαι, ἀτολμοτέραν δὲ  
μηδὲν ἀξιοῦν τὴν ἐς τοὺς πολεμίους διάνοιαν ἔχειν, σκοποῦντας μὴ  
λόγῳ μόνῳ τὴν ὠφελίαν, ἣν ἂν τις πρὸς οὐδὲν χεῖρον αὐτοῦς ὑμᾶς

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εἰδότας μηκύνου, λέγων ὅσα ἐν τῷ τοῦς πολεμίουσ ἀμύνεσθαι ἀγαθὰ ἔνεστιν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὴν τῆς πόλεως δύναμιν καθ' ἡμέραν ἔργῳ θεωμένους καὶ ἐραστὰς γιγνομένους αὐτῆς, καὶ ὅταν ὑμῖν μεγάλη δόξη εἶναι, ἐνθυμουμένους ὅτι τολμῶντες καὶ γινώσκοντες τὰ δέοντα καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις αἰσχυρόμενοι ἄνδρες αὐτὰ ἐκτίσαντο, καὶ ὅποτε καὶ πείρα του σφαλεῖεν, οὐκ οὖν καὶ τὴν πόλιν γε τῆς σφετέρως ἀρετῆς ἀξιοῦντες στερίσκουσιν, κάλλιστον δὲ ἔρανον αὐτῇ προῖεμένοι.

You, their survivors, must determine to have as unaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue. And not contented with ideas derived only from words of the advantages which are bound up with the defence of your country, though these would furnish a valuable text to a speaker even before an audience so alive to them as the present, you must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till you become lovers of her [the city]; and then when all her greatness shall break upon you, you must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty, and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were enabled to win all this, and that no personal failure in an enterprise could make them consent to deprive their country of their valor, but they laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer.

Sophocles also shows *eros* as affecting the *polis*, but in a way opposite that of Thucydides – not to the benefit, but to the destruction of the city. So the Messenger reveals Herakles' erotic motivation for sacking the city of Eurytus, Oichalia:

ὃς σοῦ παρῶν ἤκουσεν, ὡς ταύτης πόθῳ  
πόλις δαμείη πᾶσα, κούχῃ ἡ Λυδία  
πέρσειεν αὐτήν, ἀλλ' ὁ τῆσδ' ἔρωσ φανείς. (431-433)

One who being present heard from you that the whole city was subdued by his longing for that girl, and the Lydian woman did not sack it, but the *eros* for that girl.

While Bernard Knox has excluded *Trachiniai* from political consideration, he concludes that Sophocles' other plays present the city as a problem.<sup>7</sup> Despite Knox's exclusion of *Trachiniai*, I suggest that it also presents the *polis* and its people – i.e. the proto-democracy – with great ambiguity in

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two ways. First, the word “*polis*” occurs frequently in *Trachiniai*, but in every instance it appears – as in the citation above (431-433) – in collocation with its destruction. *Trachiniai*’s *polis* exists only in memory: Oichalia, the city Herakles sacked due to his desire for that city’s princess, Iole (244, 260, 283, 364-365, 750).<sup>8</sup> Just as Sophocles presents *eros* as a problem, so he presents the relationship between *eros* and *polis*. Richard Seaford has argued that tragedy depicts the destruction of the aristocratic house and upholds the *polis*. *Trachiniai*, though, names the *polis* as that which has been destroyed by the aristocratic Herakles.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Herakles’ uneasy relationship to the city, he nevertheless constitutes the people’s object of desire. The Messenger relates the people’s overwhelming desire for news of Herakles in language disturbingly resonant with *eros*:

οὐκ εὐμαρεία χρώμενος πολλῇ, γύναι.  
κύκλω γὰρ αὐτὸν Μηλιεύς ἅπας λεῶς  
κρίνει παραστάς, οὐδ’ ἔχει βῆναι πρόσω.  
τὸ γὰρ ποθοῦν ἕκαστος ἐκμαθεῖν θέλων  
οὐκ ἂν μεθεῖτο, πρὶν καθ’ ἡδονὴν κλύειν.  
οὕτως ἐκεῖνος οὐχ ἑκὼν, ἔκοῦσι δὲ  
ξύνεστιν· ὄψει δ’ αὐτὸν αὐτίκ’ ἐμφανῆ. (193-199)

He [Lichas] does not have much ease of movement, woman. For the whole Malian people in a circle standing near interrogate him, and he is not able to step forwards. For each man wishes to learn fully what he desires, so Lichas is not let free, until each man fulfills his pleasure. Thus Lichas is not willing, but with the willing Malians he has intercourse; you will see him manifest forthwith.

Strangely, perhaps, it seems to be just Herakles’ destruction of the city that contributes to his desired celebrity. For he is figured as utterly apart from the city:

ὄν ἀπόππολιν εἶχομεν παντᾶ (647)

We were considering him [Herakles] utterly far from the city

To the people, Herakles presents a radical freedom. As Paul Ludwig has discussed, a democracy wavers between individual freedom and civic dedication. The dominance of one creates a longing for the other.<sup>10</sup> For the people, figures of civic dedication, Herakles’ perfect freedom from the city

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presents a fascinating attraction. *Trachiniai's polis* is thus first of all ambiguous because it is vulnerable to the *eros* for one radically apart from the city, indeed the sacker of it.

Next, through the figure of the Messenger and the proto-democratic people he speaks for, the play presents democracy as ambiguous. One of the most curious phenomena in *Trachiniai* is its two messengers: Lichas, Herakles' official messenger; and then the anonymous, self-appointed Messenger who arises out of the people.<sup>11</sup> Lichas, the voice of Herakles, is aristocratic; the Messenger, the voice of the people, demotic. The play's doubled messengers lead to a scene of conflict and contrast between them over presenting the touchy subject of Iole, Herakles' new beloved, to Deianeira, Herakles' faithful wife (350-489). On the one hand, the aristocratic Lichas tells Deianeira carefully – in a sense, politically – about the new woman coming into her home with Herakles. Concerned for Deianeira's feelings and response, Lichas hides the whole truth from her. He is aware of his addressee and the power of his words. The demotic Messenger, on the other hand, interested in his own gain, insists on the revelation of the whole, hard truth. He makes clear that Iole is not just a pitiable captive slave, but the object of Herakles' desire. In brief, the aristocratic Lichas is more sensitive and caring, but he also lies. The Messenger, in contrast, an unlikable, self-interested busybody, reveals the truth regardless of its shattering consequence. How then regard the status and force of truth telling? Is Lichas right to shelter Deianeira? Or must democracy deal in immediate truth at any cost?

The Messenger represents the people well for the people also contain his ambiguity. In that striking and disturbing language of *eros* seen above (193-199), they are interrogators and impellers, but also seekers of truth. Due to their longing and pleasure, the people block the movement of Lichas, the bringer of partial truths. Their detaining of Lichas, which results in the truth telling of the Messenger, can be said to set in motion the chain of events that culminates in the agonized dying of the great Herakles: once Deianeira understands that Iole has entered her house as a new bride, she

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resolves to take action to renew Herakles' affection, which action turns out to be fatal for him. The people in a sense initiate the destruction of the great hero.

It is hard to feel other than distaste for these people and their messenger. They behave in a way so questionable, so unappealing. Indeed the play's language makes it sound as though they subject Lichas to a kind of rape in the way that they impose their will for intercourse so forcefully on him unwilling (οὕτως ἐκεῖνος οὐχ ἐκῶν, ἐκοῦσι δὲ ξύνεστιν· 198-199). Yet perhaps such an ambivalent portrait of democracy is precisely the one that Sophocles aims to present: democracy entails the seeking of knowledge at any cost, or specifically at the cost of the aristocratic house. The people, in their erotic search for truth and knowledge, constitute the bringers – perhaps we can say – of revolution to the aristocracy who destroy the city and that is, for better or worse, part of what the people do through the erotics of democracy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Winnington-Ingram, R. P. 1980. *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, Cambridge 75.

<sup>2</sup> Griffin, J. 1999. "Sophocles and the Democratic City," in *Sophocles Revisited. Essays presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*. Ed. Jasper Griffin. Oxford 83. In this essay, Griffin acknowledges the exception of Vickers, M. J. 1995. "Herakles Lacedaimonius: The Political Dimensions of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and Euripides' *Heracles*," *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 21: 41-53.

<sup>3</sup> Knox, B. 1982. "Sophocles and the Polis," in *Sophocle*, Fondation Hardt XXIX: 7.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the phrase "erotics of democracy" from Wohl, V. 2002. *Love among the Ruins. The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*. Princeton.

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between *eros* and *pothos*, see Wohl (note 4) 144. Wohl here cites Carson, A. 1986. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Princeton: "Carson 1986 suggests that lack and distance are the essence of Greek desire and thus *eros* is, quintessentially, *pothos*." See also Ludwig, P. 2002. *Eros and Polis*, Cambridge 7.

<sup>6</sup> See Ludwig, whose book title I have borrowed here, (footnote 5) 10-12 on political *eros*; on other objects of *eros*, see pages 124-131.

<sup>7</sup> Knox 1982 (note 3) 27.

<sup>8</sup> So also Knox 1982 (note 3) 7.

<sup>9</sup> Seaford, R. 1994. *Reciprocity and Ritual. Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*. Oxford.

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<sup>10</sup>Ludwig 2002 (footnote 5) 2: “Both tendencies, the desire for perfect freedom as well as the need to belong to a greater whole, were diagnosed as erotic wishes by classical authors.”

<sup>11</sup>Sophocles of course uses two messengers in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but there to different effect.