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.”¹ 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 Trachiniai.”² 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: Trachiniai.”³ 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.⁴
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 ἀ Κύπρις ἐκφέρεται νίκας ἀεί. (497)

Kypris 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 ὅτου πράκτωρ φανή (251); the Chorus revise his statement to name Aphrodite as such:

ά δ’ ἀμφίπολος Κύπρις ἁναυδος φανερά
tūνδ’ ἐφάνη πράκτωρ. (860-861)

The handmaid Kypris 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:

ώς τάλλ’ ἐκείνος πάντ’ ἀριστεύων χεροῖν
tοῦ τῆσδ’ ἔρωτος εἰς ἄπανθ’ ἕσσων 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):

ὡς τ’ εἰ τί τώμῳ τ’ ἀνδρὶ ἕτε τῇ νόσῳ
ληρθέντι μεμπτός εἶμι, 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*:

ἀγακλεῖτὸν ἔπέμολε πάθος οἰκτίσαι (854-855)
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. So the Chorus early in the play describe Deianeira’s longing for Herakles:

ποθούμενα γὰρ φρενὶ πυνθάνομαι
τὰν ἀμφιεκῆ Δηιάνειραν ἀεὶ,
οίᾳ τιν’ ἀθλίον ὅριν,
οὕτωτ’ εὐνάζειν ἀδικρύτων 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 τούσδε πέμπων οὐκ ἄφροντίστως, γύναι,
οὔδ’ ὡστε δούλην’ μηδὲ προσδόκα τόδε:
οὔδ’ εἰκός, ἐπερ ἐντεθέρμανται πόθῳ.
(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. So Pericles encourages the male citizens to become lovers, *erastai*, of the city (Thucydides 2.43.1):

τοὺς δὲ λοιποὺς χρὴ ἀσφαλεστέραν μὲν εὐχεσθαι, ἀτολμοτέραν δὲ μηδὲν ἄξιον τὴν ἐς τοὺς πολεμίους διάνοιαν ἔχειν, σκοποῦντας μὴ λόγῳ μόνῳ τὴν ὑφελίαν, ἣν ἄν τις πρὸς οὐδὲν χείρον αὐτοὺς ύμᾶς.
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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:

ος σοι παρὼν ἴκουσεν, ὡς ταύτης πόθω
πόλις δαμεῖ τάσσα, κοῦ ἡ Λυδία
πέρσεεν αὐτήν, ἀλλ’ ὁ τῆς 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 *Trachiniae* from political consideration, he concludes that Sophocles’ other plays present the city as a problem. Despite Knox’s exclusion of *Trachiniae*, I suggest that it also presents the *polis* and its people – i.e. the proto-democracy – with great ambiguity in

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.

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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). 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.

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 εὑμαρεῖα χρώμενος πολλή, γύναι. κύκλῳ γὰρ αὐτὸν Μηλιέως ἀπὸς λέως κρίει παραστάς, οὔδε ἐχεὶ βὴνα πρόσω. τὸ γὰρ ποθοῦν ἐκαστὸς ἐκμαθεῖν θέλων οὐκ ἂν μεθεῖσθαι, πρὸς καθ’ ἡδονήν κλύειν. οὕτως ἐκείνος οὐχ ἐκών, ἐκουσὶ δὲ εὖ ἐνεστίν· δημαῖ 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:

> ὃν ἀπόπτολιν ἐίχομεν παντὰ (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. For the people, figures of civic dedication, Herakles’ perfect freedom from the city.
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presents a fascinating attraction. *Trachiniae’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 *Trachiniae* is its two messengers: Lichas, Herakles’ official messenger; and then the anonymous, self-appointed Messenger who arises out of the people.\(^1\) 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 impeders, 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 (οὐχὶ ἐκεῖνος ὧχ ἐκὼν, ἐκουθ δὲ ξύνεσιν’ 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

6 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.
7 Knox 1982 (note 3) 27.
8 So also Knox 1982 (note 3) 7.
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10Ludwig 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.”

11Sophocles of course uses two messengers in Oedipus Tyrannus, but there to different effect.