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Form and Content in Sophocles:
a Study of Dramatic Sequence, Audience Awareness
and Theme in *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*
by

Bradley Morgan Levett

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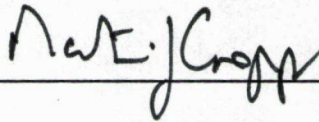
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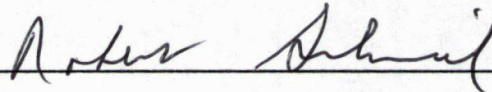
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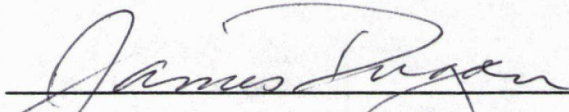
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Form and Content in Sophocles: a Study of Dramatic Sequence, Audience Awareness and Theme in *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*" submitted by Bradley Morgan Levett in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



M. J. Cropp, Supervisor, Department of Greek, Latin and
Ancient History



R. C. Schmiel, Department of Greek, Latin and Ancient
History



J. Dugan, Department of Drama

23 August 1996

Date

Abstract

This thesis examines the use of dramatic presentation in two plays of the Fifth Century Athenian poet Sophocles, the *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*. In particular, I concentrate on how the dramatist's ordering of events and his controlled presentation of information moulds audience response. My main objective is to show how dramatization implements thematic content in these plays. I show how the dramatic ordering of the *Trachiniae* reinforces the play's central theme of tragic late learning, in particular by allowing the audience to experience for itself the play's central movement from ignorance to knowledge. In *Philoctetes* I show how specific features of its dramatic presentation not only shape but determine the play's meaning, and must be taken into account in interpreting it.

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To Yuko

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I

Introduction

The starting point for this study is the matter of how the poet manipulates (a word I use without negative connotation) his audience through his dramatic presentation. The justification for this sort of study is twofold: first of all, I think that such a study is valuable for its own sake, so that we may better understand the craft of the artist. Secondly, by analysing certain scenes in terms of their dramatic impact upon the audience, one may be able to give interpretations of these scenes which better explain their function and purpose in the drama.

However, to examine dramatic presentation with a blind eye to thematic content is as lopsided as to examine theme without consideration of dramatic presentation. Thus my second, and perhaps more important, objective will be to show how theme and dramatic presentation interact and relate to one another. That this is a viable, and indeed necessary, approach to drama is obvious. The experience of a dramatic performance is a unified whole, and that whole is encompassed simply by the time we spend in the theatre and what occurs to us when we are there, and thus we should naturally strive to understand these two key elements of drama in a unified and interactive fashion, since they are never truly separate in the first place.¹ In particular in this present study I am interested in the harmony between theme and dramatic presentation, rather than any discord between the two. Often we will see how the dramatic presentation of the play and our response to it gives us what I can only call a deeper sense and understanding of the themes or content of the play. By a deeper sense, I mean that our response to the dramatic element of a play allows us to

¹ See Styan 3-6 for a discussion of the unity of dramatic performance.

experience in a personal way the themes which are being examined in the course of the action. The plays do not merely present thematic material in a detached manner, but they invite us to experience them personally, and in this way the thematic element of the plays becomes more “real”.²

There seem to be two basic schools of thought in the study of dramatic presentation and meaning in Greek Tragedy. The first begins with Tycho von Wilamowitz, and includes such authors as Waldock and Heath. Wilamowitz’s early work was an attempt to show how dramatic necessity was often the reason for certain passages in Greek Tragedy which other scholars used to support various interpretations, usually based on in-depth character studies. Hence, despite his great contribution to the field of dramaturgy, his understanding of drama was somewhat reductionist in nature. We have here an early suggestion that dramatic presentation was employed at the expense of other elements of the drama, such as content and theme, rather than that dramatic presentation can work in harmony with these other elements. This is also the case with Waldock. For instance, so much of his chapter on the *Trachiniae* is devoted to refuting the interpretations of such earlier scholars as Murray and Bowra, on the grounds that what they see as thematic meaning is often simply dramatic necessity, that there is little detailed work on just how this play works to produce its dramatic impact on its audience, let alone an examination of how dramatic presentation and thematic meaning are integrated in the play. This sort of understanding continues to this day, as can be seen in the work of Heath. Heath’s emphasis on the emotional and hedonistic element of Greek Tragedy is again used to discuss what the art form does not

² Cf Taplin (1978) 169-171 for a full discussion of this fundamental relationship between content and form in Greek Tragedy.

discuss what the art form does not contain, rather than what it does.³

A more recent school of thought takes a more holistic view of Greek Tragedy, in that it views dramatic presentation and thematic content as two related parts in our experience of a drama. Here there is a real attempt to understand how emotions and intellect are both aroused by the act of witnessing a drama, and how both work together to single effect. This movement is primarily the result of the pioneering work of Oliver Taplin, who not only revitalised the study of the dramatic element of Greek Tragedy, but avoided the pitfall that earlier scholars did not, by positing that dramaturgy is not at odds with thematic content, but that in effective drama the two are interrelated and co-dependent. For the dramatist Sophocles, Seale has continued with this line of approach begun by Taplin, emphasising the dramatic art of Sophocles, yet still viewing dramatic presentation and thematic content as harmoniously related.

Beyond this simple division, a number of other scholars are useful for a study such as this one. Karl Reinhardt, writing after and in some ways in response to Wilamowitz, is often useful, primarily because of the writer's great sensitivity for Greek Tragedy and his holistic approach to drama, rather than because of any systematic examination of the ways in which the poet moulds his audience's response. Kitto's *Form and Meaning in Drama* contains an excellent early statement in its Preface on the unity of form and content.⁴

However, Kitto seems to consider meaning as more important than form, and to hold the

³ Heath, although he understands the natural relationship between form and content (71-72), in fact posits the dramatic presentation/thematic content opposition in a very strong manner. He argues that although Greek tragedies were used as material for intellectual and moral discussion, education, etc., they were not *intended* by the dramatists to impart intellectual and moral "meanings" (72-73), but rather they were primarily designed to produce an emotional, hedonistic response from an audience. However, although there is much of value in Heath's book (such as his point that dramatic impact and emotional response should not be considered inferior to thematic content, as is often assumed in scholarship, 88) I think his overall thesis is weak because he has underestimated the difficulty in assessing authorial intention. I do not think it is very profitable to attempt to restrictively define the intentions of a group of poets who left little or no direct accounts of their intentions in making their works. The artistic process seems complex enough to warn against taking a view of authorial intent as sweeping as Heath's.

⁴ Kitto (1956) v - viii.

typical view that the first objective of a Greek tragedian was to impart meaning.⁵ Nonetheless, Kitto's simple point that a dramatist says what he says through the medium of the stage as a whole (word, sight, sound, gesture, etc.), rather than just the bare statements of the characters is important and insightful. Steidle, in a study which has perhaps received less attention than it should, also shows how Greek Tragedy relies on the performance aspect of drama to express what it expresses.⁶ W.G. Arnott is very useful in defining some of the dramatic techniques involved in Greek Tragedy, although his focus is on Euripides. Van Erp Taalman Kip also emphasises the dramatic context of Greek Tragedy, although her work is also somewhat reductionist in nature, because she stresses that it is difficult to discover just what a Greek audience of the Fifth Century BC felt or experienced in the actual course of the drama.

The current state of study of dramatic presentation in the field of Classics can perhaps be assessed generally by the recent commentaries on *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*. Easterling and Ussher both make mention of dramatic elements of the plays, but usually only in passing, and discussion of the interrelationship between dramatic presentation and thematic content is virtually non-existent.⁷ This is generally typical of scholarship today: most scholars would admit the importance of dramatic presentation and emotional response, yet it still remains a study on the periphery of scholarship on Greek Tragedy.⁸

⁵ Consider Kitto (1956) 89: "A work of art is something designed for a particular end – to express a certain conception, or mood. This conception (for students of Greek drama need not worry much about moods) is the logic of the work..." However, I think it is often precisely the mood, or the emotional impact that a Greek Tragedy has, that is the purpose of the work, as I will argue for *Trachiniae*.

⁶ For example, cf. his comments (184) on the change of mind of Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*: "Im übrigen ist hier wieder einmal die letzte und entscheidende Wendung durch das Bühnenspiel ausgedrückt; die damit im Zusammenhang gesprochenen Worte sind diesem gegenüber jedenfalls untergeordnet."

⁷ However, I should mention that Easterling in other writings shows a sensitivity for the dramatic nature of Greek Tragedy, although it is rarely her primary focus.

⁸ This would also seem to be the case for modern theatre study, as the recent survey in Bennett's book (14–15) of modern work done on theatre indicates. Carlson xii: "the majority of writing on this subject (i.e. theatre semiotics) continues to focus primarily on the written text".

I will examine this relationship between dramatic presentation and thematic content in two works of Sophocles in two distinct ways. In the *Trachiniae* I will look at how dramaturgy affects the quality of the theme of late learning, an obvious and predominant theme of the play. I will study certain scenes of the play in an attempt to show how our understanding of this theme is increased and personalised by the use of dramatic presentation. For this chapter I do not offer an overall interpretation of the play, and I shall avoid a question in the interpretation of this play, whether or not Heracles' ultimate deification is alluded to during the final scene.

For the *Philoctetes*, I will attempt to show that dramatic presentation not only influences the quality of the play's thematic meaning, but that in fact it is crucial in assessing just what this final meaning is. Hence for this play I will offer an overall interpretation of the play, with emphasis on how both the dramatic presentation of individual scenes and the dramatic nature of the play as a whole are of fundamental importance to our final judgement of the play's meaning.

I should take a moment to make clear the terminology used in this study. The main terms I will use for the distinction already discussed in this Introduction are 'dramatic presentation' and 'theme'. These terms are useful because they can be understood as representing the basic distinction between form and content in art, with 'dramatic presentation' referring to *how* the play conveys itself to its audience, and with 'theme' referring to *what* is conveyed. 'Dramatic presentation' refers specifically to a number of recognised elements in drama, such as foreshadowing, reversal, spectacle, etc., but it is also used more generally to denote the manner in which a play is organised and presented through the dramatic medium to its audience. 'Theme' is used in what I understand to be its usual sense: a repeated and often developed idea or issue throughout the drama. In addition to these two basic terms, some others are used in relation to them. 'Dramatic impact' is

used to denote the effect (often emotional in nature) that dramatic presentation has on an audience. 'Moral', 'meaning', and 'message' are all used in connection with theme, as they all can be understood as different types of content. Although it often produces a very emotional response in an audience,⁹ we must be careful of simply equating dramatic presentation and dramatic impact with emotion. For instance, reversal produces surprise in its audience, but is this an emotion? It is perhaps more correct to say that dramatic presentation can increase or enhance emotional response for the audience. When Heracles enters in the *Trachiniae*, his momentary silence comes as a surprise, since we have been prepared for a different sort of entrance by the emphasis beforehand on his agitated state and his cries of pain. This temporary calm is set up so as to be broken, and thus the scene of Heracles' sufferings affects the audience all the more, because of the extreme contrast between the character's two states. Yet the surprise of his momentary silence and the dramatic breaking of this silence do not directly produce emotion, but rather add to our emotional response to Heracles' sufferings.

It should be clear at this point that this study emphasises our response as spectators rather than as readers. A reader is able to employ a careful and close scrutiny of the text that seems ill suited to a dramatic piece of work. When witnessing a play we cannot pause to consider what is happening as we watch, and we cannot reread a scene to consider it more closely,¹⁰ as we often do as scholars. Thus our response to a live performance is naturally different in a fundamental way from our response to a novel, short story, etc. This immediacy of drama is of great importance to my study, for it is precisely because of it that drama is so potent an art form for the manipulation of its audience. Of course plays may be

⁹ See Stanford 3-10 for a discussion of the literary evidence for the highly emotional quality of Greek Tragedy. I consider this fact to be so obvious that I do not need to argue the point. As Stanford says (1) the dearth of discussion of the emotional element in Greek Tragedy is due more to the perceived subjectivity of the study than to any sort of consensus that emotions are unimportant in this art form.

¹⁰ Taplin (1977) 18.

read as well, and this will change the nature of our response, but what we are concerned with here is how the play communicates with the audience during a performance. With Greek Tragedy this approach is all the more justified since it was primarily, if not exclusively, a performed art in its time. The evidence for the possession of books in Athens in the Fifth Century is scanty, but what we do have suggests that it was a relatively new phenomenon, and that few people actually owned and read written copies of the plays.¹¹ In any case, we can use more positive evidence to argue for the supremacy of performance over text in its original dissemination. Theatre in Athens in the Fifth Century was one of the most “public” of theatres in the history of the western world. An estimated 15,000 -20,000 people attended the city Dionysia, and these included all the social groups and probably both sexes.¹² Thus, while accepting that Greek Tragedy was occasionally read in the Fifth Century, there is nothing to suggest that the plays were not created to be performed.¹³ An approach which emphasises how the plays are read is fine, so long as we acknowledge that we are examining them in an anachronistic fashion, and that by doing so we are likely to misunderstand the text and its explicit design, since we will be more liable to read into the text that which is unlikely to be understood during a performance of the play.¹⁴

Yet since we only possess the text itself, we must consider the relationship between author and play, and play and audience. In the first relationship, between author and text,

¹¹ Cf. Harris 86-87.

¹² For the relevant evidence, see Csapo and Slater 290-292, as well as their discussion (286-287) and bibliography (420).

¹³ Taplin (1977) 15-17; Van Erp Taalman Kip 3-20.

¹⁴ Bruce Heiden’s introduction to his book on the *Trachiniae* has an interesting discussion of the use of deconstructionist methods of interpretation for Sophocles. Heiden views the *Trachiniae* as an enigma whose meaning can only be understood by careful reading of the text. For his book, this careful reading comes from an examination of what is said in light of the rhetoric of the characters’ words, assuming that the words are not the truth of the play or the poet, but rather words which are intended by the character to produce a certain effect. Heiden is correct to suggest that dramatic necessity can be overstated, and that a theatre audience can still be a critical audience which does not accept everything which it witnesses. However, the gap between how a play is interpreted when directly witnessed and when read cannot be bridged by the point. An audience is simply unable to apply the level of analysis that Heiden suggests is required to understand the play, even were they a crowd of the most skeptical sophists.

we encounter the usual problem of authorial intent. Beyond recognising that a dramatist can have his play convey a meaning which in reality he did not himself subscribe to,¹⁵ we generally assume that what an author writes reflects what he meant it to reflect. Yet we possess no records of the Greek dramatist's intentions, such as the letters of Van Gogh which give detailed information on what the artist wanted to do in his work, and certainly nothing as insightful as a modern interview with the artist.¹⁶ Thus when I say that Sophocles does such and such a thing in his play, whether it be that he has surprised his audience with a certain plot twist, or imparted a certain view on a thematic issue, I am using a sort of necessary shorthand: the play seems designed to do these things, and Sophocles presumably intended it to have these effects. Yet we can never really know if what a play seems designed to do is actually what the poet wanted it to do.

The same holds true for the relationship between a play and its original audience. We may examine a text and argue that it imparts a certain meaning or dramatic impact to an audience, but there is again no way to know just what understanding the original audience had of the play. In this study I take the position that a play to a large extent defines its audience, that it contains the stimulus within itself to generate a certain response from its watchers, and that the individual psychology of the audience members is of little importance. We can detect in the organisation of the text itself an attempt to direct the audience in certain ways¹⁷ even if we cannot demonstrate just how successful a play was in

¹⁵ In modern terminology this is sometimes referred to as a distinction between the real author (the actual individual who wrote the work) and the implied author (the author as he appears to be through his work). Cf. Rimmon-Kennan 86-89.

¹⁶ Which, it should be noted, themselves do not always clear up the problem of the artist's original intentions for his work, showing just how difficult the whole matter is.

¹⁷ As can be seen, I accept, with Van Erp Taalman Kip 99-105, that we cannot talk of "the" Athenian audience when discussing how a play was originally received. However, Van Erp Taalman Kip is perhaps too sceptical in this matter of analysing an audience's emotional reaction. She stresses that any judgment upon how the audience reacted to a play is necessarily based on our interpretation of the text, which of course I accept, but I do not think we have to be reduced simply to a "personal view" (111) when we make such judgments. Van Erp Taalman Kip (121-122) seems to have little faith that the text can be analysed so as to understand how it is organised to stimulate a certain response from its audience.

producing its intended effect.¹⁸

I raise these points about the relation between author, text and audience on the one hand simply to lay out some of the basic working premises of this study, but also to answer the possible charge that the study of audience response is too subjective in nature to be useful. I have answered this question in part by suggesting that the play itself defines its audience. What I would also like to stress is that although there are indeed limitations to my study, these limitations exist for all manner of interpretations including thematic, content-based studies. In all cases we are almost completely limited to the text itself, and in our case, the knowledge that Greek drama was primarily a performed art. If we study a given play and argue that it presents, for instance, a certain view of the gods and their justice (that is, a thematic study), we are in the same dilemma as with studies of dramatic presentation: we cannot be sure if the author actually intended his work to support such an interpretation, and we have no idea if the audience understood the suggested interpretation. It could be argued that thematic studies can do away with the relationship between audience and text, that a theme still exists in a play whether or not it was understood by an audience. However, given that Greek drama was a popular theatre for the masses, and was meant to be performed, we should be suspicious of any interpretation of a text that gives a reading unlikely to have been understood by its audience. It is doubtful in such a case that an Athenian dramatist of the fifth century would have intended his play to work on this level. A popular theatre may of course be challenging (I am not arguing that a popular audience is a thick audience), but it should not baffle.

I shall at times make observations of a narratological kind, although a drama does not strictly fit into this field of study. In drama there is no proper narrator, except in individual parts such as messenger speeches, and thus drama is not technically a narrative

¹⁸ See Howard 5-6 for the added difficulty that an individual performance may not in fact respond to the direction of the script. Howard also emphasises that we work from the text to discover what intended audience manipulation it contains.

art form. Yet I am concerned with the story-telling aspect of Greek Tragedy.¹⁹ Greek Tragedy tends to employ fairly simple ‘narrative’ plots which lend themselves to such observations. Also, Greek Tragedy has close associations with other types of narrative Greek poetry, such as Epic and Choral poetry, and thus there is some sense in viewing Greek Tragedy in light of narratology. By choosing to construct a drama in a certain fashion, the dramatist himself becomes a kind of narrator.²⁰ By examining how the dramatist ‘tells’ his story, we will find plenty of examples of how this ‘telling’ allows him to manipulate his audience’s reactions. This is of particular interest in the case of the two plays under discussion, as I shall argue that both use the basic story of the myth in new ways (in both cases I shall discuss how we can distinguish such basic stories), and that this reworking of the myth is used to manipulate audience response.

In the course of my discussion, I shall often refer to audience expectation (or lack of it) of the plot as a vehicle for manipulating response. The two principles involved here are straightforward. First, the poet can prepare a scene by giving suggestions to the audience about what will occur, thereby creating anticipation for it. “The method is to prepare in advance for a tragic, shocking or frightening event by giving to the audience beforehand that piece of vital information which is withheld from the main victim of the forthcoming calamity”²¹ Of course, it does not even need to be the case that the victim be in the dark: simply knowing beforehand that a tragic event is going to occur is dramatic and upsetting. Such a case can be seen in Deianeira’s speech in the *Trachiniae* about the swab of wool she uses to anoint the robe with the blood of the centaur Nessus. The effect of the blood on the wool realises Deianeira’s, as well as the audience’s, fear concerning her plan to win back her husband’s love. The description of the woollen swab’s disintegration

¹⁹ See Lattimore for a useful discussion of the story-telling aspect of Greek Tragedy.

²⁰ Or in more proper narratological terms, the implied dramatist takes the role of the narrator.

²¹ W.G. Arnott (1983) 14.

emotionally prepares us for the later scene of Heracles' sufferings. Here we can imagine what the effect of the blood will be on the living body of Heracles, and this raises our fear and anxiety for his eventual entrance. Conversely, the dramatist can keep his audience in the dark concerning what will happen in the play, thereby making these unforeseen events more surprising and shocking when they occur. For example, when Heracles finally enters the stage at the end of the *Trachiniae*, he has been strongly awaited for most of the play. Yet before his arrival so much emphasis was placed on his pain and suffering, the noise and disruption he created, that the audience surely did not expect to see him enter in calm silence.

Complexity of effect comes about from the interplay between the two states in the audience's knowledge. For example, the poet can make a suggestion in his play only to dramatically refute it, thereby combining both anticipation and surprise.²² This may be termed misdirection.²³ In the *Philoctetes*, Odysseus' description of the lame hero and the details of his cave and possessions paints a picture of a half-man, half-savage figure, who will not listen to reason, who cannot be overpowered, who can only be tricked. This image of the character is specifically developed in order to be reversed, for when Philoctetes finally enters and speaks, we find him to be courteous and humble, more pitiable than fearful. Or, the dramatist can build anticipation without making clear exactly what will occur. For example, when Deianeira hears the news from the messenger that Lichas has lied, and that Heracles sacked Oichalia for lust over a woman whom he is bringing back home as his mistress, we the audience naturally await her response to the news. We know something is going to happen, but await the actual result. We may well expect an angry and vengeful response, and yet Deianeira has been shown to be no Medea figure, and thus we

²² W.G. Arnott's "red herrings" (1978).

²³ Cf. J.M. Morrison *Homeric Misdirection: False Predictions in the Iliad* (Ann Arbor, 1992) for a study of how this technique is employed in epic.

the audience cannot be sure just how she will react. The poet capitalises on this uncertainty, by having two reversals in her reaction and a dramatic silence on the part of Deianeira just before her response, heightening our anticipation for her words (see below – page 30ff.).²⁴ Other possibilities obviously exist, which remain to be examined.

Any study of matters such as allusion and false suggestions must deal with the old question of what an ancient Greek audience knew about the stories to be witnessed on stage. However, I do not think this question is in fact the right place to start. A play is naturally a work of fiction. When we choose to enter a theatre and watch a play, we accept the conditions of the play as our present reality, so long as it is able to imprint this reality on our consciousness. This is not a simple matter of realism in the characters and actions of the play, for much of Greek Tragedy could be dismissed on these grounds as being ineffective. Rather, it depends on the play's ability to force its own reality onto its audience.²⁵ In this regard Greek Tragedy is quite effective, since it possesses a rather strict set of rules, if we may call them such, which define and limit it. The number of speaking actors, the formal element of the Choral sections, the whole epic backdrop all serve to create a sort of self-contained universe. When we watch a Greek Tragedy, we accept this universe as our reality for the moment. It is not a case of "suspension of disbelief" (that old work-horse of a phrase) but rather acceptance of the drama's reality.²⁶ This acceptance of the play as "real" on a basic level must be the case, for if it were not, then no play would have the ability to engage us emotionally with the fates of its characters. What matter that Deianeira has failed in regaining Heracles' love, and has in fact killed him? What matter that she kills herself in her misery? It's all a fiction. The argument presumably can be proven by

²⁴ Cf. W.G. Arnott (1983) 15.

²⁵ Cf. Styan 2-5 for a discussion. Styan emphasises that the performance of a play does not restrict response, and that each member of the audience will interpret and define the work for him/herself, but also notes that the play itself will mould and form the audience's reactions.

²⁶ Lattimore 15: "in order to do this (i.e. believe the dramatic reality), we have to suspend judgment and make concessions, but tragedy makes us make them, and makes us forget that we have made them."

any individual who has watched and been emotionally affected by any drama, simply *a fortiori*.

The point is simple, but I think important for the matter of our external knowledge when watching a play. If the play is our momentary reality, then it is the play which we are focussed upon, and not our external knowledge of the story. It should be noted that this is important for all sorts of art-forms, and not just Greek Tragedy. In virtually any detective novel, we know, just from the basic nature of the genre, that we can expect the wrongdoer to be discovered in the end, and yet the reader can still feel suspense for the outcome. The ancient Greek audience was particular not because they had knowledge of the play's outcome, but because they often had fairly specific knowledge of the circumstances of the play. What is important for Greek Tragedy is that if the dramatist wished to utilise this outside knowledge of the story, he had to draw it specifically into the play itself, or else it remained outside the play, and hence outside our momentary reality.²⁷ Thus, in the *Trachiniae*, in the scene between Deianeira and the silent Iole, the dramatist draws on his audience's knowledge of the myth to suggest to his audience who the silent girl is. It is dramatically obvious that if a character's identity is kept hidden from another, then the truth of that identity is important. Sophocles specifically suggests to his Greek audience that the girl is Iole by Deianeira's pointed question asking whether the girl is a daughter of the king of Oichalia, the very father of the girl Heracles sacked the city in lust for in the common myth.²⁸ It has been suggested that earlier, when Lichas tells his false story about the

²⁷ Taplin (1978) 164 is excellent on the point: "what is not alluded to does not, within the play, exist. Far from knowing it all already, the audience knows what it is told, thinks and feels what it is aroused to think and feel." Also important is his observation (165-166) that extant Greek Tragedy contains no examples of a "breaking of the fourth wall", no reference to itself as fiction. This clearly makes the dramatic reality all the more forceful for the audience. Bain's discussion (70-86) of asides in Sophocles deals solely with words which are spoken by one character on stage which another does not hear (such as the Merchant's and Neoptolemus' conversation which Philoctetes cannot hear in the *Philoctetes*), and thus these asides do not produce a break in the dramatic reality, such as a parabasis in Aristophanic comedy.

²⁸ Stinton (1986) 70-71 uses the allusion to Actaeon in Euripides' *Bacchae* to argue the same point, that allusions which are important to our overall understanding and interpretation of the play tend to be made clear.

reasons for the sack of this city, the absence of any mention of Iole from his account would have alerted the audience to the fact that he was lying, but given our present discussion, I think this to be unlikely. We have not been informed that Lichas is lying (and Greek Tragedy is often very clear in revealing to its audience that a deception is going on if it wants to have them in the know), and the play itself makes no suggestion at the moment that we should suspect his words. The play has not suggested that there should be some reason for Heracles' latest and last labour other than that which Lichas gives, and so we would presumably accept his words as the truth, just as Deianeira does.²⁹ Also in the *Trachiniae*, we have the scene where Deianeira tells the Chorus about her plan to use the robe to win back Heracles' love. This scene is fraught with suspense and anticipation, but not simply because we "know" that the robe means the end of Heracles. More important than this external information is what is done by the dramatist in the play itself. By having Deianeira tell the story of how she received the so called love charm from the centaur Nessus, the play itself presents the main reason why we, and Deianeira, should fear for her choice. That the centaur should want to benefit the woman who brought about his death, that blood infected by the poison of the hydra should act as a love charm, is highly suspicious. It is this, not outside knowledge of the myth, that raises our expectation of a tragic ending. Hence we might posit a general rule that external knowledge of the details of the story is only relevant to the audience when the play itself draws upon it and makes it relevant.³⁰

I would also like to stress, simply because it seems to be a common means to analyse dramatic response,³¹ that my understanding of our experience of drama has

²⁹ Stinton (1986) 74 makes the point that we should not envision the audience forever filling in the gaps in a play, using their knowledge of the myth, although he argues from a different position than my own.

³⁰ Cf. Van Erp Taalman Kip 41. However, Van Erp Taalman Kip does not seem to apply her own criteria properly when dealing with Lichas' tale of Oichalia (see my argument in my chapter on *Trachiniae* below).

³¹ Van Erp Taalman Kip collects some comments that reflect this viewpoint (100-101) and I agree with her that talking about forgetting what we know is not useful.

nothing to do with forgetting what we know. The real point is that we do not in fact know anything about the play until the play makes itself clear. Thus, in Lichas' account of the sack of Oichalia, we do not forget that we know Iole played a role in this myth, we simply accept that at this time in the play the character of Iole has no dramatic reality yet.

With our author, the problem of allusions is all the more difficult because of the famous Sophoclean irony. Clearly Sophocles does delight in the use of irony, but we should not over-emphasise this. Irony can of course be used to build expectation and anxiety for events to come, as we shall often observe, but as scholars we should not be looking for and finding irony in every second sentence. If the audience is forever being slyly told ahead of time what will happen then it will lose any direct interaction and involvement in the drama, and will hence be little affected by the events of the play as they occur. I do not think the works of Sophocles aim at producing such a detached audience, and we shall see in our discussion that the plays exhibit a balance between anticipation and surprise. Also, irony often works in reverse: an ironic comment may only be meant to be realised after the fact, when its irony is more recognisable, and thus the comment will not disclose anything at the moment it is uttered.³²

Of course this does not answer the question of just what the Greek audience did or did not know. Although I will not argue it here, my opinion is that the Athenian audience – or at least a significant portion of it – had a fairly wide and knowledgeable awareness of the myths which the plays deal with. It is important to note that the question of variants in the myths is largely unimportant in the matter of allusions. An allusion is specific by nature, since it relates back to a specific point of a story, such as Deianeira asking Lichas if the silent girl before her is the daughter of the king of Oichalia. Thus, regardless of variations

³² Van Erp Taalman Kip argues (85-86) that an audience would not be likely to recall earlier words which are later found out to be ironic. Yet often it is possible to observe how a play calls attention to past ironies. For instance, when the messenger tells Deianeira the truth of Heracles' latest labour, he specifically says Iole is the daughter of the king of Oichalia, thereby making the dramatic irony of the Deianeira/Iole scene clear for audience members who did not realise the point at the time of the scene.

in the myths, an allusion is naturally selective. For all we know, there may have been more than a few versions of the death of Heracles, but so long as the audience knew the version that the dramatist was alluding to, then their knowledge of this version of the myth can be drawn upon.³³ In any case, knowledge of the myth must be considered on a case-by-case basis, as I shall do with *Trachiniae* and *Philoctetes*.

I should also note that this paper is not strictly a comparative study, as the two plays have been chosen primarily because of their suitability for my study. And although *Trachiniae* is clearly an earlier play than *Philoctetes*, and although the later play shows at times greater sophistication in its handling than the former, I will not argue that what we have here is best explained as artistic development. I think it unsafe to assume that *Trachiniae* was written in the manner it was simply because the dramatist was not able to write it in the manner of the *Philoctetes*.³⁴

³³ Also, variation in the myths is another reason why we should expect a rather clear reference to the mythical story. For if the poet wishes to make an allusion to a specific version of the myth, he runs the risk of confusing his audience if he does not make that allusion exclusive in nature.

³⁴ For instance, consider the point made on *Trachiniae* by Segal (1977b) 103 that “the dramatic ‘stiffness’ of the long narrative speeches may be the formal rendering of a mythic vision rather than the indication of immature dramaturgy.”

II

Trachiniae

Introduction

The *Trachiniae* revolves around the theme of tragic late learning. The play is simple and direct in the way it focuses our attention upon its thematic core: all the major characters of the play experience tragic late learning, and all mention and reflect upon their late learning. Further, the Prologue (which, as we shall see below, sets the pattern for the rest of the play) immediately places this question front and center by use of the old truism that a man should not measure his life until he has truly learned whether it has been blessed or not.

The action of the play centers around the homecoming of Heracles, who is away on his final labour. Deianeira awaits him anxiously, for the hero left a tablet inscribed with an oracle stating that on this labour he would either die or make an end to his toils. Word arrives that Heracles has successfully completed his labour, but the momentary bright mood created by this news is overturned when Deianeira learns that her husband has sent back a new mistress to share his bed. Deianeira decides to make use of a certain magic at her disposal, blood from a centaur, which she puts on a robe to be sent to Heracles, believing that the substance will win back her husband's love. Yet she learns too late that the blood was really a poison. Her son Hyllus returns with news of Heracles' terrible sufferings as a result of the robe, and he accuses her of wilfully killing her husband. Deianeira silently exits to her suicide. Thus Hyllus also learns the truth too late, that his mother acted without malicious intention. Then Heracles finally arrives home. He too

learns the truth now, when it is no longer of use to him, that the oracle did not prophesy either death or an end to his labours, but in fact both, since death itself is understood as the end of his toils. Heracles at this point makes two demands upon his son. One, that Hyllus light his pyre and release him from his present agony, and two, that he marry Iole. Once he has been satisfied in regard to these matters, the play ends with a somber procession to the funeral of Heracles.

The Story and Its Presuppositions

The subject matter of the play can be most simply put: Deianeira waits for Heracles to return after his latest labour. Early on, through the use of the first oracle, the poet focusses our attention on this question of whether Heracles will return home safely to Deianeira:

ΔΗ. ὥς ἢ τελευτὴν τοῦ βίου μέλλει τελεῖν,
ἢ τοῦτον ἄρας ἄθλον εἰς τό γ' ὕστερον
τὸν λοιπὸν ἤδη βίοτον εὐαίων' ἔχειν. (79-81)

DE. (The oracle said) that he was going to finish his life, or,
having completed this contest, have a blessed existence
to the end of his days.

The poet manipulates our response by manipulating the way in which the oracle is presented to us, by having Deianeira initially state it as an either/or condition.³⁵ However,

³⁵ This idea, that the inconsistencies in the reporting of the oracle are a result of the dramatist's manipulation, goes back to Wilamowitz (see his chapter on the *Trachiniae*). However, as we shall see below, I do not view this manipulation as merely gratuitous, but think rather that the confusion of the characters is shared by the audience in order that we share in the play's central process of moving from a state of ignorance to late learning.

this is in fact a misstatement of the oracle, derived from Heracles himself,³⁶ as he explains at the end of the play:

HE. ἢ μοι χρόνῳ τῷ ζῶντι καὶ παρόντι νῦν
 ἔφασκε μόχθων τῶν ἐφεστώτων ἐμοὶ
 λύσιν τελεῖσθαι· κἀδόκουν πράξειν καλῶς·
 τὸ δ' ἦν ἄρ' οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν θανεῖν ἐμέ.
 τοῖς γὰρ θανοῦσι μόχθος οὐ προσγίγνεται. (1169-1173)

HE. (The oak at Dodona) said to me that
 my imposed labours would be brought to an end
 at the living and present moment.
 And I thought I would fair well, but it
 turned out to be nothing other than my death.
 For the dead do not toil.

Thus it included both the idea of an end to his labours and his death.³⁷ However, when Deianeira first hears that Heracles has completed his labour successfully and is coming home safely (180ff.), the suggestion at the moment is that the oracle has already been answered in a happy fashion, since the two possibilities were understood as exclusive of each other, and thus we are all the more (if momentarily) deceived by this favourable outcome. But of course it only seems to have worked out well, just as Deianeira's rescue from Achelous seemed to be the end of her troubles but was in fact a new source of unhappiness on account of her concern for her constantly imperilled husband (26-35: see below on "The Prologue"). In fact this momentary false calm is set up only to be broken,

³⁶ There is a bit of confusion concerning Heracles' understanding of the oracle, since at the end of the play he talks as though he had been relatively confident of the oracle's indication of a positive result to his labours, yet at the beginning of the play Deianeira talks of all the precautions Heracles made before he set out, in case he should not return (161-168).

³⁷ Cf. Lawrence 291 and Gellie 62 and 69. This misstatement of the oracle occurs again at 166-168.

making the tragic resolution of the play all the more effective for there having been this one moment when things seemed well resolved. Yet in this matter, the poet will even go one better. No doubt the audience, simply on account of their familiarity with this genre of drama, have a certain expectation that the envisioned homecoming of Heracles will turn out in a much different, and much more tragic, fashion. Still, they would have at least expected the principal characters to meet in the course of a drama which is specifically centred around this meeting. As we shall see later, this expectation is not met, and this reversal is used to present dramatically one of the play's central ironies. Hence we can understand the confusion over the exact wording and intention of the prophecy to be purposely created by the text to create effective drama, so that the audience can share in the movement from ignorance to knowledge (I shall examine this in more detail later), and not to be simply the product of a sloppy handling of the plot.

Secondly, the dramatist in this play does some interesting things with the specific myth. The story of Heracles' death, and the role of Deianeira and the robe, is first attested in the literary sources in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 25 Merkelbach and West):³⁸

...καὶ δεῖν' ἔρξ[', ἐπεὶ ἄασατ]ο μέγα θυμῶι,
 ὁππότε φάρμακον ο[ὔ]λον ἐπιστά]ξασα χιτῶνι
 δῶκε Λίχῃ κήρυ[κι] φ[έρειν· ὁ δ' ἔναι]κεν ἄνακτι
 Ἀμφιτρωνιά[δ]ῃ Ἡ[ρακλῆ]ι πτολιπό]ρθωι.
 δ[ε]ξ[α]μένωι δέ ο[ἱ] αἶψα τέλος θανάτοι]ο παρέστη·
 καὶ] θάνε καὶ ῥ' Ἀίδ[αο] πολύστονον ἵκε]το δῶμα. (20-25)

...and she did terrible deeds, greatly deluded in mind,

when she sprinkled the destructive poison on the robe and gave

it to the herald Lichas to convey. He took it to his master Heracles,

³⁸ The text here contains March's changes (see 50-51), which I accept.

sacker of cities, son of Amphitryon. And when Heracles received it,
 death's end came quickly to him, and he died and went to
 the grievous house of Hades. (trans. March)

There is no mention of Iole here, but the epic the *Sack of Oichalia* (fr. 1), also earlier than the *Trachiniae*, attests to her presence in the story of Heracles' final labour (Ἡρακλῆς δ' ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων πρὸς Ἰόλην ὦ γύναι...). Bacchylides' *Dithyramb* 16 (27-29) specifically links Deianeira's sending of the robe with the presence of Iole:

Ἰόλαν ὅτι λευκώλενον
 Διὸς υἱὸς ἀταρβομάχας
 ἄλοχον λιπαρὸ[ν] ποτὶ δόμον πέμ[π]οι (27-29)
 (Deianeira sent the robe) because the fearless
 son of Zeus sent home the maiden Iole,
 white-armed and radiant.

However, March has recently made a strong argument that this poem is later than the *Trachiniae*, and in fact partially derived from it, although the evidence cannot permit a conclusive answer.³⁹ Heracles himself was of course a hugely popular figure in myth, and we can safely assume that the audience would have been familiar with the story of Deianeira's killing of Heracles, and the story of his sack of Oichalia by reason of his lust for Iole. It is probably also safe to say that the two stories were already (or always were) linked together before *Trachiniae* was produced. Although Iole is absent from the reference in the *Catalogue of Women*, no other reason is given for the use of the robe, and so there is no difficulty here.

What is of interest here is the question of Deianeira's motivation in the original myth. Unfortunately, a lacuna exists (20) in just the phrase in the *Catalogue of Women* that

³⁹ March 62-63 and also (more tentatively) Kamerbeek (1959) 6-7. However, March does not suggest that the presence of Iole in the story is an innovation by Sophocles.

seems to describe Deianeira's state of mind, and in any case we cannot be sure whether she was understood as acting in ignorance or malice.⁴⁰ On this point I again agree with March, that the original story must have been a tale of a vengeful wife killing her husband in jealousy over his new mistress, and that the timid, kind-hearted Deianeira of *Trachiniae* is a creative innovation of the poet. A number of specific points bears out the judgment. Deianeira's name means 'man-killer', or 'husband-killer'. The evidence before Sophocles suggests that Deianeira was a warlike figure, a suitable mate for Heracles.⁴¹ Bacchylides' *Ode 5* makes the fate of Meleagros and Heracles parallel, and in the poem Meleagros is intentionally killed by his mother, Althaia, in revenge for his having killed his uncle.⁴² Further, it is difficult to show that the blood of the centaur Nessus was a part of the story before Sophocles, and of course the blood is needed to explain how Deianeira can kill her husband without intending to.⁴³ Without it, the natural assumption to be taken from the *Catalogue of Women* fragment is that Deianeira sends the robe specifically to kill her husband.⁴⁴ For our purposes of examining audience expectation, the question is even easier to answer: I do not think it begs the question to say that any story of a husband's death at the hands of his wife after she has learned about his new mistress naturally suggests a story of vengeance and wilful murder. Such a tragic love triangle is common to any number of cultures, in any number of ages. Yet the dramatist plays with the basic story-pattern, by making Deianeira the opposite of a fearsome, bold woman. Instead, she is timid, kind, slow to act. As we shall see when we come to look at Deianeira's decision to

⁴⁰ As Easterling (1982) 16 notes, Lobel's emendation here (if correct) is ambiguous, as it could refer to a mistaken intention, or to deliberate malice.

⁴¹ March 51-52. March further points out (after Jebb) that Deianeira may have started out as an Amazon character.

⁴² March 52.

⁴³ March 52-56. She is thus able to make a strong suggestion that the inclusion of the story of Nessus in the death of Heracles is an innovation of Sophocles.

⁴⁴ Cf. March 49-58 for the full argument, which I consider convincing.

use the robe, the poet uses this expectation of the audience's and his failure to meet it as a means to make effective drama, and in fact to change the basic character of the story.

It has also often been suggested that the character of Deianeira is specifically contrasted with that of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.⁴⁵ The similarities are pronounced, the most striking being how the Deianeira/Iole scene reflects Clytemnestra's and Cassandra's confrontation in the *Agamemnon*, with the emphasis in both cases on the silence of the mistress when confronted by the wife. I think Aeschylus' work has influenced Sophocles' rendering of the *Trachiniae*, although we cannot safely assume that the connection was intended to be significant to the audience: obviously a dramatist may borrow from another dramatist simply because he wishes to make use of the other's technique. I do not argue this specific case one way or another,⁴⁶ but if the reference was picked up by the audience, then it would be that much more clear that the silent figure whom Deianeira addresses is Iole, simply by analogy with Cassandra. In any case, the specific reference to Aeschylus' Clytemnestra still falls within our general expectations for the type of story we are dealing with.

Thus, with the beginning of the play, the dramatist has two expectations in his audience which he can, and does, use to manipulate their response. In both cases, the natural expectations are frustrated, with dramatic reversals being produced in the way the plot diverges from what seems the more likely course of events. In the case of the expectations concerning Heracles' return, we see with the handling of the oracle, and with the temporary suggestion that Heracles will arrive safely, the typical artistic device of misdirection: a false conclusion, or suggestion of a conclusion, is set up only to be

⁴⁵ Cf. Kamerbeek (1959) 14, Garner 102-107 and Wender 1-2.

⁴⁶ However, I would make the point in passing that we should not be too quick to assert that a scene which is borrowed from an earlier work must be a comment on that earlier work, and that the meaning of the scene is only intelligible if we interpret it in light of the original. A successful artist of any type can have many imitators, and not all of their borrowings are meant as a comment on the original, or depend on the original in any manner for their own interpretation.

negated, thereby adding dramatic impact to the real conclusion through the use of such a reversal. In the second case, the play leaves the question open. Right from the start we know that Deianeira is no bold, angry woman. Her character is throughout defined in terms of her love for Heracles, her reflective nature (as shown in the Prologue), and her natural pity (as evidenced by her first contact with Iole). Yet the basic emotional quality of this love triangle is such that we nonetheless expect anger and jealousy from Deianeira upon hearing about Iole (which we do in fact see in the play) and thus a vengeful motivation to her actions (which is pointedly what does not happen). We should note that both these expectations arise from the text itself. In the matter of the oracle, it is the misunderstanding of it by the characters that creates a false expectation. In the matter of the basic story of a deadly love-triangle, although I have noted how this reflects the original myth, the expectation of a violent response from Deianeira upon hearing the news of Iole also arises naturally from the emotional nature of such a love-triangle.⁴⁷

The Prologue

Seale and Easterling (among others) are correct to emphasise the importance of the Prologue to the rest of the play.⁴⁸

ΔΗ. λόγος μὲν ἔστ' ἀρχαῖος ἀνθρώπων φανείς
 ὥς οὐκ ἂν αἰῶν' ἐκμάθοις βροτῶν, πρὶν ἂν
 θάνῃ τις, οὔτ' εἰ χρηστὸς οὔτ' εἴ τωι κακός. (1-3)

DE. There is an old saying, manifest among men,
 that you can not know any mortal's life,

⁴⁷ In fact, this expectation of a violent response was perhaps more natural for the Athenians of the Fifth century than for us. I recall being shocked when I read Lysias 1, in which the orator is defending a man who returned home to find his wife having intercourse with another man whom he kills. However, the defence did not rest on whether it was in the defendant's rights to kill the man, but on whether the defendant had arranged the whole scenario specifically in order to kill the man, to whom he owed a sum of money!

⁴⁸ Seale 181-182 and 209-211, and Easterling (1968) 58ff.

whether it be blessed or wretched, until he dies.

This statement prepares us for the rest of the play by warning us to look beyond the immediate to the future. We are invited to look carefully at what occurs, and not to count it as the final word until all is revealed. Thus, while the play will pose the resolution of the action as an open question, primarily by having the oracle about Heracles' present labour stated as an either/or condition, we, like Deianeira herself, tend to have a pessimistic view of what will come, assuming the worst rather than otherwise, looking forward to the justification of this emphatically placed truism. The effect is strengthened by Deianeira's comment that she is the exception, that she already knows that hers is a sorry lot (4-5).

Deianeira's account of her own past (6-35), which she uses to illustrate the truth of her statement, continues our preparation in a more detailed and subtle fashion, by giving us the basic dramatic pattern of the play.⁴⁹ Deianeira's past state of anxiety over her marriage to Achelous is mirrored by her present anxiety for Heracles. The seemingly happy resolution of Heracles' defeat of the river god parallels the glad news that Heracles is returning safely, and that his labours are ended. In both cases this sense of a happy conclusion is false: Deianeira was plunged again into anxiety after her rescue, worrying constantly for Heracles. So too the happy news of Heracles' return will be shattered for Deianeira by the news that he is bringing back a woman in lust for whom he has sacked a city. This feeling of false hope is repeated when Deianeira adopts the plan of using the anointed robe, only to learn (too late) that the blood of the centaur is a poison, not a love charm. Obviously at the beginning of the play the audience does not know that her story here is designed as an outline of the play's plot, but as events occur which reflect Deianeira's story of her past, the connection becomes more clear, giving greater force to them as it foreshadows events to come later in the play.

⁴⁹ Cf. Reinhardt 37. See Lawrence for a detailed discussion about how the play shows any knowledge to be suspect, and specifically knowledge of one's own happiness.

All this gives a certain relentless quality to the play. Here at the outset the conditions of the drama are firmly set: we are given the basic maxim that will govern and drive the action of the play, and even the pattern of this action is laid out before us. This makes the final resolution of the play all the more weighty, as we are left with the feeling that the play has all along been grinding towards its tragic end, even when things seemed otherwise.⁵⁰ Yet I should not overstate this anticipatory quality of the drama and its effect on our overall experience of the play. For the moment, I will note that we will see numerous places where the dramatist has striven to create surprise and reversal in his work, despite this rigid framework.

Heracles' Announced Homecoming and the Revelation of Iole

After the Prologue, the dramatist builds suspense over the fate of Heracles, with Deianeira and Hyllus sharing information on what they know about Heracles' present labour, and with Deianeira telling about the oracle (discussed above). Hyllus is sent off to find his father, while his mother talks with the Chorus, giving more details about this oracle. At this point, the messenger enters (180ff) and tells Deianeira the happy news that Heracles is presently returning to her. As we saw earlier, because the oracle concerning Heracles' fate has been wrongly posed as an either/or condition, we seem to have a resolution to the question already, since of course we do not yet know that the oracle has been misinterpreted. Deianeira herself is hesitant in her happiness, and waits for "official" word from the herald Lichas. Lichas' account of the sack of Oichalia (229-290), and the reasons for it, will be found to be false, but is this meant to be understood by the audience

⁵⁰ However, this should not be understood as robbing the audience of any interest in what occurs in the play even if they are given the general outlines of the action. The audience still awaits the actuality of the general *gnome*. In the first place, the prologue does not in fact have to be correct, and may be set up to be contradicted (see Hamilton 1978 for some examples from Euripides), but in any case, we still require the specific reality of the *gnome* in the form of the actions and characters in the play. "In drama this individuality (sc. the specifics of the drama) must be received as sensory perception which contributes to an image of life." (Styan 32.)

at the time? It is worth noting that Sophocles often makes clear such deceptions, but here we are given no indication that we are to understand Lichas as lying.⁵¹ Perhaps the most noted “mistake” in his story is that there is no mention of Iole, and her role in the final labour of Heracles was well enough known from myth, as the *Sack of Oichalia* testifies. Yet we should not over-emphasise an omission or a variation in a myth: the poets had a certain amount of freedom in their retelling of the myths, and no doubt it was not impossible to tell the story of Oichalia with a different cause. Thus, even if a part of the audience should notice this omission, they would not be able to tell if this was a result of an innovation of the poet or an indication that Lichas is lying. Indeed, as March has shown (see above), the inclusion of Nessus as well as the depiction of Deianeria as a gentle, kind-hearted woman in the story seem innovations of the poet, thereby showing that the original myth, as we examined it before, need not restrict the dramatist. However, more important in this regard is the position as outlined in the Introduction: the point is that the play itself has not yet made it clear that Iole will be an important character in the action or that Lichas is lying, and so the audience would presumably be paying attention to the dramatic reality of the play rather than their pre-conceived ideas concerning the myth, since myth and play at this point are not in agreement. Davies has argued that Lichas’ reason for the sack of Oichalia was itself an innovation by the poet, but leaves unanswered the question of whether the audience recognised it as such when it was initially heard.⁵² I would submit that there is nothing in Lichas’ tale to cause apprehension in the audience,⁵³ and that we are

⁵¹ Contrast Orestes’ deception of Electra in *Electra* and Neoptolemus’ deception of Philoctetes in *Philoctetes*.

⁵² Davies 481-483.

⁵³ See Halleran (1986) 243-244, who supports this interpretation as well, arguing the case in other ways. He also makes the point (244-247) that the emphasis in Lichas’ story on how Zeus punishes those who use trickery is meant as a warning to Deianeira, who of course uses trickery of a sort to disastrous effect. This supports my view as well, as this moral point to Lichas’ tale would have little impact if the audience thought at the time of his speech that he was lying. Heiden (1988) shows how Lichas’ speech employs rhetoric to put Heracles’ actions in the best possible moral light, but again, this is only noticeable after his words are revealed as false.

subsequently taken in by the present happy mood of the drama.⁵⁴

Deianeira, after asking Lichas about Heracles and finally allowing herself to believe the good news, turns to the captives from Oichalia who entered with Heracles' herald, and questions one in particular. This scene has been well discussed in terms of its dramatic function by Seale.⁵⁵ Deianeira's natural sense of pity and her understanding of life's changing fortunes cause her to question one of the captives, whom she says she pities more than the others since she alone has the sense to understand her situation (312-313).⁵⁶ This is a young maiden, unmarried and without children (line 307-309), and no doubt Iole's beauty was shown by the mask she wore, in contrast to the other captives. Deianeira asks Lichas the pointed question:

μη τῶν τυράννων; Εὐρύτου σπορά τις ἦν; (316)

Can she belong to the royal house? Was she possibly a child of Eurytus?

(trans. Easterling)

This is obviously designed to call to mind the audience's knowledge of Iole in the myth, and is much more obvious than her omission from Lichas' account. The question directly brings the myth into the reality of the drama by such a broad hint, as does the scene itself, since it is dramatically obvious that a hidden identity is an important identity, in particular for the person the identity is hidden from. The act, which seems at the moment to be a sort of recognition scene, rises to a high level of tension, with Deianeira pressing Lichas for the

⁵⁴ McCall 145-146 argues that Deianeira's mention of Zeus of Oeta, when she expresses her initial joy upon hearing about Heracles' return, is designed to alert the audience to the tragic resolution of the play and to undercut the present joyful mood. However, I think this is to take a view of the audience that presupposes over much their detached involvement in the play. A single reference to Zeus of Oeta at this point does not seem sufficient to undermine the present optimism seriously. Van Erp Taalman Kip 91-92 also thinks that the audience is not taken in by Lichas' news, because they know from the myth that the sack of Oichalia is related to Heracles' tragic end, but again this seems to assume a very detached audience who respond more to what they know about the myth than how the play itself directs them.

⁵⁵ Seale 187-194.

⁵⁶ See Easterling (1982) 117 for a discussion of the phrase καὶ φρονεῖν οἶδεν μόνη, which can also be translated "she alone knows how to behave". I have used Jebb's understanding of the phrase.

girl's identity, while he, rather unartfully, disassembles (314-328). The audience's anticipation for the meeting between wife and concubine (and the wife's reaction) increases as Iole's silence, one of many dramatic silences in the play, lengthens. In such scenes it is usually the silent character we most long to hear speak, but in this case we desire Iole to speak so that her identity may be known to Deianeira, and not so much for herself. Thus, the fact that she technically cannot speak, by the rule of the number of speaking parts allowed on stage at one time, is unimportant.⁵⁷

On this interpretation the text provides an excellent example of a basic dramatic technique that will be seen again in this play. The dramatist increases the impact of his thematic content by having the audience experience for themselves just what is experienced by the characters, who embody, or act out, these themes. In the Prologue, Deianeira's story of her past and present misfortunes set out the play's dramatic rhythm, a cycle of seemingly positive resolutions overturned by the truth of their negative nature. This dramatic rhythm is immediately put into effect in this section, because the play leads the audience to experience it personally. With the report that Heracles is coming home safely, we initially accept what seems to be a happy resolution, only to find out that we judged too early, that Heracles' return will in fact be a bitter event, because of the truth about Iole. Moreover, since we are not directly told that this seemingly happy resolution is a false one, the play has us discover this for ourselves and so we are engaged in our own act of discovery, a process which is repeatedly acted out by the characters of the play. Finally, because our act of discovery involves learning a painful truth (painful for Deianeira, and thus painful for us if the play is successful in engaging our sympathy), we come to equate learning with tragedy, an idea central to the theme of learning too late.

This technique has something in common with Taplin's idea of tragedy as a unity of

⁵⁷ Contra Gellie 59 who says "the audience could have had no expectation of hearing Iole speak", yet this would seem to go against the absolute basic function of a dramatic silence, which is to raise the audience's desire to hear the silent character speak.

emotion and intellect.⁵⁸ However, Taplin's view is more concerned with the view that tragedy allows its audience to understand painful emotion by presenting it in an organised, intelligible fashion, so that some meaning is given to life's sufferings. The basic technique I am discussing here has more to do with Aristotle's comment that we feel fear for those who seem like us.⁵⁹ Aristotle seems to suggest that interaction on the part of the audience with the characters and actions of the play is increased if there is some personal connection between character and audience.⁶⁰ It is not simply that the character of Deianeira is like us (of course this is always debatable), but rather, the text can be understood as being purposely designed to produce the same responses from the audience as can be witnessed in the characters within the play. This understanding goes beyond Aristotle's comment, since our connection with the characters is much more than just the recognition of their similarity to us. This personal interaction of the audience also creates a link between theme and dramatic, emotional, response because the experiences of the characters, which we share in, are not random but are organised into thematic patterns. When we experience late learning for ourselves in the Deianeira/Iole scene, this does not simply evoke an emotional response from the audience, but also relates this response to the theme of late learning that is in evidence throughout the play.

Deianeira's Decision

I now turn to the section of the play beginning with the messenger's revelation of Iole's identity and the real reason for the sack of Oichalia to Deianeira (335ff.) and ending with her decision to use the centaur's blood (535-632). All that can be said to happen in

⁵⁸ Taplin (1978) 170-171.

⁵⁹ Poetics 1453a.

⁶⁰ In fact, this idea seems basic to Aristotle's advice that a tragedy should contain characters who are "better" than us, while still not perfect, whereby the characters still retain some connection and relevance to the audience itself.

this section is that Deianeira learns the truth and sends the robe, and so my first objective will be to show how the section produces effective drama and is unified around the audience's concern for her response to the news of Iole, and I will again pursue the question of how theme and dramatic presentation are linked in the play.

The scene of Deianeira's questioning of Lichas about the taciturn Iole continues, with Deianeira persisting in her questions, and coming closer and closer to the truth.⁶¹ Yet the very sympathy in Deianeira which caused her to notice Iole in the first place makes her leave off her questioning, momentarily frustrating our expectation of the revelation of Iole's identity (329-331). Thus the play comes to an uneasy lull, as Deianeira makes to enter the palace, an exit, we might note, that would leave little or no opportunity for a progression of the plot. This lull is shattered when the messenger asks Deianeira to wait awhile to hear his words. Rather than a happy exit into the house (for if Deianeira has pitied the captives, things still seem well for her and Heracles), her movement is reversed, just as the plot is propelled again into forward movement, with new information that the audience must already expect, thus fulfilling our expectations while it surprises us with its jack-in-the-box form of disclosure. For the messenger gets quickly to the point. Lichas is denounced as a liar, and the story of Oichalia sacked because of Heracles' lust for Iole is revealed for the first time (351-358). That Deianeira just addressed her nemesis, all unknowing, is made evident by the messenger's comment that the girl is the daughter of Eurytus (380-382), just as Deianeira suggested to Lichas earlier. Now too, the idea of the power of Eros is presented. The messenger states that only Eros, if anybody, is to blame for the sack of Oichalia. This theme of the power of Eros will become important in the following movements of the play.

The play has now swung back into high gear. What we the audience are most

⁶¹ Seale (192-194) suggests that Deianeira's movement towards the truth is dramatically represented by her drawing closer to Iole on the stage.

interested and expectant to hear is Deianeira's reaction to the news. It should be noted how effectively our desire for this response has been developed by the play. Since we have already experienced for ourselves the shock of this news, we can well imagine and fear what it will mean to Deianeira. Further, Deianeira is the play's main character up to this point, and we require her to make some sort of decision to advance the plot. As we saw, the audience has already been frustrated in this desire when Deianeira stopped her inquiries about Iole. What we might naturally expect, simply because of the situation, is an angry, jealous, reaction. As I have suggested, the combination of Deianeira, the known mythical figure who killed Heracles, and Iole, a rival taken by Heracles in lust, can only suggest a story of vengeful jealousy. And this is precisely the type of response we seem at first to hear from Deianeira:

ΔΕ. οἴμοι τάλαινα, ποῦ ποτ' εἰμι πράγατος;
 τίς εἰσδέδεγμαι πημονὴν ὑπόστεγον
 λαθραῖον, ὥ δύστηνος; ἄρ' ἀνώνυμος
 πέφυκεν, ὥσπερ οὐπάγων διώμνυτο,
 ἢ κάρτα λαμπρὰ καὶ κατ' ὄμμα καὶ φύσιν; (375-379)

DE. Ah, wretched!, whatever has happened to me?
 Oh misery, what secret trouble have I accepted
 into the house? So she is nameless, as her escort claimed,
 she who is so very radiant in face and form?⁶²

There is a bitter, angry quality to her words, which serves as evidence of her jealous feelings towards Iole, despite her earlier kindness towards the maiden. Yet instead of a full response by Deianeira, the disclosure of her feelings is interrupted by the decision to question Lichas on his lies. Thus although we have been given a glimpse of Deianeira's

⁶² Taking line 379 as Deianeira's (one group of mss. attributes the line to the messenger), revealing her jealous feelings for the beauty of Iole.

feelings about this turn of events, we are frustrated again and must await a fuller representation of her emotional state.

The scene between the messenger and Lichas, with the former cross-examining the latter has often, I think, been misunderstood by scholars. For instance, Gellie thinks Sophocles is here making “theatrical capital out of an extended inquisition”, but emphasises the speaking characters.⁶³ Waldock describes the scene as having “an oddly laboured, everyday realism”.⁶⁴ Most interpretations of this scene are inadequate because they tend to focus on the messenger and Lichas. These characters and their words are not unimportant, but they are indeed secondary, for the scene’s prime function is to heighten expectation for Deianeira’s response. That the messenger must at first question Lichas instead of Deianeira of course emphasises her timidity, but it also emphasises the fact of her silence, since she has momentarily given up her role as questioner. Thus is it her silence that speaks volumes.⁶⁵ We already know that Lichas has lied, and so it seems unlikely that making him admit so is the primary point of the scene, although we should keep in mind the play’s emphasis on the revelation of truth.⁶⁶ The audience is forced to wait for Deianeira to speak, to hear what they are most interested to learn, her reaction to the recent events, all the more

⁶³ Gellie 60.

⁶⁴ Waldock 102.

⁶⁵ See Segal (1980) 139-142 for a good discussion on Sophoclean silences, in contrast to Aeschylean. Particularly useful for our present case is the comment (140) that “in such situations in Sophocles (sc. tableaux with a silent character) we know that the events unfolding before us are of vital importance to the silent figure. The visual configuration leads us to fill that silence with the imagined reaction of that character, the actuality of which the poet withholds until a later event or a later point in the scene.” This fits perfectly with the scene under discussion here, although Segal does not use it as an example.

⁶⁶ Seale 197 in fact thinks that the dramatic disclosure is Lichas’, that it is his silence that is important, and his admission of the truth. Yet this would not seem to make very good drama. Lichas’ revelation, the revelation of a minor character, is no revelation at all, while Deianeira’s gives us the information that is most crucial at this point to the development of the plot, her feelings about Heracles’ new mistress.

so because her first words on the matter have been interrupted.⁶⁷ The extent of Lichas' attempts to keep the truth hidden seems to reflect the dire importance of the truth to Deianeira,⁶⁸ and thus to suggest the great extent to which it will affect her, making us all the more eager to hear her speak. We await her response because we now suspect that her sense of jealousy will drive her to the tragic act which we have suggested she was known for in the myth of Heracles' death and which we suggested was natural in such a love-triangle, since her first, aborted response, suggested such a response. Yet we have been given a highly sympathetic picture of Deianeira in this play, and there can be no certainty, and so we eagerly await her words.

When Deianeira does finally speak, her words convey a strong reversal, a reversal of intention that in turn reverses the plot, and in fact causes it to grind to a halt once again. In contrast to her first words on the matter, she is now understanding, sympathetic and reasonable:

ΔΕ. Ἔρωτι μὲν νυν ὅστις ἀντανίσταται,
 πύκτης ὅπως ἐς χεῖρας, οὐ καλῶς φρονεῖ.
 οὔτος γὰρ ἄρχει καὶ θεῶν ὅπως θέλει,
 κάμοῦ γε· πῶς δ' οὐ χᾶτέρας οἴας γ' ἐμοῦ;
 ὥστ' εἴ τι τῶμῳ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῇιδε τῇ νόσῳ
 ληφθέντι μεμπτός εἰμι, κάρτα μαίνομαι,
 ἢ τῇιδε τῇ γυναικί, τῇ μεταιτίαι
 τοῦ μηδὲν αἰσχροῦ μηδ' ἐμοὶ κακοῦ τινος. (441-448)

DE. He who opposes Eros hand to hand like a boxer

⁶⁷ The technique is similar to the one described by Taplin in his interpretation (1977, 298) of the Herald's arrival in the *Agamemnon* (503ff.), when the audience require his words to find out what has happened, but are made to wait while the Chorus give a long announcement. Here, the suspense is perhaps even greater, as we await and require Deianeira's words to find out how the plot will develop. Thus the silence of the character puts in question the very course of action the play will take.

⁶⁸ As he says himself (480-483), he lied to spare her painful news.

is a fool. For he rules even the gods as he wishes,
 and certainly me too. How not also another woman
 such as me? Thus if I find some fault with my husband,
 struck by this disease, or this woman, who shares
 responsibility for no shame or harm to me, I am indeed mad.

As we noted before, this seems to mark a very fundamental change in our expectations concerning the story-pattern. Deianeira says that she understands the power of Eros, and cannot blame either her husband or Iole for this emotional betrayal. She says she feels sympathy for the girl, whose beauty has ruined her home and family (464-465, linking her with Deianeira herself, who also was fought over because of her beauty).⁶⁹ She chastises Lichas for lying (449ff), saying that the truth cannot hurt her (459). This is a remarkable statement, fraught with irony, for the play presents the revelation of truth as anything but harmless, as I have noted above.⁷⁰ The truth of the oracle portended a possible tragic outcome, and Lichas has held back the truth for fear of its harmful effect. Indeed, the play is full of harmful truths which the characters do not learn until it is too late. The reversal, for all its surprise, is also plausible and realistic. We have been given a very sympathetic picture of Deianeira so far: she is the wife who worries for her husband, the caring mother. Her sympathetic nature was strongly depicted to us in her understanding attitude towards the captive women of Oichalia, and (ironically) Iole herself. Thus we can accept that her

⁶⁹ Reinhardt (45) finds the sense of reversal in the decisiveness of Deianeira, in contrast to her earlier timidity. This contrast is certainly present, but the greater surprise surely comes from the fact that Deianeira remains sympathetic and will not retaliate to the news in the vengeful fashion we might expect. We might also question whether Deianeira is truly decisive here, since she is stating that she will do nothing about what has happened. This problem does not arise in Reinhardt's interpretation because he considers her here to be consciously deceiving Lichas as to her intent. A good refutation of this view can be found in Hester 1-7.

⁷⁰ Cf. Whitman 111f.

feelings here are honest, even if they seem untenable.⁷¹

Thus again the play comes to a calm lull. Yet once again this sense of calm is a false one, and the play can be understood as being designed to plant the suggestion in its audience that it is false, once more reflecting the basic rhythm of action defined in the Prologue. With the revelation that the captive girl whom Deianeira addressed is in fact Iole, the poet can now more easily draw on the audience's knowledge of the basic myth. Thus Deianeira's final words, promising "gifts in return for gifts" (494) cause us to recall the role of the robe in the story. Certainly there seems to be some irony here, for Lichas has certainly not given Deianeira any sort of gift with his news: the happy tidings that Heracles is returning home safely have been soured by the fact that he is returning with another woman. Thus we may suspect that the bitter "gift" of Lichas' news will be requited by an even more terrible "gift".

However, our sense of unease at this seemingly peaceful resolution is primarily produced by the simple feeling that Deianeira is being more noble than she herself can sustain.⁷² It is all very well for Deianeira to show that she understands the power of Eros, yet she too is under Eros' power in her feelings for Heracles, and the audience no doubt feels some anxiety about Deianeira's ability to maintain her generous outlook on the situation. We have already had her initial, bitter, response to the news, which gave us some insight into her more natural feelings on the matter. In a fashion, this interpretation of the audience-response invited by Deianeira's speech is supported by her words when she reenters the stage with the new plan to send the robe to win back Heracles' love. For as she states plainly, even though she still accepts the power of Eros, how can any woman live

⁷¹ Hester's interpretation (7-8) holds something in common with mine, in that he notes the irony that Deianeira does not send the robe in jealousy, but in love, and that this is the reason for the double response of Deianeira. However, his view emphasises the ironic comment of the poet rather than the dramatic presentation.

⁷² Cf. Lawrence 296-297.

with her husband's mistress? (545-546)

This relation between Eros and Deianeira herself is clearly established with her words at lines 443-444 and by the following choral song to Aphrodite which both prepare us for Deianeira's second reaction. As she says (quoted above), Eros rules even the gods, as well as herself. The enjambed $\kappa\acute{\alpha}\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \gamma\epsilon$ gives a pitiful account of her own subservience to Eros. For if Eros rules even the gods, certainly she no less than the gods is subject to his power.⁷³ Further, this is hardly an isolated reference to her love, as we have seen her deep sense of concern for her husband throughout the beginning of the play. This admission of the power of Eros, and the more specific mention that he rules Deianeira as well, calls to mind the play's basic story of a woman spurned by her husband and the tragic action she takes as a result. The ensuing Choral ode continues this theme of the power of love. The Chorus attests to the power of Aphrodite, using the savage battle between Heracles and the river god Achelous as an example of this power (497-530).⁷⁴ The vivid description of the battle, motivated by lust for Deianeira, serves to show the extremes that Eros and Aphrodite drives man (and beast) to. Thus we the audience have both this vivid account of the power of love and Deianeira's admission to being under the sway of this deity to strengthen our sense that Deianeira cannot possibly maintain her unemotional response to the news of Iole. For if Eros drove Heracles to battle the river god Achelous, and to sack an entire city, what will he drive Deianeira to do?⁷⁵ Thus during the Choral ode we sit in suspense: the plot has no obvious way of developing at the moment, but our sense of anxiety has been raised, as we fear that Deianeira cannot maintain her impassivity.

⁷³ See Holt 65-66 for a good discussion.

⁷⁴ As Winnington-Ingram (87) notes "strongly epinician in tone, it (sc. the ode) celebrates the victory not of Heracles, but of the goddess herself, umpire but, in the upshot, herself sole victor."

⁷⁵ Oddly, Bowra (134ff.), while accepting that Heracles cannot but act as he does under the influence of Eros, does not recognise that this is the same power working on Deianeira, and hence justifies to an extent her use of magic to win back her husband's love. Better is Gellie (64) who, however, does not deal with the dramatic foreshadowing.

Deianeira returns onto the stage in a new frame of mind, another reversal which we can all too easily accept. She still feels no anger against Heracles, and this maintains our sympathy for her as a generous woman, but she says just what we have felt to be so:

ΔΕ. κόρην γὰρ, οἶμαι δ' οὐκέτ', ἀλλ' ἐξευγμένην,
 παρεισδεδεδεγμαι, φόρτον ὥστε ναυτίλος,
 λωβητὸν ἐμπόλημα τῆς ἐμῆς φρενός.
 καὶ νῦν δύ' οὔσαι μίμνομεν μιᾶς ὑπὸ
 χλαίνης ὑπαγκάλισμα· (536-540)
 τὸ δ' αὖ ξυνοικεῖν τῇδ' ὁμοῦ τίς ἂν γυνή
 δύναιτο, κοινωνοῦσα τῶν αὐτῶν γάμων; (545-546)
 ταῦτ' οὖν φοβοῦμαι, μὴ πόσις μὲν Ἡρακλῆς
 ἐμὸς καλῆται, τῆς νεωτέρας δ' ἀνὴρ. (549-550)

DE. For I have accepted a maiden (though I consider her a maiden no more,
 but an experienced woman) like a merchant his cargo,
 goods that will be the ruin of me. And now we both remain,
 two objects of affection under one blanket.
 What woman could live together with her, sharing
 the same husband?
 So I fear Heracles may be called my husband,
 but the younger woman's man.

Here her true feelings about Iole are revealed, as was suggested by her first, interrupted response to the news of Iole. Her jealousy is also clear from her image of flowering beauty beside the beauty that has passed its prime (547-549). Yet she still does not devolve into the stereotype of the vengeful wife:

ΔΕ. ἀλλ' οὐ γάρ, ὥσπερ εἶπον, ὀργαίνειν καλὸν

γυναῖκα νοῦν ἔχουσιν·

(552-553)

DE. But, as I said, it is not fit for a sane woman to be angry.

Sophocles has not written his play as a simple story of the wronged woman seeking vengeance, but rather a tragedy about how ignorance leads even the best intentioned of people to misery.⁷⁶ Deianeira's use of the robe is not designed as a means to gain vengeance from Heracles but, more poignantly, his love.⁷⁷

The whole sequence of Deianeira's changing responses gives us another excellent example of the interplay between dramatic presentation and theme. As we noted, the theme of the power of love developed in Deianeira's own words and the words of the Chorus helped to heighten the dramatic impact of Deianeira's second reversal of intention, when she decides to take action by means of the robe, because it gave us a sense of anxiety for her earlier, more detached response. Yet, in turn, the dramatic presentation serves to make the thematic point all the more forceful.⁷⁸ Deianeira's kind response was totally in keeping with the characteristics she has been given in the play: reflective, gentle, sympathetic to the

⁷⁶ March (66-71) is excellent on the whole double reversal of Deianeira. Starting from her argument that Sophocles' version of the myth, with the depiction of a timid, kindhearted Deianeira, is our earliest extant literary source for this variation of the myth and hence the likely source of this innovation (cf. the comments on March in the section "The Story and its Presuppositions"), she shows how the dramatist manipulates the audience's response by utilising the audience's expectations, which derive from the original version of the myth that had Deianeira as a wilful murderer. My own contribution to her argument is the emphasis on how the play manipulates our reactions in itself, above and beyond the contrast with the audience's external knowledge of the myth, and the following discussion of how the scene links dramatic presentation and theme.

⁷⁷ To censure Deianeira, as Bowra does (127f.), by saying that in Athenian law a man was entitled to a concubine, is to ignore the basic emotional feeling one would have in such a situation as Deianeira's. Certainly the dramatist seems to be aiming for a sympathetic response to Deianeira's choice, as well as the fear that it is a foolish choice all the same. After giving us an extended picture of Deianeira, the faithful wife waiting with anxiety for the return of her husband, the news that he is returning with another woman for his bed can only make Deianeira's sadness at the news appear all the greater to the audience, thereby justifying her recourse to action of some sort, and yet an action which seems imbued with disaster. Cf. Gellie (64f.) for an effective, and humorous, rebuttal of this view of Bowra's. Cf. also Lawrence (303-304) who argues that Deianeira is responsible for her actions, not because she should not have acted at all, but because she should have acted with greater knowledge of what she was doing.

⁷⁸ Cf. Halleran (1985) 50-79 for a useful discussion of the integration of Choral songs into the dramatic action in Euripides.

plight of others. The two points usually brought up against her character are her initial passivity and her later rashness in deciding to use the robe to win back her husband's love.⁷⁹ Yet these elements seem to be entirely to the point. Deianeira's kind and thoughtful nature, coupled with her passivity, gives us the picture of a woman who would be the last person to act rashly under the effects of her emotions. The fact that such a figure is driven to adopt a plan so out of keeping with her basic character only increases our awe at the power of Eros. We expect a character like Heracles to act in such an emotional manner but in Deianeira the effect is different. The reversals of Deianeira's frame of mind strengthen the theme because they represent, in a dramatic and emotional fashion, the power of love overcoming such a passive victim. We are left with the feeling that Eros and Aphrodite have come up against very difficult prey, yet they have been proven victorious once again.⁸⁰

Finally, the double response of Deianeira reinforces the sense of determinism in the play which I discussed earlier. That the kindest and most timid of women is forced to take action, an action which forebodes a tragic outcome, even though she has striven to remain inactive, only increases our feeling that the tragic resolution of the play is inevitable, regardless of the motivation of Deianeira. Thus once more can dramatic presentation be seen to reflect thematic content, since the deterministic feeling of the play in part is a result of the uselessness of knowledge and learning, because man ever (in our play at least)

⁷⁹ For example, Bowra 120 and 127-128.

⁸⁰ Whitman sees in Deianeira's change of will the signs of her heroic nature. Of the scene of Deianeira's unmasking of Lichas, he says: "active and assertive, she begins to weave her fate, and when she sends the robe to Heracles, her deed is only the result of what she finds out here" (118). This emphasis on the decisiveness of Deianeira is overstated. Deianeira does act more forcefully when she seeks the truth from Lichas, but she does so by stating her decision to do nothing in the matter of Iole. Whitman disregards the structure of the scene of Deianeira's decision, which seems designed to emphasise the point that Deianeira's decision to use the robe is not entirely of her choosing, that she has been overpowered by her love, and forced to reverse her earlier decision to leave the matter of Iole be. If we must find "the core of the play" (117) in a certain scene, better would be the choral ode to Aphrodite, when the entire plot hangs in the balance. McCall (149-150) also shows how the apparent decisiveness of Deianeira's questioning of Lichas is undercut in the text, but does not make the obvious point that her decisiveness is based on her decision not to act at all.

acquires it too late and thus he is unable to affect his future. The ideas of determinism and the impotency of knowledge link naturally with the general theme of late learning, because they are effects of such late learning on the lives of the characters.

Deianeira's speech about her decision to use the robe is designed to create more than a little anxiety in the audience. The lull that occurred with Deianeira's first, calm reaction is shattered, for her actions portend a tragic resolution. The most obvious reason for our anxiety at her decision is our awareness of the role of the robe in Heracles' death (*Catalogue of Women* Fr. 25 ll.19-20: see "The Story and its Presuppositions"). Yet more important is the anxiety that the poet creates directly through Deianeira's words, not simply by relying on external knowledge of the myth. Deianeira explains that the ointment is from the blood of the centaur Nessus. This leads to an account of the event which led to this gift. While transporting Deianeira across a river, the centaur sexually assaulted her, for which crime Heracles shot him dead with his unerring arrows. The dying creature told Deianeira to collect his blood, claiming that it would work as a love-charm (555-581). It seems easy to state the audience-reaction evoked by this story. How can Deianeira believe that the centaur would want to give her any sort of beneficial gift when she was the cause of his death? Why should the centaur's blood, contaminated by the Hydra's poison which was on the arrow (and, importantly, the poison is referred to in the tale, 572-575) work as a love-charm? Surely she should feel some hesitation over using such a "gift", considering who the giver was.⁸¹ Once again, Deianeira herself will later voice our present fears, thereby justifying them, when she learns the truth about the blood of the centaur (707-708). Deianeira does express concern over her actions here, but not for this reason, but rather stating her fear to act as a contriving woman. In fact, the poet offers a short window of

⁸¹ Halleran (1988, 129-131) makes note of the repetition of the verb βάπτω, rare in tragedy, to describe both the arrows of Heracles and the anointing of the robe. Halleran mentions how this links the tragic acts of Heracles and Deianeira, both acting in ignorance and inadvertently bringing about their own downfalls. However, the verbal link also serves to emphasise the violent conditions surrounding the blood, and thereby the violent aspect to Deianeira's use of it.

escape, when Deianeira says that if she seems to be acting wrongly, she will have done with her plan. Yet of course this does not occur. The Chorus, sharing in the blindness of Deianeira, simply state that if Deianeira thinks the plan has some chance of working, then they think she is acting rightly (588-589). The Chorus here are in their typical state of awareness in this play, being one step behind the knowledge, or at least the foreboding anxiety, of the audience. This characteristic is fully in keeping with the portrayal of the Chorus as inexperienced young women (cf. Deianeira's description of them, 141-152)

The scene also increases our anxiety because the ominous elements of Deianeira's speech cause us to be reminded of the oracle which said that Heracles' fate rested in the balance. Deianeira's own omission of any mention or reference to the oracle can perhaps be explained by the point that she thinks the oracle already to be fulfilled, since Heracles is said to be arriving home safely. Yet we the audience must feel that in ignoring the oracle at this point she is allowing herself to be blinded by her passion. Our knowledge of the oracle, and our feeling that Deianeira is making a poor choice in trusting the words of the centaur, combine to give us the sensation that the question of the oracle is still an unanswered one, and that Deianeira may be aiding its tragic fulfilment.

Deianeira's instructions to Lichas concerning the robe further heighten our fears and prepare us for the tragic resolution of the play. The robe must only be given to Heracles, and further, the light of the sun, any holy fire, or the hearth's light must not look upon the robe (604-609). This need to keep the robe in the dark creates a sinister impression. Although any precaution might be explained away as a necessity in making the magic work, it seems highly suspicious that the robe must be kept in such conditions. Also, the idea of the robe being kept in the darkness emphasises the theme of the truth hidden, revealed only when it is too late. The fact that the robe must be kept in darkness implies that the truth of it is not known yet by its user.⁸²

⁸² See Seale 198-199 for a good discussion on this theme and its presentation. Cf. also Lawrence 298.

Thus, first of all, we can find dramatic unity for this section in the emotional rhythm of the plot. As we saw, this pattern of action was already outlined in the Prologue through the story of Deianeira's past. The ominous elements of Deianeira's decision to use the robe start us again on the pattern of calm resolution reversed, by alluding to the reversal to come. We have observed this pattern throughout the play up to this point: Deianeira's decision to stop questioning Lichas about the identity of Iole created a false calm that was overturned by the revelation of her identity by the messenger, and the false calm of her decision to not act upon the news of Iole was overturned by her decision to win back Heracles' love by sending the robe. Both the *agon* between the messenger and Lichas and the Choral ode have been seen to be part of this pattern as well, since they were used to build anticipation in the audience for the action to come.

This rhythm of false calm overturned also helps in our appreciation of the play's central theme, learning too late, specifically learning too late that what was seemingly resolved in a positive way was in fact the opposite. The play does not simply present its theme by intellectual and verbal means, although it does this by the spoken words of the characters who repeatedly state this common *gnome*, but we the audience experience the "truth" of this theme through our emotional response to the action of the play. For each time the plot comes to a rest in this section, our sense of apprehension is awoken specifically by the ignorance of Deianeira. Thus our emotional response to the dramatic rhythm of the play engages us in a deeper, more involved fashion in the play's main theme because we are made to feel that knowledge and happy (or at least non-disastrous) resolutions are not to be trusted, and in fact are linked with tragic outcome.

Finally, this section of the play is further unified by the simple fact that it is throughout concerned with Deianeira's response to the truth about the cause of the sack of Oichalia. Thus we can define the whole scene as a complex delay, used to heighten interest

in her reaction.

Thus we have formal coherence in the structure of the plot, and coherence of subject matter. As the analysis has shown, this section is dramatically effective and engaging. My final point is to show further how this section relates dramatic presentation and theme together.

The amount of concern shown by the poet for Deianeira's decision is justified by the simple point that the fateful decision of a tragedy is always of prime importance. Deianeira's use of the centaur's blood is the most important act of the play. However, the emphasis on her decision is clearly important for another reason. As I suggested above, the play makes a basic contrast in Deianeira's motives.⁸³ She wishes to leave matters be, but she cannot withstand the force of Eros and must go against her own timid nature and take action. This contrast served to strengthen the theme of the power of love, by showing Deianeira to be the last sort of woman to act rashly under his power. Yet the contrast in her responses as well as all the attention to her ultimate decision is also of fundamental importance because the contrast in her reactions makes clear the point, in dramatic fashion, that Deianeira does not act in wilful malice, but in a desire to reclaim Heracles' love. The poet spends time and effort on the point, because he is clearly using the myth of Heracles' death in a less than obvious fashion. For the central theme of the play, learning too late, is not one that at first seems applicable to the basic story. The *Trachiniae* constitutes a basic reversal in expectation for this sort of story (jealous, wilful murder), and the emphasis on Deianeira's final response is designed to point out this change, while doing so in a manner that utilises its dramatic potential. Thus the final resolution of the play (or at least Deianeira's section of the play) will not be concerned with the theme of vengeance and murder, but with the fateful relation between good intentions and ignorance.

⁸³ March 69. However, March does not comment on how the play's emphasis on the change in Deianeira's motivation is also important in directing the play into a different thematic vein (see below).

Deianeira's Exit, Heracles' Entrance, and the Unity of the Trachiniae

Lichas leaves with the robe and the Chorus sing a song primarily about their desire to see Heracles safely home. Then Deianeira learns the truth about the blood, through the disintegration of the woollen swab that she used to anoint the robe, and relates this to the Chorus (672-722). At 734, Hyllus returns with the news of what has befallen Heracles upon donning the robe. Deianeira has already stated (719-720) that if the robe kills Heracles, then it will kill her as well. Thus we can easily understand her silent exit to be a sign of her resolve to kill herself. However, unlike the audience, Hyllus and the Chorus do not understand her action, and think that her silence reflects her guilt in the matter of Hyllus' charge of wilfully killing her husband (813-814). Thus we have a privileged position in knowing what is happening in the play at this moment.

This basic distinction between our awareness and the characters' is clearly used to manipulate the audience's response, and is in fact somewhat transparent, given that the Chorus must act as though they never heard Deianeira's earlier talk of suicide. First of all, her silence marks that inexpressible level of emotion which is more effectively conveyed by silence.⁸⁴ The sorrow of the character seems to reach the point of defeating speech. Further, the emotional impact of the scene is increased because the audience is impotent in its knowledge: we must watch Deianeira walk to her death and listen to Hyllus' angry words, and yet we can do nothing. This technique is often used to create anxiety and fear in the audience, and certainly there is here a build up to Deianeira's suicide, but here our sense of helplessness derived from our impotent knowledge also gives the tragedy an aspect of determinism again. Deianeira's (perhaps slow)⁸⁵ walk to her death, in silence, without

⁸⁴ Howard (87) is good on this point: "Such moments (sc. emotional silences) plumb the audience's own emotional resources, for they ask us to supply, from an intuitive understanding of what the speechless figure must be experiencing, our own silent completion of the stage movement."

⁸⁵ See Seale 201 for a comparison between our scene and similar ones with Jocasta and Eurydice in *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, saying "hers would seem to be a slower business altogether".

protest, has a relentless quality of inevitability. Like the audience, although she now knows the truth of the centaur's blood, Deianeira also is now powerless, and all that is left for her is silent resignation.⁸⁶

In the case of Hyllus the scene also arouses our pity, despite his harshness. We here have the situation described by W.G. Arnott (quoted in the Introduction), whereby we watch the character's actions with the knowledge of a crucial piece of information that the character lacks. Hyllus does not understand the motivation of Deianeira in sending the robe, but we do, and thus we can see Hyllus laying the groundwork for his own participation in the play's central tragic theme. We know that his charge, that she deliberately killed her husband (807-809), is untrue, and thus we know that Hyllus also will learn the truth too late, and that he will come to rue his words, as the Nurse later makes clear (932-935 and 943-946).

By using our own knowledge to increase our tragic response to Deianeira's end and the beginning of Hyllus' own tragic late learning, the scene's dramatic presentation also brilliantly serves the poet's thematic purposes. Thematically, the play weaves a web of ignorance, learning, impotence, determinism and disaster. The ignorance of the characters, because they only learn the truth too late, results in disaster. That the learning is too late renders the knowledge useless and impotent, and this impotency and the fact that we know that the oracle in fact predicted all this long ago makes the outcome seem predetermined. Impressively, all these points can be found in the emotional response the scene is designed to evoke. Our own act of discovery and knowledge is emphasised by our knowledge of what will occur later (Deianeira's death and Hyllus own tragic late learning), all the more so for the fact that we know what Hyllus and the Chorus do not. Our feeling of sorrow and pity for the characters links our own knowledge with tragic outcome, or in this case, tragic response. And because we are forced to watch in horror what we cannot affect, despite our

⁸⁶ See McCall 154 for a good discussion on how the scene represents her lack of power.

knowledge, we also feel the sense of impotency that accompanies learning in this play. Further, our privileged knowledge allows us to recognise both characters as revealing the truth of the *gnome* related in the Prologue, and the tableau virtually presents them as cause and effect: if Hyllus only knew the truth of Deianeira's exit, he could see for himself the tragic effects of ignorance and late learning in the form of his own mother, and how his own actions are leading him down the same path.

In all this we have been emphasising the detached position of the audience, in terms of their foreknowledge. However, one aspect of the scene is fully a shock, and that is simply its timing. The story's basic premise was the return of Heracles to his wife, but now this will never occur.⁸⁷ Deianeira's suicide marks one of the fundamental ironies of the play, that in a story about a homecoming of a husband to his wife, the two will never meet on stage. Further, I would like to point out that this distance between the play's two main characters is dramatically presented in this scene by the contrast between noise and silence. Before Deianeira's silent exit, we are given a description of Heracles' sufferings which is everywhere filled with noise. In his pain Heracles shouts to Lichas (772-3), the crowd groans at the fate of Heracles and Lichas (781-2), Heracles cries out and the rocks resound (786-788), he groans as he is transported to Trachis. The rupture between the two characters is here dramatically represented by this contrast of sound and silence. The division is further emphasised by Hyllus' comment that Deianeira will soon see her ravaged husband (805-806), for his words are never able to solidify in the audience's mind as an expectation of a meeting between the two. For with the end of Hyllus' speech comes Deianeira's silent exit, which we know to be a walk to her death. Thus Hyllus' comment becomes a reference to one of the central ironies of the play.

I now come to the question of the structure and unity of the play. Like Easterling I

⁸⁷ As Seale (201-202) says, her exit "visibly ruptures the expectations of the development, and so the prospective meeting to which everything has been direct (sic) is aborted." See also W.G. Arnott 6-12 for a discussion of this type of reversal, which he describes as resulting from a 'major red herring'.

see the strong break between Deianeira's part of the play and Heracles', and the fact that the two never meet on stage, as a deliberate choice of the dramatist.⁸⁸ Starting with Taplin's definition of the story as a *nostos* play, a homecoming, Easterling sees the break as an attempt to dramatise this failure of the basic story-line. Thus we can see once again how the dramatist uses expectations for the story to mould our experience. The handling here is bold: the tragic outcome of our *nostos* story is a failure so complete that the two principal characters are not even allowed to meet.⁸⁹

The clear division between Deianeira's section of the play and Heracles' has long been noticed, prompting the use of the term diptych for its structure, and has raised the question of how or if the play has any sort of unity.⁹⁰ This unity has been found by different authors in different ways. For instance, Winnington-Ingram sees the unity of the play in the theme of Eros.⁹¹ Segal looks to a complex weave of symbols evoking the gap between civilization and wilderness, myth and contemporary times which the two characters represent.⁹² Easterling notes a number of linking elements, such as the characters of Iole and Hyllus, the robe, the motif of writing and in particular the unifying theme of finding out too late, in which in one way or another all the characters share.⁹³ While denying the importance of none of these interpretations, my own contribution will be an understanding of how the play is deliberately designed, by the link between Heracles' entrance and Deianeira's exit, to make clear to the audience the purpose of this rift between the two main characters.

⁸⁸ Easterling (1981) 57-58.

⁸⁹ Similar is the non-meeting of Orestes and Clytemnestra in Euripides' *Electra*, where the expectation of Orestes' murder of his mother is reversed by the dominant role of Electra in the killing.

⁹⁰ Cf. Webster 102-103, Bowra 116, etc.

⁹¹ Winnington-Ingram 74-75, and his chapter on the *Trachiniae* as a whole.

⁹² Segal (1977).

⁹³ Easterling (1981) 58-59.

Seale in fact links the silent entrance of Heracles with the silent entrance of Iole and the other captives of Oichalia.⁹⁴ While there is no need to be exclusive about the matter, I would like to argue that the more prominent companion scene of Heracles' entrance is Deianeira's exit. Seale emphasises how both processions enter silently, yet in the first scene it is a group silence, since we do not even know as they arrive that one of the women is more important than the others, while with Heracles' entrance it is specifically his silence which calls attention to itself, as we shall see. I will examine the more positive evidence for linking the wife's exit with the husband's entrance in a moment, but for now it might be said that we are much more likely to be thinking about Deianeira at this time: we have just heard the account of her suicide, and Heracles' entrance focuses the audience on the basic fact that, against expectation, his wife is not there to meet him.

I shall first examine the dramatic presentation of Heracles' entrance. After Deianeira's exit, the Chorus sing about the misfortune of Heracles, emphasising the true meaning of the oracle. Then the nurse enters with the report of Deianeira's suicide, after which the Chorus again sing an ode, this time about the twofold tragedy of the house. At this point Heracles at last makes his entrance. His pathetic return home is first and foremost the tragic reversal of the play's earlier suggestion of a happy, safe, homecoming. The silence of Heracles, and the calm, sombre procession of his entrance, is used to represent dramatically the central reversal of the play: what at first was to be a joyous return has come to resemble the funeral procession that it will in fact shortly become, and this is again in keeping with the basic rhythm of the play. Of course, this outcome was not unforeseen by the audience, as our fears have been raised since Deianeira first decided on her course of action. However, there is the unforeseen form in which Heracles enters, and this is a surprise. In contrast to all the earlier talk of his cries and shouts, his agitated state, Heracles

⁹⁴ Seale 204.

enters in silence and calm.⁹⁵ Thus his entrance has that combination of the expected and the unexpected which we found in Deianeira's exit. The function of this silence is clear and straightforward: it is created to be broken, and thus is used to make the depiction of Heracles' sufferings all more forceful when the hero does awake.

The connections between Heracles' entrance and Deianeira's exit are telling. Both move in silence, silences which tantalise and frustrate the audience since we expect and desire them to speak. In both cases, it is Hyllus who addresses the silent character, and thereby reminds us of the bond of family in which the two tragedies take place. As I noted, both scenes have the quality of being both expected and unexpected. Yet what is most striking is that both exit and entrance represent movement towards death and tragedy. The point is simple, but is therefore all the more clear to us in the presentation of the drama. We saw how Deianeira's exit was understood as a movement to her suicide, made all the more forceful in its impact on the audience because we could see what the Chorus and Hyllus could not. Heracles' entrance is in stark contrast to the happy return anticipated earlier. We know that his return home is a movement towards his own death, an "end to labours" meaning the end of his life, as the Chorus make clear before his arrival (947-952). In fact, when Heracles first enters it is still not clear whether he is sleeping or already dead (969-970).⁹⁶

Thus the exit and the entrance both link and sever the two characters. They are divided by the physical space of the skene, representing the home where wife and husband never meet, the home which Heracles never really made a home. Yet they are linked by the tragic fate they share, linked by the ambiguous oracles which foreshadowed this common

⁹⁵ Cf. Gellie 71.

⁹⁶ McCall (162) emphasises the point that a single actor portrayed both Deianeira and Heracles, and finds unity in this regard, discussing how the merging of two roles in one actor parallels the submersion of Deianeira's life in Heracles'. The idea is interesting, but I think suffers from McCall's unstated preference to interpret the drama in ways that work outside of the dramatic reality I discussed in the Introduction.

fate. It is the dramatic parallels between the two scenes which portray this. As Bowra has said, “the central unifying character of the *Women of Trachis* is not Heracles nor Deianeira but the destiny which unites them in a common doom.”⁹⁷ My interpretation here, while not intended to downplay other sources of unity in the play, is of value because it can explain how the play is unified in the course of our experience of it. Purely thematic considerations which unify the play may often not be recognised as such by the audience during the actual performance. After the shock of learning that the expected meeting between husband and wife will never occur, the audience needs something direct to bridge this gap and to explain it. This bridge is effected by the clear physical link between these two scenes, and because the obvious similarities between the two are based on the tragic fate that overcomes both characters (silent suffering, movement towards death), the dramatic parallelism is not “skin-deep”, but evokes a feeling that the two characters’ envisioned meeting *is* realised, but in a fashion that dramatises the tragic result of the play.

At this point, Heracles himself seeks revenge upon Deianeira, of course to no avail, and learns that he has been killed by one who is already dead, the centaur Nessus, just as another prophecy he heard before had predicted. He also learns the truth too late, and is now resolved to die. He asks two things of Hyllus, to light his pyre and to marry Iole, and after Hyllus agrees the play ends with the procession to Mount Oeta.

Although I will not examine the well-worn problem of whether there is an intentional reference to the deification of Heracles, as it is a question I consider beyond the scope of this thesis, I will mention that the dramatic reality of the play in no way focuses the audience upon the later events in the myth of Heracles. In this regard we can contrast the earlier allusion to Iole. There, Deianeira’s pointed question over the identity of Iole quickly became dramatic reality when the messenger informed Deianeira that the woman was in fact the daughter of Eurytus. Here any allusion to Heracles’ deification must remain

⁹⁷ Bowra 149.

truly allusive, since this event does not enter into the drama and become a part of its reality. I would suggest that any possible allusion to Heracles' deification is not meant to affect our response to the play's ending, which seems firmly focussed on human suffering resulting from late learning.

Conclusion

I will now try to review the findings of this chapter and organise them into general categories. First of all, I hope I have shown how effectively a play can use the state of awareness of the audience to create dramatic impact and to show thematic content. I discussed in the Introduction how the audience can only know or not know what will occur in the drama, or some combination of the two. In the case of the audience being unaware of what will occur, the dramatic impact produced is surprise and reversal. This was seen in the Deianeira/Iole scene, where we were shocked to learn that Heracles was bringing back a new mistress to the sorrow of Deianeira. Yet this sort of dramatic presentation is not used simply to "get a rise" out of the audience, but is employed to serve thematic purposes as well. Generally, when we are in the dark about the direction of a play, we come to share in the experiences of the characters because we respond to the events of the play just when they do and in much the same manner of response. Thus, because the events of a play are organised into a structure that makes them intelligible in the form of themes, we personally experience the events which illustrate such themes. In a Greek drama we do not merely recognise intellectually this thematic element, but are made to experience and feel it personally. Thus, the themes become better understood, and are felt as more important, since we can relate them to our own experiences. In fact, I would suggest that this technique of audience interaction provides an emotional bridge between our experiences in the theatre and our general experiences in life. Through being made to experience and feel

the “truth” of the themes in a drama, we can more easily relate these experiences in the theatre to our own life. Anything we examine in a detached and intellectual manner runs the risk of appearing detached and unrelated to ourselves.

In the second case, when the play prepares us for future events and allows us a privileged position of foreknowledge, the dramatic impact is the creation of suspense and anxiety for the events to come, often with a view to playing with and at times reversing this intentionally built up expectation. For example, since we find out about the presence of Iole before Deianeira does, this knowledge makes us anticipate and fear for the reaction of Deianeira. As we saw, the play utilises this anticipation to full effect: we are made to wait for Deianeira’s full response while Lichas and the Messenger squabble, and a double response is eventually used which plays upon the element of uncertainty in our expectation, for the basic story suggests a vengeful, murderous response from Deianeira, and yet the play has presented its Deianeira as a sympathetic and kind woman. Yet again, the dramatic impact produced by our state of foreknowledge is linked with thematic presentation. I am not sure if I am prepared to go so far as Taplin, who states that Greek Tragedy gives “an experience which, by creating a perspective on the misfortunes of human life, helps them (sc. the audience) to understand and cope with those misfortunes”,⁹⁸ since this seems to argue a positive moralistic purpose which the art-form may not possess at all times.⁹⁹ It may be safer to simply say that this detached position given to the audience by their foreknowledge allows them to see the entirety over the constituent parts, the big picture, so to speak. We saw a wonderful example in the scene of Deianeira’s exit. Since we know that she is walking to her suicide, we see her at the final stage in the tragic process of late learning. We also know, as Hyllus does not, her true motivation in sending the robe, and

⁹⁸ Taplin (1978) 170-171.

⁹⁹ In fact, an argument could be made that the *Trachiniae* presents a view of the world in which misfortune cannot be coped with or understood, since it gives such prominence to ignorance and late learning.

thus that her son's accusation that she has killed her husband on purpose is incorrect. Hence we can see Hyllus begin his own course on the path to late learning, that he will later regret his final words to his mother. Thus does our privileged knowledge allow us to see the cycle of late learning in this scene in its entirety, with Hyllus standing at the beginning and Deianeira walking to its conclusion.

I would like to reiterate one further point in connection with the audience's foreknowledge. Throughout this chapter I have attempted to show how the play itself creates and builds expectation for future events in its course of action, rather than simply relying on the audience's knowledge of myth. Certainly we saw an effective use of allusion in the Deianeira/Iole scene. However, the fact of poetic creativity alone should warn us against the assumption of an audience forever relating the actions of drama to their external knowledge, and forever expecting the events to come. Yet equally important, I think, is the basic understanding of drama I put forward in the Introduction, that our participation in drama entails on one level of our experience an acceptance of the dramatic world as the real world for the time we watch the play. We must, I feel, be very careful of assuming that knowledge of the myth affects the audience's reactions to a particular scene or play. We might reflect upon the absence of any mention of Iole in Lichas' report to Deianeira, but if the audience is focussed primarily upon how his story differs from their knowledge of the myth, then the play has failed in its task to draw the audience into its temporary reality. At the time, the play does not present Lichas as lying, and thus for the play's reality he is not, until the play itself shows that he has spoken falsely. As we have seen, anxiety and anticipation for future events is primarily produced through the text itself, and not the audience's external knowledge. For example, Deianeira's decision to send the anointed robe obviously would recall for the audience the role of the robe in the original myth, but more important is how the play, through its own words, builds anxiety for her choice: the

story of Nessus and the giving of his blood to Deianeira makes us worry for her choice because it seems so obvious that the centaur might have had in mind something other than Deianeira's benefit by giving this gift.

My other observations concerning the interplay between dramatic presentation and theme in the *Trachiniae* can be grouped into two other general categories. First, dramaturgy is used sometimes to actually make the thematic point. We saw this in how the parallelisms between Deianeira's exit and Heracles' entrance made clear to the audience the point of the absence of the expected meeting between husband and wife, that the basic tragic outcome of this *nostos* play is that although the two never meet on stage, they are joined in the tragic fate they share. Further, dramatic presentation can be used to emphasise a thematic point. In Deianeira's double response to the revelation about Iole, the dramatic reversal of a timid, kind woman deciding to plunge into a poorly thought out plan of action, after she has expressed her desire to remain detached and not act on the news, serves to enforce the idea of the power of Eros (brought to the forefront at this point in the drama by the Choral ode to Aphrodite).

The *Trachiniae* offers an excellent look at how dramaturgy can affect the quality of thematic content in various ways. Although we often talk of different types of unity in Greek Tragedy (plot, structure, theme, etc.), the conjunction of dramatic presentation and theme, or (more simply stated) of form and content, constitutes a more fundamental artistic unity, ensuring that our very reception of the drama is a single whole, a single experience.

III

Philoctetes

Introduction

In my examination of the *Trachiniae*, I looked at how dramatic presentation was related to thematic content, on a scene by scene basis, and primarily how this dramatic presentation enhanced the poet's theme of late learning. In that specific case, the emphasis was on the dramatic element of the play, since the theme of late learning is a self evident one in the *Trachiniae*, and I made no attempt to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the play. For the *Philoctetes*, while still observing individual dramatic elements and how they interact with the themes and the content of the play, I wish to examine how its overall dramatic presentation must be observed and reckoned with when we try to formulate a general interpretation. Thus rather than only examine particular scenes, I will develop an interpretation of the *Philoctetes* that will hopefully show the importance of dramatic presentation to the overall assessment of this play.

Philoctetes in Homer is known as a famous archer,¹⁰⁰ and in the *Iliad* we also find mention of the snakebite which in our play is the first cause of all of Philoctetes' troubles.¹⁰¹ There is also the comment of Nestor in the *Odyssey* that Philoctetes was one of the few heroes to reach home safely from Troy.¹⁰² Otherwise, more detail of the myth is to be found in the poets of the epic cycle, specifically Stasinus in the *Cypria* and Lesches in the *Little Iliad*, information on which survives in the summary of Proclus. Here we get

¹⁰⁰ *Iliad* 2.718 and *Odyssey* 8.219.

¹⁰¹ *Iliad* 2.721-725.

¹⁰² *Odyssey* 3.188-190.

an account of Odysseus' capture of the seer Helenus, the promise of healing for Philoctetes and the bringing of Philoctetes to Troy from Lemnos by Diomedes,¹⁰³ as well as the wound and its foul smell.¹⁰⁴

Both Euripides and Aeschylus wrote plays, earlier than Sophocles' version, based on the same episode from the Epic Cycle. We are fortunate to have some information on these from the writings of Dio Chrysostom. His Oration 52 is a general comparison of the three versions, while Oration 57 is a prose version of the first 200 lines or so of the opening of Euripides' *Philoctetes*. From these we know that Aeschylus had Odysseus, not Diomedes, come to Lemnos to bring Philoctetes to Troy, that the Chorus was made up of Lemnians,¹⁰⁵ and that Odysseus tricked Philoctetes and took his bow, resulting in the hero finally consenting to go to Troy under this pressure.¹⁰⁶ Hence Aeschylus seems to have written his play as an intrigue drama, with the central movement being concerned with how the crafty Odysseus would overcome the anger of Philoctetes against him and the Greeks, and thus it probably resembled any number of episodes in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus has to overcome some obstacle to obtain what he wants.¹⁰⁷ Euripides retained many elements of Aeschylus' version as well as adding some of his own innovations. Here too Philoctetes is won over by Odysseus after the bow has been taken from him. In addition to the Chorus of Lemnians, Euripides also had a third character, Actor, who served as a companion to the abandoned hero.¹⁰⁸ Most importantly, Euripides introduced an embassy from Troy who were also seeking Philoctetes for his aid in the war,¹⁰⁹ and thus

¹⁰³ M. Davies (1988) 52.

¹⁰⁴ Davies (1988) 32. See T. Gantz 635 for a general discussion about the pre-tragic sources.

¹⁰⁵ Dio Chrysostom 52.7.1.

¹⁰⁶ Dio Chrysostom 52.2.2.

¹⁰⁷ See Radt (1985) 352-359 and Calder for discussions of Aeschylus' *Philoctetes*. Calder also terms it a drama of intrigue (178).

¹⁰⁸ Dio Chrysostom 52.8.2.

¹⁰⁹ Dio Chrysostom 52.13.3 and 59.4.1.

Euripides' version seems clearly to have emphasised debate and persuasion. Hence it would appear that Euripides also portrayed the episode in the form of an intrigue drama, cast in his own particular way.¹¹⁰

Finally, Sophocles also wrote an earlier play called *Philoctetes at Troy*, but the fragments of this play are very few, and all we can say of the play is that during it Philoctetes remained unhealed for a time, and that presumably the play dealt with the hero's killing of Paris.¹¹¹ Pindar's *Pythian I* also mentions Philoctetes, with the novel detail that he sacks Troy while he still suffers from his ailment, but this is probably an innovation of the poet used to suit his own purposes rather than reflecting an alternate tradition.¹¹²

There are three general points we can observe for these earlier versions. First, although the play was set on Lemnos, the center of interest was Troy, since these plays seem to have focussed on the importance of the mission for events back at the war, with Philoctetes himself being both the object and the obstacle of the mission. In Dio's prose version of Euripides' prologue, the emphasis is wholly on the dangerous nature of Odysseus' mission on Lemnos and what it means to him in terms of added glory at Troy.¹¹³ Second, both plays seem to have concerned themselves with the element of intrigue, a natural development after the introduction of Odysseus into the action. Third and most important, Philoctetes himself could not have dominated the attention of the audience in the same manner that he does in Sophocles'. This is a natural consequence of the importance of intrigue in the earlier versions. Since our interest in an intrigue drama is focussed on the success or failure of the mission, the role of Philoctetes becomes

¹¹⁰ See Webster (1967) 57-61 and Olson for discussions of Euripides' *Philoctetes*.

¹¹¹ See Radt (1977) 482-484 and Gantz 637-638.

¹¹² According to the scholia, the tyrant Hieron, to whom the poem is dedicated, was at the time suffering from a malady of some sort, and hence it seems that Pindar has changed the story to create an analogy between Philoctetes and Hieron. See Gantz 635.

¹¹³ Dio Chrysostom 59.2-3.

secondary to the intrigue, acting as the object of the mission. This understanding is supported by Dio's prose account of the meeting between the disguised Odysseus and Philoctetes, where Philoctetes immediately tries to kill Odysseus upon hearing that he is a Greek. Philoctetes' portrayal here in fact seems modeled on the Cyclops of *Odyssey* book nine, with his very aggressive, rude welcome of Odysseus. Aeschylus had Odysseus lie about the fates of various heroes at Troy, saying that Philoctetes' old enemies were dead or disgraced, presumably to better show Philoctetes' bitter and vengeful nature, making him a more fearsome figure to overcome.¹¹⁴ In all of this, the portrayal of Philoctetes seems to have been less than wholly sympathetic, as might be expected in plays which have Philoctetes as the obstacle of the mission.

Yet Sophocles most definitely concentrates on the man.¹¹⁵ There is little mention of the Greeks fighting at Troy, excepting one passage which I will examine below, and it has been noticed that the fact that the Greeks have been toiling at Troy for ten years is never used as an argument to get Philoctetes to go to the war.¹¹⁶ In Sophocles' play, unlike Aeschylus' and Euripides' versions, Philoctetes is the sole inhabitant of Lemnos, and this emphasises his isolation and loneliness. One of the main innovations of Sophocles' play is this strongly sympathetic portrayal of Philoctetes.¹¹⁷ Throughout the text Sophocles puts front and centre Philoctetes and his painful existence:

One overall impression is inescapable: from the moment Philoctetes makes his first entry until the closing scene we have before us one sight of terrible suffering after another. Suffering, of course, is something we expect in tragedy. But one scene of pathos is far different from what we have in the *Philoctetes*: five long episodes of utter anguish.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Dio Chrysostom 52.10.2.

¹¹⁵ Thus Hoppin (1981) 26, 30.

¹¹⁶ Kitto (1939) 306.

¹¹⁷ As Hoppin (1981, 30) notes.

¹¹⁸ Seale 50.

I shall examine the development of this portrayal through the course of my discussion, but for now let it be said that any interpretation of the play must, I think, account for this, its primary effect and concern.

Without leaving much room for surprise in my own argument, I shall start by saying that in my view the play centres around the basic question, “What about Philoctetes?”¹¹⁹ This has less to do with specific passages than it does with the overall emotional effect of the play, the strong sense of pity it attempts to evoke for its main character. By creating this strong sense of pity in his audience as well as in one of his other characters (Neoptolemus), and by portraying Philoctetes as a hero who is suffering unjustly and out of measure (I will examine this in more detail later), Sophocles forces his audience to question the hero’s suffering and the reason for it. And because the suffering of Philoctetes is closely bound to the will of the gods, the question becomes a religious one. Just as Philoctetes was punished for setting foot in the grove of Chryse, just as he was abandoned on Lemnos because he was a religious pollution (4-10), so too it is Helenus’ oracle that causes him so much misery in the course of the play. This leads to the question of why the gods want Philoctetes to go to Troy, and hence questions as well their justice. The central question of the *Philoctetes*, I believe, is this unknown relationship between the gods and Philoctetes.¹²⁰ Are the gods unjust in the matter of Philoctetes? Is the prophecy of Helenus merely meant to ensure the fall of Troy, or is Philoctetes the man also a reason for the gods’ decree? These are the questions that Heracles will ultimately answer at the play’s end. So long as we do not make any assumptions on the moral views of Sophocles, the poet’s judgement of the gods’ justice in this play is one which can remain

¹¹⁹ As Robinson says (50), “the importance of the bow was obvious; the importance of Philoctetes himself was not”.

¹²⁰ Poe also takes a similar view of the play. He emphasises that the play is most concerned with the sufferings of the main character, and that this ultimately leads to a religious question concerning the gods’ justice. However, it will be seen that his final interpretation of the play differs radically from mine.

unanswered, and in fact we shall see how the play is constructed to keep this final judgement in the dark until Heracles himself answers the question at the end of the play. Thus suspense and interest are maintained throughout, until Heracles enters to answer this moral question that the dramatist has raised.

The Prologue

Since the prophecy of Helenus lies behind all the action of the play as well as the relationship between Philoctetes and the gods, the first key question is just what the characters know about it. Hoppin has examined the question closely, taking account of the work of various scholars, and makes a strong argument for the view that both Neoptolemus and Odysseus know the truth of the prophecy. For convenience I will use her study as my starting point on this question.

Hoppin emphasises that the myth of Philoctetes was extensively treated in the Epic Cycle, and that both Aeschylus and Euripides had earlier treated the story. She argues that the audience could use such knowledge of the basic myth to supply information lacking in the introduction of the play. Unless the poet takes pains to show the audience that he is diverging from the basic outline of the story, her argument continues, the audience would naturally assume that what was true in epic and the earlier plays was true for Sophocles' play.¹²¹ In general, I would suggest that this argument suffers from the assumption that an audience is forever reflecting upon external knowledge of the story during the course of their participation in a play. I have noted before that allusion to external knowledge tends to be broadly made in drama, self-consciously drawing such allusions into its own dramatic reality. The particular problem with Hoppin's argument is that unless the audience were familiar with, and thinking of, the earlier accounts of the story, the poet would have run the risk of unwittingly confusing a major segment of his audience.

¹²¹ Hoppin (1981) 3-6.

The play begins with Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' arrival at Lemnos. Odysseus instructs the young son of Achilles on why he has been brought to Philoctetes' lonely island. No mention is yet made of Helenus' prophecy: all that is revealed is that the bow is required if Troy is to fall. Neoptolemus receives information in a piecemeal fashion, and even this information is far from straightforward. Now the audience may have recalled that the mission to Lemnos was the result of Helenus' prophecy, yet the lack of any mention of the seer and his words is noteworthy. Greek Tragedy often offers information in the introduction to a play that must have been known to the audience. This information is often used to "set the stage" for the action to come, and not simply to display how the poet will deviate from the basic plot of the myth. Certainly we might expect Odysseus at least to mention Helenus in his attempt to convince Neoptolemus to seize Philoctetes, if the poet intended to make clear the direction of this play. Hence I do not agree with Hoppin that the poet is relying on the audience's external knowledge of the myth to fill in the missing gaps of information simply in order to avoid "unnecessary explication"¹²² Rather, it appears that the poet is leaving matters deliberately unclear, for dramatic and thematic purposes which we shall examine in the course of this discussion.¹²³

I agree with Hoppin, that the audience would assume that Odysseus does know the prophecy, but only when they learn that the play does in fact contain the oracle of Helenus, once the Merchant mentions it for the first time (603-619). After all, Odysseus was the one who captured the seer Helenus, and so he presumably heard a first hand account of the prophecy. However, the point is virtually worthless because throughout the play he shows that 1) he is unwilling to explain clearly the prophecy, and 2) he is even willing to make the prophecy suit his own ends. What is of central importance here is just what Neoptolemus

¹²² Hoppin (1981) 8.

¹²³ Thus Robinson (49), who also states that the exclusion of a clear account of the oracle must be a deliberate act by the poet to allow room for interpretation about the oracle. This interpretation originates with Wilamowitz (302-306).

knows. This is important because it is he who will direct the course of the action for much of what follows in the play. Here the audience cannot rely on knowledge of the myth for help with the answer because the character of Neoptolemus in the story is an innovation of Sophocles.¹²⁴ Also, the poet seems to make clear that Neoptolemus is basically ignorant of the oracle. Neoptolemus must ask Odysseus why it is beneficial to himself that Philoctetes and his bow go to Troy (line 112).¹²⁵ It seems he has only been told that he is fated to take a major role in the sacking of Troy (114). When he accepts that the bow must be taken, he adds “if it is thus” (line 116). If Neoptolemus had himself heard the prophecy of Helenus, or even the simple fact that Odysseus’ commands are based on a prophecy, he would have little reason to question the need for the bow. Finally, above and beyond what the characters know, the reliability of seers and oracles is often questioned in late Fifth Century writings, and indeed such a view of seers seems to have been an element of Euripides’ play, as it contained a strong condemnation of them.¹²⁶ Hence we should not be quick to equate knowledge of the oracle with knowledge of the truth. It is worth noting for my interpretation of the play that the oracle, in the way of oracles, probably never indicated its real spirit, whether it was meant to be beneficial or harmful for Philoctetes.

However, I think it is the general depiction of the characters of Odysseus and Neoptolemus which most gives the impression that Neoptolemus possesses few of the facts. Throughout the beginning of the play, the young son of Achilles is depicted as the pawn of Odysseus. As seen, he is dependent upon Odysseus for information for the mission he is on. Both he and Odysseus state that his role on this mission is to serve (15, 53, 93). In fact the whole exchange between the two characters has a strong feel of a

¹²⁴ Dio Chrysostom 52.15.2.

¹²⁵ Hinds (173-4) seems also to understand that Neoptolemus’ knowledge of the prophecy stems only from what he hears in the course of the play.

¹²⁶ Fragment 795. Olson (277) ascribes the fragment to Odysseus, although presumably the speaker could also be Philoctetes himself.

superior officer commanding a subordinate.¹²⁷ Finally, Odysseus' sway over Neoptolemus is so strong that he convinces the young man to do what he has expressly stated to be anathema to his basic *phusis*, derived from his father Achilles, the most obvious Greek example of the "forthright man", opposed to deceit and trickery. Thus, although on the surface it appears illogical (there is no inherent reason why a subservient position should render a man ignorant), the clear relation of power between Odysseus and Neoptolemus gives the strong impression to the audience that Neoptolemus knows little, because, presented as he is as Odysseus' underling in this adventure, we expect him to be dependent upon Odysseus for his knowledge. This is precisely the relationship we would expect between the young, inexperienced Neoptolemus and the older, wily Odysseus.

It is important to emphasise that we cannot use Neoptolemus' later "prophetic" pronouncement on the will of the gods (839-842), or his final appeal to Philoctetes, when he seems to possess all the facts (1324-1342: see below for discussion), to argue that he did know about the prophecy earlier. A play is linear and accumulative.¹²⁸ As scholars we may examine the play as a whole and compare passages out of sequence, but such an interpretive technique may do serious damage to the realities of the dramatic art form. The audience, as they experience the play as it unfolds, obviously cannot use later passages to form their present opinion of what is occurring. And all that we have examined so far strongly suggests that Neoptolemus is ignorant of the basic facts of the prophecy, and he certainly does not seem to have heard it at first hand.

The final question of the introduction is whether Neoptolemus understands that both the bow and Philoctetes are required at Troy. Here I again agree with Hoppin that Neoptolemus does understand this point, but not because he has firsthand information

¹²⁷ See Vidal-Naquet for a full discussion of the role of Neoptolemus as an *ephebe*, an in particular his relationship with Odysseus (169-173).

¹²⁸ As Taplin (1971, 38) and Knox 126 emphasise.

about the prophecy,¹²⁹ but because he has taken Odysseus to mean that both are required. Odysseus clearly links both bow and man together in his explanations to Neoptolemus, and the boy himself frequently talks of getting Philoctetes himself to Troy (112, and clearly at 191-200).

However, Odysseus does tend to emphasise the bow more than the man. Hoppin says this is so because the basic story seems to have had Odysseus gaining the bow to use as further “persuasion” to get Philoctetes to Troy.¹³⁰ This may be a factor, but I think the reason is much simpler. As we argued, Philoctetes’ story is basically a story about Troy. Odysseus and Neoptolemus have come to Lemnos so as to be able to take Troy and gain fame, and so it is natural that the bow should be emphasised, since it is the unerring arrows of Heracles that are most needed for this purpose. This emphasis is to Sophocles’ purpose, since he here shows the more natural concentration on Troy, only to contrast this later by making the man himself most important.

Thus the scenario with which the play begins is one fraught with confusion and suspense. We have a young naive character, obviously being manipulated by a more crafty man, and having only skewed and incomplete knowledge of the “facts” surrounding his mission, planning to deceive a poor man who knows even less than he does. These two characters, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, will act out the bulk of the drama, with the only character fully “in the know” being the behind-the-scenes Odysseus, who in fact never states plainly just what the prophecy is or what he knows. And since the poet has not given the audience any more knowledge than his characters, beyond the basics of the myth which they may or may not know (and which they may or may not be thinking of), they share in this same state of ignorance. We can see how clearly the dramatic technique here differs

¹²⁹ Hoppin (1981)15-16.

¹³⁰ I am less convinced by Hoppin’s second point (12-13), that Odysseus emphasises the bow “in order to stroke Neoptolemus’ vanity” by putting the glory won by an inanimate object above that of another man.

from that of the *Trachiniae*. In that play we saw how the prologue gave us both the pattern of the dramatic rhythm of the play, in the form of Deianeira's story of her past, and the central idea that drives the action, late learning, in the form of the old truism of not assessing one's life until the end, when all is known. While the *Trachiniae* emphasised foreknowledge and apprehension, the *Philoctetes* emphasises ignorance and uncertainty.¹³¹ This is amply shown by how the play makes the most of dramatic reversal and surprise.¹³²

One final point on the introductory section of the play. When Odysseus gives his orders to Neoptolemus, he tells the boy how to form his deception of the wretched Philoctetes. He instructs him to mix truth with falsehood. Neoptolemus is to lie about how he has come to Lemnos (a supposed feud with Odysseus over his father's arms), but to be honest about his identity (54-65). This technique of the poet of combining truth and falsehood is one that will be used again in the play. Time and time again the play will have a character pronounce a speech meant to deceive but nonetheless containing truthful information. The overall effect is clear: the mixture of truth and falsehood increases the confusion of the characters and their audience. Hence even when something is stated which sounds true, doubt is immediately cast on it because its context is one of deception.

Philoctetes' Entrance

Odysseus leaves after promising to send someone with a crafty story if he thinks it is needed (126-131), and Neoptolemus and the Chorus wait for the entrance of the main character. The Chorus strike a strong note of sympathy in their words, but as yet the youth Neoptolemus is less than caring. In answer to the Chorus, he states that none of Philoctetes' sufferings surprise him, and he gives his opinion that it was heaven's will that

¹³¹ A feature that seems to have been characteristic of late Fifth Century tragedy. Cf. Euripides' *Helen*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

¹³² For a good discussion, see Seale 48-49.

it be thus. He notes that Philoctetes' derived his wound from Chryse, and surmises that this was done so that Troy would not fall before the appointed ten years of war (191-200). Thus, we have an early reminder that the gods are ultimately responsible for Philoctetes' suffering. Further, Poe makes the good point that Neoptolemus' answer is so weak that it calls attention to the question of the gods' responsibility in the plight of Philoctetes. If the gods have caused a man to suffer for ten years just to get their cosmic timetable to work, their sense of justice is seriously flawed.¹³³ This comment also gives us the first definitive statement that Neoptolemus understands that Philoctetes, and not just the bow, must go to Troy. He thinks at the moment that this is so for military reasons, that Troy can only fall with his participation. However, as we shall see, this is just one more false suggestion of the play, for the dramatist will make dramatically obvious the fact that Philoctetes is not required for military success at Troy. We will see near the end of my discussion that there is a reason for Philoctetes' ten years on Lemnos, but this reason has more to do with Philoctetes himself than it has to do with Troy.

The entrance of Philoctetes presents us with our first dramatic reversal, and as is typical in this play, the reversal depends upon characterisation, and has ultimate thematic importance. The entrance of the poet's main character has been carefully prepared. Odysseus described him as a furious half-savage, whom neither force nor persuasion will overcome (104), and only deceit can tame (107). He lacks all the trappings of a civilised life, living in a cave with only the famous bow saving him from starvation. Except for the bow, all this closely resembles the description of the Cyclops in book 9 of the *Odyssey*. In addition, the dramatic scene is similarly prepared just before his arrival. The Chorus hears the terrible cries of Philoctetes off stage, building tension and apprehension at the entrance of this terrible figure. Now at this point the general emotional expectation of the audience is easy to surmise: they would expect an angry, fierce figure, perhaps presenting an

¹³³ Poe 31-32.

immediate physical threat, as Odysseus suggested, but also showing the physical signs of his wound and uncivilized life. If in fact Sophocles desired to emphasise this angry aspect of his main character he no doubt would have presented him in such a way in his entrance, as we saw was the case in Euripides' play. But here the poet instead throws us a dramatic twist, wishing to show a more humane side to his suffering hero:

Φι. ἰὼ ξένοι·

τίνες ποτ' ἐς γῆν τήνδε ναυτίλωι πλάτῃ
κατέσχετ' οὔτ' εὖορμον οὔτ' οἰκουμένην;
ποίας πάτρας ἂν ἦ γένους ὑμᾶς ποτε
τύχοιμ' ἂν εἰπών; σχῆμα μὲν γὰρ Ἑλλάδος
στολῆς ὑπάρχει προσφιλεστάτης ἐμοί·
φωνῆς δ' ἀκοῦσαι βούλομαι· καὶ μὴ μ' ὄκνῳι
δείσαντες ἐκπλαγῆτ' ἀπηγριωμένον,
ἀλλ' οἰκτίσαντες ἄνδρα δύστηνον, μόνον,
ἐρημον ὧδε κάφιλως κακούμενον,
φωνήσατ', εἴπερ ὡς φίλοι προσήκετε. (219-229)

Ph. Strangers!

Who can you be who have put in to this country with your ship?
It has no good anchorage and no inhabitants.
From what country or what race would I strike it right
in saying that you come? For your dress, Greek in fashion as it is,
delights me greatly, and I want to hear your tongue.
Do not shrink in fear of me and panic at my wild appearance,
but speak in pity to a man in misery, alone, deserted here

and friendless in his suffering – if you, indeed, have come as friends.

(trans, Ussher)

In sharp contrast to the picture of his character developed so far, Philoctetes is polite, deferential, and more pitiable than fearful.¹³⁴ Only 229 gives a hint of the other side of his character, which we will soon come to know. But at the moment, the information on Philoctetes' character we have been given so far is here turned on its head.

The reversal here is one of character reversal, or perhaps better a change in our expectations of a certain character. This is similar to what we observed in the *Trachiniae*, when Deianeira produced more than one reversal through her change of mind over the matter of what to do about Iole. And also like these scenes in the *Trachiniae*, this reversal hints at the thematic focal point to which the play is heading. The fact that Philoctetes seems at the moment to be a reasonable, if pitiful, character begins to raise the question of why he should be suffering as he does. I do not want to suggest that this question springs full blown into the audience's mind at this moment, but the groundwork is being laid. For both Neoptolemus and the audience the question of the reason for Philoctetes' suffering and for his need to go to Troy results naturally from the increasing feeling of sympathy for him. The creation of this sympathy begins here, and begins strongly, because the presentation of the positive side of Philoctetes' character so sharply contrasts with what we have been led to expect of him.

However, we should also note the overall dramatic impact of this reversal. Even as Philoctetes' entrance surprises the audience, it in fact decreases the tension which has been steadily building since Odysseus' fearful entry. For if Philoctetes is now found to be less fearsome than was anticipated, the tension built upon the danger that he presented must naturally ebb to some degree. Beyond the need to start evoking pity for Philoctetes, the reason is easy to understand. We are early in the play, and the poet seeks to develop the

¹³⁴ See Taplin (1978) 47.

dramatic tension of his play in a gradual, ascending fashion.

The following movement of the play is concerned with this revelation of the true character of Philoctetes.¹³⁵ Certainly he is a bitter and angry figure, but even as he shows Neoptolemus and the audience the harsher side of his character, he also reveals that he has real grounds for his temperament: he has been treated cruelly at the hands of the Greeks, specifically their leaders the Atreidae and Odysseus. His description of his sad life on Lemnos (254-316) is eloquent and moving, and as a character whose *phusis* is similar to Achilles',¹³⁶ his anger against his enemies and his bitterness is justified and consistent. Further, since we the audience know that he is currently being deceived by Neoptolemus, we quickly realise that his troubles extend into the action of the drama itself.

Neoptolemus now tells his false story concerning the supposed theft of the arms of Achilles by Odysseus and relates the fates of various heroes at Troy. Here we have that confusing mixture of truth and falsehood: Neoptolemus lies about his lack of knowledge about Philoctetes' fate and about the theft of Achilles' arms (253 and 343-390), and tells the truth (for the most part)¹³⁷ about the fates of various heroes at Troy (331-335 and 410-445). What is most important here for my interpretation of the play is that Neoptolemus portrays a picture of Troy where the evil prosper and the good die.¹³⁸ It is worth noting that Sophocles could have handled the scene differently. As I mentioned earlier, Aeschylus in his version had Odysseus lie about the fates of the Greeks in a different fashion, saying that Agamemnon was dead, Odysseus discredited, and that the Greek expedition had been a total failure. The difference is noteworthy, not necessarily because we can posit a reference in Sophocles' play to Aeschylus' (although this is obviously possible), but because it helps

¹³⁵ Gellie 136.

¹³⁶ See Blundell (1988) for how Achilles works as a paradigm for both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.

¹³⁷ Neoptolemus says (445) that Thersites is still alive at Troy, which is not the situation given in the *Iliad*.

¹³⁸ See Bowra 277 for a discussion of this common theme in Greek literature.

to illuminate Sophocles' purpose here. Aeschylus' deception speech seems to have been designed to show Philoctetes' hatred for the Greeks, since he could gloat over their sufferings.¹³⁹ Sophocles' speech allows him to show Philoctetes' concern for his former friends and comrades, and hence to show him in a more sympathetic fashion. More importantly, though, it allows the dramatist to reveal Philoctetes' view of the gods:¹⁴⁰

Φι. ἀλλ' εὖ περιστέλλουσιν αὐτὰ δαίμονες,
καί πως τὰ μὲν πανοῦργα καὶ παλιντριβῇ
χαίρουσ' ἀναστρέφοντες ἐξ Ἄιδου· τὰ δὲ
δίκαια καὶ τὰ χρήστ' ἀποστέλλουσ' αἰεί.
ποῦ χρὴ τίθεσθαι ταῦτα, ποῦ δ' αἰνεῖν, ὅταν
τὰ θεῶν ἐπαινῶν τοὺς θεοὺς εὖρω κακούς; (447-452)

Ph. But the gods well protect the villains and knaves,
and somehow delight in diverting them from hell.
But the good and just they always send there. How to account for this,
how to praise this, when, praising the divine, I find the gods evil?

This is a very strong condemnation of the gods.¹⁴¹ Although Philoctetes is here talking about the deaths of good men at Troy, it is easy to see that his assessment of the heavens fits perfectly for himself, and hence further explains his view.¹⁴² Philoctetes is a good man, and yet the gods have allowed him to suffer all these years. Nor is Philoctetes' sentiment wholly subjective or mistaken. For although Neoptolemus has lied about the fate

¹³⁹ See Calder 175f.

¹⁴⁰ Whitman (181) sees this revelation as the primary reason for the whole dialogue concerning Troy, further stating "there can be no mistake as to what the play is about".

¹⁴¹ Gellie (140) calls it "the most outspoken attack on the gods in Sophocles".

¹⁴² O'Higgins (45-47) makes the point that Philoctetes frequently refers to himself as a dead man, further marking the identification here with himself.

of Thersites, the rest is true, and does paint a negative picture.¹⁴³ Further, it is easy to imagine that this view of war would find some adherents in 409 in Athens.¹⁴⁴ The point here is not to portray Philoctetes as a wholly impious man, for often he calls upon the gods in such a way as to suggest that he has a vestige of belief in their justice, but to show him as a pious man who has been forced to an impious outlook because of the life he lived and the world he has observed.¹⁴⁵

Further, Philoctetes is literally “bitter to the gods” (254) in that his wound makes him a religious miasma: it is for this reason that he was abandoned on Lemnos (4-11). This can only increase the gulf between him and the gods. The heavens have physically marked him as foul, despite his being a good man, and this can only increase his sense of injustice.¹⁴⁶

One final point on this theme in the current section of the play. Back at 391ff, the Chorus supported the false story of Odysseus’ theft of Achilles’ arms from Neoptolemus in a prayer to Earth. Reinhardt¹⁴⁷ rightly notes that the prayer is exceptional in its impiety.

The Chorus sully a sacred invocation by using it for deceit. Now obviously the gods are

¹⁴³ O’Higgins is again useful here. She mentions (40) that “the deaths (sc. of the heroes at Troy) appear as individual, tragic and meaningless events...” She also notes that Neoptolemus does not mention that these deaths usually gained these men deathless glory, again showing that the poet is taking pains to show as negative a divine order as he can. I am not as sure as O’Higgins that the audience would naturally recall this other aspect, but for those who remember that glory was won by these deaths, there would be a subtle hint that the negative picture of the gods being presented here is not in fact correct, building a latent anticipation for the resolution of the play.

¹⁴⁴ Thus Kitto (1939) 302.

¹⁴⁵ Hoppin (1990) 176, : “The play does not focus on wilful impiety, however, but on the more interesting and subtle problems facing the relatively pious”.

¹⁴⁶ Philoctetes’ portrayal here has something in common with Oedipus in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Oedipus too is a man marked as foul by the gods, he too is isolated in his misery and walks in rags. However, Oedipus, unlike Philoctetes, evinces a sense of religious belief even in the face of all his troubles, whereas Philoctetes’ religious sense is cast in a much more negative vein. In this regard, Philoctetes has more in common with Bellerophon in Euripides’ *Bellerophon*. Bellerophon is another “hero in rags” figure who suffers from his treatment at the hands of the gods, but in this play his condemnation of divine justice (see fragment 286) seems to be more akin to Philoctetes’. See Collard’s reconstruction of the play in Collard et al. (98-120).

¹⁴⁷ Reinhardt 171.

not responsible for others taking their name in vain, but the passage shows an early reference to the possibility of impiety going unpunished, and thus again serves to support Philoctetes' own pessimistic view. A similar effect is created later by the Chorus' ode to sleep (827-838), which is all the more forceful for the dramatic break they make in their song to return to the pragmatic matter of the deceit.

The Merchant's Entrance

The Merchant now enters, as Odysseus promised, with a crafty tale to help in the deception. His story contains the now familiar confabulation of fact and fiction. The Merchant's comment that Phoenix is coming after Neoptolemus is an obvious lie meant to bring the youth and Philoctetes closer together, by making them seem to be sharing the same experience. However, his account of the prophecy of Helenus has the ring of truth to it. Even if some of the audience does not specifically recall that it was through the seer Helenus that the Greeks learnt the means to taking Troy, that the embassy of Odysseus and Neoptolemus should come about due to the will of the gods sounds right. After all, Odysseus in the Prologue spoke to Neoptolemus of the fall of Troy and the bow of Heracles with a conviction that suggested some divine instruction (112-115), and why else should they bother to reclaim Philoctetes (as the hero himself says, 1029-1039)? Yet the story has been expressly said to be a deception. Hence even if the audience is inclined to accept the account of the Merchant concerning the prophecy of Helenus, they can hardly be confident in their suspicions.

Also, the Merchant's account allows the dramatist again to depict the oracle in a very unfavourable light. The story of Odysseus boasting that he would drag Philoctetes to Troy, willing or not (592-594), and show him off to the Greeks like some quarry (615-616), can only enrage Philoctetes, who wants nothing to do with the Greeks, and who has

already expressed his hatred for Odysseus. The Merchant's account presents the oracle as if it is primarily concerned with the events at Troy. There is no mention of the benefit that Philoctetes himself will gain from going to Troy. Thus does Sophocles plant the (ultimately false, as Heracles will show) suggestion that the oracle is concerned chiefly with the events at Troy, and not with the wronged Philoctetes. This can only strengthen Philoctetes' negative view of the gods, and it will be a factor in assessing his distrust of Neoptolemus' account of the oracle near the end of the play. We should also note that this is the first time Neoptolemus has heard the oracle as well, since we have seen that he knows no more than what Odysseus has told him, and in the Prologue he pointedly kept silent on the matter.

Also, the scene builds tension once again, since it renews the idea of conflict between Odysseus and Philoctetes with the story of Odysseus' boast to bring Philoctetes by any means. Philoctetes is duly concerned by this, but we the audience are even more aroused by this account since, unlike Philoctetes, we know that Odysseus is already present and waiting in the wings, so to speak. The threat of violence looms large in the *Philoctetes*, and culminates in the near murder (it can hardly be called anything else) of Odysseus by Philoctetes (1293-1303), and this potential raises its ugly head here again.

A slight pause in the action now occurs with Philoctetes and Neoptolemus delaying their departure to retrieve the poor man's scant medical provisions. This is a typical Sophoclean lull before the storm. The placid actions of the characters will be brutally disrupted by the scene of the attack of Philoctetes' disease. The poet also needs his characters off stage so that he can increase the audience's sympathy for the main character's plight through a Choral ode (676-729). Although the text is regrettably unsound in places, the obvious general theme of the ode is Philoctetes' suffering and the fact that he is *unjustly* suffering:

ΧΟ. ὅς οὔτε τι ῥέξας τιν', οὔτε νοσφίσας
 ἀλλ' ἴσος ἐν γ' ἴσοις ἀνὴρ
 ὥλλυθ' ὥδ' ἀναξίως. (683-685)¹⁴⁸

CH. He wronged no-one, defrauded none of anything,
 but, a man of fair dealing among men who acted fairly,
 he was perishing thus in a way he did not merit. (trans. Ussher)

Importantly, no mention of Chryse is made, and this makes the Chorus' description of Philoctetes' pathetic life seem all the more unjust. Philoctetes suffers greatly, and no reason is given for such pain. And as the speech gains sympathy for the main character, it once again calls to mind the moral question of why should Philoctetes suffer so.¹⁴⁹ This question will be directly addressed by Neoptolemus after the hero's attack.

The final words of the Chorus' ode pose a difficulty because they seem to momentarily forget their own knowledge of the current deceit of Philoctetes when they say that he has taken up with a good man now in Neoptolemus and will soon return home (719-729). Jebb suggested that the Chorus resume their role in the deception at the end of their song because Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are returning and are within hearing of their words, but this has been rightly seen as a desperate solution.¹⁵⁰ I think we must accept that Sophocles here has surrendered a certain amount of his play's realism to suit his dramatic needs.¹⁵¹ But then what is the purpose of this comment of the Chorus? I do not agree with Seale that the audience may be confused by the play to the degree that they

¹⁴⁸ This reading of the text is Ussher's. See 133 for discussion.

¹⁴⁹ Kitto (1956, 103, 118) in fact uses this ode to argue that the play is not concerned with religious issues. Making an argument from silence, he thinks that it is here that the poet should talk of the gods' injustice if he wants to raise such matters. However, this is to neglect the emphasis placed on the point that Philoctetes suffers unjustly, and that his past and present state of misfortune ultimately derives from the gods. See Poe (32-35) for a fuller refutation of Kitto.

¹⁵⁰ See Seale 37.

¹⁵¹ Essentially the view of Wilamowitz (295-299).

momentarily believe the Chorus, but rather the Chorus seems to be voicing the inner feelings of Philoctetes. The emotional description of Philoctetes' sufferings allows the audience to momentarily see through Philoctetes' eyes, since it was he who most forcefully presented the story of his life's sorrows. Thus this comment of the Chorus seems designed to show us Philoctetes' present happy state of mind, and in fact with such an interpretation we can view their words as dramatically preparing us for Philoctetes' attack: for in such a case, the Chorus' words sharply contrast with his physical suffering, and serve to remind the audience that he is again being shamefully treated.

Neoptolemus' Change of Mind

The scene depicting the attack of Philoctetes' disease (730-761) is a dramatic *tour de force*. It is the final element in establishing pity for the main character in both the audience and in Neoptolemus (who may have been lagging behind in this regard). Philoctetes' pathetic attempts to hide his pain in his desperation to be off to Malis, his animalistic cries,¹⁵² his desire for escape through suicide, his inability to bear human contact all create a vivid and moving picture. The feeling of pity which has been building since the first words of the Chorus here reaches its peak, with the idea of the injustice of Philoctetes' plight ringing in the audience's ears, and will result in Neoptolemus himself being led to question what he is doing. No longer can the prophecy and the mission to Lemnos be viewed as solely a matter concerning Troy and its fall. Philoctetes and his terrible suffering have been forced to the forefront, both in the minds of the audience and that of Neoptolemus.

Let us examine Neoptolemus' change of heart, a crucial scene for any interpretation of the play. Philoctetes, before going unconscious from the pain of his attack, entrusts the bow to Neoptolemus for safe-keeping (762-776). Once Philoctetes is asleep, the Chorus

¹⁵² On this point, see Knox 131-132.

ask Neoptolemus to act upon the situation (855-864), but Neoptolemus responds that they have hunted the bow as quarry in vain if they sail without the man himself. Hoppin and others have argued that Neoptolemus has known all along that Philoctetes is needed at Troy, rather than just his bow.¹⁵³ The more traditional interpretation of the importance of the scene is that Neoptolemus realises here for the first time that Philoctetes himself is required to go to Troy.¹⁵⁴ The problem with the view that he knew this all along is that it is then hard to see the point of the passage,¹⁵⁵ which is almost universally agreed by scholars to be a crucial turning point, as indicated by the use of the dactylic hexameter, the metre of oracles. The Chorus ask for action, and Neoptolemus responds with knowledge that both he and they, in Hoppin's interpretation, must already possess:

Ne. ἀλλ' ὅδε μὲν κλύει οὐδέν, ἐγὼ δ' ὁρῶ οὐνεκα θήραν
 τήνδ' ἀλίως ἔχομεν τόξων, δίχα τοῦδε πλέοντες.
 τοῦδε γὰρ ὁ στέφανος, τοῦτον θεὸς εἶπε κομίζειν,
 κομπεῖν δ' ἔστ' ἀτελῇ σὺν ψεύδεσιν αἰσχρὸν ὄνειδος. (839-842)

Ne. Indeed, he hears nothing, but I realise that this quarry of the bow
 is useless, if we sail without this man. For his is the crown,
 the god said to bring him, and it is a shameful reproach
 to boast of work uncompleted and aided by lies.

The first point (841), that Philoctetes must come to Troy, is already known. In the case of the comment that it is shameful to boast of unfinished work aided by lying (842), it is

¹⁵³ Hoppin's article (1981) lists (note 3) and incorporates the views of previous scholars (Hinds, Linforth, Ronnet, Erbse and Calder) into her own argument.

¹⁵⁴ For example, Bowra 281, Winnington-Ingram 287-288. See Hoppin (1981) note 42 for a fuller list of those authors who adopt this view.

¹⁵⁵ For instance, Hoppin's judgment (1981, 21) that the passage is "at most a reminder to the Chorus that Philoctetes is needed, too, and that it is their responsibility to get him, not just the bow, to the ship" simply does not satisfy.

important to note that Neoptolemus does not say that the prophecy intended that persuasion, and not lies, be used to get Philoctetes to Troy. Hence those scholars who think that the importance of the scene lies in a new understanding by Neoptolemus that the prophecy demanded that Philoctetes be brought to Troy in a certain fashion (persuasion) seem to be mistaken.¹⁵⁶ Now, this difficulty also exists for my interpretation, since I also have argued that Neoptolemus already knows that Philoctetes is required at Troy. However, if we emphasise the contrast between the importance of the fall of Troy and the importance of Philoctetes himself, our understanding of the scene's effect is clear:

Neoptolemus' earlier knowledge that Philoctetes was to wield the victorious bow at Troy was inert, confused by Odysseus' manipulation and dimmed by his own selfish desire for the glory of the exploit. Now, after direct experience of the man and his suffering, that knowledge becomes alive and lucid with new meaning...¹⁵⁷

This "new meaning" is the realization that the prophecy is not solely concerned with the fall of Troy, but also with the fate of Philoctetes.¹⁵⁸ Neoptolemus now understands that Philoctetes must go to Troy for Philoctetes' own benefit, not just for the benefit of the Greek war effort, and this is what is meant by his statement "his is the crown" (841). Here we get the first indication that the sacking of Troy is meant to give glory to Philoctetes. We should recall that in the prologue, Philoctetes was depicted as a necessary element in ensuring the glory of sacking Troy *for Neoptolemus* (112-119).

We should also note that while some scholars think Neoptolemus here realises that Philoctetes is needed for Troy to fall, this is not precisely true. It is never explained in the

¹⁵⁶ For example, Bowra 167ff. For a fuller refutation of this argument, see Hoppin's 1981 article and Steidle 169-173.

¹⁵⁷ Segal (1977a) 145. Also good on this point is Seale (39) who states that Neoptolemus understands "the human imperatives which coincide with the divine injunction", and that the reversal of plot here "looks forward to a more inward, a more spiritual course of development".

¹⁵⁸ Hoppin (1981, 21) denies that ὁρῶ in line 839 indicates a new state of awareness on the part of Neoptolemus because the word is used by itself without any accompanying words such as νῦν or ἄρα with the imperfect to emphasise a new state of awareness. However, *Trachiniae* 706, where Deianeira uses the word by itself to show her new understanding of the true nature of what she has done by sending the anointed robe, seems to support this use of the verb.

play why Philoctetes himself is required for the sack of Troy, besides the simple fact that he is the possessor of the bow. In fact, as far as I can tell, there is no reason. It is important to emphasise that although the gods have demanded both Philoctetes and the bow at Troy (as Heracles himself states: 1433-1440), Philoctetes himself is in no way necessary for Troy to fall. It is the bow that ensures success at Troy, for the simple reason that it never misses its target. Odysseus later says that anyone, even he himself, can wield the bow (1055-1059: see below, p.82f), and it is hard to fault his logic. In the *Trachiniae*, Heracles himself was mocked for the same reason, that anyone could be a great archer with such a bow (265-266). Nothing could be more clearly indicated from the dramatic tableau the scene depicts, with Neoptolemus standing over the collapsed Philoctetes. The dramatic irony here is crucial. Obviously at the moment Philoctetes can hardly seem an important factor for military success at Troy, and thus Neoptolemus' comment that Philoctetes is needed is highly ironic. After all, why should Philoctetes' seizure convince, or reaffirm, Neoptolemus in the point that the man is needed to take Troy?¹⁵⁹

Thus Neoptolemus' words here suggest that it will be Philoctetes who wields the bow at Troy, not because he himself is required for military success, but because the gods have willed it to be so and because this will compensate Philoctetes for his sufferings.¹⁶⁰ The key point is that Neoptolemus in this scene does not simply realise for the first time that Philoctetes must go to Troy, but he now understands *why* he must go. The oracular meter of the hexameters gives weight and validity to his interpretation (and it must only be an interpretation, since, unlike Hoppin, we have not accepted that Neoptolemus knows the

¹⁵⁹ As Segal notes (145). However, this irony only drives home the point that Philoctetes' inclusion in the sacking of Troy is necessary for some reason other than his military prowess.

¹⁶⁰ Knox (131-132) also thinks the hexameters mean that Neoptolemus now understands that the oracle states the gods' intention to give "recompense" to Philoctetes. However, as we shall see later in our discussion, I do not think this goes quite far enough in explaining the oracle.

oracle itself, but only what Odysseus has told him of it)¹⁶¹ that the man is important in his own right, and not simply as a means to taking Troy.

The main objection that might be made against this argument is that it is too subtle. “His is the crown” (τοῦδε γάρ ὁ στέφανος, 841) could be translated as “the crown consists of him”,¹⁶² bringing us back to the viewpoint that the importance of the passage is Neoptolemus’ newfound understanding that Philoctetes must come to Troy, and not just the bow. Or the phrase could mean simply that Philoctetes himself is meant to take Troy without any indication that his participation is meant as a benefit for the man. I have answered both questions above, but is my understanding any more clear? Moreover, it is only a single phrase, and we should be careful of selectively over-emphasising any single sentence in a play. Yet I think this interpretation is altogether clear. Let us review the sequence of events that have led up to the passage in question. We have just had the culminating picture of Philoctetes’ suffering, cementing our pity for the character, after a Choral ode about these sufferings and the injustice of them. Neoptolemus is also now fully in the grip of this pity, as he clearly states before the hexameter statement (806). The suffering of Philoctetes is now, literally, front and centre. It is obviously Neoptolemus’ pity for the older man that leads to his rejections of lies. Neoptolemus has already stated in the prologue that he feels lying to be shameful, but he allowed his natural inclinations to be overruled by his desire for glory, never realising just how shameful his lies would be (hence 842). Thus his hexameter statement must be understood in the light of his (and of course the audience’s) pity for Philoctetes, which, as we have seen, is the centrepiece of this work of art. Gaining the bow implies military success, since it has been emphasised by Odysseus as the means to take Troy. After his attack, it is hard to see Philoctetes himself as

¹⁶¹ Further, as I noted above, oracles are notoriously vague, and the original may in fact have never included an express statement to the effect that Philoctetes must go to Troy for his own benefit.

¹⁶² As Winnington-Ingram translates it (287).

being instrumental for military success, and I have noted how the scene presents this in a very dramatic fashion. Yet Neoptolemus realises that the job is unfinished, because clearly he thinks that the oracle is not just concerned with the fall of Troy, but also with the fate of Philoctetes. That he understands this dual nature of the oracle is further shown after Philoctetes awakens and he abandons deception and tells Philoctetes that he intends to save him from the present evil (this is left purposely vague here: the full benefits for Philoctetes will only be revealed later) and then to sack Troy with him (919-920).

Thus does this scene mark the central reversal of the play, a reversal of plot, character and theme, and gives us confirmation that the play is not about Troy but about Philoctetes. The advantage of our argument is that it is not primarily based on any selective passage of the play; but on what must have been the major emotional response of the audience: pity and sympathy for its main character.

However, I do not think the dramatist has given away the game completely. For, if the audience now has an idea that the prophecy is not only a means to obtaining the fall of Troy, but that it is also meant as some sort of compensation for the sufferings of Philoctetes, the poet has shrouded his play in enough uncertainty that the audience can anticipate (and long for) this result, but they can not be sure that it will actually occur, hence allowing for both expectation and suspense in their emotional interaction with the play. We can note how the poet has pointedly held back a clear account of the oracle, and how Neoptolemus' statement is not a direct statement of this prophecy (since he, like the audience, has never heard it, excepting a garbled version from a lying character), but rather an inference based on it. Both points serve to undermine any confidence the audience may have concerning the conclusion of the play.

Neoptolemus' Return of the Bow and his Final Appeal to Philoctetes

On the rising of Philoctetes Neoptolemus reveals the truth, and Philoctetes pleads with the youth to return to his true nature and return the bow (915-962). Neoptolemus seems on the point of giving back the bow when Odysseus suddenly returns onto the stage. His entrance is more surprising and dramatic for being unannounced, and in fact he enters in mid-sentence, powerfully interrupting Neoptolemus' deliberative question "what should we do, men?" (974), which creates an expectation that he is about to return the bow. Odysseus' domination of Neoptolemus is represented by the younger man's silence throughout this episode. The scene also serves to weaken any confidence the audience has in Neoptolemus' earlier comment that the gods intend the sacking of Troy to serve Philoctetes' glory. Odysseus, after Philoctetes' thwarted suicide, states that Philoctetes himself is not needed, that any bowman can utilise Heracles' gift, including (not surprisingly) himself (1055-1059). As we saw, there is no inherent flaw in this logic, and it again raises the question whether the bow or both the bow and the man are required at Troy. Since Odysseus seems only to be concerned with the sack of Troy, he can answer confidently that the bow is enough, even if the god called for Philoctetes himself. Thus Odysseus does not appear to understand the complete intent of the prophecy, despite the fact that he has presumably heard it himself.

Now of course, Odysseus is the ultimate trickster, and this comment could be a bluff. The question is a heavily debated one among scholars, with no clear consensus. The basic difficulty is that Odysseus prevents Philoctetes' suicide, which seems to imply strongly that he understands that the hero himself is needed. Yet if Odysseus is bluffing, then the subsequent scene of Philoctetes being abandoned to die alone on Lemnos will lack any sort of effective drama. I would suggest that we do not need to answer the question, and that the audience would hardly be able to be sure themselves. They may suspect that

Odysseus is bluffing, without being at all sure, and thus they can still feel pity for the abandonment of Philoctetes in the next scene.¹⁶³ Certainly Philoctetes and Neoptolemus themselves do not know whether or not it is a bluff, and this can only increase the audience's uncertainty. In fact, the drama of the scene is perhaps thus best served, since it allows the fate of Philoctetes to hang in balance, with more than one outcome possible and anticipated by the audience.

Let us examine a few more key points in this speech. Of first importance is how the dramatist again confuses the role of Philoctetes in the oracle. Odysseus states that he is merely doing the will of Zeus (989-990), and that Philoctetes is meant to gain the glory of sacking Troy (lines 997-998). This is fine and correct, as the audience has been led to believe, or at least suspect, from Neoptolemus' hexameter statement. However, Odysseus talks of taking Philoctetes by force, which Philoctetes is understandably enraged at, and the idea of his going to Troy by force brings to mind his fear that he will be paraded about Troy like some sort of captured prey, as he stated when he first heard the merchant's story (628-630). Then, Odysseus says later that *he* can use the bow to take Troy, and that Philoctetes' glory can be his. As mentioned above, this may merely be a bluff, but the comment can only serve to again confuse the audience about the question of the place the gods have given Philoctetes in their plans.

This moral question is further alluded to by some comments by Philoctetes, again emphasising his view of the gods. Philoctetes responds to Odysseus' statement that he is merely doing the will of Zeus in bringing him to Troy by saying that Odysseus only uses the gods as a pretext for his own purposes (991-992). This is a natural result of the fact that the poet has chosen not to give a clear account of the oracle to Philoctetes or the audience.

¹⁶³ As Segal notes (141), we should not be attempting to read Odysseus' mind here; what is important is that Odysseus again shows himself to misunderstand the spirit of the oracle, by emphasising the bow (and so Troy) over the man. My view is essentially the same as Taplin's (1987, 70): "the desertion is neither completely true nor completely false".

Thus the will of the gods is further compromised because Philoctetes cannot trust those who represent it. Then Philoctetes again states his view that the gods are basically unjust, for his prayers that Odysseus die have been neglected. Odysseus and the Atreidae flourish while the gods give nothing sweet to him. Again the gods are presented as favouring the wicked and punishing the good, at least as Philoctetes sees it (1019-1024). However, near the end of his speech Philoctetes says something odd. He prays for Odysseus' death, for having wronged him, and says that the gods do care for justice (1035-1037). He understands that Odysseus would never have come to Lemnos unless forced to do so by the gods (1037-1039). First of all, the comment serves to hint at the final resolution of the play, that the gods do maintain their justice in man's world.¹⁶⁴ However, perhaps the best explanation of Philoctetes' religious feelings is Blundell's, who argues that his sense of the gods' justice is primarily negative in form, that he cannot conceive of any sort of compensation from the gods, but he can still believe in their wrathful retribution.¹⁶⁵

At this point the drama is at a complete rest. This is comparable to that section in the *Trachiniae* when Deianeira leaves the stage after just stating that she will do nothing about the news of Iole. Yet here the lull is much more effective, for in the *Trachiniae* the lull in the action is so encompassing that the plot has nowhere to go: if Deianeira does not act, the play does not proceed. Yet here, if Neoptolemus or Odysseus do not return and do something about the abandoned hero, then the story will indeed progress, namely with the death of the main character, as Philoctetes himself envisions (1146-1162). Philoctetes now laments his fate to the Chorus who also urge him not to be stubborn and resist the will of the gods, but to go to Troy. Philoctetes rejects them out of hand. His refusal is easy to understand. Although the Chorus talk of "escape from this fate" (1165-1166), they seem to

¹⁶⁴ Segal (147) calls it "an insight into the divine plan, an obscure divine justice working behind the present events".

¹⁶⁵ Blundell (1989) 198-199.

be talking only about escape from his lonely life on Lemnos, since they say nothing about healing at Troy. Philoctetes does not understand the true spirit of the oracle, and everything he has heard from Odysseus, the self-proclaimed spokesperson of the gods, has shown him that those who are implementing the will of the gods have no concern for his own well-being. He has no reason to trust the Chorus in the matter of the oracle. The piteous experience of his life, which has taught him that the gods are unjust, seems everywhere justified, perhaps most of all through his ill-treatment through the very action of the play. He cannot conceive of the trip to Troy as resulting in anything other than more sorrow for him.

Neoptolemus and Odysseus now return. This reversal is a happy one, for the audience surely know the reason why Neoptolemus is returning, although it is nonetheless surprising, as it occurs without warning, *in media re*. Neoptolemus walks boldly back to Philoctetes' cave, giving clipped answers to a beseeching Odysseus, saying that he will return the bow, taken in a shameful manner, to its rightful owner (1222-1234). The change in his character is marked, and the poet has taken pains that the manner in which Neoptolemus deals with Odysseus both reflects his new, but proper, *phusis*, and contrasts, in its dramatic presentation, with his last exit. Whereas before Neoptolemus was silent, he now leads the discussion. Whereas before Odysseus led him off stage, he now leads Odysseus back on, visually and dramatically representing the new state of power between the two. And most importantly of all, whereas Odysseus stopped Neoptolemus' return of the bow with words, Neoptolemus deals with Odysseus in a manner befitting his father: he makes plain his willingness to do battle with Odysseus over the matter. Again the play seems about to break out into violence. However, Odysseus backs down at the threat, most clearly showing the difference in the balance of power. Action wins out over words.

Neoptolemus returns the bow, Philoctetes expresses his happiness that his young

friend has shown himself a true son of Achilles, and Odysseus makes his last, ignoble appearance. The return of the bow represents a victory of the man over Troy, as well as the return of Neoptolemus to his true nature. Pity for Philoctetes, and the shame that lying to him produced in Neoptolemus has forced him to return the bow and neglect his “duty” to the commanders and Troy.¹⁶⁶ Hoppin has shown that the basic plot in Euripides’ and Aeschylus’ plays had the bow being returned only after Philoctetes had agreed to go to Troy. Whether or not the audience recalls this story pattern, they are sure to feel that getting Philoctetes to Troy might now indeed be difficult. Nevertheless, there is a certain feeling of satisfaction and success in the act, in that someone has finally responded in a favourable way to the man and his sufferings. Neoptolemus has put his understanding, that the man himself is important in the gods’ plans, into concrete action. However, this victory for Philoctetes is still the lesser one. Neoptolemus was only the source of his immediate misfortunes. It was the gods who were responsible for his wound and life on Lemnos, and they also must respond to the man.

The overall dramatic impact of the scene is remarkable. Neoptolemus’ pity for Philoctetes foreshadows the eventual revelation of the true spirit of the oracle as explained by Heracles, which also puts Philoctetes and his sufferings front and centre in importance. Yet the feeling that the play will end positively will be undercut immediately because Neoptolemus’ act of pity suggests the possibility that Philoctetes will never go to Troy, and hence not receive the healing of the gods which Neoptolemus tells of right after he returns the bow. Thus we have that technique described in my introduction, whereby the text builds expectation in the audience, without allowing them to be confident about the actual outcome, and thus gives them a sense of apprehension and uncertainty, as well as expectation.

Now we hear the surprising news that Neoptolemus does know the details of the

¹⁶⁶ Robinson (51) notes that Neoptolemus’ virtue is kindness of heart more than fidelity to an oracle.

prophecy. He tells Philoctetes that Helenus stated not only that Philoctetes is to be instrumental in the sacking of Troy, but that the sons of Asclepius will heal him, and that the fall of Troy will be counted a great honour to Philoctetes (1329-1342). Now, in light of such a clear statement of knowledge, the question of what and when Neoptolemus knew about the prophecy must be returned to. It might be suggested that he has learned the details of the prophecy off stage, but this would rightly be seen as sophism. The audience does not know what is going on off stage, and cannot be assumed to make such judgments based on external information. The comments of Neoptolemus here can be taken as indicating that he knew all along the content of the prophecy, yet, at the risk of redundancy, I must again urge that a play works sequentially. Even if, at this point, the audience accepts now that Neoptolemus does know the prophecy, it can have no effect on what they thought and felt at an earlier stage of the play. Since Neoptolemus was clearly ignorant of these details of the prophecy at first, the audience accepted this as so, not being able to see ahead to a later scene. Thus this speech has no effect on our preceding discussion.¹⁶⁷ The simplest solution to Neoptolemus' new knowledge is that the poet has again sacrificed realism for dramatic necessity.¹⁶⁸ The dramatist is moving towards his conclusion, and he needs to make the assault of persuasion on Philoctetes that much stronger. Further, this new information is less jarring than it may seem: since Neoptolemus has already shown that he understands the spirit of the prophecy, there is a certain emotional logic that he should now possess the particulars of how this spirit will be implemented.

The prophecy as Neoptolemus describes it closely parallels (but not exactly, as we

¹⁶⁷ Perhaps the audience is meant to reassess their opinion, after the performance, of past events in the play in light of this new information. However, I would suggest that this is unlikely here. A poet may wish to have his audience contemplate and reflect upon the play afterwards, once they have all the details of the play at their disposal, but if this reflection were at the expense of the actual experience of attending the play, that is, if the information of the play were to directly oppose the emotional and dramatic impact the play had, it would be very odd indeed. For in such a case, we would have to assume that the poet placed such later reflections above the actual experience of the drama. Common sense should warn us against such a judgment.

¹⁶⁸ Essentially the the view of Wilamowitz and Kitto (1939, 305).

shall see) what Heracles himself will pronounce. Philoctetes will gain both glory and healing at Troy, the second point being mentioned here for the first time in the play. Neoptolemus also mentions Philoctetes' transgression onto Chryse's sacred precinct (1326-1328). This point could not be emphasised before lest it reduce sympathy for Philoctetes and reduce the theme that Philoctetes suffers unfairly and beyond measure. By the mention of the original reason for Philoctetes' downfall, we are reminded again that the gods have had a role in Philoctetes' life, if only a negative one. What is important to note is that although Neoptolemus' words imply that the benefits of going to Troy are meant as compensation by the gods for Philoctetes' suffering, he does not actually present the prophecy as such. Neoptolemus does not say that the gods mean to rectify the wrongs done to him, as Heracles will at the end of the play, but only that Philoctetes will be benefited by going to Troy and thus that he should not bring troubles on himself by continuing in his resistance.

As Reinhardt notes,¹⁶⁹ with the return of the bow the audience may well be expecting Philoctetes to relent at last, but this expectation is not realised. Despite Neoptolemus' words, he rejects the plea to go to Troy. Why? First of all, we can dismiss the idea that Philoctetes stays firm in his resolve not to go to Troy because he suspects Neoptolemus of lying. Although he has been proven a liar before, we can accept that he now views the young man as honest. As he says, how can he put aside the words of a friend (1350-1351)? Certainly his own stubborn nature is part of the explanation. However I think some scholars have tended to overemphasise this,¹⁷⁰ and that the play presents his

¹⁶⁹ Reinhardt 189.

¹⁷⁰ For one example, Knox (140) describes Philoctetes here as indulging in "vengeful self-pity". A simple point which scholars who take this view seem to neglect is that Heracles both offers reasons why it is beneficial for Philoctetes to go to Troy (which Neoptolemus did as well), and an explanation of why he has suffered as he has for ten years (which Neoptolemus could not do: see below for discussion). If Philoctetes were not, in some fashion, justified in his stubborn refusal to believe the oracle is meant to see justice done to him, then presumably there would be no need for the gods to offer an explanation for his sufferings. They would simply tell him to get packing.

refusal as both understandable and likely. Scholars have often taken the view that Philoctetes is his own worst enemy. This view, that he is ultimately responsible for his misfortunes because of his wilful stubbornness and bitterness, is mainly dependent upon the knowledge that Philoctetes' journey to Troy will result in release from his terrible wound, as well as from his loneliness. However, when we witness the play, concentrating on its dramatic reality, as I have suggested is natural for any audience, I think the effect is very different. A quick review of some of the important passages of the play will explain my point.

The Prologue presents a picture of two men from Troy coming to capture Philoctetes for the sake of their own glory, with little or no concern shown for the man himself. No account at this time is given of the oracle, and there is certainly no hint that it is intended in any way to benefit Philoctetes. The oracle is first related in the text by the Merchant in a speech meant to deceive. In this account, there is again no hint that the prophecy is meant as a benefit to Philoctetes, but precisely the opposite, with the point that Odysseus has sworn to drag Philoctetes to Troy, willing or not. It is also important to note that no one ever informs Philoctetes that the Merchant was in fact a part of the deception, and hence he has no reason to disbelieve his account. The picture of Troy given by Neoptolemus, telling him about the fates of various heroes, is a purely negative one (and indeed a primarily correct one, save for the comment that Thersites is still alive), and this combines in the text with Philoctetes' own account of his past sufferings, and also his sufferings during the course of the play, to present an overall picture of the world in which the gods favour the wicked and neglect the good. The crucial information that Philoctetes will be healed by going to Troy is only given in the text when Neoptolemus makes his final appeal to Philoctetes. Yet as we have seen, despite the specific nature of Neoptolemus' knowledge, this is little better than one part inference on the part of Neoptolemus and one

part dramatic necessity on the part of the poet. It is worth mentioning that Neoptolemus did not use this point about Philoctetes' destined healing when he first made his appeal after Philoctetes' seizure.¹⁷¹

Thus, although Neoptolemus now speaks as a genuine, truthful friend, and speaks with authoritative knowledge (whatever its source), this one comment showing the gods to have the well-being of Philoctetes within their plans must be balanced with a whole play suggesting the opposite. This works on two levels. First, it is easy enough for the audience to understand Philoctetes' refusal to go: his whole life as well as his experiences during the play simply are too much for him to accept that the gods mean him well.¹⁷² As he says, he does not want to go to Troy because he fears further mishandling by the Greeks, and the text has been one long vindication of Philoctetes' pessimistic view of the world. If Philoctetes' treatment at the hands of his enemies seems unrelated to the gods' treatment of him, it should be noted that the play has in fact closely linked the two together. The man who is implementing the prophecy is one of Philoctetes' most hated enemies. The Merchant's version of the prophecy was presented in such a way as to suggest to Philoctetes that it was simply one more way for Odysseus to mistreat him. Philoctetes himself stated his belief that Odysseus was merely using the prophecy for his own gain (a largely correct account). Finally, the entire play presents a picture of the relationship between the gods' treatment of him and his enemies': throughout the course of the drama he has been tricked, robbed, bound, and abandoned, all on account of Odysseus' attempts to bring the prophecy to actuality. Hence, Philoctetes' equating of the misfortunes he has

¹⁷¹ Also, Kitto (1939, 306) notes that it is illogical for Neoptolemus to state the oracle, and then to act in a way which would refute it (i.e., by taking Philoctetes home instead of to Troy). Perhaps it is unlikely that anyone in the audience would pick up on this at the moment, but it again points to the confused state of our, and the characters', understanding of the oracle, that it can be blatantly rejected as it is.

¹⁷² As Segal notes (150), Philoctetes is unable "to accept the totality of the divine order which includes a side different from the "cruel-mindedness" (194) of Chryse". I am not sure that Philoctetes' view of the divine order is specifically a result of his feelings about Chryse, since he does not mention her in the text or accuse her, but Segal is correct to emphasise that Philoctetes' religious feelings have much to do with his refusal to go to Troy.

received from the gods with those from his enemies is entirely understandable.

Moreover, the feeling that Philoctetes is not simply being stubborn is increased if the audience has entered into the dramatic reality of the play, rather than focussing on what they supposedly know from their external knowledge. In this case they may also still doubt whether the trip to Troy is truly meant as a boon to Philoctetes, for they will have accepted, with Philoctetes, the unsavoury picture of the world and the gods' justice, and they too will have just heard this new detail about Philoctetes' intended healing, from a character who did not seem to possess definite knowledge of the prophecy throughout the text, beyond inferences based on his own pity for Philoctetes' sad state. Certainly the prophecy has been shrouded in enough confusion that they will still feel unsure about its true intention.¹⁷³ Thus if we follow where I think the text is clearly designed to lead, not only will the audience accept and understand Philoctetes' refusal to go to Troy, but they will also agree with him in his refusal to an extent, since they also will still feel unsure about the prophecy's ultimate meaning, until a definitive account is given of it.

What is important to emphasise here is that we should not be focussing on our external knowledge of the myth, specifically that Philoctetes will be healed at Troy, as we witness (or read) the play, since the text itself presents this information only very late, after showing the gods' treatment of Philoctetes, past and present, as something much less than favourable. Moreover, when this information is given it is pronounced by a character who has clearly been seen to share in the overall confusion over the meaning of the oracle. Since external knowledge and dramatic reality are in this case at odds, I think we must naturally

¹⁷³ Kamerbeek (1980, 23-24) also accepts that Philoctetes has strong grounds for maintaining his mistrust of the prophecy, but he does not go far enough in assessing this mistrust. He is right to note that the source of this prophecy has been presented as less than definitive, and makes the (perhaps far-fetched) suggestion that Helenus may simply be Odysseus' instrument. However, the stronger point is that Philoctetes not only mistrusts the oracle, on account of how it has come to him, but he actually mistrusts the justice of the gods, on account of his wretched life. Blundell (1989, 216-218) is incorrect to say that Philoctetes places the idea of harming one's enemies above helping one's friends. It is clear from his response that he does not primarily seek vengeance from his enemies, but rather he wants most of all to avoid any further mistreatment at their hands in the future.

give preference to the myth of Philoctetes as the text presents it, and not on how we assume it should be. Thus it is very hard to accept the idea that Philoctetes is excessively stubborn and bitter in his refusal to go to Troy. Perhaps he ought to trust in the gods and the words of a friend, as Neoptolemus says (1373-1375), but this is precisely what he cannot quite do.¹⁷⁴ His past suffering looms larger than his new comrade, and as we have seen, the character of Philoctetes is fundamentally defined by his suffering throughout this play, and it is this which stands between him and acceptance of Neoptolemus' appeal.

Neoptolemus agrees to take Philoctetes home, and another false exit begins as the two slowly make their way off-stage (1402ff.),¹⁷⁵ when Heracles makes his appearance (1409ff.). Hoppin notes, after Drew-Bear, that the trochaics of 1402-1408 give a strong sense of closure to the scene, as trochaic endings of plays are a variant of the more common anapestic endings.¹⁷⁶ Thus the effect for the audience is that the play has in fact reached its end with the departure of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to Malis, even though this contradicts the story-line of the basic myth. It has been noted that this false ending has an element of satisfaction in that the hero has endured all attempts to get him to do what he does not want to do.¹⁷⁷ Yet there must also be a feeling of horror in the audience: for by remaining resolute, Philoctetes will deny himself the divine healing he deserves. If pity has won out on the human level, represented by Neoptolemus' return of the bow, and if the two heroes simply return to Greece, the gods will appear uncaring of the fates of good men who suffer unjustly, just as Philoctetes has thought.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Or perhaps it is better to say that his distrust of the gods causes him to mistrust the words of a friend who vouches for their good-will towards him.

¹⁷⁵ On delayed and frustrated exits in this play, see Taplin (1978) 67-69.

¹⁷⁶ Hoppin (1990) 143-149. Drew-Bear compares the trochaics of 1402-1408 with those of *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1515 ff. and *Agamemnon* 1649ff.

¹⁷⁷ This is especially so for those scholars who see this exit as the "true" ending of the play, and think that the epiphany of Heracles is only a means to fit the play with the myth (see 104 and footnote 200).

¹⁷⁸ Knox 139.

As a tangential point, it should be noted how this passage and the interpretation of it discussed above supports the idea of dramatic reality which I discussed in the introduction. For if there is one thing that the audience “knows” from its external knowledge of the story, it is that Philoctetes does in fact go to Troy and participate in its fall. Yet nonetheless, the dramatist has clearly attempted to make the exit appear as the real ending of the play at the moment, despite this “knowledge”. Hence the passage seems strong proof that the dramatist himself thought that dramatic reality had greater potential force for an audience than their preconceived ideas about the play.

Heracles' Entrance

The choice of Heracles is of course a fine one. Since Philoctetes once did a favour for him when he was a man, for which he received the famous bow, he can be counted as a friend. Thus he duplicates the role of Neoptolemus. Yet he is now a god, and so can pronounce directly the will of the heavens (the plural in 1409 is no doubt a poetic plural, but it nicely picks up the idea that Heracles speaks for the gods here, specifically his father Zeus), and both Philoctetes and the audience can at last learn the truth. Heracles calls his message *muthoi*, a word that Pucci notes¹⁷⁹ Sophocles reserves for elevated speech, emphasising that Heracles' account is the true *muthoi*, as opposed to the various, unreliable *logoi* presented earlier in the play.

Heracles immediately answers the question of Philoctetes' role in the oracle of the gods, placing this matter first and foremost:

HP. τὴν σὴν δ' ἤκω χάριν οὐρανίας

ἔδρας προλιπῶν

τὰ Διὸς τε φράσων βουλευμάτ' αἰ... (1413-1416)

¹⁷⁹ Pucci 36-37.

He. For your sake I come, leaving behind my heavenly seat,
and revealing to you Zeus' plans...

Here Heracles is primarily concerned with Philoctetes himself, and Zeus' plans for him. He does not initially say that he has come for the sake of ensuring the fall of Troy, but leaves this until later in his speech.¹⁸⁰ Heracles makes it clear that the oracle is intended for Philoctetes' benefit, as well as those in Troy, just as Neoptolemus suspected in his sympathy for the hero. Furthermore, Heracles does not simply repeat the points that Neoptolemus made. It has been noticed before that Heracles promises not the sons of Asclepius, but Asclepius himself at Troy to heal Philoctetes. By having Heracles enlist a fellow god to aid Philoctetes, the poet shows the extent of the concern of the gods for Philoctetes' well-being. Also of note is a recent suggestion by Taplin. The play has generally posited the fate of Philoctetes as either staying on Lemnos, or going to Troy, or going to Malis. Scholars have generally interpreted Heracles' entrance as one designed to stop the false exit to Malis for a proper exit to Troy. However, Taplin emphasises that Heracles talks of Philoctetes surviving the fall of Troy and sending his spoils back to his father (1428-1433). In particular, κόμιζε ('bring') in 1433 clearly suggests that Philoctetes will himself take the spoils back home.¹⁸¹ The verb πέμψεις also can mean "escort",¹⁸² rather than simply "send". Heracles tells Philoctetes to dedicate war spoils to his pyre, located, we know, on mount Oeta, and thus he seems to clearly envision an eventual journey home. The Chorus talk in the final passage of the play (1469-1471) of the journey as a νόστος, a word which (Taplin reminds us) can be understood as referring not only to the journey to Troy but also the eventual trip home, since it would be common to the Greek

¹⁸⁰ As Winnington-Ingram (300) emphasises.

¹⁸¹ For the full argument, using the strong sense of geography in the *Philoctetes*, see Taplin (1987) 75-76. I have added a few points of my own to Taplin's argument.

¹⁸² LSJ III. LSJ actually quotes this passage to attest the meaning "to send as a gift", but I see no difficulty in taking the verb in the manner suggested.

audience as a term denoting the voyage home of the Greeks.¹⁸³ Certainly this would better explain Philoctetes' obvious joy at the words of Heracles (1445-1447). Hence Heracles seems to promise Philoctetes both glory at Troy as well as a return to his father, which is much more than what was said by Neoptolemus.

All this is important in explaining why Philoctetes relents, but it is not, I think, the primary reason. As we noted before, Neoptolemus presented the benefits to Philoctetes as a sort of compensation for his sufferings. Heracles goes far beyond this by offering no less than a complete explanation for Philoctetes' ten years on Lemnos:

HP. καὶ πρῶτα μὲν σοι τὰς ἐμὰς λέξω τύχας,
 ὅσους πονήσας καὶ διεξελθὼν πόνους
 ἀθάνατον ἀρετὴν ἔσχον, ὡς πάρεσθ' ὁρᾶν.
 καὶ σοί, σάφ' ἴσθι, τοῦτ' ὀφείλεται παθεῖν,
 ἐκ τῶν πόνων τῶνδ' εὐκλεᾶ θέσθαι βίον. (1418-1422)

He. First I will tell you of my experiences, enduring
 and overcoming great toils to gain deathless distinction,
 as you can see. Know clearly that this is fated for you as well,
 to establish a renowned life from these toils.

Using his own life as a blueprint for Philoctetes', he explains that Philoctetes will gain "undying distinction", just as he has, through his *ponoi*.¹⁸⁴ The distinction is crucial. Although the play has slowly and subtly suggested the idea that the oracle is meant as compensation for Philoctetes, the gods here in fact are not depicted by Heracles as offering Philoctetes redress for past wrongs, but as following a pattern, for which Heracles himself

¹⁸³ Cf. e.g. Webster on 1471.

¹⁸⁴ Rightly emphasised by O'Higgins (48).

is the paradigm, of immortality through suffering.¹⁸⁵ Thus Sophocles shows that the gods have been concerned with the question of justice in the case of Philoctetes all along, and to have been following an established pattern to bestow immortal excellence on a man.¹⁸⁶ The effect, I think, is remarkable.¹⁸⁷ The audience has had a play full of Philoctetes' (seemingly) unjust suffering, full of the idea of the gods' neglect of good men. This is all powerfully reversed by Heracles and the paradigm of heavenly justice he represents. Because of the Greek audience's knowledge of the story of Heracles, the labours of Philoctetes, which seemed so unfair during the course of the play, can be easily fitted into

¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the physical presence of Heracles on stage serves as literal manifestation of the immortality that Philoctetes will gain at Troy, and has already gained by enduring his time on Lemnos. The god himself seems to suggest this, when he says "as you can see" (1420).

¹⁸⁶ Here is where I think Segal's excellent interpretation falters, since he understands Heracles to be only partially compensating Philoctetes (1977a, 158). First of all, the gods are not compensating Philoctetes after the fact, but are shown, through the example of Heracles' own life (a passage Segal neglects) to have been implementing justice all along. Segal is right to note that Heracles does not promise that the Atreidai and Odysseus will be punished, but incorrect to see this as Philoctetes' fondest wish. The *Philoctetes* is not a play primarily concerned with how bad men go unpunished, but specifically about a good man who seems to be unfairly punished, and this element of divine justice is answered fully by Heracles. Also, as we shall see below, Heracles' last words do strongly state that the gods will punish the wrong-doers, even if it is only in general terms. The idea that the gods ultimately vindicate Odysseus (as Gellie, 157-158, also argues), is simply incorrect. This is to put the cart before the horse. The oracle was not the providence of Odysseus, but rather he was merely the self-proclaimed instrument of an oracle which he has been shown to seriously misunderstand. He only came to Lemnos in the first place because the oracle instructed him to. The oracle was a manifestation of the will of the gods, not of Odysseus, and it is they who are shown triumphant. Furthermore, the final exit of Odysseus, running for his life from Philoctetes, seems to preclude any possibility that the audience would feel that he is the ultimate winner here.

¹⁸⁷ As does Whitman (187), who describes it as "a sudden spiritual liberation that can scarcely be paralleled elsewhere". However, it can be seen that I do not agree with his further view that when Heracles pronounces the gods' will it is "derived essentially from the "double motivation" method of heroic characterization" (178). This is to ignore the point, emphasised in Neoptolemus' hexameter statement, that Philoctetes himself is not needed for Troy to fall, but rather his inclusion in the prophecy represents the gods' dispensation of justice to him. Whitman seems to imply that Philoctetes virtually bends heaven to his will through his heroic nature, that they merely claim that what he has forced to come to pass was always fated by them.

this pattern of divine justice.¹⁸⁸ Immortal glory was of course the highest goal of the epic hero, not freedom from suffering, nor a long quiet life at home.¹⁸⁹ This is no less so for Philoctetes: we need only recall his pain upon hearing the lie that the world had forgotten him (254-256). Indeed, throughout the play, Philoctetes' desire to keep away from Troy is not because of any sort of fear of physical sufferings (after all, what could surpass his present agonies?), but rather because he fears being paraded about by Odysseus, being mocked by the commanders, and this also relates to his *kleos*.¹⁹⁰ The very presence of Heracles on stage, and the ideal he represents for the epic hero, strongly suggests that the poet's answer to the question of the gods' justice is not meant to fall short.¹⁹¹

Heracles' pronouncement on the will of the gods is satisfying in another way as

¹⁸⁸ In this we have an example of how, as a modern audience, we cannot always bridge the distance between our culture and the ancient Greeks'. The use of Heracles as a paradigm for moral excellence clearly had an emotional and intellectual impact upon its original audience that was and is somewhat limited to the social and religious *mores* of the day, a point of distinction that is emphasised by modern semioticians (see Carlson 110-121). Carlson warns about the difficulty of reconstructing such historical conditions, especially in a dramatic form of art, where the actual performance can never be recovered (unlike, for example, a painting, where the form of the piece of art remains essentially unchanged with the passage of time). However, while accepting that these difficulties exist, I would suggest that our situation here is fairly straightforward. It is a matter of accepting that the emotional impact of such a parallelism between Philoctetes and Heracles is bound to have had greater impact upon an audience for whom Heracles was such a familiar figure of human greatness achieved through *ponoi*. Indeed, I would suggest that this cultural distance has much to do with why some modern interpreters have been left feeling that Heracles' resolution of the play falls short to some degree, when it seems fairly clear that the text is designed to produce an effect which is satisfying to the audience.

¹⁸⁹ Achilles has made his presence known in this play, as another sort of paradigm for both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, and we would do well to recall his choice to accept a life of glory at the price of an early death.

¹⁹⁰ See O'Higgins for a discussion of *kleos* in the play. O'Higgins also emphasises (48) that Heracles goes beyond Neoptolemus in his appeal to Philoctetes by showing how his time on Lemnos has already gained the hero fame.

¹⁹¹ The view that the ending of the *Philoctetes* is ambivalent (e.g. Winnington-Ingram 301-303) seems to be based on two points. First is the quickness with which Philoctetes reverses his earlier refusal to go to Troy. I have addressed this point by arguing that Philoctetes' refusal to go to Troy was a result of his confusion and suspicion over the oracle. Thus he can be convinced by Heracles because the truth of the prophecy is now revealed wholly and truthfully. The second point is that the *deus ex machina* does not seem to answer adequately the question of the god's justice for wicked men. Philoctetes will still have to associate with his enemies at Troy, Odysseus and the Atreidae, something he has resisted throughout the play. For my view on this second point, see below, in particular my interpretation of Heracles' reference to the importance Zeus places on piety (100f. Cf. also footnote 186 and 195).

well, and again I shall base my argument on dramatic presentation and our response as an audience. Heracles stated that Philoctetes was fated to gain deathless excellence through his sufferings. As we saw, this was a manifestation of divine justice for Philoctetes. The point suggests that it is specifically by suffering that he will win glory, that by enduring his hardships he has won himself excellence through his own actions.¹⁹² This, I think, is completely in keeping with what we have experienced during the course of the play. For if we have seen a play's worth of Philoctetes' suffering, we have also seen him endure as a hero time and time again. He has stood resolute under the strongest forms of pressure. He has been shamefully treated by Neoptolemus, and yet been able to still accept him as a friend,¹⁹³ showing in fact that he has not been excessively brutalised by his sufferings, despite the youth's claim to the contrary (1321). He has resisted the manipulations of his worst enemy, Odysseus, choosing to die rather than submit. The text seems designed to evoke the response from the audience that the man has maintained his pride and honour despite his treatment. Hence does our emotional response to the hardships of Philoctetes seem to support what Heracles says about winning deathless excellence through *ponoi*. It is as though Heracles has put into words our emotional response to Philoctetes' pain and used

¹⁹² This is where I think Poe's analysis falls short. Early in his work he says (18): "It may be – a thing which I doubt – that the *deus ex machina* reverses the movement [sc. of the revelations of Philoctetes' suffering in the past and present] and cancels out the previous disregard of Philoctetes' good." I agree with Poe that the play presents a very negative picture of the gods' treatment of Philoctetes, but not that the epiphany of Heracles fails to reverse what has been shown before. I think Poe misses a number of points concerning the *deus ex machina* (oddly for a study on the religious question, he devotes exceedingly small attention to it), but in particular this one, that Heracles offers an understanding of the very sufferings Philoctetes has undergone, which gave the play this negative view of the gods' justice. Poe may feel that the gods' answer to the suffering of Philoctetes is insufficient, but I do not think it is tenable to suggest that the poet has intended the words of Heracles to be anything but precisely that. We may also add the simplest of points, that in a play filled with reversals (Philoctetes' entrance, Neoptolemus' hexameter statement, Odysseus' surprise entrance, when he seems to interrupt Neoptolemus's returning of the bow, Neoptolemus equally surprising entrance and return of the bow, and Heracles' reversal of Philoctetes' and Neoptolemus' false exit), we should not be surprised that the play culminates in a complete reversal of its previous action and mood.

¹⁹³ Scholars tend to emphasise Neoptolemus' good deed in returning the bow (for example, Blundell (1989) 217), yet as he himself says (1224), he is only righting a wrong deed done before. Equal emphasis should be given to Philoctetes' ability to forgive Neoptolemus.

it to explain how even the worst hardships can be a source of personal *arete*.

If this understanding of the gods' justice, revealing a divine impersonal plan rather than compassionate recompense, seems unsatisfying and not as positive as I have suggested, despite my understanding of the impact of Heracles as a paradigm for Philoctetes' life, I can suggest one further, rather general, point. Heracles could have come on stage and simply stated that the gods require Philoctetes at Troy simply because they rule the universe and have willed it so. This of course would make for a very negative picture of the gods' justice. However, Sophocles does not employ this sort of response, but rather, as I have argued, he takes pains to give an explanation of Philoctetes' sufferings that is satisfying both to the hero (represented by his happy acceptance of Heracles' words) and to the audience (represented by how the text is designed to employ its own feeling that Philoctetes has gained glory through his suffering to validate Heracles' judgement). Thus Heracles' pronouncement is positive in nature not because he denies or erases human suffering, but because he supplies a means to understand and account for this human suffering.

The view of the gods' justice I have discussed here is quite similar to Lloyd-Jones' general assessment of justice in Sophocles. He states, "Dike means not only "justice", but "the order of the universe," and from the human point of view that order often seems to impose a natural rather than a moral law. Yet Sophocles believed that the gods were just, and just in a sense in which the word was in his day applied to men. What made it hard, he thought, for men to understand the justice of the gods was the immense extent of time which may separate cause from punishment, and the complex interweaving within human history of different causal chains of injustice followed by chastisement." My specific interpretation agrees with this general one in two ways. First, that the gods are shown to be just only with the passing of time, which agrees with my view that the gods are ultimately

HP. τοῦτο δ' ἐννοεῖθ', ὅταν
πορθῇτε γαῖαν, εὐσεβεῖν τὰ πρὸς θεούς·
ὥς τᾶλλα πάντα δεύτερ' ἡγεῖται πατὴρ
Ζεὺς· οὐ γὰρ εὐσέβεια συνθνήσκει βροτοῖς.
κἂν ζῶσι κἂν θάνωσιν οὐκ ἀπόλλυται. (1440-1444)

HE. But know this: when you sack the land,
respect the things of the gods as Father Zeus
considers all else secondary. For reverence does not
die with mortals. Whether they live or die, it is not lost.

This is likely a reference to the crimes committed by the Greeks during the sack, and in particular to the murder of Priam by Neoptolemus himself at the altar of Zeus. Yet if we consider the warning at face value, we find it is entirely apt for the present circumstances. Heracles has answered the play's central question over the justice of the gods in a positive fashion in the case of Philoctetes himself. Philoctetes is a good man, and the gods show

194 Lloyd-Jones (1983) 128. However, it is interesting to note that Lloyd-Jones comes to his conclusions in a manner completely distinct from mine, in that he emphasises how the plays allude to knowledge of the myth to place the specific action of the play within a larger framework of cause and effect and the workings of the gods' justice through this larger span of time, while I have emphasised what the text in and of itself seems to say on the question. This view also seems to agree with Kirkwood's (1958, 273): "Philoctetes suffers, inveighs against the gods, and finds cruelty in his situation. But behind the ironic cruelty, in *Philoctetes* the justice of the gods is absolutely clear, and again it is justice done to human strength and heroism, not a reward for human humility."... "Neoptolemus' divination in the parodos that Philoctetes' suffering is imposed by a divine plan, not by chance or cruelty, is correct, and the play shows that the divine will, though indifferent to Philoctetes' human feelings, is alive and just to his human worth. It is impersonal, remote, long-range justice, but is unmistakable, and it is imposed by deity."

their justice by having allotted him the highest destiny, undying fame. Yet Heracles' warning serves to show the other side of the coin: the wicked are punished for their ill-doing. We should recall that Philoctetes' feeling that the gods were unjust stemmed not only from his own unfair treatment, but also from the fact that the wicked seemed to prosper. This complaint, as we have seen, is often emphasised. Heracles' warning serves to address this other side to the gods' justice.¹⁹⁵

If the warning is a reference to Neoptolemus' future crime, I think it is also a clear reference to the original cause of Philoctetes' downfall, his transgression into the grove of Chryse. The poet's handling of his material in this matter is particularly deft here. Mention of this transgression, as we noted, was purposely suppressed during the course of the play in order to establish pity for Philoctetes as a man suffering unjustly. However, after this has been well established, Neoptolemus mentions it again just a hundred lines before Heracles' warning (1326-1328). Thus the audience has a recent reminder of the story at hand to make the connection. Heracles's warning to respect the things of the gods recalls that, inadvertently or not, Philoctetes' crime was basically one of impiety, for not respecting a sacred grove. The comment seems a gentle reproach to Philoctetes, that he was not punished without reason. And if he seems to have been punished out of proportion with what was due, this has been answered by the gods' plan of immortal excellence through suffering.

Finally, the allusion to the future crimes at Troy serves to emphasise a further theme of the play, one closely connected with all that I have discussed so far, but somewhat neglected in my study. The theme is a familiar one for our dramatist, that man does not

¹⁹⁵ Of course, the gods do not say they will punish Odysseus and the Atreidae, whom Philoctetes thinks the most wicked of the lot. However, this may be because they are not really the villains Philoctetes thinks them to be. Philoctetes' received his wound from a god, he was cast out because his person was a religious pollution, and even Odysseus' shameful treatment of Philoctetes throughout the course of the play was a result of the prophecy. Thus, it is really the gods who are responsible, and the *deus ex machina* is the explanation of their treatment.

know his fate. For even if Heracles is here warning Neoptolemus, the audience knows that his words will fall on deaf ears. Neoptolemus was famous for his crime during the sack of Troy, and no doubt the audience assumes that this is still what will happen. Just as Philoctetes was never able to see the gods' justice at work in his life until Heracles' pronouncement, so too will Neoptolemus be blind to the workings of the gods and his own fate until his own tragic act.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion

The interpretation I have suggested here is hardly new or bold. The play centres around the question of the gods' justice, resulting in a positive reversal of the bleak picture given throughout the play.¹⁹⁷ This is not to argue that the *Philoctetes* is a singularly positive piece of work. No play which focusses on human misery to the degree that this one does could possibly be interpreted as such. Rather, much in the way that Taplin suggests tragedy works in general, the play gives a means to comprehend and understand human misery, without ever denying the reality of this misery.

Nor do I wish to suggest that the *Philoctetes* is only concerned with the religious question. Clearly much of the drama concerns itself with the relationship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. However, I do think that the religious question is the most important one in the play. Easterling has argued that the main theme of the play is *philia*, represented by the act of friendship of Neoptolemus's return of the bow and by Philoctetes consenting to go to Troy at the behest of his "friend" Heracles.¹⁹⁸ However, for anyone who accepts that the *deus ex machina* scene is in fact the true ending of the play (see below 104), as Easterling does, I think the religious element has to be given precedence in

¹⁹⁶ For a discussion of this theme in the play, see Bowra 262-264.

¹⁹⁷ This general view of the play dates back to Bowra. However, I have noted that I do not agree with his emphasis on Odysseus' use of trickery rather than persuasion as a central theme of the play.

¹⁹⁸ Easterling (1978) 34-35.

importance for one very simple reason. The bond of friendship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes is ultimately unsuccessful in the task of bringing the hero to Troy. Hence Heracles' success in persuading Philoctetes to go to Troy must be for a reason other than friendship, and the obvious answer is that he can convince Philoctetes where Neoptolemus cannot because he is a god and speaks for the gods. Certainly Heracles makes no appeal to his bond of *philia* with Philoctetes to convince the reluctant hero to go to Troy.

However, my main purpose in this chapter lies not in supplying a definitive interpretation of the *Philoctetes* (which is likely impossible), but in showing how important dramatic presentation is when we come to interpret a dramatic work of art. Both the play's overwhelming emphasis on producing a sympathetic response from its audience for its main character's plight, and a number of individual dramatic elements of the play must be taken into account. I have already examined in detail how the overall feeling of confusion and mystery that surrounds the action of the play, combined with the vivid picture of Philoctetes' sad life imposed by men and gods, made us accept his final refusal to go to Troy as fully justified. Further, if we give regard to this portrayal of the main character, it seems clear, first of all, that the play is not a simple intrigue drama. If it were, we would not expect such an emphasis on the sufferings of Philoctetes. Indeed, we would rather expect Philoctetes to be as wild and as savage as possible, in order to make him the hardest, and thus most exciting, obstacle to overcome. A highly sympathetic character distracts us from the element of intrigue in the drama, because it takes attention away from the drama itself by raising the moral question of the reason for such suffering.¹⁹⁹ Thus the play cannot simply be concerned with whether Philoctetes will go to Troy, for in such a

¹⁹⁹ Contra such authors as Waldock and Craik. I do not think we need to call the play, with Craik, a melodrama to explain any faults in its plot. *Oedipus Rex*, which she uses as an example of a more properly tragic plot, has itself come under some attack. The point is not tragedy versus melodrama, but realism versus dramatic reality. Further, the fact that the descriptions of Philoctetes' wound are graphically given in the play does not seem a sufficient reason to consider Philoctetes less than a tragic character, nor the simple fact that he was a common figure in comedy.

case the sympathetic portrayal is again somewhat superfluous. Finally, we should also not accept the idea that the *deus ex machina* is a superfluous ending tacked on to square the play with the established myth.²⁰⁰ Since Heracles addresses the reasons for Philoctetes' suffering, the *deus ex machina* should be understood as being of fundamental importance for the play as a whole. It responds to the central concern of the play.

We have seen how the question of the gods' justice in the case of Philoctetes is primarily raised through the dramaturgy of the play. It was the dramatic reversal of Philoctetes' entrance, when his character was revealed to us as quite different from what we were led to expect from the Prologue, which first suggested the direction the play would take, and began the development of a sense of pity for him in both Neoptolemus and the audience. The most forceful presentation of the question of the gods' need for Philoctetes at Troy, and the reasons for it, was made in the scene of Philoctetes' seizure, when Neoptolemus made his prophetic statement. As we saw, it was the dramatic irony of the tableau that made it most clear that the gods did not want him at Troy for his military prowess, and this made Neoptolemus's words understandable as the youth's newfound awareness that Philoctetes must go to Troy for a quite different reason. Finally, the question of the gods' justice itself occurs naturally in that it addresses the audience's feeling of pity for the main character. My claim that the play is primarily concerned with this moral question can be seen to derive from that element of the play that dominates its action and its audience.

My contention that the play's ending is predominantly a positive one can also be seen to result from our emotional and dramatic response to the play's central focus, so long as the individual reader accepts the claim that the audience feels Philoctetes to have been

²⁰⁰ Contra such authors as Gellie, Waldo and Kitto. The simplest argument against this view is that it would force us to assume that the author was inept enough to have chosen a myth which did not properly suit his purposes. Yet as Whitman quite rightly notes (188), "The story's inevitable ending lay implicit in its action, and it was the poet's business to find the implications." See Hoppin (1990) 162, for a discussion of how the epiphany fits in structurally with the rest of the play.

proven a noble character in his sufferings, that he has been shown to be greater than the terrible trials he has undergone. For thus, Heracles' explanation that the gods planned for him to earn deathless merit through his sufferings, just as he did himself, is bound to have a satisfying emotional effect on the audience. They can apply their own feelings from the drama as the highest sort of vindication for this explanation.

Thus the *Philoctetes* offers an example of how dramatic presentation, both in the form of individual scenes and in the form of its overall impact on us the audience, can be important to defining thematic meaning in the play.

IV

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to show the importance of dramatic presentation for thematic content. I have examined two ways in which dramatic reality (as I defined it in the Introduction) can be applied in our understanding of a play. First of all there is the basic, and in fact well-known but not always applied, interpretive approach of observing the drama in the order in which the events of the play occur. This approach is fairly obvious in its importance and its application. However, just as important is observing the *manner* in which the drama presents its material to us.

I demonstrated the importance of these two approaches, for example, in the use of oracles in the two plays. In the *Trachiniae* the early statements of the oracle concerning Heracles' final labour were phrased incorrectly, and this influenced our understanding of the oracle and shaped our response to the drama as a whole. Later in the play the oracle is phrased correctly by Deianeira, but by now we have been influenced by her earlier understanding. It is only at the play's end, after the tragedies of Deianeira and Heracles make it clear that our earlier understanding of the oracle was incorrect, and when Heracles states the true content of the oracle, that we finally understand the truth. Thus, by placing Deianeira's false understanding of the oracle before other, truer, statements of it, the text manipulates our response to the play as a whole.

In the *Philoctetes*, we saw how the oracle of Helenus was presented to both Philoctetes and us, throughout most of the play, as primarily negative or even harmful to Philoctetes, and this was important in understanding both the pessimistic view of the gods

that is developed in the course of the action and the reason for Philoctetes' final refusal to acquiesce to Neoptolemus' entreaty that he obey the oracle and go to Troy. If we pay attention to how the play itself presents the oracle, and not to what we know of the oracle from our external knowledge of the myth, Philoctetes appears more than justified in continuing in his resistance. Neoptolemus at this point does present the oracle as a benefit to Philoctetes, but as we have seen, the source of his new knowledge is hard to explain logically, and this less than sure statement must be weighed against the drama as a whole, which has presented the oracle in a singularly negative fashion for Philoctetes. Thus it is incorrect to call Philoctetes merely stubborn in his refusal, claiming that he is rejecting an oracle meant to help him, because the truth of the oracle's good-will towards Philoctetes does not yet have dramatic reality in the play; in fact the play has so far presented it in exactly the opposite manner.

In my chapter on the *Trachiniae*, I examined the relationship between form and content, medium and message, by showing how dramatic presentation was designed in the text to enhance the tragedy's central theme of late learning. We saw how the audience's own realization of Iole's identity involved them personally in the play's thematic emphasis on late learning and its tragic effects, because this realization takes place only after they have accepted the momentary mood of joy that occurred with the news that Heracles was about to return home safely. The sympathetic portrayal of Deianeira and the empathetic response it seems designed to evoke means that the audience itself is being manipulated by the dramatic action to feel sorrow for the heroine, made more forceful because we learn too late that things are not in fact resolving themselves in happy fashion as they seemed to be doing earlier. We are not simply presented with a tragic act, but we too are involved in the process that leads to tragedy.

However, we also saw how the play is designed at times to impart a privileged

position of knowledge, allowing the audience to see the process of late learning in its entirety. In the scene of Deianeira's silent exit to her suicide, the audience understands her action while the Chorus and Hyllus do not. We see Deianeira at the final stage of late learning, a movement towards death in silence and resignation, while we also understand that Hyllus stands at the beginning of the pattern, when he accuses and condemns his mother, knowing neither her true motivation in sending the robe nor her present intention to kill herself. After involving the audience in a personal fashion in the act of late learning, the text then encourages a more aware audience to locate this personal experience within the total pattern of the tragic result of late learning that the play presents as a whole.

Finally, we saw how dramatic presentation could be used to emphasise or even make a thematic point. When the Chorus sing of the power of Aphrodite (Aphrodite being used here instead of Eros to describe the same force of love/lust), we are not merely being presented with this idea in the form of the poetry of the Chorus, but we see this power being enacted on stage in the reversal of intention that it neatly interrupts. Deianeira, that meekest of tragic characters, is shown to adopt a plan completely out of keeping with her careful nature, after expressly stating her decision to do nothing about Heracles' latest mistress, all under the effect of this power of Eros. Thus the dramatic reversals of this section of the play serve to impress upon the audience the words of the Chorus about the power of love.

What I would like to stress is that this relationship between form and content is not one in which the dramatic presentation is mere "window-dressing" for the theme in question. It is often the dramatic quality of a play which gives weight and meaning to its thematic content, and I think this is precisely the case with the *Trachiniae*. To simply say, "late learning can have a tragic result", is simple and obvious, yet this is, to my mind, primarily what the play does say. But I do not think that the play had (or has) a negligible

effect on its audience. For it is precisely in how the play dramatizes this truism that its meaning and relevance comes to life. The play engages the audience in a personal act of late learning, with a tragic result in so far as we feel the emotions of sorrow and pity which in part make up a tragic experience, and thus the “real” effect of late learning is impressed upon us in a way that a bare presentation or statement of the point cannot. Then, this personal experience is placed within a larger context by giving the audience a “bird’s eye view” of the process of late learning. This, I would suggest, evokes a more contemplative response to the theme, as we are given not just the tragic result but a picture of the entire process of late learning which invites us to think upon how and why such things occur.

In my chapter on the *Philoctetes*, I attempted to show how the dramatic nature of the play must be taken into account when we come to formulating an interpretation of the play’s focus and meaning. I examined both the dramatic nature of the whole play, with its overwhelming emphasis on the painful existence of Philoctetes, and a number of individual scenes, with the purpose of revealing how dramatic presentation not only affects the quality of the thematic content (as we saw in the *Trachiniae*) but how it also determines our perception of what this thematic content and meaning is. We saw how the religious question of the gods’ justice in the case of Philoctetes was often raised not solely, or even primarily, through the statements of the characters but through dramatic presentation. This was perhaps most noticeable in the scene of Philoctetes’ seizure, where the dramatic tableau of Neoptolemus standing over the prostrate Philoctetes, holding the prized bow that could end the war at Troy, made clear that his words about the god requiring Philoctetes himself at Troy had nothing to do with military success at Troy, but rather was an insight into the gods’ divine plan for the long-suffering hero. Thus we saw that it was dramatic presentation which often directed the audience to the basic question, “what is the play about”.

The implication of this relationship between dramatic presentation and thematic content, whereby dramatic presentation contributes to the very nature of a play's thematic content, is also, I would suggest, important. It means that dramatic presentation cannot be neglected even in a purely thematic study of a drama. Any discussion of a tragic text must take into account the simple fact that it was originally written to be performed. By this I do not mean to suggest that dramaturgy has been neglected by the academic community. Many insightful comments have been made on dramatic presentation, and the work of Taplin has had a real influence on recent scholarship in Greek Tragedy. However, most of this scholarship has remained focussed on interpretations of a play's content and meaning. I would suggest that there is still more to be done in studying and viewing Greek Tragedy as the unified whole that it is.

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